



Staking His Claim

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Dedication

To my cousins Marsha and Stacie, thanks for the love, laughs, and support over the years. The two of you are more like sisters to me than cousins. I love you guys!

Chapter One

“Damn.”

Leslie didn’t know why she always seemed to have a knack for getting herself into trouble lately.

Looking out the window, she exhaled heavily. Her car was broken down on the inside of town. Luck had passed her by again today, but not completely. She winced when a pain traveled through her body. She had been on the road too long. Her independence and stubbornness might have gotten her into another predicament. She sighed, trying to focus on the road. It was getting harder to see. The weather looked like it was going to get worse sooner than expected. Things were still bad weather wise in North Dakota. It was mid-January, way below freezing, and a blizzard had just blown in, a full twenty-four hours before it was supposed to. Looking through the windshield, she glanced around to see what she was near. She squinted when what looked like the glimmer of a porch light caught her gaze. With the way the snow was coming down, she couldn’t tell how far it was. She didn’t even know if it *was* a porch light. The snow could be playing tricks on her eyes.

She squinted again, then leaned as close to the windshield as her body would let her get. Yes, it was a porch light she saw. If she remembered correctly, it was the Johnson’s place. She could probably make it there. The house would give her more protection than her car would. The Johnson’s had always been nice to her and her parents. They would take her in and let her get warm until she could call for help.

Another pain rolled through her body, as if the baby were protesting the idea of the journey. She rubbed her stomach. She was having a hard time getting around now, so late in her pregnancy. Her parents were going to kill her when they found out she took such a risk. She wasn’t supposed to move back home until next weekend. Yet, with weathermen forecasting a minimum of a week or two worth of bad weather coming their way, she hadn’t wanted to wait.

So much for surprising her friends and family.

They were probably going to be worried sick. She looked over at the useless cell phone sitting across from her. She hadn’t been able to find her charger for the past two days. Her gut told her it was packed it in one of her boxes. She hadn’t had the time to buy another one. Leslie sighed. Maybe she should have *made* time. She’d had the most rotten luck lately, and she couldn’t figure out why. The last time she checked, she hadn’t done anything to anyone to warrant such bad luck. Bad luck, which hadn’t started up until she met Sean. She shook her head. There would be no more men for her. She had to focus on getting herself together and raising her baby. Moving to Casselton would help her resist temptation. With a population under two thousand, men weren’t in abundance. At least single ones weren’t.

Taking a deep breath, she decided to make her way toward the house. She began to bundle up and prayed for balance. One would never guess she had been a star athlete in school if they saw her now. Once she had her winter gear on, she grabbed her purse and struggled out of the car. She laughed to herself, thinking how ironic it was that she had on winter gear when spring was

right around the corner. But she was a North Dakota girl born and raised, so she was used to it. She didn't bother locking her car. Someone could come along to steal it if they were kind enough to take her stuff out and leave it on the side of the road. She laughed at the ludicrous idea before she began heading in the direction of the house. The wind picked up, causing her to duck her head to fight off the chill. What seemed like hours later, she finally made it to the porch.

She moaned when she saw the steps leading up to the house. The dull ache in her back had become more persistent than it had been since she began driving. She couldn't stand nor sit in the same position for long amounts of time now. She didn't even want to think about the lack of sleep. Mercifully, there had been only one stop for a bathroom break—a feat that amazed her. Then again, she hadn't drunk a lot before getting on the road. Reaching out, she grasped the handrail and then made her way up, one step at a time. The porch had been cleaned off recently, but new snowfall had covered it again. Raising her hand, she knocked on the door and shivered.

Moments later, the door opened and she found herself face to face with a very handsome man. He was a good head taller than her five feet seven inches. But what captured her attention was his intense dark blue eyes and jet-black hair. His hair was starting to gray at the temples, so she knew she was in the presence of a mature gentleman. Then it dawned on her that she was at the wrong house. Mr. Johnson had never looked this good. When she realized she was just standing there staring, she smiled before saying the first thing she thought of.

“Hi.”

* * * *

Blake Eaton set aside the radio he had been using to get the weather update when he heard what he thought was a knock on his front door.

Who in the hell could be out in weather like this?

The blizzard was a total surprise to everyone, including the meteorologist. He walked to the front door and opened it only to find a bundled-up figure standing on his front porch. Well, at least the person had been smart enough to bundle up. He or she would have been much smarter to just stay inside. He studied the stranger, realizing it was a woman. He couldn't keep from staring, but didn't feel so bad when she returned it. Just as he was thinking of something to say, the stranger beat him to it.

“Hi.”

His eyes widened at her strange greeting. He figured she was delirious from the cold weather. Remembering his manners, he stepped back. One thing his mother had taught him was good manners. If she found out he wasn't using them, she would have a fit. The woman stepped over the threshold, and he noticed she was a little round—at least in the stomach area. He also noticed that she had beautiful eyes. Eyes he could get lost in. He frowned. He shouldn't be thinking this way about a complete stranger.

“Thank you for letting me in. It is a little cold out there.”

He closed the door behind her. Her voice brought him out of his stupor. He turned to look at her, wondering what had driven her to get out in this weather. No one from around these parts would do something so irrational. “Only a little, huh?”

She took off her hat and unwrapped the scarf from around her face. She was smiling, and his eyes zoned right in to the dimples in her cheeks. His heart hammered in her chest. She was breathtaking.

If she was a native of Casselton, he didn’t recognize her. Casselton’s population was under two thousand people. Everyone knew everyone. He would undeniably remember her if had seen her before. He took in her dark brown hair, pulled back off of her, face revealing her creamy milk-chocolate features. Her high cheekbones, pert nose, full lips—but her eyes . . . they captivated him. A rich color of brown he could melt into like chocolate over a low flame. His eyes traveled downward. He couldn’t tell much, except she had meat on her bones. It didn’t bother him any. He liked a woman who wasn’t afraid to eat. Snuggling up next to her on a cold night like this would be fun. He tried to keep his shock from showing, not able to remember the last time he’d had such a strong reaction to a woman. He saw her lips move and tried to focus on what she was saying instead of drooling over her.

“Well, more than a little. I was caught off guard by the bad weather. I didn’t expect the blizzard until tomorrow, so I was driving in from Bismarck. Then my car broke down.”

He noticed she was trembling a little. She needed to get warm. He gestured for her to follow him into the living room, where he had a fire going. “Didn’t you listen to the weather report? They’ve been warning about bad—”

When he turned back to her, he froze in his tracks. She had unbuttoned her coat. When it fell apart, he saw she wasn’t overweight; she was pregnant—extremely pregnant, if there was such a term.

“You’re *pregnant*.”

Her smile widened, showing the dimple in her cheek again. He had to resist the urge to walk over and kiss it. “How could you tell?”

He chuckled. His statement did point out the obvious. “Please have a seat.”

She gave him an appreciative look. “Thank you. My back is killing me.”

She sat down as gracefully as she could with her pregnant body. He could tell she had a lot of experience at it. He sat back down in his recliner.

“Isn’t this the Johnson’s place?”

He nodded, wondering how she knew the Johnson's. "It was, but they packed up and moved to Florida. They said the warm weather would be better for their arthritis. I've always liked their place, so I decided to purchase it." He looked at her with puzzlement. "How do you know the Johnson's?"

She smiled. "They're good friends of my parents, Harold and Marjorie Thompson."

His eyes widened when he comprehended what she just said. "*You're* Leslie Thompson?"

* * * *

She nodded slowly. "Yes I am. Should I know *you*?"

She moved to the edge of the couch, watching him cautiously, beginning to question herself for sitting here so calmly with a complete stranger. Casselton was small, but the town wasn't crime free. This man didn't look like a serial killer; then again, neither had Ted Bundy.

"Wow. You have really grown up."

She flinched. How old was this guy? He had just spoken like he had watched her grow up. "I have?"

He nodded. "I was a teenager when you were born."

Her eyes widened. He didn't look *that* much older than her. Still, she should know him, yet she didn't. "What's your name?"

He smiled. "Blake Eaton."

The name sounded familiar, but she couldn't place it. She'd heard his name before. However, she didn't recall him being around Casselton. At least not by the time she was old enough to remember him. "How old are you?"

"Forty-three."

She managed to keep her expression clear as shock traveled through her. Aside from the gray hair at his temples, she would never have thought he was over forty, let alone near it. She felt like a dirty woman salivating over someone eighteen years her senior.

He was old enough to be her father.

She tried to conceal her shudder. Not because he was a disgusting-looking man, but because he was the opposite. He looked very good for his age. She just felt *perverted*. He broke her train of runaway thoughts by speaking.

"So what brings you back to Casselton?"

She looked down at her stomach and rubbed it. “Well, I’m a single mother, and my parents are going to help me out until I can manage on my own.”

He frowned. “What happened to the baby’s father?”

Leslie laughed, even though nothing was humorous about her current situation. “He’s out of the picture. Too busy to take care of a child.”

Blake’s eyebrows rose high on his forehead. “But not too busy to help make it, I see.” He shook his head and stood up. He appeared more disgusted than she had, when Sean had told her how he felt about her having a baby.

“Well I would offer to let you use the phone, but the land line isn’t working due to the storm. My cell isn’t getting a signal either.”

One corner of her mouth tilted up. “My cell phone died because I didn’t charge it. I think I packed my charger in one of the boxes the movers are bringing. So I guess I’m stuck here.” Leslie couldn’t contain her sigh of disappoint. She closed her eyes. Prayed for the day not to get any worse. She didn’t know how much more she could take.

Squeezing her eyes tight, she tried to keep tears from welling up. Before she became pregnant, she hadn’t been an emotional person. Now she could cry in the blink of an eye.

“Are you okay?”

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. A tear escaped, and he made his way over to her, his expression full of concern. He reached for her hands and then pulled her to her feet. When he pulled her into his embrace, she went willingly.

“There’s no need for tears. Everything will be okay. You are safe here. I promise.”

His embrace was so comforting she relaxed into him. He stoked her back in a soothing up-and-down motion. A short time later, he pulled back and looked at her. He brushed away the remainder of her tears. “Feel better now?”

She nodded, looking away from him in embarrassment. “I’m normally not a blubbery mess. It’s been a rough lately.”

“I’m sure it has, but don’t worry about that right now. Just sit down and relax. We’re going to be here for a while, if the weathermen are accurate.”

She nodded. The winter weather could always be bad up north. There was no telling how long this storm front could last. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure. Now you said your car broke down. I won’t be able to fix it in this weather, but do you have anything you need out of it for the night? The storm is going to get worse before it gets better. I will say you can look forward to staying a minimum of one night.”

She pulled back out of his embrace. “Yes, I do. I have two bags in the backseat I want to bring in. Let me get my coat on and I’ll go—”

He shook his head. “I can get both of them. You stay here, relax and keep warm.”

She wanted to argue, but after she thought about it, she didn’t. With her girth, she would slow him down, be more of a hindrance than help. She nodded, and he helped her to reclaim her seat.

“I’ll be back as quickly as possible. Make yourself at home.”

He placed the weather radio near her. Nothing but static sounds came out. “See if you can get this to work. I had a signal but lost it right before you arrived.”

She reached over and picked it up. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She watched as he left the room. For the first time, she noticed he walked with a slight limp. Curiosity got the best of her. She made a mental note to ask him about it. The sound of the front door opening and closing prompted her to look down at the electronic radio she held. She didn’t know the slightest thing about them, but it would give her something to do until Blake returned. She began fiddling with the knobs on the radio, surprised when she picked up a signal without much effort. It was weak, but it was a signal. She sat the radio on the end table, listening for the weather report. It didn’t sound good at all. The storm wasn’t going to let up. They were telling people to be prepared to stay inside for a while. If the weathermen were right, she would be here for more than a night.

She tapered off the panic that rose up in her. It wouldn’t do her any good right now. As soon as she could make contact with her parents, she would. Until then, she hoped they wouldn’t worry. They had done enough of that about her over the past several months. A little over eight months ago, the casual relationship she’d been involved in had started to fizzle out, so she called it off. In hindsight, the whole thing had been a mistake. Sean was a smooth talker, and at the age of twenty-five, she’d thought she was mature enough to handle a strictly sexual relationship. She’d had no idea how wrong she’d been until it was too late. Sean had claimed he was too busy to carry on a serious relationship. And he had been—at least with her. Sean had only called her when he wanted sexual gratification. She couldn’t fault him, because she had done the same.

Now, when she looked back on the experience, she realized the sex had been mediocre, but it had satisfied her at the time. She had suffered from the misconception that “no-strings attached” was what she wanted. Once things had gone stale, she had broken it off with the business mogul. He’d seemed to understand. Even admitted he had been close to ending their relationship as well, he just hadn’t found the time to do so. She almost laughed at the statement.

Who was too busy to break up with someone they didn’t want to be with?

Evidently men like Sean were. Their relationship ended, and everything had been okay until she found out she was pregnant. She went back to Sean, but he was quick to inform her that parenthood wasn't something he wanted to take part in. Being the proud woman she was, she accepted his decision. Her parents hadn't raised her to beg and grovel. They would also be disappointed if she let herself get down and out over something she hadn't planned. She had to get herself together. She had to plan a life for her and her baby, which brought her to the present.

Making the decision to move back home hadn't been easy, but it was the best thing for her and her baby. She was supposed to have made this move two months ago, but an unplanned disaster had put those plans on hold. Everything was in order now, and she was able to make the move from Bismarck, North Dakota back to her hometown of Casselton, North Dakota. She felt an immense amount of relief. Her parents and the friends she'd grown up with had agreed to help her out temporarily. Tessa had a job waiting for her at the small bakery and coffee shop she ran. The bakery had been in Tessa's family for years, and because of its reputation, business was always constant. Leslie was grateful for the opportunity.

Right now, however, she had more to worry about than that. She was stuck in a blizzard with a man who was almost a complete stranger. Just one more strange circumstance for her to deal with in a time when it seemed her life was filled with them.

Concerned about Blake, she scooted to the edge of the couch and struggled to ease her body into a standing position. Once she did, she walked toward the front door. Passing by the fireplace, she became distracted. There was a picture on it that drew her eye, a photo of Blake and what had to be his parents. She remembered them instantly. Stuart Eaton had been the town's barber when she was growing up. His wife Penelope had been a seamstress. In some ways, she still was. Penelope's seamstress shop was still open for business. She no longer did the sewing, but she still ran the shop.

She studied the picture more closely. Now she realized why she didn't remember Blake. She recalled hearing that he'd joined the military. She could also remember hearing his name a few times when he came back into town. Well, Blake's parent's had done a great job in raising him, from what she could see. He was a true gentleman. It didn't hurt that he was so sexy he made her eyes hurt. She wondered if he was single. He had to be. There was no way a woman would let a man as sexy as him out of her sight in weather like this. She laughed, then winced as a sharp pain raced through her. She rubbed her stomach, wondering if her baby was trying to warn her about her racy thoughts. It was what got her into the condition she was in. She looked down at her stomach and smiled. "Easy girl, Mommy is still here."

Her baby moved before settling again. Another pain traveled around the small of her back. She moaned, wondering if this was what labor would feel like. She was so confused by the false contractions she had been having off and on lately, she wasn't sure she would know when the real ones began. Alison had stopped kicking a few weeks ago, but the doctor explained her daughter was running out of room. Still, her daughter would shift every once in a while to make sure her mother knew she was there.

Her mind went back to Blake. He was still out in the cold while she was inside enjoying the warmth, and she felt a little guilty. She turned and continued toward the front door. It was taking Blake longer than she'd thought it would. She wanted to make sure he was okay. Just as she reached the foyer, the front door swung open. Blake entered covered in snow, carrying both of her suitcases. They didn't contain all of her clothes by any means. She'd just brought what she could fit in her car. The rest she put in boxes for the movers to bring. They were probably going to be delayed as well. With this weather, she doubted anyone would move anything. She stepped forward to close the door behind Blake and then locked it. As she did so, she realized what had taken him so long. Visibility was poor. She couldn't even see past the porch. The storm was in full swing. He had taken a huge risk for her, and she was grateful. She turned to look at him, full of appreciation. "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome."

He sat the bags down. "Give me a moment to get warm. Afterward, I'll show you to the guest room. If you're hungry, I have some chili I made earlier on the stove, or there is stuff to make a sandwich. You're welcome to whatever you want."

She nodded, following him back to the living room as he talked. Standing back, she observed him as he warmed himself in front of the fireplace. He was built nicely. She tended to like her men taller than him, but what Blake lacked in height he made up for in looks and personality. More than she could say about Sean.

"Are you still in the military?"

His head jerked up, and he turned to look at her. He pulled his hat, gloves, scarf and jacket off, tossing the items onto the couch as he continued to study her.

"How did you know I was in the military?"

For a moment, she felt like she had said something wrong. Brought up a taboo subject. She wouldn't be surprised if she had stuck her foot into her mouth again. She was getting used to it now.

* * * *

He studied Leslie, watching uncertainty flicker across her face. Guilt ate at him for putting it there. Still, he was curious how she'd found out he had been in the military. He knew for a fact he locked all of his military paraphernalia away in one of the spare bedrooms upstairs. It was difficult to look at them because they brought up bad memories. He knew he was being illogical. Even if she had been able to make it up all of the stairs, which he seriously doubted she could do in her condition, the bedroom was locked. She crossed the room and stopped in front of him. He caught a whiff of her scent, fighting himself to keep from inhaling more deeply. She reached behind him, and when she brought her hand back, she held the picture of him and his parents right before he joined the military.

“Mr. and Mrs. Eaton always used to talk about their son who was in the Army.” She handed him the picture. “I can remember going with my father to your dad’s barbershop and hearing him speak of you. I can also remember going with my mom to pick up the items she had mended or sewn by your mother, and my mom would inquire about you.”

He nodded, understanding how she would know him. His parents had been proud of him when he enlisted. He had to say his military career had been busy. He joined the Army and did a stint over in the first Gulf War. After the Gulf War was over, he focused on his education so that he could get into the Medical Specialist Corps Physician Assistant program. He spent a lot of time down in South America, working his way up the ranks until September 11, 2001. When he had been called up to go to Afghanistan, he went without qualms. He wasn’t there long before he was shipped out to Iraq. His time in Iraq had earned him an honorable medical discharge. A surprise group of insurgents attacked his unit. He received a leg full of shrapnel as a result. His legs had been so severely damaged there were still muscles and nerves that would never be repaired.

After months of therapy, he had become functional again. But he would never get rid of his limp. Nor would he lose the scars. Every day he would be reminded of the fateful day his military career ended, as well as other parts of his life.

“Are you okay?”

Her delicate hand touched his chest. He felt the heat from it through his sweater. Before he could stop himself, he brought his hand up to cover hers. He raised her hand up to his lips and kissed her palm. She shivered and sighed before stiffening with an audible wince. He looked at her with concern when she touched her stomach. Today had been rough on her from what he could tell. Yet he didn’t want any harm to come to her baby. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I just need to lie down. I’ve pushed my body too hard. It’s catching up with me now.”

Nodding his understanding, he led her back to the foyer and picked up her suitcases. There had been several times when he had pushed himself to the limit, but that was due to stubbornness. To his will to walk again, to prove to himself that he didn’t have physical limitations, when deep down he knew he did.

Once he had a good grip on her suitcases, he turned and made his way down the main hallway. “I’m putting you in the master bedroom downstairs. It has a king-size bed and an oversized tub I’m sure you will enjoy.”

She nodded, and when they reached the room, he opened the door. He smiled when she gasped. The room was nice and cozy. He watched her walk over to the bed and sit down. She sighed, and he could see the tension seep out of her body. He placed the suitcases where she could get to them with ease. Straightening, he went to leave the room, and she called out to him. He turned back around.

“Can you help me with my shoes?”

He nodded and crossed the room again before kneeling before her. Rolling up her pants legs, he saw she was wearing flat boots, practical for a pregnant woman. He began to tug them off. The instant he did, he saw her feet and ankles were swollen. She had pretty feet. Her toes were void of toenail polish, but they still looked cute. Instinct took over, and he began to massage them. He wondered how long her feet had been swollen. How long she'd had the boots on today. She'd said she'd been on her own, so he was willing to bet she hadn't had any help. She was probably exhausted. He looked up when she moaned in pleasure. "You've been on your feet too long."

She nodded her head in agreement, leaning back on her elbows. "You're right, but please don't stop." She moaned again. "Where were you when I needed you two months ago?"

He chuckled as he shifted to take some of the pressure off of his bad leg. He stifled a groan. Both of his legs were bad, but one was worse than the other. "Do you really want to know?"

She shook her head. "No. Just don't stop. This feels wonderful. Makes me wonder what else I missed out on during my pregnancy by not having a responsible man around."

He didn't respond to her statement, and she stopped speaking. When she remained quiet for several moments, he looked up and found her drifting off to sleep. "I better stop. I'm putting you to sleep."

He gave her foot one last rub before straightening himself up. There was going to be hell to pay for him staying in that position for so long, but judging by the relaxed look on her face, it was worth it. He reached down and helped her into a sitting position. "Come on. You need a hot shower to help you sleep better."

She moaned. "But I would settle for another foot rub."

Blake chuckled. "Well, I'm sure you would, and as much as I would like to, the old leg would complain more than it already is."

She brought her hand up to her mouth. Concern in her expression. "I'm sorry. I noticed your limp earlier." Her eyes widened when she comprehended what she'd just said. "Oops. I meant—oh, never mind. I'm sorry."

He laughed. "I like you. It's refreshing to be around a woman who says what she thinks without sugarcoating it, so don't apologize. I'm sure it's been a while since anyone has done something for you without asking for anything in return, so you deserved it."

He grinned. "Although I did get something out of it, seeing the look of contentment on your face—and you have pretty feet."

She giggled. "You have got to be kidding. The last pedicure I received was three months ago. I have a tub where I can soak my feet if I want, but with this belly, reaching my feet is out. I would have loved to go to the salon, but I've been trying to save money, so I couldn't."

He smiled when one of her hands went to her stomach, the other to her back. She rubbed her stomach and looked up at him.

“How did you injure your leg?”

“In Iraq.”

Her eyes widened. “Really?” He nodded and sat down on the bed next to her. “You know I keep up with the war on the television and in the newspaper, but I haven’t ever met someone who was actually there.”

He sighed. “Well, I was there. I have the scars to prove it.”

She looked at him with open curiosity. “Do you mind telling me what happened?”

“Sure, but I’ll leave out the gory details. There was an attack on our camp one evening. I ended up being a casualty, along with a dozen other men. However, no one lost their life, so I can’t complain too much. I took shrapnel to my legs, hence the limp.”

He paused and looked over at her. She was listening with open interest. There was no pity in her gaze, just simple interest. He wondered how she would react if she saw the scars on his legs. They had improved a lot due to the plastic surgery, but there was only so much that could be done. “But I’m okay and I can still walk, even if it is with pain, so I’ll take it.”

He stood and held his hands out to her, helping her to her feet. He showed her to the bathroom. “Now take a shower.”

He pointed out where the towels and soap were. “I’ll be in the living room, keeping up with the weather reports. Call me if you need anything.”

She nodded, and he left her to take her shower. He went back into the living room and paced around a little while he listened to the weather report. There wasn’t much of an update. The outcome was still the same right now. *Bad.*

He continued to pace, his mind on Leslie and what they’d just shared. He chuckled. What had they just shared? He wasn’t sure he could classify it, but it felt good. She made him smile, laugh, relax. He shook his head. Allowing himself to get carried away wouldn’t be beneficial. She had tried to hide her shock at his age earlier, but he’d seen the small flicker in her eyes. His age bothered her. There was no way he stood a chance with her.

He frowned when he realized some time had passed; yet Leslie hadn’t come out of the bedroom yet. He made his way toward the bedroom, wanting to check on her. She’d looked exhausted earlier. Still, he didn’t want to risk anything being wrong. He raised his hand and knocked on the door. She called out, giving him permission to enter. He opened the door and stuck his head in. She turned to face him, her shirt still bunched up. His eyes dropped to her stomach.

He grinned. She followed his gaze, smiling when she saw a great amount of her stomach was showing. Shaking her head, she went to pull her top down the rest of the way. He held out his hand to stop her. He had seen several pregnant women before, had even worked with a few. None affected him the way she did.

“Wait.” His eyes came up to meet hers. “Do you mind?”

She dropped her hand back to her side, then shook her head. “Of course not. Alison loves to make herself known.”

He looked at her stomach again. “Alison?”

She nodded. “That’s what I’ve decided to name her, after my father’s grandmother.”

He entered the room. “You’re having a girl?”

“Yes. I had the doctor tell me the sex of the baby, so I could be prepared.”

He walked the rest of the way into the room, not stopping until he placed his hand on her exposed belly. Alison chose that moment to shift. He looked up in surprise. “She is active.”

Leslie smiled. “Yes, but not as much as she used to be. She’s running out of room in there.”

He placed his other hand on her stomach and smiled. “Your skin is so soft, but your belly feels hard.”

She nodded. “I just noticed that myself.”

He frowned. “When are you due?”

“About two weeks from now?”

His mouth dropped open. “And you’re driving by yourself?”

She rolled her eyes. “This is my first pregnancy. I’m healthy because I do beyond what the doctor tells me to do. She also said there’s a possibility I will be over my due date, since this is my first baby.”

He bit his tongue to keep from telling her there were exceptions to the rules. He didn’t want to worry her. “Well, take it easy. You don’t want to rush it. And I’m sure you will have a beautiful, healthy baby girl.”

Leslie smiled, a dimple appearing in each of her cheeks. “Thank you.”

He stepped back. “Well mom-to-be, I’m going to let you get your rest. I’m sure you need it.”

He helped her up into the bed, then pulled the covers up over her. “Goodnight, Leslie.”

“Goodnight, Blake.”

She rolled over to her side and closed her eyes. He smiled as he closed the door. She was already snoring.

Chapter Two

Leslie jerked awake as she heard someone cry out in pain. Then she realized the sound came from her. When she looked down, her hands were cradling her stomach. She was in the grips of a pain she couldn't fight. Slowly, the pain eased up, and she sighed. Not knowing how long she had been asleep, she began to look around the room for a clock. A moment later, she jumped as the door burst open. The first thing she noticed was he looked bed-ragged. The second, he was only wearing pajama bottoms. The third, the man was built very nicely. Besides the gray at his temples and the laugh line around his eyes, one wouldn't be able to tell he was a day over thirty, thirty-five at the most.

"Are you okay?"

The pain that had awakened her began to subside, but the pressure on her back was unbearable. Needing to get up, she threw the covers back. "Can you help me up?"

He nodded before entering the room, walking around to help her up. "You sure you're okay?"

She nodded again. "I didn't mean to wake you. I wasn't even awake myself."

Reaching down, she pulled her shirt over her stomach. She thought the point of maternity clothes was to keep her covered. Yet it never failed, her daughter always found a way to make her presence known. "What is the weather like?"

"I haven't checked the radio report since I went to bed. I have to admit it didn't sound good then. They're predicting at least two feet of snow, if not more. But if you're awake for now, we can go listen for another update."

"Okay."

She paused when he turned to walk up the stairs. "Go ahead and go to the living room. The radio is in my room now. I'll be right back."

She followed his instructions, taking a seat on the edge of the couch. He returned a short time later with the radio in his hands, sitting it on the coffee table. She watched him fumble with it for a few moments until clear reception came through on the radio. She turned her attention to the decorations of the living room.

