

Amira Press



Her Every Fantasy

Stephanie Morris

Her Every Fantasy

Copyright © September 2009, Stephanie Morris
Cover art by Amira Press © September 2009

Amira Press
Baltimore, MD 21216
www.amirapress.com

ISBN: 978-1-935348-66-5

No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared by any electronic or mechanical means, including but not limited to printing, file sharing, and e-mail, without prior written permission from Amira Press.

Dedication

To everyone that has supported me along this journey, thank you and I love you.

Chapter One

Kayla sighed as she walked into her house. It had been a long day at work, and her students had nearly driven her insane. She was starting to wonder if teaching high school was a mistake. After sitting her bag down, she slid her shoes off. It was just stress talking. Teaching was her passion, and even after rough days like this, she knew it was something that she would never turn away from. She had a few students in her class that were driving her insane. The Christmas break hadn't done anything to cut down on the chaos as she'd hoped. In fact, it seemed that things had gotten worse. That was the reason she'd sent letters home with five of her students asking for a parent-teacher conference on Friday, less than three weeks after returning to school.

Sighing, she walked into the kitchen. She would confer with her sisters and get their opinion for Friday. She had run the idea of the parent conference by them last night at their weekly get together at Sam's Café. It had yet to be determined why it was called a café when it was more of a restaurant, but either way, it didn't matter. It was a place they had loved since they were little girls.

Kayla and her sisters were close, which was why it was hard now that Kristen and Keirra had moved out of the home that they had shared. Now she had the house to herself. Kristen and Keirra had decided that the house would go to her. It would be worse if her sisters moved out of Baxley. At least they were still within a comfortable distance of each other. She was happy that her sisters had found wonderful men. Hopefully, she would find hers. She'd thought that it would be James Feldon, but he'd been avoiding her like the plague since she met him, although she might not be sane when that time rolled around. Student related issues at work were wearing her out.

She opened the refrigerator and began to rummage for something to eat. She decided to keep it simple and light. Nothing sounded more appealing to her right now than her favorite snack. A short time later, she had a bowl of peaches and cottage cheese. She headed into the living room and settled on the couch. The couch barely accepted her weight before she had the remote in her hand and turned the television on. This was a very bad habit of hers. The only thing that kept her from feeling bad about watching television was the fact that she watched shows of content. She was hooked on The History Channel and the Discovery Channel. Kayla took a bite of her dinner and flipped to The History Channel.

Seeing that a documentary about the Civil War was on, she set the remote down and began to watch the show. She smiled to herself and wondered if her sisters were watching. They all would be planted in front of the television if her sisters were still living in the house. She was willing to admit that she was more addicted to television than her sisters, especially when it came to educational programs and documentaries. Having two identical sisters was interesting to say the least. She was the oldest of the trio by three minutes over Keirra and four minutes older than Kristen. There had been times when they had participated in the switching trick. They didn't do it often because, as much as they looked alike, that is where most of their similarity ended. Personality-wise, they had quite a few differences.

Kayla was the perfectionist, and because of that, on occasion, she was a control freak, but she always tried to exhibit a certain amount of rationale. Kristen was the shy, quiet one. She was very feminine and the peacemaker. When things got heated, leave it to Kristen to calm the situation down. Keirra was the athletic one. She was the one who you didn't ask a question that you didn't want the truth to. Keirra was going to give you her opinion, and it was going to be an honest one. She was very

outspoken, yet she tried to hide the fact that she had a softer side. Thanks to Eric, it was getting harder and harder for her sister to hide. Keirra had just moved out after Christmas and had moved in with her boyfriend Eric. Eric wasn't from Baxley. He was from Atlanta, Georgia and made the move to Baxley to be a deputy because he'd grown tired of the fast-paced life of the city. Now that Eric was in her life, Keirra couldn't stop smiling or keep the love that she felt for Eric hidden, nor could he. To Kayla, it was a good thing that she and her sisters had the different qualities that they did. Over the years, it had come in handy.

One time, she had to complete an activity course for P.E. to pass the class, and Keirra had taken it for her. Then there had been the time when she'd come through for Kristen, when she'd been required to give a speech in front of the entire class. There was also the time when Kristen had helped Keirra out when Keirra had been running late to basketball practice. Throughout the years, the times that they pulled a switching routine were memorable, but it was not something that they had done often. They hated the dishonesty that came along with switching. It had only been used in emergencies for the most part. She loved her sisters just as much as they loved her. They would do anything for each other.

She flinched as a bloody scene flashed across the screen. If there was one thing that she liked it, was history. That was probably why she taught it. She taught history for the ninth through the twelfth grade levels. Her focus was mainly on American History because she loved it, but she also added a lot of World History into her lesson plans. She flinched again as another reenactment soldier lost another limb.

It amazed her how many valuable lives were lost in battles like Antietam, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg, but she realized the fact that there weren't a lot of other options at the time. Still she would love the opportunity to sit down next to General Burnside, General Ulysses S. Grant, and General Lee to find out what was going through their minds during the war. The show was ending when the phone rang. She reached over and grabbed the cordless extension off the end table.

"Hello."

"Hi, Kayla."

She smiled at the sound of her youngest sister's voice. "Hey, Kristen." She sat back down on the couch. "How are you?"

She heard Kristen laugh. "I am good, just calling to see how the request for parent-teacher conference went."

Kayla laughed in response. "Call me on Friday, and I will have a detailed answer for you, but we both know that this is going to be interesting."

"You have a point. Although, I think it is very interesting that some children grow up to take the same path that their parents took."

Kayla sighed heavily. "I think that it is awful, especially when the parents haven't changed themselves."

It was awful. People were supposed to learn from their pasts. Not repeat it. She and her sisters had never really experienced any of the conflict that occurred during high school, probably because it was three of them. They had been popular because they were triplets. There had always been something in the paper about them, whether it was the school paper or the town paper.

They had graduated from high school one, two, and three in their senior class. It had probably been a combination of all those things that had put them in the “in crowd.” They had never taken advantage of the situation unless it was for good. A lot of their efforts had been spent taking up for those who didn’t have enough self-confidence to speak up for themselves. One of her biggest pet peeves was people who bullied others.

“So how do you plan on going about handling the conference?”

“In the Keirra fashion.”

They both laughed at the comment, but it was very possible. All three of them could get mean if needed, or if they were pushed to the limit. This was a situation that that could have had a very negative outcome based on her experiences with these parents. However, that was the last thing that she wanted it to come to.

“But seriously, Kristen, I’m not sure how I am going to handle this situation.”

Her sister’s voice was soft and sincere when she responded. “Well, no matter how you handle it, I know that you will solve the problem. You always do.”

Kayla sighed heavily wishing that she had the ability to solve conflict like Kristen did. Maybe she could get Kristen to switch places with her for the conference. She laughed at the thought. They hadn’t pulled the switching routine since high school. Shaking her head, she tried to clear it of the dreadful thoughts that the parent conference was dredging up. She had to be positive.

“Enough talk about that. How was your day?”

She could hear the smile in her younger sister’s voice. “It was good. Very unusual, yet good.”

Kristen went on to explain some of the interesting antics of the children that attended her childcare center.

It was ironic that they were all in occupations that dealt with children or students, but it wasn’t a surprise to most. The passion of working with children had started in college. It had only grown from there. She and her sisters had attended University of Georgia together. They had always wanted to go into teaching in some capacity. Kristen had even gone as far as to work two jobs to save up enough money to add to what she’d already received in grants to start her childcare center. She could have used some of her money from their father’s pension, but Kristen hadn’t wanted to use the money. She accomplished her goal on her own the way that she wanted to.

“It is good to know that everything is going well.”

Kayla grinned. “How is the love life?”

Kristen laughed. "It's wonderful, of course. Randy is wonderful."

She scoffed at her sister's comment. "Of course he is. You are in love with him."

Kristen chuckled. "It is more than that."

Kayla found herself nodding. Kristen and Randy had fallen in love years ago but had broken up over a misunderstanding. When she and her sisters had moved back to Baxley, it hadn't taken Randy and Kristen long to reconnect. Randy and Kristen were meant to be. From the first date that he'd asked Kristen out on to the time that he asked her to move in with him had been eventful. The good thing was that Randy was a good man. She'd considered taking him out the times that he'd made Kristen cry. One thing that she didn't like to see her sisters do was cry. She didn't like to cry herself. The only time that any of them cried was when there was extreme emotion good or bad, but mainly bad.

"Well I am glad that you are happy."

Kristen laughed. "If I were any happier, I would be floating, but I think that Keirra is actually flying right now."

The corners of Kayla's mouth curved upward at the thought of how happy her sisters were. "You might be right. I am so glad that Eric wouldn't give up on our sister. She has never been happier in her life."

"I know. She does have a glow about her now."

Eric was responsible for that, and she knew it. The holidays had proved that. Showing up to Eric's house during Christmas had been a shocker. The first was that Keirra had looked beautiful in a gypsy skirt and camisole number. The second was meeting Eric's family. They were lively and lovely, and she and her sisters fit in perfectly with them. More important, the Brookses loved Keirra. Her younger sister couldn't have found a better man to get involved with. After their lively dinner with the Brookses, they had gone over to the Randy's parents' home for another one. For the first time in a long time, she and her sisters felt as if they had a family again.

It had been even more special because their grandparents had been there as well. Now that her sisters were settling down, their father's parents were making plans to settle down in Baxley, something that up until now they had only been talking about. The possibility of impending weddings and great-grandchildren was just the motivation that they needed. So overall, the holidays had gone better than expected, and now she had to run an extra day a week for all the food that she'd eaten. Never had she thought that she could literally gain five pounds in one day, but she had. Too bad, it was not as easy for her to take it off as it was for her to put it on.

"And those wings go very well with those bags that she has under her eyes."

"You know that Eric is playing his injury up," Kristen scoffed.

Kayla shook her head. "I am sure of it."

Eric had been shot in the shoulder about a month and a half ago. He and Keirra had been in Atlanta visiting his family for Thanksgiving. They'd gone to the coffee store for his mother, and an irate ex-boyfriend of one of the store employees had come in waving a gun. Eric's police instincts had taken over, and without concern for himself, he'd stepped in front of a bullet. It had been touch and go for a while, but he was recovering nicely. Keirra was doting on him, and he was taking complete advantage of it.

Kayla could hear Randy's son, Wade come into the room with Kristen. He spoke to her in a hushed tone. A short time later, Kristen came back on the line. "I have to run. Wade just informed me that he is ready for bed, and it is my turn to tuck him in."

"Well, I won't keep you. Give Wade and Randy a hug and kiss for me."

Kristen promised that she would, and they disconnected the call after bidding each other a good night. Kayla stood and carried her empty bowl back to the kitchen. She hoped that her sisters were aware of how lucky they were to have good men. Kristen had been lucky enough to land two. Wade was a sweetheart, and he loved Kristen as much as Kristen loved him.

Hopefully, she would find at least one. It was too bad that things didn't seem as if they were going to work out with James Feldon. He was one man whom she wouldn't mind being involved with. She'd always liked the thought of getting married and having children. After rinsing the bowl out, she set it in the sink. When Mr. Right did come along, she would be sure to embrace him with open arms. Hopefully, he would come along soon.

She made her way back into the living room and turned off the television. She hoped that he would come along quickly because it was getting lonely. After a lifetime of constant companionship with her sisters, it was not hard to imagine why. Walking up the stairs, she headed to her bedroom. She was going to take a shower then go to bed. There she would think about Mr. Right and what he would look like.

Chapter Two

Kayla took a deep breath prior to walking into the conference room. She'd been rehearsing what she was going to say all day. All thoughts left her head as she entered the room. A lesser woman would have been intimidated by Dan and Trish Goodman's glares or by Gary and Michelle Jones' eye rolling and folded arms. Margaret and Tim Radcliffe were frowning, and Brigitte Holbrock was fidgeting nervously. James Feldon overshadowed all of those distractions. He was standing in the corner of the room looking out of the window. The man was even sexier up close and personal. Every time she saw him, she fell harder for him. He could double for Orlando Bloom. He was tall and ruggedly built with thick, wavy black hair that she was dying to run her fingers through.

He had smooth, lightly tanned skin that was accentuated by straight white teeth, but it was his eyes that always captivated her. He had an angular face with eyes as blue as the sky, expressive light blue eyes that she could get lost in. She studied his face—high cheekbones, a straight nose, square jaw, and full lips. He had a mustache that connected to a goatee, and both were neatly trimmed. He was a well-groomed man. She liked men that took care in their appearance. His stance gave her the opportunity to follow his broad shoulders down to a lean and tapered waistline. He looked to stand at least four inches over six feet because she had to look up at him, something that was a rarity for her, considering she was just under six feet without shoes.

Simply put the man was sexy as hell, and he was definitely a heartbreaker. It was written all over him. She tried to get her thoughts back on track before she embarrassed herself. She walked over to the table and set her briefcase down. Her attention went to the students that were the cause of this meeting. Holly, Laurie, and Violet were sitting at one table with expressions and body language matching their parents. Somer and Jamie sat at another table, Jamie with a comforting arm around Somer, a gesture that Kayla was used to seeing now. Clearing her throat, she began the conference. She pulled a stack of papers out of her briefcase and began to explain why she'd called the parent-teacher conference. She handed one to each parent and student. The information on the paper pertained to how many altercations and disruptions had occurred in her class. It also reflected the number of detentions that had been assigned to them because of the disturbances.

The information only went back to November because that's when the conflict had started to reach a breaking point. She began to explain to the parents what her concerns were and what she planned to do to put a halt to any future disruptions.

Michelle interrupted her. "Is there really a need for all of this? They are teenage girls just having a little fun."

"If you ask me, those two are just upset because they aren't as popular as our daughters," Trish added.

Kayla had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from saying something very inappropriate to Trish. Instead, she addressed her students. There were going to be some very unpleasant things said, and she didn't want the students to hear any of it. The last thing that they needed was more points of attack.

Standing she opened the door and called them out into the hallway. Daring any of their parents to object, she looked them all in the eye.

“Stand out here. Don’t move, and don’t make a sound, or you will be in detention and suspended from all school functions for the rest of the school year.” Their eyes widened, and she knew that she had their attention. Satisfied, she stepped back into the conference room and hoped that things didn’t get too loud. “First of all, nothing like that will be said, especially in front of the students.”

Trish shrugged with indifference. “The truth hurts sometimes.”

Kayla sighed heavily and shook her head. This was not going well at all, but she had never really expected it to. “That is your opinion, Trish, and you are entitled to it, but I would ask that you refrain from saying it out loud.”

Trish scoffed. “It doesn’t need to be said out loud. Everyone knows that Brigitte is a doormat, and so is her daughter.”

Trish turned and looked at James. “I don’t know you personally, but I have heard from a very reliable source that you couldn’t provide the things that you were supposed to in your marriage, so your poor wife took up drinking and killed herself.”

“Trish,” Kayla called out in outrage. She had to give James credit. He didn’t even flinch at the comment, but she saw his eyes darken threateningly, and his hands curled into tight fists. She sent up a silent prayer that this would not turn into a brawl.

Margaret scoffed. “Give me a break, Kayla. You and your sister always did take up for the losers.”

Kayla could feel the heat start to travel up her neck. That was the first sign that she was starting to lose her temper. “No, Margaret, we don’t. My sisters and I never take up for any of you.”

She stood up and leaned over the desk before going down the line. The first thing that she pointed out was that Trish, Michelle, and Margaret all had daughters in high school in spite of them all being the age of thirty-two. Michelle had the decency to blush and look away. Kayla looked over at Trish and informed her that she should know about not being able to provide what was needed in a marriage. She was married to the son of an alcoholic, and she went on to point out that from Dan’s bloodshot eyes, the trait had been passed down.

Margaret was her last point of attack. Kayla admitted that Margaret should know what a loser was since Tim had only married her once he was certain that he would get money out of the deal and not because she was pregnant. The room was quiet, and Brigitte stopped fidgeting. Instead, there was a slight smile on her face. Kayla sighed heavily. She knew that she’d gotten her point across. Not in the civil way that she’d wanted to, but it worked.

“We could go back and forth like this all day. Truth is it wouldn’t solve anything.” Kayla retook her seat, making eye contact with the three women that were still wreaking havoc as they had when they were younger.

“You know it is parents like you who cause the violence that occurs in schools these days. I refuse to stand by and watch it happen here. This problem will be solved with your cooperation or without it.” She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. “So what will it be?”

Michelle was the first to break, and it was not all that surprising. Out of the trio, she was probably the weakest link. Margaret was next to cave in, admitting that Violet was getting out of control and that she didn't know what to do. Looking over at Trish, Kayla knew that she was going to be the hardest one to get to agree. They sat there in silence, and finally, Dan spoke up.

"You will have our full cooperation as well."

He looked directly at Trish as he spoke. "Kayla is right. I have been hitting the bottle pretty hard, and it is because of you and Holly."

Trish's mouth dropped open, but she didn't say anything. Kayla nodded knowing that she had their cooperation. She asked Brigitte and James if she had their cooperation, and both said that she did. "Okay then, I will bring the girls back in."

She rose and went out into the hallway to get the girls. They were still standing there quietly as she'd requested. "Come back in, ladies."

The teenage girls filed back into the room, and when she went back in, she noticed that the expression of all the parents had changed, with the exception of Trish's. Once Kayla's students were seated, she exhaled softly.

"Okay, ladies, your parents and I have decided that we need to help you resolve the conflict going on among you, since none of you seem to be in a rush to do so yourselves."

Their parents murmured their agreement. Each parent went down the line to tell their child what the consequence would be if they didn't participate in the conflict resolution plan. There were threats of everything from not being able to try out for the cheerleading squad to taking away a cell phone for a year. With those consequences in mind, the girls reluctantly agreed to arrangement.

Kayla told them of her plan to put them together for the next project coming up. They would have to work on the project and report to her each day who was doing what, so that she could make sure they were sharing the work equally. The paper would be their final exam grade. All of the girls groaned, but they consented. With that plan agreed upon, Kayla dismissed the meeting. Everyone slowly began to file out. Kayla gathered her things and placed them in her briefcase.

"Kayla."

She looked up and saw Brigitte standing there. The corners of her mouth tilted upward. Brigitte really was a nice woman. It was horrible that she'd been picked on during their high school years. There had been nothing wrong with Brigitte. Just the fact that her family had been poor made her the butt of jokes. She could remember when Brigitte had become pregnant her sophomore year in high school. That had come as a shock to everyone. Brigitte became more of a social outcast overnight. Then Trish had come up pregnant, followed by Margaret and then Michelle.

People started joking that there must have been something in the water, but there had been more to the story than that. After picking up her briefcase, Kayla stepped around the table. She took Brigitte's arm under hers. "How have you been?"

Brigette shrugged her shoulders slowly. "The same as usual, but I think that things will improve."

Kayla smiled. "I am glad."

Brigette nodded. "So am I."

Kayla locked up the conference room, and they headed down the hall. She let Tom, the janitor, know that they were finished so that he could lock up the building.

"Maybe things will get better now."

Kayla looked down at Brigette. "What do you mean?"

Brigette gave her a worried look. "Just the other day, Somer and I had an argument about this. Some pretty mean things were said by the both of us."

She gave Brigette an understanding look. "Well, I am very certain that this plan will go great as long as everyone keeps her commitment, and you should apologize to Somer for the things that you think were wrong for you to say. Somer being the smart girl that she is will probably apologize as well."

They were silent as they exited the building. After a moment, Kayla cleared her throat. "Brigette, I hope it is not too forward for me to say this, but maybe after this school year, you should send Somer to her father for the summer."

Brigette laughed. "I would love to do that, but Trish would have a fit."

Kayla stumbled before righting herself. She'd definitely misheard Brigette. A quick glance told her that she hadn't. "Excuse me?"

Brigette smiled at her reaction. "You heard me correctly. Dan is Somer's father. It happened during a weak moment for the both of us."

Kayla looked at Brigette in amazement. All these years Somer's father was right here in town. "Does Somer know?"

Brigette's eyes widened. "No, of course not, and Holly doesn't know either. Dan tells me that Trish has no idea, although I always thought that she suspects since she treats me like crap all the time."

Kayla shook her head. "No, Trish is just a mean person. You weren't the only one who felt her wrath."

They continued on to their cars, Kayla still in shock over what had just been revealed to her. She paused in mid-step. "Does Keirra know this?"

Brigette sighed. "No, she doesn't. The only people who knew up until now were Dan and myself."

Kayla digested the information prior to speaking. "Do you ever plan on telling Somer?"

“Yes, we do, but with these incidents that have been occurring lately, it seems as if I should wait a little while.”

Kayla nodded. Right now might not be a good time to inform the girls that they were related. “But you will tell them?”

Brigette sighed heavily. “We will tell them. We don’t have too much of a choice.”

They came upon Brigitte’s car first. Somer was sitting in the car buckled in, and there was clear relief on her face. Kayla gave Brigitte a brief hug.

“You two have a wonderful night and a great weekend.”

One corner of Brigitte’s mouth curled upward. “You do the same.”

A small grin spread across Kayla’s face as she headed to her own vehicle because she had a strong feeling that in spite of the shocking information that had just been revealed to her, it would be.

Chapter Three

“So what do you think, Dad?”

James looked over at his oldest daughter. “I think that you have your work cut out for you for the rest of the school year.”

Jamie sighed heavily. “Come on, Dad. You know what I am talking about.”

The corners of his mouth tilted upward. He did know what she was talking about. Jamie had been going on and on about Kayla Smith. In Jamie’s opinion, Ms. Smith was wonderful. In a lot of people’s opinion, she was wonderful. She was attractive, intelligent, honest, and fair. He’d already met her younger sister Kristen when he enrolled Jenna and Josh into her childcare center. She’d been nice, but there was a definite personality difference between the two. Kayla Smith was unique in her own way. He’d run into Kayla when he’d first come to town and had stopped by Sam’s Café to pick up dinner.

The meeting had been electrifying, and he hadn’t walked away unfazed. The only two reasons why he hadn’t approached her were, first, the fact that he’d just suffered a bad loss from his last relationship and, second, he was pretty certain that Kayla was seeing another man. He hated that because the woman was beautiful. Today her thick, dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Her mahogany brown face had high cheekbones and full, kissable lips that captured his gaze in a mesmerizing hold. He wanted to press his lips to hers to find out if they were as soft as they looked. He was not afraid to admit that he was attracted to women of all shapes, sizes, and colors. Nicole had been half black, half white herself. Her skin had been fair. Therefore, most people could hardly tell that his children were of biracial decent.

Still, when he looked at Kayla, something about her made him want her more than he’d ever wanted anything, including his deceased wife. He felt awful saying that, but it was true. Kayla had a lot of bravado. She’d taken on six people like they had only been one. The other parents seemed to respect Kayla in a way that was admirable. From what he’d gathered, it had been that way for a while. There was a lot of history in that room, history that he didn’t care about, nor did he want to get involved in. He didn’t plan on being in Baxley too long. This was just until the end of the school year, and hopefully his father would be well enough to be on his own. Still, deep down, he was starting to wonder if his sister had been right. Maybe he needed to find someone to start over with.

At the age of thirty-five, he’d accomplished a lot. But in the end, Nicole had taken him through a whole hell of a lot, and he’d lost almost all of it. The first thirteen years had been good to them. Everything had gone downhill after she’d become pregnant with Josh. It was due to the fact that he’d recently found out Nicole had been having an affair. He’d stuck by her side until Josh was born. At that time, he’d requested a paternity test. The test results had come back showing that Josh was his, but Nicole’s behavior had only gotten worse. It had resulted in her getting drunk, going for a drive, and leaving him with four children to raise on his own, including an eight-month-old infant. A year later, they were still struggling to recover. He’d put himself and the girls into therapy, and that had eased the pain somewhat, but it would never be completely gone. The only thing that he could do was cope the best that he could.

“Dad?”

He looked over at his daughter and realized that he'd drifted off into his own thoughts. He gave her a kind smile. "You were right."

What he was not going to tell his daughter was that he'd already known. He had just been trying to avoid it. Kayla Smith seemed to be a complicated woman, and he had enough of those in his life already.

A huge grin spread across her face. "So you will ask her out?"

"No."

Jamie's face fell. "Why not?"

He sighed, prepared to do battle with a daughter who had his own headstrong characteristics. "Conflict of interest to begin with, and secondly, I don't think that she is interested in me."

Jamie rolled her eyes. "Dad, *please*. That is a horrible reason. Ms. Smith would never show any favoritism toward me. Then there is the fact that you won't know if she likes you or not if you don't ask."

He gave his daughter a look. "Well, judging from our conference today, others would."

Jamie shook her head, and he knew what he was in for. He recognized his own expression on his daughter's face every time.

"How many times have I told you that their opinions don't count?"

He chuckled, wondering when they had reversed roles. "Several."

His daughter was wise, sometimes too wise. For the last six months, Jamie and Jana had been trying to convince him to start dating again. Not too long ago, Jamie had confided in him that she knew about the trouble that he and her mother, Nicole, had been having in their marriage. She'd reassured him several times that he was, and always had been, a good father and husband.

The fact that he wouldn't let anyone bad mouth their mother in spite of all of the horrible things that she'd done was proof of that. It had broken his heart to know that he hadn't been able to protect his children in the way that he'd wanted to. His children were everything to him, the one thing that he'd been successful at. There had been times his children were the only thing that had kept him going. He was not sure if he wanted to put his heart on the line again. Everything that he had in himself had been given to Nicole, and it hadn't been good enough. A thirty-minute parent conference with Kayla made him doubt that he would be capable of satisfying her. She was on a higher level than Nicole could ever be.

"So you should ask her out," Jamie hinted.

James smiled at his daughter's persistence. "What makes you think that she will say yes?"

Jamie rolled her eyes as if the answer was so obvious he shouldn't have to ask. "Come on, Dad. You are hot, and the ladies love you." She sighed heavily. "If you would open your eyes and see what is actually in front of you, then you might realize it."

James shrugged his shoulders. He had a mirror, and he knew that he was a decent-looking guy. Finding a woman had never been hard to do, even when he had been married and had worn his wedding band proudly. Then there was the fact that when the women realized he came with four children, their interest in him quickly disappeared. Yet, finding the right woman had been a hard thing to do, so much to the point that he was no longer interested.

His main focus was to raise a healthy family and keep his career that he loved. He was a CPA, and it could be demanding at times. Being on call could come as an inconvenience as well. He'd just signed a two-year contract with Lockhart, Collins, Vickers, and Associates, a major law firm. There was a firm located in Austin, Texas, another in Manhattan, New York, and a third in Los Angeles, California. Before his father had gotten sick, they had resided in Austin. His mother moved them there after her divorce from his father. The relationship between his father and himself was a little strained because of the distance and the bitter divorce, but it was getting better. It was mainly because he realized that there had been a lot more to his parents' divorce than he'd originally thought.

His father felt that he'd been a horrible husband, and even more of a horrible father, and the reality was that his mother had been just as much at fault. He had to admit that up until he was an adult, he'd felt like his father hadn't wanted him. Unfortunately, he'd been with a mother who had been too busy trying to move on with her life to deal with a confused child. Not that Louis was a bad guy. He'd been a decent stepfather and had provided him with another brother and sister. He loved his brother and sister dearly, but there had been times when he'd resented them for having their father near whenever they needed him. Because of that, James hadn't felt whole again until his high school graduation had rolled around, and he made a sincere effort to renew the bond between his father and himself. He was glad that their bond had grown stronger over the years, especially after he and Nicole had gotten married and started a family. His father loved his grandkids and tried to have a better relationship with them while they were still young. When James saw his father with his kids, he realized just how good his father was. How much he truly did care.

When his marriage with Nicole had started to fail, James had come to realize how much he and his father had in common. After his father had a heart attack, it seemed only natural that he go and take care of him. Having a job that was flexible enough to let him work from home had been a benefit. He'd taken a family vote, and with his children's permission, he'd put the house that held good and bad memories for all of them on the market, and they moved to Baxley to take care of his father and hopefully to get their lives together in the process. So far, it had been a good move. Even with the events that happened tonight, everyone was in good spirits. He was just glad that the incident hadn't escalated. Jamie had a big heart and always stood up for those who were being picked on. How could he fault her? Everyone needed a protector.

