



CUTTING TO THE CHASE



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Sugar and Spice Press

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ISBN: 978-1-936110-30-8

Sugar and Spice Press

North Carolina, USA

www.sugarandspicepress.net

Chapter One

“Now Chris, you be careful on your way home.”

“I will, Ma,” Chris said before he leaned down and kissed his mother on the cheek. He was heading back to Merzton, Texas, which wasn’t too far from San Angelo, Texas, his hometown. Thirty minutes at the most, even when you drove below the speed limit. He had just finished fixing his parents’ sink under the pretense that she did not trust his father to do it, but as soon as he had stepped through the door he had seen through the ruse. A lovely woman had been sitting at the table. He could tell that she had been just as surprised as he at her being present.

He had to admit it had been a while since he had even attempted to date anyone, but that didn’t give his mother the right to meddle. He had shown his displeasure at her attempt.

There was no trouble in the romance area. He just liked to be single sometimes. He also enjoyed people staying out of his private life, which his mother knew very well. She just chose to ignore it. Walking out the door, he headed to his truck and drove off. His thoughts drifted to his younger brother, Andrew, and his lovely wife, Karen. He was happy that his brother had found someone he loved and was happy with. They had an adorable little two-year-old daughter, Samantha, and they were expecting another child in the next few months.

He was happy for his brother, but he yearned for that same happiness himself. Thirty wasn’t old, but he felt like he was running out of time. He was not getting any younger.

He was an active person. He wanted to be able to enjoy his children while he was young. Sighing as he pulled up into his yard, he killed the engine and hopped out of the truck. His house was his pride and joy. He had helped to build it from the ground up. The one thing that would make it complete was having the right woman and a family to share it with. After heading into the house, he went straight into the kitchen. He had a busy day ahead of him tomorrow, but he was hungry. He opened up the fridge and took out some leftover pizza and popped it in the microwave.

He was very thankful for microwaves because he couldn’t cook to save his life, which was the main reason he had hired George. It wasn’t that he didn’t try to learn. He would end up burning one thing, get frustrated, and not want to go any further. George was such a good cook that he could cook over an open fire if the situation called for it. The timer on the microwave went off. He took the pizza out of the microwave and sat down at the table. The problem was his heart was already taken. There was one woman who had possession of it—had for some time—but she wasn’t even aware of the fact.

He considered himself to be attractive. So did some of the women he socialized with, if the way that some threw themselves at him was anything to judge by. Hopefully one day he would have the chance to tell her how he felt. Until that day he would wait.

He felt extremely tired. He was due for a break. His work had been long and hard lately. He needed a vacation. What kind of vacation he had no idea, but he would give it some thought because he definitely would be taking one. Just the idea of getting away from the dry heat and

red dirt of Merzton perked him up a little. Fighting a yawn, he took the last bite of his pizza and took his plate over to the sink before heading upstairs and to bed. Tomorrow was going to be a long day, and he needed his rest.

* * * *

“Ouch.” Ashley leaned down and rubbed the toe she had just stubbed on the kitchen table. She had just moved back to her hometown San Angelo, Texas yesterday. So far she hadn’t been able to catch up with anyone she had grown up with or anyone that she knew. Most of those people were no longer in San Angelo. Most had moved off for better economic opportunities. It wasn’t that the city didn’t have anything to offer—you just had to be in the right place at the right time to get it. Which was the main reason why she had moved back. Still she had a handful of friends in the area or close by. Now all she had to do was try to wait patiently to hear back from them.

She had gone to college for six years, and suffered through months of various trainings and updates. Now, all she felt was stressed. Not because of the job she was doing, but because of the people she was working with. Being a private physical therapist was tough at times. Being in Dallas had almost pushed her to the limit. The money was good, but she wanted to remain healthy and happy while making it. After some deep thought, she realized San Angelo offered her that opportunity, so she decided to move back. Her family had been thrilled at the fact she was moving back. She was too.

Now she had to focus on setting up a new clientele. She had already gotten in contact with her old mentor and was due to stop by Shannon Medical Hospital the day after tomorrow to see him. There was some indecisiveness in when she wanted to go back to work and whom she wanted to work with. One thing she was certain of was that it wouldn’t be big-name athletes. She felt like she needed a break from the attitudes those sorts of patients sometimes gave off. Her main goal was to remain positive at all times. Some of her past patients had made that hard to do. Then there was the fact she had to push herself physically as well. Genetics had been cruel to her. She had to fight daily to keep her ample hips from becoming too supple and keep her thighs toned. Whenever she got lax, all she had to do was pull out a picture of her back in high school. Instantly she became motivated.

Speaking of food, she needed to finish the grocery list she was sitting there staring at. All except one of her food items were healthy. She just could not do without her rocky road ice cream. It was the treat she always enjoyed, especially after a stressful day. After writing the last item she needed on the list, she stood up and then tacked it on the fridge. She would go shopping after she came back from the hospital tomorrow. After walking out of the kitchen, she headed down the hallway of the two-bedroom apartment she was renting. The housing market was pretty good in San Angelo. She planned on looking for a house as soon as she could. The apartment was large enough for her. She had all of the extra room she needed. She walked into her bedroom and began to put away the clothes that were sprawled over half of the bed.

She would need the extra room when she went to bed. It wasn’t that she was a large woman. She was very happy with every pound on her five foot six inch frame even though she had to work to keep it that way. She just liked to sleep diagonally in the bed. That would be hard for her to do

with her clothes occupying half of it. Picking up the next dress she smiled, realizing it was the one she had worn to her ten-year reunion. It had been a blast, better than she thought it would have been, but that had been because of Christopher Morgan. He had been her best friend in high school, but they had sort of grown apart over the years.

They still spoke occasionally when she came into town because she always made an effort to look him up, but the last time she had really talked to him had been their ten-year high school reunion. That was two years ago. The main reason was she had a crush on Chris. It had become too hard to be around him without acting on it. They both had become very successful in life—she, the private physical therapist, he, the horse trainer. She'd had a crush on Chris all through high school. She had worked hard to keep it hidden, at least from him. They were from different worlds. She just didn't think that it could work. Giving herself a mental shake to clear her mind, she focused on the task at hand. She began hanging up her clothes once more. She had a long day ahead of her tomorrow. She needed to get in bed at a decent time if she wanted to have the energy to get it all done.

* * * *

“Good morning.”

“Hey, boss, did you get your mom's sink fixed?”

Chris groaned inwardly at the reminder of the disaster that had almost occurred yesterday. “Yes, I did.”

He had just walked into the barn he had built to get his morning started. His right hand man was already there.

Barrett chuckled. “I take it that there was another setup attempt?”

“Yes, and one not worth mentioning, I might add.” Chris shook his head. Everyone who worked for him, as well as those who didn't, knew about his mother's matchmaking efforts. They all got a kick out of watching his mom trying to set him up over and over again.

As much as he would like to settle down with a wife and have children, he would prefer that he have a choice in actually deciding who that person would be. He would also prefer to decide without the help of his mother. Barrett's voice brought him out of his deep thoughts.

“So how are you going to work Dancer today?”

They had been working with the stallion for two weeks now. It had been a long, slow progress.

“Let's try to break him into the saddle today.”

Barrett nodded. “Okay. Are you going to need all of us out in the corral to help?”

“No, just you. Tell Pete to be on standby.”

He normally would have recruited the help of all of his men, but he had built a connection with Dancer. He truly felt everyone's assistance wasn't needed. That was also the reason he had given Ian, Luke, and George permission to come in a little later than normal. The three men would be there in the next hour. Once they arrived they could pitch in and help with whatever was needed. They walked over to Dancer's stall, passing Pete on the way. There was an exchange of greetings before he reached for Dancer's reins as he stepped into the stall, while Barrett grabbed the saddle. “Hey, boy. You ready to work today?”

Dancer snorted, tossing his head. Chris was able to get the bridle on without a problem. This had taken several days to accomplish, but now it was worth it. Although that last bite still stung quite a bit. Once the rein was in place he led Dancer out of his stall and out into the training corral. After he was inside with Dancer, Barrett closed the gate. He tied Dancer's reins to the fence while stroking his mane in a relaxing manner. “That's it, boy, relax.”

He turned his head toward Barrett and nodded. Barrett handed the saddle to him slowly, careful not to make any sudden moves. Dancer didn't move when the saddle was transferred into Chris's hands, nor did he move when the saddle was placed on him. He untied the reins, and Dancer sidestepped. Chris held the reins tight, making sure that he still had a good grip while reaching up to comfort the horse. “Easy, boy. Easy.”

He held onto Dancer's reins until the horse settled. Once he had, Chris prepared to mount the animal. He eased one of his feet into the saddle while continuing to stroke Dancer's mane. His goal was to keep the horse as calm as possible while he got used to the different feel and commands of the saddle and the reins together. Dancer slowly settled back down, and Chris prepared to mount. This was going better than he had expected. He eased his left foot into the stirrup, continuing to stroke Dancer's mane. “Easy, boy. Easy.”

He swung his right leg over the saddle although he didn't sit straight up in the saddle. Instead he leaned forward and whispered to Dancer.

“Easy, boy.”

He sat up slowly and gathered the reins in his hands. Dancer began to back up. “Steady, boy.”

Dancer stilled, and Chris eased the horse into a slow but steady walk. A bird flew overhead, let out a loud screech, and caught Chris by complete surprise. Dancer reared back, throwing Chris out of the saddle. He landed on his rear end feeling every bone in his body vibrate, but he still managed to hold onto Dancer's reins. Getting to his feet quickly, he began speaking to the horse in a calm and soothing voice until Dancer calmed down.

Once Dancer was calm enough for Chris to remount, he did so. Getting back into the saddle was easier than he expected. He managed to get Dancer to complete one full circle around the corral. The second time around, Chris frowned as his arms became weak. He seemed to be losing control of his body. The reins slipped out of his hands, involuntarily giving Dancer the freedom

he had been craving. When the stallion felt the slack in the straps of leather keeping control of him, he took off in a gallop. Chris couldn't hold on and made the decision to jump. He was surprised when he couldn't get his legs to work. Barrett called out his name, but he couldn't answer. That scared him more than anything. Just then Dancer made a sharp turn throwing Chris off. There was a sickening crunching sound as he landed on the ground, but he didn't feel anything. Not even when he hit the ground.

Barrett hopped off of the fence, calling out to Pete as he did. Pete came out of the barn and took off at a sprint when he saw what was going on. Barrett caught Dancer, trying to calm him down just as Pete made it to the corral. He handed the reins to Pete. "Take Dancer into his stall. Get him put away."

Pete took the reins without question, and Barrett knelt down by Chris, extreme concern on his face. He placed a hand on Chris' shoulder as if to hold him down, but Chris had no intention of going anywhere. He couldn't if he wanted to. For some reason his body was numb. "Stay calm, boss."

Barrett whipped out his cell phone and dialed 911. After informing the operator of the events that had just occurred, he hung up the phone. Barrett turned back to Chris.

"I can't feel anything," Chris said.

"Just lay back. Try to relax."

Chris felt panicked at not being able to feel anything. He had never been panicked in his life, but he was scared.

Barrett stared down at him with open concern. "Are you in pain?"

He shook his head. "I can't feel *anything*."

Barrett looked at him with concern. "Nothing at all?"

"No."

An incredulous expression crossed Barrett's face, but he remained silent. "Just try to relax. The paramedics should be here soon."

As if they heard him, the sound of the sirens drew near. Pete ran out to meet the paramedics and brought them back to where Chris and Barrett were.

"What happened?" One of the paramedics questioned before kneeling beside Chris. Barrett stood up and dusted off his jeans, moving back so that the paramedics could have the room that they needed to work on Chris.

Chris explained to the paramedics that he had been thrown off of Dancer as well as thrown into a

fence. Chris could only describe losing control of his body and not being able to stay on. The paramedics began to care for Chris, and Barrett whipped out his cell phone again. He looked down at the paramedics.

“Where are you going to take him?”

“Shannon Medical.”

Barrett began to dial. “Hi, Mrs. Morgan, this is Barrett. I’m calling to let you know Chris has been in an accident. We don’t know the extent of his injuries, but he is conscious and speaking, so try not to worry. Just get to the hospital as soon as you can. I will follow Chris in my truck...you too, Mrs. Morgan.”

Chris’ heart sank when he heard Barrett talking to his mother on the phone.

Barrett disconnected the call and watched the paramedics load Chris onto the stretcher. He turned to look at Pete.

“I’m going to follow Chris in the ambulance. You stay here and once the other guys arrive, secure everything and head for the hospital.

Pete nodded. “Okay. I’ll go ahead and get started.”

Barrett nodded and jogged to catch up with the paramedics. He touched Chris’ shoulder. “Everything will be okay, boss. I will be right behind the ambulance.”

Chris nodded, and Barrett turned and ran for his truck. Chris stared up at the paramedics who were calling out vitals to each other along with other medical terminology he wasn’t familiar with. His only concern right now was why he didn’t have any feeling in his lower body.

Chapter Two

“*What?*” Ashley was sitting across from her old mentor, Doctor Walsh, staring at him as if he had lost his mind. She was pretty certain that he had, or she had to be hard of hearing. She had just walked into the hospital a few moments ago, and he was already trying to throw a new patient at her. If she hadn’t been at a crossroads in her own life she might have jumped at the opportunity, but the state of mind that she was in, the patient wouldn’t get the best of her.

“Just hear me out. I need this as a favor, plus you will have access to any equipment you need here.”

“Dr. Walsh, you have several physical therapists at your disposal.”

“His mother requested the best, and you are the best.”

Ashley sighed heavily. Dan had always used flattery against her to get her to help him out, and normally she fell for it, but not this time. “Flattery isn’t going to work with me this time, but it is nice to know that you think so. Although I am positive that you can find someone else just as good as I am.”

His eyebrows rose in puzzlement. “I thought that you were looking for work.”

Ashley shrugged. “I am, to a certain extent, but I wasn’t looking to go back to work this soon. I just got back into town, and I kind of wanted to spend time with my family and friends.”

“He is only a patient. That should still be possible.”

She laughed. “The way you just described this patient I’m not so sure. Besides, with you, one could become twenty very quickly.”

Dan laughed. “I promise you that won’t happen.”

She believed Dan. He was a man of his word. He made it sound like this patient really needed her, and the situation sounded dire.

He raised an eyebrow. “You know that I already have done my research, and you are the best person for this job.”

Ashley sighed heavily. The man could probably talk a person into selling his or her own body parts if needed. She could do it just this one time and see how it went. If she didn’t get a good vibe, her heart wouldn’t be in it. Then she would refer the patient to another physical therapist. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

Dan beamed. “Great. I know this is a last minute thing, but I really appreciate you taking the job.”

Ashley folded her arms across her chest. "For some strange reason I don't think that you would have accepted no for an answer."

"Well I will admit that I owe you big for doing this. Feel free to collect at anytime."

She rolled her eyes knowing he would try his best to keep her from collecting. Dr. Walsh owed her big as it was.

"You are right about that, and when I decide to collect, I will try to give you fair warning. So what is the name of my new patient, and when do I get to meet him or her?"

Dan looked down at his watch. "Well, I have rounds to make but the patient is a he, and his name is Christopher Morgan."

Ashley froze. She could not have heard his name right. "What did you say the name of the patient is?"

Dr. Walsh gave her a concerned look. "Christopher Morgan. He's in room three-twenty-four. Is there a problem?"

"No, not really. I just think that I know this patient. We might have grown up together." What she left out was the fact that he was also the man that she had secretly been in love with for as long as she had known him.

He stood up, an expression of understanding on his face. In the medical world everyone knew personal relationships with a patient made it difficult to deal with.

"Well I tell you what. Go and check him out, introduce or reintroduce yourself. If you feel that you can't take the job because you know him, let me know, and I will try to find another qualified therapist."

Ashley nodded slowly, still in a state of disbelief. She stood up herself and gathered her purse.

"He is expecting you, and I am afraid I must be going, but I will be seeing you around even if you decide not to take the patient." He gave her a hug. "It is good to see you again."

"It's good to see you, too, Dr. Walsh," she replied, returning his embrace. He opened his office door and let her out, following behind her. She gave him one last quick hug before heading to the elevator. She was extremely nervous about seeing this patient. If this was the guy that she thought it was, she had some serious thinking to do as to whether she could take him on as a patient or not. She reached the elevator quickly and realized she must be walking faster than normal. She really had to find out if this was the Christopher Morgan she had secretly been in love with for as long as she could remember.

To cover up her nerves, she put her best smile on as she stepped into the elevator and pushed the button that would take her to the third floor. Maybe there was just a coincidence in the name. It

had to be that. The elevator stopped on the third floor, and she made a right and headed for his room. When she reached the room, she took a few deep breaths before knocking on the door.

“Come in,” a gruff and groggy voice called out. She relaxed a little bit because she didn’t recognize the voice. Stepping into the room she noticed that the heavy drapes were drawn closed, and she could hardly see. She looked back to the bed and realized that she couldn’t see his face at all.

Something in her gut told her it was Chris, but she had to be sure. She had the right to know before she went forward, even though she was not sure how much of a difference it would really make.

“Good afternoon.”

His head turned toward her, and it was almost frightening. He seemed to be looking straight at her. She could feel his eyes.

“It is afternoon?”

She nodded. “Almost evening.”

He turned away. Did he recognize her? Had he even really seen her? He must not have since he didn’t give any indication. His next reply confirmed that he had. “I didn’t realize that I had been here this long.”

“How long have you been here?”

He exhaled heavily. “Three, maybe four days. They rushed me straight into surgery once I arrived, and since then I haven’t been able to keep up with the time or days. What I would like to know is when I am going to get out of this hell hole.”

The husky timbre of his voice overshadowed the harsh words he had just spoken. She would know that voice anywhere. A shiver went down her spine. Shaking her head she pulled herself together. A clear head was going to be the only way she would help him. Resolving to find out once and for all if it was Christopher, she walked over to the curtains. With a flick of her wrist she pulled the drapes open, but she remained facing the curtain.

“I had those curtains closed for a reason,” he growled.

“You always did like the dark, didn’t you, Christopher?”

She heard his sharp intake of breath, and when she turned to face him, she noticed his body had stiffened in shock, and his face matched. Hers was probably not as evident because she’d had the chance to get used to the idea. Though the fact that she was standing in front of him, the man that she hadn’t seen in two years, was still a little disconcerting.

“Well, aren’t we Mr. Sunshine?”

She saw him close his eyes and shake his head as if to clear it. Maybe he felt like it was a dream and needed to be certain. When he opened his eyes again, she was still standing there.

“Ashley, what are you doing here?”

“I was just asking myself the same question. All I did was stop by to speak to my old mentor, and he referred you to me.”

“This has to be a mistake,” he whispered, disbelief evident in his tone.

He raised the bed a little, and she took that as a good thing. The shock that had been apparent on his face was starting to subside, but not completely. She was in the same boat as he. It was hard to believe she was standing here in the same room with Chris after she thought she would never see him again. His dark blue eyes still brimmed with the passion and life they always had when he looked at her. He was a distracting and very sexy man to the point it simply amazed her. Being so close to him was the nerve-racking experience it had always been. Better yet, she had just agreed to take him on as a patient. *Yes, I have definitely lost my mind.*

* * * *

Christopher stared up at Ashley with utter shock. The feelings he’d had for her back in high school came rushing back. He took in her ebony skin, shoulder length black hair and chocolate eyes like a fresh breath of air. His eyes slid lower and a vibrant pink wrap skirt and matching wrap shirt emphasized she was still in good shape, as she had been at the high school reunion. On second glance, she looked to be in better shape. Not that there was anything wrong with the way she had looked then. Hell he would take her in any shape he could get her in. There was a healthy glow to her skin and she looked happy. That fact turned his mood back toward the darkness it had been in since he had become conscious after the drugs they had doped him up with. He looked up abruptly as she spoke.

“First we are going to get you cleaned up and shaved,” She said.

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t need a nursemaid.”

Ashley flinched at the tone in his voice but quickly composed herself and stiffened her spine. Chris had the grace to wince himself. He was a decibel away from shouting.

Ashley crossed her arms over her chest and her eyes narrowed. “From the smell that you are giving off, you need more than that.”

Chris tried not to smile but it happened involuntarily. Ashley had always looked hot when her attitude slipped out, especially when she tried to keep it in check. In the past she had always seemed to need to keep her attitude in check when he was around. Especially when they were back in high school. He reeled in his grin and arched a brow in her direction. “Is this how you

talk to all of your patients?”

She rolled her eyes. “No, I only talk like that to the ones who act like babies and complain, Christopher.”

A jolt went through him. It was the first time she had said his name but the feeling was always the same. Ashley was the only person who called him Christopher and no one pronounced his name quite like she did. He watched her go into the restroom and pull out a basin before running water into it. He bit back a chuckle when he heard her take a deep breath, an action that had always turned him on. Even though he was in the other room, he could see her looking skyward to calm her herself. By the time she walked back into the room she was. She placed the basin down on the table before smiling.

“Now be still. I’ve not shaved a patient in a while and I’d hate to cut you intentionally.”

His eyebrows rose. “Don’t you mean unintentionally?”

“No, I meant intentionally,” she muttered through clenched teeth.

That kept him quiet long enough for her to shave him. It was amazing she didn’t cut him as soon as she placed the razor against his skin because he couldn’t stay still. She managed to finish the task, without nicking him and threw him a towel before going back to get a fresh basin of water from the bathroom. Setting the basin on the table, she went to pull his hospital gown down and he grew agitated once more.

“*What are you doing?*” he asked.

The look she gave him made him feel stupid. “Giving you a sponge bath.”

Any other time he would have smiled, lie back, and let Ashley do her best. This wasn’t the case. She was doing this out of sympathy and pity—two of the emotions that he hated the most. There were some things that he could still do by himself even if he didn’t trust his body to comply fully. Giving her his most leveling look, he shook his head. “I don’t need one.”

She looked at him with skepticism. “Once again, judging by the smell you are producing I am going to say that you do.”

* * * *

Ashley had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. In all reality, he didn’t smell bad at all. There was a lot of dirt still covering his skin. The main thing was she had to prove if he could be nasty, so could she. His look said she had left the impression that she hoped for. She had always been sassy but never this sassy in his presence. Then again Chris hadn’t been in her presence so long, he wasn’t aware that a lot of things about her were different now.

“What are you? The doctor from hell?”

She shook her head and smiled sweetly. “No, I am the physical therapist from hell.”

He muttered something under his breath as she reached out and began to pull the gown to his waist.

“Sit up for me.”

He did it and she almost swallowed her tongue. The man had a body that should be sculpted. He was so sexy she was certain she wouldn’t be able to look at him for longer than a few minutes without going cross-eyed. She washed his back quickly, gently, and efficiently before jumping down to clean his uninjured leg. He had nice feet as well. A man who took care of his feet was sexy to her. Once she was through, she handed him the towel. “You can wash the rest.”

He smirked at her. “What? Are you afraid that there will be too much for you to handle?”

She smirked right back. “Oh I am sure I have handled much bigger.”

Ashley turned her back to Chris to fight another laugh back. The look on his face was priceless. Still, he did need privacy. She wasn’t in the business of seeing a patient’s private parts if she didn’t have to. Especially one she had such a big crush on. The bottom line was he needed privacy and she would give it to him.

A few moments later he spoke. “I’m done.”

She turned back around and he had readjusted the gown around his waist. Walking over to where they kept extra gowns she pulled out a clean one and handed it to him before turning around again.

“I’m finished,” he said.

She turned back to face him and took the discarded gown from him. He looked a lot better and she was sure that he felt better whether he would admit it or not. “Now, I know that we didn’t get off to the best start this afternoon but I’m willing to try again.” Leaning over she placed a kiss on his freshly shaven cheek. “It’s good to see you again.”

He closed his eyes and smiled. “It’s good to see you as well although I wish it were under better circumstances.”

She walked around to the edge of his bed and picked up his patient chart. After scanning it briefly she tried to keep her face impassive after she read the shocking information. The drugs they were giving him must be good. Chris had been in the hospital for a full seven days. Even worse, his diagnosis was unclear. Looking back at him, she put the chart back at the foot of his bed.

“Has the doctor been in to explain to you what is going on?”

He opened his eyes and shook his head. “No, but I have to admit I didn’t make it easy for him to either.”

“Will you listen if I explain?”

He nodded and she took a deep, steadying breath. “Well, the complete fracture in your leg is severe and there is quite a bit of nerve damage. The surgeons inserted several pins above and below the fractures, which are now holding the bone in place. The cast is extra precaution because you need to take it easy.”

She sighed trying to keep her expression from being as grim as she felt. “This was a bad break, Chris. Even when the cast comes off it still won’t be completely healed. You also show signs of having Hypokalemic paralysis. However they were still running tests because it is very rare for the paralysis to lay dormant until this late in life. There could be another cause behind why the paralysis had occurred.”

She paused and looked back down at the chart. Whatever the reason, she hoped they would figure it out.

“Has this ever happened before?”

He shook his head. “No and I hope to hell it doesn’t happen again. You don’t know how helpless and scared I felt.”

She walked around the bed and placed a comforting hand on his arm. “Well you need to prepare yourself for the worst because this isn’t just going to disappear overnight.”

He shook his head, the confusion evident on his face. “How did I get this?”

Ashley sat down on the edge of the bed and smiled. She wanted to help Chris to understand as much as possible. Hopefully she could explain the situation in a way of clarification and not a more confusing way.

“If you do have Hypokalemic paralysis, it’s genetic. This may have always been present and no one ever noticed it but it is unlikely. The signs would have showed themselves before now.”

There was a shimmer of hope in his eyes and even though she hated to douse it, she had to make sure he understood everything.

From the information she knew about this form of paralysis, things weren’t adding up. Something else had to be going on. She just hoped that whatever it was didn’t threaten his life.

“Well I can tell you that if this had happened before now, I would have remembered.” Chris looked panicked. “Could Andrew have this?”

She nodded and his expression sank. She continued, "This is genetic and even if he doesn't show signs of having the paralysis, he could still pass the gene on to his children as well as you."

Chris cringed. "But he has a little girl and another baby on the way."

Ashley laughed with surprise. "Andrew has a child?"

"Yes and he's married as well."

"Playboy Andrew is married?"

Chris nodded. "*Former* playboy and he fell hard, too. Karen and Andrew had been dating a little while before she became pregnant. As a matter of fact, she was pregnant when you came into town for the high school reunion. Unfortunately I didn't have time to tell you because that weekend was a whirlwind and you left right afterwards. Andrew proposed to Karen the night she gave birth and they were married a few months after Sam was born."

She had to take a moment to digest that information. Never in her life would she have thought Andrew would settle down and have children but there were always times when the unexpected occurred. Chris was the more solid and dependable of the two. It just always seemed that he would be the first to settle down. Not Andrew. "Well the paralysis is more common in boys than girls but Drew can be tested, as well as his children."

Chris groaned. "Man this sucks. It's bad enough that I have to suffer through this but if my brother and his family have to deal with it as well, I don't know what I'm going to do."

Ashley gave his arm another light squeeze. "With all of that in mind, just know there is also the possibility you will have to go through several months if not a year of physical therapy to overcome this. The leg injury and nerve damage combined are going to be difficult. At least the paralysis can be managed with a well balanced diet if that is what you have."

"And if I don't?"

She took a deep breath before continuing. After their initial meeting she was not quite so sure that she was ready for this herself. "Then the doctors will work to find out the right diagnosis until they figure it out. Until then, the physical therapy part is where I come in."

Confusion marred his expression. "What do you mean?"

"I am going to be your physical therapist."