"In case I didn't say it before, you have a beautiful home."

He looked up at her and smiled. "Thank you."

Just then the weather report came on. The news was still grim. The blizzard showed no signs of slowing. They wouldn't be surprised if the snow fell well above two feet, maybe closer to three. Whatever the end result, they were in for a wild ride. She could hear the wind howling outside as it was. She began to worry when she thought about her parents. They would be safe because they

were used to this weather. Her parents knew to stay inside, but if they tried to reach her and couldn't, they would panic. The further she got along in her pregnancy, the more they worried about her being on her own. She hated not having a way to contact them, to let them know she was okay.

"What is it?"

She rubbed her stomach. "My parents are going to be worried sick about me and Alison."

He gave her a reassuring smile. "I'm sure your parents know you are smart enough to remain safe."

"No," she scoffed. "I'm not smart in the least. My parent's don't even know I'm here. They aren't expecting me till next weekend. With the impending storm, I thought it best for me to go ahead and come this weekend instead of waiting. I didn't want to take a chance on getting stuck in Bismarck. I also didn't want to delay this move anymore than I already have."

He walked over to the fireplace and began working on restarting the fire. "Try not to worry. We'll contact them as soon as this storm is over."

She knew he was right. There was no use in worrying. At least not right now. The way things sounded, they were going to be stranded together for a while. She might as well make herself comfortable.

"Are you hungry?"

She shook her head, surprised that she wasn't. Normally she couldn't wait to eat. She couldn't believe she'd stayed within the recommended pregnancy weight. Yes, she had eaten healthy for the most part, but she still ate a lot.

She looked around his living room, a photograph on the wall catching her attention. Easing her round body off the edge of the couch, she stood. She winced when a sharp pain made its way through her again. Clutching her stomach, she bit her lip and tried to focus on breathing. When the pain released its grip, she straightened. If this was what false labor felt like, she didn't want to think about what real labor would be like. She planned to be as drugged as possible. Sighing, she continued towards the photo, only to stop in mid-stride when she felt a gush of liquid from between her legs.

"Oh my God!"

Blake looked up in concern from his stooped position in front of the fireplace. "What is it?"

Leslie looked at him with full-fledged panic. "My water just broke."

When he looked at her in confusion, she gestured toward the liquid soaking her pajama bottoms.

His eyes widened. “*Holy hell!*”

She held her stomach and laughed at his terrified expression. Why, she had no idea. There was nothing funny about the situation at all. He stood and rushed over to her. So much for him being a gentleman. The words coming out of his mouth right now were nothing any gentleman would say in front of a woman. He rushed her toward her bedroom.

“Do you have a nightgown you can change into?”

She looked at him as if he had lost his mind. “Forget the nightgown, Blake. I need to get to the hospital.”

He gave her an understanding look. “I know, but unfortunately we are in the middle of a blizzard. I’m afraid we can’t go anywhere right now.”

Her body began to tremble and she shook her head. “No. We have to get to the hospital. I can’t have my baby here. *I need a doctor.*”

He pulled her close and looked into her eyes. “Leslie, I need you to be calm. We can’t get to a hospital, but I can help you. I was a Physician’s Assistant in the Army Medical Specialist Corp. I have medical training. I’ve delivered babies before.”

She tried to take in what he was saying. None of it seemed real right now. She had to be dreaming. This wasn’t how she was supposed to have her baby. Blake gave her a gentle shake, snapping her out of her trance.

“Do you trust me, Leslie?”

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. He smiled. “I have welcomed you into my home, kept you warm, given you a comfortable place to sleep. Again I ask you, do you trust me?”

She nodded, unable to speak. Right now, she was so scared she was doing well to remain upright. Speaking was out of the question.

“Good. I promise you’ll be okay. I will help you and your baby. We will be *fine*. Now change into a nightgown, no bottoms, while I clean up the living room.”

She nodded slowly and moved toward her suitcase. Blake left the room, leaving her to her racing thoughts. She opened the suitcase, groaning as another pain gripped her. Holding her stomach, she whimpered, tried to wish the pain away. She wasn’t ready to have her baby. There was still so much left for her to do. When the contraction let up, she straightened, taking a deep breath to collect herself. She reached for a nightgown, tried to change into it before she was overcome with another labor pain. Blake returned just as she got the nightgown over her stomach. She started toward him but stopped to bend over with another contraction. He rushed over and placed his arm around her for support.

“Don’t hold your breath, Leslie—you need to breathe.”

She took his advice, gulped for air as her hands tightened into fists. He reached down and took her hands into his. She squeezed them for support. When the pain lessened, she was able to uncurl herself.

“Is it over?”

She nodded. “For now.”

“How long have you been in labor?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Since early this morning, I guess. I have been feeling pains on and off, but I chalked it up to false labor pains. It felt similar to what I felt about a month ago, so I didn’t know.”

He rubbed the back of her hands with her thumbs. “It’s okay. It happens to a lot of women the first time. I’m sure we don’t have much longer because your water has broken. I know it hurts, but you need to move around—you will deliver faster that way.”

He went to move away from her, but she didn’t release him. “Where are you going?”

He grinned. “I need to get a few things ready for the baby, but I won’t be long. You just focus on walking. Stop when you can’t anymore. More importantly, let me know if you need to push.”

She frowned. “How will I know?” She had planned on delivering in a hospital, surrounded by medical equipment, with doctors to tell her when she was ready.

He gave her an amused look. “Believe me, you’ll know. Now I will be right back. Just yell my name if you need me.”

She nodded, and he left the room. Her focus shifted to walking. Blake re-entered the room before she’d made a complete circulation of it. He had an arm full of towels and ratty sheets. She watched him strip the bed down, and place the sheet on it before adding the towels as a top layer, leaving several to the side. He looked over at her when she groaned in pain. He was by her side instantly, whispering soothing words in her ear and rubbing her back. When it was over, she sighed in relief. She relaxed against him.

“Would you like to lie down for a little while?”

She nodded. He assisted her over to the bed. He piled pillows behind her until she was comfortable. Tears clogged her throat, and she closed her eyes. Afraid didn’t begin to describe how she was feeling. Never had she thought she would be giving birth to her baby outside of a hospital. The fear must have been evident on her face, for he touched her cheek. When she opened her eyes, his caring expression caused the tears she’d tried to hold back to fall. He placed his other hand on her stomach.

“It’s going to be okay. You can do this. We can do this.”

His words soothed her until the contraction started again. She rolled over onto her side and moaned. He leaned over her and massaged the small of her back, whispering to her until she was able to relax again. When the aching subsided, tears were in her eyes again.

“You need to breathe through the pain, like they taught you in Lamaze class.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t take it. I started the class, but I didn’t finish it. I couldn’t take the stares of pity, feeling like an outsider because I couldn’t find a partner.”

He placed a kiss on her brow. “Well, you have one now. So let me show you the basics because you need to relax, to breathe, or this is going to be very difficult. The key is to relax. I know it sounds impossible because of the pain you are in, but you have to. Fighting against the contractions will draw out your labor. Make it more painful. If you need to scream, yell, grunt, I don’t care. I know it’s painful, so do whatever you need to do to get through this. You don’t need to pretend like it doesn’t hurt for me.”

She shook her head. “I’m not going to be able to do this, Blake.”

He smiled and brushed a loose strand of hair out of her face. “Yes you will. I will be here to help you. We’ll do this together. Just relax, stay calm. I’ll do the rest.” He continued to massage her back. “Will you be okay by yourself while I prepare a few things for Alison’s arrival?”

She opened her mouth to answer him but cried out when she was overcome with pain again. She tried to focus on breathing and not hating Sean for abandoning her. Leaving her to go through childbirth alone. She gasped, lifting her gaze to Blake’s. He was breathing with her. She wasn’t alone. She couldn’t be more grateful.

“You’re doing good, Leslie—just a little longer now.”

She hoped he wasn’t making empty promises. If this went on much longer, she was going to break. When she was able to move again, she shifted against him. “I need to get up and move around. I felt better when I was moving around.”

He gave her a concerned look. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Yes. Whatever I can do to speed up this labor.”

He smiled and helped her out of bed. “Okay. You walk while I prepare the items I’ll need. I’ll be in the kitchen. Call me if you need me.”

She nodded and began to pace the room, venturing out into the hall when it didn’t seem like enough steps. She stopped and groaned when the pain began again.

“I can’t believe I’m going to forget this pain when this is over,” she muttered to herself. “I need something for pain.”

“Sorry, but pain medication is the one thing I can’t help you with.”

She looked up and saw Blake enter with a steaming pot. From the way it sounded, there were items in it. He set the pot on a free towel out of the way and came to her side. She sighed when he began to wipe her brow with a cool washcloth. Where he had gotten it from she didn’t know. Nor did she care. She leaned into him, letting the coolness sooth her.

“You are doing wonderfully, Leslie.”

She groaned. “It doesn’t feel like it.”

“You are. I wouldn’t lie to you. Now let’s venture toward the kitchen and get you some ice.”

She leaned on him and walked with him to the kitchen, stopping once to breathe through a contraction. When he placed a piece of crushed ice in her mouth, she moaned in pleasure.

He smiled. “Good?”

She nodded. “Yes it is.”

He slipped another piece in her mouth, and she closed her eyes, enjoying the cool moisture. “Let’s continue walking.”

She lost track of time as they continued to walk. What she was able to keep up with was the contractions, how close they were coming together now. Blake was timing them aloud—she knew she was under two minutes in between them. She was barely able to gather herself, take a few steps, and take a breath before she was heaved into another agonizing minute of unbelievable pain. She took Blake’s advice and screamed, yelled, and grunted. The entire time Blake supported her, whispered soothing words, and encouraged her. Then the contractions stopped. There was no pain. As if her body had changed its mind again.

If she hadn’t been so relieved, she would have cried. At least now she knew what labor really would be like. She looked up at Blake with a tentative smile.

“It’s over. I think it was another false alarm.”

He shook his head. “No, Leslie, it’s not over. It’s just beginning.”

She opened her mouth to disagree. To tell him the pain was gone, but she couldn’t. “*Oh my God,*” she gasped. She sagged against him as an unbearable pressure began. His hold tightened on her.

“Don’t push, Leslie. I know you want to, but don’t push. Not until we get back to the room.”

She looked up at him trying to tell him with her eyes how impossible it seemed to be right now. It felt like her baby had positioned herself to indicate that she was ready to arrive in the world. She wasn't sure if she could hold on.

Blake must have read the desperation in her eyes because with more strength than she'd ever thought he would have, he swept her up into his arms and carried her to the room. He placed her on the bed and stepped back.

"Give me just a few more minutes, Leslie. I need to clean my hands. Do you have anything to put the baby in?"

She gave him a blank look, trying to listen to her body and him at the same time. "In my suitcase," she managed to gasp. He smiled at her. "Just breathe, Leslie. Breathe for me. This will be over soon."

In a haze, she watched him rush to her suitcase. He picked out a few items and placed them next to the towel. Then he went into the bathroom and the water came on. What seemed like an eternity later, he reappeared by her side.

"How do you want to deliver?"

She gave him a puzzled look. "What?"

"I want you to be comfortable; however, we need gravity, so you can't lie on your back in the bed. There isn't enough of an angle."

She looked at him, her mind racing. All she could think about was the urge to push. "I don't care, Blake. I just need to push. *Now!*"

She groaned and held her stomach while she focused on breathing. Blake studied her for a moment, then stepped closer to her. "I think kneeling and leaning against the bed or on your hands and knees might be best."

Her eyes widened. "Both of those positions were how I got this baby. I—"

His laugh cut her off, and he reached for her. "Which will it be?"

She stared at him mutely, seeing he was serious. "Kneeling," she responded. It was the only position she thought she could manage right now. He placed a few pillows on the floor, covered them with towels before assisting her onto them. She felt immediate relief. The pressure against her spine disappeared. She glared at him over her shoulder. "Why didn't you discuss this position earlier?"

If he responded, she didn't hear him, because her body took over. Blake eased down beside her. "That's it. Let your body take over. It knows what to do. Take a deep breath and push when you feel the pressure. Stop when you don't."

She followed his instructions, listening to her body pushing when she needed to. The pressure became greater and greater, but it didn't seem like anything was progressing. She was tired and not sure how much longer she could do this. Looking up at Blake, she told him so. He smiled at her in response.

"You are doing wonderfully. Alison is almost here."

She moaned. "How do you know?"

"Because I do. Now just think about the beautiful little girl you are going to have. She is going to have dark hair and beautiful brown eyes just like her mother. It will all be worth it once you have her in your arms."

She smiled inwardly; glad to have him there with her. If she had been alone with anyone else, she would panic.

After what seemed like several grueling hours, a baby's scream joined her own. All of the tension left her body, and she almost sagged in relief.

"It's a girl!" Blake told her excitedly. "Go ahead and lie down now. It's okay."

She eased herself onto her side and looked up at Blake. He had already separated her daughter from the umbilical cord, severing one connection and starting another. She whispered her daughter's name, watching him clean her daughter. She could see ten toes and fingers. Flailing arms and legs. She was healthy. Her heart gave a hard thump, and her eyes burned. It was worth it—all of the pain she had been through. All the worrying, everything she had been through. Worth it. All the months of stress and agony over Sean didn't matter any more.

She watched him wrap her daughter up snugly in a receiving blanket. He held the baby out to her, staring at Alison with a look of wonder, as if she were his own. She took her daughter and gave her a closer inspection. Her daughter stared back up at her with unseeing eyes.

"You did a good job, Leslie."

She looked up from her baby and found him between her legs, his head bent, hand pressing on her stomach.

"You can tell the truth. I wasn't very brave."

His eyes came up to meet hers, a charming grin on his face. "You were brave when you needed to be."

She looked back down at her daughter and smiled. The Lamaze instructor had told her she would forget about how bad the pain was. It was true. The labor seemed to be easy now that she saw her daughter. “She is beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Just like her mother.”

She couldn’t deny the sincerity in his voice, but right now she could focus on nothing but her daughter. How she was going to provide for her so that she had the best future possible. She wanted her daughter to have every opportunity she’d had and more.

Chapter Three

Blake was slow to wake as he heard the cry of a baby. As the events of the night came back to him, his eyes snapped open. He looked over toward the bed and saw Leslie come awake as well. Standing up, he walked over to Alison and picked her up. She was still wrapped snugly in the receiving blanket he'd placed her in earlier. Today he would help Leslie clean her up and get her dressed. Leslie smiled when she saw him holding Alison.

"So it wasn't a dream?"

He shook his head. She shifted then groaned in agony. He watched the expression of discomfort flicker across her face. "Evidently it wasn't."

Smiling, he looked down at Alison, who seemed content to be held for the moment—but he knew that wouldn't last long. She hadn't made her entrance into the world until shortly before four o'clock in the morning. Alison hadn't eaten earlier' he knew it would only be a matter of time before she'd get hungry.

Looking over at the clock, he saw it was just past noon. He placed Alison in her mother's arms. "Let me go check the water, make sure the pipes aren't frozen. I also want to see what it looks like outside. The storm was still going strong before we went to bed."

She nodded, but her attention was already on Alison again. He had an idea of how she felt. It was hard to believe she had given birth to something so precious. Blake took one last look at them before heading out of the room and into the kitchen. He turned the water on, smiling with relief as the water ran without issue. Turning the water back off, he pulled the curtain above the sink aside and peered out. It was whiteout conditions. The blizzard was still in full swing. After he helped Leslie with the baby, he would turn on the weather radio to get an update.

When he re-entered the room, Leslie was still lying there with Alison in her arms. "Are you ready to take a shower?"

Leslie smiled at him, the dimples he loved so much appearing in both of her cheeks. "Yes I am. I tried not to complain, but I do feel icky."

He didn't want to imagine what she felt like. He took Alison out of her arms and helped her ease off the bed. She moved slowly toward the bedroom. He knew she was going to be sore for some time to come. Childbirth was hard on the body. He cradled Alison to his chest, walked over to the chair with her, and sat down. Studying the miniature version of Leslie, he watched her sleep, her cute lips pursed as if she had something to say. She was beautiful.

He shook his head in disgust. How could Leslie's boyfriend abandon her and his unborn child? Well, the loser didn't know what he was missing out on. As far as Blake was concerned, it was good riddance. Leslie spent a great amount of time in the shower, but he didn't mind, and he didn't blame her. She had been through a lot in the last twenty-four hours. Hell, she had been through a lot the last nine months, from what it seemed.

The water in the bathroom went off, pulling him from his thoughts. He looked up and waited for her to appear. When she did, she was still moving slowly, but she looked refreshed. She had changed into another pair of pajamas. He'd thought her beautiful while pregnant. Post-pregnancy, she was gorgeous.

She walked toward him, smiling. "You are good with her."

Blake smiled. "I have been around a few babies, so I have had some experience."

He stood and met her halfway, handing Alison to her. "I'm going to go get a basin of water and washcloth. You can give Alison a sponge bath."

She nodded, and he left the room to get the items they would need. When he re-entered the room, he saw Leslie had already placed a clean receiving blanket out. He sat the medium size container of water next to Leslie, watching as she unwrapped the towel from around her daughter. He stood back while Leslie bathed her child, both of them encasing themselves into his heart even more. Alison turned her head to look at him, but he knew she couldn't see him. He watched as she curled her body up, as Leslie turned her onto her side so she could clean her back. When Leslie turned her back over, Alison let out a loud cry. Leslie jumped in surprise, and Blake smiled.

"I'm willing to bet she's hungry."

Leslie nodded. "She probably is."

Leslie dried her off before groaning. He looked at her in concern. "What is it?"

Leslie closed her eyes. "I don't have any diapers."

Blake groaned himself. This could prove to be a huge dilemma. Leslie laughed and hit her forehead with her hand. "Actually, look in the bottom of my suitcase. I put a package of diapers in there. A neighbor came by right before I left and gave them to me. They should be in the bag that isn't open."

He moved toward the suitcase she spoke of. "I'll get them."

"Can you see if I put baby lotion in there as well? I use it myself."

Blake walked over to the suitcase to search for the items while she tried to soothe Alison. He found the items and returned with them. She put the diaper on Alison like she had years of practice. He didn't know why Leslie was worried. She was going to be better at motherhood than she gave herself credit for. She put a little lotion on Alison, then looked up at him. "Can you wrap her up in her blanket? I know I won't be able to get it as tight as you did."

He nodded, and she moved aside. He wrapped Alison up snugly, then placed her into her mother's arms. When Leslie slipped the strap of her nightgown off her shoulder, his eyes widened. He turned around. As much as he wanted to watch Leslie nourish her daughter, it wasn't his place.

"I'm going to go take a shower. I'll be back."

He didn't wait for her to respond. Instead, he made his way to his bedroom. He walked straight into the bathroom, stripped, then stepped under the warm spray of the water. Bracing his hands against the wall, he let his head hang under the showerhead. He didn't know what was wrong with him. He was too old to be acting so foolish. Getting attached to Leslie and Alison would be a mistake. This was a temporary arrangement. Once the storm was over, they would go their separate ways. She wouldn't have anything to do with him. There was no use in thinking it could be any other way.

He bathed quickly before stepping out of the shower, then dried off. He pulled on a pair of pants and flannel shirt. Still he couldn't resist stopping by to check on his houseguests. Leslie spotted him and smiled. She had Alison up against her shoulder. He grinned when he heard her belch. Leslie laid Alison on the bed before placing pillows around her for safety. There was probably no chance of Alison rolling, but one could never be certain. She leaned over and placed a kiss on her daughter's cheek before slipping out of bed.

Blake turned, walking toward the living room. He went straight to the weather radio, then turned it on. Once he had, he wished he hadn't. The weather outside didn't show any signs of getting better. Two feet of snow had fallen, and it wasn't letting up. He sent up a quick, sincere prayer, thankful that he had been able to deliver Alison safely. If it had come down to it, he would have moved the earth to get Leslie to the hospital. He sighed. He was getting in over his head.

He turned to look at Leslie as she entered the room. She was biting her lip, looking anxious to get away from this situation as well, but probably for a different reason.

"Looks like we're going to be here a little longer."

She nodded. "Looks like it, but at least the electricity and water are still working."

"You have a good point. Were you able to feed Alison okay?"

Leslie smiled. "Yes. After a little prodding, she latched on with gusto. I guess she was starving because I didn't eat anything yesterday after lunch."

He looked at her in surprise. "You didn't?"

"No. I was too worried about making this trip."

He turned and headed toward the kitchen. "Are you hungry now?"

Her stomach answered for her. They both laughed. He led her into the kitchen, gestured for her to have a seat at the table. She shook her head. “Believe me, I’ll stand.”

He chuckled. “Go get a pillow and sit down. You don’t need to stand on your feet too long. Trust me. You’ll regret it more than sitting.”

He expected her to argue, but she didn’t. A short time later, she returned with a pillow and placed it in the chair before sitting down, gingerly. He began raiding the refrigerator for a simple, quick breakfast. Even though it was lunchtime, he had more breakfast food items to choose from. He decided on ham, eggs and English muffins. The muffins were on hand at all times because his mother liked them. Otherwise he would just put on a couple of biscuits. After the night she had been through, she deserved the muffins. He looked up when Leslie gasped. She had a hand placed flat over her chest, a teasing glint in her eye. “A man who eats English muffins—be still my heart.”

He laughed. “I drink tea too.”

Her eyes widened. “Earl Grey?”

He opened the cabinet and pulled out the box. “Anything less would be uncivilized.”

A shriek of laughter escaped her before she clapped her hand over her mouth. “Cut it out. We don’t want to wake up Alison.”

Blake nodded, turning his attention back to preparing their breakfast. He looked at her over his shoulder. “Do you want some tea?”

Leslie scrunched up her nose and shook her head. “Not with breakfast.”

“There’s juice and milk in the fridge.”

She tilted her head to the side as if pondering her options. “I’ll take juice.”

He scrambled the eggs. “Do you feel like a new mother?”

She sighed. “With every fiber of my being.”

“Are you going to be in Casselton permanently?”

He asked the question even though he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer. The last thing he wanted to think about right now was her leaving. An attraction to her was building, and he was certain she liked him as well. At his age, he shouldn’t even think about being with her. She deserved someone who was younger—someone who didn’t have a beat-up body.

She spoke, pulling him out of his thoughts. He had almost forgotten he'd asked her a question. "I'm not sure right now. I just want to get settled. Find myself again. My friend Tessa has offered me a job, and right now I'm going to take it one day at a time."

"Smart idea."

Her stomach grumbled again, and he chuckled. "Please tell me the food is almost ready."

He nodded as he put the English muffins in the toaster to brown before walking over to the refrigerator. He pulled out the orange juice and strawberry preserves, placing both on the table. As he placed the glasses and silverware on the table, the English muffins popped up. He prepared both of their plates and sat one in front of her before taking a seat across from her.

"This looks wonderful," she said with appreciation.

"Thank you. Enjoy."

"Where did you learn how to cook?"

Blake laughed. "What man can't scramble eggs, pan fry ham and toast bread?"

She shrugged her shoulders, her attention on her food. He focused on his own food. Even though he ate dinner last night, he was hungry. A glance at Leslie told him she was eating with as much enthusiasm as he was. She finished before he did, pushing her plate away with a sigh. "If you leave the dishes, I will clean them later. Right now I want to get back and check on Alison. I could also use another nap."

He shook his head. "Don't worry about the dishes. Go check on Alison. I'll take care of the rest."

For once she didn't open her mouth to argue with him. He watched her leave the room, then went back to eating the remainder of his breakfast. He was tired himself. Last night had been very eventful. Never would he have thought he would have delivered a baby in his home, in the middle of a blizzard. When he was finished eating, he would clean up and take a nap himself. He couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to take his nap next to Leslie and Alison.

He finished his breakfast with the grim reality he might never find out. It didn't take him long to clean up the kitchen when he'd finished eating. He made his way down to his bedroom, not stopping to check on Leslie and Alison. He had to pull back some or it would be harder when they were no longer there. He lay down in his bed and closed his eyes. He needed to sleep. The lack of it had him delirious. No matter how much he may want it, he didn't stand a chance with Leslie right now. He had nothing to offer her.

* * * *

Blake groaned as he opened his eyes. It was too early in the morning to be up, but Alison was still crying. He had heard Leslie's attempts to get her to quiet down. Alison wasn't paying

attention from the sound of it. She was three days old and the boss of the house already. He hoped the weather would clear soon. Alison was probably just feeling restless like he was. He needed to get up. There were a lot of things that needed to be done, starting with checking the weather radio. The weather station had predicted a break in the storm last night. For once he hoped they were wrong. He wasn't ready for his guests to leave. They would be able to once the snow was cleared away and the phone lines were back up and running.

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he went to help Leslie. He tried to stay out of mother and daughter's affairs unless his help was needed. This was one of those times. He trekked down the hallway, briefly knocking on the bedroom door. Leslie called out for him to enter. When she did, he found her pacing back and forth, rocking and bouncing Alison. He noticed tears on Leslie's cheeks as well. Walking over to them, he held out his hands for Alison, and Leslie handed her over to him.

"I don't know what's wrong with her. I tried feeding her. Changing her. When that didn't work I tried rocking her, but she just won't stop crying."

Blake nodded. He began his own pacing and rocking of Alison. He spoke to her softly. "Shh, Alison. What are you getting yourself all worked up for?"

Alison didn't seem to be listening so he launched into the first verse of the Army song. A few words in, she quieted. Blake looked up at Leslie when she groaned. She dropped her head into her hands. Sensing something was wrong, he stopped singing.

"What is it?"

Leslie looked up at him and smiled through watery eyes. "At this rate she'll be joining the military at the age of five."

He chuckled. "Hey, it works."

Leslie nodded. "I know. I'm going to have to get you to teach me the words."

He went back to singing as Alison began to stir again. He was just glad he had a decent singing voice. Looking over at Leslie, he saw she had made her way back to the bed. From the looks of it, she was dozing off. She looked so beautiful lying there, struggling to stay awake, but she was losing the battle.

"Why don't you lie down? Once I get Alison situated, I'll bring her back to you."

She nodded, accepting his offer, and crawled under the covers. She was snoring before he left the room. Walking down the hallway, he looked down at Alison and placed a kiss on her forehead. She had grown quiet, but her eyes were still open, focused on him. Even though he knew she couldn't see him, he loved the way her eyes seem to follow him. He stopped singing and began humming. The love he felt for her every time he saw her overwhelmed him. She made him feel like he had missed out on something by not having children of his own. He wasn't sure if it was

because he hadn't been with a woman in a while or if it was due to him being so attracted to Leslie.

The last time he had been involved with a woman, she had left him because she couldn't handle his injuries. Handle him being disabled—mangled for the rest of his life. He had been called to Fort Braggs, where he had been awaiting his orders, when he fell head-over-heels for Cindy. She was a green-eyed beauty. Sophisticated in a way beyond any of the women he had known in the past. Their relationship had lasted four years. He hadn't been injured until toward the end. When he had been well enough to come back home, Cindy had taken one look at him, taken her ring off, and walked away without looking back. He'd closed a part of himself away that day, but now Leslie was threatening to break into it. The most confusing thing was he wanted her to. He wanted to be whole again. But did he want to take the risk? Did he want to put his heart on the line?

