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THE JAMESVILLE SERIES

A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. They are both looking down at each other. The lighting is warm and intimate. In the foreground, there are several historical artifacts, including a scroll, a quill pen, and a small jar, suggesting a historical or historical-fiction theme.

PAST PROMISES

N. J. WALTERS

Sometimes the only way to leave the past behind is to ignore the voice of reason—and leap.

Jamesville, Book 7

For Linda Fletcher, the sign in front of her new business says it all. Past Promises Antiques is her declaration of independence from her powerful and manipulative family—and a vow to herself that her future will be different.

She never considered herself the no-strings-affair type, but the chemistry between her and her newly hired handyman is too intense to ignore. Moving to Jamesville was a bold step, so what's the harm in taking one more—into his arms?

Levi Mann's shadowed past keeps his bags packed light and his feet on the move. But one look at Linda, and he finds himself willing to hang around—just long enough to figure out what it is that triggers their explosive passion.

Warning, this title contains very explicit language, a dysfunctional family, a very large inheritance and lots of wild, hot sex.

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Past Promises

N.J. Walters

Dedication

Thank you to everyone who loves Jamesville as much as I do.

Chapter One

Linda Fletcher stared at the creamy vellum envelope with the dark black script printed on the front. It looked so innocent lying there on the top of her oak desk. But she knew that looks could be deceiving.

She'd hoped the move to Jamesville, Maine, would stop the letters from coming, but they'd followed her from Vermont. There was no doubt in her mind that they wouldn't stop anytime soon.

She recognized the logo of the prominent law firm printed in the upper left-hand corner—Fletcher, Fletcher and Dyson. Her great-great-great-grandfather had founded the law firm more than a hundred years ago. The two current Fletchers involved in the firm were her father and her brother. She had no idea which of them had sent this letter and she wasn't certain she wanted to know.

"It's just a piece of paper," she assured herself. She ignored the burning sensation in her gut, absently rubbing her stomach with her hand as she continued to stare at the letter.

But why, today of all days, did this have to be in her box when she stopped at the post office to pick up her mail? She hadn't even known it was there until she'd hurried back to Past Promises and dumped the mass of mail and flyers on her desk.

Ignoring the envelope, she stared around Past Promises and felt the pain in her stomach lessen slightly. Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly. The smell of fresh paint and lemon cleaner was faint beneath the scent of rose potpourri.

Stepping out from behind her desk, Linda wound her way through the three rooms that made up her antiques and collectibles store. She stroked her fingers over the gleaming hardwood of an oak dining table set with simple, but elegant, Wedgwood china. Assorted pieces of Minton, Spode, Royal Albert and Johnson Brothers china sat in a hutch just beyond the table.

She smiled at the whimsical display of children's dolls, their china heads and delicate linen and lace gowns a thing of beauty. Tin toys vied for a spot on a trestle table that had seen better days, but was charming nonetheless.

A settee that would have looked at home in a lady's parlor a hundred and fifty years ago sat in a corner, a tea service was arranged on a low table beside it, as if waiting for the lady of the house to avail herself of refreshments. A brass bed was located just behind it, dressed with snowy white linen and lace. The linens were new, but they fit the feel of the display to perfection.

There were knickknacks and kitchen utensils, old tools and small tables inlaid with beautiful mosaics. Some pieces were worth a fortune, while others could be had for less than twenty dollars. There was

something for everyone. And that was exactly the kind of place she wanted Past Promises to be—friendly and accessible to everyone.

And hers. It had taken her a few years to get here, but she finally had what she wanted—a store of her own. A place of her own, not tainted by her family or their expectations.

She'd worked for several years in the antiques business, building up her reputation and knowledge. Months of planning and hard work had all culminated in this special day.

The burning started up in her stomach again as she glanced at the clock. It was half-past nine and she would open her doors for the first time at ten o'clock. She didn't have time to waste worrying about what her family wanted with her—as if she didn't already know.

"Stop it." Shaking her head, she strode purposefully to the antique countertop that now held the cash register, bags, wrapping paper and everything else she needed to service the customers of Past Promises. The countertop had come out of a five-and-dime store that had gone out of business during the depression. She'd gotten it for a song at a barn sale and had spent hours stripping layers of paint from it to find the gleaming wood below.

She ran her hand over the smooth surface. She and the countertop had a lot in common. It had taken time to find its true self beneath the layers, but she'd done it—for both herself and the lovely piece of furniture.

Behind the counter, she'd strategically positioned two coffee pots with gourmet coffee beans, ground and ready. She flicked on both pots to get them started brewing. She then turned on the electric kettle before checking her supply of teas. Several covered platters were already sitting on the countertop, filled with delicious cookies and treats from Delicious Delights, the aptly named bakery just up the road.

Everything was ready for her to open the doors of Past Promises and start her new life. Everything except her.

Sighing, she gave in to the inevitable and went back to her desk. The envelope was still there, looking innocent.

Linda grabbed the two-hundred-year-old silver letter opener from her desk drawer and lifted the envelope. Fitting the silver tip in the corner, she slit the top. The tearing sound seemed unusually loud in the quiet of the store. She dropped the letter opener back on the desk and pulled out the letter.

Like the envelope, it too was made of the finest quality paper. Only the best for Fletcher, Fletcher and Dyson. Her stomach churned, the low-grade burning a reminder she needed to take some of her medication. And she'd been doing so well these past few weeks controlling her ulcer. This was why she'd moved farther away from her family. They literally made her ill.

Folding back the paper, she scanned the signature first. It was from her brother, Austin. She let out a breath she hadn't even been aware of holding. At least it wasn't from her father, Austin Senior.

She scanned the letter and the pain in her stomach intensified. It was the usual song and dance. When was she going to give up this foolishness of being a shopkeeper and join the family firm? She was an embarrassment to them all. And if she didn't want to join the law firm, she could at least marry well and join her mother in her charitable pursuits.

Linda blinked back tears as she stuffed the letter back in the envelope. It was always the same. Ever since she was a child, she'd been different. She'd wanted to play softball, but was enrolled in ballet instead. She'd wanted to learn gymnastics, but was sent to ballroom dancing class. Her childhood had been a series of controlled activities and schools. All her friends had to be approved by her parents. Public school was not an option.

She'd hated every minute of it.

Everything from the clothing she'd worn to the girls she could be friends with was chosen by her parents. She'd chafed at the restrictions, but eventually they'd worn her down. Linda had responded by withdrawing, becoming a quiet, studious child, which had suited her parents just fine.

The only person who'd understood her at all had been her maternal grandmother. Antoinette Lafayette had been a force in her own right. Even Austin Senior gave way when her grandmother put her foot down and demanded something. And what she'd demanded had been Linda's presence every summer.

Linda had lived for summers spent with her grandmother. Antoinette was the one who'd instilled her with her love of antiques. The two of them had spent days driving around the state and beyond, attending estate sales, yard sales and searching through thrift shops for buried treasure.

At her grandmother's house she could wear jeans, run and laugh. It was a time of freedom and she'd always cried when summer ended and she was sent back home.

"Are you okay?" A low, male voice startled her out of her daydreams of the past. Linda whirled around, hand on her chest, heart pounding.

He stood just behind her. Watching. Waiting.

She had no idea how long he'd been there. It should have been impossible for a man his size to sneak up on her. At six-and-a-half feet tall, Levi Mann took up a lot of space. His body was massive, but it was all solid muscle. There wasn't an ounce of fat on the man.

He was wearing his usual uniform of jeans and a T-shirt. The faded denim clung to his thick thighs like a second skin. The soft cotton of the shirt molded to his biceps and chest, leaving little to the imagination.

And she had imagined him. A lot.

Lying in bed late at night, Linda had wondered more than once what it would feel like to touch all that sculpted muscle. She knew what it looked like. Levi had helped her with much of the renovation work on the building, as well as the painting, often removing his shirt while he worked. She'd lost count of the

number of times she'd stopped painting just to stare at him while he was working. Levi gave new meaning to the phrase abs of steel. His tanned flesh looked as though it was pulled tight over slabs of muscle.

And the man was just as potent from behind. He had wide shoulders that tapered down to his thick waist, the muscles making a perfect V. His butt was first class all the way.

"Linda?" The way he said her name gave her shivers. "Are you okay?"

Oh, God. She was standing here like a ninny, staring at him again. "I'm fine." She shook herself and dropped the letter in the garbage. "Just thinking about things." That was vague enough for him to drop it. In her experience, most men were just as happy to avoid lengthy, in-depth discussions with females.

Levi stared at her, his golden-brown eyes sending a shiver down her spine. He had a way of watching a person that made you think he could see all the way to your soul. Then he blinked and the moment passed. "Excited about this morning?"

She ignored the fact that his shoulder-length hair was down this morning, making him look even sexier. Usually, he kept it tied back while he worked. And there was no doubt about it. Levi was a man of action. If not for him, she'd still be working on the building instead of opening the doors on her new business.

"Excited and scared." She laughed and motioned to the coffee pot, which had just finished perking. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Sure."

Turning her back to him, she struggled to regain her composure. He was one hot guy, no doubt about it, but she wasn't looking for that kind of complication in her life right now.

Not that he'd come on to her in any way since she'd hired him. The arrangement they'd worked out helped them both. When she'd bought the building that housed Past Promises, it had needed a lot of sweat and elbow grease to make it livable. Which wasn't a problem. Linda wasn't afraid of hard labor.

The building was almost a hundred years old, three stories high and built of brick. The main floor was the retail space, but some time in the nineteen-seventies someone had converted the two upper floors into apartments. Linda had revamped the top floor for her own use. She hadn't planned on renting out the second floor apartment until Jonah Sutter had approached her about Levi.

Jonah was married to Amanda Barrington, Amanda Sutter now, a friend of Linda's from Vermont who had also relocated to Jamesville. Jonah had introduced her to Levi, who was looking for a place to stay and was willing to work in exchange for rent. It had saved her a bundle on the renovations. Levi could do the work of three men and there wasn't much, if anything, he couldn't do.

Cyndi and Shamus O'Rourke, more friends who lived in Jamesville, had pitched in to help her as well. Shamus was a partner in B & O Construction, a local contracting company, so he'd given her great advice and a good price on work when she'd needed it done.

Jonah had done his part as well, using his skill as an electrician to upgrade all the electrical work in the building. Not for the first time, she was thankful for her new friends and glad she'd made the move. The contrast between her friends and her family made her stomach ache.

It was no good to question why her parents and brother couldn't just be happy for her. They were what they were, but she was through trying to please them.

She finished pouring the coffee into a paper cup and handed it to Levi. From past experience, she knew he took his black. Over the past few months of working together she'd gotten to know him fairly well. Or as well as anyone knew him. Levi was incredibly self-contained, keeping to himself when he wasn't working. But she'd like to think they'd become friends, of a sort.

"Thanks." Their fingers grazed as he took the coffee from her. Heat shot down her arm and her breasts tingled.

She dropped her hand and rubbed it up and down the fine wool of her dress pants. It was distressing how quickly her body reacted to Levi. It had been that way from the first moment she'd met him. All the man had to do was walk in the room and she felt her body temperature rise. She had to control herself. Levi was a friend, nothing more.

She didn't know his entire story, but she knew he'd been in the army with Jonah—Special Forces. He'd left the military and had come to Jamesville to help Jonah about six months ago and had stayed. She figured he was entitled to take some time to figure out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

Besides which, he was the perfect tenant. He was quiet and he'd done more than enough work to pay for at least six more months' rent. She had no idea how long he was staying and hadn't worked up the courage to ask. The last thing she wanted to do was make him think she wanted him gone.

"I think you've got your first customers waiting outside." Levi's quiet voice broke the silence between them. She looked at him and he canted his head toward the door. Sure enough, through the huge display window beside the front door, she could see Cyndi, Shamus, Amanda and Jonah waiting to get inside. All her friends had come to her opening.

Smiling, she let all thoughts of her family and her sexual feelings for Levi slip away. Plenty of time to deal with them later. Or not. Taking a deep breath, she strode across the store and unlocked the door. "Welcome to Past Promises."

Levi set his coffee on the counter the minute Linda's back was turned. Whatever was in that letter had upset her. He'd stood in the shadows watching her for several minutes before he'd spoken. He'd seen the way she unconsciously placed her hand over her stomach, the way her shoulders had hunched forward.

He didn't like it.

Reaching down, he plucked the letter out of the garbage and stuffed it in his back pocket. He'd read it later and decide if there was anything he could do to help her.

Some might consider it an invasion of privacy, but not Levi. He had skills that most people didn't and if he could use them to help someone he cared for then that's what he should do. Besides which, she'd thrown it in the trash without even tearing it up or shredding it. That made it fair game in his mind.

Linda was special. A classy lady who was never pretentious. She'd been reserved with him at first, but he'd soon discovered that was just her way. She reminded him of a dog who'd been abused. Guarded. Not trusting until she was certain she wouldn't be hurt.

He didn't like the idea of someone hurting her.

Not that she was fragile or anyone's idea of a victim. Just the opposite, in fact. Linda was fiercely independent and a hard worker. She'd pitched in, working long hours alongside him, sweating deep into the late hours of the night to whip this place into shape.

She had to be curious about him and his past, yet she'd asked him no questions. Linda had accepted him as he was, and that was a rare gift. He knew he made a lot of folks uncomfortable. It wasn't only his size, but the way he watched things. He'd been told more than once he had scary eyes.

But Linda hadn't seemed scared or intimidated at all. She'd worked beside him, sharing funny anecdotes from her trips to look for more antiques. She handled all the details of the renovation, as well as the pressures of getting a new business launched without breaking a sweat.

However, she wasn't all calm and composure. More than once, he'd caught her swearing when things went wrong with the renovations. Her blue eyes blazed and her skin flushed a rosy red as she dealt with whatever problem arose. She was cute when she was mad, but he'd never tell her that. He wasn't totally without social skills when it came to the opposite sex.

He liked Linda. She was comfortable to be around. Plus, she was easy on the eyes. He didn't like the idea that someone, or something, had upset her as much as it had.

He glanced over at her as she hugged Cyndi and Amanda. Linda was tall for a woman, about five-nine, but she was still small alongside him. He liked the way her black hair was cut short. The style wasn't fussy and suited her. She had a slender build and porcelain skin. He longed to touch her, but knew he was much too rough around the edges for a woman like Linda.

That hadn't stopped him from fantasizing about it though. His imagination had created scenario after scenario, which featured both of them naked and rolling around in his bed. Hell, he didn't even need a bed. A table, a sofa or even a wall would do just fine.

He could imagine her hands touching him—everywhere. He wanted to feel her fingers skating all over his skin from his face to his feet and everywhere in between. Then he wanted to return the favor.

He'd lost countless hours of sleep wondering what color her nipples were and how sensitive they were. Levi wanted to feel the texture of her fine skin beneath his fingertips, wanted to taste her soft flesh, caress her plump breasts.

He imagined working his way down her body, teasing her bellybutton with his tongue before dipping even lower. He wanted to spread her thighs wide and bury his face in her pussy, learn her scent and smell as he discovered what made her moan and what made her scream with pleasure.

His jeans tightened around his cock as it expanded. He swore under his breath and concentrated on bringing himself back under control, thankful he was standing behind the counter. It wasn't easy, but he managed to keep the problem from getting any bigger. He usually had no problem with control, except around Linda.

Her voice, low and cultured, slid over his skin like a physical caress as she greeted her friends. It had been that way from the moment he'd first heard her speak. She glanced over her shoulder at him as if she sensed his scrutiny. She raised her eyebrow at him in silent question. He stared back, giving away nothing of his thoughts.

Cyndi caught her attention, pulling her away to look at a display of dishes in the corner. Levi picked up his coffee and headed over to where Jonah and Shamus were standing just inside the front door. He nodded to both of them. "There's coffee if you want it." He pointed them in the direction of the coffee pot.

Both men took him up on the offer, heading over to help themselves to a cup. The letter he'd dug out of the garbage was practically burning a hole in his back pocket, but it could wait. If there was one thing he'd learned during his time in Special Forces, it was patience. He'd need privacy and time to examine whatever was in there. He settled back and pushed the letter from his mind for the time being.

Right now, he needed to be near Linda. Joy and excitement lit her face from within as she showed both women around the store. He soaked it up, feeling a sense of pride at his small part in helping to make this happen. The corners of his lips turned up slightly as he watched her flit around the store like a butterfly, not quite landing anywhere, but touching everything in her path. He'd bet every cent he had, which was a considerable amount, that she knew every object in the store and could tell you its history and price without checking her computer.

The door opened and several older ladies walked in, followed by a younger couple. Linda smiled and greeted them. Past Promises was officially open.

Levi did what he did best. He faded into the background and watched the proceedings unfold before him.

Chapter Two

Linda locked the front entrance a little after half-past five. Every muscle in her body ached, but it was a good feeling. She was exhausted, yet exhilarated, by her first day in business. It had been busier than she'd expected, considering the time of year. Many folks had simply been curious about the store, but many had come to buy.

Twirling around in a circle, she let out a small laugh. She grabbed hold of the side of a table when the room began to spin, a sharp reminder that she'd been so busy she hadn't had time to eat lunch. Added to that the fact that she'd been too nervous to eat any breakfast and it had been almost twenty-four hours since she'd eaten. No wonder she was feeling lightheaded.

Satisfaction filled her as she went behind the counter and began to tally the day's sales. She'd done well, considering it was early April and there weren't many tourists around. Already her mind was jumping with ideas. She definitely needed to start looking for a part-time employee she could train so she could seek out new stock at estate sales and auctions.

She hummed as she worked, enjoying the quiet after the excitement of the day. When her bookwork was done, she locked her deposit and account books in the antique safe that sat beside her desk. It had taken five men and a lot of sweat to get the heavy metal box into place so she wasn't worried about the receipts sitting there overnight. Besides, most of her sales had been credit card. Only a handful of folks had used cash.

"Are you done?"

Linda gave a half-shriek as she spun around in her chair, her hand plastered to her chest. "You have got to stop doing that," she scolded Levi. The man moved like a ghost. It was very disconcerting.

"Sorry about that." He leaned against the doorjamb that led to the inside stairwell and the apartments above. She tried not to notice how delectable he looked with his brown eyes gleaming and his black hair shoved away from his incredible face.

"Did you want anything?" As much as she enjoyed spending time with Levi, she hoped he didn't need anything. All she wanted right now was a long soak in her claw-foot bathtub and something to eat.

Heat flashed in his eyes before being buried beneath his usual unreadable stare. Linda was no longer certain what she'd seen in his eyes in that brief second. She'd probably imagined she saw a spark of sexual interest because she was so tired.

He pushed away from the doorframe and came toward her. "I'd like a lot of things, but right now I'd like to feed you dinner. You didn't have any lunch?"

It sounded like an accusation and raised her hackles. "I was busy," she snapped. He raised one of his brows and she took a deep breath, refusing to apologize. She'd done far too much of that in her life.

"So I saw. The store did great today. You must be proud."

Great, now she felt small and petty for snapping at Levi. The man was just making conversation and, if she'd heard him correctly, was offering her dinner. Her stomach chose that moment to growl. Loudly.

Levi smiled. It was the briefest flash, but it changed his face completely, softening the harsh features. Linda blinked. She'd only seen him smile a handful of times and each one left her feeling warm and tingly all over.

It was a good thing that he didn't smile all the time or she'd never be able to function around him. As it was, she tended to act like a blithering idiot half the time. She had no idea why. She'd been exposed to rich, good-looking, powerful men her entire life. But none of them affected her the way Levi did.

He sauntered toward her, muscles flexing and rolling with each step. "Why don't you come on up to my place and I'll feed you dinner while you tell me all about your day?"

"I'd planned to take a bath."

The color of his eyes deepened as he leaned closer. "You could take your bath first."

Linda swallowed hard and closed her eyes in self-defense. Images of the two of them in her large antique tub crowded her brain. Soapy, slick limbs entwined. His hands caressing her breasts, cupping and shaping them. Her breathing quickened. Her head was spinning and this time it had nothing to do with the lack of food. Her body swayed.

Levi steadied her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "You're tired. Food first."

She shook herself out of her stupor. She must be more tired and hungry than she thought. That was her only explanation for allowing her daydreams about Levi to take over so completely. Usually she was able to control her unruly thoughts. But not tonight.

"You don't need to do that, Levi. I was just going to fix a sandwich or something."

"It's no trouble. Besides, it's already cooked. All you have to do is sit and eat. Then you can get your bath."

It was an offer too good to refuse. "Just let me get the lights." Going to the bank of switches, she turned off all but three, keeping them on for security purposes. The store took on a ghostly feel as the deepening shadows enveloped it. "Good night," she whispered to the store before turning back to the doorway where Levi waited.

He stepped back and watched as she locked and secured the inside door. Silently, they headed up the stairs to his apartment.

“Thank you for making dinner.” They’d shared plenty of takeout meals while they were working on the building, but this was the first time she’d ever been in his apartment since it was finished.

“My pleasure.” Levi reached around her and pushed open the door. Curious, she walked inside. The floor plan was open and airy. Several tall, narrow windows looked out onto the street, while another one looked out onto the grassy lot out back. The walls were painted the color of a latté and there were wooden shutters at the windows. She’d bought the shutters to match the ones on her apartment above to give the building a more finished look.

The furnishings were sparse. A ratty couch sat against one wall, a recliner patched with several pieces of duct tape was situated across from it. A low, battered coffee table was positioned between the two. Obviously he’d gotten his furniture from a garage sale or maybe from the Buy and Sell on the other end of town. They sold a bit of everything there from books to furniture and knick-knacks. Either way, it was obvious he hadn’t spent a lot of money on it. Another indication he didn’t plan to stay for long. She tried to ignore the turn in her stomach that thought brought.

Off the kitchen, a wooden table was set for two with mismatched dishes. Paper napkins that matched the inexpensive placemats rested on each side plate. Two unlit candles in squat iron holders were placed next to an open bottle of white wine.

Linda was instantly charmed. Levi had gone to a lot of trouble without even knowing for sure if she’d accept his invitation. “Thank you for this.” On impulse, she went up on her toes and kissed his cheek. It was rough with stubble.

Levi stood unmoving as she stepped back. Then his head slowly lowered as he looked at her. “My pleasure.” His low voice rumbled through the room. “Wine?”

She thought about her stomach, but threw caution to the wind. It was a night of celebration. She’d have a few sips with dinner. “I’d love it.”

He filled one long-stemmed glass and handed it to her before filling one for himself. Lifting it, he saluted her. “To you and to Past Promises.”

Her heart fluttered as she raised her glass so it clinked against his before taking a tiny sip. The wine was crisp and went down easy.

“Thank you.” She placed her glass on the table. “I was surprised how many people actually came to the opening.”

Levi set his glass aside and went into the small kitchen. It was open to the dining area so she could watch him while he worked. “I’m not.” He deftly removed a pan from the oven and dished up two chicken breasts. “It’s a classy store, but it’s accessible too. Something for everyone.”

Pleasure filled her chest to overflowing at his words of praise. She hadn’t gotten much praise in her life and was always surprised when anyone complimented her. “That’s what I was aiming for.”

Adding baby carrots, sweet peas and scalloped potatoes to the plates, he picked them both up and carried them to the table. Before she had time to pull out her chair, he was there behind her, holding it for her.

“Thank you,” she murmured. She could feel the heat from his big body as he hovered behind her. The lightest touch grazed her nape, but then it was gone. Levi said nothing as he sat across from her, leaving her to wonder if he’d touched her at all or if it was just her overactive imagination.

He struck a match and lit the plain white pillar candles. The lights flickered and settled down to a slow burn. Shadows flickered across his face.

“Eat.” He picked up his fork and motioned for her to do the same. The chicken was incredibly tender and delicately spiced, the vegetables done to perfection.

“This is delicious.” She forked up another mouthful and closed her eyes, savoring every bite. A low sound came from the other side of the table and her eyes shot open. Levi sat calmly eating. Must have been her imagination. Linda ate another piece of the chicken, letting the flavors explode on her tongue before chewing. Levi really was the most remarkable man.

Levi was shocked that the fork he was holding didn’t snap in half. His knuckles were white as the muscles in his fingers flexed. With her eyes closed and her head tilted back, Linda was the most sensual creature he’d ever seen. Every mouthful of food she took, she savored, making little noises of pleasure that were driving him mad.

His cock throbbed, keeping time to the heavy thundering of his heart. The damn thing was pressed so hard against the zipper of his jeans he wouldn’t be surprised if he had metal teeth marks on his dick.

Every ounce of his control was tested as he forced himself to take a deep breath and then slowly release it. He focused on her face, taking in every delicate line. Her cheeks were lightly flushed, whether from the wine or some other reason, he didn’t know and didn’t care. The delicate blush made her skin look even more like porcelain.

Linda opened her eyes and caught him staring. She gave a self-conscious laugh and picked up the napkin, patting her lips. “I’m sorry. I’m not very good company.”

“You’re very good company.” Linda had a way about her that soothed him in ways he couldn’t put into words. Just being around her made him feel good.

She laughed again, the light, airy sound skating over every nerve ending in his body. “Now I know you’re being kind.” She rolled her neck on her shoulders before gifting him with a small smile. “I was more hungry than I thought and this is delicious.”

“You’re welcome.” He enjoyed cooking. It helped him relax. “You’re pleased with how today went?”

“Very.” She set her fork aside and picked up her wine glass, taking a tiny sip.

The liquid made her lips glisten. Levi wanted to lick them. To distract himself, he shoveled in another mouthful of dinner, chewing as he listened to her recap her day. The more she talked about the store, the more animated she became. It was obvious how much she loved Past Promises.

Conversation was easy as they finished dinner. Levi had started coffee before they'd sat down so he knew it would be done percolating by now. He stood to clear the table.

"Let me help you with that." Linda jumped up, but he motioned her back to her seat.

"Sit. You've had a long day. It's only a couple of plates."

"Thank you, Levi."

He almost groaned aloud when she said his name. He loved the sound of his name on her lips. Wanted to hear her whisper it in the dark of the night as their bodies melded together. Wanted to hear her scream it as he pounded into her, bringing them both to a mind-blowing orgasm.

Coffee, he reminded himself. Shoving the dishes in the sink, he poured the coffee and carried both mugs back to the table.

"It was nice of Jonah, Amanda, Shamus and Cyndi to come this morning."

"They're good people." He and Jonah had been friends for years, but he'd gotten to know the others over the past few months.

Linda sipped her coffee. "I'm grateful every day for the fact that I handled the estate sale after Cyndi inherited a house and its contents from her father."

"Is that how you met?" He'd heard bits and pieces of the story.

She nodded, setting the cup on the table. "Yes. And I called Amanda and brought her in on the sale. The rest, as they say, is history."

"So that's why you moved here?"

Her fingers, long and delicate, played with the handle of the mug. "Hmm. The time was right for a move."

"But didn't you have family and friends in Vermont?" There was no tactful way to bring up the subject, so Levi went for what usually worked best—being blunt.

She shrugged, her entire body tensing. He was sorry for that. She'd finally relaxed and now he'd undone all his hard work. But it had to be done and he'd never been one to shirk from the hard jobs.

Her eyes seemed sad, whether a trick of the candlelight or because of her thoughts, he couldn't say. All he knew is it made him want to take her in his arms and assure her everything would be okay. His hands clenched into fists beneath the table and he forced his fingers to relax against his thighs. It wasn't his place to make assurances. She wasn't his woman.