He closed his eyes and she could see his jaw tensing. "For how long?"

"For however long it takes."

"What? You have got to be kidding me."

She understood his shock. Not because she minded the physical therapy. After reading his chart, he needed physical therapy. There was no doubt of that. The fact that he would be completing physical therapy with her was the issue. She wasn't sure she could deal with him on a physical therapy level. Dr. Walsh was right. She was the best there was but from what she heard through the grapevine and her brief interaction with him, her being his physical therapist could be dangerous. He would have to see her everyday and she would have to learn how to hide her feelings all over again. His expression was filled with the amount of horror she felt.

"Christopher, believe me when I say that this isn't something I would joke about. I am quite expensive, but I will make you well in the areas that I can."

Chris dragged his hand across his face. "Who came up with this crazy idea?"

"I did."

They both looked up in surprise as Virginia walked into the room followed by Benjamin. She looked very worried. Ashley stood to greet Chris' mother and comfort her at the same time.

"Mr. And Mrs. Morgan, it is so nice to see you again although I wish it were under better circumstances."

Virginia embraced her warmly. "It's nice to see you as well. I didn't realize you were back in town but I'm glad you are. I asked for the best physical therapist for my son and I know you are it."

Ashley smiled. "Well I just made it back into town yesterday and just happened to be visiting the hospital when Doctor Walsh asked me to help him out. I had no idea that it was Christopher that I would be helping."

"So are you going to be his physical therapist?"

Ashley turned to look at Chris. "Only if he agrees." She had learned quickly that patients who did not want to heal normally didn't.

"He does," his mother answered for him.

Chris groaned. "*Mom, you are meddling again.*"

Benjamin stepped forward. "Son, do not argue with your mother on this one. You need the best in this situation and you yourself have said that Ashley is the best at what she does."

Ashley looked over at Benjamin before looking at Chris and saw a flush starting to appear on his cheeks. Warmth suffused her at the fact that Chris considered her to be the best at what she did. She was kind of reluctant to take Chris on as a patient herself because of the underlying feelings that existed between them. Crossing her arms across her chest, she stared at Chris. "So,

Christopher, what will it be?"

When he didn't respond she turned and looked at his parents who had determined looks their eyes and knew they would win this battle. She turned back to Chris in time to see him throw his hands up in disgust, knowing he had no choice because he was out numbered. "Okay, I agree to Ashley being my physical therapist."

His mother walked over to his side and kissed his forehead. "Good choice."

They all looked up as his attending physician walked in. His face lit up when he saw Ashley. "Ms. Bennett, I heard that you were back."

Ashley laughed. "Well Dr. Simms, I see that news still travels fast around here."

"It does."

He walked over to the bed and picked up the chart. Giving the chart a once over he laid the chart back down. "We have an interesting situation here, Mr. Morgan. The tests we have run so far indicate that this could be the paralytic form of Hypokalemic paralysis but we have questions about this. This is puzzling because the paralysis waited so long to show the first symptoms. Your muscle weakness and levels of low potassium are two of the main factors but we are going to run more test as well as call in a specialist. You responded very well to the potassium and we think that we can manage this right now through a well balanced diet. Once we run more test and bring a specialist in, we can determine if any other precautions need to be taken."

Dr. Simms scratched his chin. "I am going to prescribe some potassium pills in case you have another paralytic episode and needed a quick dose of potassium. The pills are a temporary fix but I am giving you strict instructions to get to the hospital if you see you aren't getting better during an episode. "

Ashley watched Chris' spirit sink lower. Not knowing what was wrong with him was very concerning for her.

Dr. Simms turned to Chris' parents. "This is a genetic disorder you guys could help to solve a big piece of the problem. We want you guys to get tested. If you have any other children, tell them to get tested. If they have any children, get them tested as well."

Ashley knew it would be wise if they did because they could catch the paralysis early if anyone else had it, at least in the sense to prevent any paralytic episode.

Dr. Simms turned back to Chris and shook his hand. "We will schedule you for more tests after you meet with the specialist. Once he has a chance to examine you we can determine what the next step will be."

Chris nodded and Dr. Simms turned to shake Mr. And Mrs. Morgan's hand before shaking Ashley's. "We will have to get together for lunch and discuss the old times and the new."

“As much as I would like to, I have a feeling that my patient is going to keep me pretty busy.”

It was a very subtle let down but she seemed to get her point across. Besides, the man she was truly interested in lay in the hospital bed.

Dr. Simms seemed to take it all in stride. “Well then, you take care of Mr. Morgan.”

“You know I will.”

He left the room and there was silence. Virginia was the one to speak up and break it.

“He didn’t mention anything about your leg.”

Ashley took a moment to explain to the Morgan the extent of Chris’s leg injury and she was completely honest. “The fracture is probably one of the worst he could possibly have. The main damage was done to his fibula, which is why the cast is up so high. I am hoping it will only take six to eight weeks for the bone to heal but due to the nerve damage that exists as well, it might not be possible.”

Virginia looked at Chris. “How long for everything to be completely healed?” she asked Ashley.

“Best case scenario, with serious physical therapy, six months. Worse case scenario, a little over a year.”

Ashley bit her lip. She had never seen a man faint but Chris looked close to it. Chris was stubborn but he was also a hard worker. He enjoyed his work. He was good at it. There was no way he would survive having to dedicate an entire year of his life to physical therapy. Six months was bad enough. The thought of his ranch having to run without him for a year or longer was almost heart wrenching. He loved what he did. His ranch was the only thing he had talked about at the reunion.

Chris seemed to realize everyone was staring at him. He schooled his expression and his mother smiled.

“Well that sounds good, Ashley. Make him relax. He frets about work too much.”

Chris groaned. “Mom, *please*.” He rubbed his hand down his face. Looking over at Ashley, he sighed. “So when do you think they will let me out of here?”

She shrugged. “If you promise to be on your best behavior I can probably get you released into my care tonight.”

He flinched “Is that my only option?”

Ashley put her hands on her hips in disbelief but she could hold back her laughter. “For that, I

won't ask for you to be released until tomorrow."

Chris eyes opened wide. "You wouldn't?

"Try me."

That shut him up, as she knew it would. For some reason men seemed to have an aversion to dentists, doctors, and hospitals.

"Do you have any clothes with you that will fit over that cast?"

Benjamin produced a bag. "Yes, he does. My son was complaining about the lack of clothes. Although I doubt he could put them on, at least not without assistance."

Ashley smiled. Chris was still stubborn. She guessed some things would never change. "Well then, I'll be back in a few moments. Go ahead and try to get dressed if you can." She paused at the door. "Let your parents help you. If all three of you can't get it done, wait on me."

With that said, she walked out of the room and closed the door behind her. She smiled as she walked down the hallway. She would have to take her statement about San Angelo not being interesting back. There had been non-stop action since she had arrived. Then there was the fact that Chris was here. The tension between Chris and herself was so thick that it could be cut. At least now she could breathe normally. There had been a point that she had experienced a shortness of breath every time he was around. If it was at all possible, Chris seemed to have become more attractive than the last time she had seen him. His blonde hair still short and curly and he had worn his hair cut that way as long as she could remember. His dark blue eyes still had the same effect that they always had on her. Sometimes she could stare into them and forget where she was.

He still had a great body and to be truthful she had been nervous earlier when she had helped him to bathe. Only because she thought she wouldn't be able to restrain herself from jumping in the bed with him. In all reality, she hadn't felt like christening a hospital bed. She could not give in to those temptations and she could not let them show either. He was her friend and he was her patient and that was not a line she was willing to cross.

Chapter Three

Chris slammed his hand down on the table he was sitting on. Ashley was driving him crazy. She had only been back in his life for a month and she was already driving him crazy. No she wasn't driving him crazy—she was driving him insane. She now made her living bossing him around under the pretense of being his physical therapist. Then there was the fact that she was hot—very hot. In high school, he had found her curvy shape very appealing but Ashley hadn't and nearly starved herself to death at times because of it. If she didn't believe she had the right curves in the right places now then there was no help for her. Because in his opinion she had it going on in every way a woman should. She truly was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen but she was tapping into his last reserve of patience. The way she made him work almost made him regret telling her that he wanted to complete to the suicide program.

Sometimes the workouts didn't seem as if they were designed for a person who had fractured bones in his leg being held together by surgical pins. One of the good things that had come out of this was that he knew he could take care of himself and trust his body to a certain extent. Ashley had spent the past week making sure he could, with the warning that the weeks following would be very difficult. He had to mentally prepare himself because a lot of the tasks he was currently completing were already difficult for him. The door opened again, and Ashley breezed in like a breath of fresh air. She was whistling happily and he was sure he knew the tune but he couldn't place his finger on it.

“Are you ready to finish your workout?”

“No,” he grumbled.

She smiled sweetly. “Too bad. Now let's see you get down onto the mat.”

He took in the distance from where he sat on the table to the mat. “*Oh you make it sound so easy,*” he stated with heavy sarcasm.

She arched a dark brow in his direction. “Would you like my assistance?”

“*Oh how nice of you to offer. Thank you.*”

Ashley laughed, which made him want to decline her offer of help but he was realistic and he knew there was no way he would be able to make it to the mat by himself. She walked over to him and helped him from the table into his chair before stepping back. “I always ask before I help because I know how important independence is. On the other hand, if a patient is being pig-headed I will step in.”

He settled himself into his chair, only halfway paying attention to what she was saying. She was true to her word watching as he wheeled himself over to the mat.

“Make sure that your chair is completely locked before you make a move to slide out of it.”

He did what she asked without complaint. What she suggested made perfect sense if he didn't want to be on the ground in an embarrassing position. "What do I need to do from here?"

She moved closer to him. "See if you can get onto the floor."

He paused for a minute. What she suggested was impossible for him to do or at least it was if he had to do it by himself. He looked over at her. "Will you help me this time?"

She nodded before stepping behind him. Bending at the knees she told him what she needed him to do. He did and she slid her arms lower wrapping them around his waist.

"Oh honey, not now," he whispered in a voice heavy with mock passion.

She tightened her arms, putting pressure on his ribs. When he grunted she loosened her arms.

"Hush up before you have to get down on this mat by yourself."

They worked together and within seconds he was on the mat. She walked around him until she was facing him. His gaze followed her never-ending legs, revealed by the sapphire cotton shorts. She had to be a runner or leg days on weights were very sufficient.

He would keep that in mind when it came time for his leg workout. His gaze traveled up her body until it reached her ample chest covered by the gray T-shirt. He couldn't tell whether she was wearing a regular bra or a sports bra but he hoped he would find out before their session was over. His gaze continued upward when she cleared her throat.

"Now if you have finished staring, would you please lay back?"

He gave her a wicked smile but did as she asked. She got down on her knees beside him. "I want to test the mobility of your leg with this cast on so that I can plan your workout schedule."

He almost groaned in agony. All of the things that he had been doing up until now hadn't been considered to be a workout. Man, he was in trouble.

Ashley seemed oblivious to his distress because her head was down and she was examining his cast. He didn't have a lot to work with and therapy was going to be difficult for him. The cast started at the middle of his foot and stopped a few inches below the top of his thigh. She was sure that she could come up with a workout regimen. "Okay, I want you to lift your leg."

His uninjured leg shot up.

"No." She laughed. Her hand tapped his leg within the cast. "I was talking about this one."

He shrugged. "Well you didn't say which one you wanted me to lift."

She gave him a hard look. "I'm not going to let you bait me, Chris."

He sighed. "I can't lift that leg. The cast weighs a ton."

She smiled. "Well, we are going to work on that. Now lift as much as you can."

"I'll try."

She leaned back on her haunches. "That's all I can ask of you."

He began to try to lift his leg and she watched him strain silently, adding to his mortification. Never in his life had he felt so weak. Finally he lifted about an inch but his body was shaking from the exertion. He was certain his face was beet red as well.

"Okay, that's good," Ashley murmured.

She reached out and helped him to lower his leg to the floor so he wouldn't jar it.

"Yeah right," he muttered.

"Seriously, you did very well to even be able to lift your leg. Most of my other patients with this type of injury weren't able to do this much so soon."

He sighed heavily and dejectedly. "If you say so."

Lifting his leg had been more difficult than he had thought it would be. If he hadn't understood the seriousness of his injury before, he definitely did now. The pain shooting up his leg was almost nauseating. Ashley stood up and walked over to the corner of the room. He watched her grab what looked like a square block but when she held it up he saw that it was a triangular shape. She brought the block back over to him placing it on the ground and elevated his leg. He winced and she looked down at him in concern.

"Are you okay?"

He couldn't answer for the pain that was slowly taking over his entire body.

"Christopher, is your leg hurting?" she asked.

Without giving him the chance to respond, she walked over to his bag and rifled through it before going over to the miniature refrigerator. She pulled out an individual size bottle of milk before heading back to where he was laying. She held the painkiller and the milk out to him.

He shook his head. "I don't want the painkiller."

She sighed. "I don't care what you want but I do know what you need."

He shook his head. "The last thing I need to do is become hooked on drugs."

She looked at him with hurt in her eyes. “Do you think I would let that happen?”

He sighed, knowing he was being grumpy probably from the pain that he was in. Deep down he also knew he was being irrational. He trusted Ashley with his life. “I’m sorry. I know you wouldn’t let anything happen to me. I guess I’m just not thinking straight.”

“Then take the painkiller.”

He took it and she smiled. “Good. Now let’s get you into the next room so you can rest.”

He sat up as she removed the block from underneath his injured leg. She helped him back into his wheelchair and rolled him into an adjoining room. To his surprise it was a set up like a bedroom but it had more of a homey feel to it. This room seemed out of place but he couldn’t worry about why it did. He maneuvered himself to the bed. With Ashley’s help he managed to get in bed and sighed heavily with pleasure. Tired didn’t even begin to describe how he felt right now. He watched as Ashley elevated his leg.

“Will you be okay by yourself for a moment?”

He nodded as she left the room. Closing his eyes, he exhaled softly. All he wanted to do was relax so the throbbing in his leg would go away. He had no idea physical therapy would be so hard but if it would help him get back on his feet faster, he would do it. All he wanted to do was feel whole again.

* * * *

As soon as she got outside the door she shivered. The man was so damned sexy. Every time she had to touch his hard, chiseled body she had to mentally keep herself in check. Taking a deep breath, she looked around the physical therapy area to make sure everything was back in its original place. The last thing she had to put back was the foam triangle. Doctor Walsh was nice enough to let her use the area and she wanted to ensure she took proper care of everything. Once she was certain everything was back in the place it should be in she turned and went back into the room that she had Chris laying in. It was the room the occupational therapist used so it was set up like a bedroom. Designed to help patients learn how to function in their own bedrooms. It was going to be a part of Chris’ therapy and probably by the end of this week. So far Chris had a lot of hands around to help him out but if there came a time when he didn’t have anyone around he would be able to do things for himself.

His eyes found hers when she reentered the room and he smiled before making an attempt to lift his hand. He failed miserably and she knew the painkiller was kicking in. His speech was slurred when he spoke. “Will you stay here with me while I sleep?”

She nodded. “Yes, I will.”

Going against every raging thought in her head, including the rational ones she climbed into the

bed with him. What damage could he do under the influence of the pain medication? She looked over at Chris as he chuckled. The sound was amusing and she smiled. “What is so funny?”

He closed his eyes. “I was talking about taking a vacation a week ago and I got one, although I had a cruise in mind.”

She smiled. He was definitely under the influence of the drugs. “Either way you needed the time off and you have it. Try to make the best of it.”

When he didn’t respond she thought he might have fallen asleep and she looked down at him. Instead of him being asleep, his eyes were open again and he was studying her.

“What is it?”

“Why didn’t wear your hair down today?”

She shook her head. Yeah, the medication was taking over. He would be asleep soon. She just had to keep him company until then

“You look so beautiful when you wear your hair down.”

“I am glad you think so but it takes a lot to manage my hair when I wear it down.”

His hand slid up behind her head and she felt slight pressure pulling her head forward. She resisted, knowing what his goal was. “Ah Christopher, I don’t think this would be a good idea.”

“Just one kiss. I have been imagining what you would taste like for years.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock. Chris had just admitted to wanting to kiss her. She wasn’t sure what it meant and she didn’t want to jump to any conclusions with him being in a drug-induced state. She looked at him again, reading the lust in his eyes. She couldn’t resist even though she knew that she should. It wasn’t a good idea to get involved with a patient, let alone her childhood friend. But this was just an innocent kiss that would pacify him so he could go to sleep. At least she thought that up until the point his lips touched hers, capturing her mouth in a searing kiss. She tried to resist his kiss by remaining immobile and pushing against his shoulders but it didn’t deter him.

His grip shouldn’t be so strong for someone *supposedly* under influence of pain medication. She was starting to wonder if this was all planned. He was always looking for a way to distract her from the physical therapy regime she had for him. Then again, maybe she should just let him kiss her. She would be able to get him out of her system if she did. Then she could stop having sexual thoughts about him. She could get over the attraction that had been ignited between them from the day she walked back into the hospital. She was almost embarrassed to admit her attraction to him was stronger than it should be for a man she considered to be her friend. However his mouth against hers told her he had the same internal battle so she gave in and relaxed against him. He just deepened the kiss and slowly she responded to him. His tongue swept inside her mouth and

her hands slowly slid upward around his neck. Christopher Morgan definitely knew how to kiss. His demanding kiss sent a tremor through her so intense she tightened her grip on him.

Strong, overpowering feelings raced through her. She moaned softly as he deepened the kiss with bold sweeps of his tongue, capturing the sounds she made. He claimed her mouth for his own. A claim she shouldn't allow him to make, wouldn't allow him to make. His hands slid down her waist and pulled her against him. A second later she felt his hand cup her round bottom and gather her even closer. She gasped when she came into contact with his burgeoning erection. He arched into her, bringing her more snugly against him. His taste was different, unique in a way, which made her crave more. He drew her tongue into his mouth, sucking gently, passionately, and sending desire rushing through her entire body. He drove her insane with desire. Longing flooded her, making her moan again in pleasure. She could never recall feeling this way when Warren kissed her. He broke off the kiss and she slumped against him. She gasped trying to draw in a deep breath, realizing that one kiss hadn't gotten him out of her system.

Pushing against him, she tried to create space. He released her and she moved away but he followed her, not letting her slid off the bed the way she wanted to. She put her arms out and pushed against his shoulders, he relaxed his hold on her in response.

"We shouldn't have done that." Her voice was shaky and more uncertain than she wanted it to be.

"Why not? We both wanted it. It would have happened eventually," he replied in a low, husky voice.

Her body still quivered from his kiss and she had to look away from him. His gaze was too intense, too knowing. Studying her in a way that made certain parts of her get hot.

Wet.

Chris had his eyes on her and his gaze was intense. "I have wanted to do that for so long."

Ashley stared at him in shock. All the years that they had known each other he had never given any indication that he had been interested in her as anything except a friend. Then again neither had she and she had practically been in love with him. She laughed to herself. Why was she lying to herself? She still was head over heels in love with Chris. Shaking her head to clear it, she looked at him. "I think you need to close your eyes now and rest."

A single moment passed before he spoke. "You don't believe me, do you?"

She sighed. "I think that once the pain medication wears off you may see things differently."

"The medicine does not affect me like that. Although I don't like the way that this thing is making me feel. Under the influence or not I know my heart and it is yours. It has been for a long time and the minute that you walked into my hospital room a week ago, I knew that it always

would be.”

For once in her life Ashley was speechless. Chris spoke again before she could think of anything to say. “Do you not like me?”

“Yes,” Ashley answered tentatively.

“As a friend?”

“Yes,” she replied with more conviction.

The corner of his mouth tilted upward in a lazy grin. “As something more?”

Ashley sighed heavily. “What are you getting at Christopher?”

“I am interested in you and as more than I friend. I have been for a long time. Now I want to see what we could have, where this could go between us and I want to make sure you are with me.”

Ashley shook her head in disagreement. She wasn’t comfortable with taking that step. “I don’t think that is a good idea. I don’t want to endanger our friendship.”

“Why do you think that this will end our friendship?”

“Because if this doesn’t work out then we can never go back to what we currently have?”

He gave her a hurt look. “What makes you think this wouldn’t work?”

Ashley shook her head. “That isn’t the point. You are my patient and I have made it a personal rule not to cross the line of a business personal relationship.”

Chris smiled. “Okay then. I can fire you and then we can make a go at it.”

Ashley laughed at his rationale. “I’m not going to be fired by you. Your mother would hang you out to dry.”

Chris smiled wickedly. “Not if she knew why.”

Ashley felt her eyes widen. “You wouldn’t.”

He closed his eyes. “I’m afraid that I would. I am a desperate man and desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Agitation and nerviness raced through her. She didn’t even want to think about Virginia finding out about the potential of anything happening between her and Chris. This wasn’t the reason her help had been enlisted.

“Chris, I’m not going to date you. I enjoy what we have right now and I’m not about to risk it.”

Chris’ eyes opened and there was a little hurt there. “Don’t you think I’m worth the risk?”

She paused before answering truthfully. “Yes and that’s what scares me.”

* * * *

“He what?”

Ashley dropped her face into her hands as her friends laughed at her. These were some of the same people that she had hung out with in high school. This was the first time she had been able to meet up with them since moving back into town. Looking up she glanced at her five friends and she smiled. She loved these guys. They were wonderful friends to her and they always had been. Even though the distance had separated some of them, there had always been the phone. Now she was back and up close and personal was better. She was relaying today’s earlier events with her friends and Monica had been the one to make the question of shock. The truth was there was tension between her and Chris and there was no way to get around it. After Chris had awakened from his nap she had to check him to make sure that he wasn’t still under the influence of the pain medication because he had still been adamant about them getting together and taking their relationship beyond one of friendship.

“Don’t sound so shocked, Monica. Ashley and Chris have had a thing for each other forever. I always thought that they would get married before any of us did. So I say it’s about time that one of them made a move.”

Monica stuck her tongue out at Quentin for being so matter of fact before turning to look at Ashley. “Do your brothers know?”

A shiver actually went down her spine at the thought of her brothers finding out. They had made her life a living hell growing up. Not only was she the youngest of six, she was the only girl on top of that. There had been countless times that she had cried within the warmth of her mother’s arms or on her father’s loving shoulders. Whoever had been the culprit of the abuse would be reprimanded but they were right back at it as soon as the reprimand was over. They had been another factor as to why it had been so hard for her to find a date let alone a boyfriend when she had been growing up.

Sylvie chuckled. “He is still breathing, isn’t he?”

Vivian laughed. “You have a point. I will never forget how Quentin and Joseph had to prove that they were strictly interested in Ashley as a friend.”

Monica scoffed at the comment. “Don’t feel sorry for Quentin and Joseph. We all got the third degree at times—especially if we were going out.”

There were simultaneous groans from around the table at the memories of the Bennett brothers.

Sylvie smiled. “Well, I think that you two should go for it. You two are perfect for each other.”

“But our friendship—” Ashley began to protest.

“Will be just fine, like ours is.”

Ashley wanted to deny it but Monica and Quentin’s friendship probably made their relationship as strong as it was.

“How do I know if he is the one?”

Vivian patted her friend’s hand reassuringly. “There are no guidelines. You just know.”

Sylvie’s smile widened. “I knew that Ramon was the one for me when we met at his party in high school.”

Monica laughed. “Yes Sylvie, we remember. It was love at first sight.”

Sylvie nodded. “Yes and at that time I wasn’t sure why. All I knew was that there was something different about him.”

Ashley could agree. Sylvie and Ramon had just reached ten years of marriage and four children later it was as if they were still newlyweds. Joseph shared how he knew his current fiancé Noelle was for him. He was the only divorcee of the group. “Well coming off of my nasty divorce with Shelly two years ago. Ashley, you set me up on a blind date with Noelle. We all went out and Noelle and I couldn’t be separated.”

Ashley smiled. She had almost forgotten she had been the one to set them up together. That night had been very interesting.

“And now, two years later, I know that she is the one I should have married the first time around.”

“Well I knew Monica was the one for me when we decided to take that weekend trip to Dallas the summer after our freshman year in college. It should have been a four-hour trip but somehow it turned into six because of the traffic and construction. Oddly, I wasn’t irritated at all. The conversation we had on the way was so interesting plus she laughed at all of my bad jokes.”

“She still does,” Joseph muttered, which earned him a kick under the table by Monica.

Quentin continued with his story. “But it was when I knew that Monica was the one for me.”

Monica nodded her head in agreement. “I had known before the trip to Dallas that Quentin was the one for me but I think the trip sealed the deal.”

Ashley was certain of it because shortly after that, Monica and Quentin had become engaged and married the summer before their senior year.”

“And how was it you knew Laurence was the one for you, Vivian?”

Vivian grinned. “I remember when I met Laurence on campus at Angelo State before he transferred to Louisiana State. I was infatuated with him but I didn’t know how a long distance relationship would work at our age. Laurence convinced me to give it a try and I was game. It is hard to believe we had a three-year long distance relationship but we did. It wasn’t so bad in the beginning because we had the chance to see each other about once every six weeks but we talked almost every night. However our relationship had started to turn sour partly because of the distance.”

Vivian paused. “Then there was the one eventful weekend I took a trip down to visit him and he had spent more time hanging out with his friends and his fraternity brothers instead of with me. We ended up having a big fight. I spent the night in a hotel and the next day I came home.”

Sylvie snapped her fingers. “I remember that.”

Monica laughed. “So do I. You just about had all of us ready to do down to Louisiana and pummel some sense into him.”

Ashley nodded. She recalled the awful state her friend had been in that day. Honestly, she had been surprised her friend had made the long trip back “I remember how we all piled into your room and kept you company over a two dozen chocolate chip pecan cookies.

Vivian grinned. “Yes, well, luckily it didn’t come to that. Laurence spent the rest of the day calling me relentlessly but I wouldn’t take any of his calls. As far as I was concerned our relationship was over. I was tired of the one-sided relationship.”

Vivian laughed and shook her head. “I remember checking my voicemail and there were twenty messages from Laurence. Just then the phone rang again and he was getting ready to leave another message when I decided to pick up the phone. Of course my intent was to tell him to never call me again but he wouldn’t let me get a word in. He apologized profusely saying that he missed me already and he had to have me in his life because it was empty without me.”

Vivian paused to take a sip of her drink. She swallowed and cleared her throat before continuing. “He came up to San Angelo the following weekend and all these years later, here we are.”

Ashley sat back and looked at all of her friends. They were all happy with the people they were in relationships with. Monica and Quentin were living proof that things could work out with Chris if she gave them a chance. Maybe turning their friendship into a relationship wouldn’t be as bad as she thought it would be. She just wanted to be sure that Chris was what she wanted in her life right now. One thing she knew for certain was she would have to give him a chance to find out.

“So what is your answer going to be?” asked Monica, although all of them had open curiosity in their expressions. Ashley shrugged in a nonchalant manner to keep her friends hanging a little longer. “Right now I could go either way but either way, I’m going to take my time and decide wisely.”

“Good for you,” Vivian said, reaching out to squeeze Ashley’s hand.

“Thank you, Vivian,” Ashley responded, returning the light squeeze.

Sylvie leaned forward. “So is Chris behaving himself and being a good patient?”

Quentin chuckled. “Since when have you known Chris to behave?”

Sylvie laughed. “You have a point there.”

All eyes turned to Ashley. Monica arched a brow in her direction. “A better question would be does Ashley plan on behaving herself?”

Ashley gifted her friends with a wicked grin. “Of course not.”

Chapter Four

Ashley walked into Chris' kitchen and ran into the man she was looking for. "Good morning, George."