Looking down at Alison, he knew he already had. He stroked her cheek, marveling at how much she looked like Leslie, with the exception of her lighter skin tone. Her eyes were also more of a hazel color, with green specks in them. She was beautiful just like her mother. He had been a little surprised to find out Sean was white, not that he didn't expect Leslie to be open-minded enough to date outside of her own race. It just gave him hope of having a chance with her. Now if she could get over the age difference.

Sitting down on his bed, he propped a few pillows behind his back. Cradling Alison in his hands, he began to make sounds at her until she smiled.

"So what you think, Alison? Does an old man like me stand a chance with your mother?"

Alison smiled at him in response. "Yeah, both of you have a special place in my heart. I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to let you guys go when this is all said and done." He shifted Alison in his hands. "Do you think I would make a good daddy?"

Alison smiled again. "Well, kid, I'm glad you have confidence in me as well. Now I wonder if we could convince your mom?"

He pulled Alison up against his chest. The feel of her tiny body in his hands made him even more protective of her. Closing his eyes, he tried to picture what life would be like with Leslie and Alison. It was something he definitely wouldn't mind at all. Coming home to Leslie and Alison every day after helping his friend, Kirk, on his ranch was something he could look forward to. He stroked Alison's back and smiled. Now he would have to focus on the hard part. Convincing Leslie to give him a chance would be the next obstacle he would have to overcome.

* * * *

An hour later, Leslie entered Blake's room. He smiled at the sight before him. She felt a hard tug on her heartstrings. He was a good man. He would make someone a good husband. She wondered why he wasn't married already. He was a handsome man. The salt and pepper sprinkling at his temples made him look more distinguished. Walking over to the bed, she peered

down at them. The sight he and her daughter made had her stifling a sigh. Blake had Alison cupped protectively against his chest, and they were both fast asleep. They were both adorable. Her mind drifted off to how different things might be if Blake had been the one to father her child. She was certain her entire pregnancy would have been different. Blake seemed to be a responsible person. He took the time to take care of a child who wasn't his.

But it wouldn't have happened no matter how badly she'd wanted it to. He was eighteen years her senior. After her relationship with Sean, she had learned her lesson about getting involved with men she had no future with. She was pulled from her thoughts as Alison shifted and whimpered. Blake's hand automatically began to rub Alison's back in a soothing motion.

"I can take her now," she whispered.

Blake's eyes jerked opened. He smiled when he saw her. "What time is it?" he whispered back.

She glanced at the clock "A little before eight o'clock."

"Did you get the rest you needed?"

She gave him a rueful look. "For now. Let me take her so I can change her. You also might want to be able to move into a more comfortable position."

Blake placed Alison in Leslie's arms as gently as he could so as not to disturb her. "Sweetheart, compared to some of the places I've slept in, this *is* comfortable."

Her heart skipped a beat at the endearment. It wasn't the first time he had addressed her as such. The endearments rolled off his tongue like smooth honey. She was surprised when she felt the stirring of arousal. Of course she was attracted to Blake, but she wasn't going to fall for him. Besides she shouldn't be having these thoughts about him. It wouldn't work out between them. The age difference would play too much of a factor.

"I'm sure you have, being in the Army and all," she murmured before turning and leaving the room with Alison.

"I'm going to go take care of her, then try to use your cell phone again."

He nodded, and she walked down to the guest bedroom. She had tried to call her parents when the storm began to ease up. She had received a signal for a brief second, but not long enough to make a connection. After a few intermitted attempts, she had given up. Alison stirred a little as Leslie placed her on the bed, but didn't awaken. Leslie changed her diaper, then placed pillows around her. Leaving the door open so she could hear her daughter if she started to cry, she went into the living room where Blake's cell phone lay. Picking up the phone, she almost let out a cry of happiness when she saw it had full signal but caught herself. She didn't want to wake her daughter. Dialing her parents' number, she became disappointed when the voicemail picked up.

“Hi Mom, Dad, it’s Leslie. I arrived in town a little early but got caught in the storm. Don’t worry, I was able to make it to Mr. and Mrs. Johnson’s place before my car broke down. I’m safe and so is Alison. Please call me back at this number. It belongs to Blake. I will be expecting your call, so call me back as soon as you can. I love you. I can’t wait to see you.”

She hung up the phone and did a quiet dance of happiness. She jumped as she heard Blake’s voice from behind her.

“Did you reach them?”

“Not in person. I left them a message. Hopefully they’ll be able to get it.”

He pulled her into his arms. “I’m sure they will.”

She nodded, and he placed a brief kiss on her forehead. It was comforting. She leaned into him. His arms tightened around her. In turn, she wrapped her arms around him.

“Pretty soon the snow will be cleared away. You’ll be able to go home to your parents.”

He stood there, held her for a moment. She loved the way his arms felt. She had never felt this secure in Sean’s embrace. What surprised her more was the desire to stay within Blake’s arms.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. Her eyes widened slightly at his expression. She had never seen him look at her in such a fashion. But she was familiar with the gaze. It was the same one Sean always bestowed upon her before he dragged her into bed.

“You are very beautiful.”

Leslie opened her mouth to respond, but no sound came out. The look of desire, of longing she saw in Blake’s eyes stunned her. She took her prior statement back. No man had ever looked at her like he was. Not even Sean. She wasn’t sure how to respond. Blake was a handsome man. Yet she couldn’t allow herself to give in to the weakness of lusting after him. One thing she’d noticed about herself was her judgment in the men she went after needed some major adjustment.

Sure, she couldn’t find anything wrong with Blake. Then again, in the beginning there had been nothing wrong with Sean, Paul or John either. However, in the end she always found herself with the short end of the stick. Clearing her throat, she stepped back to put some distance between them.

“Thank you.”

They stood there in an awkward moment of silence. She ran a nervous hand through her hair. “Well, I’d better go check on Alison.”

He nodded, and she backed away, glad when he didn’t push her. Still, it was too little too late. It was one thing to think Blake was interested in her. A complete different ballgame to know he

was. She made her way back to the bedroom and closed the door. Closing her eyes, she leaned against the door and tried to compose herself. Eyeing her sleeping daughter on the bed helped. She jumped when a soft knock sounded from behind her.

“Leslie, your mom is on the phone,” Blake called out, loud enough to be heard through the door but not to wake Alison.

She opened the door. Blake stood there holding the cell phone out. She took it from him, trying to contain her happiness.

“Take the call in the living room. I’ll watch Alison.”

She took him up on his offer and went into the living room. A grimace crossed her face even as she sat down on the couch as gingerly as she could. Her body was still tender in places she never knew she had. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and put the phone to her ear.

“Hi, Mama.”

“*Oh, thank goodness.* You gave your father and me a scare when we couldn’t reach you. What are you doing in Casselton? You weren’t supposed to be here until a few days ago.”

Leslie smiled. “I know, Mama, but I became impatient.”

“Are you and the baby okay?”

Leslie laughed. “Yes, Mama, but are you sitting down?”

She heard shuffling as her mother took a seat. “I am now.”

Leslie took a deep breath. “Good. I had Alison three days ago.”

“*What?*”

She pulled the phone away from her ear when her mother shrieked. “Don’t worry, Mom. We’re both fine. I’ll explain everything to you as soon as you come get us.”

“Okay, baby. Our roads are just about clear here. As soon as they are, your father and I will be there.”

Leslie sighed in relief. “Thank you, Mama. I can’t wait. I’ll let you go now so I can get our stuff packed. You’re going to adore your granddaughter. She has your lungs.”

Her mother laughed. “Then she must be perfect. I love you, Leslie, and I will see you soon.”

“I love you too, Mama. You and Dad be careful.”

“We will.”

Leslie disconnected the call and dropped her head. She lost track of how long she sat there like that. If Blake hadn't come in and called her name, she wouldn't have moved. Looking up at him, she smiled.

“Yes?”

“Are your parents on their way?”

She nodded, struggling to hold her emotions, her tears at bay. “Yes they are.”

She stood, handing the phone back to him. “Thank you for letting me use your cell phone. I had better get our stuff together.”

He nodded, and she squeezed by him, unsure of what else to say. She began packing once she made it back to the bedroom. It didn't take her long, and she was almost beside herself waiting for her parents to show up. Alison became fussy until Blake took her into his arms. Tears sprang to her eyes when she watched him walk around rocking Alison. She had a feeling her daughter seemed to know they were leaving. A bond had begun to develop between her daughter and Blake in the short time she had spent with him. Leslie turned away, knowing she was going to miss Blake, not wanting to leave—but she had to get back to the real world, starting with a trip to the hospital.

Her plan was to have her parents take her and Alison to the hospital in Fargo for a full medical check-up. She and Alison seemed to be doing fine, but she wanted to be certain. Blake had volunteered to remove the items from her car, load them up in his truck, then take her stuff over to her parents' house so they wouldn't have to worry about it. She had taken him up on his offer, hoping he would be finished before they got home from the hospital. If she wanted everything to return to normal, she had to distance herself from him. The good thing was she would have Alison and work to keep her busy. She had used Blake's cell phone to talk to Tessa as well. Tessa told her to take as much time as she needed before she came to work. There was no need for her to rush it. But she was ready to go to work. She would stay at home with Alison for a few more weeks; then she was going to get back into the swing of things.

Her savings weren't going to last forever. She also knew she wasn't going to be able to depend on Sean for child support. He'd made it clear he wanted nothing to do with Alison. She had to start making a living for herself and daughter. Her father was semi-retired and her mother fully retired. Even so, she wasn't in Casselton to be a financial burden on her parents.

It was going to be fun working with Tessa. She looked forward to seeing all of her friends. She hadn't seen Rachel, Tessa, Veronica or Ivy since her baby shower almost two months ago. Rachel had been appointed to decorate the room for Alison because she was the most creative of the group. She had yet to see the room, but it was all her parents had talked about for the last month.

Happiness filled her when she thought about how much her friends and family were supporting her. She'd always considered her friends to be more like sisters anyway because she was an only child. They had all grown up together. Their parents had been good friends, but she and the girls hadn't become inseparable until kindergarten.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the doorbell rang. She stood before making her way to the door as fast as her body would let her. Tears sprang to her eyes when she saw her parents. They rushed forward to embrace her, and she embraced them back.

"We are so happy to see you. We were worried sick about you and the baby."

She pulled back, wiping her eyes before closing the door. It was still cold out, so she didn't want to let the heat out.

"I know you guys were. I made every attempt to call you once I arrived here and got stuck, but my phone was dead. Blake's main line was down. We couldn't get a solid signal on his cell phone until today."

Everyone looked up when Alison whimpered. Blake stepped forward to place Alison in Leslie's arms before greeting her parents. "Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, it is always a pleasure to see you."

Marjorie stretched upward to place a kiss on Blake's cheek. "It is good to see you as well."

Harold held out his hand, and Blake shook it. "Thank you for taking such good care of my little girl and my grandchild."

Blake looked over at Leslie as he spoke. "The pleasure was all mine. I would do it again if I had to."

Marjorie smiled. "You will have to come to dinner sometime as a celebration of sorts."

Leslie stiffened. The idea of her leaving was to stay away from Blake. Kind of the out-of-sight-out-of-mind idea. Blake didn't make it any better by smiling.

"I can never pass up an offer for your cooking, Ms. Thompson. I look forward to it."

Leslie tried to change the subject before Blake was invited over for Sunday dinner every week. "Mom, Dad. I would like for you to meet your granddaughter."

She handed Alison to her mother, smiling when they began to gush over her daughter. "She is precious, Leslie, and she does look healthy."

Her mother looked up at her with tears in her eyes. "I wish I could have been there, but you did good, Leslie."

"Thank you, Mama."

She turned to look at Blake. "I just need to get my coat and I'll be ready." He nodded but remained silent. She went and bundled up. By the time she returned, Blake had Alison wrapped up in a heavy blanket. He placed Alison in her arms and picked up one of her suitcases, while her father picked up the other. Her mother walked beside her with an arm around her waist for support. Leslie covered Alison's face right before Blake opened the door. The frigid air stole her breath when she walked outside, but the sun was out and shining. It was a beautiful day.

She looked down at Alison, hoping she would be okay for the short car ride to Fargo. She hated that she didn't have her car seat. It was packed as well. She needed to contact the movers as soon as possible to get an idea of when her stuff would arrive. With the bad weather over, she hoped it would be soon. Blake took Alison out of Leslie's arms, allowing her to slide into the car and buckle her seatbelt before handing Alison back to her. Leslie smiled up at him.

"Thank you for everything, Blake."

"You're welcome. If I had to do it all over again, I would do everything the same," he whispered before leaning down and placing a kiss on her forehead.

"So would I," she murmured before she could stop herself. Once the words were out of her mouth, she realized just how much she meant them. Her parents said one last goodbye to Blake before starting the engine. As they drove off, she had a feeling it wouldn't be the last time she saw him.

Chapter Four

Leslie mixed together the ingredients for her banana nut muffins. She didn't realize how much she had missed baking until she came to work with Tessa at the bakery. She looked up and smiled as Tessa burst through the door. The timer on the oven dinged. Tessa sighed in relief.

"Thank goodness. There are only three banana nut muffins left and a request for eight of them."

Leslie looked at her friend, not bothering to hide her surprise. She was now working on the twelfth batch of muffins. She was making them a dozen at a time.

"Are you serious?"

Tessa nodded. "Evidently news travels fast. I haven't had this much business in God knows how long. Just promise me you'll give me the recipe if you ever decide to leave."

Leslie laughed. "Sure."

Tessa went to work removing the muffins from the oven and sitting them on the cooling rack. Leslie finished preparing the next batch of muffins to go into the oven. She finished just as Tessa began taking the muffins out of the baking pan and placing them in a serving pan. She looked over at Leslie and sighed.

"Good. You're finished. Can you come out and help me for a minute? We're swamped."

Leslie wiped her hands on a damp towel. "Yes I can."

She made sure to take the timer with her so it would be loud enough for her to hear it go off. Then she followed Tessa to the front of the bakery. Leslie smiled, waving at a few of the people she recognized before standing beside Tessa, helping her serve the remaining customers. Just as the line disappeared, the timer on the muffins went off. Leslie went back into the kitchen and pulled the pans out of the oven and placed them on a cooling rack. The customers were still waiting patiently on their muffins. She wanted to get them out as quickly as possible. Then she would be done with muffins for the day. As much as she loved to cook and eat, it wouldn't hurt her feelings if she didn't see another banana nut muffin in her life.

She couldn't complain too much. It had been her idea to incorporate a new special of the week after the first week of working with Tessa at her bakery. She noticed a lot of the customers were regulars. They also always seemed to choose the same items. It wasn't to say that pig-in-the-blankets, donuts, croissants, or bear claws were bad, but you could only eat so many of them before you grew tired of them. So each week she would make a new bakery item for the special. Tessa had been thrilled with the idea in the beginning. But seeing how successful it had been by day two after implementing the new plan, she was ecstatic. Leslie had already come to the conclusion that she was going to make one big batch of muffin mix in the morning and pray it would get them through the day tomorrow. She took the muffins off of the cooling rack and placed them on the serving pan.

She walked back up to the front and placed the muffins in the display glass. Both she and Tessa looked up as the glass door to the bakery opened. A cry of surprise escaped her as she saw her friend Ivy and her fiancé Jason walk through the door. Leslie, Ivy, Veronica, Tessa and Rachel had all grown up together. They had been best friends since grade school. Rushing from around the counter, she went over to embrace Ivy. She hadn't seen her since she came over to see Alison a week after she and Alison had gone home with her parents. But they had talked over the phone. Actually, she hadn't seen any of her friends except for Tessa since she had been in town because everyone was still trying to recover from the winter weather that had taken everyone by surprise. Three weeks after the blizzard, another winter snowstorm had come through. Leslie probably would have gone stir crazy if it hadn't been for Alison and her parents. It had gotten better when she went to work.

She hugged Ivy tight. "It's so good to see you."

"And it's good to see you."

Leslie leaned over to embrace Jason. "And it's good to see you as well."

Glancing back over to Ivy, who was glowing, she smiled. "Good to see you are taking care of my friend."

Jason laughed. "Always."

Leslie gestured towards a small table. "Have a seat. I can't chat too long, but at least this is a start."

They all went over to the table and sat down. Tessa appeared a moment later, after she'd finished with the customer who had walked in behind Ivy and Jason.

"Hey, you two."

Jason and Ivy returned the greeting. "It's nice of you guys to stop by. You two will have to try Leslie's muffins."

Jason nodded. He was a sweet food fanatic. No one had figured out how he managed to stay so fit. "Sounds like a good plan to me."

Tessa shook her head as she walked off. "That's not surprising. Leslie, visit as long as you like—we have slowed down, or so it seems."

Leslie glanced down at her watch. It was a few minutes away from being midday, and then they closed at one. Anything done after that point was special-order cakes and baked goods. The special orders today consisted of two cakes, so they shouldn't be there too long after closing today. She couldn't wait to get home. Her body was bone tired. Alison was keeping her going. Her parents were wonderful people, willing to take Alison, watch her when needed, but she

didn't want to burden her parents any more than she already was. They had raised her and deserved to be able to enjoy themselves in their prime.

"Where have you drifted off to?"

She looked up as Ivy spoke. "To sleep."

Ivy chuckled. "That much is obvious."

Leslie smiled. "Actually, my mind is on how tired I am. And my little girl."

Ivy grinned. "I can't wait to see her again. I bet she is getting more adorable by the day."

Leslie's heart lightened at the thought of her daughter. When she had first found out she was pregnant, she had been overwhelmed—not that things didn't seem so frantic since Alison had arrived into the world. She just went with the flow as much as possible.

"Well, you guys will have to come by the house and see her. I hate to bring her out in this weather."

She didn't take Alison out in the cold weather very often. Two times to be exact, and both were for doctors appointments. She had just gone back for her six-week check-up a week ago. They had both received a clean bill of health. The physician had been amazed that everything had turned out as well as it did. But he thought it had more to do with the fact that she was healthy, and with Blake's medical experience. She had healed nicely. Was even already starting to see some weight loss. Thank goodness her stretch marks had been few and in hard to see places.

"We will do that as soon as we can."

Ivy reached across the table and took her hands in hers. "Do you need anything?"

Leslie shook her head, not because she was embarrassed, but because it was the truth. "But you will tell us if you do?"

Leslie smiled, touched that her friends cared so much about her. She squeezed Ivy's hand. "I promise if I need anything, I will tell you."

Ivy nodded, seeming satisfied with the answer. "So does Sean know Alison has been born?"

"Yes. I called him when we were in Fargo. I didn't get an answer then. I still haven't yet."

Ivy frowned. "Is he helping you financially?"

A sharp bark of laughter escaped Leslie before she could catch it. "Not since he gave me the money to get an abortion. That's why I had to move back here. I have to spend my money wisely."

Ivy shook her head, an expression of sympathy on her face. “Maybe he will come around.”

Leslie sighed. “I hope he will for the sake of his daughter.”

Their conversation was interrupted as Tessa brought over a cake book, two muffins and two cups of coffee. Tessa placed the items on the table.

“Here is the cake book and your food.”

Ivy slapped a palm to her forehead. “Thanks. I almost forgot.”

Tessa smiled. “Well, I didn’t. The wedding is four months away, and you haven’t made a decision yet. I know we are friends, but this is insane. The good thing is I have already blocked off your time for preparing your cake. I just need to know what I’m making.”

Ivy groaned. “I know. I know. We will before we leave today.”

A moan of agony escaped Jason, which earned him a scowl from Ivy. Leslie chuckled under her breath. Ivy and Jason were perfect for each other. In a way, she was a little envious; in others, she knew she had to get herself together before she could focus on a romantic relationship, if she ever decided to again. Right now, a man was the last thing on her mind. Standing up, she stretched to get the kinks out of her back.

“Well, I will leave you guys to pick out cakes while I go back to help Tessa.”

Ivy moaned as she wiped away a crumb from the muffin stuck in the corner of her mouth. “Oh my, Leslie. These muffins are good. I might have to employ you to make my cake.”

Tessa laughed. “For that comment, you have to pay for your muffins and coffee.”

Leslie grinned. Some things never changed with her friends. She didn’t mind. Being around her friends made her happy. Sometimes she wondered how she had stayed away so long. Her friends were wonderful people. They all kept each other grounded. She looked over at Ivy, then down at her watch. It was half an hour to closing time.

“Well, I’m going to get started with clean up. I need a nap and would like to get one as soon as possible.”

She turned and headed toward the kitchen. Midway there, the door to the bakery opened, signaling they had a customer. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw who it was. Blake stood there looking very handsome in his coat, jeans, boots, and cowboy hat. His eyes met hers and held them. Tessa broke the silence by walking over to him with a bright smile as she passed an inquisitive look to Leslie. Leslie ignored the look. She was too busy trying to get her body to move. She felt like a statue.

“Hi, Blake, how are you?”

Blake tilted his hat in greeting to Tessa. “Fine, and yourself?”

Tessa’s smile widened. “I’ve never seen you in here before.”

Blake smiled. “I do apologize, but I’m not much for sweets.”

Tessa’s eyebrows rose high on her forehead. “So what brings you by here today?”

Blake looked at Leslie. She could feel her skin began to heat. “That lovely lady over there.”

When he mentioned her aloud, she sprang into action. Tessa stepped to the side as Leslie walked up to Blake. Leslie kept an eye on Tessa until she was behind the counter; out of what she hoped was hearing distance. She didn’t miss Tessa’s watchful eye. Turning her attention back to Blake, she took a deep breath before speaking.

“Hi.”

He smiled. “Hey.”

There was a moment of awkward silence before Leslie led Blake over to an unoccupied table in the corner. She wanted them to be out of earshot of all of her friends. Tessa was the worst, since she seemed to have sonar hearing. Leslie watched as Blake studied her, feeling a little flustered under his scrutiny. She wasn’t looking her best at the moment, but he didn’t seem to mind. His eyes roamed over her with open appreciation.

She struggled not to fidget. This was the first time she had seen him since leaving his home six weeks ago. She was willing to admit she had avoided him. Casselton wasn’t large, but she had managed to stay away from him. She’d never expected him to seek her out. She motioned for him to have a seat, and he did, but held out the chair for her first, taking his seat only after she did.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I’m fine, and yourself?”

He shifted from one foot to the other. “That’s good. I’m fine. How’s Alison?”

Leslie smiled at the mention of Alison. She couldn’t help it. Happiness overcame her every time she thought about her daughter.

“She is wonderful.”

He leaned back in his chair. “Glad to hear it. I’ve been meaning to get by to see her.”

She reached up and brushed a loose strand of hair out of her face. “So what brings you by the bakery?”

One corner of his mouth tilted upward. “I came by to see you. I meant to get by earlier, but I had a lot to keep me preoccupied. My friend Kirk needed help with tending to his cattle. These snowstorms have thrown everything out of whack.”

“Did you get everything taken care of?”

He nodded. “Yes we did.”

Their conversation lapsed into a long silence. She tried to remember when she had ever felt this awkward around a man.

“You look good.”

Leslie couldn't stop the skepticism from appearing in her expression. After all, she had looked in the mirror this morning before she left the house. She knew for a fact she had bags under her eyes from tiredness. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, but a few strands were loose. Her face was freshly scrubbed. She didn't look good at all, very plain looking to be honest. She had no intention of catching any man's eye. The way she looked this morning ought to make that clear. Yet Blake sat across from her, staring at her as though she were the best item on the menu. And he wanted a serving.

He had to be suffering from some sort of delusion. Then again, it would explain why he was contemplating her like she was an item behind the bakery display case that he wanted to sample. Her heart skipped a few beats. She tried not to squirm.

“Thank you.”

She knew Blake was being sincere. On one hand, it brightened her day. On the other, it frightened her.

It had been a pleasant but unexpected surprise to see him walk into the bakery. Her father had mentioned that he ran into Blake every once while in town. He also hinted that Blake had asked about her each time, but she hadn't gotten her hopes up. She had just thought he was being courteous. People in Casselton tended to be that way.

“What time do you get off?”

She glanced at her watch. “In about fifteen, maybe twenty minutes. But we have to stay afterwards and finish two special orders.”

He looked at his own watch. “Do you have anything planned this evening?”

Leslie laughed. “Sleep, if possible. Why do you ask?”

“I was wondering if you would like to go out and do something sometime. Not necessarily today since you are tired, but when you are rested.”

Leslie opened her mouth to reply, but she had been shocked speechless. She couldn't have just heard Blake right. However, the serious look on his face told her she had. Blake Eaton had just asked her out. Her brain cells seemed to be dying by the second. She was very flattered at his offer. He was a very attractive man. She looked at the sprinkling of salt and pepper at his temples, wanting to reach out and touch it. Everything about the man screamed sexy. How could he want to be with someone as unsettled as she was right now? Still, as flattered as she was, she couldn't say yes. Her main focus was to get herself together so she could provide a good and stable life for her and Alison. Maybe once she did, she could think about dating again, but until then she had to say no.

Reaching across the table, she took Blake's hand in hers. She ignored the jolt that traveled up her arm, ignored the thrill she felt from a simple touch. His hands had an interesting feel to them. She could tell he took care of them, but they had the feel of hands that had done manual labor as well.

“Blake, you are a wonderful man. If circumstances were any different, I would say yes without hesitation. Right now I can't. I have too much going on.” Leslie exhaled softly. “I hope you understand.”

Blake shook his head. “No, I don't understand. Are you not attracted to me?”

She pulled back from him and sighed. “Blake, I'm very attracted to you. Really, I am. But my life is in turmoil right now. I'm at a crossroads in my life, not sure which direction I'm heading in. I need to figure out the life Alison and I are going to have, before I can think about bringing someone else in it.”

“It isn't as bad as you think it is, Leslie. Trust me, it isn't. There are single mothers everywhere who are working out the everyday battles of life. I have been where you are right now, but for a different reason because it was with the injury to my legs.”

This time it was he who reached across the table and took her hand. “You are a good woman, Leslie, a strong woman. The kind of woman I want in my life. When we were trapped together, I began to feel something I hadn't felt in a long time. There's a strong chemistry between us. I'm not willing to deny or ignore it for any reason.”

He paused on a deep sigh, stood up, then pulled her to her feet as well. “Yet I understand. I'm willing to wait until you are ready. Just know if you need to talk to me, I'm here and I will listen.” He gave her a wicked smile, and her heartbeat went into overdrive. “But I have to admit, I'm not going to make it easy for you. I want you, Leslie. And I intend to have you.”

Shock rendered her speechless. Before she could move, Blake brought his lips down on hers. The kiss was brief. No sooner than he touched his mouth to hers, he had lifted his head again and

stepped back. With one last look at her he smiled, then headed for the door. She didn't know how long she stood there before Tessa finally appeared in front of her. Tessa had the biggest grin on her face.

"Did I just see what I thought I saw?"

Leslie looked at Tessa, unsure of what had just happened herself. Jason and Ivy walked over. Jason chuckled. "From the looks of it, he was staking his claim."

Tessa placed her hands on her hips. "I thought you said nothing happened between the two of you."

Leslie rolled her eyes skyward. "And it didn't. I had just given birth to Alison. *Sex* was the last thing on my mind. You ought to know that, having a two-year-old yourself."

Tessa laughed. "You're right. But still, how do you explain the kiss I just saw him lay on you?"

Ivy grinned. "The way you normally do. It means he is interested in her."

