

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Double Dare

NAUGHTY
GAMES

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Double Dare

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DOUBLE DARE

Lena Matthews

Acknowledgement

Dedicated to Liz, my heterosexual lifemate who took my three-year rule and threw it back in my face. I don't think I've ever told you how much I'm grateful for you doing that. Consider this a thank you and feel free to say you told me so.

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Chapter One

If it was the last thing she did, Paige Reyes was going to kill Shane Oxley. She didn't care if it was his birthday. He was going down—by her hands. Thanks to her medical training and *CSI*, she knew many ways to hurt a man without leaving a hint of evidence and she couldn't wait to try out her newfound knowledge.

Revenge was sweeter than chocolate.

As if he could sense her homicidal thoughts, Shane glanced at her from across the room and smiled.

The bastard.

No, bastard was too good of a way to describe the cold-hearted blackmailer. Actually, the more she thought of it, the more Paige realized there wasn't a word in the English language that aptly described Shane. No word sick or twisted enough to rest upon his evil head. He was lower than low. The devil incarna—

"Something tells me you're not thinking happy birthday thoughts." The teasing words of Gideon Foley pulled her back from the abyss of her bloodthirsty fantasies.

"I'm sure I can somehow manage to carve happy birthday on his forehead before I dose him with gasoline," she said, turning her back on the object of her disdain to look into the kind gray eyes of her dear friend. As usual, the sable-haired man with his teasing ways managed to make her smile without even trying. "Tell me, Shakespeare, will you be my alibi?"

"Sadly, no."

"Damn." She snapped her fingers in mock outrage. "It was worth a try."

"Come on, squirt, it can't be all that bad. You wouldn't be here if it was."

That showed what he knew. The truth of the matter was, Paige wouldn't be here if she didn't love her brother Perry so much. If it weren't for him and the scholarship Shane's family sponsored, Paige would have told Shane exactly where he could put his birthday cake. But she wouldn't do anything to risk her brother's future and Shane knew it.

Which was why, no matter how much she might hate it, she had come to the little get-together. The one good thing about showing up to the party was the knowledge everyone would be here tonight. She couldn't remember the last time the seven of them were together, but they were all supposed to come tonight.

They were college friends who had managed to beat the odds and remain close long after they collected their diplomas. Seven oddballs who, by all rights, had nothing in common with one another on the surface, yet they somehow managed to forge a bond that outweighed all those differences. There was Bev Navarro, the Filipino brainiac of the group with the not-so-secret crush on Holden Lancaster, the party boy. And Skylar, the pretty, pretty princess who could never decide until recently whether she was in love with Gideon the poet, or Tripp Kowalski the jock. That left Shane, the self-appointed ringleader with more money than God, to round out the group.

So far Bev was the only one who hadn't arrived, but there was no doubt in Paige's mind everyone would eventually come, as decreed by Shane, for his party. He was the first one to turn thirty and in his annoying, controlling, highhanded manner, he demanded one night together. Just the old group—like old times. No dates. No excuses.

He'd been adamant about it being a gift-free event, which, in her case, was wise on his part. Paige sincerely doubted he wanted a bullet with his name engraved on it.

"Well..." Gideon persisted when she didn't immediately answer him.

"Well, what?" she asked, slightly confused by the question.

But if there was any confusion it was apparently only on her side because Gideon picked up right where he left off, deep in her business. "If it's so bad, why are you here?"

As much as she wanted to rail against the injustice of it all, Paige kept mum about the hows and whys. She didn't want their friends to have to pick a side, especially if there was an off chance they wouldn't take hers. "Let's just say I have my reasons."

"And are they all devious?"

"A good portion." She smiled. He knew her so well.

"Look, I don't know what Shane did. Despite my constant picking the last three years, you've yet to spill. And that's fine. We're all entitled to our little secrets, but you have to admit, if it weren't for him, none of us would even know one another."

Gideon had her there. Somehow or other Shane could be credited with being the man behind the curtain in all their friendships. If it weren't for him, she would have never met any of these people in the room with her now, and for that she was grateful. But just that. "Fine. In his entire miserable life he did one good thing."

"I'm sure he's done more than one."

"Really?" Paige tilted her head to the side and furrowed her brow. "Funny, but I can't think of anything else."

"Right..." Gideon peered at her in the quizzical way only he could, seeing directly through her bullshit, as usual. That was the problem with knowing someone for a decade, they saw past the lies and false pretenses. "Not a single thing?"

She didn't want to talk about this. Not even a little. "Subject change. Have you written anything lately?"

"Nice try, squirt, but no dice." Gideon reached out and pulled Paige against him, turning her around until she was facing Shane once more. "Look at him and tell me after all these years, the only thing you feel for him is hatred."

Shane was once more involved in a conversation with Holden, the host of this little shindig, allowing Paige to look at him unaware. It had been two years since she last saw Shane, but appearance wise he hadn't changed much. He was still as devastatingly handsome as he'd been when they first met in chemistry class. His thick black hair was

a bit longer than it was back then, edging his strong jawline like a handcrafted picture frame. The big difference between the last time and now was he walked unassisted, something she knew he feared he'd never do again after his car accident four years ago.

Despite everything that had transpired between them, she couldn't stop the sense of pride that filled her at the sight of him standing tall and proud, unaided by a cane. Even back then she knew he would walk again. Shane was too bullheaded not to.

Then again, he was bullheaded about many things, which was why they were in the predicament they were in now. "I'll make you a deal, Shakespeare."

"Okay."

"If you let it go, I'll pretend I don't notice the way you're using Skylar as a shield to keep Tripp away."

Gideon's hands dropped from her arms, giving Paige the opportunity to face him again. Gone was the easygoing grin he'd been sprouting like wings earlier and in its place was the cool mask of indifference Paige had tried to perfect for tonight's festivities. His was better than hers though, making her wonder, and not for the first time, what was going on between him, Tripp and Skylar.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't." She smiled in a sweet and mocking way. "And I'm going to let your little lie slide, just as you're going to let your question to me slide. Deal?"

"You're ruthless."

"See, now I've been saying the same thing for the last three years but do you think she'd listen to me?" Paige's smile slowly slid from her lips as Shane spoke in an amused tone from behind her. "Tell me, Gideon. What's your secret?"

"It's simple really," Paige said without turning around. "I don't hate him." And without saying another word, she bypassed Gideon and walked away, all without turning around to face the man who'd broken her heart. Maybe, just maybe, if she kept

a wide-enough berth around him, she might survive the night with the remaining pieces of her heart intact.

It took everything out of Shane not to yank Paige back to him and throw her over his shoulder. The only thing stopping him from doing just that was the knowledge he wasn't walking out of this house alone. After months of plotting and planning, he was finally ready for her. And the little brat didn't have a clue it was coming.

"She doesn't really mean that," Gideon said.

"I know." She thought she did though, which was far more annoying. "Paige is just being Paige."

"That seemed a little stronger than her normally, umm...upfront self. Hate is a harsh word. I've never heard her say anything like that before."

"Then you don't know Paige the way I do."

"Lucky me," Gideon teased.

He didn't know the half of it. "If you say so." Shane offered the other man a carefree smile and walked away casually, all the while seething on the inside. The center of his palm tingled from his desire to lay his hand against the plump flesh of her bottom. If there was ever a person in need of a good sound spanking it was Paige.

She was a handful and she always had been. Of course that was also what attracted him to her. She was no wilting wallflower. Paige knew what she wanted and went after it, especially those things she cared the most about. Too bad he'd realized that after it was too late. On the other hand, he still had time to right his wrongs and he planned to do so tonight. Even if it meant making her hate him a little more before she admitted to loving him.

He walked over to the bar in the corner of the room and grabbed his drink from the table. All the while keeping Paige discreetly in his line of sight. The petite African-American was as beautiful as she was contrary. The new spiky, short hairstyle she

sported flattered her oval face. It also added a few inches to her short frame, but it still didn't help the pint-sized terror out. What she lacked in height, however, she more than made up for with attitude.

When Shane first met Paige, he was a bit put-off by her abrasive manner. He was used to his wealth and looks getting him pretty much anything he desired, but the attributes he'd coasted on his entire life got him nowhere with the slim beauty. It wasn't until he started to give Paige attitude back that she even began to notice him, thus cementing their bickering relationship. It became a game to him, to infuriate her for fuck's sake, just to see if he could get a rise out of her. When she'd blow up, he'd win, if she was able to ignore him, she'd win. They were both so competitive that the malicious aspect of it soon faded away. Their transition from friend to frienemy was slow and shaky, but somewhere along the line the woman he loved to annoy became one of the closest friends he had.

She'd been one of the first faces he'd seen after his car accident. Paige worked in the hospital he was admitted to and, despite the rules and regulations, she had been inside the operating room with him, leaving only long enough to donate blood. The doctors refused to allow her to work on him, but she stayed anyway, just to watch over him she later said.

The fact they had downshifted so fast in their relationship from gurney guardian angel to words of hate bothered Shane more than he would ever admit. The worst part was he knew the demise in their relationship was his fault entirely. Since he was the one who put them in this situation, he was going to make sure he got them out of it as well. Whether Paige believed him or not, he loved her, and he refused to be without her for a moment longer.

He watched as the object of his thoughts stealthily made her way across the room. The second she moved away from him, she began to smile once more under what he could only assume was the largest cloud of delusion in the world. She might think she was a safe distance from him but she was wrong. Dead wrong.

He was aware of her every movement since she entered the house. Then again, there wasn't much about Paige Shane wasn't aware of. Just because she'd been avoiding him the last three years didn't mean he wasn't keeping tabs on her. He'd even gone as far as to hire a private detective to keep track of her whereabouts when she moved to Baltimore. If he couldn't be in her life on a day-to-day basis as he used to, he would be as knowledgeable about it as possible.

There was no doubt in his mind his actions were a tad out there, but he didn't regret his decisions regarding the matter for a second. If he hadn't been paying such close attention, he might have missed his opportunity with her. It was no surprise to him Perry was her Achilles' heel. The way she felt about her family was the same way some people felt about money. She'd even moved six hundred miles away to accept a job that paid more so she could help out with her brother's tuition. Medical school wasn't cheap. Not by a long shot. And Paige, like every other able-minded member of her immediate family, was doing all she could to help out the young man.

Shane was too. He arranged for Perry to receive a scholarship that would pretty much guarantee the young man a full ride, but it came with a string attached. And the string ran straight from Shane to Paige.

Using her brother was low, even for him, but Shane refused to apologize. He owed Paige too many of those already.

"Hey there, birthday boy." Bev interrupted his thoughts with her arrival, birthday candles in hand. As usual, the pretty brunette had a sunny smile on her face, but it seemed as if it was a little strained. It probably had a lot to do with the six-foot-tall radio jock staring a hole in her back. As far as Bev was concerned, Holden was pretty much up the same shit creek Shane was with Paige, and their buddy Tripp was with Gideon and Skylar, with none of the three having a paddle between them. "Are you ready for your spanking?"

"Hell yeah." Shane pulled her into his arms for a hug. "Damn, lady, you are looking good."

Bev laughed as she hugged him back before they parted. "You are such a flirt."

"That's what you love about me."

"So true." Bev glanced around the room, her gaze stuttering for a moment when it reached Holden before turning back to him. "I can't believe you pulled it off. Everyone is here."

"Was there ever any doubt?" Shane teased in a good-natured manner. "I only wish I thought of it earlier. We haven't all been together in quite some time."

"It's hard..." she hedged, making way for one of the many excuses everyone seemed to come up with over the years.

"No, we need to make the effort. We can't afford to let our friendships die out," Shane insisted. "At the end of the day, all we have is each other. I think somehow we all forgot that for a brief moment. We allowed petty differences to stand in the way of what really matters."

"And what's that?"

"That we love one another." Knowing what he did about their little group, Shane thought he had never uttered truer words. They needed each other. The tiny fractures in their group had made all their lives miserable, and it was time for it all to end. Tonight was the culmination of his hard work. He watched as Paige stood talking to Holden and realized it would soon be do or die. Thanks to him and the secret gifts he bought for the party, the stage was set. He could only hope everyone took advantage of the opportunity to mend their broken relationships. He knew he would.

"Are you ready for the cake?" Bev's question had him nodding. *Ready for my wishes too.*

"Oh yeah." He smiled. "Let's get the party started."

The sooner they lit the candles, the sooner he could get to the presents, and then the fun could really begin.

Chapter Two

Regardless of her more-than-obvious disdain for the night's festivities, Paige reluctantly found herself joining in as the group sang *Happy Birthday* to Shane. Being the egomaniac he was, Shane stood in the place of honor at the head of the table, lapping up the attention like a cat laps cream. After the final note was bellowed, he blew out the candles amidst claps and wolf whistles.

Shane nodded his head regally, all the while gesturing with his hand for more, much to the apparent amusement of everyone else. From the way they were all acting, one might have thought he'd invented the cure for cancer instead of letting out some air.

The second the petty thought entered her mind, Paige forced it away. Not much longer, she reminded herself as she waited impatiently for him to cut the cake. Their agreement stipulated she had to stay for an hour after the cake was cut. Then she was free to leave. As far as Paige was concerned, the hour started the second Shane picked up the knife to cut his cake. She only had fifty-eight and some change to go before she could walk out of Holden's house with her brother's scholarship in the bag.

The rowdy noise drifted into a dead silence as Bev began to pass out the cake. As bad luck would have it, Paige was seated to Shane's right, forcing her to be closer than she preferred to him. But she could deal with it. The night was almost over. The one thing making her feel marginally better was the fact she wasn't the only miserable person at the party tonight. As she looked around the table, it seemed as if everyone appeared a tad uncomfortable. In fact, she sensed a lot of weird undercurrents.

The undercurrents coming from Tripp, Skylar and Gideon was a no-brainer. During the course of their ten-year friendship, Paige had watched Skylar flit between the two men while dating mounds of others. In the past, it seemed as if the pretty blonde was

never going to make up her mind about whom she wanted to be with. Then one day, out of the blue, she announced she was moving in with Gideon. From the way Tripp had been watching them all night Paige could sense he was none too pleased about the decision. The again, neither Skylar nor Gideon seemed all that happy either. They were their own twisted version of the Bermuda Triangle without a happy ending in sight.

With a begrudged look, Bev took her seat next to a grinning Holden and began to ignore the other man all over again. "So." Her words came out in a desperate rush. "What did you wish for?"

"Bev." Holden leaned toward her, eating up the space she managed to create for herself. "If he tells us what he wished for, he won't get it."

"You're going to wish you sat somewhere else if you don't move your hand."

Paige and Skylar shared a guilty look with one another. Bev had made the two of them promise not to leave her alone with Holden. And while technically she and Holden weren't by themselves, Paige knew Bev was closer than she wanted to be with him.

Two years ago, Bev took a page out of Paige's *Stupid Things to Do With Your Friends* manual and made out with Holden during a game of Seven Minutes in Heaven. Paige believed if things had ended after their allotted time, everything would have been fine. Unfortunately though, Holden made a grave error by telling Bev he hadn't really picked her name. And Bev being Bev, took his gesture as one of pity instead of one of unappeased lust and swore never to forgive him. From the way she'd been avoiding him ever since, Paige would say she was doing a damn good job.

From the way Bev squirmed in her chair, Paige could only suspect Holden was up to no good. Brat. He was no better than Shane. Perhaps it was time for her to step up and put an end to Bev's torture. The only question was, how could she do it without causing a scene or embarrassing Bev further?

"Where you going?" Holden asked in an innocent manner as Bev attempted to stand.

"Let go, you big bully."

"Actually," Shane said, interrupting before Paige could, "my wish was for all of us."

Curious as to where this was leading, Paige glanced over at Shane as Gideon spoke. "I hope it was for us to win the lotto."

"Not exactly."

"Damn," Gideon said.

"Then what did you wish for?" Bev asked.

"In time all things will be answered." Shane rose from his seat. "I'll be right back. I have to go get the presents."

What the fuck! "Presents!" Paige couldn't stop her cry of outrage even if she wanted to. Shane had been adamant about her not bringing a present. Not that she really could have afforded a lavish gift, but she'd be damned if she was going to be the one person who didn't bring him anything. How pathetic did he think she was? "I thought you weren't accepting gifts this year. If you told me I didn't have to bring a present as some lame attempt to salvage my poor dignity or to preserve my pride, you needn't have bothered."

"The presents aren't for me, Paige. I brought them for everyone else." Shane smiled cruelly as he stared into her eyes. "And I assure you, little one, no one knows more about your pride than I."

Paige tilted her chin and met his icy cerulean gaze head-on. Fine, she was wrong, but she still refused to back down. She could be as stubborn as he was. Besides, it wasn't as if she were here of her volition. If he didn't like what she had to say, he could let her out of their deal and she would gladly walk away. A move he taught her three years ago. As if sensing her determination not to break first, Shane cursed under his breath and stormed out of the dining room.

"Pipe down, Paige," Skylar scolded. "It's the boy's birthday, for goodness sake. Retract the claws and cut him a little slack."

I'll cut him some slack, all right. "That's what's wrong with him now. Shane is so used to people treating him as if he were the crowned heir he doesn't know what to do when someone stands up to him."

"Are you willing to test your theory?" Shane dared as he entered the room once more with three gift bags of various colors and sizes.

"I should have never come." This was a mistake. A huge one. Paige tried to let go of her anger by keeping her end goal in mind. This was for Perry. Not Shane. He was just a means to an end.

"As if you had a choice. My threat wasn't an idle one."

His chilling reminder had her seething all over again. "Don't think I didn't realize that."

Fucking bast –

"So..." Tripp interrupted. "Should we all leave and come back at a better time?"

"No way. If we leave, I won't get my present." Skylar's teasing tone broke through the dark haze of Paige's fury.

"And it's all about you, isn't it, dollface?" Tripp's haunted eyes didn't quite match his mocking tone.

But if Skylar noticed she didn't let on. In her best pretty, pretty princess persona, Skylar tossed her hair over her shoulder. "Of course it is. Now gimme."

"Don't be greedy." Shane winked as he handed her a long orange bag. "You have to share."

"Who am I sharing it with?" Forever the girly girl, Skylar glowed with pleasure at her unexpected gift.

"You're sharing with Tripp and Gideon."

Her smile quickly melted away as she cast a not-so-discreet glance between the two men with whom she had to share her present. Neither of them looked any happier than she did. And as horrible as it was, Paige felt a small measure of satisfaction at her friend's crestfallen expression. Everything was fine and good when Shane was meddling in her life, but now that the shoe was on the other foot, no one seemed amused. Somehow Paige doubted Skylar felt the need to cut Shane some slack now.

In the midst of her gloating, Gideon stood and walked to the liquor cabinet to refill his glass. When he faced the group once again, however, his face was wiped of all expression. His body language told another story entirely. He was not happy and she felt bad for him. Immediately she retracted her earlier thoughts. Just because she had to suffer with Shane's rudeness didn't mean her friends should have to. Shane should know it would hurt them to share anything with one another, even if it was something small enough to fit in a gift bag.

Before she could get herself worked up on their behalf, Gideon spoke, cutting through the tension in the room. "Shall we take this into the living room?"

Before agreeing, Paige glanced at her watch and smiled. Forty-four minutes to go. She'd play Shane's game for a little longer, if only to show him she could.

Shane waited until everyone was situated in the other room before he began. Tonight was a long time in the making and he didn't want anything to go wrong now. He looked around the room at his friends, recalling when he'd met each and every one of them. He realized most would be pissed at his gifts. In fact, he could already sense some growing resentment. Hopefully when all was said and done, everything would work out in the end and they'd be thanking him.

"On with the present-giving." He walked over to the love seat where Bev was sitting and handed her the small yellow bag. "You'll be sharing your present with Holden."

The smile Bev had been sporting immediately slipped away. Shane wanted to comfort her, or at least let her know he wasn't being cruel on purpose, but that would defeat his intention. Besides, Shane needed to save all his explanations for Paige. Speaking of which... "And last but not least," Shane walked across the room, stopping at the far wall where Paige was standing, looking disgruntled as hell, "for you, little one. You're sharing with..." Shane pretended to look around for an extra person before glancing back at her with mock amazement, "well, with me."

"Note the surprise on my face." To his irritation, Paige made no move to take the small purple bag. "I'll pass."

The hell she would. "I think not." He didn't come this far for things to fall apart now. "Take the bag, Paige."

When he didn't budge, she gave in and grabbed the bag from his hand. "There are over a thousand nerves in the human body, Shane, and you are on every last one of mine."

That wasn't all he planned to be on before the night was over. Just thinking of her sexy lithe body under his was enough to make him grin, which only seemed to annoy her further. Unable to resist irking her a little more, he winked at her before walking to the center of the room. He waited until everyone turned their attention his way before speaking again. "Everybody gather around with the co-owner or owners of your bags. It's time to play a little game."

No one said anything but the reluctance filling the room was more than obvious. Still, it couldn't be helped. They weren't going to fix their problems with avoidances and excuses. God knew they'd tried those slam, bang methods over the last few years to no avail.

The only one who seemed pleased with the turn of events was Holden, who, much to Bev's obvious annoyance, had joined her on the love seat. Shane thought it was fitting the two of them were on the love seat since they'd been head over heels with one another for as long as he could remember.

Unlike Holden though, Tripp was slower to move toward the couch where Gideon and Skylar were sitting stiffly. When he joined them, he stared straight ahead. He looked uncomfortable yet somehow right sitting with the two of them. Those three belonged together and it was time they all stopped fighting it.

Once his ducklings were all settled, Shane moved next to Paige, who was peering in her small bag as if expecting something to leap at her at any moment. So untrusting—not that he hadn't given her plenty of reasons to be. Just thinking about the many ways he fucked up in the past made him want to hurry through the night's festivities. The sooner they all fixed things, the better they all would be. "Now that everyone is in their place, feel free to open the bags."

"Yay!" With the delight of a child, Skylar opened their bag and pulled out a bottle of tequila. Her blonde brows shot up in surprise. "Exactly what type of game were you thinking of playing, Shane dear?"

"Yes," Paige held the keys to his family's cabin up for everyone to see. "What's going on here?"

"Hold up." Tripp frowned as he gestured over to Paige. "How come Paige has keys and all we have is booze? I don't want booze. I want keys too."

