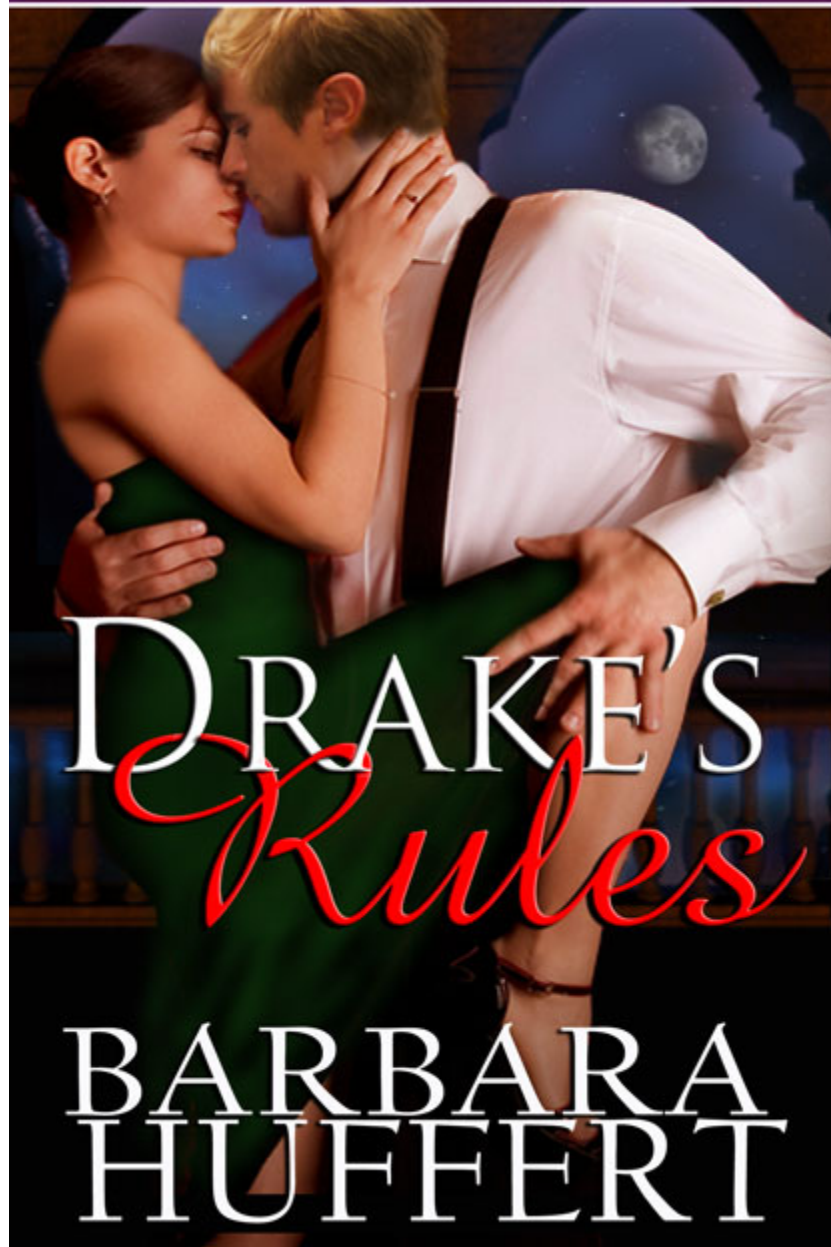


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Drake's Rules

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DRAKE'S RULES

Barbara Huffert

Dedication

For Maithe

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Cub Scouts: Boy Scouts of America Corporation

Chapter One

Megan Lewis leaned her bike against the wall to retrieve the key pinned to her T-shirt, fully aware of her young neighbor's eyes tracking her every move.

"Hi." She smiled at the little girl crouched in front of the door across from her own. "I'm Megan. I can't believe it's taken us so long to meet. You and your dad moved in months ago and we've been missing each other all this time." Megan left her door ajar as she approached the child, noting how her lip quivered when she stood and plastered her back against the door.

"Is everything okay?" she asked when the girl didn't speak. "Where's your dad?"

Megan had her hand raised to pound on the door when she heard, "No."

"Why not, honey?" She took a step back before kneeling and waited, relieved that the child didn't appear to be visibly harmed.

Clearly torn, the girl finally looked at her and mumbled, "Daddy's taking a nap."

"All right. So why are you in the hallway? I'm sure he didn't send you out here."

"Un-uh. He was doing papers and he got real tired 'cause he stays up late lots of times. Kitty meows real loud and I was 'fraid 'cause he'd hear." She held out a stuffed cat that meowed when tilted.

"And you wanted to be quiet so you brought your kitty out here to be nice to your dad," Megan concluded. "But the door locked when you closed it and now you can't get back in."

"Yeah."

"That was so sweet of you but I think your dad will be very upset and scared when he wakes up and you're not there."

"I'm gonna stay right here."

"That's not really a good idea, honey." Megan couldn't just leave her waiting alone. "How about this instead? You come across the hall with me so I can put my bike away. Then I'll make some sandwiches and we'll have a little picnic until your dad wakes up."

The girl shook her head. "I'm not s'posed to go with strangers."

"That's correct and your dad will be happy that you know that but you're not really going anywhere with me. You'll be ten feet from where you are now, across the hall and just inside my doorway. My door will stay open and I won't let you in any further than you can get with one hand on the door because you need to watch for your dad. I'll bring our snack to you and we can get to know each other while we eat."

Megan watched the girl bite her lip. "Honey, this is a nice place and you would probably be perfectly fine on your own but I won't risk finding out that I'm wrong. I'd

never forgive myself if I left you alone and something happened to you. It's good that you want to keep your distance until you know me and I respect that." She paused.

"Okay, plan B. You stay put. I'll take my bike in and grab us some water. Then I'll round us up something to eat. I'll leave my door open for you in case anyone other than your dad comes. If someone does, you must yell for me right away, all right? If you don't promise, I'll have to wake your dad." Part of her thought she should anyway.

After a long moment, the girl nodded. "'Kay, I promise."

"Thank you." Megan smiled, hoping she wasn't making a big mistake. "Your dad is going to be so proud of you."

A minute later, Megan returned with two unopened bottles of water. "Brand new, see?"

Watching Megan twist off the cap, the girl finally reached for the second bottle. After struggling, she handed it back. "Please, I can't get it."

Megan accepted her thanks and let her drink before holding out her phone. "I know you're right at the door but I'll feel better if you keep this with you until I come back. If you want your dad and don't want to knock on the door to wake him, you can call instead. Just make sure you tell him where you are as soon as he answers." She waited for a nod. "Back in a flash."

Megan washed up faster than she ever had in her life and yanked on the first pair of sweats she found. She was still pulling her wet hair into a ponytail when she poked her head out to check on her young neighbor.

"Ready as I am for that ham sandwich? I like mine with a little mayo. How about you? I also have cheese and mustard but I have to warn you that I only have brown bread. If you don't like that, I could just roll up some ham for us to eat with our fingers."

"Me and Daddy has brown bread too."

"Good, now tell me what you like with your ham?"

"Cheese." She bit her lip again. "Daddy makes me samiches with butter bread."

"Okay then, one ham and cheese on butter bread coming up. Think your dad will be hungry when he wakes up? I could make a sandwich for him too if you think he'll want one."

She nodded. "Yeah. I have cereal and sometimes I get it with no milk so I can pick 'em up but Daddy says he's too old for kid stuff first thing in the morning. He drinks that yucky coffee instead. Once, he let me taste it but I didn't like it."

"You're too young to drink coffee."

"Daddy says that too." She giggled. "He likes samiches same as me. He always lets me squeeze mustard on and I write both our initials. He showed me when I was little. He says if I put them on his belly'll know both of us made it."

"Hmm," Megan said, frowning thoughtfully. "Since you can't help me this time I could put an M for Megan on one slice and an N for neighbor on the other. That way his belly will know who made it today."

"Okay." The girl giggled again.

They were almost finished eating when they heard a thump coming from behind the closed door.

"Quick, knock," Megan urged, hoping to head off at least some of the panic the man would surely feel when he realized his daughter wasn't in the apartment with him.

The door flew open, exposing a very tense man wearing a look of pure terror on his pale face. As soon as he saw his child, his expression softened. Instantly, he slid to the floor and gathered her to him.

After numerous unsteady breaths, he growled, "Don't you ever do that again! You know better than to go anywhere without me!"

"Daddy." She squirmed. "You're squishing me."

His grip loosened marginally. "Sorry, kiddo. I was so scared when I woke up and you weren't there. You should have poked me and said you wanted to play outside."

"You were sleepy. Kitty meows loud and you needed a nap," she sniffled. "The door shut and I couldn't get in."

"God, Christy." He slumped without releasing her. "First, don't ever do that again. Second, if you do, which you won't, promise me that you'll bang on the door until I open it. Kick it too if you have to." As his gaze settled on Megan her presence seemed to finally register.

"Hello," she greeted him, reading the questions in his expression. "I'm Megan Lewis, your neighbor across the hall. I couldn't help but notice your daughter when I came in from my bike ride. She refused to let me disturb you. I offered to let her wait just inside my apartment where she could keep an eye out for you but she knows that she shouldn't go anywhere with strangers and wouldn't leave your door." Megan knew she was babbling but couldn't stop now that his incredible green eyes had focused on her. "She hasn't even told me her name. And she made sure the water bottle was unopened when I gave it to her. You must be extremely proud of your little girl for being so cautious like that. I think she's so thoughtful, wanting to give you some uninterrupted quiet time." His knowing look silenced her. "All right, then. I'll just go now that you're up. Thanks for keeping me company, honey. Maybe we can have lunch again sometime."

"Megan made samiches."

"Yes, I noticed. Please don't go." He smiled as he visibly forced himself to relax. "Unless we're keeping you from something?"

"Um, no." She sat back down opposite them.

"Great." He ran his still shaking fingers through his hair. "I can't thank you enough, Megan. I..."

She held up her hand to prevent him from saying anything that might upset his daughter. "My pleasure," she nodded slightly toward his child to explain her interruption.

Understanding crossed his face as Christy spoke up, "Megan made one for you too. She wrote a M for her and a N for neighbor so your belly knows it's from her. Aren't you gonna eat it?"

He snagged his treat and took a bite. "Mm, good. Aren't we lucky, having such a nice neighbor? Did you say thank you yet?"

"No but I was gonna. Honest, Daddy."

"Excuse me," Megan interrupted again. "For what it's worth, I believe her because she said please when she very politely asked for my help opening her water earlier." Megan felt herself blush when he raised an eyebrow at her defense of his daughter. "I figured out that your name is Christy." She briefly switched her attention to the child who was once again chewing her lip, before turning back to him. "Since we're having a picnic, do you think I could know your name too? I certainly don't mind calling you Christy's dad for now but that'd be a little strange next time we bump into each other."

"Hear that, Christy? I remind you of your manners but completely forget my own." He winked at Megan. "Please forgive me, both of you. I'm Drake Edwards and, as you've already surmised, this is my daughter, Christy."

"Just plain Christy."

"Right, just plain Christy, not Christy short for anything. We've seen you a few times and I'm glad we finally got to meet."

"Me, too." Megan took the hand he extended. For a second, she thought she saw the same surprise cross his features that she felt but quickly dismissed it as imagination.

"Tell me, Megan, what do you do when you're not picnicking with wayward children or riding your bike?"

"Well," she knew her face was pink again, "I waitress to avoid being homeless but my dream is to write children's books. What about you?"

"Ah. I see, no follow-up questions in round one." He grinned as if he were flirting. "Fine. I'm a professor, recently hired to enrich the minds of all who seek enlightenment at our fine college. Are you also a transplant or are you one of the natives?"

Megan realized that he deliberately avoided the specifics of his position. "Transplanted years ago. And what is it that you do, Miss Christy? Other than taking care of your dad."

The child beamed at being included in their conversation. "I don't have a job. I go to school but it's summer. I'm gonna be in first grade."

"Really, first grade? Don't let anyone convince you otherwise, honey. Going to school is just as much of a job as anything is. You might not get paid like your dad and I do but school can be hard work. Especially when you try your best."

"Jeez." Christy rolled her eyes. "Daddy tells me that all the time."

"And you thought it was just me." Drake ruffled her hair. "All done?" She nodded. "Since Megan was kind enough to fix our snack why don't you throw away the trash?" When she hesitated, he added, "Go on, kiddo. I'll be there in a minute."

Christy went back to biting her lip. "You mad at me, Daddy?"

"No, Christy. I'm mad at me for falling asleep when I should have been paying attention to you. We need to talk about this some more but it was my fault you got locked out, not yours. You were being sweet and taking care of me and I do appreciate that but I need to make sure that you understand how scared I was when I couldn't find you."

"Okay." She was clearly still unsure if she was in trouble or not. "Thanks for the samich. It was real good."

"You're very welcome." Megan smiled as Christy reluctantly went inside. "She's beautiful."

"Yeah," he sighed and slumped against the wall. "Damn, I'm still shaking." He held out his hand. "This is the first time something like this happened. I really am more responsible than it seems."

Without thinking, Megan leaned forward and squeezed his knee. "You don't have to say it, Drake. It's obvious that you're a very good father. Kids have minds of their own and your daughter is no exception. Cut yourself some slack, okay?"

He stared at her hand so long that she jerked it away to break the spell. "I can't thank you enough. My mind keeps playing all the possibilities of how this could have turned out if you hadn't been here."

"But I was and everything is fine so don't torture yourself. Figure out what you're going to say and then talk to her. She's a wonderful child and you should be very proud of her."

"I am and I do tell her often. How do I make a six-year-old understand that being thoughtful isn't always the best course of action? Hell, I didn't even know she knew I have trouble sleeping."

"Kids grasp much more than most people realize. You'd be amazed at the things my sister's kids call me about. Personally, I've adopted the policy of encouraging them to talk themselves out so I have the chance to weigh my response and not overreact."

"Guess that explains why you made sandwiches and sat in the hall instead of calling social services for which I am eternally grateful." He pushed himself to his feet and extended a hand to help her up. "Thanks for everything. I really am glad to meet you."

"Yeah," Megan whispered, overwhelmed by his raw male scent and the warmth of the hand that still held hers. "Nice."

"Very and I'm looking forward to seeing you again. As much as I hate to cut our conversation short I don't want Christy to have any more time to over-think our impending discussion."

"Oh." Megan mentally shook herself and stepped back. "Right. Tell her I had fun if you would please?"

"Sure." He smiled. "I know she did too since she mentioned our ritual mustard writing. You are the first person she ever shared that tidbit with. Guess she decided that you're someone special."

Megan blushed. "Um, thanks. See you." She backed into the wall before she found her doorway and spun into her apartment, praying he couldn't hear the pounding of her heart.

Chapter Two

"Stop it. You're freaking me out," Art Jennings muttered as he watched Drake stare at nothing. "You have ten minutes to explain before we have to get to class."

"What?" Drake asked as the fog cleared from his mind.

"You've been grinning like an idiot ever since you got here. I'm beginning to think you snapped."

"Nope." He shifted to peek at Christy who was coloring in the outer office.

"For Christ's sake, spill it already!"

"What? Can't a guy smile for the hell of it anymore?"

"Sure. Most of us do it all the time. But you, yes you, my friend, are the exception. The only time you smile is when Christy is the center of attention. Might I point out that she isn't at the moment and also that you've actually gone fifteen minutes without bringing her up. So? What gives?"

"Nothing really." Drake leaned on the door jamb and watched his daughter for a second before turning back to the old friend responsible for bringing him to the college. "We met our neighbor yesterday."

"The vampire?"

"She's not a vampire. She just doesn't seem to go out much during the day."

"Stop making this so difficult. I don't have time to pull teeth. Tell! What's she like? How'd you finally meet? Details, man, details."

"There's not much to tell," Drake explained how she watched out for Christy while he dozed.

"Sweet! What's she look like?"

"Pleasant, I guess." Drake shrugged. "Brown hair, brown eyes."

"Knock it off. You're killing me. That's not what I meant and you know it. Come on, Drake. You can do better than that."

"Not really. But okay, maybe a little. Megan had been riding her bike before she stumbled on Christy and didn't bother to spruce up much. Her hair was still damp, in a ponytail and she was wearing baggy sweats with a floppy T-shirt. Her arms and face are tanned so that eliminates your vampire theory. And her hand is soft."

"Hand? Just one? There is another one, right?"

"Yes, Art, she has two hands. But I only touched one so I don't know if the other is equally soft."

"You're hopeless. At least tell me you made a definite plan to get together."

"No."

"No? No! Don't take this the wrong way but why the hell not? She's the first woman you've smiled about since Claire died. She obviously cares more about your kid's welfare than making a good first impression, appearance-wise. Need I remind you what you told me about her subtle hint about calling Christy on her lack of etiquette when you were committing the same *faux pas*? Look Drake, I'm not suggesting you elope this afternoon. Just talk to her. Do something harmless with Christy and invite her to join you. As a proper thank-you."

"I don't know, Art."

"I know this sucks, being back out there after you were set for life. But Claire's gone. She's not coming back. No one will ever replace her but you know the last thing she'd want is for you to spend your life in isolation. Christy's going to grow up, buddy. She's going to find her own life. One that doesn't revolve around you. If you don't let people in you're going to wind up a very lonely man. Just think about it. Besides it wouldn't hurt to have a female friend to help deal with all the girl stuff once Christy starts asking."

"Damn it, Art! Don't even go there yet. I'm still trying to get a handle on the idea that she was worried that I have some trouble sleeping," he sighed. "So you know, I did hear what you said. And I'll consider it. But now, let's go find out if anyone actually took time out from their busy social schedules to glance at their assignments."

* * * * *

"Hold up, Christy. Don't forget what I said. If Megan says no, we mustn't argue. She might already have something to do this afternoon," Drake cautioned before they left their apartment.

"I know, Daddy." She rolled her eyes. "You already told me that."

Drake shook his head at things to come. She was six going on fourteen. What would she be like when she really was fourteen? He snagged her just before she banged on their neighbor's door. "Christy," he warned. "I talk, you look cute, remember?"

"Daddy," she groaned.

"All right, all right. Patience, kiddo or we're turning around and going right back inside for the rest of the day." Drake knew he was stalling and hated the disappointment on Christy's face. Claiming her hand, he grinned to show her he wasn't serious as he knocked lightly.

"Hey," Megan greeted them. "Come on in."

"Thanks but just for a moment." Drake restrained Christy so she wouldn't desert him. "We're on our way to feed the ducks and wondered if you'd like to come with us. We thought we could buy you an ice cream cone to say thanks properly."

Megan's expression froze, giving Drake no clue what she was thinking. "Or we could make it another time if you're busy." He started to back away, taking Christy with him.

"Wait," Megan stuttered. "I'd love to come. Just let me put on some shoes." She dashed away before he could respond.

A short time later they walked the few blocks to the nearby park. Christy filled the time with chatter, telling Megan about previous expeditions. "There they are, Daddy!" She tried to free her hand.

"And I'm sure they'll still be there in another minute. There's no need to rush. You don't want to scare them away by charging at them, do you?"

"No," Christy pouted.

"Tell me the rule again, kiddo. In case Megan doesn't already know it. We don't want her to fall in either." He winked over Christy's head.

"Okay. Daddy says I have to stay far enough away from the water so my nose wouldn't go in if I fall over. So I don't drown. But he always gets as close as I do and he's bigger than me."

"I explained that. I can swim, remember? That means I won't drown even if I fall in. You can get closer too after you learn to swim better."

"Yeah. Look! They're coming! Can I feed them now? Please."

"Okay, go ahead but keep checking where you are." He released her just as some of his students wandered by.

"Hey there, Professor Edwards." A scantily clad bleached-blond stopped nearby and posed to show off her barely covered body. "I didn't know you came here."

Drake shifted uneasily. "My daughter likes to feed the ducks," he stated, wishing they'd go pay attention to the guys who were glaring at him.

"Mm." The second girl joined them. "Want some company?"

"Sure." Megan smiled sweetly, sliding her hand into Drake's. "Are you enjoying your class this summer?"

"Uh, yeah," the first girl stuttered.

"It's great." The second stared.

"I hope Drake's not being too tough on you. He forgets that not everyone shares his passion."

Drake choked back his laugh. These girls were definitely out of their league. "Now sweetheart, you know I save all my passion for you," Drake purred, moving so their sides were touching. "Not so close, Christy," he called when Christy followed the ducks toward the pond. "Let them come to you. Ladies, we won't keep you since your friends are waiting. If you'll excuse us please?"

"Uh, yeah," the girl stuttered again, looking back and forth between Megan and Christy.

"Nice to meet you," Megan said pleasantly as they retreated.

When they were gone, Drake let out his chuckle. "We seem to be developing a pattern." He guided Megan to the bench nearest Christy. "This is the second time you've saved me in two meetings."

"Saved you how?"

"By class tomorrow everyone will know I'm taken. The girls will stop making eyes at me and the guys will stop glaring. I can wander around again as I lecture without fearing for my safety."

Megan blushed. "I didn't realize, I mean, I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry."

"Sh." He grinned and captured her hand. "I'd forgotten how nice this is."

"Drake..."

"Megan, please. You just rescued me from being devoured. Don't take away the feeling I got when you made it clear Christy and I weren't here alone."

"But we're not really together."

"We are at the moment. We're neighbors enjoying a nice afternoon in the park, getting better acquainted and hopefully becoming friends. It's none of their business what is or isn't between us. They were rude, pretending not to see you. You, on the other hand, were pure class. I wish they could learn something from this but I have my doubts." He chuckled again. "Then again, they might not have a choice, if I read the reaction the guys had correctly."

Megan seemed thoroughly confused by his words and distracted, perhaps because he was still holding her hand.

"I don't really know what you mean. What reaction?"

Drake realized she was serious. "They were comparing you. And found their girls lacking. Don't you get it? They could be attractive if they stopped trying so hard. They flaunt their bodies by wearing those clothes that leave nothing to the imagination. They're blatant about what they're after, so there's no mystery there either. And standing next to you emphasized how much makeup they cake on, which kills any desire to discover how soft their skin may or may not be. You exude confidence which gives the impression that you're comfortable with yourself and know that you're appealing without all the bullshit."

Megan frowned as she considered his observations. "Thanks, I think. But maybe I just can't be bothered to play that game. Maybe I simply don't care what anyone thinks."

"Maybe." Drake was even more curious than he had been when she staked her claim in front of his students. Especially now that he discovered that it was unintentional. "But isn't that the whole point of spending time with someone you just met? Learning those sorts of things."

"Look, Daddy," Christy squealed. "He's eating out of my hand! It tickles."

For several minutes they watched Christy's antics, laughing as she went back to the running conversation she was having with the ducks.

"Can I ask you something?" Megan started.

Drake sensed what was coming and nodded anyway.

"How long has it been just the two of you?" He tensed barely enough for her to see it. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry. Forget I asked."

"It's all right," he sighed. "It's been just us for a little over a year but sometimes it still feels like yesterday. Claire, my wife and Jimmy, our son were killed when a tractor-trailer flipped onto Claire's car. She and Jimmy were on their way to pick up a soccer ball before they went to dinner."

"Oh, Drake." Megan blinked back her tears. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks." He stared silently at their clasped hands for a moment. "I'd like to tell you about her." Raising his eyes, he asked, "Would that be okay? You can say no if you don't want to hear it. I won't mind."

"Go ahead. I'll listen to anything you want to say."

He studied her face before he began. "We met at the end of our freshman year at Ohio State. Got married the summer before our senior year and had Christy two weeks after graduation. Contrary to what her parents believed, we planned it that way. Claire had a business degree and was working in public relations while I was in grad school. At the time, I was working at the country club where her parents were members. Naturally they were appalled. We had Jimmy the summer between grad school and my first semester teaching English at a community college, a position that also fell short of Claire's parents' expectations. They had openly tried to talk her out of tying herself to me right up to the moment she walked down the aisle. Afterwards they managed to be a little more subtle. Seems a small-time professor wasn't what they had in mind as the perfect son-in-law. Especially one who refused their offers of money so we could live in a more respectable suburb right from the start instead of working our way up to it. Claire shielded me from most of it but I could always tell when they'd had another run-in.

"We knew each other so well, it was almost frightening. You know how some men need the thrill of a different conquest every other day? I've never been one on them. I loved being married, half of a perpetual partnership. It was great to be with someone who I could say anything to, who would honestly tell me how her day was and listen to mine. Claire, to the rest of the world, came off as a spoiled rich girl who was haughty and disinterested as could be. With me, she was open, playful and uninhibited about most things. I loved knowing her gestures. I loved having her understand what I was thinking when we shared a look across a room full of people. I loved knowing her body so well that I could satisfy her when we discovered we had fifteen minutes of privacy before we had to pick up the kids from a birthday party or that I could turn an evening out into hours of extended foreplay. It was so incredible to know how she'd react to my touch and yet we still managed to experiment, test our boundaries and keep it exciting."

Drake realized what he had just said and peered at Megan instead of watching Christy as he had been. "Sorry. That was probably more than you wanted to know."

"I don't mind," Megan said honestly. "I've heard about relationships like that but haven't been part of one personally."

After considering her again, he continued, "Claire started her own party planning business after Jimmy was born. She had so much energy all the time. I used to tease her that she was such a whirlwind there'd be a tornado following behind her one day. I'd get tired just watching her sometimes. Anyway, she was damn good at what she did, highly sought after by everyone who was anyone. Occasionally I could accompany her to an event. It never failed to amaze me, seeing her in action. But afterwards, at home, when she was unwinding, she'd make fun of all the hypocrisy, hers included.

"No matter how busy she was though, she always had time for us. We set aside one night a week for each of us to spend exclusively with the kids, you know, guys and girls one week, mother-son and father-daughter the next. We wanted both of them to feel equally secure with either of us. The night they were killed, Christy was sick so we stayed home. Claire had offered to put off her night with Jimmy but Christy said she wanted me to read to her so they went out as planned."

Drake paused, giving Christy his full attention as she giggled at the duck that kept sticking his beak into her pocket. "I know it was an accident but I can't help thinking about all the things that could have changed that night. What if I hadn't stayed the extra ten minutes to discuss a paper with one of my students? What if we'd talked a little longer before they left? What if they'd eaten first? You know, that sort of thing. They were on the back road to the mall when a truck coming the other way took a corner too fast and rolled over. The coroner said they died instantly without even feeling it."

Megan had moved closer and clutched his arm with her other hand while she tightened her grip on his fingers. "I know it's not enough but I am so sorry. I can't even begin to imagine what it was like that night."

"Surreal. Two cops knocked on the door and asked to speak with me. I felt like they were talking about some other family. That they were at the wrong house. That it was all a mistake. After it started to register, I remember thinking how awful it must be for them, having to tell people that the life they thought they had was gone forever and there was nothing anyone could do to fix it. That I no longer had a wife to grow old with and a son to watch turn into a man. He was as incredible as Christy in his own unique way. They called my brother for me and waited for him to get there before they left. I don't know if I would have made it through the night without him. He's a minister and switched into that mode even though it was his family. Christy heard me losing it at some point and came to see what was going on. I don't really know which of us explained it to her or how she got through the first few weeks. I was on autopilot, doing what I was supposed to do but not fully there. As you can probably guess, Claire's parents blamed me. So much so that they don't want any contact with Christy, which makes no sense. They don't get that I would have gladly died if it meant that Claire and Jimmy didn't have to.

"Last January my friend, Art called to say there was an opening here. He knew I was selling the house because I couldn't stay there without them and thought he'd mention it to me in case Christy and I needed distance for our fresh start so here we are."

"I wish I knew what to say," Megan whispered.

"You don't have to say anything. Listening is more than enough. After all, I invited you for a fun, casual outing and swamped you with my heavy emotional baggage instead. Forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive. Thank you for telling me. It can't be easy for you to go over all this."

"No but I wanted you to know. So you would understand what it meant to me when you took my hand." He paused. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable but I need to say one more thing."

"It's not that I'm uncomfortable. More like overwhelmed." Megan didn't seem to understand why he was uncertain now when he hadn't been as he spoke of his wife and son. "What is it, Drake?"

He took a deep breath to steady his nerves. "If Claire hadn't died, I honestly believe we would have stayed together the rest of our lives. I never felt even a twinge of temptation to be with another woman and, in my heart, I know she felt the same toward me. Before we moved, several women hinted that they were interested in starting something with me but the thought of it left me cold. Yesterday, when I calmed down enough to notice you, I actually *noticed* you. I have no idea what that means or if it even means anything but I wanted you to know in case I do something bizarre. I should also say that I don't have any expectations or hidden agendas. I like being around you. I'm interested in learning more about you. And I've discovered that your hand fits nicely in mine."

Megan's mixed emotions raced across her features as she stared at Drake. "Oh," she said. "Again, I have no clue how to respond."

"Well, at least you didn't run for the hills. If I haven't totally alienated you, maybe we could talk again sometime. About less emotional things, like how my brother who was hell on wheels as a teenager became a minister, or the subtle differences between here and the area outside Cleveland where we're from. Better yet, we could talk about you. Of course there's always my favorite subject, Christy."

"Why do I feel backed into a corner when you've been nothing but open and honest?"

"Megan..."

"Rhetorical question, Professor. I think I owe you some equal honesty."

"No. You don't owe me anything. I wasn't trying to coerce you into giving me the intimate details of your life."

"Shush, Drake. Let me respond." She waited for him to nod. "Here goes. First, I don't date. I haven't in years and frankly, I haven't wanted to. Until I met you yesterday, that is. I'm intrigued too and I'm not entirely happy about it. Then again I like the way your hand feels too and the way listening to you talk about personal things wasn't at all weird. Christy is adorable and I have so many ideas just from watching her. I can't wait to sketch her with that duck's head in her pocket. Ooh. Maybe I should ask if that's okay with you first, that I sketch her."

"Of course. Will you show us?"

"Sure as long as you don't expect much. I love my books and so do my niece and nephews but they're far from spectacular. Anyway, yes, I want to spend more time with both you and Christy. I have some of my own emotional baggage that I'll tell you about sometime. Can we take it one day at a time and see if we both stay interested instead of making any sort of decisions about where we want to end up?"

"Daddy, the bread's gone. Can we get ice cream now?" Christy bounced on her toes in front of them.

"Megan?" Drake deferred to her since the trip was meant to be a thank-you for her kindness.

"Fine by me." She hopped off the bench. "Lead the way. And for future reference, I consider ice cream to be a staple, consumable any time, day or night."

"What's that mean?" Christy chose to hold Megan's hand instead of Drake's.

"That means," Drake responded as he clasped Megan's other hand, "that we're going to keep an eye on her so she isn't a bad influence on you."

"Daddy," Christy sighed. "Talk kid English."

"It means that I don't always eat the way I should, honey." Megan caught his amused expression and looked relieved that she hadn't offended him. "I eat sweets instead of real food sometimes even though I know I shouldn't."

"Ooh, that's bad." Christy's eyes were huge. "Daddy says we have to eat all sorts of stuff so we don't get sick."

"Your daddy is right," Megan assured her.

At the small ice cream parlor, they sat at one of the tables outside while Christy devoured her cone. Drake was having trouble not staring at Megan's tongue as she licked the chocolate sprinkles from her ice cream until Christy stopped eating, mid-cone.

"Daddy said about Mommy and Jimmy being dead," she stated to Megan.

"Yes," Megan confirmed.

"He gets sad when he says about them. Uncle Adam says it's 'kay 'cause they can't be with us ever now and Daddy misses them. Uncle Adam says they had to go be angels 'cause they're very special. He says that Mommy and Jimmy are in my heart forever and if I get scared or lonesome I can talk to them there and they'll help me." She

paused to study Megan. "Did Mommy make you find me? I was talking to her in my heart and then you came."

"I don't know," Megan answered truthfully.

"But Uncle Adam said she'd take care of me from where angels are."

Drake had to swallow several times before he could speak. "Christy, there's no way to know if Mommy sent Megan or not. Angels help without letting us know. But even Uncle Adam will tell you that sometimes things just happen the way they do without involving angels. Do you believe Mommy sent Megan to keep you company?"

She chewed on her lip before nodding. "Yeah. I think Mommy sent her to make you happy too, like when I was little."

Drake ignored the ice cream smeared on her cheeks and hugged Christy tightly. "Maybe she did," he whispered, his voice unsteady as he watched Megan's reaction over her head. "I love you, Christy."

"I love you, Daddy. Always and forever."

"Yep, always and forever." He held her until she squirmed.

Megan slid from her seat and Drake was unsure if she was distancing herself for their sake or hers. She was trembling as she threw the rest of her cone in the trash, unable to finish after Christy's comments. He could see her indecision. She seemed torn between leaving to give them privacy and staying so Christy knew it was all right to talk openly around her.

"Ready to call it a day, kiddo?" Drake asked. "You look a little beat."

"Kay," Christy didn't protest when he scooped her up and carried her against his chest.

They were all silent on the short walk home. At the door, Christy asked if Megan would go to the park with them again before disappearing into their apartment.

"If there's an appropriate thing to say now I'm afraid that I don't know it," Drake leaned one shoulder against the wall, watching as Megan slid her key into her lock.

"Me either." She looked up at him. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea, us getting to know each other. I don't ever want to hurt her."

"You won't," he sounded certain. "Even if we decide we're best suited to be neighbors who nod politely when we pass in the hall I know you would still take a minute to chat with Christy. You're kindhearted. If you weren't, you would have left her alone yesterday without giving it a second thought. Christ! In the past two days, I've discovered I have no idea what goes on in her head."