"Good morning, Miss Ashley."

"*George.*"

He gave her a sheepish look. "Sorry ma'am."

She placed her hands on her hips. "Is that supposed to be better?"

Finally he smiled. "Good morning, Ashley."

She returned the smile. "Good morning, George, and that is more like it. I swear you will make an old woman out of me yet."

George chuckled. Since she had arrived, she had been battling with him as to how he should address her. She knew all about the respect thing and she was certain he respected her, a lot, but she had to draw the line somewhere. A man who was almost thirty years her senior was calling her ma'am and miss. She had to fight away a shudder but she still managed a grimace. Shaking her head she handed him the grocery list for Chris. The last one had been mysteriously lost so she had come to deliver this one in person. Chris was only allowed to eat certain types of food to help maintain potential paralytic episodes but of course he had to see what rules he could break. The doctors still hadn't been able to figure out what was going on and she felt awful about all of the tests Chris had to take part in but he was being a good sport about it. She hoped they figured out a real diagnosis soon.

George gave the list a once over and smiled. "I will pick this up for Chris. Also I cooked breakfast and if you are hungry you are more than welcome to it."

She nodded. "I really appreciate you making sure Christopher is eating what he is supposed to."

Reaching over she snagged the smallest biscuit she could find. True, it was the last thing she needed but bread was her number one weakness.

"Oh, it's no problem because that is what the boss pays me to do." George took the rest of the fluffy heavenly smelling biscuits and placed them on a serving platter. "How is he?"

"Good. His cast could be coming off today."

"That's great."

Ashley sighed heavily. "Yes, it is."

George must have heard the anxiety in her voice because he turned to look at her with concern. "What's wrong?"

"How do you break possible bad news to a person that has his or her hopes up for something that is more than likely not going to happen?"

The older man smiled. "There is never a good way to break bad news in spite of what others say. You just have to tell them the truth. We all know the saying the truth hurts but in the end it will be better."

Ashley grimaced. "Yes, I figured that was the best way."

She watched as he walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out a jar of strawberry preserves and grape jelly.

"Good luck in telling the boss the bad news."

She bestowed an appreciative smile upon George. "Thanks."

She finished off her biscuit and watched as George finished his coffee and grabbed a biscuit for himself. Getting up she headed out of the kitchen stopping just as she reached the doorway. She turned back to look at George before asking him a question that had been on her mind for a while.

"George?"

He looked up at her. "Yes?"

"Why does everyone call Christopher, boss?"

He shrugged. "Probably for the same reason that you call him Christopher instead of Chris. It just seems natural to us to address him as boss and since he is a good one, no one really minds addressing him by the title."

Ashley nodded. It made sense to her. "Thanks for the biscuit."

The corner of his eyes crinkled when he smiled. "Anytime of course."

She slapped her hand against her forehead. "Oh I just remembered something."

Ashley went into the living room and picked up the container she had left sitting on the couch before returning to the kitchen. "I made you some fudge brownies last night. Chris told me they're your favorite" She handed him the container. "Now you take these home so that you and your family can enjoy them. The guys have already had their share no matter what they say."

George gave her a kiss on the cheek. "If you keep spoiling me like this, when the boss' physical

therapy is over I'm going to hold you hostage."

She laughed. "We shall see."

"Well, I'm finished here for the morning. I have to run a few errands but I will be back to make lunch."

She watched as George picked up his hat and left. She saw him pause by the bell and ring it before continuing on down the porch. Standing up she sighed. She was certain Chris had heard the bell but she would have to make him get a move on if he wanted any food. The guys he worked with ate like human garbage disposals. This was going to be one hell of a day. Chris was going to have his cast removed today but she was still trying to figure out how to explain to him that things were probably not going to go as well as he expected. His leg was still weak and this was where the tough physical therapy was going to come in. She headed into the living room and toward Chris' bedroom. The good thing was she hadn't had to move him around so he would be able to access everything because he had already slept in the downstairs bedroom. She had also been surprised to see he had wide doorways in the house already as well. Her job had been made a lot easier to begin with but that had probably been to make up for the trouble she was going to have now.

When she reached the doorway she saw Chris was easing himself into his wheelchair. Leaning against the doorjamb, she watched him. Once he turned and noticed her, he smiled and reared up tilting the chair backwards before letting it back down to the ground.

"You are pretty good at maneuvering that thing now," she said.

"Yeah, well, I'm ready to get out of this thing."

Ashley sighed as George's words came back to her. She might as well be honest now. Chris had to know what to expect before they reached the hospital. "That is what I want to talk to you about."

She stepped back and he wheeled himself past her and toward the front door. "Are you not going to eat breakfast?"

He shook his head. "Nah, I'm not hungry and I want to get this appointment over with."

He opened the front door and wheeled himself outside, leaving Ashley no choice but to follow. She grabbed her keys and exited the house. He was already in the car by the time she closed the door. She grabbed his wheelchair and put it in the trunk and got in on the driver's side. Starting the car she backed out of the yard. She was silent for a moment as if trying to figure out how to approach the subject. Finally she decided to be up front and direct.

"Christopher, you know that everything is not going to be back to one hundred percent when the cast comes off, right?"

He shrugged. “Well, right now I just want to concentrate on the positive things. I have had enough negative in my life the past few weeks to last me a life time.”

Knowing that he was feeling anxious, Ashley didn’t respond. She didn’t know if he was making reference to her or to the recent medical issues. At this point she wasn’t sure she wanted to. Christopher had spoken and at this time, he didn’t want to hear what she had to say. So if he was disappointed after they left the hospital it was his fault. They made the rest of the trip to the hospital in silence. When they arrived, the wait was short. They were led back and x-rays taken before Chris was led a room. Dr. Esthers came in the room.

“Everything looks good bone fracture-wise. The pins are still in place and helping the bone to heal nicely. The initial post-fracture edema has gone down but we are still a little concerned about the nerve damage and how well your leg is going to function.”

Dr. Esthers asked a few more questions before picking up the saw and cutting the cast off. Chris tried to move his leg and had a little success but not as much.

Dr. Esthers fitted him for a walking cast that would replace the plaster cast he had just had removed. With that he gave a few more instructions before leaving the room. As soon as the door closed Chris slammed his hand down on the space beside him and profanity flew out of his mouth. Ashley stood up, wanting to comfort him. This was what she had tried to prepare him for earlier but he wouldn’t listen. “Christopher I—”

He glared at her. “I really don’t feel like talking right now.”

She stepped back. She understood he was upset but that still didn’t excuse his rudeness. Being fed up with his pouting fits she snapped. “Well that is too damn bad because I do feel like talking about this right now. Goodness gracious, Christopher. You could put a two-year-old to shame the way you pout.”

Ashley sighed and took a deep breath and calming breath. “Look it is going to take a few months of hard physical therapy but I will get you back to where you want to be. I promise you that you will have use of your leg. What you have to come to terms with is it may not be to the capacity you want to be able to use your leg in.”

She shrugged. “Heck it may not even happen no matter how hard we work but we have to try. You also have to come to terms with that fact as well.”

Ashley nodded in the direction of his walking cast. “At least you can take the walking cast off when you need to so that will allow for more movement during workout.”

She smiled. “Plus you don’t have to scratch with a hanger anymore.” She leaned closer to him. “And you can tan your leg because it definitely needs it.”

He scowled at her. “I don’t find anything funny.”

She straightened and folded her arms across her chest. "I didn't mean to be funny. None of this is funny. I was just trying to look on the bright side." She walked across the room and sat down in a chair. "So tell me something. Are you going to sit around here and mope all day, or do you want to get to work strengthening your leg?"

He stared at her so long without saying anything she wondered if he had heard her. Finally he held his hand out. "Let me see those crutches."

She handed them to him and watched as he maneuvered himself until he was standing. "You lead, I'll follow."

Ashley laughed and shook her head. "How about we walk together since you've never used crutches before?"

He nodded and they began the slow trip to the physical therapy area. They might have been moving slow but he was handling the crutches well. Once they reached the room, he headed straight to the mat and she watched as he lowered himself to it.

"Christopher what are you doing?"

"I agree with you we might as well get started. I want to try and get this over with."

She knelt down beside him. "Are you sure? You've received a lot of news today. Most of it you didn't want to hear. We can relax today and get started tomorrow."

Chris shook his head. "Yes I'm sure. I want to get started now, the sooner the better. Besides, I can get rid of some of my anger by working out. "

Ashley began to unfasten the Velcro straps holding the cast on. Once she had it off, she began to massage his leg to stimulate more blood flow. She looked down at him. "Can you feel that?"

He nodded he could. He closed his eyes and gradually she felt the tension flow out of him, which was what she needed. He wouldn't be successful with tense muscles. A few minutes later she stopped the leg massage and he opened his eyes. "What is it?"

She leaned back. "I need to test the strength of your leg again."

He nodded and she lifted his leg. Cupping it under the knee she bent it and placed his foot in the palm of her hand. Offering him the support he would need without straining. "Push against me."

She waited, watching as he gritted his teeth and focused his concentration. Several seconds ticked off the clock and she still didn't feel any pressure. It was obvious he wasn't pushing, she just didn't know why. "Christopher?"

He took a deep breath and began to push. She saw him straining and smiled when she saw a few of the muscles in his leg tighten some. Feeling a slight pressure on her shoulder, her smile

widened. “Good.”

His breathing was labored and sweat formed on his forehead. She lowered his leg to the mat.

“That was good. Lay here and rest for a minute. I don’t want you to push it with the strength test.”

He nodded and she walked over to the stair stepper. She set it on the easiest level. Once she finished, she turned her attention back to him. “Do you think that you can make it to the stair stepper with just my help or do you need the crutches?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know but it is worth a try.”

Ashley walked over to him and waited until he was in a sitting position. Stepping behind him, she squatted down. “Bend your right leg.”

He did as she asked. “Now I am going to lift. While I am lifting, use your right leg to push yourself straight up.”

He did as she asked and together they had him standing with a minimum effort. She circled around until she was standing in front of him. “Brace yourself on my shoulders and we will take this one step at a time.”

He nodded and slowly they made their way to the stair stepper. The best he could do was take a light half step, half drag, but that was better than nothing. “Okay, now step up with your good leg and hold on to the handles.”

When he did as she asked she took his other leg and placed it onto the other footrest. She had him set up to where his right leg was bent and left leg was straight.

“Okay, now straighten your right leg.”

He did it with ease, but when she asked him to reverse the position he struggled, a lot more than she had truly expected him to. After several minutes of straining and pushing, he managed to push the step down an inch, and she jumped up happily. One would have thought she had won the lottery, but it was a major accomplishment for Chris. She patted him on the back, and even though he was leaning over the handles breathing heavily, he still smiled. Pushing the peddle down may have seemed like a small feat, but anyone who had seen the damage to Chris’ legs when he first came into the hospital would have known otherwise.

“Okay, that’s good enough for today.”

He nodded his agreement and she helped him off of the machine. His breathing was more labored than she expected. She looked at him with concern. “Are you tired? If so we can get the wheel chair.”

He shook his head adamantly. "I'm not getting back in that thing again. Just give me a minute or two to rest and I'll be okay."

Her grip tightened around him as he leaned into her. He must have been more tired than she thought. She looked up just in time to see his face coming towards her. He wasn't tired. Instead he was using this opportunity to put her in a situation she couldn't get out of. She very well couldn't let him go or he would fall down. Still she tried to avert her head but it was no use. He had her in a position where she didn't have many options. His lips found hers and she couldn't help but to respond.

This had been the last thing she had expected. It was the first time Chris had made a move on her since the first workout. He hadn't pressured or asked her any questions since that experience. So his kiss was very unexpected. She had let things go because she thought he indeed hadn't remembered. A gasp escaped her and she pulled back when his hand slid up under her shirt. She hadn't even realized that he had managed to pull her shirt out of her shorts. "Christopher, what the hell are you doing?"

His grin was wicked. "Something we have both wanted for a long time."

"I told you. I don't like to get involved with my patients."

"Can't you make an exception?"

When his hand palmed her breast, all rational reasoning went out the window. It had been a long time since she had felt the touch of a man. "Oh *dammit*," she muttered.

She pulled his head down for a hungry kiss. A sigh escaped her as he ended the kiss to pull her shirt over her head. She didn't know how they ended up in the doorway leading to the room with the bed in it but they had. They entered the room and he closed the door behind them, pressing Ashley up against it. When his lips found her left nipple, she cried out. He raised his head and looked at her. "Ashley?"

She opened her eyes. "Are you sure that you want to do this?"

She groaned and dropped her head back against the door. He would have to grow a conscience now when her body was ripe with need. "Are you sure you want me to answer that question?"

"Yes, I do. It isn't my intention to force you."

She rolled her eyes. "I would never allow you to force me but I will be honest. I'm not sure about anything right now."

It was almost ironic to her. For as long as she could remember she had dreamed of this moment and now that it was here she was choking but with good reason.

"Are you protected?"

She lifted her head and looked at him knowing what he meant and she had to shake her head regrettably. “No.”

But she would set up a doctor’s appointment to take care of that as soon as possible. After this episode, she knew it was going to be hard to keep from getting hot and heavy with him.

Chris closed his eyes and groaned as he laid his head on her shoulder. “*Damn.*”

She felt the frustration radiating off of him. “What? Is something wrong?”

“Yes. You aren’t on birth control.”

She lifted her head and looked down at him. “No I’m not but what does that have to do with anything?”

He lifted his head and grimaced. “I don’t have any protection with me, either.”

She closed her eyes. “*Oh.*”

He cupped her cheek and she leaned into his touch. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

Deep down, she knew it wasn’t. This was just one more example of why it was a bad idea to get involved with Chris. If this were meant to be, they both would have been prepared. She wasn’t in the mood to toss caution to the side any more than she already had.

Chris stroked her back. “Not for me,” Chris muttered under his breath.

He pulled back slowly and she smiled before reaching for her shirt, which was hanging from the back of her shorts. She pulled it back over her head and tucked the ends back into her shorts. A chuckle escaped her when Chris’ stomach grumbled.

“See that is why you should have eaten this morning.”

He shook his head.

“Come on let’s get your brace and your crutches then we can go home. There might be some leftover food.”

Chris chuckled as Ashley handed him his crutches. “You have known the guys long enough to know whatever was left for breakfast is gone by now.”

Ashley laughed. “Who said anything about breakfast?”

Chris shook his head. "Lunch is good as well."

Together they worked to straighten up the physical therapy room to make sure it was in order. Once they finished the task, they headed to her car. The drive home was a short one and Chris hobbled out of the car. "Man, I hope George has lunch ready."

They made it into the house and Chris headed straight for the kitchen. If Ashley hadn't known any better she would have said he had been using the crutches all his life. He had figured out how to hold his injured leg up enough for him to hobble along on them. By the time she made it to the kitchen, he was seated at the table. George was leaning against the counter with his arms folded over his chest.

"Hello George."

"Hello Ashley. I was just asking the boss how it went."

She went and joined Chris at the table. "And what was the boss' response?"

George dropped his head but Ashley could still see his smile. "He said it didn't go as good as he wanted it to go but he can deal with it."

She smiled. "Oh, I'm sure he will be able to deal with it alright."

Chris opened his mouth to speak but his back door burst open and four rowdy men filed through the door. They had the decency to lower their noise decibel but they were still loud. Each man slapped Chris on the shoulder as they passed by. That was one of the things she liked about Barrett, Pete, Ian and Luke. The men were good friends to Chris. They all joined Chris and herself at the table, greeting her in the process. She returned their greeting and they turned their attention back to Chris.

"Silver will be here in another hour maybe two."

That seemed to get Chris' attention. He had been so bummed out about his leg he had completely forgotten about the arrival of the new horse. She knew how bad he had missed being out in the corral with the guys and now he could get back out there with the guys. Of course he wasn't going to be able to get on the horse for a bit longer but just being outside and being able to get off the porch was good enough for him. "Who is going to work him?"

Barrett gave a small nod. "I am."

"Well the good thing is that you guys won't have to run to the house to get me if there are any questions or problems. Now that I have the walking cast on, I can get out there with you guys more often."

Ian sighed in mock relief. "Good, that means less work I have to do."

Luke glowered. “Not a chance. You do any less work around here and you might as well not show up.”

The conversation may have heated up if George had not chosen that moment to put a platter of sandwiches on the table along with a platter of potato chips. The guys went to reach for the plate and George cleared his throat. The five men looked up.

“Ladies first.”

They all had the sense to look contrite. “Sorry Ashley. We almost forgot you were with us.”

“It is okay Pete. I have five brothers and I’m used to having to fight for food. Besides they are hard-working men and they need their nourishment. ”

George shook his head. “Well you won’t have to do that around here and you are a hard-working woman. So help yourself.”

He pointed out which sandwiches had ham and which had turkey. George had also used mayonnaise and mustard but they were all on rye bread.

“Thank you, George. The sandwiches look good.”

“Wait until you taste them. I don’t know what it is but George makes the best sandwiches.”

“I’ll make sure to tell Heidi that.”

Luke growled at Pete. “Then I will just have to tell Darcy that you-”

Chris cleared his throat. “Fellas, I know we want to make Ashley feel at home but I would also like her to think we are somewhat civilized.”

Ashley shook her head and laughed. “Too late.”

She reached for a ham sandwich with mustard and a handful of chips. “Okay, you guys can have at it.”

That was all the encouragement they needed. The platter of sandwiches all but vanished before her eyes. Yes, these guys definitely reminded her of her brothers. The guys wolfed down the food, thanking George as they did. When they were finished, they were back out the door leaving Chris speaking to their disappearing backs. “I’ll be out in a little while to join you guys.”

He turned his attention back to Ashley, who was still enjoying her sandwich. “After you finish eating I’d like to take you out and show you what we do here from beginning to end.”

Ashley nodded her head. “I would like that.”

And she would. Chris had described to her what he did but she was sure that describing what he did was one thing and showing her was another. George handed her a paper towel for her to put her sandwich in. "Take this with you so you can go on and head out. I can see the boss is anxious to get out there."

George was right. Chris looked like a little kid getting ready to go to the candy store. He was already in the process of gathering up his crutches. Ashley wrapped her sandwich up in the paper towel in a fashion that would still allow her to eat the sandwich. She wanted to see what he did because it was a huge part of his life and to determine whether she would really fit in his world or not. Once she was done, she stood up and smiled at Chris. "I'm ready when you are."

Chapter Five

“So, what is on my baby’s mind?”

Ashley looked over at her mother and laughed. “Momma, how old will I be before you stop referring to me as your baby?”

“You will never be old enough.”

She shook her head and returned to her duty of moving the food from the kitchen to the dining room where they were to eat shortly. Deborah Bennett had always treated her daughter special. Not only because she was the youngest of six and not because she was the only girl. Deborah treated her daughter special because she *was* special. All of her children were special to her in a way. Ashley knew her mother shared something unique with all of her children. Ashley picked up the candied yams and carried them to the table in the dining room. Deborah followed her into the dining room, the platter of fried chicken in her hands.

This was the reason she had avoid having dinner with all of her family at one time for as long as she had. She cringed to think about the workout she was going to have to get in to work the calories off from this meal. The second reason was because of the turmoil she was dealing with concerning her new patient.

“Are you going to tell me what’s bothering you?”

Ashley set down the candied yams and turned to look at her mother. “Christopher Morgan.”

Her mother placed the platter on the table before looking over at her daughter. A startled expression covered her face. Ashley smiled. Her mother was rarely caught off guard.

“The young man that you were friends with in high school right?”

Ashley nodded. “Yes, and he is currently a physical therapy patient that I am working with.”

Ashley said it quietly but she was certain her mother had heard her. Her mother eyebrows rose and Ashley felt a little guilty about not confiding in her mother before now. Yes, it was true she had told her mother that she was working with a patient but not the fact that it was Christopher. She wasn’t that bad but she had neglected telling her mother who the patient was and she had to admit it was intentional. Why she had kept the secret from her mother intentionally wasn’t to be spiteful. Her mother was one of the people who had always been there for her when she needed someone. No matter what trouble she might have caused or inadvertently gotten herself mixed up in. But something had kept her from telling her up until this point.

Deborah Bennett placed her hands on her youthful hips. People wouldn’t believe she’d had six children by looking at her figure. “And you didn’t tell me before now for what reason?”

“Sorry mama, I just didn’t want to make a big deal about it.”

“Well, it must be a big deal since you are bringing it up.”

Ashley smiled. “You’re right. It is a big deal. At least it is now.”

Deborah’s eyebrow’s rose. “What do you mean by that?”

She sighed. “Christopher wants to take our relationship to a new level.”

Her mother’s eyebrows rose even higher. More than Ashley thought was physically possible. “What relationship and to what level?”

Ashley couldn’t hold back her laugh. “Our friendship to the relationship level.”

Deborah began to smile and the smile turned into a laugh. “Then I would say it’s about time.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “Mother, could you please try to control your excitement. I was hoping you would try to talk me out of this.”

“I don’t know why. I haven’t seen Christopher in some time now, but he was always good to you. Besides, this is something you have wanted for as long as I can remember.”

Ashley sighed. “Yeah well, now I’m not so sure.”

“Why not?”

Ashley shrugged. “Christopher and I are good friends.”

Deborah gave her daughter a look of puzzlement. “So are your father and I.”

Her mother had a point but that wasn’t it. There was something about this set up that had her worried. “Yeah well, that’s different.”

“How? Your father and I were best friends in school but we didn’t date until we got out of high school.”

Ashley twisted the kitchen towel she was holding in her hands without noticing. They made their way back into the kitchen.

“Is it because he’s white?”

Ashley looked up in shock at her mother’s question. “*Mama*—you raised us better than that. It has nothing to do with Christopher being white.”

“Then what is it?”

Ashley walked over to the kitchen table and plopped down into a chair. She dropped her face

into her hands and groaned before looking back up at her mother. "I'm scared."

Deborah eyebrows rose. "You...scared? I don't believe it."

Ashley let a puff of laughter escape. "Well, believe it."

Deborah walked over to the table to join her. "What are you afraid of?"

Everything, she wanted to scream but she didn't. Her mother would probably scold her for raising her voice, especially if she raised her voice in the house. "Not knowing."

Her mother reached for her hand. "Not knowing what?"

"Not knowing what will happen if I take this risk."

Deborah smiled gently. "You've taken risk before."

"No, I actually haven't taken any risk. I can honestly say that ninety-five percent of the time I was certain of what the outcome would be."

Deborah pulled back. "Ashley, that is the biggest load of crap I have ever heard. You can never be that certain about anything. The best that anyone can hope for is the best odds."

"But—"

"And if Christopher is still the young man I remember him to be, you are lucky he wants a relationship with you. There are a lot of men out there right now that are looking for a lot less. So if you ask me if there was one man taking a risk on, it's Chris."

Ashley was indecisive for a moment. Like her mother said, she really had nothing to lose except her heart but Chris had already had it...for years. Why shouldn't she take a chance at true happiness? She would rather look back on this as an experience that she had learned from rather than an experience she had never had. "You're right, mom."

"Right about what?"

Ashley looked up as Frederick, her oldest brother by ten years, walked into the kitchen with his wife, Ingrid. She stood up to embrace the both of them.

"It's good to see you two again and you before you ask, it is none of your business."

Ingrid laughed. "You know your brother too well."

"I lived with him long enough so I ought to. When did you guys arrive?"

"We just made it a few minutes ago and dad told us you two were in here."

Ashley shook her head in mock disgust. "Are he and Keldon still glued to the television?"

Ingrid rolled her eyes. "You know they are."

Frederick kissed all three women, one on the lips, one the on the cheek, and the last on the forehead. "And I'm about to go and join them."

Ashley laughed. "Now, that is shocking."

She watched her brother disappear through the doorway before turning to her sister in law.

"So how are McKenzie and Patrick?"

Ingrid smiled. "The kids are fine. They're staying with my parents for the week."

"I'll have to make sure to swing by and see them this week."

The last time she had seen her niece and nephew was when she had first gotten into town. So far she'd had dinner at all of her siblings' houses since she had been back in town. It felt good to sit around the table with everyone once more. Now everything was coming to a full circle. Everyone was gathering up over at her parents tonight for dinner.

"They would love that."

"So would I."

Mackenzie and Patrick were nine and six years of age and carbon copies of Frederick. She loved being an aunt to all of her brothers' children. The kitchen door swung open and Ashley let out an excited shriek as Raymond entered the kitchen followed by his wife, Tamara. Ashley laughed as he picked her up and swung her around. She and Raymond were the closest of the six Bennett children. They were all close in age, averaging two years in difference, but six between her and Raymond. He was the third son to be born, the laidback, peace-making son.

"It's good to see you, baby girl."

"It's good to you, too."

He set her down and stopped over to greet his mother and Ingrid while Tamara embraced Ashley.

"You know, if I didn't know that you two were siblings, I swear I would be jealous."

Ashley laughed. She liked Tamara a lot and she was perfect for her brother. "Believe me the part of his heart I have is one that I am okay to have when a man has a wife."

It was Tamara's turn to laugh. All of her brothers who were married or in the process of getting married had chosen good women in her opinion. Tamara had given her brother three wonderful children. When she didn't see or hear them, she looked at Tamara quizzically.

"Where's the trio?"

"Vanessa is at a sleep over with friends from school. Yvette is at her godparents' house. Alisha is with my best friend and her husband, who say they are practicing."

Ashley's eyebrows furrowed together in confusion. "Practicing for?"

"She's pregnant."

Deborah laughed. "I should call her and tell her not to waste her time. All children are different."

"Hopefully, she's just trying to get the basics."

Tamara smiled. "That's why I gave the mildest tempered child of the trio."

"Good choice."

Tamara looked over at Ashley. "We still have to get together for lunch."

"Babe, you know it's hard for her to get away for lunch while she has a patient."

Deborah's eyebrows rose for hopefully the last time for the evening. "Do you know who the patient happens to be?"

Raymond was smart to look away from his mother before answering. "I plead the fifth," he stated as he backed out of the kitchen."

Deborah looked over at Tamara, who held her hands up in surrender. "I have no idea who the patient is, I promise."

"That is why I always tried to keep you two separate," Deborah muttered under her breath. "You two always did manage to keep each other's secrets very well."

Ashley laughed. "Mom, I never meant to—"

She broke off in mid-sentence when a loud pop was heard in the living room. They all rushed out of the kitchen only to find Carl making his entrance. His fiancé, Ebony, stood behind him shaking her head, while Quinlan and his wife, Kathy, came in behind them.

"Sometimes, I wonder why I am marrying you," Ebony said.

Everyone in the room laughed and Ashley looked at Carl suspiciously as he headed in her

direction. He was four-years older than her and the clown of the family and always had something up his sleeve—literally. The night she'd had dinner at their house had been interesting. Still, he had only been able to pull one stunt when Ebony threatened to make him sleep on the couch for a month. Carl paused when she held up a hand, motioning for him to stop. She made him turn in a complete circle so that she could inspect him. When she saw nothing suspicious looking, Ashley held out her arms and he stepped forward and picked her up in his arms. She hugged her brother back before pulling away.

He gave her a brilliant smile. "What did you think? That I had something up my sleeve?"

She gave him a wry look. "You normally do."

Ebony stepped forward to hug Ashley. "He would have if I hadn't made him empty his pockets before we left the house."

Carl smiled smugly. "Yes, but she did a really body search, which is why we are late."

Ebony punched Carl in the arm and a blush began to travel up her neck. "*Carl!*"

Carl chuckled. "But she let me bring the balloon."

"I wouldn't have if I had known what he was going to do with it."