Before Shane could begin to explain, Gideon turned to Holden and Bev, who had yet to open their bag. "What did you guys get?"

Bev's face was a mask of confusion as she peered into the bag. "It's a stopwatch. I don't get it."

"Join the club," Skylar said, glancing back at Shane.

The motives for his desire for this little get-together were about to ring clear. "You all wanted to know what I wished for this year. Well, the answer lies within your hands."

"You wished for tequila?" Skylar questioned, still obviously confused.

"No, I wished for a do-over." Shane paused to look at Paige for a moment. It was imperative she listened and understood exactly what he was saying. "A do-over for us all."

And, man, did they need it. Every single person in this room was lying to themselves and each other about their true feelings, Shane included. The only difference between Shane and everyone else was he refused to waste another day without the person he loved.

Not only was Shane the self-proclaimed ringleader of their little group, but he was also the person everyone talked to. When Bev began to avoid Holden two years ago, it was he who Holden confided in. And a year ago, after Tripp, Skylar and Gideon made fireworks of their own at Tripp's Fourth of July party, it was to Shane who Tripp divulged the details of their drunken romp.

"What do you mean?" Gideon asked, drawing Shane's attention their way. "Why do you think we need a do-over?"

Why did they need a do-over? Shane wanted to hit Gideon for even asking. Seriously, was he the only person not drifting in the river of denial? "Because you're all unhappy. Let me rephrase that, we're all unhappy, and some of us are eaten up by guilt and regret."

"You? Guilt?" Paige's disbelief rang out loud and clear. "I don't believe it."

"Believe it." He had more reason to be guilty than anyone else in the room. "And I'm not the only one, am I?"

"I'm not," Gideon said, apparently still confused.

"No, you may not be." Shane nodded his head to Tripp, whose smug smile had disappeared. He didn't want to out his friends, but if no one was willing to fess up, he would do it for them. Lies and secrets were destroying them all. "But he is. Filled with it."

Skylar's gaze cut to Tripp. "What is he talking about?"

"I don't know." Tripp's words of denial rang false. "I need another drink."

Damn, Tripp was going to force his hand. Though it hurt Shane to do this to the other man, he knew he had no other choice. "Why don't you play another game of quarters while you're at it? Maybe this time you won't chicken out."

Skylar's gasp of shock was almost as palpable as Tripp's grimace of annoyance. "What I told you was spoken in confidence."

Also during a drinking binge, but Shane thought it best not to mention that. He'd already spilled enough of the man's secrets.

"You told him?" Gideon asked, standing as well. "You wouldn't talk to us about it, but you discussed it with him?"

"There was nothing to talk about."

"No?" Gideon's fist clenched and unclenched by his side. For a second Shane thought he might take a swing at the other guy, but at the last second Gideon controlled his temper. "You're right, Tripp. There is nothing to talk about. Now or ever again."

"Gideon?" Skylar reached out to him, the pain on her face heartbreaking. "You don't mean that."

"Yes, Skylar, I think I do."

"You don't, Gideon," Tripp said adamantly. "No more so than I meant what I said a year ago."

"You don't know dick, Tripp," Gideon ground out, his words full of fury.

But his anger didn't cause Tripp to back down. Not one little bit. "Which was part of the problem, wasn't it, ol' buddy?"

"Go to hell."

"I've been there all year." Tripp turned to face them again, sincerity now written across his face. "I could use a do-over. I'd be willing to play. What about you, Skylar?"

Skylar bit into her bottom lip and cast her gaze around the room nervously. If she was waiting for gasps of outrage, she was in the wrong room. Shane didn't care if Tripp and Gideon enjoyed catching and pitching. He just wanted his friends to be happy.

Skylar nodded in affirmation. "I would love a do-over. I'm more than willing to try again."

"Then goody for the both of you because I'm sure as hell not." Gideon's retreat was stopped by Tripp, who walked in front of the other man, blocking his exit. "Get out of my way, Tripp. You should be real good at that after the last several months."

"I don't want out of your way." His confession sounded raw, even to Shane.

"This time it isn't about you," Gideon said coldly as he brushed past Tripp and out the room.

So far his gifts weren't eliciting much of a positive reaction. But he wasn't willing to give up yet.

"It's not too late," Shane said to Tripp and Skylar. But his words weren't just for Tripp, they were for them all. "If you want to fix this, go after him and make it right. You only get one do-over, Tripp, don't mess it up this time."

Tripp turned to Skylar, who was watching him intently. "What do you think, dollface?"

"The same thing I thought a year ago. My feelings for the two of you haven't changed. I love you both, and I want to be with both of you."

That's what Shane was hoping to hear. One couple down, two to go.

Chapter Three

Good Lord! Eyes wide, Paige watched as Skylar and Tripp walked out of the room, hand in hand, as if nothing of importance had just occurred. What the hell had she missed in the last two years? Skylar was in for one hell of a phone call come tomorrow morning. In shock, she turned to look at Bev, who looked as confused as Paige felt. Good, at least she wasn't the only person in the dark.

"And then there were two couples," Shane said gleefully.

Paige tore her gaze away from Bev and stared in utter amazement at the obviously smiling man. *Is he fucking kidding?* There was no way in hell she was staying here to see what else he had up his twisted sleeve. Thirty minutes or not, she was out of there.

"Shall we move on to —"

Hell no! Paige held up her hand to block out his words. "I don't think so. They," she gestured with her hand in the direction the couple had walked out, "may not mind you putting their business all in the street, but I do."

Her words didn't appear to deter him at all. Shane turned and took a menacing step toward her. "Then come with me. You know what the key unlocks."

"Heartbreak and headaches, and thanks to you, I've already had plenty of both." Shane was delusional if he thought she was going anywhere near his cabin. Amazed at his audacity, Paige dropped the bag, keys and all on the floor, and walked over to the coffee table where she'd left her purse. "The only regret I have, Shane, is coming to your stupid party."

"Good." After picking up the keys, Shane stormed over to her. "That means you don't think the night in my cabin was a mistake. A night too good to be forgotten or regretted."

Fury filled her as he towered over her as if his very presence would force her to alter her decisions. The last couple of years must have clouded his memory because he truly forgot who he was dealing with. Paige couldn't be intimidated. Not by him. Not by anyone. "Goodbye, Shane."

"Think again, little one."

His impudence was infuriating. Without bothering to say goodbye to either Bev or Holden, Paige turned on her heels and stormed from the room. She was halfway down the hallway when Shane grabbed her arm and spun her around.

"Don't walk away from me."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Does it look as if I'm teasing?"

"No." She snatched her arm away and took a step away from him. "It looks like you've lost your ever-loving mind. Seriously, you're beyond crazy."

"The only thing I'm crazy about is you." Paige opened her mouth to blast him but nothing came out. She was too floored to come up with anything vile enough to say. "What? You don't believe me?"

"Of course I don't," she shouted. "Why would I believe anything you say ever again?"

"Honey, I know. If I could do it aga—"

"Do you know what type of fool I'd be to allow you within breathing space of me again? A huge one. Gigantic. Sorry, buddy, I'm not that girl. You had your chance and you blew it."

Paige forced herself to keep her hands by her sides and not ball them into fists and pound on his chest as she truly wanted. How dare he act so cavalier about something that at one time meant so much to her?

"I don't accept that," Shane insisted against all logic.

Paige tilted her head and spoke as if to a child. "You don't have a choice." Head held high, Paige turned around and walked out the house. The cold air was like a slap in the face, catching her off-guard for a second, as did the sight of Tripp and Skylar arguing in the front yard. Not wanting to interrupt them, she cut across the lawn out of their line of vision and headed for her car. Before she neared her vehicle though, she was grabbed around her waist from behind. Startled, she opened her mouth to scream, but was cut off by a large leather glove covering her mouth. "ElLLLLL—"

"Quiet, Paige," Shane whispered fiercely in her ear. "It's just me."

Did he think that eased her mind? "Fkng bstd, et g," she tried to speak while attempting to jerk from his grasp.

"Hush up."

Before she could protest further, he began to drag her away from her car. Her gaze darted to Skylar and Tripp, but they had entered their car and couldn't see her. She continued to struggle against Shane, although she realized the futility of her efforts. He was larger and stronger. The added element of surprise had completely taken her off-guard.

Wide-eyed with fury, she kicked out as he marched her across the street toward a limousine. When the driver's door opened, she thought she was saved for one brief moment. But the man stared straight ahead, as if he couldn't see a kidnapping going on right before his eyes. He held open the back door as if he were driving around a rich businessman. And in a way he was.

Once again Shane and his money had greased the wheels and made things happen. Too bad she was the one to suffer. Her only chance now would be when he tried to push her into the limo and she stopped her struggles for a moment, hoping to regain some of her strength.

"I'll explain everything soon. I promise." Shane's words held no meaning for her. She wasn't interested in his lame-ass explanations. His ass was going to be on its way to prison when she was done with him.

As they reached the car, he adjusted his grip on her and she pushed back against him in an attempt at escape. Attempt failed. Before she could even squeak out a scream he had her bundled into the limo. He quickly moved in after her, shutting the door behind him. The slamming of the door was like the slamming of a prison cell. She was trapped.

Instead of sitting across from her on the leather bench seat next to the driver's window, Shane sat next to her, which sent her shuffling over to the other side. She didn't want to be anywhere near him. "If you start this car..."

"You're going to do what?" He viewed her escape with mockery as he straightened his shirt. Her struggle had done a number on his outfit, forcing the normally suave-looking man to appear thrashed. "Damn, you're a wildcat."

His derision had her seeing red. "Bastard," she shouted as she kicked out at him. "Let me out of here."

Shane easily deflected her blow, grabbing her foot in the process. "Pipe down, Paige."

"Pipe down. Are you kidding me? You kidnapped me," she yelled. Yanking back her foot, she made a move to grab the door handle.

"Touch the handle and your brother can kiss his scholarship goodbye." When she eased away from the door, he gave a sharp nod of approval. "Good girl. If you happen to notice, the car isn't even turned on. All I want to do is talk. Then, after an allotted time, if you still feel the need to leave, I'll let you out."

"Who are you?" she questioned, confused. This cold man before her now in no way resembled the young man she knew.

"I'm the man who holds your brother's future in his hands."

For a moment she was too stunned to act. Shaking off the shock and lethargy infecting her, she sat up and regarded him defiantly. "Do you really hate me that much?"

The icy glare, which had shone so bright in his blue eyes mere seconds ago, seemed to defrost at her words. With a wary sigh Shane rubbed his hand over his face and let out a deep groan. When he dropped his hand away, he looked aged somehow. "I don't hate you at all," he said quietly.

Paige felt an uncontrollable urge to snort. These weren't exactly the actions of a person who cared. "You couldn't prove it by me."

"It's kind of hard to prove anything to someone who won't let you near them."

"Why would I?" she snapped, pushing herself back against the plush leather seat, as far away from him as she could.

"Because you missed me. Missed us."

"There was never an us."

He let lose a harsh crack of laughter that startled her. "I seem to recall quite vividly that there was."

"I think you're confusing sex with something else, Shane."

"It wasn't just sex."

"Keep telling yourself that."

"Fine." His mouth tightened. "Prove me wrong. If it was just sex and you feel absolutely nothing for me, come willingly with me to the cabin. I dare you."

His words brought back a rush of memories, some almost too painful to recall. "If I remember correctly, it was a game of Dare that landed me in this mess to begin with."

"You call it a mess. I call it the best weekend of my life."

* * * * *

Three Years Ago

Shane was lucky to be alive, and if for one tiny second he forgot that little fact, someone, be it his parents, his doctors or his friends, was quick to remind him. The only

thing though, Shane didn't exactly feel all that blessed, at least not all the time. Sometimes he straight-out cursed the fates for keeping him alive.

In fact, as he stared at the blank computer screen, he almost wished for death. Almost, and only because death had to be better than being forced to journal by his flower-power therapist. He didn't want to keep a diary and, frankly, was stumped at the reasoning behind this lame exercise. Besides, writing about emotions and shit was Gideon's job. His was to design buildings. And hopefully make it back to his old self.

Groaning, he took his fingers off the unused keyboard and rolled his neck in an attempt to release the tension gathered there. Talking about his feelings was something that had never come easily to him. Even if his therapist would be the only one to see what he wrote, Shane couldn't find it in himself to talk about what happened.

What was there to talk about, really? What was there to say he hadn't said before? This life-altering event that changed his world as he knew it happened not because of a drunk driver but because someone had simply fallen asleep while driving and crossed the center line, hitting his car head-on.

At first the doctors thought that on top of the crushed bones in both his legs he might be permanently paralyzed, but after the swelling went down, he'd been able to show some movement in his lower extremities, giving them hope he'd eventually recover. The other driver hadn't been so lucky, dying on impact, a sad fact Shane was still unable to talk about, despite how much everyone pressured him to do so.

For the life of him though, he couldn't figure out why anyone wanted him to. It wasn't as if he hadn't tried to proceed on with his life as if the car wreck had merely been a fender-bender and not the life-altering change it truly was. And because of that, he wanted to have as much normalcy in his life as possible.

Despite his parents' preference, he refused to move back home with them. He had his own place, with his own life before the accident and he would have one again. Fortunately his doctors agreed it was the best thing for him to resume life as he had before, not that he would have surrendered to his parents' will if the doctors hadn't.

Love them as he did, they were a tad on the smothering side. Sometimes he wondered what was worse, parents who cared too much or ones who didn't care at all.

It had been over a year since he began rehabilitation and he was finally able to walk again. It wasn't easy, he still wasn't cruising on his own, but it was a start. A very, very good start.

"Hey, you."

Shane glanced over his shoulder toward the master bedroom door and spotted Paige, lounging in the doorframe. "Hey." Startled, he pushed away from the desk and turned his office chair around until he faced her. Talk about a surprise. The plan was to have his parents' cabin all to himself for the weekend. This was going to be his little retreat from his therapist and well-meaning family and friends. "How did you get in here?"

"Housekeeper let me in on her way out."

"Wow, remind me to fire her later."

"It'll have to wait until Monday. She said she was gone for the weekend."

"No worries. I'll remember."

Paige rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Leave the poor woman alone. She remembered me from the last time I was here."

"Is that right?"

"Yep. You know this probably wouldn't happen if you had more than one black friend." Shane shot her an aggravated look, to which she merely smiled. "I'm just saying."

"Well, don't." Shane always wondered exactly how he should respond to her little gibes about her being the lone black person in their group. The fact was, it was the God's honest truth. There was no way to argue with logic, or Paige for that matter, so instead he changed the subject. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

She walked all the way into the room and dropped her bulging gray backpack on the floor. "I'm here for the weekend."

"You are, are you?" Despite his gruff tone, he was happy to see her. Lord knew he didn't get to see her as much as he preferred since she began dating the four-eyed douche bag. He and Paige used to hang out a lot before that creature came along. Now she was apparently too busy making a new life for herself to have time to spend with the likes of him. Just thinking about it had his already sour mood turning morose. With the frame of mind he was in, he wasn't fit for company, even when it was with someone as sexy as she. "Why?"

"I pulled the short straw."

So his less-than-positive attitude of late hadn't been lost on his roommates. "I thought the suicide watch was over now that I can drag my sorry ass down the street, thanks to my old man's cane." No matter how lightly he tried to treat the matter, it still filled him with great pride. After months of nothing, there was finally something. He was walking again.

"It is. Now we've moved on to 'Shane is a pain but he's still our friend so we have to take turns keeping him company' watch. Since it's such a mouthful, we simplified it to A.S.S. duty."

"Ass?"

"Another Sucky Saturday," she explained, a deadpan expression on her lovely brown face.

He wasn't buying it though. "It's Friday."

"Then I'm early. But never fear." She wiggled a white plastic bag with blue writing on it in the air. "I brought movies. The best trilogy of all time."

"Star Wars?"

"Hell no." She frowned. "*The Matrix*."

Was she mad? “That’s just sacrilegious,” he said as disgust filled him. He should kick her out for that comment alone. “What if I’m not really in the mood for movies or visitors?” He hadn’t thought he was until she showed up, now Shane welcomed her company. But of course he couldn’t admit it. That would be too much like right.

Not as if he needed to though, because, as usual, Paige didn’t back down. “What makes you think you have a choice?”

“I don’t?”

“Nope. I want to watch movies and I didn’t want to do it home, alone. Plus, I’m too tired to drive back tonight, so unless you want to loan me Mommy’s and Daddy’s limo you’re stuck with me. Deal with it.”

“Alone.” Paige hadn’t been alone since she started seeing that accountant last fall. Hmm...was there trouble in paradise at last? “Why not call your pocket protector and have him come over to your place?”

“Jaffee,” she said, stressing her boyfriend’s name as she always did in a futile attempt to get him to address the other man properly. It wasn’t going to happen.

“Whatever.”

“He and I are taking a little break.”

“Really?” Now this was news. “What happ—”

Paige held her hand up to silence him. “Nothing happened. It’s not a permanent break. Just a small one. Weekend only. I just needed to pause for station identification.”

“I don’t know what that means,” he said, confused as hell. “Is that like a black thing or something?”

“Yes, Shane. It’s a black thing.”

From her dry tone and the wry expression on her face, he could tell he was way off-track. “I was just asking.”

"Well don't, and before you start, I don't want to talk about it." Paige brushed an errant strand of her shoulder-length hair behind her ear. "I just want to watch movies and veg in front of the TV."

"You can do that at your own house. Come on, admit it. You're here for something besides my big screen."

"You're right."

"I am?" Those were words he didn't hear often from her. "How so?"

"I'm here for you."

"Me?" This was getting better and better every second.

"Yes, if I was at home, I couldn't bother you, could I?" She seemed a little too happy about that prospect for his peace of mind.

Suddenly he wasn't feeling as pleased to see her. "What if I don't want to be bothered?"

Paige smirked, as if his wants didn't matter in the least to her. "Tough tittie."

"How did you even know I was here?"

"Tripp."

Fucking Tripp. Shane should have known better than to tell his roommate where he was going. "You know, most people who come to visit are invited and try to be civil."

"I'm not most people."

"Isn't that the truth?" he muttered under his breath. If she were most people, he could kick her out without a second thought. But she wasn't. She was Paige. And that meant more to him than it rightly should. Especially in light of her relationship status.

When it came to women, Shane prided himself on three things. He never made a promise he didn't keep. He never left them unsatisfied, and he never poached on another's man territory. Paige was the one person who made him want to rethink his third rule.

"Don't be a baby—you won't even know I'm here." Somehow Shane didn't quite believe her. "Besides, don't you think you're milking this accident just a bit? Stop with the moping already."

"Some would say I'm entitled to mope a bit, seeing as how I have been through hell in the last year."

"Those people would be stupid."

"Or they have eyes." He gestured to the red scars zigzagging up and down his legs, as if it somehow slipped her notice. Shane would have worn pants if he knew there was a chance someone would be stopping by. He hadn't exactly reached comfort level with his scars yet, but he wanted to drive home his point.

"Last time I checked, you were still rich, male and living in America. Even with your old-man stick, you have it better than half the population in our country. So get over yourself and be thankful for the things you have. Like me." She grinned and held her arms out wide as if putting herself on display.

Gee...I'm feeling better already." It was like arguing with the wall.

"Of course you are. I'm here." Shane snorted in lieu of commenting. Speaking would do him no good with Paige anyway. She was going to do whatever the hell she wanted. The accident didn't change the way she treated him one iota. She never let him get a word in edgewise before then, and she sure as hell didn't let him do it now. The most annoying part of that little fact was that as much as it annoyed him, it equally intrigued him. Where Paige was concerned, Shane's brain was as fucked up as his legs.

"You're sulking," she said, as if this too went unnoticed by him.

"You're bothersome." To his irritation, his comment made her smile, lighting up her pretty face in a way nothing else did.

"But you love me anyway."

"Like I love a rash," he grumbled.

"I'm going to take that as compliment."

"You do that, but I still think there's more going on here than you're letting on."

"And I think you're paranoid."

"But that doesn't mean I'm wrong." Shane grabbed the handle of his cane and rose to his feet. "Word to the wise, pretty lady. I'm on to you."

"Think what you want, Shane. You always do."

"Before the weekend ends I'll get the real reason out of you, Paige. I promise you that, and you know I always keep my promises."

"Whatever." Smirking, Paige bent over and picked up her bag. "I'm going to go put my stuff up in one of the guest rooms. I'll be back in a second."

"I'll be waiting." And not just for her. For answers, as well. Shane had a feeling whatever explanation for why she was here was a very important one indeed, and he wouldn't rest until he knew what it was.

Chapter Four

"One more game of Scrabble?" Although her tone was innocent, Paige's grin was anything but. She couldn't help it. Some people were sore losers. She was an ungracious winner. She was competitive by nature and found it hard not to gloat when she won.

Shane was normally the same way, which made playing games with him all the more fun, especially tonight because she was kicking his ass. "I'll give you fifty points, right off the bat."

"Why, so you can throw it in my face that you won despite the fifty points?"

"Would I do that?"

"Yes, which is why I'm done playing." Shane rose from the table, not even attempting to help her put away the tiles and board. "Cheater."

Paige gasped. "I did not!"

"Oh please, using medical words is cheating."

It gave her an added advantage, but that was all. "Don't hate because I have a better vocabulary."

"Geek." He tossed the putdown over his shoulder as he slowly made his way from the dining room into the living room and over to the entertainment center. Although it was an open floor plan, the arrangement of the expensive yet tasteful furniture made the rooms appear separate even without walls, giving them a nice homey feeling. It also allowed her to keep an eye on the pouting man going through the DVDs.

"Sore loser," she tossed back before sticking her tongue out behind his back. "Hopalong Cassidy, get back here and help out. I'm not going to clean up after you. I'm not your maid."

"No one said you were," he said without turning around or coming back.

"Fine, be that way." If he wasn't going to contribute, neither was she. Two could play this sulking game. Paige rose from the table and walked over to the couch, which faced the television and sat down, curling her feet underneath her.

"I will."

Amused at his childishness, Paige watched Shane sulk with a small smile on her face. He was downright adorable when he pouted. The brat had always held a special place in her heart, and as big of a pain in the ass as he was, she knew she couldn't imagine her life without him in it. This weekend was their first chance to truly be alone since his accident and she wasn't going to waste their time together fighting, no matter how much fun it was. Because, after this weekend, she wouldn't have the opportunity again.