"Then you'll just have to encourage her to tell you. You're a great dad. I know because Christy is a great kid." She smiled. "Thanks for including me today. I'm sure you're a little emotional so I'll make this easy and say I have to go now. See you soon?"

Drake was stunned at how the afternoon had turned out. Megan was affecting him in ways that he'd never expected. And now she proved to be intuitive enough to sense that he needed some space. Slowly, he raised his hand and caressed her cheek. "Yeah,

see you soon.” Even though he was drained, he couldn’t help but notice the startled expression when he touched her and wondered if the reason she didn’t date was that someone in her past had hurt her.

Chapter Three

Drake and Christy stepped into the hallway just as Megan closed the door to her apartment.

"Hiya, Megan," Christy bubbled. "Daddy took us out instead of making samiches 'cause I was a good girl and needed a special treat."

"Wow, that's great." Megan crouched so they were eye to eye. "What did you have?"

"China chicken salad. It had little oranges on top and nuts too."

"Mm, sounds yummy," Megan declared even though Drake could see the surprise in her eyes. "I'd be a good girl too if I knew I'd get a reward like that."

Christy was looking at Megan's attire. "You going swimming?"

"Yep. It's such a nice day that I thought I would spend the afternoon at the pool. Want to come with me?"

"Please, Daddy, can I?" Her expectant look echoed Megan's.

Drake frowned as if he hated what he was about to say. "Sorry, kiddo but not today. Remember how I told you that we had to have some quiet time when we got home?"

"Yeah." Her face fell. "You gotta do the stinky papers all day and I gotta stay inside too."

"That's right. I'm sorry to disappoint you. We'll go swimming tomorrow. Right after class."

"Christy could come with me," Megan offered and instantly regretted it. Hope bloomed on the girl's face while anxiety showed on her father's. Thinking to salvage the situation, she added, "I spent six summers working as a lifeguard, four of them teaching the beginners' swim class. I remember you mentioned that Christy doesn't swim all that well yet and I'm sure I could help. I wouldn't leave her side for one second, Drake."

He hesitated. "That's not it..."

Megan suddenly understood his reluctance. "My balcony overlooks the pool. You're welcome to sit there while you work. That way you can monitor Christy's progress." A detached corner of Megan's mind questioned why she wasn't panicking over having suggested leaving a relative stranger alone in her apartment.

"Please, Daddy," Christy pleaded. "I'll be real good and do what Megan says. Honest."

Drake knew he was being somewhat unreasonable. Megan had already demonstrated that she was protective of Christy and Christy was definitely comfortable with her. Studying Megan's face, he saw nothing but sincerity. "Well, all right. But just for a little while and only if you listen when Megan asks you to do something. I'll be paying attention and if I see you ignoring her, I'll come right down and get you."

"Okay, Daddy." Christy grinned. "Let me in. I gotta get my suit on."

Drake waited until Christy raced into their apartment before facing Megan. "I know how it seems but please, it's not that I don't trust you."

"I understand." Megan put her hand on his arm. "I wouldn't want her out of my sight either if I were you."

"That obvious, huh?"

"Only because of what you told me. I should have thought before I said anything. I'm sorry that I put you on the spot."

"No, I'm sorry. I know I'm possessive and I am working on it. It's just that the thought of losing her too paralyzes me. It's ridiculous, thinking that something bad will happen if she's not with me but I haven't managed to conquer it yet. Hell, I haven't even let her visit my mom and dad without me. Last time I said no, Adam called and gave me the 'don't invent problems' lecture. I'm sure they're going to ask again soon and I keep telling myself that I can make it through a couple of days but I'm not at all positive that I can."

"You will when you're ready," Megan assured him.

"I'm so afraid of smothering her," he admitted.

"I don't think Christy sees it that way. Or it didn't seem like that to me," she hesitated.

"Go on," Drake urged. "I can see that you were about to say more."

"I admit that I have no experience in this sort of thing and don't know either of you all that well yet but have you ever considered that Christy might not want to be away from you either? Maybe I'm off base here but the things she's said make me think that she worries about you too. I mean, she noticed that you don't sleep well and she thinks that you're unhappy. Has she ever said that she wanted to go stay with your parents on her own?"

Drake frowned. "No. She hasn't. In fact, you are the first person that she's opened up with at all. She stayed glued to my side every time one of our friends dropped by before we moved even though she already knew them."

"I'm ready." Christy bounded back into the hallway.

"Not so fast," Megan opened her door. "First, we need to douse you with sunscreen. You're much too cute as a little girl to let turn you into a lobster." She pulled the lotion from her bag and coated Christy while Drake watched. "There. That should do it," she announced as she crossed the room and slid open the balcony door. "Here's

the key. After you walk us down, you can make yourself at home. There's water and juice in the fridge. Feel free to snack if you want."

"Thanks but I think I'm good." Drake wondered why he didn't feel uncomfortable at the thought of being alone in Megan's apartment before he spent any time there with her. "If it's okay with you guys, I think I'll just get right to it. Maybe if I work really hard I can take a break and join you for a little while later."

"That would be great." Megan smiled as he caught Christy for a kiss.

"Be good and listen to Megan," he reminded her.

"I will, Daddy," Christy agreed. "Honest, I will."

* * * * *

An hour later, Drake set aside the paper he was staring at without seeing, and turned his attention to the pool below him. Christy's giggles had filled the air ever since she'd jumped into the water. Water that was over her head, trusting that Megan would catch her as promised. In their brief time together, his daughter had already made progress and was well on the way to becoming a mermaid. Part of Drake swelled with pride. The other part dreaded the knowledge that she would soon be asking to go swimming more often and would make friends with the other children who used the pool. What was he going to do when one of them invited her to play in their apartment? That thought brought back Megan's suggestion that Christy might be unwilling to separate herself from him. Maybe it was time to leave her alone with his parents for a few days to show her that they would both be fine if they spent some time apart. He decided that he had to speak with her about it soon. He was having enough trouble at the thought of her being alone with his parents. There was no way he could let her go anywhere else the first time she went without him. Maybe he would call Adam later for his opinion. Christy was always comfortable with his brother and they had obviously talked about things without him. If he could enlist Adam to visit his parents often while Christy was with them it might help to put his mind at ease.

Drake forced himself to read another five essays before he let himself take a break. He rejected the idea of slipping on his swimming trunks. That would make it much too easy to spend the rest of the afternoon with his girls instead of finishing up his schoolwork. He froze as his last thought registered. His girls? Christy, yes but Megan? He barely knew anything about her so why did it feel so right to think of her as his? Hell, he didn't even know why she had no interest in being with anyone. It was entirely too soon to be picturing them in any sort of exclusive relationship.

Chapter Four

For the next two days, Drake and Christy didn't see Megan at all. During their afternoon at the pool, Megan explained her work schedule, stating that she would be scarce the rest of the week. Since she waitressed at a bar, she usually spent the afternoons sleeping. She went to work around four, to help set up and generally stayed until it closed at two a.m. On occasion, she was there even later because the place had a special entertainment license that permitted it to host private parties after hours.

Megan said she was too keyed up to sleep right when she got home so many mornings dawned with her working on one of her books, not sleeping until long after breakfast. Since Drake's class ran from eight-thirty until eleven-thirty, she wouldn't have an opportunity to see them during the day. Megan said she was in the habit of sleeping until the last minute and wound up rushing to work, without a minute to spare.

Megan saw the paper as soon as she flipped on the light. Curious, she unfolded it immediately and discovered it was a note from Drake. Smiling, she leaned against the door and read it.

Megan,

It's two a.m. and I can't sleep. I woke up half an hour ago, my mind filled with thoughts of you. I know it's only been two days but the afternoon we spent together was so nice that I can't help wanting to see you again. Christy jumping up every time there's a noise in the hall and asking if it might be you only adds to my need to spend time with you. Is it wrong of us to miss you so much when we've only just met?

Christy doesn't share my insomnia, thank goodness! I just checked on her and she's sleeping like the angel she is. I, however, am sitting here alone, wondering if you're almost home and how your night was. If you're up for some conversation, I'd love some company. Please know that you are under no obligation to join me. I'll understand if I don't see you tonight. I'll be disappointed but in no way do I intend this invitation to be viewed as pressure.

The door is unlocked. I have juice, soda and beer if you're thirsty. Leftover lasagna if you're hungry. Bring something else if you prefer.

Hope to see you, if only for a minute to say good night,

Drake

P.S. This is not an invitation for a date, just a friendly gathering of neighbors.

Megan grinned at his words. She would have been wary at his obvious attempt to charm her if she hadn't already decided that he was a truly nice man. It only took a second for her to decide. It was harmless, popping in to say hi. Just because she was

going over didn't mean she had to stay very long. Hesitating at her door, she wavered at taking a glass of wine with her. She'd decided on one on her drive home but now she didn't want to give Drake the wrong impression. One glass would be okay. But maybe he'd think she was rude, not bringing the rest of the bottle with her and offering to share. With a snort, Megan chastised herself for over-thinking the situation. He was awake and interested. Why couldn't she accept him at face value and leave it at that? Grabbing the bottle and two glasses, she told herself to relax and crossed the hall.

"Hey," Megan greeted Drake when he looked up from his book. "Still want company?"

"Hi," Drake stood and approached her. "Come in. Make yourself comfortable." He reached for the wine. "Want me to pour?"

Megan's grip tightened as she took a step back.

"Megan?" Drake stepped back also. "You look like you're about to bolt. What's wrong?"

She closed her eyes and sighed before meeting his concerned gaze. "No. I'm sorry. Maybe I should just go."

"Please don't," he said softly as he retreated further into the room. "There's nothing for you to be afraid of here. Honest, as Christy would say."

His cautious smile made her feel foolish. "Damn. I really thought I could do this. I'm such an idiot."

Drake backed up until he reached the sofa and sat down. "I doubt that but if you want to talk about why you think you're an idiot, I'd be happy to give you my opinion."

Megan stared at his face and saw only kindness and concern reflected back at her. "I guess it's my turn to talk. I'll explain if you're not too tired. It might take a while and I don't want to keep you up."

"Do you honestly believe I'd be able to sleep after seeing that expression on your face? You looked petrified. Of me. I may not be the nicest guy in the world but I would never hurt you. Never, Megan."

"I know that. I do. Really." She took a step forward. "My reaction wasn't about you. Would it be okay if I take this to the kitchen and pour it myself? I'll bring you a glass too if you want."

"Be my guest."

Megan saw his surprise when she sat on the other end of the sofa instead of the chair facing him. "Can I ask a favor?" He nodded. "Just listen, okay? Unless I'm wrong, I think you're going to react and I'm afraid I won't have the nerve to finish if you say anything. This, um, isn't something I talk about."

"You don't have to tell me anything, sweetheart." Drake's tone was soothing. "I admit that I'm curious but I don't want you to be uncomfortable. Why don't you tell me how your night was instead?"

"No. I'd rather explain. I want to explain. I need to so you understand why I am the way I am."

"All right, if that's what you want."

Megan couldn't sit still. She needed to pace. "I already told you I don't date. I haven't dated since my second year of college. I'm afraid to because I don't trust my own judgment where men are concerned." She stopped for a sip of wine. "When I was younger I used to be a flirt. I wasn't a big tease or anything but I liked to be noticed. I had fun kidding around with the guys I met and sometimes got a little too suggestive. I thought I made it clear that I was just flirting and that it was all innocent and harmless and that I had no intention of following through on any of it. I really enjoyed the attention I got but I wasn't ready to be serious with anyone in particular at that point. I really believed everyone understood that about me."

"The first week of classes I met this guy who seemed really interested in me. I liked him so I didn't discourage him from hanging around as much as I normally did but I let him know that I wasn't interested in being with him exclusively. He acted okay with it and I thought everything was fine."

Megan retrieved a second glass of wine, bringing the bottle with her to top off Drake's glass without meeting his eyes. She didn't want to see his thoughts in case he disapproved of her behavior.

"One night, I went to a frat party with him. I was underage but so were a lot of the people there. Everyone else was drinking so I didn't see anything wrong with me having a drink too. I figured I'd just hold it for effect and not really drink much of it. After a few sips I started to feel strange. It was like I knew what was happening but I had no control over it. I couldn't talk either. It was kind of like watching a movie in slow motion only I was in it."

She stood mutely, lost in the memory. "Anyway, it turned out that the guy was only pretending to like me to get me to trust him. Apparently, I'd flirted with a few of the guys in the fraternity before and they decided I needed to be taught a lesson. For being a tease and leading them on. He put something in my beer so I wouldn't be able to fight back while they all took turns using me for the night. I heard them discussing the chances of getting away with keeping me tied up longer so they could make sure I learned not to play with them like I had. They took me to the pledge room in the basement. You know, where they take the new guys to scare the crap out of them? It was mostly the older guys but the one who got me there was allowed to be part of the first group who got to watch as his reward. They tied my hands together and hooked them above my head before they started taking turns cutting off pieces of my clothes with this really big knife. They kept saying I had to hold still or they might cut me by mistake. They had me naked and were touching me, telling me how many different ways they were going to rape me when I heard the door slam open. I wasn't facing it so I didn't know what was going on right away. I thought it was just more of them who decided they couldn't wait."

"I didn't understand what was happening and why someone was wrapping a blanket around me but eventually I realized that it was my friend, Gwynne. Her boyfriend had overheard some of the guys talking and he got some of his friends to help get me out of there. Daryl is really big and scary looking, even though he's actually a teddy bear. His friends were even bigger so the fraternity guys backed down pretty quick and kept saying they didn't know I was already someone's whore and that they were trespassing. Gwynne told me later that Daryl went berserk and attacked the guy who had been telling the rest of them what to do. It took four of his friends to get him to stop pounding on him. If they hadn't taken the videotape one of the frat guys was making, I think he would have gone to jail.

"Anyway, Daryl carried me out of there. He and Gwynne took me back to their tiny apartment and both stayed with me until I pulled myself together enough to function. They wouldn't let me quit school and even took extra classes so one of them was always there to keep me from running away. Daryl's friends made sure someone was always around when it was just me and Gwynne, in case anyone from the fraternity tried something again. I know I probably should have gone to the police but I was so ashamed that I couldn't do it. I'm not sure but I think Daryl's friends used the tape to make sure they never tried the same thing with anyone else.

"I'd been an accounting major even though I hated it because that was my dad's business and I was going to work with him. After that happened, I switched so I didn't have to be in classes with any of them. I ended up with a degree in cultural anthropology which, as you can guess, is highly impractical. After graduation Gwynne and Daryl got married. When they moved to Buffalo, I came too. They even invited me to live with them but I didn't. I knew I had to stop being so dependant and that it was time for me to grow up. Even so I think I spent more time at their house the first six months than I did at my apartment but they let me break away at my own pace.

"The bar took off and the tips are good so I've managed to pay back the money my parents spent sending me to college. They protested but I made them take it since I didn't stay in Philadelphia to work with my dad. They still don't know about this. I didn't tell my sister either even though we're pretty close. That makes me feel guilty if I think about it too much since she told me how she and her boyfriend got pregnant on purpose in high school so they could get married without all the objections they'd have gotten otherwise. They have four kids already, one girl and three boys and I think they want another one. Everyone always said they wouldn't make it but they are even happier now than they were at the beginning."

Megan knew she was babbling but couldn't stop. "I don't date because I can't get past the notion that what happened was my fault. That I caused it because I acted like I was willing when I wasn't, without considering how badly some guys might take that. I know that's not really true and that very few guys would plot against me like that. Even though I know that, I still don't trust myself enough to go out with anyone. The thought of letting someone get close to me scares me more than you can imagine.

"See? That's why I don't date. Why I'm not interested in men. Why reaching for your hand isn't something I do. Why I couldn't give you the wine when you offered to pour it. Now what I don't understand is why you're different. I like being with you. I didn't panic at the thought of coming over here tonight. I wanted to hold your hand in the park. I want to touch you and find out if the rest of you is as warm as your hands are. Monday, when you said goodbye after we got back from the park, I wanted to kiss you. After I read your note I almost changed my clothes so I looked nicer for you."

Megan finally faced him and met his eyes. "Being near you excites me. When you came down to the pool I was so disappointed that you hadn't put on your swimming suit and I wasn't going to get to look at your bare chest. I feel alive again and I want things I've refused to think about for years. I'm scared to death of it all. But I'm also scared of chasing you away without letting myself get closer if you decide you want us to be more than friendly neighbors."

Drake had no idea how he managed to hold back. He could see that she was waiting for him to say something but wanted to make sure his response was the right one. "I don't know what to say first. I'm reacting in so many ways right now that I'm afraid to say anything. I don't want to say the wrong thing that would cause you to push me away when what I really want to do is hold you to make you feel protected and safe."

That seemed to surprise Megan so much that she blurted, "Would you? Hold me, I mean?"

"Yes. But only if you come over here to me. I don't want to scare you by approaching you." Drake's heart pounded when she took the few steps to close the distance that separated them. He opened his arms and let Megan move into them before folding them gently around her. Almost instantly, she began to cry. "It's okay, Megan. You're okay now. I'm here and no one is going to hurt you," he crooned as he lightly stroked her back.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, clearly embarrassed.

"Shh, sweetheart. Go ahead if you need to. I've got you and I'll keep you safe while you cry." Drake had no idea how long he held her against his chest before her tears dwindled. When she finally raised her head, he said, "Feel any better?"

"No. I feel like an even bigger idiot," she admitted.

"Aw, Megan why? Because you cried a little?"

"Yes. I should be done with that by now. It was years ago and I shouldn't let it get to me as much as I still do."

"I don't think there's a time limit on this sort of thing. Seeking comfort after opening old wounds hardly qualifies you as an idiot. It makes you human." He could read the doubt in her eyes. "Do you have any idea how much it means to me that you trust me enough to tell me all this? If I weren't so furious at the guys who tried to hurt you, I'd be on top of the world with how special you make me feel. I won't pretend to know what you went through while it was happening or as you tried to put it behind

you. I'm grateful that you have friends like Gwynne and Daryl and that they found you before it was any worse. May I ask a question?"

"Sure." Megan rested her cheek on his chest as if unwilling to leave the warmth of his embrace.

"How can you work in a bar? Alcohol makes some men act like assholes and say things to women that they shouldn't. I'm sure you get plenty of unwanted attention."

"Yeah, seems weird, doesn't it? I don't know. I guess it doesn't bother me because it's a bar and it's acceptable to act like that there. Or maybe because Daryl is always around and I know he won't let anything happen to me. He doesn't let anyone mess with any of us. If someone crosses the line he tosses them out immediately and has the bouncers make sure they don't get back in. He even has us walked to our cars when we leave so he's sure that no one is waiting outside for us. Gwynne used to waitress too but now that she's pregnant she leaves after everything is set up so she isn't exposed to all the smoke. It may look like every other bar on the surface but it's a very safe place to work.

"Daryl lets everyone have a good time but makes sure no one gets out of control. He flags people faster than most places and sends people home in cabs at his expense all the time. Even the private parties, where things are a little more relaxed, are carefully monitored. He has a contract that says he reserves the right to cancel the party or refuse admittance if someone shows up too drunk or he suspects that they're on something. Right from the start, he and Gwynne decided that's how it would be. They'd rather lose business than deal with the problems that come with letting people get away with everything. They even return most of the deposit if they veto a party. All they keep is what the staff would have been paid plus thirty percent to cover lost tips. Daryl only had to call the cops twice when he cancelled a party and the guys he turned away refused to leave. After that, he got the reputation of not putting up with anything so there aren't problems very often these days. Oh God, I'm babbling."

"It's fine. Don't worry about it. I think I'd like to meet your friends sometime." When Megan tensed, he added, "Away from the bar. I won't show up and distract you at work. Daryl sounds more than capable of handling security but I'm not sure I'd be able to sit by and listen to the comments I suspect you inspire."

"Huh?" Megan peeked at him.

"I'd be jealous and I'd probably act like a possessive jerk." He was still fighting the urge to crush her to him and hold on as tightly as he could. When she let her cheek rest against him again, Drake decided to say more. "Megan, I want to be honest but I don't want to scare you. You have my word that no matter what, I will never forget that no means no." He could feel her pulse quicken. "You said that I'm different from other men and you already know that I'm attracted to you too. Hearing you say that I excite you has me picturing all sorts of scenarios where we see just how excited I can make you. But I'm somewhat afraid of you too so we're not going to rush into anything. I really haven't touched a woman other than Claire for ten years. Yes, I want you and yes, my body is responding to yours physically but truthfully, I'm not sure I wouldn't

be a big disappointment to you if we move too fast and hurting you is the last thing I want to do. Also, I don't want to be hurt either and I think you could hurt me without realizing it, so for now, I'd like to ignore that side of our getting to know each other. If that's acceptable to you, of course."

"Are you real?" Megan sighed and relaxed more completely, lulled by his warmth as well as his words.

"One hundred percent, sweetheart, I assure you." He chuckled and let his hand gently stroke her back. "Are you as comfortable talking to me as it seems?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah. Nice, isn't it? Not having to weigh every word like this."

"Mm, nice."

"I like how this feels too. Holding you."

"It's good. Almost too good. You're warm all over, just like I thought you would be. Solid too."

"And I've figured out just how soft you are."

"Drake, shh. We're ignoring that stuff, remember? If you keep that up I'm going to have to leave now because you're making me think about it and I want to stay where I am for a little longer."

"You sure? You're not just saying that because of the wine?" he teased to lighten the moment.

"No, it's you not the wine. I've never spent any time listening to someone's heartbeat before. It's very soothing. In fact, I'd better move soon before I get too comfortable."

"Not just yet. Please. Stay put and let me hold you. Take a little nap if you want to. If you leave now, I'll worry about you because of all the memories you brought to the surface tonight. I know how stressful memories can be."

"Yeah, I guess you do. Was it wrong for me to walk away from you Monday like I did? I thought you needed some time alone with Christy."

"You thought correctly. Our memories are painful in different ways. Sometimes I'm going to need to share the link to our past with Christy more than we need your comfort."

"Promise to tell me if I do the wrong thing?"

"Okay but I don't think I'll have to. You seem very sensitive."

"I think Monday was just dumb luck but I want to learn so I don't hurt you or Christy."

"You wouldn't hurt us intentionally. I trust you, sweetheart. It feels right to trust you with us."

"I trust both of you with me too. Drake?"

"Hmm?"

"Thanks for letting me talk. I'm glad I don't have to hide that part of me from you."

"You don't have to hide anything from me, just like I don't have to hide from you. Now shush and relax a little bit."

Chapter Five

Megan arrived at the bar much earlier than scheduled, hoping to catch her friends alone. Both followed her into the office immediately when she asked if they could speak for a few minutes.

"I think I have a problem," Megan jumped right in. "I don't know what to do and I need your advice."

Gwynne and Daryl exchanged a look as Gwynne slid a chair next to Megan's and Daryl leaned on the desk in front of them.

"What's wrong?" Gwynne asked, clearly concerned.

"I met my neighbors last Sunday." Megan spoke nonstop for the next fifteen minutes. "When I got home last night, I found this." She handed them Drake's note and waited until both finished reading it. "I took a bottle of wine and went over, thinking I'd say hi and stay long enough to have a glass. I freaked after he offered to pour it and tried to take it from me. He noticed that I was about to panic and backed away so I wouldn't. I ended up telling him everything that happened in college and how I moved here with you. Before I started I asked him not to say anything and he didn't. He sat there and let me talk and watched me pace around his living room while I polished off most of the bottle."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Gwynne commented. "After all, he told you about his life."

"I know. But then I cried all over him."

"So?" Gwynne asked.

"Or did he get weird about it?" Daryl prompted when she seemed unwilling to continue.

"No. Just the opposite. He said I should cry all I wanted. Then he started rubbing my back and whispering all these sweet things. After I managed to stop, he wouldn't let me apologize for acting like an idiot. He said I made him feel special for trusting him enough to tell him about it. He was furious that it happened and said he was grateful I had friends like you to take care of me."

"Still doesn't sound so tragic to me, Megan. Or is there more?" Daryl seemed confused.

"Oh there's more. After I calmed down, I admitted he made me curious like I haven't been in forever and how much that scared me. That's when he said he was interested too but just as scared because he hasn't considered anyone since his wife died. I should probably tell you that this whole conversation took place with me sprawled across his chest while he petted my back. We spent some time on how nice it

was to have someone to talk openly with and moved on to how good we both felt at the moment. We had to stop ourselves from saying too many things like that since they were turning us on. I tried to leave but Drake asked me to stay a little longer and relax so he didn't have to worry that I'd be upset by what I'd told him. He asked me to let him hold me and said that it was okay if I took a nap."

"Oh no, Megan tell me you didn't both fall asleep." Gwynne guessed what was coming.

"You got it," Megan confirmed her friend's speculation. "Somehow we got shifted around so we were lying side by side, wrapped up together with our arms and legs. Neither one of us woke up until Christy shook her dad this morning to tell him that she was hungry. He was almost late for class and I hid all day, leaving him to explain us sleeping on the sofa to Christy without giving her the chance to ask me questions if she had any. I'm such a coward. What the hell do I do now? What is she going to think, finding her dad having a slumber party with some neighbor that they just met?"

"Calm down, Lu Lu," Daryl used her bar name to get her attention. "It's not as bad as you think. I'm sure Drake explained it so Christy knows that your being there was innocent and you merely fell asleep together because you were both tired. Or did you leave out the part where you stripped each other in your sleep?"

"God, no!"

"He's teasing you, Megan. We know you weren't naked. Even though it seems you both wanted to be."

"I can't face either of them. I have to move. Can I stay with you until I find someplace?"

"Nope, sorry Lu. Not an option this time." Daryl shook his head at her.

"He's right," Gwynne agreed. "You need to talk to him before you do anything drastic."

"But I don't know what to say."

"Sure you do. Start with exactly that and ask about Christy. If he's as decent as he seems so far, it'll be fine. I promise it will."

"I second that," Daryl stated. "He's the first guy who got your attention after all this time. You have to give it a chance. You'll regret it if you don't."

"Did he give you his number?" Megan nodded. "Then we'll clear out so you have privacy when you call him."

"Now?" Megan shuddered.

"Yes, now," Gwynne insisted. "Talk to the man before you make yourself sick. You're already tied up in knots. It'll only get worse if you put it off."

"Do it. We're going to be busy tonight and I can't have you spilling drinks all over the customers." Daryl winked as he closed the door behind them.

Megan's hands were shaking as she gripped the phone. When Drake answered, her voice came out as a croak.

"Hello," he repeated.

"Drake, it's me. Megan."

"Hey, Megan. This sure is a pleasant surprise," he replied cheerfully.

"I didn't want to wait until the next time I saw you to talk to you about this morning. I'm sorry I deserted you like that. How's Christy?"

"Christy? She's fine. She's in her room having a stuffed animal convention."

"But she saw us. She knows I spent the night with you."

"Yes, she does but I explained that I left a note under your door, asking you to stop in to say hi and that we were so tired we both fell asleep."

"So she doesn't hate me?"

"Absolutely not. In fact, she wants to know when you're coming back to sleep in her room with her."

"You're not serious."

"I am. Honest. Everything's fine on this end. I'm concerned about you though. I was afraid you were thinking that I tricked you into feeling safe so I could be selfish and hold you all night."

"That didn't even cross my mind." She hesitated. "You didn't, did you?"

"No, Megan. I wouldn't do that to you. Not when there's such a risk of alienating you by pulling something stupid like that. Damn, I should have let you leave when you said you were too comfortable instead of asking to hold you a little longer. I'm sorry I was so irresponsible, sweetheart. Please don't run away because I got careless and let myself relax with you. I was serious when I said I was attracted to you."

"I won't. I shouldn't have assumed the worst and hid from you this afternoon instead of talking to you after your class."

"Don't beat yourself up like that. Not over this one. Save it for when we really screw up."

"I don't want us to screw up."

"Give us some time. It'll happen sooner or later. We're only human and it's inevitable. Only when we do, you can't hide from me. It's easier to fix things if you work on the problem together. Rule number one of couplehood. Never let the other person deal with a situation alone when you were both responsible for creating it."

"Rules of couplehood? I never even heard of those."

"That's because I just invented them for you. I'm sure I can come up with more when it's appropriate. Seriously though, Megan. We're cool, right?"

"Yes, Drake. We're cool."

"Good. So when's our next sleepover? We could all camp out on the floor and have a real slumber party for Christy."

"Now you are joking, aren't you?"

"Mostly." He chuckled. "I admit that I enjoyed holding you last night and I'm looking forward to doing it again but it probably isn't the best idea to make a habit of it so soon."

"I don't think so either."

"All teasing aside, don't hesitate to come over if you get scared. Let me give you a key so you don't have to worry about waking Christy. You're more than welcome to slide in next to me any time you need to." His offer was met with silence. "No ulterior motives here. I'm offering comfort, not luring you into my bed for wild sex. Nope. No wild sex until we're good and ready for it. Then again, you might find that kissing adds another level of comfort and I'm very willing to demonstrate for you." More silence. "I meant what I said last night. Nothing will happen unless we both want it to. Megan?"

"I'm still here. I can't do that yet, Drake. I can't let myself depend on you like you just suggested. I'm sorry but I don't want a key."

"Then I won't give you one. But my offer stands. Whether or not you choose to take me up on it is entirely up to you. Maybe I'm being selfish because I already care about you and am concerned that something will frighten you. It just felt so good to be strong for you last night. I like being needed because I'm a man sometimes. Should I shut up now?"

"No, it's okay. I'm a little overwhelmed since I spent the day thinking I'd have to move so we didn't bump into each other in the hall. I never expected to have a conversation like this when Gwynne and Daryl insisted I should call you instead of putting it off."

"You told your friends about me?"

"And Christy. Is that okay?"

"Hell yes! I mentioned you to Art too. He wants to meet you so he's sure I'm not inventing you just to shut him up. He thinks it's unnatural of me to not need sex for the last year. He's the type that seeks constant thrills without knowing anything more than a woman's first name. We've agreed to disagree on that one since we get along about most other issues."

"I don't think I'm ready for him yet even though I'm sure it would be fine as long as you were there."

"No way would I leave any woman alone with him. Especially not one I care about. Christy would never forgive us if I went to jail because I needed to kill Art for disrespecting you. But he's really not that bad and can control himself when he has to. Promise you won't ever tell him I said that or I'll never hear the end of it."

She giggled. "All right. When I meet him I'll make sure I mention that you warned me about him."

"Thanks."

"I'm really sorry but I have to get to work now. Can we do something Sunday afternoon? Maybe there's a movie that Christy wants to see."

"I'm sure there is. And before you start worrying that you just asked me for a date, let me point out how happy you just made me. I was trying to come up with a way to get you to spend time with us but didn't want to seem devious by getting Christy to ask you. I'm glad you called."

"Me too. Thanks for making it okay with Christy."

"No problem. Thanks for worrying about us. Now say goodbye and get to work. I don't want your friends to think I'm taking advantage of them by keeping you on the phone all night because it wouldn't be at all difficult to talk to you for the next few hours."

"Judging by their reaction when I told them I was interested in you, I don't think they'd mind all that much. I'm the one who would feel guilty about it. 'Bye, Drake. There's a party tonight so I doubt if you'll see me before Sunday."

"Christy will be as disappointed as I am but we'll find some adventure to keep us busy tomorrow. Drive safe tonight."

Chapter Six

Over the next few weeks, the trio spent increasingly more time together. Megan timed her morning bike rides to end so she could say hello when Drake and Christy were leaving for class. On her days off, she and Christy entertained each other while he read the creative writing assignments his students handed in, sometimes hanging out in his living room, sometimes swimming while Drake worked on her balcony. Sundays became the day the three of them more often than not engaged in family-oriented outings, which generally ended with Megan helping Drake tuck Christy into bed before the two of them spent the rest of the evening talking.

Megan was practically bouncing off the walls, waiting for it to be late enough to knock on their door. She originally planned to wait until after Drake's class to show them the book that Christy and the ducks inspired but she was too anxious to share it with them. When she finished it late the previous night, she was so excited that she went to an all-night copying service in the city so she could give one to each of them. Once she was sure they'd be up, she took the brightly wrapped books and tapped on their door.

"Hey," Drake greeted her with a warm smile. "Couldn't wait to find out if a good morning kiss is as nice as the goodnight kiss was?"

Megan blushed at the memory of what they shared the night before in her open doorway. "Mm, nice thought but not really what I had in mind."

"I'm crushed," he teased. "Come on in. Want some coffee? I bet Christy will share her cereal with you."

"No thanks. I'm not here to mooch."

"Now I'm puzzled. You don't want a kiss and you turned down food. Not that you need a reason but we don't usually see you this early."

"Who said I didn't want a kiss too?" Megan winked just before she greeted Christy. "I know you guys don't have much time but I have something for you and I couldn't wait." She handed each a package.

Christy ripped hers open first. As soon as she saw it, she squealed. "Look, Daddy! It's me."

Drake quickly flipped through the pages, seeing images of his daughter in the park. He paused at the one that depicted him holding her horizontally to demonstrate the rule they had about standing near water. "This is incredible."

"You really like it? You said you didn't mind if I sketched Christy."

"Megan," Drake stopped her. "I know you said you did children's books but I never pictured this. Not after you told me that I shouldn't expect much. Christy, Megan drew all those pictures of you. She made these books for us all by herself."