Leslie shook her head. "And I have no idea why."

Tessa's eyes widened. "Are you serious, Leslie? Goodness gracious, you are stunningly beautiful, and Blake is just as handsome. You would make a good couple."

Leslie turned to look at Tessa. "I think you have lost your mind. Is anyone else aware of the eighteen year age gap between Blake and I?"

Ivy shrugged. "Who cares? Age is just a number. Besides, it's not about the age, it's about what you have in common."

Jason nodded. "I agree. Leslie, you are smart, attractive, an all-around good person. I think Blake sees that."

Leslie dropped her head and massaged her temples. All of her friends had gone insane. The question was, was it temporary or not. She looked up when Tessa placed an arm around her shoulders. There was a look of concern on her face.

"Don't fight your attraction to Blake because of what Sean did. We know he did a number on your level of trust in men. Don't let him make you doubt Blake."

Leslie shook her head. "I don't doubt Blake because of Sean, Tessa. I knew what I was getting into when I began a casual relationship with Sean. A baby was never part of the deal for a man like him, so I'm not surprised that he doesn't want to be around now. I just can't figure out why a man like Blake would want a woman like me."

Tessa folded her arms over her chest. "Why not?"

Jason frowned. "For you to even think that, I have to agree with Tessa, Leslie. Sean must have done a number on you."

Ivy and Tessa nodded their agreement.

"You know the guys and I can take a trip to Bismarck. You know, *talk* to him a little."

Ivy smiled and patted Jason's arm. "Thanks, sweetheart. If we thought it would do any good, we would send you all off in a heartbeat."

Tessa looked over at Leslie. "Besides, she doesn't need a guy like Sean in her life, but she should have a man like Blake in it."

Jason and Ivy looked over at Tessa and groaned in unison. "Uh-oh. Are you thinking about matchmaking?"

She shook her head. "I don't need to. Blake is attracted to Leslie. Leslie is attracted to him."

Leslie looked over at Tessa, who laughed. "Don't give me that wide-eyed shocked look. You haven't denied it. You can't, or you wouldn't have returned his kiss a few minutes ago."

Leslie sighed. Her head was starting to hurt with trying to keep all of this stuff straight. She had no idea why he would be attracted to her. Blake seemed to be so together in his life. He didn't have time for a woman who was hanging on by a thread like she was. She looked over at Tessa.

"The bottom line is, I don't know, nor do I have any intention of trying to find out either."

Before her friends could say anything else, she turned and headed for the kitchen, only to turn around when Ivy called her name.

"Don't forget to be over to Mrs. Eaton's shop on Saturday to get fitted for your dress. She wants to go ahead and get a preliminary measurement of you. Make sure you bring Alison to Tessa's with you afterwards. I look forward to seeing the little bundle of joy again."

Leslie laughed. "I will be there on time. I'll also bring Alison."

In an exhausted state of mind, she continued toward the kitchen. They had a few minutes until closing. The dining area was empty besides Jason, Ivy and Tessa. Leslie knew Tessa could handle the clean-up duties out front, while she got started on frosting the cakes. They could get it done quicker if she helped Tessa, but right now she needed a break. Space to clear her thoughts, pull herself together. Between Blake's kiss and her friend's meddling, her head was spinning. True to form, Tessa joined her a few moments later. She had a few leftover bear claws, two muffins and half a dozen donuts from the display case.

Leslie was resolved to ignore the sweets today. So far she had been doing a good job of getting the baby weight off. With Ivy's wedding around the corner, she had a little further to go. There was no way she was going to stand up in front of the church as a bridesmaid looking less than her best. She watched Tessa take the leftovers to the counter, then box them up before putting the dirty pans into the sink.

"I'll be back here in a moment to help you clean up. I've already locked up, but I need to wipe down the tables and bring the coffeepots back."

Leslie looked up from the cake she was frosting and gave a brief nod to let Tessa know she'd heard her, before turning her attention back to the project in front of her. She was glad these were simple single-layered flat sheet birthday cakes. She was too distracted to concentrate on anything more complex. Right now all she wanted to do was get home so she could relax, spend time with Alison—forget about the kiss from Blake.

Tessa rejoined her and placed the coffeepots on the counter before turning to lean against it. When she folded her arms, Leslie sighed, knowing her friend was getting ready to start up again. Leslie put down her spatula and looked at her friend.

"What is it, Tessa?"

Tessa got straight to the point. "I think I should be asking you that."

Leslie looked at her. "Why would you?"

"Because you are doing a pitiful job of icing the cake. You've also been icing it for the last ten minutes. We both know you can usually do two cakes and start on a third in that amount of time."

Leslie looked down at the cake, realizing her friend was right. Groaning in frustration, she put the spatula down and walked away.

Tessa laughed. "So what, or should I say who, has you so distracted?"

Leslie moaned. The last thing she needed was to get into the budding attraction between Blake and herself. Not with Tessa.

"Nothing and no one."

Tessa laughed. "Oh don't give me that. Someone has you distracted. I think his name is Blake."

"Tessa," Leslie said, her tone full of warning.

"Oh come on, Leslie. A man like Blake doesn't come around too often."

Tessa slid the cake out of harm's way, then boosted herself up on the counter. "Why are you so defensive?"

Leslie groaned with impatience before looking over at the friend she loved so dearly, yet wanted to strangle. "Because I don't want to talk about it."

"Blake is a good guy."

Leslie sighed. "I know he is, but it's just not meant to be. Not between us."

Tessa gave her a leveled look. "How do you know? You haven't given it a chance."

Leslie shrugged her shoulders. "To be truthful, I don't know. What I do know is I need to take some time to get myself together. For the sake of my daughter and myself. I don't have room in my life for a man right now."

Leslie walked back over to the cake and picked up the spatula again. Tessa took it out of her hands.

"Let me frost the cake before you damage it beyond repair. You wash the dishes."

Leslie smiled as Tessa hopped down off the counter. The cake did look pitiful. Tessa spoke to Leslie over her shoulder. "Don't be so hard on yourself. We all make bad judgment calls every once in a while."

Leslie reached over to turn on the faucet to run water into the sink. The problem was she couldn't afford to have any more bad judgment calls. She had two mouths to feed. Yes, Blake was a nice guy. Yes, he was so attractive that she could just sit and stare at him without growing tired of doing so. But she really couldn't afford to let her emotions cloud her rational thought process.

"Why are you doubting yourself so much?"

Her head snapped up, her eyes narrowed. "What makes you think I'm doubting myself?"

She winced at the defensiveness she heard in her voice.

Tessa grinned. "Because the Leslie I know would have jumped at the opportunity to have a man like Blake in her life."

Leslie placed her hands on her hips. "Well, it is nice to know that you envision me running around so carefree when I have responsibilities."

Tessa laughed. "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

Tessa turned her attention to the cake and began icing it. Leslie turned around to shut the water off. She reached for a wash towel, then began the chore of washing the dishes, hoping this ridiculous conversation was over.

“Blake is a good man, not a lowlife like Sean. He will appreciate you for your brains as well as your beauty.”

Leslie scoffed. “What older man do you know who pursues a younger woman for her brains?”

As soon as she said it, she knew the statement was false, but she wanted it to be true. She was grasping for straws to keep her sanity. She had spent enough time with Blake to know that even with the age gap between them they had a lot in common. Blake had actually proven he valued their conversation. He had even spent time with Alison, helped Leslie out with her more than he had to. Which was more than Sean had done so far. She was going to have to take a day to get down to the Attorney General’s office. File a child support claim. From the looks of things, it was the only way she was going to get Sean to help her. Tessa called her name, and she jumped. Leslie turned to look at an amused Tessa while trying to slow down her heartbeat.

“Yes?”

“Now I really want to know what you were thinking about.”

Leslie smiled. “My daughter.”

Tessa shook her head. “Sure you were.” Tessa slid the iced cake aside and began on the other one. “Like I really believe that one. Well, personally I hope Blake sweeps in and whisks you off to a place you have never been.”

Leslie rolled her eyes. “I have had plenty of experience with a smooth talker and over-the-top romance. Believe me, it wasn’t all it was cracked up to be, thank you very much.”

Tessa shook her head. “You can be sarcastic all you want. But the love bug will get you. When it does, I’ll make your wedding cake.”

Leslie shuddered. The last thing she wanted to think about was love and marriage. Putting a little extra vigor into washing the pots, she finished the dishes in record time. She went back to help Tessa finishing decorating the cakes. A short time later they were locking up the bakery. She was glad it was Tessa’s turn to deliver the cakes. She drove home in the car that Blake and his friend Gareth had managed to fix, while she had been in Fargo with her parents having Alison and herself checked out.

When she entered the house, it was quiet, and she sighed in relief. She made her way upstairs, finding Alison asleep in her crib. She looked down at her daughter, marveling at how perfect she was, how precious. She stroked her daughter’s soft cheek, then left the room. Maybe she would be able to get in a small nap before her daughter awoke; then she would give her daughter her undivided attention.

Chapter Five

“Okay, Alison, we’re almost home.”

Leslie groaned when Alison’s crying didn’t stop. Instead, it escalated to another level. Her daughter really did have her mother’s lungs. However, she had yet to figure out where her daughter’s impatient streak had come from. When Alison wanted something, she wanted it immediately.

Leslie pulled into her parents’ driveway and scrambled out. She reached into the backseat, making sure her daughter was bundled up, before pulling out Alison’s car seat. It was a tedious job to make her way up the driveway with snow still covering the ground. Her daughter’s demanding wail was motivation to move faster. She frowned at the truck that sat in her parents’ driveway. It looked familiar, but she couldn’t recall where she had seen it before. Her parents van was also gone.

She made it to the front door safely. After opening it, she stepped inside, calling out to her parents in case one of them was still home. Unlikely, since her parents seemed to like to travel in pairs recently. She closed the door behind her, listening for a response, but didn’t get one. Alison’s cries increased, and Leslie rushed into the living room. She stopped dead in her tracks when she saw Blake standing there. He smiled at her, and if Alison’s crying hadn’t grown more insistent, she would have smiled back. Instead, she walked over to the couch and placed Alison’s carrier on it. Picking up her daughter, she began the painstaking act of taking the layers of clothes off. Once she had her daughter unwrapped, she sat down on the couch, unzipping her own jacket. Undoing a few buttons on her shirt, she opened it, undid the fold on her nursing bra. Alison seemed to know her demand was going to be met and began to quiet a little.

She lifted Alison to her one of her breasts, wincing slightly as she latched on with gusto. This was one of the reasons she tried to keep her daughter on a feeding schedule. Blake cleared his throat, and she looked up, startled. She had forgotten he was there with her focus on her daughter. She gave him an apologetic smile.

“Sorry about not speaking earlier. I had an urgent issue to attend to.”

He cleared his throat again, averting his gaze. “That’s understandable.”

Leslie looked around. “Where are my parents?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure. They were leaving when I pulled up. They told me it was unlocked and to come on in to wait for you.”

She shook her head. Her parents always had a habit of leaving the doors unlocked. Yes, the town of Casselton was small, everyone knew almost everyone else; still, it bothered her to leave the door unlocked. She was going to ignore the fact that her parents’ habit just came in handy a short time ago.

She noticed that Blake had grown quiet again. When she looked up, she found his gaze on Alison suckling at her breast. She knew she should cover up, but her modesty around him was gone. After all, he had delivered her baby. She inclined her head toward the couch.

“Have a seat.”

He looked at her with surprise. “You don’t mind?”

She shook her head because she didn’t. Breastfeeding Alison was comforting to her. Blake had already seen her at her worst. He sat down across from her while she switched Alison to her other breast.

“So what brings you by?”

He smiled. “I wanted to see you and Alison.”

It was her turn to be surprised. “Oh, okay. Well you haven’t been waiting long, have you?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Good. I had to go shopping to get a few things for Alison.”

Blake looked around. “I didn’t see you bring anything in. Where’s the stuff?”

Leslie laughed. “In the car. Alison was hungry. When she is hungry, she comes first.”

Blake chuckled. “I noticed her lungs have developed.”

Leslie grinned. “Yes they have, but that was nothing.”

He stood up. “Well, you finish feeding her. I’ll get your things out of the car.”

She shook her head. “Oh no. You don’t have to.”

He gave her a look that told her there was no use in arguing. “I know, but I want to.”

She handed him her keys out of her coat pocket. He headed out the front door. Looking down at Alison, she smiled, stroking her cheek. Her daughter looked content, a complete about face from what she had been a few minutes ago. When Alison indicated she was full, Leslie covered herself up, then placed her daughter on her shoulder to belch her. She held her daughter with one hand while taking her jacket off. There hadn’t been time earlier.

She had just gotten Alison situated again when Blake walked through the door, carrying the bags of items she had purchased from the store.

“Where do you want these?”

“You can place them in the kitchen on the table.”

She noticed he had Alison’s diaper bag on his shoulder. She was struck by how natural it looked for him to carry it. She shook her head to clear it. Thoughts like those would get her in trouble. He slid the diaper bag off his shoulder, sitting it on the coffee table. He disappeared into the kitchen, giving her the chance to breath normally again.

She heard Alison belch. Smiling, she stood up, then walked into the kitchen while speaking softly to her daughter.

“Look who has come to see you, Alison.”

Blake sat the last of the bags down before turning to look at them. She held Alison out to Blake, who took her happily. He looked down at her for a moment, then back at Leslie.

“Wow! She has grown.”

“Yes she has. Now, do you mind watching her while I put this stuff away?”

Blake shook his head, taking off toward the living room with Alison in his arms. She stood there and watched them. He bounced Alison gently in his arms while talking to her softly. The sight tugged at her, bringing emotions to the surface that she couldn’t describe. Taking one last look at the adorable picture they made together, she picked up the sacks before shifting through them. She put away the food items first, then took the diapers and disposable bottles to Alison’s room. Unfortunately, she had miscounted how many bottles she had left, which was why she had the feeding emergency with Alison.

When she made it back the living room, she caught Blake changing Alison’s diaper. She was getting ready to ask him why when the putrid smell assailed her nostrils.

“Oh, Alison.”

Blake looked up at her and smiled. “When I was walking with her, I stared to smell something. I knew it wasn’t me, because I haven’t been out in the pasture today. So I figured it was Alison.”

Walking over to the couch, she went to take over, but he stopped her. “It’s okay. I’ve got it.”

She didn’t bother to hide her surprise. Even she would hand off diaper duty if she could. Yet here he was volunteering to change a diaper without complaining about it. Blake was definitely an enigma of a man.

“Are you sure? She is a little fragrant.”

Blake chuckled. “I assure you, I have smelled worse.”

Leslie nodded, standing back, watching him change her daughter's diaper perfectly. "How did you learn to change a diaper so well?"

"I have had tons of experience with my friends' children."

Alison interrupted the conversation by kicking her leg and letting out a gurgle, which was followed by her passing gas.

Leslie's eyes widened in shock, then she bent over in laughter. "I have to teach my daughter some manners."

Blake laughed. "It's too late. She has already ruined her reputation with me."

He continued to change the diaper, handing Leslie the dirty one. She took it and disposed of it. By the time she came back, Blake had redressed Alison and was picking her up. "So how has work been going for you?"

Leslie smiled and nodded. "Very well. It was a little slow today, so Tessa and I got out of the bakery early."

Today had been the last day that she was going to make the banana nut muffins. She was going to spend the weekend brainstorming on what she would make as the weekly special for the upcoming week. It would give her something to do since she didn't have anything planned, besides getting measured for her bridesmaid dress.

He turned to look at her, and she marveled at how his hand was large enough to cover most of Alison's body and hold her to him. "Do you have anything planned for tonight?"

"No, I don't. Why?"

He shrugged. "Well, I was wondering if you and Alison would like to come over for dinner?"

She went to protest, but he stopped her. "It's just dinner."

Leslie sighed heavily, not having a good reason to say no. She'd just told him she didn't have plans. In the future she would learn to think before she spoke. She stared over at him, needing an answer before she said yes. She looked deep into Blake's dark blue eyes.

"Why are you so interested in me? I'm twenty-five years old. I live with my parents. I'm a single mother. You know, now that I think about it, I'm a *real catch*."

Blake studied her for a moment, then walked over to her until he was directly in front of her. "All of that may be true, but you are very intelligent and beautiful. I haven't seen one thing about you that is lacking. You and Alison are exactly what I need in my life, exactly what I want in it. In other words, you *are* a great catch."

She shook her head. How could she argue with him when he sounded so sincere? “Either you are very delusional or you’re a saint.”

He smiled. “So you will go to dinner with me tonight?”

She paused before nodding. “Yes, I will.”

He grinned. She noticed he had very nice teeth. As a matter of fact, he had a very nice everything. She couldn’t find anything wrong with him. Another reason this was a bad idea. Lately there seemed to be a lot wrong with her. It wouldn’t be fair for her to put her burdens—her baggage on someone else.

“What time should I be there?”

“You and Alison should come over around seven.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Do you really want me to bring Alison?”

“Yes. The two of you are a package deal. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

* * * *

Blake took advantage of her silence, placing Alison in her arms before he walked over to the coat rack to get his jacket. It was still cold out, but at least there hadn’t been any snowfall since yesterday.

“Now, you relax a little. I’ll see you at my place after awhile.”

She nodded, as if sensing she had no choice but to say yes. She’d already told him she didn’t have plans. So there was no reason for her to turn him down. At least not without admitting that time alone with him made her nervous. He just couldn’t figure out why yet.

He zipped up his jacket, then placed his hat on his head and left. Walking to his truck, he smiled. He would have Leslie and Alison in his home tonight for dinner. He wasn’t afraid to admit that he had missed having them around. However, he planned to rectify that. He glanced down at his watch. There was enough time for him to run into town to pick up the things he would need to surprise Leslie later. He groaned as the chill seeped through his jeans. Thermal underwear should have been a part of his attire today. His leg was going to give him hell later. He could already feel it stiffening up.

After he climbed into the truck, he pulled out of the Thompson’s driveway and headed into town. He made a quick stop by the flower shop, picked up some flowers for Leslie. Then he made a trip to the grocery store, finding a small stuffed bear for Alison. They were the first gifts he had bought for the both of them, but they wouldn’t be the last if he could help it.

Getting back in his truck, he drove to his house. Once inside, he placed the items on the kitchen table, then took off his jacket. He put away groceries, keeping out what he would need to cook dinner. His plan was to surprise Leslie. Romance her in a way she hadn't been before. Leave her with no doubt that he wanted her and Alison. He felt he could say that over the years, he'd learned a few tips on how to deal with a woman. He didn't proclaim to know everything, or to be an expert. But he knew things about women now that he never would have guessed at the age of twenty.

He began preparing dinner, and forty minutes later he had everything ready with twenty minutes to spare. It was just enough time for him to shower and change. He walked into the bedroom and stripped down. His shower was quick, with him only taking a few minutes to enjoy standing under the warm spray. He looked down at his leg, misshapen and plagued with scars, wondering if it would turn Leslie off the way it had turned Cindy off. He shook his head and shook off the self-deprecating thought. Not only would it sadden his jovial mood, it wasn't likely.

Deep down he knew Leslie was a totally different person than Cindy. Their personalities were like night and day. Looking back, he realized Cindy had been cold, manipulating. If it wasn't going to benefit her in some way, she hadn't seen why it should be done. She had caused him to be bitter toward women for a while. When he came back to Casselton, he had enjoyed being a recluse. But now, with the support of his friends and family, he was looking to settle down. He didn't need to have any children of his own, but he definitely wanted a woman to share his life with. Right now, Leslie was that woman. The night she had showed up on his porch had been the night he knew his life was going to change forever.

Rinsing the soap off his body, he began to imagine what life would be like with Leslie and Alison in it. He knew if he could convince her to give a relationship between them a try, they could make it work. He sighed, turning the water off. Now was not the time to get carried away with what-ifs. Time was passing by. Leslie and Alison would be there soon. He stepped out of the shower and dressed quickly. When he went back into the living room, he picked up his discarded jacket before straightening up a little. Generally he was a neat person, so there wasn't much to do. A knock sounded on the door, signaling that Leslie and Alison had arrived. He walked to the door and opened it, stepping aside so Leslie could enter. Once she was inside, he took Alison's carrier, leading Leslie to the living room. He set Alison's carrier on the couch and turned to pick up the flowers on the coffee table. Clear surprise filled her expression when he handed them to her. She took them, giving him a brilliant smile.

"Thank you. The flowers are lovely."

She handed the flowers back to him. He held them while she took her jacket off. They made a trade, and he hung her coat up for her. When he turned around, he saw that she had Alison out of her carrier, unwrapping her from all of her layers. He remembered the bear and picked it up. When Leslie was finished taking off Alison's winter gear, he produced the bear. Leslie laughed and took it.

"Oh, that is so cute."

He waved a hand in the direction of the couch. "Make yourself at home."

Leslie smiled shyly. "Actually, I was hoping we could eat. I haven't eaten since lunch, and I'm a little hungry."

Blake smiled. "Well, you are in luck. Dinner is ready."

"Good." She smiled, reaching for the diaper bag, and brought out a container of milk. "Can you put this in your refrigerator?"

"Sure."

He took the container, placed it inside the refrigerator before turning around to look at Leslie. He watched as she situated Alison in one arm, while picking up her carrier with her free hand. She had gotten pretty sufficient in toting Alison around by herself, but not tonight. He took the carrier out of her hand and led the way to the kitchen.

"Where would you like this?"

She nodded toward one of the empty chairs at the kitchen table. Instead he took two chairs and pulled them together to make a more stable foundation. He stepped back, letting Leslie lay Alison in the carrier. He checked to make sure it was sturdy before moving over to grab some plates out of the cabinet. He made their plates and brought them over to the table.

"What would you like to drink?"

"Juice or water is fine."

He poured them both a glass of lemonade before having a seat next to her. She gave him an appreciative look.

"Everything looks and smells wonderful."

"Thank you. Now eat up."

Leslie took the first bite of her baked chicken, then moaned in pleasure. "This tastes good."

"Thank you," he murmured. They ate a few moments in silence, before Blake struck up a conversation. They had always been able to talk. He liked how easily their banter flowed. Looking down at his plate, he tried to remember if it had ever been so easy with Cindy. If it had, he couldn't recall.

He looked over at Alison, who was lying in her carrier with contentment. Her eyes were wide open, staring at him. He smiled at her when she yawned. He laughed when she smiled back.

"How did your last check-up go?"

Leslie smiled. "It went well. Both Alison and I have a clean bill of health."

She sighed. "I don't know if I can ever repay you for what you did for me. If you hadn't been here, I don't think this would have gone as smoothly as it did."

They both looked up when Alison cooed as if in agreement. He looked over at Leslie. "She seems to be developing well."

"And are you settling into the new role of motherhood?"

Leslie leaned back in her chair and smiled. "Well, it is an adjustment. I take it one day at a time. I have learned to sleep when Alison does. She also has different cries to tell me what she needs. So I know the difference between I'm hungry, I'm wet, or I just want to be held. Most importantly, I'm learning to ask my parents for help when I need it."

"Good. I'm glad both of you are doing well."

The conversation between them lulled somewhat, but Alison provided all of the noise needed. When they were finished eating, he made Leslie go to the living room and make herself comfortable while he cleaned up the kitchen. After he finished, he stood in the doorway of the living room, watching Leslie play with Alison. He walked further into the room, and Leslie looked up at him.

"Do you want to hold her?"

He nodded. "Of course."

He joined her on the couch. Leslie placed Alison into his arms. Blake looked down at her, inhaling her soft baby scent. She seemed so content in his arms that it tugged at his heart.

"She is a good baby."

Leslie laughed. "Right now she is, but it is getting close to her feeding time. We could have a repeat of earlier if we aren't careful."

"Do you need to make a bottle?"

Leslie shook her head. "Not yet, but when it's time I will let you know. You can even feed her if you like."

He looked down at the precious little girl who stared back up at him. Deep down, he wondered how much different things would be if Alison belonged to him and Leslie. She definitely wouldn't be raising Alison alone. "I would like that."

* * * *

Leslie took a deep breath. Blake was a good man. In some ways, she wished she'd had Alison with him instead of Sean. She sat there, watched him play with her daughter. He was a wonderful guy. Would be a great catch for a woman who deserved him. Curiosity got the best of her. She wanted to find out more about Blake's personal life. She wanted some insight into who he was.

"Why haven't you been married or had kids?"

Blake looked up at her, clear surprise on his face. There was a long pause before he responded. "I almost was once."

Her eyes widened. "What happened?"

"The Iraq War."

She was caught off guard and couldn't hide it. It probably was hard to keep up a relationship when one partner was active in the military, but she still couldn't see it as a reason to break up. She knew whatever the cause was must still be hard for him to deal with. His demeanor had changed. He had become more tensed.

"What happened?"

He sighed. "I went over as a whole man and came back as half of one. I told you about my accident over in Iraq. What I left out was, I was engaged at the time. Her name was Cindy. She was repulsed when I came back to Fort Braggs. She saw the extent of my injuries, wasn't able to deal with the probability of my injuries being a lifetime issue."

He looked down at Alison and stroked her cheek. "My world crashed around me when she walked away from me. However, her rejection pushed me to work harder at recovery. I wanted to prove the doctor's wrong, that I wouldn't be disabled for the rest of my life. In a way, I wanted Cindy to come back to me. I needed to get my self-esteem back."

Blake looked up at her. "After a while, I came to the realization that I didn't need Cindy back in my life. She hadn't done anything to enrich it in the first place. I also began to understand that a woman who truly loved me wouldn't have cared what disfigurement I came back home with. If she cared for me, she would just be happy to have me back home, period."

Leslie shook her head in disbelief. She never would have imagined that he had been through such a rough time with the woman he cared about, especially during an already tough time. "I'm sorry to—"

They both jumped in surprise as Alison let out a loud cry. Leslie chuckled before reaching for her. Blake relinquished his hold, but concern was etched into his face.

"What's wrong with her?"

Leslie stood up with her daughter. “A combination of a lack of attention and she’s hungry.”

“Ah, okay.”

“If you get up and walk around with her, I will make her bottle.”

Blake rose to his feet and took Alison out of her arms. He began to pace with her as requested. Leslie left to go to the kitchen to prepare a bottle, taking the diaper bag with her. She was back in minutes with a warm bottle. She held it out to Blake. He took it, placing it in Alison’s mouth. She quieted instantly. Leslie sat back down on the couch to watch Blake feed her daughter. The action looked so natural for him. She wondered if this was how he had felt earlier when he watched her breastfeed. Sure, her parents fed Alison, but not with the expression that always seemed to be on Blake’s face when he looked at her. It was an expression she found hard to decipher.

Blake looked over at her. “How often do you switch out between the bottle and breastfeeding?”

Leslie smiled. “I breastfeed her whenever we aren’t in public.”

Blake turned his attention back to Alison. Leslie sat back and watched the two of them. The sight the two of them made together was indescribable. Blake seemed to have rubbed off on her daughter just as much. Leslie laughed at a memory from last week.

Blake looked over at her. “What?”

Leslie shook her head. “I just remembered last week when Alison was having a crying spell and wouldn’t stop. I tried everything. Nothing worked. So I launched into the Army song, and she quieted instantly.”

Blake chuckled in response, and Leslie grinned. “My parents thought I had lost my mind, but it worked.”

