



# ANIMALS

## GEMINI JUDSON

Loose Id

# *Animals*

*Gemini Judson*



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ISBN 978-1-60737-471-8

Available in PDF, HTML, Microsoft Reader, and Mobi

Editor: Ann M. Curtis

Cover Artist: April Martinez

Printed in the United States of America

**Loose Id.**

Published by

Loose Id LLC

870 Market St, Suite 1201

San Francisco CA 94102-2907

[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

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## About this Title

**Genre:** Erotic Suspense

Humans are animals. When three biologists are captured in the remote woods of northern New Hampshire and forced to make pornographic videos, they are surprised by their own response—biology overrides fear and inhibition. When they escape and resume their normal lives, they find the animal passions they conjured are not so easily forgotten.

Even though it was the young intern, Kevin, that Jessy was forced to be with, it's Conrad she's crazy about, and has been since he took over the job as the fisheries crew foreman. After a summer of watching his gorgeous 6'5" body keep a cool distance, Jessy hopes the abduction has opened his eyes. He's finally ready to give a relationship a try.

Their kidnappers are not happy with the way their three porn stars ran away. Just when Jessy's aimless existence seems to be finding focus—on Conrad—she finds herself the target of more dangerous games.

**Publisher's Note:** *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Dubious consent, ménage in dream sequence, violence (including attempted rape), voyeurism.*

# *Part One:*

*Abducted*

## Chapter One

Jessy Tanner sat on the curb near the truck and waited for the guys to get their butts out of the bagel shop. The routine had grown tiresome. It seemed the crew needed their little treat before heading out on the road. She'd noticed that Kevin smelled like a brewery again this morning. *Stupid college kid. At least he's gorgeous and good with a net.*

The two guys came out to the truck with the rustle of paper sacks and the smell of coffee.

"You're not eating bagels today, Jessy?" Conrad Manzey tapped Jessy on the shoulder as he rounded the front of the truck. Con was the crew foreman, head of the fisheries program for the state of New Hampshire.

Jessy didn't think his question required an answer. She stood, opened the truck door, and used the overhead handle to hoist herself up into the passenger seat. "You guys got your carbohydrate fix for the day? Let's get on the road."

"Jess, why are you so eager to get up north?" Kevin Shepherd sat in the backseat of the supercab truck, kitty-corner from Jessy. He rummaged in his bag and produced a cinnamon raisin bagel. "Sure you don't want one of these? I bought a whole bag full. I got plain and garlic cream cheese."

"You're putting garlic cream cheese on a cinnamon bagel?" Jessy wrinkled her nose. "What a disgusting combination. No, thanks, Kev. I'll pass." The night's libations wafted up to the front with his exhales, and Jessy tried to guess. Wine? Beer? Probably both. She strapped the seat belt across her chest and flipped her sunglasses down from her forehead. *It's just a damn good thing you have a cute butt.*

Conrad gave her a puzzled look. “Not looking forward to the trip this time, eh?” He lightly grazed her leg with the outside of his hand, holding a raspberry scone.

“Ah, I’m sorry. I’m just bummed thinking about how many prerequisites I need to get into the accounting program. I met with the dean of admissions last Friday. He said everything will transfer from the University of Kansas—they just don’t have any use for all my music classes.”

“Accounting? I thought you were looking into nursing.” Con took a sip of his coffee.

“Ah, no. Accounting.” Jessy fixed her gaze out the window and wished she had a cup.

“Jessy, you told me you wanted to be a Web designer.” Kevin’s words dripped with sarcasm. “And before that, it was a used-car salesman.”

She pursed her lips and blew at a few stray curls. “All right, smart-ass.”

Con came to the rescue, reeling in the straying conversation. “Accounting. So are they math classes or what?”

“Yes. How could I graduate from college with no math? I guess I should have spent less time in the studio and more time in stupid algebra classes.”

“Are you kidding me?” Conrad took his eyes off the road just long enough to give her a quick glance. “Your music is a gift. I wish I had some musical talents.”

“A lot of good it does me. People aren’t exactly lining up to hire piano players. Seems like those four years were a waste, ya know? Heck, even the husband I met in college is history.” Jessy tried to laugh at her joke but didn’t really see the humor.

“Well, I don’t know about the husband—you’re probably better off without him—but education is never a waste.” Conrad looked over at her again with a comforting smile. “Didn’t you say you started playing the guitar? I bet you picked that up in no time.”

That was true. Jessy had found a beat-up Fender guitar at a garage sale for three bucks. After a few weeks and a new set of strings, she sounded pretty good.

"It just seems like everybody else has a sensible progression to their life, one thing segueing to the next. Like dominoes. My dominoes have never lined up. They all fall independent of one another—and only because of some external jolt." She punctuated this with a punch of her fist into the open palm of the other hand and glanced over at Con with a weak smile.

"Scone?" He held out his half-eaten pastry.

"I'm good." Jessy was crazy about Conrad. He was new to the department, only on the job a few months. When she first met him, she thought he was impossibly sexy and wondered how she'd be able to work with him without spending every damn day in a horny fog. The guy reeked of masculine energy. He had wavy blond hair that he wore layered and longish, and it always looked windblown. And his body. *Phooey*. This past summer, watching him cover that gorgeous ass of his with a pair of bulky chest waders seemed like a crime.

She thought he could look like a badass if he wanted to—a "don't mess with me" quality. Until she looked into his eyes. They were a soft, sweet pale blue that made Jessy's heart race. She thought the best part of Conrad was his mustache. It was probably unprofessional—at least, she'd heard that about mustaches. To be taken seriously, men had to keep their mustaches neatly trimmed or forgo them entirely. His grew long and skirted down the sides of his chin. At six-five, Con didn't have any trouble getting people to take him seriously. She sometimes caught herself daydreaming about what his kisses must feel like with that soft brush of whiskers.

"Jessy, did I tell you we got the go-ahead to purchase that software package? We'll probably start entering this summer's data directly into that. There's a training course offered up in Bangor. Maybe we can send you up there."



“Remember I told you my mom and sister are visiting in a couple of weeks? Any chance that training will overlap with their visit? *Please?*”

Con laughed. “Training's not until November. I take it you're still not looking forward to having guests.”

“You have a sister?” Kevin butted into the conversation with a mouthful of bagel. “Is she anything like you? Older or younger?”

“She's younger, and we are nothing alike. And before you get your hopes up, Kev, let me warn you. She would eat you up and spit you out, pickin' her teeth with your bones.”

He wrinkled his nose. “What the heck does that mean?”

“Morgan is a man-eater.”

“Oooo. I like 'em feisty. Is she beautiful like you?”

Jessy's heart melted at Kevin's comment. “Morgan was Miss Kansas. And right now, she's a cheerleader for the Kansas City Chiefs. Does that answer your question?”

A few minutes of highway slipped by before Con mused to no one in particular, “A cheerleader?”

\* \* \* \* \*

The truck hummed along as the smell of coffee and garlic and Kevin's boozy breath filled the air. Jessy flipped through a UNH catalog and tried to concentrate on the required course load for a first-semester accounting student. At thirty years old, she knew she would be the oddball old person in all the classes.

She had been a fisheries biologist now for three calendar years—counting the two summers she'd spent as an intern. It wasn't what she'd planned on doing. It was one of those dominoes that fell independent of the others.

When Jessy and her then husband, Jeff, moved to New Hampshire, she found a niche playing keyboard in a local bar band. Brad Deals was the lead singer in the band and also the fisheries crew foreman before Conrad. After her

divorce, Jessy needed a more reliable income than the band. She'd picked up a few piano students, but that wasn't much. When Brad asked her if she wanted to be his summer intern, she was dubious. She'd grown up fishing the reservoirs of Kansas with her dad, but that sure as hell didn't make her a biologist. She'd put lots of bandages on skinned knees, but that didn't make her a nurse.

Brad was like a brother to Jessy, and she trusted him. She interned with him for two summers, and when the full-time position opened up, he used his professional muscle to squeeze her in. She became a half-assed fisheries biologist, who could play the piano like nobody's business.

As the morning passed with light truck banter, Jessy's mood lightened. She put the college catalog away and felt stupid for her grumpy mood. Her life had had the stuffing knocked out of it when Jeff left. She'd been aimlessly kicking fluff into the air for a couple of years—what were a few more days? This was one last field trip with her friends.

The crew had spent nearly every day together over the summer, wading in streams all over the state, collecting fish, and recording data. Some days it would rain, and they trudged through it anyway. If the weather became dangerous, they huddled together in the truck until it passed. They ate lunches on the shore, sweated together, laughed together, got pissed off at each other, and got over it.

Kevin was a summer intern. She had to admit, he was a good one. In their line of work, they sent electricity into the water from a long wand. The fish would feel the jolt and try to escape. Kevin had reflexes like a cat. Nothing ever got by him. He'd lean against the handle of his net, grinning, probably still bombed from the night before. But when the electricity went on, he was ready. And those eyes. Big, beautiful brown puddles filled with mischief. His smile was nothing short of breathtaking. The butt, the sculpted arms, the gorgeous black curls—whoever landed this one was a lucky gal. At nineteen, life was a joyride for him.

Jessy stared out the window, tired of hashing and rehashing her plan to go back to school. She thought about Con's encouraging words. He was such a great guy. Why couldn't she meet a man like that? She laughed to herself. She already *had* met a man like that. She had extended her daydreams out so far that *if* she went back to school and *if* she no longer worked with Con... Could he think of her as anything other than a scrappy biologist? His coworker?

In their four-month relationship, he'd only seen her sweaty and dirty, her hair up in a ponytail. She hadn't had the chance to show him her feminine side—show Conrad that she had legs and dresses and preferred flowers over fish. But then, she didn't know what kind of women Con liked. Maybe he liked them rugged and tough. Jessy sighed. Con was a mystery man.

"Jess, you got any gum?" Kevin poked his head to the front. "I have a funny taste in my mouth. Cinnamon and garlic."

Jessy dug in the back pocket of her Levi's and pulled out a stick of Juicy Fruit gum. "It's my last stick. I only give up Juicy Fruit for guys I *really* like. Now, who's carrying the sampling buckets today?" She playfully waved the gum under his nose.

"I am, Jessy—you know I'd do that for you, even without the gum." He gently plucked the foiled stick from her fingers.

She did know it. The sampling buckets weighed a ton when they were loaded with fish. Jessy counted on Kevin so much with the really physical work. "So, what did you do this weekend, Kev? Did you break any hearts? Or any laws?" She glanced back. He froze in midchew and wagged his eyebrows a few times, as if to say, *Right on both counts*.

"Hey, I saw Cory on Saturday." Kevin smacked his gum with exaggerated gusto. "He's mad as hell that you wouldn't let him come on this last trip, Con. But he sure had some nice things to say about you, Jess."

"Me? Like what?" Jessy stomach went into a knot, and she couldn't explain why. She always thought Cory was a little weird, and was glad he wasn't able to make this last trip.

“Well, actually, what he had to say wasn't nice at all, and I wouldn't dare repeat it. Even made *me* blush. He was pretty loaded. That guy likes his marijuana.”

Con and Jessy exchanged glances. Cory Johnson was the other summer intern. His employment started with a thud when Con caught him smoking a joint in the boat shed. He didn't fire him, but Jessy knew he wanted to. Sure, Kevin liked his booze, but he always showed up ready to work. He was just a college freshman testing his boundaries. Cory was older, out of college. He was looking to make a career with the New Hampshire fisheries program and already off to a bad start.

“With that broken collarbone, he wasn't able to do a whole lot. I saw no need to drag a one-armed netter along for the ride,” Con commented. “He wasn't even that good at netting fish with two hands.” Jessy saw him glance at Kevin in the rearview mirror. “We'll hook up with Lon Briggs from the Vermont office tonight and be just fine.”

“So, Conman, did we bring the live wells for specimens this trip?” Kevin turned and glanced into the bed of the truck. He was in charge of critter keeping. The crew learned early in the season that he had a knack for keeping fish alive for a few days during transport.

“Not this trip. Too far to travel, gone too long. We'll just keep a good paper record. Jess, did you grab the digital camera?”

“Yup, and fifty million batteries.”

“Seems like a lot,” Con muttered absentmindedly as he focused on the road. The first fishing site was off the beaten path. Way off. They needed to take some logging roads to get there, and Con had gotten directions from the local logging company. GPS navigation wasn't going to help much for these roads.

The truck bumped along with their gear secured in the back end. Jessy read the directions, amused that Con had taken the time to type them. She knew hers would be scrawled on a gum wrapper. “Con, I think the river is just

through those trees. See how there's a break in the canopy? If you stop here, I'll hike in and check it out."

Conrad pulled the truck onto the grassy edge. "Why don't you and Kevin both go. It looks like the woods get pretty thick in there. It'd be safer with two. I'll see if I can get some GPS coordinates."

Kevin and Jessy climbed out of the truck and started into the woods. She was certain the river they were in search of was just a quick hike away. They'd driven the road back and forth but weren't able to find an access. This may be the best they were going to get. She led the way, and Kevin followed.

"You better not be looking at my butt, you little pervert."

"Forty-year-old butts don't interest me, Jess."

"What! I'm nowhere near forty, and you know it!" She blew a pretend huff over her shoulder. "You're mean."

The afternoon heat stifled the surrounding forest, and Jessy drew in a long, deep breath, happy to be out of the truck. Just ahead of her, the shrubs and undergrowth suddenly rustled. She stopped. *Were there bears around here?*

"Kev, did you see that?" she whispered.

"See what? I was looking at your butt." He caught up to her, and she swatted him with her arm.

"Listen. There's something up there." The woods settled once again to an eerie silence. "Hmm. I don't hear anything now."

In that instant, twigs snapped behind them, and everything went black. Strong arms wrapped around Jessy, and she felt her feet lift off the ground. A dark fabric veiled her vision as she wrestled to get free. "Kevin? Kevin!" The arms squeezed her in a vise and immobilized her as she struggled to regain her footing. "What the fuck is going on? Is this a joke?"

"This ain't no joke, honey. Now shut up. Not one more word."

She felt a solid poke in the middle of her back. She'd never had a gun in her back before, but it definitely felt like a gun. In a shroud of darkness, her lungs wouldn't fill. Sunlight and precious oxygen couldn't penetrate the thick fabric that covered her head and shoulders. She gasped for air and found very little as the cloth collapsed against her mouth and nose.

"Who are you? Kevin, are you there?"

"I'm right here. I can't see shit. I'm covered—*ooof*."

Kevin was silenced by what sounded like a violent punch. "Shut the fuck up! Both of you. Now we ain't gonna hurt you. We just have a little project we need your help with."

Jessy felt her captor's arms shift as the man maneuvered around for something. "Put your hands behind you."

"Why?"

"Put your damn hands behind you." The man sounded fed up, as if he were talking to an uncooperative child. "Do it!"

Jessy put her hands behind her and felt a rope winding around her wrists. *We're screwed*. "Kevin, are you okay?"

"We have a bunch of people with us—they're gonna wonder where we are." Kevin's voice rasped like he'd had the wind knocked out of him.

"We know all about your fearless leader." The man gave a final jerk on the knots around her wrists with a huff for the effort. "Don't worry. We took care of him."

Conrad. What had they done to him? Jessy felt fear pool in the pit of her stomach, and tears stung her eyes. Her breath felt hot as it circled back onto her face.

The commands thus far had come from one man. Now the other one spoke. "He's tied. You lead, Red."

"All right, let's go. Start walking. One foot in front of the other."

“Where are we going? What have you done with Con?” Jessy pleaded for information as she stumbled through the woods. Her shoulders cried out for release, and her wrists were frozen in place by vicious knots of rope. She heard Kevin and his escort behind her.

What the hell was happening?

## Chapter Two

Conrad gingerly touched the back of his head and winced when he brought his hand around, covered in blood. He sat up and looked at his surroundings, blinking through layers of painful fog.

*What the fuck?* He was on the floor of a camper. A filthy, smelly camper. He tried to stand but stumbled back down to his knees. Nothing was familiar—all he remembered was sitting on a fallen log with the GPS unit. Then blinding pain. Where was he? Where were Jessie and Kevin?

He pulled himself onto a faded, worn cushion and tried to find a position for his head that didn't throb. He noticed the back of his pants was covered with dirt and grass stains. Somebody had cracked him on the head and dragged him into the camper. Not an easy feat for a man his size.

Dead air provided no sustenance for his lungs, and sweat trickled down his temples. He rubbed his hands over his eyes and blinked hard to focus in the dim light. The only source of light came from an elevated area above him to the left. He tried to look up, but the effort hurt his head. His heart rose to his throat when the door burst open and a cloaked figure clumsily ascended the steps into the camper.

"Step up. There you go, sweetheart."

"Who are you? Have you hurt Conrad?" He recognized Jessie's voice and her jeans.

"Conrad? He's right there." A darkened silhouette of a man pushed Jessie onto Conrad's lap. A soft *oomph* left him as he took all Jessie's weight.



“Jessy?” With trembling fingers, Con struggled to untie the twine around her neck that held the fabric. “What the fuck is going on?”

Kevin's cloaked form flew to the floor of the camper with an *ooof*. With no further words, the silhouetted figure shut the door, leaving them in dim light once again.

Con lifted the heavy cloth from Jessy's head and saw her terror. Forgetting to be gentle, he grabbed her face and looked into her eyes. “Did he hurt you?”

“No.” She gasped for fresh air. “Not yet.”

Con realized her hands were bound behind her and pushed her forward to work on the knot.

“You okay, Kevin?”

“I'm great, Con. Never better.”

As Con hopped to the floor to free Kevin from his cloak, the camper started to move. It pitched and swayed, and the truck engine groaned. Con left Kevin's hands still tied as he lunged at the door. He turned the useless knob and kicked at the heavy steel. “Goddamn it!”

“What the hell is happening, Conrad?” Jessy asked as she stumbled to the floor to finish freeing Kevin's hands.

“*Shit*. I don't know.” Con slid to the floor, giving up on the unyielding door. “I was knocked unconscious. How did they get you guys?”

“We were jumped by two guys, and our faces were covered. We didn't see a thing.” Jessy rubbed her wrists.

“Neither did I. Did you say there were two men?”

“Yeah. Two voices. One had Kevin, and one had me.” Jessy wiped her eyes. “I think one guy had a gun in my back.”

Con tightened his jaw at the thought of anyone pointing a gun at Jessy. He rubbed his head and winced.

"Let me look at your head." Jessy slid across the floor next to him. He sat while she sifted through his hair with a gentle touch. His pain eased from that alone. "It's not too bad. A little blood. Do you have a terrible headache?"

"I do. Or I did." Jessy continued to glide her fingers through his hair and massaged around his wound. His headache all but disappeared. "Thanks." He sent her a smile. "That helped a lot."

Jessy scanned her surroundings as they bumped along in silence. A blank space yawned between two benches where a table probably used to be. The camper rode high above the bed of the truck, and every rut and rock they hit swayed and jolted them. An old pin-striped mattress sagged over the edge of the elevated sleeping quarters above the truck cab. The whole place smelled of mold and old grease. Heavy sheets of aged plywood covered the windows and conveyed the ominous message that these men had every intention of keeping them inside.

Kevin got up and pounded on the would-be window above the filthy kitchenette, testing the plywood. "Anybody got a wrench? This stuff's bolted in place. Maybe we could work these nuts loose."

"What could they possibly want us for?" Jessy ignored Kevin's stupid request for a wrench. "And where's the state truck? Did they take it?"

"No. That's weird." Conrad stood up and thumped with Kevin on the wood, pausing to examine the rusty bolts. "There's thousands of dollars worth of equipment in there, not to mention the truck itself, and they just left it. At least I think they did. I guess I don't know anything for sure."

Jessy felt the truck slow down and heard the tick of twigs and stones on the bottom of the truck bed. A few minutes of rough travel and they stopped. She exchanged anxious glances with her friends as they heard muffled voices and doors slam. Then the camper door jolted and swung open.

“Anybody need a drink?” Jessy recognized the voice of her captor and saw him for the first time. He was a fat man, his face peppered with freckles. She fought her inner smart-ass not to burst out laughing. Then she noticed the black handgun poking its head out of the waistband of his jeans, digging into his fat belly. Not so funny.

His red hair was pulled back into a frizzy ponytail held by a leather band. He stood at the top of the stairs and tossed two bottles of water on the bench next to Jessy. “It ain’t much.” He motioned around the camper with sarcastic pride. “But it’s home.”

Conrad spoke with his usual calm demeanor, but Jessy heard the underlying anger. “What do you want with us? Money? We’re a bunch of state employees. We don’t have any money. You plan on keeping us here? For what?”

“You sure ask a lot of questions.” The fat man stepped close to Conrad and must have realized how stupid he looked trying to stand face-to-face with him. His nose came only to the middle of Con’s chest. “We’re getting our gear set up.” He pointed a fat finger at Jessy. “And then it’s showtime.” He laughed with an anemic chortle in his chest and headed back down the steps. A heavy lock jammed into place on the outside of the door.

“Showtime?” Jessy’s blood froze in her veins. She rubbed her eyes, still trying to get fuzzy stuff out of her eyelashes from the cloak. Seated on one of the benches, she pulled her knees in tight and reached her arms around to hold herself. “What the hell could he mean by that?”

“I’m betting it’s not popcorn and reruns of *M\*A\*S\*H*.” Kevin’s wry humor didn’t ease her fears.

Suddenly she bolted up. “Do you have the phone, Con?”

“Nope. It’s sitting on the dash of the truck. Charging. I guess that means you don’t have yours?”

“In my purse.”

“We probably would get shit for reception up here anyway.” Kevin patted Con on the back.

“So they whacked you on the head, cloaked Kevin and me, and brought us to this camper, and they think they are going to get blackmail money from our families?”

“I get the feeling this isn't a blackmail job. They have something else in mind.” Conrad got up again and started opening drawers. “We need to get out of here.” Most of the cabinetry had been removed, and what remained they soon discovered was empty. There was nothing to throw, nothing sharp. Even the makeshift toilet was smooth and round.

Kevin ran his hand over the heavy plywood. “Do you think we could kick this out?”

“Not without breaking our legs. Damnedest thing. Look at that door. That's not a regular camper door. It's a solid steel security door. They don't want us getting away.”

Jessy held herself tighter. This wasn't good.

Jessy and her friends sat mostly in silence. Their pockets were empty, and their shoes were sneakers. No heavy, steel-toed boots for this crew. They'd anticipated spending most of their time in their chest waders.

“I don't even have my buck knife.” Con slapped his hand on the belt of his jeans, where the knife would normally ride.

“You told us not to carry metal when we're using the shocker. Sound safety advice, Con. Don't blame yourself.” Jessy swiped some stray curls from her sweaty neck and blew a cloud of hot air from her lungs. “It's so humid. Even for August. We're like sardines in here.”

They sat for another hour in worried anguish before the door opened and the fat man with the red ponytail came in. He pointed at Jessy, then at Kevin. “You, and you. You're coming with me.”

"Where are you taking them?" Conrad hurried to his feet and moved to shield Jessy. As heroic as he was in her eyes, he was no match for the weapons. The fat man pressed the gun into his cheek.

"You'll get your chance." He looked a long moment at Con with narrowed eyes and then motioned to Jessy to move out the door.

Kevin and Jessy walked single file, following the other tall, lumbering man down a grassy path. He walked like a guerilla—a guerilla with a shotgun in one hand. The guy with the red ponytail followed behind.

"Red, I told ya it was getting too late. We're gonna lose our daylight."

"They'll just have to get busy right away. No time to lose. Setting up that bed took longer than I thought. It'll be worth it, though. It's a nice touch. Looks more professional."

They walked into a small grassy opening, and Jessy tried to blink reality into the vision before her. She and Kevin exchanged bewildered glances. This made no sense. A bed? In the middle of nowhere? A wrought-iron headboard with chipping white paint looked stark against the dark greens of the surrounding forest. It was a normal-looking bed, with pillows and a silky red quilt. A few feet away, a tall stepladder towered up to the sky.

Jessy looked in disbelief at the surreal scene and reached for Kevin's hand. The larger man stood behind him with the shotgun pointed at both of them. The woods glowed in the fading sunlight, and the grass shouted a vibrant green. And right in the middle of it all was an ominous red bed.

Then she saw the equipment. Suddenly she understood what she was there for, or at least understood enough to be terrified. The muscles in her legs betrayed her, and she slipped in the fat man's grip.

"Don't let her pass out, Red. That won't do no good."

"Just get the camera ready, idiot."

"What is this? What are you going to do?" Jessy's heart thundered violently. She broke from Red's grip and tried to run.

Red caught her instantly. "Don't do that. You won't get anywhere. Besides, this is going to be fun. You wouldn't believe what Larry does with that video camera. He'll make you look like a movie star." He roughly pulled out the scrunchie that held Jessy's hair back. "Now take your clothes off. We need to get this done."

Jessy didn't move but stared at an expensive-looking camera bag unzipped and lying open in the grass. Larry, the tall man, fiddled with a video camera and headed toward the ladder. "I'm all set here." He handed Red the shotgun as he passed by.

"Take your clothes off!" the fat man shouted, and Jessy jumped. Kevin looked at the ground. "You too." He poked his gun at Kevin. "Let's get this party started."

"Don't do this. This isn't right," Jessy pleaded, her eyes darting from the stepladder to the bed.

Suddenly the man grabbed her by the arm. "If I have to do it for you, you're not gonna like it." He shoved the gun under her chin. "Now take your clothes off."

"But...but the light. It's too dark. You should wait." Jessy's mouth was dry like cotton, and her words sputtered and stuck together. Her mind reeled in fast motion to find a way out of this. Force wasn't an option, but perhaps reason...

"Yeah, maybe we can come back tomorrow. We'll do this in the light of day." Kevin grabbed Jessy's hand and pulled her toward him.

Red's hand flew across Kevin's face, sending him to the ground.

"Kevin!" Jessy helped him to his feet and scanned his face for blood. No blood, but he had a vivid red mark on his cheek from the slap.

"Look, assholes. Don't underestimate me. I'd have no problem shootin' ya in the head and leaving you here for the birds. Now get on with it."

Jessy's hands trembled on her zipper, and her thoughts raced over an image of their two dead bodies lying in the leaves. She unzipped her jeans and slid them down, noticing Kevin's eyes focused on the ground, not looking at her. All she wore was a black T-shirt and a pair of Levi's—not a complicated outfit to take off. When she had gotten down to her bra and underwear, she asked, “Do I need to take everything off?”

Red landed in her face. “When was the last time you got fucked, huh? Were ya wearing your underwear? Take 'em off.”

She saw Kevin removing his clothes as she stepped out of her underwear. When they were both naked, the man pushed them into the view of Larry's camera. “Here's what's going to happen. When I say 'camera on,' you guys get busy. Now I'm not expecting this to be easy. Really. You're not even revved up. But I think once you get started, the feelings will come. We're just animals, right? Animals having sex.” He pushed Kevin and Jessy together.

“Now here's what'll piss me off—if I have to waste a pile of time telling you where to grab, what to kiss, what to suck, all that. I know you know what to do, so don't ruin good video by making me jabber through the whole thing. We'll dub music into it later, but just...don't make me tell ya how to do it. Ready?”

Tears streamed down Jessy's face. She did the only thing she could think of. She grabbed Kevin around the neck and held him tightly, not wanting to let go. “Hold me, just hold me.” She didn't feel his warm body against hers. She felt numb, her heart thrumming rapidly, her breathing shallow.

Kevin reached to hold her too. “I won't do this,” he whispered in her ear. “I just won't. He can't make us.”

“Yes, he can. He can! I don't know how to get out of this. I'm afraid of what he'll do if we don't do what he says.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I think he'll rape me.” She blinked hard to clear the tears from her eyes. “I'd rather it be you.”

"It'll be okay, Jessy." Kevin's breath feathered her ear, and his words sounded calm and reassuring, more mature than his years. "We're friends. I won't hurt you."

"Get on with it!" Red barked.

Jessy touched Kevin's face with trembling fingers, then kissed him. She felt nothing but fear and tasted Kevin's old Juicy Fruit gum. He reached to get the gum out of his mouth and gave it a fling. Then he kissed her back. They were mechanical in their actions, lips touching with an artificial desire.

Kevin was so young. Jessy had never even entertained this possibility. She had admired his youth and beauty, but that was all. Never in her wildest fantasies was she making love to him. And then it occurred to her—he probably wasn't too thrilled about this either. What if he simply...couldn't get it up? Maybe he thought she was disgusting. Those thoughts all crashed through her mind as they coolly and gently kissed.

Kevin took the lead and looked into her eyes. "Just forget about them, Jess. Just focus on me."

Jessy felt frozen inside. She was kissing this young, naked man, and they were being forced to do something so intimate on this bed in the middle of nowhere. And there was nothing she could do about it. Any minute they could have a bullet in their heads. And the thought of that fat man on top of her made her sick. She held Kevin tighter.

As Kevin pressed his youthful body into hers, she couldn't help but notice he was aroused. His lips felt soft and slippery, and his kisses began to feel like...real kisses. *This isn't so bad. I can do this. Forget about the camera. We're alone in the woods, just the two of us.* Kevin's hand slid down the length of her body, down her waist, and around to her butt, sending shivers to every one of her million nerves. Jessy felt his hard cock rubbing up against her own furry patch. Were their movements happening spontaneously? She couldn't believe it, but she was feeling this. Biology was overriding everything. This wasn't rape. Kevin was her friend. This was forced sex—with a friend.



“Get on the bed.” The man directed their actions. This was his movie. Jessy shuddered. She had control over nothing but her inner dialogue. If she was going to get through this, she needed to focus on Kevin and his mind-blowing kiss. Not the perverted ponytail, not the camera. *Just Kevin.*

Kevin sat on the bed and gently pulled her to him. His eyes. His beautiful brown eyes somehow conveyed warmth and gave her courage. A little spark ignited inside her.

“That's it. Girl on top. Start it that way. Your hand better get working on that hard-on, Curly.”

*That man. That fat little perverted man.*

Jessy slid easily along the silky quilt and lay beside Kevin, supporting herself on one elbow. She saw the ladder where the video camera captured the action, but didn't dare look up. Kevin lay on his back, his erection full and large. With a trembling hand, she reached out to touch him. Her thumb worked the tip and rolled just under the ridge. He pulled her face to his and swallowed her mouth with blazing-hot kisses. *He's getting into this—he wants me.* She'd gone without intimacy for so long, his eagerness made her feel things she hadn't felt in months. Her heart thundered against her ribs, and her breaths came in shallow puffs. Was this terror? Or desire? *How could this be happening?*

As Kevin drew his molten kisses down her neck, Jessy caught sight of the fat man sitting on a chair near the ladder. His legs were stretched out, his dick in one hand, gun in the other. He was slowly stroking himself—not outright jacking off but enjoying the show. Her hand stopped the action on Kevin's cock, and she began to panic. “I can't do this. Don't make me do this. Please.”

Kevin's arms reached to envelop her, but the fat man was quicker. In an instant, he was at the edge of the bed with Jessy's hair in his hand, pulling her up and off Kevin, out of his embrace. He gave her a violent shake and shoved her face into Kevin's groin. “Get busy, you little cunt, or I'll fuck ya myself.”

Through a cascade of tears, she put Kevin in her mouth and did what she barely knew how to do. She'd only given head to Jeff occasionally and had gotten the impression he was largely indifferent about her lips around his most intimate part. Not so with Kevin. His cock twitched to her tongue's tender touch, so sensitive.

"Jess, I'm so sorry—aaah." Kevin's cock pulsed in her mouth. Her hand pulled tightly as she drew her mouth up, and Kevin groaned. His hands were snarled in her curly hair, his fingers tightening when the suck on his dick was greatest. Jessy had one hand on his cock and the other perched delicately on his stomach. She felt his muscles tighten as he raised his hips to deepen himself in her mouth.

"Get on your back. Don't let him come in your mouth," came a bark from off camera.

He was really pissing her off. She sat up. "Shut the fuck up, you fat little pervert. You want me to do this, then shut the fuck up."

A smile curled Kevin's lips. Apparently he liked her little outburst. He shifted her onto her back and rolled on top, spreading her legs and positioning himself. "Are we going to be okay?"

Jessy looked up at Kevin with disbelief. *This can't be real.* He was so handsome with his wild, dark hair and dark eyes filled with lust for her. She ran her fingers in a slow dance across his smooth chest. Above him the moon beamed, surrounded by a company of faintly twinkling stars. She'd never made love under an open sky and may never get the chance again. These men could shoot them in the head before the night was through. Her heart roared in her ears, and her hands trembled. "Kev, we don't know what tomorrow will bring, so let's just go for it. Let's do this. We're okay." She meant it.

He gave her a sideways look and covered her mouth with his. Reaching down between them, he massaged her wet folds, and Jessy cooed and coiled toward his touch without conscious consent. She felt blazing hot, longing for

something to fill her up. Her body was responding without her. On some level, she wanted this just as much as everybody else at this twisted party.

“Are you ready for me? I don't want to hurt you.”

“Go, Kevin,” she whispered into his ear.

Slowly he slipped his tip into her pussy with a low, deep moan. She spread her legs wider and tilted her hips. He felt huge, but her pleasure centers responded with a juicy, hot lubricant. The pleasure of his entry blended with agony, filling every inch of her. God, it had been so long since she'd had a man inside her.