"Cool," Christy declared, still looking through her copy. "I'm Cricket!"

"Yep, you're Cricket. I made the little girl look like you but I didn't want to use your real name."

"Like they do it in the movies," Christy concluded.

"That's right," Megan laughed.

"My daughter, the star," Drake chimed in.

"I already started another one. I have enough ideas for a whole series of Cricket stories."

"Can I see it?" Christy asked. "Are you gonna make more today when Daddy goes to school? Can I stay home and watch you do them?"

Megan froze, unsure of how to respond. Instead, she turned to Drake.

"If Megan says yes and you promise to behave, I guess that would be okay," Drake replied without hesitation.

"Please, can I? I'll be good. Honest."

"Are you sure?" Megan questioned, searching Drake's face.

"Completely." He smiled. "Thanks to you."

"Really, Daddy? You're going to school and I get to stay with Megan?" Christy sounded as amazed as Megan felt.

"Yes, honey. If you want to. I can't come home in the middle of class so you can't change your mind after I leave. Why don't you go brush your teeth and get dressed while you think about it? Pick out some toys because you'll need them whether you decide to stay here or go to school."

Neither spoke until she left the kitchen. "Drake," Megan began as he pulled her into his arms.

"I trust you and so does she. It's time," he whispered as he cupped her cheek. "Because of you and the way you care about us, we're both safe enough to do this."

"I'm going to cry." She felt so emotional.

"Why don't you kiss me instead?" he suggested, lowering his head almost to hers.

Megan closed the gap, meeting his mouth tentatively. When she felt the brush of Drake's tongue, she parted her lips in invitation as she leaned against him. Her response caused an even bigger one from him. Soon the kiss transformed into something unlike the others they'd shared. Her soft moan triggered both their senses.

"Christ." Drake released her.

"Oh wow." Megan was stunned. "That was..."

"Yeah," he agreed, moving to lean against the counter. "Kept you from crying though."

"Sure did." She nodded, reaching for his coffee.

"The book is awesome. If the rest are like that, I don't see why you haven't had them published."

"I haven't tried. The others I did were for my niece and nephews. I haven't had the nerve to send them out to anyone professional yet."

"You should. This is seriously good, Megan. I have some contacts if you ever decide to give it a try."

"Thanks but I don't know if I'm brave enough to do that. I'd like to do more of these and I think I could but what if they hate me? I don't know if I am ready to deal with that kind of rejection. Christy's smile is more than enough for me. Yours too."

"Wouldn't you like to know that your book is making other kids happy too?"

"Well, sure. Who wouldn't want that?"

"What if I sent it out for you? I could do it and only tell you when I heard how much they loved it and want more."

"Somehow I doubt that but okay. Fine. If you think it's good enough, go ahead and send it. Just don't ever tell me that you did it. That way, I won't get all excited at the thought of being published and I won't have to be heartbroken when they send it back with a 'don't waste our time' letter."

"Deal." Drake grinned confidently.

"I'm ready." Christy returned, clutching her backpack.

"So what'll it be, kiddo? School with me or are you hanging out with Megan?"

"Megan. Okay, Daddy?"

"Okay, Christy." He stooped and tickled her until she giggled uncontrollably. "Remember what I said." She agreed. Drake released her and quickly deposited their dishes in the dishwasher before grabbing his own backpack. Pausing to retrieve something from the stand near the door, he said, "Here's the spare key in case she forgot something." He handed it to Megan. "Sorry but I have to go. Don't let her take advantage of you, sweetheart. It's okay to say no if she tries to walk all over you."

"We'll be fine, Drake. Honest," Megan assured him, using Christy's word.

"I'll be good, Daddy," Christy promised.

"All right." He kissed her forehead. "Have fun, girls. I'm bringing lunch so don't snack all morning." He grinned and kissed Megan's forehead too. "I'll call you when we take a break."

* * * * *

Art shook his head, certain he hadn't heard correctly when Drake explained why his daughter wasn't glued to his hip. "Come again. I could swear you just said that you left the midget with the vampire."

"For the last time, Megan is not a vampire. And you heard correctly, Christy asked to stay with Megan this morning."

"Well what do you know?" Art grinned. "Maybe this'll get your pathetic ass in gear. After all, stashing the midget solo is significant enough to derail even your one-track mind. What inspired this sudden change in tactics?"

"Take a look at this." Drake pulled Megan's book from his backpack. "Megan brought one for each of us this morning. When she mentioned that she was working on another one, Christy almost begged to stay home and watch."

Art whistled. "So Elvira has hidden talents." He read through the short book. "Cute pics, feel-good story, useful lesson. Parents would eat this up along with their kids. She cranks out this caliber in a few weeks as the norm, she should be making a mint. How come she's not the hottest thing around?"

"She hasn't mustered up the confidence to submit anything yet. Megan's positive that she'd be rejected and isn't willing to expose herself to that."

"You planning on changing that?"

"Might. I'd like to see the ones she did for her sister's kids. Maybe submit a selection. She said Christy's smile was reward enough but the look in her eyes wanted more."

"Hmm, just think how grateful she'll be to the guy who makes it happen."

"Shut up, Art. I offered to help because I think I can, not because I'm looking to get something out of it."

"Yeah, yeah. Tell yourself that all you want but we both know it's not that simple. You've been wearing that silly grin since you met and it keeps getting bigger. Now you're trusting her with the midget. Deny it if you need to but even your dense mind should be able to grasp where this is headed."

"And where is that, oh wise one?"

"Since you're incapable of recreational sex purely for the sake of getting laid, I'm predicting it's only a matter of time."

"Until?"

"Until the bells are ringing and Elvira slips into place in your ready-made family. Seems to me she's halfway there already, playing at being momma like she is today."

"You're a real asshole sometimes, Art."

"Hey, I calls 'em like I sees 'em."

"Too bad you don't bother to open your eyes and take a look first. Megan's not playing at anything. I told you she has reasons for taking it slowly just like I do. Christy was the one who asked if she could stay with Megan. Besides, she only came over before class in the first place because she was so excited about sharing this with us."

"Chill. I'm not putting down your new squeeze. I'm just trying to point out that it's highly unlikely that there is another Claire out there. Not even you are charmed enough to get that lucky twice."

"Hell, Art, I know Megan's not Claire. She's nothing like her and isn't trying to be. She's just, I don't know, Megan."

"If you say so. I don't get why you are so hung up when you don't even know if she can dance yet."

"Who says I don't?"

"No fucking way! You're doing the nasty and didn't tell your Uncle Artie? Son of a bitch!"

"Anybody ever tell you what a pig you are? We're not doing the nasty as you so tastelessly put it. I was merely referring to the kiss I got earlier."

"Must have been one hell of a smooch to make you lose all those heavy-duty doubts you've been wallowing in. Care to elaborate?"

"Not a chance. Let's just say that I wouldn't turn down another one and leave it at that."

"Well hot damn, dude! Back in the saddle again. Now that you've cleared the first hurdle by unchaining the midget for a few hours, it isn't such a leap to spending a whole night apart. The Summer Splash is coming up. Why don't you pack the midget off to your parents and bring Elvira? Wine her, dine her, romance her with some dancing in the moonlight and sweep her off her feet for a night of tender exploration between the sheets. Mike's shindig is that weekend. Come out with us while she's at work and meet up for some rough and tumble later. Make a weekend of it. Sample the whole smorgasbord and see if she's really worth all the time you're wasting."

"As I said, Art, you are a pig." Drake stood. "And on that note, I'm going to class. Maybe I'll have them describe the anatomy of a perfect kiss in two hundred words or less."

"Now I'm positive you've lost it. They're still speculating about that day in the park. Assigning something like that is too much, even for you. Christ! If you ever do nail her you'll have them outline the perfect fuck."

"Later, Art." Drake merely smiled and refused to be drawn in.

"Just remember that you heard it here first," Art called after Drake who just waved without looking back. "Fool," Art muttered to himself. "Broken heart in the making and he's too far up in the clouds to see it coming."

* * * * *

Megan launched herself into Drake's arms as soon as she opened the door.

"Thank you," she gushed, hugging him tightly.

"You're welcome." Megan's cheerfulness was contagious. "I take it this morning went well."

"Try spectacular." She beamed. "Wait until you see what we've been up to. But first, tell me how you are?"

"I'm fine, sweetheart. It was different, not seeing Christy when I glanced toward the door but it wasn't even remotely like I imagined it would be. She sounded so happy when I called that I actually managed to relax afterwards."

"I'm so glad. I half-expected you to cut it short and rush home."

"Christy was with you, Megan. I knew she was fine," he stated as he realized she was still in his arms.

"That means so much to me," Megan admitted, unable to tear her gaze from his mouth.

"Mm," he agreed. "Megan?"

She met his eyes, seeing the unspoken question and replied by raising her face. That was all it took for him to claim her lips, joining their mouths with a kiss that surpassed the one they shared earlier.

All too soon, Drake ended it. "Even though I was preoccupied with Christy this morning, a little part of me couldn't put the taste your sweet mouth out of my mind. I could get addicted to you so easily." Megan was clearly flustered. "But for now, you better take me to Christy before I forget that we're not rushing things."

"Oh man." Megan rested her forehead on his chest. "Maybe we should rethink that one."

"Please don't say things like that. I'm already having enough trouble reigning in my libido today. You keep that up and I'll need a cold shower."

Megan laughed shyly and took his hand to lead him to her workroom. Just short of the doorway she paused, peeking up at him through her eyelashes. "Just so you know, I need one too."

He groaned as she urged him into the room.

"Hiya," Christy greeted him with a happy smile. "Look at what I did. Um, okay, Megan helped lots but I did this part." She pointed at the drawing that could easily have passed for her reflection. "After we get it done, I wanna do one of you too. But it's gotta be littler so I can take it to Nana's when I go see her and Pop Pop."

"When you what?" Drake stiffened.

"When I go see Nana and Pop Pop. Uncle Adam says I gotta come before school starts so we get to do a real visit. He says Nana wants us to go shopping for school stuff but I said I wanted to do it with Megan. 'Kay, Daddy?"

"Hold on." Drake sat heavily in the chair next to her. "Back up and start over for me. I think I missed something."

"Daddy," Christy sighed and rolled her eyes in frustration.

"Christy," Drake cautioned. "Don't even think of pulling that with me. First you spring some surprise visit on me that you seem to have all planned out, then you announce that you're going to do your school shopping without me and now you're treating me as if I'm not very bright because I'm clueless. That's not a nice way to act and you know it. Why don't you adjust the attitude and try again?"

"Sorry," Christy muttered, chewing on her bottom lip.

"Is this how you behaved with Megan?"

"No. Honest."

"All right then. Apology accepted. I really don't know anything about any of this, honey." He tucked the strand of hair that had escaped from her ponytail behind her ear. "Let's start with something easy. Tell me what you're wearing first." He glanced over his shoulder and saw Megan hovering in the doorway as if she were about to flee. "Perhaps you should sit down too since some of Christy's plans appear to include you. Or have you two already gone over this?"

Megan flinched even though Drake thought he had kept his voice level. Reluctantly, she joined them. "Not really. I mean, Christy did say she wanted to draw a picture of herself for you but I didn't know why she wanted it. I thought it might be for your office."

"And the shopping expedition?" he sneered suspiciously, questioning the wisdom in leaving Christy alone with her.

"Don't be mad at Megan," Christy practically shouted. "You're being a big meany."

Drake took a deep breath and covered Megan's clasped hands, which rested on the table in front of her. "You're right. I'm not mad at Megan but I was acting mean. I'm still a little upset with you and I took it out on her. I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"It's okay," Megan murmured.

"Thanks. Christy, we're waiting," Drake prompted.

"Megan showed me how she draws stuff and I wanted to try to do me. I had to wear this shirt 'cause it's real messy if I got it on my own clothes."

"Hmm," Drake noted the smears on the shirt. "Good idea."

"Yeah," Christy agreed. "I got scared that you won't know me if I go away to Nana's so I needed to give you a picture to see me until I come home."

"Christy, honey, there is absolutely no way I would ever not know you. We're for keeps, kiddo. Always and forever," he promised. "What makes you think that you're going anywhere without me?" He clutched Megan's hands as he waited for her answer.

"Uncle Adam said so on the phone last time. He was like maybe I was a big girl now and was I ready to go to Nana's by myself 'cause they miss me. He thinks if you go along and stay the whole time that they aren't gonna get to baby me 'cause you'd say no. He said maybe you could stay here and hang out with Megan so you don't get lonesome."

"You told Uncle Adam about Megan?"

"Well, yeah. He wanted to know if I was getting into trouble and I said about the door getting locked and how Megan found me and we had samiches in the hall."

"What else did you tell him?"

"All sorts of stuff like she's real pretty and she makes you laugh and how you get up so you get to say hi when she comes home from work. He thinks it's good how you make her come eat with us so she gets real food 'stead of just ice cream."

Drake gulped, knowing his brother would only wait so long before calling for more information. It would be better if he called Adam first, during the grace period.

"I said about how I asked Mommy for help when I was stuck in the hall and I know that's why she gave us Megan. He thinks maybe Mommy really did 'cause of how Megan holds hands with us."

Choosing to ignore her last bit of information, he urged her to continue. "What about the school shopping?"

Christy chewed her lip, deep in thought. "You can come if you want to, Daddy," she paused. "How come I don't get to do girl stuff with Megan like how Mommy and me did? Is it 'cause Megan doesn't have a little boy for you to do stuff with and you'd get lonesome at home when we weren't there too?"

"I didn't know you wanted to have some girls-only time with Megan, honey. I thought you liked it when we all do things together."

"I do but Mommy used to say that sometimes girls just had to stick together 'cause they needed to have time for girl talk about stuff boys don't get to hear. Can you do girl talk, Megan?"

"Uh, sure," Megan replied with a dazed expression. "Isn't that what we do when we go to the pool while your dad stays up on the balcony and when we sit in your room while he grades his papers at the kitchen table? We don't need to go shopping to have girls-only time."

Christy mulled over Megan's explanation. "'Kay. Then maybe I can get some of the stuff for school with Nana 'cause Uncle Adam says that would make her be happy and more stuff with you, Daddy. Can I go? Uncle Adam says Pop Pop might even take me to a real baseball game and I could get a hot dog and maybe a snow cone too and we could maybe eat them in the seats."

"We'll see," Drake hedged, forcing himself to relax his grip on Megan's hands before he hurt her. "I need to talk to Nana and Pop Pop and Uncle Adam first, before I decide anything. Give me a few days to call them and think it over, okay?"

"'Kay. Wanna help me do my picture? We can do you next. Megan says it's too hard for her to do her so I gotta take a picture instead. For if you say 'kay and I get to go to Nana's. I'm gonna take my book and show Uncle Adam how Megan made me Cricket." She frowned thoughtfully. "Can we take a picture with us and Megan in it like we did with Mommy and Jimmy?"

"Slow down, kiddo. We don't need to do everything right this second. I expected you to be ready for lunch by now. Or did you snack all morning?"

"Nuh-uh." Christy shook her head.

"We had some of your grapes just after you called," Megan explained. "I hope that was all right."

"Of course, that's what they're there for. Now what about lunch?"

"But I gotta finish my picture!"

"We can do that later, Christy," Megan promised. "We'll leave it right here for the next time you come over."

"Tomorrow? When Daddy goes to school?"

"Christy," Drake sighed.

"Tomorrow is Tuesday, Daddy. Megan doesn't sleep in the day on Tuesday," she explained.

"Let's get through today first, before we worry about tomorrow. Remember what I said about being a pest."

"Oh, yeah. You said we can't be pushy when Megan has other stuff to do so she doesn't say we're pesty neighbors."

Megan tactfully pretended she was thoroughly engrossed with returning the pastels to their case and not listening to their conversation. She waited for the silence to stretch before looking up from her task. "Didn't you say you were bringing lunch?"

"Changed my mind." Drake nodded his thanks. "Do you have any plans for the rest of the day?"

"No."

"Good. Are you up for a little adventure?"

"Ooh, Daddy has a surprise!" Christy squealed. "Daddy always has real good surprises. We do lots of fun stuff. You gotta come too. Tell her she has to, Daddy."

Drake noticed her hesitation. "Tell you what I'm going to do, Megan. Since you haven't gone on one of our adventures yet, I'm willing to make an exception and reveal our final destination if you promise not to tell. Christy, you need to change anyway. Megan, if you'll come over with us, we can talk in the kitchen. No pressure. We'd love it if you come with us but we'll understand if you don't."

Megan smiled at their expectant faces. "All right. I'm being ridiculous."

"Nope." Drake watched as his daughter helped put away the rest of the drawing supplies without being expressly directed to. "You're just being cautious like you always are."

* * * * *

Half an hour later, they were in the car, discussing where to eat. Megan barely noticed their chatter as she considered Drake's comment regarding her caution. He was right. It had been years since she trusted anyone enough to let herself be spontaneous. She realized that she didn't even go anywhere with Gwynne and Daryl without asking for the plan first. How could she question their motives after all they'd done to help her

survive? And hadn't Drake repeatedly demonstrated that he was a truly decent man right from the day they met? He had given her his ultimate trust by allowing Christy to stay that morning and she practically threw it back in his face by failing to accept this adventure as a surprise.

Megan shook her head sadly. Who was she kidding? Other than Gwynne and Daryl she hadn't let anyone inside her barriers since that night in the fraternity. She even distanced herself from her sister. How could she possibly fit in with these two warm and caring individuals?

"Hey," Drake brushed his knuckle against her leg. "You're awfully quiet. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Sorry. Just thinking."

Her mind drifted again, unaware of Drake's concerned glances. She was marginally better when they stopped for lunch, focusing enough to respond when necessary but isolating herself as soon as they resumed their journey. She didn't even notice that Drake turned off the engine until Christy's shriek startled her.

"Look at all the little animals," she bubbled. "Ooh, that girl touched one. Can I do that too, Daddy?"

"Sure can. This is called a petting zoo, honey."

"Cause they have lots of different animals and I get to go in and pet them."

"That's right. But you have to move slowly and talk softly, just like when you feed the ducks."

"So I don't scare them and they run away."

"You got it. I think we're just in time to help feed them too." Drake looped his camera over his shoulder and captured both their hands. "Ready when you are, ladies."

With a final reminder to listen, he released Christy so she could join the group around a guide who was explaining the different treats she would give them as she led them through the various pens, stopping in each while the children fed the animals.

"All right, Megan. What's up?"

"Nothing really."

"Then I'm confused. Before we left, you seemed to like the idea of coming here. Since we got in the car though, you've been a million miles away."

Megan waited for him to snap a picture of Christy surrounded by baby goats. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ruin this for you."

"Shh, nothing's ruined. I was so psyched with your book and Christy asking to stay with you that I wasn't thinking about what a handful she can be. I didn't consider that coming here might be too much all in one day."

"It's not, Drake. That's not it at all." Megan's heart sank at his quiet concern as he patiently waited for her to continue. "You and Christy don't have anything to do with this. Really. I'm the problem here, not you guys."

"Problem in what way? I don't understand."

"It's what you said earlier. About me always being so cautious. You trusted me enough to leave Christy alone with me and I couldn't just come along and enjoy your surprise."

"Me and my big mouth," Drake uttered. "I wasn't criticizing you, sweetheart. In fact, I admire you for it. It's one of the reasons I was able to leave Christy with you this morning. I knew if something unexpected came up, you'd consider things instead of charging into a potentially dangerous situation. You use your head with your own life so I'm positive that you'll use your head with Christy."

"So being overly cautious is a good thing then?"

"A very good thing."

"Now I really feel like a jerk."

"You aren't unless you insist on beating yourself up over this one. We'll get there one of these days." He winked. "Look. Christy's having a blast and I'm here with the best two girls in the world. Is there any better way to spend a sunny afternoon? I mean, what more could a guy ask for?"

"Someone to grade your papers for you?"

"Don't have any. I ditched my usual format today so class was a little different. Instead of using the first half to lecture what I wanted them to attempt and giving them the second half to write something, I assigned a short essay. I read them after the break as we discussed what they'd written."

"What was the topic?"

"Well, Megan, I asked them to describe what they imagine to be a perfect kiss. Some of them were actually pretty good but none topped mine," he chuckled at her gasp. "I thought it only fair that I participated too. Don't worry. I kept it anonymous so no one knows I even wrote anything. Want to read it later?"

"Oh God," she groaned.

"What? You made me so happy that I couldn't help it." He grinned. "I think they're done with the feeding part. Adventures are supposed to be fun. Come play with us and let me take some pictures. Rule number two of couplehood. Nothing terrible will happen if you both give yourselves permission to put all your concerns on hold and take a break for a few hours to enjoy what's right in front of you."

"How do you know this stuff?"

"Experience? Decent childhood? Insightful parents? Dumb luck?" He kept it up until she relaxed enough to smile. Drake's advice made it possible for their adventure to transform into an easygoing, pleasant afternoon.

Chapter Seven

Megan cast a longing glance at Drake's door. She couldn't remember more enjoyable days than the ones she'd just spent with her neighbors. Christy was so easy to be with. She was such a contradiction, acting her age one minute, filled with the wisdom of the ages the next. Drake insisted she was just like her mother but Megan could see traces of him in almost every situation. Even without their striking resemblance, she would have known they were related just from watching them together.

On top of Drake the father, there was also Drake the man. And oh wow, could that man kiss! Megan felt her cheeks flush as heat spread with the thought of him. One of his smiles was enough to distract her from whatever she was doing. But kissing him left her mindless and quivering with need, especially now that he'd stopped shielding his obvious desire for her. When they'd parted the night before, the kiss they shared left her tingling long after it ended. Even sleep didn't provide Megan with any distance from his overwhelming charm. The dreams she had only added to her growing lack of satisfaction.

Megan automatically changed out of the clothes she wore home from work. She sat at her drawing table but didn't bother to open her pastels. Thoughts of Drake and how much she wanted him made her restless. It was bad enough earlier when Daryl caught her staring into space with a goofy grin on her face. Now she couldn't think of anything other than using the key she'd had since the first morning Christy stayed with her and disrupting his sleep.

Megan jumped when her phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hi Megan." Drake's voice evoked a smile. "Just making sure you made it home in all this rain. Have any trouble?"

"No but thanks for checking. It feels nice knowing that someone was worried for me."

"Mm," he practically purred. "Bet I could make you feel even nicer."

"Oh yeah? You think so, do you? Going to tell me how?"

"I could but I'd much rather show you. Come over and I will."

"I'd love to but what about Christy?"

"She's out cold. We spent the afternoon in the pool. Then I hiked her halfway across town because she insisted that the only thing she'd eat tonight was a hot roast beef sandwich from the diner. On the way home we wandered through the sidewalk sale and picked up a complete rollerblading ensemble. Christy spent the rest of the night practicing. A circus could parade through her room and she'd sleep through it. And just

in case you're wondering, I didn't last much longer than she did. But unlike her, I don't sleep through until morning. I was mostly awake even before it stormed."

"I don't know, Drake. I'm already changed."

"Even better. Tell me you're wearing something lacy and nonexistent."

Megan laughed. "Hardly. Picture boxers and a crop top instead."

"Just as sexy as my first image. Come on, sweetheart. Scoot over here and give me a peek at how hot you are."

"Damn it, Drake stop it! I'm having enough trouble functioning without you saying things like that."

"Really? You've been thinking about me too?"

"Yes and you know it."

"Yeah but tell me anyway. What was it that interfered with your concentration?"

"Oh man," Megan sighed, giving in to his coaxing. "If you really can't guess I'll tell you. I was thinking about kissing you and what it would be like if we didn't stop at that. About whether or not I have the nerve to admit that I want more and how you'd react if I told you that while we were kissing."

"Maybe you should find out. I've been thinking about you too and I'm ready for more than kissing. I do want to make love, sweetheart but that's not what I have in mind for tonight."

"No? But you said you'd show me how you could make me feel."

"True, I did say that and yes, I'm more than willing to demonstrate. There are plenty of ways I can make you feel good without us actually making love. When we decide to do that I want us to be entirely alone without any time limits or interruptions."

"You sound awfully confident."

"Hey, I may be out of practice but there are some things that a guy never forgets. Come over and I'll prove it."

"You're making this very difficult for me to resist."

"So don't. I want to explore every inch of you with my hands while I'm kissing you and then nibble my way from head to toe and back again."

"Oh God, Drake."

"Getting excited? If you join me, I promise it'll be even better. Let me show you that I'm right about how good I can make you feel. But we'll only do as much or as little as you want. We can just kiss until we're senseless or I'd be perfectly happy holding you if you say you'd rather talk or we can see how many ways I can make you come without taking my pants off before I have to send you home at dawn."

"But what about you? I don't want to be selfish."

"Listen carefully, Megan. Rule number three of couplehood. Orgasms don't always have to be mutual. There's nothing selfish about taking what's being offered. As long as

both partners are agreeable, giving can be just as satisfying with the right person. Oh sure, I'm already hard but that's not important tonight. You are. What you want. The way you respond. How you feel. Trust me. The opportunity to give you unlimited pleasure would make me a very happy man." Drake waited but she didn't respond. "You're safe with me. Always. I still understand what no means. I'm lonely tonight and I spent the whole day missing you. You're home now and we're both awake. I need to ask you something anyway. At least come say hi and give me a few minutes of harmless conversation. I promise you can leave anytime you want to, okay?"

"Okay," Megan agreed, wondering if he could hear her heart pounding through the phone.

"Wow. Great." He disconnected instantly.

Megan didn't know what made her more nervous, his offer or her need. She was petrified of how she felt when he talked like that but wanted to explore as he'd suggested anyway. Telling herself to stop being such a coward, Megan finally stepped into the hall.

"Hi." She leaned against her door, waiting for Drake to finish his perusal.

"Hi, yourself." He grinned. "Coming over?"

She nodded and crossed the hall, trailing her fingers above his waistline as she walked past him and into his apartment.

"I really did spend the day thinking about you, Drake," she repeated. "I was wishing you were awake when you called."

"I believe you, sweetheart."

"I know. Why do you call me that?"

"What? Sweetheart?"

He considered her question. "I don't know. It just feels right. So you know, I never called Claire anything other than Claire. Well, mommy sometimes when I was talking to the kids."

"Why not?"

"Again, I don't have a clue. It fits with you. It didn't with her. Is it okay or should I stop?"

"It's fine. I just wondered. I wasn't sure you even knew you were doing it when you called me sweetheart in front of Christy the other day."

"She noticed too. Told Adam all about it."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. He was explaining that it only means that I like you when she said that she already knows that. She wants him to find out from Claire if it would be all right for us to keep you."

"Oh, Drake."

"It's not as bad as it sounds. Adam doesn't usually tell me about their conversations. He made an exception this time because he's concerned about us getting hurt, meaning the three of us not just Christy and me."

"What did you say?"

"That we talk a lot and we're both aware of what we're getting into. That brings me to what I wanted to speak with you about."

"There's more?"

"Don't be so worried. As you know, Christy wants to visit my parents. I'm ready to give it a try for a few days, especially since Adam said he'll make sure he's there the majority of the time too. Classes are over next Wednesday. I'm taking Christy that afternoon. It'll take me most of Thursday to work my way through the final papers and turn in my grades. Friday is the Summer Splash, which is a formal dinner dance, held outside, weather permitting. I'd like you to go with me as my date. Before you say anything, I should add that most of my class will be there as well as Art and his latest. Now I do understand that you don't date as a rule and I respect that but is there any way I can convince you to make an exception? We'll go late, just in time for dinner and leave after a few dances."

"I need to talk to Daryl but, assuming he lets me have the night off, then sure, I'd love to go with you."

"Really? Just like that? I anticipated much more resistance and many days of begging."

"I still don't date men I don't know. But wouldn't it seem a little strange, saying no to an evening out in public with you after I came over in my pj's to find out if having you touch me feels as good as I think it will?"

"Well yeah, I guess." He seemed stunned. "Maybe I should make it clear that next Friday we'll be alone. Completely alone, Megan. Or we can be if we decide to be."

"Is that a roundabout way of telling me that you're ready to make love? I heard what you said before but I didn't know if you were serious or trying to persuade me to come over here. Kissing and touching are one thing, Drake. If we spend the night together after the dinner dance, it'll be more than just having sex. For me anyway."

"And me. Yes, we still have a lot to learn about each other but I already know the most important things. I like you. I like the way you are with Christy. I think the three of us fit well together. I want to know more about us as a couple. I told you how I feel about being in a relationship. I'm not looking for a quick fling. Maybe I'm repeating myself here but I need to make sure you understand that I'm very interested in the possibility of you being more involved in my life, our lives. I have responsibilities to my daughter that aren't negotiable. We come as a set and I won't let anyone come between us. So far, you've only seen her at her best. She can be a holy terror when she's having a bad day and sometimes she has a whole string of them."

Megan wondered if he was deliberately trying to push her away. "Don't you think I know that, Drake? I may not go see my sister's kids much these days but I'm still close

to them. Who do you think my niece calls when she's fighting with her mother? Or when her best friend didn't include her in the group her parents invited to an amusement park for her birthday? Or when her brothers dissected her favorite teddy bear? Who do you think my sister and her husband enlisted to help reinforce the fact that a new baby doesn't mean the first one was being replaced? I can handle any mood Christy comes up with. Now about what you said about you and Christy. Do you think I would be here if I believed you were capable of neglecting her in favor of a woman you met a few months ago? Honestly I'm much more insecure about you."

"Me?"

"Well not just you really. More like us. I trust you more than I ever thought I could. I know you won't hurt me. I believe that you would stop if I ever said no. I used to enjoy sex. I was positive that that part of my life was over and I was okay with it. Until I met you, that is. Now I want you so much it petrifies me. What scares me even more though, is not knowing if I can handle being with you. I'm not at all certain that I won't panic and run after we get started. I do want to make love but what if I'm nothing but a disappointment for you?"

"After that night I went on the pill. Not that I ever thought I'd need to. I was just so paranoid that they'd get me alone again. When they told me what they were going to do and were cutting off my clothes part of me kept thinking what I'd do if I lived through it and ended up pregnant. I've always believed that women should have a choice even though I wouldn't be able to abort a child of my own."

"Anyway, I'd like to find out what we could eventually have together. I don't want to be thought of as Claire's substitute and I'd hate it if you or Christy felt you couldn't talk about her. I'd want to share the types of things you did with her but I'm aware that no two relationships are the same. What if we decide to make a commitment and you discover later that I'm not as compatible as Claire was?"

"Wait, I'm getting sidetracked, talking things that have nothing to do with this. I was talking about making love." Megan avoided his eyes to keep him from interrupting. "I know some people have strong relationships without being intimate but I don't think I'm one of them. If I open up to something with so many risks I want the chance to have it all. It wouldn't be fair to either of us to settle for anything less. I guess my point is that I trust you enough and want you enough to invite myself into your bed next week if everything works out for Christy's visit."

Drake waited until he was sure Megan had finished before he spoke. "I appreciate your honesty, Megan. And what you said about Claire. No one could ever replace either of them and Christy and I will always have them in our lives in many ways. That doesn't make Claire and Jimmy better. It's just who they were. If we decide to make a go of this then you'll be uniquely you, the woman I invite to share a life with my daughter and me. Any children we might eventually have will be our children. Our son would not be Jimmy's replacement. We'd be a family, just like Claire and Jimmy were our family. Different families. Not better or worse, just different."

"But I'm getting ahead of myself here too. We were discussing what happens if we start making love and can't continue because one or both of us has to walk away. If our first time isn't all that we hoped for I don't think we should necessarily immediately rule out the possibility of our being together. Rule number four of couplehood. Don't give up if you don't click instantly. Don't get frustrated and don't start slinging blame. Relax and give it a chance to work out before you abandon what could evolve into something wonderful." Drake's grin lightened the moment.

"Another bit of your inherent insightfulness. Maybe I should be writing these down so I can give the rest of the world the benefit of your wisdom."

"Not right this second."

"Why not?"

"Because I think our serious discussion has distracted us from our original plan long enough. Since it is all very important we'll pick it up some other time but now I'm going to kiss you. That okay with you?"

"Yes but can I ask you to do something first?"

"Ask away, sweetheart."

"Thanks. I know you said tonight was about me."

"Still is if you say you want more than a kiss."

"I do. But can't you take off your shirt first? I've wanted to touch you so many times at the pool."

Drake responded by yanking off his T-shirt and tossing it over his shoulder. "Go for it." He opened his arms to her.

"Stop looking at me like that. I'm nervous enough."

"Would you feel better if I said that I am too? Hey, I'm in unfamiliar territory."

"Then maybe you should start exploring." Megan's face burned. She was too embarrassed to look at him.

Drake rested his hands on her shoulders. "You're too tense. Come with me." He guided her to the kitchen and patted the counter next to the refrigerator. "Hop up."

"What are you doing?"

"Distracting you," he answered, opening the ice cream he took from the freezer.

"I'm not really hungry."

"Good because this isn't about eating." He held a spoonful of chocolate something to her lips. "Good?"

"Yeah." Megan watched him watching her as she licked the spoon.

"Let me taste." Drake swiped her lips with his tongue.

"Have more."

This time he purposefully coated her lips so he could lick them clean. "Mm," he agreed.

"One more," Megan requested, pulling him so he was standing between her thighs.

After swabbing her lips again, he teased her with his tongue until she opened her mouth. Drake deepened the kiss, cupping her face in his hands. By the time the hand that had been holding the ice cream was warm, Megan realized that he was waiting for her guidance. His hands would remain on her face unless she had him move them.

