

ELLORA'S CAVE *Breathless*

Barbara Huffert

Linked

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# ***LINKED***

**Barbara Huffert**

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## Chapter One

Russ waited out of sight for Stan's whistle signaling that their plan for the night was a go. Hours earlier he'd leaned against the end of the bar and studied the crowd as the magician performed his big finish of sawing his assistant in half. He and Stan didn't need to speak to confirm that they'd both chosen the same broad to participate in their little game later on. That taken care of, Russ downed the last inch of his beer and made a point of stating that he had a long drive ahead of him as he politely declined a refill.

Leaving Stan to secure their entertainment, Russ left at the same time as a group who were obviously regulars. In the parking lot, he made sure he repeated his comment of moving on to at least three different individuals.

Now, four hours later, Russ had already disconnected the mickey mouse alarm system, climbed in through the window he had unlatched in the men's room and unlocked the supply room door. Walking right in would fit with the impression of them belonging there after hours that Stan was to create.

Russ whistled his answer to Stan's signal and stepped away from the wall, eager to begin. "Watch your step," Russ cautioned pleasantly as he motioned for the pair to follow. Holding the door, he stood aside to let the woman enter first while he and Stan exchanged wicked grins.

"Aren't you going to introduce us, Stan?" Russ asked when they reached the barroom.

"Just getting to that. This tasty little bit is Mindy. And this is the amazing Russell. He's a master magician but he don't go on stage much no more."

"I find that it is more rewarding to share my knowledge with promising individuals new to the craft. The occasional command performance before a limited but very special audience is sufficient to satisfy the showman in me."

The tipsy bleached blonde giggled. "I can't believe you picked me. I used to dream of being a magic helper when I was little. I even had one of those cute costumes."

"I'm sure you were adorable." Russ pressed one finger to her lips. "Did Stan explain my conditions?"

"Yeah." She nodded eagerly. "I told Sue that I thought Stan was okay to talk to but that was it and that I was the one who said he'd try to hook up with that redhead who was checking him out. I gave him a thumbs-up when he left with her just like he said I should and then I stayed a while longer before I made a big deal of how tired I was and that I was going to go right to bed when I got home. I didn't even talk about the magic act at all or Stan either after he was gone."

"What's the pout for?" Stan asked. "I had to give her a ride home to make it look like what your girlfriends thought. I'm not the kind of guy who would mess around with one girlie when I already had plans to meet up with another."

Russ forced himself to keep a straight face. As long as he'd known Stan he'd never once seen the hound pass up on any opportunity, plans or no plans. He'd bet anything that there was at least a little slap and tickle at the end of the ride.

"Excellent," Russ declared. "Did Stan also explain the price of admission?"

"Um, yeah." Mindy's giggle sounded nervous this time.

"Let me assure you," Russ gave her a charming smile as he patted her arm, "that your participation merely indicates that you're aware of your own sensuality and aren't afraid to let it show as most are. Don't you think most of the ladies in the audience this evening were fantasizing about being involved? They were all imagining it ending as implied instead of stopping when it did."

"Well, yeah, okay, I guess."

"Did it excite you when Stan suggested that we could make it come true for you? Of course it did or you wouldn't be here now. You don't have to stay if you've changed your mind."

"That's right, Mindy," Stan chimed in. "Neither of us would ever force you to do anything you didn't want to do. Say the word and I'll take you home."

"Think very carefully about what you want," Russ added. "I don't make a habit of this but, since Stan assured me you were someone truly special, I agreed to perform with you. I won't think any less of you if you decline the rare and generous offer we made you but it certainly won't be repeated."

"Remember what I told you, Mindy. Russell is a very busy man. You have no idea how lucky you are that he happened to be here tonight and is willing to give you a personal show. Asking for a little relief ain't nothing when you think how he's going to have to watch me pleasure you without getting to touch you himself. Forget about him trusting you with a trade secret and all too."

Mindy shifted her gaze between them and sighed. "I guess I'm being silly. I really want to do this but I don't want you to think I'm some kind of slut."

"We'd never think that," Stan insisted.

"Absolutely not," Russ echoed. "Taking care of me so I can concentrate on my performance merely demonstrates that you're a kind-hearted woman as well and an adventurous and sexually confident one."

"Helping out my friend makes it sure that you're as special as I thought you were when I first saw you. You don't have to but it would mean a lot to me, not to have to ask him to take care of it himself. You're just so pretty and he's not going to be able to help it when you strip down. But if you don't want to stay..." Stan let the thought hang.

"All right," Mindy whispered.

"All right, you're staying?"

She nodded. "I want to do the trick."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. I want to do it. All of it."

Russ responded to Stan's questioning look with a nod, indicating that he should begin.

"Thank you." Stan kissed her. "I don't want to rush things but Russell does have a commitment in the morning so we don't want to keep him all night. Can I take your clothes off now?"

"Um, okay," Mindy agreed.

Russ hid a chuckle with a cough as he watched them out of the corner of his eye. He saw everything even though he appeared to be fully occupied with the props he'd need.

"Damn, if you ain't a hot little piece," Stan gushed. "Look at them titties." He squeezed them for emphasis. "That gash is leaking already. You can't wait to feel my tongue, I can tell. I'm gonna eat you so good you ain't gonna want me to ever stop. You're gonna come so hard for me but not too soon. You're gonna be a real good girlie and wait for when Russell works his magic." He unzipped his fly and pulled out his stubby penis. "Now don't you worry none. He don't look like much because he ain't real long but he gets real fat once he gets started. He'll fill you up good and I know how to use him once he's in there. But that part gotta wait for later. I just wanted you to know that I'll take care of making you feel real fine when I get you back home."

Mindy whimpered when Stan wrapped her fingers around his shaft and encouraged her to stroke him. It was soon evident that she forgot all about Russ being in the room.

"That feels real nice. You got me so hot already that I'm gonna shoot in no time." He pushed her to her knees. "But I ain't gonna pop until I get a sample of that mouth. I don't mind you doing for my friend just this once but I gotta coat your throat before he does." He groaned as her lips closed around him. "Shit yeah, that's it. You sure got one sweet mouth on you. So fucking hot. It was made just to suck my fat prick." He pumped faster. "Come on, girlie. Suck him real hard now. Harder! Oh shit, yeah! Here he comes..."

Russ waited until Stan's hips stopped jerking before he deliberately made some noise to remind Stan of their plan so he didn't do something stupid to ruin their game. When the pair joined him on the platform a few minutes later, Russ finished adjusting the lights instead of instantly turning his attention to Mindy's naked body. Not that he wasn't more than ready to take his turn. He just wanted to set the scene first, before they began because he hated to stick around once the game ended.

Slowly, Russ looked Mindy over from head to toe. Finally, he smiled. "Perfect. It almost seems a shame, not having an audience for what I'm sure will be a stellar performance." He extended his hand to help Mindy into the box. "Most people fail to realize how important the assistant is to the overall success of the show. You are spectacular."

"Thank you." Mindy blushed with pride as they slipped on the restraints.

The men flipped open the side panels and stood back to enjoy the view.

"Very nice," Russ muttered, caressing the side of her breast with his gloved knuckle. When Mindy shivered, he drew back. "My apologies. You're so tempting I forgot myself. Stan, would you do the honors?"

Stan made a show of turning the box completely around before he closed up the sides, trapping her hands. Next, he removed the panels that covered the top, leaving Mindy visible beneath a layer of solid plastic. With a flourish, he repositioned the end of the table, engaging the added feature of spreading the occupant's thighs wide while bending her legs at the knee, exposing her crotch for all to see. During the performance earlier, the magician had merely toyed with the assistant's skimpy costume without giving the audience more than a quick glimpse of what it covered. Mindy was fully displayed and helpless now that Stan had latched the bands above her knees.

"Lookie here." Stan parted her flesh. "Seems you like showing your pussy like this." He stroked her with his gloved fingers. "Like the way the leather feels too, don't you?" She pressed against his hand as much as she could. "Ready to get the show started?"

"Please," Mindy gasped. "Tell me what to do."

Russ and Stan exchanged a quick glance. "Why don't you go with the flow for now and see if you can figure it out on your own? If you can't, I'll go through the whole thing again and explain it to you as we go," Russ paused to watch Stan tease her again. "Press those pretty titties of yours up against the top so I can see if they're as hard as I am. Pretend we have an audience and let them have a good look at you."

"Okay, now show me your cock," Mindy commanded as she flexed her chest against the plastic. "I wish I could use my hands too." She opened her mouth and stretched her tongue toward his groin.

"Are you sure about this?" Russ asked as he exposed himself. "Having you watch me use my hand would be fine."

His declaration drew a smirk from Stan. Both men knew his offer was empty. Now that they had Mindy in the box she had little choice about what happened to her.

"But I want to," she protested. "I probably shouldn't tell you this but I always kinda wondered what it would be like with two guys at once. Um, maybe, if you like how I suck you, you could come along with me and Stan after. I mean, if it's okay with Stan and you wanted to," she giggled nervously again.

"Fine by me," Stan announced as he penetrated her with one finger.

"All right then," Russ chuckled, shifting into Mindy's waiting mouth as he wondered if she would be able to handle him with her head upside down as it was.

Soon Russ' hips were flailing as he repeatedly speared her throat, ignoring her whimpers of protest. He alternated between watching her mouth accommodate his rigid pole and Stan's thick fingers stabbing her pussy.



"Better get to it if you still want to stick your tongue in there," Russ grunted to keep Stan from losing track of time.

Instantly, Stan had his head between Mindy's thighs. He pointed his tongue and plunged forward, meeting Russ' gaze briefly before he quit teasing her and began slurping with determination.

The added stimulation made Mindy moan deep in her throat and the vibrations triggered Russ' climax. When he finished, he tucked his deflated penis back into his pants. With a gesture that Mindy would misinterpret as tenderness, he caressed her face and neck to ensure there were no traces of his semen even though it felt as if she had swallowed it all. They had come too far to make such an amateur mistake now. Satisfied, he nodded to Stan and decided it was a very good thing the stupid slut couldn't see the evil leer on the younger man's face. Stan was good at luring people into their games but still hadn't learned to hide his enthusiasm once the end was in sight.

"Mm," Stan practically growled. He attacked her with both his mouth and his fingers. Judging by the sounds coming from Mindy she didn't object to his less than gentle treatment.

With Stan coaxing Mindy to her impending climax, Russ positioned the special pair of separators he had replaced the magician's with. They looked identical. There was, however, one major difference. One that the foolish whore was about to discover. Mindy's body was still twitching with pleasure when the men pressed down on the handles at either end of the metal panels.

"What...hey...stop, you're hurting me," Mindy squealed. Her expression of bliss was replaced with one of confusion. "Ow! Come on, I mean it. Stop." It transformed to pain.

Russ eased up slightly and leaned over her face. "What's the problem? I thought you liked the idea of being a star."

"Well, yeah," Mindy gasped. "But it was starting to hurt. It's not supposed to hurt. I mean, the girls never looked like it did when I watched this before."

Both men laughed. "True," Russ said. "But we're not magicians and this isn't an act." The more terrified Mindy became, the more insane Russ sounded. "I do promise that we will make you a star."

"No! Let me go," Mindy pleaded. "Please. You've had your little joke so open this thing. Come on, guys. I thought we were all going to have some fun together. Get me out of here and I'll do whatever you want."

"We already had some fun. And now we're going to have some more. Well, Stan and I are. Sorry you won't enjoy it as much as we will but that's what happens to whores like you."

With that, both men put all their weight into pushing down on the handles. There was a sickening crunch of bones snapping and Mindy's scream was silenced. The only remaining sounds were the men's excited breathing, heavy with the thrill of the moment, and blood dripping on the wooden platform.

Stan wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Not bad for a twat. Wouldn't a minded fucking her."

Russ snorted and headed for the back door. "Patience. You really don't want to ruin your chance to be with our angel by slipping your prick in that filth just for a quick thrill. We have to stay pure or she won't accept us, you know that. Especially now that Miss Vicky is calling us to her. We're getting close, can't you feel it? Couldn't you feel her with us tonight, watching the show we put on with the sacrifice? She's always been able to see what we're willing to do to prove we're worthy of her but these past few months the pull has gotten so much stronger. She knows we're almost there. Soon, we'll be with our angel and once we are, everything we've ever dreamed of will be ours. You'll see, Stan. Miss Vicky will be with us and then all this waiting and doing without will be worth it. Oh yes, soon as she spreads open her slit and gives us the first little taste of that sweet angel pussy. God, it's going to be so tight and so wet."

"Yeah." Stan was almost panting. "You're right. I know it but keep on telling me, okay? Don't let me get stupid and fuck this up."

"Done." Russ locked the door behind them after he reconnected the alarm. "Time to hit the 'pike. Don't want to take any chances."

## Chapter Two

The screams slowly penetrated the terror that gripped Victoria Banks' mind. The only way to break the spell was to move. Unfortunately, she was still paralyzed with the horror of what she just witnessed and the fear of what their conversation implied. Deep inside, a small part of her knew it was all in her head but that didn't stop her from struggling. As the spine-chilling screams grew steadily louder, she became aware of her increasing ability to move.

Finally breaking free, Tori jolted upright. Her last scream stuck in her throat, choking off her air supply. What seemed like an eternity later, Tori gasped, dragging in a ragged breath. Fighting against the overwhelming panic, she pulled herself into a tight ball and wrapped her arms around her bent knees as firmly as possible. Without realizing it, Tori began to sway, rocking back and forth as an inhuman keening escaped from her throat.

Tori forced her body to function. If she didn't get up and move around, the encroaching darkness would close back over her mind and she'd see that poor woman sliced in half again. And again.

"Oh God," Tori sobbed. "Oh God, oh God, oh God." She prowled through the cottage, switching on every light she had. After rechecking everywhere to ensure she was truly alone, she backed into a corner in the living room and slid to the floor behind her wooden rocking chair. "Oh God," she muttered one last time before she gave in to the emotions that were trying to boil over.

By the time Tori had regained some control, the sun was fully up. It was brilliant, reflecting off the pristine snow, making the world outside look all sparkly and pure. If only that was true. Deep down in her heart, Tori sensed that somewhere out there was a woman named Mindy who had only wanted a little adventure but wound up dead instead.

"Okay, Banks, get a grip," Tori muttered, shaking herself into motion. "It was a bad dream just like all the others. It wasn't real. There isn't a woman in pieces in a bar somewhere about to be found by some poor kid who comes in mornings to mop the floor. You weren't really there, watching those guys get blowjobs and no one is passing up sex because they're saving themselves for you," she snorted and stepped into the shower. "If I believe this stuff then Diana is right and I do need professional help. Christ, I'll be stopping strangers soon to ask if their names are Russ and Stan if I don't watch it."

Tori continued her pep talk all the way to the library. She knew she looked even worse than the day before but, now that someone was killed, she should have a few dream-free nights and might be able to catch up on her rest. Tori knew Diana Peters,

her boss, would let her hide in the stacks once she heard how the nightmare ended. She'd tell Diana right away and disappear to the basement before the library officially opened.

"Tori." Diana wrapped her in a fierce hug as soon as she walked in the door. "Oh, little girl."

Tori fought down the rising panic as Diana rushed her into her office, closing the door behind them. Something must be terribly wrong for Diana to be holding on like she was. From experience, Tori knew to wait until Diana released her to ask what had happened. It didn't matter if the cause was good or bad, Diana never spoke until she was finished hugging.

"My sweet little Tori," Diana murmured as she dabbed her eyes.

"Diana, please. Tell me what's wrong. You know I'm here for you, whatever it is." Tori rested a hand on the older woman's shoulder.

"Me?" Diana looked stricken. "Oh no, dear, I'm fine."

Tori felt the color drain from her face. She began to tremble. "Th-then w-what is it?"

Diana wrung her hands and hesitated. Meeting Tori's eyes, she caught her for another firm embrace.

"Diana?" Tori's voice shook.

While she collected her thoughts, Diana motioned for Tori to sit and crouched in front of her. For a second, Tori had the impression that Diana's position was as much to trap her in the chair as it was to maintain contact.

Diana took a deep breath and began. "Since we opened late today, I indulged myself by working this morning's crossword instead of doing a few chores as I probably should have. I was in the kitchen so I switched on the radio to see if I could pick up that talk station in Hartford."

"And?" Tori prompted when Diana hesitated.

"I'm so sorry." Diana clasped her hands. "There was a report of a woman's body which was found this morning in a bar on the outskirts of Springfield. They didn't give out any details other than she appears to have died because something went wrong with a magic trick."

Tori fought Diana's grip unsuccessfully, struggling to break free. "No-o," she moaned repeatedly, shaking her head in denial. "Oh God, Diana, no!"

Tori slumped in defeat and would have fallen from the chair if Diana hadn't been there to catch her. All the terror she'd reined in earlier broke free. Tori was too stunned to try to temper it.

The pair ended up on the floor. Diana did her best to comfort Tori as she cried hysterically. It seemed forever before she dried her face and could meet Diana's concerned gaze.

"Tell me everything they said. All of it."

Diana did as she asked although she had already told Tori all that had been in the report.

"Mindy," Tori whispered, barely audible. "Her name is Mindy. Oh God, Diana, what am I going to do?"

Tori let herself be drawn back into Diana's comforting arms and tried to believe her when she said, "First, we're going to stop jumping to conclusions. Just because there are similarities to your nightmare doesn't necessarily mean they're one and the same."

"Diana."

"No, listen to me. I was wrong to overact like that," Diana sounded determined. "I'm sorry I even said anything. I should have waited until they reported more details. Think about it, baby girl. You've been having these dreams for years. One of them was bound to resemble an actual crime eventually."

Tori nodded even though neither believed it was a simple coincidence. Russ had said they were getting closer to her. It was more likely that she just hadn't heard of the others.

"That's right," Diana continued. "So for now, we're going to fix our faces and get to work. We're going to forget my melodramatic performance and concentrate on the reality of dealing with the group that'll be barging in here shortly. Or I should say I'm going to handle our bunch of stir-crazies who always forget that there are many days they don't go out while you go pretend that your greatest desire is to repair every loose dust jacket we have."

Tori opened and closed her mouth several times to protest but gave up, accepting she wasn't in any shape to chat with the regulars. "Do you mind?"

"Not a bit." Diana smiled softly. "I even understand but I do want to remind you that I am not fooled, nor have I ever been and that nothing is quite as bad once you've talked it over with someone who cares very deeply."

They were both surprised when Tori gave Diana as fierce a hug as she'd received earlier. "I love you too, Diana. Thanks for putting up with me." There was so much more she wanted to say but knew she couldn't without falling apart again. Sensing she'd understand, Tori released her friend and practically ran from the office.

## Chapter Three

Tori took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders as she pulled open the door. She forced herself to enter the lounge where she was to meet the wrong detective.

At lunch, when she let Diana convince her to speak with her niece's husband, the idea didn't feel so wrong. After all, Barry wasn't a complete stranger. He and Diana's niece, Carla, had included her on a variety of occasions so she already knew he was a decent man who would treat her with respect. The fact that he was a detective in the city twenty miles away would help determine if the rest of Tori's nightmare matched the crime that had been reported on the news. He'd have access to the details that hadn't been announced and then she'd know once and for all if what she saw was real or not.

Now, six hours later, she wished she'd never let Diana extract the promise from her. Even though everything had changed and Tori was positive this would be disastrous, she couldn't break her word to Diana.

Tori scanned the lounge and told herself how wrong it was to curse Diana's sister, Debbie, for her current circumstances. Debbie certainly didn't hit that patch of ice and flip her car deliberately just to make Diana and Barry unavailable to her now. She didn't wreck her car and land in the hospital just so Tori would end up meeting with Barry's partner in this noisy, dimly lit pick-up joint instead of talking with people she knew in Diana's safe, comfortable kitchen.

Giving her mind a shake, Tori repeated Diana's words to think positive. Telling someone official about this mess was the right thing to do. If, for whatever freakish reason, she really did witness the murder in her dreams she had to do anything she could to help the police catch the men. They had to be stopped before they killed someone else.

"Tell me you're not serious. Tell me this is a sad ploy to make me jealous," the woman said as her face twisted into an ugly scowl.

"Now, Lana." Guy tried to take her hand. "You know I'd never interrupt our evening unless it was unavoidable. But how could I refuse? Barry wouldn't have asked if he didn't think it was too important to put off. His mother-in-law was in an accident. He couldn't just drop his wife off at the hospital without knowing her condition."

"I don't like it." Lana pouted.

"Neither do I but that isn't the point." Guy ran a finger along her forearm. "Look, she's here. I won't be long."

"You better not be." She frowned. "And you better believe you'll be making this up to me."

Guy sighed as he made his way across the room. Not only had this little farce pissed off Lana enough to guarantee he wouldn't be having sex any time soon but it was apparently going to be an expensive waste of time. If Barry had asked him to fill in for any other reason, Guy would have refused as soon as he managed to stop laughing at the explanation behind the meeting. Unfortunately, family was equally important to Guy and he'd never turn his back on his partner when the man's family needed him.

"Ms. Banks." Guy forced a thin smile.

"Yes." She took a step backward.

"I'm Detective Breauchard, Barry's partner." He extended his hand and noted both her hesitation and the slight tremble when she finally accepted. "Shall we?" He indicated a nearby table.

"Oh. All right." Tori looked disturbed by his choice.

Guy let the silence stretch beyond the comfort zone. "I understand you believe you have knowledge of a homicide?"

"I think I might."

"You might? As in you're not sure?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe. I don't know."

Fighting for patience, Guy made the mistake of glancing at Lana. When he refocused on the woman next to him, he knew she'd seen his date's annoyed gesture. "Perhaps you could begin by telling me how you got this information that you may or may not have."

Tori flinched. "I had a nightmare."

"Pardon me. I don't think I heard you correctly."

"I said I had a nightmare. Of that poor woman getting killed."

Guy snorted. "I see."

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Of course I do, Ms. Banks," he sneered. "We employ a full staff of sleeping witnesses. How else would we ever catch the bad guys?"

"This was a mistake. I shouldn't have come." Tori's shoulders slumped.

"No, Ms. Banks, what you shouldn't have done was take advantage of the good woman who befriended you and her family."

"What?" His words startled her into looking at him.

"What's wrong? Are you so bored with our little community that you decided to play the psychic and stir things up?"

"I never —"

"Cut the bullshit, princess. This is New Hampshire, not California. Your Beverly Hills drama queen act may do it for you there but here, we have values. We respect honesty, not hyped-up hysterics."

"Beverly Hills drama queen," Tori sputtered. "Since that's where I'm from, that's what I must be?"

"Hey, if the shoe fits." Guy watched her features sharpen with anger and saw something in her eyes that made him question his opinion.

"Then that would make you an asshole, Detective Breauchard," Tori emphasized the French pronunciation of his name. "Since everyone knows the French are all assholes."

"My distant family is from Quebec, Ms. Banks, but I assure you, I am as American as you are."

"That may be." Tori stood and leaned over the table toward him. "But roots count tremendously and Quebec is the next best thing to France. Forgive me for interfering with your evening. I'll go now and let you get back to your date."

Guy watched as she mustered her dignity and swept out the door. Anyone watching would see only her grand exit. If Guy hadn't seen how her hands were shaking and the hurt and sadness in her eyes when she leaned closer to him, he would have believed it too. But he had seen and that made him wonder if her regal behavior as she left wasn't the true act. If it was then that meant his assumption that she was an attention-seeking lunatic was wrong too.

"Guy," Lana interrupted his musings. "Why are you still sitting here?"

"I'm sorry, Lana. I was just about to join you."

"Thanks but don't bother." She batted her eyelashes. "Since you couldn't seem to remember you were here with me, I found someone who can. Bye-bye." With that, she sashayed over to a foppish-looking man in an expensive suit and twined herself around him.

Guy watched as Lana bestowed an open-mouthed kiss, with plenty of tongue on her rescuer and wondered why he wasn't at all bothered by the sight. In fact, he felt nothing but relief at her desertion. Raising his glass in salute at the couple, he admitted he had been ready to end it with her. Sure, they'd had some fun times between the sheets but honestly they had little in common other than that.

Checking the time, Guy decided to abandon the rest of his drink and head to the hospital. It was still early so Barry would be there. He could find him and check on Carla's mom instead of spending the night worrying about her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Guy was so relieved that Barry's mother-in-law was essentially fine that he didn't censure his words when his partner asked about the meeting.

"I tell you, my friend, the lady is a flake, pure and simple."



"You really think so?" Barry questioned. "She always seemed so steady to me. A little reserved, shy even but not at all flighty."

"Loony tunes, Bar, a total nut job. Claims she might have information because she dreamed it. I know you told me but what a wacko."

When Barry suddenly stood, Guy did the same, turning to see the cause. Diana was right behind him with a shocked expression. Without warning, her hand flew to his cheek with a resounding slap.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," she fumed. "Do you have any idea how hard it was for that little girl to find the courage to speak with you about this? She trusted me when I assured her that she could be as open with you as she would have been with Barry. She believed me when I repeated that Barry insisted you would listen without being judgmental."

"How could you betray her like that? My God, that poor child must be devastated. She's been suffering for years, only confiding in me when I gave her no choice. Imagine what it was like to realize that her nightmares may be more than just bad dreams. She's struggling with the possibility that all of them may have actually occurred and finally agreed to tell someone because the thought of them killing again was more horrifying than opening herself to ridicule was."

Diana gave him a look of pure disgust. "Your mother would be appalled," she paused. "You'll forgive me if I've misjudged you but frankly, I don't think you're half the man Barry said you were."

After Diana stormed from the waiting room, Guy realized that Carla had joined them at some point.

"Guy Breauchard, I don't know what you did but I have never seen Aunt Diana that furious in my life."

"Carla," Barry tried to interrupt.

"Let her say it," Guy urged. "No matter what it is, it'll be something I deserve."

"Something you deserve?" Carla was even more stunned. "Well, if that's the case then you won't have a problem fixing it, will you? And until you do, you are not welcome in my home."

"Carla," Barry gasped.

"I mean it, Barry. I know he's your friend on top of being your partner and I'm sorry if you think I'm being too harsh but that doesn't change things. I'll bet anything that Aunt Diana has never struck anyone before. Whatever you did pushed her to do that so it must be awful. Out of respect for the woman who is in some ways closer than my own mother, I will not tolerate your presence until you gain her forgiveness and reestablish her trust in you as a decent human being. When that happens, you'll be free to drop by anytime as you always have. But until then, you'll just have to find somewhere else to watch your Sunday afternoon football games."

Guy saw the turmoil in Barry's face and knew he was torn between comforting his wife and defending him so he took the choice out of his hands. "You and your aunt are both correct, Carla. My behavior with Ms. Banks was reprehensible."

"Tori? Aunt Diana was talking about Tori? You're damn lucky she didn't kill you. She's even more protective of Tori than she is of me. My God, if you hurt Tori..."

Guy raised his hands in surrender. "I did and I have no excuse for it. I don't know how but I promise you, I will find a way to make it up to her. Your aunt will probably never forgive me but, if Ms. Banks does, will you give me a chance to beg that you will?"

Carla stared for a long moment before glancing at her husband. Guy could see the pleading in Barry's eyes and knew Carla could too.

"Fine." She nodded curtly. "You bring Tori with you and show me that she's not a bit uncomfortable with you and we'll be square again, with or without Aunt Diana's forgiveness."

"Thank you, Carla," Guy said sincerely. "That's more than I have any right to ask for at the moment. Barry, I'm sorry I let you down like this. Please don't let my idiocy affect you guys. I'm not worth it." He turned back to Carla before Barry could respond. "Please don't hold me against him. You don't need any more emotional upheaval tonight. Oh, I'm very glad to hear that your mom's okay." Guy was afraid to say more because his throat was beginning to close. Instead, he gave each an apologetic look and left.

## Chapter Four

There were only a handful of cars in the library lot when Guy arrived. After leaving the hospital the night before he'd had a great debate with himself over how and when to approach Victoria Banks. His conclusion that there was no ideal solution made him select the best situation to actually get to speak with her. His final decision was to seek her out in the library and include Diana in his apology. With her in the room, Tori might listen long enough for him to repair some of the damage his attitude had done.

"Morning, Diana," Guy greeted her quietly when she acknowledged his presence.

"Detective," Diana's tone was icy.

"I know I'm not particularly welcome here but I'm hoping you'll spare me a minute anyway."

"It's a public library," Diana stated. "Everyone is welcome here until they give me good reason to ban them. Feel free to use any of the materials you need."

"Thank you but, as you know, I'm not here for the library." Diana merely nodded. "I don't mean to barge in and interfere with your work but I've always thought it best not to put off an apology when one is owed. I thought Ms. Banks might be more willing to let me make amends if I came here and spoke to her in your presence. If you prefer that I come back at closing, I certainly will, or if you think it better to meet in some other public place that she chooses, I'll do that instead."

"First you said that you wanted to apologize, then you said that you wanted to make amends. Which is it?"

"At the very least, an apology but if at all possible, full amends. I went over our encounter many times last night and I understand how wrong I was about everything. For what it's worth, I would have realized that on my own once I had a chance to think about it. There was a lot of fear in her eyes yesterday. If she'll let me, I'll do whatever I can to help erase that."

Diana scrutinized him closely. "Now this is the man I expected Tori to meet. You can talk in my office and, unless she asks me to stay, I'll give you privacy."

"Thank you, Diana. I can't tell you how much I regret last night."

"I believe you. As do I. Guy, I owe you an apology for my behavior as well."

"Please don't," he interrupted. "You were running on adrenaline and didn't say anything that wasn't true. My mother worked very hard to teach me manners so I would grow up to be as decent a man as my father is and I forgot all of them. Mom wouldn't have stopped with one little slap. No, she'd have been so horrified that she'd have tried to make my head spin all the way around while she raked me over the coals."

"Still." Diana looked ready to argue. "I heard from Carla this morning."

"Again, please don't. She's right too. I hurt someone you're very close to. That hurt you which hurt her. Barry trusted me to fill in and act as he would and I screwed up royally. I damaged not only our partnership but our friendship. Believe me, the things you and Carla said are nothing compared to what I said to myself all night."

"Your mother would be proud of you for knowing that." Diana smiled kindly. "Let me send one of the volunteers for Tori and we'll go wait in my office."

"Diana, I told you, I'm fine. Not that I don't appreciate it but I don't need hourly pep talks." Tori came far enough into the office to notice Guy. "Oh. Excuse me."

"Come in, Tori. Guy asked for a few minutes of your time and it would please me if you'd listen to him."

Tori wanted to run and it showed. Instead of giving in, she forced herself to sit without gripping the arms of the chair. "All right, Diana."

Behind her back, Diana gave Guy's arm a quick squeeze before she left them alone. Guy sighed. After a long moment, he took the chair next to Tori. He rubbed his hands over his face, put his elbows on his knees, rested his chin on his steeped fingers and sighed again.

"I had a nice little speech all prepared for you if I got the opportunity and now it seems all wrong."

"Fine." Tori stood to go.

"Wait." Guy stopped her with a hand on her arm but released her just as quickly. "Please, sit back down."

Tori cautiously did as he asked, clearly curious about his apparent lack of confidence. "Well?"

"I don't know where exactly to begin."

"Maybe you should just spit it out. I mean, does this really matter? I don't even understand why you're here."

"I'm here because it matters a great deal, as much as it did to you yesterday."

"Yeah, well, yesterday's history, isn't it?"

"Yes and no. The day itself is over but the effects of it aren't."

"I guess you expect me to believe that you woke up this morning and magically accepted that I was telling you the truth and not just lying to get attention and now care about what I planned to say last night."

"I don't know that one way or the other because you didn't have the chance to say much of anything. I was wrong on so many levels last night, Ms. Banks, and for that, I am truly sorry. I'm sure you don't believe this but I'm really not the stereotypical Frenchman you met yesterday."

"Mm, right. So the reason for this visit is to convince me that you're not an asshole?"

"No, although it would be an added benefit if I could improve your opinion of me."

"Wait a second." Tori's eyes narrowed as she figured it out. "You're here because they made you come, right? I know Diana saw you at the hospital last night and that you said something to her because she knew you blew me off without bothering to listen. She was upset that she couldn't come with me and about Debbie's accident so I can imagine her coercing you into showing up today. Or was it Carla because it pissed her off that Diana was upset with you? Or did Barry figure out what a jerk you were and send you back so I don't think he's one too?"

"Honestly, it was all three of them but I would have come on my own eventually."

"Why?"

"Because of your eyes. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that the fear I saw in them was more than nervousness at meeting a stranger in a public place with the intent of revealing something personal. You were shaking even before I got rude," he paused and shook his head. "No, it was your eyes. When you were putting me in my place, they still held more fear than anger but there was also sadness, exhaustion and resignation. There had been some hope when you first got there but that was gone."

"You're serious." Tori was awed.

"Very. Growing up, I was always the guy who tried to help everyone. I became a cop because I believed I could make a difference. I still do. Ms. Banks, I have no excuse for my attitude last night. If you had asked Barry to describe me yesterday morning, he would have said I'm open-minded with unlimited patience and that I have a knack for making people feel comfortable enough to talk freely with me."

"So I bring out the worst in you."

"No. If you did, I wouldn't be feeling so protective of you now."

"Protective? You don't really know what's going on."

"Not yet but I want to. More than anything, I'd like you to talk to me. Make me understand so we can figure out how I can help."

Tori rolled her eyes in disbelief.

"Can't we please just forget yesterday and start over? I'm fully prepared to grovel in any way necessary. Name what it'll take and I'll do it."

"You're serious," she stated again.

"Completely," Guy confirmed. After a prolonged silence, he added, "I really am sorry. Everything about last night was a mistake. Please give me a chance to show you how I should have handled things."

Tori studied his face. As much as she didn't want to, she believed he was sincere. As she saw it, she had three choices. She could refuse to tell anyone and live with the guilt forever when her next nightmare turned out to be real too, send Guy away and

take a chance that Barry would sneer at her the same way he had or give Guy the benefit of the doubt as Diana obviously had.

"On one condition." Tori made her decision.

"Name it." Guy leaned forward anxiously.

"Tell me what they said to you last night. All three of them."

"Fair enough." Guy groaned inwardly. He had to tell her everything even though it could make her decide that he was there more to get himself off the hook than for her.

Taking a deep breath, Guy began with his comments to Barry. When he reached the part where Diana had slapped him, Tori gasped. "She didn't!"

"Oh, I assure you, she did. I think Barry was even more surprised than I was." He continued with the rest, uninterrupted until he repeated Carla's declaration.

"I'll call her."

"No."

"Then we can go see her and tell her you're going to check into things for me."

"No."

"But —"

"Please don't think I don't appreciate your offer. I do but wouldn't you rather wait until they have one of their gatherings and go together? I know you've been to some in the past and I'm really surprised we never bumped into each other.

"Last night, I remembered a conversation I overheard between Carla and Diana. Diana was worried about you not sleeping and Carla suggested you take a vacation and go visit your family. I'm assuming Carla knew why you weren't sleeping and thought a change of scenery would help. Diana seemed certain that your family was last on your list of destinations and it wouldn't much matter since you don't know the meaning of vacation. She started to say something about how giving you more time alone not being the answer but then they noticed I was there and changed the subject."

"I hate that she wastes time worrying about me like that." Tori jumped up and stood in the doorway, looking at Diana while she unconsciously wrapped her arms around herself.

Guy stood behind her and gently rested his hands on her shoulders. "I seriously doubt that Diana sees it as a waste. She obviously cares about you and I know she's not one to ignore someone important to her when they're troubled."

Tori wasn't sure if she turned on her own or if Guy guided her but suddenly she found herself within inches of a very broad chest. She could feel the warmth where his hands still held her shoulders. Slowly, she raised her chin and met his gaze. He was watching her with an expression that almost looked tender.

"What had Diana so concerned? How long have you had dreams bad enough to keep you awake and why, Ms. Banks, do you think you can provide information on a crime committed over a hundred miles away?"

Without meaning to, Tori moved her hands to Guy's waist and lowered her forehead to his chest. "Could you please call me Tori? I don't think I can get through this if you keep being so formal."

Guy pulled her closer and lightly caressed her back. Instead of moving away, Tori let herself relax into the security of his embrace. When she slid her arms around him, Guy tightened his hold on her. The comforting gesture overwhelmed her and Tori couldn't hold back her tears.

As the sobs shook her body, Guy cupped the back of her head. With one hand, he smoothed her hair. With the other, he rubbed her back. Instinct had him whispering soothing words while he encouraged her to cry herself out.

Diana must have realized what was going on because Guy saw her heading toward the office when he glanced up. With a silent plea and minimal gesture, he waved her away. If Tori let him comfort her, they might form a tentative bond. If Diana came to her rescue, he'd be back to square one.

Diana hesitated and responded with a look that held an unspoken request that he get her if Tori needed her. When he nodded his agreement, she went back to the far end of the desk.

Guy continued his calming attempts until Tori was down to sniffles. Very slowly, she raised her face to see him. Her eyes were huge when he met her gaze with a soft smile. Still holding her, he used one thumb to dry her cheeks before kissing each eyelid. With another smile, he brushed her lips with a butterfly kiss.

"Feel any better?" Guy asked with his mouth close enough that she could feel his breath.

"Wha – um, what, I mean, why..."

"Oh Christ." He released her and stepped away. "Damn!"

Tori backed up against the wall. "I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I never cry, especially in front of people. I..."

"Tori." Guy ran his hand over his face. "I'm the one who should be apologizing. Again. Christ." He scowled before dropping his chin.

Tori reached out and put her hand on his arm. "Why? What did I miss?"

Guy's head jerked up. "I just kissed you."

"To get me to stop crying."

"Well, yeah, but..."

"But what? You wish you hadn't because I'm repulsive?"

"God, no!"

"Oh. I get it." Tori blushed with embarrassment. "I forgot about your girlfriend."

Guy snorted. "If you're referring to the woman who was so annoyed with me last night, don't give her another thought."

"But I thought she was waiting for you."

"Me too but apparently I took too long. After you left, she pointed out my replacement. Claimed he knew how to give her the proper attention."

"But I wasn't even there ten minutes."

"Her reaction wasn't really about you at all. You just provided a convenient excuse. Our acquaintance had run its course weeks ago. If she hadn't ended it, I would have."

Tori frowned. "All right, then why are you so annoyed?"

Guy looked extremely uncomfortable as he explained. "Because I completely blew it. I lost my mind and did everything wrong again. Yesterday, I treated you with contempt and accused you of being an attention-seeking liar. If you'd actually told me something that hadn't been reported in the paper, I would have accused you of being involved and probably arrested you."

"Today, you give me the opportunity to show I am capable of doing my job, a job that I've always been fairly good at and the instant you're about to let me prove myself, I toss the most elemental principle of how a decent cop behaves out the window."

"I don't understand."

"I kissed you, Tori."

"Because I was crying all over you after I asked you to stop being so formal. For comfort, right?"

He sighed. "Not really."

Tori gasped. Then she scowled. Then she paced in the limited space, glaring at him every time she turned. Finally, she stopped directly in front of him. "And of course you couldn't just go along with what I thought. No, you have to be too honest for that."

"I'm sorry." He looked miserable.

"For what exactly?" Tori challenged him.

Guy held her gaze as he considered his answer. "Several things and most of them inappropriate. The obvious, of course, failing to act as a detective should when offering assistance to an individual who has requested help. Sorry that we didn't meet at Barry's where it would have been perfectly acceptable for me to feel attracted to you. Sorry that because of that attraction I am obligated to step aside and ask someone else to take over. Sorry that I'm going to go Alpha male on you and demand that you refuse to confide in anyone other than me. Sorry that as an Alpha male I'm going to go overboard protecting you even if you tell me to go away and I have to become a stalker to do it. Sorry that even though I feel that way and want you to tell me everything since I know essentially nothing other than you see homicides in your sleep, I can still feel the softness of your lips and your body against mine." He laughed without humor. "Maybe what I should be most sorry for is dumping all this on you now, when you obviously have enough on your mind and the last thing you need is an asshole cop trying to cozy up to you when you're vulnerable and might let me take advantage of you."

"I would have sworn you despised me yesterday," Tori commented when she was sure he'd finished.



"Hardly. I was annoyed at myself for letting Lana rope me into going to a bar I've never liked. I was mega-pissed that I had to meet you for Barry instead of going straight to the hospital to wait with him and Carla. Then you showed up, looking lost and gorgeous at the same time. You didn't notice the leers you were getting, did you?"

"Oh, be real." She rolled her eyes.

"I'm serious, Tori. That's the reason I dislike that place so much. It's a meat market and you were fresh meat."

"If you say so."

"Something else I remember hearing Diana say about you is how you keep to yourself to the extent that she wondered that you weren't lonely."

Tori groaned.

"Wait. I only said it because I wish I'd remembered it before I accused you of being a drama queen. What I'd like to know is why you're alone. Why isn't there someone there to hold you after your nightmares?"

"I'm not comfortable with the idea of letting someone get that close," she surprised them both by answering.

"That mean you're not going to talk to me?"

"I want to. I know I should, that it's the right thing to do. But I'm so scared. If you prove that what I dreamed really happened then that'll mean that the others were probably real too and then what do I do?"

Guy heard the anguish in her voice and pulled her into his arms without thinking about it. "You let me help figure out what it all means and go on from there. You're not alone in this anymore, Tori."

"But I am, Guy. It was nice of you to say all that but what about what you said before? If you're really attracted to me, isn't that going to be a problem?"

"Only if you're equally attracted to me."

"And if I am? Although I'm not sure attraction is the right word. For either of us. I agree there's something and, yeah, it started yesterday but I don't know that it's not just a reaction to your Alpha male thing."

"What?"

"Yeah, that's probably all it is. You said I looked lost and vulnerable. Even though you were less than thrilled with the situation your protective nature probably kicked in anyway. I think I picked up on that in spite of your sneers and jeers because I stopped being uncomfortable with where I was as soon as you introduced yourself. It was like I knew you wouldn't let anything happen to me even though you clearly didn't want anything to do with me. And today, you came to apologize and offer to help and I react like the stereotypical weak female by crying all over you."

"So you're saying we have a damsel in distress and knight in shining armor thing going on and that's it?"

"No. Yes. Oh hell, I don't know."

Guy pondered her theory. "Tell you what. Let's ignore it for now and focus on what brought us together in the first place." He waited but Tori didn't comment. "Please tell me about your nightmare, Tori. I'll help any way that I can."

"I don't know if I can."

"Then let me call Barry and have him come talk to you."

"No, Guy, I didn't mean I couldn't tell you. When I was driving home last night I decided that I was done letting a bunch of stupid dreams bother me so much and that I needed to grow up and get over it."

"Really? If that's so then why do you still look like a scared rabbit? Why are you shaking? Why were you crying so hard?"

Tori searched his eyes but found only caring. He really was only pushing her to help and not to be mean. That thought made her even more afraid so she said the only thing she could think of. "I better get back to work before Diana fires me."

"Tori, wait." Guy caught her at the end of the desk. "When Barry asked me to meet you he explained that you were having nightmares that might be related to the woman in Springfield who was found in the bar. I'm going to find out everything I can about that and I'll be in the coffee shop across the street when the library closes. Why don't you and Diana meet me there so you can determine if your dream is just that or something more?"

Tori shook her head and inched away.

"Please don't say no. Just think about it. Let me help if I can."

Tori shivered. She glanced at Diana who was being tactful by keeping her distance. She hadn't told Diana about the end of her dream when the men were talking about their angel, Miss Vicky, guiding them to her. If—no, when—he confirmed the details she already knew, she would have to tell him that part of it too. If Diana heard, she'd be sick with worry and insist that Tori come stay with her and that was the last thing she wanted to do. She'd relied on Diana's support far too much already for Diana to be worrying at one of her niece's gatherings. If she refused to meet with Guy, Diana was bound to appoint herself Tori's guardian and again, that was not what Tori wanted.

"If you ask questions isn't someone going to wonder why and then show up here?"

"Maybe if I called directly but I'm not going to. I have a brother-in-law in the FBI. I thought I'd ask him to call. He can ask lots of questions without answering any in return."

"But won't he want to know why you're interested?"

"Yes, but Todd is a good guy. If I tell him it's important he'll find out whatever he can without an explanation up front."

Tori sighed and nodded. "Okay." She saw Diana's shoulders relax slightly and knew she'd been holding her breath.

"Thank you." Guy touched her cheek in a brief caress.

Not wanting to face Diana, Tori raced for the steps before Guy even turned to go. She knew Diana would give her time alone before approaching her and was grateful her friend was so understanding.

"She won't ask me to come with her," Diana stated softly.

"Excuse me." Guy pulled his thoughts from Tori's hasty retreat.

"She won't have me join you."

"Why? You've already heard about it. I'd think she'd be more comfortable with you there."

"She might be if she weren't holding something back. Tori is a very self-reliant young lady. Always has been. She's a tough little cookie, very difficult to get to know. But don't let that hard shell fool you. She's determined to hide it but inside she's a kind, caring, sensitive little girl. Yes, you'll find she's a real sweetheart if you can get past all her defenses. Tori doesn't trust easily or lightly, Guy. This is extremely hard for her, asking for help. You must have said something right for her to agree to meet you but don't expect her to just open up and tell you everything. You're going to have to drag it from her, word by word. I'll appreciate it if you don't let her frustrate you to the point where you give up and she closes you off."

"Not a chance, Diana. I'm in for the duration."

Something in Guy's tone caught Diana's attention. "Ah."

He couldn't read anything in her expression. "Pardon me but ah what? What does that mean?"

"It means, young man, that I can see you've greatly revised your opinion and your motives for helping aren't purely professional."

"Am I that transparent?"

"No, but I was fascinated the first time I met her too. There was just something about the way she marched in here and informed me that if I didn't hire her in spite of her total lack of qualifications I'd be making a huge mistake. She stood there, all proud and prickly, like it didn't matter in the least what I decided but I could tell that wasn't really her. Taking her on was one of the best decisions of my life. It's been wonderful, watching her grow into herself. I expect it'll be quite an adventure watching her figure out that she's as hooked on you as you are on her."

"She is?"

"Mm, and that's the last bit of matchmaking I'm going to do."

"Then I should thank you for the tip. Diana, no matter how we end up personally, I will see this nightmare business through. I'm sure I'll meet plenty of resistance but I'll take care of her."

She nodded. "See that you do. Tori is very special to me. She's family. I won't ask you to tell tales behind her back but if there's something I can do, will you let me know?"

"You have my word." With that settled, Guy went to collect the information as he'd promised.

## Chapter Five

The longer Tori spoke, the more the hair on the back of Guy's neck stood on end. The scene she described matched the report he'd received to the last detail. But Tori's knowledge far surpassed the police report. Guy didn't understand how she knew what she did but there was no doubt in his mind that her information would prove to be accurate.

Tori finished and drew her thoughts to the present. Guy could see the resignation in her eyes. "It's all in there." She pointed to the folder between them on the table.

Knowing he had no other choice, Guy slid it toward her. As she read, he wished he'd talked her into returning to the library where they would have had total privacy. Though they had the coffee shop practically to themselves it was still too public at the moment. What little color had been left in Tori's face when she'd reached the end of her dream was draining rapidly. He'd never seen anyone so pale who still had a pulse. Her pupils were dilating, like she was about to faint and her hands were shaking so badly that he doubted she could actually read the page.

Without warning, Tori dropped the folder, slid out of the booth and ran from the coffee shop. Guy grabbed their things, tossed a twenty on the table to cover their untouched coffee and raced after her.

"Tori, stop!" Guy shouted, chasing her across the parking lot. "Tori!" He had to catch her before she reached her Jeep. Fortunately, his longer legs closed the gap just as she grabbed the door handle. Guy extended his arm above her shoulder and leaned his hand against the top of the door to prevent her from opening it. "Tori."

"No. Not now. I have to go," Tori's voice was unsteady.

"Just wait one minute."

"No. I can't do this now." Her shoulders jumped.

Guy turned her and held her tightly to his chest, trapping her between his body and her Jeep. "You don't have to say a word but I can't let you take off until you calm down. I know your mind is reeling, hell, mine is too, but you killing yourself in an accident isn't going to solve anything."

"Let go." She struggled unsuccessfully.

"I can't. You're too important to people around here. I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you because I let you drive away." He was desperate enough to use brute force but only as a last resort. "And what about Diana? She's already had one scare this week. If you won't stay a few minutes for me, do it for her."

Tori slumped against him. "That's so not fair."

"I know but did it work or do I have to come up with something even more shameless?"

Wordlessly, Tori handed Guy her keys.

"That's my girl." Guy kissed her forehead. "Now put on your coat before you freeze to death."

"You sound like Diana." She let him close the zipper.

"That mean you make a habit of going off without your coat when it's this cold?"

"No. But since I grew up where it never got below fifty, she's afraid I'll forget if she doesn't keep reminding me."

"I can't imagine not having seasons. Isn't it weird?"

"Not when you've never had them."

"Good point."

"Hey, Guy, since you're going to keep me here until you're satisfied that I'm capable of driving, even though I already am, could we maybe get in and turn on the heater?"

"You planning on shoving me out the door so you can take off?"

"No. I'll stay. I'll even sit in the passenger seat."

He opened her door and handed her the keys. "You said you'll stay and that's good enough for me."

Inside the Jeep, Guy clasped Tori's hand, needing to maintain contact. When she looked at their hands and raised an eyebrow, he chuckled. "If you're thinking I'm holding on because I don't believe you, you're wrong. I trust you, Tori. I'm just a little rattled at the moment and touching you is making me feel better. If you'd rather I didn't, I'll let go."

"It's okay."

They sat in silence.

"You're going to tell your brother-in-law."

"I have to."

"In case the extra things I said could help find them."

"Yes."

"Am I going to have to go there? To Springfield and answer questions?"

"I don't know but I'll try not to let that happen. Maybe if you'll talk to Todd, he can keep you out of the rest of it."

"When?" She paled again.

"Soon, but I'll see if I can put him off for a few days if you want me to."

"Can I think about it a little?"

"Sure." He handed her one of his business cards that he'd added his personal numbers to. "Give me a call tonight or tomorrow." She nodded. "Tori, he'll need to hear all of it, including what you left out earlier."

She looked startled but didn't deny it. "It doesn't have anything to do with what they did to that Mindy."

"He'll still need to know. You could bounce it off me first. It might not be so hard to say if you've already spoken about it."

"I can't," she insisted, her eyes refilling with tears.

"Aw, Christ. I'm sorry." He lifted her across the Jeep and onto his lap, tucking her head under his chin.

A short time later, through her sniffles, Tori asked, "You always do this?"

"Do what?"

"Touch people so much."

"Family and close friends, yeah. Potential witnesses or victims, never. Do you shy away from physical contact with everyone or just me?"

"Everyone, but how did you know?"

"Experience. I have four sisters and dozens of cousins. Add in all their friends over the years and I can honestly say that you are the first female who resisted being held once the tears started."

"But I didn't push you away."

"I know and the Alpha male in me thanks you for that." He managed a smile. "It's highly inappropriate for me to be asking this but are you involved with anyone?"

"Involved as in dating? No."

"Thank God. That's one line I haven't crossed with you." He cuddled her close again for a few minutes. With a sigh, Guy shifted her back to her seat. "I guess I should let you get home. Call me when you get there?"

"Guy."

"Please, Tori. I'd much rather follow you home but I won't if you humor me."

"Fine. Jeez, you really are as bad as Diana."

"Then you'll call her too?"

"Always do," she frowned. "You're going to want to hear about the others, aren't you? And Todd."

He nodded. "Eventually but I won't push."

"Thanks but you might have to. I, um, I am sorry I didn't tell you the other part today."

"You going to?"

"Yeah."

"Then there's no need to apologize. You'll tell me soon enough. Until then, I'll demonstrate my unlimited patience and wait for you to be ready." Guy cupped her cheek and couldn't resist running his thumb over her lips. "Soft. So kissable. Tell me to get out now before I forget that I'm ignoring how much I want to get involved with you."

Tori pressed against his hand for a split second before drawing back. "Please go now, Guy."

"Take your time and drive safely. And don't forget to call me."

Tori rolled her eyes but agreed.

Halfway out of the Jeep, Guy paused. "If you need anything, literally anything, no matter what time it is, I'm just a phone call away."

"Guy."

"Don't say it. I know it's too soon for you to accept that I mean that unconditionally. You'll learn." He squeezed the hand that was clutching the steering wheel. "Let me know what you decide about meeting with Todd."



## Chapter Six

For four days, Tori kept looking over her shoulder, expecting to find Guy lurking in the shadows. She hadn't spoken with him since she'd called Sunday morning and asked him to hold Todd off as long as he could. He'd agreed, telling her that he'd relayed everything she'd said and the authorities were already working with her information.

Tori hadn't slept well all week but for a change, it wasn't due to bad dreams. No, the trouble now was her overactive imagination. Whenever she relaxed, her thoughts drifted to Guy, no matter how hard she tried to resist. She kept remembering how strong and solid his chest had felt when he'd held her. She couldn't forget the fleeting kiss and wondered what it would have been like if she hadn't chased him out of her Jeep. What would it be like for Guy to pull her onto his lap for reasons other than to comfort her?

"Forget it, Banks," Tori muttered, pounding her pillow into a more comfortable lump. "You're not really infatuated and neither is he. It's just a reaction to the circumstances. So what if he's tall, dark and handsome? You don't do casual sex because it's not worth it, remember? You're waiting for a guy who means something even if it takes another six months. Sure, he'd make you forget all about what Russ said about coming for you but you can't use him like that even if he might be willing. So what if he's probably even better than your wildest dreams. He's off-limits and that's final."

No amount of self-admonishment could prevent Tori's mind from drifting into a fantasy of what sex might be like with Guy. She imagined him beginning by caressing her cheek as he had but not stopping there. His hand on her face had been gentle but he was such a strong man. Once he got excited would his strength become more apparent? Tori pushed her shirt up and out of the way. Her hands covered her breasts, squeezing them lightly as Guy might when he first touched her. Closing her eyes, she could almost see the hunger on his face. Her fingers found her engorged nipples. She pinched them, wishing her hands were rougher on her skin, more like Guy's would be.

Her back arched as if she was offering herself to Guy's mouth. She gasped at the thought of how it would feel to have his lips close over her nipples. Would he begin by kissing them? Would he draw as much of her breast as he could into his mouth while his hand worked the rest of it? Would he tease her before zeroing in on her nipples? When he did, would he suck them gently or devour them? Would he bite her flesh, marking her as his?

Tori slipped a hand into her pants. Squeezing her legs together, she covered her mound. If she did that with Guy would he coax her legs open or work his hand straight to where he wanted it? Her fingers pressed her slit. Imagining Guy had her soaked. She

spread her legs and dipped her fingers into her pussy, coating them with her juices, spreading it over her stiff clit. Would Guy want to taste her? Yes, she believed he would. He'd lick and nibble his way downward from her breasts, settling between her thighs, all the while teasing her, stroking her with his fingers. Tori's own imitated what she thought Guy's would do. Only his would feel so much better. They were thicker and longer and he could angle them differently than she could. Tori moaned as her hips lifted, pressing her fingers deeper inside her needy pussy. How she wished it was Guy's hand instead of her own!

Her mind went back to dreaming about having Guy's mouth take her. He'd point his tongue and use it to penetrate her, like a miniature cock. Then he'd circle her clit, tormenting her until she begged for more contact. Finally, he'd give in and flick her nub. Or would he flatten his tongue and lick her? Would he alternate sucking her clit and fucking her with his tongue? Maybe all of it or he would if she had any choice in the matter. He'd also pump his fingers in and out of her pussy while his lips claimed her clit. Tori focused all her attention on her sensitized bud. The more she thought about Guy, the faster her fingers went. She knew he'd make her come first. He might profess himself to be an Alpha male but something made her certain that he'd be a considerate lover, giving as much pleasure as he took. Mm, he would be so good. Tori twisted her nipple as she imagined Guy would. She pressed her clit harder and harder, working herself into a frenzy. Finally, when she was nearly breathless, she allowed herself to come.

Satisfied, Tori drifted into an uneasy sleep. She was already tossing and turning when Russ' excited laughter invaded her mind. Stan's, much louder, joined in until Russ silenced him. Full of nervous anticipation, they watched the old man cradle each kitten in turn, speaking softly to the mother the whole time. He assured her repeatedly that no one would hurt her babies and that he and Kimmie loved them as much as she did. He was still sitting with them when a little girl bounced into the room. Immediately, she was by his side, chattering to both him and the kittens.

"Careful now, Kimmie. Don't squeeze. That's the way," he crooned.

Soon Kimmie was giggling happily with all four kittens crawling all over her. The mother cat had settled onto Sam's lap, enjoying his stroking as she kept a close eye on her rambunctious litter.

When the kittens tired out, Sam and Kimmie returned them to their box and went to the kitchen. Sam prepared a snack while Kimmie did her homework. They remained there until Kimmie's mother arrived to take her home. At the door, Kimmie asked Sam if he knew how to bat. She wondered if he could teach her because she wanted to play softball on the school team with her friends in the spring.

After they left, Russ motioned Stan from their hiding place. "This is going to be so much fun." His tone and expression were crazed.

"What are we gonna do, Russ? You got an idea yet?"

"Oh yeah. She wants to learn to bat, we'll show her how to bat. Soon as we're sure today's visit wasn't a one-time thing we'll give her a lesson she'll never forget." His laugh was pure evil. "Batting practice. Yeah, this is going to be good."

Tori's scream echoed around the bedroom as she jolted herself awake. She bolted from the bed so quickly the covers were still tangled around her legs. Before she freed herself, she landed flat on her face on the floor.

"Oh, ouch, damn, that hurt." Tori's voice was as unsteady as her legs. "You are such an idiot," she chided herself as she moved through the house, turning on every light. She had just lit the last one when the phone rang.

"Oh God, they found me," Tori gasped as she backed herself into a corner.

"Tori, it's me, Guy. I know you're up and I'm pretty sure you're listening. I'm sorry if the phone scared you but I thought it would be better than pounding on the door."

His voice drew her toward the machine. "Guy," she whispered, unable to believe it was really him.

"I drove up a few minutes before you turned on all the lights. I don't really know what I'm doing here. I was asleep but something woke me. For some reason, I had the feeling that you were afraid. I couldn't shake it so I drove over to check on you. Tori, can you hear me? I'm worried about you. Can I come in please? I don't want to impose and I won't stay longer than it takes for me to see that you're okay. Call me paranoid but I'm not going to calm down until I see you, whether it's now or in the morning when you leave for the library. I'll wait out here if that's what you want, Tori. I'll have to start up my truck now and then to run the heater a little so don't worry when you hear—" The tape was full so the machine cut him off.

"Guy." Tori flung open the door and was out on the porch without thinking about what she was doing. Her bare feet slipped in the fresh snow and she would have fallen down the steps if Guy's strong arms hadn't caught her.

"Slow down, tiger." He scooped her off her feet and carried her back inside, kicking the door closed behind them. "You could have just turned on your porch light and waved. You didn't have to come out and get me."

"You're here," she mumbled into his chest. "You're really here."

"Yes, I'm here." He set her on her feet.

"Don't let go."

"I won't. I'll hold you forever if you want me to."

"Guy." Tori's sobs broke as she wrapped her arms around his waist without giving him a chance to take his coat off.

Guy shrugged out of the sleeves one arm at a time, letting his coat fall where they stood. He backed them to one of the overstuffed chairs and, with gentle pressure, urged her to release her hold enough for him to sit down, pulling her on top of him as he sat. She didn't seem to notice that he arranged her so he could surround her as much as possible.

It felt like forever before Tori's tears ended. When they did, she became aware of how he was whispering softly while he cuddled her.

"I really don't cry all the time like this. I hardly ever cry at all."

"Then you were due. I remember asking my father once why my sisters were always crying." Guy tried to distract her. "I think I was about twelve. I was the middle child, the only boy with four sisters and my youngest sister had just gotten her first period. She was only ten but they all matured young. Between them and my mom there were only a few days a month when one of them wasn't hormonal. Well, Dad took me out to the garage. That's where we always went for our man-to-man talks. He spent the afternoon giving me a very explicit explanation of everything female as he knew it. My father is a very insightful, intuitive man and I can't tell you how often I've drawn on something from that conversation. For instance, Dad said that sometimes things are clearer after a good cry. He made a point of stressing that that applied to everyone, not just females even though some men weren't secure enough to let themselves cry."

"Are you?"

"Secure enough to cry? Definitely."

"When?"

"When my grandparents passed on. When my sister, Terese, she's Todd's wife, had her miscarriages, two of them. When Barry told me he knew Carla was the one for him. When—"

"Wait, why?"

"Why did Barry's happiness make me break down? Because he'd found what I was still searching for. Don't get me wrong. I couldn't have been more pleased for him. It didn't stop me from being envious and feeling sorry for myself."

"I grew up in a big affectionate family who all believe that there is a perfect match for everyone and when you meet, you'll know right away. My oldest sister, Marie, met her husband in third grade and there was never any question that they wouldn't always be together."

"Todd's car broke down on the highway when I was fifteen and working in my uncle's garage after school. He had to wait overnight for one of the parts and we'd spent a good few hours talking so I invited him home for supper. He and Terese wound up talking all night on the porch swing. In the morning, before he left he asked my dad's permission to visit often because he intended to marry her when she graduated from high school. I could tell you plenty more stories about various cousins and friends but you get the idea."

Tori felt her heart race at the sudden thought that she wanted to be the one for him and rapidly changed the subject. "Why did you come here tonight?"

"I told you on the phone. I was sleeping and then I wasn't. I woke up and couldn't shake the feeling that you were scared. Did you have another nightmare? Is that why you turned on all the lights?"

"Yes."

"Want to talk about it?" She shivered. "You don't have to, Tori. I'm sorry. I don't want to upset you."

"What?"

"You started trembling when I asked if you wanted to talk about it."

"Oh." Tori blushed and fought the urge to hide her face in his shoulder. "It's not that. I'm just a little cold. Or the part of me that's not against you is. The rest is nice and warm."

Guy hid a grin. "Yeah, now that you said that it does feel chilly in here. Maybe I should check your furnace."

"No. I turn the heat down when I go to bed because I like lots of covers. You called before I turned it up and then I got sidetracked."

Guy was rubbing his hands over her exposed skin. "And your nightwear isn't designed for warmth although I must say how much I like it."

Tori glanced down at her shorts and tank top and realized how well-defined her stiffened nipples were in the flimsy cotton of the tight pink shirt.

"Oh God," she groaned.

"Christ, could I have said anything more inappropriate? Hey, at least I haven't lost my mind entirely or I'd be touching them instead of just wishing I were."

At his declaration, Tori felt the peaks tighten even more. She watched his glance drop and knew he'd seen the change. When his gaze returned to hers, she saw that his eyes had darkened. Wordlessly, she caught one of his hands and drew it to her breast, pressing herself against his palm. For a long moment, he cupped her.

"Guy." Tori made his name sound like a plea.

With a sigh, Guy slid his hand to her shoulder and rested his forehead against hers. "You could tempt a dead man."

"But not you, huh?"

"Oh, I'm plenty tempted. If you don't believe me, shift your hip and you'll be able to feel just how tempted I am. As much as I hate to do it, I'm going to beg you to go put on a robe or some sweats or anything less revealing, not that it'll do much good now that I've seen you like this."

"But—"

"No, Tori, don't. I know it would be pure heaven, spending the next month exploring your body, after which we'd spend the following year making love in every way imaginable but that's not something we can start tonight."

"Not even if I tell you I want you more than I've ever wanted anyone?"

"Oh Christ." Guy ran his thumb along her collarbone. "Don't do this, Tori, please. I'm trying to be decent and not take advantage of the situation. You say you want me now but what about tomorrow? You're the one who questioned my attraction to you,

remember? I won't do something that you may regret later. You're too important for me to chance that."

Tori studied his eyes and saw more emotions than she expected. "All right, Guy. You wouldn't be taking advantage but okay. I won't beg you to show me if those big strong hands of yours feel as good as I think they will."

"Tori."

"Just trying to make you feel better by not being the only one who says inappropriate things."

"Thanks, I think." Guy stood her on her feet. "Go put on more clothes and stop looking so damn desirable."

"You'll be here?"

"Until you tell me to leave."