But, oh, how he wished she were.

Stuffing that thought away, he focused on the problem at hand—getting Linda to talk to him. "No family?" he prompted.

She shoved the chair back, her smile brittle. “None worth talking about. Thanks so much for dinner, but I should go now. It’s been a long day and I’m tired.”

She didn’t take a single breath as she spoke. When she was done, she whirled away from the table and headed to the door. Levi beat her there, pressing his hand against the heavy oak panel as she tried to pull it open.

He was so close he could smell the remnants of the perfume she’d applied this morning. Or maybe it was body lotion. Either way, he was beginning to associate the smell of roses with her. He’d never particularly liked roses, but that had changed in the past few months. Now they reminded him of her. His cock lengthened and thickened as he fought the need to press it against the curve of her back.

“Don’t go.” His voice was low as he whispered in her ear. He didn’t want her to leave like this—upset and tense. “Talk to me.”

“There’s nothing to say.” Her shoulders rose and fell in a shrug, but she didn’t even try to turn around. She laughed, but it fell flat. Tension flared between them and her body stiffened. “Please let me leave.”

Levi knew he should step back, open the door and let her go. He was too blunt and rough around the edges for a woman like Linda. She was softness and roses and class. He’d been born to a junkie mother and an unknown father and grown up in surroundings that made some of the third world countries he’d been in during his years as a soldier look like a paradise.

He’d been in situations that no person should ever have to endure. He’d killed. He’d learned to shut down his emotions to survive, but that had lasted only so many years before the cracks began to show. That’s why he’d retired. He wasn’t certain of himself and his reactions anymore. That made him dangerous in combat situations and he wouldn’t risk the safety of his fellow soldiers. So he’d opted out and come here to figure out his life. All he’d wanted was peace and quiet, but he’d found so much more.

Yes, he should walk away, and probably would in the future. But right now, Linda was hurting and he could do something about it.

“I can’t let you go,” he whispered. “Not yet.” Unable to stop himself, he nuzzled the curve of her neck. The scent of roses was stronger here and he inhaled deeply, breathing in the potent smell of flowers mixed with the unique perfume of the woman in front of him.

She froze.

Levi swore inwardly and took a step back. It was incredibly hard when all he wanted to do was step toward her, flattening his front against her back and letting her feel his need for her. But that wasn’t what she needed. Not now.

Slowly, she turned toward him, her eyes wide with confusion. She licked her lips and his cock jerked in response. He wanted her sweet tongue to lick him. His body tensed and he made himself take another step away. It didn’t help. The scent of her warm body filled his nostrils. His baser instincts roared at him to take her, to love her so long and hard she’d never want him to leave.

“I don’t understand.” Linda pushed a lock of hair out of her eyes as she took a deep breath. The actions made her chest rise and her breasts pushed against her blouse, making him sweat.

Levi reached into his back pocket and slowly drew out the letter. Linda stared quizzically at it as he opened it and then all the blood seemed to drain from her face. She swayed. He was ready to catch her, but she locked her knees and straightened her shoulders.

Her gaze was fierce as she stared up at him. “Where the hell did you get that?”

“From your garbage can.” He saw no reason to lie. “You want to tell me about it?”

Chapter Three

Linda could barely breathe, let alone think. Levi had the letter from her brother. Correction, Levi had stolen the letter out of her trashcan. Obviously, he'd read it. But why?

She reached for the letter and he let her have it. As she crumpled the heavy paper in her hand, she tried to figure out what to say. Finally, she decided she didn't have to say anything. This was nobody's business but her own.

Levi was watching her with that guarded expression he wore almost all the time. It was as if he assessed every situation, constantly searching for the best approach to take in order to gain the results he wanted. That was fine when he was working on a construction project. Not so great when he was trying to dissect her mind and figure out how to handle her. She'd had enough of men trying to *handle* her. Her father, brother and ex-fiancé were the worst offenders.

"This is none of your business." She turned to leave, but he stopped her once again by placing his hand on the door. Levi was much stronger than her and there was no way she was getting out of here until he let her.

Linda faced him again, not the least bit intimidated by his scowl. He might be much bigger and stronger than her, but she knew without a doubt he'd never use that against her in any way. She was safe with Levi.

That thought surprised her. Safety wasn't something she usually associated with a person. Owning this building, having a business of her own, a place, gave her a sense of safety. It was never a good idea to rely too heavily on people—especially men. They tended to have their own agendas and let you down when push came to shove.

"It affects you. That makes it my business." Levi leaned in as he spoke, taking up most of the space around her, making it hard for her to focus.

The clean scent of his soap mixed with the spices from dinner made her mouth water. She swallowed hard. She had to get control of this situation. Levi was acting out of concern. While she was grateful to have him as a friend, she didn't exactly approve of his methods.

Placing one hand against his chest, she pushed. Levi stepped back, but she was under no misconception that she'd actually be able to move him if he didn't want to go. The heat from his body soaked into her palm, even through the layer of his T-shirt.

“Thank you for your concern,” she began as she dropped her hand back to her side. Her fingers curled inward of their own accord, holding the heat from his body a little longer. “But you shouldn’t have read the letter. It’s private.”

“It hurt you.” The way he said the words told her he considered that justification enough.

Her stomach began to burn as humiliation washed over her. It was bad enough that she knew her family didn’t think much of her, but it was another thing altogether for Levi to find out. All her life her family had been disappointed in her, labeling her a failure.

She squared her shoulders and ignored the tears welling in her eyes, blinking them back. She would not shed one more tear over her family. There was nothing wrong with her. It was a mantra she’d repeated over and over the past few years. As far as she was concerned, now that her grandmother was gone, she had no family.

“Yes, well life hurts sometimes.” She tried to make her voice strong and brisk, but it came out sounding slightly pitiful.

“Yes it does.” Levi brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. Linda closed her eyes for a brief second, soaking in the care and concern behind the gesture. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t do something about it,” he continued.

Linda sighed as he let his hand drift from her face. “I am doing something. I’m ignoring them.” She leaned back against the door, exhaustion creeping in once again. “I’ve gotten very good at that,” she added wryly.

Levi’s frown deepened. “I don’t understand what their problem is in the first place. You’re beautiful and smart and successful. What more could they ask for?”

Heat crept up her cheeks as she stared in wonder at Levi. He truly believed what he said. The warmth left her face and spread out to other areas of her body. She almost groaned as her nipples tightened and liquid slipped from her core to dampen her panties.

She swallowed a groan. She had to get out of here before she did something stupid like jump Levi’s bones. It had to be the combination of emotions and exhaustion making her feel this way. The two of them were friends. In the months they’d been working together, he’d never shown any sign he’d felt anything for her beyond friendship. Plus, he was just passing through, not settling here for good.

Getting involved with Levi wasn’t a good idea. She’d only had one serious relationship and that had ended in disaster. She wasn’t the type of woman to jump into bed with a man, not without some sort of commitment.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “It’s an old fight. One we’ve been having my entire life. They want me to be something that I’m not and I’m through trying to fit in to please them. They can’t accept that. Hence the letter.” And the occasional phone call from her mother, but she wasn’t going to mention that.

"It's still not right." His voice was pitched low and intimate. The room was dark but for the flickering candlelight and the small light over the stove in the kitchen.

"It is what it is." She turned it back on him. "What about you? What's your relationship like with your parents?"

Levi became very still. The air around him changed. Tension pervaded the room. This was obviously a sticky subject for him too. Just when she thought he wasn't going to tell her anything, he spoke, "My mother died of a drug overdose when I was sixteen. I have no idea who my old man is. I don't think she knew. Given my mother's taste in men, he's probably in prison, if not dead." Levi's face was grim as he continued, "I didn't exactly have a loving family."

She hurt for him. He was the strongest person she knew. According to Amanda, Levi was loyal and kind. He'd come to help Jonah without asking any questions and had helped save Amanda's life. Character. That's what Levi had—strength of character. Obviously he'd risen above his upbringing and made himself into the man he was today.

But like her, he carried scars from the past.

Without thought, she reached out and placed her palm against his jaw. The slight stubble was rough against her skin. "I'm sorry."

His jaw tightened and a muscle beneath his right eye began to twitch. "Don't be. It was a long time ago."

"Doesn't make it hurt any less." She knew that for a fact.

"I don't need pity." His voice was harsh, but he didn't move away from her. In fact, he shifted closer.

"No," she agreed. "You don't need pity. You've made something out of your life. Something you can be proud of."

"You don't know that."

She started to move her hand away, but he captured it with his much larger one and pressed her fingers back to his face.

"I do know that. I know you served your country with honor and distinction. I know you're a loyal friend. I know you're a good man," she continued. "Working alongside you these past months, I'd like to think I've come to know you rather well."

"You don't know me at all." She heard the faintest edge of hope beneath the anger and it made her heart ache. They both carried such pain inside them.

"I may not know everything about you, but I know you here." She released her death grip on the letter and let the paper fall to the floor. It didn't matter any more. The only thing that mattered was the man before her. She placed her free hand over his heart, feeling the heavy thud. "You're a good man, Levi."

Levi swore as he stepped forward, herding her toward the door until her back hit it. "I'm not a good man," he gritted out. "If I was so good, I wouldn't want to strip off your clothes and fuck you against this door."

Her body went hot, then cold, then hot again. Had he said what she thought he had? He wanted her. Her mind could barely wrap around the concept. All these months, he'd kept his distance, never giving her any indication that he was attracted to her.

"If I was as good and honorable as you think, I'd open the door and let you go." He crowded closer, pressing his lower body against hers.

His erection pressed against her belly, hard and thick. Linda sucked back a moan of pleasure as her sex clenched hard in anticipation. Cream slipped from inside her, coating her labia with moisture.

"Tell me to let you go." His voice was rough and thick with arousal. His breathing, ragged.

Linda couldn't speak. Need flowed through her like wildfire, setting her blood aflame. She forgot all the reasons why she shouldn't get involved with Levi. There was no place for reason in the heat of madness.

She had to get closer. Her clit throbbed in agreement as she hooked her leg over his hip and arched her pelvis, grinding her swollen sex against the front of his jeans. The friction was so marvelous she did it again.

"Fuck." Levi gripped her hips, hauling her closer.

A moan of pure pleasure escaped her as he pressed against her. "So good," she groaned.

"If we're going to stop, it has to be now. I'm not sure how much longer my control will hold out." Levi's words came out in a rush and were followed by a low groan as their hips met again and again.

A sense of power flowed through her. That she could bring a man like this to the brink of losing control was a heady rush. But it was quickly followed by tenderness and need. He needed her. She needed him. It was as simple as that.

Maybe she might regret it in the light of day, but that was a long way off. She'd always been a good girl. Now she simply wanted to have hard, heart-pounding sex. With Levi.

Gripping his hair in both her hands, she pulled his face down to hers. "Don't stop."

Levi captured her lips in a searing kiss. There was no tentative exploration, no gentle seeking. He took control, licking her lips until she parted them on a gasp. Then he plunged inside. His tongue was hot as it tangled with hers.

She didn't recognize the soft whimpers of need that came from her. Tilting back her head, she tried to get closer to him. Their teeth clinked together as Levi's hands molded her hips, lifting her into each stroke of his hips.

He tore his lips from hers. "Too much clothes," he muttered. Releasing his hold on her hips, he grabbed the front of her blouse and tugged. Buttons popped, pinging off the floor and the wall.

Her hands clutched the cotton of his shirt, shoving it upward as large hands cupped her breasts. Linda moaned as his thumbs traced her nipples through the thin lace of her bra.

“I’ve got to see you.” He reached behind and undid the hooks holding her bra in place. Shoving the fabric up, he leaned down and nuzzled her breasts. First one. Then the other. Her breath caught in her throat when his tongue swirled around her distended nipple.

Levi took the tip into his mouth and suckled. Her pussy clenched and began to throb. “Levi,” she moaned, needing more.

She tugged at his shirt, wanting it off, wanting to be able to feel his bare skin against hers. He released her long enough to drag his shirt over his head and toss it aside. Before she could touch him, he was kissing her again.

His hands shaped her breasts as his fingers toyed with her nipples. Grasping his shoulders, she tried to wrap her legs around his waist. The pressure between her thighs was becoming unbearable.

“Not yet,” he groaned in between pressing open-mouthed kisses along her neck. He shoved her legs back down and went for the buttons on her slacks.

While he was busy, she stroked her hands over his chest. It was even better than she’d imagined. Muscles leapt beneath her palms as she touched him. His skin was soft, yet what was beneath it was rock solid. Several pale scars ran down his chest. Another curved around his left shoulder. Reminders of the dangerous life he’d lived.

He had a light patch of hair in the center of his chest that angled down toward his navel, thinning as it went lower. Her finger slowly traced that line of hair.

Linda suddenly realized Levi was no longer moving. His hands were frozen on the zipper of her slacks. He sucked in his belly as her hand played along the waistband of his jeans.

“Touch me.” He arched his hips upward, reaching for her hand.

Using her index finger, she traced the hard line of his zipper. Levi swore, grabbed her hand and placed it solidly over his erection. She could feel the heat and the pulse of it through his jeans. Her fingers closed around him and she moved her hand up and down, learning his size and shape.

He yanked down her zipper and pulled her slacks and underwear down her thighs, shoving them toward her feet. Going down on one knee in front of her, he pulled off her shoes before tugging away the wad of fabric circling her ankles. She helped as best she could. And then her legs were free.

Levi grasped her ass in his hands as he stood. Lifting her, he squeezed both globes, his fingers hot against her skin. She wrapped her legs around his waist and braced her hands against his shoulders, pressing her sex against the hard planes of his stomach. Her clit throbbed as moisture seeped out to coat his belly.

“Hold on,” he ordered. He ripped open the front of his jeans. She heard the sound of a foil packet being torn open and he fumbled briefly. Then she felt the broad head of his penis searching for her opening. Levi held her hips steady, pressing past the initial resistance of her body.

She hadn’t done this in a long time. Her body was tight. Linda tensed in spite of her best efforts not to.

“Relax,” he crooned. “We can take it slow.”

She wasn’t sure she believed him. Every muscle in his body was tense and a light sheen of perspiration coated his chest and shoulders. She closed her eyes and braced herself for the invasion, but it didn’t happen.

She opened her eyes and found Levi watching her. The moment their gazes met, he pushed inward another inch.

Her body, so ready for him, gave way easily. The heat from his body surrounded her. His cock pulsed inside her like a heartbeat—slow and steady.

“More.” She squirmed, trying to get closer.

Levi held her steady, fighting her, fighting for control. Linda leaned inward and nipped at the sensitive skin on his neck.

“Linda!” He roared her name, driving forward in one long, hard stroke and burying himself to the hilt.

She gasped and then moaned. He stretched her and filled her to the point of pain, but it passed quickly as her body adjusted. Pleasure drove out any feelings of discomfort as Levi bent his knees and withdrew almost to the tip before driving forward again.

Linda gripped his upper arms, moving her body in rhythm with his. The door was hard against her back, her bra and blouse still tangled around her upper body, but she didn’t care. All that mattered was finding release.

Pressure built low in her body as Levi pounded into her over and over. Linda gasped for breath, tightening her thighs around his waist. “Close,” she moaned.

His strokes got quicker. Harder. He angled her hips so her clit was pressed against the hard planes of his stomach with each stroke. She could feel the first twinges starting deep in her body.

The explosion was instantaneous. She cried out. Every muscle in her body clenched and released. Her pussy clutched his cock with each stroke, pulling it deeper inside her.

Levi yelled and pushed deep one final time. The ripples from his orgasm made her catch her breath. He leaned heavily against her, his forehead touching the door, his chest heaving as he struggled for breath.

Quivers shook her body and she knew she would be in a heap on the floor if Levi wasn’t holding her up. A cramp in her leg caught her off-guard and she groaned. Unhooking her legs, she let them fall back to the floor.

“What’s wrong?” Levi was alert immediately. She could see the concern etched on his face as he withdrew from her body.

“Cramp.” Linda stretched out her leg and it subsided. She cursed the cramp, wishing Levi was still buried deep inside her. She wasn’t ready for the interlude between them to be over. But from what she’d read in magazines, and from her experience with her ex, she knew men were different. He’d probably want her to go.

Feeling suddenly vulnerable and aware of her nudity in a way she hadn’t been before, she tugged her blouse closed without even trying to hook her bra. She was reaching for her slacks when Levi swore under his breath. She glanced his way and her breath caught in her throat.

It wasn’t fair how good he looked. His hair was tousled and his chest gleamed in the candlelight. He’d yanked up his jeans and zipped them, leaving the button undone. She had no idea what he’d done with the condom. She felt sticky and uncomfortable, while Levi just looked plain sexy.

“That shouldn’t have happened.”

She flinched at his words. Obviously, his world hadn’t been rocked in the same way hers had. Holding her slacks in front of her while she tried to untangle her panties, she gave him a smile. It felt brittle and fake. “Sorry about that. Just give me a minute and I’ll be out of your way.”

“Fuck!” Levi grabbed her slacks, but she held on, not willing to give up their dubious protection. “That’s not what I meant.” He released her pants and raked his fingers through his hair. “I’m sorry. I was rough with you. You deserve better.” His golden-brown eyes examined her from head to toe.

“Pound her against the bloody door,” he muttered so low she knew he hadn’t meant for her to hear him. He looked down at the floor, rubbing one hand over the back of his neck.

Linda blinked as she watched him. He wasn’t sorry they’d had sex. He was mad at himself for not being gentle with her.

“It’s okay.” She smiled and this time it felt more natural. “I didn’t mind being pounded against the bloody door.”

His head jerked back up. Every ounce of his attention was on her.

“In fact, I enjoyed every minute of it.”

Chapter Four

Levi would have kicked his own ass if he could've reached it. Not that it would have helped matters any. What was done was done.

He was just grateful Linda wasn't running screaming from him. Yes, she'd come. He'd made sure of that before taking his own pleasure. But he'd been rough and hard. And he'd taken her for the first time against the damn door.

So much for his plans of taking it slow and coaxing her into his bed. He'd been all over her like some damn marauder, pounding into her until they'd both cried out.

His body hummed with pleasure and his cock was getting hard again. Linda made him feel like he was sixteen again, not a man staring forty in the eye.

She stood there looking more beautiful than ever. Her hair was sticking up on end, her lips were moist and her skin was damp with sweat. And he could smell her. The scent of roses mixed with the raw smell of sex. It might be barbaric, but it turned him on.

What he didn't like was the look of uncertainty on her face and the fact that she felt she had to hide her body from him after what had just happened between them. He'd messed up again when he'd sworn and said it shouldn't have happened. Linda had taken it the wrong way and he'd tried, in his own inept way, to correct that assumption.

When she spoke, his attention was riveted to her. Tension melted away when she smiled and said she'd enjoyed it. He felt the corners of his mouth turning upward. "I enjoyed every minute of it too." Reaching out, he cupped her chin in his hand. "But I still should have been more gentle with you."

He stroked his thumb over her bottom lip. Her eyes lost focus and her lips parted. Small puffs of breath caressed his thumb. She was still aroused.

She swallowed, the slender column of her neck rippling. "It was..." she broke off and gave a shaky laugh. "It was good. Real good."

"I can do better."

Linda seemed to hold her breath, her eyes growing even wider.

"I barely got started." He let his hand slide down her neck. The pulse there beat frantically. "You mentioned a bath earlier. How about you get a bath and we'll go from there?"

She licked her lips. "Okay. A bath would be...good." She shook her head and sighed. "I'd like a bath."

Levi reached down and scooped her into his arms. The wool pants she'd been clutching tight in her hands fell to the floor, forgotten, as she grabbed onto him. For such a tall woman, Linda hardly weighed anything. He frowned as he carried her toward the bathroom. He'd have to feed her more often.

Linda slid one of her hands around to the back of his neck and rested the other one against his chest. Her head was nestled into the curve of his shoulder. Levi didn't want to put her down. Only the thought that he'd get to hold her throughout the long night ahead allowed him to release her.

He let her legs down slowly, holding her until she was steady. The small window and the street light just beyond gave him more than enough light to work by. He had excellent night vision, which had come in handy in his former profession.

Leaving her leaning against the vanity, he flicked on the taps in the tub, fixing the water until it was the right temperature. It was a large, claw-foot tub that he'd refinished, bringing it back to its former beauty. He was glad that Linda had found two of the old-fashioned tubs at the salvage yard when she'd been searching for one for her apartment. While he'd worked on it, he'd imagined what she'd look like lounging in it, naked and wet. His dick stirred again, reminding him he was still wearing a condom.

Linda stood beside the sink looking uncertain, her hands tugging at the tails of her blouse.

"I'll be back." Striding out to the dining table, he plucked up the two candles and carried them to the bathroom, placing them on the counter. She'd been busy while he'd been gone. Her bra and blouse were on the floor and she was sitting in the tub, her legs pulled up to her chest.

Levi pulled out a clean washcloth and towel, placing them on the counter across from the tub. "You relax." Whether she did or not remained to be seen.

Leaving her, he went back to the kitchen and removed the condom, dumping it in the garbage. Grabbing a piece of paper towel, he wet it and cleaned himself up. When that was done, he finished clearing up from the meal, putting everything where it belonged.

Finally, he went to the front door and picked up Linda's shoes, placing them on the small welcome mat. He shook out her slacks and panties and socks, draping them across one of the kitchen chairs. He smoothed his hand over the silky underwear. The garment was ridiculously small and fragile.

Removing his hand, he stepped away from her clothes. He'd only touched her underwear and he was as hard as steel and hurting. Muttering under his breath, he grabbed his T-shirt and tossed it over his shoulder.

A splash caught his attention. Sometime in the past few minutes the water had stopped running. Unable to wait any longer, he went to the bathroom as if drawn by an invisible thread. Linda lounged against the end of the tub, the washcloth draped over her breasts and her right leg curved inward, hiding her soft thatch of pubic hair. Her eyes were closed, but popped open when he entered.

"Hi." He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorframe. She looked so pretty lolling in the water. He could stand there all night and just watch her. His erection flexed in protest.

“Hi.” She smiled at him and held out her hand.

Levi pushed away from the doorframe and went toward the tub, tossing his shirt aside before taking her hand in his. Such a strong hand, yet so fine boned and delicate at the same time. He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze and then released them.

Bending down, he unlaced his boots, shucking them one at a time. His socks followed. He straightened and placed his hands over his zipper, giving her time to object. When she said nothing, he undid his jeans and pulled them off, taking his underwear with them.

Naked, and fully aroused, he stood by the side of the tub. “Shift forward.”

Linda scooted ahead and Levi climbed in behind her, settling himself against the end of the porcelain tub. His legs surrounded hers as he gripped her shoulders and eased her back. “Relax and let me take care of you.”

Linda felt almost drunk with pleasure, arousal still pulsing deep within her. She’d never felt like this in her entire life. There was something about Levi, something about this night that was unique. A time out of time.

She knew she was acting out of character, but she didn’t care. Levi was special. Plus, she trusted him. He wasn’t offering her forever, but he wouldn’t hurt her either. Not intentionally. As long as she went into tonight with her eyes open, there was no reason she shouldn’t enjoy herself.

Every woman deserved one night of unfettered passion. One night with an incredible lover who made her feel like the most special woman in the world.

And that’s how Levi made her feel.

He wasn’t interested in what she could do for him or using her family’s connections for his own personal gain. He didn’t care that she owned and operated an antique store. He wanted her—Linda, the woman. There was no greater turn-on than that.

His big body surrounded her as he slipped in behind her and pulled her back to rest against him. His erection pressed against the center of her back, a tangible reminder that he wanted her again.

“This is nice.” What an understatement. Linda had never bathed with a man before, never would have imagined even doing so.

Levi reached around her, plucked a bar of soap from the holder and began to rub it between his large palms. Bubbles poked out from between his fingers as he built a thick lather. Dropping the soap back into the dish, he placed his hands on her stomach and began to rub.

“This is very nice,” he agreed as his hands continued their lazy circles, moving steadily upward.

Linda let her head fall back against his shoulder and stared up at him. In the flickering candlelight, he looked barbaric and untamed with his hair flowing down to his shoulders. His expression was one of total concentration as his fingers skimmed the undersides of her breasts.

Her nipples tightened, puckering into pointy nubs. Levi gave a low hum of pleasure as he circled her breasts, coating them in soap and bubbles. His fingers slid easily around her nipples, not quite touching them.

“Levi,” she moaned, her hips shifting. The motion pushed her back against his erection. His hands tightened around her breasts. She could feel his shaft pulsing, hot and heavy.

“Not yet.” He plucked at her distended nipples, tugging gently with his thumbs and forefingers.

Lightning shot from her breasts to between her thighs. She tilted her head back further, wanting to see him better. Levi gave a growl of pleasure. His mouth came down to cover hers.

This. This was what she wanted. Hot, mindless kisses that went on and on. Tongues dueling. Twining. Levi tasted hot and male and absolutely perfect. She’d never met a man quite like him. He was so self-contained, but she’d always sensed the depths beneath the layers.

She reached behind her, gripping his hair in her hand and tugging him closer. One of his hands continued to tease her nipples while the other one slid lower. She parted her legs for him. Eager. Ready.

A sexy rumble came from deep in his chest as he stroked over her wet, soapy flesh. Linda gasped, breaking away from their kiss when he slipped two thick fingers into her snug channel. Yes, they’d had sex once, but she was still tight.

“Damn, you’re so perfect.” He stroked his fingers inward, curling them upward on the outward stroke.

Linda cried his name. He’d found her sweet spot. She whimpered, arching upward. She needed him deeper. Harder.

He pressed his thumb against her swollen clit and she bucked, sending a wave of water over the side of the tub. Levi gave a sensual, satisfied laugh and touched her clit again.

“Come for me.” He pressed his fingers deep. When he withdrew, he spread them apart, widening her, preparing her. “Give me everything.”

His voice was thick with need as he plucked one swollen nipple, then another. Back and forth he went, working his fingers in and out of her channel. Her pussy was on fire.

She needed to come. Had to come.

Breathing was impossible. She panted hard, sucking in air. Her hips arched upward and she cried out. More water sloshed out of the tub and onto the floor. Her entire body coiled. She came, hard and fast. Spasms shook her while she rode out the waves of pleasure.

Through it all, Levi was there with her, touching her, coaxing her onward. Her orgasm seemed to spin on forever. When it was over, she collapsed back against him totally spent.

He shifted her so she wasn’t pressing so hard against his erection. It was then it dawned on her that this had been a solo flight. He’d made it all about her.

“What about you?” Her voice was lazy. Sleepy.

“Not here. No condom.” He grabbed the cloth and began to wash her. A strange lethargy filled her and she let him clean her from head to toe. She grumbled when he set her away from him and stood. But then she realized what a wonderful view she had as he stepped to the other end of the tub and gave himself a quick wash.

His legs were like tree trunks, so long and strong. Muscles roped over his thighs and arms and he dragged the cloth over them. His chest was slick. Linda wanted to lick the beads of water that slid over his hard, brown nipples and down his abs.

But it was what was between his thighs that captured her attention the most. His cock was long and broad. The plum-shaped head was dark and smooth. His shaft was thick and engorged with blood. The sac below it was heavy and full.