"I can feel you smiling." Drake drew back slightly.

"Anyone ever tell you what a nice man you are?"

"Occasionally." He flashed a grin. "Cute pj's. Soft and innocent yet still playful. Makes me wonder if you have anything on under them." He brushed his knuckle along the strip of bare skin between her short top and the top of her boxers. "How'd your stomach get so tanned? All your suits are one piece."

"There's a tanning bed at work. Daryl overheard some of us talking two winters ago so he went out, found a decent used one and surprised us with it. It's kind of hard to get a real tan in Buffalo and it'd be gone by Thanksgiving anyway."

"Hmm, I guess it would be. I never really thought about it. Got any tan lines?"

"Nope."

"Whoa! Gonna let me see? I'm having a little trouble with the idea that you tan in the buff."

"Why? It's not like anyone ever watches, Drake. The booth is private and there's a lock on the door. It only adds a couple of minutes while I'm changing into my work clothes."

"That's something else I never thought about before. That you look the same as always when you leave for work."

"I usually get dressed there because I'm not real comfortable wearing my work outfit in public. I shower before I change back to get the smoke out of my hair."

"Mm, lemon suits you better than smoke would." He inhaled against her hair. "Goes well with that little yellow top too."

Megan captured the hand that was fingering the hem of her shirt and guided it to her skin. "Touch me, Drake," she urged as she arched toward him in invitation.

Watching her expression, Drake caressed her sides. "Soft." He reached higher and barely brushed the curve of her breasts. "Do you like this?" he asked when her nipples responded beneath the fabric.

"Yeah," she sighed, wanting more contact but unable to ask for it.

"Can I take your top off? I want to look at you." She nodded.

Still watching her face, Drake slowly raised her shirt, not dropping his eyes until long after he bared her breasts. When his gaze finally lowered, Megan stopped breathing. "You're beautiful," he whispered, his hands returning to her ribs.

"Please." She leaned forward, clutching his arms.

Drake lifted her with his palms as if testing the fit. Recapturing her gaze, he found her nipples with his thumbs. Instantly, they hardened into tight nubs.

She gasped. "Drake."

"Shh." He seemed to want to explore her slowly as if to savor every reaction. Her pulse quickened when he lowered his head, seeking another kiss as his hands roamed to her back. It was soon his turn to groan when Megan pressed her chest against his. Part of his mind knew she had no clue how each deep breath caused her nipples to shift. The way her hands on his back mimicked his touch was inflaming his already aroused body.

Teasing her lips from his, Megan nipped his jaw, soothing each bite with her tongue. Drake forced himself to let her investigate his torso in spite of his urgent need to do the same to hers. With one hand splayed on his stomach, her mouth drifted toward his nipple, tugging gently at his scant chest hair as she went. It took all he had to refrain from dragging her from the counter, stripping her bare and taking her right there on the kitchen floor when her teeth reached their destination.

"Megan," he hissed when she caught his other nipple with her fingers, pinching and rubbing in imitation of her mouth. "Christ," Drake growled as he coaxed her head from his body and captured her hand. "You're forgetting the plan, sweetheart. You know, the one where I do this to you. Where you sit back and enjoy while I make you feel good."

"Hmm." She peeked up at him. "Guess I forgot. Can't say that I'm sorry though."

"Me either but I can't take much more of that."

"Mm." Her sensuous smile lit up her face. "Guess that means it's your turn to go exploring."

"Is it, Megan?" Drake needed repeated assurance that she wanted him to continue.

She shrugged, deliberately watching her chest. "Either that or I won't be the one getting naked tonight."

"Stop trying to distract me, sweetheart. I might start thinking that you're turning this around to keep me from touching you. If you're not sure, just tell me to stop. You don't have to trick me into it."

"I'm not," she stuttered. "I mean, I wasn't...oh. Maybe I was a little bit. But mostly, I just wanted to touch you. All of you." Her hand fluttered over his erection.

Drake inhaled sharply and snagged her wrist. "Stop tempting me."

"Oops," she giggled.

"You're making me crazy. Just remember, payback can be a bitch." For emphasis, he leaned forward and sucked as much of her breast as he could into his mouth, attacking her nipple with his tongue. The direct stimulation evoked the reaction he hoped for. Megan forgot all about reaching for him. Instead, her hands caught his head, holding him in place. She shivered when he paused to blow on her wet flesh before

switching sides. He used one hand to fondle her as the other caressed every inch of exposed skin.

Drake's mouth left a trail of kisses as he nibbled his way back to her head. He tasted every inch of her face before he paused.

"Megan?"

"Mm." She tried to capture his lips.

"Tell me what you want me to do now."

"Mm." She tilted her head to expose her neck.

"Please sweetheart, talk to me."

"Mm." She leaned toward him.

"You know I need to hear you say it."

"Mm." She seemed thoroughly distracted by the way his hands played over her skin.

"Come on, sweetheart. Tell me to carry you into the living room."

"Mm." She was clearly not listening.

"Tell me you want more. That you want me to take off your boxers."

"Mm." She attempted to pull him closer.

"Say I can run my finger along your slit to see if you're as turned on as I am."

"Mm." She tried to guide his hand to her center.

"I want to spread you out on the sofa and bury my face between your thighs and eat you until you can't remember if you're begging me to stop or begging me to go on forever."

"Mm." That had her panting.

"Tell me to do it. I can't suck your clit if you don't say you want me to."

"Mm." She whimpered with desire.

"I'm begging here, sweetheart. I know you want to come around my fingers and in my mouth. Just say yes and I'll take care of the rest."

"Mm." She sought to make contact with his erection.

"Sorry, sweetheart. No more until you talk to me."

"Drake? Please. I need you."

"I know you do. And I will take care of you as soon as you tell me."

"Drake." Her eyes managed to focus on his. "I want all of it. What you said. I-I... Don't stop. Make me feel good. Make me come."

Drake swept her from her perch and had her on the sofa in an instant. Tugging her boxers from her hips, he forced himself to slow down. Fighting back his desire to do everything at once, he positioned himself on the floor in front of her and just looked. "Say it again," he urged as he draped her legs over his arms and slid her to the edge of the cushion.

His gaze seared her and she moaned. "Make me come. Now. Please, please, please."

As soon as Drake touched her he knew Megan was right on the edge. He originally intended to coax her along slowly, building the anticipation before letting her climax. Judging by how wet she was though, he sensed that her orgasm was one touch away. Maybe he could draw out the next one. Or would she be too sensitive for him to continue? Mentally shaking himself, he decided to worry about that later. At the moment, he had to figure out the best way to give her what she urgently needed.

Megan's legs opened even further when he moved closer. His question was answered when the scent of her arousal overwhelmed his senses. He had to taste her this first time. The rest could wait. Drake used his wide-open mouth like a suction cup as he covered as much of her as he could. One bold stroke of his tongue against her engorged clit was all it took for Megan's thighs to quiver. Wanting to feel her internal spasms, Drake immediately pointed his tongue and thrust it inside, growling at the taste that flooded his mouth.

"Oh my God," Megan finally whispered.

"You're so sweet," Drake stated, still kissing the moisture from her thighs. "How do you feel?"

"Oh my God."

"Oh my God, good?"

"Mm."

"I'm gonna take that as a yes."

"Mm."

Drake's chuckle was cut short when she tried to remove her legs from his shoulders. "Hey! Where do you think you're going? I'm not finished."

"Oh my God."

"I think I'll take that one to mean that you aren't ready for me to be finished either." Tentatively, he lapped her slit, waiting for her reaction to show him if she could handle more attention so soon. When she lifted her hips, Drake understood and added stimulation by alternating his licks with deep probes. He used what he heard to guide his actions. When her moans and whimpers turned urgent again, he sought her clit with his mouth and entered her with one finger, teasing with both but not giving her the direct contact that she desired.

"Oh my God."

Drake was certain Megan was unaware that she was squeezing her breasts. He almost forgot what he was doing as he watched her roll her nipples between her fingers.

"Drake," she moaned. "Please. Again. Now. Please."

Unable to deny her, he filled her completely by adding a second finger, and sucked her nub steadily while flicking rapidly with the tip of his tongue. Her orgasm was so intense that Drake was afraid he'd lose control before it ended.

After Megan went limp, Drake left her long enough to check on Christy and retrieve a washcloth. Gently, he cleaned her before stretching out next to her on the sofa. He smiled when Megan snuggled closer as if seeking his warmth even though he had already pulled a blanket over them. It didn't take long for Drake to stop resisting the urge to caress her. Soon he was kissing her cheek or forehead every time she sighed.

"I can't move," Megan stated.

"Then don't. Give yourself a few minutes. I'm wide awake tonight."

"Mm." She slid her hand across his chest.

"You okay?"

"Never better. Wow, Drake."

"Yeah, wow. Thank you, Megan."

"Isn't that my line? I am the one with the melted bones here."

"Yeah but I'm the one you let get you that way. You're amazing."

"Thanks." She tilted her head and found his lips. "Hey, you might want to stop doing that," Megan suggested when her body demanded that she pay more attention to the way he was stroking her.

"You sure? I thought I might want to do more instead." He kissed her thoroughly while he cupped her mound. "Up to you."

"Mm." She repositioned her legs to give him better access. "How did you do that?"

"Do what?" he asked as his fingers penetrated her deeply.

"Make me want more. Ten minutes ago I was barely conscious and now I'm so wound up I can't stand it. I wasn't like this before."

"Maybe your body changed."

"Maybe it's you."

"Maybe you shouldn't question it now and just let yourself enjoy it instead. I promise to do whatever it takes until you figure it out."

"Mm," she agreed, giving in to the building pleasure. The combination of his sensual kisses and magic fingers pushed her higher and higher until the overwhelming sensations exploded as she climaxed a third time.

When she stopped panting, Megan announced, "Next time, you."

"We'll see." Drake's emotions soared at her indication that they would have a next time. They fell when he glanced at the clock. "I hate to say it but it's time for you to go. Unless there's some way to persuade you to let me hold you until morning."

"Drake."

"Shh. I know I can't really do that. I just needed to say it so you understand how much I want you to stay." Drake picked her up and made sure the blanket was wrapped securely around her as he said, "Hang on."

"What are you doing?"

"Taking you home and tucking you in. Christy will be fine for three minutes." He checked the hall to make sure it was empty before carrying her into her apartment. "Pj's?" he asked, ready to help put them back on since he had removed them earlier.

"Not if I can borrow this blanket. It's warm and I'm cozy."

"Sure, sweetheart. You sleep with it wrapped around you tonight and then I'll sleep with it tomorrow. It should smell like you by then." He leaned closer. "Yeah, I can smell the lemons already."

"Mm, I was thinking the same thing a minute ago. Night, Drake."

Drake brushed his lips against her forehead. "Sweet dreams, Megan."

Megan snuggled into his blanket and was asleep before her door clicked shut behind him.

Chapter Eight

Megan assumed Gwynne could tell she was nervous by the way she had been fidgeting ever since she walked into the bar. Megan also suspected she was being ridiculous. There was absolutely no reason for her to be so afraid of asking her friends for a night off. How many times over the past four years had they nudged her to take a few days to do something for herself? She'd already told them about Drake and Christy. Why was she making this such a big deal?

"Because it'll be just the two of us."

"What's that, Megan?" Gwynne seemed relieved when Megan finally gave her an opening.

"Damn! I said that out loud, didn't I?"

"Yep. Is there something you want to talk about?"

"Yes," Megan admitted, not resisting when Gwynne led her to a private corner. "I'm being such a jerk."

"If you say so," Gwynne agreed pleasantly. "Sorry, I can't contradict you unless I know what you're being a jerk about."

"I am. Trust me."

"I do, Megan. Although it seems a little one-sided at the moment."

"Told you I'm a jerk." Megan relaxed when her friend grinned. "I'm just a little freaked today, Gwynne. You know I trust you and Daryl more than anyone else in the world. It's my own sanity that I'm doubting."

"I'm sure it's not as bad as you think. Tell me about it and you'll see that too."

Megan took a deep breath to steady herself. "I'd like to take next Friday night off."

"Because?"

"Drake invited me to the end of semester formal dinner dance. As his date."

"And wanting to go is bad because?"

"Christy won't be there when we get home." Megan saw that Gwynne was too shocked to respond. "After I gave her the book I did about her in the park Monday, she asked to stay with me instead of going along to Drake's class. We spent most of the morning drawing her portrait because she said her dad needed one. We finished it up Tuesday morning when she spent the morning with me again."

"Megan!"

"Just wait," Megan cut her off. "It turns out that Christy thought her dad would forget what she looks like when she goes to visit his parents without him. Apparently,

his brother has been talking to her about it on the phone without either of them including Drake."

"But now that he knows?"

"Yeah, now that he knows she wants to go, he's talked to all of them and is dropping her off after his class Wednesday."

"I'm missing something. What's wrong with Christy not being home?"

"Well, um." Megan blushed.

"Oh. I see. It's like that now, is it? Megan, he sounds like a decent guy. I'll even go as far as to agree with your feeling that he won't pressure you into anything. It's just that for all you know he's still too hung up on his wife to do anything about it."

"He's not."

"And you know this because?"

"We talked about it. Last night. After he called to make sure I got home safely. When I told him it felt nice, having him worry about me. Because I went to his apartment to take him up on his offer to make me feel even better."

"Oh shit, Megan. Stop a sec so I can absorb all that before you give me the rest."

"I know. It's kinda much for me too."

"All right. I can take it now."

"Well I went over, in my pj's by the way and he told me that Christy's trip was a go first. Then he asked if I'd go to the dance with him. I'm not sure how we got talking about making love and me being afraid that I'll run away in the middle of it. After that, he pointed out that he was just as likely to bail as I was but even if one of us did we still deserved a chance since we're both already taking one. Drake said he knew I was me and not Claire. He says we're different, not better or worse and then I invited myself to spend the night after the dance."

Gwynne gawked. She opened and closed her mouth three times and still couldn't speak.

Needing to get it out, Megan continued, "Anyway, Drake thought we'd been serious long enough for one night and should put the conversation on hold until we both had time to think. Then he said he was going to kiss me. I was so tense that he needed to feed me some really good chocolate ice cream to relax me. This is so embarrassing."

Gwynne raised her eyebrow and waited.

"Well, I ended up sitting on the kitchen counter, topless, trying to get him naked, which he refused because he invited me over so he could do things to me, not so he could get anything and one thing led to another." She shrugged, hoping Gwynne would guess the rest.

Gwynne fumed. "One thing led to another? Nice try but why don't you spell it out for me before I feed him his own nuts for dinner?"

"Gwynne." Megan shuddered at the expression on her friend's face. "I had to actually tell him what I wanted him to do before he touched me. Next thing I knew, we were on the sofa and I was a big lump of mush. Drake was so sweet afterwards. He knows that I'm still wary of how Christy found us that morning so he wrapped me up in his blanket and carried me home around dawn. What the hell am I going to wear?"

Gwynne couldn't contain her laughter. "All that and you're worried about what to wear?"

Megan finally joined her and they laughed so hard they both had tears streaming down their cheeks.

Eventually, Gwynne managed to collect herself. "First, let me say that you're damned lucky that I'm already in love with Daryl or I might have to check out if Drake's really as sweet as he seems."

Daryl saw their tears and approached to check on them. "Excuse me," he exclaimed.

"Oh God," Megan groaned.

"Let me," Gwynne offered and gave her husband a condensed version of Megan's story, omitting the part about how she reacted to Drake's physical attention.

Daryl's scowl grew with every tidbit. "Damn I hope I don't have to kill him."

"Daryl!"

"What? I'm overprotective. So sue me."

"But..."

"I'm having some trouble adjusting. I always figured when you were ready to reconsider men that you'd ease into it gradually. Give me a chance to switch gears. I never imagined that you'd go from total isolation to seriously discussing commitment in a few months. For Christ's sake, Megan! How did you expect me to react?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "I never really thought of it because I never dreamed I'd meet someone like Drake and that I'd feel this way about him."

"Can you even blame me for being suspicious? What happened to all the insecurities he had about his dead wife? You talk about them for a few minutes and everything's hunky-dory the second you say you're willing to sleep with him. Damn it, Megan! Think!"

Gwynne stopped him before he said something he'd regret. "I left out most of what happened last night after he invited her to go out."

"What the fuck happened?" Daryl demanded hotly. "Gwynne, since you brought it up and she's obviously not going to tell me, you better."

"He's only acting like this because we love you so much, Megan," Gwynne tried to reassure her before making him even angrier. "The professor spent most of the night satisfying her without dealing with his own needs. He wouldn't ever let her touch him when she tried. Sound familiar?"

"Just because he keeps his pants on for a few hours doesn't necessarily mean I want her hooking up with the guy!"

"Daryl, you're not helping," Gwynne pointed out as Megan paled even more. "She's already nervous enough so just calm down. Think about this for a minute. He has to be a decent guy for Megan to trust him. Don't you say it either." She prevented Megan's response. "No matter what you think, I know you still have good instincts. Tell me, do you believe that he would let you change your mind about sleeping with him next week?"

"Yeah, I do."

"And do you believe he's capable of using his child to lure you in just so he can take advantage of you?"

"No."

"Do you really have feelings for him?"

"Yes."

"There you have it then," Gwynne made her statement sound final. "Megan, you are going to stop twisting every detail into something sinister and let yourself enjoy this for what it is. You are going into the office and call your professor and tell him you are available next Friday. You will also tell him that you are spending tomorrow night with us so we have time to shop for a dress. I don't want him to worry when you don't come home. Daryl, you are going to back off and reserve judgment until we get to interrogate him and form our own opinions. Nod if you understand." They both did. "Good. Now, off you go." She shooed Megan away.

The second Megan walked out of the room, Gwynne collapsed against Daryl. "I hate being forced to defend some guy I don't even know yet."

Daryl hugged her for support. "Didn't think you were that okay with all this."

"Yeah well somebody had to do it. I couldn't let her run away without even trying now that she's already started."

"Man this scares me. It was bad enough, the way she reacted to his vulnerabilities by showing her own. Not that I have a problem with someone else realizing what a hidden treasure Megan is. I just wish he'd waited longer than a day to pour his heart out to her."

"Me too. If he screws with her you won't have to worry about killing him though."

"Why not? You can't possibly think that I'd just let him walk away if he deliberately hurts her. Get real, Gwynne."

"That's not at all what I meant. You won't have to kill him because I will have already done it. Damn, I hope I can keep her from figuring that out until after the dance. You know she'll bolt if she sees I'm even more concerned than you are. I can't get away with having a macho attitude like you can."

"I'd say you are more tigress than macho," Daryl teased. "I know you can do it. Just like you know I'll keep my mouth shut about ninety-seven percent of what I want to say. We have to for her sake. No one deserves to have something good that makes her happy more than she does. I really do hope he's even better than he seems. And if he's a

fraud, we'll come up with a way to kill him and not get caught. We can't go to jail. Not when she needs us like she will if he turns out to be a bastard."

"How did I get so lucky, finding a guy like you? I don't think many men would put up with what you did the last six years." Gwynne never stopped being grateful for the way he stepped in to save her friend and accepted that Gwynne would never desert her afterwards, even if it meant losing him. "I love you so much."

"I love you too. As much as I want you to think I'm one of a kind, I'm pretty sure I'm not. Or I sure as hell hope I'm not the only guy unwilling to step aside and ignore what they were going to do to Megan. And how could I not stick around when you needed to help your best friend make it through something like that? I'd have to be pretty damned selfish and shallow to turn my back on the love of my life instead of doing whatever I could to make things easier for you two.

"Fuck!" Daryl growled, startling Gwynne. "Sorry. I know this guy's not one of the ones who hurt her but I can't help feeling that way. It would be so much easier if we'd met him. Think she'd get mad if we dropped by Sunday afternoon?"

"Ah, yeah." Gwynne had already considered the same thing. "We might not scare him off but she'd know exactly what we were up to and that would be the end of it." She rubbed her belly. "If this is what it's going to be like when this baby grows up, I don't know if I'll be able to handle it."

"Not a chance. If it's a girl, she's not going to be alone with a guy until she has grandchildren. And if it's a boy, he's going to be like me so we won't have to worry about him."

"Not a bad plan but what if he has his own Megan in his life?"

"Gee thanks, Gwynne. You had to say that, didn't you? Couldn't let me think I only needed to stay awake 24/7 if we had a girl, could you? Stop talking and smile. Here she comes."

"Well?" Gwynne asked when Megan was close enough.

"He said to tell you thank you and he appreciates you giving me the night off. He also said it was nice of you to have me tell him that I wouldn't be home tomorrow night because you were right, thinking that he'd be worried."

"And?" she sensed there was more.

"And that we should have fun shopping and he can't imagine anything making me look sexier than my pj's did but he's already full of anticipation seeing me in whatever we pick out. You guys aren't ever going to tell him that I told you that, are you? I'm acting like a teenager, running off at the mouth like this."

"Our lips are sealed," Gwynne giggled with her.

"Speak for yourself," Daryl teased, enjoying the easy smile he hadn't seen in years. "I'll keep my mouth shut as long as you don't bring up any of the pranks you used to pull on me. I'm not just saying that either. You keep him around long enough to work

your way that far back in our history and I swear, I'll bring up every sigh and giggle I heard since you met."

"That's blackmail!"

"Nope, that's family. Your professor comes with a daughter and you come with us. I'd ask you to bring him by and introduce us on Sunday but I won't because I don't want to panic you but don't wait too long."

"Is that some sort of warning?"

"Hell yes and you better take it seriously." Daryl didn't bother to hide the threat in his tone. "But, since my beautiful and pregnant wife has decided to give him the benefit of the doubt then I'll behave myself for a little while."

"You better or I'll do the raging hormone thing again." Gwynne winked at Megan.

"God help us all," Daryl chuckled. "Seriously, Megan, I don't mean to rain on your parade but I can't help worrying that you're rushing things and might get hurt. Force of habit. I should get over it by your tenth anniversary."

"Oh my God," Megan gasped. "I was feeling almost calm until you said that."

"Forget it," Gwynne took over again. "He was just teasing. It'll only take nine and a half years. Stick to thinking one day at a time. Deal with long-term when it gets here."

Megan listened to the words her friend repeated so many times over the years and smiled. "That's right. One day at a time. Work tonight. Shopping Friday. Adventure Sunday since I just told Drake I'd wait and be surprised with Christy instead of knowing where we are going before we leave this time. But where was I? Oh yeah, finish drawing with Christy Monday. Figure out the perfect something to give her for her trip Tuesday. Lose my mind worrying about Drake driving home without Christy Wednesday. Dance Friday. See? No problem."

Gwynne hugged Megan as Daryl rested a hand on her shoulder. "It'll be fine," she insisted. "Take lots of deep breaths and don't get ahead of yourself. You know he's not one of those guys. And he knows that you're not Claire. Have some faith."

"We're here, Megan," Daryl reminded her.

* * * * *

Drake tucked Christy into bed and picked up the book he intended to relax with. Twenty minutes later, he realized he hadn't read a word. Situations like this made him wish his brother weren't so far away. Although he'd rather have this particular conversation in person, he decided a phone call would have to suffice.

"Hey, Adam. Got a minute?"

"For you, anytime. It's about time you called. Been expecting to hear from you for days."

"Figures."

"So, where do you want to start? Christy's visit, although we already covered that last time, Megan and how she makes you feel, or what's going on in your head about Claire and Jimmy?"

"Are you this good at reading everybody's mind or is it just me?"

"I'm hardly psychic. Pay attention to what's going on around me and I don't have to read minds. Drake, you started bouncing things off me the day after you learned to talk. I know you." Adam paused. "Need me to ramble so you can put our topics in order?"

"No, I'm ready," Drake sighed. "I don't think I can separate them into individual sections."

"Then why don't you do the rambling and let me help sort through it?"

"You already heard how Megan and I met. I never realized so many scenarios could run through a mind in thirty seconds. I'm sure I don't have to explain what I came up with."

"I have a pretty good idea. Work your way through the guilt yet?"

"For the most part, yes. Thanks to Megan. Her sister has four kids so she's aware of the things they do. After our impromptu picnic, she made a point of telling me not to dwell on what might have happened instead of how it ended up."

"Smart girl. Handled the situation well too."

"I think that's how she is all the time, not a reaction to the moment. You heard about taking her along to the park as a thank-you? I know Christy mentioned that I told Megan about Claire and Jimmy."

"Yes. How detailed did you get?"

"Extremely. I still don't know what got me started but I wound up telling her everything that I consider most important about them. About us. You know, me and Claire, her parents, deciding when we wanted to have our kids, both our jobs, the accident and how I might have prevented it. You and the way you helped me and Christy make it through losing them. Everything. Then I finished up by telling Megan that she was the first woman I'd noticed since Claire died and how I wouldn't be able to have something frivolous with her if she was interested in me."

"Yep, sounds thorough to me."

"If that wasn't enough for one day, Christy explained her 'Mommy the angel sent Megan because Christy knew we needed her' theory when we stopped for ice cream. Actually, I think Megan handled that one better than I did."

"Christy mentioned that Megan held both your hands that day."

"She doesn't miss much."

"Most kids don't. They also don't know how to play the games that adults do so they're generally more perceptive about people they meet. They don't know how to subdue their instincts and over-think their reactions so their first impressions are often

accurate. Christy absolutely adores Megan, Drake. I don't think you need to question Megan's sincerity as far as Christy goes."

"I already figured out that one on my own. After all, it's hard not to notice how attached Christy was, right from the start. Just wait until you see them together. They're amazing."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Right after we met I couldn't sleep one night so I slipped a note under Megan's door and invited her over after work if she felt like talking. That conversation was as much of a surprise as the one in the park. I know you won't repeat this but I feel the need to ask for your discretion anyway."

"Are you trying to insult me?"

"No. Just making sure you know how serious I am. Let me tell you about Megan's life and I'm sure you'll understand, okay?"

"I'm listening."

"Megan brought a bottle of wine when she came over. I offered to pour and she nearly panicked. Thank goodness I noticed and could back away so she didn't take off. I guess my doing that was enough to let her know she didn't have to be afraid of me. She explained that her reaction to me attempting to pour her a glass of wine was the result of a fraternity party she went to in college. Some of the members didn't handle it well when she wouldn't do more than flirt with them. Megan thought she made it clear that she wasn't interested and I believe her Adam. I think you would too. Anyway, they came up with an elaborate scheme and enlisted a guy to act harmless enough to get Megan to the party. After she got there, they proceeded to drug her drink so she would be unable to fight when they tied her up in the basement and took turns raping her in groups. They thought that would teach her a lesson about being a tease."

"Please tell me they didn't actually go through with it."

"They didn't but they would have. Her best friend, Gwynne brought her boyfriend, Daryl and a group of guys to get her out of there. They got there in time to prevent the actual rape but not soon enough to keep her from being terrorized. After they tied Megan to the ceiling, they used what I'm guessing were hunting knives to cut her clothes off, one little piece at a time while they kept up a running commentary of what they intended to do with her. They had her naked and were touching her when her friends got there. Gwynne covered her with a blanket while the fraternity guys tried to talk their way out of the situation. Megan didn't know it at the time but Daryl lost control and attacked the guy who instigated the whole thing. She said Gwynne told her it was bad enough that Daryl would have gone to jail if one of his buddies hadn't taken the video they were making. They used it as leverage to prevent any sort of retaliation too."

"My God, Drake!"

"Yeah. I'm furious every time I think of it. Afterwards, Gwynne and Daryl took Megan home with them and kept her there until they graduated three years later. Daryl

and his friends made sure she was never unprotected, even when Gwynne was with her. They wouldn't let her slink away and isolate herself as Megan says she would have. After school, her friends got married and moved here, bringing Megan with them. They opened a bar and she's worked there ever since. They even invited her to continue living with them but Megan decided she was ready to work on her life so she got an apartment instead."

"She works in a bar?"

"I had the same reaction. Sounds like Daryl runs a tight ship and doesn't take any chances where his staff is concerned. Megan says she feels safe there."

"I already started to respect Megan with what Christy told me but now there's much more to it."

"Tell me about it. Now add in the fact that she's gorgeous in a very understated way. She makes baggy clothes look sexier than you ever imagined. Not to mention that our conversation that night ended with Megan saying I'm the only man she's had any sort of interest in since the fraternity party. She said that I excite her and that reaction scares her almost as much as hiding from our mutual attraction does."

"I'm surprised you didn't go ballistic before she got that far."

"I probably would have if she hadn't asked me not to react until she was finished talking."

"So how did you react?"

"I did the only thing I could think of that wouldn't have scared her away. I asked if I could hold her and waited for her to come to me."

"Now I understand how you let Christy find the two of you sleeping on the sofa together."

"It was completely innocent and purely accidental."

"As I assumed. Mind if I ask if it's still innocent?"

"No although we haven't made love yet."

"But you're going to soon. Have you and Megan really thought this through? I know how special Claire was, Drake. I'm also sure this is going to be extremely difficult for Megan. Feel free to tell me to mind my own business but, as your big brother, not to mention someone who Megan might have turned to for counseling, I can't help being concerned for both of you."

"We're concerned too and yes, we've spoken very openly. I tried to ignore how much I desired her by not letting myself kiss her like I wanted to. A few days ago, I let my control slip a notch but it was enough for Megan to notice. When she started kissing me back like I knew she would, I realized that it wasn't something I could just pretend wasn't there."

"Doesn't mean you have to rush things."

"We're not. Or it doesn't feel like we are. Does that make any sense?"

"Yes. What's the rest?"

"We had a pretty bad storm last night, just about the time Megan would be driving home. After I thought she should be there I called to check on her. I suggested that she come over and let me, ah how can I put this? See how good I could make her feel without actually having sex?"

"You're not serious!"

"Unfortunately or fortunately, depending on how you look at it, yes I am. She was wearing a pair of printed boxer shorts and one of those half tops that don't reach the waist in this really soft yellow color because she'd already changed for bed."

"And why bother putting your clothes back on when you'll just be taking them off again anyway."

"Now who's being insulting? Just shut up, Adam. Or don't you want to hear the rest?"

"Sorry. Shows you how surprised I am."

"Me too. After I said that I'd called Mom and Dad about Christy's visit, I invited Megan to the big dance that the college hosts to mark the end of each semester. I felt the need to point out that Christy wouldn't be here because I'd already announced that I didn't want us to make love until we were alone. I just left that hang and waited to see how Megan would take it. That's what prompted the heavy discussion where we both admitted we might run away in the middle of whatever we could be doing. We've decided to deal with it when and if it happens. At some point though, Megan informed me that she intended to invite herself into my bed, her words, after the dance. That hit my conscience and my libido simultaneously. I was mentally berating myself for even considering being unfaithful to Claire."

"Guess that put a damper on your night."

"Actually no."

"No?"

"No. Can't we just skip the details here, Adam?"

"I don't want details, Drake. It's just that with what Megan went through, I'm a little surprised. Then again, maybe I shouldn't be."

"And why's that?"

"Think about it with me for a sec. You met in a situation that took you out of your roles as man and woman and united you in the goal to protect an innocent child. For the first time since the accident, you were faced with a female whose only motivation toward you was to ensure Christy's safety. You didn't have to question whether her interest was in you or how she could move into the hole in your life. The lack of pretense let you open up about your past."

"I think Megan responded to your willingness to expose yourself to emotional risk by doing the same. Since you hadn't used your personal tragedy as an excuse to hide behind some phony image then she wasn't required to either. She also couldn't let you be the only one at risk."

"So the fact that we're both wrecks is what is bringing us together?"

"On some level. I doubt you'd be moving this fast if worrying about Megan's reactions wasn't making you forget your own. I don't think pretty could have you panting this much."

"You thought wrong. You have no idea how hot Megan looked in her playful little pj's. Or how turned on I got after I asked how her stomach was so tanned when all her swimming suits are one piece and she told me that she uses the tanning bed at work. Adam, she doesn't have any tan lines. And if you're wondering if she was responsive after being afraid to let anyone touch her for the last six years the answer is yes, as in beyond my wildest dreams, yes. Adam, can I still tell you anything?"

"Of course. You compared her to Claire, didn't you?"

"I didn't want to."

"You're human, Drake. I'd worry if you hadn't no matter how unintentional it was. And by the tone of your voice, I'll assume that Megan wasn't at all inferior and now you feel guilty about that."

"Big-time."

"If the situation were reversed, would you want Claire to spend the rest of her life alone, holding onto the memory of what you had instead of finding someone to love her again? Would you expect her to feel guilty for continuing to live after you?"

"No."

"So why do you think you should? What if Christy's right and Claire really did send Megan to you? I'm not suggesting that you should spend the rest of your life with Megan if you don't truly mesh but maybe you should think about the possibility that Megan finding Christy in the hall that day was more than coincidence."

"You know, it's moments like this when I wish I could be as accepting as Christy is."

"One of the many perks of being a child. When you met Claire, how long did it take for you to know you were in love with her?"

"A month."

"How long have you known Megan?"

"Six weeks."

"Claire's been gone over a year, Drake. This isn't a rebound relationship. Don't reject it because you're scared or you have some misguided notion that you don't deserve to be happy again. Love is too precious to waste."

"Thanks, Adam. I'm glad you're my brother."

"Me too. Can I make a request?"

"Sure."

"I still think you should slow down but if you do marry Megan someday, will you let me perform the ceremony this time?"