He looked over at his daughter who was looking back at him expectantly. "So you think that I should impose on someone else's relationship and ask Ms. Smith out?"

Jamie gave him a confused look. "What do you mean?"

He looked over at her again as he pulled up to a red light. "Isn't she dating someone?"

Jamie shook his head. "No. There is a guy named Jonah that she goes out with from time to time, but they are friends that go way back. Nothing more than that."

James frowned. He should have known that his daughter would do her research.

"So you think that I have a chance?"

A slow smile spread across her face. "I think that you have more than a chance."

Turning his attention back to the road, he sighed. "What do you think your sisters are going to say?"

Jamie laughed. "Congratulations."

He chuckled. Jana and Jenna would have a little more to say than that. He was certain of it. Sure his children wanted him to be happy, and they wouldn't complain if he found a good woman in the process. She would have to pass his daughters' intense scrutiny.

He pulled up into the parking lot of Kristen's childcare center. "I will be right back."

After getting out of the car, he went inside and picked up Jenna and Josh. It was not too late, and a few other children were still present, but he normally picked the children up prior to five, no later than five thirty. He bid Zebbie and Gerri a good evening before heading back to the sports utility vehicle that he'd bought on a whim after Nicole had died. He didn't want another minivan, so he'd taken the kids to the car dealership and let them pick out the tan SUV that he now drove. The kids had chosen well.

He opened the back door and buckled Josh into his car seat. Once he was certain that Jenna was situated, he pulled out of the driveway and headed for the house. He asked Jenna how her day was on the way to the house. Her day didn't seem to be as interesting as Jamie's, but it had been fun for her, and she'd learned something new, so that is what was important to him.

"What's for dinner?" she asked after telling him about her day at school.

"Shrimp and French fries."

"Fried?" she asked, her voice full of hope.

"Jumbo?" Jamie asked, with her own optimism.

James laughed at his daughters. Everyone loved Friday and Saturday nights because they were junk-food nights. They were also movie nights. To him, the weekends were for them to sit down and spend quality time with each other. It was time used to find out how everyone's week had gone.

A short while later, he pulled up into the driveway of his father's home. The home that he'd spent the first ten years of his life in. His father hadn't made many changes to the house at all. Pictures of

him at all ages still lined the wall. He got out of the SUV, undid the buckle on the child seat, and picked Josh up out of his car seat. They entered into the house.

“Will we be doing homework tonight or Sunday night?”

“Sunday night,” all his daughters replied unanimously.

James chuckled and carried Josh into his father’s room. His dad was starting to look a lot better.

The mild heart attack that his father had suffered had been a big scare. After the unclogging and repairing of several arteries, the doctor had placed his father on a strict diet with moderate exercise. So far, his father was doing very well. Then again, with four other people watching his every move, he had no choice. Everyone was happy and, at this point, healthy.

His father smiled when he saw them. “How was the meeting?”

James set Josh down and watched him run over to his grandfather. “It went pretty well. Jamie isn’t really in trouble, but she is going to have her hands full for the rest of the school year.”

Dennis nodded and lifted Josh into his lap. James sat down next to his father.

“How was your day, Dad?”

His father shrugged. “It was okay. I moved around quite a bit and managed not to drop into exhaustion.”

James’s eyebrows rose at the statement. “What all did you do?”

His father rolled his eyes skyward at his concern. “Nothing much. I just took a slow stroll around the block.”

James shook his head. His father could be so stubborn. Yet, the doctor had recommended light exercise, so he couldn’t fault him for following instructions. “Just don’t over do it when I am away from the house.”

His father set Josh on his own feet and stood slowly. He was getting his strength back but gradually, and he was nowhere near as strong as he used to be.

“Jana went with me and wouldn’t let me go beyond three blocks. She also made me take the cell phone and kept an eye on me the entire way.”

James nodded with some satisfaction. His children were smart and knew what to do when it came to most situations. “Are you going to help with dinner?”

“Only if I can eat it,” his father stated with a note of longing.

James chuckled. “You can’t eat exactly what we are eating, but what you will have is close enough.”

His father frowned. "You all ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

Jenna came bouncing around the corner into his father's arms, but as carefully as she could. "Why should we be ashamed, Grandpa?"

They all went into the kitchen. Jamie and Jenna were already at the counter cleaning the shrimp.

James's father's eyebrows rose skeptically. "How do you plan on preparing my shrimp?"

James began to nudge him from the kitchen. "It is going to be a surprise. Now why don't you take Josh into the living room and keep him busy while we prepare dinner."

His father grumbled something under his breath about relentless children and grandchildren before taking Josh's hand and leading him into the living room.

James turned to look at his three daughters while rubbing his hands together. "Let's get this show on the road so we can eat and watch some movies."

Within minutes, they all had their heads and their hands together, and they were busy making dinner. It was times like these that he didn't mind being a single father. It was also times like this that he wouldn't mind having that special woman to share it with. Either way, he was going to make the best of the situation and keep moving forward. His life could be fulfilling with just his children in his life.

Chapter Four

James took a deep, calming breath as he watched Jamie, Jana, and Jenna head up Kayla's walkway. He was starting to regret what he'd reluctantly agree to earlier this morning. Over breakfast, his three daughters convinced him that he needed to ask Kayla out but only after she passed their last test. On top of that, the trio thought that it would be best if this happened quicker than he would have liked it to. He hadn't known soon would mean when they cleaned up the mess they made in the kitchen while making breakfast. He was starting to wonder if he truly wanted another woman in his life, along with the three he had. He grimaced as the door open and Kayla appeared. Her eyebrows rose before she stepped back and allowed the three girls into her house.

A grin appeared on her face, and he thought that she couldn't be any more beautiful than she was in that moment. His wife had been beautiful as well. He had quickly fallen head over heels in love with Nicole and had asked her to marry him six months into their relationship. Other people had thought that they should take it slow and wait until they were finished with school, but he had known what he wanted at the time, and so had Nicole.

Even now he didn't regret that decision because marriage to Nicole had been good in the early years. That was the reason why he was able to determine something had been wrong immediately when Nicole changed. He could understand how his father had felt like a failure in his own marriage to his mother. He'd loved Nicole with everything in him, and yet, it hadn't been enough. She still chose to go outside of their relationship instead of coming to him and telling him what the issues were. When he looked back, he wasn't sure that there were any. The best things that had come out of his marriage were his four children. He hoped Kayla knew what she was getting herself into.

* * * *

Inside the house, Kayla was looking at three determined young ladies. She had no idea why they were there yet, but she had a feeling that whatever it was it was serious. Studying the girls carefully, she waited for one to speak up and tell her why they were there. When they remained silent, she spoke.

"Good morning, ladies. If you don't mind me asking, what brings you to my home?"

Jenna was the first to speak, and she was straight to the point. "We are here to ask you to go out on a date with our dad."

If the looks on their faces hadn't been so serious, she would have laughed at the nine-year-old's statement. Instead, she shook her head. She couldn't entertain this horrible matchmaking scheme. "No."

Jamie spoke next. "Ms. Smith, our father is a good man."

Kayla held her hands up in a non-threatening manner. "I don't doubt that at all, but we have to be reasonable here. My dating your father would put all of us in an uncomfortable situation."

Jenna smiled. "No more than we already are."

She was speechless for just a moment. How in the world did James survive these three? “Does your father know that you are here?”

Jamie nodded in the direction of her front door. “He is outside waiting for us.”

Kayla went to the window and pulled the curtains aside. Her eyes met James head on. The man had the nerve to wink at her, and the simple gesture sent her heart rate soaring.

Letting the curtain fall back in place, she shook her head again. She’d been so shocked by the three of them being on her porch that she hadn’t noticed the SUV sitting in the driveway next to hers.

“Excuse me, ladies.” She crossed to the front door and walked out to the vehicle that James was sitting comfortably in. His eyes followed her all the way to the SUV. The window was rolled down, and she leaned into the car with more confidence than she really felt. “Now you didn’t really think that I was going to let you sit out here and relax while your daughters have me in the hot seat did you?”

He grinned, and time ceased. His smile was lethal. “Well, they seemed so determined I didn’t think that it would take long, so I wasn’t sure that I needed to come in.”

She tried to keep a straight face at his lousy excuse as she stepped back and opened the driver’s side door. “Well, let me make it clear.”

He chuckled as he slid out of the vehicle. She tilted her head back to look at him. Lord, he was tall. Unfortunately, the man was gorgeous as well, and that was going to make this situation tough.

“Ladies first.”

She led the way back up to the house. When they returned to the living room, Jamie, Jana, and Jenna hadn’t moved. James walked over to the recliner and took a seat while Kayla continued standing, facing the girls. “Now you were saying?”

“That you should go out with our dad,” Jamie responded quickly, picking up right where she’d left off.

Kayla sighed. If she didn’t know any better she would say that the three sisters had taken lessons from Kristen, Keirra, and herself.

“We trust you.”

Kayla looked over at Jana. These three had put their heads together. Either they loved their dad a lot and wanted to see him happy or they needed someone to distract him so that they could have a life. Although, it looked like they had too much of one already to come up with a plan as insane as the one that they were trying to sell. Based on what she knew about Jamie, she was going to go with the first idea. As flattering as it was that she was the chosen one, it was also an impossible situation. “So what do you think that people will say about me dating my student’s father?”

Jana grinned. "From the way that Jamie talks about you, I have a feeling that you don't care what other people say about you."

Kayla looked over at James who was sitting with a smug look on his face. If she didn't know any better, she would say that he was enjoying this, especially since he was not on the receiving end of it for a change.

"Are you going to say anything?" Kayla asked, arching an in his direction.

James smiled and shook his head. "I already lost this battle earlier. I don't plan on losing another. Besides, I agree with them and would love to take you out."

His statement confirmed her earlier thought and floored her at the same time. Kayla's mouth dropped open and almost dragged on the ground. She could see that it was four against one at this point.

"See, there you go. Dad is a good man, and you are a good woman. This is a perfect combination."

Kayla liked the way Jana made it sound, as if it were completely logical reasoning. If anyone had told her that this was how her Saturday was going to start off, she would have called the person a liar. She had to figure out a way to convince these three crazy people that this was a bad idea. Crazy was being used in a positive way right now, but it could become a negative thing any moment. Facing this trio was worse than battling Kristen and Keirra. The three girls sitting in front of her reminded her so much of her and her sisters that it was slightly humorous. She paced a few times before turning and facing the sexiest man she'd ever come in contact with and his adorable children.

"You guys are really serious about this, aren't you?"

Jamie nodded. "Since we have moved here, I haven't seen my dad smile until last night after I asked him if he thought that you were attractive."

Jamie paused dramatically, and Kayla had to give the teenager credit. She needed to be in the drama club, and Kayla just may recommend that she audition.

"It was genuine. The same one he gives us when we come home in the evening."

Jenna pitched in. "Yeah, and he works an awful lot. Maybe if you were around, he wouldn't work so much."

Kayla felt true sympathy for James. These were three of the most manipulative children that she'd ever met. They put her and her sisters to shame. The man didn't stand a chance, nor did his daughters when it came to her. She had to show these ladies that she and her sisters had been at this longer than they had. When she stopped in front of them, she was struggling to hold back a grin. "When you ladies came up with this brilliant plan, did it occur to you that I might already be dating someone else?"

Kayla saw him stiffen out the corner of her eye. The idea didn't seem to sit well with him, which intrigued her even more. Jamie shrugged. "We know that you aren't dating anyone. The only man that you have been seen around town with is one that you have known since growing up in Baxley."

Kayla's eyes narrowed at that comment. Either these girls had done a thorough investigation or her private life was too public. She also realized that she was getting herself in trouble by trying to outwit them by herself.

"Okay, let's say that I am willing to agree to this outrageous plan of yours. When do you propose that your father and I go out?"

Even though she was as interested in James as he seemed to be in her, she had to make this look good. A woman would be crazy not to want to go out with James. The man was sexier than sin.

All it had taken was one look. Yes, she wanted to go out with him, but she couldn't just fall into his grasp. A little fight had to be put up, even if it was a small one. The girls looked at each other before looking back at her.

"Tonight," they responded in unison.

She laughed. She'd known that would be the answer. "Do you have the date planned out?"

Jamie sat back and folded her arms across her chest. "We have given Dad a few ideas."

Kayla found herself shaking her head. "I tell you what. If your father and I decide to go out on a date, then you three must agree not to get involved. And if your father and I decide that this isn't going to work, you will accept that with no arguments."

She could see the girls contemplating the request as they huddled together, but after a few eye, hand, and shoulder gestures, they came to an agreeable decision. Just to make them wonder and worry a little longer, she walked toward the phone and picked up the cordless extension. "Give me a moment to discuss this with my sisters."

She could almost hear the girls groan. Turning back around, she stifled a chuckle and dialed Kristen's number first. Kristen answered on the second ring.

"Hey, Kayla. What's up?"

"James Feldon."

She heard Kristen drop the phone, and laughed. When Kristen picked the phone up again, Kayla could tell that she had her sister's full attention.

"Now what were you saying about James Feldon?"

"That he is sitting here on the living room couch with Jamie, Jana, and Jenna, and they are all trying to convince me that James and I would make a great couple and that we should go out."

“Are you *kidding* me?”

The disbelief in Kristen’s voice was obvious. When Kayla thought about it, if she’d been the one receiving such a call, she might have a hard time believing it as well. Kayla held out the phone to the crowd that was sitting in her living room.

“She doesn’t believe me.”

“Hi, Ms. Smith,” Jenna sang out in response. “Tell your sister that she and my dad would be great together.”

By the time Kayla put the phone back to her ear, Kristen was laughing. “You realize that you have your hands completely full, right?”

Kayla smiled. She did have her hands full, but she didn’t mind. James had raised wonderful children. From what she could tell, they were well-behaved, kind, and definitely intelligent. They were also carbon copies of him down to the blue eyes. His children were his through and through.

“Yes, I do. So what is your opinion?”

Kristen laughed again. “As if you have to ask. Of course you should go for it.”

Kayla made a little more small talk before disconnecting the call. She planned to work this as much as she could, and based on the tortured looks that the three girls had, she was doing a good job. Her next call was to Keirra. She answered on the first ring.

“Well, this is a surprise, stranger, and I must say that you are absolutely insane calling me this early in the morning on the weekend.”

She laughed at her sister’s sarcasm. It was late enough for most reasonable people to be up, but considering the fact that Keirra wasn’t reasonable, she wasn’t shocked. “Well, the situation is about to get better.”

Keirra sighed. “Unless you are going to pass a cup of coffee through the phone, how do you figure?”

Kayla shook her head and chuckled. She loved her sister and missed her coffee fetish. “I don’t have any coffee ready, but I can provide something just as interesting. Take a guess at what happened when I opened my front door twenty minutes ago.”

Keirra took two guesses, and both were incorrect. Kayla finally informed her sister that James and his three daughters had shown up on her front porch and were now sitting on the living room couch trying to convince her that she should go out with James.

Keirra was laughing by the time she was finished. “What in the world are you doing on the phone with me then? Isn’t this like a dream come true for you?”

She laughed. “You know that it is, but I had to make it look good.”

Keirra yawned. "Well, get your butt off of my phone and go have some fun."

"Thank you. I will."

Kayla said good-bye to her sister and hung up the phone prior to turning to look at what was now four expectant faces instead of three. The sight was comical, and she would have laughed, but her stomach was in knots with nerves. She had been looking forward to this day for a long time. James was everything that she wanted, but was he everything that she needed, everything that she had ever fantasized about? He came with baggage whether he wanted to or not.

Jamie was the first to break the silence and speak up. "What did they say?"

Kayla sighed heavily as if it were killing her to admit that her sisters were on their side. She was going to play this up to the fullest. Have a little fun with them but only a little. She liked the trio and didn't want to torture them too much.

"Both of my sisters think that it is a good idea."

Jenna jumped up and did a little dance. "All right!"

Kayla folded her arms across her chest. "But I'm still not convinced that this is a good idea."

Jana dropped her face into her hands. Jamie, on the other hand, narrowed her eyes as if she was starting to catch on to the fact that something was amiss.

"What will it take to convince you to go out with our dad?"

Kayla looked over at James who, until this point, had been completely quiet. She struggled to contain her smile when his eyes narrowed. The spotlight was on him, and he knew it, judging by his expression.

"I want your father to plead his own case. I need him to tell me why he is interested in me. What makes him want to go out with me?"

He stared at her for a moment, and she wondered if he was going to respond. She watched as James stood up and came to a stop in front of her.

"I am interested in you because you are beautiful, you have a strange sense of humor, you are intelligent, I like you, and you have the ability to stand up to those three."

She smiled when he nodded in Jamie, Jana, and Jenna's direction. She was satisfied with the answer that she received. The man had captured her attention when she saw him in town a little over two months ago. Even if things didn't work out between them, she had a feeling that this was going to be fun. Grinning, she winked at Jamie. "I agree to one date with your father. Any that follow will be based on how well the first goes."

"You had better make it good, Dad," Jana warned.

James didn't break eye contact with Kayla when he spoke. "I plan on it."

Chapter Five

“I can’t believe that we let ourselves be talked into this.” Kayla looked over at James who was driving them toward the city park.

He grinned. “Well, I can. Those three are always talking me into something.”

He made another turn prior to pulling them into a secluded spot. He shut off the engine. Luckily, there were no other cars up there with them. “This looks like a good spot.”

She gave him a questioning look. “Now why are we here again?”

He exhaled deeply as if nervous about what he was about to reveal. “Because I have always wanted to go to a secluded spot with a beautiful woman and enjoy her company. I also thought this would be a good place to talk without interruptions or loud music.”

She shot him a look of warning. “Well, then I guess that is okay as long as you don’t try any funny business.”

His expression was full of sincerity when he responded. “I won’t do anything that you don’t want me to do.”

She had to keep her mouth closed. The problem was that she wanted him to do a lot to her. She would also die of embarrassment if Randy or any of his deputies caught her up here. Instead, she finished the subject off as quickly as she could. “Make sure that you remember that.”

He turned on the interior light and reached for the bag holding their fast food. Handing the Tater Tots to her, he placed the french fries on the dashboard. “This should be yours.”

She took the burger that he handed her and unwrapped it before nodding. It looked like the burger that she ordered. “Yes, it is. Thank you.”

She took a bite of the burger and closed her eyes in pleasure. The burger was great. Reaching for a tator tot, she said, “I thought that we were going to the movies.”

“We are. Do you want to watch the movie while we eat or afterward?”

She gave him a puzzled look. “The last time I checked, you can’t take outside food into the movie theater.”

“Well, in this one you can.”

He slipped out of the car and walked around to her side. He held out his hand for her food. She handed it to him and stepped out of the vehicle as he indicated for her to. Once she did, he led her to the back of the vehicle. He asked her to get inside and she did. When she was seated, he went back to the front and gathered up his food and the drinks. After closing the doors, he joined her in the back, and they were in their own private movie theater, or at least they were when he handed her a case of DVDs and opened up the DVD player.

She smiled brightly. “Smart, very smart, but we could have gone to my place to watch a movie, and we would have had just as much privacy, if not more.”

He chuckled. “Thank you for the offer, but I didn’t want to face that sort of temptation on a first date. Now, if you are ready, feel free to pick a movie, and we can watch it.”

She nodded, opened up the bag, and chose to ignore the revealing statement that he had just made. It was refreshing to know that he was as physically attracted to her as she was to him. Surprise registered at the choices that he had made. Her preferences were for more than blood and guts. She chose *Hitch*, a movie starring Will Smith. It was a funny movie that she also thought was pretty good from what she’d seen of it. She handed the movie to him, and he grinned.

“Good choice.”

Leaning forward, he set the movie up, and when it started, he sat back and resumed eating. Within minutes, they were both laughing. He finished eating first and put his trash back in the bag. A short while later, she was finished eating, and he took her trash and put it away.

They both settled into the movie, and she ended up laughing so hard that she found it hard to catch her breath. When the movie ended, she shook her head. “That movie is hilarious. I am surprised that they haven’t made a sequel. It looks like they would have enough of a storyline to do so.”

James chuckled. “I can only imagine what a sequel would be like.”

She didn’t think that she could laugh any harder than she already had without passing out. There was already a stitch in her side.

“I am glad that you enjoyed the movie.”

He gathered up their trash and turned off the DVD player before stepping out of the SUV. She followed behind him, and they both returned to the front seat of the vehicle.

Fortunately, no one had pulled into the parking lot and shined a flashlight through the windows. It was definitely one of the most interesting dates she ever had. He received points for originality and smelling good. It had been hard to resist touching him more than she already had, but at least he’d confirmed one of her suspicions. The man had a dynamite body. She snuck a feel when he placed his arm around her during the movie.

He took off the emergency brake, and they pulled out of their secluded spot. She noticed that there were more cars now. Maybe the park idea hadn’t been an original idea. As they drove by, she spotted foggy windows that could only mean one thing.

“I hope that the kids are being safe. I already have two pregnant students in my class.”

James grimaced at the thought. “Well, I started talking to Jamie when she became interested in boys in middle school.”

“I’m glad.”

“So am I, as uncomfortable as the conversation was. I also think that having Josh around helps out a lot.”

Kayla looked over at him. “Why do you say that?”

He sighed. “Jamie has had to help out with him a lot. Much more than I would like. I try not to put too much pressure on her, but being the oldest puts her in that position sometimes.”

He shrugged. “The good thing is she knows how hard it is to raise a child even when you have help. I also think that she is going to avoid doing anything that could put her in the position of having a child before she is ready.”

Kayla nodded. She had to agree. Jamie was a pretty rational teenager who always thought things through. This morning was an example of that. She didn’t see Jamie making the mistakes that some of her other students were making.

A short while later, James parked in her driveway. He shut off the engine, hopped out, and darted around the SUV to help her out. At her front door, she searched a moment for her keys, and then they stepped inside together after she unlocked the door. Closing the door behind him, she turned and walked toward the living room.

“Would you like anything to drink?”

He shook his head, and she smiled at the sight of him leaning against her door, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans. Jeans that, despite being loose, couldn’t hide the fact that there was a muscular frame underneath them.

“No, thank you.”

“Make yourself at home,” she called out as she disappeared into the kitchen. Setting her purse on the counter, she leaned her hip against it and tried to slow down her racing thoughts. She had remained cool so far—she could last a little longer. Tonight had been a lot of fun, and she was looking forward to seeing how they would progress from here.

She poured herself a glass of water and drank it slowly, giving herself time to resettle herself. Taking a deep breath, she headed back into the living room. James had taken her advice and moved from the foyer into the living room. He was standing there leaning against the sofa, and she smiled at him. It was almost a reflex when it came to him. The man was so sexy that the only thing she could do was grin at him when she saw him.

He spoke first. “I hope that you really did have a good time tonight.”

“I really did.”

He straightened up and walked toward her. “So you would be interested in going out again?”

She watched him approach her, locking her knees and trying her best not to collapse onto the floor. His effect on her was dangerous, but she managed to force her throat to work. "Yes, I would."

"How about next Saturday?"

She nodded without hesitation, not caring what was on her schedule. If it wasn't important, she would clear it. "Sounds good to me."

He took a step closer to her. "Would you be offended if I kissed you good night?"

She closed the rest of the distance between them wrapping her arms around his neck. She was glad for her height at this moment. That was a first in a long time.

"I would be offended if you didn't."

He stared at her for a moment and then lowered his lips to hers. His hands came up to graze her throat. He traced the curve of her jaw before moving his fingers upward, threading them through her hair. She felt him tug at the band that held her hair up until her hair came down. A moan escaped her as his hands found her scalp underneath the thick mane. Her limbs seemed to be turning into liquid. The pounding of her heart increased wildly, and she felt on edge. She moaned again at the loss of his lips when he pulled back. He'd made her lose complete control with that one kiss.

"Wow," she breathed softly.

James pulled back and looked at her. His expression told her that he'd been just as affected by the kiss. "I think that was putting it lightly."

Kayla studied him, desire surging through her. Her lips felt swollen from their kiss. She could only imagine how wanton she looked.

"You look beautiful." He brought his hand up to touch her hair. "I love your hair."

Kayla made a face. "I don't. I was just contemplating cutting this stuff off."

"That would be a big mistake."

She gave him a strange look, but he continued. "You can't cut your hair. Your hair is beautiful the way that it is."

The corners of her mouth tilted upward. Maybe cutting her hair would be a bad idea. Her sisters would kill her if they knew that she'd been contemplating it. It was not that she didn't like her hair. She just wanted hair that was manageable. She and her sisters had inherited their curly hair from their father and the thickness from their mother.

Those were the main reasons that she didn't cut her hair after countless threats to do so. She'd inherited the traits from her parents, and she was happy to have them.

“Okay, maybe I will get it styled differently,” she said, more to herself than him.

James nodded and then stepped back. He looked down at his watch and grimaced. “I need to get going. My dad is probably asleep by now, and I don’t want the kids up too late, especially by themselves. You have no idea how much trouble three girls can get into.”

She gave him a look and laughed. “Actually I would.”

He chuckled when he realized what he’d said. “I meant to say that you might know better than most, and maybe you can give me some pointers.”

“Some things you have to figure out for yourself,” she teased.

He laughed. “Along with everything else when it comes to parenting, or so it seems.”

“By the way, how is your father?”

James sighed. “He is getting better. Still stubborn about what the doctor says to do when it comes to certain things, but he is fine.”

“I am glad to hear that. I need to stop by and see him.”

“He mentioned that you and your sisters were the main people to come by and check on him after his heart attack. I don’t think that I thanked you for that, but it is very much appreciated.”

Kayla shook her head. “Your father is a good man. We would do it for him anytime.”

He placed a brief kiss on her lips. “Well, thank you anyway.”

Her smile was genuine. “You are welcome.”

Once they were at the front door, he backed her up against it. He lowered his lips to hers one more time. This time the kiss was over before it really began.

He pulled back. “Can I give you a call during the week?”

She nodded. “Yes you can. If I don’t answer the phone, leave a message, and I will call you back.”

“I will do that.”

She watched him back out of the driveway, then closed the door. What she needed right now more than anything was to relax. She made her way upstairs and undressed quickly while her mind raced with thoughts of James. The man was lethal. Never had she imagined she would feel this way about a man who came with four children, even if they did like her. She still had to wonder if she was setting herself up in some ways.

She closed her eyes and sighed. The warm water was soothing. It helped to release some of the tension from her body. Part of it was anxiety, the other a deep yearning. She smiled to herself. The

feeling of sexual tension was welcome. It was really a first for her. It felt a little odd to say that, but it was true. Trish, Michelle, and Margaret had been an inspiration to Kristen, Keirra, and herself.

When the three friends had come up pregnant in high school, she and her sisters had made a vow not to give themselves to another. If they decided to become intimate, it had to be with a person they really cared for. She and her sisters knew that even with protection, there was always a possibility that pregnancy could occur. The last thing that any of them wanted was to be tied to a man that they didn't have a future with. All of them had made it to twenty-eight years of age. Kristen had found Randy, and Keirra had found Eric. Kayla knew in her gut that James was the one for her, but she wanted to be certain when she took that step.

Her sisters hadn't regretted their first time, and she didn't want to regret hers. After turning off the water, she stepped out of the shower and reached for a towel to dry off. She walked into her bedroom, put on her favorite grape-colored nightgown, climbed into bed, and reached for the remote. After turning on the television, she started surfing for a good show. The phone rang, and she jumped. *Who could be calling at this hour?* She looked down at the caller ID, and the corners of her mouth curled upward when she saw who it was. She answered the phone.

"Hello, Keirra."

"And Kristen," her youngest sister added.

"Yes, this is a conference call," Keirra informed her.