Blake looked down at Alison and stroked her cheek again. “I just think she missed me.”

Leslie didn’t bother to disagree. She had missed Blake too. Being trapped in the blizzard with him had forged a bond between them that she hadn’t expected. A bond she wasn’t sure how to classify yet.

She sighed. “I know I might sound like a broken record, Blake, but why me? Why are you so interested in me?”

He stopped pacing and walked over to her. He rejoined her on the couch. His nearness distracted her, but she had to focus.

“Because there is something about you that tells me you are the right woman for me. When I look at you, there is this chemistry there. A chemistry I haven’t felt in a long time, and I can’t pass it up.”

She sat there in silence for a moment because she wasn’t sure how to respond. Earlier when her parents had made it back to the house, she had told them of her plans. Her parents had been thrilled. Her dad had even gone so far as to mention that Blake was a good man. One he wouldn’t mind having as a son-in-law. Her parents were liberal people, but she had still been surprised by their complete acceptance of Blake. Right now it seemed like everyone was willing to give him a chance—except her.

It was the total opposite with Sean. Everyone else wanted to write him off, but she had been the only one who wanted to give him a chance. Maybe going out with Blake wasn’t such a bad idea. She had already come up with numerous ways in which they were similar.

“So you are interested in dating me?”

He nodded. “Yes I am.” He paused, looking down at Alison. “I think she is finished.”

Leslie stood up and looked down at her daughter. She was nestled snugly in Blake’s arms. Her eyes were closed, the bottle empty. She took the bottle from Blake.

“Do you want to burp her?”

He nodded, gently bringing Alison up to his shoulder. Leslie touched her daughter’s back.

“I’m going to get her carrier. She is going to be out for the night.”

She went into the kitchen, picked up the carrier before bringing it back. She sat it on the sofa. Once Blake had belched her, Leslie took her and placed her into the carrier. She stood there and watched her daughter sleep.

“She is beautiful, just like her mother.”

She looked up at Blake and smiled. “Thank you.”

“Is she sleeping through the night yet?”

Leslie nodded. She was thankful that she was. Although Alison still had the tendency to wake up early. It wasn’t an inconvenience unless it was the weekend. She wanted to sleep in late if she could on those days. But Alison wasn’t always willing to cooperate. If she was hungry or wet, she made it known. No matter what time it was. Yet once her needs were taken care of, she would usually go back to sleep.

Leslie sat down on the couch, not wanting to disturb Alison. She looked over at Blake as he came over and sat down beside her. He placed his arm around her. She leaned into his embrace.

He ran his hand up and down her arm, making her shiver. His touch, although simple, was unlike one she had ever felt before.

“You know what I would really like to do right now, Leslie?”

She looked up at him. “No, I don’t, but I’m sure you will tell me.”

He leaned down and nuzzled her neck, making her quiver. “I want to kiss you.”

Her eyes widened. It had been a while since she had kissed someone, excluding the little peck he’d bestowed upon her at the bakery earlier this week. A kiss that she didn’t think really counted. It had been months, the last person being Sean.

Her gaze fell on his lips. She wondered what it would be like to feel his lips against hers. She had a feeling the last kiss they’d shared was nothing compared to what was about to happen. Having the urge to feel his lips against hers in a real kiss, she stretched upward. He met her halfway. She sighed. Her heart pounded hard in her chest the moment their lips touched. And when their tongues began mating with an intensity that shook every nerve in her body, she had to fight the instinct to break the connection for fear of losing control. In that moment, she wasn’t aware of anything but the feel of his tongue stroking hers, the feel of hers stroking his, the rush of sensations flooding and overpowering her. She was also aware of the dampness between her legs increasing, of the way her body was beginning to ache with need.

If he hadn’t been holding her, she was certain she would have floated away. Opening her mouth slightly, she allowed him to slip his tongue further inside. She leaned more into him, mating her tongue with his. She moaned as a strong surge of desire rolled through her. Her nipples hardened into tight little peaks. She shifted to ease the sensation. When it didn’t work, she leaned even closer to Blake, until her aching nipples brushed against his chest. Slowly, he pulled back, their lips reluctantly separating. She felt a tremendous sense of loss. He was breathing as heavily as she was.

“Whoa,” he breathed. “We need to stop before we get carried away.”

She blinked slowly, trying to gather her bearings. It stung a little that he had been the one to pull away. If he hadn’t, they might have ended up rolling around on the couch in front of Alison. There was no telling how far it would have gone then. Sex wasn’t a step she was ready to take. Not yet. She had just come to terms with actually agreeing to see him. As if sensing her inner battle, Blake cupped her face in his hands and tilted her head upward.

“Just so you know, that wasn’t a mistake.”

He leaned closer to her. “When we do take it further, I want to make sure there are no regrets and that I’m the only man on your mind.”

Knowing what he meant, she nodded. Although she wasn’t sure she would ever get to that point. Every time she looked at her daughter, she thought about Sean. How cold he had been to her

toward the end. Sean made it plain and clear to her that he had only been interested in her body, nothing more, nothing less. Her being pregnant didn't make a difference to him. The final slap in the face had been when he ended the conversation by giving her the money to terminate the pregnancy. Told her to use it wisely. She had been crushed. Not because he had rejected her, but because he had rejected their unborn child. It was then that she had seen him for the selfish man he was. There were two things in the world that mattered to him above all else: business and how to make money while doing it.

She wondered what could make a person become so cold and heartless. One thing she had been sure to do was to let him know she was going to keep the baby. Even if he didn't want to be there for Alison physically, he was going to be there financially. She informed him she had no intentions of ending her pregnancy because her daughter had been unplanned. Sean had responded by shrugging his shoulders, murmuring something about a tax write-off. After that, she had resolved to make it on her own. It didn't take her long to realize she wouldn't be able to. So she started making arrangements to move back home until she was sure she could make it on her own. The old her would have just chalked it up to a mistake, struggled paycheck-to-paycheck to make it on her own. But she had quickly realized that she had a baby growing inside of her to think about as well. So she had done the right thing. She had done the smart thing.

Now she was going to do the smart thing again. Head home before she got into trouble. Clearing her throat, she pulled away from Blake and stood up.

"Well, thank you for dinner. I enjoyed myself, but I must get going. I have a bridesmaid dress to get measured for in the morning."

He stood up and went to get her coat, returning with his own as well. She bent over and bundled Alison up as much as she could without waking her, then placed the heavy blanket over the carrier. Blake helped her into her coat, adding to his true gentleman status. He slipped into his own coat, then picked up Alison's carrier. Leslie went and grabbed the leftover milk from the fridge and put it back in the diaper bag. She would be so glad when it was springtime. The snow was pretty, but the cold weather was getting on her nerves. It was okay when it was just her, but now she had a baby to carry around as well. She led the way to the door, sucking in a breath when they stepped out into the chilled air.

She rushed to her car and unlocked it. He placed Alison inside before taking the diaper bag from Leslie, placing it on the floorboard. He straightened and pulled her into his arms.

"Thank you for coming."

She looked up and smiled at him. "Thank you for inviting me—us."

He placed a kiss on her forehead. "Drive home safe, and I will call you sometime tomorrow."

"Okay. Have a good night."

He assisted her into her car and placed a brief kiss on her lips before he stepped back. “Drive safe.”

“I will.”

He closed the door, and she backed out of the driveway, noticing he didn’t move until she was well down the road. She focused on getting home. Wondered what it would be like if she were staying the night with Blake instead of going home to her own bed. What struck her was how much she wanted to find out.

Chapter Six

Leslie tiptoed up the stairs. She had returned later than she'd thought she would. Her parents were asleep, but they had left a light on for her. Thankfully, Alison was still asleep. As she walked into her room, she sat the carrier on the changing bed. Picking her sleeping daughter up, she placed her in her crib before turning on the baby monitor. Leaning down, she kissed her daughter's forehead, loving how adorable she looked, and how soft she felt. Giving her daughter one last look, she turned to walk out of the room. Leaving her daughter's room, she crossed the hall to her own, resolved to get as much sleep as she could. Tomorrow was going to be extremely busy.

She crawled under the covers and closed her eyes. It felt like she had just drifted off when she heard Alison's first cry come across the monitor. Her eyes snapped open, and she rolled over to look at the clock. She groaned when she saw what time it was. She had slept, just not long enough. Sitting up, she swung her feet over the edge of the bed and shuffled over to her daughter's room.

"Shh, sweetheart, Mama's here."

Alison quieted when Leslie picked her up. Feeling that her diaper was wet, she walked over the changing table, sitting the carrier left there a few hours ago on the floor. She changed Alison's diaper before picking her back up.

She made her way to the rocking chair her mother had pulled out of the attic. She sat down in it and began to rock Alison after putting her to her breast to feed. She loved the rocking chair. It was the one her own mother had rocked her in when she had been a baby. Leslie loved the closeness, the bonding time she and Alison shared during feeding time. Glancing down, she stroked her daughter's cheek. She couldn't believe how good things were going since she'd moved back to Casselton. It was going much better than she'd expected. Her parents were helping out with Alison. They had given her a place to live. Her friend Tessa had given her a great job. She just hoped she didn't wear out her welcome. When she no longer felt Alison suckling, she glanced down and noticed her daughter was asleep again.

She covered her breast and stood, walking over to Alison's crib and placing her back in it. She placed a kiss on Alison's forehead, then left the room. Now she could go downstairs and pump her milk. Alison hadn't fed much. She would need the milk for later. Once she finished pumping, she ought to be able to get some additional sleep. By the time she climbed back up the stairs, she was almost asleep again. She fell back into bed and closed her eyes, only to be awakened by the alarm a few hours later. She still felt a little sluggish, but she had to get a move on if she wanted to be on time today.

She made her way to Alison's room and found her daughter awake, staring up at the mobile hanging over her crib. She picked up her daughter. The nervousness of being a single mother to a newborn had dissipated. She had gotten into the swing of it. Now she had to get back into the dating arena. Blake was a good guy, and she knew he would never do anything to intentionally hurt her, but she still had to be careful. She had Alison to worry about as well.

She gave Alison a quick bath, then dressed her before taking her downstairs. Her parents had to be up because she could smell the coffee brewing and breakfast cooking. She walked into the kitchen. Her dad was reading the paper, drinking his coffee.

“Good morning.”

Both of her parents looked up and smiled. “Good morning,” they replied in unison.

She leaned down, kissed her father on the cheek before walking over to her mother, doing the same. She went back to the table and sat down. Her father put down his paper.

“Let me see my favorite granddaughter.”

Leslie laughed. “She is your only granddaughter.”

“Well, hopefully not the last.”

She shook her head, handing Alison over to him. Her father wasn’t subtle in the least about anything.

“Are you hungry?”

“Not really, Mama, but you can fix me a small plate. I need something on my stomach.”

Leslie watched her dad make silly faces at Alison and smiled. When she had first found out she was pregnant, she’d just known her parents were going to be upset. Disappointed in her. But if they were, they never showed it. They loved Alison. Spoiled her rotten whenever Leslie would let them. Her mother placed a plate in front of her.

“Thanks, Mama.”

“You’re welcome.”

She reached for Alison as her mother placed a plate in front of her father before taking a seat at the table herself.

“So how did your date with Blake go?”

Leslie almost choked on her bite of pancake at her mother’s unexpected question.
“Date?”

She hadn’t really considered it to be a date, but she guessed there was no other way to classify it. Her mother looked at her with a twinkle in her eye.

“Yes, your date.”

Leslie shrugged. There was no use in arguing semantics. “It was nice.”

Her mother’s eyebrows rose. “Just nice?”

Leslie put down her fork, looking back and forth between her parents. Something was going on, but she couldn’t place her finger on it. Still, she knew something was up.

“What are you guys trying to do?”

“Trying to marry you off so that we can get you out of our hair,” her mother replied, straight faced.

Leslie’s mouth dropped open. “Are you serious?”

Her father nodded. All she could do was sputter. After a long moment, her mother reached across the table and grabbed her hand.

“We were kidding. Just trying to get a smile out of you. You’ve become so grim and quiet lately. Lighten up a little, have fun.”

Still in shock over what her parents had considered to be a joke, she couldn’t say anything. Maybe they were right. The old Leslie would have laughed, went with the flow. But a change had come over her. Life had a different outlook for her now. She swallowed hard.

“Have I really become dull?”

Her mother shook her head. “Oh no, Leslie. You haven’t become dull at all, just too cautious.”

Her mother stood up to refill her coffee cup. Leslie just stared at her in what she knew was a state of confusion.

“But my lack of caution is what got me into the predicament I’m in now.”

“Predicament? Sweetheart, this is a blessing. Yes, you got mixed up with a creep, but you got a beautiful daughter out of it.”

Her mother walked back to the table, retook her seat. “You learn from the mistake you made, but don’t run from it. Right now you’re running.”

Her mother sighed. “It’s almost like your spirit has been broken. I don’t like seeing you like this. Blake is a good man. I don’t want to see you pass him up because of a mistake you made with Sean. In case you haven’t noticed, Blake is infatuated with you and Alison. Not a common occurrence these days.”

Leslie stared at her mother for another minute before standing up. There was no way she could disagree with her mother. Anyone with eyes knew there were major differences between Blake and Sean. It hadn't taken her long to pick up on that. The question was, had *she* changed? Was she capable of making better decisions? Even with the right man, she could make the wrong decision.

She handed Alison over to her mother. "Thanks for the breakfast, Mama, it was great. I need to take a shower so I can be on time to Mrs. Eaton's. If Alison gets hungry, feed her half of the bottle I left in the refrigerator. She ate a little early this morning, but not much."

Leslie left the kitchen, her mother's voice still in her ear. She wondered when her life had become so complicated. Wondered if there would ever be a day when it no longer was.

* * * *

Leslie huffed up Tessa's driveway, the lack of sleep last night catching up with her. She had made it out of her parent's house early, and to Penelope's seamstress slash dress shop on time. At first it had been a little awkward being measured by her. But Mrs. Eaton had gone out of her way to make her feel comfortable. She had shared some amusing tales of Blake growing up. Leslie couldn't wait to tease him about them. Overall, the measuring session had gone well. Alison had even been on her best behavior. Penelope had seemed just as taken with Alison as Blake was. She was sure Blake had mentioned they'd had dinner last night, but Penelope was polite and didn't bring it up.

Leslie made it to the porch before adjusting her load so she could ring the doorbell. The door swung open before she could complete the task. The sight before her made her jaw go slack in surprise. If she hadn't been so tired, she would have thought she was hallucinating. Her hallucination spoke, reaching for Alison's carrier as he did so.

"What are you doing here?"

Blake ignored her question, pulled her inside. Looking back over her shoulder, she noticed Blake's truck was parked in Tessa's driveway. She had been too busy playing attention to her juggling act to notice it when she first pulled up. Now Tessa's insistence for her to hurry up and get there made much more sense. As soon as she could get her alone, Tessa was going to get an earful. She wasn't ready to see Blake again so soon. Not after the kiss she still hadn't recovered from.

She didn't have time to think about what she was going to say, because her friends surrounded her. They greeted her warmly before turning to fawn over Alison. She watched Blake take Alison out of her carrier, then placed a kiss on her cheek before handing her over to Rachel. He pulled Leslie off from the crowd. Still in shock, she went with him without protest. He drew her into the hallway, tilted her chin up until her eyes met his. She closed her eyes, not able to take his all-knowing stare. He brushed a loose strand of hair away from her face.

"You look tired. Did you get any rest last night?"

She opened her eyes, looked at him, touched by his concern. “Yes, I did. But trying to keep up with an infant can be very tiring.”

He smiled. “Busy day?”

She rolled her eyes. “Like you wouldn’t believe.”

He grinned. “Well, you still look beautiful.”

She had to give Blake credit. He did know how to flatter her. In the short time she had known him, he had given her more compliments than Sean ever had.

“Thank you.”

“Is it safe to come in?”

Leslie looked to her left and smiled when she saw Veronica peeking around the corner. “Yes it is.”

Veronica cleared the corner, holding her daughter, Faith, in her arms. Leslie smiled at the adorable little girl. She had just turned a year old. Leslie couldn’t wait for Alison to be that age. Veronica walked up and hugged Leslie.

“You look good. You don’t even look like you gave birth to a baby.”

Leslie laughed. “You always know the right thing to say.”

Leslie knew full well she looked like she had given birth to a baby. Yes, she had dropped most of the weight, but her stomach was still soft, a little rounded. Anyone who had seen her pre-baby would notice a difference. She turned her attention back to Faith, who was a beauty. She was also a carbon copy of her father, Ethan.

Leslie reached out and brushed Faith’s cheek. “She sure has grown.”

Veronica nodded. “Yes she has. I also saw your little one. She is precious. I remember when Faith was that size.”

Ivy came around the corner. “Hey, is this where the gathering is going to take place?”

Before she or Veronica could respond, Tessa walked up followed by Rachel, who still had Alison in her arms. “What is everybody doing back here?”

Leslie felt Blake’s arms come up and encircle her waist before he spoke. “Well, if you must know, I was trying to sneak Leslie back here for a minute alone.”

Ivy looked back and forth between the two of them. “Why would you want to do that?”

Blake didn’t answer. Instead, he spun her around and brought his lips down on hers. She should push him away. Tell him not to give her friends anything else to pester her about. Yet, she couldn’t focus on anything but the feel of his mouth against hers. He tasted of hot cocoa with a hint of mint. She forgot about their audience and stepped closer to him. Allowing him to explore her mouth while she did a little exploring of her own. Lifting her arms slowly, she placed them around his neck, while stretching upward. The kiss went on for what seemed like forever. He was a wonderful kisser.

Veronica cleared her throat. Leslie jumped before pulling back from Blake. She didn’t even bother to turn around to look at her friends. She could imagine what their expressions were. She should be embarrassed about sharing such an intimate kiss with him in front of them, but she wasn’t. Instead she was turned on.

She closed her eyes, lowering her head. If she couldn’t control herself in front of her friends, how could she control herself when she and Blake were alone? The last thing she needed to do was climb into bed with him too soon. She was starting to develop feelings for Blake. Feelings she hadn’t figured completely out, so she didn’t want to cloud it up with the distraction of sex. She knew firsthand that sexually based relationships didn’t work for her. Opening her eyes, she took a deep breath, letting her arms fall to her sides. She turned slowly to face her friends, looked into curious and expectant faces. Robin broke the ice.

“Well, the food is ready and the guys are hungry, so let’s eat.”

Leslie sighed in relief at Robin’s resourcefulness. Everyone murmured their agreement, and Alison was placed into her arms. She followed everyone into the living room, looking at her angelic daughter. True to what Robin had said, the men were sitting around the table waiting—salivating. She spoke to Cade, Dean, Ethan and Jason. Jason and Ethan were staring at the ham with such longing, she almost laughed. She took her seat, grateful when Blake brought the carrier over for her to lay Alison in. The food was blessed, then they began passing around the dishes of food.

Leslie looked around the table, smiling at how good it felt to sit around the table with her friends again. It had been a long time since they had shared times like this. The last time she could remember was after her baby shower a few months ago, although the guys hadn’t been there. She had missed this. She was happy to have it back. The food disappeared quickly, and when the meal was over, Leslie handed Alison over to Blake and volunteered to help with the dishes.

She would do anything to distract herself. Toward the end of the meal, her mind kept wondering toward Blake. How well he seemed to fit into her world. She needed to take her mind off of him. After helping to clear the table, she went into the kitchen and ran water into the sink. Rachel appeared in the kitchen a short time later. She was holding her daughter Bailey, who seemed to be wearing most of the dinner she had just eaten. Rachel found a damp towel before wiping her daughter’s face.

“Alison is beautiful, Leslie.”

She looked at Rachel and grinned. “Thank you.”

“Blake is pretty handsome himself.”

Leslie groaned. “Oh no, don’t you start. I have already heard it from my mom, Tessa, Ivy and Jason.”

Veronica laughed. “Well, don’t you think I should have a turn too?”

Leslie couldn’t hold back her smile. “No, you don’t. But I know you won’t listen.”

Rachel leaned closer to her. “So, do you like him?”

“Yes she does, although she won’t admit it.”

Leslie jumped at the sound of Blake’s voice. Turning around, she saw he was standing in the doorway. Leaning against the doorjamb with his arms folded. Leslie felt her heart flutter. She had never seen a sexier pose. What made her mad was he wasn’t even trying. Rachel took her cue, leaving the kitchen. Blake’s gaze never left hers, even as he began to laugh. She dried her hands on the drying towel before crossing her arms over her chest.

“Are you going to make it a habit of sneaking up on me?”

“I’m sorry.” He could barely get the words out from laughing. She had to say he didn’t look sorry in the least.

“It isn’t funny.”

“I know,” he replied around his laughter.

Leslie turned back around to the sink, irritated by his amusement. She didn’t find anything funny the situation. “Was there a reason you came in here?”

“Yes, there is. I was going to tell you that Alison is fast asleep. I also changed her diaper.”

Leslie turned around with one raised eyebrow. There had to be something wrong with the man. He couldn’t be perfect *and* sexy.

“Leslie?”

Blake’s voice brought her out of her thoughts. She looked over at him. He was staring at her with puzzlement.

“Did you hear what I said?”

She shook her head. "If you said anything after telling me you changed Alison's diaper, no."

Blake leaned closer to her, his warm breath brushing her ear. "What were you doing, thinking about me?"

The dish she had been washing slipped out of her hands, back into the water. She jumped back just in time, but a little water still splashed on her.

"Oh crap."

* * * *

Leslie reached for the towel and rung it out before wiping up the spilled water. Blake attempted to help her.

"Are you okay?"

Looking over at her, he realized she was flustered. He figured his question was too close to the truth.

"I've got it," she snapped.

He continued to help her wipe up the excess water anyway. Finally he reached over, took the towel out of her hands. She looked up at him with a glare.

"I said that I have it. I did it, and I will clean it up."

Instead of backing away, he dropped the towel, grabbed her hands in his. She looked at him through narrow eyes. "Why is it so hard for you to accept help?"

She snatched her hands out of his. "Because there are times when I just don't need it."

He shook his head. "I think you mean there are times where you just won't accept that you need it."

Not wanting to argue with her, he stood up and took a few steps back, watching as she finished cleaning up the water. Once she was done, she stood, placing the towel back in the sink. When she resumed washing dishes, he closed his eyes and rubbed the back of his neck. She frustrated the hell out of him, with her unwillingness to accept what was going on between them. When he opened his eyes again, she was scrubbing the dishes to the point that there would be no paint left on them if he didn't stop her. Taking the few necessary steps that were needed to bring him up behind her, he placed his hand on her shoulders, feeling her tremble.

"Leslie."

When she didn't respond, he turned her so that she faced him, but her eyes were lowered. She wouldn't meet his gaze.

"Look at me, Leslie."

She shook her head. He stifled a chuckle, then lifted her chin until she was looking at him. What he saw in her eyes made his gut tighten. There was desire there. It matched his. Not being able to resist, he lowered his head until his mouth met hers. This kiss was different from the others they had shared. She didn't respond to him. Disappointment roared through him. He never wanted her to shun his touch. He also wasn't going to force her. Just as he started to pull away, she began to respond. Wanting to feel her in his arms, against him, he lifted her. She automatically wrapped her legs around his waist. He sat her on the counter. Yes, he was strong, but his leg wouldn't be able to take the extra strain for long.

She adjusted herself against him. He groaned when the vee of her thighs settled against his growing erection, before deepening the kiss. When he slid his hands up under her shirt, he felt her stiffen slightly. Her skin felt so smooth. She had a soft floral scent that he couldn't place. His hands continued to stroke and caress her soft, feminine curves. He felt her sharp intake of breath before she stiffened against him, grabbing his hand.

"Blake."

He pulled back and looked at her. "What is it?"

"We have to stop."

Looking into her eyes, he saw the residual passion and wondered why. It was obvious she didn't want this to end any more than he did. "Why?"

Leslie pulled back, looking in the direction of the doorway. "I can hear Alison crying."

He stepped back, helped her off the counter, watching her adjust her clothing. A second later he caught the first sounds of Alison's wail. Jason came into the kitchen with Alison. He smiled and handed her over to Leslie. Without a word, Jason turned around and left the kitchen. Blake looked at Alison with concern.

Leslie smiled. "She's hungry."

He nodded, rubbed the back of his neck, willing the rage of desire rushing through his veins back. Now wasn't the time. He watched Leslie prepare a bottle for Alison, bouncing her until it was ready. She placed the bottle in Alison's mouth, but she didn't take it. Leslie sighed, then tried again with the same results.

Watching Leslie struggle with Alison wasn't easy. Still, he didn't want to wear out his welcome, but he had to try to help her. He walked over to Leslie.

“Do you mind if I try?”

She handed Alison over. “Anything to keep her from crying.”

He took the bottle from Leslie. Coaxed Alison into quieting down long enough for him to get the bottle in her mouth. Once she realized it was a food source, she began to eat heartily.

Leslie smiled. “Thank you.”

He looked up and winked at her. “You’re welcome. Anything I can do to help. Now, you go finish up the dishes. I’ll take care of Alison.”

He left the kitchen and went to rejoin Leslie’s friends. They were good people. He also liked that Leslie seemed to relax with them. He hadn’t seen her smile as much as he had until today. He sat down on the sofa, his gaze on Alison, hers on him in return. He could get used to having her in his arms like this. A short time later, Leslie joined them. Cade, Rachel’s husband, looked over at her with a teasing smile.

“Did you get the solitude you needed?”

Leslie narrowed her eyes at him. “As a matter of fact, yes, I did. Thank you for asking.”

Blake stifled his chuckle as Leslie sat down next to him. He focused his gaze back on Alison, who captured his heart more and more each time he held her.

“So what were you guys talking about, besides me?” Leslie asked.

Jason groaned. “The wedding, of course.”

Veronica laughed when Ivy elbowed him. “Speaking of which, how did your measuring session go?”

“It went well.”

Ivy beamed. “Good. Your dress is the only one Mrs. Eaton needs to complete.”

Blake sat back, listening to the women talk about the wedding and honeymoon plans. He was a little surprised when Leslie laid her head on his shoulder. But he didn’t move, nor did he question her. He shifted, wrapped his arm around her, still supporting Alison with the other. The position felt more natural than it should. He glanced over at Leslie, wondering what it would be like if the two of them were to get married. Would she want more kids? Would she be content staying in Casselton with him? There were several questions he needed to ask her, but he had just gotten her to consider dating him. He didn’t want to scare her off. Even now she looked somewhat wary. He placed a kiss on her temple.

“Rough day?”

When he pulled back, she looked up at him with a smile. “Yes it has been, but it has just gotten a lot better.”

Chapter Seven

Leslie rushed into the kitchen of the bakery, a half hour late. At least she had been able to call Tessa and let her know.

“Tessa, I’m sorry, I’m late.”

She put on her apron, rushing to the sink to wash her hands. Once they were dry, she dashed to the refrigerator. It had been a hard night last night because she had taken Alison for her two-month check up. Alison had received immunizations in both of her legs, and now they were sore. Even though she had massaged them with rubbing alcohol, Alison had still been irritable. Leslie had paced back and forth with her daughter all night. Alison had finally quieted and gone to sleep in the early hours of the morning. When her alarm had gone off, Leslie had slept through it. Her mother had come in and awaken her thirty minutes later. Leslie had rushed to get dressed after calling Tessa to let her know she would be late.