"I wanted you to last time. I won't make any promises, especially since we haven't gotten that far but I will tell you that I'll do all I can to persuade Megan. I'm not sure I'd have to do anything other than ask though. She's heard so much about you from Christy that I don't think she'd want anyone else."

"Great. Feel any better?"

"Much. Just like I always do after I talk to you."

"Glad to listen. Any time, Drake, okay?"

"Okay. Guess I'll see you next week when I bring Christy. And before you say it again I know she'll be fine without me for a few days."

"Sure she will. Now that Megan's there to take care of you for her. See you."

Drake heard his brother laughing as he hung up.

Chapter Nine

All the way home, Drake struggled against the urge to turn the car around and go back to his parents' house. More than anything, he wanted to snatch Christy from the room he grew up in and whisk her back to their apartment where she belonged. Intellectually, he knew it would be the worst thing he could do to her. She was a little teary when he said goodbye but that was to be expected. She had been teary every time he and Claire had dropped her off for a few days alone with his parents even when she was used to visiting them. The last time, just a few weeks before the accident, Christy had surprised all of them by explaining to Jimmy that they were supposed to cry a little when their mommy and daddy left. It was all right for them to be sad because they would miss their parents even though they were going to have a lot of fun playing with their grandparents and that grown-ups knew all about that sort of thing.

In the end, Drake stayed much later than he'd intended to, more for his sake than Christy's. His parents and brother had her settled long before he was able to force himself out the door. Thank goodness they understood and encouraged him in subtle ways without alerting Christy to his trepidation. He'd been thinking since Megan had suggested that Christy might have picked up on his inability to separate himself from her. Now that she was ready to let go, the last thing he wanted to do was let his own insecurities ruin it for her. If he balked after she said it was fine for him to go, who knew when either of them would be capable of trying again?

So here he was, alone in the car with nothing but his imagination for company. Unfortunately, his imagination kept latching onto his worst fears and expanding them until he could barely breathe. It was hard enough to concentrate on driving. Playing tag with a thunderstorm the last hour hadn't done anything to improve his lonely trip home. The only good thing he managed to come up with was that the storm would be long gone before Megan left work. At least he didn't have that worry to keep him awake as it already had several other nights. Drake snorted. Who was he kidding? No way would he sleep. Even with his mother's promise to have Christy call if she woke up frightened and wanted to talk to him, he still knew he would be too tense for more than a five-minute catnap. Even that probably wouldn't be possible until after he called to say good morning to Christy as he'd told her he would every morning they were apart.

Drake momentarily forced his mind onto other things. Checking the time, he decided it was too bad he hadn't stayed longer. It may be late but it would still be hours until Megan got home. He should have taken Christy on Tuesday, so Megan could have gone along. Driving alone to pick her up would be so much easier. Maybe he'd skip Mike's bachelor party Saturday night and go get Christy a day early. If he left as soon as he woke up, they might make it home before Megan even rolled out of bed. Of course, Christy would miss the baseball game his dad was taking her to. Drake swore. As much

as he wanted to change their plans, he knew he couldn't. Not only would Christy be disappointed but it wouldn't be fair to his family either. Or Megan. She seemed enthusiastic about meeting the trio that Christy spent hours describing to her. He couldn't let his own selfish needs outweigh everyone else's. Sometimes being an adult and doing the right thing sucked.

From the time they'd moved into the apartment, Drake had opted for using the steps unless he and Christy had too much to carry. Closing the security door behind him now, he didn't hesitate before pressing the elevator button. He was so weighed down by his thoughts that he'd never make it to the second floor on his own.

Drake knew he should force himself to read a handful of papers while he waited for Megan. Maybe she wouldn't be too tired and would take pity on him for a little while. He'd feel a lot better with her reassurance that he and Christy would both be fine until the visit ended. Over the past few days, Drake couldn't count the times Megan had smiled in a way that seemed like she was telling him not to worry.

As soon as he began to open the door, Drake noticed that the light was on. He remembered consciously thinking that he'd be home before nightfall so the apartment should have been dark.

"Oh, hi." Megan jumped when she saw him standing in the open doorway. She was startled but avoided spilling the drink in her hand.

"You're here." He stared, half-convinced his mind was playing tricks on him.

"Yeah." She put down the glass and took a hesitant step toward him. "I hope it's okay. We weren't all that busy tonight and it's been a while since I asked to be the one who got sent home. When Daryl said that one of us could leave, I jumped first. I thought you might not want to be alone when you got home. You weren't back yet so I just let myself in to wait. I didn't really think you'd mind and..."

"Megan." Drake finally reacted and closed the distance between them. Hugging her tightly, he said, "Thank you."

Megan could barely breathe, let alone talk. Instead of attempting to speak she simply embraced him in return.

"God, am I glad you're here," Drake stated. He was shaking so violently that he wasn't aware of moving until he felt the sofa against his legs. Megan landed in his lap when he fell.

Still holding him, Megan stroked his hair and softly repeated comforting things although he didn't seem to notice.

Drake shuddered and took a deep breath. He pulled back only far enough to see Megan's face. "Guess you can tell how bad it was but, believe it or not, I expected it to be worse. So much for my tough guy image."

"Stop it." Megan hugged him again. "You, a tough guy where Christy's concerned? Not a chance I'd ever believe that one so forget it. I knew you'd stay later than you thought you would but I was getting a little worried. Your brother called over half an hour ago. I didn't pick up but I'm couldn't help hearing his message."

"Is Christy okay?" he asked even as he reached to push the button. "You should have talked to him. What'd he say?"

"Hey little brother," Adam's voice filled the room. "Guess the storm caught up with you since you're not home yet. Mom called just before she and Dad turned in. Christy is sleeping like a played-out kitten. Kid always did sleep like a rock. Glad that hasn't changed. I thought I'd save you the 'should you call or shouldn't you' debate and call you first. After she finished reading *Cricket Goes to the Park* to us for the third time, Christy wondered if her mom the angel fixed it so Megan could come home early and keep you from being sad as she'd asked her to do. Quite a kid you've got there but you already know that. Seriously, Drake, she's fine. She misses you but she's fine. Anyway, I'm waiting up for you so call me when you hear this."

Drake held Megan where she was as he waited for his brother to answer. "It's me."

"You make it okay?" Adam asked.

"No problem. Just a little slow going in the rain. Thanks for calling."

"Figured you'd want to know. Don't make yourself insane before Megan gets home."

"She's already here. The bar was slow so she got to take off early."

"Will wonders never cease," Adam chuckled.

"You're going to have to explain more of this angel stuff to me sometime," Drake decided as they said good night.

Drake dropped the phone and clutched Megan again. "I still can't believe you're here."

"I had to come. I know how hard it's been all week for you to act like you were as happy about this visit as Christy was. I'm sure it was even worse in the car."

"I hope she didn't see through me as easily as you did."

"I don't really think she noticed. I was an anthro major, don't forget. I have tons of training on being the perfect observer. I also had the advantage of seeing the expression on your face when she wasn't aware of you watching her."

"If you say so. Next time we'll plan better so you can go along to drop her off too."

"Next time, yes. You know I couldn't go today anyway. You had to do this alone the first time."

"Hmm," he considered that. "You're probably right. Doesn't stop me from wishing you'd been there to tell me leaving without her was the best thing for both of us."

"I'm here now. It is the best thing for both of you. You know you need to do this to prove to yourselves that you can spend a few days apart without anything bad happening to either of you."

"Knowing that doesn't stop me from panicking every time I think about it. Just keep reminding me, okay?"

"Okay," Megan agreed. "Are you hungry? Want me to make you a sandwich?"

"No thanks. What's in the glass?"

"Juice. I'll get you some..."

"Stay here and let me share yours," he requested, holding her against him as he leaned forward to grab her glass.

"All right." Megan took a sip when he offered it to her.

Drake had no idea how long they sat in silence as he absorbed the wordless comfort she provided. "I feel sticky from spending all that time in the car. Mind if I grab a quick shower? I'd like you to stay. I should start on those papers but I'm not ready just yet."

"Go on." Megan patted his arm so he would release her. "Take your time. I'll be here."

Drake stood under the water, hoping the heat would wash away some of his tension. Thank goodness Megan was there. He'd be bouncing off the walls without her. Even so, he had to get a grip so she wouldn't think he was completely out of control. He kept telling himself that he had to relax enough to convince her that she didn't need to babysit him all night although he suspected she would stay if he asked her to. She may not have worked her whole shift but she was probably tired anyway. And she did have to work the next day. He had to pull himself together and show her that he knew Christy was fine and he could handle being alone. He simply had to before he started begging her to stay until morning.

Towel-drying his hair as he walked out of the bathroom, Drake heard a gasp. He saw Megan's wide eyes staring at him when he lowered the towel from his head. His hand froze at his chest, leaving the rest of his body exposed as he returned her stare. While he was in the shower, she had gone home and changed into her boxers. Before he startled her, she had been sitting in the middle of his bed, braiding her hair.

"Sorry." Drake finally realized he was the reason she was blushing and covered himself with the towel. "I didn't think...uh, you were waiting in the living room."

She shrugged with false casualness and went back to her hair, pretending to ignore him until she finished. "I changed my mind. I know you said you wanted to grade some of those papers tonight but do you really think you can give them the attention they deserve?"

"Well, I... No, probably not."

"That's what I thought but I figured you'd never admit it if I didn't bring it up first. You seem a little lost at the moment and I have a solution."

"Oh?" Drake questioned. "Let me grab some shorts and then you can tell me all about it."

"No," Megan stopped him before he opened his drawer. "You don't need shorts, Drake. Come here." She patted the bed next to her where she had turned down the covers.

"Megan, you really don't have to do this." Drake assumed she was about to suggest sex to distract him.

When she grasped his meaning, she blushed even more. "I'm not! Or not that. Oh God, I'm making such a mess of this."

"A mess of what? If my guess was wrong, what did you mean?"

Megan closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Stop being such a ninny, Megan Lewis. What's the worst that can happen? So he laughs and kicks you out. Big deal. Just say it."

Drake listened to her little pep talk. "Say what, sweetheart? What's on your mind?"

"Sorry. Too late to be embarrassed, now that I've already made a complete fool of myself." She took another calming breath. "Okay, I've been thinking and I figured out why it was so different with you the other night."

"Did you?" Drake sat on the edge of the bed even though he knew it was a bad idea.

"Well, I think I reacted like I did because you're a man. I mean, before, the guys that I was with were teenagers. The only foreplay they bothered with was what it took to make sure I was turned on enough so they could get in without hurting themselves. I never had anyone do what you did just because of how it would make me feel. Experience-wise, I'm still at the teenager stage."

"That's not a bad thing."

"I didn't say it was. I always figured I'd grow into adult sex gradually, you know, at the same time as the guys I knew. But I never did. And now there's you and you are definitely a man and I'm intimidated."

"Don't be..."

"Wait please. I'm intimidated because I don't really know what to do with a grown man. Oh don't say it. I'm not talking about the basics. I know how this works. But I never spent any more time with a guy than it took for him to get off before. You probably think I'm being silly and you can laugh if you want but I can't help it. I'm curious."

"Megan..."

"Shh. I know you were comparing me to Claire the other night. No, let me finish. I didn't mean that you were really comparing us but that you couldn't help noticing differences between us." He nodded, knowing that denying it would be a mistake. "Okay then, I think you'll probably compare the differences when I touch you too."

"It's not intentional," Drake began.

"I know. It's just that, on top of being relatively inexperienced, I don't know you like she did. I don't know how to excite you. Hell, I haven't even done some of the things I've been thinking about trying with you."

"It's okay. We'll..."

"No, it is not okay. I'm an awkward, inexperienced, well, kid and you're a very skilled, knowledgeable, generous adult man."

Drake studied her closely. "So what's your suggestion? Where are you headed with this observation?"

"I thought, since we're not likely to sleep all that much tonight anyway, you might be willing to let me get to know your body a little."

"Megan..."

"Just listen to me. The more I think about it, the more afraid I am that we'll be making love and you'll keep thinking I'm clueless about men and how much you wish I was Claire. I know it's stupid but please, can't you let me do this? For me and so you can get used to me?"

Drake dragged her onto his lap and leaned against the headboard. "I know you're not Claire, Megan. I would never pretend otherwise." He kissed her lightly. "You may not have a lot of experience but you have nothing to worry about. Everything about you is so naturally seductive, you don't need to practice."

"But..."

"Shh." He kissed her again. "My turn to talk. I do understand what you're saying and yes, part of my mind noticed the differences in you. Your body is different. So are your kisses. But this isn't a competition. You're not being judged. If, however, you feel the need to familiarize yourself with my body, then by all means, do."

"You mean that? I can touch you or whatever and you'll just let me?"

"Or whatever?" He raised an eyebrow. "By 'just let you' I assume you mean that this is to be a one-sided exploration?"

"Well, yeah. But only because I know I'd forget what I wanted to do if you were touching me too."

"Fair enough." Drake grinned and spread his arms wide. "I'm at your disposal, sweetheart."

Megan blushed hotly at his submissive gesture. She seemed even more embarrassed now that he'd agreed to her request, uncertain of what to do next.

"Rule number five of couplehood. Never hold back when your partner can use some support or encouragement. You need the opportunity to work through the insecurities you have because you skipped a few steps in your sexual development. I need you to help me make it through the night. We have two issues, both of which can be resolved with this one solution."

Megan continued to avoid his gaze.

"Worried that I'll give into temptation and won't be able to keep my hands to myself?" Drake teased. "Since I'm worried about that too, maybe you should tie me up to make sure I stay put." He realized his blunder even before she stiffened and caught her so she couldn't pull away. "No, wait," he pleaded, very aware of how rigid she was. "That didn't come out right." No response. "Rule number six of couplehood. Any worthwhile relationship must be grounded in mutual trust. Partners should demonstrate that trust by sharing new experiences. I've never been tied up. You seem

uncomfortable to use me as I've offered. I trust you so I'm willing to let you restrain me if you'll feel more at ease. I know you won't take advantage of the situation. I know you won't use this as a means to manipulate me or hurt me. I know all I'd have to do is ask and you'd release me."

"You never did this before?" Megan asked. "But you'd let me? Do you want to be tied up?"

"Do I want you to tie me up? Not necessarily. Am I willing to give it a try if you need to guarantee that I won't reach for you? Sure. Seriously, I never gave much thought to being either half of this scenario. But if you want to experiment, I'm interested in participating."

"I can't do that! Not even knowing that it would be okay with you," she shuddered. "God, Drake."

"Megan, nothing we ever do together will be anything remotely like the things they had planned for you. Mutual trust, not force. Let's drop it for now. Maybe we'll talk about it again sometime, maybe we won't. Either way is fine with me."

Megan shifted on his lap until his body reacted. "Oh," she gasped.

"Relax." He winked. "I'm in bed, covered only by a towel, with a gorgeous woman on my lap. A gorgeous woman, I might add, who asked for unlimited access to do whatever she wanted to with my naked body. As you already pointed out, I am a man."

Megan wiggled. "I noticed." She leaned back and let her gaze drop to his chest before returning to his face.

Drake managed to hold still while she looked him over. When she rested her hands on his shoulders and pulled him closer, he had to remind himself that he wasn't supposed to reach for her. No matter how much he wanted to actively participate, he couldn't unless she asked him to.

"Mm," she purred. "Men kiss better than boys." She moved to his side. "Lie down please. I'd like to look at you, it that's okay."

He laughed and slid to his back. "Sweetheart, there's very little that wouldn't be okay right about now." Drake stretched out his arms and wrapped his hands around the bedposts. "I won't let go until you tell me to. I won't do anything other than lie here unless you specifically say I should."

Megan nodded and reached for his towel. He fought back a groan. He'd never had anyone study him so intently before.

"Ooh," she seemed surprised by the way his cock twitched when she stroked his chest. "I've never really seen a man up close before. I mean a real man, not just a guy. Other than Daryl but he doesn't count."

He tried to hide his reaction but Megan saw it anyway. "Guess I should explain."

"Entirely up to you." Drake hoped he sounded disinterested.

"Thanks." She leaned over for a quick kiss. "After the first few days, I felt weird, staying with them. Gwynne figured out that the problem wasn't just that their

apartment was very small, one bedroom, one room that was a combination living room, kitchen and that it would be practically impossible to avoid us seeing each other at some point. She realized that Daryl made me nervous because he'd seen me that night and he'd had to help Gwynne dress me since I was so out of it that I couldn't manage on my own. She resolved it by having Daryl strip. They must have talked about it because he didn't act at all surprised. He kept telling me to look as he took off his clothes. At first he just stood there. Then he turned around real slow so I didn't miss anything. Next he posed for us until I started laughing. After that it wasn't such a big deal. We didn't prance around in front of each other but we didn't dive behind furniture either."

"What's so funny?" Drake asked when she giggled.

"I was thinking about the other time I got a good look at Daryl. You're going to love this." Megan relaxed as she got lost in her memory. "That was also the night I discovered boxers. See, Gwynne was always stealing Daryl's. He pretended to grumble but he didn't really mind. There was this one night when they were going out to dinner and Daryl's brother was coming over to hang out with me. Gwynne was lounging around, still in his boxers, pouting about why she had to get all dressed up when she'd be just as happy staying home, eating pizza and watching a movie with us.

"He ignored her and went to take a shower but she kept going on and on about how comfy she was in his shorts. Somehow she convinced me to give it a try and said I should just put on the ones Daryl had out on the bed. As soon as he saw they were missing he came charging out of the bedroom, yelling at me to give them back.

"Gwynne was laughing so I didn't think he was serious until he grabbed me and started trying to yank them off. She still thought he was playing so she snatched off his towel. We wound up on the floor, me half-naked with Gwynne sprawled on top of me. Daryl was standing there glaring and shaking his boxers at us.

"When he told her to go get dressed she wanted to know why he was getting so bent out of shape. That made him really mad and he lost it. He yelled that there was no way he was taking any chances and proposing without his lucky drawers.

"As you can guess, neither one of them noticed when I yanked on some clothes and got out of there. Daryl's brother and I thought they'd go to dinner eventually so we went and got the pizza. We ended up sitting in the hall and talking most of the night. The next morning, Daryl went out and bought me a dozen boxers of my own to apologize for overreacting."

"Hold on." Drake laughed with her. "You're saying that Daryl proposed, buck naked, after he wrestled his shorts off you while his girl laughed at him?"

"Yep."

"Now I really have to meet this guy. Makes me wish I wore boxers instead of briefs. I'd share with you anytime."

"Ever try them?"

Drake shook his head.

"I'll get you some."

He watched as the blush returned to her neck. "Don't be shy," he urged. "I love the way your face lights up when you let yourself talk like that. Do you know this is the first time I've been on the receiving end of one of those smiles? Christy's been the lucky one so far."

"Drake."

"Shh, sweetheart. I was just making an observation, not criticizing you in any way. It feels great, by the way, you telling me something that personal about your friends. Shows me that you trust me with your past."

"I told you about my past."

"You told me about one incident, one very small part of your past. Don't look at me like that. Again, I'm not criticizing you. Nor did I mention it to pressure you. It was a good moment for me and I wanted you to know."

"Rule number seven of couplehood. Pay attention to the small stuff. It is just as important as the big stuff. Mention it when your partner makes you feel special, even if it's minor. You can't just assume that they know."

Megan caressed his stomach. "You mean you won't think I'm dumb if I tell you how incredible I think you are every time you come up with one of those rules for me?"

"Nope."

"Or if I say that it means so much, you talking to me like this until I get over the fact that you're lying there naked, waiting for me to do something?"

"Sweetheart, I'll lie around naked and talk to you any time. Whether or not you choose to explore is entirely up to you. I'm not embarrassed by my nudity. Not when we're alone. I don't exactly hide from Christy but I certainly don't flaunt myself either. Hell, I only started wearing something to bed after she crawled in with us the first time."

"Did Claire sleep naked too?"

Drake chuckled. "No. Claire had a thing about that. Oh, she had no problem with me being nude. She, on the other hand, was too proper for that. She made fun of herself all the time but never got the hang of it. Of course, she also put makeup on as soon as she got up on Saturday mornings. I still don't understand that one."

"Thank you." Megan kissed him, longer this time. "You're right. It does feel good to just talk like this."

"You're welcome." Drake's mouth went dry when Megan tugged off her top and stretched out next to him.

"This still okay?" she asked, licking his neck.

"Oh yeah," he gulped as her hand wandered to his chest.

Megan draped herself partly across Drake in order to watch his face as she ran her hands over his outstretched arms. She covered his jaw with light kisses, returning to his

mouth repeatedly, more thorough each time. Every movement brought her nipples in contact with his chest, teasing them both as they hardened.

When her pointed nubs brushed over his, Megan felt Drake tremble and paused to look at his face again. Deliberately, she raised her chest and stroked him with hers. He groaned but held her gaze. Smiling slightly, Megan realigned her body so her mouth could reach his nipples. She used her tongue to toy with them before nibbling gently. When he sucked in a breath, she blew on his moist flesh, remembering how erotic it had felt when he did that to her. Soon her hands joined her lips as she continued to lavish attention on his chest. Every time Megan glanced at him, Drake was watching her intently.

"God your eyes are amazing," she stated.

He grinned. "Thanks, I think."

"What?"

"You've looked me over from head to toe and you choose my eyes to comment on," he chuckled.

Megan blushed and stuttered, "Wait. That's not what I meant. Or it was but not like you think."

"Calm down, sweetheart. I'm teasing you. But maybe you should explain, just so I don't misunderstand."

"Oh you." She bit his bottom lip. "I didn't know you were one of those guys who fished for compliments."

"Hey, give me a break. It's a little unnerving, waiting for your opinion. What if you decide you don't like what you see and that you're not interested? Maybe I repulse you so much that you won't even be willing to continue being my friend."

Megan rolled her eyes. "You're worried about my opinion, huh? Okay then, I'll give it to you." She paused to devour his mouth. "In my opinion, your body is as spectacular as the rest of you. Your mouth is so kissable." She demonstrated. "Your skin is delicious." She licked his neck and chest. "Your nipples are too luscious to resist." She used her teeth to tug at both of them, soothing each with her lips. "I love resting my head on your chest and hearing your heartbeat. Your back is so strong under my hands. Your legs are great. Not spindly or too muscled, like some guys' are. Your arms feel so wonderful when they're wrapped around me. And you have the cutest butt I've ever seen."

"Forgetting something, aren't you?" Drake winked at her startled expression. "I thought you were going to tell me why you like my eyes."

"Oh. Yeah. Your eyes. Right. Your eyes are so green anyway. But now they're even greener somehow. I can practically feel you watching me, like the other night. I think you could hypnotize me if I looked at you too long."

"Now there's an interesting thought. Wonder what I could make you do."

"You're shameless." Megan nipped his earlobe. "Drake, why aren't I petrified of you? I can't even talk to most men without getting jittery. How can we lie here like this, teasing each other and me not be at all panicked and about to run away and hide?"

"I'm hoping it's because you trust me, Megan. Sometimes people just fit without any solid reason. I think we can be here like this because we both sense that we have nothing to be afraid of. We don't threaten each other's subconscious and our instincts say that it's okay to let go together."

"Hmm. Maybe." She teased his lips with her tongue. "Or maybe it's because this hot bod of yours has me so turned on I can't remember that I'm supposed to be more cautious."

Drake groaned into her mouth. He returned her passionate kiss as his grip tightened on the bed posts.

Megan raised her head and stared into his eyes. Her strokes became bolder as she worked her hand down his chest. "I want to touch you but I'm afraid I'll do it wrong. Tell me if I do."

He nodded as her fingers traced his shaft. Her thumb spread the drop of escaped moisture over the head. Tentatively, Megan wrapped her hand around him and began to caress his length.

"You're so hard and so soft at the same time," she whispered. "I can't believe I'm doing this. God, you're getting even bigger."

"That's what happens when you touch me like that. Don't be afraid to squeeze harder. I won't break."

"Like this?"

"Yeah. That's it." His hips lifted involuntarily. After a few minutes, he said, "Unless you want me to come, you'd better take a break."

"But I like to touch you." She kept her hand still.

"I like it too but it's been a long time. I'm extremely sensitive right now. Maybe you could explore my balls for a few minutes. You haven't checked them out yet. Give 'em a tug, sweetheart. It'll calm me down some. Yeah, that's good."

Megan fondled him, rolling each one between her fingers. She sat up so she could run her hands over his legs before returning to his erection. "Tell me when to stop again."

Drake's jaw clenched as he fought to hold onto his control. Megan was enjoying his reaction and he seemed to want to give her as much time as he could. "Let go," he hissed when he was close again.

Megan tugged his sac as she twirled her tongue in his navel. Her mouth drifted upward, eventually seeking his as she crushed her chest to his. When they parted this time, she licked her way back down his torso.

When her tongue found the tip of his cock, Drake's body jerked. Megan glanced at his hands, fisted around the posts. She could see his struggle as he refused to let go.

After lavaging his entire shaft, she followed her curiosity and switched her attention to his sac. One by one she drew his balls into her mouth, sucking them until Drake shuddered. She decided she'd pushed him far enough and returned to his shaft.

"Stop, Megan," Drake growled when her lips closed over his engorged head. "I can't take much more."

Ignoring him, Megan drew his cock into her mouth, sucking him in as far as she could. When he groaned, she added her tongue, teasing him while she slid her lips back to the tip. "Mm," she purred, her lips vibrating as she reversed her movement.

"Megan," he pleaded as if not sure what he was pleading for. "I'm gonna come. You gotta let go."

"Un-uh," she refused, feeling his body tense. His shaft pulsed as his climax filled her mouth with liquid heat. Megan had been expecting it but she was unprepared for the force of his orgasm. She couldn't swallow fast enough to catch it all.

As Drake's mind engaged, he realized that Megan was licking him clean. Instantly, his cock stirred. He was overwhelmed by the intensity of his climax and by Megan's refusal to let him slide out of her mouth. She was incredible. He'd assumed that she would use her hand to provide his release. Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine that she would make him come down her throat and lick up what she hadn't swallowed. For a brief instant, his thoughts turned to Claire. She'd hated his taste and demanded that he warn her so she could pull off before he exploded. And now, here he was with a woman who hadn't been with a man in years, who claimed to be intimidated by him and who still just gave him pleasure more intense than he could remember.

"You okay?" Megan's voice cut through his musings.

"Hell yes!"

"You sure? You looked a little lost just now." Megan seemed able to sense his hesitation. "I'm sorry that I'm not very good at that. If you'll tell me how to make it better, I really want to learn."

"Christ!" he swore as her lip trembled. "Come here and let me hold you. I need to tell you something and I'm afraid you'll run away before I can."

Megan nodded and slid into his embrace. She hid her face in his shoulder, not meeting his gaze almost as if she was afraid she'd see disappointment in his eyes.

Drake held her tightly with one arm as he tipped her chin. "Please listen, sweetheart. Don't cry," he urged. "Please don't cry. You don't understand."

"What's to understand?" she asked. "I'm not good enough. Don't sugarcoat it. Just say it so I can go."

"Megan," his voice commanded her attention. "You have to let me explain. You were right. I did zone out for a minute there but it's not what you think. Remember how you said I'd be unable to prevent myself from comparing you with Claire? Well,

you were right about that too. But you're wrong, thinking that I didn't enjoy what just happened. I loved it. You took me by surprise, not pulling off at the last minute."

"You mean..." She grasped his meaning.

"Yeah. Claire hated me letting go in her mouth. She didn't like the way I taste. She would suck on me because she knew how much I liked it but she only did it for me."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I just thought..."

"I know what you thought. And I'm sorry if my reaction hurt you."

"I'm okay." She smiled shyly. "You really liked it? Enough so that I can do it again?"

"Any time, sweetheart." He returned her smile. "Today. Tomorrow. Every day for the rest of my life. Don't laugh. I'm serious here."

"I'm not laughing at you. It's just, well, what you said makes me happy."

"Wow. I never had a woman say that about sucking me off before."

"Good." Megan's hand captured his cock. "Let's make me happy again."

"Oh, yeah." He let her slide from his arms. "Let's make you real happy." Drake grinned as her mouth pleased him a second time. As she had before, Megan repeatedly built his arousal, letting it fade when he neared his climax, until every nerve screamed for release. "Please, Megan."

"Please what?" she teased.

"Please let me come."

"Okay," Megan agreed, stimulating him until he lost control.

Drake opened his eyes and saw Megan watching him, her chin propped on his chest. "Still happy?"

"Very happy and not at all intimidated."

"Glad I could help. Can I do anything for you?"

"No thanks. I get what you said about giving now." She snuggled into his arms. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I think I might actually be able to sleep tonight after all."

"Me too. Maybe I should go."

"Maybe but you don't have to. Stay here and hold me."

"Mm, I think I'd like that. So I don't have to worry about you all night."

* * * * *

Drake was almost awake but hadn't opened his eyes, afraid to shatter the dream of Megan lying next to him by looking around and confirming that he was actually alone. When a soft arm tightened across his chest, his senses hit full alert.

"Morning." Megan's smile greeted him as his eyes flew open.

"I thought I was imagining things." He pulled her more completely against him. "But you're really here."

"Yeah, I'm really here. I never spent the night in a man's bed before."

"How was it?"

"Nice. Surprisingly comfortable. You always this warm?"

"Probably. Thanks for staying. And for last night."

"No problem." She stopped looking at him.

"Megan? You're hiding from me. Talk instead."

She scowled. "I'm not sure I like the way you picked up on that so fast. Or that you point it out when I'm trying to avoid you."

"Personally, I'm glad I did. Rule number eight of couplehood. Communicate at all times. Don't let little things slide or they may grow into big things. Issues are easier to resolve before they compound into something major."

"I almost wish you weren't so good at that."

"No, you don't."

"Fine," she sighed. "I was thinking about what you told me about Claire and I'm afraid you might decide that I did what I did so you would want me to stay with you Friday night."

Drake blinked in disbelief. "Did you actually hear what you just said? How could I possibly reach that conclusion when we hadn't discussed how much I enjoy oral sex or that Claire didn't? Maybe I'm the one doing the manipulating here because I don't want you to uninvite yourself Friday night?"

"Because you wouldn't do that. Not after the way you held on to the bedposts last night."

"And you wouldn't do that to me either because that's not the kind of person you are. Maybe we should just forget about making love for now. We're putting pressure on ourselves unnecessarily. We don't have to have sex just because we've considered it."

"Oh. I guess not."

"But?"

"But I want to. Last night I kept imagining how you'd feel inside me. And how you'd fit. Face it, Drake. You're not exactly small and I haven't done this in a long time."

"Christ." Drake ran his hand over his face before meeting her insecure gaze. "I wish you hadn't said that. I'm trying to back off and lighten us up here and now you have me thinking with my cock instead of my brain."

"Hm." Megan shifted so he was aware of her nipples poking his flesh. "So what does your cock think?"

"It thinks you're irresistible when you're being playful and seductive like this. That it wants to find out just how we fit together and if being inside you feels as amazing as I think it will."

"Oh wow. What does your brain think?"

"It thinks we should change the subject before I start begging you to skip work tonight and Saturday so we can spend every minute between now and the time we have to go get Christy right here in this bed."

"Really? What would we possibly do all that time?"

"Every sexual thing either one of us can come up with and then some. Twice."

"God that's tempting." Megan tweaked his nipple and drew her leg up so her thigh nudged his erection.

"Not helping here."

"Maybe, maybe not." She tilted her head for a kiss. "But, if you're willing, I could."

"Solo or mutual?"

"Solo, I think. There's something I wanted to do last night before you distracted me."

"But there's so much I want to do too," Drake protested weakly as her fingers closed around him. When she increased the pressure, he groaned. "Okay. I give up. Whatever you want."

"Thanks." She kissed him until they were both shaking before Megan pulled away and rolled to her back. "Come here." She patted her stomach. "Do you think my boobs are big enough...if I push them together...I mean..."

"Christ," Drake growled as he claimed her mouth. "I assume you're asking because you haven't attempted this?" She shook her head. "I see. Then, by all means, we should find out." He lowered his head and licked the valley between her breasts. "Lubrication," he explained. When Drake finally straddled her he could see the desire in her eyes.

"Shouldn't you be lubricated too?" she asked, licking her bottom lip as she stared at his hard cock resting between her breasts. "I think so," she answered her own question. Plumping the pillow to angle her head, Megan opened her mouth in invitation.

Drake restrained the urge to thrust fully, not wanting to choke her. He let Megan guide his movements with her hands on his hips. He sensed that she had forgotten all about her original plan so he eased back. "You wanted to use your breasts," he reminded her when she looked confused.

"Oh yeah. Thanks." Megan blushed as he repositioned himself. "Is this okay?"

"Hell yes," he hissed as his shaft spread his own moisture along the channel she created. His hands covered hers, helping to hold her in place while his thumbs found her nipples.

"Drake," she gasped at the unexpected stimulation.

"Shh, sweetheart. Let me help. Let me hold you so you can put your hands back on my hips."

Megan watched him as she followed his suggestion. Instead of stopping on his hips, she continued sliding her hands until she was grasping his cheeks. Instantly, she felt his muscles clench with his thrusts. "Oh God," she moaned. "This is amazing."

Drake chuckled at the expression on her face. Her innocence was even more arousing than he'd anticipated. "Think how I'll feel under your legs when you wrap them around me to pull me deep inside you."

"I am," Megan admitted. "Stop holding back. I asked for this. Let go. I won't break."