Kayla frowned. "Is there anyone else that I need to address then?"

"Ha-ha, very funny," Keirra replied wryly.

Keirra huffed playfully. "Is that anyway to talk to the people who are calling to see how your date went?"

Kayla laughed. "If it is the two of you, yes it is."

"And you wonder why I always try to disown you," Keirra retorted.

"Keirra, you try to disown everyone, even people that aren't related to you," Kristen replied around a laugh.

"Hey," Keirra exclaimed. "Whose side are you on?"

"Mine, of course."

Kayla shook her head at her two sisters. With sisters like hers, it was a wonder that her hair was not gray.

"The date went very well," she replied quickly, trying to get the call back on track. Otherwise, they could end up on the phone all night. As she expected it to, the simple statement got her sisters' attention.

“Did you kiss?” Kristen asked.

“Better yet, is he still there?”

Kayla rolled her eyes at Keirra’s irrational question, but Kristen interjected before she could respond.

“Silly, she wouldn’t have answered the phone if he was still there.”

Keirra sighed dejectedly. “You have a point.”

“Hey, you sound way more disappointed than you should,” Kayla protested.

Her sister laughed, and she scowled. Keirra had sounded disappointed at the fact that James wasn’t still there, but no more disappointed than she was. Still, she knew that it was too soon. Sighing heavily, she closed her eyes. It was late, and she was ready to go to bed.

“I answered your question. Is there anything else?”

“Of course there is. Don’t forget that you grilled each of us after our first dates,” Kristen replied.

“Heck, you locked me in the house on mine,” Keirra added.

Kayla sighed at her sister’s drama. “Just so you know, that is impossible since you weren’t restrained inside the house anyway.”

“Yeah well, I had a guest that I couldn’t get rid of.”

Kayla scoffed. “I think that you should be thanking me for that considering the end result.”

Both of her sisters ignored that statement.

“So we will grill you now,” Kristen continued.

Kayla sighed before going into the details of her date with James. It was the only way that she was going to be able to have any peace. She included the kiss at the end, and they were satisfied, or so she thought.

“Do you think that he is the one?” Keirra asked.

Kayla sighed. Deep down, she knew that he was. She just had to be sure that she could deal with the issues that he came along with. She’d never run from tough situations, and she didn’t plan to start. “You know, Kristen, I think that he is.”

“Well, I am glad.”

She heard some rustling in the background, and Keirra laughed breathlessly. “Hey, you two, I have to go. Eric wants me to tuck him in.” There was more rustling then Keirra came back on the line. “I take that back. Eric wants to tuck me in. Good night, and I will see you on Monday.”

They barely had enough time to say good-bye then Keirra hung up.

“Is she really related to us?”

“I am afraid so,” Kristen replied sadly, but her voice was laced with obvious humor.

They both laughed.

“Well I just wanted to call and make sure that you had a good time,” Kristen stated softly.

“I had a great time, and thank you for calling, Kristen.”

“You are welcome. Have a good night, and I will see you on Monday.”

“You, too. Good night.”

Kayla hung up the phone and smiled. She loved her sisters. They were good to her, and she had no idea what she would do without them. A yawn escaped her, and she realized that she was tired. Maybe it was the exciting day that she’d had, or maybe it was that steamy kiss that she’d shared with James. Either way, she was more excited than she’d been in a long time. Turning off the television, she closed her eyes and dreamed of James.

Chapter Six

“So how did it go?”

Kayla grinned at Jonah. They had known each other for a long time. He was Randy’s best friend as well as a good friend of hers. They had started hanging out together shortly after Kristen and Randy had started dating again. At first they had tried the dating thing but quickly discovered that they were better off as friends. Now their weekly outing consisted of having dinner on Wednesday or Thursday night, whichever night both of them managed to have time to do so.

“It went very well. He is a good guy.”

Jonah chuckled before biting into his hotdog. “If he is anything like his father, I will agree.”

She smiled as she bit into her own hot dog. Jonah was so male. He was also the brother that she never had, and she the sister that he didn’t want.

“Did he try anything?”

She almost choked on the bite she had just taken, but she managed to finish chewing. She shot Jonah a look of warning.

“Nothing that I didn’t want him to do.”

It was Jonah’s turn to choke, and she laughed then stuck her tongue out. “You had better be kidding.”

She found herself cutting her eyes at him. “Geeze, Jonah, you should hear yourself. You sound like my father would if he were alive.”

Jonah gave her a look that only she could decipher, but she could see a hint of a smile tugging at one corner of his mouth.

“I promise you, Jonah, he was a perfect gentleman. Besides, I heard that I was not the only person with a date.”

A genuine grin appeared on his face, and her eyebrows rose. “Maybe I should be the one asking the questions here.”

Jonah shook his head. “Ellie is not like that.”

Her eyebrows rose higher. “And I am?”

It was Jonah’s turn to cut his eyes at her. “That is not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Sounded like it,” she grumbled as she bit into a fry. “You know, between the holidays, my sisters, and you, I am going to end up running five days a week.”

He scoffed at the comment. "Oh, please. You have a nice body. If you actually have any fat, you keep it well hidden."

She laughed. There were definitely a few weak spots in her figure, but overall she was okay. "That is because you haven't seen me naked."

He wiggled his eyebrows. "We can change that if you like."

She rolled her eyes. Anyone on the outside looking in would think that she and Jonah were crazy or that they were actually sexually attracted to each other. It was definitely the first option. Although she had to admit that, in the beginning, both of them had been physically attracted to each other. But one date and a kiss had told them that it was not meant to be. Even though that was the case, she was glad that they had the friendship that they did.

"So you like Ellie?"

He nodded. "Yes, I do."

"I think that she is a good choice for you."

She really did. Ellie was a nice person, and she could remember her very well from high school. Ellie had been one year ahead of her and her sisters. She knew first hand that Ellie was as smart as she was beautiful. Ellie was a good person for Jonah.

She ate another fry before chewing slowly. "I hope that things between James and I go just as well as they seem to be going for you and Ellie."

Jonah stared at her, his expression full of puzzlement. "Why do you say that?"

She leaned back in the booth pushing the rest of her food away. "James comes with a lot of baggage."

He gave her a concerned look. "Is it something you think you can deal with?"

She shrugged her shoulders because she truly didn't know. To be honest, it really didn't matter to her as long as she was not held responsible for something that someone else did. Nowadays, most people came with baggage, and she even had some of her own.

Hers stemmed from the early death of her parents. She'd become a control freak over the things that she could control because there were so many things that she hadn't been able to. The second was that she was working on her control issues.

"I think that I can, but we will see."

He reached across the table and took her hand in his. "Well, I hope that it works out for you. You deserve nothing but the best."

She found herself grinning at her friend. "So do you."

He finished off the rest of his hotdog and fries and the rest of hers. She shook her head in amazement. The man was a bottomless pit. It was amazing that he was still in good shape with his appetite.

“So how is Eric doing?”

She chuckled at his question. “I think that depends on who you ask.”

He laughed. “He is getting restless, huh?”

“Very much so from what Keirra says.”

Her poor sister had never looked more worn out with trying to keep Eric from pacing like a crazed person.

“The good thing is that Eric has a doctor’s appointment in three weeks. If all goes well, he will be released to go back to work.”

Jonah smiled. “Well, tell Keirra not to let him overdo it, or he will have a longer recovery time.”

She rolled her eyes. “Keirra is doing everything that she can, but don’t forget that we are talking about Eric.”

He laughed. “You’re right.”

She knew that Jonah had only met Eric a handful of times, but that was enough for anyone to know that the man had to be going crazy being off work.

“Well, if it isn’t Kayla and her boyfriend. Oh wait, I thought I heard that you were seeing James Feldon.”

She rolled her eyes in exasperation at the sound of Trish’s voice. This was the last thing that she felt like dealing with tonight.

“What do you want, Trish?”

There was a snide look on her face when she replied. “To know if there is some rule about teachers fraternizing with their students’ parents.”

She smirked at Trish. “Well, I am sure that if there is, you will find it . . . Oh, but wait, that would mean you would actually have to work. Did you hear what happened the last time Trish went to work?” She snapped her fingers. “Oh wait. Trish never has worked.”

She looked up at Trish giving her a small smile. “Sorry, I must have had you mixed up with someone else who happens to be a productive citizen of society.”

Trish gave her a nasty sneer. “You are just jealous.”

She felt her eyes widen in shock. “*Of what, Trish?* What do you think that you have that I could possibly be jealous of? Because, believe me, I’m not in the market for plastic surgery.”

When Trish sputtered in outrage, Kayla shook her head and stood up. “Come on, Jonah. Trish looks like she needs a place to sit.”

By the time they made it outside, Jonah was laughing so hard that he had tears in his eyes. She shot him a puzzled look, and he pulled her into his arms to place a brief kiss on her forehead.

“I am so proud of you.”

She became more puzzled. “Why is that?”

He chuckled again, still amused at the display that just occurred between her and Trish. “Because you handled yourself very well, but then again you always do.”

She sighed. “Yeah, well, it is getting old with that one, and I’m really getting close to resorting to violence.”

He chuckled. “Well I am glad that you didn’t, but if you had you would be covered.”

She stared at him with confusion. “Why do you say that?”

He took her hand in his and led her toward her car. “Well, your sister is dating the sheriff, and you are the good friend of an attorney.”

Her expression of puzzlement turned into a grin. “That may be true, but the day that Trish becomes worth breaking the law for is the day that I leave Baxley.”

Jonah laughed. “I am very sure that will never happen.”

She exhaled softly. “Well as usual it has been fun.”

He embraced her as they stopped by her car. “Call me when you make it home.”

“I will. Drive safe,” she murmured, then placed a kiss on his cheek.

She slid behind the wheel of her car and drove home. As much as she hated to admit it, she thought about Trish the entire way home. There was something about her that was worrisome. Trish was the older of two children born to very decent parents. As cliché as it sounded, Trish was the black sheep of the family. The thing was that no one knew why.

To be honest, she really didn’t care as long as Trish didn’t pass her poison on to others. So far, she was still doing a good job of causing trouble like she had in high school. Regardless of that, Kayla refused to have Violet, Laurie, and Holly causing trouble in her class. Right now it seemed that her plan was working. Her conference with the parents had lasted a lot longer than she had thought it would. She pulled into the driveway and, shivering from the cold air, walked quickly into her house.

Locking the door, she pulled out her cell phone and speed-dialed Jonah's number. He answered on the third ring.

"Wow, what took you so long to answer?"

"Ellie is on the other line." She could hear the excitement in his voice.

"Oh, okay. Well, I have made it home safely. Tell Ellie that I said hello and have a good night."

After he told her to do the same, she hung up the phone. She prepared herself for bed before crawling under the covers. Turning on the television, she settled into find something interesting to watch while she waited for sleep to overtake her. She chose a rerun of *I Love Lucy*. The show was funny to her, and it always had been. She jumped when her cell phone rang. When she saw James Feldon's number, she answered, a grin on her face.

"Hi, James. How are you?"

"I am fine and yourself?"

She paused at the tone of his voice. He sounded tired and upset. "I am doing well. Thank you for asking."

She settled back into the covers. "What are you up to?"

He paused briefly. "Just wondering if you made it home safely."

She didn't bother to hide her confusion. "What do you mean?"

He repeated himself without hesitation. "I just called to see if you made it in from your date okay."

It was her turn to pause. Had she missed something? She hadn't had a date and had no idea what he was talking about, but she planned to find out.

"My date? What are you . . . Oh, you are talking about Jonah? That was not a—" She stopped when she realized that the strange tone in his voice was due to jealousy. "Are you jealous?" She didn't give him a chance to respond. "Listen, Jonah and I are friends. We have been for a long time."

His tone held uncertainty when he spoke again. "Are you sure that's all it is?"

She replied without hesitation and was extremely bothered by his line of questioning. "*Yes. I am sure.*"

"Well, I'm sorry that I bothered you. Have a good night," he replied and disconnected the call before she could say anything else.

She looked at her phone in shock and closed it. It would be a waste of her time to call him back because she would only swear at him if she did. Instead, she plugged her phone into the charger, set the timer on the television, and tried to relax again. If she didn't know any better, she would believe

her when she said she and Jonah were just friends. He had some nerve considering the fact that she just started seeing him. *Was he already trying to place claim on her?* She wondered what the hell had gotten into James. Whatever it was, she was going to find out, and try to refrain from kicking him in the knees while she did.

Chapter Seven

“Okay, class. Who can tell me the names of the people who signed the Declaration of Independence?”

Kayla turned to face her ninth-grade class. Several hands were up, and she was glad. She wrote down as many names as the kids could call out. When she turned back to the class, she walked around and sat on the edge of her desk.

“Can anyone tell me why it was so important that the Declaration of Independence was written?”

She only half listened to her students. One reason was because she’d already had this discussion, and the second was that her mind was on James.

She was still mad as hell at his rudeness. Nothing gave him the right to be that rude or inconsiderate. Her students finished giving her reasons as to why they thought the Declaration of Independence had been written. She gave them a few more reasons. The bell rang shortly after she gave her students their assignment for that night and the following day. As her students began to file out of the room, she erased the board and prepared for her class of tenth graders. They were going to discuss the French Revolution. Napoleon was always an interesting subject for her.

The rest of the day flew by, and for that, she was thankful. Unfortunately, her last class of the day was full of tenth graders. Five of them had made it an eventful one so far. She turned to look out at her students.

“What can you tell me about the French Revolution?”

She called on the students who had their hands raised. Some gave her answers that let her know that they had read the book. Others gave her answers that were questionable. When Holly raised her hand, the classroom became silent. Kayla took a deep breath then called on her.

When Holly gave her a correct answer, she had to keep her mouth from falling open in shock. Instead she grinned. “That is correct, Holly.”

The smile that appeared on Holly’s face was blinding. Kayla realized then that compliments of the sort were a rarity in the teenager’s life, and wondered if Holly wasn’t immune to her mother’s negative ways. After standing up, she headed to the chalkboard. “Most of you are correct.”

She listed important events and people of the French Revolution. They became so involved in discussion that the bell caught them off guard.

“Okay, everyone, that is it for the day.”

She quickly told them what the next day assignment would be prior to wishing them a good evening. All of the students ran out excitedly. She used to get excited herself for the last class of the day, especially the closer it got to the weekend. She turned to the chalkboard and began erasing it.

“Am I too late for class?”

She spun around at the sound of James's voice. The first thing she noticed was that he was sexy. The second was that he was entering her classroom and closing the door behind him. Lastly, she noticed that she was drooling over a man that had been so rude and disrespectful to her the prior night. She turned back to face the chalkboard before she got herself in trouble.

"Yes, you are. Maybe you can try again tomorrow."

He hesitated in his response. "Even if I am here to apologize?"

That caused her to pause slightly. She could feel him walking up behind her, but she kept erasing the board.

"Apologize for what?"

"For my rudeness and jealousy," he replied as his hand came up and covered the one that held the eraser. His touch made her shiver, but she fought the reaction knowing that she should be aiming for his knees as she had promised to refrain from doing last night when he'd hung up on her.

"Please look at me."

She didn't respond, and his grip tightened. "Look at me, Kayla. I have always been told that you can see the truth in a man's eyes. So I want you to look at me."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Lord, the man had a way with words. Turning around, she looked at him. Up close, he was only more breathtaking. He also smelled good. She was so weak for this man. She was in trouble when she became turned on by his scent.

"I am sorry, and if you give me the chance to explain, I will."

More importantly, she saw the sincerity in his eyes and felt herself nod, then looked at the clock on the back wall. "Okay, but you have five minutes."

His eyebrows rose. "Do you have somewhere to be?"

She smiled. He truly was a man. "No I don't, but neither do I get paid for overtime."

He laughed. "You have a good point. I will make it quick."

* * * *

When Kayla agreed, he sighed in relief. She eased into one of the student chairs, and he sat in another next to her.

"I know that I behaved like an ass last night, but I promise you that it won't happen again."

He paused for a moment, trying to figure out what he was going to say. "My ex-wife Nicole had an affair with her best friend."

He smiled, but it was not one of humor. “Actually it was a good friend of both of ours. Byron and I went to high school and college together. We all hung out in college.” He shrugged in a nonchalant manner that he didn’t feel. “I should have seen it coming, but it didn’t. Because even if I didn’t trust Nicole, I knew that I could Byron.”

His laugh was void of amusement. “Turns out that I couldn’t.”

What he left unsaid was that Byron had been one of the possible candidates when it came to Josh’s parentage. Once he’d found out just how willing Nicole was to share her body with anyone, he hadn’t touched her. He wouldn’t sleep in the same bed with her and allowed her to go about living her life the way she wanted because he didn’t know what else to do at the time. His only rule had been that she not leave the house until after the children were in bed. At least until he’d found out that she was pregnant with Josh. Then he hadn’t let her out of his sight. The last thing that he’d wanted was for a child to be harmed whether it was his or not. Luckily, Josh had turned out to be his son, and he cherished him. He cherished all of his children. Kayla reached out and touched his hand bringing him out of his thoughts.

“I am sorry to hear that, but I’m nothing like Nicole.”

James looked up in alarm and total horror. He realized that was exactly what he’d implied, and he was ashamed. “I know that, and if I have insinuated that then I really do apologize. You could never be anything like her. Nicole lacked the intelligence and class that you have. It was just too late before I realized it.”

She looked at him with an expression full of hesitance. “I am glad that you realize that, and I accept your apology. Just make sure that it doesn’t happen again.”

He brought his hand up to cup her cheek. “It won’t happen again. You are too kind and deserve better than that.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

He dropped his hand. “I don’t know if I can make it up to you because what I did was really stupid, but I hope that you will let me try.”

The corners of her mouth tilted upward. “I’m not the one that you need to make it up to.”

At his look of puzzlement, she continued. “You need to make it up to yourself. I am sure that I don’t have the whole story, but hopefully you will tell me one day.”

He returned her smile. She was better at reading his eyes than he expected. Then again, he shouldn’t be. Kayla was a very intelligent woman. He simply nodded, confirming her statement.

“I will because you deserve to know it, but it won’t be now. This is not really the time or place.”

She gave him a look of understanding. “Well, until you do, try not to beat yourself up too much, or me while you are at it.”

He laughed. "I will work on that."

She gave him a warning look. "I'd like that, because if it does happen again, I won't be responsible for my actions."

He leaned closer to her. "It won't. I like you."

She chuckled. "Well, I would hope so. I hate to think that I invested all of this time for no reason."

He grinned. "Well I don't want to keep you over since you don't get paid overtime, but I would still love to see you again on Saturday. That is if you have time."

She studied him for a several moments, then exhaled softly. "That sounds good, and thank you for coming by to apologize. Now I can reserve all of my curse words that I had laid out for you until a later time."

That statement made him laugh again. "You know I really do like your sense of humor."

She stood up. "It is my pleasure. We all need a little laughter."

He stood up. "You are right. What else do people need in their life?"

She shrugged, her expression becoming indecisive. "Whatever else that person wants."

He stepped closer to her. "And what is it that you want?"

She shivered as she looked up at him. He looked at her intently because he really did expect an answer. She disappointed him when she gave a simple but complex one.

"To be happy."

He smiled. "And are you happy?"

She paused briefly before responding. "For the most part I am."

"What part of you is not happy?"

She sighed. "The part of me that wants a wonderful man to spend the rest of my life with."

One corner of his mouth curved upward. "Do you have any prospective candidates?"

She nodded slowly. "Only one."

He tried to taper the hope that surged through him. "And who would that be?"

She answered without hesitation. "You."

He knew that he should be running in the opposite direction at that statement, but for some reason he was excited to hear that. This was the first time that he'd thought about getting serious with another woman. The fact that it was her made the idea a whole lot more appealing. He truly had been hurt when Nicole had gone off and began having affairs. Kayla was nothing like Nicole, and he was starting to realize that she was a woman that he could look forward to spending the rest of his life with. He couldn't help but to grin at the thought.

"What are you smiling about?"

The expression on his face became lethal, and he felt her shiver. "The fact that every time I am around you, that I am tempted to kiss you senseless."

She chuckled as she stepped closer to him. Her eyes told him that a kiss from him would be more than welcome. "Well, feel free to do so anytime."

That was all of the affirmation he needed. He pulled her into his arms and loved the feel of her against him. Lowering his head, he captured her mouth passionately. He swept his tongue in a search of her mouth, and she wilted against him. The thin material of her blouse allowed him to feel her nipples harden as soon as her chest touched his. His hands came down and cupped her bottom as she moaned. He brought her into his growing erection, and she in turn arched her body into his willingly.

His erection became one that was full and throbbing. He lifted her up into his arms and carried her over to her desk. The knee-length skirt was the perfect length for what he had in mind. Her breath caught in her throat as he stepped between her legs. His erection strained against the confines of his pants. He bit back a moan as her hands gripped the hard muscles of his arms. He countered her move by bringing his hands up and cupped a breast in each hand. The feel of her body was producing sensations in him that he had never imagined. Her breasts were heavy in his palms. He groaned as she arched against him. The feel of her against him—in his arms was almost too much. She stiffened against him, pulling her mouth away from his, and he had the perfect excuse to turn his attention to her neck. She trembled in his arms again calling his name.

"Yes," he responded, his lips barely leaving her neck.

She moaned then cleared her throat. "As much as I love what you are doing, we have to stop."

It took him a moment to realize what she was saying, and another to realize what he was doing. He pulled away from her, groaning in the process. A quick look at her revealed the deep flush of arousal. Her lips were also beautifully swollen from his kiss. He gave her another brief kiss before stepping back. She sighed heavily, and he helped her off the desk. He gave her an apologetic look.

"Forgive me. I got a little carried away."

Kayla smiled as he tried to straighten up her clothing. Amazingly, she was not as wrinkled as she should be. He turned his back to her and tried readjust himself prior to turning back to her.

She sighed with slight disappointment, and he stifled a chuckle at the sound. At least he wasn't the only one let down. "There is nothing to forgive. I enjoyed what we were doing a lot. Unfortunately, this is definitely not the place to do it."

"You know that is another thing that I like about you."

She sighed as she tried to smooth her hair back then paused when she seemed to realize what she was doing. He chuckled because her hair always looked untamable no matter what she did to it.

She gave him a questioning look. "What is that?"

"Your honesty," he responded with sincerity.

She laughed. "I need a voice recorder to catch you saying that. I might need that later."

He chuckled. "I would prefer not to have any incriminating evidence against me."

She shook her head as she finished straightening up the classroom before picking up her bag. They had stayed a lot longer than five minutes, he soon discovered when she signed out for the day. He walked her out of the building, only to have her turn to look at him, clear astonishment on her face.

"Has Jamie been waiting for you this whole time?"

He nodded, and she gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Once again, thank you for coming by to see me. Give me a call later on tonight if you can."

He watched her walk away in astonishment. A few steps later, she stopped. "You might want to get a move on. My sister does charge late fees."

She continued on, and he groaned as he watched the gentle sway of her behind as she made her way to her car. It took him a moment to realize that his daughter was in the car waiting on him and probably watching him drool over Kayla as well. The last thing that he needed to give his teenage daughter was something to bait him on. He also had two children to pick up from Kristen's daycare. He turned and headed to the car. When he slid inside, Jamie was bobbing her head to the music on one of her CDs. She smiled when he started the car.

"I wondered if I was going to have to come in and get the two of you."

He shot his daughter a look. "You just keep in mind who gives you your allowance."

His daughter stared at him in surprise before her expression turned to one of amusement. "You are right, Dad."

She flipped to the next song, and it happened to be one that he actually liked. "Oh and, Dad?"

He looked over at his eldest daughter not liking the tone in her voice. "What is it?"

“If you plan on going anywhere else, you might want to wipe that lipstick from around your mouth.”

Chapter Eight

“Now tell me why we are doing this again?”

Kayla looked up and laughed, but he didn’t find anything amusing right now. It had been her idea to have a double date with Jonah and Ellie. She had orchestrated the date, and now they were on their way to Sam’s Café to have a nice dinner.

“Because I want for you to meet Jonah and for him to meet you.”

He shook his head as he held the door open for her. Jonah and Ellie were already seated. They walked over to the booth hand in hand. Jonah and Ellie stood up to greet them. She hugged Ellie, then gave Jonah a hug and kiss on the cheek.

James was surprised that he didn’t tense at the action. The truth was he could tell that Jonah and Kayla truly were just friends. He accepted Jonah’s handshake before letting Kayla slide into the booth. She and Ellie were so involved in conversation that he had no choice but to converse with Jonah, especially if he didn’t want to come off as a rude jerk in front of Kayla again.

“How is your dad doing?” Jonah asked.

He nodded. His dad had improved a lot since he and the kids had arrived. In the beginning, he’d been skeptical about the return to Baxley. He’d actually been afraid of the memories that would be dredged up if he did. It was one thing for him to have a long-distance relationship with his dad. It was another for him to live in the same house with him.

Fortunately for him, his experience had been a lot better than he expected. He had a lot of people to thank for that. All of their conversations were halted as the waitress came up to the table to take their order. She started with their drinks and, since everyone was ready, went ahead and took their food order. When Nadia walked away, he looked over at Kayla just in time to catch her laugh at something Ellie had said.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?”

He looked at Jonah with an arched eyebrow. Even though Kayla was beautiful, he didn’t want another man, especially her guy friend, to be looking at her like that.

His eyebrows only rose higher when Jonah grinned. “I was referring to Ellie.”

A second later, the corners of James’s mouth curled upward, and he and Jonah shared a laugh. He realized then that he liked Jonah.

“It is reassuring to me that you haven’t been able to take your eyes off Kayla. I also like the fact that you haven’t bought into the rumor that is flying around town.”

He found himself chuckling knowing first hand just how quickly rumors could get out. It was still a mystery to him at how his past had gotten around town so fast, but it had. He turned his amused glance to Jonah. “Which rumor would that be?”

“The one that Kayla and I are romantically involved.”

He had to laugh again. “Actually, I fell for that one myself but only because I saw the two of you with my own eyes.”

Jonah gave him a puzzled look but didn’t have time to respond because Nadia brought their drinks back to the table. When she left again, Jonah resumed where he’d left off. “What do you mean?”

He gave Jonah a look that only a fellow man would understand. “Let’s just say that I have seen the end of one of your date nights.”

Jonah chuckled. “I can see how someone who isn’t from around here could think that Kayla and I have something going on.”

He found himself shrugging his shoulders. “The thing is I trust Kayla. That helps a lot.”

Jonah smiled. “That is good, but what do you know?”

He shook his head. “Nothing other than the fact that you two have known each other for a long time.”

Jonah leaned back in the booth. Jonah admitted that he’d known of the Smith sisters as soon as they stepped foot in town. He hadn’t really gotten to know them until Randy had started to date Kristen ten years ago but had lost contact with them once Randy and Kristen broke up. He hadn’t met back up with them until Kristen and Randy had thrown a party and invited some of their close friends.

“It was there that I first saw Kayla as a woman, and she will admit that she saw me as a man as well.” Jonah paused briefly. “Yet, the more time that I spent with Kayla, the more I knew that we were better off as friends. But we had to be sure.”

Jonah paused, staring him directly in the eye. “We went on one real date and shared one kiss that I swear to you, if I had a sister, I know that was what it would feel like.”

James laughed, and he had no idea as to why, but it had a little to do with Jonah’s dry tone and his facial expression. He should be bothered at the fact that the two of them had once wanted to date each other. Yet he wasn’t. He couldn’t be. Both Kayla and Jonah were honest and up front about the whole ordeal.

“And what are the two of you talking about that has you laughing so much?”

He looked over at Kayla then wrapped his arm around her. “Oh, not much. Jonah is just filling me in on the history of you guys’ relationship.”

She shook her head and placed a brief kiss on his lips. “Glad that you find it so funny. I must say that it is a totally different reaction from the last time that this topic came up.”

“Which you can’t hold against me because I apologized for that, and you forgave me,” he teased.

She scooted closer to him. “And I must say that you do apologize very well.”