Reaching out, she lightly ran her fingers over his length. Levi groaned, dropping the cloth into the water. It landed with a heavy plop, forgotten by them both. Linda went up on her knees in front of him.

“This isn’t a good idea.”

She ran her thumb over the crown, spreading the bead of moisture that seeped from the slit. The muscles in his stomach clenched.

“This is an excellent idea,” she countered, letting her hand slide down his shaft. His skin was so soft and hot to touch. She cupped the heavy sac and gave a gentle squeeze. Levi groaned. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, but he made no move to stop her.

Licking her lips, she leaned forward, blowing softly. His cock flexed and Levi shuddered. His hand cupped the back of her head, urging her forward. Linda leaned inward, wanting to taste him.

She circled her tongue over the head of his cock. He tasted slightly salty and musky. She liked it. Opening her mouth, she took him inside. His hips thrust forward. She took as much of him as she could, wrapping her hand around his shaft and squeezing.

Sucking, she began to move up and down his cock. Levi’s fingers tightened in her hair, guiding her movements. Linda was surprised by how aroused she was getting again. His pleasure was feeding her own.

He tugged back, his voice ragged. “Stop. You have to stop.”

She didn’t want to stop and kept sucking.

Levi groaned and tugged a bit hard. “I want to be inside you when I come again.”

She released him with a wet pop. Levi was out of the tub before she could blink. Reaching in, he hauled her out of the tub and into his arms. He paused long enough to blow out the candles before carrying her down the hall and into his bedroom.

The light from the streetlamp beyond was the only illumination, but it was enough for her to make out a king-size bed, a nightstand and a chest of drawers. Levi dumped her on the bed, following her down.

He leaned over her, arms braced on either side, blocking out the light. “You are so beautiful.” There was wonder in his voice as he peppered her forehead, cheeks and chin with tender kisses.

She knew she wasn't beautiful. She was average and had some good features. She knew how to dress well for her body type and had long since stopped worrying about the rest of it.

Her mother had lamented the fact that Linda wouldn't dye her hair or get surgery to correct the fact that her nose wasn't quite perfect. All she'd heard while she was growing up was that she'd have to make the most of what little she had in the looks department. But Levi made her feel beautiful.

The comforter beneath her was getting damp as their bodies dried. She shivered. Not because she was cold, but because she wanted him again.

She'd already come twice and still she ached.

She stroked his powerful shoulders, feeling the muscle ripple beneath her fingers. "How do you do this to me?" she moaned.

"Do what?" He trailed kisses up the side of her neck before stroking his tongue over the whorls of her ear.

"That." Her fingernails dug into his skin. "Make me want you so much."

Levi stilled and then levered himself up, supporting himself on his hands. He stared down at her, his eyes smoldering with sexual tension. "That's a dangerous thing to tell a man."

She shrugged. There was no point in lying about it. He had to know she wanted him. The signs were all there.

"Linda—" He broke off as if he suddenly wasn't sure what to say.

She didn't want to talk. Didn't want to hear that this was just a one-night thing. She wanted Levi touching her, taking her. Tomorrow she'd deal with the fallout, but tonight she just wanted to forget the past and the future. There was only now.

Reaching between their bodies, she gripped his erection and stroked. Levi moaned, collapsed on top of her and rolled to one side. Throwing one thigh across her legs to keep them still, he captured one of her nipples between his teeth and gently tugged.

Linda stroked his shoulders, his head, his chest—wherever she could reach him. Levi shifted lower in the bed, kissing a path down her torso. He licked her hipbones and teased her bellybutton. She parted her legs, encouraging his exploration.

"I have to taste you." He made a space for himself between her thighs, his broad shoulders pushing them wider. Using his thumbs, he spread her slick folds wide and licked at her sensitive flesh.

Linda closed her eyes and let herself just feel. Her toes curled into the damp comforter, her back arched as she pushed her hips upward, her nipples tightened into hard nubs of pleasure. She wanted to remember everything about tonight.

Levi's hands were so big, yet so gentle as he continued to caress her. He teased her with his lips and circled her swollen clit with his tongue, wringing a groan of pleasure from deep within her.

"I wish I could see your pussy better. You're so hot and wet. I could spend hours eating you up."

Her inner muscles clenched tight. The man was seducing her with words alone. If he didn't stop soon, she was going to come again.

"You taste so sweet. Like honey." He lapped at her folds before returning to suck on her clit. She twisted her head from side to side on the pillow and dug her fingers into the comforter for support. "But spicy too." He blew on her heated flesh and she cried out at the delicious sensation.

"Levi." His name was a hoarse whisper. She needed him. Now.

He rolled to one side and yanked on the drawer to the nightstand. She opened her eyes and watched as he pulled out a condom, ripped the packet open and quickly sheathed himself. He crawled between her legs and shoved his arms beneath her thighs, placing his hands flat on the bed beside her.

The position opened her wide, allowing him to control everything. Excitement flooded her and her cream flowed, coating her, preparing her for penetration.

Levi flexed his hips forward. He pushed inward, not stopping until he was buried as deep as he could go. He didn't rush it. Just a slow steady push that joined them together.

He held himself steady as he leaned over her. Watching. Assessing. She liked the out-of-control Levi better. Flexing her inner muscles, she gripped his cock tight.

Groaning, he dropped his head down until it rested against hers. "I'm trying to be gentle."

Grasping his face in her hands, she kissed him. She could feel the heavy pulse of his shaft inside her. "I don't need gentle. Not now. Be gentle later."

Levi gave a short, harsh laugh that turned into a moan. Linda tightened her inner muscles again and Levi began to move. He thrust hard and fast, getting faster each time he pumped his hips until he was pounding into her.

It was just like when he took her against the door. It was fast and hot and made her explode.

"Levi!" she screamed. Every muscle in her body clenched and released. Her body shuddered and strained as he continued to fuck her, drawing her orgasm out.

He yelled, his hips driving hard one final time. She felt his cock rippling inside her. His head was thrown back, his teeth bared and every muscle tense. Linda loved that she was able to give him this, give him the same pleasure he'd given her.

He pulled out and collapsed facedown beside her, snaking out his arm and drawing her close. Linda snuggled against his side and sighed, content in a way she'd never been before.

It wasn't long before the cold began to seep into her skin. The comforter was damp because they hadn't taken the time to dry off after their bath.

Levi levered himself up at her first shiver. Without saying a word, he picked her up and yanked back the covers, placing her beneath them and pulling them around her. He dumped the damp comforter on the floor before disappearing down the hallway. She heard the water draining from the tub. Snuggling down, she tried to get warm. She missed Levi beside her, his heat surrounding her.

As if her thoughts conjured him, he was back. As silent as a wraith, he slid into bed beside her, gathering her into his arms. She went easily, ignoring the voice in the back of her head that was urging caution. She knew she had to get up soon, get dressed and go to her own apartment.

In a minute, she promised herself. For now she wanted to bask in the afterglow and be held in Levi's arms. The man gave off more heat than an electric blanket and she snuggled closer, wanting to soak up the warmth. He rested his hand on her hip, pulling her tighter against him.

Sighing, Linda relaxed. *Just one more minute. Just one more.*

Chapter Five

The sun was shining when Linda opened her eyes. She frowned. Her bedroom didn't get the morning sun. Why was it so bright?

Blinking, she stared around the room, not recognizing the barren walls or the ugly brown chest of drawers that stood opposite the bed.

She sat up and the covers fell to her waist. The cool air of the room hit her bare skin. *She was naked.* Linda grabbed the covers, clutching them to her chest as the events from the night before came flooding back.

Levi. She was at his apartment. He'd cooked her dinner. He'd pried into her personal life and read her mail. He'd also given her the most erotic night of her entire life.

But it was morning now and time to face reality.

She glanced at the clock on the nightstand and breathed a sigh of relief when it read half past seven. There was no way she wanted to be late for her second day of work.

"I wouldn't let you oversleep."

She jerked around to face the door. Levi stood in the doorway looking as handsome as sin. He was wearing jeans and a plain white T-shirt that stretched across his broad shoulders and chest, emphasizing the muscles beneath. His feet were bare. His hair was wet. Obviously, he'd been up long enough to shower and dress.

He hadn't shaved and his chin was dark with stubble. On most men it would look unkempt. On Levi it just looked sexy.

Her body jumped to life, breasts tingling, sex clutching. She had to get a grip on herself. The night was over. It was time to get their relationship back on an even keel. She didn't want to lose Levi as a friend. This was a night of passion between two adults. As long as she didn't make more of it than it was, she would be all right.

She was pathetic. She didn't want Levi to pack up and leave. She wanted last night to happen again.

She cleared her throat. "I appreciate that." What did one say the morning after? She hadn't had one before. Her ex had always left after they'd made love, heading back to his own apartment. He'd always cited that he didn't want to hurt her reputation by staying the night. She hadn't objected. Obviously, that should have been a sign to her that they weren't going to make it as a couple.

Levi padded across the floor on silent feet, a mug in his hand. The aroma of coffee wafted from it, almost making her moan. She licked her lips, almost tasting the potent brew.

The corners of Levi's mouth quirked up as though he knew exactly what she was thinking. "I thought you might need this." He held out the mug.

Linda made certain the covers were tucked tightly around her before she accepted the mug. Not that he hadn't seen all of her. She certainly hadn't been shy last night. But that was last night. In the bright light of the day she felt different, more uncertain.

He watched her as she sipped from the mug. The coffee was hot and strong—exactly what she needed. The brew had been sweetened just the way she liked it. Levi was a man who obviously paid attention. She took another sip. As long as she was drinking, she didn't have to worry about talking.

The silence between them grew.

She glanced away, surveying his bedroom. It didn't improve on second viewing. The walls had been painted a café mocha color. The woodwork around the window had been painted white. It was neutral, but nice. Levi hadn't done anything to punch up the color. The nightstand and chest of drawers were secondhand and had been painted a dark brown. Paint was chipped in several places, revealing a flash of white and red beneath. The sheets on the bed were white and the comforter that was crumpled on the floor in a clump was dark brown. Clearly, decorating wasn't high on his list of priorities.

"I'll be in the kitchen making breakfast when you're ready." She glanced back in time to see his back as he left the room.

Sighing, she set the mug on the nightstand and shifted her legs over the side of the bed. She stood, taking the sheet with her and wrapping it securely around her body. Her clothing sat in a tidy pile on the top of the chest of drawers, her shoes on the floor next to it. Grabbing all of it, she headed for the shower.

Fifteen minutes later, feeling refreshed, she headed for the kitchen, empty coffee mug in hand. She could hear a familiar sizzle from the frying pan. As she entered the room the smell of bacon and eggs hit her, making her stomach growl. She'd worked up an appetite last night.

She could feel her cheeks heating up as she strode toward the counter and poured herself another coffee, spooning two teaspoons of sugar into it before stirring. "You didn't have to make breakfast." She set the spoon on the counter and toyed with the handle of the mug.

"I wanted to." He deftly scrambled the eggs. "Besides, I was hungry." He moved the pan to the back burner and reached for her, pulling her into his arms. "I woke very hungry this morning." His golden-brown eyes glittered as he lowered his head.

Linda went up on her toes to meet him halfway. Their lips met, lightly grazing. The slight pressure sent shivers down her spine.

Levi groaned and deepened the kiss, thrusting his tongue past her lips. He tasted like fresh coffee and hot male. Yummy. Linda reveled in the feel of his mouth against hers. His hands cupped her butt and pulled her closer. He was obviously aroused. She brushed her stomach against his erection.

The bread in the toaster popped up. His hands tightened briefly before he released her, resting his forehead against hers. "Food. You need to eat before work."

She took a step back. "Is there anything I can do?" A part of her wanted to escape to her apartment, but another part of her wanted to share the morning meal with Levi.

"Can you pour me some more coffee while I get this?" He motioned to the pan of eggs.

"No problem." She topped up his mug, grabbed her own and carried both to the table. The placemats were still there, along with clean cutlery and napkins.

By the time she was settled at the table Levi was there with two plates loaded down with bacon, eggs and toast. There was no way she could eat all this. Besides, it wasn't great for her stomach. Still, he'd made it for her, so she would eat some of it.

He settled her plate in front of her. "It's turkey bacon so it's not as greasy and I did the eggs in a nonstick pan without butter." He sat down and grabbed his fork. "I know women worry about stuff like that."

Her heart did a tiny flip at his thoughtfulness. He didn't even know about her ulcer, but he was looking out for her. She frowned. The fact he had turkey bacon and cooking spray meant he'd planned this. Didn't it?

She took a bite of the eggs; they were light and fluffy. "Do you normally eat turkey bacon?" Why it was important for her to know if he'd planned this or not, she wasn't sure.

He chewed his food and laid his fork down as he leaned back in his chair. He was so big and handsome he took her breath away. "No, I don't. I bought it just in case." He said it matter-of-factly.

She set her fork down on the side of her plate. "You planned for me to stay the night?"

He shook his head. "Let's just say I was hoping."

"But why?" She was confused. In all the time they'd worked together, he'd never given her any sign that he was interested in her that way.

He shrugged. "The time seemed right."

She grabbed a piece of toast and bit off a corner to give herself time to think. He waited, the picture of patience, as she chewed and swallowed. "I don't know whether to be flattered or scared to death."

He frowned. "Don't be scared. All you had to do is say no."

Linda cocked her head to one side, staring at him. She'd caught a flash of what looked like hurt in his eyes. Even though he hadn't moved, she could sense the tension in him that hadn't been there a minute before. "I'm not afraid of you," she said. "I'm afraid of getting involved in something that might end up

hurting me emotionally.” It was important for him to know she wasn’t physically afraid of him. She sensed she’d upset him when she said she was scared.

He leaned back in his chair, his face inscrutable. “Where we go is up to you.”

His words made her stop and think. Could they have an affair for the time he was here? Her feminine hormones all stood at attention and sang the Hallelujah chorus. Of course she could.

Her brain pleaded for caution. Warning that she was getting in over her head. She already had an emotional connection with Levi. Having a prolonged affair would only make it worse.

Still, she pondered the possibility.

They’d proved last night they were more than compatible in bed. She was a grown woman in her early thirties and she’d never indulged in an affair before. If she was ever going to have one, Levi was the man to do it with.

He wasn’t looking for ties or commitments. He wasn’t staying in Jamesville. She liked him as a person. Trusted him. That had to count for something.

One corner of Levi’s mouth turned up. “You don’t need to decide this minute, darlin’.”

The endearment made her feel warm all over. The corners of her lips turned up in a genuine smile of pleasure. “Why don’t we just take it day by day and see what happens?”

The tension drained from Levi, replaced by something else. Anticipation. That’s what it was. He was as excited about the prospect of continuing their relationship as she was.

She couldn’t imagine what her parents would say about her having an affair with an unemployed ex-soldier. Her father would get all tight lipped and tell her she was making a huge mistake and to come to her senses. Her mother would be shocked and appalled while lamenting what her friends would think. She shook her head, wondering how her parents could live with being so snobbish and judgmental.

She finished a few more bites of her breakfast before pushing her plate away. “That’s it for me.”

Levi frowned. “You didn’t eat much.”

“It’s not your cooking. Everything tastes great. I just have to be a little more cautious about what I eat.” If they were going to be spending time together, he had to know about her stomach problems.

His laser stare made her squirm slightly. “Why?”

She shrugged. “I have a small problem with ulcers. Nothing serious,” she hurried to assure him when his frown turned to a scowl. “I just need to be careful. It’s no big deal.” She fiddled with the handle of her mug, not bothering to lift it. She shouldn’t have had the second cup. She usually allowed herself one coffee in the morning before switching to herbal tea.

He leaned forward and took her hand in his. “That’s what was wrong yesterday morning after you read the letter.”

It wasn’t a question, but she confirmed his suspicion. “Yes. But it wasn’t just the letter, there was the added excitement and terror of my first day as a small business owner.”

Levi twined their fingers together. “Your family doesn’t approve.”

She tried to pull her hand away, but he tightened his hold.

“You read the letter.” Just the memory of it made her stomach start to burn. She took a deep breath to try and calm herself. “I’ve always been a disappointment to them.”

She tugged again and this time he let her go. Perversely, she wished he hadn’t released her. She missed the connection. “It’s old news. History. They don’t approve and never will, but that’s their problem.”

Levi inclined his head slowly. She could tell he didn’t quite believe her, but wasn’t going to press her any further.

Linda pushed back from the table and grabbed her plate, carrying it into the kitchen. She dumped the remainder of her meal into the trashcan and set her plate in the sink. “I’ve got to get ready for work.”

When she turned around, he was behind her, startling her. Once again, she hadn’t heard him move. “I’m going to put a bell on you,” she muttered.

He smiled—a big, wide genuine smile that lit up his entire face. Linda froze. It changed him entirely, making him look younger and so handsome it brought tears to her eyes. Then he laughed. Not for long, but enough for her chest to tighten. She had the feeling he didn’t laugh often. He looked as surprised as she was by the sound.

Wrapping his arms around her, he tugged her close. She rested her head against his shoulder and sighed. There was something about Levi that made her feel safe and secure and incredibly turned on at the same time. Her breasts were swollen, her panties damp. Yet she could stand here all day, not moving, and be totally content.

“You’ll let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

She leaned back and stared quizzically at him. “Other than painting and putting up shelving in the storage room, I can’t think of anything else.” The renovations were all but done except for a few odds and ends here and there.

“That’s not what I meant.” He brushed his lips over her forehead in a tender gesture. “If you need any help with your family.”

She stepped back and gave him a tight smile, wishing he’d let the subject drop. His hands fell back to his sides. “I don’t need any help with them. They’re in Vermont and I’m here. They have their life and I have mine. Case closed,” she added before he could pursue it further.

Levi reached out, gently tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “If you need me, I’m here.”

She didn’t want to think about her family any longer. The subject always left her feeling slightly ill and totally inadequate. She’d been in therapy for an entire year after she’d struck out on her own. She knew it wasn’t her fault her parents had unrealistic expectations for her. She was her own person—successful and content. Yet, it took little more than a letter or phone call to make her feel like an insecure little girl again.

Well, no more. She'd had enough. This was her life and she was living it the way she wanted. That meant working to make her new store a success and possibly having an affair with Levi.

"I have to go." Turning, she made her way to the door. She felt a blush creep up her cheeks as she stared at the heavy panel of wood. Memories of last night bombarded her. She'd never look at that door the same way again.

When she turned the handle, it opened easily. This time, Levi didn't try to stop her. She glanced over her shoulder as she stepped out and closed the door behind her. Levi was standing there, arms crossed over his chest, watching her every move. The heat in his eyes told her he was remembering last night too.

That thought put a little jump in her step as she hurried up the stairs to her apartment. She had to get changed and take her medication before she went to work. The talk of her family, added to the heavy breakfast, was making her feel queasy.

Letting herself into her apartment, she hurried down the hallway to her bedroom, pulling off her wrinkled clothing. Her breasts were sensitive as she removed her bra and dropped it to the floor. She cupped them in her hands, shivering as her nipples puckered tighter.

"This is crazy," she muttered. Dropping her hands, she went to the antique maple dresser and pulled out fresh underwear. "I haven't had sex in more than a year and I didn't really miss it. One night with Levi and suddenly I'm a nymphomaniac."

Automatically, she tugged on a pair of light black wool pants and topped it with a dark blue cashmere sweater. A quick trip to the bathroom and she had a light coating of mascara on her lashes and a swipe of lipstick applied. Satisfied, she glanced at the clock.

It wasn't quite nine.

Deciding she had time, she went to her kitchen and plugged in the kettle. While it boiled, she leaned against the counter and enjoyed the room. It was painted a cheerful yellow that made her smile. The cupboards were shaker style and painted a crisp white. Some of the cabinets had glass fronts, showcasing some of her nicer pieces of china.

She enjoyed pretty things and had surrounded herself with them. It was so different from the stuffy, stifling surroundings of her childhood. "Don't think about that," she cautioned herself.

But of course, she did.

The house she'd grown up in was filled with antique furniture and valuable oil paintings. She'd learned the value of them at a young age. It had been like living in a museum. You could look, but you couldn't touch. Even her bedroom had been overdone. There had been a massive, four-poster oak bed, heavy armoire and chest of drawers. The bed curtains were dark burgundy, as were the drapes, bedspread and carpet. It had been oppressive and depressing. No place for a young girl to play and dream.

Which was probably why her bedroom now was a light and airy soft green with accents of pale yellow. Hardwood gleamed on all the floors, accented with colorful rugs that weren't antiques.

This was her home and she'd made it everything she wanted. She'd put down roots in Jamesville and this was where she was staying. Her parents and brother could have as many plans for her as they wanted. The only ones that mattered were the ones she'd made for herself.

The kettle whistled, pulling her away from her musings. Grabbing a cheerful red mug and a teabag from the cupboard, she made herself some chamomile tea. The soothing steam wafted from the mug, settling her nerves.

"Time to go to work." She locked the door of her apartment behind her, holding her keys in her right hand and her mug in the other. Her feet slowed as she passed by Levi's apartment, but she didn't hear him inside. Not that she expected to. The man moved like a ghost.

She unlocked the inner door to Past Promises and entered, stuffing her keys in her pocket. Satisfaction filled her as she went to her desk and began to get ready for her day.

Her mind was already working on new displays. She'd sold a lot of merchandise yesterday and needed to rework a few areas. Thankfully, Levi would be working on the storage room today. She had a lot of stuff still in boxes in the basement that needed to be opened and sorted. Plus, she planned on going to an estate sale on Sunday to look for more goodies for her shop.

Linda lost herself in her work, only looking up when she heard a tap on the door. She glanced at her watch and realized it was ten o'clock and time to open. Her mug of tea was still sitting on her desk. It was cold by now.

She shrugged as she unlocked the door and opened for business. She'd get another one later. "Good morning, Mrs. Saunders." She greeted the older lady. "What can I help you find today?"

Levi spent the day working on the storage room. After he'd painted the walls, he'd checked on Linda, bringing her some lunch. She'd thanked him for the sandwich and smiled when she saw the oatmeal cookie tucked beneath the napkin.

As he worked through the afternoon, mounting shelving to the walls, he listened. With the door open, he could hear her voice as she chatted to customers. He liked listening to her, knowing she was near.

Last night had been the most incredible one of his life. His cock pressed against the placket of his jeans, thickening and lengthening in agreement.

He'd always been honest with himself and he knew that being with Linda had changed him. He'd always been a loner. Sure, he'd had drinking buddies in the army and guys he hung around with, but not many friends, except Jonah.

Since he'd arrived in Jamesville, he'd found himself being drawn into a circle of good folks—Jonah and his wife, Cyndi and Shamus O'Rourke, Shamus's brother, Patrick, and his wife, Shannon. Levi stayed on the edges, mostly watching, as was his way. But he liked it here. He liked them.

Most of all, he liked Linda. A lot.

He wasn't sure if he loved her. Wasn't even sure he knew what love was. All he knew was he wanted to be with her all the time, loved to talk to her, to listen to the sound of her voice. He'd watched her sleep last night, marveling at how beautiful she was. She soothed the bad thoughts that sometimes haunted him in the dark of the night.

She was too good for him, but he'd take whatever he could get for as long as he could get it. And he would protect her, whether she wanted him to or not.

His eyes narrowed as he thought about that letter. He'd already started researching, digging into the lives of her parents and brother. He wanted to know everything about them, just in case. He'd always been a planner. Success was in the details.

He glanced at his watch. Speaking of details, he had to go shopping if he was cooking dinner for them again tonight. He'd done some research online while he'd wolfed down a sandwich for lunch, checking out ulcers and the foods that would be better for her.

Standing back, he admired the final shelf. The pine was thick and strong. Levi had sanded and varnished it so the wood grain shone. It might only be a storage room, but he wanted it to be perfect. It would hold everything from dishes to toys to whatever else Linda needed.

He'd bring up the boxes from the basement for her tomorrow and help her unpack them. He loved to watch her with her antiques. The joy in her face as she examined the stuff was something to behold. He didn't know much about antiques, but he was learning. Partly from being around Linda and partly from the research he was doing online. A lot of the stuff he could do without, but some of the furniture had good, clean lines that he liked.

Maybe he should invest in a few pieces. He hadn't missed the look on Linda's face this morning when she got a good look at his thrift-store bedroom furniture. Not that she'd said anything. She was too classy for that. His furniture was functional, which was fine by him, but she was used to finer things. If he wanted her to be comfortable at his place, he should make a few changes. There was no reason he couldn't buy some new furniture, make the place nicer for her.

Something to think about.

He shook his head at his musings. His buddies in the Special Forces would laugh their asses off if they could hear his thoughts. In all his years, he'd never once worried about furniture. He hadn't had much growing up or during his years in the army. As long as he had a bed to lie on and a place to put his stuff, he was happy.

But that was then. He winced as he thought about his faded sofa and the chair with the duct tape. He definitely needed some new stuff. What was okay for him wasn't anywhere near good enough for Linda.

Packing away his tools, he headed upstairs to get cleaned up before hitting the grocery store. Linda was busy with a customer, but she saw him and smiled as he was leaving.

She hadn't agreed to sleep with him again, but she hadn't said no either. Her smile was warm and inviting. It was enough. For now.

Chapter Six

The next few weeks flew by at the speed of light for Linda. Past Promises was doing a brisk business as word got around about her shop and the number of tourists passing through Jamesville increased. Cyndi was promoting Past Promises at her B&B, Stone Manor. The two of them had worked out an advertising campaign where anyone who stayed a night at the B&B got a discount at the store. In return, Linda handed out brochures for Cyndi's B&B to all her customers.

She'd also hired her first employee. Dana Sampson was finishing her last year of high school. The girl had presented herself the first week the business was open. Quiet but competent, she'd handed Linda a resume and told her she was available to work weekends now and full-time in the summer and maybe beyond. Dana was looking for a job to earn some money while she pursued her passion of painting. She could have had a reception job at her father's auto body and repair shop, but she didn't want that. It was the only time during the impromptu interview that Dana had acted like a teenager, screwing up her nose at the thought of working in her father's garage.

Linda appreciated the girl's honesty and had hired her a few days later. The girl had immediately become invaluable. She had a wonderful eye for display, was punctual, could follow instructions and was surprisingly good with the customers. The fact that Dana had grown up in Jamesville meant she knew everyone in town and the surrounding area.

As Linda had settled into a routine at work, she'd found time to socialize, getting together with her friends on several occasions for lunch or dinner. Amanda had tagged along with her last weekend when she'd gone to an estate sale an hour's drive away. Both of them had scored big. Amanda had been in raptures over the boxes of books she'd bought. Linda recognized the enthusiasm in herself. They both loved the old and the unique. She'd taken home four boxes of china and trinkets herself, along with some good costume jewelry, two chairs and a small table.

People in town were beginning to know her on sight now, calling out a greeting to her as she picked up her mail or shopped. It felt...nice.

Linda glanced at the clock. It was almost time for her to open for the day, but she still had a half hour to enjoy her tea. She closed her account book, leaned back in her chair and stared out the front window of Past Promises to Main Street beyond. It was a beautiful May morning, the sun was shining and she was happy.

And Levi was a big part of that happiness.

Levi brought her lunch every other day, stopping to share it with her if she wasn't busy with customers. He'd lugged boxes, made several furniture deliveries and put up several new shelves in the shop for her.