Her words made Drake wild. He gave in to her encouraging hands and pumped between her breasts with abandon. "I'm almost there. Where do you want it?"

"Everywhere." She raised her head to catch the first spurt on her tongue, watching as the rest coated her skin.

Drake covered Megan with his body when his climax ended. He managed not to collapse completely but couldn't stop himself from positioning his hips between her thighs with his softening shaft along her slit with just the thin fabric of her boxers separating them. He was aware of how tightly she held him, pressing him into the evidence of his satisfaction. When she wrapped her legs around him and wiggled her hips, he groaned.

"Megan, wait," he heard himself stopping her even though his body tried to respond. It would be so easy to nudge the fabric aside and enter her.

Megan froze. Her expression was stunned as she realized what they had been about to do. Slowly, she untangled her legs and let Drake move to her side, folding her in his arms as he went. "Wow."

"Yeah."

"I can't believe we almost did that."

"I can. You don't seem to understand the effect you have on me."

"Apparently it's the same effect you have on me. You make me feel so free. It's like something's been holding me down and now it's gone."

"That may be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me." He kissed her tenderly. "Guess we answered your question," he teased, sensing they needed to lighten the mood.

"Guess so," she grinned in response. "Guess we have to get up and be responsible adults now."

"Yeah. Too bad," Drake burst out in laughter. "Sorry. Being called a responsible adult reminded me that Adam slipped me a box of condoms when I was about to leave last night."

"Oh my God," she gasped. "A minister figured out that we've been considering sex?"

"Actually, I told him. Don't panic. Adam may be a minister but he is my big brother first. He'll be the first to tell you that I've always used him as a sounding board when I needed to talk things through. He's never run his mouth about what I confided. He's not going to start now. It's not such a big deal."

"Maybe not to you. How can I face him? He's going to think I'm some kind of slut, knowing I wanted to have sex with a guy I've only known a little while."

"First of all, Adam doesn't judge people. Second, if he decided that you were a slut, which I can guarantee he won't, then that makes me a slut too. Third, we are in no way anything even remotely close to being sluts just because we're physically attracted to each other. We're consenting adults who discussed it and made a mutual decision to move our growing relationship to an intimate level. He's a minister but he's not one that's oblivious to real life. He doesn't go around preaching eternal damnation to those who give into their carnal desires without the bonds of marriage. He has sex too. He was only making sure we had the essentials when we needed them. He knows neither one of us has been in this position recently."

"What do you mean? You told him? You didn't!"

"Yes, I did. I had to so he'd understand why I was so sure we'd be okay together. I trust him, Megan. He won't tell anyone what I said about your past. I'm sorry if I did something wrong but I needed someone to talk to. I needed a friend to remind me that I don't have to feel guilty for not dying with Jimmy and Claire. I needed encouragement to know that it was okay for me to move on and let another woman into my life, into my daughter's life."

"I'm so stupid. Of course you needed to talk to someone. I talked to Gwynne and Daryl. I'm sorry for overreacting like that. I was just surprised even though I wouldn't have been if I'd bothered to think for a minute."

"You are not stupid! Rule number nine of couplehood. Never put yourself down for being human because it really pisses off your partner."

"I don't think that qualifies as a rule."

"Well I do and since I'm the one making these up, I'm keeping it," he declared fiercely. "Sorry," his voice softened when Megan flinched. "Guess I don't have to tell you that I've always disliked hearing people berate themselves. I didn't mean to snarl at you like that. I've been much worse. Ask someone from my class Friday night. They'll tell you just how bad I get since I went off at them during the first week of classes."

"Good to know. And I'll keep that in mind during future conversations," she stated pleasantly. "It's nice to know that you're not completely perfect."

"Hardly." Drake relaxed for a minute with Megan snuggled against him. "I hate to bring this up..."

"But it's time for us to get cleaned up and back to reality. I know. It's just so nice, being with you like this. Hey Drake? Thanks for indulging me again this morning."

"Any time, sweetheart. You don't have to ask me twice. I'm more than happy to assist you in any sexual experience. All you have to do is tell me what to do and I will. Think maybe next time can be mutual? I'd hate you to feel neglected."

"I don't. And I'll think about it," she teased. "Now let me up so I can use this excess energy to go for a bike ride before I try to make you forget all those papers you have to grade."

"Forgetting would be more fun but I'd feel guilty later."

"And I'd have to pay more attention to what I eat if I don't get some exercise."

"Oh I'd make sure you got some exercise." He grinned wickedly. "Plenty of exercise. Lots of good sex can be a real workout."

"Then I'll have to give it a try sometime. Not today, of course but sometime when we don't have other commitments." She kissed him and slid from the bed. Pulling on her shirt after a quick stop in the bathroom, she said, "Stop looking so tempting and get to work, Professor. I'll be back to check on you before I leave for work."

"Going to check on me when you get home too? If I'm all done do I get a reward?"

"Depends. What do you think it should be?"

"How about a prolonged kiss from my very sexy neighbor for starters? Maybe if I'm really good all day, she'll give me an extra special reward and stay with me again. Maybe she'll even let me touch her although I'd be just as happy if we spent a few hours talking while we snuggled."

"Hmm, I'll see what I can do about that." Megan ogled Drake as he pulled on a pair of sweatpants.

"Talk about looking tempting," he chuckled. "Come on. Let me walk you home."

Chapter Ten

The first thought Drake had was that he couldn't believe he'd slept on the sofa until morning. The second thought was that Megan wasn't with him. She told him she'd come over when she got home from work. Dread filled him instantly as his mind raced through all the things that could have happened to her. He was still disoriented when he spotted her note propped against his glass on the end table.

Drake,

You look as peaceful as Christy does when you're sleeping. So peaceful that I couldn't bring myself to disturb you. I saw the hard copy of your grades so you must have waded through the rest of your papers. You'll just have to claim your reward after the dance.

Gwynne insisted that I wouldn't be presentable unless I had my hair trimmed. It's easier to go along with her when she gets like this so I gave in. I suspect she has additional errands to spring on me that will keep me busy all day. She probably thinks that we need the added anticipation of waiting until we're both fully dressed before we see each other. As if I'm not nervous enough!

Hope you had pleasant dreams. See you soon.

Megan

As he read her note, his tension drained. Drake was smiling by the time he finished. Megan's friend had the right idea, making this evening seem like a real date. Seem like a date? It was a date. His first date since he was nineteen. Hers too. Shaking his head, Drake hoped Megan didn't feel as much like a teenager as he did at the moment. He'd forgotten how awkward this stage had been, how insecure he'd been, expecting the girl to cancel until they were actually on their way to whatever they'd planned. At least he didn't have to worry about that with Megan. Or did he?

* * * * *

Megan checked her appearance one last time and silently thanked Gwynne for taking over the past six hours. She'd have spent the day bouncing off the walls if she'd stayed home. She doubted that it would have been any better even if she'd been with Drake. No, Gwynne was right to keep her occupied. Megan couldn't remember feeling this jumpy when she was in high school. Maybe it was one of those memories that improved over time.

When she heard a knock, Megan's heart skipped a beat. She told herself to stop being ridiculous and get over it as she opened the door to find Drake holding out a bunch of flowers.

"Hi," she greeted him shyly.

"Good evening, Megan. For you." Drake handed her the token.

"You brought me daisies," Megan stated the obvious. "I love daisies. How did you know?"

"I noticed they are the only flowers in any of your books. I hoped that meant you liked them."

"You are so sweet." She thanked him with a hug. "Handsome too."

"Thanks." He motioned for her to turn around so he could see her dress from all angles. "And you are absolutely gorgeous. Well worth the wait and even more beautiful than I imagined."

Megan felt herself blush as she smoothed the side of her dress. When she tried it on in the store she thought the straight cut with its hidden side slit and slinky material suited her nicely. Gwynne's comments had eased her fears that wearing something with only one shoulder would be inappropriate for a college function. The appreciation in Drake's eyes eliminated all her anxiety.

"You really like it?"

"Very much. That color looks great on you."

"I picked it because it matched your eyes." She gasped in embarrassment, her face heating.

Drake chuckled. "Now that's a first for me. Don't be bashful. Truthfully, I'm flattered."

Megan took a deep breath. "I'm such a wreck. I have been all day."

"Me too. I'm so glad you said that. I wondered if you were having the same reactions as I did today."

Megan put her daisies in a vase. "I don't know what I would have done without Gwynne."

"What did the two of you do after your haircut?"

"Went back to Gwynne's. She asked me to draw on the nursery walls."

"What a great idea."

"It was a lot of fun. She wants me to do another wall too sometime. Maybe you and Christy can come along with me and get to know Gwynne and Daryl."

"We'd love to. Ready?"

* * * * *

Megan noticed Drake scowling when she heard someone whistle as soon as they walked through the hedge dotted with twinkling lights into secluded area where the Summer Splash was held. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Megan. I'm afraid that's Art whistling and it's directed at you. I shouldn't even be surprised. I knew he'd drool over you but I'd hoped he'd contain it a little better."

She shrugged. "Once a pig, always a pig. It's fine. I'll just treat him like I would if I was working. Besides, I'm not the only one making people drool." At his confused look, she added, "Better stick close to me. If you wander off alone, you might cause a cat fight. Then I'd have to come to your rescue. I'd probably mess up my hair and it took forever to get it to stay in this twisty thing Gwynne gave me."

"But you would rescue me, wouldn't you, sweetheart?"

"Of course. I don't think I'm one of those women who shares."

"Thank goodness. Neither am I so don't you wander off either."

Art openly examined Megan as they approached him. "Now I see why Drake's been hoarding you. I'd keep you chained to my bed too. Wish I'd met you first. Just think how tonight could have been if I had."

"Hmm, let's see. If I'd met you instead of Drake tonight would have been like any other Friday night, with me working and you acting like a pig with some other woman."

Drake bit his lip to hide his amusement. "Thought you were bringing a date."

"I did. She's around here somewhere."

"What? Tired of your company already. Somehow, I'm not surprised," Megan commented sweetly.

"Guess I was wrong about you, Elvira. You're too nasty to be a vampire. I'd say you definitely fall into the evil witch category."

"Really? I was shooting for bitch but I guess that'll have to do."

Art burst out in laughter and slapped Drake on the back. "I like her. Good choice, buddy."

"Gee thanks, Art. Now stop pushing your luck and play nice before I have to make you," he warned.

"Message received." Art held up his hands and took a step back. "Loud and clear. Megan, forgive me if my teasing offended you in any way."

"If you'll forgive my rudeness," she used a tone that made it clear she was only saying that for Drake's benefit.

"Of course. Perhaps you'll let me get you both a drink to show we're square?"

Megan knew Drake saw a shadow cross her face when he refused Art's offer. "Not necessary. Megan and I are sharing a glass of wine and we need to see what options we have. Coming?" He held out his hand.

"Thank you." Megan squeezed his fingers. "I hadn't thought about that."

"I hadn't either. I don't know why I just didn't say we weren't drinking."

"We can. I do know that no one is lurking around, waiting to catch me off guard. I appreciate how you just protected me but you don't have to."

"How about if I want to? I know you can handle things on your own but we're both facing a lot of firsts tonight. It'll help relax me if you pretend you like me taking care of you in little ways."

"Who says I'd be pretending? I should admit that I'm not sure I can drink some wine even though I'd like to."

Drake cupped her cheek. "I have an idea."

Megan let him guide her to the bar and listened as he made a special request to the bartender. The man didn't even blink when Drake asked him to open a fresh bottle for them.

"After you." He handed her the glass with a flourish. "We're still sharing."

"You are the sweetest man." Megan kissed Drake's cheek just as some of his students appeared at his side. Her gesture inspired all sorts of teasing comments as they paused to chat.

When the group wandered off, they heard someone say, "Guess we know he's been in such a good mood lately. He must be getting some on a regular basis these days."

Megan laughed at Drake's horrified expression. "Shows what they know."

"They may have reached the wrong conclusion but they did have the first part right. I have been happier since I met you. Christy has been too. You're a good influence on us."

"No more than you guys are on me." Megan had her hand resting on his chest. She could feel Drake's heart pound as he slowly lowered his head to kiss her. As soon as their lips touched, she forgot everything except him. She didn't hear the sounds around them until he separated them.

"Christ." Drake gulped some wine to steady himself. "We probably shouldn't do that again until we're alone."

"What? Oh." Megan's face flushed with embarrassment as she realized how they'd been kissing. "Look, I think it's time to eat."

"Don't bother. It'll take more than mediocre food to distract me from you tonight." He pointed to their table. "Damn, Art saw us. I'll try to head him off but get ready for round two, just in case."

"Quick," Art shrieked. "Somebody get a bucket of water. I don't want to go up in flames when these two spontaneously combust."

"Better make it two," Drake wiggled his eyebrows before introducing Megan to the others at the table.

The meal passed without any further comments from Art although he stared at Megan almost continually. The group ignored him for the most part as the conversation flowed easily over a wide variety of topics. By the time the last dish was cleared, Megan realized that she and Drake were chatting comfortably. Both seemed to have overcome the new couple awkwardness that occurred when two people were out with others the first time.

Before the dancing began, Drake walked a short way along one of the surrounding paths to call Christy. He invited Megan to join him to say hello since she hadn't been with him during any of their other calls. Megan sipped a fresh glass of wine, waiting while Drake spoke to his father and learned that Adam had taken Christy with him to his church.

"Hi, Adam. How's my girl?" Drake asked when he reached his brother. He could hear Christy in the background.

Adam chuckled. "Nope, it's your dad, Christy. God doesn't need a cell phone to speak with you. Hey, Drake. How's the dance?"

"Good," Drake answered. "That sounded like a line from one of your sermons."

"Not yet but it is a good one if I do say so myself. It relates nicely to everyday life and I'm sure I can expand the theme enough to turn it into a sermon," Adam said thoughtfully. "Just tell me one thing and I'll turn the phone over to Christy."

"What's that?" Drake questioned.

"Relax, little brother," Adam sensed Drake's wariness. "Give me some credit here. I'm only looking for your opinion on your date's appearance."

Drake's relief was evident. "Ah, sorry," he sighed. "Megan is a vision. And, judging by the glances she's getting, I'm not the only one who thinks that. I forgot how unsettling it is to be out with a beautiful woman."

"I assume that means you're reacting like you used to," Adam stated.

"Yep. Thrilled, proud and as possessive as hell."

Adam laughed. "Good for you. Here's Christy."

"Hi, Daddy," Christy greeted him cheerfully. "I'm putting up the songs with Uncle Adam so people know what we're gonna sing."

"That's great, honey. I bet you're the best helper he ever had. Did you have fun today?"

"Yeah," Christy spent a few minutes telling Drake about her day.

"Wow. Sounds like you're a very busy girl."

"I am, Daddy. I took lots of pictures so I can show Megan. You gotta tell her I remembered what she said."

"Megan's here too. Why don't you tell her yourself and then we can talk some more?"

"Hey, Christy," Megan spoke when Drake handed her the phone.

"Hiya, Megan. I took pictures of everything so you can see. Nana and Pop Pop and Uncle Adam helped me write in my trip book so I don't forget, just like you said I should so we can do a book like the park one when I come home. I have two more whole cameras that I didn't open already."

"Good for you." Megan was pleased that Christy was enjoying the blank book and disposable cameras she had given her before she left home. She had encouraged Christy

to record memories of her visit so they could choose some to use in the "Cricket Goes on a Trip" story she had planned to base on Christy's experiences.

"Uncle Adam showed me how to play the piano after we put the songs on the wall. Can I do lessons?"

"I don't know, honey. You need to ask your dad about that, not me."

"But you gotta say yes too 'cause if I play lots I might pest you when you're busy drawing stuff. Daddy says that's your work, the same like his school is."

"I don't think we have to worry about that. I won't be able to hear you from my drawing room no matter how loud you play."

"No, Megan. I mean when we all go and live in a big house. Maybe we can get a puppy then too so Jimmy can play when he comes and watches us sleep. Jimmy was gonna tell Mommy and Daddy he wanted a puppy on his birthday and I think he wants one now anyway."

Megan gulped and leaned into Drake's side. "Um, Christy, I really think we should talk about this when your dad can hear both of us. Let's wait until after you get back home, okay?"

"Kay," Christy agreed. "Are you really gonna come too when Daddy gets me?"

"You bet. Here's your dad again."

While Drake and Christy chatted, Megan fidgeted and drank most of their wine. She knew Drake would question her odd behavior as soon as he hung up since Christy's comments had caught her completely off guard. She was too stunned to hide her reaction but wasn't certain she should tell him what his daughter had said.

"What did she say to you?" he asked the instant after he disconnected their call.

Megan shrugged and forced a small smile. "Nothing really. I'm just being silly. Ignore me."

Drake considered her for a moment. "No. I'm sorry but I can't. Twice I heard you tell Christy that you thought she should talk to me about whatever she was saying. You still have that 'deer caught in headlights' look on your face. Rule number ten of couplehood. When dealing with a child, any child, give your partner as much information as possible. Help each other so you're both as prepared as you can be for the things they throw at you. If it's important to Christy she's not likely to forget and I'd appreciate knowing what I'm in for."

Megan met his eyes. "Sometimes you're too reasonable. Besides, I'm sure your brother was listening. He probably won't hesitate to fill you in on Christy's half of the conversation."

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm asking you, Megan. I don't want to call Adam."

"God, I'm being so ridiculous. It's just that Christy asked if her practicing would disturb my drawing if you let her take piano lessons once we all live in the same house. She also wants to know if we can get a puppy like Jimmy planned on asking you for on

his birthday so he can play with it while he watches over us in our sleep. Guess I blew it, telling her to wait and talk to you instead of giving her a real answer."

Drake stared. "Actually, that was pretty good. I probably would have choked. At least you managed to say something appropriate."

"So what are we going to say when she asks us together? I don't want Christy to be hurt. Or disappointed but..."

"But she's moving a little faster than we're comfortable with? I'm sure Adam is discussing this with her as we speak. Don't worry. He'll explain it so she understands that this sort of thing takes time and she needs to let us figure it out on our own. We'll wait a while so Adam has time to drop her off and then call him. If he hasn't already spoken to her, I'll ask him if he will." Drake suddenly smiled. "Look at it this way. We don't have to worry that my daughter will try to scare away the new woman in my life like some single fathers do."

Megan grinned with him. "Yeah, there is that."

As they headed back to the makeshift wooden dance floor, Drake said, "I think this is another example of the rule that lets us temporarily put aside something big for the moment. We have two whole days to come up with a plan. Let's forget about everything except us for the rest of the night. There's a spectacular sunset, soft music and we are dressed for dancing."

Unable to resist his charm, Megan accepted his unspoken invitation and took his extended hand as they reached the edge of the dance floor. "I should warn you that I'm not very good at this."

"I am." He urged her into his arms. "All you have to do is relax. I'll take care of the rest." He lowered his voice and brushed her lips.

"Mm." Megan tilted her head to gaze at him as Drake folded her hand against his chest, making the dance more intimate. "You really are good at this."

"I'm good at a lot of things."

"Oh my. Keep that up and I'm going to start thinking that you're trying to seduce me."

"Ah." Drake placed her other hand on his shoulder so his was free to caress her back.

By the time the song ended, Megan was tingling everywhere he touched her. Neither moved as they waited for the music to begin again.

"Megan?" he spoke as they swayed to a melody they barely heard. "About what you just said, what if I am? Do you want to be seduced?"

"Hey kiddies," Art's boisterous greeting interrupted the spell before Megan could reply. "Mind if I cut in?"

Megan tensed even though Drake answered, "Actually, yes."

"Come on, buddy. Be a sport. It's just a dance. I'll give her back in a few minutes."

"Nope." Drake held Megan's eyes. "Not tonight." When Art continued to stand there, he added, "Go away, Art. Dance with your own date for a change. Mine's off limits."

"Well excuse me," Art drew out each word. "Damn fool's getting worse. Wasn't nearly as possessive with the last one," he muttered as he stomped away.

"Sorry, sweetheart." Drake tried to will away Megan's tension. "Let me say something before we add this to the things that we're ignoring. Yes, Art did dance with Claire on a few occasions. Our wedding, our graduation dance and maybe two or three receptions of mutual friends, all long after we met and knew each other fairly well. Tonight, I'm keeping you all to myself. I intend to chase off everyone who attempts to cut in, not just Art. Maybe he's right and I am behaving like a possessive fool but this is our first dance, our first date, our first evening together as a couple. I don't want to hand you over to anyone else and watch some other guy hold you in his arms tonight. Tell me if I'm acting like a brute."

"No, not at all. Especially if this means that I don't have to turn you over to any other women either."

"Not a chance. Now back to my question. You haven't answered yet."

"Hmm." Megan stroked his shoulder as one song blended into the next. "Do I want to be seduced?"

"That's the one. Perhaps I should be more specific. So there's absolutely no misunderstanding. What I should have asked is do you want to be seduced now by me?"

"Now. By you. The best-looking man here who just happens to be my date. The one who looks like he stepped right out of every girl's fantasy in that dinner jacket you're wearing. You know, I used to think those formal white jackets made all guys look like waiters. You, however, are so handsome my knees get weak every time I look at you. Goes to show you what I know."

"Thank you, sweetheart. You're very flattering but you still haven't answered my question."

"I know. I'm stalling because I'm enjoying this part so much that I'm not ready for it to be over."

Drake chuckled. "Neither am I. I wasn't going to drag you straight to bed if you say yes. Think adult male seduction with extended foreplay, not teenage boy race to the finish."

"Oh," Megan's breath caught at his sensual smile. "Sorry. Guess my lack of experience is showing again."

"I can't comment since part of me does want to rush like a greedy teenager."

Megan kissed his cheek. "Thanks for saying that. Part of me does too."

"Is that a roundabout way of saying yes?"

She shrugged. "Since you were so clear with the question, shouldn't I be equally clear with the answer?"

"Please." Drake forced himself to breathe.

"All right, Drake. Since you asked so nicely then yes, let's seduce each other."

"Megan," he whispered against her lips. The song changed again as the kiss lengthened. Though it remained gentle, it was as potent as it would have been if they'd forgotten where they were and let it turn more passionate. When it ended, Drake urged her cheek to his shoulder. "Picture this. We'll stay here until the band takes a break. Then we'll go to my place and turn on something soft so we can dance in the moonlight."

"On your balcony."

"Yes. But we'll light a few candles inside first, so we don't have any interruptions later."

"And we'll kiss too?"

"Definitely. Lots of kissing. All kinds of kissing."

"All over?"

"Everywhere. At some point we'll move to the bedroom so we can undress each other while we continue to dance."

"And kiss."

"And kiss. We'll also be caressing each other. I love your soft skin as much as I love to feel your hands on me."

"Drake," she sighed into another kiss. "Then what?"

"Then, when we're both so overwhelmed with desire that we're trembling, we'll lie on the bed. We'll take our time. We'll touch and kiss until our skin is tingling with anticipation. When we're ready, I'll cover you with my body as you urge me between your thighs."

"I'll feel you pressing against me, hesitating so we both have a chance to change our minds. But I won't. I'll open up even more to show you how much I want you."

"I'll see it in your eyes. Without saying a word, you'll arch your back so your nipples graze my chest. You'll be so wet."

"And you'll be so hard."

"Slowly, very slowly, slower than you ever thought possible I'll slide into you."

"Slowly, yes but you won't stop until you're all the way in. You'll stretch me as you go so you fit but I'll be so tight around you that I'll feel every bit of your, uh, your..."

"Say it, Megan. Tell me what your beautiful pussy is going to be wrapped around," Drake whispered harshly as he licked her ear.

Megan shivered. "Ooh." She tilted her head in invitation. "Your cock."

"That's right. My cock is going to make your tight, wet pussy feel fuller than you ever imagined. I'm going to watch your face the whole time, so I can see what you're feeling."

"Just like I'll be watching yours."

"Once I'm buried, I'll hold still so I can memorize how perfect being inside you is."

"But I'll want you to move. I'll wrap my legs around you to pull you in even deeper. And then I'll squeeze you until you can't stand it any more."

"You'll feel so good that I can't resist giving you what we both want. I'll start to move, slowly drawing my cock out before your heels urge me back in again."

"Oh God," Megan moaned.

"I'll hold back no matter how much my body protests, until you come. When I feel your pussy ripple, I'll let go. I'll give in to the passion you inspire and I'll thrust fully. I won't last as long as I hoped to because you feel even better than I dreamed."

"You'll start to come before I'm finished. Your cock will erupt like a volcano and I'll be able to feel it pumping deep inside me."

"And when you do, you'll come even harder. Your pussy will milk every last drop from my cock before you stop."

"Yes but you'll still be hard. In a minute you'll be moving again."

"Only this time, it won't be slow."

"No. This time we'll be out of control."

"We'll stay out of control all night. We'll be insatiable. You'll sit on my face and let me lick your pussy until you're begging me to stop spearing you with my tongue and suck you so hard you'll come over and over again."

"You'll only stop long enough to tell me how much you want to explode in my mouth, since I'll be teasing you with it the whole time."

"After we collapse, we'll go back to kissing and touching, exciting each other all over again. It won't take long before my fingers have you coming, since by then you'll be so sensitive that you only need a few touches to set you off."

"You'll get harder and harder as you feel me. When you can't stand being teased, you'll push me until I'm on my hands and knees. Then you'll ram your huge cock into me from behind. You'll pound me harder and faster, using me for your pleasure even as you take me higher than I've ever been."

"That's right, sweetheart. I'll bury my cock up to my balls with every thrust, so you feel them slapping you from behind. I'll wrap one arm around you, partly to hold you in place and partly because I'll want to play with your clit to make sure you don't stop coming until I'm ready to let you."

"Excuse me," Drake's friend, Mike cleared his throat next to them. "I really hate to interrupt but we figured I'd better before someone else does. As much as we've enjoyed watching this verbal, ah, intercourse of yours, we think it's time for you to go somewhere a little more private."

Megan groaned and buried her face against Drake's chest as he held her protectively. "Huh?" Drake blinked in confusion.

Mike laughed. "Just what we suspected. Neither of you has a clue, do you? The music stopped five minutes ago and you're still dancing. Not that you took much notice of it anyway, since your motion had nothing to do with the various tempos. Although you're just looking at each other and talking, it's not all that hard to guess the nature of your conversation. I was elected to come over and suggest that you go home before you forget that you're surrounded by impressionable young men and women. I don't think the dean would appreciate it if this became less than innocent even though the kids would love it."

"Christ." Drake tightened his hold on Megan.

"Relax," Mike chuckled. "Before you get all bent out of shape let me assure you that no one heard you. It's obvious that you're having a personal moment and they all gave you plenty of space so as not to intrude."

"But..."

"But nothing. Don't apologize for being strongly attracted to each other. Personally, I'm happy for you. Sue is too. It's nice to be reminded how special the beginning of a relationship can be. Megan, it was great to meet you. I'm sure I'll see you again, hopefully soon. Don't forget about Bill and Nancy's cookout Tuesday so Christy knows someone before the first day of elementary school. Now say goodnight, smile and wave at everyone else and get the hell out of here."

Drake grinned. "Let's listen to the nice man, sweetheart. He's been in our shoes so he knows what he's talking about. Thanks, Mike."

"Don't mention it." Mike winked. "Don't be shy, Megan and whatever you do, don't think. Let yourself feel for now and worry about the rest later. It really will work itself out if you let it."

"Um, thanks," Megan said shyly. "'Night."

Chapter Eleven

The silence was oppressive as they sat in the car after Drake maneuvered it into the garage. Drake could feel Megan watching him but was unable to meet her eyes.

"Just say it," he commanded, much stronger than intended. "Since you ignored Mike's recommendation about not thinking, we might as well get it over with."

Megan's tiny gasp was quickly smothered. "Mike's advice was meant for both of us. You didn't follow it either." She paused but he didn't speak. "Fine. I'll go first. I was wondering how being with me tonight compared with a night out with Claire. Let's be honest, Drake. I know you're thinking about the differences, whether you mean to or not. I'm curious about how I measure up. From what you've told me, I'm very afraid that I disappointed you. I'm not used to formal occasions and I don't play the game well enough to pretend that I'm someone I'm not."

"Damn it, Megan!" Drake slammed his hands against the steering wheel. "I never asked you to pretend to be anything."

"No, you haven't. And you've been very discreet with your comparisons. Art, however, isn't and he made it quite clear that I'm not up to par."

"Art is an asshole! But okay, since you are so curious. Being with you tonight was nothing like being out with Claire. She was cool and classy, almost unapproachable even. She'd show up somewhere and there'd be an instant silent recognition that she'd arrived. She had a way of commandeering a room, as if it were her right and everyone knew not to question that. When Claire was there, she ruled the event. The first impression she gave was haughty, ice princess. But then she'd smile and speak with a few people and the impression switched to generous and caring. She wasn't as aloof as she seemed and that made it permissible for the peasants to speak directly to her. They'd go home believing that she was friendly and not at all high and mighty. But Claire played the game better than anyone. She won over the crowd without them ever realizing the distance she maintained.

"Remember when I said we'd turn an evening out into extended foreplay?" Drake gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were white. "In case you're also wondering how our conversation compared, I can't tell you. I can't tell you because Claire and I never had a conversation like that. Verbal foreplay for us consisted of me making suggestions and her nodding when I said something that excited her. Claire loved me telling her what we were going to do later or even what we were doing as we did it. She never once participated in any way other than to make one of her little sounds that let me know she was enjoying it. Even at her most passionate she never stopped being a proper lady, quiet and dignified using only her body to let me know she was enjoying herself.

"That first night in the kitchen, I pushed you to tell me what you wanted so I didn't do anything that would scare you off. Tonight, I almost forgot to breathe when you started adding to my description. I don't think I've even been so turned on before. Not in the way I was with you. But that doesn't mean that Claire didn't excite the hell out of me. She was incredible. So untouchable one minute, so needy the next. I loved being with her. I would have loved being with her forever."

Drake's face twisted with rage. "But I don't have Claire anymore. She left me alone. She died without saying goodbye. Walked out of the house for what was supposed to be a few hours and let it turn into forever. Stuck her own daughter with the misfortune of growing up alone with a father who has no idea how to manage without her help. If that's not bad enough, she took my son with her. My little boy, who never got to have his puppy. Who never got to play little league or go to kindergarten, knowing his big sister would be there to look out for him or go on his first date after he asked all sorts of questions about how to tell if a girl really liked him. She was supposed to buy him a soccer ball and take him to get something to eat and then bring him back home with her to spend the rest of their lives with me and Christy. She didn't come home to tuck Christy in like she promised she would."

The car was filled with the sound of his harsh breathing as Drake rested his head against the wheel. "I'm so furious sometimes. I can't believe they're gone and not coming back. That Claire let them both die like that. That she didn't find a way to save them for us. Or to save Jimmy if she couldn't save both of them. I hate that Christy and I need to figure out how to survive on our own. I hate that my nice, happy life is over and I'm stuck, learning how to do all this relationship stuff all over again. I hate not being able to shut down the part of my mind that makes the comparisons you rightly accused me of. I hate admitting to myself that I'm interested in another woman in as many ways as I was in Claire. I hate discovering that she wasn't the only woman in the world for me. That the perfect balance I thought we had may not have been so perfect after all. That I want things I never knew I missed. That I never even knew I wanted because I never knew what Claire and I had was lacking."

Drake turned his head and looked at Megan. "But more than that I hate that I hurt you. I hurt the one woman who got through to me because I don't know how to let go of what I had and reach out for what I might find with you. I let an asshole friend of mine look down his nose at you and make you feel like you're less than Claire was without showing him that you're every bit as special in your own way. Claire was Claire and you are Megan. You'll never be like her but she could never have been like you. How can I compare the two of you when you're such different people? Why should I even bother to try? I already know the bottom line is that you're equally amazing in completely different ways. I don't need any more examples to know that."

Drake pushed himself back against the seat and dropped his hands to his lap. He sighed sadly. "I'm so sorry, Megan. You don't deserve to be treated like this. I shouldn't be yelling at you when I know all you wanted was a little reassurance."

"You weren't yelling at me," she pointed out calmly. "Don't you dare let yourself feel guilty about this because of me. You didn't do anything to me except let me see things from a different angle than you have before. I am fine."

Drake almost smiled. "You remind me of Adam when you say things like that. He warned me that I'd get angry eventually and said that I shouldn't hold it in when I did. Too bad I had to choose now to do it."

"There's nothing wrong with now. Think how much worse you'd feel if you had tried to keep all that in. You must have been thinking about it on some level. Don't you feel better now that you actually said it?"

He was quiet for a long moment. "Yeah, I guess I do. I wish I'd been talking to Adam and not you though."

"Why? Adam knows what Claire was like. I don't. Maybe I'm nuts or something but I really do want to know about her. She was your wife. And Christy's mother. Claire will always be a part of your lives and nothing will ever change that. No one should ever want to either. I meant it when I said I didn't mind hearing about her. I am willing to listen to anything you want to say, even when you're angry with her like this and blaming her for something you know wasn't her fault. As unfair and horrible as it is, you know it was an accident and accidents can happen to anyone."

"How did I ever get so lucky, meeting you?"

"I keep asking myself the same thing. I've decided it's because neither of us was looking."

"Could be." Drake was stunned that Megan hadn't run away as soon as he exploded. He didn't want her to go so he postponed the moment by saying, "Mind if I call Adam? It'll only take a minute and I can tell you what he said when I walk you up."