They both looked up as Jonah cleared his throat. “The two of you might want to head home if you are going to keep that up.”

Kayla rolled her eyes at him. “It looks to me that you and Ellie are sitting pretty close together yourselves.”

Ellie blushed, but before Jonah could respond, their waitress walked up to the table with their food.

After she walked off Jonah reached for his glass. “I would like to make a toast.”

Everyone picked up their glass and waited for Jonah to continue. “To new friends and new relationships.”

James was happy to drink to that. He could think of nothing better to toast to. His stay in Baxley was only getting better with each passing day. He enjoyed the rest of dinner. It had been a while since he’d done this for several reasons, one being that he didn’t trust anyone after he’d caught his best friend in bed with his wife and the second that he had four children who demanded a lot of his time. Or rather three who did. Jamie was only demanding every once in a while. It felt good to be in the presence of good people. Good and trustworthy people. By the time dinner was over, he was stuffed. They paid their checks then made their way to their respective vehicles.

Jonah was parked closer. Ellie embraced both of them prior to into Jonah’s SUV. James held his hand out to Jonah.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, and I look forward to all of us getting together again.”

Jonah nodded. “Same here.”

He turned to Kayla and gave her a hug. “Have a good night, and give me a call later on in the week.”

She smiled. “I will. Have a good night.”

Jonah slid behind the wheel, and James pulled her in the direction of his own SUV.

“Did you have a good time?”

He looked down at her. “Yes, I did. And I am glad that you made me come tonight.”

She looked at him in shock. “Made you come?”

He nodded, unable to hold back his chuckle of amusement as he opened the door for her, and she shook her head.

“Oh yeah, I really twisted your arm.”

“I know, and you were so subtle about it.”

He closed the door before she could respond. By the time he got in on the other side, there was a grin on her face. “You know you should have been an actor.”

He shot her a dry look. “I wouldn’t last more than a month.”

She laughed as he drove her home. “You are probably right.”

He didn’t bother to hide his amusement. “Hey now. You don’t have to agree so readily, especially with it being your suggestion and all.”

He pulled into her driveway, and she glanced over at him. “Of course I do.”

He turned off the ignition, then got out of the SUV. After going around the other side, he opened the door, and she slid into his arms.

“All of that aside, thank you for coming tonight.”

His response was interrupted as a cold gust of wind hit them, causing her to gasp. “I think that we need to get inside.”

She led the way up her walkway, pulling out her keys as she went. She opened the door and let both of them into a warm house. She closed the door before turning to face him. “As I was saying, thank you for coming tonight. I know that it took a lot for you to do that.”

He smiled. “You are right. It did. But I am glad that I did it, and I would do it again in a heartbeat.”

She went up on tiptoe and gave him a brief kiss. He caught the back of her head and deepened the kiss. A moment later, she drew away and groaned. She quickly put distance between them, and he gave her a puzzled look.

“What is it?”

The corners her mouth tilted upward. “Now is not a good time to go any further.”

Having a wife who had given him four children and two developing daughters, it didn’t take him long to figure out why that was. He grinned and pulled her back into his arms. “That’s okay.”

She rested her forehead against his chest. “No, it isn’t. As crazy as it may seem, I do want you.”

He pulled back and looked at her with a frown on his face. “I’m not sure if that was a compliment or an insult.”

She laughed. “You know what I mean.”

He nodded. “Yes, I do. So that is why I think that we should do something just as meaningful.”

Before she could ask him what he meant he helped her out of her jacket and then slipped out of his own. He led her to the couch and sat down, pulling her down next to him.

“Find anything that you want to watch.”

She turned on the television, and came across *Blood Diamond*. He settled in to watch the movie. When she laid her head on his shoulder and fell asleep, he studied her. He didn't want to leave her but it was inevitable. He woke her gently, telling her that he had to get home. She murmured incoherently, and he chuckled. He touched his lips to hers briefly before he covered her with the quilt on the back of the sofa. As he drove home, he could only think about how bad he wanted to bring Kayla home and place her in bed with him, but it was too soon. He could honestly say that he was looking forward to that.

Chapter Nine

“You are insane,” Keirra retorted.

“No more than you are,” Kristen responded.

Kayla released a pent-up breath. She and her sisters were sitting at their usual table inside of Sam’s Café. This was a place that they had enjoyed going to since they had first moved to Baxley as little girls. She truly loved this place. Tonight, they were having their normal Monday get-together. The food had been ordered, and the conversation had become interesting.

“I say it is possible,” Kristen said with a shrug.

Keirra shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

The conversation had started out pretty innocently. Kayla had asked her sisters how their first sexual experience had been. She had followed up by asking what they wished they had known to make the first time a better experience. It had been a completely innocuous question, and her only purpose had been to gather helpful information. Somehow, they ended up on the subject of sexual fantasies, and Kristen of all people was getting a little carried away. Still, there was a twinkle in Kristen’s eye that indicated that she might be goading Keirra more than anything else. Luckily, Kayla was saved from the rest of the awful conversation by Nadia bringing their food to the table. She’d heard way more about her sister’s sex life than she ever intended.

All of them looked at each other a little confused when their dishes came out covered.

Kayla looked at Nadia. “Is Sam trying something new?”

Nadia gave a brief nod but remained silent before walking off.

“Strange,” Keirra murmured.

Kayla lifted the cover off her plate and inhaled the aroma of her pasta with Alfredo sauce appreciatively.

“Oh my God,” Kristen exclaimed as she lifted her lid. Her plate was full of red rose petals, and it looked like a ring box was sitting in the middle. Kayla watched as Kristen trembled and picked up the box, not understanding why it was there. Kristen opened the box and closed it quickly then sat it back down.

“*Oh my God*,” she cried out again looking over at her sisters.

Kayla stared at her in concern. “What is it?”

Kristen’s hands were shaking, and the picture became clearer when Randy walked up in a tuxedo. He took the box out of Kristen’s grip and pulled her into a standing position. Kayla moved closer, just in case Kristen’s legs gave out. Her sister looked very close to fainting. Randy went down on one knee, and Kristen started to cry. Kayla felt her own eyes grow moist, and she heard Keirra

sniffle. Randy told Kristen that he'd fallen in love with her twelve years ago when he had run into her while he'd been washing his car. That love had never faded in his opinion, even over the five years that they had been separated. The past months let him know that he wanted her in his life permanently as his wife.

"I love you, Kristen. Will you marry me?"

"Yes," Kristen replied around a sob. He placed the ring on her finger then stood up and placing a kiss on her lips.

There was applause from all over Sam's Café. It took a few moments for Kristen to collect herself, but once she had, Kayla and Keirra were up hugging the two and congratulating them. Kristen's hand was still shaking when she held it out for Kayla and Keirra to examine the engagement ring.

Kristen put her hand to her chest. "My heart is beating so fast." She turned to look at Randy. "When did you decide to do this?"

He grinned. "Right after Christmas."

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "Why today?"

"Because twelve years ago today, we ran into each other at my parents' home, and it was the first time that we kissed and that was the day that I fell in love with you."

Kayla stifled a sigh. That was so sweet. Her sister was lucky to be able to find a man that was good at remembering dates of significance. She was not trying to be sexist, but it was true for most males.

Randy turned to look at her and Keirra. "If you two don't mind, I would like to borrow your sister for the rest of the evening."

Kayla shook her head, and so did Keirra. This moment was for Randy and Kristen.

"Do you need someone to watch Wade?" Kayla asked, ready to volunteer if needed.

Randy gave her an appreciative look. "My mother has him, but thank you for offering."

Kristen looked down at the table. "What about the food that I ordered?"

Randy chuckled. "It was never ordered, but that is the second part of my surprise."

Kristen looked up at him with the biggest smile on her face. "You really had everything planned out, didn't you?"

"Yes I did, and as soon as we get home, you will see what else I have planned."

Kristen turned and hugged her sisters and told them to have a good night. Kayla and Keirra retook their seats as Randy and Kristen left the restaurant. Kayla looked at Keirra over the table. Both of them had watery and swollen eyes.

“I am so happy for the both of them,” Keirra said around a snuffle.

She nodded in agreement. “So am I.”

Keirra looked down at her sirloin steak. “I’m not even hungry anymore. How about you?”

Kayla shook her head. Her appetite was gone as well. She was too excited to eat. “What do you suggest that we do?”

Keirra smiled. “I want to go out and celebrate, but not tonight. I do need to be able to think with a clear head tomorrow. Grandma and Grandpa are going to be so excited.”

She laughed. “I know. I guess I had better make room for them at the house since they are bound to move in now.”

Keirra shrugged. “Maybe for a little while, but I can see them looking for their own place. As much as they love you, it is obvious that they would prefer their own home.”

She knew that Keirra was probably right. Her grandparents were very independent, and if she could convince them to move in, they wouldn’t stay long. They signaled for Nadia to bring them their checks and two to-go boxes.

“We never did get around to you telling us how the meeting with the parents went.”

She laughed before quickly describing the events that had occurred during the meeting from beginning to end. The expression that went across Keirra’s face was priceless. She left out the part about Somer being Dan’s child. By the time she finished, there was a huge grin on her sister’s face.

“Well, I am glad that the meeting ended well.”

She sighed. “So am I, but more importantly, I am glad that everything seems to be going okay right now.”

Things really were going well because of that parent teacher conference. She was not sure if the effects of the meeting would last over the weekend, but today had been a wonderful day.

There hadn’t been any disruptions in her class today. The five students had actually been civil to each other. Today was also the first day that she had realized how much Somer and Holly looked alike. It was amazing that no one else had noticed the similarities between the two girls. They had the same eye color and similar hair color. They favored Dan quite a bit. Both girls also had Dan’s height, but Somer wore glasses. The glasses made a big difference and could easily keep most from guessing that the girls came from shared parentage.

Nadia came back with the containers and their checks. They both put their food into their containers and paid their checks. Arm in arm, they walked out the door. They reached Keirra’s car first. Kayla said good night to her sister, then climbed into her own car. She waited until Keirra started her engine, and then started her own and pulled out of the parking lot.

The corners of her mouth curled upward as she thought back on the event that had occurred tonight. She was so happy for her sister that she was almost beside herself with joy. The first thing she had to do was get together with Keirra and plan an engagement party for Randy and Kristen. They deserved it. If she had to pick a man for Kristen to marry, it would be Randy. Randy was a good man. He spoiled Kristen in a way that every woman should be. And Kristen, being the woman that she was, did the same in return. Kayla turned into the driveway and killed the engine. When she reached the house, she let herself in and locked the door behind her.

Her cell phone rang, and she frowned when she didn't recognize the number. She answered the phone hesitantly. "Hello?"

"Hey, beautiful. How was your day?"

She couldn't disguise the shiver of excitement that traveled through her as James's voice came over the line. "It was good, and it is getting even better. How was yours?"

She headed into the kitchen to put her leftovers in the refrigerator before heading upstairs.

"My day went very well. Especially after Jamie gave me a high five for putting a smile on your face all day."

She shook her head. Jamie Feldon was an enigma to say the least. Jamie reminded her of a very miniature Keirra. The teenager was very bold and quite outspoken. She was also very protective of the people that she cared about.

"I think that I need to keep her a little busier during class."

James chuckled. "Could you give me a few pointers as well?"

She entered her room, sat down on the bed, and laughed. "I will try, but I need to think quick. My grin will be even bigger tomorrow."

"Why is that?"

Kayla felt her happiness grow, and there was nothing she could do to prevent it. She was happy about her sister's engagement. "My youngest sister, Kristen, became engaged tonight."

"Wow. I will have to be sure to congratulate her and Randy."

The noise level at the Feldon residence began to grow. She heard James move to another location, and the background quieted again.

"It seems as if the wild bunch is out of the tub, and it is time that I start putting them to bed."

She could hear the amusement in his voice when he spoke. "The main reason that I called is to inform you that I would like to have dinner with you this weekend. If at all possible, I would like to have a nice private dinner so that we can get to know each other a little better."

She sighed at the thought. A private romantic dinner would be nice. “That sounds good to me. Do you have a particular place in mind?”

“I will let you decide the place. We can go wherever you would like, even if it is outside of Baxley.”

She chuckled knowing that it would be possible to find a place in Baxley with some privacy, and she knew where to start. “Okay, well I don’t want to hold you up, but it was nice of you to call.”

“Should I call you, or will you call me later on this week to finalize things?”

“I will call you.”

With that said, they both said good night and disconnected the call. She fell back onto the bed with a huge grin on her face. She would come up with a plan by Thursday that would work for the both of them. After plugging her cell phone into the charger, she stood up. She needed to get ready for bed herself because it was getting late and it was a work night. Heading into the bathroom, she undressed. She paused as she walked by the bathroom mirror. Jamie was right. There was a smile on her face, and her eyes were shining. If this was what James Feldon was doing to her, she welcomed more it, a lot more.

* * * *

James breathed a sigh of relief as he looked over and saw that Josh was asleep. Closing the book of favorite children’s stories, James set it aside and placed a kiss on Josh’s cheek before standing up. He made his way to Jenna’s room and found her sitting in bed waiting for him.

“Are you ready for bed, sleepy girl?” She nodded and lay back so he could tuck her in as he did every night. “What kind of story would you like tonight?”

“Tell me the one about me being born.”

The corners of his mouth curved upward and sat on the edge of the bed. Jenna had heard the story countless times, but she never grew tired of hearing it, and he never tired of telling it. The birth of each of his children had been special.

He launched into Jenna’s birth story, and at the end, her eyes drifted shut, and she was asleep. He pulled the covers up higher on Jenna before placing a kiss on her forehead. “Good night, princess.”

He left the room and walked toward Jana’s. The door was closed, and he knocked. One thing that he realized was that he had developing daughters—daughters who were going through puberty. The last thing that he wanted to do was traumatize anyone, including himself. He heard Jana call out for him to enter, and he opened the door. Jana was standing by the window gazing out as she always did. It was something that he’d done with her when she was younger until she started doing it on her own.

When rocking hadn't worked, and it seldom had, he'd gone over to the window and held her up so that she could see the lights of the city and the stars, if they were visible. That had always seemed to calm her down.

"How is the view?"

She turned around and grinned. "The same as usual. Although, the sky is beautiful."

He walked over to the window to stand beside her. She leaned into his side and he put his arm around her. Looking up at the night sky, he smiled. "We might need to get you a telescope so that you can see the stars better."

She shook her head. "There is no need to, Daddy. The sky is so clear that I don't need one."

He nodded. "Are you ready for bed?"

"No. I want to look at the stars for a few more minutes."

"Okay but don't get in bed too late."

"I won't. I promise."

And he was certain that she wouldn't do so. He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. Her arms went around his waist and squeezed tight for a moment.

"I love you, Dad."

His heart tattooed inside of his chest. It always made his heart swell when his kids said the words to him. "I love you too, sweetheart."

Sometimes, he wondered if his children suffered more from their mother's death than they let on. Toward the end, Nicole hadn't been around a lot, but he could remember how lost he'd felt when his parents had decided to divorce. The only reason his mother had been able to give him was that she'd fallen out of love with his father and that they both thought it best that they go their separate ways.

The relationship between him and his father had grown tense. When things had become strained between Nicole and himself, he'd made sure to keep his children out of the drama. It had also been his priority to make sure that his kids' relationship with him was still strong. So far, he felt as if he'd done a good job. Yet, something in Jana's embrace made him worry. She'd always been the quiet one, and sometimes it took some coercion to get her to talk. He pulled back from his daughter and knelt down.

"Is everything okay? Do you want to talk?"

Jana smiled and shook her head. "I am fine, Daddy. I really am."

She gave him another hug. "How could anything be wrong with a great dad like you around?"

His heart swelled with joy as he gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Good night, Sleeping Beauty.”

“Good night, Dad.”

He stood up and left the room, closing the door behind him. His last stop would be to Jamie’s room. Then he could collapse into his own bed if he made it. He headed down the hall to Jamie’s room. It was times like this that he was happy his father had decided to keep this big house. He could remember playing hide and seek in it. Stopping in front of her door, he knocked. She gave him permission to enter, and he did. Jamie was sitting in front of her vanity mirror brushing her hair.

She grinned when she saw him. “I was wondering when you were going to come and tuck me in.”

He laughed knowing that she was being more figurative than literal. Her years of being tucked in were long over. “Your brother and sisters held me up.”

She put the brush down and frowned with concern. “Is everything okay?”

He sat down on the edge of the bed and nodded, although he was concerned about Jamie as much as he was about Jana. “I want you to start hanging out with your friends more.”

She picked up the brush and resumed brushing her hair. “You know most parents are saying the opposite to their teenagers.”

James had to admit it did sound a little ironic, but he didn’t want Jamie to miss out on her teenage years. He knew that he relied on her quite a bit, and she’d never let him down.

“Besides, most of my friends are back in Austin.”

He sighed heavily. “Do you think that this was a bad move?”

She shook her head. Setting the brush down again, she turned to face him. “No, Dad, it was a good move. We needed to get away from the bad memories.” She stood and walked over to him and sat down beside him. “I will go out when I find people I would like to go out with.” She paused as if working out a plan. “If it makes you feel better, Somer and I hang out after school at least two days a week, and don’t forget my assigned team for my final exam grade.”

James smiled. “How is that working out for you?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Other than the fact that Holly, Violet, and Laurie are still snotty on occasion, Holly is actually smarter than I thought she was.”

He stared at her with slight disappointment. “That is not a nice thing to say, Jamie.”

Her expression became apologetic. “I know, Dad, but it is true. It is also obvious that they haven’t heard a word Ms. Smith has said.”

He could only shake his head. His goal was to make sure that his children had the most healthy and positive upbringing that they could have. “Just make sure that you aren’t missing out because you are worried about trying to take care of us.”

She smiled. “I won’t.”

He nodded with satisfaction, knowing that she would make an effort to get out more. “And on that note, I will let you finish getting ready for bed.”

“Good night, Dad.”

“Good night, sweet pea.”

He left the room and headed into his own. He needed a shower, but he was too tired to take one. Reaching over he turned on the monitor so that he could hear Josh if he woke up in the middle of the night. He would wake up earlier so that he could take a shower in the morning. Rolling over to his back, he looked at the empty space beside him. He wondered what life would be like if Kayla were filling that space. Things would be different. He knew that for sure, but he was also certain that it would be a good difference.

Chapter Ten

This had been a bad idea, Kayla thought to herself. She'd thought her place would be a good location to have the private date James wanted to have. Now she was starting to wonder. Her heart had begun to beat furiously as soon as she'd looked out the peephole and saw him. She took a deep breath and tried to calm her raging hormones before opening the door. Her pulse began to race again as he came into view.

His hands were in his pockets in a casual way, which made her wonder how he could stand there look so unaffected. He smiled and shifted his weight, causing his jeans to stretch across the muscular thighs that she'd come to love in a short amount of time. His broad shoulders were covered by a leather jacket that revealed a gray turtleneck sweater underneath it. He had an athletic physique that made her drool. His expression told her that he might be close to doing the same himself. She stepped back and invited him into her house. He stepped closer to her and placed a kiss on her cheek.

"Thanks for inviting me over."

The warm sensation of the innocent kiss almost rendered her speechless, but she managed to respond. "You are welcome."

Closing the door behind him, she motioned for him to follow her into the kitchen. They should be safe there, considering they were going to be sitting across the table from each other.

"Come on in. Dinner is almost ready."

"You look nice."

Looking over her shoulder, she smiled at him. "Thank you."

She knew that she'd made a good decision when she decided to wear the cranberry-colored, silk chiffon dress. Spaghetti straps held up the dress, and the flowing material stopped a few inches above her knees. She had to admit it was a little formfitting, although nothing that would give the man a heart attack, at least she hoped not. To keep things simple, she was barefoot. She heard him inhale deeply.

"Whatever you have cooked smells great."

"It is spaghetti with cornbread, and thank you again."

He rolled up his sleeves and went to the kitchen sink to wash his hands. She stifled a sigh at the sight of his nice forearms.

"What do you need help with?"

The oven dinged, and she headed toward it. "The only thing that I haven't done is set the table."

He nodded. "Okay. I can help you with that."

She instructed him to where everything was turning her attention back to the cooling corn bread. By the time she had the muffins out of the pan and onto a platter, he had the table set. She carried the muffins to the table. At the stove, she placed the noodles into one container and the spaghetti sauce into another. He had both containers in his hand and was moving toward the table before she could blink.

He sat them onto the table. "Anything else?"

Shaking her head, she grabbed a sauce spoon and the spaghetti fork. She placed them on the table next to the right containers and took a seat. He joined her, and she snapped her fingers. "I forgot the wine."

He stood back up. "I will get it."

She stood up as well. "And I will get the wine glasses and the corkscrew."

They both got up from the table and went in separate directions to get the wine, corkscrew, and wine glasses. She couldn't help but notice how natural it felt to have him in the kitchen with her. When they returned to the table, he popped the cork and poured each of them a glass.

"I would like to make a toast."

Picking up her glass, she studied him and wondered what he would say. He toasted to having a good meal and a wonderful evening. They drank to the toast before making their plates. She watched as he took a bite of the corn bread. He looked up at her, the corners of his mouth tilted upward.

"This is really good. Although I must admit that I have never eaten corn bread with spaghetti."

Kayla smiled. "Neither had my sisters nor me until we moved here to Baxley with Nana and Grandpa. Once we had it, we were addicted and have been eating it since."

He nodded. "Tell me more about your family."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I must warn you that there isn't much to it."

At his look of puzzlement, she told him her family history. Her nana and grandpa were no longer living, and both of her parents were deceased as well. Both of her parents had been only children. The only family members left whom she considered immediate family were her father's parents, Kristen, and Keirra.

"What about you? Tell me about your family."

* * * *

He paused. It was a simple question with a not so simple answer in several ways. "Well, you already know my father and children."

She nodded, and he continued. He was the oldest of three as well. His mother had remarried to Louis two years after he and his mother had moved to Austin. Ross had come along less than a year later, and Elayne came along about a year after Ross.

“Sounds like you have a good family.”

He nodded although the relationship between his family and himself was strained at times. Once Ross and Elayne had come along, he'd been on the outside looking in. Louis had made more of an effort than his mother to make sure that he was included. But by the time he was in high school, he started going down his own path. He didn't love his family any less, but his childhood had definitely shaped him into the man and the father he was today.

His goal was to make sure that he raised his children so they would turn into healthy and mature adults. There had been some kinks along the way, but so far so good or so he felt. The kids' grades were good, and they seemed to have good social interaction with other people. He chuckled under his breath when he realized where his thoughts were going. His father was right. He worried too much. Here he was on a date with a very beautiful woman, and he was raising his children to the best of his ability.

“Has anyone told you that you are a good cook?”

“Yes, someone has, and thank you.”

He turned the conversation back to her finding out what her interests and hobbies were as well as sharing his. They teased each other relentlessly. He was truly enjoying himself, and from Kayla's expression, she was enjoying herself as well.

* * * *

She'd never had so much fun and been turned on at the same time. A short while later they were both finished with their food. She took their empty plates to the kitchen sink for a short reprieve. The entire time that they had been at the table together, he'd teased her with touches. She gave as good as she got. Right now, she was turned on, and she was pretty sure that he was as well. She could feel his eyes on her.

“Do you mind if I ask what you have for dessert?”

She placed the plates in the sink while scolding herself mentally. For all the preparation of the meal and of getting ready, she hadn't even thought about dessert. Turning around slowly, she offered him the only thing that she had. Something she'd wanted to offer him since she ran into him in front of Sam's Café.

“Me.” A smile was trying to find its way onto her face at his reaction, but she fought it.

“Excuse me?”

Using her sexiest, slowest stroll, she made her way to where he was sitting. She grabbed her dress and lifted it some. His eyes widened at the additional skin she revealed, and her grin finally came to

the surface. She was nervous as hell, but his response was helping her to hide that fact. She lifted her leg, swung it over his lap, and sat down. She felt brazen, but nervous, yet his expression told her that it was worth it. James's hands automatically came up to her waist.

"You heard me correctly." She brought her hands up to his shoulders and began to massage them. "I have to be honest with you. I have wanted you since I first laid eyes on you."

His eyebrows rose. "Oh, really?"

"Yes, really. I just had to make you sweat a little."

He shook his head, and she knew what he was thinking. Yes, she had been a little sneaky, but she couldn't just throw herself at him. Plus, there was the fact that she wanted to be pursued a little.

"So you really want me?"

Leaning forward, she studied his features. "The question is, do you want me?"

His answer was to move closer and place a brief kiss on her lips. Pulling back, he slid his hands down to her thighs. "Wrap your arms around my neck."

She did as he asked, and he lifted her up into his arms. Her legs automatically wrapped around his waist. He headed out of the kitchen with her.

"Which way?"

She gave him directions and held on as he took the stairs and made his way to her bedroom. It was amazing that he didn't trip and fall since their eyes never left each other. He made it to her room and set her on her feet. James walked over to the bedside table and turned on the small lamp. The lamp didn't give off a lot of light for the room, but the lighting by the bed was great. When she noticed that, she almost grimaced. This being her first time, she was not sure that she wanted a spotlight on her, especially since she'd put on five pounds during the holidays. Looking him directly in the eye, she gave him a shy smile. "Do you mind if we leave the lights off?"

He walked back over to her. He brushed his hand across her cheek. "Yes, I do."

She sighed and closed her eyes. He would make this difficult for her.

"Look at me."

She opened her eyes slowly, and it was a difficult thing to do. There was a look in his eyes that she couldn't decipher.

"I want to see you when we make love."

She started to protest, but he stopped her. "That is what we are going to do, make love, not have a quick tumble in the dark."

She quickly averted her eyes then looked back at him. This was the first time that she'd ever been unsure.

His surprised expression told her that he read her uncertainty. "Are you nervous?"

She nodded. This was a big deal to her. "Yes, I am."

He stepped closer to her. "It has been a while for me too."

"Well, you are a step ahead of me since I have never done this."

* * * *

He could feel his mouth dropping open in shock. If she threw any more surprises at him today, he didn't know what he was going to do. The last thing he'd expected to hear from her was that she was a virgin. She was a beautiful woman. Men were attracted to her. He'd seen a few of the looks that she'd received, and he'd been behind a few of them. There was a reason she hadn't given herself to a man before now, and a strong surge of uncertainty swept through him.

"Are you sure that you want to do this with me?"

"Yes," she answered without hesitation.

He was still hesitant in spite of her growing certainty. "Do you trust me to make this right for you?"

"Yes, I do."

He conceded. "I want you to be as comfortable as possible to enjoy yourself. So I am going to turn the lamp off."

"Wait a second. There is something that I want to do first."

He groaned to himself as he watched the seductive sway of her rear end as she left the room. She returned a few minutes later with three candles in her hand. He watched as she lit them, placed one on the bedside table next to the lamp, and set the other two on her dresser. She gave James the okay to turn off the lamp. The corners of his mouth curved at the sight. The candles left enough discretion so that any flaws that she imagined she had wouldn't show but enough light for him to see what he was doing.

"That was a good idea," he stated as she walked toward him. He pulled her into his arms and placed a brief kiss on her lips. "Turn around for me."

She did as he asked, and he found the zipper on her dress. He slid the zipper down. The smooth skin that he uncovered was tempting. Leaning forward he placed a kiss on her skin. Once he finished unzipping the dress, he gave a slight tug, and his erection strained to be released from its confines. If the sight was this phenomenal from the back, he could only imagine what it would be like from the front. He turned her around to face him then pulled her closer to him.

“You are beautiful.”

She smiled. “Thank you. I feel a little underdressed compared to you.”

He’d left her bra and panties on, but he was still fully dressed. Bringing her hand up to his chest, he whispered, “Undress me.”

She did, taking her time to explore what she uncovered until James had all that he could take. He removed her undergarments then his own. Pulling her down on the bed with him, he turned so that he landed first. He reversed their positions again, bringing his lips down on hers. He shivered at the sensation of her bare breasts against the rough hair on his chest. Her nipples tightened, and they both groaned. He pulled back, and she groaned only to stop when his hands came up and replaced his chest.