"Do you really want to stay and talk?" Tori asked when she returned, dressed in her most comfortable sweats and a heavy pair of socks. Not looking at Guy, she raised the thermostat and turned off most of the lights.

"Absolutely. I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't willing."

"Want some coffee or cocoa or something?"

"Cocoa please," he answered, following her into the kitchen. "Cozy," he said. "Friendly, like the living room."

"Thanks." Tori was unreasonably pleased by his comment. "That's why I bought this place. The whole thing feels warm. Not at all like the house I grew up in."

"No?"

"Not even close. Picture the quintessential Beverly Hills mansion and the one I lived in was ten times more so. Everything in it was about image. My parents have a salon that caters to the in-crowd. If you're not one of the *crème-de-la-crème* you could wait months for an appointment if you even managed to get one. The décor there and in the house shifted with whatever was trendiest at the moment. Whenever they redecorated, they'd have an intimate soiree with, oh, fifty or sixty of whoever was on top that week. That way everyone knew how with the times my parents were."

"Doesn't sound like you enjoyed it."

"I hated it. The house was cold and impersonal and the people were stuck up and phony. My brother and sister loved giving command performances for the A-list but I dreaded every minute of it. After I proved to be totally incompetent in everything having anything to do with the salon, my parents banished me from all future events so they wouldn't be reminded of what an embarrassment I was."

"Ouch. What did you do?"

"Let's just say that I couldn't have been more of a disaster if I'd been intentionally trying to sabotage them. The final straw was when I doused someone's head with

depilatory instead of perm solution. If my brother hadn't walked by and smelled it, there probably would have been a lawsuit."

"So how did you wind up here, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Dumb luck more than anything." Tori added a handful of marshmallows to their cocoa and joined Guy at the table. "When I graduated my parents informed me I was going to study accounting. They decided I could be useful by taking over the books and staying far away from the clientele. When I tried to object, they issued an ultimatum. Do things their way or be disowned. They tacked on the condition that if I persisted in defying them, I'd have one hour to collect my things and whatever I couldn't carry with me would be forfeited. They said they'd allow me time to think about it before I gave them my decision because they wanted to be sure I understood that if I left I would not be able to change my mind. I would never be permitted inside either the house or the salon ever again. Twenty minutes later, I was on my way to the bus station. I wanted to get as far away as I could so I bought a ticket to Portland, Maine. The bus stopped here long enough for people to grab something to eat. I saw an ad for an assistant librarian on the bulletin board and didn't get back on the bus."

"I don't know what to say."

"About what?"

"Your parents. How could they treat you like that? You're their child, for Christ's sake."

"It's not like I ever fitted with them."

"That shouldn't matter to parents. Family is family, even when you have different interests. You don't throw away your child because she chooses not to work in the family business."

"Maybe not your family but mine did. We weren't ever much of a family. I didn't even know what a family should feel like until Diana took me along to Carla's. It's like seasons, Guy. You can't miss what you never had."

"It was still wrong of them. I can't imagine living like that. Just wait until you meet my family. You'll see why I'm having so much trouble with this."

Tori fidgeted with her mug. "I think I'm ready to tell you what I left out Saturday if that's okay."

"Sure. Whatever you like."

With a deep breath, Tori repeated the conversation that she suspected was about her. Guy's expression got darker and darker. By the time she'd finished, he looked ready to explode.

Not saying anything, Guy rose from the table to stare out the window, gripping the counter so tightly his knuckles were white.

Dreading his response less than the tense silence, Tori said, "Please say something."

Guy spun around so fast he scared her. When he leaned over her bracing one hand on the back of her chair and one on the table, Tori flinched. Instantly, Guy dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around her.

"I'm sorry. Christ, I'm so sorry. I won't let them get to you. They won't lay a finger on you. Ever." His voice was tight. "I'll stand guard outside your door if that's what it takes to protect you. Better yet, you can come stay with me."

"Guy."

"I have a spare room, so it's okay. They won't know where to find you."

"Guy, stop. He's in my head. It won't matter where I am. Besides, that's the least of it."

"What do you mean?"

Tori let out a small sob. "They're real. Don't you see? They chopped that woman in half for me. They killed all of them to impress me. It's my fault they're dead. I should have stopped them."

"How? Listen to me, Tori. It is not your fault. No, wait. One, just because one dream is real doesn't mean they all are. Two, you said they never talked about where they were."

"What if I just missed it?"

"You didn't. If they had given you any hint of where they were you would have checked the papers. I know you would have. Three, even though you have some bizarre mental link, they obviously aren't paying any attention to you. They can't be or they'd never choose killing as a way to impress you."

"How do you know that? What if there's something inside me that is subconsciously urging them to do it?"

"There's not, Tori. I know that and so do you so just stop it."

"But how do you know?"

"Because I do. And so does Diana since she's an excellent judge of character. She never would have given you a chance if she hadn't sensed you were a good person."

"You're really sure?"

"Without a doubt. Now get that thought out of your head. I mean it. Tori, you are not capable of making someone kill and I'd bet Terese's daughter's life on it."

"God, don't say that!"

"Why not? I want you to understand how positive I am that you are not a killer. Correct me if I'm wrong here but you could have sold the story of your parents' ultimatum to one of those gossip rags and knocked them down a peg or two, right?" She nodded. "Did you even consider it?"

"No."

"If you didn't lash out at the people who hurt you like that then there isn't a snowball's chance in hell of you killing a stranger for kicks."



"Yeah," she finally agreed. "The rest happened too, Guy. I can feel it."

"I hate to ask this of you but will you tell me what you remember about the others?" Tori paled but nodded. "I want to give Todd a list. He can research them and hopefully find a pattern."

"You believe me?"

"Unfortunately, yes, but I hope to hell you're wrong."

"Me too, but I'm not." She sighed deeply and pushed his arms away. "I'll be right back."

Tori returned to the kitchen clutching several notebooks. "I don't know why but when the nightmares started, I made sure I wrote them down." Hesitating while she searched his face, Tori finally extended them toward him.

"Are you sure?" Guy asked before accepting them.

"I don't have a choice if there's even the slightest chance they'll help. Will you give them to your brother-in-law?"

"I'll make copies for him. I'd like to page through them first. Can I stay here to do that? You can go back to bed if you want to."

"There's no point since I won't sleep anyway. If you start with the oldest, I can write down tonight's dream."

"Okay, but I need you to do something for me first."

"What?" She was instantly afraid.

"Come over here and hold me for a minute. I'm so frightened at the thought of what you've been going through that I'm shaking."

Not hesitating, Tori was wrapped around Guy in a flash. "You don't have to be. I'm fine."

"I know you are. You're an amazingly strong woman and I'm glad we finally met even if it is under these circumstances."

She drew back and looked into his eyes. "I don't think strong is the right word but I'm glad we met too." Her hand went to his cheek. "Wow, your eyes have green flecks. I thought they were just brown."

"And yours are the prettiest green I've ever seen. They go perfectly with your freckles. I can't decide if your hair is red or blond though. Will I insult you if I ask if it's natural?"

"It should and I would be, if it was coming from anyone else but yes, it's mine." She blushed shyly.

"Damn, I love when your cheeks get pink like that. You wouldn't be fibbing to me, would you, tiger? I have every intention of finding out one of these days."

"Think so?" She giggled at his exaggerated grin, enjoying the way he'd lightened the mood. "Sorry to disappoint you but you won't."

Guy's face fell. "Ah. I shouldn't have assumed so much."

Her eyes widened. "Oh no, that's not what I meant."

"No?"

"No. Jeez, I really suck at this."

"You do not but I think you need to explain."

"I, well, look, just forget it, okay?"

"No, it's not okay. You're blushing again and that makes me extremely curious."

"I'm blushing because I'm embarrassed."

"Embarrassed, hmm? That's a problem. You see I was planning on keeping the sexual tension high between us by exchanging innuendoes with you frequently. That way I figure you'll be so turned-on by all my suggestions that when this is all settled you won't be able to resist me. If you're going to be too embarrassed to participate then I'll have to watch what I say too. You don't want to miss out on all that, do you, tiger? Maybe I should tell you that once we get together there's not going to be any room for modesty or embarrassment. We're going to do things together that you've never even thought of and I promise you're going to love every second of it."

"You sound awfully confident."

"Not really. I just know how good we're going to be. Seriously, Tori, you never have to be anyone but who you are with me. If you want to say something outrageous or off-color, go for it. Since everything I think seems to pop right out of my mouth, I'm counting on you to cut me some slack. How about if I do the same for you and if either of us is ever offended we'll say so right away?"

"Deal." She blushed again. "What I meant when I said that was that you're won't be able to tell that way if there's nothing there for you to compare."

"Holy Christ, you shave," Guy gulped.

"Maybe. Maybe not. You'll just have to wait and see."

"Damn, tiger, you got me all hard again just thinking about that."

"Then maybe it's time to look at the notebooks."

"Mm," he agreed but caught her hand before she could sit back down. "Thank you for showing me these. I'm sure it's not easy."

Tori shrugged. "I figure since you went to such trouble to get us to start over and trusted me with the Jeep you deserve the same."

"I promise you won't regret it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tori was so involved in writing down all she remembered about her newest nightmare that Guy's voice startled her. "Hey, Todd, it's me. Sorry to call so early but I need help." His explanation was to the point. When he brought up his growing unease at the thought of leaving Tori alone, he gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

"I know you will, Todd, and I really appreciate it. We'll set something up after you've picked through everything. Tell Terese I'm sorry I woke her but once she meets Tori, she'll understand why I felt it was so urgent."

"I don't need a baby-sitter, Guy," Tori stated as soon as he disconnected his call. "You didn't even ask me first."

"You're right and I'm sorry but I'm not taking any chances with your safety."

"I appreciate that, don't think I don't, but you still should have discussed it with me before you went all Alpha male. If you had, I could have told you that they're not here yet. There wasn't any snow on the ground in my dream earlier so they aren't that close yet."

"Was anyone wearing a heavy coat that would indicate it is cold?"

"Yes."

"Then they could be forty miles away. Call me paranoid if you want but remember you were awake and frightened when I got here tonight. If you won't trust my personal need to do this can't you at least trust my professional one? If what I've read so far is any indication of the rest, then you may be the only way to find these guys and put a stop to whatever they're planning next."

"Oh my God, I'm so horrible."

"No, you're not. I would have reacted the same way in your position."

"I doubt it. So what are you going to do, follow me around the library all day with your gun drawn? The gossips will have a field day."

"Honestly, I was hoping you would use some of that vacation you've accumulated. Todd wants to meet with you and I'm sure he'll ask you to spend some time with one of their artists. If they alter their appearances every time, it'll take days to compile a full set of sketches. You know Diana will understand."

"Yes, but I'd still be deserting her. And what are we going to do once we're done with Todd and the sketches?"

"Nope, too easy. I won't say it." He chuckled. "You are just so cute when you blush. But to answer your question, we can spend the time getting to know each other."

"Isn't it going to be awkward? I never had someone around all the time so please don't make fun of me for asking."

"I'd never make fun of you, Tori. Tease you, yes, but not when you're clearly unsure of something like you are now. We'll be fine together but if I get on your nerves you can spend a few nights with Todd and Terese or even Barry and Carla."

"Nights? You really do intend to stay here. With me. Alone."

"Yep, unless you think we need a chaperone? Maybe Diana would agree to stay with us. Or I could call my mom."

Tori gasped. "Okay, this is you teasing me, right?"

"Un-huh. We are adults here, tiger. We both know now is not the time to give in to our desires. We're going to wait until there won't be any doubts between us because what we're going to have together is too special to risk."

The silence stretched as Tori processed his declaration. Finally, she said, "Well, that sure worked. If you were trying to distract me with something even more scary than the thought that I'm drawing Russ and Stan to me, that did it. That is why you said that."

Guy just smiled.

"Guy? Tell me you said that just to make me not think about Russ and Stan." Silence. "Guy, please."

His smile widened. "Of course, Tori. Did you think I was serious?"

"I don't know. Were you?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. You'll just have to wait and see."

"You are so not funny," Tori growled, swatting his shoulder.

"Hey! You're assaulting a police officer here."

"Like that even hurt. What are you going to do? Arrest me?"

"Nooooo," he drew the word out. "But if you keep it up I might have to handcuff you."

Tori's heart skipped a beat before it began to race. She felt the heat as her face flushed and wondered if eyes could really leap out of one's head.

"Holy Christ, you'd like that," Guy concluded from watching her.

"Maybe. Maybe not. You'll just have to wait and see." She laughed. "Want some breakfast?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The vibration from Guy's cell phone was the first thing that drew his attention from Tori's notebooks since he'd opened one halfway through breakfast.

"What?" he answered sharply.

"Good morning to you too," Barry replied sarcastically.

"Oh, hey. It's you. Sorry. What's up?"

"What's up? What's up! Hmm, let's see. Perhaps it could be the fact that when I walked into work today, it felt like an average ordinary day, like every other. You know, the kind where we drink some bad coffee, go to the daily meeting to find out what new heinous crime may require our attention, report on any progress in our ongoing cases, then map out our day, deciding how best to utilize the combined hours of our partnership. Sound familiar?" Barry paused just long enough to breathe. "It should since we've been doing the same thing for years. Now imagine my surprise when my partner is still nowhere in sight when we're due in the meeting. Just disappeared without a trace. No message on either phone, no email, no skywriters, nothing. Picture it, me only half listening to what the captain's saying when suddenly I

hear his name. Seems my partner's been temporarily reassigned to the FBI as a special liaison on a case regarding potential serial killers."

"Damn, Barry, I was going to call you but it was too early and then I got lost in Tori's—"

"So that's what all this is about. At least now it makes some sense. What the hell happened, Guy?"

Guy filled Barry in on all that had occurred since they'd said goodnight at work the previous day. Although his partner didn't comment his various grunts were enough for Guy to know his thoughts.

"There are so many things I don't know where to start. What the fuck, Guy!"

"I know, Barry, I know. Believe me, I know."

"Do you? Because from what I'm hearing—"

"I sound certifiable. My attitude has gone from one extreme to the other. My belief in a possible mental connection has gone from skeptical at best to acceptance to the point where I think I've joined it. I acted totally out of character by not hashing this out with you before I called Todd. See? I do know."

"That's a good start but you left out one very obvious concern."

"Tori."

"Hell yes, Tori. Where are you? Did you skip her because you can't speak freely at the moment?"

"No, it's okay. I just heard the shower start so I can talk."

"Then why aren't you? There are rules, rules even a rookie knows. Damn it, Guy!"

"I know, Barry. I've been telling myself the same things."

"Then why the hell are you doing this? You're about to cross the line, if you already haven't and then what?"

"Then we'll see. Everything you're saying is right and I know I should hand the whole mess, including Tori, over to Todd. I know he'd handle it and take care of her but, Barry, I can't. I just can't. The look on her face when I got here, the trust it took to offer me her notebooks, the way she accepts that I'll stop them before they get to her and keep her safe. I can't turn my back and walk away. I won't do it. Tori's already been alone with this way too long and I'm not going to let that continue."

"So you're just going to drop everything, put your whole life on hold, if you even have one to go back to after this and move in with some girl you just met?"

"Yes. I have to, Barry. I don't have any other choice."

"All right then." Barry sighed. "How can I help?"

Guy chuckled. "Thanks. I owe you."

"Big-time and you better believe I'll be collecting every bit of it."

"I expect you to."

"Seriously, Guy, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Honestly, I have no idea. I'm in so far over my head I might drown but that's not important as long as Tori's okay."

"Easy for you to say but personally I'd rather not see either one of you get hurt."

"Do my best."

"Yeah, yeah, just don't forget you have backup. No matter what you think now you really don't have to do this all on your own."

"Point noted."

"Good. You can prove it by stopping by tonight. Debbie and Diana are coming for dinner and your first token payment can be to spare me from the inquisition."

"Christ," Guy groaned. "Okay, we'll drop in. I'm not promising dinner because I may be putting myself on a limb here already but I'll think of something."

"Good enough."

"Yeah, good enough to count as an installment not just a token."

"We'll see. Check in, Guy. You left me hanging this morning. I'll be royally pissed if you do it again."

"Understood. Thanks, Barry," Guy repeated even though he knew it wasn't necessary.

## Chapter Seven

"That was nice of Carla to invite us to stay like that," Tori commented as she pushed things around on the counter.

"Yes," Guy agreed, watching her fidget.

"You sure you'll be okay? I don't have to turn the heat down so far if you'll be cold."

"Tori." He caught her hand and tugged her next to him. "Stop. Yes, Carla's wonderful. They're all wonderful. I'm fine with the heat wherever you set it. I have everything I need and if I don't, I'll find it or I'll ask. You need to relax."

"I know. I'm sorry I'm acting like such a wacko but I never had anyone stay with me before and I'm a little nervous."

"I get that but there's no reason to be. You don't have to entertain me. Pretend I'm not even here. Just do whatever you normally do. I'll stay out of your way. I mean it. Even if your nightly routine is to put on some sultry blues and spend hours perfecting your striptease and then, once you're naked, exercising your flexibility, I promise not to interrupt."

"Now that's ridiculous." She pushed his shoulder.

"Watch it there, tiger. Shoving a cop is just as bad as slugging one."

"Oh, just shut up." She laughed. "But thanks for calming me down."

"Anytime. Now since it's late and neither of us got much sleep last night, may I suggest you save the show for morning and turn in? I'm going to as soon as I check my email."

"Okay, Guy. 'Night." She shifted from foot to foot, waiting for him to release her hand.

"Hmm." He tilted his head. "Nope."

"Nope?"

"Nope, that didn't feel right." Guy urged her against him for a hug. "Close but not perfect." He tipped her chin and kissed her softly. "Goodnight, Tori."

"Mm." She blushed. "Much better. See you in the morning."

Guy stayed where he was until he heard the door to Tori's room close. If he moved sooner he might have given into the impulse to follow her and kiss her goodnight until it was time to kiss her good morning. Yes, that would definitely be breaking the promise he'd made to Barry less than an hour earlier not to rush things with Tori until they were both sure they weren't merely reacting to the stress of the situation.

Concentrating intently on one of the news reports that Todd's email directed him to, Guy jumped so fast he knocked over his chair when a scream shattered the silence. Instinctively, he grabbed his gun and was at Tori's bedroom door before it registered that her screams were a result of a nightmare. Just to be on the safe side, Guy pushed open the door cautiously and scanned her room before reengaging the safety and placing the gun on her dresser.

Without thinking, Guy captured Tori's hands as she fought the tangled mess of covers and sat next to her. In the dim light from his room, he saw Tori's glazed eyes switch from fear to pure terror as she woke from her dream only to find herself trapped by a huge figure looming beside her.

"No," Tori cried in panic as she twisted to escape. When his grip tightened and he attempted to draw her closer, she screamed nonstop and fought with all her might.

"Oh Christ." Guy realized his mistake and released her. "Tori," he spoke softly as he moved off the bed and flipped on the light. "It's me, Tori, Guy. It's just me. Please, Tori, look at me."

"Guy," Tori managed as she gasped for breath.

"That's right, Tori, just Guy. Christ, I'm an idiot," Guy continued to apologize even after Tori squirmed into his arms.

When her breathing returned to normal, she tried to get his attention several times without success. He didn't notice until she nipped his shoulder. "I'm okay now. You can loosen up some."

"Maybe you are but what about me? You scared me half to death, screaming like that."

"Hey, I warned you."

"I know but I sure as hell wasn't expecting that. I guess I thought you were exaggerating and that it only seemed like you were screaming. I figured you'd be the same as my youngest sister, Brigit, was when we were kids. She had bad dreams after I told her there were trolls living under our porch. I had her convinced the only way they wouldn't eat her was if she gave them the treat Mom packed in her lunch every day before school."

"How old were you?" Tori asked, knowing he was using this to distract her.

"I was nine and she was seven."

"How could you?"

"Hey, it wasn't as easy as you think. Giti was fearless. After a few days of peeking under the porch as she left the snack, she decided she didn't believe me. She hadn't seen anything or heard them moving around so she concluded they must have moved away."

"So she stopped?"



"She would have if I hadn't gotten two of my friends to hide under the porch. One grabbed her foot through the steps and the other rolled around, scraping the boards with a stick and growling."

"Why didn't she tell your parents or other sisters? Didn't she wonder why she was the only one they were after?"

"I told her the trolls weren't the greedy kind and only needed one child to keep them happy. I said I had been the one when they first picked our house but they wanted her instead. I explained that she wasn't allowed to talk about it with anyone who didn't already know they were there or they'd get mad and eat the whole family. I said it was up to us to protect the others. I even volunteered to put her treat in the hiding place so she didn't have to get too close."

"You were awful!"

"Yeah, I was. Especially since I didn't think ahead to when school left out for the summer. I made up some lame story about weekends but I forgot about summer. When Giti couldn't figure out how to sneak her cookie or cake out of the house after lunch, she started having bad dreams. She'd flop around and whimper until Mom or Dad woke her. She started crying every time someone left the house but I was too busy with my buddies to pay much attention. She held out a whole week before my parents got her to tell them."

"What did they do to you?"

"Dad took me to the garage and explained all about the responsibilities of being a big brother as well as a good man and pointed out how my behavior went against most of them. He always had the uncanny knack of knowing when to yell and when a reasonable discussion would be more effective. Mom, on the other hand, usually yelled until she got it out of her system unless it was one of the rare occasions when she was too angry to say a word. When that happened she'd just stare instead. We would all be together, like at dinner and in the middle of a conversation she'd give the offender a look that said it all."

"Was this one of those times?"

"Oh yeah. She was waiting when Dad and I went back in the house. I'll never forget the expression on her face. I could see how much I'd disappointed her. I felt like the biggest failure in the world. I wanted to fall down and cry at her feet but I was too afraid she'd push me away so I just stood there, wishing there really were trolls who would open up the floor and eat me."

"Dad eventually took pity on me and told me to go apologize to Giti and then go to bed. He said that they'd decide my punishment later."

"What was it?" Tori prompted when Guy got lost in his memories.

"Officially, what you'd expect. I gave Brigit my share of all the goodies Mom baked for the same amount of time I'd taken hers, was grounded with extra chores and had to tell my friends' parents what I had them do. Unofficially, I opened myself up to ridicule

because I became the one to derail schemes that would hurt others the way I'd hurt Giti."

"Protector of the innocent at nine. What about your mom and sister?"

"My sister was easy. After the first week she was trying to sneak me cookies. I promised I'd never lie to her again and that if she was ever afraid of anything, no matter what, she could come to me, knowing that I would never make fun of her and would help however I could.

"Mom kept her distance so long I thought she'd never forgive me. Imagine all of us at the table, my sisters all talking over each other, Mom and Dad trying to make comments to each of them and talk to each other, Dad asking for an update on my extra duties and my older sisters doing their best to include me because, even though they were pissed at me for tricking Giti, they knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end of Mom's cold shoulder. Then, in the middle of all the chaos, Mom would give me one of her looks and I'd go back to feeling lower than a worm. Giti walked in on me crying in my room one night after dinner and without thinking, I told her it was because Mom hated me. She went to Dad and asked if he hated me too. Of course Mom heard her and before I knew what was going on, she was hugging me hard and crying all over me.

"Once we were square again, Mom dragged me down to the living room where Dad already had my sisters waiting for a family meeting. Mom started by asking my sisters if they'd ever felt like I had. They didn't say anything but Mom knew they had. That set off another round of hugs and tears until Dad stepped in and explained that Mom stopped talking when she didn't trust herself not to blurt out something in anger that she didn't really mean because she didn't want to hurt us."

"So her silence was a sign of how much she loved you," Tori snorted. "That would make me the most loved kid ever."

"Tori."

Guy let Tori go when she shifted away from him and scrambled out of the bed. "Sorry I scared you. I'm okay now so you don't have to worry about me waking you again."

"You didn't wake me. I was reading something and lost track of time. Want to talk about it?" He stood, ready to follow her.

"No. It was pretty much the same as last night."

"Oh Christ," Guy groaned and sat heavily on the edge of the bed.

"What?"

"Not only did I scare you when I woke you but I interrupted. I didn't stop to think at all."

"That's because you were too busy coming to my rescue." She sat next to him and nodded toward her dresser. "Bet you grabbed that without thinking too."

"Yeah. When you screamed I thought someone had gotten in without me hearing them. The question now is how I'm going to avoid making the same mistake again."

"I guess you really shouldn't wake me," she paused. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, you or even someone else staying here. They think I'm the one drawing them here so why would they hurt me if they managed to find me? Maybe you could just call me and I could give you a signal to let you know they're here."

Guy took a deep breath for control. "How can you even suggest that? Have you forgotten how they're saving themselves for you?"

"No, but I could stall them. Make up some sort of ritual so you'd have time to get here."

"For Christ's sake, Tori!" He gaped in disbelief. "These guys aren't meek little Cub Scouts. They're cold-blooded killers. Psychopaths. What happens if they take one look at you and know you're setting them up? What if they can see that you're horrified instead of impressed? Do you seriously believe they wouldn't turn on you?"

"Well, no, but maybe instead of phone calls and a signal you could get Todd to give me one of those panic buttons so I could let you know as soon as they show up."

"No, and by no I mean hell no, as in I don't want to hear another word about it. I am not leaving you alone. Period. End of discussion. Yes, it goes against everything in me to sit by and let you scream yourself awake but I'll do it because I have to. Damn, I'd give anything to be able to help for real."

"You are helping. If you hadn't been here to talk to me I would have been up the rest of the night. Thanks to you I think I can go back to sleep."

"Really? You're not just saying that so I don't feel completely useless?"

"No, Guy. I may be Beverly Hills but I'm not going to lie to you just because it's something you want to hear."

"Okay then." He patted the bed behind them. "Stretch out and I'll say goodnight."

"You don't have to tuck me in," she stated but did as he'd asked anyway.

Guy straightened the covers and tucked them under her chin. "Just doing my job, ma'am." He kissed her forehead and winked when Tori giggled as she was supposed to.

"Thanks, Officer. I'll be sure and tell your captain how dedicated you are." It was his turn to chuckle. "Really, Guy, thanks. Not just for tonight but for staying. I think if you come turn on the light and start talking after I stop screaming I won't be scared like I was tonight."

"Then that's what I'll do. Mind if I leave the doors open? I might hear you if you're restless before you scream and then I won't be scared either."

"Deal." Tori stopped herself from saying more.

## Chapter Eight

The following days passed in a whirl. The first day, Todd arrived soon after his warning call to Guy. He spent hours, gently coaxing Tori out of her shell until she was comfortable with him. The second morning, Todd arrived with a soft-spoken, baby-faced boy who looked all of fifteen. Tori wondered if he'd even started shaving yet as Todd explained that Ned, who was Tori's age and not a kid at all, was one of the top sketch artists on the East Coast. In a remarkably short amount of time, Ned unloaded and set up a whole slew of electronic gadgetry. After meeting Tori, Todd had decided that it would be less stressful to bring Ned to her rather than vice versa because of the sheer volume of work involved.

Leaning against the archway that separated the small dining room from the kitchen, Guy watched with growing respect as Ned erased the awkwardness between them by explain how he combined his hand-drawn images with the computer-generated ones. By the time Ned was ready to begin, he and Tori were chatting so companionably that Guy was able to stop hovering and concentrate on what Todd was saying.

"Can we take a little break?" Tori interrupted when Ned brought up the sixth set of descriptions that some nameless FBI person had filtered from her notebooks and entered into Ned's program.

"Sure." Ned's eyes snapped up at the change in her tone. "You okay?"

Guy heard Ned's question and would have rushed to her if Todd hadn't clamped onto his arm.

"Sit," Todd ordered quietly. "She knows where you are. Give her a chance to come to you if she needs you," He prevented Guy's response with a look. "I understand what you're going through but you have to back off or you'll smother her."

"Am I that obvious to everyone?"

"You are to me but I know you well enough to read you. Why? Who else has noticed?"

"Diana, the day I went to the library to apologize."

Todd whistled softly. "Happened that fast, did it? This must be killing you. What's Barry saying?"

"Exactly what you think he would and nothing I haven't already told myself. You going to pull me?"

"As if I could. It's the right thing to do but, as long as you don't lose it, I won't. Much better to keep you close where I can keep an eye on you than let you charge off on your own. Terese would never forgive me if I let something happen to you."

"Thanks, Todd. I'd apologize for sticking you in the middle of this but it would be a lie since I'm not at all sorry you're involved."

Todd shrugged. "Hey, you had to call me. If you hadn't I would have been highly insulted, not to mention pissed off and then your sister would have lashed out at you. She's already hormonal enough with the pregnancy. We don't need you adding to that."

"Oh Christ, please tell me she's not going to barge in here. You know how much I adore my sister but the last thing Tori needs right now is Terese on a rampage."

"Relax. I haven't told her anything other than we both got assigned to a joint investigation. You led me to my wife and I am eternally grateful. No way would I ever sell you out before your woman accepts the inevitable. Your family en masse can be a little intimidating until you get used to them. If I opened my big mouth and they scared her off I'd have to let you shoot me and that would make Terese very unhappy. Besides, they'll all know soon enough anyway since they'll see you at our open house."

"That's not even a month away. What do you think the odds are of this being resolved by then?"

"Doubtful at best. Why? You know they're not going to care how inappropriate your beginning was."

"I'm not worried about them. Tori's semi-convinced that we're only attracted to each other because of the situation. She's not going to accept it completely until this is behind her."

Todd's eyebrows rose. "If you came up with that excuse, you're selling Tori short. If she did, I'm willing to bet she already knows it's bullshit meant to keep you from getting close enough to hurt her like whoever it was who did before."

"No bet since I'm sure that's why she said it even if she doesn't realize it. I've heard the details and it's not as bad as it could be."

"Then it's only a matter of time."

"The one thing I don't have a lot of. If I don't put in an appearance, they'll all swarm in on us and call me on whatever excuse I give Terese. If I call everybody and ask them to play it cool with Tori, they'll switch into thundering elephant stealth mode which Tori will pick up on right away. If we just walk in together, they'll be overwhelming to someone who has no experience with anything even remotely like our bunch. The choices all suck. And the only acceptable way for us to not be there sucks more than all three combined since it would mean we'd be in the middle of something related to Tori's situation. You'd miss your own party which would be ruined anyway with them all worrying about us."

"Hate to say it but you're definitely screwed on this one. Guy, if Tori's the one for you, you'll find a way to handle it, just like Terese and I did when we lost the babies. Either you're together for everything or you're not and if you're not you didn't belong to each other in the first place."

"Damn, I should have kept my mouth shut. Compared to what you got through, this is inconsequential."

"Nothing that threatens to come between you and your partner is inconsequential. Every couple has their own demons."

"You guys are awfully serious in here," Tori commented from the kitchen doorway. "Did something new happen?"

"Nope." Guy gave silent thanks that she hadn't overheard their conversation since he was fairly sure she wouldn't be thrilled that they'd been talking about her instead of the investigation. "Just keeping it down so we didn't distract you. How's it going in there?"

"Okay. I hope it's all right that I asked Ned if we could take a break. I'm heating up some stew in case you guys are hungry so it isn't really a waste of time."

"We owe you an apology," Todd spoke before Guy could. "We should have made it clear that Ned's here for however long it takes. He'll work at whatever pace you're comfortable with. We know this can't be easy for you and are very appreciative that you're putting yourself through it to help us. Stop as often as you need to and don't push yourself beyond your own limits, Tori. This is all very important but not so important that you make yourself sick by going back over too much at one time."

"Thanks but I'm fine."

"Good." Todd could feel the tension radiating from Guy because of the tremor in her voice. "I have some things to go over with Ned first but then I'm more than ready for some lunch now that I'm smelling it." He winked at Guy once he was behind Tori to let him know they'd have a few minutes alone.

Guy wrapped Tori in his arms as soon as Todd was through the archway. He made sure they couldn't be seen from the dining room so Ned wouldn't be forced into an awkward position.

"You're tense, tiger. I can feel it." His hands kneaded her back. "Is Ned as good as Todd says he is?"

"Better I think. It's fascinating in a sick way. By the time he finished each one I could hear them again."

"Them? How many did you do?"

"Five."

"No wonder you're so tense. Five sketches in four hours is tremendous."

"Five dreams. After the first set, Russ and Stan don't take long to change. Seeing them isn't as bad as I expected it to be. Kimmie and Sam and all that go with them was worse than awful but it was the others that got to me. I know Todd's right that it might help pinpoint the locations but it was bad enough watching them die the first time. Seeing them again, knowing that they're real people..." Tori broke down, sobbing helplessly into Guy's chest.

As he had before, Guy crooned softly to the top of Tori's head, not really saying anything but using his voice to soothe her. He abandoned the massaging caresses to hold her firmly against him.

A movement caught Guy's eye. He raised his head to find Todd standing in the kitchen, silently offering support. Guy shook his head ever-so slightly, indicating that he wanted more time alone. He knew Todd would see all he was feeling but trusted him not to betray them by sharing the information he now had.

"It hurts so much," Tori managed through her tears.

"I know it does." Guy understood all too well from personal experience. "It'll fade but it might not ever disappear completely. Or it never has for me."

His statement sank in and Tori jerked back so she could see his face. "How can you stand it? Why do you keep doing this to yourself? And Todd and Barry too. How do you get up every day knowing you could face something even worse than the day before?"

"You can't let the hurt rule you or it'll destroy you, Tori. You have to find a way to put it in perspective."

"Perspective?"

"Mm. Everyone has their own technique for coping but I use the pain to remind me not to take anything for granted. All life is precious but those closest to me are even more so. I've learned to cherish the special people in my life because I know all too well that they could be taken at any time. I can't give you any magical solution because there isn't one. You're the only one who can find peace. I'll do anything to help but in the end it all rests with you."

"I don't know how."

This time Guy nodded for Todd to join them. He must have been listening, out of sight, because he gave Tori's shoulder a squeeze and said, "That's how I feel most days too but I always seem to figure it out just when I need to. I know it's rude to eavesdrop, even worse to butt into a conversation uninvited but one of the things I learned from Terese is that sometimes it's better not to be politically correct."

"It's obvious that you're a survivor, Tori, but even survivors need someone to lean on occasionally. I'm pretty certain that you prefer to be self-reliant and that's great if it works for you. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that you have to do this on your own. When it gets to be too much and it will at some point, speak with someone who understands. Guy wasn't just talking when he offered his assistance. I'm available too though not in the same capacity as he is. Now that you've met Ned, you can talk to him if you need someone who's not as close as Guy. If you'd rather be anonymous, I can recommend several good people with the Bureau. I'm probably overdoing it but it's too important not to."

Todd took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. "Now that I've made you uncomfortable, I'm going to make it up to you by taking over lunch. Come sit down

and tell me where everything is. We'll let Guy go take a look at everything with Ned since I made him stay out of there all morning."

\* \* \* \* \*

There was an unspoken agreement during lunch to keep the conversation light for Tori's sake. The men refused to let her lift a finger. While they ate, all three entertained her with stories of occasions at Todd and Terese's house. Since Ned had been to several, he had plenty to add.

Their ploy to distract Tori was a success until Ned began to clear the table. His ready smile was replaced with a frown and he lost all track of the conversation. When he stood, staring blankly out of the window, dishes still in hand, Todd tilted his head in Ned's direction and covered Tori's hand.

"Sorry, kids, but I'm afraid playtime is over. Ned's got that look about him that generally means his mind has latched on to something and won't let go until he asks about whatever it is." Guy captured Tori's other hand and nodded. "Ned. Yo, Ned. Put down the dishes before you drop them and spit it out."

Ned blinked several times to focus. "Oh." He leaned against the sink. "No. It can wait. It's nothing really."

"Ned," Tori sounded calm but both agents noticed the death grip she had on Guy's hand. "You've had a question all morning. What is it?"

When Todd gestured to indicate he should ask, Ned became eager. "Okay, here's the thing. I don't get the tree. All the rest follow the same basic pattern from start to finish. Your dreams coincide until their plan is executed and then the series ends. The tree just doesn't fit. From what you wrote that particular dream pops up at random and stays the same without progressing. Other than the fact that it looks like it belongs in the opening scene of a super-freaky thriller, what does it have to do with anything?" Ned retrieved the drawings from the dining room and spread them on the table. "Why is this all you ever see? Where are the men? What is the point of approaching the tree when you never find anything once you reach it?"

For the longest moment, they all sat contemplating the images in front of them. Each showed a huge tree in the middle of nowhere. The branches were twisted and interlocked, as if it was ancient and had withstood the ravages of the seasons for many, many years. It was bare as was the ground surrounding it, giving the impression that the whole area was dead. The bark was dark, almost like it was wet but the ground was dry. In the dream, Tori always saw the tree from a distance. She could hear the sounds of labored breathing and footsteps as she went toward the tree. Nothing else ever moved. There was no wind swaying the branches and no birds startled into flight by her presence. There were no small creatures rustling in the field. The closer she got to the tree, the harder her heart pounded. She wanted to turn around and run away without looking back but was unable. Her feet kept trudging on, taking her to something that remained a mystery.



Todd frowned at the questions Ned raised. "Maybe there isn't a point. Maybe the scene is just something you saw once that your mind held on to. Ned's right. It is eerie. Maybe it keeps popping up simply because its evil image fits."

Tori shook her head without seeming to realize it but didn't comment.

"Tori?" Guy broke into her thoughts.

"No."

"No, what?"

"It's not random. There's someone there. It's just," she hesitated, unsure if she should share her opinion.

"It's all right, Tori," Todd lowered his tone. "You can speak freely with us. Ned and I are here to help resolve this but we need any information you can give us. If you have a theory about this, please tell us. Even if you think it's highly unlikely and farfetched, you never know. Something you say may be the clue that makes all the other pieces fall into place."

She saw that Ned's expression echoed Todd's words and turned her attention to Guy. She could read the unspoken encouragement in his eyes along with the concern and caring that she had come to expect in the short time he'd been around.

"It's different from the rest," Tori began tentatively. "But there is someone buried there. I know it."

"So why do you think this one is different?" Todd asked.

"Because, well, because it wasn't planned. I think they had an opportunity that was too tempting to resist. Instead of carefully choosing their victim and planning out a specific scenario, they just killed somebody. They buried him under the tree and the body hasn't been found yet. I think when it is the dream will change and I'll see more. I also think whoever they killed was someone who nobody missed. You know, someone like me when I got on that bus without any real idea of where I was going."

"Tori," Guy gasped.

"Come on, Guy. You know I'm right. I didn't talk to anyone on the bus so no one questioned when I didn't get back on after one of the stops. There wasn't anyone waiting for a call to say I got here. No one even knew I got on a bus. I don't know why but I think the person under the tree was more like me and not a typical homeless person. Somehow they knew he was alone and killed him just because they could get away with it."

There was an extended lull as they all considered Tori's thoughts. Eventually, Todd said, "You may very well be right."

"Too bad we'll probably never know," Ned added. "Even when we catch these guys it's not likely that they'll tell us anything."

"Next time they say they can feel me with them I'll ask," Tori declared. "Hey, you never know. If they can tell that I'm watching, maybe they'll be able to hear me now too."

"I know you want to help but I don't recommend that you attempt to communicate with them. If they find a way into your mind, they will know you're working with us to try to catch them. They're already too dangerous, carefully planning things and carrying them out to impress you. If they discover you betrayed them, it could trigger a reaction that might be even worse," Todd explained truthfully although he knew it would scare her.

"Oh no." Tori's lips quivered. "What if they find out anyway? I mean..."

"Don't do this to yourself," Todd commanded. "I don't want you to do anything differently from what you have. I know it's eating at you, knowing they're real but don't dwell on it any more than you did before. Don't second-guess them or you, even if that means you have to babble nonstop about what's happening on your favorite show, every memory you have from your childhood, the plot of every book you ever read and your opinion of each of them until you exhaust yourself and pass out. You have to keep talking to keep your mind off what we're doing here even if Guy conks out first and you stay awake for three days straight. We'll take turns sitting with you if we need to, Tori. Seriously, we'll do whatever it takes to keep your mind occupied." Todd gave Guy a look that told him not to say whatever it was that he was about to.

"Oh, okay. Thanks," Tori mumbled. The thought that they'd all disrupt their lives for her was too much at the moment. "Should we do some more?"

Ned answered slowly, as if he expected one of the others to object. "If you're up for it. Or we could call it a day and pick it up in the morning."

"I'd rather keep going and get this over with. I don't want to spread this out or I'll have too much time to think about each of them. Maybe, if we do another bunch, they'll all blend together and I won't remember them individually."

"You're the boss." Ned collected the images of the tree. "Just give me a few minutes to get set up again and we'll get to it."

Todd followed Ned with a hasty excuse. Once in the dining room, both men kept their backs turned toward the kitchen. Without speaking, Guy gestured for Tori to move into the living room.

"Don't overdo it, tiger," he urged as he cupped her cheek. "I get why you want to get this over with but don't burn yourself out. You're already not getting enough sleep."

"I'm fine. Really. I know you don't think so but I'm sleeping more now than I usually do when I'm having nightmares. If you didn't talk to me after I wake up, I'd be up the rest of the night."

"Okay, if you say so."

"I do. Now stop worrying so much and let me get in there before Ned starts getting ideas about why Todd keeps leaving us alone."

"Ned already figured it out, Tori. You were holding my hand like you needed me. I'm sure he noticed. But I'm equally sure he won't mention it. Todd knew my

involvement was more than professional when I first called him. He must trust Ned or he wouldn't have brought him here."

"But—"

"Shush. You may have doubts but I don't. Under any other circumstances I'd never even consider hiding my interest in you. You bring out a possessive streak I didn't know I had and, as an Alpha male, I have a very strong need to stake my claim around other men. But as a sensible, civilized male, I do know there's a time and place for everything."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I have no idea." Guy shrugged. "Guess I got a little sidetracked."

"Yeah, maybe just a little."

"All right, I got a lot sidetracked. Ignore me." Guy pulled her into his arms. "Maybe I'm the one who was holding on like I needed to. Maybe I should say thank you for not yanking your hand away."

"No. I was holding on too." She sighed against his chest. "I'd better get started."

"Yes." He released her after kissing her forehead. "You're a very brave woman, Tori Banks."

"Hardly, but thanks for saying it." She forced a smile and left him standing there.

## Chapter Nine

"Did you hear that?" Russ asked gleefully. "That'll be perfect. We'll have plenty of time to play before we have to move on. Couldn't have arranged it better myself."

"Guess it won't make no difference what that teacher says about Kimmie. Won't her momma be in for a surprise when she comes for her? Man, thinking about this makes me so fucking hard. I could jerk off right here."

"Not now, Stan. We're too close to our angel to mess around like that. Pay attention. We'll just stop by Wednesday in time for some lunch. Act all friendly like so he lets us in. We'll tell him the car broke down and we were ready to give up on finding someone at home. I'll even pretend to make a call and say how we have to wait a couple of hours, that they're already out on another pick-up or something. We'll get the girl talking about school and what she likes to do. Maybe you could say how you were on the baseball team in high school to get her started."

"I can say I was batting champ two years in a row."

"No. I don't want to overplay it. Since it's supposed to be pretty warm, we'll try to let her ask to play first. Let's wait until we're started and you can ask the old man where the john is. Make sure you ask him to show you so he doesn't think you want to be inside alone. Once you're away from the door so she won't hear you, you can go ahead and do him."

"How, Russ? How do you want me to do it?"

"However you want as long as it's quiet and clean. You don't want to come back out with his guts splattered all over you. No, you come back out with those stupid cats. We'll wait for her to pick one up before we stick a rag in her mouth and tie her to the porch. Then you and I will have some batting practice of our own. We'll show her how it's done."

"We gonna use the rats for balls like you said? 'Bout all they's good for anyways."

"You got it. We'll play around a little, have some fun with the fur balls and then we'll get her in place and use her head. We can prop her up with that boot scraper he has next to the door."

"I can't wait. I wish we could do it now."

"I know, Stan. Me too. But we have to wait two more days so we have time to enjoy it. I don't want to rush because I know Miss Vicky will be watching. We have to make it good so she's happy when we go to her."

"When's that? My nuts are gonna pop if I gotta hold off much longer."

"Relax. Soon as we're done here we'll go to her. Don't worry. She'll be so glad to see us that she'll take care of us right off. Then we'll take care of her. Oh yeah, we'll take

real good care of her. We'll take turns licking her sweet angel pussy and working her pretty titties. We'll get her screaming and begging for more. She'll be creaming all over our faces but we'll make her wait for what she really wants. By the time we slip her on our dicks she'll already know that fucking us is better than going to heaven."

"I wanna be the one to fuck her up the ass. Can I, Russ? I know you wanna kiss her so you can stuff her cunt the same time as you're swallowing her face. You said she'll want to fuck us both together so that means I get to do her ass. We can play with her titties together. She'll like that, won't she, Russ?"

"You know it. We'll do her real slow, so she gets a good feel for us rubbing inside her. She'll be begging for more before we're even done. Now let's go. We gotta shut up about this before you start pulling on your dick. You gotta save it for our angel, Stan. You don't want to run out too fast and disappoint her."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tori fought her way out of the bed before she was awake enough to stop screaming. With the same motion, she flung herself at Guy who was leaning against the windowsill as he had been every night after the first.

"No, no, no," she chanted. "Oh God, no."

"It's okay now, Tori," Guy stated softly as he tried to comfort her.

"No," she cried again. "Oh God, oh God, no."

"You're safe. I'm the only one here. It's okay."

"No," she wailed. "Guy." Tori rubbed her hands over his chest as she looked up at him with terror-filled eyes.

"I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I won't leave you alone. It's okay now."

"Guy." She wrapped her arms around his hips and pressed herself against him. "Please," Tori pleaded as she licked his chest. It wasn't enough so she lifted her head and tried to reach his mouth for a kiss. Even though he was leaning and she stood on her toes, she couldn't quite get to him so she put an arm around his neck to pull him closer. Just as she made contact, he raised his head.

"Wait, Tori."

"No." She tugged again. "Please, Guy. I need you."

Guy momentarily gave in and returned her kiss. When she moaned and started moving her body against his, he broke it. "What are you doing?"

"I was kissing you, damn it. I still would be if you'd shut up."

"I know that, Tori. What I don't know is why. We're not doing this, remember?"

"We're not doing anything. This isn't about us. It's about me. Now shut up and get back here."

"Wait." Guy caught her roaming hands. "What the hell do you mean, we're not doing anything and this isn't about us?"

"I told you. It's about me." She rubbed her hip against his groin. "I need this. You're getting hard, I can feel it. Let me go." Tori struggled enough to free one of her hands and instantly covered his growing erection. "See?"

"Stop that." Guy held her away from him. "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing yet but your cock will soon if you quit pushing me away."

"Damn it, Tori why are you doing this?"

"I already told you," she growled in frustration. "I need this. Me. I need to feel a big hard cock pounding into me over and over again until I can't think of anything else. You're here and you have one. You said you'd help me however you could. This is how you can. Please. I need you to fuck me. Hard. All night and then some."

"I can't, Tori. Not like this. We can't start out like this."

"Damn you, why won't you listen to me? This doesn't have anything to do with us. We aren't starting anything. I need mind-blowing sex and you promised to help me." She yanked her arms free and turned away. "Just forget it." She started digging through her dresser drawer.

"Wait." Guy stared as she pulled out some lacy panties. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Getting dressed."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going out. I need a man and you aren't interested so I'm going to find one who is. Besides, you're probably as diseased anyway."

"What the fuck? For your information, I've never had sex without a condom in my life. And I'm tested regularly just to make sure I haven't been exposed to anything through my job. Maybe I'm the one who should be worried about you."

"No need, Detective. I've always been safe and tested too on top of having an implant for extra birth control protection. Not that it's any of your concern. Now get out of my way. I'm going, Guy. You turned me down so get over it already."

"Tori." He spun her to face him and pinned her against the dresser. "If you think I'm going to sit here while you go out prowling then you've lost your mind."

"It's none of your damn business. Let me go."

"No. Not until you tell me what this is about. You wake up screaming like you have every night for the last week and a half and suddenly you're looking for someone to fuck you. If this is something you do all the time you sure as hell didn't mention it. Talk to me, Tori."

Her face crumbled. "You think I do this all the time?"

"No, I don't. That's not what I meant. I think you're very selective and would never pick up a stranger for sex unless there was something pushing you to do it. Please tell me what happened. I know you don't really want anonymous sex with some nameless penis. Help me understand."

"Why should I help you when you won't help me?" She was angry enough to try to shove him away from her. When Guy reached for her hands, she started pounding on him. "You big son of a bitch. Who the hell do you think you are? If I want to fuck a stranger I will. You can't stop me."

"Oh yes, I can." He snagged her arms and twisted them behind her back, holding her wrists in one hand. His legs trapped hers before she thought to kick him. His other arm snaked around her stomach and held her firmly against him. "I'll handcuff you to the bed if I have to. You aren't going anywhere so you may as well start explaining."

"Damn you! Let me go."

"Talk to me."

"Fuck you."

"Talk to me."

"Let me go or I'll report you for police brutality."

"Talk to me."

"Don't make me hate you."

"Talk to me."

Tori's breath came in heavy pants as she struggled to break free but Guy didn't budge.

"Talk to me. Please. I don't want your arms to go numb but I can't let you go until I understand. Please, Tori. Talk to me."

She sighed and stopped fighting. "Fine. After they finished talking about how they're going to kill Sam and torture the kittens in front of Kimmie before they bash her head with the baseball bat on Wednesday, they started talking about finding me. I'm their next stop and they have it all planned out how it's going to be when they get here."

"What do they have planned out?" Guy asked when she didn't continue.

"Oh, just how they're going to get me all worked up so I beg them to fuck me. Together. At the same time. With Russ in me from the front while Stan gets me from behind. They were describing it and I could feel it. I can still feel it. Oh God, Guy, make it go away. I can't stand it. Make it stop. Let me go so I can find someone to have sex with so I don't keep feeling them touching me. Please, let me go."

Guy turned her to face him. "No," he refused as he stared intently into her eyes. "I can't. What if you pick up someone even worse than they are?"

"I'll go to the rest stop out on the highway. I used to waitress there. I never went out with any of the guys who asked but I learned to tell which were nice and which were jerks."

"No, Tori. I can't let you do this."

"Then you'll have to do it. Don't say no, Guy. Don't make me picture this over and over again in my mind. Stop being a cop and be a man. Stop controlling everything and

take what I'm offering. Your cock is still hard so I know your body wants mine. Don't think about this in terms of us. Think of it as raw sex. As a man taking a woman who wants to be used hard. For as long as you can. In as many ways as you can. Think pure lust tonight. Better yet, don't think at all. Just let go and do it. Be the Alpha male and fuck me like you know you want to. Use your body to prove I'm yours."

Tori had been shifting her nipples against his chest as she spoke, certain he could feel how hard they were through her light tank top. "I'm so wet already. Wet and tight. I haven't had sex in months and your cock is so big. I want to feel you stretching me around you until you're buried deep inside and then I want you to pull almost all the way out and shove it back in all at once. It'll feel so good, Guy. I'm so hot it won't take much to make me come. You want to do that, I know you do. You want to feel me come around your stiff cock as much as I want to feel you explode inside me. For real, Guy, no condom. If they're coming here to kill me too I want to feel that once in my life before I die. I want you to fuck me so many times I'm pumped so full of your hot cum that it feels like it's going to run out of my ears. I want you to grab my head and force your cock into my throat and make me fuck you with my mouth until I have to swallow every drop you have."

"Tori," Guy snarled, fighting a losing battle.

"Don't say no, Guy. Don't stop what we both want. Don't hold back from me. Be an Alpha male beast and take what's yours. Stop thinking about right and wrong and do it. Fuck me, Guy. Do everything you've ever wanted and make me scream."

"Are you sure? Are you really sure? If we start this we'll do all that and more. I won't stop until I have it all. Be sure this is what you want because once I agree there's no going back. Saying no and you've changed your mind won't end things. It'll just piss me off and make me wild enough to get rough with you. I don't want to hurt you but I might if you try to get away from me."

"I won't. I want you wild. I want you rough. You won't scare me out of this no matter how out of control you threaten to be. Not when the other choice is to keep seeing their faces as they panted over what they believe I want to do with them. I could smell their sweat. I could feel their slimy hands on my skin. I could feel them drooling on my body. Help me forget. I need you, Guy. Please help me."

Tori had tears streaming down her cheeks but this time Guy realized they were tears of desperation. The part of him that was reared to be a decent man and treat women with respect balked at giving in to Tori's pleas. He had never callously used a woman in the way she suggested. Even the relationships that he'd formed purely for sexual gratification were more than what she was pushing for.

On the other hand, the woman he was rapidly falling in love with needed him. She had been horrified when she described how they wanted to be with her. Her skin was practically crawling when she spoke of how real her dream had seemed. The thought of them touching her intimately stirred the Alpha male instincts in him to claim her exactly as she was urging him to. On top of that, she was right. He had promised to help her in whatever way she needed him to and he had refused the only thing she'd



asked him for. Add in the feel of her hand when she'd managed to stroke him with the way she had ground her hips against his cock and brushed her stiffened nipples across his chest, and Guy's body was primed for action.

"What about tomorrow, Tori?" Guy asked, holding her so she couldn't reach him. "How are you going to react when you wake up, naked in my arms, sticky and smelling of sex? Are you going to pretend nothing happened between us and shut me out? Don't bother repeating that bullshit of how this isn't about us because if we do this every bit of it will be between us. You and me, Tori. Not you and a nameless cock. You and me. If we fuck tonight I'll expect to make slow, sweet love tomorrow. If we do this I won't stop myself from caressing you and cuddling you and kissing you as I have been. Are you going to push me away or will you do the same?"

"God, Guy, why are you asking all these questions? Either you want me or you don't. That's the only thing you should be asking right now."

"That's the one thing neither one of us has to ask. We both know I want you. I'm not looking for any promises of undying love forever here. But I want more than a quick fuck."

"Quick?"

"You know what I mean so knock it off. All I'm saying is that I deserve—no, we deserve—a chance to see if we can have something together." Guy studied her. "It's up to you, Tori. Do you want my cock and all that you'll get with it? Before you answer, let me give you an alternative. If you say no, I'll still take care of you."

"How?"

"With my hands. Not that I'm bragging but I am very capable of making you come that way. It won't be exactly what you want but I will keep you screaming until morning."

Tori stared until he finally released her. She sputtered, furious, before spinning to pace in the limited space of the bedroom. Guy was standing in the doorway and she knew he'd never let her leave. "You-you big French jerk! Conceited asshole! You'll keep me screaming until morning with nothing but your hands," she sneered, repeating his statement with an exaggerated accent. "This is blackmail and you're doing it on purpose. You'll give me what I need but only if I agree to keep on screwing you or I have to settle for your measly little hands fingering me like-like some horny teenager."

"You can always use your own hands." Guy shrugged. "Now that I think of it, I'd love to see that. Take your pick, tiger, but whatever you decide I am staying with you until you get over the idea of picking up a stranger. And don't bother lying because I'll know and I'll handcuff you to me for the duration."

Again, Tori stared in disbelief. After a prolonged silence, she scowled. "Okay. Fine. You win." She yanked off her tank top and threw it at him. "We'll fuck and we'll make love and paw each other and all the rest of that shit for however long this takes. But when this is over, if I wake up one morning and realize that I only wanted you because you were the big strong man who swooped in to rescue me you have to go away and

leave me alone." She kicked off her shorts. "Well? What are you waiting for? Drop those drawers already and show me what you got. I said you'd get your chance, now I want to fuck."

"Shut up," Guy growled. "Come here."

Tori hesitated at his tone. His gaze raked her boldly and she could see the lust in his eyes. No one had ever looked at her like that before and she wasn't sure she could handle it. Then again, she'd never made the kinds of demands she just had or said anything remotely close to the things she'd said to Guy. She stayed where she was so long he finally raised an eyebrow as if questioning her nerve. She took it as a challenge and forced her feet to cross the short distance between them until she was inches from his chest.

With a savage growl, Guy scooped Tori off her feet and shoved her things out of his way so he could deposit her on top of her dresser. His hands gripped her thighs and pulled her to the edge. He spread her legs and stood between them.

"Open up wider. All the way, like you would if you really wanted a man."

Tori did as he ordered, leaning back on her hands and arching her back so her breasts were just as available. Still holding her gaze, Guy pinched her nipples so hard she gasped in surprise. She knew he was testing her and forced herself to push into his grasp instead of retreating. He chuckled wickedly and pinched even harder, tugging on her flesh almost cruelly before abruptly releasing her.

After several repeats, he added a vicious twist at the end of each tug. He kept at it until Tori's startled expression softened with pleasure. Instantly, he assaulted her peaks with rapid flicks as if he was trying to remove them from her body. Again, the shock wore off and Tori was moaning for more. Without warning, Guy fisted his hand in her hair and yanked her face back so her mouth was open when his covered it. Even before his lips molded to hers, his tongue invaded her mouth, stroking deeply as he tasted her.

At exactly the same time as he began to claim her mouth, one finger plunged fully into her soaked core. His tongue and finger withdrew in unison. On his second thrust, he impaled her with two fingers. He used three on the third. Instead of withdrawing, his tongue explored and his fingers curled, pressing firmly against her G-spot as his thumb mashed her clit.

"Oh my God," Tori gasped into Guy's mouth as she climaxed almost violently, bucking against him while he held her in place.

Even before she calmed, he untangled his hand and resumed his torment on her nipples, alternating both sides and touches. The fingers of his other hand mimicked the one at her breasts as he relentlessly attacked her already sensitive bud. Within minutes, Tori was writhing with pleasure as she shattered again.

"Stop," Tori panted when his fingers reentered her quivering sheath. "Too much."

"I told you to shut up," Guy reprimanded her harshly.

Tori's struggles ended seconds later when Guy shifted her slightly off the dresser. He trapped her legs with his body. His gaze snared hers with its intensity while his

fingers spread her wetness to her now-accessible anus. When she was sufficiently lubricated, Guy slowly wriggled his little finger into her tightly clenched hole. Using his other hand, he stroked her other opening, distracting her until he managed to replace his little finger with the two biggest ones. Still watching her, he began to thrust with both hands. At first, he alternated, letting her muscles adjust to his intrusion. When she attempted to move with him, he switched so his fingers all moved together, filling her fully, retreating completely and reversing rapidly, impaling her to the hilt. Tori was already shaking when he pressed his fingers together, pinching the tight barrier between her channels. The third orgasm had Tori sprawling bonelessly on the dresser. Without Guy supporting her, she would have slipped to the floor.

When Tori's mind finally began to function, she realized Guy was standing between her legs, leaning with his hands on the outside of her hips without touching her anywhere. "Guy," she pleaded, unsure what she was pleading for.

"Tell me, Tori, how many horny teenagers made you come like that with their measly little hands?"

"Oh God, Guy. I'm sorry. I take it back. Your hands are incredible. Amazing. Better than unbelievable. That was... I never... I mean... Oh God, Guy."

"I need you to concentrate now, okay? Are you listening?" Guy waited for her full attention. "That was just a sample of what I can do with my hands. I think I proved that I wasn't merely bragging when I said I could take care of you like that. I'm going to ask you one last time. Do you want me to lay you on the bed and show you how creative I can be with nothing but my hands and no other intimate contact until after you put this behind you or do you still want to give yourself to me completely, knowing that I have every intention of finding a way to keep you?"

Tori searched his face while she debated her answer. She was certain that he really would limit himself to touching her if that's what she decided. From what she'd just experienced, she knew that his hands alone would drive any lingering images of Russ and Stan from her mind. Hell, he'd already done that with three orgasms in maybe eight minutes at most.

Guy's expression was bland as if her response didn't matter in the least but Tori could see how rapid his pulse was in his neck. In the brief time she'd known him, Tori felt more at ease with him than she ever had in her life. Talking with him, working together in her small kitchen, relaxing in the evenings after Todd left them alone was so different from her previous experiences. For the first time in her life, Tori was comfortable. She was beginning to understand what it felt like to belong. Somehow she forgot she needed to keep her distance and protect herself from him without even realizing it.

Sitting up, Tori ran her palms over his solid chest. "I want you to show me everything you can do with your hands, Guy." His expression faltered. "But not right now." His eyebrow lifted. "Now I want you to show me what you can do with your cock."

Guy nodded once and stepped back. Watching her watching him, he dragged off his sweatpants, exposing his raging hard-on.

"You want me to fuck you," he stated. "How?"

"Hard," Tori whispered, not taking her eyes off his engorged cock.

"Where?"

"Everywhere."

"Where on your body, not where in the house," he clarified as if she'd misunderstood.

"Everywhere," she repeated. "I-I, well, no one else ever, um, you were the first who, I mean..."

Guy chuckled softly at her blush. "Your ass is virgin."

"Yeah. But I liked it. Once I got used to it, it felt really, really good."

"So good you're curious about being filled with my cock." He stroked it slowly while she watched with rounded eyes. "It's a lot bigger than my fingers. Stretching you will hurt even if I manage to do it slowly. But once I have you open the pain will become pleasure."

Tori's expression showed that she believed him. "Can I touch you?"

"No." Guy continued his lazy movement along his shaft. "Stand up and turn around." Tori looked slightly intimidated but did it without hesitating. "Bend over," he ordered, pushing on her back as he spoke. "Oh yeah," Guy growled as his hands gripped her buttocks. "I definitely want this ass." Tori gasped when he parted her cheeks. "Later. I need this first." His erection found her slit and Guy buried himself with one thrust. "Christ, you're tight," he groaned as he began to move. His hands slid to her hips and he held her in place, pounding into her from behind.

"Guuuy," Tori moaned, trying desperately to push back to meet him. "No," she cried when he withdrew completely.

Guy lifted Tori and dropped her on the bed facing him. He fully appreciated the added height of the antique bed and overstuffed mattress now that she was sprawled naked on top of it. Roughly, he grabbed her thighs, yanking her to the edge and hooking them over his arms all in the same motion. Without delay, he shoved his rock-hard shaft back inside her, grinding against her mound when he was buried to the hilt.

"Much as I like watching your ass, I want to see your face the first time you come on my cock." Abruptly, he stopped, fully impaled and rubbed his thumbs over her mound. "Soft," he stated. "I never fucked a bare pussy before. It's hot." He stroked her quickly. "I like seeing your clit twitch above my cock. I'm going to love licking you." He gave a few steady thrusts. "So tell me, is your hair natural?"

"What?" Tori was confused by his question and tried, unsuccessfully to move against him. When he kept her still she almost growled.

"Easy, tiger. Answer me."

"Guy!" She clutched at his arms.

"Yes or no? Tell me or I won't let you come."

"Yes, damn you."

Guy went back to plunging deep inside her. "There now, that wasn't so hard."

"Please," she whimpered.

"Please what? Please fuck you harder?" Tori nodded with a moan when he did. "Please fuck you faster?" She panted her agreement when his pace increased. "Stop biting your lips. Don't hold anything back from me." With that, Guy angled her higher so he was pummeling her G-spot with every thrust. It didn't take much more for Tori to scream her release.

Guy waited a few minutes for her shivers to subside before he repositioned them on the bed. He was kneeling between her legs without touching her but ready to trap her if she tried to move away from him.

When Tori's eyes found Guy's she gave him a satisfied smile. "Wow. Are you always so intense? You keep staring at me."

"I like watching you come. If I don't see your face, I won't know if you're faking."

"Faking." She laughed. "As if. You're teasing, right? No way would anyone need to fake it with you."

"Why thank you, ma'am. We aim to please."

"We as in you and your cock? Don't be so smug. You're damn good and you know it, so knock it off."

"What's this? More praise? What happened to you're going to hate me and report me for police brutality?"

"That was before you touched me. I didn't mean it, Guy. I was just upset and you wouldn't let me go. You were being a brute."

"I think I'll always be a brute where you're concerned. Especially if you're telling me you intend to let someone else touch you. I don't share, Tori."

"Guess that means threesomes are out," Tori teased. When Guy's expression turned hard, her grin vanished. "Guy? What's with you? Jeez, lighten up already. I knew you weren't going to let me leave. I was just pushing you." Guy continued to glare. "Yeah, okay, I would have left if you'd backed off but I wouldn't have gone through with it. I wouldn't have even gone as far as the highway before I pulled over. I would have ended up sitting in my car feeling stupid and too embarrassed to come back. I'm sorry I yelled at you. I'm sorry I said all those nasty things. And called you names. I guess maybe I should have just explained things to you instead of grabbing you like I did."