“Just look at me, Jessy, not them. Just look at me.” Kevin eased into her, holding her gaze with his warm brown eyes. Finally he was in all the way, pulsing inside. She contracted tiny muscles around him, drawing him into the creamy darkness. He drove his cock deep inside her, glided out completely, and then eased into her again. Jessy gasped and shuddered from the delicious, slow-motion explosion of her senses. Making love to a nineteen-year-old man was an experience she'd long forgotten—and had only known with Jeff Tanner.

“Oh, Kevin. Can this be happening?” Tears continued to squeeze from her eyes and slide back into her hair. His masculine scent flooded into her brain and aroused a slumbering tiger. She ran her hands through his hair and pulled his lips closer, deeper. A soft moan slipped into their breathless kiss.

Kevin jabbed deep inside her with slow, smooth motions that melted what little resistance remained. She wanted to get fucked, camera or no camera. It had been too long. “Kevin, give it to me.” Her words quivered with desire.

Kevin needed no further encouragement. He went wild with hard thrusts, heaving loud exhales with the motion of his surging hips. He was strong and forceful, and his kisses were a perfect complement. His cock slid so perfectly inside her, and she wanted him deeper, as if she kept a secret compartment just out of reach. “*Deeper*,” she whispered on his lips.

“Deeper,” he repeated between kisses. Supporting himself on strong arms, he pulled away from her and shifted his position. Jessy wrapped her legs around him and moaned as he shoved his cock downward at a new angle.

“Oh fuck. Oh fuck!” That was it. The secret compartment flooded open, and Jessy wanted to scream. The heated friction of his slippery, hot bullet threatened to blow her mind. “Oh, Kevin...”

He went on and on, slamming into her, and Jessy couldn't keep her passion quiet, panting his name to the trees. The cameraman and that other guy disappeared into nothingness as her body was consumed by the fire. Kevin's cock thrusting inside her spurred a feeling she hadn't known in three years, and it was all she wanted.

“Oh God. Yes!” She trembled as she gave up the last thread of control, wanting to cry out a thousand pleasures, not wanting it to end. One final request in his ear: “Don't stop.”

Kevin groaned as he thrust himself in a frantic rhythm. “I can't help myself, Jessy. I can't stop it.” He exploded inside her, pulsing hot liquid and breathing hard. Jessy relaxed, melting onto the red silk quilt.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Cut. Woo-hoo! That was perfect, boys and girls. I knew once you two got rolling, we'd have a moneymaker.”

Jessy's heart raced at the speed of light, and sweat puddled in the pulse point of her neck. Kevin lay on top of her, motionless other than the exaggerated rise and fall of his chest.

“We did it. We had to. No guilt,” she whispered and stroked Kevin's hair—his gorgeous, thick black hair. “You're amazing,” she added softly.

He wouldn't look at her. She reached and turned his face to hers, giving him a quick kiss. He looked down at her. “You want me again, don't you.” They both laughed a little, and she rolled him off her. They took refuge in the red quilt.

Nervously, she glanced over at him. "I can't believe what's happening to us. I guess we...uh...kinda got caught up in the heat." She gave a sheepish shrug.

"Of course. I much prefer sex with a gorgeous woman over getting shot in the head." He nodded toward Larry, who was packing up his video equipment. "Did he have a gun on us the whole time?"

"I don't think so—I think he was running the camera." Jessy shivered under the quilt. "What do you think the video is for? And what did the guy mean when he said 'a moneymaker'?"

"I'm betting it won't be Christmas presents for the grandparents."

They spoke in whispers and watched the fat man and Larry put their equipment away. Jessy and Kevin cradled each other under the quilt as the remnants of dusky evening dissolved into the moonlight.

"Jessy, I want you to know. I just couldn't help myself. I feel like a bastard. But you really did—do—turn me on. You always have. Since the second day we worked together, I've fantasized about being with you."

Jessy's heart leaped. "Second day? What did I do the first day that didn't work for ya?"

Kevin laughed. "You were mainly sitting at your desk. Remember my second day? You and I scouted out some fishing sites. I watched your ass all day. And oh man, the way your boobs bounce when you carry the sampling buckets..."

"No way." This fascinated Jessy. She had always been self-conscious of her small breasts. She was a small-framed woman, even though she stretched to five-seven. She'd always wished she had voluptuous breasts instead of the apples she had. "My boobs don't bounce. There's barely enough to get a good jiggle going."

"Oh yes there is. They're perfect. You're totally hot, Ms. Tanner."

The fat man interrupted their talk and told them to get dressed. Tomorrow, he assured them, would be a busy day.

## Chapter Three

Lon Briggs pulled into the Northern Lights Resort in Pittsburg, New Hampshire, and scanned the parking lot, looking for a New Hampshire fisheries truck. When he didn't see one, he parked and went inside to the hotel desk. He'd planned to meet Conrad's crew at the resort for supper at six thirty or so. He figured they were just running late. He asked the girl at the front desk if Conrad Manzey and company had checked in yet.

"Not yet, sir."

He looked a long time at her doe eyes and freckles. *At least, not according to your crayon drawings.* He went to the overstuffed chairs of the lobby and wondered what cell phone reception was like so far north. He checked and saw two bars—not too bad. He figured he'd give the New Hampshire gang a half hour and then call them.

Lon was a Boston native. He'd been in Vermont long enough to flatten out his dialect for everyday use, but when the mood was right, he could pull the accent out of slumber and lay it on thick. Tonight he was out of his usual element and feeling surly. *Would a phone call be so hard, Conrad?*

He spent a few minutes reading the local newspaper, internally making fun of the bumpkin headlines. After enough time had passed, he called Conrad's cell phone and got no answer. Still in the field? Tired of waiting, and damn hungry, he went into the pub for a beer and a burger. The waitress was a petite brunette with a mouth full of braces. "Are all the workers in this town kids?" he asked.

Katie, according to her name tag, blushed and didn't answer the question. "Can I start you out with something from the bar?"

“What do you have on tap?”

Katie recited a long list of beers. Even Lon was impressed with the way she rattled them off. “Very good. But can you list them in alphabetical order?” He laughed and tapped the table while Katie looked flustered. “I’m just kiddin’.” He gave her a friendly smile. “I’ll have a Sam Adams. A tall one.”

While he waited, he pulled out his laptop. It seemed unlikely that Con would e-mail him, but it was worth a quick check. He scanned through mundane announcements on parking restrictions and a new sick-leave policy—nothing from Con Manzey. He double-checked the earlier e-mails from Conrad. *Meet in Pittsburg Monday night at 6:30.* Where the hell could they be? Did he have the wrong hotel? It was too late to call the office, so after his meal, Lon settled into a nice little resort cabin to watch some ESPN. He’d worry about them in the morning.

The men escorted Jessy and Kevin back to the camper at gunpoint. The silvery moon lit the woods like a nightlight, but Jessy’s focus vaguely centered on the footfalls of the big man in front of her. What the hell just happened? She’d never, *ever* had a sexual experience like that. Damn, at one point she thought she saw fireworks... “Ouch! Fuck.”

“Watch your step, Curly.”

A sharp pain carved into her shin. *Watch your step, you redheaded, freckled freak.* Shit, that hurt.

Despite the powerful moonlight, the camper was black inside, and the acrid smell had become more pungent. Larry pushed Jessy and Kevin up the steps, and they both stumbled in.

As Red stepped up behind them, he popped on a flashlight, casting a creepy yellow glow over everything. He looked around with an air of satisfaction. “Go ahead and use the toilet. It’s not hooked up, but when ya



gotta go, ya gotta go. We'll get you guys some food and water too. Animals need to eat."

Conrad went to Jessy and held her tight against his chest. Tears welled in her eyes, but she blinked them back. She turned and looked at Red from the safety of Con's embrace.

Red held his gun up in the air for them to see as he reached out a freckled arm and rubbed Jessy's cheek. "You did a real nice job. Do you know how many people will see your performance by tomorrow morning? We'll work on this a little bit, put some music in, and bingo! You're milkin' his dick all over the World Wide Web. And I'll probably be a thousand dollars richer in the morning."

Larry gave a loud "ahem."

"Oh, sorry, big fella. I keep forgetting it's your camera." He got close to Jessy's face, as if to let her in on a little secret. "I'm really the brains, but he's better with a shotgun."

Jessy shrank from his touch and his breath, her tears now overflowing. So that's the game. He was going to sell the disgusting video over the Internet. Her knees weakened, and she turned to look at Kevin. His arms were folded across his chest as he stared at the floor like a little kid who did something he was in big trouble for. This wasn't his fault. Jessy pushed out of Conrad's arms and went to Kevin, dissolving in his arms with open sobs.

Conrad's fury erupted, and he grabbed Red's shirt, pulling him close to his face. "What the fuck did you do to her?"

In an instant, Larry had the shotgun barrel jammed into his neck. "Let him go."

He had no choice. Con loosened his grip on the sleazebag with a cocky flourish and held his hands in the air.

Red straightened his shirt, visibly flustered by Conrad's handling of him. "Hey, I didn't lay a hand on her. But by morning, there'll be guys whacking off

all over Europe, watching her fuck that one. And I'll bet they'll be willing to pay for more." He reached out his hand and stroked the back of Jessy's hair as she clung to Kevin's neck. Conrad flashed a quick swat at the fat arm, shoving it away from her.

Red sniffed. "You're jealous, eh? Perfect." And with a sick laugh he turned to leave, Larry following. "You can keep the flashlight. Can't guarantee the batteries."

Kevin led Jessy to the benches to sit down. Con came over and sat down across from them. A deafening silence fell in the dimly lit camper. "Tell me what happened. Kevin, can you tell me?" Con spoke in a whisper, his low voice slicing through the heavy air.

"Jess, do you want me to tell him?"

Jessy rested her head on Kevin's shoulder and looked blindly at the plywood-covered window. "He needs to know. This is the game we're in. He'll probably be next." Her voice was soft, her tone resigned. She took a deep breath and turned to Conrad. He reached across the span between them and grabbed her hand.

"Con, it's no big deal. Kevin and I did some mattress surfing for the guys." She tried to make a joke, but her voice cracked.

Kevin continued for her. "They have a bed set up with a video camera pointing at it. He told us to get our clothes off and—we had no choice. I swear, I would have let them beat me up first. She... We..."

It seemed so much like they had done something wrong. Like in the midst of this ordeal, Kevin and Jessy took the time to have wild sex. She was still surprised at how easily they fell together. How could they admit that? Like the man said—a couple of animals.

"Con, the fat one held a gun on us. He threatened to kill us." She watched her thumb slide over the back of his hand, but much like a dream, her brain gathered no data. "There was nothing we could do."

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"I'm so hungry." Jessy sat with her back against the wall and ran her hand over the bump where she'd whacked her shin. Con's watch said 11:30 p.m. They hadn't eaten since lunch in the truck.

"Anybody tired? You guys can go on up to the mattress. I don't know if I can sleep." Con looked spent. Jessy realized how much he'd suffered, alone and scared in the camper, not knowing what was happening to his crew.

"What about you?"

"You rest up there. Both of you. I might catch a few winks down here." Con motioned vaguely toward the cushions on the benches.

Jess and Kevin climbed up and realized it was stifling hot up there, and the mattress was covered with bug carcasses and unrecognizable crud. They swept with their hands, and Kevin squished a few hapless spiders. Jessy's hopes rose when she saw tiny crank-out windows. They were apparently not worth the trouble of boarding up and provided only a small breath of fresh air. It was better than nothing.

"You okay, Jess?" Kevin spoke in a whisper.

"No. Not even close. We should probably talk about this. Making love, I mean. We went crazy."

"I know. I feel like a pig."

"Stop." Jessy reached for his hand. "Please, don't say that again. You're not a pig. You're a healthy American male. I feel grateful. If I have to be a victim of a crime, I guess if that's as bad as it gets—I mean—not that you were bad." They both giggled. "Seriously, you made me forget about the camera and the men. God help me, you felt wonderful." She blew out an exasperated breath. "I can't explain it."

"Well, you're a healthy American female, I guess. I, ah...I've had a lot of practice at that particular sport." They cracked up. "Now, if they were trying to get good footage of us playing tennis, that would be a problem."

Jessy laughed so hard—it felt wonderful. Kevin made this terrible situation bearable. She knew in her heart there was nothing funny about any of this, but the laughter was a relief.

“Now we're out on the Internet.” Kevin's tone was serious once again. “That makes me sick. And there's no way to ever get it back.”

Jessy thought about the endless reach of the Internet. It made her sick too. But the more pressing thought on her mind was the fact that those assholes didn't provide them with any protection. She tried to remember where she was in her cycle. The last thing she needed was to get pregnant. Kevin was a sweet young man, but not exactly father material.

Without thinking about it, she snuggled onto Kevin's chest, and he reached an arm around her. It felt oddly reassuring to be with him like this. It made what they had done together seem more natural. If not an act of love, at least friendship.

The hours ticked by. Nobody slept. Jessy replayed the experience with Kevin over and over in her mind. The truth was, she had not had sex since before her divorce three years ago. Her ex had taken up with a young engineering intern and shut Jessy out. In the span of one month, he was out of love and out of interest in her. Her self-esteem shattered, along with her interest in an intimate relationship. That part of the breakup was no big loss. Sex with Jeff was mildly amusing on a good night, and if that was the pinnacle, she'd wondered what all the fuss was about.

And now she'd just had stratospheric sex at gunpoint with a video camera recording the whole thing. Not what she planned when she left the house that morning. She reached down to feel her legs—when was the last time she'd shaved? She smiled in the dark at the stupidity of her concern.

Conrad sat down on the cushion and leaned against the wall, making big circles and little circles on the ceiling with the flashlight. He heard Kevin and Jessy giggling in the upper deck, and it annoyed him to no end. He felt

possessive toward Jessy and didn't appreciate being shut out. He was even madder at himself for being so damn self-absorbed. Still, it seemed to him they were enjoying this a little too much.

When Con had first started working with Jessy, he'd felt the chemistry between them right away. He thought she was smart, good-natured, and gorgeous. Most of all he admired her ass. He'd watched her bend over a thousand times during the summer, and each time he wanted to grab her tiny waist and ram his hips into her. Those thoughts he quickly brushed away. His love of the bachelor life, coupled with a strong belief that coworkers shouldn't date, kept any hope of a relationship at bay. Women were a complication he didn't need. He'd take a woman out on a date only rarely, and even more rarely find the need for a second date. One-night stands had become the centerpiece of his social life, leaving a long trail of broken hearts. He was fine with that. He and Jessy had become friends, and it would have to stay that way. He kept pretty high walls up, trying not to send any signals. Conrad sighed. Nope, a relationship wasn't what he was looking for.

So why the annoyance? It was as if he was jealous, for Christ's sake.

\* \* \* \* \*

The morning light came slowly into the camper but managed to slip in through a few cracks and the little windows in the upper level. Conrad's watch said 8:25. He'd spent the night on the benches, and his neck was not going to let him forget it. The gash on the back of his head didn't ache, but the rest of him sure did. He still stewed over Jessy and Kevin. Last night he'd heard them talking and laughing. Laughing! Was this just a goddamn frolic in the park for them? He had no right to be angry, but he was.

"So, who's first in the shower?" Kevin sat up and peered over the edge of the pin-striped mattress. His hair stuck out in every direction. Con had to laugh in spite of his bitter feelings.

Jessy slid down to the floor. She tilted her head and finger combed her tangled mess of soft brown curls, then checked in all the pockets of her jeans. “That damn Red took my only scrunchie. I'm warning ya, guys, this is going to get a lot worse before it gets better.” She pointed a finger to her hair.

Con rubbed the back of his neck and admired Jessy's pluck to keep her sense of humor under such horrifying circumstances. “I'm stuck in a camper with a couple of goofballs.”

At about ten o'clock, they heard the *clunk* of the heavy lock, and the door opened. A surprisingly small amount of light trickled into the camper.

“Rise and shine. C'mon out here. You guys need some fresh air.”

Conrad led the way down the steps. The two men each had a gun, Larry holding the big shotgun.

“Curly, you walk with me. Stud Muffin here will be next. And the mustache—what's your name? Conrad? You're last in line, right in front of Larry and his 12-gauge. Get it?” He held his gun up with a cavalier wave at Larry. “Did I mention he's nuts?” Jessy watched Larry rock onto his toes and grin, apparently damn proud of the fact. “You bet. Nuttier than a fruitcake.” Red pulled Jessy's arm to urge her ahead. “Let's move it.”

The three captives headed into the woods, following a trampled path that probably hadn't existed the day before. Jessy inhaled deeply. The sun beamed brightly, and the fresh air tasted especially sweet. She heard the rush of a river somewhere. A few more minutes of walking and the woods opened up to reveal the banks of a cobble-covered riverbed. This was probably the river they were looking for the day before.

When they got to the water's edge, Red tossed a bottle of shampoo to Jessy. With quick reflexes, she caught it and stood there, puzzled by what he wanted her to do.

“Wash yourself. You're scaring me with that hair.”

"You want me to wash my hair in the river?"

"Yeah, and you know, clean yourself up. Whatever women do after sex."

Jessy was embarrassed and pissed. Did he expect her to bathe in front of the guys? She stood staring at the Prell bottle in her hands. Red came over to where she stood and grabbed her arm, dragging her to the edge of the river. "I got places to go and people to see. Now wash your damn hair."

Jessy heard a tussle behind her, and she assumed Con had made an effort to help her. *Don't be stupid, Con.*

She squatted at the river's edge and started to scoop water onto her head. The icy water made her shiver, but she had to admit, it felt good.

"Make her take her clothes off, Red."

Red looked at her, then motioned with the gun toward Larry. "Do what the guy with the 12-gauge says."

"It's freezing-cold water. You can't expect me to take a bath in this." She kept scooping water over her head, surprised by her own defiance. If they wanted her clothes off, this damn time they'd have to rip them off. She leaned down low and dunked her head fully into the ice-cold river.

"Larry, we'll get her in the water later. See, Curly, I think my large friend has a crush on you."

Jessy cast a quick glance over to where Larry stood, shotgun pointing at the ground. She had been more afraid of Red, but she now saw a menacing look on Larry's face.

Red motioned to Conrad and Kevin, standing nearby on the bank. "Why don't you get down here and wash up too. While ya got the chance. Everybody take a leak too."

Larry pushed the guys down to the water's edge and indicated for them to get going. As Jessy lathered her hair, Con dunked his head in. Kevin followed suit. *This is complete insanity.* Jessy took in the scene of her workmates

standing before her, lathering up with shampoo. She leaned down for one final rinse. *And I am just vain enough to be happy to wash my hair.*

One last dunk and they were all finished, their hair slicked back and dripping. Jessy leaned to the side and squeezed a stream of water from her curls.

“Hey, Larry, check out those nipples. They're stickin' out, just beggin' to be sucked.” Red looked at Jessy coyly.

She looked around the group of men and saw that all eyes were on her. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at Conrad.

“C'mon, Jess.” He reached for her hand and helped her away from the stream.

Red sidled up to them and surveyed the scene. “This is a nice location. I think we'll come back here later with the dark stud muffin.” He slapped Jessy's butt. “I know he warms your engine.”

Con looked at her. What was that? Pity? Jealousy? Curiosity? She couldn't be sure. Unable to hold his glance, she turned away.

In the morning, Lon awoke to the *bling bling* of his cell phone alarm clock. He checked his office voice mail—nothing. He called the New Hampshire crew's cell phone—nothing. Checked his e-mail again. *What the fuck happened?* How many times in the course of his eighteen years as a fisheries biologist had he heard the joke? This time it was finally no joke—there was something fishy going on.

Still too early to contact the office, he decided to grab a quick breakfast and then go for a little drive to look for the first fishing location. Con had e-mailed him the list, so he knew where the crew should be. Maybe they had gotten electrocuted – he'd never heard of that happening, but it was always a possibility, working with electricity and water. Could they just be lost? Nah. They would answer their phone. Yup, something totally fishy going on.



Lon drove on some side roads and checked his map every now and then, looking for the site the New Hampshire gang was supposed to be fishing the day before. Badger Brook was first on the list. Unfortunately his GPS unit was AWOL, so he wouldn't be able to get an exact location of their site. And Badger Brook meandered for several miles. The ringing of his cell phone made him jump. Finally. Should he be pissed? Nah...he'd wait and hear their story first. He flipped the phone open. "Yeah. Ma? What the hell you calling me for?"

Lon listened to his mother's anxious voice. "I just got a call from Larry's caseworker. They haven't seen or heard from him since Sunday night. He hasn't been at work all week. Do you know anything, Lonny?"

"Jeez, Ma, I don't. I've been up in New Hampshire—left early Monday morning myself. Last time I saw Larry was when I left work Friday. His work crew has been assigned to my building now."

"You saw him Friday? How did he seem to you? You know if he misses just one dose of his meds, he starts downhill."

"He seemed just fine. Ma, I got a crisis of my own up here—work-related. Keep me in the loop."

They closed their conversation with Lon assuring his mother that Larry would turn up. But he wasn't at all sure of it himself. His older brother had suffered from mental disorders since Lon could remember. He would have a good run with the medication but always seemed to slip back into psychopathic behavior and into the mental hospital. Lately he'd shown progress, but unlike his mom, Lon held out little hope for long-term stability.

His mother had moved Larry into a group home in Vermont because it was quieter and safer than the possibility of running loose in Boston. She hoped Lon could keep an eye on him. Lon hoped that meant popping in to say hi once a week. When their crew of nutjobs started cleaning the state office buildings as part of a work-release program, Lon ran into Larry far more than he wanted to. He was dismayed when Larry showed up at quitting time a few weeks ago.

*"Hey, Lonny. I'm your new janitor."*

*"Whoa, buddy. Nice work if you can get it, eh?"*

*"Hey, Lonny, do me a favor. Leave your computer on—I like to play that one card game on there. Can you leave that on?"*

*"Sure, Larry. But aren't you here to work? Ha-ha-ha."*

*"Ha-ha-ha."*

Larry wasn't a stupid man. He had a strong attraction to electronic gadgets, and Lon was pretty sure that's how his GPS unit ended up missing. Larry liked electronics, and he liked them best when he could steal them.

The trio sat in the camper with wet hair, still starving and thirsty. Jessy ran her fingers through her curls, knowing they would be a nightmare when they dried. "Prell? Who the hell uses Prell anymore?"

"Hey, Jess, if I let my hair get long like yours, it would look just like that."

"Gosh, Kev. Maybe if they keep us here for a few months, I'll be able to see that."

"Hey, do either of you have people who might be expecting a call? Or anybody who would wonder if you were okay?" Kevin sat on one of the benches with his back against the wall.

"As far as anybody knows, I'm right where I'm supposed to be." Jessy gave a shrug. "I don't have *people*."

"My shirt is all wet from that weird-ass hair-washing party. What was that all about?" Kevin stood and pulled his shirt over his head. Jessy had to swallow a gasp, unable to avoid staring at his toned abs and tanned skin. His waist was slender, and his jeans hung low on his hips. Her thoughts flashed to those hips rolling so smoothly, forcing his long, slender unit inside her. She shook her head to scatter the image. It didn't work.

Conrad was up on the mattress, hoping to soothe his aching neck. "I told the division chief I would call him midweek, so he's assuming everything is fine

until then. And even then, he probably wouldn't get too concerned if I didn't contact him on time."

"So are you guys just social aardvarks or what? Don't you have family or friends? How about a girlfriend, Conman?"

Kevin's question intrigued Jessie, and she let her horny image of his dick drift away to hear Con's answer. Her heart beat a few extra anxious bumps while she waited.

"Nope. I'm uncommitted at the moment." Lying on his back and out of sight, he was only a disembodied voice. "My dog died a while back, so I don't have to worry about him, and my family has long since given up worrying about my whereabouts." He rolled over to look down at Jessie. "Any chance Jeff will be expecting a call from you?"

Jessie couldn't help but burst out laughing.

Kevin looked up at Con. "I guess that answers that question. So, Jessie. Why are you not dating? I mean, you're gorgeous, smart, talented. You're just such a cool lady. You're not starting to swing the other way, are you?"

Kevin's questions were so direct, and Jessie knew he was just messing around. She'd been open with the guys this summer about her divorce. They all made her feel better by ripping Jeff on a regular basis. Whenever they saw a water snake, one of them would shout, "*Hey, there's Jeff!*"

Jessie sat on the bench across from Kevin and looked up to catch Con's eye. Time for more honesty. "You weren't too far off with the aardvark thing. I've been burrowing—not looking for anything. But who knows. Maybe if the right woman came along..."

Con's eyes widened, and Jessie winked up at him. Kevin threw his shirt at her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The afternoon brought deadly boredom. Jessy's stomach ached from emptiness, and her mouth felt pasty. Kevin drew her out of her misery with chitchat.

"Okay, everybody. We all have to tell the story of our favorite memory of all time. Who's gonna go first?"

Con and Jessy took a moment to think. Finally Jessy spoke up. "I've got mine. You'll think this is lame. But believe it or not, my favorite memory is my wedding day."

"Why would we think that's lame?" Kevin encouraged her to go on.

"It was just such a fairy tale. Jeff and I had been together for four years, all through college. We had just graduated, and Jeff was about to start his new job at Lockheed. We had the world by the tail." Jessy paused a minute to reflect. "I usually don't care for the attention so much, but on that day, I loved it. I was a June bride, and my dress was a dream. I took on five new piano students just to pay for it." She smiled at the guys. "I know, you can't imagine me without jeans and a T-shirt."

Whoops. That was a whopper just waiting for Kevin. The two guys looked at each other, and Con motioned to him as if to say, *Be my guest*.

"I think I speak for both of us when I say dreaming of you without your jeans and T-shirt has brightened many long truck rides." Con nodded, and they all had a laugh.

Jessy tried to act all shocked and offended, just like she would have the day before. As if they weren't trapped in a moldy camper. "Con, you take your turn."

"All right. A favorite memory for me. Let's see." He paused a moment. "After I graduated high school, I took a trip to Banff. We hiked and camped—took a whole month and saw so much pretty country. I'll never forget some of those mornings, when the mountains were covered in snow, and the valleys floated in fog. We'd crawl out of our tent—not another soul in sight."

"Who did you go with?" Jessy asked, feeling certain she wasn't going to like the answer.

Con smirked. "I went with my wife."

Jessy's heart lost its rhythm. "Did you say 'wife'?"

"Con, you were married?" Kevin sat up and leaned in.

"Meg and I didn't last very long. We married young and were both pretty wild." Con smiled at Jessy and Kevin, clearly enjoying this game of dribbling out details, like feeding fish behind a boat. He had revealed so little information about himself, Jessy couldn't help but nip at each morsel.

"I came home from a bike trip and found my loving wife on the couch with another man. They were naked and going at it. I stood looking in through the screen door and watched for a minute or two, then turned and walked away. Honestly? I've not set eyes on Meg since. We were divorced, and I went into the Coast Guard shortly after. Like I said, we were young and wild."

Kevin made an "Oooo, ouch" face.

Jessy just sat and stared at Con. She couldn't believe a woman actually had her hooks into him and let him slip away. *Fool*. "How old were you, Con?"

"We got married when we were eighteen. We were divorced by the time we were twenty." Here he stopped, once again controlling the information feed. "There. Now I've finally told you guys something about myself. Kevin, you want to take your turn?"

"Jeez. I was gonna tell about a trip I took to Six Flags with my brothers. Seems a little trivial now."

"Nah, let's hear it.

## Chapter Four

“No, there haven't been any calls from Conrad. Maybe you should call down to the New Hampshire headquarters.”

*Maybe you should call down there, ya fat-assed cow. Isn't that your job?* This Lon thought to himself, getting more worked up by the minute. He was not a fan of the hatchery secretary. The feeling was mutual. When he slammed his cell phone shut, he considered going back home and saying the hell with it. Larry was off on a junket, probably stealing every small electronic gadget he could get his hands on, and Conrad apparently didn't have the common courtesy to call.

He hopped out of the truck and pulled a small cigar out of his shirt pocket. After giving it a good sniff, Lon fired it up, took a few satisfying drags, and sat on the tailgate of the truck. His mood brightened. He'd better stick around and investigate. Con's crew could be in trouble, after all.

He called the New Hampshire bureau chief and got his voice mail. “Yeah, this is Lon Briggs from the Vermont hatchery. I was supposed to meet Conrad and his band of monkeys up here yesterday. I haven't seen any sign of them, and I can't get 'em on the cell. I was just wondering if I got my lines crossed. Give me a call when ya get a minute.”

Lon continued to cruise the countryside around Pittsburg and cursed the poor radio reception. He found a small logging road leading to Badger Brook, but a locked gate crossed the path. He doubted he'd find Conrad, but his legs ached from sitting, and he needed to take a leak. He walked around the gate and headed down the grassy path. The August sun blazed, and he broke a sweat within a few strides. He noticed there were tire tracks, and they appeared

to be recent. Lon figured it was probably the logging supervisor, making rounds.

He stepped off the path a few steps to a tree to relieve himself. As he stood there, his eyes fell upon something out of place. Nestled against the edge of the woods was a rusty old truck with an equally rusty old camper. That explained the fresh tracks. He pushed his dick back in his pants and took one last long look. Something didn't add up. Whoever camped here would need a key to get past the gate. Couldn't be Joe Public. And that sure didn't look like a logging-company vehicle. Through the dusty glass, he saw dark wood lining the camper windows, and the door was replaced with an odd steel security door. Lon narrowed his eyes and focused on the heavy lock—on the *outside* of the door. Somebody had something in there they didn't want anybody to see. He started back down the path with one last backward glance. He made a mental note of the license plate, feeling in his pocket for a pen. He'd have to remember it.

Jessy climbed quietly up onto the mattress where Conrad had fallen asleep. She cranked her head around to glance at his watch—2:21. She stretched out on her stomach and stared out the dirty little window, not thinking about what had happened between her and Kevin for a change. She thought about her wedding day. Their earlier conversation dredged up a ton of memories, and it felt good to linger on them. The divorce had shattered her dreams, but she finally felt she could reflect on her failed marriage without the pang of rejection.

She'd met Jeff Tanner in college at the University of Kansas when they were both freshmen. He majored in engineering, and they scooped him up right out of the graduation line for a job at Lockheed Martin, which brought them to New Hampshire. He quickly rose in the ranks and became a player. Jessy encouraged him as he worked to build his career. She often felt like a fading shadow, playing keyboard in her little band while her husband was a friggin' rocket scientist. Little did she realize, he felt the same way. After five years of

marriage, he found he had more in common with a young intern. He wanted out.

Conrad opened his eyes and saw Jessie beside him. He looked at her profile and the pile of wild curls that trailed down her back. He noticed the streaks of gold the summer sun had painted to highlight her face. His eyes traveled down her body to her butt, perched up so nice and firm in her Levi's. He closed his eyes. *Get a grip, Conman. Now's not the time.*

He inhaled deeply, and Jessie looked his way. "Did you finally get some sleep? I know you didn't get any last night."

Con laughed at her choice of words, rolling onto his side. "I did. What a nice surprise to wake up to. What are you so deep in thought about?"

"I was thinking about Jeff. I surprised myself by announcing my wedding day as the happiest day of my life. You probably don't know this, but...I'm a hopeless romantic."

"You probably don't know *this*, but your hopeless romantic shows in just about everything you do."

Jessie blushed and smiled. "Am I that transparent?"

"Well, let's see. You drive your dad's old Dodge truck, even though it's completely impractical and probably unsafe. You had the whole damn crew pull over so you could browse at an antique sale, and then made us haul some musty dresser back for you. Plus, you always smell so good."

"Hey, the dresser was sitting out in the rain. It needed me. And it looks perfect in my apartment. The truck—well, that was the truck my dad and I used to take on fishing trips. When he died, my mom was gonna junk it. So I drove it back to New Hampshire. It made Jeff crazy when I parked it next to his Lexus. I smell good?"

"Like flowers."



He felt so close to her. They had become good friends over the summer. She looked at him with surprising uncertainty. "Con, you don't think—they aren't going to hurt us. I mean, physically. Do you think when they're done with us, they'll pull the trigger?"

Con pushed a few soft curls away from her face. "Jess, I don't know. Honestly they seem like a couple of hicks with the brains of a walnut. I just don't know what they're capable of."

Jessy shifted and rolled over onto her side to face him. Con couldn't help but draw his eyes down the curve of her waist and over her hips. His cock swelled a little, and he inhaled. Why was he so horny?

"Con, I want to tell you about what happened. I feel like I owe you an explanation."

"Jess, no. You don't owe me an explanation. This whole thing makes me sick, and I'm helpless to do anything about it. So far you're the victim. Not me."

"That's just it. Would you think I was crazy if I told you Kevin and I—we needed to close out the world. It was like a suspension of reality. All of a sudden, we weren't Kevin and Jessy anymore. Red kept saying we're just animals. And that's what it felt like." She ruffled her hand in her curls with a frustrated exhale. "I'm not making any sense."

It was true she wasn't. Con wasn't there and couldn't understand the fear or the raw animal desire. "You did what you had to do. That's all. I don't think there's a right way to feel. And the bastards didn't hurt you."

