

ELLORA'S CAVE *Breathless*



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Questing

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# *QUESTING*

**Barbara Huffert**

## *Dedication*

*For Lance Cheuvront, dearest friend and poet extraordinaire. One day soon...*

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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Armani: GA Modefine S.A.

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## Chapter One

"This cake is absolutely delicious! I still can't believe you chose to spend your birthday here but I do admit I'm happy to share it with you." Vera patted Kiley's hand. "You're such a sweet girl, the way you continue to visit even though your poor mother passed over three years ago. She'd be so proud of the lovely young woman you've become. And Alyssa, what a nice surprise for you to drop in too. Your cousin showed me that book of pictures you compiled. Quite shocking, I must say but she assures me that was the whole point." She smiled innocently and asked, "Kiley, why didn't you bring your young man with you?"

"Young man?" Alyssa perked up, vibrating with even more energy than usual.

Kiley blushed, her pale complexion turning the prettiest feminine shade of pink, which suited her green eyes and red hair perfectly. "He's not my young man. I hardly know him," she declared, her normal serenity slipping somewhat.

Vera's eyes were full of mischief. "From what you told me dear, that's only because you choose to keep him at a distance."

"Him who?" Alyssa pried.

"No one, Lyssa," Kiley scowled at her cousin. "I'm glad you enjoyed the cake, Vera. I'm so sorry but we really must run now if we want to make the beginning of the movie."

As they said goodbye, Kiley's spirits sank. Alyssa was sure to latch onto Vera's question like a terrier. She'd push and prod until she got details that didn't even exist yet.

"Come on, Kiley, spill it. Who is Vera talking about?" Alyssa demanded the instant they were outside.

"No one, really," Kiley insisted. "I just mentioned once that Jordan McKade is still coming in for lunch every day. I told you about him and I'm sure Dee's added her two cents."

"Jordan McKade? The guy with the voice?" Alyssa rolled her eyes. "It's been what, six months and you still haven't gone out with him?"

"Only four," Kiley corrected. "Besides, he's never asked me out."

"Maybe he would if you didn't turn into a complete ninny whenever he tried to talk to you."

"So Dee has been telling tales," Kiley was quick to respond.

"Yeah but only because the two of you are so amusing," Alyssa supplied. "Maybe I should come see this performance myself. Dee says you're hysterical. Does he really show up every day?"

"Yep. He and his friend, Brett Hudson. Dee must have told you about him too," Kiley sighed. "I can't help it, Lyss. All I need to do is hear him and I go to pieces when he's nearby, even before I see him. Every day I tell myself I'll be cool and chatty when he gets there but, as soon as he says hello, my brain turns to mush."

"Dee claims he has a voice that could melt butter."

"Mm, you should hear him." Kiley felt her face flush just thinking about it. "He just sounds so hot. I'm telling you, that man's voice should be illegal. Nothing should sound that good. It doesn't help that he's absolutely gorgeous either."

"So why don't you make the first move and ask him out? Any man who's willing to eat at the same place everyday like he does is either hooked or brain-damaged."

"Or an incredibly good and supportive friend like Brett is," Kiley sighed again. "I'm such an idiot around Jordan. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I do," Alyssa snickered. "You want him. Bad."

"Lyssa!" Kiley exclaimed.

"Admit it, Kiles. This Jordan guy is the first man who ever got you hot just by being in the same room and you don't know how to handle it." She grinned. "Take my advice, cuz. Just go for it. Tell him you want him and see where it leads. Dee thinks he's an honestly good guy. The least that could happen is you have a steamy fling. But who knows? Maybe, just maybe, he's a keeper."

"Be real." Kiley pretended to be shocked by her casual attitude even though she wished she could be as nonchalant as her cousin had always been. Alyssa would meet a guy. If she wanted him, she got him. When she got bored, she moved on. Kiley knew she was at the other end of the spectrum. She was too old-fashioned or idealistic or something. Still, she had to admit that Jordan McKade was the hottest man she ever met even if she didn't have the courage to do anything about it. He really was nice too on top of being incredibly handsome with that voice that made her wish he would never stop talking. It didn't even matter what the man talked about as long as he kept speaking. It was like she could feel his voice caressing every inch of her with each word and they hadn't discussed anything personal yet.

"Kiley. Hey, Kiley." Alyssa nudged her.

"What?" Kiley realized her mind had drifted, lost in daydreams and turned bright red. "Oh, sorry."

Alyssa laughed. "Yep, I was right. You do want this guy real bad."

"Hey, stop teasing. It's my birthday, remember? You're not supposed to pick on me on my birthday," Kiley stated.

"Okay, you win. I'll back off for now but one of these days..." She let it hang. "Let's get to the movie. I still think you could have come up with a better way to celebrate." She held up her hand to stop Kiley's protest. "I know, your birthday, your choice. Well cuz, next month is my birthday and we're going to start the night with a hockey game, followed by many drinks at locations of my choosing. I'll let you bring Mr. Sexy Voice if

you want. Would I like his buddy, Brett?" When Kiley gasped, Alyssa fought to control her giggles as she said, "Teasing, just teasing."

\* \* \* \* \*

Brett Hudson waited on the balcony for the man who had always been his best friend to join him. "Did you get Will all set up?" Jordan McKade asked, handing him a beer without bothering to ask if he wanted one.

"All done," Brett responded cheerfully. "He already had it in order for the most part. I just did a little tweaking. You should've come with me. Dee's one hell of a cook."

"What did you mooch this time?" Jordan teased.

"Mooch! I don't mooch. Since Will's new to the whole website business we made a deal," Brett explained. "Creative advice in exchange for dinner. Of course, you'd already know that if you actually listened to the conversation going on at your table instead of focusing entirely on the hostess."

"I listen," Jordan protested half heartedly.

"Yeah, okay, right, whatever you say." Brett humored him. "Why don't you just get on with it and ask her out?"

Jordan sighed, staring into the top of the bottle. "Kiley's not ready. She needs some more time to get used to me."

"More time? We've been eating lunch there every weekday for four months. I don't think time is the answer."

"Maybe not." Jordan's face took on a far away look. "But she gets so flustered when we get there everyday that I'm afraid that if I invite her somewhere she'll say no without even considering it."

"It's not we, Jordan, it's you. I've been there plenty of times before you and she's perfectly calm and coherent. The instant you show up, she gets tongue-tied and grows two left feet."

"So how do I make her comfortable around me? I don't want to scare her off."

"Well, now, that's why I'm here." Brett grinned. "Dee said that Cousin Alyssa wants to go to a hockey game on her birthday. Probably hoping a bloody fight will break out and she'll get to photograph it. Apparently, a quiet dinner, cake at the nursing home and a movie isn't her idea of celebrating. Last night, Kiley called to ask Will how she could get tickets since the game's already sold out."

"What did he tell her?"

"Funny thing about that." Brett made him wait. "As it turns out, Dee had mentioned our discussing just that subject a few weeks ago. Will, good man that he is, remembered and suggested to Kiley that she speak to you. He said it wouldn't be safe for her to go to any old scalper since most would surely take advantage of her. He made it sound as if you hooked him up with someone once but unfortunately the information slipped his mind. Couldn't find the paper he wrote it down on either. It's a perfect

setup and all you have to do is be ready to step in and take care of it for her when she asks you."

"She won't go for that." Jordan's tone indicated that he was already scheming. "And I certainly won't send her to anyone I know, alone but..."

"But what?" Brett knew he had a plan.

"But I could give her a number to call where someone could arrange to have tickets dropped off for her."

"Won't work. She'll recognize your voice no matter what you do to disguise it."

"True but she won't recognize yours," Jordan stated. "I'm sure one of your interns would be willing to deliver the tickets if he gets some for himself as payment."

"Did I also mention that Dee's decided Kiley might be less shy if you two bumped into each other away from the restaurant?"

"I've been thinking that same thing myself." Jordan grinned. "You know, Brett, we haven't done anything with Shane lately. He's been working much too hard. Maybe it's time for the three of us to get together."

"Hmm, your brother always did like a good hockey game," Brett observed.

"So he did." Jordan was already reaching for the phone. Five minutes later, everything was arranged. "I think I'll wait a few weeks to call Shane. It'll sound better if it seems more last minute."

"Probably be less obvious to the ladies if it comes up too. And it would be very rude not to invite Alyssa for a birthday drink."

"We'd never be rude," Jordan agreed. "Of course, we'd have to go somewhere with some sort of competitive distraction available."

"Of course. I'm sure I can find a way to goad Shane into playing but what about Cousin Alyssa?"

"From what I've picked up she sounds awfully competitive too," Jordan paused. "Naturally, I will be available to keep Kiley company."

"Naturally," Brett echoed. "You really need to make something happen soon. It's not good for you to spend all your time moping like you do."

"I'm not moping," Jordan protested. "I've been working on our little project."

"Really? How are we doing?" Brett trailed Jordan to his office to review the progress.

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"Brett, what are you doing, sneaking around back there?" Dee asked when she noticed him lurking behind a plant.

"Sh." He pulled her so she was hidden too. "I came in the back. Jordan has something for Kiley. He's coming in a little early. I want to see her reaction but I don't



want to be obvious by waiting around out front because she might get suspicious, which would ruin his element of surprise."

"Did you tell him about the hockey tickets?" Dee whispered.

"Yep, he's got it covered." Brett crouched lower as Kiley moved around the room, checking tables. "Here he comes."

Jordan waited near the door, watching as Kiley made some last minute adjustments. When she turned and their eyes met, Jordan smiled slowly, staying where he was, letting her come to him.

Kiley quickly glanced around the dining room. Thank goodness no one else was there. Maybe today she'd manage to speak to him without making a complete fool of herself. But who could blame her for being nervous, what with the way they all stared as soon as he walked in every day?

"Good morning, Kiley," he greeted her softly when she reached him.

"Hello, Jordan. You're early," Kiley responded. So far so good.

"Yes, I was hoping to catch you alone for a minute," he explained.

"Oh," Kiley mumbled after a long pause.

Jordan continued as if he hadn't noticed. "I know I'm a few days late but I wanted to wish you a happy birthday." From behind his back, he produced a single white orchid.

When Kiley reached to accept it, Jordan caught her hand. "Thank you. It's beautiful." Kiley's heart started to pound the instant he touched her.

"No, it's you that's beautiful. The flower is merely pretty." His voice lowered seductively as his other hand cupped her cheek.

"Jordan..." Kiley was afraid he'd be able to hear her heart.

"I intended to invite you to dinner until I overheard you telling Dee about your plans with your cousin." Jordan almost seemed about to kiss her. "Did you have fun?"

He wanted to ask her to dinner? Kiley felt her smile growing. "Uh, we did."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. Do you girls celebrate all your birthdays together?"

"What?" Kiley felt warmth radiating from his hands. He was still very close to her. "Oh, um, well, usually." She tried desperately to ignore the impact he was having on her so her brain would continue to function.

"When's your cousin's birthday?" Jordan's expression showed he clearly knew she'd be much more comfortable if he gave her some space but continued to hold her hand anyway.

It finally registered on Kiley what they were talking about. She'd been worrying about how to bring up the subject of finding tickets without sounding like an idiot ever since Will recommended him. "In three weeks and that's actually something I was hoping to discuss with you."

"Really? Are you throwing a party? I'd love to come," he said.

"Well, no, sorry." Kiley watched his face fall. "But I do need a favor. If you don't mind my asking?"

His smile returned. "Sure. Anything. Ask away."

"Alyssa, um, my cousin, wants to go to a hockey game on her birthday. I called and it's already sold out. I asked Will and he suggested I talk to you." She hesitated.

"No problem. Which game do you need the tickets for?"

"Oh no, I couldn't let you get them." Kiley stepped back slightly but not so far that he had to release her hand. "All I want to know is who I should go to."

"You're sure? I don't mind," Jordan offered before she nodded. "All right, I'll give you the number but when you call, be sure you say that you got it from me and that I told you to call him as soon as he answers. Otherwise he'll hang up."

"Jordan?" Kiley hated it when he let go of her hand to write it down for her.

"It's okay, Kiley. Trust me. You just tell him what game you want and that I said I'd appreciate it if he has someone drop the tickets off for you." Jordan must have seen the doubt on her face because he shrugged. "He owes me a favor."

"You didn't do anything illegal for him, did you?" she blurted before she could stop herself.

"No," he laughed. "It's nothing, really."

"Oh, okay." Kiley felt her face flush. "I didn't mean..."

"You have the prettiest blush," Jordan observed. "It makes your eyes sparkle even more than they usually do."

"No, that's from you," she gasped. "Oh!"

"Hmm, I think I like the sound of that." He reclaimed her hand.

"I like the sound of you." She groaned, horrified by her lack of self-control. How had this gone downhill so quickly? She had actually been conversing like a normal person until she turned back into an idiot. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize." He waited until she met his eyes. "You saying that gives me hope."

"Hope?" What was wrong with her? Why did she always react like this around him? Kiley heard Alyssa in her mind. Her cousin was right. She did want him. Bad, just like Alyssa had said the other night.

"Sure. If you like how I sound maybe we'll talk again sometime. Maybe away from here." He paused. "Kiley, I'm very attracted to you. I'd like to get to know you better."

"Me? Better?" Kiley felt the cloud of his voice surround her and lost her ability to think.

"Yes, you." Again, Jordan ignored her lack of response. "Here, let me give you my number. I'd like you to call me after you make arrangements for the tickets. I'm sure you'll be treated properly but I'd still like to know on the off chance that he doesn't have any for that game and I need to give you another source."

"Call you?" Kiley was stunned. Imagine, talking to Jordan on the phone. She couldn't decide if it would be easier than it was in person because she wouldn't be distracted by his incredible smile or if having his voice concentrated solely on her would make it even harder.

"I'd appreciate it tremendously." Jordan's hand touched her cheek again. "Besides, I'll worry about you all night if you don't."

"Worry?" Kiley felt herself sway toward him. "About me?"

"Mm, Dee told me you live alone," Jordan said smoothly. "I always worry if you've gotten home safely, even though I can tell that you're perfectly capable of taking care of yourself. Promise you'll call me tonight about the tickets. It'll give us a chance to chat again."

She couldn't believe she agreed although with him standing that close, holding her hand, talking like he was, she'd probably agree to anything he suggested. And yes, she had some suggestions of her own to add!

The moment ended when another customer came in but before Kiley could pull away, Jordan leaned closer and brushed her cheek with a light kiss. "Thank you, Kiley. And happy birthday again. Now I think I better go get Brett and Dee out of that plant they're hiding in before they fall through it."

Kiley stared, stunned when she realized that he meant they'd been spying the whole time. As she turned to greet the new arrival, she felt the flush creep up her neck and knew her face was bright red.

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During the afternoon lull, Kiley closed herself in her boss's office to call the scalper. As she stared at the number Jordan had given her, she replayed their conversation. She could almost feel his hand on hers as it had been. He had wanted to celebrate her birthday with her. He thought she was pretty. He was attracted to her and was interested in getting to know her better. He said he worried about her safety at night, which meant he thought about her away from the restaurant. He'd been so quick to offer to help her. And he hadn't been offended when she implied that he was a criminal. What a ninny she was to think such a thing! Jordan McKade was a decent man. Just because people said he made money hand over fist it didn't mean he did it illegally as some assumed. Not when so many others firmly believed he was so successful because he was a true financial genius. Still, he was able to produce a scalper's number instantly. Then again, Brett had once commented that Jordan always remembered anything having to do with numbers. And it was Will who suggested she go to him for help. With the way he and Dee always fussed over her, he certainly wouldn't have her do that if he didn't trust Jordan.

With a deep breath, Kiley dialed.

"Yo," a gruff voice answered.

"Uh, hello?" she began tentatively.

"Speak up, cupcake," the voice growled.

"Um, hi, I, uh, need some tickets," she continued.

"Wrong number," he snapped impatiently.

"Wait. Please. I...um, Jordan gave me this number." Kiley feared he'd hang up before she could explain.

"McKade?"

"Yes. Jordan McKade."

"Why didn't ya say so?" He sounded slightly less annoyed. "Whatcha need, cupcake?"

"Hockey tickets." She quickly told him which game it was.

"No problem. Ya want 'em dropped?"

"Um, yes. Please. Jordan said I should ask you to do that." She told him where she worked. "When do I pay you?"

"Pay?"

"Uh, yes. I need to pay you. For the tickets, that is." Kiley was flustered because the man was laughing so hard.

"You sure McKade gave you this number?"

"Yes. Is something wrong?"

"Not a thing, cupcake." He was still chuckling. "You must be damn special."

"What? Why?"

"No reason." He paused. "Been trying to express my thanks to McKade for his help in a family matter for 'bout a year now. He said he'd give me a shout when he needed something but you call instead. And now you say you're paying."

"I have to. They're a present for my cousin." Why was she telling a perfect stranger something so stupid? "If you won't let me pay, then I'm not going to need the tickets after all."

"Hold on, cupcake." Brett was having trouble maintaining the voice he was using while he fought to contain his laughter. "Don't get your panties in a bunch. We'll compromise. You pay me for your cousin's ticket and I give you yours."

"Um..."

"Hey now, come on. I'm willing to give McKade a hell of a lot more than your one ticket but it's up to you. You can take it or leave it but I tell ya you'd be doing me a big favor if you do it even though it rubs me the wrong way to take a cent from you."

"Well, okay, um, thanks," Kiley accepted as she wondered about the family matter he mentioned.

"Good. Someone'll be there soon." Brett was gruff again. "McKade's a good one, cupcake. Make sure you don't forget it."

The line clicked before she could respond.

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Dee snagged Kiley after she seated an elderly couple. "I know you're pleased with yourself today and I'm sure you're looking forward to chatting with Jordan tonight but Kiley, honey you have got to tone down that smile. It's causing lots of speculation and there'll be too many questions if you don't."

Kiley impulsively hugged her. "I can't help it, Dee." She knew she had had a dreamy look on her face all afternoon. "You must think I'm such a ninny. I know I'm acting like a schoolgirl with a crush on the class hottie. I know Jordan only asked me to call to make sure I got the tickets..."

"No, Kiley," Dee said firmly. "Jordan used those tickets as an excuse. I was there, remember? I saw the way he managed to hold your hand and the way he was looking at you. I heard him say he was attracted to you. He's eaten here every day for months. The food's good but we both know it's not that good. Face it. That man keeps coming in here for you and you alone. I heard Will and Brett talking Saturday. He said that before they used to get together for lunch once or twice a week. And they took turns picking the restaurant and had the deal that whoever chose, paid."

"Dee! Brett must be so sick of coming here."

"No, I think he's so entertained that he doesn't mind," Dee paused, deciding how much of Brett's conversation to repeat. "As we suspected, Brett is a bit of a playboy. For ages, he's the one who nagged Jordan into going out on the town. He told Will that Jordan has gotten a bit reclusive over the years. That, since he went out on his own, he's become very involved with his work and that he'd be content never leaving his office. Meeting you has actually helped. According to Brett, you give Jordan something else to concentrate on."

"But that's not the point I'm trying to make. What I was going to say is that when Brett and Jordan went out they were never at a loss for female companionship but Jordan wasn't ever overly interested in any one in particular. Brett said he's usually bored a few hours into an evening and rarely sees the same woman more than a handful of times. Now that Jordan's met you, Brett can't get him to go out at all anymore except for lunch here. Kiley, that gorgeous man with the incredibly yummy voice obviously wants you. And, from the way you act around him, I'm thinking the feeling's mutual. So tonight when you're talking to him, keep that in mind and don't be in a rush to hang up. You maybe should take him out for a thank you drink since he saved you so much on the tickets."

Kiley sighed. "How I wish I could. I can feel my face getting red just thinking about it. If I actually managed to make enough sense for him to know what I was asking and he actually said yes, I know it would be a complete disaster. I'd do something awful like spill both our drinks all over him and even he wouldn't be able to ignore that. Let's face it, Dee. I'm a real klutz when he's around. He's too much for me."

"Don't be silly," Dee scolded. "You need to spend some time with him, is all. Away from here. Who knows? Calling him might do you some good. On the phone, you'll only hear that spectacular voice. Without the impact of his killer smile, those smoky eyes that keep devouring you and that magnificent body that's to die for, you might actually be able to have a real conversation for a change. You seemed to be doing almost okay this morning until he held your hand. Uh-oh," Dee groaned suddenly. "Don't look now but here comes the weasel."

Kiley glanced anyway and saw Malcolm Winslow approaching from the bar, drink in hand and pasted on a polite smile. "Good evening, Mr. Winslow. Are you ready for a table now?"

Malcolm watched her closely as Dee scurried away. "I told you before, Kiley, several times, to call me Malcolm."

When he smiled thinly, Kiley felt a chill run up her spine. She disliked him intensely and hated whenever he came in but always forced herself to keep her feelings hidden. He was a regular customer and he never specifically did or said anything inappropriate. If he had, she would most definitely have gone straight to Henry to report it since he had always insisted on knowing of anything that was out of line in regard to his employees. More than once, she'd witnessed him requesting that a customer leave with the understanding that they were no longer welcome due to their treatment of his staff. In all fairness though, Malcolm had always acted like a gentleman even though he did give her the creeps. "Will someone be joining you tonight, Malcolm?"

"No, alas, I'm on my own this evening." His attempt at a boyish grin failed, ending up as more of a sneer.

Kiley couldn't come up with response that wouldn't offend him so she quickly grabbed a menu and led him to the table she knew he preferred. "All right then. I hope you enjoy your meal," she said brightly and hurried back to her station.

Malcolm decided something about her was different. He had been dining here for almost two years and still hated it as much as ever. When he walked in the first time and instantly recognized the restaurant's better than average potential as a location where he was likely to meet lonely women with money he decided the benefits far outweighed his personal preferences. His initial assumption had proven correct many times over and the women's generosity never ceased to please him but his interest always returned to Kiley whenever he was between companions. He thought it was her shy smile and coyness that kept drawing his attention since, after all, everyone knew it was the quiet ones who were the hottest fucks. Maybe Kiley would even turn out to be a screamer. He intended to find that out very soon because he was almost due to move on to greener pastures.

Tonight, Malcolm decided to time his dinner so he'd be getting to desert just about the time she'd be ready to leave. He was sure she'd jump at the chance to join him as soon as he asked. He'd been watching lately and there didn't seem to be a boyfriend in the picture because, as far as he could tell, she never got any personal phone calls. And

no one ever came to pick her up. She'd probably been creaming her panties for him to make a move the whole time he'd been coming there. That had to be why she was all smiles tonight. She must sense that it was finally her turn for his attention.

The more Malcolm thought about it, the more positive he was. He imagined how it would play out. He'd get her to share dessert and then drive her home. She'd undoubtedly invite him in for a drink or some coffee to keep him with her longer. He'd accept and go so far as to give her a few kisses to get her primed for the good stuff. Then he'd play the real gentleman and go home. He'd leave her hanging, wanting him. She'd go to sleep dreaming about his dick and what he'd do to her with it. Probably even get herself off first, just so she could sleep. He might suggest a picnic next. He'd supply the accessories for their comfort and get her to bring the food so that he wouldn't have to put out any cash. Yeah, he'd spend the entire day teasing her, getting her ready for him and then, once he got her home, he'd give her what she needed most. She'd be begging for him to fuck her by then. He could practically feel what it would be like, ramming his hard cock into her tight pussy while she screamed for more. He'd take her mouth too. Those sweet lips of hers were meant for sucking him off. Yeah, he'd shove his dick down her throat over and over until she was gagging on his hot cum. Then, just as soon as he was done, he'd take off before she could figure out what he was doing because he despised the way women got all clingy after sex. He was willing to do it if the bitch had money but Kiley was nothing more than a working class piece of ass. She was hot enough that he might give it to her a few times but a slut like that wasn't really worth his time no matter how sweet her pussy might be. He'd nail her good and move on. She'd be an interesting distraction but that was all. He really did need to find a new place since Mr. Paul's was pretty much tapped out for his purposes. He'd screw the little bitch as his goodbye and say good riddance to the dump. After all, the peach had been begging to be plucked for months now in every way other than actually coming out and saying the words, so she'd be plenty grateful that he was even willing to lower himself to do her.

Malcolm's dinner arrived just as Henry convinced Kiley to head home early. He heard the proprietor saying something about it being a slow night before wishing her luck with her evening's plans. What was going on here? Kiley never skipped out a second before she was scheduled to any other time. How dare she change her routine? Since he had his meal, the timing was all wrong to ask her to join him. The bitch was toying with him after all, playing hard to get, thinking she was better than she was. Maybe he'd have to reconsider his decision about her. Maybe she was even more of a whore than the rest of them and he wouldn't bother wasting the time to fuck her.

## **Chapter Two**

Kiley snatched the phone the instant she walked in the door. She had four numbers dialed before she remembered Dee's words. Maybe she should follow her friend's advice. Thinking it over, Kiley decided she'd rather not have Jordan know that she'd jumped at Henry's offer to leave early because the anticipation of the call she'd promised had become so distracting she couldn't concentrate. She knew her nervous excitement would leave her tongue-tied and thought it would be better if she took a few minutes to calm down before attempting to speak with him. Concluding that she'd already made a fool of herself with Jordan far too many times, she opted to follow her standard nightly routine first, hoping it would help level off her wildly out of control emotions.

While Kiley sorted her mail, she wondered what she should say after she told Jordan she had the tickets. Would it be prying to ask what the family matter was that he'd helped with? When she stepped into the shower as she did every evening after work, she cautioned herself not to rush. He didn't know that Henry had sent her home half an hour early. Standing under the hot water, Kiley's mind drifted to Jordan's arrival. There was no doubt that the choice had been hers when he'd clasped her hand. She had sensed his strength even though he hadn't exerted any pressure. She could have pulled away whenever she wanted to but the feel of him holding her hand had been so right she never considered it. It had been clear that he wanted to touch more than just her hand too. The way he looked when he brushed her cheek was so intense. His eyes held so many questions and an equal amount of invitations. If she'd turned her head earlier, she could have met his lips. Would he have turned away?

It was very easy for Kiley to picture Jordan in the shower with her. She could almost feel how his hands would roam all over her, leaving heat everywhere they touched. Would his kisses be light and teasing? Would he let them turn savage and demanding if she was uninhibited when responding to him? And what would he be saying if he were there now? Would he whisper sweet nothings? Would he describe what he wanted to do to her? Would he make her tell him what she liked? Would he tell her?

Unconsciously, Kiley's soapy hands drifted to her body. She slid them up her sides to her breasts. She imagined it was Jordan caressing them, squeezing them. If he were there would he lift them to his mouth and fasten his lips on her nipples? Mm, she could picture it so vividly. He would press them together and then alternate between them, sucking, licking, kissing, driving her wild with desire. Just thinking about it had her so wet. If Jordan were with her she'd urge his hand down to her pussy to show him how he affected her. She'd need to hold onto him once he slipped some fingers inside. Kiley gripped the bar on the inside of the shower door to steady herself while she ran her



fingers along her slit, teasing them back and forth, closer and closer until she was pressing on her bud. Stroking slowly at first, then faster and faster, Kiley's mind drifted to how much better it would be with Jordan's fingers on her clit instead of her own. And of course he'd be talking to her the whole time in that sinfully sexy voice of his. God, that alone could make her come.

The hot water would be streaming down over them. As much as she loved hearing him speak, she'd still interrupt him with kisses. Her hands would slide up his arms to his broad shoulders. She'd pull him close, pressing her chest to his.

Mm, that thought sent shivers throughout her body. Her fingers moved faster. She increased the pressure on her clit, working it until she couldn't hold off any longer. She came with a cry and then smiled. She'd only made it halfway through one of her favorite fantasies. That was okay. She'd save the rest, the part where she ended up with Jordan's cock thrusting wildly into her clenching pussy, for the next time.

It wasn't the first time she'd pleased herself thinking about him and it likely wouldn't be the last. Perhaps, relieving the tension like that was just what she needed to keep her mellow so she wouldn't panic when she spoke to him later. Sighing, she decided that it probably wouldn't make any difference. The man could quote stock prices at her and she'd be wet. Maybe she should invite him for a drink as Dee had suggested. Maybe, without an audience, she'd be able to relax and be herself instead of fumbling worse than a lovesick teenager like she usually did.

Kiley pulled on her comfy sweats after debating over a pair of tidy khakis and a sweater. She was only going to call the man. There was absolutely no reason to get dressed up to do so since she'd rejected the idea of asking him to meet her. Perhaps she'd reconsider that option if she actually survived the telephone conversation. Reaching for the phone, Kiley decided she was as ready as she ever would be and dialed.

Jordan was pacing. He knew Kiley had the tickets. Brett called him hours earlier to say the mission was accomplished. When she hadn't called soon after, Jordan guessed she was waiting until she got home. Hopefully, that was a good sign. But it was already past the time he expected to hear from her. It wasn't her night to visit the nursing home and she rarely made any other stops after work so where was she? What was she waiting for? Maybe she was ignoring her promise and had decided against calling him at all.

When his private line rang, he stopped himself from diving to grab it on the first ring. Instead, he took a deep breath. He had to appear casual, not anxious. If he sounded impatient like he'd been waiting for her, she would get flustered again. He was hoping to put her at ease and spend some time having a harmless, relaxed chat. He wanted to make her comfortable enough to get beyond the nervousness that came out around him. He was sure she wasn't afraid of him. He knew they connected on a level he'd never experienced before. He'd accepted the situation the instant they met. In the universal cosmic plan, Kiley was destined to be his future. She just didn't know it yet. Jordan wondered how he could make her see the reality that their lives were meant to

be joined when they still hadn't managed five minutes without her getting jumpier than a puppy on the Fourth of July.

"Hello," Jordan answered, trying to sound as if he thought it could be anyone on the other end of the line.

"Jordan, it's Kiley," she began tentatively.

"Kiley, hi. How was the rest of your day?" He hoped to sound friendly and unassuming when what he really wanted was to ask if he could join her and spend the rest of the night making passionate love to her. If he ever had the opportunity, he'd gladly devote hours to worshipping every inch of her. Then again, he'd be equally happy sitting across from her in the nearest Starbucks, drinking coffee and sharing inane chatter. Well, maybe not equally happy...

"All right. We were a little slow so I had time to call about the tickets."

"Any problems?"

"Not after I mentioned your name."

"I'm pleased he could help you." When she didn't comment, he continued, "Do you like hockey or are you just doing this for your cousin?"

"Both I guess," Kiley responded. "It's Alyssa's birthday so she gets to choose what we do. Within reason, that is. But I've been to a few games and always had fun."

"I'm glad to hear that. It's nice she picked something you'll both enjoy."

"Well, that's only part of the plan," Kiley admitted. "Alyssa wants us to go out for drinks afterward too."

Although Jordan already knew about it, he still felt a flash of possessiveness. No way was she going bar hopping without him. "You don't sound overly excited by that prospect."

"It's okay. Alyssa's more comfortable with that atmosphere than I am."

"That's surprising," Jordan stated. "You seem to adjust smoothly to everyone who walks into Mr. Paul's."

"Except you," she blurted. "Oh no," she groaned in horror.

"It's all right, Kiley. I've noticed I make you a little nervous. I'd rather have you say whatever comes to mind than hide your thoughts from me."

"Why are you so kind to me, Jordan?"

"Simple. I like you. A lot. You have the same affect on me. I just cover it up better than you do."

"Jordan," she actually giggled. "You don't have to say things to make me feel better."

"I'm not. Honestly, Kiley. Every day when it gets close to lunchtime, I can barely wait to see you again. I rush to get there and then I hesitate at the door. Sometimes, I can see you from outside, double-checking things or talking to someone and I just stop and watch you."

"I can tell you're there even before I actually see you," Kiley confessed.

"So you feel the connection between us too." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes," she sighed. "I'm sorry I'm such a jerk around you."

"You have never been a jerk," he said sincerely. "Frankly, I'm very flattered."

"Flattered?"

"Absolutely. A beautiful woman like you could snap your fingers and have anyone at your beck and call but for some reason you're interested in me."

"Stop exaggerating," she said as if she assumed he was being outrageous just to help her relax.

"I'm not," he insisted. "I don't think you realize the way you affect people. You —"

"Please, let's talk about something else," Kiley interrupted.

"Okay," he agreed pleasantly. "Your topic or mine?"

"Mine," she said quickly. "I like listening to you talk. Tell me where you guys used to have lunch."

"You mean, before I decided that I needed to see you as often as possible to survive?" She laughed. "Hey, you don't know how many times I've forced myself to resist the urge to come back for dinner. I was afraid I'd be too obvious if I was there more than once a day."

"You think you're not obvious, having lunch every day for months?" she teased in return. "Come on. Tell me where you used to go."

"All right. Brett and I ate at a variety of places but I think we went to Bruno's more than anywhere else."

"I love Bruno's! What's your favorite?"

"I'd have to say the eggplant parmesan. It's a little heavy for lunch but it's too good to resist."

"I know what you mean. There must be half a pound of cheese in every dish."

"Yeah and I think they put the other half pound on the salad."

"Even the garlic bread is perfect."

"A woman after my own heart," Jordan said smoothly.

"Does Brett like that too?" she asked curiously.

"Nope, he prefers the veal. He maintains a vegetable isn't suitable as a main course even at lunchtime."

"Ah. Beer or wine?"

"Definitely wine. As I said, it's almost too much as it is. A beer on top of that meal would be more than I can handle."

"Of course," she agreed.

From there, the conversation meandered to various other topics. Jordan was thrilled that Kiley seemed to have overcome her nervousness. Hopefully, the ease of their phone time would transfer over to their next meeting.

Kiley was amazed when she realized how comfortable she had become with Jordan. After a few awkward gaps that he smoothed over at the beginning, the conversation fell into an easy rhythm. Now it felt as if they always chatted like this.

"Jordan, I'd like to apologize for earlier today when I asked if you'd done something illegal. I don't really think you would."

"There's no need to apologize. After all, I'd just given you the number for an unsanctioned ticket procurer and stated that he owed me a favor. It's perfectly understandable that you'd reach that conclusion," he said, then paused. "I won't lie to you, Kiley. I do know some unscrupulous people. I also know some criminals who could be classified as downright dangerous. But I assure you my business dealings are one hundred percent legal. I will never compromise that. Before I accept a client, I thoroughly investigate every aspect of his or her life, both professional and personal. If there's anything unethical I turn him away, no exceptions. The same with corporations."

"You don't have to tell me this," Kiley interrupted.

"Yes, I do. I want to. I'd like to get closer to you and I know that's not possible unless you trust me. It's very important to me."

"Do you trust me?" Kiley asked, considering what he said.

"Without a doubt," he answered instantly.

"Did you investigate me?"

"Sure. I've asked Dee lots of questions. Some she answered, some she didn't. Will too. And I spoke with Henry, not that I planned to but once he initiated the conversation I took advantage of the opportunity."

"Henry started it?"

"He wanted to know my intentions toward you." Kiley groaned. "He's very protective of you. Of all of you at the restaurant. I appreciate that."

"When was this?"

"About a month after Brett and I started coming in. It was a Friday and there was a group from a convention. We were finished but I didn't want to leave."

"That was the day you went to the bar after Brett went back to work," she remembered.

"So you did notice." His grin was audible. "Henry did too. He gave the bartender a break and we talked."

"About your intentions?"

"Yes, about my intentions. Want to know what I said?"

"I should say no since Henry obviously was satisfied with whatever you told him."

"But you're curious," he concluded.

"Of course. And maybe this would be the right time for me to admit that I had Dee ask Brett some things about you."

"I know. He told me." Another groan. "We've been friends since first grade, Kiley. We look out for each other. Brett didn't tell me right away though. He waited until a particularly frustrating day when you wouldn't even look in my direction and then mentioned your questions as a way to bolster my spirits."

"Oh." She was amazed.

"Anyway, back to Henry. He knew why I was reluctant to leave. He assured me anyone working for him was guaranteed his protection. I said I was glad to hear that and expressed my concern for you specifically. So did he in regards to me, so I admitted my personal interest in you. I assured him that I would never do anything to intentionally hurt you. I also stressed I wouldn't rush things to give you time to get to know me. Afterward, Henry confided that you'd never reacted to anyone the way you do to me. He admires the way you adapt to everyone who comes in, the way you make each of them feel comfortable, in case he never told you."

"Everyone except you," she snorted.

"So we're back to that again."

"I'm sorry, Jordan. I can't help it."

"Don't be sorry. I kind of like it. It makes me feel unique, knowing I get to you." Without hesitation, he continued, "Do you have any idea how much I want you?" In the silence that followed, Jordan realized what he had just said. "God, Kiley, I just blew it, didn't I? I guess I'm not as in control of my reaction to you as I thought I was." More silence. "Kiley? Are you there?" He waited as the seconds ticked by.

"I'm here," she finally answered in a small voice. She wanted to tell him that it couldn't be any more that she wanted him but the words wouldn't come out. Here was the perfect opportunity. He had given her an opening and she let it pass by.

"Damn." He sounded frustrated. "I could have sworn I'd actually made a little progress in putting you more at ease with me and then I go and blurt out that."

"It's okay. I pretty much guessed that already anyway. It was just a bit of a shock to hear you say it so directly."

"I am so sorry. I—"

"Wait," she stopped him. "It's nice to know that you're not completely together all the time."

At that, Jordan laughed. "That's hardly the case."

"Maybe but you give that impression, like there's nothing you can't handle."

"Nothing except you."

It was Kiley's turn to laugh. "I think I'd like to hang up now."

"You mean quit while I'm behind?"

"Yes, no, well maybe something like that." She was still giggling. "This was fun, Jordan. Can I call you again sometime?"

"Anytime, Kiley. I'd like that. I had fun too."

"I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Certainly. Will you talk to me?"

"I'd like to. I do always try. It's just..."

"It's just obvious that I want you and knowing that makes you nervous?"

"Jordan," she sighed. "I-I..."

"I thought maybe if I said that often enough you'll get used to the idea."

"That may take some time, especially with your voice...oh!"

"You'll find that I can be very patient. We'll take all the time you need."

"Thank you. Good night, Jordan."

"Good night, sweet Kiley. Pleasant dreams." Jordan heard Kiley sigh just before she hung up. He put down the phone and stretched out his legs, propping them on the coffee table in front of him. He laced his fingers behind his head and relaxed, deciding that all in all it had been an extremely good evening with the possible exception of blurting out how much he wanted her. It was entirely true though much too soon for him to be spouting off about it.

Thank goodness he hadn't continued on, ruining his carefully maintained image of being a gentleman with all the patience in the world by confessing how tempted he was to mould himself to her back every day when he walked into the restaurant. More times than he could count he'd imagined slipping in behind her as Kiley stood at her podium. He'd use it to shelter their activity from view as he lifted her skirt. Of course, in his fantasies she wasn't wearing any panties. He'd wrap his arm around her and slide his hand down to cup her mound while pressing his growing cock against her luscious ass.

Jordan could hear Kiley's moan within his mind. He'd risk discovery just to brush his palm over her stiffened nipples. Unfortunately he wouldn't be able to expose them as he so wanted to. No, he'd have to focus all his attention on her lower body to avoid discovery.

Kiley would press back against him and widen her stance slightly, inviting him to work his roaming fingers into her slit. She'd already be wet in anticipation of having his cock in front of a roomful of unaware people. It would be a challenge to keep quiet so they wouldn't be caught. They'd also need to maintain polite expressions in case anyone glanced at them.

He'd stroke his fingers through her cream, toying with her clit, making sure she was well lubricated with her own juices so he could enter her easily when the time came. He'd tease her, working her stiff clit, pumping her needy pussy until she was right on the edge of climaxing. All the while he'd whisper in her ear about how he could smell her arousal, how he couldn't wait to have her soft flesh squeezing his hard cock, how this was only the preview to hold them over until they could fuck privately.

Eventually he wouldn't be able to wait another second and he'd free his throbbing cock from his pants. He'd bend Kiley slightly over her podium and run his fingers between her cheeks. Then he'd do the same with his shaft, tormenting her into begging softly for what they both wanted. He'd give in and finally penetrate her. They wouldn't have much time so he'd need to make sure he speared her at just the right angle. No more teasing once they reached that point. No, he'd push his cock in as deep as it would go and then use short, fast strokes with minimum movement while his fingers plucked her clit to provide maximum pleasure for them both. Somehow they'd remain standing after they came without anyone noticing. Then Jordan would straighten their clothes, kiss Kiley on the cheek and go to his usual table.

Jordan laughed. As much as he'd love to do just that he knew it was pure fantasy. No way would they ever be able to get away with it. Besides when he finally got his cock in Kiley's pussy he wanted them to have the freedom to enjoy it as much as possible without holding back in any way.

## Chapter Three

"It was wonderful, Dee!" Kiley couldn't stop smiling. "We talked for over two hours and I even managed to participate like a normal person. It was hard at first with the way Jordan's voice was. I couldn't believe it but he sounded even sexier than he does in person."

"Why not, Kiley?" Dee grinned at her friend. "He was talking to you without an audience for a change. Just think how he'll sound when he's seducing you."

"Dee!"

"What? You know that's where this is heading, don't you?"

"Well, yeah but..."

"But nothing. Just relax and enjoy it," Dee advised. "Tell me. How did you get Henry to go along with your little plan?"

"After I finally calmed down, I called him. I explained what I had in mind and I think he was so pleased for me that he said it was okay before he thought about it."

"He really is just an old softy. Sometimes I think we're more his family than his family is."

"Yes and no. We're around and they're not most of the time. Jordan and Brett will be here soon. Is everything ready?"

"Yep, just like you ordered. Stop fidgeting and don't worry. I'll take care of everything." Dee went to check on her tables.

"Hello, Kiley." Jordan brushed a quick kiss on her cheek. "You look beautiful as always. Did you sleep well?" He had his hand over hers on the reservation book.

"I guess, um, once I managed to stop thinking about you." She turned bright red and refused to look at him.

Jordan tilted her chin with one finger until their eyes met. "I'm sorry to hear that. I prefer to remain in your thoughts."

"Stop doing that."

"Doing what?" He linked his fingers with hers.

"Talking like you're trying to seduce me."

"Mm." Jordan gave her a slow smile as he lowered his voice. "Sweet Kiley, when I seduce you..." He ran one fingertip from her wrist to the inside of her elbow and looked at her with naked desire showing clearly in his eyes.

Kiley felt herself tremble at his touch. How could one finger generate so much heat? And his voice! Oh my God, his voice. "Oh," she gasped, her pulse accelerated, her breathing shallow.



Brett chose that moment to appear next to them. "Hi, kids. I hope I'm interrupting something."

"Hey, Brett," Jordan greeted his friend without breaking eye contact with Kiley.

When she didn't seem to realize he was there, Brett let out a low chuckle. "Finally, there is something to interrupt! Ease up, Jordan. Let go of the pretty lady. She's working, remember?"

"She started it. Offered me a challenge."

"Yeah, right." He rolled his eyes as confusion crossed Kiley's face. "Hello, Kiley. It's nice to have you back with us."

"Brett? Oh my God!" She spun away from them.

"Take it easy, honey. My pal here has been holding in that look for months. It was bound to be a little potent when he let it loose."

"Shut up, Brett," Jordan warned with no real threat in his voice. "Go sit down, why don't you?" His laughter drifted back to them as he walked away. "I'm sorry, Kiley," Jordan said softly. "I promised to be patient and I will be."

"Why am I such a mess around you?" she asked.

"Hopefully because the attraction is mutual," he responded. "Just so you know, I didn't sleep much either."

Kiley didn't know what to say so she took the easy way out. "You'd better go on and join Brett now. Please?"

Jordan squeezed her hand before he went to his friend. "Damn, I love that woman," he said, sitting down.

"Ah, Jordan, I still think it's just a little soon to tell her that," Brett commented. "Even if she did actually converse on the phone."

"I know, Brett. I'm willing to wait as long as it takes. Kiley's the only woman I've ever met who's worth every second."

Before Brett could respond, Dee appeared with two glasses of wine. "Here you go, guys."

"What's up, Dee?" Brett asked as Jordan grinned toward Kiley. Briefly, she met his eyes and returned his grin.

"You'll have to wait and see," Dee replied. "Trust me, Brett. I'm sure you'll be happy with today's special."

"Whatever you say. Any idea what's going on, Jordan?"

"Yeah," Jordan wouldn't say more.

In a few minutes, Dee brought them each a salad, loaded with cheese. "Is this what I think it is?" Brett asked.

"Yeah," Jordan repeated.

"But..."

Kiley approached and stood next to Jordan. When she rested her hand on his shoulder, it was his heart's turn to expand. "I wanted to say thanks again for helping me yesterday, Jordan. I hope you don't mind being included, Brett."

"Kiley, honey, sweetie, darling, you have just secured my eternal devotion." He took a bite of the garlic bread that Dee added to the table.

"This wasn't necessary, Kiley," Jordan said.

"Shut up, Jordan. When a gorgeous woman is thanking you, don't you know you're supposed to just smile and accept?"

"Brett," Kiley laughed.

"I don't want to seem ungrateful," Jordan said sincerely. "It's just that you spending time talking to me last night was more than thanks enough."

"Oh please," Brett teased while Kiley blushed. "Ignore that since talking to him is something you should do anyway. If it has to be on the phone, then so be it. Can I recommend that you do it often?" Dee interrupted with their meals. "Now this," he gestured to his plate, "this is the perfect thank-you."

"Glad you approve, Brett. And to think I almost didn't include you." Kiley's eyes were twinkling.

"What? After I take time out of my busy schedule to come and see you every day like I do?" When Jordan raised an eyebrow, Brett grinned. "Well, I have to show up to see if you two are progressing."

"You're incorrigible," Kiley declared as Jordan sighed.

"You do know that I only bring him along for comic relief?" He shifted and caught her hand to place a kiss on the inside of her wrist. "This really is a wonderful surprise. Maybe we can go to Bruno's together sometime?"

Kiley flushed with his attention. "Oh..."

"Too much, Jordan," Brett observed. "Next time you try to ask her out, keep your hands and your lips to yourself. Look toward me and use a less direct approach, like you're not really talking to her."

Jordan managed to refrain from scowling at his friend until Kiley excused herself and scurried away to greet some new arrivals.

"Don't give me that look," Brett cautioned. "She was doing fine until you got too involved."

"Too involved? I casually suggested we have dinner sometime at a place we both happen to enjoy."

"While you kissed her intimately on the very sensitive inner wrist, gave her a smoldering look and made your voice sound like you were really inviting her to join you in a passionate romp," Brett countered. "You have to be less intense, pal."

"Brett," Jordan automatically started to protest until he considered his friend's observations. "Am I really that bad?"

"Well, maybe I'm exaggerating slightly but you're damn close to it." Brett stopped eating. "Listen, just because you're certain that your lives are destined to be shared doesn't mean Kiley has even considered the possibility yet. You need to relax. What happened to your 'play it cool and casually bump into her at the game' plan?"

"Something wrong with your lunch, guys?" Dee stopped by their table. "You know Kiley went to lots of trouble to pull this off. She is so pleased with herself over it too. If you don't start looking like you're enjoying it, she's going to think she did something wrong."

"It's great, Dee." Jordan finally smiled. "How'd she get Henry to let her bring in food from the competition?"

"Well, she won't go into details other than that she called Henry after you talked last night. But," she paused, "Henry did mention how bubbly Kiley sounded and that on top of the way she's been smiling the past four months..." She winked at Jordan. "Hang in there. She just needs to get over being nervous so she can say and do what she really wants to around you."

"And what might that be, oh wise one?" Brett teased.

"Don't be such a smartass." Dee swatted him. "I'm sure Jordan doesn't need to have it spelled out. I know the wise guy here thinks you should back off but if you want the opinion of a woman who's been swept off her feet..."

"Yes, please," Jordan urged.

"You're already under her skin. I'll bet you take up more than a few of her thoughts and I'm sure plenty of them are far from innocent. When Will first stormed into my life, I'd get tingly and turn to mush every time he was around. Jordan, unless I've completely lost my sense of people, I'm pretty sure she's almost as hot for you as you are for her. I say turn it up and go for it." Dee saw Kiley leading patrons their way so she winked again and moved on.

After Kiley showed the couple to their table, she stopped by Jordan again. "I'm sorry. I just..."

Jordan snagged her hand again and waited until she met his gaze. "Sweet Kiley, there's no need. I'm patient, remember? I admit I'd love to go out with you sometime, anytime actually, frequently if you want the truth. But for now, why don't you take that as a spontaneous suggestion meant to reinforce that my interest in you extends further than these walls?" He encouraged her to lean closer. "As you already know, I like you. A lot. I think, if you'll give me a chance, you may find that you like me too."

Kiley surprised him with a quick kiss on the cheek. She whispered so only he could hear, "I already like you too, Jordan. A lot." She rushed away quickly. Even though she was scarlet, she managed to meet Jordan's eyes and smile once she reached her podium.

On her next pass, Dee, who had noticed the exchange, muttered, "Told you."

\* \* \* \* \*

"All right, buster. That's the third question I've had to repeat. And you're still wearing that stupid grin you walked in with." Sadie Brown finally snapped her fingers to get Jordan's attention.

"I'm sorry, Miss Sadie. I'm a little distracted today."

"Harrumph," the elderly woman muttered as Jordan drifted back to his thoughts. "Jordan McKade! If you don't fess up to what's in that head of yours today instead of our dealings, I'm going to redirect every penny you earned me and dissolve our agreement." She waited until her words registered. "Ah, I see that got your attention. Boy, I've known you since my husband chose you over that group of spineless ninnies you had the good sense to disengage yourself from four years ago. We've worked closely ever since that old coot of mine died, forcing me into understanding all this financial gobbledegook. Until today, you never had a moment's difficulty focusing on whatever set of numbers was in front of you. Why, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were in love."

"Well," Jordan said, blushing because she lectured him like a teenager who had his first crush.

"Ah." She smiled knowingly. "Tell me about her."

Jordan did as she directed, accepting that it was easier than trying to resist. He knew her well enough to know how relentless she could be when she was determined. He spent the next hour sharing everything about Kiley, concluding with her admission earlier at the restaurant.

"Four months and this is the first I'm hearing about her," Sadie scolded with a frown. "With all the opportunities during our frequent conversations and never once did you so much as mention her existence. Why is that?"

"Until recently there really wasn't much of anything to tell," he sighed. "Besides, you don't call to hear about me."

"That would annoy me if it wasn't true." She studied him closely. "Two questions, one, where are you hoping this will lead and two, how does it affect our plans?"

"One's easy. I'm going to convince her to marry me and then share a wonderful future with the most incredible woman in the universe." He paused. "Two depends."

Sadie smiled smugly. "Good answers to both, boy. I always knew you were a fine man. That's why the old coot trusted you. You remind me of him sometimes. I ever tell you that? You're determined to succeed at every undertaking and entirely dedicated to achieving the goals you set for this business of yours, single-minded just like he was. And then along comes this little girl who could very easily throw a monkey wrench into the whole works without even realizing it and you're ready to rethink everything if that's what it takes. I am correct in that you haven't told her anything of our plans?" When he shook his head, she asked, "What about the gigolo?"

"Miss Sadie, Brett isn't a gigolo. In fact, he's almost old-fashioned in his opinions on the finances of dating."

"All right, settle down. Perhaps playboy is the term I should have used rather than gigolo."

"That's better although he'd probably object to that too. Brett likes to have fun. Can he help it if he loves women? And I can honestly tell you I've never heard one of them complain about spending time in his company. Now, to answer your question no, he hasn't discussed our plans with anyone either. Even though we never actually spelled it out, I always assumed that the three of us were in agreement and would broach the subject together should it become necessary."

"So what about your Kiley?"

"When the time comes, I'll ask you and Brett to make an exception and let me tell her privately. She should have all the facts before I ask her to marry me or it won't be fair."

"You don't think she'd blindly follow you anywhere?"

"I'd never expect her to and she shouldn't have to. When she's ready for the kind of relationship I want, I intend to be open about everything from the start."

"What if she's not like you and doesn't have the same need to reveal any unknown details of her life? And what about your financial status? Does she have any idea how successful you are? Have you considered the possibility that she's only after your money and putting on a show in order to get it?"

"Are you trying to piss me off, Mrs. Brown?" Jordan scowled.

"Whoopee!" Sadie hooted. "The boy is in love. Sorry to needle you, Jordan. I had to see how serious you are. You've always been the most kind-hearted, level-headed, indulgent gentleman with me, old fool that I am. You've let me get away with so much more than other people without becoming annoyed as most do. It's nice to see that you'll defend this girl from me in spite of your fondness for me." She sat back and grinned at him. "You'll make her a good husband, boy, just like the old coot did me. And when you're ready, you go right ahead and tell her all about our goings-on."

"Thank you, Miss Sadie. I appreciate what you said. Also thanks for letting me talk about Kiley. I think I can concentrate now that I got to say all that out loud."

They finally settled down to discuss their business. By the end of the afternoon, both were very pleased with the progress.

Jordan gathered the files and pulled on his coat. As he bent to kiss her cheek, Sadie caught his arm. "Next time we speak, I expect to hear more about your Kiley. Don't you dare let me get away with being as selfish as I am usually."

"All right, I'll keep you posted. I'll even interrupt and remind you that you asked if I have to."

"Good boy." Sadie showed him out. Her husband certainly knew what he was doing when he signed on to have Jordan invest their finances. The boy was very talented and equally modest in his money dealings. Thanks to him, she could enjoy her remaining years with no worries. As she often had, Sadie wondered if her husband

knew he was also ensuring a caring friend who would give her things to occupy her days after he was gone. She couldn't wait to meet this Kiley Fisher. Jordan was an exceptional man. If this girl captured his heart, she must surely be something special herself.

## **Chapter Four**

For the third day in a row, Malcolm Winslow watched from the alley across the street as Kiley greeted Jordan McKade. So, the little tease thought she would have it better with the Golden Boy than with him. Golden Boy, ha! Nothing but a fraud. What a fickle tramp the twit had turned out to be. Malcolm almost convinced himself he was glad he hadn't wasted his time on her after all. Still, the thought of McKade having her rankled. Why should McKade always have anything he wanted handed to him so easily instead of needing to work at it? Malcolm had already decided he'd be willing to bet the farm that the whore had gone after him, not vice versa. Even if the greedy bimbo was just a little nothing slut, why should McKade have her spreading her thighs for him at the flash of a buck without putting out any effort?

Malcolm wondered why he hadn't thought to check out Mr. Paul's at lunchtime. He'd been surprised by the parade of well-dressed, older women dining there alone the past two days. Maybe he would put in a little more time there instead of moving on as planned. Today, he had his sights set on the bleached blonde he'd noticed while spying on Kiley. Both days, she had been dressed twenty years younger than her age, heavily made up, which didn't come close to hiding the miles on her and was obviously snickered by the time Kiley and Henry poured her into a cab long after lunch. Malcolm decided on introducing himself at the bar during her second pre-lunch cocktail. He'd ask her to join him and then let her convince him to accompany her home.

As an added benefit, Malcolm would get to watch McKade and Kiley at closer range. He was still enraged every time he remembered McKade refusing his business. Money was money so how dare he turn Malcolm away? Over the past year, Malcolm had managed to convince himself it had been for the best. No one was as good as McKade seemed to be. All he had was a slick voice and the ability to charm most anyone. Truth be told, he'd probably turned Malcolm away because he realized Malcolm would be able to see through his flimsy charade. McKade had to be scamming someone, hell revise that to everyone. It was only a matter of time until he got caught out and Malcolm was looking forward to that moment, glad he wouldn't be involved in the fallout. Then he'd be able to boast how he had always known McKade was crooked to those fool associates of his that he'd tried to warn away from McKade. The Golden Boy, ha! Being connected to him would turn out to be nothing more than chasing fool's gold at the end of the rainbow. Sooner or later, they'd see how right he'd been all along.

When the woman in question signaled for her second drink, Malcolm made his move, deciding she'd be well primed to accept his approach. He slipped into the bar while Kiley was away from her post. Malcolm snickered. Wouldn't she be surprised when she saw him showering another woman with his attention? That would make her regret blowing her chance on that phony.

Kiley may have missed Malcolm's entrance but Jordan didn't. When Dee paused at their table, he nodded toward the bar and asked, "Does he come here often?"

"Who, Winslow the weasel? Yeah, at least once a week. Why?"

"No reason, just curious really," Jordan replied.

After Dee moved on, Brett said, "Okay, Jordan, what gives?"

"I don't like him being here."

"He's not even looking at Kiley. Relax."

"No, Brett, I don't like him being here period. He's a liar and a con man. I'm sure I told you about him, the thief who was pretending to be someone he's not and doing a poor job of it. He's the one who got so pissed when I rejected him." Jordan watched closely while appearing not to. "See the way he's sidled up to that woman? He's probably talking her out of some cash as we speak. He was on his way down when I refused him and I can't imagine his circumstances have improved."

"Yeah, now that you say that I do remember him. Melvin something or other, right?"

"That's him."

"Why don't you talk to Henry?" Brett suggested as they observed Malcolm holding his new friend's chair after moving to a table.

"I bet he's already watching him. You know how he looks out for his people. Thank goodness I passed his test or I'd be even more pathetic."

Brett laughed. "It's only two days, pal. You'll both be back Monday. And who knows? Now that you reached the cheek kissing stage can no-holds-barred, hot gorilla sex be far behind?"

Jordan pretended to scowl. "To think I actually defended you when Sadie called you a gigolo the other day."

"Gigolo! She didn't," Brett feigned offense.

"She did but I got her to amend it to playboy," Jordan stated.

"Playboy, hmm, we'll just see about that. Maybe I'll see if she's free for dinner. I'll show her who's a playboy."

"I knew that would throw you off track." Jordan nodded when Malcolm glanced his way. "I really don't like that man. He gives me a bad feeling."

"You already said that and you already decided Henry was keeping an eye on him. Jordan, you've seen him toss guys out for being disrespectful. He isn't going to take any crap from him either," Brett tried to reassure his friend.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. It's not up to him to dictate a woman's choice of companions." Jordan decided he'd ask Dee more about the man and his habits since she always seemed aware of everything going on around her. And he did know it wasn't up to him to protect every female in sight. Also, he'd met plenty who would gladly



exchange a chunk of their savings for some masculine attention. Maybe even Melvin Wilson, or Malcolm Winslow as he was calling himself these days, had a niche.