"Finally. You have to be honest with me, Tori. Always. Like I will be with you. This won't work without it and, for me anyway, it's too important to risk."

"Wait, what? What are you saying?"

"Exactly what I said before. You're mine now. We're together. You made your choice and —"

"Hold on." She tried to slide away but his hands caught her where her legs joined her body and held her where she was. "Just wait, Guy. You didn't mean... I thought... Oh, come on. You were just saying that. You can't be serious." She felt cornered, trapped and instinctively tried to force him away even though her mind was telling her mouth to shut up.

"I'm very serious. If you'd picked my hands I would have turned you loose once you were sufficiently distracted. I gave you two chances to walk away but both times you chose not to. You knew there was more to it if you opted to feel my cock. You belong to me now. You gave yourself to me. You said you'd give us a fair chance and I refuse to let you go back on your word. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Fine. Whatever. Would you lie down and relax already. You did it. I can't even remember what they look like at the moment so come here and snuggle. Oh. Maybe I should ask if you want to sleep here with me instead of just assuming you'd stay."

Guy threw back his head and laughed. "You're too cute. Snuggle and sleep? As in you think we're done for the night?"

"Well, um, yeah. Aren't we? Oh." Her eyes got huge. "You didn't get off. Okay, I get it. I guess we could do it again so you can come too."

"You guess we can do it again! How generous you are, offering to let me take care of this." He rubbed his cock along her thigh. "We barely got started. You asked for all night and that's what you're going to get."

"Oh my God," Tori whispered. "I don't know if I can handle any more. I already came four times. I never did that before."

Guy leaned toward her and braced himself above her with his arms on either side of hers. He checked to make sure she was watching before he lowered his mouth to her breast and bit her nipple. His tongue immediately soothed the slight pain. His lips closed around her peak and sucked her firmly into his mouth. When he released her, he switched his attention to the other side and repeated everything.

"Better get used to it, tiger. You're going to lose count long before I'm done with you tonight and every time we're together." His mouth returned to her breasts.

"Oh my God," Tori moaned, arching toward him. "But what about you?"

"Don't you worry that pretty little head of yours about me. I plan on coming plenty by the time I'm through with you this time. I'm not in any rush. Relax. Don't think. Let yourself go. Let your body feel everything so it shows me what you like and what you need." He licked his way to her neck and began to nibble.

When Tori sighed and turned her head to give him better access, Guy smiled. She let go of the conversation and was focused on the sensations. Soon he moved on to her face, teasing her lips with fleeting touches. Once she was frustrated, Guy kissed her. He ravished her mouth thoroughly, kissing, licking, biting and sucking, using his lips, tongue and teeth until Tori was squirming with need. Still kissing her, Guy shifted his

hips and jammed his cock into her fluttering pussy. Tori shattered instantly, screaming into his mouth.

"How did you do that?" Tori asked when she could speak.

He chuckled and flexed slightly so she would be drawn to the way he still filled her. "Damned if I know."

"Huh?" Her mind was still sluggish and his tiny strokes weren't helping. "Hold still. Damn it, Guy, stop!"

"Tori, Tori, Tori, I must be hearing things. You couldn't possibly have just ordered me not to do this." He lengthened his movements.

"No. Just wait. I want to ask you something and I can't think when you're doing that. Please."

Guy paused with just the tip inside her. "All right. I stopped. What's so important that you couldn't wait until morning to ask?"

"Don't be a jerk. I wanted to know what you meant. When I asked how you make me come like you do and you said what you did, what did you mean?"

"I meant what I said. I'm not really doing anything. You're the one who is so responsive that you come as soon as I touch you."

"But I'm not. Or I wasn't. It takes me a long time. Or it did. Oh hell, I don't know. You're the one doing this to me."

"Holy Christ," Guy swore and sank into her without intending to. "Damn! You don't get it, do you?" he asked in amazement.

"Get what?" Tori sounded timid.

"You have no idea what you just said." He smiled smugly and began to move his hips. "That's okay, tiger. You'll figure it out. Let me know when you do."

"Figure what out? Damn you, Guy, tell me. Hold still. Come on. Oh God! Not fair. Guy." She raised her hips to meet his.

"Quiet!" he snarled. "That's enough talking. Push your chest up. I want to feel how hard your nipples are when you come this time."

Without a protest, Tori did as he told her to. When he merely teased her by flicking his tongue over her nubs she arched higher, babbling her need almost incoherently. After tormenting her relentlessly, Guy finally responded to her pleas and gave her the attention she sought. Tori ended up on his thighs, completely off the bed. She was bent in two with her ankles next to his ears. One strong hand moved her on his shaft while the other supported her back. Her head was thrown back. She panted, moaned and gasped in ecstasy as his mouth did amazing things to her breasts while his hard cock danced nonstop inside her.

Tori was barely aware of Guy rearranging them so he was propped against the headboard with her sprawled on top of him. He held her against his chest, murmuring sweet nothings as his hands lazily caressed her back.

"Am I dead?"

"I sure as hell hope not." He chuckled, kissing her forehead. "That would ruin the rest of my night, big-time."

"Oh God, you're going to do that some more. Wait, you're still hard. Are you real? Or did you take some Viagra when I wasn't looking?"

His laughter shook his whole body which made Tori gasp. "That's insulting. I'd be offended if I hadn't already figured out that your previous lovers were a waste of time. Don't get all prickly, tiger. You're the one who said you never had four orgasms at one time before. With the way you've reacted you should do that before you even get warmed up. It's not your fault they were too inept to give your body what it needs. But you're with me now and I promise I'll never neglect you." He put a finger against her mouth to prevent her from commenting as he held her gaze for a prolonged moment. "I need you to do something for me and then I'll be ready to come."

"What?" Tori's voice shook because he was fondling her buttocks.

"Calm down. I'm not going to be in your ass the first time I let go. I may not even get to that tonight. Maybe I'll save that for another time. Or maybe not. You'll just have to wait and see." Guy chuckled at her expression.

"Ha, ha." She didn't manage to sound annoyed. "So what do you want if it's not that?"

Guy somehow shifted so he was flat on his back with her still impaled on his shaft. "I need a break before we get to the serious fucking. I'm going to lie here and relax and you're going to scoot up and hold your pussy above my face."

"Oh God."

"I wasn't done," he snapped as he urged her from his cock. "I know you'll need to hold on to the headboard when you come but the rest of the time I want at least one hand on your breasts. I want you to play with them like I was. Who knows? After I rest a little I may take over but for now, I just want to stretch out and conserve my energy for what I'm going to do next." Guy flopped his arms onto the bed. "Well? I'm waiting. Don't be shy, tiger. Look at your body. Your nipples are puckered and your clit is already reaching out to me. I can feel your wetness flowing onto my stomach so I know your body wants my tongue to lap up your juices as much as I want drink from your pussy. Get up here. Now. Don't deny me or I'll be forced to teach you a lesson."

"A lesson?" Tori gulped and moved a few inches.

"Yes, and I promise you won't enjoy it. I'll take your ass dry. I'll force my cock in deep and I'll fuck you long and hard before you're ready for it. I'll pull out and come all over your back while I spank you for not giving me your pussy when we both know you want to. I assure you it won't be the kind of spanking you'd enjoy. You'll be screaming for mercy and your ass will be red. I won't stop until my cock is ready for more and then I'll ram right back where it just came from. I'll take you like that all night and I won't care how much it hurts you."

Tori's face was pale as she straddled his head, lowering herself until he nodded. When he looked pointedly at her hands and then her breasts, she released the



headboard and grabbed her flesh. Guy continued to watch without tasting her until she met his eyes. What she saw within them must have startled her because she gasped.

"You didn't really mean that. You would never hurt me deliberately. You were trying to scare me."

"You're right. I'm very pleased that you realized that. You were thinking too much and I want your pussy, not a debate. When I fuck your ass and I will fuck your ass sooner or later, I'll make sure we're both nice and slippery so it hurts as little as possible. I already told you I'd start out real slow and that's how I'm going to do it. How can I make you want me more than any other man if you don't get as much pleasure as possible from everything we do together? One more thing though, Tori, and then this conversation is over for now. I saw the look on your face when I said I would spank you. You aren't ready to accept it yet but when I spank you, you will enjoy it so much you'll ask me to do it again. Now spread your legs a little more so I don't have to strain my neck to get to you. Don't forget about your breasts. That's my girl. Tug that nipple. Give yourself a pinch. Remember how much you like it when I do it. Don't be afraid. You have to get over your embarrassment because I'm going to buy us a vibrator and a dildo. Christ, the thought of watching you fuck yourself is so hot! I know I'll come when you do."

Tori's face flushed bright red but the hands at her breasts became less tentative. When she pushed against herself, Guy chuckled and traced her lips with his tongue.

"Don't stop," he urged when she clasped the headboard. When one hand returned to her flesh, he rewarded her with a long lick.

Guy hummed his enjoyment as Tori moaned above him. His mouth took her right to the edge numerous times without pushing her over. She was writhing on his tongue, trying to make contact with her clit, knowing when he finally touched it she would explode.

"Oh, Guy, please," she begged.

He watched her twist her nipple and knew she had done it without thought. "Please what?"

"Please. I need..."

"What? What do you need? Show me where, Tori. Help me and we'll make you come."

"Guy," she pleaded, unsuccessfully seeking more.

"Come on, tiger." He licked the outside of her slit and rubbed his nose against her mound. "I want to suck on you but I don't know where." He thrust his tongue as deep as he could several times. "Touch the spot for me. Show me where to suck. Keep your fingers around it so I don't forget. I want you to feel so good. But I need your help." He circled her bud without touching it. "Please help me, Tori."

Tori watched his eyes as she slid her hand from her breast. Before she reached her target he caught a finger with his teeth and drew it into his mouth. He sucked on it and

swirled his tongue so she knew what he'd do once she pointed him in the right direction.

"Show me," Guy whispered, releasing her so she could continue.

Tori's hand reached her pussy and Guy groaned. The sound encouraged her and she cupped herself. She traced the inside of her lips and plunged two fingers into her wetness. Guy moaned as he added his tongue to her opening. He alternated between pointing it inside with her digits and licking at them as she withdrew.

Parting her folds with two fingers, Tori pressed the middle one to her clitoris. "Here Guy. Touch me here."

Guy flicked her with his tongue. "Here?"

"Oh God, yes!"

He pushed her finger to the side. "Come for me. Flood my mouth with your sweetness." His lips closed over her sensitive flesh and sucked hard. His tongue strummed the tip rapidly until he felt her orgasm begin. As she fought not to collapse, Guy opened his mouth wide and suctioned it over as much of her pussy as he could. He entered her with his pointed tongue but flattened it to lick inside while her muscles rippled around him.

If Guy hadn't helped support her, she would have melted on his head and suffocated him. She had no idea how they ended up on their sides, facing each other.

Tori was still trembling when Guy said, "Taste." He coated her lips with her own wetness before swabbing her tongue with his and claiming her mouth in an exotic kiss. "Your pussy tastes so good. I could get addicted to it." He kissed her again. "Think Diana and Barry would mind if I made him drive me to the library eight times a day so I could crawl up under your skirt and drink from you while you worked?"

Tori giggled. "Ah, yeah."

"Hmm, then maybe I'll just have to settle for long lunches."

"I eat lunch with Diana."

"Okay, here's an idea. We'll get a bunch of lollipops and every morning, after I get you flowing, I'll dip them in you until they're thoroughly coated. Then I'll wrap them up and take them with me so I can suck on one whenever I need a fix."

"Your teeth will rot."

"Not if I only lick them until I clean off all of you. When I hit pure lollipop I could wrap them back up and save them for the next day. See I wouldn't really be eating the lollipops. They'd last a long time if I kept reusing them."

"Your brain is suffering from oxygen deprivation because there's no blood getting to it."

"Hmm, I'll take it as a no to that last idea," he paused to kiss her deeply. "Christ, I love your mouth. Wish I'd kissed you more that morning in the library. Promise you'll spend hours necking with me one of these nights." Instead of letting her answer, Guy

recaptured her lips and indulged in a leisurely kiss. "Unfortunately, we'll have to get back to that."

"Huh? What?" Tori had been kissed senseless.

"You said I need more oxygen, more blood. Only way for that to happen is to do something about this hard-on. Time for me to come, tiger."

"Mm," she purred and closed her fingers around his shaft.

"I'll keep that in mind but that's not going to do it for me this time." He squeezed her hand and peeled her fingers from him. "Roll over. Get on your hands and knees." He moved her into position and kneeled behind her. "Time for that fuck you wanted. I'm ready to claim you now. Mark this pussy." He dipped his fingers inside. "As my own."

"Oh God," Tori moaned when he rubbed his shaft through her slit. When the stiff ridge pressed against the bare flesh of her mound, both groaned. "Fuck me," she cried, opening her legs farther. "God, Guy, fuck me!"

Guy growled at her words. His hands clamped on her hips and he rammed his cock in. Instantly he began to pull her back and forth over him while his groin surged to meet her. Their flesh slapped together as he lost control. "Like this? You want me to fuck you like this?"

"Harder. More. Don't stop."

His movements turned savage, ravaging her pussy. A small part of his mind cautioned him to ease up. It reminded him that Tori was small and his cock wasn't. Even though she was drenched with natural lubricant he could still hurt her. His body overruled his mind and his pounding increased. "Like this? Do you like the way I'm fucking you now?"

"Yes. Oh God, yes! Don't stop. Don't ever stop."

"No way. I'm going to fuck you so good. I'm going to ride you so long and hard that you won't remember how your body feels without my cock ramming it." He stopped talking to watch his shaft take her. "Christ, I wish you could see this. We'll do it again in front of a mirror so you can watch too."

"Guuuy!" she screamed as she flew apart at the feel of him.

Guy chuckled wickedly but didn't even slow down. "That's it. Scream my name so I'm sure you know who's fucking you." He added a little twist to his withdrawal.

"Guy! Oh, oh, oh, Guy!" Tori convulsed again.

"Right again." He swatted her cheek, guiding her with one hand. "Tell me, Tori. Tell me who's making you come," he demanded with another swat.

"You are," she gasped, on the verge again.

"Who am I?" Two rapid swats. "What's my name?" More swats.

"Guy! You are, Guy."

"Guy," he agreed, probing her anus. As soon as his fingertip penetrated her tight bud, Tori screamed his name and shook uncontrollably, peaking yet again.

"Put your head down." Guy pressed against her back. "Stick that tight ass up higher. It'll make it better."

"Oh, oh, oh, Guuuy," Tori panted beneath him, climaxing almost continually now.

With a feral growl and a punishing thrust, Guy jammed his rigid pole into Tori as if he wanted to go even deeper. All the semen he'd hoarded shot almost violently from him and the feel of it pushed Tori over the crest one final time. He was still pulsing when he wrapped an arm around her waist and collapsed onto her back. When Guy finally realized he was crushing her, he maneuvered them to their sides and held her tightly with his shaft still inside.

"Holy Christ." Guy tightened his hold. "You okay?"

"Don't know. Can't tell. Can't think."

"Yeah," he sighed against her neck. Soon his tongue was licking it. When it found her ear, his lips latched on to the lobe.

"Oh God, no. No more," Tori gasped but didn't try to move.

"Sweet. Salty and sweet." He continued to taste her skin.

"Please," Tori protested weakly.

"Sh," he whispered in her ear. "I'm just cuddling. I need to bring myself down like this or I won't be able to let go."

"Don't."

"Sorry but I have to. Don't fight me now. Don't push me or I'll have to take you again and I don't want to hurt you."

"No! Don't let go." She wrapped an arm over his as best she could. "That was... I never... You were... What I mean... Oh my God, Guy."

"Sh, tiger. I get it. Me too." He bit her neck where it met her shoulder and soothed it with a kiss. "Sleep with me."

"Okay."

"Like this. Let me hold you exactly as I am and sleep with me."

"Okay," she repeated, tilting her head to kiss his arm. "Guy," she sighed.

"Sh." He briefly remembered the light was still on but decided it didn't matter. "Sleep now. Everything else can wait until morning."

"Mm," Tori agreed.

Within minutes, Guy felt Tori's body relax and knew she was out for the night, or what little was left of it. "I love you, Tori tiger," he whispered, needing to say the words out loud before he gave in and slept with her.

## Chapter Ten

"Oh shit!" Tori exclaimed as struggled to free herself from Guy's possessive embrace. When he grunted and gave the breast he had been holding a lazy caress, she elbowed his ribs. "God damn, son of a bitch! Stop that and get the hell off me! Damn it, Guy! Let go!"

"Whoa," Guy nuzzled her neck. "Slow down, tiger. What's the rush?"

"It's eight thirty-five, you big French control freak! Get up already!"

Guy bolted upright. "Christ! We overslept."

"No duh. Ya think?" She swatted at the arm still holding her in place.

Tori rolled her eyes and he scowled. "Valley girl bimchette doesn't suit you."

"We don't have time for this. Todd's going to be here in less than half an hour and you're being a jerk. Let go and get dressed."

He tightened his arm and tipped her chin so she had to look at him. "Tori, stop. We have plenty of time so take a deep breath and hold still for just one minute."

"Guy," her voice filled with frustration but she stopped squirming and looked at him. "What?"

"That's better." Guy grinned and kissed her gently until she was breathless. "I just wanted to say good morning. Tonight we'll set an alarm so we have time to make love tomorrow before we get out of bed like I wanted to today."

Tori sputtered. "I don't believe you. Is sex all you can think about? Jeez, you're too arrogant for words. Assuming we'd be sleeping together again. Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I'm the man you promised to give a chance last night when you were begging for my cock. The same man you made the deal with. The one where I fuck you the way you wanted me to and you don't shy away from my touch whether it's a simple embrace or a night of sweet loving." He sounded furious as he ran a hand over his face. "You made the choice and I'm holding you to it." He released her and got out of bed. "Give me two minutes to shower and I'll go make breakfast. Take your time. I'll tell him you had a bad night and I didn't want to wake you." With that he stalked from the room and slammed the bathroom door behind him.

Tori was still scolding herself for her behavior when she walked into the kitchen after her shower. The apology she owed Guy would have to wait because Todd and Ned were already there. They had been talking but all three stopped as soon as she stepped into the room.

"Sit down, Tori," Guy urged, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "I made you some cocoa."

Todd waited until Guy placed her mug on the table before he snarled, "Outside, Guy. Now."

Guy knew what was coming and couldn't decide how much to tell him by way of explanation. He concluded that it would be best to answer Todd's questions honestly. He trusted him enough to know that his brother-in-law would never use what he said to hurt Tori even if he was angry with what he was about to hear.

Todd stormed off the porch, across the yard and didn't face Guy until they were almost at the end of the driveway. For a moment, he just glared. "Well?"

"I know."

"Do you? Do you really? I don't think so! She's a witness, Guy. A witness who you're supposed to be protecting, not screwing! That's the whole point of you being here. Do you have any idea what this means? You can't possibly believe that I wouldn't notice the difference and figure out what changed things. You're not that stupid. What the hell were you thinking? You weren't thinking! Not with your brain anyway. All you had to do was keep your pants zipped until this was over but no, you had to go and let your dick think for you. God damn it, Guy!"

Guy let Todd vent until he ran out of steam and then told him the main reason behind their new intimacy. "She was determined to find a man, Todd. What other choice did I have? If it had been Terese what would you have done?"

Todd swore for another minute before calming down. "All right, you made your point. Just keep it private, okay? I understand how you feel but you can't flaunt this. When you're with us, you have to let the rest of us do our jobs. We will do our jobs. We're as concerned for Tori's safety as you are so if something happens don't think you're the only one who can protect her. Don't fuck up and put us all in jeopardy by doing something stupid."

Guy nodded. "If Tori leaves that out of her dream..."

"Give me some credit here, Guy. This is me. You know me better than that. I won't push her if she skips it and I won't ask her to elaborate if she gives the bare minimum. You know, I always thought you were the calm one but you're even worse than your sisters."

"Hey. I still am the calm one."

"Yeah." Todd chuckled and headed for the door. "As long as it's not about Tori, you're fine. They're going to have a field day when they figure this out."

"I know," Guy sighed. "Guess I should have kept my mouth shut when they were falling in love."

"Paybacks are a bitch but you have to admit you deserve whatever you get."

"Yeah, yeah, don't you start. I'm still the one who introduced you."

They were both grinning like fools when they returned to the kitchen. "Everything okay?" Tori asked.

"It's fine," Guy assured her as he retrieved the plate she had set aside for him in the microwave.

"Sorry if I worried you, Tori," Todd apologized. "I needed to go over some family business with Guy and didn't want to bother you and Ned with it."

"Oh. Okay." She knew there was more to it but didn't press the issue.

"Tori was telling me how she had a rough night," Ned filled in quickly. "I thought it best to wait for you before she explained."

"Why don't you eat your breakfast first?" Todd suggested.

"I'd rather talk. I don't think I can eat anyway." Tori had obviously been pushing her food around on her plate without touching it.

"Well, nibble on your toast at least," Todd urged. "Not eating and making yourself sick won't help anything." He waited for her to take it off her plate before he took it away and began to clean up the dishes.

"You don't have to do that." Tori tried to take over.

"No, but I am anyway. Sit down and let me. We invaded your house so it's the least I can do. Besides, Terese would skin me alive if she found out I sat by and let you wait on me."

"But you didn't eat."

"Doesn't matter. I will later."

Reluctantly, Tori returned to the table. Soon she began to tell them of her latest nightmare and information that the men had added at the end. When she reached the part that centered on what they intended to do when they found her, she blushed until her cheeks flamed but forced herself to relate a brief description. She glossed over many of the specifics but said enough for them to get the gist of what she implied.

Todd remained passive, watching both Tori and Guy. When she concluded, he couldn't help but be proud of both of them. Tori for the way she handled the awkwardness of the situation and Guy for having the restraint to let her speak without interruption. He was even more pleased when Guy refrained from reaching for her. Instead of pulling her close, as Todd knew without a doubt was what every fiber of Guy's being was screaming for him to do, he merely put his hand on the table so it was available if she needed it. When Tori did exactly that, he met Guy's eyes and acknowledged the significance of her unconscious gesture.

After Tori finished, Todd called back to his office and updated the staff assisting them with her new information.

"Do you really think you can find them in time?" Tori asked.

"Honestly, we have about the same chance of locating the proverbial needle in the haystack. Which is slightly better than we had yesterday. Knowing about the early dismissal narrows the search somewhat even though many schools are having parent-

teacher conferences now. Kimmie is a surprisingly popular name for the age bracket we're looking at."

"So are Kim and Kimberly," Ned added. "Too bad Sam hasn't called the mom by her first name. That would be a big help."

Guy had been watching Todd closely and knew there was something he wasn't saying. "You going to tell us what's rolling around in your head, Todd?"

Todd hesitated. "I was just thinking. It's probably nothing but they're not following the established pattern this time."

"What? Sure they are," Ned disagreed.

"No, not entirely. From what we know, they always choose victims who won't be found until the next morning. Granted, the early dismissal gives them a window of a few hours but it's still not as much time as the usually have. Maybe they're distracted by the thought of their next destination, maybe they're overconfident, maybe they're getting sloppy but I can't help wondering why they're taking the chance of the mom showing up early. Tori, has she said anything about what time her appointment is?"

"I don't think so." Tori frowned in concentration. "No, I'm sure she hasn't."

"That means they're assuming she's going to the school after she leaves work at her regular time. What if she arranged to leave early? What if she gets there while they're still there? What if she realizes what's going on before she walks in and calls for help without them knowing she's there?"

"What if she walks in and they kill her too?" Guy interrupted.

"That's a possibility too but it doesn't seem like they even considered this." Todd shook his head. "Don't mind me. I'm just grasping at straws. It irks me that we're running out of time and the odds are against us on finding them before it's too late."

Todd's thoughts brought on a heavy silence as they all pondered his conclusion. It lasted until Ned began to drum his fingers on the table.

"I need you to let me do something, Tori," he stated uncertainly.

"W-what?" She clamped down on Guy's hand again.

"Let us put in an alarm system. I know Guy's staying here and he'd die before he let them get to you. I couldn't stop thinking about what you said about them coming to find you or their Miss Vicky. With what you added this morning I can't help it. I realize that the chances of an alarm making any difference are ninety-nine point nine percent against but I would feel better if you had one at least temporarily until they're caught."

"I agree, Ned," Todd spoke up. "In fact, I insist." Not letting her respond, he quickly called and arranged for a system to be installed within the hour.

The agents stayed until the alarm was in place and functioning properly. There was no other reason for them to linger so they returned to their office, leaving Guy and Tori alone.

"Is there any way I could go to the library this afternoon?" Tori asked the instant the door closed behind the men. "Even if it's just for half an hour, I'd really appreciate it



if I could. I miss talking to Diana. I feel like I'm shutting her out and I don't want her to think that, too. I know I could always call her or ask her to stop by here but it would mean more to her if I came to her. I won't even ask you to leave us alone. It's just that...oh, I don't know."

"It's okay, Tori. I understand. And I admit that I'm going overboard with the paranoia and protectiveness. I can't help it and I'm not going to stop. I'm sure it's starting to seem like it but I'm not trying to make you a prisoner in your own home. Tell you what. You let me call Barry and ask him to check out the library first and I'll drop you off for a few hours."

"Drop me off as in leave me there while you go somewhere else?"

"Yes. As you pointed out before, they're not coming here today. If this were Thursday, I'd agree only if you promised to stay within arm's length of me. Barry and I need to go over a few things on other cases anyway. We can do that while you're with Diana. Afterward, if you're ready to eat something, we could go out for an early dinner. Maybe catch a movie too if there's one you want to see."

Tori stared in amazement. "Jeez, that almost sounds like you're asking me for a date."

"What if I am?"

Her jaw dropped. "Are you?"

"Actually, yes. Interested?"

"Um, well, okay, sure. I don't really get it but why not?"

"What's not to get? Granted, you're stuck with me for now and we're doing this backward but so what? I'm attracted to you and want to spend time with you, so what's wrong with a little socializing?"

"Nothing, I guess. It seems a little weird."

"If it makes you uncomfortable we can come straight home."

"No. I'd like to go out."

"Great. Let me call Barry and we'll get going."

"Then I better go change my clothes."

Guy laughed. "Yeah, I guess I should too. Even if you decide you don't feel like going out later, these jeans have seen better days." He looked down at faded pair he'd grabbed in his hurry to be dressed before Todd arrived.

"Hmm." Tori tilted her head. "You're probably right but it's too bad. I kind of like the way they're worn in all the right places." Her face turned bright red at his grin. "I don't believe I just said that." When he couldn't hold in a chuckle, she fled from the room.

## Chapter Eleven

"How are you and Guy getting along?" Diana asked when the conversation lagged.

Tori shrugged. "Okay, I guess." Diana's expression told her she wanted more of an answer. "We're sort of going on a date tonight."

"Oh?" Diana waited.

"Yeah. He thinks he's attracted to me or something so he asked me to dinner and a movie."

"And you accepted. Does that mean you're attracted to him too?"

"Maybe. I don't know. He's not really the jerk I thought he was at first and he's not hard to look at or anything. I could be interested but I wonder if it's not really a case of hero worship. He dropped everything to come to my rescue so I could just be reacting to that and not really to Guy as a man. He's a little overwhelming with the protector bit so it could be the same thing in reverse for him."

"Hmm, I suppose that could be the case. Or you could both be honestly attracted to each other. Don't be so quick to rule that out."

"I won't. We talked about it and decided to give the idea a chance."

"But?"

"But it doesn't seem really likely. I saw the woman he was with at the bar that night, Diana. She was supermodel material. I can't imagine why he'd go for someone like me when he's used to that. You must have heard some of the things Barry's said. I get the impression that he dates a lot and they're all similar to her."

Diana sighed. "You still don't believe what I keep telling you. You, Victoria Banks, are so much more than you see yourself as. Maybe Guy sees what I do. Maybe he looked beyond the mask you wear and realized how special you are. Maybe he considers your fresh, clean flawless complexion a change for the better after dating model-types who overdo the makeup. Maybe a perfect body isn't enough for him. Maybe he appreciates your intelligence and truly wants to know you better. Don't be swayed by his reputation. I suspect he is one of those men who keeps looking for what he really wants in all the wrong places. He could very well be the type who falls hard once he finds what he wants. A man like that is generally very devoted to the woman who captures his heart."

"Maybe. It doesn't really matter though because I'm not ready for anything like that. I don't even know what I want for me yet so how could I possibly know if Guy or any other man might fit with me?"

"All right, Tori. As long as you're not using that as an excuse to prevent him from getting too close to you because you're still afraid that everyone you meet will one day

turn their backs on you like your family did, I won't hound you about it. Just think things through very carefully before you make any hasty decisions that you end up regretting."

Tori and Diana spent the next few hours happily discussing the new books that had arrived during the past week. They were still at it when Guy returned to collect Tori for their date.

"Did you girls have a nice chat?" Guy asked, trying to draw Tori into a conversation.

"Mm. How about you and Barry? Get everything done you needed to?"

"Yep. We had that taken care of in an hour."

"Oh. So what did you do the rest of the time?"

"Hung out. We planned on sitting in the coffee shop but I couldn't do that."

"What?"

"You were too far away so we ended up sitting in the parking lot even though one of the rookies was in the library."

"You're not serious."

"I am. She was posing as a college student doing research. I'm sure you were within her sight the whole time."

"Oh God," Tori groaned. "That makes me feel like such a moron."

"Why?"

"I had a baby-sitter and didn't even realize it. Jeez, she must have hated that."

"No, Tori. She was doing her job protecting a member of the public who is in danger. She was there to help if you needed it, not to baby-sit. According to Barry she really had some things to look for so it wasn't all downtime."

"Oh. Okay." Tori stared at her plate and fidgeted nervously, barely responding for the next few minutes.

"What's going on in your pretty little head now, tiger?"

"Nothing. Sorry I'm not better company. I'm not good at all this dating stuff."

"What makes you think that? We've spent the last week together without you being at all nervous around me."

"But we weren't out on a date."

"Technically, no, but you've known I'm interested in you. What's the difference between us being here instead of having dinner in your kitchen? You said you liked to come here so it can't be the restaurant."

"It just is. I can't explain, so why don't you just ignore me and eat your dinner?"

Guy's hand reached across the table and claimed hers. "Would you please look at me?" He waited for her to raise her eyes. "I can't ignore it because it's bothering you. I

don't want to ignore it because that's not the way I work. I refuse to ignore it because it is affecting us. I will, however, drop it for now as long as you understand that I only asked because I want to know you. All of you. We said we'd be honest with each other. If I'm making you uncomfortable I need to know so I understand why. You don't have to pull any punches with me, tiger. Feel free to say anything because I'd much rather hear it than have you hide it. I may or may not like it and I may or may not react like an overbearing jerk but you already saw me at my worst so I know you can handle it."

"Okay."

"Okay, you're pacifying me to shut me up, or okay, you'll keep that in mind and talk about it when you're ready?"

"Okay, I'll keep it in mind. Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"What did you and Todd really go outside to talk about this morning?"

"You. Todd and I know each other very well. When you walked into the kitchen he saw the way I looked at you and knew things had changed between us."

"Wait. He knew we slept together? Oh God."

"Yes, Tori, but he didn't take me outside to judge you. He was concerned for your safety and the fact that my reactions could interfere with that."

"You mean your Alpha male act might get in the way?" He nodded. "What did you say to calm him down so fast?"

"I explained why I couldn't stay away from you until after this is over. I asked him what he would have done if Terese were the one in need of a man to wipe out the images in her head and he accepted that I had to be with you."

"You told him all that? You actually told him all the things I said?"

"Not verbatim. I said enough for him to grasp the situation. He understands and all he asked is that I don't go overboard in public."

She yanked her hand from his. "We shouldn't be here."

"It's fine, Tori. I promise."

"Well, then you shouldn't touch me."

"Again, it's fine. He didn't mean I shouldn't hold your hand or put my arm around you when we're not alone. He meant not to flaunt our relationship in front of his team. He trusts me to control my behavior and stay out of the way if something comes up but the others don't know me like he does. If I make my feelings obvious someone else may request that I be pulled from the investigation. Todd doesn't want that any more than I do so he reminded me of the possibility and how I can prevent it."

"If you say so. This is so embarrassing. I can't believe he knew we had sex just by watching you look at me. He must think I'm such a slut."

"One, we're consenting adults and it's no one's business what we have or have not done together. Two, Todd already figured out that I want to be with you and would go

to extremes to convince you that you want me too. Three, he and my sister are very open about their sexuality so there's nothing to be embarrassed about. Four, he still thinks that you are one hell of a woman just like he did yesterday. There is absolutely nothing about you that gives the impression of sluttishness in any sense of the word. I understand that you have to get to know him for yourself but I guarantee that you'll eventually agree that Todd's a good guy." Tori didn't say a word. "I'll get our waiter to pack this up and we'll go home."

Tori swallowed the lump in her throat at the flash of disappointment that crossed Guy's face. "Do we have to? I'm sorry that I ruined our date so far but maybe we could try to salvage the rest of it. I mean if you want to."

Guy smiled at her suggestion. "Sure thing, tiger, if that's what you want too. Going to let me hold your hand in the movie?"

She giggled. "What are we, thirteen? Or were you already more advanced than that by then?"

"I'm not sure I like what you're implying. You seem to have the wrong impression of me."

"Do I? I wasn't trying to insult you. It's just so obvious that you have way more experience than I do, Guy."

He considered what to say. "I won't deny it. Does that bother you?"

"I don't know yet. It depends."

"On what?"

"Oh, Guy, it is you," a breathy voice interrupted their conversation as a well-endowed woman in an extremely tight dress leaned over the back of Guy's chair, pressing her cleavage to his shoulder. "I thought it was when you came in but I wasn't sure since you didn't stop to say hi."

"I'm sorry, Candy. I didn't notice you." He blatantly caressed Tori's hand and smiled at her a beat too long. "This is Victoria Banks, my very special lady. Tori, Candy's a former acquaintance of mine."

"Tori." Candy glared. "Well, I guess I won't bother inviting you to drop by later. But give me a call when things get back to normal, okay, Guy? Ta-ta." She sashayed back to her table after wiggling her fingers and batting her eyelashes.

"I really should have warned you." Tori couldn't stop laughing at the look on Guy's face. "She's been trying to get your attention since we got here."

"Since you're still here and laughing I'll assume I passed that test. Tell me, what did you expect to happen when she came over here?"

"I wasn't sure. I really thought you'd be much happier to see her. She seemed insulted when you called her a former acquaintance but not enough to keep her from propositioning you."

"An acquaintance is all she ever was. We went out a few times but there wasn't anything between us."

"But she's beautiful. Even prettier than that woman you were with when we met."

"Do you honestly believe that I'm that shallow? Sure, she looks good on the outside but that's not what does it for me. There wasn't much else to her which is why we never got to be more than acquaintances. We met in a bar when I stopped for a drink on the way home with some of the guys from the station and she invited me to a benefit party. We went to dinner alone one time after that and I discovered we had nothing to say to each other so I didn't ask her out again. I also turned her down when she called me."

"Guess I was wrong but between her and that other woman and what I heard Barry say..."

"What did Barry say?"

"Well, he was talking to Carla and I didn't hear what she asked but he said something about you being with the flavor of the week so I just assumed that meant you go through a lot of different women."

Guy took a deep breath to rein in his temper before he responded. "I admit that I've dated a lot. I admit that I didn't see most of the women more than a few times. I admit that I am sexually experienced. But if you're assuming I got that experience by sleeping with every woman I dated, you're very wrong. If you expected me to walk out on you because a woman you consider pretty seemed to know me then you are wrong again. Believe it or not, I'm not the hound you think I am. I treat women with respect or I try to at least. No, I wasn't polite to Candy but she wasn't at all polite to us either," he snorted. "I guess I really was just the most convenient option for you last night after all." He signaled for the waiter without saying another word and barely waited for her to follow him out of the restaurant.

They drove back to Tori's house in complete silence. She had no idea how to approach Guy through the mounting tension surrounding him.

"Wait here," Guy snapped coldly when he pulled into her driveway. Still without looking at her, he took the keys and locked the door behind him.

Tori watched as he quickly checked through the house to ensure it was untouched in the time they were gone. He returned, disengaging the lock and opened her door, taking their boxed dinners from her hand. Inside, he put his in the refrigerator and left hers on the counter. He activated the alarm system with one control unit but kept both to prevent her from trying to sneak out later as he challenged her with a stare.

"Goodnight," he said curtly before leaving her standing in the living room alone.

Tori forced herself to move. Guy's room was dark by the time she made it upstairs so she decided to turn in as well. It was extremely early but she had no desire to sit up by herself. She felt numb as she replayed the way the evening had ended. Every time she pictured the hurt expression that had been on his face while he defended himself, the lump in her throat grew until she couldn't stand it.

Standing in the hall outside his room, she tapped lightly on the open door. "Are you awake?" she asked softly so she wouldn't disturb him if he was sleeping.

"Yes."

"Can I please come in and talk for a minute?"

"Yes."

"Do you mind if I turn on a light?"

"No."

Afraid to face him, Tori chose to switch on the small light on the dresser instead of the one next to the bed. After several deep breaths for courage, she turned toward him but stayed where she was.

"Well?" Guy prompted when she didn't speak.

Tori could feel the hurt radiating from him as easily as she heard it in his voice. "I owe you an apology. I was wrong and I'm sorry."

"Fine," he dismissed her.

Tori knew he wanted her to go back to her room but instead she had to continue. "I should have stopped you right away before you said all that."

"Why?"

"Because I already knew you aren't the way I let you make it sound. Other than that one comment, Barry always said good things about you. When I was upset about meeting you instead of Barry, Diana assured me that you were a good man. I did hear you when you were talking about your mom rearing you to be as decent as your dad is and how he helped too." She finally looked at him and saw he was watching her intently although he had his hands behind his head in what appeared to be a relaxed pose. "I'm so sorry."

Guy waited to see if she'd retreat before he moved to hold up the edge of the covers. "You're shivering. Come here so we can talk about this without your teeth chattering."

Tori saw that he expected her to refuse and made herself slide in next to him. She was surprised when he pulled her to his side instead of maintaining the distance she left between them. He sighed as he settled her against his chest with his arms wrapped around her.

"If you believed I wasn't all bad then what was that all about? Why did you want me to feel like some self-centered asshole who only paid attention to a woman to see what I could get from her and ditched her as soon as I had? I don't understand."

"I'm sorry, Guy."

"Me too. Tori, I'm sorry for blowing up and shutting you out and walking away from you in the restaurant and here without talking to you. What are you sorry for?"

Tori shook her head against his chest and gulped for air.

"Come on, Tor."

"Just give me a second. I never really said this out loud before." She let out a humorless laugh. "I never admitted it either, not even to myself. I'm going to screw this up big-time so bear with me, okay?"

Guy must have sensed how hard it was for Tori to begin so he snuggled her closer. "I'm not going anywhere so take your time."

"Thanks. When I told Diana we had a date planned she said some things that got me thinking. Some were the same as she's always said. Some were specifically about you. See, I told her why I wasn't sure that we were really interested in each other. I also said I doubted you'd even consider going out with me if you weren't stuck with me like you are now. I described the woman you were with and insisted there was no way you'd pick someone like me over someone like that."

"Tori—"

"No. Please let me say this." Guy responded by kissing her forehead. "Diana's been trying to build my self-esteem for years but I still have a hard time accepting what she says. When I said that, she got a little annoyed and brought up how you might share her opinion instead of mine and actually do like me," she relayed their conversation before pausing for a deep breath to give herself courage for what she wanted to say next.

"Diana said that was fine as long as I wasn't making excuses to stop you from getting too close. Ever since we met, Diana's been very kind to me. She offered me friendship right from the start and it took me a long time to believe she meant it. Even when I was little I believed that people only wanted to be around each other for what they could get. My parents always took us to the salon with them and paraded us around like little clones, making us look like adults before we even went to school. My brother and sister loved the attention and couldn't get enough of it. I always tried to hide so I could wipe off the makeup. I hated the way it felt on my face as much as I hated the way being dressed up made me feel inside. They even insisted I keep my hair long so they could show off whatever the latest style was. I got it cut the first day I got here, as soon as I left the library, before I started looking for a place to stay.

"They always told me I was the plain one, the one who would have to settle for whatever I could get after all the good ones were taken. Diana decided that I don't let anyone get even moderately close to me because I'm afraid they'll say the same things as my parents and reject me like they did. If I don't let anyone get to know me then it won't hurt when they tell me to get lost.

"I always denied that and told Diana she had no idea what she was talking about because there was no way I do that. I have a whole list of reasons for why I'm right and she's wrong. I won't bother to tell you though because I can't keep lying to myself. Diana is right about all of it. I was so scared when we walked into the restaurant and I saw that Candy looking at you. After she saw you, she noticed me. She looked at me like I was less than dirt and not worth wasting even half a thought on.

"I don't know how I knew what would get to you but I did and I kept picking even though I could see I was hurting you. I knew it but I couldn't stop because if I did I wouldn't be able to keep my distance from you and I have to or it will hurt too much when you decide you're done with me."



"Tori—"

"No." She was crying. "You're one of the really, really good ones and I'm so not. Last night was incredible but I know it wasn't real. No way could that last. Can't we just chalk it up to circumstances and let me have the memory of what you made me feel being magical instead of drawing this out until you get bored with me? I'm so sorry I hurt you and I shouldn't have forced you like I did last night. I should never have made that deal with you. I was selfish but I won't hold you to it so please can't we pretend it never happened and forget about it?"

Guy held her while she cried her heart out. He waited until she quieted before he spoke. "My turn. The morning I came to the library to beg you to start over, Diana stopped me as I was leaving. She warned me that you would do your best to chase me away and I promised I wouldn't let you. When Barry and I were sitting in the car waiting for it to be late enough for me to drag you out of the library, he took a break from busting my balls to make sure I understood how hard you'd fight against letting me get close to you. Again I was positive nothing you threw at me would make any difference because I'm never giving up. I really thought I could handle whatever you came up with and I caved in after five minutes. I like to think I would have figured it out eventually and found a way to get you to talk to me again but I honestly didn't have a clue. Some Alpha male I turned out to be."

"Why would Diana say that to you?"

"Because she could see how fascinated I was by you. Your family is the biggest bunch of misguided fools. They obviously never bothered to look beyond what they tried to mold you into because if they had they would have seen that you are the best there is. They were idiots to bury your face under makeup. And why would anyone with even a minimal understanding of hair ever mess with yours? It's soft and fluffy and it's all I can do to keep from toying with it all the time."

"You don't have to do this. I never let myself believe you were staying so I'm okay now that you know what's going on. I won't lie and say I would have turned you down if you wanted a repeat of last night but I know it wouldn't have been the same. I'd rather skip it so I get to keep the memory."

"For Christ's sake, would you stop before you royally piss me off!" Guy's arms became steel bands so she couldn't escape. "Honestly listen for a change because this is extremely important. Diana is right. I have been wasting time with the wrong sort of women. When you stepped into that bar I felt like I'd been sucker punched in the gut. Part of me wanted to drag you right out of there and lock us up together forever. The other part of me was scared to death. Most of the reason I was an ass was because of that. The other night when I was telling you about finding the right one, I had to force myself not to say you were it for me."

"Don't—"

"No! It's my turn now so just listen. I know you're scared and I understand why. I get that this isn't going to be easy for you and you're going to struggle every step of the

way. I'm sure you'll manage to zing me like you did tonight but I'm not giving up. We have a deal and you promised me a chance and I refuse to let you off the hook. I know it's too soon to tell you that I love you like I did after you went to sleep last night so I'll wait." He didn't give her a chance to interrupt. "I swear I will prove that we belong together even if it takes the rest of my life to hear you say it too. Now about the sex, last night was just as overwhelming for me as it was for you. Yes, I'm experienced but it has never even come close to what we shared. As for getting bored and not being as good if we tried again, you are wrong. I'll prove that to you too. Hell, Tori, I never did what we did before."

"Yeah, right. Like I'm really going to believe that one. You knew exactly what to do the whole time."

"Yes, I did but I was going on instinct. Your body showed me what it needed and all I did was follow your lead. Deny it all you want but that is one hundred percent true. I've gotten a little crude at times but I never spoke to anyone the way I did to you. I never lasted as long as I did with you. I never had anyone respond like you did. I never had any interest in spanking anyone, not even when I was invited to but with you I felt like I had to. I never suggested anal sex or stuck my fingers in anyone's ass unless the woman I was with brought it up first but last night I couldn't have resisted yours if my life had depended on it. The thought of some other man even looking at your naked body is enough to make me lose control. If someone else actually touched you I'd probably end up in jail. Face it, tiger. I'm hooked and you're going to have to learn to deal with it because you're stuck with me."

"Stop it. Just stop it. Don't say anything else because I can't handle it right now. I keep thinking you're only saying this stuff to get back at me for hurting you and I don't really believe you would but I'm about to freak out on you and I don't want to do that, so please stop talking like that."

"All right. You win. Calm down and breathe. I'll drop it for now but we're nowhere near done with this. We'll never be done with this because I'll keep telling you even after you accept it."

"Guy." She struggled again.

"Hold still. I won't say any more tonight although I sure wouldn't mind talking dirty with you. Hey, maybe you could talk and I'll just lay here and listen."

"God, you're impossible."

"Probably, but I made you smile and you're not as tense as you were ten minutes ago so I can't be all bad."

"You're insane. Yeah, that's it. You are completely insane and for some reason you can't hide it around me like you do with everyone else."

Guy laughed. "Tori tiger, there is no way in hell I'll ever get bored with you. Promise the only thing you'll ever change is your belief in my wanting to be with you. The rest of you is just perfect."

"That's it. Let go so I can go to bed."

"I guess I have to." He turned serious. "I don't want to but I also don't want to interfere with your dreams. Soon as this is all over I'm keeping you in bed for at least a week."

"Doubtful but I don't want to argue any more tonight. I don't agree with most of what you said but I like that we're not still at odds so let's try to keep it that way."

"You have so much to learn and I am going to love watching it happen. I don't want to argue either, especially since make-up sex is out of the question at the moment. Let me kiss you goodnight and I'll come tuck you in."

"You don't have to get up."

"I know but if I do I'll get to kiss you goodnight in your bed too so it'll be worth it." Guy arranged their heads so he could reach her mouth. He teased her with a few soft kisses before giving her a sensual smile. "Goodnight, Tori tiger," he whispered against her mouth before claiming it for the most drawn-out, incredible kiss she'd ever had.

Guy released Tori only to sweep her into his arms. He carried her to her room and put her in her bed. After he repeated the kiss, he tucked the covers around her and said goodnight again before leaving her to her dreams.

## Chapter Twelve

Within hours, Tori's screams filled the silence of the cottage. As soon as her eyes began to focus, the first thing she saw was the now-familiar concern lining Guy's face. Instead of falling out of bed in her usual haste to flee, Tori extended her hand toward him even before she untangled the covers.

"I can't stand this," Tori cried as Guy held her to him with one arm while he tucked them in with the other. "Since they can hear me, why won't they say where they are?"

"Back up, tiger. What makes think they can hear you?"

"They can. I know they did because they're going to kill the mom now too. God, it's all my fault!"

"Sh," Guy soothed. "It's not, Tori. Nothing they do or have done is or ever will be your fault."

"But they weren't going to before. I must have been thinking about it because they just said they're going to."

"That doesn't mean you have anything to do with it. Listen for a sec. If anyone's to blame it would be Todd. He's the one who brought it up this morning, not you. He's the one who pointed out how odd it was that they were ignoring her, not you. He's the one who suggested what a mistake that could be, not you. He's the one who put the thought in your mind, not you. But it doesn't make one bit of difference. If they were truly able to read your thoughts they never would have killed anyone. Even if you were angry enough to wish someone dead, I know you would never do it. You don't have it in you. Think about what Todd said. They came up with this on their own. They have a set pattern. They are merely following it as they have from the beginning. Tori?"

"Maybe you're right."

"Not maybe. I am right. It's their choice, not yours. Or Todd's. They are responsible for every bit of what they've done. You are only the unfortunate soul who's somehow been forced to observe. I don't have the slightest idea how or why that happened but I believe that you have no involvement whatsoever. You're as much of a victim as the people they've killed."

"Thank you."

"You don't have to say that. Everything I said is true. I just reminded you of what you already know."

"Do you think it'll ever stop? I mean after they get caught. Will they be in my head forever?"

"I'd give anything to answer that with what you want to hear but I can't. I simply don't know. If they don't go away, I'll ask Todd to find someone to teach you how to

block them out. I'll go with you so I can learn how to help. No matter what you won't be alone with them again."

"Guy."

"Please don't say it. After you went to bed I realized how sidetracked I got earlier. Will you let me tell you how I should have responded to what you said?"

"I guess," Tori squeaked out in a tiny voice.

"First, I'm afraid I agree with Diana and I understand why you don't have much self-confidence. It sounds like you spent the first eighteen years of your life with the people you should have been able to depend on undermining every aspect of your self-image. They were so wrong.

"Instead of selling out though, you were strong enough to start over. You walked away from absolutely everything you knew and made a life for yourself. You had the guts to get on a bus without any real plan. You got off on what sounds like an impulse and convinced a complete stranger to give you a chance. You worked damn hard to prove yourself. You juggled three jobs and college without asking anyone for anything. You managed to save for a car at the same time as you had living expenses and tuition. You must have been exhausted more days than not but you didn't quit. You graduated and now you have a very nice home that you are solely responsible for making possible. I admire you so much."

"Wow, I don't sound half bad when you describe me."

Guy hugged her. "Christ, I wish to hell we'd met at a picnic at Barry's. This would be so much easier if we had. Easier, Tori, but not easy. I'd still have to prove myself to you so you could learn to trust me but there wouldn't anywhere near as many obstacles as we have now." He chuckled. "I probably would have rushed things as badly as I am and pushed you for a commitment long before I had any right to suggest it but you might have had less trouble accepting my sincerity. I'd like to tell you that I would have had more control around you but I doubt it. I would have realized you were amazing then too so I suspect that my Alpha reaction would have been just as strong.

"I'm sorry I let my thoughts get lost in a sexual haze earlier. I'm the one who got distracted by the need to claim you with a declaration. I meant it when I said I love you but I shouldn't have blurted it all out like that but it's out there now and I'm afraid I overwhelmed you to the point you're afraid of me and will reject me out of fear before you let yourself get to know me. I don't want an answer tonight but I'd appreciate it if you would consider giving us the chance we talked about. I'll do my best to take it slowly and give you all the time you need but I need you to point out when I get overbearing."

Tori shifted uncomfortably. "I know I should say something now but I don't know what. I don't think I really understand why you would want me. That's wrong and I know it but I can't help it."

Guy cuddled her closer. "You don't have to say anything. I do want you and I will find a way to convince you eventually. All I'll ask until then is that you keep an open

mind to the possibility of what I'm suggesting. Well, that and the fact that I'm not going to be able to completely stop myself from touching you."

Tori tilted her head in time to catch his grin. "Now I'm really confused."

"Why? Tell me what part you're having trouble with and I'll find a different way to explain."

She pushed his arms away and sat so she was next to his stomach but facing him. "I get why you think it would be better if we hadn't met like we did and I agree with you. I appreciate the way you described me and I'll work on seeing me like that just like I have been with Diana. I'm having a really hard time with how you think I'm worth the trouble but you already said you'd convince me."

"That's all of it, Tori. What's left not to understand?" Guy rolled so he was on his side with his knees bent against her back.

"The part about how you're going to try not to touch me. Why would you do that?"

"It's like I just said. I need to back off. I've been rushing you and if I keep it up you might too be preoccupied with avoiding my hands to notice how well we'll be interacting at the moment."

Tori laughed so hard she had to hold her sides. "Damn, Guy, that's a good one. You're not going to touch me." Her giggles continued until she saw he was watching her and frowning. "What? You're not serious. It's a joke, right? You're just teasing me again."

"Honestly, no. You need to get to know me without me crowding you."

"Holy shit, you really did mean it! What about last night? What about those things you said about how it was for you? You sounded like you agreed we were hot together."

"I meant every bit of it and we are hot together. You blew my mind last night, tiger. I won't ever forget a single second of it or the way you said you thought it was magical. But you also said it was about you. Not us. More than once you insisted that nothing was happening between us. You needed a good fuck and my cock was handy."

"And you believe I still think that after what all the things we did? After I told you how you made me feel? You thought I was lying when I said I wouldn't really have picked up a stranger. You think I act like that all the time and that I let any guy who's interested do that stuff to me." Tori was almost hysterical. "Oh my God! I'm too stupid to live. I actually believed you and you were just being nice. Or distracting me." She would have fled but Guy's large hand clamped around her ankles so she settled for hiding her beet-red face behind her hands.

"Tori. Tori. Tori," Guy raised his voice each time he repeated her name. When she refused to look at him, he released her and rolled to his back with his forearm over his eyes. "Holy Christ, I couldn't have fucked up worse if I'd tried. My gun's on the dresser, tiger. Pop the safety and just shoot me now."

Tori gasped. "What did you say?"

"I said you should shoot me. Have mercy and put me out of my misery before I turn into an even bigger asshole and come up with something even more idiotic that comes out completely wrong and you take exactly opposite of how I mean it."

"Wait." Tori broke out in a new wave of giggles. "Guy." She tugged his arm from his face and propped herself on his chest.

"Yeah. This is better. I deserve it. Torture me before you shoot me."

"Would you just shut up! And open your eyes too," she demanded. "I shouldn't laugh. I'm sorry." She had to stop for another burst of mirth. After a deep breath, she said, "Okay. I'm done. I'm not laughing at you. Really. It's just... I mean... God, we're both pathetic! You don't think there's a chance that Todd had them bug the house when they put in the alarm, do you? It's bad enough, us listening to this but I'd die if anyone else heard it."

"Huh?"

"Think about it. We should be writing this down so they can make a movie about us. I'm sure we'd be funnier than that comedy we were going to go see after dinner. We misread each other the second we met. Everything we do or say turns into a total mess and neither one of us seems to be able to stop it but what I don't get is why you're as bad as I am. I know I suck at people stuff but I really thought you'd be good at this."

Guy's body relaxed as he returned her grin. "I am good at this. Very good except when I'm with you. Around you I turn into a lunatic and forget everything I ever knew. Christ, if I didn't already believe we belonged together this would prove it."

"Why?"

"Simple. You're the only one who does this to me. Correct me if I'm wrong but I suspect you're reacting to me differently from how you have with anyone else as well." She nodded. "See? We bring a side out of each other that neither of us knew we had before."

"But we're a disaster."

"Only until we get to know each other better. Then we'll understand what we're saying and won't screw up like we have been." His thumb traced her bottom lip. "I'm sorry I made you think last night didn't mean anything to me. I know it was between us even when you were telling me it wasn't. It was between us as soon as you got out of bed and came to me."

"And I'm sorry I'm too insecure to remember you did all that with me last night because you wanted me for me and not because I threw myself at you and demanded that you fuck me. I heard every word you said about how you see me and why you're willing to slow down and somehow I translated that into you didn't want me at all, not even for sex."

"I wonder how long it'll take us to get the hang of this?" Guy asked, lightly rubbing her back. "Now just so you don't have any more doubts, I do want you. For all of it. And yes, in case you're still uncertain, that includes sex." His thumb grazed the side of

her breast and he felt her nipples harden in response. "Oh yeah, that definitely includes wanting you for sex."

Tori slid one leg between Guy's to get closer. "That mean you'll take back the bit about not touching me?"

"If you want me to." His hands brushed her tank top out of the way so he could get to her bare skin.

"I definitely want you to." She pushed herself up far enough to tug at her shirt, struggling to remove it until Guy pulled it off her. Tori ran her hands over his chest to his shoulders and pressed her flesh to his. "But only if you tell me that you want me to touch you too."

"You saying you want to touch me?" Guy traced a path from the edges of her breasts downward until his fingers teased the waistband of her shorts.

"Definitely. In fact," She pushed herself to her knees, straddling his thigh, "Since I didn't get to touch you at all last night, I think I should get started now." Tori caressed her way up his arms and down his chest before giving him a questioning look. "Well? You going to say I can and let me do some exploring or are you the only one who ever gets to touch?"

Guy surprised her by moving her off his leg and stripping off his pants. He kicked the covers to the end of the bed and put his hands behind his head. "Go for it, tiger. I won't promise how long it'll be before this becomes a mutual exploration but I'll try to hold off if you want to start solo."

"Mm." Tori returned to her position on his thigh. "Yes, please." She bent forward so her nipples could follow her hands. "Try really hard so I can take my time." He groaned as she reversed. "Guy." She pouted when he lifted his head to free his hands. "If you can't give me a lot more than ten seconds I'm going to need your handcuffs." She blushed hotly as she peeked at his face. "If I asked, would you give them to me?"

"Are you asking?"

Her blush deepened. "Yes."

He studied her eyes. "In the nightstand drawer. I get to hold the key but I swear I won't use it unless the alarm is triggered. I trust you but I can't prove it by giving you complete control this time. I can't risk your safety no matter how much I want you to know that trust." Tori's expression told him she understood his need. "Better grab one of the remotes too. It needs to be right by the bed so I hear it. You're going to be so distracting that I doubt I'd notice if it went off in the next room."

Tori continued to stare in amazement. She stared so long that Guy finally flexed his thigh. "You change your mind, tiger?"

Instantly, she bounced off the bed and scooted to his room. She returned and put the alarm unit on the nightstand. Her blush returned full force when she offered him the key.



Guy slipped the ring over the tip of his little finger, pushing it on just until it fit snugly. He didn't want it to get stuck if he needed it but he didn't want it to fall off if he clenched his hands as he expected to. At her hesitation, Guy shifted until he was angled so his hands were near the cutout at the edge of the headboard. The rest was solid so she would have to loop the cuffs around the post at the corner.

"I trust you," he stated as he waited with his arms over his head. "Not too tight," he urged. "I need to be able to maneuver if I have to use the key." When she clicked the second closed, he tugged his hands to show her he couldn't escape. "Please don't hurt me too much. If it gets real bad, I'll fight the cuffs and you'll be the one explaining the bruises to Todd tomorrow."

"Oh my God!" She looked horrified. "You think I'm going to hurt you but you let me do this anyway."

"I trust you, Tori. I don't think you're doing this to hurt me but I don't know how this is going to make you react or how exactly you plan on exploring. I won't be at all surprised if you do some of the same things to me that I did to you and I'm pretty sure I can handle that but I've never tried this before so who knows."

"You never had a woman touch you like that or you haven't been handcuffed to a bed before?"

"Neither."

"Holy shit! Why the hell would you ever pick me to be the first? You really are insane!"

"No, I'm not. And I picked you because one, I trust you and two, I want to experience everything with you. Come on, tiger. Touch me before the suspense kills me. You have me at your mercy and can do anything you want. Don't make me start begging so soon."

Tori briefly linked their hands and gave his a squeeze. Slowly, she stroked his arms, pausing to rub her thumbs over the inside of his elbows.

"Christ," Guy groaned as his body responded to her innocent caress.

"Wow." She noticed instantly and sat back to look.

"Please don't stop already."

"Oh, sorry." Tori blushed again and moved her hands back to his arms. She resumed her path, tracing his collarbones to his neck before running her fingers along his jaw and across his cheekbones. Next, she drew her thumb over his lower lip just as Guy had done several times to hers. She gasped when he caught it between his lips and sucked it into his mouth. Guy used his tongue to push it almost out before sucking it back it several times until he ended by twirling his tongue around her whole thumb.

"Hey." Tori shook herself from his spell and pulled her hand away. "I didn't say you could do that."

"You didn't say I couldn't," he pointed out.

"Well, you can't. When I want something inside your mouth I'll put it there."

"I can't wait. What's first?"

"Keep that up and you'll be spending the night alone."

"No. Please don't leave me. I'll behave. I promise I won't do anything unless you tell me to."

"Hmm, okay." Tori bit back a giggle but knew Guy caught it as he coughed to cover a chuckle of his own. "Maybe, if you hold really still, I'll let you suck on all my fingers."

"I'll try my best."

"Good." She drew on his chest with her fingertips, carefully avoiding his nipples. Eventually she realized he was struggling to stay quiet. "I want you to tell me how it feels while I'm touching you. It's all right if you say you want me to do things as long as you understand that what you say won't make one bit of difference to what I do next."

He groaned, raising his chest toward her hand. "Don't tease me. Touch me."

She tapped him with one fingertip. "Un-un-un." Suddenly her grin disappeared. Her hand landed firmly over his heart. "Are you okay? Your heart's pounding so hard."

Guy sputtered to speak through his laughter. "Unbelievable. You're too cute for words, tiger. I'm helpless, cuffed to a bed, bare-ass naked. There's an extremely sexy woman next to me wearing nothing but a skimpy pair of shorts loose enough that I get a flash of her incredible ass every time she moves." He exaggerated a deep breath. "I can smell her arousal and am so close to begging for her to sit on my face and let me taste her I can't think straight. She locked me up here so she could satisfy her curiosity about my body which has my mind overflowing with all sorts of possibilities and she's wondering why my heart's about to burst out of my chest."

"Oh yeah." Tori blushed and looked him over from head to toe. "Wow," she whispered, staring at his engorged cock. "No way in hell will all that fit." Her jaw dropped when it grew under her scrutiny.

"Uh, Tor, it does. Perfectly if my opinion counts for anything. You do remember last night, right?"

Her blush spread. "Hmm, now that you mention it, I do sort of remember something about that." Tori giggled slightly before going back to staring at his body. "How tall are you?"

"Six three."

"That's amazing." She slid her hand under his leg and urged him to bend his knee so she could lean against it.

"Not really." Guy seemed confused when she got comfortable as if she intended to stay there. "Six three isn't that tall."

"That's not what I meant. I think it's incredible the way you're so well proportioned. Lots of guys who are tall have something that's off. You know, their bodies are too long or their hands and arms don't fit or their bellybuttons are in the wrong place. You're just right."

"Thank you."

"I mean it, Guy. Look at you! Your shoulders are broad but not too wide. You have the right size neck. Your chest is divided up like it should be. Your waist isn't too small and you have a great ass. Your legs are defined but not gross. Your feet aren't too big and you don't have those extra-long toes that are too creepy to look at but once you see them you can't stop. Hell, you even have the right amount of hair."

"Again, thank you. I'm glad you approve so far. Aren't you forgetting something?"

She blinked as she realized what he was referring to. "Hmm, no, not that I can think of just now. You look like a swimmer only more solid. There's not an ounce of fat on you, is there? Do you work out or are you one of the lucky one?"

"I'd say it's about ninety percent genetic and ten percent effort. I try to watch what I eat and I take steps instead of elevators. You're very perceptive though. I was on the swim team in high school and college."

"Oh man," Tori gasped. "No wonder you're so experienced. One look at you in a Speedo and I bet all the girls were falling at your feet. Did you have to dunk that," she nodded toward his cock, "in ice so you could tuck it in?"

Guy snorted. "This is the most bizarre conversation I ever had."

"Why? I didn't mean to pry but what's so bad about what I asked? You're huge and every Speedo I've ever seen was tiny. I can't help picturing you diving into the pool with it poking out from somewhere."

"Sorry, tiger, it's not what we're talking about. It's the fact that the conversation is going on with my hard-on in between us. I can feel your warm breath when you talk. It's driving me insane but you don't seem to notice what you're doing to me."

"Oh, I noticed, Guy. I'm just a little intimidated."

"You? If anyone should be intimidated here, it's me. Seriously," he added when she looked skeptical. "You're fairly innocent and you already took me to new heights. Think what you'll do once you gain a little self-confidence. You scare the hell out of me."

"Oh, ha, ha. Just shut up already. You're scared. Yeah, right. You, the epitome of Alpha male, afraid of me. No way do I believe that one." She shivered and closed her eyes.

"Tori, we don't have to do this tonight. We've had a long day and you must be even more tired after your dream so why don't you turn me loose and we'll get some sleep?"

"Um, okay. I guess I should."

"Wait. I only suggested that because you seem uncomfortable. I didn't mean to sound like I want you to quit if you're not ready to."

"I don't want to but I don't know what to do with you," she mumbled against his knee. "You're too much for me and I can't handle you."