He began to stroke her breasts until she shuddered hard against him. Her thighs clinched together involuntarily, and he chuckled low in his throat. He knew exactly what she needed. Her body twisted uncontrollably beneath him, seeking his touch. She went to reach for his shoulders, but he slid out of her reach and moved lower. He trailed his tongue down her body, leaving a hot, wet path. He kissed the undersides of her breasts before moving on to her flat stomach. When he slid lower, he paused. He lifted her legs over his arms, nipping at the soft skin inside her thighs as he parted her legs. She gasped, and being that she was new to all of this, he wondered if she was ready for it.

He touched his mouth to her, and her body let him know that she was ready. She lurched upward uncontrollably, but he held her fast and pressed her back onto the mattress. He felt the tension building in her, and she asked him not to stop the wonderful sensation. He had no intention of stopping anytime soon. He continued to pleasure her. He felt her thighs stiffen and tremble. Her hands clenched the bed sheet, and her hips arched into his. Her head thrashed from side to side. Her cries of passion escalated until the tension exploded, and her release came with a force that left her panting and limp. James had waited until he was certain that she’d found her pleasure, but his own desire was beyond waiting now. His heart pounding and his breathing ragged, he covered her body with his own.

He reached beneath the pillow for the condom that he slid under it earlier. The protection was donned in record time. He fit himself between her legs, poised to enter her. His eyes found hers, and the emotion that he read there made him smile as he began to enter her. There was a hint of discomfort that appeared in her expression, but it was gone before he could draw in his next breath. He held still and made sure that she was okay before moving again. She tensed instinctively, and he struggled to find some control as he felt the final shudders of her pleasure tightening around him. Then he began to move, agonizingly slow, within her, before gradually withdrawing, then filling her again, deeper still in a thrusting motion.

“Look at me, Kristina,” he whispered in a gravelly voice as he continued to thrust slowly into her and relished each and every time he did so.

He watched as she did what he asked, met her gaze mere seconds before he leaned closer and took her mouth. The stroke of his tongue with hers was as slow and deliberate as the joining of their bodies—pushing forward, retreating, and then pushing forward again. He could feel his erection expanding inside her with each time he entered her.

She traced his shoulder and gripped it on occasion. Never had he imagined that it would feel like this but he knew from experience that this was rare. Something that he'd never felt with Nicole. He knew that it wouldn't be this way with anyone else but Kayla. He began to change his movements, and he could feel his pleasure beginning to build.

His body took over. It seemed to know what to do. His teeth clenched as she began matching his rhythm, arching beneath him as he drove into her. When he kissed her, she moaned, crossing her legs over his back taking him deeper. Seconds later, she threw her head back, and a cry of pleasure burst from deep within her throat. She pulled him over the edge with her, and he dropped his face onto her throat. His groan of pleasure vibrated in her ear as her body drained him of every drop of his essence. He rolled to the side to keep from crushing her. He kept them connected. He caressed her, up and down her back.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Yes, I am."

He held her a few moments, both enjoying the residual ripples his release. "I wish that I could hold you all night."

She looked up at him. "How long can you stay?"

He looked over at the clock. It was still early. He could at least stay for another three hours. He pulled away from her, withdrawing slowly. "I can stay until midnight. So how about we take a shower and take it from there?"

She nodded. "That sounds good."

He rolled out of bed and headed for her bathroom. When he looked in the mirror, he had to smile because he almost didn't recognize himself. He looked relaxed and satisfied. Tonight had been an interesting night. It had also been a wonderful one. He knew that it could only get better from here.

Chapter Eleven

“So you are okay?”

Kayla nodded at Keirra’s question. It was Monday night, and they were doing what they normally did on Monday—eat at Sam’s Café. As soon as she walked in the restaurant, her sisters had known something was different. They had decided to take turns at guessing what it was. Kristen had guessed right on the first try. They had already ordered their food, and Kayla was grateful that her sisters weren’t asking for details. She wouldn’t be surprised if they wanted to make her suffer.

“I am glad for you.”

She reached across the table and took Kristen’s hand in hers. “I am happy for you as well.”

Keirra inclined her head toward the engagement ring on her sister’s hand. “What is it like being engaged?”

Kristen’s smile widened. “Different, but fun.”

“Have you set a date yet?” Kayla asked after she swallowed the sip of soda she’d just taken.

Kristen shook her head. “No, we haven’t. I gave Randy a list of dates to see if there was one that he thought was good. We both have agreed that we don’t want to get married near any holidays or birthdays. We will come up with a date soon enough. But when we set a date, you two will be first to know because I’m going to count on both of you to help me with the wedding plans.

Nadia came back with their food, and all three of them thanked her gratefully. They all seemed to be hungry tonight.

Kayla looked over at Keirra. “How is Eric?”

Keirra released a pent-up breath. “Back at work, thankfully.”

Kayla laughed, and Keirra rolled her eyes. Kayla knew how happy her sister was that the doctor had given Eric the okay to go return to duty, and not a moment too soon. He’d started to become like a caged animal since he’d been shot the day after Thanksgiving. In the beginning, he’d been okay because he’d been sore and hadn’t been in any rush to get back. The last three weeks of his time off duty had been rough. Eric had felt like he was healed at this point and had started to become restless.

Kayla knew that her sister now regretted the plan that she’d come up with to keep him from becoming too restless. Sexual gratification had been one of those ways. Keirra hadn’t minded, at least not in the beginning. But for the last two weeks, all Kayla and Kristen had heard from Keirra was that she was hoping the doctor would give Eric the okay for the sake of her students. As it stood right now, the lack of sleep was affecting Keirra’s ability to stay focused during the day. Kristen spoke, interrupting her thoughts.

“Maybe those dark circles under your eyes will go away now.”

Keirra almost choked on the piece of steak that she eaten and gave Kristen the evil eye. “That is so not funny.”

Kayla laughed, and Keirra fought her own chuckle. Kayla knew Keirra loved Eric. He was a good guy, and she was glad that Keirra had chosen to stick with him in spite of the fears that she had stemming from their past. The fear of losing Eric in the line of duty like they’d lost her father was still there, but Keirra was dealing with it, and she knew that Eric was doing his best to at least meet her sister halfway. She had a gut feeling that they would be together a long time.

“So how do you want this thing with James to play out?”

She shrugged at Keirra’s question, but there was a slight smile on her face. “He is a good man, and I wouldn’t mind getting seriously involved with him. But I’m not looking to rush into putting a label on anything either. I just want it to happen naturally.”

She meant that. When she’d first laid eyes on James, it had been lust at first sight. Now that she’d met him and was in the process of getting to know him, it was more than that. Was it love? Not yet, but it had the potential.

“Earth to Kayla.”

Her head snapped up, and both of her sisters were looking at her expectantly. She knew that she’d missed something while off in her own thoughts again. It was something that she’d been doing a lot of lately. “I’m sorry. I didn’t hear the question.”

“Kristen asked how your students have been behaving since the parent conference.”

One corner of her mouth tilted upward, and she reported that their behavior had improved a great deal. She could actually get through that class period without one of the girls taking snobby shots at the others.

Today had been interesting. The groups for the project had been put together, and each group had been given a list of wars in American History. The girls had chosen the War of 1812 to write about. She’d also assigned them weekly progress reports to turn in to her. The reports were designed to make sure that all did their part in the paper. If the students were honest, the reports should work out very well. She had let the students know anything that they put down on the report would be confidential. This was for grading purposes only. She herself had once been a student and knew that when it came to group work, each didn’t necessarily pull his or her load, but everyone wanted credit for the grade. So hopefully the way she was going about this would keep everyone honest.

“I’m glad everything is working out.”

Kristen exhaled softly. “So am I. Yesterday was the first time I have seen Dan sober in a while.”

Keirra elbowed her. “That isn’t nice.”

Kristen shrugged. "I know, but it is true. Although the kicker is that I swear I saw him with Brigitte."

Kayla choked on the bite of angel hair pasta that she'd just taken as Kristen continued.

"By the time I got around to get a second look, they were pulling off."

Keirra laughed. "It couldn't have been Brigitte. Trish would have committed murder by now, and there would be a full-out war in Kayla's classroom."

She remained silent. It really could have been Brigitte in the truck with Dan. Who knows what could have happened if someone besides Kristen had seen them. She would talk to Brigitte to see what was going on. Maybe she could stop by Brigitte's house on the way home if they didn't leave Sam's too late.

"Get your mind off James."

Kayla smiled at Keirra's comment. If her sisters knew what she'd just been thinking about, they would probably flip. Instead, she just went along with Keirra's assumption.

"How can I when the man is so fine? Besides, I didn't tell you to keep your mind off Eric, did I?"

Keirra's smile grinned. "No, you didn't, but it wouldn't have worked anyway."

Kristen pushed her plate away. "I am stuffed."

There was still half a piece of chicken left behind. Kayla snagged it before Keirra could even pick her fork up. She cut the piece in half and gave it to Keirra, who thanked her graciously. Kayla bit into her piece of the moist chicken and almost moaned in pleasure.

"I hope that I fall in love soon. You two seem to be losing weight, and judging from the dress that I wore this weekend, I am gaining it."

Keirra laughed. "I don't know about Kristen, but the amount of sex that Eric and I have is what is causing me to lose my weight."

Kristen rolled her eyes. "Running after several children during the day and a three-year-old at night is keeping me skinny."

Kayla looked at her sister. "Are you and Randy planning on having any children together?"

Kristen shrugged. "We have talked about it."

Keirra pushed her plate away. "Sounds dangerous to me."

She chuckled as she pushed her own plate away. "No worse than what she is already dealing with, considering the fact that she runs a day care center."

Like clockwork, Nadia appeared at their table and removed their plates. Moments later, she returned with their checks. They each settled their bill and made their way toward the front door. Somehow, they had all managed to park side by side in the parking lot, so they didn't have to escort each other to their cars. Kristen was the first to pull out of the parking lot, followed by Keirra, and she Kayla left last.

She drove home, but a block from her street, she took a left going toward the Holbrock residence. Fortunately Brigitte had been able move out of the bad and rundown neighborhood that she'd lived in while she was in school. High school had been tough on Brigitte. Pregnancy prior to graduating hadn't made it any better. There had been several times when Kayla and her sisters had babysat Somer to give Brigitte a break, or if Brigitte had to go to work. Brigitte's mother had died giving birth to her, and Brigitte's father had been a cold and heartless man. Not to mention Brigitte had spent the night at their house because her father had been drinking heavily, and she didn't want him to harm her or the baby.

Times had been hard for Brigitte, but after high school they seemed to get a little better, especially financially. She'd never said why that happened, but Kayla had a good idea now how it had. The Goodmans had money. It was also old money.

She turned into the yard of the modest house and smiled. It was a nice-looking home, and it was definitely Brigitte. After parking behind Brigitte's car, she got out and headed up the walkway toward the house. Brigitte answered the door after the first ring of the bell. Brigitte's eyes widened when she saw who stood there.

"Hi, Kayla. This is a surprise."

"I hope that I'm not interrupting anything."

Brigitte shook her head no. "Please come in."

She sighed. "As much as I would like to, what I want to talk to you about might be best said out here."

Brigitte's eyes widened with concern before she stepped outside and closed the door. "Is there more conflict among the girls?"

"No, not at all. Things have been going really well."

Kayla paused not, really sure how to approach the subject. After a second of deliberation, she decided to be straightforward. There really was no other way to be. "My sister thinks that she saw you with Dan this weekend." She held up her hands before Brigitte could respond. "If you were together, it is none of my business. I just came to warn you to be more careful, especially since there are a lot of people who don't know about the past that the two of you have together."

Brigitte brought a shaky hand to her mouth. "I was with Dan, but it was totally innocent."

Kayla put a reassuring hand on Brigitte's shoulder. "I am sure that it was, and I'm not here to judge you by any means. I never have, and I never will, but any gossipier could have made this a bad situation."

Brigitte nodded. "I started to tell Dan no when he asked me to ride with him and talk." Brigitte sighed heavily. "I thought that the tint on his truck would be concealing enough. I guess I was wrong."

Kayla smiled at Brigitte. "Kristen didn't know for sure that it was you. She just thought that it was."

Brigitte shook her head. "Close enough."

She paused, and then asked Brigitte a difficult question. "Are you in love with him?"

Brigitte's eyes widened. "I'm not sure anymore."

Kayla asked another difficult question. "Is he in love with you?"

Brigitte laughed. "I doubt it. Does he care about me? Yes, just like I care about him, but he loves Somer. We are trying to figure out when would be a good time to come out with the fact that Dan is Somer's father."

Kayla was silent for a moment. She knew that when the truth did come out, it was going to rock Baxley. "Well, I know that you are a grown woman, and you know what you are doing. I just wanted to warn you to be careful."

Brigitte released a pent-up breath. "Thanks for the warning, Kayla. If I haven't told you, you have always been a good friend."

She leaned forward to hug Brigitte. "So are you."

Brigitte shook her head. "I didn't have a lot to offer you or your sisters, but all three of you befriended me."

Kayla gave her an extra squeeze. "And it was our pleasure."

Both women smiled at each other. Growing up had been an experience for the both of them. They had also learned a lot from each other. Brigitte was one of the reasons that she and her sisters worked with children and teenagers. They felt that they had the power to make a difference, and so far, they had. She gave Brigitte another hug.

"I don't want to keep you long because it's late."

Brigitte nodded. "Yes, it is, and we both have to get an early start tomorrow. I appreciate you coming by."

"You are welcome."

“Tell your sisters that I said hello.”

“I will do that.”

Both women said good night to each other, and Kayla walked toward her car. She got in and drove off as Brigitte went back into the house. It was going to hit the fan when it came out that Somer was Dan’s daughter as well. Some of Baxley would be in an uproar for a while. She was certain that it was going to be messy. Whatever the outcome, she would stand by Brigitte and Somer. Neither of them had received a lot of support from others over the years. She would make sure that would change. Turning onto her street, she sighed when she saw her home. It still felt strange to go home to an empty house. After having her sisters for roommates as long as she had, she wondered if she would ever get used to not having them there to greet her when she arrived home. When she pulled into the driveway, she cut the engine and made her way into her house. She locked the door behind her and headed upstairs to get ready for bed.

While she was in the shower, she began to yawn. It had been a good day, yet one filled with adventure. She needed a full night of rest. It was only Monday night, and she’d had enough action happen today to last her for the rest of the week. After turning off the water, she stepped out of the shower and toweled off. Clad in her nightgown, she climbed into bed and tugged the covers up over herself. Closing her eyes, she thought of crawling into bed and snuggling up with James. Saturday night he’d been true to his word. At midnight, James had reluctantly pulled himself away from her and had gotten dressed. He’d placed a brief kiss on her lips then walked downstairs and letting himself out. She hadn’t gotten out of bed herself because he’d made her stay there. When she rolled over onto her side, she winced slightly at the ache between her thighs. She and James had made love one more time before he left. It had been even better than the first time. She caught herself wondering if the next time would be better. Something told her that it would be.

Chapter Twelve

Kayla turned to the chalkboard and erased the information that she'd discussed with her first class of tenth graders. The tardy bell rang just as she finished. She turned to face her class of eleventh graders. "Good morning, class. I hope that everyone had a great weekend."

There were a few grumbles about it being a good weekend except that it had been too short. She felt like grumbling herself, considering that it had been a busy weekend, which had kept her from spending any time with James. Instead, the corners of her mouth tilted upward as she walked around to the front of her desk.

"Well, whether you had a good weekend or a bad one, I hope that everyone read the assignment." She shook her head as she received a few of the regular groans that she was used to hearing every Monday. "Who can tell me about the United States' race to world power?"

By the time class ended, she was still grinning. One reason was because her students had been so entertaining. The other was that it was lunchtime. Even though she was not hungry, she enjoyed the break. It also gave her time to rest up for her class of twelfth graders. She only had one class of twelfth graders, but it was a large class, and they had already begun the countdown to graduation. The bell rang, signaling that her lunch was over and that class was getting ready to begin. When it was time, she started it just like she did all others, by greeting her students before getting into the topic of the class.

"Who can give me an example of how the media can influence political life in America?"

"What media?" The comment from Kevin caused a few outbreaks of laughter.

She smiled. "I am glad that you asked that question. Let's begin with one that is simpler. Do you know what media is defined as?"

Her sarcastic question had the effect that she wanted it to. Kevin ducked his head in embarrassment, and a few of his classmates laughed. She quieted the students.

"Now let's start over. Who can tell me what influence the media had or can have on American politics?"

She finally started getting answers that she could put on the board. By the time the bell rang to end class, she was more than ready for it to. She couldn't remember being that difficult as a senior in high school. As a matter of fact, senior year had been the best year to her. It had been the highlight of her high school days. She and her sisters had had a lot of fun, but they had taken things a lot more seriously than her current students did.

"Remember the homework assignment for tomorrow, and have a good day."

Her second class of ninth graders filed in. They had finished their discussion on the Declaration of Independence, and now they were moving on to the subject of the U.S. Constitution. When the last bell of the day rang, she was more than ready to meet her sisters at Sam's Café, but she had a little time to use up. She spent it watching a special on Christopher Columbus. It was interesting to know

how much confusion surrounded him. There were always people questioning where he'd come from as well as other aspects about his background. When she walked into Sam's Café, her sisters were already sitting there waiting on her. They stood up to embrace her then slid over to make room for her.

"Nadia has already been by to take our drink orders. We placed yours for you."

She smiled at Kristen. "Thank you. Sorry I'm late. I got caught up in watching a special on Christopher Columbus."

"Did you see the special on communism yesterday?"

She shook her head at Keirra's question. "No, I missed that. Do you know when it is coming on again?"

Her sister shrugged. "No, but if I find out, I'll call you or record it for you."

"I would appreciate that."

Nadia brought back their drinks. "You girls ready to order?"

The corners of Kayla's mouth curved upward as she looked up at the waitress that had been waiting on them for years. Nadia was at least six years older than they were and had been a waitress in Sam's for as long as she could remember. Even though ownership of the restaurant was in the process of being handed over to Nadia, she was still a waitress. She claimed that she loved waiting on people and would do it for as long as she could.

"Yes, we are."

Nadia took their orders before walking away. Kayla looked at her sisters who looked just as tired as she was. "I thought that moving back to Baxley was supposed to leave us well rested?"

Kristen laughed. "It did until we met the men in our lives."

Keirra laughed herself. "And because of that fact, I don't mind being tired at all."

Kayla rolled her eyes. "Believe me, it shows."

Keirra gave her a mock sympathetic look. "Oh, are you jealous?"

She shook her head at her younger sister. "Trust me. I have no reason to be jealous."

Kristen leaned forward to look at her. "You look very tired yourself, and you have been tight-lipped about what's going on between you and James."

It was her turn to be sarcastic. "Well, there hasn't been a lot going on between us, so there is nothing to tell."

An expression of disbelief settled onto Kristen's face. "Yeah, right."

Kayla smiled before putting her sisters out of their misery and filling them in on what had been going on.

Keirra arched a dark brow in Kayla's direction. "So he and Jonah get along?"

Kayla nodded, and she was glad that was the case. It would be hard for her to choose between the two men.

"I heard that Jonah is dating Ellie," Keirra added.

She held her response until after Nadia had delivered their food. Once Nadia was gone again, she looked at Kristen. "Yes, he is dating Ellie, and they are getting along great."

She took a bite of her pasta marinara and closed her eyes in pleasure. She ought to be ashamed of herself for being so gluttonous. "I need to have my jaw broken."

Kristen laughed at her, but looked across the table at Kayla. "Why is that?"

"Because I can actually feel my butt giggle when I run."

Both of her sisters burst out laughing, but at her disgruntled look, Kristen stopped laughing. "Come on, Kayla, we all have at least one imperfection on our bodies."

She shrugged. "Yeah well, that doesn't mean a lot to me because this is the only body I have to look at in the mirror every day."

Keirra had to jump into the conversation. "Well, it ought to. Trust me, no one wants a perfect person, body or otherwise. In the end, someone ends up feeling inferior. Besides, you look just fine to me."

Kristen scoffed at the statement. "In my opinion, perfection only invites jealousy. Besides, you are beautiful."

She laughed at Kristen. "I think your opinion is biased."

Kristen gave her a sly look. "You think so, huh? Well, what does James have to say about that?"

That question gave her pause. James loved her body. It was obvious because he couldn't keep his hands to himself whenever he was in her presence. She knew that he loved her mind just as much. He engaged her in questions about history. He seemed to be interested in her passion for history as well as her outlook on life. When she looked at Kristen, her expression said it all.

Her sister grinned. "That is what I thought."

Kristen reached out and touched her hand. "Look, we have all had our days when we feel like we are packing on the pounds. But seriously, you look great, and I can't tell that you have gained any weight at all."

She sighed heavily. "You are right. I don't know what is wrong with me."

Keirra who had been silent up to now spoke. "You have to focus on something negative when everything else is going well. So you search for something negative. That way when something bad actually happens, it softens the blow."

She looked at Keirra in shock, and Kristen's expression matched hers. Keirra only shrugged her shoulders. "It is just a suggestion."

Kayla looked at her with surprise. "Is that what you used to do?"

Keirra nodded without hesitation. "At least I did until Eric. But even in the beginning of our relationship, I did it."

She laughed. "So many awful things have happened to us in life that I didn't feel like I could survive anything else."

Kayla could see the pain in her sister's eyes even though she smiled.

Keirra reached for her drink. "Lucky for me, Eric wouldn't give up."

Kayla didn't know what to say to her sister's confession. It was amazing to her how differently she and her sisters had been affected by the tragedies in their lives. Maybe she was doing the same thing that Keirra had done. Maybe she wasn't. Either way, she didn't feel as bad about her body anymore. The main reason she hated gaining weight was because it was too hard for her to get it off again, even though she was still young. The other was that she hated dieting and running, and preferred to do both at the bare minimum to keep healthy.

Kristen frowned as she looked at her watch. "Oh, man. It's late."

She looked at her own watch and grimaced. It was later than they normally stayed out. They got Nadia's attention and boxed up their leftover food then paid their checks. When Kayla walked into her home a short while later, she thought about the day when she would no longer come home to an empty house.

* * * *

"How does this look?"

Kayla moved a set of balloons to another chair, shaking her head and moving it back. That earned her a growl from Keirra and laughs from Eric and James.

She turned to look at her sister. "I want everything to look good."

James pulled her into his arms and placed a kiss on her lips before Keirra could say anything. “No, you want it to look perfect, and it is. Kristen and Randy are going to love everything.”

She hoped so because they had worked hard to put the engagement party together. Kristen and Randy thought that they were coming over for lunch. They had no idea of what was really going on. She and Keirra had worked hard to put the party together.

“They are coming,” someone whispered loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Everyone took their spots and waited for the engaged couple. When they stepped into the backyard, a loud “Surprise” echoed around the yard. Surprise showed all over Kristen and Randy’s faces. They were greeted by all of Randy’s siblings and by his parents. Kayla and Keirra hung back and let everyone else get in greetings. Kristen and Randy finally appeared in front of them. Her sister was smiling brightly, her eyes containing a few unshed tears.

“So this is what the two of you have been up to?”

Kayla nodded and she embraced her younger sister. “Guilty as charged.”

Kristen pulled back and hugged Keirra next. “Well thank you, guys. We really appreciate it.”

Keirra gave the couple a sly look. “Don’t thank us yet.”

Kristen and Randy groaned simultaneously. Their worried expressions mirrored each other. “What have the two of you done?”

“I think the better question is what haven’t they done,” Eric corrected with around a chuckle.

It also earned him an elbow from Keirra, but she was careful of his shoulder. He chuckled and gave her a kiss.

Kayla shook her head. “You will find out later.”

Kayla announced that it was time to eat. Kristen could ask any other questions. It felt like the holidays all over again. She looked over at Kristen and couldn’t help but to grin at how happy her sister looked. After everyone finished eating, it was time for the surprise that she and Keirra had planned.

She disappeared into the house to get the stuff that she needed. When she returned, Kristen and Keirra were gone. She went ahead and set up the projector so that it would show on the screen that James and Eric had set up for her earlier.

“Hey, James, could you . . .” She stopped speaking when she realized that he wasn’t standing there. “Eric, have you seen James?”

He nodded his head in the direction of the corner that her sisters had James hemmed up in.

She gasped as she walked over to the corner. “Kristen and Keirra!”

She was glad to see her sisters jump before turning around looking at her with guilty expressions.

“What are you two doing?”

James smiled as he answered for them. “They are making sure that my intentions toward you are good.”

She frowned and placed her hands on her hips. “And the two of you wondered why I wouldn’t bring him around you prior to now.”

James pulled her into his arms. “They have asked pretty tame questions so far.”

She gave him a look. “That is only because they haven’t had you in their grasp long enough.”

He laughed. “It’s okay. Trust me. I have been in their shoes.”

She rolled her eyes at him. So much for trying to keep him from being interrogated. “You aren’t supposed to be on their side, but since you are and since you are enjoying yourself, I am going to go ahead and start the presentation. You all stay back here and enjoy yourself.”

She started to walk off but James held onto her, aware of her agitation. “Where are you going?”

“Back to the party to enjoy myself,” she huffed.

“Don’t worry about her, James. She just gets mad when she can’t be in control.”

A look of surprise fell over James’s face at Kristen’s statement. “Really?”

Her sisters laughed when they realized why James was surprised and why she, turning red in the face, glared at her sisters. Their laughter died down quickly.

Kristen finally stepped forward and hugged her. “We know that this was probably not the best time to do this, but it has been our first opportunity.”

Keirra gave her a leveled look. “As you pointed out yourself, you have kept him from us.”

When Kristen pulled back, Kayla was still a little upset, but not as much. Kristen was right. This was the first time that they had spent with James since the two of them became involved. Still the fact that they were questioning him and not her was nerve-wracking.

“So now, where is my surprise?”

Keirra shook her head. “It is not only your surprise.”

Kristen smiled. “Okay then, where is our surprise?”

Kayla pointed in the direction opposite of which they were standing. “Over there.”

Kayla and Keirra led the way up to where the tables were set up. When everyone was seated, she started the projector and the music. She and Keirra had arranged a compilation of pictures of Kristen and Randy over the years together. The last and most recent was one that she'd managed to sneak after the two had become engaged. Her sister's smile sparkled just as much as her engagement ring.

When the projector and the music stopped, Kristen had tears in her eyes. Kristen stood up to embrace Kayla and Keirra. "Thank you. I have no idea where the two of you found all of those pictures, but thank you."

Randy stood up next and gave Kayla a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you for giving me another reminder as to why I would be a fool not to marry your sister."

Kayla laughed. "And thank you for reminding me of a reason why I shouldn't kill them."

Chapter Thirteen

Pulling away from James's tight embrace, Kayla gasped for air and tried to regain control of the situation before it got out of hand.

"We have to stop."

He groaned as he tried to move closer to her again. "Why?"

"Because I can't get the door open."

It took him a moment to realize what she was saying. "Where is the key?"

She deposited it in his hand, and a moment later, he had the door open. "There we go."

He backed her into the house and closed the door behind them, not giving her a chance to say anything. His mouth found hers again, and he stripped her of her jacket then took care of his own. He scooped her up and carried her upstairs. They hadn't been able to take their hands off each other since James had convinced her to sneak out of the house with him. Well, for her, it hadn't really been sneaking. For James, it had, even though he'd informed his father that he was going out after he'd put the kids to bed. By the way they had began steaming up the town with their romance, it was not a shock to anyone to see them together no matter what time it was. James was also busy raising a family and didn't have a lot of time to spare during the week. That was one of the reasons that she'd agreed to meet him tonight. They had gone for a drive that had ended back at her home with them making out in his SUV.