Megan nodded. As Drake reached for his phone he noticed her face was carefully blank and wondered what she was thinking. After a brief conversation with his brother, he sighed and got out of the car. His discussion of how Adam had explained things to Christy lasted until they reached her door.

"I guess I'll say good night." Drake stood next to Megan with his hands in his pockets.

"Oh." Megan stared up at him, her face full of disappointment.

His heart thumped. "Tell me exactly what you're thinking right this second, Megan."

She couldn't miss the pleading in his tone. "I'm thinking how selfish I am for wishing tonight wasn't ending like this and how much I wanted what we talked about earlier. I know it's wrong for me to expect anything at the moment after all you just said in the car but I can't help wondering if it would have been even better than it sounded."

Megan had lowered her head as she spoke so Drake used a finger to tip up her chin until she looked at him. "You mean that?"

"Do I mean that I still want to be with you tonight even though your past popped up in the middle of our seduction? It's no secret that we both have pasts, Drake. If we can't learn to accept each other's then we may as well make this goodbye instead of just good night because they're not going to vanish or turn into something prettier that would make this easier for us. So yes, I mean it. I don't want to be alone tonight. But I won't force you into something that you aren't ready for yet. I'm a big girl. I may be disappointed but I'll survive if we don't do the whole seduction bit that we described. I've done without for six years. I'll make it little while longer. This isn't the only opportunity we'll ever have, or at least I hope it's not."

"Megan," Drake whispered before he cupped her face and captured her mouth. He kept their bodies apart even after she responded to his kiss. "Please come home with me. I don't want to be alone tonight either. And not because of the meltdown I just had. I want to be with you specifically because you're you, not because I want someone with me."

Inside his apartment, Drake pulled Megan fully against him and kissed her thoroughly. He caressed her back as he had when they were dancing and soon felt the same shivers on her spine.

"Can we change things? From what we said before?" Megan asked.

"We can do anything. Tell me what you want," he stated before his mouth traced her jaw, claimed her neck and nibbled his way to her bare shoulder.

"Stop that a second, Drake," she protested, weakly pushing against his chest. "I mean it."

"No, you don't," he countered but quit instantly as she requested. "What should I do instead?"

"Oh wait, I don't mean stop as in don't do that. I meant stop as in let me put on some music while you light some candles in the bedroom. Dancing in the moonlight sounded like a great way to start earlier but, if it's okay with you, I'd rather skip to the dancing us out of our clothes part instead."

"Five CDs and make sure you push the continuous play button. Pick something soft that will make good background music." Drake gave her a quick kiss before releasing her to do his task.

When Megan walked into his bedroom, Drake was standing next to the bed, waiting for her. He was looking at her with such desire that Megan trembled. "You can change your mind any time," he reminded her.

"So can you," she replied, moving into his open arms.

Drake sensed her nervousness and kissed her gently, hoping to calm her fears before touching her intimately. His own too, if he were to be honest with himself. He hesitated so long that Megan finally slid his jacket from his shoulders. Next, she tugged on his bow tie, pulling it from his collar. He stood passively as she unbuttoned his shirt and offered his wrists so she could open his cuffs.

Megan laughed. "Real cufflinks. Should have known."

"A graduation present from my brother," he informed her, correcting her assumption. "Put them on the dresser please. The clothes can stay wherever they land but these are very special to me." Megan made sure they were in a safe place before she finished stripping him. Drake remained motionless as she ran her hands over his flesh. After she kissed him, he asked, "My turn?"

"Yeah," she sighed. "God, I'm so nervous. What the hell is wrong with me? You've taken off my clothes before."

"Not the same thing and I'm nervous too," Drake admitted, starting with her hair. "You know, I've never seen your hair down before." He ran his fingers through it and let it fall over her shoulders. "It's so soft," he stated as he continued to play with it. When he was sure she was relaxed, Drake untied the knot on her shoulder. It was the only thing holding up her dress so it slid off as soon as he released the ends. "Christ," he hissed when it hit the floor, leaving Megan standing in front of him in her tiny panties. "That's it?"

"It's lined so there's no need to wear anything else." Megan blushed.

"Good thing I didn't know this earlier. I would have come in my pants just thinking about it."

She giggled. "Good. I'd hate to be the only one embarrassed. I almost asked you to stop talking about what we were going to do because I was afraid I'd soak through my dress. Probably would have if we'd sat back down."

Drake grinned and put his hand over the swatch of fabric between her legs. "Hmm, must have been dripping earlier. You're still plenty wet now."

"Why don't you take them off and see how wet I really am? You said you've never been so turned on as when we were talking. Neither was I. But I think I'll be even more excited in a little bit."

He used his thumbs to lower the silk from her hips and helped her step out of her sandals before kissing his way up her body. "Tell me you want this. Tell me you want us to lie down on my bed and make love. Tell me you want me to touch and taste every bit of you."

Megan held his gaze and his hand as she backed toward the bed. When her legs were against it, she managed to kneel and continue backing up until she was in the middle of the bed. She refused to let go of his hand so Drake had no choice but to follow. "I want all of it. Everything you said. Everything we talked about. I want you, Drake. I need you," she whispered as she pressed herself against him.

Drake kissed her repeatedly, teasing her with light touches until she was squirming in his arms. Only then did he urge her to her back, stretching out beside her, prodding her hip with his erection. He knew she was remembering his words when she circled his neck and pulled him closer for a kiss.

When he didn't move, Megan drew her lips away from his. "Make love to me. I need to feel you inside me."

Drake watched her face as he rolled on a condom and settled between her open thighs. He took a moment to fondle her breasts, toying with her nipples until she whimpered before caressing his way to her mound. Megan's eyes were half closed when he slid his fingers into her opening. He wanted her fully aroused before he entered her. Drake smiled at discovering she was as wet as she claimed to be. He couldn't resist rubbing her engorged clit when Megan spread her legs even wider, making herself more accessible.

"Please," she whispered.

"Shh," Drake continued to stroke her. "No rush, remember? I want you ready so I don't hurt you."

"I am ready," she declared as her hips rose, bringing her sensitive flesh against his hand. "As ready as I know you are. I felt how hard your cock is. You want to be inside my pussy as much as I want you there. I know you do. Tell me."

Drake groaned, pressing against her thigh. "You're right. I do want to be inside you."

Megan's hand covered his, helping to guide him to her core. "God, you're big. I know I'll stretch around you but I'm still a little scared."

"We'll go slowly. A little bit at a time. We have all night," he soothed her with words as he pushed in just the tip of his cock.

She gasped, her wide eyes never leaving his. "More," she urged when he hesitated. "I need more." He stopped with just the head inside. "Oh my God."

"Hold still, sweetheart. Relax and let your body adjust. I'm not going to desert you."

"Relax? You can't be serious! Relax. I have a little bit of a huge cock in my pussy and you're telling me to relax. I want the rest of it so bad I could scream. I can relax later. Stop teasing me and start moving."

Drake chuckled. "You trying to goad me into losing control? Forget it, Megan. Not gonna work." He pushed in a little further. "Not this time. You're so tight that I know I'll hurt you if I give in so I won't no matter what you say."

"But you feel so good."

"So do you." Drake lowered his body to keep her from shifting her hips against him. He groaned when he felt her legs wrap around his waist. "Megan, please. Let's do this my way this time and then I'll do anything you want."

"Anything?"

He swore. "Anything within reason."

"Is hard and fast and out of our minds with lust within reason?"

"Depends. One, I have to live through this time first. Two, you have to give me time to recover. Three, you have to be positive it's what you want."

Megan lessened the pressure against his hips and surrendered herself to Drake's kiss. She managed to hold still as he worked more of his shaft into her. "Ooh," she panted when his hand found her breast. "Not fair."

"Fair? We're making love not playing a game. No one ever said this had to be fair."

"Drake," she cried, arching against him as he continued to stretch her. Instinctively, her inner muscles started an intimate massage.

"Oh Christ," he gasped, finally burying himself completely. "Talk about not being fair."

"Hey, you're the one who said this didn't have to be," she reminded him, tightening her legs to ensure he was as deep as possible.

Slowly, Drake began to move. He kept his strokes small at first, lengthening them as Megan's body responded. He held her gaze the whole time, watching for any hint of discomfort and showing her his desire. It took all his self-control not to lose himself in the sensation of her flesh. Soon he could feel her arousal racing to the peak. She was writhing beneath him, crying out his name as her orgasm began. Her waves of pleasure took him over the top with her, leaving them both trembling.

About to collapse, Drake rolled to his side with Megan in his arms. Between pants, he kissed her forehead and whispered her name. When she tried to shift so she could look at him, he resisted, holding her closer instead.

"Stop hiding and look at me, Drake," she finally said when he continued to avoid her. "Tell me how guilty you feel now that you're thinking about what we just did."

"Megan."

"I mean it," she stated firmly, wiggling in his embrace. "Let go."

"Christ," he released her, dealt with the condom and flopped on his back, covering his eyes with his arm. "It's not what you're thinking."

"Really? That's good because I was thinking that you're feeling as good as I am and that's bringing on a major guilt attack because you don't think you should since your wife isn't the other half of this incredible moment."

"Okay, it is what you're thinking. Megan, I..."

"Don't say it. Please just don't say it. It's not like we didn't know this was going to happen. But if you apologize I'm going to feel guilty too and I don't want to because if I do the feeling'll end. It's still so good that I want it to last a little while longer."

"It is good, isn't it?" He smiled, beneath his arm.

"Mm." She snuggled against him, resting her arm across his chest. After countless minutes she said, "Grown men are so much better than boys."

Her comment made Drake laugh. He finally looked at her and saw the uncertainty in her eyes. "Thank you, Megan. I'm okay now. It'll take some time but, if you can stand talking to me like you just did, I know I can get a handle on this guilt thing."

"So you're interested in doing this again?"

"Hell yes! That is, if you are too. I mean, maybe I'm assuming things I shouldn't but you didn't run away yet so I thought that meant that you're okay with this..."

Megan put her fingers on his lips to silence him. "I am perfectly fine. At first, I was concerned with you and how you were going to react. Then I couldn't think of anything except how you were making me feel. I forgot that I was afraid of men and that I should be panicking at the thought of being with one."

"Are you afraid now?"

"Honestly, no. Not of you. I wouldn't be here if I didn't trust you not to hurt me. I think it was the situation that I would have run from, not you personally."

"Hmm, then can I suggest that you limit this situation to me?"

"I kind of thought that was understood. I know we haven't talked about it but I assumed you were interested in an exclusive relationship not a jumping off point to get you back out there." Megan cringed and turned beet red. "You were teasing me when you said that to show that your mind is back with me again. Damn, I'm so stupid."

"Shh. Don't get me started on that again. You know how I feel when I hear you putting yourself down."

"Give me a break. I'm new at this teasing stuff, remember? Not to mention that I just had the best orgasm of my life. You're damned lucky that I can think at all let alone catch something subtle like that."

"You're saying I should be more blunt when we talk after making love?"

"For now at least. Maybe I'll get better at this after part eventually but, for now, you have to keep things simple. After all, this is the first real conversation that I ever had after it was over so I really have no idea how this part works."

"God you're beautiful." Drake cupped her cheek. "You're looking at me with those big brown eyes of yours that are still sparkling almost as much as they were when you were begging for more of my cock and sounding to me like you think we're done for the night."

"We're not? I wasn't sure if you'd want more tonight or if you needed some time to think about it."

Drake took her hand from his chest and guided it to his groin. He closed his over it, urging her to wrap her fingers around his renewed erection. "Is this blunt enough or would you prefer me to actually tell you how much I want you again?"

"Oh my," Megan purred, running her fingers along his length. "I think you're bigger than you were before."

"Might be now that I've had a sample of how you make me feel."

"Maybe I should show you again, just to make sure."

"Up to you. We had a deal and you did your half of it. All you have to do is tell me what you want now and I'll do it."

"Within reason, of course."

"Of course."

Megan kissed him as Drake lay passively, waiting for her instructions. She continued to fondle him as she licked her way down his body, pausing only to nibble on his nipples. Drake knew she wasn't paying attention to anything other than her intended goal so he gently maneuvered her from her position at his side to one where her knees were closer to his head. When her mouth captured his penis, he urged her thighs open, giving him access to her core. He resisted his desire to stroke her, afraid that if he touched her too soon he wouldn't be able to coax her to where he really wanted her. He whispered words of encouragement as he raised one leg and quickly slid his head between her knees.

Megan gasped when Drake's mouth claimed his prize. She hadn't noticed what he was doing until she felt his tongue lapping against her sensitive skin. "Hey! Who said you could do that?" She tried to sound fierce but failed miserably when he wiggled his fingers inside her pussy.

"No one said I couldn't so I figured it would be all right," he explained, making sure she could feel his breath. Pausing to suck her swollen nub, he eventually asked, "Want me to stop?"

"No," Megan moaned as her arousal built. She was so distracted that she stopped tormenting him with her mouth and merely held him in both hands, resting her head on his thigh. "Oh my God. Ohmygod. Oh. My. God."

"I can't tell if that's one word or three," he commented between kisses. "You're so sweet. I could do this all night if you'd let me."

"Draaaaake," she drew it out as she moaned.

"That's it. I can feel it. You're ready to come. Let go for me."

Megan bucked out of control until his arm anchored her in position. Her knees were shaking as his tongue refused to stop long enough for her to calm down completely. "Wait. I can't."

"You sure? I think you can. Up to you but I think you don't really want me to stop. I think you want to come again."

"Yes," Megan hissed as he touched her more directly. "Oh yes. Drake," she cried as he pushed her over the edge again. He kept her exploding continually above him until she pleaded for him to let her go.

"Not fair," she eventually declared. "You said I could ask you for anything."

"True but you didn't ask. Since tonight is mutual I couldn't just lie here and do nothing. Especially when you were so close and so tempting. How could I resist?"

"But you distracted me and I didn't do anything for you. Not very mutual, was it?"

"You did do something for me. You gave me the pleasure of tasting your pleasure. Of sharing it with my tongue and fingers when you squeezed your pretty pussy around them every time you let go. I may be a grown man with more control than the average teenager but that doesn't mean I have unlimited stamina. I can't climax over and over

again like you can. If I tried to match you one for one I'd be exhausted before you even got warmed up."

"Hmm, I guess that makes sense," she agreed as she unconsciously pressed herself against his thigh.

"Christ, you're hot," Drake groaned when she shivered. He couldn't resist squeezing the nipple that grazed his chest every time she moved.

"No." She grabbed his wrist. "My turn."

"Maybe. If you ever get around to telling me what you want. Until then you're forcing me to improvise."

"All right, Drake. I'll tell you." She slid away from him and sat up. "Since you made us go so slowly earlier and I should probably thank you for that because you were right and since you just made sure I was very ready for you, I want you hard and fast and out of control, losing your mind with lust. Specific enough for you?"

"Not really." Drake sat facing her. "I'll assume you want my cock inside your pussy again but other than that and the fact that you don't want a repeat of slow and gentle, you haven't told me anything. I can't get to you with how you're sitting now so I don't have any clue as to how you want us arranged. Maybe you should try again."

"Oh." She blushed. "Guess you can tell I never got to make this choice before either."

"Which once again proves how inept teenagers are. Although there are men who would argue with me, I personally like not calling the shots all the time. Yeah, sure, sometimes I want things my way but other times I'd rather be told what to do. I'm secure enough to let a woman use my body however she wants to. Giving up control does not make me a pushover. It makes me half of a sharing and giving partnership. Being a man doesn't give me the exclusive right to dictate how we make love."

"I may be wrong here but I suspect you're not an average man. I'd say that attitude is pretty unique and not many guys are like you are."

"Maybe. Maybe not. So are you ready to use me or can I go back to improvising for now? I can't be this close to you, knowing how turned on you are and keep my hands to myself. Either tell me how you want me or let me suck your nipples while you're deciding. They were made for my mouth and I can't resist much longer with them poking out at me like that."

"Really? You can't resist these?" She tormented him by fondling herself. "You want to put your lips on these and see if they get any harder?"

"Megan," he hissed. "You know I want to so why are you killing me like this? Say I can suck you."

"Nope, sorry." She giggled. "Not just now. Got something else planned for you at the moment."

"Tell me," he urged, thoroughly enjoying the expression on her face. "Please, sweetheart. I'll do anything. Just let me touch you somewhere."

"Oh I'll let you do more than that," she stated before turning away from him. Megan dropped so she was on her hands and knees with her ass toward Drake. "This is how I want me to be when you ram your big, fat cock into my tight pussy, Drake. I want you to scoot closer and take me from behind. I know you can see how wet I am. Hard and fast. I'm ready and so are you so I want you now."

"You're making me insane," Drake declared as he covered himself and grasped her hips.

"Good. That makes two of us." Megan moaned as he entered her fully the first stroke. "Oh yeah, that's it."

Drake started to thrust as she slammed back against him. "Like this?"

"Harder. Ooh. Don't stop. Pound me with your cock."

"Christ you're so tight. I bet you can feel every inch of me, can't you? I bet you feel me so deep inside that you think I'm going to get stuck and we'll have to stay this way forever."

"Yeah. More. I can feel your balls slapping me."

"You like that, don't you? Bet you'll like this even better." He reached one arm around her waist and covered her mound with his hand. Soon his fingers found her clit and tugged it in time with his thrusts.

Megan's senses exploded. She lowered her head to the bed. She would have collapsed if Drake weren't wrapped around her hips.

"Un-uh. We're not done here. You said you wanted hard, fast and out of control. Well that's what I'm giving you so don't even try to get away from me now."

Megan responded with a whimper. Drake suspected she had no idea what she had asked for but she'd pushed him too far to stop now unless she honestly told him to. Since she hadn't and her hips were meeting his again, he took that as encouragement and continued to pump wildly.

"Oh yeah. That's what I like to feel. Come around my cock and show me how much you like it." He pounded against her. "One more and I'll be with you. Let go for me again. Make me come too now." Drake felt her muscles spasm. "God, that's good," he shouted as his body tensed and his passion exploded.

This time, Drake slumped onto Megan's back, covering her damp body with his own. His breathing was ragged and his heart was pounding wildly. Every nerve was screaming with pleasure as he wrapped himself thoroughly around the woman who caused it. Finally, he calmed down enough to shift slightly to his side, keeping his flesh buried in hers, not ready to lose the intimate connection.

Megan pulled his arms even tighter and whispered, "Wow."

"Yeah."

"Are we dead?"

"Maybe. Don't think so. Just paralyzed."

"Mm, good. Didn't want you to let go anyway."

"Can't."

"Don't."

"Won't," he sighed against her neck, giving in to the same exhaustion that claimed Megan.

Chapter Twelve

Megan was pulling chairs off the tables when Gwynne startled her by flopping into the one she had just put on the floor.

"So?" Gwynne prompted expectantly.

"Hey Gwynne. What's up?" Megan greeted her friend casually.

"Don't even try to pretend like you don't know exactly what I mean. This is me, remember? I can see right through every act you have so stop stalling and tell me already."

Megan sighed and took the chair next to her friend. "It was so incredible. Why didn't you ever tell me it was supposed to be like this?"

"Hmm, let me think a minute," Gwynne teased her. "Maybe because you wouldn't have believed me anyway? Or perhaps because you had no interest until very recently?"

"Gee, you're probably right," Megan giggled. "You could have at least warned me. I'm stiff in places I didn't even know I had."

Their laughter was cut short when Daryl snarled. "Too much information. Guess that means you spent the night with your professor."

"Stop being such a grump, Daryl. Can't you be just a little bit happy for me?"

"You think I should be happy that you slept with some guy?"

"He's not some guy. He's Drake."

"And that's supposed to mean something? At least you're smiling. Got to give the guy credit for that. Guess that means I won't forbid you to see him again."

"Forbid me? Thanks but for future reference, saying that sort of thing, Dad, is the quickest way to guarantee that a girl will spend more time with a guy, even if she doesn't particularly like him. You might want to keep that in mind when you interrogate your own daughter about who she's involved with."

"Shut up, Megan. I'm having enough trouble dealing with the thought of you having sex. No way am I ready to start thinking about my little girl letting some guy touch her."

"Better get used to the idea," she giggled again.

"Yeah, well let's just see how you handle it when it's Christy we're talking about. Bet it won't be so amusing then."

"Oh God." Megan paled. "Do you think I'll be around for that?"

Gwynne squeezed her arm. "Do you want to be?"

Megan stared in shock before she nodded. "Yeah, I think I do."

"Told you so, Daryl." Gwynne gave her husband a smug look. "I knew she wouldn't have sex last night unless she was already in love with him."

"Love!" Megan exclaimed. "Who said anything about love?"

"Megan," Gwynne interrupted her. "Still me here. Look me straight in the eye and tell me last night was strictly about sex with no emotional involvement." She waited. "I promise it's not as scary as it seems once you get used to it. Here, it might be easier if you think of it this way. How you felt last night? It's even better as you're more and more in love."

Megan groaned and covered her face. "I can't do this."

"Sure you can." Daryl patted her shoulder. "How close were you to calling off tonight?"

His question confused her. "Very," Megan answered.

"And what about him? Was he as close to ditching his friends?"

"Closer."

"Yep, you're in love. If it was only lust, neither one of you would have given a second thought about being irresponsible and blowing off your previous commitments. You didn't do that since you're planning on being around each other whether you consciously know that or not."

"I have to think about that one," Megan muttered as she ended the discussion by going back to the chairs.

* * * * *

Drake was completely lost in the memory of his marathon night with Megan. His mind was reliving one of the many times they had made love after they walked into his apartment the previous evening. He hoped she was having better luck concentrating than he was. Maybe the extra sleep she got would help. He hadn't been able to close his eyes and stop watching her after she collapsed in his arms. Even though he knew it wasn't a dream, he had still been afraid she'd disappear if he wasn't looking at her. Instead of dozing when she did, he remained awake, gently stroking her back to help relax her even more. Maybe he'd offer her a massage when she got home. She had to be stiff, with all they had done together.

Mike dropped his arm over Drake's shoulders to get his attention as they followed the group into the club they'd reserved for the after hours party. "How you holding up? Last stop and then we'll take you home to your honey."

"Sorry, Mike," Drake replied. "I probably should have stayed home instead of tagging along and ignoring you like this."

"Wrong! Think how much longer tonight would have been if you were sitting there all alone. At least being with us is helping pass the time. And don't say another word about ignoring me. I love seeing that look on your face. Reminds me of me when Sue and I first got together. Tell you what we're gonna do. You're going to ride along and

keep me company while we drop off everyone else. That way you'll have just enough time for a long, hot shower before Megan gets home. I'll get Harry to drop Art off first," Mike added for persuasion. "He's got to be getting on your nerves by now but don't let it get under your skin. He's the pathetic one, not us. Think how much he's missing by not having someone worth committing to in his life. Makes me feel sorry for him even though he has been an asshole all night."

Drake managed to laugh and agree. He didn't even mind when he walked into the club and found that Art had saved the chair next to his so he could continue harassing him as he had all evening.

Art elbowed Drake in the side and nodded toward the waitress leaning down beside the bar with her back to them. "Take a look at that one. Bet she's a tasty little piece. Man that ass is hot. I'd like to line her up just like she is and climb right in behind her. Wouldn't even make her take off those work boots she's wearing. Just yank that top of hers right up so I can reach around and grab those titties. Yep, one hand on those puppies and the other wrapped up in that hair like it was a mane. Oh yeah, I'd pull that head back real good while I was riding her. I'd give her a fuck that was better than any workout she's ever had."

"Shut up, Art. Christ, you're even more of an asshole tonight than you usually are. I'm sure she heard every word you just said."

"What's the big deal? She's paid to be here. Probably gets paid for a lot more than just listening to the customers too, if you get my drift."

"Would you just stop? How do you know she's not the bartender's wife who works here so they can spend more time together? Or maybe she just got married and they're saving up for their first house? Not every woman in short shorts and a suggestive top is a whore. Maybe she's just dressed for the job."

"Oh right. And not every waitress is as pure as yours is, buddy. Get your head out of the clouds for a few minutes and do a reality check."

Drake saw the others at their table glare at Art's comments. None of them spoke because the waitress was approaching them.

"Hi boys," she said. "Sorry for the delay but I promise I'm all yours for the rest of the party. Now what's your pleasure?" The woman smiled at each of them individually until she reached Drake and Art.

Art's snort broke the spell. "Holy shit, it's Elvira in a Daisy Duke getup! Son of a bitch, if this don't beat all. Hats off to you buddy. Didn't know you stepped up to the big leagues, first time up to bat."

Megan shook herself into action and managed to take their order before Art could say more. She returned with their drinks and forced herself to smile and tease even though she had gone numb the instant Drake looked at her. And now he was gone.

"Lu Lu," Daryl's voice cut through the fog. "Go see if everything's ready in the kitchen."

Megan didn't question him even though it was the first time he'd ever asked her to do that and she was sure there was no need for her in the kitchen.

Daryl waited until Megan was gone before he followed Drake to the parking lot where he'd retreated with the excuse of needing air. "Professor," he nodded when Drake looked up to see who was behind him.

"Daryl, I presume." Drake could barely breathe. "I must be the biggest fool in the world, you know that? I actually thought Megan changed at work to avoid being seen in an old-fashioned waitress dress that they used to wear in diners. How stupid could I be? You don't put in a tanning booth for your employees unless having tanned employees benefits your business no matter how nice a guy you are. Christ, she told me she works at a bar that has after hours parties. What the hell did I think that meant, you give tea parties to people who like to stay out late? Art running his mouth off was bad enough even before I realized he was saying all that shit about Megan."

Daryl waited patiently until he ran out of steam. "You about done here?"

"Yeah. Don't worry. You don't have to kick me out. I'll wait in the van until the others are ready to go."

"Huh?" Daryl stared. "Why'd you think I wouldn't want you to come back in? You were the one defending her even before you knew who she was."

"What? How do you know that?"

"Simple. I read lips. My grandfather opened his tavern fifty years ago and do you know what he taught me? Doesn't matter that he has a family bar and I don't. Some things apply to both. One, run an honest business. Treat people fairly and show respect and most will do the same with you. Two, take care of your employees. Without them, you don't have a business. Three, head off trouble whenever possible. It's always easier to prevent things from getting out of hand if you stop them before they start. Gramps said that studying body language could only do so much. Reading lips could give you the extra advantage you need. I know why Megan let herself trust you when you first met now."

"Not that it'll do me any good."

"Do you know why I followed you out here?"

"Honestly, no since you don't seem to want to make sure I stay out here. Oh. If you're about to hit me please try to avoid my face. It's going to be hard enough, explaining to Christy why Megan won't speak to me anymore without having bruises where she can see them."

"Hit you? You gonna do something incredibly stupid like hurting her? Before you answer let me tell you that I love my wife more than anything else in the world. But there is very little I wouldn't do for Megan. She's one of the rare ones. And she deserves the best after all the shit she's been through. Such a waste, her blaming herself all this time. Frankly, Gwynne was the tease, not Megan. No, Megan was always very upfront with everyone, saying she'd go out with them but only as one of the group, not as a couple. Tell me something? Do you love her?"

Drake sighed. "Yeah. What the hell am I going to do? I saw the look on her face. I know how much my reaction hurt her."

"Yeah but I saw the look on your face every time she refused to look directly at you. Since she met you, Megan has been more like she was years ago. You saw the way she stiffened up but kept the comments flowing with your friends. She pulled herself together like she does when she goes into hiding and forced herself to play the part. She put on her Lu Lu face and got back to work."

"I noticed that on her name tag."

"Part of the illusion. Actually it was Gwynne's idea. Right after we opened there was a guy who got very explicit in what he wanted to do to her. For some reason, she couldn't shake it off the way she usually could. The next day she decided to make the comments less personal by using a different name. She made a game out of it, getting all the girls to pick a new name that they'd remember to answer to but would let them distance themselves from the things some guys said to them."

"It took me a long time to understand this but Megan works here to prove to herself that what happened at the frat house wasn't her fault. Every time she gets home safely she's made it through another few hours of responding to men in what could be called a teasing manner without being punished for it. Are you going to punish her for coming to work and doing her job or are you going to prove to me that Megan wasn't wrong to trust you?"

"How can I do that when she won't even look at me?" Drake laughed harshly. "Did she tell you I offered her a key right after she told me what happened to her? I tried to give it to her in case she got scared in the middle of the night and needed someone to hold her. And now I'm the one who's scared and needs to be held. I don't stand a chance of getting a ride home with her. How am I going to convince her to open the door and talk to me?"

"When Megan told us about your wife I tried to imagine how I'd feel if I lost Gwynne like that. I don't think I came close to what you went through. When you saw Megan tonight you were surprised at first because you weren't expecting her. Next I'd say you were angry and reacting to what your buddy said to you and last you were hurt. Why were you hurt, Drake?"

"Because I know Megan saw how angry I was and assumed I was angry with her. I've just found her and I love her so much already but now I've hurt her and I'm going to lose her if I can't find a way to explain things to her."

Daryl contemplated Drake's answer, studying him closely before he spoke. "I'm going to do something here that I never thought possible. But before I do I need to make you understand how far out on this limb I'm going for you. If you fuck this up and hurt her, I will hunt you down and kill you very painfully." Drake nodded mutely. "Good. I also need your word that if things don't work out you'll do as much damage control with Megan as you can."

"You mean find a way to put all the blame on me? Oh man I'll try but you know that's not gonna work."

"Yeah. Had to give it a shot though." Daryl shrugged. "Okay here's what we're going to do. You go back in there and sit next to your buddy and make sure he keeps his comments to a minimum. If you don't get him to shut up, I will and I promise you don't want that. You're going to chat pleasantly with the rest of your friends and show them that you don't have a problem with Megan working here if she chooses to. If, by some miracle, you do manage to catch her eye, you're going to give her your most charming smile. Before you leave, I'm going to slip you the key to Megan's apartment that we have in case of an emergency. Give her half an hour after she gets home to come see you. If she doesn't, use the key and tell her what you told me about loving her and being afraid to lose her. I'll take care of making sure she goes straight home as soon as this party breaks up so you shouldn't have that long to wait."

"You mean that? You're going to give me her key?" Drake didn't believe him.

"Yeah. I'd better not be making a mistake here or after I kill you, Gwynne is going to kill me. Keep in mind that what you say could change my life too."

"I can't believe you're doing this."

"Frankly, neither can I, but Megan was honestly happy when she got here today. I'd like her to stay that way."

"Me too." Drake paused. "Can I ask you do to something for me if I can't get her to give me a chance?" Daryl raised an eyebrow. "Megan gave me copies of all her books to send to a friend of mine if I really thought they were publishable. He's written a few novels for preteens so I figured he may know who I should contact. Well, he was very impressed and said he'd show them to his agent. I've been expecting an e-mail all week."

Daryl grinned. "No problem. If this guy is interested and Megan shuts you down, call me. Gwynne and I will make sure she doesn't throw away that kind of opportunity."

Back inside, Drake returned to his seat next to Art. "Hey buddy," Art sneered.

Drake glared so viciously Art stopped talking. "Listen very carefully because I will only say it once." Drake's tone was deadly as he lowered his voice so no one else could hear. "If you say one more thing tonight that is in any way derogatory or off-color, about any woman, not just Megan, I will cut out your tongue with the dulllest knife I can find. Then I will turn you over to that very large gentleman over there at the bar to finish explaining why you need to learn when to quit. He and Megan have been friends for a long time and he's extremely protective of her. Look around, Art before you say something stupid like I won't get away with it. You've been acting like an asshole and running your mouth all night and I'm fairly certain they've had enough of you, especially since most of them are in relationships. Do you seriously want to find out if they'll step in on your behalf once they see how furious I am?"

Art blinked back his first reply and sat there, staring at Drake with his mouth hanging open. "Wait. You really didn't know she worked here?"

"No, I didn't. When she talked about working in her friends' bar she said she'd prefer if I didn't go there because I'd make her nervous. It never occurred to me to ask for the name of the place until she was ready for me to stop in and see her."

"Son of a bitch, Drake, I'm sorry. I thought you knew and set me up to get a rise out of me."

"In all the years you've known me have I ever done something like that? Even you should have realized how unlikely that scenario was."

"Yeah. Guess I was out of line after I saw it was her."

"You were out of line the second you spotted her bending over that box. Hell, Art you've been out of line all night. You used to be a little crude when we went out with the guys. Now you're just plain offensive most of the time. It's your business how you want people to see you but, as much as I appreciate you helping me get a fresh start, I just don't know if I can deal with you socially anymore, especially if I'm not alone. Megan's a grown woman who knows how to handle men who are pigs but what about Christy? Honestly, I don't trust you to censure yourself in front of her at the moment."

"You're right." Art slumped. "I won't make excuses because there aren't any. Instead, I'll just say I'm sorry again and shut up unless I have something decent to add to the conversation. I owe Megan an apology. Probably the other guys too. I'll take care of them on the way home. And next time she's at the bar, I'll go talk to her. Don't worry, I'll be on my best behavior."

Drake glanced at Daryl to get his opinion, since he was paying close attention to their discussion. When Daryl gave him a small nod, Drake said, "Fine. Just make sure you remember what I told you. If she looks even the slightest bit upset, I'll be on you so fast."

Mike snagged Megan's hand to keep her at the table between him and Bill. "Please talk to us for just a second Megan. Is it okay to call you that or should I use Lu Lu while we're here?"

He looked so genuinely concerned that Megan relaxed a bit. "Megan's fine since it's a private party and you already know who I am anyway."