Quinlan jumped into the conversation. "Is that what we heard?"

Ebony gave everyone an apologetic look. "Unfortunately."

Quinlan shook his head before stepping forward to hug his sister. He was eight-years older than her and the most serious next to Frederick.

"Some things never change," Quinlan murmured.

"I know," Kathy muttered. "I almost jumped out of my skin thinking it was a gun shot."

Ashley hugged her sister-in-law. "I apologize for my brother taking ten years off your life."

Her father chose that moment to stand up and turn off the television with a few complaints. "Since everyone is here, I say that we eat before my wife's delicious cooking gets cold.

"Dad, are going to skip the rest of the Rangers game to *eat*?"

Gerald smiled. "Sure am, son. For your mother's fried chicken and candied yams, there is a lot I would miss."

Ashley laughed as her brothers ran into the dining room. Her mother called out to them.

“Don’t touch anything or you don’t eat.”

As she walked into the dining room with her parents, her brothers and their significant others were seated. She glanced at Keldon. He was the only other single member of the family although he wasn’t really single. Keldon was the playboy, and she could never get the names of his lady friends right so she didn’t even try any more. He was two years older than her but still a little on the immature and unsettled side.

The good thing was he was smart enough not to have kids by all of them. He didn’t have children by any of them and she called all of them *sweetie* because she couldn’t remember any of their names.

“Let us bless the food.”

Everyone bowed their heads and Ashley led the prayer to bless the meal they were all about to eat. She ended the prayer and everyone began passing patters of food around. Looking at her family, she couldn’t help but smile. This reminded her of old times. Times that they all sat around the table when they were growing up through the years. Dinnertime had always been exciting for her. It was a time when everyone’s troubles seemed to melt away.

“So how is the physical therapy with Chris coming along?”

Ashley groaned and closed her eyes. Of all of the subjects that Raymond could bring up it had to be this one. When she opened her eyes, ten pairs of curious eyes were on her. One pair was on Raymond, so much for a night lacking trouble.

* * * *

“We received the results of the test back today.”

The bite of green beans Chris had been about to eat landed back on his plate. Andrew, Karen and Samantha had finally had time to go and get tested for Hypokalemic Paralysis. He was over to his parents’ house and it was nice to be having dinner with his family. They hadn’t done this since he’d had his accident. He had only had one paralytic episode since the first one that had been the cause of his accident. He had worked out really hard and his body seemed to rebel against that. Ashley had been with him so it had been a lot easier to deal with the episode. She had known exactly what to do and with minutes the episode had ended. He glanced up at his baby brother again when Andrew spoke.

“Everyone tested negatively and more than likely, so will junior here when he is born.”

“Stop calling our daughter junior,” Karen huffed.

Andrew shook his head. “I am telling you that sonogram was wrong. We are having a boy.”

Karen looked at everyone before rolling her eyes. “Your brother thinks he knows everything and

it will be just my luck if he's right."

Not really hearing Karen, Chris nodded before leaning over and rubbing his hand over Karen's stomach. Relief flowed through his veins knowing that no one else would have to suffer like he was took a big weight off of his shoulders. It also gave him a little hope for himself as well but he didn't want to become too elated. There were still more tests that needed to be ran on him. He looked over at Andrew. "I'm happy to hear you guys are okay."

Andrew smiled. "So am I."

Karen reached out and took his hand in hers. "You will be okay as well. I know you will. We all do."

Andrew leaned back and pushed his plate away and leaned back. "So, how are things going between you and Ashley?"

Everyone's head snapped up and Andrew groaned. "*Uh-oh*. Did I say something I wasn't supposed to say?"

Chris sighed heavily. This had been bound to happen sooner or later. He might as well face the music. "No, not really."

Andrew relaxed. "Oh, okay. So how is it going between you and Ashley?"

Virginia put down her fork. "Yes, son, how is it going between you and Ashley, and why is this the first I've heard of this?"

"Well to be honest, I'm pursuing Ashley relentlessly to no avail and I didn't tell you, mom, because I didn't, and still don't, want you to meddle."

Virginia gave her son an indignant look. "I don't meddle."

At everyone's disagreement, Virginia folded her arms and attempted to pout before renegeing.

"Okay, maybe I meddle a little."

Chris gave his mother an amused look. "Try a lot."

Everyone turned to look at Benjamin when his sharp crack of laughter echoed around the dining room. "Meddling or not, I say good choice, son. I like Ashley. She is a lovely woman and just what you need."

"She's very intelligent and talented as well."

Chris glanced over at his mother as she spoke. Glancing down at his plate, he had no idea what to do or say. He was pursuing Ashley adamantly but she hadn't budged and he agreed with his

parents. She was a very lovely and intelligent person and she was definitely what he wanted to complete his life. He wondered what he would have done back in high school if he had known that Ashley had been interested in him. Probably the same thing that he had done when he hadn't known, due to the age that he would have been at the time. The most important thing he had to worry about was convincing Ashley to take a chance on them now. Glancing up at his mother, he needed a woman's point of view. His mother and Karen were definitely the people who would be willing to give him advice.

"What can I do to get Ashley to take a chance on us?"

"What is it, big brother? Are the dark blues not enough for you?" Andrew questioned with a smirk.

Before Chris could reply, Karen elbowed Andrew in the ribs. "Hush up. If you remember correctly, your dark blues weren't enough, either."

Chris snickered remembering how hard Karen had made it for Andrew to snag her and prayed that Ashley didn't put him through that torture even though she was coming close.

Karen gave him a warm smile. "You have to use a little reverse psychology. Make her see that you two getting together is the best thing that could ever happen. Show her how good things can be if she gives in to temptation but, most importantly, show her that this is *her* idea."

Virginia nodded. "I agree. In the end, I ended up being the one who had to convince your father that I was the one for him."

Everyone looked up in surprise. Chris expressed his surprise out loud. "What?"

Virginia launched into the story of her courtship with Benjamin. "I moved to San Angelo from Abilene, Texas with my parents and siblings. I met your father our junior year in high school. It was love at first sight, at least on my end. I was infatuated with your father but there wasn't the same amount of enthusiasm on his end. He hadn't wanted to get involved with a city girl who would more than likely break his heart."

Virginia paused, reaching for her glass of tea. Chris stared at his mother in shock. "How did you manage to convince dad that he should take a chance on you?"

Virginia smiled. "A little reverse psychology, as Karen so nicely put it. See, your father told me he wasn't interested so I cut my losses and started dating other people."

Chris frowned. "But if that is the case, how did you guys get together?"

Benjamin spoke up. "I came to my senses. When I saw how many other men had been interested and more than willing to date your mother, I figured there must have been something about her. I wanted to know what the interest was and I almost went nuts trying to find the answer. So I set out to romance your mother for myself. I wooed your mother until she begged me to stop. I

informed your mother the only thing that was going to stop me from pursuing her was if she agreed to be mine. Thirty-five years later, she still is.”

Virginia batted her eyes playfully. “He walked right into my trap, although your father did not keep his promise. He is still romancing me but I’m not complaining.”

They all shared another laugh but Chris knew the statement was very accurate. He and Andrew had experienced their parents’ unconditional love for each other over the years. That love had also trickled down to them. He wanted the same with Ashley. Years of unconditional love and the emotional up and downs with Ashley. Now he just had to convince her that she wanted the same and he hoped that it wouldn’t be as difficult as it sounded. Still, something told him that even if it was hard, in the end it would be worth it.

Chapter Six

Ashley came around the corner and shrieked loudly, placing a hand to her chest. It took her a few moments to compose herself and she was glaring by the time she did. “You almost scared me to death!”

Christopher stood before her, sans a shirt and cutoff sweatpants, leaning against the counter with a cup of coffee as if he had been waiting for her. After the week she had so far, this was the last thing she needed. Christopher was plaguing her thoughts and her dreams. Every night this week she had awakened with his name on her lips and her hand between her thighs. It was almost too much to think about. Then to top it all off, he seemed to be operating in a mode she couldn’t place her finger on right now. She shook her head. What she needed was time away from him. He was starting to drive her insane. Make it hard to remember why she shouldn’t get involved with him. Even as he stood looking so sexy, he made her eyes hurt.

“I didn’t mean to.”

Her eyes widened at the lack of sincerity in his voice and the fact he didn’t make any attempt to move as she came toward him to get to the coffee pot. Like she really needed caffeine right now, as jittery as she was.

“Is there a problem?”

He straightened from his reclining position against the counter and sat his coffee cup down. She took a step back before she could stop herself. When she realized what she had done, she stood her ground. She couldn’t allow him to see how much he got under her skin. He took a step toward her, and another, and another. His steps were slow and uncertain because of the walking cast, until he stood directly in front of her, making her tilt her head back to look him in the eye.

She raised her hands and placed them against his hot rock-solid skin like a shield, a useless shield. He disarmed her quickly, capturing her wrists in his hands and sliding her hands upward until they rested on his strong shoulders. She bit back a whimper when she felt the muscles flex underneath her palms.

“Yes, there is. I want to know why you are avoiding me. Did I do something wrong?”

This time she didn’t stop herself from taking a few steps back. She almost sighed in relief when he didn’t follow her. It made it easier for her to be honest.

To think.

His nearness seemed to incapacitate her, mind, body and *common sense*. She shook her head, trying to pull herself together. All she had to do was get rid of him, put the files in her filing cabinet and leave.

Probably going to be easier said than done.

“No, Chris. You haven’t done anything wrong. I’m just keeping space between us. Besides, how can I avoid you when I’m your physical therapist? I see you almost every day.”

His brows furrowed together in a way that made him look even more handsome. “Why do you need space? Why aren’t you here for breakfast anymore? Why do you leave before dinner to go home?”

She folded her arms across her chest, annoyed by how he was insinuating she was the one with the problem. From where she stood, this was a mutual issue. “Because I’m tired and ready to go home. I also like to sleep in. Not showing up for breakfast here gives me the opportunity to do so. Besides, after what happened between us, do you have to ask?”

His frown deepened. “Is there something wrong with a healthy attraction between a man and a woman?”

She gasped. “Yes, when you are my client, not to mention we are friends.”

“It happens every day.”

She opened her mouth to deny it but couldn’t. He had a point and a good one. Romances between friends and clients weren’t uncommon but she knew well enough that it could be disastrous if it didn’t work out.

“It isn’t wise, Chris. Besides, I’m not ready to get involved with anyone. I’m still trying to get settled and figure out what I want.”

“Are you saving yourself for any particular amount of time? If there is a time frame, I would like to know?”

Her mouth dropped open. “You are being an *ass*, Christopher.”

His left brow rose. “I was serious. I’m just trying to figure out what is going on in your head. I can’t understand why a woman would fight such a strong attraction. We are very compatible.”

“What if we aren’t compatible, Christopher?”

His eyebrows rose high on his forehead. “Excuse me?”

Her mouth curved into a smile. Apparently he found the idea ludicrous. In a way, she did too but she had to fight this attraction. The end results could be devastating if it didn’t work out.

“I said what if we aren’t compatible? How do we know we’re really attracted to each other? That we’ll be able to click?”

He chuckled softly. “Trust me. We are very compatible.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you still remember the heated kiss we shared the last time we touched. You just mentioned it, remember?”

She tried to keep her expression blank not wanting to let him know he had just backed her into a corner without taking a step toward her. Still, she wasn't going down without a fight.

“I believe that was a fluke, a one-time occurrence. It wouldn't happen again if we wanted it to.”

One of the first things she had discovered about Christopher was that he didn't like challenges. He preferred things to go smoothly and normally had a plan of action and back up plan in place before he did anything. At least that was his mode of operation at the ranch. However, she could tell from his expression that proving she was incorrect was exactly what he wanted to do. Still, she hoped he would decline the opportunity to so.

It's not going to happen.

She released a long, slow breath as he stepped closer to her. His eyes never left hers when he came to a stop in front of her. Reaching out, he touched her arm and the shock of that touch for some reason almost took her breath away. This was the zing, the thrill that was missing when any other man in the past had touched her. It unnerved her and she struck out at him verbally. “I thought you were a horse trainer not an expert on sexual attraction,” she said in a low, raspy tone.

She didn't dare clear her throat. He already heard the effect he had on her with just a simple touch. She might be better off just remaining quiet.

“You're right but I'm also a man and I know sexual chemistry on any level. Yet I think this will eliminate any doubt in your mind on whether or not we the first time was a fluke.”

Before she could respond he lowered his head, cupped the back of her neck and brought his mouth to hers. Her heart pounded hard in her chest the moment their lips touched. And when their tongues began mating with an intensity that shook every nerve in her body, she had to fight the urge to break the connection for fear of losing control. In that moment she wasn't aware of anything but the feel of his tongue stroking hers, the feel of hers stroking his, the rush of sensations flooding and overpowering her. She was also aware of the dampness between her legs increasing and of the way her body was beginning to ache with need. Slowly he pulled back, their lips reluctantly separating and she felt a tremendous sense of loss.

“Now tell me,” he said slowly, dragging the words out as he eased away from her lips. “Are we compatible?”

She struggled to clear her mind, as well as hide the way her nipples had hardened. It was too late, for his eyes zeroed in on them. Her lips felt thoroughly kissed. Her response to him was as potent

as the intoxicating drinks she'd had at Burk's the first night they met. And from the heated look in his eyes, he was just as affected by the kiss as she was. There was no way she could answer his question without being truthful. It would be a moot point. She was surprised they hadn't combusted with that kiss.

"Yes," she finally said, pulling in a deep, hot breath. "I can say with all certainty that we are compatible. The question is, what do we do about it?"

* * * *

"Are you ready to go?"

Chris nodded and swung his bag over his shoulder before reaching for his cane. He had made a lot of progress in the last several weeks. The walking cast had been taken off and the crutches were gone as well. Instead, he used a cane and now his leg was strong enough to support him for long distances. He had come a long way since he had become her patient although he was still pushing for more. After the kiss they shared two weeks ago, Ashley still seemed to be warming up to the idea but very slowly in his opinion. He didn't want to press her but his patience was growing thin.

They left the physical therapy room and headed for the exit of the hospital. Today had been a hard workout for him. Not because it was physically draining but because it had been mentally draining. It was his birthday and it had been a lonely one so far. No one in his family had called to wish him happy birthday. As a matter of fact, no one had called him at all. Even Ashley and he knew she was aware that it was his birthday. She had just asked him what he wanted for his birthday three days ago, the only time she had spoken to him about anything personal. Today she had been acting very strange but he was not sure why. They reached the car and he came close to falling in. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back against the headrest.

The drive back to his home was a short one. She killed the engine and he swung his legs out of the car, making sure his cane was sturdy before standing. They walked to his porch together. She stuck her key in the door.

"So what are you going to do today?"

He shrugged. "I had planned on—"

"Surprise!"

Chris looked up in surprise as the door swung open and all of his and Ashley friends and family stood there. He was sure that his look of shock was priceless.

"What are you doing here?"

Luke chuckled. "We're here to eat, of course."

That earned him an elbow from his wife, Heidi. “No, we are here to celebrate your birthday.”

Chris shook his head. “I thought you guys had forgotten.”

Hell, he had even gone as far as to call everyone else but no one had answered. He knew why now. Virginia stepped forward and embraced her son. “Your mother may be getting old but not that old.”

He pulled back and smiled trying to take everyone and everything in. “Well, I must say I’m surprised.”

Ashley placed a kiss on his cheek. “I’m glad. Happy Birthday. As much as I hated keeping this from you, I thought it would be a nice surprise.”

He looked at her with confusion. “You put this together?”

She started to deny it but Andrew beat her to the punch. “She sure did and man, can she become militant when it comes to you.”

Chris’ words died on his lips when his sister-in-law pulled him away. “Ignore your brother. You know he doesn’t know how to behave in public.”

He laughed and a second later he was standing in front of a table, looking at his favorite foods. The table was covered from end to end. His eyes skimmed the sautéed chicken breast with mushrooms, deviled steak, beef ribs, green bean casserole, baked beans, potato salad, macaroni and cheese, carrots, and dinner rolls. A grumble rumbled from his stomach. He had been so distracted this morning he hadn’t eaten breakfast. A plate was placed in his hand and he began trying to figure out how he was going to get a little of everything on it. “I can’t thank you guys enough for this.”

“You’re welcome.”

He was seeing people he hadn’t seen in years, mainly Ashley’s family. Mrs. Bennett was still as beautiful now as he remembered her being when he was in high school. Her five brothers still looked as intimidating but not as much as they used to be. The intimidation factors used to be the size advantage they had over him as well as there being five of them and one of him. Now it was just the fact there were five of the Bennett brothers that were intimidating. Even though that was the case, he still felt at ease. He looked over at Ashley. “Did you make all of the food as well?”

She smiled and shook her head. “We have to give George and our mothers credit for that.”

He thanked the trio for making the meal before adding a little of everything to his plate. It was a balancing act trying to carry the plate and operate the cane at the same time but he managed and felt a surge of self-satisfaction.

With Ashley supporting him and motivating him every step of the way, he was achieving his

goals more quickly than he ever thought he would. He found a seat, moments later Ashley joined him. She had focused on the chicken breast with mushrooms, carrots, green bean casserole, and macaroni and cheese. He looked at her in surprise when he didn't see her with a roll. Mr. Bennett's bread was Ashley's weakness. It always had been. He wondered why she didn't have any.

She looked up and caught him staring at her. She smiled. "So did you really enjoy the surprise?"

He nodded and he had. No one had ever gone through the hard work of getting the number of people that were present in one place just for him. This was probably one of the best adult birthday's he'd had besides his twenty-first birthday. It felt good to see everyone laughing, joking, eating and introducing themselves to each other. Leaning over, he placed a brief kiss on Ashley's lips. He was glad when she didn't pull away. It meant there might be hope for them yet.

* * * *

Andrew walked by, clearing his throat. "None of that now. We have enough strays running around here as it is."

Ashley laughed. "If only you had followed your own advice."

Andrew's face fell playfully. "I tried but it is just so much fun making them."

Chris shook his head. "Where is your wife?"

Andrew pouted. "No fair trying to call in reinforcements."

Ashley watched the two brothers banter with each other playfully as they always had. Karen must have had a sixth sense because she appeared and dragged Andrew away. She had to admit he seemed to go very willingly. She also looked around the room to make sure that everyone was okay. There was no need to worry. Everyone was milling around like one big family. They had made themselves at home and were talking amongst themselves to introduce themselves to each other.

Her gaze came to a halt when she saw her mother sitting next to Virginia. Their heads were too close together for anything good to come out of it. She elbowed Chris to get his attention.

"Our mothers are together and it doesn't look too good."

Chris looked up and smiled. "Good. I can use all of the help that I can get."

Ashley elbowed him again. "Believe me you don't need any help. You have been persuasive enough."

His eyebrows rose. "I have?"

She bit her lip then nodded. "Yes, you have."

More than he would ever know. She took a bite of her macaroni and cheese. When she had finished chewing she looked back over at him. Good thing too or she might have choked. The man was sexy as hell and he was nice. He was a man that any woman in her right mind would love to be with.

She was learning that more and more each day. She spent more time with him outside of physical therapy but she had made sure that it couldn't be mistaken for more than friends having a good time together. It was obvious that he didn't like it. Yet, he hadn't protested. Even so, he put up with her hesitation, especially about taking their relationship beyond a friendship level. Today something was different. Seeing all of their friends and family together and getting along so well made everything click into place. A smile came to her face when she leaned over to whisper in his ear. "Besides, after tonight you won't need any help except mine."

Ashley laughed when Chris turned red under his tan and choked on the bite of potato salad he had just eaten. She patted him on the back while noticing they had caught the attention of a few others. Catching Raymond's eye, she winked and he smiled at her. He probably had a good idea of what she had said to make Chris choke and blush. Between her mother and Raymond they could exchange one look and know what the other was thinking. It was one of the ways her mother had known if they were telling the truth or not.

Raymond and her mother knew Ashley too well, in her opinion. Sometimes better than she wanted them to. Although it had come in handy the times when she was so hurt that she couldn't bear to speak. Lately she had been speaking more openly to Raymond than to her mother because more comfort seemed to lay with her brother concerning the subject. It was mainly because she wanted a male point of view. Noticing the room was becoming quieter by the minute, she looked up. Everyone was lounging around looking completely happy and stuffed. George stuck his head out of the kitchen and nodded to her. She didn't know he had disappeared into the kitchen already. It had been her intention to help him with the next surprise. She placed her empty plate in the temporary trashcan that had been set up to keep everyone from having to travel into the kitchen to throw away any trash.

Giving everyone the signal of what was to come, she headed into the kitchen hoping they would remember what to do when she returned to the room. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight before her. "Oh George, it's beautiful. I almost hate to eat it."

She gazed at the cake a moment longer before turning to look at George. "I'm going to need your help carrying it."

He nodded and lit the candles on the cake and they picked it up together. As soon as the door to the kitchen opened, everyone launched into the chorus of happy birthday. Chris just stood there and shook his head in wonderment. When they finished singing, he was smiling. Ashley set the cake on the table.

“You guys are great.” He studied the cake before looking over at Ashley. “Black forest cake. I can’t believe you put all of this together.”

“Well, I did and you deserve it. Now make a wish and blow out your candles.”

Chris obediently leaned down and blew out the candles. The cake was huge. It was a flat sheet cake but two-layers thick. George was a miracle worker in his own right. She looked up in surprise when Chris pulled her into his arms. He brought his lips down on hers. It was a brief kiss but passionate enough to where she or anyone else witnessing the kiss wouldn’t mistake what the kiss represented. Someone cleared their throat.

“Enough of that you two. It’s time to cut the cake.”

A cake knife appeared in his hands and he cut the first slice of the cake. He received the traditional first piece of cake and George took over handing out the rest. There were simultaneous moans that came from around the room as everyone took their first bite of cake.

Darcy moaned. “George, this tastes great. I need the recipe.”

She liked Darcy, who was married to Pete, and they made a great couple.

George chuckled. “Ashley gave me the recipe. She knew it was his favorite cake.” He gave Chris a playful dirty look. “Which I had no idea about and I have been cooking for the man for years.”

Chris chuckled and Ashley jumped in, not wanting to take all of the credit. She was starting to feel like blushing from all of the credit she was receiving. Good thing she had a darker skin tone. Her embarrassment wouldn’t show up easy. “It’s my mother’s recipe. Mom made the cake all the time in high school and Chris was the only one who would consume it besides my father. Also, let us not forget who made the cake.”

Enid shook her head. “Well all I know is that this cake taste wonderful and I want the recipe as well.”

Ashley took her first bite of her own cake and instantly saw what everyone was talking about. Her mother’s version of the recipe had never tasted this good although she would never say it out loud. If her mother’s cake had tasted this good she could only imagine how much wider her hips could have been. Everyone turned their attention to Virginia when she cleaned her throat.

“All right, it’s story time.”

Chris groaned and Andrew chuckled. It was a Morgan tradition to tell stories about Andrew and Chris’ childhood. Some of the stories were embarrassing and others were tame but one never knew which one she was going to tell. Ashley had definitely heard more than her share of both types. She almost felt bad for Chris when she took in his sour expression.

“Mom, can you refrain just this one time?”

She shook her head. "I have the perfect story."

Clearing her throat, she smiled. "On the first day of kindergarten, you were overly excited when I came to pick you up. Then you told me why. It was the first time that you had seen Ashley. You were love struck instantly." Virginia smile grew wider. "You told me that Ashley was the girl you were going to marry when you grew up. The two of you were inseparable afterwards."

Ashley paused with the fork halfway to her mouth. She didn't even want to look at Chris. She could imagine the expression of horror on his face. It probably matched hers very well. She couldn't believe Virginia had just told such a story. Then again, yes, she could.

"Oh, that is so sweet," Karen said on a catchy breath.

Andrew tightened his arm around Karen. "Yes, it is, but please do not cry. You know I can't stand it when you do, even when you're happy."

Ashley was still speechless herself and she could feel tears gathering in her own eyes. She could remember that day. From day one, she had known Chris was different. To know that he wanted her to be his wife since the first day they met meant a lot to her. She put her fork back on her plate and gathered up the strength to look over at Chris when he pulled her hand into his and placed a kiss on the back of it.

"Well, mom, I was young and I don't remember those exact words but I don't doubt it. Ashley made a lasting impression on me and if that is what I said, it still holds true."

Ashley's eyes widened and it caused a tear to fall. Which was more embarrassing to her. She wasn't a person who shed tears easily. Marriage hadn't been an outcome she thought Chris was even contemplating. It proved to her that a physical relationship with Chris would be something more than just sex. Even though she knew that she could expect more than that from him, the thought had always been in the back of her mind. Evidently he was and it made the last piece of the puzzle fall into place. This changed everything. She looked up as a shadow fell over them. A smiling Frederick stood in front of them. He held his hand out to Chris.

"I know that it isn't official yet but anyone that can make my sister speechless is welcome to the family."

Her mouth dropped open in shock when Chris went to shake Frederick's hand but didn't when a feral growl come from Ashley.

"I think that it's time that you open your presents," she grumbled. Everyone in the room seemed to know that it was best to move on to another subject. Their attention went to the table with his presents on it.

"Ebony, would you do the honors please?"

Her sister-in-law stood up with a smile. "I would love to."

She walked over to the table before handing the first present to Chris. It was from George and Frances. They gave him a pair of working gloves that he had been wanting but hadn't taken the time to buy for himself.

He made his way through the presents one by one as Ebony handed them to him. If anyone noticed that he hadn't received a present from Ashley, they didn't say anything. She would give him his present from her in private. Once all of the presents had been opened, he thanked everyone for the gifts. Ashley stood up quickly. With nothing to distract anyone there could be trouble. "And on that note, it's time to clean up."

There were a few grumbles, mainly from the men, but everyone pitched in. Within minutes, they had leftover food packed away and the place spotless. Pete came over to shake Chris' hand.

"Happy birthday, again. I hope it was a good one."

Chris nodded. "It was and thanks for coming."

"You're welcome. Unfortunately, we have to run. We promised the sitter we would be back early."

Chris smiled. "Okay. Be safe going home."

"We will."

Her parents were the next to leave. Deborah gave hugs and kissed Chris on the cheek, then Ashley. "It was good to see you again and hopefully we'll see you again and soon."

Deborah gave a meaningful look to her daughter and Ashley just shook her head at her mother's lack of subtleness.

Chris just smiled. "It was good to see you again and I'm sure it won't be as long before I see you again this time around. Thank you for coming."

He shook hands with Gerald. "Thank you for coming as well."

"Good to see you son and you're welcome. I hope this day was a good one for you."

Chris grinned. "It has been."

Gerald kissed his daughter on the cheek. "Be good."

She smiled at her father. "When am I not?"

Her parent's left and everyone else slowly began to leave until it was only Ashley and Chris left.

She jumped when the door shut. The sound of the locks turning made her heartbeat speed up. She wondered if he had any idea of how sexy he was. She turned to face him, hoping she didn't pass out before she said what she had to say.

He pulled her into his arms.

"Have I thanked you for everything that you have done for me today?"

She nodded. "Yes, you have."

He brought his lips down on hers in a passionate kiss. It was official. She could no longer resist this man.

* * * *

Chris lifted his head slowly. Today he had been blown away by her selflessness. If there had been any doubt in his mind about her caring about him it had disappeared today. Ashley had gone through a lot of planning to put together his birthday party. She had found out what his favorite foods were and had them fixed for him. She had made sure that all of their friends and family had been present. A lot of time and effort had gone into planning his party. He lowered his head for another kiss and when he came back up, both of them were breathing heavily. "Do you have any plans for the night?"