Or maybe she would. Paige still wasn't sure what to do. It shouldn't be this hard to accept a proposal of marriage, but for her it was. Her mother thought she was crazy, and part of Paige agreed wholeheartedly. But the other part of her knew the truth, which was sad truth of the matter was that although she loved Jaffee, she wasn't in love with him, or not enough to automatically say yes to him.

Paige hoped that time away from him and her pressuring family would help, but so far no luck. In fact, hanging out with Shane again had her feeling more confused than ever. She was having a really good time with him. Too good of a time for someone who was supposed to be considering marrying someone else. And to add insult to injury, her attraction to him was as strong as ever.

One would have thought, after all these years, she would have been over that by now, but one second alone with him brought all of her feelings back tenfold. Shane was the one man who wasn't intimidated by her. And the one she felt the most comfortable with. Yet he wasn't the man she was seeing, the one she was considering marrying, and that was the biggest problem she had with Jaffee's proposal. He wasn't Shane. It was one thing to date a man she didn't love, quite another to think about pledging her life to him forever.

With a heavy sigh, she pushed the troublesome thoughts from her mind and tried to concentrate on the moment at hand. "So what do you want to do now? Each other's hair and nails?"

"Oh, can we?" Shane mockingly asked before moving to the cabinet that housed DVDs like books, spines out. He stood silent for a moment and perused the shelf before letting out a disgusted sigh. "I've seen all of these at least twice."

"We could watch *The Mat*—"

"No," he cut her off in midsentence as he turned back to face her. "We can't. How many times have you seen those movies?"

"Three hundred and forty-seven for the first. Three hundred and—"

"Forget I asked." Shane picked up the remote control from the shelf and turned on the big screen television. He began to flip through a few channels for a second or two before letting out a loud sound of exasperation and turning the TV off. "I'm bored."

"Do you want to play another game?" Paige was beginning to feel as if she were sucking at her job. She'd come up this weekend to keep him company as much as she did to get some much-needed space from Jaffee, but from the looks of things, she wasn't doing such a good job with the former. Shane didn't look any happier than he had two days ago when she saw him at his place. "Any game. I'll let you pick."

"Any game?" Shane glanced over at her with a devilish look in his eyes.

The way he arched his eyebrow made her a tad nervous, but she would be a terrible candy striper if she let a little arch scare her away. "Any."

"How about," Shane walked over to the couch and sat next to her, "strip poker?"

"Sure, but we'd have to start off evenly matched," Paige nodded her head toward his dark gray sweat pants and light gray T-shirt. "How many items are you wearing?"

"Four. How many are you?"

Paige glanced down at her outfit. Shane wasn't the only one who'd changed before dinner. She'd nixed her jeans and T-shirt for a Juicy Couture hoodie, matching shorts

and a pair of big thick socks. She was comfy and cute, two things she insisted on. "If socks count as one item."

"Yes."

"Then I have three."

"Three." Shane's brow furrowed in confusion.

"I'm not wearing a bra or any underwear."

"You're not..." His gaze shot to her covered breasts then back to her face in record speed.

"Nope. My boobs aren't all that big. I can go without one if I want." Paige was unashamed of her small breasts. There was nothing wrong with a full B-cup, at least not in her book.

"I think your breasts are just the right size." If she wasn't mistaken, she thought she could actually see a flush on his face. "I mean, for your height and everything. You're a small woman. Anything...overly large would be obscene."

"It seems as if you've given my breasts a lot of thought." Yep, he was definitely blushing. It was comical. Shane, the pussy hound of the dormvilles, as he was so lovingly called in college, was flushing at the mere mention of her breasts. Would wonders never cease? "Interesting."

"Just an observation."

"Uh-huh."

"You know what else I observed," he said, coming back strong. "You didn't bat an eye at the idea of playing strip poker."

"Of course not." It wasn't as if she had anything he hadn't seen before. To put it bluntly, Shane was a himbo. His sexual prowess was legendary and not even only in his own mind. Besides, she didn't plan on losing. Her pride wouldn't let her. Nor would her skills. "Why would I?"

"Because you have a man." His lips twisted into a cynical smile. "Or do you?"

"Of course I do." But she wouldn't for long if Jaffee knew she was considering playing such a risqué game with another man. Hell, if he even for a second suspected she was at the cabin alone with Shane he would blow a gasket. Personality wise, Jaffee was her complete opposite. He was more reserved and mellow, and they didn't exactly have the same taste in fun but they fit in other ways. Her mother always said he was the black Ken to her black Barbie, but her mother wasn't the one who would have to spend the rest of her life with him. A fact Paige was becoming more and more aware of. It wasn't something she wanted to chat with Shane about, however. "Jaffee has nothing to do with this."

"Doesn't he?" Shane was way too perceptive for her peace of mind, and too tenacious. Any other person would have let it go. But not him. No, he was going to keep at her until either she cracked or until she cracked his head wide open.

"No," she reiterated, cursing herself for ever mentioning Jaffee's name.

"Now isn't that interesting? Noteworthy, even."

Paige resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She really didn't want to get into this with him. Not today. Possibly not ever. "What part of 'I don't want to talk about this' didn't you understand?"

"The part where you didn't want to talk about it."

At least he was honest. "Why are you so nosy?"

"Why are you so hesitant to answer my question?" he challenged.

"Because it's none of your business."

Shane snorted with derision. "Since when has that ever mattered?"

"Since now."

"Oh, now we keep secrets." His voice held a vague hint of disapproval that made her shake her head in amusement.

What friendship has he been a part of all these years? "Please, Shane. We've always kept secrets."

"I don't keep anything from you."

"Liar." Of that, she was sure. "Everyone has secrets. Even you."

"If you think you know so much about me, Miss Smarty Pants, then tell me when I have ever been anything but open and honest with you?"

"I can't think of a 'for instance'. I just know you keep certain things to yourself. We all do."

"Then let's you and me start a brand new tradition. Nothing but the truth. From here on out."

"Uhh...I don't know if that's such a good idea." Not at all. Paige didn't think for an instant that the old adage of "the truth will set you free" was right at all. In fact, she thought it was bullshit of the highest order.

"Why not? Do you make it such a habit to lie and hide things that the mere thought of being a-hundred-percent honest gets you up in arms?"

"No, but I know you."

"And..."

"And to quote my boy Jack, 'You can't handle the truth.'"

"Think so, do you?"

Paige smirked. "Please. I know so."

"Then try me. I dare you."

"Dare." She quirked her eyebrow. "Sounds as if you're playing a game to me."

Shane shrugged his shoulders. "How about it? Truth or Dare, Paige. What do you say?"

"I say you're crazy."

"And I say you're chicken."

"Fuck you." There was no way in hell she could back down from a challenge, and the bastard knew it. "Fine, then. Let's play."

There was only one thing Shane hated more than losing and that was knowing someone was keeping something from him. It was ten times worse knowing Paige was the offender. It wasn't merely the fact she had a secret. It was that she didn't seem inclined at all to share it with him of all people. They had always been close, or at least he thought so, up until this moment. Even in a group of friends like theirs, people tended to pair off, and Shane had always thought Paige was the second pea in his pod. She was the one person he felt he could always talk to, and he would have sworn she felt the same.

The mere thought there was something going on with her he knew nothing about rubbed him the wrong way, especially knowing it had something to do with the dick she was dating. From the moment she introduced Jaffee to him, he hated the man on sight. The studious man had never stepped out of line with Shane, in fact he had never been anything but courteous, but that didn't stop Shane from disliking him with every fiber of his being.

She was too good for the likes of that guy, and the sooner they ended it, the better for all concerned. Especially for Shane, who wouldn't have to sit through one more group outing, watching Jaffee drape his arm around her shoulders, as if he had a right to touch her when Shane did not.

"So do you want to go first?" Paige nuzzled back into the couch and folded her legs underneath her.

"Sure." Unlike some people in the room, he had nothing to hide.

"Truth, Dare, Double Dare, Promise or Repeat."

"Excuse me?"

"Which one do you want? Truth, Dare, Double Dare, Promise or Repeat?"

"I get the first two, but I'm not so sure about the other three."

"Double Dare is the ultimate dare. With Promise, you have to promise something, like to loan me your car —"

"Sure, you can have what's left of it."

"And," she continued on as if he hadn't interrupted her, "Repeat means you have to repeat something I say, such as Shane is a big-ass titty baby."

"I'm not saying that." Not even on a dare. This was about telling the truth, after all.

"Then don't pick Repeat."

"Fine. I pick Truth."

"Pussy."

Shane smirked. "Truth is, I like it. That was easy." If she kept it up, this game was going to be over in seconds.

"No way."

"Oh, that wasn't your question."

Paige picked up a small pillow and hit him in the chest with it. "You know it wasn't. Now play fair."

"Fine. What's the question?"

"Have you ever fantasized about making love with someone in our group? If the answer is yes, who with?"

"That's two turns."

"No way."

"Yes way." Shane didn't mind answering the question, but he'd be damned if she'd cheat him. "Fair is fair."

"Fine. Let me reword my question." The glittering light of mirth in her eyes warned Shane of the trouble ahead but, as he said earlier, he wasn't afraid of a little truth. Besides, he knew Paige. She was too chickenshit to ask the good stuff. The stuff she may not like the answers to. In fact, he was counting on it. "Truthfully, who is the one person in our group you've fantasized about making love to?"

Maybe he was wrong about her after all because that was a pretty good question. One he didn't think she was really ready to hear in light of her current circumstances. "What makes you think I've fantasized?"

"Because we all have. Myself included."

"Really?" Hmm...now this was the stuff he wanted to hear.

"Yes. Now answer the question."

"Okay. Truthfully, I've fantasized about making love to Bev." Shane watched in peevish delight as Paige's smile began to dim. "And Skylar."

"Skylar too?"

"Yes."

"Why am I surprised?" Her once-twinkling eyes were now narrowed in irritation. Good. "You're a humongous horndog. You should really walk around with a sign that says 'Have cock, will travel'."

"Hey." Shane tried his best to look affronted by her accusation, but it was hard to pull off when all he really wanted to do was laugh. "You wanted me to be honest. I'm trying to do as you asked. You girls are like those potato chips, I can't pick just one. I'm sure I've had fantasies about you too on occasion."

As in every occasion he closed his eyes. Shane didn't know what it was about her he loved more, her feisty attitude or her sexy body. Both were pleasing in his eyes and surprisingly, both made him rock-hard.

"Wow. I'm lucky you've even had time in all these years to fit me in."

"I'm a busy guy."

"I guess." She didn't look too happy about it though. "Your turn."

"Okay. Truth or Dare."

"Dare."

"Now who's the pussy?"

"I don't think choosing Dare makes me a pussy at all. In fact, I think it's daring for me."

"Fine. I dare you to..." Shane paused as he tried to think of something good to say. Nothing came to mind.

"Well?"

"Gimme a second. This isn't easy." Not at all.

"Today."

"I dare you..." Since nothing good came to mind, Shane thought to suggest something there might be a slim chance she wouldn't do in order to push her into asking for a truth question. It was easier for him to think of something to ask her than it was for him to think of something to make her do. "To strip and do the hula."

He actually had her goggling at him. Score. "Dream on. Not going to happen."

"Why not? You were willing to undress at the turn of a card, why not now?"

"Because you're only picking this because you know I won't do it."

"Would I do that?" Not when he had the very good reason of wanting to see her naked because he found her cock-hardening attractive.

"Yes."

"I'm hurt you'd think that," he lied with a grin. He was more amused than anything else. "Come on, what's a little nudity between friends?"

Paige studied him for a few seconds more through narrowed eyes before she flashed a compliant grin. "You know what? You're right. Besides, it's not as if you haven't seen me naked before, anyway, right?"

"Wrong. I think that's something I might have remembered."

"Sure you have. That night we all went skinny-dipping at..." A funny little smile spilled out across her face. "Wait. That's right. You weren't there. It was just the three of us."

"Thee three of us, who?" Something told Shane she wasn't about to say Skylar and Bev.

"Gideon, Tripp and myself."

Damn, he hated it when he was right. "When the hell did this happen?" Shane wasn't sure what upset him more. Missing out on skinny-dipping with Paige, or the fact the other guys didn't.

"Awhile ago. It's not a big deal."

One more thing they had to disagree on. "Did anything else happen that night?"

"That night," Paige tilted her head to the side with a pondering look. "No."

That night. "Then what night?"

"You've already had your turn. Now do you want me to strip and hula or answer your question?"

Rock meet hard place. Shane couldn't shake the feeling Paige was fucking with him. What annoyed and upset him more though, was he couldn't say for certain she wasn't. He shouldn't care what she'd done with the other two. He knew there was nothing between them now. So why did all his logic not matter one iota? Fuck it. "Do the Truth."

"Are you sure?"

He was sure he was insane, but as much as he wanted to see her naked, he wanted an answer to his question more. "Are you trying to back out?"

"Never that." Paige met his challenging gaze in a bold and saucy manner. "But to be fair, according to the rules, it's up to me to decide which I want to pick. You're not allowed to switch them because you changed your mind about seeing me naked."

"The rules." He didn't want to hear about rules. He wanted to hear about whether or not she let Tripp or Gideon touch her. "Are you worried the Truth or Dare police might suddenly show up and fine us for not playing the correct way?"

"No, I simply don't think it's fair you're allowed to be all wishy-washy."

"Good Lord. I'll give you a take back in exchange for this one."

"Fine." Paige's pleased expression made Shane wonder what he'd agreed to, but before he could ask, she moved on. "Now what was your question again?"

"When, if ever, have you done something sexual with a member of our group?"

"Not counting the time Skylar and I kissed when she and I played this game with you and Tripp?"

Shane grinned at the memory. "No, not that time."

"A few times in college."

Shane's eyebrows flew up in surprise. A few times in college. As he repeated her words in his mind, his emotions zoomed past shocked and landed on fury with a vengeance.

College. Paige had fucked one of their friends. Oh, hell no.

Clenching his teeth, he fought hard not to lash out at her and demand answers and reparation. He could be reasonable about this. He was a man. Not an animal. After the last six months and everything it entailed, this would be easy breezy. This was nothing compared to that. But why did he suddenly feel as if he were hurdling down a darkened road at a hundred miles per hour straight toward a brick wall?

Damn it all to hell. She was his. Not...not theirs. Taking a deep breath, Shane tried his best to calm down. It would do neither one of them any good if he blew up. Yet he wasn't going to sit idly by and just let her get away with this. He wanted answers. And he wanted them now. "Who?"

"Ah. Ah. Ah." Paige chided him, waving her finger as if she were scolding a wayward child. "You had your turn, now it's mine. Truth or Dare."

"Was it Tripp?"

"Why didn't you say Gideon?" Curiosity laced her voice.

"Why? Was it him?"

"I'm not saying if it was or not. I was merely curious as to why you immediately crossed him off the list."

"Don't change the subject. Answer my question. Now."

His command was met by her amused resolve. "Quid pro quo, Shane. You're going to have to wait your turn."

"Fine." He could wait, but before this night was over, he would have the answer he wanted, along with the name of the man he was going to kill.

Chapter Five

"So it's my turn, right?"

"Yes." His voice held no humor. Something told Paige he wasn't enjoying this little game as much as she was. "I pick Truth."

"Color me surprised," Paige retorted. "You know, we don't have to keep playing, Shane. We could always watch a movie or turn in."

"I said I pick Truth."

"I heard you. I just don't understand why you're so bitchy now."

"Keep fucking with me, Paige, and you'll find out."

"I'm not trying to fuck with you, Shane." It was just an added bonus of playing by the rules. "So Truth, huh? Okay. I have one for you."

"Ask it."

"Why don't you like Jaffee?"

"That's easy." Shane snorted derisively. "He's a dick."

Shane's comment was a little bit too much of "the pot calling the kettle black" in Paige's opinion. It wasn't as if her friend was known for his pleasing personality. But that was beside the point. "No, he isn't."

"Yes, he is. And the only dick I'm partial to is my own."

"Why do you think he's so bad? He's never done anything to you."

"Sounds to me as if you're asking another question."

"Piss off." Paige wasn't letting him off so easily. "Explain it to me. I really need to know."

Shane's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Because it's important to me." On so many different levels. Maybe Shane had a reason to dislike Jaffee that would explain her hesitation to accept his proposal.

"How important?"

"Very." Paige was on the verge of vowing to spend the rest of her life with Jaffee. If something in the milk wasn't clean, she needed to know. "Did he ever do anything when I wasn't around? Have you ever caught him with another woman or flirting with Bev or Skylar?"

"He's still breathing, isn't he?"

"Yes." Paige wasn't exactly sure what he was getting at.

"Well, that answers your question. If I ever caught him doing you dirty, I'd kill him. End of story."

Paige cocked a brow, waiting for the punch line, but when Shane continued to stare at her, face solemn, eyes sincere, she felt herself melting a little on the inside. "You'd kill for me?"

"Hell, if you don't stop messing around and tell me who you fucked in college, I might kill you."

"I never slept with Tripp or Gideon." Shane's eyes widened and Paige could tell he had totally misunderstood what she meant. "Nor did I sleep with Bev or Skylar."

"Then what sexual thing were you talking about?"

"Like you, I fantasized about certain members in our group and sometimes those fantasies led me to take," Paige cleared her throat, embarrassed by what she was going to admit, "matters into my own hands."

"Are we talking about solo satisfaction here?"

"We are."

A wicked smile danced over his lips. "Nice. Tell me more."

"No way." It was bad enough she had to admit to the bit she did.

"I could always dare you."

Paige crossed her arms over her chest. "And waste a perfectly good dare."

"Not too sure that would be a waste at all."

"Pervert." Paige shook her head and smiled at his total guyness. "Don't think I didn't notice though."

"What?"

"You never did answer my question. Why don't you like him?"

Shane groaned and leaned his head back on the couch and closed his eyes. "Let it go."

"No." Paige refused to be deterred. Reaching out, she covered his hand with hers and squeezed. "Tell me, Shane. Why?"

Shane opened his eyes and turned his head so he was looking at her. "Because he's not good enough for you. Not by far, and you deserve someone better."

As nice as that sounded, she couldn't believe it was so simple. "And that's the only reason you have?"

"I don't need another." His stubbornness was unbelievable.

"You're such a tyrant."

"I protect what's mine."

His words silenced her for a second, as did the stark truth that peered at her from his eyes. *His*. Despite how stupid and wrong she knew it was, Paige couldn't help but be affected by his possessive statement. Any more than she could help the sense of rightness she felt at his claim. But as much as she wanted to revel in his assertion, she couldn't. It would be the dumbest thing she ever did. Shane wasn't the type of man a girl could pin her hopes and dreams on. He was a love 'em and leave 'em kind of guy, and Paige wasn't built that way.

No, the more she thought about it, the more she realized the truth saying yes to Jaffee was the right thing to do. She had to keep her head on straight and stop thinking with her libido. "Last time I checked, Shane, I wasn't yours."

"Keep thinking that." From the smirk he shot her, she could tell he thought she was delusional.

"Okay, I am your friend, but I have to say, I don't recall you acting this way about any of the guys Bev or Skylar ever dated." Which was probably a good thing because she would have hated to have to kill either of her friends.

"And why do you think that is?" Shane turned his hand over under hers and began to gently caress her with his fingertips.

Paige pulled her hand back and crossed her arms over her breasts, trying hard not to let the implication of his words sink like lead into her subconscious. She didn't need another reason to second-guess Jaffee's proposal or another reason to hold on to her attraction to Shane. "Moving on," she said with a shaky laugh. "Since I answered your question about the sex thing, it's my turn again, right?"

"Yes."

"Truth or Dare."

"Dare."

"Really?" She was surprised he'd given in so easily.

"Yes."

"Okay. I dare you to...call Jaffee by his name." Paige laughed at his grimace. "Come on, you have to start sometime."

"No, I don't."

"Yes. You can't go the rest of our lives calling him my pocket protector."

"Then I'll call him something else." Shane tilted his head in thought. "What is the name of the nerdy kid from that show back in the day?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Come on. Yes, you do. The one with the suspenders and big glasses. Lived next door and was always breaking things."

"Urkel?"

"Yes. That's the one. That's who he reminds me of."

"Jaffee is not an Urkel. Take it back."

"No way. Your boyfriend has nerd written all over him."

"He does not. Take it back." Paige picked up the pillow once more and held it up in a threatening manner.

Shane glanced at the pillow then back at her with an unrepentant smirk on his face. "Not going to happen."

"Take it back." Paige rose to her knees and smacked Shane with the pillow. "Say it." She added another well-aimed blow for good measure.

"Okay. Okay." Shane held up his hand to ward off any further attacks. "I'll say it. Urkel." Acting quickly, Shane grabbed the pillow and moved it to his right hand and held it over the armrest, out of her reach.

"Gimme that."

"Come and get it."

She tried to lean over him, but his arm reach was much longer than hers. "That's my pillow, hand it over."

"Here you go." Shane held the pillow closer, as if he would do as she asked. Of course as soon as she moved to grab it, he laughed and pulled it away again. Finally getting mad, she scrambled over him, straddling his lap in her attempt to reach the pillow. He'd put his arm out behind him, making her lean forward. She realized her breasts were practically pressed into his face at this angle but she didn't care, she wasn't going to allow him this victory.

Shane, on the other hand, was as competitive as she, and just as her fingers brushed over the fabric he dropped the pillow from his grasp and it fell to the floor behind the couch. "Oops."

Laughing, she sat back and shook her head in defeat. "Damn it, if you can't win, no one can, is that it?"

"Exactly."

"Brat." Paige went to move off his lap but was stopped by Shane's hands on her hips, holding her in place.

"Where do you think you're going? Don't you know to the victor goes the spoil?" Shane hands slid from her hips to her ass then tightened his grip. "Give me my prize."

"Ha, ha, ha. Very funny."

"Who's joking?" Shane asked as he peered deep into her eyes.

Paige smile melted away as she met his heated gaze head-on. Suddenly she didn't feel like laughing. Swallowing hard, she tried to return them back to the subject at hand and the reason she'd put herself in this predicament in the first place.

"Say his name," she ordered in a husky tone, needing to put things back into perspective before she did something she'd regret. "I dared you. You have to do it."