Jordan and Brett were finished as Malcolm was served. When Jordan paused to have a word with Dee, Brett used the opportunity to speak to Kiley. "Honey, please, call the lug tonight, tomorrow, Sunday, all three if you can. He's miserable at the thought of not seeing you until Monday," he confided pathetically. "I have a date tomorrow night and I'd hate to cancel it because I had to go cheer up my buddy."

"As if you would," Kiley teased.

Brett suddenly became very serious. "I would if he needed me to. Jordan's been my best friend forever. If you don't call him or I don't pester him, he'll end up working nonstop until Monday when he takes a break to come see you for an hour."

"He wouldn't really... I mean, he does..." Kiley clearly hadn't expected the perpetual clown to say something like that.

"Yeah, he would. Before you, Jordan was only interested in his work and the challenges he set for himself. See, he's always needed to prove himself, mostly to himself since he's his worst critic but also to his family, well, I should say mainly to his brother and to the assholes he used to work for. He's very good at what he does. He's very dedicated and concerned for his clients. You'd expect a financial planner or counselor or advisor or whatever the hell the appropriate term for wizard is, would have a glamorous life, especially when he's so in demand, wouldn't you? Kiley, I used to be able to get Jordan to go out now and then even though no one ever held his interest. I always felt he went to humor me. Then, after we came here that first day, everything shifted. Now he's more interested in you than he is in work and that's saying a lot.

"As I said, the guy is my best friend, the brother I never had. He'd do anything for me and I'd do the same for him. Jordan has many acquaintances. He can go anywhere and fit in with ease. But in all honesty, there are few people he counts as true friends. He's extremely interested in a serious relationship with you. This week you started to show a little mutual interest. Please, Kiley, if you're just playing, make it clear now. Don't toy with his feelings and don't let him continue his pursuit unless it's truly welcomed. He's the best there is. If you give him a chance, he'll show you that a million times over so I'm asking you, no begging you, don't break his heart. That's the one area where he's not nearly as cool and confident as he seems. In every other aspect, he's more so but you could hurt him so easily. If you did, I'd have to hate you even though he wouldn't want me to and I don't want to do that."

Kiley stared when Brett stopped talking because Jordan was approaching. "Have a good weekend, Kiley. I'm sure I'll see you Monday." He smiled sweetly as if he hadn't just finished speaking so seriously.

"Sure, Brett, you too. Try to behave yourself," she teased as she nodded behind Jordan's back.

"I'll give you a call over the weekend, Jordan, to let you know how dinner with Sadie goes. I've got to run." He took off before Jordan could reply.

"So, any big plans for this weekend?" Kiley asked before his full attention could fluster her.

"No, not really. I just asked Dee if I could stop by Sunday afternoon. There's some details I need to discuss with her and Will. How about you?" Jordan was standing too close for Kiley to concentrate. And he was talking softly, just to her.

"Ah, um, me? Nothing much, just stuff, you know," Kiley mumbled.

"Okay then, I guess I'll see you Monday." Jordan hesitated as if he wanted to say more.

"Yeah, okay, good." She blushed.

"Kiley sweet, I'll be thinking about you." He kissed her cheek and left her standing there, kicking herself for her inability to say what she wanted to once again.

Malcolm watched the entire exchange. So it was more than he thought. The idiot actually had feelings for her. And the twit was playing him perfectly with the way she pretended to go all shy when he tried to talk to her. Maybe he'd do something about it, something to blow a hole in their plans. Yes, Malcolm decided, he'd have to give this situation some serious consideration. Maybe, just maybe he could upset the applecart for both of them. Just as soon as he maneuvered the horny, drunken bitch in front of him to do as he desired, that is.

## **Chapter Five**

Kiley spent the afternoon mulling over everything Brett had said. Happy-go-lucky, ever cheerful Brett had a serious side after all. Dee insisted he was very different when he was helping Will with his website but she'd never seen him be anything other than lighthearted. Today, he'd been extremely somber while cautioning her not to hurt his friend. Obviously, he'd held back, waiting to see what developed, not commenting until she appeared receptive to Jordan's overtures. His words added even more to consider regarding the situation.

Could Jordan really be as serious about her as Brett implied he was? Or was Brett simply being overprotective of his friend? Was she interested in him in more than just a physical way? And if she did want to have a real relationship, how could she go about letting him know? She'd been slightly less of a ninny since they'd spoken on the phone, slightly being the key word. At this rate, she'd be old and gray and he'd have grandchildren with someone else by the time she managed an entire conversation with ease.

After her customary evening routine, Kiley went about paying her bills. What a way to spend a Friday night! Again, Brett's sentiments danced through her head. Was Jordan really still working? Her chores were finished and she was ready to relax. Maybe she would call him. They could chat for a moment and then she'd let him get on with his evening. He probably wasn't even home anyway. Surely Brett exaggerated. More than likely Jordan was out, using that voice of his to seduce some lucky female. She'd overheard the comments women made about him at the restaurant. Not all were limited to the sexy way he sounded either. From them, Kiley got the impression that the female patrons of Mr. Paul's were in undisputed agreement that Jordan McKade was hot in every way. And that all he'd need to do was wiggle his little finger to have any number of women at his disposal. He just hadn't taken advantage of any of the countless opportunities while she was around yet. Brett must still be laughing at his personal joke at her expense, that she was stupid enough to believe Jordan was actually home alone, working on a Friday night. Oh right, he might really be home but he certainly wouldn't be alone.

Without thinking, Kiley dialed the number she'd committed to memory. She'd simply hang up when she got his machine without leaving a message. He'd said he'd be thinking about her. Hopefully he had caller ID that would show she had called. Then she'd see just how charming he could be after he realized she knew he'd been out on the town instead of at home, pining away for her as Brett claimed he would be.

"McKade," Jordan answered, not looking at the display since he'd been expecting Brett to call with some scheme in mind.

Kiley was stunned when he picked up before the second ring. He was home. And he couldn't be entertaining too intimately or he wouldn't have bothered with the phone. Her cheeks burned as the unreasonable anger her imagination generated evaporated. Was she jealous?

"Hello?" Jordan repeated.

"Uh, Jordan, hi. It's me, um, Kiley," she finally sputtered.

"Wow, Kiley! What a nice surprise." She could almost hear him smiling.

"You don't mind? You did say I should call you again sometime. If you're busy?"

"Kiley, I'm never too busy for you. And why would I ever mind if you called when I suggested it? I'm very happy to hear from you."

"Oh, okay," she paused, wondering what she thought she was doing. "I'm just surprised you're home."

"Why?"

"Well it is Friday night. I thought you'd be out."

"Where are you?" he asked softly.

"Home," she responded.

"Why?" he echoed her question.

"Oh, yeah, okay." She felt so confused.

"Sorry sweetest, I didn't mean to put you on the spot like that. Actually, I've been working..."

She gasped. "I don't want to interrupt..."

"As I was saying, I've been working but I just wrapped everything up. If you want the truth, I was just thinking about you and wondering what you were doing."

"Well, I sorted my mail, took a shower and..."

"Wait." Jordan took a deep breath, "Let me picture that."

"What? Me in the shower?" she giggled.

"I was going for you and your mail but if you'd rather I tried for you in the shower, I'll give it a shot."

"Jordan!"

"Hey, you can't blame a guy when you say something like that. What else did you do?"

"Paid my bills."

"Now there's an image for me. Do you chew on your pen? Bite your bottom lip? Stick the tip of your tongue out when you concentrate?"

"Stop." She was laughing comfortably. "None of the above if you must know. I did lick the envelopes though but the stamps were self-stick ones." Kiley groaned. Why had she said that?

"Wait, I'm imaging myself as the envelope."

"Hmm, how long have you wanted to have a stamp stuck on you?"

"Oh about four months now." Jordan wondered if she knew how much she was killing him.

"I'm sorry that I was still a jerk this week."

"I told you before. You are not a jerk. I think we made great progress. Thursday you completed two whole sentences before I scared you off."

"Jordan McKade, you are an honestly nice man," she sighed. "I'm not scared of you. I never was. It's just that around you, I, um..."

"I bet you're blushing." He couldn't stop himself. "Sorry 'bout that. After we hung up Monday, I promised myself that I wouldn't say anything to intimidate you if you ever called me again." When she didn't answer, he continued, "I was thrilled the other day when you said you liked me too."

"Oh, well..." She sounded frustrated. "Why can't I think with you? When you're not around I come up with all sorts of things I'd like to say. But then, as soon as I hear your voice, every one of them flies right out of my head," she said, gasping. "Jeez, there I go again."

"Do you have any clue how you make me feel when you say something honest like that?"

"Like you wish you'd never come into Mr. Paul's?"

"You can't really believe that's a possibility." He sounded unsure.

"I guess not." She was remembering Brett's words.

"Kiley, listen to me. First, I promise I will always be honest with you."

"All right."

"Good. Second, walking into Mr. Paul's that first day may have been the best thing in my life so far."

"Jordan, stop exaggerating. You just said you'd be honest."

"I am being honest. You may not realize it yet but meeting you has had a tremendous impact on me."

"What? No..."

"Yes, Kiley. You are one very special woman..."

"But you don't know me."

"Hmm. Okay so tell me everything you think I should know."

She remained silent for a bit. "Like what?"

"Anything at all. Let's see, start with something easy. How did you wind up at Mr. Paul's?"

"I was a dishwasher the first day. My mom wasn't well and I needed a job. It was a month after graduation and that was the first job I tried for."

"Your mom wasn't well?"

"No, she'd just had an aneurysm. They did surgery but it wrecked part of her mind. I couldn't give her the kind of care she needed and I didn't want her stuck in one of those county homes so I sold the house to pay for the Villa. I found the cheapest apartment I could but there wasn't anything left after her expenses."

"Kiley," he said gently.

"I'm okay, Jordan. It still hurts and I miss her terribly but I don't mind talking about her. I mean, if you really want to hear this."

"Absolutely. I'll listen to everything you're willing to tell me." He wished he were with her. He could hear the emotion in her voice. If it were up to him, he'd prefer to have this conversation with her folded in his arms. Instead, he'd have to do his best to offer support over the phone. "Please continue."

"Okay. I was hired as the evening dishwasher and it was a total disaster. Mom's surgery wiped out her recent memory. She was stuck in the year I was thirteen. I'd been in the habit of visiting her around the time school would have been done. That first night, I was so worried that she'd think something bad happened, that I was lost or hurt that I was a wreck. I dropped a stack of plates and knocked a tray of glasses off the counter. Henry called me into his office and I really expected to be fired after he said I had to pay for what I broke. Instead he got me to tell him why I was so jumpy when I hadn't been during my interview.

"When I finished, he said he wished I'd told him about her up front. He explained that he was looking for a lunchtime hostess. He guessed that I could probably use some extra money so he asked if I'd come in early and help set up every day. Since the job was weekdays only and it paid almost twice as much as the dishwasher job did, I took it.

"I was so scared. I'd never tried to make idle conversation with complete strangers before. It turned out that Henry explained my situation to Dee and asked her to keep an eye on me when he was busy. He was so nice to me and patient. And he even encouraged me to call and check on my mom every day.

"For two years, she thought I was visiting her on my way home from school. I took a change of clothes to work with me so I'd look how I did in middle school. She got progressively worse and eventually gave up and died."

"I'm sorry, Kiley. I wish I could give you a hug."

"I do too," she sniffled. "Anyway, Henry let me keep my hours even though I didn't need them to stay the same. I help out at night and on weekends during vacations but usually I only work on weekdays."

"Thank you for telling me about your mom. It means a lot to have you trust me with something so personal. Do you have any other family, other than your cousin?"

"Just Lyssa's parents but they're in South Carolina at the moment. My uncle is in the Marines and that's where he's stationed now."

"What about your dad?" Jordan had purposely asked Dee not to tell him about Kiley's parents.

"He's gone too. He was a Marine like my uncle. He was in Kuwait during Desert Storm and went into a minefield in the desert to rescue a little girl."

"God, Kiley." Jordan didn't know what to say to show how much he hated initiating such a painful conversation over the phone.

"Not what you expected is it?"

"Not at all. With your consistently upbeat nature, I'd never have guessed that you've endured so much sadness."

"I think it's what makes me care so much about everyone who walks into Mr. Paul's even though I don't really know anything about them. I feel like I want to protect all of them."

"Including me?"

"Especially you. Now as I saying, my dad went into the minefield. He carried the girl until he was close enough to swing her to one of the other guys. He hit the mine on his next step. I think he knew somehow that it was going to happen and that's why he threw the girl."

"Sounds like he was a good man."

"He was. Before he died, I had a great life. Everyone's always saying what a bad childhood they had but mine was truly wonderful. My parents were the best. I have so many good memories."

"Then you're very fortunate. Did your mom know what happened?"

"No. Her memory ended when he was sent to Kuwait. I used to make up letters from him to read to her. That probably sounds bad but it actually helped me. I wrote things that I could imagine him telling us. I think it brought him back to me for just a little bit. In an odd way it gave me the chance to say goodbye."

"I can't begin to imagine how painful this must have been for you."

"It was awful at the time. I admit I still cry sometimes but not like I used to. At the beginning, when Mom would ask if we'd had a letter from him, I'd go home and fall to pieces."

"And now I brought it all up again. I'm so sorry, sweet."

"I'm glad I told you about them. It seems right somehow. I think they both would have appr—ah—liked you."

Had she almost said approved of him? Jordan felt as if his heart were going to burst. "I'm glad you told me too. You're a very strong woman."

"Thanks, Jordan but I'm just me. Your turn. Tell me about your parents."

"Well, I'm very lucky to still have both of them. They both retired early. Mom worked as a police dispatcher which sounds more involved than it was since we lived in a small town and there wasn't really much serious crime. There were only two full-time cops and a few part-timers. Mostly, they took care of the people who drank too much. There were some that got violent toward their families so the cops had to haul them into the little jail to sleep it off. They also chased speeders and cornered teenagers

who were intent on causing some havoc. My brother, Shane, is a cop now probably because he spent so much time riding in a squad car when he was young."

"Is he in the same small town?"

"No, he's here actually. He wanted something that wasn't as tame as our town was."

"Are you close?"

"Pretty much. Shane's the best big brother a guy could ask for. When I was a kid, I practically idolized him. He's two years older than I am so growing up he seemed bigger than life. There was nothing he couldn't do and nothing he hadn't already tried before me. I wish we could get together more often but he does a lot of undercover stuff now so I can't always get in touch with him."

"Sounds dangerous."

"I think it is. Shane doesn't talk about that side of his job though. I suspect he still thinks I'm a little kid who needs to be sheltered from the worst of it."

"What about your dad?"

"Dad was basically the town handyman. He took care of just about anything anyone needed. He could always fix anything. He'd paint houses or cut down a tree before it fell on a roof. He was even known to drive some of the older people to their doctor's appointments or stop at the store if someone couldn't get around. He still helps out when he's needed."

"Your family sounds terrific."

"They are. I, however, was a constant nuisance growing up. If there was trouble to be found, I'd be in the middle of it. More often than not, Brett would get sucked right in with me but it was generally my fault. I think that's another reason Shane is a cop. He was always dragging me out of something or reading me the riot act when he heard what I'd been up to. There were many occasions that he dealt with the problems I caused on his own instead of turning me in to our parents."

"I don't think they were ever fooled though. Mom and Dad could see right through me. If they asked me directly if I'd done something, I never lied. I'd tell them what it was and take whatever punishment they gave out. There were lots of times when Brett was sent home and instructed to come clean with his parents. He always did too, once we'd been caught so my parents never had to call his. And they all knew I was the instigator so they were slightly less hard on Brett most of the time. Of course, they always pointed out that he knew better than to follow me but he was my best friend. He never backed down once I started something."

"You've seen how Brett is. Well he's always been like that, always happy and out for fun. The few times I've seen him honestly angry were my fault. Shane didn't hesitate to give him the same lecture I got. Brett took it but, on occasion, Shane would give me an extra dose. If Shane was being exceptionally hard-nosed to me, he'd jump right in the middle of it like he was trying to protect me."



"Why did you do things if you knew you'd get caught?"

"To be honest, Kiley, I only got caught when I let myself get caught. I'd set it up so Shane would find out because I wanted his attention. I'd tried all his activities, football, basketball, baseball but it backfired. The coaches were always comparing us and I think Shane was disappointed that I didn't measure up. Our grades were about the same. Then one day, I was rambling about nothing and Brett rearranged some words and we were onto our first scheme.

"After I saw how well it worked, I started pushing the limits. I'd come up with the basic plan. Brett would find a way to sell it and then I would talk us into or out of whatever it was. I usually avoided doing things that were too illegal but not always."

"Illegal, Jordan?"

"Well yeah but like I said, it wasn't really anything that bad. I mean, take the car incident for example. There was a married couple who taught at our school. When I was fifteen, I went and told the wife that her husband locked his keys in the car and had sent me to get hers for him."

"He didn't really send you?"

"Nope but Brett told me just how to phrase it so she'd believe me. It was hot and we were bored so we drove out to the lake for a swim. We brought the car back before school was over and had planned on slipping the keys back on her desk where we knew she kept them even though we knew I'd probably get caught but figured it would be worth it. What I didn't count on was Shane being there, waiting with the teachers when we got back. See, he'd been trying to get them to call to report their car stolen. I'd never seen him so furious or so close to physical violence before. It was fascinating in a twisted way. Fortunately, for Brett and me, our teachers had a different idea in mind. School was over the next week and we spent the summer at their disposal. We did unlimited yard work, house painting and garage cleaning. We also had individualized unofficial summer school. Shane made a point to check in with them every week and I'm sure our parents knew about it but they never mentioned it. Now, you'd think that would have reformed most kids, right? Not me though. Brett would occasionally try to talk me out of stuff but if I was determined, he'd help with whatever."

"Wait a minute. You stole your teachers' car?"

"More like borrowed it. And we filled the tank for them and washed it. It's not like they needed it for those three hours."

"Jordan!"

"I know. You're thinking I'm not showing any remorse. Kiley, I know we were wrong. We both did but did it anyway. Once Brett knew he couldn't talk me out of it he coached me on what to say to talk our way out of the trouble we knew we'd be in. But it could have been much worse. We could have stolen a stranger's car or been drinking and wrecked it."

"You know how to steal a car?"

"Yes but I never have. I figured it would be good to know in case I ever lost my keys."

Kiley laughed at how he made it sound so perfectly reasonable. "I'm amazed."

"Good or bad?"

"Undecided for now. Was that summer awful?"

"No, it turned out to be great. They were both really good people. He was an English teacher and she taught math. I guess they figured out that part of why we got into trouble was that we were bored so they solved the problem by giving us things to concentrate on. And they talked to us while we worked too. We learned a lot about life that summer, not just school stuff. It's not like they said anything much different from what our parents did but we were kids and it was easier to listen to coming from someone else."

"So did you stay out of trouble?"

"Yes and no. We did things we shouldn't have but we didn't get caught."

"Like what?"

"There was a racetrack about thirty-five miles away. We hitchhiked there every other week or so. We'd find a woman who'd been deserted by her husband and then get her to bet on the horses for us. We amassed a tidy sum by the time school started again. Shane knew we had unexplained cash but never figured out where it came from."

"He went off to college that fall but came home at least once or twice a month. I made annoying him into an art. We'd hang out and everything would be great. Just before he was about to go back I'd do something to make him wonder what I was scheming. Brett, of course, always told me just what to say and then Shane would have to go. He'd be crazy until he got home again and saw that we hadn't really done anything. Naturally we had to cause some trouble now and then so he wouldn't get complacent."

"What did your parents do about all that?"

"Nothing. They were both very generous with their attention. If they had a favorite, I certainly never knew. I think they guessed what I was up to and how Brett was involved and decided to stay out of it. I'm sure there was a line somewhere but I never crossed it."

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. Or you can tell me every thought that's crossing your mind," Jordan waited.

"Hmm, okay. I think you must have always been charming. I think you underestimate yourself or put too much emphasis on your brother's opinions. I'm not sure I like him but I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt for now. Your parents are good people. You and Brett were very lucky with your teachers. It's a good thing you two decided against being criminals because you probably would have been very good at it."

"I envy your friendship with Brett especially the way you've made it last over the years. I had what I considered good friends in high school but we haven't kept in touch. Dee is a very good friend now but we don't share a past. My uncle is a trainer of sorts and they moved around a lot more than we did so Alyssa and I weren't as close as I think we could have been if we'd been together all the time. Or maybe I'm wrong. We see other pretty often now but there's still this distance between us. We're closer than ever but not like you and Brett are. I could tell that about you guys right away. I bet either one of you would do anything for the other if you ever needed something and I'm sure neither of you would have to ask." She gasped. "Oh no, I said too much."

"No, I told you I'm interested in whatever you think. In fact, I need to give some serious consideration to a few of your observations."

"I...oh...damn!"

"What's wrong?"

"Well, I said some things —"

"Yes, you did and I appreciate your thoughts."

"But I was..."

"Perfect. Never be afraid to say anything to me."

"Jordan, why do you tell me things like that?"

"Because I mean it, Kiley. I'm hoping that you'll eventually feel comfortable with me."

Without thinking, Kiley blurted out the question she'd had since the first day. "Why aren't you married or at least with someone?"

Jordan could tell she was blushing by the way she groaned. "Simple. You're not ready yet."

"Oh God," she groaned again.

"Can I ask you the same of you?"

"No one ever asked. And I wasn't in love before. Oh damn."

Jordan felt as if he couldn't breathe. Could she mean what it sounded like she was saying? Did she even realize what she implied? "Kiley?"

She kept muttering.

"Kiley, please."

"Just ignore me, Jordan. I can't seem to make any sense when I try to talk to you." She wanted to crawl in a hole and hide until she could control her stupid mouth. He must think she is such an idiot.

"I could never ignore you." His voice dropped seductively. Kiley could feel it everywhere. It was as if he was right there with her, touching her. "Please don't answer this now but will you marry me someday, Kiley?"

"Uh...oh...I..."

"Wait. Don't say anything now. I've wanted to ask that since the instant I saw you that first day. Every day since then I've had to fight myself not to tell you that I know we belong together. I used to wonder why no one ever interested me. When I met you, I realized it was because I was waiting for you to love. I'll make you very happy, Kiley, if you let me."

"Oh God...ohgodohgodohgod," she repeated rapidly. "I-I-I, um, have to go. Bye."

Kiley hung up before he could say anything. What a damn fool he was! They were having a real conversation. They were getting to know each other. And then he had to go and blow it. Oh, he meant every word but she wasn't anywhere near ready to hear it. And Kiley thought she lacked control when they were speaking! Why hadn't he made some nice, safe comment to reassure her, changed the subject and kept on chatting? Still, Dee had suggested she was aware of him. Yeah right, aware of him, yes. Ready for declarations of love and marriage proposals, no. Should he call her back and try to smooth it over or would that just make it worse? Maybe he should give her a little time. He could call tomorrow and check on her. Or maybe he should just wait until Monday and see how distant she was first.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the phone rang, Jordan glanced at the clock. It was eleven thirty so it could only be Miss Sadie. After her husband died, he had offered her his assistance in any way possible. One night, a few weeks later, Sadie had called him. She asked if he would be kind enough to give her a few minutes' conversation. She missed having someone to talk to about nothing in particular. She said she would call one of those radio talk shows if he preferred things remain strictly professional but she liked his voice and just hearing him say hello already had her feeling better. It was a simple enough request so Jordan readily complied. Since then, she called him a few times a month and he soon found he looked forward to their chats. Sadie was extremely opinionated and never hesitated to speak her mind. She often claimed to be a cantankerous old bat. Jordan didn't object. Conversations with Sadie were lively and always entertaining. And at the moment he could certainly use a distraction to get his thoughts off his blunder.

"Good evening, Miss Sadie. What's your topic tonight?"

"Don't humor me now, boy. I'm calling for some help."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Settle down. I just need a ride tomorrow."

"Say that first next time. You had me scared."

"What's with you? You seem testy."

"Sorry, ma'am. I didn't mean to be short with you." He took a deep breath. "How can I help?"

"I have to get my car inspected tomorrow. I'm to drop it off before lunch. I don't feel like waiting around there so I thought, if you could spare the time, you could pick

me up and drive me to the Villa to visit my sister-in-law. Her hip is almost mended but I should see her again while she's there. I can always take a cab if you have plans."

"No, no, I'd be glad to," he answered automatically. He knew Kiley still visited there. He'd heard her talking about it with Dee. It must be someone she met while her mom was there so at least their conversation earlier had explained that mystery. What chance was there that they'd run into each other? Kiley's friend had to be a permanent resident. Sadie's sister-in-law would be in the short-term rehab area. Surely they had to be in separate locations.

"Are you sure? You don't sound sincere," Sadie stated bluntly.

"I'm sure, Miss Sadie. I made a bit of a fool of myself with Kiley earlier and..."

"At lunch? And you're still moping?"

"No, she called me tonight."

"Things are looking up."

"I wouldn't say that."

"Why? What did you say, Jordan?" When he hesitated, she used her most determined tone. "I'm waiting."

Jordan sighed, deciding how much to tell her. Finally, he said that they had been having a good conversation up until she caught him off guard with an unexpected question. When he explained that he answered it very impulsively, he heard her snort.

"Harrumph. Put your foot in it good, did you, boy? Did you mean whatever it was that you said?" He had left out the details but Sadie was reading between the lines.

"Absolutely, with all my heart."

"Then what are you worried about?"

"It was too soon for my comments. I probably just scared Kiley off for good."

"That's nonsense! It's more likely that you just surprised her. If she's as good a girl as you say she is she'll come around. Of course, it would be easier to reassure you if I had specifics."

"I told you I'm a fool and that's enough for now."

"Fine. Stop being ridiculous. From what Brett says, I'd say it's safe to bet that this Kiley girl is plenty interested in you too. So what if you came on a bit strong? It'll work out."

"Ah then you did accept a date with the playboy tonight."

"Yes and I'll thank you not to repeat my comments to him in the future."

"Why not? I've heard you call him both a gigolo and a playboy in person."

"It's not the same, coming from you," she continued to discuss little tidbits with him until Jordan sounded more like himself. Then she reminded him what time to meet her at the garage and wished him a good night.

## Chapter Six

"I won't hear of it, Jordan McKade." Sadie was annoyed. "If you insist on sitting in this car instead of coming in then I will too. There's a perfectly good lounge where you can wait."

"I'm fine here, really," Jordan tried again. When she continued to glare silently at him, he finally accepted defeat and got out of the car.

"It's about time." She took his arm as they walked toward the door. "You're acting like a petulant child and frankly, it doesn't suit you."

Jordan apologized and brushed a kiss on her cheek. "Forgive me? I'm in new territory here and it's a little unsettling."

"Hmm, interesting." She stopped to stare at him. "It may be that you're even more endearing and adorable when you're being humble and vulnerable than you are when you're charming and confident."

Jordan had to grin. "And you, Sadie Brown, are impossible at all times."

"That's my boy." She patted his arm. "Oh miss, excuse me but could you..." She trailed off at the expression on the girl's face. Brett and Kiley's friends had described her perfectly. And she was as punctual as they said she would be.

When Kiley turned toward the woman questioning her, the last person she expected to see there was Jordan. She knew she was blushing and staring like an imbecile and she couldn't make her mouth function.

He recovered first. "Hello."

She didn't respond so Sadie stepped in. "Young man, where are your manners? Introduce me to your friend."

"Of course." He had forgotten she was with them. "Sadie Brown, may I present Kiley Fisher? Kiley, this is Miss Sadie. She's my most unique client and usually a good friend."

"H-hello Miss Sadie," Kiley stammered.

"Well, well, I'm very happy to meet you, dear. You're just as pretty as Jordan said you were." Sadie saw the surprise cross Kiley's face. "He's such a good boy, escorting me to visit my sister-in-law while my car is being inspected."

"Yes, he is very nice," Kiley agreed.

"Who are you visiting?" Sadie asked.

"Vera. She had been my mom's roommate."

"Such a sweet girl, still visiting," Sadie commented. "Oh I am just so glad we bumped into you. I was going to leave the boy in the lounge while I had my visit but now he can go along with you. Jordan, I'll see you back here in an hour or so."

"I'll be fine in the lounge, Miss Sadie." Jordan was beginning to get suspicious.

"I won't hear of it! You don't mind, do you, Kiley?" Sadie's question sounded more like a command.

"Oh, um, of course not. Jordan's welcome to come with me." Kiley was flustered but still knew better than to refuse.

"There, that's settled it," Sadie said firmly. "Go on now, off with you." She stood and waited until the pair started down the hall.

"I'm sorry about this, Kiley. Sadie likes to have things her way and I've learned it's easier not to resist. If you'd rather I go back to the lounge, I'll just wait around the corner here until she's gone," he offered.

Kiley began to giggle. "I don't think that's wise. She'll know if you do and then you'll be in trouble."

"You're right but I don't want to intrude or make you uncomfortable." Her laughter was contagious.

"Oh so noble, willing to sacrifice yourself for me. It really is fine, Jordan. Vera loves visitors and I have mentioned you. I'm sure she'd be very disappointed if she knew you were here and I didn't introduce you."

"All right, Kiley." He extended his hand. "Lead the way."

Kiley accepted it. Her heart thumped when he closed his fingers around hers. Her mind drifted to the night before and how she'd spent most of it criticizing herself for how badly she'd handled the ending of their phone conversation. She had replayed his words in her mind and was more thrilled each time. She certainly hadn't been expecting what he'd said and she realized Brett had been very honest when expressing his concerns. Jordan really wasn't as calm and confident as he always appeared. She'd heard the vulnerability in his voice which she never would have thought possible. Just thinking about that made her blush again. He'd bared his heart to her and she'd essentially hung up on him.

She stopped just short of Vera's door because she felt she had to say something. "Wait, Jordan. About last night. I shouldn't have hung up like I did." She was standing very close and put her hand on his arm.

It was Jordan's turn to have trouble breathing. The way she was looking up at him had his pulse racing. "It's okay, Kiley."

"No, it's not. I was just...you...well...you overwhelmed me and I didn't know what to do."

"I never should have said all that over the phone. Things like that should always be discussed face to face. But I meant every word of it. I shouldn't have been so impulsive and just blurted it out."

He meant every word! Kiley followed her emotions and hugged him. As she rested her cheek against his chest, she said, "Thank you for understanding. I was afraid that I hurt you with my reaction."

Jordan decided that having Kiley in his arms felt even better and more right than he'd anticipated. When she shifted to look at him, he had to force himself not to hold her even closer.

"Can we talk about it again sometime?" she asked, her green eyes wide and serious.

"You can count on it." Jordan couldn't resist claiming her lips with a gentle kiss.

Kiley had to force herself to breathe once he raised his head. He kissed her! Every nerve was jumping as if electrified. God, it was just a tiny, little kiss. One most people wouldn't even count as a kiss. So why did she want to drag him to the nearest closet and yank off both their clothes? She'd never been overly interested in sex before although she liked it just fine. And yet, here she was, one little peck and Kiley could feel the wetness between her thighs. One peck and she was ready to turn into a sex fiend. No wonder she couldn't function around him!

Jordan needed every ounce of restraint he could muster to keep the kiss brief and light. Damn if she hadn't leaned into him as soon as she guessed his intent! Damn if he couldn't see the heat in her glazed eyes! Damn if she wasn't flushed in a way different from her normal blush! Damn if he didn't want to drag her off somewhere private where he could see exactly where she wanted to take this!

Instead of following what every bit of his body was screaming for him to do, Jordan tucked a strand of hair behind Kiley's ear and grinned. "There's nothing sexier than big, green eyes and freckles." He kissed her forehead as her flush turned to a blush. "Let's go, beautiful. We should find your friend quickly, before I forget where we are."

Kiley could barely breathe as he linked his fingers with hers and urged her forward. How did this man do that to her? A tiny kiss, a few words and she was all but trembling. And he wasn't even using that seductive tone of his. Just imagine if they'd been alone so she could have encouraged him the way she wanted to. She was still lost in thought as she led Jordan into Vera's room.

When the older woman looked up expectantly and Kiley didn't respond, Jordan extended his other hand. "Hi. You must be Vera. I'm Jordan McKade. I hope you don't mind if I share Kiley's visit."

Vera chuckled at the startled look on Kiley's face. "My goodness! Kiley told me about your voice but she failed to mention that the rest of you is equal to it. I'm glad you came along."

"Honestly Vera, we didn't intend to end up together today but I think some well-meaning, meddlesome friends did a little scheming and here we are. Tell me, what did Kiley say about my voice?" Jordan asked smoothly, hoping to keep Kiley distracted until she answered.

Vera was enjoying their exchange. "Let's see. Actually she's mentioned it several times. I believe she's described it as incredible, amazing and sexy."



Jordan laughed and flashed Kiley a killer smile. "Hmm, interesting. But she seems to have left out soothing and comforting."

That comment caused Kiley to gasp.

"Young man, there is absolutely nothing soothing about you at the moment nor is there intended to be. In fact, I suspect you're being purposely distracting with how shamelessly you're teasing our little Kiley right now."

"What about the way she's teasing me?"

"I'm not teasing you," Kiley finally spoke. "And stop talking about me. I am right here."

"Yes but you seemed to be lost in your own little world instead of interested in our conversation. If you want to be included then you'll need to participate, won't you, dear?" Vera said sweetly. "Otherwise, I may end up relating some of the stories your mother told me, rest her soul."

"Oh no, Vera, please don't." Kiley looked mortified.

"That's okay, Vera." Jordan winked. "I'll come see you alone sometime and we can share stories without Kiley's interference."

"Jordan!" Kiley gasped again.

"He's still teasing you, dear. Although," Vera looked him over slowly, "I certainly wouldn't turn away such a handsome boy if you feel like chatting sometime, Jordan."

"I'd be delighted to visit again, thanks." He grinned as he guided Kiley to the chair next to Vera's. He then leaned one hip on the windowsill and relaxed, facing them. "Why don't we get better acquainted before we share Kiley's secrets?"

For the next few minutes Jordan and Vera bantered back and forth. Eventually, Kiley was settled enough to join in. When Jordan saw it was time to meet Sadie, he was disappointed.

"Well ladies, I hate to break this up but I'm afraid duty calls."

"It's been nice speaking with you. Will you come again? I know we were teasing earlier."

"I enjoyed meeting you too so I'd be glad to come back." Jordan kissed Vera's cheek, about to leave.

"Good, I'll look forward to it. Kiley, see your young man off," Vera instructed.

"Uh, oh, okay. Be right back." Kiley practically jumped out of the chair while Vera smiled at Jordan behind her back.

"Jordan, I'm sorry about the way Vera kept referring to you as my young man. It's just..."

"Gee, Kiley." He stopped walking and turned to face her. "I like the way it sounded. In fact, I'd like very much to be your young man."

"Oh...well...um..." Kiley stammered.

"You know, I think I'm beginning to understand you when you're flustered. You're trying to say you don't object to the idea either." He smiled as she stared at him. "Now we'll have to check with Vera but I'm guessing that makes you my best girl."

Slowly, she nodded. "Yeah...I..."

"Don't worry, sweet Kiley. You make me nervous too." When she looked doubtful, he took her hand and held it over his heart. "See? My heart's racing just like yours is."

"But..."

"But I can talk?" he guessed as she nodded. "Remember what I told you on the phone last night? I've had lots of practice talking in stressful situation."

"Stressful?"

"Sure. What if I manage to do all this talking and you won't let me into your heart? You've already captured mine, whether you realize it or not but..."

"You're in mine too," Kiley whispered, meeting his eyes. Did Jordan just stop breathing?

Very slowly, Jordan moved his other arm around her. He still had her hand captured against his chest. When he started to lower his head, Jordan whispered her name. His kiss was just as gentle as the one earlier had been. This time, however, Jordan let his lips linger just a fraction of an instant longer.

For Kiley, it was over all too soon again. "Jordan?" There were so many things she wanted to ask him. So many things she wanted to tell him as well.

"I'm sorry, sweet. Sadie's probably waiting already."

"Oh! I forgot."

"I'd like to." He grinned. "Call me later?"

"I...no, I can't. I'm going with Lyssa to visit some of her friends. We're leaving in an hour and won't be back until Monday morning."

"Ah. Well then, have fun and I'll see you Monday." He didn't want to let her go. "Are you going home first or straight to work?"

"Home."

"Okay. Will you call and let me know you're back safely? I don't have any appointments scheduled Monday so before you ask no, you won't be interrupting, not that it makes a difference. I want to hear from you no matter what I'm doing." He quickly kissed her again. "I'll be thinking about you."

"I wish," she sighed.

"Me too." He'd see her in less than forty-eight hours. He'd spoken with her the night before and seen her today, neither of which he'd expected. "I'm going to see Dee and Will tomorrow. Maybe, if I'm lucky, I can talk her into feeding me." Jordan was trying to lighten the moment so Kiley wouldn't see how badly he wanted to ask her things he had no right to ask.

Finally, she smiled. "Jordan, is there any doubt that you'll talk her into that?"

"No, not really," he admitted with a grin. "You better get back to Vera or she'll think you deserted her."

"Now that she's met you, she'll be more surprised that I didn't." Kiley realized what she'd said. "Oh!"

Jordan chuckled and gave her one last little kiss. "Phew. I was afraid you were getting too used to me. I'm not ready for you to be completely unaffected when I'm holding you."

"I don't think I'll ever live that long." She blushed as she gasped.

"That's my girl." He forced himself to turn her back toward Vera's room and let go. "See you Monday, Kiley."

"Bye." Kiley's heart was still racing as she took a few steps away from him. Again, his light kisses left her unable to function. All she could think about was how much she wanted him. At the door, she paused to look at him and met his gaze before he walked around the corner.

"Jordan," she said but didn't know how to continue.

He could see the desire in her eyes this time. He had to force himself not to go back to her and claim her for a real kiss. "I know, Kiley," he said instead. "We won't always have other people waiting for us."

Kiley understood his meaning. God, she wished she could bail on Alyssa but she'd promised. She gave him what turned into a seductive smile and nodded before she made herself step back into Vera's room.

Jordan took a deep breath. Did she have any idea how she affected him? He'd purposefully kept their kisses brief, afraid that if he tasted her mouth he'd be unable to resist the reaction he knew his body would have. And did she have any idea how potent that smile of hers was when combined with the heat in those incredible green eyes? He had to stop thinking about it or he'd go after her.

Sadie was waiting. He strongly suspected that she and Brett, with Dee's help, had set up this little meeting today. He decided to pretend he didn't know that and keep her hanging a little. No matter how well it had turned out, it could have just as easily backfired and pushed Kiley away from him.

While he drove, Jordan kept the conversation focused on Sadie's sister-in-law and Vera. He could tell Sadie was beside herself but too stubborn to give in and ask about Kiley. After he checked to make sure her car was ready, he confirmed their next visit, said goodbye and left her to stare after him with a look of total frustration on her face.

Heading home, Jordan wondered about Kiley. Did she have any trouble concentrating during the remainder of her visit? What questions did Vera ask and how did Kiley answer? And what, if anything, would she tell her cousin later? He also wondered which of Alyssa's friends they were visiting. Were they male friends who might be interested in Kiley? What if one of them caught her attention? What if it was love at first sight and he lost her forever before he even had her?

Jordan knew he had to squash that train of thought before he made himself crazy. Instead, he'd replay the day. When he thought of her asking if they could talk more about the things that he'd said during their call, Jordan had to smile. He had been slightly concerned that Kiley was so nervous around him because she was trying to find a nice way to tell him she didn't want his attention. Now it appeared that Kiley was very receptive to him. So maybe if he could stay calm and minimally restrained long enough for her to get comfortable with him, he just might be able to convince her to be a permanent part of his life sooner than he'd dared to hope.

## Chapter Seven

"What do you think?" Will showed Jordan all the new features on his website.

"Very impressive. You've been busy."

"Thanks but I can't take the credit. It was nothing like this until Brett was here last Sunday. It took him less than an hour and the whole time it seemed as if he wasn't really paying attention."

"That's Brett for you. He mentioned that he tweaked it a little."

Will nodded. "Hon, the coffee should be ready. I'd sure like some."

Dee left her husband to show off his newest creations. His father had taught him to tie fly-fishing flies when he was a child. A few months ago they were teasing each other in front of Brett about the space the flies took up and he suggested that they set up their own website to sell some of them. The couple dismissed the idea until Brett presented the research he did that indicated there was real demand for high-end, hand-tied flies. When he showed them the amount of money that serious fishermen were willing to invest, they were amazed. In the three days that Will had been online, he'd already received more orders than he'd ever imagined as well as inquiries for specific, custom-made items.

"Jordan, while Dee's out of the room," Will's voice dropped to a whisper, "let me say that I tried to talk them out of it. Brett showed up Friday night with your friend, Sadie and eventually they got started on you and Kiley. It was Dee who suggested they try to get you two to bump into each other yesterday. They refused to believe that you will get together on your own."

"Thanks for understanding and for attempting to discourage them. I appreciate that. Fortunately, it was fine but I admit I'm letting them twist a little. I want to see which of the three will break down and ask about it first."

"So you already figured it out?" Will asked.

"Yeah and I might thank them eventually but not right away."

"I'd wait until after they promise to stay out of it. How did Kiley react?"

"I'm not sure she realized we were set up."

"It was good?"

"Oh yeah." Jordan smiled as he remembered kissing Kiley. "But you're right. We can manage on our own. Kiley called me Friday night." His smile grew. "And we had a nice, long conversation without any outside help."

"Glad to hear it." Will heard Dee returning, realized she wasn't alone and winked.

"Glad to hear what?" Brett handed Jordan a mug. "What did we miss?"

"What makes you think you missed something?" Jordan wasn't surprised to see Brett.

Brett and Dee exchanged a guilty look. "We must have, judging by Will's comment."

"I hate to disappoint you," Will responded, "but I was referring to the program Jordan set up to keep track of the website expenses so they mesh with our personal ones."

"Were you expecting something else, Brett?" Jordan asked innocently.

"No and you can both spare me the details. That's Jordan's realm."

"You really should take at least minimal interest," Jordan advised.

"Oh blah, blah, blah." Brett rolled his eyes. "You know I suck at numbers."

"Market share information, price points and profit margins are all numbers."

"Yeah but they're advertising numbers. Big difference."

"The only difference is that advertising numbers interest you and your own finances don't." Jordan deliberately redirected the discussion.

"Why should they?" Brett asked. "You take great care of the bulk of my pay. I had enough to entertain last night and you'll be buying lunch forever at this rate. What more do I need?"

"Hopeless, you're utterly hopeless."

"No, Jordan," Dee interrupted. "I think Brett has a point this time. Why should he be concerned? I'm sure you have everything under control."

"I do but that's not the point," Jordan stressed. "What if I snap and wipe out his accounts? If Brett doesn't know what he has, how would he get it back?"

"Are you going to take my money, Jordan?" Brett asked mildly as Will fought not to laugh.

"No, of course not."

"Good. You know you can have it if you ever need it though. You earned more of it than I did anyway." Brett shrugged.

"You're entirely too trusting."

"And you're entirely too you."

"Guys." Will wasn't sure where this conversation was headed but sensed it was going somewhere private. "Fascinating as this could become, I don't think you want us to hear any more of it."

Both men stopped to look at him. "Right. Thanks, Will," Jordan muttered.

"Are we done up here?" Dee asked. "I'm going to the kitchen to work on dinner. Jordan, if you'd like to come along, we can talk about Malcolm."

After they were all settled Jordan began his questions.

Dee answered as she cooked. "He's only started coming in at lunch this week. Usually, he's there during dinner. I don't know why but he gives me the creeps, all of us really. He hasn't ever done anything wrong but still," she shrugged, "it feels like he has. How do you know him?"

"He wanted to be a client last year."

"Jordan refused him," Brett added.

"Why?" Will wondered.

"He wasn't someone I wanted to be associated with."

"Jordan checks people out before he accepts them," Brett supplied.

"Everyone?" Dee asked.

Brett gulped as he realized the position he just put his friend in.

"Jordan?" Will waited.

"Yes," Jordan answered honestly. "Before I went out on my own, I saw some things I didn't like. I decided, prior to accepting my first client, that I didn't want any surprises. Sometimes there's a tremendous amount of money involved. Even if I'm perfectly legit in everything I do, I could still be indicted if someone I represent isn't. I'm not willing to risk going to jail for someone who's using me."

"I'd say that's a good policy," Will commented. "So this Malcolm was not kosher in some way."

"Wait a minute," Dee interrupted. "You investigated us?"

"Yes," Jordan admitted.

"And?" Dee prompted.

"And I found you and Will to be exactly what you appear. Honest, hard-working people trying to ensure a secure future."

"Who don't have much to start with so why would you bother?" Will asked, trying to distract his wife.

"Why not?" Jordan countered. "Everyone should have the opportunity for financial advancement. The amount you have to invest shouldn't matter."

"It's all true then? All the things that people whispered when you first started coming in?" Dee alluded to the gossip she'd overheard.

"What? That he's 'The Golden Boy'? A financial genius? A true wizard?" Brett chuckled. "They don't know the half of it. My pal Jordan is so much better than anything you heard. No one has a clue!"

"And my pal Brett exaggerates." Jordan winced. "Not to be immodest but yes, I am very good at what I do."

"Understatement of the century," Brett muttered.

"Tell me more about Winslow," Jordan steered the conversation back to his purpose for visiting.

"Well, he's been coming in for maybe a year and a half, usually with some woman. He seems to trade them in fairly often and most are somewhat older than he is," Dee stated.

"Ah," Jordan said.

"Ah what? He's always very attentive to his companions. I've never heard any of them complain."

"They probably wouldn't, not even after they turn over some of their money. Winslow's smooth in a sleazy sort of way. But he gambles too much. I guess, since he relocated and is using a fake name, he must have figured out that it's easier to get cash with caring than it is with violence. Mr. Paul's attracts a nicer clientele. If he's switched to lunch it's probably because he milked all he can from the dinner crowd."

"Are you saying he's stealing from those women?" Will was appalled.

"Not exactly. Conning with false promises and flattery. Unless they get together and compare experiences they might each continue to think that they were truly special and not even mind what he took from them."

"That's disgusting," Will stated.

"No, that's life," Jordan responded. "And that's why I refused to invest for him. They might catch on someday and I didn't want to be around when they demanded repayment. I also didn't want to generate cash for someone to throw away foolishly. When I said Winslow gambles, I meant big-time serious, not a few bucks here and there."

"But he always seems so proper even though he is icky," Dee mused.

"It's all part of the act. He seems to have fine-tuned it over the past year but he'll slip up one of these days."

"Is he dangerous?" Will was concerned.

"Potentially, if he runs out of sources for quick cash. I wouldn't worry as long as he can get his hands on money when he wants to."

"Jordan, should we be concerned that you know people who can supply you with this sort of information?" Will asked.

"Nope. I trust them implicitly."

"Did you investigate Kiley?" Dee couldn't resist.

"No, should I? Does she have money that I don't know about? Is she really an heiress, playing at working?" Jordan grinned. "I'll learn all about Kiley when she chooses to tell me. In fact, we had quite a nice conversation Friday evening when she called me."

"What did she say?" Brett perked up.

"Nothing that's any of your business. But I will tell you that I think we're making some progress."

"What did you do yesterday?" Brett asked. "I thought you might drop by."



"I chauffeured Sadie while her car was being inspected and then I did some work." Jordan said truthfully. "Did you need me for something?"

"No, I just wondered." Brett shrugged at Dee when Jordan turned his attention to Will.

The four continued to chat as Dee put the finishing touches on dinner. They shared a wonderful meal during which the conversation turned light and teasing. By the time Brett and Jordan left, all were sorry to see the evening end.

## Chapter Eight

Alyssa had been watching Kiley ever since she picked her up on Saturday. She kept staring like she saw something different but couldn't place it. Kiley had been waiting for her to ask all weekend but Alyssa didn't until she was about to drop her off. "We were so busy, Kiley, that I haven't had a chance to ask how your week was."

"Pretty routine," Kiley responded, feeling slightly guilty over being relieved there wasn't enough time for Alyssa to get into it. "Nothing special."

"Then why do you keep grinning?" Alyssa asked bluntly.

"Grinning? I had fun. That's all. And I'm very pleased with the clothes I bought. I think I'll wear the green dress to work today. It's a little different for me but I really like it."

"That's it?"

"Sure, what else would it be?" Kiley didn't want to tell her cousin about Jordan yet. She felt so decadent, keeping his words to herself. And his kisses! There was no way she could begin to describe how they had made her feel. She couldn't imagine how she'd react to a kiss if Jordan let it deepen. She'd realized that he'd purposely kept them friendly, probably so she wouldn't get any more nervous than she already had been. Maybe next time she'd get the chance to show him how she wanted to kiss him. "Are you going downtown today?" she asked, shamelessly redirecting the subject.

"Yeah, I'm going to try some of the shelters. I've learned a little respect goes a long way. They may be homeless but they're still people and talking to them like anyone else, showing some real interest beyond the time it takes to snap a few photos, does wonders toward their participation."

"I guess but doesn't it get to you, hearing about their lives?"

"The shots are more real when I know my subject, even if it is only on the surface. They're more willing to look into my eyes through the lens if they know I'm genuinely curious about their histories. I talk about myself too so it's not all one-sided. It's working just as well with this project as it did with the last one. I don't interfere. I make it clear that I'm not there to judge or to collect any sort of evidence. I don't shoot anyone without permission and I leave when I'm told to."

Kiley tried, as always, to understand but still worried about her cousin. "I don't see why you have to choose such dangerous assignments. Why can't you take a happy looking picture sometime? You could do kids playing in the park, for instance."

"I'll get to that someday." Alyssa had never been able to explain what drove her. "Wait until I show you what I've done so far. Maybe we can get together next weekend?"

"Sure, I'd like that." Kiley wanted to say she might have plans but then she'd have to explain what they might be and again, she wasn't ready to share. "Sorry we don't have time for coffee but I'd really like to unpack before I head in to work."

"It's okay. I need to get busy anyway."

"Be careful, Lyss, please." Kiley hugged her cousin.

"I always am, Kiles. I still think there's something going on with you but I suppose it'll have to wait until next weekend."

"And I'm still telling you that you're imagining things." Kiley laughed as she grabbed her bags. "Thanks for taking me with you."

"You're always welcome. See you, cuz." With a wave, Alyssa was gone.

Kiley forced herself to unpack before she called Jordan. She hung up her new dresses and took a quick shower. When she had dressed as far as her slip, she finally reached for the phone.

When Jordan answered, Kiley felt suddenly shy. "Um, hi, Jordan."

"Good morning, Kiley. Have a nice weekend?"

His voice went straight through her, igniting every nerve. She let out a small, excited sigh. "Surprisingly, yes. I think I may have enjoyed it even more than Alyssa did. Her friends are going on a cruise in a few weeks so we had a marathon shopping day yesterday. I doubt if we would have visited if Lyssa had known that was planned."

"She's not much of a shopper?" Jordan loved how relaxed she sounded.

"Nope. She hates it. She usually waits until everything she owns is ready to fall to pieces before she'll go willingly. I think yesterday was torture. Especially since she left her cameras at their house." Kiley strongly suspected her cousin only made it through the day only framing scenes in her head.

"What about you?"

"I had fun. I don't splurge often but we were on such a mission that I broke down and got a few things too."

"Things I'll get to see?"

"Oh yes. I'm going to wear one of my new dresses today. It's a little different from what I usually wear but I think it looks okay."

"I bet it's beautiful. I can't wait to see it."

"Did you keep Sadie waiting on Saturday?" Kiley could listen to him talk forever.

"Not too long." He paused. "Kiley, about Saturday, did you realize that we were set up?"

"Set up? How? By whom?"

"Brett and Dee mainly, with Sadie as an accomplice."

"But why? How do you know? Did they tell you?"

"Why, because Brett thinks it's taking me too long. He has no concept of long-term relationships that are very important. He doesn't understand that some things

shouldn't be rushed. I know because Sadie doesn't like her sister-in-law. She'd never visit her for the heck of it. And no, none of them has admitted it yet. I neglected to tell Sadie that we got along very well during our chance meeting. I also didn't mention to either Brett or Dee that we saw each other on Saturday. While Dee was out of the room yesterday, before Brett showed up, Will apologized for not being able to convince them to leave us alone. Since they didn't know about our conversation Friday, they could have maneuvered us into a situation that was uncomfortable for you."

"I was happy to see you, Jordan."

"I'm glad and likewise but they couldn't have been positive it would be fine. They risked pushing you and created a chance where you could have just as easily turned away from me.

"Kiley, I told you where I'd like us to end up. You are extremely important to me and I don't want our friends, no matter how much they love us and want to help, to interfere without being invited to. I appreciate the thought but I'd prefer us to see where we can go on our own. You need to get to know me at a pace that's right for you, not them."

"Jordan, I understand what you mean and I agree but I can't be mad at them for trying to help."

"I'm not mad either. I'm sorry if I seem to be. I just thought you should be aware of what they're up to."

"You really didn't tell Brett we ran into each other? Did you tell him what we talked about Friday?" She was amazed since the two seemed to share everything.

"Nope. There are some things that are private, even between Brett and me. Did you tell Alyssa?"

"No. I'm not ready to share you yet. Like you, I think we should get to know each other better first. Alyssa would demand too many details, some I don't want to talk about and some I simply don't know yet."

"Then we'll just have to spend some time together, won't we?"

"Mm, I'd like that. Want to meet me for breakfast tomorrow?" Kiley asked impulsively.

"I'd love to." He'd rather meet her tonight and make her breakfast in the morning but resisted saying that.

Kiley named a time and place. "I like it there because they don't rush you. We can talk a little if you have time."

"I have as much time as you'd like." Yeah, like forever and then some.

"Okay...good." What had she done? "Well...I..."

"Getting nervous on me again, sweet Kiley?" he said softly. "There's no need. I won't bite until you ask me to."

"Jordan!"

"I'm serious. After all, you're my best girl so you can have anything you want."

"Anything?"

"Absolutely. All you have to do is ask."

"Hmm, I'll have to think about it. Maybe you shouldn't say things like that."

"Why not? I mean it. I'm at your disposal. Your wish is my command," Jordan declared before he could stop himself.

"Jordan." She made his name sound like a wistful sigh. She was fantasizing about telling him exactly what she wanted him to do but didn't have the nerve. How would he react if she said they should take the day off and spend it together, naked? Would he be appalled if she asked him to describe what he would do to her when they made love? Did he realize that listening to him talk made her tingle all over? If he talked about sex she'd probably climax instantly, without either of them taking off their clothes. Oh God, she had to stop thinking like that!

"Kiley? You still there?" Jordan hoped he hadn't scared her again. What was it about this woman that made him forget all the instructions he kept giving himself?

"Yes but I...ah...I really should get ready for work." She had to hang up before she asked him to come over.

"All right, I'll see you at lunch. Until then, I'll be wondering about your new dress."

"Oh...uh...I hope you're not disappointed."

"I don't think that's possible." She could wear a potato sack with a paper bag over her head and she'd still be beautiful to him.

Jordan heard Kiley take a deep breath. "Uh...bye," she said quickly and hung up before he could respond.

Jordan sat and looked at the phone. She was gone again. What would she do when he said things like that in person? He was half-afraid that she'd actually run away. He tried to settle back into working but eventually decided that today might be a good day to get to the restaurant early. He'd relax in the bar and spend some time talking with Henry. Maybe Winslow would be there so he could try to intimidate him. Maybe he'd be able to discourage the man from hanging out there again if he let him know that he knew what he was up to and intended to keep an eye on him. Oh, who was he kidding? Jordan knew his only reason for going early was Kiley. New dress or not, he needed to see her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jordan froze just inside the door. My God, she was breathtaking! The dress Kiley termed okay was unbelievable. No, it was Kiley who was unbelievable. The dress simply suited her perfectly. Instead of the normal, tailored sets she usually wore, this was a soft, straight, knit thing. Jordan thought it resembled an extra-long sweater. It was the same green as her eyes and moved when she did as he had only dreamed about since her normal attire concealed so much. It wasn't at all tight or clingy but the way it shifted with her emphasized her features in a way that left Jordan weak.

He was generally semi-hard in her presence to begin with but this different style was almost too much for him. It took tremendous effort not to grab her, drag her out of the restaurant to somewhere private and spend the next hour running his hands all over her. And then he'd peel her out of her new dress and start all over again. He'd kiss her from head to toe and back again, pausing to lick all the best parts.

Jordan had to unclench his hands and force himself to relax. If Kiley noticed how tense he was she'd think there was something wrong. He shook his head. There was something wrong. He wanted the woman so badly he could taste it and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it at the moment. He had to settle for imagining how she'd taste once he got his mouth fastened over her clit and his tongue buried inside her. He wondered what sort of attention she liked best. Was she a woman who needed a lot of stimulation or was she highly sensitive? That was something he couldn't wait to learn from experience. Just like whether she was quiet or loud when she came. Would she talk, telling him what she wanted, crying out his name as she let go or would she be as serene and ladylike as always?

He couldn't decide which he hoped for and then admitted it didn't matter. As long as he got to make her come repeatedly he'd be a very happy man. Then he wondered if she was multi-orgasmic or not. He hoped so. He'd love to spend unlimited time, pleasuring her with his tongue, making her come over and over again with his mouth until she collapsed in sexual exhaustion.

He groaned softly. This waiting to get a taste of her was driving him insane and he had to stop obsessing over it. At least until he knew if she liked to be eaten or not. Mm, now there was a thought that fascinated him to no end. Eating Kiley's luscious pussy. And he was positive every inch of her, pussy included, would be the most luscious thing he ever got his mouth, hands and cock on. It couldn't happen soon enough for him but he would be patient and give her as much time as she needed even though it was damn near killing him.

Kiley sensed he was there before she saw him. Very slowly, she turned from the table she just set up and met his eyes. She was amazed when she saw how stunned Jordan looked. His usual, confident smile and ready greeting were missing, even as Kiley stopped in front of him.

"You're early, Jordan. Anything wrong?" she asked when he remained motionless.

Without thinking, Jordan reached out and pulled her into his arms. He tipped her head with a finger under her chin and kissed her lightly. "Thank you."

"For what?" She was confused.

