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The
Firefighter's
Woman

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Chapter One

Odessa couldn't take her eyes off him, even when the smoke burned her eyes and dried her throat or when the police were pushing the line of spectators back to a safe distance. She clung to the yellow caution tape like her life depended on it, like she was one of the people who had been stuck in that burning building. She'd been worried about him, but he'd come out safe—pissed off—but safe. Stretching up to her tiptoes and leaning as far forward as she could, she strained to catch the conversation between the object of her desire and his boss.

He tore off the oxygen mask and threw it with vehemence on the truck before peeling out of his gloves and tossing his hat after the mask. "Chief, I don't know what happened in there. I guess—"

"You're done, Steven," the fire chief told him.

"Chief, please."

The heavysset man with the thick mustache, which Odessa hated because it curled over between his lips, waved his arms with finality. "Don't, Steven. I said done! Take a break, a vacation. You're burned out, and I'm not risking any of my guys getting hurt because your head isn't in the game. You know better than anyone that this is serious business, and when we're facing the beast, we've got to have our shit in order. As of right now, you're off the clock."

Odessa's heart hurt for him. Steven loved being a firefighter. The man was a born hero if ever she'd seen one. He got off on helping people even if no one recognized him for it. She supposed that was what had drawn her to him in the first place, when she was seven and he was nineteen, just training to be a firefighter.

She sighed and looked down at her cell when it rang. Sherise's name flashed on the screen, her sister. "Hello?"

"Hey, girl," her sister greeted her. "He okay?"

Odessa glanced back over to Steven. He was just removing his fire retardant uniform and tugging his T-shirt, which he wore under the jacket, up over his head. Odessa caught her bottom lip between her teeth at the sight of his broad chest, tanned from the hot summer sun. His abs were ripped, his biceps cut to perfection. Her mouth watered, and she grew wet with longing to touch him, to be in his arms.

"Yes, he's fine. But I think he's in trouble."

Sherise groaned. "Oh, I knew this was coming. I told that fool to take some time off. He needs it. That bitch he was with walked out less than a month ago after he gave her three years of his life." Sherise paused, and Odessa picked up the clicking of her keyboard in the background. When it stopped, she spoke again. "I guess we'll have to have him over for dinner tonight to cheer him up."

“Yeah.” Odessa was torn. Sure, she wanted to spend more time with Steven, time in which she hoped that he would at last see her as a twenty-three-year-old woman and not the child whose braids he used to tug and who he used to chase and tickle years ago. How she longed for him to desire her like she desired him. The one problem with that was most of the busybodies in their town had always thought Sherise and he would one day hook up since they had been best friends since high school.

So, Odessa did not want him to realize what a good thing he had been overlooking in her sister now that the both of them were single again. Yet, it was a risk she would have to take if she wanted to change her image in his eyes. She sighed. “Okay, you want me to ask him?”

Before her sister could answer, Steven turned and caught sight of her. A reluctant smile spread across his handsome face, and he strolled over. Odessa went still while she watched him walk. Soon he towered over her, seeming to block out the sun with his massive build, dwarfing her five-feet-five height. Steven had once told her he was six-feet-six. That might have been stretching it by a couple inches, but he was up there, she knew.

While he stood over her, he shook his head, which sent droplets of water flying from his sandy-brown hair.

“Jerk,” she grumbled and swatted him, reluctant to let her fingers retract when they touched his heated skin. Thank goodness, he didn’t notice.

“That Sherise?” he asked.

She nodded.

He nipped the phone from her hand and put it to his ear. Irritation rose in Odessa as he turned his back and strolled away while chatting with her sister. He and she were close. They had tons in common, but what did Odessa have? She had a penchant for watching anime online, which Steven had found mind-boggling. At least he didn’t tease her given that she was a student of Westwood College, going after a degree in animation. That gave her an excuse aside from the fact that she was addicted to her shows like some people were to soap operas.

Still, Sherise was better suited to carry on long conversations with Steven. After all, she was a health inspector. Both saved lives in their own way, she supposed.

“Okay, folks. Show’s over,” the chief called out.

The citizens of Forest’s End began to drift away, but Odessa stayed where she was. She coughed a few times and, swallowing, tried to gather enough moisture in her mouth to wet her throat, but it didn’t work.

Steven glanced her way while still talking, and he turned to come back toward her. She swayed a little. He was there in an instant with his arm around her waist and frowning down at her. In a daze, she thought he was about to kiss her.

“Snap out of it, squirt,” he told her. He shoved a bottle of water into her hand. “You’ve been out in this smoke too long. Why did you come? You’ve seen this a million times in the dry seasons.”

She frowned and shook his arm off. “You’re right. Why bother?” She spun on her heel and was about to march off, but he caught her shoulder and turned her back around. Hope rose in her, but he was only holding her phone out to her.

“I’ll be by later for spaghetti. If I’m late, don’t eat all the garlic bread.” He chuckled when she snatched her phone from him. Why the hell couldn’t he see? Or why couldn’t she let it go, find some other man?

Defeated, she headed back to her Jeep.

Steven called out to her. “Did you hear me, Odessa? If you do, I’ll tackle you.”

She grunted as she hopped into her vehicle. “Yeah, I wish.” From the looks of things, he’d never see the light. It was hopeless. She’d need a miracle to become that firefighter’s woman.

Chapter Two

Steven stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel to dry off his body and dripping hair. After he had wrapped the towel around his waist, he headed out of the bathroom to empty out his locker. A weight settled on his chest as he sorted through the locker's contents and decided on what he might need to take home since he wouldn't be coming in to work for a while.

The chief had been livid, and Steven couldn't blame him. A rookie would have made better decisions than he had today, and the firefighter's procedures were there for a reason. Hell, he did annual training and took courses regularly to keep up on both his skills and his knowledge of how to fight fires while staying safe. There was no excuse for miscalculating the direction the fire would take, and to follow up with kicking in a door before double-checking the conditions beyond it was stupid and could get him and his buddies killed. That was unacceptable.

Besides all that, he loved being a firefighter, and to be put on what amounted to suspension was hard to take. To top it off, he'd have to wait until the chief decided he was ready to come back to work. That man held onto his anger like nobody Steven knew. It could be fall before he was back on the job. In a fit of explosive anger of his own, he tossed his duffle bag on the floor and slammed the locker closed.

"Hey, there. Keep it down, Steven," his buddy Tony called out from the kitchen. "I have a cake in the oven."

Steven rolled his eyes and, in his slippers, padded to the kitchen while pulling a T-shirt over his head. "You're always cooking. Smells good though."

"You staying for dinner?" Tony offered.

"No. Going to Sherise's."

Tony grinned. "Ah, the beautiful Sherise. Sexy as hell. When are you going to get some of that chocolate sweetness, bud?"

Steven groaned. "Damn, not you too. When will it stop? Sherise and I have been friends forever. I'm not going after her. Besides, you know what everybody would think about that."

Tony leaned over a pot full of sauce and dipped his spoon in to taste. He added in a few seasonings, stirred, and replaced the lid. Steven's stomach growled. No one cooked like Tony. Sherise was good, but she couldn't touch the man. Truth be told, Steven had always thought Tony and Sherise would make a great couple, but she didn't like him for some reason.

"Who gives a fuck what others think?" Tony told him. "She's beautiful and smart. You couldn't ask for more."

"Like I said, not interested in her that way."

“The other one then,” Tony suggested.

Steven frowned. “What other one?”

Tony smirked and shook his head. “Come on. Don’t tell me you’re still hung up on that bitch that left you.”

Steven winced. He had loved his ex, was still fighting through the pain of her leaving him after such a long time together. She was part of the reason he had been having a hard time getting his head on straight—that and the fact that he’d been at this full-time for almost sixteen years without a break. He did need a vacation.

Tony went on. “The younger sister, Odessa. Talk about growing up in the family genes. Man, one minute she’s got no curves at all, and the next”—Tony curved his fingers behind his ass to indicate how round Odessa’s was—“bam! She’s sexy as hell, I’ll tell you that. A man could ride that all night. You’re telling me you haven’t seen that ass of hers? And tiny too, waist so small a man could span his hands around it and touch his fingers together.” He shook like he was picturing touching Odessa. Steven found himself getting angry at that. No wonder Sherise wasn’t into him if he was this insensitive.

“I’ve known her since she was a kid,” he snapped. “She’s like a little sister to me, as well. I hadn’t noticed how much she’s changed.”

Tony rolled his eyes and turned back to his pot.

Steven had been lying, of course. How could he not notice the way Odessa had grown up, had developed into a knockout? If he were being honest, he’d admit that she was sexier, by far, than Sherise. Tony was right. She was small, and when he’d wrapped an arm about her this afternoon, he’d had the same thought, that he could span her waist with both hands. Worse was that it had also made him rock hard touching her. He’d thought he’d lose it when her fingers had rested for a moment on his stomach.

Like he had been doing since she was a child, he had called her squirt and teased her, to help put some distance between them. He’d known his words would piss her off and make her walk away. That was better than the alternative, dragging her into his arms and kissing that sweet-looking mouth of hers. No way was he getting involved with Odessa. One, she was his best friend’s kid sister, and two, she was the kind of woman who needed a man ready to devote himself to her. He wasn’t that guy, and he more than likely never would be. Since his grandfather, his only living relative, had died last year, Sherise and Odessa were all the family he had left. He wasn’t going to blow it by boinking Odessa because it was for certain there could never be any more than sex between them.

“Anyway, that’s a moot point. I’ll see you in a few weeks, I guess, when I get off the chief’s shit list.”

He turned to leave, but Tony stopped him. “Uh, bud, you planning on going like that?”

Steven glanced down at himself, and heat rose in his face. He was still wearing the towel he had wrapped around his waist when he got out of the shower. *Scatterbrain*. When would he pull it together? “Yeah, new style,” he grumbled and stomped back to his locker to slip a pair of jeans on and his street shoes.

Chapter Three

Odessa ran a comb through her hair, frowning. Was it the fact that she had small breasts? Most men loved a woman who had at least a C cup. Odessa could scarcely fill a B cup, and that was pushing it. Her grade of hair wasn't bad, at least. She didn't keep it in the latest style, but when she used any type of gel on it, her hair became shiny and curly and so cute that she could swoop it all up into a puff atop her head and go. She'd broken down and gotten a perm after being natural for a few years. Sherise had loved the kinky curls, but Steven had told her he needed to get used to it. He hadn't made any more comments after that, and she ended up letting it grow out again, straightened with chemicals.

She sighed and closed her eyes, drawing in a calming breath. "Get over him, Des," she told herself. "Just move the hell on."

Neither her heart nor the rest of her body listened since she proceeded to push a turquoise band in her hair to hold it back from her forehead and popped in some matching turquoise circle earrings. The accessories went well with her formfitting top and her short shorts. They didn't dress up for dinner, but it didn't mean she couldn't be sexy. Odessa'd had men whistling because of how her ass looked in these shorts, so if Steven didn't look, he was gay or something!

She laughed at that assessment and turned from her mirror. The scent of Sherise's spaghetti and the garlic bread was wafting up the stairs, and Odessa was getting hungry. Steven should be there soon.

He was just coming in the front door as Odessa descended the narrow stairwell. On the one broken step that needed to be replaced—but she and Sherise didn't have the money to get someone to come in and do it—she tripped and catapulted toward the bottom. Odessa let out a small scream, but Steven was fast. He zipped forward and caught her before she could land face first on the floor.

Odessa, instead, smashed into Steven's chest, and one of his hands cupped her breast. The impact hurt, but didn't last long as desire took over. To her embarrassment, her nipple drew up beneath his palm. He had to feel that. She knew he did when he almost threw her backward away from him.

"Uh, sorry. You okay?" he asked.

Odessa blinked back tears. "Fine. Thanks."

"Any time," he mumbled and moved past her to head into the dining room.

Odessa didn't budge. She stood in the hall at the bottom of the steps with her eyes closed. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* Then again, she couldn't help how her body reacted. Nipples were an erogenous zone, weren't they? Any woman would have had the same physical reaction. With that half-convincing argument, she followed Steven into the dining room and took her seat.

Sherise plodded into the room carrying a huge bowl of pasta. She set it in the middle of the table, disappeared, and came back again with the bread and a bowl of her homemade sauce. "What was that commotion in the hall?"

"Nothing," Odessa almost shouted. Steven didn't respond.

Sherise glanced at them both and shrugged. "Well, let's say our grace and dig in. I'm starving." After they had prayed over the food, Sherise began dishing spaghetti on plates, topped them with loads of meatball-filled sauce, and then passed them around. "So, what is everyone doing for the summer?"

Odessa shoveled a few bites of food into her mouth, chewed, and swallowed before answering. "I don't know. I'm just happy to be off from school. I didn't get that animation project I told you about. Someone else outbid me."

Sherise tsked. "Aw, next time, baby. You'll show them. You're the best."

"How do you know that?" Steven cut in. "Neither of us know much about what she does."

Odessa stared at him in shock. Why was he being mean? To get back at her for landing her boob in his hand, or because he was having a bad day? She stared him straight in the eye, feeling annoyed that he had thrust her off him like she disgusted him. "You should understand, shouldn't you? After all, you're unemployed, as well."

Steven pointed his fork at her, his eyes narrowed. "After dinner, you're mine."

Odessa held back a grin and hoped the breathlessness that had come over her wasn't obvious. "Ohh, I'm so scared of you."

"Children!" Sherise interrupted. "You two have been acting like this since Odessa was a little girl. When are you two going to act like civilized adults?" She pinned Odessa with a glare. "You should be kinder to Steven. He's had a rough day. We both know what fighting fires means to him."

Odessa dropped her gaze to her plate. This was why Steven didn't go after Sherise. The woman was, at times, an old maid, naggy, too mature, and not fun at all. Odessa wondered how the two of them could be best friends when Steven was so fun-loving and down to earth.

When the conversation lagged, both Odessa and Steven eating in silence with their heads down, Sherise clapped her hands. "I know, we can all three spend a couple weeks on the beach. Remember, Tony has that house down on the shore, and he said we could use it any time we want. I bet he'd let us take it since this is the busy season for firefighters with all the dry weather. I never expected you to get time off, Steven, so this would be perfect for you. What do you say?"

Hope rose in Odessa's heart. A whole two weeks, uninterrupted, spent with Steven. She could talk to him more, let him get to know her and understand what it was she wanted to

accomplish in her field. Also, she could listen to him, get him to open up and talk to her about his ex, and maybe get him to relax enough to be ready to go back to work. That kind of intimacy could breed deeper feelings, couldn't it? She hoped so.

Steven shook his head. "Just like you said, this is the busiest time for the guys. The chief is stubborn, but if he gets short-staffed, he's bound to call me in. I want to be close by. Besides, the Fourth is coming up, and you know how the idiots get with all the fireworks. Every year, we're out all night long putting out small fires and sheds where some fool has tossed a match in 'just to watch it burn, dude.'"

He had changed the tone of his voice to mimic the airheaded guys they liked to make fun, because every summer the guys got drunk and did something dumber than the year before. Odessa and Sherise giggled at the impression, but Odessa felt a weight settle over her. She should have known Steven wouldn't go. Not at this time.

After a few moments, Sherise sobered. "So, in other words, you don't give a fuck if your head's still not in it? You don't give a fuck if you screw up and get, I don't know, some old lady killed? Just so long as the chief calls you back to work."

Silence reigned over the table.

Odessa was the first to speak. "Did you have to bring that up, Sherise? He doesn't need to be reminded of that incident from five years ago."

Her sister rolled her eyes. "Oh, you're his defender now, Odessa?" She turned to Steven. "You know what I'm saying is true. I care about you. Despite how she acts, Odessa does too. We both feel like you need the time. I'm sorry to agree with the chief on this one, but you have to take the time. You have to heal, and you need it now more than ever."

Steven shoved his chair back from the table, threw his fork on his empty plate, and stomped toward the back door of their tiny house. "Make the arrangements," he called over his shoulder.

Sherise looked at Odessa. "Why don't you go and cheer him up?"

"Me?" Odessa frowned. "You're the one that opened old wounds. The loss of that old woman was not his fault at all. It was the rookie he had with him who made the error. The investigation placed no blame on him."

"Yes, but we both know he still blames himself. If he had been right beside the guy, it wouldn't have happened."

"He's a hero, not a superhero," Odessa told her dryly. "He had his hands full trying to save the lives of two others."

Sherise shrugged and stood as she gathered their empty plates. "You can go out there and say all of that again, like we've done before, but I wanted to hammer into his head that it

could happen to him again, only this time it would be his fault if he didn't get away. He knows that, and it tore my heart to remind him."