"Bullshit! I'm too much for you? You're the only one capable of making me this vulnerable. You can't handle me? You sure didn't have any trouble pushing me for more last night. Stop thinking. Isn't that what you told me? Don't have any great

debates about what you what to do just do it. I'm defenseless and at your disposal. You said you wanted to touch me so touch me."

"Where?"

"Everywhere. Run your soft little hands all over me." She still didn't move. "You were teasing my chest hair but you stopped before you did any exploring. I know you're curious. I know you like the way I look. Find out if you like the way I feel. Slide your palms up and down my chest until you memorize every inch of it. Dig your fingers into me and see what it does to me. Stroke me softly. Don't ignore my nipples. Touch them. Pinch them. Tug them out until you can roll them between your fingers. Twist me hard. Lick me. Suck me. Probe me with your tongue. Bite me and then kiss me and make me better. I never minded when someone gave me a little attention there before but I never asked for it either. But I'm begging you, Tori. I want you to do the same things I did to you last night. I want to know if I'm as sensitive to you as you are to me. My skin is on fire and I need you to put it out. Please don't torture me anymore. Please touch me. Anywhere, just please touch me," Guy continued to plead until Tori released his leg and inched toward his chest.

Watching his eyes, Tori leaned across him and rested her hands on his waist. Slowly, she slid them up and down his sides. Her tentative touch soon had him squirming.

"More. Please, Tori. I need you."

His encouragement boosted her courage and Tori shifted to the front of his body. "Ooh yeah. You're as solid as you look." She stroked him thoroughly. "So strong. When I waitressed there were these guys who would come in and strut around like they were something. What a bunch of wannabes. You're the real thing but the only time you let it show is when we've been alone together."

"Don't let that fool you," Guy advised seriously. "I won't deny that you bring out the Alpha in me almost constantly but there have been plenty of situations at work where I didn't hesitate to flex my muscles."

"I'm sure you did but it's not the same thing. At the truck stop, those guys were flaunting. You wouldn't do that just to draw attention to yourself. Not with me and especially not at work."

"No, you're right. I don't flaunt while I'm working because I only get tough when I have to. But if I'm not trying to get your attention what am I doing when I go Alpha with you?"

"Well, you're the one who keeps saying you're staking your claim. Marking your territory as the head stallion and protecting your much-weaker mate from the rest of the herd."

"Interesting analogy but I don't see you as a broodmare. You're much more the tiger type."

"I noticed you call me that sometimes. I wasn't sure I wanted to know why."

"It fits you but I must confess I consider you more of a tiger cub than a full-grown tigress. Don't look at me like that. I don't mean it in a derogatory way. I'm probably full of shit but you still seem to be figuring out how you fit in your own skin. You're inquisitive one moment and playful the next. And then you turn all fierce, like you're about to unsheathe your claws and take a swipe at me just before you retreat to somewhere safe." He shrugged as best he could. "Hey, I watched a really cool special on one of those nature channels one night and it stuck with me."

"I'll have to think about that one." Tori curled her fingers and scraped his chest with her nails.

"Holy Christ, I can't wait to feel you do that on my back when I have you screaming beneath me."

"You sure I'm going to be the one screaming?" she asked sweetly. Before he could respond, Tori caught a nipple with her teeth and gave it a sharp tug. With a wicked chuckle, she moved on to the other side. When she raised her head to look at Guy, he was watching intently. She could see the lust in his eyes and fought her surprise that she inspired it. Without a word, she lowered her mouth and tickled his reddened flesh with the tip of her tongue.

"Tori," Guy moaned, tugging at the handcuffs.

"Stop doing that," she commanded. "If you keep pulling, you'll have bruises and I don't want that. Be a good boy and hold still or I'll have to stop."

"Okay, okay. Anything you say, just please don't stop."

She laughed softly. "Begging, Guy? What would the wannabes say about the true Alpha now?"

"Not a damn thing. If you were doing the same to them, they'd all be dead by now."

"Good thing you're so tough then." Tori proceeded to treat his hard points as he had hers. She kept it up until he was almost incoherent. "Seems to me that you're pretty sensitive yourself. I wonder what it would take to make you come just by stimulating you here." She gave him a quick peek as he groaned. "Maybe I could do this again sometime so we can find out."

Guy managed to raise an eyebrow in question. "I'm sure that can be arranged. You look ready to pounce, tiger. What's on your mind?"

"I'm curious about something I read once."

"Ask me anything and I'll tell you everything I know."

"Thanks, that's so nice of you. I would be extremely surprised if you couldn't answer this question but I think I'd rather find out on my own than ask." She swiped his lips with her tongue but didn't kiss him. Instead, she spun around and stretched out next to him. Knowing exactly what he expected, she caressed his hip to tease him. When his muscles tensed, she gave him a wink and crawled to the foot of the bed.

"So cruel," he growled.

"Be nice or I will be."

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me. You wanted to experiment and I shouldn't have been thinking so selfishly."

"Oh, shut up before it gets any deeper in here."

"Yes, ma'am. Can I help you in any way?"

"Nope. I'm good." She giggled when he bit back a retort. "Here's the thing." She ran a finger over the top of his foot and around the inside of his ankle. "The book implied that there are some unlikely spots that can be used to enhance foreplay. This is supposed to be one of them." Tori devoted some time to lavaging the soft skin beneath the bone with varying pressure.

"Christ, Tori," Guy groaned when she switched feet.

"I'll take that as a yes," she concluded with a smug glance. "It also mentioned here." She urged his knee to the side so she could stroke the back of it. "It might be better if I had you roll over but I wouldn't be able to see your face so this will have to do for now." She used her tongue as she had on his ankle. When she reached for the other side, Tori discovered that Guy's legs were spread wide. She couldn't get to it unless she stretched on top of him and since she was making him wait before she touched him other than where she was focused, she climbed over the leg she'd just abandoned and settled between them.

"They were right about there too," Guy stated in a tight voice. "Any other spots you want to test?"

"Not right now, thanks. I already know about your elbows." She sat back on her heels and looked at him.

"Now what?"

Tori frowned and shook her head.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry."

"Why? What's wrong?"

She blushed and refused to meet his eyes. "I was going to try something but no way is it going to work."

"What? What won't work?" She shook her head. "Please look at me. Talk to me, Tori. What did you want to try?"

"Oh, damn. You already know what I'm going to say so I may as well stop being such a chicken. I know you'll pester me until I do anyway." She forced herself to meet his eyes. "I want to suck your cock, okay. I want to try to make you come that way but I know I can't because you're so massive I doubt if I can get more than a couple of inches into my mouth. Even your nuts are too big for me to suck on. Jeez, I wish I had more experience." She dropped her face to hide her misery.

"Back up a sec and listen to me. Tori, please." He waited for her to look up. "You're thinking quantity, not quality. You don't have to swallow the whole thing to make it

good for me. You can use your tongue to lick me like a Popsicle. You can alternate between pointing it to separate my balls and flattening it on the smooth spot just under them. You can run it around the ridge and probe the slit or butterfly the head. You could cover me with open-mouthed wet kisses or close your lips around the head. Then you could keep them there and suck my cum right out of me or torment me more by keeping them tight while you drew the tip in and out of your mouth, with or without tongue action. I know most guys are petrified of teeth but I enjoy it when there's a little nip or scrape thrown in as long as it's followed by something soft and soothing.

And don't forget your hands. While your mouth is busy at the tip, you can wrap your hands around the base. Stroking. Tugging. Squeezing. Both my cock and my balls. Did that book of yours tell you that there's a spot beneath the balls that you can press on to prevent ejaculation? You can make me feel liking I'm coming without spurting. As long as you keep the pressure on, I'd be ultra-sensitive and go wild at the slightest touch of any kind. I'm not sure but I think it might be possible to make it seem like I'm getting off a few times before I get too sensitive to handle any more and you'd have to let go so I could really come." Tori stared wordlessly. "I only tried that once so I'm just guessing about that last part but my point is there are many ways to make me come that don't involve gagging yourself with my cock."

"But I thought all guys wanted that."

"I won't lie and say we don't. But to be totally honest, no one ever managed to take all of me so that's not an experience I've had."

"You really mean that." She was awed.

"Yes. And before you start worrying about it, the choice to swallow or spit would be entirely yours. Some women do. Some don't. As I understand it, men all taste differently so sometimes a woman needs a sample before she makes up her mind one way or the other. Sometimes it might depend on the mood you're in. I come hard and copiously. Some men ooze a steady flow. It's a woman's prerogative what she does with it."

He paused but Tori was back to staring. "There are other personal differences too. Some women hate the way a man smells and keep their noses as far away from that area as they can. Some women like to use their hands so they can watch the result and aim it at various places. There are women who like ass play. Fingers, tongues, or both. Or they might use a strap-on so they can fuck a guy's ass."

"Are you saying...?" She couldn't continue.

"Is that something I personally enjoy? I don't think so. No one's ever asked and I'm not sure what I'd say if someone did."

"Oh, so you expect me to let you do that but your ass is off-limits?"

"As wrong as I know it is, I have to say yes."

"Well, what if I say I won't let you fuck my ass until after I get to fuck yours?"

"Are you saying that?"

"No. I never even thought of doing that as I'm sure you already know. I don't know if I'd want to," she admitted shyly.

"Then let's forget about it for now and both give it some thought. I'm much more interested in whether or not I can persuade you to experiment with some of the ideas I gave you for my cock. You're welcome to test out your own too."

"Hmm, I'm not sure."

He tried not to sigh. "All right, then what are my chances of getting you to scoot up here and hold your boobs in my face so I can lick them? No comment. Okay. Maybe I could interest you in taking off those shorts and letting me tongue you for a few hours. I see. No comment on that either. I suppose a kiss is out of the question too. A hug? No? Would you please let me go and hold my hand for two minutes?"

Tori couldn't contain her giggles any longer. "You're so cute when you're desperate." Her hands had been resting lightly on his thighs as they spoke but her touch became more firm as she ran them toward his groin. When her thumbs traced the crease where his legs met his body, she realized Guy was holding his breath. "Better breathe, Detective. This investigation is going to take awhile and I'd hate you to pass out before it's over." She smiled at his gasp but didn't look away from his erection.

Emboldened by the way Guy's cock appeared to be straining to reach her, Tori slid her hands to the inside of his thighs. Her fingers framed his testicles as her thumbs pressed them apart. She stretched his already tight skin by pushing his sac away from his shaft. When it was against the sensitive area he spoke of she caressed the spot with his own skin.

Guy's hips bucked, startling her. "Don't stop," he groaned, as if afraid she'd misinterpret his reaction.

Tori was amazed when his shaft swelled even more. "Oh my," she purred, curling her fingers around his orbs. Continually watching his reaction, Tori devoted some time experimenting with a wide range of touches, from barely there to almost brutal squeezes and sharp tugs.

"Holy fuck, tiger." He sounded like he was in pain.

Unsure of his meaning Tori glanced at his face. The unquenched lust radiating from him answered all her questions. "Hmm, interesting."

After giving his swollen sac one final pat, her fingers circled the base of his shaft. "Uh-oh."

"What?" he asked, frantically trying to see what was wrong.

"Oops. Sorry. I didn't mean to say that out loud," she teased. "I always thought my fingers were a little on the long side but I guess they're not. I can't get the tips to touch so I must be wrong. Either that or you're just plain huge."

"You could link your hands together," he suggested helpfully.

She did and gave him a squeeze. "Yeah, that works." Suddenly curious, Tori separated her hands. Starting at the base, she alternated them until the tip was



concealed. "Would you call that three and a quarter or three and a half?" Guy groaned and arched his hips. "Hey! No cheating. Now I know where the other half of the penises I saw before got to."

"Christ."

"Such a contrast. So incredibly soft on the outside but harder than steel inside. Did you jerk off the first few nights you were here?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, how should I put this? After I woke up and we talked I couldn't help but notice you had a hard-on when you were tucking me in. If you went right to sleep, weren't you afraid you'd roll over and break it?"

He laughed. "One, I didn't let myself fall asleep until I was sure you were completely out. Not that it made much of a difference since I thought about you the whole time which is guaranteed to keep me hard, but two, I've learned to sleep on my back when necessary."

"Ah." She angled him this way and that so she could study every bit of him. "You're really very impressive."

"Thank you."

"For what? Stating the obvious? I bet the other guys on your swim team were jealous when they saw this. Or drooling if they were gay."

Before Guy could comment, Tori licked the drop of pre-cum from his slit. "Mm." She used her hands to squeeze him from base to tip as if trying to force out more. When she succeeded, Tori opened her mouth as wide as she could and covered his knob, careful not to disturb the pool she filled. Her hand was holding him just below the ridge and she used that to judge her location. When she reached it, she closed her lips and sucked hard, drawing upward until just his slit remained in her mouth. Next she moved her lips over him, catching his moisture as if she were enjoying a juicy peach.

"Tori, please," he begged.

"Please?" She licked the head with a flattened tongue. "Please what? Please stop or please don't?"

"Don't. More. Please." He was struggling against bending his knees to thrust at her.

Feeling more daring than ever, Tori once again used her mouth over his full length before descending to his testicles. When her tongue took over the exploration, Guy began to tremble. His obvious desire encouraged her to try even more so she licked her way back up his shaft. Pulling him back into her mouth, Tori boldly nipped him just below the head. She wasn't prepared for his reaction and suddenly felt him pressing the back of her throat as he surged almost violently from the bed. If Tori had been trying to fit that much of him into her mouth, she would have gagged. Since it happened naturally, she didn't have time to worry about it and discovered it was not at all uncomfortable or threatening. She lowered her head when he lowered his hips so he

couldn't withdraw. Though she knew she wasn't ready for him to thrust in and out of her mouth, she discovered she liked holding him as she was.

Tori closed her hands around the base of his shaft and pressed her forearms against his body in an attempt to communicate that she wanted him to stay still. Guy tensed and groaned and she knew he understood. After a pause she realized she couldn't just stay like that forever. Still unwilling to release him, Tori flexed her lips around him.

"Aw, fuck!" Guy swore harshly, fighting to keep his hips from leaving the bed.

In seconds, Tori tasted him as more pre-cum leaked into her mouth. "Mm," she hummed around him.

The vibration was too intense and Guy yanked on the handcuffs. "I'm there, tiger. Too good. Aw, fucking Christ!"

Instantly intimidated, Tori abruptly removed her mouth and raised her head. At his tortured groan, she used her hands to stroke him firmly. When he didn't explode as she feared he would, Tori alternately ran her palms over his slit so he was lubricated with more than her saliva alone.

Paying close attention for signs of his climax, Tori extended her tongue and lapped up more of his moisture. She pulled back when his breathing turned ragged. "Hope you don't mind if I watch this time," she stated calmly as her hands devoured him. "You said you come hard and lots and I don't know if my mouth's ready to handle that." His hips arched wildly. "Think you can manage like this?"

"Harder," Guy urged, groaning when her hands tightened. Tori stroked him from base to tip and lost her grip constantly. "Catch the ridge. Squeeze hard. Tug." Again, Tori followed his words. "Oh yeah. Oh fuck, yeah."

Guy was bucking so violently that Tori's hand slipped. Not wanting to break contact, she grabbed for him. The tilt of her fingers changed and her nails pressed into the underside of his knob. The unexpected sensation triggered his climax. His whole body stiffened and he shouted as his cock throbbed. Each rippling pulse pumped streams of hot cum onto Guy's chest. The first spurts were so powerful some landed on his face and arms. It seemed to go on forever before the pulses slowed and weakened to mere twitches though even they pushed out a few more drops of his semen.

"Holy shit!" Tori whistled in amazement. "Damn, you weren't exaggerating. Look at all that." She scooped up the nearest blob with her finger and stuck it in her mouth. "Mm, mm, good," she declared, pressing her fingers together and capturing enough to coat her palm. When she realized how intently Guy was watching her, she paused mid-lick. "What? You got a problem with this? You're not going to freak, are you?"

"Nope. You're so un-fucking-believable! You don't even have a clue."

Tori blushed and concentrated on her treat. After a slight hesitation, she moved next to his chest and removed his juices from his arms. With a quizzical smile, she leaned over him and licked his face, avoiding his eyes the whole time. In a minute she sat up and looked him over. "Missed some," she stated as she kissed the last drop from the tip of his semi-hard shaft.

"Uncuff me now, tiger. Please. I'm going to fall apart if you don't let me hold on to you within the next ten seconds."

"Can't have that," Tori teased until she noticed he was trembling. She freed his hands as quickly as she could and dropped the handcuffs on the floor. When he didn't move, she pulled his arms around her as she stretched out next to him. "What's wrong? What happened? Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry."

"Sh." He tightened his arms. "Just give me a minute."

"Okay," she whispered. Tentatively, Tori stretched her arm over his waist. When he didn't resist, she pulled herself closer until she was holding on as hard as he was.

"Christ, Tor."

She angled her head to look at him. "Please tell me how I screwed up."

"Screwed up?" He was stunned. "You really don't get it. Listen to me. What you just did was so incredible it blew my mind. Kind of ironic if you think about it. You were the one afraid that you couldn't handle it and I'm the one petrified."

"What?"

"Don't you see? It was too good. The way you make me feel is so intense I'm scared to death that you might decide to do that again."

"I don't understand."

"Tori, you know I already believe we belong together. The way you responded to me last night and how I acted had me close to losing it. When I told you it hadn't ever been that amazing for me before I wasn't lying. I knew everything we experienced was going to be overwhelming but I never expected it to be like that. For someone who thought the only way to suck cock was to swallow it whole you sure figured out exactly how to make it so insanely good for me that I'm in serious danger of breaking down and crying all over you."

"I still don't understand. I only did some of the things you told me about."

"I may have given you the idea but you made each touch hotter than anything I ever felt before. You took my suggestions and turned them into things uniquely your own. Remember how I said I had no clue how to make you respond like you did and was following my instincts? Seems to me that you do too."

Tori frowned. "You're saying it doesn't really matter that I lack experience. If I act instead of think, it'll be good."

"Exactly."

"Wow," she sighed.

"Hell yeah, wow! Christ, tiger, you damn near had my whole cock down your throat. Shocked the hell out of me when you didn't spit it out. Watching your face while you were debating about what to try next had me so fucking hard. The sight of your tongue and lips on me is something I'll never forget. You're too sexy for my own good. And I won't be able to let myself even think about how you felt when I'm in public or I'll be locked up for indecent exposure eighteen times a day."

"Oh, ha, ha, ha." She giggled. "You can cut the crap now, Guy."

Guy sighed. "Guess you'll need some time to let yourself believe me."

"Yeah, right. What is it with guys and handcuffs? Take away your control and give your cock a little attention and you go mushy on a girl."

"Fine. I'll drop this too for now. I promised not to push and I won't. Just let me ask one more thing and that'll be it."

"Go ahead and ask. You will even if I say no so we may as well get it over with."

"Am I really that bad? That's not my question but I'd appreciate an answer anyway."

"No." She squirmed uncomfortably. "I'm just not used to someone expecting me to talk like this. Diana's the only person who asks me for details and she's much more subtle about what she wants to know and waits for me to be ready to talk."

"Guess that makes me impatient, demanding and direct."

"I'm sorry, Guy. I never met anybody like you before and, as much as I want to believe the things you've said, part of me is still having a lot of trouble accepting it. I know my parents were screwed up about me but there isn't a switch to turn off all my insecurities. Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm not sure you understand what I'm up against because let's face it, your life is completely different from mine."

"That's a good point and you're right. I don't know how it feels to be totally isolated and told I'm useless by the people who should have unconditional faith in me. I chose my life gradually and was surrounded by a support system every step of the way. I never needed to rebuild my self-image from less than nothing and I haven't ever lived without trust. I grew up believing in myself and took for granted that others did too."

"It's unrealistic of me to tell you how I perceive you once and expect you to agree instantly. But I am right about you. I'll tell you constantly and show you in any way I can for as long as it takes for you admit how great you are. I'm sure I'll be overbearing more often than not and I'll apologize in advance. When you need me to take a break, I'll try to give you one but I'll need reassurance that you aren't going to shut me out forever. And now I've made you even more uncomfortable. Damn, I never know when to quit."

"We're doing it again," Tori stated softly when he fell silent. "You had a question before I started it this time. What embarrassing, personal detail did you want to know?"

"Nothing important. Curiosity really, so let's forget it."

"Un-uh. No way." She sat up and poked his chest. "You don't let me get away with changing my mind about asking things so you're not doing it either."

"Gee, I was hoping you'd miss that one. All right. Fine." He gave in when she merely waited. "I was wondering if you actually like the way I taste or if you only tolerated it because you could tell how it affected me."

Tori glared. "You can be such a jerk! Get out of my room!" She tried to push him off the bed with her feet.

Guy trapped her legs under his and caught her hands before she started swinging. "What the hell did I do now?"

"You really don't know, do you?"

"Would I ask if I did?"

"Hmm, let's see if this helps. Tell me, Detective Breauchard, last night after you made me come in your mouth so much that I was half afraid you were going to drown you claimed you enjoyed the taste of my pussy so much you could become addicted. Did you force yourself not to gag and keep eating me because I was so into it or did you mean what you said when you were done?"

"Ah. Not only am I a jerk but I'm an insulting jerk."

"Guess you're not completely French since you figured that one out so quickly."

"Thanks but maybe you should let me make it up to you. So I know I'm truly forgiven."

Tori guessed what he had in mind. "Yes, perhaps you should. So there aren't any misunderstandings about this later."

"No, we can't chance that. Tell me what I can possibly do to make you smile again."

"It would be best if it were related to our conversation."

"Definitely."

"Since your question made me start to doubt something I thought I knew, I think it's only fair to have you prove that you weren't pretending last night."

"It would be the appropriate thing to do. You will give me enough time to restore your complete acceptance of how much I honestly love the flavor of your pussy?"

"That may take a long time."

"So what? I insulted you. I won't stop until I have your complete forgiveness no matter how long it takes."

"Well, okay, if you insist." He nodded. "But this time you're not going to be the one lying on his back."

"Absolutely not." Guy tossed a pillow on the floor and knelt on top of it. He patted the bed in front of him. "Why don't you make yourself comfortable right here and I'll take care of the rest?"

It didn't take long for Guy to have Tori whimpering. The night before he had used his mouth to attack her in keeping with the rest of his actions. This time, he caressed and teased, urging her higher and higher. Soon Tori was squirming, trying to press against him. With her legs over the bed she didn't have any leverage so she lifted her heels next to her hips. Successfully arching toward his mouth, Tori's brief triumph ended when Guy retreated.

"Oh, please," Tori cried in frustration.

His teasing ceased instantly at the anguish in her tone and Guy gave her the attention she sought. His hands reached under her sprawled thighs and found hers.

Tori clutched his fingers tightly as her climax sent her spiraling. He may have wanted to watch her face but it was tilted too far back for him to see because he kept his mouth on her the whole time she bucked and quivered.

Tori sighed with satisfaction when her pleasure ebbed. The man was simply too good to be true. Suddenly she became aware of the wide circle of lips pressed gently around her gaping core. "Hey." She wiggled one finger against his hand.

"Mm," Guy hummed as his lips formed a suction cup to link them together.

"Ooh," Tori crooned at the new sensation he created. His mouth was massaging the outer edges of her pussy. He wasn't touching any of the sensitive spots and he still managed to excite her beyond belief. The anticipation built quickly and she fully expected to feel Guy's tongue lapping up her wetness. When he merely continued his current torment, Tori decided she'd waited long enough. "What are you waiting for? The whole purpose of this is to make me believe you like how I taste. No way is that going to happen unless you actually lick up some of my liquid and taste it."

"Thought you'd never invite me," he spoke against her.

With slow, thorough strokes, Guy's tongue laved every inch of her swollen flesh, both inside and out. He made his enjoyment obvious with a stream of never-ending sounds.

"Guy," Tori moaned.

"Hmm?" He vibrated near her clit without making contact.

"Why are you teasing me like this? You said you like to make me come."

"I love to make you come. I'm atoning for my careless insult but you're in charge tonight. I'm not teasing you I'm waiting for you to tell me what to do." He returned to licking her.

"Oh," she said flatly, knowing he was doing this partly to build her confidence. "I didn't realize but I suppose that's as it should be."

"Mm hmm," Guy agreed, temporarily pressing his lips to her.

"Okay, then I think it's time for you point that tongue of yours and use it to make me come."

"How?" He switched to licking her in the same fashion with the pointed tip.

"Like a cock," Tori stated as she questioned why she wasn't at all embarrassed by her behavior. "Start slowly," she instructed and immediately felt Guy's stiffened tongue penetrate her. "But don't tease. Make sure you go deep." The strokes lengthened. "Ooh yeah," she moaned, lifting her hips to meet him. "More," she demanded. "Faster. Harder." Guy's hands pulled hers so she was pressed firmly against his mouth. "Oh, oh, oh," Tori chanted. In response, Guy curved the tip of his tongue so it rubbed the spot sure to drive her wild with each stroke. "Guuuy!" Tori screamed as he accomplished his assigned task.

Though Guy loosened the tension in her arms he hadn't let go. Not that he could have with the way Tori was gripping his hands. As soon as she calmed enough to

realize it, she relaxed, but only slightly. The next thing that registered was that Guy's tongue was once again lapping up the evidence of her ecstasy.

"Perfect," Tori declared softly.

"That's the same word I use to describe you," Guy stated between licks. He sensed her flash of self-consciousness and added, "Sh. Relax while I drink from you. Figure out what you want next. Take your time. There's plenty here to keep me occupied."

"Oh God," Tori groaned at his statement. "Mm," she purred a short time later when his attention cast another spell over her. She followed his suggestion and left her knees splayed open as they were after her orgasm. She sighed contentedly and acknowledged how completely comfortable she felt at the moment. That thought was replaced with one of disbelief. She never expected to find herself in this position. Never in a million years would she have even considered it was possible that a man like Guy would give her so much as a passing glance, let alone kneel at her feet and worship her drenched pussy as he was. No way did she imagine he'd make her feel the way he did. She would have insisted it was impossible that he'd want to touch her at all let alone spend so much time with his face in her crotch, contently swabbing her with his incredible tongue. The man not only had a body that women drooled over but a personality that would have drawn them to him even if he looked like a deformed troll. He was the perfect blend of strength and softness, control and compassion, demanding and giving, focused professional and humorous buddy, Alpha male beast and sensuous lover...

"Tori tiger," Guy called through the haze Tori had drifted into. "Where'd you go, Tori tiger? Please come back."

"Huh?" She blinked in confusion. "Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking."

"I could see that. Mind if I asked what you were thinking about?" he asked as he continued to clean her with his tongue.

"You," she blushed at her admission.

"That explains the way you were smiling."

"Was I?"

"Mm."

The quick glance Guy gave her showed Tori how pleased he was with her honest response. He may sound like they were merely playing but that brief look told her it was so much more.

"I'm running out of cream. Can I have more please?"

"Since you asked so politely I'm sure that can be arranged. Perhaps if you push on the button right above where your tongue is."

"Push it?"

"Yes, push it. Or maybe you have to pull it. Or is it a switch that you move from side to side? I'm not really sure but I bet you could work it out. I know it takes a long time to make it work but it's the only way to get more of that cream you seem to be enjoying so much."

"Oh, I most definitely am. Don't you worry about me. I don't mind a little effort to get more of what I want. You go back to your thoughts and I'll take care of this but please tell me if you come up with any more suggestions of how to release the flow."

Guy slowly turned his attention to her engorged clit. He clearly understood exactly what she meant when she told him how long it would take because his first touches were light and teasing. It was amazing how he managed to combine his lips and tongue, stimulating her gently without pushing her directly to completion. Very gradually, the touches grew firmer, pulling Tori closer to the edge.

"Mm," Tori sighed. "That's just about perfect. You didn't have any problem figuring out how this works."

"Just about perfect?" Guy sounded distressed. "That's not good enough to gain your forgiveness. What else should I do?"

"Ah." She shivered. "Let me think about it for a bit. You keep doing that and maybe it'll help me."

Tori fought the urge to move. Guy had her body humming but she wasn't ready for it to end. There was absolutely nothing lacking in his technique and she hadn't intended to make him think there was with her comment. Unfortunately, she hadn't thought about how it would sound to him and now she had hurt him. Just before she said it, Tori had been thinking of the night before and wondering if she had the nerve to ask him for something. Focusing her eyes on Guy's, she easily read the question in his expression. He was honestly afraid of disappointing her. Instantly, Tori realized the only way to fix this was to abandon her cowardice and find the courage to request what she had been thinking about.

"You make me feel so good," Tori declared. "I never knew it could be like this. I must be pretty special after all to wind up with you showing me how it should be."

"Tori." Guy put so many emotions into her name that it was almost overwhelming.

"Sh. I wasn't done." She gave him an unguarded smile. "I think I figured out what's missing."

"Hmm?" he hummed in full contact with her bud.

"Ooh yeah. That's good too. Do it again." Tori let herself get lost in the sensation for a minute. "You make me wish we could stay in bed forever."

"Me too," Guy agreed before fluttering his tongue rapidly against her.

"Oh God! Guy! I... Wait... You... Stop!" She instantly regretted her command when he tensed and drew back. "Wait. That's not what I meant. I didn't mean stop everything. Just stop a little so I can think long enough to tell you what I came up with."

"You sure?" Guy asked as he gave her a tentative lick.

"Positive. Get busy, Detective. You want me to forgive you, remember? Making me beg is a very bad idea right now." Guy grinned and returned to toying with her, carefully avoiding all direct stimulation.



"That's more like it. Jeez, you gotta learn when to take things literally and when not to. But back to what I was trying to say. Before I get to that I need to make sure you understand how much I love what you're doing. I do, Guy. If you did any one thing a few seconds longer you'd get all the cream you wanted. Okay?"

"Thank you."

Tori heard all those emotions again and felt as if she was going to cry. The thought filled her with fear of how Guy would interpret tears at this moment and decided she couldn't let herself ruin this for either of them. "Good. I'm glad you understand. I'd like to tell you to prove it to yourself now but I don't want to get sidetracked. Don't look so disappointed. I'm sure we'll find ourselves in this position again sometime so you'll have other opportunities for that."

"Unlimited opportunities?"

"We'll see. Oh God," she moaned when he gave her a quick, hard suck. "Hey! Stop trying to distract me. I only meant we'll see because there are so many other things we can do together."

"Many, many things." He decreased the pressure.

"See? That's why you can't always be so literal."

"Mm hmm."

"Ah! Damn it, Guy."

"Sorry. I'll behave now. Please tell me how to make this better for you."

"Don't say that like you think this isn't already so far beyond incredible." She held his gaze until his expression softened. "I've been lying here, shamelessly enjoying your attention, feeling like the most spoiled girl ever and I realized that you're being especially sweet with me tonight. That, by the way, is not a complaint. It's an observation. I thoroughly love your being sweet and I'm looking forward to finding out what other varieties there are." Her hips bucked when he swirled his tongue around her hard bud, ending with a few rapid flicks. "Oh, wow! I take it that you agree we should explore that extensively."

"Mm hmm."

"Guy," she warned. "Last night, when you were being masterful instead of sweet you showed me things about myself I didn't know. I loved absolutely every bit of that too."

"Tori."

"Listen. Earlier, when I was trying to make you come my hand slipped and I was petrified that I'd screwed up by digging my nails into you. Clearly I was wrong."

"What do you want?"

"You obviously. To make me come. More specifically, I want you to do that to me. Tongue me. Suck me. Hard until I'm almost coming and then bite me. Show me what you felt."

Guy responded by manipulating her with his tongue. He backed off at the right time to prevent her from climaxing. After a pause, his lips took over. Tori was writhing wildly, on the verge of exploding when she felt a sharp pain as his teeth nipped her. Everything in her shattered as she experienced an entirely new and intense kind of pleasure. She heard herself screaming incoherently and felt her body bucking uncontrollably as it grew even stronger. The sensation seemed to go on forever before it slowly diminished, leaving Tori whimpering and boneless. For the longest time her mind refused to reengage. When it finally did she discovered that Guy had returned to tasting her cream.

"Oh my God, Guy." She managed to make her mouth function.

"Good?"

"Oh my God, oh my God."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too."

"Oh my God." Her body shivered and she gasped.

"Don't fight it, Tor," he advised when he sensed her resisting the residual pleasure. "Let yourself feel as good as you can."

Tori was completely out of control in a way she never experienced. "I can't," she cried, beginning to panic.

Guy tightened his hold on her hands and pulled her so his shoulders were pressing the back of her legs. "It's okay. I'm with you. You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you. I promise I'll take care of you. Let go, Tori. Let yourself go and feel how good we are. Feel good like I did with you."

"Don't let go," she pleaded as the feel of his warm breath renewed the sensations.

"Never," he promised. "I love you. Christ, I love you so much."

"No," she cried, rolling her head from side to side in denial.

"Aw, fuck! Don't be scared of me. Please. Don't be afraid of how I feel. I won't ever hurt you. Never, Tori. I swear I won't ever hurt you. Or push you for more than you're ready to give. Just let me love you. I know it's too soon for you to trust me completely but can't you trust me even a little bit? Just enough to let me make this even better for you? I can if you let me. I promise to keep you safe." He kept whispering against her as he began to add in soft kisses on the outside of her slit.

Even though she was panicked and felt as if she was fighting for her life, she understood Guy's promises were entirely sincere. She also understood she was fighting herself even more than she was fighting him. A very large part of her wanted to push him away and forget that she ever knew him. Her internal struggle raged as her body continued to respond to his nearness. The tiny part of her grew stronger and refused to be ignored. It urged her to give in and accept what he offered. She knew letting go would be equivalent to stepping blindly off a cliff but maybe it was time for her to take that step. She already admitted that she did whatever it took to isolate herself because

she was afraid of letting someone get too close. After that, how could she continue to deny the loneliness that isolation caused?

She was almost hyperventilating by the time she made her choice. In the meekest, barely audible voice, she said, "Make me come." She forced herself to meet his eyes. "Please make me come again, Guy."

It was Guy's turn to have trouble breathing. "I'm sorry but I need you to say that one more time. Louder, Tori, so I don't misunderstand."

Tori sensed Guy was offering her the chance to change her mind and she almost gave in to the temptation. She knew he wouldn't hold it against her in any way and would even hide the disappointment it would cause.

"I said," Tori took a steadying breath, "I need you to make me come again so I can find out how good we are."

Guy was trembling as he kissed her bare mound. "Thank you," he whispered softly, kissing her again. Ever-so slowly he kissed his way around her quivering pussy. "I love you," his voice was even softer as his tongue caressed her outer lips without any attempt to delve inside.

"Don't tease," she begged. "Not now. I need..."

Her words stopped when Guy penetrated her with his tongue. His thrusts were slow but steady and deep. Tori's body begged for more as her hands gripped his unbelievably tighter. Guy followed her lead and began alternating the strokes with an occasional flick over her clit. Each time she felt that, Tori moaned for more and arched against him. Gradually, Guy's attention shifted until it was focused entirely on her ultra-sensitive bud. He read her body perfectly, adjusting his actions to give her the most pleasure. As he had before, he latched on to her with his lips. With continually increasing pressure Guy extended her flesh as far into his mouth as possible. When Tori's climax began, he scraped her with his teeth, instantly soothing with his tongue.

Tori knew what to expect but wasn't at all prepared when Guy provided exactly what she'd asked for. The sensations were even more intense and she honestly questioned if the pleasure could kill her. She was positive she'd die if he didn't stop touching her. As positive as she was that she'd die if he did. Time was suspended as Guy's mouth and words drew her orgasm on and on. He knew exactly what her body needed to prolong the experience. He stayed with her even as it faded, ensuring that she knew he was right there with her.

"Guy," Tori spoke through her tears. She released his hands and held her shaking arms up to him. "Please."

Guy knew Tori was asking him to hold her. Within seconds, he had her in the middle of the bed with his arms wrapped firmly around her, pulling her securely against his chest. At first she heard him murmuring softly as he had before. Eventually, as her emotions stabilized she realized that Guy's chest was heaving in time with hers. It dawned on her that he was crying with her, as overwhelmed by the moment as she was.

"It's okay, Guy," Tori crooned. "Hold on tight. I've got you."

A short time later Guy sighed and kissed the top of her head. "Some protector I am. I promised to take care of you and I'm the one who needed taking care of."

Tori squirmed so she could look at him. "Not one more word unless you're intentionally trying to ruin this."

"Christ." He tried to recapture her and failed.

"Don't. I mean it, Guy. No jokes. No apologies. Nothing. Not now. Not after that. Not when you just gave me the only perfect moment of my life."

"Can I thank you for giving me the same?"

"If it's true, yes."

"Thank you, Tori," he said seriously.

"You're very welcome and thank you too," she replied in the same tone.

Tori knew Guy was still watching her as her body relaxed. She didn't want the night to end but it was becoming so hard to stay awake.

"Let me up a second, tiger. I have to set the alarm so we don't oversleep again."

"Okay." She snuggled under the covers he pulled over her. "Turn off the lights too. But come back. Hold me." Tori was almost asleep in the minute it took Guy to return. The last thing she remembered was how wonderful it was to have him kiss her goodnight as he cuddled his warm body around hers.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

In the gray light of early dawn Guy drifted in the hazy state between sleeping and wakefulness. There was still time before the alarm went off for him to savor the absolute peace of holding Tori while she slept. After their emotional lovemaking, she fell asleep clinging to him. Throughout the night her soft sighs and mumblings had woken him. Each time he expected her to draw away but was pleasantly surprised when she continued to cuddle as she shifted.

As happy as Guy was that Tori accepted him in her sleep, he couldn't shake the feeling of dread that it would be entirely different after she woke up. Once the passion-inspired fog lifted, Guy had instantly known he pushed her too hard. He should have let it end with the first earth-shattering orgasm instead of coercing her for the second. Not only did he say things she wasn't ready to hear, he pressed her to give more than he had any right to ask for so soon. To make matters even worse, he had an emotional meltdown at the time he should have been surrounding her with his strength.

Guy cursed his selfish behavior, bringing his mind fully awake. Tori was facing a day already overloaded with stress. And now he, idiot that he was, foolishly heaped on a whole lot more. He prevented his arms from clutching her in a death grip as his possessive nature demanded and made a decision. No matter what it took he would follow Tori's lead without any hesitation or comment. He would not create the slightest conflict even if it killed him. If Guy's instincts were anywhere close, her reaction this morning could easily put him in serious danger of that happening. His imminent demise, however, was not important. No, the only thing important was Tori and Guy had to let her push him away if space was what she needed without letting her see how much it destroyed him. There was a very strong possibility that last night was enough to scare Tori off. He was already on extremely thin ice here and there was no way he would let himself do anything else to alienate her or he'd lose her for sure before he even had her.

Guy knew that Tori was awake by the way her body tensed. He kept his breathing deep and even so she would believe he was still sleeping. As he feared, Tori slowly inched her way out of his arms and tiptoed around the room. He heard her collecting some clothes and escaping to the bathroom. Only after the sounds assured him she was downstairs did he get out of bed. Taking his time and making enough noise to let her know he was up, Guy joined her just before Todd was due to arrive.

"Morning, tiger," Guy greeted her pleasantly, helping himself to coffee. "Did you eat?"

"No. I'm not really hungry," Tori answered, barely glancing up from her notebook. "I can make you something."

"Thanks but I'll get it so you have time to finish before Todd gets here. I doubt he'll stay very long."

Tori nodded and continued writing as Guy made some sandwiches. He was sure Todd had been up most of the night, doing all he could to find Kimmie and Sam without taking any time to eat. A sandwich was something Todd could manage while he drove and Guy knew him well enough to be certain he'd accept them without protest. He was wrapping them up when he heard Todd's car.

Guy opened the door as Tori hovered just inside the living room. Todd glanced at both of them and ran his hand over his face in a tired gesture.

"Hi, kids," Todd said evenly. "Guy, go take a little walk. I need a few minutes with Tori."

Guy frowned as he searched Todd's blank expression. Slowly he reached for his coat. "Fine," he agreed without asking any of the questions he had. He knew Todd wouldn't supply any answers. Not when he already told him to give them privacy. "I'll be right outside, Tori."

Tori tried to stay calm as she watched Guy close the door. She knew she was safe with Todd but still wished he hadn't made Guy leave. Even if she was petrified of facing him she'd feel better if he were there.

"Can we sit for a minute?" Todd strolled into the kitchen. "I just want to talk, Tori. There's no need to look so nervous."

"Oh. Okay." She returned to her seat and hid her hands under the table.

"I wanted to speak to you without Guy because I have some things to say that are in reference to him," Todd's tone was strictly professional as was his posture.

"What's wrong?" Tori's voice broke as she choked back a sob.

Todd frowned at her growing unease. After an uncomfortable silence, he must have realized he was the cause and slumped forward, resting his elbows on the table with his head held between them. "I didn't mean to frighten you by barging in like this. You don't have to pretend I didn't." He smiled gently.

"Yeah, well, maybe just a little," she admitted. "You seem so different today."

"I'm not surprised. I tend to get a little rigid when I'm tired. Terese calls this my professional FBI guy mode."

"Mm. I guess you've been toning it down for me."

"Perhaps I was subconsciously but I think it has more to do with the extenuating circumstances."

"Huh?"

"Forgive me for being blunt but you're not purely a part of this investigation. Hear me out," he rushed on before she could deny it. "The simple fact that Guy called me directly and asked me to get involved made that clear right from the start. He hasn't said a thing unless I asked point-blank but I would have known anyway. We've been

friends for a long time. It's obvious that he has feelings for you every time he looks at you."

Tori groaned and hid her face with her hands.

"I'm sure he's told you so I'm not saying anything you don't already know. I don't think I understand why you seem so horrified that I noticed though. Sure, the timing sucks but you don't usually have any control over that sort of thing. When it hits you it does."

"Oh God." Tori blushed hotly, clearly embarrassed by the conversation.

"Hey, hold on a sec. I'm not criticizing you or condemning you or anything of the sort. I wanted you to know that I understand so you don't feel awkward when it's just the three of us. Guy won't hide his feelings for you then and I wanted you to know you could be open too."

"But it's not like that!"

"Oh." Todd was stunned. "Please excuse me for misinterpreting the situation. I guess I was mistaken and I apologize for jumping to conclusions."

"Wait." Tori looked miserable. "Damn it! I didn't mean it like that. Well, I did but...oh hell."

"I see."

"That's it? I see? What the hell does that mean, I see?"

Todd lost the battle not to laugh. Tori's face took on a look somewhere between mortification and utter disbelief. When she started to slide her chair away from the table Todd caught one of her hands to keep her there. "I'm not laughing at you," he declared even before he had his laughter under control. "Truly, I'm not. At least not directly," Todd took a deep breath but continued to grin.

"No wonder Guy's so bent out of shape. Let me see if I can explain. Guy is one of the rare individuals who is as genuine as he seems, probably even more so. Has been for as long as I've known him. You know how some people are better at, say, being part of a close family or exceptional in their careers or treating others with kindness and respect or going beyond the description of being a true friend? With Guy, all areas of his life are in balance. He matured evenly instead of in spurts with one facet lagging while another surged. You can ask anyone who knows him and they'll all tell you the same thing. He's a good guy. Good cop. Good son, brother, uncle. Good neighbor. Good friend. No, good's not right. I should have used great or the best even. He's unconditionally fair and level-headed. Even with his sisters who could all make a saint's head exploded, Guy is often the one to stop yelling first and become the peacekeeper. Two weeks ago, I would have sworn it was impossible for any situation to throw Guy so far off that he'd go into a tailspin. Then you popped up and showed me just how wrong I was."

"What are you talking about?"

"You've had him tied in knots from the moment he laid eyes on you."

"But I didn't do anything."

"I know. I didn't mean to imply that you had. You don't have to. Guy would never admit this or even mention it but he's been pretty frustrated the past few years. He wants someone to share his life with and his inability to find the right woman had him discouraged to the point where he was beginning to accept there might not be one for him. Then he met you."

"You shouldn't be telling me this."

"I have to. He's too lost not to make a complete mess of it if he attempted to. Tori, I know the basics of how you got here. I understand why you question everyone instead of taking them at face value as many people do. I'm not judging you or trying to push you into anything with Guy. I'm sure this would be hard enough for you even without the many complications of your current situation. My point is that Guy is very likely to do and say things that would normally have you running in the other direction without looking back. I already noticed he's protecting you to the point of smothering you and I doubt you'll have much success if you tell him to back off a little. If I don't stay on him he'll start believing that he's the only one who can keep you safe until these men are caught. I can see how hard he finds it to stop himself from reaching for you constantly and I suspect it's close to impossible to let you out of his sight."

"Yeah," Tori mumbled.

"When I met Terese, I felt like I couldn't breathe. She hadn't even spoken to me yet and I knew I'd love her forever. Guy invited me home with him while my car was being repaired because we'd spent much of the afternoon kidding around like guys do when they first meet and aren't sure of each other yet. I followed him into the noisiest house I'd ever been in and announced who I was and why I was there. His mother was stirring a pot on the stove and yelled for one of his sisters to get something for her. Terese was at the sink and turned to hand it to her. She looked up to see who Guy had with him and as soon as our eyes met it was like we were the only ones there.

"The rest of the room faded and I couldn't hear any of the commotion that had been there a second ago. The only thing I was aware of was that the most beautiful girl in the world was smiling at me. Guy saw how we were looking at each other and managed for me to sit next to her. After dinner he asked her to help him out by keeping me company while he did his homework. He gave us the opportunity to spend some time alone which I'm sure his parents would have objected to if I'd suggested it. Guy brought us together by being the generous man he's always been.

"Terese and I have often wondered if we would have realized our feelings for each other if Guy hadn't stopped me from returning to the garage as I'd planned to. We don't like to think about our chances if he hadn't taken me home that day. You probably wish I'd mind my own business but I can't sit by and watch him flounder around and do all the wrong things where you're concerned without saying something to you. He's being overbearing and controlling with you because he's petrified that they're going to find a way around all of us and hurt you. I can't promise he'll ease up



once we have them but I can assure you that his heart is in the right place even if his actions aren't.

"I'm pretty sure his mind is racing in a million directions at once right now and he has no idea what to do about that. This is hitting him hard, much harder than I thought it would. It would be damn amusing for the whole family to see him like this if you weren't in danger. I'll be the first in line to bust on him once this is over. I'll do what I can to keep you out of the middle of it as I know Guy will but you should be prepared to meet the rest of the family. They'll come on like gangbusters, welcoming you and you'll feel like you've been attacked by a swarm of rabid locusts by the time they all leave. You'll need to learn to stick up for yourself and be blunt to the point of offensive until you find the right balance with them. The sisters have all been actively trying to fix Guy up. They're going to ask very personal questions and pick up every little thing but it will only be because they love Guy so much and want him to be happy."

Tori shrugged to hide her nervousness. "Thanks, Todd, but I don't think I have to worry about that since I know Guy will realize he isn't at all interested in me as soon as you arrest those guys. He thinks he is now because of how closely he's protecting me. I won't deny that he's a handsome man and we have managed some decent conversations but we don't really have anything other than this in common so once it's over we'll say goodbye and get back to reality."

Todd shook his head and stared at her. "You don't believe that any more than I do and you aren't going to no matter how often you say it. Love like I have with Terese and you could have with Guy is a very powerful thing. It's the scariest and most wonderful thing when you finally let yourself accept that that's what you're feeling. For me, it's still some of each. But the wonderful far outweighs the scary and I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world."

"Why's it still scary?"

"Oh, lots of reasons. There are many times when I'm so overwhelmed that it seems too good to be true. It hits me when I'm alone and lasts until I see Terese again. The second I'm with her I know it's real and even better than I thought. I'm also scared that something unexpected will take her away from me and I don't think I could live without her anymore. We've talked about it and she feels the same way which has made both of us more aware of how precious our time together is and why we shouldn't waste any of it. Our daughter, Sarah, compounds it every day as I know our new baby will when it's born in about three months. I don't know if Guy told you much about us but Terese and I lost babies twice when she miscarried, both times in her third month. I didn't think you could survive something that hurt that much, let alone open yourself up to the chance of it being repeated but we both made it because we had each other."

"Guy did tell me about that and I can't imagine what you went through."

"Just as I can't imagine what you've survived. Tori, I know I'm way out of bounds and I've said too much but please just think about it. Don't give in to the fear and hide behind how others have treated you in your past and reject Guy without honestly

considering what you could have with him if you let yourself take a chance. Take your time and listen to your heart. Tell him to give you room to breathe as often as you need to for him to hear you and back off. He'll wait as long as it takes if you tell him you aren't rejecting the idea of being with him. He's the kind of man who doesn't commit lightly and wouldn't break it once he does so I promise you with all the love I have for Terese and Sarah and our unborn child that there would never be a need for you to be insecure with him."

"Don't say that!" Tori jumped up to stare out the window. "You can't make promises like that for someone else."

"When it comes to Guy and how I know he would be if he had you in his life, I can. It's up to you to figure out what you want and if there can be something between you. All I'm asking is for you to be fair to both of you by looking beyond your current safety zone until you honestly see what could be out there."

Tori slid back into her chair and faced him. "I don't know if I can do that and I'm still not sure there'd be anything to see if I managed to look."

"Understood." Todd squeezed her hand again. "Just try to let yourself think about it. It's your decision, Tori. Yours and Guy's although I'm certain he's already made his. Okay, I promise I'm through meddling so you don't have to worry about me cornering you like this again. No matter what happens from here on in you will have my continued respect and highest regard for the strength and courage you possess. If you end up married to someone else, I'll still believe you're someone special who could have become a friend. Even after this case is closed, you'd be safe trusting me with personal details but I can see you don't believe that so I won't push it. I will however belabor the fact that I am available if you ever need to talk about Guy or just listen if he's being an ass and you need to vent."

"I may take you up on that venting part if you don't find them real soon," Tori blurted before she could stop herself.

Todd chuckled. "Anytime and I honestly mean that. If I thought he would listen I'd offer to have a talk with him but since I already made him give his word that he'd let the rest of us do our jobs I doubt that I'd get as far as you will if you point out his less than endearing behavior."

Tori rolled her eyes. "Better to save my breath."

"I know you don't need me to make excuses for him but he really does know what he's doing. He simply can't stop himself even though I'm sure he tries to."

"That makes one of us."

"If you say so. One more thing before I go see if he has any mind left after the way this is driving him crazy. Today is going to be stressful for all of us but even more so for you. Guy will attempt all sorts of things to distract you and I wouldn't be at all surprised if some of them are too bizarre to tell anyone because they're too unbelievable for words. I won't be asking you for details by the way. If you have the slightest interest in whatever he comes up with please go along with it. It's getting to all of us that we're

going to know when we're out of time and watching you hurt without being able to do anything about it is going to be extremely hard for him."

"I do know you're doing everything you can."

"Thank you but that isn't going to mean a thing if we fail."

"You said if. Not when."

"I don't want to give you any false hopes but we have a chance as long as they're alive. Granted we're rapidly approaching the miracle stage but personally, I still believe in them no matter how rare they are."

"If you can do that after all the things I'm guessing you've seen then I'll try to too. I think I used to but I haven't for almost as long as I can remember." Tori was amazed that she'd said that. "I already made a copy of what I wrote down for you. Let me grab it while you get Guy so I don't hold you up any longer. I shouldn't have let you talk to me today."

"Stop it. Don't even let that thought form. Our discussion was extremely necessary and important. If I had stayed in the office I'd have spent the last half-hour bouncing off the walls and looking over everybody's shoulders. My team is very capable and efficient. They are thorough in all aspects of their jobs whether I'm present or not. I'm overseeing this one, Tori. That means I coordinate and suggest options instead of doing the nitty-gritty searching that's been going on as soon as you gave us the names Kimmie and Sam."

"Okay then. I won't feel guilty for keeping you from your work even though I don't agree this was at all necessary. I do appreciate what you were trying to do though and I guess I should thank you for that."

"Thank me by getting to know Guy after we have these two in custody." Tori frowned. "Just a suggestion, Tori. No pressure. And, for the record, you certainly don't have to be polite and thank me for giving out unwanted advice. You don't have to pretend that you're not thinking I just made a nuisance of myself by poking my nose in where it doesn't belong. I'm not someone you ever need to pretend with, Tori, and not just where Guy is concerned. Friends, no matter how recently they met, don't do that sort of thing with each other."

"Okay, fine, friend," Tori's tone was sarcastic as she glared at him. "I do know you mean well but our friendship will have much better chance if you stick with reality and don't start seeing things that aren't there. You need to butt out unless," she gasped at her outburst. "Oh my God, I'm—"

"Don't you dare apologize," Todd cut her off. "Fact is I'm proud of you for speaking up. Shows you know you can be open with me without worrying that I'll run away just because you expressed yourself."

"Yeah, especially since you're as stuck with me as Guy is for now," Tori snorted. "Go get him before he turns into a total Neanderthal and drags me around by the hair for the rest of the day." Tori went to the copier that Ned had set up in her dining room for her convenience during their investigation.

Seconds later when Todd waved Guy back inside, Tori was busy filling a thermos with the rest of the coffee. She put it on the table next to the copy of her dream and the bag of sandwiches that Guy had made for Todd.

Todd smiled at her kind gesture. "You didn't have to do this but I sure do appreciate it."

"Great but Guy did it, not me. All I did was pour the coffee that I should have offered when you got here," Tori answered flatly, avoiding looking at both men.

"Then I'll change that to a joint thank you." Todd met Guy's eyes behind her back and saw his frustration. "And now, unless either of you needs me for anything, I should be going."

Tori nodded her goodbye and ignored him as Guy walked him to the door. "Todd," she stopped him as he was about to leave. "You will call? If you find them, um, before..."

"Absolutely," Todd promised, holding her eyes for an extended minute. "And if you think of something else, no matter how insignificant it seems, you call me."

Tori nodded and retreated to the sink.

"Hey, Todd?" Guy snagged him around the shoulders. "I know you want to get right back but why don't you take five minutes and swing by your house?"

"I look that bad, do I?"

"No, but I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't make it home last night. Don't forget I know you. Go kiss your wife and let that little one kick against your hand a few times. You could even make an exception and drive Sarah to school today instead of her taking the bus," he suggested quietly.

"Damn, you do know me," Todd sighed and glanced at his watch. "Time's about right. Think I'll make that detour since I don't have to stop to pick up breakfast." He gestured toward Tori. "Hang in there and don't pay attention to most of what's said today since it'll just be the stress talking."

"I know. Not that it helps but I do know. I'll check in later."

"Do that. Time to let me know when you go out too," Todd stated, more to remind Tori than Guy, hoping to prevent a scene when Guy did as he'd been instructed to.

Guy watched until Todd's car disappeared before turning from the door. When he did, Tori was still occupied in the kitchen.

"You okay, Tori? I didn't know Todd was going to do that. I'm sorry if he said anything that made you uncomfortable."

"Oh, please." Tori rolled her eyes. "I admit I'd rather not be alone when Russ and Stan show up but, contrary to what you think, I am capable of surviving a conversation with someone I already know has no interest in harming me in my own kitchen without you standing guard. I took care of myself the first twenty-four years just fine and I bet I can handle the next twenty-four too."

"You are extremely capable and I shouldn't have made it sound like I doubted you."

Tori shrugged and continued to take the dishes from the dishwasher.

"Want to go to the library today? I have some work to do on my laptop but I can do that anywhere."

"No, thanks."

"We could take a drive. Do some talking along the way."

"You just finished saying you had work to do. I'm a big girl, Guy. I can entertain myself," she stated sharply. "Sorry. I don't mean to snap at you but I'm still a little too tired to be social this morning. If you don't mind I think I'd rather spend some time reading."

"No problem," he answered even though she'd already grabbed a book from an end table and settled into one of the chairs in the living room. "Any objections to me using your washer since we're not going anywhere? Be happy to do your laundry too while I'm at it."

Tori stared suspiciously. "Yeah, whatever. Basket's in the bathroom and I won't bother saying you don't have to do mine since you're going to do what you want anyway," she mumbled the last part loud enough for him to hear it.

"All right, then I'll leave you to your book."

Five minutes later Guy returned with their laundry and his laptop. After he had the first load started, he took a seat in the kitchen. As he opened his computer, he pretended he wasn't aware of Tori watching him.

"What are you doing?" she asked, slamming her book closed.

"Laundry and the work I mentioned. I thought I'd bring it down here so I didn't bother you when it was time to switch loads."

"Fine," Tori said and stomped up to her bedroom.

Guy put in the second load when Tori reappeared. She clearly expected him to say something and was surprised when he didn't.

"I need a different book," she explained with her back to him as she poked through the bookcase in the living room. "The other one's good but I don't feel like it today. I do that sometimes, read more than one at a time, depending on what I'm in the mood for."

"That's fine, Tori," Guy said pleasantly, looking up briefly before returning to his computer.

Again, she stomped upstairs but muttered as she went. She continued to grumble for the next half-hour before returning noisily.

Tori flopped into the chair across from Guy and tapped her fingers on the table until she had his attention. "What's up with you? Some kind of new game or something? I don't get it."

"Excuse me?" he sounded confused.

"You didn't seem to like the way Todd chased you out of here. You apologized in case he made me nervous. But you still haven't asked what he wanted. I thought you'd do that as soon as he walked out the door."

"I considered it but I trust Todd. If he wanted me involved he wouldn't have asked for privacy so he must have his reasons. I invited you to talk but you said no. I won't deny how pushy I am with you but I told you I'd back off so I am. I figure you'll tell me if you want me to know and don't want me to pry if you don't."

"Oh," she sounded suspicious. "Okay. Thanks." When Guy didn't speak, she abandoned her spot and left him alone again.

Tori came back as he put their folded clothes in the basket. "Are you hungry yet? What can I get you?"

"What the hell is wrong with you? You're like a Stepford clone."

"Excuse me?" He used the same calm tone as he had previously.

"Would you stop already!"

"Stop what?"

"Being like that!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you think I'm doing."

"Knock it off, Guy! I'm not kidding around here."

"Tori."

"Now! I mean it or I swear I won't be responsible when you make me smack you upside the head."

Guy studied her as she glared with her chest heaving like she truly was as furious as she sounded. "That's it. Time to go."

"Go? Go where?" Tori demanded as Guy dragged her with him.

"You need some sweats and a T-shirt. A sports bra might be good if you have one."

"What for?"

Instead of explaining, Guy pulled out his phone. "It's me, Todd. Tori and I are heading for the gym by way of my place. She has the need to beat the shit out of me and I prefer to be wearing some pads while she does it. And no, you can't come watch this time. Maybe next time after I see what I'm up against. I'll let you know when we get there. Yeah, good idea."

"You son of a bitch," Tori growled, throwing the clothes she'd collected while he was on the phone.

"Grab your keys too. Todd suggested that you should drive so you don't pop me in the car."

"French asshole," Tori muttered but stalked from the house without waiting for him to open the door.

## Chapter Fourteen

Sitting on the locker room bench, Tori fumed even though she knew her anger was totally unjustified. She was the one acting like an asshole, not Guy. She was the one being completely unreasonable. Yes, she was definitely the one so far out of control she felt like a train wreck waiting to happen. And she was positive she would get much worse before it was all said and done.

"Coward," Tori sniped at herself as she yanked her clothes from the bag Guy had tucked them in when they stopped at his apartment. "Who are you trying to fool, Banks? Once a wimp, always a wimp. What a fucking joke," she snorted as she balled up her shirt and threw it in an open locker. "You're so strong. So brave to set out on your own and make such a nice life for yourself," she exaggerated Guy's accent. "Yeah, real brave, walking away without even a word. Takes a lot of guts to run instead of standing up for yourself."

She struggled into the old sports bra she used to wear when she waitressed because the snug fit helped to avoid some of the unwanted attention she drew without it. "He must think I'm brain damaged after the way I acted this morning," she huffed. "Don't you wish. Better that than proving you really are the Beverly Hills drama queen he thought you were."

Tori berated herself until she was dressed. She stared mutely at the locker door before glancing around the rest of the room. With a groan, she let out a humorless laugh. "Figures," she said, shaking her head and leaning back against the lockers. She wanted to crawl inside one and never come out but forced herself to face the woman watching her warily. "I guess you're my baby-sitter for the day. You must be since you didn't run out screaming about the nutcase having a mental breakdown in here," Tori paused but the woman remained silent.

"Do me a favor, okay? I already lost the end of my rope and am too stupid to realize I'm holding on to thin air so please don't give me some fancy song and dance about how you have no idea what I'm talking about. I saw you getting in your car at Guy's and I noticed it out in the lot. Even if I hadn't the fact that Guy let me come in here alone is a dead giveaway. I expected him to drag me into the men's locker room with him, with his hand over my eyes while he chased everyone else out. Jeez, he barely lets me out of his sight in my own home, no way would he do it here unless he already had someone waiting for me." Tori took a deep breath and hid her face for a moment. "Hey, I'm sorry. I'm being a mega-bitch and taking out my bad mood on you when you're going out of your way to do your job and keep me safe. Just ignore me. I'll keep my mouth shut if you'll tell me your name."

The woman smiled warmly and moved to Tori with her hand outstretched. "Lita."

"Thank you, Lita." Tori bit her lip to hold back the sudden urge to cry. "Is it against the rules to ask you if you work with Guy or Todd?"

"Normally, yes, but I'm also supposed to remain anonymously in the background. I'm with the Bureau but not part of Todd's team."

"Oh. So what do you usually do when you're not riding shotgun on a spoiled brat basket case?"

Lita laughed. "Riding shotgun with a different one. I'm part of the security unit that is responsible for individual personal safety for various reasons such protecting key witnesses, judges who might draw a threat, visiting dignitaries."

"Oh, goody, a professional guard dog to go with the mongrel I already have," Tori groaned. "Damn, I shouldn't have said that."

"Forget it." Lita squeezed her arm. "I was briefed on your situation and I promise not to take anything you say personally. I'm actually glad to be here. I try not to stereotype assignments but if I did you wouldn't be at all what I'd expect."

"Um, thanks, I think. What are my chances of slipping out the door that I'm assuming would eventually get me outside?"

"Zilch."

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Guess you won't let me hide in here all day either?"

"I wish I could but you know that's impossible."

Tori stomped her foot in frustration. "I am so ready to scream! I hate this! Don't tell me it's for my own good either because I'm so sick of having someone breathing down my neck all the time I think I'd rather take my chances with Russ and Stan."

"You don't really mean that and I would appreciate it if you hold off on that scream until we're out there. I'm scheduled to escort the governor's wife to a luncheon where she's speaking next week and my boss would not be at all happy if he has to find a replacement because he loaned me to another team and I got shot by their leader's brother-in-law."

"You're joking, right?"

"Mostly. I prefer not to find out. Especially since I might be unable to avoid drawing my gun and shooting Guy in the arm if he came in here intending to shoot first and ask questions later."

"He wouldn't!"

"He might. Again, I don't think we should test him."

"No." Tori shivered. "I don't even know what we're doing here since he's so paranoid about public places."

"Hmm, how can I break this to you gently so you don't scream?"

"Oh God, what?"



"After school, weekends and in the summer, this gym is used by the Police Athletic League. During the day or when PAL doesn't have anything scheduled it's available to off-duty cops and those in rehab programs."

Tori rolled her eyes. "Well, gee, at least now I don't have to be embarrassed that you're here to watch me. Yes, I feel so much better knowing that I'm the only one here who isn't a cop. Oh yeah, so much better." Tori scowled and shoved open the door.

"Have you two met?" Tori asked sarcastically, confronting Guy just outside the locker room where he stood waiting for her.

"Not yet." Lita grinned at Guy's stunned expression. "Don't look so surprised. I couldn't lie when Tori told me she figured out my purpose since she saw me at your apartment and recognized my car when you got here."

"Tori," Guy began.

"Don't bother. I get it. I don't like it but I get it. Now where was I? Oh yeah. Lita, professional watchdog, meet Guy, Alpha mongrel. You two going to play nice or is there some sort of pissing contest you have to get out of the way first?"

Guy didn't share Lita's chuckle. "Damn, I do like you. I'll be just over there, pretending to lift weights if you need me."

"Well?" Tori snarled at Guy. "I'm dressed as ordered. You ready to tell me what the hell we're doing here or are you planning on standing there with your mouth open all day?"