"Baby." Shane reached up and gently brushed her wayward hair out of her face. The feel of his cool fingertips against her overheated skin made her tremble inside. "Not only am I not going to say Urkel's name, I'm going to do everything in my power to make you forget it."

She opened her mouth to speak, but words failed her. If there was anyone capable of making her forget Jaffee's name, it was Shane. And from the feel of his cock stiffening beneath her, she had a hunch he had the ability to make her forget her own name.

"Actually, that sounds like a better game to me. Make Paige forget Urkel's name."

That was a bad idea, all the way around. "If...if you're not going to say it that makes me the winner."

"You didn't win. I conceded and took a stance. A man has to have his limits."

"Well, when a man gets in the room I'll ask him about limits."

"Oh, never doubt, Paige. I'm still all man." Her pussy throbbed over the very proof of his words, begging her to take up the challenge he so expertly laid down. "Or do I need to prove it to you?"

"No." Nervous at the direction the conversation was going, Paige darted her tongue out to moisten her dry lips. "I...I can feel the proof for myself, which means one thing."

"What?"

"It's time for me to go to bed."

Shane released his hold on her. "Who's conceding now?" His voice was deep and husky and far too appealing for her piece of mind. She had to end this before she did something she'd regret or, more importantly, before she did something she wouldn't regret.

Paige moved off him and rose with shaky legs from the couch. Pasting a fake smile on her face, she looked at Shane and tried to put on the buddy-buddy cloak and pretend as if the last few minutes never happened. "Good night, Shane. It was fun beating your ass."

"You won tonight because I let you, tomorrow though, will be a different story."

"If you say so." She tried for cavalier, but it fell short by a mile. A fact that wasn't lost on Shane, who gave her a knowing look.

"No, baby. I know so."

* * * * *

Shane jerked awake, gasping for air and clinging to the sweat-soaked sheet as he tried to gather his bearings. Blindly he searched the nightstand for the remote that controlled the overhead light and fan. In his haste he knocked the glass of water he'd placed there before going to bed to the floor. The noise of shattering glass ricocheted through the room, an eerie reminder of the nightmare he'd escaped from seconds earlier.

"Fuck," he muttered as he continued with his search. Since the accident, he slept with a low-wattage light on, but last night he allowed his macho pride to keep him from turning it on, not wanting to seem like a baby in Paige's eyes.

Now, instead of feeling like a baby, he felt like an idiot sitting in the dark, afraid. He needed to get over this shit. Even now, as he flapped his hand around the nightstand like a fish out of water, he could feel panic rising inside him. Fucking nightmares, no, night terrors as his shrink called them, were taking over his life. He couldn't go a week without having at least one and it wasn't getting better.

Just as he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, he touched the edge of the remote. The instant security he felt at the mere brush of his fingertips gave him the strength to lunge forward and grab the small rectangle. Pointing the box at the ceiling, he hit the bottom button as if it were the trigger for his old morphine drip, and let out a relieved sigh when light flooded the room.

Taking a deep breath then another, Shane tried his best to calm his racing heart. It took a few minutes to get himself back together, but the second he did, he vaulted over the foot of the bed and across the room, turning on the lamp at record speed. Once the room was duly lit, his heartbeat returned to normal.

Feeling as if he were the world's biggest pussy, Shane padded barefoot into the kitchen and retrieved the broom, dustpan and a roll of paper towels before disappearing back into the room to clean up his mess. It took a few minutes, but once he was done, he climbed into bed and tried to go back to sleep. It was a futile effort. He was far too worked up to simply drift off as he hoped.

The silence of the house began to get to him so he grabbed the other remote from the nightstand and turned on the TV. He had porno keyed up in the DVD player and, thinking a little sexual release would be the key to induce nature's own nightly coma, Shane hit play. He stole a quick glance at his open bedroom door and wondered for a brief second if he should get up and close the door. But then the movie came on and he pushed the thought right out of his head. Paige was more than likely asleep anyway.

Pushing the sheet past his lap, he reached his hand into the opening of his boxers and began to lightly touch his cock, which, unlike him, was still fast asleep. The movie, however, wasn't doing the job it was supposed to. The women were beautiful, but their

golden blonde hair and overly large tits weren't working to stir him. He was more interested in a brunette firecracker with a smart-alec mouth and skin as smooth and dark as milk chocolate.

Closing his eyes, Shane replaced the plastic porn stars with images of Paige and just like that his cock began to stir to life. The mere thought of her, naked and spread for him, made his gut clench. Encouraged by the new direction of his arousing thoughts, Shane released his cock then shoved his boxers down his thighs and out of his way.

He licked the palm of his hand then grasped his cock and began to stroke himself to the image of Paige nude in his mind. Unlike Tripp and Gideon, he'd never had the opportunity to see her in anything more revealing than a bikini, but that didn't mean he hadn't imagined her in a lot less many, many times.

God, he wanted her. Had for more years than he'd care to admit. Even when he'd been with other women, she was always there in the back of his mind. The one he really wanted beneath him, over him, surrounding him with her sweet, heady scent as he powered into her, again and again.

He'd been such a fool not to make his move before, and now wasn't the time either, but he'd be damned if he didn't want to slake his lust with her. Once would do it. *Okay, who am I fooling?* At least a dozen times, but then he could walk away knowing he'd purged her from his soul. Eradicated the hold she held on him once and for all.

No one should have the power to seduce to the magnitude she did. Hell, it had taken everything out of him tonight to let her walk away. His cock had been so hard, almost as hard as it was now, from the second she moved over him.

It would have taken nothing but a moment for him to pull her sweats down and thrust his aching shaft deep within her. As small as she was on the outside, he'd be willing to bet she'd be likewise on the inside. He'd have to make sure she was excited enough so her tight little pussy could accommodate his long, thick shaft. Just the thought of sinking balls-deep inside her had his cock jerking in his hand.

"Fuck," he muttered, and squeezed the head of his cock, running his palm over the dripping slit then down his length, using his own juices for lube.

Shane picked up his tempo and felt the familiar tug on his testicles. He was so close. Close to spraying her pretty brown breasts with his hot, milky-white seed. He could imagine how she'd look beneath him, vulgar and wet with the evidence of his desire.

Or maybe instead of coming on her, he'd move up a bit and press the plum-shaped crown of his cock past her lips and into the warm haven of her mouth. He'd always been fascinated with her mouth, with the full plumpness of her mocha-tinged lips, the cotton candy pink of her tongue. Shane would happily give up his right nut for a chance to sink his cock balls-deep between those two precious lips.

Squeezing his eyes shut even tighter, he imagined Paige on her knees before him, mouth open to receive his dick. He groaned as he fantasized about Paige sucking him, tasting him, begging for his cum.

"Hmm...yeah..." His moans rivaled those of the woman faking on-screen, but he didn't care. Shane needed to come. No, what he needed was to fuck Paige, but that wasn't an option so he'd have to fuck his fist instead.

Oh, but if he could, he'd sink balls-deep inside her. He would do her so good she'd never give another man a second look, let alone a shot at a chance of slipping between her legs.

"Paige, Paige," His mind was flooded with images of her, not all sexual, some from memories past, but all of the one woman he couldn't stop thinking about. "Fuck."

Shane tightened his fist around his shaft and sped his strokes until his hand nearly became a blur. He imagined Paige under him, begging him to fuck her, telling him how good it was. Her pussy would clamp around his cock as he powered into her and she would be his. Finally.

That final thought had him soaring. Paige. His at last. Shane bit back a groan as he came, shooting stream after stream of creamy semen from his pulsating cock.

A sharp noise from the doorway drew his attention. Shane opened his eyes and turned his head, all the while stroking his still-spurting shaft. To his surprise, Paige stood in the open doorway, frozen, staring at his hand splashed with come, working his dick.

The shock of seeing her there, in living color, after vividly imagining her seconds earlier was surreal to say the least. "Paige. I—" he whispered, but it was too late. The sound of her name on his lips sent her scurrying back from where she came, but not before he noticed her nipples beaded underneath the short nightshirt. Shane wasn't sure how long she'd been there, but he was willing to bet it hadn't been for only a few seconds and he would put down double to nothing he hadn't been the only one who enjoyed his release. Now all he had to do was get her to admit it.

Chapter Six

"Yeah. Yeah. I love you too." Laughing, Paige shook her head and hung up her cell phone. Even when she was feeling unsure about the world around her, all she had to do was make one phone call and she instantly felt better. It was a good thing, considering how her world had been spun on its axis last night.

God, just thinking about what she walked in on was enough to make her flesh warm anew. Never in her wildest dreams would she have ever imagined walking in on Shane masturbating. The image of him lying on his bed, cock in hand, was one that would stay with her forever. "Finger-lickin' good" didn't come close to describing the way she felt as she watched his cum come spurting out. It took everything in her to remain standing in the doorway and not slink over to him and replace his hand with her mo—

"Did you give Urkel my love too?"

Startled, Paige turned around to face a frowning Shane and placed her hands on her cheeks. She could feel her skin warm under his glare thanks to her wayward thoughts. "Christ," she said once she could get her heartbeat back under control. "You scared me."

"I'd be scared too if I had to say 'I love you' to him every morning," he grumbled as he limped into the kitchen, leaning heavily on his cane.

Under any other circumstances, Paige would have fired off a witty, cutting comment that would have left Shane crying in his cereal, but she was having a hard time doing anything other than staring at him. Shirtless and dressed only in jeans, he was quite a vision. His sable hair and chest were still damp from the shower she'd heard running a few minutes ago, leading her mind to travel down a road it need not

venture. This is not good, not good. She was practically engaged, she shouldn't be having these thoughts.

"What?" Shane glanced down his body. "Did I leave my zipper open?"

"Uhh...no." Before she could do or say something stupid in regards to last night, Paige moved her hands from her face and returned her attention to the stove. She needed to stay busy to keep her mind and her hands off things that didn't concern her. "I was talking to my brother Perry, not Jaffee."

"Oh." Shane's voice had sounded completely annoyed until she mentioned her brother's name. "What's he up to?"

"The same." Paige toyed with the edge of the pancake with her spatula. "Driving my parents and his teachers crazy. He's been accepted to five different colleges but hasn't applied for a single scholarship. He'll be kicking it at the local community college, working at a burger joint, if he doesn't get his shit together soon."

"Give him time. Let him enjoy being a senior for a bit."

She flipped the pancake over once more to test the underside before scooping it up and placing it on the plate with the five she cooked earlier. "He's going to get to enjoy the perks of saying 'would you like fries with that' if he doesn't get on the ball. A good education is far too important to blow off because he wants to hang with his boys." After turning off the stove, she placed the skillet on the back burner before facing Shane again. "Anyway, enough about my knucklehead brother. Are you ready to eat? I made breakfast."

Shane glanced to the counter at the three platters brimming with breakfast goodies. "So I see." With a firm grip on his cane, he hobbled over to the counter and snagged a piece of bacon cooling on a paper-towel-covered plate. "Where did all this food come from?"

"Your refrigerator. Surprising. I know."

"I know that, brat," he said, nudging her with his arm, "but it wasn't in there prepared. What time did you wake up?"

It was more like what time did she give up the pretense of sleeping? "I didn't wake up that early," she hedged, not lying...exactly. "Besides. It's just eggs, bacon and pancakes. Simple fare for simple folks."

"It doesn't seem simple to me. Lord knows I couldn't have cooked all this without setting off the smoke alarm." Shane turned around and stole another piece of meat. "And I can't remember the last time I had pancakes."

"Well, don't get too excited. I didn't use Holden's famous recipe or anything," she teased, referring to the breakfast staple Holden made whenever the seven of them gathered together for a weekend getaway. "But I figured they would do."

"I'm sure they're much better than Holden's. I think the only reason they were famous to begin with was because it was the only thing he knew how to cook. Sort of like's Tripp's famous BBQ burgers or Skylar's famous menu drawer."

Paige laughed. Skylar didn't even attempt to cook. She could dial, though, with the best of them. "I guess we aren't all that original, but we do know how to have fun."

"True." Shane rested the cane against the counter and raised his hands high above his head, stretching his long, lanky frame. Despite knowing how wrong it was, Paige ran her gaze over his bare chest, taking in every newly formed scar, the wide planes of his pecs, the sexy little happy trail leading into his jeans. Six months working with a trainer had definitely done his body good. Everything inside her begged her to reach out and feel for herself just how good it all was.

"Thanks for making breakfast." Shane's voice brought her attention back to the here and now and away from the "don't think about it, don't talk about it".

"No problem. Besides, I figured it was the least I could do, considering how I did come up uninvited and all. And speaking of breakfast," she said with false pleasantries, "everything is done. Do you want to go throw on a shirt before we eat?" And then maybe she could concentrate on something besides how good he looked.

"Not especially."

“Okay.” There went that diversion. Paige picked up the plate of bacon and handed it to him, forcing her gaze to stay at chin level or higher. “Take this and I’ll bring the rest.”

She’d put the game away and set the table earlier, leaving little left to do but fill the glasses with juice and bring the food out. Shane looked at her for a moment, as if he were going to say something, but then nodded and took the plate from her outstretched hand. She breathed a sigh of relief, hoping she had dodged a bullet. After setting the rest of the food out, Paige went back to the kitchen once more to retrieve a jug of orange juice from the refrigerator. With a carefree smile she didn’t quite feel, she joined him at the table, filling both their glasses before setting the bottle down and taking her seat.

The easy conversation they shared in the kitchen dissipated once they were sitting across from one another, filling the room with tension so thick it was suffocating. Unable to meet Shane’s gaze, Paige concentrated on loading her plate.

Picking up her fork, she toyed around with her eggs, not necessarily hungry but knowing she had to eat. Besides, if she ate, it would be a good excuse for why she couldn’t talk. After getting a good scoop of food on her fork, she raised her head to look over at Shane to see how he was enjoying his breakfast. Unlike her, Shane hadn’t made a single move toward the food. He sat quietly in front of her, hands crossed over his chest, staring straight at her with an amused expression on his face.

“What?”

“Truth or Dare.”

She knew eventually they’d get back to this, she just hadn’t expected it to be so soon. “We haven’t even eaten yet.”

Shane didn’t waver for a second. “Truth or Dare.”

Paige took a bite of her food and thought about her options. Basically, either way she went she was screwed, so she might as well put her big-girl panties on and deal with it. After swallowing her food, she took a dainty sip of her juice and went for it. “Truth.”

"Are we ever going to talk about it?"

"It?" Paige looked everywhere but at Shane.

"Yes, it. My big it, even."

"Oh that."

"Yes. You walked in on me jerking off."

That was succinct. "What's there to talk about?"

"Oh, I don't know." Shane unfolded his arms and reached for the pancakes. He selected two before picking up the dish containing the eggs. "I can think of one or two things, can't you?"

Paige watched him fill his plate, feeling a bit trepidacious. She could see the trap, knew she was about to step right into its springy net, yet she could find no way around it. "Other than I'm sorry, not really."

"You're sorry?" He looked up and eyed her with speculation. "Why are you sorry?"

"You know, for interrupting your..." she paused to search for another word, "moment."

"Did it look as if my moment was ruined to you?"

Paige could feel her face warming again. "I guess not. Still, it had to have been a little embarrassing."

"No." He shrugged his shoulders then dug into his eggs with gusto, like a man who had everything right in his world. "Not really."

Now this she could not believe. Even Shane couldn't be this cavalier. "Seriously, you don't care in the slightest that I saw you being one with yourself?"

Shane set his fork down and shook his head in disgust. "Stop right there," he ordered. "You're a nurse, for goodness sake. Surely you know better words for masturbating."

"Talking dirty isn't a class they teach in nursing one-oh-one."

"Come on, do you actually say 'one with yourself' when you're masturbating?"

"Say it to who?" she asked amused. "It's not as if I'm going around announcing to everyone I'm about to touch myself."

"Well, what do you call it when you get yourself off for Urkel?"

"I don't call it anything because I don't do it in front of him."

"Never?"

"There's no need. He does it just fine for me." When they did it, that was. Which, of late, hadn't been often. "Just fine."

Displeasure marred Shane's brow. "As pleased as I am to hear the two of you are setting the sheets on fire," he replied in a biting, dry tone, "and believe me, I'm so pleased, I'm a bit disappointed to know you don't masturbate in front of him."

That made about as much sense as this conversation. "Why?"

"Because speaking as a guy, there is nothing hotter than watching a woman finger herself. Nothing. Don't you enjoy it when Urkel does it in front of you?"

"He...I..." Paige couldn't even imagine Jaffee in the same position she found Shane last night. She didn't want to. "We don't watch each other."

"You don't know what you're missing."

It was time to bring this topic to a close. "I'll have to take your word for it."

"Don't take my word for it. Didn't you enjoy watching me last night? I know you were there for more than the curtain call."

Just like that Paige felt herself tumbling down the rabbit hole. The trap was sprung, and she fell for it so easily it was out-and-out embarrassing. "I've already apologized for that. I should have left the second I realized what you were doing."

"But you didn't, did you?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Wow, this has been the longest Truth question ever." Paige picked up her glass with a shaky hand and raised it to her mouth. All of a sudden she was thirsty and

desperate to find something to do with her tongue instead of flapping it. She chugged a good portion of her juice before setting the glass in front of her. "Okay, isn't it my turn now?"

"Can't hide forever, Paige."

"I can surely try." Paige took a deep breath. "Truth or Dare, Shane."

Shane watched Paige dance around the topic of last night like a prima ballerina. "I'm not sure if you should have a turn."

"Why?"

"Because I like this topic." He liked it a lot, in fact.

"Of course you do. Anything to embarrass me."

"Why are you embarrassed? It wasn't your body covered in semen."

"All righty, then." Paige rose from her seat. "I'm done."

Shane glanced at her full plate then back at her. "You've had one bite. Two tops."

"I'm not hungry." Paige grabbed her glass and headed for the kitchen. Acting fast, Shane pushed back his chair and reached out and grabbed her arm. "Hey."

He wasn't going to let her go so easily. "Hey, nothing." Shane moved back even more and pulled her to him, forcing her onto his lap. With one hand he took the glass away from her and with the other he anchored her to him.

It took everything out of him to keep his hand at her waist and not move it down to her bare legs. He didn't know what deity he had to thank for the sexy lavender short set she was wearing, but whoever it was, he owed them a statue in their honor. The color and the cut of her outfit highlighted not only her mouthwatering skin tone but her firm thighs and legs. The stretchy tank top was V-cut, teasing him with a peek at the gentle curves that lay beneath the soft cotton fabric. Damn, she looked good. He shouldn't be thinking of her in this manner. Instead, he tried to remind them both why they were here. Goading her, he asked, "Quitting already?"

"No. I told you. I'm done." She wiggled, trying to free herself, which was a wasted effort of both time and energy, but felt damn good against his denim-covered cock. "Let me up before you hurt yourself. I know your legs are bothering you this morning."

"My legs are fine." Pain was a friendly reminder he was still alive. Lord knows he had enough of it to know that. "Besides, you weigh like thirty pounds."

"Not hardly."

"I can barely feel you." Except for the one place where it counted most.

Paige glanced over her shoulder at him, her face immediately clouding over with concern. "That could be because of poor circulation. Let me look at your legs."

"Paige."

"Seriously, Shane." She gripped his hands and tugged. "I'm not playing around."

Shane smiled at her nurse voice. It was like a mom voice but less manipulative. "What'll you give me if I let you look?"

"A clean bill of health."

He snorted. "My doctor already gave me that."

"Then why not do it to give me peace of mind?"

Because he didn't want her seeing him as less than a man even though he felt that way a bit. Of course he couldn't tell her that. He'd die first. So instead, he deflected. As usual. "There's nothing for you to look at."

"Fine. I dare you to."

Shane couldn't help but chuckle. She was a determined little thing. "I didn't pick Dare."

"I'm picking it for you."

"I think you just want to get me out of my pants."

"Think what you want. Just drop them. Now. Or do you want to lose again?"

Shane released her instantly and watched as she rose to her feet. He knew a challenge when he heard one, and of course he couldn't let it slide. "I didn't lose last

night." He felt the need to remind her as he took hold of the arm of the chair and used it as an aid to help him rise. "I let you win."

"Keep telling yourself that," she said in her condescending way before eyeing him with wary trepidation and obvious concern. "Do you need help?"

That was the last thing he needed. He wasn't an invalid, for Christ's sake. "No. I can do it. But brace yourself." Shane placed his hands on the button on his jeans. "It's not pretty."

"Somehow," Paige dropped to her knees in front of him, a position his stiffening shaft immediately welcomed, "I sincerely doubt it."

His cock picked a helluva time to jump up and say "hi", but it wasn't as if Paige hadn't already seen an eyeful last night anyway. With his gaze firmly centered on Paige, he unbuttoned and unzipped his pants. He watched her intently as she caught her breath when he pushed the denim down his hips and past his calves. When his jeans hit the floor, he tried to step out of them, but the material was too coarse for a smooth transition.

"I know you said you didn't want any help but..." Her gaze skated over his erection as she reached out to steady him. "Deal with it."

"Thanks."

"No problem." Paige sat back on her heels and stared for a long moment. He wondered what she was thinking but wasn't willing to break the silence to ask her. In what seemed almost timid at first, she reached out and traced the sharp remains of his multiple surgeries. His scars were puckered and deep red but healing nicely.

The doctors had told him in a few years they would fade away almost entirely, leaving behind just the memory and a slight permanent welt to remind him of his close brush with death. And if he were lucky, his mind would heal as rapidly. Nightmares aside, Shane still had more mental issues than *Sports Illustrated* magazine. His mind was brought back to the present as she gently probed at the zigzagging marks on his legs. "Nice."

"Glad you approve."

"I knew you would." Smiling, she spared him a quick glance before moving her hands around to the back of his legs. She lightly massaged his calves, as if trying to ease his pain, causing him to grow tense. The second she felt his discomfort she moved her hands and looked up at him again. "Am I hurting you?"

"No," he bit the word out. Pain was the last thing he was feeling. "You're not hurting me."

"You sure?"

Shane crossed his arms over his chest and willed his cock to behave. Despite his wayward thoughts from last night, he couldn't risk his dick acting out. It was one thing to fantasize about Paige and something entirely different to act on it. "Trust me. I've been in enough pain to recognize it by now."