They spent evenings together just talking, watching movies or even playing board games. She'd discovered his passion for board games when she'd picked up a dozen at a yard sale and brought them upstairs one evening to check to see if they had all their pieces. The games were still being made today, but these were original ones and still in near-mint condition. She knew some collector would love them. They'd ended up playing two of the games. Levi was very competitive, but so was she. Linda had laughed until her stomach hurt.

Some evenings she had to work. With any business, there was always a ton of paperwork to be done. Levi would either leave her alone while she dug through the mounds of paperwork or he would sit in her living room reading or tapping away on his laptop. She had no idea what he was doing and didn't feel she could ask. After all, they were having an affair, not planning a future together.

Partly, it was a defense mechanism on her part. She knew she was already half in love with Levi but had no idea how much longer he was going to be in Jamesville. She had no clue as to how much money he had, but even with the free rent he was getting from her for his work on the renovation, he had to be thinking about how he was going to live.

Then there were the nights. Her entire body clenched at the mere thought. Levi was an insatiable lover and a generous one. They'd made love everywhere. She could feel her cheeks heating as memories bombarded her. They'd had sex in the bathtub, on the kitchen counter, the table, the sofa and even one night in the stairwell.

He'd come in through the private entrance of the building just as she was locking the inside door to the shop. She'd smiled at him and started up the stairs to her apartment. He hadn't said a word, but halfway up he'd stopped her, whirled her around and kissed her.

Clothing had been quickly discarded as he'd pulled her down and taken her on the floor of the landing, driving into her so hard she'd had to push her hands against the wall to keep from hitting her head. He'd taken her hard and fast and she'd loved it. It had been an intense and extremely erotic experience.

Shaking off the erotic memory, she squirmed uncomfortably in her chair, trying to ignore the fact that her panties were damp. The man was bringing out a side of her she'd never known existed. Around him, she felt alive and sensual and free to take what she wanted.

And it wouldn't last.

She sighed. But at least she could enjoy it for now.

"That was a big sigh, darlin'."

Linda jerked around in her chair, her heart pounding. Levi stood behind her looking as sexy as ever in a pair of blue jeans and a faded blue chambray shirt. He perched on the corner of her desk and crossed his arms over his massive chest. She swallowed another sigh.

“I swear I’m going to get that bell for you.” She put her worries away and smiled at him, ignoring all thoughts of doom and gloom.

Levi tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. His fingers grazed the sensitive lobe before he trailed them down the curve of her neck. Her breath caught in her chest before resuming at a much more rapid rate. Her nipples tightened, becoming visible through her bra and the thin silk of her blouse.

“Wouldn’t do much good,” he informed her as he let his fingers slide over her collarbone.

“No?” Her reply was little more than a breathy gasp.

He shook his head. His dark hair shimmered and settled back around his shoulders. “Nope.” He continued the gentle caress, back and forth over her skin exposed by the V-neck of her blouse. “I’d just silence the bell.” One long finger dipped into her cleavage.

Linda bit her bottom lip, barely stifling a moan of pleasure. “Did you want something?” Now that was a stupid question.

“Oh yeah, I definitely want something.” He withdrew his hand and held it out to her. “I need you to see something in the storage room.”

“The storage room?” She felt like a parrot, but she couldn’t keep the disbelief from her voice even as she took his hand. Here she was, body primed, ready to explode and he wanted to show her something in the storage room.

“Yeah.” He pulled her out of her chair and led her to the storage room. The moment she crossed the threshold, the door closed behind them. His big body crowded hers back against the door. “I lied.”

“Did you now?” She grasped his shoulders for support as she peppered his neck and chin and jaw with kisses. He always looked and smelled so good.

He grunted and pressed his lower body against hers, rubbing his erection against her stomach. “Yeah. You don’t need to see anything, but I sure as hell do.”

His fingers made quick work of the buttons on her blouse and he carefully spread the silk back. A low hum broke from deep in his chest as he flicked open the front clasp of her bra. The lacy material fell away, revealing her breasts.

Levi clasped the globes in his hands and let his thumb circle the areolas. “This is what I wanted to see. So tight and pink. Like juicy berries.” He lowered his head, his breath warm and moist against her flesh.

Her core clenched and cream dampened her panties. Threading her fingers through his hair, she tugged his mouth closer. He gave a satisfied laugh, captured one peak in his mouth and suckled.

Linda gasped at the delicious sensations that surged through her. As always, the moment he touched her, all other thoughts fled except getting closer to the man in front of her.

His hands skimmed down her sides, molding her hips and thighs. She groaned when he touched her calves. He changed directions then, his fingers moving steadily upward, pushing beneath the hem of her skirt. The material bunched as he shoved it around her waist.

He released her nipple with one final tug and knelt on the floor in front of her. "Oh darlin'." He raised his head and smiled as his fingers brushed her bare thighs. She was wearing thigh-high stockings rather than pantyhose. "You are so damn sexy." His fingers skimmed the crotch of her lace panties.

She sucked in a breath as he barely touched her swollen clit.

"You're wet and ready for me. Aren't you?"

She nodded as he repeated the caresses, a strangled cry breaking from her lips. Her body was on fire. Her breasts were swollen, the tips wet from his mouth. Her skirt was shoved up around her waist, exposing her damp underwear. She was mostly dressed, yet felt more exposed than if she were naked. She felt wanton and voluptuous.

"Will you let me touch you?" His fingers skimmed the waistband of her panties. "Taste you?"

"God, yes." She grabbed his head and tugged it closer.

Levi swore and yanked at her panties. She heard them rip, but didn't care. He pushed her legs apart and dived between them. His mouth was on her, hot and wet. He pressed two fingers inside her, pushing them deep.

"Yes," she panted. She hooked one of her legs over his shoulders, opening herself wider for him.

He gave a murmur of approval as he continued to eat her up. He flicked his tongue against her clit, circling it several times before he took it between his lips and sucked. He worked his fingers in and out of her core, stretching her, filling her.

Her scalp tingled. Her body ached, strained for release. He'd barely started, but already she could feel the familiar feelings racing through her body. This was going to be over quickly.

He stroked into her again, grazing her sweet spot on the way out.

Linda screamed, her hips pumping hard as she came. Heat flashed over her, through her. Levi continued to suck and lick her pussy, driving his fingers hard. Her orgasm seemed to go on forever. Finally, she couldn't bear it any longer. Tugging at his hair, she tried to pull him away. "Enough," she gasped.

His actions grew gentler, more soothing, until he finally released her and sat back on his heels. He licked his lips and smiled. Another shudder went through her and more cream slipped from her core.

It took her a second to come back to her senses. Levi was still obviously aroused. The front of his jeans had an obvious bulge. She started to slip to her knees, but he stopped her.

"No time." He gave her a rueful grin. "You've got to open up in five minutes."

"Ohmygod." She'd totally forgotten about work.

Levi pulled a couple of tissues out of his pocket and handed them to her. After she cleaned herself up as best she could, she held the tissues up, not quite knowing what to do with them. He calmly took them

from her and stuffed them back into his pocket. He eased her skirt back down. Goose bumps broke out on her skin and her sensitive flesh quivered.

“Sorry about your panties.” He held them up. They were ruined, the band ripped in several places. He tucked the material in his other back pocket.

She tugged the ends of her bra together and fastened it. She didn’t want to think about having to go for part of the day without underwear. A quick glance at her watch told her that, if she was fast, she had time to run upstairs, grab another pair of panties and freshen up. She’d only be a few minutes late opening.

Levi pushed aside her trembling hands and quickly did up her buttons. Linda tucked the garment back in where it had come out of the waistband of her skirt. She straightened her skirt and took a deep breath. Levi raked his fingers through his hair.

He looked exactly as he had before this started. Well, except for the prominent bulge in the front of his jeans. She, on the other hand, felt hot and sticky. A complete mess.

“You look fine.”

She narrowed her gaze and glared at him. The man always seemed to know what she was thinking. It was disconcerting. His eyes, usually so solemn, seemed to twinkle in the light from the overhead fixture. She sighed, knowing she couldn’t really be mad with him. And why would she be? The man had just given her an incredible orgasm. She felt relaxed and loose, in spite of feeling ruffled.

He leaned down and kissed her. It startled her. What had happened between them had happened so fast they hadn’t even kissed.

His lips were warm and firm against hers and she could taste herself on them. Her pussy clenched. Levi groaned and pulled away. “Later. There’s no time now.”

“Right.” Throwing her shoulders back, she turned the knob and opened the door. “I’m going to run upstairs for a minute. Can you open up?”

“Sure.”

As she started for the inside entrance a heavy banging came on the front door. “What in the world...” She automatically glanced toward the sound and froze, her insides turning to ice, as she saw who was standing on the other side of the heavy oak and glass door. She so did not need this. Not now.

“Who is it?” Levi was beside her, his face set in its usual stark, unemotional lines. The playful lover from moments ago was gone.

“Someone from my past.” The banging came again. She knew he could see them. There was no escaping upstairs to change. Whether she wanted to or not, she’d have to deal with him now.

“Who?” Levi repeated, as she sighed and headed to the door.

“Simon Dyson.”

Levi’s gaze narrowed as she unlocked the door. She had no doubt he recognized the last name from the letterhead of the note her brother had sent her.

Yanking open the door, she came face-to-face with her ex-fiance. “Hello, Simon.”

Chapter Seven

The man didn't reply when Linda opened the door and greeted him. Levi didn't like him already. Obviously, Simon Dyson had a history with Linda.

He strode into the shop like he owned it, looking here and there, and frowning as he did so. Levi might prefer to wear jeans or fatigues, but he knew expensive clothing when he saw it.

The suit Dyson wore was definitely not one he'd bought off the rack. The cufflinks and tie clip were set with a large onyx and a small diamond. Nothing too flashy, but just enough to show wealth. The watch strapped to his wrist would easily pay for a new car and his shoes cost more than Levi's entire outfit put together. His blond hair was short, but styled, his fingernails buffed and the scent of expensive cologne emanated from him.

Levi had seen Dyson's type before. Well educated, privileged and from a background of money, the Simon Dysons of the world coasted through life assuming everyone else lived to serve their whims.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Levi leaned against the edge of a heavy, oak dining room table and watched. Dyson worked out. He was fit beneath the expensive suit, but it was the kind of fit that came from an expensive gym and trainer and not from honest physical labor. There was no way he was leaving Linda alone with this guy. He'd seen the expression on her face when she'd seen Simon. It was a look of resignation.

"Why are you here, Simon?" Linda closed and locked the door, obviously not willing to open the shop until she found out what was going on.

Simon glanced in Levi's direction, swept him from head to foot with a contemptuous gaze and turned back to Linda. "This is a *private* matter."

Levi kept one eye on Simon as he watched Linda. She took a deep breath, one of her hands coming to rest on her stomach. *Son of a bitch*. This guy was making her ulcer act up. His eyes narrowed as he imagined all the nasty things he'd like to do to Dyson.

Linda gave a bitter laugh. "Nothing between us is private, Simon. Our relationship, our breakup and the subsequent fallout was fodder for all the gossips back home." She strode over to the counter and straightened up some papers that were resting there. "You made certain of that."

He shrugged as he glanced at his watch, giving the impression that he had somewhere better to be. "I thought you'd want to keep this conversation private, but that's your prerogative." He raked his gaze over

Linda, obviously taking in her frazzled air, her disheveled hair and the slight reddish mark on her neck. “You seem a bit scattered this morning.” He shot Levi a smirk before returning his attention to Linda.

Levi cursed the stubble on his jaw. He’d marked her skin without meaning to. His muscles clenched with the need to do something. Anything. In a perfect world, that anything would include his fist connecting with Dyson’s face. But Levi didn’t move, didn’t blink. There were better ways to deal with men like Dyson who would run to the cops at the first sign of physical violence.

Linda flushed, a pink tint creeping up her cheeks. Her blue eyes snapped with annoyance. “Say what you have to say, Simon. I’m busy.”

“I can see that.” He let his gaze wander around the store. “Selling trinkets and second-rate antiques. Quite a comedown for someone of your lineage.”

Anger, slow and steady, burned in Levi’s gut. He’d been gathering intel on Linda’s family, but he was starting on Dyson the second he was gone. One way or another he was going to pay for the look of pain that flashed across Linda’s face.

“I know neither you nor my family can accept my choices in life, but they’re mine to make.” She put her hands on her hips and glared at Dyson. “If you have nothing more to add, you should leave.”

Dyson shrugged. “I’m here on behalf of your family. Your poor mother and father are concerned about you—leaving law school, breaking our engagement, moving away from home, working in sales. He raised a finger with each point he listed, as if ticking off an imaginary list. When he finished, Simon shook his head in mock concern.

“Get to the point, Simon.”

He tugged at the cuffs of his shirt, straightening them. The diamond in the cufflink glittered briefly. “Well, some might wonder about your emotional state of mind.”

Linda gave a harsh laugh. “That’s pushing it, even for you Simon. I left law school because I didn’t like it. It was my family’s dream, not mine. I found a job I liked. I ended our engagement when I discovered you sleeping with one of my so-called friends.” She broke off, her chest rising and falling heavily.

Simon shrugged again. “What did you expect me to do? You’re a cold woman, Linda. It didn’t mean anything.”

Linda snorted, “It meant something to me. It meant you were a two-timing, unfaithful louse.”

“Men aren’t faithful and anyone who says differently is lying. I expect we both would have had affairs over the years once you’d presented me with a son to carry on the tradition at the firm.”

Levi ignored the pain in his chest. Linda had been engaged to this guy, which meant she’d slept with him. The thought of Linda, with her open and honest sexuality, in bed with Dyson made Levi want to hit something. Hard.

And Levi couldn't believe this guy. He'd had Linda in his bed and he'd cheated on her. Levi knew firsthand what a sensual, giving lover she was. If there was a problem in their relationship, it obviously stemmed from Dyson.

The coldness grew within Levi as his resolve strengthened. He was going to get her family and Dyson out of her life. One way or the other.

"That's big of you, Simon. But I don't want a marriage like my parents or your parents or any of the other members of your social group. You didn't want to marry me. You wanted to marry a Fletcher. Someone with name recognition and money to help with your political aspirations. And I inherited quite a bit of it when my grandmother died."

"And look what you chose to do with it." The façade of sophistication fell away for a brief second, but Dyson caught himself almost immediately and quickly returned to his urbane self. "You squandered a chunk of it on an old building and all this stuff." He waved his hand contemptuously to encompass the furniture around him.

Levi put his anger aside and continued to listen. Every detail he gleaned now was something he might use later. He kept his eye on Linda, not liking the pallor of her skin. Dyson knew just where to dig to undermine her confidence.

"It's called starting your own business, Simon. Obviously something you'd know little about."

One corner of Levi's mouth turned up in a quick grin. Score one for Linda. Dyson straightened his shoulders and raised his nose in the air, not liking that shot.

"It's called tradition and family, something you don't seem to care about in the slightest. Your family is concerned about you."

"No," she countered. "My family is concerned about grandmother's money and they want me to come home like a good little girl, marry you and become a politician's wife. Not gonna happen, Simon. I'm happy here. I've made a life for myself."

"I can see there's no talking to you right now, but I promised your father I'd try. He'll be disappointed when I tell him you're not only selling trinkets, but sleeping with one of the locals."

"You leave Levi out of this."

The pain in his chest receded slightly as Linda immediately jumped to his defense. Nor did she deny the fact they were sleeping together.

"So, I'm right." Dyson continued. He turned his back on Linda and strode over to Levi. "I'm Simon Dyson." He said his name as though Levi should recognize it. Dyson obviously had delusions of grandeur.

"Levi Mann." He didn't offer his hand and neither did Dyson. They sized one another up and Levi could tell immediately that Dyson wrote him off as a muscle-bound local without too much ambition. A lot of folks made that mistake. Levi didn't mind. Made his job easier in the long run. Gave him the element of surprise.

“Hmm,” Dyson said under his breath. He headed to the door and turned the locks, glancing back over his shoulder. “You’ll be hearing from me again.”

“Go away, Simon.” Linda made a shooing motion with her hands. “I have better things to do than talk to you.”

Dyson lost his smile, turned on his heel and left the store.

Linda turned to Levi. “Sorry about that. Can you watch the shop for a few minutes while I run up and change?”

Levi nodded, watching Linda as she all but ran from the room.

Linda was shaking as she climbed the stairs to her apartment. Simon and her family had the ability to make her so angry, while making her feel totally inadequate as a person at the same time. Quite a feat considering everyone else in her life saw her as independent and competent.

She let herself in and headed straight for her ulcer medication. Her stomach was burning after her conversation with Simon. “Don’t do this,” Linda admonished herself. Stopping in the middle of her living room, she took a deep breath and slowly released it. Then she took another breath. “Let it go.”

Kicking off her shoes, she padded to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of milk. She wanted to avoid taking her medication, if possible. It was a way of not letting Simon win. It might be petty and childish, but she didn’t care.

Sipping some of the milk, she headed to her bedroom, immediately calmed by the serene space. The pale green on the walls soothed her. Taking a calming breath, she placed her glass on the nightstand and hunted up some clean panties and a fresh blouse. The one she had on was badly wrinkled.

She grinned as she went to the bathroom to wash up. It was much better to think about Levi and what had happened between them in the stockroom. Too bad Simon had to come by and ruin the mood.

But that was Simon.

When she was dressed again, she picked up her brush and tidied her hair. Grabbing her favorite lipstick, she slicked it over her lips. Nothing made a woman feel more in control than being confident in how she looked. Linda stared critically at herself in the bathroom mirror. Other than the slight pallor of her face, and the small reddish mark on her neck, she looked like her normal, competent self.

Tossing her lipstick back onto the counter, she left the bathroom and hurried back to the living room, stopping in the bedroom long enough to grab her glass of milk. She’d take that with her.

She slipped on her shoes and headed for the door, once again grateful for Levi. The thought of him having to deal with customers made her smile. He was so big and strong and some of the antiques she sold were so fragile. Yet, she knew Levi could handle it.

He was a man very aware of his strength and tempered it when necessary. She shivered as she remembered the way he’d brought her to orgasm, pushing her up and over so fast.

She locked the door to her apartment and started down the stairs, Simon's parting words flitting through her head. She didn't want to hear from him again. But she knew he wasn't going to give up. He'd decided he wanted her for a wife and was pissed off that she hadn't just fallen in line and married him when he'd given her a half-hearted apology for having an affair.

The bastard. Did he really think she was so weak willed and stupid?

Probably.

The only member of her family that had known the real her was her grandmother. She missed her dreadfully. It had only been a few months, but her passing had left a void in Linda's life. She truly felt orphaned in spite of her parents and her brother. Or maybe because of them.

Which reminded her, she had to call her lawyer later. There should be some news about getting the money from her grandmother's estate released to her any day now. The will had gone to probate after the estate had been appraised. Her grandmother had made bequests to several charities and friends, but she'd left the bulk of the estate to her only granddaughter. Her lawyer was expecting things to proceed with no problems.

The first thing she planned to do when the money was transferred to her was to pay off the promissory note that she'd taken out to pay for the building and renovations. Even though the note was for a short term, there was no sense in waiting until it came due. She wanted the security of owning her home and business. Besides which, there was so much money in the estate that paying off the building wouldn't even make a dent in it.

She was lucky the bank had loaned her the money. After spending almost all her personal savings on stock for Past Promises, Linda hadn't had much in the way of assets. But with the promise of the money from her grandmother's estate and the income the bank would make on the interest, they'd agreed. It was easy money for them and a convenience for her.

Linda hadn't wanted to wait until the money was available to her to start her new life. Even with everything flowing smoothly, she'd known it would take months to settle the legal affairs, given the size of her grandmother's estate.

When she'd visited Jamesville late last fall and seen the perfect building, she'd been willing to do whatever it took in order to buy it. That included taking out a promissory note with outrageous interest.

The money would come in the next few months and the hefty payments would be a thing of the past. Life would be perfect if only her family and Simon would leave her alone.

She wouldn't have to work at all once she had that money, but she wanted to. Antiques called to her on a deep level. She loved finding a beautiful piece and matching it with just the right owner. Didn't matter if it cost twenty dollars or twenty thousand. The feeling was the same.

Voices reached her as she opened the inner door to Past Promises. “Yes, ma’am. The inlay on that table is cherry wood. It’s a good quality piece. They don’t make furniture like this anymore. You can see the craftsmanship in the way the table is constructed.”

Her stomach settled and she crept inside, setting her glass on the counter as Levi bent down to listen to the elderly lady he was talking to. He glanced her way and sent her a beseeching look even though he looked to be in control of the situation.

It was in that moment that she completely lost her heart to Levi Mann. She knew he hadn’t known anything about antiques when he’d started helping with the renovations. He’d told her so. He was always asking her questions. But more than that, he listened to the answers. Listened to her when she prattled on and on about antique tables and dishes and silverware.

He was a remarkable man.

Taking pity on him, she strode forward. “Good morning.”

“This is Mrs. Perry.” Levi took the elderly lady’s arm and escorted her toward Linda.

“I’m Linda Fletcher, the owner of Past Promises.” Saying it aloud made her tingle all over. She smiled as she took Mrs. Perry’s hand in hers. “Would you like a cup of tea or coffee while you browse?”

“My, yes.” Her eyes twinkled behind gold wire-rimmed glasses. “A cup of tea would be lovely. The young man here was just telling me all about the Piecrust table in the corner. It would look perfect in my entryway.”

Linda barely contained her grin. It was funny to hear Levi referred to as a *young man*. “It’s a beautiful piece. I acquired it at an estate sale in Vermont. It belonged to a prominent family.”

“Excuse me, ladies. I’ll be going now.” Levi inclined his head and headed for the front door. The bell jangled as he left.

Linda realized she was watching him and glanced down at Mrs. Perry, who was watching him too. The older lady looked at her and grinned. “If I was thirty years younger, I’d give you a run for your money with that one.”

Linda laughed, delighted with her customer. “I imagine you would.”

She hitched her large purse over her arm and looked away as Levi drifted out of sight down Main Street. “But it wouldn’t matter. That boy only has eyes for you.”

Pleasure suffused Linda. It was much different from the earlier pleasure. That was physical. This was emotional.

Caution, she warned herself. She loved Levi and he cared for her, but he wasn’t staying. That had been made clear from the very beginning.

Still, that didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy what they had while he was here. It was going to hurt when he left. It was too late for her to pull back and protect her heart.

It had been too late from the moment they’d met.

“Let’s get you a cup of tea, Mrs. Perry. Then we can discuss the table and anything else you’re interested in.”

The older lady gazed up the road where Levi had gone. “We’ll start with the table and see where that goes.”

Chapter Eight

Linda was ecstatic as the clock ticked toward half past four. Her sales today had been incredible. Mrs. Perry had not only purchased the table, but two matching Waterford Crystal vases and a Spode tea set. And hers hadn't been the only good sale of the day.

A couple from out of state had purchased a complete table setting for eight of Johnson Brothers china, after the woman realized it was the same pattern her grandmother had owned. The original dishes had been lost in a fire twenty years ago and the woman was thrilled to find a complete set.

A businessman passing through had been pleased to discover an antique game table for his study. She'd also sold several board games and trinkets to locals. All in all, it had been her best day yet. And it wasn't over.

She wished Levi were here so she could share it with him. Later, she promised herself. They'd celebrate later. She owed Levi for this morning and was looking forward to paying up. Her nipples tightened and she tried to ignore the hungry feeling pulsing between her thighs. No doubt about it, she was horny.

There was no other word for it.

She almost laughed aloud. For the first time in years, she felt good. She felt free of her family, free from her past. This was the life she had made for herself and she loved every aspect of it.

Amanda had shown up with lunch today. She'd left the part-timer she'd hired in charge of her antiquarian bookstore, By the Book, and had brought thick turkey sandwiches topped with lettuce, tomato and mustard on twelve-grain bread. Milk and a double chocolate chocolate chip cookie from Jamesville's amazing bakery, Delicious Delights, had rounded out the meal.

For Linda, it had been nice to sit at the counter and chat with her friend. Shopping traffic had been slow during lunch and she'd only had to deal with one customer while they'd been eating. It was hard to believe Amanda was happily married. Not too long ago, they'd both been single.

Linda was happy for her friend, but she felt a twinge of jealousy deep in her soul. Amanda had Jonah. Cyndi had Shamus. She had Levi. For now.

She shoved that thought away, determined not to destroy the happiness Levi gave her by wallowing in self-pity. Every day with him was an unexpected gift. She'd never thought to find a man she could trust and love. Until Levi.

The move to Jamesville had been one of the best decisions she'd ever made. She had a home, a business, friends, a life, and for now, a lover. And she'd just had her best day of sales.

Grinning, she carried a box out of the stockroom. It was filled with Royal Albert china, a place setting for eight that would look perfect on the dining table to replace the set she'd sold earlier today. She also needed to redo the "gaming" area as she'd sold the table and several of the games today. She was glad she was heading out to two estate sales this weekend. She needed some new merchandise, especially with the summer season fast approaching.

Humming to herself, she unpacked the box and set the china on the table. Tiny flowers rimmed the edges of the white plates and decorated the teacups and saucers. When she was done, she stood back and surveyed the arrangement. Whirling around, she went to a shelf and plucked a vintage hand-crocheted doily and a Victorian silver tea service and carried them back, setting them up in the center of the table. Much better.

Business was slower this time of day, but Linda didn't mind. It gave her time to work on displays or catch up with paperwork. She wondered if she had anything in her refrigerator she could cook for dinner tonight. In spite of her substantial lunch, she was starving. There was a package of chicken breasts in her freezer that she could thaw in the microwave. They wouldn't take long to bake. She could make some rice and open a bag of frozen carrots and peas to go with it.

Dinner decided on, she headed toward the next display. She didn't have another games table, but she did have a small drop-leaf table in the storage room that would work.

The phone rang and she hurried across the room, picking it up on the second ring. "Past Promises."

"May I speak with Linda Fletcher?"

"This is Linda Fletcher."

"Ms. Fletcher, this is Harvey Spokes."

"Yes, Mr. Spokes." It was her grandmother's lawyer, now her lawyer. This had to be about the disbursement of her grandmother's estate. Finally, the waiting was over.

"We need to talk."

Her stomach clenched. That didn't sound good. "What's wrong?"

He hesitated and she could almost see him rubbing the bridge of his nose as he always did when he was troubled. She'd met him many times during her visits to her grandmother's home and had come to know him fairly well.

"I'd rather do it in person."

She shook her head, and then realized he couldn't see her. "Whatever it is, I need to know now."

He sighed. "Your father is making a simple situation complicated. He's claiming your grandmother's will is invalid, that she was mentally incompetent at the time she wrote it."

Linda swayed, catching herself against the counter. Once again, her family was doing their best to hurt her. Even though she'd half expected something like this, it still hurt.

Black spots appeared before her eyes. She took a deep breath, clutching the receiver tight in her hand. "You can't be serious." But she knew he was. Simon, the bastard, had known all about this when he'd arrived this morning. His veiled threats and his parting quip about seeing him again made so much more sense now.

"Linda?" She could hear Mr. Spokes's voice as if from a distance. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she managed to gasp. But she wasn't okay. Not in the least. Her family was trying to destroy her. And over what? Money. How did one deal with that?