"For buying this dress. If I die today, I'll die a happy man. I've never seen a more beautiful woman than you." He was still holding her and his voice had dropped into a caress.

Kiley was so affected by his nearness and tone that she couldn't make herself move away. "Oh please, stop exaggerating."

"He's not." Henry approached from the bar. "You're drooling, Jordan. And Kiley, your phone is ringing."

"Oh." Kiley blushed and jumped away from Jordan.

"Come sit down and let the poor girl work," Henry urged. "You can stare from the bar." After he handed Jordan a glass of iced tea, he continued, "Dee says you've been asking about Malcolm Winslow."

"He's bad news, Henry," Jordan answered without taking his eyes off Kiley.

"I think so too but until he does something inappropriate, I can't toss him out. Sometimes being the owner sucks."

"Yeah, I guess you have to stay impartial. You can't refuse to serve someone just because you can tell he's scum."

"You got it. I know he's only showing interest in the women to get their money. But not a one of them has complained, not even when they see him with someone else."

"They're probably too embarrassed to admit they made a bad choice. They may lose some cash but they keep their pride. I doubt if he takes too much from any one of them either. It's more likely that he just skims the surface so they won't protest."

"I'll continue to keep an eye on him but maybe it's time to let it be more obvious." Henry glanced at Kiley and chuckled. "Ease up, son. You're devouring her with your eyes and making her uncomfortable."

"You're wrong, Henry." He saw Kiley sneak a peek and grinned. "She bought that with me in mind, knowing that watching her move would almost kill me."

"What makes you think that?"

"Oh, just some things she's said recently. And the way she keeps checking to make sure I'm still watching her."

Henry tried to continue the conversation but realized that Jordan wasn't hearing a word of it. Giving up, he tapped Jordan's arm. "Why don't you wait for Brett on the bench over there? You won't have to strain your neck when she moves away from her podium."

"Sorry, Henry. I can't help it. She's always gorgeous but today's soft look is getting to me."

Henry laughed as he waved Jordan away.

"Done talking to Henry?" Kiley asked as he approached her.

"I have no idea. I was too preoccupied to pay attention." Jordan shamelessly looked her over from head to toe and back again. "Woman, do you have any idea how incredibly sexy you look in that dress?" His voice was seductive. "I've been trying so hard to control myself around you and you're making it damn near impossible. The thought of other men looking at you is going to haunt me all afternoon."

"Jordan, you're the only man who looks at me like that." Kiley was thrilled by his reaction.

"Ha! You should check more closely. No, forget I said that."

"I have checked," she declared. "But you're the only one I noticed."

Jordan groaned. "Are you tormenting me on purpose?"

"I'm not tormenting you at all."

"You are and you know it." He stepped closer and leaned on her podium so he could whisper in her ear. "I want you, Kiley. I've always wanted you. This dress is so much softer than what you usually wear. It's taking all my willpower to keep my hands off you. Every time you move I come up with another idea for the many ways I'm going to make love to you."

"Oh my God." Kiley lowered her head. "You can't say things like that. Please, you have to stop." She felt her knees start to shake and was afraid she'd collapse at his feet. What she really wanted was to drag him out of there and explore all his ideas. She also had a few of her own to add to the list that he might have missed.

Jordan misunderstood and assumed he'd offended her. "I'm so sorry. I was out of line there. See? I'm not completely sane around you and until we know each other better, I should keep thoughts like that to myself."

"But—" she tried to explain.

"I'll behave. I promise." Jordan gave her a tentative smile. "Forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive." She put her hand on his arm.

"Damn if you're not looking hot today!" Brett instantly noticed the different style of Kiley's dress. "Oops, sorry, pal. What I meant to say was nice dress, Kiley. Or maybe it was that I'm just going to go sit down now."

"Stop scowling, Jordan," Kiley giggled.

"He just proved my point. Other men do look at you like I do. Even my best friend, who knows how I feel about you."

"Don't tell me you're jealous!" Impulsively, she hugged him. "It doesn't matter. You're still the only one I want to notice." She kissed his cheek. "Now go talk to Brett."

"I'd rather stay with you," he muttered to her amusement. "Did Dee ask you about Saturday?"

"Not directly. She hinted a lot though."

"Should we let them off the hook?" When she nodded, he took her hand and said, "Come with me." Dee was speaking with Brett when they approached. "By the way, Kiley, I really enjoyed meeting Vera Saturday."

"She loved you too."

"So you did bump into each other." Dee grinned.

"Yes, we did but please don't do that again." Jordan looked steadily between the two. "Fortunately, it worked out just fine but it could very easily have backfired. Kiley and I spoke Friday evening. And again this morning. And we're meeting for breakfast tomorrow."



"What that means is that as much as we appreciate the thought," Kiley chimed in so their friends would know she was in agreement, "we'd prefer to do this at our own pace. We're doing fine all by ourselves, right Jordan?"

"Right," he agreed, thinking how much he liked the way she was still holding his hand.

After Brett and Dee both apologized and promised not to interfere, Kiley tried to walk away but Jordan hadn't released her. "Jordan?"

In spite of his recent promise to behave, he motioned for her to lean closer in order to whisper in her ear. "Do me a favor. Try to walk around a lot while I'm here. The sight will feed my fantasies." He gave her earlobe a quick caress with the tip of his tongue.

Kiley gasped, blushing hotly. "Oh!" She tugged her hand from his and scurried away. He fantasized about her! That one flick left her weak at the knees and wanting to feel it repeated all over her body. How did such a tiny gesture do so much?

"What the hell did you just say?" Brett watched her race back to her podium. "And why did you chase her off when she was holding your hand?"

Jordan groaned. "Damn! I just can't stay cool around her anymore. I'm getting worse."

Brett sat back and studied his friend. "So, you had a nice visit?"

"Yeah, we did. But I said something that upset Kiley Friday night so a setup like that could have made it even worse."

"Care to share what you said? I might be able to help."

Jordan watched as Kiley wandered from table to table, stopping to chat with some of the regular customers. When she sensed his attention, she turned and gave him a slow smile and a wink. As he grinned in response, he said, "I don't know, Brett. Maybe it's not that bad after all."

Brett looked over his shoulder and caught her smile. "Hmm, I don't believe it. Is she actually flirting here?"

"Hey!" Jordan scowled again.

"Lighten up. I know she's yours but can you blame a guy for looking? That dress is about perfect and I, for one, always appreciate perfection. Besides, in all the months we've been here, I've never seen her look at anyone the way she does you."

Jordan sighed. "I know. Somehow I thought it would be easier once she started talking to me."

"I hate to say it but I doubt it'll get easier until she declares, as you have, that you're her future. Until then, I think the torture you're putting yourself through will only get worse. Now come on, let me tell you about the rest of my evening with Sadie."

"Anything else, guys?" Dee asked long after they finished eating.

"Not today, thanks," Brett responded.

"Then you need to move to the bar if you're staying. There's a birthday party here soon and we need to set up. You're in the way."

"Subtle, Dee." Jordan chuckled.

"Yeah well, I figure by now you're family so move it or help." When she saw Jordan considering it, she rolled her eyes. "Don't you have work to do? I thought you had a big meeting coming up?"

"We do but we're ready," Jordan responded confidently. "And no, before you ask again, we'll tell you about it when the time is right."

"I bet you'd tell Kiley if she asked you," Dee teased.

"Tell me what?" Kiley was nearby.

"About our meeting. But," Brett paused, "Kiley's a good girl who has more manners than to push Jordan into that position."

Kiley immediately recognized that Brett had just added to his warning from the previous day. "That's right, Dee. So stop pestering them. They've said they'll tell us when it's time and when it's time, they will." She walked them toward the door, leaving Dee grumbling. "Class again tonight, Jordan?"

"Mm but I should be home by ten if you want to talk." He looked at her hopefully.

"Give it a rest, pal." Brett couldn't resist. "We've stayed much longer today. You're seeing her in the morning. You know this is her long day. She'll be too tired tonight, won't you, Kiley?"

"Probably," she admitted. "But we'll see," she added because Jordan looked truly disappointed.

"Don't feel you have to," Jordan said seriously. "Of course, I'd love to talk to you but," he leaned closer so Brett wouldn't hear him, "I've got plenty of images in my mind to hold me over until breakfast."

Kiley actually giggled, surprising them all. "You are shameless."

"Nope, honest." He decided he could happily listen to that forever.

"That's it. I'm out of here," Brett interrupted, pretending to be annoyed. "If you're going to go all secretive and ignore me there's no point in waiting for you, Jordan. Tomorrow, kids." He left them alone.

"He's not really mad, is he?" Kiley worried.

"Nah, look." Jordan pointed at Brett as he laughed his way passed the window. "Unfortunately, I should take off too. Let me say one more time how beautiful you look." He kissed her palm. "Thanks again."

"Oh...um..." She was very aware of how close he was standing and could see the heat in his eyes.

"Have a pleasant afternoon." He closed the brief distance and brushed her lips with a gentle kiss.

Kiley stood, watching him go.

"Kiley, you'd better breathe," Henry intruded in her thoughts. He laughed at her startled expression when she realized he was there. "Little girl, why don't you give in and stop torturing that poor boy? He's a good guy and I hate to see him in so much pain."

"Henry, I..." Kiley groaned. "I don't mean to tease him. It's just... I mean, he's so handsome and I can feel it every time he speaks."

"Ha! I knew it. You're just as badly off as he is." Henry was pleased. "Boy, this is going to be fun. Now remember if you have your reception here —"

Kiley gasped. "We haven't even gone out yet!"

"Oh but I heard you mention breakfast so I'm sure that's just the beginning. You'll see." He winked. "One thing will lead to another and if you both have the sense to follow your hearts, it's only a matter of time before you'll be setting the date."

"Knock it off and let me get back to work." Kiley sighed. Henry's chuckle followed her as she went to help the staff prepare for the party.

## Chapter Nine

Worse than a damn schoolboy. Jordan laughed at himself as he waited in front of the restaurant for Kiley. He had been so full of anticipation at the thought of seeing her that he'd arrived a good half-hour early for their breakfast date. He'd always expected to fall hard when he finally fell in love. What he hadn't imagined was the way his emotions would override his normal cool and confident demeanor.

When Jordan landed his first financial consulting job, he rapidly earned the reputation of being able to keep his head under any circumstances. His persona grew after he ventured out on his own. He was known for his boldness and his ability to be in the right place at the right time. He could negotiate a cutthroat, multimillion dollar deal that could make or break both him and his client in a heartbeat without ever showing a hint of nerves at either possible outcome. He was "The Golden Boy" as they'd started calling him soon after he'd proven his assessment of the opportunity that caused him to part ways with the firm where he'd been employed was dead-on. The firm, on the other hand, missed out on literally millions and lost credibility with some very powerful clients. When the dissatisfied flocked after Jordan, he shocked more than a few by refusing their business. Now, with his level of success, his right to pick and choose clients was no longer questioned.

Fat lot of good that did him now! Jordan tried not to pace. He wanted to appear casual and calm when Kiley arrived. He silently lectured himself that he would remain in control and unfazed, no matter how good she looked or what she said.

"Morning, Jordan." Kiley wondered what he was thinking when he failed to notice her approach. "You're scowling. Is something wrong?"

"Not anymore." His face lit up with a smile.

"I did say eight thirty, didn't I?" Kiley told herself to shut up. She'd been surprised when she turned the corner and saw that he was already waiting for her.

"Yes." He glanced at his watch and saw it was only five past eight. "Do you need to do something before breakfast?"

"Um, I'm perpetually early. I can't seem to help it. I try not to be but..." She knew she was babbling.

"And here I'd hoped you were as anxious to see me as I am you." He pouted, urging her closer.

"I...well...yes. I mean, no..."

Kiley was silenced when Jordan covered her mouth with his. The kiss was soft and lingering. He started to pull her tighter against him until the door to the restaurant

opened next to them. The conversation of the emerging couple reminded Jordan where they were. He forced himself to ease his lips from hers.

"Damn, woman, you make me lose my senses!"

It came out sounding harsher than he'd intended and Kiley took an anxious step back from him. "Me? You're the one who grabbed me. I didn't do anything!"

"The hell you didn't!" What was wrong with him? Here he was, accusing her of who knew what, behaving like a complete ass when what he wanted was to have her back in his arms.

Kiley was shocked. For the life of her, she couldn't understand why he was mad. Quickly, she racked her brain, searching for something, anything that could have angered him. She hadn't called him the night before because she had fallen asleep as soon as she sat down to unwind. He'd said she shouldn't if she was too tired. And this morning all she'd done was show up early, just as he had. When Jordan attempted to speak, Kiley held up her hand to prevent him.

"Actually, um, being perpetually early isn't it today. You see, last night Henry asked me to come in before my normal time to help with something so I came here on my way there to leave you a note because that means I need to cancel on you."

"Kiley." He reached for her but stopped when he saw fear in her eyes. He lowered his hand and tried to look natural even though his heart was sinking. "All right then. Maybe some other time?"

Instead of responding, Kiley nodded and rushed away, knowing without looking that he was standing there watching her retreat.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dee, I love you but please, I don't want to talk about it." Kiley wiped her eyes. "Oh darn it! Would you look at me? I'm just a mess!"

"Come, I can help." All that Dee knew was, according to Henry, Kiley had shown up for work almost two hours early. She'd spent an hour in the employee bathroom, crying, before she asked him to back her up by saying he'd needed her to run an errand for him that morning. When Dee came in, he'd sent her to Kiley to see if she could find out what had her so upset and if there was anything they could do to help. Now it was almost lunchtime and the only thing Dee had learned was that Kiley had left Jordan standing on the sidewalk after she'd backed out of breakfast. And the later it got, the more frazzled Kiley became. "Maybe he and Brett won't even show today," she offered helpfully as she touched up Kiley's makeup. "Don't cry again, honey. It'll all work out. Whatever happened can't be all that bad."

Henry stuck his head around the door. "Why don't you just take the day off? It's not that busy. We could manage without you just this once."

Kiley was shaking her head. "No thanks, Henry. I appreciate your offer but I'm not running away." She might have been confused and scared earlier but here she was

among friends. She'd decided that whatever it was that had set Jordan off had nothing to do with her. There was absolutely no way she was going to let him chase her from her job. Maybe other people jumped when "The Golden Boy" snarled but she wasn't about to become one of them. But what if it was something she'd done?

Jordan was waiting for Brett at the corner, unwilling to face Kiley alone. He knew she'd used Henry as an excuse to ditch him. Not that he blamed her. He'd reacted like a lunatic, taking his anger at himself out on her. She was gone before he could explain that he was disgusted by his own lack of control when she was around. He'd meant to give her a friendly, "good morning, it's nice to see you" kiss and had been seconds from deepening it into a demanding, "let's uncover some body parts and have wild sex" kiss. If those people hadn't walked out when they had, Jordan knew his hands would have strayed inappropriately.

"What did you do now?" Brett asked after taking one look at him.

"Blew it. Big-time," Jordan responded. "I'm not sure I should go in there today."

Brett stopped walking and stared. "Details!" Jordan shook his head sadly. "Listen up, pal. You are not, I repeat not, running away now. I don't care what happened."

"She won't want me there."

"Nope, no way, forget it. You've dragged me here every day for months. You hit one little snag and you're ready to hightail it out of here? Well that's not happening. We're going in there right now and we're going to continue to every day until you figure out how to fix it." He sensed that Jordan was about to argue. "You've been telling me that Kiley is your future for months. I've known you all my life and never have you even come close to saying something like that. I believed you the first time you said it and I know you still feel that way."

"But..."

"I never saw you as a coward, Jordan. I'm not going to let you become one now." Brett watched as his words hit home. "You can get past this. Remember all that patience you keep declaring you have? It's time to get your ass in there and show some."

Kiley was busy when they walked in and Henry moved to her podium. "McKade, you made my girl cry. I'd like to tell you to turn around and leave but she won't let me. I don't know what you did but you better figure out how to make it up to her, pronto."

Jordan steadily met the angry man's glare. "I'm going to try my best, Henry," he said sincerely.

Henry stared for a long, silent moment. "Do you love her?"

"With all my heart," Jordan answered honestly.

He must have seen what he wanted in Jordan's eyes because he nodded. "Good. Why don't you go sit down? But McKade, I'd better not regret letting you in today." Henry and Jordan exchanged another look before the men went to their usual table.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later Kiley and Jordan were still tiptoeing around each other. Neither would tell their friends what had happened but both were clearly still affected by it. He had stopped waiting for Brett outside and she had stopped avoiding them when they arrived. Both continued to watch the other whenever the opportunity arose with a new wariness that hadn't been there previously.

Today, Brett got there first and used the opportunity to consult with Dee. "I can't get anything out of him other than he was an ass, a fool and an idiot."

"No luck for me either. Every time I mention his name she looks like she's going to burst into tears and runs away. We have to do something."

"Not yet, Dee. You remember the last time? With how they're acting now, I think there's more chance of us making things worse instead of better."

"Are you guys still going to the game tonight?"

He nodded. "I'm planning on being as obvious as I can to get us noticed. Hopefully, Kiley won't run the other way when she sees us."

"If she tries to, make a big fuss wishing Alyssa happy birthday. That way they'll both have to stay put at least until Kiley introduces you. I'm sure Alyssa won't let you get away without finding out how you know each other."

"That'll be a start and then I'll do my best to keep them talking without pissing either of them off since they're both going to know what I'm trying to do."

\* \* \* \* \*

The plan Malcolm decided on was perfect. He'd overheard Kiley and that cow of a waitress talking about her cousin's birthday. It had been more than obvious how much Kiley cared about her. That was something he could easily use to his advantage so that everything would fall right into place. Tonight was going to be spectacular.

Malcolm waited until Kiley's back was turned to put the drops into the water glass that was always on her podium. He'd come up with the idea when he noticed how she had started to reach for it as soon as she saw him in order to avoid his hand when he greeted her. The bitch! Her idiotic reluctance was about to become his benefit. There wasn't much water left so she'd surely finish is as she spoke to him.

"Kiley," he said, sounding extremely distraught. "Alyssa's in trouble. She sent me to get you."

"What?" Kiley hurriedly gulped to swallow the water in her mouth.

"We have to hurry! There's no time to waste. She told me to bring you to her immediately before it's too late for you to help her."

"Yes. Okay just let me grab my purse." She raced to retrieve her bag from her locker. "Dee, tell Henry I'm sorry but I have to go. I'll explain later." She rushed out before Dee could react.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jordan stood with one elbow resting on the bar as he semi-listened to the conversation between Brett and Shane. He'd almost backed out of the evening but then decided he couldn't turn into a coward at this stage. Besides, there was a possibility that Brett was right. There was a chance that running into Kiley away from the restaurant would shock her into standing still long enough to give him the opportunity to speak with her. The next instant Jordan's senses went on high alert. He couldn't believe it when he saw Kiley being dragged through the door by Malcolm Winslow. He watched her make her way unsteadily across the room to a table already occupied by two men.

"Friend of yours?" Shane asked.

"Stay here," Jordan said quietly. He put down his bottle and stalked away.

Bo was furious with himself. He was a bookie. What the hell did he think he was doing, involving himself in this mess? He never should have let Winslow convince him to arrange this meeting. He should have taken his losses and walked away. He knew better than to be included in this business. This was serious shit and Winslow was bound to screw it up. He'd always avoided stuff like this before. He was a bookie, for Christ's sake! He was a good bookie and as long as he didn't overstep his bounds, everyone left him pretty much alone. Now, he'd gone and done something stupid like this. Winslow was finally here. Yeah, here but he had some whacked-out broad with him so it was bound to get ugly.

"Gentlemen." Malcolm shoved Kiley into a chair.

"Who's the girl?" Vincent asked, his calm belying the annoyance he felt. Mr. Samuels wouldn't like the fact that Winslow had been late when he'd insisted on a meeting. Showing up with the girl had been a stupid move. And just what was a girl like her doing with him? Even though she was stoned, she was obviously much too classy for Winslow.

Before Malcolm could answer, Jordan stepped up to the table. "Evening, Vincent. Bo." He nodded to the two, pointedly ignoring Malcolm.

"McKade," Vincent acknowledged him while Bo squirmed uncomfortably. "Are you joining us?"

"No." Jordan reached down and pulled Kiley out of her chair, pinning her to him. "I just came over to thank you for entertaining my girl. I guess you didn't see me at the bar when you walked in, Kiley."

Jordan! Jordan was here! Thank goodness! He'd help. Even though she'd been avoiding him for a week he'd still save her. Wouldn't he? What was wrong with her? The room kept swimming around her. She knew she'd fall if he let her go. "J-J-J..." She couldn't get her mouth to work.

"Luckily I saw you so everything's just fine. Nothing to worry about, sweet. We'll go now and leave these gentlemen to their business." His expression broadcast that he wouldn't tolerate any interference.



Vincent nodded as McKade backed away with the girl. He noticed that Bo released the breath he'd been holding. It was common knowledge how successful McKade was and that his deals were squeaky clean but, to some extent, he was still an unknown. Very interesting that he'd turned up to claim the girl that Winslow had dragged in. So far nothing about this meeting was what he'd anticipated. "Sit down, Winslow," Vincent ordered coldly when the idiot jumped up intending go after them.

"Don't be fucking stupid, man. That dude with him is a cop," Bo added.

Shane didn't know exactly what was going on but his brother had just snatched that babe from the middle of a group gathered for what he was willing to bet was an illegal purpose. He recognized Bo the bookie who apparently remembered him from his street patrol days since he helped the other one he should know, but couldn't place instantly, prevent the third one from trying to reclaim his escort. Shane maintained his stare until Jordan and Brett had the mystery woman outside before slowly following them.

He caught up as they rounded the corner. "What the hell is going on?"

Jordan ignored him. "Kiley, you're okay now, love. I'm here and you are safe." She tried to focus on him but couldn't. "Do you know what he gave you?" When a tear slid down her cheek, Jordan cradled her against him and simply whispered soothing things. Over her head, he said to Brett, "I've got to get her home."

"What about him?" Brett asked.

"I need to take care of Kiley first. I'll deal with him later."

"Hold on," Shane interrupted. "I want to know what's going on here."

Jordan sighed. "This is Kiley, the woman I love. Brett can tell you more in a minute but for now all you need to know is that the guy she came with is pure scum, up to something he probably deserves to die for. I'm sure he drugged her somehow because otherwise there is no way she'd ever go anywhere with him. And now I'm going to take Kiley home where I can make sure she's safe until it wears off. You and Brett have to go to the game and find her cousin. Shane, in spite of what I know you're thinking, I need you to trust me more than I ever have in my life. Hell, I'm begging you. No matter what, do not bring her cousin to my house tonight."

"Jordan, I think—" Shane started.

"No Shane, listen to him," Brett spoke up. "Come on man, this is important. I'll tell you everything I can but Jordan is right, doing it this way. From what I've heard about her cousin, she really shouldn't see Kiley like this. Let him take care of her."

"What's to keep this cousin from leaving after we find her?" Shane asked. "Have either of you met her? How's she going to accept we're not lying about everything, most importantly, Kiley's safety?"

Kiley must have heard them even though she couldn't talk. When she kept trying to open her purse, Jordan shifted to hold it in front of her. "What is it, Kiley? What do you want from here?"

Kiley's face crinkled in concentration. "Ti-ti-tic..."

"Your ticket?" She nodded. "That's good. They can take your ticket to prove they know you." She nodded again. "Can I get it for you?" Another nod as Brett took her purse so Jordan could rifle through it. When he found the ticket, he handed it to Brett. "He has it, Kiley. Brett and Shane will go find her and make sure she has a great birthday. They'll take good care of her for you. And they can call in between periods to tell us about the game, okay love?" Kiley's eyes were like saucers as she nodded at him one more time. "Shane, please."

Shane read the pleading on his brother's face. He had also noticed the tenderness every time his focus was on Kiley. He'd never seen as much determination in his brother's expression as he currently had. Even though he didn't like it, he decided that for now, he'd give Jordan the benefit of the doubt. He'd wait for Brett's explanation before he worked on locating Bo in order to confront him about what he knew. "All right, Jordan. We'll do this your way for the time being, at least until I know what's going on."

"Thanks, Shane. You too, Brett." Jordan felt Kiley clutch him tighter. "I'll call if anything comes up."

After Brett and Shane headed toward the arena, Jordan lifted Kiley into his arms. "Hang on, Kiley. I'll have you home in no time."

Home. Jordan was taking her home. He said she'd be safe. He said he'd take care of her. He was holding her. He was holding her and everything was going to be all right.

## Chapter Ten

"I'm waiting, Winslow." Vincent had run out of patience with the man. At least Bo appeared to be honestly horrified by whatever Winslow had been attempting to pull. Maybe Mr. Samuels would see fit to overlook his involvement just this once.

Malcolm gulped. "He's a no-good, interfering bastard. McKade's always been jealous of me. He had no right..."

"No right? It appeared that he had every right," Vincent cut him off.

"She was for Samuels!" Malcolm blurted.

"That's Mr. Samuels to you," Vincent said coldly. "Tell me. What exactly did you intend for Mr. Samuels to do with her?"

"Why, anything he wanted," Malcolm declared. "I thought I could give her to him as a token of my appreciation for his patience."

"You don't have your payment?"

"You asshole!" Bo interrupted. "You swore—"

Vincent silenced him with a glance as he stood. "I'll be in touch." With that, he walked out of the bar.

"How could you?" Bo exclaimed. "I can't believe that I let you drag me into this. If you ever call me again—" Bo didn't finish as he jumped up and rushed out.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Just let me talk to her first," Brett said once they located Alyssa. "Excuse me, are you Alyssa? Alyssa Campini?"

"Yeah. Who's asking?" She eyed him speculatively.

"Brett Hudson, at your service." He grinned. "Kiley sent me for your birthday."

"Oh?" She returned his grin. "Cute, but who are you really?"

"I honestly am Brett Hudson and your cousin did send me." He became serious. "Kiley had a little trouble. She asked us to come and make sure you have fun since she isn't able to be here herself."

"Trouble, what kind of trouble?" Alyssa finally noticed Shane. "You!"

"Ms. Campini, we meet again." Shane felt the evening going from bad to worse.

"McKade." She looked back and forth between them. "Where's Kiley? What's wrong?"

"Your cousin is fine," Shane said as he added mentally that she would be eventually. "She's with my brother."

"Why? It's my birthday and we always spend our birthdays together." Alyssa was suspicious.

"Alyssa, she really is okay," Brett tried. "She ran into some trouble at the restaurant with a customer and Jordan, that's Shane's brother, stepped in to assist her."

"So why isn't she here?"

"Well, she wasn't quite up to an evening out but didn't want you to miss the game so we offered to come keep you company for her." Brett told himself that he wasn't exactly lying.

"Wait. Did you say Jordan?" Brett and Shane both nodded. "Jordan, as in the guy with the voice?" Alyssa laughed. "I can't believe it! She ditched me on my birthday for a guy." She saw Shane scowl. "Was there really some kind of trouble or are you just playing along to help them?"

"Both," Shane admitted. "But we really are supposed to make sure you have fun and don't worry about her. We're to check in between periods."

"She's really okay?" Alyssa asked.

"She will be," Brett tried to sound confident as Shane agreed.

"There's only two seats here," she pointed out.

"We have three up there." Brett pointed to seats a few rows behind them.

"So you guys were joining us all along," she concluded.

"Well..." Brett didn't know how much to say.

"Just tell her, Brett. Jordan'll tell Kiley at some point tonight." Shane slumped in his seat. Of all the people to be her cousin, it had to be Alyssa Campini. Not to mention the explanation Brett had given him. There were way too many holes in it. Jordan certainly had a lot of filling in to do later.

"You're right," Brett stated. "Kiley didn't know that we'd be here. We were going to pretend to bump into you by accident."

"Why?"

"He was hoping to charm an invitation to drinks after the game. You see, he's very interested in your cousin and..."

"Why doesn't he just ask her out?" Shane wondered.

"He thinks he makes her too nervous. She doesn't do real well talking around him."

"She still can't talk?" Alyssa laughed.

"Nope, she gets too flustered."

"Oh please." Shane rolled his eyes.

"Hold on, I believe him. Every time Kiley mentioned your brother she blushed." Shane looked skeptical but kept quiet. "So he planned to run into us and wheedle an invitation to go out with us after the game all to get her to talk to him? He must want her badly." Brett decided it would be better not to comment as Shane snorted. "How'd you arrange the tickets? Kiley said she called a scalper for ours."

"Jordan gave her the number," Brett admitted.

"He had that girl call a scalper?" Shane sounded annoyed.

"Yeah, only the alleged scalper was me. And the runner who dropped them off is an intern where I work."

"Where did he get the tickets?" Shane asked quietly.

Brett sighed. Here we go! "A guy owed him a favor."

"For?"

"Look, why don't you save these questions for Jordan?" Brett pleaded. "I'm not comfortable with this."

"Your comfort is the least of my concerns," Shane informed him. "If my brother —"

"Oh shut up, McKade." They seemed to have forgotten Alyssa between them. "He's right. If your brother collected a favor, it's up to him to tell you. I'm just happy that Kiley didn't have to deal with a real scalper. I never imagined she'd go to that extent to get us tickets. I would have been happy with seats to any game. It didn't have to be today's."

Brett wanted desperately to change the subject. "How do you two know each other?"

"Ms. Campini is the photographer who did that exposé on street gangs," Shane responded, sounding as if he found her distasteful.

"McKade doesn't approve of me," Alyssa supplied.

"She takes unnecessary risks."

"He worries too much."

"Whoa." Brett didn't like the way they were glaring at each other. "Sorry I asked. Am I going to have to separate you? Just because we're at a hockey game doesn't mean you have to fight. That's better left on the ice."

Brett had never been happier to hear the national anthem begin in his life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jordan lived in an older section of the city in a three-story home. His office took up the first floor. He occupied the rest. Kiley was still limp when they got there so Jordan carried her up to the living room where he laid her on the couch. Hoping to make her more comfortable, he removed her shoes and took the clip from her hair. As he moved around the room, her saucer-like eyes followed him everywhere.

He'd been furious when he saw Winslow dragging her after him. For now though, he had to put his feelings aside. Kiley was already frightened. If she saw his fury now it certainly wouldn't help. Not knowing what she'd been given, he had no idea how it might affect her or how long it would last. For now, he needed do his best to make her feel safe. He hoped that Brett and Shane would be successful at keeping Alyssa away.

Even without knowing what to expect, he was positive that the fewer people who witnessed it, the better.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked, hoping the fear he saw wasn't for him.

Kiley curled into the corner of the couch as if she were trying to make herself as small as possible. He was looking at her, trying to determine what to do next, waiting for her to answer when all she really wanted was for him not to leave her alone. It took all her determination to stretch out her hand toward him. She was so frustrated at not being able to talk that a tear slid down her cheek.

For an instant Jordan looked furious, like he was about to explode. Then he took a deep breath and his features softened. He sat down beside her and gently gathered her to him. Kiley shifted so she could bury her head against his chest. With him holding her, talking softly, stroking her back and smoothing her hair, Kiley believed it really would be fine. As long as he didn't let go, she'd be safe.

Kiley was feeling slightly better. She'd lost track of time so she didn't know how long they'd been there. "Thank you," she finally said.

"There's no need." Jordan shifted her in his arms so he could look at her. "I would never let anything happen to you if there was any way for me to prevent it."

"You were mad," she was still having trouble forming words.

"Of course I was. Winslow was up to no good and dragging you into the middle of it."

"No. Last week."

"Not at you." He finally understood why she had been avoiding him. "Oh no, definitely not at you." He caressed her cheek.

"But—"

"Sh, listen. I was angry with myself. I meant to give you a little hello peck and I came very close to letting it get away from me. I can't seem to help myself, sweet Kiley. Every time I get close to you I can't think straight. I mean to stay calm and non-threatening but as soon as I touch you, I forget. I was mad because if those people hadn't interrupted us, I would have completely lost track of where we were and devoured you."

"Oh!" She looked at him with understanding dawning on her face. "What—"

"You have the most kissable mouth." Jordan traced his thumb over her lips. "I've dreamed of kissing you, really kissing you since the day I met you. I would have if we hadn't been disturbed. Your lips are so sweet. Once I'd kissed you, I know I would have needed to touch you, to explore you." He noticed her breathing was becoming labored and her cheeks were flushed. "We were on a public street in broad daylight. I was mad because I came too close to losing control."

"But you said..."

"I know. I implied it was your fault. It wasn't, Kiley. All you did was show up. That's more than enough to make me want you. I had you flustered again and you are

so damn feminine when you get that way. Without doing anything beyond saying good morning, I felt like you were seducing me. That's my mind, Kiley. You didn't do a thing."

Kiley hugged him, moving sluggishly. Mm, this man could talk! She sighed. "It's okay."

"Thanks but it's not. You were right. I did grab you just as you said. The only excuse I have is that I spent the night before replaying the fantasies that your green dress inspired."

"Tell me."

"Tell you what, my fantasies?" She nodded. Was this a side effect of the drug or had it relaxed her enough to say what was on her mind? "Come on Kiley, you don't really want to hear them. You can guess most of them anyway."

"You don't have any," she pouted.

"Kiley, you are so wrong." It was not the right time for this. How could he possibly tell her all the things he wanted them to share and not have it end with both of them naked? There was absolutely no way he'd take advantage of her in the state she was in. She was still looking at him expectantly. "We shouldn't have this conversation now. I've already shown my lack of control around you. Discussing the many ways I've imagined us together and not touching you would be more than I can stand. I'm not sure I'm strong enough." She continued to stare at him. "Kiley, really, you're asking too much."

"Then tell me about the kiss," she urged, snuggling against him.

"All right." Maybe he could do this. Wait! Not do this, he'd tell her but there was no way he'd actually do it. Not tonight. As long as he pretended to be talking about people other than them, maybe he could say enough to satisfy her curiosity. "It will start gently, soft, like our others have. Instead of ending though, we'll continue it. When it's time, I'll use my tongue to caress your lips. You'll open your mouth, slightly at first, inviting me to taste you. In return, you'll explore my mouth too. We'll both let the kiss deepen, knowing we want more and using our mouths to say that. By now, we'll be pressed tightly against each other. I'll feel your nipples through our clothes. You'll know how much I want you since you'll be able to feel how hard kissing you has me. But we won't end it just yet. We'll be so involved with enjoying it because it's showing us how much we want each other. We'll both be senseless with desire but..."

The phone rang.

"That'll be Brett and Shane with Alyssa.

"McKade."

"How's Kiley?" Shane asked impatiently.

"Starting to come out of it. She's finally talking some. Her eyes still look pretty bad but Kiley's doing okay. Did you find Alyssa?"

"She's here. She wants to talk to Kiley."

Jordan turned over the phone after telling her that her cousin wanted to speak to her.

"Damn it, Lyss! Your timing sucks." Kiley sat up too quickly and Jordan had to reach out and steady her.

"Kiley, what's wrong with you? Why are you yelling?"

"He was talking to me, Lyssa. Telling me things. I could feel every word everywhere. I was about to come and you ruined it!"

Alyssa shrieked loud enough that Jordan heard her too. "What the hell is going on there? Kiley, if he's touched you –"

"You're not listening. Jordan is being very well-behaved and gentlemanly and I am so damn tired of it. Don't you get it yet? I want him to touch me. I finally got him to talk to me for real and he was making me tingle all over and I was so close – Oh God, I'm going to be sick." Kiley thrust the phone at Jordan and stood unsteadily.

"Hang on," Jordan managed to say in the direction of the phone as he helped Kiley to the powder room. Setting the phone on the sink, he held her hair and rubbed her back while she retched. When she finished, she rested her head on the wall.

Jordan could hear Alyssa yelling through the phone. "Alyssa, we have some things to do here. Why don't you call back after the next period?"

"I don't know who the hell you are but –"

"Alyssa, I'm sorry but I don't have time to get into this with you now. Kiley needs me. I promise I'll answer all your questions later. Please give the phone back to Shane." He could hear her grumbling but she did as he asked. "Shane, Kiley's sick but I assure you that I have everything under control. Whatever you do, do not bring Alyssa here. You've got to stay at the game." He knew Shane heard her moaning as he comforted her.

"Okay, Jordan. We'll call you again in about an hour."

"Tell me where she is!" Alyssa demanded as soon as he hung up.

"I can't." Shane hated it but he knew Jordan was right.

"McKade, if you don't tell me I swear, I'll hurt you. You didn't hear the things she said to me."

"What things?" Brett spoke up.

"Well," she hesitated, "she was mad at me for interrupting them. She said Jordan was talking to her and if we hadn't called, she would have..."

"Would have what?" Brett asked when she stopped.

Alyssa looked furious. "Come, all right! Kiley said she was about to come just listening to him. She said he was being too much of a gentleman to touch her like she wanted him to. She said she'd convinced him to talk to her and that's how it's affecting her. I have to get her away from him."



"Not a good idea." Brett had to hide his grin. Jordan had heard her comments and, drugged or not, he was sure his friend was in for quite a night. And if she was sick now there was no way he could distance himself from her, not when she might need him. "I'm sure Kiley's mortified enough at the moment. Hopefully, she won't remember all of this but if she does, the last thing she needs is more of us, sitting there, watching her."

"But she's my cousin. She needs me!"

"No, right now I'm sure my brother is doing everything necessary for her. Kiley needs you to do as she asked and stay here so you can tell her about the game later. Consider how much worse she'll feel if she thinks she ruined your birthday," Shane stated even though he understood her frustration.

"What happened to her?" Alyssa demanded. "Why is she acting like that?"

"We're pretty sure a very disreputable man who frequents the restaurant drugged her somehow." Brett knew they couldn't continue avoiding telling her.

"What?"

"He brought her to the bar where we met up for a beer before the game. We'll figure out why later but I don't think he was there for a friendly meeting. Jordan interrupted and escorted Kiley out of there," Shane added.

"Who? Why?" Alyssa was stunned.

"Don't worry. We'll get to all of that soon enough. Tonight, our only concern is your cousin and how we can make this as easy as possible for her," Shane replied.

"Alyssa, I know you're worried. We all are. Your cousin is just about the nicest person I've ever met. It makes no sense that anyone would deliberately try to hurt her. But, and I'll give you my word on this, no one could take better care of Kiley than Jordan is," Brett tried.

"But —"

"Believe him, Campini. I saw my brother put his own life at risk for her earlier. He did it without hesitation."

"What do you mean?"

"At least two of the men at the table with Kiley were armed, probably all three. He walked right over to them and made it clear that he was taking her out of there. He did it in a way that said Kiley was his and he wouldn't tolerate any bullshit they might be stupid enough to try," Shane said thoughtfully. "I know Jordan said he'd answer all your questions later. I have plenty of my own for him too. Until two hours ago, I didn't even know your cousin existed let alone inspired my brother like she obviously does."

"He's taking care of her," Brett restated.

"Fine. We'll stay," she agreed sullenly. "For now anyway."

## Chapter Eleven

"Don't fight it, Kiley," Jordan urged as she tried to resist vomiting. "It's better to get it out."

"I hate to be sick," she sobbed.

"I know, sweet, but please, just let it go."

"I'm a mess. I'm disgusting."

"You're beautiful to me, even when you're not at your best," he soothed.

"Jordan." She turned as another wave hit her.

"That's it. Go ahead. That's my girl." Jordan wished there were some way he could make this less awful for her.

"If I get through this I'm going to hunt him down and make him take the same stuff," Kiley declared when she sat back.

"You are going to get through this and I'll hold him down for you."

"Why did he do this to me?"

"I honestly don't know. But don't worry, I'll find out soon enough."

"Who were those men? You talked to them."

"One was Bo. He's a bookie, pretty decent as bookies go. He's not such a bad guy if you overlook what he does. The guy in the suit was Vincent. You might say he's the right-hand man for Mr. Samuels who is, among other things, in the high interest loan business. My guess is Winslow was planning on using you to stall. I think he's in trouble and getting desperate." At her questioning look, Jordan continued, "He's a high-stakes gambler. He's been milking the females in Mr. Paul's but I suspect that the well's running dry."

"Why didn't he just run away?" Kiley's head was clearing even though she felt worse.

"Mr. Samuels isn't someone you can run from."

"Are you saying he kills people?"

"I'm saying that it's a possibility."

"And you know him?"

"I know of him. We've never actually met."

"But you know that other guy, Vincent?"

"We've crossed paths but I wouldn't really say I know him. How are you feeling?"

"Dizzy. It comes and goes. I'm such a mess."

"Think you're done throwing up?"

"Yeah." Kiley started to cry. "I'm so sorry."

"For what? You didn't do this, sweet. There's nothing to apologize for."

"I made such a mess. Look at me!" She tried to hide her face.

"I am. And as far as I'm concerned you're still beautiful. Are you up for a shower?"

"I don't know...I'm not sure...I'm afraid..." She covered her face again.

"You think you'll get dizzy and fall." Jordan understood before she nodded, still not looking at him. "Then I'll help to make sure you don't." He scooped her into his arms and headed for the steps.

"No," she moaned. "Your shirt. Put me down."

Jordan did once they reached the bathroom off his bedroom. "Kiley, stop it. My main concern here is making you as comfortable as possible. You'll feel better with a shower. I brought you here so I could take care of you. Let me help." He smoothed back her hair and kissed her forehead. "Please love, I knew Winslow was bad news. I didn't help you by preventing this but I'm here now."

Another dizzy spell hit her. He was right. She needed him and she knew it. Part of her wanted to giggle. All the times she'd pictured him in the shower with her and now he was going to be but only to keep her on her feet. Finally, she nodded.

"Good girl. Now you sit here and I'll go get something for you to put on. Then you're going to rest and I'll take care of everything else." When she tried to protest, he said, "Don't argue, please. You're in no shape to do anything now. Tell you what. When this is all settled, you can take me someplace special." Again she nodded. He made sure she was steady before he left her. In a minute, he was back with a shirt for her to wear. He had also searched the guest bathroom and found a new toothbrush.

"Oh, yes please. That first." Kiley almost fell as she stood.

Jordan caught her and held her to him. "Hang onto me and I'll get you set up." He opened the brush and covered it with toothpaste. Then he pinned her between himself and the sink. "I won't let you fall. Trust me, Kiley." He held her hair while she awkwardly brushed her teeth. "Okay now let's get you out of these clothes."

"God, this is awful." Kiley stopped looking at him again.

"Knock it off. I'll have you know that undressing you for the shower is one of my fantasies."

"Not what you pictured though, is it?" Kiley actually grinned.

"Well, no but hey, that's why they're called fantasies. No more stalling. Let's get you cleaned up. Hold onto my shoulders."

He had her stripped in no time. Jordan tried very hard to ignore her body. Briefly, he considered leaving his underwear on but decided against it. Kiley would be less embarrassed if they were both on equal ground. "In we go."

This was torture! The moment he'd been dreaming of for months and he couldn't do a damn thing about it. She was incredible. So much was hidden by the style of her

clothes. The green dress had hinted but what he found was way beyond what he'd guessed.

"Jordan?" Kiley said tentatively when she noticed his jaw clench. "Am I that repulsive that you won't even look at me?" Her voice trembled. "I know my boobs are ridiculous and my ass is too big. I'm sorry to put you through this."

"Shut up." He sounded dangerous. Jordan sighed and rested his forehead on hers. Taking a deep breath, he raised his head and met her eyes. "I'm sorry." He saw her confusion. "You are unbelievable, do you know that? Kiley, this may be the most difficult thing I've ever done."

"What?"

"Standing here with you, both of us naked and not being able to touch you the way I want to. I'm not looking at you because I'm afraid you'll see what I'm thinking and that it'll scare you. If my opinion matters, I think you're perfect. Your breasts are lush and full of promise, not ridiculous. As far your ass, well, I'd love to run my palms over it after you wrap your legs around me and pull my cock deep into you."

Kiley could feel it as he described it. "Do it."

"Oh God, Kiley, you're killing me."

"Do it, Jordan."

"Not tonight. Even though I lack control around you most of the time I can't touch you now."

"You don't want me." She was close to tears again.

"More than anything. Look." Jordan looked pointedly at his erection that was a fraction of an inch from her belly.

"Oh my!" Kiley reached for him. She managed to circle his shaft before he caught her wrist.

"Don't. We can't do this. Not when you've been drugged. I won't take advantage of you."

"But I want you. I think I've been excited since the moment we met. You talk about fantasies. Well, you in the shower is one of mine."

Jordan groaned. "You shouldn't say that. Not now. Turn around and let me wash your hair. Put one hand on the wall and one on the bar." As he lathered her hair, Kiley began to moan. "Am I hurting you?"

"No, don't stop. Your hands feel so good. Touch me, Jordan. Everywhere."

Her words made him realize just how sensual the act of washing her hair was. He was taking too long and needed to get them out of there. Kiley leaned back against him, trapping his erection between them.

"Hold still please." He backed up, recreating the space between them. "I'm almost done here."

"I am too." She giggled at her own words. "You make me feel so hot. Your voice alone could make me come if you'd keep talking. I need you. I can't take it anymore. I'm going to explode. Just one touch is all it'll take."

"No, I can't. Not tonight. Listen, I'll make a deal with you. If you let me rinse you off, get you dry and tuck you in, I promise that tomorrow night I'll do anything you want."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"I can't wait that long."

"Yes, you can and so can I. Close your eyes." He rinsed her hair. "I want our first time together to be special. If we make love tonight, I'm not entirely sure you'd even remember it."

"I'll remember. There's nothing about you that I'd ever forget."

"Please, Kiley. Don't make this harder than it already is."

Kiley managed to wrap her fingers around him again. "I don't think this can possibly get any harder," she giggled.

"Hey! Behave yourself." Jordan gently removed her hand. "I can't believe that I'm saying this but keep your hands to yourself."

"You don't mean that."

"Tonight, I do. Hang onto this and don't move. I'll just dry off first and then we'll get to you."

She surprised him by doing as he asked. "Can I really touch you tomorrow?" she wondered seriously while he towed her off.

"If you still want to. I already told you that I'm up for anything you can think of as long as you behave tonight." He had mixed emotions when he finished buttoning her into his shirt. It helped, having her body hidden from sight but it sure had been magnificent to see. "Want me to comb your hair?"

"I can do it. I'll sit on the sofa and keep you company while you clean up my mess. I wish..."

"We already settled that. Wait here, I'll get you some socks."

Jordan had to force himself not to stare while Kiley combed her hair. It was usually held back by some sort of clip. Now, with it framing her face, Jordan needed to stifle another groan. He had to stop picturing the way it would look spread across his pillow when they made love.

This time when the phone rang, Kiley managed to assure Alyssa that she was fine and not to worry. Although the call ended better than the last one, Jordan repeated his request that they stay away.

After Jordan stowed the cleaning supplies, he made a few quick calls. Kiley was amazed when food and clothes were delivered less than fifteen minutes later. When she

finished the soup he insisted she eat, she glanced at the clothes the unnamed person had dropped off. "You're taking me home tonight."

"Absolutely not unless you ask me to."

"I'd rather stay here with you. I'm still a little shaky. But the clothes?"

"The clothes are for tomorrow morning. I figured you might be happier if you're dressed when my brother and your cousin get here."

"Thank you. I know I don't have to say that but I want to. Not everyone would have wanted to deal with this. Not everyone would have rescued me like you did."

"You're welcome." He held her gaze for a prolonged moment. "Why don't we go lie down? The game should be over soon. We may as well get comfortable while we wait."

## **Chapter Twelve**

"Give me the address in case we get separated along the way," Alyssa demanded.

"Wait," Brett finally yelled to get their attention. "You cannot go over there tonight!"

"The hell I can't," Alyssa yelled back. "I'm going to get Kiley and take her home with me where she belongs."

"And I want some answers," Shane added as they turned to go.

"Both of you just shut up," Brett growled.

Shane was stunned. In all the years he'd known him, Brett had rarely lost his temper. Now he was madder than he'd ever seen him.

"How dare you," Alyssa shrieked.

"I said. Shut. Up." He took a step toward her so Shane moved between them. "Kiley is right where she should be and you are not going over there to interfere tonight. They're waiting for us to call with who won but I'll bet he's already tucked her in. There's no way in hell I'm letting you disturb them now."

"Brett, be reasonable," Shane began.

"Me be reasonable? Me! Speak for yourself. There's something you two don't seem to get here. For the past four months, Jordan has been referring to Kiley as his future. He is so in love with her. I've never seen anything like it."

"You said they haven't even gone out," Alyssa interrupted.

"Doesn't matter. Jordan's positive and that's enough for me."

"This sounds like another one of his impulsive schemes," Shane snapped.

"Shane, I am so tired of you putting Jordan down like that." He stepped closer until they were nose to nose. Alyssa was certain they were going to fight. "It's time you took a long, hard, honest look at your brother and stopped making the same asinine assumptions you've made all our lives. If you did, maybe you'd see that he rarely does anything impulsive. He's organized and thorough and every damn thing about him is planned down to the last detail. You just don't want to accept that this is the truth because you can't verify it like you usually do. You can't audit love, Shane. Not like you did before you turned over your savings."

"You had your own brother audited?" Alyssa gasped.

"Yeah, he did," Brett confirmed. "Twice. The first time shocked the hell out of Jordan. It hurt. You alone make him feel incompetent even though he knows better. And of course Jordan hid it completely, just like always."

"What's that supposed to mean, like always?" Shane demanded.

"It means like every other time you were an asshole and hurt him. As long as I can remember, you've never given him any credit. No matter what he did, you dismissed him like he's some insignificant nothing you don't give a shit about. Big brother Shane, Jordan's hero. He idolized you and you barely knew he was there unless there was trouble. Then you'd swoop in and put him in his place. He only did all that stuff to get your attention.

"Didn't you realize how he tried to do everything you did so you'd have something in common? No, you were such a self-centered asshole that you never noticed, not unless you had some bogus criticism to shove down his throat. You never did figure out that he moved here and took that shit job just to be close to you."

"The shit job that he lost," Shane pointed out.

"That he lost because he wouldn't back down on something he believed in." Brett was growing angrier by the moment. "The deal that cost him that job earned your useless, screw-up of a brother his first million. Why is it, Shane, that the most wealthy and powerful people around flock to Jordan and trust him implicitly when you, his own brother, are so suspicious of him that you had him audited twice for a few measly thousand dollars?

"Maybe I should thank you for that second audit. That's the one that pushed him into finally waking up about you. Not that it matters. Even though he's accepted the fact that all you'll ever be is a mere relative and not the friend he always wanted, he went ahead and put you in our investment group anyway. I hope he lets me be there when he gives you your first million although I'm sure you'll find something negative in that too."

"Gee, McKade, you're even worse than I thought," Alyssa said smugly.

"What makes you think you're any better than he is?" Brett turned on her.

"Hey," Alyssa bristled.

"You're not so high and mighty yourself and you know it," Brett stated. "Okay, so you passed on the chance to be embedded with a combat unit in Iraq but have you told Kiley about your latest scheme yet? What's with you? You got some sort of weird death wish? Do you get a thrill from walking out your door every day, knowing that steady, predictable, dull Kiley is being a good girl, going to work at her nice, safe boring job, visiting with her old folks while you intentionally put yourself in danger? You think she doesn't deserve to have some fun with a great guy? She shouldn't have someone who'll do anything to make her happy? Or is all the good stuff reserved for you? Well let me tell you, Kiley is so far out of your league. You need to stop trying to drag her down to your level and start using her as an example instead.

"You knew damn well that Kiley would get tickets for tonight's game. It's your birthday and this is what you told her wanted so she made sure that's what you got. Unlike you, it matters to her whether or not she lets people down.

"She's honest and giving and truly cares about the people around her. I, for one, consider myself very fortunate to have her call me a friend. I hope she and Jordan do



get together because they're perfect for each other. Neither of them would ever lie to someone they care about."

"I don't lie," Alyssa declared.

"No?" Brett glared. "How are your ribs? Did you enjoy your night in the emergency room? What does Kiley think about your idea for your next assignment? Omission is just another form of lying in my book."

When Alyssa just stood there with her mouth gaping, Brett switched back to Shane. "You still over on the south side? Jordan's pretty much stopped telling me what you're working on since he'd probably end up getting yet another of my pointless lectures about you."

It was Shane's turn to look stunned.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to call my best friend and ask if he or his love need me to drop anything off before I head home. I'll be visiting tomorrow, after lunch. In case you actually decide to listen for a change and don't barge in on them tonight, I'll leave the morning free for you since you're family." He turned to go. "Oh and Shane, I'll save you the trouble of hunting down Bo. The third guy tonight goes by the name of Malcolm Winslow but you'll want to check Melvin Wilson too since that's his real name. Jordan could tell you a lot more but I doubt you'll bother to ask." He gave them each one more pointed glare before stalking off.

Alyssa and Shane stood silently, staring down the street long after Brett departed. Eventually, Alyssa spoke. "I don't think I could feel any worse. How about you?" When Shane didn't respond, she continued, "Everything he said is true. How does he know about all that? I thought he was going to hit you."

"That's maybe the fifth time I ever saw Brett angry. But this is the first time Jordan wasn't around to step in." He paused. "I guess I've had that coming for years since, like his assessment of you, he was right about me too."

"So now what do we do?"

"We do what he advised. We call to check on your cousin and remind them that we're available if they need us and tell them we'll be over in the morning. Maybe, just in case, you should ask Kiley if she's still okay where she is or if she'd prefer you to take her home. Did you know about them?"

"No but that's my fault. Kiley mentioned that a guy had started coming in at lunch and was paying a lot of attention to her. When she said he had a sexy voice, I made fun of her. She hasn't brought him up again and I haven't talked to our friend, Dee, who works with her recently so I forgot about him. Kiley always listens to whatever I want to talk about. She's so supportive of me and I don't do the same for her."

"You've never publicly humiliated her though, have you? I really did have my brilliant brother audited twice. Maybe he could forgive me the first time but the second? I was way out of line. Brett was right. Jordan handles million dollar deals for high profile people and top notch companies and I questioned his ethics. I was somewhat

afraid his success was due to illegal activities rather than his abilities. I really never have given him the credit he deserves."

"I guess we both have a lot to think about," Alyssa decided.

"Yeah and I've got a lot to make up for. Can I suggest something?" She nodded. "Tomorrow, I'd like to go to Brett's first. He should be there in the morning, more than we should."

"Can I meet you somewhere so we can all go together?"

"Why don't you come to Brett's too? And I think I'll talk to Jordan before I start checking into that Winslow guy. I've heard that Jordan investigates potential clients before he accepts them but I guess I assume he did it haphazardly. We better call before it gets late."

She agreed.

"Hi, Jordan. How's Kiley?"

"Worn out but otherwise okay. After her shower, she managed to eat a little."

"Good. Is she still awake? Alyssa wants to talk to her if she is."

They both turned over their phones. "Hey Kiles, how are you feeling?" Alyssa felt shy.

"Better. I had some soup."

"That's always good. Do you want me to come take you home or are you okay there?"

"I'm good where I am. Jordan has me tucked in and I'm cozy. We've been waiting for you to call before I doze too much. I'm sorry I wrecked your birthday."

Alyssa felt her throat close. She reached out and clutched Shane's hand as she fought the tears that threatened. "You didn't. Brett told me the lowlife who drugged you is pretty scummy."

"He said you were in trouble and needed me. I never stopped to think that there was no way it could be true."

"Of course you didn't. I'm sure you were too worried about me to think about anything other than helping me. You've always come to my rescue, Kiley. If I weren't so reckless all the time, you wouldn't be so worried about me getting into trouble."

"Lyss, I'll worry no matter what you're doing. You know me, Kiley the worrier."

"Yes, I do know you. You're Kiley, my kind-hearted, caring, super-sweet, over-generous cousin. Do you need anything?"

"No, Jordan took care of everything for me."

"He seems like a good guy. I'll let you get some rest and Shane said we'd come by in the morning. Can I talk to Jordan a sec?" Kiley said good night and handed him the phone. "Jordan, thank you for taking such good care of my cousin."

"No problem."

"Brett told me how you arranged for all the tickets and planned to run into us. You must be quite a guy to do all that just to make Kiley comfortable with you."

"Yeah well, Kiley's very special to me."

"I'm beginning to understand that. I wish it had turned out the way you'd wanted it to."

"Me too."

"Okay then, I'll meet you tomorrow. I think your brother and I are going to grab something to eat but I'll be home after that. Call me if Kiley needs me. Here's Shane."

"That goes for me too. Try to get some sleep once Kiley's out. You must be almost as wiped out as she is."

"I'm fine, Shane."

"You're a good man, Jordan. I'm proud of you for the way you got her out of there earlier. You were quite impressive."

"Uh, thanks, Shane but I really didn't think about what I was doing at the time. I just did what I had to in order to get Kiley away from them."

"I can't wait to meet her. Brett tells me the two of you are perfect for each other."

"I think so."

"I'll say goodnight now so you can turn in. We won't show up too early so you can let Kiley sleep as long as she needs to."

## Chapter Thirteen

"Something weird is going on," Jordan stated after hanging up.

"I'm so glad you said that," Kiley seconded. "Lyssa was so strange."

"Strange how?"

"She said things that were very unlike her."

"Same with Shane." When the phone rang again, he said, "This'll be Brett."

"Hey Jordan. Kiley feeling any better? You guys need anything?"

"She's remarkably fine. We're about to sack out."

"She's staying then."

"Yep. She told her cousin that she is good right where she is."

"They didn't show up there?"

"No, they called to check on Kiley and said that they'll be over in the morning. What's up, Brett? What did we miss? I thought you were with them."

"I screwed up. Major big-time. I'm so sorry. I..."

"What do you mean? What happened?"

"Shane was being all blustery and controlling and Alyssa was insisting on coming to get Kiley away from you and I lost it. I blew up and said all sorts of things that I shouldn't have."

"Like what?"

"For starters, I told them how you keep saying Kiley is your future. I was trying to convince them to leave you alone tonight. Then, when Shane tried to object, I lost it and told him what I think about the way he's always treated you."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"I told him about the money. Then I blasted Alyssa. I called her a liar and I asked about her ribs and her night in the emergency room. I said she must have a death wish, doing the projects that she does. To top it off, I asked Shane if he's still working on the south side. I'm such an idiot."

"Hmm, at least you didn't hit him. Or did you?"

"Almost but with Alyssa there, I managed not to."