"True." Paige rose to her feet, bringing his pants up with her. "Everything looks fine."

Shane took over when his jeans were mid-thigh and pulled them over his butt. He zipped up but left them unbuttoned. "That's because it is. I couldn't sleep, even after all that. I went out and swam. I might have overtaxed myself."

At his words, Paige frowned. "You shouldn't have swum alone. I would have gone with you."

That was news to him. "Really, because after the way you took off last night, I could have sworn you wanted to be as far from me as humanly possible. In fact, I was surprised to see you still here this morning. After you saw me and heard me, I was sure you'd be long gone." Which probably wouldn't have been a bad thing. As much as he wanted her, he was bad news right now. But later, oh later, she and he were going to have to have words.

"Heard." Paige licked her lips and looked away. "I didn't hear anything."

"Liar."

But he was going to let it slide. This time. He didn't want to start a fight. Not when he still had something important to tell her. Before she could try to escape once more, Shane reached out and took hold of her hand. "Thanks."

"For what?"

Hell, he didn't even know where to start. She had done so much for him, for so long, in numerous ways, that it seemed impossible to narrow it down to a single thing he was grateful for. "For being you?"

"Just doing my job."

Shane stepped back and ran his gaze down her less-than-professional outfit. "I don't see a little white dress."

"Nurses don't wear those anymore."

"And it's a shame." Since Paige seemed less like a flight risk now, Shane sat back down in his chair. He didn't release her though, instead he pulled her right back onto his lap, despite her laughing protest. "Speaking as someone who was surrounded by nurses almost twenty-four hours a day, cartoon character smocks are not the last thing a man wants to see before he meets his maker."

Laughing, Paige turned sideways on his lap, enabling them to see each other more clearly. "Leave it to you to think with your cock first, even when you were knocking on heaven's door."

"Trust me, I was nowhere near heaven."

"You're not as bad as you pretend to be." She flashed him a smirk.

"And you're not as good as you would like people to think you are."

"Oh please." She crossed her arms. "I'm so good."

"Good girls don't watch bad boys jerk off."

"Can't let it go, can you?"

"Nope." Shane wasn't sure why, but needling Paige was some of the most fun he'd had in a long time.

"You're such a child. When are you going to grow up?"

"Grow up?" Shane stuck his tongue out in disgust. "Who wants to do that?"

"Lots of people."

"Name one."

"Jaffee."

There she went again, bringing up the erection deflator. "You know, I think you enjoy saying his name to piss me off."

"Why would talking about my boyfriend piss you off?"

Shane sent her a leveled look. "Why wouldn't it? When are you guys going to break up already? You're really beginning to test my patience with him."

"We're not going to break up."

"Right."

"He asked me to marry him."

"Not funny."

"Wasn't meant to be."

Shane waited for her to crack a smile, but she didn't. She kept staring at him solemnly, as if he were the one who had lost his mind and not her. Finally reality smacked him in the back of the head. "You're not kidding?"

"No." Paige licked her lips, a telling action if ever there were. "He asked me on Wednesday."

"Tell me, Paige." Shane clenched his hands into fists in an effort to keep from shaking some sense into her. "Did he take it too badly when you laughed in his face?"

"I didn't laugh and before you ask, I didn't say no."

Shane could feel his blood pressure rising. "You can't marry him."

"Why not?"

Shane stared at her blankly. Was she serious? "Would you prefer the reasons alphabetically or numerically?"

"I'd prefer them to be real reasons and not just because you dislike him." Angry, Paige rose from his lap and moved away from him. Pivoting, she turned back to face him, hands on her hips. "It sucks that you don't like him, Shane, but it's not my problem."

"The hell it isn't. Tell the truth, Paige, you didn't come up here just for station identification, you came here to get away from him." Suddenly everything made sense. "You don't want to say yes and you're looking for the balls to say no."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"I know someone about to marry the man of her dreams doesn't take a break so she can weigh the pros and cons of his proposal." Shane was feeling coldly furious. "And they definitely don't watch as another man jerks off."

"That was an accident."

"The stumbling in on me, sure. The staying and watching while I come, not so accidental. Admit it. You liked it, didn't you?"

She raised her chin and shook her hair back over her shoulders, meeting his unflinching glare head-on. "No."

Shane didn't let her obvious lie hold him back. He knew the truth, and he wouldn't be happy until she admitted it, to herself and to him. He'd been willing, more than willing, to let things simmer between them until he was in a better position to approach her, but her actions were forcing his hand. "Liar. Not only did you like it, you wanted to join me, didn't you?"

"No."

"And remove my hand to replace it with your own."

"No." Her voice grew louder and more desperate, but Shane would not relent. This was too important for him to back down now.

"Did you want to climb on top of me and sink your sweet cunt on my stiff cock?"

"Damn it. I said no. Stop asking me these crazy questions."

"I'll stop asking you when you start telling the truth, Paige." Shane rose to his feet, angrier than he'd ever remembered being before. Over the last year he'd learned as only one who'd experienced trial and suffering had that life wasn't fair. Nothing was driving home that point, however, as this madness taking place now. She couldn't marry him. She just couldn't. "Admit it. You wanted me last night. You wanted my hands on you and yours on me."

She shook her head as she backed away from him. "I'm done playing."

"Who's playing?" He'd never been more serious in his life.

"You are and I'm not going to indulge you a moment more. I have a man, Shane."

Shane snorted. "That's debatable."

"A good man," she continued as if he hadn't spoken, "and I'm not going to ruin it to give in to you."

"You mean give in to yourself, don't you?"

His accusation stopped her in her tracks. "You don't know anything."

"I know you don't want him the way you want me." And Jaffee could never want her as much as Shane did.

"You're a conceited ass." In her anger, she stepped toward him, ready to do battle once more. They were mere inches apart now, separated only by empty space and her rage.

"But I'm a truthful conceited ass," he admitted with no shame. "And you want me. Just as I want you." And it was time they both stopped denying it.

Chapter Seven

Paige stared at him with disbelief. She couldn't believe his bravado. Wait. This was Shane she was speaking about. Of course she could believe it. It was just so like him to toss out a relevant piece of information and expect her to act as he would, without any thought of the consequences. "I...I..." Paige shook her head, trying her best to process the madness swallowing her whole. "I have no words right now. None."

"You better come up with some and quick." He cocked his head and stared at her pointedly. "Admit it, Paige. Admit you want me."

She couldn't. She wouldn't. Not without a good fight. "What good would that do?"

"It would finally put it out there for us both to see. Then maybe we can stop avoiding the inevitable."

That wasn't a good enough reason for her. She'd been ignoring her feelings for him for a while now. Disregarding them for the ten minutes it would take to leave here now was a walk in the park compared to the last few years. "Nothing is inevitable, Shane, but death."

"I disagree."

He would, stubborn ass. "That's your prerogative."

"I never figured you for a coward."

Even though she knew he was only taunting her, his words raised her hackles just the same. "I'm not."

"You could have fooled the hell out of me," he snapped.

Annoyed, Paige took a step away from him, needing to put a little distance between the two of them before she did him harm. There was no one on this earth who could push her buttons so fast or so hard. "What do you want from me?"

"The truth would be a good start."

She'd teased him yesterday about his ability to handle the truth, when the fact of the matter was, she couldn't. "What good would it do to admit it? It won't change anything. I might want you, Shane, but I'm not going to act on it."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because I'm with Jaffee." And she was going to marry him. It was the right thing to do, even if it wasn't what she truly wanted to do.

Shane's mouth turned down in disgust. "Fuck him."

"Very mature."

"Right, because hiding behind him is real mature." His remarks hit a little too close to home for her. "Tell me this, Paige. If he's so real and if he's the man you want to marry, then how come you're here with me?"

"I'm asking myself the exact same thing." This was a mistake. She should have never come. Shaking her head, she turned and walked down the hallway to the bedroom where she'd spent the night. Unfortunately she wasn't the only one on the move. Shane was right behind her. He wasn't as fast as she was because of his cane, but he definitely put every step to good use and he cleared the doorway just as she plucked her backpack off the floor and set it onto the bed to pack.

The second he walked in Paige expected for them to pick up right where they left off. Instead, Shane merely leaned back against the wall and watched her through hooded eyes as she packed her meager belongings. The silent way he stared unnerved her. In her mind, Shane being quiet meant he was plotting, and Paige had a hard enough time dealing with him when he was working off the cuff.

Flustered, she placed her hands on her hips and faced him, unable to deal with the silence any longer. "What?"

Unlike her though, he didn't seem the slightest bit phased. "Running now?"

"I'm not running. I'm walking away." At a rapid speed, as if the hounds of hell were right behind her.

"Walking to what? To whom? You and I both know this thing with him will never work."

The calm, matter-of-fact way he spoke rubbed her the wrong way, mainly because she knew deep down he was right. But she would be damned if she admitted it. "I don't know any such thing."

"Then know this. You don't love him, Paige, and to be honest, I'm not too sure he loves you, either. Come on. You're smarter than this. Saying no is not only the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do."

"What am I doing that's so stupid?" she replied in a sarcastic tone. "Considering marrying my boyfriend?"

"No, considering marrying someone you're not in love with."

"I do love him."

"But you're not in love with him." Shane pushed away from the door and slowly made his way across the room to her.

Refusing to budge, Paige raised her chin and met his determined gaze with her own.

She would not back down.

She would not cower.

"You're wrong." Her voice was strong, and even to her own ears her lie rang as truth. Maybe if she could convince him she would be able to do the same to herself later on.

"No, I'm not. Deep inside you know it." He reached her side and stared into her upturned face. "Damn it, Paige, don't do this. Don't make this mistake. You'll only end up regretting it."

"I thought you were my friend." Her voice quivered with frustration.

"I am," he said through gritted teeth.

"Then as my friend, you should be happy for me and congratulate me on my impending nuptials or whatever people do when someone shares this sort of good news with them."

Shane released his cane, reached out and curled his hand around her upper arm and pulled her to him. "Then let me speak as the man about to fuck you. You say yes to him and it will be the biggest mistake of your life." Bending his head, Shane captured her mouth and silenced her in the best way she could ever imagine. His tongue plunged into her mouth, demanding entry, not asking. Shane kissed her as if he had every right to, and her body responded in agreement.

Nothing this wrong had ever felt so right. She wasn't the type to cheat, never had before, and would have sworn she never would. But one taste of Shane's lips had her rethinking everything she'd ever held true.

His mouth devoured hers in a kiss so commanding and passionate it left her breathless and hungry for more. In all her years she'd never been so thoroughly made love to, all without removing a single stitch of clothing and never before had she felt as fucked as she did now. Paige knew she shouldn't be enjoying the taste of him as much as she was, but knowing had nothing to do with the reality of the moment. And it was a helluva moment.

Before she could lose her head entirely, Shane broke the kiss. Instead of releasing her though, he pulled back a bit and peered down at her with eyes filled with stubborn resolve. "You can despise me all you want, Paige, but if you go through with this, you'll hate yourself more."

"Yo-you think you know me so well." Her words were as stuttered as her breathing.

"Yes, I do." Shane tightened his hold on her. "And you know I do. That's what pisses you off so much, isn't it?"

"I'm not going to give you what you want."

"The hell you're not." Shane took his hands off her arms and wrapped them around her waist before taking her mouth under his once more. This time Paige was ready for him and waiting. She figured they could argue from now to doomsday or they could put their mouths to better use. She slipped her hands up his shoulders to wrap around his neck, pulling him closer to her as she surrendered to not only his wants but her own.

She welcomed his tongue inside her mouth and his hands on her body, especially as they made their way down her slender frame. When he reached her cotton shorts, he shoved them over her hips.

Frantic, she followed his lead, moving her hands between them to tug at his zipper and free his erection. Because neither of them were in a hurry to end their kiss it took twice as long as it should have for him to push her shorts past her thighs and for her to take his shaft in her hand.

His erection was thick and long and from the feel of him, not only was his cock impressive, his reputation was well-deserved. She stroked him feverishly as he ran his hands over her exposed flesh.

He brushed his hands over her ass, cupping the firm flesh.

They released one another and broke from the kiss long enough to push their garments to the floor and stepped out of them before coming together once more in a passionate embrace. Paige was still wearing her top, but that small fact didn't seem to bother either one of them. The important parts were bared and that was good enough for now.

Despite there being a perfectly good bed just inches away, Shane backed her against the wall. Gripping her, he raised her hips, causing her to automatically wrap her legs around his waist. The new position did something her morals did not. It caused Paige to push against him in an effort to be released. "Wait. Your legs."

"Fuck my legs," Shane ordered as he reached between their bodies to center his crown against her slick opening. "Tell me, God, please tell me you're on something."

"Yes." Paige was thankful one of them was thinking because Lord knows she wasn't.

"Good." And with that, Shane thrust inside her. There were no words of endearment, no passionate looks or even a warm-up period to get her wet and ready. She didn't need it. The fight had been foreplay enough.

Eyes closed, she held on tight as he began a frenzied rhythm, pumping himself in and out of her at a backbreaking pace. The intensity of his loving was so overwhelming she had to bite down on her lip to muffle her moans. Deep inside she'd always known they would end up together like this, but never did she think it would feel so damn good. Shane was everything she'd ever imagined and more. He took her with a fierce passion that damn near took her breath away.

"I...oh...mmm...I..." she moaned as she pushed down, meeting him thrust for thrust. She couldn't form a coherent sentence, but Shane seemed to get the gist of what she was saying.

"That's it, baby," he encouraged through gritted teeth. "Take my cock. Fuck me with your sweet pussy."

"God. Shane." Paige had never had someone talk dirty to her during sex, and it was amazing how erotic the words sounded pouring from Shane's lips. Then again, everything was better when it involved him, why did she even think sex would be different?

"Not his. Mine," he bit out savagely. "Mine."

Unable to argue with the truth, Paige wisely kept her mouth shut and tightened her arms around his neck. She leaned into the wall, using the sturdy structure as an anchor to hold her upright as Shane pushed into her, over and over. He blinded her to everything around her, making her focus on him and him alone.

As she climbed the steep hill to paradise, Shane rearranged his grip on her. He held her steadily against the wall with one hand as he moved the other between them to strum her engorged clit.

The new contact had her singing out with pleasure. "God...yes..."

"Like that, do you?"

"Yes. Don't stop. Donnnnnn—" she pleaded as her body raced closer and closer to her release. "Ohhh...mmmmm."

"Fuck yes." His voice had a frantic edge, and she could tell he was as close as she was. "Come for me."

As if she'd been waiting for those words, her body began to tremble with pleasure. Gripping him tighter, she cried his name as she came, her orgasm powering through her like a freight train. Her release was so intense it bordered on painful. "Fuuu... Shane..."

Her orgasm was the catalyst to his own. Gritting his teeth, Shane pumped his hips once more, burying his cock as deep inside her as he could go, and came, filling her with his creamy, hot seed.

"Fuck, fuck," he cursed as he trembled against her in the aftermath of his fierce climax.

Shane held himself inside her for a few seconds before slowly pulling out of her well-used body. After lowering her back to the floor, he released her and made his way to the bed. He dropped more than he sat, all the while breathing as if he'd run a marathon, which in essence, Paige had to admit, he practically had.

She also had to admit to a whole lot of other things. Things she wasn't so sure she was ready to face just yet. Had they really...had she? Her body trembled with aftershocks as her mind filled with the ramifications of their thoughtless actions. Wordlessly, she walked on shaky legs over to where her shorts lay on the floor. She was stopped by Shane, however, who reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her to him.

"Stop it," Shane ordered in a harsh and demanding tone. "Stop feeling guilty. What we did wasn't wrong. You don't belong to him."

"No," she admitted to Shane, and finally to herself. "I don't."

"Then say it. Say who you belong to." Paige closed her eyes and pressed her lips together, unwilling to say the words that would give Shane the keys to her soul. But he would not be deterred. "Say it."

"I belong..." Opening her eyes, Paige peered down at him and focused her gaze on her irate lover. "To myself."

To her surprise, instead of becoming more upset, Shane laughed. "That's my girl. Fight me to the end."

As much as it would have pleased her to do so, Paige couldn't. The fight had gone out of her. At last.

* * * * *

Shane moaned in appreciation as he sank into the bubbling water of his parents' hot tub. His he-man act had really seemed like a good idea at the time. Now, two pain pills and a beer later, he wasn't so sure. His legs were sore as hell, but even despite the throbbing ache, Shane knew he'd do it again in a heartbeat.

Paige, on the other hand, didn't come off as feeling the same way. She seemed a little too shell-shocked for his peace of mind. And to his surprise and dismay, she'd insisted on showering alone. He'd asked her join him outside in the hot tub after her shower, thinking it best to give her a little space and time alone. He could tell by the wary look in her eyes Paige was still reeling. Truth be told, so was he. Although he'd wanted her for as long as he could remember, it was still a little heady to have his dream come to fruition.

But if he was only allowed to have one dream come to life, then this one was a hell of a good one. Even if he wasn't exactly proud of the way it went about. Sitting back in the hot tub, with his head leaning on the rim and his eyes closed, he thought back over the last hour and mentally kicked his own ass.

What the hell had he been thinking? Oh wait, that's right. He hadn't been. Because if he had, he would have never fucked Paige like that. She was his friend, one of his best friends, and she deserved better than a careless screw against the wall.

It wasn't as if he was sorry they made love, far from it, in fact. He just regretted the manner in which they did so. In his anger, he allowed his lust to overrule his common sense. In his haste to stop her from making the biggest mistake of her life, he'd taken her roughly, showing her no more affection than he would some girl he picked up in a bar. Paige deserved better than that.

Truth be told, she deserved better than he had to offer her, no matter which way Shane approached their problem. Yes, sex between the two of them had been as fucktastic as he'd always imagined it would be, but as of today, sex was all he could offer her. If Shane were forced to do an evaluation of his life and tally up the good versus the bad, he'd have to admit his cons would outweigh the pros.

It would be a year or so before he was done with his physical therapy and who knew how long he'd be in psychotherapy. Despite his degree, thanks to the accident he was unemployed. Sure he had money, but none of it was of his own making. He cared for Paige, loved her even, but as the old song went, what's love got to do with it?

Despite everything, he couldn't regret making love with her and hopefully changing her mind about Jaffee. True, Shane himself was nowhere good enough for her, but neither was that pocket protector. The difference was, Shane knew it, and he refused to allow Paige to settle for anything short of the world. Whether he liked it or not, he knew he had to put things back to the way they were before he messed things up entirely.

"Fuck," he muttered aloud, his mind fraught with confusion and uncertainty. What the hell was he going to do?

"Wow, don't you sound all post-coital tristesse? I thought that was my job."

Paige's voice startled him and woke him from his mental funk. Opening his eyes, Shane sat up and peered at Paige, who was standing next to the spa in a teal two-piece

swimsuit. She fiddled with her dark hair, pinning it at the top of her head as she waited for his answer.

Instead of replying right away though, Shane took his time, drinking in her barely covered form. How in the world had he managed to keep his hands to himself all this time? More importantly, how was he going to manage keeping them off her after experiencing paradise in her arms? "Post-coital tristesse?"

"Uh-huh."

"Is that another one of your egghead words?"

"Sort of. It basically means to be sad after sex."

"Do you really think I could possibly be sad after having sex with you?" Shane stood and offered his hand to her.

"Actually," Paige took his hand and stepped carefully into the spa, hissing at the heat of the water as she sank into the warm tub. "I'm not quite sure what to think right now."

That was a feeling Shane was familiar with. "I see." He moved until he was across from her before sitting and leaning back against the backrest. She wasn't alone in her uncertainty. He was swimming in it. "Do you regret it?"

"Do you?" she fired back.

"Well," Shane hedged, just to annoy her a bit. "I regret not taking your shirt off so I could see your breasts."

Paige laughed at his comment. "They're just boobs."

Not to him, but they could argue about that later. "I also regret not lying down on the bed."

"I told you your legs would hurt. Do you need me to—"

"But most of all," he said, interrupting her before she went into nurse mode. "I regret not eating your pussy." Especially if it was his only chance to do so.

Paige opened her mouth to snap off another retort, but then closed it as his words sank in. He almost laughed at the stunned expression on her face. Who would have thunk it? His Paige. Speechless.

"Oh please, I beg of you," he teased, enjoying this side of his fighter. "Don't tell me that all this time, in order to get the last word with you, all I had to do was say something dirty?"

"I...ahh...of course not."

He didn't believe her for a second, but because he was such a nice guy he was going to let it go. For now. "What about you, what do you regret?"

"Nothing."

"Good to know." Shane smiled at her words. Her nothing meant something to him. He scooted over on the bench seat until he was sitting right next to her and took her hand in his. There was no reason they had to rush right back to being friends only. "So you enjoyed my less-than-impressive moves?"

"I wouldn't say they were less than impressive."

"Really?" He brought her hand out of the water and kissed her damp palm before lowering it back under the water and setting it on top of his rising erection. Unlike her, Shane hadn't put on a swimsuit. A fact he was very happy about now. "Because I would."

"Oh." Intrigue filled her voice and she took hold of his cock. "That seemed A-game material to me. I mean, I came."

"Yes, but only once."

"Once is good."

"That's the problem. I'm so much better than good." Shane leaned down and licked the shell of her ear.

"Mmm...Shane." Paige pulled her hand away. "We...we should probably talk."

"We will," he said as he took her hand in his once more and placed it back in its rightful place. His lap. He had to have her one more time. Just once, then they could talk. "Later."

"You're insatiable." She laughed. His cock had grown hard under her hand, giving her words credibility as nothing else could have.

"You say that as if it's a bad thing," he teased.

Paige began to slowly stroke his cock, holding his gaze all the while. From the heated look she was giving him, Shane could tell he wasn't the only one getting revved-up. "We're going to need a condom. Maybe even two."

The idea of fucking appealed to him, but the thought of sheathing up after riding her bare did not. "Why?" he asked confused. "I thought you said..."

"Yes, I am, but that was 'heat of the moment stupid me' talking. I'm a nurse. I should know better."

Shane frowned. "You worried your birth control won't be effective?" He hadn't thought about that. Frankly though, the idea of a little girl in the image of Paige didn't scare him. Even though it should have. He had nothing to offer Paige, let alone a baby. Hell, he could barely take care of himself these days. Yet knowing all that, Shane still loathed the idea of a condom.