When she'd suggested that they go inside, he'd followed her happily. After James entered her room, he stood her on her feet. Their clothes disappeared quickly, the next time their bodies touched, they aligned perfectly. She jerked against him, enjoying the sensation of feeling his skin against hers. Her hands automatically came up and touched his chest. She was addicted to the sexiness of his body already. She traced the muscles of his chest with her hands and moved toward the tightness of his abdomen. When she roamed lower, he grabbed her hands.

"You are getting into dangerous territory."

She looked up at him, passion rushing through her and smiled. "Good. I want to."

He tried to pull her into his arms, but she stopped him. "I want to pleasure you this time." She almost shocked herself as she made the bold statement, but she meant it. "I want to pleasure all of you."

He responded to her desire by pulling her close for a kiss. "You always do," he stated when he lifted his head. He let her hands go, and she eased them down his stomach until she found his erect manhood. A groan escaped him at the sensation of her hands surrounding him. She seemed to know how to pleasure him simply from his response to what she was doing. She continued to torture him with pleasure until he pulled away from her.

"That's enough, baby," he whispered.

She let him go even as she shook her head. “We are just getting started.”

He didn’t have a chance to ask her what she meant because she knelt before him. He emitted a guttural sound at the first tentative touch of her lips. When she opened her mouth and took him inside, he shuddered hard against her.

He put an end to the pleasure she wanted to give him when he reached down, lifted her up, and then placed her on the bed. She couldn’t blame him for lack of gentleness. She felt extremely turned on. Somehow, she ended up on her stomach. He covered her with his body, not giving her a chance to roll over. He reached for some of the pillows on the bed and slid them under her stomach until she was arched sexily toward him. He entered her slowly, and her body gripped him greedily. She moaned, and he closed his eyes.

“Baby, you feel so good,” he whispered. He slid deeper into her before stiffening. Kayla arched into him, and he grabbed her hips.

“Be still, baby.”

“I can’t. You feel too good inside of me,” she moaned.

His eyes, closed, an expression of pure torture on his face. “I am sorry, baby, but I forgot protection.”

It was her turn to stiffen once she realized what he had done. The statement should have completely doused her arousal, but it didn’t. She closed her eyes and tried to relax. “What are we going to do?”

He opened his eyes, his body still taut, giving her an idea of how thin a grip he had on his control.

“Give me a moment, and I will pull out. Because if either of us moves right now, I am going to come inside of you.”

Even though that comment should have scared the hell out of her, it didn’t. Instead, her body contracted involuntarily at the idea.

James groaned in her ear. “Baby, you can’t do that.”

“It was not intentional,” she whispered trying to remain as still as possible.

Several heartbeats later, he was able to withdraw from her as he said he would and without incident. He moved to the side breathlessly. “I am sorry. Unfortunately, I got a little carried away.”

She turned to look at him and saw the apologetic look on his face. “It’s okay. I didn’t help, so I am just as responsible as you are.” He closed his eyes briefly opening them again. She cupped his cheek. “It really is okay.”

She hoped that it would be. The last thing that she needed to worry about was an unplanned pregnancy, but hopefully it wouldn't come to that. If it did, she and James would figure it out together.

Leaning over, she gave him a kiss pulling back. There was a smile on her face when she spoke. "Hopefully the moment hasn't been ruined, because I really do want to be with you."

It was his turn to smile. "I want that too," he stated his lips met hers.

She brought her hands up and around his neck. Her body was flush with his by the time they came up for air. He reached for protection coming up over her. A mutual moan fell from both of their lips when he entered her again. The sensation for her was totally different. So much so, that she arched against him. Needing him, craving his touch, she rocked against him.

"Yes," she moaned.

James caught her mouth in another kiss. Every movement of their bodies seemed to be producing mind-blowing ecstasy.

"James, please don't stop," she begged.

And he didn't, continuing to move deep within her. Pleasure raced through her with each thrust until her release hit her like a tidal wave. She cried out his name as her body began to contract. It was enough to make him go over the edge with her. A shout of pleasure escaped from his throat. It was a long time before either of their breathing returned to normal. Once it had, he placed a kiss on her lips. She when he pulled back.

"I think I'm addicted to you."

A smile appeared on his face that she couldn't contain. The laughter followed. A few moments later, he withdrew from her and made his way to the bathroom. She lay there for a second before sliding out of bed slipping into her robe.

He looked at her with confusion. "What are you doing?"

"I know that you have to leave soon, and I wanted to walk you out."

He walked over to her and pulled her into his arms. His hands went for the sash that was keeping her robe together. She looked at him with puzzlement as he undid it.

"Well, you don't have to worry about that, because I will be staying the night."

Shock traveled through her. "You don't have to do that."

Even as she said the words, she knew that she was lying through her teeth, and his expression told her that he was aware of that as well. She wanted him to stay the night as she always did and hated when he had to leave her after their passionate encounters.

He nodded. "Yes, I do. The last time we were together I wanted to stay with you, but I couldn't." He slipped the robe off her shoulders. "This time I can, and I will. I want to feel you in my arms for the night."

She was speechless. Long enough for him to sweep her up into his arms and carry her back to bed. "What about the kids?"

"Dad is with them, and even though I am nervous about it, I know that he will call if anything goes wrong."

With that said, there was nothing left for her to say. She'd thought about spending the night in his arms several times, and evidently, so had he. She allowed him to tuck her into his arms and he placed a brief kiss on the back of her head.

"I will spend the night as long as you don't mind me interrupting your sleep early in the morning."

She turned her head to look at him. "What time do you plan on getting up?"

The time he mentioned would have made her flinch if it hadn't been a morning that she was scheduled to run.

"I have to get up and run, so I will probably be up by then."

Several hours later, she was proved to be wrong. James was the one to turn off the alarm first. She felt him reach across and hit the snooze button. Kayla barely stirred, not wanting to move. James's mouth found hers for a brief kiss. She stirred slightly and snuggled closer to him then settled again.

He chuckled. "Baby, it is time for me to go."

Kayla stirred again before opening her eyes. He was studying her intently, making her feel beautiful in more ways than she ever had. She gave him a sleepy smile. "Is it time for you to leave?"

"Yes, I don't want to go, but I have to get home to get the kids ready for school."

She moaned as she stretched. He slid out of bed and began getting dressed. She was a little slower to move about, but she finally followed James downstairs. She folded her arms across her chest to keep from reaching for him as he slipped into his jacket. When he was finished, he held his arms out, and she went into them.

"Call me later on."

He placed a brief kiss on her lips. "I will. Have a good day."

She sighed. "I will. You do the same."

* * * *

James gave her one more kiss before opening the door and walking out. Walking away from her was hard, a lot harder than he wanted to admit. When he made it home, the house was still quiet, but he knew that it wouldn't be for long. He went straight for the shower. By the time he got out, his alarm was going off. He dressed quickly and then began the routine of waking the kids. Jamie was the first. The fact that she'd become interested in makeup and appearance was his reasoning behind that. He woke Jana next, and Jenna followed. When he entered the room that Josh occupied, he couldn't help but smile. His son looked so peaceful as he slept in his crib. He reached in and picked his son up. Seeing his children this morning made him realize two things. The first was that they were okay without him for a little while, and the second was that he hadn't lived his life in a long time. Jamie walked by the room and paused, concern taking over her expression.

"Is everything okay, Dad?"

He looked at his daughter and released a pent-up breath. For the first time in a long time, he realized that things were.

Chapter Fourteen

“Oh, Jonah, please. I know that . . .” Kayla trailed off as she looked at her friend sitting in the booth across from her. There was something different about him. Her eyes widened when she realized what it was. “You did it.”

Jonah gave her a puzzled look. “What are you talking about now?”

“You and Ellie did it.”

Jonah sat up quickly and looked around as if to see if anyone had heard Kayla. Once he was satisfied that no one had, he turned and glared at her. “Could you keep your voice down? I would appreciate it if Ellie doesn’t receive any embarrassment due to that.”

She brought a hand to her mouth. She could understand his concern over having his personal business known in public. “Sorry, Jonah. I just got a little excited for you.”

One corner of his mouth tilted upward. “I appreciate that.”

“I am happy for you and Ellie.”

His smile widened. “So is my mother.”

She reached over and snagged a fry off his plate. Tonight, she’d decided to go with a side salad, and as good as it was, she was still craving a French fry. “So your mother likes Ellie?”

Jonah gave her a look. “Almost as much as she likes you.”

She shook her head. “Tell her that Ellie will probably give her grandchildren, and I will quickly become a second favorite.”

He laughed. “There is no way that I would put Ellie through that torture.”

She laughed before taking another bite of her salad. “Oh, come on. I am sure that having your children won’t be that bad.”

He gave her a look of displeasure. “That is not what I meant.”

She grinned. “Relax, Jonah. Ellie can defend herself against your mother just as well as I can.” Taking a drink of her soda, she shrugged. “I can even give her a few pointers if you like.”

Jonah chuckled. “That is fine. Just remember that I want her to be able to defend herself against mother, not give her a heart attack.”

She grinned as she finished her salad, and when she walked into her house a short while later, it was still there. She headed upstairs and she began to prepare for bed. She enjoyed her dinners with Jonah. It was always a good ending to a hard day. She crawled into bed as her cell phone rang. Jonah’s name appeared on the screen, and she answered.

“I was calling to let you know that I made it home safely.”

She laughed. “Very funny.”

He chuckled. “Well, I figured that I would call you since you forgot to call me.”

“Sorry, I was a little preoccupied when I got home.”

The phone beeped letting her know that she had another call. A glance at the screen told her that it was James.

“Hey, Jonah, that is James. I will talk to you tomorrow.”

She could hear the amusement in his voice at her level of excitement but ignored him. Talking to James was one of the highlights of her day, especially if she didn’t get a chance to see him.

“Have a good night, and tell him that I said hello.”

She smiled. “You too, and I will.”

She clicked over to answer James’s call. “Hello.”

“Hey, beautiful. How are you?”

She shivered at the husky timbre of his voice. Something about the deep baritone excited her. “I am fine. Just made it in. “What are you doing?”

He chuckled. “I just put the kids in bed, and I am getting ready for bed myself.”

She rolled onto her back, stared up at the ceiling, knowing his children as she did, she was sure that it was interesting. “I wish that I was there with you.”

“I wish that you were here with me as well,” he replied, and she knew that it was heartfelt. Unfortunately, she hadn’t had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with the children because James wanted to be sure of where they were with the relationship before he pulled the children into it.

He paused, and she knew that he was thinking. “I have a question for you.”

She heard the seriousness in his voice, and she sat up a little. “Okay.”

“Would you like to come over to the house Friday night and join us for dinner?”

That question gave her pause. Was the man psychic and reading her thoughts? Until now, the time that they had spent together was solely between the two of them, and now that the opportunity was presenting itself, and in such an intimate setting, she wasn’t sure. Yet, she knew that it was now or

never. She and James were way beyond a casual relationship. After taking a deep breath, she said, “I would love to. What time should I be there?”

“Anytime that you want, but we normally have dinner around six thirty or seven.”

That time would work well for her. It would give her time to get off work and run the few errands that she would need to. “I will join you all for dinner on Friday, but on one condition.”

He paused. “And that is?”

She smiled at his hesitance. “That you let me cook dinner.”

“Only if you let me pay for it.”

She laughed, knowing that the deal wasn’t going to get any better than that.

“In that case, we have a deal, and I will be there.”

They talked a little bit longer until she yawned. He made her get off the phone knowing that she had to get up early. She told him good night then disconnected the call. As she lay there, she now knew why her sisters didn’t mind being tired. With a man like James around, she was willing to drink an extra cup of coffee or two if that was what she needed to make it through the day. As it turned out, she didn’t need any coffee. The idea of having dinner with the Feldons was enough to keep her going for the next two days.

* * * *

When the bell rang signaling the end of class for the day, she wished everyone a good weekend before turning to erase the chalkboard.

Jamie stuck her head into her classroom a moment later. “Ms. Smith, I need to run to my locker.”

She nodded at Jamie. “Okay. When you get finished, meet me at my car. I am in my usual spot.”

“I will meet you there,” Jamie stated and left the room.

She turned back to the chalkboard and continued erasing it. Tonight was the big night, and she and Jamie were going grocery shopping prior to heading to the Feldons’ house. She’d volunteered to bring Jamie home since they were already in the same location. That would give James more time to pick up the other kids and get them settled. She finished straightening up the room then gathered up her bag and heading to the front office to sign out. Jamie was standing by the car waiting on her, and she hit the unlock button allowing Jamie to enter her car. The teenager was all smiles by the time Kayla got into the car.

“What are you grinning about?”

Jamie shrugged her shoulders. “I am just excited that you are coming over for dinner tonight.”

Kayla started the car and drove out of the parking lot. “So am I.”

They pulled in front of the grocery store. She pulled the grocery list out of her purse and tore it in half. Giving the bottom half to Jamie, she kept the top half for herself.

“You take that list, and find everything. Then we will meet by the sour cream.”

Jamie nodded, and they went into the grocery store. It didn’t take her long to find everything on her list, and she and Jamie walked over to the sour cream at the same time.

“I found everything on my list.”

Her jaw dropped at the amount of food that Jamie had in her basket. “Good Lord, girl, how many people are we feeding?”

Jamie laughed. “Don’t forget, Ms. Smith, you are feeding seven people.”

She looked at her own basket. It definitely wouldn’t be enough to feed seven people. She had never needed to feed so many, but she was up for the challenge. Looking back up at Jamie, she smiled. “Maybe I need to go back and pick up extra.”

Jamie looked inside of Kayla’s basket. “I would say yes to that.”

She picked up a family size container of sour cream before heading back down the aisles that she’d just came from. When they were both satisfied that they had enough food, they made their way for the check out. By the time they made it to the Feldons’ house, the kids were in a high state of excitement. Jana and Jenna sprinted off the porch and made their way to the car animatedly. The girls embraced her eagerly, then grabbed a bag, and headed inside the house.

Kayla’s breath caught in her chest when James appeared. He walked toward her and gave her a brief kiss on the lips while taking the bags out of her hand. He walked over to Jamie, and gave her a kiss on the forehead. She relinquished her hold on the groceries bags when he took them out of her hands. He led the way to the house. Dennis embraced Kayla warmly as he stepped aside.

“You are looking good, Mr. Feldon.”

James laughed. “Don’t tell him that. His ego is already big enough.”

At that moment, Jana came around the corner holding Josh. Kayla felt her heart melt. He was so adorable and a miniature version of his father. Josh stared up at her shyly for a moment before reaching out for her.

She took him into her arms, happiness surging through her. It had taken him longer to warm up to her last time. “Hi, Josh.”

He gave her a shy smile. “Hi.”

James continued toward the kitchen, and everyone followed him.

“What are we having for dinner, Ms. Smith?” Jenna asked as she bounced happily in one spot.

Kayla turned to look at all three girls. “Well, first I would like it a lot better if you call me Kayla. School ended a few hours ago, and we are at home. Secondly, we are having what I call nacho layer dip.”

A cheer went up around the kitchen, and James shook his head as he unloaded the grocery bags. “Did I give you enough money?”

She nodded. “You even have some change.”

“Can we help?”

She looked at Jana. “Everyone can help after I get the meat ready.”

Jana was the quietest of the Feldon kids. Kayla could tell that the child was extremely shy but intuitive. In the short amount of time that she’d known Jana, she knew that one way to get her to open up was to talk about math or astronomy. Either subject brought Jana out of her shell and quickly.

Giving Josh a kiss on the cheek, she put him down. “Even you, Josh.”

He made his way to the table as quickly as his little legs could carry him, and Jamie put him in his high chair.

“What all do you need?” James asked as he looked over at her.

She told him, and he gave her everything she needed. When she’d come up with the idea to cook dinner, she’d asked him about any food allergies that the kids might have. She was happy to hear that they didn’t have any. A few moments later, the kitchen was starting to smell good from the seasoned ground beef. She was surprised at how at home she felt. So much so, that she was actually walking around the kitchen barefoot. When she had the ground beef ready, she put it in the casserole dish and set it aside.

“How are the refried beans coming along, Jamie?”

The microwave dinged giving her the answer that she needed. Jamie brought the beans over and sat them on the counter before stirring them.

“What do I do now?”

Kayla handed Jamie a spatula. “Spread the beans over the meat.”

Jamie did what she said then moved back. Kayla motioned Jana closer. “Okay, Jana, we are ready for the cheese.” Jana spread the cheese out evenly. It began to melt from the heat of the ground beef and refried beans.

Kayla glanced over to her left. “Jenna, is the guacamole ready?”

“Yes ma’am,” Jenna replied as she picked up the packages that she’d opened. She brought it over, and Kayla helped her spread it evenly.

“Dennis, it is your turn.”

Mr. Feldon spread the sour cream on top of the guacamole, a huge grin on his face as he stared down at the dish that he was helping to make.

“Stop drooling, Dad.”

Laughter sounded from around the kitchen at James’s comment. Kayla was not going to tell him that she’d bought lean ground chuck. He’d already complained about the sour cream and refried beans being light.

“Okay, Josh, it is your turn.”

James handed her the scallions that he’d chopped up, and Jamie brought Josh to her. She helped him sprinkle the scallions on the casserole, and he clapped happily once he had. She seated him and then carried the casserole to the table. The girls had already set it. James brought the bowl of salsa and tortilla chips over to the table.

Once everyone was seated at the table, Kayla couldn’t help but smile. She liked sitting around the table with the Feldons.

“This is good.”

Everyone nodded in agreement with James’ comment. “I am glad that you like it. This recipe actually came about in a funny way.”

“Why do you say that?”

The corners of her mouth tilted upward at Jenna’s question. “The only reason I made this recipe is because I love nachos, but I hate soggy chips.”

Jenna laughed. “So does Dad.”

Kayla was certain there would be a lot more that they had in common when it was all said and done.

The laughter that surrounded the table throughout dinner was infectious. When everyone finished eating, James stood up, but his father stopped him. “You and Kayla go in the living room and relax. The kids and I will straighten up.”

She didn’t argue the point, and neither did James. He led her to the living room. She was in his arms and his mouth on hers before she could blink. When he pulled back, she was breathless.

“I have wanted to do that since you pulled into the driveway.”

She grinned. "Well, I am glad that you finally had the chance to do it."

"Thank you for dinner."

"You are welcome. I am just glad that everyone enjoyed it."

James laughed as he pulled her onto the couch beside him, rubbing his stomach. "A little too much."

The fact that there were no leftovers was proof of that.

He brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. "So how was your day?"

She relaxed as he pulled her feet into his lap. A sigh of pleasure escaped her as he began to massage them. "It was good. Busy but good. How was your day?"

"It was good. Better now that you are here."

Her smile widened as he reached for the remote control. "Is there anything in particular that you want to watch?"

Her response was drowned out as the kids began to file into the room. He leaned closer to her. "I guess that our time alone is up."

She laughed as the kids began to crowd around them. They ended up with Jana sitting next to James. Jenna sat next to her, and Jamie sat on the floor in front of them. Josh took it upon himself to plant himself on Kayla's lap. She enjoyed the closeness of the kids and James. It was something that she could get used to easily. The discussion turned to what movie they were going to watch. It ended up being Finding Nemo, and she found herself enjoying the movie.

When it was over, she shifted Josh into James's arms. "It is getting late. I should head home."

The kids protested.

"You can't stay the night?" Jenna asked.

Kayla shook her head, not bothering to confer with James. That had been the last thing that she'd expected the kids to request, and James's expression told her that he was just as shocked. She gave the kids a gentle smile. "I hadn't planned on it, and I don't have a change of clothes. So it probably wouldn't be a good idea."

Jana sat up. "Dad can let you borrow some clothes."

She had no response to that. A glance at James told her that he was just as flabbergasted as she was, but he wasn't offering up any argument as to why she shouldn't stay. Dennis didn't make the situation any better when he stated that he didn't mind if she stayed the night. That only gave the

kids more ammunition until she agreed to stay. Once she had, she could have sworn that there was a hint of amusement on James's face.

Chapter Fifteen

They made it through one more movie before the kids started to yawn. James informed the kids that it was bedtime. Dennis told everyone good night then heading upstairs. Surprisingly, there was no argument.

“Will you help Jenna while I take care of Josh?”

She nodded, more than willing to help where she could. Jenna led the way to her bathroom. Kayla watched as Jenna ran her own water and added bubble bath.

“What do you need help with?”

“I have trouble reaching my back.”

“Okay, then just call me when you are ready.”

She’d no sooner stepped out in the hall when Jenna called her name. She laughed when she opened the door. Jenna was presenting her back. Kayla knelt down beside the tub and washed Jenna’s back.

“Who normally helps you?”

“Daddy, but Jamie or Jana does if he isn’t finished putting Josh to bed.”

She was silent as she finished washing Jenna’s back. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

Jenna took the washcloth. “Thank you.”

She left the bathroom again just as James walked out of another room holding a wet and giggling Josh. He looked up at her and chuckled as he struggled to hold onto his wiggling son. “Is Jenna finished?”

She shook her head. “Not yet.”

“You can wait in my room if you want.” He tilted his head in the direction of the room that he’d just come out of, giving her a chance to escape the madness.

She smiled. “Actually, if you don’t mind, I would like to help you.”

“Understand that if you do so, it is at your own risk.”

She laughed as she followed him into Josh’s room. He dried Josh off quickly, then put a pull-up on him.

“We still put him in a pull-up at night because he normally sleeps through until morning.”

Helping James put on Josh’s pajamas, she laughed at the way that he wiggled around, enjoying the interruption of his normal routine. After he was dressed, she could only watch. James placed Josh in

his crib, and after several moments of rubbing his back, he walked toward a bookshelf. He pulled out a book before looking at her.

“Would you like to read to him?”

She started to hesitate but decided to take the book from his grasp. Sitting in a chair close to the crib, she began to read. She kept her voice low and soothing as she had when she read to Somer as a baby. When she finished the last page, she knew that Josh was asleep. She placed a kiss on Josh’s cheek and handed James the book. He sat it aside, placed a kiss on Josh’s forehead, and turned on the monitor. They left the room together.

“Jenna is next.”

James led the way to her room. When they entered, Jenna was struggling to tie her hair up. James crossed the room to help her. When he was finished, she thanked him.

“Can Kayla tuck me in?”

James nodded, and Kayla realized that she had no idea what was involved in tucking a child in besides pulling the cover up around her body. But evidently, she did a decent job. Jenna’s small arms encircled her neck as she leaned down to give her a kiss on the cheek.

“Good night, Kayla.”

“Good night, Jenna.”

She stood up and stepped back as James came forward. He sat on the edge of the bed, and Jenna gave him a hug as well.

“Which story would you like to hear tonight?”

Jenna laughed. “You know which one, Daddy.”

He launched into the story of her birth, and Kayla was smiling by the time he finished. Jenna was also asleep, and they left her room. He took her to Jana’s room next. He knocked on the door, and they were granted permission to enter. Jana was standing by the window looking up into the sky.

“Can’t sleep?”

Jana turned to look at them. “Actually I am a little sleepy, but I just wanted to see the stars.”

With one last glance at the night sky, she headed for her father and gave him a hug. Jana came over and hugged Kayla next. “Thank you for coming over tonight.”

“Thank you for inviting me,” she murmured, and she returned Jana’s tight embrace.

Jana crawled into bed, and James pulled the cover up over her. “Good night, Sleeping Beauty.”

“Good night, Dad.”

They left the room, and James took her hand in his. “Just one more to go.”

She smiled, but right now, she wasn’t sure how James had found the strength to manage by himself. His life was so demanding, and she felt overwhelmed. She could only imagine how inundated he’d felt when he’d first taken on the challenge. She could see why he was so guarded at times. It would be difficult not to be. He cared deeply for his children, and that was obvious. She could also see that he’d worked hard to set up a sense of normalcy for his children, and he’d done a great job of it. He led her to Jamie’s room and knocked. Jamie told them to enter. When they did, she was sitting at her vanity tying up her hair. The corners of her mouth tilted upward when she saw them.

“Isn’t it past your bedtime?”

James laughed and gave Jamie a kiss on the cheek. “Very funny, young lady.”

Kayla studied her. It was good to see that Jamie could be so light and upbeat. She knew there was a lot could be expected of the teenager at times. The fact that she was willing to take on that responsibility spoke even higher of her, and it also explained why she could be so caring. She walked over and embraced Jamie.

“Thank you for all of your help today. I really appreciate it.”

Jamie embraced her back just as tightly. “You are welcome.”

They left the room with James telling Jamie not to stay up too late. James led her to his room, and she collapsed onto the bed. He sat down beside her. “Tired?”

She looked up at him. “Yes, and I am trying to figure out how you do this by yourself.”

He shrugged. “It was difficult at first, but I have had lots of practice since then, and I don’t regret a moment of it.”

She knew without a doubt he meant that. He stood up and walked over to his dresser. When he returned, he held a shirt that was going to swallow her, and a pair of shorts that thankfully had a drawstring.

“If you want, you can sleep in these.”

She gave him a bright smile. “You know, for some strange reason, I don’t think that I will need those right now.”

His grin matched hers as he put the clothes aside. He walked over to door and locked it. “Just in case one of my children forgets that we have a guest in the house.”

She laughed, and he came back over to join her. “How about we take a shower? Then I can tuck you in.”

She relaxed as he pulled her into his arms. "That sounds good to me."

He led her to the bathroom before turning on the water to the shower.

"This is going to sound like the strangest question, but do you have a shower cap?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Jenna likes to use them as water balloons on occasion, so I keep the extras hidden in my bathroom."

She laughed as he walked over to the bathroom sink. He opened up a drawer and pulled one out. "Thank you," she murmured as she pulled her hair up and put the cap on her head.

No, it wasn't a sexy look, but she definitely wouldn't be sexy if she wet her hair while taking a shower. She didn't have all of the hair products that it would take to fix it if she did. When she turned around, James was already shirtless. As he went to unbutton his pants, she watched the muscles ripple beneath the surface. She became more turned on. Closing her eyes, she moaned. "I don't think that we are going to make it through the shower."

When she opened her eyes, one corner of his mouth was tilted upward in a wicked expression. "If we don't, we will start over."

With that said, he reached for the first button on her blouse, and within seconds, he had both of them undressed. He pulled her into the shower with him, and she went willingly. She'd been wrong. They made it through the shower. Barely, but they made it.

She ripped the shower cap off her head as he dried the both of them off quickly. When he stood up, his mouth automatically found hers. He claimed her mouth, his tongue sliding between her parted lips. He kissed her until her breathing was harsh and uneven and she was clinging to him. Not wanting to be the only one breathless, she reached down and cupped his erection. Her calculating move had been the right one to make. He tore his mouth away from hers and moaned her name. She stifled a moan of pleasure as she wrapped her hand around the hardness of his arousal and began to stroke. He leaned into her stroke then grabbed her hands, his breathing become more ragged than hers. With one hand, she pulled his head down for another kiss. One that she hoped would distract him while she continued to tease his firm flesh. The plan of distraction didn't work, and once she realized that it hadn't, she slipped away from him but didn't go far.

When she touched his erection again, it was with her lips. A soft curse slipped from between his lips as he watched her lips surround him. She licked and stroked him until he could no longer take the wonderful sensation. He reached down and pulled her upward until she was standing. His mouth found her, and she shared the saltiness of his own essence with him. He swept her up into his arms and carried her to the bed. Placing her on the bed, he stared at her with intensity hard to describe before joining her. She watched him pause to reach for protection. She smiled, remembering what happened the last time they forgot.

Pulling back, he studied her carefully. "You are so beautiful." He placed a brief but passionate kiss on her lips, then pulled back. "Roll over onto your stomach."

She did as he asked without hesitation, and he slid a few pillows under her hips. The last time they were in this position, she enjoyed it immensely. She prepared herself for his first thrust, only it was not from his manhood. She sucked in a sharp breath as he began to ravish her with his tongue. Her back arched on its own, and she pressed closer to his mouth. Closing her eyes, she gasped as his tongue did another sweep. The truth was she couldn't get away from his caress if she tried. He had such a good grip on her hips, and the pillows had her at the right angle. She gasped again as he increased the pleasure. Her body was telling her that it wouldn't be long until she went over the edge. She tried to tell him, but her voice wouldn't cooperate. Her tongue was thick in her throat with arousal. The only thing that she could do was bury her face into the pillow as an intense rush of pleasure seized her.