"But you're the one who is tough on him, making him stay on the right path. Right there helping him to never give up."

Sherise nodded. "Yeah, and you're the fun one. We're like his sisters, his only family. So get out there."

Odessa winced. She didn't want to be Steven's sister. With reluctance, she stood up. "Fine. I'll go, but I won't like it."

Sherise laughed and headed into the kitchen while Odessa passed by her to push open the screen door at the back of the house. Steven was sitting on their old, rusted swing in the cookie-cutter backyard with his shoulders slumped, head down. Odessa's heart constricted.

She strolled across to him and dropped onto the grass to lay her head on his lap. He rested a hand on her cheek, and sensations of longing passed through her. "It's going to be okay, you know?"

He sighed. "I know. I always bounce back, and I know that Sherise sent you out here to tell me five years ago wasn't my fault. My head comprehends that, but the pain will be with me forever. I think it's why I keep pushing myself harder and harder, to be sure it doesn't happen again."

She glanced up at him and rested her chin on her folded hands at his thigh. He was so beautiful with his smoldering green eyes, eyes that every woman and girl in town grew weak over. They had all fought for Steven's attention, and most were jealous of the closeness he maintained with Sherise, and even Odessa. In the end, he had chosen Gloria, the sexy blonde who had lived in Forest's End long enough to stomp his heart under her spiked heels.

Steven's eyes were nice, real nice. But what had Odessa's heart doing flip-flops every time she stared into his face was that small scar at the side of his mouth that he had picked up in that same fire five years ago. Something about it said rugged sexiness to her, and it made her want to eat Steven up.

Some of her desire must have shown in her eyes because he jumped to his feet, almost causing her to bang her chin on the swing seat. He trudged away with his hands in his pockets. Odessa grunted and stood up to take Steven's place in the swing. She gripped the rusted over chains at the side of her head and used her feet to push off. With the ease of years of practice, she stretched her legs out when the swing went forward and tucked them under her when she went back. Soon, a gentle breeze was cooling her skin as she swung higher.

With no warning, Steven reached out and grabbed hold of one of the chains, stopping her in midarc. "Are you nuts?" he grumbled, standing above her. "This thing is on its last leg. I

saved your clumsy ass once tonight. Do I have to do it again to keep you from flying over into the neighbor's yard?"

Odessa stood and looked up at the pole over her head but didn't see anything hanging loose or looking like it was in such disrepair that it might break at any second. Annoyed, she raised an eyebrow at Steven. "You just want to ruin my fun because you're in a funk."

A reluctant grin spread over his face. "A funk? Where did you pick that up? It doesn't even sound like you."

She rested a hand on her hip and pushed her lips out. "You don't know me, Steven Ohms."

He stepped closer, trapping her between his huge, muscled body and the swing seat. "Oh, I know you, all right."

She caught her breath. He couldn't be coming on to her. Could he? She dared look up and, expecting his usual teasing eyes with the half smile on his lips, found instead an arrested expression on his face. Steven's gaze had dropped to the front of her blouse. Following his line of sight, she realized the three buttons on her top had come undone, giving him a healthy look at the gentle swell of one breast.

Just knowing he was looking made her break out into a cold sweat, and her nipples hardened, clearly defined behind the thin materials of her bra and her shirt. She parted her lips, and her breath came in short puffs.

Steven's head dropped down close to hers, his cheek alongside her cheek. "You've grown up a lot, Odessa. I noticed."

A small involuntary moan started from her lips, but she clipped it off by clenching her teeth. One kiss, one hot kiss, was all she wanted. Steven's mouth came closer. He crowded her even more, and she imagined she felt the heat of his body even though they weren't touching.

Steven's full lips dropped closer, and Odessa went up onto the balls of her feet. He was going to kiss her. He was really going to do it. She'd dreamed about it for so long, pleasuring herself in the middle of the night while imagining her fingers were his. How she loved him, *needed* him.

"Hey, you two. I know you're not going to turn down my peach cobbler," Sherise called out.

The spell was broken just like that. Odessa slumped into the swing seat, and Steven spun away, hands back in his pockets and expression dark, like nothing had happened. In disbelief, Odessa watched him stride across the patch of grass to the narrow walk and then disappear inside the house.

Before she knew she was going to, she burst out into noisy sobs and muffled them with a hand over her mouth.

Chapter Four

Steven lay in his bed at twenty after midnight with his stiff shaft in his hand. While he stroked, he held his eyes wide open because, every time he closed them, she was there. Soft and brown, sweet chocolate, Odessa was a craving that had come over him from nowhere. One minute, he had been acknowledging to himself that she was beautiful, and the next, he had been about to kiss her. He'd been riveted to her breasts. In fact, he had itched to squeeze them, to rip that blouse she wore open the rest of the way so he could see if they were all he had imagined in that moment of seeing her hardened nipples through her top.

"Stupid!" he chided himself for the millionth time. Still, he pumped, unable to get a release for the almost half hour he'd been at it. Something told him that if he closed his eyes and brought her face up in his mind, he'd shoot his load in a second. He resisted. The chief had always preached to the guys that trouble started in the head of a man who didn't keep his mind trained on what it should be trained on. If Steven began to fantasize about Odessa, he'd be doing all the time what he'd almost done tonight at their house, and that was not going to happen.

"She's like a little sister," he reminded himself. His eyes drifted closed, and Odessa's curvy ass rose up in his mind's eye. *Damn, she looked good in those shorts!* His shaft grew rock solid, pulsed once under his hand, and he came good and hard. Pumping his hips with the rhythm his hand maintained, he groaned all the way through it, giving in to temptation. "Odessa," he cried as the last of his seed shot out. Steven would have been lying through his teeth if he didn't admit that he felt more satisfied than he ever had thinking on some vague centerfold.

With a sigh, he swung his feet to the floor. He was fulfilled for the time being but still wide awake. Perhaps a run on the trail that lead all over Forest's End through thick groves of trees would settle his mind and body enough to rest. After cleaning up a little in the bathroom, he dressed in sweats, slipped on his sneakers, and headed out the front door of his house.

He'd been jogging all of two minutes when he regretted the choice of sweats over a pair of shorts. His legs were slick beneath the thick, grey material, and sweat stains appeared under his arms. His hair was plastered to his forehead, but he was used to that part. Jogging five miles a day was a part of his regular routine, along with lifting weights in the small room he and the guys had set aside down at the firehouse.

When he rounded a curve in the trail, with the moon so bright it lit up everything around him until it looked like twilight, his heart thumped in his chest for a whole other reason than the fact that he was exercising. The tiny feminine form with an ass a man could lose his mind watching was unmistakable. And then remembering the time of night it was, he grew angry. Odessa should not be out alone. The crime rate in Forest's End was one of the lowest in the entire country, but it was not nonexistent. He increased his speed to catch up to her.

"What the hell are you doing out here alone?" he demanded.

She cocked an eyebrow at him, and her gaze swept him from head to foot. Unlike his mistake in dressing, she was clothed in only a sports bra and another pair of short shorts. His dick twitched, and Steven swore under his breath.

“You’re out here,” she countered.

“I’m not a four-foot-two woman.”

She rolled her eyes at him and turned her attention back to the trail. “I am not four-foot-two, thank you very much.”

Despite himself, he chuckled. She tended to make him laugh even when she wasn’t trying. He thought he had the same effect on her, as well. That fact was the only thing he didn’t share in common with Sherise. He could talk to his best friend about anything, but just letting go wasn’t her.

“You don’t do this very often, do you?”

“You think this body was something I was born with?” She pointed her chin at him. “You’re out here, and I’ve been doing this for a few months. No one has ever messed with me. In fact, this is the first time I’ve met anyone on the trail this late, which is why I do it now.”

She gave him a look that could not be misread. She resented his intrusion.

Steven ignored the urge to tackle her to the grass and take the kiss he had wanted earlier in the evening. Setting his jaw, he continued at her side. “I’ll keep you company.”

He ignored her loud sigh in response.

After they had been running awhile in silence, he said, “I teased you earlier about your work, but I want to understand. You don’t really go into much detail. I mean, you said something like you make cartoons—”

“I do not make cartoons!”

He held up his hands, palms facing her to ward off the animosity in her eyes. “Whoa, sorry. What is it? Uh . . .”

She sighed again and made a great show of unhooking the water bottle she had hanging from her waist and taking a few sips before answering. “It’s anime that I do, and before you start comparing it to cartoons, you should know that it’s huge in Japan, where it’s targeted more often to adults rather than children.”

His eyes grew wide. “You’re kidding?”

All of a sudden, it was like the sun had come out when she smiled. Steven was short of breath, but he attributed it to the run and not to his reaction to her, along with his heart rate spiking. The excitement in discussing what she loved seemed to have given her more energy. She picked up speed, and Steven adjusted his, as well, having no trouble keeping up with her.

“Yeah, it’s not as big here, which might be kind of why I’m having trouble getting a contract position. I know I should broaden my scope and try to get something in the field of game-making, but I just have that dream, and I can’t shake it loose, you know?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I know what you mean. I’ve wanted to be a firefighter long as I can remember. I never wanted anything else.” He shrugged. “After doing it so long, though, without a break, it’s not old, but . . .” He tried to find the right words to describe what he was feeling.

“Same old thing? Like you were talking about, the idiots who set fires every year, the dry brush at the side of the highway catching fire, some of the trees. All that can take its toll after a while.”

Steven studied the woman who had been the girl with pigtails, with big pink bows she’d demanded her mother put in, even when they didn’t match with what she was wearing, stretching down to her shoulders. He remembered her knobby knees and skinny legs. He had wondered what she would turn out to be when she was older. Odessa’d had a quick temper, had been in fights with a few neighborhood boys, but she had been able to shake it off when he joked around with her. He was the one to coax her out of the pink bows and get her to try something new.

Thinking of her hair, he glanced up at it. Now that it had grown long again, he liked it and thought it suited Odessa, even enhanced her beauty. He had felt wrong for preferring it this way, but the fact was, he sometimes liked to fantasize about running his fingers through it while he did other things with her. Coughing in a way to dislodge such thoughts from his mind, he turned his head to watch the trail. They were heading into a more shadowed area, and he didn’t want to land on his face because he stepped wrong.

“You’re right,” he told her. “But I do know what it’s like to reach my dream, the thing that I feel like I was born to do, and I want that for you, Odessa. Don’t give up. If you want a job in anime, and it’s big in Japan, maybe you should consider going to live there for a while. Might be loads of better opportunities.”

She stopped running and faced him when he followed suit. “Are you serious?” Her eyebrows had dropped low, and her full lips were compressed so that they thinned out. “Are you kidding me?”

“What?” He frowned. “Did I make you mad? I was encouraging you to reach for your dream, to do whatever it takes to obtain it. That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“What about . . .” She turned her back on him.

Steven stepped up behind her and dropped his hands on her shoulders. He spun her to face him and put a finger under her chin to force her to look at him. “Tell me.”

She poked her lips out and rolled her eyes at him while crossing her arms. “If you don’t know, I’m not telling you. Forget it.” She tried to pull away from him, but he stopped her. It was all he could do not to take her in his arms and kiss away her frown. Where was their

play, their lightheartedness? They used to joke around continuously until they got on Sherise's nerves. Without warning, it hit him what she was referring to. "About this evening," he began.

"I said forget it, damn it. Not interested in hearing whatever you have to say on that subject, Steven." She jerked herself out of his hold and began jogging again. He followed.

"Look, it's not you. It's that I just got out of that thing with Gloria. Or rather, she got out of it and left me holding my balls."

"I get that. Don't worry about it." She ran faster.

"Odessa, wait." He reached out and jerked her to a stop. "I'm sorry. I don't want to hurt you, okay?" He tried to hug her, but she pushed him away. "All right, I admit it. There's an attraction there between us, but I truly feel it's only because I'm lonely because I'm used to having someone all the time, and you're without prospects right now."

"What?" she shrieked. Her voice echoed over the quiet night. "You did not just say that to me, Steven. You couldn't have. Maybe I'm not out here in the middle of the night at all. I'm at home having a freaking nightmare because you did not just tell me I don't have prospects!"

He was the biggest idiot in existence. "I didn't mean that. I'm sorry."

"Kiss my ass."

Running his hands through his wet hair, he could have kicked himself. How could he have had said something so insensitive? Of course Odessa had prospects. Hell, he'd noted just the other day how many guys were eying her, climbing over each other trying to get her attention. She'd never been serious about any of them far as he could tell, and he'd wondered at the time if she was still a virgin. The thought that she might not be didn't sit well with him, but it was none of his business.

Like he'd been waiting for his cue, one of Odessa's admirers appeared on the path ahead, and Odessa jogged right up to him. "Guy, what are you doing out here?"

Steven shook his head in disbelief, irritation rising inside him that this guy happened to show at the most inopportune time, when Odessa was pissed off at him. "Yeah, Guy, good timing," he snapped.

The other man, a law university student in the city about twenty miles from Forest's End, and too damn sure of his appeal to the opposite sex, never took his eyes off Odessa's breasts as she ran up to him. "Hey, Odessa. You run out here late, too? Funny, I've never seen you."

"Yeah, funny," Steven grumbled. Guy looked like he hadn't run anywhere. Not that he was overweight, he noticed with displeasure. Odessa curled her arm in his and pressed close to his side.

She cast a glare Steven's way. "Don't worry about Grumpy. I don't think he runs much, although he claims to." She rolled her eyes. "You know how people try to impress you."

"What?" Steven's voice rose in pitch. She was trying to provoke him, and damn if it wasn't working. All of a sudden, all he wanted to do was trudge home and go to bed.

"Can I talk to you in private, Odessa?" Guy asked, a glare directed at Steven.

"Sure, baby." Odessa's voice was too sweet, too inviting. "Walk with me while I cool down."

They started walking ahead of Steven. He considered following to keep his eye on Guy to make sure he didn't try anything, but changed his mind. Right now, Odessa was right. He wasn't in the best of moods, and seeing that fool try to worm his way in her pants wouldn't help him. He'd end up putting a fist in his face and maybe spending a night in jail. That was not the impression he wanted to give the chief should it get back to him later, and it wouldn't encourage the man to bring him back in to work.

"Odessa," he called out to her.

She glanced back and scowled at him. "I can take care of myself, Steven. Don't worry."

He clenched his hands at his sides, sighed, and turned half away from them. "Guy, you'd better not cross the line with her. Walk her to her door, and if I have to, I *will* find you. Got it?"

Guy paled but nodded. "Got it."

Having no other alternative, Steven spun on his heel and ran at his top speed all the way home. He hit the door and stripped all the way to his bathroom where he jumped in the shower, washed in a few short minutes, dried his body and crashed on the bed stark naked. Thankfully, he was out in less than a minute, unable to be tormented over what Guy and Odessa were doing out in the dark.

Chapter Five

“Vacation!” Odessa whooped as she came down the stairs, laden with her suitcases and with sunglasses perched on her nose. “Oh yeah. You know it,” she sang as she descended each step one at a time. Stopping at the bottom, she dropped everything and began to dance with her ass sticking out and one leg in the air while spinning around.

Steven tramped into the house in his usual way, without knocking, and spotted Odessa dancing. He ran over to her and began to do his version of dancing, the kind without a hint of rhythm. Odessa burst out laughing but continued to wiggle her ass in his direction. He shimmied up close and threw his arms up strait in the air, his knees bent like he was doing the limbo with her as a vertical stick.

“You’re crazy, Steven.” Odessa giggled. “You can’t dance a lick, but you keep trying.”

Sherise came into the hallway in time to see them swaying together with Steven’s hands on her hips. Her sister swung a dish towel around in the air. “Hey! Ho!”

Steven mis-stepped, bringing Odessa to him, and just that quickly, the atmosphere changed. Odessa shivered when his thigh muscles tensed in back of her. Sherise continued to make her own music, but Odessa didn’t pay attention to anything other than the way her breathing seemed to have become restricted, how moisture gathered between her legs, and, most of all, how Steven’s hands had tightened on her hips. He felt it, too. She knew he did.

Almost at the exact moment she did, he stopped dancing and dropped his arms to his sides. He took two giant steps back away from her and frowned down at the luggage she had dropped on the floor. “You’re taking all of that for just a two-week stay where you’ll more than likely be in a T-shirt or bathing suit the whole time?”

Odessa opened her mouth to speak, but Sherise scoffed, cutting her off. “You don’t know us by now, Steven? A woman has to be prepared. Odessa’s probably got a casual and a dressy outfit for every day she’s down there on the shore, and a few just in case outfits.” She ticked the items off on her fingers. “Plus, there’re shoes and accessories, makeup, hair products.”