Guy scooped up a pile of pads and motioned for her to follow. "We are here," He led her to a boxing ring and held the ropes so it was easier for Tori to step inside, "Because you need an outlet for all that aggression you have today. Something more effective than stomping up and down the steps. I help out with the kids from time to time and I've noticed that sometimes a hostile kid whose only reason for being here is because he has no other option is more willing to talk after I help him release some of his stress."

"And you think that's what I need too?"

"I'm not sure but I figure it can't hurt. Hold out your hands," Guy requested so he could slip on a pair of gloves. When he added shin guards she gave him a skeptical look. "I thought you might like kickboxing."

"Because?"

"Because you'll have the opportunity to kick me too instead of just hitting me." He put on his pads. "I'll teach you some basics and then we'll give it a try."

"Wait. You're seriously going to show me what to do and then let me do it?"

"Sure. I will be defending myself, Tori, not just standing here and we're both wearing pads so we'll be fine."

"Just defending yourself and not fighting back?"

"Unless you confess that you were the state champ all through high school I'll stick with defending myself until you have some experience."

Tori's laughter built until she had tears streaming down her face. "Wish I'd thought of this back then. Can you imagine the lead balloon it would have caused if I'd announced I wanted to be a kickboxer? Would have made all of them have strokes."

Guy waited for her to settle down before he patiently explained various moves and positions. Even though he had no intention of acting offensively, he demonstrated how to counter as well as attack. Guy was amazed as her interest grew to the point where she was totally focused. She seemed disappointed when he suggested they take a little break before he turned her loose to test her new skills.

"Drink some more Gatorade and then we'll get to it," Guy hounded Tori until she gave in. He was more than a little concerned by her lack of food consumption with the energy she was expending but there was nothing he could do about that at the moment. He could, however, make sure she didn't get dehydrated.

Back in the ring, Guy took a defensive stance and slowly began to circle Tori. At first, she did the same, watching him closely as they moved. Next she tried a few tentative advances, backing off before she was within range. When Tori suddenly twisted and caught Guy with her foot he couldn't entirely hide his startled expression. After that, Tori's confidence grew along with her aggression. Soon she was attacking nonstop and making contact much more often than Guy had anticipated.

Guy considered calling a temporary halt to the action but the look on Tori's face stopped him. She had been practicing what he taught her for the most part but now her movements became jerky and random. She was on the verge of being out of control and he decided it might be the best thing for her. He'd let her go as long as he was able to prevent her from injuring herself. Guy shifted to block Tori's foot and missed the hand that slammed his chin. He quickly revised his plan. He'd let her go as long as he could keep her from hurting herself and knocking him unconscious.

Tori's arms were flailing wildly when she suddenly stopped and stood with her hands by her sides. She was sweating profusely and panting heavily. Very slowly, she raised her head and met Guy's eyes. He only had an instant to see her pain before Tori flung herself into his arms, her whole body racked with sobs.

Clutching her tightly, Guy backed to a corner and slid to the mat, leaning against the pole. He pulled Tori onto his lap and held on. She was hysterical beyond the point where words could reach her. For now, all Guy could do was wait until she was ready to be comforted. Out of the corner of his eye, Guy caught a movement and realized that Lita was on the floor with them. She looked as if she felt as helpless as he did when she helped wrap a towel around Tori so he wouldn't need to let her go.

Guy had no idea how much time had passed before Tori slumped against him. "Go check if the men's locker room is clear and grab Tori's things," he whispered to Lita. When she assured him it was, Guy stood with Tori in his arms.

Within minutes, he had Tori stripped and in the shower warming her body under the water as he rinsed her off. When he had her dried and dressed, he asked Lita to hold

her where Tori could see him if she realized that he wasn't next to her. He yanked off his soggy clothes, showered and dressed in record-breaking time.

"Thanks," Guy paused after he had Tori strapped into her Jeep with a blanket tucked around her. "For everything."

"Don't mention it." She handed him their bags. "Call if I can help."

Guy understood what Lita's simple statement meant and nodded again before leaving her standing in the parking lot as he fought the urge to drive like maniac in his rush to get Tori home.

## Chapter Fifteen

The numbness faded from Tori's mind soon after they left the gym. She had to say something but didn't trust herself to speak without falling apart so she spent the drive staring silently out her window. She'd already made a fool of herself at the gym, wailing like a banshee. The last thing she wanted was to lose it while Guy was driving because he'd pull over and fuss at her and they'd never get home.

After Guy was satisfied that the cottage hadn't been invaded, Tori made her way inside. She sensed he wanted to carry her but forced her legs to function instead. It would be all too easy to give in to temptation and let Guy coddle her. She was determined to resist because giving in would make it hurt that much more when he walked away from her.

Oh, who the hell was she kidding? Tori was already in so far over her head that she didn't stand a chance of getting through this with her heart intact. She was too tired to fight against what her heart kept trying to tell her. Somehow, despite the ugly reality of what threw them together and the horror surrounding her, she had done the unthinkable. It would probably be the stupidest mistake of her life but knowing that hadn't stopped her from making it. No, she knew perfectly well how utterly wrong it was but she went right ahead and fell hopelessly in love with Guy anyway. Her mind was still screaming at her to stop but Tori ignored it and only heard the whispers of her heart. Her mind knew it couldn't possibly last but her heart kept believing all the wonderful things Guy said to her.

Tori sat in the middle of the sofa and let her head fall back with her eyes closed. On her best day, she wouldn't have a clue how to deal with the man. Figuring out that in the middle of the rest of the mess was beyond impossible. There was no way she could handle any of it but that didn't mean she could go on pretending the last two nights hadn't happened as she had been all morning. Even if whatever she said turned things into an even bigger disaster she still owed it to Guy stop being such a coward. His misdirected emotions had given her something better than she'd ever imagined and it was wrong of her to continue hiding from him. Hell, she should be groveling at his feet for the opportunity he'd given her instead of doing her best to sabotage what little time they had. Instead, why not try for a few more memories to relive in the many cold, lonely days of the rest of her life?

"Guy," Tori whispered without opening her eyes. "I know I was horrible to you and now I'm about to take advantage of you but would you please sit with me for a little while anyway?"

Instantly, Guy claimed the spot next to her and slid his hand into hers, linking their fingers. "You can't take advantage of someone by inviting them to do exactly what they want to do."

"Mm," she sighed and rested her head against his shoulder. "But I was horrible."

"You're scared."

"Please don't make excuses for me. I can't handle you being nice when I'm being a bitch."

"Tough, because you're going to have to. Say whatever you want but I know what you're up to and I refuse to fall into that trap."

"Trap?" Tori finally peeked at him.

"Yep. What happened between us last night has you so scared that you think your only choices are to run or prove it was only temporary. Since running is currently out of the question you attempted to piss me off so I would say something stupid that you could use to reject me."

"Ah." She rolled her eyes.

"But you're overlooking one very important point. You're forgetting that I know we belong together. Nothing you say will change my mind. Keep it up if you have to but let me explain something to you. You can stick with it as long as you need to. No matter what you come up with or how many times you push me into losing my temper as I'm sure you will or whatever ridiculous things you throw back at me after I let you bait me into being an asshole, you still won't get rid of me because I know you'll see the truth eventually. When you do, I'll be right next to you, waiting for you to finally admit it."

"Is this your idea of not pushing? If it is you better get a clue since it's no different from when you are pushing."

"Ah, yeah, I'm going to have to take that one back. I thought about it this morning when I was holding you, waiting for you to wake up. I kept telling myself that last night was more than you bargained for and I should give you space to understand that's just how we are together. I forced myself to let you think I was sleeping when you wiggled your way out of my arms. I kept my mouth shut when you pretended that nothing was different this morning. I had every intention of waiting you out."

"So that's why you were being so weird and acting all nice to me."

"Yes and no. Yes, for the obvious reasons and no, because I didn't want to make today any harder by picking a fight with you."

"You thought fighting for real was a better idea?"

"Again, yes and no. You were ready to climb the walls when Todd left. Keeping you cooped up inside would have gotten to both of us in a bad way. Holding on to stress is not a good way to deal with it. Taking you to a secure place and giving you a safe way to let go seemed like the best option. Underestimating your speed and flexibility was a stupid mistake on my part but it's one I won't repeat so all in all it worked out pretty well."

"Yeah, it was just great. First, I make a fool out of myself by being a snotty bitch to a woman who could kill me and make it look like an accident and then I turn into a blithering idiot and cry all over you. What kind of moron can't dress herself? What kind of imbecile can't sit alone for two minutes so you can change without getting undressed in front of a perfect stranger? Yep. Worked out just fine."

"One, Lita doesn't think you're a fool or a bitch. If anything, you impressed her by the way you saw right through her. Two, crying is nothing to be ashamed of. You burned up all your energy and couldn't hold it in any longer. Three, if I had given you a few minutes you wouldn't have needed my help but I needed to get us out of there. Four, Lita's a professional and couldn't care less about seeing my bare ass. And five, it's nice to know that you noticed my naked butt in spite of all that you were going through at the moment."

"It wasn't your butt that I noticed," Tori stated and groaned.

"Really? Tell me, tiger, what part of me did you notice?"

"Open mouth, insert foot."

"Come on, Tori. You started it. You have to tell me the rest."

"Fine. If you really must know I noticed your penis and realized it was the first time it wasn't poking out at me." Guy laughed. "It's still impressive."

"Thank you, ma'am. Glad you approve."

"Guy," she sighed in frustration. "You should really be more interested in whether or not Lita approved. Professional or not, she's still a woman and I'm sure took a quick peek. You should give her a call once I'm out of your hair."

Guy just shook his head at her newest tactic. "Hold that thought while I let Todd know we're home." He held her hand so she couldn't move away. "Hey. Just wanted to let you know we're home from the gym," Guy groaned at Todd's response. "That sure didn't take long. Would you believe me if I said she was exaggerating? Didn't think so. Yep, she's a natural. Perfect instincts when it comes to timing. Next time we spar, I think we'll see if her defense is as quick as her offense. Hell, yeah, I'm serious. I doubt if I'll be able to land anything. It's a good thing for me that she's not taller or I'd have a broken nose for sure." Tori's elbow slammed his ribs, causing Guy to exhale sharply. "Christ, tiger, time out already. Guess she has something against praise since she just jabbed me with her elbow. Hurts like a son of a bitch too since she caught the same spot where I took a few in the ring. If I wasn't bruised before I will be now and Tori hasn't even offered to kiss it and make me better."

Tori realized Guy wasn't really joking so she shifted and pulled up his shirt to take a look at his side. When she saw the red smudge where she had poked him with her elbow, she frowned. She had bruised him. Very gently, Tori traced the area with one fingertip. She leaned forward, intended to kiss him but Guy intercepted her.

"Please, Tor. Not while I'm talking to Todd," he begged and then laughed. "You guessed it. Todd says wait until we hang up for that. Yeah, she's a little more relaxed. Listen to this one. Lita told you about everything, right? Well, Tori's still in denial about

our future so she decided that Lita probably liked what she saw and that I should try to hook up with her sometime." Guy laughed again. "Todd says you should knock it off. He's sure Lita's wife, Wendy, would have major problems with that one but might not mind meeting you."

"Oh my God," Tori gasped.

"She's so cute when she blushes." Guy hugged her and let her bury her face against his shoulder while he listened to Todd. "Right. Keep in touch."

"They didn't find them," Tori stated when he put down the phone.

"No, but they're still looking. They won't stop, Tori."

"He said the same thing this morning."

"Want to tell me more of what you talked about? I know I shouldn't ask and won't do it again if you say no now but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious."

"All right, Guy." She turned so she was facing him. "It seems Todd, like Diana and Barry, doesn't think I'm capable of looking beyond your caveman behavior and seeing the real you. He felt it necessary to give me advice on our nonexistent relationship and tried to convince me that I should listen to what you say while I ignore your brutish personality."

"Christ, I'm sorry."

Tori stopped him from reaching for her. "Why? He only said the same things as everyone else, including you. What I don't understand, though, is why, if I'm such a hopeless idiot, they all want you to be stuck with me? Why aren't they pushing some nice, secure girl who knows what she wants at you instead of a nut job like me?"

"Simple. We all know I'm so in love with you there is no other woman in the world who could take your place in my heart. We see you in ways that you can't yet. Or won't. And it's obvious that I am the only man who can help you accept how incredible you truly are and they know I won't give up until you do and even then, I'll stick close in case you need to be reminded."

"Hmm. Maybe you're all full of bullshit and even more clueless than I am."

"Maybe. Maybe not. We'll just have to wait and see."

"Oh, ha, ha. Was Todd joking about Lita?"

"Preferring women? No. He wouldn't mess with you like that. Why? You thinking about hooking up with them?"

"Guy! No! Jeez."

"What, Tori? It's okay for her to be interested in me but you have a problem when it's you? Or are you embarrassed because she watched you change when we got there?" Tori groaned. "Hey, you're the one who pointed out that she's still a woman even though she's a professional. Your body is too hot to ignore. Why wouldn't she admire the view when it's an attractive one? Or is the fact that she's a woman what you object to?"

"No. It doesn't matter what gender someone is to appreciate how they look. I don't care who she sleeps with and no, Lita is not the first lesbian I met. I'm from Beverly Hills, remember? There's not much I didn't see growing up and I do mean see in the most literal sense since the parties my parents gave usually ended as the anything goes type of events."

Guy's face showed all his conflicting emotions as he sputtered for a response.

"Don't bother. My parents were generally in the middle of things so they'd forget about me and not notice when I escaped."

"Christ." Guy ran his hand over his face. "Here I thought you blush so much because you're shy."

"I am shy. I knew what was going on and saw way more than a kid should have but I never ever participated. That's what you're thinking. I know it is."

"Whoa. Hold on. It crossed my mind but I rejected it just as fast."

"Oh. Okay. Don't get me wrong. Personally, I'm not interested and don't think there's much chance I ever will be but if that's what a group of consenting adults all want, that's fine for them. Go for it and have a blast. But kids, well, kids should get to be kids and not be exposed to that sort of thing until they're old enough to understand what's going on and what other choices they could make for themselves. I'm not saying they should be kept in bubbles and be totally ignorant but they also shouldn't have to watch their father initiate an orgy by asking who wants their mother to use her mouth on them first."

"I wish I knew what to say," Guy commented softly.

"Don't say anything, Guy. I didn't tell you this to get you to say something to me. I don't really know why I told you at all. I probably shouldn't have."

"I'm glad you did. I want to know you, Tori. I may need a minute to calm down like I just did but that doesn't mean I don't want to listen to anything you choose to tell me."

"But you were disgusted."

"By your situation, not by you. I agree with what you said about kids and I'll never understand parents who don't treat them as all kids deserve but it's your parents I have the problem with, not you. Christ, Tor, I can't begin to imagine what your childhood was like for you."

"I didn't have one. I don't think anyone I grew up with did. I went to private schools and my family was pretty much the same as everybody else's. I was the only oddball. The rest of the kids I knew never thought to question the way they lived. Even my friends made fun of me for being a weirdo if I brought up how unreal it all seemed too often. Do I wish it had been different? Of course I do. Do I feel sorry for myself or want you to because it wasn't? Absolutely not. I can't change it but I'm not part of it anymore so it really doesn't matter."

"You have no idea how utterly amazing you are," Guy stated, caressing her cheek.



"That's our cue to change the subject." Guy nodded. "But just so you know, I haven't told anyone else about all that."

"I won't either. Thank you for trusting me." He brushed her lips.

"Yeah, well." She shrugged. "Consider it an apology for hitting you in the same spot. I didn't even consider that I could hurt you."

"I'm fine, trust me. You won't even see it by morning, I promise."

Tori still felt bad but let it drop anyway. She was getting numb again and knew arguing would make it worse. "So Lita told Todd everything?"

"She had to. Although I suspect she went above and beyond the simple report her job requires when she told Todd about how often you got past my defenses. You can bet he'll make sure my sisters all know too. Thank God I stayed on my feet. I'd never live it down if you'd knocked me on my ass."

Tori chuckled. "Hey, Guy? Thanks for keeping me from thinking about them."

"Thanks for letting me."

"Thank Todd, not me. That was the other thing he talked about this morning. He guessed I might be too self-absorbed to realize that you needed to distract me as much as I needed to be distracted so he asked me to consider your suggestions instead of just rejecting them."

"Then I'm even more pleased you let me teach you a little kickboxing. Lita's description of you scoring some good hits will give all of them a few minutes of stress relief."

"Oh, come on. You don't have to keep saying that. I know I only hit you and kicked you because you let me."

Guy shook his head. "No, I didn't. I admit I was being sloppy when we first started and it would have been more difficult for you if you'd had to defend yourself but I swear that was all you, tiger. I wasn't just talking when I told Todd you had good instincts. Too bad you didn't think of it in high school. If you'd had some decent training you really could have been the state champ."

"Maybe you could get me ready so I can enter one of those tournaments I've seen advertised. If I did well enough to be interviewed I could say I owe it all to my family and give the name of the salon."

"Okay." Guy laughed with her. "Could we wait until tomorrow for the next round? I'm still feeling a little beat up today and I don't want you to overdo it and strain something."

"I was kidding."

"Me too." He grinned. "So what should we do since we're not going back to the gym?"

"Oh no. You're looking at me like you do when you're about to make me eat something and I know I'll throw up if I try to so please don't."

"You'll let me know when you're ready?"

"Yes," she promised as she unsuccessfully tried to hide a shiver.

Guy reached for her hands. "Damn, your skin is like ice. Why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't notice," she admitted. "I think I'm a little out of it."

"Tori."

"I'm okay, Guy." When Tori met his eyes, she was overwhelmed by the tenderness she found. "Will you let me do something?"

"Should I be afraid to ask?"

"No." She reached for the bottom of his shirt and eased it up. "You wouldn't let me kiss your boo-boo when you were on the phone. Can I now?" Tori gently covered the purplish bruise and looked back up at him.

"Please do." Guy held his shirt out of the way.

She slowly leaned forward and barely touched him with her lips. "Maybe you should take that off and stretch out," she suggested shyly. When Guy tugged off his shirt, she slid to the floor next to the sofa. "You might be more comfortable with another pillow," she decided as she snagged one off the nearest chair. "Better?" Tori asked after fluffing it under his head.

"Somewhat. Be much better if you were up here with me."

"Gee, that's what I was thinking too." Tori spent the next few minutes covering his slightly bruised skin with soft kisses and caresses. "You are so warm." She ran her hand across his chest and held it over his heart. "I'm tired but I don't want to sleep. I know I'll see them die if I do and I don't think I could stand watching as it happens now that I know they're real. It'll be almost as horrible tonight but it won't be the same. Am I being too selfish? I mean, what if they talk about where they are and they die because I'm too scared to let myself sleep now?"

"They never mentioned it before. I seriously doubt they will this time."

"You sure?"

"No, but I'm not going to let you find out now that you have me thinking about it. It's not up to you anymore. I'm taking it out of your hands and whatever the outcome, it's my responsibility now."

"You don't have to do this."

"I know but I am. I let you kiss my boo-boo and make it all better so now you have to let me do something."

"What?"

"We already agreed that you should be on the sofa with me. You said I felt warm and I think you still feel cold. What I want is you to take off your shirt just like I did for you and stretch out on top of me so we have lots of skin-to-skin contact. I want you to tuck your hands underneath me and let me pull this cover over us. I want to wrap my arms around you and hold you against my chest while we spend the next few hours talking about whatever comes to mind. Can we do that?"

Tori answered by removing her sweatshirt. She climbed between his legs and let Guy position her body because she was afraid she'd press against his semi-hard cock and cause him pain. After he had their lower bodies comfortable, Tori shifted her head so she could listen to his heart.

"This is so nice," Tori sighed.

"Better than nice," Guy agreed. "Now don't go to sleep on me or I'll be forced to tickle you."

"But I'm not ticklish."

"Ah. Okay then, don't go to sleep or I'll uncover your back and lick as much of it as I can reach so you get real cold, real fast."

"That's just plain mean."

"I know and I'd hate to be so mean to you but you'll be the one who caused it so you'll be the mean one, not me."

"Then you better start talking so neither one of us has to be mean."

"Maybe we should make the first topic lady's choice so I don't start out boring you to sleep."

"Hmm." Tori paused to push her hands farther beneath him. She stalled by taking a deep breath. "Okay, the first thing I want to say is that I'm sorry for falling asleep last night."

"Huh? Maybe I'm being stupid but I don't understand why you're apologizing."

"Because, um, well, because I fell asleep right away. Without, um, I mean, you were..."

Guy chuckled. "Oh, I get it. You think you should apologize because you fell asleep without taking care of my hard-on."

"You don't have to laugh at me."

"I'm not. Listen to me. Last night ended exactly as it should have. The way you trusted me was so special. As special as the way you made me come. Anything more might have taken away from that. If you haven't noticed, I'm perpetually hard around you. I'm getting used to it because unless you're willing to take care of that for me, oh, say every nine minutes, twenty-four hours a day, there's not a whole hell of a lot I can do about it."

"Guy. I was being serious."

"So am I. Tori, I won't deny how much I want you. We haven't really started yet. So far we've just been teasing each other. No, let me finish. Don't think I didn't love every second we've been together because you already know how much I did. But there are many more possibilities for us to explore. And I'm sure we'll keep coming up with new ones so we'll never run out of ways to find pleasure with each other. There are going to be times when one of us gets more attention than the other and there's not a damn thing wrong with that because it'll balance out."

"But I felt so selfish when I woke up this morning. That's why I was afraid to face you."

"Wait. You thought I'd be mad?" Tori nodded mutely. "Christ, no, tiger. How could I ever be mad at the gorgeous babe who let me spend all that time licking her tasty pussy? How could I be mad at you when you look so beautiful and feel so good when you come around my tongue? How could I be mad when you made me feel so special by giving yourself to me like that?"

"Guy," Tori sounded lost.

"Sh, don't get upset. I know you don't understand but I promise you will if you stick with me."

"I'm scared."

"So am I but it's a really good kind of scared, isn't it?"

"I don't know how to do this."

"I can help you if you let me. We can help each other."

"Yeah, right. Like you need any help, especially from me."

"But I do. I've never been in love before either. The only difference between us is that I've already accepted it for what it is. I'm ready for us because I've been hoping to find you. I know the life I want with you is possible because I grew up surrounded by people who have what we can have. You're not sure any of this exists, that a couple can love and trust without boundaries because you weren't exposed to it before you came here and even now you've kept yourself on the fringes."

Tori caught a few chest hairs in her teeth and tugged to get Guy's attention.

"Hey! What was that for?"

"Distraction so you let me change the subject before I hit overload." She kissed the spot. "Better?"

Guy shifted his groin slightly. "What do you think?"

Tori giggled. "I'd say that's a yes. I'd also say it really was okay for me to leave you hard last night since I don't think you're exaggerating anymore about that being your constant state."

"Tease. You might want to watch what you say next, tiger."

"Why?"

"Because you're nice and warm now."

"Yeah, so?"

"If you're not cold anymore there is some other reason for your nipples to be as hard as my cock." She gasped. "Personally, I'm glad to know I'm not the only one affected here. Gives me more to work with. Now I can ask you to listen to your body until you're ready to hear your heart. Or are you going to pretend that you're not excited and deny that you want me?"

"No. But that's just physical. It doesn't have anything to do with love."

"All right, Tor, if you say so," Guy agreed pleasantly. "Want to talk about something else or should we discuss how physical we can get together?"

"Tempting as that sounds, I think we better save that for later. Why don't you tell me why you have an accent?"

Guy was soon lost in his past. "If you ask Mom she'll insist we would have been fine staying in the two-room apartment while Dad finished his time with the Merchant Marines. I think she would have managed somehow because, let me tell you, my mother is the most determined person I know. The fact that she had an almost toddler, an infant and was pregnant again with a husband who was away for months at a time didn't stop her from finding work. She would have continued to juggle it all after I was born too if she'd had to but I'm getting ahead of the story.

"Dad says they couldn't wait to get married even though they couldn't afford it and both sets of parents told them not to expect any help if they went against their advice. He and Mom eloped and he joined the Merchant Marines because they decided it would be worth spending time apart for a few years if they could then afford a house when he got out. They hadn't exactly planned on having kids right away but they'll both tell you they didn't do a thing to prevent it.

"Marie was born nine and a half months after their wedding. She was five weeks old before Dad got to see her. Mom was pregnant with Terese by the time his month leave was up. He was home for her birth but gone again a few weeks later. I was conceived on his next leave.

"The whole time Dad believed their parents would come around. Mom was skeptical but she sent letters and pictures every month or so since it made Dad happy. She included Dad's grandmother even though she'd never met her. She says she did it because she loved the way Dad looked when he talked about her.

"Two weeks after I was born Mom opened the door and, as she calls it, entered the Twilight Zone. Granma got tired of waiting for Mom's and Dad's parents to come to their senses and decided it was time for her to take charge. A week later, when Dad got home he walked into utter chaos. He says Mom was unpacking as fast as Granma packed. Everything they owned was thrown somewhere and Marie and Terese were crawling through it, laughing and babbling while Mom and Granma argued over Granma's plan, which was to take Mom and the babies back to Quebec with her until Dad was off the ship. After Dad got them calmed down enough to explain he figured out that Mom didn't object to moving. She just wasn't leaving until he got back and agreed it was a good idea.

"Dad had signed on for five years. He got out two months before their fifth child was born. We spent another two years in Quebec while Dad did an apprenticeship with a local electrician before we moved back here. After that, my sisters and I spent summers there."

Guy continued to speak, telling Tori everything he remembered about his time with his great-grandmother and what his childhood had been like. For the most part, she let him ramble, uninterrupted except for an occasional question.

"I wish I could have met her," Tori stated when Guy paused.

"Me too. She would have loved you. And I think you would have loved her too, not that she would have given you any other choice."

"No wonder you are the way you are."

"Which is?"

"Everything you've said about your mom and great-grandmother combined and magnified. Determined, stubborn, one-track mind, willful, focused, persistent..."

"Kind-hearted, loving, loyal, patient, truthful, dedicated," Guy added. "You can't pick out the traits that suit your purpose and ignore the others I share with them. I'm sure you're right. I did grow up under the influence of their strong personalities. I'm proud of who they helped me become. Overall, I like who I am. I think Granma would be very pleased with the way I turned out. I know my parents are."

"Hearing you talk about them like this almost makes me want to meet them."

"Ah," Guy hesitated.

"What?" Tori tensed, dreading what she knew was coming. "Guy?" she asked her whole question with just his name as she tugged her hands from under his body and used them to prop her chin so she could see his face.

"There's something we need to talk about and I've been avoiding it because I honestly don't know what to do."

"I can tell already that I'm not going to like this. Too bad too since I enjoyed the last hour. May as well just spit it out now that the fun's over."

Guy took a deep breath and linked his fingers behind her back. "Terese and Todd host a Christmas open house every year."

Tori immediately began to shake her head. She would have pulled away but Guy's arms prevented her. "Un-uh. No way. No how. Not happening. No, and I mean hell no! Do you hear me? Are you listening? You'd better because there is absolutely, positively, without a doubt, not any chance in the universe that I am going to that with you."

"Tori —"

"Don't bother. Just forget it because nothing you say will change my mind so don't waste your breath."

"Tori —"

"What's with you? How many different ways do I need to say this? For the last time, Guy, thanks but no thanks. I must regrettably decline your kind invitation. I have a prior commitment that I just can't get out of so, I'm sorry to disappoint you but I'm afraid I simply can't be there. It's impossible."

"That might be more effective if I'd told you when it was."

"Doesn't matter because I'm booked from now until the third Tuesday in April."

"Then you have some calls to make because your plans have changed."

"Just like that? You say jump and I say how high? And if I refuse to get in the car when you order me to you'll handcuff us together and carry me to it? Where do you get off, bossing me around like you are somebody? Who the hell do you think you are anyway?"

"Tori," he said sharply, his tone silencing her. "I am the man who cares for you enough that I've stayed awake for hours trying to find the solution that is easiest and least upsetting for you. I'm the man who loves you enough to worry about whether or not my good-intentioned family will hurt you by being themselves. I'm the man who would do anything to keep a smile on your face and your eyes from taking on that cautious look they get when you realize that you forgot yourself and opened up the slightest bit as you put the distance back between us."

"Nobody asked you to do that so why don't you just forget it? Why don't you just go away and leave me alone?" Tori cried as she finally struggled out of Guy's embrace. She got off his chest and moved to stand at the window on the far side of the room. She stared out, her rigid back toward Guy and fought to hold in her tears. As she wrapped her arms around her middle she felt more alone than she ever had in her life.

"Tori," Guy said softly to let her know he was behind her before he draped a blanket over her shoulders. "Please come sit down and listen for a few minutes. Let me explain why I'm torn about this. I know you don't really want me to go away and forget about you. I know you don't want to be alone anymore. At least come back and let me keep you warm." Guy slowly guided her back to the couch and maneuvered so she was sitting between his outstretched legs, cradled against his chest.

"Can we talk now?" he asked.

"Don't you mean can you make your proclamations while I nod like a good little puppet?"

"No."

Tori waited for him to continue until she couldn't handle the silence. "All right, fine. Let's talk. Start with why you don't know what to do."

Guy sighed and kissed her forehead. "As I said Terese and Todd have an annual Christmas open house. Friends and neighbors wander in and out at random. Family generally stays for the whole thing. In the past, it's always been a nice thing. Relaxed, mellow, easy. I told Terese I'd be there last month when she called with the date. I can't back out without an excuse and she'll know whatever I tell her is a lie. I can't go alone because the only way I'll know you're safe is if I can see you. I know, I know. It's a paranoid, overbearing, Alpha reaction but that's how I am so deal with it.

"If I call my sisters and explain who you are and why I'm bringing you with me, they'll fall all over each other trying to make you comfortable in a way would have you cowering in the nearest closet. If we just show up there they'll be able to see how I feel about you. I can introduce you as the witness I'm assigned to guard and make your

presence into a purely professional thing and they won't hear a word of it. They'll make a fuss over you and pry into your life by asking all sorts of inappropriate personal questions without noticing how uncomfortable they're making you. Even with me and Todd running interference for you, we won't be able to shield you from all of it. Don't misunderstand me. I love my family. I wouldn't trade any of my sisters for the world but I'm not unconscious. They take some getting used to especially when they're together. They're not at all subtle and they don't know how to be tactful. They've been trying to fix me up for years and they'll push and pick until they figure out what makes you so special to me."

"Gee, that sounds like so much fun. Todd and his wife provide the setting and you provide the entertainment. Tell me, does someone time how long it takes for your dates to flee? Do you keep a cab waiting outside so they can escape quickly once they've been reduced to mush? Do the neighbors line the walk and throw rotten vegetables if the woman doesn't make it through round one?"

"I never took anyone with me before," Guy stated quietly.

"Oh," Tori almost choked. Her assumptions and comments had been uncalled for and completely undeserved. "Why not?"

"I never had anyone in my life I wanted to introduce to my family. I don't mean that as in I hid my past relationships or I was ashamed of them. I dated some great women and a few of them did meet various family members. I meant that no one was ever an important enough part of my life that I wanted to include her in a significant family gathering."

"I'm not either, Guy. If you weren't stuck protecting me you wouldn't bother considering this."

"Tori," Guy exhaled heavily. "I would appreciate it if you stopped telling me how I feel. At least until you pay enough attention to know for certain. I understand why you're lashing out at me but I'm seriously concerned and trying to be open with you so we can come up with what's best for you because I don't want to hurt either you or my family. I get that you believe I'm lying and manipulating you so I can use you for my own selfish purpose before I kick you to the curb. I can swear on my life and make promises until I'm blue in the face and you still won't see me as anything other than the cop you've accepted to protect you and the man you don't mind having sex with when you need help forgetting your nightmares for a few hours. I get that, Tori. It hurts but I know I'll get over that as soon as you see me for who I am instead of who you have yourself convinced I am. Aw, Christ," Guy swore when he realized Tori was crying.

Unable to face Guy, Tori buried her head against his chest. She slid her arms around his waist and clung to him. She wished she could turn back time and erase the hateful things she'd said from his memory. He was right. He had been trying to make an unavoidable and potentially stressful situation easier for her and she had been a cruel bitch. Now, to make things worse, he was comforting her even though he thought she considered him a liar and a user. Even if he was mistaken about his feelings for her, Guy was a good man. One who would never deliberately set her up to be hurt and



publicly humiliated. One who certainly didn't deserve the treatment she had been giving him.

Tori swallowed her tears and swiped her face. She forced herself to look at Guy. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I was wrong. I shouldn't have said those things. I'm so sorry."

"Sh, it's okay."

"No, it's not! Damn it, Guy. You were being nice to me and I was a miserable bitch. You know it and you're still being nice."

"What should I do instead?"

"Toss me on the floor, wish me luck living through Russ and Stan's visit and leave me alone like I deserve."

"I see. There are several things wrong with your suggestion. One, I don't want to toss you on the floor because I like holding you. Two, no matter how much you piss me off I refuse to turn my back on my duty. Three, the thought of handing you over to those two goes against everything inside me and would even if I didn't feel a thing for you. Four, you do not deserve to be alone. Not now. Not ever."

"Please just stop. Don't keep being nice when I'm so horrible to you."

"Tori—"

"No! You're too good for your own good, you know that? Well, I do. I know you're not a liar. I know you really believe what you keep saying but it won't be lying even after you realize you were wrong. I know you're not using me. Hell, if anything I'm the one using you. I'm the one who threw myself at you and backed you into a corner until you didn't have any other choice that first night. And last night I was the one who handcuffed you and played with you and coerced you into eating me. You've been so nice to me and I treat you like dirt and take advantage of you." Tori pulled away from him and went to the kitchen.

"Who are you calling?" Guy asked when she picked up the phone.

Tori ignore him. "Hi, it's Tori. I'm fine. Yes, I know you would have called. Yeah, I thought I might feel something when they killed them but I haven't yet. Of course it's only two thirty so maybe they're still alive. Well, I know you're busy but I called because I need a favor. I need you to replace Guy. No, it's not that. He's fine. He's been great. I'm the problem. I don't want to hurt him anymore and I will if he stays. Don't say it, Todd. You're as wrong as he is but I don't want to argue about it. Just get him out of here before he starts to hate me. He's been so kind to me and I couldn't stand that." Tori's face fell. Her shoulders slumped at whatever Todd told her. "He wants to talk to you," Tori stated flatly as she handed him the phone.

"Guess I don't need to ask how your day's going," Todd commented.

"Nope. I told Tori about your party," Guy reported, knowing Todd would figure out the rest.

"I'm assuming you want me to tell her there's no one else available so she'll have to work things out with you."

"That's correct."

"Are you sure? Don't take this the wrong way but Tori sounds honestly upset with herself. Maybe you should give her some space and let her work through it on her own."

"Bad idea considering the history," Guy answered evasively.

"Hmm, let me think about that one since you obviously can't give me an explanation with her listening. I said give Tori space and you won't because of her past. Oh, wait. I get it. Even if she is hurting you as she thinks she is you have to stay so she realizes you're in for the long haul. Damn, I already knew that she expects you to walk out on her like everyone else has. I shouldn't have suggested giving her the chance to convince herself that you're the same. All right, give me back to Tori."

"Todd?"

"Sorry, kiddo. Wish I could help you out but I don't have anyone else available just now."

"Why am I not surprised? I shouldn't have bothered to call you. That's fine, Todd. I know you're lying but I won't hold it against you. After all, I've only been your friend for a few days and he's been your friend for years. Of course you'd pick him over me. Damn, if I'm not the stupidest thing alive." Tori hung up without giving Todd a chance to respond.

When she tried to leave the room, Guy stopped her by pulling her back against his chest. "Don't take this out on Todd. You were right. He was lying but only because I made him. He suggested that it might be better if I gave you some space. When I made the remark about history I was referring to your past. Todd thought about it and realized that I wouldn't leave even if he sent someone else because I need you to see that I am not going to desert you when things aren't going precisely the way I want them to. Relationships, good ones, are full of compromises. It's give and take, not me dictating and you meekly agreeing. All couples argue and disagree. The good ones work it out together and move on. You told Todd you wanted me to leave because you thought you'd find ways to hurt me until I hated you."

Guy tightened his arms when Tori squirmed again. He dipped his head and nudged hers until it was tilted enough for him to reach her neck. Before he resumed speaking, he spent a few minutes nuzzling the back of her ear.

"But you didn't hurt me. Just the opposite, in fact. You don't even know what you said, do you? I'll tell you. You said you know I'm not a liar and you know I wouldn't use you. Christ, Tor, don't you get it? You're starting to trust me. You have no idea how good that makes me feel. Please don't be mad at Todd for trusting me too. Please don't reject his friendship because he knows I love you and will find a way for us to get through this."

"Oh my God." Tori slumped against his chest. "I was so awful to him. What a stupid jerk I am. I just don't think. I'd call him back and apologize but no way is he going to talk to me now."

"Sure he will. Todd knows you're having a tough day and running on nerves. He's probably debating on calling you back as we speak."

Tori tugged his arms so she could turn toward him. "You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

Tori was shaking when she picked up the phone. As soon as she dialed, she slid her arm around Guy's waist and urged him closer. "I'm sorry," she said as soon as Todd answered. "Guy explained why you said no and I understand now but I shouldn't have been such a mean bitch in the first place."

"Apology accepted and thank you for not making me figure out the appropriate amount of time to wait before I called you."

"Guy said you'd call. I know you don't have time for this but thanks for putting up with me anyway."

"That's what friends are for, Tori. We are still friends, aren't we?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Good. I'm glad. Now, as my friend, I expect to see you at my Christmas party next Saturday. It's casual, just nibbles and drinks between six and nine. Stop in anytime. Feel free to bring a date."

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Tori laughed. "That is so not fair."

"I know but the question is did it get Guy off the hook?"

"You guys are like a tag team. Both of you trying to keep me from being mad at the other like this."

"That's an interesting conclusion but you didn't answer my question."

Tori sighed. "I'd say yes but he wasn't ever really on it. He was trying to be nice and I overreacted and twisted things make him into the bad guy."

Todd chuckled. "Can Guy hear you?"

"Yes. He's right here. Um, he's letting me hold on to him for courage."

"Damn. Hell of a roller coaster you two are on today."

"Wish I knew how to get off."

"You already know the solution. You just need to let yourself believe in it."

"On that note," Tori didn't want to hear any more, "I'm going to say goodbye and let you get back to work."

"Guess it's my turn to apologize. I promised I would drop it this morning and I just tried to give you a push. Forgive me?"

"Of course, although I don't think that was you. I've noticed that I have a very bad habit of setting people up so they say things I keep denying that I want to hear. Why do you suppose I do that?"

"Maybe because you really do want to hear those things but are still too wary to believe them? It's just a guess but maybe you think if you hear them often enough you'll find them easier to accept. Why don't you ask Guy for his theory on this? I'm sure he has one."

"I'd be amazed if he didn't. Hey, Todd? Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Hang in there, okay? We aren't very likely to get them today but we will get them. I promise we will get them. You can count on that."

"I know. Bye."

Tori hugged Guy to her and sighed into his chest. "I want to thank you for being here before I turn back into a raving lunatic. I know you're going to tell me I don't have to but please let me anyway. I couldn't handle this without you. If you weren't here, I'd probably do something stupid like go looking for them, tell them they could do anything they wanted to me as long as they promised not to kill anyone else. It's ridiculous to think it might work but I'm to the point where I would do it if there's a chance they'd stop. Damn it, don't listen to me. I'm babbling and not making any sense again. I'm not going anywhere so you don't have to get dramatic and handcuff me to you."

"Good to know but what if I want to handcuff you to me anyway?"

"Hmm." Tori looked at him as if she were considering it. "Might be worth a try sometime but today I think I want to keep our arms free so we can hold each other like this."

"Whatever you want." Guy brushed her lips with a soft kiss.

"Guy." Tori asked for more by looping one arm around his neck and raising herself to her toes to reach his lips.

Guy must have understood because his mouth claimed hers in a way that matched her need. Tori arched against him as if she couldn't get close enough. She refused to let the kiss end. The hand that had been around his waist slipped under the waistband of his sweatpants and cupped one cheek. She squeezed his flesh, pulling his hips tighter against hers. Tori knew she was losing control but couldn't stop herself. She knew she was forcing Guy into another no-win situation. What she was doing was so unfair that she should have been ashamed but at the moment, all she could think of was how much she wished they weren't wearing any clothes so she could feel his whole body against her bare skin.

"I'm sorry, Guy. I'm so sorry," Tori whispered against his mouth. "I know it's wrong and I'm taking advantage of you," she paused for another involved kiss. "Please forgive me but I need you so much." Her hand explored the crease between his cheeks. "I can't help it. Please, Guy. I'm sorry. Please."

Guy's control slipped and he backed her to the wall. He caught both hands and held them above her head, grinding his pelvis against her as he brutally took her mouth. "Tell me what you want," Guy demanded.

"You. I want you," she replied, scowling because he wasn't kissing her.

"Not good enough. Tell me what you want."

Tori realized he was pushing her so she would be sure of what she was doing. "Kiss me again."

Guy complied but wouldn't let her rub against him. "What else?"

"Fuck me," she stated, knowing he'd force her to be more specific.

"How? Where?"

"Here. Let go so I can take my jeans off."

Instead of releasing her, Guy used one hand to strip both of them. "Done. Next?" He teased her by brushing his erection against her stomach.

"God, Guy, please. I need you to be inside me now. I need to feel your hard cock moving in and out, deeper than it ever was before. I want to squeeze you with my pussy until you're as out of control as I am. I want you to make me come until I'm begging you to stop and then I want you to make me come so hard I scream. I want you to feel all of it with your cock until you can't stand it anymore and then I want to feel you exploding deep inside me."

"Tori," Guy growled, lifting her so he could impale her.

"Yes," she cried when he plunged.

"Wrap your legs around me," he urged, kissing her savagely.

Guy did exactly as Tori described. By the time they were through, neither could speak. They wound up on the kitchen floor. Tori was on Guy's lap with her ankles locked behind him. His spent shaft rested inside her. The only sound was their labored breathing.

Several long minutes later Tori lifted her head off Guy's shoulder. "You're perfect," she whispered shyly.

"No, tiger," Guy countered. "We're perfect. Together, we're perfect."

"I should feel like I need to apologize but honestly, I don't. I'm not even embarrassed by the way I pushed you into this again. I made you let me use you and I don't feel at all guilty about it," she admitted, more to herself than Guy.

"Hallelujah!" Guy shouted. "Listen up. Yes, you initiated the moment but you sure as hell didn't push me into anything. I was a more than eager participant so you weren't using me. As for apologizing and feeling guilty, don't you dare do either. You wanted me. I wanted you. It's that simple."

She nodded slowly. "Guess this takes some getting used to."

"I don't think you'll have any problems with it, Tor," he teased.

"But I'm not like this."

"Like what?" Guy asked, trapping her where she was. "Don't run away. Explain what you're thinking so I can understand why you're getting upset."

Tori took a calming breath and forced herself to remain in the position that was becoming awkward now that the excitement was fading. "I know people like to do all

sorts of things, anytime, anywhere. But I've always been more traditional. You know, in bed, at night, no bright lights. I'm not aggressive when it comes to sex. What's wrong with me?"

"Not a goddamn thing! Consider this. In the past, you stuck to no-frills sex because your body needed the physical contact but your subconscious knew you weren't with the right man. You chose partners who felt safe for the moment but not safe enough for you to share your true self with."

"Yeah, okay, right," she agreed sarcastically.

"Hold on. I'm not suggesting you sat down and decided to do that. I think it was another of your instinctive defense mechanisms. Those same instincts now sense that you're safe with me in all ways. You don't have to hold back with me. You don't have to stick with a set pattern where everything follows a predetermined plan from start to finish. Your subconscious recognizes that you can explore your sexuality because I won't let anything bad happen to you."

Tori laughed harshly. "Maybe. Or maybe I'm just so far out there now that I've lost my mind and have no idea what I'm doing anymore."

"Maybe. I disagree but who knows? Personally, I've enjoyed every bit of it and hope you continue to test your boundaries."

"What if I go too far?"

"I doubt that you will but I'll make a deal with you." He waited for her to nod. "If you ever suggest something that makes me uncomfortable, I'll tell you instead of going along with it for your sake."

"Okay. What's my part?"

"I want you to stop second-guessing yourself and follow your body's desires. Let's go one step further and make this a two-way deal since I know I'm safe with you too. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes. God, this is so unreal."

"What?"

"Making deals about sex, sitting on the kitchen floor, naked, wrapped around a guy who just had me screaming like a brazen hussy, with his cock still inside me."

"Ah. I see. So tell me, how do you usually make your sex deals?"

Tori laughed. "Don't know. This is the first one I made."

"Then it shouldn't feel unreal. Perhaps this is how you'll make all your sex deals."

"Oh, just shut up already before you get even more ridiculous."

"Okay, but only if you'll do something for me."

"What?"

"Squeeze my cock with your pussy muscles."

"What?" Tori gasped, her cheeks bright pink.

"You heard me," Guy lowered his tone. "Squeeze me tight like you never want to let go." He held her gaze until he felt her flesh ripple around him. "More," he groaned. "Fuck, yeah, don't stop." Guy shifted his embrace so his mouth could reach her breast. The more he sucked her, the more energetic Tori's contractions grew. "Christ, that feels so good," he declared, biting her nipple for emphasis.

"Guuuuy," Tori moaned, arching into his hungry mouth. "Can I make you come like this?"

"Oh yeah." He was flexing inside her.

"Let me do that to you." She suddenly craved the taste of his flesh. "Come on, stop it. It's my turn." She pushed his mouth from her breast.

With Guy watching her, Tori lowered her head and caught his nipple in her teeth. She raked him gently at first, soothing with her tongue after each bite. Every one got progressively harder but Guy only seemed to want more. Tori began to alternate sides, wanting to stimulate both equally. She could feel his heart pounding as his chest heaved with growing arousal. When she felt his body tense, Tori gave his cock several quick squeezes, clamping him firmly with the last. Very slowly, she released the pressure only to tighten sharply again.

"Ah Christ, Tori!" Guy cried as his cock pulsed inside her, flooding her with his heat.

Tori waited until Guy's breathing returned to normal before she tapped his shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah, but I think I created a monster."

"Hey! I only did what you told me to do. Not my fault if you can't handle it," she giggled when he groaned. "Time to get cleaned up. I'm hungry."

## Chapter Sixteen

"Nice hit, Kimmie," Russ praised the girl when her bat made contact with the ball. When Sam turned back toward her, he gave Stan a single nod.

"Sorry but I think I need a little time-out," Stan announced. "Sam, I'd sure appreciate it if you could show me to the bathroom."

"Of course," Sam complied, flipping the ball back to Russ. "Toss a few until I get back."

"You got it." Russ smiled pleasantly. "Keep your hands together," he reminded Kimmie while the men approached the house. "That's it. Watch the ball." Russ pitched the ball so she could hit it easily. She giggled happily when her swing sent it back to Russ who encouraged her loudly for Sam's benefit.

Inside, Stan flushed the toilet as expected but knocked some things from the shelf above it. He yelped deliberately and called out to the old man, asking for help. As soon as Sam crossed the threshold, Stan flipped the cord over his head and quickly yanked it around his neck, cutting off his startled cry. He pulled the struggling man in front of the mirror so he could watch his face as he strangled the life from him. Stan's grin was manic as Sam's terrified eyes bulged. He wanted to shout with glee but remembered Russ' warning to keep it quiet so he settled for a demented laugh.

"See what happens, old man? Didn't your momma teach you not to open the door to strangers? Shoulda listened to her 'cause she was right. Now don't you worry none 'bout that little girl. Russ and me are gonna take real good care of her 'til her momma comes. Yep, we sure will and then we're gonna take care of the momma too. Bunch of stupid fools. Making this so easy for us. That's all righty this time. Gotta save our strength for our angel. Gonna need it so we can do her right. Oh yeah. Gotta be raring to go 'cause she's not gonna be happy if she gotta wait for us to rest up." Stan kept the cord tight around Sam's neck even after the old man's body was dangling limply from it. He gave it an extra-hard tug before he twisted it viciously, making doubly sure the man was truly dead before he returned to the party in the yard.

"Sam said I should go on and bring 'em out to play in the sunshine," Stan explained why he was carrying the box of kittens as he pushed the door closed with his hip. "He'll be along in a minute."

"Let's take a little break," Russ suggested when Kimmie looked torn between continuing their play and going to the kittens.

A minute later, the three were settled on the steps, each holding a squirming ball of fluff. "Don't fuss," Kimmie told the mother cat who growled in protest. "We're just petting them. They're right here," she stated as Sam had many times in the past. "She's always like this until she sees we're not hurting her babies."



"Perfectly natural," Russ agreed. "All mommas watch over their babies. We'll put them down now so she can stop worrying." He nodded to Stan to return his kitten to the box.

The men spent some time sitting quietly with the girl as she chattered to the cats. When she bent forward to pet the mother, Stan grabbed her arms as Russ shoved a rag into her mouth. In a flash, Stan had her wrists secured to the railing with the cord he used to strangle the old man. Russ forced more of the rag into her mouth until he was satisfied that she wouldn't be able to spit it out. Then he scooped up the kitten she had dropped and held it in front of her.

"Come on, Stan. Time for some batting practice. Let's show Kimmie how it's really done." He tossed the kitten in the air a few times, folding it back into a ball after each catch. "Ready?" he asked as Stan took a few practice swings.

"Hell yeah." Stan took the stance he had shown Kimmie and circled the bat in the air next to his shoulder. "Toss me a good one. Right over the plate."

"You watching, girl? Pay attention now. Don't want to miss this one," Russ chuckled as he pitched the kitten toward Stan.

Stan swung the bat. He caught the kitten squarely with the end of it. It was a perfect hit that sent the kitten sailing over the fence.

"Lookie, Russ! A home run! Did you see that one, Kimmie? I sure got me a good piece of that little rat," he bragged, dancing in front of the petrified child. "Toss me another one, Russ. Let's see if I can go two for two."

Russ bent down to grab another kitten without noticing the mother cat. Before he could pick it up, he had four sets of claws embedded in his hand while her teeth sank into his flesh.

"Fucking twat." Russ shook the cat from him. "I'll show you what happens when you fuck with me," he said as he kicked the cat so hard she flew almost to the porch. "Son of a bitch, I should stomp on your head, you stupid cunt."

"Damn, Russ, she had you but good. Musta hurt too but don't yell like that. You said we gotta keep it down."

Russ continued to grumble but lowered his voice. He glared at the cat until it was obvious that she wasn't moving. "Hurt like a motherfucker," he growled, flexing his fingers inside the glove he wore thinking how much worse it would have been without it. "Damn thing. Spoiled the fun too. No more messing around, Stan. Get that girl over here. It's my turn now. Then you can have a go again."

Kimmie fought for all she was worth but couldn't escape Stan's grip. She was sobbing hysterically, panicked by what the men had done since Sam had gone into the house. When Stan dropped her at Russ' feet she tried to curl into a tight ball but was yanked to her knees over and over again until she stayed where Stan put her.

"Stay right there, Kimmie," Russ crooned. "Don't move a muscle or I might hit you. Don't be scared. I'm just going to swing real close so you can see how I do it, okay? I'm not going to hit you as long as you hold real still." He smiled wickedly when Stan's

laughter followed his words. "You be a good girl now," Russ urged, positioning himself in front of her. "See how I'm holding the bat. Look how I have my hands. Look how I'm standing. This is how you should do it. Watch close now and I'll show you how to swing too."

Kimmie never even blinked as Russ put all his weight into the swing he aimed at her face.

A short time later Russ ordered him to stop. "We need to see to the house before Momma gets here. I don't want to waste any time once we take care of her."

Very methodically, Russ and Stan wiped down everything. They were thorough, cleaning things they knew they hadn't touched to be certain there weren't any of their fingerprints anywhere in the house. They scoured both external doors and the back porch where they had sat with Kimmie. When Russ was satisfied that they hadn't missed anything, he and Stan stood inside the front door to wait for their third victim. She arrived at five past six. After Stan went to hide in the kitchen, Russ answered her knock with a smile.

"Hi. You must be Kimmie's mom. I'm Russ. Sam asked me to get the door so he could help Kimmie finish up her homework," he stated in a muted tone as he guided her into the living room. "I said I'd chat with you a few minutes so they have enough time. We had such a good time playing ball with Kimmie today that I'm afraid we lost track of the time and she got a late start. She was worried you'd arrive before she was done and on top of what she was afraid her teacher would tell you the poor thing was almost in tears."

"Oh my," the woman gasped. "I should go right in and tell her she has no reason to be upset."

"Please stay here with me. Make it look like she was done before you got here. Sam tried to assure her that everything would be fine but she wouldn't hear of it. Mind if I ask how your conference went? She's such a sweetie that I can't imagine anyone having a harsh word to say about her but she was just beside herself."

"I don't understand why she gets so worked up like this. Kimmie's teacher gave me a glowing report just like I kept telling her she would. I wish I knew how to build her confidence. How did she do with the bat?"

"Just fine. She was hitting them all over the yard by the time we called it quits."

"Oh good. Maybe that will help her some."

They heard a noise in the hall. "I'll go check. I thought I heard something too," a voice called from the direction of the kitchen.

"That'll be Stan. He's to come get us when Kimmie has her books all packed up."

Before she could turn toward the doorway, Stan was behind her with the cord. Once again, his eerie laughter filled the house while he pulled it tighter and tighter.

"Isn't it nice to know that your daughter will be remembered fondly?" Russ asked just before she blacked out.

He stood and watched until Stan finished with her. The two of them deposited her lifeless body on the porch. They left her where she would be hidden by the low wall surrounding it but easily seen by anyone who stepped onto it.

"That should do it," Russ concluded happily. "Lock up, Stan. Don't want any riffraff getting in where they don't belong," he chuckled at his own joke as he and Stan strolled away from the house.

## Chapter Seventeen

The waiting was making Tori jumpier by the minute. Ever since she woke up screaming after witnessing the three horrific deaths, she had been ready to snap. Guy tried everything he could think of but Tori was inconsolable. She broke down so many times while she related the scene to Todd that it had taken almost two hours for her to get through it.

When Todd's phone finally chirped, Tori let out a small shriek and grabbed one of Guy's hands with both of hers. Her knuckles were white by the time the brief conversation ended.

"The mailman found the mom," he stated flatly, naming a town only forty-five minutes away. "I have to go but I'll check in later. Don't forget what I told you. Even though someone will be nearby I don't want either of you to take any chances. That goes for both of you."

"I want to come." Tori spoke up, startling them.

"No," Todd refused instantly.

"I have to," she argued.

"Tori." Guy reached for her but missed as she moved to stand between Todd and the door.

"I need to go there. Just to see the house. I won't try to go inside. I'll stay out of the way."

"Don't do this to yourself, Tori," Todd advised.

"Please, Todd. Let me go with you."

"You can't. Why do you even want to?"

She was crying again but persisted anyway. "I have to. I have to stand there and see the house. I have to see it so I know how real my dreams are."

"Tori," Todd tried to interrupt her.

"I have to find the kitten. The one they hit over the fence. He's still alive. I know he is. I have to go so he doesn't die too."

"I'll find him for you. I promise. As soon as I get there."

"I have to," she insisted. "I have to find him. I have to save him. I have to." She was on the verge of hysteria. "I didn't even try to help any of the others but I might be able to help him. I can't stay here and let him die like the rest of them. Please, Todd. Don't make me let them kill him too."

Todd sighed, clearly unhappy and met Guy's eyes. She could see that Guy agreed it was not something they should let her do. Tori continued to plead as the men

considered it. When Guy shrugged helplessly, the final decision was Todd's. Clearly everything in him wanted to prevent her from getting that close but he pulled out his phone anyway. After a short call, he studied Tori's face, frowning while he looked at her.

"I understand your reasons but I want you to reconsider this. I will find that kitten and get him the care he needs. If it's possible, I'll bring him to you. If not, I'll take you to see him but I don't want you to go there."

"I know. I really do but I still want to. I'm sorry and I understand you don't want me there because you're trying to protect me and keep this from being even worse but it doesn't matter. I have to go get him. Please, Todd. Please. I'll do whatever you say, just please let me go get him."

"Fine. I'll take you even though I still believe it's the wrong thing to do. I think you're going to make yourself hurt even more than you already do but I know you'll beat yourself up anyway if I refuse. You can ride with me. Lita's meeting us there to bring you back home. Guy, I want you to hold on to Tori at all times. Tori, if you resist what I say even the slightest bit I'll have Guy toss you over his shoulder and stuff you in Lita's car immediately and nothing you say will convince me to let you back out of it."

"I'll listen," Tori repeated, accepting her coat from Guy. "I can see how much both of you want to protect me from this. I'm sorry I can't let you this time. I know you don't think I can handle this but I can. It really will help me. Please trust me."

"We do," Guy assured her after meeting Todd's eyes in the rearview mirror. "You know how we men are. Trusting you isn't going to stop us from trying to shield you from all the bad things in the world."

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Tori didn't resist when Guy unfastened her seat belt and pulled her onto his lap. If she was truthful, she would admit how much she needed to feel his strong arms holding her to his solid chest. The steady beat of Guy's heart combined with his even breathing soothed her to the point where she lost some of the tension that had filled her all morning. By the time Todd switched off the engine, she was barely shaking.

Todd asked them to wait in the car until he spoke to various agents already on the scene. When he returned, Ned was with him.

Tori stood outside the gate and stared at the house. "It's the same," she stated.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Ned asked with equal awe. "You didn't miss a thing."

"No, they didn't miss a thing," Tori corrected him. "Russ sees all the details." She shivered and turned away. "The kitten should be around there." She indicated the left side of the fence.

"Go find him, Tori." Todd obviously wanted to get her away from there. "We'll be right beside you. Don't let go of Guy's hand."

Within minutes she had located the poor creature. He was alive but just barely. Todd stopped her before she could pick him up. He made her wait until he called the

veterinarian who had already been there to pick up the mother cat and three other kittens. When he explained his purpose he repeated the man's instructions and had Tori touch the kitten. He responded immediately. He was very weak but still struggled to move closer to Tori's comforting touch.

"From how he's moving he doesn't think there's any spinal injury. Tori, pick him up very carefully and try to hold him steady because he may have other internal injuries. It sounds like the first thing we have to do is raise his body temperature and get him rehydrated. The vet gave me the name of a colleague to take him to who's closer to you, Tori, and is calling him before you get there." He gave Lita the address. "Have you seen enough?"

Tori nodded, cradling the tiny creature gently. Once they were in Lita's car, she asked Guy to help open her jacket and raise her shirt so she could put the kitten on her bare stomach. Holding him in place with one hand, she lowered her shirt over him, stroking softly through the material. She murmured the whole trip, hoping she had the same effect on the kitten as Guy had on her when she rested against his chest the prior afternoon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tori was pacing again. Ever since Lita dropped them off at her cottage, she alternated between pacing and staring out the window.

"Come here," Guy demanded as he snagged her around the waist and hoisted her to his lap. "Wearing yourself out isn't going to help. You heard the vet. He did everything medically possible. All we can do now is wait."

"I know. But what if I was wrong to bring him here instead of taking him to be with the other kittens?"

"Tori, he wouldn't be in with them anyway. He has to have an IV for now. They don't. He has to stay sedated so he doesn't aggravate his bruises. The others are too active to be around him until he has some time to heal."

"But maybe he could sense them if they were nearby. Maybe he could smell the mom cat too."

"Maybe but think about the reason the vet asked us to leave. If the kitten really can pick up on your nervousness while he's out, wouldn't he also be able to tell that his mom's hurting? What if the others are scared and that upsets him? Right now he needs quiet, warmth and fluids. You heard the simulated heartbeat through the heating pad. The vet said it's been effective with other animals. It'll seem like he's curled up against something warm and calming. I'm worried too but for now he's where he needs to be."

"Oh, Guy, I know he is," Tori sounded lost. "It's just that I keep seeing Kimmie's face when he got hit. She loved how half of each paw was white. She thought he looked like he was wearing socks. She always giggled at the way his nose looked off-center because the white triangle wasn't right where his nose really was. Harry let her touch his eyebrows on the black side of his face to make sure they were really there since he

only had one white one on that side and she couldn't see the rest. He let her rub his belly and play with his toes. Harry can't die, Guy. He just can't. He was the one Kimmie was going to keep when they were old enough to leave the mom. He has to live because she loved him so much and I have to take care of him for her."

"I'm sure he's trying. Cats are very perceptive. He heard you talking to him. He understands he has a home with you and that you'll take care of him just like Kimmie planned to."

Tori's face crumbled. "I never had a pet. I don't really know how to take care of a cat."

"Nothing to it. We always had a menagerie. Cats have unique personalities or ours did. They have a way of expressing their opinions until you understand what they want. We'll pick up some basics, dishes, whatever food the vet recommends, litter box, assorted toys and let Harry take it from there."

"What if he gets better and I bring him here and screw up?"

"You won't, Tor. You already love him and that's all animals need after you take care of the common sense stuff, like food and water. You're very observant so you'll notice if anything's different and once you do you'll have him checked out instead of ignoring it. You won't go off for a week and leave him alone. You won't kick him out of your way when he acts like a kitten and walks under your feet all day. You won't toss him outside when you turn your back for three seconds and he steals your dinner. You won't tie him up with a very short rope when he races around the house, knocking over everything he gets close to for hours at a time. You won't yell mean things and push him away when he wants to cuddle and you're in the middle of something that you can't easily put down. I have faith in you."

"I wish I did."

"I bet you'll be wondering what you were so worried by the end of the first day he's here."

"If he gets here. I guess it's too soon to call."

"Not if it'll make you feel better. The vet told us to call as often as we wanted to and we're going to take him at his word and do just that. Here." Guy shifted her so he could tug his cell phone and the vet's card from his pocket.

Tori shook her head and pushed it back toward him. "You call. I don't think I'll be able to talk without crying no matter what they say."

A few minutes later Guy repeated the vet's assurances that the kitten was resting comfortably and appeared to be stabilized. As Tori suspected, she was in tears before he finished telling her. Without a word, Guy reached for her shoes and removed them. Next, he did the same with his. Quickly, he tugged off both their shirts and pulled her down on the sofa with him, holding her on his chest as he had the day before.

"Much better," Guy declared, drying Tori's cheeks with his thumb. "Oh. I should have asked if this is okay with you first."

Tori stared at him with a frown. "I didn't think I was that bad today."

"Excuse me?" He was confused.

"You're being nice again like you were yesterday."

"Well, damn. I made a real mess of things with you if you're suspicious when I'm not being an overbearing brute. I need to work on this one."

"Yeah, but could you maybe wait until I'm not so close to losing it? I think one of us should stay consistent and we both know that's not going to be me for now. I was getting used to having an Alpha male around."

"Mm, I sure do like the sound of that," Guy teased.

"Not what I meant and you know it."

"Ah, but it was. Don't fight it, tiger. Not when you already know it's inevitable."

"You don't have to overdo it."

"Hey, just trying to make you comfortable," he stated smugly. "Now shut up and relax." Guy turned her head and pressed her cheek to his chest before kissing her hair. "It's naptime."



## Chapter Eighteen

Two and a half hours after Tori crawled into her bed, she was still wide awake. Over dinner, when she and Guy had discussed the possibilities of her having a dream-free night, they both agreed that they shouldn't alter their sleeping arrangements. Though she knew that continuing as they had been was the correct thing to do, it didn't dispel her growing sense of loneliness. She felt exhausted in spite of the hour she'd napped on Guy's chest earlier. Somehow, Tori sensed Russ would give her a night of peace so she should have been able to sleep but still couldn't.

For a time, her thoughts focused on Harry. After Guy spoke with the vet the last time, he had the man repeat his comments to her so she could hear firsthand how encouraged he was by the kitten's improvement. Baring any unforeseen circumstances, Tori would be bringing him home within a week. He was younger than most kittens when they traditionally left their mothers but Sam had already been adding bits of solid food so the vet didn't think the transition would take very long. She was still apprehensive but not nearly as much as she might have been without Guy's supportiveness.

Guy. The real reason her mind wouldn't shut down so she could sleep. On one hand, Tori still believed that his feelings would disappear as soon as the threat to her did. On the other hand, he seemed so certain that she was beginning to accept the things he kept insisting on. On yet another, Guy and everything that had happened since they met was entirely too overwhelming. It was all too much too soon and Tori didn't trust her own reactions to let her life change so quickly. On the fourth, nonexistent hand, there was her vow never to leave herself vulnerable to the type of hurt she'd felt when she left her parents' life. On the fifth hand, sex with Guy was too incredible to dismiss lightly, especially since she'd previously decided against casual sex with meaningless men.