They were quiet for a moment and time seemed to stand still. Jessy's eyes focused on Conrad's lips. Slowly she reached to him and touched his mustache with delicate fingers. How could that feel so magical? His thoughts became a tangled pile of disconnected threads. He wanted her at that moment and was a heartbeat away from pinning her down and kissing her.

"Con, Red's gonna put the two of us together next. You know that." Jessy spoke so softly, he felt his heart turning to mush in his chest. "Are you..." Her

words died. Without another thought, Con leaned in to kiss her. He held her magical fingers while his lips drifted over hers. He slipped his tongue in only briefly, then stopped. Jessie looked at his lips, hungry for more.

“Now's not the time, girl. Whatever happens—we'll be fine.”

They heard the lock, and light flooded into the dim camper. Red climbed the steps with the gun sticking out of his pants and sweat beading on his freckled forehead.

“So what's goin' on? Where's my girl?” He stood on tiptoe to see Jessie on the mattress. “Oh, you're getting it on with the mustache, eh? Come on down.” He waved a fat arm in the air, and a waft of body odor filled the small space. Jessie put her hand over her nose to filter her next breath as she slipped to the floor.

Red stroked her hair with a creepy mix of affection and admiration. She winced away. “You wouldn't believe how popular you two are.” He pointed a fat finger at her and then Kevin. “We've been *conducting commerce* all afternoon. Come on. Let's make another one. Then we'll work on getting you guys something to eat.”

He talked with bizarre enthusiasm and pulled his gun from the waistband of his jeans. He motioned for Jessie and Kevin to get going down the steps. As he turned, he pointed the gun at Conrad, who was sliding off the mattress to the floor. The gun went to the middle of his chest. “You should be nicer to me, big fella. Maybe I'll let you soak your serpent inside her next time.”

Larry waited outside the door, shotgun in hand. Red closed the door and slammed the lock into place, and they began to hike through the thick woods on the trampled path. Jessie knew where they were going. Back to the river.

When they got to the water's edge, she saw a camera tripod set up, pointing to the water. Red spoke from a perch on a large boulder. “All right. This is just an experiment. We'll see if these sell. Hand me your clothes.”

“Are you fucking crazy?”

Red hopped down from the rock with surprising agility and got into Kevin's face, the gun by his ear. “You don't know the half of it, dickweed. Now give me your pants.”

Jessy knew Kevin's resistance would get them nowhere, and she reached for his arm. She didn't want Red to slap him again. She pulled her T-shirt over her head and looked into his eyes. The night before, those eyes had gazed into hers while he fucked her to the moon. Her heart raced with anticipation—she couldn't wait to have him again.

Under the scrutiny of strangers, they'd blasted through the walls of their inhibitions. In the new light of day, Kevin watched her strip off her clothes and seemed oblivious to the voyeurs. His eyes smoldered like a hungry animal. Jessy's body tingled as he visually explored her, and suddenly she felt sexy as hell. He'd fantasized about being with her—said she was totally hot. Now she quivered, naked and longing to be touched, with a burning desire to fulfill his fantasy again.

Kevin piled his own clothes on the ground and reached for her hand. His cock stood long and tall and perfect in the sunshine. Jessy slowly licked her lips and fought an unfamiliar urge to drop to her knees and suck it till he screamed. Instead she lifted her eyes to the scenic river.

They were upriver from the shampooing site. The shallow run gave way to boulders, water tumbling and pooling in turns. Larry stood behind the tripod and checked the view. He wore the black shoulder bag that Jessy had seen in the grass the night before. A real professional with the camera.

Red climbed onto one of the rocks. “Come on in here. Test the water. It's nice and warm.” He splashed water up into the air. “Come on. Curly, you slip in right here. What's your name?” He motioned to Kevin. “Ah whatever. I call you Stud Muffin. You get in here too.”

Large boulders near the shore created multiple pools, some big, some small. Jessy lowered herself into the spot Red had indicated, and submerged to

her hips. A shiver rippled over her skin, and she hugged herself, but the water felt warmer than it did that morning. Her bare feet squished in the sandy bottom, where the rushing water left its load behind the boulders before blasting downstream.

“Hurry up!” Red barked. Kevin sat on the rock and swung his legs into the water. “Let me get out of the scene. Camera on! Now get started.”

Jessy looked at Kevin's perfect, soft lips as they curled into the slightest smile. The past twenty-four hours had left a rugged dark shadow on his upper lip. His eyes betrayed his uncertainty. Jessy gave him a small smile back. *Permission granted.*

Kevin slipped all the way into the water. With a deep inhale, he buried his hands in Jessy's hair and kissed her lightly. She remembered his kiss from the night before. The circumstances were so terrifying, but the sensation—the memory—was wonderful. She kissed him back and reached her arms around his neck. Without any decision on her part, her fingers danced up into his hair and buried themselves in the thick black waves. His hands swept like silk down her back, sending a thousand little goose bumps marching on her skin. He pulled her close, and she let her body dissolve into his. *I'm in your hands, Kevin. Damn good hands.*

The afternoon sun was hot and the air heavy with the sound of buzzing cicadas. Jessy's legs trembled in the cool water as Kevin's hands roamed her body. His kiss stole the breath from her lungs. A rush of excitement pulsed through to her fingertips, and she couldn't help but make little feminine moans of submission in response to his driving tongue.

They stood in the water in a lover's embrace. Kevin pulled back and looked at her with brewing desire. “Here we go again, beautiful.” His voice soothed like butter as he kissed her neck, running his tongue up around her ear and back to her mouth. “I'm ready if you are.”

Jessy let her hands glide down to his ass, solid as a rock, and tightened to pulse his cock against her pubic bone. Was this a dream? He turned her on so

much. Those goddamn men were somewhere—out there, with a camera capturing everything. But her focus was on this gorgeous hunk who was about to make love to her. She couldn't help herself. She had gone without sex for so many years. This was heaven. "I'm ready, Kevin."

Kevin's tongue left trails of fire along her neck, and the cicadas buzzed a crescendo of their own mating ritual. Jessy's mind flashed to Conrad. She had been certain it would be the two of them Red came for today. He was messing with Conrad. With Kevin's hot breath dancing on her neck, the image of Con alone in the camper had no chance to linger in her thoughts. But still...

Kevin gently pushed her against the rock, pinning her with his muscular form, and Jessy felt the cold, hard surface on her back. She lifted one leg to draw Kevin into the warmth of her loins. She wanted him inside her, thrusting hard. Just like last night. "Fuck me." Words she'd never uttered or even thought slipped from her lips, and it felt liberating. "Oh God. Fuck me, Kevin."

She reached for his hand and led him down to her opening. He stroked her folds, then plunged his fingers inside her, and she breathed out a coo as he kissed her neck. Everything about Kevin was long and lean and solid, including his fingers. He continued to pulse in her pussy and massage her bud with each slippery entry. Damn, he knew that move well. Strength drained from her supporting leg as she instinctively pushed against his deep probes. His fingers rubbed so smoothly in her passage and seemed perfectly at home inside her. She purred like a kitten and invited him in.

He pulled away from her neck and looked into her eyes as his fingers touched her secret center. "We're animals, Jessy."

She moaned softly and rested her head back on the rock, losing herself in the sensation of his fingers. Could she come from just his touch? Oh hell yeah. His rapid drumming in her pussy was driving her wild. She wanted his cock inside her, but for now... "Oh, Kevin! You're so good... Oh..."

A small but delicious wave of unbridled desire coursed through her—so satisfying. Her eyes fluttered closed as she kneaded handfuls of his strong arms. How had she gone without this beautiful feeling for so long?

When he stopped and positioned himself, she felt the familiar longing to be filled completely. His fingers were heavenly, but she knew there was more.

Kevin lowered himself with his cock in his hand. He rubbed it around her hot slit, making her crazy with anticipation. “I want you, Kevin. Take me,” she whispered. He planted his hands on the rock, and Jessy felt captured. Caged. Imprisoned. Her chest heaved, and her fingers trembled on his chest. “Take me.”

Kevin shifted his hips and drove deep inside her, devouring her mouth with his own, keeping the scream from making its way past her lips. Jessy lowered her body to meet him, one leg wrapped around his back, pulling him inside, wanting it all. Kevin skillfully rolled his hips, thrusting with exhales of pleasure as the water sloshed around their legs.

She looked at him. His eyes were closed, lost in the pleasure, lost in lust. Her heart raced with the unreality of the sensation. As his cock drove rhythmically deep inside, she settled back on the rock, letting him fill her. The sun warmed her face as she lay back and opened up. He was taking her completely.

“Oh, I don't understand this,” she whispered to the trees. The wave of her orgasm overtook her body, and she tightened her muscles around his cock. The trees spiraled above and around her, and she was in perfect harmony—a human animal in its element. Kevin groaned with satisfied pleasure.

A healthy young man with limitless stamina, Kevin went at her with every ounce of manhood he had. He seemed lost to the world around him, and with a loud cry, he gave it up. There seemed to be no end to the pulsing liquid filling her up. At last he melted down, breathing heavily onto her neck.

“Jessy. What the hell's the matter with me?” He gasped. “That felt so amazing.”

Jessy swept her fingers over his back, the weight of his body heavy on hers as she lay back on the rock. "There's nothing the matter with you. Trust me. There is nothing the matter with you."

He peeled himself off her, and Jessy dropped her leg into the water. The release felt good on her hip, and the juices drained out of her, down her leg. She grabbed Kevin's hand, and he looked at her dreamily. She pulled him out of their pool and into the riffle. They sank down into the knee-deep water and sat bare-assed on the cobble bottom, not saying a word. Two naked captives.

Kevin reclined completely in the water, exposing his now-flaccid cock. He's an Adonis, Jessy thought as she took in the sight of his long, muscular legs and narrow waist. He didn't have any chest hair and was beautifully sculpted with a washboard stomach. *Holy shit.*

He pulled himself up out of the water, and his hair slicked back on his head, accenting his dark eyes and sharp cheekbones. *I must look like a sack of feed sitting here.* Jessy felt suddenly self-conscious of every one of her flaws.

Red interrupted the reverie. "That wasn't so bad, now was it? We're doing that again."

Surprisingly, so shamefully, that possibility didn't strike fear into Jessy. She was totally looking forward to it. They were escorted back down the trail with Red leading the way. Jessy's back was sore from the pummeling Kevin had given her against the rock.

Conrad was a mess. They'd been gone nearly an hour. He'd kicked and pounded on the plywood until his hands were bloody. There wasn't the slightest give in the rough wood. What were they doing? He knew what they were doing, and that was more torturous than anything. Would those bastards hurt them?

His mind conjured images of Jessy and Kevin together. Jessy said they suspended reality and became animals. It was tearing him up inside. Did he

want it to be him? Yeah, he did. No, he didn't want to be videotaped, but he wanted—he just wanted Jessy. The idea of Kevin shoving his nineteen-year-old prick inside her made him blind with jealousy. He thought of Kevin's tan skin entwined with the creaminess of Jessy's, his hands traveling over her soft, ivory skin. Conrad's hands fisted. This shouldn't be happening. He needed to put an end to this, one way or another.



## Chapter Five

Jessy and Kevin climbed the camper steps and swatted at the millions of mosquitoes that had descended upon them during their hike through the woods. Red and Larry were not up for socializing and shut the camper door immediately, with a screech of the heavy lock following. Very little fresh air entered the camper. Conrad sat on one of the benches with his knees drawn loosely to his chest.

“We're home, Dad.”

“Don't call me that,” Conrad snapped and pointed a finger at Kevin. “Do you think this is a good time? Are you enjoying this?”

“I'm sorry. I just... That was stupid.”

Jessy knew Kevin only meant to add some comic relief. Con's anger surprised her—she'd never seen it. At least, not directed at Kevin. But then she realized Con was in a terrible state. The camper was stifling hot and smelly, with a poor sampling of sunlight. He had been left alone to stew and worry. He needed to get out of there. They all did.

She sat next to him and grabbed his hands. His knuckles were bloody, with slivers of broken skin. Fresh beads of sweat dribbled down his temples, and his hair hung limp. He'd been thrashing like an animal in a cage. With gentleness, Jessy drew him close and whispered in his ear. “Con, I don't know what to say. Just...please know, we don't think this is fun. This is humiliating and uncomfortable.” She laid her head on his shoulder and sniffed. Her words weren't exactly true. The sex with Kevin was incredible.

Con straightened. "I'm sorry." He blew out a cloud of frustration. "I'm just glad you're both safe and not hurt."

"It's okay, Conrad." Jessy kept hold of his battered hands and wanted more than anything to ease his anguish. "Sitting here in this dreary camper alone would drive anybody wild."

The group sat in the stifling heat and listened to the rumble of their empty stomachs.

Lon sat at the diner counter. The hot beef sandwich was the best he'd ever had. The truck he'd seen in the woods earlier that day still puzzled him. Damnedest thing. His phone vibrated in his pocket and scared the shit out of him. He flipped it open. "Yeah?"

"Lon, this is Ed Stein down in Concord. I got your message. Any luck hooking up with Conrad?"

"Ed, hi. How's it going? No, no sign of them. I was pretty sure we were meeting in Pittsburg, but if they're here, they're doing a good job of avoiding me. I keep wondering if I was supposed to go to another town—maybe Colebrook?"

"I sure don't know those details. Con runs his own show. You can't get him on the cell, eh?"

"Nothing. There could be a thousand explanations for that, though."

They blathered about cell phone carriers, and Lon got the impression Con's boss wasn't too concerned about the whereabouts of the missing fisheries crew.

"I don't know what to tell you, Lon. Conrad said he'd call midweek, so that's tomorrow. Why don't you hang tight until then? Can you do that?"

"Ah, why not. A couple of days at a nice resort on the state of Vermont's tab. I can handle that."

“What time ya got there, Conman?”

“Coming up to four o'clock.”

Jessy sat on the floor of the camper for no other reason than a change of scenery. She jumped when she heard the lock screech. Was she going out for more? Would it be with Conrad this time?

Without a word, Larry tossed a plastic grocery bag onto the camper floor, then unceremoniously slammed and locked the door. The camper had a brief period of light and then was dark once again. Inside the bag was a loaf of bread, a package of wieners, a box of Cheez-Its, and a handful of Snickers Miniatures. A couple of big water bottles tumbled out and rolled across the floor.

“Hey! Snickers. I love those.” Kevin grabbed a couple, popped one in his mouth, and opened a second.

Jessy ripped open the wieners and wrapped a slice of bread around one. She bit into it with a giant mouthful that would have been embarrassing under any other circumstances. Not today. “I'm humbled by how delicious this tastes.”

In silence, they sat on the benches and ate cold hot dogs and Cheez-Its.

After their meal, there was nothing to do but nap. Jessy climbed up to the top bunk and fell asleep. The guys sat on the benches and snoozed in the artificially darkened camper.

Con's mind was still plagued with thoughts of Jessy and Kevin getting it on. Finally he'd tortured himself enough with speculation. He needed to know. “Kevin, what happened today? Where did they take you?”

“We went to the stream.” Kevin seemed hesitant. “Con, it's unreal. With a gun pointed at you, he just says, 'Start.' And we do.” Again, a long pause. Conrad closed his eyes, listening and waiting for more.

“Look, I’m just a dumb-ass college kid. I can get it up twenty-four hours a day, rain or shine, gun or no gun. Tell me *that* doesn’t make me feel like a pig. And Jessy—she thinks it’s safer with me. She’s terrified the ugly, fat guy is going to rape her. She’d do anything to prevent that. I just make her focus on me and forget about the cameras. We can’t fight back against their guns.” Kevin ran a hand over his five-o’clock shadow, suddenly looking very weary. “It’s all we can do.”

Was he supposed to be okay with this? Anger rose from the pit of Con’s stomach and clawed through his muscles. He clenched and unclenched his fists.

“Are you enjoying it? Sex with Jessy?” He looked squarely at Kevin and watched his youthful, easygoing nature yield to an uncomfortable squirm.

“Ah, jeez, Con. Who wouldn’t?”

With a deep inhale and a hard swallow, Conrad settled himself. That wasn’t a fair question, and he knew it. This situation was not their fault. Not Kevin’s, and certainly not Jessy’s. He closed his eyes. Somehow he had to think of a plan to get them out of this mess.

Jessy awoke drenched with sweat. The temperature in the camper was unbearable in the August heat. *I bet I don’t smell like flowers now.*

The guys sat on the benches, leaning against the wall. Both had their shirts off, and they glistened with perspiration. She climbed down, sat on the grimy floor, and glanced up at Con. His chest was broad, and his arms looked massive. He wasn’t one of those tall, lanky guys—he was built like a wall. With his hands resting loosely over his drawn-up knees, he could have been a centerfold in a magazine. Jessy drew in a long breath.

“What are you thinking about?” Conrad asked softly.

His voice startled her. "I just don't know how this will end. And it surely can't go on." Tears misted her eyes. "Con, what if I get pregnant? They aren't even thinking about protection."

Jessy addressed Conrad, but she noticed Kevin's reaction. His eyes went from sleepy boredom to wide-awake attentiveness, and he ran a hand over his face to wipe away the sweat. "Do you think that's possible, Jess?"

"Well, yeah, Kev." Jessy sniffed. "I didn't see a condom machine in the restroom."

"I wasn't thinking about that at all. You're not on—I just thought maybe—"

"No, I'm not. Why the hell would I be on the pill?" She raised her arms in exasperation. "I've been living like a nun for three frickin' years." Then she burst out laughing.

Con shook his head and chuckled. He stood and pointed a finger down at Jessy. "Enough. We're gettin' you out of here."

She looked at him, hopeful for the first time. This was the Con she knew and loved. The man in control. "What can we do?"

"We're gonna have to take a chance." Con snapped his finger. "The fat one, Red. He's so goddamn out of shape. If I got a slight advantage—just a split second to get the gun away from him—I could put him out."

"But they travel in pairs." Jessy reached her hand out to Con, and he helped her up.

"Well, then let's think of a way to separate them."

Jessy ran her fingers through the ends of her curly hair, trying to detangle some of it. "Here's a thought. They don't restrain us. What if I just took off running? What are they going to do—shoot me? I'm the star of their show. Maybe they won't shoot me."

"Maybe?" Con pshawed. "That's not a risk I'm willing to take."

“Seriously, I think Red would run after me. I just can't imagine him raising a gun at a woman and shooting her in the back.”

“Forget it.”

Kevin piped up. “I have an idea. What if we suggest we have a threesome? Tell them we are totally into this and would like to ramp it up even more. Then you and me, Con, when we get out there we could jump 'em or something.” Enthusiasm lit his face as he grabbed at an imaginary enemy in front of him.

Conrad looked a long moment at Kevin. “That's not such a bad idea.”

“A threesome?” Kevin looked excited. Con rolled his eyes.

“Now wait a minute.” Jessy looked from one to the other. “You're telling me you're gonna overpower two big, fat guys with guns? Have you two been hanging out watching *Miami Vice* or what?”

“What if we tripped them? Made one of them stumble. Then jump on 'em.” Again, Kevin looked a lot more fired up than he should.

Conrad addressed Jessy, visibly running out of patience with the teenager. “Whatever we do, it needs to be orchestrated perfectly. We won't have much time.”

“Hey, I know. Why wait until we're out on the trail? When Red comes in, he stands right there,” Jessy said, pointing. “There are three of us. We'll just jump all over him, get his gun, and then pop Larry when he comes looking.” Jessy looked at Con for his approval.

“I have noticed the way he has his gun tucked in his jeans. That might work to our advantage. We need to wait for the right moment, though.”

Kevin pounded lazily at the plywood window. “If we get Red out cold, I think we should make a run for it. Don't wait for Larry. If that door is open and unguarded, I'm not going to just sit here and twiddle my thumbs until the next guy with a gun comes along.”

“Good point. Are we all up for running? We'll need to stay together.” Con looked at Jessy. “You especially—run like hell. We've got to get you out of here.”

They talked more about their plan. It wasn't much, but it was their only hope. They waited and wrestled with their own thoughts while the heat in the trailer climbed higher.

It was evening when they heard the sound of someone at the door. The heavy lock on the outside screeched, and the door opened. The group glanced at one another, and Con gave the slightest nod. He stood at the top of the stairs and leaned on the sink. His heart thundered as he swept a steady hand down his mustache. Gauging the right moment, he watched Red climb the steps,

A hike through the woods was no easy feat for Red, and with a wheeze in his throat he huffed, "Who wants to be a movie star tonight? A little streamside action for the mustache?"

With the gun in one hand, he leaned forward like a fat-assed runner trying to regain his wind. Con gave a quick look behind him for Larry. Not there.

With a powerful grunt, he kicked Red square in the face. The gun flew out of his hand and landed with a scurry across the camper floor and banged into the bench. Kevin leaped down to get it and spun it awkwardly in his hand.

Red lay on the floor with blood gushing from his mouth or nose or both. "You fucker. You cockshuckin'... I'm gonna make you..."

Con didn't wait to hear the details. One more grunt and another swift kick to Red's face and he was quiet. He grabbed the gun from Kevin and cracked Red one more time across the back of his head. "Let's go."

Stepping over Red like a pile of dirty laundry, the captives were out the door. Con paused to slide the lock into place and caught up with the others. They ran like animals through the woods, leaping over logs, tripping, and whacking themselves on rocks. Con stopped once to help Jessy up after she stumbled. "Can you keep going?"

Jessy didn't answer but just bolted again. "Come on!"

Finally the trio stopped to rest in a thick mess of spruce. They talked in whispers, but only because they were breathless from running. There was no way Larry could keep up with them—no way he would find them.

Kevin was the first to recover his breath. “Any chance we're going to find the truck?” He ran his hands over his face to sweep the dripping sweat away before it reached his eyes.

“That'd be our best bet. I left the keys in the ignition. What are the chances those dumb-asses left them there? If nothing else, we might be able to use the cell phone.” Con glanced down at his sweaty chest. “And a clean shirt would be nice.”

Jessy fell back onto the forest floor and laughed. “We did it! We got away. Con, you were amazing.”

“Hey, I have big feet. It wasn't that tough. Kinda like beating up on a pig.” Con pulled his sneaker off and saw that his white sweat sock was bloody.

“A pig with a gun. You did it, Conman.” Kevin raised a fist in a triumphant gesture. “Now what?”

“Now we get back to civilization. I have no idea where we're coming from. Would you say we traveled half an hour in that camper?”

“That seems about right. That means the truck isn't that far.”

“My thoughts exactly. That stream we were in, where we all washed our hair? That might be Badger Brook, the sampling site we were looking for yesterday. We should try to get back to that.”

Con was still stumped. He remembered the headwaters of Badger Brook being slow and low gradient. The river he saw was clipping pretty fast. Maybe he was way off. Maybe they were nowhere near Badger Brook. Maybe he was just fucking lost. His big toe throbbed, and there was a damn good chance it was broken.

\* \* \* \* \*



After a short rest, the group got up to continue their getaway. When Jessy stood, she wobbled and fell back down to the ground. Con stooped down to her. "Are you going to be okay? We don't need to push that hard."

"Do you suppose they could catch up to us?"

"No, I don't think so. Red's banged up pretty good, and Larry doesn't seem like he could do anything fast. We'll just go easy." He gave her a hand up.

The three tramped along as their sunlight disappeared and the heat eased. The woods were no longer thick, and eventually they came out onto a narrow gravel road.

Kevin looked up and down the road. "Which way, chief?"

## Chapter Six

They traveled north on the moonlit gravel road for no particular reason, and certainly no scientific one.

"If we were going to fish the headwaters of Badger Brook, we probably drove north. Upstream from where we...washed our hair." Con paused, knowing that Kevin and Jessy had a different memory of that particular spot. "But that's just a wild-assed guess." He still nursed some bitter feelings over Jessy and Kevin's hot sexual adventures but hadn't decided what to do about it.

For the most part, they walked along in silence, Con limping from the damaged toe. He'd sure landed some hefty kicks to Red's face. Kevin seemed to spring along like a—well, like a nineteen-year-old. They followed the road for an hour or more, and then it simply ended, with a couple of large boulders strategically placed to prevent any further vehicle traffic.

Kevin climbed up onto one boulder and stretched himself out. Jessy climbed up next to him, and Con climbed onto the second boulder. It was a relief to give his weary muscles a break, even if the rock surface provided little comfort. "You guys doing okay?"

"I'm pooped, but so happy to be free." Jessy stretched back and looked up to the night sky. "Look at that moon. It looks like it's mad at us."

Con looked up too and saw feathers of clouds floating over the moon, giving it a secretive look.

Jessy continued with a soft voice. "I remember looking up at that very same moon last night, feeling absolutely helpless."

“Did I make you feel helpless, Jessy?” Kevin's voice was an unwelcome intrusion into Conrad's quiet moment of reflection with Jessy.

“No, Kevin. You gave me courage.” She sat up and did a cat stretch with her arms. “No guilt, remember?”

“No guilt. But can I think about it and get just a little turned on?” Kevin winked at her and scratched her back.

Con groaned in frustration at the casual flirting of the two lovebirds. He sat up, looked over at Jessy, and felt the urge to grab her and run far, far away from the teenager. Instead he inhaled deeply and stretched his tired muscles. “Whateeya say we move on? This rock is no place to rest. Not for a guy with a stiff neck and a fucked-up toe.” He slid off the boulder and started walking.

In the dark, they continued on the same course, only now it was barely a footpath. Jessy's body ached from head to toe, the lack of sleep and the day's exertion taking a toll.

“Are you wiped out, Jess?” Con reached for her arm. “Maybe we should stop for the night.”

“No, I'm okay. We all just need water. I think if we find a stream, we need to risk it. How bad can it be to drink a few bugs?”

“Shh. Guys, listen.” Kevin stood like an animal, angling his head to the sound. Jessy laughed at him but then stopped. She heard it too. Rushing water.

They followed a mossy path and emerged from the dark woods to a vision of a waterfall cascading in turns from a high, rocky ledge. Moonbeams filtered through the trees and illuminated the plunge pool, where the tumbling water broiled and fanned to the edges. It looked almost sacred. They stood in silence and took in the beauty. But only for a moment.

"I'm goin' in. Anybody else?" Con pulled his shirt over his head and reached for his belt. With an apologetic glance to Jessy, he pulled it open. "Turn your head, girl. I think we're going skinny-dipping."

"What? Really?" Jessy spun around to face the other way. Was she really about to see the glory of Conrad Manzey? "Tell me when I can look." But she didn't wait. She turned in time to see Con and Kevin wading into the pool. One after the other, they dived in. Her heart raced from the anticipation of the cold water and even more from the view of the two gorgeous butts disappearing into the black water.

She watched them pop up, cool and refreshed, their hair slicked back. Jessy's breath caught in her chest, and she smiled. A wave of confidence spread through her, and a sign in her mind blinked WHAT THE HELL. Kevin had already seen her naked, and Conrad was about to. Might as well make it good.

She stepped out of her sneakers and pulled her T-shirt over her head, standing in just her sports bra and jeans. She squared her shoulders and unzipped her jeans, then slipped them casually over her hips and stepped out of them. Standing in the moonlight, she looked not at the guys but at the millions of diamonds sparkling on the water from the moon overhead. Slowly she reached around herself to stretch the bra over her head and shook her hair around her shoulders.

Her nipples were hard and sensed the breeze that tossed a few curls into the air. Standing at the water's edge with two gorgeous men staring at her nearly naked body, she felt powerful. With little concern for anything but the diamonds on the water and the fire in her pussy, she glided her panties to the ground and lifted her leg in a languid motion to kick them aside.

Jessy waded into the pool, reaching to dangle a finger here and there. She didn't approach Con or Kevin, but instead drifted over to the waterfall and stepped in, letting the cold water tumble over her shoulders and wet her hair.

She arched back and pointed her face into the stream of icy water, her hands sliding over her hips and down her backside.

The shower of water tingled and prickled her skin and put all her senses on high alert. The awful heat and smell of the camper washed from her skin and from her mind. The hands that circled her waist didn't register as human touch. Not until the lips caressed the nape of her neck. With her eyes closed, Jessy tilted her head and let the mustache sweep like magic on her skin. "Conrad," she purred.

His hands trailed up to her breasts and flicked and pinched her nipples, and she leaned back into his arms. Cold water tumbled onto her chest, and his cock rubbed with solid prominence against her butt. She cooed into the roar of the water and rested her head back onto his chest. A thousand glorious sensations coalesced into one giant hum throughout her body.

Con pulled her gently out of the icy waterfall, but before she could open her eyes, his lips landed on hers. No. *Oh, Kevin...*

Kevin's smooth, deep kiss melted down onto her. She reached her hands over her head and gave in to whatever was happening. If this was a dream, she was going to take full advantage of it. Hands roamed everywhere on her tingling skin, and Kevin's tongue spread a mind-blowing fire into her mouth. This is what she'd wanted all along. Why choose when she could have both? Someone slipped a finger into her pussy, and she spread her legs, receiving sensual thrusts on trembling legs. Con's cock felt like a serpent pressing at her back door, and she wanted him inside her. All of him.

She sunk into his warm body, hoping he would hold her up, because she'd lost the capacity. The contrast of the cool night air on her wet skin and the inferno inside made her head spin... There was no air... Dimples of light blinked behind her eyes... "Guys," she whispered.

"Jess."

\* \* \* \* \*

She blinked up at Con.

“Hey, girl. How do you feel?”

Conrad held her warmly in his arms as he sat, leaning against a tree. Had she dreamed it? She quickly glanced down her body and realized she was naked and covered with her dirty shirt. “What happened?”

“I think the last couple of days caught up with you. You fainted.” Con gently rearranged the shirt to cover her better. “I’m sorry about your clothes. We didn’t feel right dressing you. I was going to cover you with my shirt, but that would just be cruel.” He made a funny face, and Jessy was more puzzled than ever.

“Where’s Kevin?”

“I’m here, Jess.”

She craned her neck around to see Kevin waving a goofy hand at her. Damn. Did she pass out and dream she’d had both men? Or did she nearly know the joys of both men and blow the chance? Either way, she was pissed at herself for an unfinished fantasy. “Did you—did we...?”

“Did we what?” Conrad blinked his baby blues down at her.

“Oh never mind.” She sat up and quickly slipped her clothes on while the guys pretended to avert their eyes. “Are we moving on?”

“We’re going to rest for a while.” Con encouraged her to relax back down beside him against the large spruce. He curved his big arm around her shoulder, and she settled on his chest.

With the nighttime forest sounds snapping and tittering around them, they tried to get some sleep. As exhausted as she was, Jessy’s brain wouldn’t rest. She diddled with a twig between her fingers and struggled to figure out if she’d even made it to the waterfall. Her hair was wet, and she was naked...

Finally Con whispered in her ear, “That was a onetime offer, beautiful. From here on out, I’m getting you to myself. I’m not fond of sharing.”

A soft sigh slipped from her lips, and Jessy smiled. *Damn.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Jessy awoke in the morning stiff and cold and hungry. Everyone seemed to have aged a hundred years. Even Kevin had no quip to lighten the mood. And even though the reality of the previous night's frolic in the waterfall had been confirmed, it could just as well have been a dream. There wasn't a whisker of friskiness left in any of them.

"We need to find that truck. I'm sorry, guys. I spent my youth hiking the mountains of West Virginia and six years in the Coast Guard. Now I feel like I couldn't navigate my way out of a paper sack." Con shook his head. "Somewhere along the road, I became a city boy."

Conrad looked exhausted, and his lack of assurance unsettled Jessy. "We'll just keep walking. If we don't find the truck, we'll find something. Eventually."

"So you guys. What are we going to do when we *do* find the truck? Are we going straight to the cops or what?" Kevin's energy fired up again.

Jessy had been considering that very question. It would be a tough crime to talk about. "Maybe we could just say we were held captive—leave out the sex and the video. What do you think, Con?"

"Whew." Con wiped his arm over his face. "I know it's going to be awkward tracking down those Internet files. Probably an FBI investigation. We can't let these guys get away with this, though."

"Look at it this way." Kevin skipped ahead a few steps to walk backward and face them as he continued. "Who's gonna see the video of Jess and me? My friends? My family? My neighbors? Anybody who is out buying crap like that, I'm not hanging out with them. Remember when Red said something about some guys in Russia or whatever? Let 'em look. They don't know me."

Kevin's comments were flippant and made Jessy feel oddly better. Would she consider *not* reporting the crime? Maybe. She sighed. "Let's just get back and have a bath and get some food. I can't think straight."

The next day, Lon lounged in bed later than usual. He checked out of his room, figuring if he didn't hook up with Con today, he would head back to Vermont. He felt more and more certain they were in a completely different part of the state, and he was hanging around Pittsburg like an idiot. He grabbed another delightful breakfast at the local diner and went back out on the road in search of a New Hampshire fisheries truck. He traveled north out of town and darted off onto back roads when they looked interesting. He planned to drive around that morning, grab a lunch at the diner, and then—well, he didn't know what after that. Maybe talk to Ed down in Concord again.

His cell phone vibrated in his pocket, and he jumped. “I gotta get this damn thing off vibrate. Yeah? Hey, Ma. What's up?”

Lon figured his mom was calling to tell him the cops picked Larry up in a grocery store acting weird, and he was now back in the state hospital. Been there, done that. He would be happy to give up his questionable janitorial services.

“Nobody's seen him, Lonny. I'm worried. Does he have friends who drive? Could he have gotten out of town?”