“It’s okay. I’ve been there before,” Tessa stated, focusing on the donuts she was glazing.

Walking over to the refrigerator, she took out the mix for the orange cranberry muffins. She preheated the oven and gave the mix a quick stir. A few minutes later, she had two dozen muffins in the oven. Her idea for the weekly special was still going strong; in some ways, she was excited about it. In others, she was ready to pull her hair out. They worked quietly together to make sure everything was ready before they opened up. Leslie was grateful when it was. She leaned against the counter, taking a deep breath.

Things had been wild in the past two weeks. Alison was growing like a weed. She and Blake had gone out a few times. Things were developing quickly between them. At the end of their last date, she had almost ended up shirtless. Once again he had been a perfect gentleman, pulling away before they got carried away.

The doorbell jingled, followed by the first three customers walking in. She smiled as she recognized the three women. It never failed that the trio would come in together, the same time every day. She greeted them, preparing their normal order before they even ordered it. Three regular coffees and three bear claws. After they had their food and drinks, they made their way to a table and sat down. Leslie chuckled under her breath when she heard them begin their daily gossip. She had yet to hear them talk about her and Blake. She doubted they would, at least not to her face. The unfortunate thing about living in a town with such a small population was nothing was a secret. She and Blake had been seen out in public enough for everyone to know they were a budding item.

The door opened again, and another regular came in. One of the things she liked about the bakery was most of the customers were regulars. They also were nice enough to make her feel welcome. When she thought about it, she couldn’t figure out why she had ever moved away from her hometown. She looked up as Tessa tapped her on the shoulder.

“You look exhausted. Go lay your head on the counter in the back for a little bit. You are dead on your feet, and will be no help to me if you pass out.”

She wanted to argue with her friend, but she couldn't summon the strength to do so. Instead she nodded, then went to the kitchen. She sat down on the stool and groaned. Bone tired didn't begin to describe how she felt.

Laying her head on the counter as instructed, she closed her eyes. She felt a little guilty about leaving Tessa out front by herself to handle the bakery, but her friend was used to it. Before she agreed to work with Tessa, her parents had worked at the bakery with her. Her father had suffered a mild heart attack. Now he was taking some time off. Tessa's mother was taking care of him, although she did come into the bakery on occasion to help out.

Leslie relaxed, drifting off to sleep. Thirty minutes later, the breakfast rush hit. Tessa had no choice but to wake up Leslie.

“Leslie,” Tessa called, giving her a gentle shake.

Leslie stirred, then opened her eyes and yawned. “How long have I been asleep?”

Tessa checked her watch. “About thirty minutes.”

Leslie sighed. She felt a little better with her power nap. Standing up slowly, she smiled. “Thanks for allowing me to take a few minutes. I needed it.”

“You are more than welcome. I would have let you sleep longer, but there is no way I can handle the breakfast rush we're about to have with the school kids and people heading to work.”

Leslie nodded as she walked over to the sink to splash some water on her face. Then she washed her hands. “Okay, I'm ready.”

Leslie followed Tessa to the front. For the next hour they were busy with customers. When they were finished, Leslie was sure they had served every person in Casselton. She went back to the kitchen, taking dirty dishes with her. She didn't want to wait until the end of business to start cleaning up today. As soon as she was off work, she planned to go home and crawl into bed. Speaking of which, she needed to call her mom to check on Alison.

She sat the dirty pans in the sink and reached for the phone, only to pause when the door to the kitchen opened. Her eyes widened when she saw Blake standing there. He always found a way to surprise her when she least expected it.

“Hi.”

He smiled. “Hi.”

She hung up the phone. “What brings you by today?”

He walked over to her. "I came by to see if you wanted to go to dinner this evening."

As much as she wanted to, she didn't know if she would have enough energy to go. Not to mention she didn't know how her daughter was feeling. She shook her head.

"As much as I would love to, I can't. Alison got a few of her immunizations yesterday. She didn't sleep well at all last night. For that matter, neither did I."

"Okay then. How about you and Alison come over to my place. I'll fix us a nice dinner. Afterwards we can sit in front of the fireplace and relax."

He stepped behind her and began to massage her shoulders. She had to bite back a moan of pleasure. His touch made her mindless. Things were starting to heat up between her and Blake. To the point where she didn't think she should be alone with him in this kitchen. She didn't trust herself to be strong enough to resist him when it came to being intimate with the opposite sex. The last thing she wanted to do was get involved in a relationship where she would end up getting hurt again.

She shook her head. "I can't tonight. I'm really tired. I also don't know what kind of mood Alison is in right now. I was getting ready to call home to check on her when you walked in."

She sighed. Man, she was drained. All she wanted to do was go home and lie down. She felt overwhelmed with everything that was going on. She couldn't think right. Not on two hours of sleep. *What was wrong with her?* When had she become such an emotional wreck?

His grip on her shoulder tightened. She closed her eyes. He turned her to face him as a tear slid down her cheek. He brushed it away with his thumb.

"Sweetheart, why are you crying?"

"I'm exhausted, Blake. I'm not thinking straight."

He pulled her into his arms. She lowered her head to rest it against his chest. "I don't know what's wrong with me, Blake."

She lifted her head and looked at him. "I don't know why I'm afraid of getting hurt by you."

He tightened his arms around her. "The last thing I ever plan to do is hurt you. I know your relationship with Sean didn't work out. From what you have told me, he didn't value you for the wonderful person you are. Believe me, I do."

He brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. "I would never hurt you," he whispered soothingly. She wanted to believe him. She truly did, but it made her nervous to think about putting her heart into someone else's hands. She didn't even have any feelings of love for Sean. Somehow, he had still managed to hurt her.

Blake leaned down to place a kiss on her forehead. "You are beautiful and intelligent. I just want the chance to show you."

She looked away, but he grasped her chin, turned her face until she was looking up at him. She shivered at the intensity of the emotion she saw there.

"Give me a chance to show you. I have been honest with you from day one. With me, you will always know what to expect."

When he said it aloud, she realized how true the statement was. Blake had been very honest with her. He wanted her to know who he was. Get to know the person she was getting involved with. He had shared as much of himself with her as she had shared with him. There was just one unturned stone between them: he hadn't showed her the scars on his legs. Still, she knew he had taken a risk, allowed her into a place he hadn't allowed any woman since Cindy. She owed him the same.

She smiled at him, then leaned forward to rest her forehead against his chest. His embrace tightened around her again, and she snuggled against him. She loved being in his arms.

"Leslie?"

"Yes?"

"Look at me."

She pulled back to stare up at him. Instead of speaking, he lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her. Lord, this man could kiss. He could make her melt with just one touch of his lips. She tried to keep it light, but when his tongue swept into her mouth, she moaned, then wrapped her arms around his neck. He stepped closer to her. She gasped when she felt his growing arousal. Blake slid his hand down her side, grasping one of her legs. He lifted her leg around his waist, fitting himself in the vee of her legs. She moaned at the heat pooling between her legs. It was a good thing she had worn spandex to work this morning.

The material allowed for the range of movement that she needed to wrap both of her legs around his waist with ease. It was also thin enough for her to feel his hard length pressing insistently against her. It took everything she had not to arch into him and ride him. She gasped, breaking off the kiss as Blake slid his hand under her shirt. She trembled when his hand found one of her breasts. A gasp of shock escaped her lips as his hand found her nipple.

The exploration might have gone further if Tessa hadn't chosen that moment to walk into the kitchen. Leslie buried her face into Blake's shoulder. A second later, she felt his hand slide downward until it rested on her rib cage.

In a way, she wanted to give Tessa a kiss for stopping things before they got out of hand. They were well on their way to stripping off each other's clothes. Having their way with each other on

the counter. On the other hand, she wanted to strangle her friend for interrupting. Her body raged with need. It had been a long time since she'd felt the touch of a man, especially one as virile as Blake.

"Well, I was wondering what was taking you two so long back here."

Leslie lifted her head, looking into Tessa's amused expression. "I'm sure you did."

Leslie disentangled herself from him before sliding off the counter. She looked up at him, her decision made.

"I will meet you at your place at seven tonight."

He nodded his agreement. "Okay."

Leaning down, he gave her another quick kiss before walking out of the kitchen. She was glad because he had distracted her enough as it was. It took her a few minutes to collect herself. Once she had, she folded her arms across her chest and narrowed her eyes at her friend.

"I don't know why you're acting surprised about Blake and I still being in here. I'm sure you knew it was going to happen, which is why you sent him back here."

Tessa gave her a smug look. "Of course I did."

She watched Tessa walk over to the industrial size refrigerator to take out a cake to be picked up by a customer. "So how was it?"

She rolled her eyes at Tessa before heading toward the front with her, knowing what her friend was getting at.

"I haven't had any. Even when I do, I won't tell you."

If she survived the experience. She was sure that whenever she and Blake came together, it was going to be explosive. Hopefully she would survive the blast.

* * * *

Leslie snuggled closer to Blake. The dinner he had fixed for her had been wonderful. He had topped it off by keeping his promise of enjoying a nightcap in front of the fireplace—if hot chocolate could be considered a nightcap. She had left Alison at home with her parents. She had felt guilty about it, but her parents had insisted, since Alison had still been cranky. Her mother and father insisted there was no reason that her date with Blake should be spent trying to console Alison. They promised her they would call her if they needed her. Blake brushed his lips against her forehead, drawing her out of her internal musings.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded. He rubbed his hand up and down her arms in a soothing motion. She knew she had surprised him when she had shown up tonight without Alison. When she explained that Alison still wasn't feeling well, he had understood. As guilty as she felt, she was enjoying their privacy. She looked up at Blake and found him smiling at her.

"You know I plan on making love to you tonight, right?"

She sat up in surprise, looking up at him. She valued his honesty, but sometimes it was almost too much. He chuckled.

She frowned at him. "I don't find anything funny. It's disconcerting when you say unexpected stuff like that to me."

He tilted his head to the side and studied her. "Was it unexpected?"

She was rendered speechless. Because in all reality, she had expected this—she just hadn't known when. There was chemistry between her and Blake that she could no longer deny. She didn't want to. She continued to look at him. His left brow rose in her direction.

"Well?"

She looked at him a moment before responding. "You're making me nervous, Blake. I was hoping the moment would be more spontaneous."

He chuckled. "Leslie, this is about as spur of the moment as we can get. When we woke up this morning, neither of us knew we would end up spending the night like this. Besides, when we are too impulsive, it never seems to work out. So I think right now would be the perfect time to take our relationship to the next level."

Leslie looked at him for another minute, then leaned closer to him. He was right. She was also tired of denying herself what she wanted, worn-out from the frustrated and lonely nights. With her decision made, she leaned closer to him before pressing her lips to his. He pulled her closer, deepened the kiss, causing her to moan in return. The feel of his lips against hers was enough to send her into a tailspin similar to the one she had experienced earlier. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she gave herself over to the kiss. Blake ended the kiss, then pulled back to look at her.

"Our first time isn't going to be on the couch."

He placed a brief kiss on her lips, then stood, holding his hand out to her. She stared at his hand, knowing what it meant if she took it. Her doctor had given her the okay to resume a physical relationship during her second check-up. So physically she was okay. Her mental readiness was a different story.

She tried to block out the memories of Sean, knowing what she had with Blake would be anything but casual. Blake was a long-term type of guy. Taking a deep breath, she placed her

hand in his. Allowed him to pull her to her feet. He turned off the lamp. She let him lead her out of the living room, down the hall to his room. After they entered the room, he closed the door. He strode over to the bed and sat down on the edge. She stood there with her hands by her side as he bent down to take his boots off.

“Do you have protection?”

He stopped in the middle of slipping his boot off and looked up at her. She stepped back when he stood up, watching him walk over to his dresser. He opened the drawer before pulling out a box of condoms.

Her eyes widened. She had expected a few. Not an entire unopened box. “Well, that answers that question.”

Blake placed the condoms on the nightstand before walking back over to the foot of the bed. He sat down again. She watched him finish taking the boots off, followed by his socks. Before now, she’d never realized how much of a turn on it was to watch a man undress. Lord, he was only taking off his shoes. She was in trouble. When he was finished, he looked up at her.

“Come here.”

She crossed the bedroom until she stood in front of him. He leaned down, unlaced her boots before sliding them off of her feet. She braced her hands on his shoulders to keep her balance. Once he was finished with the task, he straightened up. He stood up, and she took a step back to give him room.

“I want to show you the scars on my legs. If you are turned off, tell me. I will understand. I promise.”

For the first time since she’d met him, she saw a hint of vulnerability in his eyes. She was shocked. She knew in this moment how significant this entire situation was. She didn’t bother to tell him that she would want him no matter what. In the same way he seemed to want her. “Okay,” she whispered.

He paused, and for a moment she thought he had changed his mind. She saw him look away, swallow a few times, then look back at her. His hands went to the snap on his jeans. She held her breath as he undid it before he eased the zipper down. He paused again, then eased the jeans over his hips and down his legs. She released the breath she was holding, slowly. Once he had his jeans off, he walked over to the lamp so she could see what he had revealed. She inhaled sharply before she could stop herself.

She brought her hand up to cover her mouth. His legs were almost indescribable. She could tell there had been severe muscle damage to his legs. Several scars marred his legs, they were misshapen, and it was easy to see that it was a miracle he had survived in the first place. She couldn’t imagine the pain he had experienced. In that instant, she hated Cindy. How could she have walked away from Blake when he had needed her the most?

Well, it was Cindy's loss. Leslie had no intention of turning her back on him. She walked over to him and brought her hand up to his cheek. Repulsion was the last thing she felt when she looked at him. She felt proud of how strong he had been to overcome the injury he had been dealt. A lesser man would have curled up, given up, probably be using a wheelchair by now. Tears came to her eyes when she looked into his.

"Your legs are beautiful."

A sigh escaped him, and his body relaxed. She could see the relief in his expression before he pulled her into his arms, gathering her to his chest. He pulled back slightly, lowering his mouth to hers in a passionate kiss. She slid her hands under his shirt, wanting to feel his skin. He let her pull it up over his head without resistance. He began trailing kisses down her neck as he unbuttoned her shirt. Lowering his head, he leaned down to kiss one of her breasts, drawing a moan from her. He lifted his head, causing her to groan in protest. The sound was cut short when he slid the straps down her shoulders, trailing kisses over each of them as he went. She gasped as his hands found her breasts. His mouth joined his hands, drawing one of her nipples into his mouth, giving it a light flick of his tongue, before doing the same to the other.

Her thighs clenched in anticipation. It was all she could do not to push him back on the bed, slide herself over him until he was deep within her body. The rest of their clothes seemed to disappear before she could draw her next breath. She made a sound of protest.

"Blake, the lamp."

He lifted his head, confusion in his expression. "What about it?"

"Could you turn it off?" she asked, trying to keep her nervousness out of her voice.

"Why?"

She lowered her eyes. "I just had a baby."

His eyebrows rose. "And?"

She looked at him, wondering if he was serious. His expression told her he was. She opened her mouth to explain but paused. He had shared his body with her in the lamplight. She hadn't shunned him. Why would he reject her? She shook her head and smiled.

"Never mind," she whispered, then pressed her lips to his again.

She sighed when he took over the kiss. When their mouths touched, time seemed to stop. Instinctively, she angled her head to get more of the pleasure. He released her mouth to draw a breath. They were standing so close, their lips mere inches apart, as if ready to go at it again, devour each other senseless. He cupped her breasts in his hands, ardently caressing them, letting the tips of his fingers rub gently across her hardened nipples. He met her gaze. The heat she saw

in the depths of his dark blue eyes made her a lost cause. At that moment, she wanted to make love to him more than anything else. A moan of pleasure escaped her as he trailed kisses down her throat. His touch was magical. Her reservations flared their ugly head again when his hand slid down her stomach, but he didn't pause. Instead, his hand slid inside her panties. She arched up toward him, crying out his name.

His fingers dipped inside of her sensitive flesh. Blood pounded in her ears when he began stroking her intimately. She wasn't sure what was sending her closer to the edge the fastest, his mouth or his fingers. She released a soft sigh when his mouth found hers again. He intensified the kiss while, at the same time, he increased the tempo of the stroke of his fingers. She was so wet, so ready for him that a shudder traveled through her body. He continued to stroke her body, lavishing attention on each part that he could reach. Finally he pulled his mouth from hers, drawing in deep breaths. He trailed kisses over her jaw line, down her cheek, sliding lower. When he reached the swell of her stomach, he gave it a light, stinging nip before soothing it with his tongue. He moved lower until he was nestled between her thighs.

"Umm, Blake, I think I ought to lay down."

She gasped when he obliged her without protest. Her back met the mattress, and he resumed his position. At the first touch of his mouth she cried out, arching upward. When his tongue thrust out and gave her that first intimate touch, she felt boneless. Pleasure of the most intense kind oozed through her pores.

"Blake." She closed her eyes on a pleasurable sigh as he continued to kiss her in the most intimate way a man could. Even while part of her mind was telling her to resist him—to reach out and jerk his head up—the only thing she could do was reach out, grab hold of his head to hold it in place. But the reality of it was that it didn't look as though he planned to go anywhere anytime soon. He was assaulting her with thorough, leisurely strokes of his tongue, relentless in his goal to pleasure her. And she was brazenly enjoying it. She became aware of the shiver that raced through her body. His tongue probed deeper, becoming more insistent, ravenous. She let out a passionate moan from deep within her throat. Her hands holding his head tightened as if to draw him closer. He continued going at her as if her taste was something he couldn't live without. Her body exploded, seemingly into a thousand pieces. She let out a high-pitched cry as deep fulfillment seared through her.

She realized his hold on her was just as firm as her hold on him. He had an unyielding grip on her thighs. As if he didn't intend to let her go anyplace until he'd gotten his fill. The thought sent her over the edge again. Never in her life had anything happened to her like this before. With Blake it seemed to be the norm. Every time he touched her, desire raged through her. Yet this just wasn't normal, not for her, and she wondered if it would have been normal for any woman. She reached down, tugged on his shoulders.

"Blake, I need you inside me now."

He obeyed her request, moved up her body, before reaching for the protection he had set out earlier. She watched him rip the box open and don a condom in record time. He came back up

over her. She reached for him, gripping his shoulders. He gripped her hips in his hands as he leaned forward, tilting her hips upward while he did so. She gasped. He gritted his teeth. She felt the heat of him, big and thick, as he entered her, stretching her body again to accommodate its presence. He continued to enter her until she could barely breathe at the feeling of him filling her so completely.

Leslie moaned in pleasure as he began to move. She had never felt as good as she did right now. Moving her hips, she tried to urge him to increase the rhythm, but he ignored her request. She wrapped her legs around his waist, accepting his slow, deep thrust until she was begging him for release. He finally gave her what she asked for, and they both fell headfirst into an onslaught of pleasure. She whispered his name. He moaned hers in return. He lowered himself to her, and she encircled his broad shoulders with her arms, accepting his weight. Several heartbeats later, he rolled to the side, taking her with him. He ran his hand up and down her back, exhaling heavily.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. What they had just shared was hard for her to put into words. She wasn't even sure she wanted to. Not sure that she could. He placed a kiss on her forehead, then moved away from her. She watched him disappear in the bathroom, shivering when a cool draft drifted over her sweat-dampened body. She slipped under the covers, just settling in when he returned. He rejoined her, sliding next to her, pulling her into his arms. “Will you stay the night?”

Indecision struck her once again. She could stay the night, but what would that mean? She smiled. Not any more than it already did, except it would be the first night spent away from Alison since she was born. She also wasn't quite sure she was ready for that step. A major one had already been taken by her sharing herself with Blake. Spending the entire night, in his eyes, would be another. It was going to be tough

“Yes, I will stay the night, but only if Alison is okay with my parents.”

“Okay.”

He reached over, then handed her the phone. A glance at the clock on the bedside table told her it was a little past ten. Her mother should still be up.

“Do you need privacy?”

She shook her head, but she was thankful for the consideration. Her hand was amazingly steady as she dialed the number to her parents' home. Her mother answered on the second ring.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, Leslie. How is your date going?”

She smiled. “Well, it isn't over yet, Mom.”

“Oh?”

She heard the surprise in her mother’s voice. “No, it isn’t, which is why I’m calling. How is Alison?”

“She’s fine. The worst of the pain seems to be over. I gave her a warm bath, some more pain reliever and massaged her legs. She fell asleep about an hour ago.”

Leslie sighed in relief. “Good. Well, I was wondering if you mind watching her though the night.”

Her mother chuckled. “If it means you will be spending the night with Blake, not at all.”

Leslie gasped, then choked. “Mom!”

Her mother laughed. “You deserve some happiness. Some fun. I don’t mind watching Alison tonight. You have been a good, responsible mother. You still will be after tonight. She is fine with your father and me, so enjoy yourself.”

Leslie smiled. “Okay, Mom. Thanks for watching Alison for me on such a short notice.”

“It’s no trouble. We will watch her anytime. Don’t be afraid to ask.”

Leslie thanked her mother again, then hung up the phone before handing it back to Blake. He placed the phone back on the receiver before reaching over, drawing her back into his arms.

“Everything okay?”

She nodded, snuggling into his side. “Just fine.”

She lay there, listening to his breathing. Counted his heartbeat as he stroked her back.

“I like the way your skin feels. It’s very soft and smooth.”

His hand brushed the curve of her bottom, and she shivered against him. She felt him began to harden against her stomach. There was no way he could be ready again so soon. Hadn’t she read in a magazine that men in his age bracket needed a longer recovery time? She smiled to herself. He must be the exception to the norm. She didn’t mind.

She slid her hand up his chest, looking up at him. A second later, her gaze met hers. When he lowered his head to kiss her, she met him halfway. She gasped when he pulled her up and over him, so that she straddled him, without breaking the kiss. She pulled back to take a deep breath. In all reality, neither one of them should be ready to make love again, yet they were. She trailed a free hand down his chest before sitting up, bracing her legs on each side of his hips. Looking down at him, she smiled.

“Are you sure we can do this again so soon?”

He smiled wickedly at her while reaching for protection. “Just try and stop me.”

Chapter Eight

“Hi, Blake. Hi, Leslie.”

Leslie smiled at Kirk’s wife. “Hi, Andrea.”

Andrea stepped back, allowing them to enter the house. Blake had invited her to come along with him to a Sunday evening dinner with him and his friends. She had been a little apprehensive but had agreed in the end. She had met his male friends before, Gareth, Kirk and Oliver. They were nice and perfect gentlemen whenever she was around, but they were men. Women were different. She was a little nervous about being on their turf. He was a good friend of theirs. She didn’t know if they would approve of him dating someone her age. Andrea took their coats, putting them in the closet before leading them toward the living room. She heard other voices as they neared the room. Everyone stopped talking as they entered.

Gareth grinned when he saw them. He stood up and crossed the room to greet them. Leslie really liked him. He and Blake were the same age. They had served in the military together. The major difference was Gareth had left the service after eight years, instead of making a career out of it like Blake had. She smiled as he kissed her on the cheek.

“How are you?”

She nodded. “I’m good. How about yourself?”

He chuckled. “Hanging in there.” He engulfed Blake in a bear hug. “Good to see you, buddy.”

Blake laughed. “I would believe you if we didn’t see each other almost every day.”

Gareth turned and motioned for his wife to come and join them. She was a beautiful dark-haired lady. Leslie saw where their oldest daughter, Paige, got her looks from. Paige and her friends frequented the bakery in the mornings. They tended to be a part of the school age rush. Wendy’s smile was just as bright and welcoming as Gareth’s.

“Leslie, I don’t think you’ve had the opportunity to meet my wife, Wendy.”

Leslie shook her head, holding out her hand. “Not in person, I haven’t. It’s nice to meet you.”

And she was sincere. She and Blake had been in the full swing of dating for two months. He had already met all her friends and their families. Now she wanted the opportunity to do the same, even if she felt like she was going to throw up from a case of bad nerves. She wanted to get to know the people in his life, to see if she did fit into it completely. Wendy surprised her when she ignored her hand, embracing her instead.

“It’s nice to meet you as well. I have heard so many wonderful things about you.”

The tension in her body began to seep out. They were off to a good start. If the rest of the evening went like this, it would be a successful one. Blake took her around the room, introducing her to the remaining people she hadn't met. Norma, Oliver's wife, gave her a warm reception too. The one advantage she did have was she had met Kirk's wife Andrea in passing while in town one day.

With the introductions out of the way, everyone sat down again. Blake looked around for a moment, then over at Kirk.

"Where are the kids?"

"Outside in the back running wild, of course. Speaking of which, where is Alison? We were sure you were going to bring her."

Leslie sighed. "I was, but she just had her four month check-up yesterday. She doesn't do well with the shots."

Andrea gave her a sympathetic look. "I never realized how many immunizations there were in the world until I had Heather."

Leslie smiled. "Neither did I. From what I understand, there are plenty more to come. Needless to say, Alison isn't feeling sociable right now."

Kirk groaned. "Well, if I don't get anything to eat soon, I'm going to be unsociable too."

Andrea elbowed Kirk in the side. "Go round up the kids, then we'll eat."

Kirk was in motion before anyone could blink. Moments later, they were all sitting around the table eating and talking. Leslie was surprised at how calm she felt surrounded by Blake's friends. It was as though she fit right in. It was a good feeling. She relaxed even more.

"So how is business at the bakery?"

She looked up at Wendy, swallowed the bite of food she had just eaten before answering. "It's going well. I enjoy the work. I don't think there is ever a dull day."

"Well, your weekly special at the bakery is the talk of the town," Norma commented with a smile.

Conversation continued to flow easily. Leslie chimed in when she could, which was more often than she'd expected. The food disappeared, and clean-up duties began. Once the dishes were loaded in the dishwasher, the men disappeared. Leslie found herself sitting in the living room again with Andrea, Norma, and Wendy. The nervousness that had waned during dinner reared its ugly head again. Her buffer was no longer present.

"What are you thinking about?"

Leslie's head jerked upward at Andrea's question. She seemed to be the more vocal of the trio. Surprising, since Kirk tended to be the quieter of the men.

"Excuse me?"

Wendy laughed. "You look so nervous. Don't be. We aren't going to attack you or anything."

Norma nodded. "No, we aren't. Any woman who can bring about the changes we have seen in Blake is welcome by us."

Andrea smiled. "You have brought out a side of Blake we haven't seen in a long time. He was different when he came back from Iraq, almost reclusive. He was starting to change before you came back into town. Now the gate has swung wide open."

Leslie stared at them, positive that her confusion was evident. "The age difference between Blake and me doesn't bother you all?"

Andrea laughed. "Why should it? You two are obviously happy together. The two of you are consenting adults, so there are no crimes being committed."

"But our age difference—"

A sharp bark of laughter escaped from Norma. "Age has nothing to do with it. As long as it's what the two of you want and it works for you, it's nobody else's business."

Leslie looked at the three women and saw they all meant what they were saying. No one else seemed to have a problem with Blake and her dating—with the exception of herself. She was her own worst critic. Taking a deep breath, she smiled. If she wanted Blake, he was hers for the taking. She was the one in control of whether she could make it work or not. Now she just had to figure out how she could.

* * * *

"It's your turn now."

Leslie reached over and scooped up an ice cube out of the cup of water Blake had brought her. She pushed him onto his back before placing the ice cube in her mouth. Then she gently licked the inside of his left wrist with the tip of her tongue. He moaned. She had warned him that her goal was to make him beg for his pleasure like he had just made her beg for hers.