"Everything will be fine, Linda," he assured her. "Antoinette Lafayette was nobody's fool. She never trusted your father. Her will is airtight. This is just a minor glitch, but it will take some time to sort out. It's a delaying tactic, that's all."

Linda clung to the edge of her desk as she eased herself down onto her chair. "You're certain?"

"Absolutely."

Relief hit her. Her skin went hot and then cold. Sweat made her blouse cling to her torso. "Okay." Her heart was racing, but she was growing calmer by the second. "I can deal with that."

He cleared his throat. "Financially, will you be okay? I know you got a loan based on your inheritance."

"Yeah, Past Promises is doing well, and I still have some savings." Not much. But she could tighten her belt. She'd better enjoy that chicken tonight for supper, because she foresaw a lot of macaroni and soup in her future. She'd poured all her savings into buying stock and getting her business launched.

"Good. I'll call you as soon as I get this mess straightened out."

"Thank you, Mr. Spokes." The line went dead and she slowly lowered the phone. Almost as soon as it disconnected, it rang again. "Past Promises."

"Ms. Fletcher, this is Albert Kramer at the bank. We have a problem."

Levi glanced at his watch as he headed toward the inside entrance of the store. It was only ten minutes past closing but his gut was telling him there was something wrong. He never ignored those feelings. Linda was probably just busy with a late customer or with paperwork. But he'd rather feel like an idiot than stay in his apartment worrying about her.

He opened the door and glanced around. The lights were still on, but there didn't seem to be anyone here. The hair on the back of his neck stirred. He sensed there was someone here even though he couldn't see them. Levi reached for his weapon, cursing when he realized he didn't have it. His sniper rifle was in a locked box beneath his bed and his 9 mm was in the bedside table. Not much help to him at the moment.

He did have a knife in his boot and he wasn't without skills. He could take on an intruder with his bare hands if he had to. He took a deep breath and released it slowly.

This was Jamesville, not some hellhole in a war-torn part of the world. The chances of there being an intruder were slim. There was little to no cash on the premises and a thief wouldn't find the stuff she carried easy to hock. Linda was probably fine. She was more than likely in the storage room.

"Linda?" He listened intently as he prowled into the room.

A soft sound caught his attention and he moved swiftly to her desk area behind the counter. Linda was sitting in her chair, doubled over, her head buried in her lap.

His heart skipped a beat as he hurried to her side. Dropping to his knees beside her, he touched her shoulder. "Linda." She seemed oblivious to everything around her. "Darlin', look at me. Are you hurt? Is it your stomach?" When she still didn't answer, he stood and started to lift her into his arms. "I'll take you to the hospital."

"No!" She shook her head, her entire body trembling. She jerked back in her chair and stared up at him. Her eyes were red, her face blotchy. Makeup streaked down her cheeks.

"What happened?" Every instinct Levi had went on full alert. Something or someone had hurt his woman. He needed to fix this. "What's wrong?" He kept his voice gentle as he cupped her face in his hands. "Talk to me, sweetheart."

"Oh, Levi." She started to cry again, tears trickling down her cheeks. "They're trying to take it from me."

He tapped down his growing fury and caught her tears with his thumbs, rubbing softly. "I'm going to lock up the store, then we're going to go upstairs and talk."

"The store doesn't matter," she replied despondently. "Not anymore."

Truly concerned now, he hurried to the door. He didn't want to leave her for a second, but this was no place to have this conversation. Anyone walking down the street could look in the big glass display windows and see them there.

He flicked the locks and went back to Linda. He scooped her into his arms and headed to the other door. "I haven't finished my paperwork." Her voice hitched and he tightened his hold on her. He felt helpless in the face of her distress and he didn't like it. Not one bit.

"You can do it in the morning."

"I have to go to the bank in the morning." Her voice was toneless as she made that proclamation.

Levi turned off the lights and carried her out of the shop, closing the door behind him. He quickly took her upstairs to his apartment. She might feel more secure in her own place, but he didn't have a key. Not that such a minor detail would stop him. But he didn't want her to realize how easy it was for him to break into her home, nor did he want her to have to worry about digging out her keys.

He didn't stop, carrying her straight into the bedroom and settling on the bed with her in his lap. He leaned against the battered headboard and nudged her chin up with his thumb so he could see her face. "Tell me what happened."

She sniffed and blinked back tears. "My family is trying to destroy Past Promises."

Levi forced himself to appear calm and relaxed as she related the call from the lawyer and then the loan officer from the bank. He hadn't liked her family before this, but now he felt nothing but fury toward them. How could they try and destroy her like this? Her own father.

"Because of the hard economic times, the bank has sold some of their mortgages and high-risk loans. My promissory note was bought up by a bank in Vermont that just happens to be run by a good friend and client of my father. I recognized it immediately. They're calling for immediate repayment. I have sixty days to pay, but it doesn't matter. With the inheritance tied up, I just don't have the money."

"Can they do that?"

Linda sighed and nodded. "Unfortunately, yes. There's a clause in the agreement that allows for it, but I was assured it was standard procedure and they'd never use it." She gave a bitter laugh. "More fool me."

Levi's mind was working to process all the information and come up with possible solutions. "But you will have the money?"

"Eventually. Mr. Spokes guaranteed it. But when you're dealing with that much money, it takes time."

"How much we talking about, darlin'?"

Her eyes were large and luminous as she stared up at him. "Millions."

Levi nodded. "That's what you meant earlier when you mentioned Dyson's political aspirations."

She nodded. "They all decided it would be the perfect joining of families if I just married Simon and gave him access to my grandmother's money." Fire burned in her dark-blue eyes, momentarily driving out the despair. "They thought wrong if they thought this would make me go home." She snorted. "No, not home. That place was never home."

Levi's chest tightened. He hadn't had much of a childhood to talk about. In fact, he really never remembered being a child. Younger, yes. But not a child. A child had some sense of innocence. Levi had never had that luxury. Linda might have had financial security growing up, but she'd never had any illusions of being anything other than a pawn to be used by her parents.

"I'm sorry, darlin'." The words were totally inadequate, but he didn't know what else to say.

"Me too." She sighed and some of the fire died from her eyes. "I'd rather live on the street than go back to my family. I'll have to start making plans in the next few days." She chewed on her bottom lip as she thought. "I'll keep the store open as long as I can to make some money. I'll box up everything that's left and see about putting it in storage."

Pride welled up in Levi. His woman was a fighter. "You're going to reopen."

She yawned, covering her mouth with the back of her hand as she nodded. "At some point down the road, I'll have to rent a space. Maybe Cyndi can help me find something suitable. I know she owns property around town. It's not ideal, but at least it will keep the store open."

"We can talk more about it tomorrow," he promised.

Her eyes drifted closed and she snuggled closer to Levi. "I'm sorry I fell apart like that. I'm usually much stronger."

His arms tightened around her, as if he could protect her from all harm even though he knew that was impossible. There was no physical threat, but this emotional attack had been worse, striking at the very core of who she was and where she came from. Her own family had turned on her. It didn't get any worse.

"I'll talk to Cyndi tomorrow," she mumbled. "If anyone will understand about dysfunctional families, she will."

Levi knew that Cyndi O'Rourke had been through her own troubles with regards to family. He didn't know the entire story, but enough to know that Linda was right. She would understand. From what he'd seen, she was also the type of woman to stand beside her friends in a time of crisis. She'd been there for Amanda when she'd had trouble.

The light in the room faded and the streetlights winked on. Levi held Linda until the muscles in his arms began to fall asleep. He didn't want to move for fear of waking her, but he had things to do.

Shifting as slowly as possible, he laid Linda on the bed beside him. Staring down at her tear-stained face, he made a promise to himself. She would not lose her building, no matter what he had to do in order for her to keep it. Dyson and her family had underestimated the number of friends that Linda had in this town.

He stood and pulled the comforter over her. She murmured in her sleep and snuggled deeper into her pillow. Releasing a soft sigh, she fell back into a deep sleep, exhausted from the stress and from crying.

Tomorrow, she'd be back to her feisty self. But that didn't mean he wasn't going to do what he could to help in the meantime. It took a lot of willpower for him to leave her. He wanted to do nothing more than stretch out beside her and gather her into his arms.

Turning, he left the room, carefully closing the door behind him so he wouldn't wake her. Levi strode to the kitchen table and checked on his laptop. He had initiated several searches this morning and was waiting on information from several sources. There was nothing yet. But there would be by the time he was done. Everyone had secrets, especially the rich and powerful. They were also the folks who would do anything to keep them.

Walking to the window, Levi stared out at the quiet street. The building was on Main Street, but it was a far cry from the city. Several cars passed by, probably folks on their way home. A police cruiser headed toward the center of town, most likely back to the station. It was a quiet place, a place to put down roots.

Levi had never had anywhere that felt like home. Growing up as he had, in a roach-infested apartment with a mother who didn't even know he was there most of the time, hadn't left him with any sense of place. His stint in the Army hadn't helped. He'd gone wherever they'd sent him, living in barracks or tents or sometimes sleeping on the ground for weeks on end when he was on a mission.

Nowhere had ever felt like home until he'd arrived in Jamesville. He was glad he'd come to help Jonah when he'd called. Not that there had ever been any doubt. Jonah was his one good friend. No matter what, he would have come to his buddy's aid.

But he'd found so much more here. He'd found friends. And he'd found Linda. Being around her gave him a sense of peace. She helped to silence the ghosts that often haunted his sleep, driving him from bed many nights. Working out helped some too. And since he'd been in Jamesville, he'd been pumping iron and jogging until he fell into bed exhausted.

Since he and Linda had gotten together, he'd been jogging in the mornings after she went to work. The change was nice. Instead of running in the dark, he ran when the rest of the world was up and around. Folks were starting to recognize him and wave as he passed by. It was...nice.

He glanced at his watch. It was just after eight. Pulling his cell phone out of his pocket, he dialed.

"Yeah." The male voice on the other end was brisk.

Levi smiled. "I see your wife hasn't domesticated you yet."

Jonah Sutter snorted. "What do you want?"

"I need help."

There was no hesitation. All traces of humor disappeared from Jonah's voice. "What do you need?"

Levi's reply was quick. "I need you to make some calls."

Chapter Nine

Linda stood in the shower and let the hot water cascade over her. She still couldn't believe she'd had such a meltdown in front of Levi last night. But she'd been upset and vulnerable when he'd found her.

Still, he'd handled it just fine. Better than fine. He'd let her cry and vent, all the while holding her in his arms. He'd offered her the only thing he could. Comfort.

She grabbed her sponge, squirted some of her rose-scented shower gel on it and began to wash. She'd awoken alone and still fully dressed. It was a grungy feeling to sleep in your clothing, but she'd slept well in spite of it. Other than her eyes being puffy, she felt like her normal self again.

After she'd crawled out of bed and used his bathroom, she'd found Levi hard at work at his kitchen table, tapping away on his laptop.

He'd closed the cover on the computer when she'd appeared and she hadn't asked what he was doing. If he'd wanted her to know what he was working on, he'd tell her. Besides, she had more than enough to worry about in her own life at the moment.

Sixty days. She had sixty days to relocate Past Promises. She might lose the building, but she wasn't going to lose the store. The promissory note had been a personal loan to her, strictly for the building and the renovations. The bank could have it.

She ignored the pain in her stomach and continued to wash. She'd searched long and hard for the right location and loved the hundred-year-old building with its brick façade. Rinsing her body, she grabbed her shampoo and squirted a dollop into her palm. She could rent for as long as she had to if it meant keeping her business open.

Finding another place to live would be more of a problem. Apartments weren't plentiful around here. She could impose on Amanda and Jonah for a few days if she had to. She couldn't ask Cyndi for a room at her B&B. It was almost summer and that meant tourist season. Most likely the rooms were already booked. If this had happened in January, she probably could have rented a room there for a decent rate.

She scrubbed her scalp and then stood beneath the spray, rinsing off the shampoo and any remainder of soap. Slicking her hair back from her face, she turned off the water and stepped out of the shower stall. She grabbed a thick white towel and wrapped it around her body.

Her friends would help her. Unlike her family, she knew she could count on them. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but facts were facts. At least she had wonderful friends. That was definitely a reason to be thankful.

Linda swiped her palm over the mirror, clearing away some of the steam. She stared at her reflection with a critical eye. She didn't look too bad all things considered. There were dark circles beneath her eyes, but some strategically placed concealer would take care of those.

She grabbed her hairdryer and brush and dealt with her hair. Thankfully, her short haircut was wash and go. When that was done, she dug out her cosmetic bag, knowing she needed an extra boost today. She applied her makeup carefully and went for the works—foundation, concealer, blush, mascara, eyeliner and shadow, followed by lipstick in a deep plum.

Her reflection was different this time. Gone was the tired woman. In her place was a confident businesswoman. Her grandmother had taught her that the proper clothing was half the battle in any business situation. You had to look the part before you could act the part.

Linda went to her bedroom and yanked open her closet door. She had to find something to wear. A damp towel just wouldn't cut it. She ignored the clothing in front of her and dug right to the back. She knew exactly what she was looking for. The garment bag was zipped tight, but she pulled it out and hung it on the hook on the back of the closet door. The zipping noise was loud in the room as she opened the garment bag.

The skirt and jacket were a rich burgundy and screamed power. The designer label was discreetly sewn into the collar of the jacket. "Thank you, Grandma," she murmured as she pulled out a cream-colored silk blouse to wear with it.

Underwear came first. Linda rummaged through her dresser drawer searching for just the right undergarments. She needed a bra that wouldn't show through her light-colored blouse. It also had to make her feel sexy and confident. No one else would know what she was wearing beneath her suit, but she would. And that was all that mattered. After a short debate, she chose a lacy bra and panties in a light café au lait color. She dropped the towel and slipped them on. Stockings were next. Her choice was thigh highs. Much more comfortable than pantyhose.

She slid the blouse off its padded hanger and slipped it on, doing up the pearl buttons one by one. The skirt came next. The silk lining slipped over her skin like a lover's caress. Linda stilled, her thoughts going back to Levi.

He'd been so good to her this morning. She'd barely stepped into the main room before he'd ushered her to the far end of the table, away from his laptop. He'd served her tea and oatmeal for breakfast. Oatmeal.

Tears welled in her eyes. She took a deep breath and sucked them back. She wasn't going to cry over oatmeal. But it had been so sweet of him. He'd obviously gone to some trouble because it wasn't the kind of oatmeal you just added water to, but the kind you actually cooked on the stovetop.

The warmth had felt good in her belly, while his obvious concern had been a balm to her soul.

She worried about what this whole situation would do to them. When she lost the building Levi would be homeless, just like her. Would he move on? Would he stay in Jamesville? She'd been too afraid to ask him. She was already losing so much. She didn't want to contemplate losing Levi as well.

Not now.

Maybe in a few weeks when she had hopefully found a new place to live, as well as rented a space for her store. Maybe then she would broach the subject with Levi. If he hadn't already left town by then.

Sixty days. Actually, it was less than that now. Not much time to find a new place to live, relocate a business and find out if her lover would be leaving or staying.

It wasn't that she was being a coward. It was that she could only deal with one crisis at a time. And, unfortunately, the financial one took precedence. Unless Levi decided to pack it in and leave town in the next few days.

Her hands stilled on the suit jacket hanging on the back of the closet door. No, he'd tell her if he was leaving. She knew he would. Besides, he hadn't kissed her like a man who was planning on going anywhere.

After she'd eaten her breakfast, he'd walked her to her door and wished her luck with her bank meeting, telling her he'd see her later. Then he'd kissed her with a passion that had left her breathless, her entire body tingling.

Her breasts swelled and her nipples tightened. Swearing, she yanked the jacket off the hanger and pulled it on. There was one button right at her waist, which she closed. She slipped on a pair of black leather pumps. The added height gave her a sense of confidence. She grabbed her matching leather purse, quickly transferring her wallet and belongings from her everyday purse. Everything she wore was good quality and classy. Perfect for a meeting with a banker.

Accessories were next. Nothing too flashy. Small gold hoops for her ears and a single strand of pearls for around her neck. She looked smart and successful. A quick glance at her watch told her she was running out of time. The store would stay closed until she got back. She hated to do it, but there was no other choice. Her part-timer was in school and wouldn't be able to work.

There was nothing left to delay her any longer. She was as ready as she was ever going to be. Linda left her apartment before she gave herself any more time to think, locking the door behind her. There were no sounds coming from Levi's apartment as she passed his front door. Only silence. She had no idea if he was still in there or if he'd already gone out. He ran in the mornings and was most likely pounding the pavement. She would have liked to have seen him before her meeting, but she consoled herself with the fact she'd see him later.

She almost left by the front door to the building, but at the last second decided to go through the store. She needed to put up a sign anyway to let folks know she'd be late opening today.

A noise reached her ears as she unlocked the inner door. Maybe she hadn't missed Levi after all. She pushed the door open, a greeting on her lips. It caught in her throat and she blinked, not quite able to believe what she was seeing. Amanda was there, her reddish hair tucked back in a ponytail, wearing jeans and a cotton sweater. Beside her was Cyndi, looking stylish as always, dressed in pair of dress pants and a silk blouse. Both women walked toward her, their arms open wide.

"I'm so sorry," Amanda began.

"Families can suck," Cyndi added.

Their arms came around her and the three of them shared a group hug. She pulled back and stared at them in wonder. "Why are you here? How did you know?"

Amanda pushed her wire-rimmed glasses up onto the bridge of her nose. "Levi called Jonah last night."

Linda wasn't quite certain how she felt about Levi telling her business to other people. But when she looked at their sympathetic faces, she couldn't be mad with him. It felt good for her to have her friends around her. And besides which, they'd have to know eventually. Everyone in Jamesville would know before too long. Gossip like this wouldn't stay hidden in a small town for more than a day or two.

"I'm here to cover the shop for you until you get back from your meeting with the banker. Is there anything I need to know about how you handle your sales?" Amanda went over to the counter and poked around. "I think it's pretty basic. I may not know anything about antique furniture, but I know how to talk to customers." She shot Linda a cocky smile. "And I certainly know how to charge their credit cards."

Linda laughed in spite of the gravity of the situation. A weight lifted from her shoulders. No matter what happened, she'd be okay. She had good friends around her. "You guys are the best." She turned to Cyndi. "I take it you're here for moral support."

She shook her head. "I'm going to the bank with you. I'll wait outside the office while you talk with Albert Kramer. But you don't need to do this alone."

"How did you know my meeting was with Kramer?" Linda was stunned by how much information her friends had about the situation. She raised her hand to stop Cyndi from speaking. "Let me guess. Levi?"

"Not quite. Levi talked to Jonah, who told Amanda, who called me and spilled everything. Shamus knows too, but that's everyone. We want to help. We need to help. You should have called." Cyndi hugged her again and she heard the underlying hurt in her friend's voice.

"I was going to tell you." She sniffed and then laughed when Amanda handed her a tissue. "I spent a lot of time on this war paint, I can't afford to smear it." She dabbed carefully beneath her eyes.

"You look fine," Amanda assured her. "But you should have called us."

"I'd planned to. I was just going to wait until after my meeting this morning. I wanted to know exactly where I stand with things." She held out her hands to both women. They each took one hand, holding on tight. "I was in no shape to call anyone last night."

Cyndi squeezed her hand and nodded. "I'm sorry. I should understand that better than anyone. My own family life wasn't exactly what you could call normal. I don't know how I would have gotten through everything without Shamus." She released Linda's hand and shoved her purse strap further up on her shoulder. "At least you have Levi to help you."

Linda nodded, released Amanda's hand and fiddled with the button on her jacket. She had Levi. For now. She had no idea how long he would be staying in Jamesville, but she was grateful for everything he'd done.

"Are you ready?" Cyndi jolted her out of her pity party, reminding her there were problems that wouldn't wait.

"I am." She gave Amanda what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "You'll be fine. This shouldn't take too long."

Amanda waved them away. "Take your time and don't worry about a thing. But stop by Delicious Delights on the way back. I think we're going to need something sweet and fattening. I'll have the coffee on."

"We can take my car," Cyndi offered.

Linda nodded. "Let's get this done."

Levi heard Linda head downstairs to the shop. As much as he wanted to see her one more time before she left for her meeting, he didn't want to do anything to upset the balance she'd seemed to find over breakfast.

At least she'd eaten something healthy. She'd missed supper last night and he worried about her. The oatmeal would hold her over until lunchtime.

He also had reinforcements waiting downstairs. Maybe he'd overstepped the boundaries of privacy, but he didn't care. Linda would have to tell them eventually. This way she didn't have to worry about that. Her friends already knew the situation. Plus, they could help her out this morning, give her some added confidence by letting her know she wasn't alone.

Both Amanda and Cyndi had exceeded his expectations. Amanda had grabbed the phone from Jonah last night, wanting to talk to Linda. When he'd told her she was resting, Amanda had let him know she'd be there first thing in the morning and would cover the store for Linda while she was at her meeting. When he'd protested, she'd ignored him, saying that she didn't open By the Book until noon anyway and she'd call her part-timer to handle things for her.

Cyndi had phoned a half hour after he'd finished speaking with Jonah and Amanda. She'd promised to go to the bank with Linda and try and exert any pressure she could, even threatening to use the James name if she had to. Cyndi had been born into the James family, the most prominent one in town. She was also the bank's biggest client.

There was probably little Cyndi could do at this point. The bank had already sold the promissory note to the bank in Vermont. But she could be there for moral support.

Levi was doing what he did best—digging up intel on the enemy. In this case, the enemy was Simon Dyson and Linda's family. On the surface, they seemed like moral, upstanding citizens. But Levi dug deeper. People who treated their family and loved ones as heavy handedly as they were treating Linda surely had skeletons somewhere in the closet.

He had three laptops set up on the table and was currently running complex search programs through various banking and government systems. It was illegal as hell, but Levi didn't care. Uncle Sam had given him these skills and he was making good use of them. Nothing he found would ever hold up in a court of law, but it didn't have to. It was meant for leverage against Dyson and her family.

A knock came on the door. "It's open," he called. He'd been expecting Jonah all morning. The door opened and Jonah walked in, followed by Shamus. Levi downsized the screen on his laptop and stood when he saw the third man. He walked around the table, downsizing screens on each of the other computers. He hadn't expected to see the local sheriff. Patrick O'Rourke seemed like an okay guy, but he was still the law.

"We brought coffee." Jonah carried a paper tray with four large cups and set it on the corner of the table. "What have you got?"

Levi glanced at Patrick. "Not much. Yet. I'm still searching."

Patrick crossed his arms over his chest, his dark gray eyes narrowing as he read between the lines. The man was nobody's fool. He'd seen the look passed between the two friends. "I won't ask you what you're doing so you won't have to lie to me. Just let me know if there is anything I can do on my end to help."

Levi nodded as he tugged the cover off one of the coffees and took a sip. Black and strong. Just the way he liked it.

Shamus had propped himself against the wall, coffee cup in hand. "Family can be nothing but trouble sometimes." He shot his brother a glance. "Present company excluded, of course."

Patrick snorted. "Of course." He grabbed a cup of coffee and saluted them. "You'll talk more freely without me here. You know where to find me if you need my help."

"Will do." Levi inclined his head. "Thanks for the offer." He waited until Patrick was gone, then he turned to Shamus. "If you're going to have a problem with my methods, you should go. If you don't know anything, you can't be held accountable."

Shamus shook his head. "I'm in." He paused and cleared his throat. "As long as we're not talking about physically harming anyone."

Levi shook his head. "You've got a vivid imagination there, Shamus. There are much better methods of getting results. We don't want to create an even bigger mess. The trick to getting what you want is information."

His phone rang and he pulled it out of his pocket, not bothering to check the caller ID. The men he had digging into the lives of the Fletcher and Dyson families would be using disposable phones—easily discarded and impossible to trace. He should know. That’s what he was using.

“Talk.” He listened as his contact reported what he’d found. “You’re sending pictures now?” Levi sat back down at his computer and brought up his email.

Jonah pulled up a chair and sat back to wait. Shamus started to pace, his long legs quickly eating up the short distance between walls. The difference between the two men was marked to Levi. Jonah was like him, possessing the patience of a hunter. Shamus lacked that killer instinct, but he was a good man and Levi counted him as a friend.

“Got it.” He tapped several keys. “That’s good. Send me anything else you get. Payment is in your account.”

Shamus looked startled by the last exchange and Levi shrugged as he hung up the phone. “Information doesn’t come cheap. Not the kind we’re looking for. If we had more time, I’d do it myself, but time is a factor. I want this mess straightened up quickly. It’s not good for Linda’s health.”

Jonah, the bastard, grinned at him. “Like that, is it?”

Levi didn’t even bother to deny it. “Yup.”

“Bout time.”

“I’m not quite sure what you’re talking about.” Shamus stood beside the table, legs splayed with one hand fisted on his hip. “But I can take a pretty good guess.” He grinned at Levi. “I guess we’ll be seeing you for a long time to come in Jamesville.”

“Maybe,” Levi countered. That would depend on Linda. He ignored both men as he concentrated on the flood of information coming in. The devil was always in the details. And somewhere in the midst of all this information was something he could use.

Dyson, and people like him, continually underestimated Levi because of his appearance. They took one look at his large size and casual clothes and dismissed him as all brawn and not much brain. He cultivated that image, used it. It was as natural to him as breathing and had served him well in his former profession. What most people didn’t know about him was that he had an IQ that was off the charts and could manipulate computers and information as well, or better, than anyone else on the planet.

The other two men settled in to wait. After a while, Jonah got up and went into the kitchen, rummaging around. “You don’t have much food in here, do you?”

“I need to shop,” Levi muttered. He’d planned to do that this morning. One of the laptops dinged. He went around the table to the right laptop and pulled up the program. Scrolling through pages of financial information, he found exactly what he was searching for. “Gotcha.”

Chapter Ten

Linda had been expecting it, but it still stunned her to find out there was absolutely nothing she could do about the situation. The local bank had sold some of their loans to several larger institutions to offload some of their debt and hers had been one of them.

Stupid! She should have waited until she'd had the money in hand from her grandmother's estate. But she'd been impatient and she'd found the perfect building for Past Promises. After all those years of waiting, she'd jumped at the chance to finally have what she'd always wanted. Now she was paying the price for her impatience.

Either she came up with the money or she'd lose the building.

She watched the scenery go by as Cyndi drove her home. They'd made a quick stop at the bakery, but she'd stayed in the car while her friend ran inside for snacks. Cyndi kept sneaking her worried glances, but she wasn't ready to talk. Not yet. Amanda would want to know everything and she only wanted to go through this once. Not that Cyndi didn't already know the score. Linda had given one shake of her head when she'd stepped out of Albert's office. It had been enough to let her friend know that nothing had changed.

Cyndi parked the car in front of the store and turned off the ignition. Linda stared at the beautiful window displays that she'd spent hours lovingly creating.

"I'm sorry." Cyndi's voice was quiet, but there was no mistaking the sincerity.

"Me too." Linda took a deep breath. "It's just the building. They can't touch the business." Once again, she was thankful that the loan for the building was a personal one, not connected to her business.

Reaching into the backseat, Cyndi pulled out a baker's box. "Let's go in. Amanda's got her nose pressed to the glass watching us."