Wide-eyed, Steven looked at Odessa. She’d had time to pull herself together by then. She grinned, pretending no sparks had just flown between them. “I’m just saying. A girl’s got to be prepared.”

“Okay, I get it,” he conceded.

Steven began to gather Odessa’s bags to take out to the car, but Sherise stopped him. “I have bad news, you two.”

He stopped, and Odessa turned to her sister. “What’s up?”

Sherise scrunched her face with an apologetic look in her eyes. Odessa knew what was coming, and her heart dropped. She should have known.

"I can't go," Sherise said in a rush.

"What?" Odessa and Steven shouted.

"I'm so sorry. I wanted to, but my boss called me this morning. One of the restaurants I inspected just last month has a suit against it for food poisoning, a *big* case. I have to make sure all my papers are together, that I did a thorough job on looking that place over because you can bet I'll be questioned until I can't take it anymore." She shrugged. "Plus, I have to meet with big guys down at the office to plot our strategy, what we will and won't release to the media about this, etcetera. There's no way I can get away until this thing is settled."

Odessa sank down to sit on the bottom step behind her and hung her head. Why? Why the hell did Sherise let her pack all her crap if she knew the whole thing would be canceled? Just a little time with Steven is all she had wanted. Was that such a fucking problem? She shut her eyes and pressed the heels of her hands to them while she tried not to cry. This was a sign, she decided, a sign that they weren't meant to be, and even if she had the perfect setting, it wasn't going to happen. Whatever. She was over him. *Moving on!*

She stood up and sniffed. "Okay, well whatever, Sherise. I'll find something to do with myself here."

Steven hoisted the bags. "I'll help you get these upstairs."

Sherise grabbed both their arms. "What are you talking about? You're going." She dropped her voice low, the tone she'd used while Odessa was growing up, when Sherise meant business. "You're both going without me."

"Sherise," Odessa began to protest, but excitement welled inside her.

"Don't 'Sherise' me." Her sister's fist went to one hip. "You have worked your ass off and need a break from the books and computer." She turned to Steven. "And you don't need me to tell you why. Good-bye! Drive safely, and call me when you get there."

With that command, she twirled away and marched back into the kitchen. Odessa glanced over at Steven, too nervous to say anything unless he bucked against Sherise's orders, remembering that the two of them together might be trouble. He smirked back at her.

"I guess that's that." He left the house with two of her bags. Odessa had no choice but to take one herself, grab her laptop bag off the hall table, and follow him out. What would a lazy two weeks in the hot summer sun be like spent with Steven and no one else? She was about to find out.

* * * *

Odessa rode with her feet up on the dash in front of her so she could study her toenail polishing job while blasting music from her ear buds on her iPod. Anything was better than

Steven's country music station. She thought if she listened to another lonely heart breaking, she would break *him*.

Her stomach growled, and she happened to see a sign for a fast food place just a half mile ahead. She yanked the buds from her ears and sat up. "Oh, please pull over to that rest stop, Steven. I'm ready to bite the leather, for real."

He frowned. "Fast food? Can it get more unhealthy?"

She smirked. "Ah, I forgot the firefighter health food junky. It's funny how that flies out the window when Sherise cooks."

He shrugged. "Home cooking. I only come over about twice a week, and the rest of the time, I can eat right. Besides, Tony always makes me and one or two of the other guys something a little less heavy on the arteries."

He pulled into the stop, and Odessa pushed her door open. "Every time you talk about Tony's cooking, I get the feeling that you love it more than Sherise's. Better not let her know that." She slipped out of the car, and when Steven didn't respond to her comment, she glanced back at him. "What?"

"Do you have to wear your shorts that high? They're practically panties."

She slapped a cheek and laughed. "Don't hate on my shorts. Guys like this."

"Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of, more attention than you can handle."

Odessa slid her sunglasses on her nose and pulled her top down over her shorts while Steven strolled around the front of the car to her side. "I can handle it, baby, but can you?"

Before he could respond, she sauntered ahead of him, being sure to give her hips extra sway. There wasn't a doubt in her mind where his eyes focused as she walked. When she entered the burger joint, she spotted a cashier just opening up, and she rushed ahead of the man who was one step behind. She winked. "Sorry."

His deep brown gaze took a tour over her body and lingered at her ass. If Odessa weren't as brown herself, he would have caught her blushing. She turned away, waving a hand to her face from the heat. The air must not be working here. "Can I get a cheeseburger, please, with extra pickles, a large fry, and a large coke? To go."

A low whistle next to her caught her attention. "I like a tiny woman who can eat like the big boys." He grinned. "What's your name?"

Odessa rolled her eyes. "It's hardly big enough for a man to eat."

His grin spread wider, and she could have bit her tongue off for the way her words came out. "Is that right?" he asked, sliding in closer, making her feel crowded. Someone bumped her from behind, and she turned to find Steven looming up over her.

The man's face fell. "Your boyfriend?"

"We're just friends," Steven was quick to answer.

Odessa frowned. He sure wasn't giving that impression pushing up on her the way he was. He didn't want her, but he didn't want anyone else to have her either? She was not playing that game.

When she had received her and Steven's order, she turned away from the register to be stopped by the man who had asked her name. He held out a slip of paper with a number on it that must be a cell from the first three digits after the area code. A name was written above that.

Odessa read it. "Lamont?"

He grinned. "That's me. Why don't you give me a call when you can, pretty lady. I'll look forward to hearing from you. When you figure out what this is." He gestured to Steven, winked at her, and turned to go with his food. Odessa stood there dumbfounded, and Steven grunted in annoyance behind her head.

"Did you see that?" Odessa bumped Steven in the stomach.

"See what?" he grumbled.

She punched him in the arm and hurried out to the car. What she had been referring to was the fact that Lamont had been holding in his free hand a brochure to the exact condo rental development that she had noted nearby Tony's house on the beach when she and Sherise were checking out activities they could get involved in. If there was only one development by that name, and Lamont wasn't just browsing for the sake of browsing, then it was likely she would see him again.

From Steven's dark expression, she figured he thought she was referring to Lamont's hard body defined beneath his T-shirt and shorts. She did not clarify it for him. Soon enough, he'd have plenty to get in a funk over if Lamont was vacationing close by.

Chapter Six

Odessa snapped her bikini bottoms into place and examined herself in the mirror. A little hippy, but not bad. The bandeau top piece looked like it was twisted in the middle with one breast covered in turquoise and the other covered in green. A thin strap went up around her neck. She knew Steven would either whine about the skimpy bottoms or never take his eyes off her ass. The turquoise covering her center was surrounded on both sides with the green. She'd paid a little more than usual for this bikini, but it was worth it. The vibrant colors looked great against her sienna-shaded skin.

Slipping her laptop bag over her shoulder and her sunglasses on her nose, she was ready to spend a lazy day on the beach. As she padded in flip-flops across the living room floor, she took in Tony's summer home. Sunflowers seemed to be the reigning theme on everything from the little caddy beside the heavy wood furniture in the living room, to all the tea towels, the clock, and the curtains in the kitchen. There was even an exposed brick fireplace to warm the place when Tony and his friends came down in the cooler months. She wondered how he could afford such an obviously expensive second home right on the water on a firefighter's salary. Investments maybe?

Not caring one way or another since she got to enjoy it all, Odessa headed toward the front door. "Hey, Steven? Going down to the beach. Catch you later."

She'd decided when they pulled in last night to ignore Steven, and let him come to her. No man wanted a woman to chase after him, least of all Steven. And if his ass didn't wake up soon, maybe Lamont, or some other guy she met down here, would help console her until she was well and truly over Steven.

He came rushing out of his room on the other side of the house. For the life of Odessa, she couldn't figure out why there were two bedrooms at one end and two at the other. Steven had shown his intentions when he'd waited for her to choose one while he choose the other side. *Jerk!*

"Hey, whoa," he called out. "You're not going to wait for me?"

His jaw dropped at her outfit, and Odessa resisted striking a pose and pursing her lips.

"You're wearing that?"

"It's the beach unless you missed the massive body of water like fifty feet from the house," she explained like she was speaking to a small child.

His eyebrows dropped low.

She sighed. "You're wearing *that*?" His chest was bare, and he wore swimming trunks like most men did that extended down to his knees. The two shades of orange, one light one dark, were on the loud side, but it was the bulging package that caught Odessa's stare. She was grateful for her dark glasses. Summer had just come around, but Steven was already tanned, and the tattoo along one arm was hot as hell. His skin looked lickable.

He glanced down at himself. “Nothing wrong with this.”

“Same with me.” She turned and strolled out the front door. By the time she hit the sand, Steven was jogging up behind her. Odessa paused while Steven put up the beach table and snapped the umbrella above it into place. She set her laptop on the table and slid a chair that had been left out there close by and sat down.

“We’re on vacation. Just what are you doing with that laptop?”

Odessa grinned. “Just what are you doing with that book?” The book was titled *Working Fire*.

He shrugged. “Light reading.”

“It will remind you of work. That’s a no-no.”

“At least I’m not *actually* working.” His pointed gaze was directed at her laptop. She stuck out her tongue at him, and he lunged for it, knocked her chair over, and landed on top of her. Odessa burst out laughing and wiggled beneath him while pounding on his chest.

“Get off me, you big bear,” she screeched, joking.

“Make me.” They had tumbled away from her chair, and the soft sand cushioned Odessa while Steven’s heavy body pressed her down but didn’t hurt her. He caught hold of her wrists and held them above her head, making her almost feel like arching her back to push her breasts into his chest to surrender to him. Heat started between her legs because one of his thighs was pressed there, as well.

Odessa stopped fighting when Steven went still and stared down at her lips. She licked them, hearing his sharp intake of breath.

“I should,” he began and fell silent. “I should, um, get up.”

“Maybe not.”

He lowered his head to hers and captured her lips with such force and suddenness that all she could do was match his hunger, push her tongue into his mouth, and kiss him back. He nipped her lower lip, moved his greedy kisses to her chin, her neck, and down to her chest. When he licked the place between her breasts, she cried out and arched into him, but he continued. He closed his mouth over her nipple behind the thin material of her bikini top. Releasing her hands, he sought out her mouth again and grasped her beneath the arms to lift her up off the sand a little and crush her to his chest.

Odessa had been kissed by plenty of guys before but never in a way that made her think the man couldn’t stop, like some inner urging had taken over all control. Steven ran his hand down her side until he reached her ass, and he pushed his fingers inside her bottoms to grab her ass and pull her up to him with a hard thrust. His moan was more of a growl as he ground his hips into hers, parting her legs. The sound and the movements zipped straight

through her, down to her core and brought her up on an orgasm so fast, she hadn't seen it coming.

Before her climax could crash over her like the waves hitting the shore just feet away from them, Steven dropped her in the sand and backpedaled on his heels and hands, a look of horror on his face.

Odessa gaped at him. "What was that for?"

He ran a hand through his hair, already wet though he hadn't yet been in the water. The sun was hotter here. "I didn't mean to do that. I don't know what came over me," he explained.

Odessa frowned. "We're both adults here, Steven. We can decide to fuck if that's what we both want." She was making light of it, but she wanted more than one night in his bed. His rejection hurt.

"You're too young for me."

She sighed, having heard it all before. "I'm twenty-three. You're thirty-five. Not a big deal. You're not old enough to be my father, for Pete's sake."

Her words brought on more horror. He shoved to his feet and walked over to retrieve his book from table, and then he tossed it back down. "We're not having this conversation. We're here to relax, not share a bed. I'm going for a swim."

She balled her hands in the sand where she was still on her ass after Steven had dropped her. She watched in disbelief as he ran down to the water, waded in, and soon disappeared beneath the waves.

A shadow blocked out the sun above her, and Odessa looked up to find Lamont grinning down at her. "Need some help?"

He offered her a hand, which she took, and she stood to brush off her rear. "Thanks."

Lamont didn't waste any time looking her over, and for some reason, this time, it irritated her. She turned from him, set her chair upright, and sat down. With a flick of her wrist, she had Steven's towel spread over her lower half while wishing she had a T-shirt to slip into. This was what she got for showing off, trying to seduce Steven. Someone should have told her before now she was clueless as to how to play the game.

Lamont didn't appear to pick up on her sour mood. "I was pleasantly surprised to find you are staying nearby." He lowered his sunglasses and peered up toward the row of houses behind them. "You in one of those?"

She waved her hand and pretended to be engulfed in booting up her laptop. "One of them."

Lamont stooped down and rested his arms on his thighs close to her. "Aw, what's got you so grumpy? Come on, pretty lady, this is vacation. You should be happy."

Odessa looked at him sideways. He was right, damn it! She should be happy, not in a funk because Steven wouldn't give her the time of day, and why should she beg it from him anyway? What kind of low self-esteem woman needed to plead with a man to sleep with her? Not Odessa Calvin, that's for damn sure.

Besides, Lamont was sexy in his own right. His hair was cropped close to his head and sported waves. He had a neat mustache and a goatee too, both things that Odessa had always liked on a man. Lamont's smooth, brown skin and youthful face put him at somewhere around late twenties, she guessed, and he wasn't putting up an excuse that she was too young for him. Maybe she should give him a chance.

She crossed one leg over the other and turned a beaming smile on Lamont, tilting her head to the side. "You know, you're right. So what do you have planned for this week?"

He rested a hand on her knee, and Odessa caught Steven scowling in their direction as he exited the water. He better not even think of throwing a fit like he owned her after the way he'd acted before he took a swim. She focused on Lamont in time to realize he had squeezed her knee.

"Well, if you let me, I'll be taking you to dinner," Lamont was saying. "And who knows, maybe you'll even tell me your name."

Odessa laughed. "It's Odessa. I'd love to go to dinner with you, Lamont."

He rested a hand over his heart. "You remembered."

She rolled her eyes. "Hasn't been that long since I routed you in line at the burger place."

"Oh, you admit that now?"

They laughed together just as Steven came up. He didn't acknowledge either of them, but grabbed his book and marched back toward the house.

Odessa gestured over her shoulder. "Notice where the big grump is heading, and you'll see where I'm staying. Pick me up at seven? You did mean tonight, right?" Teasing him, she raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips.

"Oh most definitely, girl. Most definitely." He kissed her hands and stood. "I'll be there at seven. Wear something revealing. Not too dressy, but a dress, though."

Odessa pulled her hands from his and gathered her things. She'd had enough sun for the moment. "I think I can choose my own clothing, thanks."

She tucked her laptop bag under her arm and the towel Steven had left behind and strolled back to the house. Once she was in her room, she threw her bag down on the bed and flopped beside it with her head in her hands and her eyes closed. How had she gotten into

this mess? She had no real desire to go out with Lamont, less so since they had barely exchanged names before he thought he could tell her how to dress.

She grunted, rolled over to her back, and stared at the ceiling. What was she going to do? What was there *to* do? Steven didn't want her, but her stupid heart still beat for him. Why couldn't she just snap her fingers and have the feelings go away? Testing the theory, she raised a hand and snapped, but she'd used her right hand, being left-handed. The snap was dull and weak. "Great, can't even snap my fingers right."

A knocked sounded on the door.

"Come in."

Steven opened the door and rested a hip against the doorjamb, his arms folded over his chest. "So, you're going out with him?"

She threw an arm over her eyes. "Don't start, Steven. I don't want to hear it."

"I don't want you to see him."

"You don't have a vote."

"What if I want to fuck you? Right here. Right now."

She choked and sat up. "What?"

"You heard me." He strolled across to her and stood less than an inch from where her legs bent over the side of the bed. "You and me while we're here. I make no promises after this, and you don't see anyone else while we're here. Deal?"

Well, a love declaration wasn't coming, but right now, who gave a crap? "Deal."

Chapter Seven

Seconds after he had made the demand, half disguised as an indecent proposal, Steven could have shoved his fist in his mouth. Not that he didn't want Odessa. Boy, did he ever want her, more so looking down on her slender body in that scrap of material she called a bathing suit. He wanted to drop down to his knees and yank down the vibrant-colored panties with his teeth. The thought of inhaling her sexual essence almost buckled his knees, but he held firm in place. Right now, he should tell her he was thinking with his dick, something he didn't want to do, that he had changed his mind because it was not smart for them to have a physical relationship. But, fuck it, he couldn't say the words.

He hadn't heard what was said, but he was sure that asshole who had come onto her in the fast-food restaurant had asked her out, and just to spite Steven, she had accepted him. Of that he was sure. The fool had looked too gleeful when Steven had peeked through the curtains once he had entered the house. Everything inside him had shouted, "No! Never!" That fool would never have Odessa. He was oily, and it was obvious to Steven even if Odessa, in her innocence, couldn't see that Lamont wanted only one thing.