Lon didn't know much about Larry's friends. He just assumed the group-home freaks hung out together. He knew Larry liked to take walks around the park and had permission to go unsupervised. It was possible he'd met somebody who drove. Shit, he resented wasting time thinking about who the hell Larry chummed around with.

“Ma, if you're that worried, call the cops. Tell them he's a vulnerable adult. They'll start looking for him. He'll turn up. They may need to cast a wider net this time, if he somehow got out of town.”

“Lon, that's not very nice. They won't need a net to catch him.”

“No, Ma. That's not what I meant. It's just a figure of speech. Hey, listen. I gotta go.”



As Lon flipped his phone shut, he drove past a narrow, grassy turnoff. "What the hell," he said out loud. "I might as well check it out." He backed his truck up and turned into the lane, noticing tire tracks in the grass. "This is it."

He pulled up next to the New Hampshire fisheries truck and hopped out, glancing into the open windows. "No dead bodies. Jeez, Con, you left the keys hanging there too. Where the fuck are ya?"

Lon looked around for clues. He was alone in the woods with no life in sight. He opened the truck door and noticed the cell phone on the dash. For the first time, Lon was truly worried. Something bad happened to this crew. He looked again at the cell phone. The Message Waiting signal blinked in the little window. He reached for his own phone to dial 911.

## Chapter Seven

The crew trudged along on narrow logging roads, and sometimes no road at all. Con replayed the capture over and over in his head. How did Red and Larry know they would be there? They had to have been waiting for them. Parked near but out of sight. There was no way this was a random grab. If they planned to make sex videos, they had to have known Jessy—or at least some female—would be part of the crew. It rattled him to think it had been a setup. For now, he kept his thoughts to himself.

“Hey, guys, this looks familiar. We might be on the right trail.” In another minute, Con pointed ahead. “I see something. Through the trees. See it?”

“It's the truck!” Kevin skipped a few steps ahead. “Come on.”

“Wait!” Jessy raised her hand in the air. “Red and Larry might be there looking for us. They know we'd head for the truck.”

“She's right. Let's be careful. Into the woods.” Con indicated for the group to follow. They made their way through the thick understory, and Con winced at the sound of snapping branches. As they drew near, he noticed another vehicle parked on the other side of their truck.

Con stood a little taller so he could see. “It's Lon Briggs. Let's go.”

Lon looked in amazement at Con and the other two. “What the fuck are you doing? I was just about to call the cops, and you come popping out of the woods like a bunch of Boy Scouts on a day hike?”

Con released an exhausted sigh. “It's a long story, Lon. But first, do you have any food or water?”

Lon began to see they weren't frolicking in the woods and that there may have been some mischief. These guys looked awful. He hadn't packed a lunch—why would he, when there was a luscious hot beef sandwich waiting for him back at the diner? He did have a granola bar and a can of Coke, so he handed them over.

“So. Where ya been?”

“Some guys kidnapped us and held us in an old camper for two days.” Con spoke calmly in his matter-of-fact way, cracking open the Coke and handing it to Jessy. “They had guns and barely fed us. We escaped last night and have been looking for our truck since then. Has anybody been looking for us?”

“Just me. Now back up. Did you say an old camper?”

“Yeah. On a rusty white truck. The windows were boarded up, so we couldn't get out.”

“Shit, I saw that camper yesterday. I was out looking for ya. Don't tell me you guys were in there.”

“Oh hell yeah. Did you see anybody?”

“Nah, I didn't. It looked creepy, though. Out of place. Plus the road was gated off. Whoever drove back there had to have connections with the logging company. Any idea who the guys were?”

“We don't know. Just a couple of lowlifes with a vid—Just two guys, Red and Larry.”

The hair on Lon's neck rose when Con mentioned the names. “Red and Larry, you say? What'd they look like?”

Kevin jumped in, seeming eager to characterize the men. “Red was a honey. Fat and freckled, long, frizzy red ponytail.”

“What about this Larry?”

“He was a big dumb dimwit. Huge guy with a shotgun.” Kevin's description didn't provide Lon with the accuracy he wanted.

“Dark hair? Blond? Bald? Charles Manson? What'd he look like?”

Jessy helped him out. “He had short, dark hair, a buzz cut. His eyes were dark too—they looked like they bulged out of his head.”

“You know them, Lon?” Con asked.

“What? Ah, no. No way. I'm just trying to get a feel for what you guys went through.” Lon felt sick inside and needed to sit down. That was his brother, no doubt about it. “Did they hurt you?”

“They didn't hurt us.” Con cast a wary glance around the group, meeting Jessy's eyes as she popped the last of the granola bar into her mouth. “We managed to escape before we figured out what they wanted us for.”

Lon observed the puzzling visual exchange. He wasn't getting a clear picture of what had happened to these guys. “They just held you in a camper for two days without food or water, but didn't do anything to ya?” So far it didn't sound like much of a crime.

“Well, they had guns. And threatened to shoot us lots of times.” Kevin sounded indignant.

“How did you get away? Did you hurt anybody? Nobody was shot, were they?” Lon ran a sweaty hand over his mouth and wondered about his next move. And whether he should come clean with these guys about his brother.

“Nobody was shot, thankfully.” Jessy looked at Conrad. “Con wailed on Red and knocked him flat. We ran like animals away from there. That was last night.” Jessy rubbed her tummy. “Can we go to town? I really want some food.”

Conrad pushed himself off the truck, where he'd been leaning. “Let's go. Lon, can you lead us back to town? A restaurant?”

\* \* \* \* \*

On the drive back, Lon wrestled with the possible outcomes of what he'd learned. He needed to call his mom. And tell her what? That Larry had finally gone over the edge, turned violent? His psychological slips had always resulted in bizarre behavior—talking to himself, exposing himself, stealing things like

cameras and video games. Nothing that caused local law enforcement too much angst. And who the hell was Red?

His phone vibrated in his pocket. “Jesus!” He jumped and let up on the gas. “Yeah. Ma. What's up?” He listened for a moment. “Larry's back? You're shittin' me. Where is he—where's he been?”

“He ended up getting in with some man he met at the park, and they went on a joyride. He showed up at his group home this afternoon. He doesn't seem quite right, but at least he's safe.”

“What do you mean, he doesn't seem quite right? And who was the guy? What was his name?”

“Oh, I don't know the man's name. Larry gets so defensive when he thinks I'm being nosy. I bet he wasn't taking his meds, that's for sure. I got into town today—you know I like to drive slow. When I went to his room, he had a fancy video camera on his desk. He tried to hide it from me. No doubt it's stolen. Lonny, I let myself into your apartment with my key. You should have more fruit. Are you eating enough fruit?”

“I eat plenty of fruit, Ma. Let's hope they get Larry back on track now that he's home.”

Lon slapped the phone shut. All righty, then. No harm done. Everybody was safe and sound. He'd convince the New Hampshire crew to forget the whole thing. It wasn't like anything bad happened to them.

He had one more angle to explore. He dialed his pal, the hatchery secretary, again. “Can you find the number for Hampton Brothers? It's a New Hampshire logging company.”

“Where would I find something like that?”

“How about a phone book?”

Annoying silence filled the void as she looked—at least Lon hoped she was looking—for the number.

“I've got Joel Hampton Logging. Is that it?”

“Yeah, gimme the number.”

It felt odd to be back in the truck. Jessy rummaged in her purse to find her phone and gave an audible sigh. No messages. *Didn't anybody even miss me?*

“Problem?” Con asked with a concerned look.

“No. I don't know who I thought would've called me. Being an aardvark and all. When this trip is done, I'm getting a social life.”

Kevin rummaged in the backseat. “Aha!” He produced the bag of bagels, grabbed one, and handed the rest up to Jessy. “They might be a little stale, but I'm going for it.”

Jessy fished in the bag for the softest bagel. “So Con. Thanks for the discretion—not telling Lon about the video.” She yanked on a chunk of hard bread and accidentally whacked her hand on the dash. “Ouch.”

“It's not my story to tell.”

“What do you want to do, Kev?” Jessy glanced back at Kevin, his jaws working hard on the dry bread. “Go to the police?”

“I thought about that as we walked this morning. What do I say? 'I'd like to report a crime, Officer. I was just forced to have the best sex of my life with a beautiful woman.' What do they do with that? If anything, they'd probably be jealous. I can just see all the men sliding their chairs in. 'So, tell us about it, Son. Don't leave anything out.'” Kevin shrugged, like it was pretty obvious.

Jessy heard Conrad draw in a loud breath and blow it out impatiently. She closed her eyes and sank down into the seat. She felt a little embarrassed by Kevin's comment, but also flattered. On that same twisted level—the one becoming all too familiar—she was glad Kevin felt the sex was good. *Lord, help me...*

Kevin continued. “What I keep thinking about is, what will happen when the media gets ahold of this. What a titillating story to report. And what about

the people you guys work with? Con? Do you think it'd be wrong not to report these guys?"

"I can see why it would be awkward. But do you feel comfortable with them still out there? What's to stop them from doing this again?"

Neither Jessy nor Kevin had an answer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lon led them into the diner, and Jessy made a beeline for the ladies' room. When she pushed the door open, the smell of wintergreen disinfectant flooded her senses. Then she looked in the mirror. No screams—she just burst out laughing.

"What little bugger got me there?" She rubbed at a welt on her neck. Her hair was a confusion of curls, her face smudged with dirt, and grime had worked itself into the creases of her neck. *Didn't that waterfall get any dirt off me?* She splashed some water on her face, polished her teeth quickly with her finger, and headed back out the door. "Whatever. I'm hungry."

She slid into the booth next to Kevin.

"Hey, Jess, you missed a spot—right here." Kevin touched her face. "And here. And here. And here." He poked her playfully.

Jessy waved him away, laughing. "When's the last time you looked in a mirror? You look like a thug." She grabbed the menu, opened it on the table in front of her, and rubbed her hands together. "Oh, man. Strawberry malts. And breaded mushrooms. I love those."

"The hot beef sandwiches will make your toes curl." Lon winked at her from across the table.

"Is that a good thing? Look what happened to my hair." Jessy winked back.

Con slid in next to Lon, making Jessy smile. They pretty much filled up the booth, cozy, shoulder to shoulder.

“Hey.” Lon put his menu down with disinterest. “I put in a call to the logging company. I’m pretty sure it’s Hampton Logging that owns the gates up that way. I asked them about anybody named Red. They said they did have a guy who matched the description. Said he worked for them all summer. Then one day he just never showed up for work—and never turned in his keys.” Lon punctuated each one of those last words with his finger on the table.

“No kidding? What about a guy named Larry? Did they have a big dumb Larry? One with a video camera?” Jessy nudged Kevin’s leg under the table, and he gave her an unspoken *what?* Then he pursed his lips in an apology.

“This Larry had a video camera? What’d he do, tape you guys starving to death?”

“He just carried it around. I don’t think he was all there.” Jessy tapped a finger to her temple.

“So you calling the sheriff’s office from here or what?”

“We’re debating that.” Con turned casually to search for a waitress. “I’d sure like a glass of water.”

“Well, not that it’s any of my beeswax, but...you weren’t hurt, they didn’t do anything to you, nothing was stolen. Maybe a kidnapping charge. I don’t know. Not to seem unsympathetic, but what exactly is the crime?”

Con shrugged. “Just trying to do the right thing. We weren’t hurt, I guess.” He glanced at Jessy. “But what if they do it again? And this time, things go wrong, or go too far.” His eyes stayed steady, forcing Jessy to look away. To her relief, the waitress came by to take their orders, putting an end to talk of kidnapping and video cameras for the time being.

Jessy had a hard time focusing on the conversation as it wobbled around to disconnected topics. Con commented that he had his wallet in his pocket the whole time, and Red and Larry didn’t make any effort to get his money or credit cards. She mentioned the futility of having a cell phone, cuz she had no friends who ever called. Kevin promised to call her. The waitress brought their drinks.



"Well, if it makes you feel any better, the guy at Hampton Logging said federal police picked that Red up trying to cross into Canada this morning. Eh?" Lon looked around the group.

"Really." Con left this word out there all alone and sounded incredulous, not inquiring.

"Yeah, ah—he was wanted for auto theft. They won't be letting him go anytime soon. So I wouldn't worry about him."

"That's good news, eh, Con?" Jessy took a long pull of her malt. "He'd have a tough time getting back into the US."

"And I don't think numbnuts is much of a threat without Red." Kevin reached for Jessy's malt. "Can I have a taste of that?"

Their orders came, and they gobbled up burgers and fries, malts and breaded mushrooms.

The fisheries phone buzzed in Con's pocket. He pulled it out and glanced at the number. "It's Ed Stein from headquarters." He got up from the table. "I better give him some explanation for the last few days, accurate or otherwise."

"You guys might as well grab a room for the night." Lon glanced casually at the bill and then back to Jessy. "I don't know what your plans are, but I'm betting you could use a good night's sleep. I stayed at the resort here in town the past couple of nights. Nice place."

That sounded so wonderful to Jessy. A shower, a nap, another snack, another shower. All good. While they waited for Con to return, Jessy eyed Lon with curiosity. He wasn't exactly good-looking, but not bad either. He was swarthy, a little overweight. His eyes carried heavy brows, and he had a neat goatee. He looked familiar—like she'd met him before. Yet she knew she hadn't.

Con came back and sat down. "Ed just thinks we got our wires crossed."

Jessy and Kevin told him about their idea to get a room, and he was all for it. When they arrived at the front desk, they were told that there was nothing available. The Conrad Manzey reservation had been given to other travelers.

Jessy stuffed her hands deep in her pockets and huffed. The resort cabins had looked so inviting when they drove by them, she could almost feel the softness of the pillows.

“Sir,” the desk clerk said, looking at her computer. “After seven o'clock, we relinquish reservations. The people who haven't checked in by then are out of luck.” She tapped a couple more keys. “Looks to me like there might be at least one no-show.”

Jessy gently grabbed Con's wrist to see the time. “That's only two hours from now, Conman. Let's wait.”

“Hey, you guys. It's cocktail hour. Let's head over to the pub and celebrate your safe return, eh? Then chances are you'll get your cozy cabin.”

Jessy smiled at Lon's liberal definition of cocktail hour, but a beer sounded pretty good. A nod from the others, and they headed over to the pub.

## Chapter Eight

Con squinted his eyes against the harsh lights as the group descended the steps to the pub. The window boasted every major beer label, lit up in neon. He grabbed a chair for Jessy and pulled it up to the table, then grabbed one for himself and slid beside her.

"It's funny." She shrugged. "I don't quite know how to process any of this. I can't believe we were held at gunpoint just a day ago."

Con put his hand on her shoulder. His resentment had softened during the night in the woods. Now he was just damn glad everyone was alive. When he'd held Jessy in the waterfall, and afterward as she rested in his arms, he'd noticed how slim she was. At any moment those men could have snapped her like a twig. Yeah, he was just grateful she was here with him now, in one beautiful piece.

"Well, I think I know what to do in a situation like this. Your brain is in overdrive, trying to put everything in a box. You need to give your brain some well-deserved rest." Lon motioned for the waitress. "Sam Adams all around, and throw in four bumps of Jack."

"You know, Lon, I'm not old enough to be drinking in a bar. I'm just a kid." Kevin glanced around the group with a wry look.

"Look, smart-ass. I think an ordeal like this one makes a man outa ya. You're old enough. Now show me you know what to do with a shot of Jack Daniel's." Lon's Boston accent was coming out thick, and it made him sound like a city guy—not a biologist from Vermont. Con didn't know him all that well but had a fleeting feeling this new "Boston Lon" was not to be trusted. He brushed the feeling aside and turned his focus on Jessy, who looked like a

delicate flower in a bed of rough weeds. He laughed out loud. Maybe a flower in need of shower.

The waitress loaded their table with beverages and hustled off. Con gave Jessy a quizzical look. She gave him a “what the heck?” look.

“For some reason, I don't see you as a big Jack Daniel's drinker.” Conrad gently pushed Jessy's shot glass aside. “Even under the best of circumstances. Am I right?”

“Me? Well, actually, I've always been partial to Jim Beam.” She winked at him and pulled the glass back.

“Attagirl. It'll make a man outa you too. Not that anybody wants that. You make a damn fine woman.” Lon slid a bottle of beer next to her glass. “You might want to keep that handy. To put out the fire.”

Jessy put the amber liquid to her lips and poured it down in one gulp. “Holy shit!” She gasped and reached for her throat, quickly grabbing her beer for a pull. Con laughed and swallowed his shot. More beer all around.

The group drank, laughed, shot of few games of pool, and got up to pee a thousand times. The events of the previous few days seemed far away. Jessy got plastered in a big hurry. At one point she giggled and told Lon he'd be handsomer if he lost the goatee.

“Ya think?” He stroked the sides. “I thought it made me look rugged.”

“I love it, Lon—I wouldn't change a thing. You're a helluva handsome guy.” No surprise, Kevin became even more affable when he was drunk.

Con drank up too but was able to hold his liquor better than the rest of them. He kept a watchful eye on Jessy most of the time. He thought she was so adorable with the laughing, and he picked her up off the floor more than once. And she couldn't shoot pool worth a shit.

“Ya know, I've always wanted to know what your mustache felt like, and now I know. I have to tell ya—I love it. I'd kiss ya again if you let me.” Her

words were liquidy, and she wasn't able to stand straight, but she managed to trace an unsteady finger over Con's mustache.

"Well, that sounds like a fine offer, Jess. And I'll sure let you, but let's wait until you're able to stand without falling over. Okay?" He held her firmly around the waist.

"Con? Do you know how many times a day I wanna grab your ass? Do you think I'm disgusting or what? How come you don't make a move on me?"

Con couldn't help but laugh. "Jessy, I am absolutely crazy about you. And you can grab my ass anytime you feel like it."

Jessy took him up on the offer and squeezed a big handful of his backside before she slipped briefly from his grasp and slid to the floor. Con scooped her up again, completely enchanted with the little drunk in his arms. "Hey, gang? Whateeya say we check out the room situation?"

When Con went to the front desk to inquire, only one resort cabin was available. "That's fine. We'll take it." The woman taking the reservation glowered at the drunken bunch babbling behind him.

"All of you in one cabin?"

"Yeah, and can we get a pile of extra blankets and pillows?"

With a sniff, the woman accepted Conrad's credit card and said someone would bring the extra items over shortly.

Lon was sloppily puzzled by the group lodging too. "We all sleeping in the same bed or what? I mean, I like ya, Conrad, but jeez. I don't swing that way."

"After what we've been through, this will seem like the Hilton."

The cabin was cozy, with a queen-size bed and a fireplace. Lon spread out on the rug with the extra blankets and pillows. Kevin, Con, and Jessy shared the spacious bed. There was no danger of anybody getting any action—they were all too wasted. Jessy curled up against Con's chest the minute they hit the sheets.

"I sure think the world of you, Conman. I just wish you'd ask me out." And with that, she passed out.

Con held her in his arms, still with the black T-shirt on, her hair wild and tangled. "You know, Jess. I just might do that. I just might," he whispered into her hair.

Thursday morning Jessy awoke curled up in Conrad's arms. She mentally peeled back the layers of activity from the night before. Where was she? She remembered drinking in the pub, shooting pool, and even puffing on a cigar. She wasn't clear on how she got in this room with Conrad. And Kevin was snoring on the far edge of the bed. She slowly lifted Con's big arm off her shoulder and crawled out of his embrace. She stood a moment and wavered. Her head pounded, her mouth was full of sawdust, and all she could think of was the shower.

With a gentle massage of her temples, she tried to gather more memories. The bags with all their clothes were still in the truck. *Whatever*. She'd worry about what to wear later, when she was clean and rehydrated. She padded into the bathroom and turned the shower on. She could hardly wait to get under the water. It was going to be the best damn shower she'd ever taken. There was even a yummy-smelling shampoo, and look! Conditioner!

Con stirred and heard the shower running. He sat up and wiped the blar from his eyes. He pulled his dirty shirt over his head—yeah, that shower would feel pretty damn good. He heard the *click* of the bathroom door as it opened, and watched Jessy tiptoe out into the darkened room. She made her way over to his side of the bed, wearing nothing but a big white towel. Her shoulders looked soft and vulnerable, and he imagined running his tongue along the silky surface. He could make her scream his name and beg him...

She jumped and let out a little squeal when she saw that he was watching her.

“Conrad. I didn't know you were awake. I'm sorry if I woke you with the shower—I just couldn't wait a second longer.”

Jessy dabbed her wet curls with a hand towel and somehow looked more beautiful than ever. He rose and went to her with his heart thundering. Hungry to feel her warmth, he lightly ran his fingers over her soft shoulder and down her arm. Jessy shivered and looked into his eyes. Con met her gaze briefly before his eyes drifted to her moist lips. God, he wanted to feast on her—and she wanted it too. He heard a snort behind him, and his thoughts came back to earth with a thud. He looked away and, without a word, grabbed the truck keys and headed out the door.

When he got to the truck, he grabbed the bags out of the backseat and paused for a second or two to gather himself. He recalled Jessy's last words to him the night before. “*Why won't you ask me out?*”

“That girl drives me crazy.” He leaned against the truck and ran his fingers through his long, dirty hair. He knew why he hadn't asked her out, and swore he'd never get tangled up in a mess like that again. In the Coast Guard, he'd dated subordinates. It always landed him in trouble. A recipe for disaster. But this wasn't the United States Coast Guard, and Jessy was—Jessy. She would never turn on him. His heart was in charge, overriding everything. When they got back to Concord and things got back to normal, he'd do it. He'd give a relationship—her—a shot.

When he reentered the room, Jessy was reclined on the bed, leaning against the headboard. “Hey, you got my duffel bag. Thank you.” She spoke in a whisper and hiked her towel up around her when she stood. “I was thinking of something lacy and flowing today. Perhaps a skirt.” She grabbed the bag from Con and headed back into the bathroom.

Con smiled. “I thought the towel worked just fine.”

When Jessy came out, the towel had been replaced by a clean pair of jeans and a bright white T-shirt with a treble clef on the pocket.

“Nothing lacy and flowing, Jess?” He inhaled. She smelled like a bouquet.

"It's the strangest thing. All I thought to bring on this weird vacation are jeans and T-shirts." She extended a warm hand to Con's cheek. "Try the shower. You need it."

When Con emerged from the shower, he looked like a new man. Lon and Kevin were still snoring and showed no signs of stirring. He motioned with a finger to Jessy as she reclined on the bed.

"Look at that. You made me come with one finger," she whispered to him when she arrived at his side. Con looked down at her, raised an eyebrow, and grinned.

"Imagine what I could do with both hands."

Jessy's knees wobbled. Their relationship had turned a corner in the bizarre events of this trip, that's for sure. A suggestive, spine-melting, knee-weakening corner. Was he finally going to look for more than friendship from her?

"Let's go for a walk." Con touched her elbow lightly and brought her out of her brief reflection.

The morning was cloudy, the air heavy with the possibility of rain. They walked around the cobbled paths of the well-manicured resort grounds.

"So are you going to be okay, going back to our routine?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you going to be afraid? I'd like to offer to stay with you a few days. I know Lon said Red was stuck tight in Canada. Still, I thought maybe you might have some lingering fears. Shit, I think I do."

Jessy's heart beat a happy rhythm. Con was asking to stay with her. She wanted that for seven hundred different reasons, none of them having anything to do with Red or Larry. She drew in a long breath.

"Con, that's thoughtful of you." She paused to stand and face him. "I'd like that. Thank you."



“So Mr. Universe in there thinks he's got himself a new girlfriend.” He motioned his head back to the cabin. “Is that about right?”

Jessy laughed. “Oh, Con. Kevin's so young. He's just doing what comes natural.” *Very natural*. But then she thought more about her next words. “I know it's hard for you to understand, but yeah, our relationship is different now. I mean, we've made love. Everything changes after that. How can it not?” They continued on their walk.

“I'm gonna be blunt here, Jess. Are you gonna want more from him?”

Hmmm. So Con was a little jealous—this was good. Jessy planned a delicate answer for a delicate question.

“Con, when I met Jeff, I was eighteen. I was a virgin.” She shrugged. “And I was faithful to him all through college. So figure it out. Kevin was only the second man I've ever been with. And the circumstances we found ourselves in were so ugly. But I've never felt anything like that in my life.” She looked out on the misty morning, not knowing what Con would think of her honesty. “I had to tell you the truth.”

Con stopped and grabbed Jessy's arms and pulled her close for a powerful, passionate kiss. Gradually he loosened his grip and embraced her. They stood buried in each other with hungry, wild tongues.

Breathless, Con pulled back. “Jessy, I'm... I don't think it's a nineteen-year-old kid you need.”

She looked up into his eyes. “Are you offering?”

“Girl, I'm offering.” Another kiss made Jessy's spine melt into the cobblestone. This was too much. Jessy reached her arms around his broad shoulders and let his kisses burn their way down her neck. “Oh, Conrad.”

“You called?” Jessy blinked her eyes and saw Con sitting on the edge of the bed where she had fallen asleep. He tousled his hair with a hand towel and had a satisfied grin on his face. “Were you dreaming of me?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jessy and Conrad went to the restaurant and ordered a big breakfast. If Kevin and Lon were going to sleep off their hangovers all morning, they were on their own.

“Jessy, I was wondering what you would think if I offered to stay with you for a few days.”

Jessy's fork clanged to the floor. The waitress heard and scurried over with another. “Con, that's very thoughtful of you. Do you really think it's necessary? Do you think any of us are in danger?”

Con set his fork down and looked at her seriously. “Jess, I think these guys targeted us. Why, I haven't a clue. But they knew we would be at that stream. I don't mean to scare you, but it would make me feel better if you weren't alone. At least, not right away.”

Jessy stopped chewing her toast and swallowed a big chunk. “You think they set out to ambush us? That they knew who we were?”

“I don't know. It seems unlikely that they just happened to stumble upon us, doesn't it? They could have waited a hundred years to get a suitable group for sex videos.”

Jessy thought about that. He was absolutely right. It couldn't have been random. She felt a chill and blamed it on her wet hair.

“Well, my apartment isn't the greatest. No security system. I guess it would be nice to have you around. And my mom and sister will be arriving in just a few days.”

They gobbled up eggs and sausages and drank gallons of juice. Jessy hadn't had a hangover in years, but she did remember they always gave her a powerful appetite.

“Con, I won't let a strange man into my apartment without knowing how old he is.”

Con stopped in midchew. “Did you just call me strange?”

Jessy laughed. “You know what I mean, and stop avoiding the question.”

"These sausages are spicy—love 'em." He popped another link into his mouth.

"You suck."

\* \* \* \* \*

They met Kevin and Lon later in the lobby, and everybody looked spit-shined, if not peaked.

"So did you guys decide if you're going to the cops?" Lon jingled his truck keys in his hand. "Is this something I'm supposed to keep under my hat? Not that I have a big ladies' club meeting or anything, I just don't want to spill the beans if I'm not suppose to."

"Well, Lon. We appreciate your discretion." Con looked around the group. "I don't think we've decided yet. I personally have some strong misgivings about pretending this didn't happen."

"Look. These guys are thugs. Sounds to me like Larry was probably just doing what the other guy told him. He couldn't mastermind something like this. With that freckled guy doing time in Canada—" He shrugged his shoulders, then waved his hand.

"Let's just keep this to ourselves, okay Lon?"

"Sure thing."

Lon got into his truck. Con started the fisheries truck and asked one last time, "What's it gonna be, you two? You both certainly have more at stake. You make the call."

"Con? I don't want to explain any of this to anybody. I just don't know if I could do it." Jessy's voice was soft and distant. Con knew she'd been through an unimaginable experience, and despite his reservations, he understood her reluctance. With greater enthusiasm, she added, "Plus you said you'd stay with me. The guys would be crazy to mess with you."

Con looked at Kevin in the rearview mirror. "You too?"

“Yup. But I want to know when we decided we're all sleeping over at Jessy's?”

“You, Kevo, are not invited.” Conrad looked forward to spending time alone with Jessy without the young Casanova around.

Kevin rustled his still-wet hair. “Hey, no problem. I start classes Monday anyway, and I'll have a whole dorm full of girls to keep me safe and warm.”

“All right. You guys want to get some fishing done?” Con put the truck in gear and looked over at Jessy. Even a hangover looked good on her. “Let's head south and grab a couple sites today. We still have two days left.”

Lon pulled up behind them in his truck, and they caravanned out of the area. No chance of running into thugs with video cameras. As they made their way south, Jessy dozed, leaning her aching head against the window. Kevin snored in the backseat, and Conrad hummed along to songs on the radio.

They fished the next couple of days with Lon, careful not to give him too many details of their captivity. Lon persisted in his questioning. “So what did you do all day? Where'd ya pee? Didn't you get out at all? So this Larry—did he seem normal to you?”

At one point Kevin was about to tell him about the bed in the middle of nowhere. Jessy scrambled to find a stone to throw at him. It hit him in the butt cheek, and he shut up.

In private, Jessy's emotions were a jumbled mess. She continued to wrestle with the fact that she could respond sexually under such brutal circumstances. It was as if she'd discovered a well of forbidden water and *damn*, she liked it and thirsted for more. She'd never experienced such raw animal passion before. Kevin's performance would be tough to forget. She remembered her dream. Conrad had told her she needed more than a nineteen-year-old. And in her dreams, Con was offering. And what were his words that

night after the waterfall? Next time he wouldn't share her? Her heart thumped in her chest just thinking about that. "Next time."

"Next time what?" Con sat in the passenger seat studying a map.

"Oh nothing. Just daydreaming." Jessy drove to the next sampling site. Her mind wandered back and forth and back again. She hadn't forgotten that she'd had unprotected sex, twice. She ticked off the days on her fingers—she'd need to wait until after her mom and sister left to do a pregnancy test. She thought about the videos. What did they look like? Her newly fed libido wouldn't mind taking a gander at those. But the thought of other men watching them made her skin crawl. And then a terrible thought occurred to her.

"Hey, Con? The videos of Kevin and me. Can anybody pull them up online? Can we just Google them?"

"I doubt it. The original plan was to sell the stuff, right? And if it's true that he made a thousand dollars a night, somebody has to be taking credit card numbers and uploading files. With Red in jail, there's nobody minding the store. Literally. I know it's hard to let go, but I wouldn't worry about that aspect too much. It's like Kevin said, people who traffic those kinds of sites are not people we'd bump into."

\* \* \* \* \*

They spent the night in a motel. Lon invited everybody out for a repeat of the party, and Kevin was all set to go. Con pulled the responsible-adult card on him and said they'd be staying out of the bars for their last night. Con and Kevin got a room, Lon got a room, and Jessy got her own. She felt empty without her friends within arm's length. She missed Kevin's prattle and Con's irresistible smirk.

At suppertime they reconvened in the guys' room and ordered room service. Kevin flipped through the channels. "Oh, guys. *The Blair Witch Project*. This is awesome."

By the time she'd finished her chicken strips, Jessy was thoroughly freaked-out and not looking forward to going to her own room. When she did slide under the covers, she was miserable—scared, lonely, and sad. At about ten thirty, she heard a knock on her door.

“Who is it?”

“It's me, Jess.” Kevin's voice was such a relief. Jessy hopped out of bed in her baggy shorts and T-shirt and opened the door.

“Con and I are watching baseball—wanna come over?”

“Boy, do I.” With a sudden love of baseball, she grabbed her door key and went with Kev. She spent the night in their room, curled up happily on Con's bed.

Finally Friday came, and they fished one more site, then said good-bye to Lon. In the truck, Jessy drove while Conrad looked over the data they had collected during their trip. He muttered absently about how to handle the crazy situation with only two days' worth of fishing data on a five-day trip.

“I'll come up with some excuse for having no numbers for the first three days.” He smiled weakly into the windshield and smoothed his mustache. “Maybe I can say we simply didn't catch any fish. Totally true.”

“So, Conman, how do you suppose they knew we were going to be there?” Jessy thought Kevin was asleep in the backseat, happy to have his MP3 player in his ears once again. His entry into the conversation surprised her.

Con put his papers down and shifted to look back at Kevin. “Jessy and I were talking about that. There's no way it was random. Jessy, they especially had to know you were on the crew.”

“Me? Why me?”

“Think about it. Women aren't that common on fisheries' crews. Wouldn't they have been disappointed if they'd turned up four guys? Nah. Somehow they knew we had two guys and a girl.”

“Could they look on our Web site? Are there pictures of us?” Jessy mentally ran through all the images she used when she created the Web pages.

“I suppose that information wouldn't be so hard to get. But how did they know we'd be at Badger Brook on August twenty-sixth?” Con directed his question to the window as the crew settled into silence for the drive home.

*Part Two:*

*The Relationship*



## Chapter Nine

When Conrad arrived at Jessy's apartment, he clucked at the security system—or the complete lack of one. The building had a wide-open front patio with a neglected courtyard off to one side. Double glass doors invited friends and enemies alike into a poorly lit lobby. Once inside, he looked around. No security cameras. It was probably a damn nice place in the fifties. But not a good place for the present times, and definitely not the stronghold that Jessy needed right now.

“Jessy, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I have to ask. Why the hell are you living here?”