He didn't give her time to recover coming up over her immediately. She made her first verbal sound as he entered her fully in one deep thrust. He pulled her hips back sliding deeper into her. She arched wildly in response to the sensation. He delved deeper into her with each rhythmic push of his hips. This time when she climaxed, it was with soul shattering intensity. She reached out for him, needing the connection, and he took her hand in his. His name fell from her lips on a groan muffled by the pillow. She called for him to join her, and he answered her plea. It took both of them a while to recover, and when he did he removed himself from her. She missed him instantly and, not wanting the moment to be over, reached for him.

He rolled her into his arms, and she was still breathing heavily. She felt very sated and waited willingly as he leaned down and placed a kiss on her already swollen lips. The corners of her mouth curled upward when he pulled back.

"Thank you for inviting me over tonight."

"Trust me when I say that I enjoyed it as much as you did, if not more."

Kayla curled herself against his side and laid her head on his chest. She loved making love with James. Each time, it really was something new for her. The fact that she could drive him just as wild with her touch as he could drive her with his was good to know. She yawned, closing her eyes. The sleepiness that she'd felt earlier was back, and this time, she was not able to fight it. James reached down and pulled the covers up over them.

"Good night, beautiful."

He placed another kiss on her lips as she whispered good night to him. She fell asleep, her grip on him as tight as the one that he'd on her.

Chapter Sixteen

Kayla jerked awake as her cell phone rang. She reached for it, surprised to see Brigitte's name appear on the caller ID. As soon as she answered the phone, she knew that something was wrong. "What is it, Brigitte?"

At the sound of concern in her voice, James stirred before sitting up.

"When did she leave? Do you have any idea where she is?" She closed her eyes at Brigitte's response. "Okay, Brigitte. I will be there as soon as I can." She hung up the phone and dropped her face in her hands. "Oh, my God."

"What is it?"

When she looked up, James had a look of concern on his face. "Somer is missing."

His expression changed to surprise. "What happened?"

She filled him in on the fact that Dan was Somer's father and the fact that the only people that knew were Brigitte, Dan, herself, and now him. Somer had just found out as well, which was probably the reason that she was missing.

"Evidently Brigitte and Somer had an argument, this information came out, and now Somer is nowhere to be found."

He looked as dumbfounded as she had been, trying to digest the news. "What are you going to do?"

She sighed heavily, thinking about the daunting task that lay in front of her. "I am going to help Brigitte find her."

James smiled. "Well, I know that you will need help, so I'll come with you."

She started to protest but knew that it would be pointless. Also, she knew that she would need help. Baxley might not be that large, population-wise, but there was a large amount of land to cover. She also had no idea as to where to begin a search. She reached for her cell phone and dialed Kristen's number. Her sister answered the phone groggily.

"Kristen, I am so sorry for waking you, but I need your help. Somer can't be found. I think that she may have run away."

She heard her sister start moving around. "What? What do you mean she ran away? What happened?"

She sighed. "Meet me over at Brigitte's house as soon as you can, and I will explain everything there. I promise."

She disconnected with Kristen and dialed Keirra's number. Eric answered the phone on the third ring. "This had better be an emergency." The irritation in his voice was obvious.

“It is. I am sorry to wake you, Eric. Can you get Keirra for me?”

She held on while Eric woke up Keirra. Her sister came on the line a moment later and sounded even more irritated than Eric had.

“Sorry to wake you, Keirra, but Brigitte needs our help. Somer is gone, and Brigitte can’t find her.”

“Where are you?” She heard the confusion and concern in her sister’s voice.

“Right now I’m at Mr. Feldon’s house, but can you meet me at Brigitte’s as soon as possible?”

“I will be there.”

She hung up and looked at James. He was completely dressed, and even in a state of emergency, she couldn’t help but to notice how sexy he looked. He gave her a gentle smile as if he could read her thoughts.

“I am going to wake up Jamie.”

She shook her head in protest. “Let her sleep.”

“Right now, we need all of the help we can get. If anyone knows Somer, it’s Jamie. She would be upset if we didn’t wake her.”

She knew that James was probably right. The two teenagers were close and spent a lot of time together. “Okay, go ahead and wake her up.”

He left the room, and she began getting dressed. She slipped into her bra and panties before putting her clothes back on. When James returned, she was dressed and ready. She slipped her feet into her sneakers, glad that she hadn’t worn heels to work. They wouldn’t be practical to wear when trying to search for someone.

“Jamie will be ready in—”

“I am ready.”

They both looked at a frantic Jamie who now stood in the doorway, and Kristen smiled at the teenager.

“Come here, Jamie. There is something that I want to tell you.”

Jamie entered the room and sat on the edge of her father’s bed. Kayla sat down next to her and took a deep breath then told Jamie what was going on. The teenager was truly confused by the information, but she handled it very well.

“What I need for you to do is to think about any place that Somer might be.”

Jamie nodded. "I can think of a few places. I will see if I can think of any others on the way."

She gave Jamie a hug. "Good, and try not to worry. Somer is just confused right now, and she needs our help."

Jamie agreed, and Kayla felt that the teenage understood exactly what she meant. Kayla stood, and James and Jamie followed. He stopped by Dennis's room to tell him what was going on with the promise to call as soon as there were any developments. The ride over to Brigitte's house was a quiet one. They pulled into the driveway behind Kristen's car, and Keirra was behind them. Kayla took a deep breath as Randy and Eric appeared by her sisters. She led the way up to Brigitte's door, and it quickly swung open. A distraught Brigitte stood there, and Kayla embraced her. "I hope that you don't mind, but I brought some help."

Brigitte her head and gave everyone an appreciative look. "I just want to find my daughter."

"*Our* daughter."

Everyone turned in surprise as Dan's voice sounded from behind them. Kayla interjected not giving anyone a chance to speak.

"Before we do, I think that everyone should be told everything that is going on with this situation."

Everyone moved into the house, and Brigitte and Dan filled everyone in on what had happened nearly sixteen years ago. Only Kristen had a question when they were finished. "So was that you that I saw in Dan's truck a few weeks ago?"

Brigitte hesitated briefly. "But it wasn't what you think. We were discussing how we are going to tell Somer and Holly about this."

Kristen held up her hands. "You don't ever have to explain anything to me. Right now, we need to focus on finding Somer."

Everyone consented, and Randy and Eric set down the bags that they had been carrying. The men pulled out flashlights, two-way radios, and thermoses that held hot chocolate and cider. Kayla found herself smiling, glad to have both men along. They had thought of things that she hadn't.

Kayla held up her hand to get everyone's attention. "The only suggestion that I have is that whoever finds Somer doesn't move in until we can get Jamie there." She looked at Jamie. "The girls share a bond and a comfort zone that right now will probably be the only thing that Somer will respond to."

Bridget gave an anxious nod. "I agree. I don't want Somer any more upset than she already seems to be."

Looking Jamie in the eye she gave her a gentle smile. "I know it is asking a lot, but do you think that you can you handle that?"

Jamie nodded without hesitation. "Yes, I can."

“Let me know if things get overwhelming.”

Kayla sighed in relief as Jamie began giving the adults ideas of where she thought Somer could be. They all agreed to split up and search each of the places.

Kayla tried not to allow her nervousness to show as Jamie climbed into the backseat. She couldn't imagine what Jamie was thinking, but she knew Jamie would be there for Somer. Their friendship was a good one and had been since she'd moved to Baxley. Her thoughts were interrupted when Jamie spoke as they pulled up to the park.

“She's here.”

Kayla's gaze met James's briefly, as they both turned to look back at Jamie, but neither of them questioned the teenager. Her expression spoke of confidence. Kayla got on the radio and informed everyone that they had found Somer at the park.

All came back stating that they would be there shortly. Kayla put down the radio before handing Jamie her coat, the flashlight, and a thermos. “My cell phone is in the inside zipper pocket. Call us if anything happens.”

James brushed a kiss on her forehead. “Be careful.”

“I will,” she stated as she climbed out of the car. Kayla tried to relax as she watched Jamie disappear. She could have never imagined they would be standing out here like this. James wrapped his arm around her waist, giving her a squeeze, as if he sensed her inner turmoil. He brushed his lips across her forehead.

“Everything will be okay. You know the relationship Jamie and Somer have. If anyone can get through to her, it will be Jamie.”

Kayla nodded, trying to relax. She tapered her nerves down even more when Brigitte and Dan arrived. They looked frazzled enough. Kayla had to keep her head. She had to remain calm, but it was difficult. Jamie had been out of their sight for some time now. The wait seemed like an eternity. She jumped when James's cell phone rang. He gave her another quick squeeze as he reached for his phone and handed it to her.

Kayla answered before the end of the second ring.

“Is everything okay?”

Kayla could hear the smile in Jamie's voice when she spoke. “We're fine. Somer wants to talk to you. Oh wait. Actually, she wants to see you.”

“Where are you?” Kayla asked her.

Jamie told Kayla where they were. “Okay, I will be there as soon as I can.”

Kayla hung up the phone, giving everyone a smile of relief. “Jamie found Somer. Somer is okay, but she wants to talk to me.”

Brigette released a pent up breath, some of the strain leaving her face. “Thank God. Please give her a hug for me.”

Kayla reached out and squeezed Brigitte’s hand. “I will.”

Kayla gave everyone one last look before heading off in the direction Jamie indicated they were in. It wasn’t hard to find the girls. When she did, Kayla went straight to Somer. She embraced Somer tightly. When she pulled back, the corners of her mouth curled upward. “That was from your mom.”

Kayla situated herself on the ground between the two teenagers and wrapped her arms around both of them so that they could all share their warmth. “Now, what do you want to talk about?”

The most important question fell from Somer’s lips rapidly. “Why did my mom wait so long to tell me that Dan is my father?”

Kayla looked Somer straight in the eyes. “I can’t tell you why your mother did what she did, because I don’t know. But maybe I can give you some history of what may have led to that decision.”

Kayla told her about the rough times that Brigitte had experienced growing up in her home life and social life. All of the ridicule that she’d faced, especially after she’d gotten pregnant. The fact that her mother had never given up and had worked even harder. That she had kept going to school full-time and had worked to provide for Somer and herself.

“Your mom made the best decision that she could, but only she can tell you why she made it. What I can tell you is that your mom has always loved you. She was always proud of you, and everything that she has done has been for you.” Kayla gave her a gentle smile. “I think the least you can do is give your mom the opportunity to explain.”

Somer was silent for a moment. Finally, she sighed.

“I am willing to hear her out.”

Kayla gave her another hug. “Try to understand as well. When you have all of the information, ask yourself what you would have done if it were you in the same exact situation.”

Somer nodded, and they gathered up everything then headed back to the area where everyone was waiting. Brigitte stood there, wringing her hands nervously while Dan was pacing. Somer approached her mother tentatively and embraced her tightly. Kayla reached out and hugged Jamie just as tightly.

She gave the teenager a look of admiration. “I am proud of what you did tonight.”

Jamie ducked her head in embarrassment at the praise. “I only did for Somer what she would have done for me.”

The corners of her mouth curled upward. “That is what a true friend does, and I am proud of you anyway.”

Brigette was finally calm enough for Dan to take her and Somer home. She thanked all of them one more time before Dan drove off. Kayla turned to face her sisters once they had.

“Thank you guys for coming to help.”

Keirra stepped forward to embrace her. “I would say anytime, but I hope that this is the last.”

Kayla laughed as she hugged her sister back. “I hope it’s the last time as well.”

James pulled her into his embrace after she hugged Kristen, and she went willingly, needing his warmth and strength. Tonight had been emotionally draining, and she hoped that Brigette, Somer, and Dan were able to work it out. She also had to prepare herself for Monday because this could mean more trouble ahead once this got out.

* * * *

Everyone said good night and climbed into the cars. Kayla gave James a grateful look as he helped her into the car, and he could tell that tonight had done an emotional number on her. Seeing her in action this morning only increased the feelings that he had for her. He couldn’t wait to get her home to take care of her as she’d taken care of so many others in this chaotic situation. It amazed him at how selfless she was when she didn’t have to be. She was an amazing woman to say the least, and he was glad that neither of them had been paying attention to where they were going that day outside of Sam’s Café. It was one of the best accidents that he could have had. James glanced over at Kayla during the drive home realizing that somewhere along the way he’d started to fall in love with her, and that scared the hell out of him.

Chapter Seventeen

Kayla looked at the clock on the stove and frowned. It was six in the morning, and no one in their right mind would be knocking on her door this early on a Saturday. After taking the pot off the stove, she headed out of the kitchen and through the living room toward the front door. She looked through the peephole and smiled when she saw James. He was standing there holding a bag and two cups of steaming coffee. She opened the door and pulled him inside. After she closed the door, she allowed him to pull her close and to place brief but passionate kisses on her lips.

“Good morning,” she whispered as she pulled back.

“Good morning to you too.”

She turned and led the way back to the kitchen. “What brings you by this early?”

“Jamie.”

She’d just reached the stove but turned to look at him with concern. They had made it through two weeks without any other incidents except that Baxley was abuzz with the recent news that Dan was Somer’s father. It had brought some of the fallout that she’d expected but not in the way that she’d imagined it would.

“Is something wrong?”

He nodded. “With me. Or at least Jamie said there was. I guess she figured we needed to see each other again.”

Kayla shook her head and turned off the pot of boiling water. “Well, I am glad she was smart enough to suggest it, and that you were smart enough to follow the suggestion even at this awful hour.”

He chuckled as he handed her the bag with Lori’s Bakery logo on it. “So am I, and I also brought breakfast for two.”

She took the bag, and the scent of the cinnamon roll assailed her. “How did you know?”

“Jamie says that she sees you with one every Wednesday and figured that it was your favorite.”

She pulled the container holding the cinnamon roll out of the bag. “She is right. This is my favorite, but I try to limit myself to one a week.”

It was that she didn’t want her hips to expand anymore than they already had. She set the container on the cabinet and pulled out another container. It looked like it contained pigs in the blanket.

She set it on the counter just as James walked up behind her. His arms went around her waist, and she leaned back into him. Her knees weakened at the feel of his lips on her throat.

“If you don’t stop that, you won’t be eating breakfast.”

James's answer was to spin her around and back her up into the counter. She gripped the counter with her hands as he pressed her into it, and then she leaned back to look into his eyes and saw pure passion.

"I thought you were hungry?"

He grinned wickedly. "I am. Just not for food."

* * * *

He chuckled as she moaned at his touch. Reaching down he began busying himself with untying her robe. When he parted it, his breath came out on a pained gasp. She was completely naked beneath the purple terry cloth robe. The woman's body was breathtaking. Leaning forward, he captured her nipple between his lips. Her hands came up to clutch his shoulders. Effortlessly, he lifted her onto the edge of the counter. Her legs fell open on either side of him, and he stepped closer to her. She inhaled sharply at the sensation that he caused. She was becoming so tense that he knew she was approaching her limit. Her long legs circled his waist, and he dug his fingers into the flesh of her hips. When his hand came around to the front and his fingers found her, she was slick, soft, and ready. When he removed his fingers, she whimpered in frustration.

He couldn't wait other minute himself. The woman turned him on beyond belief. Before either of them could take their next breath, James had his pants and his boxers down around his ankles. His arousal was almost painful. He loved the way that she watched as he opened a packet that would protect them. Moving closer to her, he lifted her legs high over his arms and thrust into her. She was so tight around him, so incredibly hot and tight. Her moans and the rocking of her hips spurred him on. She matched him thrust for thrust. Each rock of her hips brought him deeper within her body. He couldn't believe the way that he filled her so completely, and with each thrust, she cried out. They were soft little cries at first, cries that grew wilder and harsher as her passion escalated. She let out one ear-shattering cry of pleasure when she exploded.

Fire swept through him, and he called her name as he trembled with the force of his release. He collapsed against her and held her against his chest as their passion faded. Her cheek rested against the hollow of his shoulder. He ran his hand up and down her back, a caress that allowed him to revel in the softness of her skin. It was becoming harder and harder for him to keep his hands off her.

"So much for breakfast."

His laughter escaped as a puff of air. "We are still going to have breakfast, but only after we get cleaned up."

He withdrew from her and pulled the robe back around her. She hopped down off the counter with his help then exited the kitchen. By the time she returned, he'd discarded the condom, and she handed him a towel so that he could clean himself up.

"How about we do this every Saturday morning?"

“I wouldn’t be able to keep up with you like this every Saturday.”

He laughed then pulled her close. “What do you say to putting breakfast away and going back to bed for a while?”

She agreed and he felt her eyes on him as he placed the items in the refrigerator. He turned back to her, swept her up in his arms, and carried her up the stairs. When they awoke a few hours later, he was giving serious consideration to his earlier suggestion of him bringing breakfast over every Saturday morning. The way that she felt in his arms, it might not be a bad idea.

* * * *

“So you are sure that you don’t mind?”

Kayla shook her head and opened her door wider. She’d spoken with James a few moments ago. The law firm that he did accounting for as a consultant had an emergency issue with an audit that required him to fly out to Houston. He had asked her if the kids and his father could stay with her while he was out of town since he wasn’t sure how long he would be gone. It was late, but he needed to catch a flight right away to be on time in the morning. She stepped back, and James stepped inside, followed by Jana, Jenna, and Dennis. Jamie brought up the rear holding a sleeping Josh in her arms. Kayla closed the door and led everyone upstairs. She showed Jana and Jenna to their rooms. They had a connecting bathroom, and they didn’t seem to be upset about that. She put Dennis in the next room. The bathroom was across the hall.

She led Jamie to her temporary room. Jamie had received the biggest bed because Josh was going to sleep with her. She had a room available for Josh, but James had told her that Josh had trouble sleeping when they first moved into Dennis’s house. Jamie entered the room, and Kayla turned and headed to her own, followed by James. As soon as they made it to her room, he pulled her from the doorway and out of sight. His lips came down on hers before she could blink. Seconds later, she pulled away, conscious that anyone could walk in on them.

“Thank you again.”

She smiled. “You are welcome.”

She knew that James hadn’t wanted to leave the kids by themselves or his father with his recent health scare. His father hadn’t suffered any setbacks, but there was no way that he could watch all four kids by himself. Instead of splitting everyone up, she figured it would be best for everyone to come over and join her. He told her that in the past, when emergencies like this had arisen, he’d had to leave the kids with his mother, sister, or brother. It was easier then because they all lived in Austin. It had felt a little strange offering to take in his family, but she didn’t mind, and she knew it was the right thing to do.

“What time do you leave?”

He sighed. “My flight is supposed to leave as soon as I can arrive at the municipal airport. They are sending a private jet.”

Her eyebrows rose. "This must be serious."

"It is. These guys don't work on Sundays. And for them to be this insistent, I know it is."

"Well, you get going. We will be fine."

"Okay."

She smiled. "You can call as much as you want. Just be conscious of the time zone difference."

He winked. "I will keep that in mind, and I will call when I arrive, providing that it is not too late."

She shook her head. "No, call when you make it, no matter the time, to let us know that you have made it safely."

He promised that he would before turning to leave the room. She followed him.

She watched as he said good-bye to his children. If there was one thing that she knew for sure, it was that he loved his family. She wondered if his deceased wife had had any idea of how lucky she'd been to have such a devoted husband. She'd yet to ask James anything specific about the situation other than what he had already told her, but from what she knew, it had been rocky in the end. Everyone, including Josh, who was now awake, made their way downstairs and waved James off. Once James was out of view, Kayla led everyone into the house.

"Are you guys hungry?"

Everyone either nodded or said yes, and she grinned. "How does pizza sound?"

Jana and Jenna did a little celebration dance. She asked them what kind of pizza they liked and told them to go into the living room and watch television while she ordered it.

After she ordered the pizza, she went back to the group that was waiting anxiously. "I will give you guys a quick tour of the house, and the pizza should be here by then, and we can eat."

She showed them the house, informing them of whose old room they were sleeping in. They finished the tour pretty quickly, and she sent everyone off to wash up for dinner while she went downstairs into the kitchen and began to prepare a salad. Three pizzas had been ordered, but she already knew that she was going to limit Dennis to three slices of cheese, and he would have to get full on salad if that wasn't enough. She even had light Italian dressing to accompany it. Just as she put the finishing touches on the salad, the doorbell rang.

She left the kitchen and heard the pounding of feet on her stairs. Just as she opened her mouth to tell the girls to stop running, Jamie beat her to it. The girls stopped dead in their tracks without any argument. They even offered her an apology for running in the house with the promise that it wouldn't happen again. She opened the door to take the pizza boxes from the deliveryman and handed him the money. She thanked him then closed the door. Turning around, she almost jumped out of her skin. Jana and Jenna were standing behind her expectantly. She handed them each a box, keeping one for herself. They all went into the kitchen with Josh, Jamie, and Dennis behind them.

She'd added the extension to the table so that they could all fit at the table. She arranged the pizza boxes in the center of the table with the salad in the middle of the boxes so that everyone could reach them.

"Everyone, dig in."

Dennis reached for a slice of pepperoni pizza, and she slapped his hand. "Three slices of cheese for you, and that's it."

Dennis's face fell, and she laughed at his pout. "Why is that? I got to have nacho layer dip."

She chuckled. "Yes, you did, but don't forget that I made that as healthy as I could."

Dennis could only sit there and sulk like a child, and she laughed. "It is for your own health, but if you don't get full off of the pizza, there is plenty of salad."

She was glad that the kids were eating responsibly without her having to tell them to. They all had at least two servings of salad if not more. She was almost afraid that she hadn't made enough.

Jenna looked up at her with surprise. "Ms. Smith, this salad is good. How did you make it?"

She laughed. "It is not as hard as it seems. I will have to show it to you sometime."

They made small talk as they ate. The girls filled her in on their day at school and the new things they had learned. The only thing missing was James. She looked over at the empty spot where he would have sat and missed him instantly. Sitting around the table with the Feldons had her thinking about how life would be if this were a permanent situation. She wondered if James would want any more children. He already had a handful. She knew for sure that she would want at least one child. Looking up, she saw that Jenna had finished eating, and her eyes were starting to droop. Kayla stood and picked up Jenna's plate.

"Why don't we go upstairs and get ready for bed?"

Jenna nodded and headed out of the kitchen toward the stairs. Kayla put the plate in the sink before following Jenna.

"You two keep an eye on your grandfather."

The words were barely out of her mouth when she heard a hand being slapped. Turning around, she saw that it was Jamie slapping Dennis's hand. Smiling she turned around and continued out of the kitchen. By the time she made it upstairs, Jenna was sitting on the toilet taking off her shoes and socks. Kayla turned on the water.

"Would you like bubbles?"

Jenna shook her head. "I would, but I am too sleepy to play tonight."

When the tub was half full, she turned the water off. “Give me a call when you need me to wash your back.”

She stopped outside the door knowing that it wouldn’t be long before Jenna called out to her. As she expected, Jenna called out, and she went back into the bathroom.

She washed Jenna’s back, then left the bathroom and heading to the room that she put Jenna in. A few moments later, Jenna entered, dressed in her pajamas and carrying her dirty clothes. Kayla took the clothes from her and placed them aside. She helped Jenna into bed and tucked the covers up around her little body. Trying to remember if there was ever a time when she was that small, she looked down at Jenna who was staring up at her expectantly.

“Would you like a bedtime story?”

Jenna looked toward the corner. “My tape player is in my bag.”

She gave her a questioning look but went over to the bag and found the tape player. “Why do you need the tape player?”

Jenna grinned. “Because Daddy recorded my bedtime story on it in case he was not able to tell it to me himself.”

Kayla sat on the edge of the bed and pressed the play button. A moment later, James’s voice filled the room as if he were sitting right there with them. Jenna was asleep by the time he finished the story, but Kayla let it play to the end, wanting to hear the rest of the story herself. When it was over, she rewound the tape. She placed the tape player aside still while marveling at the smart idea that James had come up with. It was amazing the things that one could come up with if it were absolutely necessary. With one last look at Jenna, she left the room and headed back downstairs.

When she entered the kitchen, she couldn’t help but to smile. Dennis was still eating his salad with a dejected look. Jana had just gotten up from the table and was putting her plate in the sink. Josh was still sitting on Jamie’s lap. He had a handful of pizza and a mouthful to match. He spotted her and held his arms out. “Up, please.”

She reached out and picked Josh up into her arms. He was a handsome little boy. Being a heartbreaker like his father was in his future. He offered her some of the pizza, and she took a mock bite making him giggle before continuing to the table and having a seat.

“Did you guys finish up your homework?”

Jamie nodded. “Dad made us do it once he found out that he had to go to Houston.”

She nodded, happy with the answer. “Well, you guys go ahead and get ready for bed. Then come back downstairs, and we can watch a movie.”

She could tell by looking at the kids that they were tired and not going to be able make it through an entire movie, but that was okay. She wanted the kids to relax and have a good time without worrying about their father being out of town. Even though James had told her that this had happened a few

times, she knew firsthand what it was like be uprooted and to stay in a strange place even if it was with a person one knew.

The more time she spent with James, she realized just how tough it was to be a single father. He seemed to have a system down pat for everything and a backup plan in case things didn't go as originally planned. She looked down when she felt Josh's head hit her chest. He was fast asleep.

Jamie grinned. "He will wake up as soon as he hears the bath water." Jamie stood up. "I will clean up the kitchen while you give Josh a bath." She walked to the sink with a few plates before turning to look back at Kayla. "Don't forget to line the floor with towels and pull your hair back."

She appreciated the reminder, because she remembered the first time she had participated in his bath. Even though she'd been a safe distance back, a few well-placed splashes had come close.

With that said, Jamie began to straighten up the kitchen, stopping to slap Dennis' hand when he reached for a slice of hamburger pizza. Kayla shook her head and smiled as she removed the pizza clutched in Josh's hand and stood up. She would bathe him in her tub. That way she wouldn't tie up a bathroom that needed to be used by the others. Heading up the stairs, she inhaled Josh's scent. He was so precious, and she couldn't help but to hold him closer. Looking down at him, she wondered what it would be like to have a child with James. Would their child be another miniature version of him like his other children, or would their child inherit a few of her exotic characteristics? Maybe one day she would find out.

Chapter Eighteen

“Once again you have saved us, James.”

He grinned and shook Stephen’s hand. He was one of founders of Lockhart, Collins, and Vickers law firm. The contract work that he’d been completing for the company was enjoyable.

“That is what you pay me to do.”

Stephen nodded. “And you do it very well.” Stephen indicated for him to have a seat. “I called you in here to thank you for your speedy work and to make you an offer.”

He took a seat and wondered what the proposition would be. His current contract with the company was already lucrative, and they understood his need to relocate to Georgia. With his promise that his quality of work wouldn’t change, they had been more than willing to accommodate him.

“Collins, Lockhart, and Vickers want to offer you a longer contract. We also want to increase what we are paying you.”

He felt his eyebrows rise, unable to keep the look of surprise off of his face. His contract wasn’t up for another year, and he was already being paid a substantial amount of money.

“We want a five-year, exclusive contract with you with a forty-thousand-dollar increase.”

He had to lock his jaw to keep it from dropping to the floor. That would put him well into a six-figure salary, and he would be set with work for another six years. This was a deal that he couldn’t pass up. Yet, it sounded too good to be true. “That sounds like a very lucrative deal. What would be required on my part other than what I currently do?”

Stephen smiled. “I don’t think there is anything too demanding.”

He watched as Stephen reached into his desk drawer. He pulled out a contract and handed it to James. “Take a look at this, and if everything is agreeable sign, and get it back to us.”

James went to agree, then paused frowning as he recalled an earlier conversation with Richard, another partner in the firm.

“Richard mentioned relocation as a possible requirement several months ago. Is that still something that you guys want?”