Blake twitched against her. The feel of her cool mouth on his wrist had been explosive. He felt her lick her way up along the inside of his arm, stopping to tickle the crook of his elbow with tiny swirls of her tongue. She followed his arm all the way up to his shoulder before moving over to his chest and working her way down.

His breath hissed out just like hers had earlier when her tongue trailed over his ribcage. He moaned in pleasure as her tongue slid across the ultra-sensitive crease of his thigh. The way that she paid homage to his body had turned him on. Made him feel whole. She had never turned away from him in repulsion. His thoughts were interrupted when she skipped over the part of him that needed the most attention from her right now. Instead she moved away, reaching for another ice cube. A groan escaped from him when she touched the ice cube to the outside of his leg, followed by her warm breath, as she trailed her tongue along the trail of water the ice cube left. If he had known this was what she meant when she had claimed to be thirsty earlier, he would have gone faster than the speed of sound of to get to the kitchen.

She moved the ice to the inside of his leg. He gasped. He felt her mouth near his straining erection and had to keep from assisting her in her next move. Disappointment raced through him when he saw she was only teasing him as she moved her mouth away.

Jolts of intense passion were shooting through his body. She had him guessing which move she was going to make next. He almost lost it as she made her way back across his body before sitting up straight. She smiled down at him as she grasped his rock-solid erection in her hands. Her eyes were heavy lidded. Passion filled. She reached over to the nightstand, picking up a foil packet. She covered him with a condom before sliding the tip of him into her. When she stopped, he growled in protest. She smiled, then took him back out, before rubbing the tip of his hardness against the opening of her hot center. When she slid it back in, he went taut. She let him slide deeper until he was fully inside of her. He let out what was a mixture of a growl and shout of ecstasy. She began to move her hips slowly until she had him on the edge. Once she had him there, she increased the speed of her hips, pushing him over, hard and fast. Leaning down, she kissed him. He struggled to get his breathing under control when she pulled back. His breath came out on a puff of laughter.

“Give me a minute and it will be your turn again.”

She looked up at him and laughed. “How long do you think we can keep this up?”

He gave her a wicked look. “Until one of us begs for mercy.”

She grinned. “You’re on.”

* * * *

“What are you thinking about?”

Leslie looked up from the oatmeal raisin muffin mix she was scooping into the muffin pan. They had run out, but she was whipping up a batch for a customer who had come in and ordered a dozen. She hadn’t realized just how much she had been in her own world.

“What?”

Tessa smiled as she finished icing a cake that was on its way out the door with a customer. “You were scooping muffin mix with a smile, so I figured something was on your mind. It must be good. Since I could use a little good news right now, maybe you would be willing to share.”

She looked at her friend in concern. Tessa did look a little tired. “Are you okay?”

Tessa nodded. “I know the flu season is over, but I think I’m coming down with something.”

Leslie crossed the kitchen and placed a hand on her friend’s forehead. “You do feel a little warm. Do you need to go home? I can finish icing the cake, then close up.”

Tessa shook her head. “You are wonderful for making the offer, but I can hang on for another half hour.”

Leslie looked at her friend for another moment, then went back to her muffin mix. She couldn’t recall a time when she had seen Tessa under the weather. Just in case it was contagious, she would take something herself. The last thing she needed to do was pass a virus on to Alison. She had done a very good job at keeping her daughter from becoming ill. Having her cranky from the shots was enough.

Leslie scooped the last of the batter into the muffin pans, then placed them in the oven. While the muffins were baking she began cleaning, so they could leave as soon as the muffins and cake were ready. The door to the front of the bakery opened, indicating they had another customer. Tessa looked up.

“That might be Mrs. Edwards for the cake. Could you tell her it’s almost ready?”

Leslie left the kitchen and walked up to the front to see who had come in. She was surprised to see it was Blake. He was toting Alison. Blake smiled when he saw her before stepping forward to greet her with a kiss.

“Hi.”

“Hello.”

She lifted the blanket, looked in Alison’s carrier, before leaning down to give her a kiss. When Leslie pulled back, she looked up at Blake.

“What are you doing here?”

“Alison and I came to pick you up.”

Her car hadn’t started this morning. She had caught a ride with her father, since he had been going into town. Yet she hadn’t expected her father to guilt Blake into coming to pick her up. She laughed. “You didn’t have to do that.”

He nodded. "Yes I did. Your father called me and told me you were having car troubles. I went over to look at it with him, but there's no fixing it."

She frowned. "It can't be fixed?"

He shrugged. "I'm sure it can, but the car is old so I'm sure it's no longer under warranty. So by the time you pay to fix what's wrong with it, you would have a nice down payment on a new car."

She groaned before walking over to a table and flopping down in a chair. "This is the last thing I need."

He walked over to join her, sitting Alison's carrier in an empty chair. "I know, but the car was on its last leg when you bought it, according to your father. It's amazing it lasted this long."

Her father was right. Still, she had bought it because it had been cheap. The payoff on her old car had paid for it in full. The used vehicle had good gas mileage on the speedometer. It had lasted a good four years. Now she had to buy a new one. A new one she couldn't afford.

"If you want, we can go to Fargo this weekend to look at a new one."

She did a mental calculation of what she had in the bank. Her money was tight. She couldn't afford to spend any. Yet she might have to. Technically she could get up earlier, walk to work. But when she needed to tow Alison around she would be in trouble. She could borrow her parents' car if she needed to; then again, that would leave them without transportation.

Maybe she could have her father drop her off in the morning. Have Tessa drop her off after work. Leslie dropped her face into her hands. Her plan wouldn't work because it wasn't practical. She couldn't inconvenience everyone else because of her financial issues. She lifted her head when Tessa came out of the kitchen. A smile spread across Tessa's face when she saw Blake sitting there with Alison.

"Hi, Blake." Tessa murmured before cooing at Alison, which earned her a smile. "Hello, beautiful."

Tessa looked at Leslie. "The timer on the muffins went off. I took them out and placed them on the cooling rack. They should be ready to box in a few minutes."

Leslie smiled, looking over at Mrs. Klute, who was busy reading the paper, enjoying the last of her coffee as she did every morning.

The door opened again, and Mrs. Edwards walked in. Tessa walked over to assist her. Leslie turned her attention back to Blake.

"So it would be better for me to go with a new car?"

He nodded. "Yes it would, if you don't have the cash saved up. At least with financing you will be able to get a car whether you have immediate cash or not."

Leslie sighed with resignation, knowing she had no other choice. "Okay. We can drive to Fargo this weekend." She stood up. "I need to box up Mrs. Klute's muffins, then finish cleaning up, so we can get out of here for the day."

Blake remained silent, but she could feel his eyes on her, following her around the bakery as she gave Mrs. Klute her muffins, then began cleaning up. Alison made a cooing sound, and when she turned around to look, she found that he had taken Alison out of her carrier. Now she was propped up in his arms with him making faces at her.

Leslie stood there, watching him interact with her daughter. Alison and Blake had definitely bonded, with good reason. For the exception of a handful of times, wherever she and Blake were, Alison was. He treated his daughter like she was his. It was the last thing she had expected considering she hadn't heard anything from Sean yet. She had hoped she would be able to hold off on forcing Sean's hand to take care of his responsibility, but he hadn't budged so far. He knew Alison had been born because she had sent a photo shortly after she had settled in at her parent's home. If he didn't come around soon, she was going to have to take more drastic measures.

She had thought with the amount of money Sean had, he wouldn't have a problem giving money for his daughter. If she hadn't been mistaken, he had called Alison a tax write-off anyway. She hated that he had referred to their daughter in such a degrading way. She sighed. In a way she felt sorry for Sean, for what he was missing out on. Alison was a lovely child. Yet she couldn't deny her life was complete without Sean in it. Since she and Blake had become serious, she caught herself smiling for no reason when she thought of him. Thought of how he was with her daughter.

Blake chuckled, and she looked up to find Alison had a good grip on the fingers he held up in front of her. Leslie laughed, and he looked up at her. Their eyes met, held for several moments before she broke the intense contact. She went back to cleaning. He still scared her. She wanted him so badly in so many ways that it frightened her.

* * * *

Leslie looked over at Blake when he groaned. He was stiff. She wanted to help him relax. Take his mind off of the muscle spasms he was suffering from in his legs. She had been shocked to find out that he lived with pain everyday. The more time they spent together, the more she had the chance to see the extent of the life-long injuries he would live with. She had only seen him suffer with the spasms once before. The scarring on his legs wasn't as bad as he made it seem. The shock of seeing it for the first time was worse than anything else. Yet he had shown her the pictures of how he had looked right after the accident, and she knew just how far he had come. His strength and resilience were two more characteristics she found sexy about him.

Scooting over on the couch, she pulled his head into her lap and began to rub her fingertips in circles on his temples. She massaged his entire face, paying special attention to his forehead and temple area. He moaned.

“That feels good.”

“I’m glad, because you need to relax.”

She moved her massage upward to his scalp, ran her fingers through his short hair, rubbing as she went. He closed his eyes. She could see some of the tension seeping from his body. She hated to interrupt him, but she knew something else that would help him relax.

“Sit up for a moment.”

He eased himself into a sitting position. She stood up and walked out the living room, heading for his room. Walking into his bedroom, she made her way to the bathroom and turned on the light. She crossed the room to the oversize tub, understanding why he’d had it specially installed. After the tub was full of very warm water, she turned the faucet off. She undressed, then grabbed his robe and wrapped it around herself. She headed back into the living room. Blake still lay there, unmoving. He opened his eyes and looked at her when she stopped in front of him. She held out her hand to him.

He smiled. “What is it?”

“Come with me.”

He took her hand and stood up, allowing her to lead him toward the bathroom. He took in her surprise and grinned.

“If you wanted to get me naked, you didn’t have to come up with a bath as an excuse.”

She laughed. “Good to know you can still make jokes when you are in pain.”

She reached out and began to undress him. Once his clothes were gone, she dropped the robe covering her body, then stepped into the tub. She offered him her hand again. He took it and joined her, a moan escaping him as they sat down together. She sat back, pulling him between her legs, his back to her front. When she began massaging his shoulders, his head fell forward on a moan.

He sighed. “You are too good to me.”

She smiled and shook her head. “No more than you are to me.”

She continued to rub his shoulders and his back until the tautness left his body. Finally he leaned back into her before tilting his head back so that he could look at her.

“Thank you.”

She pressed a kiss against his temple. “Are you feeling better?”

He nodded. “Yes, I am. Much better.”

He brought one of his hands up to her mouth and kissed it. Placing her hand back on his chest, he stroked her forearm lightly.

“I hate when these muscle spasms flare up, but you made the situation a lot better than it usually is.”

“I’m glad, but my job isn’t over yet.”

She reached out and picked up a washcloth, catching his smile when she came back with it. She dragged the towel through the water, then lathered it with soap. When she ran it across his chest, he sighed. “You know, I could get used to this.”

She drew the towel over his muscular shoulders. She couldn’t get over how fit he was. If he hadn’t told her he was forty-five, she wouldn’t have guessed it. Even with the salt and pepper at his temples that she could spend hours staring at.

“Used to what?”

“You spoiling me,” he murmured.

She laughed. “Again, just doing a little spoiling in return to make up for all you have done to spoil me.”

He turned to look at her. “Well, as much as I’m enjoying this warm soak, there is something else I would rather be doing.”

The heated look he gave her told her the muscles spasms were a thing of the past. It wasn’t hard to figure out what it was he would rather be doing. She rinsed the soap off of his chest, then his shoulders before putting some distance between them, so she could stand up. She stepped out of the tub, then reached for a drying towel. When she turned to look at him, she had to bite her lip. He was sexy as hell. Just looking at him turned her on. He stood, allowing her to take in his gorgeous body, all of him. She stared at him for a little longer, then turned to grab another drying towel, before handing it to him.

He tied it around his waist, but it didn’t do much good. His arousal was evident. He turned around to pull the drain. When he turned to face her, she was smiling. How had she gotten so lucky? Before she could figure it out, he took her hand, tugging her toward the bedroom. She laughed as he raced her to the bed, not stopping until they reached it. Her laughter died off when he pulled her close before kissing her throat. He slid down to the sensitive juncture where her throat met her collarbone. She moaned as he flicked his tongue against the soft, delicate column.

A shiver went through her body as he unwrapped the towel from around her body. When his lips touched her left nipple, her heart began to race with passion. She loved the feel of his mouth on her body.

A sigh escaped her. He picked her up and placed her on the bed. She lay back, watching as he unwrapped the towel from his waist. She sucked in a deep breath when she saw how ready he was. She became even more turned on. He came down over her, and she smiled before raising her head up to kiss him. She wanted to ignite his desire, like he was igniting hers. He drew back slightly, not breaking the connection of their lips, and opened the towel, still folded above her breasts. As his hands found her breasts she reached down between them, grasping his erection in her hand. Blake moaned with pleasure against her lips. She began to stroke him from the base to the tip of his shaft in a smooth rhythm. He pulled his mouth from hers, closed his eyes, and gritted his teeth. She watched the veins in his neck bulge, giving her a good indication of what she was doing to him.

“Leslie, if you keep doing that, this isn’t going to last long.”

“Who says it has to?”

He growled, reached down to still her hand, before moving away. He reached for protection, but her hand was already there. He groaned, and she smiled.

“Don’t worry. I will take my time.”

He lifted his head, looked at her with eyes full of passion. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Well, you did say you wanted me to go slow,” she teased.

“Leslie,” he said in a warning tone.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure we are both satisfied.”

She opened the packet with her teeth before taking him into her hands and putting the condom on him.

“Hurry up,” he muttered from between clinched teeth. He didn’t know what was wrong with him. He felt like a randy teenager getting ready to go off at any time.

“Now, you know these things do take time,” she whispered wickedly. “We have to make sure it’s on properly.”

“Well, time is something I don’t have right now,” he muttered. “Not if you want me to come while inside you.”

She decided to put an end to their torture, rolled the latex down over his hard shaft. He went to move between her thighs, but she shook her head.

“Uh-uh. On your back.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but something in her expression must have told him it would be a moot point. He rolled over onto his back, and she rose up over him. She straddled him, causing both of them to moan in mutual pleasure as she lifted her hips. He slid into her in one smooth glide. She brought her hands up to his chest to steady herself. The first rock of her hips had him closing his eyes and her gasping in pleasure. She moaned when he brought his hands up to grip her hips. He held onto her while she established a rhythm that was sure to send them skyrocketing into orgasmic release in no time.

She gasped, looking down at Blake. Making love with him was better each time. She could let go with him. Knowing he would be there to catch her if she fell. She closed her eyes; let her head fall back, getting closer to the sweet climax she sought. He removed one hand from her hip, slid it down to where their flesh met. He applied pressure to the knot of nerve endings that she knew would send her headfirst into mind-altering pleasure. At the first touch, her body stiffened. A shudder traveled through her. She tried to prolong the pleasure, but it was a waste of effort. Her body flew apart, her climax hitting her with the force of an oncoming freight train. Her entire body was engulfed in a scorching, quaking release that started between her legs but unfurled throughout her entire body.

She gasped incoherently, shuddering, holding on as Blake threw his head back and roared, delivering two more long, deep thrusts into her. His whole body convulsed underneath hers as he reached his own explosive release. She collapsed against him, laid her head on his chest. His heart was pounding, his breath matched in rhythm. They were both covered in sweat, but the moment couldn't be more perfect. She snuggled into him, amused when he kissed her forehead.

“Woman, you are going to be the death of me,” he rasped.

She chuckled, breathlessly. “Well, I could say the same about you. But remember this was your idea. I was only trying to help you relax.”

He grinned. “Believe me, I can't get any more relaxed than this.”

Laughing, she stretched upward, placed a kiss on his lips before moving to the side. She watched as he slid out of bed and went to the bathroom. Climbing under the covers, she moaned. Several minutes later he rejoined her in the bed, slid under the covers next to her. Worn-out, she cuddled closer to him, struggling to stay awake. She didn't plan to spend the night. Yet the warm coziness of his arms overpowered her, and she fell asleep. His gentle kiss on her forehead was the last thing she remembered.

Chapter Nine

“Tessa, are you sure you’re okay?”

Leslie, Veronica, Rachel and Ivy all stood with their ears to the bathroom door. Tessa had made a mad dash for the bathroom a few moments ago before locking herself inside. It sounded as if she was throwing up. There was a long pause; then Tessa responded.

“Can you get Dean for me?”

Veronica was out of the room before anyone else could move. Today was Ivy and Jason’s wedding day. They were all at the church, with twenty minutes to spare before Ivy was supposed to walk down the aisle. Leslie looked at Ivy.

“You need to go hide. We don’t want Dean telling Jason what you look like.”

Ivy nodded, making it into the other room just as the door burst open. Veronica had returned with Dean. She and Rachel moved out of the way. Dean knocked on the door before announcing his presence. The door opened, and Tessa pulled him in before closing the door again. Leslie looked over at Veronica and Rachel.

“I wonder what this is all about?”

Ivy peeked from around the corner. “I have no idea, but they had better hurry up. Jason is going to have a fit if this wedding doesn’t start on time.”

Leslie smiled as she looked up at the clock. Ivy’s statement was very accurate. Jason’s singular request throughout the whole wedding planning was for the ceremony start on time. They had fifteen minutes and counting. They weren’t completely dressed yet. She closed her eyes, saying a silent prayer. They had to start this wedding on time.

Her prayer must have been heard because the bathroom door opened a short time later. Dean and Tessa walked out. Tessa still looked a little peaked, but she was smiling. Dean looked at Tessa before kissing her on the cheek.

“If you need me again, call me.”

Tessa nodded. “I will.”

He left the room and Ivy came out from hiding, all eyes instantly turning to Tessa. Veronica spoke first. “What in the world was that about?”

Tessa looked over at Ivy with an apologetic expression. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to take away from your day.”

Ivy came over and hugged her. “Oh, you haven’t ruined anything, but you don’t look so hot. Are you sure that you are okay?”

She nodded. “I’m fine, just pregnant.”

Leslie felt her eyes widen as she stared at Tessa.

“You’re what?” Rachel exclaimed.

Tessa walked over to an empty chair before sitting down. “I’m pregnant. I was trying to keep from letting everyone know until after Ivy’s wedding because I wanted this to be her time. We all know how long she and Jason have been waiting for this day.”

Ivy shook her head before crossing the room to where Tessa sat. “Oh Tessa, you didn’t have to worry about that. We could use all the good news we can get around here.”

Leslie smiled. “How far along are you?”

“I’m almost three months.”

Leslie laughed. “That’s why you’ve been dragging for the last month.”

“Yes it is,” she confirmed as she stood. “I thought I was coming down with a bug at first. Thanks to Jason’s reasoning, I quickly realized it wasn’t just a cold.” Tessa smiled. “But I’m fine. I promise. Now let’s finished getting dressed. We have a wedding to be on time to. I don’t want Jason to come looking for me. He may take pity on me because I’m pregnant, but not much.”

“*Oh God*, I’m getting married,” Ivy exclaimed.

Everyone laughed. Leslie had been wondering when Ivy was going to panic. Her friend had been super calm, very levelheaded up until this point. All they had to do was keep her that way until they could get her down the aisle.

They began to scramble around with her friends to finish getting ready. They all made it to their spots with seconds to go. The tension didn’t leave Leslie until Rachel and Tessa’s daughters went skipping down the aisle, pelting guests with flowers instead of the walkway. There were a few laughs mixed in with several gasps. When the girls were finally standing still next to their mothers, the wedding march was played. Ivy and her father stood in the doorway. Leslie couldn’t believe how beautiful her friend looked. Even through the veil she could see Ivy’s radiant smile. Tears welled up in Leslie’s eyes. She blinked rapidly to hold them back. No crying was allowed today. If one of them got started, all of them would join in. She had to hold it together for Ivy’s sake.

Ivy and her father arrived at the altar where Jason stood waiting. Leslie lost track of anything being said after that point, for her eyes met Blake’s. He sat in the third row, holding Alison. She noticed just how sexy he looked in his suit. Their eyes met, held, before he winked at her. The

intense emotion that began to appear in them made her drag her gaze from his. She didn't want to get her hopes up over what she saw there. Didn't want to imagine herself standing in Ivy's place, while Blake stood in Jason's.

The rest of the wedding went by in a blur. The next thing she knew she was walking back down the aisle, out of the church, to the reception area. She took a seat at the table that had her name card and sat down before dropping her face into her hands. It wasn't even her wedding day, yet she was drained. More guests began to file into the reception hall, and the volume rose.

A cheer went through the room. She looked up in time to see Ivy and Jason walking hand in hand through the door. A genuine smile made its way across her face. They looked so happy together. She couldn't be more excited for her friends. She could still remember when Jason had proposed to Ivy. It had been a whirlwind ever since.

She retook her seat as they sat down at their table. A shadow appeared over her shoulder. She looked up to see Blake standing there with a smiling Alison. She automatically leaned toward her mother when Leslie reached for her. Blake sat the diaper bag on the floor before taking a seat next to her. She kissed her daughter's cheek before looking over at him.

"Has she been a good girl?"

Blake chuckled. "You know that she has. I was worried she would get excited, start babbling when she saw you, but not one peep out of her during the ceremony."

Leslie kissed her daughter's other cheek. "Good baby."

Blake placed his arm around the back of her chair. Leslie tried not to shiver when he touched her.

"The food looks good."

She looked over at the self-serve buffet that was already starting to draw a line. When Leslie looked around, it seemed as though most of Casselton had showed up for the wedding.

"Yeah, you're right. You might want to get a plate before it's all gone."

He stood up. "I'll get you one as well."

She watched him walk over to get in line, speaking to people as he went. He was a very popular guy. Well liked in the community. She looked away from him, needing something else to focus on before she got herself in trouble. Wendy's face came into view. Leslie smiled as Wendy headed her way.

She had a plate in her hand and was chewing on something she must have already taken a bite of. When she was within hearing distance, she picked up a broccoli pocket off of her plate.

"This is wonderful. I'm not sure who made it, but I need to find out so I can get the recipe."

Wendy was off in a flash before Leslie could say a word. She looked down at Alison, who was looking around the room at all of the people passing by. A few stopped to play with Alison, admiring how much she was growing, before moving on. Leslie smiled when her mother and father walked up to the table.

“You look beautiful, Leslie.”

Her mother leaned down to kiss her on the cheek, followed by her father. “Thanks, Mom. Dad.”

Her mother looked around the room. “The wedding was lovely.”

Leslie nodded. “Yes, it was.”

Her parents smiled as Blake came back to the table with two plates. Sometimes she couldn't get over how much her parents adored him, almost as much as she did. Blake sat the plates on the table, which Leslie immediately had to put out of Alison's reach. She learned the hard way that her daughter's reach was long and her hands quicker than she thought. She watched her father shake Blake's hand in greeting. Blake turned to kiss her mother's cheek before retaking his seat. They looked up in surprise as Cade and Rachel came through, toting trays of champagne.

“It's time for the toast.”

She took a glass for Blake, sitting it out of Alison's reach as well. She would toast with water. Her parents made their way to their own table before the toast began.

A moment later, Dean stood up and cleared his throat. “May I have everyone's attention please?”

He waited until everyone was quiet before making his toast. Wishing Ivy and Jason many years of happiness together. She watched Jason and Ivy's expressions, wondering if she would ever wear it herself. Blake was someone she could fall in love with if she let herself. In several ways, she was already willing to say she had an inkling of the strong emotion. Even though she had tried to keep her heart under lock and key, Blake had found a way to sneak in.

“Leslie?”

She looked over at Blake, who was smiling at her. “Yes?”

“Ivy and Jason are getting ready to have their first dance as husband and wife.”

Her attention automatically went to the dance floor. Ivy looked so beautiful in her white off the shoulder organza gown. Jason twirled Ivy around the dance floor. Ivy looked like she was in heaven. When the song was over, other couples started joining the newlyweds on the dance floor. She looked over at Blake when he stood and held his hand out to her. “May I have this dance?”

She looked down at her daughter. “What about Alison?”

Blake smiled. "She can dance with us."

Leslie shook her head, handing Alison to him before standing. She took his hand, allowed him to lead her to the dance floor. He shifted Alison in his arm. Leslie laughed when her daughter lowered her head to Blake's shoulder, like she had been dancing with him all of her life. She followed her daughter's lead and stepped closer to Blake, sighing as his free arm encircled her waist. She wrapped one arm around his waist in return, placing her free one on Alison's back. All three of them swayed to the beat of the music.

"So what were you thinking about earlier?"

She sighed heavily before answering. "About how happy my friends are."

He placed a light kiss against her temple. "Are you not happy as well?"

She pulled back and looked at him. "Yes, I am."

And she was, but for a different reason. Stretching upward, she placed a kiss on his lips, only to pull back when a low wolf whistle sounded from behind them. She turned to see Veronica and Ethan behind them. She smiled at them, and Veronica shook her head. "Now, now. We don't need you to encourage the newlyweds."

Leslie laughed. "Too late. Tessa and Dean were showing them what to do before Blake and I were."

They all shared a laugh before slowly drifting away from each other.

"Do you every think about getting married?" Blake murmured.

Leslie looked up in surprise. "What makes you ask that?"

Blake's left brow arched in her direction. "Look around."

She laughed. A wedding could make one think about getting married. "Well, I did when I was growing up. I guess even now a small part of me still wants to get married. But I'm careful about rushing into anything. If I get married I want it to be one time, and for life."

Deep down she hoped he wanted the same thing. Hoped he wanted it with her. The rest of the wedding went by quickly. The next thing she knew they were seeing Ivy and Jason off to their honeymoon destination of sunny Florida. They were going to spend the night in Bismarck and catch their flight out in the morning. Once the taillights of the car disappeared, everyone began to disassemble. Blake looked over at her, holding a sleeping Alison.

"Are you ready to go?"

She had given into his request for her and Alison to come home with him tonight. She had agreed without hesitation.

She nodded. "Yes, my feet are killing me."

She picked up Alison's diaper bag, and he wrapped his arm around her waist before leading her through the remaining crowd, saying their goodbyes as they went. When they reached her car, he placed Alison in the car seat. Once he had Alison situated, he turned and looked at her.

"Do you have everything you need for the night?"

She nodded as she slid behind the wheel. "Yes I do. I will follow you home."

He closed her door and she started the engine, waiting for him to walk to his truck. She couldn't get over how sexy he was. He was an enigma of a man. She followed him to his home, smiling at how he was outside of his truck and by her car before she was in park. He opened the door as she shut off the ignition. Sometimes he amazed at her because of how much of a gentleman he was.

He helped her out of the car. Within a few minutes they were inside the house with Alison and situated. Leslie set Alison's diaper bag down on the couch, their overnight bag on the floor. When she turned around Blake was pulling Alison out of her carrier, making faces at her while she smiled and gurgled. Leslie shook her head, reaching down to slip off her torturous shoes. She sighed in relief as soon as she'd accomplished the feat.

"Man. I could kill the person who decided to invent high heels."

Blake chuckled. "Let's get situated, then I'll give you a foot rub."

She smiled before leaning over to place a kiss on his cheek. "That sounds wonderful, and I will hold you to it."

She followed Blake into the living room, laughing as Alison began to flail and kick her arms and legs.