"Well that definitely explains why they were both so strange just now. Shane said he was proud of me."

"Wow. He may have said that but he's still going to be relentless when he questions you."

"I was ready to tell him about most of it anyway. You may have made it so he actually listens. And it's never been a secret that I have sources I use to check out potential clients. He's just chosen to underestimate me. It'll be okay, Brett."

"What about Alyssa? Running my mouth off means you need to explain some things to Kiley now instead of whenever you would have. Oh I blabbed how I was the scalper too."

"Don't worry about that either. I intended to tell Kiley everything either tonight or tomorrow once she felt up to it. I don't want any secrets between us anymore. She deserves better than that."

"Jordan..." He hesitated. "The first time they called, Alyssa said Kiley yelled at her for interrupting. She told her that you were talking and she was...well, she claimed to be...um...I'm sure you heard her side of the conversation."

"Yeah, I did, Brett and honestly I believe it."

"I'm not sure how to word this but I know you've been drooling over her for months. It's just that...you're not going to ruin this by taking advantage of the situation?"

"Not a chance but thanks for your concern. Kiley is perfectly safe from everything, including me."

Kiley had inched closer when Jordan began to grin. Hearing his last comment, she snatched the phone. "Brett, you're worrying about the wrong person. Jordan assures me he'll be keeping his distance all night. I, however, have made no promises to do the same. You can't expect me to keep my hands off him, not when he's right here next to me."

Brett actually groaned in misery for his friend. "Honey, any other time I'd be thrilled to hear you say that with him listening but I will guarantee that no matter what he's not gonna touch you tonight. Not after you were drugged. Even if it's one hundred percent out of your system Jordan will still question your willingness. Kiley please, give the guy a break. He has to be honorable and not take any chances with this one because you're too special to him. Don't keep pushing and force him to be the bad guy who says no. Wait until tomorrow when he can be sure it's what you honestly want because I promise he'll do everything and anything to make you as happy as humanly possible."

"I understand," she responded, realizing how truthful he was, even though he tried to sound like he was teasing. "Thanks for your help tonight. I know Lyssa can be a handful when she's determined to get her own way."

"Don't mention it," Brett replied. "I'm glad you're feeling better. Kiley, I overstepped my bounds tonight with both your cousin and Jordan's brother. I said stuff that puts Jordan in the awkward position of having to tell you some things that he might not be ready for. I know I'm really pushing my luck but I'm begging you to be patient. Give him a chance to explain before you jump to conclusions. He really is the best."

"All right, Brett. I happen to agree with that last part. Besides, I have a few things of my own to open up about too. Thanks, though. I'll keep your advice in mind. Here's Jordan."

"What's your advice?" Jordan was surprised when Kiley wrapped her arms around him instead of settling back against the pillows.

"I'll let Kiley explain. She's a hell of a woman, pal. I think Dee was right, telling you to go for it."

"Perhaps but as I said..."

"Not tonight. But Jordan, there's always tomorrow," Brett chuckled. "I'll see you around lunchtime since I'm off tomorrow. Call if you need anything."

"Thanks but I think we're set for the night." Jordan sensed his friend was still concerned so he added, "It really will work out. Don't lose any sleep, okay?"

"If you say so." Brett clearly didn't share Jordan's optimism.

When Jordan sighed without speaking after ending the call, Kiley twisted to look at him more fully. "Brett said he told Alyssa and your brother things that probably put you in an awkward position and I should give you a chance to explain."

"Yeah." He slipped from the bed and tucked the covers around her. "But, as you may have heard me tell Brett, I was planning on telling you everything as soon as you felt up to it anyway so it's not really a problem." He pulled a chair over to the bed.

"Wait. Can't you sit here," she indicated the spot next to her, "while you talk? Jordan, part of the reason I'm so stupid around you is because I'm telling myself not to touch you. If you're beside me and don't mind if I hold onto your arm or hand, I'll be able to concentrate better."

"What? Why did you stop yourself? I would have been thrilled."

"I was too intimidated. I never met anyone before who makes me feel like you do."

"And how's that?"

"Like I want to be in physical contact with you all the time." She held up the corner of the covers to him. "Um, those sweats are probably too warm to sleep in so it's okay if you take them off. I promise to keep my hands out of your shorts."

He laughed and did as she suggested. "You're absolutely adorable."

"So are you." Kiley snuggled with her head on his shoulder as she clutched his arm with both hands. "I've decided that after tonight nothing I say or do can be more embarrassing than throwing up all over everywhere so from now on, I'm not going to fight to censure my words or actions with you."

"You never had to anyway and I'd rather you didn't."

"I know that now," she sighed. "Figure out where to start yet or should I babble some more?"

"No wonder I love you," Jordan said without thinking. Quickly, he continued, "First, about the tickets and tonight's game." Jordan told her what he'd done and how Brett helped him.

"Did he tell you that he kept calling me cupcake?" Kiley giggled at the memory.

"Cupcake! That would seriously offend the guy I got the tickets from."

"Did he really owe you a favor?"

"Yes. You know I've been taking some classes? His daughter was in one of them. One night, after class, her ex-boyfriend showed up and refused to leave her alone. He was drunk and getting ugly so I made sure she got home safely. I didn't know who her father was at the time."

"It wouldn't have mattered. You're a nice man, chivalrous even."

"Kiley."

"No, really. If Malcolm had drugged someone other than me tonight you would have helped her too, admit it."

"Yeah, most likely. I probably would have waited to see what was going on and let Shane handle it though."

"That's still helping. You wouldn't have just left someone who was obviously out of it like I was, alone with him. You're not like that. Jordan, you may have the reputation of being cold and calculating but I never accepted that. Oh I'm sure you can be when you want to be but that's not really you."

"Okay, so who am I really?"

"You're someone who is warm, caring and protective. You have a big heart. People, in general, matter to you. And I suspect that there's nothing you wouldn't do for your friends and family. I'm not at all surprised that you helped the girl from your class. I would have been much more surprised if you hadn't. I bet you help lost dogs and stray cats too."

"Hmm, I'm glad to hear you say that," he admitted. "Maybe this won't seem as bad as I thought it might."

"Go on," she urged.

"I've never hidden the fact that I use various sources to investigate potential clients."

"I know. I've heard you talking to Brett."

"Good. Kiley, when I met you I knew instantly that I wanted you to be part of my life."

"Oh. Did you use those sources to find out about me?"

"No, not exactly. Other than the few questions I asked Dee and Will I haven't pried into your life. Not directly that is because I did research Henry, Dee and Alyssa. Dee and Will know because I told them however they assumed it was strictly business-related."

"Did they get mad?"

"Dee might have but Will talked her out of it. Tonight, Brett let it slip that he knows things about Alyssa that you don't. It won't take Shane long to figure out that he got the information came from me."

"What things?"

Jordan tried to appear relaxed. "Well, for starters, about a month ago she had a little trouble with one of her subjects and spent the night in the emergency room with two broken ribs."

"How?" Kiley wasn't sure if she was more stunned that he knew this or angry that her cousin hadn't told her.

"I have contacts in all the area hospital emergency rooms. Originally, it was to know if anything happened to Shane. Or Brett. After I met you, I included you and Alyssa."

"Me and Alyssa?"

"Sure. You because I'd hate for you to be hurt and alone and Alyssa because she's important to you. If she got hurt, I wanted to be there for you while you were there for her."

"But you didn't tell me either."

"I decided not to until I had more information so I went to check on her first. The guy I know managed to let me get close enough to hear her. She was complaining loudly and making demands. He assured me she'd be sore but just fine so I figured there was no need to worry you. I thought it would be better to let her tell you herself."

"See? You are a caring, protective man. What else?"

"She's been offered another project."

"Oh please tell don't say she's going to Iraq."

"No Kiley, I promise it's not that although it could be almost as dangerous. She hasn't hinted at anything?"

"No." Kiley searched his face. "If I ask you, will you tell me?"

"Yes but I really think you should ask Alyssa first."

"And I think she should have told me about it as soon as she started considering it. She should have called me from the hospital too." She was very angry with her cousin. "About these sources of yours?"

"Initially I used various private investigators, mainly because of Shane. Since he made detective he never tells me what he's working on anymore."

"So you found a way to keep tabs on him without his knowing about it," she concluded.

"Yeah. Brett mentioned that to him too."

"Which means you're going to be answering his questions on top of mine and Alyssa's. I'm surprised they aren't here by now."



"They would be if Brett hadn't expressed his opinion on the way he sees Shane's treatment of me."

"Which is?"

"Shane acts like I'm a frivolous kid who wouldn't make it without his big brother coming to the rescue all the time."

"That's ridiculous."

"That's always been Brett's opinion. Shane was bad when we were kids but I think Brett still respected him until Shane had me audited, if not the first time then definitely the second."

"He didn't!"

"He did." Jordan shrugged. "He asked me to invest for him even though he didn't have much confidence in my abilities. Then, when I didn't fall flat on my face, he decided I was doing things that were less than legal."

"Jordan!"

"Hey, don't forget about earlier. Both Bo and Vincent knew me. And they're not the only less than upstanding citizens who can say the same."

"Yes but he's your brother! Shouldn't he, of all people, give you the benefit of the doubt or at least ask you about it before condemning you?"

"You'd think so but Shane still thinks of me getting into trouble all the time."

"Why are you defending him? I understand you love your brother but honestly, I'm not really sure he deserves your loyalty. As I said on the phone, I don't think I like him much."

"You sound just like Brett."

"No wonder Brett was so mad earlier! I've only known you for four months but I can already tell how wrong your brother is. Brett's known both of you forever."

"Thanks, Kiley." Jordan wrapped her in his arms and hugged her.

"For what? Realizing that the praise I hear about you is true and that you're probably more successful than everyone says you are? Or for sensing that you're a truly good man and that even though you are generous and pleasant with everyone, it's an honor to be your friend for real?"

"Although what you said is somewhat of an exaggeration I suppose it applies too. What I was referring to was that you listened before you judged me."

"What you told me about so far are all things you did because you care. And, if you want the truth, it makes me feel kind of special. But there's something I can't figure out. Why didn't you have me investigated?"

"I admit I considered it. I decided not to. I'd rather wait until you feel comfortable and trust me enough to want to tell me about yourself."

"Oh. Is that it?"

"Almost. Brett said he mentioned the money too. Shane has no idea how much I've earned."

"A lot?" she gawked.

He nodded. "A lot as in we could retire now and travel around the world."

"Why don't you?"

"You haven't said you want to go yet."

"Be serious."

"I am serious, Kiley. Earlier I said I wouldn't take you home until you asked me to. If you never ask, I'll never take you. If it's up to me, I'll keep you with me forever."

"Jordan! You can't mean that."

"Why not? The day we met, I knew you are my destiny. Take as long as you need but deep inside my heart I believe you'll agree one day. I want to share my life with you, all of it. I want to be included in every bit of yours. I've never been in love before. Now I am. With you. I loved you that first day. I love you now. I will love you as long as I live. That is one thing you can count on forever, no matter what else happens in our lives. What you do about it is up to you."

Kiley pulled away to look at him again. "My God, you really are serious."

"I've never been more serious about anything. You asked me how I can still defend Shane. He's my big brother and nothing will ever change that. His lack of confidence in me may or may not be due to my own behavior when we were younger. Yes, sometimes he treats me like a kid. Yes, sometimes he's an overbearing know-it-all. Yes, sometimes he's an incredible ass. And yes, sometimes I don't particularly like him. But none of that could ever make me turn my back on him. The way I see you is very similar. Whether it's as your husband, your lover, your friend, or just the guy who comes to see you at lunch every day, I want more than anything to be part of your life and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen. I'm not going to rush you because I understand that you need to get to know me first in order for you to decide where I fit in."

His tone had dropped since the beginning of the discussion and Kiley had been listening intently the entire time. Jordan finally realized the affect he was having on her when she urged him to continue speaking. "Perhaps I should include the guy you call for phone sex in that list."

"Oh my God, how do you do this?" Kiley asked breathlessly.

"Honestly, sweet, you're the only woman who's ever had this reaction. I must admit that I'm fascinated."

"I never felt this way with anyone else either. If you keep on talking...oh please!" She tried to move against him but Jordan wouldn't let her.

"Is that what you want, Kiley?"

"No, damn it! What I want is both of us naked. Now! Shouldn't we make sure we're compatible?" She reached for him again.

"Nice try." He deliberately sounded seductive and gave her a smoldering look. "Do you really think we won't be?"

Kiley's eyes began to glaze. "Jordan, please. I can feel every word you say. It's amazing. Make love to me."

"I can't. Not tonight. I told you. You know I need to be sure, for you to be sure. No matter how much I love you, that is the one thing I just can't do for you now."

"But I want you. I'm so hot for you right now. Here, feel how wet I am." Kiley grabbed his hand.

"You're killing me, sweet. Do you know that?" Jordan got out of bed and quickly pulled on his sweats.

"I saw that. You want me too."

"Hell yes, I want you! You're so damn sexy in those tailored skirts and blouses you wear to work that I've been half-hard for months. Now that I've seen what you try so hard to keep hidden, I'm practically in pain." He was pacing. "Actually having you in my arms, soft and willing, saying you want me but knowing I can't do what you're asking, what we both want? Do you have any idea?"

"Okay we won't make love but we can touch each other."

"No Kiley, not tonight."

"But Jordan, I am so wound up. I'll never sleep now if you don't let me come. I need to or I'll lose my mind." Kiley was kneeling, watching him, her eyes huge and full of desire. Her cheeks flushed. Her lips parted in a breathless pout. Her nipples visible beneath his shirt.

"Do you really think I could make that happen just by talking to you?" Part of Jordan knew it was a bad idea but part of him hated not being able to give in to what she so obviously wanted.

"I know it. When you were describing our kiss earlier I was so turned on. I meant what I told Alyssa. If I'd had three more minutes of you sounding that hot, I'd have been over the top." Her expression showed she knew he was torn.

Finally, Jordan sighed. "You win. Against my better judgment, I'm willing to find out if that's possible if you are. But," he stopped her from trying to tug him onto the bed, "I am going to sit here." He pulled the chair closer to the bed. "And you are going to stay there."

"Are you going to talk about sex?"

"If that's what you want." Jordan couldn't believe he was agreeing to this. He must be losing his mind!

"Will you be embarrassed if I touch myself?"

"I thought this was to see if you can come with just my voice but no, I won't be embarrassed if you're not." How could he possibly just sit there and talk while this amazing woman pleased herself in front of him?

"I told you, Jordan. I'm done being restrained around you. Besides, I doubt if anything could embarrass me more than earlier." She settled back against the pillows and unbuttoned his shirt without exposing her body. "Feel free to touch yourself too but please keep in mind I'd be happy to do it for you."

"And I actually thought you were shy," he laughed. "Seriously, what would you like me to talk about?" He hoped she'd pick a different topic.

"You don't really need to ask that, do you? You left off with our mouths showing each other what we both want."

Jordan groaned. This was pure torture. "Okay, let's see. Our mouths are joined. I've discovered you taste even sweeter than expected so my tongue is probing yours. I hear you moan, deep in your throat. That sound tells me you want me as much as I want you and it makes me wild."

Kiley was watching him through wide, passion-glazed eyes. As he spoke, a moan did escape from her, matching his description. "That's it, sweet. I hear your desire and my control slips a little. Our kiss turns savage. I've been feeling your nipples against my chest through our clothes. I can't wait any longer. I have to touch your bare skin."

"Me too," Kiley panted.

"Yes, you too. I force myself to take the time to undo each of the tiny buttons on your blouse. I'd rather just rip it open but I know the wait will be worth it. Finally, it's off. Your skin is as soft as I've dreamed. Your breasts rise and fall with every breath you take. I can't believe how full you are. You've been hiding your big, beautiful breasts from me but never again. I hear another moan when I lean forward and kiss each swell above your lacy bra. Although I could look at you forever it's not enough at the moment. I have to touch you. I know I should draw the moment out, lingering over what I see before I go any further but I'm not listening to myself."

"Oh Jordan, I feel it." Kiley was caressing herself through the shirt.

"That's right, Kiley. I can't wait. As soon as I have your bra off I cup both your breasts, one in each hand. My thumbs find your nipples. I stroke you and I can't believe it. Your nipples get even harder. I need to explore them with my tongue. Just in time, I remember how I meant this to last. Instead of pulling you into my mouth, I use just the tip of my pointed tongue to circle your pebbled nub, making us both wait, knowing the anticipation is adding to your excitement. You keep arching yourself toward me but I miraculously find the willpower to keep you in suspense."

"All this time you've been holding onto my arms. Since I won't let you rush me, you tug at my shirt. When I give in and yank it over my head, you pull us together and press your breasts against my chest. Your skin electrifies me."

Jordan watched as Kiley brushed open the shirt. She was kneading her breasts. Her own thumbs circled her nipples as he described. When they hardened, she rolled them with her fingers. Jordan didn't want to watch. The longer he did, the more he ached to replace her fingers with his. Kiley may be able to feel his words but he could practically feel her nipples on his tongue.

"Since you're holding me so tightly, I kiss you again. Soon I'm nibbling on your neck. I leave a trail of kisses as I lower my head to your breast. Your hands flutter across my chest. Every place you touch is on fire. When I flick my tongue over your nipple, I feel you tremble. Your hands are moving. Somehow your skirt is bunched up. My leg is wedged between yours and you're pressed against my thigh. I can feel your heat through the barrier of our clothes."

"Oh my God, Jordan." Kiley was writhing on the bed. One hand was squeezing her breast, finding her nipple often. The other had drifted across her stomach, moving steadily lower until it caressed her thatch of red hair. Her knees bent leaving her spread open. Her hips rose and fell as she reached her goal. Jordan watched while she dipped a finger inside and used her own lubrication to moisten the center of her attention. Her breathing became more and more ragged as she increased the pressure on her clit. Soon she was quivering, shaking as pleasure engulfed her.

"Wow," Jordan was fascinated. She was absolutely incredible and he was so hard he hurt.

When Kiley calmed down, she met his eyes. "Don't stop now Jordan, please."

"You want more?" he asked, watching her trace lazy patterns on her stomach.

"I need more. I want it all." His eyes followed her hand when she returned to fondling her breast.

"You make yourself come by moving against my thigh. When you're done I have to feel how wet you are so I quickly finish undressing you. I pull your naked body back against me with one arm and slide the other between us. My hand strays downward as our mouths join again.

"This time the kiss is demanding. When I slip one finger into you, loving how hot and wet you are for me, I echo its motion with my tongue. My other hand grips your ass. I shift you so I can bury my finger as deep as possible." Kiley's own finger was doing the same thing as he told her his was. Without thinking, Jordan reached into his pants and wrapped his hand around his hard shaft. Soon, the movements of his hips matched hers.

"I can't believe how responsive you are. I feel your muscles constrict around my finger every time I push into you. Another moan comes from deep in your throat. Your hands are squeezing my erection through my pants."

Kiley noticed what he was doing. "Get it out, Jordan. You watched me and will again. I want to see you."

Fair was fair. Jordan raised his hips, let his erection spring free and kicked off his clothes. He heard Kiley suck in her breath as he resumed his stroking. He still couldn't believe they were actually doing this but somehow it wasn't at all awkward.

"Jordan," Kiley moaned his name, her finger delving deep inside her drenched pussy.

"You're so hot, moving against my hand. I'm clutching your ass, guiding you. I push you faster and slide a second finger in with the first. Our mouths are still devouring each other. I shift you again so your clit brushes against my hand."

"Oh God," Kiley gasped as a second orgasm claimed her. "Oh God," she repeated, shivering with pleasure. Jordan stopped moving his hand and merely held himself. He'd wait for that part of his story.

Kiley quieted so Jordan resumed, "When your pleasure fades, you discover that I'm covering you with kisses. You've found your release twice. Now you decide that it's time for me to join you. You help push off my pants and tug me with you onto the bed. You're so wet and I'm so hard."

"I want you, Jordan," she interrupted.

"No more than I want you," he replied. "This time you kiss me. I try to take my time and caress you, as I intended to. Instead, you pull me over you. Your thighs are wide open and my cock ends up right where you want it so it's easy for you to guide me inside." His hand was moving again and hers was back on her clit. When she tweaked it, her hips arched upward. He matched her tempo. "I try to slow down and worship you as you deserve but you want me to move faster. Your muscles contract, pulling me deeper into you. We fit together perfectly, as we both knew we would. You have your legs wrapped around me, making sure I fill you completely with each thrust. Being buried in your velvet is so much better than I ever imagined. You urge me on by telling me how much you need me, how much you want me. I can feel that you're getting close again." Jordan knew she was by watching her work her clit. So was he! "Now you're gasping because you're coming again." Kiley was gasping on the bed, right on cue. "I can't hold off any longer. You excite me too much. I promise to make the next time last longer because I can't wait. I give in..." He saw her struggling to focus on him. "And...come with you." He did, trying desperately to catch it all in his hand.

When his breathing returned to normal, Jordan surveyed his mess, which wasn't too bad. "I'll be right back." He disappeared into the bathroom.

Kiley crawled off the bed and followed. "Jordan?" Tentatively she poked her head around the door jamb. "That was amazing." She accepted the washcloth he offered.

"Kiley, you are amazing." He had to remind himself that he couldn't touch her. "I think watching you is the most erotic thing I ever did."

"Why? I only did what you said. Thank you for joining me that last time."

Jordan noticed that her gaze was boldly raking him from head to toe. If he wasn't careful, he'd get hard again and he wasn't sure how long he would continue to resist. "How could I not? You are too sexy to ignore and I'm just a man."

"Just a man, ha!" Kiley made no attempt to hide what she was looking at. "From what I can see, you're quite a man, Jordan McKade. It's after midnight. Does that count as tomorrow yet?"

"No, it'll be tomorrow after you get some sleep."

"I was afraid you'd see it that way. Come on." She tugged his hand. "Let's go to sleep so it'll be tomorrow faster."

He laughed until she shrugged off his shirt. "Kiley." He reached for it.

"No, Jordan. We're adults. We can control ourselves. I want to feel your skin while I'm falling asleep." She crawled into bed and held the covers for him. "You don't need anything on you either."

"Are you trying to be a temptress?" He was semi-hard again.

"Listen. If you really intend to keep me here you're going to have to get used to this. Besides, it's your own fault that you're in that state."

He slid in next to her. "Kiley, I am going to get even for that remark. You knew damn well this would happen when you said you were going to touch yourself."

"So did you, so stop complaining. If it'll make you feel better, I'm wet again too."

Jordan groaned. "That's supposed to make me feel better?"

"Sure, now you know that I want you again too."

"I don't think it's again. Even though we just did that together, it doesn't count."

"I guess you're right." She snuggled closer when he slid an arm under her head.

"Night, Jordan. Thanks again for rescuing me."

"Night, Kiley. Thanks for letting me watch you come." He chuckled at her gasp.

## Chapter Fourteen

"All right, all right, don't knock down the door. I'm coming." Brett couldn't imagine who would be pounding so impatiently on his door at nine a.m. on a Friday when he had the day off. The only person who would dare show up on such an occasion was Jordan and Brett was positive it wasn't him. No, he wouldn't hammer away anyway. Jordan would use his key and startle Brett out of his sound sleep. Not that his sleep had been all that sound the night before. Despite Jordan's confidence, Brett was still afraid that he'd made a mess of everything.

"This better be important," Brett growled, yanking the door open. "I should have known," he muttered when he discovered the intruder was Shane. Still grumbling, he turned and stalked to the kitchen, leaving the door open, not caring if Shane followed.

"Morning to you too, sunshine," Shane greeted him cheerfully which earned another scowl.

"Bite me, Shane. Or beat me to a pulp since there aren't any witnesses here. Anything else will have to wait until after coffee."

"Here." Shane handed Brett a Starbucks cup. "Double shot espresso. It'll hold you over until yours is brewed. Sit." Shane pushed the stunned man toward a chair and took over the coffee preparations.

Brett took a large swig. "You're scaring me. What are you doing here?"

"What's it look like to you?" Shane sat across from him. "I thought about what you said last night and have to admit you're right. I wish you'd said all of it years ago. But I do have something to say in my defense, not that it excuses my behavior, if you'd care to listen."

"You're here to talk?" Brett was still confused.

"If you let me."

Brett drained his cup. This was the last thing he expected. "I think I'm ready now."

"First, I'd like to say how glad I am that you and Jordan have been friends all these years. I've always envied the closeness you share. For a long time I was actually jealous of you. Until I realized how that was dumb. My brother has a big heart so there's room for both of us. Then I started thinking of you as my other little brother. I imagine that the two of you are what it'd be like to be in a family with twins. You know why I went out of my way to find fault with Jordan? To give him some doubts."

"What the fuck? Why would you do that?" Brett was furious.

"Because my little brother scared the hell out of me. Still does."

"Yeah. Right. You expect me to believe that you, big-shot jock, class president, top of your class, Mr. Personality was scared of your kid brother?"



"Yep. His best friend too." Shane paused and got them coffee while his words sank in. "Maybe I was all that but it took a lot of effort. I worked out constantly, practiced hard, studied harder and was always sure I'd trip and fall, spilling something on my date. But for you guys, it just came naturally. It was easy to see that everything I worked so hard to accomplish was nothing compared to what you two could do if you decided to.

"The day you took that car I heard about it from the girl who I'd been trying to impress. She was so enthralled with the way you got teachers to hand over their keys and drove the car out to the lake in the middle of the day when you were only fifteen that she completely forgot about me. Yeah, I was mad at how stupid you were to pull something like that. But I still have to admit it was also the coolest thing ever. And after that you could have been unstoppable. Why were you content to live on the legend when you could have done so much more?"

Brett was amazed. "We only did it to try to impress you. I really thought you were going to talk them into having us arrested."

"I was mad enough at first to want that. You two weren't the only ones to learn from our teachers that summer. Anyway, I guess it got to be habit, Jordan tormenting me with your help and me trying to keep you in line. Did you really come here because of me?"

"Yes. Jordan never gave up hope that you'd see him as a man someday, a friend instead of just your rebellious little brother. He knew the job he took would suck. We both had better offers but when he came here I had to too. I knew nothing would be different, not really. So what if we were grown men with real jobs? You were still the overbearing big brother and Jordan was still the impulsive, unthinking kid with me for his sidekick.

"Shane, all he's ever wanted is your approval, for you to be proud of something he's done. When he went out on his own, your parents accepted his decision instantly. They've always supported both of you unquestioningly. But you had to go and tear him down again with those audits. You have no idea how well respected he is, do you?"

"I have my job, thanks to Jordan. The owner of the agency was busting a nut to be his client so Jordan told him that the only way he would accept him was if he gave me a six-month trial. I knew I could do the job but I was an unknown kid and he wasn't interested. Jordan was almost out the door before my boss called him back."

"You obviously proved yourself. I've heard that you're the hottest thing in advertising these days."

"That's not the point, Shane."

"I know. The point is the rest of the world accepts my brother for the genius he is but I'm too stupid to do the same."

"Not stupid, just stubborn."

"Which brings me back to my original statement. Jordan intimidates me. He can do anything and make it look easy. He can be tough or cool when he needs to be. He's

comfortable no matter where he goes or who he's with. And rumor has it that he's made himself quite wealthy. He's brilliant and widely recognized as the best. But in spite of all that, he's managed to stay the good-natured, steady, unpretentious guy he's always been.

"Look at me, Brett. I'm just a cop. Granted a good cop but that's it. I didn't have the courage to try to make it into the FBI so I'm stuck doing the next best thing. You and Jordan blow into town and, within a year, have it by the balls. Hell yes, I'm proud of him, of both of you. You're still quite the duo, the silver-tongued devil and his demon scriptwriter. You'll never cease to amaze me even though you both intimidate me."

"Why didn't you ever tell him, Shane? And you're wrong by the way. Jordan is the brains behind us. I'm just the one with the pretty words, not that he couldn't come up with them himself. I wouldn't have made it through some of my classes without him. You know, most of the time I thought you hated me. Wait, that's too harsh. Let's say didn't approve of me. I had to stick with Jordan. He's the best friend there is and I was afraid he'd get into real trouble, trying to get your attention.

"I guess I see your point but why couldn't you have just once talked to Jordan like this? We always thought you were so tough, so confident, so in control of everything around you with your take-charge, don't-mess-with-me attitude. If you'd ever let us see just a little bit of uncertainty..."

"Thanks to you I understand that now. Jordan always stopped you from saying anything."

Brett nodded.

"This Kiley, she's the one?"

"Absolutely. Get to know her. They've been circling each other for months. I wasn't totally convinced at first so I decided to wait and see. Dee, Kiley's friend from the restaurant, told me that Jordan is the only guy who's ever made her blush. Two words from him and her composure flies right out the window. I think, if she gives him a chance, they really will be perfect together."

"I'm glad to hear that. She must be completely the opposite of her cousin."

"Yeah what's the story there? Last night, you seemed to honestly dislike her."

"I wouldn't say that. She's just aggravating. The woman has no common sense when it comes to that damn camera of hers. Care to tell me what she's doing next so I can make sure I'm somewhere else?"

"Now that I'm not blowing off steam, I remember that it's not my place. But what I can tell you is that it's out of town so you don't have to worry."

"For now. If Jordan and Kiley do get married we're going to cross paths more than I want to."

"Hmm, you seem awfully annoyed at the prospect of being in the company of a very hot female." Brett eyed him speculatively.

"I am annoyed. Every time I see her it gets worse. There's no reason for it really."

"Well you'd better figure it out and get over it. Your brother is on his way to claiming Kiley for the whole nine yards and there's no way in hell I'm letting you be a black cloud."

"Calm down, Brett. You showed me how wrong I was so I'm going to do better in the future. And I'm sure you'll give me a nudge if I step out of line again." Shane glanced at the clock. "By the way, you might want to get dressed. Alyssa'll be here soon. We thought we could go over to Jordan's together. Things haven't changed just because you finally spoke your mind. If Jordan heard that you said you'd leave the morning open for family and wait to stop by in the afternoon, he'd be very hurt."

"Why? Jordan knows that I think you treat me like I'm intruding where I don't belong. He's always insisted that I'm wrong though. I guess I am." He stood. "Shane, it means a lot that you came over and said all that. I hope you're planning to do the same with Jordan."

"There's a lot I need to make up for."

"He won't see it like that. Say what you have to say and then do better in the future. Now I'm going to go grab a quick shower. Can I trust you to be cordial if Alyssa shows up before I'm back?"

## Chapter Fifteen

"Are you sure these jeans look okay? Not too tight?" Kiley asked as she handed Jordan the last of their breakfast dishes.

"Do they feel tight?" Jordan thought they were perfect.

"No. I guess I'm not used to them anymore. I don't really wear jeans since I stopped dressing like I was in middle school for my mom."

"Maybe it's time you started again. Like when you know I'll be around since I don't mind admitting how much trouble I'm having keeping my hands off that fine ass of yours." He grinned wickedly.

Grinning in return, she stated, "No one said you had to."

"Stop tormenting me. The inquisition will be here too soon for us to get into that one now. Shane will kick down the door if we don't answer immediately." His hand brushed her denim-clad cheek. "Why don't you come downstairs and let me show you my office? You can think of me there while you're working."

"Jordan! Oh no! I've got to go! I'm late and I forgot—" She was frantic.

"Kiley, calm down. I called Henry last night to tell him that Alyssa was fine and it was all a misunderstanding. I also said that something you ate disagreed with you and we were missing the game. He made me promise to take care of you and decided that you're off today. He said if you showed up he'd send you right back home." When she gave him a questioning look, he added, "When I spoke to him I had no way of knowing how you'd feel this morning. Besides, we both know Shane and Alyssa wouldn't let you being at work keep them from questioning us. I figured it was better all around to stay put today."

"You're a nice man, Jordan McKade." She kissed his cheek. "I'll call him later and let him know I'm okay." She followed him downstairs. "So this is where you do all your money magic."

"Hardly magic." He waited until she noticed her picture. "Dee gave me that about a month after we met when she invited me over for dinner to meet Will. Once I noticed it in the living room, I kept sneaking out of the kitchen to look at it. Is it okay that I have it?"

She nodded and continued to look around. "Five computer screens and three phones?"

"Yep, just technology not magic. It's really not all necessary but I get too annoyed if it takes too long to switch screens. And the phone behind my desk is a personal extension so I don't have to remember to carry the cordless back and forth with me."

"Still it must be very exciting when everything's turned on."

"Honestly, no. It's a job, Kiley. I'm good at it and some days it's interesting. Most of the time it's just tedious."

"But you control all that money. Isn't it thrilling to see it grow, knowing that you did it?"

"I guess so. The best part is the small, personal accounts. Telling parents that they can afford to send their kids to college is better than moving millions for faceless corporate lackeys. Those are the ones who take life too seriously for all the wrong reasons."

"It sounds like you're not particularly happy with what you do."

"I guess I'm happy overall. It's not like this is all I'm ever going to do with my life."

"Oh? What else do you have planned?"

"I don't know. Maybe Brett and I will buy a radio station one of these days and I'll have my own talk show."

Kiley laughed. "You're so funny, Jordan. People don't buy radio stations."

Jordan was facing the computer he'd flipped on so Kiley didn't see the disappointment cross his face. "Right. I thought I'd bring Shane down here so you and Alyssa could talk privately."

"I wouldn't mind if you stayed while I talk to her. You already know what I'm going to say."

"True. However she might mind and I want her to be able to open up with you. I could say the same for me and Shane. You know what I plan on saying too but I know he'll have enough trouble being honest with me. He'd never let me say what I need to in front of you. Or at least not before he knows more about you than your name."

"I understand. We need to clear the air first. We'll have plenty of time to spend *en masse* later."

"Ha! There it is!" Jordan exclaimed. "I probably shouldn't show you this but I trust you." He stepped aside. "Look."

"\$1,002,079.37," she read the figure on the screen.

"This is Shane's account. I'll have to give him a printout of every transaction but even he should be pleased with this."

"Pleased! I'd be in shock. He must have given you a lot to start with."

"No."

"But there's a million dollars!"

"I said I was good at this." He shrugged.

"No wonder you have the reputation that you do. I've heard how cool and calm you are. I'd be confident too if I could do that."

"It's just money, Kiley. It's not such a big deal."

"I can barely balance my checkbook and you say generating a million dollars isn't a big deal."

"Damn. I was counting on you to take care of our bills once we're together," he teased as they went back upstairs.

"That's a really bad idea. I wish they'd get here so we can get this over with."

"Not looking forward to confronting your cousin?"

"That's not it. The sooner they get here the sooner they'll leave. In case you're wondering, I remember last night. All of it. From the time I saw you walking toward me in that bar to the call you got just as I was falling asleep. Thinking about it, I must agree you were right not to let me touch you last night. But you did promise I could today. You haven't changed your mind?"

Kiley was standing very close to him. As she spoke, she placed her hands on his chest and was slowly sliding them upward to circle his neck when they heard the doorbell followed by Brett's loud greeting.

"Saved by the bell," Jordan teased. "In the kitchen," he called. "Kiley, just so you know, I will never change my mind on that one." Her gasp told him she could see all the desire he was feeling.

"Good morning, Kiley." Brett kissed her cheek and whispered, "This look is even hotter than your green dress."

"You're dressed," Alyssa stated. "I stopped and got you some clothes but apparently that was unnecessary."

"Thanks, Alyssa. It was nice of you to think of it. Jordan arranged these for me last night."

"That explains it," Brett muttered, helping himself to coffee.

"Hi, I'm Shane. Since I don't think last night counts, I'd like to say it's nice to meet you."

"You too. And Lyssa, this is Jordan."

They chatted for a few minutes while Kiley assured them all that she was fine.

Eventually, Jordan said, "Ladies, if you'll excuse us? I'd like to show you something in my office, Shane. Coming, Brett?"

"He seems nice enough," Alyssa hedged after they left the room.

"He's extremely nice, Lyss. He's good and kind and caring, not to mention gorgeous and I think I'm falling in love with him."

"Kiley! Are you sure those drugs didn't do permanent damage?" Alyssa wanted to bite her tongue when she realized what she said. "Wait. That was unfair. I'm just really surprised. You've mentioned him a few times and his voice is as good as you said it was but you never implied it was serious between you."

"That's because I've been keeping it to myself. I wasn't ready to share yet."

"And I'm not at all attentive."

"Or forthcoming. How are your ribs?"

"Fine. It wasn't a big deal, Kiles. I didn't want to worry you over nothing."

"I always worry as you well know. I shouldn't have to hear that you were hurt from someone else."

"How did he know?"

"Jordan knows people." She went on to explain everything that he had said. "Now is there anything you'd like to tell me?"

"Didn't he already?"

"No but he would have if I'd asked him to. We thought I should give you a chance first."

"It's not definite yet. I'm still deciding."

"About?"

"I've been invited to travel with a team of storm chasers." Kiley stared. "It's not as bad as it sounds. They're really very careful."

"I see."

"Kiles..."

"Alyssa, I know the choice is yours. I don't understand why you feel compelled to do this sort of thing but I've seen the results. I've never hidden that I wish you'd pick something safe to photograph. What were you going to do? Wait until the night before you left and call me to say something like you'll be out of town for a few months, trying to find a tornado to get sucked up into so you can get exclusive photographs of Oz?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet."

"Oh come off it. You're going and you've known it since they asked you. You know, if you told me then I would have had time to get used to the idea before you actually go."

"I'm really sorry. I know I'm not very considerate. I'm thoughtless and selfish. I really do try though. You know growing up we moved even more often than you did so I never had close friends. I learned to be independent. I guess old habits are hard to break. I'm sorry I take you for granted. You've been there all my life and most of the time I ignored you. But when I was old enough to go out on my own, I thought of you. I knew I wanted to be near where you were. That's not an excuse but it's true. Knowing you were out there, waiting to care about me if I showed up got me through some very lonely times when I was little. If I promise to treat you better, will you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive. You treat me fine. I just want to be included more."

"I will try. In fact, I'll start now. Do you remember when I was working on the gang bit there was that cop who gave me such a hard time?"

"Shane," Kiley deduced.

"Yep. I thought I should tell you even though we agreed to try to get along. Now tell me about Jordan."

Downstairs, Shane repeated all the things he'd told Brett that morning. Jordan reacted as Brett predicted.

"Tell me one thing," Shane requested. "Are your sources inside the department?"

"No," Jordan answered.

"For some reason I'm glad to hear it."

"Then that's good. Now I really do have something to show you." Jordan handed him the account summary he had printed out earlier. While Shane looked at it, Jordan nodded to Brett who instantly understood what it was.

"Is this...this is...holy shit! Son of a bitch!" Shane looked back and forth between their matching grins. "Are you setting me up? Is this another prank?"

"No, Shane. That is your balance as of 9:17 this morning."

"Damn Jordan, I don't know what to say."

"Tell him the rest," Brett urged.

"You sure?" Jordan asked.

"He's speechless. You won't get a more perfect opportunity."

"Good thinking," Jordan agreed because Shane was truly stunned. "There was a day about a year ago when I stopped you just as you were going into court to sign some papers." Shane nodded, indicating he remembered. "One of them was an authorization to form a partnership. You are part of JBS, Limited."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You, Brett and I are the major partners in an investment group. We've had a very good year."

"Jordan, I think this is too much all at once. First you tell me I have a million dollars and now I'm part of a successful investment group. What are we investing in?"

"Nothing in particular at the moment. For now, we're just making money. But we have a plan."

"A damn good plan." Brett beamed. "And we're getting closer to it being ready."

They waited for Shane to consider what they'd said. "I need some time to think about this. Would you be offended if I asked you to wait before you tell me about this plan? I'm having too much trouble accepting the million dollars."

"That's fine. Let us know when you're ready and we'll tell you all about it," Jordan laughed.

"A million dollars. Me."

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it. I did when Jordan told me about mine." Brett chuckled at the expression of Shane's face. "That's right, I have one too. And Jordan has several."

"I'm a cop. I can't have a million dollars."

"Sure you can, Shane. There's no reason to tell people about it, is there? I just thought you might like to know." Jordan shrugged.

"I guess. I'm not sure." Shane still sounded dazed. "You know we really have to talk about last night."



"I know but let's go back up first."

"Think they've had enough time?" Brett asked.

"Yeah but talk loud on the steps so they know we're coming." Jordan stopped in the doorway. "Shane, thanks for what you said today. In my opinion, you're the best big brother a guy could have."

"And you, as always, are beyond spectacular. Brett, I wish you'd stepped in years ago. What would we do without you?" Shane draped an arm over each of them. "Have I said thank you for changing your lives and coming here?"

"Don't mention it," Brett replied.

"No thanks necessary. I think it's turned out for the best," Jordan added.

Halfway up the stairs, Shane said, "About this plan, I don't want specifics but should I be worried?"

"Nope." Jordan wondered how long it would be before his detective brother asked for details. "It's truly excellent even if Kiley did laugh."

"She laughed?" Brett asked.

"Mm but I mentioned it in an offhand way that sounded like a joke, not a fact. She said people don't do this."

Shane groaned when Brett declared, "But we're not people. We're us."

"Which is exactly why we are going to do this." Jordan and Brett grinned like small children at Christmas.

"I changed my mind. I don't want to know any of this now," Shane announced.

"Trust us, Shane. This one is honestly brilliant," Jordan said seriously as they reached the kitchen. "Ladies, can we join you?"

"Sure, everything all right?" Kiley smiled, letting him know that she and Alyssa were fine.

"Great." Jordan sat next to her and took her hand. "Sweet, we need to talk about Winslow."

"I know."

"You should have gone for a blood test last night but there may still be some traces—" Shane began.

"For what purpose?" Jordan interrupted. "We know Kiley was drugged. We know Winslow did it. We also know there is no way to prove it."

An uncomfortable silence stretched as the brothers eyed each other. Finally, Shane nodded. "Brett indicated you know his background." After Jordan told them everything, Shane said, "Okay that gives me something to go on. I'll see who I can get—"

"No, Shane," Jordan interrupted again. "This is something I will take care of."

"Jordan, be reasonable!"

"No, you be reasonable. We need to know what he's up to and why he tried to use Kiley as a distraction. I have a better chance of uncovering that than you do."

"And how do you propose to do that?" Instead of answering, Jordan raised an eyebrow. "All right, what if he takes off?"

"I'll know. And I'll stop him."

"Jordan, maybe you should let Shane handle this," Brett suggested. He trailed off when he saw the look on his friend's face.

Kiley hated the tension growing in the room. Squeezing Jordan's hand to get his attention, she asked, "Jordan, what did you mean he was using me as a distraction?"

"Sugar-coated or straight-forward?" he asked gently.

"Brutally honest," she answered.

After studying her face, Jordan explained. "He intended to offer you to Samuels to use in whatever way he wanted."

Kiley gasped. "But I wouldn't have..."

"Think about it. You couldn't talk for the first hour at least. Could you have fought someone off if you'd needed to?"

"You can't be serious!" Alyssa exclaimed.

"I'm afraid he's probably right," Shane said grimly.

"Obviously Winslow didn't bother to find out who he was dealing with. Samuels is a very dedicated family man. He's been married to the same woman since high school and all indications say he never strays."

"Jordan, why do you know that?" Shane scowled. "I thought you were legit."

"You, of all people, should know that I am. Every aspect of every deal has been and always will be one hundred percent clean. But that doesn't mean I'm not aware of the rest of the financial community."

"Financial community," Shane repeated with disbelief.

Jordan shrugged. "Hey, every aspect has its place."

"That doesn't mean you should get involved —"

"Damn it, Shane, think! I interrupted their meeting. I snatched Kiley away from Winslow right under their noses. That means I'm involved whether I want to be or not." Jordan let his words sink in. "Winslow was using someone I care for very deeply and I can't ignore that. I won't ignore that. He's made this personal. I'm going to find out what he's trying to get away with and then I'm going to deal with it."

"How?" Shane demanded.

"Depends on what it is."

"Jordan," Brett tried to interject but Jordan stopped him with a look.

"Wait a minute," Alyssa spoke up. "This Samuels guy..."

"Is a very dangerous man to cross," Jordan stated. "And Winslow's stupidity may be fatal."

"Surely you're exaggerating." Alyssa stopped when Shane shook his head.

"Then you have to stay out of it," Kiley pleaded.

"I can't, don't you see? I claimed you and took you out of the bar. I disrupted Winslow's scheme, which puts me in this."

"What about me?" Kiley asked softly.

Jordan reached out and caressed her cheek, not caring that they had an audience. "I'll keep you safe. Nothing else will happen to you."

"I think you're wrong here, Jordan." Shane drew their attention. "You should let us handle this."

"Sure, Shane. You'll drag Kiley in for a blood test that may or may not show anything. You'll take statements from all of us that say we suspect she was drugged and part of some illegal plot. Winslow will say she came on to him and willingly accompanied him and she was already stoned when he picked her up. I bet you won't find any witnesses who can identify the men Winslow met other than us. I'm sure there'll be no evidence that you can find connecting Winslow to Samuels. I'm equally sure that Bo will deny any knowledge of anything. He'll say he was having a beer and the others just happened to sit down with him. And while you're doing this you'll be subjecting Kiley to all sorts of unpleasant and accusing questions and innuendoes about her character and willing participation. You'll waste a lot of time and effort, not to mention manpower and end up with nothing but dead ends. You know I'm right. Admit it."

"Is he, Shane?" Kiley broke the silence that followed.

"Well?" Alyssa asked when he didn't respond.

Finally, Shane nodded. "Unfortunately."

"So he'll get away with it," Kiley concluded.

"Not if Shane stays out of it," Jordan emphasized.

"I don't want anything to happen to you," Kiley told him.

"I'll be fine if I have the freedom to do what I need to do," he assured her.

"I don't like it," Shane scowled.

"There's really no other option. Look, I'm not asking for your approval. And I promise to call you if I need you."

"You'll tell me before you do anything?" Shane tried.

"If I can." Jordan wouldn't promise something he wasn't sure he could do. "There may not be time but if there is, I'll tell you."

"I guess I have to accept that for now. Just be careful, okay?"

"You better take care of my cousin," Alyssa growled.

"Lyss!" Kiley exclaimed.

"It's okay," Jordan stopped her. "Alyssa, you have my word. As long as I live I will do everything and anything I can to keep Kiley safe and happy." Without breaking eye contact with Alyssa, he raised Kiley's hand and kissed it.

"I think that's our cue to leave." Brett stood and pulled keys from his pocket. "Kiley, your car's at home."

"What?" she asked.

"Last night when Jordan got your ticket from your purse, he gave me your keys."

"I thought it would avoid questions if it wasn't still there in the morning," Jordan explained.

"Oh. Good idea. Thanks, Brett." Kiley was amazed.

"Well, I guess we'll be going then. When will you be home?" Alyssa wondered.

"Um," Kiley hesitated, "I don't know. I'll probably stay here for a few days."

"Ah. Well. Okay then." Alyssa had clearly expected Kiley to leave with her.

Brett shamelessly grinned at both of them and whistled. "It's about time!"

Alyssa was so uncomfortable that Shane came to her rescue. "Come on, Campini. Let's go before you say something stupid." When she glared, he added, "You can yell at me in the car. It'll make you feel better. Jordan, remember what I said. Kiley, I'm sure I'll see you again."

"Have fun, kids!" Brett called as he followed them down the stairs.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

"I don't think your cousin likes me," Jordan observed once they were alone.

"She doesn't know you yet." Kiley turned to face him. "I like you enough for both of us."

"It would be nicer for you if she liked me too. Did she mention that she and my brother have bumped into each other before?"

"Yes but I don't want to talk about them or anything else right now." She put her other hand on top of theirs, still linked on the table.

"Hmm, what do you want to do?"

"Touch you." She blushed.

"You sure? It'll change things. I don't think I'll be able to stop with just once. I don't know if I'll be able to let you go," he told her seriously.

"I expect things to change and I don't want you to let go of me." She moved closer. "I'm going to kiss you now." Kiley leaned forward and touched her lips to his. "Jordan," she sighed.

With a groan, Jordan pulled her to him. Their lips parted and Kiley tentatively prodded her tongue into his mouth. When he drew it more fully in, she wondered if he was savoring her taste as she was his. They were finally kissing but she was still frustrated. Sitting at the table prevented her from being as close to Jordan as she wanted to be. She resented the temporary interruption but knew it would be worth it. Hating to anyway, Kiley eased out of the kiss. "Come with me," she whispered, standing, tugging his hand.

Jordan seemed to understand her purpose. He followed without questioning her so Kiley decided he was curious to see where she would lead him. Just inside the living room, she stopped. Turning them so he was against the wall, Kiley then moved her hand to his head to guide his lips back to hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed herself to him. It didn't take Jordan long to wrap his arms around her and pull her in tighter.

Soon their lips opened, their tongues tangled and the kiss deepened. Kiley moaned. She could feel Jordan's pulse racing. She shifted so she was standing between his legs and instantly found that he was already hard. She pressed her hips against his and rubbed his bulge with her mound. She knew she was tormenting him shamelessly and was amazed by his self-control.

Slowly, Kiley ended the kiss. "Jordan?" She looked deeply into his eyes and saw the same raw need that she felt. "Will you listen for a minute?"

"Yes, Kiley." He was clearly fighting not to reclaim her mouth.

She moved her hands to his chest to prevent herself from pulling him back for another kiss. "Yesterday, even though I couldn't talk, I could still think. I was terrified and panicked and I couldn't do anything to help myself. I didn't know what, exactly, was going to happen but I knew it would be awful and I wondered first, if I'd live through it and second, if I did, how would I survive afterward. I was petrified but I was also furious with myself. I thought I'd done something to make you mad and that, with the mess I was in, I'd never get the chance to straighten things out with you. I thought whatever happened to me would disgust you and I'd never see you again. Then you magically appeared next to me. As soon as I saw you, I felt safe. I could trust you with my life because I knew, mad or not, you'd make things okay somehow." She put her hand on his mouth when he would have spoken.

"You brought me here, opening your home and your life to me. In the middle of taking care of me you explained why you were angry that day. What I should have said then was that I wanted that kiss on the sidewalk to get out of control. I've fantasized plenty about you too.

"You were so gentle and caring with me last night, just like I knew you would be. God Jordan, I wanted you so much when we were in the shower! The way you felt in my hands before you made me let go was so much better than I'd been dreaming it would be. My mind agreed with you when you wouldn't let us make love last night. My heart and body didn't even though I knew you were right. You were so hard and I was so excited by your reaction. I didn't know it was possible to want someone as badly as I want you. And like you, I think that what's between us will be more than sex.

"I appreciate how difficult it was for you to talk to me like you did. If anyone had ever suggested that I'd willingly touch myself while a man described us, that I'd let him watch while his words and my fingers made me come, I'd have insisted it would never, ever happen. But Jordan, it felt so right. Watching you watch me was so damn hot. Seeing your reaction really turned me on. The whole thing was so erotic. I'd do it again, anytime, just to see that look on your face.

"Yes or no answer only please. Do you trust me?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes," he responded without hesitation, his features showing he wondered where she was going with this.

"Will you let me do something?"

"Yes." His expression grew more curious.

"Last night you told me that you wanted this to be special. When you described us, you said you'd be unable to take it as slowly the first time as you wanted to. I noticed how quickly you got hard again when we were going to bed. Yes or no, would you have more control the second time?"

"Yes." His look asked what she was thinking.

"And you meant it when you said you'd let me touch you today?"

"Yes."

"In that case, I'm going to show you what you skipped in your narration last night." She began unbuttoning his shirt.

"What are you up to?" Jordan helped by opening his cuffs.

"Well," she slid his shirt off his shoulders and let it fall to the floor. "Take off your shoes please." When he had, she unbuckled his belt. After she lowered his zipper, she declared, "I'm going to take the edge off for you first so that when the time comes, we can both savor this as we say we want to." She carefully tugged his jeans and briefs down over his hips, trying not to drool when his erection sprang free. Kneeling in front of him, she said, "Step out please."

He did. "You're not serious."

"I'm very serious, Jordan." She slowly raised her gaze, pausing at his impressive shaft before meeting his eyes. She cupped his balls when she stood, staring as if daring him to stop her.

At her touch, he grew even harder. "Kiley," Jordan gasped, not pulling away. "I sort of planned on your pleasure first." He leaned back against the wall when she applied pressure to his chest, pleading with his eyes.

"Don't worry. We'll get to me." Her hand roamed across his chest. "I want us to share as much pleasure as possible, in as many ways as possible." She nuzzled his neck, letting him feel her breath as she whispered "Let me do this. I want to. The thought of it excites me so much."

He caught her face in his hands so she had to look at him. "Aren't you going to take off your clothes too?"

"Will you keep your hands to yourself?"

"No."

"Then my clothes will have to wait." She was still caressing his balls, delaying her first contact with his cock.

"How about half of them if I promise to try as hard as possible to control myself?" He covered her face with little kisses. "Please," he whispered against her lips.

"You'll let me do whatever I want?"

"Yes." He kissed her gently.

Kiley moved her hand to the base of his erection when he raised his head. Holding his gaze, she circled it and drew her hand slowly to the tip where she briefly rubbed it with her thumb. "Okay," she said before stepping back to pull her sweater over her head. She shed her jeans just as quickly.

Jordan gave an appreciative whistle. "Wow!" His eyes feasted on the sight of her, dressed only in a swatch of white lace that could barely be called panties and a matching bra so thin that it was practically transparent. If she moved too quickly, her breasts would spill over the top. Her nipples were very close to peaking over the edge anyway, even though she was standing still. "Remind me to say thank you."

"Where, exactly, did these clothes come from, Jordan?" Kiley turned so he could see the back that revealed at least half of her cheeks. She thought the suggestion of covering might actually be better.

Jordan groaned, telling Kiley he liked what he saw. "The couple I mentioned who can now afford to send their child to college? They own a boutique. This is on their way home so they said they didn't mind dropping something off."

Instead of embarrassing her as she thought it would, Jordan's devouring gaze made her feel sexy. "What did you ask them to bring?"

"Just something casual to hold you over. I said I had a friend who wasn't feeling well and wouldn't be going home. I explained that I wanted you to be comfortable. I checked your clothes for sizes after our shower."

"I think I'd like to thank them in person sometime. For putting that look on your face," she said honestly. "I'd also like to see what else they have. You make me feel like I should have more things this feminine."

"You're killing me." Jordan reached out and waited for her to take his hands, leaving her in total control. "And I absolutely assure you that I will be available any time you want to model lingerie."

"I'll take you up on that." Kiley stepped closer, guiding his hands to her waist before sliding hers up his arms. He was leaning on the wall with his feet far enough away so that they were face to face. She was standing between his legs so she was able to catch the tip of his shaft between her thighs. Kiley moved her hips back and forth, rubbing over him with only the thin strip of fabric as a barrier. "Can you feel how you excite me?" she asked just before she claimed his lips.

Jordan moaned into her mouth. His hands tightened possessively as he held her against him. Kiley shifted to brush her stiffened nipples over his. She was overwhelmed as she kissed him even more hungrily, her mouth demanding. His hips moved, urging her to glide along him. If she didn't rein herself in, she'd forget what she had intended because it wouldn't take much more for her to come so she made them both stop. Kiley ended the kiss, shifting her mouth to his neck and discovered he tasted as good as he smelled. She forced herself to step slightly away, creating a space between them.

Jordan leaned his head back against the wall and drew in a sharp breath when she trailed her lips down his chest. The same instant her tongue flicked his nipple, her hands skimmed his sides, ending with his throbbing hard-on firmly in her grasp.

Unable to resist, Jordan's hands left Kiley's waist, seeking to explore her while she was touching him. "Jordan, you promised." She looked into his face, her eyes huge and filled with desire. "You have two choices. Either you put your hands behind your back and keep them there or I put my clothes back on."

"I'll try." He leaned on his hands and was rewarded with a sensual smile. "But you know how difficult this is going to be."

"Trust me. It will be worth it." She went back to nibbling on his chest. Still stroking with one hand, Kiley slid the other down his thigh and then around to fondle one firm



cheek. She felt him tense when she brushed his chest with hers as she raised her lips for another kiss. She sensed how difficult it was for Jordan to remain still. She knew the only thing keeping his hands in place was his need to demonstrate the trust he'd claimed. He was fighting so hard to let her control the moment but seemed on the verge of losing his internal battle. Having no desire to torment him, Kiley decided it was time to proceed.

After one more quick kiss, Kiley dropped to her knees and wrapped both arms around Jordan's thighs. She began tentatively, feathering soft kisses over his hip. His bobbing cock encouraged her. Feeling bolder, she licked her way to the base of his penis. When she caressed it with her cheek, she heard Jordan's sharp intake. Her teasing was working. She caught his shaft in one hand, holding it still while she ran her tongue from base to tip and back again. He groaned when she touched it just below the crown. Her other hand was soon involved, boldly stroking with both while she licked. When her thumb spread the first drop of moisture over the head, Kiley heard him murmur her name. How did he do that, make all that desire so obvious just by using her name? Unable to resist any longer, she covered his rigid flesh with her mouth. Matching the rhythm of her hand and head, she sucked him in only to let him slide almost completely out before reversing. Her other hand palmed his balls, gently squeezing then tugging. Relentlessly, Kiley caressed him with her lips, alternating the speed and pressure until she knew he was close to exploding. When he growled and tried to pull away, she wrapped one arm around his thigh to prevent him from withdrawing.

"Kiley, sweet, you gotta stop. Right now. Please..."

"Mm-mm," she hummed as she continued, making it perfectly clear she wouldn't release him.

"I'm about to come," he warned desperately.

"Mm," she hummed again, sucking harder, letting him know she was aware of his predicament and that it was what she wanted.

Jordan's hips bucked as he let go. Kiley sucked until there was nothing left. She stood to embrace him, not releasing him until his breathing slowed.

"My God, woman, you are incredible."

"So are you." She tugged his hands from behind his back, urging one arm around her to show him that she wanted to be held. The other she guided between her legs. "Feel what you do to me." Her panties were soaked.

Jordan groaned as he cupped her. His mouth claimed hers savagely, his tongue imitating the motions so recently made by his penis. Soon Kiley arched against him and moaned as if wanting more. Gruffly he rasped, "No more barriers."