Tori sighed. She'd been going around and around, trying to figure out what it all meant. So far, it evaded her. Her head was beginning to feel like it might explode so she had to find a way to turn off her mind long enough to fall asleep. Her thoughts were still spinning wildly after another half-hour of telling herself to stop dwelling on it so she decided it was time to take action.

She had been hearing Guy's deep, even breathing for the past hour and knew he was sleeping soundly. Maybe, if she moved slowly and took her time, she could crawl in with him and snuggle up to his warm body without waking him. Even if she had to settle for sleeping next to him without touching him it would still be better than lying there alone all night, staring at the ceiling until the sun came up.

Very cautiously, Tori slid from her bed and padded to the spare room. She could see him in the light that stayed on in the hallway. Guy was on his back with one arm under his head and the other on his chest beneath the covers. For a few moments, Tori just stood there, watching him sleep. He looked so peaceful, much less rugged than when he was awake. It made her wonder if this was his usual expression when he wasn't being the larger-than-life Alpha male who came out when they were together.

Tori lifted the corner of the covers just enough for her to inch her way beneath them. She thought she had successfully managed to join Guy without disturbing him when she suddenly found herself pinned on her back. There was one strong leg immobilizing hers. His forearm leaned on her neck so he could easily suffocate her and the barrel of his gun pressed against her temple.

"Please don't shoot, Guy. It's just me," Tori choked out, forcing herself not to struggle.

As soon as Guy heard Tori's voice, he released her. "What the fuck are you doing, sneaking in here like that? You looking to get yourself killed?"

"No," Tori answered, her voice sounded small and meek.

"Holy Christ," Guy swore. He switched on the lamp on the far nightstand and put his gun next to it after reengaging the safety.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled as she struggled to make her body function so she could run back to her room.

Guy ran his fingers through his hair and took a deep breath as his other hand clamped around Tori's wrist. "No, I'm the one who is sorry."

When Guy finally looked at her, Tori knew he could see the panic she was feeling. She'd never been more afraid in her entire life as she was when Guy reacted to her presence. She was sure he was affected too by the way he hauled her against him with his arms so tightly around her that she couldn't breathe. Tori patted his forearm to get his attention but Guy failed to notice. Her fear returned, causing Tori to fight frantically against his grip. When she struggled for a breath, Guy evidently realized his mistake and loosened his arms just enough for her to breathe.

"Take it easy, tiger. You're okay now," he crooned. "There's nothing to be afraid of. No one's going to hurt you."

Guy's comments registered and Tori burst out laughing. "Don't you mean other than you? That I'll be just fine if you don't break my neck, shoot me or suffocate me yourself?"

He waited until he was sure she was listening. "I will never hurt you. Even when you sneak up on me and my instincts kick in before my brain catches up and figures out it's you, I swear I will never hurt you."

"All right, fine. Whatever you say," she agreed merely to pacify him.

Guy didn't force the issue. "I can't believe I didn't hear you," he sounded annoyed with himself. "I—"

"Wait," she cut him off. "Don't do that. I didn't make any noise so there wasn't anything for you to hear."

"You woke yourself up this time? Weren't—"

"No," she interrupted again. "I wasn't dreaming. I wasn't even asleep."

"Oh. Then what's wrong? Did you hear something outside?"

Tori grabbed Guy before he made it off the bed. "No. Jeez, this was a really bad idea."

"What was?" His frustration was showing.

"Damn," she swore at herself. "I couldn't sleep, okay? I know what we said but I'm sure I won't have one of those dreams tonight. I just couldn't get my mind to shut up. I was lying there, staring at the ceiling, listening to you sleep and I decided it might help if I could hear you better."

"So you came over here, intending to cozy up to me and I scared the shit out of you instead."

"Like I said," she shrugged, "bad idea. Guess I'll get back to where I belong now."

"Wrong," Guy declared, emphasizing the word by trapping her on her back again, only without any pressure this time. "The only flaw in an otherwise perfect idea was my failure to explain how I might react if I were startled. I neglected to make sure you understood the need for you to make plenty of noise so I wouldn't do what I just did."

"Hmm." Tori's brows crinkled. "I do something impulsive, something that I would have known not to do if I'd bothered to think at all, which you perceive as a threat to my safety so you switch into super-cop mode and now you're making it seem like it was your fault. Nope. Not going to work. Thanks for trying though."

He shook his head. "I see we need to spend more time on this one. I was irresponsible, Tori. But I can wait until morning to make you see that. I'd much rather discuss the fact that you just acknowledged that you know you sleep better when you're with me."

"Hate to burst your bubble, Detective, but it's a temporary thing. Once this is over and I'm back to my regular routine, I'm sure I'll be just fine. If you didn't breathe so loudly I wouldn't have thought of it tonight either."

"More denial," Guy stated. He rolled to his back with Tori stretched along his side. "It's okay though. Hang on to that if you need to. I won't say I told you so when you admit it."

"You're being a jerk again."

"Since when does having the patience to wait for the woman of my dreams to let herself accept that she loves me as much as I love her qualify as being a jerk?"

"When you know it's not true and act like a smug asshole while you pretend it is."

"Better watch what you say. Since only one of us is pretending and it isn't me you might want to reconsider making your current misguided definitions known."

Tori was too tongue-tied to choose between her sarcastic responses so she punched the side of his stomach instead.

"Aren't we past that yet? If you want me to handcuff you, say so. Hitting me to get me to caution you against assaulting a police officer really isn't necessary."

"Oh, get a grip, will you? Not everything is about sex. Sometimes people get hit because they deserve it. And before you say it, I came over here to sleep, not because I had some secret plan to trick you into pawing me again."

"Really?" Guy acted totally shocked. "You aren't longing to find out what other ways I can use my hands to make you scream?"

"No."

"You really weren't lying in bed, unable to sleep because you kept remembering how good my fingers felt inside your pussy?"

"No."

"Huh? No burning need to discover how long you can stand having your nipples tormented without begging for my cock?"

"No. Jeez, get over yourself already. Can't you take a hint? I'm not interested. I simply do not want you at the moment. Why is that so hard for you to understand?"

"Oh, I understand all right. I understand perfectly well. Yep, I sure do understand what you're telling me. Just like I understand that you're lying. Badly."

"I am not."

"No? Good then, since you're not at all excited, you won't mind if I give you a proper goodnight kiss to help me get back to sleep."

"No problem. Take your time. Talking to you has me almost asleep anyway. Don't mind me if I nod off in the middle of your little kiss."

Guy chuckled at the bored expression on Tori's face. It might have been convincing if her nipples weren't poking his side and he wasn't able to smell her arousal. "You go right ahead if you're that tired. Don't force yourself to stay awake for me. I can entertain myself." He winked as he lowered his mouth to hers.

Guy started with little, tight-lipped kisses that he once thought were the best the first time he worked up his nerve to try them. He continued until he slowly covered every bit of her lips several times, long after Tori began to respond. He eventually progressed to kisses with looser lips but still closed-mouth. When she attempted to pressure his lips to part, he ignored her. He refused repeatedly until she forced her tongue into his mouth. Even then, Guy remained passive, letting Tori work to make it into something more.

"Damn it, Guy. Kiss me for real!"

"Gee, Tori, I think this is real. What am I doing wrong?"

She groaned in frustration and shifted to her back with him leaning over her. Tori wrapped her arms around Guy's neck, inviting him to press his length against hers but he merely used one elbow to prop up his head as he rested his other hand along his

thigh. Soon she wiggled one leg between his and used it to move his over hers so she was more able to arch against his groin. She grabbed his hand and held it to her breast but failed to encourage him to fondle her. Nothing she did encouraged him to participate as she craved.

"What's wrong?" she asked, completely confused. "I thought you wanted me."

Guy lightly traced her jaw. "I do. But the only thing I suggested was a simple goodnight kiss. As I recall, you are the one who wasn't interested in anything other than sleeping beside me. I won't force myself on a woman after she specifically says she doesn't want me."

"But couldn't you tell I changed my mind?"

"It seemed like you might have but maybe you were teasing me to punish me for scaring you. You might have been trying to lure me into a trap so you could accuse me of taking advantage of the situation even though you already made your wishes for the evening perfectly clear."

Tori untangled herself so they were no longer touching and frowned as she searched Guy's expression. "You really think I'd deliberately do stuff like that?"

"Honestly, no. Not unless giving in to your need to be next to me tonight has you afraid that you might let me get close to you and your subconscious came up with a different tactic to keep the distance between us. Could I be over-thinking again and letting my own paranoia of screwing up with you blow things out of proportion? Without a doubt. But I'd rather screw up in that direction than misread your reaction and destroy what little trust you're able to give me."

"My, how interesting," she commented sarcastically. "Do tell, oh, wise one, what form of trust it is that you think I'm capable of?"

"Physical. Think about it, Tor. You have to trust me with your body or you'd never have let me hold you for longer than it took you to stop crying. You certainly wouldn't have let me pull you onto my lap. You wouldn't have demanded I touch you intimately. You wouldn't let me peel off your shirt and comfort you with the feel of our bare skin pressed together. You wouldn't have considered sharing a bed without being in a blind panic first and there is no way in hell you wouldn't have my ass hauled out of here after I held a cocked gun to your head if you didn't trust me fully with your physical safety."

"Yeah. Probably. But I think you were more shaken up than I was that you were about to kill me."

"Scared the hell out of me," he admitted.

"Me too. Remind me to tell Lita that you ask first before you shoot. She thought you might do it the other way around when I said I was ready to scream in the locker room," Tori paused. "Oh, wait. She was just saying that to keep me from losing it when I figured out who she was. Duh!"

"Overall, I'd say you're right but it wasn't entirely for your benefit. We've met briefly but most of what she knows of me is hearsay. Until you actually work with someone, it's only natural to speculate how they'll react in a given situation. When

you're in a line of work where you sometimes have to trust an unknown with your life you do need a certain amount of blind faith. You have to believe they have the ability and desire to do their job to the greatest extent possible as they, in return, expect from you."

"Isn't that hard?"

"Sometimes. I've been very lucky. Barry's been my partner since the beginning. We were friends long before we bumped into each other at the academy. It surprised both of us since we hadn't been in touch for almost a year but we still knew we'd watch each other's back."

"I thought they discouraged friends from working together."

"At times if their friendship could interfere with their purpose. Barry and I work well together. We have a lot of the same instincts and can often sense what the other will do without discussing it."

"I'm sorry, Guy, but can we talk about something else? It's selfish but I really don't want to think about what you'd be doing if you weren't stuck baby-sitting me. It's good to know that you and Barry watch out for each other but I can't handle the way you accept the need for it because the next person you run into might want to kill you."

"Aw, damn, tiger. I wasn't thinking."

"Don't." Tori pressed her fingers to his lips. "I started it. You were just explaining things to me. You shouldn't have to think that continuing a conversation that's already in progress might make me freak on you. I shouldn't have said anything."

"Sure you should. I want to know what you're thinking, no matter what it may be. It's called getting to know you and that's one of my top priorities."

"For now, but I don't want to argue about it. We already know what we'd say so let's skip it this time. You were sleeping and I came to snuggle so I could too, not to wake you up for a repeat of the same thing again."

"I certainly don't mind talking to you anytime you want to talk about whatever the topic happens to be."

"I knew you were going to say that," she sighed. "Turn off the light please."

Guy did and settled on his back next to her. "You staying over there or do I get to hold you?"

"I don't think it counts as snuggling if we're not touching somehow." Tori slid into his arms. She didn't feel comfortable and finally figured out what the problem was. "Let go a sec," she said, pushing slightly away from him. She felt Guy tense momentarily until she slipped her tank top over her head.

As Tori returned to his embrace, he chuckled. "Amazing how quickly you get used to something, isn't it?"

"Shut up before you start sounding like a jerk," she teased, relaxing into his warmth.

"Just making sure you noticed what you just did." He ran his hand over her back. "I love the way your skin feels. You're so soft and silky. Bet we'd both sleep even better if we were completely naked."

"Then we should get that way," Tori giggled and squirmed out of her shorts. "Who knows how many nights we'll get without me screaming and keeping us awake. We need as much rest as we can get."

Guy arranged Tori so she was draped halfway on top of him. His arms were wrapped around her. One leg held hers in place and he had her head on his shoulder. He waited for her body to relax before he spoke. "Feel how right this is, our bodies perfectly meshed together. We fit, Tori. This is where we belong. Now that we found this, neither one of us will ever sleep as peacefully alone as we will together. You might manage to convince your mind that you're fine without me wrapped around you but your body will miss mine. After you fall asleep, you'll spend the whole night, reaching for me. In the morning, you'll wake up, restless. You'll feel cold when you realize you spent the night alone."

"Hmm, maybe I should go back to my room now, before we expose ourselves to something so dangerous." She wasn't really joking.

"Too late," Guy whispered, not letting her escape. "We're in the same bed for no reason other than this is where we both choose to be. I didn't join you to comfort you and we didn't exhaust ourselves with hot sex. It only takes an instant in the right person's arms to be hooked for life. Running away now won't make one bit of difference so you may as well stay put."

"You are so full of bullshit, Detective," Tori declared. "But I'm warm and cozy so I'll let it slide this time."

"I love you, tiger." He kissed her hair. "Go to sleep."

"You don't but goodnight anyway," she protested but kissed his chest lightly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana smiled behind Tori's back when the younger woman failed to respond to her question. She left the table, hoping to catch Tori's expression before she retreated behind her polite mask. Diana was startled by the level of emotion displayed on Tori's face as she claimed the rare and unguarded moment to study her.

As soon as Tori sensed Diana's scrutiny, she lowered her chin, effectively hiding her features. When she raised her gaze to meet Diana's, Tori's expression was carefully blank. "I'm sorry, Diana. I didn't hear what you just said."

"Guess you were distracted by the view," Diana teased, slipping an arm around Tori's shoulders. "Can't say as I blame you. That's one fine bit of eye candy."

"Diana!"

"What? No harm in looking. A woman would have to be dead not to notice a bod like that. Or are you shocked because you consider me too old to still be interested?"

"You're not old." Tori blushed. "It's just that I never heard you say something like that before."

"That's because I never had an opportunity to tease you before. Not even when you were dating someone."

"Huh? I don't mean to be rude but I'm not really up to solving your riddles today."

Diana considered her thoughtfully. "Yes, I can see that it is still a mystery to you. Tori girl, you can deny it all you want and I fully expect you to but you can't hide the fact that you have feelings for Guy from me."

"Well, sure I do." Tori scowled. "He's been with me continually for over a week now. He promised to protect me and keep me safe and he's very patient and kind when my screams wake him up in the middle of the night. He even took me to the gym Wednesday to stop me from climbing the walls like I was about to do."

"Guy took you to the gym?" Diana was amazed. "To work out or just to show off and flex all those nice muscles for you?"

"Aw, jeez. Neither, if you must know. He's teaching me kickboxing."

Diana laughed. "Now that's something I wish I'd gotten to see."

"Hey! I'm not a total slug."

"I know. You must admit, however, that the image of you doing something athletic is not the first thing that comes to mind when I picture you away from here."

"Right. It was kind of fun for a little while."

Something in Tori's voice prevented Diana from teasing her. "Only a little while? Did something happen in the gym?"

"Not really. I don't know. Maybe. When we got there, I went to change and there was this FBI woman in the locker room. It was so strange. I confronted her and made some pretty rude comments but instead of being offended, she smiled and told Guy she liked me. It was okay while Guy was showing me how to do stuff and even when he let me try what I'd learned. It made me feel good when he told me I did something right but then I snapped and lost control and wound up on the floor with Guy, crying all over him. I was so embarrassed but he wasn't at all fazed. He carried me into the locker room, gave me a shower and got me dressed and then did the same, all with the FBI woman watching. He acted like it didn't bother him, like it was something he did all the time."

Diana wondered why Tori selected this particular example and realized it was because it took place in a neutral setting. She also realized there were things going on that Tori had no intention of telling her just yet. How could Tori discuss things when she was fighting so hard against what was happening to understand it herself?

"Do you remember when I told you Barry said that you could explain things to Guy just as you would with him? The man with you at the gym was the man he expected you to meet that night. He truly is that man, Tori. Why are you shaking your head like that?"



"Because you're wrong. Yes, Guy is really great but no one could ever be that good all the time."

"Some are. My Bill was. Carla would tell you Barry is. Old Mr. Fisher from the hardware is, just ask his wife. I bet you'd be surprised how many of them there are if you went looking for them."

Tori turned back to looking out at the main library so Diana couldn't see her face. "Okay, if you say so. I guess I'll have to take your word on that since I don't have a clue where I would even begin to search for them."

"You're deliberately avoiding the obvious. I suppose I'm to pretend not to notice so you can think you're fooling me again?"

"Um." Tori squirmed uncomfortably. "Could you?"

Diana nodded slowly. "For now. After all, you were sweet enough to bring my favorite lunch so I don't want to seem ungrateful."

Tori smiled warmly and gave Diana an extended hug. "You're entirely too good to me. Want to hear about my kitten?"

Barry watched Guy pretend he wasn't watching Tori. He was so pleased with the table he'd selected before Guy and Tori had arrived. From his vantage point, he could see both of them without turning his head. While Tori and Diana shared their lunch, he'd observed more animation on Tori's face than he'd seen in all the years she'd been there. He was positive that Diana saw it too and looked forward to comparing notes.

When Tori moved to embrace Diana, Barry's jaw dropped. "Well, I'll be."

Guy understood. "It's as I thought then?"

"Oh yeah. I wasn't sure she had it in her. Even Diana's had doubts from time to time."

"You're both in for a big surprise. One of these days, Tori is going to quit hiding and let everyone see her big heart and saucy personality."

"Due to your influence, I suppose."

"Of course. Holy Christ, Bar, you can't begin to imagine the woman she is."

"Aw, fuck," Barry said, leaning forward and clenching his fists on the table. "You seduced her. Damn it, Guy! What the hell did you do that for? Why didn't you keep it zipped at least until this was over? It really wouldn't have killed you to go without sex for a month or two."

"I know but—"

"But nothing. Tori's not the kind of woman you fuck a few times and kiss off when it gets inconvenient. She's one who is worth waiting for."

"Shut up, Barry," Guy growled. "Just shut the fuck up before I forget that you're my closest friend and that I respect you more than just about everyone else I know." Guy's tone was deadly as he fought to control his fury. "If you ever refer to Tori as a quick fuck again I swear I won't be responsible for what I do to you."

Barry stared mutely as Guy reined in his temper. He waited until his eyes lost some of the intensity they held when Guy had issued the threat before letting out the smile he'd been hiding. A minute later he was laughing heartily in spite of Guy's scowl.

"You do know why I had to say that, don't you, Guy? Personally, I have all the confidence in the world that you have only the best intentions in regards to Tori. You'd chop off your right nut before you'd intentionally harm even one hair on her head. I know you've been trying to figure out how get her to believe that you would give your life to love her."

"Sure have a twisted way of showing that."

"Stop being so pissed off over nothing and think for a minute, would you? I said I trust that you know what you're doing. Diana, on the other hand, doesn't know you as well as I do."

"Christ." Guy's tension vanished.

"Hold on before you get all worked up again. She may not know you like I do but she's willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. Even more so now that she's seen firsthand how good you are for Tori. I haven't told you this but Diana came to the station the day Tori asked to take this time off. She was loaded for bear, to put it mildly."

"That bad?"

"Worse."

"I'm surprised she didn't break down Tori's door and toss me out on my ear if she felt that strongly about it."

"Yeah, that's another one you owe me for. I defended you until I was blue in the face. Even had Todd stop by and vouch for you later on. Diana was a little more comfortable after she saw you with Tori at dinner. She wants to believe that you're good for Tori. She's trying to accept you."

"But Tori is the daughter she never had and I'm the man who is trying to capture her heart so she can't squash the urge to protect her little girl from the possibility that I might break it instead."

"Give the man a prize. You can't let it get to you because she will come around. Once you can put this mess behind you, you can focus exclusively on Tori. When Diana sees that you make her genuinely happy and that you intend to do whatever it takes to keep her that way, she'll lighten up some."

"But not entirely."

"Hell no. No matter how much your mother-in-law adores you, nothing could stop her from turning on you the instant you screw up with her baby. It's one of the laws of nature. I'm surprised your family hasn't already taught you that. Hell, even mothers and daughters who usually despise each other close ranks when the husband becomes the enemy."

"How did I miss this so completely?"

"Simple. You never considered having a mother-in-law before. When you don't plan on keeping the daughter, there's no reason to concern yourself with the mother's opinion of you. Look, I know I'm stretching it because Diana's not really Tori's mother but—"

"She's the closest thing she's got. Tori values Diana's opinion. She trusts her judgment as much as she can let herself. Diana's important to Tori. She might also be the only other person who recognizes some of what Tori holds inside so that qualifies her as Tori's mother much more than her real one does."

"Not the ideal?"

"Not even close. I can't give you specifics but I will say that getting away from those people was the second-best decision of Tori's life."

"And the first would be?"

"Admitting she loves me and doesn't want to spend another minute not being the center of my life."

"Damn, I hope she doesn't take too long to figure that out. You're going to be impossible if she keeps you hanging."

"I won't even bother denying that. But I swear I'll be patient and wait as long as it takes even though it might kill me."

Barry chuckled. "At least you already figured out that you have to hang in there. Think of how thrown you'd be when you hit some resistance if you hadn't."

"Already did and I was still thrown," Guy stated. "I knew what she's doing and why and I could even see it coming but I haven't learned to deflect it yet. Christ, I knew this wasn't going to be easy but I wasn't even remotely prepared for it. Even Diana warned me, which I now see as a good sign but so far, I've fallen into just about every trap Tori's set."

"Man, I don't envy you. I was so damn lucky that Carla didn't put me through any of that."

"You've developed selective memory. I recall plenty of times you had to decide which hoop to jump through."

"Yeah, you're probably right. But since the end of the rainbow is so damn incredible, it's easy to forget most of the storms. You'll see."

"He'll see what?" Tori asked, jolting them out of their revelry.

"Hey." Guy stood and kissed her cheek.

"Hey yourself. You haven't answered me, Barry."

"We were just talking about Sunday," Barry sputtered. "I asked if you would be coming over to watch the game with us and Guy wasn't sure how you felt about football. I don't think it makes a difference, either way, since Carla would rather do just about anything than watch a whole game although she does from time to time anyway. I said that you girls are perfectly capable of entertaining yourselves for a few hours if

you share her opinion and I told Guy he'd see that I'm right if he finds the balls to suggest it to you."

"Oh God, not another one," Tori groaned.

"I'm sorry?" Barry didn't understand Tori's comment.

"You're one of them."

"Tori?" He looked to Guy for an explanation but all he got was a sheepish grin.

"One of the guys who will manipulate things to take the heat off his buddy. First Todd, now you. I'm almost impressed with how realistic that sounded. Too bad I know you're not telling the truth about what Guy's going to see but I won't call you on it because that would ruin the nice feeling I have from spending time with Diana," Tori paused for effect. "Don't expect to get away with it again because this feels like a once and done thing to me."

"Well, son of a bitch," Barry muttered. "Where have you been hiding those claws all this time?"

"Men can be such boys," Diana stated. "Don't encourage them and they'll quit soon enough. I'm so glad you came by, Tori girl." Diana hugged her and winked at Guy behind her back. "I know you're tired of hearing this but I have to say it again. As much as I miss you I absolutely refuse to let you come back to work until this is over and done with. I can come to you or Guy can bring you in for a chat whenever he feels it's safe, either here or at home if you're going stir crazy. I'd much rather do without you for another month than lose you forever."

Tori sniffled and dropped her chin. "Me too."

Guy snagged her waist and gently urged her head to his shoulder. "Tori will be back before you know it," he declared. "Todd has everything under control. Still, you better get used to the idea of me hanging around anyway because I plan on making a lifelong habit of it."

"How the mighty have fallen," Barry teased. "Seriously, come to the house Sunday. It'll give Carla a chance for a little girl talk. No offense, Diana."

"None taken." She smiled. "I do understand the need for female friends who aren't relatives."

"Good." Barry shifted. "I should go. Please think about it. No need to call. There's always plenty to munch on and you're both welcome anytime."

"Thanks, Barry," Tori replied. "We need to go too since I would like to stop and see Harry if you don't mind, Guy."

"Not at all." Guy let her slip from his arm but not before catching her hand. "We'll see you both soon."

They said their goodbyes. Since they didn't look back they didn't see Diana and Barry grinning happily behind them as the pair discussed the changes in both Guy and Tori.

## Chapter Nineteen

The sound of soft laughter could be heard from the kitchen during a momentary lull in the noisy football game. Guy knew he had a silly grin on his face again but didn't attempt to hide it. Barry was someone who understood what he was feeling. He was even looking forward to the teasing comments Barry would make sooner or later.

"Damn, this feels great," Guy sighed contentedly, knowing he was adding to Barry's amusement.

"I wish I had a camera. Next time I heard you referred to as a cold-hearted bastard with ice water in your veins I could flash a picture of you sitting here looking like a love-sick puppy," Barry chuckled. "Nah, wouldn't work. They'd think I drugged you or something because no way would they believe it was the real you."

"They will when I can't stop thinking about her long enough to get rid of the stupid grin on my face. I know I must look like an idiot but I can't help it."

"You don't look like an idiot. You look like a guy who just found the secret key to the universe. It's called being in love with the right woman. Whole different ball game from this side, isn't it? Even for you, the guy who always went out of your way to be supportive when the rest of us needed a boost to keep us from falling apart while our heads and our hearts were way out of sync."

"Sure is. I don't know why but I always thought I'd handle it better than the rest of you."

"You might if you didn't need to keep looking over your shoulder for a pair of serial killers who are expecting your woman to welcome them with open arms when they show up."

"Thanks for trying to humor me but we both know I'd be a mess anyway. If Tori didn't have that to hide behind she'd just come up with some excuse for why I'm temporarily deluding myself into wanting to be with her. I bet she'll have a new one as soon as we have them in handcuffs. I know she's pretty stressed right now and that's part of the reason she switches gears so often but I have a strong feeling that it won't be much different after we get them. She's quick and I suspect she has one hell of an imagination."

"Hate to say it but I'm looking forward to watching you work your way through this. Not that I want to see you squirm because I'm sure you're going to be suffering. You do know I'm here if you need me, right?"

"Right and don't be surprised if you find me cowering at your door in the middle of the night."

"Anytime. Now what I meant by that is that it'll be good to see a less reserved side of Tori. She's never been here without Diana before even though we have asked her. She was always chatty and interesting but, I don't know, unapproachable maybe? Even though she was pleasant and joined right in with whatever was going on, I had the impression that there was an invisible boundary around her that no one could get through. I mentioned it to Carla either the second or third time Tori was here and she agreed."

"I'm surprised it didn't drive her crazy," Guy chuckled. "No offense, Bar, but your wife can meddle almost as well as my sisters."

"It would have if Diana hadn't still been here and knocked the wind out of her sails. Now she is one perceptive lady, Diana is. She convinced Carla that actively trying to draw Tori out would only manage to push her deeper into herself. She told us just enough about Tori's past to make us understand that patience and consistency were what it would take if Carla truly wanted to get to know her."

"Guess that applies to me too."

"Probably but not in the same way. Tori has relaxed more over the years. She's loosened up since we first met her. I think she would have become more open given time and Carla and I both enjoy her company enough to give her as much space as she needs so she keeps coming back."

"I wish I'd met her here years ago."

"You would have if you hadn't been such a stubborn ass and gone out of your way to avoid her," Barry stated, studying Guy closely. "Damn, I knew I was right. You deliberately stayed away when you knew she'd be here. What I don't get is why? It's so unlike you, not showing up to check out a pretty girl."

"I know, I know. But the first time Carla hinted I might find Tori attractive I had just gone through a whole string of disastrous blind dates arranged by my sisters who insisted that each and every one was the one for me. They were so ambitious that I dreaded going to visit any of them and I didn't want to feel that way about coming here so I became a stubborn ass and ignored Carla's subtle attempts to get us together. You could have told me you noticed."

"Sure, but then I would have had to ask Carla to back off and she was having so much fun with her little plots to lure you both here at the same time that I couldn't. If it helps any, Carla didn't have any success with Tori either the few times she felt daring enough to push her luck."

"I hate that I wasted so much time that we could have been together."

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe you had to meet now, like you did, or you wouldn't have connected. Aren't you the one who believes in fate arranging things as they need to be so things end up as they're meant to?"

"Yeah, but I always assumed that fate would be kinder to me. Guess I'm being taught a lesson for being so presumptuous."

"Think of it as being challenged because you're up for it. Maybe you deserve a few obstacles but what about her? What did she do to piss off fate to be subjected to all she has before she found you?"

"Not a damn thing. Maybe that's my true punishment, Tori suffering for my stupidity."

"Perhaps but you're together now so you must have appeased the powers that be. It's all just the storms that make the rainbow. Focus on what you'll find at the end of it and put the rest in the past where it belongs."

"My goodness, Barry," Tori spoke from the doorway where she stood next to Carla. "I never knew you were such a philosopher. Going to share what you think Guy will find at that rainbow or didn't you guys get that far?"

"Let me, Bar," Guy interrupted. "Tori?" He held out his hand toward her and waited patiently for her decision. When she finally stepped in his direction, Guy had to smile. Instead of just accepting her hand, he caught her and drew her onto his lap, much to her horror. "Sit still. You know what happens when you wiggle around like that."

Carla gasped in shock and Barry didn't even try to hide his amusement as Tori gave Guy a deadly glare. "God, you are such an asshole."

"Since when does being honest qualify for asshole status?" Guy asked sweetly. He managed to intercept Tori's hand before it connected with his cheek. "Careful. Assaulting an officer of the law in front of witnesses, one of whom is a fellow officer, is against the law. Consider yourself warned. Try it again and you'll force me to handcuff you for my own safety. Now if that was your intention when you took a swing at me then I'll tell you again that all you have to do is ask."

By the time he finished Barry was openly chuckling and Carla was moderately concerned as they waited for Tori's response. For a few seconds, Guy was afraid he'd gone too far but relaxed when Tori began to blush.

"Oh, Guy, stop acting like such a hard-ass." Tori cupped his cheek as she gave him a shy smile. "Barry and Carla are our friends. You don't have to pretend you're a domineering tough guy in front of them. They won't think any less of you if you admit you're the only one of the two of us who spent any time in cuffs. There's no need to drop hints and hope I pick up that you want another go. If you liked it as much as you seemed to, just say so when you're desperate for more."

"Holy fuck!" Barry exclaimed between bursts of uncontrollable laughter.

"Oh my God." Carla's expression was a mixture of disbelief and fascination as if she couldn't decide if Tori was serious or teasing in response to Guy's comment.

Guy merely shook his head and grinned at her. "You're going to keep me on my toes. Yep, full of surprises, you are." Guy hugged her to his chest and glanced at his friends. "In case you're still wondering about what I know I'll find at the end of that rainbow," he paused until Tori shifted to look at him. "The treasure I'll claim when I get there is a pretty little tiger girl with the softest pale red hair and huge green eyes that are full of dancing sparkles whenever she smiles at me. She's as feisty as she is sexy and

she has so many different ways of frustrating me that she's utterly amazed I haven't run away like she expects me to. She's so sure I'll be the same as the other people she's known that she can't let herself accept the truest truth in all the universe. If asked, she'd even pretend not to know what that truth is but deep in her heart, she does. Want to tell us what that truth is, Tori?"

"That you are so full of bullshit it's time to break out the boots?" Tori suggested, dreading what she knew he'd say next but knowing he was pushing her because of her crack about the handcuffs.

Guy laughed and brushed her lips. "Not even close but I know you need to hold on to that for now. No, the truth is that I love her—you—with all my heart and I will for the rest of my life."

"Guy." Tori frowned and peeked at their audience.

"Shh. Since you think they're good enough friends that I don't need to hide the fact that I've loved every second you had me in handcuffs then there's no need to hide the way I feel about you. Barry knew without me saying a word that I want you to have a permanent place in my life. Carla's probably ready to burst since she's been trying to fix us up for years and I was an incredibly stupid fool not to let her. I'm sure she'll have lots of fun, throwing that back at me forever but you know what? I deserve it. She was right and I made a mistake every time I ignored her little comments that were intended to make me ask her to arrange for me to meet you."

"Let me go." Tori struggled against his arms.

"In a minute, after you listen first."

"I can't believe you're doing this." Tori turned her head to stare at Barry. "Why are you letting him?"

Barry waited for Guy to gesture that he should answer. "I know you don't understand why I didn't shut him up as soon as he started, Tori, and I'm very sorry for how you feel right now. Please don't hate me for understanding my friend's need to share his overwhelming feelings with people he trusts enough to know it's safe to say all of that out loud in front of us. I'm sure Carla is going to read me the riot act after you leave but she hasn't interrupted so she knows how important this is too, so please don't reject her either."

"Ah. I get it now. This is all just a sick joke that you set up the other day at the library. I guess I'm not surprised that you're in on it too, Carla. After all, everybody loves Guy and would do anything for him so why would you be any different? Okay then. Guy, get on with it. Spit out the punch line since I'm just dying to hear it."

Guy could tell how upset Carla was and hoped Barry would manage to explain it to her so she didn't banish him from their lives permanently. Either way, he had to continue. He'd already said too much to stop now.

"That was unnecessarily cruel of you, Tori, including Barry and Carla like that. You know both of them too well to suggest they'd deliberately plan to embarrass you for their amusement. Once you remember that I'm sure they'll accept your apology and



forget what you just said because they do understand how hard this is for you and that you're fighting against it in every way you can."

"You twisted son of a bitch," Tori growled.

"There now, didn't that feel much better than lashing out at people who have cared for you from the first moment they met you?" Guy's tone was pleasant but his grip tightened when Tori tried to tug her wrists from his grip. "Keep listening for another minute and then I'll let you get up. I do love you. With all that I am in the forever kind of way. I will prove that to you even if it takes the rest of my life. Someday I hope you'll forgive me for tonight and understand what Barry was trying to say. They are truly our friends and we can trust them with anything. They know you can't accept it yet but that won't stop them from being our friends. I know you don't believe in true love that lasts a lifetime and you don't trust me enough to let yourself open up with me and be vulnerable at this point but I'm not going anywhere. I won't ever give up on us. I know without a doubt that you will love me too if you ever let yourself take a chance with me. I'm sorry you think I'm only saying this to hurt you and that I'm doing it with an audience to humiliate you but I promise that is the last thing I'd ever do to you."

"Is there more?" Tori asked tiredly.

"There is a lifetime of more but I'll stop for the moment." Guy released her, watching as she straightened her shoulders and transformed her expression into the same dignified one he'd seen the first night they met.

"Thank you." She glanced at Guy. "If you'll excuse me," she included all of them, "I'll be in the car. Once you're finished with the good laugh you'll have over this and are done congratulating yourself for the complete success for the effectiveness of your prank, I'd appreciate it if you drove me home. Goodnight." She spoke to Barry and Carla, "Thanks so much for including me."

Complete silence filled the room after Tori made her exit. Guy finally managed to focus on his friends. "Holy Christ, what have I done?"

"What have you done? What have you done!" Carla screeched. "You just publicly humiliated a very sweet girl who is entirely too good for a worm like you, that's what you did. You're totally insane. How could you! And we're no better, Barry, letting him go on and on like that."

"Stop, Carla." Barry caught her mid-pace and snaked an arm around her waist. "Look at him. Nothing you say will come close to what he's already saying to himself, so let him go. As for us, our only excuse is we know Guy and trust him. He says he loves Tori and will find a way to prove it and we accept that because we know it's right to believe in him. Right or wrong, Guy needed to express his feelings out loud and right or wrong, we wanted to hear him. We all got too caught up in the moment to remember that Tori isn't ready for any of this. We are all to blame."

Guy actually chuckled. "Knock it off, Barry. Sorry, Carla, I was thinking of what Tori would say if she'd heard that. See, she's decided that guys have some sort of pact to divert blame from the guy who loves the girl who's furious with whatever stupid

thing he's just done by making it sound like it's their doing instead of his. Barry, thanks and you do have a very tiny point but let's face it, I screwed up beyond belief and probably just lost the only woman I'll ever love. I'm sorry I wrecked things for you too but I'll do what I can to fix that."

"Good, and while you're at it you can fix the rest too," Carla commanded. "You damn well better fix this and fast or Aunt Diana's going to kill all of us, literally. Personally, I don't want that to happen and I doubt you do either. I'd much rather live and hear whatever tidbit Tori decides to share next so get your ass out there and do it."

Barry started to laugh. "You heard her, Guy. My wife wants to watch Tori make you squirm again so get a move on."

Guy stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "I can fix this, right? If I follow my heart and keep showing Tori how much I really do love her, I will be able to fix this."

"Sure you will." Barry let go of Carla to hug his distraught friend. "I have faith in you even if you don't at the moment."

"Thanks, Barry." Guy looked defeated. "I'll call you tomorrow."

Guy let Tori fume until they got to her cottage. Before she had a chance to move away from his truck, he stopped her by kneeling in front of her.

"I screwed up royally, Tori. It was wrong to force you to let me declare my feelings in front of people before you've accepted them yourself. Yes, everything I said was God's honest truth and yes, Barry and Carla are the very best of friends but none of that matters. I hurt you by being unable to control my need to share how much I love you and nothing I do now can erase that. I don't know how to tell you how sorry I am. And I have no idea how to make this up to you but I will do anything if you'll just give me the chance to try."

Tori closed her eyes and sighed deeply. "Yeah. Okay. Fine. Whatever. It's snowing. I'm cold. You're going to be frozen to the spot if you don't get up and then what good will you do me? You're forgiven. Can we please go inside now?"

Guy stood and held out his hand. Tori glanced at it and shot him a look of total disbelief as she pushed past him on her way to the house. Once she hung up her coat, she left him standing in the living room without saying another word.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hours later, Tori fought to get out of the dream that she was trapped in. She had been telling herself to scream so she would wake up and put an end to it for the night but she couldn't. She knew she was tangled in the covers in her own bed and not really tied up as it seemed but she still couldn't wake up. For the first time in all the years she'd been having these nightmares, she couldn't do anything to break free of the hold it had on her. She knew she was seeing something that had happened earlier and she reminded herself that she could stop it by moving but nothing made any difference. No

matter how often she told herself to wake up she couldn't make her body cooperate and she remained stuck in a dream that made absolutely no sense.

"Wake up, Tori," Guy's voice finally penetrated her mind. "Come on, tiger, time for you to wake up now. Tori! Can you hear me? Please try, Tori. You have to listen to me. I need you to wake up and open your eyes and talk to me." She felt his hand on her shoulders, squeezing gently.

Tori's mind latched on to Guy's voice and used it to pull herself from whatever was holding her. Suddenly, she was in his arms, gasping for breath as she whimpered with no memory of finally being able to move.

"Guy," she panted. "Oh my God, Guy."

"I'm here, Tori. It's okay now. I'm here and I'm not going to let you go."

Tori let him rock her in his arms until she felt less shaky. She noticed that he sounded honestly frightened and wondered why.

"Hey." Tori loosened the death grip she had on his arms. "I think I'm awake now."

Guy held her away from him to look at her. "Christ, you had me scared."

"Why? What happened?"

"I heard you thrashing around so I came over to wait for you to scream but you didn't. You were battling the covers and whimpering but neither made you wake up tonight."

"How long?"

"Forty-five minutes that I'm sure of. More if I didn't hear you right away."

"It wouldn't stop. I knew I was dreaming and I told myself to wake up. I tried to move or scream so I would but I couldn't. It just kept seeing the same thing, over and over again. I thought I was trapped and didn't know how to get you to save me."

"Damn, I shouldn't have waited so long. I should have woken you sooner. I should have known."

"How? How, Guy? Tell me how you would ever know that tonight's dream was completely different from all the others and that I needed you to wake me up because I couldn't scream like I do every other night."

"You're right. I couldn't have known but it doesn't stop me from thinking I should have anyway. You needed me and I should have known that."

"Okay, if that's true then I should have been able to reach for you somehow. I should have been able to tell you I needed you in the first place. If you should be able to sense me then I should be able to make you aware that something's changed so you need to act differently. It works both ways. I know it does but I don't know how I know. I can't give you a reason, I just know it."

"I believe you," Guy stated seriously. "And, for the same unknown reason, I know you're right. Too bad we don't also know how we make it work but there are a lot of other things about why this is happening to you that I don't understand. I wish more

than anything I had all the answers for you but I just don't. Hell, I'd settle for having one of them at the moment."

Tori pulled away and kneeled in front of him. Her expression was fierce as she clamped onto his shoulders. "Listen to me, Guy. Listen very carefully. You are doing so much for me already. More than I ever expected from anyone. More than I ever thought was possible, so do not—I repeat, do not—start thinking you should be doing even more or you'll be letting me down. I know it's hard for an Alpha male, protector of the meek like you to accept that you don't always get to have all the answers and that what you're already doing is exactly what's needed but this time you're going to have to do just that. You have to because right now I need you to be the strong man who lets me hold on to him when I need to remind myself that I trust him to keep me safe. If you have doubts then I'll lose it completely and panic in ways no one has thought of yet."

Guy yanked her firmly to his chest and surrounded her with his arms. "You are absolutely, positively, without question the most perfect woman in the world. Thank you."

"I think what you meant to say was completely self-centered and incredibly selfish but you're welcome anyway. I'm sorry I lost it earlier. I shouldn't have been such a bitch to Barry and Carla just because I was overwhelmed when you said all that stuff in front of them."

"And I'm sorry I put us all in that position in the first place. I want to tell the whole world how much I love you and I forget that you're not ready for that yet. Don't take my stupidity out on them, Tor, please. They didn't have any idea of what I was going to say. Hell, I didn't plan to get into it like that either."

"No? So this was another one of those things I make you do just by being around me?"

"You could say that."

"I just did. But what about you? Are you going to say that and make me responsible for the disaster tonight?"

"Yes and no." He tightened his arms. "Yes, being with you obliterates any trace of common sense I ever thought I had so I said what I was thinking without considering the ramifications. No, you are not in any way responsible for my failure to maintain even the slightest bit of control when I'm with you. As I said before, you are perfect and I'm an out-of-control fool who gets so stupid around you that I can't remember any of the manners my mother taught me and can't stop digging the hole I'm in even deeper. I know I shouldn't ask this but, since you already know I'm an idiotic jerk of an asshole, I will anyway. Can you help me get out of here before I'm in too deep I never see daylight again?"

"Shut up, Guy. I need overbearing Alpha now, remember? Not humble but charming little boy trying to grovel his way back into my good graces."

"All right. I'll put the groveling on hold again and demand that you tell me about your dream instead. Alpha enough for you?"

Tori nodded. "It wasn't even scary."

"Tell me," Guy urged when she didn't continue.

"Can we get under the covers first?" Tori asked when she realized she was cold.

Guy quickly straightened the bed and stretched out on his back with Tori snugly against him. "Better?"

"Mm, thanks." She took a deep breath. "It was so weird. It was like I was walking with them. I knew they were there but I couldn't see them. And I couldn't hear anything. Not the things that should have been there. We were in a grocery store and there were lots of other people but there wasn't any sound. Sort of like watching a muted TV. People's lips were moving like they were talking but I couldn't hear what they were saying.

"At first, it seemed like we were just wandering up and down the aisles. They put a few things in the cart but I think it was so they would fit in. They would stop and pick things up, like they were reading the labels or trying to choose between brands but again I don't think we were really shopping. We did that for a while but then we started following one woman and her little girl. Most of the time we were behind them and all I could see were their backs but a few times, we went past them. I tried to look at their faces but they wouldn't let me. They didn't touch me or anything but I know they stopped me somehow. At the checkout we got in the line next to theirs so we'd be leaving at the same time. We let them get ahead of us at the door and followed them into the parking lot but not all the way to their car. I tried to see it but they made me go the other way so I couldn't. It stopped then so I didn't see their car either.

"Then we were back at the beginning and it was the same, like someone rewound a movie and started watching it all over again. I tried telling myself to wake up, that I was dreaming the third time we started following the woman. I could hear myself and I knew what I was saying and I understood why I had to move but I couldn't do anything differently from the first two times. I couldn't change anything no matter how hard I tried or how loudly I told myself that I had to. There wasn't anything scary about any of it but I was terrified. I told myself to warn the woman that something awful would happen if she didn't get her daughter out of there right away but I couldn't make myself talk to her."

"I think you just learned how they choose their victims," Guy stated when Tori was calmer. "I don't understand why you didn't hear anything when they must listen until they hear something that draws them to a particular individual."

"I hate this. I can't stand being there but not being able to do a damn thing to help that poor little girl. That's who they're after, just her, not her mom. How can I know that when I didn't hear them talking about it?"

"No clue." He sounded as frustrated as Tori did. "Try to concentrate on the store for a minute. Did you notice any of those displays they have sometimes that feature regional specialties? When they picked things up, did you see a store brand?"

Tori stared blankly for a long time. "No." She frowned, shaking her head. "One of their arms was always in the way of anything that wasn't brand name. They didn't let me see anything that could identify where we were, not even the bags or the checkout people. They made me go along and watch them pick out that girl and intentionally kept me from being able to figure out anything else. That's why there wasn't any sound. So I wouldn't hear anything that might tell me where we were. I must be missing something but I just can't see it."

"Let it go, Tor. Don't torture yourself over something that isn't there. Think about what you told me. They only let you see what they wanted you to see. You can replay it in your mind forever but you won't find anything because there isn't anything for you to find. I'm right. You know I'm right."

"But I don't want you to be."

"Neither do I but that doesn't change things."

"No." Tori wiggled until she was propped on Guy's chest, facing him. "Why are they doing this when they said they were coming for me? Why didn't they just come here? If they want me like they said they do, why are they still messing around instead of finding me so they can do what they want with me?"

"Again, I have no idea. I don't understand either, not that it helps. I almost wish they would show up so I could make it clear that they will never have you because you're mine and no one takes what's mine."

Tori blinked at him. "Wow. You sound really scary when you're being possessive."

"Good because I felt scary when I said that. I would be very scary if they were here now. But none of it would be directed at you. No matter how scary I may seem, Tori, none of it will ever be meant for you."

"I know that, Guy. Jeez, would you give me some credit here? I admit I'm not at all knowledgeable when it comes to the way people work but even I know I don't need to be afraid of you. Well, not physically afraid anyway. Alpha males don't turn on the person they're in the middle of protecting unless they discover that person was lying about needing to be protected in the first place. If they discover they were being set up, yeah, then they might attack whoever they were guarding but not otherwise. Well, um, they might but not how we're talking about it."

"Oh, really? Tell me, if you would be so kind, when might it be the appropriate time for an Alpha male to attack his charge?"

Tori realized the corner she backed herself into and groaned. "Any chance you'll let me off the hook?"

"Nope." Guy slid a hand under her top and caressed her back as he grinned at her.

"Didn't think so. Not when I did this to myself like that."

"Sure did," Guy agreed.

"No use stalling. Okay. Fine. I'll say it even though we both know you already know the answer to that one. The only appropriate time that I can think of for an Alpha

male to attack someone he's protecting without them doing something to make him feel threatened is when they're having sex. There. Are you satisfied?"

His laugh made her last words clear. Guy shifted his hips. "What do you think?"

"Well, duh. Set myself up again." She rolled her eyes. "No way am I answering that one so stop looking at me like that."

"Aw, tiger. Don't spoil the fun when it's just starting to get interesting."

"Interesting, hmm?" Tori asked softly, blushing as she gazed at him with her eyes wide open.

"Why do I feel like things just shifted and I no longer know where they're headed?"

"Perhaps there isn't enough blood left in your head for you to think with."

"Oh Christ. Am I in trouble, Tori?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. You'll have to wait and see. If you do what I'm about to suggest, you'll be just fine. If you don't..." She raised her eyebrows and let the rest of her sentence hang.

"Ah. I think it's time for your suggestion now since I hate not knowing where I stand like this."

"I really should make you wait, after the way you tortured me earlier but since I know it was unintentional I won't."

"Thank you," Guy stated.

"You're welcome." She held his eyes. "Here's what I was thinking but maybe I should clarify something first."

"Whatever is best for you."

"So nice of you to agree. I've been wondering why we haven't had sex since the night I handcuffed you. I'm pretty certain it isn't because you don't want to..."

"I do."

"I know but that means there must be some other reason. I was confused because you haven't stopped pawing me or slobbering on me but I think I figured it out. I think we haven't had sex because you're waiting for me to let you know I want to."

"That's correct. I may paw and slobber, as you put it but I'm not about to force myself on you even if you do keep me perpetually hard."

"Do you think I'm a tease?"

"Hell no! Christ, Tori. You toss out a suggestive comment now and then when I manage to get you to flirt with me but you haven't done anything that would classify you as a tease."

"What about what I said about the handcuffs tonight?"

"You didn't say anything that I didn't deserve or challenge you into saying. Your spicy response to my loaded statement was great. I love that you felt comfortable enough at that particular moment to say it. Of course it would have been better if I had teased you in return but we already know that."

"You really don't mind?"

"No. Not at all. I would have mentioned it to Barry eventually and I know he would have told Carla. They are close friends and I'm not embarrassed that they know I let you cuff me and have your way with me. I'm not ashamed to admit that I enjoy being intimate with you. I wasn't planning on sharing details but I had no intention of hiding our physical relationship from my best friend."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah. Okay. As in I'm not ashamed of us either."

"Thank God."

"In fact, I'm so not ashamed that I'm about to suggest it's time for more. Hear that, Guy? I'm letting you know that I want to have sex again. With you. Now. Interested?"

"Hell yes!" Guy exclaimed.

For a minute, neither moved. They watched each other with smiles on their faces, both holding their breath in anticipation. The laughter that followed was simultaneous.

"What a pair of goofs," Tori declared.

"Maybe but you sure are a pretty little goof."

Before Tori could comment, Guy had her pinned to the bed. The heat in his eyes captured her gaze as securely as his sturdy body trapped hers. With deliberate slowness, Guy lowered his mouth to hers until they were breathing from each other.

"No games this time, tiger," he whispered against her lips.

"No," she agreed. "Just us."

They started with a simple kiss that grew until their mouths devoured each other. Soon their hands were caressing everywhere. Their minimal clothes disappeared, leaving no flesh unavailable. Every time Tori looked at Guy's face, he was watching her. His expression was intense. His eyes were so full of emotion that, to Tori, it seemed as if she was seeing straight into his heart.

After what felt like forever, Guy's fingers finally reached Tori's slit.

"Oh, please," she begged, writhing beneath him.

"Please what?" he asked, teasing her by running one finger along her outer edges.

With Guy partially covering her, Tori couldn't move like she wanted to. Instead of spreading her legs wide open to offer herself to him, she had to settle for shifting the one he didn't have trapped. She bent her knee and raised her hip, unsuccessful in her attempt to press against his hand.

"Please don't tease me. Touch me, Guy. I need you."

"Sh." His lips claimed a sweet kiss. "You have me. Don't get upset," he whispered as one fingertip traced her slit. Guy repeated the motion, delving slightly inside. He continued, going deeper each time. "You're so wet," he announced, his finger poised just inside her core.



Tori whimpered with need. She already knew Guy was controlling everything but that didn't prevent her from trying to impale herself on his finger. "Touch me," she pleaded again, afraid he'd keep his finger exactly where it was forever.

"Sh." He kissed her lightly before nuzzling her neck. "Let me go slowly tonight, Tori. Let me show you how I should have loved you the first time."

"Oh, Guy," she cried when his finger worked its way inside her flesh.

"Feel everything. Don't rush," he urged, slowly stroking in and out.

"More," she panted.

Guy added a second finger, studying her face closely. "Your pussy is so tight. I love the way it holds my cock," he whispered, kissing his way lower. "You're already squeezing my fingers. Are you getting ready for me?"

"Yes," Tori gasped when Guy's mouth covered her nipple. "Oh God!" she cried as his tongue drove her crazy.

"Sh," Guy soothed, working his way to her other breast. He used his mouth, nipping and sucking, kissing and licking until Tori was shivering with desire. "Come for me," he requested as his thumb massaged her clit. "My cock is so hard. I'm afraid I'll hurt you if you don't flood yourself with cream. Come now. Please come, Tori. I can't wait much longer to be inside you."

Tori was on the edge already with the way his hand and mouth stimulated her. Guy's words pushed her over the top and sent her soaring. When Tori's senses returned she opened her eyes to find Guy once again staring back at her. He had moved between her sprawled thighs, the tip of his hard cock poised at her opening.

"I love you," Guy whispered as he sank slowly into her. "No, don't close your eyes. Look at me. See how joining with you makes me feel."

His heated gaze held her captive and Tori couldn't have looked away even if he hadn't told her not to. His emotions were almost too much before. Now she saw even more. Her heart wanted to reach out and take what his offered. It wanted to return his feelings and mix them with hers until they were the same. Unfortunately, even though it was muddled with passion, Tori's mind was still stronger. It refused to release the hold it had on her in spite of the incredible sensations Guy's body evoked.

Guy watched the turmoil play across her face. When her head began to roll from side to side he knew her unrelenting mind had won again. Very gently, he closed the gap on either side of her head until he held it steady. He looked deeply into her eyes as his shaft continued to caress her with full strokes. He may not have gained her heart this time but seeing the depth of her internal struggle filled him with such hope his heart swelled with even more love.

"I love you, Tori," Guy whispered. "I don't know how to say it so you know how much it's true." He interrupted his declaration with a kiss. "There's so much," his voice turned desperate as his thrusts became more determined. "Forever. I swear. Until my last breath. More and more every second."

He could see it was too much for her but couldn't stop himself from baring his soul. He knew he should. She'd already forgiven him for losing control so many times that he was terrified she'd reached her limit. He knew he should stop but the sensations he found in her soft body were too intense to ignore. Her mind might not be ready to accept him but her body had to know he loved her to respond as it did. It took all the self-restraint Guy had to hold back long enough for Tori to reach her climax. He had been ready to explode the second he penetrated her but was determined to wait until she was with him. When he felt her internal muscles ripple with the first wave of pleasure, Guy let himself take her the rest of the way with hard and fast thrusts. As Tori's orgasm had her clenching around him, Guy buried himself to the hilt and pumped her full of the evidence of his passion.

Unable to help himself, Guy continued to kiss her as he professed his love repeatedly the entire time it took for his mind to recover. He wasn't even aware of what he was doing at first but couldn't stop once he was. He persisted until Tori sighed against his lips. When he raised his head, Guy saw a greater range of emotions than before. Her conflict tugged at his heart and he wished he could make it easier for her. He knew he couldn't. It was something she had to resolve for herself. In the meantime, all he could do was be patient. He would continue to shower her with his love so consistently that she would realize it was as real and true as he said it was. Once she accepted that, she would be able to open her heart and share her growing feelings. Guy was positive it was only a matter of time. Knowing that was the only thing that would keep him sane while he forced himself to wait for her to catch up to him.

Guy rolled to his back, clutching Tori tightly so he stayed inside her. "Please don't make me let go yet."

"Okay." Tori snuggled into his embrace.

Her mind was racing even faster than his heart was beating. Ever since the day she caught herself thinking that she was in love with Guy she fought to convince herself that it was just wishful thinking. She couldn't be in love because love didn't exist and even if it did she wasn't the kind of person who indulged in such sentimental emotions. The last thing she needed was to confuse the way he made her body feel with messy emotions because that would be her biggest mistake ever. No matter what Guy said or how he acted at the moment it wasn't real. She couldn't start thinking it would last because she knew it was impossible. She knew it as surely as she knew anything so why was she even wasting time thinking about it? She was frightened. Guy rescued her from her dream and made her feel safe. They had sex. It was that simple. Just misplaced gratitude, not love. No sense reading more into it than there was because as soon as this was over he would be history. Sure, she'd miss his incredible body but who wouldn't with the things he did with it? At the moment she was swamped with physical sensations, pure lust and nothing more.

## Chapter Twenty

Tori looked around her kitchen and felt as if she was a stranger in her own home. The outrageously handsome man at the sink was her lover. His best friend stood next to him, helping to wash dishes. Two women sat at the table with her. One, her boss and first true friend, the other, her friend's niece who was also married to her lover's friend, who had been a friendly acquaintance until very recently when she had become an honest friend. In addition, there was a little black-and-white kitten scampering everywhere in his never-ending quest to be involved in everything that was going on around him. She knew this had all come about from her nightmares but it was still very much a mystery to her.

"Guy tells me you're going to Todd's open house tomorrow," Barry said casually as he lounged against the counter.

"Don't remind me." Tori shuddered.

"Sounds like you're not looking forward to it," Barry commented.

"Hardly. Between the things Guy's told me about his family and his behavior at your house last Sunday I can't help thinking I should wait in the car while he goes in and visits."

Diana didn't miss the look that passed between her niece and husband or the way Guy dropped his eyes. "Oh my. I must have missed something," Diana mused.

Tori knew no one else would respond so she stalled by scooping up Harry and cuddling him to her face. Too bad he was too small to hide her completely because she knew she was blushing.

"I'm sorry." Diana reached over and patted Tori's arm. "I shouldn't pry into something that's clearly none of my concern."

"It's all right, Diana," Tori tried not to mumble. "I brought it up so I should explain. You already know we all spent last Sunday afternoon together. What they were kind enough not to mention was the way it ended. You see, um, Guy got a little over-emotional and couldn't keep his mouth shut and I had a meltdown and accused the three of them of all sorts of awful things before I stormed out of the house and went to pout in the car."

Diana met each gaze before commenting. "Forgive me for asking but I'd like to know what you said, Guy, if you don't mind."

"Tori?" He waited for her to nod. "I told Tori the truth about how I feel about her." Diana remained silent so Guy continued. "I said I loved her with all my heart and I would spend my life proving it to her. Unfortunately, I didn't think how saying that

with others in the room might upset Tori and I was too stupid to shut up when she asked me too."

"We didn't interrupt," Barry added, "So Tori decided we were helping Guy embarrass her for our entertainment."

"I know, Aunt Diana," Carla joined in when her aunt glanced at her. "I should have done something but the expression on Guy's face was so amazing and I was so happy for them that I didn't realize what was going on until afterward and by then Tori was already gone."

"Fortunately for me," Tori smiled shyly, "Guy was right and Carla and Barry really are my friends and are willing to forgive me when I lose my mind."

Again, Diana looked at each of them. "I'm stunned. Tori, may I ask one more question?"

"Sure."

"First, let me say how thrilled I am that you finally understand what I've been trying to tell you about Carla."

"Thank you. Believe it or not, Carla and I had quite a talk about all that too. You were absolutely right that I could have more friends if I'd stop hiding behind my fears."

"I'm so proud of you," Diana's voice was filled with emotion. "Please understand that I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable but I can't help wondering how you feel about Guy. If you prefer to wait until we're alone, please say so, Tori. I really don't want to embarrass you but you seem unusually relaxed with Carla and Barry."

"I don't mind. They already know what I'm going to tell you. I'm sure all three of them will want to argue with me but they won't because they know it's pointless," she paused for them to nod their agreement. "Guy says he loves me. I think he's caught up in the moment. We've been over this before. He's still the hero sent to save me, the damsel in distress. I like him and enjoy his company and really hope we can stay friends once this is over. When it is, he'll see that he was overreacting to the situation and he doesn't love me after all and he'll get on with his life. I wish him all the best and hope he finds the right woman soon because he really is a sweetheart and deserves to have someone as nice as he is who is able to make him happy."

"You are the right woman, Tori," Guy insisted.

"Stop beating a dead horse, Guy," Tori countered.

While the two of them glared at each other, Diana exchanged glances with Carla and Barry. She could tell they agreed with Guy just as she did. She wondered how long it would take for Tori to stop resisting and accept what was right under her nose.

"I guess you have spoken about this at length," Diana interrupted. "And I agree with Tori that it's pointless to argue with one who is so stubborn."

"Thank you." Tori's attention was on Harry so she missed the sympathetic look Diana gave Guy. "Isn't he amazing?" she asked. "He goes full-speed ahead and then is

out cold before you can blink. And he's so curious about everything. Guy keeps telling me that all kittens are like this but I've never had one before so it's all new to me."

"He sure is a little sweetie," Diana agreed, letting Tori change the subject. "He seems remarkably resilient."

"Mm." Tori frowned at her thoughts. "I wish he didn't have to settle for me as his consolation prize."

"We all wish things were different for him." Guy claimed the seat next to her and rested his arm on the back of her chair. "But you're certainly not a consolation prize. You are the kind-hearted woman who cared enough to find him. You're going to give him a happy life and will love him not only for yourself but doubly because you have Kimmie's love in your heart too."

"Knock it off before you make me cry again." Tori sniffled.

"Yeah, Guy, shut up," Barry growled. "You get Tori started and then Carla will have to join her and then Diana won't be able to resist and what are we going to do with three weeping women?" Everyone laughed at his comment as he intended. "Now, getting back to tomorrow night. I'm sure Guy will behave himself."

"He already promised and if he doesn't I'm supposed to ask Todd to take him out back and shoot him," Tori announced.

"Then you definitely have to mind your manners, Guy. You know Todd will do that if Tori asks him to and you certainly don't want Tori stuck with having to explain that to your family."

"I wouldn't do that to her. I gave my word to stay glued to her side the whole time and that is exactly what I'm going to do even though I'm positive Tori is perfectly capable of handling whatever they come up with."

"That still makes one of us."

"Two. Don't forget what Todd told you this morning. He's right that you can't let them intimidate you. If you let one of my sisters get to you, the others will come to your defense. They'll mean well but having them defend you is only slightly better than having them interrogate you."

"Don't let that scare you," Barry advised. "Guy isn't exaggerating but you can't run away. You have to get to know them because once you do you'll see that they're basically harmless and would do anything for you."

"I remember the first time Barry took me to one of Guy's family gatherings," Carla laughed. "They both warned me, just like they're doing now but it didn't prepare me for what it's like when you're surrounded by them. I was fortunate because I was with Barry and not really someone they were extremely interested in but you, I'm sorry to say, are going to be the center of attention no matter how closely Guy and Todd stick to you."

"Which is exactly why I shouldn't go," Tori argued. "They're going to get the wrong impression and get all excited over nothing because this is most likely the only

time I'll ever see them. What's the point of introducing me and having them get all curious when you're only going to have to tell them there was nothing between us later on when you show up to the next family thing without me?"

"We've been over this, Tori. One, you have to go because I have to go and I need to see you to know you're safe. Two, I love you and I want you to meet my family, no matter what the circumstances are. Three, they are going to love you too and, if you give them half a chance, will fall all over you to show it. Four, you can't let yourself believe that there is no us now but I trust you and have faith in you so I know you will be able to someday. I don't want to keep you hidden while I wait so you will end up at plenty of events with me. We may as well get the first one over with. After tomorrow, they'll calm down. You might even surprise yourself and have fun once they do."

"Do you always number your points like that? You seem to and I find it very distracting."

Guy shook his head in frustration as the other three laughed. "You'll get used to that," Diana stated calmly. "Tori is a master when it comes to derailing your train of thought and sending a conversation in an entirely different direction."

"Oh, ha, ha." Tori scowled. "Yes, we all know I do that and yes, we all know it's intentional but we also know why so I don't think it's very nice of you to tease me."

"I'm only teasing you because I love you, Tori girl," Diana assured her. "You're surrounded by friends who understand so why avoid the obvious?"

"I think I liked it better when you all worried about what you said to me."

"You did not," Carla protested.

"Admit it," Barry urged. "You've had a lot more fun since you let yourself relax around us these last two times we were together than you did when you stuck to the fringes."

"Yeah, okay. You're right. But we don't have to talk about it constantly either."

"Don't pout," Diana took over. "We have no intention of harassing you, Tori. As I said, we love you. We'll let it drop as soon as you stop trying to hide from us like you were about to do. Until then you need us to remind you that it's okay for you to be yourself around us."

"We are your friends and you are ours," Carla added. "Frankly, I'm amazed that you brought this up last Sunday and are willing to let us discuss it like this. You know Aunt Diana is proud of you but I am too. I always knew you were keeping your distance and I'm so glad you've decided to stop doing that."