"No, but kids aren't the only thing to worry about." She cocked her head. "You do have a reputation to live down."

Shane's brows shot up. She was worried...about him? Removing her hand from his cock, he reached out for her and pulled her onto his lap so she was facing him. "I'm clean. I swear it. I would never do anything to put you in harm's way."

Paige gave him a smile. "I know you wouldn't."

"I haven't gone bareback since high school and I've been tested since then. Many times," he said, wanting to assure her in every way possible. "And again after the blood transfusion, but that was for my own piece of mind."

"Shane," Paige laid her finger across his lips to silence him. "I believe you. I'm clean too, I just...well, you know you?"

Shane pulled back so he could speak. "I can't change my past, but I can own up to it. I've never been a choirboy, but I don't have a death wish, either. More important though, I would never do anything to hurt you."

Paige sighed and looked away. A move that upset Shane more than he ever thought possible. Reaching out, he took her chin in his hand and turned her face back to his. "Do you trust I would never hurt you?"

"Never...is a big word."

"Never," he assured her with emphasis. "Hurt you. Tell me you believe me."

She opened her mouth then closed it and nodded. "I believe you."

"Tell me you want me."

"Needy much?"

He was where she was concerned. "Stubborn little minx." He reached behind her and attacked the strings to her top. "Going to make me work for it, aren't you?"

"Hell yes. Things come too easily to you as it is."

"You didn't," he reminded her as he freed the strings at the center of her back before moving on to the ones at the back of her neck.

"Didn't know you wanted me."

"I did. Right from the start. It's always been you."

"You sure hid behind a lot of girls."

"But I'm not hiding now." The knot gave, causing the teal top to drop into the bubbling water, followed quite closely by Shane's gaze, which zeroed in on the sexiest brown morsels he'd ever seen. "Looks as if I'm not the only one done hiding."

The sight of her breasts made him suddenly want to travel back in time. These were breasts to be worshipped, held in wonder. Not something to be discounted lightly. They were pert and round, and from the looks of things, they'd fill his hands quite nicely

without spilling out. And if that wasn't cock-hardening wonderful enough, both breasts were topped with the smallest areolas he'd ever seen. Her nipples themselves were like dark chocolate Hershey Kisses, peaked out, begging to be touched.

"They're just as I knew they would be." Shane bent forward and laved one of her nipples with his tongue before sitting back up and smiling. "Perfect."

"Not too small?" she moaned, arching into his touch.

"Not at all." And to show her how perfect he thought they were, he lowered his head once more and covered a nipple with his mouth as he cupped her other breast.

He teased one bite-sized nipple with his fingers as he suckled the other in his mouth, dragging moans of approval from Paige. Her breasts might not have been as big as those of his last few dates, but they seemed more sensitive. From the moans she was making, and the way her hand gripped the back of his head, Shane was willing to bet he could make her come from using his mouth on her tits alone.

He was going to try that out. Soon. But not today. Today he had to get back inside her wet warmth or go mad from lack of trying. Reluctantly he pulled his mouth away from his new favorite tongue-resting place. "I want to fuck you again." Even though he knew it was wrong, he couldn't help it.

Paige undulated on his lap, rubbing her still-bikini-covered pussy over his erection. "I could tell."

"Know what I can tell? You have way too many clothes on."

"Just this one tiny thing?"

"If you want to keep this one tiny thing intact, take it off. Or I'll take it off for you."

Laughing, Paige pushed off him and moved to the center of the spa where she pushed her bottoms off before climbing back on his lap. "Happy now? I'm now naked."

"Happy doesn't come close to describing it." Shane gripped her hips, pulling her tight against him. Damn, she felt good. Too good. And before he lost what little sanity he had left, there was something he needed to ask. "Do you want me to go grab a

condom?" He hadn't really given her a choice before, but he would this time. Shane didn't believe in making the same mistake twice.

To his immense pleasure though, she shook her head as she took his cock in hand. "I trust you and I don't want there to be anything between us when you come inside me."

"Careful what you ask for or I might just come before I get inside you. I'm a man out on the ledge here, woman."

"Then let's see what I can do to send you over." She took him in slowly, teasing them both with her unhurried downward descent. Just when he thought he'd go mad with longing, she seated herself fully, engulfing his cock in her sweet sex. The heat surrounding his pussy-covered shaft rivaled that of the water splashing about around them. And even though he knew it wasn't true, he felt as if it'd been an eternity since he had last been in her welcoming depths.

Damn, she was tight. It took almost an act of God to work her up and down his shaft. At this rate, he'd have to fuck her at least twice a day to get her body accustomed to his width and length. That was a chore Shane was more than willing to take on.

Even with the water as an added lube, it still didn't give him much in the help department. Shane could only wonder if her pussy was this taut, how her ass would be. He was willing to bet she'd never been taken back there, something he'd have to rectify and soon. But for now he had a pussy to accommodate.

The water, already splashing about, grew tidal-wave deadly as they began to move against one another. The bubbling spa didn't necessarily create an ideal spot to make with the loving, but it didn't hurt, either. Of course with the heat they were generating, plus that coming up from the hot water, Shane was sure he'd eventually pass out. It would be entirely worth it, if he was able to get her off just before he slipped into a heat-induced coma.

For the first few minutes Shane allowed Paige to set the rhythm and just sat back and watched her ride on his dick. Her pretty little breasts beckoned for him to come

back for another taste of their sweet, dark flesh, but he held back, knowing there would be time for that later. For right now he was simply going to concentrate on sinking his cock deep inside her, again and again. He closed his eyes, letting the sensations wash over him, the feeling of her riding him, the touch of her hand on his neck. All those little things were beginning to get to him, however.

Unable to give up complete power, Shane gripped her hips and worked her up and down his cock, controlling the movements and her release. His new approach didn't win him accolades from Paige, who apparently was under the mistaken impression it was she who was in charge. When she tried to speed up, he tightened his grip on her and slowed her down, never letting her go any faster or any slower than he decreed. After a few minutes of his loving, she gripped her hand in his hair and pulled. "Bastard."

"Yeah, but you love it. Don't you." He thrust his hips upward as he pulled her firmly down on him, causing her ass to smack against his lap. "Love me taking over and making you work for it. Love me making your pussy mine."

"Yes, but I hate you," she gasped, rising once more to repeat their demented dance.

"I can live with that." He began to rock her faster and harder, causing her to dig her fingernails in his shoulders to hold on as he sped up his thrusts. "That's it, baby. Fuck my cock with your juicy pussy. I can't get enough of it. Enough of you."

"Shane...ohhhh." Throwing her head back, she let out a cock-tingling cry of pleasure as she came. Her body trembled as she undulated her hips, fucking him through her orgasm as if striving for another.

If that was her goal, Shane was just the man to help her achieve it. "Come for me. Flood my cock with your sweet dew," he ordered as he continued to drive his cock into her as she sank down.

"Yes. Yes. Yes" Her cries were barely audible over the roar of his own. After a while, Shane lost the ability to make any sound whatsoever. He sped up her thrusts,

feeling his own orgasm approaching at a ball-breaking rapid speed. Despite that, he held out until she came again before succumbing to the pleasure himself.

Exhausted, Shane collapsed against the backrest of the spa with Paige sprawled across him, head on his shoulders, arms lying limply by their sides. If he wasn't so damn tired himself, he might have laughed. But he could barely work up the energy to blink.

Once he was finally able to breathe without feeling as if his lungs were on fire, he spoke. "Fuck."

Paige raised her head off his shoulder and peered up at him with a sleepy little look in her eyes. "What?"

"Once again," he grumbled, "you managed to withhold your pussy from my mouth."

"Sorry," she said with a smile that didn't look the least bit repentant. "I was too busy riding your cock to think about moving up a few inches to ride your lips."

"Then think about it next time. Sheesh. What's a man have to do to eat some pussy in this house?"

"Try fucking me in a bed."

"Oh," he said as if the mere thought had never occurred to him. A bed. What was that all about? "Now there's an idea with merit."

"But feed me first. A girl has to keep her energy up around you."

"I'll make you a deal. I'll feed you then you feed me."

She stuck out her lower lip and lowered her gaze as she grumbled. "If I must."

"Oh trust me. You must." And the sooner the better—for the both of them. If they only had tonight, he was going to make sure it was the best night of both their lives.

Chapter Eight

"Let me ask you something."

Paige rolled over onto her side, away from the flickering fireplace she'd been staring into absentmindedly and faced Shane, who was studying her intently. Lazily, she propped her head up on her hand and ran her gaze down her lover, grinning when she spotted his thickening cock. It had been over twelve hours since their first sexual encounter and just minutes since their last, and somehow he still had the energy to speak. They had made love half a dozen times in so many positions and ways that even the back of her knees were sore, and yet he was still lounging about with a semi, as if the other six times had only been appetizers.

He and his cock were her new heroes.

"The answer is no. I'm tired. My pussy needs a break." Though she was sure with the right motivation she could be properly convinced otherwise.

Shane chuckled softly. "Pay no mind to the man below the bellybutton. Despite his rousing interest, that's not what I was talking about."

"Oh. Then...ask away."

"Where do you see this going?"

"This what?"

"Us."

"Wow." He considered them an us. Smiling, Paige felt her heart swell with joy. For so long she'd protected her heart from him, fearing he'd hurt her, only to find out she couldn't be further from the truth. Feeling all kinds of good, she reached her hand out and ran her fingers lightly across his cheek. "Isn't that my question as the girl?"

"Normally yes, but before things went too far, I thought we should talk about it."

"Went too far?" Good mood gone. Feeling a little bit too exposed now, Paige sat up and reached for her shirt lying only a few inches away and slipped it on. "What do you mean 'too far'?"

"You know I care about you. Right?"

"Yes." This conversation was quickly going downhill. And the faster it rolled, the more clothes she felt the need to put on. With nervous hands she grabbed her shorts, stepped into them and then rose to her feet, pulling them up her legs as she did.

"And I still want to see you." Shane rose painstakingly slow to his feet but bypassed his sweats to go straight to her side.

"I would hope so," she said with a little shaky little laugh.

"But I don't think it's a very good idea if we do. See one another, I mean."

Her stomach knotted and for a moment, she feared she'd be sick. "Excuse me?"

"I have a lot things going on with me, Paige. Things I need to deal with."

"And seeing me would complicate that?" Paige stared at him, her body cold, her heart pounding so hard she was sure it would burst from her chest at any moment. Was she dreaming? Was this all some chlorine-induced nightmare, or was Shane really saying what she thought he said?

"Complicate is not the right word." He ran his hand through his dark hair in obvious frustration. "I'm not saying this right."

Paige disagreed. She thought he was saying it right, but just in case he needed another word, she had a few for him. "How's 'fuck it up for you', then?"

"You're getting upset for no reason."

"No, I think I have a very good reason." Every emotion rained down on her as she fought with all her might to remain standing. She felt disillusioned, hurt and angry, but most of all she felt stupid for believing she could ever mean anything to him. "Tell me something, Shane. Was this like the world's longest one-night stand or what?"

"Of course not."

"Then what is it?"

"I can't be in a relationship right now."

"But you can fuck me and ensure I mess up any chance I have of having a relationship with someone else?"

"Someone else like who, Jaffee?" He spat the other man's name out as if it were distasteful.

"Oh, I see you can say his name now."

"And I see you're trying to run right back into his arms." Shane crossed his arms over his chest and his lips twisted into a cynical smile. "Tell me, Paige, would he be so quick to give you a ring if he knew you spent almost the entire weekend riding my cock?"

No. He. Didn't. "Oh my God. I can't believe you. I can't believe what you made me do."

"Whoa." Shane jerked back as if she'd slapped him. "Let's get one thing straight, Paige. I didn't make you do anything. You wanted me as much as I wanted you."

"It wasn't just sex I wanted, Shane." She shook her head, the regret she hadn't experienced before now filling her so full she felt as if she were drowning in it. "Fuck. I knew this was going to happen. I knew it was going to happen, but I let myself believe your bullshit and lies."

Without giving him a chance to respond, Paige tore from the room, barreling down the hall until she reached the guest room. With wide eyes, she scanned the room, looking for any and every trace of her brief trip to hell. Single-mindedly she gathered her clothing and dumped it on the bed before storming over to the closet and yanking the door open to retrieve her backpack and slip on her shoes. By the time she made it back to the bed, Shane was standing in the doorway, dressed now in sweatpants and accompanied by his cane.

"I never lied to you."

She could tell by his sincere tone he really believed what he was saying. Well, that made one of them. "Maybe not with your words but most definitely with your deeds," she said as she began to stuff her backpack. "I can't believe I hurt a good man for you."

"Good," Shane scoffed. "Face it, Paige, there's nothing good about him or evil about me. You're just mad because I made you face up to something you've been waiting to deny for too long."

"What's that?"

"That you're not in love with him."

"Wow. Gee. Thanks a lot for that. Don't I feel loads better? You saved me. Now I guess instead of having a bad relationship, I have no relationship."

"I'm not saying no to a relationship, Paige. I'm just saying not now. I have to get my shit together before and be good for myself before I'm ever good for you."

"Which one of us is in denial, Shane? You'll never be good enough for me."

His blue eyes sharpened with anger. "Honey, I'm the best thing that could ever happen to you."

"Well, your best isn't good enough." She was a fool, a fool who needed to wise up, and quick. "You know what the worst part is? I have no one to blame but myself."

"Why does there have to be blame at all?"

Paige yanked one of her shirts from the bed and jumbled it into a ball before tossing it in her backpack. "Because assigning blame assigns responsibility. So I blame myself and give myself the responsibility to make it right."

"And how do you plan on doing that?"

"By getting the hell out of here and never speaking to you again."

"How the hell would that solve anything?" Shane looked as if he could barely speak his jaw was so tight.

"For a start, it would go a long way to make me feel better."

"This isn't just about you, Paige." He stepped forward as if he were going to grab her, but his hands remained at his sides.

"Right, just how it wasn't only about you until you climbed up on your pedestal and made it that way."

"I. Didn't," he said, in a firm, unwavering tone.

"The hell you didn't. You're a selfish asshole and you don't care what happens to anyone else as long as you get your way."

"That's not true."

"The hell it isn't." It was sad how things seemed so clear in hindsight. "You didn't want me to marry Jaffee so instead you fucked me."

"Oh please." His curt voice lashed out at her. "You're not a victim in this, Paige. I didn't force you. You wanted me too. You admitted you didn't love him."

Her cheeks burned with resentment and humiliation. Leave it to Shane to remind her of her own idiocy. "Fat lot of good it did me. This is what I get for changing horses midstream. I...I need to talk to Jaffee."

"And tell him what?" His chiding tone made her angry. "You don't love him. You can't marry him. Even you wouldn't go that far to get back at me."

"Everything isn't about you. He's a good man. He'd forgive me."

"Why on God's green earth would you want him to? You keep hiding behind this saintly person when the sad truth of the matter is the only reason you want to be with him is because he allows you to control the entire relationship. And to you that makes him perfect, but that's not perfection. It's stupidity."

"You would know," she retorted with cold sarcasm.

"I do." His face hardened until she barely recognized him. "You can't control me, Paige. I'm my own flawed person. I don't fall in line with the rest of these bootlickers you date. I won't toe the line. I tend to be a bit of a dick and do not-so-nice things

sometimes, but I'm also the same man who was inside you just moments ago, making you scream."

"And you're the same one who just managed to break my heart." Paige clapped her hands together repeatedly in a slow, condescending way. "Kudos to you and your many multiple personalities. I hope you all rot in hell."

"You're scared and running, Paige."

"Funny, Shane, I was thinking the exact same thing about you." No longer caring if she gathered all of her stuff, Paige zipped her backpack and slung one of the straps over her shoulder. "Bye, Shane. Thanks for...thanks for nothing."

"Don't go to him," he urged. "He won't make you happy."

"Yes, well, he can't make me unhappy. Thanks to you, no one else can or will again."

"Don't do this," he ordered. "I just need time."

"Take all the time you want, and when you get everything hunky-dory, forget you ever knew my name." Weariness filled her body and she had the sudden urge to crawl into a bed and pull the covers over her head. For the next month or two. "Goodbye."

For a moment she thought he wouldn't let her pass, but then to her surprise he stepped back into the hallway, giving her the room to leave. "This isn't goodbye. Far from it, Paige."

Shane could argue all he wanted. She was done fighting with him. Hell, she was done with him in general.

* * * * *

Present Day

Things weren't exactly going as planned. Although he hadn't for a second thought she'd give in to his charms so easily, he also didn't think she'd fight him tooth and nail. God, this was a disaster of titanic portions. All he wanted was to talk to her. To explain

to her all the things he'd meant to say and try to take back all the things he did say. Yes, it was true he hoped his friends would reconcile as well, but nothing was more important to him than smoothing things out with Paige. Nothing.

"What do you say? If you come willingly with me to the cabin so we can talk, I'll make sure your brother receives the scholarship. Do we have a deal?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice." That was a lesson he learned the hard way when he made the wrong one. "It's just not always one of your liking." Shane reached over and took hold of the door handle. "Are you staying or going?"

"I hate you."

Shane flinched. No matter how many times she declared her feelings, it didn't get easier to hear. "That wasn't what I asked you."

Paige narrowed her eyes. "Staying."

Shane sat back in his seat. "Excellent." Acting as if her decision hadn't held him in knots, he casually lowered the privacy glass. "To the cabin, Morris."

"Yes sir," the driver replied, as if every day he took part in kidnappings.

Paige's snort of derision was loud enough to shake the car.

This ought to be good. "What?" he asked as he raised the glass.

"Yes sir," she parroted in a poor imitation of Morris' voice. "Is there anything your money doesn't buy?"

"Since I bought you for the price of a scholarship, I'd have to say no." Even as the words slipped out, Shane knew it was the wrong thing to say. Before their fallout three years ago, he wouldn't have thought twice about taking her to task for giving him shit about his wealth. It was how they'd been with one another. Each giving as good as they received. But now everything seemed to have a double meaning, an extra blow landed with every word. Shane couldn't help but wonder, even if he was able to explain things

to her satisfaction, would they ever get back to the way they were? "That was a joke, you know?"

"Wasn't funny."

He sort of figured that out by the lack of laughter on her part. "Or maybe you can't remember how to laugh anymore."

"And if that's the case, I wonder who's to blame?"

"The first half I'll take full responsibility for."

"That's mighty white of you."

"The second half," he continued on through clenched teeth as if she'd never interrupted him, "is all your doing."

If he wanted to garnish her attention, it seemed he'd finally succeeded. Eyes wide, she stared at him as if he'd grown two heads. "How do you figure?"

"If you would have given me an opportunity to explain myself, we wouldn't be here today."

She frowned. "You know, you have a really twisted view of reality."

"That doesn't mean it's wrong."

"Do you even understand the concept of right and wrong?"

"Do you understand the concept of forgiveness?" he immediately countered.

"I understand it. I just don't practice it."

And he was living proof of that. "Tell me something I don't know."

"You're an asshole."

"No, I knew that." A small smile flickered across her lips before it slipped away. But it didn't matter. He saw it. "You know it's okay to let your guard down with me."

"Since when?"

"Since forever."

Paige grimaced. "You have a funny way of showing it."

"Not really, I just think your view is slightly askew."

"You fuck me, kick me to the curb, blackmail me and then kidnap me." Her voice was heavy with sarcasm and self-righteousness. Never before did Shane want to kiss her silent more. "I think my vision is fine."

"When you put it that way," Shane wasn't above mentioning his faults but things weren't as black and white as she wanted to believe, "I don't come off in the best of lights."

"Is there any other way to put it?"

Well, since she wanted to know. "Yes. I did it for you. All of it for you, and if you weren't so damn stubborn you'd realize that."

"When are you going to realize that all you're doing is pissing me off more than I already was?"

"Is that even possible?" he questioned.

"Before you called me with your list of demands, I would have said no."

Maybe he shouldn't have called, and instead just showed up and kidnapped her straight from her house. Somehow, though, Shane didn't think it would have gone any easier on him if he had. "Do you plan on fighting with me the entire way to the cabin?"

"Will it do me any good?"

"No," he admitted. She could argue until she was blue in the face and he would not waver from his plan.

"Then no." Paige crossed her arms and shot him a look of distaste. "I'll save my energy until we get there. That way I'll be all nice and relaxed while I kill you."

"Do you really want me dead?"

Paige turned her head to peer out her window.

Her silence was answer enough. Chuckling, Shane reached out and patted her leg, leaving his hand there for shits and giggles when he was done. "That's what I thought."

Paige pushed his hand away. "Don't touch me."

"Before this weekend is over, I'll be touching more than your leg."

"In your dreams."

Since all his dreams of late had revolved around her, Shane couldn't deny it. Instead he opened a side compartment, extracted two magazines and offered one to Paige. "Want one, it's a long drive?"

Paige glanced at the periodical before turning her attention back to the window.

"We could always play a game. Twenty Questions. I Spy." Paige clenched her hand, an action that caused Shane to smile. Oh yes, he could become used to this again. "The license plate game is always a win—"

"For Pete's sake." She snatched the magazine from his hand. "Happy now?"

"No, but it's a start," he said with a smile. "It's a start."

Chapter Nine

"Wake up, baby. We're here."

Wake up? When did she fall asleep? Drowsy, Paige lifted her head from the too-comfortable yet familiar place on Shane's shoulder and looked around. The interior of the limousine was still as dark as sin, but the same couldn't be said for the cabin outside her door. Geez, they were there. When did that happen? Somewhere along the two-hour route, Paige had fallen asleep on Shane, making the drive seem to pass in a blink of an eye. "You too sleepy to walk? I can carry you?"

His offer was a cruel wake-up call. Paige jerked away from him. The less he touched her and vice versa, the better. "No. I can walk."

"Pity."

Before she could formulate a reply, her door was opened from the outside. "Ma'am."

"Thank you," she automatically said to her kidnapper's accomplice as she stepped out. Good manners were a curse and a blessing.

"You're welcome," Morris said before closing the door behind her. "Tomorrow, sir?"

"Yes," Shane replied, already out and at her side. He moved so fast Paige couldn't help but wonder if he'd hurried in fear of her fleeing. If that was the case, his haste was in vain.