Linda smiled. Amanda was indeed watching them, motioning for them to come in. She had the door yanked open by the time they reached the entrance.

"Well?" Her green eyes flashed as she reached out to hug Linda.

"We have chocolate and lots of it." Linda glanced around, grateful for once that there were no customers. "Quiet morning?"

"Yes, but I sold the dining room set, as well as the hutch. Oh, and she wants the dishes too. All the details are on your desk. I didn't know how you handled delivery, but it's local so I said you'd take care of it." Amanda nibbled on her bottom lip. "Was that okay?"

Linda could barely wrap her head around what her friend was telling her. “I think I need to sit down.” She groped her way over behind the counter and sank into her office chair. “You sold the set, the sideboard and the Royal Albert dinnerware?”

With her red hair and fair skin, her friend looked younger than a woman in her early thirties. Amanda often said it was the smattering of freckles on her nose that did it. She might look like the girl next door, but Amanda was obviously one hell of a saleslady.

“And the silver service too.” Amanda grinned as she handed Linda the bill of sale. I gave the customer a ten-percent discount and free delivery. Oh, and I threw in the doilies as well. She liked those.”

“Do you want a job?” Linda asked her.

Amanda laughed, obviously pleased. “I’ve got a job, but thanks.”

“No, thank *you*.” That was a huge sale she would have missed if the store hadn’t been open this morning. Closing her eyes, Linda once again thanked the heavens for her friends. Her relationship with her family might suck, but she had the best friends ever.

“Thank you. Both of you.” She opened her eyes and stared at the two women. They were all so different in many ways, but they’d forged deep friendships that would last a lifetime.

Cyndi opened the bakery box while Amanda poured up coffee. Linda smiled when she saw that Amanda had set up cups, saucers and tea plates she’d plucked from the miscellaneous dishes that were stacked in one hutch. They were mismatched, but colorful.

It was perfect.

Touched by the gesture, Linda took the cup of coffee Amanda handed her and set it on the desk beside her. Cyndi handed her a plate with one of the sinful chocolate éclairs she’d purchased from the bakery. It probably had a zillion calories, but it would be worth every single one of them.

Lifting her cup, she raised it high. “To friendship.”

“To friendship,” they echoed.

Amanda pulled up a Victorian chair and handed Linda a sheet of paper. “This is a list of empty properties around town. Cyndi doesn’t have vacancies in any of her properties that are suitable for Past Promises but Jonah knew of a few places.” She shrugged at Linda’s quizzical gaze. “Being an electrician, he knows everyone in the construction business. I called the real estate agent, got some prices and details. I figured you’d call him about setting up some appointments to view when you were ready.”

“Thank you, Amanda.” She’d known she’d have to tackle the real estate issue sooner, rather than later. But Amanda had already done a lot of the preliminary work for her.

“And, of course, you’ll stay with us when the time comes.” Cyndi took a bite of her éclair and chewed, an expression of ecstasy crossing her face. “Ohmygod, this is divine.”

“Thank you.” Linda was beginning to feel like a parrot. But she didn’t know what else to say. The generosity of her friends was staggering. She’d spent so many years being only able to depend on herself

and her grandmother. This was almost overwhelming. Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them back. She'd done enough crying and it didn't change a thing. All she could do now was move forward and that was exactly what she'd planned to do. "But I can't stay with you."

Cyndi swallowed her bite of éclair and glared at her. "Of course you can."

Linda shook her head. "I appreciate the offer, but it's your busy time of year. You can't afford not to have the inn packed to capacity and I can't afford to pay full rate for who knows how long."

"You're not going to pay anything." Cyndi's outrage would have been funny if it hadn't been so touching. "I have more than enough money to leave one of the rooms not rented."

Reaching out, Linda took Cyndi's hand in hers. "I really appreciate the offer, but it's not going to happen."

"You're so stubborn." Cyndi groused.

"Look who's talking."

Amanda watched the byplay as she sampled the éclair, licking sweet filling from the corner of her mouth. "You can stay with us. We've got an extra room."

"Maybe for a day or two if I absolutely have to. I want to look around first. If I can find an apartment, that would work best." She took a sip of her coffee before setting the fragile cup back on the saucer. "Besides, I figured Levi would be staying with you. After all, when this place is sold, he'll lose his apartment too."

Silence greeted her. Amanda glanced at Cyndi, and then they both stared at her. It took every ounce of self-control not to squirm under their intense scrutiny. Cyndi shook her head. "You've been holding out on us."

Amanda pulled her chair closer. "You and Levi. I never would have guessed. How long has it been going on? When did it happen?" She sat back and fanned her face. "This is too much. Details. We need details."

"Ladies." Levi stepped out of the shadows, figuring it was long past time to make his presence known. He'd come downstairs a few minutes ago after he'd glanced out the window and seen Cyndi's car parked out front.

Jonah and Shamus had left for work twenty minutes ago, promising to call later. Levi had worked out his plan of action and that meant he had to leave early tomorrow morning. He'd only be gone for the day, but he wasn't looking forward to being away from Linda for even that long. Jonah was right. He did have it bad.

All three women jumped in their seats. Amanda's cheeks grew red, but Cyndi just stared at him with speculation in her pale blue eyes. Linda smiled at him. She was putting on a brave face, but he could see the underlying sadness beneath.

“How did it go?” He already knew, but he wanted her to tell him.

She took a deep breath. “Nothing has changed. The bank sold the promissory note and the clause in it allows the new bank to ask for full payment. If I can’t pay, they’ll foreclose and sell the building. It’s my own fault. I signed the papers knowing that clause was there, but I figured my grandmother’s estate would be settled by now.”

“I could give you a loan.” Cyndi leaned back in her chair and linked her hands over her stomach. “You could pay off the loan and then pay me when you get your grandmother’s money. I don’t know why I didn’t think of that before.”

Levi could tell Linda was stunned by her friend’s generosity. And so was he. “You can’t do that!” Linda leaned forward, her face pale. “I appreciate the generous offer, but my family could keep my grandmother’s estate tied up for heaven only knows how long. It could be months, maybe a year or two.”

Cyndi shook her head. “I can afford it. Might as well put all that money my father left me to good use. And besides, if you don’t get your inheritance straightened out right away, you can make monthly payments to me.”

Hope began to glow in Linda’s gaze. “It would have to be drawn up as a legal agreement.”

“I can get my lawyer, Alicia Flint, to do that.”

Linda sat back like someone in a daze. “I can’t believe you’re offering to loan me all that money.” She gave a small laugh. “I can’t believe I’m considering taking you up on your offer.”

“Think about it.” Cyndi glanced at her watch. “I’ve got to get back to the inn. I’ve got a large group of tourists checking in later this afternoon.”

Linda stood and hugged her friend. “Thank you so much.”

“You’ll think about my offer?”

“Yes.” Linda nodded and then reached out to Amanda. “Thank you for everything.”

“My pleasure.” Amanda hugged her back. “See you later, Levi.” Amanda patted his arm as she passed him.

As the door closed behind the women, they were left alone in the store.

“Well,” Linda began. “The meeting with the banker went the way I thought it would.”

Levi cupped her face in his hands and stared down into her face, which had become so incredibly precious to him in the past few weeks. “Don’t make any decisions tonight. Give it a day or two.”

“Levi...”

“Please.”

“Okay,” she reluctantly agreed. “But I can’t just bury my head in the sand and hope this situation goes away. I either have to find a new place or I have to take Cyndi up on her offer of a loan. Time is running out.”

“Just give me until the end of tomorrow.” He stroked his thumbs over her cheeks, loving the way they flushed a light rose color. Her glossy lips parted and her breath came out in short puffs.

She licked her lips. Every muscle in his body tightened and his cock flexed, lengthening and growing. She always looked fantastic, but dressed in a power suit she looked good enough to eat. He wanted to strip the layers away and uncover the woman beneath.

He took a deep breath and slowly released it. “I’ll be gone for most of tomorrow.”

“But you’re coming back. Right?” She stepped back and turned away, fiddling with an invoice on her desk. “Not that it’s any of my business.”

He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger and applied light pressure until she looked at him. “It’s your business and I’ll definitely be back. You can count on it.”

Lowering his head, he watched as her pupils dilated and her lashes fluttered down. His lips grazed hers. She tasted warm and sweet, like chocolate and cream. “Mmm, éclair.”

He felt her smile against his lips as he let his tongue delve into the depths of her mouth. Her hands crept up the front of his shirt. Her short nails scraped over his flesh, through the thin material. He wanted her hand on his bare skin.

The bell over the door chimed as a customer came in. They broke apart quickly. Levi turned away and took a deep breath. He heard Linda do the same. When he turned back, she’d straightened her jacket, plastered a smile on her face and was greeting the middle-aged man who’d entered.

“Good morning. Welcome to Past Promises.”

The man hurried forward. “Do you carry any jewelry? It’s my wife’s birthday and she loves the stuff.”

“I have a few very nice pieces. Right over here.” She led him over to a locked jewelry case.

“I’ll see you later.” Levi left before she could answer. By the time Linda closed the shop for the day, he wanted all his work done, his files complete. He was taking a trip tomorrow. It was a short one, but it would be an effective one.

Linda knew the second Levi left. The air in the place changed, settled, becoming less sexually charged. The man had a way of pushing all her buttons without even trying. She couldn’t believe she’d kissed him right in the middle of the shop where anyone passing by outside could have seen them.

She brought her attention back to her customer, pleased when he purchased an art deco brooch for his wife. Linda chatted to the man as she boxed and wrapped the gift for him. The minute he left, she slumped back into her chair and blew out a breath.

“What a day.” She felt as though she’d been through an emotional hurricane with all the ups and downs. She had so much to think about, so many decisions to make.

Her eyes fell on the letter her brother had sent her. For some reason, she’d saved it after Levi had plucked it from her trash. Maybe she was a glutton for punishment, but she still wished she had a better

relationship with her entire family, or at least her brother. They'd been close when they were small children, but had grown apart over the years.

Picking the letter up, she read it again. Anger began to bubble deep within her. What right did her brother have to criticize her life? What right did her father have to use their family power and financial clout to hurt her? What right did any of them have? It was time for this to come to an end.

Not giving herself time to think, Linda picked up the phone and dialed. It was answered on the third ring. "By the Book. Amanda Sutter speaking." Her voice was brisk and professional.

"Hey, Amanda. It's Linda."

Amanda's tone changed immediately, becoming concerned. "Hey, sweetie. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing good." She picked at a nonexistent piece of dust on her skirt and sighed. "I need another favor."

"Anything."

The willingness of all her friends to help humbled her. "I need someone to watch the store tomorrow. I know you can't leave By the Book for a second day, but I wondered if you thought your part-timer could handle my store for one day."

"It's easier for me to handle Past Promises and let Gemma handle By the Book. I'll be there by ten."

"Thank you. I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

"I did have my eye on that oak cabinet in the corner. The one with the games in it." Amanda laughed. "Maybe I could get a staff discount."

"Done."

"I was only kidding, Linda. You don't need to give me anything. I'm more than happy to help."

"You're still getting the discount if you really want the cabinet."

"I won't turn it down. I really want that for my living room." Amanda hesitated slightly. "It may be none of my business—and please feel free to tell me so—but, out of curiosity, why do you need tomorrow off?"

She glanced at the letter sitting in the center of her desk. "I need to take a short trip."

There was a brief silence on the other end. "Your family."

Linda's stomach began to churn, but she ignored it. "Yes." It was past time to deal with this situation with her family once and for all.

"I'm not sure you should do this alone. Maybe Cyndi could go with you." She hesitated slightly. "Or maybe Levi."

There was no way she was dragging Levi any further into the mess with her family than he already was. This was something she had to do on her own, something she should have done a long time ago. "I'll be fine. I'm going to check on the flights, but I'll probably have to get up early to drive to the airport. I'll

drop the keys to the store into your mail slot on my way out of town. I'll be back sometime tomorrow night."

"No problem. Just let me know if you need longer."

"You're a good friend, Amanda."

"So are you." There was a noise in the background. "Look, I've got to go. But call me as soon as you get back tomorrow night. Okay?"

"I will." The line went dead and Linda hung up the phone. She grabbed the phone book out of the desk drawer and turned pages until she found the number for a local travel agency. She dialed and the phone was quickly answered. "I need a return ticket to Vermont for tomorrow morning." The cost of the ticket made her stomach hurt but she charged it to her credit card and finalized her travel plans.

When that was done, she turned to the invoice on her desk. She still couldn't believe the huge sale Amanda had made for her today. Picking up the phone again, she called the woman who'd purchased the dining table. She identified herself and made arrangements for the table to be delivered later today.

She needed to call in one final favor. She took a deep breath and then dialed. The phone was picked up on the first ring. "Yeah." Levi's voice went through her like a hot knife through butter, making her insides melt.

"It's me."

His tone changed, becoming softer. "Hey, darlin'."

A shiver skated down her spine and goose bumps rose on her flesh. She shifted uncomfortably as her body immediately responded to him. "Could you do something for me?"

"Anything." The seductive way he said the word made her think of satin sheets and naked bodies twined together.

She picked up the invoice and waved it in front of her face. It didn't help. She was still way too hot. "I need you to help me deliver some furniture as soon as the store closes."

"No problem. I'll get Jonah to help me so you can stay home. After the day you've had, you could use the break."

That was so like Levi. Always trying to take the burden onto himself. "I don't mind helping."

"I'll check with Jonah."

She gave up, recognizing the stubborn tone in his voice. "I'll pack up the dishes and get it all ready for transport."

"Don't work too hard, darlin'."

"I won't." She clicked off the phone and tossed it down on the desk. The first thing she needed was some boxes.

Chapter Eleven

Linda lay in bed later that night, tucked tight against Levi's body. She was exhausted and wanted to sleep, but her mind wouldn't stop working overtime.

As promised, Levi had turned up just before the store closed with Jonah right behind him. The two men had made the furniture delivery, allowing her to close up Past Promises and head upstairs for a quick shower before Levi returned.

They'd had a quiet dinner of soup and sandwiches at her place before Levi had taken her off to bed. Their lovemaking had been slow and measured, drawing out the pleasure for as long as possible.

She hadn't told him she was going to see her father tomorrow. He'd only protest or insist on going with her and this was something she needed to do herself. She also planned a quick visit to her lawyer to check on the status of her grandmother's estate. By this time tomorrow night she'd have her plans in place. For better or worse, she'd put her past and her family behind her and move forward with her life.

The only problem was getting Levi out of her apartment before she had to get up to drive to the airport. She'd gotten a seat on an early flight, but that meant she had to leave here between six and half past in order to drop off the keys to the store at Amanda's and make the drive to the airport.

Levi stirred beside her. "Can't sleep?" His voice was deep and intimate in the dark. His arms surrounded her, his legs were tucked behind hers and his chin rested on the top of her head.

"Too much to think about," she replied honestly. She shifted and felt his erection stirring against the small of her back. The man was insatiable. Then again, so was she. Cream slipped from her core and her breasts tingled in anticipation. Her legs moved restlessly against the sheets.

"I can give you something else to think about," he murmured. Splaying his hand over her belly, he tugged her even closer, grinding his shaft against her.

She tilted her head back and he leaned forward, capturing her mouth with his. The kiss was long and hot and thoroughly erotic. There wasn't an inch of her mouth that he didn't explore. She reached behind, gripping his hair with her hand to hold him close. He tasted hot and male and she wanted him again.

Her sex pulsed with growing need, the slick folds more than ready to receive him. She rubbed her back against Levi's erection, drawing a deep, low groan from him. He tore his mouth from hers. "You're asking for trouble, darlin'," he growled.

"Maybe I like trouble." She was slightly breathless, her body on fire for him. Linda wanted to forget all about tomorrow. Right now, all that existed was the two of them.

He didn't turn her to face him as she expected. Instead, he lifted her top leg and draped it over his thigh. It left her sex wide open for him to explore. His fingers traced the inside of her thigh, making circles on her flesh.

Her pussy clenched as need gripped her. "Higher," she moaned as he lightly brushed the sensitive folds of her sex. They were damp and swollen and she moaned again as he stroked his thumb over her clitoris.

He feathered kisses over her nape and down the curve of her shoulder. "You are so beautiful." His breath was warm against her skin. Her body felt ripe and ready.

Slipping his other arm beneath her, Levi cupped one plump breast in his hand. Thumb and forefinger carefully teased her swollen nipple. Reaching behind, she groped for his butt, pulling him closer. His erection was pressed hard against her back, not where she wanted it.

"Hang on," he muttered as he shifted lower in the bed. The head of his cock probed at the folds of her sex. Linda squirmed, trying to make room for him between her thighs.

"This is going to be tight." He flexed his hips and the broad tip of his erection forged inward. Her inner muscles rippled around it, trying to draw it deeper.

"Damn!" He swore, pushing slowly forward. Suddenly he stopped and started to withdraw.

Linda dug her nails into his ass, trying to keep him inside her.

"Condom," he muttered as he pulled out and reached behind him.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. How could she have forgotten something as important as that? Thankfully, at least one of them had retained a modicum of common sense.

She heard the sound of a foil packet being ripped open and then Levi was back, lifting her leg as he made a place for himself between her legs. Her eyes popped open as he surged inward. With her facing away from him and both of them on their sides, it made deep penetration difficult. But he felt larger, stretching her to her limits.

He had both arms wrapped around her once again. He played with her breasts, shifting from one to the other, while nestling his other hand between her thighs. Levi surrounded her. Filled her. It felt incredibly intimate to lie in her bed, their bodies joined in the most basic way possible.

He feathered his lips over the curve of her ear. "You okay, darlin'? I'm not hurting you, am I?"

Her heart ached with love for his man. Even now, his concern was more for her than for himself. She knew if she said the word, he'd withdraw from her immediately. Levi was one of a kind and she was glad that she had this time with him, even if it was limited.

He started to withdraw. She made a whimpering sound low in her throat and shifted her hips back to keep him inside her. "Don't stop."

He tightened his hands almost imperceptibly around her, the rough pad of his thumb teasing the tip of her breast. "I won't," he promised, his voice thick with need.

He held her steady as he started to move. Short, firm strokes that built the embers within her until her entire body was on fire.

“Levi.” She gasped his name, rocking her hips against his as the pace of his strokes quickened.

“Your pussy is squeezing my cock so tight. So perfect.” The graphic words made her moan. His hands became rougher, more frantic as he stroked her. Fingers plucked at her nipples and circled her clit.

Linda couldn’t speak. Inarticulate sounds of pleasure erupted from within her. Every muscle in her body tensed for one brief second before her orgasm broke. Her inner muscles gripped Levi’s erection, milking it hard. His hips pumped, digging deeper and harder. He yelled as he came, his fingers tightening almost to the point of pain around her breast.

Through the condom, she felt the ripple in his shaft as he came. It sent another round of spasms through her. When it was finally over, neither of them moved for the longest time. Linda was content to lie in Levi’s arms.

Finally, she felt him soften inside her. He swore and rolled away and out of bed, padding to the bathroom. He returned a few minutes later, stretched out behind her and threw his arm around her waist. “Sleep.” He kissed her shoulder and her nape. “You can think about everything tomorrow.”

She knew she should tell him to leave, that she wanted to be alone. How else could she sneak out in the morning? Sighing, she stared at the clock. She’d wait a few more minutes. Right now, she just wanted to enjoy the afterglow.

Just as she was dozing off, she felt the mattress dip. She kept her breathing slow and steady, not moving or speaking. The light whisper of clothing reached her ears and she realized that Levi was getting dressed. She didn’t know what to think. Yes, she’d needed him to leave, but perversely she didn’t want him to leave. Not without her asking him to. He’d never left her before. Maybe tonight had been about goodbye. Maybe that’s why she sensed a desperation to their lovemaking that had never existed before.

Linda kept her eyes closed. She wanted Levi to stay, but she needed him to go. She could feel him staring down at her. It took everything inside her to keep from opening her eyes and asking him why he was leaving. If she did that, she’d never get out of here in the morning without him knowing. They’d talk when she got home this evening. She’d tell him everything then.

She knew the moment he was gone. It wasn’t that he’d made a sound. As usual, he was uncannily quiet for such a large man. It was the atmosphere in the room that changed, as if he’d taken most of the vital energy with him.

Linda opened her eyes and stared at the clock. It was just after three. She’d have to get up in a couple of hours in order to have time to shower before she got dressed. She didn’t have anything to pack and she certainly wouldn’t be eating anything until after her meeting with her father. She’d drink a glass of milk to settle her stomach, but that would have to do until after the confrontation.

She rolled over, fitting herself into the space that Levi had just vacated. It was warm and smelled like him. She hugged his pillow close and inhaled deeply. The scent of sex and soap and male filled her nostrils. Pulling her knees close to her chest, she curled around his pillow and slept.

The beeping of the alarm woke her. Linda was pleasantly surprised she'd slept at all. Obviously, making love several times last night had exhausted her.

She felt strangely calm as she rose and headed for the shower. Whatever happened today, she was finished with her family. It was a hard decision to cut out the only family she had in her life, but it was the right one.

When she returned, she and Levi were going to talk. No more tiptoeing around the situation. She wanted to know how long he was staying in Jamesville. She loved him, and even if that confession drove him away, she'd decided it was time to tell him. No more living in fear.

As clichéd as it sounded, today was the first day of the rest of her life.

Levi stood in front of a high oak desk, face impassive, as he asked to see Austin Fletcher, senior and junior, as well as Simon Dyson. He didn't have an appointment, but the receptionist had noted his designer suit, linen shirt, gold cufflinks and Italian leather shoes and briefcase. Levi had contemplated wearing his jeans and a T-shirt, but felt this would be more effective.

The receptionist, whose nameplate said she was Marissa Blakely, had also sized him up as she batted her eyelashes and leaned across the desk to give him a better view of her spectacular cleavage. But he wasn't tempted by her charms in the least. The only woman that interested him was the one he'd left all warm and cozy in the middle of the night.

It hadn't been easy to tear himself from her bed. But this was for Linda. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do to obtain her security and happiness.

"Mr. Fletcher's schedule is full this morning." She smiled at him. "I could probably fit you in this afternoon." The way she said it gave her words a double meaning.

"Tell him Levi Mann is here. He'll see me." Levi had no doubt that her father knew all about him. Or at least as much as Levi's official records showed, which wasn't much at all.

Ms. Blakely was pouting slightly now, but he gave her credit for maintaining her professional demeanor. "Of course." She picked up the phone and contacted the next person up the line, Fletcher's personal secretary.

Levi glanced around the room while he waited. He'd catalogued it all the second he'd walked through the door. He knew the location of all the windows and possible exits. Old habits were hard to break.

The room was decorated in a style that said money without being ostentatious. The carpet was a rich gray that went well with the luxurious cherry wood furniture. Several chairs, upholstered in burgundy, sat off to the left in a well-appointed waiting area. If Levi was correct, the chairs were all genuine antiques.

Coffee and tea were available on a Victorian teacart. He knew what it was because Linda had one something like it in her shop. Real china mugs and silver spoons waited beside the carafes of coffee and tea.

Levi turned back to Ms. Blakely as she hung up the phone. She stood, tugging down her skirt as she came around the desk. Her legs were long and shapely, shown off to their best advantage in her high heels. "This way, please." She led him through the inner door and down a hallway, glancing over her shoulder several times. She stopped at a door near the end. Opening the door, she motioned him in.

"Thank you." He nodded at her and entered the room. The door closed behind him.

An older gentleman sat in an ornate chair at the head of a long conference table, resting his elbows on the heavy wooden arms of the chair, fingers steepled in front of him. His suit was impeccable, and he had an air of confidence surrounding him. No doubt about it. This was the king of the castle in his own domain.

The room itself reflected the man. Everything about it reeked of money and tradition, from the original oil paintings on the wall to the thick volumes of law books in the floor-to-ceiling bookcase that ran the entire length of one wall. Not a thing was out of place, nor was there a speck of dust anywhere.

Levi saw the family resemblance. The older Fletcher's hair was graying, but there were still strands of black. His eyes were dark blue, but where Linda's were warm and welcoming, his were cold and calculating.

The old man was doing his best to intimidate Levi with silence. Levi could have told him he was wasting his time. No one had intimidated him since he was out of diapers. He thought about waiting until Fletcher broke, but decided that taking the offensive would be the most effective tactic.

"Might as well get your son and Dyson in here so I only have to say this once." Levi dropped his briefcase on the table and opened it, ignoring Linda's father.

He almost grinned when the old man bristled. Obviously, he was used to giving the orders, not taking them.

"I don't see the need to involve them."

Levi drew out a sheaf of papers and laid them aside. He raised his head and stared at Fletcher for a long moment and then shrugged. "I'll just go see them afterwards then. I'd hoped to save time." Arching an eyebrow in question, he waited.

Linda's father picked up the phone and barked at the person on the other end. "Get my son and Simon in here." He slammed the phone down. "The quicker you state your business and get out of here the better."

"I agree."

"I know who you are, Mr. Mann."

Levi heard the door opening behind him and subtly angled his body so he could see the two other men in his peripheral vision. He recognized Dyson immediately. The other man had to be Linda's brother. He

looked like a male version of Linda. His features were finer than his father's. They both must take after their mother in that respect.

"What's this all about?" the younger Fletcher asked.

"That's the guy I told you about. The local that Linda is shacking up with."

Levi shook his head and sighed. "You can say anything you want about me, but one more word about Linda and you'll live to regret it."

"Don't threaten me," Dyson sputtered.

"I don't make threats." Levi dismissed Dyson and turned back to the senior Fletcher. "Let's get this over with, shall we?" How a sensitive soul like Linda had grown up around people like this and come out untainted, he'd never know. He figured he had her deceased grandmother to thank for that.

"Let's," Linda's father intoned. He didn't invite Levi to sit when his son and Dyson took seats beside him. They made a united front. "I had you investigated when I found out you were living with Linda. You're a nobody who was born in the gutter. You were in the army, but you left that about a year ago. Since then, you've drifted around taking odd jobs. You ended up in Jamesville where you managed to get free rent in exchange for services."

The way he said the word "services" made it sound dirty and sleazy. Levi clamped the lid down on his temper. That wasn't the way to beat these men.

"Am I correct?" Fletcher looked pleased with himself. Dyson looked smug. The younger Fletcher appeared concerned. For who or what, Levi wasn't certain.

"Some of your facts are right. But they're really irrelevant."

"You think so?" Linda's father sat back in his chair, a self-satisfied look on his face. "I wonder if my daughter would still sleep with you if she knew where you really came from."

Levi ignored the barb, even though it scored a direct hit. He knew he wasn't good enough for Linda, but that didn't matter. She'd let him into her life and her bed and he'd cherish her for as long as she allowed him to stay. "You can go right ahead and tell her if you feel the need." He picked up the papers and strolled toward the head of the room. "Now, let's get down to business, shall we. We all know you're causing Linda financial problems because you want the money left to her by her maternal grandmother."

"How the devil do you know that?" Dyson demanded.

Levi continued, ignoring Dyson. "When Linda is upset, I'm upset."

"And this should matter why?" Austin Fletcher finally spoke up. "Look, Mr. Mann, this is a private family matter. Linda's always been high strung. She needs to be protected from herself."

Levi laughed. He couldn't help himself. "Linda is an intelligent, independent woman who is passionate about what she does for a living. Everyone who knows her at all knows that."