Jessy poked her nose in the air a little. “It's very affordable. I know it doesn't look like much, but I like my apartment. It's huge. And it has great windows. You'll see.” She grabbed his arm and pulled him up the wide steps covered with ancient gold carpeting. “Here's mine, 2B. Remember that.”

When Jessy opened the door, Con stepped into another universe. His eyes didn't know where to begin. Tall windows invited soft sunlight into every corner, the bold impact muted by gauzy green curtains. Along one wall, a low, narrow table heaved with lush houseplants. Jessy liked things hanging from the ceiling apparently, because mobiles and wind chimes hung everywhere. Finally, a shining grand piano arrested his attention. An impressive piece of furniture, indeed.

“Look, Con, here's the antique dresser.” Conrad pulled his eyes away to see Jessy caressing the surface of the battle-worn antique. He remembered it looking much less elegant sitting out in the rain. “Kevin and his college friends helped me get it out of my truck and up the steps. Doesn't it look nice there?”

Jessy looked proudly at the old pine dresser, now furnished with a delicate lace cover and a vase of dried flowers.

“Jessy. This is the most amazing apartment I've ever seen.”

“Oh come on. It's not *that* great. Do you like my piano?” She made her way around the bench and sat down. “This is the one thing I kept from my marriage. When we decided I needed a piano, Jeff got me this. Nothing but the finest for Jeff Tanner.” She perched her fingers above the keys.

Conrad continued his visual feast, taking in smaller details of the apartment. “Tell me about all these mobiles. There has to be a story behind them.”

“Well, it's not really my story.” Jessy started to play a soft tune. “The woman who had the apartment before me had a deaf child. I guess she had all these wild and crazy things hanging from the ceilings to give the little girl beautiful things to look at. So when I got here, there were a million hooks up there. I bought a few things—a wind chime here, a crystal sphere there. Then I started collecting them. And ya know? I love it. I can't stop myself now. I'm afraid it's some kind of psychological disorder.”

Con laughed. “Maybe it is. But I love it too.” He looked at the mobile nearest him, with multicolored glass fish swimming in paper-thin strands of glass seaweed.

Jessy abruptly stopped playing. “Let me show you your room.”

The spare room didn't have nearly the attention to detail as the rest of the apartment. It was just crowded. It had a bed in it, at least. And an old computer, piles of clothes, boxes of books, and a saxophone. Grabbing all the attention in the room was a bulging upright bass.

“I'm sorry, Con. As you can see, I don't get many overnight guests.” Jessy pushed some boxes to the side to make room. “The bed is a good one. I just need to clear a path so you can get to it.”

“Jess, it's not a problem. In fact it's perfect. I was wondering when I would get a chance to practice the—” He looked with exaggerated confusion at Jessy and pointed a finger at the bass. He mouthed, *What is that?*

Jessy pushed him. “You're so weird. It's an upright bass. A contrabass, really. I got a great deal on it at an auction. Isn't it beautiful?”

“Hmpf. Do you know how to play it?”

Jessy bit her lip. He loved when she did that. “A little. I've never been much for strings, but I can pluck along with some music. It's more of a rhythm instrument.”

Con motioned to the saxophone suspended on a metal stand. “I know what that is. Do you play it?”

“Ah, now that I do play. That was my baby in high school. I marched all over Kansas with that thing.”

Con watched as Jessy fondly tapped the keys of the shiny gold saxophone. She amazed him. Again. “You're so talented. Will you play something for me?”

“On my sax? Heck no. Maybe later I'll scratch out some things on my guitar for you.” Con sensed her shifting gears and guessed the music tour was over. “Let me get some clean sheets for the bed. Those are probably dusty.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The comfort Con felt in Jessy's apartment surprised him. She was unpretentious and real, and they both put their feet up on the coffee table. That night she baked a frozen pizza, and they drank beer, watching the local news on a ridiculous twelve-inch black-and-white TV.

“So what brings your family to New Hampshire? If your sister's a cheerleader—Isn't it cheerleading season?”

“My mom said she had some legal things she needed me to tend to. I think it has to do with my dad's will. She just sold the farm, so maybe I have an inheritance or something. Morgan said she would catch up with her squad this weekend when they play the Patriots.”

"Your mom sold the family farm? Do you feel the need to go back there? One last visit?"

"Hmm." Jessy frowned and took a swig of her beer. "I don't have a big travel budget these days. Nor do I have enough vacation time."

"Jessy, why don't you talk to your supervisor? I've heard he's a very understanding guy. He'd let you take all the time you need." Con raised an eyebrow. "And seriously, I can loan you some travel money. If you need to mop up some memories, go do what you need to do."

Jessy looked at him for a long moment, but he sensed her sharp brown eyes were a million miles away and not focused on him. "When I left after the funeral, I took my dad's tackle box and fishing poles. I got his hat and a box of pictures. I have what I need. Thank you, though, Conrad." She reached over and tapped his hand.

She did grab her guitar later that evening, and what she called scratching, Con thought was beautiful music. He watched her play and fell under her spell. Everything she did seemed to be pure magic to him. The windows breathed only a whiff of night air into her warm apartment, and the wind chimes barely tickled their hypnotic, distant notes. Her creamy white skin radiated in the heat and made Con hungry to touch her.

At the close of the night, Jessy dangled a hairy green ball under Con's nose. "Here ya go, roomy. Come and go as you please." Con grabbed it and found it held a key to her apartment. She continued to look up at his tall figure, as if sizing him up. "I just can't do this. It isn't right."

"What are you talking about? What isn't right?"

"Take my bed. It's full-size, and, well, so are you. That one in the spare bedroom is small. I'm sure your feet will stick out."

"There's no way I'm—" A finger planted on his lips stopped him. Jessy grabbed his hand and led him into her bedroom. Con felt a ripple of excitement and a swelling in his jeans. *Down, boy.*

“See. It's okay. It's not like it's covered with lace and roses and teddy bears.”

Con looked around the room—another amazing creation by Jessy Tanner. There was a dry sink with a huge pitcher and washbasin, and towels flopped over a half-open cupboard door. Her bed had solid ornate spools in all four corners. A fuzzy green robe hung over the top of one. Above the bed, a flock of white swans flew, suspended from invisible string.

“My dad used to say I reminded him of a swan.”

Con looked from the swan mobile to Jessy. “That's a good animal for you.” Then he laughed. “What am I?”

Jessy's eyes lit up like fireworks. “What fun! Oh, I'm going to spend the night thinking about that.”

He'd had a thousand opportunities throughout the night to make a move, but it never seemed right. Yet he felt closer to her now more than ever. He didn't want to just grab her and screw her to the bed. Well, he did, but Jessy was special.

“Are you sure you want me in here?”

Jessy nodded her head. “You'll be much more comfortable. And I'll sleep better knowing you're not lying with your feet poking over the end of the bed.”

“You're treating me like a king.”

Jessy looked up at Con and placed her hand on his shoulder. “I'm treating you like a friend.”

What a kind gesture. Conrad tried to throw a wet towel on his horny thoughts, with no success. He longed to run his hand along the curve of her waist and cup her tight ass. Girls shouldn't be allowed to buy Levi's—not if they filled 'em out like Jessy did.

“Jess, I offered to stay with you to make you feel safe. But it's more than that.” He spoke softly, choosing his words like a diplomat. She'd been through so much in the last week. But so had he. He was ready to kick this relationship

door open. Instead he peered through the keyhole. "Jessy, do you think we can be coworkers and be more than friends?"

Jessy glided a hand along his cheek that seemed to leave a trail of sparkling dust. When she stretched up and touched her satin lips to his, Con saw stars. Her tongue slipped inside and eased his mind like a gentle rain.

"God, I'd love that," she whispered against his lips. He reached for more stars, but she'd already turned and headed for the door, leaving a floral bouquet in her wake.

"Did you sleep well?" Jessy scratched some jelly on toast, feeling sheepish for serving a man like Con such a weenie breakfast. Her cupboards were pretty bare, especially after being gone for a week.

"I slept great. Those big oak posts in the corners of your bed gave me all sorts of ideas."

Whoa. She didn't know what he meant by that, but her heart skipped a beat just to cover all the possibilities.

"I bought a new wood lathe a while back, and I'd like to try making something like that."

"Oh. A wood lathe."

"I'll get out of your hair today and head back to my cabin." He drank the last of his orange juice and put his glass in the sink. "Be sure and keep your door locked."

Jessy set her toast on the counter, her hunger gone. She wiped her hands on a small hand towel. "I saw an ad for an auction down in Peterborough that looked promising. That's where I'll be today, safe and sound." Jessy had a sinking feeling he'd forgotten about the baby relationship step they'd taken the night before. As Conrad walked toward the door, he grabbed her hand and pulled her into his chest.

"Can I come back tonight?"

His arms felt like they held the world at bay, and his blue eyes nearly buckled her knees. “Yes.” She was about to babble something more, but he kissed the words away. His mustache felt like heaven as he took tiny bites of her kiss and nibbled the breath from her lungs. This time her knees failed, but he held her so close, it didn't matter. When he stopped kissing her and looked into her eyes once again, she whispered to him, “I know your animal.”

“What?”

Her legs found solid ground as he backed away. “Your animal. You know, from last night?”

“Oh. It better not be a giraffe. I'm hoping for something deeper than that.”

“You seem like a cougar. Powerful, strong, cunning...and kind of a loner. How's that work for ya?”

Con didn't say anything, but he smiled and winked at her. “See you this afternoon.”

Jessy spent the day poking through a bizarre collection of junk and treasures, bidding on a few things but not too enthusiastic about anything in particular. On the way home she saw a sign for an orchard with GRANNY SMITHS ARE READY! written in big letters. Con had one of those every day in his lunch this summer. She stopped to pick him a fresh bag. As she picked, she pondered.

*More than friends.* Finally. Her thoughts lingered on the massive bulge in his jeans she'd seen the night before. Definitely more starting material than Kevin. With a long, drawn breath, Jessy closed her eyes and imagined how he would feel inside her, his body pressing down on hers. And his kiss...

She wobbled and nearly fell off her ladder, drawing the attention of some fellow pickers. “How do you like them apples?” Hoisting an apple in cheers, she took a big, juicy bite and giggled. Enough horsing around on the ladder. She decided to go home and cook a nice meal, put on a dress—show Conrad a little more of the real Jessy.

On the drive back to her apartment, the real Jessy thought about the possibility of an untimely pregnancy. She and Jeff had planned on waiting to have children—now she was glad of that. But she never liked the feeling of a condom. She'd opted to use a diaphragm instead. The new little vixen she'd discovered inside her would have hated to pollute her experience with Kevin with anything other than all of him, skin to skin. But the thought of telling that doe-eyed young man he'd soon be a daddy made her eyes mist over. With a fire brewing in her jeans, she thought ahead to the evening. The real Conrad, skin to skin. Where the hell was her diaphragm, anyway?

It was late afternoon when she pulled into the parking lot of her apartment building. She grabbed the bag of apples from the front seat of the Dodge and headed up the sidewalk.

“Hey, Jessy.”

Jessy jumped and let out a squeal. Kevin stood under the plastic white archway that led to the courtyard.

“Kevin! What are you doing here?” She stooped to gather the handful of apples that had toppled out of the bag when she jumped. Kevin grabbed some too and placed them on top.

“This is kind of a cool little nook. What is this?” He motioned around the courtyard as they entered. “Seems like a secret hideout.”

“It used to be a picnic area for the families that lived here. Now there are no families, and it's kind of crumbling. I never come here.” She sat her apples on the bench.

“So what are you and Conrad doing tonight? Anything?” He cocked his head to one side.

*Could you be any cuter?* “Just hanging out, I suppose. What are you doing in Manchester? Shouldn't you be moving into the dorms?”

“All done. It's quiet around there tonight. Dull.” He paused to consider something. “Hey, Jess. Let's go out. Will you go out with me?”



“Are you asking me out on a date?”

“Well, maybe I am.” He pretended to be defensive. “Do you have a better offer?”

“Kevin, besides the fact that it would look like I’m taking my—well, maybe not my son—but my adorable young nephew out on the town, we just can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Kevin caught Jessy around the waist and pulled her to him, looking deep into her eyes. “There’s no reason we can’t get together again.” He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, sweeping his velvet tongue inside her mouth. Without thinking, Jessy reached for him too, reacting to her memories of him and his easy, sensuous kisses.

Kevin’s arms held her tightly as his warm, creamy kiss covered her mind like a blanket. Then he grabbed her ass and pressed against her with his hips. His hard-on ground into her pubic bone, and she recalled how perfect he felt inside her. *Oh God, she wanted him inside her again.*

As her hormones blasted from zero to sixty, her thoughts ran alongside and skidded to keep up. She gave in to the desire and wrapped herself up in Kevin, meeting his thrusts. She crawled her fingers into his hair and breathed in his scent. It felt so easy to melt into him. Nineteen or not, he knew what to do with her body.

But Conrad. He was the one she wanted, and she was so close to landing him. One last second of Kevin’s mind-numbing kiss and she pulled away.

“Hold on, lover boy. We can’t do this.”

“Why not?” He kissed a path of temptation on her neck with hot breath bursting from his lungs. “You know it would be wonderful.”

That she did. “Kev, look. Let’s go grab a hot cocoa some blustery Saturday morning. Maybe I’ll take you antiquing. But this, we just can’t do this.” She pulled out of his arms.

"We can." His chest heaved as he gazed at her with his burning dark eyes. "Maybe not tonight. But I'm coming back, Jessy. I'm coming back. We're too good together." He grabbed her hand and kissed the back. Taking a few backward steps, he turned and grabbed an apple off the top of the bag and headed out through the arches. Jessy sat down on the graying wooden bench, suddenly feeling very old.

Conrad headed up the sidewalk and casually cast a glance into the courtyard. He backed up a step and looked again when he saw Jessy. And Kevin. He couldn't believe his eyes. He watched for only a moment as Jessy lost herself in the arms of her nineteen-year-old lover. The blood boiled in his veins. What, was she in love with this guy? Was the sex that unforgettable? He turned and headed back down the sidewalk toward his car.

"Hey, Conrad. You coming or going?"

Con turned as Kevin gallivanted toward him and playfully punched him on the shoulder. "I'm going. What are you doing here, Kevin?"

"I just came to ask Jessy to go out to dinner with me." He gave a defeated shrug of his shoulders. "She said no."

*Looked to me like she was trying to fuck ya right on the spot, ya little...*  
"Better luck next time." He turned to walk away.

"You okay, Con? You seem...distracted."

"Yeah? Well, you seem like you're—" Con paused and took a deep breath. "You better be on your way. The night is young." He headed for his car.

## Chapter Ten

Con didn't know where he was going. He raised his hand from the steering wheel to see he was doing seventy-five. He needed to let off some steam. *Kevin asked her out? Who did he think he was?* He drove south out of Manchester and saw a sign: MILLER SPORTS COMPLEX—blah blah blah blah—BATTING CAGES. Perfect.

He'd never heard of this place, but then, batting practice wasn't a high priority for him since he moved to New Hampshire. He paid for a cage and spent two hours clobbering a bunch of defenseless baseballs. His thoughts ranged from *Jessy, you horny little cradle robber* to *Kevin needs to be taught a lesson*. In between there was *You better back off, you little prick* and *She wants a lover boy instead of a man*. Some of these things he said aloud, but only to the ball as it popped out of the shoot. This was rapidly followed by a grunt and then a *crack*. When the vision of Jessy's leg wrapped around Kevin's ass sprang into view, he ratcheted up the speed of the pitch. By the time he was done, he had a good sweat going, and he felt much better.

If he wanted Jessy to forget about Kevin, maybe he needed to *make* her forget. He stopped to get a bottle of wine, even though he felt more like slamming a few beers. When he parked his car at her apartment, the setting sun poked a few late-evening rays through the trees and illuminated Jessy's green truck. Con smiled at the sight and shook his head. Walking up the sidewalk, he averted his eyes, not wanting to look at the burning spot where he had seen Jessy and Kevin in a lip-lock, practically fucking each other.

He didn't use his key. He knocked. When Jessy opened the door, any fragment of residual anger poofed into fairy dust. She looked like an angel. Her

skin had a porcelain beauty that made her dark eyes even more captivating. She wore a skirt that swirled and twirled and seemed to be made of wind, and a gauzy red blouse, unbuttoned just enough to show off the roundness of her breasts. Con couldn't help an indulgent glance from the top, all the way down, and back again. "God, you're beautiful."

"Thank you." Jessy turned, and Con followed.

"You need to ask who it is before you open the door." He pointed a scolding finger at her.

"You need to let a girl know what your plans are for dinner so she doesn't burn the chicken." She returned the scolding finger.

"Oh, jeez, I'm sorry. Were you expecting me for dinner?"

"Well yeah. I guess so." Jessy's eyes glittered with tears. "It's all right, just...help yourself. It's a little dry." She waved a hand nonchalantly toward the kitchen and went to look out her floor-to-ceiling window.

Con looked to the kitchen and saw a meal on the stove. He sniffed and realized the apartment didn't have the floral fragrance of yesterday but smelled instead like Italian food. He blew it. And to think Kevin was going to take her out to dinner.

"Jessy, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's okay, Con. It's just a recipe I saw on a box of pasta. Is that wine?"

"Yeah." Con went to grab a couple of glasses and found the most eclectic collection of dishes he'd ever seen in one cupboard. Not a single wineglass.

"So how was your auction?"

"A dud. But I stopped and picked you a bag of Granny Smith apples. I know you like those. The orchards aren't too busy yet, but Granny Smiths ripen early." She seemed preoccupied as she stared out the window, barely turning to acknowledge their conversation. Or maybe she was disgusted. Con figured being stood up for dinner would do that. He popped the cork and poured the wine.

"That was thoughtful. Thank you." All of a sudden, he felt like he was at a ninth-grade dance. So much for making her forget the teenager. "Hey, Jess? Would you play the piano for me? Something you wrote?"

Jessy's skirt wheeled in an arc as she turned to look at him. "Really? You'd like that?"

"Very much." He handed her a mug of wine.

She took a sip and narrowed her eyes at him, a smile hiding behind a softening pout. "I suppose I could play a little." Jessy floated over to the piano and set her wine on a coaster waiting for her on the shiny wood. "This is something I've been working on just this summer. It's not done, but here's what I have so far."

Con had never watched someone play a piano from such an intimate vantage point and couldn't believe the complexity of the music. Jessy's long, graceful fingers never seemed to touch the keys but simply glided above them, and the piano did as they asked. Her song was soft and soothing, and Con was enchanted.

When she finished, she reached to take a sip of wine. A satin white bra strap sneaked down her shoulder, and she swept it back up again. It was the most innocent and sexiest thing he could imagine. Her arms were slender and strong, and her hair tumbled loosely around her shoulders.

"What'd ya think?"

"I think you have amazing talent. That was beautiful." He watched a lovely blush rise to her cheeks. She put the mug down again and pounded out a bouncy little rhythm with a playful key run at the end. Then she rose from the piano bench and stepped around to where Con stood.

She stood toe-to-toe with him and looked up to meet his gaze. She was so beautiful. Her eyes spoke volumes directly into his heart. *I'm right in front of you. What are you waiting for?*

His hands glided under her hair to caress her neck, and his fingers tangled in curls. He leaned down and touched her lips so gently with his, slipping his tongue into the silkiness of her mouth, smelling the flowers that seemed to be in every one of her exhales. *What was he waiting for?*

Her hands perched on his chest and gently pushed him away. "You're sweaty. Were you working out?"

Okay. She was waiting for an explanation of why he was late. Fair enough. "Kind of." He coiled a curl around one of his fingers. "Jess, I came here earlier—I saw you and Kevin in the courtyard."

"You did?"

"Yeah. And it pissed me off. I'm not going to stand around and let him mess with you."

"Kevin's not messing with me, Conrad. Honestly." She stepped back and took her curl with her. "We discovered something—a passion. We were forced together, and it felt good. It's hard to forget."

Shit. How could he compete with that? His only power card was honesty. "Jessy, listen. My first day on the job in the fisheries program, you knocked my socks off. I couldn't believe you were my assistant biologist. But I swore I would never get involved with someone I work with. Never again. I paid a high premium for that in the past. Almost got me booted out of the Coast Guard. But you...you drive me crazy. Just the thought of you and Kevin..."

"I wanted it to be you." Her words were soft and spoken like an apology. She stood like a goddess, a picture of strength under a veil of vulnerability and beauty. Con's heart beat with a furious rhythm, and his hands trembled.

"I want you, Jessy. Tell me I can have you tonight." God, that sounded perverted. He wanted to be so smooth...

"I'm yours." Her breath came in bursts, and her chest heaved.

Two steps and she was in his arms. No sweet, nibbled kisses would satisfy his need. He swallowed her lips and squeezed the breath from her lungs. She

responded with erotic moans and gasps for life. Oh, he had waited so long to hold her just like this. She would be his tonight.

He scooped her up and carried her to the couch. He feasted on the vision of her lying there, wanting him, begging him. She traced his mustache with trembling fingers and then began to unbutton his shirt. "Don't be afraid of me, Con."

Con's shirt slipped from his shoulders as Jessy's gentle caress curved around and down his back. His heart hammered with a need to be touched as her fingers glided across his chest. He inhaled deeply and sank down onto her, closing the space between them. Her satin lips invited him inside, so warm and willing. He drove his tongue into her mouth and tasted her sweetness, mentally washing away any trace of Kevin. As her fingers swept up his back, he pressed harder and groaned with a hunger to brand her as his. She needed a man, not a boy.

Her hips thrust upward for attention and rubbed against his cock as he fumbled with the buttons of her blouse. The thought of her delicious pussy creaming for his lips to taste launched a wave of heat he didn't know if he could control. He abandoned the blouse for the moment and grabbed her pussy through her skirt, running a rough hand over the prominent mound. He'd have all of her.

The telephone rang with a shrill tone right next to the couch.

"Don't answer that, Jess." Con's fingers worked with a fever to get Jessy's blouse off. It was fastened with the damndest little satin buttons.

"I think I need to get it—it could be my mom." Jessy jammed a hungry tongue into Con's mouth.

"Let the machine get it." The last button was giving him a surprising amount of trouble.

"I don't have a machine."

He stopped all action and looked at her with disbelief.

Jessy picked up the 1950s model phone. "Hello? Hello? Is anyone there?" There was a pause. "Ah, no. Chestnut." Pause. "Six twenty-five Chestnut." Pause. "It should be open, yeah." Pause. "Two-B. I'm sorry, could I have your name?" Jessy put the receiver back on its black rocker with a puzzled look on her face.

"What was that all about?"

"I guess I'm getting a package." Jessy gave a careless shrug.

"Tell me you didn't just tell a total stranger your street address and apartment number."

"Not a stranger. A neighbor. He said he lives in the apartment building across the street. He got a package with my name by mistake. Now where were we?" She climbed onto his lap, straddling him as he sat on the couch, and slid her arms around his neck. Her blouse was almost completely open, exposing creamy white breasts under a veil of lace.

Con drew in a long breath. The phone call didn't sit right with him. A neighbor would give his name. He was glad he was staying the night. But what about the next night? And the next? Jessy spilled puddles of fire on his neck as she kissed him. He made a mental note to worry about the phone call later. With a nod of his head, he motioned to the bedroom. "Let's take it in there."

Jessy lit a single taper candle on the dresser that cast a soft yellow glow around the room. She slipped out of her bra and unzipped her skirt, gliding it over her hips and off. Con watched her move with a desire he'd never known. He wanted Jessy's sexy, long limbs wrapped around every part of him, clutching at him, surrendering to him. But it was more than her sex appeal. He was falling in love, probably for the first time in his life. All he could think of was laying claim to her. Tonight, he would.

She slid down to the sheets, reclining in a sensual position on her side. Con saw that curve again—it was the most delicious part of Jessy.



He sat beside her and ran his hand over the curve, noticing the contrast of his tan skin against hers, flawless and soft. He leaned down and kissed her waist and drew his tongue around to her stomach. Jessy relaxed onto her back as Con continued to explore her, tempting the satiny fabric of her panties.

"Will you let me pleasure you?" He reached his fingers between her legs and made tiny swirls on her inner thigh.

"I'll let you do anything."

Con pulled her panties down, taking his time to escort them along her legs and over her perfectly painted toes. When he slipped a long finger inside, he felt the silken cream glide him in. Jessy moaned with approval and tilted her hips to draw him deeper. He smiled, knowing he'd soon have her quivering.

Kneeling between her legs, he slid his hands under her hips and encouraged her to swing her legs over his shoulders. He held her firmly, possessively, her thighs widening to give him access. His first wet lick made her cry out with excitement. A quick suck of her clit and she tried to slip away. "*Oh, Conman...*"

"Hang on, girl. I'm just getting started." He plunged with his tongue and made rapid circles on her tiny bud, eliciting coos and moans and wiggles. He didn't know the details of her and Kevin's experience, but her timidity made him guess this was a first for Jessy.

She raised her hips with breathless gasps, and he followed, letting her body ride the tidal wave he created. He'd hold her with no escape when she was close to climaxing. First, he wanted Jessy to writhe with ecstasy. She was his, willingly, bucking her hips to his feeding.

He let loose his grasp of her with one hand and slipped his finger deep inside her once again, searching for that single magical spot. "Oh God, oh..." Her words trailed off into soft whispers of pleasure as she raised her hips greedily for more. He found it. He felt her hot muscles clutch him as he relentlessly sucked and tugged on her clit, a single long finger massaging some mysterious, unseen spot.

“Conman, stop, stop.” She repeated those words softly, punctuating them with whimpers of total release. She didn't want him to stop, as her trembling hands fumbled in his hair. Oh, Jessy gave in to him so sweetly. Her coos of pleasure made him feel powerful, his heart thundered in his chest.

Jessy was certain fireworks had just exploded in her bedroom. She nestled back onto her pillow, still recovering from the last orgasm that sent her to the stratosphere. Con's skillful tongue had escalated her up and over the edge for a free fall at least twice. She remembered someone begging for more—it must have been her, although she wasn't sure of anything at the moment.

Jeff had never liked that kind of intimacy, and Jessy realized now it was because he didn't have a clue what he was doing. Con sure as hell did. He sidled up beside her and ran a gentle hand over the flatness of her stomach. Jessy looked at him dreamily. “Where did you learn to do that?”

He just smiled. “You're so beautiful.”

“Mmm. Good answer.” She pulled his face close to hers. She could kiss him forever. She reached down to feel his cock, thick and long, still straining to get free. Con moaned at her touch as she released him from his briefs and slid his pants down over his hips. She bit her lip and filled her lungs slowly. Her sexual experience was limited, but she knew his size was impressive. He made Jeff look like a child.

She touched him again, pulling up long and hard along the tremendous length of his cock. Con rose above her, grabbed her hands, and perched them above her head. He came down to her breasts and drew a nipple into his mouth, sucking hard. Jessy mewled with pleasure as he moved to the other breast. “Conrad, please. I want you.”

He inched his way to her lips. “Let me get to my jeans pocket.”

“No. Don't. It's taken care of.”

His mustache and tongue took turns driving her wild on her neck. "Taken care of?"

"I put my diaphragm in."

"Oh, girl." With a slow glide, he began to enter her. She opened up to it all, letting her legs fall open. Conrad perched his elbows on either side of her head and slowly drove his massive cock deeper, kissing her to swallow her gasps. Her muscles pulled willingly, drawing him in, burying him to the furry hilt. He moaned and whispered her name. She had never had a man so large and so powerful inside her before. The weight of his body on top of hers thrilled her, and she ran her hands along his ribs, feeling them expand with his labored breath. As they lay united, she felt him trembling and knew his need was overpowering.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Conrad, let it loose," she whispered into his neck. "I want you so much." She felt like she wanted to cry in anguish, not from pain but from longing. She'd fantasized about this for so long, and now she finally had him inside her. *Conrad*. "Please, just fuck me."

Con made each entry last a deliciously long time to reach full penetration, and Jessy moaned, raising her arms above her head in submission. Their union crossed the fine line of pain, giving way to pleasure, and her heart raced with the sensation of taking all of him. At that moment, she wanted him to ravage her and please himself inside her. Tears filled her eyes, and she could only expel clouds of weak air into his ear.

Their motions synchronized, and she rose to receive each long, smooth surge. Slippery, delicious sounds danced in the air as he withdrew and plunged into her again. He gave it to her completely and called her name, making wild-animal sounds with each thrust. "Jessy, come for me. Don't hold back."

There was no holding back. Con's cock impaled her with an endlessness that made her feel helpless beneath him. He stole her body for his own pleasure, and she happily relinquished it. Jessy's breathing exploded in short

bursts. What was happening? She purred out sounds she'd never made before. The feeling had no shape or description, but she wanted it to go on forever. She panted as her muscles contracted around him in her hot, creamy cave. She moaned. "Oh God, Conman."

He drove hard inside her, not fearing he would hurt her—she wanted this, more and more and deeper and harder.

She was lost—Conrad was sending her to the stars. She let go with a shudder. Why did it have to end? Conrad's hot juice spilled inside, pulsed into her. *Let it come.*

Jessy's body tingled all over. Her sweaty skin mingled with Conrad's, his body dominating hers. They stayed like that for a thousand years, hearing nothing, sensing nothing but their thundering hearts settling back to a normal rhythm. Con pulled himself out and looked down into her eyes. She kissed him tenderly as deep emotion washed over her.

"Why haven't we been doing that all summer?" Conrad asked breathlessly, his weight still heavy on top of her.

Jessy smiled and stroked the pulse at his neck and felt his heartbeat, falling in love with every thump. He slipped to one side and supported himself on one elbow.

"So will you tell me? How many guys have you been with, Jessy?"

Jessy sat up and covered herself loosely with the sheet. She shook her head and laughed, looking down at Con's gorgeous form lying in her bed. Men. Why didn't they just walk around with rulers, measuring each other's dicks? Wasn't it enough she damn near lost consciousness from his touch?

"Conman, college was a rockin' good time for me. I lost count a few weeks into my freshman year."

He grabbed her and threw her onto the bed, pinning her hands above her head. He looked down at her with a sneaky grin. "You are so full of crap." Then he leaned down and kissed her neck softly. Jessy felt his mustache dust her

skin, and she moaned with approval. "I could do anything I want with you right now. I think I'll torture you, just like this, until I get the truth out of you."

More mustache kisses made Jessy coo and then giggle. "If this is torture, I'll never tell."

Con stopped and looked into her eyes. He looked serious. "Are you gonna be able to forget the nineteen-year-old?"

Oh. So that's what this was about. He needed some reassurance.

"Con, Jeff was my first, and I'm afraid Kevin was the second. What happened to us up north was forbidden and raw—it set me off-kilter. It's like I told you. We just lost ourselves and were both surprised by how strong that animal drive was." She ran her fingers through his waves of sandy hair. "But Conrad, no one has ever made love to me like you just did. And yeah, that includes the nineteen-year-old."

Sunday morning Conrad awoke with a mass of curls snuggled onto his shoulder. His heart swelled at the thought of having Jessy in his life—in a big way. *What was I waiting for?* His breath quickened as he considered the past week. Or even the past twenty-four hours. A little rain cloud formed above his head when he realized he had plunged into the deep end. After guarding his bachelorhood for nearly twenty years, he'd moved damn fast with this one. It felt so right, but still. He knew his history. Was he gonna break her heart? Have some fun and then push her away when she got too close?

All his thoughts bumped into each other. He wasn't blind—Jessy was getting in deep and looking to pull him down with her. It didn't feel like a noose—not like it usually did. The Jessy he knew was warm and gentle and had a captivating vulnerability. Last night she had loved him so passionately, stirring him like no one ever had. Conrad had bedded too many women who wanted to control him. Jessy trusted him to take her completely, giving herself to him. He breathed in deeply and kissed the tousled curls.

She stirred and nestled deeper into his neck. “Hmm. I'm dreaming I'm in Conrad's arms. Don't wake me.” She nibbled a few little bites of his earlobe.

Con felt the softness of her kisses and ran a hand down the curve of her body. He could get so used to this.

“Jessy.” He paused as she danced her lips around his ears. “I'm forty. I just thought you should know.”

Jessy laughed into his neck. Then, lifting the blankets, she lowered herself, wet kiss after wet kiss, down his chest and farther. Con inhaled sharply when she grabbed his cock and began to do some magic. He threw the sheets back and let her have her way. *Oh, I could get used to this too.*

“I'm going to miss you, Con. My mom and Morgan will only be here for a few days, but I know it will feel like months. At least I have wonderful new memories of you to keep a smile on my face.”

Jessy looked at Conrad's freshly showered hair and appreciated the loose waves coming to life at his neck. He sipped his coffee in the morning light, an amazing specimen of everything manly. Her limbs still tingled with the memory of his hands caressing her, his tongue on fire inside her, his ass tightened... She pleased him. As a friend, she'd come to know Con as one who expected to be in charge. And nobody argued. In bed she happily, hornily bowed to his wishes. What he did for her was indescribable. She wasn't kidding about the smile on her face.

“I don't like working when you're not at your desk next door. Hey, you don't happen to have a picture of you, do you? Something I can keep in my top drawer?” He winked.

Jessy almost commented that she knew a guy who might have some pretty amazing video of her, but she bit her tongue. Instead, she wrapped her arms around him one last time. “Remember me in your heart. Keep your key. You never know. I might just let you become a regular around here.”