Ashley began to fidget and he was certain this was the first time he had ever seen her do so. "Um...other than giving you your birthday gift, no"

He searched the room to see if he had overlooked something. She had managed to get a lot by him today so he wouldn't be surprised. Yet he didn't see anything so he turned to look back at her. He studied her for another moment then smiled. "Where is it?"

She exhaled shakily. "Right here. I'm your birthday gift."

"Excuse me?" Chris' body tightened as Ashley's words reached his ears. He couldn't have heard her right. If he had, it wasn't what she meant. It couldn't have been. He had never been that lucky on his birthday. But she smiled and damned if his groin wasn't hardening in response. Which meant that his day—hell, his week—might not end on such a bad note after all. Her gaze traveled from his chest to his mouth then remained transfixed on his lips.

"You heard me correctly," she whispered.

He heard her, all right. Every fiber in his body had heard her—and responded accordingly. He still didn't believe his ears. But if he heard her right, she wanted him—in his bed, if they made it there. Taking in the sensual expression in her brown eyes and the flush on her cheeks, he was sure he was right. The only question that remained was, why? He wasn't stupid enough to delay the situation by asking. If she said she wanted him, he would take it at face value.

“I—I’m sorry,” she stammered, and he realized he hadn’t answered her aloud. “This was a bad idea. I should go—”

“Wait.” The word exploded from him, causing her to jump. Reaching out, he brushed his fingers over her bare arm, enjoying the little moan that escaped her lips. “You can’t say something like that to me, and then leave.”

“Too ill-mannered?” The smile returned to her face and he was glad to see when her shoulders relaxed a little.

He didn’t know the exact thoughts racing through her head, but if the evening was going to lead to where he hoped, he didn’t want her tense. “I’m not sure you could ever be ill-mannered.”

“Impolite?” She offered.

He hesitated and she punched him. Groaning, he caught her hand and pulled her to him. She went willingly, pressing her heat against his.

“Then again being polite is a little overrated.” He body tightened, and his erection pressed painfully against the confines of his sweat pants. With his other hand he tracked a path from her ear to her cheek, down her throat to her collarbone and she shuddered in response.

“Is it?” She questioned and he heard the hesitancy in her voice read it in her eyes. “Yes, it is.” He took her hand and began to move backwards, leading her toward his bedroom. He wanted her as much as she wanted him and he meant to show her. But not until he understood fully what she wanted from him besides the moment they were in right now. He didn’t know if his rationale made him gallant or hedonistic, and he didn’t care. He just wanted to figure it all out because then he could lose himself deep within her. Which was a strong motivating factor.

As they entered the darkened room, she tugged her hand from his. He let her go, giving her the space she needed. She pulled her bottom lip in between her teeth. “I shouldn’t have started this.”

Even as she stated the words, he saw the longing in her eyes. He stepped closer to her and brushed her cheek with his fingertips.

“But you did.” She moaned and leaned into his touch making him smile with pleasure. “Now I want to finish it but the decision is yours. So what do you want, Ashley? Because once we do this, you are mine and not just as a friend either. So again Ashley, tell me what you want.”

* * * *

What did she want?

Chris’ question hung in the air and she struggled to find a rational answer. Earlier, it had all seemed so simple—she wanted him. But now that she was here, she was being overtaken by a

severe case of nervousness. After Warren, she never thought she would be here like this with another man, especially one as virile as Chris. Truth be told, she had expected him to shy away from her advance. Sure, he had flirted and teased her. Even propositioned her but she never dreamed he would say yes when it came down to it.

Or had she?

But he had said yes. He had accepted her gift to him, with gusto. Which meant what had started out as an impulsive plan, was suddenly a reality. And now she had no idea what to do.

“Ashley?”

His amused expression made him look even more handsome than usual. “I hope you have an answer for me tonight because I don’t plan on wasting this opportunity.”

She staggered backward, unable to think. His scent did something to her brain. Something breathtaking, and it made it hard for her to keep her thoughts together. “I shouldn’t have—”

“Propositioned me?” Humor danced in his eyes. “But you did and I’m not complaining, at least not yet. You still have told me what you want to do about it.”

He moved toward her as he spoke, and now she was backed up against the edge of his bed, unable to escape. Not sure she wanted to. Instead she wanted to pull him to her and demand he kiss her with the fervor she saw mirrored in his eyes. She knew she should say the words that would turn him away but her throat wouldn’t cooperate. His index finger found its way underneath her chin and tilted her head back.

A tiny voice in the back of her brain told her to run away, to protect herself. Do anything to get away from him. She knew she was playing with fire and bound to get burned. But she wanted him, wanted this. God help her, she did, and when he lowered his lips to hers, all he could do was whimper and open her mouth in quiet invitation. His arms tightened around her waist, pulling her against him into the warm solidness of his body.

“Are you sure about this? If not, say so now, because I have wanted for you too long. Wanted you too badly. I won’t be able to stop if we take this any further.”

Common sense told her she should stop him. Once they went down this path there would be no going back. Everything would change. *Permanently*. Instead she responded in a husky, raw voice. “I’m sure. I don’t want you to stop.”

He took her invitation and lowered his mouth to hers, tasting and teasing in a frenzy of passion that left her breathless and moaning. When he lifted his head she groaned.

“Please don’t stop.”

He lowered his head again and her enthusiasm matched his. She squirmed closer as his hands

cupped her butt, pressing her tightly against him. So tight he would have entered her had it not been for their clothes.

“Chris, please. I need...” Her voice trailed off on a gasp as his lips found the sensitive column of her throat.

He lifted his head when she didn’t continue. “What do you need?”

She met his eyes, losing herself in the pleasure his intense smoky gaze guaranteed. “I need you to touch me.”

Her words were all the assurance he seemed to need. His hands came up and went to work on her clothes, undressing her slowly. Somehow he managed to lose his own clothes and the removable brace as well. Before she knew it, he was right there, hot and hard. She was so ready. He inhaled deeply as she when his thumb brushed over her nipple and he cupped the full globe, bent his head to kiss it, then looked up to meet her gaze.

“I want you, Ashley.”

“I want you too,” she whispered.

She didn’t doubt his words in the least as he lifted her and placed her on the bed. She felt the proof his desire for her, saw it. She wanted him to enter her, but instead he continued to stroke her breasts, his mouth dueling with hers, his stiff sex taunting and torturing her. His hands skimmed down her luscious body, and then back up again. He kissed her throat, then licked and lightly sucked as if he couldn’t get enough of the taste of her. He was beyond sexy to her, beyond size and strength and manliness. The pressure in her very center that had been building was coiled tight, waiting to burst free. She reached for him when he moved away but he was back before she could. He placed a condom in her hand.

“You do the honors,” he whispered.

She realized what he wanted her to do and why. Yes, she had said she was sure but now she had to show him as well. Chris wasn’t going to force her to do anything she didn’t want to. She took the condom out of his hand and ripped the package open. She sheathed him, smiling at the primitive sound he made. A gasp of surprise escaped her when he rolled onto his back pulling her with her. Before she could draw her next breath, he was lifting her over him. She braced her hands against his chest, lifting slightly then easing down, encasing himself within her slick heat. She moaned, tightening her thighs against his hips as they moved together. Her back arched, and she took him as deep as she could, relishing in the feel of his body against hers. Chris was a hard slab of muscle beneath her, his hands spanning her waist, his face full of pleasure. He penetrated her, filled her up, and filled the emptiness that had been inside of her for the past several months. She had never been so physically possessed.

She moved with him as if she had been doing it all her life. Moved as graceful as horse and rider. Excruciatingly slow at first, getting her bearings, adjusting to the thickness of him. She stretched

out on top of him, her face cradled against his neck. She rocked her hips, pushing lower and lower until her cleft pressed directly against the base of his hard arousal.

“Yes Ashley, that’s it, that’s it,” he whispered.

She continued to move, spurred on by the passion in his voice until something changed. A deep need raced through her. Her body opened even more to accommodate him and slowly she sat up. This time when she began to move it was with urgency. To obtain something they both had denied themselves for too long. Her hips began to move again in the age-old rhythm, speeding up with each rise and fall, until her bottom was smacking against his hips, eliciting the most erotic sounds from him she had ever heard.

Soon the bed began to vibrate. It seemed the whole room was vibrating from the frenzied motions of their bodies. She tried to prolong the pleasure but it was a waste of effort. Her body flew apart, her climax hitting her with the force of an oncoming freight train. Her entire body was engulfed in a scorching, quaking release that started between her legs then unfurled throughout her entire body. She gasped incoherently, shuddering, holding on as Chris threw his head back and roared, delivering two more long, deep thrusts into her. His whole body convulsed underneath hers as he reached his own explosive release.

She collapsed against him and laid her head on his chest. His heart was pounding and his breath matched in rhythm. They were both covered in sweat but the moment couldn’t be more perfect. She snuggled into him, amused when he kissed her forehead. Several minutes later he surprised her by maneuvering her so that she was under the covers before joining her. Worn-out, she cuddled closer to him and tried to stay awake. She wasn’t going to spend the night. Yet the warm, coziness of his arms overpowered her and she fell asleep. His gentle kiss on the tip of her nose was the last thing she remembered.

* * * *

Ashley shifted underneath the cover trying to turn her head away from the sunlight starting to peek through the windows. She wanted to sleep for a few more minutes before she got up and started moving around. Her foot bumped something solid and furry and her eyes jerked open.

She stiffened and bit back a cry of alarm when Chris came into view. Last night hadn’t been a dream. She should be panicked but she couldn’t muster up the energy. She felt too good. Too sated.

It hadn’t been in her plans to spend the night but here she was and she didn’t regret what they had done. She just hated what the implications of spending the night meant. She was certain she would find out soon enough. She relaxed and rolled onto her side to study him. A man shouldn’t be allowed to look so scrumptious in the morning. And she shouldn’t be lying next to him. Her intent had been to give him a birthday gift he wouldn’t forget. She smiled.

Neither would she.

She wondered if he would be up to a repeat performance. Her eyes widened at the thought. This was the reason why she shouldn't have spent the night. She let her eyes drift over him. He appeared bigger than life and was definitely impossible to miss. The sunlight shined through the window on him at an angle that made her insides flutter. He was a very attractive man. She shifted in bed and the ache she felt in certain muscles quickly reminded her that he was also a skillful lover. She lost track of how long she lay there and watched his boyish expression while he slept. Finally her bladder called out to be relieved. She slid out of bed and reached for a shirt of his. Sniffing it, she found it to be clean and slipped it before continuing to the restroom.

She relieved her bladder before seeking out a spare toothbrush to brush her teeth then finished up by washing her face. When she returned to the bedroom, Chris was still asleep under the covers. She stood there and watched him a few more moments before heading downstairs to the kitchen. Chris had given everyone the day off, including George, so she felt pretty safe in thinking they would be alone. She made her way into the kitchen and started the coffee pot before resting her head against the cabinet thinking about what was probably getting ready to occur between the two of them when Chris awoke. Last night couldn't have been more special. She didn't regret it but she was still afraid of what their relationship would develop into.

When Chris laid a hand on her shoulder a minute later, she jumped. He was smiling when she turned around. He stood there in his boxers. She almost swallowed her tongue.

Sweet Mary, did he have a gorgeous chest.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I thought you might have been asleep."

She struggled to return her breathing to normal. "No, I wasn't asleep just thinking."

He reached for her. She went into his embrace without protest. "Good morning, beautiful."

"Good morning."

He brushed his lips against hers before pulling back to look into her eyes. He tasted of minty fresh toothpaste and Chris. "What do you have planned for today?"

She gave a slight shake of her head. "Nothing."

"Good. So that means you don't have any objections to spending the day with me, right?"

She shook her head and slipped out of his embrace before hopping up on the counter. "No, I don't."

He grinned and leaned in for another kiss. "Good."

He pulled back and studied her. Playing with a strand of her wild hair she had managed to comb back. "You look like you are thinking."

She nodded. "I am."

His left brow arched. "About?"

She shrugged. "About you and I and where this is going."

He leaned closer to her. "And where is this going?"

She shrugged. "I don't really know but I'm willing to say I definitely want to give being more than friends a try." She leaned forward and rested her elbows on his shoulders. "I think we could have something good between us," she whispered huskily.

Passion flared up in his eyes, telling her that he knew the double meaning behind what she had just said. His eyes darkened with passion of his own and Ashley's nipples harden. Just from a look. If she'd had time, she would have gone into shock. Her body had never responded so strongly from just a look.

His lips came down on hers and she forgot all about the look in his eyes. She leaned into him, almost desperate for another touch of his lips against hers. A sigh escaped her and he swallowed it up with his mouth. She opened wider for him and he took complete control over the kiss with no objections from her. He pulled back slightly giving her enough time to take a quick breath before his mouth found hers again. Up until now she had never noticed the perfect height of the counter. He pulled her flush against him her gasp mixing with his groan as their bodies met perfectly even through the layers of clothes. When his hand slid between them trying to push the extra material of his cotton shirt aside she almost stopped breathing. Her hands clutched at his shoulders and she moaned into his mouth when his hand found her. It felt like every inch of her was alive. His lips left hers and slid down the column of her throat trailing kisses as he went. The feelings were so intense she cried out in pleasure.

The coffee pot beeped, alerting to the fact that it was ready. Her body tensed and he moaned before removing his hand. If he thought they were going to stop for coffee he had another thing coming. She pushed her hips flush against his, doing a little grind that had him gritting his teeth. He was already as hard as a rock. Ashley moved her hips again. He tried to stop her but she was too far-gone. He brought his lips back down on her again. That seemed to be all she needed. Her eyes slammed shut. She ripped her mouth from his and screamed as her body shuddered before she ground herself against him frantically. His grip tightened on her hips. She called his name her hips still moving.

"Baby wait," his voice was gruff. There was obvious strain laced in it. "I'm going to—"

Ashley was so far gone she couldn't hear him. Deep convulsions were traveling through her body. Her legs had a death grip on his body. Her hips seemed to be alive.

One more grind of her body against his was all that it took to wring another wave of pleasure from her. Chris dropped his head and buried his face into her neck and groaned. Tightening his hold on her hips he pulled her hard against him. She felt him thrust against her and her legs

tightened automatically. He quivered against her and she heard his breath catch in his throat before he shuddered against her. Her name was forced from his lips just before his mouth found hers again. She revealed in the kiss feeling her passion spike again. He slumped against her and it was all that she could do to hold the both of them up. Moments later he lifted his head and when his eyes met hers the passion seemed to flame even higher. Ashley didn't think it would be possible but it was. His face was flushed as well as his upper chest. It had been just as intense for him as it had been for her. She would hate to feel as if she had been the only one to feel the earth move.

* * * *

A slow smile spread across his face.

"I will have you to know that I have never done that in my life."

Not even when he was a teenager. Having an orgasm while partially dressed had been a new experience. There had been times that he had thought he was close but he had always had time to pull away and regain control of himself. With Ashley it had been impossible to fathom. She had ridden him frantically her wet heat seeping through the thin material of his boxers and he just couldn't control himself. Even now he grew excited just thinking about it. His lips found hers again but this time the kiss was soft and sweet. He lifted her up in his arms and she pulled back and began to struggle.

"Christopher, put me down. I'm too heavy for you to carry."

He wanted to ignore her warning because she wasn't heavy but he had never walked more than a few feet without his cane. The proof was sitting next to the both of them. He let her slide down until she stood on her own feet.

"Just for your information you weren't heavy. I put you down because it's my leg I don't trust."

She nodded, accepting his reason and he reached for his cane with one hand and hers with the other. When she placed her hand in his, he led the way to his bedroom. He could not wait to get out of his boxers. Thankfully they were dark so he was certain that if there was a stain it didn't show too much. Once he was there he took her face into his hands. "You are so beautiful."

He could stare at her all night and never grow tired of it. She smiled and brought her hand up to cup his face before going up on tiptoe and placing a brief kiss on his lips. "Thank you."

He returned the kiss before pulling back. "I think it's time to finish what we started a few minutes ago."

She ran her hands across his chest playfully. "You think so, huh?"

"I know so," he whispered as he lowered his lips to hers.

The passion they had seemed to gain control over flared back up. She responded to the kiss, obviously loving the way that his lips felt on hers. He backed her toward the bed pulling Ashley with him never breaking the kiss. He reached for his shirt, loving that she had felt comfortable enough to put it on. When he had successfully removed the shirt he pulled back and studied what he had just uncovered. It was more than he could have ever imagined. He pulled the shirt completely over her head before leaning back. The skin that he uncovered looked smooth and silky. One touch told him that it was. He pulled her down on the bed with him and gathered her close before rolling over and pulling her on top of him. She sat up and his hands went around to her back to unsnap her bra. He almost forgot to breathe when he uncovered his treasure. She was perfect.

He knew she worked hard to keep her shapely figure and she was doing a very good job. Sliding his hands back around to the front, he cupped her breasts and she gasped arching into him. Her nipples were very responsive and seemed to beg for his attention so he gave it to them. Sitting up he pulled her close and his mouth closed around a nipple. A moan escaped her and she grabbed his head between her hands and urged him upward. Her hand fumbled with his underwear and he took over. Within seconds he had them off. He slid his hand in between them, touching her stomach. This time was supposed to be slower, less frantic and less heated than the episode in the kitchen but the idea was quickly going out the window. Sliding his hand lower, he slipped inside of her slick heat and she cried out, arching against him.

He stroked her wet heat until she was writhing against him uncontrollably. She felt so good. It was a sensation he never wanted to be without again. The feel of her body in his hands was much better than he would have ever expected. He was spurring her on, sending her higher and higher by the sounds of her pleas. She was too close to the edge again and he didn't want that yet. When he pulled his hand away, a groan escaped her and she trembled against him. This time he didn't want her to experience release without him. He reached out for the box of condoms in the nightstand only to find Ashley had beaten him to it. She had a packet between her teeth that she had just ripped open. Her hands touched his erection. He gritted his teeth to keep from exploding.

He hadn't realized how close he had been to the edge himself and he stilled her hand. The last thing he wanted was a repeat of the kitchen scene. He wanted to feel her surrounding him the next time he exploded. "Let me do that. I could only give you a few seconds right now."

She smiled wickedly. "That's all I need."

But she still moved her hand away and Chris sheathed himself before reaching for her. He settled her over him so that she straddled him. He loved having her on top of him. Loved the way she rode him. She shifted and it was just enough for him to begin sliding into her. Her grip on his chest tightened. Their eyes met when he slid in further. When he was as far as he could physically go a cry of passion escaped her. He gripped her hips between his hands and she began to move tentatively at first.

Her body gripped his tightly. He closed his eyes at how good it felt to have her surrounding him with him deep within her. He pulled her down for a deep passionate kiss. The taste of her pushed

him closer to the edge and it didn't help her hips began to change the tempo. Her eyes closed and her head fell back. He knew she was getting close to going over the edge again but he wasn't ready for her to. This time was going to be more explosive and he was going to make sure of that.

His grip tightened on her hips once more slowing her tempo down, making her moan. Her eyes opened and the amount of passion filling her eyes stole his breath.

"Christopher."

"What is it?"

She was visibly trembling and breathing heavily. "I need more."

"What do you need more of?"

She gasped shaking her head. Seeming incapable of speech. She opened her mouth but no words came out just sounds of pleasure. Her grip on him tightened and she leaned closer to him.

"Please."

He slid his hand down her stomach until he reached the area where they were joined. His thumb began to stroke and she arched deeply into him throwing her head back.

"Christopher," she moaned between clenched teeth. He continued to thrust and stroke until she went over the edge. The feel of her body milking his pulled him over with her. He couldn't get close enough to her and both of their bodies seemed to be straining together to get the most pleasure possible. Finally the tension left her body and she collapsed on top of him, trembling and gasping for air. His hand came up to stroke her back. "Are you okay?"

"Oh yes," she rasped.

She rolled to the side with his urging and he got up and went into his bathroom. When he reentered the bedroom, Ashley was on her side half asleep. He crawled back into bed with her and pulled her into his arms. Neither one of them said anything. There was nothing left to say. Their bodies had said it all. He rose up on his elbow and found her eyes still closed and she was smiling. His own smile matched. It had been much better than he had ever dreamed it would be. Still, he wanted to make sure this was what she wanted. It would kill him if she regretted anything that happened between them.

"So do we keep going forward from here?"

Ashley yawned and nodded. "Yes but only after I get eight hours. I was up late last night and the night before and I'm tired."

Chris chuckled. Leave it to Ashley to respond so honestly. He rolled onto his back and pulled her

closer to him, glad that this was just the beginning. There was a lot more that he wanted to experience with Ashley. Her arms tightened around him and he looked down at her. There was definitely a lot more that he wanted to explore with her.

Chapter Seven

“Christopher.”

“Hmm?”

Ashley gave him a little push. “Move your arm.”

“For what,” he muttered. He had her in his arms and he liked her there. Therefore he needed a good reason as to why he should move his arm.

“The phone is ringing.”

That was a pretty good reason. In his state of deep sleep, he hadn’t even heard it. A first but Ashley had worn him out. They were almost out of condoms and it was a good thing. He released his hold on her and she reached for the phone.

“Hello.”

He heard Andrew chuckle through his half sleep haze. Turning over, Ashley placed the phone on his chest then rolled back over. “It’s for you.”

Chris groaned and rubbed his eyes. He reached for the phone and brought it up to his ear. “Hello.”

“Hey big bro. I guess it was a happy birthday for you, huh?”

Chris rolled his eyes at the comment. “Is there a reason you called?”

“Yes there is but one more question.” He remained silent so Andrew went ahead. “You guys still in bed?”

Chris sighed heavily. “Yes, we are.”

“Together?”

He wasn’t going to get too specific. This was personal and he wasn’t ready to share it with anyone.

“As if it’s any of your business.”

He heard Andrew’s playful groan. “You never were one to kiss and tell.”

Chris closed his eyes. “You ought to try it sometime.”

Andrew chuckled. “That isn’t any fun.”

Chris groaned himself this time. "Please tell me this isn't the real reason you called."

Andrew sighed. "I called because I need to know if Karen Samantha and I can stay with you for a few days."

He could hear all of the playfulness go out of Andrew's voice and it concerned him. He opened his eyes. "What's wrong, Drew?" Chris sat up "What is going on?"

"A gas line broke because of construction crews. We are without gas, let alone the overbearing fumes. With Karen only being a month away from having the baby, I don't want to bring on labor any earlier than it needs to happen."

Chris smiled. "Let me guess. Karen is already panicking."

Andrew groaned. "You know it. Which is why I want to bring her to your place. I don't know how long it's going to take for them to fix the gas line but I don't want my wife stressing while it happens. If we go over to mom and dad's house, Samantha would be spoiled rotten by the time they returned home and Karen would be stressed. Our mother tends to have that effect on some people. With Karen in her last month, mother has started the smothering stage again and it irritates Karen. When Karen is irritated, I'm the one who has to hear it."

Chris's laughed. "Well I am glad you chose my residence over mother and fathers but I have an idea why." Both brothers knew anybody's sanity could be in danger if they were in their parents company for more than twenty-four hours straight. "All three of you are more than welcome to stay here."

"Thanks. I am hoping that it won't take too long to fix the gas line."

Chris smiled. "It doesn't matter if it takes longer. You guys are welcome here for as long as it takes. When should I expect you guys?"

"Not until this evening. We both are going to work today."

"Okay then I should be back by then since I will probably go and workout within the next hours or so. Also I will let George know and make sure there is enough to feed all of us for dinner tonight."

Andrew chuckled. "If you're buying, sounds good to me. I'll see you tonight."

They both said goodbye before Chris reached over Ashley to hang up the phone. She didn't stir and he realized she had fallen back asleep. He lay back down and pulled her into his arms. When his arms surrounded her she stirred a little, murmuring in her sleep before settling back in. They seemed to fit perfectly together because her bottom nestled his growing erection. He was so tempted to reach for protection and slide into her, but he couldn't. That would rob him of precious energy that he would need for his workout. After twenty-four hours alone with her he

was drained. Maybe he could talk her into taking a nap when they got back. Then he would have the chance to wake her like he wanted to right now.

Leaning closer to her he placed a kiss on her bare shoulder. She stirred again and he smiled.

“Time to wake up.”

“Why,” she grumbled.

“Because I need to work out.”

She grumbled under her breath and he could tell she was struggling to become fully awake. “What time is it?”

Looking over at the nightstand his eyes widened. “It is almost eight.”

She sat up in a rush. They had slept for six hours instead of the four that she had requested after they collapsed into each other’s arms after the last round of lovemaking. Looking over at him, she shook her head in puzzlement. Evidently the both of them had been tired. “What did Andrew want?”

Chris covered his mouth as he yawned before answering Ashley. “To stay here for a few days.”

Ashley turned and looked at him with concern. “He and Karen didn’t have a fight did they?”

He shook his head. “No. A gas line near the house broke and they’re doing an evacuation of the houses affected. Andrew says there’s no telling how long it will take to repair the line.”

Ashley nodded taking in the information. “When will they be here?”

“After they both get off of work. Which is why I want to go ahead and get my workout in.”

She sat up and scooted out of bed. He liked the fact that she was comfortable enough with her body to walk around and gather up her clothes without trying to hide anything.

“I need to by the house take a shower and change clothes. Are you going to drive yourself or do you want me to swing back by and pick you up?”

He drove on occasion but not for long distances because he was never really certain when an episode would occur and he didn’t want to take a chance. “Do you mind swinging back by and picking me up?”

She shook her head and began getting dressed. “No, I don’t mind.”

Chris lay in the bed, gazing at her while she slipped into her underwear.

When she realized he was drooling over her she turned to face him. “What?”

“You are so beautiful.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

He rolled over onto his side and propped up on his elbow. “But then again you have always been beautiful.”

Ashley wrinkled her nose in disagreement at that. “You think so?”

“I know so.”

She resumed getting dressed and he sat up and slid out of bed. Reaching for a clean pair of boxers, he pulled them on.

“Even in high school?”

He paused and looked at her in surprise as images of her rushing down the halls raced through his mind. The corner of his mouth tilted upward. “Especially in high school.”

“Thanks. I needed to hear that. I’ve always been insecure about my appearance in high school. The issue of being overweight and uncomfortable in my body plagued me. Some days it still does.”

Christopher crossed the room and pulled her into his arms. “You have always been beautiful to me. You always will be.” He placed a kiss on her forehead. “Will you bring back a change of clothes so that you can spend the night?”

“I don’t know. You are already going to have a full house as it is.”

He tightened his hold on her. “I want you here with us.”

She hesitated for a moment but finally nodded. “Okay I’ll spend the night. Now I need to get going. I’ll be back to get you in half an hour.”

He nodded. “I will walk you out.”

He released her and waited for her to finish getting dressed before taking her hand in his and walked her to the front door. She stretched up on tiptoe and kissed him before slipping out the front door. He watched her drive off then turned to head back toward his bedroom to get ready. Entering his bathroom he walked to the tub and turned on the water before stepping into the shower. The water felt good but he didn’t stay in long. He wanted to get his workout over with so that he could get back home and slip between the sheets with Ashley again. Stepping out of the shower, he toweled off and went into his bedroom. He pulled on a T-shirt and shorts before heading into the kitchen. George was standing over the stove.

“Is Ashley gone?”

“Yes she is but she’ll be back to take me to physical therapy.”

George turned back to the pot that he was stirring and was silent for a moment. He looked up again, his expression stern. “Don’t do anything to hurt her.”

Chris chuckled. George liked Ashley a lot, so did the other guys. There was something about her that could make everyone smile. “She is the one with the power to hurt me.”