She was pissed but she wasn't stupid enough to try to escape into the woods to get away from him. If she'd learned anything from horror flicks, the black chick was always the first to die.

"After you?" Shane gestured with his hand toward the front door.

"Whatever," she muttered under her breath as she hurried up the path to the front door. Silently she waited for him to unlock the cabin before storming in the lit house. Ready to do battle, Paige attacked the second they entered, not even waiting for Shane to close the door before she started in on him. "So we're here. You wanted to talk. Let's talk."

Unfortunately though, Shane didn't seem as in a hurry to get things over and done with as she was. Instead of giving in to her fit, he calmly closed the door and locked it before heading into the living room, leaving Paige no choice but to follow him or hang out in front of the door like a big loser.

"Well," she asked once they were in the other room. "Get to it."

"Actually, all I really want to do is go to bed."

Bed! Hell no, Shane had seriously lost his damn mind. "If you think I'm fucking you, you're crazy."

"I do think that, but I don't think it will happen tonight."

The confidence of his tone only infuriated her more. "I love my brother but I'm not whoring myself out for him."

"I don't expect you to. You can stay in the guest room. It's already made up for you."

"Oh." His forethought took some of the wind out of her sails.

"Despite what you might think, or how you've interpreted my actions, all I really want to do is talk. Morris is heading to town. I've instructed him to come back tomorrow. If you want to go back then, I won't stand in your way."

The calm, cool, logical manner in which he spoke was such a contradiction to his behavior earlier, Paige was a bit taken aback at first. It couldn't be that easy, could it? "And Perry?"

"Scholarship is his. He'll be getting a personal phone call from the chairman of the Foundation Committee first thing Monday morning. You have my word on it."

"Thank you," she replied, stiff-lipped. Despite the manner in which he went about it, Paige couldn't help but be grateful for his help regarding the scholarship. She knew without him Perry wouldn't have even been a blip on the committee's radar as a candidate.

In the last few years her family had bent over backward to make sure her brother's tuition was paid without Perry having to take a job in order to allow him to concentrate on school full-time. The money he would receive would go a long way to ease a lot of the pressure their parents had been under.

"You're welcome," Shane said with a small smile. "Would you like me to show you to your room?"

"I think I can remember the way."

Shane shrugged as if she were being astute and leaned back against the couch. "Okay then."

His lack of sarcasm bothered her. She didn't want him to be reasonable. She wanted to fight. It was so much easier to hold on to her anger when they did that. "There is one small problem though. I don't have any clothes or any bath things here."

"Check the closet and drawers. There should be something—"

Jealousy quickly reared its ugly head. "I'm not wearing your whore's castoffs."

"You wouldn't be. Other than my parents stopping by a few times during the last three years, there hasn't been anyone here since you. In fact, last weekend was the first time I've stepped foot in here since our weekend together."

"Then how..."

"Everything in there was bought for you."

"How did you even know I would agree to come here?"

"Because I know you."

"At one time I thought I knew you too."

"You did. You do."

"Right. Since I'm too tired to try to Houdini my way out of here, I'm going to go to bed."

"Are you hungry? I had the refrigerator stocked. I can make a couple of sandwiches. Nothing too fancy, just something to tide us over until morning."

Now that he mentioned it, she was a little famished. But doubts still plagued her. "Are you going to slip something in it?"

"Yes," he drawled sarcastically. "Meat, mayo and mustard. If you're lucky, tomatoes too."

His mockery appeased her. It was good to know he hadn't planned on being anyone other than himself this weekend. Smartass Shane she could hold her own with, this apologetic, sincere dude she had no defense built up for. "Hold the mayo and make the tomatoes happen."

"Aye-aye, Captain." His smart-alec salute reminded her so much of how they once were with each other that it was almost painful to see. Even though she thought it was easier to deal with him when he was this way, it still hurt.

"I'm going to shower. I'll be back."

"Okay." His easy acquiescence was beginning to grate on her nerves. "If you need me to wash your back, just call out."

"I'll call you all right," she muttered to herself as she headed down the hall to the guest room. As he'd said, the bedroom was equipped with a few items of clothing, eerily close enough in her size she could wear them quite comfortably. The bath was stocked as well, with unopened bottles of shampoo, conditioner, shower gel and a bath scrunchie, all arranged hotel style in a basket on the sink.

Everything looked so inviting she was almost tempted to steal the fluffy cream bathrobe on the back of the door. Shaking her head at the weirdness of it all, she started the shower and began to strip off her clothes. She had no idea why she agreed to be a party to her own kidnapping. In her rationalization, she told herself it was only for her

brother. But truly, in her heart of hearts, she didn't really know if she believed Shane would have followed through with his threat.

No matter how ruthlessly he acted, she knew he was aware of the pressure her parents had been under. Even though she hadn't spoken to him, other than snide comments in passing over the last few years, she had talked with her friends about her woes. Their conversations had more than likely been leaked back to him, allowing him to help her in this sick and twisted way.

Wait. Was she making excuses for him? "God," she cursed aloud as she slipped the plastic shower cap on her head. It had only been a few hours and Stockholm syndrome was already kicking in.

Irritated with herself and the situation at hand, Paige pulled back the shower curtain and stepped into the steaming cubicle. Closing her eyes, she let the warm water wash over her. As much as she hated to admit it to herself, she wanted to hear what Shane had to say. After three years, she needed to understand why he'd left her brokenhearted. Maybe then she could finally move on.

Listening didn't mean forgiving, however. That she was something she wasn't sure she could do, ever.

* * * * *

After months of plotting and planning, the moment he'd been waiting for had finally arrived, and Shane was nervous as hell. This was it. His one and only shot and he couldn't blow it. Not again. As it was now, it was going to take a miracle to get Paige to hear him out, let alone forgive him. This opportunity was a one-time-only type of thing, so he had to have his game on and get it right or risk spending the rest of his life without the woman he loved. He'd barely survived the last three years sans Paige, he didn't think he could make it another three years.

"Need any help?"

Shane closed the lid on the potato salad container with a snap of his wrist. "No. I'm all done." He shot her a smile he didn't quite feel as he took the plastic bowl to the refrigerator. After closing the door, he looked over at Paige and drank in the sight of her.

She was wearing a pink and brown pajama short set he picked out for her, something similar to sleep outfits he'd seen her wear in the past and from the looks of it, it seemed to fit. With the exception of her new haircut, she hadn't changed much in the last few years. She was still as beautiful to him as she was the first day he'd met her.

From her relaxed stance and stress-free demeanor, he'd have to say the shower did her some good. She didn't remotely look like the same hot-tempered, irritated woman he'd arrived with. Maybe there was hope for them yet. "Feel better?"

"Are you still holding me here against my will?"

"Yes."

"Then no, I'm not."

"Fine." Or maybe his expectations were a tad high. It was just a shower, after all. "Let me rephrase. Did you have a nice shower?"

"Yes. If your parents ever decide to go into the bed-and-breakfast business, let me know. I'll be glad to write them a letter of recommendation."

At least she was pleased about something. "I'll be sure to let them know."

"By the way, should I even ask how you knew what size clothes to buy?"

"Hmm...no." There was a lot about Paige he knew that if it came out would make him a prime candidate for a police lineup. "It's better not to think about it."

"I had a sinking feeling that might be the case."

Shane walked back to the counter, picked up her plate and handed it to her. "Here you go, madam, your mayo-free, untainted sandwich is ready."

Her lips twitched as if she were holding back her laughter. "Thank you."

"It's the least I could do." Paige opened her mouth to reply, but Shane cut her off at the path. "No smartass comment necessary."

"Ahhh...am I hurting your feelings with all my cynicism and derision?"

"If you weren't cynical you wouldn't be you." He handed her one of the glasses of soda he fixed earlier before grabbing his own sandwich and drink and heading out to the table.

"Too true," she replied as she followed suit and walked out of the kitchen.

"And if I weren't plotting to control everything around me, I wouldn't be me."

"Amen."

Without saying another word they each took their seats, the exact same ones they used the last time they were together. A fact Shane was wise enough to keep to himself.

He waited a few minutes for them both to become settled before he spoke again. "With knowing me the way you do, why were you so surprised by what I went through to get you here?"

"It wasn't the kidnapping or even the blackmail that surprised me."

"Then what?"

"The fact you still care. You're like a dog with a bone. Let it go already. I mean, seriously, you got what you wanted, let's move on."

"What exactly is it you think I wanted from you?"

"Sex."

"You're wrong." Shane picked up his soda and took a drink.

"Really, because I distinctly remember you trying to chafe the hell out of my pussy three years ago."

Oh shit! His soda skyrocketed on the wings of his laughter, back up his throat and out his nose, thanks to her crude yet funny comment. Shane quickly moved his hand in front of his mouth to try to spare the table and his guest. "Fuck," he chuckled as he picked up his napkin to clean first his hand then his mouth. "That was mean."

"Thanks," she said, seemingly cheered by his statement.

"You seem in better spirits."

"You know," she cocked her head to the side and nodded, "I am."

As much as that pleased him, he couldn't help but be a tad wary. "Why?"

"Because I can either spend the rest of the night plotting the many different ways to kill you or I can just do my time and wait for my ride home and away from you."

"There's a third option I believe you're missing."

"Which is?"

"You could try listening to what I have to say." Shane shot her a mocking look. "You know, the complete opposite of what you did last time you were here?"

"Just like last time, I doubt there is anything you have to say I want to hear."

"Want, probably not, but need to, yes."

"Shane, do you honestly think anything you have to say is going to make a bit of difference?"

"I have to believe it will."

"Then you're more delusional than I thought." Paige picked up her sandwich and took a bite.

"I'm not delusional."

"What do you call it?"

"Dedicated," he said with a smile before picking up his own sandwich and diving in. After a few minutes they began to converse a bit, Paige loosening up as the time wore on. It was just as it used to be, almost. "I have a question for you."

She shrugged as if she didn't have a care in the world. "This is your hostage situation, ask your question."

He hated to go there since they were sort of getting along, but there was something he had to know. "What happened with Urkel?"

“Urkel, are you serious?” The disbelief on her face was laughable. “After all this time, can’t you at least say his name?”

“Fine, Jaffee. Whatever.” Three years later it still grated on Shane to say the other man’s name. He could never get over knowing the other man touched his Paige, made love to her, and for a time had a right to call her his. “What happened with the two of you?” The answer to that riddle was one thing his money couldn’t buy. “It’s apparent you didn’t say yes, so what did you say?”

Paige took a drink before answering. “The truth.”

Shane raised an eyebrow at that shocking bit of news. “Really?”

“Well, not the part that involved you and me of course.”

“Then what other truth was there?” Shane picked up his glass, feeling a bit smug. “Other than the part about you not loving him, that is?”

“I didn’t say that, either.” She set her drink back on the table with a loud clank. “I simply told him I couldn’t say yes.”

Her answer wasn’t nearly good enough. “Did he ask why?”

“I don’t really want to go into this with you.”

“I can’t imagine why.” To be honest, he didn’t care what pathetic excuse she gave Jaffee for ending things. He was just pleased she did.

“I’m sure you can’t, but I’m not telling.”

“What if I ask nicely?”

“I’d tell you to get used to disappointment.”

There was a word he was pretty done with. “I’ve already had my share of it. Three years worth.”

“Oh please,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “You should thank me for leaving that day.”

Was she mad? “Thank you?” His hand tightened around his glass. “I assure you, gratitude is the last thing I felt that morning. Or the day after. Or the day after that.” Or

the many, many days that followed. In fact, the only thing Shane had been grateful for in the last few years was the opening Perry gave him to get Paige back.

"It should have been. I gave you the best of both worlds, sex with no strings attached."

"All the while robbing me of one my best friends and the woman I love in the process."

Paige didn't even let his declaration set in before she stood. "What do you know about love?"

"More than you think," he said, coming to his feet as well. If she wanted to, they could talk about this right now and put everything out in the open once and for all.

"I sincer—" Paige took a deep breath and held out her hand to stop him from speaking. "No. I'm done for tonight. We can play this game tomorrow. I'm going to bed."

"One would think after three years your legs would be awful tired from all the running you're doing."

"Good night, Shane."

He watched her walk from the room without a backward glance. Damn it, as much as he wanted to talk to her, he knew this discussion in the vein it was going wasn't helping at all. He could only hope the morning brought cooler heads.

Chapter Ten

After tossing and turning for the last hour, Paige threw back the covers and headed down the dark hall into the kitchen for a drink. The conversation from earlier in the night was still pounding through her brain. As was the feeling of rightness she felt from being with him again. Without even trying, they had quickly fallen back into their old banter before reality reared its ugly head. They weren't friends. They couldn't be. Paige wouldn't allow herself to be stupid enough to fall for him again.

Again was probably not the most accurate word, seeing how she never really got over him. Yes, she'd been hurt by his actions and pissed off by his behavior, but the truth of the matter was she never stopped caring for him. She wished she could have, wished she could have walked away from him as easily as she'd been able to walk away from Jaffee. That, of course, was telling in itself.

God, what a mess she was.

Heavy-hearted, Paige made her way into the kitchen and over to the refrigerator. Nighttime snacking had become her mistress, but since her treadmill wasn't here to counter the effects of her unhealthy lover, Paige settled on a bottle of water.

She was just making her way back toward her bedroom when she heard a low moan. Frowning, Paige turned her head and stared down the hallway toward Shane's room. For a moment she thought she imagined it, but then the sound came again, and before she could stop herself she booked it down the hall to his room.

Unlike last time, his door was closed. Holding her breath, Paige stood very still and listened to see if she could pick up any telltale noises. Other than the sound of what she could only describe as someone in distress, nothing could be heard. Softly, in case she was interrupting his alone time again, she knocked on the wooden frame. When she

didn't get a response, she turned the handle and opened the door and peeked in, making sure she was as inconspicuous as possible.

Thanks to a small lamp sitting in the corner of the room, there was enough light for her to see Shane. And what she saw didn't mimic any form of masturbation she'd ever witnessed. The covers were disheveled and Shane was tossing and turning like a buoy on the sea. His eyes were pinched closed, his face was a mask of terror, and he appeared as if he were in the throes of a nightmare.

Pushing their petty differences aside, Paige moved toward the bed and quietly called out his name. When he once again didn't respond, she reached out and touched his shoulder, giving him a gentle nudge. Fast as lightning, Shane instantly awoke and jackknifed into a sitting position. Eyes wide, he grabbed hold of her arm and held tight.

"Ow...Shane." Paige could tell that from the hazed-over expression in his blue eyes he wasn't coherent enough to realize what he was doing. "Shane, it's just me. Paige. It's okay. You're okay."

"Paige..."

"Yes. You were having a nightmare, but it's over now."

Saying her name seemed to do the trick for Shane and he instantly released his hold of her. His breathing was erratic but he appeared more clear-headed and focused now. "Did I hurt you?"

"No." Paige had worked the emergency room far too many times to be brought asunder by a strong grip. "I'm fine. What about you?"

"Peachy," he murmured as he ran his hand shakily through his tousled hair. With a heavy sigh, he reached over to the bedside table and clicked a button, flooding the bedroom in warm ambient light. "Did I wake you?"

"No, I—"

"Christ," he muttered before she could finish what she was saying. "Why won't this shit stop already?"

"Stop?" Lowering herself onto the bed, Paige peered at him warily. "You're still dreaming about the accident?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

Her eyes widened as she stared at him in shock. She hadn't known. She wondered if anyone did. "Have you talked to someone about it?"

Shane let out a harsh laugh. "Sometimes I think it's all I ever talk to anyone about."

Paige wasn't sure who "anyone" was, but she knew it hadn't been her. "Do you have them all the time?" She couldn't even imagine reliving the accident again and again.

"No, thank God. Just when I'm really tired or stress—" Shane abruptly stopped speaking and looked away. "I'm sorry I bothered you."

"You didn't." But her conscience was beginning to. As a nurse, she should have realized what he was going through, instead she'd merely chalked up his bad moods to his slow recovery, never imagining it was something more. "I thought..." Paige paused and licked her dry lips before continuing. "I thought you were doing okay after the accident. You never said anything about nightmares or having problems sleeping."

"I kept a lot of things to myself at the beginning."

"Why?" But even as she asked the question, she knew the answer. Shane was the rock. The glue that held everyone together and he took his role very serious, even to the detriment of himself apparently.

"Everyone was already worried enough about me. My parents practically aged overnight and my friends were taking turns helping me take a leak. Adding one more thing to the list of worries seemed a tad bit selfish to me."

"Instead you kept it to yourself and bottled it up inside." She shook her head in disappointment.

"No, I talked to my therapist about it."

She waited for him to continue but he didn't until she insisted on the matter. "And..."

"And," Shane scooted back in the bed until he was leaning against the headboard, "he said, 'and this too shall pass'."

"But it didn't." And quite frankly she was shocked at the thought he'd been suffering this long.

"It's..." he paused as if searching for the right word, "lessened."

"I see..." Not really seeing at all. If this was the downsized version, she would hate to see the supersized one.

"I told you I had issues I needed to work through."

She remembered the conversation well but figured his issues had more to do with commitment phobia than some sort of posttraumatic stress. "I have to say this isn't exactly what I thought you meant."

"Would it have mattered?"

It would have, but it did no good to reflect on something she had no power to control. "I can't rewrite the past."

"No, you're too busy living in it."

Damn it, why did he have to constantly push her buttons? Annoyed at the new direction the conversation was heading, Paige stood. "And this is where I say goodnight."

Before she could make good her escape though, Shane reached and took her hand in his. The surprising gentleness of his touch was like the sun after a rainy day. "I wasn't trying to pick another fight."

She believed him, she really did, but that only made things harder on her. She had to stay strong. She had to. "You know what they say, 'if it looks like a fight and sounds like a fight...'"

"That's the real problem, Paige, fighting is what the two of us do best." Shane ran his gaze over her. "Or should I say the second thing we do best."

"You'll have to be satisfied with the silver because you don't stand a chance at the gold." Despite the way her body was warming at the simplest of touches from him.

"Since you've been gone I've been settling for a lot less than silver." Shane cocked his head to the side and grinned. "I'm not sure if it even counts as a mineral, now that I think about it."

Irritated, Paige yanked her hand from him. "Sad to hear the chicks you've been banging lately haven't measured up." Okay, she wasn't really sad, but she didn't want to hear about the other women he'd slept with, either.

"Banging." His brow furrowed in confusion before realization seemed to hit him and he gave a little half smile. "I haven't been with anyone since you and I were together last."

His words hit her like a ton of bricks. Was he serious? The mere concept was so un-Shane-esque it blew her mind. "You haven't been with anyone in three years?"

"Yes." He met her gaze head-on in an unflinching fashion that left little doubt to the authenticity of his words.

"Why?"

"When I told you I wasn't in shape to be with anyone, I wasn't just spouting off bad breakup lines. It was the truth. Besides, I only wanted you, Paige. No one else would do." Sincerity laced his every word. "Should I take it from your deer-in-the-headlights stare you can't say the same?" Even though his words were jesting, he looked anything but amused.

"The same?" She could but she would never give him the satisfaction of knowing the truth. He and his enormous ego would take it the wrong way and make it about him instead of making it about her and the lack of decent men she'd met over the years. "That's none of your business."

Instead of putting him in his place as she'd hoped, her comment made him smile. "Looks as if you can."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because if you had slept with someone you would have thrown it in my face just because you could."

What troubled her most was it sounded just like her, and she couldn't tell what bothered her more, the fact she was the kind of person who would do that or the fact he knew she was. "Goodnight...Shane."

"Goodnight, Paige," he said with a smile too smug for words. "Thanks for waking me. I'll see you in the morning."

As she left the room, she somehow felt as if Shane now held the upper hand, and she didn't like the feeling one bit.

* * * * *

Paige came out of the bedroom as Shane was placing the baskets of muffins on the table. Knowing Paige was an early riser, he'd set his alarm to wake him at six thirty just so he'd have time to make her breakfast. It hadn't been easy to get up when the alarm had gone off. Falling back to sleep after having a nightmare was never an easy thing, but Paige's presence last night made it all the more difficult.

Three years ago he'd let her go because he needed time to heal. He'd finally thought he was ready to be the man she needed him to be only to have a frickin' nightmare. All the vulnerability returned tenfold, to the point where he wondered if he'd ever be healed enough.

In some ways he didn't think he'd ever be a hundred percent again, but this time he had the common sense to know the right thing to do. And that wasn't to push the person he loved most in the world away.

If last night's little episode had warmed her heart toward him in any way, Paige was doing a good job of keeping it to herself. Although she was less antagonistic during

breakfast, she was far from engaged. Instead she was politely civil, a trait that in no way resembled the woman he knew and loved. By the time they were through eating, Shane was ready to bang his head against the wall.

"What time is Morris coming?" It was the first iota of conversation she'd initiated, but unfortunately for him it was in no way one he wanted to discuss.

Annoyed, Shane pushed his plate away. "Still in a hurry to leave?"

"Did you think I wouldn't be?"

"I was hoping." Sighing, he stood and walked around the table to her chair and pulled it out for her so she could rise. He waited until she was standing before he placed his hand on her lower back. "Let's continue this in the living room." If they were going to fight, they might as well do it in a more comfortable setting. One where there were less sharp, pointy instruments within her reach.

"Fine." Her posture was stiff, but she allowed him to lead her in the sitting area before she broke away from him and sat in the plush chair cattycorner to the couch. She appeared indifferent, as if his words would be negligible at best. "Let's get this over with."

Gritting his teeth, Shane tried his best to temper his rising frustration. Over the course of their estrangement he'd thought of little else but mending the broken bridge between them. He had speeches on top of speeches planned, reasons and explanations by the tons, yet now that she was in front of him, he could only think of one thing to say. "I should tan your ass."

"What the hell." Affronted, Paige sprang to her feet. Gone was her blank stare and in its place was one that could have killed him on the spot. She was pissed, but anything was better than the vacant disinterested persona she'd worn like a new wardrobe only seconds earlier. "Tan my ass?"

"And good," he said with a firm nod. "Man, my hand is tingling at the mere thought."

"The only one who should be hit around here is you. In case you've forgotten, you're the one who was in the wrong, not me."

"Right," he scoffed. "Me. Just me. And your yell-first, listen-second routine had nothing to do with it? You were so quick to leave you never gave me a chance to explain."

"Because there was no explanation."