"No more barriers," she repeated, helping him remove the slips of lace. "Wait," she halted him before he could recapture her lips. "Can we go upstairs now?" When Jordan merely grinned, she added, "You see, um...I've pictured you...I mean us..." She blushed hotly.

"How can you possibly still be flustered with me after that?" He gawked in amazement. "I'm guessing here but I think that what you're trying to say is that you've imagined us in my bed even before you actually saw it?" his voice lowered as he caressed her cheek. "So have I." Without warning, he scooped her into his arms. "Last night you were too worried about my shirt for me to enjoy this."

"Jordan," Kiley sighed and snuggled against his chest. She looped her arms around his neck and traced his jaw with tiny kisses. "Thank you for not saying I'm silly."

"Kiley, there's nothing silly about choosing where we make love."

"Just the first time, Jordan. After that..." She shrugged.

Jordan set her on her feet as he began to laugh. "You are priceless. I've never met anyone like you."

"Like what? An ignorant bimbo who spent months fantasizing about seducing a brilliant, successful man in his own bedroom while being too turned on just listening to him and standing next to him to manage to speak even though he has unlimited patience?"

"Kiley, don't ever put yourself down like that again. Later on we're going to have a long talk about what you just said." Jordan felt a flash of anger that she might actually think of herself in those terms. Letting it go just as quickly, he embraced her. "Right now I'm much more interested in this seduction."

"I'm sorry."

"Sh. Later." He kissed her softly. "I'd hate what you did downstairs to wind up being purely for my pleasure."

"I'm very interested in your pleasure." Kiley ran her hands down his back, giving him a squeeze when they came to rest on his cheeks.

"Mm." He mimicked the gesture. "And I'm equally interested in yours, not to mention that which we'll share."

Jordan ended the conversation with a surprisingly gentle kiss. He let his lips play across hers, teasing her when she tried to capture him. When his tongue finally found hers, Kiley shivered. She pressed her body fully against his with a moan. Jordan gave in to the burning desire he felt and deepened the kiss. He claimed her mouth, demanding a response. His hands boldly explored her body. In no time, Kiley's passionate reaction had Jordan rock-hard. As he suspected, his earlier release did little to quench the fire she ignited within him.

Kiley noticed. "I know I said I wanted to make this last but I can't wait. I want you."

"Slow down. We have all weekend," Jordan tried to sound more patient than he felt. Needing a second to rein in his passion, he released her and went to the nightstand, retrieving a handful of condoms.

"Oh," Kiley gasped. "I...um...I..." She sank onto the edge of the bed.

"I can't guess this time so you're going to have to tell me." When she stared at the condoms, he tried, "I won't leave you unprotected."

"No more embarrassment," Kiley reminded herself. "The third day that you came in for lunch I decided if I ever got the opportunity to have sex with you, I'd take it. All my previous experiences included condoms and were just okay. I never wondered before but with you, I didn't want to feel anything between us so I made an appointment and got on the pill."

"Do you have any idea how you make me feel, telling me something like that?" His look was so intense that it took her breath away. "I've always worn protection too, Kiley, so I can guarantee that I'm not a health risk. God, the thought of us actually touching..." He stood, gathering the extra condoms from the nightstand and tossed them all in the trash. Rejoining her on the bed and urging her to stretch out beside him, he whispered, "No barriers."

As Kiley reached to pull his head toward hers, she echoed, "No barriers. I don't want anyone other than you. I thought you should know."

Jordan gathered her close to him. "I love you, Kiley. With all my heart. You're making my dreams come true." She responded with a searing kiss, arching against him. "You're about to make me forget my resolve."

"Please, I need to feel you..."

"You will. I promise. But first," he untangled them and sat up, "first, I need to touch you. I had to hold back yesterday but today," he caressed the side of her breast, "I'm going to touch every inch of your body." He cupped her cheek. "From here," he slid his hand down her side, across her hip and shifted, grazing her knee before drawing a line to her ankle, "to here." He caught up her foot.

Kiley raised up onto her elbows in order to watch. "Lay back, sweet. You don't need to see what I'm doing. Concentrate on what you feel. I'll tell you what's next." He massaged her feet, first one, then the other. "So pretty." He kissed the top of each one. "You're on them all day and they're still so soft." After kissing the inside of each ankle, Jordan asked, "Did you know ankles are reported to be very sensitive?" His tongue touched both before he settled between her feet. "What do you think?" He nibbled on both again.

Kiley answered with a moan. He slid an arm under each leg and stroked his way to her knees. "I've heard the same about the backs of the knees." His tongue licked the bend of each leg while his hands wandered over her thighs.

"Oh God, Jordan," she gasped, her hips starting to move. "Touch me."

"I will. Soon." He kissed her thighs, forcing himself not to rush. "I was wondering about this area." He ran his thumb along the crease where her legs and body joined. "Are you sensitive here too?" His tongue repeated the motion, ending with a kiss on each hipbone.

"Of course this area," he stroked the outside of her lips as Kiley struggled to push against his elusive hands. "I already know you're sensitive here." He dipped one finger in slightly and slid it along her slit. "I saw what you can do all by yourself last night." He lightly grazed her nub. "I wonder if I can do the same."

"Jordan," Kiley panted. "Please."

"Shall we find out, Kiley?" He continued to touch her fleetingly.

"Yes!"

He stroked her more completely. "Perhaps you'd like this?" He pushed one finger inside. The movement of her hips buried him deeply as her breath caught. "You're already so slick." He slid in a second. "The experts must be right because touching all those spots does seem to excite a woman."

"You excite me," Kiley moaned when Jordan kept his actions slow.

"You're so tight on my fingers." He circled her bud with his thumb before touching it directly. Kiley arched sharply against him. "Maybe I should make sure you're ready for me."

Jordan increased the pressure until Kiley trembled. She rolled her head from side to side, repeating his name over and over as she got lost in the pleasure he created. Jordan stopped moving his hand but kept his fingers in her, relishing the way her muscles squeezed them.

When she lifted her head to look at him, Jordan brought his fingers to his mouth and sucked them. "Mm," he commented. "I think I need a direct taste." He licked the moisture that had spread to her lips.

"Jordan, no," she gasped.

"Kiley, yes." He dipped his tongue between her folds and began lapping her juices. When her back arched, he thrust it in fully, darting in and out as she raised her hips to meet it. "You're so hot," he murmured as he returned his fingers to her. His lips captured her stiffened clit, sucking it into his mouth while flicking with the tip of his tongue nonstop because he wanted her to come. When she finally did she babbled incoherently, continuing to push against his mouth until the last wave subsided.

Jordan shifted once she stilled, capturing her hands in one of his. The other kneaded and stroked her breasts. "Perfect," he declared. "So lush, enough for my hands and my mouth." She thrust her breasts upward as if offering them to him. "But before I get sidetracked, I want you to taste yourself on my tongue, just like you had me taste myself on yours." He kissed her deeply, relishing the way she sucked his tongue into her mouth.

"Jordan," she moaned while he kissed his way to her breasts.

"Soon, love," he promised just before his mouth covered her nipple and began sucking greedily. He switched his attention to the other side, fondling with his hand, nipping lightly with his teeth. He licked circles around the peak until Kiley let out another moan. "Your nipples are so hard. I'm going to love feeling them against my chest while your pussy's wrapped around my cock," he said, his body keeping her trapped even though she was squirming wildly. "Are you ready for me, Kiley? Do you want me now?" he asked, positioning himself between her thighs.

"Yes!" She touched him everywhere she could. Finally, her fingers closed around his dripping cock, guiding it to her. When he attempted to enter her slowly, Kiley's back arched. "All the way, Jordan. I want to feel your whole cock deep inside me."

With one thrust he plunged into her. "Wrap your legs around me," he urged, knowing it would force him even deeper. With a groan, he savagely claimed her mouth, his hips moving to mimic hers. "Slow down, sweet." He tried to regain some control but Kiley wasn't making it easy. "We were going to make this last, remember?"

"Next time." Kiley rubbed her nipples against his chest. "More," she pleaded. "Harder," she gasped, her voice full of need.

Being inside Kiley's body was even more incredible than he'd dreamed. "Next time," he growled in agreement, pumping his hips harder with each long stroke. Jordan could feel her muscles vibrating as they contracted around him. With a scream, Kiley shattered as she climaxed. Jordan plunged in as deeply as he could, only seconds behind her. His cock pulsed, filling her with his hot cream. He felt Kiley's legs tighten as if to hold him there in order to feel every bit of his climax.

Jordan was on top of her, supporting his weight so she could breathe. Finally, he lifted his head and smiled before kissing her lightly. "You're beautiful when you're relaxed." Another kiss. "You're beautiful when you're excited." Another kiss. "You're beautiful when you're coming." Another kiss. "And you're beautiful afterward." This kiss demanded her involvement.

"And you," she continued his pattern of making a statement then punctuating it with a kiss, "Are so damn sexy." She looked deeply into his eyes after her gentle kiss. "I never knew, I mean, I've never... It wasn't like that before, Jordan. You're incredible."

"So are you." He switched to kissing her neck. "No one else has ever made me feel that much either, Kiley. I think the difference is what love adds." He nibbled along her collarbone until he shifted to reach her nipple.

Kiley was so sensitive that the touch of his lips went straight through her. She arched toward him, holding his head to her breast with her arm. Almost lazily, Kiley felt Jordan's mouth move over her. When he sucked harder, her hips began to move, almost as if on their own. She felt his cock stir, still buried within her. "Jordan?" she questioned as she squeezed with her inner muscles. "I don't believe it!"

He grinned, getting steadily harder. "It's you, Kiley." Without warning, he rolled them until she was astride him. "You inspire me." Jordan watched as she writhed on top of him. "Ride me, love. Show me what you like."

"Oh God!" Kiley couldn't have stopped unless he lifted her off him.

"That's it." He seemed to realize that she was trying to move in a way to gain more contact.

"How's this?" Jordan positioned his hand so her clit rubbed it with every stroke.

He was amazing. The way he sensed what she wanted. The way he was letting her use him, not seeming at all concerned with finding his own pleasure. "Jordan!" She clasped his other hand to her breasts. Though he needed no encouragement, Kiley held

it while he fondled her. When he looked at her other hand and nodded, she immediately clutched his where their bodies joined. She could no longer determine which of them was actually touching her.

Jordan was clearly fighting to hold back. He seemed to know that she was getting close and wanted her to find her pleasure first. "Don't stop," he instructed, sliding his hands to her hips.

Kiley was confused but didn't drop her hands. She finally realized that he was now guiding her. He changed her angle ever so slightly and thrust up to meet her, hitting exactly the right spot. A few strokes were all it took for Kiley to come again. She watched Jordan's face as his restraint vanished and soon had him following her over the crest.

Before settling her against his chest, Jordan sucked the finger she had been using to stimulate her clit. "So sweet," he declared.

He thought she was dozing until Kiley propped her hands under her chin in order to look directly at him. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything." Jordan tucked her hair behind her ears, thinking it had been as sexy fanned across his pillow as he had imagined.

"Earlier, in the living room, when I, well... I never actually did that before, swallowed that is and I was, um, well, wondering if it was okay?" She sounded uncertain.

"Couldn't you tell?" His hands traced her spine. "What you did was spectacular. You were amazing, don't you know that?"

She giggled. "I'm glad you liked it. I wanted you to but I was afraid I wasn't really doing it right and that it wasn't good enough for you to let me do it again sometime."

"Kiley, it was more than right." He leaned up and kissed the tip of her nose. "In fact, I have so much faith in your natural abilities that I volunteer to let you try anything else you want to. I'm at your disposal, any time, anywhere, any way you want me and I encourage you to use me often."

"Oh Jordan," she sighed. After a minute, she asked, "Shouldn't I move? If I don't, we'll probably be a mess."

"So? I don't mind if you don't. Besides we're washable. I may not be hard anymore but I'm still enjoying the feeling of being inside you."

"I thought men didn't like to cuddle after sex."

"I'm not men. I'm me and I'm very content to stay just where I am. Unless you prefer us to move apart, that is."

"I like you where you are." She blushed.

"In that case, I'll plan on spending lots of time here."

"I'm looking forward to it." She snuggled her cheek back to his chest. "Mm, just right."

"What?"

"The amount of hair on your chest." She shifted slightly to touch him. "There's enough so I can feel it when I'm against you but not too much that you're furry," she groaned when realized how her comment sounded. "Just ignore me. I don't mean to be so stupid..."

"Kiley, I asked you not to put yourself down like that. Why do you?"

"Because it's true," she answered seriously. "I didn't go to college and I don't know much. I must seem very ignorant to someone like you."

"Hold on, someone like me? There's really not that big a difference between us and I'm beginning to dislike the way you're making more of it than there is. Yes Kiley, I had a very fortunate life when I was younger. I had two parents who worked hard to make sure my brother and I could go to college if we chose to. Your circumstances weren't the same. You didn't get to make that choice because you were forced to become an instant adult whether you were ready to or not. But I believe the person you are was decided long before that time came just like I was formed before I went off to school."

"But Jordan, you're so successful. You can go anywhere and fit in."

"And you can't? The only person I've ever seen you uncomfortable with and unable to talk to was me. I understand why, now that I know what was going through your mind. I've paid close attention to you for months and whether you know it or not you have a real talent for reading people. You sense who needs what sort of attention and how much. That's pure instinct and can't be learned."

"It's not the same."

"Why, because my success can be measured financially?" She nodded. "So can yours in a more subtle way. Think about it. The first person people find at Mr. Paul's is you. You're pleasant and friendly, welcoming them and making them comfortable. You can gauge who needs privacy and who'll be more festive. Do you even realize that you put diners with the waitress who suit them best?"

She mulled over the idea. "Maybe. But you seem to know so much. And you're still taking classes."

"Consider yourself honestly, Kiley. You know plenty too. I understand finances. Brett specialized in ideas. You handle people. Everyone is good at something. And learning never stops. It doesn't matter if it's in a class or part of your everyday life."

"I didn't miss out, not going to college. Honestly, I doubt that I would have gone anyway. I wasn't ever really interested."

"What did you want to do?" Jordan tilted her chin when she tried to hide against his chest. "Kiley?"

"It's dumb. You'll laugh. I'd rather not."

"It's okay. You don't have to tell me if you don't feel comfortable. I won't push you."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course." He kissed her forehead. "You need some time to get to know me better. Once you realize that you can tell me anything and trust that I'll never make fun of you or twist anything you say to hurt you, you'll tell me. I can wait." He smiled. "Let's change the subject. Where should we go for dinner tonight? Bruno's? Someplace decadent? Somewhere casual?"

"Can't we stay here? I like to cook and rarely bother just for me." She looked unsure.

"Sounds perfect. Two things though. One, you have to let me help and two, we have to go shopping. There's not much here."

"Then I guess we better get dressed. I think I'll take a shower if you don't mind." Kiley began to sit up, intending to crawl off of him but found herself pinned back to his chest.

"You're going to desert me, just like that? No hug? No kiss?" He pretended to be stunned.

"Actually," she blushed, "I was going to suggest that you join me." Jordan managed to stand them both on their feet so quickly that Kiley giggled.

He grinned in response. "You go turn the water on and I'll get our clothes from downstairs."



## **Chapter Seventeen**

"I can't believe you wouldn't touch me in the shower today!" Kiley exclaimed as Jordan held her coat.

"It's for your own good, sweet. Trust me," Jordan tried to explain. "I thought you might be a little oversensitive after this morning and I don't want you to get sore. There's no rush, Kiley. As I already said, I'd like you to stay forever." He attempted a frown. "Please don't be mad. I love you."

"Jordan," she wrapped him in a hug, "you're impossible. I'm not mad and I do understand." Kiley was already feeling stiff in places she didn't know she had. "You are so adorable when you pout." She kissed him.

"And you're adorable all the time. We better go before I forget my good intentions and drag you back to the shower."

Kiley giggled.

"It's not too cold. Everything we need is fairly close by. Want to walk?"

"Could we? That sounds like fun."

The pair set off down the street, holding hands, talking and laughing as they wandered in and out of shops, gathering ingredients for dinner along the way. After listening to people in each store greeting Jordan, Kiley finally asked, "Do you know everyone?"

"No. Why?"

"It sure seems like you do, the way you talked with people in all the places we've been."

"I live here. They're my neighbors. Don't you know yours?"

"Honestly, no. It's a city, Jordan. You're not supposed to talk to strangers. It's not safe."

"But Kiley, if you talk to people, they're no longer strangers and that makes everyone safer."

"I talked to Malcolm and look what happened."

"You do have a point there but you also talked to me." Jordan stopped walking and pulled Kiley to him. Seeing that the mention of Winslow had upset her, he gave her a gentle kiss. He meant for it to be brief but then Kiley grabbed the edges of his jacket.

"Jordan McKade, I don't believe it!" a woman called from a nearby doorway. When they broke apart, Kiley was blushing and Jordan was grinning sheepishly. "All these years, we never see you walking with anyone and then suddenly you call, needing an

emergency clothing delivery. Now today, you're making out in the street, clearly unaware of where you are."

"Hi, Gina. Thanks again for coming by last night. I'd like you to meet Kiley."

"Would you two get in here?" She waved them inside. "Artie! Artie, come see. Jordan's brought his honey." She spun around. "My, aren't you a pretty thing? Artie!"

"Shush, Gina. I was just in the back, not on the moon."

Jordan winked at Kiley as the couple continued to bicker back and forth. Though they were now in the same room, the noise level hadn't dropped significantly.

"Hey, Artie. This is Kiley," Jordan said when they both took a breath at the same time.

"Pleased ta meetcha." Artie extended both hands to her. "Everything fitcha?"

"Yes, everything's perfect. Thanks so much for going to the trouble..."

"Trouble, what trouble? With all this boy's done for us. I wish our Maggie was here to say howdy do. She's on her way to being a fancy surgery nurse, thanks to Jordan. Only a year to go. Come, I've got pictures." Gina gave Kiley no choice but to follow.

"Quiet a looker there, Jordan. Bet she's nice too. Kinda quiet though. Course ya always hear how it's the quiet ones ya gotta watch out for, if ya know what I mean." Artie winked. "You shoulda told me 'bout that red hair." He was hunting through a nearby rack, obviously looking for something specific. When he found what he wanted, he took it to the counter, snipped off the tag and folded it into a small bag. "A little something for later." Before Jordan could thank him, he shouted, "Gina! Let her out here. They got things ta do."

The two were hustled through the door with many well wishes. Both Gina and Artie had extracted a promise from Kiley to return soon. They rounded the corner in silence. Halfway down the block, Kiley took a deep breath which caused Jordan to chuckle.

"Are they always like that?" she asked, still overwhelmed.

"Oh no, usually they're loud and excitable," Jordan managed with a straight face. When she began to laugh, he added, "They really are good people. They're so proud of their daughter."

"I could tell. And they do seem nice. I'm just not used to that much fuss."

"They settle down somewhat eventually. I think they're half the reason people shop there. Where else can you find great stuff and that kind of entertainment?" Jordan pulled out his phone. "I have an idea, since you look like you could use a break." When whoever he was calling answered, Jordan said, "Did you eat? Don't. We'll be there in five."

In not much more time than that, they had a fully-loaded sandwich from the deli on the next corner. Walking another block, Kiley was curious when Jordan pulled out his keys and let them into a stunning house. After hanging her coat on the rack with his,

Kiley followed Jordan down a hallway, passing what she looked like an amazing living room, dining room and den.

They found Brett in the kitchen. "Hi, kids. I'm surprised to see you out and about."

"Hey, bud. We needed provisions." Jordan put their steaks in the refrigerator and snagged three beers.

"I can't drink in the middle of the afternoon!" Kiley exclaimed.

"Sure you can." She watched Jordan take some oranges from one of their other bags and peel them, offering slices to both her and Brett. "Live dangerously."

When she took a sip, Brett grinned. "Uh-oh. He's corrupted you already. No more sweet and innocent..."

"Sweet, definitely," Jordan interrupted. "Innocent?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Jordan!" she gasped.

"Relax, Kiley. He's just teasing you." Brett was openly enjoying them. "Jordan is too much of a gentleman to provide details, even to me. Besides, one look at the two of you and everybody can see you've just had mind-blowing sex."

Kiley groaned and hid her face. "Oh God. Do you think Gina and Artie—"

"You took her to Gina and Artie's? Are you crazy?" Brett was shocked. "And no, Kiley. I'm just teasing you. I'm sure not everyone you passed could tell. Just the ones who know Jordan."

They heard the quiet chirping of Jordan's phone. "Damn, that'll be about Winslow." He left them to answer it.

While Jordan was out of the room, Brett picked up the large tablet next to him and began to sketch. "Seriously, I'm glad to see both of you looking so happy. You've made a big difference already."

"Difference how?"

"Jordan is smiling again. He's relaxed. He's back to being himself." Brett shrugged.

"What?"

"Let me tell you something. Jordan is the most generous guy I've ever met. But over time, I've watched him be forced to hide that. When we were kids he'd do anything for anyone. Then Shane got to be hard-nosed and Jordan began to not be able to share with him. After the car stunt you heard about, he learned that some people wanted to be around him for what he could do, not who he was. Once people started noticing his success, it only got worse. He used to come to the gym with me. He stopped when a guy had his girlfriend come on to Jordan to try to get him to do some investing.

"When we go out and ladies realize who Jordan is you can see them start to calculate what they can get from him. Men we used to know have shamelessly hit him up for hot stock tips and actually got mad when he wouldn't tell them anything."

"That's horrible," Kiley commented.

"Yeah, especially to someone like Jordan." Brett looked at her closely. "Do you know what he said when you walked away after seating us that first day?" She shook her head. "He told me that we'd just met his future."

"You didn't think so."

"Not really but I wanted to. After we came back a few times, I could see you really were different."

"But you still warned me."

"Only because I care."

"You still don't believe it."

"Maybe, maybe not. I admit that I'm a cynic. Besides, Jordan believes it and that's what matters most. Let me get to the point. Jordan is generous. He's thoughtful. When he gives you something, please don't argue."

"But I don't want anything."

"I know that, Kiley. I'm not talking big things although I'm sure he'd willingly give you just about anything in the world if he thought you wanted it. I'm talking about little things, like the clothes. He didn't want you to have to face us this morning in his robe or your clothes from yesterday. He's like that. If he chances on a trinket that reminds him of something you shared, it'll appear on your podium, no thanks wanted. He'll show up at your door with a sandwich and peel oranges for you, making sure you know you're part of his life even though he did just get together with the woman he's been dreaming about. He'll save all the sketches you've done over the years and have them framed and hanging in both your homes one day as a surprise."

"Oh." Kiley was beginning to understand. She had noticed the drawings at Jordan's. Now she looked around and saw similar ones in Brett's kitchen. "They're all yours?"

"Yeah. I didn't even know he kept them. Just wait. You'll see, I'm sure. Jordan's already relaxed around you. He's told you more about himself than practically everyone else. I'm sure it's only a matter of time before he starts to share things with you."

"But I don't want anything! And what could I possibly give him in return that he doesn't already have?"

"There you go. You don't want anything, which will let Jordan feel free to be as generous as he used to be. Just don't ever offer to pay for something, okay? And as to what you could give him, you're already done it."

"I don't understand."

"This morning. When your cousin said it was time to go. You announced your intention to spend time with Jordan in front of all of us, showing him that you're willing to include him in your life somehow."

"While you guys were downstairs I told Lyssa I think I'm falling in love with him."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"Did you tell him?"

"Well, not exactly but I think showed him how I feel."

"No wonder he's so happy. Kiley, I hope you don't take any of this the wrong way. I'm just looking out for my best friend. I sincerely hope you turn out to be exactly what Jordan believes you are. You obviously listened to him when he talked to you last night."

"Yes, I did. I can see why you have doubts. I never thought about what it would be like to be successful, wealthy and powerful. You probably are treated differently. The first day, when you were leaving and Jordan introduced himself to me, he shook my hand and held it slightly longer than was necessary. That brief touch was when I decided I wanted him. I've had trouble talking to him all this time because I couldn't accept that someone like Jordan McKade could ever be interested in someone simple like me. At first, I thought he was flirting out of pity. Then I decided he honestly liked me but I still didn't get it." Kiley smiled. "Now I do. Jordan could see that with me, what you see is what you get. He actually likes that I'm uncomplicated, doesn't he?"

"Yeah and I'm glad that you're not furious with me." Brett relaxed.

"Brett, I know how important you are to Jordan. I don't intend to come between you."

"I never thought that. Jordan's heart has plenty of room for both of us. I just need to be sure about all this. You say you are starting to love him. But is it the same way he loves you? When he says forever, he literally means forever. The thing that gets me is you could thoroughly trash his heart and his life and I know he'd still love you. Are you sure you aren't going to abuse the power he's giving you?"

"Are you sure you're not exaggerating?"

"No. Honestly, I hope I am. I hope I'm being completely ridiculous and we'll be able to laugh about my paranoia. But," he looked up from his sketch, "what if I'm not? Loving you makes him vulnerable."

"Have you ever been in love, Brett?"

"No. That's probably why I'm so skeptical."

"I wasn't either before Jordan. It makes all the difference in the way you see things. I will think about all you've said though. For now, all I know is that I don't feel like I'll ever be able to get close enough. I'm not talking sexually either, although I don't think I'll ever have enough of that."

"Good answer, Kiley. I even believe you." They heard Jordan returning. "Thanks for talking to me. Now be a good girl and grab us another beer."

She turned from the refrigerator just as Jordan joined them. When he stopped beside her, Kiley gave him a spontaneous hug.

"Hey, what's up?" He looked back and forth between them.

"Nothing." Kiley surprised him with a kiss. "I told you last night. I'm done keeping my hands to myself around you." She kissed him again. "You said you didn't mind."

Jordan responded with a more lingering kiss.

"You know," Brett spoke up, "I've always wanted to do a study of nudes. I don't mind if you two want to continue."

"Knock it off, Brett," Jordan said mildly. "Kiley explained that that's why she's had trouble talking to me."

"And of course you're so considerate that, in the interest of conversation, you told her do whatever she wants."

"Of course," Kiley giggled. "Can we see that yet?"

"Nope, not 'til it's done." Brett nodded, showing his appreciation of her affectionate play with Jordan. "That Frank?"

Jordan shook his head. "Jesse."

"Next you'll say their last names are James," Kiley laughed.

"No but both their middle names are. They're brothers too," Jordan stated.

"And their cousin's name is Wyatt," Brett added.

"Wyatt as in Earp?" she asked.

"Yeah, I think their dads had a thing for the Old West." Jordan turned serious. "They're sort of private investigators."

"Sort of?"

"My infamous sources." Jordan shrugged. "Wyatt is an inventor. He creates surveillance stuff. Frank and Jesse test it for him. They're not exactly people you ask a lot of questions, Kiley. I suspect they're with some government agency or at least they were at some point. I assure you that they're the good guys. I trust them implicitly. They're the ones keeping tabs on Winslow for me."

"What's he up to?" Brett asked as Kiley paled.

"Nothing. He slithered home around one a.m. and is still there. He hasn't called anyone. He hasn't even turned on his computer," Jordan hesitated, sharing a look with Brett that Kiley noticed.

"What else, Jordan?" she urged.

"It seems we're not the only ones waiting and watching. Jesse said Samuels' guy showed up about half an hour after they finished installing Wyatt's gadgets. They found something interesting. Winslow has money in the bank."

"How much?" Brett wondered.

"More than he owes Samuels."

"So why doesn't he just pay?"

"I have the horrible feeling that he's even stupider than I thought. My hunch is that he's going to try to take the money and run."

"What's going to happen to him if he does?" Kiley asked in a little voice.

Jordan was quiet. Finally, he asked, "What do you want to happen to him, Kiley? In an ideal scenario, I mean."

"Ideally," she began after some thought, "I'd have spent the night with you after we all enjoyed the hockey game and celebrated Alyssa's birthday because I worked up the nerve to tell you I wanted to." She held his gaze.

Jordan caressed her cheek. "Yeah, that would have been ideal. Last night you said you wanted to hold him down and make him drink whatever he gave you."

"It's not that simple anymore, is it?"

"It never was."

She nodded and glanced at Brett, who was still sketching. "Okay then, I guess I want him to go away forever." She realized how that sounded. "Not as in dead forever, just move away. And I wish there were a way to make sure he'd never do this to anyone else."

"Okay, so you want him gone, so there's no chance of ever bumping into him and you want him reformed," Jordan repeated.

"Yes," she confirmed.

"You're too good, Kiley," Brett stated. "I'd want him seriously hurt."

"What would that prove? Other than that we're as bad as he is," she countered. "Is this Samuels guy going to kill him?"

"I honestly don't know," Jordan answered grimly. "There are rumors of people disappearing after they've crossed him but nothing's ever been proven." Jordan opened his phone. "Hey Jesse...yeah, exactly what I thought...I'm counting on it...thanks, stay in touch," he sighed. "They'll do what they can. Wyatt froze Winslow's account so he can't get the money. That should keep him from taking off."

"Froze it how?" Kiley asked.

"Jesse said it'll appear to have been initiated by the IRS if the bank checks."

"But won't they talk to the IRS?"

"I'm told it's all in order and they'll be no questions if they do. Kiley, for all I know it really is coming from the IRS. You have to trust me. They are going to do everything possible to make what you want to happen, work."

"Are we out of it now?" Kiley hoped.

"Jordan?" Brett questioned when he didn't answer.

"If possible." They both waited. "It still depends on Winslow. Look, it'll be all right. The guys will take care of it, I'm sure."

Brett knew Jordan said that for Kiley's benefit. It was much more likely that his friend would end up right in the middle of whatever happened between Winslow and Samuels but he'd keep his mouth shut like he knew Jordan wanted him to.

"So, who gets the sketch, Brett?" Jordan asked, kissing Kiley's hand.

"Toss up."

"Between me and Kiley? Let me assure you, as soon as this hurdle is out of the way, I intend to do everything I can to convince Kiley that she belongs with me." He grinned at her. "In fact, I considered telling you it isn't safe for you to go home alone."

"Is it safe?" Kiley hadn't thought of that.

"Completely. Jesse and Frank would prevent Winslow from getting to you even if he were dumb enough to try. And Samuels is sure to know that you were an unwilling participant so he has no need to look for you. I want you to be by my side the rest of my life but I understand you need some time and space to agree. I'll never pressure you into anything. And I'd never lie about your safety to trick you into doing what I want. I sure would appreciate it though, if you stay for dinner tonight."

"Of course she's staying for dinner, Jordan. We all heard her earlier. When I said it was a toss up I wasn't talking about you as individuals. I meant you as a couple, since I fully expect you to end up together, and your parents, Jordan. They missed the way you were looking at each other when you got here." Brett turned the pad for them to see. He had captured them perfectly. "I'm a little rusty and I'd like to fix some things but it's a good start."

"Brett," Kiley had tears in her eyes, "is that how we really look?"

"Yeah, you're both giving off some pretty powerful vibes. Jordan?"

"Can I ask for one thing?" he finally said. "If you choose Mom and Dad will you wait until after I get to introduce Kiley in person to give it to them?"

"Sure thing," Brett agreed. "Why don't you two take off now? I appreciate you stopping by and bringing the sandwich but it's time for you to go. I want to make some plans for later."

"Who is it this week?" Jordan teased.

"I haven't decided yet."

"What about Alyssa? You could make up for what you said last night," Jordan suggested.

"Yeah, right," Brett snorted.

"What's wrong with Lyssa?" Kiley asked defensively.

"Absolutely nothing. But like you, she has no romantic interest in me."

"How can you be so sure?" Jordan questioned.

"Simple. If your cousin and your brother can manage not to kill each other long enough, they might be able to see the other sparks between them."

"Really?" Jordan grinned.

"Oh yeah. There was so much anger flowing last night for no reason. They were on their best behavior this morning but it won't last. They just might turn out to be even more fun to watch than you two were. Now get out."



Kiley watched Jordan put the last few orange slices in a bag before he gathered up their purchases. When she caught Brett looking at her, almost daring her to ask, she decided not to. He obviously knew what Jordan was doing. She'd just have to wait and see.

At the door, Brett gave Kiley a hug and whispered, "Keep him this happy and I'll be devoted to you for the rest of my life." She nodded seriously. To Jordan, he whispered, "I know why you came. Not necessary but I appreciate it. Thanks, bud."

While they walked, Kiley asked Jordan about Brett's sketches. "Why isn't he an artist?"

"He's always done that for fun. If you think about it, he is an artist of sorts. Advertising lets him be very creative." Jordan went into a bakery. He chose a loaf of French bread for their dinner and some wonderful looking cookies. When he asked for three in a separate bag, Kiley was curious but again didn't ask. "One more stop and then we'll head home."

"I thought we had everything," Kiley stated.

"We do. I want you to meet someone." He led her across the street into a small park.

"Jor-in! Hiya, Jor-in!" A little boy with leg braces and a lopsided grin was awkwardly running toward them.

"Hey, Max." Jordan knelt to catch the boy when he reached them. "How's it going, buddy?"

"Goo Jor-in. Did ya see me run? I go goo!"

"Yes you did, Max. You're really fast." He tousled the boy's hair. "I brought company today. Max, this is my friend, Kiley."

"Hiya, Ki-ey," Max said softly before he ducked behind Jordan.

"Hello, Max. It's very nice to meet you." Kiley smiled when he peeked at her.

"Jor-in, she pre-y."

"I think so too." Jordan started walking slowly toward the woman who was watching them. "Hi, Wanda," he greeted her and introduced Kiley. "No Bear today?"

"He's off at the puppy doc getting fixed," she explained.

"Jor-in, did ya bringed a coo?"

"Yes but you know the deal." He handed Max the orange slices.

"Yuh, fuit firs, coo afer." Max sat on the ground next to Jordan.

"How's Penny?" Jordan asked.

"She at schoo. Las night she read me stor. She do it again a day."

"Wow, you sure are a lucky guy, getting stories two days in a row."

"I a-ways get stor. Momma an Da an Wan reads too." They continued to chat happily until the oranges were gone. "Coo now, Jor-in?"

"Here you go, Max. Small bites, remember?"

"Yuh, sma bites or I choke." He nibbled on his cookie. "Goo coo, tan ya."

"You're welcome, buddy." Jordan handed the bag with the other two to Wanda. When Max finished, he helped him stand. "Kiley and I have to go now."

"See ya ext wee, Jor-in." Max hugged him. "Less it rain."

"You sure will. Say hi to everyone for me."

"K. Bye, Ki-ey." Max surprised her with a hug too.

"Bye, Max. I hope I'll see you again sometime."

"K, Ki-ey. We go home now an waits for Bear."

Jordan and Kiley watched them until they reached the other side of the park. There, Max turned and waved before they crossed the street and went into one of the houses.

"He's a great kid," Jordan grinned.

"He seems it. He sure loves you." Kiley smiled in return. "How'd you meet?"

"His parents are clients. When I first met them, Max was in an overcrowded, underfunded daycare. He's come so far since they found Wanda."

"Thanks to you, I'm guessing." He nodded. "Another little account that means so much. I can see why you like them better than the faceless corporations. Each one has a story, doesn't it?"

"Yep. Eventually I plan on phasing out my corporate clients and keeping only the individuals."

"You're such a good man, the way you want to help people."

"Yeah well, the financial community is going to call me a fool. They're going to decide that I've lost my touch and gone into hiding. They'll say I never really had what it takes to make it big. They'll assume I screwed up royally and it's just not evident how yet."

"But they'll be wrong. You'll be doing what you want. Does it matter what they think?"

"Not to me. What about you though, Kiley? Will their opinions matter to you? What would you think if I give up all the big dollar, power deals?"

"I'd think they are the fools for not accepting who you are, fools for not understanding that you care more about people than you do about money, fools who would rather convince themselves that you are flawed in some way than believe that you'd walk away from all the hype to follow your heart. A heart that tells you that the average, ordinary people who need your expertise are so much more important than corporate America is." She touched his face. "You're an amazing man, Jordan McKade."

"Nah, I'm just me, a small-town guy who's temporarily in the big city, seeking my fortune so I can get on with my life."

"You're not staying here?"

"Not forever. That is unless you want to," he said, sounding uncertain.

"Let me tell you some things about me while we walk. When I was really little, my dad was stationed at a base in the middle of nowhere. When Mom would take me into town, I'd see whole families playing, kids with moms and dads. It wasn't how we lived but I wished it were. Dad was transferred here when I was ten. The only people my mom ever got to know were the other wives so when he died, we stayed. I stayed when she died because, by then, I had my apartment, my job and the people I work with. But I never forgot that town. When you asked me earlier what I wanted to do instead of college? I was afraid to admit that I want to live in a place like that. I want the fairytale life. You know, meet a guy, fall in love, get married, have kids, get a dog. I always hoped to find someone old-fashioned like me who would understand that I want to stay home and take care of my family."

"Why didn't you want me to know that?"

"I thought you'd laugh. You're so sophisticated, Jordan. You need someone your equal, someone elegant. I bet you even own your own tuxedo. I was afraid that I'd embarrass you if anyone found out how simple I am."

"Kiley, you are elegant and I could never be embarrassed by you, no matter where we are or who we're with."

"But you should be with a professional woman who understands the same sort of things you do."

"Kiley Fisher, listen to me. For the last time, stop putting yourself down. For your information, you are far more interesting and insightful than any of the so-called professional women I know. It doesn't matter what you do, it's who you are. I've been watching you assess people with no problem for months. Why can you see everyone else so clearly and not us?"

"I don't know. I guess I formed an impression of you that wasn't entirely accurate. I have learned a lot about you since the first time I called you and I've realized that some of the things I thought at first weren't right. I know I shouldn't be but I am still surprised at how regular your life really is."

He snorted at her use of regular. "Do you mind that it isn't glamorous and fast-paced like you assumed? I'm sure I can find us some exclusive party to go to tonight if you'd prefer to go out somewhere."

"No Jordan, I like you much better this way. I mean, I was always attracted to you, physically. You're one gorgeous man. Then I watched you talking with Brett and discovered you were also a good man. Your friendship is so obvious and open. Once you guys started helping Dee and Will I found out you weren't a snob. I half-convinced myself that the way you seemed was an act. But last night you took such good care of me. It was so thoughtful, how you made this morning less awkward by getting me these clothes. You walked me around your neighborhood, introducing me to people who you care about, showing them I'm part of your life. You made sure Brett knew I wasn't replacing him, which by the way, was unnecessary. He and I both know there's room for both of us in your heart. To top it all off, you let me see how much you care

about children and not just pretty, politically correct children either. I could tell you were disappointed that his dog wasn't there today. I bet the three of you play together. Now I understand why you guys always have an early lunch on Fridays. You visit him every week, don't you? Add in the way you just described yourself as a small-town guy and I don't know if I should run like hell or hold on tight. You're too perfect, Jordan McKade. You scare me and I don't know what to do about it."

"Have you considered that you claiming to want to be a housewife and a mother scares me?" Jordan asked seriously. "The fact that you'd rather stay in tonight and cook is a new experience for me. A few years ago, Brett talked me into joining him and his date and a friend of hers. I thought it might be nice to get together before the evening started to meet each other so I asked them to stop by first for a drink. The ladies were appalled to discover that I didn't have a maid. My date offered to rectify the situation while she made it clear she wouldn't be involved in a relationship with me if I expected her to serve when we entertained. Needless to say, the evening ended rather early. Brett found a new companion and apologized for an entire week until I finally yelled at him to get him to stop. And I want you to know that that was the last time a woman has been in my house.

"Maybe you're the one who's unbelievably perfect. Maybe I should be afraid that you're the one doing the acting in order to trap me and take advantage of me." They had reached his home several minutes earlier. "But you know what, Kiley? I think you really are who you say you are. I think it's right to trust you with my heart. Hearing you say that you actually want to stay home and care for your family, our children and me is too good to be true. The idea that you'd be constantly involved in our kids' lives in a time when there's so much danger to be found everywhere they go makes it feel okay to want to have them. One of the major advantages of my job is that I can work from anywhere which means I'd be right there with you for all of that too. Yes Kiley, I do love kids, all kids, not just the pretty ones. Max showed me just how much I've forgotten over the years. He really is perfect in his own way but you already figured that out. And that tells me you'll love your kids even if they were in some way what society would label as defective.

"You say you don't know whether to run or hold on. Every instinct I have is screaming for me to hold onto you and never let go. But, I said I won't pressure you and I won't. For now, know that I want you with me, forever if it's up to me. This discussion is far from over. You have a lot of decisions to make. I already made mine." He'd been leaning on the door, talking softly and Kiley was having trouble breathing. Not only did his voice alone excite her but his words made her heart race. "I'm going in now." He opened the door. "I'll be a very happy man if you come with me."

Wordlessly, she walked past him and up the stairs. When he followed her into the kitchen, she took their purchases and put everything away while he waited. When she took off her coat, Jordan relaxed enough to do the same.

"You're right, Jordan," she began, finally facing him. "I do have a lot of decisions to make, major decisions that will affect both our lives. I'm sorry if it disappoints you but I need some time to think this through."

"I'm not disappointed," he declared, not moving. "I'd much rather have you be honest and admit that than jump into something you're not positive about just because I said it's what I want. Something I've always believed is that to be half of a couple means you're willing to give and take, to compromise. That you may not see eye to eye all the time but when sharing lives it's usually better to be open about whatever's on your mind than it is to keep it to yourself. Both partners should have the freedom to be who they are. Maintaining a long-term relationship is damn hard to begin with without the added pressure of attempting to hide your true nature. Kiley, never, ever be afraid to say anything to me even if you know I won't agree. When that happens, we'll find a way to resolve it together."

"Thank you, Jordan. I appreciate what you just said. And I think you're right about needing to settle the whole Malcolm mess first too. I feel like I'm going to look over my shoulder and find him standing right behind me about to do something again. I know that's impossible because you've made sure I'm safe. I like that by the way, knowing that you'll protect me if I need you to. And I like the thought that we'll take care of each other if we end up together. But I'm also overwhelmed at how fast all this is happening."

"Then we'll slow down," he stated. "From now on, the direction we take is up to you. I'm game for whatever you decide. I don't want to lose you by being impatient. I'm not going anywhere. Take all the time you need. All I ask is that you let me spend some of it with you."

"Oh, don't worry I intend to spend a lot of time with you." She inched nearer. "As far as making decisions goes, yes, I will take it slowly. And about arguing? I think a good argument now and then is essential. I should probably warn you that I can be very stubborn. I might even yell sometimes. Promise you won't walk away if I do?" He did. "Good. As for the rest, we'll see how it goes." She had gotten very close. "Do you know what I want right now?"

"Why don't you tell me?" Jordan fought not to touch her.

"Well Jordan, you've been talking to me in that sexy tone of yours. I'm tingling all over but I can't help wondering if listening to you now is making the memory of what we did earlier seem better than it actually was. So, if you don't object," she slid her hands up his chest, "I'd like both of us to take off our clothes and find out."

"All right Kiley, in the interest of satisfying your curiosity." He pulled his shirt over his head as he kicked off his shoes. "And because I'm positive we're even better together than you remember." He slid off his jeans, briefs and socks in one motion, "Hey, you're not naked."

Kiley was laughing so hard she had to hold on to keep her balance. "You are too cute." She raised her arms so he could pull off her sweater. Soon, she was naked too.

"My God, woman, do you have any idea how much I want you?" he asked while his gaze devoured her.

"Yes, I think I do." She blatantly glanced at his fully erect shaft.

"But it's more than physical, more than just sex."

"I know, Jordan. I feel it too. I love your body." She trailed a fingertip down his chest. "You look so strong, so powerful, so capable. But this morning you were so loving with me."

"That's because you make me feel loving. I should have been gentler with you, taken more time. I meant to."

"It was perfect just the way it was." The way he was stared had Kiley feeling extremely desirable. "We'll get to slow and gentle eventually. As you said, there's plenty of time. I intend to do this often. I thought you should know that." Jordan took a deep breath but before he could respond, she said, "Do you know I can practically feel it everywhere you look at me? How can I be so excited, so ready for you when you haven't touched me yet?"

"The same way I am."

"Oh yeah," she giggled.

"You're beautiful, Kiley. I could look at you forever."

"Oh really?" She smiled seductively. "Just look, not touch?" She backed away and slowly turned all the way around. "You make me feel like doing things I've never imagined even wanting to."

"Like what?" Jordan was fascinated.

"Well, like last night. The thought of touching myself in front of someone...of actually wanting to do it again." Kiley lifted her breasts to him, caressing herself, squeezing her nipples before she slid her palms down her sides, over her hips, finally settling on her thighs. "Did you like last night, Jordan?" She inched her hands between her legs.

"You know I did."

Jordan groaned when she slid her fingers along her slit, dipping one in inside only to remove it quickly and put it in her mouth. "Hmm, I liked that better on your tongue."

"Kiley." Jordan reached for her but she took another step backward.

"Hold on, Jordan. I'm getting an idea here." She smiled again. "I liked tasting you too. I'm wondering what we'd taste like together. Would you be too sensitive for me to lick right after you come?"

She was killing him. "Immediately after, yes but if you let me rest inside you for a minute I could probably take it."

"Good. I wonder why I want to do these things with you?"

"Because you know I love you."

"Could be. Or maybe I trust you and know I can do anything without needing to be afraid of you hurting me."

"You're right about that. You may drive me absolutely wild but I'll never hurt you no matter how savage you make me feel."

"I never had a conversation with an erect, naked man before. I think this turns me on."

"Do you have frequent conversations with naked, limp men?"

"No," she giggled.

"That's because no man could ever be limp with you naked."

"Do I really make you feel wild, Jordan?" She was walking around the table.

"Hell yes, Kiley!"

"Savage?"

"Absolutely."

"Do you want me right now?"

"You know I do."

"Do you want to be inside me, filling me, feeling me clenching around you?"

"Kiley," he growled.

"Would you push all the way in and then slide almost out? Would you pump into me over and over, harder and faster until I screamed from the pleasure you gave me?"

"Oh my God."

"When you feel me come, would you lose control and come too? Deep inside me?"

"Hell yes."

"I'm so wet, Jordan. Just thinking about it makes me so hot, so ready for you. I never felt so sexual or so desirable. I can see that you're barely able to stand there and not take me. You want to be in me so much, don't you?"

"Damn it, Kiley. Stop pushing me!"

"Why? Can I push you too far? What happens if I do? Will you ravish me? Toss me on the floor and do what we both want?"

"Stop, Kiley. Please."

"No, Jordan. You make me wild too. I've never felt like this before. I want to try everything with you. Everything from tender lovemaking to lusty, out-of-control sex." She rolled her nipples between her fingers again. "Will you be uncontrolled for me now, Jordan?"

"Don't do this, Kiley. Once we start, we'll have to ride it out."

"Ooh, ride it out. That's it! I've never done this either." She moved in front of him and turned to lie facedown across the table. "Ride me, Jordan," she urged, resting on her forearms, peeking over her shoulder.

Jordan couldn't breathe. Kiley was bent over in front of him. He could see the moisture on her lower lips. She hadn't been exaggerating when she said she was ready. When she slid back slightly, opening herself more fully to him, looking at him with raw desire on her face, saying his name with her voice full of need, Jordan gave in. Though he wanted to resist and show Kiley how sweet they could be together, she seemed determined to bring out the beast in him.

"Jordan, please. I want you. No, I need you. I have to have you." She wiggled her ass at him. "You'll feel so good, so hard, I know it."

"God, Kiley," he growled as he rubbed the tip of his cock through her slit, coating it with her juices. Leaving his shaft lying against her, he squeezed her cheeks with his hands before running them up her back to her shoulders. From there, he grazed them along her sides, stroking the edges of her breasts before returning to her cheeks.

"Jordan," she panted his name, pressing back against him.

With a savage groan, he guided his engorged cock to her opening.

"Yes!" Kiley cried. "More! I need all of you."

Jordan plunged in fully, feeling Kiley shudder. He put one hand on her shoulder, forcing her harder to his body and grasped her breast with the other. Over and over, he repeated the actions she had described, pumping in completely before pulling back only to fill her again.

Kiley was moaning, urging him on. "Yes, oh Jordan, yes," she cried as he pushed faster. Thrusting back to meet him, Kiley arched her back, pressing her breast into his hand. She was unable to breathe as her orgasm began. Soon she was screaming just like she said she would be when taunting him.

When Jordan felt her muscles constricting tightly around him, he couldn't hold back any longer. A few more deeply penetrating strokes was all it took for him to join her. As he fought not to collapse, Jordan struggled to slow his ragged breathing. Even though most of his weight wasn't on her, Kiley was still pinned to the table beneath him.

"Oh wow," Kiley finally said. "That was amazing."

"Told you we were better than you remembered," he teased, nuzzling her neck.

"I've never behaved so wantonly before."

"You won't hear me complaining. Nope, no need for you to be inhibited with me, ever." He began to pull out.

"Wait," Kiley stopped him. "Has it been long enough?"

"Long enough?" Jordan wasn't thinking clearly yet.

"Long enough for me to taste you. Remember? You said I could."

"You were serious?"

"Is it too weird?"

"Not if it makes you happy. You're very adventurous, aren't you?"



"Actually, no. I never even considered most of this before you. I really don't have much experience."

"Then I'm honored. And flattered. And thoroughly enjoying every second of it. You want to experiment, fine by me. I do draw the line at causing you physical harm. You can push all you want but I will never hurt you."

"Jordan, I may be daring and curious with you but I'm still not interested in pain." She turned to face him after he stood. Kiley couldn't help but stare at his cock, still wet from their pleasure.

Jordan noticed. "Go for it, sweet. I'm at your disposal. But you realize that you have to indulge me too?"

"That's fair." She pushed him into a chair and knelt between his thighs. Gingerly, Kiley took him into her mouth, sucking gently. When he didn't object, she ran her tongue over his length.

"Well? What do you think?" he asked, thinking how spectacular she was.

"Interesting, definitely not something that I'd avoid in the future."

"Really?" She nodded as he surprised her by lifting her from the floor. "Maybe I should see for myself." Jordan parted her thighs, scooted his chair closer and slid her to the edge of the table. "Lay back, love." She did, with him between her thighs. "Definitely not to be avoided," Jordan seconded after sampling their combined flavor. He couldn't resist claiming her clit and soon his tongue was stroking it, circling it, flicking it.

"Jordan," Kiley gasped his name when he reached out to find her breasts.

"Hmm," he hummed with her still in his mouth.

"I'm on the table."

He replaced his mouth with his hand to continue stimulating her while he spoke. "So? We were on the table a minute ago too." She moaned when his fingers filled her. "Turnabout is fair play, woman. You push a guy like you did, you gotta expect side effects. My cock might not be completely hard yet but I'm certainly not finished with you. You are so hot, so sexy. You turn me on and I'm going to keep you ready until I am again."

"I don't believe this." Kiley's toes curled against him when his mouth coaxed her to new heights of pleasure.

This time, Jordan kept his fingers buried inside. He was watching her face and knew when she calmed enough to realize he was moving them ever so slightly again. Once she had, he increased the pressure, still only touching her with his fingers.

"What are you doing to me?" She sounded awed as her hips began to shift.

"Making you want me."

"I do! Are you ready for more yet?"

He was hard but since she wasn't able to see that, he replied, "Soon," wanting to continue watching her.

"I don't understand how you do this."

"Do what?"

"Make me feel like this." She trembled. "Oh my God, each time is more...better...Jordan!" Kiley gasped his name when he made her come again.

"You do like this, don't you, sweet?" Jordan asked softly.

"Yes."

"Good. I love watching you come. You're gorgeous, Kiley. You make all those hot, little noises like you're really enjoying it."

"I am. Because of you. I never felt like this before."

"Me either." He tugged until she was sitting in front of him. "I can't seem to get enough of you. Even though we only started this today it feels like I've known your body forever. I knew we'd be incredible. Somehow though, I suspect we'll be even better with more time together."

"Me too." Kiley leaned toward him and kissed him. "Part of me can't believe I'm really here with you. I keep expecting to wake up and discover that this is just a dream."

"I've been dreaming about you too. This is better." He kissed her back. "I love you, Kiley. Forever."

"I'm scared, Jordan," she said truthfully. "I have feelings for you too but..."

"Sh. Don't say anything until you're ready. There's no need. You're here and that's what matters most." Jordan framed her face and kissed her tenderly. "Come make love with me, Kiley."

She nodded, accepting his hand and letting him lead her upstairs. In his bed, Jordan continued to shower her with kisses until Kiley was clinging to him. When he finally entered her, Kiley could see everything he was feeling on his face. She hadn't questioned his declarations of love before but now that she could almost feel the emotions flowing from him, she was overwhelmed. Slowly, his body coaxed hers to share a new sense of pleasure. It held a sweetness that hadn't been there before. And the entire time Jordan never stopped kissing her.

Kiley felt her heart expanding within her chest. Jordan's actions were filling it with a love so strong and sure that it was too much for her. When her passion exploded it was even more intense and meaningful than the other times. Feeling his warmth filling her, Kiley's emotions shattered.

Jordan rolled to his side and gathered her in his arms, holding her while she cried. "What's wrong, love?" he asked when her tears slowed.

"Nothing. Everything. That was too much, Jordan. I can't take it."

"Sh, it's all right."

"But I could feel what's in your heart. It's overwhelming."

"It doesn't have to be. There's no need to cry. Just let me love you. I'm not asking for anything in return."

"But..."

"Sh, no buts. As I said, you're here and that's enough. I won't ask for more."

"You're too good, Jordan."

"No, I'm still just me. Let me hold you. Take comfort from me even though I upset you."

"It's not that I'm upset. It's just...you're... I mean... I-I don't know how to say this so it makes sense."

"Then don't try. Add this to the things you need to think about."

Kiley snuggled into his arms and relaxed. Was that how it would always be between them if she could let it? For now, she decided that she couldn't permit Jordan to be that tender again. There was simply too much emotion. She'd have to make sure there was an element of playfulness involved at all times.

"What are you thinking?" Jordan asked.

"Honestly, I think I can't handle you being like that again. Or at least not for now." She met his eyes. "Will you help me? If you won't, I think I need to go."

"You're that afraid of me?"

"Yes."

Jordan was silent for a long time. "All right, Kiley. I'll be less serious when we make love."

"It's wrong of me to ask that. It's not fair."

"I told you earlier that I'd let you set the pace for us. If that includes this, then it does. For the rest of the weekend, we'll have fun. We'll talk and get to know each other. If you have doubts, then we won't pursue our physical relationship."

"Wait. This is starting to be you making all the compromises and I take and take without giving. All I'm saying is that I can't handle so much tenderness. We'll just have to stick to lusty sex for now. Even if you're willing to go back to a platonic relationship, I'm not. I still have lots of experimenting to do. And then I want to start all over again. I think, by the time we get back around to loving and tender, I'll probably be ready for it."

"Thank goodness," Jordan sighed. "I was a bit unsure how strong I'd really be if you said I couldn't touch you anymore." He kissed her forehead. "Let's get cleaned up and have dinner early. We can compare notes on Shane and Alyssa and figure out if Brett's right about them."

"You're not going to touch me in the shower this time either, are you?"

"Nope, not this time."

"That's cruel, Jordan."

"Haven't you ever heard of anticipation? Besides if I touch you so soon, even in the shower, I'm not sure I'll be able to keep my word."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Think of what I have to look forward to." They were about to step into the shower when Jordan remembered Artie's gift. "Hop in. Artie sent you a present. I'll be right back."

He put the bag on the counter while they showered. "What is it?"

"I didn't quite see it. All I know is that it's small and green. I thought that maybe you should check it out first. Why don't I wait for you downstairs?"

## **Chapter Eighteen**

"How can you take a day off like this?" Kiley wondered. "What if something happens?"

"I have an intern who works with me. If anything had needed immediate attention, I would have heard from him."

"Where is he? I thought interns worked with you."

"He usually does. But I also have him set up with a laptop for when I don't want interruptions. If I'm out like today or over lunch I can forward everything to him if he's not here. He knows to call if something's urgent, email if it can wait."

"But you haven't checked your computer since this morning. Shouldn't you? It's after four, Jordan."

"Well," he hesitated. "If you're sure you don't mind?"

"Go. What you do has to be time-sensitive."

"At times." He sensed she was uneasy and guessed why. "Coming?" In his office, Jordan quickly scanned his emails, efficiently dealing with each. "Damn," he sighed tiredly.

"Something wrong? If my staying today disrupted —"

"No, that's not it. I've been having some trouble with an insecure CEO who has absolutely no business being in the position he's in. He calls constantly for reassurance and it's gotten to be a real pain in the ass. Last time I threatened to close his account if he didn't quit."

"If he's that bad, why did you take him on in the first place? You said you investigate everyone."

"I inherited him. His father was a very good man but he retired early. The company has a financial officer who is more than capable when he's permitted to do his job."

"What will happen if you turn him away? Won't the company suffer? How many people work there?"

"If I cut him off entirely the ramifications would be disastrous. Since I have no desire for others to suffer because of his lack of common sense, I'm going to give him away. I had an intern two years ago that I've already made arrangements with. She's the type who won't mind coddling him constantly."

"Aren't you being a little harsh? What about his father?"

"I spoke to him when I first started considering this. He knows his son isn't someone I would choose to do business with. No matter how hard I try, I simply can't dredge up any patience for him."

"But you have infinite patience."

"Generally, yes. If he were a single father, fighting to move his kids to a better neighborhood, I'd talk to him every day it that was what he needed, without hesitation. But, since he's responsible for the fate of one hundred and fifty people, I just can't overlook his ineptness." He shrugged. "Yet another factor that swayed my decision away from corporate accounts."

"I better get this over with." He phoned his current intern. "Hey Dwight, it's me...Yeah, I saw it...Go ahead and take the letter. Insist on waiting while he reads it and then make the call from there. I'll let Sue know to expect you...Anything else? Okay. I like your suggestion for the Prentise account. Good job. I'll let you set it up. Don't work too late and enjoy your weekend."

"Do you always have an intern?" Kiley asked after he hung up.

"Usually. I have a new one every semester if I can find someone suitable."

"How do you get them? I mean, with who you are, aren't there hordes of applicants?"

"Hardly," Jordan chuckled. "I have the reputation of being very selective. Those who want the position merely for the line on their resume have heard not to bother since they've learned that I can always tell."

"So how do you choose?" Kiley was fascinated.