Steven sighed, still staring down at Odessa's luscious body. She might be small and thin, but she was not skimpy on the curves. A little extra in the hips had his mouth watering. He wanted to settle atop them, between her legs, and lose his mind for as long as it took to shoot her full of his seed. Damn, he needed her. No, the words that would pass his lips in the next few seconds were not a retraction. *Fuck no.*

He reached a hand out and trailed his fingers down over her mound. He made out the curls beneath her bikini. She didn't shave. His shaft swelled more than it had already upon walking into the room seeing her stretched out over the bed. Had she ever been with a man? *Let it be so*, he pleaded in silence because he knew he'd never force his desire for her into submission enough to be gentle like a virgin required.

"Are you a virgin?"

She rolled her eyes. "Are you?"

"Come on, Odessa. I need to know. I don't want to hurt you."

Rather than answer him, she sat up and reached for the string in his swimming trunks. He didn't try to stop her when she tugged, a coy grin spreading over her face as she flicked a glance his way. In seconds, she had yanked his covering low so that his stiff erection sprang out to bump her cheek. Embarrassed, he moved back, but she took a hold of him and gave a slight tug. When he didn't move forward fast enough, she leaned out, and his shaft disappeared inside her mouth.

"Fucking hell!" Steven shouted at the unexpected pleasure. She sucked him hard, teased his tip, drew back to run her tongue around it, and moistened it even more before swallowing him again between her hot lips. This would not work, Steven decided. If she didn't stop that now, he'd release before he got inside her.

Taking her eagerness for confirmation that she was not a virgin, Steven laid a heavy hand on her shoulder and shoved her away. His shaft popped from between her lips, and she frowned up at him. Steven rested one knee at the side of her hip. "Lie back," he commanded.

She balked, huffing, but she did what he asked. He caught hold of her bikini bottoms and snatched them down her legs before tossing them over his shoulder to the floor. Odessa's lips parted, and she expelled a short breath while her intense stare never left his. He bent over her and weaved his way to her mound, and lower still to find her wet. He threaded his middle finger up her channel, the muscles tightening around his digit as he drove into her. She whimpered, and her long lashes came down to cover those beautiful brown eyes.

"No." He wagged a finger on his other hand at her while he continued to work between her legs. "Open your eyes, Odessa."

"You just want to punish me," she said. "Because you want me. That's not my fault."

"Open your eyes," he commanded again.

He bit back a grin when her eyelids fluttered open and she glared at him. The anger soon dissipated when he slid his finger, coated with her juices, out of her sweetness and then brushed her swollen bud. Her back arched, pushing her breasts forward. If he hadn't been so busy between her legs, he would have uncovered them to feast his eyes on nipples, which, he noted, were drawn up into turgid points. But he would get there after he had made her come for him once or twice.

Steven immersed his finger in her once more and then took hold of one of her ankles. He raised it and pulled his finger free. "You've been fucked here?" he demanded, moving his hand to her rear. She squeaked, but didn't pull away.

He placed pressure on the snug hole, and the tip of his finger eased inside. Odessa chewed her lip and cried out, squirmed against him, but not so much that he lost his hold on her.

"Do you want me to stop, Odessa, or go deeper?"

She moaned in response.

"Answer me."

"D-Deeper," she begged. "Steven, please."

He drove in farther, withdrew, and drove in again. By this time, she was wiggling so much Steven had to slide his hand from her ankle and take a firm hold onto her waist. He drove his finger all the way up to his knuckles and worked it around inside her. Her muscles clamped down on him, and Odessa screamed her pleasure. She was so wet. Steven marveled at the cream cascading from her sweetness.

Bent over, he stuck out his tongue and began to lap at her juices. He licked up every drop, gliding over her silky folds until he met with her nubbin and took the small bud into his mouth. He sucked just enough to make her buck while continuing to work his finger in her ass.

Odessa began to cry. "It's too much. I can't, I can't."

"You can," he told her with gentleness in his voice. Not for a second did he slow down his caressing of her ass. He lowered his mouth to her button again and took it a second time into his mouth. Odessa tried to crawl away from him, but he hooked an arm around her waist and forced her to stay sealed to his mouth.

He licked and sucked, loving her flavor, wanting more, but also aching to fill her. He stroked harder and faster. Odessa's muscles spasmed, and he knew her orgasm was near. He worked her even more, called out encouragement between sucking and licking her. He moaned against her sex, let the vibrations tease her. And then, with unexpected force, her hips rose from the bed, and she bucked like she was riding a wild stallion. Steven rested his shoulder and arm over one of her thighs to keep control of her as he ate her out.

"Steven!" she screamed. Her thighs shook, her muscles contracted around his finger, and a gush of cream rolled down her channel. Although he wanted to eat it up the second he noticed it, Steven didn't leave her bud, and soon he felt Odessa going into a second orgasm on the heels of the first. When she came down from the high, he would have driven her up again, but she got a hold of his hair and yanked hard.

"Ouch, damn, Odessa!" He released her.

"You bastard," she growled. "I told you it was too much."

He grinned, raising an eyebrow at her. "So you're saying that wasn't good?"

She grumbled and crossed her arms. "You know damn well it was good." She laughed, her voice trembling. "So good, better than anything. I mean—"

He climbed up the bed and gathered her in his arms to take her higher up to her pillows, and he settled himself half on top of her. "You mean, better than anyone else. You can't take it back."

"Arrogant dick."

"Hm, you'll pay for that." He gave her a mischievous grin, but she shook her head, resting her palms against his chest to stop him from lowering himself fully on top of her.

"No, way. I've paid enough. It's your turn." Before he could protest, she rolled him over until they almost catapulted over the side of the bed. Steven reached above him, gripped the edge of the mattress, wrapped an arm around her waist, and hauled them both back to the center of the bed. When he turned before releasing his hold, he found her gaze on his flexed arm muscle, a look of pure lust filling the brown depths. Her breathing, which had begun to

slow, quickened again. The lust turned to something warmer, something he didn't want to identify. "You're so beautiful."

He stiffened at her words. He didn't want to believe there was anything more to Odessa's feelings than lust and maybe sisterly love, but that was all. She seemed to catch his arrested expression, and she blinked. The moment passed, and the odd look in her eyes was gone.

She grinned. "Ready?"

"Always."

Chapter Eight

Odessa breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment there, she thought that Steven had seen her love for him reflected in her eyes. She knew it must have gleamed like a damn beacon given how her heart seemed to swell in her chest with the emotion that she couldn't shake for the life of her.

Taking firm control of herself, she lowered her eyelids to hide her feelings and pushed up from his chest. In a sitting position straddling him, she reached behind her and took his shaft into her hand to massage it. Steven growled and lifted his hips to push himself upward to her palm. Slick at the tip with the beginnings of his release, his shaft seemed to have a mind of its own as it twitched beneath her firm hold.

Feeling him swell bigger, Odessa didn't think she had much time before he would let himself go, so she arched her back, lifted her hips, and guided him into her heat. Like a reflexive action, Steven's hands sprung to her waist, squeezing her as he drew her down. She threw her head back. His penetration made her ache, he was so broad and solid, but she refused to pull away. She nudged him farther and farther, until he stuffed her full.

"So much," she rasped, trying to move a little to get some relief from the ache.

He stilled. "You said you weren't—"

She bit her lip and didn't look at him as she concentrated on relaxing the muscles along her narrow center. "I'm not. Who knew you were built like a frickin' Mack truck!"

He forced her to keep still. "I'm sorry, Odessa. I didn't want to hurt you. Come here. Get down, and we'll do it from a different position."

His gentle voice brought a tear to her eye, to her shame, and it rolled down her cheek. *Stupid idiot!* She hated to look weak, or worse, like she didn't know what she was doing. "No, it's all right. It doesn't hurt as much anymore."

She was lying, but she wasn't about to give up now or let him take control again, simply for the fact that she wanted to pleasure him. She wanted Steven to walk away from this experience thinking he hadn't fucked a woman better than Odessa. She rested her hands on his stomach and began to rock her hips, causing his shaft to glide in and out of her at an unhurried pace. The motion, the friction, made Steven moan and close his eyes with his lips parted, and his Adam's apple bobbed while he swallowed.

"Uh-uh, homeboy," she teased. "You made me keep my eyes open. You keep yours open." She moved her hands to her top and yanked the strings loose before tossing away the bit of fabric. "Do you like my breasts, Steven?" She rolled her nipples, which were puckered from her arousal, between her forefinger and her thumb. "Well, baby? Do you like my nipples?"

He all but drooled. "Damn, they're hot, Des," he whispered, as if he could scarcely push the words past a slack jaw. "They're thick. I could stare at them all night."

She grinned and continued to play with herself, turned on at his obvious appreciation and the fact that she had the upper hand. The pain having faded, she increased her pumping. She let her small breasts bounce a little. They might be small, but he was right—she had thick nipples and knew they were a huge turn-on for guys.

Steven cried out when she increased her pace. “You’re going to make me come, Des.” When had he started calling her Des? She had only used the nickname when she was lecturing herself in the mirror at home, but she liked the name on his tongue. It was special.

Odessa wasn’t finished teasing him. “Not yet, baby. Hold it,” she commanded. She reached down and pulled his hands from her hips to guide them to her breasts. “Do you like touching them, Steven?”

“Fuck, yes!”

He squeezed just enough to send missiles of pleasure along her nerves, straight down to her coochie. She whined and pumped harder. Lifting her knees so that all her weight was on his lap and driving him higher, she braced herself on his thighs to raise her hips and bring them down with near violence. Her orgasm was gathering. Forget teasing. Forget controlling. She had to come right now.

“I have to come, Steven,” she called out. Oh, let him be enjoying it because she was gone. She threw her head back and yelled. Steven pinched her nipples, plucked at them, and pulled over and over. Odessa screamed a second time, and then she couldn’t hold on any longer. Her climax hit, sudden and wild.

Steven released her breasts and moved his hands to her hips. He sat up, wrapped an arm around her waist, and took them up to an even faster pace, where their bodies slammed together and her nipples grazed his chest. He bent low to find her mouth, and he pushed his tongue between her lips. Odessa surrendered everything to him, all her love, all her lust. She encircled his neck with her arms and clung to him body and soul while she rolled into a second, more powerful orgasm.

Her lover was close behind, and he gave a short hiss before she felt his warm liquid coat her insides. His breathing noisy and harsh for a long while, Steven continued to rock them together until they came down from the pleasurable heights they’d been driven to. At last, they sat quiet, unmoving, with Odessa laying her head on his shoulder and him not releasing his hold on her.

Had it been good for him? Really good? He didn’t say anything, and she was afraid to ask. She prayed it was so and that he wouldn’t feel regret tomorrow morning. That would be too much to handle.

“Odessa.”

She stiffened. “Yeah?”

“I know it was kind of hard for you at first, but if we both rest for about an hour, do you think you can take me again?”

She could have shouted for joy, but she feigned nonchalance. “Boy, please. I can take anything you dish out and more.”

He chuckled. “We’ll see about that. I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve.”

Odessa didn’t get the chance to answer because someone knocked on the front door. She imagined her face registered the same shock and guilt that was on Steven’s. They both turned toward the alarm clock at the side of the bed, which read five minutes to seven.

“Oh hell,” she squeaked. “That’s Lamont.”

Steven untangled himself from her body and laid her with tenderness on the bed. A lump rose in Odessa’s throat. He winked. “I’ll take care of it.”

She rose up on an elbow. “Not dressed like that you won’t.”

He glanced down at himself, realizing he was stark naked, and laughed. “Maybe I should. It would give him the picture better than any words I could say.”

She rolled her eyes and rose to slip into a robe that extended to mid-thigh. “Forget it. I’ll go and explain it. You stay here and recover because, I guarantee you, I could go all night long.”

Steven relented and sat on the bed. “Fine, but hurry because my recovery time is shorter than you think.” Odessa lowered her gaze to his dick, and sure enough, the monster was growing out again. *Oh yes!* She had no idea sleeping with a white man could be so good. She was going to enjoy every second during their time here because she didn’t know how long it would last. And while the sex was out of this world so far, what made her heart beat faster was the tenderness mixed in with his every touch. She didn’t want to read too much into it, or hope that they would continue this new turn to their relationship when they got back home, but for the time being, it was more than enough.

Chapter Nine

Every nerve in Odessa was tied in a knot. She had already knocked over her wine glass once, and from the way her fingers wouldn't obey her head while she held the second glass, she was on the way to doing it again.

Steven sat across from her looking too damn calm, too self-assured, when she could almost throw up being out with him like this. Hell, they had fucked all night for the last two weeks and had spent hours playing on the beach, in the sand, and in the water. So why was she acting crazy now that they were both dressed to stop traffic and eating at a fancy restaurant?

She supposed it had something to do with her fear that, in this intimate setting, Steven might find out she was just an immature college student, not on his level in the least. Sex was one thing, conversation another. Sherise had always been there between them as a buffer if they weren't just horsing around like kids. This was different, she admitted, watching him over the rim of her glass.

"Hey." He extended a hand across the table and rested his fingertips on the edge of her glass. With gentle pressure, he managed to lower it. "Why are you hiding?"

She rolled her eyes and set her glass down on the table. "Please. I'm not hiding. I was just having a sip of my wine, if you don't mind." She demonstrated by lifting the glass again and drawing a small amount into her mouth. She swished it around for a few moments before forcing it down her throat. Alcohol was an acquired taste, and she hadn't acquired it yet. Right about now, she could use a Coke or a Pepsi.

A knowing grin spread over Steven's face, and he raised two fingers just above his head. The waiter tripped over himself to get to Steven's side. "Sir? How may I help you?"

Steven studied her before answering. "A Pepsi for the lady, please. Make that two."

"Very good, sir." The man shuffled away.

Her lover winked at her, and she tried not to blush. "Better?"

"Yes. Thanks. I guess you know me better than I thought." She shrugged. "It always seems like we do nothing but joke around. Every time we've tried to have a serious conversation, we're interrupted, you know?"

He linked his fingers together and rested his chin on them as he leaned over the table. "I know. So tell me now. This is the perfect setting. There's no one in existence but you and me."

Odessa's jaw dropped open, and her throat went dry. "T-Tell you what?"

"All about you. School, when you're finished, what you're studying. Tell me every detail."

She frowned. "You don't want to know every detail. Anyone not interested will think it's childish and pointless, what I do."

"Hey, somebody out there is raking in millions with animation. There's a place for it, a profitable place, and someone has to be the designer. Why not you? I admire what you're trying to achieve. I know I wouldn't have the patience." He scrunched up his nose, which made Odessa's heart beat faster at how cute he looked. "Maybe not the brainpower either."

She laughed. "Yeah, right. Sherise told me about your grades in school. You're no lightweight when it comes to intelligence."

His cheeks pinked, and it was all she could do not to reach over and stroke them. All she wanted to do right then was stand up and move around the table so she could sit on his lap and listen to his heart beat. That she couldn't do it was probably a good thing, given that she'd convince herself that it beat just for her. Things were bad enough with his attentiveness tonight and his gentle compliments. He had to know what he was doing to her.

He acknowledged the compliment she paid him with a dip of his head, but said nothing more on it. Odessa got the feeling he was modest and wanted to change the subject. After all, he hadn't chosen an academic career. He did what he loved. She loved him for it.

At her use of *loved* even in her mind, she closed her eyes. *Let it go, Odessa. Enjoy the evening.* Sexy man, tasteful restaurant, hot sex back at the house afterward. The whole shebang couldn't be beat anywhere.

She raised her glass of soda the waiter had brought by and drank a third of it down before turning the tables on Steven. "So what about you, Steven? We've talked for what"—she glanced at her watch—"a little over an hour with me telling you all the boring facts about my work. Now it's your turn to talk."

He shrugged. "Not much to tell about my job."

She noted the tension around his mouth and the way he tugged at his napkin, a cloth one not quickly destroyed between his agitated fingers. Like he had read her, Odessa could read Steven. He was worried. Their time on the beach was fast coming to a close, and Steven wasn't confident that the chief would accept him back so soon. Had their vacation been long enough? Could he hack it, or would he need more time? Worse, would the chief insist on more time off?

Like she could read the thoughts, Odessa figured all these and more questions were rolling around in Steven's head. This time, she did reach across the table to take his hand in hers. He laced their fingers and stroked the skin just over her thumb. Although Steven had darkened to a rich, golden brown out in the sun, their skin was still a sharp contrast because Odessa had tanned as well.