Con opened the door and almost stumbled over a package. He reached down and picked it up. "I guess this is the delivery from last night." He looked it over and gave it a little shake. "Looks normal enough."

Jessy looked at the shoebox-sized package and noticed a prominent *MMM* in the corner. It didn't look like Morgan's frilly handwriting, but those were her initials. "I'll bet you anything Morgan sent herself something. I'll betcha five hundred dollars."

"Ah, that's not a bet I'm willing to take." Con handed her the box, kissed her lips, and headed down the steps. He turned one last time. "Be careful, Jess. I know you'll be with your family, but be alert."

"I'll be alert." She waved down to him. "I'll be a miserable 'lert." The words *I love you* unexpectedly sprang to her lips, but she caught them. "Bye, Conman."

Alone in her apartment, Jessy missed Con's broad shoulders already. Holy crap, he looked good without a shirt on. Her heart felt warm, and optimism finally danced around the edges of her life. She sat down at her piano and rested her hands on the keys. She'd been blocked for months, unable to write the songs that were in her heart. The half-written song she'd played for Con the night before began to take on new life, and ideas popped up like daisies. She could finish it now.

As her fingers tickled along the keys, her gaze fell to the package. She had little doubt it was makeup or something else of earth-shattering importance that Morgan couldn't bring on the flight. After some consideration, she decided to open it. After all, it had her name on it. The clunky handwriting on the outside was certainly curious. Morgan must have had someone else send it.

The brown paper fell away, and she ripped the tape on the side of the box. When she lifted the lid, Styrofoam peanuts tumbled out. She gently pawed through the box, and her finger caught on the strap of something. She pulled up black lace. Slowly drawing the entire garment from the peanuts, she saw it was a barely there black teddy. It was beautiful.

Did her narcissistic sister finally slip over the edge? What an odd package. She rummaged in the box for more as peanuts spilled all over the counter. When she pulled the next item up, her stomach lurched. A colorful hair scrunchie dangled from one finger. She let it slip from her finger onto the counter, certain she'd hear a clap of thunder to match her thundering heart. But her apartment remained ghostly silent.

Jessy reached for a stool to sit down and stared at the scrunchie. The image of Red violently yanking it from her hair played before her eyes. This package was from him. One more frantic rummage in the box came up empty. In a panic, she tipped the contents all over her kitchen counter. A folded sheet of notebook paper sat askew on top of the pile of peanuts. Written with the same clunky hand, it simply said, *See you soon.*



## Chapter Eleven

Jessy picked Morgan and her mom up at the airport with gift bags of New Hampshire novelties and a stomach full of butterflies. She hadn't seen her mom since her dad's funeral four years ago. On that day, she'd pulled out of the driveway with the back of her dad's truck loaded with as many of her memories as she could fit. It wasn't that they parted on bad terms. Quite the opposite. Lois McNair was warm and supportive and glad to get her older daughter out of her hair. She even let Jessy take her grandmother's clock. Jessy had always admired it sitting on the mantel in the living room.

The passing of her father had devastated Jessy. She never understood her family dynamics but grew to accept them and eventually embraced them. She was her dad's daughter; Morgan was her mom's. Simple as that.

Morgan was five years younger than Jessy and accustomed to pampering. Jessy assumed her apartment was rife with grievances for her little sister to grouse about. No air-conditioning, just one bathroom, no cappuccino machine. She'd spent two days cleaning the spare room, dragging musical instruments out and making room in the closet. Morgan would be unimpressed, but Jessy thought it shaped up pretty well. Her mom would have her bedroom, and she'd take the couch.

The package weighed on her mind like a load of cement. Could it be that Red was no longer jailed in Canada? Did they set him free? She hadn't told Conrad about it. Not yet. She'd be safe with a house full of guests. For that reason alone, she was glad for their visit.

Jessy saw them coming out of the tunnel with their fellow travelers and waved. Morgan looked more stunning than ever. She was petite and dark-

haired and had the same McNair brown eyes. Hers were darkened with a load of makeup that made her look like a movie star. Hugs all around, a quick poke through the gift bags, and they headed for the car-rental desk. Jessy had reserved a nice midsize for their stay. She sure wasn't going to listen to Morgan bitch about Dad's old truck. She hoped her mom would kick in for the rental.

“So Jessy, what are you doing with your hair? It looks wilder than ever. That

is so much in style now. Sort of a rebellion against the salons.” Jessy recognized Morgan's comment for what it was. An insult with a weak compliment wrapped around it.

“Yup, Morgan, that's me. A salon rebel. Here are your car keys. Can you guys follow me okay? It's not very far to my apartment.”

On the drive to her place, Jessy motored through an entire pack of Juicy Fruit gum. Her nerves were frazzled, and she wanted to be back at the pub slamming Jack Daniel's and smoking a cigar with her friends. The gum wasn't strong enough. She toyed with the idea of telling her sister and mom about her abduction. Toyed with it for about twenty seconds and then dismissed it. These weren't gal pals—something Jessy felt very short on these days.

The two women were astonished when they walked into Jessy's apartment. Even Morgan couldn't come up with a derogatory comment. Everyone unpacked, and they had Kentucky Fried Chicken for supper. Mrs. McNair asked Jessy to play her piano, so she tickled out some familiar songs. They played a few hands of rummy and went to bed. Jessy curled up on the couch. *And this is only Tuesday.*

Wednesday turned into a painful frenzy of sightseeing. They drove the rental car to Franconia Notch and toured everything tourable on their way back down. Morgan was whiny, her mom was bored, and Jessy was miserable.

That evening Jessy's mom brought some paperwork out and told Jessy to look it over. Owen McNair had left the farm to all three women. Now that it was under contract to be sold, Jessy had some papers to sign.

“Should I have an attorney or someone explain any of this to me?”

Morgan pounced like a cat. “Jessy, it's not like our mom is trying to screw you. We just want to get out from under that run-down old farm. You ran off with Jeff, leaving us to watch that eyesore fall apart, shingle by shingle.”

“You guys haven't lived in Junction City for years. Even when Dad was alive, you two lived in Kansas City. I hardly think it's been a real burden for you, Morgan.”

Morgan and Mrs. McNair had gotten a condo in Kansas City when Morgan was Miss Kansas. It was just easier for them to make all the engagements. Jessy always wondered why her mom had to go with her. She figured Morgan needed a handmaiden. It had to dampen her appetite for men, having her mom there. Jessy laughed to think of her mom stuffing cotton into her ears, shutting out Morgan's wild escapades. More than anything, she'd worried about her dad out there on the farm alone. And for good reason. When his heart stopped beating, he'd lain undiscovered for four days.

Mrs. McNair intervened in the girls' conversation. “Jessy, it's time to let the farm go. We have a buyer, and we're getting a good deal.”

“I'm not saying I want to keep the farm, Mom. I just thought maybe it would be good to know what I'm signing.”

“Well, this is saying that we—the three McNairs on the will—are selling the whole place for three hundred fifty thousand dollars. Split equally. Minus all the fees and whatnot.”

“Did you say—”

Morgan flew in her face again, this time bubbling with excitement. “Can you believe it? We're going to get a pile of money. The farm's all paid for.”

“So that's over one hundred thousand dollars each. Are you sure?”

“Jessy, that farm has been in the McNair family for a long time. It has no debt. I know it's hard to let go, but I think you could use the money.”

“No kidding.” Morgan waved her toned arm around the room.

Jessy ignored the dig at her apartment. They were right. Jessy needed the money, and her sentimental feelings about the family farm had been eclipsed by the thought of her dad lying lifeless on the kitchen floor. She never wanted to go back there.

“When do we get the money?”

“You sign these papers, and we’ll close the deal when we get back to Kansas.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Thursday the threesome headed to the coast and returned early. They were all exhausted. Jessy slipped out to get some groceries and to see if anybody was selling bottles of sanity. Her visitors were driving her crazy.

With her arms wrapped around a paper sack full of snacks and some special request Snapple for Morgan, she headed toward her truck. The sun rested just above the tree line and beamed into her eyes. Jessy took a long, deep drag of fresh September air. As she made her way across the parking lot, she fumbled for the keys in her jeans pocket and casually glanced at her truck. It needed washing. Was someone leaning against the tailgate? She shifted the grocery bag and raised her hand to shield her eyes from the sun's glare.

The blood froze in her veins, and her feet rooted to the pavement. Larry stood with an arm resting on the back end of her truck. Waiting for her.

The air turned to quicksand, and the world went still. A car horn beeped. “Miss, are you gonna move?”

In a slow-motion fog, Jessy looked to see a plump woman in a minivan waving her out of the way. She stood in the middle of the parking lot with her snacks and Snapple. In another slow-motion shift of her eyes, she looked back to her truck. She blinked. No one was there.

“I’m kinda in a hurry here.” *Beep beep.*

With her eyes trained on her truck, Jessy took a few mindless steps to move from the path of traffic. Was he really there? The sun—it was in her eyes. It could have been anyone.

She climbed into the truck and sat in silence, staring at the steering wheel. Her windows were rolled down like they always were on a hot day. There was no point in locking the doors.

They were there. In Manchester. Jessy inhaled a thready breath. Conrad needed to know.

When she got back to the apartment, Mrs. McNair was there alone.

“Where's Morgan?” Still shaken, Jessy placed the grocery bag on the kitchen counter. Instead of standing nicely, it tipped over. She retrieved the rolling beverages before they fell to the floor. “I saw the rental car in the parking lot. Did she go for a walk?” That seemed implausible since they had done nothing but walk for two days.

“A friend of yours stopped by and offered to take Morgan to the store. She's been dog tired these last few days. She needed to get something for her feet, I think she said.”

There were so many things wrong with her mother's answer, Jessy didn't know where to begin. Friend? What friend? She thought of Kevin.

“Mom, who was it that stopped by?”

“I believe he said his name was Conrad. Tall and handsome. He said he worked with you.”

Jessy grabbed a chair to sit down before she fell. Con was there and left with her sister? What the hell for?

“Where did they go?”

“Well, Morgan wanted to go to the mall, but you know Morg. I'll bet he'll take her out to dinner.”

“Mom, I asked Morgan if there was anything we needed to stop for. *I* offered to take you guys to the mall. Why would she ask Conrad—” She banged her palm to her forehead in utter disbelief.

“Oh, now don't be angry. This trip has been hard for Morgan. She took time out from her cheerleading training for this. Luckily she'll meet up with her friends this weekend.”

Jessy wanted to huff into her bedroom and slam the door, but the room wasn't hers at the moment. This made no sense. Did Conrad just happen to show up and willingly grab her sister for a dinner date?

“All right. Let me get this straight. Tell me exactly what happened. Start with Con knocking on my door.”

Con pulled into the parking lot and didn't see Jessy's green Dodge. He didn't want to interrupt her family visit, but he had forgotten his flash drive at her place. He'd been missing it all week at work. He hoped they weren't home and he could just get in with his key.

When he got to the door, he knocked. A drop-dead gorgeous brunette opened the door. She had Jessy's eyes, smothered with makeup.

“Can I help you with something?”

“Is Jessy home?”

“I'm afraid she isn't. She stepped out to get some things. I'm Morgan, Jessy's little sister. Who might you be? Jessy didn't mention she had any men as handsome as you coming around.” Con gulped and wondered if this woman would notice if he turned and ran down the steps and out the door.

Con introduced himself and explained how he knew Jessy.

“So Jessy works for you? Lucky gal.” Con wasn't easily intimidated by a pretty face, but the way Morgan looked at him made him want to run for cover.

An attractive older woman came up behind Jessy's sister and politely pushed her aside. "Conrad, is it? I'm Lois McNair, Morgan's mom. Why don't you come in and sit down? Jessy won't be long."

Con noticed she didn't say Jessy *and* Morgan's mom. Another wistful glance toward the exit and they whisked him inside. He sat on the couch, and Morgan slid in right beside him. They chatted about Kansas and about the Kansas City Chiefs and, of course, about cheerleading. Con was amused by this girl who looked so much like Jessy. She was darker, with black hair and artificially tanned skin. It was like looking at Jessy in a Halloween costume. He laughed to himself, not really listening to anything Morgan said.

"Conrad, would you do me a favor? Do you suppose you could take me to the mall? I need to pick up a few...girl items. Jessy's been such a trooper, and I wouldn't want to ask her to go out again when she gets back. It'll only be a quick scoot into a store."

"Oh, Conrad, that would be so nice of you," Mrs. McNair campaigned. "Morgan has been trailing around to all these touristy things. Jessy's a great tour guide, but I think Morgan could use a nice, quiet night out. Maybe even dinner. All we've had is takeout since we got here."

Conrad was aghast. What were they, a goddamn tag team? "I'm sorry, but I just came to pick up something I left here. I need to get going. And Jessy wouldn't want me taking you away for the evening."

"Mom, of course he and I can't go to dinner." She turned back to Con and rolled her eyes. "But listen, I do need to get to a drugstore," she whispered. "Forget what Mom was saying. If you could just give me a lift to the mall, I'll only be a second."

Con thought a moment and figured this wasn't asking too much. "All right. I can do that. Are you ready?" He stood to head out the door.

"I'll just be a minute." Morgan disappeared into the spare room. Con wondered if Jessy's bass was still in there. When Morgan came back out, she wore a short white tank top and a tight pair of hip-huggers. He hadn't seen a

rack that nice in a long time. Morgan was trim and toned and probably more athletic than Jessy. But she didn't have the long, lean lines that Jessy had. She was a caricature. There was nothing real about this girl. He looked quickly back at the tits while Morgan rummaged in her purse. No way—even they weren't real. He'd bet money on it.

He drove Morgan to the mall and made small talk on the way. “Tell me more about what it's like to be a professional cheerleader.” He smirked over how strange those words sounded coming out of his mouth. Morgan was a beautiful bundle of pep, and he did let his eyes feast on the tight tank top—real or not.

“Do you think Jessy and I look alike?”

“Sure you do. In the eyes. Of course, she's got a few inches on you.”

“Oh yes. The long-legged, elegant piano player. I've heard it all my life. My dad called her a swan. You know what he called me? A chickadee, of all the damn things. Well, I guess his swan is a divorced thirty-year-old living in a flea-bitten apartment, catching smelly fish for a living. Ha!”

“Nothing wrong with catching smelly fish for a living.”

“Oh sure, no offense. Not for a big, handsome guy like you.”

He pulled up to the curb at the main entrance to the mall. “I'll drive around a couple of times and watch for you.”

“What? Come on. Park over there and walk me in. I promise I won't drag you around, just escort me in.”

Con parked as Morgan continued. “I just want to get to know you. Are you Jessy's boyfriend?”

Conrad's mind flashed to the closeness he and Jessy had shared over the weekend. Was he her boyfriend? “We, ah, we're taking it slow, but yeah. I guess we're heading in that direction.” Yikes.



“Heading in that direction? God, that sounds like Jess.” They walked into the mall, and Morgan slung her arm through his. A cloud of fruity fragrance drifted in the air when she swirled her smooth black hair.

“Here's a drugstore. I'll wait here.” Con sat on a bench in the mall corridor and waited. He waited a long time. *What the hell could she be doing?* Finally he went into the drugstore and scoped out all the aisles—no Morgan. He stepped back out into the mall, puzzled. *Did I just lose Jessy's sister?*

He roamed down a few stores and saw a restaurant. The barbecue smell wafted into the mall corridor, but Conrad smelled a rat. A rat with silky black hair and great tits. He walked in and saw her sitting at the bar, sipping a tall drink, and flirting with a couple of men.

“Oh, Conrad, I'm so sorry. I just had to have a Tom Collins. Do you like them?” Blabberty blabberty blabberty. Con wasn't listening but was astounded at the audacity of Jessy's sister.

“What are you doing, Morgan? When did you decide to come in here, and why didn't you tell me, for Christ's sake?”

The other two men looked with disapproval at Con's tone. And his intrusion. “Is she with you?” one of them asked.

“Let's go, Morgan.”

“Come on, Conrad. Sit down and let me finish my drink. Don't be angry. I promise, we'll leave right after I've finished.”

Conrad was no fool, and he knew when he was being played. This girl was good, but he wasn't buying any of it. “Let's go.”

“Just let me finish. This thing cost me—well, him—six dollars. Let me drink it. I've been to every tourist trap in New Hampshire, and I need a little refreshment.”

Con realized he couldn't very well drag her out bodily, so he relented and sat on the stool next to her. Should he call Jessy? He didn't carry a cell phone. Outside of work he had little use for them. Plus he thought it made guys look

feminine. “Morgan, why don't you call your sister and let her know where you are.”

“Jessy will figure it out. Mom knows where we are—she'll tell her.” Morgan coiled herself around his shoulders and blew a little kiss into his ear. It was after seven o'clock when they finally walked out into the cool September evening.

“I could have stayed. Aaron, the dark-haired one, offered to take me out to dinner. But I lied and told him you were taking me out.” She paused and swept her fingers up the length of his arm. “Why won't you take me out to dinner? I haven't eaten since lunch.” She danced a delicate hand around Conrad's collar. “I'm weak from hunger.”

Con was done with her manipulations. With a quick hand, he caught her by the wrist. “Stop this. I'm taking you back to Jessy's.”

The quickness and forcefulness of his action clearly surprised Morgan. She narrowed her eyes in anger. “You're a fool.” She wheeled around and climbed into the car.

They rode in silence on the way back to Jessy's until Morgan piped up. “You know, I pull in three hundred dollars an hour for appearances. I can't think of a single thing Jessy could do that'd be worth that much. Even in bed.”

You're wrong about that, Con thought as he seethed inside. Was it okay to hate Jessy's sister this much?

“Where do you live, Conrad? Are you in Manchester too?”

“I'm out of town a couple of miles.”

“In the woods? Would you take me there?”

Conrad shook his head. “No, Morgan. I'm not taking you to my place.”

“Is it a farm? Or by a lake? I'm totally sincere. Tell me about your place. This is so different from Kansas.”

“I have a log cabin.”

Con and Morgan zipped through town while she sucked details out of him about his cabin. Whatever. He just wanted to get rid of the cobra sitting next to him that seemed ready to swallow him whole.

Jessy was poor company for her mom. The impetus for Conrad and Morgan's sudden need for a dinner date remained unclear. Her mom made it sound like they'd chummed around the apartment and decided Morgan needed to get out for a while, and Con was more than willing to oblige. That seemed extremely unlikely to Jessy, but still. Where were they? Her mom had her playing the piano, and she couldn't keep the black and white keys straight. Her mom wrinkled her nose at the sour notes, and Jessy closed her eyes, hoping it was all a bad dream.

She heard people in the hallway outside her apartment and ran to the door, stubbing her toe on the coffee table on the way. "Goddamn it!"

She paused and listened. No more voices. Was she mistaken? Coolly, Jessy opened the door. When she did, she saw Con and Morgan in the midst of a kiss.

Conrad pushed Morgan off his lips and looked at Jessy with regret. "Jessy, I-I..." he stammered. "I was just saying good night to Morgan."

"No kidding." Jessy slammed the door and began to walk away but realized she couldn't leave Morgan out there with no key. Opening the door again, she refused to look at Con. "Morgan, you wanna come in?"

"Yes, I suppose I better. Thank you, Conrad, for taking me to your cabin. It's darling." She waved demurely and entered the apartment. Con was about to say something, but Jessy cut him off with a slamming door.

When Morgan entered the apartment, Jessy looked at her in disbelief. "What game are you playing, Morgan? What the hell was that all about?"

"What was that all about? I've been so bored here, Jessy, and Conrad offered to take me out on the town. Why would I turn down an offer like that?"

“Conrad offered?” Jessy was incredulous. “Mom said you asked him to take you to the mall. *I* offered to take you to the mall.”

“I don't know what you're so upset about, Jess. Con said you guys weren't in a relationship. He seemed up for anything.”

Jessy's heart thundered out of control. She reached for an apple from the basket and started to peel the skin off with a paring knife. This was a dangerous operation with her trembling hands.

“When we drove out to his place, I thought he just wanted to show me some fall colors. I had no idea what he had in mind.”

“You're lying, Morgan. Conrad wouldn't take you out on the town or out to his cabin.” She laughed nervously and added, “You're so not his type.”

“You sure about that? Besides, he told me you guys were just friends. Jessy, I asked him. I made sure before things went too far. I just want you to know that.”

“What are you talking about?” Jessy felt her pulse throbbing in her temples.

“Your Conrad couldn't keep his hands off me.”

Jessy didn't believe her. It wouldn't be unlike Morgan to make up a lie just to hurt her. “Con wouldn't do that.” She chopped the apple into tiny little bits.

“I can be pretty hard to resist, Jess. And I've never had anyone lay me out like he did.” Morgan fluttered her hand by her face. “That man's got stamina.”

“You and Conrad made love at his cabin.” Tears filled Jessy's eyes as she struggled to chop the apple some more.

“Jessy, like I said. I asked him, and he said there was nothing between you two. So what's the deal anyway?”

Jessy wiped the back of her hand over her eyes and sniffled. “Con and I have been friends. I guess that's all.” Enough. She wasn't going to give her sister any more satisfaction. She scooped up the pulverized apple and threw it in the garbage and looked squarely at Morgan. “You can have him.”

“Oh, I don't want him. I have a whole football league to paw through first.” Morgan laughed and patted Jessy's hand. “He was probably too much fella for you anyway, sis.”

## Chapter Twelve

Conrad accidentally drove home in third gear. All he could think about was Jessy's face when she'd opened the door. The truth was, Morgan had *just* reached her arms around him and planted one on him at that very moment. He'd had no intention, nor any desire, to kiss her sister. Morgan was the polar opposite of his type. Yeah, she was nice to look at. But there was no light in her eyes. Not the warmth that he saw in Jessy's. There was a clear family resemblance, but Con thought Jessy was the one blessed with the best features. Morgan was simply a cruel woman.

When he got home, he called Jessy. The phone rang and rang.

Morgan and her mom flew out in the morning. Jessy couldn't get to the airport fast enough to unload her unwelcome guests. She barely spoke at all to her sister. Morgan, on the other hand, blabbered on about Con's log cabin and the fire pit in the backyard and the hardwood floors and the eastern kitchen window. Jessy was numb from the pain of debating the reality of Morgan's story. When she got home, she flung herself on the bed and sobbed into her pillow. *How could he?*

She didn't exactly trust Morgan's rendition of what happened. But she did describe Con's place with convincing detail. And there was no mistaking the kiss. And they had been gone for hours together.

Jessy didn't know who'd betrayed her most. Even her mom seemed in on a scheme to trample any hope Jessy had with Conrad. She knew her mom lived her life through Morgan. An aging beauty herself, Lois McNair turned a blind eye to Morgan's stupid, cruel games. And Morgan had trained her well. If she

caught a scent of disloyalty, she'd turn on her mother like a pit bull and leave her behind. With amusement and pity, Jessy had witnessed her mom's fawning until Morgan magnanimously invited her back.

Morgan, she had come to expect this from. She had made a play for Jeff the night before their wedding. And that was after she'd told Jessy she thought Jeff had a face like a lizard. But Jeff hadn't fallen for it. Con had taken the bait and swallowed it up, apparently.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her insides were in turmoil. Jessy sat at her piano and cried a million tears for the relationship she'd lost that never was. The scribbled notes of her unfinished song mocked her, doomed to remain unfinished forever. It was Friday, and she had originally planned on going in to work. *Screw that*. She didn't even call her supervisor to tell him she wouldn't be in. *He can fire me if he wants to*. She unplugged her telephone. She needed to think and didn't want to talk to anyone. Certainly not Conrad.

\* \* \* \* \*

Friday night Jessy took a long, hot bath and cozied up in her favorite fuzzy robe to watch *The Sound of Music*. Maria and the von Trapp family could make her forget her troubles like nothing else.

She had just pulled the tea bag from the steeping cup when the doorbell rang. Conrad? Or Red? Or Larry? Her voice quivered as she asked, "Who's there?"

"Jess, it's me, Kevin."

Kevin. Maybe he was just what she needed. A friend. One who hadn't played tonsil hockey with her sister. She unlocked the door and saw him standing there, tall, dark, and gorgeous. "Hey, Kev, what's up?"

"I just—I wanted to check on you. See how you're doing. I know your family left today. I thought you might be lonely." He strolled in, and Jessy closed the door. God, she was glad to see him.

She smelled booze and realized that Kevin had been drinking. His hair was a carefree tousle of thick black silk framing his sculpted cheekbones. She'd never seen him look so sexy. Jessy tightened the belt of her fuzzy robe just a little.

Jessy watched Kevin's gaze travel a wavering path around the apartment. "Cool place." Then he brought his attention back to her. Silence settled between them, and she felt him looking at her.

"Are you naked under there?" He playfully tugged at the belt, swaying just a little.

"I just got out of a bubble bath."

Kevin stepped closer and looked into her eyes, then reached to hold her face while he gently kissed her lips. *Oh God, that kiss...*

They stood in the entry of Jessy's apartment, kissing with increasing heat, Kevin still holding Jessy's face. She wanted to stop it—she knew she should—but she couldn't pull away. His lips were hypnotic, transfixing her to the spot. He stopped.

"Would you think I was terrible if I told you I wanted you tonight? I want to make love to you, Jessy." He lowered himself to her neck and made irresistible little circles with his tongue, breathing hot bursts onto her skin. Jessy felt her body respond with a tingle as she cooed softly. She needed to stop this. And she would...in a minute. Kevin loosened the belt of her robe and reached inside, around her waist and down her butt. His tongue continued its liquid journey up to her ear, and he whispered, "Tell me you want me, Jessy."

"Kevin, we can't do this. You need to stop." But her words made no sense as she tilted her head to allow Kevin better access to her neck.

"We *can* do this. We've done it before. I seem to recall we were pretty good at it. Jessy, I can't get you out of my mind. The way you stripped your clothes off and slipped into that waterfall. Me and Con, we both wanted you. I've been jack—ah, dreaming of that every night."



Oh, he was cruelly teasing her with his slow tongue, leaving a trail of fire all over her neck.

"I've never made love to a woman who responds like you. Knowing I can make you come like that—I want to bring you over the top again and again."

The alcohol gave Kevin a loose tongue, but his message was loud and clear. "But, Kevin, it wasn't real."

"How 'bout this? Is this real?" His hand traveled down and found her wet and hot between her legs. He quickly found her bud and began to massage it with his thumb. Jessy moaned and curled one leg high around his back, inviting him into her. "This is real, Jess. Make love to me. Take me to your bed."

Their mouths came together in a fury of passion, with his fingers working in her hot box. She'd love him tonight, just one more time...

Then the doorbell rang. "Don't answer it, Jess." His words simmered on her lips, still reaching his fingers to pleasure her. "Ignore it." He tried to hold her to him, but she slipped out of his grasp. Wrapping her robe around her and with a tug on the belt, she pulled the door open.

Conrad stood there, looking surprised as hell to see Kevin. "Have I interrupted something?"

"Con, no. Kevin just got here." She had nothing more to add to that, although her mind searched for a story.

"I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I would check on her." Kevin stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"You were in the neighborhood bar, you mean." Con's eyes narrowed as he looked at Kevin.

Kevin tittered nervously. "You know I'm not old enough to be in a bar, Conman."

Con laughed a little too, then reached his hand out, palm up. "I'll take your keys, Kevo."

“What? Nah, you don't have to do that. Really. I haven't had that much.”

Conrad's hand remained. He snapped his fingers impatiently. Kevin shrugged and did as he was told. “You're the boss.”

Con looked at Jessy apologetically. “I'm gonna take his stupid ass home. Can I call you in the morning?”

“Don't bother.” Jessy's mind reeled. She slammed the door behind them and blew a heavy sigh. She had been so close to making love to Kevin. Now, alone with her thoughts, she wasn't at all happy with the dialogue. How could she even consider having sex with Kevin? Was that totally sick? Or was it totally natural? Was it okay? Maybe it was the best therapy. All she knew for sure was that it would have felt wonderful.

Conrad and Kevin rode in silence on their long drive back to Durham. Con broke the silence. “You can give me a call in the morning, and we'll figure out a way to get your car back to you.”

Kevin had the passenger seat reclined as far back as it would go, half dozing, his arms crossed in defiance. Con knew what Kevin was doing at Jessy's, and he'd foiled his plans.

“So are you in love with her?”

“What?”

“Jessy. Are you in love with her, or do you just plan on banging her when the feeling comes over you?”

“Jeez, Con. I don't—I'm not—I don't know what to say.” Kevin pulled the lever on the seat and sat up.

“Look. There's no rule book for our situation. I know that.” Conrad glanced in his rearview mirror, then back to the road, squinting at the oncoming traffic. “I'm just saying that we need to think with our heads and not our dicks. If you and Jessy really need each other right now, that's one thing.

I'll step aside. But if you're messing with her just 'cuz it feels good—that's something different.”

Conrad was much angrier than his words conveyed. He was trying to be cool—dammit, he still liked Kevin. He was a great intern, and Con looked forward to mentoring him. But the little prick needed to lay off Jessy.

“So let's just say Jessy and I were both in it cuz it feels good. So what? Who are we hurting? This kind of stuff happens all the time, right? Older woman, willing college kid...”

*I'm going to punch his face into the next century.* Conrad took a deep, mind-cleansing breath. “I'm just saying that Jessy might be feeling a whole range of things right now, and you better make sure you know where her head is before you go waving your manhood all over her. You might end up hurting her more. She's been through some weird stuff. We all have.”

“Yeah, but it seems like she likes to be with me. She wants it. I make her feel good, you know? That's gotta be therapeutic.”

That was it. Con had had enough. He pulled off to the shoulder and looked squarely at Kevin. “Look, you keep away from her. You hear me? If you want to be friends, fine. But if you can't keep your dick in your pants, then stay the hell away from her.”

The minute those words were out, Conrad regretted saying them. He had no claim on Jessy. But he'd opened up a big can of whoop-ass now, that's for sure. He'd made his move, ready or not.

Kevin looked at Con and then through the windshield into the dark night. “Wow. All right. I think I get it. You want her.” He nodded his head to affirm his understanding.

“Kevin, I'm sorry. But this is Jessy we're talking about. And yeah, I want her. But it's not just since this ordeal. I've been crazy about her since I first met her. I swore it off, since we work together, but I think we're going to give it a try. And a threesome's not gonna work.”

Con pulled back onto the road, and they drove the rest of the way in strained silence.

Saturday morning Jessy heard the doorbell. She stood in front of the door and listened to the thunder of her heart and Con's voice on the other side.

"Jessy, I know you're in there. Please talk to me. Please."

"Go away. I have nothing to say to you."

"Jessy, please, let me talk to you. I know I hurt you, but it meant nothing. It was a big farce."

Slowly Jessy opened the door and shot daggers into Con's eyes. He looked weary.

"A farce? Con, how could you do this? I thought we had crossed some barrier. You said you wanted to..." Her words trailed off. "I thought we were more than friends."

"Jessy, we *are* more than friends. I want to start something with you. For the first time ever, I'm looking for something more."

"Con, you had sex with my sister. Do you think that's a good place to start something?"

"What? I didn't have sex with your sister. What made you think that?"

"Morgan told me. She told me you brought her to your cabin and described every detail. Con, my sister is a snake, but—" Conrad furrowed his brow and rubbed his mustache. With an uneasy gulp, Jessy began to sense the unraveling of Morgan's threadbare story.

"Jessy, I never laid a hand on your sister. I would never do that. You're the one I want. I'm..." He stopped and gently grabbed her hand. "I'm so damn crazy about you. I was only with your sister because she tricked me into taking her to the drugstore. Jessy, she's not real. You *are*, and I want you in my life."

"But why did you take her to your cabin? And what about what I saw in the hall? That passionate kiss? That didn't cap off a night of lovemaking?" She tried to tug her hand away, but he held it tighter.

"What you saw was Morgan flinging herself on my lips when she knew you would see it. And it capped off a night of her squeezing her cleavage in my face." Con shook his head in exasperation. "She scares me, Jess."

Jessy couldn't help but laugh. She believed him. She'd been on the receiving end of Morgan's mischief before, and this was exactly like something she would do. God, she was relieved. "But you *did* take her to your cabin. *I've* never been to your cabin."

Conrad shook his head. "Morgan never came near my cabin. She filled your head full of lies. We talked some about my place. She must have picked up on enough details to torture you with. Was she raised by killer bees or something?"

Jessy felt much better, if not a little sheepish for her anger. She reached for Conrad's hand and pulled him into her apartment. "Didn't I warn you about Morgan?"

"As for you never being at my cabin, what do you say we take care of that little detail? I'll take you out there right now." He grabbed her around the waist. "Do you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive. I'm sorry I didn't talk to you about this before I jumped to conclusions. I've lived with Morgan's manipulations for too many years. I should have known better." Then she brightened and nodded. "I'd love to see your cabin."

They headed out to Conrad's car, and Jessy noticed the shine. She could see herself in the perfect black surface. "Did you spend the night polishing this thing or what?" She looked the car over. "What kind of car is this?"

"It's a Cougar." Con looked at her and winked. "I should probably warn you. I'm a little obsessive about my car."

“Oh.” They hopped in, and Jessy stole a quick glance at her shoes. The interior was impeccable and smelled like musk. She thought of her own truck, its seats loaded with the crumbs of a thousand sandwiches and smelling like French fries. “There's so much about you I don't know. You're not a hand-washing freak or anything, are you? Please tell me you don't talk to your mom every night on the phone.”