"I have a deal with the college. Every semester I have a questionnaire available. If I like the answers, I observe a class that's geared toward student participation, where they're encouraged to ask questions and find the best solution for whatever situation I give to the professor to present. Again, I pick the best of the bunch. The ones that overlap with the few I've chosen from the questionnaires get interviewed. If there's an individual who gives me the right feeling, they become my next intern. If not, I skip a semester. Two years ago I had two at the same time."

"You're always helping someone, aren't you? It doesn't matter if it's a small business owner, a worried parent, a student who may not get chosen because he doesn't have the highest grade in the class, a widow who needs a ride, me. If someone needs you, you help."

"If I can."

"You really are too good to be true."

Kiley was walking around, studying Brett's sketches. "Some of these are amazing."

"Yeah, especially when you know Brett drew them soon after the event each shows. He's captured our whole lives, from when we met until this afternoon."

"Didn't you say you met in first grade?"

"We did. Brett's been drawing us ever since. Of course, he's improved over the years but I could always tell what it was supposed to be. I kept every one he ever gave me. The ones that aren't framed are in an album. I did the same for Brett and Shane too. I used to take theirs after they'd forgotten them and saved them along with mine."

"You must have spent a small fortune getting them framed."

"Not really. I did it myself."

"No way!" She looked more closely. "You built all these frames?"

"Sure, why not? I also hung them all, mine and theirs. It was so great when they got home from work and saw them."

"You made these frames?" she repeated.

"Oh, I get it. I'm in finances so that means I can't use a saw and a hammer."

Kiley blushed. "Well...I..."

"Don't start acting like the rest of the world on me. My dad is the town Mr.-Fix-It, remember? He and Mom, not to mention Brett's parents, made sure the three of us were capable of taking care of ourselves. I'll have you know I also do my own laundry, cook most nights, know how to grow vegetables and redid the inside of this house, including the floors. I mow grass, shovel snow and can change the oil in my car. I do own my own tux and can tie a real bow tie. I can fix a flat on a bicycle, fish, hunt and pitch a tent. I can start a fire without matches and, last year, when Brett's parents were on a cruise, I used his mom's recipe and baked his favorite cake."

Kiley didn't know if she should laugh or cry. He was so vehement, listing his skills with such a fierce expression on his face. When he paused and took a deep breath, ready to continue, Kiley held up her hands in surrender. "Enough. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply that you couldn't do normal things."

'Normal things!'

"I mean ordinary guy stuff."

"Ordinary guy stuff! What am I, Kiley? I thought we'd already established that I'm just a guy."

"Wait! Just wait. Please? I was surprised about the frames is all. I know not everyone can just do that and have them come out square, with the corners matched up perfectly. I never meant to offend you." She looked slightly scared.

Jordan stood, staring at her. Eventually, he began to grin. "I'd say that's what is called overreacting. Forgive me?"

"If you'll forgive me for sounding like I expected you to pay people to do things for you just because you can afford to."

"I guess I'm more anxious than I thought for you to see me for who I am, not what my image says I should be."

"And I guess I'm more intimidated by your image than I'm letting myself admit. Do you think this counts as our first fight?"

"Absolutely not. This was a minor misunderstanding caused by the newness of us. We just need to get to know each other better. You'll see."

"You're really not mad?"

"Of course not. If anything, you should be mad at me."

"Well, I'm not so I guess that makes us okay then, right?"

"Right." She still looked uncertain. "Want me to make love to you like I did earlier to prove it?" He kissed her sweetly.

By the time the kiss ended, Kiley was clinging to him. "More than anything, Jordan. But one, I believe you so you have nothing to prove and two, I can't handle that yet," she answered honestly.

"All right." Jordan smiled. She'd said yet so that reinforced there would be a time for tenderness eventually. "Why don't you wander around and look at Brett's sketches? I'll get the album too. Pick one and I'll tell you the story behind it while we cook."

Kiley quickly agreed glad to put the misunderstanding behind them and also for the opportunity learn more about him. Once she'd seen them, she went back to the one she'd chosen. "This one."

The sketch was one of Brett, Jordan and Shane. There were tents in the background and mosquitoes buzzing around. Brett and Jordan looked up to no good, while Shane's expression was a mixture of amusement and pride.

"That was the summer Brett and I turned thirteen. Both our birthdays are in July and by then we were asking Shane for a joint present. That year, he and his friends planned to hike into the woods and camp out overnight. We wanted to go along so that's what we told Shane. At first, he offered us a campout of our own, just the three of us but Brett and I wanted to be one of the guys. They were in high school and we thought it'd be so cool, hanging out with them.

"We assumed they agreed because they didn't really mind us tagging along. Then, maybe two days before we went, I overheard Dad and Shane talking. His friends only gave in because they planned on pulling stuff on us. Dad made Shane promise not to let it go too far. Instead of being mad or scared or backing out, Brett and I took it as a challenge. We decided to get them before they got us."

"Did you tell your brother that you knew?" Kiley asked as they worked side by side.

"Nope. We didn't want him involved in case our ideas backfired."

"What happened?"

"To start with they made us carry the heaviest stuff. We'd expected that. It was hot and we were tired but we kept our mouths shut. They also made us set up the tents. Shane and his buddies had one big enough for the four of them and Brett and I were sharing a little one. After they picked out a nice, smooth spot for us to pitch their tent on, we slid some rocks underneath while they weren't looking. We knew they wouldn't complain since it would be like admitting they chose wrong. When we laid out their stuff inside, we found their flashlights. We turned the one on in the pack we weren't supposed to open and we broke the bulb in the other one.

"We were camped next to a stream so Brett and I jumped in to cool off. When we came out we made such a big deal about putting on mosquito repellent that they called us wusses. We offered them some but they'd teased us so much they had to act too



tough to want it. When we ate Brett and I waited until after they finished their sodas before we messed around with ours. Of course they sprayed all over us when we opened them. Again, Brett and I acted like babies, making sure it was all washed off before drenching ourselves with bug spray again. We tried to avoid hitting Shane as much as possible. When it started getting dark, we made a big deal about zipping the tents, saying several times how we'd hate to let any mosquitoes in with us. Since Shane knew a few bites never bothered us before he suspected we were up to something so he put repellent on when his buddies weren't paying attention.

"We sat around the fire with them telling creepy stories to get us primed for whatever they had planned. Once we were in the tents, they pretended to be asleep, waiting for us to settle down. Brett kept mumbling while I crawled out of our tent and used a twist tie to hold their zipper down. That way they wouldn't be able to get out without making a lot of noise and since their flashlights didn't work, they couldn't see what it was stuck on.

"Next, Brett and I took turns sneaking around the camp, snapping twigs and scratching the ground like an animal. The one of us near the tent made it seem like we were still talking, being sure to sound scared. Soon they quit trying to open their zipper. After they were asleep, I took off the twist tie off."

"Why did you make such a fuss with the bug spray?" Kiley could picture them laughing in their tent, looking just like they did in Brett's sketch.

"Ah, that was the best part." Jordan grinned like a little boy. "After I heard Shane and Dad, Brett and I spent the two days capturing mosquitoes. When Brett zipped up the tents, he dumped them in theirs. Remember we'd sprayed the guys with soda, sugar water, to ensure they got bitten. And, since they'd busted on us, they had to suck it up and try not to scratch.

"Between the bites, the rocks under the tent, which, by the way, we spared Shane from too, being trapped in the dark and the noises we made, they had a pretty rough night."

"Did they figure it out?"

"Shane did but not the others. We had a good laugh when we got home. After that we were included even when their little brothers weren't." Jordan smile at the memory. "Brett did a sketch for each of us. His has us crawling to their tent. He's holding the jar of mosquitoes and I have the twist tie. Shane's friends are inside, cowering while Shane sleeps. Shane's has his friends looking miserable, him standing in the middle and us peeking out from behind him."

"It's hard to remember that Brett was only thirteen. This is great and I bet the other two are just as detailed."

"They are. Brett's always said he's just doodling but I think his drawings are spectacular. You should have seen his reaction when he saw that I hung them up all over the place. He tried to act like it wasn't a big deal but I knew he was pleased."

"You're a good friend, Jordan." Kiley finished tossing the salad.

"So is he." Jordan was leaning on the counter, looking at her. "How many times has he spoken to you?"

"He talks to me all the time."

When she deliberately misunderstood, he folded his arms across his chest and waited. Once it became clear that she wasn't going to say more, Jordan reached out and settled his hands on her shoulders. "Kiley," he paused until her eyes met his, "I am willing to bet every cent I have that Brett gave you some sort of lecture, warning, insight, or guidance about how you're supposed to treat me. We've been friends for over twenty years so we can both pretty much guess what the other is going to do. If Brett declared that a woman we'd met less than five minutes earlier was the one he was meant to share his life with, I'd make sure I was around to get to know her. If she returned his interest, I'd leave no doubt that I was willing to protect him in anyway I had to even if it meant asking a lot of uncomfortable, personal questions and prying into her life. Now, I'll ask again, how many times has Brett talked to you?"

"A couple," she admitted.

"I'm sorry if he put you in an awkward position."

"It's okay, Jordan, really. I know he meant no harm. He's concerned because he cares for you."

"Can I ask what he said?"

"I'd rather you didn't. I thought it was sort of sweet and even though I'd prefer you have Brett tell you what was said if you really want to know, I will assure you that he was very nice about it. I can't imagine having a friend like that, one you know will always be there."

"If you take a chance with me, Kiley, you'll know what that's like. You'll have me and I'll share everything with you, hopes, dreams, worries and thoughts, no matter how inconsequential or monumental they may be. Add that to your list of things to think about." Jordan tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "You know what else I'd bet on? If you become a part of my life, Brett will accept you and be your friend too."

"I..." Kiley was flustered.

"Sh, there's no need for you to say anything. I'm just letting you know what I'm thinking not trying to pressure you into anything. I asked Brett to trust me about you but, apparently, he feels I'm too emotional to think straight." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to his chest. "Perhaps this would be a good time to change the subject?" She nodded against him. "How do you like your steak? That should be safe enough."

"Will I horrify you if I say rare? I don't like the center to still be squishy but not much more done than that."

"Sounds perfect to me. Ready to eat?"

"Yes but you haven't let me do much of anything."

"Fine. You can tend the steaks while I get us set up." He indicated the built-in grill next to the stove.

"Oh," she sighed, "I don't know how to use that. I'm afraid I've never seen one of these before."

"It's just like a regular grill. You just have to make sure you turn on the ventilation so it doesn't get smoky." He turned it on for her. While Kiley cooked the meat, Jordan opened the wine they picked up earlier. He handed her a glass and raised his. "To us and a fun, relaxing evening at home."

She clinked her glass to his. "To getting to know each other."

"Can I suggest we eat in here?" He put the silverware on the kitchen table. "I assure you all traces of our activities are completely cleaned away. Since we're aiming for comfortable tonight, I think the kitchen is better than candlelight and soft music in the dining room."

"If you don't mind." Kiley sensed that Jordan was trying not to make her uneasy by showing too much emotion. "Can I pick some CDs? You'll have to show me how to work the stereo too."

"Sure. That'd be great."

They quickly had her choices in the player. "If you push this button, they'll play in order, this one and songs will be randomly selected." She chose the second button. "You made some interesting selections," he commented as they sat to eat.

"You sound surprised. Should I be equally surprised by your CD collection?" Kiley grinned. "Or are you surprised that we have similar taste in music?"

"Ah, I guess it's my turn to apologize for making assumptions. Jimmy Buffett, I understand. Warren Zevon, The Doors and George Thorogood?"

"You're forgetting that I spent most of my childhood living on Marine bases. I bet I could surprise you with lots of things."

"I guess you could. Tell me," he teased, "do you swear like a Marine?"

"Yeah but not as smoothly as Alyssa does. She looks fierce when she lets out a string. I tend to blush."

"I can't wait. I bet you're incredible."

"Let's get something straight right now." Kiley poked his arm. "I only swear when I'm really, really angry so you better watch what you say once I get started."

"So you do have a temper that matches your hair."

"Now who's making assumptions?"

"Do your eyes flash too?"

"Jordan, don't make fun of me."

"I'm not, sweet. I'm just trying to visualize you. You are so beautiful. You're innocent-looking. I've seen you flushed with passion. The thought of you, red-faced and

bright-eyed, angry enough to swear, is painting quite a picture in my mind. And I have to admit that it's turning me on."

"You are impossible." She rolled her eyes.

"No, I'm a guy, picturing a very furious, very hot, sexy woman."

"You better not grin like that if you're the one who's made me angry," she warned.

"Kiley," he began seriously, "it's highly unlikely that I won't do something in the next seventy years that makes you mad. And if you look like I think you'll look, it'll be impossible for me not to grin."

"Why?"

"Because I'll be so distracted by how hot you look that I'll forget you're pissed at me. You'll be swearing and your chest will be heaving. Your eyes will flash and I won't be able to prevent myself from hoping that you'll redirect all that energy to sex."

"If it's you that I'm angry with that line of thinking might get you hurt."

"Quite possibly but imagine what it would be like." Jordan's gaze seared her. "Angry sex with a furious, dangerous woman. You could take everything out on my body and then be calm enough to talk about whatever I'd done to set you off. Just think, you might be as out of control as you pushed me to be this afternoon."

"You don't need to make me angry for that to happen," she admitted as she blushed. "But before you decide you want me to demonstrate, we need to change the subject and eat our dinner."

"If you insist," Jordan sighed dramatically. "Why don't you tell me about a birthday you particularly enjoyed? You heard about one of my best so it's your turn."

"That's easy." She smiled at the memory. "It was my seventh birthday and, for a change, Alyssa's dad and mine were on the same base, so we were all together. My mom was happy because she and my aunt had been very close growing up. Then, a few weeks before my birthday, my dad got sent somewhere. I cried so hard, thinking he'd miss my birthday. To cheer me up, my mom planned a party. She invited all the kids on the base and set up a bunch games for us to play. We were in South Carolina so it was warm enough to be outside.

"The morning of my party, Alyssa found me crying in my room. She's two years older than I am and, of course, I thought she was so smart. She told me how important it was for my dad to be doing whatever he was doing and that I had to be tough like he was and be happy for my mom. Lyss had a camera even then so she promised to take loads of pictures to show my dad when he came home. I made myself have fun so he would like the pictures. I really did understand that he'd be there if he could and I knew that my birthday without him was no different from any of the other kids at the party. All their dads missed things too.

"Anyway, about half way through the party a clown showed up. He had those big, floppy shoes, huge pants and a bright red nose. He brought a bunch of balloons bigger than I'd ever seen. I was so amazed that when he started calling for the birthday girl I

couldn't stop looking at them. It wasn't until someone tied them to the porch railing that I finally looked at the clown. When he was saying happy birthday, I realized that it was my dad. He'd made it back to surprise me. Alyssa took the most perfect picture. I still have it too."

"I'd love to see it sometime if you want to show me. I can tell by your expression what a great day that must have been."

"It was one of the best. And yes, I'd like to show you. I was thinking that you could come to my apartment tomorrow if you have time." She saw a flash of sadness on his face. "I'm not asking you to take me home yet, Jordan. I need to do some weekend chores, you know, pick up dry cleaning, pay some bills, a few loads of laundry. I was going to ask you to just drop me off but you could stay if you like."

"I'd be happy to help. We did well making dinner together and shopping earlier. We can see how we do at other domestic tasks."

"I'm sure we'll be fine." She gave him a shy smile. "It'll ruin my surprise but I think I'd like you to stay."

"Surprise?" Jordan saw her begin to blush again.

"Mm, I was going to pick up my green dress and do laundry so I can wear Artie's gift under it on Monday. I know you have your exam and I heard you telling Brett that you're all going out for coffee afterward and it's my long day so we'll both be too busy and tired to get together. I think, once you see this and know I'm wearing it again under that dress, you might not be as tempted by any of the girls in your class."

"Kiley," he took her hand and held her gaze, "no one, anywhere, ever, will tempt me. I'm with the only woman I want to be with. I promise you that if you decide to keep me, you'll have me forever. I'm not the kind of guy who would ever jeopardize the sort of life I want us to have by doing something stupid like playing around. I'll tell you though, I do have some female friends but I trust you to know the difference between simple friendship and something more. The only something more I want or need includes you."

"Does that mean you won't be jealous if other men pay attention to me at the restaurant?"

"No. But if you say I have no cause to be jealous I'll trust you and attempt to keep it under control," he said honestly. "Now back to Artie's gift. I was wondering if I get to see it. When you didn't mention it, I was afraid you didn't like it."

"I think I like it. I'm not sure since this is the first thong I've ever had on. The top thingy is a new experience too."

Jordan was actually speechless, imagining her in a thong. He had no idea what the top was but he enjoyed the way it held her under her sweater.

"Let's toss the dishes in the dishwasher and then maybe I'll let you see."

"Such a tease." Jordan grinned.

"I'm creating anticipation so you're not too sweet. Is it working?" She peeked at him as if gauging his reaction.

"You think forcing me to visualize you in a thong will prevent me from being as emotional as I was this afternoon?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "It's just... I was serious when I said that you being that tender is more than I can handle right now."

"And I meant it both times I said you could set the pace for us." He relaxed against the counter as he flashed a seductive smile. "Although, I do feel it only fair to tell you that I'm extremely curious about seeing you in Artie's gift and what it would take to get you to lose control."

"Don't you know, Jordan? I thought you could tell. All it takes is you, talking to me and looking at me like you are now for me to want to rip our clothes off. It makes me tingle all over. You get within a foot of me and I can feel the heat radiating from you." She paused to kiss him greedily. "About Artie's present, come with me."

Kiley led him to the living room where she traded in the CDs from dinner for some blues. Soon she was swaying along with the pulsing beat. When Kiley pulled her sweater over her head and shimmied out of her jeans, Jordan felt as if he'd been punched in the chest. He'd glimpsed the color when Artie stuck it in the bag so he already knew it matched her eyes. The thong was a mere wisp. Jordan could see her red curls peeking around the edges. The top was stretch lace that molded to her breasts, stretching to accommodate her rapidly hardening nipples. Kiley twirled, letting him see how the thong was nestled between her cheeks. Wrapping her arms around him from behind, she pressed against his back.

"Jordan," she kissed his neck, "you should breathe. You look like you're about to pass out and I have plans for you." She lowered a hand and squeezed him through his pants. "Does this mean you like me in this?"

"There are no words to describe how gorgeous you look."

She moved in front of him and kissed him again. "So you'll think of me wearing this too on Monday?"

"God woman! That dress alone fueled my fantasies for days. Knowing this is under it might kill me."

She rubbed her chest against his, sure he could feel her nipples through his T-shirt. "Jordan," she breathed against his neck. "Touch me. Please."

"Kiley," he groaned when she pulled his hands to her breasts.

The lace seemed to enhance her sensitivity when Jordan lowered his head and sucked her into his mouth, leaving the covering in place. Kiley's head was thrown back as she arched toward him. His fingers kneaded her cheeks while he nibbled the length of her neck. Her hips pulsed against his obvious arousal in time with the music. Trapping her tightly to him, Jordan claimed her mouth only to let Kiley take over the kiss. One finger traced a line from her navel downward until he found her opening, already drenched with her desire. He pressed a finger to her wetness, relishing her

excitement. The thong itself was the same thin lace so when Jordan brushed her clit through it, Kiley responded instantly. Continuing to stroke her, Jordan returned his mouth to her breasts, sucking hungrily, nibbling and nipping with his teeth. Soon she was writhing with pleasure. She urged his lips to hers, devouring him when she came.

Jordan eased Kiley to the floor, caressing her gently while she collected herself. "Mm," she stretched. "Remind me to thank Artie. Maybe I'll see if he can recommend anything else."

"You realize I'm going to walk around with a hard-on all day Monday."

"And the thought of that is going to keep me soaked." She grinned. "Take off your clothes now please. As good as that was, I know it'll be even better with that hard-on you just mentioned inside me."

Jordan stripped. When she started to peel off the thong, he stopped her. "I noticed something about this little thing you almost have on." He shifted over her, hooking her legs over his arms. "It provides absolutely no barrier."

Kiley gasped when he nudged it aside and entered her. "More!" She attempted to pull him in even deeper.

"Tell me what you want." He held himself motionless.

She lifted her hips toward him. "Move with me, Jordan. Let me feel all of you." He did as she requested. "That's it...oh God, yes...harder," she panted. She was close. "Please! Don't hold back. Come with me, Jordan." As she peaked, his climax pulsed with her constricting muscles. Before he could slide his weight from her, Kiley urged him down on top of her. "Stay."

"I'll crush you," he managed.

"Stay. Just for a minute." She held on tighter. When she loosened her hold to caress his cheek, she sighed, knowing she loved him completely.

As if reading her mind, Jordan whispered, "I love you, Kiley." He kissed her. "You're incredible."

"No more than you." She nipped his shoulder.

Jordan chuckled as he watched her eyes slide closed. "Tired?"

"Mm, happily exhausted."

"Me too." He sat up, pulling her with him. "Come on, bedtime."

"But it's early," she protested.

"So? We're not on any schedule here. We've had an emotional, active day after a stress-filled night. I'd like nothing more than to fall asleep, naked, with you wrapped in my arms."

"We did that last night," she pointed out as they got ready for bed.

"Yes but last night I had to be careful not to touch you. I couldn't relax because you brushed against me in your sleep." They crawled in. "Tonight, I can savor the feeling of your breasts pressed against my side. I can pull your leg over mine and enjoy your

softness while we both slip into sleep. And if I wake up during the night with your hand wrapped around my cock like I did last night, I can coax you awake with some well-placed touches of my own and see where it leads."

"You sound so sexy," Kiley said sleepily. "If I weren't so relaxed..."

"Take a nap." He kissed her forehead and stroked her back. "If you want my attention during the night, wake me."

"You wouldn't mind?"

"Mind?" he chuckled. "Why would I ever mind if a very desirable woman wanted me enough to wake us both up during the night? I'm serious here. I'm willing to indulge you any time, day or night. Never doubt your appeal or my desire."

"Same goes for you, Jordan." She snuggled closer. "This feels right."

"More right than I ever knew it could," he agreed before they drifted off to sleep.



## **Chapter Nineteen**

Kiley woke up alone. Glancing at the clock on the nightstand, she saw it was after ten. She never slept that late! They'd turned in early, so she'd slept for over twelve hours. Jordan must think she was incredibly lazy. How embarrassing! Kiley hopped out of bed and grabbed one of his shirts. Quickly, she brushed her teeth, splashed her face and attempted to make her hair more presentable.

Before she started downstairs, Kiley heard music coming from Jordan's personal office. Hesitating in the doorway, she watched Jordan typing away at the keyboard, deep in thought. The man was undeniably hot. Even totally engrossed in whatever he was working on, he was the most delicious man she'd ever seen.

"Jordan, why are you always so well-dressed at lunch? Do you meet with people everyday?" She startled him when she spoke.

"What?" He looked at her blankly for a minute. "Morning."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt." She made to back out of the room.

"Wait. Don't go."

"But you're working."

"Not really. I only came in here so I wouldn't ravish you in your sleep. I guess I got a little involved."

"Oh." She blushed, sinking onto the window seat.

"Now, to answer your question, I did have an appointment the day we met. After that, I dressed to try to impress you."

"What?"

"Well I did have occasional meetings but mostly it was for you."

"Wow."

"Mm. Brett had a field day when he realized what I was up to."

"That's very flattering but you needn't have bothered. You're impressive no matter what you have on. Why didn't you wake me?"

"Because you were sleeping so peacefully. I figured you'd wake up when you were ready. You must have needed the rest and we really don't have to be anywhere at any particular time. You're still visiting Vera, right?"

"I don't have to."

"But don't you usually?"

"Well yes but..."

"But nothing. I hope to add to your life, Kiley, not disrupt it."

"Okay then, she'd love it if you came with me. She's asked about you several times since you were there."

"You don't have to take me unless you truly want to. I don't want you to get sick of me."

"Not likely." Kiley smiled. "We can stop in with Vera before we go to my apartment."

"Sounds like a plan." He shut down his computer. "Why don't you grab a shower and get dressed and I'll make some hot chocolate to go with breakfast?"

"Hot chocolate?"

"Sure, it's cold and drizzly. I thought it would be a good day to make you my specialty." He couldn't suppress his grin.

"What's that?"

"Hot chocolate and the cookies we got from the bakery yesterday."

"Cookies for breakfast?"

"Not every day," he explained. "I don't always give in to the urge when I pick up Max's. I can make you real breakfast if you prefer."

"No, your specialty will be just fine." Kiley let him pull her to her feet. "I take it that you already showered?"

"Yep, hours ago." He saw the disappointment on her face.

"Can I tempt you?" She unbuttoned the top button on his shirt.

"You always tempt me." He seared her with a lusty look. "However, we have a plan and I'm sure you don't want to disappoint Vera. Off you go."

"Jordan," she started to mutter.

"Patience, sweet. Remember the old saying? Good things come to those who wait." He propelled her toward the bathroom and then headed for the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, now don't expect much." Kiley shifted nervously in front of her door.

"Kiley," Jordan said firmly, "do not apologize for your home. I noticed how you did that while we were saying goodbye to Vera this morning and there's no need for it. I caught the look she gave you. I'm guessing she's heard about your apartment and is going to call you on being so insecure about it next time you see her without me."

"But Jordan, your house is so nice."

"Yes, it is nice. But that's all it is, a nice house. If I took down Brett's sketches, anyone could be living there. It's never even felt like home. Sure, I did some work on it and I'm proud of that but it's merely the place I live while I'm here. I won't mind giving it up when it's time." He shrugged. "Your apartment, on the other hand, is probably a reflection of you. I expect it to feel friendly and cheerful like a home should."

"Jordan McKade," she sighed. "What am I going to do with you?"

He grinned wickedly. "Where would you like me to start?"

Kiley gasped and blushed. "I...uh..."

"That's my girl." He hoped to distract her so she'd stop worrying long enough to let him in. Finally, Kiley opened the door and stood aside. Jordan looked around, knowing she was waiting for him to say something. His smile grew. "It's just like you."

"Um, thanks. I'll just get my wash."

He stopped her. "Would you prefer me to leave?"

"No. I'm just nervous. I know it's silly but I've been fantasizing about you here with me for months and now that you actually are...well...I pictured many scenarios but you coming here to wait while I pay bills and do laundry just wasn't among them."

"Too much reality, huh? Fantasies don't usually include everyday, ordinary activities but that's what makes this real. Life can be so much better."

"You're perfect, you know that?"

"Hardly but thanks for thinking so. Trust me, I have plenty of faults which I'm sure you'll notice soon enough. Or you could call Shane if you don't believe me."

Kiley rolled her eyes and started the laundry. She was sorting through the mail from the past two days with Jordan sitting companionably beside her. Fumbling with an envelope, she finally said, "You have to stop watching me."

"But you're fascinating when you're engrossed."

"I can't concentrate with you staring at me like that. I told you I'm not very good at this. I wasn't kidding."

"I could help."

"I'm sure you could have this done in no time but I don't think I'm ready for that yet."

"All right. Where's your photo album?"

"On the dresser in my bedroom."

"Then that's where I'll be." He stood. "I'll look through it and see if I can find the picture of your birthday. Then I'll pick another one for you to tell me about when you're done, okay?"

"Oh, um, okay." She couldn't decide if having him in her bedroom was better or worse than him watching her. Before she could say more, he walked from the room.

Jordan was sprawled across her bed, paging through the album when she checked on him an hour later. "All done?"

"Almost. I should be by the time I stick the other load in the dryer. You okay in here?"

"Yes. You were right about the picture. Alyssa was talented even then."

"She took lots of the ones in there. You can probably tell which are hers."

"Not really. I've only seen her book on the gang. Nothing family-oriented like you have here. Does she do fun themes too?"

"No, she gravitates to, I don't know, darker things."

"Why?"

"I guess it started after my dad died. It was like she closed off that part of herself. She's always fun and funny but in a bold way. She doesn't let things get to her and she certainly doesn't put up with anyone messing with her. It's like she won't give anything the chance to make her hurt like it did when he died. Remember her dad's in pretty much the same boat as mine was. He could be sent anywhere at any time. And I think my mom's problems pushed her further into herself too."

"You've obviously given this some thought."

"Yeah. I could be wrong though. Maybe unsettling things just interest her more and it took her this long to figure it out. I tried to ask her once but she keeps me at arm's length whenever I get too personal."

"By not letting you get close, it won't hurt her if something happens to you too?" he guessed.

"Exactly, which is why I go overboard to let her know I care." Kiley seemed amazed by his interest. "Wow. How'd we get on this? I better get back to work."

"Go ahead. I'm not through here. We can talk while we wait for the dryer to finish." Jordan didn't tell her that his information on Alyssa was very similar to what she'd said.

He continued to flip through the rest of the album, enjoying the glimpse into her childhood. After he set it aside, he relaxed on her pillow. He could smell her shampoo. The bedding was floral, which suited her. It was so feminine, just like she was. He looked around the room slowly and decided that it was a collection of Kiley's life. Probably everything in it held a memory. Hers was exactly the kind of home Jordan wanted for himself, comfortable and welcoming, filled with things that were personal. In his opinion, it made her even more appealing.

When he heard Kiley moving around in the other room, he decided that he was ready to play. Quickly, he stripped, grabbing his cell phone before he stretched back out on the bed. Hearing the noise of the dryer, he dialed her number.

"Hello," she answered.

"Hi, Kiley," he spoke in the tone Kiley deemed sexy. "Done with your bills?"

"Yes. What are you up to?"

"I'm lying here in your bed, picturing us together."

"Oh really?"

"Mm. Did I mention that I'm naked? And that the thought of you here, sleeping on these flowered sheets that are so like you, is very exciting?"

"Is it?"

"Definitely. Want to know what else I'm thinking?"

"Yes."

"I'm thinking that, since I already know you're going to drive me wild Monday and we won't be able to see each other to do anything about the state you'll have me in, you need to have something to think about too. It's only fair."

"What am I supposed to think about?"

"Us. Together. Here. In your bed."

"Sleeping?"

"Far from it." Jordan chuckled, sending shivers up and down her spine.

"Then what?"

"Hmm, let's see what I can come up with." He paused. "You already know that I'm naked and hard. I was thinking about you walking in here, seeing the condition I'm in and being unable to resist pulling me into your mouth."

"Go on." Kiley could practically feel him.

"All right. You stretch out next to me. Did I mention that you're naked now too? Well, here you are, running your tongue up and down, sucking me deep into your throat, just like you did yesterday. You have your hands on me too and I'm burning up everywhere you touch."

"And?" Kiley's breathing was ragged.

"And today, instead of making me keep my hands to myself you urge me onto my side, facing you. You open up to me, knowing how much I want you to share the pleasure you're giving me. I cover you with my mouth, sliding my tongue into you, mimicking the movement of your head."

"Do we come?"

"You do, several times."

"But not you?" Kiley was pulling off her clothes.

"Well, see that all depends. I'm certainly ready to. I can't believe how hard you make me. The way you stroke me, the way you clamp your thighs around my head when you come has me so close."

"But?"

"But you know I'll want more as soon as I'm physically able. You know you're so hot that once isn't enough. If you continue with your mouth, you know the next one will be in your sweet pussy. You know you make me emotional and you know my second time will be drawn out. I'll have to touch you all the places that I've learned you like. My body will worship yours and I won't be able to stay playful."

"What if I stop before you come?"

"Then I can imagine you pushing me onto my back. You'll straddle me, lowering yourself onto my hard cock. I'll still touch you everywhere but it'll be different since you'll have me so incredibly turned on. You'll make it last though. You'll let me watch

you move on top of me, showing me how much you like the feel of me by coming over and over again until you think you can't handle any more. Then and only then, will you take me with you."

"Okay, so that would be once. Would you still want me again?"

"I will always want you again. I'll never get enough of you. Don't you know that by now? But, since we've been very active, we'll need to shower..."

"And this time you'll join me like I want you to?"

"Yes." Jordan waited. "Kiley? Are you there?"

"No, Jordan." She climbed on to the bed and positioned herself next to him as he described. "I'm here." She took him in her mouth. Soon she encouraged him to do exactly what he had told her.

When Kiley pushed him to his back and mounted him, Jordan said, "Not ready yet, huh?"

"Not quite," she moaned. "But the thought of us in the shower..."

"You seem fond of that idea."

"Oh yeah." He slid his hand between them to give her added stimulation.

Jordan barely let her catch her breath before he was moving. "Do that again. I want you to have lots to think about Monday."

"Jordan," she panted his name as she set the pace. "Oh God!" It took no time before she was ready again. "You too." She let him know what she wanted.

Afterward, they lay intertwined, talking about nothing. "Monday, when you get home, will you call to say good night?"

"Sure, if you want me to. You can tell me what you're thinking."

"I'll be thinking about this and you know it."

"Good. I will be too. I think you are the most spectacular, amazing, incredible woman." Jordan was lying on his side, tracing his finger along her chin.

"Thank you." She snuggled closer. "You're pretty hot yourself."

"I wasn't talking about sex although the description applies to that too." He held her gaze. "I meant you, who you are. When I looked at your pictures I could see how much your life changed after your dad died. When you were talking about Alyssa you could easily have had the same reaction that you think she did, even more so. But you didn't. You're sweet and generous and..."

"Sh." She put her finger against his lips. "I am, as you say, just me. Like you, I have plenty of faults."

"I'm looking forward to discovering them. That is, if you're really willing to spend more time with me."

"Is that a not so subtle attempt to make sure I'm coming home with you tonight?"

"Not really but, since you brought it up?"

"You're so cute." She kissed him playfully. "Yes. In fact, if it's okay with you, I thought maybe you would bring me here Monday morning. Unless you have something and want me to bring my car instead."

"I would love for you to stay until then and I certainly don't mind dropping you off. Want to go out for dinner tonight?"

"How do you feel about pizza?"

"Pizza's good. We can rent a movie and have a picnic. What's your favorite?"

"Wouldn't you rather watch something new?"

"No, I'd rather know more about you."

"I don't think..."

"Please?"

"Okay but we really don't have to watch either of these. It's a toss-up between *While you were Sleeping* and *Joe versus the Volcano*."

"Hmm, I'm surprised you didn't include *Overboard*."

"That's next. I can't believe you're familiar with these."

"Why not? But maybe I should tell you that during college Brett usually made me go along whenever his date wanted to see a chick flick and the movie theater nearest the school specialized in the classic ones on Saturday afternoons."

"For moral support?" Kiley laughed.

"Yeah, something like that. I think he really wanted someone to make snide remarks to."

"And you were nice enough to go along."

"That's what friends are for. He generally provided me with a blind date, most of which were disasters."

"Aw, poor baby." Kiley thought the look on his face was priceless. "We'll pick something else."

"Nah, I think my present company will make all the difference in the world. Besides, you can explain the fascination to me while we watch."

"I'll try but as a guy, there might be some things you just don't get," she giggled. "You sure you don't mind going to dinner at Dee's tomorrow?"

"Not at all. I should check in with Will anyway and I agree that it'll be easier for you to answer Dee's questions away from the restaurant. I won't be surprised if Brett shows up too."

"Yes, I've heard how he enjoys Dee's cooking."

"That's only part of it. He also likes Will and the way he and Dee are together. So do I."

"Me too." Kiley noticed that Jordan's hands were roaming over her body. "Can I ask you something?" He nodded. "How come you waited until now to play in the shower with me?"

"Simple. The first night you told me you'd been fantasizing about us in the shower. Since then, we've been living out mine at my house. I thought we should save some for here."

"But how did you know we'd be here?"

"I didn't for sure. I just hoped you'd invite me sometime."

"And how were you going to get us to the shower?" she teased him by caressing his chest.

"I figured I'd seduce you." He claimed her mouth with a demanding kiss. When Kiley responded, Jordan almost forgot his intent. "Hang on, love. If you don't slow down, we're not going to make it to the shower."

"Oh. Yeah. Thanks for reminding me." She slipped away from him and tugged on his hand.

Jordan chuckled, following her into the tub. He positioned himself behind her as he had the first night at his house only this time he didn't stop her from reaching for him. He didn't stop himself from pulling her close and kissing her as he'd wanted to then.

"Mm, I've been waiting for this," Kiley purred.

His hands slid down to her ass. He squeezed her cheeks, his erection trapped between them as he reclaimed her mouth. "Me too," he whispered, devouring her as she was him.

Kiley seemed frustrated, not being able to capture his cock. She took a step back to separate them and, missing the mat, her foot slipped out from under her. Fortunately, Jordan reacted quickly, catching her before she fell.

"Careful, love. You okay?"

Steadying herself by clasping his arms, Kiley looked up at him and began to laugh. Softly at first, then a full belly laugh. After a minute she was just barely able to contain herself. "I'm sorry, Jordan." She chuckled again. "Somehow this isn't what I imagined."

Jordan's laughter joined hers. "No, not quite my fantasy either." He kissed her thoroughly. "But I bet we can improvise and come up with something we'll both enjoy anyway."

"Ooh yeah," she echoed. "I'm sure we can. The last thing I want to do is kill us trying to have sex in the shower. I'll have to get a bigger mat so we can maneuver in here a little better next time." Her giggles returned until Jordan took her body wash and drizzled some over her breasts.

"Better hold on to me," Jordan advised.

With a grin, Kiley rubbed her hands over her breasts, coating them before wrapping her fingers around his cock. "Good idea."

As Kiley slowly stroked him, Jordan's hands roamed over her body, lathering her as he went. He massaged her breasts, circling her nipples over and over again, making them stand out in stiff peaks. It took ages for him to actually touch them and by the time he did, Kiley was moaning.



"God, Jordan," she gasped when he pinched her nubs between his fingers.

"Like that?" he asked, brushing her flesh with the back of one bent finger.

"You know I do." She gripped his cock tighter, arching her back in offering. "Don't stop."

"Not a chance." His hands manipulated her sensitive peaks until she trembled. Only then did he let one drift lower, caressing her belly before settling over her mound.

"Yeah," she whispered, widening her stance slightly to give him better access. "Touch me. Please."

That was all the encouragement Jordan needed. He slid one, then two fingers into her tightness, matching her tempo as she continued to pump his cock. For the longest time all that was heard was the water cascading over them and their labored breathing. He wrapped his other arm around her, half supporting her, half supporting himself.

"Kiley," Jordan groaned, awed at how she added a slight twist at the end of each stroke, catching his crown just right. He felt his balls drawing up tight and knew he was close. He wanted her to find release first and he bent his thumb so his knuckle would press her clit as he penetrated her.

"Oh wow," Kiley exclaimed, shivering in delight. "Oh my God," she moaned, eyes locking with his. "That's perfect."

Unconsciously, her hands tightened on his shaft. "So's that," he agreed, thrusting into her grip. "So good." His pumped faster with both his cock and his fingers. "Come with me."

"Yes," she cried in ecstasy, her pussy clenching his fingers tightly just as his cock erupted.

A minute later they were clinging together, panting, struggling to stay upright. Jordan recovered first. He used one finger to tip her head for a soft kiss. "Beautiful," he sighed before getting down to the business of showering in earnest.

Forty-five minutes later, Jordan was drying Kiley with one of her fluffy towels. "Now that was the best shower I ever had."

"Yeah." She leaned against him. "Thanks, Jordan. It wasn't exactly what I imagined but it was still amazing."

"My pleasure," he murmured.

"Mine too," she sighed. "We should go."

"We don't have to. I'm happy right where I am."

"But I'm hungry. I know it's awfully early but we didn't have lunch."

"If we have lunch now we won't want pizza until midnight. Why don't we go pick up the movies and get some snacks for later? The place right down the street from me makes the best pizza so we can stop there last. We can eat it while we watch the first movie."

"Then what?" He seemed very comfortable walking around naked in front of her and, even though she was completely satisfied, she still felt a tingle looking at him.

"Then we'll have an intermission. What do you think my chances are of getting you naked again?" He caught her staring.

"I'd say damn good," she answered boldly, reaching out and squeezing his butt.

"Hey!" he pretended to be shocked.

"What? I thought you liked me to touch you."

"I do and I recommend that you do it often but you're the one who said we should go."

"I know," she sighed and began to dress. "Jordan?" She turned and wrapped her arms around him. "Thanks for today. I shouldn't have been so nervous about bringing you here."

"It's all right. Even though we're good together, we still need to get used to each other."

"You're too kind, saying that. I agree that we're extremely good together but we both know that I'm the one who needs to get used to us."

"You will."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I have faith in you, Kiley. I trust you. I love you. I have patience so stop worrying." He gave her a tender kiss. "Now get dressed before I forget."

## **Chapter Twenty**

"That confirms it," Will laughed, "it's definitely love if you willingly watched chick flicks."

"He didn't really watch all that much," Kiley confided.

"What was he doing instead?" Brett asked, ignoring Jordan.

"Well...ah...um..." She blushed.

"He's teasing you, sweet," Jordan said before leaning over to whisper, "He's just jealous because none of his dates ever indulged him the way you did me."

"I heard that," Dee stated, causing Kiley's blush to deepen.

"What did he say?" Brett asked, knowing Dee wouldn't respond.

"He said I let him have more fun watching those movies than the girls you saw them with did," Kiley answered him with a direct stare.

"I think I liked it better when you were too flustered to talk." Brett made them all laugh.

"So what did you do today?" Will asked, causing more laughter.

"You mean besides the obvious?" Jordan managed with a straight face. "Kiley was kind enough to keep me company while I put the finishing touches on the material we need for our meeting Tuesday."

"The big meeting that you won't tell us about?" Dee wondered. "So you know now, Kiley?"

"Nope. Jordan offered to explain what he was doing but I'd rather wait to hear about it on Tuesday night after you guys do whatever it is that successful businessmen do to celebrate."

"I doubt that I'm included in the major portion of Jordan's celebration plans." Kiley blushed again as she got the meaning behind Brett's statement.

"Brett, why don't you let me show you how the website is doing before you get yourself into any more trouble here?" Will suggested before anyone else could comment.

Jordan winked at Kiley and, to give her some time with Dee, asked, "Mind if I come too?"

After the men left the room, Dee waited just long enough not to be overheard. "Come on, Kiley. Tell me everything. Start with what happened to your cousin."

"That seems so long ago. He was so sweet, Dee," Kiley proceeded to tell her friend all that had occurred, from what Malcolm had attempted to the ways Jordan continually amazed her. "He even got in the shower with me to make sure I didn't fall."

"Oh really?" Dee raised her eyebrows.

"I was so bold, grabbing at him and the things I blurted out but Jordan just kept saying no."

"Wow!"

"Yeah, wow is right. No matter what I tried he was totally controlled and wouldn't let anything happen. Instead he promised me we'd do whatever I wanted if I still felt the same way Friday after Lyssa and his brother were done talking to us."

"Well? Did you?"

"Yes and yes," Kiley sighed, sounding dreamy. "Dee, the man is better than perfect if that's possible. You know what I mean."

"Yes, I do. I'm happy for you, Kiley. You seem very comfortable with him."

"Jordan makes it easy. He's so willing to accept me as I am."

"What did you expect? He's been that way since he first showed up. I don't think he's the kind who will play games with you."

"I don't either. He says that after the mess with Malcolm is over we have some very serious talking to do."

"You do know what he's going to talk about, don't you?"

"I think so. He's said he wants to be part of my life permanently but I think it's more than that he wants to get married. I found out that Jordan isn't planning on staying here forever. He described himself as a small town guy. I think their meeting Tuesday has something to do with it. I was so surprised when he told me that he really doesn't enjoy all that money he's surrounded by."

"Will and I have noticed that he seems to like dealing with little people like us. Don't you have any idea what they're up to?"

"None at all and even though I'm extremely curious, I still think it's better to wait. If something goes wrong, I'd think telling me jinxed them. Although I really don't think things ever go wrong for Jordan."

"Hang on. You know that's not true. If it were the two of you would be married by now and Malcolm would never have gotten anywhere near you. He also wouldn't need to put finishing touches on whatever they're doing."

"Oh. Right. Thanks again for having dinner early today."

"Don't mention it. Will and I do this most Sundays anyway so we can relax together all evening."

"I understand that now. I'm going to hate getting back to reality tomorrow."

"So don't. Kiley, you've taken all of what, three days off other than the time for your mom's funeral? Henry's always urging you to go on a real vacation. Why don't you spend a few more days with Jordan? Maybe go away somewhere? You know he'd be all for it."

"Because I'm afraid of how strongly I'm reacting to him already. If I stay too long, I don't know if I'd ever leave."

"I think that's what he has in mind."

"I know but this is all a little too fast for me. I can't handle it."

"I bet he told you to take all the time you need to catch up to him."

"He sure did. He meant it too."

"Girl, you've still got a lot to learn about your man if you're saying something like that." Dee saw Kiley's lip quiver. "What's wrong, Kiley? Jordan is a good guy. He won't pressure you."

"I know. It's just...it's just that all this is making me really miss my mom. I wish I could talk to her. I dated a little in high school before her trouble and I liked discussing the guys with her."

"I'm sure she would have loved Jordan."

"Yeah, me too. This is just so big and exciting. It's wonderful and scary all at once."

"And you want to know what her reaction would be," Dee concluded. "Well honey, the two of you visited Vera yesterday. She saw you together a few weeks ago too. Why don't you bounce everything in your mind off her? You said she's seemed pleased when you've gone to her for advice before. And I'll tell you what my mom said when Will invaded my life. She said, 'Dee, close off your brain and listen to your heart.' She asked me if he suddenly disappeared, would I truly miss him and how long would it take for me to want to see someone else. You already know how I answered those questions. Add that when you're thinking about everything else and see what answers you come up with."

"Thanks, Dee. I think that's pretty much what I needed to hear."

"I'm glad but I'd still have a chat with Vera. Although it might be difficult to go anywhere alone for a while, if Jordan's anything like Will was."

"Where are you going?" Jordan surprised them. "If you want privacy, Kiley, just say so. I don't intend to take over every waking moment unless you invite me to."

"That's not it at all, Jordan." Kiley had been helping Dee set the table. She put down the plates she was holding and went to him, pulling his head to hers for a kiss. "I was just telling Dee how much I wish my mom were here for me to talk about you with. Since Vera's met you, Dee suggested I give her a try."

"And you two figure I'll be reluctant to let you out of my sight." Jordan caressed her face. "I do understand what you meant when you said you needed time. But I have to confess that I'm hoping you decide to spend unlimited time with me. For now though, I'll be happy with whatever you're willing to give me."

As he spoke, Jordan's voice lowered. Although his hand was still on her cheek, Kiley shifted as if he were drawing her toward him. She sighed when their lips met again. Dee quickly turned back to the stove, trying not to stare. Brett and Will halted abruptly in the doorway. The couple had obviously forgotten that they weren't alone.

"They been at this long, Dee?" Will asked, walking around them.

"Well," she glanced over her shoulder, "just a few minutes."

"You think we should take dinner into the living room?" Brett chuckled. "Or we could throw a bucket of water on them?"

"Nah, I bet we could guide them in there with a few gentle pushes without them even noticing," Will suggested.

"I hope they're not planning on doing this at the restaurant. Some of those little, old ladies would go into cardiac arrest just from watching them," Dee joined in.

"Hmm, they are kind of hot," Will declared as Kiley began to giggle. Jordan held her while she hid her face against his chest.

"I'd apologize but you'll know I'm lying," Jordan grinned happily.

"We do understand," Dee motioned for them to sit down. "Now if we could only find someone for you," she commented to Brett.

"Nope, no way, no thanks," he protested. "I'm not ready for anything like this yet."

"Do you think any of us were particularly ready either?" Will asked seriously.

Brett looked around the table at each of them. "No, probably not. Honestly, I don't know what I'd look for."

"Neither did I until he kept standing in front of me every day," Kiley stated.

"Well I never reacted to anyone the way that Jordan did to you. If I do, I might feel differently but for now, I'm content with my life as it is," Brett paused. "I'm not saying that I'm not open to the idea. I wouldn't pass on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity if she showed up now. I'd just rather wait until I'm more settled if I have a choice."

"That's what I used to think too," Jordan agreed, reaching to clasp Kiley's hand. "Don't worry about Brett, Dee. He may claim to be a cynic now but I'm sure it's temporary."

The conversation continued to drift throughout the meal. Jordan tried to control himself but there were many times when he caught his hand reaching out to touch Kiley. Every touch, no matter how brief and seemingly innocent, distracted her. Jordan realized how he was affecting her but pretended to be unaware of it while continuing to make his actions appear accidental. He knew Will, Dee and Brett could all see what was happening, especially once Kiley completely lost track of what was being said.

"Jordan, why don't you two take off?" Will finally suggested after they finished eating.

"Yeah, stop tormenting the poor girl," Brett added.

"What? I'm just sitting here," Jordan grinned as his hand skimmed Kiley's wrist.

"Oh please," Dee rolled her eyes. "You keep this up and the three of us are going to have to leave in order to spare Kiley's modesty."

Jordan nodded and looked at each of them before turning to Kiley. Capturing her gaze, he smiled. "Kiley," he cupped her cheek, "ready to go home, sweet?"

"Yeah," she sighed, rubbing her face against his hand. "Jordan," she practically purred his name, leaning toward him for a kiss.

When they separated, Kiley's eyes were slightly glazed. Jordan stood, pulling her with him. "Say goodbye," he whispered.

"Goodbye," Kiley repeated as he led her from the room.

He shrugged at their friends, helping put on her coat. Outside, Jordan opened her car door. Instead of getting in, Kiley caught him in a passionate embrace.

Inside, the trio watched. "Skill skeptical, Brett?" Dee asked.

"Yes," he admitted. "Look, no offense but being distracted to the point Kiley is only proves that she's hot for him. Hell, she may even love him. But none of it shows me that she deserves the faith Jordan has in her. Please don't take that the wrong way because I truly like Kiley. I want her to be exactly what Jordan believes she is. I'm happy for them, really. I'll even apologize for every doubt I ever have at their fiftieth anniversary party."

"But what's wrong?" Dee prompted.

"I don't know. Maybe I need time to accept that they're honestly as good as they seem now." He shook his head. "Maybe I'm jealous even though it doesn't feel like it. Maybe I'll feel better after there's some outside pressure and Kiley handles it without breaking his heart. Other than Winslow I mean. Tomorrow will be a good first test. She's going to be embarrassed about the way they just left. We'll see if she's embarrassed as in she wishes she'd had more control or embarrassed as in it was rude to rush off like that but she's glad they did."

"I bet she doesn't stop blushing all day," Will speculated.

"Me too," Dee agreed. "Brett, they'll be fine. Kiley does love him, even if she is afraid to tell him so soon. She's just a little overwhelmed at the moment. That's all. Keep in mind that she doesn't have someone like you who's known her all her life who can help sort out her feelings without even being told what they are. She and I are pretty close now but I didn't know her before her parents died. Oh sure, I worked with her while her mom was in the home but Kiley spent all her time there so I didn't really get to know her until after. And you can't really count Alyssa because they've always been in and out of each other's lives not to mention her tendency to keep things impersonal with everyone, including Kiley. While you guys were upstairs, she told me how she wished her mom were here so they could talk about this. It's all so new and exciting and frightening for her. She just needs time for her heart and her mind to reach the same place."

"Dee's right, Brett," Will seconded. "Give Kiley the benefit of the doubt. She reminds me of Dee when I first announced that she was meant to be with me. She'll settle into this. Jordan will make it easy for her."

"I know. I'm probably worried over nothing."

"It's understandable. You simply want him to be happy. You've known him forever and she's new. It's only natural that you're a little overprotective," Will stated.

"I guess. As I said I'm really not jealous. You know Jordan brought her by Friday and gave me and Kiley time to talk. It's funny but since he met her, we've actually spent more time together than we did over the past four years. It's like he wants me there to share this with him."

"Of course he does. You're his best friend. Maybe he's asking for your approval, not that I think he'd give her up without it."

"Yeah, I got that part already. It means a lot to me, that he wants to include me. You're both right. It'll take some time for us to all settle in."



## **Chapter Twenty-One**

In the car, Jordan talked continually in his very seductive tone. Every time he stopped for a light, he touched her. By the time he parked, Kiley was trembling.

"Come with me." Jordan held her against his side while they walked.

"Jordan, please!" She molded herself more tightly to him and tried to capture his mouth for a kiss.

"Just let me get the door," he pleaded. His mind was racing. The first few touches had been truly accidental, well mostly accidental. As soon as she started to react, he had been too fascinated to ease up though he knew he should. Kiley was going to be more than a little embarrassed once she was thinking clearly again. Probably angry too but it was worth it. God, how he loved this woman! And how could he possibly resist when she was so unbelievably turned on? He was sure their friends understood and had a good laugh after they'd left.

Jordan pushed open the solid wooden door to his formal office and finally maneuvered her to the rich leather couch. Kiley had been making things difficult ever since she'd gotten out of the car, reaching for his belt buckle, trying to push off his jacket, tugging at his shirt. "Let me help, sweet."

When he took over those tasks, she threw off her own coat. Kicking off her shoes and shucking her pants, Kiley reached for him. "I want you, Jordan. I can't wait." She pulled him down with her. The desire showed plainly in her eyes.

With a growl, Jordan gave up his tenuous hold on the restraint he'd been attempting to exercise. Roughly, he positioned her under him, thrusting deeply when she raised her hips in invitation.

"Oh, God!" Kiley shifted so he was filling her fully.

When he felt her inner muscles begin to spasm, Jordan pumped harder, coming as she did. When his mind returned, Jordan slid from her and sprawled on the floor. Kiley followed, curling next to him, snuggling in his arms.

"Wow," she sighed softly.

"Are you okay?" Jordan asked.

"I'm more than okay," she mumbled before recognizing the real question. "Jordan, what do you mean?"

"I was rough with you, Kiley. I'm sorry. If I hurt you..."

"Sorry for what? A little lusty sex certainly won't hurt me. After yesterday, I thought you knew I don't always want gentle. If anything, I should apologize to you for the way I grabbed you."

Jordan chuckled. "You can grab me anytime. Seriously, Kiley, I shouldn't have let myself get that out of control."

"You do realize that sounds like a challenge? I admit I'm not very experienced but I don't have to be to know you excite me more than anyone else ever could. Tell me, did you intend to drive me crazy like that during dinner?"

"Not at first," he answered honestly. "But then I felt you shiver and I got carried away."

"I tried to resist. I feel bad, rushing out like that. But I'm sure I was very entertaining."

"You're not mad?"

"Mad? Heck no! Slightly embarrassed and I'm sure we'll get teased tomorrow but no way could I ever be mad at you for working me up like that. Unless you left me hanging, that is."

"Not a chance. Good thing we got out of there when we did because I was ready to ask if we could use their spare room."

"You wouldn't! Jordan, please tell me you're teasing. Leaving is one thing but asking to use the guestroom for casual sex in the middle of dinner..."

"Kiley, there is nothing casual about this."

"Sorry, wrong word." She nuzzled his cheek. "So this is where you hold all your big powwows." She looked around since he hadn't shown her this office before. "Why do you keep your main setup out of sight?"

"I use this room when I want to be intimidating. Having no computers in sight tends to cause discomfort among corporate types."

"Oh, I get it. It adds to your mystique when they don't see how you work."

"Exactly. I must admit though, it's going to be extremely hard to give an indifferent glance to anyone sitting on this couch from now on. It's highly likely that I'm going to see your face in my mind every time I'm in here."

"Mm." Kiley grinned. "I'll have to see what I can do upstairs to make this seem insignificant."

"No way." Jordan straightened his clothes and handed Kiley hers. "A hot, sexy woman like you, looking at me first with desire, then pleasure, followed by satisfaction is not an image I'll ever let go of."

"Not even if I show you more longing and ecstasy somewhere else?" She slipped on her panties but tossed her jeans over her shoulder.

"I doubt it, but I'm willing to try whatever you have in mind." He let his gaze rake her boldly from head to toe, showing her actions conveyed the message she'd intended.

"Why didn't you take me right upstairs?" Kiley was curious.

"Because we just would have needed to come back down here later." He kissed her deeply, sliding his hand under the elastic on her panties. "Dwight said his girlfriend got a present for you."

"A present? For me?"

"Yeah, he said he'd leave it on his desk." Jordan took her shoes and their coats before pointing to the package on the corner of his intern's desk. When she hesitated, he urged, "Go on."

Kiley opened the card and read the note. "Thought you could add these to your collection. We're looking forward to meeting you. Enjoy! Amy and Dwight." The gift was two DVDs, "Sleepless in Seattle" and "Hudson Hawk". "I've never heard of this one." She held up "Hudson Hawk".

"Me either," Jordan laughed, thinking of the teasing he was in for. "I guess they understand."

"Understand what?"

"That one of the reasons I'm so willing to watch these movies with you is so we stay home and I don't have to share you."

"Jordan, you could have just said that. You didn't need to get them to start a movie collection for us."

"Sure I did. Some of the things we said last night are helping us get to know each other. I thought we had fun."

"We did but I think that was more us than the movies."

"Probably but I like the idea of having a shared collection. We'll watch them again sometime."

"Okay. Can we watch this one now since neither of us has seen it?"

"I thought you were going to make me forget what just happened down here."

"I am." She headed for the stairs after looking over her shoulder and giving him a seductive smile.

Hours later as they cuddled in bed, Kiley asked, "So, how'd I do?"

"Love, you are indescribable."

"Thanks but did I make you forget about earlier?"

"In the office? No. Every time you share your pleasure with me is special."

"Jordan," she sighed and snuggled closer. "This weekend has been magical."

"It's only the beginning."

"I know but tomorrow we go back to real life."

"We don't have to. We could take off for some deserted island and ignore the rest of the world."

"That's so tempting but..."

"It's too soon and we're both too responsible."

"Yeah. It's not that the idea of disappearing to paradise with you doesn't appeal to me though."

"Thanks, Kiley. I'm very glad to hear that. I think, though, that anywhere we are together is paradise."

"You always know exactly what to say."

"I'm just telling you how I feel." He kissed her forehead. "What time do you need to be home tomorrow?"

"Nine unless you need to start earlier."

"That's the beauty of being independent. I can set my own schedule and be available whenever you want me."

"You still coming in for lunch?"

"Of course. I've heard that the hostess plans on inspiring some fantasies."

"You don't have to."

"Don't you want me to?"