"Don't worry about that. I want to know how you're doing at your house with your grandfather gone. Are you still going to sell it?"

His eyes seemed to glow for a moment, and then he glanced down at their hands, giving hers a light squeeze. “Thanks for asking. I’m much better now that it’s been a year. Hurts less. Yeah, I was thinking of selling, but I changed my mind.” He shrugged. “Grandpa owned it for fifty-five years, and I feel like I would be disrespecting him if I got rid of it. Hell, the thing’s paid for. I’d be crazy to sell.”

“Yeah, Sherise is good for something.”

They laughed together, and Steven shook his head. “Now you know why I keep her. She was right on the money telling me it was my emotions speaking when I put it on the market a month after he passed.” He ran a hand through his hair. “What an idiot.”

Odessa stomped down the pang of jealousy she felt at his admission of “keeping” Sherise. She’d sometimes suspected them of having a secret affair, but could never find evidence, and they didn’t act like there was more. That fact didn’t lessen the insecurity when Steven didn’t take anything with Odessa very seriously, or consider something permanent. And there had been Gloria, of course.

Steven seemed to anticipate her train of thought yet again. He untangled their hands and leaned back in his chair, an expression of resignation on his face. “Thinking of Sherise and how she was always right in whatever advice she gave me makes me remember that she warned me against going on that first date with Gloria.”

Odessa blinked in surprise. “Oh, for real? I didn’t know that. I mean, she would tell me that Gloria was nothing but a—” She clamped her teeth together and chided herself for flapping her lips when she should have said nothing.

He smirked. “Don’t stop now. Go ahead. What did you and she say about my ex-girlfriend?”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” She stared at her empty plate and wondered when she had eaten the last bite. The food had been good, but her mind had been consumed with thoughts of Steven. Like the saying went, she’d hung from every word that passed his lips. “It’s none of my business.”

He reached across the table and caught hold of her chin, forcing her to raise her head and meet his eyes. “Don’t give me that. From the moment you two came into my life, I’ve not had any privacy. You two are my family, and I care about what you think.”

You two. She sighed. She’d never be anything other than Sherise’s younger sister in his eyes, never her own person, having a separate place in his heart. Even being lovers for this short vacation hadn’t changed that fact. Steven ran his thumb over her lower lip and then stroked her cheek with it. She closed her eyes, almost feeling like she was absorbing life from him, something to sustain her when this was over. She wanted to clutch at him, to beg for more. *Just a little more, a small piece of your heart.*

He drew away, and she could have wept.

Attempting to shift the subject somewhat, she hoped he would go for it. “You’re not like you were when she first left,” she told him. “You don’t seem to be hurting as much. Time, huh?”

His eyes narrowed on her and told her he wasn’t fooled, but he did let her slide. “You’re right. I am over her. For the most part.” He shook his head like he couldn’t believe what he had done, the decisions he had made. “Truth is, I lost myself first over her looks. She was hot, and all the warning signs were there. She liked the man in uniform, so to speak, the aura of danger around me because of my job. I admit, at first, it was about having the trophy, and then I let myself care. Too much. She was shallow from day one, but no matter what, after a while, I was dreaming of a family, my home, kids.”

Odessa gasped. So his desires had gone that far? He was way off base there. She and Sherise had heard with their own ears while in the beauty salon how Gloria had bragged about her body and how she had determined she didn’t want kids to fuck that up. Odessa remembered thinking how cold she sounded, using “fuck” and “kids” in the same sentence.

“Hm, I bet that’s when you started thinking the house would be good to own, when you were thinking of kids?” She regretted what she’d said the moment it passed her lips. Her words seemed insensitive, too direct.

“I suppose it was. Right before she dumped me and blew out of Forest’s End.” He moved his shoulders as if he were rolling the burden of caring for the no-good wench from his life. “That’s what I always loved about you, Odessa. You don’t bite your tongue. You say it just like it is.”

She frowned. “Thanks. I think. But you’re wrong.” She glanced down at her hands and then busied them by shifting the empty glasses around the table. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a waiter headed their way, no doubt to clear away the dishes. What would she do with her twitching fingers then? “Everyone assumes I say what’s on my mind, but I bite off a lot more than you think.”

“Oh yeah? Give me an example.”

She opened her mouth to tell him, but a shout from the back of the restaurant, in the direction of the kitchen, caught her attention. She and Steven both turned in that direction to see what was going on. Odessa gaped to find it was who she assumed was the chef hurrying toward the manager. Murmurs of alarm sprung up around the room. Odessa glanced at Steven and saw his mouth tighten and his eyes narrow.

The manager rushed in through the kitchen door, but was back in seconds coughing and waving his hands. “Please, everyone out of the building. Immediately!”

Some of the patrons didn’t have to be told twice. They bolted for the exit. Some of the women, as they ran at full tilt on high heels, cried out like someone was attacking them. Odessa rose, as well, but stopped when she would have headed for the door. Steven wasn’t following. He moved toward the manager with an authoritative set to his broad shoulders. “I’m a firefighter. What’s the problem?”

“Oh!” The man’s arms were still flapping. “The oven, the oven!”

Steven turned away from him and pointed to the nearest waiter. “You, get everyone out of here on the double. Once outside, call the fire department.” He turned to another employee. “You, clear the bathrooms. Now!”

With her stomach knotted so tight that she almost wanted to bend over and clutch it, Odessa tried to follow Steven toward the kitchen. The chef stepped in her path. “Miss, you can’t go in there. The gas is coming out like—we all better get out right now!”

“What happened?” She wasn’t looking at the chef but was trying to get past him to follow Steven. The kitchen was no safer for him than it was her, and he didn’t have his usual protective gear on. “Steven,” she called after him, but he didn’t hear as he disappeared from her sight.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the chef told her as he hauled her toward the door, “you’ve got to go. I’m not staying another minute.”

“Then you go! I’m not leaving my boyfriend.” She ducked under his arm, but before she could take two steps, he enclosed her wrist in a viselike grip and dragged her out of the restaurant.

On the sidewalk, being forced against her will toward the street, Odessa fought to get loose. “Stop, please.” Sirens wailed in the distance. “Let go. Help’s coming now. I can help look for anyone in the bathroom.”

The man wasn’t listening. They were in the middle of the street, traffic stopped in both directions because all of the customers from every restaurant, it seemed, had crowded onto the road. Odessa considered biting the chef until he released her, then realized that the man was holding onto her more for his own comfort than any real sense of protecting her.

The roar when it came stopped all chatter around her and sucked the oxygen out the air. The impact sent everyone flying backward, and Odessa landed on top of the chef on the ground. Something stung her leg, and in a daze, she looked down to find a shard of glass embedded in it. The chef whined like a child, and tears filled his eyes. Odessa glared at him, ready to reprimand him until the full impact of what had happened hit her like a fist to the jaw.

The restaurant where they had dinner had just blown up, and Steven had been inside.

Chapter Ten

Odessa screamed and ripped herself from the chef's hold. "Steven!" She crawled on hands and knees a few feet before she managed to stand, and tumbling out of one shoe, ran toward the burning building. "Steven. Please, no. Steven!"

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she ran. Her ears stopped so that the roar from the fire was muffled and seemed far away. The black smoke was a mushroom in the air over the restaurant, but she didn't give a damn. She had to check. He had to be all right, or she didn't know what she would do. Could anyone survive that blast? Could Steven, surely knowing what would come beforehand?

"Stop her!" someone called out, and the patter of running feet came from somewhere behind Odessa. She tried to increase her speed, but what energy she'd had dissipated with the thought that Steven could be lost. At the curb on the side of the street where the charring building was ablaze, Odessa couldn't raise her foot high enough to clear the step up. Tumbling forward, she put her hands out to brace herself against the fall, but someone grabbed hold of her from behind, and she was yanked backward. She fought with everything inside to get free.

"Let me go! Steven is in there. Let me go, please! He can't—" She sobbed. "He can't be dead."

"Odessa, sweetheart." Steven's voice above her head, hoarse but strong, was a balm to her shattered nerves. She glanced up to find herself in his arms, and he guided them both away from the danger, back to the opposite side of the street. "It's okay. Everything is going to be okay, Odessa."

A shuddering sigh tore through her, but she began to calm down, and her sobs subsided. "How did you—" It didn't matter how he'd gotten out, just so long as he had. If she had wondered how much she cared, the loss she'd felt was the answer, and if he hadn't been distracted in what was happening around them, it would have been obvious to him, as well.

At first, resting in his arms, with her face buried against his shirt, Odessa took a peek up at him a second time. Steven's attention was focused just past her to the firefighters arriving on the scene. Police gathered and directed them to clear the area and let those trained do their job so that all of them might be safe. Odessa looked from the men in the heavy fire-retardant gear to Steven. Under her ear, his heart had kicked up a few notches, and from the intensity in his eyes, she guessed he was aching to join them.

Odessa opened her mouth to suggest that he ask them if he could help in any way, but the words stuck in her dry throat. She didn't want him to help. She wanted to pretend this hadn't happened, wanted them to go back to the house, and wanted to just hold onto Steven. He must have felt her staring up at him because he glanced down at her and brushed her hair from her forehead.

"You okay?"

She nodded.

“I should get you home. You’ve had a scare. That was a close call, huh?”

He didn’t seem shaken up by it at all. She guessed he wouldn’t be, it being all in a day’s work. “M-Maybe you should ask them if you can help,” she croaked. “Show them your firefighter’s card.”

He grinned and then chuckled. “I’ll take you home. Come on.” When they had turned and began walking the half block down to where Steven had parked the rental, he noticed how she limped, and he looked down. Embarrassment spread through Odessa, knowing the sheer pantyhose she’d worn in the summer heat must have torn from her now bare foot, and that she must look a mess. The cut on her leg wasn’t deep, so dried blood caked the wound. Steven pulled her to a stop. “Your shoe. Wait here.”

Before she could say a word, he darted back the way they had come and searched the street. His head disappeared among the crowd, and then popped up again a few minutes later. Soon he was at her side, and he lifted her in his arms, amid her protests, to set her on a parked car.

“Steven, are you nuts? You don’t know whose car this is.”

He bent to the task of slipping her shoe on her foot. His hands on her bare skin sent shivers throughout her body. She swallowed to try to wet her throat, but even without the lack of moisture in the air, with him so close and so tender with her, that wasn’t happening.

The drive back to the beach house was quiet with Steven deep in his own thoughts and Odessa exhausted but wide awake. She went over the events of the evening in her mind, and came to one conclusion. Steven cared. The way he had looked into her eyes when he comforted her hadn’t been the look of a big brother or a friend. She was certain she had seen love, and while he had known she wasn’t in any danger with the fire, having gone outside ahead of him, he had seemed worried about her state of mind, even tormented over the thought that he had caused her so much pain by making her think he was dead.

Equal to this realization was the assurance that Steven knew she loved him, as well. He could say she was too young for something long term, but he couldn’t deny her feelings. Not now. Hope sprung up strong inside her that this night was a turning point for their relationship, and it was all at once about more than sex.

At the house, Steven came around the car and slipped an arm along her waist. Odessa toddled on unsteady legs while they walked inside, and Steven led her to her bedroom. He stood behind her while she removed her shoes and began to undress. Not daring to turn around to ask him if he was sleeping in her bed, she kept her back to him. However, when she eased the two sides of her dress over her shoulders, his hands came down on her hot skin and teased her out of some of the tension that had settled in her knotted muscles.

“Let’s wash the soot off of us,” he said into her ear, his voice cast low. She shivered and nodded in silence.

They stripped out of the rest of their clothes, and Odessa followed Steven into the shower. When they were inches apart under the warm spray, she stood still while he lathered his hands with soap and began to wash her body. His rough palms moved over her breasts, paused to tweak her nipples before exploring lower to her belly and sent ripples of delight through her.

“Turn around,” he commanded when he had finished washing her front. She did and gasped, bracing herself on the wall when he found his way between her legs and parted her folds to wash her intimate place. Odessa rose up on the balls of her feet and arched her back. Steven shifted closer, allowing her to feel his erection along her ass. “Do you want some of that, Odessa?”

She shook from head to toe. “Yes.”

“Are you sure?” He led his bulbous tip across her skin, between her ass cheeks, until it poked at her moist center. She rested her forehead next to her hands, the water spraying over her head. Pushing her ass toward him, feeling herself open, she let that be her answer. Steven moaned. He guided himself into her slow enough to make her want to cry out and beg him to give it all to her, but she forced herself to remain calm and let him take the lead.

Steven moved closer so that she felt the heat from his body from the top of hers to the bottom. He set his feet beside hers and leaned in until his chest met her back. Running his fingers up her thighs, to her hips, on up under her arms, and, at last, to the wall alongside her hands, Steven took total control, hemmed her into a place she never wanted to escape from.

With no further guidance, he pushed in deeper. Odessa called out his name. He pumped, and Odessa almost came just from the sound of their bodies slapping together. The beads of water running off their hot skin went flying everywhere as Steven picked up speed.

Their position not enough, it seemed, and Steven extended one arm around Odessa’s waist and hauled her into the air. He tightened his hold, trapping her between himself and the wall, and then he continued to pump into her. While one arm held her up against him, the other wrapped around her, as well, and searched lower. He threaded through the midnight curls at her apex and descended to her swollen bud. When his fingers closed around it, and he tugged in rhythm to his gyrating hips, Odessa lost all self-control.

She screamed out his name, and tears mingled with the water coating her face. Her lips trembled, but Steven stilled them with his as he sought access with his tongue. She kissed with fervor, sucked at his bottom lip, tasted the inside of his warm mouth, and willed her heart to him. *Let him understand*, she pleaded. *Let him accept me as I am*.

Steven continued to rock them together, bringing Odessa crashing over into an orgasm that left her dizzy. While she calmed, he tightened his hold, his breath shortening, and rough to the point of a slight wheeze. And then, with one final thrust, his come filled her. “Odessa,” he growled. “You make me feel so good.”

Her heart pounded with her pleasure. She rested her face against his neck while he lowered her to the tub again. They washed away the evidence of their coupling, and Odessa found

she couldn't take her gaze off his. She didn't want to. Being lost in Steven was more than anything her life had offered her up until now. In fact, she was sure she would walk away from her dreams if she had to make the choice between him and them. She'd do it in a heartbeat, with no regrets.

Drying off with a towel, Odessa considered how things had turned in her favor. All this time, for years, she had been waiting for Steven to notice her. She had pulled some dumbass stunts to make him turn her way, and he acted like he never knew. She didn't know what idiot screwed their restaurant up, causing Sherise to have to stay home, but she couldn't have been more grateful.

She yawned, her eyes beginning to burn from tiredness, and she climbed into the bed. The thick, soft mattress dipped with Steven's weight as he followed her beneath the covers. While it was hot down here, they kept the air on so high they needed covering at night.

Odessa sighed and settled in Steven's arms. He kissed the top of her head. "Sleepy?"

"Uh-huh," she affirmed.

He remained silent for a few moments and then said, "I saw it."

She yawned again and nuzzled closer, feeling his shaft beginning to harden on her belly. "Saw what?"

"Saw the love you feel for me."

She stiffened, waited for him to continue, to tell her that he felt the same, and maybe even that he wanted to take their relationship to the next level. She held her breath, but if she thought that was coming next, and her life depended on it, she'd be dead.

"And?" she blurted out.

He ran a hand down over her ass and tugged her tight to him, parted her legs, and, just that fast, entered her. Odessa hadn't realized that while he was growing, she was getting wetter. His shaft glided into her, deep and so good. She moaned, lifted her head, and found his mouth. For a long time, they lay making love, taking their time with slow strokes and gentle caresses.

He's afraid, Odessa concluded. *He's scared to admit he loves me, but I saw it, and he wanted me to know he saw mine, as well.* Joy exploded inside her, and if she weren't at home in Steven's arms, she would have danced around the room. Soon, all thought of dancing dissipated when Steven increased his pace.

"Come with me this time, Odessa," he instructed her.

"Yes." That one word was all she could manage to say before the ache growing in her womb was an inferno. Her orgasm broke free inside her, and Steven seemed to sense it. He let go just as she did, and together, they cried out, their mouths touching, tears on both faces and

limbs entangled, while she ground her hips in unison with his. Spent, she swallowed and muttered, “We should clean up.”

“Mm, in a minute.”

Odessa began to drift off, not intending to move in the next few hours. “You and I together is better than everything.”

He didn’t answer, and soon she joined him in a deep sleep.