Con casually shifted into reverse, smirking. “I like my car neat, my hands are probably clean enough, and I haven't talked to my mom for a couple of months. What else do you want to know?”

Oh, this could get interesting. “When's your birthday, Conrad?”

“I'm an Aries. You?”

“Libra. I like cats. Do you like cats?”

“I'm more of a dog person. So is this relationship doomed to failure?”

Jessy got a warm feeling hearing him use the *r* word. “I think we can work around that. How come I've worked side by side with you and know so little about the real Conrad Manzey?”

Another smirk. “I hate disloyalty, I love a rare steak, and I'm a sucker for curly hair and gorgeous curves. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever had the pleasure of bringing to my cabin, and Jess?” He ran his hand up her thigh. “We have all the time in the world to get to know the finer points.”

Jessy couldn't breath. This man had actually taken her breath away. She leaned back into the seat. No more questions.

When they pulled into the lane leading to his cabin, Con felt a little anxious. It wasn't like it was some grand lodge. It was just home. His little log cabin in the woods on a hill in New Hampshire. He'd scoured the market looking for a place, and finally this one had come up for sale. It had his name written all over it. Pretty rugged for most people's tastes, he figured.

When they got out of the car, he came around to open Jessy's door, watching for her reaction. She gave him a mysterious look.

"Well, what do you think?"

"You had me worried with the shiny black sports car. This is the Conman I know." They headed up the flagstone path and onto the wide front porch. He showed her around the place, which didn't take long.

"Let's take a little walk in the woods. I only have five acres, but there's a nice trail from one end to the other." Con showed Jessy all the nooks and crannies of his acreage, and she got excited about all the right things. When they came in, they split a root beer and sat at the kitchen counter.

"I want to see a picture of you from when you were in the Coast Guard."

"Ah, now that's something you will never see."

"Why not?"

"You wouldn't like the clean-shaven, butch haircut. Trust me."

Jessy got up and stood in the living room in front of the stone fireplace. Con was struck by the newness of her presence in his private world. He liked it. "Do you like fireplaces?"

"I love fireplaces." She stuffed her hands in her pockets, and Con licked his lips, loving Levi Strauss very much at the moment. "We had one at the farm but rarely used it. Do you use yours much?"

"Every night when the weather's cold." Con came up behind Jessy and held her loosely around the waist with one arm while his other hand took in the fine details of her ass. "Maybe I can talk you into having dinner with me, and we'll build a fire tonight. I've missed you." He pushed his nose into her curls and rummaged to find her bare neck, smelling of flowers.

"That sounds like a great offer. But I have to get back to Manchester for a piano lesson at three o'clock this afternoon. And another one at four fifteen."

"Cancel it." Con inhaled her scent, wanting so much to make love to her again.

“Con, I can't cancel. I need the money.” She turned around and reached her hands up around his neck and pulled him down to her lips. Oh, he'd missed this kiss, her hunger for him.

“I'll pay you. Just stay with me.” Con grabbed her ass and squeezed.

Jessy giggled at Con's remark. “Something just doesn't sit right with an offer like that.” She pulled back. “Take me to dinner tonight. Will you? Take me on a date?”

“God, I'll fly you to Paris if you want me to.” Con eyed the curve of her mouth and bent down to kiss her once again. Her lips were like the best food in the world.

“Hmmm. Maybe another time. I'll settle for an opportunity to wear my little black dress. Make a reservation at Chantilly's for seven o'clock.”

One last smoldering kiss. “Are you sure you can't stay? I haven't shown you the whole cabin. Like my bedroom, or my new sheets. You haven't even studied the ceilings properly.”

Jessy dragged his horny ass out the door and down the porch steps. “I need to get back to town. And when the opportunity arises, it won't be the ceilings I'll be focused on.”



## Chapter Thirteen

Con spent the afternoon in a lather, thinking about what awaited him that evening. He wanted the night to be special, so he stopped on his way home to get a dozen roses. At the last minute, he grabbed lilies. He didn't know why. Did Jessie like lilies? There was so much about her he couldn't wait to discover.

Jessy arrived home from her piano lesson later than she'd planned. The little shit wasn't paying attention, and his mom was frustrated by his lack of progress. Jessie spent a few extra minutes with the kid to make her feel better. She did a quick sweep through her closet to determine which of her two little black dresses she'd wear tonight. Not a big selection. One had a high turtleneck collar with a matching sequined jacket. The other had an open neck that scooped low in the back. Yup, that's the one. The way Conrad danced around the nape of her neck with his tongue made her crazy. She wanted to give him full access.

She hadn't told him about her fear that Red and Larry were in Manchester. The day had been carefree and wonderful. She hadn't wanted to spoil it. Tonight at dinner she would tell Conrad about the package and the fleeting view she'd had of Larry by her truck. No doubt that conversation would be followed by a trip to the police station. Her stomach knotted just thinking about it.

When she stepped out of the shower with freshly shaved legs, she wrapped herself in her fuzzy robe. Con thought it was mint green and said it made him hungry for a grasshopper. Jessie had corrected him and told him it was sea foam, and being in the Coast Guard, he should know that. She squirted some

oil in her hand and began working it through her wet curls. She thought about when Red had yanked the scrunchy from her hair. She brushed the image from her mind and instead thought of Kevin and Conrad as they waded into the plunge pool after the dreadful day of walking in the heat. Two glorious butts. She heard a knock at the door. Puzzled, she looked at the time. Con wouldn't be there yet. She wiped the remaining oil off her hands and went to the entry.

"Who is it?"

"Flowers for Jessie Tanner."

Without giving it a second thought, except for the thoughtfulness of Con to send her flowers, she opened the door. In a flash she was thrown to the side, a hand covered her mouth, and the door slammed shut. Larry's large form loomed over her, holding her tightly around her waist, breathing hot, sour breath into her face.

Jessy's heart raced as she grabbed at his hand on her mouth. She tried to call out as she wrestled and twisted in his firm hold. She was no match for his grasp, but she managed to get a couple of screams out through his fingers. Larry held her as if she had no mass at all. One more frantic scream and the hand that covered her mouth came slamming across her face. She fell quiet from the impact and tasted blood.

"What are you doing here? What do you want?"

Larry held his hand in the ready position near her face. "I missed you. Think I wasn't watching you fuck that kid?" He smiled and exposed crooked teeth that hadn't seen a toothbrush in a long time.

Jessy thrashed violently and managed to escape his grasp. She ran a few steps, but he caught her around the waist. More screams were muffled with another sharp blow to her face. The room blinked dark for a second, and her knees collapsed beneath her.

"Stop it. I don't want to hurt you. Stop making me hurt you."

Larry held Jessy around the waist as she went limp in his grasp, her mouth burning with pain. He leaned down and buried his face in her neck with a deep inhale. "I knew you'd smell good."

She regained her senses enough to consider how to get to her phone. Her cell phone lay on the kitchen counter, a million miles away.

"Larry, I'll—I want to be with you. Just don't hurt me. Just loosen your grasp. I can barely breathe."

Their eyes met. He was a large man—everything about him bulged. His broad, round nose ballooned from an egg-shaped head made more pronounced by a butch haircut. In their captivity she hadn't had a chance to see what a homely man he was.

For a brief instant he loosened his grip, and Jessy broke free once again. She raced to the cell phone and had it in her grasp, but Larry swatted her hands. The phone spun to the floor, batteries skittering across the floor. With a struggle of flailing arms, Jessy grabbed one of the kitchen stools to hurl at him, but he had her from behind, arms tight around her waist.

Jessy cried out for help again, but this time Larry held his hand over her mouth with such force, she could scarcely draw a breath.

"I'm getting tired of this." He started to drag her, backing up through the living room. As they rounded the sofa, Jessy kicked with what little force she had left, her adrenaline running out. Her feet crashed into the coffee table and knocked everything off, including her antique phone. She managed to hook one foot around the cord and drag it along, but it slipped away. When they reached her bedroom door, Larry spun her around and pinned her face-first against the closed door. She felt his hands reaching around the front to untie the robe.

"No, please don't do this. Please." Her voice was small. She saw her own blood streak the white paint on the door as her bloodstained robe slipped off her back. Larry turned the knob and pushed her into the room, closing the door behind him. Jessy glimpsed her ceramic water pitcher on the dresser and lunged for it. She never even came close before Larry had her, dragging her

over to the bed. She flailed her arms frantically, trying to scream, but had little wind left. Larry landed another solid blow to her face, and she fell, no longer able to fight. He held her wrists in one vise-grip hand while he reached behind his back.

“Don't make this harder on yourself. We're just animals, remember?”

Rope. He had rope. “What are you going to do?”

“You think he's the only guy who knows how to fuck a woman? I want the world to know that Larry Briggs knows how to fuck a woman.” As he talked, he pulled Jessy to the top corner of the bed and tied both her hands to the corner bedpost. Then he reached into his shirt pocket and brought out a red handkerchief. He leaned close and tied it around her battered mouth. He held up a scolding finger. “I know how to fuck a woman.”

Jessy watched him pull a bag over his shoulder. In all their struggles, she'd never noticed it slung crosswise over his chest, bag hanging on his back. He gingerly pulled out his video camera and set it on the bed. Then he reached in the bag again and pulled out a tripod and began to assemble it. He was not hurried but very professional about his routine.

Jessy stole a glance at her clock—6:20. *Take your time, Larry. Take all the time you need. Conrad's on his way.*

Conrad drove around the block of Jessy's apartment. He'd made reservations at Chantilly's for seven o'clock just like she asked. He had a bottle of wine and thought that maybe they could have a glass before they left for the restaurant. But he didn't want to get there too early.

Ah, but the little black dress. His imagination was having a good time with that. He couldn't wait to see her. He'd had to dig pretty far back in his closet to find a decent pair of dress slacks and had debated the tie. If a woman wore a black dress, was a guy obligated to wear a tie? He opted for a nice dress shirt

with the tie hanging loosely—no commitment, ready for Jessy to snug it up, or pull it off. Her call.

Bottle in hand, lilies in the other, Con rang the bell. And waited. He rang again. “Come on, Jess. It's me,” he called out. Was she still in the shower? He glanced at his watch. It was now 6:30 p.m. No longer early, he didn't think. Surely she would be expecting him by now. He rang again. Nothing. *Where the heck are ya, Jess?*

Then he remembered his key. He wondered if it would be too presumptuous to let himself in. Something in the pit of his stomach gnawed at him. *Use the key.* It sat with the ridiculous green fur ball attached to it in the console of his car. He hurried back down the steps to fetch it. He noticed Jessy's green truck—she was in there. Why wasn't she answering her door? Con felt a rush of apprehension. He hurried back inside. One more ring and a good hard knock. Then he turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

He glanced around and stepped inside. He saw Jessy's purse on the table and a pair of black pumps sitting next to it. Con lingered on those pumps for a second or two—he liked them a lot. Then he noticed the stool toppled on the floor, and bent to pick it up. As he did, his eyes traveled to all the odds and ends strewn across the floor. Jessy's phone was on the floor, off the receiver, and unplugged. Then he saw Jessy's bedroom door and the blood smeared all over it. His own blood froze, and the lilies fell to the floor. “What the hell happened here?”

Still holding the bottle of wine, now grabbing it like a weapon rather than a gift, Con went to the bedroom door and listened. He heard whimpering, and then a man's voice. “That's it. No more fighting. Just relax.”

When Con burst into the room, Larry was on top of Jessy, forcing himself between her legs. He lunged at Larry, cracking him on the back of the head with the wine bottle. It snapped in two, splattering dark liquid and glass fragments all over the bed. Larry slumped to the side with Jessy pinned beneath him, struggling to push his massive form off her. He began to rise,

shaking his head, when Con grabbed him and leveled a solid punch to his face, then another. Larry fell backward off the bed and onto the floor with a *thud*. Jessie had already scampered to a corner and wrapped herself in an afghan. Con went to her now and untied the handkerchief from her mouth. "Jessie, my God—"

Jessie flung her arms around his neck, sobbing. "Never let me go. Never let me go."

"I'll never let you go."

"Are you sure he's out?"

"Not for long. Let's get you out of here."

As they turned to the door, they saw Larry standing on the other side of the bed. Con pushed Jessie behind him, but Larry made no move toward them. He just stood there, staring stupidly at them. Then slowly he raised his left hand. Con saw the gun only for a second. A shot rang out that split their ears. Jessie screamed.

Larry lay dead on the floor, gun in his hand.

When the police arrived, Con sat with Jessie in his arms, icing her cuts and bruises.

A nonuniformed officer sat next to them on the couch. "Do you know the attacker?"

What a weird place they were in. They had been victims of a series of crimes they chose not to report. Now one of the perpetrators lay on Jessie's floor, dead by his own hand.

"His name is Larry." Jessie put her hand to her forehead, as if to clear away some confusion. "He said his name was Larry Briggs." She looked at Conrad. "That's what he said. Larry Briggs. Do you suppose? Could he be Lon's brother?"

"Did you know him?" The police officer put a gentle hand on Jessie's knee.

"No, no. I know his brother."

Con looked at Jessy with great concern, handing her a fresh ice pack for her swollen eye. She was still unwilling to report their abduction. "Officer, I'd like to get her to a hospital. She needs to be checked."

"All right. Just a few more questions. The dead man has no identification. You say you know his brother. Could you give me his name?"

Con spoke up. "Londel Briggs. He's a fisheries biologist in Montpelier, Vermont. We just spent a few days fishing with him. I can't say for sure it's his brother."

"Ma'am? Did this man tell you his name was Larry Briggs?"

"Yes. That's what he said."

"You can take her to the emergency room, but I'd like you both to come by the station when you're done. Ask for Detective Ashe." He handed Conrad his card and then left them alone.

"Let's go, Jess. I want you to see a doctor."

"Con, he didn't get to me. You came. You came in time." She held him around his neck like a child. He knew what she meant—Larry was about to rape her but didn't get the job done. Thank God.

"We still need someone to look at your cuts and bruises." He urged her up and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Let me take you."

\* \* \* \* \*

As Jessy walked out of the emergency room doors, wearing bulky gray sweats and green wool sweater, she looked pale—she looked terrible. One eye was almost swollen shut, and her bottom lip puffed out. Larry had a powerful hand. Con swallowed hard. Now he needed to convince her it was time to tell the police everything. This wasn't going to be an easy sell.

The guilt was almost more than he could bear. He'd known they needed to report Larry and Red to the police—but he hadn't seen to it. This attack should have never happened.

Before they went into the police station, he tried to brace Jessy for what was about to happen. “The time has come, Jess,” he told her, his voice soft and soothing. “We can't keep pretending the abduction didn't happen. I can call Kevin and have him come down here. We've got to get this on record. They need to start looking for Red. I don't know that you're safe—any of us—until they find him.”

“You don't think Red's in jail in Canada?”

“I've had my doubts about that from the beginning. But now even more so.”

“I have my doubts too.” Jessy's words seemed to trail off over a cliff.

They walked into the police station and asked for Detective Ashe. He came around the corner and shook hands with Con, standing eye to eye with him. He gently patted Jessy on the shoulder and asked how she was doing.

“I'll be fine.” Jessy clung to Con's arm as the detective escorted them back through a sea of messy desks and makeshift dividers. Con noticed a picture of two little girls taped to the wall above the detective's desk. *This is a guy we can talk to.*

Detective Ashe pulled chairs up for them. The station was quiet, but Con was hoping for a private little investigation room, not a couple of chairs around this guy's desk.

“So I looked into Larry Briggs's history. You were right. He was Londel Briggs's brother. Seems like this guy was a ticking time bomb. He had a history of mental illness but nothing violent. Londel Briggs is on his way to Manchester—should be here in the morning.”

Con wondered if Lon knew they were describing his brother when they told him of their abduction. God, he had to have known. The fucking little weasel.

Detective Ashe asked Jessy how Larry got into her apartment and how Con came on the scene. His questions were all very direct, just piecing together



the events. Then he probed into the randomness—or lack of randomness—of the attack.

“So you've never seen this Larry before tonight?”

Jessy looked at the detective. “That's not true. I've seen Larry before.”

“Where did you see him?”

“Last week, when we were fishing up north. Larry and a guy named Red kidnapped us. They held us in an old camper.” Jessy looked at the detective with a steadiness that surprised Conrad. It was the detective who looked shaken. He looked from Jessy to Con.

“Come again?”

Con gave it a shot. “We were abducted. I was hit on the head and dragged into a camper, and Jessy and our intern, Kevin Shepherd, were tied up and thrown in there too. They held us there. They made videos—sex videos. They recorded Jessy and Kevin having sex. They said they sold the stuff on the Internet.”

Detective Ashe rubbed his hand over his short hair. “Wow.” He stared at his notes. “This investigation just got a whole lot more complicated.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Jessy and Conrad were moved to that quiet investigation room he'd hoped for, and they spent the next couple of hours relating their kidnapping ordeal.

"We're going to need to get this Kevin Shepherd in here. Do you know where to reach him?"

Kevin was a quick cell phone call away, already partying it up in Manchester. Within half an hour he sauntered into the police station with a confused but amused look on his face. Until he saw Jessy. He ran to her and knelt down at her feet, looking into her battered face. For the first time, Con saw a mature look of genuine concern on his face.

"Jessy, who did this?" He looked up at Conrad.

"Larry found her."

They explained what had happened at Jessy's apartment, and Kevin told his story to Detective Ashe. Contrary to Kevin's prediction, the questioning was sensitive, with no sense of mining for juicy details. Con and Kevin and Jessy related every detail they could remember.

Jessy told the detective about the package with the black teddy, and how she knew it was from Larry and Red because of the scrunchie.

"Jessy, why didn't you tell me?" Conrad was stunned.

"I meant to." She waved a hand vaguely in the air. "My sister and the kiss and your shiny black car..."

His heart went out to her. She'd meant to. Life just got in the way.

Another detective entered the room to assist in the case. This guy was older and far less sympathetic. "You mean to tell me you guys were held at

gunpoint and forced into sex acts, but you didn't think it was important enough to report? What the hell were you thinking? I oughta lock you all up just for being stupid."

He pointed a finger at Conrad. "Didn't you think she, or any of you, might be in danger?"

Con closed his eyes.

The rage Conrad felt toward Lon for not telling them about his brother was matched only by his own shame in letting the abduction go unreported. Jessy was nearly raped and could have been killed.

It was late into the night when they walked out of the police station. They stood on the sidewalk like stunned animals. Jessy wrapped her arms around herself in her bulky wool sweater.

"You're coming home with me, Jess. Do you want to go back to your place and get anything?" Conrad wrapped a solid arm around her. She looked at no one, just down at the sidewalk.

"I don't care where I go...just not back there." She slipped from Con's arm and turned, heading down the long, wide steps toward the parking lot.

Con looked at Kevin and clapped him warmly on the shoulder. "I know you're busy with classes starting. If you get a chance, why don't you call out to my place tomorrow? I think she'd appreciate talking to you."

"Sure thing, Con." He looked an extra-long second at Con. "I'm sure glad you were there. We fucked up by not reporting that nut. I'm just glad you got there when you did."

"Me too."

\* \* \* \* \*

Con's cabin was small and had no guest room. He also figured this was no time to invite her into his bed. Con lit a fire in the fireplace and made Jessy a nest on the couch.

“Will you let me sleep in your arms tonight, Con? I don't want anything more. Just your arms.”

Conrad looked at Jessy's swollen lip and bruised face. “I'll be right here.” He slipped under the blanket and wrapped his arms around her. Jessy slept, holding him around his neck, all night.

In the morning he called Ed Stein at home and explained some things. The story would soon hit the media, and he needed to talk to his boss first. Ed asked to meet Conrad in town that afternoon.

When Jessy awoke, Con had a cup of hot coffee waiting for her on the coffee table.

“You look better this morning. The swelling has gone down some. How do you feel?”

“Numb.” She hugged herself into a ball, knees hiked up. “Con, I don't know what to say. You were right about the phone call. I told Larry exactly where to find me and all but held the door open for him. I feel like an idiot. Once again you were my hero.” She was quiet a moment. “Are you going to get tired of coming to my rescue?”

“Jessy, you're not an idiot. You're a victim of a terrible crime by a sick mind. I am not a hero. Not by a long shot. I should have never let this happen. And I will never get tired of coming to your rescue. Monsters big or small.” He slid in next to her, cocooning her in his arms.

“I'm usually not this much trouble.” She started to laugh. “From now on I'll try to limit your rescue requirements to reaching things in high places and killing spiders.”

Con gave her a scrunch. “What do you have against spiders?”

Con left Jessy alone that afternoon and went to meet with Ed. She felt safe in his cabin with the door locked. Jessy stared out Con's kitchen window, thinking about everything—the whole whirlwind of experiences in the last two

weeks. She thought of the morning in the truck, how consumed she'd been over her next life step—the next damn domino to fall.

Her emotions boiled to the surface. Memories flashed in a disturbingly rapid sequence. She heard Red's voice. "*Camera on!*" She thought of the camper and Kevin's bewildered look when they saw the bed. She lingered on thoughts of Kevin's perfect kisses and making love in the rushing water.

She saw Morgan with her lips on Conrad's, and the way his hands were suspended in nowhere land in his surprise. Jessy laughed out loud. How could she have believed for one minute that Conrad was in on that kiss? *Must be the McNair temper.* And she hadn't forgotten about the inheritance. She just hadn't had a chance to ask for Con's advice. Conrad. Thinking about him gave her comfort.

Most of all she thought of Larry. He'd sprung at her like a wildcat in a split second. She felt his hot breath and remembered his acrid smell as if he stood right in front of her. She'd felt utterly hopeless and helpless as he untied her and tugged her to the middle of the bed. His strong arms pressed her down as he climbed on top of her and prepared for the unthinkable.

She'd thought Conrad wasn't going to come, until the powerful blow to the back of Larry's head. Even then she hadn't been sure what was happening. Larry had collapsed on top of her, and then she'd smelled wine. The next thing she knew, she had her arms around Conrad's neck.

Jessy looked around Conrad's kitchen and suddenly felt alone and out of place. She needed to go back to the apartment. She needed to go back to work. Shit, she didn't even have her truck, or a change of clothes. As she stood at the bathroom sink, a battered reflection blinked back at her. She ran her fingers over the cut on her cheek. It wasn't much—the bruises around her eye unsettled her more. She winced at the thought of that powerful hand. Leaning into the mirror, Jessy dabbed at her lip. *Yeah, but you should see the other guy.* She shuddered and ordered the gruesome thought from her head.

The calypso song of her cell phone made her jump. Warily, she checked the number. Kevin. "Hello?"

"How are you today, beautiful?"

"I'm not beautiful. I'm a swollen, bruised mess. But I am feeling much better, thank you." Kevin's voice offered a wonderful break from her brooding thoughts.

"I'm coming out to see you."

Jessy protested, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. When she clicked her phone closed, Jessy wondered if he even knew where Conrad lived.

\* \* \* \* \*

She watched a Sunday football game, Chiefs versus the Patriots. She looked for Morgan bouncing on the sidelines but didn't see her. When she saw Con's shiny black Cougar come up the lane, her heart fluttered. That car amused her. It seemed incongruous with the rugged man she knew. Of course, when he'd told the crew that summer that he played the stock market, she realized there was more to Conman than raw masculine charisma.

She watched him get out of the car and turn to look down the lane. Pulling in behind him was her truck, Kevin behind the wheel. Kevin got out, and both he and Conrad continued to watch down the lane. A big van climbed the hill and parked behind the other vehicles. *What the heck did you do, Conman?*

She opened the cabin door to a smirk. Nobody could smirk like Conrad.

"You brought my truck?"

Kevin hopped up onto the porch behind him. "That's not all. We grabbed a ton of your stuff—clothes, stuff from your bathroom, some of your hangy things. Hey, Jess, if you think I was pawing through your underwear drawer, well...you'd be right." Kevin made a hot and bothered motion with his hand.

All of sudden Jessy loved these two guys more than anything. She couldn't help herself and started to cry. She walked over to Kevin and threw her arms around him.

"Ah, c'mon, Jess. It's not like Con and I were parading around in your thongs or anything. Well, Con did. I didn't."

Jessy laughed and held him closer. Then she stopped and stepped back. "What's up with the moving van?"

She noticed Con measuring the door with a tape measure. Two men came up the porch steps and stood looking in the open door. "Where do you want it?"

"Want what? Con, what's going on?"

"Don't be mad. I mean, it really amounts to theft—grand theft, I suppose." He laughed a little at his joke, then grabbed her hands. "I want you to stay here with me. Don't go back to that apartment. Nobody knows where Red is, and you're not safe there." He shrugged, looking at Jessy like he was sorry, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"So—" Jessy made the motion of pulling on something hand over hand.

One of the men interrupted, "You want the piano to come through this door?"

"Piano? You brought my piano?" She looked at the two men, then Con, then Kevin.

Kevin raised his hands in innocence. "Hey, don't look at me. I just drove the truck."

Jessy ran out the door and down the lane to check on her baby. It took special considerations to move a piano. She looked up at the words on the van. MEYER AND SONS: QUALITY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS. Con had hired professionals. *Of course he did.*

A third man stood in back of the van where her piano was nestled, safe and sound. "Ms. Tanner? Once we get it in there, I'll tune it for you. This girl is in wonderful condition, so it shouldn't take long."

When Jessy went back into the cabin, Con was waiting for her on the couch with a look of satisfied guilt. She pursed her lips and marched over to him. Planting one knee beside him on the couch, she pushed him back and

leaned down, falling onto his lips. Jessy's heart felt like it could explode in her chest, emotions of all shapes and sizes bubbling to the surface. She needed to feel his mustache and feed off his well of strength. She took what she needed from him, plunging her tongue, feeling his hot breath—

“Be careful of your lip, Jess.”

“I just needed to feel you. It doesn't hurt if you kiss me softly.” She stopped and looked down at him.

“Does this mean you're not mad?” He gave her another smirk that made Jessy want to rip his clothes off.

“This is the most presumptuous—” She stopped. “This is the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me. Thank you, Conman. I know I have to go back to the apartment soon. But for now—now that you've kidnapped my ten-thousand-dollar piano—I guess I'll stay with you.”

She climbed off him as the guys brought in the legs of her piano. Kevin came behind with an armload of bags full of her stuff. She couldn't wait to see what they had grabbed of her belongings. For some reason she pictured a lot of skimpy things and very few jeans and sweatshirts.

Con moved his furniture around so the shiny black piano became the center of the room. He looked at Jessy with feigned frustration. “You couldn't just play the harmonica?”

Kevin hitched a ride back to Manchester with the piano movers. Con made Jessy a nice meal while she unpacked a few of the bags they'd brought. She was conscientious of the fact that Con was a bachelor and had been for some time. He seemed okay with sharing his space—it was his idea—but she wasn't going to explode into his home.

It looked like they'd reached into her closet and grabbed an armful of what was in front, which was good. And sure enough, there were a few handfuls of her skivvies too. She smiled, imagining those two trying to be sensitive, wondering what the hell to grab. She noticed her diaphragm nestled in among



the silky panties. She was willing to bet Kevin didn't even know what it was. Then her hand touched something else in the bottom of the bag. Lying in among her garments were her six white swans. The mobile that hung in her bedroom. She remembered looking up at it when Larry...

"Jessy?"

"Con. Thanks for bringing the swans." She looked up at him. He knew. He knelt down beside her, scooping her into his arms.

"Have you eaten anything all day?" She shook her head. "Come and have something. I'll clear out some space for you in the closet after supper. I might even have some little hooks." He gave her a smile as he brushed the hair back from her face. "A girl has to have a place to hang her swans."

\* \* \* \* \*

When Jessy stepped out of the shower that evening, she wrapped herself in a skimpy towel, cold and shivering. As she rummaged through her things, she felt Con's warm hands caress her arms and sweep her hair to the side. He kissed her neck with a softness that made goose bumps rise on her skin.

"As much as I love seeing you in this little towel, I have a surprise for you. Close your eyes."

Jessy closed her eyes and felt a tug on the towel. She let it slip from her body, feeling hotter on the inside but still shivering in the cold. Con's hands slid like molten satin from her shoulders to her butt, and Jessy's knees went weak. With her eyes still closed, she heard him sigh. Then she felt a softness drape around and enclose her, and she opened her eyes. Con had wrapped a fluffy robe around her body and hugged her tightly from behind. He whispered in her ear, "I thought you might need a new one."

Jessy took a second to enjoy the fuzziness. It felt so snugly on her skin and was the softest sky blue—the color of Con's eyes. She slipped her arms into the holes and tied it around her waist. Then she spun around and reached her arms around Con's neck for a warm hug.

"I love you." Her eyes widened. *Oops*. She'd meant to say "it"—I love *it*. She held him around the neck, waiting for him to say something.

"I love you too," he whispered into her ear with breath that felt like butterfly wings. She almost collapsed in his arms.

Con continued to hold her, speaking in a whisper. "Jessy, I'm gonna take my cue from you. I want you in my bed. I want to hold you all night long. But I don't want to push you. You tell me what to do."

"Take your clothes off." She stepped back and slid her hands under his shirt and tugged it over his head. Wisps of sandy hair spooled carelessly at his neck, almost touching his broad shoulders. But the mustache. All these years, she never knew she had such a thing for mustaches. She'd accidentally told him she loved him. Right? Hell no, it was no accident. She loved him with all her heart. And probably had for months. She stood on tiptoe to reach his lips and kissed him again. She wanted to pull him inside her but could only nibble. Con's mustache danced across the surface of her lips and her heart.

They backed up to the bed, and Con melted on top of her, the beautiful sky blue robe slipping open. Jessy opened his jeans and touched him, hearing him moan with pleasure. God, his size turned her on so much, knowing the depths he'd reach inside her.

"Oh, girl." His jeans slipped off, and they were entwined. Jessy relished the feel of his mass on hers. She spread her legs to let him in.

And in that instant, Larry joined them.

In her mind's eye, his face loomed over her, looking down at her. This was just where he was—just what he was doing when Con burst into the room. She never felt his cock, but still... Oh God...

Jessy put her hands to Con's chest. "Stop," she said softly.

Con was breathless with anticipation. "What is it? Do you want me to get protection?"

Jessy looked into Con's eyes as tears stung her own. "Larry's in my head. I'm so sorry. I...I see his face. I feel his hands." She closed her eyes. "I'm so sorry."

Con sat back and ran his hands through his hair. "God, Jess. What was I thinking?" He reached for her robe and helped her sit up and put it on. A stream of tears slid down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Conman." She stroked her hand on his cheek.

He got up and grabbed a pair of sweatpants off a nearby chair and slipped them on quickly. Then he grabbed her hand and pulled her into the living room. He paused for a second to grab a big quilt from the couch and wrapped it around her shoulders. As if preoccupied with a million details, he escorted her out the back door, down the steps, and into the chilly September evening.

"What are you doing? Are you kicking me out?" Her voice quaked with shock and curiosity and a little bit of anger. "Conrad, what are you doing?" Jessy stood out in the moonlight, holding the big plaid quilt around her shoulders.

He disappeared back into the cabin and came out again, passing by her to step down the slope a few yards. He'd slipped a bulky Carhartt coat on and looked set for a rugged evening of log slitting. At the moment he was busy with—

Jessy stamped her cold, bare foot on the grass. "Conrad. What are you doing?"

He looked at her as if it were so obvious. "I'm building a fire."

So he was. She watched as he grabbed several logs from the nearby woodpile and tossed them onto the stone fire ring. Then he snapped a match, and within a second, a little crackling fire huffed and puffed in the darkness.

She gave him a bewildered look. He walked up to her and wrapped his big arms around her, quilt and all, and looked into her eyes. "I never, ever want to hurt you. Do you know that? But you're hard to resist." He hitched his arms up

tighter, and she saw the contrition in his eyes. "I screwed up. I should have known you needed more time. I'm so sorry."

Jessy buried her face in his chest. He was shirtless under his big coat, and she smelled him—just him. Yeah, she could spend a lifetime in the safety of his arms.

"It's not your fault, you know. I started it. I just couldn't finish it. Maybe I do need some time."

Con grabbed another blanket, and they sat in silence watching the fire, Jessy snuggled up between his legs. It was a starry night, the bold moon waning. Jessy thought about the moon she'd seen when they were escaping their captors.

"Con? Were you scared when we were in that camper?"

"I was."

"What were you afraid of? Did you think they would kill us?"

"I've never had a gun shoved under my chin before. I'll admit, it shook me up."

"I wasn't as terrified up there as I was when Larry came after me. I thought he was going to kill me. Rape me and kill me." She touched her swollen lip. "I've never been hit like that before."

Jessy's voice was flat and matter-of-fact. Con wrapped her tighter in the blanket as she continued. She needed to talk.

"Did you ever think of leaving?"

"What do you mean?"

"When I didn't answer the door. Did you think for a second to just leave?" Her voice rose and cracked a little.

"I was just puzzled. Then I remembered my key."

"I heard you knocking. Did you know that? I couldn't call out. And then you stopped. I thought you'd left. That's when I thought I was done for."

Conrad shifted his weight a little so he could stretch one leg. "I was early. I felt stupid for being so eager to see you in that black dress." He paused and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Do you like lilies?"