"Yes, there was, but you were too stubborn to listen. With you, Paige, there is no gray, only black-and-white. Right or wrong. With you, sins are either forgivable or, as in this case may be, unforgivable."

"Of course it's unforgivable. I can't believe you want me to make this easy for you. I mean, easier than giving in to your blackmail and demands."

"You know what? Yes, yes I do." If he was going to dream, he might as well dream big. "Make this easy. I won't tell anyone. It will be our little secret."

"You know what they say, two can keep a secret," Paige took a menacing step forward, "if one is dead."

"What are you so afraid of, Paige?" he asked as he took a step as well. "Giving in to me, or giving in to yourself?"

She pressed her lips together and shook her head, refusing to answer. But he wasn't in the mood to allow her to escape him so easily. "No, Paige, I think you owe me this."

"I owe you?" She took another step forward. "Think again, buddy. I don't owe you anything."

"Tell me, damn it. Tell me what it is you're afraid of."

"I can't do this again. I never expected hearts and roses from you three years ago. But I didn't think you'd throw me out the door, either."

Her take on the situation was vastly different from his. "I wasn't the one running. That was you."

"Not true. You might have been sitting here calmly, giving me all the reasons you couldn't be with me, but it was running away, plain and simple."

"I was being smart. I was no good for you then." Shane ran a hand through his hair. "It didn't mean I didn't care. It was the exact opposite. I cared too much. Still do."

"What you failed to realize is I would have stuck by you through all that stupid shit. I would have been at your side."

Her words raised his spirits. "Because you loved me, right? Because you still love me, even now."

Biting her lower lip, she looked away. "I'm not saying that."

But she wasn't denying it, either. "You don't have to. I knew the second you left I had made the biggest mistake of my life."

Raw hurt glittered in her eyes as she turned to face to him once more. "And now you expect me to do the same and let you in my life again?"

"Giving us a chance won't be a mistake."

"You can't know that." She shook her head regretfully.

"Just as you can't know it will." Unable to hold back any longer, Shane reached out to her and brushed his fingers over her warm, soft cheek. "Being without you these last three years was like losing a part of myself. I missed you more than I could ever say."

"Of course you did. There was no one around to check your ego at the door."

"True," he said with a small smile. "But there was also no one around who could make me feel like I was ten feet tall with just a glance. No one to make me want to be a better man. No one to care for me, care about me the way you do. You took my heart when you left, Paige, but you can keep it if I can have yours." Shane slid his hand around to cup the back of her head and pull her into him for a kiss. Paige's eyes widened but she didn't resist, going with the flow of things and moving closer to him until their lips were aligned.

And just as Shane began to move in to sample the sweet essence of her once more, the doorbell rang. Startled, he jerked back and swung his head toward the front door. Confusion filled him for a split second before reality kicked in. Fuck, Morris was early.

Paige stiffened and took a hesitant step backward, breaking his hold on her. Cursing to himself, Shane turned to her once more, only to be met by the haunted look returning to her eyes again. "Looks as if game time is over."

"Doesn't have to be. I can send him away."

"And what kind of fool would that make me if I agreed?"

The same kind he was for pursuing her when there was barely a glimmer of hope. "One in love."

"Shane, I...I can't."

"You know what I can't do? I can't let you walk away again. I can't stop thinking of you, can't stop loving you." Shane closed his eyes briefly before opening them and staring at her intently. "I can't live without you."

"Please."

"Tell me you don't think of me. Tell me you don't want me even though I hurt you. And I did. I know I did. But I'm here now, asking you to give me a second change. Give us a second chance. Don't go."

"I do still care about you and maybe if you'd told me everything, then things could have been different. But too much time has passed, too many things have happened. I can't..."

"Can't or won't?"

The doorbell rang again. "I need time."

There was no doubt in his mind if he let her walk out the door she would find a reason, any reason to never walk back in it again. Fear pumped through his veins as images of another day without her rushed through his mind. He couldn't do it again. He couldn't let her go. "I love you, Paige."

"Don't." Tears welled in her eyes, and she shook her head sadly before turning and heading for the door with him right behind her.

This was one time he would not concede, nor would he lose. "I love you," he said, this time louder and more insistent. "Stay with me." His fingers tingled with the need to reach out and pull her to him.

Instead of replying, she opened the door. Morris, who was waiting on the other side, stepped back to let her exit. "Hello, sir. Ma'am, are you ready to depart?"

"No," Shane said at the same time Paige said, "Yes."

"Okay." The other man's normally neutral expression broke for the first time since Shane had known him. He seemed unsure about what to do, taking a step backward. "Ummm... Sir?"

But Shane didn't care about Morris' uncertainty. All he cared about was Paige's. Even though she'd rushed to leave the room, she hadn't made a move to step outside, a sign Shane couldn't help but see as something good. "Paige."

"You hurt me." Her words were barely above a whisper.

The desolation in her voice was causing his heart to break in two. "I know, baby, and as God is my witness, I'll never do that again."

Her hand clenched around the doorknob, and he could practically see her struggle to remain with him. He knew everything he was asking went against the very grain of her soul, but it didn't stop him from asking, or hoping.

"How can I believe you?"

"You'll have to trust me, even though my past actions would give you cause not to."

"Please don't ask this of me." Her voice cracked under the weight of her words.

"I'm not asking. I'm challenging you to do what you've always done."

"What's that?"

"Take me on. You never let me get away with anything before and you never backed down, no matter how big the odds against you winning were. So don't do it

now. Play with me, Paige. Winner takes all.” Shane was putting all his hopes and dreams in this one moment of decision. “I dare you to stay. I dare you to try. I dare you to love me.” Shane waited and he hoped, and when Paige closed the door, he thanked the good Lord for an undeserved but well-appreciated second chance.

Chapter Eleven

Paige took a deep breath and stared at the wood grain of the door, wondering if she'd made the biggest mistake of her life. She was being a fool in love. Her feelings were something she still had barely admitted to herself, let alone Shane. Her only hope was that she wasn't taking this chance in vain. "I'm scared."

"Don't be scared, baby. Just love me." Shane reached out and turned her around and the instant she saw his face, she knew she made the right decision.

"I do. I love you so much." Without saying another word, she went into his embrace and burrowed into him. Here, with him, was where she belonged. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight to him.

"God...baby." His voice trembled but his hold was steady, like him. "I love you. I love you." He murmured the phrase repeatedly until it was coming as fluently as the rise and fall of his chest. After a few seconds, the declarations drifted off, but the feeling of completeness stayed with her.

He loved her, just as she loved him and because of that, everything else could and would be worked out in time. Closing her eyes, she squeezed him to her. "Three dares in a row. I'm...I'm surprise you didn't double dare me."

Chuckling, Shane pulled back and rested his forehead against hers. "That was going to be my next move if this didn't work."

"What makes you think it did?" she teased. Just because she'd decided to stay and give it a go, didn't mean she was going to make things too easy for him. Paige didn't want him to start thinking he had the upper hand after all.

"Because you're still here." His logic was going to be the singular downfall to her great "make him squirm" plan.

"Maybe I just forgot my purse." Paige released her hold on him and stepped back.

"I know exactly where you left it."

"Where?"

"My bed." The corner of his lips turned upward. "Need help looking for it?"

Paige laughed softly. "One of us needs help, all right. And I think it's you."

"I know it's me." Teasing done, he lovingly ran his thumb on the underside of her chin before tilting her face up to his. The amusement fled from his gaze as gratitude poured in. "Damn, baby. I thought I lost you there for a second."

"I thought you did too," she admitted. "For a second there it was touch-and-go. I wasn't sure if I should stay or leave with Morris. Oh my God, Morris." Paige pulled away and looked back at the door. "I slammed the door in his face. After he drove all this way." She couldn't see his shadow anymore but that didn't mean he wasn't still out there. "Should we tell him I'm staying?"

"Don't worry, I think he figured it out."

"Jesus." She was so embarrassed. Shaking her head, she turned back to face an amused-looking Shane.

"It's okay. I'll slip him a bonus and apology later. Right now the only person I want to think about is you."

Since there was nothing she could do about Morris, Paige decided to concentrate on the matter at hand. "And I want to think about the many ways I'm going to make you pay for being such a jerk to me."

"Pay?"

"Yes. If you think about it," she said in a rational tone, "it's the only thing that could possibly work. I have a whole list of ways to make you earn your way back into my good graces. First, we can start off with a little sexual slavery."

"Sounds like a plan to me. Although," his forehead crinkled with confusion as he peered down at her, "I'm little perplexed about one thing."

"What?"

"How is you being my slave going to make me pay?"

It took her a second to get his joke, and when she did, she snorted. Damn, she walked right into that one. "Your slave." Paige slapped her hand against his chest in poor retribution as he laughed. "I think not."

"Maybe we can take turns," he said with a hopeful grin.

Turns. Now he was talking. "Do I get to go first?"

"And second and maybe third too."

His image-provoking words had her knees trembling and her pussy flooding with cream. "That's very magnanimous of you."

"I'm a giver. Let me prove it."

"What?" Paige looked around the living room. "Here? Again?"

"No, I was thinking of the bedroom to save wear and tear on my knees and your back."

Licking her lips, Paige reached out and cupped his denim-covered cock. "What makes you think it's me who's going to be on my back?"

"Honey, I'm game either way."

As was she.

Hand in hand, the two of them walked into his bedroom. Once there, they separated and faced off. Even though she hadn't admitted it, like him, it had been three long years since she made love. Paige wasn't sure if she could remember what went where anymore.

"Where did my magpie go?" Shane cocked a brow. "Having regrets already?"

"No." Far from it. "I'm a little out of practice. I hear it's supposed to be like riding a bicycle or something."

"More like a unicycle," he teased gently before turning somber. "All kidding aside, I'm as nervous as you are. But we're in this together and we have three years to make up for. Let's start one night at a time."

"I like the sound of that."

"From here on out. You and me."

"You and me." The words had barely passed her lips when he lowered his mouth and covered her lips with his own. And just like that, she was home. His tongue danced across her own as he kissed her senseless. Moaning she grabbed on to his shirt and held on tight, reveling in the powerful way he took command of her. She missed this closeness with him, even though they'd only had one night together.

Wanting – no needing – more than his lips, Paige broke away from his too-tempting mouth and took hold of the hem of his shirt and began to pull it up. Catching on, Shane took over and yanked his shirt over his head before tossing it carelessly over his shoulder.

Paige ran her gaze hungrily over his bare chest. His pecs were definitely larger than the last time they were together. "Somebody has been working out." She stroked her hands over his muscular chest. "I can't believe how hard and ripped you are."

"That's not the only part of me that's hard."

"Prove it." Grabbing the loop of his jeans, she walked backward to the bed, pulling him with her. When the back of her knees hit the edge of the mattress, she sat down and with her eyes on the prize, unbuckled his pants before carefully lowering the zipper over his bulging erection. Antsy to touch him, she pushed his jeans open and moved his boxers out of the way, causing his cock to spring out of its tight confinement. "Looks as if you were telling the truth."

"You know, looks can be deceiving. I think you should go in for a closer inspection."

"I couldn't agree more." Paige reached out and took his cock in hand, lovingly stroking him for a few seconds before leaning forward and running her tongue across his pre-cum-slicked crown.

The small taste of him made her hungry for more and she greedily took him deep into her mouth. His salty essence marinated her senses as she familiarized herself with

him once more. Three years ago she'd only had a brief sample of his heady flavor, this time she wanted to make a meal out of him.

"Fuck, baby." Shane's heated words were all the approval she needed to swallow as much of his length as she could before working her way back up his shaft then down again.

Getting into the swing of things, she began to use her hand along with her mouth to pleasure him, stroking and sucking him at the same time.

"God, your mouth feels good." With a guttural groan Shane slipped his hand around the back of her head and began to set a rhythm all his own. His excitement made her own rise to heights unseen and her pussy began to weep from the pleasure of it all. And just as she began to speed up, Shane gripped her hair in his hand and pulled her off and away from his cock. "Stop, baby, before I come in your mouth."

Paige licked her swollen lips as she continued to stroke him and looked at him, desperate to have him inside her once more. "I don't mind."

"I do. Damn." Shane's breathing was as erratic as her own. Stepping back, he kicked off his shoes then shoved his pants down to the floor. "Strip now. I have to get at that cunt."

Sweeter words had never been spoken. Mad with desire, Paige rose to her feet and quickly undressed. As soon as she was done, Shane picked her up and laid her out on the bed. He climbed on the bed with her and settled himself between her parted legs. "My turn." Shane ran his fingers over creamed-covered nether lips. "Lucky, lucky me."

To Paige's immense delight, Shane buried his face between her legs and thrust his tongue deep into the depths of her sex. As if he were a man on a mission, he teased and lapped at her until she thought she'd go out of her mind with pleasure.

Shane was one of those people who excelled at many things. Lucky for her, eating women out was one of them. He knew exactly what to do to drive her wild and he wasted no time in bringing her to the brink with subtle twists and licks of his tongue. And just when she thought she couldn't stand a second more of his oral loving, he

added his fingers to the mix. Dipping two digits into her sopping-wet pussy, he stroked and stretched her in the sweetest of ways.

Before she could become used to the feel of him inside her once more, he withdrew his dew-slicked fingers from her core. He moved them to her rosette where he pressed against it gently, all the while still feasting on her. Paige moaned and moved into his touch, loving of the feel of him against her puckered hole.

He pushed harder until his finger popped through the resistant ring and sank knuckle-deep inside her.

"Shane." She gasped his name as he moved slowly in and out of her ass. She had never had anal sex before but Shane was quickly making her long to experience the taboo thrill.

"Gonna come for me, baby?" Shane added a second finger into her tight hole and twisted it as he pumped it back and forth. "Gonna come from me fingering your sexy ass?"

"Yes." And how. Moaning, she buried her fingers in his thick, dark hair and pressed him harder against her. "Yes, God, yes," she cried as her body bucked with pleasure.

"Then show me, baby. Show me how much my dirty girl enjoys having her backdoor fucked." Before she could speak, Shane covered her clit with his lips and sucked hard on the sensitive nub.

The unexpected pleasure was one too many to her overheated body, and with a soul-shattering cry she came, screaming his name in the process. Wrung out from her intense climax, Paige released her hold on him and dropped her hands to the bed. Despite her exhaustion, Shane was far from done with her. As she trembled in the aftermath of her orgasm, he moved up and positioned his cock against her wet slit. "Damn, baby, you make my cock so hard. Do I need to use anything?"

She was still on birth control and like Shane she hadn't been with anyone since they were last together. "Just your cock in my pussy."

"That I can do." And with that Shane thrust forward, sinking his cock in her with one fell stroke. The welcome invasion made her catch her breath. Notwithstanding their glorious foreplay, it had still been three years since she'd last had sex. It took her pussy a second or two to catch up with the rest of her, which was raring for him to fuck her silly.

Thankfully, Shane was wise enough to give her a few seconds to adjust to his girth and length before he began to move, but when he did, it was miraculous. He knew her as no other man did, which made being with him all the better. They fit together, not just physically but mentally, and it made the loving between them so much more than mere sex. It was love.

Neither muttered a coherent word as he thrust into her over and over. Paige couldn't say why on his part, but on hers it was because she was too busy feeling, enjoying the way he moved inside her. Closing her eyes, she gripped his sides and welcomed him even deeper inside her.

"Baby," he groaned, his first word since entering her. "Been too long. You feel good, so damn good." His hips pumped faster and faster, pushing Paige into the mattress with every thrust. "Your tight cunt is going to be the death of me."

"As if...as if I'd let you slip away that easy."

"Don't worry," he said, never wavering from his steady thrusts, "the only place I'm going is balls-deep inside you." As if to prove his point, Shane slid his hand between their bodies, stroking her clit in tune to the tempo of their loving.

The added stimulation was almost more than she could handle. Wrapping her legs around his waist, Paige held on to him as he spun her world on its axis. Blinded by pleasure, she could do nothing more than hold on with all her might and enjoy the ride of a lifetime.

And what a ride it was. Shane powered into her continuously, pounding into her body as Paige undulated beneath him. "Yes. Yes. Don't stop, please. Please, oh, oh."

The words tumbled from her lips, a tangled web of jumbled nonsensical sounds that became their own personal soundtrack.

Just when Paige thought she was incapable of lasting a second longer, Shane squeezed her clit between his fingers and sent her soaring. Her release sent him tumbling over the edge right after her. He pumped faster and faster inside her until he too came, flooding her pussy with his come. Exhausted and worn down to the nub, she released her death grip on him and dropped her legs to the bed. After a few seconds, he pulled from her tender body and collapsed on the bed next to her on his back.

"You know," he said once he was able to get his breathing back under control. "If make-up sex continues to be so appealing, I won't have any incentive to improve my bad behavior."

Laughing, Paige rolled over onto her side so she was facing him and propped her arm up under her head. "If I know you —"

"And you do."

"You have no need to worry on that front. I see lots of make-up sex in our future."

"But you see a future, right?" Smiling, he brushed the back of his hand against her cheek in a gentle caress.

Paige leaned into his touch. "Yes."

Shane slid his hand around the back of her neck and gently pulled her to him, lightly brushing his lips across hers. "Then that's good enough for me."

For once, Paige couldn't have agreed with him more.

* * * * *

One Year Later

"I can tell by the silly look on your face, you're much too pleased with yourself."

Shane stilled his expression and glanced at his fiancé. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Liar." Paige smirked at him. "Come on, admit it. You're freaking eating this up, aren't you?"

"What?" he tried again, this denial no better than the one before.

"This." Paige gestured to the small party gathered together in honor of his birthday once more. "Everyone. You're pleased as punch."

Who wouldn't be? Shane looked around the room and grinned. If he had to say so himself, he'd done good. His birthday wish from last year not only changed his life, but those of the people he cared the most about. His friends.

Bev, who a year ago refused to be in the same room with Holden, was sitting in a large oversized chair with Holden perched next to her on the arm. He toyed absentmindedly with a strand of her dark brown hair as he listened to Tripp regale his latest locker-room tale.

And Tripp, who for years had idiotically passed on a chance of happiness with Gideon and Skylar, was now sitting on the couch across from Holden and Bev with Gideon on one side and Skylar on the other. From the way Tripp's hand was on the back of Gideon's neck, and the way Skylar was curled into Tripp's side with her head on his shoulder, Shane could tell the three of them were growing even closer as time went by. Tripp appeared happier than Shane could ever remember the other man looking, and he sincerely doubted it had anything to do with the new contract he signed and more to do with the two people who were flanking him.

"Uh-huh." Paige's amused voice drew his attention back to her. "Just as I thought. You're loving it."

"Look, woman," Shane growled as he pulled her into his arms, "can't a man enjoy his party and the people he loves without his woman giving him hell?"

"Not if the man is you and the woman is me." She grinned. "I'm always going to give you hell. You might as well get used to it." Paige raised her left hand and wiggled the engagement ring that had once belonged to his grandmother at him. "You're in this for life."

"Now you tell me," he said with a laugh although, truthfully, Paige knew how much it meant to him to have her in his life and how thankful he was to have her.

"Seriously though, you did a phenomenal job here, you know that, right?"

"Nah, fate had a hand in this," he said modestly.

"But it took you to make it all come together." Paige wrapped her arms around his waist.

"I might have put the wheels in motion, but what happened here was..." Words seemed to escape him. As much as he'd hoped and prayed his friends would find their true loves, he never knew it would have worked out so well. But what happened with him and Paige was beyond his wildest expectations. Her faith and love in him had brought about so much healing in his life he'd never be able to express to her how important she was to him.

"I know, baby." Her hand stroked over his back. "Miraculous I think is the word you're looking for."

It wasn't the word he was thinking but it would definitely do. Because, honestly, it had been nothing short of a miracle they had all found each other only to fall in love with one another and begin to work their way to a happily ever after now.

"Hey, Shane, when are we eating cake?"

He looked over at Bev. "Whenever you're ready."

"I'm ready now." Bev stood and glanced down at Holden. "Want to help me?"

"No," Holden rose and held his hand out to her. "But I'll do it anyway."

"That's all that matters." She laughed as she took his hand and walked into the kitchen. Shane watched them leave with a smile on his face. Little did Bev know the next event they'd be celebrating would be her engagement party. Before dinner, Holden had pulled him and Paige aside to show them the platinum ring he'd picked out for the pretty Filipino woman. And if Paige's squeal of delight was anything to go by, Bev was going to be extremely pleased.

“Are we receiving presents from you again this year?” Skylar asked eagerly as she joined him and Paige in the dining room.

“Greedy much?” Tripp teased, coming up behind her. “Didn’t you get enough last year?” He reached around and caressed her barely distended belly.

Shane wasn’t sure exactly who the father was, and from what he gathered, neither did Skylar, Tripp or Gideon. Nor did they care.

Skylar placed her hand over his. “More than enough.”

Just at that moment the lights were lowered and Bev and Holden returned to the room. Bev was holding a large cake full of lit candles. “Happy birthday to you,” she began to sing.

The others joined in, singing off-key as usual, as Bev brought the cake into the dining room and placed it on the table. Once the horrible and barely legible song was over, Bev gestured for him to come closer to the table. “Come on, birthday boy, time to make your wish.”

With his arm around Paige, Shane walked over to the table and glanced down at the candle-heavy cake. He wasn’t sure what to wish for since he had everything he wanted right here.

“Come on already, make your wish,” Gideon encouraged. “We want to eat sometime tonight.”

Shane looked around the room once again at all his friends before releasing Paige and leaning forward. Closing his eyes, he blew out the flames while making the only wish he possibly could – that they would all stay as happy as they were now from here on out.

At the sound of everyone clapping, Shane opened his eyes and stood back up. “Good job, old man,” Paige teased. “All out on the first try. This means you’re going to get exactly what you wished for.”

“Of course I will.” Shane would settle for nothing less. Now all his dreams had come true, he’d never let them go.

About the Author

Lena Matthews spends her days dreaming about handsome heroes and her nights with her own personal hero. Married to her college sweetheart, she is the proud mother of an extremely smart toddler, three evil dogs and a mess of ants that she can't seem to get rid of.

When not writing, she can be found reading, watching movies, lifting up the cushions on the couch to look for batteries for the remote control and plotting different ways to bring Buffy back on the air.

Lena welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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