"That goes for me too," Barry stated.

"God, would you listen to yourselves," Tori said with mock horror. "You're starting to sound more like a support group than a bunch of people I invited over for a casual evening. Give it a rest already, would you?"

"Stated like a true Beverly Hills therapy veteran," Guy teased.

"Don't start with me, Detective." Tori glared. "I'll have you know I may be the only person from Beverly Hills ever who hasn't attended a single therapy session."

"Really? How'd you manage to avoid that?"

"When I was little, my parents assumed I was just going through a phase and I'd grow out of it. By the time they realized I wouldn't and tried to force me to get the help they thought I needed I was stubborn enough not to back down after I refused to go."

"Good for you." Guy grinned. "In case you've been wondering, I'm proud of you too." He raised her hand and kissed her palm.

"God, you're all impossible." She rolled her eyes dramatically. "And I'm so lucky that you put up with me. I know you don't want me to say it but I need to say thank you. I've never been easy to be around and I can't tell you how much I appreciate the patience you've all given me."

"You're worth it," Guy answered for the group. "You'll understand one of these days."

The conversation drifted through many topics by the time Diana, Carla and Barry called it a night. Tori surprised them once again by hugging them as they said goodnight. During each hug, the recipient shared a look with Guy who was standing behind Tori, thoroughly pleased with the progress he was making and overjoyed that their friends were able to share it with them.

As soon as Tori stopped waving and closed the door, Guy pulled her to him and cuddled her under his chin. "You made Diana very happy tonight," he stated.

"Yeah." She relaxed into his embrace. "I don't know why I was so scared all this time. I thought it would be much harder to talk about why I was afraid to let anyone get a little close to me than it turned out to be. I certainly never expected to sit around and talk about it so casually like we did tonight. I guess bringing it up with Carla last week helped more than I imagined it would."

"Possibly. Or maybe you're more ready to let yourself trust people than you think you are. Maybe you're letting yourself accept their friendship because you're tired of being alone and want to have people in your life that you know you can be yourself with. Maybe you're doing this because you need to so you can take the next step and let yourself admit that you love me as much as I love you and are ready for the life I know we can share."

"Or maybe I've decided I should have friends because I know I'm going to need them to get you to stop badgering me all the time if this drags on much longer. I understand you think you believe what you're saying but I wish you would stop repeating yourself so often. I don't want to argue and I really don't want to hurt you but I know you're fooling yourself. I know it'll pass and I really am starting to enjoy you. If you keep pushing me I might get annoyed and say something ugly and uncalled for that'll ruin our potential friendship. I thought we all had fun tonight and this may be selfish but I want to do this again. If you hound me until I snap it'll be too awkward

between us and we won't be able to visit Barry and Carla at the same time and I don't want them to have to worry about that."

Guy sighed. "Fine. You win. I'll cut back on expressing my feelings for now but I won't stop altogether. I'm willing to limit the number of times I tell you how much I love you but there is no way I will let a day go by without saying it at least once. It wouldn't be fair of you to insist so we'll have to compromise. I refrain from sharing my feelings constantly and you cut down on how frequently you deny what I know is in my heart."

"I guess that's fair. But you do know I only point out that you're mistaken after you tell me what we both know is not true."

"Correction. I am the one stating the truth and you are the one who refuses to see it for what it is." Guy tipped her chin. "I know neither one of us wants to argue tonight and I know we both believe what we're saying. For now, let's agree to disagree and let time show us what's real." He kissed her lightly. "We're not going to change things even if we stay up all night repeating ourselves. You look tired and I know I am, so why don't we turn in now?"

"Okay," she agreed, raising her lips for another kiss. "I'm as frustrated as you are, Guy. We both need to let it go because you're right, neither of us is going to change our mind and we'll make each other crazy if we don't stop fighting about it."

"Mm." Guy extended the kiss, deepening it into something less than innocent. "I bet we can both come up with better ways to drive each other crazy."

"I thought you were tired."

"I am. Doesn't mean I can't give us something to think about while we're falling asleep."

"Keep that up and I won't be able to sleep."

Guy rested his forehead against Tori's. "I sure as hell wish Todd would hurry up and nab those two because I hate going to bed separately. I hate having to lie there alone, in the room next to yours. I hate having to wait until after you wake up afraid because of what you have to go through every night. I hate not being able to carry you to bed and hold you for the entire night."

"Calm down, Guy. This isn't going to last forever. Isn't that what you keep telling me?"

"Yeah. Doesn't make it any easier to let you go."

"I know." Tori gave herself a moment to cling to him and enjoy the feeling of being held since she knew there weren't many nights left before Russ and Stan were captured and Guy would walk out of her life forever. "Come on." She slid from his arms and took his hand to lead him upstairs. "I sure hope tonight's dream makes more sense than the last few. Wake me up, okay?"

"You know I will," Guy promised seriously as if dreading the fear he knew he'd see in Tori's eyes later. "Try telling yourself that I'm right beside you if you start to feel



trapped again. If you reach toward me at all, I'll wake you right away instead of waiting until you seem like you're panicked."

"Sh." Tori cupped his cheek. "You have to let me do this even though I know you don't want to. Dreams can scare me but they can't hurt me. You're here and I'm safe and you know it even when it doesn't feel like it to me. You are taking care of me, Guy."

"Thank you." Guy let her comfort him. "I do love you, Tori. I'll be right beside you the whole time and I promise you will be safe."

"I know. Now get to bed. The sooner I get this over with the sooner I get to take advantage of your body."

Guy forced a chuckle. "Is that so?"

"Oh yeah. I hope you don't mind but I think I may have to try to suck your huge cock again tonight. I'm sure I could handle more of it if I keep trying."

"Christ, tiger, do you have any idea what you're doing to me?"

"Yep." She grinned and gave him a quick squeeze. "Gotta make sure you don't fall asleep so deeply you don't hear me."

"That won't be a problem. Nope, no problem at all since you have me so hard I'm afraid to roll over and I won't be going to sleep any time soon."

"Oops. Sorry," she giggled. "Don't stay up too long or you won't have enough strength for me to take advantage of you."

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about that one. I'll be more than ready for whatever ways you decide to use my body later." He kissed her deeply. "We really need to stop calling it that because we both know there's no advantage taking or using involved when we are together."

"Yeah." Tori claimed his mouth and rubbed her hip against his groin. "Mutual pleasure. 'Night, Guy. I hope Harry stays with you so I don't roll over and hurt him."

"I'll try to hold on to him but I doubt he'll stay. He's like me, much happier in your bed so I can't blame him for deserting me. Night, Tori." He chuckled at her scowl but returned to make sure she was comfortable as soon as he heard her crawl into bed. "Be back later." He leaned over to brush his lips across her forehead.

"Hey, Guy." Tori stopped him in the doorway. "I'm sorry you can't stay with me now too."

"Thanks." Guy's expression showed he thought she meant more than she did by that statement but she didn't contradict him.

## Chapter Twenty-One

"I'm sorry I can't shut up about this but it's making me nuts," Tori grumbled.

"You sure you're not dwelling on this to avoid thinking about meeting my family?" Guy teased.

"No. Yes. Maybe. I don't know. I might be but it really is getting to me." She frowned, propping her head against the window. "I admit I would rather be on my way just about anywhere other than to Todd's but I'm not dreading it as much as I was before you guys agreed that we should get there early so I can meet your sisters individually instead of walking in with all of them staring at me."

"Either way, you'll be fine."

"Yeah, yeah. Nothing I can do about it anyway. Why are these damn dreams so weird this time? They follow some woman around a grocery store and then stand around staring at some window with a tree inside. What are they doing, checking the progress of the decoration? I'm sure it must be her house but why don't I ever see her? Where's the girl? And what does it mean that after she's downstairs they'll wait until dark to go in? She, the girl or she, the mom? What happens downstairs and why is there only one person there? What are they planning for when they go in?" Tori growled in frustration. "I hate this!"

"I know. I don't get it either but as Todd told you this morning, you have to wait and see and hope they start making more sense before they do anything."

"Is he really as calm as he seems or is that just an act?"

"An act for the most part but not entirely. Todd has a way of maintaining a level head, even when he's bent way out of shape over something. He's very methodical when he's working on a problem. He looks at every detail from every possible angle so there are few surprises once things come to a head. He's as frustrated as we are so don't be so hard on yourself."

"But, Guy, I am the only link there is and what good am I if I can't tell you anything?"

"Stop beating yourself up, Tori. It doesn't help. Besides, we're almost there and Terese will ask questions if you scowl at her like you are now."

"Do you have any idea how much I don't want to do this?"

"Yes. Just keep reminding yourself of what Carla said. The first time is a little tough but once you get through it everything that follows is a piece of cake."

"You know damn well that is nowhere near how Carla described it!"

"Yeah, but my version put some color back in your cheeks." Guy grinned and squeezed her thigh. "Maybe instead of whispering sweet nothings in your ear all night I should say things to keep you pissed at me."

"Maybe, if you're so uncertain, you should turn around and take me home."

"No can do, tiger. We're already here."

Tori stopped glaring at Guy and glanced at the house he indicated. "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," she whimpered.

"What's up?" Guy started to park along the curb.

"No-o," she wailed. "Don't stop! Keep going! Oh my God!"

Guy turned to Tori and saw she was on the verge of panicking. She was as white as a ghost and shaking uncontrollably. Her hands were covering her mouth as if she was trying to hold something in. "Tori!" He had no idea what was causing her reaction.

"Go, Guy! Just go," she cried, pointing for him to turn to the left.

The expression on Tori's face made the hair on his neck stand on end and all his senses kick into overdrive. He followed her instructions, knowing he had to in order to get an explanation. Three blocks away, Tori indicated that he should pull into a church parking lot. She had her door open before he came to a complete stop and was out of the truck, falling to her knees by the time he switched off the engine.

Guy crouched next to Tori and held her shoulders as she retched. Her shaking was worse and she was keening without seeming to realize it. When she finished, she was practically hyperventilating.

Guy captured her head and forced her to look at him. "Talk to me, Tori," he demanded firmly. "Tell me what's going on. No, don't fight me." He moved his hands to grip her shoulders. "Tell me now!"

Tori hiccupped and sniffled. She used the back of her hand to wipe her mouth. The panic was crushing her and the edges of her sight were going black. She was so cold. It would be so easy to let herself fade into nothingness. That would make it all go away. She was giving in to that temptation when she felt the pressure of Guy's hands on her shoulders as he gave her a gentle shake. His voice began to penetrate the fog swirling in her head and her eyes focused enough to see him.

"Oh my God," Tori moaned. "Oh my God. Guuuy!"

"Tell me!" he ordered harshly, squeezing her shoulders even harder. "Tell me!"

Tori took a deep breath. "Okay." She took several more. "Okay." Her head began to nod frantically. "Okay."

"Now damn it!"

Another deep breath. "The house." Her voice was as shaky as her body. "In the dreams." She was almost panting. "Todd's house."

"The house you keep watching in your dreams is Todd's?"

"Yes. Oh my God." Tori clawed at his hands, trying to free herself because her stomach was heaving. Guy barely managed to turn her before she retched again. "Tonight. They're coming tonight. Sarah," she sobbed. "Nooo!"

"Tori." Guy shook her again. "Stop it, Tori." He was close to yelling to get through to her. "You have to get it together now. Do you hear me? Come on, Tori. Sarah needs you. You are the only one who can help her. You have to be strong now. Tori."

Guy's words registered and Tori fought back the terror and forced herself to concentrate. Her breathing was still fast and shallow but she had regained a miniscule amount of control. "We have to do something."

"We will." He was still watching her as if he expected her to snap.

"Please," Tori begged. "I'm okay now. Please do something."

"Okay, but you have to stay with me." She nodded but couldn't hide her shivers. "I mean it, Tori. You have to stay with me now. I know you're scared out of your mind but you can't fall apart until after we take care of this. I need you to be as brave as I know you are." She nodded again. "Promise me that you will get through this."

"I promise. I'm okay. Really I am. You don't have to worry about me. Please do something."

Guy stood, pulling Tori with him. He wrapped one arm securely around her and held his cell phone with the other. While they waited for help to arrive, he opened his coat and folded it around her, hoping to stop her shivers. When Tori slipped her hands under his sweater, he felt how ice cold she was and wondered if she was going into shock. Tori was holding on so tightly he suspected he'd have a ridge in his flesh. Instead of asking her to loosen up, Guy increased the pressure in his arms and squashed her against him.

Within minutes, Ned joined them. He had been on his way to the open house when he got Guy's call.

"You holding up, Tori?" he asked by way of a greeting.

"I'm fine," she declared, somewhat steadier, partially freeing herself from the cocoon of Guy's embrace.

"Good girl." He seemed impressed. "How the fuck did we not recognize that? Makes me wonder."

"Me too," Guy agreed as more cars began to pull into the lot.

Ned made introductions to each agent as they arrived. They were the other members of the group which had been assigned to work with the information Tori provided. Lita had been summoned too, since after meeting Tori she asked to be involved if there were any way she could help. A quick debate soon decided the question of whether or not to alert Todd. Trusting Guy's judgment, they opted to wait until everything was in place, fearing that his normally steadfast demeanor would desert him in this situation.

Next the state and local police were notified to ensure that all procedures were strictly followed. There was too much at stake to risk their chance to convict the pair due to an overlooked technicality.

Once everyone assembled, Ned gave the police a condensed summary of the two men involved. He added a brief overview of Tori's connection and concluded with all he knew of their current situation. The only thing missing was a firm plan for how to proceed.

After Guy finished describing the layout of Todd's house, the group discussed several possible scenarios. Each had both good and bad points and none were precise enough to satisfy any of them.

"I'm sorry," Tori spoke up, her voice as shaky as she was, "but that's not going to work."

The police exchanged doubtful looks, clearly uninterested in her statement. The federal agents' expressions showed slightly more tolerance. Only Guy, Ned and Lita had faith in her reasoning and wanted her to continue.

Before anyone could object, Ned silenced them with a hard glare. "Which isn't going to work, Tori?"

"All of them." She refused to look at anyone but Ned. "You can't grab them on their way in since you really wouldn't have any reason to other than they were about to trespass. You can't keep Sarah out of the playroom or they won't go in. You can't send anyone else downstairs to hide because they're already watching the house and that would chase them away."

"We sure as hell aren't leaving a seven-year-old alone with them," one of the local officers said sarcastically.

"No duh," Tori snorted. "I know you think I'm a fruitcake and I don't blame you because most of the time I do too. There must be something wrong with me. I mean, really, how else can you explain any of this?" She could feel the tension radiating from Guy and paused to give him a weak smile. "None of this makes any sense but that doesn't matter anymore. The only thing that matters is stopping them before they touch Sarah but not before they incriminate themselves."

"As you just put it, no duh." The same man scowled. "We all know you mean well, honey, but it's time for you to stop wasting time and leave this to the professionals."

In a flash, Lita had him facedown on the ground with his arm twisted painfully behind his back. "Stop interrupting, asshole, and let her talk."

There were a few tense seconds when no one moved. Forcing herself into action, Tori stepped forward and put her hand on Lita's shoulder. "Way cool move, Lita. Maybe you could teach me how to do that sometime. Now, though, it would probably be a bad idea to break his arm like it looks like you're about to do. I mean, it's really nice of you to stick up for me but you can't be mad at him for saying what everyone else is thinking."

Lita released the man's arm and offered her hand to help him up. "No hard feelings?" she asked. "I shouldn't have overreacted but you struck a nerve, dismissing the one link we have to all this without bothering to listen."

Ned stepped between them before either could say more. "Save it for later, folks." He waited for both to nod. "Go on, Tori. Tell us what you're thinking."

"I'm sorry." Tori's face lost most of its color again. "I do know you all are experts on this stuff and I'm a clueless nobody. I really don't mean to interfere. It's just that I know I can help. They won't run if I'm with Sarah and I'm positive they'll talk to me."

"Tori, no," Guy objected.

"Just listen, Guy. Please." Her eyes pleaded with him to let her finish. "I can keep them from Sarah and get them to tell me about things they've done and later I can testify about what they said. I won't let them hurt her. You know I won't, Guy. Tell them."

"I believe you, Tori," Ned assured her. "I don't doubt that you could get them to open up but I won't put you in that position."

"But, Ned," she protested.

"Hold up," one of Ned's fellow agents interrupted. "We could put a wire on her. Record it all and hear exactly what's going on. We could take them down as soon as things start to heat up."

They all considered the suggestion. "Please let me do this," Tori coaxed. "They're here and I can help you catch them. If they get away tonight, they might kill someone else. You have to stop them."

"I don't like it," Ned stated. "And I'm not agreeing to anything but if, and that's a big if, Tori, if we do things your way how could you get to the playroom with just Sarah? You haven't met yet so it's not likely she'll want you there."

Guy's frown deepened. "She'd invite Tori to color with her if I asked her to. Sarah's a sweet, sensitive kid. If I explained that Tori was nervous about meeting her aunts and told her that coloring would make her feel better, Sarah would have her downstairs within the minute."

"Okay. What about Todd and your sister?" Ned seemed to be warming to the idea. "No offense, Tori, but Todd's going to take one look at you and know something's going on. I doubt he'll let you wander off with Sarah and if he starts asking questions Terese's bound to notice."

"We'll use the same excuse." Guy clearly hated that they were about to decide that using Tori was their best option. "'Well we're already planning to introduce Tori as a friend. We're saying that she wasn't sure she wanted to come with me tonight because she's uncomfortable in groups where she doesn't know anyone so I had you join us when we bumped into you two at lunch one day. We can play that aspect up with both of them. Forgive me, tiger, but Ned's right. You look like a scared rabbit. Todd will buy it if we say you're so nervous you're making yourself sick. I can tell Terese you're painfully shy but let me talk you into coming with me because you know how

important my family is to me and like me enough to want to meet them in spite of your shyness. She'll ask how she can make you more comfortable. I'll say that you'll be fine once your nerves settle down and mention how much you love chatting with the kids in the library. If I say I'm sure a little time with Sarah would put you at ease and stress how important it is to me that they get to know you, she'll send me right to Sarah. She'll also take it on herself to ensure you have privacy until you feel ready to join the rest of us."

Everyone waited for Ned to comment. "Any other suggestions?" he finally asked. When no one responded, he gestured for Tori to join him as he stepped away from the group. He walked until they were standing in the church archway.

Leaning against the wall, Ned sighed and met her eyes. "Everything in me wants you to change your mind and refuse to do this. I'm not usually the one who makes decisions like this. That's Todd's job and I've always respected him for it but I never understood how difficult it must be for him. I asked myself what he would do in this situation. The odds are extremely high that we will grab a pair of serial killers who have gotten away with a whole slew of murders, spread all across the country, all seeming unrelated and none with even the remotest leads. Killers who will no doubt continue as they have been. We have a decent setup to lure them in and get information that will ensure a conviction.

"The only snag is that we don't have enough time to pull in professionals to act as bait. Instead we have an innocent child who we know personally and, although we value the safety of all children and would do anything to protect each and every one of them, knowing this one makes her that much more important to us. We also have a woman who is equally special to us. She's willing to put herself between the ruthless killers and the child in spite of her own potential danger. There is always a danger factor, Tori. We can plan everything down to the last microsecond and do everything exactly right and still have it blow up in our faces with the most horrible outcome imaginable. And we don't have that kind of time here," he paused to study her.

"So what do I do? Is the chance to keep two men from killing again worth the possibility of losing two people dear to my heart?"

"Yes," Tori replied instantly. "Yes, because if you don't stop them now you have no way of knowing how many others they'll kill before you have another opportunity. Even if you lose me, it'll be more than worth it to save someone else. I heard what you said about things going wrong but no matter what happens or how screwed up this gets, there is absolutely no way you'll lose Sarah. I know you're thinking that I don't know what I'm talking about but I do. Even if they wind up killing me you're going to be close enough for me to keep them from her long enough for you to get to her before they do. Guy would be pissed if he heard me say this but I would rather help you stop them and die than worry about my own safety and do nothing so they go kill anyone else. I know I'm not disposable but, in comparison with a child or a parent or someone who might one day find the cure for cancer, well, let's face it. Much better for me to die than one of them." She waited for Ned's decision. "Well?"

"You're wrong about your life being less valuable than someone else's. And yes, Guy would go ballistic if he heard what you said."

"So let's not repeat it to him."

"We won't for now. But I'm not making any promises for later on, after they're in custody and you and Sarah are safe."

"Why would you do that to me, even then? We both know what he'll say and how he'll react. Haven't I been through enough already?"

Ned took a minute to study her again before he nodded. "Yeah. More than enough and about to take it to a new level." Ned caught Tori in a hard hug and steered her back to the others. "It's a go. Let's get Tori wired up. Guy, give us another rundown on the layout inside."



## Chapter Twenty-Two

As the sun began to set, a smiling Sarah led an extremely nervous and watchful Tori to her playroom located in the lower level of the house. It was next to the basement but not underground itself. There was a door to the outside on the side of the house and a window that allowed the room be filled with late afternoon sunshine. On any other occasion, the room would have seemed as warm and friendly as the little girl it was created for. Some of the furniture was slightly undersized but not to the extent where adults would find it too uncomfortable. The walls were painted a creamy ivory color that echoed the softness of the muted burgundy sofa. It faced a light-colored wooden entertainment center loaded with children's movies and music. Next to the sofa was a matching chair with a bookcase lined with books any child would love. There was a table nearby, perfect for the games and crafts Sarah enjoyed with both her parents.

Sarah showed Tori her wide selection of coloring books and let Tori choose one first before she picked her own. They sat at the table and chatted easily as they paged through the books to find the pictures they would color.

"Sarah, can I ask you something?" Tori paused her drawing.

"Uh-huh," Sarah agreed without looking up.

"Did you ask me to color with you because Uncle Guy said you'd be doing him a favor?"

"Uh-huh."

"You are such a sweet girl, helping him like this." Tori patted her arm. "Can I ask you for a favor too, to help me with something for your uncle?"

"What?" Sarah seemed uncertain.

"It's nothing bad, I promise. And it's not just for him, it would be for your daddy too." Sarah nibbled her lip and nodded. "The other day we were talking and some other men I know heard them telling me what a good girl you are. Well, they didn't believe it when your daddy and uncle said that you were so good that you would do something I asked you to do, since you and I are new friends. The men think they could trick you into forgetting about what you're supposed to do and get you to listen to them instead. I agreed with your daddy and uncle but they thought I was wrong too. The favor I want to ask is a really easy one that will show them you are as good as your daddy says you are and that they can't fool you into doing something I asked you not to do."

"What am I s'posed to do?"

"Like I said, it's really simple. The two men are going to sneak in here and pretend that no one but you and I know they're here. They're going to say weird things, like they don't know who you are or who your daddy is and they might even call me a

different name. No matter what they say I want you to stay right there in your chair until I tap on your foot with mine. When you feel that, I want you to act like you have to go to the bathroom really bad. They'll probably say no and tell you to be quiet but you keep it up until I get them to let you go.

"When you get in there I want you to lock the door right away. They're going to call for you to come out. They might say they have a present for you or they might act like they're mad and yell at you but they're just pretending to trick you into opening the door so they can tell your daddy he was wrong about you being the best little girl in the world. Uncle Guy and I know he's right and they're the ones who are wrong but you are the only one who can make them believe that. Can you help us with this, Sarah? Can you go in the bathroom and lock the door and stay in there until your daddy or Uncle Guy or I come to get you, even if it takes a long, long time and you don't feel like staying in there anymore?"

"Uh-huh," Sarah agreed happily.

"Everyone is going to be so proud of you, playing this game with me." Tori hugged her awkwardly. "You remember what the signal is and what you're supposed to do?"

Sarah rolled her eyes. "You kick me and I gotta go to the bathroom and don't come out."

"And you lock the door. Don't forget to lock the door."

"I know. You said I gotta lock the door right away."

"And when do you unlock it?"

"If Daddy or you or Uncle Guy says I can come out."

"Perfect. You're so smart too, remembering all that. Oh, I forgot something. We have to keep this a secret. Those guys have a secret from us too. They wouldn't tell me how they were going to try to trick you and they said we could keep it secret how I asked you to help me, okay?"

"Kay." Sarah went back to her coloring book, concentrating intently on her picture.

Tori choked back her tears and fought not to give in to the panic that was so close to overwhelming her. More than anything, she wanted to drag the innocent child next to her back upstairs and push her straight into her father's arms where she would be safe from all this ugliness. Watching her, Tori was swamped with doubts. Whatever possessed her to insist that she was capable of handling this and why in the world did they believe her? Granted, she felt slightly better, now that she'd figured out how to possibly get Sarah out of the room and she still wouldn't hesitate to put herself in between them and protect the child with her life if need be, but none of that was doing much to dispel her growing anxiety. For the next few minutes, Tori colored blindly, forcing herself to act as expected. Inside her head, she chanted that she would not pass out because Sarah needed her to hold it together. She had to keep her head and do her part to stop Russ and Stan or they would get away and go after someone else. Forcing herself to be calm, Tori drew Sarah into a conversation by asking questions about her school and her friends and the things they liked to do. She had almost reached the point

where she could respond to Sarah's comments without hesitating when she felt a sudden blast of cold air.

Tori swallowed her scream when she looked across the room and saw the men who starred in all her nightmares standing just inside the door. Not wanting their presence to startle Sarah, she extended her pinky and brushed the side of the girl's hand. When Sarah glanced at her, she nodded toward the pair, alerting her of their arrival.

"Well, would you take a look at this." Russ grinned widely. "Isn't this a nice surprise, Stan?"

"Hot damn." Stan's grin was even bigger. "You shittin' me or didn't you really know she'd be waiting with the girlie girl?"

"Don't mind him." Russ stepped closer to the table. "He meant no disrespect, Miss Vicky, but he's having some trouble believing that you're really here. To be honest, I'm a little stunned myself."

"Yes, I can see that." Tori felt like someone else had taken over her body and answered for her. "Perhaps you should sit down." She gestured toward the sofa. If they accepted, the table would be between the men and Sarah. Not that it was much of a barrier but anything was better than nothing.

Russ gaped at her unexpected suggestion. "Thank you," he mumbled after a long pause. When he realized Stan was still gawking, he shoved his shoulder to get his attention. "Don't just stand there. She wants us to sit down."

Stan seemed embarrassed by his inability to hide his reaction to her presence. "Hey, what you hitting me for? I heard her."

Tori glanced at Sarah and noticed that she had slid halfway off her chair to move closer to Tori. "Now, now." Tori shook her head at their scowl. "Enough of that. Introduce yourselves to Sarah so she knows who her guests are."

The men blinked at her again. "Oh. Okay." Russ had the look of a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Hey there. I'm Russ and this here's Stan. We, ah, hope it's okay that we came to your party."

"Uh-huh." Sarah nodded warily.

"That's much better," Tori declared.

After another pause, Stan shifted uncomfortably. "What're we sitting here for? You said we was going to come in, do her fast and get out real quick."

"I gotta go to the bathroom." Sarah tugged Tori's sleeve.

"No!" Russ jumped to his feet but Tori's raised hand held him in place.

"I gotta go." Sarah stood and squirmed as if she actually needed to go. "Real bad."

"Go on, sweetie." Tori patted her arm and smiled. "Take your time so you don't poke any holes in your pretty tights. Russ didn't mean to scare you but he's been looking forward to meeting you so much. He doesn't want you to rush either, right, Russ?"

"Um, no." Russ sank back onto the sofa.

"See? You go ahead now, Sarah, and we'll have a little grown-up talk while we wait." Tori watched until the door closed before turning back to the men. "What did you mean, Stan, when you said you'd do her?"

He looked nervously at Russ and didn't reply.

"Oh, come now. There's no need to hide anything from me. I asked a question and I expect an answer."

"Well, um, you see," Stan stuttered.

"Russ?" Tori redirected her question.

"What he's trying to tell you is that we were going to stuff a rag in the girl's mouth to keep her quiet and peel off all her skin."

"Ah." Tori swallowed her horror. "Care to explain why you would do something like that?"

"For you," Stan blurted.

"Me?"

"We wanted to give you something when we came to you," Russ added.

"Something as in her skin?"

"Yeah. We didn't want to show up empty-handed. I know I should have thought of it right off and brought you something from each of them but I didn't. I'm real sorry to disappoint you but I was hoping you'd let this token represent all the others and forgive us for not bringing a whole collection."

Tori's heart was pounding as she searched for a response. "Hmm, maybe, but not until you describe some of what you neglected to collect for me."

Russ and Stan exchanged a look. "I, um, we, well, it would have been little things. Stuff that we got rid of when we were done or maybe things they had with them. Like, maybe the cord Stan strangled the old man and the bitch with last week or the black gloves I wore for our little magic act."

"A few of your things. Tell me about some of the others."

"Yeah, okay." Russ frowned in concentration. "We should have brought you that weird doll with the orange hair sticking straight up that was hanging on that mirror instead of letting it burn up in the car with her."

"And the picture of that girl that kid had," Stan suggested.

"What kid?" Tori asked.

"The one we planted under the tree. You know, Russ. Tell her."

"Yes, Russ," Tori fought to keep her voice even. "I'd like to hear all about that one."

"Sure." Russ seemed to relax. "We were real lucky that time. We just stopped for something to eat at one of those truck stops right on the highway and heard him going on with his friends about how he was out of there for good. He said his leaving would teach his girl a lesson for cheating on him like she did. He thought she'd be real sorry once she figured out that she was really on her own and would hate herself for treating

him so bad. His plan was to hop a ride with any trucker who would give him one and figure out where to go once he got there. Stan followed a big, burly guy into the john and fed him a line about how his kid brother was being stupid and running away from some no-good tramp who'd been messing with him. He talked the guy into picking him up and taking him a ways down the highway and then acting like he expected the kid to put out as payment for the ride. When the kid refused, the trucker would pretend to be pissed enough to force him but then change his mind and toss the kid out instead," Russ paused to chuckle.

"We were driving an old foggy-mobile then. A real safe-looking family car. We finished eating to give them a head start and then took off after them. Since we were just passing through I didn't hurry because it didn't really matter much if someone else stopped for the kid before we got there. Nobody did and we had him tucked in the back seat feeling safe and sound in no time. I was driving and Stan got him to spill his guts. We kept him talking all the way around Wichita before he pulled out the picture he'd been waving in the diner. By the time we were back in the middle of nowhere Stan had him convinced he'd be much better off if he buried his past and made a clean break before he tried to start fresh. I saw the perfect spot and worked back to it from the next exit. Remember how the little punk agreed that it was perfect to dig a tiny grave under that big, old dead tree, Stan? He even said he wished she were there with us so he could bury her too. That's when Stan and I pulled out our guns and told him to start digging."

"You made him dig his own grave?" Tori shuddered.

"Hell yeah," Stan giggled. "You shoulda seen him! Crying and begging like he meant something to us. Russ was so cool, the way he asked who was gonna give a shit when he was dead since he'd already told us he wasn't ever going to see anyone he used to know again. Jerk-off got right in the hole when Russ told him it was deep enough. Just stood there and watched us shoot him. Probably pissed himself too."

"So you killed him and you buried him instead of the girl's picture."

"Nah, we stuck her back in his pack and put that in the hole too," Russ stated. "Figured they deserved each other."

He finally realized how long they'd been talking. "Hey, what's taking her so long in there?"

Tori stood as he did. "She hasn't been feeling well all day."

"Doesn't take that long," Russ growled. "We can't sit here jawing all night. Got to get a move on."

"Maybe you should just leave."

"What? You saying you don't want us to give her to you?"

"Yes. I don't understand just why you think I'd want something like that in the first place. Or why I would want any sort of souvenir from the poor people you killed."

"Whata ya mean by that?" Stan's gaze shifted between Tori and Russ.

"It means that I have no idea who you think I am or why you think I'd want any of the things you've suggested." Tori took a step back.

Russ' eerie laughter filled the uncomfortable silence. "She didn't mean that, Stan. She's just putting us on so we don't forget who we're talking to."

Tori saw that Stan believed Russ' words. "Is that so? Perhaps you should tell me who exactly you think I am, so there are no misunderstandings." She gave them what she hoped looked like an encouraging smile.

"See, Stan?" His chest puffed, matching the pride in his tone. "Miss Vicky, you are our angel. The woman we have always worshipped even before we made ourselves worthy of being with you."

"Worthy how?"

"More teasing," Russ assured Stan. "By performing acts that we knew would please you. By being careful and making sure we had good plans and then sticking to them. By not making any mistakes along the way so nothing would interfere with our coming to love you in person."

"We kept our pricks pure, just like you wanted," Stan added proudly.

"Pure for me?" Tori backed away more. "What kind of sick psychopaths are you? Saying you killed people to make yourselves worthy of me and expecting me to let you touch me? Whatever you're on must be damn good to make you believe all that because there is no way in hell even one bit of this is real."

"Miss Vicky," Russ sounded agitated.

"See that's another thing. I've never been called Vicky in my life and certainly don't intend to start now. As for being some sort of angel, well, you obviously have me mistaken for someone else." She shivered. "God, you're both just so revolting." Tori backed closer to the steps as she spoke.

"No." Russ' face twisted with rage as her words sank in. "Stop it now. Stop acting like that." Stan whimpered. "She don't mean it, Stan. Come on out here, angel, and tell old Russ you was just pulling his leg some more. Come on now, Miss Vicky. Your joke is scaring Stan into thinking you really don't want us."

"Hate to break it to you but this isn't a joke." Tori backed herself into the corner at the foot of the stairs as she'd been instructed to do if possible. "I don't know either of you and I never saw you before in my life until you broke in here and announced you were going to skin that sweet child alive for me in some super-sick attempt to make me have sex with you." She was almost hysterical. "You admitted you're both murderers and it sounded like you stalked your victims first and planned out exactly how you would kill them. You said you're here for me. Well, let me tell you, the only thing you're getting from me is a one-way trip to jail because I'm going to make sure you're arrested and locked up for good."

Russ' expression turned manic as he lunged for Tori. His charge was deflected when the door flew open to reveal three armed FBI agents with their guns drawn and pointed steadily at him and Stan. Russ swerved mid-stride and raced to the bathroom

door. He yanked it open, expecting to find a child to hide behind. Instead, he came face-to-face with the barrel of Lita's gun. She repeated Ned's order to drop to the floor. Refusing to give up as Stan had, Russ pulled his knife from his waistband under the back of his coat. His arm was thrusting toward Lita who had no way of seeing what he held. Fortunately, Ned did. He fired, stopping Russ before the knife connected. The noise of the gunshot cut off all the chaotic shouts that filled the room just seconds before.

"No," Stan screamed, pushing to his feet and violently twisting to free himself. "Russ, no!" Two agents caught him instantly. He continued to struggle as his eyes located Tori. "Why'd you do this to us? We loved you. We was gonna treat you right and you let them shoot him."

Tori was sobbing as she stared at the hatred on his face. She didn't realize Guy was in the room until his arms closed around her.

Stan gasped. "You ain't no angel. You ain't nothing but a whore, just like all them others." He spat in her direction. "You think they got me but you just wait. I'm gonna get you. I'm gonna get away and then I'm gonna find you and then I'm gonna fuck you like the tramp you are. I'm gonna fuck you for Russ too. And when I'm done I'm gonna shoot you in the back, just like they did to Russ so you know how it feels."

"Shut up," an agent snapped, finally managing to drag him through the door. "Time for me to talk and you to listen." He proceeded to read Stan his rights as he arrested him.

"Is he really dead?" Tori asked, refusing to let Guy prevent her from watching as two paramedics attended Russ.

"No," Lita supplied the answer. "Thanks to Ned's superior ability to remember the rules against killing a suspect if at all avoidable."

Tori dragged her eyes from the scene to look at Lita. "You wouldn't have killed him either."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence but I'm not so sure about that," Lita admitted honestly. "I was in the van listening. I heard how you made Sarah think this was all make-believe. I've seen a lot of things over the years but very few people have impressed me as much as you have."

"Lita." Tori squirmed with embarrassment.

"I'm serious, Tori," Lita insisted, deliberately standing so she was blocking most of Tori's view. Her eyes flashed quickly toward Guy who acknowledged he knew she was intentionally distracting Tori. "None of us had any suggestions on how to get Sarah out of the room. You did that all on your own, in a way that made perfect sense to her, at a time when I know you were sick with fear and more than ready to run. Once they showed up and were in, Ned sent me into the party to bring Guy and Todd outside. Since I wasn't expected, Todd knew something was going down and played along with my line of needing the two of them to help me with my car. After Sarah was in the

bathroom, Todd tapped on the window and motioned for her to stay quiet. He and Guy lifted her out so I could take her place."

"Yeah, I wondered how you got in there," Tori commented.

"I heard every word they said and I must repeat how impressed I am with you. Guy, I'm sure you'll listen to the tape but the bottom line here is that Tori's calm head and leading questions guaranteed us a conviction." She held up a hand to stop Tori from saying anything. "Don't start with the whole you were just doing what you had to routine because we all know that you went way beyond that."

"You sure did." Ned joined them. "Those overpriced actors that flock to your parents' shop have nothing on you, Tori. I know you don't want to hear it but that's God's honest truth and we all know it. Now why don't you pry your way out of his clutches," he winked at Guy, "and come sit down so we can get the tape off you. Guy, Todd's waiting for you in the kitchen." He waited for Guy to release Tori. "Go on up and tell him Tori will be there in a minute, okay?"

Guy understood that Ned wanted a moment to speak privately with Tori and forced himself to give it to him but not before he tipped her chin for a light kiss. "It's over now, tiger. You did it and I love you so much." After another kiss he started up the stairs and let Ned lead Tori across the room.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

The instant Guy entered the kitchen, Terese began her attack.

"I can't believe you," she snarled, poking his chest. "How could you do this? You bring that woman here, knowing full well what was going to happen and then lie to me so I agree to let you use my daughter. You send my baby off with that...that," she shuddered, "horror as bait for a pair of killers! You let her take your own niece downstairs to wait for them to break in and try to kill her! You've done some things in the past, Guy, but I always managed to put them behind us even when I didn't agree with you. But not this time! This time, you've gone too far. Sarah could have been killed, thanks to you and that woman. But that's it. I'm done," she screamed.

"Terese," Todd attempted to interrupt for the third time.

"You get away from me too." She shook Todd's hand from her arm. "You may not have known about it from the beginning and you may have gotten Sarah out of there but you didn't do a damn thing about the rest of it and you better believe I won't forget that any time soon." She switched back to Guy. "I want you out of here. And make sure you take her with you. As of now, I no longer have a brother. Do you hear me —"

"Damn it, Terese." Todd spun her so violently she stopped screeching. "That's enough! Just shut up and listen already," he yelled, clamping his hands around her upper arms.

"Get your hands off me," she ordered.

"Shut. Up," Todd ordered. "Shut up now because you have no idea what you're talking about." Todd's chest heaved as a tear slid down his cheek. "You have it backward. Tori being here is the only reason Sarah is still alive. Do you understand, Terese? If she hadn't been, our little girl, our precious baby would be dead. She'd be lying down there in a puddle of her own blood and we'd be up here at our party, laughing and talking without even knowing she was gone."

Todd was sobbing and couldn't continue. Instead, he urged Terese closer and held on as if he were afraid to let go. Terese realized that what he told her was true and held him just as desperately. Tears streamed down her face as they did Todd's. Blindly, she extended her hand to Guy. When he took it, she pulled him into their embrace, apologizing without words.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I think I need some air first," Tori retreated down the steps. "I'm just going to step outside for a minute, Ned."

"Sure thing." Ned smiled at Tori as he glanced her way before resuming his conversation.

Outside, Tori wrapped her arms around her sides and fought down her tears. She had to get away from there before she made things even worse. Guy's sister was right. It was her fault that they had come here. Sarah could have been killed because of her. She had to get away before Guy found her. If he caught up with her now, he'd have to choose between his family and her and there was no way she'd let that happen. Okay, so there was a very slim chance that he'd send her away but it was far more likely that he'd turn his back on his family because he still believed that nonsense about the two of them belonging together. Once he realized it was just a passing thing and nothing more, he'd hate her if she let him walk away from his family.

Tori was about to call a cab when she noticed the local officer who had spoken down to her earlier in the church parking lot. He seemed unsure of what he should be doing so she decided to take a chance.

"Hi." Tori smiled slightly when she stood in front of the man. "I'm so glad I found you."

"Going to rub it in, eh? Go ahead. I deserve it, the way I barked at you earlier," he sounded resigned.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Tori's face fell. "I didn't even think of that or I wouldn't have said I'd find you myself."

"Huh? You're not here to gloat?" Tori shook her head. "Guess I can't win tonight," he condemned himself. "What is it then?"

"No, I'm sorry that I've made you uncomfortable. I really do understand why you were so skeptical. I would have been too."

"Uh, thanks," he seemed confused. "That's nice of you."

"Let's forget it, okay? No harm done so there's no need to worry about it anymore. What I really wanted was to ask for your help. Todd, um, Agent Evans, is finished with me for the night. I'm so exhausted that I'm afraid I'm going to fall flat on my face any minute now. I'm sure Detective Breauchard would take me home if I asked him to but these people are his family. I asked Agent Evans if one of his agents could drive me but they're all still tied up so I was wondering if it would be terribly inconvenient for you to take me. If it is, I can call a cab but the driver might ask questions and I'm so tired I might say the wrong thing."

"Hey, no problem." He relaxed. "Hop in and you'll be home before you know it. Glad to help."

After telling the officer where she lived, Tori rested her head against the window with her eyes closed. She really was exhausted and didn't feel capable of even the politest of conversations. She must have dozed off because the next thing she knew he was patting her arm and telling her she was home.

"Thanks," Tori hesitated. "Are you going back there?" He nodded. "Could you let either Agent Evans or Detective Breauchard know you got me here safely? Not that

they think you wouldn't," she rushed on, "but we've spent pretty much time together lately and they've gotten a little overprotective. Maybe I'm wrong but I don't think that's something they can just switch off even though it's over now."

He agreed. "One of the side effects of the job. I'll make sure to tell them. I'll wait until you're inside."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Where the hell is she?" Guy swore in frustration.

"Damn, Guy I'm sorry," Ned apologized yet another time. "I should have gone with her."

Guy ran his hand over his face. "No. I'm acting like an ass. She told you she needed some air which was perfectly understandable at the time. It's not up to you to baby-sit her."

"Yeah, I know but if I had we'd know where she was," Ned cursed himself.

"At ease, men." Todd appeared beside them. "Tori's home. Apparently she maneuvered one of the locals into thinking he'd be doing me a favor by driving her home."

"What the fuck!" Guy was relieved and furious at the same time.

"Not a clue," Todd answered his unasked question. "Call me tomorrow."

Guy found Tori's note on the table near the door where he'd developed the habit of leaving his keys. Since Tori had only left on one small lamp, he walked into the kitchen and flipped on the overhead light so he could see.

*Guy,*

*I know you were worried and I'm sorry. I was so tired I didn't stop to think before I came home. I should have told you that I was leaving instead of making you crazy, wondering where I was. I guess they weren't exaggerating when they told me how I'd feel like when the adrenaline rush wore off. Since you're already mad I'm going to be selfish and ask you not to wake me tonight. I promise not to interrupt your lecture in the morning since I deserve it.*

*With tentative thanks for your indulgence – Please!!!*

*Goodnight,*

*Tori*

Guy reread her note and scowled. She was right. He had every intention of giving her a lecture on common sense and why it had him out of his mind when he couldn't find her. But he also knew how hard it could hit once the rush faded. With a sigh, Guy switched off the light and made his way upstairs.

Guy stood in Tori's bedroom doorway, listening to her deep, even breathing as she slept. Harry lifted his head from his spot in the circle of her arms and blinked at him.

"Stay there," Guy whispered softly. "Stay with Tori." Guy stayed where he was as the kitten curled back up. After another minute, he went to the spare room to spend the night alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Morning," Tori greeted Guy cheerfully when he walked into the kitchen. "Thanks for letting me sleep. Hungry?"

"Yeah." Guy noticed the large quantity of food on both the stove and the counter. "What's all this?"

"Too much?" She followed his gaze. "You're probably right but I'm starved and couldn't make up my mind. Think of it as a celebration to mark the end of missed meals because I was too freaked out to eat."

"Okay," Guy agreed slowly. "Can I help?"

"Nope. Everything's just about ready. Why don't you sit down and let me wait on you for a change to say thanks for all the times you've fed me the last couple of weeks?"

"It was my pleasure, Tori. I don't expect you to thank me."

"I know but that is precisely why I want to." She handed him a cup of coffee.

Guy let Tori babble as she arranged the various dishes of food on the table. He didn't miss the fact that most of them ended up between them, making it impossible for him to capture her hand as he did more often than not at some point during each meal. Eventually, Tori's chatter fizzled and died under his watchful gaze.

"Oh. Guess I'll just shut up now so you can get started yelling at me."

Guy frowned. "I'm not going to yell," he stated. "You know I was worried and you know why and you already apologized. Nothing left to yell about."

"Well, all right." She shrugged and went back to eating until she couldn't handle the way he continued to stare at her. "What?" she asked, dropping her fork and crossing her arms defensively.

For a moment, Guy silently searched her expression. With deliberate slowness, he took a bite of his breakfast. "That's what I was about to ask you. What's going on?"

"Oh gee." She rolled her eyes. "Hmm, let me think. We're having breakfast, Guy. I may not be the best cook in the world but you really should be able to identify all of this."

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Guy refused to let her push him into raising his voice. "Try again."

"Try again to do what?" She acted like she didn't know what he was referring to and proceeded to eat. "I am having breakfast. If you're doing something else then forgive me because I must have missed it."

"You're avoiding my question."

Tori let her fork clatter to her plate as she left the table. She busied herself with disposing of her uneaten food and the dirty plate without answering him. She was putting the plate in the dishwasher when she felt Guy's hands on her shoulders. When he turned her to face him, she forced herself to meet his eyes.

"Talk to me, Tori," he coaxed gently. "You're acting like we're strangers and I don't understand."

Tori shook her head and sighed sadly. "Okay. Fine." She backed out of touching range. "I tried to tell you this would happen but you wouldn't listen."

"You tried to tell me what?" Guy's tone indicated he was close to losing his patience.

"I'm sorry." She gave him a helpless look. "I'm being such a coward and I know that's stupid of me. I really don't want to hurt your feelings but I know I'm going to. You see, I woke up this morning and knew I couldn't keep leading you on like I have been."

"Leading me on?"

"Yes." Tori backed around the table to maintain the distance between them. "It wasn't intentional but that's what I've been doing by letting you think we had some sort of future together."

"You're saying we don't?"

"No. Not the kind you want. I do like you and wish we could find a way to be friends but it's wrong of me to go on pretending that it could be more."

"I see." Guy's eyes were cold. "You had this great epiphany and have all the answers and I'm just supposed to go along with it?"

"Guy, please."

"No. I wasn't finished. I'm not buying it. We have something special, damn it! Why are you denying it? I promised not to rush you and I won't. I can be patient for as long as it takes you to be ready for us. You know I mean that so why are you running away from us?"

"There is no us," Tori stated softly. "I'm sorry that you think I'm running away. I'm not because you can't run from something that doesn't exist. I know you think I'm wrong but you'll see. Once you let yourself think about all we've been through together you'll be relieved that we didn't draw this out."

Guy was speechless. Her tone sounded so final. As much as he wanted to argue until she agreed with him, he knew it was pointless at the moment. She was determined to convince herself that she was right and that anything he said was wrong. It might destroy him but Guy knew he had to back off. Give her a minimum amount of space while he showed her that she could count on him to stick by her, even now, when she no longer needed his physical protection.

Guy looked into her big, sad eyes, filled with pity over his inability to let go and almost laughed. He should have anticipated this new tactic to resist him. He was the

one who insisted she give him a chance until the danger was over. Well, the danger was over and she wasn't wasting any time reinforcing her contention that their attraction was merely a response to their circumstances.

"Tell yourself whatever you want, Tori, but nothing will change the simple fact that I love you. I don't want to upset you so I'll let you chase me out of your home. For now. But I will visit you here and at the library. I will call to talk to you about nothing in particular. I will pick you up so we can ride to Barry's together. I may not be staying with you anymore but I will still be around constantly. I will wait, Tori. As long as you need me to. But nothing you say or do will keep me from loving you while I wait or telling you every chance I get. I wish you didn't need to do this but you do and that's that."

Guy stunned her into standing in one spot so he had no trouble catching up with her. His hand landed on her waist and he drew her closer. "I do love you," Guy whispered, claiming her lips. "I'll always love you," he insisted, kissing her with all the feelings he had. "I don't want to leave you. I'd rather dump the table and spread you out on top of it and make you into that celebration feast. I want to spend today and every day making love to you and fucking you and everything in between. I know you want that as much as I do and I know you're too afraid to admit it. I also know you're not going to stay afraid forever. I'll be waiting for that day too, Tori. When you're ready for more of the pleasure you know you'll find with me, I'll be ready to provide it."

With a deep sigh, Guy lowered his head and used his lips to give hers a tender caress. "I'm going to miss you, tiger. When you get too lonely, call me. Anytime, okay?"

Tori looked so lost that Guy had a difficult time walking away from her. More than anything, he wanted to grab her and kiss her until she was too senseless to use her fear to hide her own feelings. Then he wanted to use their bodies to show her how right he was. Instead of giving in, Guy packed his belongings and tossed them in his truck. He was sure she would prefer him to leave without saying more but he wasn't willing to make this that easy for her.

Standing quietly until Tori acknowledged him, Guy waited to remove her key from his ring. With her watching, he twisted it off and placed it on the end table next to her chair. "I'm pretty sure I have everything."

"Okay." Tori stood nervously.

"There are some loose ends that you need to speak with Todd about."

"I'll call him and set something up."

"Good." He took a minute to study her. "Tori."

"Please, Guy. Don't."

He shook his head as if fighting an internal battle. "I know but I have to," Guy's voice broke as he folded her in his arms, arranging hers so they went around his waist. "This is where we belong, in each other's arms." Tori dropped hers to her sides. "Aw, please. One minute, Tor, I'm begging you. Hold me for one more minute and then I'll

go." He held his breath until her arms returned. "Thank you," he whispered, holding on even tighter.

The silence stretched as Tori embraced Guy for much longer than he'd thought possible. When she sighed against his chest, it took all he had to resist the urge to caress her back to soothe her. Time seemed suspended as they continued to hold each other. Much to Guy's disappointment, Tori remembered she was pretending not to want this. The instant she began to stiffen, Guy loosened his arms enough to let her put some space between their bodies.

"Please say you changed your mind and want me to stay." He had to try again even though he knew he'd fail.

"I'm sorry."

When Tori looked up at him, Guy could see unshed tears shining in her eyes in spite of the way she was struggling to hold them in. "Me too but you can't blame a guy for trying." Holding her gaze, he lowered his head for one last, gentle kiss. "See you soon."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

The phone rang, startling Tori so badly she dumped Harry off her lap even though she had been expecting it all day. Ever since she'd canceled her plans to spend Christmas day with Carla and Barry and their assorted families and friends, she knew it was only a matter of time before someone called her. At first, she thought that Diana would be the one. As the day wore on, she decided that Diana would hold off questioning her until they were face-to-face in the library so she could compare her responses with the expressions on her face. Yes, that was definitely what Diana would do.

Over the last week, Tori had felt Diana's eyes on her many times throughout each day. As soon as Tori finished describing what had happened that night, Diana began to watch her with a thoughtful expression on her face. After Guy's first visit, Diana stopped trying to hide it. Even though she hadn't asked for an explanation for the changes between them, Tori felt compelled to give her one anyway. She listened without interrupting until Tori stopped talking and then, instead of offering different viewpoints, made a simple comment about how she understood that Tori needed to do what she thought was best for her.

That meant the person calling was Guy. Tori knew she had to answer the phone and speak with him. If she didn't, he'd show up and talk to her in person and Tori didn't feel capable of that at the moment.

"Merry Christmas," she said cheerfully.

"Merry Christmas to you too, Tori," Guy replied in a tone that shot straight through her heart. "I missed you today. Are you feeling better?"

"A little, thank you." She had to get control of herself before she cried into the phone. "I hated to call Carla at the last minute like that. I hope she knows how much I wish I could have been there."

"She does. There are tons of leftovers if you feel up to visiting tomorrow."

"Oh yeah. Maybe. I'll see how I feel in the morning."

"Hmm." Guy seemed to be struggling to keep his comments light. "I'm sure she'd love to see you but will understand if you can't make it. Perhaps you can give her a call tomorrow if you're still under the weather. You know she worries almost as much as Diana does."

"I'll do that, thanks."

"Do you need anything? I'd be happy to come over and make you some tea and toast."

"No, I'm good. Harry's keeping me company."



"I bet he's been sitting with you all day. Animals can sense when you need a little TLC."

"He's been so sweet. I think he could tell my stomach was upset because he hasn't pounced on it like he usually does."

"Tell him I said he's a good cat, taking care of you like that," he paused. "Can we talk for a minute or should I let you go?"

"No, it's okay." Tori was as surprised by her answer as she had been his question.

"Thanks," Guy chuckled warmly at her gasp. "I already mentioned that I missed seeing you today. I was looking forward to catching you under the mistletoe but I'm sure you were expecting that."

"Yeah," she admitted to both of them.

"Ah. You know that means you have to let me collect later, right?"

"As if I have a choice," Tori grumbled. Her offhand comment was met with silence. "You still there?"

"Sorry. Yes, I'm still here. Tori? You always have a choice. You do know that, don't you? You do know that I would never force you to kiss me if you seriously told me not to, right?"

Tori sighed. "Yeah, Guy, I know that. You are pushy and overbearing but I know you understand when no means no."

"Thank goodness." He relaxed. "I knew you liked kissing me."

"I never denied that. I like a lot of things about you. If I didn't, we wouldn't be friends."

"Right. Friends. Want to know the other reason I was hoping to see you today?"

"I'm almost afraid to ask."

"Oh, come on. You're much too brave to be afraid of something I intended to discuss in public."

"Fine, if you say so."

"Too bad that doesn't apply to other things. Someday," he sighed. "For now all I wanted to do was ask if you had plans for New Year's Eve. If you don't, I'd be honored to have your company for the evening."

"Guy."

"Now wait. Before you say no let me add that I don't have anything specific in mind. I have a whole list of possibilities—"

"Guy."

"That cover all levels of how much personal interaction we'd have and—"

"Guy!"

"Damn. When you didn't say yes right away I figured if I kept on talking you wouldn't be able to say no either."

"Wait. It's not that. And no, I don't have plans with someone else. But I'm not making any plans with you either. But not because of you. It's because of me. I never celebrate New Year's Eve. Never. It's just another night to me."

"Can I ask why?"

Tori snorted. "Sure. What the hell. You already heard about my parents' parties so why not? Everything I told you about them was nothing compared to New Year's Eve. That was the ultimate party, the big one that always topped the rest."

"I'm sorry, Tori."

"Why?" her voice sounded hard. "You weren't there. You didn't do the things that made me sick. You didn't think it was hilarious when I covered my eyes so I couldn't see anything after they refused to let me go to my room."

"You're right. But I'm still sorry. I wish I could erase those memories for you."

"Really? I don't. I don't ever want to forget what people are really like underneath their phony smiles and fake concerns."

"Not all people are fakes. Some of us are exactly as we seem."

"Yeah, right," she laughed without humor. "I'm really happy for you that you can still believe that but I know better. Hey, thanks for calling but I'm tired so I'm going to say goodnight now."

"All right, I'll let you get some rest. Please call me if you need anything, okay?"

"Yeah, whatever."

"Goodnight, Tori tiger. I love you."

Tori hung up before she burst into tears. She had done it again. She'd turned into a raving bitch and all Guy had done was be nice to her. Some friend she was. If she kept this up, he'd decide trying to talk to her wasn't worth putting up with her abuse and she'd never see him again. That thought made her cry even harder. When Harry nudged her cheek with his head, Tori gathered him in her arms and buried her face against his soft fur. She was grateful that he was there and wanted to comfort her. Animals could be trusted. If they acted like they loved you, they did. Too bad the same things didn't apply to people.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Six days later, Tori was rinsing her cocoa mug when someone pounded on her door. For an instant she considered ignoring it but decided it had to be Guy and he'd break down the door and search the house if she didn't open it. Primed for an argument, her mind went blank when someone she never expected to see again was standing on the other side.

"Hi, Tori," Terese spoke when Tori didn't. "I'm sorry to bother you but if you give me a few minutes you'll understand. Can I come in?"

"Oh. Sure." Tori shook herself. "Of course. Can I get you anything? Cocoa?"

"No, thank you." Terese stayed so close that Tori had to look at her. "I can see you wish I were anyone but me and I can't say that I blame you. I just found out that you heard part of what I said that night and that you left before Todd got me to understand that only you being there saved our Sarah."

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop..."

"Kind of hard not to when I was screaming like I was. Don't look so shocked. I know I have a big mouth. I said a lot of awful things before I learned what really happened. I reacted to what I thought was going on and lashed out at you indirectly and my brother, directly. My baby girl was almost harmed and I let my imagination take over even though she was perfectly safe and untouched. On top of that, my hormones were on a rampage. Anyone can tell you how out of control I've been the entire seven-plus months I've been pregnant. I can be happy as a clam and still bite Todd's head off just for saying good morning to me. My point is that I was as wrong as wrong can be about you and I'm more sorry than you will ever know."

"That's okay. I understand why you would think that way."

"Thanks but I wasn't done," Terese snarled and then laughed. "See what I mean? I can't even apologize without snapping at you. Anyway, I need to ask you something that is none of my business but I expect an honest answer from you in spite of my rudeness," she paused for Tori to argue. "If I had thanked you for putting your own safety at risk for the sake of my Sarah as I should have, would you still be involved with my brother? The truth now, Tori, or you'll set me off in a very bad way."

Tori was shaking. "Yes."

"I'm a horrible person. Much worse than I thought. All right, next question. After everyone went home and I calmed down enough to listen to what my husband wasn't saying, I figured out he thinks you're in love with Guy but are too afraid to let yourself give in to it. Is he right?" Tori nodded miserably. "Well, I'll be damned," Terese gasped in amazement. "I was all ready to dig in and badger you to get you to admit that."

"So what? Nothing's changed. It doesn't matter."

"Oh, honey, you have no idea." Terese's exuberance manifested as a hug. "It matters more than anything else you can think of and absolutely everything's changed. Or it will once you tell Guy how you feel."

"Me? But I thought..."

"That I'd tell him?" Terese chuckled. "That's not for me to tell."

"Then why..."

"Why did I insist on knowing? Simple. Contrary to how it seemed the other night, I do love my little brother. I don't like to see him hurt and do what I can to protect him, not that he thinks he needs me to. Our other sisters will tell you the same thing. We've all been hoping he'd find someone special and settle down because he needs that to get rid of the restlessness he won't admit he's been feeling for some time now. I'm sure Guy and Todd warned you about our family and they probably gave you a watered-down version so we didn't scare you off. We're all loud and pushy whether we're at each other's throats or fawning all over each other. We're bad enough when it's just us. When we put aside our differences and gang up on someone else, well, let's just say it's not a pretty sight. I asked how you feel so I know what to do next."

"You mean you have different plans for whether I or not I figured out how I feel?"

"Yep. And one for if you would have broken it off with Guy even if I'd been civilized and friendly to you."

"Oh God," Tori groaned. "Look, Terese, I'm sure you mean well and please don't think I don't appreciate your coming to talk to me but—"

"Un-un-un," Terese cut her off. "Hormonal pregnant woman who has always butted in where she wasn't wanted here, remember? You try to blow me off without hearing me out and I won't be responsible for how I react."

Tori sputtered. "That is so not fair!"

"I know." Terese grinned. "Getting back to what I was saying, if you truly weren't interested in Guy, I would have apologized and gone home. If you were interested but your feelings were undecided, I would have apologized and gotten you back to the point you were at before I tore you apart."

"How?" Tori was curious in spite of telling herself she didn't want to know.

"I would have arranged for the two of you to have dinner out somewhere with Todd and me. You would have come with us, to make you think you wouldn't be alone with Guy and then our baby-sitter would have called, needing us to come home without delay shortly after we arrived at the restaurant but not before it was too late to cancel our order, leaving you and Guy on your own to work out the rest."

"Next?"

"Hmm. Why don't I save that one for last and give you the optimum now?"

Tori gave her an exaggerated smile. "Why don't you just get this over with however the hell you want since that's exactly what you're going to do anyway?" She scowled. "You are as bad as he is."

"Why thank you." Terese beamed. "So nice of you to say so."

"Um, Terese, I was being sarcastic."

"Sure, Tori." She patted her hand again. "If you say so. Personally, I think you want to believe you were insulting me to annoy me so I'd go away but I prefer to take it as a compliment. Now stop changing the subject and let me finish. It would be best all the way around if you accepted my apology, admitted how you felt and called Guy to come over as soon as possible and told him as soon as he walked in the door."

Tori shook her head violently and backed away. "No. I could never... I mean..."

Terese stepped forward and grabbed Tori's hand. "Hey, it was just a suggestion. I didn't really think there was any chance of that happening so don't go all weird on me."

"I can't handle this." Tori was so overwhelmed at the thought of actually calling Guy that she felt as if her head were spinning wildly out of control. If Terese didn't stop, she'd lose her mind and get hysterical.

"Oh, please." Terese rolled her eyes. "Todd told me about some of your dreams and Ned showed me the sketches of our house and I listened to the recording of that night. You managed all that without any problems so this should be a piece of cake."

"No chance you'll leave if I asked you to?"

"As if," Terese giggled. "You're going to be fun to have around. I can't wait to see what you do when Guy gives you an order. Anyway." Her expression dared Tori to interrupt. "Here's what we're going to do." Terese proceeded to outline the rest of Tori's evening. She ignored Tori's protests as if she hadn't spoken and steamrolled her to go along with her plans.

\* \* \* \* \*

Guy sat in front of his parents' home and wished he could leave without going in. Correction. Leave without going in and without hurting his family. It was still early enough to call Tori. Once he went in, he knew he wouldn't have an opportunity to sneak off for a few minutes of privacy until it was too late for her to still be awake. She already had bad memories of the night. The last thing he wanted to do was disturb her with his own selfish needs and have her add him to her reasons for disliking the holiday.

Pulling his mind from his depressing thoughts, Guy mentally prepared himself for the long evening ahead. He had cut short his visit on Christmas because he was anxious to spend as much time as he could with Tori at Barry's. No way would they let him bail early tonight. No, he was stuck for the duration so he might as well just suck it up and get over it because no amount of self-pity was going to change a damn thing.

"Finally." Guy's mother latched on to him as soon as he opened the door. "It's about time you got here."

"Hey, Mom." He kissed her cheek. "I'm not that late, am I? You always told us eight and it's only ten after. Did you ask me to come earlier? I'm sorry but I don't remember if you did."

"No." She tugged him through the living room without letting him greet anyone and briefly wondered why none of them seemed surprised. "Can't a mother just want to see her baby boy without any specific reason?"

"Sure." Guy's instincts kicked his mind to high alert when he realized they were alone in the kitchen. There were always people spread all over the house on holidays. There had to be something wrong for everyone to gather in one room when it wasn't time to eat. "Everything okay?"

"Why yes," she assured him cheerfully. "Unless there's something you haven't told me."

"No, I'm fine. Things seem a little off but I'm probably just imagining it."

"Hmm." She continued to watch him with her unreadable expression. "Why don't you take a minute and say hi to your father. He's out in the garage. Maybe things will seem better to you when you come back in."

Guy frowned. It wasn't like his dad to not be in the center of things when they all gathered. If he had isolated himself in the garage, there had to be trouble.

"Yo, Dad," Guy called before he had the door completely open. "What are you doing out here all by yourself instead stirring things up inside?"

"I'm not alone," his father replied from the partially enclosed area where he kept his tools.

"Oh. Sorry. Mom didn't tell me when she sent me out to say hi. I didn't mean to interrupt. I'll see you inside."

"Hustle your butt on in here," his dad ordered playfully. "This isn't a private conversation."

"Hey, Todd. Terese." Guy almost collided with the pair when he walked behind the wall. He was even more confused when their expressions matched his mother's. "If you're not talking about anything private, why are you standing around out here?"