Chapter Eleven

Sunlight and tweeting birds woke Odessa the next morning. She sat up and stretched, wriggling her toes and twisting to the left and right. Soreness between her legs made her smile. Steven was insatiable, and so was she, for that matter. She hadn't been able to get enough of him. Thinking of Steven, she noted he wasn't in bed, and she slipped to her feet and padded naked and unashamed out to the living room.

"Hey, Steven, where are you?" She reached up to her head and groaned. Air dried hair. What the hell had she been thinking? "Steven! Where you at? I'm starved. Let's go to breakfast somewhere before we go back to Forest's End."

Heading into the kitchen, she saw the note on the table, and dread hit her hard, almost buckling her knees. She reached a trembling hand out and drew back, then snatched it up. No sense being a wimp. Still shaking, though, she opened the slip of paper and read.

Odessa,

I went down to the station house in this area to do a report on the fire and see if I can give any assistance on the investigation. I left you the rental. See you back in Forest's End.

Steven

"That's it," she shouted. "No 'I love you' or 'I'll miss you', or how about 'Wait for me,' you fucking bastard!" Tears flooded her eyes and plopped down on the paper, obscuring the words. She knew what he meant. An idiot could figure out that he had dumped her cold, had let her know it was over now that the vacation was done. "Asshole!"

She stomped back to the bedroom, jumped in the shower, brushed her teeth, and was packed inside a half hour. Afterward, she cleaned the house from top to bottom in her rage and was soon ready to leave. Crying and cursing Steven, she drove home in record time and burst through the front door of her house, dragging her suitcases behind her. "Sherise," she called out to her sister.

The swinging door to the dining room opened, and Sherise emerged. "Hey, girl! Have fun?" She hugged Odessa, and Odessa tried to avert her face, but her sister caught her beneath the chin. "You been crying?"

"No." Odessa pulled herself free. "Just out in the sun too much. Salt water irritated my eyes a bit." She spun away to head to the stairs, but Sherise grabbed for her again, and this time pulled her around to face her.

"What's really going on? And where's Steven?"

"I'm not his keeper!"

Sherise's eyebrows shot up, and she folded her arms over an ample chest that Odessa had always been jealous of. "I know you didn't just talk to me like that, little girl."

Odessa gritted her teeth. "Little girl. That's the problem, isn't it?"

"What problem?" Sherise almost shouted. "Talk to me, Odessa."

Odessa stared at her sister for a long time, and then to her annoyance, she broke down, yet again. Heavy sobs made her shoulders shake, and she fought for control, but it was no use. Sherise wrapped an arm around her and led her to the stairs. They sat down side by side with Odessa's face buried against her sister's neck. "I can't," she whimpered.

"Yes, you can. Or I can guess."

"No, please."

Sherise sighed. "You've loved him a long time, haven't you?"

Odessa shuddered.

"The two of you took it in a new direction over the vacation, and Steven, the ass, broke it off just before you came back. Am I warm?"

"You're scorching hot." Odessa sat up, her tears on hold in the midst of her shock at how her sister could read the situation so quickly. "How did you know all that? Were we so obvious?"

"I've known the both of you forever, girl. I know you. Don't forget it. So, what did that dumb ass say to screw it up?"

Odessa shook her head, sniffing. "He said he'd see me back here. He didn't even say he was breaking it off. He just wasn't there when I woke up this morning. That said it all. Why, Sherise? You know him so well. Why doesn't he want me? I know he loves me. I've seen it in his eyes, and well, he desires me too." Embarrassment had her staring at the floor when she admitted that last part. She did not want to discuss with her sister how she and Steven had done each other like rabbits.

Sherise nodded. "Hm, yeah, that sounds like he was ending it. Had he made any promises of it continuing between you when you got back?"

"No."

"I'm going to talk to him when he gets in." She squeezed Odessa's hand and kissed her cheek. "I love him like a brother, but I'll be damned if I let him treat you like this. He should have known better. If he wasn't going to be serious, he shouldn't have started anything. You're not one of those loose girls that always hang around the firehouse trying to snag a firefighter, in their short skirts and boobs about to fall out of their tops."

Odessa chuckled. "Well, I've been known to dress—"

“Odessa!”

She held up her hands in defense. “I’m just saying. But you’re right, somewhat. I knew what I was getting into, and Steven did say he couldn’t guarantee that we would continue when we came back. He has a problem with my age. Maybe it makes him uncomfortable, and he’s afraid the guys will tease him about robbing the cradle and that old crap. Whatever. It’s over. I’m moving on.”

She stood up, and Sherise did, as well. “Are you sure? Love isn’t cut that easily.”

“I’m strong. I’ll get through it.” Her gut was calling her a liar. All she wanted to do right now was take something to make herself sleep for the next week so she could wake up whole and happy. Her biggest fear was that she would never wake up that way, that she would always long for him, and that have to suffer watching him when he found someone new.

Odessa started up the stairs and stopped when she spotted mail for her on the table in the hall. She leaned over the banister and reached for it. The return had a Tokyo address, and her heart picked up speed. She ran back down the stairs, dropped her suitcases, and then skipped steps up to her room. After she’d slammed the door, she threw herself on the bed and tore into the envelope.

“Dear Ms. Calvin . . .” She scanned the rest of the letter, and then screamed at the top of her lungs. Feet thumped on the stairs, coming closer, until her door burst open.

“What’s wrong?” Sherise said through pants for breath.

“An internship,” Odessa squeaked. “It’s a real internship—paid!—in Tokyo. I’ve heard of this company, Sherise. Remember? I interviewed with the CEO six months ago at the industry conference.” She rose slowly off her bed with tears pooling in her eyes. “They produce tons of anime on TV Tokyo. Some of them are my all-time favorites that I watch over and over. I can’t believe this. It’s a dream come true.”

Sherise screamed and pulled Odessa into a rib crushing hug. “I’m so proud of you. See? Didn’t I tell you, you would find the right opportunity if you stuck to your guns?” Sherise leaned back, beaming, and then leaned in to kiss Odessa’s forehead. “To celebrate, I’ll cook your favorite foods tonight, and we can get Steven to bring over some—”

Odessa brought her arms up to fold over herself in a protective stance, and she whirled away. At her window overlooking the backyard, she stared down at the rusted swing set and the grass and noted that it needed to be cut, well, what little there was left of it. She had been meaning to throw some seeds down in the bald spots.

“Odessa?” Sherise sounded apologetic.

“Don’t worry about it.” She shrugged, but didn’t face her sister. “I see now that it was better this way, that he didn’t want me. I can move to Japan, and since I attend school online, I can finish up my final year with no problems.”

“Oh, baby, don’t say that. He wanted you. He’s just a fool, and I’ll tell him so.” She would have drawn Odessa into another hug, but Odessa held up her hands. Sherise sighed. Odessa remembered how hard it had been for her sister to let go and stop mothering her when she’d turned eighteen. What would she do now that Odessa was moving so far away?

“Are you okay with this, Sherise?”

Sherise rolled her eyes, but Odessa didn’t miss the wetness there. “Of course. This is what you’ve been wanting for years. I’m not about to stand in your way. Go for it, little sis.” She wagged a finger in Odessa’s direction. “But write me every single day, and tell me all about Japanese culture. I hope you pick up the language even more than you have watching those nutty shows and can teach me some too.”

Odessa laughed. “*Baka!*”

Sherise flared her nostrils. “Did you just call me an idiot?”

“Look at the time, Sherise!” Odessa said. “I have to call Mr. Morioka before it’s too late over there.”

“Uh-huh, whatever.”

* * * *

Steven fell back into his chair and pressed his eyes closed. A throbbing pain started in his left temple, and he attempted to keep himself calm while he wanted to throw something, smash something, or just yell. His heart ached worse than his head was beginning to, but he made sure that when he spoke, it did not register in his voice. “So, she’s going?”

“Yes, of course,” Sherise told him. “In spite of how you treated her, she will be a success, and I pray that one day she’ll find a man worthy of her love.”

He would not be provoked. Just let it go. Let her think that he didn’t give a fuck and that his world hadn’t gone dark despite being given the word that he could return to work. “I did what was best.”

“Who the hell are you to determine that, Steven?” She slammed the phone against something, sending needles of pain ricocheting across his skull. He winced and pulled the earpiece away to a safe distance. His best friend continued her rant. “I can’t believe you would do this, that you would be dumb enough to get involved with her in the first place, and then fuck it up. I thought you were a better man, but I was wrong. I am so glad she is going away. Better than to see you reject her every day.”

“It’s not like that. I told you—”

“Save it!”

He fell silent, his gaze blurring on the uneaten sandwich Tony had made for him. One bite had told him it was unparalleled with any the genius chef had made before, but Steven didn't have the stomach for anything right now. If he were a drinker, he'd have been under the desk unconscious by now, but that wouldn't help anything.

Maybe he was cursed. Here was his first day back on the job, and yet again, he was facing losing the woman he loved. But this time was different. He had loved Gloria. No doubt about that, and he had thought the next step for them was marriage, but he could not see it with her. With Odessa, as different as they were in so many ways, he envisioned her as his wife, with his last name, with his children.

Tightness moved across his chest. With a sweep of his arm, he shoved the sandwich into the trashcan at the side of the desk and then regretted it. The guys all shared this single desk, and if Tony found the sandwich in the garbage, he would be offended. Out of his mind, he opened an old Yellow Pages book in the corner and ripped out a few sheets, then reached into the trashcan to retrieve the sandwich. When he had wrapped it in the pages, he strolled to the kitchen and dumped it into the larger garbage can, shoving it beneath a few other items.

"Are you still there, Steven?" Sherise called through the phone tucked between his ear and shoulder.

He stood still, staring down at the garbage. "Yes. I guess this means we're no longer friends."

"Don't be stupid. You're family. Family does dumbass things, but you can't get rid of them. However, I will punish you for hurting Odessa. You can believe that. Don't leave town." She hung up.

Well, at least he wasn't completely alone in the world.

Chapter Twelve

Nineteen months later

Odessa fidgeted in her seat, chewed her nails one minute, and then stared unseeing out the window the next. She glanced over at Chelsea, but found her daughter still sound asleep. She breathed a sigh of relief for that at least. Afraid her baby would cry from painful, stopped ears during the flight home because of the compressed air, Odessa's stomach had been in knots, but everything had gone well so far. They were more than halfway home. She glanced down at her watch. Another eight hours, and she would have to face both Sherise and Steven.

Her little one would be one year old in three days, and she had not even told her sister or the baby's father about her pregnancy, or of Chelsea's birth. All her reasoning for not telling them when she had found out she was pregnant seemed stupid and unfounded now, and she would have to face the consequences.

Sherise would forgive her, she knew, but what about Steven? She had taken away his baby and never told him she existed. She'd taken his right to be present at her birth, and he'd missed the first year. Now, because she had decided she hated living overseas and was not impressed with the treatment she had received in her dream job, only then did she slink back home and hope they'd welcome her and Chelsea with open arms. She was the *baka* and a whole lot of other choice words. That was for damn sure.

The worse part of all of this was that she still loved Steven with all of her heart. She'd thought absence would heal her heart and force her to move on, but that hadn't happened. And if she had figured she'd date to remove his hold over her, she'd been mistaken with that, as well. From morning sickness to a rounded belly that only drew perverts who wanted to do a pregnant woman, to having no babysitter, the dating thing had never materialized.

While she thought on all of this over the next few hours, Odessa had come to no simple way to solve her problems, so she decided to face them head on. Responsibility for Chelsea had matured her, she thought, and whatever was deemed best for her little one was what she would do, no matter who didn't agree.

The plane touched down, and soon Odessa was pushing her daughter's stroller through the expansive airport, having phoned Sherise to tell her that she had arrived. A shout over the crowd caught her attention, and she stopped to stand on her tiptoes to peer over the sea of heads. For one irrelevant moment, she wondered just how tall Chelsea would be, being the product of one rather short parent and one pretty tall one.

Sherise broke through the people that separated them with her arms thrown wide, but she came to a sudden halt when she spotted the sleeping baby in the stroller, Odessa's hands curved around the handles, and the pink baby bag with the tiny teddy bear design slung over her shoulder. Odessa had followed the path of her sister's eyes as they flicked focus from one item to the next, her mouth hanging open.

"You . . ." Sherise began.

Odessa lowered her gaze to the floor, but then with determination, she met her sister's gaping expression full on. "Yes, she's mine. Her name is Chelsea. She'll be one year old on Tuesday." Odessa paused to allow her sister to do the math.

A low hiss escaped her sister's thinned lips. "Steven's," she muttered. "I assume he doesn't know since he didn't tell me. Somehow I think knowing he is a father would have been too much for him to keep secret." She sank to her knees and leaned forward to plant a kiss on Chelsea's soft cheek. "She's so beautiful, looks just like him. Odessa, how could you do this? How could you not tell us? I wouldn't forgive you."

Tears sprung to Odessa's eyes. "Sherise!"

Her sister reached for the luggage and swung away. "I said I as in if I were the parent left in the dark. I don't know what Steven will feel. Come on. Let's go."

If Odessa weren't terrified enough with her own imaginings of what Steven would say, Sherise's words sent her over the top. She chewed her lip all the way back home and felt no better when she had settled Chelsea in her small bedroom with the realization that it wasn't going to work long term. The third bedroom in the house had been turned into a home office, and she didn't feel comfortable asking Sherise to vacate it now that she had a niece she hadn't known existed. She had no choice. Within a month or two, when she was confident one of the projects she was working on online would solidify, she would begin looking for a place for her and Chelsea.

While she assessed what she would do next, her door opened, and Sherise strolled in, her face a determined mask, as if she expected Odessa to argue with her next words. "I will babysit her while you go and see Steven."

Odessa squeaked akin to the mouse she was feeling like. "What? So soon? I just got off the plane and—"

"No time like the present. Get it over with."

With her hands on her hips, Odessa faced her sister. "This is why I didn't tell you. I may not seem like it, but I did a lot of growing up while I was in Japan."

"Growing up?" Sherise's expression showed doubt. "Not with this bull—"

"Don't even." Odessa ran her hands through her hair and stared down at Chelsea. "You wouldn't understand. I did this. I made her. I know, not by myself, but Steven had enough to deal with in his life, trying to get over that bitch Gloria, being put on leave against his will, and not sure if he could cut it anymore. Yet, there I was not giving a crap at all. I seduced him at the beach a couple summers ago, and it was my fault that I didn't use protection. I did not want to lay the responsibility of a baby on him, not then. I planned to come back here and tell him, and I have returned."

Sherise crossed her arms. “Only after the newness wore off, and the opportunity turned out to not be all it was cracked up to be.”

“Sherise.”

“I’m just disappointed. That’s all. I know you were—*are*—young, but I pretty much raised you after our parents were gone, and I thought you would have a better sense of what is right, Odessa. Steven deserves to know about his daughter. I can’t make you go, and I’m not commanding you to, but I’m offering to watch her while you run down to the station to see him.”

Odessa’s eyes widened. “He’s back at work?”

“Did you doubt it?”

She chuckled. “No, I guess not. And it has been a while.” She swallowed. “Okay, I’ll go, but I won’t be long. Chelsea doesn’t know you.” When her sister would have commented on that, Odessa rushed ahead. “She should sleep for a few more hours after that plane ride, so I’m sure there will be nothing to do other than check on her.”

After running down a list of instructions for her sister, Odessa showered, and changed her clothes before heading out the door. She borrowed Sherise’s car, and was soon tooling along the main thoroughfare toward Steven’s firehouse off Bend Avenue, her heart thumping enough to ache in her chest. Before she reached his work place, she spotted a parking space just opening and pulled in. The town had installed more meters than she remembered, so she paused long enough to search her pockets for change. Sherise would nag her nonstop if she came home with a ticket.

“Odessa? Oh my goodness, Odessa, is that you?”

She stiffened, recognizing the voice right off. Why had she come back, and why of all people did Odessa have to run in to *her*? With reluctance, Odessa spun around. “Oh hey, Gloria. What’s up?”

A fake smile was plastered on her face, and her even faker boobs strained against a paper thin top. Gloria toppled forward and took Odessa into a tight hug. Cheap perfume engulfed her head, and she bit back a sneeze. Why, again, had Steven gone for this? Maybe it was the boobs, Odessa surmised when the woman drew back.

“I thought that was you. I’d heard you’d moved away like I did for a time.” She flipped her long hair back over her shoulders. “After while you’ve got to escape from Hicksville. Am I right?”

Odessa blinked. “I happen to love Forest’s End. I came back because living away from here, among other things, was not what I found I wanted.”

A shrewd expression came into the blonde's eyes, and she crossed her arms over her chest, emphasizing it even more, if possible. Her long, manicured nails, sharp enough to slice and dice a person, tapped against one arm. *Let her just try it*, Odessa thought.