Linda's brother shook his head. "She left a prestigious law school to go to work for little better than minimum wage at an antique dealer's. She slaved away there for several years, ignoring her family. Then

the moment she inherits a sizeable amount of money, she takes out a huge loan for a rundown building and fills it with second-rate antiques. And that's before she has the money in hand. Obviously, she's not in her right mind."

"She was supposed to get her degree. Work for a year or two. Marry Dyson and then raise children." The older Fletcher sat forward in his chair, a scowl on his face. "That's all I ever asked of the ungrateful girl." He banged his fist on the table for emphasis. "It was all her grandmother's fault. That woman encouraged her."

"And you couldn't deny her," Levi added softly. "Because she held the purse strings in the family."

The elder man's face turned red. "That's a lie. I did it because it pleased my wife."

Levi shook his head. "You have a huge house with servants and an extravagant lifestyle. You like to give parties and take expensive trips. That takes every cent you earn from your law practice. So I asked myself, where did you get the money to play the stock market, to keep a mistress? Those things don't come cheap."

Linda's brother jumped up from his seat. "How dare you make these allegations?"

Levi tossed a sheaf of papers in front of Linda's father, which included several photos of him and his much younger mistress. "You lost a bundle in the recent economic downturn. You don't have a knack for playing the markets. And you just bought your mistress a house in the country. Nothing large. A quarter-million dollars. A getaway from the city, where she lives in the condo you purchased for her."

"My personal life isn't your concern," Linda's father blustered.

"It is when it affects Linda's life." Levi picked up another sheaf of papers and tossed it toward Dyson. "Let's see, where was I? Oh yes. Dyson is a philanderer of the worst kind. He had two women on the side while he was dating Linda. He routinely sleeps with the wives of his rich clients and he has a gambling habit. Unfortunately for him, he doesn't win as often as he loses. He was counting on marrying Linda and getting his hands on her grandmother's money to bail him out."

"Damn it, Simon. You told me you were through with the gambling," the elder Fletcher yelled.

"I am." He shook his fist at Levi. "How dare you pry into my private life?"

"If you'd kept your dick in your pants, you'd have been married to Linda by now," her father griped.

"No, he wouldn't." All heads swiveled toward the door where Linda stood. She appeared pale, but her shoulders were thrown back.

She looked like a queen as she closed the door and strode toward them. Levi recognized the burgundy suit as the same one she'd worn yesterday. Her heels made no sound on the gray carpet. She tossed her purse on the table. Ignoring her family and Dyson, she turned to him. "Hello, Levi. I wasn't expecting to see you here."

He was so proud of her. She carried herself with poise and class, barely blinking at finding him here even though he knew he had to have thrown her off with his presence. “I wasn’t expecting to see you either. I’d planned to talk to you about this over dinner this evening.”

“I see,” she said, even though he knew she didn’t understand at all what he was doing here.

“Linda,” her father began. “Do you have any idea who this man is?”

Levi stood beside her, ready to support her in any way, as he listened to her father spill the sordid details of his childhood.

Linda was shocked to find Levi in the conference room with her father, brother and Simon. When she’d entered the office, the reception desk had been empty. She’d headed toward her father’s office, but had heard the loud voices and detoured to the conference room instead. The last thing she’d expected to find was Levi.

She could feel the heat from his body as he stood beside her. The gesture was more than symbolic. She had no idea why he was here, but she trusted him and knew he would support her. There was no verbal commitment between them, no talk of love or a future, yet she didn’t doubt for one second that Levi was on her side.

She listened as her father related the shocking facts of Levi’s childhood. It was appalling. And what was worse was her father was obviously gloating over the fact that Levi had grown up in the slums with an addict for a mother who hadn’t cared for him at all.

“It’s clear to me that he came here today with fabricated stories to blackmail us. It’s money he wants, either from you or us. Probably both. You can’t trust his kind. He has no job, no ambition.” Her father thumped his fist on the table.

Linda almost jumped, but managed to stop herself. He’d used that ploy over and over when she’d been a child. And every now and again, he’d finish off by slapping her. No one else knew that. Well, she suspected her mother knew, but she didn’t care enough to do anything about it.

She looked up at Levi. He was wearing his usual impassive expression, which told her nothing. “Do you want money, Levi?”

“No.” He didn’t deny their allegations of blackmail or add anything else in his defense. But that was Levi.

She nodded and turned back to her father. “He doesn’t want money.”

Her brother shoved his seat back and stood. “You’re too stupid to know when someone is taking advantage of you. Of course he wants money. He’s even willing to sleep with you to get it.”

She felt the shift in Levi and the air in the room thickened with menace. Reaching out, she grabbed his hand and gave it a brief warning squeeze to keep him from going after her brother. Whatever Levi’s intentions were, she’d figure them out later. Right now, she needed to put a stop to this.

“What I do with Levi is none of your business.” She took two steps forward and laid her hands flat on the table, glaring at her father and Simon. Austin still stood watching her. “You’ve tied up grandmother’s money for now, but I will get it eventually.”

“You’ll lose your building and your business if you don’t come to your senses,” her father countered.

Linda gave a bitter laugh. “If I did what you wanted and came home, I’d lose it anyway. I’d also lose myself and any scrap of self-respect I ever had.” She straightened and shrugged. “So I’ll lose the building. But not my business. Past Promises is a separate legal entity from my personal loan. I’m not stupid, despite what you may think. I’ll rent a new space and move forward from there. Whenever my inheritance comes through, I’ll buy another building.”

“You don’t have any money.” She could sense the glee in her father’s tone.

“But I do have friends willing to help me. And I don’t need much money to live.”

“That’s preposterous.” Her brother grabbed her by the upper arms and pulled her close. “Why do you always have to be so difficult?”

“You’ll want to let her go. Now.” She heard the thread of steel in Levi’s voice, and apparently so did Austin. He let her go slowly and took a step back.

“Why do you care?” she asked her brother.

“He needs the money.” Levi’s voice was low, but it carried to all of them. “They all need the money.”

It hurt her. Even though she knew her family and Simon had never loved her, it made her stomach hurt to realize all they did care about was money.

“That’s a lie,” her father began, indignation in his voice. “Who are you going to believe? This killer or us. That’s what he is, you know.”

“He was in the army and we’re at war.” How dare her father toss Levi’s service to his country back into his face.

“He’s nothing more than a hired killer, sanctioned by the government. He wasn’t a regular soldier.” Her father aimed his derision at Levi. “He was in a special unit. The one they call when they want certain people dead but don’t want to be held publicly accountable for it. I have friends at the Pentagon.”

“Oh, give it up, father.” Linda felt suddenly tired and beaten down. It was time to finish this. “I’m never coming home. After today, I’m severing all contact with all of you. I’m seeing my lawyer after this and if you don’t stop harassing me, I’ll file charges or get a restraining order. That becomes public record and wouldn’t the gossip mongers have a field day with that.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” her father yelled. “What would that do to your mother?”

Linda snorted. “As long as mother can throw her parties, I doubt she’d even notice.”

“You ungrateful bitch.” Her brother was staring at her with such venom she was suddenly glad that Levi was beside her.

"This is done." She picked up her purse and tucked it under her arm. "I'll fight as long as it takes, but I will get grandmother's money, just as she wanted me to. And I will have my own life." She glanced at Levi and then back at her father. "I'll also sleep with whoever I damn well choose. As of this moment, you're no longer my family. I'm officially disowning all of you."

"You'll regret this."

Ignoring her father, she looked at Levi. "Are you coming?" Her stomach was one giant knot. If she didn't get out of here soon, she was afraid she was going to keel over in pain.

"I need another minute."

"Fine." She needed to get away from her family and Simon. They left her feeling slightly nauseous and vaguely unclear.

Levi waited until the door closed behind Linda. "As of this moment, you're out of Linda's life."

"You can't tell me what to do, you guttersnipe." The elder Fletcher's face was an interesting shade of red. "I'll ruin you."

"You can try." Levi nodded at the papers spread on the table. "Those are copies. Feel free to keep them. They outline all your activities, both illegal and questionable. If you persist in harassing Linda, those details will be made public."

Levi shut his briefcase and continued, "If you think to take more drastic measures, please be assured that if anything happens to me, these papers will be made public immediately. Plus," he paused for effect, "I have several associates who would make it their life's work to take revenge on my behalf. There would be nowhere in the world where you would be safe."

"Who are you?" Linda's brother asked in a strained voice.

"Not someone you want to make an enemy of." Picking up his briefcase, he headed for the door. "Oh, and you can forget getting your friend at the bank to call in Linda's promissory note. I paid it off this morning. The building belongs to her now."

"You paid off the building?" Dyson seemed shocked by Levi's pronouncement.

Levi shrugged. "It was no problem."

Dead silence surrounded him as he left the room. These men understood money and power, and they now understood they were minnows and he was a shark in the larger scheme of things. They'd back off because there was nothing to be gained and way too much to be lost.

To be certain, he'd leaked certain documents to the IRS. All three of them would soon be too busy scrambling to save their own asses to worry about him and Linda. Her inheritance was lost to them. They'd have to find other ways to get out of their financial troubles.

Cynically, Levi expected both Dyson and Linda's brother to announce engagements. They were both seeing very young, very rich young ladies at the moment.

The flirtatious Ms. Blakely was at her desk when Levi emerged from the inner sanctum of Fletcher, Fletcher and Dyson. He glanced around. "Where is Ms. Fletcher?"

She shrugged. "Someone was leaving when I came back from delivering today's mail. It was a woman in a burgundy suit."

"Thank you." He left the office, swearing under his breath. Linda hadn't waited for him. He was certain she hadn't believed her father when he'd said that he was after her money. But had she truly believed him?

Or maybe it was his past that had made her run.

Levi ignored the pain in the vicinity of his heart. No matter what happened, Linda was safe from her family. Even though she didn't know it yet, the building was now hers. There was no way anyone could ever take it from her.

Why did she leave?

Was she hurt? Angry? He had no idea.

Tonight would map his future. He and Linda had to talk. He might not know where she was now, but he knew where she'd be later today. He hailed a cab and headed for the airport. The quicker he got home, the better.

Home. Somewhere along the line, Jamesville had become home. It wasn't so much the place as the people who lived there. Linda was home to him. Being with her had given him a sense of place he'd never had in his entire life. He'd fought in hellholes around the world for lesser causes. He wasn't willing to lose Linda without giving it everything he had. He only hoped that after they talked tonight, he still had a place to call home.

Chapter Twelve

Linda was exhausted by the time she climbed the stairs to her apartment later that evening. The appointment with her lawyer had taken longer than she'd anticipated and she'd missed her original flight.

She'd called Amanda, who promised to cover for the rest of the day and close the store. It was just after seven now and Linda had been on the go for about fourteen emotional, gut-wrenching hours straight.

Her thoughts were still reeling from the events of the day. She couldn't believe Levi had gone to her family without even discussing it with her. She vacillated between being angry with him and amazed that he'd even bother.

It had been cowardly of her not to wait for him earlier today, but she'd needed time to think. And she couldn't think clearly with Levi beside her. Her feelings and thoughts got all muddled whenever he was around, and logic went straight out the window.

She was looking forward to a hot bath. Although she was bone-tired, she was strangely elated too. She'd severed all ties with her family. That should make her sad, but it didn't. Linda felt free for the first time in her life.

Harvey Spokes had assured her that her grandmother's estate would proceed through the probate courts with little or no problem in spite of her father's objections. Antoinette Lafayette had been of sound mind and had an ironclad will. Once the will was through probate, all her belongings would be disposed of and distributed as her grandmother had stipulated. When that was done, everything else would belong to Linda.

She hadn't mentioned the possible restraining orders against her family. She was hoping it wouldn't come to that. But she'd do it if pushed. Maybe she'd talk to Cyndi's lawyer, Alicia Flint. She would need a local lawyer to handle her business affairs. Perhaps Alicia could also handle the restraining orders against her family if they became necessary.

Linda unlocked the front door and pushed it open. The wonderful aroma of baked chicken tickled her nose. Soft classical music played in the background. Levi stood just beyond the doorway, his eyes hooded, his expression blank.

She didn't ask him how he'd gotten into her apartment without a key. She wasn't even surprised to find him there. She'd known that Levi would want to talk about what had happened today. She also suspected the man had more skills than she could even imagine. Getting into her apartment would be child's play for him.

She shut the door and set her purse on the hallway table. Levi looked much different than he had earlier today. He was back in his usual jeans and T-shirt. She'd never seen him in a suit until today. Strangely enough, he seemed totally comfortable in both attires. But this one suited him best.

"Hi." She wasn't sure quite what to say to him. Her thoughts and emotions were still tumbling around in her tired brain.

"Why don't you go get changed? Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes. Everything is already cooked, I just need to reheat it."

Grateful for the reprieve, she nodded and hurried down the short hallway to her bedroom. It didn't take her long to kick off her shoes and get out of her business clothing. She loved the designer suit, but hoped she didn't have to wear it again for a long time. She zipped it back into the protective garment bag and shoved it to the back of the closet. Then she sat on the edge of the bed and rolled off her stockings, tossing them aside and wiggling her toes.

She chose cotton socks, jeans and a blue knit top. Comfort was what she wanted after the long day she'd put in. She padded down the hallway in her stocking feet and found Levi standing in front of her stove, stirring something.

"Why don't you sit down and relax while I serve dinner?" He hadn't even glanced behind him, but he'd known she was there.

Linda pulled out a chair and sat, admiring the table. He'd set it with china from her cupboard, accessorizing with linen placemats and napkins and silver cutlery. He'd obviously dug around the drawers in her kitchen to find everything. Crystal candleholders with pristine white candles completed the look.

Levi carried two plates to the table and set one down in front of her. "Baked chicken, mashed potatoes and carrots. I wasn't sure how your stomach would be after the stress of today, but I assumed you hadn't eaten much."

"Oh, Levi." His thoughtfulness overwhelmed her. "Why in God's name did you go to Vermont to confront my father? What did you hope to gain?"

He stared at her, his golden-eyed gaze unblinking. "You sure you want to do this before we eat?"

She bit her bottom lip and nodded. She had to know.

Levi sat in the chair beside hers and rested his hands on his stomach. His shirt was pulled tight across his abs, drawing her attention. "I wanted the threats to stop. I wanted them out of your life for good."

She leaned forward, placing her hand on his thigh. The muscle jumped beneath her palm before becoming rock solid. "I appreciate that, but what did you think you could do to stop them?"

His expression changed then, becoming harder, sharper. For the first time, Linda could see the barely banked fury in his eyes. But she wasn't afraid of him. Quite the contrary. She knew without a doubt that Levi would use his strength to protect her, never to hurt her.

"I'm sorry for what my father said," she blurted out. That had been bothering her all day. "You were a soldier..."

Levi sighed, but otherwise didn't move. His expression changed, becoming more remote with each passing second. "He was right. I was in a special unit and we were called in to do the dirty jobs. I've killed men."

Although not a hint of expression showed on his face, she knew how much those deaths still weighed on him. She'd come to know him well these past months. She'd seen the man beneath the façade. Levi was one of the most loyal, loving and caring men she'd ever met. Look at how he'd stepped in to try and help her with her situation.

His inability to settle down made sense to her now. Levi was searching for a way to deal with what he'd been through.

She stood and moved between Levi's thighs, cupping his face in her hands. "You did what your country asked you to do. But you pay for it every single day. Don't think I don't see it."

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. Opening his eyes, he gave a short nod. She realized that was as much as he was going to say about what had happened to him.

She sighed and swallowed her disappointment. Maybe someday he'd open up to her and share some of his feelings about it. Maybe not.

"About your father." Levi obviously wanted to change the subject.

Leaning down, she pressed a kiss to his forehead and turned to take her seat again. His strong arm came around her waist and he pulled her down onto his lap. She sensed he needed her there as much as she needed to be there.

She settled herself against his solid chest and waited for an explanation. When Levi didn't speak, she prompted him. "What about him?"

His lips twitched. "You need to learn patience."

She groaned. "Tell me about it. My impatience is what got me into this mess."

He pressed his forefinger to her lips. "No. It was your family and Dyson's greed and malice that got you into this situation. They won't be bothering you again."

The finality with which he made that statement unsettled her. "How can you know that?" For the first time ever, Levi looked slightly uncomfortable. Alarm filled her. "What did you do?"

He shrugged. "I did what I do best."

Honestly, it was like trying to get a monk who'd taken a vow of silence to break it. "And that would be...?"

"Research."

Of all the things she'd expected him to say, that hadn't been among them. "Research?" She wanted to make sure she hadn't misunderstood him.

Levi shook his head. "What did you expect?"

Now it was her turn to be slightly uncomfortable. "I'm not sure."

He shifted slightly and she wrapped her arms around his neck to keep her balance—not that he'd let her fall. His arms were tight around her hips, holding her close.

"Men like your father, brother and Dyson have secrets. The trick is to find out what they are and how best to use them."

Linda could hardly believe what she was hearing. "You're blackmailing them?"

He shook his head. "I prefer to think of it as negotiating. They leave you alone and all their secrets stay hidden. If they don't..." He shrugged again.

"That's incredible and dangerous." She gripped his hair in her hands and tugged him closer. "What have you done? My father will try to hurt you."

Her mind scrambled to find a way out of the situation. "I'll give him the money to leave you alone. I'll sign it all over to him." Anything to protect Levi from her father's wrath. He had no idea the lengths her father would go to in order to protect his reputation. "How could you do something that crazy?"

Terror filled her. She knew what kind of a man her father was. "He has friends in high places."

Levi stared at her for the longest time. Stunned silent, she imagined. Now only grasping the depth of what he'd done.

The smile started slowly, tilting the corners of his mouth upward. It changed his face, making him look so handsome it took her breath away. His lips parted and laughter spilled out.

She was scared to death and the man was laughing.

Part of her was thrilled to hear him laugh. The sensible part of her wanted to smack him for being so obtuse. He was in danger, couldn't he see that?

"Are you out of your mind?" Her question seemed to amuse him because he laughed harder. Linda smacked him on the chest, barely keeping herself from wincing. She'd hurt her hand and he was still laughing.

Annoyed now, she tried to pull away from him, but he was having none of it. He tightened his grip around her and buried his face in the curve of her neck.

She absently tapped her fingers on his brawny forearm. "You know, a girl could get a complex like this."

"I'm sorry." He leaned back, obviously trying to contain his mirth, but failing as he chuckled once again. "I'm not laughing at you, darlin'. But no one in my entire life has ever tried to protect me."

"And you found that funny?" She wasn't sure if she should be insulted or not.

"Funny and courageous and absolutely amazing." He cupped her face in his hands. "You are the most incredible woman in the world." He kissed her hard and fast. "And you most certainly will not give up your money to your grasping father."

“But, Levi—”

“No.” He cut her off. “What you need to understand is that I have more than enough information to publicly embarrass them and to see all of them in deep trouble. They know if they don’t leave you alone, that information will be released. If they make a move on me, others will release the information. Plus, I made it clear to them if anything happens to me or you, there’s nowhere they can hide, nowhere they’d be safe from the men who would come after them.”

“Levi, who are you really? You’re not just a soldier.” She’d always suspected there were a lot of layers to this man, but she’d only just scratched the surface.

All humor fled and the mask dropped over his features once again. She hurt inside to see it happen, but she had to know.

“I’m a man like any other, but I have certain skills that make me unique. There isn’t anything I can’t find with a computer, no information that I can’t access. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

Holy crap! He was a hacker. That was how he’d found the information about her father. Another worry hit her. “You didn’t do anything that can be traced back to you, did you?” She grabbed his shoulders and shook him. “You can’t do that again. What if you got caught? You’d go to prison?”

The look in Levi’s eyes softened. “Don’t worry, darlin’. It’s not something I make a practice of. And I didn’t even have to dig that deep to find dirt on your family and ex. I got some of my information from a guy I hired to watch them as well.”

“You hired someone?” The surprises just kept on coming. “Didn’t you think I could deal with this situation myself?” That was the crux of the problem. She was strong and independent. She’d planned to handle this on her own. Needed to confront all of them, one final time.

“Of course I knew you could handle it.” He looked shocked that she’d even questioned him about it. That went a long way to soothing her battered pride. “You’ve been handling them for years. The fact that you were able to forge your own life away from them is nothing less than astounding. The pressure they’ve put on you over the years has been tremendous. Most people would have buckled years ago. Your brother certainly did and so did Dyson.”

She’d never thought about it from that perspective before. She had memories of her brother saying he wanted to be an artist when he grew up. He’d been quite talented as a young man. That had all changed when he’d hit about fourteen. His art supplies had disappeared and she’d never seen him pick up a paintbrush again, not even as a hobby. The same applied to Simon. There’d never been any question that he would become a lawyer and join the family firm. “You’re right.”

Levi rubbed his hand in circles at the small of her back. The heat and his gentle touch worked their magic, relaxing her. “Of course, I’m right.”

She gave a small laugh. “Don’t expect to hear those words very often.”

"I won't. Even though we both know the truth," he teased. "I knew you could handle them, but why should you have to do it on your own. You had enough to worry about with everything they'd thrown at you and I was here and able to help."

No one, other than her grandmother, had ever taken her side before. Never stood against her powerful father. "I wish you'd told me. Shared it with me."

He lowered his head and sighed. "I know. And I'm sorry for that. I had no idea you were planning to confront them yourself. I assumed I'd be back by tonight and I would have explained everything over dinner."

She caught his chin in her hand and raised it. The stubble of his beard lightly scratched her palm. The sensation sent a shiver down her spine and she tried to ignore the tingles that radiated to all the sensitive parts of her body.

"I understand that. But from now on, talk to me first. Okay?"

He nodded. "I'll try."

Levi was so self-contained and such a man of action, she knew it was difficult for him to make this promise. "That's all I can ask." She glanced at the table. "We should probably eat dinner before it's icy cold." She slipped off his lap. Her breast brushed against his arm and she almost groaned as the nipple pebbled on contact.

He cleared his throat. "There's one more thing." Linda turned and raised one brow in question.

His gaze went to her breasts so she crossed her arms over them to hide their aroused state. She knew it was too late. He'd seen her nipples outlined against her top. The man didn't miss anything. "What?" She was almost afraid to find out.

Levi slipped an envelope from under his napkin and handed it to her. Linda opened it, drew out the heavy paper and gazed at the official document. She had to read it twice before she understood it.

The paper slipped from her fingers and drifted to the floor. Levi waited patiently, as always. He was so large and fierce—most people would never think him vulnerable. But Linda knew him better than most and she could see the uncertainty lurking in his eyes. He had his massive arms crossed in front of his chest and his chin slightly tilted. His entire body posture said he could take whatever anyone could throw at him. And he probably had over the years.

"You bought me a building?" The thought was staggering.

He shook his head. "Not any building. This one. It's yours. I paid off the promissory note before I visited your father. There was nothing they could do to legally stop me as your representative from paying it off."

"That's a lot of money, Levi. I'll pay you back."

A muscle ticked beneath his left eye. "No, you won't pay me back. It's a gift."

“Levi.” Exasperated, she placed her hands on her hips and glared at him. “You can’t just give me a building.”

He stood and stared down at her. “Why the hell not? It’s my money.”

Another thought struck her. “You didn’t do anything...you know...illegal, with your hacking and everything?”

Levi chuckled. “No. The money was mine.”

“But that has to be your entire life savings. You can’t do that. You don’t even have a job.”

He cleared his throat. “Actually, I do.”

Everything inside her froze. If he had a job, he would probably be leaving Jamesville very soon. “I’m very happy for you.” Her smile felt frozen on her face. “When do you leave?” She’d known her relationship with Levi wasn’t a long-term one, but she’d hoped for more time. She was determined to be an adult about this, even if it killed her.

He frowned, his expression growing dark. “I’m not leaving.” He raked his hand through his hair. “Unless you want me to.”

“Not if you don’t want to.” Great. Now she sounded like she was in junior high. “Levi, I’m glad you have a job, but obviously I’m missing something. Did you get a job here in Jamesville?” She couldn’t imagine what it was as there weren’t a lot of full-time jobs available in town. “Are you going to work for Jonah?”

“I’m doing this all wrong,” he muttered. Squaring his shoulders, he glared at her. “I’ve always had a job. I play the stock market. I invest. Not just my money, but also other people’s. Mostly guys I served with, including Jonah.”

“Isn’t that risky? Especially in today’s economy.”

Levi shook his head. “I have a knack for it. I can read the trends before they happen. I know when to get in and get out. I make a hell of a lot more money than I lose.”

“Wow!” She didn’t know what else to say. “That’s incredible.” But something troubled her. “If you already had a job, why did you do renovation work for me in exchange for free rent?”

“Because—” Levi cupped her shoulders and tugged her close, “—I wanted to be near you.” Leaning down, he kissed her forehead. “I wanted to spend time with you.” More kisses on her cheeks, nose and chin. “Because I want to make love with you.”

Breathless, she pressed herself against his chest. His large body was hot and he always smelled so good. She ached between her thighs and in her soul. She needed this man to fill both places.

Linda had no idea where their relationship would go from here. There had been a lot to digest tonight. All she knew was she loved him and he was staying. The man had given her a building for heaven’s sake. Not that she was accepting it. She’d be paying him back as soon as her inheritance came through.

She'd tell him so. Tomorrow. All that mattered now was getting closer to Levi. Going up on her toes, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down until his lips met hers. "All you had to do was ask."

Chapter Thirteen

All the tension that had filled Levi since he'd gotten back to Jamesville slipped away as Linda tightened her arms around him. Their lips melded together in a tender kiss. He wanted to be gentle with her, show her a softer side. She'd seen a side of him today that he'd never wanted to show her. But she'd taken it all in stride. He still couldn't believe that she was worried about protecting him from her father.

He let his palms slide down her slender back until he was cupping her ass. It filled his hands and he squeezed. She moaned into his mouth before sucking on his tongue.

Levi was a man renowned for his patience. He was a legend in certain circles for his ability to block out all else and concentrate on the problem at hand. But this slender woman made a mockery of self-control.

She stroked her fingers over the nape of his neck before tunneling into his hair. Her nails scraped over his scalp in an erotic caress. She rubbed her breasts against his chest. Even through the layers of clothing, he could feel her taut nipples.

He had to have her. Now.

Lifting her, he started down the hallway. Linda didn't break their kiss. Instead, she wrapped her legs around his waist and ground her mound against his erection. Levi staggered, bouncing off the wall before regaining his balance. He tore his mouth from hers and gasped for breath.

That didn't stop her. Linda peppered his face and neck with hot little kisses. He managed to make it into her bedroom. The light from the hallway was more than enough. He stopped by the bed, but she kept her legs wrapped tightly around his waist.

"Linda." He tried to get her to unlock her legs. Really, he did. But he didn't want to hurt her. "Darlin'," he tried again. "You've got to let go if we're going to get naked."

That seemed to galvanize her. "Right." She slid her legs away, brushing the entire front of her body against him. She smiled, a sexy teasing smile, as she ripped her top off and unhooked her bra. The straps slid down her arms and the scrap of material fell to the floor at her feet.

Levi grabbed a handful of his shirt and dragged it over his head. He couldn't stop staring at her. As always, the sheer beauty of her drew him. His hands were trembling as he reached out, using his thumbs to trace the soft skin surrounding her nipples. Her breath was faster now, short puffs of air that were warm against his skin.