"I said it wasn't private in regards you." His father stepped to the side. "I didn't say it wasn't private in regards to everyone."

Guy was frozen to the spot as he stared at Tori. He was afraid to blink in case it would make her disappear.

"Hi," Tori whispered, sounding as terrified as she looked.

"Stop gawking and say hello," his father broke the expanding silence. He slid his arm protectively around Tori's shoulders when he noticed she was trembling. "Mind your manners before you scare our guest of honor."

"Tori? What... Why... I don't understand. Dad?" His mind deserted him.

"Start over from the beginning, Todd. Maybe Guy will remember how to speak by the time his turn comes around." The older man winked at Tori as he made his suggestion.

"I wouldn't count on it," Todd teased. "But we'll give it a try anyway. I bumped into Lita in the hall today and found the missing piece of the puzzle. She asked when we'd be hearing wedding bells and was completely shocked to learn that you'd parted company. She had already gone before we realized that Tori was missing. Too bad too, since what she told me would have been a big help. Apparently, Tori was about to join us when Terese blasted you. She overheard all the horrible accusations and assumptions as well as her decision to exclude you from our lives. Unfortunately, Tori took off before I made Terese let me explain what really happened."

"When Todd told me, I felt lower than pond scum," Terese took over. "I owed Tori an apology that couldn't wait. I was thinking of how to word it and began to suspect that my big mouth had done even more damage than just hurting her feelings. I realized that what I said could have played a very big part in Tori's decision to end it between you."

"Oh Christ." Guy saw that Terese had been right by the expression on Tori's face.

It was his father's turn again. "Your sister, being your sister, barged in on Tori and interrogated her until she confirmed Terese's theory, after which she used her overly hormonal pregnancy to trump up her standard refusal to take no as an answer to entice Tori to join us this evening."

"I'm so sorry." Guy kept his focus entirely on Tori.

"Hush, son. I'm almost finished and then you can take over. Terese, in her less than subtle way, fully intended to sit Tori in the middle of the living room so everyone could see the look on your face when you spotted her. Todd, on the other hand, exercised his rarely used veto power and, with a minimal delay to make a quick request that your mother and I join them, snatched Tori right out from under Terese's nose and whisked her straight through the house and out here where he held back the flood of curiosity-seekers that followed in our wake. Once your mother got the gist of things, she raced back inside to wait for you and, if she's still the same woman I married, spill her guts to the assembly. I, however, much preferred to stay put and have a moment with this spectacular woman." He grinned down at Tori's pink cheeks.

"Just one more thing and we'll leave you to talk." He returned his attention to Guy. "Son, your sister was horribly wrong but everyone involved has forgiven her due to the extenuating circumstances. I must admit that the only reason for what I'm about to say is my own need to hear the words that have been bouncing around my head spoken out loud and your eyes show me that we're in complete agreement on this, Guy." He paused for effect before facing Tori. "Please let me express my extreme gratitude for single-handedly standing up to those men to save my granddaughter."

"I didn't... I mean... It wasn't me," Tori protested.

"Yes, yes, I know there were plenty of other people involved. But you, young lady, were the only one in the room with Sarah at the crucial moment. And, as I understand it, you were the only one to recognize the house from your dream. As my son-in-law freely admits, without you, our Sarah would have been taken from us. Again, I thank you from the bottom of my heart, as does the rest of my family."

"You're welcome," Tori responded, blushing hotly.

"My point, son, is that any woman brave enough to put herself in the direct line of fire as Tori did is reason enough to keep her by your side. Add in the fact that she loves you enough to —"

"No. Wait," Tori gasped as she tried to shrink away.

"Sh." He tightened the fingers on her shoulder to hold her in place. "Let an old man finish."

"You're hardly old," Tori declared, surprising them all.

After a pleased chuckle, he continued. "As I was saying, the added fact that this utterly charming woman loves you enough to selflessly sacrifice her own heart so that you're not forced to choose between her and the family that you hold dear makes her someone you should devote your life to making feel as special as you know she is."

"That's been part of my plan from the beginning, Dad," Guy stated.

"Never doubted it for a minute." He grinned. "I'm sure Guy can handle the rest without us." He waved Terese and Todd from the room. "Tori, life is too short and precious to waste any of it hiding from fear of the unknown. Yes, sometimes you get the wrong directions and end up far away from your intended destination. Sometimes smooth roads become so rocky it seems like you're being bounced into a million pieces and every bit of you aches so painfully you would almost prefer to die than live like that for one more second. But sometimes a detour will take you exactly where you always wanted to be and then you'll realize that the rest of the journey isn't worth remembering."

"Dad." Guy feared that he'd drift into metaphor after metaphor now that he'd gotten started. "Please."

"Ah, yes." He grinned sheepishly. "I'll leave you to it. Everyone will understand if you don't join us, so please do what's best for the two of you but, if you decide to leave, just call your mother so she doesn't worry."

"Okay," Guy agreed without taking his eyes off Tori. "And, Dad, in case you start to worry, I haven't forgotten any of the wisdom you shared with me over the years in this very room."

"That's my boy." He chuckled all the way out of the garage.

"Hey," Guy said softly when Tori fidgeted without looking at him. "You okay?"

"Honestly," she raised her gaze to his, "I don't have a clue. One minute, I was standing in my kitchen and the next, I was the main attraction of a three-ring circus and I have no idea of how I got there."



Guy couldn't contain his laughter. "I did tell you that I was the mellow one."

"Understatement of the century," Tori announced. "Here I thought you were the Ultra Mega Alpha. Ha! You're a cowering little weakling compared to that sister of yours. I mean, really! No wonder Todd doesn't bat an eyelash at the thought of coming face-to-face with the meanest son of a bitch in the universe. But let me tell you, if she thinks she's going to get away with any of her bullshit with me again, she'll get the biggest surprise of her life because it ain't gonna happen. Un-uh. No way. No how. Today was a one time and one time only deal and any negotiators who attempt to renew it will be shot on sight with a silver bullet before they are burned at the stake and have their ashes scattered across all the continents," she paused to draw in a much-needed breath and noticed that Guy was laughing. "Oh, you think this is funny, do you? You think you're going to get away with standing there and laughing like some damn hyena, well, you got another think coming too."

"Stop. Tori. Please. No more. Wait," he pleaded, snagging her arm when she tried to walk away from him. "Sorry." He took a deep breath to eliminate the remaining chuckles. "I'm not laughing at you. Well, I am but not the way you think I am."

"Gee, that makes it so much better," she said sarcastically. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be going."

Guy released her arm but whispered, "Please don't."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"For whatever reason you let yourself come here in the first place. I know my sister's over the top but I know you too. Nothing she said or did would have gotten you here if you were determined not to come on an ordinary night. You'd throw yourself out of a moving car before you'd let her drag you here on tonight of all nights."

Tori pondered his comments. "Yeah, so why were you laughing?"

"At first, I was imagining how impressed Dad would be if he'd heard you. Then, I pictured Todd trying to keep his face blank while you said all that to Terese. He'd be so proud of you for standing up for yourself that he'd want to cheer but trying to hide it from Terese so he didn't get caught by the backlash. I was also trying to figure out the look Terese would have on her face but I'm sure I'm not even close because no one's ever had the guts to fight back like you're going to. You sure are the fiercest tiger cub. You growl like that once and you won't have to again because we'll all still be shaking in our boots."

Tori shut her eyes and shook her head. "Would you just give it a rest already? I didn't grab my boots."

Guy rested his hands lightly on her shoulders. "Seriously, Tori. Are you okay? I would have stopped them if I'd known."

"Yeah, I know that. I'm not entirely sure that I didn't fall through a cosmic hole into an alternate dimension but I'm okay. Thanks for letting me vent like that."

"Anytime." One finger hovered under her chin so she couldn't dip her head. "Will you please tell me why you're here?"

"Do I have to?"

"No. You always have a choice, remember? But you'd make me very happy if you decided you wanted to tell me."

"I...well, um..." she groaned and spun away because she couldn't face him. "Damn, I suck at this, big-time."

Guy moved to press his chest to her back and wrapped his arms around her waist. "No you don't." He kissed the top of her head. "You never had the right inspiration before. Now that you do, you're going to be great. Give it a try. You'll see."

"As arrogant as ever," Tori noted.

"Stating the truth has nothing to do with arrogance," he replied. While he waited for Tori to decide if she would talk about the important things with him, Guy gently massaged her shoulders. He had felt tension radiating from her the instant he spotted her beside his father.

"Mm, so good," she purred, dropping her head forward.

"Glad to be of service, ma'am." She chuckled. "Please tell me what happened today. I know what the others said but I still want to hear your version."

Tori went rigid for a brief flash but Guy's hands continued their magic and it went as fast as it came. "I really was at the sink when someone pounded on the door. Really hard and impatiently so I thought it was you. I'm pretty sure I stood there with my mouth hanging open like an imbecile when it turned out to be your sister. I didn't even have enough sense to ask her in. She had to do that on her own. She said she didn't want to bother me so she got right to the point. It was just like she told you, Lita told Todd she'd seen me going up the basement steps. They figured out I'd overheard her yelling at you and she wanted to set things straight. She asked if we'd still be involved if I hadn't heard her."

"You said yes?"

She nodded.

"There's more."

She nodded again.

"The reason you let her bring you here."

Another nod.

"The part I most want to hear and the thing you least want to talk about."

Silence.

"I'll drive you home."

"Wait." Tori wrapped her arms around her waist and seemed very small.

"All right. If that's what you want." He returned his hands to her shoulders.

"Guy," her voice shook. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Running away instead of talking to you."

"Thank you." Guy tried to keep the pressure even to hide his surprise. "You would have explained what was going on eventually."

"I'm not sure I would have."

"I am. We may not have been together very long and yes, the circumstances that got us there were all wrong but what we had was more than a simple reaction to the moment. That night, when I got to your house, were you really sleeping?"

"No."

"Then you know I stood in your doorway and watched you. Could you sense how much I wanted to hold you?"

"Yes. It was so hard not to ask you to."

"When Todd told me that he and Ned picked up their equipment, he mentioned that he tried to get you to talk to him. I mean more than just to tie up the loose ends. You haven't done that yet."

"No." She gulped to prevent the tears that were forming. "You're the only person I could do that with and I couldn't ask you."

"Why not? I offered. You know I would have listened."

"That's why I couldn't ask. We would have been alone. I would have fallen apart and you would have held me. It feels so good when you hold me. I'm not sure I would have been able to make myself let go. If I'd told you I wanted you to stay, you would have. Then you'd have ended up lying to your family and keeping me a secret or having to choose between me and them, since I'm sure your other sisters would have sided with Terese. If you picked me, you'd wind up hating me and if you picked them it would have destroyed me even worse than telling you I didn't want you did."

"Dad was right. You were sacrificing your heart for me."

"I'm sorry."

"Sh, don't cry." Guy turned her and held her to his chest. "Don't be sorry for taking care of me like that."

"No." She shoved against him until there was some space between them and wiped her eyes. "That's not it. After," she took a deep breath, "after I told Terese she was right about why I shut you out she asked me something else."

"Okay." Guy felt a little lost. "Your answer is what you're apologizing for?"

"Yes." She dropped her chin to her chest.

Guy used a finger to tip it back up to face him. "You can't stop now. What was the question?"

Tori searched his eyes and found tenderness and patience. He deserved to hear it from her. She'd already hurt him enough. If he learned of the rest of her conversation with Terese from someone else, he'd be tremendously disappointed with her.

"She asked if I loved you," Tori whispered in a small voice that was barely audible.

"And?" Guy coaxed her to continue.

"And I said yes." She burst into fresh tears. "I'm so sorry."

Guy's first reaction was to shout with joy and cover her face with kisses as he swept her off her feet. Her repeated apology stopped him before he moved. "You're sorry you told Terese you loved me because you really don't or you're sorry you love me?"

"Yes. No. Oh hell." Tori rested her forehead against his chest. "See? I still suck. I'm worse."

Guy rubbed her back and waited. "You do not suck and you are not worse. If you were, you'd be home with Harry, missing me and I'd be here alone, absolutely miserable without you. I don't want to push you but I really would like you to explain this to me. Right now, you have me out here on a very tiny limb and it's breaking. I don't know if I'm going to fall onto the jagged rocks at the bottom of the cliff or if you're going to reach out and save my life."

Tori struggled for control and lifted her head. "I'm sorry that I answered Terese. I shouldn't have told her. Not before I told you."

This time Guy did pull her against his chest, lifting her feet off the floor. He spun her around several times, laughing happily. Eventually, he stopped and stood her back on her feet. His hands framed her face as his smile covered his whole face. "I already knew you love me. You didn't have to say it for me to know. Don't apologize."

"But, Guy." She frowned.

He kissed her loudly. "You don't even know what you did, do you?" Another noisy kiss. "Christ, you're incredible."

"Wait. Stop." She squirmed.

He lowered his hands to her shoulders and forced himself to calm down. "You told Terese because you knew she'd take over and bring you to me. You wanted to be with me but you were afraid to say so because you thought I might reject you, to hurt you the way you think telling me there was nothing between us hurt me. I won't deny that hearing you say that didn't affect me. It did hurt but not the way you think it did. It hurt because it meant you were isolating yourself at a time when you needed me to help you deal with what happened at Todd's. When I needed to be with you to believe you were truly safe.

"Believe it or not, Tori, I knew you loved me long before you did. You fought against yourself because you were scared to let me in. You were afraid to trust your feelings because every other time you put them out there they got shredded and tossed back in your face. You would have let yourself take a chance with me eventually but then Terese barged in. She presented you with an opportunity that meant you wouldn't have to wait to be ready on your own and you took it. You knew once we were together that I'd help you with the rest." Guy felt his heart swell but tried to hold back because Tori still looked uncertain. "Tell me, did you actually say the words to Terese or did you just agree with her?"

"She asked if I loved you and I nodded my head."

"So you didn't specifically tell her anything. You haven't really told anyone yet."

"Oh," Tori gasped. Her eyes went wide and her face turned bright red as she stared up into his encouraging gaze. "Guy."

"Tori." He smiled expectantly.

"Guy..." She paused so long he raised an eyebrow. Tori closed her eyes and sighed. She mentally cursed herself for being such a coward when he was being so patient with her. Forcing her eyes open, she once again met his gaze. "Guy, you wanted to know why I came tonight. What reason could be important enough to let your sister bring me to your parents' house on New Year's Eve when your entire family is here. Do you still want to know?"

"Very much."

"Okay. I'm here because I knew you would be too and I didn't want to wait until tomorrow to tell you something."

"I'm listening."

"Guy." She fought not to tremble. "Guy, I love you."

Even though he knew exactly what she was going to say, Guy still felt as if he'd been punched in the chest. For a moment, he just stood there, staring at her frightened face, grinning like an idiot. The spell was broken when Tori's lip started to quiver.

"Forgive me. I'm feeling overwhelmed at the moment."

"Why?"

"Why?" He laughed. "Why! Because the woman I love more and more every minute of every day for the rest of my life just told me that she loves me too. Tell me again."

Tori laughed with him. "I love you."

Guy covered her face with loud, sloppy kisses, repeating the words with each one. "Again."

"I love you." She tried to bat him away. "Jeez, stop slobbering already. Some Alpha you are. Drooling like a little puppy who just got his first ball."

"Excuse me? You don't think an Alpha male should be thrilled when his chosen woman finally expresses her feelings for him?"

"Well, yeah, but not like that."

"Ah. I see," Guy dropped his tone and flashed her a wicked smile. "Perhaps you'll find this more appropriate," he crooned as he pulled her body fully against his.

Guy lowered his head and claimed Tori's mouth with a searing kiss. One arm held her in place as the other moved until his hand covered her butt. His tongue explored her mouth. His lips moved over hers savagely as he fondled her. Not stopping, Guy backed Tori until his hand connected with his father's workbench. He continued to ravage her mouth as he unbuttoned her jeans. As soon as the zipper was open, he yanked them down her hips, taking her panties with them. Refusing to let her end the kiss so she could protest, Guy worked at his groin with one hand until he managed to free his erection.

He lifted her to the workbench and separated their lips, holding her in place with one hand. Guy's eyes burned into hers as he removed one shoe and dragged her leg from her clothes. With a feral growl, he forced her thighs apart and stepped between them. He held her gaze, noting how her lips were parted, her breath ragged and the way her chest heaved. Without any preliminaries, Guy penetrated her core with three fingers.

A superior smile crossed his face. "So wet. Ready for me. I like a woman who knows how things should be." Guy removed his fingers and impaled her fully with one deep thrust.

"Guy!"

He pounded into her steadily. "Say it."

"I love you," she gasped.

"Again."

"I love you."

"You're mine," he growled. "Mine. All mine."

"I love you."

Guy was out of control. "Who do you belong to? Tell me," he demanded.

"You," she panted. "Yours. I belong to you."

"Forever." His thrusts became even more wild. "Mine. I'll never let you go."

"Guy," Tori cried when Guy yanked her forward and lifted her legs over his forearms. She lost her balance and fell backward, landing on her elbows. The new position changed the angle of his shaft so it rubbed against her engorged nub. "Oh my God!"

"That's it. Come for me. Let go. Use your tight pussy to show my cock how much you love it. You missed this as much as I did."

"Oh God! Guy," she cried, feeling every ridge of his huge shaft moving inside her as he forced her higher and higher. "I love you."

"You love the way I fuck you. You love to feel my cock pounding deep into your hot pussy."

"I love you, Guy. I love you."

"You love fucking me. You love this."

"Yes." She held back. "Yes, I love when you fuck me. Yes, I love it, just like this. But I only love it because I love you. I love you, Guy. God, I love you," she continued to whimper as she exploded around him. "I love you."

As soon as Guy felt her orgasm begin, he shifted his hips and managed to force himself even deeper. The way Tori's muscles squeezed him as if she never wanted to let go pushed Guy over the top. He cried out her name as he emptied himself into her throbbing channel, collapsing on top of her when he finished. Soon, the only thing left was the sound of their harsh breathing as they clung to each other.

"I love you," Guy whispered when he could. "You okay?"

"Mm," she responded.

"Aw, Christ." Guy's brain reengaged. "Fuck!"

"Okay." She wiggled slightly.

"Hey." He lifted his torso to see her. "I'm trying to be serious here. Stop playing around."

"Who says I'm playing?" Tori used his shoulders to pull herself up so she could reach his mouth to kiss him.

"Tori." Guy stood, bringing her upright with him. "Are you all right? Did I hurt you? Answer me, damn it!"

Tori was stunned when she realized he wasn't kidding. "I'm fine. Better than fine. Incredibly, wonderfully, unbelievably fine."

"Christ, I shouldn't have been so rough with you," he cursed himself and pulled away from her.

"Hey! Get your sexy butt back here," she demanded. "Right here." She pointed at the spot on the floor he had just vacated. "Listen up, Detective. I'm the one who wanted Alpha, remember? I wanted it and you gave me exactly what I was hoping for. I love it when you get that way, knowing I did that to you. God, Guy." She blushed. "I missed you so much. All of you, not just this. Do you realize this is the first time you didn't make me ask for sex? Yeah, okay, I made that crack about your reaction but all I expected was a real kiss."

"Oh? You didn't want to be taken by an overbearing, dominant Neanderthal?"

"Hell yes, I did! Or I would have if I'd given it some thought. Guy, you were wild and demanding. I can't wait to find out if I can get you to be even more out of control because I've discovered that I love it when you get a little base. But you know what? No matter what I do to push you into it and believe me I will push you, frequently I suspect, I know you won't ever hurt me. I'm talking honest hurt not a little bruise here and there."

"Tori." Guy glanced at her hips where he had been holding on.

"Don't say it. Maybe I'm sick but the way you grabbed me and held me where you wanted me so you could fuck me like you knew I wanted you to. God, I feel like I just got claimed or something."

Guy slid his semi-hard shaft along her slit. "Um, Tori? I know I didn't give you much choice when I asked who you belonged to but..."

Tori giggled. "Oh, wow. Tell a guy you love him and he goes all sensitive on you. Aren't you the one who keeps saying that I always have a choice? You demanded an answer but that's it. I chose to tell you that I belonged to you. Get it through your thick head already, would you? I may be insane and I admit I have mood swings at the drop of a hat but I am not fickle and I do not run around telling every guy I see that I love him and belong to him forever. I never told anyone that before and I have no intention

of saying it to anyone else so you better get a clue and deal with it or you're going to piss me off big-time."

"Easy there, tiger. Pull the claws in. I didn't mean to imply that I doubted you but I was being insistent at the time. I was just reminding you that you do still have that choice we keep bringing up." Guy's smile softened and he leaned forward for a gentle kiss. "Thanks for coming here tonight."

Tori's happy expression vanished to be replaced by one of complete horror. She pushed at Guy's chest. "Oh God. I can't believe this."

He trapped her in place. "What's wrong?"

"This isn't happening. What the hell is wrong with me?"

"Not a goddamn thing other than that you're not making any sense at the moment. What is it, Tori?"

"Guy! This is your parents' garage. I'm half naked on your dad's tool bench. We had sex and your whole family is here."

"Yeah, but they're inside. Dad and Todd won't let anyone disturb us."

"That's not the point!"

"Then what is the point?"

"We had sex! Here! In the middle of your dad's tools!"

"Yes, I know we had sex and I know where we are. What I don't know is why you're freaking out about it."

"And I don't get why you aren't. Oh, wait. This isn't a big deal to you because you do it all the time, right? Your family's used to you dragging whoever you're with out here for a quickie in the middle of dinner. You don't care if they can guess what we've been up to by the way I look because they already know."

Guy took a deep breath and swallowed his angry response. He scooped her from her perch and carried her to the corner of the room. Letting her stand but not releasing her, Guy pushed open a door to reveal a small bathroom. He urged her inside, trapping her in the space with his body. After he let the water run until it was warm, he used paper towels to clean away the evidence of their pleasure. He lifted her foot and rearranged her pants. He made her wait while he washed his penis and tucked it away before leading her back to replace her shoe.

"Tori, I understand this is all new to you and letting yourself trust me isn't easy. I know admitting your feelings is frightening. It'll take some time for you to accept you have no reason to be insecure and until then you're going to have moments when you lash out to protect yourself from what part of you still expects to happen. I'll do my best not to let you goad me but I'm sure there will be occasions when you'll succeed. Tonight, however, is not one of them. You are the only woman in my adult life who has been here. You are the only one in my entire life who I had sex with in this garage. You're probably right that some of my family will be able to guess what we did out here and yeah, they'll more than likely tell the ones who can't. I'm not ashamed of it. We're



both adults and I love you and I see no need to hide the fact that I find you physically desirable. So incredibly desirable that I can't resist an opportunity to be intimate with you even if it isn't the most politically correct situation. Yeah, maybe I should have waited until we were somewhere else but damn it, Tori, I refuse to let anything you say make me feel guilty about this."

Tori watched Guy struggle to remain calm for her sake and melted. She closed the gap between them and slid her arms around his waist, hugging his unyielding body. "Told you I suck at this. Why the hell do you keep putting up with all my bullshit?"

Guy relaxed. "Simple. You're more than worth it and I love you."

"I can't promise I'll change."

"I don't want you to change. You're perfect, bullshit and all." He let her see his face so she knew he was sincere. "You make me so happy. You, exactly as you are. I'm the luckiest man in the world to have you love me."

She blushed. "Okay. I get it. Enough already."

"Nope. It'll never be enough no matter how often I tell you that. I suggest you figure out a way to deal with it because I promise you'll be hearing it constantly. I'll try not to call you every four minutes while you're working but I'm not promising the same about the nights."

"You're going to call and wake me?"

"Often."

"Oh." She suddenly looked very sad.

"Teasing, Tori. Don't get upset with me again so soon."

"I'm not. It's just..."

"Just what? Tell me why you seem so unhappy."

"Well, I, um, oh, damn." She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "I just assumed we'd be together at night or some of them anyway. I guess I'm stupid but I was disappointed when you said you'd be calling me."

Guy stared for a long minute. Then he grinned. "Holy Christ, tiger. Here I am, still trying not to rush you until you're ready so I don't scare you away and I end up hurting your feelings instead. Hell yes, I want to spend my nights with you. All of them. Starting tonight. Say the word and I will round up some guys and be moved in before dark tomorrow."

It was Tori's turn to stare. "You mean that. You'd give up your apartment and come live with me just like that."

"Absolutely. I do have to warn you. I fully intend to marry you and I won't quit asking until you say yes but I'll be more than happy to live with you while I'm convincing you."

"Oh my God."

"Now what? I never made any secret of wanting you permanently. I know I mentioned forever plenty of times. To me, that means marriage. Perhaps I should have been more specific." Guy clasped her hand and got down on one knee. "Victoria Banks, I love you with all my heart. Will you marry me?"

"Oh my God," she gasped.

"That's not an answer. Want some help?" He kissed her palm. "First, there's my favorite choice, yes. Then, there's the totally unacceptable choice, which I'm only including because I like to be thorough and not because I'd ever accept it, no. Or there's the third choice which is not the best but one I'm willing to live with, yes at some point in the future when you're completely comfortable with the idea."

"Oh my God."

"I thought I explained that that is not an appropriate response to my question. I'll ask it again, just in case you forgot what it was. Tori, love of my life, will you please marry me?"

Tori began to tremble and frowned.

"Don't forget choice number three. Want to hear it again?"

"No."

"No, you don't want me to repeat it or no, you won't marry me?"

"No, I remember all the choices."

"Good. How about I throw in a fourth one? Here, possible response number four, you prefer not to answer at this time and would like to put the question on hold until you have the opportunity to evaluate the outcome."

"That's nice of you but no thank you," Tori could barely speak.

"Okay, now I'm confused."

"Maybe this'll clear things up." Tori got to her knees in front of him and captured his other hand. "Guy Breauchard, I love you in a way I didn't believe existed before I met you. Yes, I will marry you."

"Yes?" Guy was stunned.

"Yes." Tori wasn't sure if she should laugh or cry or do both.

Guy crushed her to his chest. He brought them to their feet and spun her around again, laughing the whole time. When he finally put her down, he held her tightly.

"Hey," Tori whispered when she felt Guy shaking. "You okay? Loosen up, Guy."

When he did Guy smiled down at her, not attempting to hide the tears on his cheeks. "This is one of the occasions when I'm not embarrassed to shed a few tears."

"Guy." Tori joined him. They held each other for a minute until Tori began to giggle. When Guy gave her a questioning look, she explained. "Sorry. I was just thinking about that movie I said they should make about us. This would make a great sappy ending."

"It is a perfect ending," he corrected her and covered her mouth in a kiss that drew on for endless minutes. "Christ." Guy forced himself to break away. "We keep that up and we'll be having a repeat performance."

"Oh right, make it up to me to tell you to go for it or stop. That is so not fair."

"It sure as hell is. You're the one who got all bent out of shape the first time. I'm not taking any chances so soon after you agreed to marry me."

Tori laughed so hard Guy had to hold her up. "You're so cute," she hesitated. "I, um, guess we can't stay here forever."

"We could but we'd have to call for supplies. So what's it going to be? Head straight to the truck and call to say goodnight or stick our noses in the door and tell them we're taking off?"

"They'd let us get away with that? I kind of thought we'd have to stay a little if we went in."

"We would but I was going to blame it on them."

She returned his grin. "So cute. Let's go in. I don't want them to start off hating me."

"No one would hate you. They'd just assume that I couldn't wait any longer and was dragging you off for sex."

"So not helping."

Guy was so pleased with her decision to say hello to his family that he caught her for a thorough kiss. "Much better."

"What?" She didn't resist as he urged her to leave their nook.

"You were starting to look a little pale. Your cheeks are nice and pink now."

"Again, not helping." She waited while he turned off the lights. "Hey, Guy? Can I be selfish and ask that you don't announce that we're getting married the instant we're in the door? Not that I don't want them to know. I do but I also want a few minutes to share the most wonderful secret ever with the most wonderful man ever."

Guy kissed her again. "I like that. Why don't we keep it all to ourselves tonight? We can tell them tomorrow when they help me move or don't you want to mention that either? I can always enlist some of the guys on the force instead."

"No, that part's okay. I can't explain it, so don't ask me to try."

"I think I understand." Guy stopped just before they reached the door. "You know," he slid his hands to her buttocks and palmed her cheeks, "I never did get around to showing you how good my cock will feel buried in your sweet ass."

"Don't bother getting any ideas, Detective, 'cause that ain't happening tonight either."

"Aw, Tori," Guy pouted. "I thought you wanted to experience that."

"I do." She reached for the doorknob. "And I will. Just as soon as we get a big, fat dildo that's the same size as you are and I finish fucking your ass with it, mine will be ready and waiting."

Without looking at him, Tori pulled open the door and stepped into the kitchen. She relaxed when she found Todd right inside. He had been sitting there all evening to prevent anyone from sneaking out to the garage.

"Your Dad's guarding the front door," Todd whispered as he hugged her. He glanced over her shoulder at Guy and froze. "This sure isn't what I expected. Somehow, I pictured you to be the one looking flustered and Guy to have the big grin. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, we're good." Tori snuggled against Guy's side and wrapped her arms around his waist. "He was getting a little overconfident and I just took care of that."

"Any more effective and I'd be curled up on the floor, cowering behind my mommy."

Todd didn't bother to hide his amusement as Terese joined them. "You managed to repair the damage I caused?"

"Yes." Guy grinned as more of his family drifted to the kitchen. "I owe you a great big thanks for this one, Terese."

"Not at all. I'll never be able to repay Tori for what she did for us." Terese sniffled.

Guy felt Tori shiver. "I don't mean to be rude but could we please save this one for later? Like after I get to talk to Tori about it? We haven't spent any real time together since before that night and I'm still feeling a little raw about the whole thing."

"We understand, son." His father glanced around the room, letting everyone know the subject was closed. "I assume, judging by the look on your face, that Tori will be coming back and there will be plenty of other opportunities to discuss this with her."

"You assume correctly. In fact, I should tell you that I will be spending much of my time at Tori's if you need to reach me. Apparently her house felt empty without me in it."

Mark, Guy's childhood friend who helped trick his sister, Brigit, into believing in trolls and who married her years later, spoke up. "May as well just move in if you're going to be spending all that time there anyway."

For a few seconds, no one moved. Tori broke the awkward silence by grinning. "He has a good point, Guy. Why don't you move in? I mean, what's the sense in paying for an apartment that I'm going to try not to let you stay in anyway?"

"Well, son of a bitch!" Todd exclaimed.

"You're right. That doesn't make a lot of sense," Guy agreed. "So, Mark, since you brought it up, can I count on you to help me move tomorrow?"

In no time, they had a solid plan for the next day. At some point, Guy had lifted Tori to sit on the counter. He stood next to her, frequently stealing her attention with a kiss.

Guy's sister, Sondra, had been staring at Tori with a slight frown the whole time. "Mom, do you still have that entertainment magazine I gave you a few weeks ago?"

"It's on the bottom shelf of the coffee table," she replied. "With the holidays, I haven't had a chance to read it yet. Why?"

Sondra went to find it without answering. She was flipping through it when she came back. "I thought you looked familiar," she stated, joining Guy and Tori at the counter. "I couldn't place your name right away but I knew I knew it from somewhere." She held the open magazine so Tori could see it.

When Tori gasped, Guy snatched the magazine to see what had startled her. There was a photo of the outside of a shop with four people in front of it. Beneath it, after the list which identified those in it, the blurb read, "Missing from photo, daughter, Tori Banks."

"That's you, right?" Sondra questioned. "I can see the resemblance even though your sister is a lot older than you are."

Tori continued to stare as she shook her head. "She's not. Only two years."

"Oh." Sondra seemed embarrassed. "I'm sorry. Me and my big mouth. I shouldn't have said that."

"Wait. It's okay." Tori reached out for her hand. "It's not you. I never... I mean...this... I haven't..." Tori gave up and buried her face against Guy's shoulder.

"Sh," he crooned softly. "Take a deep breath. I won't let go." He handed the magazine to Todd who showed his surprise with a whistle.

"What?" Sondra demanded as the rest waited for an explanation. "Is something wrong?"

"No, Sondra." Guy cuddled Tori as he tipped her chin. "I love you, Tori," he declared, not caring that they all heard him. "The people in this room are my family. They're part of me. I promise you're safe with each and every one of them. You can tell them anything. Okay? Trust me?"

She nodded and forced herself to meet Sondra's concerned gaze. "Yes, that's my family. And their salon. I haven't seen any of them for six years, since my parents disowned me right after I graduated from high school. I was too much of a disaster to work with the clients so they decided I should take classes and learn how to handle the accounting part of the business. I didn't want to and they thought they could make me do it anyway by giving me the choice of following orders or leaving for good, right then, taking whatever I could carry and knowing they would never let me come back."

"You left?" Sondra looked horrified.

Tori nodded. "I got on the bus that was going the farthest and got off here."

"You never called them?"

"No. They said I wouldn't exist if I left."

"But they didn't mean it, not really."

"Oh yes, they did." She looked around the room. "Guy's told me about all of you and what it was like growing up in this family. I believe him but I can't really understand it because my family was completely different in all ways. I don't know what that article says but my parents' salon is very exclusive. They've been on top for years, much longer than the average in their world. They've stayed there because they worked very hard to. That place and the prestige that comes with it was the most important thing in their lives. It was their life. My brother and sister always felt the same but I never fitted in. Not at the salon or at home or with any of them. You are all part of a family and everything that stands for. I was a stranger living with a group of people who happened to share the same blood."

"You don't have to tell us this," Sondra tried to interrupt because of how upset Tori was.

"Yes, I do. I need to so you don't hate me when I hide from you. Before Guy, I never let anyone get at all close to me. I figured if I kept my distance no one would know me well enough to hurt me. If I pushed everyone away and didn't let them in, it wouldn't matter when they didn't stay because I expected to be alone anyway. You heard Guy tell me I was safe with you and ask me to trust him. He did that because I don't believe I'm ever safe with people and I don't know how to let myself trust anyone."

"Except Guy," Sondra whispered.

"Yeah," Tori agreed, turning briefly to cup Guy's cheek. "Except Guy. He's making me realize that not everyone is like the people I knew growing up. This group thing is all new to me and I'm sure I'll screw up lots before I get the hang of it." She glanced around again, tears streaming down her cheeks. "You probably doubted my sanity already because of the nightmares and now I'm telling you I'm an emotionally insecure wreck who, in all probability, will zone out and act like a total nutcase just because you're being friendly to me. You're probably wishing Terese hadn't brought me here and that I would stay far away from Guy. But I'm not a bad person. I'm not easy to get to know and I get defensive when I get scared. I know I'll offend all of you eventually if you even let me come back again and I'm very sorry that I don't know how not to because I love Guy so much and I wish I could learn to fit in because that would make him happy. I have no right to ask for your help but I do want Guy to be happy and he won't be if he has to keep us separate so, for him, do you think you could try to put up with me at least a little and ignore some of the stupid stuff I do?"

Guy's sisters were all crying. Their husbands were holding on to some part of them. Guy's parents were watching all of them. Guy hadn't moved or spoken. He was depending on his family to prove the truth of his words. Todd was the only one there smiling.

In the end, it was Guy's father who approached Tori first. "Last week, Guy and I were talking and he told me a little about you. He asked if I thought he was hurting you by continuing to see you. He was afraid his persistence would make you withdraw further into yourself instead of drawing you out as intended. He loved you enough that he was willing to let you go if that's what was best for you.

"Earlier, you heard me say that you were worth fighting for because you loved him enough to walk away so he wasn't forced to choose between you and his family. That kind of love, the one you both feel for each other, is the thing truly strong, close families are based on.

"My wife and I have been extremely fortunate that our sons-in-law are good men who share our values and are willing to build solid relationships with our daughters. I'm proud to include the four of them in our family.

"Lately, I became concerned for Guy. He's been looking for someone to share his life with that he could add to our family as his sisters did with their spouses. My son has waited a long time for you, Tori. From what little I know of you so far, I can already tell you were worth the wait. You are a very special lady and I'm thrilled to welcome you to the family. You are courageous and decent. You have a good, kind heart that should be shared. I suspect you don't think much of yourself at the moment but I sure do and obviously my son and son-in-law do too. You say you don't know how to fit in and might offend us. I say good for you. We need a little stirring up now and then and I'm looking forward to it. Hell, you already started, inviting Guy to move in with you in front of all of us and then telling us about your past. You've got spunk. I bet you're full of surprises that will keep my boy hopping."

He shooed Guy out of his way so he could embrace her. "We're the ones who should be warning you, what with the chaos this bunch creates sometimes. You stick up for yourself and you'll feel like one of the group in no time."

"Thank you." Tori sniffled. "I don't know what else to say."

"You don't have to say anything, tiger." Guy reclaimed her. After stopping kissing her, he looked around the room. "Uh-oh."

"What?" Tori frowned. She had heard them start to talk while Guy was kissing her but hadn't listened to what they were saying.

"Okay, everybody, listen up." He waited for their attention. "I realize you mean well and I understand why you're considering what you are but do not, I repeat, do not meddle in this one."

Tori saw Guy's sisters shift uncomfortably. "Guy?"

"My good-intentioned sisters are plotting on how to fix the separation between you and your family. They've decided that you were listed as missing from that photo because that is your parents' way of reaching out to you. They think your parents were hoping you'd see it and come home. Ask them if you don't believe me."

Tori looked at his sisters and got a nod from each. "Oh no," she sounded horrified. "Please don't. I'm sure they just put that there so they would look good to their clients."

"I'm serious here. No interfering this time. If Tori wants to contact them, Tori will contact them. If Tori wants your help, she will ask for it. Until she does, I expect all of you to mind your own business and butt out. I want you to give me your word that you won't go behind her back, no matter how helpful you think you're being."

"Ladies," Guy's father growled when none of them spoke. As soon as he did, they each promised not to get involved unless Tori specifically invited them to.

For the next few hours, Tori lounged in the kitchen, constantly surrounded by Guy's strong arms. She watched the ebb and flow of family interaction as members drifted in and out of the room. She joined in a few conversations but spent more time observing without participating. Guy kissed her frequently. At first, she was afraid of what the others would think but soon found that his inability to restrain himself was highly amusing and inspired constant teasing. Guy's reaction was to laugh and kiss her again. His unwavering attention and the kind acceptance from his family relaxed Tori so much she was surprised when someone announced it was almost midnight.

The entire group counted down the last few seconds to the new year. Guy repositioned Tori into a full embrace and kissed her thoroughly, abandoning the teasing pecks he'd been giving her.

"Happy New Year," he whispered against her mouth.

"Happy New Year," she replied, laughing and crying at the same time.

"This is only the beginning," he promised. "It'll only get better from here."

"I believe you," she whispered. "I really believe you."

Without warning, Guy snatched her from the counter and tossed her over his shoulder, laughing at the reaction he got. "Much as we've been enjoying ourselves and would love to stay, I'm afraid we have to be going now."

"Put me down," Tori demanded unsuccessfully.

He crossed the living room and someone handed him their coats as they all wished them the best.

Todd held the door and caught them just outside. He stood so Tori could see him and gave her a huge smile. "You won't ever regret the choice you made tonight," he assured her happily. "Everyone loves you already so don't let this exit bother you. Guy's just trying to set the tone for tomorrow. He wants us to tease him about sex instead of letting his sisters pry into your life. I'll talk to the guys and we'll do what we can too."

"Say goodnight, Todd," Guy commanded when he felt Tori flinch.

"Goodnight," Todd complied. "If you manage to sleep at all, sleep well."



## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

In the elevator, Tori stood in front of Guy. She moved her hands behind her back, intending to continue the torment that had been going on all day. As she cupped his erection, she felt cold steel close over both wrists. With the bellhop beside them, Tori couldn't question his actions. Instead, she had to settle for flashing Guy a curious look over her shoulder. When she did, she saw that his face still wore the same pleasant smile it had while they waited for the elevator. She tugged against the cuffs and heard the clink of metal against metal. Guy met her eyes with a slight shake of his head. Apparently, he was willing to cuff her in the close proximity of a stranger but not to make it public knowledge.

The bellhop led the way to their room. Guy kept Tori directly in front of him by holding on to the chain that linked the cuffs. He guided her into the room and stood her with her back to the windows. He spent several minutes asking the young man for his restaurant recommendations before handing him his tip and escorting him to the door.

When they were alone, Guy deliberately ignored her. He hung up their coats and went into the bathroom to freshen up. He returned to the room, lifted a suitcase to the stand in the closet and flipped it open.

"All right, you win. I'll ask since that's what you're obviously waiting for. Care to explain why the hell you just handcuffed me in the elevator when we weren't alone?"

"I'm sure you can answer most of that yourself. Why don't you give it a try?"

"Yes, why don't I?" Tori asked sarcastically. "I assume you chose that particular moment because, with someone else there, I couldn't yell once I realized what you were up to."

He chuckled. "Correct. You know me so well."

"Yeah, right," she snorted. "If I did, I'd know the rest of the answer and I have no idea why I was in handcuffs before we got to the room. I am still completely dressed here so I really don't get it."

"That's easy to fix." Guy reached into the suitcase and pulled out some scissors.

Tori looked at him, down at her clothes and back to him. "Are you serious?"

"Honestly, I haven't decided yet," he admitted.

Adding to the suspense, Guy suddenly took an interest in the contents of the minibar. He was still poking around when there was a knock at the door. He opened it to admit a waiter with a bucket of champagne, glasses and a covered tray. Again, Guy chatted before ushering the man out.

Tori watched Guy open the bottle and pour one glass. "You going to drink that all by yourself?"

"No." He had a taste. "We only need one glass since you can't hold one anyway." Guy approached and let her take a sip.

"Thanks. Ready to tell me what this is about yet?"

"I suppose," he paused for them to drink. "Consider this payback for your behavior this morning."

"Payback? For what?" Tori demanded even though she knew exactly what he meant.

"Such a brave little tiger." Guy traced her jaw and held the glass for her again. "Fierce as ever even though you're already trapped," he whispered against her neck, caressing her skin with his warm breath. "But since you asked, I guess it won't hurt to humor you." He paused to run the back of his hand along the outside of her breast. "As you well know, you started misbehaving not five minutes after we left home. You ignored my repeated requests that you stop. You spent the entire three-hour trip amusing yourself at my expense."

"Oh, get real." Tori rolled her eyes. "Like you couldn't have made me stop if you really wanted me to. And you know damn well I wanted to take care of you so don't even try to blame your lack of satisfaction on me."

"Hmm, you do have a valid point there." He grinned wickedly and began to unbutton her shirt. "Although we honestly could have become a dangerous traffic hazard if I'd given in to you."

"Again, why is it my fault if you can't come and drive at the same time? Aren't cops supposed to be able to do all sorts of things while they're driving?"

"Yes, we are and yes, I can but trust me, they didn't teach us how to avoid slamming into the back of a tractor-trailer while getting our cocks sucked at the police academy."

"It seemed like you were doing a decent job of it to me. I think you're just acting tough now to hide the fact that you liked having my head in your lap the whole way."

"You think so?" He went to one knee to untie her shoes, lifting each foot in turn to remove them.

"Yeah, I do. As I already told you, we both know you could have made me stop licking your cock anytime you wanted to. You didn't have to let me play with your balls either. You could have handcuffed me to my door as soon as I reached for your fly. No, I think you enjoyed being my lollipop all the way here." Tori shivered in anticipation when Guy slid her jeans and panties from her body. She still had on her bra and shirt but both were open, leaving her chest exposed.

"Perhaps. But that's not the point."

"So just what is this point of yours?"

Guy delayed by refilling their glass and bringing the tray to the table at the window. He let Tori drink before he removed the cover. With deliberate slowness, Guy

selected a plump strawberry dipped in chocolate and brought it to her mouth for a taste. He ate the other half, following the fruit with more champagne.

"My point," he brushed the back of his finger lightly over her nipple, "is you spent three hours teasing my cock. Licking, stroking, sucking, biting. The same for my balls. As I see it, you deserve the same."

Tori gasped. "You're going to play with me for hours and-and..."

"And not let you come? Exactly." He offered her another berry and more champagne.

"But that's not fair. You're the one who kept pushing me off whenever you got close. You know I wanted you to."

Guy considered her statements as he rummaged in the suitcase. He returned to her side with a bag in his hand. "Yes, I suppose I can't deny that."

"Thank you. Now uncuff me already."

"No."

"No? What do you mean, no? You just admitted that I don't deserve to be tormented."

"That's true but the answer is still no."

"Why?"

"Because I've decided that I want to play with your body."

"You can do that without handcuffs."

"Yes, but I like the idea of having you at my mercy. Don't tell me you didn't expect this sooner or later. After all, Tori, you've had me cuffed to the bed on several occasions."

"Well, yeah, I know," she muttered, dropping her chin.

"Hey." Guy was concerned. "What is it?"

"Nothing. It's just... I mean..."

Guy tipped her face up and searched her eyes. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe I would never hurt you?"

"Yes."

"Are you afraid?"

"A little."

Guy sat in a nearby chair and studied her. "Of me or the situation?"

"Oh no, Guy, it's not you. I'm not really afraid of this either." She tugged her wrists. "It's just that I never did anything like this before and, well, what if I can't handle it?"

"Exactly what you already know. You say you want to stop and I release you instantly. Tori, my intention is to give you the freedom to experience all you can without feeling the need to reciprocate at some point. As much as I love the way you do

that and I know you do know that, there have been times when I wished you had indulged me longer than you did. Not that whatever replaced what I had been doing wasn't equally enjoyable."

"Oh, I get it," Tori stated. "It's just like when I handcuffed you. Duh, what a jerk!"

"Hey! My wife is not a jerk. I'm much bigger and stronger than you are so I don't have the same trouble as you do when I want a little solo exploration time. But that doesn't mean I can do everything I have in mind. Not when I have to hold on to you with one hand."

"I should have known that. I probably would have if you hadn't shocked the hell out of me in the elevator like that."

"Oh, I'm positive. If I'd waited until we were tucked away in here you would have treated this as a game and played along without any hesitation. All I did was get us started on a different level. Or was I wrong to think you were excited as soon as you realized you were caught?"

She nodded. "After you stopped me from making any noise."

"Just because I want you helpless and at my mercy don't think that I'd let some horny kid see it and turn you into his favorite fantasy. There wasn't any real risk of us being found out. It was all an illusion."

"Again, something I should have known without needing to think about it. You may torment me in front of people we know but you're much too possessive to flaunt that part of our relationship in public. I'm sorry I forget sometimes and get insecure over nothing."

"Tori, Tori, Tori, when are you going to learn that you don't have to apologize for being yourself? I love you, insecurities and all. Don't you realize that I know you well enough to understand your reactions even better than you do?"

"Oh. Yeah. Hey, at least I didn't have a brain cloud in the middle of the ceremony yesterday."

"Actually, I half expected you to. I'm not entirely certain you wouldn't have balked at something or other if Terese hadn't been in labor."

"Mm. But I still don't get why that doesn't bother you."

"It might if I didn't understand you so well. You throw me curves and try to turn me in the wrong direction whenever things get overwhelming and start to close in on you. I've learned the best way to get you back on track is to stay consistent. If you had come up with something in the middle of the ceremony yesterday, I would have asked everyone to sit tight and taken you off alone and talked you down from the ledge you crawled out on until you were ready to finish marrying me."

"Either that or you would have ripped off my panties and fucked me like a maniac."

"Ah, yes, there is always that possibility," he chuckled. "Bottom line, we're in this together every step of the way."

"There's no one I'd rather be with." Tori blushed. "Can we get back to what you had planned before please?"

"That mean we're done with the serious discussion for now and my wife is ready for me to play with her?"

"Yes. What's in the bag?"

Guy grinned and picked up the bag. "This bag?"

"Yes, that bag. Let me see."

"Patience. You be a good girl for me first and then I'll show you."

"What do I have to do?"

"I changed my mind about cutting off your clothes this time. I'd like to remove the cuffs so you can slip out of your shirt but I don't want to wrestle with you to get them back on. If you struggle, I'll have to rethink what I intended to do with you and that would disappoint me because I think we'll both like what I have in mind."

"I'm sure we'd both like anything that you do, with or without a struggle but I'm curious so okay, I'll hold still."

Guy stripped her and refastened the cuffs. He poured more champagne and fed her several chocolate-covered strawberries. Soon, he added kisses and caresses between the treats he gave her.

"Are you wet, Tori?" Guy asked suddenly in a husky voice.

"Yes." She arched toward the hand hovering near her mound in a silent plea.

"Are you very wet?"

"Yes. Why don't you see for yourself?"

Guy stroked her as she suggested. "Oh yeah. Spread your legs wider."

"What are you doing?" she asked when he dipped a strawberry into her moisture.

"Improving the flavor," he stated, swirling it around her opening. "Mm, so good," he declared after popping it into his mouth. He picked up another berry and repeated the process. "Here, you taste."

"Be better with you mixed in too," she commented. "Let's give it a try."

He chuckled. "Maybe later."

After holding the glass for her again, Guy took it to the table. While his back was to her, he quickly retrieved an item from the mysterious bag and hid it in his hand without her seeing it.

"What a great view," he stated, turning back toward the windows. "Magnificent."

"Mm-hmm, very impressive. I can't wait to see them after dark."

"What? Oh, you mean the falls. Yeah, they're pretty good but I was referring to the naked woman in front of them." Tori blushed again as Guy's gaze raked her body. Soon his perusal switched from visual to physical. His hands and mouth explored her flesh with light, teasing touches.

"Guy," Tori moaned.

"Need something?"

"You. More. Please."

He grinned and worked his way back down to her feet. "Better?"

"Nooo," she groaned. "More. Touch me."

"Hmm." He paused to look her over from head to toe again. "Where? Here?" Guy asked repeatedly as he nibbled and stroked his way up her legs. By the time he reached her hips she was trembling. "Here?" He pressed two fingertips against her slit.

"Yes, oh yes," she pleaded as she tried to impale herself.

"Like this?" he questioned as he slid his fingers into her.

"Ooh, Guy," she moaned.

"How's this?" he wondered, adding a third and stroking her fully.

"Oh God, yes," Tori panted.

"Good to know." Guy withdrew his hand and stood.

"Hey!"

"Patience."

"Oh, come on, Guy. Don't be mean."

"Stop whining and behave or I'll make you wait even longer," he chuckled at her scowl but was impressed by her lack of protest. "Good girl. Why don't you go lie down while I get out of these clothes?"

Tori watched Guy with a hungry expression on her face. She obviously liked everything she saw as he stripped. Guy was about to join her when he frowned. "Not good," he declared. "Better fix it before I get carried away and forget."

"What?"

Guy freed her wrists long enough to reposition them over her head. He grinned wickedly when he looped the cuffs around one of the posts in the headboard. "That's better. Don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"I wouldn't be if you'd get back to what you were doing a minute ago."

"Gee, that sounded almost sarcastic. Maybe a little demanding too. Have you forgotten that you need to be a good girl already?"

Tori scowled instead of answering. She squirmed against the bed and concern creased her features. "Something's wrong."

"What kind of something?" Guy asked mildly, standing next to the bed.

"I mean it, Guy," she insisted seriously. "Let me go."

"Sh, everything's fine." He retrieved another object from the bag.

"No, it's not! Come on already. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." He stared down at her as she began to struggle. "Hold still before you hurt yourself. *Tori!*" he raised his voice sharply to reclaim her attention. "This is all about trust, remember? Now tell me what you think is wrong?"

"Oh," she gasped, confusion replacing some of her concern. "It, it feels like there's something in me." She watched him closely. "Is there? Did you put something inside me?"

Guy nodded and stretched out next to her. He began to leisurely explore her body without giving her the information she wanted.

"Aren't you going to tell me what it is?"

"Not yet," he stated as he deliberately avoided her most sensitive spots.

"But —"

"Sh." Guy silenced her with a lazy kiss. "Patience. Trust." His breath was hot as he whispered against her neck. "You're safe, *Tori*. I promise."

"Ooh," she moaned as his lips caught her nipple.

All too soon, Guy shifted his attention as he resumed his exploration. He chuckled every time she muttered in frustration. Taking his time, Guy worked his way down her body. *Tori* was shivering with unfulfilled need long before he finished. He added to her confusion by leaning against the post at the foot of the bed instead of reversing his path and moving back up her body.

"Such a good girl. I knew you could do it if you wanted to," Guy praised, not bothering to hide his amusement. "I think you deserve a reward."

"Oh my God!" *Tori* exclaimed in surprise as soon as Guy activated the unidentified object inside her pussy. "Oh, wow. What is that thing?" she asked.

"Like that, do you?" He studied her. "How's this?"

*Tori's* hips arched off the bed when the vibrations increased. "Oh, Guuuy."

Guy tested the different settings, noting her reaction to each. He teased her relentlessly, taking her almost to the edge before easing her back, denying her the release she craved.

"Oh, please," she begged when the movement slowed to barely a flutter.

Before Guy could respond, his phone chirped. He hit the off button as he answered. "What did you hear?"

"Didn't your mother teach you that it's rude to ask questions without greeting the person calling?" *Todd* teased. "I must have interrupted something."

"Yeah, so cut the crap and spill it."

"Rude and grouchy. Good thing I called to speak with your wife, because with your attitude I'd probably hang up on you. Would you be so kind and hand her the phone now please?"

"Kind of tough at the moment. She's a little tied up."

"Literally?"

"You got it," Guy chuckled at Todd's groan. "Hang on a sec and we'll work it out."

Tori shifted to her side so Guy could position the phone beneath her ear. "Hi, Todd."

"Hey. I really hate disturbing you."

"But I asked you to call."

"Yeah, you did and I assure you that is the only reason I'm calling you on your honeymoon."

"I know. So did you hear something?"

"Yep. As you suspected, they found the body of the kid from the truck stop under the tree. The backpack had a plastic lining so everything inside is in excellent condition."

"That's the last one."

"Sure is. No more loose ends so that should mean no more nightmares."

"I hope so. Thanks," she hesitated. "Hey, Todd? Can I ask you something?"

"Of course. You know I'll answer if I can."

"Oh. Right. Um, it isn't about this."

"No? That's okay. I'll still answer if at all possible. What is it?"

"Well, Guy told me something this morning that made me curious about the differences between police training and FBI training." Guy made a show of grabbing for the phone but let Tori keep it tucked under her head. "I was wondering if yours was more thorough than his. You see, he said his didn't include a lesson on how to drive and get a blowjob without running off the road."

Todd choked on the coffee he had just swallowed.

Tori giggled. "I'll take that as a no, since you can't even drink and talk at the same time."

"Son of a bitch, you got me with another one of your drive-bys. Set me up for a real zinger too," Todd teased. "I think I liked you better when you were too intimidated to say things like that."

"No, you didn't and you know it."

"Yeah, but I really do prefer it when Guy is the one squirming."

"Don't worry. He's squirming too. Serves him right for telling you I was tied up. Only problem is I'm still tied up and I can see his wicked mind plotting some new way to torment me as soon as you hang up. Thanks for letting me know, Todd."

"No problem but tell your husband he has to wait because I have more news."

"There's something else?" Tori shivered at the possibilities racing through her mind. Guy noticed her tension and immediately rearranged her so he could listen with her.

"What's wrong?" Guy demanded.



"Nothing. Calm down. It's a good one. In fact, it's so outstanding that I wanted to be the one to tell you. It's so good I would have called you even if I hadn't heard about the other yet."

"Please Todd. You're scaring my wife in spite of the way you keep insisting it's not bad news."

"Damn, I'm sorry, Tori. I'll stop with the buildup and get straight to it. We heard from their lawyers today. Both men have changed their pleas to guilty to avoid receiving the death penalty. Apparently, they realized the chances of not being convicted for any of their crimes were extremely low and they'd rather go straight to jail for the rest of their lives than sit through trial after trial, waiting for the shoe to drop."

"Oh my God," Tori gasped. "I don't have to testify."

"You don't have to testify," Todd repeated happily. "You don't have to see either of them again. You don't have to sit through a recap of any of the murders. It is honestly and truly and thoroughly, one hundred percent, completely over and done with."

Tori had her head buried against Guy's chest and was crying. "Thank you, Todd. For both of us," Guy responded.

"My pleasure. Tell Tori she owes me a big hug when you get home."

"You got it," Guy agreed. "You been to the hospital yet?"

"Not yet. Brigit called before Sarah was awake this morning and asked if I could wait to pick her up until after lunch. Since Brigit's Sarah's favorite aunt, Terese enlisted her to help us reinforce how special Sarah is to all of us even though she now has to share our attention. Brigit and one of her astrology buddies have been teaching Sarah about birth charts. Once we were sure of the month, Sarah started one for the baby. She's been working on the background with all the general traits. When I called to tell Sarah she had a brother, I gave her all the specifics of his birth and, after they left your reception last night, they added the information to the chart. They're finishing it up this morning so Sarah can give it to him when she sees him. Apparently, there's some sort of mumbo-jumbo about how gifting a sibling with a birth chart as you meet for the first time is supposed to forge some sort of bond between the pair that enhances the traditional relationship."

"You sound a little skeptical, like you don't believe it'll make any difference."

"A few months ago I didn't. But now, after seeing Tori's experiences firsthand, who knows? Brigit offered to give me examples when I made the mistake of laughing after Sarah told me what they were working on. Who am I to say whether or not her proof is real or merely coincidence? Terese knows Brigit's friends and assured me they're all pretty much alike in that they believe in the possibilities suggested by their astrological whatevers without being fanatical about it. And Sarah gets a kick out of it so why not let her enjoy herself?"

"Ah. So that's why Sarah was asking us for our exact birthdays yesterday."

"Yeah, she mentioned something about learning to do heart charts next. She must have picked you and Tori to be her guinea pigs."

"Hmm, could be interesting."

"Right," Todd chuckled. "Anyway, I'm going to get her soon and take her to the hospital so she can give Bradley his chart thingy. When I talked to Terese this morning she said they can come home tomorrow but you know how much she hates it when we're apart for any reason so we'll probably hang out with her until we get kicked out."

"I'm surprised she didn't make them let you and Sarah stay in her room with her."

"She probably would have if she hadn't been so exhausted last night."

"I'm just glad she didn't deliver in the middle of the ceremony. I'm not sure Tori would have gone through with it if Terese had been giving birth on one of the tables at the same time we were exchanging vows."

Todd laughed. "As if you'd let a little thing like that stop you. There could have been an earthquake, a tidal wave and pterodactyls swooping through holes in the roof as the library fell down around you and you would have managed to form a protective bubble for you, Tori and the minister long enough for him to finish up."

"Yeah, you're right. Last night Tori wanted to know if all holiday get-togethers were so eventful."

"I guess it could seem that way to her."

"Kind of hard not to, considering. First, there was your Christmas party and the uninvited guests. Then Terese drags her along on New Year's Eve. Now we plan a simple, quiet ceremony on Valentine's Day and end up playing beat the clock with your son who wasn't due for another week and a half."

"He didn't want to miss the party," Todd teased. "I hope you pointed out that they were all fairly tame before she turned up."

"No, and I don't think I will. Let's wait and see how Easter goes first."

"Bet you're getting a look for that one."

"Yep."

"I wonder how long it'll take you to cave and explain it to her. I'm sure she has ways of making you talk."

"Very effective ways but she is a woman, Todd."

"Okay, that's my cue to hang up. I really don't need to hear what she's about to do to you."

"Kiss our nephew for us," Guy said happily.

"Will do. And tell your wife if she gets you two arrested for indecent exposure and public lewdness I'm sending Diana to bail you out." Without waiting for a response, Todd disconnected his phone.

"Hey." Guy smiled into Tori's huge eyes.

"You do know I can still hear even if I'm crying, right?" she asked.

"Of course I do. I also know you needed a minute to absorb what Todd told you but you would have kicked yourself later if we'd hung up and not asked about the baby."

"Oh. Yeah. He's okay?"

"Just fine. Terese too," Guy told her what Todd had said. "Now, how are you?"

Tori's eyes glittered with more tears before she rested her forehead against Guy's chest as he cuddled. "I don't believe it," Tori stated when she had her emotions under control. "I just don't believe it."

"You will once you give it some time to sink it. Christ, what a relief!"

"Mm, calls for a celebration, don't you think?"

"Hell yes. Got any suggestions?"

"Maybe." She rubbed her nipples against his chest as much as possible despite being handcuffed to the bed.

Guy grinned and switched the vibrating egg back on. "Gonna tell me?" he asked, adding to the stimulation with his hands.

"Ooh." Tori lost her train of thought. "Oh God. Guy."

"Oops." He grinned wickedly, temporarily halting all her distractions. "Guess you can't talk while I'm doing that."

"No." Tori sounded disappointed.

"Aw, don't look so sad, tiger. Soon as you tell me what you have in mind, we'll get back to that."

"Good." She blushed.

"Ooh yeah. I can already tell it's going to be damn good, judging by how red you are. I can't wait to hear it."

"Okay." She took a breath for courage. "Okay. I thought that maybe, um, this would be the right time, I mean, you keep saying that, um, well, you told me that you were going to wait until there was a special occasion to, um..."

Guy threw back his head and laughed. "You're right. This calls for a celebration and I agree that it is the perfect occasion to initiate your sweet ass to the pleasures of my cock. That is what you were suggesting, right?"

"Yeah."

"Christ, you're incredible. Handcuffed to the bed, completely at my mercy, blushing the prettiest shade of pink and offering me your virgin ass." He paused for a searing kiss and continued with some well-placed fondling until Tori was arching and whimpering with need. "You want that? You ready to feel my cock in your ass?"

"Yes."

"Good thing I brought some lube then, isn't it?" He left her temporarily to retrieve it. "You gonna let me work my way in and open you up so I can pound hard and deep the way I do in your tight pussy?" He spread some lubricant between her cheeks.

"Yes."

"You gonna let me show you how good it can feel when you come with my cock buried in your ass?"

"Yes."

"You gonna let me pump you until I shoot my hot cum way up inside you?"

"Yes," she moaned as his fingers penetrated her, stretching her for his penis.

"Want me to leave this toy in while I take you?" he asked, increasing the speed to heighten her arousal.

"Oh God, yes."

"Okay. You want it, you got it. Just as soon as you say it, I'll give you what you want. Tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it," he urged as his fingers mimicked what they would do.

"Guy."

"Yep, that's me. Your husband. I'm the man who will give you exactly what you need as soon as you tell me what that is."

"God," Tori cried, close to exploding already. "Guy! I want..."

"What? What do you want?" He bit her extended nipple.

"Ooh yeah. Guy! Please. Fuck me. Fuck my ass. Fuck my ass just like you said you would. Show me how good it feels when you use that big, hard cock of yours to fuck my ass."

"Christ," Guy growled. He lifted her legs over his shoulders and lubed up his shaft until he was slippery enough to enter her with as little pain as possible. Very gently, he worked his cock into her tight hole, sliding in a fraction of an inch, retreating and returning even farther. It took some time but Guy finally managed to bury his cock to the hilt.

"Okay?" he asked for reassurance before he started to move.

"Oh my God, Guy. More. Please," she whimpered with need, arching against him.

Guy let his tight control slip and began to give her what she wanted. It wasn't long before they were thrusting wildly against each other. The toy's vibrations added to the heightening stimulation until they both surrendered to the pleasure Guy had promised. Miraculously, he managed to switch off the vibrator as he collapsed only partially on top of her. It took several long moments before either could for a coherent thought. The first thing Guy did was release Tori's wrists and roll until she was sprawled on his chest.

"Oh, wow," Tori sighed contentedly. "Jeez."

"That mean you liked that?"

"Oh God. Yes. You?"

"Christ! You know I did. Hell of a way to start a honeymoon, setting the level that high right off the bat. Gonna be hard to top it."

"Mm, maybe if you were talking about anyone other than us," she commented, shifting in his arms for a drawn-out kiss. "Piece of cake for us." She wiggled

suggestively. "You're almost hard again and I'm still soaked so I'm sure we won't have any trouble making us feel even better."

"No wonder I love you so much," Guy declared.

"That's the same thing I was thinking," she sighed. "I love you too, Guy. I love how insatiable we are together. I love how perfect we are together."

"And I love how we're going to get even better for the rest of our lives, even though we are perfect already."

"Forever," Tori stated, meeting his intense gaze with one of her own.

"Forever," Guy seconded, trusting both of them to fulfill their statements in every way possible for the rest of their lives.

## 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 inconvenient, 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](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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