"Yes. And I'd miss you but I thought you might not want to come in anymore since we'll be seeing each other away from there. You and Brett could go back to the other places you used to go."

"And deprive Brett the opportunity to tease us? He won't let us off that easily."

"Well Jordan, we do deserve it." She giggled. "Oh no! I didn't give you time to study for your test."

"I don't need any. It's all essay. We're supposed to give our first reaction to the problems that are presented to us. There's really no way to study for that."

"Good. What about your meeting Tuesday?"

"All set. With the time I spent this morning and an hour with Brett Tuesday before hand, there's nothing more to do." He guessed her concern. "Trust me, Kiley. Please? If I had work that couldn't wait, I would have said something like I did this morning. In return, I trust you to tell me if I start to smother you."

Kiley laughed, thinking she'd never have enough of this man. "Deal. Do you think your parents will like me?"

"Are you kidding? They'll love you. My mom isn't one of those fussy, no-one-is-good-enough-for-her-boys types. She's very accepting of everyone and I'm positive she'll see what a sweetheart you are right away. And my dad, well, he'll take one look at you and decide that you're hot." Kiley groaned. "I mean that in a good way, honest. Just wait. My dad is so laid back and easy-going that he makes Brett seem hyper."

"I can't imagine that's possible."

"It is. When this mess with Winslow is over and you feel more comfortable with me, we'll go visit them. You just have to tell me when you're ready."

"Oh!" Kiley took a deep breath. "Meeting your parents. That sounds so big."

"Nah. It'll be fine. They're nice people and they really will love you."

"Your brother probably already told them how stupid I am. It makes sense that he would have slipped whatever he gave me into my water so I'm sure it must have tasted funny. I didn't even notice. Then, like a true idiot, I fell for a line that was so impossible anyone else would have laughed in his face as soon as he said it."

"Stop it, Kiley. You told me how Winslow made you nervous and you'd started using your glass to avoid his hand. How would you ever guess he'd be devious enough to slip something in your water to drug you? You reacted the only way you ever would once he told you that Alyssa was hurt. Again, why would you have suspected he was luring you into something? You are neither stupid, nor an idiot and Shane knows that. To him, you are an innocent victim whose caring nature was used against you in order to draw you into a situation that you had no way of anticipating or controlling. He also knows how unbelievably lucky you are to have come into the bar where we were. He knows how special you are to me. And I'm sure he's already feeling very protective of you too, just like he does me and Brett. Give him a chance and get to know him. He really is the best."

"But Jordan, he still must see me as a silly fool anyway."

"No, he doesn't. Shane's always had a noble streak. He's extremely aware of right and wrong even when it comes in so many shades of gray that the rest of us can't tell the difference. I think that one reason he became a cop is because part of him believes he can save the world. Kiley, if you let Shane see who you are inside, he'll realize what a treasure you are. As a person, I mean, not just to me."

"Mm," she nodded. "Jordan, can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"Earlier, when you said...um..."

He knew she was blushing even though it was dark. "When I offered to keep you coming all night?"

"Yeah...um...if I hadn't said I'd had enough..."

"You ready for more, sweet?"

"No, that's not it. I'm very well satisfied, thank you very much. But...I mean...why would you? I mean, what do you get out of it?"

"Me? My God, Kiley, you really don't get it yet. Giving you pleasure, seeing it on your face, feeling your body respond, is all so special to me. Knowing I have a part in that means so much. You are so sensitive, so responsive and every sound, every movement you make, thrills me beyond belief. You know, as a guy I have limits but you, well, you can continue indefinitely until you choose to put a stop to it. I want you to have everything."

"Oh man, I love to listen to you. I can feel your voice all the way through me. I'm tingling."

"So you do want more." Jordan was more than willing to indulge her.

"No." She kissed his cheek and relaxed back against him. "I like the way you have me feeling right now. I'm tingling but also very content and happy, peaceful even. Right now, Jordan, you make me believe that anything is possible. I feel almost special and loved and it's closer to perfect than I ever imagined so I think I'd like to go to sleep and see if I can keep this through tomorrow."

"You are loved, Kiley, more than you know. You are special and you're right, we are perfect together. You make me happy too and anything is possible." He covered the hand she had resting on his chest. "Listen to me for a sec, okay? You know how I'd like us to end up, the whole happily ever after bit with you falling asleep in my arms like this every night forever. I realize this weekend has been a little bit like make-believe and tomorrow we go back to the real world. I understand if you're overwhelmed by all of what we've talked about once you have time on your own to think about things. I want you to know that I meant it when I said you should take all the time you need to decide where you want us to go from here. If you need me to slow down, I will. If you want to just be friends until you know me better, I can handle that. All I ask is that you don't shut me out entirely, that you give us a chance."

"Of course I won't shut you out, Jordan. Yes, this is a bit too much all at once but you're everything I've always wanted. I need time to get used to what you're offering but I really can't imagine anything that would make me walk away from you."

"Thanks, Kiley."

"You say that like you're insecure or something."

"When it comes to you, I am. I'm afraid I want you too much, that I'll scare you off by being too intense."

"You sweet, adorable man," Kiley sighed. "Good night, Jordan. By the way, I'm not giving up the things your body makes mine feel so you can forget going back to just being friends." When he started to respond, she put her hand on his mouth. "Sh, let's just go to sleep now."

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

Kiley was having the best dream. She'd finally overcome her shyness around Jordan and ended up in his bed. She was lying there, naked and he was doing such wonderful things to her body. He knew exactly how to touch her to send shivers up and down her spine. His mouth joined his hands, kissing, licking, nibbling, spreading the heat. She was so wet, so ready for him. It was so incredibly real. But why was he hesitating? He had to know how much she wanted him. "Jordan, please."

"Please what?"

Kiley's eyes flew open.

"Morning, sweet."

"I thought you were a dream."

"Nope. Did I wake you?"

"Apparently," she moaned when he resumed his exploration.

"Do you mind?"

"Only if you stop." Her hands roamed.

"Not a chance."

"Then what are you waiting for?" She caught his head for a kiss.

"I wanted your undivided attention. You looked so sexy when I woke up but I didn't want to take advantage of you while you were still sleeping."

"I'm not sleeping now." Kiley arched toward him in invitation. "You definitely have my attention." Reaching out, she guided him into her. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I thought I'd make love to you."

"Oh no!"

"No?" A mixture of confusion and hurt crossed his face.

"Not with that look in your eyes."

"What look?"

"The incredibly emotional, about to show me what's in your heart look." Kiley wiggled, burying him deeper inside her.

"Ah, sorry. But if I'm not going to make love to you then what are you doing?"

"Oh I didn't mean we aren't going to make love. We just need to change the mood a little."

"How do you propose we do that?" Jordan appeared fascinated.

"First, I think you should roll us over." When he had, he gave her a questioning look. "Okay, now I want you to lie there and let me see what I can do for us."

After Kiley kissed him deeply, she gave him the opportunity to comment. "You'll let me know if I can help?"

"Certainly." She grazed her erect nipples along his chest before pushing up so she was sitting. She began to ride his cock and could sense his struggle not to touch her. When she squeezed her nipples, Jordan growled, watching intensely. "Give me your hands." She placed them on her breasts, covering them with hers. "You have me spoiled."

"You should be, Kiley but trust me, I haven't even begun to spoil you."

"I mean sexually." She leaned forward and kissed him. "I've noticed how giving you are."

"I try."

"Oh, you are. In fact, if I put your hand here," she guided one to her mound, "You'd touch me to make sure I came first."

"My pleasure." He worked her fingers between his, urging her to help.

"Hmm, I kinda noticed that too. I think you like being inside me when that happens."

"Sure do. It feels so erotic, the way your pussy squeezes me."

"You mean like this?" She could barely speak as the waves of pleasure began.

"Yeah, that's it." Everything about him was tense, showing how hard he was fighting against taking control.

Kiley was almost still as she slumped on his chest. "Kiss me. Then I'm doing that again only this time you're going to move too."

While they kissed, Jordan again let her set the pace. "You sure you don't want more first?"

"Always, Jordan." She smiled seductively, lifting almost off before impaling herself again. "But right now, I need your help because I want hard and fast."

Jordan put his hands on her hips and did as she asked. "Like this?"

"Oh, yeah." She knew that he was as excited as she was by his expression. "That's perfect."

When Kiley's orgasm hit, she chanted his name. "Stop holding back. I love the way you feel too." She rode him until she felt his cock softening. "Mm, so much better than any alarm clock. I could get used having a wake-up call like that."

"Say the word and it can be arranged," he said playfully.

"I know and I'll be sure to add it to my pro-Jordan list."

"Your pro-Jordan list? Does that mean you have a con-Jordan list too?"

"Don't look so worried. I'm well aware that there's usually a con list when there's a pro list but I haven't found anything to put on it yet."



"Whew. Seriously though, Kiley, when there is something, I hope you know you can talk to me about it."

"Of course, as long as you know the same goes for me."

"Deal." They sealed it with a kiss. "Unfortunately, it's time to get up. I figure we have enough time for a quick shower and some breakfast before you need to get home."

"By breakfast do you mean real breakfast?"

"Yeah. I thought I'd cook, eggs, home fries, bacon, French toast. Whatever you want."

"Can I make an alternate suggestion?" He nodded, tugging her to her feet. "I think we should grab something quick, like a muffin or a bagel and spend more time in the shower instead."

"Hmm," Jordan pretended to consider it. "Tough choice." He spun her to face him and bent, capturing a nipple with his mouth. "Bagels for breakfast it is."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kiley was beat. In the hour she'd been home she had completed all her usual evening chores and taken a shower. Now, in her softest nightshirt, she was replaying the comments Jordan had made at the restaurant earlier. He'd arrived while she was busy seating customers on the far side of the dining room. He'd waited for her to return, leaning on her podium, raking her from head to toe with his gaze as she approached, clearly enjoying her physical reaction to his watching her. Jordan had blocked her body from view and grazed one of her nipples while bestowing a deceptively innocent peck on her cheek. He'd whispered that he was just as excited and guided her hand beneath his coat so she could feel the truth of his words. When he ran his hand gently down her back to confirm her lingerie, he'd groaned softly. Throughout the entire time he was there, he'd given her smoldering looks whenever their eyes met. Thank goodness Henry was an understanding boss because she'd been distracted even after he left. She'd certainly be unemployed if he weren't.

Waiting for Jordan's call, Kiley was stunned at how important he'd become in such a short time. She couldn't believe she missed him so much even though she would soon be talking to him. Their weekend together had lasted until morning. She'd seen him over lunch. Why then, did it feel like forever since they'd spoken?

Kiley didn't know how to define what she was feeling. Poor Jordan thought she needed time to consider what he was offering. How could she find the words to make him understand that all her doubts centered on herself? It was the indisputable truth that Jordan was perfect. She believed every word that he'd said to her. She was certain that life with him would be even better than she imagined. Unfortunately, it was highly unlikely for her to ever come close to what he truly wanted. Sure, they'd had fun together all weekend and probably would continue to for a while. Good thing she knew better than to trust her severely lacking self to hold his interest indefinitely. Kiley decided it would be way less selfish to convince Jordan that fun was all she really

wanted. That way, when he started getting bored, it would seem like her decision to walk away, thereby taking the burden from him. If she ended it, it would spare him the pressure of admitting that he'd been wrong. Kiley believed it would be best to keep their relationship light and playful. However, the mere thought of not having Jordan in her life made her heart feel as if it were being crushed.

That was when the phone rang. "Hello," Kiley answered in a very small voice.

"Kiley? It's me. Are you okay? You sound upset." Jordan's concern could be heard in his voice.

"Oh. Hi." She fought to rein in her emotions. "I'm fine. Sorry. I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"Uh, nothing really. You'll think I'm silly."

"Please tell me," he urged gently.

"Well...um...it's just...well...I wish..."

"You wish what?" Jordan asked once she'd clearly stopped speaking. "You know if there's anything I can do, I will."

"But it's late. You're tired. Me too. It's just..."

"Are you wishing that we were together, like I am? I miss you ridiculously, considering that I saw you a few hours ago. And yes, I am tired but I doubt I'll sleep very well. You see, it may have only been a few nights that I slept with you in my arms but my bed is still going to seem very empty tonight."

"Jordan," Kiley sighed, fighting tears. "That's exactly what I was thinking."

"Then I suggest we remedy this. That is, if you want to too. If you do, all you have to do is invite me over and I'll be there in no time."

"Are you sure it's not too late?"

"Yes or no answer please, Kiley. Do you want to be alone tonight?"

"No but..."

"Stop. No buts allowed. One more question, again yes or no only. Do you want me to come over now and hold you while we sleep?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then I'll be right there." He hung up, not giving her the chance to protest.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thank you," Jordan said as he closed the door behind him and swept Kiley into his arms.

"For what? Not wanting to spend the night without you?"

"Definitely that but also for making sure it was me before you opened the door and for not changing out of your nightshirt."

"I always check who's at the door first. I will admit I considered changing but then I realized that I don't own anything remotely sexy other than what I wore today and I didn't want to put it back on since you already know I always shower when I get home."

"Kiley, the sexy part of that little green set is you. You do look incredibly delicious in it and as expected I did spend all day picturing you. But I spent Saturday afternoon, stretched out on your bed, visualizing you in something more like what you have on now and that image is just as hot."

"You're exaggerating."

"Nope, trust me. You are one fine woman no matter what you're wearing."

After refastening the security chain, she went into the bedroom. "Can we continue this conversation in bed?" she asked. "Oh," she realized what she'd said. "I didn't mean... I just thought..."

"You thought we'd be more comfortable stretched out while we talk." Jordan turned her to face him and tipped her chin. "I didn't come here to seduce you. We don't have to make love or have wild, out of control sex every time we're in bed together. I missed you. All of you. It seems like ages since I was with you. You haven't smiled at me in hours. My hand felt empty all afternoon since yours wasn't in it." He buried his face in her hair before he continued. "Yeah, you smell as good as I remembered and your lips look as kissable as I thought they did."

"And you, Jordan McKade, sound just as sexy as ever." She unbuttoned his shirt and hugged him with her arms beneath it. "You still smell wonderful too and your chest feels as good on my cheek as it did last night. Please come to bed now. I want to hold you while we talk."

"Damn, woman! I'm trying to convince you I'm not here just for your body and you go and say things like that."

"So you're not totally opposed to the idea of our bodies touching then?"

"I'm very much in favor of it. I just don't want you to think that that's the only reason I wanted to come over."

"Do you think that's the only reason I wanted you here?"

"No." Jordan stripped to his briefs and climbed in bed beside her.

"Then why would I think that about you?" Kiley switched off the light and snuggled into his embrace. "Now that we have that settled, is it okay if I kiss you hello?" She shifted and gave him the sweetest, softest kiss. "I'm glad you're here."

"Me too. How was your day?"

"Long. The morning went quickly enough, with Dee's teasing. Then when Brett showed up before you, they just had to tell Henry all about us. And you, well you know what happened while you were there. God, Jordan, I can't believe how excited I was. All you did was look at me."

"You had the same effect on me."

"Yeah but at least you had a coat to hide behind and you don't blush. I think it took me half the afternoon before I could concentrate fully. Then we had a slew of groups. Two of the night girls called in so I helped with drinks all evening."

"You must be exhausted."

"I am but it's a good kind of tired. We're usually steady Mondays but tonight was nonstop hectic. Poor Henry kept trying to give us breaks but the bar was really busy too."

"Don't your feet hurt?"

"No more than they do every Monday."

Jordan slid away from her. "Scoot up." He had her feet on his lap before she realized what he was doing.

"You don't have to... Mm, that is so good," Kiley sighed contentedly as he massaged her feet. "You're amazing."

"Nope, still just me." He hit a particularly good spot and Kiley moaned in appreciation.

"Tell me about your day. How was the test?"

"It was actually kind of fun." He told her the scenarios it contained and how he suggested they be resolved.

"How do you know all this stuff?"

"Mostly it's common sense. You just have to pay attention to circumstances." He proceeded to give her another of the problems and asked what she'd recommend. "See, Kiley? You answered that the same way I did. You need to give yourself more credit. You have great instincts when it comes to people."

"So good they got me drugged. Do you think he's gone?"

"No, he's still hiding in his apartment."

"How do you know?"

"I met up with Jesse after lunch. They've been watching Winslow around the clock since last Thursday. We gave him a little push."

"What does that mean?"

"Jesse and I went to see Bo. I wanted to know how he's involved in this."

"Jordan! Wasn't that dangerous? You could have been hurt."

"No, Kiley. I meant it when I said he's an okay guy other than being a bookie. And he was expecting me to show up sooner or later. Besides, Jesse was with me. We were in a public place and I made it clear that I just wanted to talk."

"You say this Jesse being there made it safe but how?"

"When this is done I'll introduce you. Jesse is very capable of giving the impression of being someone you really don't want to mess with. I'm sure he was armed even though it wasn't necessary and I know he knows what he's doing in a physical

confrontation. I also know he'll never use force unless it is absolutely necessary. Bo got that right away so there was no need for Jesse to do anything other than sit there."

"How can you sound so calm?"

"Because everything really was fine, Kiley. Trust me, please? All we did was ask a few questions. Winslow owes Bo three thousand two hundred dollars, which is higher than he usually goes. He only did it this time because he knew Winslow was onto something with Samuels and figured it was worth taking the chance. He had no idea Winslow was planning on bringing you into it and can't believe he actually tried to pull something that stupid. Bo's already made it crystal clear with Samuels that he wasn't involved."

"So now what? We just keep sitting around until does something?"

"Basically, although I had Bo give Winslow a call to ask when he was getting his money. He implied that Winslow needs to settle up fast because he's running out of time. Jesse figures that thinking Samuels is out of patience will force Winslow into action. It was too late for him to hit the bank today so it's likely he'll make his move in the morning. There's no way he'll run without his money."

"But you said his account was frozen."

"Exactly. He'll find out when he gets to the bank and by the time he leaves, I should be able to get there. Hopefully I can convince him to pay up. It's probably his only chance of walking away from this after what he tried to pull."

"Oh."

"Don't worry, Kiley. I can't believe that once he's cornered Winslow won't see reason. Especially since Samuels' guys are still watching him too."

"Doesn't that mean Samuels knows you are?"

"I doubt it. Jesse and Frank are better at this than most people."

"But won't they stop him as soon as he leaves his apartment?"

"Not if he heads to the bank. Jesse told me that they're supposed to stay out of sight until after he goes for his money."

Kiley gawked wordlessly. "So Bo just made this call for you?"

"He did once I explained that by helping me, he stands a better chance of regaining what would otherwise be a definite loss. I also told him it was the least he could do since the situation was so dangerous for you."

"But you said he didn't have anything to do with it."

"He didn't but he still needs to know how serious I am about this. No one is going to do that to a woman, any woman, if I can help it. The woman being you just makes me angrier. If Bo knows I'm willing to help get this mess straightened out, other people will hear about it and maybe it'll make someone else think before they try a similar stunt."

"You're scaring me."

"Why, Kiley? All I've done is try to fix this by making sure Winslow doesn't skip town without paying his debts. I talked to Bo and enlisted his help in pushing things along so everything's settled quicker."

"You didn't threaten this Bo person?"

"Threaten Bo? How, by taking Jesse with me? I believed Bo when he said he didn't know what Winslow was going to do. I'm trying to get him his money too. I took Jesse so Bo didn't try to run. And also because I thought you'd be more comfortable, knowing I didn't meet with Bo alone."

"I wouldn't have wanted you to see him at all if I'd known you were going to. Why didn't you tell me? And how did you know where he would be?"

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to worry over nothing. I knew where he was because I've used him for information in the past. I told you, Kiley. He's really not a bad guy. We had a long talk when we first met and we understand each other. He knows I'm asking questions for myself and not to interfere with his business."

"But if he knows you why would he run away from you?"

"Because he could tell how furious I was last Thursday when I realized Winslow drugged you. Some of the people he deals with would have swung first and asked questions later. In his line of work, it's a good policy to be cautious, especially when someone messed with someone else's girl. Keep in mind that I've always kept a certain distance when I got information from him in the past, even though I did help him out a few times by mentioning some people he might want to reconsider dealing with. He really had no way of knowing how I was going to react without you there."

"What if he had run?"

"I would have caught him and then we would have talked. I had my class to get to. I didn't feel like chasing him and wasting that much time. I couldn't have gone to him earlier because I didn't want Winslow to have time to get to the bank today, again because I had class. Tomorrow, I have the time to deal with him if I need to."

"What about your big meeting?"

"Brett and Sadie can handle it if necessary. Everything is ready so even though I would like to be there I really don't need to be. It's not until early evening anyway. I suspect Winslow will make his move long before then." Jordan could see Kiley's face in the glow from the streetlight. "Are you really afraid of me?"

"No, I guess not. You just sounded a little dangerous for a minute."

"I won't lie to you, Kiley. If you're ever in jeopardy again, I will be dangerous. I could never stand by and let you be hurt. I know how to fight and I will if I have to just like I would have then. But Kiley, I do know there's a time and place for everything. I'm not the kind of man who would resort to violence unless there's no other option."

"Jordan, I wasn't saying I think you'd go around beating people up for the heck of it because I know you wouldn't. It's just that you know all these guys."

"Yes, I know them but I don't socialize with them. I don't transact business with them. I don't invest for Bo and I don't bet with him either. We exchange information now and then. That's it. You already know Samuels tried to hire me at the beginning and I refused him. The same with various other less than legal businessmen. They're part of the neighborhood. I still think it's better to know everyone slightly than it is to be unaware."

"I don't know which is worse, you knowing real criminals or Alyssa hanging out with gang members."

"She's a good example. She let those guys get to know her enough to trust that she wasn't there to turn them in. I'm not looking to turn anyone in either although if I'd caught Winslow in the act I certainly would have. Honestly, Kiley, I believe it takes all kinds. Who am I to judge how someone makes a living? As long as they don't intentionally hurt others then I don't really care what they do with their lives. Frankly, I'm much more worried about your cousin than I ever have been about me. She's right up there with Shane."

"I guess you do know what it's like to worry about someone who takes risks, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. You need to trust me, sweet. I don't take unnecessary risks, in spite of who I may know. I need to be involved because I want Samuels to understand that you weren't there by choice. And, even though I'm not really sure he deserves it, I'm doing what I can to get Winslow through this in one piece."

"Wait." Kiley sat up and switched on the light. "You're doing this partly because you want him to know I wasn't there willingly? What would happen if he thought I was?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I don't want to find out either."

"Oh my God, Jordan! If he thinks I agreed to be there..." She was too horrified to continue.

"See? That's precisely why I'm doing all I can to protect you. I will protect you, Kiley." He held her gaze. "I promise."

"I'm so stupid. You sounded so sure they knew Winslow tricked me that I never even considered they might think I agreed to be there." She shivered.

"You are not stupid," Jordan stretched out next to her again. "You're beautifully innocent, as you should be. You know there are plenty of bad things in the world but why should you have to think of them in terms of you specifically? No one should be shoved into that position."

"I guess." Kiley wanted to accept what he was saying.

"Why don't you turn off the light and let me hold you? I came over here so we could both sleep better and I've managed to make you tense instead."

"Jordan, I did that to myself, not you. I'm the one who didn't think of all this before even though I should have. You simply told me what you did today as I asked you to

do. I like talking to you about everything, not just fun stuff. I don't want you to hide things from me because you want to protect me from my own ignorance. I'm a big girl. So what if I worry? I'm going to do that anyway, even when there's nothing specific to worry about, okay? I'd much rather know what's going on."

"Fine, Kiley. I won't keep things from you, even if I think it would be for your own good."

"Thank you." She flipped the light back off and snuggled against him. "And thank you for rubbing my feet. They feel so much better."

"Glad to be of service."

Kiley was quiet for a long time. "Jordan?"

"Hmm?"

"It feels nice, knowing you'd protect me."

"Good because it feels nice, knowing I have you to protect."

Kiley was wrapped in his arms, pondering all he'd said, since he got there and over the weekend. In that moment, she decided she didn't want to give him up. She had to find a way to keep him interested somehow. They'd just had a conversation and she'd held up her end of it, even though parts of it upset her. When he was talking about his test, he'd listened to what she said in a way that didn't seem like he was humoring her so maybe she wasn't actually as much of a ninny as she considered herself to be.

While Kiley was lost in thought, Jordan had been gently rubbing her back as if to relax her. Suddenly, she was very aware of his hand. It never strayed but she started to want it to. Kiley began to trace lazy circles on his chest. Her head was on his shoulder and it wasn't much of a shift for her tongue to be able to flick his nipple. She proceeded to nibble her way to his neck while her hands continued to caress him.

"Whatcha doing, sweet?" Jordan couldn't stay silent any longer.

"Indulging myself," she whispered, brushing his lips with a fleeting kiss. "Unless you prefer that I didn't."

"Go ahead. I don't mind."

"Good." She kissed him more thoroughly. "Earlier, when you showed what you were hiding behind your coat it was all I could do not to drag you to the back. I still can't believe that I do that to you."

"I've had that reaction since the day we met. Why do you think I'm always carrying my coat?"

"Hmm, how do I know you don't react that way to all females?"

"You know I don't. I talked to other women several times over the weekend. When my attention wasn't entirely on you, did you see even a hint of a hard-on?"

"No, not even in the bakery when that very pretty girl waited on you."

"You're much prettier even though pretty isn't enough for me. There's something about you, a feeling I've gotten since the moment we met. You're different from other



women. Special. Like you were meant to be mine all along even if we had to wait until now to meet."

"I'm not sure I'll ever understand what you mean by that but I guess I'll take your word on it." She kissed him deeply as she stroked him through the cotton of his briefs. "Take these off, Jordan. They're in my way and I really want to touch you." He did as she asked. "I absolutely adore your body, did I tell you that?"

"Yeah, you may have mentioned it over the weekend once or twice."

"Will you let me return the pleasure you gave me yesterday? It will make me very happy if you do."

"I certainly want you to be happy but don't you want me to touch you too?"

"Thanks but not just now. I happen to agree with what you said last night. Giving you pleasure gives me pleasure. Please, Jordan?"

"All right. Whatever you want. I'm all yours."

"Ooh, I do like the sound of that." Kiley kissed him again, trying to put her emotions into it. Without a doubt, she knew she loved him. Now all she had to do was conquer her certainty that she was too inept and unsophisticated for him. Kiley forced that thought from her mind as she kissed her way down his chest. "You're an incredible man, Jordan McKade."

"Thanks, Kiley but I'm still just me."

"Well in my opinion, just you," she was fondling him again, "is truly incredible. I never met anyone like you before. You're strong and handsome. You're so confident that you make me believe you're capable of anything. You're funny and charming. You're powerful and yet gentle and tender. You're decent and kind. You're extremely lovable and loving. You have the sexiest voice I ever heard, not to mention the sexiest body."

Jordan groaned. "God, Kiley, what are you doing to me?"

She'd been stroking him as she talked, altering the tempo and pressure, testing his reactions. "I'm touching you, Jordan. Just like I wanted to at lunch. You're so hard. I'm guessing that means you like this."

"Hell, yes!" He couldn't keep himself from moving his hips.

"No, no, hold still. I'm not ready for that yet." She moved to kiss him again, cupping his testicles to lessen his excitement. "I want to enjoy you a little longer."

"Whatever makes you happy."

"You make me happy, Jordan." She returned to nibbling on his chest. This time, she continued downward until she was at his hip. When Kiley took Jordan's erection in her mouth, he groaned, fighting to stay still. She switched between licking the shaft and sucking his cock deep into her mouth. Each time he felt close to coming, Kiley sensed it and eased off. "I love doing this to you," she muttered around him. "Talk about hot! Do you have any idea how sexy you make me feel, knowing I can turn you on like this? I love the way it feels when you explode in my mouth." She sucked him in, pumping her

head over his groin. "That first night, when you were talking and we were both touching ourselves, I was too preoccupied to watch you closely." She licked a drop from the tip. "Can I turn on the light? I want to make you come with my hands so I can watch you. Will you let me?"

"Anything you want." He could barely speak.

Once Kiley could see, she spent some time feasting on his mouth, keeping her hand around him but not moving. When she raised her head, she stared intensely into his eyes. Still holding his gaze, she slowly began to caress him. "Watch with me." She waited for him to nod before settling her head on his shoulder. "Look at you, Jordan. My fingers aren't long enough to touch when you're this excited. No wonder I can feel you everywhere when you're inside me." Jordan groaned so she peeked at him. "Keep watching, please. See that? When you start to throb like that I can feel it. It's so amazing. That little pulse has pushed me over the edge more than once. We may still be getting to know each other in lots of ways but I think our bodies already do."

"Kiley," he gasped her name as he exploded.

"That's it. Did you see that? When you let go like that inside me, it's simply incredible." Kiley held him gently even after his climax ended. "Thank you." She kissed him tenderly, not letting him respond. "Please don't say anything. And don't move. I'll be right back."

Jordan lay still, letting her clean him. When she finished and snuggled against him, he said, "You're the incredible one. You sure you don't want some attention?"

"Not tonight, thanks. I'm very content at the moment," she sighed happily. "Night, Jordan."

"Night, sweet Kiley. I love you."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

"Jordan, why don't you just propose and get it over with? I knew you wouldn't be able to stay home last night," Brett teased.

"Hey, I fully intended to spend the night alone. It's just when Kiley said she wished I was with her, how could I resist?" Jordan shrugged. "And you already know I can't propose until this is settled with Winslow."

"So you'll be doing that tomorrow then?"

"Brett—" Jordan's phone vibrated, cutting off his reply. "McKade...be right there."

"Winslow?" Brett asked.

"He's on his way into the bank."

"Want me to come with you?"

"Thanks but no. I don't know how long I'll be. If I get tied up longer than expected, you'll have to handle the meeting." When he saw Brett's concern, Jordan added, "Jesse will be nearby."

"Don't be a hero, okay? He's not worth it."

"I know, Brett."

As soon as Kiley finished seating two new arrivals, she hurried to the door where Jordan was waiting. "Who called? What happened?"

"That was Jesse. Winslow's in the bank. I have to go."

"Jordan." Kiley stopped him with a hand on his arm.

Quickly, he pulled her to him and held her for a moment. "It's okay, Kiley. I'll be careful and everything will be fine. I promise. Trust me." Jordan kissed her before releasing her. "If I can, I'll call you before the meeting. If not, I'll see you as soon as it's over. Don't worry, sweet. It's all going to work out for us." He waited for her to nod before leaving.

Kiley watched until he rounded the corner. Then she went and sat with Brett. "I hate this."

"Me too but you have to have faith in him. Jordan knows what he's doing."

"Yes but I don't understand why he has to confront Malcolm. If Jordan knows this Samuels guy, why doesn't he just go talk to him?"

"I don't think it works that way although I suspect he'll end up doing that at some point."

"Oh my God. I really wish I'd told Henry how uncomfortable Malcolm made all of us. If I had, Jordan wouldn't be doing any of this."

"But then you two may not have gotten together."

"Or maybe we would have after we'd met at the hockey game like he planned. Come on, Brett. We both know Jordan would have gotten us together eventually. Although, if it had taken longer, you might be more comfortable with me."

"It's not you, Kiley. My best friend has his heart out there, exposed to whatever comes next and honestly, I haven't seen yours yet. I really do want to believe you. You're good for him and I like the two of you together. Even a cynic like me is starting to believe it's possible to find that one perfect someone. You should get back to work." He nodded toward the door. Kiley rushed off to seat the new group.

As she returned, his phone chirped. "Hudson...oh son of a bitch...damn! No, you're right...I'm on the way."

"What?" Kiley demanded when Brett tossed some bills on the table.

"Winslow came out of the bank swinging and there was a cop nearby. Jesse said they were just tossed into the back of a squad car. Since Jordan insisted that he stay out of sight, I have to go try to get Jordan out of the station before Shane shows up."

"I'm going with you," Kiley declared. "Dee, tell Henry..."

"No, Kiley," Brett interrupted.

"Yes, Brett. If you won't take me, I'll drive myself."

He could tell how determined she was. "Jordan's not going to like this but I don't have time to argue."

\* \* \* \* \*

Brett was parking when he saw Jordan, Malcolm and an unknown man leaving the police station. Jordan was smiling as he spoke like it was any average day. Malcolm looked as if he had gone ten rounds with a prizefighter. His face was purple. One eye was swollen shut and his clothes were a disheveled mess. At the curb, Vincent was waiting beside a large, black car. He reached out, offering Jordan his hand when the trio reached him. After a brief conversation, Vincent made a gesture toward the car. Malcolm was forced into the back seat when he resisted. Jordan, on the other hand, got in willingly, almost as if he was going for a drive with friends.

Brett heard Kiley gasp and said, "It's not what it looks like. That's Jordan's business face." He read the doubt in her eyes. "He's going because he has to in order to resolve this. You have to believe me. Look, there's Shane. Let's see if he knows anything more."

"What the hell is he doing?" Shane growled when he spied Brett. "I got a call, saying he was picked up for brawling in the street."

"He was trying to talk to Winslow."

Shane spewed a string of obscenities. "Sorry, Kiley. What is he thinking? Let's see if they're going to hold him."

"He just left," Brett supplied as they entered the station.

"Left? With whom? Brian," Shane snagged the officer who had called him. "What's up with my brother?"

"Hey, Shane. You just missed him." The man laughed. "Damn, you should have seen him in action. I thought you were impressive to watch but man, your brother can move. I don't know what had the other guy so pissed off but he came tearing out of the bank and went straight for him. He was swinging and swearing and your brother sidesteps him and calm as can be, tells him to settle down, that he just wants to talk. The other guy went berserk but your brother managed to avoid everything, talking the whole time, trying to get him to listen but he wouldn't shut up so finally your brother popped him dead on the head. Asshole never even saw it coming but the guy's so stupid he still wouldn't quit." He snorted. "Nope. He kept right on charging even after it was obvious he didn't stand a chance. I don't think he came close to connecting anything he threw. Idiot looked pulverized by the time I pulled them apart and your brother didn't even need to straighten his tie."

"Enough, Brian, we get the picture." Shane nodded toward Kiley, who had gone very pale. "Where'd he go?"

"Hell if I know." Brian shrugged. "Five minutes after we got here, some hotshot lawyer in an Armani suit waltzes in and wants to know if there are any charges. Before I could say a word, your brother pipes up that it's all a misunderstanding. The other guy changed his tune from wanting Jordan to fry for what he did to the same misunderstanding shit. I gave them both a warning, since neither would say more and they left with the lawyer. You have any idea what's really going on?"

"No, not really," Shane answered evenly. "I guess I'll catch up with him at home." He motioned for Brett and Kiley to follow.

Outside, Shane turned to Brett. "Where is he?" When Brett hesitated, he added, "I know you have a way to find out so just do it. Come on, Brett."

Brett saw the concern in his eyes. He nodded and pulled out his phone. After a short exchange, he told Shane that Jordan was on his way to Samuels' townhouse in the hills. "Shane, Jesse says if I can't talk you out of interfering that I should make you understand how important it is that you leave your badge and gun in the car. You can't go in there as a cop. Stress the brother thing and you just might manage not to blow this for Jordan. You know you should just let him handle this."

"And you know I can't, Brett." He met his gaze. "Why don't you take Kiley home? I know you guys have that meeting today. Kiley, Jordan'll call you when it's over."

"I'll be at work," Kiley stated, surprising them both. She was still pale but she seemed calmer. Her face was unreadable.

"All right," Shane glanced at Brett. "It will be fine, Kiley."

"I'm sure it will." She left them and walked to Brett's car.

"Brett?"

"I know, Shane. I'll stay with her as long as I can."

"I'll tell Jordan. Now, I have to go."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mr. McKade, what an interesting surprise to have you join us. Please, take a seat," Samuels greeted Jordan with courtesy.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Samuels. It's nice to have the opportunity to meet you."

The two exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes, both completely ignoring Malcolm who was still standing by the door with Vincent.

"Excuse me, Mr. Samuels," one of Samuels' men said as he entered, crossing the room to whisper something that only Samuels was able to hear.

"By all means, show him in," Samuels said cheerfully. A moment later, Shane was ushered in. "Detective McKade, how nice of you to come. I must say it's not every day that one of our city's finest shows up at my door, at least not without a warrant."

"Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Samuels. I assure you that I am not here in any official capacity."

"No? Why then, are you here, Detective?"

"Pure and simple concern for my brother. You are probably still wondering why, since he obviously isn't happy to see me and I know I'll hear his opinion on my interference later. The fact is that no matter how old we get, Jordan will always be my kid brother. And now he's gone and fallen in love so I'm afraid he might not be thinking as clearly as he usually does."

"In love? How nice. Tell me, Mr. McKade is this girl special?"

"Kiley Fisher is more than special, sir. She's my future, my life."

"Pretty?"

"Not that it matters but yes." When Samuels looked at him expectantly, he continued, "She has the softest red hair, the biggest, most expressive green eyes, the most caressable skin with the perfect amount of freckles, a smile that lights up her whole face and a laugh that I can feel in my heart. She has a great sense of humor and an adventurous streak that I'm sure is going to surprise me endlessly. She's clever and interesting although I'm going to have to work on her self-confidence in those. Kiley's caring, kind-hearted and compassionate. In fact, she's the reason I'm involved here."

"Do you intend to marry Miss Fisher?"

"If she'll have me. We need to put this behind us first."

"Do you see yourself getting bored and letting your affections wander, Mr. McKade?"

"Never," Jordan answered truthfully. "If Kiley becomes my wife, I intend to cherish her forever. No matter what our future holds, she'll know without a doubt, that we'll face all of it together."

"Detective, what's your opinion of this Miss Fisher?" Malcolm's nervous shifting distracted him. "Stand still, Winslow. We'll get to you." He pinned him with a deadly glare. "My apologies. Detective, you were about to comment?"

"Honestly, I haven't spent enough time with Kiley to know her very well but I do know that she looks at Jordan the same way he looks at her. I also know that my brother is an excellent judge of character. His instincts are phenomenal so if he believes Kiley is the woman meant to share his life then I believe it too."

"I see." He looked back and forth between them. "All right, Mr. McKade what does your Miss Fisher have to do with me?"

"She is the girl Winslow chose for his scheme last week."

"Ah." He shot Malcolm another glare. "As I understand it, she had been drugged?"

"Yes, sir," Jordan confirmed.

"The odds of you being there at that precise moment are astronomical. Winslow," Samuels stood, "you are damn lucky to be alive. If I'd caught you doing that to my woman, I would have killed you, very slowly and very painfully. In fact, if you'd succeeded in getting here with Miss Fisher, I might have killed you on principle. Come to think of it, I still may."

"Begging your pardon, sir but that's another reason I had to come," Jordan risked interrupting. Samuels turned to stare at him. "I was afraid that would be your reaction, knowing how you treasure your wife. When I told Kiley, her gentle nature overruled her sense of outrage and hoped to prevent that."

"Amazing. The fool here chooses a woman willing to want to save his miserable hide, regardless of what he intended. She's loved by a man noble enough to put aside his own desire for revenge and get involved where he most definitely should not be. On top of that, the nobleman's brother waltzes in, declaring his loyalty and risking it all over a piece of scum who truly doesn't deserve to live."

"In my defense, Samuels I meant no disrespect. I had the impression that the girl was willing but needed something to help relax her. She asked me for it."

Samuels silenced him with a glance. "That's Mr. Samuels to you and you'd do well to remember it. Might I recommend you stop lying before Mr. McKade loses the tremendous control he's exhibited thus far and tears you to pieces? Perhaps you'd like to begin again."

Malcolm was visibly shaken. "Uh, yes, Mr. Samuels. The thing is I was on my way to pay you today but McKade stole my money."

"Stole your money?"

"No, sir," Jordan spoke. "I merely had his funds frozen to prevent him from leaving before we had a chance to talk."

"Hmm, interesting." Samuels considered them. "Winslow, I believe Mr. McKade did the appropriate thing. I believe you tried to ruin an innocent woman, perhaps because she favored Mr. McKade over you or perhaps to get back at him for turning

you away. I suspect, had you accessed your account this afternoon, you would have run in order to escape the debt we all know you owe me. You also would have done the same with Bo, who I know did not appreciate the way you involved him in your despicable ploy. In my opinion, any of these things individually would be too serious to overlook. The fact that you are guilty of the lot makes certain consequences unavoidable. However, I feel I must take into consideration the wishes of the lady in question. Mr. McKade, what does your Miss Fisher see as the ideal outcome today?"

"Mr. Samuels, Kiley would prefer for Winslow to leave the area. She also wished for a way to ensure he'll never try anything similar again. I should add that Kiley doesn't know the extent to which he has taken advantage of many of the female patrons at Mr. Paul's, the restaurant where she works."

"Winslow, you are certainly the luckiest bastard I ever met." Samuels was quiet. "Detective, is there any chance of you being corruptible?"

"No, sir, absolutely none."

"Mr. McKade, I won't bother asking you. Since I'm not one of your clients, I already know the answer to that. Does this trash have enough to cover his debts?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would he have anything left?"

"About ten thousand dollars."

"All right, Winslow here's the deal. You pay up, both Bo and myself. You give my wife five thousand dollars to donate to the rape crisis center where she volunteers. You use the rest to leave town. You have three days. If you're still here or if you ever come back, I assure you I will deal with you. I have many friends and I will use them to keep an eye on you. If I hear of you pulling another stunt like you attempted here, I will take it personally and I will deal with you. As I will if I ever have any indication that you have returned to the same method of enhancing your cash flow. Do you understand the gift you've been given by Miss Fisher?"

"Yes, Mr. Samuels."

"Have I made myself clear? I'd hate to find there's been a misunderstanding about something I said."

"I understand."

"Any objections, Mr. McKade?"

"No, sir."

"Perhaps you'd like to discuss this with Miss Fisher?"

"That won't be necessary. I'm sure she'll be pleased."

"Detective?"

"You're being more generous than he deserves. Thank you, sir."

"Good. Mr. McKade, how much time will you require to restore his account?"

"I can arrange it instantly if you'll permit me to make a call."



Samuels nodded.

"It's me. Do you know where I am? That's right. Go ahead and release it. Great thanks. It's done."

Samuels raised an eyebrow. "Vincent, accompany Winslow to the bank. If there's any trouble... Let's just say there better not be any trouble." Vincent motioned for Malcolm to leave but Samuels stopped him. "Three days, Winslow."

When he was alone with the brothers, he said, "Such a shame. What I wouldn't give to have you two in my pocket. The loyalty you've shown here is hard to come by. Unfortunately, that same loyalty prevents me from using this visit to my advantage. Your credibility will not be compromised by me or anyone in my employ."

"Thank you, Mr. Samuels but that was never a consideration," Jordan stated sincerely.

"I suppose not. You wouldn't be willing to share your account controller?"

"No, I couldn't possibly do that." Jordan grinned.

"As I expected. Mr. McKade, it's been a treat meeting you even in such unfortunate circumstances. I am glad you were there for your lady but I assure you, Vincent would have kept her from further harm. Give her my regards and I wish you both a lifetime of happiness as I've had with my wife. Detective, it is a rare privilege, having you in my home."

"The privilege is mine, Mr. Samuels. I wish you were in a different line of work. I'd like to know you better."

"I share your opinion. Perhaps after I retire? For now, I'll guarantee you that if Winslow returns, you won't know about it."

"Thank you. I'd appreciate that." Shane found himself grinning along with Jordan. "We've taken up enough of your time. Jordan?"

## Chapter Twenty-Four

"Kiley, it's over. Everything's fine now."

"That's good, Jordan. You just missed Brett."

"Hey, are you okay?" Jordan didn't like the sound of her voice.

"Yes, thanks. You'd better hurry so you make your meeting."

"Brett can handle it. I'd rather see you."

"Don't be ridiculous. You worked very hard to organize whatever this is. I told you, I'm fine. Besides, I'm still working so you just go on with Brett."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." When he didn't respond, she said, "Just go, okay? I want you to."

"All right but I'll see you as soon as we conclude our business."

"Fine. Goodbye, Jordan." She hung up before he could say more.

"Something's wrong," Jordan told Shane.

"She'll be fine once she sees you. She was pretty quiet earlier after she and Brett saw you and Winslow get in the car with Vincent. She's probably still stressed."

"Maybe but it feels bigger than that. She said goodbye like it was final."

"Come off it, Jordan. You're imagining things. You have to be a little stressed yourself, between Winslow and this big meeting of yours."

"I guess." They were back at Jordan's car. "Shane, thanks for coming. You know I would have been fine on my own but thanks anyway."

"Don't mention it, kid. That's what brothers are for. You were very impressive, by the way. Is that what you're like when you're doing business?"

"Nope, that was me bluffing and hoping it worked out okay. I have much more confidence in business settings."

"No wonder I've heard that you're frightening with the way you're so far beyond cool. If that was you without confidence, you must be extremely intimidating with it."

"It's just a job. I've heard you're very impressive when you're in action too. Jesse says you're something to see."

"I'd like to meet that guy. Brian told us about your altercation with Winslow and Brett explained how you've been working out with Jesse."

"Yeah, every now and then when we have some time. I'll see what he says. He and the others like to stay low-key. They can be hard to find when they want to be."

"You're sure they're the good guys?"

"Yes, Shane. What happened to you trusting my judgment?"

"I do but, as your big brother, I reserve the right to question it too."

"Fine. I guess that means that, as your little brother, I reserve the right to make you wonder sometimes. I'll give you a call tomorrow to set something up so I can tell you about this meeting."

"I'm still not sure if I'm ready to know but I'll see you then."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mrs. Brown, gentlemen, thank you for coming." Jordan arrived just as Brett ushered the others into his conference room.

Two and a half hours later, everyone except Brett, Sadie and Jordan left.

"Well boys, it seems that we're in business."

"Was there any doubt, Sadie?" Brett asked. "You know Jordan was determined and when he is, there's no stopping him."

"Another month or so and all the paperwork will be filed. Then we can get things headed in the right direction," Jordan commented. "Shall we go celebrate?"

"Look at him, Miss Sadie, trying so hard to seem like he really wants to," Brett teased. "Jordan, why don't you just take off? I can fill Sadie in on everything that's been going on."

"But this is a big day for us," Jordan protested.

"It's a bigger day for you. I think Kiley needs you more right now than we do. She was pretty freaked by all of that earlier."

"Shane mentioned that she was withdrawn when he left you."

"Yeah, I think that's how she was dealing with it. In the car on the way to the station, she was panicked and worried. I had to restrain her when we pulled up. When she saw you with Vincent, I tried to tell her you weren't as cool and collected as you seemed. Then, when Shane's buddy kept going on about you and Winslow, it was like she flipped a switch. She got very distant and polite. All afternoon, it seemed like she was on autopilot or something."

"That's how she sounded when I called. She said she was working and would prefer that I come here instead of going to her."

"Boys, it's very rude to carry on a conversation and deliberately exclude others present. What's going on?" Sadie scowled at them.

"Sorry, Miss Sadie. I—" Jordan began to explain but Brett interrupted.

"Jordan here had a very busy few days, which I will tell you all about over dinner. But our friend needs to go now because he has some pressing personal business. We'll get together this weekend with Kiley and Shane to celebrate. Maybe Dee and Will too if you agree, Miss Sadie but we'll discuss that later. Jordan, would you just get out of here already?"

"Miss Sadie?"

"Go on, boy. The playboy will take good care of me." She waved him away. "Brett, you'd better tell me everything."

"I will but let's wait until we get to the restaurant. It's quite a story and not a short one. I promise you'll love it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kiley's body was very stiff when Jordan embraced her. She avoided meeting his eyes when he greeted her. When he kissed her, she was unresponsive and pulled away as quickly as possible.

"What's wrong, Kiley? Everything with Winslow is really over. It's fine. We can put it behind us now." Jordan didn't understand why she was keeping her distance.

"Was your meeting successful?" She ignored his question.

"Very." He stared as she moved so the table was between them. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She still refused to look at him. "Want some coffee?"

"No." Jordan took a step toward her, which Kiley countered with another step around the table. "Why won't you look at me? You tried to avoid kissing me and you barely tolerated my touch."

Kiley stalled by sitting. "Well, I've been thinking." She fiddled nervously with the placemat.

"And?"

"Well...um...we really don't know each other all that well."

"I know you."

"Oh. Okay but I don't think I know you. Not really. Not at all."

"What are you saying?"

"I don't think we're right for each other."

Jordan let the silence stretch. "Look at me, Kiley." Finally, she did. "Would you please explain what's changed since this morning? You do remember this morning? We were both in your bed, naked, in each other's arms. You said you were falling in love with me."

"I was wrong. You're a handsome man who paid some attention to me. I'm not used to that. It was lust. That's all."

"You think what we shared was just sex? I don't believe you. It was more than that and we both know it."

"No, I don't. It was great sex but that's it."

"I don't understand."

"What's to understand? You have an incredibly sexy voice and I wanted your body. I've had it and I'm done now. It's time to move on. Don't make more out of this than it was. I do appreciate your help and everything. I mean, I'm grateful..." She shrugged.

"You're grateful? You appreciated my help? It's time to move on? Kiley, why are you doing this?" Jordan felt his emotions spiraling out of control. "If you honestly believe you don't know me well enough, then spend more time with me. I told you I'd back off and give you space if you need it. I told you I'd wait until you are ready."

"You're not listening to me, Jordan. I don't need time. I don't want to know you any better. I know all I need to in order to realize that you're not someone I want to be around."

"Why? What did I do? When I left this morning you sounded like you couldn't wait to see me at lunch. You seemed happy me when I got there. I don't believe you were acting."

"Do I need to spell this out to you?" She sounded annoyed.

"Frankly, yes. I wish you would because I can't accept this."

"Fine. You're not who I thought you were."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I saw you. Outside the police station. You were enjoying yourself. Malcolm was beaten to a pulp and you were happy-go-lucky, just chattering away. It seemed like a game to you, like you were getting a kick out of it. I bet you actually had fun while you were hitting him."

"I don't believe this!"

"Well neither did I. I was so wrong about you and now I'd like you to leave."

Jordan sat, staring at her. Did she really believe what she had just said? She couldn't honestly be tossing him out of her life without letting him explain what happened. She couldn't possibly mean it when she said she didn't want to spend more time with him. It hadn't been just about sex and lust. "Kiley..." He searched for something to say but suddenly his mind was only capable of screaming "No". No other words would come out.

"I want you to go now, Jordan. I don't want you here." Kiley stood and walked to the door. She opened it and waited. "Now. Get out."

Jordan's heart was breaking as he rose. For a moment, he just looked at her helplessly. "Please," he whispered, his voice breaking. "Can't we talk about this?"

"I have nothing more to say to you."

Jordan was next to her, searching her face for any indication that she would change her mind. "I love you, Kiley."

"That's unfortunate, Jordan."

"That's all you have to say?"

"There's nothing else. Goodbye, Jordan."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Brett was pleased. After dinner with Sadie, he put the finishing touches on the sketch of Jordan and Kiley. Occasionally, he felt he captured exactly what he was trying for and this was one of those rare instances. The expressions in his drawing looked just as they had when the pair sat in his kitchen. While he was framing it, he decided to give it to both of them as a joint present to show his acceptance of their togetherness. Brett realized as he wrapped the picture that he had started thinking of Kiley as part of their group. She had been right. All he'd needed to do was give her a chance. She hadn't been with Jordan all that long but his friend had never been happier in his life. It was a different kind of happy, calm and settled, peaceful even. And yet, at the same time, he was also ecstatic beyond belief. Being in love definitely suited Jordan. And now that the whole mess with Winslow was resolved it was only a matter of time before Kiley accepted Jordan's belief in a grand cosmic scheme in which they were destined to be together forever now that they'd finally found each other.

Brett made sure he arrived at Mr. Paul's before Jordan. He took off his jacket and draped it over the picture just outside. Kiley would probably guess what it was but he saw he was in luck. She was busy across the room so he could hide it under the table before she noticed him.

Kiley turned just as Brett sat down. She froze like a deer caught in headlights. Dee was watching and came to her rescue. "Hey, Brett. I'm a little surprised to see you today."

"Where else would I be?" He saw her tense. "What's up, Dee? You really look shocked."

"Honestly I am, what with Kiley ending it with Jordan last night."

"What?" Brett jumped to his feet.

"Didn't he tell you?"

"Oh my God, she didn't...she couldn't..." He yanked on his coat. "Why?"

"I don't know. She won't say anything other than it was a mistake and it's over."

"Son of a bitch! Damn her!" Brett stormed away from Dee. At the door, he paused and fixed a glare on Kiley before stomping out.

Kiley was still frozen. Jordan hadn't called his best friend? What did that mean? She thought they shared everything. She'd been positive he'd go to Brett's after she made him leave. Why hadn't he? What had he done instead? Once Brett finally released her eyes, she didn't know which was worse, the shock and disbelief she'd seen on his face or the hatred. His expression was so cold and hard. She knew he was thinking that he'd

been right. He hadn't trusted her with his friend's heart. He'd been so sure she was out to hurt him and that's exactly what had happened.

For the zillionth time, Kiley asked herself what she'd done. She loved Jordan. She knew it even when she'd been telling him to go. Somehow the ridiculous doubts that had started outside the police station had mushroomed until she lost touch with her heart, not to mention her mind. She'd heard herself accusing Jordan of enjoying the way he'd hurt Malcolm and hadn't been able to stop herself.

Now, seeing Brett only made Kiley more certain of how wrong she'd been. Jordan hit Malcolm to defend himself. He'd gotten into that car to protect her, not because he'd wanted to. Jordan wasn't the monster her fears had twisted him into. If anything, she was the monster. She took the selfless love offered by a truly good man and turned it into something sordid and ugly. She threw it back in his face and refused to talk to him. She hadn't even shown him any common courtesy or decency to listen when he tried to explain what had happened with Malcolm. Instead, she'd made it sound like she'd had sex with him just so he'd help her out of that situation and once he had, she considered the return favor complete. How he must hate her!

Kiley watched as Dee picked up the item Brett left at the table and opened it. When Henry took it out of her hands and motioned for Kiley to follow, she felt even worse. In the months that Jordan and Brett had eaten lunch at Mr. Paul's, they'd both become part of the group, part of Henry's substitute family. She'd ruined that too.

"Kiley." Henry closed the door to his office behind them. He propped Brett's sketch on the desk. "Tell me, what do you see when you look at this? Ignore the fact that it's a drawing of you. Tell me what you know just by looking at it."

"Henry, I can't..." Kiley felt tears in her eyes.

"Sure you can. I just want to know if you see the same thing I see." He tried to keep his tone pleasant.

"I... Well... I guess..." She took a deep breath and fought to steady her voice. "I see two people in love."

"Huh." Henry studied the sketch again. "Yep. That's what I see too. What I find amazing is the accuracy in Brett's details. Yesterday, a mere twenty-four hours ago, you and Jordan looked at each other exactly like that. Now, rumor has it you broke it off with him. I'm sure you have your reasons but I need to ask you this anyway. Do you know what you're doing? Are you sure you gave this enough thought? Maybe I'm wrong but he seemed like a real good guy to me."

"I don't know anything anymore, Henry. But, if it's okay, can I get back to work now?"

"Why don't you take off and go see him instead? Maybe talk about whatever happened?"

"There's nothing more to say after yesterday but thank you for the offer." She obviously wanted to escape from his office and stay busy.

"All right, Kiley. You know best. If you change your mind though, just say so." He watched as she pulled herself together. "Don't forget to take this home with you when you're done today," Henry said in a way that told Kiley not to argue.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brett walked into Jordan's office but only Dwight was there. "Jordan around?"

Dwight nodded. "He's upstairs. I haven't seen him today but every now and then I think I can hear him. It sounds kinda like he's smashing things. What's going on?"

"I'm not sure yet but I recommend giving him some space."

"He didn't go to lunch today. Did something happen with Kiley?"

"That's my guess but like I said, you might want to steer clear of him today, okay?"

"No problem. Let me know if I can help."

"Thanks, Dwight but I doubt there's anything we'll be able to do."

Brett found Jordan on the balcony off the kitchen in the back of the house. There was a bottle of scotch on the table next to his coffee cup. Wordlessly, Brett poured himself some coffee and went out to join his friend. He sat and waited for Jordan to speak.

"Hey," Jordan finally acknowledged Brett without looking at him.

"Want to tell me about it?" Brett asked quietly.

"I guess I should have called you," he stated flatly.

"You could have, anytime."

"Was she there?"

"Yeah. She was busy when I walked in so I went and sat where we usually do."

"She talk to you?"

"No. When she turned around and saw me, she got very pale and panicked-looking. Dee told me."

"Told you what?"

"That she was surprised to see me since Kiley ended it with you yesterday." He waited but Jordan was back to staring blankly at the city. "Why didn't you call me last night?"

"Because I still don't believe it. I've been sitting here, thinking I'll wake up and that it's all been a nightmare. I considered drinking but I keep expecting her to call and ask me to come over."

"Dwight thought he heard things breaking."

"Yeah. I keep pouring shots then throwing the glass before I drink any."

Brett peered over the edge of the balcony and saw the broken glass. Briefly, he wondered if his friend had any glasses left. "What happened?"



"Hell if I know." Jordan picked up the bottle and stared at it like he was ready to throw it too. "I got to her apartment yesterday and she wouldn't look at me. She wouldn't talk or listen. She made it clear that she didn't want me to touch her and then she spouted some bizarre mumbo jumbo and told me to leave."

"I don't understand."

"Me either." Jordan told Brett everything that Kiley had said.

"She can't really believe that bullshit!"

"Apparently she does," Jordan sighed tiredly. "What the hell do I do now? For the first time in my life, I don't have a clue. I keep hearing her say it's unfortunate that I love her and there's absolutely nothing else in my mind. What should I do, Brett?"

"I'd give anything if I could answer that one," Brett said sincerely. "You need to get her to talk to you."

"She won't. Kiley made it clear that she never wanted to see me again. She's, in her own words, done with me."

"Maybe you should get some sleep."

"What if she calls? Look, I know I'm not making any sense but I can't help it. I think my mind stopped functioning yesterday. Right now, I'm not sure if it'll ever start again."

"How about if I call Dee and find out if Kiley's working all day? You could sleep until she gets off and be more alert if she wants to see you later."

"You can't call there. She'll answer the phone and know it's you." In a gesture of pure frustration, Jordan snatched the bottle he'd just returned to the table and heaved it into the courtyard below.