Leaning down, he blew softly on her nipples. They pebbled even more. Satisfied, he drew one of them into his mouth and sucked. Hard. Linda's fingers dug into his scalp, tangling in his hair, tugging him closer. He worked back and forth, teasing one breast, then the other, loving the sounds of pleasure that came from her.

Suddenly, it wasn't enough. He had to have her naked. Beneath him. He had to bury himself deep in her warmth. He'd been cold for so long. Only Linda could warm him.

Releasing her nipple, he kissed a path down her torso until he reached the band of her jeans. On his knees in front of her now, he flicked open the button and drew down the zipper. Levi pushed his hands inside, dipping beneath her silky panties to the even softer skin beneath.

He inhaled the scent of her arousal, pushing one of his hands between her thighs. She was hot and wet, her cream coating his fingers. She whimpered, digging her nails into his shoulders.

"Levi." She drew out the sound of his name on a moan. His cock jumped in response.

"I need you naked." He stood and reached for the opening of his jeans. "Finish it," he prompted her as he toed off his sneakers and kicked them aside. He shoved his jeans and briefs down his thighs. He stepped out of them and drew off his socks, leaving him naked.

His eyes hadn't left her while he'd been stripping off his clothing. Linda shimmied out of her jeans and panties, skimming off her socks in the process. Her pale skin gleamed in the light from the hallway.

As always, he was struck by the sheer wonder of her. She was so slender and delicate in appearance. Her short black hair framed her fine-boned face and her dark blue eyes to perfection. She might be tall for a woman, but she was so much smaller than him. He was always aware of his strength when he touched her. Right or wrong, it brought out the primitive part of him. He wanted to claim her, fuck her, protect and cherish her. It was as confusing as hell. But it also felt right.

She shivered and he swore at himself for keeping her standing there while he looked his fill. He started toward her, but she stopped him by raising her hand.

"What's wrong?" He didn't know if he'd survive if she wanted to stop, but he'd damn well do it.

Linda licked her lips. He shuddered as a fiery need coursed through his veins. His balls ached for release and pre-come seeped from the head of his cock.

"Sit down on the side of the bed." She walked forward and placed her palm in the center of his chest and pushed. He took the two steps necessary to bring him up against the bed and sat.

Her eyes were wide, her pupils dilated. Her nipples were tight buds of desire. He knew she still wanted him. He swallowed hard and recited complex math formulas in his mind as she stared at his erection. It jumped and flexed toward her.

"I've never had my turn." She looked at him then and he could see the uncertainty in her eyes.

"Your turn?" he questioned gently.

She nodded and reached out her hand. Using her index finger, she stroked the length of his shaft from base to tip. He swallowed hard to keep from coming.

“You’re always pleasuring me, but I never get to do it in return. Not since that time in the bathtub.”

Was she saying what he thought she was saying? Linda put both hands on his knees and pushed his thighs wide. Then she gracefully knelt on the floor in front of him.

Sweat broke out all over his body. Every muscle in his body tensed and he began to shake. The mere thought of her mouth on his cock was almost enough to make him come. He swallowed hard. “My control is hanging by a thread, darlin’.”

“Good.” She gifted him with a brief smile before turning all her attention to his erection.

Linda no longer felt the chill of the room as she knelt between Levi’s thighs. Between his body heat and the fire coursing through her limbs, she was hot. Her breasts felt swollen and her nipples were hard. She felt empty inside, filled with a hot, wet ache that only Levi could assuage.

She studied his shaft. It was long and thick. Blue veins ran up and down the length. The bulbous head at the top was plum shaped and much darker. As she watched, a pearly bead of liquid seeped from the slit.

Leaning forward, Linda swiped her tongue over the tip. Levi groaned and his knees tightened around her. She raised her head and licked her lips. He tasted salty and musky and masculine. As good as she remembered.

“You’re killing me, darlin’.” He ran his fingers through her hair, gripping her head and holding her steady. She wasn’t sure if he was going to pull her closer or push her away.

Knowing what *she* wanted, she leaned forward again, curling her tongue around the head of his cock. His fingers tightened around her head as he tugged her mouth closer.

Grinning, she opened her mouth over the tip. Hollowing her cheeks, she sucked. Levi’s hips bucked, driving him deeper. Linda gripped the base of his cock with one hand, squeezing it. Using her other hand, she cupped his balls and rolled them gently.

Levi roared her name, rolling his hips as she stroked and sucked, using mouth, teeth, tongue and hands to pleasure him. It was a heady feeling to be in command of this man’s pleasure. He was always so in control, so restrained.

She rubbed one of her breasts against his hairy thigh. The rasp of the hair against the taut bud of her nipple made her moan. The throaty vibration surrounded his shaft, drawing a groan of pleasure from him.

“I want to be inside you.” He used his grip on her head to try and pull her away.

She retaliated by raking her nails over his scrotum.

“Darlin’,” he gasped. “Linda, I have to be inside you.”

She heard the desperation in his voice and realized she'd have to finish this way another time. She ached for Levi to take her, to fill her. Releasing his shaft on a wet pop, she leaned forward and nuzzled him one final time.

Levi didn't waste any time. Grabbing a condom from the nightstand, he ripped it open and rolled it on. Linda's legs were shaky as she started to stand, but it didn't matter.

Levi lifted her easily, pulling her onto his lap. He raised her up higher. "Put me inside you." His eyes were almost black with desire. "Put my cock inside your pussy."

Linda didn't hesitate. Only Levi could stop the pulsing ache that was consuming her. Taking him in hand, she fitted the head to her opening and then slowly sat down. One inch at a time, she drew him into her.

His hands were on her waist, guiding her, supporting her. When she was seated to the hilt, she sighed with pleasure. Her inner muscles were stretched tight. She could feel his shaft pulsing inside her. They were joined. Connected in the most intimate way.

"I love you." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. She hadn't meant to say them aloud. But there was no use denying them now. Levi was staring down at her, an expression on his face she couldn't identify.

Before she could say anything else, he stood. The motion drove him deeper into her. She gasped and clutched his shoulders for support. Levi put one knee on the bed and lowered her back to the mattress. Gripping her shoulders tightly, he began to thrust. Short, hard stabs were interchanged with long, hard strokes.

Levi pushed her higher than she'd ever been before. She didn't know what was different this time. Maybe it was because she'd told him she loved him.

She ignored the pain in the vicinity of her heart. He hadn't told her he loved her back, but she knew he cared. He showed it in every action he took. That meant more to her than false promises spoken to make her happy.

He shoved one arm beneath her back, hammering into her. Every thrust pushed her closer to the edge. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders as she clung to him. She wrapped one leg around his back, trying to pull him even deeper.

Every nerve ending in her body was primed and ready. She arched her hips up to take every thrust, welcoming him, encouraging him.

"Come for me," he commanded.

As if that was the signal her body had been waiting for, she felt the pleasurable heat rise up inside her and then, forcefully, she came. Her vision dimmed as her orgasm exploded deep within her. Her inner muscles clenched hard around him. His cock jerked and she felt the hot pulses of his release inside her.

She cried out as her body shook from head to toe. When it finally receded, a lone tear trickled down her cheek. She lay sprawled on the bed, totally spent with Levi draped over her.

Absently, she toyed with the silky strands of his hair that tickled her skin. He raised his head and stared down at her. She smiled at him, but he didn't smile back.

Pulling out of her, he lifted her and tucked her beneath the covers before padding to the bathroom. Linda swallowed back her tears and took a deep, cleansing breath. She had no idea what was going on in Levi's mind right now.

Closing her eyes, she let her thoughts drift away. There was nothing to be done about what she'd blurted out. And she wouldn't change it even if she could. She loved Levi. He could either accept that or not. It didn't change how she felt.

The mattress dipped and the covers shifted. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes. Levi stretched out beside her, supporting himself on his elbow as he watched her.

Reaching up, she cupped the side of his face. In the shadows, his face appeared even more rugged. She loved every inch of it from his high forehead, to his slightly crooked nose, to his golden-brown eyes and dark brows, to his stubborn chin and kissable lips. He was Levi and that was enough for her. She knew she'd never love another man the way she loved him.

He turned his face into her palm, placing a kiss there. The stubble of his jaw lightly abraded her skin.

"Did you mean it?" His voice was low and slightly raspy.

It took her a minute to understand what he was asking. She dropped her hand back down by her side and nodded. "I did. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable or anything."

He placed a single finger over her lips, halting her explanation. "Say it again."

Linda chewed on her bottom lip. She felt very vulnerable and open. But she'd taken a big step forward in her life today by dealing with her family and cutting off contact with them once and for all. There was no way she was going to become a coward now. She owed Levi a lot, the least of which was her total honesty.

"I love you." Sitting up, she tucked the covers around her to keep them from slipping. Levi sat up beside her, letting the covers fall to his waist. He faced her, his features unreadable. Placing her palm over his heart, she repeated her vow. "I love you, Levi Mann. Now and always."

He stared at her for so long she began to get uncomfortable, but she didn't look away.

"I'm not an easy man to live with," he began.

She could feel the heavy thud of his heart beneath her hand. "I don't know about that. You don't seem to have any trouble taking care of yourself. Plus, you cook." She'd been hoping for a smile but his serious expression never wavered.

"I'll never have a normal nine-to-five job, but I can support myself."

Linda nodded, not quite certain what he wanted her to say. But it was obvious he required some sort of response. "My job isn't exactly nine-to-five either."

He nodded solemnly before covering her hand with his. His fingers fit between hers until they were linked together over his heart. "I can't change my past, where I come from, what I've done." He sighed. "You're a classy lady, Linda, and I come from the gutter."

"The past doesn't matter." She hated that her father had dragged out Levi's past in order to hurt him. "You made yourself into a good man. The best I've ever known."

The air in the room changed, becoming charged with each passing second. Tension surrounded Levi and his grip on her hand tightened almost imperceptibly. "Good enough for you to marry?"

She blinked several times, certain she hadn't heard him right. "Marry?"

Even though it should have been physically impossible, his features grew even grimmer, more remote. "Yes," he gritted out.

"Are you asking me?" Her stomach jumped and this time it had nothing to do with her ulcer and everything to do with hope.

He nodded stiffly. He was expecting rejection. How many times in his life had he been rejected by someone he loved? And he did love her. She knew it in her heart even if he'd never said it. He never would have asked her to marry him otherwise. Not Levi. If he made a vow, he'd keep it. He was that kind of man. She'd never have to worry about Levi falling into bed with another woman or breaking his promises to her.

"Yes." She threw herself into his arms, hugging him tightly. "Yes, I'll marry you."

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her so hard she could barely breathe. "Thank you." His voice was barely a whisper, but she could hear the relief in it.

She wanted to talk, but Levi had other ideas. He rolled her beneath him and proceeded to make love to her. Twice.

Hours later, Linda was nestled in Levi's arms, resting her head on his chest when he suddenly spoke.

"I love you."

She waited, but soon realized he wasn't going to say anything else. Levi was a man of few words, but those he said, he meant.

"I know," she assured him, rubbing her hand over his chest. "I love you too."

"I don't want to wait."

"For what?" She let her nails skim over his abs, loving the way they flexed and rippled.

"The wedding."

"I'll need at least two weeks. I have to find a dress, arrange for flowers and the church and invite people."

Levi shifted slightly, drawing her closer. "You want a large wedding?"

She shook her head. "Not large. But we have to invite Shamus and Cyndi and Jonah and Amanda. Probably Patrick and Shannon as well." She started making a list in her head.

"Whatever you want." He kissed the top of her head. "As long as it only takes two weeks."

She grinned, already planning on asking Cyndi if they could have their reception at the B&B. "Don't worry. I can make it happen."

He rolled until he was staring down at her. "Thank you."

"For what?" She sensed the change in him. Whatever he was thinking now was important to him.

"For loving me. For giving me a home."

Such simple words, but they touched her to her core. "Oh, Levi." Wrapping her arms around him, she held him tightly. "I'll always love you."

He settled beside her again, neither of them speaking. But it was a good quiet, a contented one. Just as she drifted off to sleep, she heard him one final time.

"I love you." A soft kiss grazed her temple and she was wrapped in the strength of Levi's body and his love. Content, she drifted off, still making plans for the wedding.

About the Author

To learn more about N.J. Walters, please visit www.njwalters.com. Send an email to N.J. Walters at nj@njwalters.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as N.J. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/awakeningdesires>

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By the Book

Between the pages...between the sheets...something's smokin'!

By the Book

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Amanda Barrington hopes Jamesville is the right place for her rare-book business—and her new life. The moving truck barely pulls away before both are off to a rousing start. It's not her new customer that's caught her attention, though. It's the customer's brother, Jonah Sutter.

From the moment cynical, ex-military Jonah sets eyes on Amanda, he burns for her like a house afire—which is what she's going to have if she doesn't get her house's electrical system overhauled. He knows he's not a forever kind of guy, but he's more than willing to be her fix-it man. In more ways than one.

When unexpected danger threatens, Jonah finds himself dealing with more than just the desire to get Amanda into bed.

Protecting her means moving in, which exposes them both to a new danger—losing their hearts.

Enjoy the following excerpt for By the Book:

Jonah couldn't stop staring at Amanda. Her hair was once again caught at her nape in a ponytail. She wasn't wearing any makeup and there was a smudge of dirt on her nose and another on her cheek. A pair of gold-rimmed glasses perched daintily on her nose, giving her a studious appearance. She hadn't been wearing them the first time he'd met her so he assumed she must wear contact lenses at least part of the time. She looked good enough to eat and he hadn't had any breakfast yet. He'd left home the second he'd gotten Shamus's phone call.

"Can I come in?" His voice was rough with arousal, but he was hoping she wouldn't notice. Thankfully, he'd left his shirt untucked and the tails covered most of the front of his jeans, hiding the hard ridge there. His fingers tightened around the handle of his toolbox.

She was wearing a pair of faded jeans that fit her like a glove. The material lovingly caressed her curvy thighs and waist. Her green V-neck T-shirt was modest enough, but it hinted at the firm, rounded breasts beneath it.

Amanda frowned at him and glanced back toward the road. Her eyes widened when she saw the truck he'd driven over here. "Sutter's Electrical?"

"Family business." He stepped forward and she fell back a pace. He kept going until he was firmly inside. "Shamus called me." Jonah used his booted foot to shove the door closed.

"Oh." He could sense she was still suspicious of him. "That was fast."

He barely suppressed a smile. She had no idea just how fast he could be given the right motivation. He estimated it would take him about fifteen seconds, maybe less, to strip her clothing off her and burying his face between her curvy thighs. “I was just on my way out the door when he called.”

“Oh.”

“You already said that.”

She scowled at him and waved her hand toward the kitchen. “The electrical panel is downstairs. I have no idea what the problem is, but two of the outlets in the front room don’t work.”

When he didn’t move, she turned on her heel and headed toward the kitchen. Jonah took the opportunity to admire her firm, tight ass. No doubt about it, he’d love to have her on her hands and knees in front of him as he fucked her from behind.

His cock jerked in agreement. Jonah reached down and adjusted himself, but it didn’t help. There was no relief to be found. He’d already done quite a bit of research on Ms. Amanda Barrington and nothing in her past sent up a red flag. She seemed to be exactly what she presented herself as—a dealer of antiquarian and used books who’d moved to Jamesville for a fresh start.

Amanda had one hand on the handle of the basement door. It was more than obvious that she wasn’t comfortable with him. That had to change if he ever hoped to get her into bed with him. And he did.

“How about a cup of coffee?” He placed his toolbox on the floor.

She hesitated. “Okay. I guess that would be...okay.” She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and nibbled on it.

Jonah almost groaned. There was a natural sensuality about Amanda that he doubted she was even aware of. He glanced away from her and noted all the boxes. She hadn’t even begun to unpack yet.

“I think I can find another mug.” She opened a box and peered inside before she began to rummage.

Unable to resist, he moved up closer to her. As if she sensed him behind her, she jerked upright. “What are you doing?”

“This.” Reaching out, he stroked his thumb over her cheek, brushing at the dirt there. “You have a smudge right here.”

“Oh.” A tinge of pink colored her face. He was fascinated by how easily she blushed. Her pupils dilated as he ran his thumb over the bridge of her nose. “I must have gotten that when I was down in the basement earlier.”

“No problem.” Her skin was so soft beneath his calloused fingers. He wanted to run his hands over her entire body, learning her curves, searching out all her sensitive spots. His gut clenched as he imagined how soft and inviting her pussy would be.

Her breathing was shallow, her chest rising and falling rapidly. She licked her lips and swayed slightly toward him. Her eyelids drifted shut, fanning her thick lashes against her cheekbones. That was all the permission he needed.

Cupping the back of her head with his hand, he held her steady as he lowered his mouth to hers. Her lips were as soft as the rest of her. Jonah ran his tongue over her bottom lip before moving on to the top. He caught the faintest taste of cherries and knew it had to be her lip balm.

Her hair was thick and he tangled his fingers in the mass, not wanting her to escape him. Not yet. He loved the color, with its tinges of cinnamon, red and mahogany. It was vital and alive, just like Amanda. He wanted to know if the hair between her thighs was the same color.

He urged her closer and she came. She made a small sound of pleasure as the soft mounds of her breasts pressed against his chest. One of her hands slid up his arm before stopping at his nape. Her touch made his skin tighten and his balls ache.

Deepening the kiss, he pressed his lips more firmly to hers and let his tongue slide over the seam. She parted for him and he slipped inside. Her mouth was warm and wet and oh-so-inviting. She tasted of coffee, of late nights and early mornings. She tasted like home. But he wasn't a forever kind of guy.

Jolted, he pulled back. Yes, he wanted to bed her. And he would have her. But only as a temporary lover.

Continuing education was never this hot...

Seduction 101

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No one knows the advertising game better than Julia—sell the sizzle, not the steak. However, selling sirloin and selling herself are two different things. When she tries to generate sizzle in a coworker, he's more interested in paper shuffling than anything juicy she has to offer.

Eric, her long-time best friend and co-worker, feels the sizzle all right. The sizzle of the rare and beautiful Julia...and a searing jealousy as he watches her try to seduce another man. If Julia is ready to hit the sheets with someone, he's determined it's going to be him. But he needs a plan. Like her clients, Julia doesn't respond to the direct approach; she needs to learn to generate her own heat.

So Eric cooks up his own little continuing education class. Something he likes to call Seduction 101.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Seduction 101:

Julia stood before her open closet in her robe, a dress in each hand. "What do you mean, sexier stuff? I don't have any sexier stuff."

"The red one is sexier." Eric pulled a dress from the back of her closet. "You wore this to work once. I'm telling you, this is what catches a man's eye."

"It's not comfortable, and it gapes at the chest."

"Yeah." Eric's lips turned in a wicked smile as he handed the dress to her. "You've made my point. Seduction isn't about comfort. It's about stretching your boundaries. You want comfort, put on some flannel pajamas and veg out in front of the television—alone. You want to seduce a man, it's red, baby."

Julia considered the dress and sighed. She remembered the dress quite well. It had hung in her closet such a long time it was a wonder the moths hadn't eaten through the fabric. "I was self-conscious all day the one time I wore this thing. I kept thinking people were staring at me."

"Uh yeah," Eric said, nodding. "That's the idea. You can't seduce a man if he's not looking at you. Did Harris notice you today in that black suit?"

"No." She tossed the other two dresses onto the back of a chair and stared at the red one. "He didn't care if I was alive."

"So, trust me. Wear the red on Monday with these shoes." He bent over and picked up a pair of red, high-heeled slingbacks. "Bring them with you. We'll practice with them."

She'd bought the ensemble years ago on a crazy whim. This was what it was going to take to get Harris's attention? As her grandmother used to say—*oy vey*.

Taking the pair of shoes, she stared at the rows of muted colors in her closet—blues and blacks. "Maybe I'm not cut out for this seduction thing. I never would have worn this again."

“Exactly the reason I’m here. You’re in training, and you want to learn what men find sexy. I’m telling you...the red dress...is sexy.” He drew the words out and she wanted to hit him over the head with the shoes.

“Now, for other necessary weekend apparel. Show me your lingerie.”

“Lingerie?” She hung the dress on the back of the door and dropped the shoes next to it before she gave in to the impulse to brain him with them.

“Yes. You’re going to play the part all weekend. Fake it until you make it. *Trust me.*”

He walked to the dresser and opened first one drawer, then another. This was too weird on too many levels. It took a gay man to tell her how to dress for a hetero relationship? How much did she have to change to get a guy interested?

She wore what was professional, conservative and comfortable. She couldn’t be bothered with all these details.

But Eric sure paid attention to them.

Why did all the good ones have to go the other way? When they’d first become friends she’d asked about his past relationships, but he’d been so overtly evasive, she’d suspected something was amiss. All straight men bragged at least once in a while. Eric’s elusiveness, his extremely caring and considerate demeanor, and the fact that he’d never once come onto her—oh yeah, he was too sweet to be straight.

He obviously wanted to remain closeted and it was none of her business anyway. She loved him no matter what he did in private. One of these days, maybe he would feel comfortable enough to confide in her about his personal life.

Still, did he cross-dress, too? “I didn’t think women’s clothes were something you’d be interested in.” She knew she was prying now, trying to coax him to share his “secret”. As she watched him go through her bureau drawers, she tried to imagine him dressed as a woman.

She couldn’t see it.

Eric continued searching through the drawers. “Well, I *look* at what women wear like every other man on the planet. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Men *look*, but they know next to nothing about styles—what goes with what. How do you happen to?”

“I’m not that interested in the clothing. I just know what would look good on you.”

“Something you’d look good in, too, maybe?” As soon as the words passed her lips, she wanted to wrench them back.

He closed the drawer and turned toward her, his eyebrows drawing together. “What?”

So, he’s not a cross-dresser. “Nothing.”

He left the bureau and walked slowly toward her. “That wasn’t *nothing*. What are you talking about?”

Julia took a step back. The last thing she'd wanted to do was hurt or embarrass him. Damn her nosiness anyway.

"I'm sorry. It doesn't make a bit of difference to me. Your business is your business, and you're great to be helping me on this. Forget I said anything."

"And what did you say, exactly? That I'd look good in *women's clothing*?" His eyes bore into hers. "What doesn't make a difference?"

Her face grew hot and she chewed her bottom lip. Now she'd done it. She'd put him on the defensive, something she'd avoided all the time they'd been friends. If he didn't want to tell her, he didn't want to.

She shouldn't have said anything. Now there was no way out.

Well, they were friends, weren't they? Maybe this was her chance to let him come out to her, her chance to tell him he could confide his secret. It was the least she could do after all the work he was going to for this "training weekend".

Julia took a deep breath and smiled. He'd said "trust me"... He had to realize he could trust her, too. "I thought maybe you were into cross-dressing, as well."

He blinked. "What?"

Julia shook her head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pried. This is none of my damn business. I wanted you to...well, you can tell me stuff, you know? I don't judge."

"What is none of your business?" He put his hands on her shoulders and stared into her eyes.

"Your being gay."

Eric's eyebrows shot up and disappeared under his shock of blond hair.

"You think I'm *gay*?"

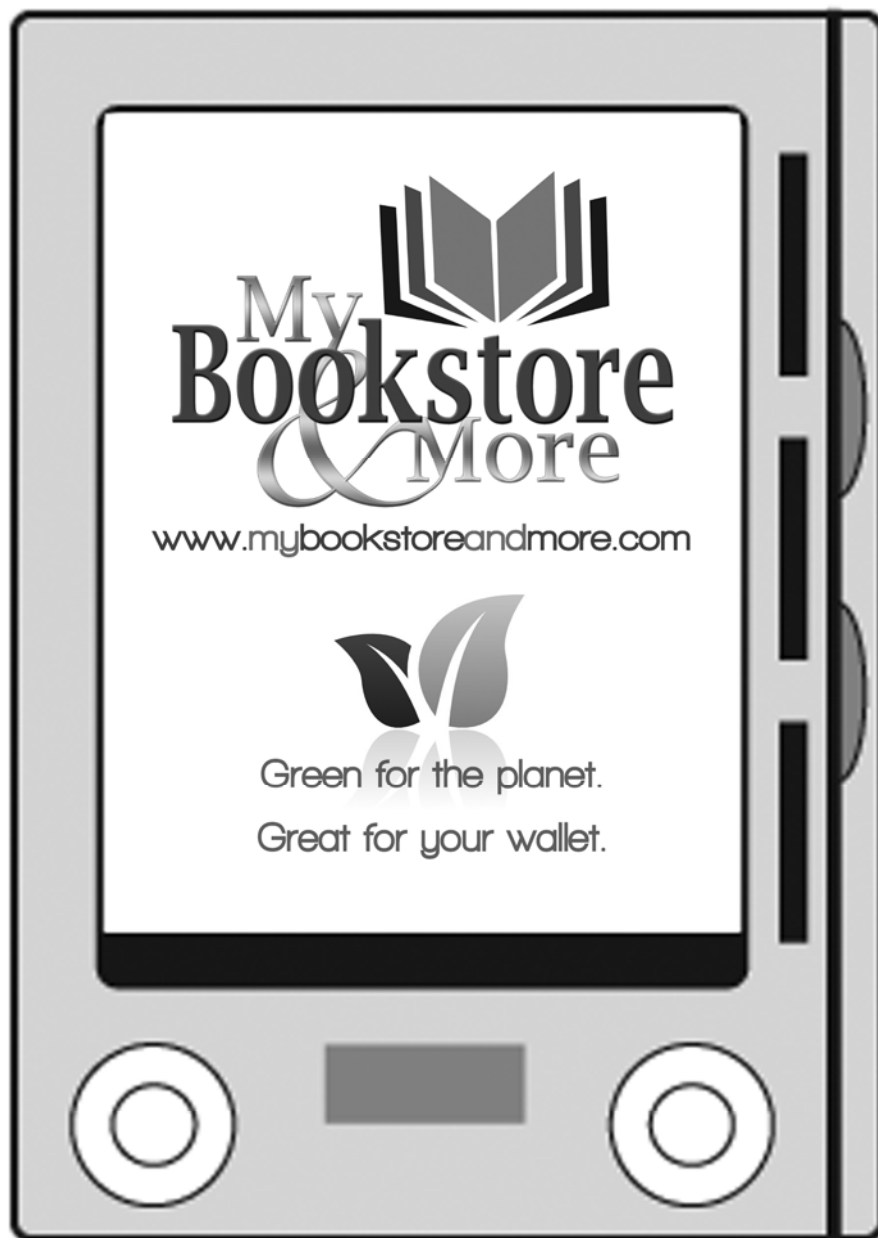
He pulled her into his arms and covered her mouth with his before she could sort out what was happening. His tongue moved over her lips and she opened her mouth against the insistent, mind-blowing action. Heat raced through her limbs, no longer from the embarrassment at her *faux pas*, but from the fervor of stark, shocking desire.

Eric tangled his fingers in her hair and held her to him, his warm breath mingling with hers, obliterating all thoughts of the closet, the clothes and any question about his sexual preference. She slid her hands slowly up his arms, only to steady herself—for no other reason.

Yeah, right.

The kiss went on for another staggering bombshell of a moment before he released her with a jolt and stared down at her, his eyes blazing, his mouth a hard, thin line.

"I am *not* gay."



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