"She won't be happy for too long. Her feeding time is coming up soon."

Blake looked over at her still bouncing Alison. "Did you bring any milk?"

She looked down at one breast, then the other, and he chuckled. "Yes I did. I also brought the pump, but I won't have time to pump now, so I will feed her when she's hungry."

Blake nodded. "Just let me know when you're ready."

Leslie laughed. "Don't worry, Alison will. Do you mind changing her while I get out of these clothes myself?"

He shook his head, so she handed him the outfit to change Alison into while she picked up the overnight pack and took it toward Blake's bedroom. She couldn't get over how domestic it felt when she was with Blake. It made her wonder if this was what life would be like if they were together on a permanent basis. Was Blake even thinking about a future with her, or was she setting herself up for heartbreak?

She sighed as she entered the bedroom. It didn't take her long to change. Once she had, she rejoined Blake and Alison. If she didn't know any better she would say he had a brood of kids hiding somewhere. He had managed to change her daughter without any issues. Alison whimpered when she saw Leslie. She reached for daughter, already aware that Alison was warning her. Knowing it was close to feeding time, she hadn't bothered with a bra. She leaned closer to Blake after Alison was settled. In so many ways she wished Blake had fathered her daughter. Right now as things were, she felt like her daughter was being shortchanged. Blake placed a kiss on the tip of Leslie's nose, then stroked Alison's cheek with his index finger before standing.

"Where are you going?"

He smiled. "To take off these uncomfortable clothes."

If her hands had been free, she would have hit herself in the forehead. She had been so caught up in her fantasy that she had forgotten he hadn't had a chance to take off his suit.

"Sorry. You look so handsome, I forgot you were in it."

He chuckled. "Thanks, but I equate suits to the same hell you equate heels to. I'll be right back."

He left the room, and she turned her attention back to her daughter. Her mind went back to her fantasy of a happily-ever-after with Blake. Before the wedding today she hadn't really thought about it, but now she couldn't get it off her mind. She cared a lot about Blake, would be willing to call it love. It was hard to label it, but she knew for certain she had never felt the way she did about Blake with any other man.

Thankfully he wasn't gone long enough to give her time to feed into her runaway thoughts. Still, when he returned, she almost swallowed her tongue. He had on a pair of pajama bottoms, nothing else. He looked good enough to eat. When he rejoined her on the couch, she had to refocus on feeding her daughter.

Blake was a distraction-and-a-half. Alison finally gave indication that she was full. Blake took her while Leslie covered herself up. She shook her head when Alison let out an unladylike belch. She was still trying to figure out who her daughter had inherited the sound from. Blake chuckled and laid Alison in his lap before pretending to bite her fingers and toes. His playfulness earned a laugh from Alison. Right now it sounded more like a grunt, but it came with a smile, so Leslie claimed it as a laugh right now. Leslie grinned at the sight that they made.

"Where is a camera when I need it?"

Blake looked over at her with a mouth full of toes, which made Leslie laugh. He released Alison's toes from his mouth.

"Exactly where it's supposed to be. Well hidden."

Blake gave Alison another mock bite before sitting her up, turning her so she rested in the crook of his arm. Leslie rolled her eyes.

"You know, as much as she is held, it's a miracle she isn't spoiled rotten."

Blake grinned. "Who says she isn't? I'm not afraid to say Ms. Alison has me wrapped around her little finger. So she can have whatever she wants from me."

He looked over at her with a twinkle in his eye. "So can her mother."

Chapter Ten

Leslie moaned with pleasure as her mom stuck a spoon in her mouth. “Mom, you have got to stop this.”

“She has got to stop what?”

Leslie looked up to Blake, standing in the doorway holding Alison. The spoon was removed from her mouth. She finished chewing the potato casserole before swallowing.

“Cooking like this. It’s bad enough that I work at the bakery.”

She walked over, took Alison out of his arms before placing a kiss on her cheek. “All the hard work I’ve put into losing the weight that I gained from carrying this one.”

Blake pulled Leslie into his arms and placed a kiss on her lips. “Either way, you look great.”

She patted his cheek. “You always know what to say.”

Marjorie cleared her throat. “Before the two of you get carried away, help me carry the food into the dining room. Everything is ready.”

Leslie smiled. “Let me go sit this little girl in her chair. I’ll be better equipped to help.”

“Okay,” Marjorie replied before turning back to the stove. Leslie watched Blake walk over to the counter to pick up a dish, then head into the dining room. Blake sat the dish down on the table before turning to go get another. She sat Alison in her chair. Her daughter perked up. Her daughter seemed to like being about to sit up high enough to see everything going on around her. Her father came up behind her.

“I’ll watch her.”

Leslie looked up at him and grinned. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, leaving all the hard work to Mom, Blake and me.”

Her father chuckled. “You don’t get to be my age without picking up a thing or two.”

Blake came back into the room again with a dish of green beans. Her mother followed behind with the potato casserole. She followed them back into the kitchen. A short time later, they had all of the food on the table and were sitting down to eat. She liked it when Blake joined them for Sunday dinner. It was becoming more of a habit. Actually, it was becoming more of a habit for them to enjoy Sunday dinner together—it just happened to be at different locations.

She put a moderate portion on her plate when the dishes were passed around and began to eat. They were halfway through their meal when the doorbell rang. She watched as her father wiped his mouth before getting up from the table. “I’ll get it.”

They went back to eating as her father left the dinning room. A few moments later, her father's voice rose to an alarming level. Leslie stood up, followed by Blake and her mother. Leslie automatically reached for Alison, but her mother stopped her.

"You go and check on your father. I will get Alison."

Leslie followed her mother's instructions. She and Blake went into the living room. Leslie stopped dead in her tracks, gasping at the sight before her. Blake caught her as she passed out in a dead faint.

* * * *

As Blake caught Leslie, he scooped her up, carrying her to the couch. He had an idea of why she had fainted, but his main goal was to bring her back around. He patted her cheek, calling her name. Marjorie came into the living room cradling Alison, then gasped just as Leslie had before doing an about-face and leaving again. Harold came over and peered down at his daughter before turning back to the man standing several feet away from him.

"You come into my house, uninvited, causing chaos. You need to leave."

The man spoke. "I will once I speak with Leslie."

Blake tried to ignore what was going on behind him. But he had never send Mr. Thompson raise his voice. Let alone get upset. Blake needed to find out what was going on—and fast.

"Mr. Thompson, can you get Leslie's water off the table?"

Mr. Thompson left the room, mumbling under his breath the entire way. Blake patted Leslie's cheek again, not liking how still she was, but he could see her pulse in her throat.

"Come on, sweetheart, open your eyes for me."

Leslie moaned as she began to come around. Her eyes opened slowly. "What happened?"

"You fainted."

That seemed to be the last thing she needed to hear. But he stopped her before she went into full-fledged panic. She went to sit up, but he held her down.

"Now don't get worked up again."

He reached for her glass of water that Mr. Thompson held out. "Here, drink this."

Leslie took a few sips before giving the glass back to him. He handed it back to Leslie's father, who took the glass back. Then he left the room, grumbling under his breath the entire way.

“Now, take a deep breath and relax.”

She nodded and sat up. Another gasp escaped her when she looked over his shoulder. “*Sean?*”

Blake felt his stomach drop as Leslie confirmed what he had suspected. He looked over his shoulder at the man who had made Leslie’s life a living hell for the past year, if not longer, and wondered what the man wanted.

“*Oh my God.* How did you get here?” She looked around. “*Oh no.* Where is Alison?”

Blake took her face between his palms, leaned close to her before whispering. “Don’t let him upset you like this. He is standing over there smiling with a cocky expression on his face because he had you high-strung. He hasn’t even said one word.”

Leslie looked over his shoulder again, then back at him. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. He could feel some of the tension leave her body.

“You’re right. I have given him enough power over me as it is. I’m not going to any longer. Where is Alison?”

Blake smiled. She was a lot calmer, stronger, and resilient. “Your mother took one look at him and turned on her heels. Alison is safe. Now, what do you want to do?”

* * * *

Leslie found the strength to smile. If Sean knew what was good for him, he would state his business quickly and leave. Her mother didn’t like him, he had just interrupted Sunday’s dinner, and it wasn’t an emergency. Still, she couldn’t worry about that right now. She needed to find out what Sean wanted. She hadn’t been expecting him at all—he hadn’t responded to any of the letters she had sent or phone calls she had made. So why was he here now? Looking deeper into Blake’s eyes, she took a deep breath.

“I need to talk to him.”

Blake stared at her for a moment, then took a deep breath. He took her hands into his and gave them a light squeeze. “I know you do, but I don’t like it.”

He placed a kiss on her forehead. She sighed. He moved back, then stood up, tugging her up with him. Holding her until she was steady. She took another deep breath before turning to face the man who was partially responsible for turning her life upside down.

“So what brings you to town, Sean?”

Sean raised the briefcase he held in his hand. “Business.”

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. Of course it would be too much to ask for him to make a social visit to check on his daughter's welfare. She was starting to realize her daughter might not need a man like Sean in her life. She was better off with Blake. At least he cared about Alison. Still, she wondered what business Sean had to deal with in Casselton.

"Well, I hope you had a successful business trip, but if you will excuse us, we were in the middle of dinner."

Sean smiled, an expression she used to find sexy. Now she found it repulsive. "I still have business to conclude with you."

She frowned at him. "Okay." She nodded toward the sofa. "Have a seat and we can talk."

Sean stepped further into the room and sat down before opening the briefcase. He pulled out several papers and a pen. "This information pertains to my child and her future."

Rage surged through Leslie, but she kept it contained. He had some serious nerve. "So you're *claiming* Alison now?"

Sean shook his head. "I never said she wasn't mine. I just never wanted her."

Leslie reached behind her when she felt Blake tense and lean closer to her. She wasn't surprised by Sean's statement, but it still hurt. Yet she didn't want Blake to waste his energy on someone who wasn't worth it. Blake spoke before she could stop him.

"And do you want her now?"

Sean smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "No."

Blake stiffened even more. Leslie wanted to put an end to this before it got out of hand. She turned around to look at Blake.

"Can I talk to you in the kitchen?"

Blake nodded and gave Sean one last parting look before following her toward the kitchen. She looked at her parents with surprise when she saw them at the kitchen table eating calmly. Alison was sitting in her chair between them, looking as content as she could be.

"Is the jackass still here?"

"Mama, don't talk like that in front of Alison, but yes he is."

She pulled Blake toward the kitchen so they could have privacy. As soon as they entered, she stopped and turned to face him.

"I need you to do something for me."

He took her hands in his. "Anything."

She sighed. "I need to talk to Sean alone."

His eyebrows arched in her direction. "Why?"

She closed her eyes briefly. "The two of you are goading each other on, and it's distracting. I just want Sean to state his business so that he can leave."

Apprehension filled his expression. She was touched at his concern for her. But she could deal with Sean. She had to. This was one time where she had to fight the battle by herself.

"I don't like you having to face this guy by yourself, Leslie. He has already taken advantage of you once. I don't want to see him do it again."

She frowned. "I didn't let him take advantage of me, Blake. I knew what I was getting myself into. We even used protection each time, but once a condom broke. That was all it took. But I don't regret it."

He shook his head. "I'm not saying you should, nor do I want to argue with you. I'm just worried. Will you be able to deal with him by yourself?" He shook his head as soon as the words were out of his mouth. "Never mind. I know the answer to that. You are a strong woman. You can stand up to him."

He placed a kiss on both of her hands. "I'm going to go home now."

She looked at him with surprise. "Why? Just finish your dinner with my parents. I'm sure it won't take long. I'll be back to join you."

He shook his head. "If I can't be in there with you, I would rather not be here at all. Don't take it personally. We are at a point in our relationship where I feel very protective of you; because of that, I must leave." He placed a kiss on her forehead. "I love you."

She pulled back and gasped in shock. He didn't give time to respond. Instead he left the kitchen. She had no idea how long she stood there before she pulled herself together. It was the first time she had ever heard those words from Blake. She hadn't been expecting to hear those words from him. Not when she didn't know what to do with them, not when her mind was so jumbled that she couldn't think straight. Now she had to figure out if she loved him in return, but after she handled Sean. He had gotten on her nerves. Cast their daughter aside long enough. She took a deep breath, squeezed her hands into fists to hide how bad they were shaking. She rushed through the dining room, past her parents, not wanting to stop or she would lose her nerve.

Sean looked up when she re-entered. She didn't like the smirk on his face. "Your boyfriend just left. He didn't look too happy. Did you guys have an argument?"

She scowled at him. “No, we didn’t. Just the opposite, as a matter of fact.”

Walking over to the couch, she retook her seat. Sean shuffled through the paperwork in front of him. “You know, as pretty as you are, I never took you for the type to start slumming.”

She managed to hide her outrage at Sean’s jab at Blake very well. “Yes, I know, but I stopped as soon as I broke up with you.”

Sean chuckled. “Tongue is still sharp, I see.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. What had she seen in this jerk? The sex had been okay, but not anywhere near the level it was with Blake. She stifled a sigh. Right now wasn’t the time for her to get sidetracked. She needed to know what Sean’s so-called business concerning Alison was about. She refocused her mind on Sean.

“Yes it is. It might be sharper now.”

He picked up the stack of papers and handed them to her. “This is my main reason for being here. Look these over, with your attorney if you like. If you agree to the terms, sign them. Once you do, we can put all of this behind us.”

Leslie looked down at the papers. Her heart began to pound as she read. She began to shuffle through them, trying to take in the information. It was hard not to pinch herself to see if she was dreaming. She couldn’t be reading the information right. By the time she reached the papers she would need to sign, she didn’t know what to feel. She looked up at Sean, who was staring at her expectantly.

“Is everything agreeable?” he questioned.

She looked back down at the paperwork briefly before returning her gaze to his. “So you are signing over all of your parental rights to Alison as well as your visitation?”

He nodded. “The exception being if Alison wants to contact me once she had reached legal age. I also agreed to provide for Alison financially.”

Leslie was well aware of that. Her eyes had bulged at the figure he’d listed. It was more than she thought he would ever have given.

“I have also set up a trust fund and a college fund for her. If anything goes wrong with Alison medically and insurance doesn’t cover it, I will pick up the cost.”

Leslie was speechless. In other words, her daughter was set for life. Money was no longer an issue. Still, she was saddened. Sean was taking care of Alison financially, but he wouldn’t be there physically or emotionally, and he was making that clear. He was handling their daughter in the same way he would a business deal, and it made her sick. How could someone be so cold?

Did he even have any feelings? She looked over at him. He glanced down at his watch as if he had somewhere else to be.

“Is everything agreeable so far?”

She nodded, because it was. She didn’t need an attorney to tell her what was obvious. He handed her the pen. She took it and signed the paperwork. She handed the papers back to him. He gave her the duplicates of everything she had agreed to before putting the rest back in his briefcase.

It was hard to believe it was over, all of the heartache, the mental anguish. It almost felt too easy. Like she would wake up from a dream any minute now.

“Would you like to see her?” The instant the words were out of her mouth, she wanted to kick herself. She didn’t know what made her ask other than curiosity. How would he feel when he saw his daughter in person? Would he want to see her? Would he change his mind about being in her life once he did? She needed to know now. If Sean was truly going to be out of the picture, she didn’t care any longer. Deep down, she was starting to realize her daughter had an enriched life without Sean in it. She just needed to know that he wasn’t going to play games. She looked at Sean, who seemed surprised by her suggestion. It was good to know she wasn’t the only one.

From the expressions flickering across his face, she thought he would say no. He didn’t.

“Sure.”

She stood up and went into the dining room. Her parents were finished eating but just sitting there. They looked at her in surprise when she walked over and picked up Alison. Her mother spoke first.

“Where are you going with her?”

Leslie smiled. “Sean wants to see her, but don’t worry. Everything is okay. Actually, it is more than okay.”

She took Alison into the living room, and Sean stood as he saw them. She handed Alison over to him, smiled as Sean handled her as if she were glass. Alison looked as though she wanted to cry, but she didn’t. Her daughter stared up at Sean with wide eyes, as if she were trying to figure out her connection to him, or at least why he was holding her. He studied Alison before looking back at her.

“She is beautiful.”

Leslie felt her heart turn over as he placed a kiss on Alison’s cheek before handing her back over.

“You take good care of her.”

Leslie sighed and hugged her baby close. “You know I will. This isn’t the way I planned for this to go, but thank you, Sean.”

Sean remained silent as he gathered up his things. She walked him to the door and watched him head to his luxury car, give a slight wave, then drive off. She closed the door, closed her eyes, still wondering if this was real. Alison gurgled, making Leslie open her eyes. Her daughter looked up at her, and Leslie knew it was. How had she not realized how selfish Sean was before now? When she had been involved with him, she’d just thought him to be afraid of emotional intimacy. Now she thought him to be incapable of it. Regardless, he had taken the financial burden off of her. She could handle the emotional; part.

Why had she chosen to get involved with a man like Sean? She couldn’t regret it because she was blessed with a beautiful daughter out of the deal. Yet she was bothered that she had been attracted to him in the first place. She turned around to head toward the dining room, stopping to pick up the papers she’d just signed. Her mother spoke first.

“Is Sean gone?”

She nodded. “And for good, unless Alison says otherwise after she turns eighteen.”

Walking over to the table, she sat down, keeping her daughter in her arms. Not wanting to put her down.

Her father frowned. “Where is Blake?”

Leslie closed her eyes. “He went home.”

“Is he coming back?”

Leslie opened her eyes and looked at her parents. It scared her that she didn’t have an answer to their question. “I don’t know.”

* * * *

Blake sighed heavily, put down the newspaper he had been reading and picked up the phone. After the past few weeks he’d had, he didn’t feel like talking.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Blake, it’s Marjorie.”

A smile came to his face, the first in two weeks. It had been that long since Sean left town, that long since he had spoken to Leslie. Yes, he could have called her, he could have gone by to see her, or he could have even invited her over. But he hadn’t, and with good reason. The day Sean showed up, he’d realized Leslie was still holding on to a large portion of her past with Sean. Fortunately, he had lived long enough to know to give a person space when they needed it.

Leslie's actions that day had told him she needed space. He just hadn't realized how much she needed.

"Hi, Marjorie. I'm fine. How are you?"

"I could be better, but I can't complain."

There was a moment of silence, and Blake frowned. He had never known Marjorie to be hesitant about speaking.

"Is something wrong?"

As soon as he asked, he heard Alison's gasping cry in the background. A cry that indicated she was upset and had been for a while. He sat up straight. "What's wrong with Alison?"

Marjorie sighed, but he could barely hear it. "She won't stop crying. We've done everything we can think of. Leslie says Alison wants you but she won't call, so I'm taking matters into my own hands."

Blake sighed heavily. Alison needed him, and he wasn't going to turn away. She was an innocent baby who didn't deserve it.

"Okay, Marjorie. I'll be right there."

"Thank you."

Blake heard the deep relief in her voice before he ended the call and hung up. He grabbed his wallet and keys. Walking toward the front door, he took a deep breath. Mentally tried to prepare himself for the battle he knew was likely to occur. Leslie was stubborn. She hadn't called for a reason. Her rejection hurt.

He climbed into his truck and headed over to the Thompson residence. A few minutes later, he pulled up in their driveway. He'd reached the front door before the engine completely died. Marjorie opened the door, standing there with a squalling Alison. Her little face was red and his heart almost broke, to know she was crying this way for him. Was Leslie doing the same? He had to focus on Alison first. He took her from Marjorie, cradled her against his chest, whispering softly to her as he did. It took her some time to respond to him, but she did, until her cries became a whimper. Marjorie appeared by his side with a bottle.

"She if she will drink this now. She hasn't eaten since this morning."

Blake took the bottle and smiled when he didn't have to coax Alison into taking it. She latched onto the bottle, bringing her hand up to help hold it. She ate in such a greedy fashion he urged her to slow down, for fear she would choke. It felt good to have the precious little girl in his arms again. Hopefully her mother would be in them again as well.

He looked up at Marjorie. “How long has she been crying?”

Marjorie rubbed her forehead. “About thirty minutes now, but she’s been cranky since breakfast. Actually, all week.” She sighed in relief. “Maybe I can get a few things done—”

Marjorie went silent. Blake looked up to see what had interrupted her. Leslie was standing at the bottom of the stairs. The first thing he noticed was the bags under her eyes. She looked dead tired. He hadn’t seen her look that way in a long time. It reassured him. Staying away from him seemed to have been hard on her. Marjorie stepped forward to take Alison out of his arms, but she whimpered. Blake shook his head.

“She’s fine. I have her.”

Marjorie nodded and left the room quietly. Leslie took a tentative step toward him before speaking. “I see that you got her to stop crying.”

Blake stepped closer to her. “But have you?”

Now that she was closer to him, he could tell her eyes were also puffy. It was obvious she had been crying at some point. They stood there facing each other until the sound of Alison sucking the last of her milk out of her bottle captured his attention. Alison relinquished her hold on the bottle. Blake took it out of her mouth before settling her on his shoulder. All the while, his gaze never left Leslie.

“We need to talk.”

She nodded before walking over to the couch and sitting down. Blake sat down next to her.

“So how have you been?”

Her laugh came out on a puff of air, void of humor. “How do I look like I have been?”

She sighed. “You see, there’s this guy I met several months ago, he’s a lot older than me, but he’s a wonderful guy. He appreciates me for who I am. He loves my little girl like she is his. The most important thing is that I can be myself around him. Somewhere along the way, I fell in love with him. I didn’t realize it. I wasn’t even expecting to. Now I have no idea how to tell him. I don’t know how to open myself up to him on that level because I have never done it before.”

* * * *

Leslie heard Blake’s sharp intake of breath and knew he was surprised. Just as surprised as she had been when he’d admitted he loved her two weeks ago. Since then she had been battling with herself, her emotions, her new state of mind. Once again she was in a position she had never been in before. She was head over heels in love with Blake. Trying to deny it had only served to make her sick and Alison cranky. Looking over at Alison, her heart turned over again. Her

daughter looked so comfortable in Blake's embrace. She wasn't sure who had missed him more. Reaching out, she placed her hand on his thigh.

"Blake, I have been such an idiot."

He smiled. "So have I, in a way. It was stupid of me to stay away for so long. It seems like instead of giving you the space I thought you needed, I gave you time to worry yourself to death about something you shouldn't have."

Leslie smiled, then stood up. "I have something I want to show you."

She left the room to get the paperwork she had been waiting to show him ever since she'd received it. She returned to the living room and found Blake staring down at Alison, who was drifting off to sleep in his arms. He was whispering to Alison, but Leslie couldn't hear what he was saying. He looked up when he realized she had rejoined them. She held the paperwork out to him. He looked down at the paperwork, then back at her without taking it.

"What's this?"

She urged him to take the paperwork again. "Read it."

He took the papers, and she sat down beside him. She waited patiently for him to read them. After the first page, he looked up at her with clear surprise etched into his features.

"What is this?"

One corner of her mouth tilted up. "That's Sean stepping out of our current lives and giving us the opportunity to make another."

Tears came to her eyes, and she tried to blink them back before they fell. "It wasn't until I received that paperwork that I realized what was holding me back. Since Alison was born, I think I had this irrational fear in the back of my mind that Sean was going to try to take her from me. Even though he kept saying he didn't want her, I was afraid he would change his mind."

Leslie wiped the dampness from her cheeks. "I was also afraid of you, Blake. Afraid of the strong attraction I felt for you. Not sure what you would want with a woman in my situation. In the back of my mind I wondered if I was a plaything for you. It usually seems that way when a man your age pursues a woman my age."

He opened his mouth to respond, but she stopped him. "Believe me, Blake, I know my fears were irrational now. My only logical excuse is raging hormones from my body trying to regulate itself after having a baby." She smiled. "The crazy thing is, we have a compatibility that's hard to find, in spite of the age difference between us. I know that now, and I accept it for what it is."

"And now?"

She smiled. "I know I love you. I want to build a home and a future with you."

"And if Alison decides she wants to contact Sean?"

Leslie shrugged. She had already decided the sole decision would be Alison's. She would tell her daughter about Sean. It would never be a secret. She wouldn't have her beautiful daughter without him. She would tell her daughter everything when she was old enough.

"Then it is her choice, but I am choosing you. Right now, that is all that matters."

He put down the paperwork and held his hand out to her. She took it and let him draw her closer, careful not to disturb her sleeping daughter.

"And I choose both of you."

Epilogue

“It’s time.”

Blake looked up at Leslie and smiled as he stood up, squeezing his wife’s hand. There was a chorus of well wishes from their friends and family as they filed out of the room. Blake stayed by her side as the medical personnel began rushing around the room to make preparations.

It had been a little over two years since Sean had disappeared from their lives. In that time, she and Blake had gotten married, Blake had legally adopted Alison, and now they were expecting a new arrival.

This time, she had decided to deliver at the hospital with Blake’s insistence. He’d told her he wasn’t willing to try their luck twice. He also remembered how much pain she had been in the last time. And even though they had taken Lamaze class together this time, he wanted her to have access to pain medication in case she needed it. So far, it seemed as though this time around was going to be a little better and easier. The birthing ball Blake had purchased for her had helped a lot.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, a strong contraction took over her body. She had to focus on not bearing down like her body was urging her to. Blake leaned closer to her, coaching her through it until she could relax. She listened to the instructions the doctor gave her, already familiar with the process. With the next contraction, she was able to push. She made Blake her focal point. Focusing on what a wonderful husband and awesome father he was. There was nothing more she could ask for when it came to him. Her life was complete. Their life was complete.

What seemed like an eternity later, her son slipped from her body and into the physician’s waiting hands. His wail filled the room, and Leslie smiled. The nurse placed him on her stomach. Leslie studied him, making sure he was healthy. He was. He was whisked away, and Blake placed a kiss on her forehead before walking away to check on their son. A few moments later, her husband returned with their son. Blake placed him into her arms. She smiled and placed a kiss on their son’s cheek.

“Welcome to the world, Alexander.”

Leslie leaned back on the bed, closing her eyes. The medical staff began to clear the room, replaced by their family and friends, looking anxious to see the new arrival. Seeing all of the familiar faces that had played such a vital role in her return brought a smile to her face. These were her family and friends.

The crowd moved aside when Blake walked up with Alison. She clung to Blake’s neck, but her eyes were turned toward the bed. Her face seemed to brighten when she saw Leslie.

“Hi, Mommy.”

Leslie reached out to her daughter, and Blake placed her on the bed with the instructions to be careful, like they had practiced. Alison scooted closer, a look of curiosity on her face.

“Meet your brother, Alison.”

Alison looked at Alexander for a long time before leaning forward to place a kiss on his cheek. Leslie was proud and amused at how her daughter moved carefully around the baby, like she’d had experience dealing with infants all of her life.

It wasn’t until Leslie yawned that everyone began to clear the room. Alison was going to spend the night with her parents because Blake planned on camping out in the room with her and Alex. When everyone else was gone, Blake moved closer to the bed, studying their son, then her. Leslie knew just what he was thinking. They were both lucky. She couldn’t be more thankful for that blizzard three years ago, and even more thankful that he had decided to stake his claim upon her. Because she was his and he was hers for a long time to come.

He placed a brief kiss on her lips, then pulled back and smiled. “I love you, Leslie.”

“And I love you too, Blake.”

The End