George nodded. “True, although both of you have more power to hurt the other than you think.”

Not really sure where George was going, Chris nodded. He didn’t want a lecture. There were risks involved when it came to getting involved with anyone. The only difference about this was he truly felt he and Ashley could make it. Chris looked George in the eye. “I promise you, I won’t do anything to hurt Ashley.”

George nodded his approval.

“Andrew, Karen and Samantha are going to be staying here a few days.”

Chris didn’t even have to explain why. George just nodded. “Okay. I will make sure the extra room is prepared for them.”

Chris smiled. That was what he liked about George. The man was quick and efficient. “Would you like to make a special request for dinner?”

“Karen likes baked chicken.”

“Done.”

Chris grabbed a banana and his cane before standing up. “I need to finish getting ready before Ashley gets back.”

George chuckled. “Try not to have too much fun.”

Chris gave him a wry look. “Tell that to the guys.”

George’s laughter followed him out of the kitchen. Chris had watched the guys in action as he had been doing since he had gotten out of the hospital. They were all good at what they did and it took a big burden off of him.

He missed being out there with the horses and having his hands involved in what was going on but soon enough he would be back out there. For him it was just a question of when. He had yet to be back on a horse. It wasn’t about having a fear of getting back on. He was still a little shaky

on how much he could trust his body. Something in his stomach told him he would have the answer to that question soon enough.

* * * *

“Ashley.”

“Yes.”

“Answer the door for me.”

“Why yes I can. How nice of you to ask,” she muttered loud enough for anyone in the room to hear but no one was so it didn’t matter. Even though she had shortened his workout today, he had still worked up a good sweat and ran to the shower as soon as they arrived back at his house. He was still in the bedroom getting dressed. George was gone. So she was stuck with having to get up and answer the door. She might not have minded as much if he had asked a little nicer. Looking through the peephole she saw Andrew standing there with Samantha in his arms and Karen standing next to him. She opened the door.

“Hello.”

She stepped back and allowed them to enter. “Come on in.”

They came in and she closed the door behind them. “Make yourself at home.”

“Hey Ashley. Bring me my cane.”

She flinched at his demanding tone and had to take a deep breath to keep from saying something uncivil. Walking over to the corner where the cane was propped, she picked it up and went into his bedroom with it. He looked up in surprise when she threw it at him. Thankfully he had quick reflexes and he was able to catch the flying cane. He looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

“What was that all about?”

She let out an exasperated breath and stalked out of the room and into the kitchen. She went into the living room but he was right on her heels. His brother’s family sat on the couch, waiting patiently.

“Hey Karen. Drew.”

Ashley shook her head as he tickled Samantha under her chin and she giggled holding her arms out to him. He could be nice to them because he had reserved his bossy and demanding attitude for her. Today he had been on a roll, barking commands left and right instead of asking.

A chuckle escaped him, bringing her out of her inner thoughts in time to see him taking Samantha out of his brother’s arms. She looked over at Karen and noticed her stomach seemed to

get rounder and rounder every time she saw her. It seemed like her stomach had a life of its own. Although in all reality it did. Karen looked like she could give birth any moment. But she knew that point was at least a month from now. She wondered if she would look as radiant when she was pregnant. The idea gave her pause. She hadn't really thought about having children before now. She hadn't met a man who made her want it. What she did know was two would be her cutoff. There was no way she could have six children like her mother had. No, it was four too many.

"You look good, Karen."

She looked up as Chris bestowed the compliment upon Karen who laughed in response. "You and your brother are two of the best flatterers I have known in my life but thank you anyway."

Her hand came up to rub her stomach. "Your niece has definitely been giving me a run for my money."

Andrew leaned closer to her. "Well sweetheart, that is because you are having a boy and he is getting offended that you keep calling him Andrea."

Chris laughed. "Are you two still going on about that?"

Karen sighed heavily. "Unfortunately, yes. But between you and I, Andrew doesn't want to be outnumbered so that's why he is so set on this baby being a boy."

Andrew pulled Karen close and gave her a loud kiss on the lips before making his way lower and placing another on her protruding stomach. He rubbed his wife's belly and smiled. "Believe me I don't mind being outnumbered at all. I just know I'm right on this."

Karen pulled away. "Would you stop that? I am sure that your brother doesn't want to be exposed to your vulgarity."

"Too late," Chris replied.

Andrew pulled away but still leaned over to whisper in her ear. "You won't be saying that tonight."

Karen gasped and blushed. "*Andrew Morgan*. Behave yourself."

Chris and Andrew both laughed while Karen huffed indignantly. Ashley turned and walked into the kitchen not being able to take their jovial attitudes when she was in a foul mood. She sat down at the kitchen table but she could still hear their muted tones through the doorway.

It wasn't enough to disturb her. She would try to sneak out when they weren't paying attention because right now, she wasn't good company to be around. She folded her arms over her chest and sighed. The door to the kitchen swung open and Chris walked in, an expression of confusion on his face. Her expression made him back up. She didn't blame him because her angry face was

a force to be reckoned with. It had brought some of her very famous, very wealthy clients down a notch or two.

Chris approached her carefully and it was hard for her not to smile. “Why do you look so upset?”

Her eyebrow rose and he stopped in mid-step. “Do you really have to ask?”

He paused and several expressions crossed his face before he settled on blank. “Yes. I’m afraid I do. I can tell you are pissed off but I’m not a mind reader so I don’t know why.”

She sighed and shook her head. “You are a very rude man.”

Chris eyes widened in surprise. “*What?*”

“I said that you are a very rude man.”

He nodded, his expression full of disbelief. “I heard you, I just can’t figure out why you would say that.”

“Ashley, *answer* the door. Ashley, *give* me my cane. No *please*. No *thank you*. *Nothing*.”

He stared at her for a moment then smiled. It only added fuel to the fire. There was nothing humorous about this situation at all. She glowered at him.

He held his hand up in a non-threatening way. “Do you think you might be overreacting a little?”

Ashley gritted her teeth. If he had any idea the rage flowing through her, he wouldn’t be as close as he was and he definitely wouldn’t be smiling. “You have been barking orders left and right and without reason. To me that equates to rude.”

His right brow arched in her direction. “So when you treat me that way what does it equate to?”

She gasped. “I have never treated you that way.”

He nodded. “During physical therapy you tend to be very rude.”

Her eyes widened. “*You have got to be kidding me*. It is my job as your physical therapist to make sure that you get better. You told me that was what you wanted. I have to make sure you do everything you need to do to get better. I have to give you orders, especially when you become difficult, and I always tell you when you do a good job.”

He smile became smug, which only goaded her more. “I see what this is about now.”

Ashley wanted to scream. If she could choke him right now and get away with it she probably would. Was she overreacting? Maybe she was. Her feelings were probably heightened because

of the lack of sleep. She did get cranky when she didn't have enough rest. Right now, she was running on less than eight hours of it. "I told you what this is about."

"So the fact that you like to be in charge is fine but when I take over it's not okay."

Her mouth gaped open and she began to shake. He had to be doing this on purpose. Evidently he had missed the whole point that she was trying to get across and it was a little infuriating. The truth was she was very upset and he found it amusing. Placing a hand to her forehead, she closed her eyes. She could feel a headache coming on and it wasn't going to be nice. When she looked back up, she was almost on the verge of tears. Her voice actually cracked during her first attempt to speak.

"I think we made a mistake in sleeping together. You didn't treat me like this before hand and I can't allow you to treat me like this now. If you aren't going to take my feeling serious I'm done."

She stood up. "I also think that I should resign from being your physical therapist."

The smile disappeared off his face. If he hadn't realized how serious the situation was before, now his expression said that he was now. He stood up and made his way toward her. "You know what I like about you? You are strong, full of independence and you are a take-charge type of woman. I like knowing that you shared yourself with me because you wanted to and not because you felt like you needed to." He took a deep breath. "You're right. I could have been more polite when asking you to do stuff for me. I also apologize for being rude and making fun of you a few minutes ago. But I do have a question for you."

She sighed. "Go ahead."

"Do you think that I was rude on purpose?"

Her face softened and a tear fell before she shook her head. "No, I don't but I do think you weren't taking my feelings into consideration."

He grimaced. "I wasn't even putting any thought into how I was saying it. I'm sure it came across as rude and I'm sure mother would probably kill me if she heard me speak to you that way. Sometimes I have to remember I'm not out in the corral dealing with the guys. Do you think you can forgive me?"

One corner of Ashley's mouth tilted upward. "Before or after I tell your mother?"

He cringed. "If you have to tell her then I would prefer you forgive me before hand so you can throw that in as well."

She laughed and he closed the remaining distance between them and pulled her up into his arms. When his arms surrounded her, she sighed. There was no other feeling like it. He pulled back and when he looked at her she felt like she could see into his soul. It only confirmed what she already

knew. He really cared about her. "I'm sorry too. I'm a little sensitive tonight because I'm tired. Unfortunately I get moody when I am. So I apologize as well."

He placed a kiss on the tip of her nose. "I accept your apology, but I think we should kiss on it to make it official."

Her eyebrows rose. "I thought that it was shake on it?"

He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "It is but because of our special relationship I figured we should spice it up so it suits us."

Shaking her head, she went up on tiptoe and Chris met her halfway. A sigh escaped her as his lips touched hers. He slid his hand under her shirt and she gasped when his hand found her left breast. She pulled back a little. "Christopher...I thought this was only supposed to be a kiss"

"I told you that we have to put our own spin on—" He cut off in mid-sentence when Andrew came into the kitchen. A smile appeared on his face when he saw them.

"Stay where you are. I'll only be a minute. Karen wants something to drink. I'll be out of you guys' way and you can resume."

Ashley hid her face in crook of Chris' neck. He leaned down and whispered in her ear. "We'll finish this later."

Andrew continued on into the kitchen and walked over to the cabinet. He pulled down a cup and poured Karen a glass of juice.

She didn't move until she was certain that Andrew had left the kitchen. When she lifted her head, Chris smiled. She knew her cheeks were burning because she had never been more embarrassed in her life. Chris hadn't even bothered removing his hand from her breast. He gave her a kiss on the cheek and confirmed her worst fear.

"You look very pretty when you blush."

She rolled her eyes and went to pull out of his arms but he stopped her. Her eyebrows rose. "Please don't tell me you want to take up where we left off."

He nodded his head. "I would but something tells me I wouldn't be able to convince you we should."

She pushed him in the chest playfully and he didn't move. It was good to see that he was getting stronger. "Behave yourself."

He gave her a puppy dog look. "If I do, will you reward me with a treat later?"

At the look on his face Ashley laughed. "You are a very special man."

He placed a quick kiss on her lips before removing his hand from underneath her shirt.

“I’m glad that you think so.”

Ashley removed herself from within the circle of his arms and went to the oven and turned it on.

“Come on. Let’s warm up dinner and go out and entertain our guests.”

Her stomach grumbled very loudly, causing Chris to smile. “I guess we had better get you fed but believe me you don’t want me to touch the food or we might be having charcoal for dinner.”

Ashley smiled and nodded. She had witnessed some of Chris’ cooking fiascos and they were pretty funny. Hopefully she might be able to teach him a few quick dishes he might do better. Dishes that didn’t require constant stirring would probably be his best option. Once the oven was preheated she went to the refrigerator and pulled out the large dish that George had left.

She had convinced George to let her cook the vegetables and he had conceded. Looking over at Chris she caught him staring at her. “What is it?”

“You are beautiful.”

She turned back to the oven and smiled. After taking a few steps over, she turned on the two front burners for the stove. Spinach and carrots were going to accompany the lemon pepper chicken.

“Can you get the other casserole dishes out of the cabinet for me?”

He walked over and pulled them down before setting them within her reach. She poured the vegetables in the dishes once they had finished cooking. “I think the meat should be ready.”

“Do you want me to take it out?”

She nodded and he picked up an oven mitt and pulled the meat out of the oven. He sat the dish on the counter before stepping back. “Should I go and tell Andrew and Karen dinner is ready?”

“No, I need to set the table first.”

He sprang into action with a smile. “Let me take care of that. I can set a table with perfection.”

For a few moments they worked together in silence. She wondered if this was what it would be like if they lived together. She blinked hard at the thought. They needed to establish a relationship first. She shook her head. Talk about getting ahead of herself.

When he had the table set, she sat the dishes on the table and gave everything a once over.

“Okay, now you can tell Andrew and Karen dinner is ready.”

He nodded before walking out of the kitchen and when he returned, they were in tow. Samantha was testing the strength of her legs and balance, moving as fast as she could. It was such a cute sight that Ashley automatically imagined what a miniature Chris would look like. Her attention went back to Samantha when the little girl headed in her direction. She was such an adorable little girl. Ashley’s heart melted when Samantha reached out for her.

“Up. Please.”

She leaned down and scooped Samantha up into her arms before placing a kiss on her soft cheek.

“Oh look, my favorite,” Karen exclaimed in delight when she saw the baked chicken.

She walked over to the table and a smile appeared on Ashley’s face when she watched Andrew pull out the chair and help Karen into it. He came around and pulled her chair out for her as well and she smiled gratefully. Andrew reached for Samantha and Ashley shook her head.

“It is alright. I have her.”

Andrew frowned. “Are you sure?”

Ashley smiled. “As many nieces and nephews as I have, I’m certain.”

Andrew nodded and took a seat. “Man, this looks great.”

Ashley nodded. “Yes. George is a miracle worker when it comes to food.”

Andrew picked up the dish of chicken and placed a piece on Karen’s plate before putting one on his on. Chris did the same.

“Is Samantha eating table food?”

Karen laughed. “She would probably eat the house if we let her and let me warn you—those teeth might be little but they hurt.”

Ashley nodded and reached for one of the baby carrots on her plate. She placed it in Samantha’s grip and watched as the little girl took a good-sized bite out of it. The carrot was soft but she still watched her carefully to make sure she didn’t choke. There were several moments of silence as everyone ate their food. Karen finished her plate and sat back rubbing her stomach.

“Do we have anything for dessert?”

Ashley nodded her head in the direction of the refrigerator. “We still have some cake left over from yesterday.”

Karen moaned. "Oh good. I definitely want some of that."

Chris nodded. "Same here. If I had the time, the cake would be gone by now."

Andrew chuckled. "I'm surprised it isn't."

Ashley smiled. "George threatened the guys with punishment of none of his food for a month if they did."

"Wow, that is a severe punishment for them."

Ashley nodded. "That was his intent."

Everyone looked at Samantha as she picked up the last piece of meat that Ashley had cut for her. She chewed happily. "If everyone is finished eating, feel free to have dessert."

Chris nodded and stood. "Andrew, help me clear the table and get the cake."

Andrew nodded and stood. Within moments they had the table cleared and the cake plates on the table.

"Just cut a small piece for Samantha. I couldn't eat another bite if I tried."

Samantha clapped her hands in glee when the cake was set in front of her. "Cake."

Ashley smiled at her. "Yes and it's yours."

Ashley picked up the spoon and placed it in Samantha's hand. Together they scooped a piece of the cake off. Ashley helped Samantha bring it to her mouth before looking over at Andrew and Karen.

"She's a very well behaved child."

Karen laughed. "When she wants to be. You and Chris ought to get married and have a few yourselves, and then you'll see."

A hush fell over the room and Andrew stood up and stopped behind Karen's chair. "Ah honey, I think it's time for bed."

Karen frowned, oblivious to response to her unexpected suggestion. "But I didn't finish my cake."

"You can finish it upstairs."

Karen barely had time to grab her plate before Andrew was pulling her into a standing position.

He picked Samantha up out of Ashley's arms and they were gone from the kitchen in the blink of an eye. Ashley could hear Karen complaining all the way. She looked over at Chris in shock. She sighed heavily.

"Karen is worse than Carl."

Chris laughed. "No. She isn't that bad. I can remember how much of a jokester and prankster Carl was when we were growing up but it's nothing compared to his way with words."

Ashley shook her head. "Yeah. Carl does have a bad habit of saying stuff and not really caring who it affects."

Taking the last bite of cake, Chris picked up his plate and stood up. "Do you mind helping me clean up?"

She shook her head and stood up. Within minutes, they had the kitchen clean. He held his hand out to her. "It is late. We should go to bed."

She resisted when he pulled her toward him. She had gone ahead and brought a change of clothes waiting for her in Chris' room. Still, she wasn't sure about spending the night. "I'm not sure I want to spend the night with your family here."

"What if I made you the promise that the only thing I will do tonight is hold you?"

She hesitated but she saw the honesty of what he was saying in his eyes so she gave in and let him pull her out of the kitchen. "Okay."

He led the way out of the kitchen and to his bedroom before pulling her inside. She watched as he closed the door and locked it for good measure.

"Is there any way I can convince you to sleep naked?"

The lecherous look he gave her to accompany the words made her laugh. "No."

He shrugged. "Oh well, it was worth a try."

She began unbuttoning her shirt. "It was a good attempt."

Ashley finished undressing and put on her pajama short set. When she looked up, Chris was standing in his boxers and from the look of things he had watched her undress. He walked over to the bed and pulled the covers back before sliding in between the sheets. She went around to the other side of the bed and climbed in beside him.

"What do you guys have planned for tomorrow?"

Chris shrugged. "Nothing probably. Andrew and Karen are probably going to have to go to work

since it's a work day."

Ashley smiled. "Good. I don't feel guilty about making you work out tomorrow."

Chris chuckled. "You wouldn't feel guilty about that anyway."

She elbowed him in the side. "Very funny."

He placed a kiss on her forehead. "I'm glad you work me as hard as you do. If you didn't, I know I wouldn't be as far along as I am now."

"Well, you're welcome."

She rolled onto her side and scooted backwards until she was resting against him. A yawn escaped her and she smiled. She must be more tired than she originally thought. Chris wrapped his arms around her and she sighed. It felt good to be in his arms.

Chapter Eight

“Mmm, good morning.”

Ashley smiled as Chris hugged her around her waist. She had snuck out of bed early this morning to catch George before he had started cooking. She had given him the day off.

“Good morning, yourself.”

He nuzzled her neck. “What are you fixing?”

She leaned into his embrace briefly before returning her attention back to the food. “Eggs, bacon, sausage and waffles.”

“That sounds good.”

She tilted her head back to meet his gaze. “You can only have two pieces of bacon and two pieces of sausage.”

“Aw come on. Make it two of each.”

She shook her head. “No, I’m already letting you be bad as it is. Let’s not push it.”

He opened his mouth to complain but Andrew walked into the kitchen carrying Samantha and Karen was in tow. She wouldn’t let him talk her into anything more anyway. He was already getting a treat. His normal diet consisted of wheat toast, a banana and oatmeal seven days of the week. George always did his best to spice up the bland meal but the grimace on Chris’ face when he ate it told her it wasn’t always enough. The chorus of good mornings from Andrew and Karen brought her out of her thoughts.

“Whatever you are cooking sure smells good.”

Karen took a deep breath herself before turning pale. “I think that I am going to be sick.”

Karen rushed from the kitchen with Andrew close behind. Ashley went about fixing Chris’ plate and sat it in front of him. She saw the look of worry on his face and smiled.

“She’ll be okay. Nausea is a common side of effect pregnancy, no matter how far along a woman is.”

Chris didn’t look one hundred percent reassured that his sister-in-law was okay but he began to eat. A few minutes later Andrew returned.

“Do you have any crackers?”

Chris nodded. “Yes, in the pantry on the middle shelf.”

“Thanks. Karen stomach is a little upset and those usually help to settle it.”

Ashley gave him a sympathetic look. “Okay. If you need to leave Samantha with me to keep her out of the way that’s fine. I can even feed her.”

Andrew handed Samantha to her before walking over to grab the crackers. “Thanks. You are a life saver.”

He left the kitchen and Ashley made herself a plate with enough on it for her to be able to share with Samantha. Ashley walked over to the table with the plate and sat it on the table. She sat down at the table with Samantha in her lap. “Are you ready to have breakfast?”

She nodded and Ashley picked up the towel that she had sat beside the plate and draped it over Samantha so that she wouldn’t get her clothes dirty. Ashley handed Samantha a sausage link. She bit into it happily.

“After we come back from my workout, will you go out to the corral with me?”

Ashley looked up at Chris in surprise. She had been out the corral with him several times but there was something in his voice that hinted at more. “Why?”

He smiled. “It is a surprise.”

She nodded and took a bite of her waffle. Looking down, she checked to make sure that Samantha had finished chewing the piece of sausage she had just bitten off. Once she was assured Samantha had, Ashley offered her a piece of the waffle.

“Have you considered having children?”

Ashley looked up at Chris in surprise. “What makes you ask that?”

He nodded his head in Samantha’s direction. “You’re good with her.”

She studied him for a few moments then nodded. “Well yes, I have thought about having children. Have you?”

He nodded. “Yes, I have. However if my blood work comes back as conclusive of me having Hypokalemic Paralysis, no I won’t. There is no way in the world I can bring a child into the world to suffer. But yes, I would love to see my children running around the house in a few years.”

They both looked up when the door to the kitchen opened. Andrew and Karen reentered. She still held onto the bag of crackers. Walking over to the table, she sat down while Andrew walked over to the stove and fixed himself a plate. Even though she knew Karen probably wouldn’t want anything to eat, Ashley offered some anyway.

“Would you like anything else to eat? We have oatmeal and cold cereal.”

Karen shook her head. “As good as everything looks and sounds I don’t think that my stomach could handle anything right now.”

Ashley nodded. “Okay. Well just let me know if you want anything and I’ll make it for you.”

Karen smiled. “I might take you up on that offer if my stomach settles before I have to leave for work.”

Andrew made his way to the table and sat down. He took a bite of his food and nodded. “This is great.”

Ashley smiled. “Thank you.”

A few moments later Andrew finished his plate and took it over to the sink. He walked back to the table and helped his wife into a standing position before reaching for Samantha. She was halfway asleep after enjoying such a hearty breakfast. Ashley placed a kiss on her soft cheek before handing her over to her father.

“Come on sweetheart, we need to get going so we can be on time. We’ll see you guys later on this evening.”

Chris smiled at them. “Have a good day.”

“You do the same.”

They left the kitchen and Ashley finished the little food left on her plate. She took it to the sink once it was clean. “Is an hour long enough for you to let your food digest before we head to the hospital for your workout?”

He nodded. “Yes, it is.”

* * * *

“Man, it is hot out there.”

Chris closed the door behind him. Summer was in full swing and there was no denying it now. Today had been a busy day for the both of them. As she had promised earlier, they had left for the hospital an hour after breakfast. When they arrived at the hospital, he completed an hour workout before they headed to her place so she could grab some more clothes. When they arrived back at his home he helped her to put her stuff away before leading her out to the barn. Together they had saddled Dasher and had taken him for a ride. She had really enjoyed herself after getting over the horse’s name. Chris had assured her that Dasher’s dashing days were behind him. At the end of the ride, she suggested they go horseback riding more often. He agreed

with her.

Inhaling deeply, she frowned. "Is that myself that I smell?"

Chris chuckled. "Feel free to use my shower."

Ashley nodded. "I'm going to take you up on that offer. I could use cool shower anyway. I feel hot and sticky, not to mention stinky."

Heading through the kitchen she made her way through the living room and toward his bedroom. She opened the drawer that Chris had emptied out for her belongings and pulled out her underclothes before heading into the bathroom. Sitting her clothes and towel on the toilet she leaned over and turned on the water then stripped down. She took care to pull her hair up to keep it from getting wet. Stepping into the shower she sighed when the cool water hit her skin. It was so refreshing that she stood there for a moment before reaching for the soap. She had just begun to work up lather when the shower door opened. She looked up in surprise to find Chris standing there naked. "What are you doing?"

He smiled. "Saving water, time and money."

He stepped inside the shower with her and took the soap and washcloth out of her hand. "I'll wash yours if you wash mine."

She laughed at the lecherous look that accompanied his statement. "You are incorrigible."

He winked at her. "I know."

They ended up wasting time, water and money. By the time they made it out of the shower they were wrinkled. He reached for a towel and attempted to wrap both of them in it. They entered his bedroom only to have a naked Samantha run in and greet them. To their demise Karen followed close behind her.

"Samantha, get back—"

Karen stopped dead in her tracks before looking back and forth between Chris and Ashley. They were both struggling to keep the towel scantily covering them intact.

"Now I see where she gets it from."

Karen scooped up Samantha and turned to leave the room. "By the way, you guys should try two towels instead of one," she called over her shoulder.

She closed the door behind her and Chris chuckled but it was quickly cut off when he received an elbow from Ashley. "I am going to stop hanging around you. I always seem to get into embarrassing situation when I do."

Chris turned to face her. “Well if you don’t hurry up and put some clothes on you might find yourself in another embarrassing situation.”

Ashley gasped when she felt Chris’ growing erection against her leg. He was becoming quickly aroused and she hoped he hadn’t been when he was facing Karen. That would just be icing on the cake. He began to ease her toward the bed and she took his hint. Shaking her head, she gave him her sternest look. “Don’t even think about it.”

She snatched the towel away, leaving him completely nude and turned and headed back into the bathroom. She closed the door and locked it for good measure. Reaching for her clean underwear, she put them on before gathering up her dirty clothes.

When she came out of the bathroom, Chris was halfway dressed. She swore she could physically see his mouth began to water when he stared at her. Shaking her head, she put the dirty clothes in her empty overnight bag before walking to his dresser. She opened the drawer where her clothes were, realizing how intimate the action was. Reaching inside, she pulled out a baby doll shirt and a pair of denim shorts. She put the clothes on, aware of Chris’ gaze the entire time and she had to admit it was a little nerve wracking. The intensity of his gaze always affected her. When he made a move toward her, she shook her head. “Don’t think about it, Christopher.”

Chris smiled wickedly. “Tell you what. I will think about it but I won’t act on it. At least not right now.”

Ashley shivered at the promise she heard in his voice. It wasn’t because it bothered her but because it was what she wanted as well. She wanted to see if a third time would be as explosive as the last two. Clearing her throat, she walked toward the door before it was she who threw Chris on the bed. “Let’s go see if our company is ready to eat.”

Chris stood up and followed Ashley out of the room with a smile on his face. She took in his expression and shook her head. “I’m almost afraid to ask why you are smiling.”

“No reason really. I just like the way you made reference to my family as our guests.”

She remained silent and allowed him to take her hand in his. The sentence had been a subconscious thought but it had come out with ease. She smiled. Even if it wasn’t official she did consider Chris’s family to be a part of hers and he was definitely a part of hers. She groaned inwardly. It was official. She was in love with Chris

* * * *

Karen embraced Chris. “Thank you for letting us stay.”

He returned the embrace. “You’re welcome and you guys are more than welcome to stay here anytime.”

Andrew slapped Chris on the back. “Thanks bro. I hope we weren’t too much of an intrusion. ”

Ashley reached out and took a fussy Samantha out of Andrew's arm. "I think that someone needs a nap."

As if to agree, Samantha rubbed eyes. Ashley placed a kiss on the adorable little girl's cheek. "Be good for your mom and dad."

Ashley handed Samantha back over and the trio headed toward the front door. The gas line had been repaired and it was safe for Andrew, Karen and Samantha to return to their home.

Chris opened the front door and led the way outside. He helped to pack the car and with one final wave, Andrew, Karen and Samantha were off. Ashley and Chris turned and went back into the house. The door was barely closed before Chris had her in his arms. "Now I mean to make good on that promise I made two days ago."

She resisted. "Not now. George will be here any minute to make dinner."

"Well then, I guess you're going to have to be real quiet."