Stephen nodded. “Yes, it is. We know that your father is still recovering and that your family is young, but it would be nice if you could move out here to our main location by the end of summer. However, if you sign that contract, it won’t be effective until your current contract it up.”

He had to lock his jaw again to keep it from dropping open. That would be a very sudden move if he were to agree to do it prior to his contract ending. Would he really mind the move? Not really. He was not so certain that the kids wouldn’t mind. His father was also another issue. His father had

grown used to him and the children being around, and he liked it. Whether he would admit it or not was a different story. He would hate to uproot his family again, but they could make a life in Houston. And this time, the move would be during the summer.

Stephen checked his watch then stood. "I hate to be brief, but I have a meeting with a client."

James stood and exchanged another handshake with Stephen. "Thank you for your time."

Stephen smiled. "No, thank *you*. Hopefully I will be seeing you again but under different circumstances."

"Yes, you will."

Stephen escorted him back to his personal receptionist. "Susan, can you take care of Mr. Feldon? He will let you know what all he needs."

Stephen shook his hand again. "Have a safe trip back."

"I will. Thank you."

Stephen left him standing in front of Susan's desk, and the executive assistant had him boarded on the private jet within the hour. He checked the time and saw that the kids were in school. They would be out by the time he reached town.

Picking up the phone, he called Kayla's cell and was not surprised when it went to her voice mail. He left a brief message stating that he was on his way back and would be in later that evening. Hanging up the phone, he leaned his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes. It had been a long week, but it had been worth it. He'd talked to the kids every night since he'd been gone. Each time had been interesting. They were having fun at Kayla's and were minding her as he'd hoped they would. His kids were good kids, but they had their moments. He had really missed his kids. This was the longest that he'd been away from them, but the financial audit had been a nightmare.

Thankfully, it was over, and he could get back to life as he knew it. The kids were going to be excited about a possible move to Houston. Hopefully, this would be the last move. He wanted to give his children a stable life. He sighed. A good nap was what he needed before he reached Baxley. The next thing he knew, the pilot was calling his name. He gathered his items. It was a very nice and luxurious plane. He hoped that he would get to take several more trips on it but under different circumstances. Thankfully, the drive to Kayla's home wouldn't be long. He thanked the pilot for the safe trip and headed toward his SUV. When he pulled up into Kayla's driveway, her car was there. The corners of his mouth curved upward as he stepped out of the SUV. He was excited to see his children again. He rang the doorbell. His smile widened when he heard Jenna's shriek.

The door flew open, and Jenna and Kayla stood there. Jenna jumped up into his arms and rained kisses on his cheeks. He stepped inside the house, and Kayla closed the door behind him. Within minutes, all of his children were surrounding him and he had fifty questions being thrown at him at once. Kayla clapped her hands loudly a few times before clearing her throat. The kids quieted at once, even Josh.

“Your father has had a very long trip, and I am sure that he doesn’t mind the questions, but one at a time.”

His eyebrows rose as his girls actually heeded what Kayla said. They all went into the living room. The questions ranged from how had his trip gone to what had he brought any gifts back.

By the time the last question was answered, it was time to eat dinner. Everyone pitched in, and dinner was ready within the hour. Jamie and Jenna set the table. With the table set, they sat down and began to describe how their week had gone so far. During the middle of dinner, James decided to share his good news. He clinked his fork on his glass, and all turned their attention toward him.

“I received some very good news today. Collins, Lockhart, and Vickers offered to extend my contract for an additional five years as well as increase my pay.” Everyone began to chatter excitedly, but he continued. “They also want us to move to Houston.”

Silence fell around the kitchen. Jamie was the first to recover, but there was obvious shock on her face. “What did you say, Daddy?”

He grinned. “We will be moving to Houston.”

James was oblivious to the damper of everyone’s mood. Jamie set her fork down. “I would like to be excused from the table.”

Jana followed her, then Jenna. He frowned when Kayla stood up and left the table as well, leaving he, Josh, and father at the table.

James frowned at the reaction that he’d just received. “I thought that everyone would be excited about the news.”

Dennis frowned, his disappointment clear. “You thought wrong. The kids have finally found a place where they are happy, and you are taking them away from it. I won’t even mention what you have just done to Kayla. Don’t make the same mistake that I made, son.”

With that said, Dennis stood, picked up Josh, and left the kitchen himself. James shook his head in disbelief. What had his father meant by not making the same mistake that he had? Maybe he’d been fooling himself thinking that his family would be excited about this move. He’d thought that this would be a good thing for everyone. Evidently he’d been wrong. He had no idea how he was going to make things right. Turning down this contract was not an option. He would be out of a job in a year and, in this economy, that was something that he couldn’t afford.

Maybe they could work something out about the move to Houston, but he wasn’t going to completely turn down the job. He stood and headed upstairs to do damage control. He went to Jenna’s room first. She was lying facedown on the bed. Her little body was shaking, and he knew she was crying. He walked over to the edge of the bed and sat down.

Before he could say anything, Jenna turned to look at him. “Why do we have to move again? I like it here.” She paused to catch her breath. “Grandpa is here, my friends are here, and Kayla is here. I like it here.”

James scooped her up and placed a kiss on her forehead. He wiped away the tears that he'd caused. "I didn't realize that you liked it here so much."

"I do, Daddy. We all do."

James stifled a groan. He would find a way to bargain the move to Houston. Or maybe he could be out there full-time during the summer months. Yet, there was no way he would uproot his kids again when they were happy where they were. He had to figure out a way to make it all work out.

"I will find a way to keep us here. Okay?"

That quieted Jenna some. There was still a short pause before she agreed. After one last kiss on her forehead, he stood up. Leaving her with the instructions to pack her bag, he headed to talk to Jana. She was standing by the window with her forehead pressed against it. He called her name softly, and she turned to look at him. The sadness in her eyes made him pause for a second. He hadn't seen her look this sad since Nicole passed away. It hit him hard, knowing that he was the reason behind that. When her gaze went back to the window, he moved toward her.

"I just wanted to come and tell you that we won't be moving to Houston."

She turned and looked at him with surprise. The expression turned to confusion. "Did you turn the job down?"

He gave a slight shake of his head. "No, I haven't. But I may have to do that to keep us here."

Jana dropped her head. "I really like it here, and I want to stay, but I don't want you to lose your job because of it."

James held out his arms, and Jana rushed into them. "I don't want you to worry about that. I have always provided for you and always will."

He had a pretty substantial amount of money set aside because he was well paid, and he had more money coming in than going out. He felt Jana nod against his stomach. "I will let you worry about the big stuff."

The corners of his mouth curved upward at the comment. He had a habit of telling the kids to let him worry about the big things, and they would worry about the small stuff. It was his way of keeping his children in their state of childhood. Kids shouldn't have to worry about adult problems. Jana's arms tightened around his waist briefly.

"I love you, Daddy."

He placed a kiss on her forehead. "I love you too, sweetheart."

Pulling back, he gave her instructions to pack up because they would be leaving for home shortly. She nodded, and he took a deep breath then left the room. He was getting ready to deal with the

toughest of his children. When he made it to the room that Kayla had put Jamie and Josh in, the door was closed.

He knocked on the door and was greeted by silence, but he entered the room anyway. Jamie was reclined across the bed with her head facing away from the door.

“Jamie—”

“Go away, Dad. I don’t want to talk right now.”

He sighed heavily. “I know that you are upset with me right now, but it doesn’t excuse rudeness. Now sit up, and talk to me. There are some things that I need to say.”

It took a moment, but Jamie finally sat up and looked at him. He closed the door behind him and sat on the edge of the bed beside his daughter. “I want to apologize for upsetting you with my surprise.” He shrugged. “I truly thought everyone would be happy.”

Jamie shook her head. “Before we moved to Baxley, we might have. Jana is happy, and she is smiling, Dad. How long has it been since you have seen her so content? She even told Kayla one of the jokes that you told her one time, although Jana’s version was funnier. This is home, Dad. Baxley is the place that we have all been looking for.”

James sighed, knowing that his daughter was right. Baxley was home. Baxley’s residents made it a good place to be. “Well, based on what you just told me, I think that it wouldn’t bother you if I told you that I changed my mind about moving to Houston.”

Jamie frowned. Confusion was clearly expressed on her face. “I’m not going to ask what changed your mind.”

“I am sure that you already know.”

He stood, informing her that they would be heading home tonight. Jamie slid off the bed, and he left the room. He ran into his father and son in the hallway. “It sounds like you have settled most of the problem.”

He looked at his father with puzzlement. “What do you mean?”

His father gave him a pointed look. “Kayla is downstairs cleaning up the kitchen.”

He closed his eyes and sighed heavily. His concern for his children had been so great that he’d forgotten about her, and he was ashamed to admit it. He told his dad that they would be heading home shortly. Dennis nodded and headed off to pack his bag.

James went downstairs wondering how he was going to make things right. He’d never intended to get serious with Kayla, but he had. Now he had to decide just how far he wanted to take this. His feelings were developing for her. Could he say that he loved her? No, he couldn’t but the feelings could mature to that level if he opened his heart completely to her. When he entered the kitchen, she was putting stuff away angrily. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“But—”

She turned around to face him. “Did you give your family any thought when you made this decision? Did you give me any thought?” She didn’t give him a chance to reply before presenting him with her back again. “Don’t answer that. I might be tempted to throw something sharp.”

He would have laughed if it he thought he could get away with it without her fulfilling her threat of bodily harm. Instead, he held himself in check. He watched her hands on the towel as she walked toward the doorway leading out of the kitchen exit.

“Don’t call me again. I don’t want to see your face or hear your voice again unless it has to do with your father or the children, and even then it had better be life or death.”

With that said, she left the kitchen. He would have stopped her, but he knew that she needed time to cool off. He would give her that time, but he would be back. After leaving the kitchen himself, he went to gather up his family. A few minutes later, he was herding the bunch out the front door.

The kids informed Kayla that they had a good time and hoped that they could do it again. Josh even gave her a wet kiss on the cheek. James knew right then that she cared for his children as if they were her own. It made him feel like a jerk to see that she’d been crying. Her eyes were puffy and red, and her nose matched. He’d obviously hurt her, and that really bothered him. Kayla said good night to his father but refused to acknowledge James. She was truly ticked, and he was smart enough not to push her either.

Walking out to his SUV, he prayed that the following days wouldn’t be torturous ones. He had a lot to do to get everything back on track, but he was up for the task. Pulling out of Kayla’s driveway, he drove toward his father’s home. It was going to be a long evening, but as soon as they made it home, he hustled the kids inside the house.

The children and his father went to their rooms and began getting ready for bed. Within the hour, they were settling into their normal bed routine. He’d missed this the past few days. Putting his children to bed was something that he truly enjoyed. Kayla had even praised him for his idea of recording the bedtime story that he told Jenna. He’d heard the admiration in her voice at doing something so thoughtful. He smiled to himself at how quickly things could change, because she obviously saw him as a heartless bastard now. And honestly, he couldn’t blame her. The longer he thought about it, the more he realized how stupid he’d been. Once his children were in bed and settled, he made his way downstairs and went into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and reached for a bottle of beer. In the living room, he settled down to think.

In the morning, he would fax a copy of the contract to his lawyer to see what he thought of it and to make sure that he wouldn’t have to move to Houston as a part of the deal. He finished off the beer and discarded the bottle in the trash then headed back upstairs. After taking a quick shower, he began to get ready for bed. Shortly after stepping out of the shower, he fell into bed and began to wonder what the next several days were going to be like. Whatever they would bring, he would make sure that he had enough sleep to face any issue that arose.

* * * *

Kayla was so tired that she should be yawning, but she was too numb to do so. She'd shed too many tears over the man, and she'd cursed him several times over. The man was despicable. She'd given herself to him unconditionally, and in the end, he'd proved to her that he hadn't cared. It hurt to even think about it. The last bell for the day rang, and she began to pack up her things. She was glad that it was the weekend. She needed a break, time to collect himself and get her thoughts together. Gathering up her briefcase and her purse. The only thing she wanted to do was relax. She was going to go home, get in her spa tub, and consume a gallon of Chunky Monkey. Calling her sisters over to help her consume the ice cream sounded like a good idea, but she really just wanted to be alone this weekend. She walked out of the school and climbed into her vehicle. She drove out of the parking lot and passed right by James and Jamie.

* * * *

James watched Kayla pull off. She didn't see them, but they saw her. Jamie slammed the car door and began to grumble.

"What did you do to her, Dad? She is different now."

James gave her a stern look. "First, young lady, we don't slam doors around here. Second, Kayla and I will work this out."

Jamie put her seatbelt on, folded her arms across her chest, and glared at him. "You had better, Dad. My sisters and I don't want to have to interfere again."

He shook his head. His children were going to be the death of him. "I will handle this starting tomorrow."

Jamie nodded, satisfied with the answer. He had been busy the last two days securing his job. Now that he'd been successful with that, he could focus on trying to get back in good with Kayla. He had a plan that would include Keirra and Kristen. Fortunately, they had been very understanding when he'd explained to them what he'd done. More understanding than they should have been. Once he picked the kids up and got them home and situated, he would fill everyone in on his plan. Hopefully, it would work.

Chapter Nineteen

“I am going to have you two arrested for kidnapping.”

Kristen laughed. “Now, do you really think that would happen considering the men that we are in relationships with?”

“Don’t forget that a good friend of mine is a lawyer.”

“Trust us, we didn’t forget that, and he is well aware of our plan. He also wishes you luck.”

Kayla mumbled something unintelligible under her breath then renewed her struggling efforts. Her sisters had burst into her room early this morning, handcuffed, and blindfolded her. She’d put up a fight in the beginning but saw that it was useless. After realizing that trying to escape wasn’t going to work, she’d decided to conserve her energy for when she could really use it.

She remembered that thought and stopped struggling once more, but it was hard to because the handcuffs were uncomfortable. She made that fact known. “Which one of you did these handcuffs?”

Keirra laughed. “If you hadn’t put up such a fight, I would have been able to leave them a little looser.”

“When I have to the chance to put these things around your wrists, we will see how much you like it.”

Keirra was smug when she replied, “Too late. Eric and I use them all the time.”

She flinched at the horrible thought, and Kristen couldn’t contain her laughter. Kayla shuddered. Now she really wanted the handcuffs off and hoped that they would be soon.

It seemed like they had been driving forever, but suddenly they rolled to a stop. She tried to listen and gather her bearings, but it was too quiet for her to distinguish anything. “Where are we?”

Keirra was the one to respond, and it was obvious that she was enjoying this torture. “You will find out soon enough.”

The door opened, and she was assisted out. They hustled her to a building quickly, not that she blamed them. Anyone who saw a woman blindfolded and handcuffed was bound to become suspicious. It also offered her the perfect escape. She opened her mouth to scream, but Keirra warned her before she could. “You can scream if you want to, but it won’t work. There is no one else around.”

“You are lying.”

She could hear the amusement in Keirra’s voice when she replied, “Try it.”

Just as she started to, she realized that her sisters were no longer leading her. The click of a door sounded loudly behind her, and she turned in the direction of the sound.

“Keirra and Kristen, if you two have left me by myself, I am going to kill you.”

She jumped and did scream as a hand touched her shoulder. It was definitely a man’s hand.

“Who are you?”

Whoever it was didn’t speak. Instead, his hands came up and took the blindfold off. She spun around and gasped. “You are behind this?”

James was standing there looking as tired as she was feeling, but he still managed to look sexy as hell. She was not going to let that fact weaken her resolve. “Take these handcuffs off me now.”

He shook his head, walked over to the bed, and sat down. “Not until you hear me out.”

She rolled her eyes. “No need to. I already know what your plans are, and I am not included in them. Trust me, you only have to tell me once.”

He ignored her sarcasm. “The plans have changed, and I do want you to be included in them.”

She sighed heavily, and then she narrowed her eyes as she took in the room. It was set up for seduction. He actually had the nerve to try to seduce her to take him back? He was crazier than she’d originally thought. When her gaze went back to his, she was furious. “James, undo these handcuffs now.”

Instead, he smiled and patted the space beside him. “After we talk.”

She groaned with displeasure. He was going to pay as soon and her hands were free, she would make sure of it.

“Do you care about me?”

Her mouth dropped open and almost dragged the ground. She recovered quickly. “If you don’t know the answer to that question, then we don’t need to talk.”

She backed up against the wall and closed her eyes. It took everything she had not to collapse. She was exhausted, and all she wanted to do was go home and crawl under the covers so that she could cry herself to sleep as she had the past few nights. It seemed the only way she was going to be able to do that was by listening to what James had to say. If that was what it took, that was what she would do, but she was only going to hear him out.

That didn’t mean that she had to believe him. Sighing with defeat, she spoke without opening her eyes. “Why did you bring me here, James?”

He responded without hesitation. “To talk to you. I want you to know what is going on.”

One eye opened in disbelief. “A little too late for that, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t. I am sorry that I sprang the news on moving to Houston to you in the fashion that I did.” He paused, and when she didn’t say anything, he kept going. “I want you to know that we aren’t moving to Houston.”

She gave a snort of irritation. “Oh no, don’t stay here on my behalf.”

He gave her a sincere look. “I’m not. I am staying because of my family.” This time, he did pause slightly, then continued. “And because I want to see what develops between us.”

Her mouth dropped open, and she looked at him as if he’d lost his mind. She finally came off the wall and stalked toward him. She didn’t bother to hide her anger and disgust. “Am I supposed to be grateful? Two days ago, you told me that you were leaving town without blinking.”

She paused before laughing harshly. “You admitted that you didn’t even think about me when you made the original decision.”

He didn’t deny her accusation, but it didn’t lessen her rage.

“So now I am supposed to be happy when you decide to include me?” she spat. She shook her head at him in complete disbelief. Turning her back to him, she held out her hands. “Undo these cuffs now, James.”

Surprisingly he finally did as she asked. When she was free, she rubbed her wrists as she headed for the door without looking back. She had the door open when he spoke again.

“I think that I am falling in love with you, Kayla.”

Kayla felt her heart skip several beats, but she didn’t look back when she responded. “Well, I know that I am in love with you.”

With that said, she left the room and closed the door. Tears sprang to her eyes, and for the first time, she held them back. She wouldn’t cry didn’t have time to cry. Right now, she had to keep a level head to figure out where she was and get back home.

How she was going to do that, she had no idea. She could find a payphone and blackmail her sisters into coming back and picking her up. The door opened, and she instinctively whirled around and backed up when she saw James standing there. She didn’t really fear him. She just didn’t know what to expect. “What is it now?”

His expression was pleading. “Will you please hear me out, and once you do, I will take you home?”

She sighed heavily, knowing that she should resist his request, but something told her to listen to what he had to say. She gave him a weary look before giving a slight nod. “Okay.”

He stepped back, and she followed him into the room. She sat in the chair, and he sat on the bed. Without pause, he began to tell her about his relationship with Nicole. The happy times that they

had shared in the beginning to the rocky times that had been shared between them in the end. She was shocked when he confided that there was a time when he didn't know if Josh was his son or not because Nicole had been cheating on him. Shortly after Josh had been born, Nicole had gone completely wild. Drinking and doing drugs became a part of her routine until the fateful night that she died in the car accident. His voice broke.

"I never got the chance to ask her why I wasn't enough. I tried to be the best husband and father that I could be, but it was not enough."

Tears came to her eyes, and she stood up and walked over to James. Her heart hurt for him. She could hear how rejected he felt, knew how rejected he felt, and could understand his actions a little clearer now. When she stopped in front of him, his hands came around her waist, and she felt him tremble. She wrapped her arms around him, and he continued to speak. "I didn't want to get involved with another woman, and then you came along."

He pulled back and looked up into her eyes. She felt as if she could see his soul. There was still a lot of hurt there.

"You were right earlier. I didn't think about you when I decided to move to Houston. Not because I didn't care, but because I didn't want to." He closed his eyes again. "I can't face rejection again. If I'm not the man for you, I need to know now."

Kayla laughed even though this was not a laughing matter. Some men just didn't have a clue. "Of course you are the man for me. I wouldn't have given myself to you if I didn't think so."

He pressed his face against her stomach, and his arms tightened around her waist. "Are you willing to give us a chance to see where we can go from here?"

She didn't have to think long about her answer. She loved this man, and he loved her. That was all that she needed. They would get through the rest. "Yes, I am. As long as you involve me in the decision making."

He nodded. "No more surprises, or at least bad ones." Pulling back, he looked up at her again, his expression still weary. "You know I come with a lot of baggage, right?"

She laughed. "I know, but I am willing to help you unpack it."

He couldn't help but chuckle. "Good. Now, is it too soon for me to ask you for a kiss?"

Shaking her head, she leaned into him. How could she resist him? When their lips met, she knew she had everything she had ever wanted.

Epilogue

Kayla sighed as Ellie and Jonah snuck in a kiss. They were still an adorable couple to her. So much had changed in so little time. She looked down at the engagement ring that now sparkled on her left hand. Things had improved with time for her. Open communication was the sole reason as to why they had. There were still times when hints of vulnerability peeked through, but she loved him as much as he loved her, and he knew it. Keirra and Eric had their own share of happiness as well as Kristen and Randy. They were all at a point in their lives that they had dreamed of forever. It didn't hurt that they were getting ready to walk down the aisle together in one month. She and her sisters had chosen a day that was special to them. It was the day that they had moved back to Baxley two years ago, the day that had changed their lives forever. A day that was more significant than any of them had ever realized it would be.

She truly was happy now, and so were her sisters. Today, they were older and wiser. Things couldn't be any better. James and the kids had moved into the house that had been in her family for years. It had been difficult to leave Mr. Feldon by himself, but a short while later they realized that it shouldn't have been a worry for them. Mr. Feldon's love life had picked up. He was now dating Grace Martin, a widow who was taking good care of Mr. Feldon from the looks of things. Kayla watched the newly formed couple chat with Arthur, Charlotte, Ophelia, Stuart, and her grandparents. It was good to have them in town again. She was a little disappointed that James's mother and stepfather couldn't make it, but his sister and brother had. She knew that it meant a lot to James to have the support of his family. His relationship with his mother was still strained, but it was definitely getting better.

She flinched as Josh, Wade, Cody Junior, and Joel went flying by at a dangerous speed. She, Kristen, Irene, and Alexandra told the kids to slow down simultaneously. The boys heeded the warning. She shook her head and wondered how many scrapes she would have to fix for Josh. Sometimes, he tried to move faster than his legs allowed him to. The corners of her mouth tilted upward when James, Eric, and Randy appeared, each carrying a cake in her and her sisters' direction. Everyone began to sing the birthday song, and she and her sisters moved closer to each other. She gave James a kiss on the lips as he sat her cake in front of her.

"Thank you."

He chuckled. "No, thank *you*."

She knew exactly what he meant. He was thanking her for taking a chance on him. Thanking her for being patient with him when she didn't have to. Thanking her for treating his kids as if they were hers. Most important, thanking her for loving him. She looked down at her cake and actually found herself making a wish before blowing out the candles. Cutting into the cake, she laughed. It was her favorite flavor, strawberry. Keirra's cake was vanilla, and Kristen's chocolate. All three of them looked at the men that they loved then looked back at each other and smiling, but only Keirra said what they were thinking.

"You do realize that we are getting married in a month, right?"

Eric grinned and wiggled his eyebrows. "If it is the calories that you are worried about, I will help you burn them off."

At that comment, Keirra cut herself a larger slice of cake, and Kayla couldn't help but to laugh at her younger sister. The cake and ice cream were distributed freely. When she couldn't eat anymore, she pushed her plate away before leaning over to clean Josh's mouth, and soon realized that it was a futile effort.

A few minutes later, Marianne stood up. "It's present time."

Kayla shook her head. "Tell me that you guys didn't."

When the presents began appearing, tears welled up in her eyes. She heard Keirra sigh heavily. "Don't start crying, Kayla."

She looked at her sister as the first tear fell. "I am sorry, but I can't help it."

Excusing herself, she went into the house and headed for the bathroom. James caught up with her there and pulled her into his arms. She melted into his strong embrace. He was smiling, and she dabbed her eyes with tissue.

"You told me that you weren't going to cry today."

She laughed. "I know, and I tried, but I couldn't help it."

It was an emotional day for her, and James knew that. He also understood what she felt. For so long, she and her sisters had been on their own with only each other to call family. Almost overnight, that had changed. For the first time in her life, she felt like she belonged. She had the family that she always wanted. James lifted her left hand to his lips and placed a kiss on her ring finger.

"I love you," he whispered, the emotion behind the words making them mean even more.

"I love you, too."

When she felt presentable again, she let him lead her back outside. Kristen got up to embrace her first. This time she didn't tear up. Sitting down she joined her sisters, and they began opening their presents. Two of the most meaningful ones to her were from Jamie, Jana, Jenna, and Josh. They had posed for a family picture for her and had placed it in a nice frame that was engraved "To our mom." To her surprise, it had been Jana who had been the first to call her mom, and the rest of the kids had soon followed. What surprised her even more was that she was able to hold her tears back as she stared at the picture. She embraced all of them tightly.

The next-best gift had come from Somer. She'd given all of them a painting that she had done of Kayla and her sisters. Somer had all of them sitting together with their arms around each other, and the picture truly resembled the three of them. She was grateful for all of the presents that she'd received.

Somer embraced her tightly. "Thank you for everything that you have done for me, and happy birthday."

“Anytime,” she said to the blooming teenager and watched her walk away to join Jamie and Holly.

Brigette and Dan’s secret had rocked Baxley, but no one had been more affected than Trish. When the secret had come out, Trish had flipped out, but Dan had threatened divorce and to fight for full custody of Holly. She wasn’t sure which threat had brought Trish around, but it had been a quick turnabout. For that reason, seeing Dan, Brigitte, and Trish standing together and talking had lost some of its shock value. Fortunately, Trish’s horrible behavior hadn’t rubbed off on Holly so that she and Somer were close as sisters could be. It had also sparked a friendship between five teenagers that at one time couldn’t be within the same proximity of each other.

Her thoughts were interrupted as Jamie ran up to her. “Mom, can we go hang out at Sam’s? Dad said that I have to ask you since this is your day.”

She smiled, happy with the fact that Jamie had become more of a teenager since Kayla became engaged to James and everyone had moved into the house. Jamie still had responsibilities but nowhere near the amount that she’d had in the past. It was hard to believe that she would only be with them for another year then head off to college. She knew that it was weighing heavily on James’s mind, but he was proud of his daughter and was willing to make any sacrifice necessary to see that she succeeded. It didn’t hurt that he wanted to have another child. She knew that if that were to happen, it would probably keep them busy enough so that they wouldn’t notice that Jamie was away.

She gave Jamie a slight nod. “That’s fine.”

Jamie reached for the keys, but Kayla held them out of her reach. “Make sure that you are home by eleven.”

Jamie gave her a wounded look. “But it’s Saturday.”

Kayla gave her a warning look. “And you are only seventeen.”

Jamie sighed in defeat. “Okay, Mom, eleven it is.”

She dropped the keys in Jamie’s hand and received another hug and kiss. “I hope that you had a wonderful birthday, Mom.”

Kayla watched the teenager embrace her sisters as well before running off. It had been a good birthday, and looking at her sisters, she knew that there would be many more to come. All of their hopes and dreams had come true. She found it hard to believe sometimes that her life was so perfect, but she didn’t take it for granted, and she never would. She and her sisters had come to Baxley to start a new life, and they had gained so much more. When she looked across the yard, her gaze met James’s, and she knew that their life together was going to be everything that she’d ever imagined because he was everything that she’d ever wanted, and all that she would ever need.

The End

About the Author

Stephanie Morris resides in Fort Worth, Texas. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, traveling, dancing, cooking, and spending time with her friends and family. Stephanie is addicted to writing books, drinking coffee, and sour candy. She has been writing for several years now and has written several works in erotica and romance. Stephanie can be contacted on MySpace at www.myspace.com/stephaniemorrisbooks or at <http://www.stephaniemorris.webs.com/>.