"Oh yeah, I remember you always did have a thing for Steven. Back to try your luck now that you're all grown up?" Her gaze dropped to Odessa's chest. "Well, older anyway. Not really grown, huh?"

Bitch!

"Well before you get your hopes up, you should know that Steven and I are giving it another try." She waved a hand in the air. "I expect when the bug hits me this time, I'll take him with me. I didn't find a piece of grade A as fine as he is while I was out there in the big city."

Odessa steeled herself from stumbling back against Sherise's car. She would not give this whore the satisfaction of thinking her words had cut her. Not that Odessa had held any illusions that she would get Steven. That train had left long ago, and with her keeping Chelsea a secret, she knew nothing was coming of them being together. Not now, not ever.

"Excuse you?" she retorted. "I don't know if you're telling the truth about you two being together or not. And frankly, romantically, I don't give a shit. But Steven is family if he's nothing else." *More than you know*. "So neither I nor Sherise will allow you to come back and mess with his head again. Sherise will definitely kick your plastic ass." Odessa let her gaze fall to Gloria's boobs, and the woman's face flamed.

"You haven't grown up at all," she shouted. "Still running your mouth to your elders."

"Then I guess I never will," Odessa shot back.

Gloria, flipping her air into Odessa's face, spun away and stomped off down the street. Disgusted, angry, and ready to sink to the ground and cry it out, Odessa watched her walk away. Cowardice stole over her, and she considered climbing inside the car and driving back to get her bab, before blowing out of town. However, that's what Gloria would do, and Odessa was not that woman. She steeled her resolve. No matter what Steven's reaction was, she couldn't let the thought of that stop her from telling him the truth. He was not a bad man, and he deserved to know about his daughter.

Odessa dropped four quarters in the meter and started down the street toward the firehouse.

Chapter Thirteen

Steven swiped at his underarms, popped the top of his deodorant back on, and tossed the bottle into his locker. Before he slipped his T-shirt over his head, he ran a hand over his stomach and tightened his muscles. Five and six times a week, he ran and then hit the gym. For what? So that he would have rock-hard abs to show off to himself? He damn sure wasn't seeing anyone, hadn't since Odessa had left town. He had the horniness to prove it. No amount of jerking off had put out his internal fires. If he were honest with himself, he'd admit that he kept in shape hoping some day she would come back and regret leaving.

Not that he had encouraged her to stay. He'd pushed her away, knowing she would give up all her dreams just to stay with him. When she'd mentioned the possibility that any good opportunity for her work would come out of Japan, he had made the mental decision that should they get involved, he would do everything in his power not to hold her back. She was young and needed to live some before tying herself down. Later, when he'd learned she had gotten an offer out of Tokyo, he'd known he had done the right thing. So why had it felt like he'd ripped his heart out and sent it with her? And why the hell hadn't it come back to him since then?

He sighed, stuffing his arms into his T-shirt and lifting it over his head. A sound to the right of him caught his attention, and he paused to glance over. Speak of the Devil, there she was, looking at him like she'd been caught in a criminal act. Her big, brown eyes were wide, her soft lips parted, giving Steven an instant replay of what it had felt and tasted like to kiss her.

She was still small, but not as she had been when he'd last seen her. Good eating, he supposed, a good life. Bitterness ate at him. He forced himself to finish dressing, as if seeing her hadn't shifted him off the center he had fought so hard for after she had gone. Having Odessa leave had been worse than losing Gloria because he had been more in love with the thought of settling down with Gloria than he'd actually felt for the woman herself. However, Odessa was different. In what way, he was not going to explore at this time.

With a low bang, he shut his locker and shifted to face her, leaning a shoulder against the hard metal. The unyielding surface, along with the chill, helped him to relax enough to appear unmoved at seeing her after two long years. "Odessa. You're back."

The flash of hurt in her brown eyes almost made his resolve crumble. They couldn't pretend to be buddies like they had been in the past. The effort to pretend they were would be too much.

Her voice trembled when she spoke. "Yes. I came to see you."

"Good to see you," he said, dismissive. "We can catch up when I stop over for dinner tomorrow night. Sherise and I kept up the weekly tradition during my days off. Tonight I have a prior engagement. I was on my way out."

Her eyes widened, and he could have sworn there was a knowing look in her expression, but it flitted away. "Oh, well, there's something I have to tell you, and it's not going to wait until tomorrow night. Or, I'd rather it not wait, and after I tell you, I think you will agree."

Foreboding hit him. He nodded. "Go ahead. I'm all ears."

"Well, um . . ." She wrung her hands and looked away. After a moment, she puffed out her chest and squared her shoulders. Her brows dropped low over her eyes. She focused on him, unwavering, although he sensed she was still afraid of his reaction to what she was about to say. A sneaking suspicion began in his gut. "I have a daughter," she blurted out.

"A-A daughter?" He swallowed, staring at her. His ears rang, and he had trouble formulating words that were more coherent. Odessa would come especially to tell him about her daughter for one reason. His heart thundered in his chest. "The father?"

This time she looked away. "You."

He calculated how old the baby must be. A year or so? "You tell me this, in this cold way, like you don't give a shit? What made you tell me at last?"

"It's not cold!" she shouted.

"Then what? Scared?" He advanced on her until he stood above her, dwarfing her tiny build. The move was a mistake. He still wanted her, could eat her alive right now. In anger, yes, but also in white-hot lust. Damn, she was beautiful. Why did he ache for her? Why her of all women? There were tons in Forest's End who threw themselves at his feet, and not his alone, every one of the firefighters. It went with the territory. He knew now that he should have taken one or two up on her blatant offer, even that whore Gloria who had slinked back to town like he'd welcome her with open arms. She would be safer to bed than Odessa.

"Nervous," she amended "I made a mistake—"

"You're damn right you did. Where is she? What is my daughter's name?"

Odessa drew herself up to her full height. "Her name is Chelsea. You can see her whenever you want and—"

"You're damn right."

"Would you stop saying that and cutting me off!"

"This is not a game, Odessa."

"Like I don't know that? I was there taking care of her, struggling between a demanding work schedule in a country where I didn't speak the language, and learned real fast that I couldn't pick it up like I wanted to."

"It was your dream."

She hesitated, staring at the floor. “Well, it wasn’t all I expected. I’m back. I regret not telling you about Chelsea. I didn’t want to weigh you down with the responsibility since I wasn’t careful. You had enough on your plate.”

He clenched his hands at his sides in an effort not to ring her neck. “You decided I couldn’t handle having a daughter? You decided you’d keep her to yourself? Why, because you thought I was weak? What gives you the right, Odessa?”

“I didn’t have the right. It was the wrong choice. I’m sorry.”

“Damn ri—yes, you made a mistake. One I will correct.”

She looked up at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He stepped closer to her and breathed in her intoxicating scent, unable to pinpoint what it was but knew it was her. With supreme effort, he did not take her into his arms and devour her sweet mouth. His anger was too high, and Odessa’s actions could not be overlooked. He wanted to punish her. “It means I’m filing with the court as soon as possible to get full custody of my daughter. I’m pretty sure, after the stunt you pulled, I’ll have no problem at all getting what I want.”

And with those cryptic words, Steven shoved past Odessa, unsettling her, and he stomped out of the firehouse.

Chapter Fourteen

Odessa sank to the floor, tears flooding her cheeks, her hand over her mouth to stem the sobs. She curled forward, sick to her stomach. She lectured herself that this was her fault, and that she didn't have to take this from Steven no matter what she'd done. But still, the tears fell.

Hands encircled her waist, and she was pulled up onto a lap, cradled against a strong chest. She fought to be free but found it impossible. "Shh, Odessa. It's going to be okay."

Tony. She clutched his shirt and buried her face, on one hand wondering if he was taking advantage of her weakened state and, on the other, thinking he was a comfort for the moment.

"Are you crying more over what Steven threatened, the thought of losing your child?" he asked her after she had cried awhile and had at last taken the offered tissue to wipe her nose.

She frowned at him. "What do you think?"

He smirked, and she took back the charitable feelings she'd had toward him for seeming to care. "I think you're crying because you love him, and you hoped that this would be a reunion, one that would make him see what he's been missing all this time."

Catching him off guard, Odessa shoved his hands off her and climbed from his lap. She stood and gathered her purse from the floor where she'd dropped it. "You don't know what you're talking about. This is about my daughter, Chelsea, and how I treated Steven by not telling him. That's all."

Tony sat back in the chair behind the desk that occupied the small space between the room where the men changed and the kitchen where he created masterpieces of culinary delight. He scratched a stain of white Odessa assumed was flour on his cheek. "Steven will come around. He's just angry and hurt. Trust me. He loves you, and seeing you again brought that home just like you wanted it to."

Odessa willed herself to tell him to mind his business and flounce out the door, but she couldn't make herself say the words. Her bruised emotions ached to be soothed into thinking this wasn't what it seemed to be, a disaster.

"He'll come around," Tony assured her, "but he's also stubborn. So it might take a bit of persuasion to get him to where you want him."

"Whatever." Odessa rolled her eyes like she didn't care what Steven felt. "He can take me to court all he wants. I'm not giving up Chelsea. Not for him or anybody."

"This isn't about the baby."

"Give me a damn break, Tony. If you have something to say, say it so I can go."

He sighed and stood, crowding her. His grin was too lascivious, and she backed up a step, but he snaked a hand out and wrapped it around her waist to haul her close to him.

“You have two seconds to get your hands off me!”

Tony leaned down, allowing his warm breath to fan her cheek. He was hot as hell, but it did not a thing for her. He allowed his solid pecs to brush her chin. “I will be his motivation.”

She struggled to make room between them. “What?”

“You and I will go out on a date.” He grinned, wiggling his eyebrows and making her want to laugh rather than being turned on. “He thinks I’m a pig.”

“What gave him that idea?”

“But I’m a decent guy. I’m not going after you. I have a woman I’ll make my move on after while, but I’ll be a stand-in for you, to make Steven jealous.”

“Oh goodness, you have got to be kidding me.” She frowned and shoved at his chest with no effect. “How juvenile is that? He’s not going to fall for that one, and it won’t do a thing to change his mind about Chelsea. Desiring me has nothing to do with wanting custody of our baby.”

“It has everything to do with your daughter. Steven might not have admitted it even to himself. It might not have been a conscious thought in his mind, but I guarantee you, he said what he did because he believed deep down that it was a way to bring you closer to him on a permanent basis.”

“That wouldn’t bring us closer. That would destroy any hope—” She clamped her lips together.

Tony chuckled. “You both love each other, and I’m willing to bet you were just as miserable as his sorry ass was the whole time you were gone.”

“He dumped me. He wasn’t miserable.”

“He loved you the way he thought was best. The man’s a fool, if you ask me.”

“When did anyone?”

“He wanted to force you to step out into life because you were so young. He wanted to give you a chance to live a little before you came back. Deep inside, he prayed you would come back, probably dreamed of it. However, you coming back with a baby you didn’t tell him about made him feel like you never loved him in the first place, and the fact that you went without looking back.”

Tears threatened to start up again. This wasn't her fault, not *all* her fault. Steven had pushed her away. What was she supposed to have done, run behind him like a pathetic fool, crying for him to love her?

Tony seemed to read her mind. "The way it happened may or may not have been the best way, but we're where we are now. Like it or not, you've got to do something to keep this out of court, or it will get ugly, and the love you have for one another will be destroyed." He released her, and Odessa put distance between them. Tony winked. "So, the best solution is for you to let me take you out. Perfect place is that Italian restaurant on Fifth."

"I thought you hated it there, said the food wasn't up to par. Did it improve?"

Tony cringed. "Not likely. No. The thing is people love Italian in this town, and Alonzo's is the only place that serves okay fare in Forest's End. A lot of people in our community go there, which means they'll be flapping their lips about us in no time. It will get back to Steven. And if I know my bud, I know he is superjealous." Tony rubbed his jaw, his eyes glazed. "Bet I'll have to take one on the chin before it's over." He shrugged. "Worth it."

"You're weird, you know that?" She shook her head. "Gloria says—"

"Don't." Tony's nostrils flared before he turned to head back into the kitchen with Odessa on his heels. "She has dreams of getting Steven back, but trust me, it's not happening. You aren't the only one that has grown up. Fake tits and a dye job won't turn his head."

Odessa laughed, her mood lightening. "So you think this will work?"

"I know it will." He wagged a finger at her with one hand while pulling food from the refrigerator. Did the man ever stop cooking? "But you'll owe me."

"What do you want?"

"All in good time. For now, we'll say tomorrow night."

"But Steven is supposed to come to my house for dinner then."

He winked. "Yes, so?"

Odessa grinned. "Okay. I hear you." She chewed a fingernail in thought. "I think I will tell him he can watch Chelsea with Sherise tomorrow night because I have a date. He'll get to know her while, at the same time, wonder about what I'm doing."

Tony snapped his fingers and gave her thumbs up. "Now you're talking, baby. We'll get him yet."

"Okay, Tony." She turned toward the exit. "But just so you know, I might not have picked up Japanese too well while I lived in Tokyo, but I damn sure learned how defend myself." She winked. "I'll rip your balls off if you try anything with me. Got it?"

Tony shivered. “Got it!”

Chapter Fifteen

Steven kissed his baby daughter's forehead and felt a surge of love for her rise inside him. He held her close to him for a moment longer and then lowered her into her crib. Sherise stood at his side watching while he clung to the side of the crib, loathe to let go.

She grinned. "You're a natural."

He shrugged. "I don't know about that, but I know I'm not letting her go again now that she's here."

"You're still bound and determined to go to court over this?"

"It's the only way."

"The only way to what?"

Steven pressed his lips together. He wasn't going to discuss this with Sherise. He had shared every other thing that had happened in his life with her, but not this. Not now. He couldn't bring himself to admit it outside his own head. He loved Odessa, but they were screwed. She wouldn't forgive him for threatening her, and he shouldn't forgive her for keeping Chelsea from him. He shouldn't, but he ached to, to be near her, to hold her, and to be a family. He hated how the thoughts of the three of them together had entered his mind and wouldn't leave since he'd first found out about their baby.

Anger still heated his blood, and the betrayal that went with it hadn't left. Some part of him wanted her to hurt like he did. The sentiment was childish, he knew, but it lingered. To top everything off, he did not know if she still loved him. If nothing else, the last year and a half had taught Odessa not to wear her heart on her sleeve, and so he was vulnerable, and it pissed him off.

"Never mind," he told Sherise and turned from the crib after planting another kiss on the pillow soft cheek. He and Sherise left the room, and he closed the door until only a crack was left, just enough for him to hear if Chelsea woke up. He glanced at his watch. "Don't you think she should be back by now?"

Sherise shrugged. "It's only eleven."

"She has a baby to take care of. She can't run around like she had no obligations anymore," he complained, hating the sound of his voice, like that of a nagging old woman.

"Well, she is on a date."

Steven went still. "A date? That's the first I've heard of a date. You said she was out with a friend."

"He *is* a friend." With Steven close behind her, Sherise strolled down the stairs to the living room and began straightening up, tucking newspapers in a bin to hold them and rearranging

the women's magazines on the coffee table. "Sort of a friend, I guess. Not mine, that's for sure."

"What the hell does that mean? Who is this guy?" Steven's pulse raced, but he tried to ignore it. "Don't play games with me, Sherise. I'm not in the mood."

"Nobody's playing games with you!" She stopped what she was doing and put a hand on her hip. "If my sister wants to go out, that's her business, and I don't see how I should have to report to you who she goes with. Now drop it!"

She turned her back, and he stood there staring, wondering where that irritation had come from. They had gotten along fine while Odessa was gone. Sherise had even forgiven him for dumping her sister like he had, and she'd seemed to understand his reasoning, even agreeing with it as the best thing for Odessa at the time.

Before he could demand she tell him more, the phone rang, and Sherise left the room to answer in the kitchen. Steven scratched at the back of his head and ruffled through his hair. He flexed his fingers and then stormed toward the kitchen. Sherise was going to tell him who Odessa was out with if he had to shake it out of her, but in the entry to the kitchen, he stopped at her next words into the phone.

"Yes, Lisa, I know she's there with Tony. Girl, are you calling from the restaurant? You sure are loud." Sherise paused to listen, and then she lowered her voice so that Steven had to strain to hear. "She didn't mention where they were going to eat, but I admit I'm shocked that culinary wannabe took her to Alonzo's. He always said he hated their food, that they were faux Italian, whatever that is."

That was all that Steven needed to hear. He slammed a fist on the doorjamb, making Sherise jump and spin around to face him. Her eyes widened when she saw him, and guilt clear as day lit her expression.