He lifted her up in his arms and before she could protest, he was carrying her down the hall to his bedroom. Once he stepped over the threshold he let her slide downward to stand on own her feet. He turned and closed the door behind him, locking it. When he turned back around to face her he reached for her shirt. He pulled it over her head before circling around her.

She shivered when his lips found the sensitive areas of her neck. His hands spanned her small but curvy waist. He slid them downward into her shorts and they moaned simultaneously as he found her hot and ready. It seemed she was always ready for him no matter what. He slipped a finger inside of her and Ashley moaned, leaning back into him. Another finger slipped in and her head fell back against his shoulder. His touch felt good but she wanted more.

"Christopher, protection?"

Those were the only words she could manage to get out. He walked her toward the bed. Once they reached it, he slid her shorts over her hips before turning her around and easing her down onto the bed. He slipped his own shirt over his head and her hands were drawn to his chest like magnets. He shivered against her when her fingers brushed his nipples. He broke the contact by leaning down and taking her nipple into his mouth. She arched into him, crying out in the process.

He pushed her back on the bed before leaning over her and placing kisses on her body. Everything felt highly sensitized to her. When his lips touched the area just below her stomach she trembled. She looked down at him as he looked up at her. He kneeled at the edge of the bed pulling her to it. She tried to sit up when he placed her legs over his shoulders but he held her down. Never in her life had she felt so exposed. She didn't have a lot of time to dwell on it. A loud moan of pleasure escaped her and her legs tried to close involuntarily but his broad shoulders kept her from doing so. He placed his hands under her bottom and held her against his

mouth. She was muffling her own cries of pleasure and indicating she was only seconds away from going over the edge.

Her thighs tightened and he gave her one last stroke with his tongue, pushing her head first into a mind-altering orgasm. Her body shook and her back arched as she went over the edge. It was a miracle that her spine didn't snap in two at the onslaught of pleasure. It took everything in her power not to scream. The man was talented with his tongue. Too talented. He didn't stop pleasuring her until the last tremor traveled through her. He pulled away from her, sweeping off his shorts and underwear in one motion. With his free hand he grabbed for protection and covered himself with it. His first thrust drove them halfway up the bed. Ashley bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out in pleasure. Her hands came up and gripped his arms and her legs came up and gripped his waist. She knew she was going to come again and she wasn't sure she would survive it.

Her gaze met his when he touched the side of her face and tilted her chin toward his. He brought his lips down on hers. A moment later his mouth muted her cry of completion as well as his as he joined her. He rolled to the side, taking her with him. She held onto him struggling to catch her breath.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Yes but it will probably be a while before I can breathe normally."

He smiled at her before sitting up and scooping her up in his arms. She frowned. "You know even though your leg is better you still shouldn't be picking me up."

"Well, your squirming only makes it worse."

She stilled with a huff of her breath and he carried her into the bathroom. He set her on her own feet. "Take a hot bath and soak."

She grinned at the sight of his bare bottom disappearing through the door. It was so tight and muscular she could probably bounce a dime off of it. Leaning over, she turned on the water and set it to the hottest temperature she could stand. What they had just shared was passionate and wonderful. This time had definitely been just as good as the first time. Yes, Chris was a talented lover.

Turning off the water she stepped inside the tub and laid back. Her breath came out on a relaxed sigh as the warm water surrounded her. Chris' suggestion for a warm soak had been a good idea. Hopefully he would come and join her. A loud thump sounded and she sat up quickly. She called out to Chris and when he didn't answer, she jumped out of the tub with sinking feeling in her stomach. Grabbing Chris' robe off the back of the door, she wrapped it around herself. Looking down she made sure that everything was covered just in case it was one of the guys. She looked into the bedroom and didn't see Chris so she headed for the hallway. A small cry escaped her when she saw Chris was lying in the middle of the living room floor.

“Christopher what happened?”

“I can’t feel anything.”

She ran into the kitchen and grabbed a glass of water. At that moment she was glad he kept a bottle of the potassium pills in the kitchen and George hadn’t made it there yet. She was certain that she looked like a wild woman. When she made it back to Chris, she knelt beside him and lifted his head. She placed the pill in his mouth with some water. Her massaging of his throat made it easier for him to swallow the pill. She gave him a little more water before placing the glass aside. Shifting beside him she put herself in a position so that she was able to support his head in her lap. Moments later the episode started to ease up and he was able to move a little but not much. A few more minutes passed and he was able to move but he was extremely weak. He had pushed himself too hard today and she had let him. Tears came to her eyes and as the first one fell he lifted his hand and brushed it away.

“Don’t cry.”

She closed her eyes and another tear fell. She felt so awful right now. If she had paid better attention they might not be here right now. “This is my fault.”

He shook his head. “No it isn’t.” He shifted in her arms. “I pushed myself too hard today but I’ll be fine. I’m feeling better already, just a little tired.”

She opened her eyes and cupped his cheek. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “Now help me back to bed, and lie down and take a nap with me.”

She helped him up and together they made their way down the hallway to his bedroom. He got into bed and she went into the bathroom and let the water out of the tub before returning to the bed. She crawled into the bed beside him and snuggled closer to him. Ashley closed her eyes and her heartbeat slowly returned to normal. This was the second time that he’d had an episode since the first one. It was times like this that made her wonder if Chris really did have Hypokalemic Paralysis. What else could be causing the paralysis? Hopefully they would find out soon enough.

Feeling Chris’s arms tighten around her brought her out of her musings. His strength was back

She lay there letting him hold her and thought about the fear she felt when she saw him laying on the floor and there had been nothing that she could do to help him besides give him a pill and hoped it work. In all of her physical therapy training she had never felt more helpless than she did then during his episodes. She sighed when he began running his hands up and down her back. It was soothing and she closed her eyes drifting off to sleep before he did.

Chapter Nine

“I’m in love with him, Raymond.”

Her brother paused with his cup of coffee to his lips. She was sitting at his kitchen table visiting him. He was shocked and it was obvious.

“My independent ‘I don’t need a man to complete me’ sister is in love? Care to explain that?”

Ashley laughed. “I could try but I’m not sure I could.”

Raymond set his cup down. “Well I can. You have been in love with Chris for as long as I can remember and we all knew it. That’s why we made Chris feel as if he were a part of the family.”

Ashley’s jaw dropped in shock. Her brothers had known all these years that she’d had feelings for Chris? She couldn’t believe it.

“But you guys did give him a hard time.”

Raymond smiled. “It was only to see if he could hang with us and to see if he deserved you.”

He leaned across the table and took his baby sister’s hand.

Ashley sighed. She was confused and needed his support and advice or she wouldn’t have come to him this early on a Saturday morning and definitely not without calling. When he had opened the door ten minutes ago and saw her standing there, she had read the shock on her brother’s face. Yet he hadn’t said anything. Instead he had pulled her inside and led her into the kitchen. After he had started the pot of coffee he had pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly. She had needed his secure embrace.

“Baby sis, do you know how I knew I was in love with Tamara?”

Ashley shook her head. “No, I don’t.”

“When she was the first thing on my mind when I woke up and the last thing on my mind when I went to sleep at night. When I couldn’t imagine my life without her. That was when I knew I was in love with Tamara.”

He sat back. “But that is how I knew. Still being in love is different for everyone.”

“How do I know if he loves me?”

Raymond chuckled. “If I could answer your question I would be rich. However I will tell you this. If he is the one for you, you will know and there won’t be any doubt but I can tell you from what I see Chris loves you. At least he does if he has any common sense. How can anyone not love you? You are intelligent, attractive and independent.”

She gave her brother a wry glance. "And you are my brother. You're supposed to say that."

He shrugged. "Even so, it's the truth."

"What is the truth?"

They both looked up as Tamara walked into the kitchen. Ashley answered her.

"That I am lovable because I am intelligent, attractive and independent."

Tamara greeted her with a hug before greeting her brother with a kiss. Raymond pulled his wife onto his lap and she went willingly.

She liked the fact her brother and his wife were comfortable with their relationship. Even after years of marriage. It made her wonder if it would be the same way between her Chris and herself. "Well that is the truth but then again Raymond always knows the right thing to say."

Tamara took a sip of her husband's coffee before giving him another kiss. Reluctantly he let her go so she could get up and get herself a cup. She turned to look at her husband and sister-in-law. "Do you two mind if I join you?"

Ashley shook her head, always amazed by her sister-in-law selflessness. "This is your house. I should be the one asking you that."

Tamara walked over to the table and added cream and sugar to her coffee. "Well when my husband didn't come back to bed and I smelled the coffee, I decided to come and investigate."

Ashley laughed. "Yeah. I had a dilemma and had to come and steal your husband away."

Tamara smiled. "For you to be over here at this time of morning it must be a doozy. Are you two hungry? I'm going to go ahead and get breakfast started."

Ashley smiled. "That sounds great. Do you need any help?"

Tamara stood up, shaking her head before picking up her cup. "No I don't but the kids will be up shortly so I had better get started."

"Well then I would love to stay for breakfast but don't make anything special on my part."

Tamara began to move around the kitchen and Raymond turned his attention back to his sister.

"So where do you think you guys' relationship is going to go from here?"

Ashley shrugged. "Hopefully in the right direction if I have anything to do with it. Although I have just made it to the part where I can admit that I am in love with him."

The smell of the food Tamara was cooking made Ashley's stomach grumble. "Someone sounds hungry."

Ashley shook her head in mock disgust, staring down at her stomach. "Unfortunately."

Raymond grinned. "I know that I say this a lot but you are looking good, baby sis."

"Thanks Ray. I have been working hard to get and keep myself this way."

Raymond chuckled. "I also know that momma's chili beans and cornbread muffins did not help."

Ashley rolled her eyes. Raymond was right about that. There had been times when her mother had fixed chili beans and corn bread three times a week simply because it cheap, easy to make, and her father's favorite. Her mother was also where she had picked up her addiction to bread. She could still remember joining her mother in the kitchen over the years to help make fresh bread. Bread that she had barely been able to let cool because she was so anxious to taste it. Then there had been the numerous meals of fried chicken, fried pork chops, and chicken fried steak. The joke in the household had always been that her mother had created a seventh food group...*fried*.

It was a miracle that no one had high cholesterol or a massive coronary. After she had become health and weight conscious, her arteries gained the chance of being open again by now. She could still remember some of the major battles that had occurred because Ashley still hadn't been able to resist the temptation of some of the fattening food and was always breaking her diet because of it. In the end, Ashley had done better than most. Especially once she had moved off on her own. The weight had seemed to fall off. Lord help her when her metabolism slowed down. She was going to be in serious trouble then. Everyone looked up as the kitchen door swung open and a sleepy-eyed Yvette walked in. When she saw her Aunt Ashley sitting at the table she perked up and threw herself into her aunt's arms. "Aunt Ashley."

She wrapped her arms tightly around her adorable niece. "Good morning, Yvette."

Yvette pulled back to look at her, rubbing her eyes. "What are you doing here?"

Ashley brushed a stray wisp of hair out of her niece's face. "I came to talk to your dad and to see you guys."

As if realizing that both of her parents were in the room, she ran up to each of them before coming back and settling herself into Ashley's lap.

Raymond shook his head. "To think my wife and I did all of this hard work to raise your child."

Ashley laughed and turned her attention to her niece. "How have you been?"

Yvette rested her head against her shoulder. "Fine."

“And how is school?”

Yvette nodded. “Good.”

Yvette had just started her first year of school last fall and her niece had been ecstatic. Ashley smiled to herself as she imagined holding her own Yvette. The smile faded from her face as she wondered if that would become a reality if she stayed with Chris. The diagnosis Hypokalemic Paralysis was more of a possibility now.

They were pretty certain he didn't have it but they were still running test to figure out what he did have. Until they figured out what it was that he had, it would limit the possibility of him wanting kids. She had heard him voice the fear a few times that he could pass the medical issue plaguing him right now to his children. The fact it could happen to any possible children he might father was enough to put a halt to the dream. Shaking herself mentally, she tried to clear her head. She was getting ahead of herself. Who said Chris wanted to marry her, let alone have kids with her?

The kitchen door opened again, bringing her out of her thoughts, and Vanessa walked in carrying a sleep Alisha. The little girl lifted her head and when she saw her father she reached out for him. Vanessa deposited her baby sister in their father's lap before kissing him on the cheek. She greeted her mother before going over to the table and sitting next to her aunt.

“Good morning, Aunt Ashley.”

“Good morning, Vanessa.”

Vanessa propped her arms on the table. “Are you going to spend the day with us?”

Ashley tilted her head to the side, pretending to think about it. “I might. I don't have any other plans.”

“Cool,” she replied.

Ashley laughed and shook her head. Oh to be so young and innocent again. Tamara ended all conversation by announcing that breakfast was ready.

Raymond stood up and placed Alisha in her high chair while Tamara deposited plates in front of Ashley and the kids. The fluffy blueberry pancakes, bacon and eggs made her inhale appreciatively. Her sister-in-law could throw down in the kitchen. “This looks and smells wonderful, Tamara.”

“Thank you.”

Everyone was seated and the food blessed before anyone began to eat. Several moments later Ashley came up for air and realized she couldn't eat at Raymond and Tamara's place too often or

her weight might become an issue again.

“So what so you have planned tonight?”

Ashley reached for her coffee. “Well, Virginia invited me over tonight.”

Raymond’s dark brow arched and he grinned. “What do you two have planned?”

Ashley shrugged. “We’ll probably just sit around and talk.”

Raymond chuckled. “Sounds like fun.”

Ashley nodded, sure that it would be. She really liked Virginia. Ashley’s high school years had been a little better because of Virginia. There had been times she had just wanted to get away from her house and her brothers and Vivian, Monica, and Sylvie had been too busy. Virginia had always welcomed her with open arms. It had been a gesture she had always appreciated. If there were someone she would choose to have as a mother-in-law, it would be Virginia. She shook her head to clear it. Marriage and children had been on her mind a lot for some reason. Maybe it was time for her to do both but she had to be certain it was what Chris wanted as well.

* * * *

Ashley smoothed the one stubborn wrinkle from the gold V-neck, cotton slip dress she had chosen to wear tonight. Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm her nerves. She wasn’t certain as to why she was so nervous although this was the first time that she had spent time alone with Virginia since Chris and she had taken their relationship beyond one of friendship. Lifting her hand, she rang the doorbell and a few moments later Andrew opened the door.

“Hey Ashley.”

She hid her surprise well. He was the last person that she had expected to see. “Um . . .hi Drew.”

He stepped back and allowed her to step inside before placing a kiss on Ashley’s cheek and embracing her in a hug.

“Mom is in the kitchen with Karen. They’re finishing up dinner.”

Ashley turned around quickly. “Who is all here?”

“Just Karen, Samantha, mom, dad, and Chris.”

She couldn’t hide the look of surprise on her face at that statement. “Oh.”

Andrew gave her a puzzled look. “Didn’t you know that everyone was going to be here?”

She gave Andrew a sheepish look. “No, I didn’t. I just kind of assumed Virginia was only

inviting me.”

Ashley shook her head before heading into the kitchen. Wondering how she could have jumped to such a conclusion. Anyone probably would have. Karen was sitting at the table chopping vegetables for a salad. She looked over at Samantha who was sitting in her high chair chewing on a slice of cucumber. Virginia was pulling a roast out of the oven. Both women looked up and smiled as they heard her enter the kitchen.

“Hi.”

Virginia sat the roast down and wiped her hands before coming over to Ashley and hugging her.

“Glad that you made it.”

Karen greeted her from her chair. “I would get up but my back has been killing me since early this morning.”

Ashley looked at her with concern. “Are you okay?”

Karen nodded then groaned and touched her stomach. “I’m not due for another week but I swear it feels like this baby is ready to see the world.”

Ashley almost thought she had misheard Karen because she was so calm about it.

Karen sighed. “Let me give you a helpful tip. Don’t get pregnant and have to carry to full term during the summer months.” She let out a small moan and took a deep breath before resuming her work on the salad. “Do you guys need any help with anything?”

Virginia nodded and Ashley walked over to lend a hand. Between the three of them they finished dinner and set the table. Soon, everyone was sitting down and eating. It almost felt like old times when she had joined the Morgans for dinner. Conversation flowed easily and Ashley smiled. She wondered if things would ever change. A little sadness came over her at the thought of what would happen if she and Chris didn’t work out.

Deep down she knew that the Morgans would welcome her but she just didn’t know how comfortable she would feel about being around them. Her thoughts were interrupted and everyone glanced up in concern as Karen gripped the table and moaned in pain.

“Okay, these pains aren’t letting up. I think I might actually be in labor,” she gasped when she was able to speak again.

Andrew dropped his fork. “What?”

“I think I’m in labor, Drew. The pains started late last night but I was able to still function with them so I didn’t think anything of them. But they are getting stronger and closer together. The same way they did with Samantha.”

Ashley put down her napkin and stood up. She believed Karen. “Then I’m inclined to agree with you and we need to get you to the hospital.”

Ashley felt a woman like Karen would know her body if she knew nothing else. Karen had already had one child, which added to her certainty. Everyone else stood as well, spurred into action. The food was put up while Karen was hustled toward the car. Andrew had to run back into the house and grab a towel because Karen’s water broke just before she stepped into the car. If the situation hadn’t been so chaotic, Ashley would have laughed.

“Do any of us need to go by the house and get the overnight bag?”

Karen shook her head. “Andrew has it in the truck. He wouldn’t go anywhere without it the last week. I guess it’s a good thing.”

Ashley nodded. “Yes it is.”

They put Karen into the car and Virginia slid into the backseat to keep Samantha occupied. Ashley ran to her own car with Chris and Benjamin close behind.

They arrived at *Shannon Medical Hospital* in record time. Several minutes later Karen was set up in her room and hooked up to monitors. She was also in full labor. It became obvious to Ashley as she looked on that Andrew was Karen’s rock. Karen entered the last stage of labor and Ashley left the room, not wanting to intrude on a private moment between husband and wife. Chris and Benjamin followed her out. They went into the waiting room. What seemed like an eternity later, Andrew came down the hall wearing the proud smile of a new father. He handed Chris and his father a cigar before informing them that they could come and see the baby. They followed him down the hall excitedly. Ashley looked over at Chris who was looking back at her. There had been so much excitement since she had arrived at the Morgan’s household that they had barely had time to speak to each other. She planned on making it up later

They all entered the room and a tired but glowing Karen sat in the middle of the bed holding the new addition to their family. Benjamin, Virginia and Chris stepped forward to see the baby and when they all laughed, Ashley stood on tiptoe. Looking over their shoulders she tried to get a glimpse of what they were laughing at. Her own eyes widened. Karen had pulled the blanket back to reveal that their daughter was indeed a son as Andrew had said the baby would be. He was even a good sport in not gloating. Her heart melted as Andrew reached for his son.

“Everyone, I would like for you to meet our son Andrew Jr.”

Ashley had to blink rapidly to keep tears from falling. Feeling Chris’ gaze on her, she glanced up at him. He was gazing at her with a look she couldn’t describe. It was one that she didn’t want to describe. She turned her attention back to Andrew Jr. The newborn added to her desire to become a wife and a mother. Everything in her body made her hope that she was standing next to the man who was going to help her fulfill that dream.

Chapter Ten

“Hail Alma Mater, Hail Blue and Gold for ASU, Go Rams!”

Ashley sang of the end to the school song that she would remember for the rest of her life. Angelo State’s football team had just scored a touchdown, putting them up by fourteen points against their opponent. It was homecoming and the first game she had been to this season. She had mainly been talked into coming to the game by her five friends and it was the official first date between her and Chris. It felt awkward to say that but it was true. Yet, it didn’t bother her. Chris offered her some of the cheese nachos that he had talked her into letting him get. She shook her head because he had them loaded down with so many peppers that it was bound to burn the roof off the top of her mouth. If he had indigestion later, she wasn’t going to feel any sympathy for him.

She was enjoying herself immensely. A lot of people she had not seen in years were at the game.

“We are going to Up and Down’s after the game is over. Are you and Chris going to join us and have a few drinks?”

She looked over at Vivian before looking over at Chris. He gave her a look and she knew what he was going to say but she cut him off.

“Come on. It would be good for you to get out of the house.”

It was a good idea and she was going to encourage him to get out and go with her. His expression told her it wasn’t going to be easy.

He gave her a level look. “I’m out of the house already.”

She returned the look. “Christopher, please. It will be fun. You know it will.”

He studied her and for a moment she thought he was going to fight her on it. Instead, he sighed and nodded. “Okay, we can go.”

Ashley turned to look at her friends and smiled. “Yes, we’ll join you guys.”

A few hours later she almost regretted making the statement. Angelo State had won the game and they left to go to Up and Down’s immediately to celebrate. It was a hot spot with a versatile music selection. An environment they would both be comfortable in.

“You are looking good, girl. Chris must be doing something right.”

Ashley almost choked on her drink. She looked over at Monica before looking over at Chris to make sure that he hadn’t overheard the comment. He hadn’t heard and she was relieved. Turning back around, she looked at her friend. “Girl, watch your mouth in front of Chris. He thinks we’re crazy as it is.”

Monica laughed. "But from your reaction it must be true."

Ashley shrugged. "Could be."

Monica gave her a look of surprise at the sassy reply. "Well then."

Ashley shook her head, needing a change in conversation before this one got out of control. All she needed was to mix Monica with alcohol and a lack of censorship. It would be a disaster in the making.

"How is your mom?"

Ashley could actually see the relief on her friend's face at the mention of her mother. "She is doing much better. The bronchitis is gone. She still has a little cough but she's much better."

Ashley sighed in relief. "I'm glad to hear that. I need to get by and see her again now that she's home."

Monica smiled. "She will love to see you. The last time you visited she talked about it for a week."

Ashley smiled. Monica's mom had given all of them a scare when she had fallen ill. She was just glad that Mrs. Ware was feeling better. Ashley looked over at her friend who was enjoying the last of her fruity concoction. Monica sipped the glass empty before standing up. Ashley looked at her with alarm but Monica was still steady.

"Where are you going?"

Monica smiled. "To find my husband so we can dance."

Ashley laughed and watched as her friend made a beeline for her husband. The attention that Quentin gave Monica as soon as she walked up made Ashley yearn for it. She could see her friend asking Quentin to dance and without any qualms he took Monica's hand in his and led the way to the dance floor. The music slowed down when they reached the dance floor and Quentin pulled Monica into his arms. The two of them held each other closely and began to sway together. Ashley jumped when Chris' hand touched hers. She looked up at him and he smiled.

"Would you like to dance?"

She started to say no but realized she did want to dance. When she nodded, he stood up and held out his hand to her. He led the way to the floor and she followed close behind him. When they made it to the dance floor, he pulled her into his arms. He moved well even with the brace.

In the car on the way over he confided the brace had been the reason he hadn't wanted to go. She wished she could get him to see the brace didn't slow him down as much as he thought it did.

Tonight was a start. She rested her head on his shoulder.

“Are you having fun?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes I am. Are you glad you came out with us?”

He placed a kiss on the crown of her head. “Yes, I am. Thank you for inviting me.”

She lifted her head and smiled at him. “Anytime.”

She laid her head back on his chest and closed her eyes. This was the first time they had danced together in years and she was enjoying it. Chris was firm in all the right places that he should be, at least in her opinion. She had watched him pack on some additional muscle as a result of the physical therapy she had him going through.

He was healing nicely and faster than the average person would have. But that was mainly because he was willing to whatever it took to get better. There were days where he had pushed himself to the edge. Days where she had been forced to make him stop for fear of him overexerting himself but it was paying off. Within the last week he had put the cane away. He no longer needed it and the slight limp he had was almost unnoticeable unless a person had seen him before the accident. Once the brace was gone, it would probably disappear. His arms tightened around her and she smiled. Opening her eyes she glanced over at Monica and Quentin who were still in their own world. She felt Chris’ chin touch the top of her head.

“What are you thinking about?”

“How lucky I would be if my husband and I had a relationship like the one Monica and Quentin have.”

There was a brief pause and she could hear the wheels turning in Chris’ head. “Do you think we could have one like that?”

She pulled back and looked at him. The look in his eyes told her he was serious. She nodded.

“I think we can.” She laid her head back on his chest. She did feel like they could have the same thing Monica and Quentin had.

“Do Monica and Quentin have any children?”

“No they don’t have any. I don’t think that either one of them want children.”

She could feel Chris’ surprise more than she could see it. It wasn’t an often occurrence that a married couple made the decision not to have any children but she thought it was a commendable decision. There were too many people who had children that either were not wanted or couldn’t be provided for.

To be truthful she had no idea what the driving force behind the decision for Monica and Quentin not having children was but their friends knew where they stood in their own life. She was sure whatever decision the couple made, it was the best one for them. Ashley looked up when someone bumped into them and realized a fast song had started and the dance floor was starting to crowd. Chris pulled away and started to pull her off the dance floor but she resisted.

“Stay and dance with me.”

Chris laughed. “I’m not good at dancing to fast music.”

She shook her head at the lame excuse. “Not good enough.”

Placing her hands on his hips she showed him a move. “You do this and I’ll do the rest.”

The first thing that she noticed was that he was a quick learner and he wasn’t as bad and he thought he was.

She turned to face him sliding her arms around his neck. His arms slid around her waist. They moved together as if they were born to dance together. Turning away from him she did a sensual roll of her hips that seemed to give him an instant erection. A groan escaped him and she smiled. Turning back around, she went up on tiptoe and kissed him. The kiss lasted longer than she expected and by the time the kiss ended she was in the same shape that Chris was in. The song ended and she could feel Chris relax.

“Okay, this time we get off the dance floor.”

She nodded, figuring that she had tortured them both to the point of insanity. He took her hand and led her off the dance floor. Everyone else was seated around the table and all eyes were on them when they made their way back to the table, Joseph was the first to comment. “Chris, I need to take dancing lessons from you.”

Chris chuckled before looking over at Ashley. “Actually Ashley is my dance instructor and before you ask, she doesn’t give private lessons to anyone except me.”

Noelle gave Joseph a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “It’s okay, sweetheart. I’ll give you all the private dancing lessons you want.”

Ramon looked over at Sylvie and gave her a lecherous wiggle of his eyebrows. “Can I have some private dance lessons as well?”

Sylvie rolled her eyes. “Not on your life. That is how we ended up with the four we already have.”

“This kind of dancing doesn’t involve a bed or lying down naked,” Monica whispered in a loud stage whisper.

The smile on Sylvie's face was priceless. "Who says that is how Ramon and I dance?"

The table was surrounded by laughter for the next ten minutes. Ashley clutched her sides leaning against Chris for support. Her friends were precious and she wouldn't give them up for anything.

* * * *

"I'm finished with the jump rope."

"Okay," Ashley responded without looking up. "Give me fifteen minutes on the bike and then we will call it a day."

Chris nodded and headed over to the stationary bike. Ashley was sitting at the desk in the corner of the physical therapy area, finishing up paperwork. Today was his official last day of physical therapy. It had been a tense week to say the least. At this point, neither one of them knew what the next step was going to be. From this point forward they would have to make an effort to fit into each other their respective schedules. They were going to have a normal relationship. For some strange reason it seemed like it would be easier for her to maintain two relationships instead of one. Being his physical therapist had called for her to see him on a daily basis. Now maintaining a romantic relationship with Chris almost seemed stressful.

She realized how awful that sounded but it was true. It wasn't like she hadn't had to put in any effort so far because she had. They both had. It had just been a little easier because they had never had to make arrangements to get together. Those had already been made for them. Now she needed to know if Chris truly wanted her as much as she wanted him. If he didn't, she was going to take the client in Midland that Dr. Walsh had referred her to. It would require her to move away but at least she wouldn't be as far away as she had been in Dallas.