"I have an idea." Brett walked through the kitchen and opened the door that led downstairs to Jordan's office. "Yo, Dwight. Get up here." When Dwight appeared, Brett dialed Mr. Paul's and handed him the phone. "Ask for Dee. Do not identify yourself."

When he reached Dee, Dwight asked her to hold on.

"Thanks." Brett waved him back downstairs. "Hey, Dee, its Brett but I don't want Kiley to know I'm calling. Yeah, I'm with him. How the hell do you think he is? You got any ideas? Tell me exactly what she said. So what do you think? Is she planning on staying all day? Okay but I need you to call if that changes, even by a few minutes. He hasn't slept and he's afraid that if he does he'll miss her if she calls. Yeah, that's what I said too. Right. Thanks Dee. You too."

Jordan continued staring blankly while Brett spoke with Dee. "Well?" he finally asked.

"Kiley waited until right before they opened and asked all the waitresses to listen for a minute. She said she'd decided not to see you anymore. She explained that she'd made a bad decision and jumped into something without thinking it through. She said it was her fault entirely for showing bad judgment in encouraging you from the start and she hoped if anyone ran into you that they would treat you with the same courtesy

they always had. She stressed it wasn't anything you did, just that she has no sense. She asked them all to bear with her for a few days until she pulled herself back to normal and thanked them in advance for not expressing their opinions or questioning her. And then she went back to work just like every other day until I walked in."

Brett paused, debating whether or not he should mention the sketch. He decided not to. "After I left, Henry took Kiley into his office and tried to convince her to talk to you. She refused and was escaping when Dee cornered her. She asked Kiley for more details, thinking she had the right, due to their friendship but all Kiley would tell her was that it was wrong of her to get involved with you. She insisted that she should have realized that instead of being flattered by your attention.

"Dee's afraid to push more today because she doesn't want to alienate her. She thinks there's something going on in Kiley's mind that's out of whack and that eventually, she'll work it out and come running back to you. Dee's not sure Kiley will know what to do once it registers how much she hurt you but said she'll keep trying to get her to see you.

"Dee also said to tell you she knows Kiley loves you, no matter what she's saying. Dee wants you to call her if there's any way she can help. In the meantime, she's sure that Kiley is determined to stay there all day. She says you should get some sleep. She'll call if Kiley's plans change and she'll do her best to take care of her as much as Kiley will let her."

Jordan considered what Brett had said. "It's over, Brett. It was over when I called her yesterday, before our meeting. She isn't going to change her mind."

"She will, Jordan. She'll think about what she said to you and what she knows about you and she'll know she was right to love you in the first place." Brett hoped he sounded convincing.

Jordan just looked at him. "Go back to work. I'm glad you came by and I'll talk to you later."

"I'll stay. It's no problem."

"I know and I appreciate that but I'm going to sleep. She's not going to call or show up, not today, not ever. There's no point in me waiting around like I have been."

"It's not like you to give up without a fight, Jordan. Go rest and tonight we'll come up with a plan." Brett was even more concerned than he had been.

"There's nothing to plan for Brett, but thanks for the offer. I'd tell you there's no need for you to stop by later but I know you will anyway so thanks, okay?" Jordan took his cup inside and threw away the rest of the coffee in the pot in a gesture of resignation. "Tell Dwight I'll see him tomorrow and I'd appreciate it if he hangs out the rest of the day."

"Sure thing, buddy. You are going to sack out, right?"

"Yeah, I will. Right now, I'm so tired I can barely move." Jordan waited until Brett opened the door to go downstairs to add, "Hey, Brett? Thanks for not saying I told you so."

"Damn it, Jordan, I wouldn't do that. I never wanted this to happen. I never expected it from Kiley either. You two had me believing in happily ever after."

"Me too. Guess you were right after all," Jordan sighed. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that. See you." He walked away, not giving Brett a chance to respond.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Will stormed into Jordan's office and confronted Dwight. "I need to see Jordan."

"I'm sorry but he's not available," Dwight responded as Jordan had instructed him to.

"I'll wait." Will stared.

"You can't. He's tied up all day," Dwight replied.

"Look, you don't get it. I know he's here. I'm a friend as well as a client and I don't care how long I have to sit here, I am not leaving until I speak with Jordan. You can either get used to me or go tell him I'm here. I only need a few minutes."

Dwight watched Will settle into a chair. He saw the determination on his face and was unsure of what to do. When Will continued staring at him, he felt very uncomfortable. Half an hour later, Dwight decided he'd had enough. He'd rather risk Jordan's disapproval than sit there with him all day. Or longer since Dwight was beginning to believe he'd still be there in the morning if he didn't succeed in speaking with Jordan.

"You win," Dwight muttered as he went into Jordan's private office. "I'm really sorry. I know you said you weren't in for anyone but there's a guy here who isn't ever going away until you give him a minute."

"I said no one, Dwight. Is that so difficult?" Jordan spoke quietly.

"No, sir, but he says he's a friend." Dwight didn't give up. His boss had been working nonstop since sometime Wednesday night with an intensity he hadn't seen before. It was like he was possessed. If that guy really was a friend, maybe he could get Jordan to take a break. "His name is Will."

"Oh." Jordan suddenly appeared extremely tired. "I guess this is one that I can't avoid. Thanks, Dwight. We'll be upstairs." Jordan went to greet his friend. "Why don't you come up?"

Will waited until Jordan was seated across from him, then pulled a paper from his pocket and spread it on the table. "You care to explain this to me?"

"What's to explain? I think it's perfectly clear."

"Come off it, Jordan. You know damn well I'm not asking about the contents. I get the fact that you turned our account over to someone else. What I want to know is why? And why you sent this instead of telling us? I thought Dee and I were more than clients."

"You are, Will. And you're right. I should have called you. I'm sorry. It's just that I haven't felt much like talking lately."

"Understandable but if the fact that we're friends with both of you is behind your decision..."

"That's not it at all. I know you're not going to take sides. Hell, Will, there's nothing to take sides over."

"Then why are you tossing us?"

"You remember the big meeting Brett and I talked about? Well," Jordan said, explaining their plans.

"You guys are full of surprises. That's one hell of an idea." Will paused. "What about Kiley?"

"What about Kiley?"

"I thought you loved her."

"I do. I'm always going to. But she made it very clear that it's one-sided."

"She's lying," Will declared. "Or she's in some sort of weird denial. Dee's trying to figure out what's going on with her but whatever it is, that girl definitely loves you."

"She doesn't want to though. She wants me to leave her alone. She told me there's no place for me in her life."

"She doesn't mean it."

"Will, I know you're trying to help but please don't. Kiley made her decision and, as hard as it is for me, I have to respect it. I can't cling to false hope or it'll end up hurting even more than it already does."

"It's not false hope, Jordan."

As they sat there, Will worked to keep Jordan talking. The poor guy was suffering but it was obvious he needed to get it out. Eventually, even though Jordan kept changing the subject, Will heard the shocking details of what had transpired with Kiley.

When the door swung open and Brett stormed in, Will was even more stunned.

"Why didn't you warn me about this when I saw you earlier?" Brett was waving a letter that Will guessed matched his. "Imagine my face when I get back from lunch and my boss corners me, demanding to know why my best friend is no longer his financial wizard. Hi, Will. Sorry if I'm interrupting something."

"I'm actually here for the same reason, Brett. Jordan told me your plans. Congratulations."

"Thanks." Brett took a calming breath. "Jordan, I thought you were going to wait a while before you started this. And do it gradually so you could notify most people in person."

"I changed my mind." Jordan shrugged. "There's really no reason to wait. I decided to just get it over with."

"No wonder Dwight looks stressed. Have you spoken to anyone today other than Will?"

"Nope. I'm working on something else."

"Something else?" Will asked. "There's more?"

"Not really, just some personal investing. Dwight is holding up fairly well but I'm afraid Monday is going to be worse."

Brett and Will exchanged a worried look. Jordan kept steering the conversation away from whatever he was doing. Eventually, Will felt it was time for him to go so Brett could ask more in-depth questions.

"Thanks for telling me of your plans, Jordan," Will said lamely. "Think about what I said, okay?"

"I will even though it won't do any good." Jordan stopped him at the door. "Have you seen her, Will?"

"Not yet but she'll be there when I get home. Why don't you come with me?"

"Can't," Jordan refused. "I need a favor though, if you don't mind?" Will nodded. "Could you hold off telling Dee the reason for this?"

"Because you don't want Kiley to know?" It was Jordan's turn to nod. "Of course, if that's what you want. I'm not sure I understand but fine. You two can come by and tell Dee all about it yourselves sometime."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kiley was leaning against the counter, chatting while Dee cooked, when Will got home. Wordlessly, he crossed the kitchen and pulled her into a hug. The gesture triggered the sobs that Kiley had been struggling to hold in all day. Dee met Will's gaze over Kiley's head and nodded, knowing that this release was exactly what their friend needed.

After Kiley cried herself out and returned from washing her face, Will asked her to sit with him.

"Thanks, Will." Kiley tried to smile. "I guess I needed that more than I thought."

"Glad to help. Now I want to talk." Will held her gaze as he handed Dee Jordan's letter. "What the hell are you thinking?"

"Will," Dee gasped.

"I heard what you said and frankly, it's the most asinine load of bullshit! I'm surprised Jordan didn't laugh in your face."

"He told you?" Kiley was mortified.

"Yeah, every ridiculous word. You sure must have put on quite a show. I don't know how you did it but Jordan actually believes that you don't love him."

"Oh, God," Kiley groaned.

"Will, that's enough," Dee tried again.

"No, it's not, Dee. Somebody needs to talk some sense into her. Look, Kiley, I don't know what's behind this but I suggest you work out whatever stupidity is playing tricks in your mind and get over it. Go see Jordan and tell him honestly how you feel

because you and I both know that you love him. And that you belong together. What I don't get is why you decided to deny it now."

"Will, I..." Kiley was at a loss for words.

"I'm not done." Will silenced her. "You know I'm only saying this because I care," he paused. "It's time for you to put aside the embarrassment you must be feeling after your foolish detour into la la land. Jordan loves you, even though you gave it your best shot to destroy that. He wants you in his life just like he did before you lost your mind. We all know he'll forgive you and forget all this nonsense if you ask him to. If you don't do something about it, you'll be making the biggest mistake of your life. But do it soon, Kiley. The longer you wait, the worse it'll be for you. Another thing, and I'm not really sure why I think this, but I have the feeling that you don't have unlimited time to fix it. Oh, I don't mean Jordan's going to stop loving you. It's just that I doubt he'll be around indefinitely and I'd hate for you to wait too long realize how wrong you are."

"Did he tell you what he's going to do?" Dee asked.

"If you're referring to that big meeting, yes and before you ask, I'm not saying a word. If either of you wants to know about it, you can go ask him. It's not my place to tell you. But no, that's not what I meant. Oh sure, their meeting will change a lot of things. In fact, I'm astounded at what Jordan and Brett are capable of. Actually, I'd give just about anything to be part of it. But it's more than that. Brett showed up while I was there. It appears that all Jordan's clients received one of those letters." Dee passed it to Kiley. "He's working on something that Brett doesn't know about and Brett was clearly concerned. By concerned, I mean more than just worried that his friend's heart was just broken. He's not being included. I got the impression that Jordan is distancing himself from everyone and everything, including Brett who, in my opinion is so far beyond worried that he's downright scared.

"Kiley, I'm only going to say this once unless you bring it up so you don't have to be afraid to come back here. You know I'm your friend but I'm Jordan's too. I hate what you're doing, the way you're hurting him. But I can see that you're hurting yourself as much, if not more. I can't figure out why but I'm begging you, for both your sakes, put an end to it. Listen to your heart not the lies in your head. Go talk to him. Listen to him. You know he's a good man. Stop being a damn fool and do whatever it takes to get him back. Admit that you need him. Go and get things back on track before you manage to ruin both your lives."

Will stood. "That's it. No more lectures from me. I'll leave you girls to talk now. Dee, yell when dinner's ready and let me know if I'm joining you or eating in front of the computer." He kissed his wife. "Kiley, don't blow it, okay? He'll make you happy if you let him, I know it."

"Kiley, what did you say to Jordan?" Dee asked once they were alone. "Will doesn't usually get that vocal about anything unless he's extremely upset."

"Nothing, really. I'd rather not talk about it."

"But if you don't talk about it, how are we going to figure out how best to fix it?"

"There's nothing to fix." Kiley jumped up. "Um, I'm not really all that hungry so I'm just going to head home. Thanks anyway."

"Kiley, wait!" Dee tried to stop her. "Please stay. I promise that we'll talk about whatever you want."

"I'm sorry, Dee. I can't." She practically ran from the house with Dee watching helplessly.



## **Chapter Twenty-Seven**

"What's up with you these days, McKade?" the officer at the desk asked when Shane checked in at the end of his shift.

"Same old, same old. Why?" Shane responded.

"First, the mysterious suit comes after your brother and that other guy. Then the same buddy who came looking for him calls for you. Now the camera babe shows up, wanting to wait for you no matter how long it takes."

"Camera babe?" Shane stalled even though he already knew who she was.

"Yeah, you know, the one who did that gang shit."

"Where is she?" He looked around and spotted Alyssa on a bench in the corner. He stalked around the counter without waiting for a response. "Campini, if you're here to gloat, you can skip it."

"Hang on, McKade. I come in peace." Alyssa jumped to her feet and held up her hands as she faced him. "Is there some place more private we can talk?"

"I'm done for the day. Let's go." Shane headed for the door, not checking to see if she followed.

"Slow down. Please?" Alyssa was running to keep up with him.

"What do you want?" He spun and glared at her.

"I need your help," she said quietly.

"You what?" He was stunned.

"I said I need your help. With Kiley."

"Right," he sneered. "I guess throwing everything he thought he'd found with her back in his face isn't enough for her even though it broke him. What more does she want? Wait. I know. You're here to talk me into holding him down for her while she grinds her heel into what little is left of him. You know, squash him like a bug. Well, you and that little miss innocent cousin of yours," he snorted, "can just forget it!"

Shane was past the point of listening so nothing Alyssa tried to say got through to him. He completely ignored her attempts to interrupt as he ranted on and on. Finally, since he was towering over her, she balled up her hand and punched him as hard as she could to stop his tirade.

For several long seconds, Shane stood there, staring and clutching his stomach. "You hit me! I don't believe you just fucking hit me!"

"Shut the fuck up and listen or I'll do it again," Alyssa snarled, fist clenched, poised to follow through on her threat. "She's completely wrecked too. I'm here because I need your help getting through to her so she starts thinking straight again."

Scowling, Shane studied her before nodding. "How?"

"Do you know what happened with Winslow and that other guy?"

"Yes. I was there for most of it."

"Somehow, Kiley got this weird idea stuck in her head that your brother was just acting like a nice guy and really isn't one. I've tried everything I can think of to get her to call him and ask what went on but she won't do it. It's like she's decided to throw away what they could have and I don't get it."

"Why are you so sure that telling Kiley about it will make a difference?"

"Because if she listens, I mean really listens, she'll know that everything Jordan did, he did out of love to protect her. I can see that no problem but for some reason, she can't."

"She wouldn't listen to him. What makes you think she'll listen to me?"

"I don't expect you to give her a choice. I think your brother probably didn't insist on her hearing him out because he knew his pushing to explain would upset her worse than she already was."

"And you don't think I will?"

"Sure you will but you'll be upsetting her for her own good. She'll be so shocked that you showed up in the first place that you can get her listening before she realizes what's going on and can shut you out."

"But you haven't asked me what happened."

"I'm not the one who needs to know."

"You're not curious?"

"Of course I am but I'm guessing that everything went the way Jordan wanted it to or he'd still be doing something."

"How do you know he's not?"

"I spoke with Dee yesterday who told me everything was settled. And she said your brother is getting rid of clients and working on something private that Will knows about but won't tell her. She also told me Kiley acts like a robot on autopilot at work. Is your brother sleeping? My cousin isn't. It's time to do something before they both make themselves sick."

"Don't take this the wrong way but are you sure Kiley should be with him? It's not that I doubt her really but Jordan is so destroyed already. I won't do anything to hurt him more."

"That's why you need to see Kiley. If she still insists on ignoring the life she should have then he doesn't ever need to know." Alyssa looked lost. "McKade, I don't know what's gotten into her. A week ago, I would have bet everything that they'd be inseparable forever. If you can't get through to her, I'm going to have to face the fact that my sweet cousin has lost her mind completely and gone totally insane. There's simply no other explanation for why she deliberately trashed the relationship they were building."

"You know, I believed they'd have it all too," Shane agreed. "Okay. It's worth a shot even though Jordan will be furious at me for interfering if this backfires. She may have kicked him to the curb but I know he'd still do anything to protect her, even from us. My brother is turning into someone I don't know. If he loses Kiley forever, I doubt if he'll ever be himself again so yeah, I'm in," he convinced himself. "When do you want me to do this?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Tuesday morning, Alyssa arrived at Kiley's as just as she finished getting ready for work. "Hiya, Kiles. Thought I'd swing by to see how you're holding up before I go back to convincing the homeless that I'm not exploiting them. Did you sleep at all?"

"Not much." Kiley was too tired to pretend. "I'm fine, Lyss really. You don't have to check on me like I'm some kind of invalid. I told you that last weekend, remember?"

"I remember and I don't think you're an invalid. I think you're my baby cousin who's going through an emotional time and might need moral support."

"You're not here to hound me some more?" Kiley was suspicious.

"Nope. You already know my opinion is that you're not thinking clearly and that you need to go see Jordan so you can find a way to patch the two of you up."

"Gee, thanks for not mentioning that again."

"Sarcasm, Kiley? You must be stressed if you're resorting to that."

"Sorry. I'm just tired. I know better than to try to outdo you at that since you're the sarcasm queen."

"Kiley!" Alyssa feigned shock.

Instantly, Kiley felt bad for her harsh words. "I really am sorry. Here you are, nice enough to worry about me and I'm being a total bitch."

"Nah, you're not a total bitch. We both know I'm the queen of that too," Alyssa joked and was rewarded with a weak smile. "I figure you're entitled to a few days of self-pity since you threw away the man you love."

"Lyss," Kiley warned. Before she could continue, there was a knock. "I can't imagine who this could be." Her mind went blank when she saw who was on the other side of the door.

"Morning, Kiley," Shane began. "I'd like to speak with you for a minute." He walked in without waiting to be invited. "Hey, Campini. I hate to do this to you but I want a word with Kiley in private."

"Shane, I don't think this is such a good idea." Kiley was close to panic.

"Too bad because I'm not leaving until you hear what I came to say. Campini, before you jump down my throat, I'm just here to talk. I assure you that Kiley will be fine."

"Kiley?" Alyssa's expression showed she understood he wasn't going to reveal her part in initiating his visit.

"It's okay," Kiley responded politely. Silently, she was screaming for him to leave. The last thing she wanted was to be questioned by Jordan's detective brother.

"All right then, if you're sure, I guess I'll get to work. McKade, I'm warning you –"

"Yeah, yeah." With a wink, Shane pushed her toward the door.

"Um...Shane... I'm not so sure..." Kiley fidgeted nervously.

"Too bad, Fisher because I am sure. I have something to say that you need to hear. Perhaps you should call your boss before I get into it and let him know that you'll be a little late."

"I can't be late! Look, I appreciate the thought –"

Shane scowled. "Two choices. One, you can call and say you'll be late before you sit down and listen to me or two, I can put you in handcuffs, have you fingerprinted, searched and tossed in a cell for the majority of the day until I'm done working. Then, if I've calmed down enough to be civil since needing to do that would really piss me off, you can sit in an interrogation room and listen."

Kiley saw the look on his face and knew he'd do it if she didn't give in. Quickly, she reached for the phone and called Henry. While she explained that she'd be there as soon as she could, she motioned for Shane to join her at the table. After she hung up she waited silently for him to get on with it while she tried, unsuccessfully, to blink back her tears and hide the way her lip was quivering.

"Kiley, I'm sorry to come on so strong like that. I'm really not here to upset you. I was so afraid you wouldn't give me a chance to talk to you that I was desperate. I really wouldn't have taken you in."

Kiley appeared doubtful. "Okay," she finally said.

"Well, I guess I should get to the point." Shane let his nervousness show as if he thought it would help. "As I understand it, you didn't let Jordan give you details pertaining to his discussion with Samuels about Winslow."

"It's over. Isn't that all that matters?"

"No, I don't think so. Not if it being over with Winslow makes it over with Jordan. I already know you saw him leave the station. And I know you heard Brian expounding on the moves Jordan made but what you don't know is that most of what he said was for my benefit. When we were younger Jordan and Brett used to take turns ambushing me to see if they could overpower me. My only excuse is that we were kids. Fortunately, we never seriously hurt each other. It's also fortunate that I left for college before they finished growing because they could have bested me no problem by the time they were. Anyway, the first time they came looking for me at the station, we got to teasing about it and Brian overheard us. See, that's why he felt the need to rib me a little.

"Kiley, you have to believe me. My brother is the best kind of man in all ways. He's honest. He cares. He gives his word and stands by it. Once you have his friendship and loyalty, you can count on it forever. He loves you, no matter what. I know he does."

"How can he?" Kiley blurted out before she could stop herself.

"Oh, I assure you he does." Shane didn't seem entirely sure that she was referring solely to the way she had ended their relationship. "I could tell by the way his concern was first and foremost for you the night you were drugged. He thought about sending me and Brett to find your cousin second and left Winslow's part in all of this for last. If he hadn't loved you then, he would have passed you off to one of us, sent the other to be with Campini, grabbed Winslow and demanded that Vincent take them to Samuels instantly. Instead, he waited until you were able to discuss it before he confronted him, then respected your wishes on what happened to Winslow. If it had been up to the rest of us, we would have let him fend for himself with Samuels.

"Think about it for a minute. My brother is the most honest, legitimate to the point of being obsessive, businessman ever. To protect you and to ensure things turned out the way you said you wanted them to, he had someone's private bank account frozen. Now it may have been undetectable. It may or may not have been done legally but who knows?

"Then, the man who tried to use you was right in front of him, giving Jordan every opportunity to beat him senseless and all he did was only what was needed to defend himself. He left the station under questionable circumstances with the man he'd just tangled with and a lawyer of dubious, at best, repute. He willingly got into a highly visible car with a man who is well known and goes to the house of someone rather high up on our list of commonly known but untouchable money movers. I say untouchable only because we can't ever prove anything. And yes, I went there after him so I do know what I'm talking about here."

"Oh my God," Kiley finally realized what he was getting at. "He could lose everything he's worked for. Or at least his reputation and credibility. Shane, so could you!"

"Possibly, but that's the point. Jordan loves you so much that he was willing to risk it. Putting it simply, you're worth it. You mean more to him than all that."

Silent tears streamed down Kiley's cheeks. "What about you?"

"He's my brother. Even though I knew he could have handled everything without me, I needed to be there with him. To me, he's worth it. And, since I trust his judgment, so are you."

Shane grabbed the box of tissues from the counter and sat back down beside her instead of across from her. "Please, Kiley will you let me tell you what happened at Samuels' house?"

Kiley dried her tears and finally met his eyes. "Yes." For the most part she let him speak without interruption. When he concluded, she asked, "Do you think Samuels meant it when he said he wouldn't use your going there to his advantage?"

"Yes and so does Jordan," Shane answered honestly. "He's very proud of you."

"I don't think so." She tried to laugh.

"He is, Kiley. I told you how he described you to Samuels. I spent a lot of time with him last weekend too. At one point he was telling me more about you, about your family. You haven't had the easiest life and yet you're not bitter or withdrawn," Shane sighed. "Jordan said he will always love you and I believe him. You broke his heart and it's tearing him to pieces but I think there's a part of him that's weirdly fascinated because he can't figure out why you're doing this."

Shane seemed undecided for a moment and then added, "Something I left out is that Jordan thinks you need to work on your self-confidence. He mentioned it several times, including during his discussion with Samuels." He let his statement sink in. "How right is he?"

"Shane..."

"Stop it, Kiley. I know you're not seriously afraid of my brother. You may have reacted to the way he seemed at first but, by the next day you knew he was only doing what he had to." He waited but she was back to crying silently.

"Don't feel bad. He intimidates me too." Shane proceeded to tell her much of what he'd recently admitted to Brett in case she hadn't already heard it. "I've been thinking since then. Or should I say I remembered something I always knew. Jordan really does have excellent judgment. I trust his instincts. If he has faith in me, so should I. One of the differences between me and Brett is that he's never let go of that. I wonder what I'd have accomplished by now if I hadn't given in to my own doubts. Maybe you need to concentrate on the faith Jordan has in you too."

Shane stood. "Well, I guess that's it. I'd better let you go." At the door, Shane startled her by bestowing a quick, hard hug. "My brother was right about you being the one for that cosmic plan of his. No matter what he will love you forever. Kiley, all I'm asking here is that you think about what I told you. He really is a good guy. If you can get around your own insecurities, go talk to him. I know he still wants you to share his life." He seemed even sadder if that was possible. "If you can't, well, then you can't but I'll be very disappointed. After I met you for real and saw you with him, I started looking forward to having you as my sister-in-law. I thought it was going to be great." He brushed a tear from her cheek. "I hope I get to see you again. If I don't, then I guess this is goodbye. Take care, Kiley."

## **Chapter Twenty-Eight**

After standing there, staring at the door for however long it was, Kiley finally shook herself into motion and headed to work. Henry and Dee spent her entire shift fretting over her. She lost count of the number of times they found her deep in thought, totally unaware of where she was or what she had been doing.

Kiley thought the day would never end. Her mind kept replaying all that Shane had said. At some point, Will's words from the previous week blended in too. She was relieved to be finally going over the reservation book with the night hostess when she glanced up and found herself face to face with Sadie Brown.

"Good evening. Do you have a reservation?" the other girl asked when Kiley stared mutely.

"No but I'm not here to eat. Kiley and I will need a private table off to the side. We have some things to discuss," Sadie announced.

The girl's eyes shifted back and forth between them as the silence stretched. Henry noticed and joined them from the bar. "Is there a problem, ladies?"

"N-no, Henry, thanks," Kiley said meekly. "Hello, Miss Sadie."

"Huh," Sadie grunted. "For a minute there I thought you'd lost your manners along with your senses."

"Excuse me," Henry's protective urged kicked in but Kiley halted him with a hand on his arm.

"It's all right, Henry. Miss Sadie just wants a word with me. Do you mind if we take a table?" She knew he could feel her hand shaking through his suit coat. After searching her face, he nodded. Stalling for a moment to collect herself, Kiley studied the seating chart. Finally, she marked off a table in the back corner where no nearby tables were occupied. "Miss Sadie, if you'll follow me?" She led the way and waited uncomfortably for Jordan's friend to begin.

"Can I get you anything?" Dee appeared with water after Henry suggested that she try to stay close while this formidable woman was there in case Kiley needed her.

Suddenly, Brett was by her side. "I'll take some water too, Dee, and then I think you should join us. Henry said it's fine with him."

The little remaining color drained from Kiley's face while Dee grabbed two additional glasses. She clasped Kiley's hand when she took the chair beside her. They both stared as Brett opened his sketchbook and began to draw.

"I can see that I don't need to ask how you are," Sadie spoke up, holding Kiley's gaze. "You're probably anxious to be away from us so I'll get right to it. I have a story to share with you."

"My husband was quite a man, in many ways. Five years ago, he met the new boy at the investment firm he used and saw something in him. When the boy tried to stand up for what he believed in, he was let go. The firm thought he was so inept that they opted not to enforce the competition clause in his contract. When he announced his intention to go out on his own, they actually laughed at him and waited gleefully for him to fall flat on his face.

"My husband, however, was very shrewd. He'd been listening to the boy for a year. He understood the boy's confidence and believed in him. My husband took our account and invested every cent we had with the boy as soon as he got the paperwork from the firm. For the next year, he watched our finances expand in unimaginable proportions. At the same time he learned the kind of man the boy was. Then he up and died. There was a letter with his will that I hadn't known about. It was for the boy and it specified that I was to take it to him and wait while he read it.

"Of course, I did as instructed. Jordan had been asked to take me in hand and teach me to monitor my finances. Unbeknown to me at the time, he was also implored to watch out for me. Over the next few months, I had a standing two p.m. appointment. I was amazed when I actually understood what he was telling me and grasped just a minute part of what Jordan actually did.

"During that time, I got to know Jordan McKade, the person. In a small way, he was like my husband in that he was able to see past my countenance. Eventually, I realized that we'd become friends. Once he declared I was capable of reviewing my account on my own, I found that I missed our daily talks. I was lonely.

"One night, I couldn't get settled. I'd had a particularly trying day and needed someone to talk to. Jordan had stressed that I should call him if I ever needed anything so I did. He didn't seem at all surprised to hear from me. At one point, when I was explaining the reason for my intrusion, I offered to call a radio talk show if he preferred. One thing led to another and I fell into the habit of calling him a few nights a month. We began a game of me phoning and him acting like the host. You've heard his voice, Kiley. I'm sure you can imagine how easy and realistic it was, putting him in that role."

Sadie continued, not permitting Kiley to respond. "Eventually Jordan introduced me to the playboy here. They were nice enough to escort me to dinner from time to time. Inevitably, Brett heard of our chats. That started what I thought was merely wishful thinking at the time. When they came up with their grand scheme, I was offered a chance to be in on it. Last week, after two years of work and planning, it all fell into place.

"Tuesday, Brett and I sent Jordan off to have his own private celebration with you while we had dinner, during which he updated me on what had transpired the week before. We planned a small gathering for the three of us, you, Jordan's brother, your cousin, Dee and Will. We were going to tell the others what these boys were plotting. By Thursday, I was highly annoyed by their lack of communication. We had plans to finalize and I hadn't heard a peep from either of them. I was utterly flabbergasted to learn that you had shot the whole shebang straight to hell."



Sadie glared as Kiley stuttered, "I don't even know what all that is about."

Impatiently, Sadie poked Brett. "Tell her."

Brett briefly glanced up from his sketch to peer at the three of them before he spoke. "As you know, Jordan never intended to stay here indefinitely. I always figured that when he left, so would I, even though we hadn't really discussed what we'd do next. Then Sadie came along and they started their own personal talk show. The idea developed and Jordan suggested that we make it a reality. We'd pool some money. Jordan chose to include Shane's too. He'd make us more. I'd research markets in areas we were interested in. We started discussing management and programming goals. Jordan decided that he'd actually like to be a host, at least for a little while. He felt the responsible thing to do was take some psychology courses since he wanted to be able to recognize if someone was in real trouble as opposed to just talking."

"I laughed at him," Kiley gasped.

"Yeah but he defended you. He said he mentioned it in passing in an offhand, not at all serious way." Brett shrugged. "Six months ago, we found the perfect station. It's located in a small college town. The college operated it at one point but due to lack of funding, declining enrollment and mismanagement, they were forced to sell. Over time, it became more and more run-down. When the last group decided to bail, it had deteriorated to poor quality, local daytime programming and a second-rate syndicated show overnight. We planned on turning it around. You know how Jordan is with his interns. He has a whole cooperative program ready to put into place in order to bring the college back into it.

"And then, we came here for lunch one day. Kiley, he took one look at you and as soon as you were out of earshot, announced that we'd just met his future. Outside that first day, I tried to joke about it and Jordan, very seriously, explained why I shouldn't speak about his future wife the way I was."

Brett's eyes locked on Kiley's. "I have never heard him so certain of anything the way he was about you. He knew he'd eventually win you over. He didn't doubt it for a minute. There were a few tense days when he was afraid you wouldn't want to leave the city but he decided the solution was to move just outside it. The station is just over an hour away. If he could convince you to move a short distance west, he'd only need to drive an hour each way to get there. When you shared your desire to live in a small town and raise a family, I thought Jordan would break his jaw with the size of his smile.

"Kiley, you know I was skeptical. You know I'm a cynic. You told me I had to have faith in you and you showed me that my doubts in you were unfounded. I honestly have no idea what's going on with you but I've decided to listen to you. I'm going to put all the faith I have and all the confidence that Jordan has, in you. You're the only hope I have for keeping my best friend." She couldn't contain her shocked gasp. "Last Friday, I met up with Jordan and Max in the park. I sat there and listened to him defend you even though what you did is killing him."

"What do you mean, he defended me?" Kiley asked.

"Max was afraid you weren't there because of him. Jordan had to reassure the poor kid that you were mad at him, not anything to do with Max. He explained that he'd done something to make you not want to talk to him anymore. He sat there and convinced Max that you were still his friend even if the two of you couldn't visit him together."

For the second time that day Kiley sat and wept silently as she heard how Jordan protected her.

When Brett was sure she was listening again, he continued, "Jordan's been investing for himself the past week. He's taking tremendous risks and is being very successful. As of Friday, he was up roughly half a million dollars."

"Holy shit!" Dee exclaimed.

"Impressive, isn't it, especially in today's economy?" Brett commented. "All weekend, Shane and I tried to get him to tell us what he's doing but he wouldn't spill it. This morning, I had a thought." He paused and looked meaningfully at Kiley. "I think Jordan is getting ready to take off. He'll stay until the station transfer is completed next month. I'm afraid though, that when Max is gone..."

"What?" Kiley interrupted.

"He didn't tell you?" Brett asked. "Max is dying. It's a degenerative disease that affects his muscles. Although he still has a good day now and then he's in the wheelchair practically full-time now. Eventually, his heart or lungs will stop functioning. Until then, you can bet that Jordan will visit him every week, as he's been doing. Not even you can make him disappoint that little boy. Once Max is gone though," Brett shrugged, letting his words hang.

"Now, young lady you see how your actions have changed everything? From what I heard, I don't understand it. Observing you today, I find that you don't look like a woman who ended a fling with a man you didn't really want. You're acting much more like a woman in love who's made a dreadful mistake." Sadie waited.

"Do you love him, Kiley?" Brett asked softly.

"Yes," Kiley sobbed, lowering her head to her arms as Dee attempted to comfort her.

Brett and Sadie waited for her to regain her composure. When she dried her eyes, Brett laid the sketch he'd been working on in front of her. It portrayed a very anguished, miserable looking Jordan on one side, mirrored by an equally distraught-looking Kiley. There was a broken heart between them. "Do you want this to be the last sketch I do of the two of you? Henry said he made you take the first one home. If you don't go to him and fix this, I want it back. I'll frame this one and hang them side by side to remind myself never to fall in love."

"What if I can't?" she asked hopelessly.

"If you want him, you'll find a way." He gazed at her steadily. "Talk to him. At least try. I want my friend to be happy and he needs you for that, just like you need him. I believe in you, Kiley."

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

"You'll figure it out," Brett assured her.

"I have an idea," Sadie announced. "Wait until after eleven tonight and then call him. He'll think it's me and answer in radio mode out of habit. You could start out like a caller would and take it from there."

"Better yet," Brett interrupted, rapidly warming to the suggestion, "go over and call him from right outside. You won't be far away when he wants to see you."

"I-I don't have a cell phone," Kiley admitted.

"Here." Brett handed her his. "This is my work phone. If Jordan checks his caller ID he'll think I grabbed the wrong one again."

"And if he only checks the time, he'll assume it's me," Sadie added, studying her closely. "You do think you made a mistake?"

"Yes."

"Then admit it to him and get on with your life," Sadie advised. "Go home and rest. Decide how best to ensure that he gives you a chance instead of hanging up."

"Stop it, Sadie. There's no way in hell Jordan will ever hang up on her. Don't you think she's nervous enough without you adding to it?" Brett scowled.

"Down boy," Sadie patted his arm. "I just want her to make it good. She has a lot to atone for."

"Just tell him the truth, Kiley. Tell him how you feel and what went wrong," Brett hesitated. "What did go wrong?"

"I overreacted, believed appearances and made assumptions on top of being scared," Kiley finally answered.

"See, now that was good," Sadie declared. "Good and honest and to the point. You'll need to give him more details, especially about what scared you but that would be a suitable opening."

"She'll figure it out, Sadie," Brett refocused his attention on Kiley. "If you seriously don't want him please, talk to him anyway. Explain what chased you off. Give him at least that much. If he understands, maybe he won't take off." He stood. "Time to go, Sadie."

"Thank you for your time, young lady." Sadie looked at her intently again. "Do the right thing."

Dee waited until they were gone before she hugged Kiley tightly. "Honey, I know this will be the hardest thing you've ever had to do but, they are right. You need to go talk to him."

As he approached, Henry overheard Dee's comment. "Listen to her, Kiley. You'll never get past this, either of you, until you do. No matter what the final outcome. You can't leave it as unfinished as it seems currently."

"I know. I will. Tonight." Kiley sounded exhausted.

"In that case, you have the day off tomorrow," Henry declared. "Don't bother arguing. Look at you. You're dead on your feet. Good or bad, this is going to be tremendously emotional for you. Tomorrow, you can spend the day being lazy with Jordan or nursing your heart. You need to get some real rest or you're going to make yourself sick. In fact, I've changed my mind. I don't want to see you back here until Monday. And I'll tell you right now, if you don't look well rested and restored, I'll send you home for another week."

"But, Henry," Kiley protested.

"I mean it, Kiley. I won't have you collapsing on the job."

"Give in," Dee encouraged. "It's for your own good."

Kiley sighed and nodded. "Okay. You win. Anything else or can I go now?" She was appalled with her words and tone. They were only showing they cared and she was being a bitch, just like she was with Alyssa. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean that. It's just..."

"We understand," Dee said as Henry agreed. "Go on now. Be careful driving home. If you need me later, call, no matter what time it is, okay?"

"Thanks, Dee."

"If you don't speak with Dee tonight, please call one of us tomorrow to let us know how it turns out," Henry requested. "And tonight, be the brave, level-headed, loving girl I know you are. Jordan's a good guy. He'll meet you halfway if you're honest with him. You just have to reach out."

"I know, Henry. Thanks again for everything." Kiley made her way out, the weight of the world on her shoulders.

## **Chapter Twenty-Nine**

When Kiley got home, she performed all her normal after-work chores, more out of habit than anything. The entire time, she searched for the words she might say to Jordan. For a few minutes, she toyed with the idea of just going and ringing his doorbell but rejected it. If he looked like he had in Brett's sketch, she'd be unable to speak. Or if she saw rejection in his eyes she knew she'd be too much of a coward to say all she needed to say and would run away instead. No, it was better to start out on the phone.

After she completed her evening routine, Kiley tried to relax. Unable to, she spent hours pacing instead. Choosing what to wear became an added problem. She knew it was the last thing that she should be concerned with but she couldn't help it. Somehow, the thought that Jordan would turn her away if she dressed wrong had formed and refused to be dismissed. She finally decided on a green sweater he'd admired and the jeans that he'd gotten her. After her first shower, she'd pulled her hair into a ponytail. Since Jordan had mentioned how soft and feminine she looked with it loose, framing her face, she thought she needed to wear it down for him to talk to her. That meant a second shower to erase the crease that the ponytail holder put in her hair.

Once she was dressed, Kiley forced herself to quit stalling. She was going to heed Sadie and Brett's suggestion and begin as if she were calling a talk show. She'd ask for advice and then, if he didn't hang up or tell her to simply say what she had to say, she'd describe the situation as if she were describing someone other than him. If she could think of him as a stranger whose job it was to talk to her then maybe she could get through it.

Jordan was sitting on the balcony again too tired to bother with a drink. Not that it would help. Friday, when Brett and Shane had invaded his kitchen, refusing to leave, he had tried dulling his mind with alcohol. Unfortunately, all he accomplished was a heightened state of melancholy and a hangover, which interfered with the work he planned for Saturday. Worse, his comments had motivated Brett and Shane to spend Saturday with him as well. Sunday, he finally had to get vocal and kick them out. If he hadn't, they'd probably still be there.

Monday had been torture. The fallout from the letters he sent informing his clients of his need to sever their business relationship was even worse than he'd expected. Dwight held up surprisingly well considering that the calls were coming in nonstop from the time he arrived in the morning until he left. He worked so hard to conceal his frazzled nerves that Jordan gave him the rest of the week off because he realized it was more than any intern should be asked to handle. He decided he'd leave the machine on, keep the door locked, not look at his e-mail and somehow force himself to forget that he cared about his former clients. All he had to do now was find a way to keep Brett and

Shane out and he'd be all set. He needed to wallow privately and they didn't seem to get that.

"Damn," Jordan muttered as the phone rang. He wasn't up to dealing with Sadie but he'd never forgive himself if she truly needed something and he hadn't bothered to pick up. Taking a deep breath, he answered, "You've reached Jordan McKade. What's your topic this evening?"

"Um...hi...m-my name is Kiley and...and I need some advice." She did it! So what if it came out a little rocky. She managed to speak and that was almost more than she'd hoped for.

Every nerve in Jordan's body jumped to alert as adrenaline pumped through him. After a long pause, he responded, "Good evening, Kiley. How can I help you tonight?"

He was playing along. Kiley couldn't believe it. She fought to breathe. "Well, there's this guy..."

"And he went back to his wife?"

"No."

"He cheated on you?"

"No."

"He borrowed your panties and ran off with your ex-fiancé?"

"No, nothing like that." She realized he was trying to put her at ease. "I broke his heart."

"Why don't you tell me all about it?"

"Do you have time?"

"As much as you need." He paused. "Tell me, Kiley. I can't help unless you do. Start at the beginning."

"Okay. Let's see. It was last December, just before Christmas. I'm the day hostess at a restaurant and he and his friend came in around lunchtime. I'd never seen him before, well, either of them. They were handsome, charming, friendly. Both were extremely well-dressed, obviously businessmen, successful, confident. I don't know why I was drawn to one more than the other but I was instantly. As I walked around the dining room, I kept hearing his voice. It was incredible. Whenever he spoke, I could feel it. Not the words, I couldn't always hear them. It was like his voice was wrapping itself around me somehow. When they left, the one I was attracted to took the time to introduce himself. He shook my hand and his touch made me tingle. I didn't ever expect to see him again but the next day they showed up for lunch again. They started coming in every day.

"My friend at work and my boss got to know them, since they never missed lunch. I learned that the man was an ultra-successful, highly respected investor of some kind. Apparently, he's a genius at what he does. Well, discovering that intimidated me tremendously and I already could barely speak to him. He thought I was shy and went

out of his way to be especially kind and patient with me. But that wasn't it. I just couldn't tell him the real reason."

"What was the real reason?" Jordan interrupted.

"I was overwhelmed whenever he got close to me but not because I'm shy. I was flustered and said stupid things because I wanted him, more than I ever wanted anyone. I began to fantasize about being with him. I even went as far as getting myself on birth control pills so I could be spontaneous if I ever had the chance. I was tongue-tied because I had to fight not to blurt out what I wanted us to do together. I was clumsy because I had to resist touching him."

"So how did you get close enough to break his heart?"

"It was my cousin's birthday and the opportunity came up for him to help me with the present. I didn't know it at the time but his friend, the one he had lunch with and my friend maneuvered it so I would ask him. We started talking and getting to know each other a little. He was so kind, the way he ignored my awkwardness. He just continued as if I hadn't just stuttered or said something stupid. He actually asked me to marry him the second time we spoke on the phone."

"Really?" Jordan would never forget.

"Yeah but he did it in a way that made it seem as if he were teasing. I panicked anyway. Let's face it, we're in different leagues or so I thought at the time. His image is all mystique, brilliance and sophistication while I'm a plain Jane, what you see is what you get. Oh, I'm nice and pleasant and I always try to be a decent person but he's so amazing. He seems to know everyone and everything but he's still taking classes anyway. He's never at a loss for words. He's wealthy and unbelievably confident. I had a hard time accepting that an incredible guy like him could honestly be interested in me. On top of everything, I began to see that he was as genuinely nice as he seemed to be. It wasn't an act. He was perfect."

"What happened?"

Kiley was crying. Jordan could tell she was trying to hide it. He decided that, as much as he wanted to go to her and have this conversation with her securely in his arms, he couldn't. He had to maintain the charade as long as she did.

"On my cousin's birthday, this horrible, evil weasel of a guy tricked me and tried to hurt me. Against all odds, which were about a gazillion to none, he was somehow in the right place at the right time to rescue me, which he did without a second's hesitation. I was in the middle of something really bad and he put himself in tremendous danger to save me. He took care of me and had his brother and friend make sure my cousin had a nice birthday.

"I was a disgusting mess but it didn't matter. He took me to his home and made me safe. I had been drugged and was sick everywhere but he didn't get mad. He held my hair and rubbed my back while I threw up all over his house. He ignored the mess I made of myself and him. He cleaned me up and made everything okay. He wouldn't let me be embarrassed. And when the drug loosened my tongue and started to tell him

what I wanted us to do he prevented me from ruining us before we had a chance. He even found a way to take the edge off my lust and still be a gentleman."

"How's that possible?" Jordan was fascinated.

"I mentioned his voice, remember? Well, I thought he could excite me to the point of satisfaction just by talking to me if he tried. Even though he would have preferred to wait until I was completely myself again, he agreed to talk to me anyway. He sat on a chair while I sprawled on his bed and told me what our first real kiss would be like. He told me what he hoped it would lead to. Well, there I was, wearing only his shirt, which I'd unbuttoned and shoved open. I may as well have been naked. He talked and I touched myself in ways I never thought I'd ever do in front of someone. I climaxed three times just from listening to him."

"I thought you said you touched yourself."

"I did but I wouldn't have needed to. His voice turns me on that much but I couldn't just lay there. He wouldn't let us touch each other like I wanted so I did the next best thing. I used my hands as I wanted him to. I even got him excited too."

"I would think so."

"Anyway, the next day, he protected me from our families by getting clothes dropped off so I didn't have to face them in his. After he convinced the others to let him deal with what happened to me his way, I found the courage to stay with him when they left."

"Why did you stay?" He was unable to resist the question.

"The night before when I was drugged, he refused to touch me even though I practically threw myself at him and begged. He promised if I still felt the same after we spoke with our families, he'd indulge me. There was no way I was changing my mind, not the way I'd fantasized about him for months. When we were alone I made it clear that I wanted to make love. We did and I can't begin to describe how truly amazing we were together. It was almost unreal in the way it was beyond perfect. It didn't matter if we were playful or sweet, lusty or overwhelmingly tender. Every time was incredible. I was never overly interested in sex before but this guy made me want to try things I'd never even considered before. He let me too. He was willing to do anything and everything I wanted. I was spoiled sexually beyond belief.

"You're probably thinking that that's all it was, great sex but it was so much more. We had seen each other briefly practically every day for four months. We spent four days being one hundred percent together, in all ways. He made me part of his life so easily and so completely. We talked about absolutely everything, from dreams, to goals, to growing up, to silly movies. It was so right, being with him. He really was the kind, caring, generous, good man he seemed to be."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. If this guy was so great, why did you break his heart?"

"I'm getting to that. You see, we still had to deal with the guy who drugged me. He was in a lot of trouble with some really bad people. Foolishly, or should I say naïvely, I



didn't understand how dangerous it was even though he explained everything to me very thoroughly." Kiley tried to muffle a sob.

"Please," Jordan waited until she was quiet, "continue. I can't help if you don't tell me the rest."

"All right." Her voice was shaky but she kept going. "A week ago, one of the men helping him resolve this called while he was at the restaurant. He left after reassuring me that everything would be fine. Maybe that's why I didn't think it was all that bad. He was so calm and confident. I know now that he was behaving that way to keep me from being terrified but at the time, I didn't realize it.

"Then his friend got a call, saying he'd been taken to the police station for fighting with the other guy in public. I insisted on going along. When we got there, my guy looked as impeccable as always and the one who tried to hurt me was beaten up. They were with a man who turned out to be a lawyer, sent by the big-time criminal. I watched as the man who I thought was good and honest chatted with the criminal's personal assistant. He readily got in the car with them while the man I thought was evil resisted. His friend tried to tell me that he was being cool because he had to be. He said it was the only way to get anything close to the outcome I stupidly said I wanted.

"Then we talked to his brother who is a cop. The other cop who'd called him went on and on about how talented a fighter my guy is. Again, I overlooked the fact that someone so skilled could easily have seriously injured an attacker if he wanted to. He'd only done what he had to in order to defend himself.

"I spent the day in a daze. I was so scared for him that I stopped thinking straight. I started to dwell on the way he seemed. I let my mind blow it so incredibly out of proportion. I knew better but I couldn't stop. I made him into some kind of monster. I convinced myself that what I knew about him had all been a lie and it just kept getting more horrible. By the time he called to say it was finished, I was out of control," she sniffled.

"He and his friend along with a feisty old woman they know had a huge meeting that evening. It was about something really big. He'd offered to tell me but I was too insecure to let him."

"Insecure?"

"Yes. This perfect-in-all-ways guy had already offered me the life I'd always dreamed of and I was scared. What if plain me wasn't enough for him? I'd just had the four best days of my life. I knew he'd make all of them like that if I said I wanted that. I didn't need to know what it was to know that whatever they were involved in would be the chance of a lifetime for me too. But what if I took the life he offered and he decided he didn't want to share it with me anymore? How would I live if he stopped loving me?"

"Why are you so sure he would? Maybe you'd be the lucky ones who actually made it? What if forever, in your case, really meant forever?"

"I told you, Jordan, I was scared and insecure and I lost my mind and believed an image that couldn't possibly be true. Instead of talking to you and letting you explain everything, I gave into my fear and ran away. No, that's not right. I hurt you and forced you away from me." She was openly crying.

"Kiley, where are you?" he asked softly.

"Not yet, Jordan. Please. I have to finish this way."

"But I hate that you're going through this without me. Can't I hold you? I can hear you crying."

"No. Please?"

"If this is how you want it, fine. Go on."

"Thank you." She took a deep breath. "I knew, even while I was chasing you away that I was making the worst mistake of my life. I didn't want you to go but I couldn't stop myself. I spent the night trying to make myself come to you but I never managed to move. The next day, when Brett came in and Dee told him what I'd done, I saw the hatred on his face. No, don't say it, Jordan. He had warned me that in spite of your unfailing confidence and self-assurance, you were vulnerable to me. I assured him that I'd never hurt you and I'd done just that. He had the sketch of us with him and Henry forced me to look at it. He made me take it home with me. There were so many times I wanted to call you."

"Why didn't you?"

"I hurt you, Jordan, in the worst way imaginable. I know I made it sound as if I repaid the way you helped me with sex. I made your love into something ugly. I said horrible things that I knew weren't true. What could I say to you if I'd called?"

"You did call though. What changed your mind?"

"First, I saw the letter you sent out. I was with Dee the day Will talked to you about it. He was much more blunt than Dee was. He told me how you looked. He said I should fix things with you and I might not have unlimited time to do it. Then this morning, Shane came to see me."

"I'm sorry, Kiley. He shouldn't have."

"Yes, he should have, Jordan. He made me listen to what happened last Tuesday. I knew I was wrong but he showed me just how wrong. He also pointed out that if you had faith in me, I should too. And I'm sure you already guessed that Brett and Sadie came to see me. They came to the restaurant as I was about to leave today. They told me your plans and how they came to be. Brett mentioned your recent investing and how he thinks you're getting ready to go away same as Will had. Then he told me that he's decided to believe in me. He said he was ready to put all his trust in me to get us through this. While he and Sadie talked, he did another sketch. It was of both of us looking as he sees us now. If I blow it tonight he wants the first one back so he can use them to remind him why he shouldn't ever fall in love."

"What are you trying to say, Kiley?"

"Well, Jordan, first, I'm trying to apologize and—"

"Don't you think you should do this in person? Please. Where are you?"

"Out front. Brett loaned me his cell phone. Sadie told me what time to call and he gave me his phone. She figured you'd answer if you thought it was her and he knew you would if you checked and saw his number."

When she revealed her location, Jordan raced down the stairs. Before she finished her explanation, he was outside. "Hang up and come over here," he said before he disconnected their call. When she hesitated, he sat on the top step to wait. He was in a shadow so she couldn't see his face.

Trembling, Kiley got out of the car and crossed the street, stopping on the sidewalk in front of him. She knew she had to speak but standing there, so close but still afraid to reach for him, her mind went blank.

"I thought you had something to say to me," Jordan urged gently. "Should I go back inside?"

"N-no... I... God, I'm blowing this!"

"Just tell me what you feel. Everything. Don't think, just talk."

She wished she could see his eyes. "Okay... Well... I love you. I'm embarrassed. I'm ashamed. I hurt you. I was so stupid but I was scared. I would do anything to turn back time and relive last Tuesday. I finally meet the guy I want to spend my life with and I screw it up so bad. I couldn't believe it when you said you wanted the same things in your life that I'd always wished for in my own. I hung up on you when you asked me to marry you over the phone because I was about to scream yes and how would you react if you'd just been kidding? I was also afraid you'd think I was insane since, at the time, I still couldn't really talk to you. And you made everything okay, just like you said you would and I ruined everything. You were about to start the life I wanted to share with you and I destroyed that too. Is Brett right? Are you going to disappear after Max dies? Jordan, I'm sorry I freaked out and let my mind invent things instead of listening to my heart. I ruined our chance for happiness but please, don't let my mistakes ruin things for you. Don't let me destroy your friendship. Brett is so worried about you. Go follow your grand scheme and do what the two of you set out to do. You are such a good man. Don't let my foolishness deprive the rest of the world of all you intended to give it."

"I need to ask you a question," Jordan interrupted. "Did you want to hurt me? Did you plan on throwing me out of your life when I left the restaurant to meet Winslow that day? Did you believe I was a monster then?"

Kiley took a deep breath to steady herself. The day Brett told her Jordan had his heart on his sleeve and she didn't, she hadn't really understood exactly what he meant. Now she did. At this point, nothing less than the naked truth would do. "I did not ever sit down and tell myself that the next time I saw you I was going to rip your heart out. It never crossed my mind. But I could see what my words were doing to you. I knew I was hurting you and I couldn't force myself to stop. I was stunned to hear me telling

you that it was unfortunate that you loved me. God, Jordan, I was saying things that were exactly opposite of how I felt. I never imagined that I'd meet someone like you. Even when I proclaimed that you were a monster, part of me kept insisting that I shut up. That was so far from the truth and I knew it.

"You asked if I planned on kicking you out of my life. For a few minutes I did but not that day." She saw him flinch and rushed to continue. "It was the night before, when I was waiting for you to call to say good night. I was thinking about the time that we spent together and let my insecurities sneak up on me. I thought you'd get bored with me eventually so I was going to make it easy on you to walk away when the time came. I planned on telling you that I just want to have some fun and that I wasn't ready to settle down in a serious relationship. I figured I could convince you to keep us in a fling mood without any heavy emotions, kind of like friends who happen to have great sex when the mood strikes."

"Why didn't you tell me then?"

"Because when you started to rub my feet, I knew I didn't ever want you to be just a fling. I wanted it all, everything we'd talked about. I decided that I'd become whatever I had to, to keep you interested in me.

"This morning when Shane was talking to me, he said that somewhere along the line he'd forgotten to trust your instincts and judgment and became intimidated by you. He wondered how much more he could have done with his life if he'd continued to have the same faith in himself as you do. He used Brett as an example of what can be accomplished with you believing in someone. It got me thinking of how you always stopped me when I made a comment that put myself down. You believed in me when I didn't and now my doubts have sabotaged our chance."

"So you think we only deserve one chance?"

"After the way I treated you, I have no right to hope for anything."

"What about me? Don't I deserve another chance at the life I want? Don't I deserve to be happy?"

"Of course you do, more than anyone," Kiley responded instantly. "I'm just not sure it should include me."

"Still insecure?"

"Not about my feelings for you and what I want. I don't see how you could possibly forgive me. How could you trust me with your heart again after what I did?"

"Would you hurt me like that again or would you discuss things with me if you start having doubts about something?"

"I'd remind myself of this week and talk to you. I never want to put that look back on your face."

"Do you think I still love you?"

"My heart does but my head doesn't see how you can."

Jordan was silent for a long time, so long that Kiley decided he was going to send her away. When he began to speak again, she braced herself for his dismissal.

"Well Kiley, I think I do have some advice regarding your guy. If you truly mean everything you told me I suggest you listen to your heart. Tell him the truth about what was in your mind that day. And then, if he's still with you, simply ask him to forgive you and take you back into his life."

Kiley was afraid to breathe. Had she heard him right or was her head playing more tricks on her? "Jordan, you told me that you wanted to have some role in my life. You said you'd always love me and that I could count on that, no matter what. I know I'm asking more than is reasonable but I also know I have to try since I can't imagine my life without you. I made a monumental mistake and, even though I'll never make that one again, I may make others. I do love you, Jordan, so I have to ask you this. Can you forgive me?"

"If you'll answer one more question for me, I think that may be possible." He took something from his shirt pocket that she couldn't see.

"Anything," she replied.

"Kiley, will you marry me?" He held out his hand, showing her the diamond and emerald ring he held.

Kiley gasped. "Yes, oh my God, yes! I don't believe this."

"Why not? I said forever and I meant forever." Kiley was still on the sidewalk. Jordan stood, opening his arms to her. "Come here, sweet. I missed you."

Kiley flung herself at him, laughing and crying all at once. "I promise you, Jordan. I will never..."

"Sh." He held her tightly. "It's in the past now." Slowly he released her. "I bought this the day after I met you." He took her hand and slid the ring on her finger.

"It's beautiful." She wasn't surprised by his information. "Jordan, I don't want to rush you but can we get married soon? I want Max there with us."

"You're a good person, Kiley Fisher." Jordan was thrilled. "I'd like that too."

"And then we can move to that little town so you can show me how an investor and an advertising guy go about revitalizing a radio station?"

"It will be my pleasure." Jordan claimed her mouth with the sweetest kiss.

"Speaking of pleasure," Kiley murmured against him. "Can I come in?"

"Do you think I'd ever send you back across town to sleep alone when you're here, saying you love me and agreeing to marry me?"

"No." Kiley kissed him this time. "We need to make a phone call first." Jordan raised an eyebrow as he ushered her up the stairs. "I want to call Brett."

"Okay, then what?"

“Then,” she turned to face him and smiled, “I want you to show me how sweet you can be with me encouraging you to share your heart. I want to see just how tender we can be together now that I’m not afraid of loving you. I want to begin our forever.”

## 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 e-mail address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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