"Oh I get it now. Lu Lu's like a stage name." Bill grinned. "Keeps you anonymous with the riffraff. Too bad we brought the worst one with us."

"I can't tell you how much I wish we hadn't come here tonight," Mike said sincerely.

"It was my idea. I heard about this place and thought it sounded good way to end up the night," Bill explained. "With everything spelled out and so strict, I figured it would keep us from getting too wild. Since I told everybody we wouldn't be allowed in if we were out of control when we got here and one of the rules is having a designated driver, I wouldn't have to remind anyone that we were celebrating in Mike's honor and we should have fun but keep it mellow, like the gatherings are at his place."

"I thought it was a great plan because I really didn't want a drunken bash with a bunch of strippers, which is what Art was pushing for before Bill overruled him," Mike added. "I'm guessing Drake was as surprised as the rest of us." Megan nodded. "I half expected him to beg off tonight until I remembered that you were working. Even though he's been physically with us, his mind has been on you the whole time. I saw the look on your face when you came back and he wasn't here. Again, I'm just guessing but I'm pretty sure Drake went outside to calm down so he wouldn't beat Art like we all want to, not whatever reason you came up with.

"What I'm trying to say in all this floundering around here is that you need to talk to him. I was watching you last night too, remember? Don't throw away what you started while you were dancing because of something some jerk said."

"We haven't known Drake all that long," Bill joined in. "But it's not hard to see what a decent guy he is. With all he's been through, he still cares. One look at Christy and it's obvious that she adores him and what a great dad he is. His students worship him because he manages to point out what they're doing right instead of just how they can improve."

Mike took over. "He finds the good in people, even people like Art who make it difficult to bother. Drake's spent most of the night acting as a buffer although I'm not sure he realizes it. Art's been riding him about the silly grin he's had on his face since we picked him up and Drake just kept on smiling. It was impossible to miss the things Art said when we first got here and the comments he made to Drake after he recognized you. The rest of us know how wrong Art is. We understand you're dressed for the job. We also know that the image may scream wanton and willing but the woman behind it is warm and kind and friendly. No matter how sexy you look and trust me, you look as hot as hell," Mike grinned as Bill agreed, "you're still the same sweet girl we met last night. Drake knows that, Megan. I know he does."

Megan maintained her frozen smile. "Thanks guys. You really don't have to worry about me. I'd hate to ruin your party any more than I already have."

"Forget it," Bill urged. "Most of us aren't big party animals at heart. We'd rather hang out and shoot the shit than act like fools anyway. You'll see Tuesday at our cookout. You are still coming, right?"

"I don't know." Megan glanced at Drake nervously but dropped her eyes without seeing his smile.

"Talk to him when you get home tonight. I'd bet my life he'll be waiting at the door for you. It's all just a misunderstanding anyway. Straighten it out and I promise not to gloat about how right I am when you get there Tuesday," Mike encouraged. "At least think about it before you reject all of us. We had as much fun as you seemed to while we were eating. We'd like to get to know you better too, not just Drake and Christy."

"Thanks. And I will think about it," she mumbled before she rushed to the bar and began to rinse glasses as an excuse to stay there.

Art waited for Megan to look up before he spoke. "Just give me two minutes and I swear I'll never bother you again." Megan stared mutely. "Okay. I suck at this but here goes. I want to apologize for acting like a pig and saying all those disgusting things when we first got here. Not that it matters but I've always been on the crude side and lately, I've been outdoing myself. Don't hold my lewdness against Drake. He's not responsible for my personality flaws. He can't help that I ignore him when he tells me to shut up." Art paused but Megan merely stood there, watching him.

"He may be my one true friend but that still hasn't stopped me from constantly abusing his good nature. Honestly, I don't know why he puts up with me." Art snorted. "I introduced them, him and Claire. She was in class with me. Wouldn't even give me the time of day until she bumped into me when Drake was with me. Thought I was gonna get lucky for a minute there since I never hid the fact that I'd gladly be her slave but then I noticed how she couldn't keep her eyes off him. Didn't take long before I was the odd man out. Drake was too nice to tell me to take a hike outright but Claire wasn't.

"She cornered me before class and made it extremely clear that I needed to stop tagging along all the time and give them some space or she would carve me out of Drake's life so fast my head wouldn't stop spinning for a week. After that, I backed off and Claire tolerated me. I never thought they'd last but Drake softened her enough that they worked. She even stopped torturing me for being in love with her by the time they got married. I'm sure he knew but he pretended he didn't. Never said a word about it because he knew her heart was his.

"Then there was the accident and Drake brought Christy here. For months, I tried to get him to go out, even if it was just to socialize a little. His standard answer was thanks but no thanks, no matter what I suggested. When he mentioned you, I couldn't believe it. I thought he'd finally gone without too long and caved. Encouraged him to nail you until he started getting that far away look on his face.

"Bet he didn't tell you that I accused you of doing that first Cricket book so you could use Christy to get to him. I mean, no way could you be as good as you seemed. I couldn't accept that Drake managed to stumble across another woman who was as perfect for him as Claire was. Every time he brought you up, I did my best to tear you down. The more he ignored me, the worse I got. You heard a prime example tonight. What you didn't hear was Drake's ultimatum when he came back in. Seems I've pushed his tolerance to the limit. I can either learn to keep my mouth shut or give up my only friend. You know what makes this even worse? You are exactly the type of woman I always pictured him with. You're already as good together as they were. You'll be even better with time. Which is why you can't let this come between you. He's mad at me, not you. Hell, if I'd greeted you like the other guys did, we'd all be having a good laugh instead of holding our breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"You should let this side of you show," Megan stated. "You're almost likable right now, Art."

"Thanks. So you'll talk to him? You won't avoid each other?"

"Look, I know you mean well but what you said earlier wasn't even close to the worst I've heard. Your assumptions are very common and honestly, the things guys say about me don't even register anymore. I just play them up and use them to get bigger tips. Guess that says a lot about me, huh Art? Who was I kidding, thinking a guy who blushes when one of his students bats her eyelashes at him and an impressionable child would actually want someone like me hanging around? I get it now. Don't worry, Art. Your friend is safe from my bad influence. I should probably thank you for pointing it out to me but I'm just not feeling very grateful at the moment so if you'll excuse me..." Megan flashed him a phony smile and dashed into the kitchen before he could stop her. She was still hiding when Daryl came looking for her.

"You surprised me tonight, Lu Lu," he said mildly, ignoring her startled gasp. "I must have missed something because I would have sworn you had more guts than this. Where's your backbone? You know, the one that you used to hold your head up and square your shoulders when most other people would have slunk off and crawled under the nearest rock?"

Megan frowned with confusion. "You and Gwynne wouldn't let me."

"That's right and I'm not going to let you now either," he growled. "Don't make me call in Gwynne for reinforcements. You know I'll do it if you force me."

"Daryl! Stop yelling at me. Hasn't tonight been bad enough already?"

"Tonight is only bad if you make it that way. You're jumping to conclusions and you of all people should know better."

"What's that supposed to mean? You saw how pissed he was. Why couldn't I have listened to you in the first place?"

"Because I was wrong. Because your professor isn't so bad after all. Yeah, he was pissed. But you're making assumptions and that disappoints me. What if I'd believed the things I overheard those frat guys saying about you? What if you hadn't bothered to see beyond how it looked when you found Christy locked out all alone in the hall that morning? I think the least you owe yourself, not to mention him, is a chance to talk about his reaction when he saw you tonight. Especially since that was the only reaction you saw, with the way you avoided him the rest of the time and I know you aren't hearing what all his friends are telling you." Daryl raised her chin so she had to look at him. "Go home, Megan. Go across the hall and talk to the guy. And then call me and tell me you're smiling again so I can get some sleep."

Chapter Thirteen

Drake heard Megan's door close shortly after he got out of the shower. As he paced around his apartment, unable to hold still, he concluded that Daryl must have sent her home as soon as his group left. He checked the clock every minute, silently willing her to open the door. Even before the half hour Daryl recommended had passed, he knew she wasn't coming. It was up to him to make the first move if he wanted to hold on to what they started.

His hands were shaking while he fumbled with her key. Megan's apartment was dark when he let himself in. His heart sank as he considered the possibility that she had gone back out and he'd somehow missed her. Switching on the lamp so he wouldn't trip over anything, he heard a small sob coming from her bedroom.

"I'm scared, Megan," Drake said softly, standing in the doorway. "Can I get in bed with you? Will you hold me?"

Megan sat up and clutched his blanket to her chest, frantically swiping away her tears. "Drake? How'd you get in here?"

"A friend gave me a key when he saw how bad things were. He didn't want me to be alone tonight because he suspected they'd only get worse once I got home."

"Why? What happened to make him decide to take matters into his own hands like this?"

"It's a long story. Can I please sit down?"

Megan couldn't breathe. She was so torn between hope, disbelief and fury that she wasn't able to do anything but stare at him. The longer she remained silent, the more Drake's shoulders slumped. He looked completely broken before Megan managed to snap out of her trance. Not trusting her voice, she responded by lifting the edge of the cover.

Drake sat cautiously, keeping plenty of space between them. Megan understood his hesitation. He had taken such a big risk, coming into her apartment like this. He must have had a very interesting conversation with Daryl earlier, for him to be given her key. The least she could do now was encourage him to say whatever it was that he felt couldn't wait until morning. On the other hand, maybe Drake and Daryl had the right idea. Cut out all the waiting and skip the mind games they'd play during the night instead of sleeping. She already knew what he was going to tell her anyway. He'd give her a very nice little speech about how he'd thought he was ready to start a new relationship but realized that it was still too soon and he hoped they could be friends for Christy's sake. He'd make it sound like it was all him and that seeing her at work had nothing at all to do with his decision. That had to be why Daryl gave him the key, so he could get it over with instantly. For all she knew, Daryl was already on his way so

he'd be there to pick up the pieces after Drake finished breaking her heart. Megan bit her lip to keep herself from crying. She could do this. Losing a guy she met barely two months ago was hardly life-threatening. She'd survived worse. She could keep it together long enough to convince Drake she understood his decision and show him there were no hard feelings. She'd assure him that he didn't need to avoid her. She'd make it clear that Christy would always be welcome to visit and he needn't worry that she'd treat his sweet child any differently.

Megan forced her hand to unclench and patted the bed next to her. "Be easier to hold you if you weren't so far away. I'd scoot over there but I'm afraid you'd wind up on the floor so you better snuggle over here with me." She leaned against the headboard and rested her hand on his shoulder. Megan was surprised to feel Drake tremble when he slid into her arms. "Now why don't you tell me what has you so scared and we'll see if it's really all that bad, okay?"

"Megan." Drake's voice broke. He buried his face against her neck and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Aw, Drake," Megan smoothed back his hair and kissed his forehead. "It'll be okay. I promise."

"Will it really? I'm just so afraid."

"Of what?"

"You. What you were thinking when you first saw me tonight. That all you saw was how angry I was without really knowing why. That the way you avoided meeting my eyes was how it would be whenever we bump into each other, if we bump into each other. That I'd only see your Lu Lu smile and never your Megan smile. That you'll disappear and I'll never see you again."

"Of course we'll see each other. We're neighbors so why wouldn't we see each other?" Megan chose the safe response.

"That's not how I meant it." His arms tightened. "Losing Claire and Jimmy was beyond my control. I had to accept it no matter how much I wanted to fight to get them back because there was no one to fight with. Tonight, I realized how naïve I've been. You told me everything about your job except the name of the bar and I just didn't get it. Somehow I pictured you serving cookies at a Cub Scout meeting instead of drinks to a bunch of horny guys at a bachelor party."

"I'm sorry."

"For what? I'm the one with problems connecting the dots. I'm the one who needs to apologize. We walked in there and Art started spouting off about how he wanted to screw the waitress just because she was bending over in front of us and had tiny shorts that showed off her ass. Even as I told him to shut up and stop assuming she was available for anything other than bringing drinks, I kept thinking about how we'd done pretty much what he was describing and how incredible it had been. Then she turned around and I saw she was you. At first I thought I was hallucinating because I wanted to be with you instead of out with the guys. You heard Art. I was almost as furious at

him as I was at me. Daryl was watching very closely and I momentarily panicked. I thought it would be better if I went to wait outside on my own rather than making him come over and ask me to leave because of how my reaction hurt you.

"You didn't mention that he reads lips," Drake continued. "We had an interesting discussion in the parking lot. Did you know he thinks you only work there so you can keep proving to yourself that what happened that night in college wasn't your fault? He said that meeting me and Christy has made you happier and wanted to know if I was going to find a way to keep you that way. He figured you wouldn't come to me tonight since you wouldn't even look at me, so he slipped me your key.

"I'm so damned scared that I'm going to lose you because I didn't make myself honestly picture you at work even though we talked about how jealous I'd be if I heard other guys coming on to you. My own distorted sense of reality is driving you away from me and I'll do anything to get us back to where we were this morning."

Megan wished that Drake had turned on more lights. The one in the living room sent a soft glow into the hall but didn't reach far enough for her to see him as well as she wanted to at the moment. He sounded sincere and she thought she could believe his words but looking into his eyes would remove any doubts. Too bad she couldn't think of a clever way to switch on the light on the nightstand without looking like a total moron.

"Why were you crying when I got here?" Drake's question startled Megan from her thoughts.

She took a deep breath and made a choice that would decide her future, fueled by the hope that Drake's words inspired. "Because I was scared too. Daryl and your friends all tried to tell me that I jumped to the wrong conclusion and that I needed talk to you. Poor Mike was more concerned about us than he was about how I ruined his party." She laughed sadly. "We've never had a bachelor party where the guys completely ignored the dancer before. She would have been pissed if she hadn't gotten such a big tip. Then I think she felt almost guilty for taking it since she didn't really do much."

"Sweetheart, you're avoiding my question. And yes, they all told me about what they said to you on the way home. Even Art thinks I shouldn't let you get away. Quite a compliment considering he was so in love with Claire. Yeah, I always knew that, just like she did. I also knew that he didn't want to be and it would be extremely awkward if I ever brought it up so we never talked about it. When we dropped him off Art insisted that he's looking forward to verbally sparring with you and all but begged me not to ruin the fun for him. Now that he understands, he's fascinated at the way you brought out Lu Lu when he confronted you last night but let her slide away once we all started talking over dinner."

"Brought out Lu Lu?" Megan questioned. "It's just my bar name, not some sort of mask I slap on at will."

"I think it is, Megan. When I first got here I could practically hear your mind working to brace yourself against me. What were you thinking?"

Megan couldn't stand not seeing him anymore and turned on the light. "Honestly?" Drake nodded after he shifted so he could study her face as well. "I was telling myself that I could handle it when you told me you'd changed your mind and decided against being more than just friends. I was going to hide how much it hurt that you didn't want someone like me around Christy and was trying to figure out how I could continue to be around her and hide how badly I wanted to have what was starting between us."

"Wait. You were letting me crawl in next to you and holding onto me until I calmed down even though you thought I'd come to say I didn't want to be with you because you wear provocative clothes at work and can ignore the crude suggestions you get? You thought you'd act like it didn't matter to you and give me a pat on the head before you sent me on my merry way? Were you going to thank me for showing you that not all men wanted to punish you and that you could handle some guy touching you? Were you going to smile and encourage me to find a nice girl who would fit into my simple little life?"

"You're twisting things," Megan stated, horrified by his questions yet amazed that he'd made them without any hint of bitterness. "You're a good man, Drake. I didn't want to create a scene because I didn't want you to think you had to worry about me. We agreed not to hide things. Well, I admit that it'd hurt, hearing you say you didn't want to continue in the direction we'd started but that's my problem, not yours. I'm a big girl with some very good friends who give me plenty of moral support. I don't need you to feel responsible for what I go through after you leave."

Drake frowned. "I guess I should say thanks for the thought but there's one huge problem with your scenario. I'm not walking away unless you convince me you want me to. That you, Megan, not Lu Lu, wants me out of your life. Lu Lu is bold and brassy and can take on anyone and anything. But Megan, my Megan, is a very sensitive and caring woman. A woman I love so much it causes physical pain to think of life on my own now that I've had a glimpse of what it's like with you in it."

"Wh-what?"

"I said I love you, Megan. I want you in my life."

"Drake." Megan's frown grew as she stared at him.

After a tension-filled silence, Drake stated, "Rule number eleven of couplehood. When your partner bares his soul and offers his heart, it's best if you respond quickly. Good response that makes his world soar or bad response that sends him crashing on the rocks. Either way, it doesn't matter, well it does but even a bad response is kinder than leaving him stuck out on the limb, twisting in the wind with it about to break." She still gaped mutely.

"Maybe I can make this easier for you. How about multiple choice? A, you think I'm an even bigger asshole than Art and wonder why you ever gave me a second look and want me out of your bed before you call the police. B, you're not sure you want to

get more involved but find me amusing so are willing to tolerate my presence as long as I refrain from all heavy emotional discussions in the future. C, the idea of my loving you isn't repulsive but you're not sure how you feel so you want me to back off and let you think about it."

"You forgot D."

"D?"

"Mm, D. Multiple choice questions always have a D."

"All right, I'm sure I can come up with a D."

"I already have. D and yes, this is my final answer. D, I love you too and am so happy that you weren't disgusted with me earlier and will let me make it up to you for being too much of a coward to look at you the rest of the night."

"D? You're sure it's D?" Drake asked hopefully.

"Positive. I love you, Drake. I think I have since the first day when you realized that Christy was safe. God, now I'm really scared."

"Me too but I know we'll be fine. We'll lean on each other when it gets overwhelming and then it won't seem so huge."

"Thank you. For knowing I would try to hide and not letting me. I wanted to come talk to you but I couldn't. I was too afraid you'd toss me out."

"Never." Drake brushed her lips.

Megan responded instantly by opening her mouth and using her tongue to encourage him to deepen the kiss. She was confused and disappointed when he drew away. "Drake, what's wrong? I thought..."

"You thought right and I promise we'll get back to that in just a minute but there's something I need to show you first." He sat up and released her completely. "Trust me?" She nodded, her expression filled with questions. "Read this." He pulled a folded paper from his pocket and handed it to her.

Megan's features changed as she read. When she was finished, she looked at Drake with stunned disbelief. "Is this real? It can't be."

"It is. I assure you that this isn't some hoax I made up to tease you. I sent your books to my friend and he forwarded them to his agent, who showed them to a publisher. This email came after I left tonight. They think your books are as great as I do. If you're willing to share them with kids everywhere all you have to do is call him and say yes. They want to publish what you've done so far and are interested in seeing anything else you do in the future."

"Oh wow." Megan felt as if her world was spinning out of control. "Published. Me. Me, Drake. Published."

Drake laughed and hugged her. "Don't sound so surprised sweetheart. You're good. Why wouldn't they want to publish you?"

Megan sat back and considered the idea. "I guess if I do it I'd get paid enough so I wouldn't have to work at the bar anymore. That would probably be good. You know, because of us."

"Whoa, hold up. What does one have to do with the other? I will never tell you where you can or can not work. I may not like other men ogling you and fantasizing about taking you home but it's not my place to make you switch jobs. I might have a different opinion if you worked somewhere seedy but I have no doubt that Daryl will protect you if need be. I trust you. If you tell me you're not sharing your body with anyone but me, I believe you. I worry about you driving home late at night but I'll do that no matter where you work or what time it is. Don't ever make a decision like this based on me. And don't think of this as an either/or choice. You can work at the bar and have your books published. You could spend your days off painting scenes on nursery walls too, if the conversation at dinner last night was any indication. Don't limit yourself by thinking you can't do something if it's what you want to do without giving it a try. I'll give you my opinion on anything you want and probably lots of things you don't but in the end, the decision of what you do is yours."

"You really mean that."

"Absolutely. I'm fairly easy to get along with. I don't play mind games to manipulate things. I find it's much simpler to be honest and talk things over instead of trying to outmaneuver the other person involved, especially when that person is the woman I love and want to make as happy as I can."

"You're too good to be real." Megan's eyes shone brightly with unshed tears. "You're just plain sweet. No wonder I love you so much. But can we figure all this out later? There's only one thing I can think about at the moment."

"And what's that?" he asked innocently.

"As if you don't already know," Megan teased before her expression became serious. "Love me, Drake. Take off your clothes and love me. I want us as close as we can get in every possible way."

Drake stripped before she could move. "Let me, sweetheart," he said when she clasped the bottom of her shirt. Slowly, he pulled it off her raised arms. Megan could feel his eyes caressing her. He studied her so intently she was blushing by the time he tugged the blanket from her lap. "I get to use this the next time we sleep apart. It'll smell like both of us and make me dream of making love all night. Now there's a pair of boxers for you," Drake declared once he uncovered her and saw them.

Megan lost that train of thought the instant she felt Drake's hands on her. She wondered how one little touch could make the rest of the world disappear so thoroughly. A minute later she gave up thinking entirely and lost herself in the sensations he created. She sensed that Drake was using his body to declare his love just as she was. They proceeded tenderly, lingering over each caress, coaxing each other to new heights as they shared their passion.

Afterwards, Drake held Megan as she rested her cheek over his heart. "I have a request," he announced, letting his hands roam, unable to get enough of her softness.

"Mm," Megan purred, signaling him to continue.

"Whether or not you decide to be published I want you to do a book just for me."

"Mm."

"I want you to call this one *Cricket Goes to Her Dad's Wedding*."

Megan stopped breathing, every bit of her frozen with tension. "You want it called what? I don't think I heard you right. Say it again slowly so it gets through my head."

"Oops. Sorry. I forgot you can't do subtle right after you have an orgasm. I said I want my book called *Cricket Goes to Her Dad's Wedding*. I should have been more blunt and said please marry me. Soon. Now. I don't want us to have separate apartments and spend every day dealing with the possibility of sleeping alone. I want to find a house and be a family. And no, before you think it, this has nothing to do with Christy. I doubt if she'd blink twice if you slept in my room. Or if we moved in together without getting married. Of course I will move in with you in a flash if that's what you prefer. I just want you to be my wife. I want to be your husband."

Megan smiled. She giggled. She laughed uncontrollably until tears streamed down her cheeks. She knew how insane she must seem but couldn't stop no matter how hard she tried. She was still laughing when she reached across Drake for the phone. Holding up her hand to stop his questions, she waited for someone to answer.

"Hey," Megan managed.

"Laughing or crying?"

"Laughing." She flicked Drake's nipple playfully before moving to straddle him. "Guess what."

"You and your professor worked things out and you're not going to hurt me for giving him your key?"

"Better than that." Megan rubbed herself against Drake's shaft, holding his curious gaze. "They're still lucky."

"Come again?"

"Oh I will. My professor will definitely make sure of that. Many, many times." She resisted the urge to impale herself on his renewed erection.

"Don't tell me you called me in the middle of doing the deed. I'm going to have to kill you if you even think you'll get away with that."

"Relax Daryl. Yeah, we're about to but I have no intention of letting you listen in. Although maybe I should for all the times you and Gwynne forced me to bury my head under my pillow so I wouldn't hear every sound you made."

"Hanging up now."

"Wait," Megan pleaded. "I didn't call just to torment you. You told me to, remember?"

"Oh. Right. Thanks. I'm glad for you, Megan. He seems as okay as you said."

"Thank you but there actually is another reason I called. I had to tell you that they've still got it. Your boxers are as lucky for us as they were for you and Gwynne." Megan watched her words register on Drake's face as he realized what she meant.

"No fucking way!" Daryl exclaimed. "Holy shit! I don't believe it."

"You better believe it." Megan giggled as Drake's tongue teased her nipple. "I put them on when I got home and Drake just asked me to marry him." She tried to stifle a moan. "Oops. Gotta go. Call you later."

They both heard Daryl's chuckle as Drake took the phone. "Say it for me, Megan."

"Yes," Megan responded as Drake slid his hard cock into her dripping pussy. He shifted so he was sitting with her on his lap. "Yes," she repeated as they wrapped themselves around each other. "Yes," she gasped as his hands on her bottom lifted her, guiding her movement over his shaft. "Yes," she cried as his mouth captured hers, sealing them together as they spiraled toward their ever increasing pleasure. "Yes," she sighed once Drake relaxed under her, stretching out as he continued to hold her against his chest.

"Yes," he echoed happily.

Chapter Fourteen

Megan laughed as she watched Christy and her new puppy playing tug-of-war in the yard. She originally intended to get her sketchpad but didn't want to miss any of their antics.

"Now here's a pretty sight," Drake stated, standing behind her. "My gorgeous wife in her sexy little pj's watching our adorable little girl playing with her silly puppy. What more could a man ask for?" He wrapped his arms around her from behind, slipping one hand into her boxers and the other beneath her crop top.

"Drake," Megan protested weakly as his hands worked their magic.

"Shh," he whispered against her neck. "I already checked. From outside, all you can see is your head and shoulders. Even if Christy does drag her attention away from that pooch, she won't ever know that her parents are taking advantage of the moment."

"But what if she comes in?"

"She won't. Rule number twelve of couplehood. Never pass up an opportunity to enjoy your partner. Your nipples want to be pinched." He emphasized his statement with a tug, repeating it on the other side. "Your breasts want to be fondled." He gave them attention. "Your slit is soaked already. It wants my fingers." He demonstrated. "Your horny little clit wants me to stroke it." His thumb found her nub. "Your body wants to come for me. It wants me to skip all the preliminaries you crave as much as I do and get right to the part where I make you wild."

Megan wiggled against his obvious arousal. "I think your cock wants to be a part of this."

"Definitely if that's an invitation."

"If you're sure we'll get away with it."

"We will if you can manage to keep watching the two of them like you're still choosing scenes for your *Cricket Gets a Puppy* book instead of *The Professor Gets Some Pussy* that's actually going on here." Drake freed himself from his sweatpants and filled the hand Megan reached behind her. "Christ, I can't get enough of you," he growled. "Time to test my theory."

"What theory?" Megan forced her mind to function.

"The one behind these stretchy boxers. You see, I figured I can pull them aside just enough to shove my hard cock into your tight pussy without needing to take them off. More efficient when engaging in a quickie."

"Oh God," Megan moaned through her clenched teeth. "Only you would think of that."

"Doubtful but I'll take the credit since it works," Drake groaned with her as his cock steadily added to the stimulation his hands already provided. "Keep talking. Smile too. Tell me why we're having an all-day party at a skating rink after we spent all of last weekend with our families."

"Because it's Christy's birthday and both parties make her very happy."

"But I want some time with my girls all to myself."

"You'll get it."

"Next weekend."

"Ooh. We need to talk about that."

"Why? Now who wants to visit?" His movements slowed almost to a stop in order to concentrate on her words.

"No one. Brenda wants to invite Christy to Diane's sleepover next Saturday. I asked her to wait until after today, so you could meet all the other girls first."

"Brenda, the skating teacher and Diane, her daughter who's in Christy's class? The ones who live two blocks away?"

"Yes. Oh God, yes." Megan wrapped both arms behind her to hold onto his hips.

"Do you trust them?" Megan nodded under his chin. "Okay, then I will too. You could have decided this."

"Not the first time."

"Oh. Yeah. Next time." He fought to keep their upper bodies relatively still. "So this means we'll have a whole night alone?"

"Unless Christy calls to be picked up. Is it incredibly selfish of me to hope she has so much fun that she doesn't even consider it?"

"Nope. Not if you look at it mainly as Christy enjoying her friends and our time alone as a secondary benefit. And I thought I'd have to wait another month to ravish you without worrying about how much noise we make."

"I still think you need something else for your birthday. Not that I would ever refuse your request, especially with Christy so excited about staying with your parents again after we have Thanksgiving together but I'll go away with you any time, not just on a special occasion."

"Every day with you is special, sweetheart." Drake couldn't resist nibbling on her shoulder where her top had shifted to reveal her soft skin. "But I must insist, spending three days in total isolation in a cabin is all the present I need. Just think, we'll light a fire and stay naked the whole time. Or maybe I should just keep you naked. Pretend you're my own personal sex kitten."

"I already am your own personal sex kitten. But that gives me some ideas if you'll let me surprise you while we're there."

"Christ." Drake's thrusts stopped being so playful. "Give me a preview next weekend."

"Perhaps." Megan tilted her mouth for a quick kiss.

"What should we do on your birthday?"

"My birthday's not until June. It's only October."

"So? It's never too soon to toss out ideas. Give me lots of suggestions and I'll pick the one I like best unless I can come up with something even better."

"What if I don't have lots of ideas? If being alone for a few days is all you want then there's no question of what I want."

"Tell me."

"Remember the night you were teasing me about going away for Spring Break like your students do?"

"Yeah."

"I want to do that. Only I want to go to a bed and breakfast somewhere in the middle of nowhere so we're the only people there. Kind of the same idea you have only warmer with spring flowers in case we decide to get dressed and take a walk now and then instead of staying naked the whole time. Who knows? Maybe we'll find a secluded field of daffodils and have wild sex in the middle of them."

"Megan." He thrust wildly, aroused by the thought of it. He couldn't wait any longer and focused his fingers on making her explode as he angled his shaft to push in even deeper. Megan's muscles contracted around him, pulling the evidence of his pleasure into her. He leaned them both against the counter until his knees stopped threatening to give out. "I love you," he whispered as his hands calmed her.

"I love you too. This mean we're going away for Spring Break?"

"This means we'll go anywhere you want for your birthday and wild sex in the middle of any flower fields we can find."

Megan turned and captured his face for a kiss. "What if there aren't any flower fields?"

Drake grinned wickedly. "Not a problem. We'll buy some flowers and scatter them around us."

"You're so cute." She winked, giving his cock a squeeze through his sweatpants. "Now let me go clean up before I start dripping on the floor or that puppy comes in and starts licking my leg."

"He better not. I'm the only one who gets to lick your legs," Drake teased as she dashed to the bathroom.

When she returned, she said, "Stop looking at me like that. We're going skating with a dozen kids in an hour. We have to focus on them and make sure they all have fun because some of them can't skate yet."

"It'll be fine, sweetheart. Art's coming, remember? He's never been ice skating in his life so he'll be falling all over the place. Ever since he bumped into Brenda that day they both stopped in, he's become very open to teasing. He'll make falling into such a joke that they don't have a chance to feel embarrassed, even after he realizes that you

girls set him up. I can't wait to see the look on his face when he discovers that Brenda teaches skating. He's been all puffed up, bragging that he's going to spend the whole afternoon supporting her. It's much more likely he'll spend the day freezing his sore ass off as he keeps dragging it up off the ice while Brenda skates rings around him."

"Am I being too cruel?" Megan wondered.

"Hardly," he chuckled. "He loves every prank you've played on him. I probably shouldn't tell you this but he said it makes him feel like part of the family. I've given it some thought and I think some of Art's behavior was his way of hiding how lonely he was. You're an amazing woman, putting up with his remarks when he forgets himself."

"He's not all that bad. Kind of grows on you. I never thought I'd miss that part of working at the bar but some days I almost do."

"You can always go back."

"I know but it's not the same now that Daryl let his brother buy in. Not that he does things differently. I bet the customers haven't noticed that anything's changed. It just feels like it has to me. I might fill in for vacations but I don't want to go back full time."

"Daddy." Christy burst in with her puppy. "Did you see? We were playing soccer!"

"I know. We were watching," Drake assured her.

"Are you gonna put that in the next Cricket book, Mom?" Christy spun toward Megan.

"You bet," Megan stated as tears brightened her eyes.

"Cool. Come out and play with us, Daddy."

"Olay kiddo but we only have a few minutes before we have to get ready to go skating. Give me a sec to put on some shoes."

"Kay. Come on pooch." Christy and the puppy managed to avoid falling over each other as they raced back outside to continue their game instead of waiting for Drake.

"You okay?" Drake asked, hugging Megan tightly before getting his shoes.

"Yeah," she sighed. "I never knew one little word could make me feel so good. How about you?"

"I'm fine but I knew it was coming. She's been calling you mom when you weren't around for the last two weeks. I think she's been working up to doing it with you. Don't cry. Christy understood that it was her choice what to call you after we got married. She gets that calling you Mom doesn't mean she has to give up her memories of Claire. The first few days she referred to you as found mom and Claire as her lost mom."

"Lost and found moms," Megan whispered, watching Christy through the window.

"I know what you're thinking and before you ask, yes, she'd love it if you sketched the three of you together. She's yours now too. Don't forget how she believes that Claire sent you to take care of us just like she is taking care of Jimmy. Now, I'm not really sure how it works when he comes to play with the pooch while we're sleeping but Christy does so I guess that's enough." He kissed her forehead before slipping on his sneakers.

"I wish she'd hurry up and give that poor pup a name. Yell if we're not back in ten minutes."

Megan remained at the window, watching her family with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Claire," she spoke softly, "I don't know how Christy's angel stuff works either, but if you really did arrange for me to find her that day then I want to thank you. I honestly wish you and Jimmy were still here with them, even though that means that I wouldn't be. Since you're not, I promise to make them feel as loved and treasured as you did. I'll do my best to keep them as happy as they are right now and I'll do everything humanly possible to keep them both safe."

As soon as she finished speaking it looked as if someone threw a handful of glitter into the sunbeam around Drake and Christy, and Megan knew that Claire had heard her.

About the Author

For Barbara Huffert, reading has always been a favorite pastime. A few years ago, she started her first novel after one of the friends she trades books with challenged her to write something better than the last book they read. Barbara's been writing ever since. With her opinionated cats sprawled wherever is most convenient, she now spends her time happily wandering through the worlds of her characters.

Barbara welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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