She jumped when Chris' cell phone rang. Getting up she walked over to the table it sat on. She turned and walked toward him with it extended.

He smiled. "Go ahead and answer it for me or it might go to voice mail."

She did as he asked. "Hello."

"Hey Ashley, it's Andrew."

She grinned. "Hi Andrew, how are you?"

He chuckled. "I'm fine. Exhausted but fine. How about you?"

"Good. How are Karen and the kids?"

He laughed. "Great. Junior is growing like crazy. Samantha is being a good big sister and Karen is being a wonderful mother as usual."

Ashley smiled. "That's good to hear."

"You need to come by and see us."

Ashley met Chris' gaze. "Maybe your brother and I will get by there today."

"That sounds good. We should be here all day."

She stopped in front of Chris. "Well, let me let you talk to your brother. He is starting to get restless."

Ashley handed the phone to him. She informed him she was going to run downstairs and turn in the paper work she had just completed. He nodded before sticking the phone to his ear and she turned and picked up the paperwork before heading down the hall.

* * * *

Chris continued to pedal even as he spoke into the phone. "Hello."

There was a moment of silence on the other end. "Did I interrupt something?"

Chris frowned. "No. Why do you ask?"

"You sound a little out of breath."

Chris groaned. "You know sometimes I wonder if you need medication."

Andrew chuckled. "So how is the last workout coming along?"

Chris looked down at the counter on the machine. "Six minutes left and counting."

Andrew was silent for a moment. "Have you told her that you love her yet?"

Chris sighed heavily. "No, I haven't."

"Tell her."

Chris rolled his eyes. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't think she plans on staying in San Angelo."

He didn't give his brother any of the details he overheard Ashley talking about when she had been on the phone with Raymond. He was bothered that she hadn't mentioned it to him yet but he would give her time. He knew their relationship was changing, he just didn't know if it was

for the better or worse.

“Then give her a reason to stay. If you don’t, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

Chris sighed heavily but Andrew didn’t give him time to reply.

“Tell you what—you think about it. I need to get back to Karen and the kids but give me a call later.”

“I will.”

Chris disconnected the call and dropped the cell phone into the slot on the bike and began to pedal faster. No it wasn’t going to solve the problem but maybe it would help work off some of his frustration. With a minute left in his workout Ashley returned and he realized that the frustration he was feeling hadn’t gone away. The timer dinged and he stopped peddling.

“Good workout. Do your cool down, and we will do one more strength test. After that we can head home.”

He nodded and hopped off the bike. After toweling off he got down on the mat and Ashley conducted the last of the test that she needed to run on him. “Good. You are at about ninety percent usage with your leg.”

Chris smiled to himself. He was happy to hear that. Six months ago when he had lain on this mat he hadn’t even had ten percent of the use that he should have had in his leg. The months of pain and desperation had been worth it. Now he only needed two more things to make this a complete success.

“Are you going to take a shower here or at home?”

He sat up. “I can wait until I get home.”

She nodded and together they straightened up the room before heading out to his truck.

He had started back driving a month ago but only did so if he had someone else to ride with him. Ten minutes later, they were pulling up in front of his house.

“I hope George fixed something good for lunch. I am starved.”

Chris led the way into the house and Ashley went straight into the kitchen. He locked the front door then followed her. She was at the refrigerator and he smiled as she pulled out two containers and put them on the cabinet. He wrapped his arms around her waist.

“What did George leave for lunch?”

“Chicken salad and fruit salad. Do you want your chicken salad on wheat or rye bread?”

“Wheat is fine. What do you want to drink?”

“I saw some tea in there.”

He smiled and stepped back. Walking over to the cabinet he pulled down two glasses and filled them with the tea Ashley had accurately spotted in the refrigerator. She continued to make both of their plates. He walked over to the table and set the glasses down before taking a seat. He needed to shower but he was hungry right now and if he didn't eat, he wouldn't have enough energy to make it through a shower. They were almost finished with their lunch before Chris spoke.

“What are you going to do with yourself now that you don't have a patient taking up all of your time?”

* * * *

Ashley was silent for a moment. She had been waiting for the topic to come up and she had rehearsed her reply fifty times but those fifty times seemed to be useless to her right now. She wanted to be with Chris but now that she wasn't required to be in his life, she was uncertain as to how she was going to fit in it.

“Well, I have been offered a new patient but-”

She was interrupted in mid-sentence when Barrett stuck his head in the kitchen door. “Boss, we have a problem.”

Chris finished off his sandwich and stood up. “I know what you have to say is important. Can you give me just a minute and I promise you will have my undivided attention. I know we have a lot to talk about.”

She nodded. “Okay. Are you finished with lunch? If so, I'll clean up.”

He smiled. “Yes, I am and thank you.”

He walked past her and she saw him pause for a second. If he was going to say something he changed his mind. Instead he reached for her hand placed a kiss on the back of it then continued out the door. As soon as the door closed she stood up and cleaned up their mess. She needed to clear her head. She knew she promised Chris she would stay but she needed to get away for a while. He would understand. He had to. Loading the dishwasher she set it to start washing the dishes. She wrote Chris a brief letter and hoped that he was in the barn and wouldn't hear the start of her car. She just needed time to think. Her heart began to race. It was cowardly for her to leave in the fashion that she was but she was only going to be able to hold herself together so much longer. She thought she would be prepared when it came time to make this decision but she wasn't. Grabbing her keys she headed for the front door and got into her car. She took one last look at the ranch before starting the ignition and driving off. In the back of her mind she

hoped it wasn't the last time that she saw it.

* * * *

"Hey, boss."

Chris almost growled. Why did Barrett have to sound so chipper? Barrett came and sat down at the kitchen table beside him before taking a swig of his tea. A very bold action considering the mood he was in. Chris had come back into the house an hour later to find Ashley gone. His cursing had been so loud it had brought all of his ranch hands to the house. Once they had realized what was going on they had given him their advice in what to do to get her back and had gone back to work. Their advice had been the consensus. Do whatever it took to get her back. He hadn't followed any of their advice yet. He was too busy fuming over the way she left and what it meant. If she didn't want to continue their relationship all she had to do was tell him. She didn't have to pull a disappearing act.

"Have you called her?"

He glared at Barrett. "No."

Barrett frowned. "Why not?"

Chris shrugged. "Why should I call her? She left me."

Barrett didn't answer. He just sat and looked at Chris as if the answer was obvious. His expression darkened Chris' mood even more.

"You know, I really don't feel like talking about this right now," he half growled.

Barrett's brow arched upward. "Well, that is tough shit because we are. The guys and I aren't going to sit around here and listen to you gripe and watch you mope. Pete is already ready to hand in his resignation." Barrett leaned back in his chair. "So tell her that you love her and get her back here."

Chris shook his head. "She left me. I shouldn't have to prove to her that I love her. I'm not even sure she wants me to."

Barrett frowned. "She left because maybe you didn't give her a reason to stay. From what I can see your relationship with Ashley was operating around her being your physical therapist. Now she no longer is needed in that capacity. She is probably wondering where it leaves her, especially if neither of you have discussed it." Barrett paused and shrugged. He took another drink of his tea before continuing. "Knowing you the way I do, I'm sure you didn't. Wouldn't you be confused about where your relationship stands? Actually it seems like you are."

Chris groaned. "What the hell am I supposed to do, Barrett?"

Barrett smile. "Easy. Go find her and talk to her. Tell her you want her. Don't depend on your friendship, your prior connection, to just carry you through this. I might not have a wife or a serious girlfriend right now but I know women need communication. They need to hear what the plan is so they can think it through. So go find her, Boss, and talk to her."

Chris closed his eyes, knowing his foreman was right. Deep down he had known she was leaving as soon as he stood up to leave the kitchen but he hadn't stopped her. When he wasn't sure that he could offer her everything that she desired he saw no need to. Sure, he could give her his name but not his children. He couldn't bring a child into the world to suffer like he was suffering.

"I don't think I have any reason for her to stay."

Surprise flickered across Barrett's face. "Why do you say that?"

Chris shook his head. "I can't give her a strong and able bodied husband. Nor can I give her any children."

Barrett smiled. "I don't think Ashley would consider you to be a weak man and there are other options available when it comes to having children." Barrett stood up. "I'm going to go help the guys finish up and see if I can talk Pete out of resigning once more. You, on the other hand, need to swallow your pride and go to Ashley. If you love her, tell her otherwise she will only think you went after her because she was accessible."

Chris watched as his foreman walked out the door. He ran his hand over his face. Could Ashley really think that? Could she think he had only gone after her because she was accessible? He had no idea where Ashley was but he had an idea of a few people he could call and find out. Picking up the phone he dialed Raymond's number. He would start with family members and if he had no luck there he would move on to her friends. The phone was answered on the second ring. Tamara's voice came over the line.

"Hi Tamara, it's Chris. Is Raymond there?"

"Just a moment."

He heard the phone being set down and heard Tamara announcing him on the phone. Closing his eyes he said a small prayer and hoped that he wouldn't be hung up on or have any bodily harm coming to him.

He was positive Raymond already knew what was going on. Ashley would have definitely called him by now. He was willing to fight for Ashley. Unfortunately he wasn't in any shape to be facing off with the five Bennett brothers. He heard the phone being picked up.

"Raymond speaking."

He sighed. "Raymond, this is Chris and I need your help."

“With?”

Chris took a deep breath. “With you telling me where your sister is so that I can find her and apologize for being a jerk. There are a few things I should have told her before now but I didn’t but I promise if you tell me where she is, I will tell her everything she needs to know.”

There was a moment of silence before Raymond spoke. “You sound sincere so I’ll help you but with the warning that if you hurt my sister again, myself and the rest of my brothers will come looking for you.”

He responded without hesitation. “I love your sister and I promise you the next time that she comes to you, it will only be good news.”

Raymond chuckled. “Glad to hear it. Just make sure you tell my sister that. She needs to know it.”

Chris smiled. “I plan on it.”

“When I talked to Ashley a little while ago she told me she would stop by here after she talked to Dr. Walsh at Shannon Medical.”

Chris sighed in relief. “Thanks, Raymond. I owe you.”

“Make my sister happy for the rest of her life and we’ll call it even.”

It was a tall order but Chris felt as if he were up for the task. “It’s a deal.”

Chris disconnected the call only to have the phone ring again. He answered quickly when he saw *Shannon Medical* number on the caller ID. Hoping that it was Ashley, he answered the phone quickly.

“Hello.”

“Can I speak to Christopher Morgan?”

His heart sank as he realized that the woman on the other end wasn’t Ashley. “This is he.”

“This is Veronica and I’m a nurse here at Shannon Medical. Dr. Simms asked me to give you a call on his behalf. He wants to know if you can come to the hospital today.”

Chris became concerned. “Is there something wrong?”

“I don’t know, to be honest, sir. He just asked me to give you a call to see if you could come in.”

Chris dragged his hand down the side of his face. “Tell Dr. Simms I’ll be there in thirty

minutes.”

He heard the nurse flip through papers before concurring. “Okay, that’s fine. I’ll let Dr. Simms know.”

“Thank you.”

He hung up the phone and went in searched of his keys. When he found them, he headed out the kitchen door. Luke was the first person that he came to. Chris explained to him where he was going and told him that he would give him and the other guys a call later on to let them know what was going on. He headed for his truck, knowing more test results were in and hoped it was good news. Right now, he couldn’t take anymore bad. Getting behind the wheel he took a deep breath and started the engine. He willed his body to get him to the hospital without failing him and put the truck into gear. Heading toward the hospital he tightened his hands on the steering wheel and focused on making it to the hospital in one piece. He would deal with Dr. Simms first then hopefully he would be able to catch up with Ashley.

Chapter Eleven

Ashley sighed as she tried to concentrate on what Dan was telling her about a patient before she could decide if she was going to take the job or not. She had already said no to taking the patient in Midland, but this patient was here in San Angelo. She had just gotten back to San Angelo and when she thought about it she wasn't ready to leave again. She loved being near her family, her friends, Chris. She sighed. After today he might be the least important factor in her staying here. She might even want to leave. Yes, he lived on the outskirts of town in Merzton, but he was close enough. She laughed. She was kidding herself. Chris could be on the opposite side of the world and he would plague her every thought. Just like he was now when she should be focusing on the patient file in front of her. Trying to focus, she asked about the situation that led to the lady needing physical therapy. She looked up at Doctor Walsh.

"What happened?"

He leaned back in his chair. "She was involved in a car accident with her parents."

Ashley frowned. "Who was driving?"

Doctor Walsh grimaced. "She was but the accident wasn't her fault. A driver who had pulled an all night drug binge hit them."

"How are her parents?"

Doctor Walsh sighed heavily. "Her mother was killed instantly and her father is in critical condition but his chances of making it aren't good. He is alive right now because of the life support machine. At this point, she has amnesia. She doesn't remember anything."

Ashley shook her head in sympathy. That was probably the one thing keeping this woman sane. When the woman did regain her memory, she was going to have a hard time coping without help. She couldn't imagine losing one parent, let alone losing both. "How long do you think she will need physical therapy?"

"With the extent of her injuries, it's hard to say."

Ashley sighed. "I have to think about this one."

It was going to be a touchy case and she wasn't sure she had the mental fortitude for this patient. Not so soon after dealing with Chris. She needed a distraction but this was likely to send her into a tailspin.

Doctor Walsh gave her a look of understanding. "Well, you have some time because it'll be a while before she is in shape to do anything."

Ashley nodded. "Okay."

Dan looked at her with concern. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Yes. Why do you ask?”

His brows furrowed together. “Well, you just seem a little preoccupied.”

She smiled. “I am but I’m okay.”

“Good. Well I read your report on Mr. Morgan and it seems as if everything is okay and—”

Dan looked up over her shoulder and stopped speaking. Ashley turned to see what had caught his attention. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Chris standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame. Leaving earlier today without saying goodbye had been the hardest thing she had ever done. But seeing him standing there in the doorway, she knew that it had been worth it. Clearing her throat she found her voice. “Christopher, what are you doing here?”

The corners of his mouth tilted upward in a breathtaking smile. “I came to see you.”

Dan looked back and forth between Ashley and Chris. “Well I see this might be a private moment. Ashley, you can use conference room three, it should be available.”

Realizing where she was and whom she was in the presence of she stood up quickly and grabbed her purse. She gave Doctor Walsh an appreciate smile.

“Thank you. I’ll be in touch.”

“No problem and take your time. It seems like you have more important things to deal with right now.”

She didn’t bother to agree with Doctor Walsh. He was a very astute man. She walked over to the doorway and Chris moved out of the way so she could get by.

“However I will need an answer by Friday, Ashley.”

She turned to speak but Chris beat her to it. “The answer is no.”

Ashley looked at Chris with surprise but before she could say anything he went one step further and shocked her even more.

“She won’t be taking anymore patients because she will be busy planning her wedding.”

Chris pulled her out into the hall and closed the door to the office. He turned to look at her.

“Which way to the conference room?”

She pointed to what she hoped was the right direction because his words had just rocked her. She

had no idea she was even getting married. The last she checked she hadn't been proposed to. Her eyes widened when she realized he probably intended to.

Before she could speak, he took her hand and started off in the direction that she had pointed him in. Once they reached the conference room, he pulled her inside and locked the door.

"I don't want any interruptions," he muttered. "What I have to say is very important."

Walking over to the table, he pulled out a chair for her and she sat. It was due more to the fact that she didn't think her legs could support her for too much longer. He pulled up a chair next to hers and sat himself in it. His hand reached for hers and grasped it tightly before he spoke again.

"I know this is a surprise. I didn't mean to spring it upon you in this way."

His statement seemed to snap her out of her trance. "To say the least."

"I have something I need to say and it needs to be said before any more time goes by."

At his solemn expression she braced herself. "Okay."

"First off, I'm not happy with the way you left today but I have to admit I didn't help the situation any. If it weren't for the guys nagging and complaining about my grumpiness, I probably wouldn't have come to my senses this quickly."

He caressed her cheek with his free hand. "Ashley, we never talked about what would happen after my physical therapy but we should have. That is partly my fault as well. I want us to continue to be more than friends. More than patient and physical therapist, I want us to be husband and wife."

Tears sprang to her eyes. That had been the last thing she had been expecting to hear and from the expression on his face he wasn't finished.

"I want us to be happy, make beautiful babies, but most of all I just want to know that you love me as much as I love you."

Tears began to fall down her cheeks. "I want those things too and I do love you."

She reached for him and he pulled her into his arms. A sigh escaped her as his lips found hers. After all this time, she was finally had everything she wanted.

He slipped his hand up under her blouse and all thoughts floated from her mind. She sat as still as possible while he undid the clasp of her bra before bringing his hands around to the front. His hands slid from underneath her blouse and she went to protest the loss but his hands found the buttons of her blouse and she bit her protest back. She heard laughter in the hallway outside the conference room and remembered that she was in the hospital. When she grabbed his hands to still his motion, it was more difficult than she thought it would be. Chris was trouble. Just one

touch from him could render her senseless. The man was extremely talented with his hands.

“Christopher, we can’t do this here.”

He smiled. “Why not?”

“Because...”

Her voice trailed off as Chris found the sensitive skin on her neck. He lifted his head when she moaned. “You didn’t answer me.”

“I can’t answer you w...wi...with you doing that.”

He lifted his head again but it was a slow process and she forgot what the question was. A smile came to her face as he reminded her.

“Now tell me why we can’t do this?”

She took a deep breath trying to collect her thoughts and slow her breathing. “Because this is a conference room and if we do it here, I will never be able to walk on this floor again let alone come into this hospital about thinking about what we did.”

Her eyebrows furrowed together. She was certain there was a more important reason as to why they shouldn’t be getting it on in the conference room but it slipped her mind at the moment.

“Well believe me when I say that it would not bother me if you never stepped another foot in this hospital again. Although I do plan on making you come in it again and again.”

Her response was cutoff by his mouth. It was a brief kiss but it was a powerful kiss. He stood her up and reached up under her skirt and pulled her panties off.

“I love it when you wear skirts.”

She gasped as he pulled her back onto his lap. She could feel his erection beneath his blue jeans. He was wonderful with his hands and his next move proved that. His hand slid under her skirt, pushing all thought of anything except him from her mind. She stiffened when he slid his finger inside of her body and a moan of pleasure slipped from between clinched teeth.

“You are going to get me fired,” she moaned breathlessly.

“How? You don’t work here but even if you did, I promise you this is going to be worth getting fired,” he mumbled against her neck.

He withdrew his finger from her and reached for the buttons on his jeans. With Ashley’s help they freed his erection and with a little maneuvering of her hips, he was sliding into her. They both moaned at the new sensation. He was still for a moment and she pulled back to look at him.

“You do realize that we aren’t using protection don’t you?”

He gave a tentative thrust and she gasped. “Yes I do.”

“I may get pregnant.”

He gave another thrust. “Then I guess this may be a good time to tell you I don’t have Hypokalemic Paralysis. I don’t have anything that can pass on to our children.”

Her look of surprise was the perfect opportunity for him to move without restraint. His third thrust took her breath away. Her hands came up and gripped his shoulders. Ashley’s hips seemed to take over, spurred on by the notion that this was the man she loved. The man was going to marry. Chris tightened his grip on her hips and if to hinder her movements.

“Slow down, honey. We have time.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Ashley stiffened and her release roared through her stealing her breath. He swallowed her cries of passion, holding her to him in a way she would never forget.

She collapsed against his chest and when she was able to catch her breath she realized Chris was still hard and inside her. She gasped when he began to move. Her last orgasm hadn’t completely subsided yet. “This time we will take it slow.”

A few moments later she made a liar out of him as they both experienced the intense pleasure of fulfillment together. When their breathing returned to normal, she smiled. Her heart was full. She pulled back and cupped his face between her hands

“I love you, Christopher Morgan.”

“I love you, too, Ashley Bennett,” he whispered

When she thought her legs would support her, she stood up and they both groaned at the loss. They began straightening up their clothes. She reached into her purse and pulled out the travel size package of moist towel wipes that she carried.

Here she was thinking they would just come in handy when she babysat her nieces. Handing a few to him, she took a few for herself and both of them freshened themselves up to the best of their capability. Once she straightened her clothes up, she took a seat next to Chris. He was almost presentable himself but his jeans were still unbuttoned. Thankfully he had tucked himself back into his jeans. She didn’t know if she would be able to concentrate if he hadn’t.

“Now do you care to explain what you were saying earlier?”

Chris gave her an innocent yet teasing glance. He was in a good mood today. She could feel it

radiating off him. A much better mood than he had been in for a while. Everything seemed to be falling into place as she had been wishing that it would.

“What are you talking about?”

She arched a brow in his direction. “*Christopher Morgan.*”

He laughed and held his hands up in mock surrender. Starting from the beginning, he explained to her what had transpired earlier.

“Okay. Okay. I got a call from Doctor Simms’ nurse telling me to come to the hospital. Dr. Simms was kind enough to explain to me that additional test results had come in. Test results he was sure I wanted immediately.”

He paused, a grin spreading across his face. “Hypokalemic paralysis has been ruled out as the factor behind my episodes. My parents and brother didn’t carry the gene or the trait for the genetic disorder making them doubt it as the culprit. Through all the testing they have reached dead end after dead end in trying to match up any other genetic disorder that could be causing the same symptoms.”

He chuckled. “One of the specialists caught something on the last MRI I agreed to have done. The paralysis I experienced is because of a pinched nerve near my spine. The nerve has probably been affected for a while and it had just taken the right fall to agitate it. I can’t tell you how hard I fell the first time off of Dancer. I swear I felt my teeth jar. ”

Ashley shook her head, trying to take in everything he was saying. It was good news but it was overwhelming. She could just imagine the reaction while he was sitting there receiving the semi-good news. She wished she could have been there with him. A random thought occurred to her and she frowned.

“What about the potassium? You always seem to react to it.”

He nodded. “With good reason. My potassium was low probably due to my low potassium intake. I have to admit I haven’t always been the healthiest of eaters but that is going to change. I have a lot to live for.”

She laughed. “I plan to see to it. Now, what do they plan to do about the pinched nerve?”

He sighed. “They wanted to do surgery to take care of the nerve damage and I should be as good as new. I just have to be careful until then. The doctor said any more hard falls or strenuous workouts can lead to another episode until the nerve is fixed.”

He blinked in surprise when she threw her arms around his neck. “I am so happy for you.”

She truly was. It had been hard for Chris to not know what he was dealing with and she knew it. Suddenly, she pulled back in concern.

“Isn’t what we just did strenuous?”

He smiled. “I chose this position for a reason. Less strain on my back.”

His wicked grin made her shake her head. “Have you told anyone else?”

He shook his head. “No. I wanted you to be the first to know.”

She kissed him passionately but briefly. “Let’s get out of here so we can tell everyone the good news.”

He looked at her quizzically. “Which part?”

She winked at him. “All of it, of course.”

He stopped her when she went to stand. “I want to go pick out a ring first. I hate I didn’t have one when I proposed but we will have one before we tell everyone.”

She tugged him into a standing position and smiled. “Sounds like a wonderful idea to me Mr. Morgan.”

Epilogue

Ashley held a finger up to her lips as Chris came up the stairs. "I just got the girls to go sleep," she whispered.

Chris nodded and lightened his steps. He headed to the girls' room. He turned out to be a great husband and wonderful father just as she knew he would. They had been happily married for two years now, and she had given birth to identical twin girls six months ago. Jacqueline and Jasmine were a handful when it came to bedtime, and she was beat. They entered their daughters' room together and walked over to their cribs. Jacqueline and Jasmine looked angelic, and they could be although she understood the comment that Karen had made to her about Samantha and Andrew Jr.

Even though Jacqueline and Jasmine were identical, there were tiny differences she could use to tell them apart.

She stood there and watched Chris look at his daughters. Her heart turned over. The same way it did when he spent most of his lunch playing with his daughters instead of eating. He was already talking about getting them on horses. She shuddered at the idea. Her babies needed to be walking before she would allow them to get on a horse. Still, she knew whenever the time came he would take care of them. He was an excellent father and a wonderful husband.

Chris whispered good night to his daughters and reached for Ashley's hand before leading her from the room. She turned to make sure that the light on the baby monitor was on before quietly closing the door. The girls slept through the night for the most part, but there was always a night or two that they didn't.

Chris led the way down the hall to their bedroom. Once she had gotten pregnant they had moved to an upstairs bedroom so that they would be close to the girls when they arrived. Chris and she entered their bedroom, and she sat down on the bed as quietly as possible. Taking a moment to catch her breath, she began to undress.

He looked over at her and smiled. "Tough day?"

Ashley shook her head. "Tough night, but you have bedtime duty tomorrow, so I will deal tonight."

The girls had enough energy to run her ragged during the day, but they only seemed to pick it up even more at night. A trait that she was positive they had inherited from their father. Nevertheless her daughters always amazed her with the small developments they made everyday.

The shocker to her was that they had her brother Keldon wrapped around their little fingers. Her brother was always over to the ranch whenever he could get there. The addition of the girls to the family had only enriched it. A smile came to her face at that thought. The only thing that made her smile widen was the image of her wedding day. Walking down the aisle toward Chris had been one of the best days in her life. When they looked each other in the eyes and said their

vows, it was with a sincerity each of them meant with everything that they had in themselves. Two years later, that sincerity was still there, and she expected for it to be there for a long time.

She looked over at her husband. “How was your day?”

“We sent Thunder back to his owner today, and he was so pleased with the results that he gave me an extra bonus plus another referral.”

He grinned as he took off his boots and socks and started on the buttons on his shirt. “We’re supposed to get two new horses on Friday, and Barrett is taking Misery back to his owner tomorrow.”

“So the last run with him went well?”

He nodded. “Yes it did.”

Ashley smiled. She was happy for Chris. After the surgery to repair the damaged nerve in his back, Chris had required some additional downtime. With her help, he recovered quickly, and once the doctor cleared him, he had resumed breaking in and training horses. She had watched him enough times to know that he was a natural at it. He was born to do it. The love that she felt for him surpassed anything she had ever imagined. She watched him shuck his jeans before he lowered himself to the bed beside her and pulled her into his arms.

She inhaled deeply, his intoxicating cologne a combination of a horse and outdoors, but it was a smell that Ashley found comforting as strange as that sounded. Sure, she had to wash the sheets the next morning, but it was worth it. She smiled. She loved her new domestic duties. She had recently given up physical therapy to be a full time mother, and she loved it so far. The transition had been a lot smoother than she had originally thought it would be. Still this had been a move she had wanted to make for a while. She loved being a physical therapist just like Chris loved being a horse trainer. Yet she enjoyed being a mother and wife more. Chris brought in enough income for her to have the luxury of staying home so she could. Maybe when the kids were school age she might think about going back to work, but until then home was right where she would be.

“What are you thinking about?”

She glanced up at him, and he grazed her forehead with his lips. She smiled and snuggled more into his embrace. “Us and how far we have come.”

He smiled and gathered her closer to him if it was possible. “Thanks to you.”

She stretched upward and brushed her lips against his. “Crossing the line of friendship into relationship is one of the best decisions I have made.”

He reached down and ran his hand up her leg. “What are some of the others?”

She placed another kiss on his lips. "Falling in love with you." Another kiss. "Marrying you." Another kiss. "Having your beautiful children."

This time Chris' lips came down to meet hers. This was definitely the man that she would spend the rest of her life with. Chris had been right. They were very compatible. Convincing her to take their friendship into a relationship of romance had been one of the best decisions that he could have ever made. A decision that she knew she would never regret.

The End