"Watch Chelsea for me. I'll be back." With that said, he headed toward the front door.

"Oh fuck!" Sherise shouted behind him. "Hold on, Steven. I'll go with you."

"You can't leave my daughter."

She stopped, frowning. "Okay, but don't do anything stupid. You have no right to say who Odessa goes out with, remember?"

He didn't bother responding, but slipped into his SUV and peeled out of the driveway. When he got his hands on Tony, he'd rip him a new asshole with his foot. And Odessa would come home and take care of their child where she was supposed to be. Rage tore through him, jealousy, anger, and hopelessness. That last emotion took him by surprise, but he tamped it down. This was no time to feel sorry for himself. This was all about Chelsea. At least, that's what he would keep telling himself.

Outside the restaurant, Steven shut off the engine of his vehicle and waited, trying to pull himself together. Now that he had some time to think about what he was doing while driving over there, he realized Sherise was right. He had no say in who Odessa wanted to date. She was grown, and he'd dropped her. What they had shared on the beach was a thing of the past, fleeting, and meaningless.

He shut his eyes and gripped the steering wheel until needles of pain threaded through his fingers. After a few calming breaths, he unbuckled his seatbelt and threw the door open to step out. He paused to allow cars to pass by before starting across the street. "If that time on the beach was so meaningless, why is it all I cling to?"

The restaurant was packed. Steven suspected Lisa had called half the town to tell them about Tony and Odessa. Alonzo must be thanking the couple on his knees because the last Steven had heard, they had been on their way out. Alonzo was looking for a buyer, lamenting that no one liked good Italian. Steven had thought that was funny at the time. He'd compared Tony's cooking to every restaurant chef's in Forest's End, and hadn't found any better. Sherise's came close.

Steven stepped into the foyer and halted to scan the interior. What the big deal was about Tony and Odessa, he didn't know. People dated all the time in their town, and no one acted like it was newsworthy. He stopped searching at the middle table near the window that overlooked the harbor. The requisite red and white tablecloth and the flickering candle beneath dim lighting, set the mood. Steven's gut twisted and his throat went dry when Tony, leaning forward, ran a hand down along Odessa's bare arm.

Her dress, if it could be called that being so short, showed off fit brown legs and shaped her small body to a T. The neckline was cut low, and even if Steven could ignore Tony's teasing touch on her arm, he could not ignore it when the asshole moved that same offending hand to the trim right above the swell of her breasts.

Just when the host shuffled up to him with menus in hand and a happy smile splitting his face, Steven barreled past the man to get to Tony. In two seconds, he had hauled his coworker up from his chair and slammed him against the window behind him. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Tony?"

"Whoa, bud." Tony held his hands up, palms facing Steven. "What's up with interrupting my date?"

"This isn't a date. This is nothing!" Steven roared. "And this nothing is over." Without taking his eyes off Tony, he commanded, "Get your stuff, Odessa. We're leaving."

"No."

Steven blinked, and Tony smirked.

In small degrees, Steven turned his head to face Odessa. "Excuse me?"

She crossed her arms over her chest, and he wished she had more than that to cover her beautiful body with the present company of the lusty ape he had in his hold. "I'm not going anywhere with you, Steven. I don't appreciate you bursting in here acting like you own me. We're not an item."

A guffaw somewhere nearby caught Steven's attention, and they each turned in that direction. Lisa was standing at the next table, openly watching the show he was putting on for all the patrons of the restaurant. "Please, girl. Everybody knows Steven's been wanting your ass forever, and we just found out that he got himself some since you have a baby together. We were sure the 'you know what' was going to hit the fan with you going out with Tony, the womanizer, tonight."

Tony frowned. "Hey!"

"How does everybody know my business?" Odessa said. "I just got back in town."

Lisa shifted her shoulders and didn't answer.

Changing tactics, Steven dropped Tony, although *dropped* wasn't what he did given that his fellow firefighter was not more than an inch taller than he was. He moved around the table to tug Odessa up to her feet. "You're done here."

"Like hell I am." She tried to yank out of his grasp, but he tightened his hold and pulled her ahead of him to shuffle toward the door.

"We'll talk later, Tony!" he promised.

Out on the sidewalk, Odessa wrenched herself free and planted her hands on her hips. "Who the hell do you think you are coming in there and ruining my date? I was having a good time until you showed up."

"With Tony? You've got to be kidding me. Odessa, everyone knows his reputation for sleeping around. He's never serious about any woman, and you're not the type—"

"I'm not the type?" She poked a finger in his chest, and Steven fought irritation. "You don't know me. You don't know what type of woman I am, not two years ago, and it's for damn sure you don't know me now!"

"Odessa, just listen." He spread his hands out toward her, but she backed away. "Come on. You can't convince me you want something with him, even if it's a one-night stand."

"He's hot." She shrugged.

Jealousy ate at his gut. He wanted to toss her over his shoulder like a caveman and carry her off. From the belligerent set to her mouth, he judged she didn't give two cents for him or what he thought. He dragged his hands through his hair and paced.

"Look, I—"

“Save it.” She glanced up and down the street before spotting his SUV. “Since you ruined my night, you can drive me home. After that, I don’t want to see you. We can make arrangements for your visits with Chelsea through Sherise.”

She stepped off the curb, but he pulled her back to crash against his chest. “No.”

“Wha—”

“Hell no! That’s not going to work for me.” With those words, he drew her up off her feet, crushed her to him, and captured her soft mouth beneath his. He forced her lips apart with his tongue and kissed her so deeply his head began to spin with the pure pleasure of it. His body came alive as if it had been dead all this time away from her. He fought an impulse to strip her naked and take her on top of the Corvette parked beside them. As it was, he drew her higher, his hand planted against her ass, and squeezed the round firmness until his erection pushed between her legs.

She whimpered and clung to him, her arms slung about his neck. Her dress rose an inch or two, and Steven fought not to tear her panties off her. When she moaned in his mouth, he was lost. He found his way to the waist of her panties and would have tugged them down, but her hand covered his to stop him.

She drew back, breaking their mouths’ connection. “Not here.”

Amid cheers from the restaurant doorway, Steven being sure he’d heard Tony’s among them, he carried Odessa across to his vehicle and tucked her inside. She frowned over at him when he ran around to jump into the driver’s seat.

“Did you have to do that? Everybody knows what we’re going to do.”

He turned over the engine, shifted into gear, and tore off down the street. “Like they wouldn’t have known otherwise? If Forest’s End is known for anything, it’s known for the fact that everyone knows everything about everyone else.”

“That became abundantly clear tonight.” She leaned back in her seat, eyed the erection between his legs with interest, and then seemed to force her attention back on his face. “I want you. Don’t mistake that, Steven. But . . .” The sudden vulnerability that came over her made his heart ache. “I can’t go back to being in the same situation we were in at the end of our summer vacation. You understand that?”

Steven watched her while he sat at the red light. She was strong, no doubt about that, but he also saw the hurt he’d inflicted on her reflected in her beautiful eyes. Shame washed over him. Good intentions didn’t change the fact that he had torn her apart and that she couldn’t take a repeat. He needed to know without a doubt what he wanted, and no excuses would suffice this time around.

“I understand. First, we talk.”

Chapter Sixteen

When Steven stopped alongside a grassy area near the lake, Odessa stepped out of the car and wrapped her arms about her. The night had turned chilly, and she regretted not bringing a wrap or a sweater since her arms were bare. Steven slammed his door shut and came around to her carrying a jacket.

She smiled her thanks. "Where did you get this?"

"I keep it in the car." She slipped it on. "Better?"

"Yes, thanks."

"So?"

He was too eager. She whirled away and strolled down to the water's edge to watch the ripples play over the surface. Steven moved up behind her and stopped. All she wanted was to fall back into his arms, to have him hold her and tell her he loved her. She'd come to the conclusion that she'd never love any other man. Steven was it. Earlier tonight, Tony had enjoyed pretending that they were going to end the evening in bed. When Steven had stormed out of the house, Sherise had called, and another of the firefighters had sent Tony a text message to say Steven was watching them from the front door.

Tony had warned her about what he would do, reaching across the table to run a finger along the neckline of her dress. It had been too much. Her stomach threatened to send her dinner back up because she was so scared after Steven had attacked Tony. If she'd wondered about him being jealous, or giving a crap one way or another about her, she knew now. Yet, that was desire, not love. Steven wanted her for himself, for his bed, and lust had never translated to wanting to spend the rest of one's life with someone. Not in real life it didn't.

"You deserve better than him," Steven began.

She grunted. "I deserve better than you."

"Touché." Steven shifted behind her, moving nearer. The warmth of his body penetrated the jacket she wore just before he rested his hands on her shoulders. His mouth was less than an inch from ear, and he dropped a gentle kiss there. "You don't want him. You want me. I can't . . . I can't bear it if you let him touch you."

His hands stirred from her shoulders, moved down to her sides until he raised them to cup her breasts. Odessa's breath rushed out in a low moan, and she fell back into his arms. Steven pinched her nipples and kneaded them, causing her to grow wet between her legs. "I want this," he growled, dragging the jacket from her shoulders and letting it fall to the grass.

The spaghetti straps of her dress followed, and Odessa was glad for the stretchy material of her outfit as Steven undressed her. She shivered. He enclosed her in the shelter of his warm body, peppered her neck with kisses while tossing an arm over her breasts and running a

hand down between her legs. He stroked her heat above her panties, his fingers concentrating on her bud.

She cried out. "Steven, what are you doing? We're supposed to talk."

"Afterward," was his harsh reply. "I've waited too long!"

He shed his clothing in record time and laid them out on the grass so she could lie on top of them. Following her down to the ground, he tried to examine Odessa's naked body, but she covered herself, especially her stomach, and angled her face away from him. "Don't look at me. Having Chelsea changed things."

He pulled her hands away from her belly and leaned down to kiss each stretch mark. Tears filled Odessa's eyes. His tenderness was too much, but she reveled in it, let herself believe, for now, at least, that he loved her.

"You're still the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on. Bar none." A tremor shook her, and he tsked, bracing above her. "You're cold. I'm selfish for taking you here." But he didn't move away. Instead, he pulled her panties off and parted her legs to settle closer. His body heat chased away the goose bumps along her arms. "Odessa, I need to be inside you," he murmured against her lips. "Tell me yes."

"You stripped me naked, and now you ask for permission?"

"Please?"

She glanced out to the water, craving him, aching for him to sink his hard erection inside of her and to pump until she lost her mind.

"I thought you loved me back then. I thought I saw it in your eyes, that time when we were in the shower down at Tony's house on the beach." She swallowed the tears that threatened. "I was wrong. If you loved me, you couldn't have walked out on me like you did. And now."

"Aw, my love." He pressed his cheek to hers and stayed that way a long time. Odessa could have sworn she felt his shoulders quaking like he was laughing or crying. He drew back, and she spotted the moisture in his eyes. "I've screwed everything up. I should have walked away from everything just to be with you, like I was trying to keep you from doing for me."

Her mouth fell open. He tucked a finger beneath her chin and lifted it. "But why?"

"Because I loved you. I *love* you, with all my heart, Odessa. I knew it at the time, but being the pompous ass that I was, I thought I knew what was best for you because you were so young and just finishing up school. Please forgive me. If I am screwing it up all over again this time around, forgive me, and just tell me what I need to do not to lose you again."

She couldn't believe her ears. He was confessing his love? This was too good to be true to be happening in her life. Not that her life was one big curse, but it had felt like it when she'd lost him, and when she'd moved to Tokyo only to hate it. She cupped his face. "I love you

too, Steven, more than you could ever know. I never stopped loving you.” Suppressing a sob, she sniffled. “I never wanted Tony. I didn’t want any man except for you, and even though it was too much to hope for, I did hope that you would have changed your mind about us when I came back. You can imagine my horror when I ran into Gloria who told me you two were back together.”

“That bitch!” he growled. “Never. I’d rather be celibate.”

She chuckled and wiggled her hips under him. “No need for that.”

His shaft twitched. His eyes drifted closed. “Woman, don’t do that. I’ll explode before we get started.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” she complained. “I want you bad.”

“One last thing.” He stared down into her eyes, and Odessa’s heart beat faster. “You’ve watched me over the years, seen the near misses I’ve gotten into all those times being a firefighter. I know it was hard for you and Sherise, but that was as my friend. Now we will be a real family, you, me, Chelsea, and Sherise. I’ve never felt like my life was more complete, never had my head this much into the game. Can you handle me continuing as a firefighter? I promise I will be extra careful so that I can come home to you and Chelsea.”

A flutter started in her belly. Come home to them? She chewed her lip and pretended to think about it. Steven shook her a little, anxiety clear in his eyes.

“Okay, okay. Yes, I believe we’ll be fine. Besides, firefighters are sexy as hell!”

Steven blushed and chuckled. “I lied.”

“Huh?” She blinked up at him.

“I said that was the last thing to settle, but there’s one more.”

She swallowed. “Yes?”

“Will you marry me?”

For a moment, she was unable to speak. She was expecting him to ask. After all, that was the natural direction after they had admitted their love, and everyone knew that Steven desired family above all else. A family was what she wanted, as well, but faced with it, having Steven, living in his home, cooking for him and raising his children, was overwhelming. Okay, maybe not *cooking* for him.

“What are you thinking?” He looked doubtful. “Not thinking of turning me down? I thought you forgave me.”

“I’m not thinking of that.” Embarrassment hit. “I never learned to cook well.”

He laughed. "Is that all? I can run a mean grill, baby. You haven't eaten until you've tasted a firefighter's steaks."

Odessa wrinkled her nose. "You're crazy. Then, in that case, I say, yes, yes, yes. I'll marry you."

Steven placed a gentle kiss on her lips and drew back, gliding a hand down over her bare hip. "Then let us seal the deal." His hand rounded the curve of her thigh, lifted it out and up, and then he sank inside her. In steady strokes, he took her. "My wife."

Odessa arched her back, her eyes closed, and her legs wrapped around Steven's waist. She used her heels to push him deeper, wanting to become a part of him so that they were never separated again. She willed him to brand her, to make her his in every way. Their hips moved in unison with Steven's groin molding to hers enough to tease her nubbin and then withdrawing, driving into her to stretch her heated opening, and then pulling back.

"Ah, Steven, make me come. Please. I'm so hot, I can't take it."

He rose up on his haunches, caught hold of her heels, and lifted them into the air. Odessa looked down over her body to see his shaft, wet and thick, gliding in and out of her. The mere sight drove her ecstasy to new heights, and she lifted her ass from the ground to meet his thrusts.

She was going higher, almost there. Oh, to come, and then again, to make it last. She didn't want it to stop, needed almost to be owned by him. When Steven drew out of her before she could come, she screamed in frustration. "No, don't! I'm almost there."

"Easy, baby. It's okay." He flipped her over to her stomach, raised her hips so that she kneeled with her ass in the air facing him. With the sensual predatory grace she remembered so well, he layered his body over hers, trailed hungry kisses from her ass to her back on up to the back of her shoulder. She shook from head to toe, whined to be filled with him. "You want my dick in you, Odessa?"

"Yes, you know I do. Don't tease me, Steven."

"Do you know how angry it made me to see another man touch you?" His voice had grown rough with the force of his emotions. Odessa gripped the shirt bunched beneath her. "You are mine. If ever I see that again, the man who dares put his hands on you will die. Do you understand?"

She had never heard Steven speak like that. He was a strong man, even dominate in ways, but not with her. She should be angry at his threat, tell him to back off, but she wasn't upset. In fact, his words, his possessive attitude, turned her on. Her core clenched with need. "Yes, I understand."

"Good." He reached under her, cupped her belly, and then sank deep within her. A scarce three or four pumps, and she came crying out his name. He sat up, gripped her hips, and pounded behind her. Odessa pushed back into his thrusts, shouting for him to fill her, to

take what was all his. He groaned, and pulsed faster. The friction between them created an erotic tone that filled the night around them.

Odessa reached between her legs and took hold of Steven's balls, massaged them, and bumped her ass back into his groin. That sent him over the top. He hissed. Soon, a warm flow spread throughout her womb. Steven sagged down over the top of her, his breath ragged.

"Odessa," he muttered with his lips buried in her hair. "Don't leave me again."

"Never."

The End

About the Author

Tressie Lockwood has always loved books, and she enjoys writing about heroines who are overcoming the trials of life. She writes straight from her heart, reaching out to those who find it hard to be completely themselves no matter what anyone else thinks. She hopes her readers enjoy her short stories. Visit Tressie on the web at www.tresslock.webs.com