Jessy laughed. "What a funny question. I love lilies. They're my favorite."

The fire snapped, and a few crickets creaked slowly in the cool September air. Jessy felt the rise and fall of Con's chest and for a moment couldn't remember life before this closeness. And she couldn't imagine life without it. She reluctantly broke the silence.

"Will you help me with a problem?"

"A spider?"

She chuckled. "Yeah. A one-hundred-thousand-dollar spider."

"Wow. You better explain."

"That's how much money I'll get from the sale of the farm. I don't have a clue what to do with that kind of money." She looked up at him. "Any advice?"

Conrad shifted again. "Sure. I'd be happy to help. I could show you how to turn that into a pretty big nest egg, but you need to decide first what *you* want. Are you going to go back to college like you planned? Certified Public Accountant Jessy Tanner, at your service?"

"Yeah, right." There was no way in hell Jessy was going to be an accountant. At least not one who was any good. She repeated his words. "I need to decide what I want."

"Are you ready to come back to work? When I talked with Ed, he thought you might need some time. Maybe a leave of absence. The rumors will be flying, you can count on that. Maybe you'd like to stay clear of that for a while."

Jessy had thought of that and dreaded going back to work. "But what about you? Won't the rumors and gossip bother you?"

"Nah. I can handle it."

Jessy had no doubt. Con could handle it.

“Jess, I'm not gonna tell you what to do. I'll just tell you what I think, as your friend.” He paused to consider his words. “Take some time. I can hold down the fort at work. If you decide not to come back, now you'll have a little cushion to live on while you decide your next move.”

Jessy laughed lightly. “You mean, while the next random domino wobbles and falls.”

## Chapter Fifteen

Jessy spent Monday tinkering at her piano and doing some odds and ends around Con's cabin. He'd gone back to work, and she was bored and restless. When her cell phone rang, she expected Conrad or Kevin, but the unfamiliar number on the LCD screen puzzled her. With caution, she answered it.

"Jessy. This is Brad. Talk to me."

"Brad? Oh my goodness! It's so good to hear your voice. How are you?"

"Me? Peachy. But it sounds like you're having a bit of excitement up there. Is there anything I can do?"

"You've heard." Her heart sank a little. She'd expected this, but it was starting already? Just how far was news of their ordeal going to spread? "Is it on the news all the way down in DC too?"

"No. But I still keep track of what's going on in New Hampshire. So how ya doin', kid?"

"I'm afraid of my own shadow. But I have some friends looking out for me." Jessy felt a surprisingly warm glow in her heart at the sound of those words. She couldn't rustle up a girlfriend these days, but her guys were better. Way better. "How are Alisha and the girls?"

"They're good. Actually Lish wanted me to call you. We want you to come down and stay with us for a few weeks, or as long as you want."

"What? That's an awfully nice offer, but why?"

"There's a couple reasons. First, Lish is up to her eyeballs with this new partnership at the law firm. And the girls miss you. The other thing is, I might have a new music opportunity for you. A friend of mine manages a band, and

they're in need of a good keyboard player. And it sounds like you need a fresh start."

Jessy was silent.

"Jess? Did I lose you?"

"No, Brad. I just—I've had kind of a rough couple of weeks. I'm feeling the need to cocoon, not spread my wings and fly."

"Well, I don't know about the bug metaphors. But, Jess, we went to see these guys at a concert. Early in the show Lish turned to me and said, 'I can see Jessy playing with these guys.' I thought so too. This isn't a bar band. These are professional musicians with a big following up and down the coast."

"Did you say concert? Like where people sit and listen?"

"Yeah. Hawk Wilson's the main guy in the band. He said they'd like to start playing more of their own stuff. Jessy, you could get real musicians to play your songs. Not just a bunch of biologists and mechanics like we were. Look, you knew when you started working for me in the fisheries program it was just to stop the bleeding after your divorce. But you're a musician. Don't go back to catching fish. Maybe plunging into something new right now is exactly what you need. Sounds to me like a real opportunity."

"This guy, Hawk? What's he like?"

"He's a real nice fella, plays the trumpet. He's got three brothers who are also in the band. They call themselves Wilson Brass. The band has a big sound. I told him about you and gave him your demo. He wants to meet you."

Jessy felt her throat tighten and tears pool in her eyes. "You gave him my demo?" She paused and sniffed. "You're always looking out for me. How can I thank you?"

"By saying you'll come down. At least meet Hawk and the rest of the band. Get some R and R too. Washington DC is a great place to lose yourself for a while. Or find yourself."



Jessy said she'd think about it. That afternoon, she sat and watched *Days of Our Lives* and heard not a word. Brad's offer was on the table. On the table and on the TV screen and dancing in front of her eyes. She went and sat at her piano. A big sound? She thought of so many of her songs that would benefit from a brass lead. She tried to remember the song she'd been working on. She needed her music folder, which she kept in the top drawer of the dresser—back at her apartment. The thought of going back there did a number on her stomach and her heart. The last few days had left her feeling like a scared, victimized child. Where was her courage? She stiffened her jaw and admonished herself. *I can't hide out here forever. And there's nothing to fear. No monsters and no ghosts. Maybe a spider or two...*

One more look in the mirror, then she grabbed a pair of dark glasses and climbed into her truck and headed to town. It felt good to be out and about. No fear, no worries. No Larry, no Red. As she drove along, she thought of her conversation with Conrad the night before. *"You need to decide what you want."*

She just wanted to make music. That's all she'd ever wanted to do. And Brad had opened a new door for her. *Her songs*. She had books full of her musical compositions. Many had never seen the light of day. Were they good enough? Hawk liked what he'd heard.

*You need to decide what you want.* She wanted to hear Hawk's band play her songs.

She swung into a nursery that was on the way to her apartment. She'd been in there many times before and found it always soothed her frazzled thoughts. Con and Kevin had thought to grab her purse for her, so she had a few bucks. And something special in mind. She was about to raise her sunglasses but changed her mind. Thankfully the bright sunlight in the greenhouse made it completely okay to keep them down, covering her bruises. She saw a clerk heading toward her and gave her a smile.

"What do you have for lily bulbs?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Jessy drove past her apartment. Then another drive around the block to gather some courage. Finally standing in front of apartment 2B, she turned her key in the lock. Her eyes went immediately to the yawning space where her piano had been. The guys did a good job of straightening things. She opened her fridge, grabbed the expired carton of milk and emptied it into the sink, chasing it down with water. She didn't look at the bedroom door. Instead she straightened the pillows and pinched off a few withering leaves on her houseplants. Her grandma's clock ticked in the tomblike silence.

Then slowly she turned and walked toward the bedroom door. Someone had done their best to wash the blood off, but Jessy could still see it. Her own blood. Instinctively she touched her hand to her bruised cheek. Then, taking a deep breath, she opened the bedroom door and went in. The carpet had been removed. "There goes my damage deposit," she said out loud. The sound of her own voice surprised her. Like bracing her shoulder against an unseen force, she said what she needed to say, even to an empty room. "You didn't get me. Conrad came, and now you're dead." With finality she added, "I won."

The bedding was gone. Jessy looked at the solid oak corner posts, debating if she should get rid of the bed. It held too much power over her now. It was no longer beautiful.

She went back out to the antique dresser in the living room and opened the top drawer to get her music. Her plants were thirsty, so she gave them a quick drink. Then she flopped down on the couch and opened the music folder. Inside she found a handful of songs in various stages of completion. Holding one, she studied it with a tuck of her hair behind her ears. "I can think of a thousand different ways to add brass to this one."

Liking the sound of her voice, she talked some more. "And this one could have a light flute harmony."

Jessy sat cross-legged on the couch, jotting notes in the margins of her music sheets, until her mind started to wander. She thought of Conrad. She

knew she couldn't stay with him for much longer. Sure, he'd invited her and insisted she stay. Still, she couldn't start a relationship being beholden to him. Con wanted to protect her and felt a heavy burden of guilt. Jessy shook her head. Nope. That's not the way to a man's heart, and it wasn't the way Jessy operated. Maybe her sister, but not her.

She was in love with him and was sure there was something powerful between them. But she shouldn't just plunge into his life. "Just like landing a big blue catfish. I may have a hook in him, but getting him in the boat would take some time." She laughed and rolled her eyes at herself. "Right, Dad?"

Sitting there amid her pile of musical scores, Jessy made her decision. She was going to go to Washington DC. She'd take her inheritance money and put all her belongings in storage. If things didn't work for her with Hawk Wilson, she'd come back and start fresh. But she'd never forgive herself if she didn't at least give her music a try.

She'd had enough talking to herself. And since she'd made up her mind, she'd better get busy. Jessy headed over to the local supermarket and grabbed boxes of all shapes and sizes, then went back to her place to start packing.

Con drove up the lane, surprised to see Jessy's truck gone. *She's a big girl. She doesn't need a chaperone.* But still, where did she go? He'd been thinking about entering the cell phone age. The events of the last few weeks put it high on his to-do list. He went inside and saw traces of Jessy everywhere. She had cleaned and put an arrangement of autumn flowers on the piano. He inhaled. His place smelled fresh.

Con cracked open a beer. Yeah, the stories were flying around the office now. He'd overheard a bevy of women talking in the break room. *"I heard they tied her up and made her perform oral sex on several men."* That one he didn't let go by. He told the old bags to check their facts before flapping their jaws, and that nothing like that had happened. He didn't care if he offended them.

They all looked like they probably hadn't had a good fuck in years and couldn't bet on it anytime soon.

Ed took the brunt of the media calls, and Con appreciated that. For the most part, Con laid low, spending time in the boat shed. He would have to tell Jessy that the investigation hadn't turned up any information on Red. Except that the story of him crossing into Canada and being arrested for stealing a car was a complete fabrication on Lon's part. Con had serious plans to introduce Lon to his fist the next time he saw him.

He heard Jessy's truck pull up the lane and went out on the porch to wait for her. Jessy approached him with her arms full and a demure smile on her face. "Look at that. I managed to take a trip into town and didn't need a hero." She stretched up and gave Con a quick kiss on the lips. "Except I did hit a big bug, and it's stuck on my windshield wiper." She winked. "A real hero would get that for me."

"I'll get my gun." He put a gentle finger under her chin to examine her face. "Your bruises look much better today." He let her go and took another swig of his beer. "Where did you go?"

With a big inhale, she put her armload down on the bench. "I went to 625 Chestnut Street, apartment 2B."

"How'd that go?" He grabbed her hand, and they sat on the front steps. It was going to be a warm September evening.

"Not so bad. Can we have a fire again tonight?"

"Yes. Are you okay?"

"Conman, I *am* okay. It was creepy at first, but the place still has my vibes, not his."

"Vibes?"

Jessy cracked up. "Yes, vibes." And with a slap of her knees, she stood. "I bought you something." She handed him a bag.

Con opened the bag and peeked in. "Garlic? Do I have a vampire problem?"

"It's not garlic, silly. They're bulbs. I bought you some lily bulbs. I got the impression you liked them too. We can find a spot out here—" She stopped.

"And?"

"Ah, you can find a spot for them. Lilies don't take much care, so you won't have to baby them. I just thought you might like some color. Or you can fry 'em up in butter, for all I care." She waved her hand in the air and went into the house.

Con followed. "You're a riddle today. This is a neat idea. You noticed I don't know a thing about plants or landscaping. I'll take all the help I can get." He paused and looked at her with confusion. "What's on your mind, Jess?"

"I suddenly realized I was way out-of-bounds. Here you've been such a good friend to let me stay with you, and now I'm planning flower beds."

Con reached for her. "Jessy, you can turn my whole damn yard into a rose garden, if it makes you happy. I'm way past friendship here. You and your beautiful curls have bulldozed through every one of my barriers." He fumbled with some loose spirals spilling over her shoulders.

"You sure know how to say just the right thing."

"Really? I'm winging it most of the time. Are you cooking supper, or am I?"

That night Jessy told Conrad about the conversation she had with Brad Deals.

"Are you going to go?" He looked solemn.

Breathing deep to bolster herself, Jessy nodded. "I'm going to go. I started packing my things this afternoon. I haven't seen Alisha and the girls for months, and I miss them. Brad said this Hawk Wilson wanted to meet with me, maybe let me play a few sets with the band to see how we fit. It might be just the thing I need." She searched his eyes, trying to make him understand. "Con,

I'm so tired of being lost. I feel like the Jessy McNair I used to know slipped through the cracks. Maybe if I can give this music thing one more chance—”

“*This music thing*, as you put it, is an extraordinary gift. If this guy Hawk can help you break into the business, you've got to give it a try.”

Jessy looked at the unusual expression on Con's face. “But?”

“Does this mean I'm losing my biologist?”

Jessy gulped. “Yeah. I think it does.”

“I'm going to miss you. Been a long time since a woman walked out of my life of her own choosing.”

Jessy's throat tightened. “Don't say that. I'm not walking out of your life. Not by a long shot.” She swallowed hard to keep the tears at bay. “But, Con, it was only a few weeks ago that you didn't even want to date me. Now here I am, cramming my piano into your living room. It's so symbolic.”

“Symbolic of what? I moved the piano here. I want you here.”

“You do—right now. And I know what a huge step this is for you. With the barriers and all. I want to do this right, and I think eventually you'll resent the intrusion. I don't want you to see me as needy or want me in your life out of guilt or worry.” Jessy's voice cracked, and the tears she'd been holding back flooded her eyes.

Con grabbed her and held her tight. “Girl, listen to me. You've needed me these last few days, and it has given me so much peace of mind knowing I can help you. And yeah, I feel guilty that I couldn't protect you from Larry. But if I wasn't so in love with you...” He paused and bent down by her ear. “This is the real deal, Jess.”

Jessy slipped from his grasp. “These past few weeks have been staggering. My dominoes, they're falling all over the place. There's been an earthquake.” She raised her hands in exasperation. “I need to get them lined up. I'm going to go to DC and—” She turned to face him. “And dream of your gorgeous face, and

your lips, and your mustache, and your nice buns, and your strong arms.” He reached to hold her again, and she gladly went.

“I’m keeping your piano.”

“It’s *you* I’m coming back for.” She sniffed. “You can use that old thing for firewood.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The inheritance check didn’t arrive as planned, and Jessy was quickly running out of money. Her mom said there were some legal delays, and it could be a couple of months. The only choice Jessy had became obvious. Shiny, black, and obvious. She sold her piano. With the money, she put all her things in storage, safe and sound. Her belongings were not impressive by most standards, but she had gathered them with care and creativity. She needed to know they’d be there when she came back to New Hampshire.

It was Conrad she worried about.

She stayed with Con during the upheaval of her life. She packed up her mobiles and gave most of her plants to neighbors. She hired a moving crew to take her furniture to the storage unit and donated her bed to charity. Within two weeks she was ready to go to DC.

Con didn’t like her selling the piano. Not one little bit. As Jessy arranged her trip, he grew quiet, and Jessy felt him withdraw. One night as they lay in Conrad’s bed, he confessed. “I feel like you’re not coming back. That piano was my insurance policy. Now I have nothing.”

“Conrad, you have my heart. I’m trusting you with that. Please, don’t break it.”

She climbed on top of him and kissed him. Her courage had waxed and waned as she’d packed. Why the hell would she leave Conrad now that she finally had him?

“What do you do at Christmastime, Conman?”

"Since my mom remarried, we don't get together much. She has a big stepfamily. I have a sister in Michigan, but she's got her own in-laws to deal with. I'm a lone wolf, Jess. What about you?"

"We always spent the holiday with Jeff's family. Since the divorce, I tried to spend it with Morgan and my mom. They drove me crazy. Last year I spent Christmas Eve at a soup kitchen and went sledding on Christmas Day with Brad's kids. I'm not so much a lone wolf as a sad pup. Could we maybe spend Christmas together?"

Conrad gave her a squeeze. "I can't think of anything I'd like more."

"That's it, then. We have a date for Christmas Eve."

"I won't see you until then?" He pulled Jessy tighter, rolled her over, and looked into her eyes. "I'm gonna miss you, girl. I've gotten used to having you around."

Jessy wanted him, wanted to feel the warmth of his body. She'd been having dreams, terrifying dreams, of Larry. She would awake in the night, breathing hard and trembling. But Con was always right there to hold her.

Jessy had another nagging detail to clear up before she could have a fresh start. Enough time had passed since she and Kevin had had unprotected sex, and she was late. She bought a home pregnancy test kit, and when she got the results, she called Kevin. They needed to talk. They sat in a little campus coffee shop. He loved the college life and looked as handsome and carefree as ever.

"I have a present for you, Kev."

"For me? A present? Ah, Jessy." He leaned forward. "There's only one thing I want from you, and you know what that is." He winked, and Jessy felt her heart flip-flop.

"I think this is something you want even more than that." She handed him a tiny little box.



He gave her a puzzled look and opened the lid. Inside was a slip of paper with one word on it. *Negative*.

"Okay, Jess. I'm clueless. You're going to have to explain this."

She grabbed his hand and looked into his big brown eyes. "Kevin, I think the world of you. In fact, I love you." The words hit the air with surprising softness. They felt right, and she was glad she said them. "But I sure wasn't prepared to have a baby with you."

"Oh." He leaned back and laughed. "You did a test? And it was negative." Jess saw his facial features soften. "That's good news."

She also got the distinct impression he'd forgotten all about it. He was, after all, just nineteen. He had a lot of other things on his mind. Like growing up.

"I can see you're not too impressed with my gift." She reached into her purse and handed him a paper sack. "I got you something else."

He peeked inside and started to laugh again. "Are these for us?"

"No, silly, they're not for us. I just want you to be careful."

"Hey, when a woman says she loves me and hands me a box of Trojans, extra-sensitive, forgive me if I get a little excited."

Jessy looked at him for a lifetime. Suddenly she was awash with sadness. Something bad had happened to him too. He didn't even realize it, but he was a victim as well. A month ago they were two friends, goofing around in streams, catching fish. Everything had changed.

"Jessy, are you okay? You look like you're about to cry."

She was. It just hit her that she was leaving her two best guys behind. She sniffed. "You're such a great guy. And if you were ten years older, I'd date the hell out of you."

"Well, you already know what I think of you, Jessy. But there is something else I think you should know." His face became artificially serious, and he leaned in close again. "I was a virgin when we went up north."

Jessy balled up her napkin and threw it in his face. "You're so full of shit."

They had a few more laughs. "Hey, you'll never guess who called me last night. Right after I talked with you, Cory called me."

"Cory? What did he want?"

"He read about what happened to you in the paper. Asked if you were okay. He asked if anybody knew where Red was. He actually seemed worried about you."

Jessy thought about this. She didn't recall the papers saying anything about Red.

"He asked if you were going back to work for Conrad. I think he has his eye on your old job. I hope you don't mind, but I had to brag about your big move to DC and how your music career is taking off."

Jessy didn't answer. How would Cory know about Red? "Did he mention Red by name?"

"Hmm? Jeez, I don't know. Maybe he didn't. He just seemed pretty worried about the fact that a guy ended up dead in your apartment. I tried to keep the conversation short."

Then Kevin did get serious. As serious as he could be. "So you and Con are hooking up?"

"Yeah, we're hooking up. I've been in love with him since the first moment I saw him." Jessy gazed out the window at the bustle of college life.

"Is he gonna ask you to marry him?"

His question surprised Jessy. That notion hadn't been drifting anywhere in the ether. "I don't know if you noticed, but Con's not the marrying kind. Maybe I'm not either."

"Oh, Jess. You are too the marrying kind. He'll ask ya. I bet you anything, by this time next year you guys will be walking down the aisle."

That was preposterous. Wasn't it?

Jessy made Kevin promise to call her once in a while and said she had some houseplants in the truck he could have. She gave him a warm hug before handing over the plants and wiped away a tear as she watched him bound down the street to his dorm.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the big day arrived, Con and Jessy stood at the train station in Boston. She would leave her truck parked at Conrad's. Not as valuable as the piano, but he said he wanted something of hers to hold for ransom.

She held him around his neck, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I don't want to leave you."

"You go and do what you need to do. I know you have it in you. This is your time. Then you hurry up and get your butt back here to me."

Jessy swallowed hard. A company of butterflies had already gathered in her stomach for the meeting with Hawk. She'd been polishing her songs, old and new, finished some and burned others in Conrad's fire pit. With a final dusting of Con's delicious mustache and a long look at his face, imprinting it to memory, she hopped on the train heading for Washington DC.

# *Part Three:*

## *The Music*

## Chapter Sixteen

Jessy arrived safely at the home of Brad and Alisha Deals. And what a home it was. They lived in the suburbs on an elegant, quiet lane, in a white colonial with more bedrooms than they would ever need. Brad had taken a cushy job writing grants with some environmental advocacy group. His home office was bigger than Jessy's apartment, give or take. They welcomed her with a tour, and Jessy noticed the high-quality piano in the family room. She tried in earnest to mentally map how to get back to the family room but failed and had to be shown again later that day.

They gave her a secluded corner guest room with her own private entrance and a little balcony that poked out over the backyard. She felt like she'd taken up lodging at Buckingham Palace.

The next day Brad dropped her off at the corner in a busy business section of DC. "Sorry, Jess. There's no way I'm gonna find a parking spot. I can't stay anyway. Just look on the directory. The Wilson brothers have an office down in the basement. I'll be around to pick you up later. Just call me on my cell."

Jessy looked at the names on the directory in the lobby. No Wilson. *Great. Now what?* She hiked her heavy satchel over her shoulder and headed for the stairs, intending to roam the basement corridors, when a man's voice called out to her.

"Who are you looking for, Miss?"

Jessy turned and saw a tall, slim blond man wearing a rainbow-colored silk shirt, striding toward her. She couldn't help but notice he was wearing black ballet slippers. "I'm looking for the Wilson brothers' office."

“Well, we don't actually have an office, but our manager does. I'm Hawk Wilson.”

Jessy followed Hawk down to a plush office suite with confusing glass panels everywhere she turned. One large glass window overlooked a recording studio, and several smaller booths, all connected by glass, lined the wall. Her knees wobbled as Hawk led her into the large studio. Trumpets and assorted percussion instruments were strewn about, but Jessy's gaze rested on the massive keyboard.

He invited her to sit and pummeled her with questions. Yes, she took the train to DC. Yes, she was staying with Brad and Alisha. Sure, she'd been writing music since she was in high school.

Jessy was going to need a good chunk of time to figure this guy out. His clothes seemed feminine, but he didn't seem so otherwise. He wasn't exactly good-looking, but he had great hair, thick and feathered back. His cheekbones were high and sculpted. Everything about him was angular. His chin had a few pubescent whiskers that amused Jessy. She wondered why he didn't shave them off. Clearly there would be no explosion of a beard anytime soon—was he waiting?

They talked for nearly an hour, and Jessy showed him some of her new songs. Then she met with the rest of the band, Wilson Brass, and they asked her to play for them. Her fingers trembled, and her heart fluttered wildly, but the music was there. She played several songs for the group, and Hawk was enthusiastic. He had a secretary make several copies of her scores and passed them out to the other members of the band.

There were eight full-time members, which included a drummer, a couple of guitarists, three horn players, and a woman vocalist. The horn players were all Wilson brothers. They also had a floating cast of woodwind players and some strings. It seemed there was no limit to the sound they could make. Jessy would be replacing their keyboard player, who was now six months pregnant.

That night she sat with Brad and Lish, still trying to process the day's flurry of events. "You guys wouldn't believe how wonderful they made my songs sound. We played some of my older compositions. It's a good thing I have most of my notes memorized, 'cuz I sure couldn't see my music. I cried the whole time."

Lish squeezed her hand. "We knew this was a good fit for you. So what did Hawk say? How did you leave it?"

"I'm going to do a couple of full rehearsals with them. Tonight I'm supposed to go with Hawk to his brother's for dinner. Could you guys help me figure out how to get there?"

"We're going too, Jess." Brad swirled his brandy drink. "Lish's firm represents Wilson Brass in all things legal. That's how we met Arnie, their manager, and Hawk. So we'll get you there." He winked at her. "Just stick with us."

The conversation wandered to a few mundane topics. Neither of them had asked her about the business with Larry and the abduction since she arrived, and Jessy felt they were tap-dancing around it.

"So are you seeing anybody up in New Hampshire?" Lish always played matchmaker. She'd hooked Jessy up with an attorney once, who ended up being gay. Another time Jessy went on a blind date Lish had arranged for her, and the guy ducked out of an expensive dinner, leaving her with the tab. This time she could put an end to any matchmaking schemes.

"As a matter of fact, I am. Brad, did you ever meet Conrad Manzey? Your replacement?"

"Ah, no kidding? You're dating him? I've never met Conrad, but Ed Stein tells me he's a heck of a nice guy. Big guy, right?"

Jessy nodded. "Con's tall. It's only been since the ordeal up north that we sort of found each other." Jeez, that sounded lame. *Found each other?* She'd been right in front of him the whole time.

“Jess, was he the guy that you—what they talked about in the papers?”

Alisha swatted Brad's arm. “You're such a boob.” She turned and gave Jess an apologetic look. “We weren't going to ask you about that.” She turned and gave her husband a stern look. “Were we, Brad.”

“It's okay, guys. I'm sure you must be curious.” Jessy took a deep breath and gripped the glass in her hands a little tighter. “Conrad wasn't the guy that I was forced to be with. But we were together throughout the whole ordeal. He was so solid and strong. He's the reason we were able to escape. And he's the one who rescued me from that pervert in my apartment.”

Brad cocked an eyebrow. “So he's got a hero thing going, eh?”

Jessy looked out the massive panel window at the setting sun, suddenly missing Conrad very much. “Yeah,” she said softly. “He's got a hero thing going.” She laughed. “I was crazy about him anyway, but he was all *Mr. Bachelor*, 'nobody's gonna tie me down.' I haven't tied him down, but I did get him to quit thrashing.” Brad and Alisha laughed, and the tension in the room released.

Before they left for the party, Jessy called Conrad. His voice calmed her preparty nerves but also made her heart ache. “Con, this is a dream come true. But so are you. Don't think you're going to get rid of me so easily.”

“I miss you, Jess. But you take care of business. Make your mark. I'll be here.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jessy spent the week in Washington with her feet not touching the ground. She floated from rehearsals to parties and back to her comfy room at the Deals' place.

“So? Are you thinking of hooking up permanently with Wilson Brass? As you can see, Lish and I have plenty of room. Could be the big break you've dreamed of.”



That was an understatement. And Hawk had basically said, *Welcome aboard.*

This was a no-brainer. Wasn't it? Could she keep Conrad waiting, see him every couple of months? The thought of that felt like a weight around her heart. And while Con was never far from her thoughts, Larry was. She'd had very little time to think about him. This adventure was therapy for her, and she felt the old Jessy McNair coming back into her skin.

She called Con that evening. "So how long will you wait for me?"

"That depends. How many rock stars am I competing with?"

"The only competition you have is a big fella who goes by the name of Yamaha." She paused. "Am I doing the right thing, Con?"

"You are. I can tell in your voice how excited you are. Don't worry about me. Maybe I can come down to see you play."

Con updated Jessy on the investigation, which was essentially nothing to report. He had the opportunity to go to Vermont for an upcoming meeting, where he would likely meet up with Lon.

"I'm not ready to talk to him yet. I'm afraid I won't be able to control the urge to deck him. And if I deck him, I'm afraid it might feel good, and I'd want to do it again. See my problem?"

"I do, Con. But a funny thing has happened since I've been here. I'm not angry anymore. Larry was nuts. I feel sorry for him in a way. And I realize that, as frightening as the experience was for us, Lon lost a brother. I feel lucky we're all safe and sound."

Con was quiet for a few breaths. "That's some good perspective, Jess. It gives me something to think about tonight while I'm missing you like crazy."

"How about my fingers gliding warm oil over every inch of your body? Is that something to think about?"

"Hmmm. Now *that's* some good perspective."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jessy spent her days collaborating with Hawk and the other musicians on songs, many of them her own. Jessy was never much of a lyricist, so that task was turned over to other band members. Some songs were left as instrumentals, which was her preference. She cringed to hear silly words lilting over a song she'd written with a very different meaning in mind. Every evening they rehearsed. A band like Wilson Brass didn't rise to the top on a few jam sessions. Every weekend they traveled to concerts from Philadelphia to Virginia Beach. The venues ranged from intimate stages with less than one hundred people to large concert halls with thousands. Sometimes they played for crowds that danced, and other times they played a concert for a seated crowd. Either way, Jessy was having the time of her life.

She had an elegant wardrobe of dresses and someone helping with her makeup and hair. Hawk liked it wild. She was able to accommodate his request. No problem there. She began to realize how much of Wilson Brass was presentation. It wasn't all about the music. Hawk micromanaged every aspect of everyone's persona. Their new keyboard player needed to be hotter than hot.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jessy woke up early most mornings to have coffee in Brad's sunroom. In a few minutes she'd help get the girls off to school, but this was her time to reflect. And count her blessings. Her songs were no longer an archive of obscurity, played only in her head or at her lonely piano.

When she sat in the mornings, she also thought of Conrad. In just a few short weeks their friendship had exploded into a passionate love. They weren't forced to have sex for a stranger's video camera, and she'd arrived at a point where she was glad of that. The two of them set the world ablaze when they made love. It would break her heart to share that with strangers.

On her birthday, Jessy came home from a long afternoon rehearsal and went to her room with a heavy heart. A package had arrived at the Deals' with

her name on it and waited for her on her bed. She unwrapped a simple oak picture frame with a photograph of a man. A soldier. Jessy gasped. It was Con! In his Coast Guard dress blues, clean shaven, with short hair, and wearing a big, scary hat. She could see the Con she knew in his face, even though he looked so young. He was probably told to look stern, but his sweet blue eyes couldn't pull it off. *So that's what's hidin' under that mustache.* She smiled. He was adorable.

A note slipped from behind the frame and fell to the floor. With a lump in her throat and a flood of tears threatening, she picked it up. In Con's perfect printing, it said:

*Dear Jess,*

*This gift isn't romantic, but I hope you like it anyway.*

*This is me as a young Coast Guard seaman, warts and all. I know I told you I would never show this to you. You've got me doing all sorts of things I thought I'd never do. Today I planted more lilies.*

*I miss you, and I love you. Happy birthday.*

*Con*

*P.S. Please turn the picture frame over.*

Jessy wiped her tears with the back of her hand and flipped the frame over. Taped to the back was a string of diamonds. With trembling fingers, she loosened the tape and held up the most extravagant bracelet she'd ever seen. She held it to her heart and grabbed the picture, flopping down onto the bed. There she stayed, sobbing into her pillow. How could her lifelong dream come true while the man of her dreams was not a part of it?

She must have fallen asleep, because when she opened her eyes, someone was knocking at the door. *Shit. I don't feel like playing piano with the girls tonight.* She stumbled in the dimness to the door, still clutching the bracelet

and the picture of Con. When she opened it, there he stood, leaning against the door frame.

Jessy couldn't believe her eyes. She thought for sure she was dreaming as she gazed at Con's smile.

"Hi, beautiful."

She stepped into his arms, letting him envelop her, inhaling his scent. This was no dream.

"What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't let your birthday go by and not see you. I decided this afternoon and grabbed a flight. I hope it's okay. I'll leave in the morning."

"Oh God. Of course it's okay." She pulled away and held out the picture. "You were pretty cute back then. It's a marvel to me you managed to stay single."

"I was just waiting for you, girl."

Jessy looked at the bracelet dangling from her fingers. "Con, the bracelet. It's stunning. Thank you."

"I've never seen you wear diamonds. Do you like them?"

"Oh gosh, yes. I haven't worn them since I took off my wedding ring."

"Now you have a whole bunch of 'em." Con held her waist and pulled her close. Jessy kissed him deeply, blending the saltiness of her tears between their lips.

"I hope you ate your Wheaties this morning, Conman, 'cuz you have a big night ahead of you." She stepped to the nightstand, laid down her gifts, lit a candle, and turned out the lights.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jessy ran her hand along the length of Con's strong back and felt the indentations of corded muscles. His broad shoulders felt as big as the whole world lying on top of her. How could a man so virile love her so gently and so

perfectly? Five minutes ago she'd quivered beneath him as he sent her to the moon and back, pulsing his hot seed inside her. She slipped from beneath him and sat up on her haunches, continuing to massage his back.

"You're so strong, Con."

"And yet your touch makes me crumble. How is that?"

She kept at her task and studied his back, admiring the way his perfect, round buns rose from a narrow waist. She danced her fingers over the surface and smiled with satisfaction at the goose bumps she induced.

He buried a moan in the pillow. Then he rolled over and looked at her, perching his arms behind his head. "I've missed making love to you."

She continued her gentle sweeps on the front of his body. "We've waited a long time. Since before my sister came. Before Larry." She paused, regretting the mention of that name. "Take me the way you want to tonight. Let me be your fantasy."

A smile curled under his mustache. "That's an interesting offer."

She reached to feel his cock, already hard and weeping fresh juices from the little slit. What an amazing tool. She pulled up long and spread the puddle with her thumb. "Haven't you fantasized about me? Just a little? Is there something I can do to drive you wild?"

"Ah, Jess." Con closed his eyes and flexed the muscles of his stomach, raising his hips to her touch. He seemed especially sensitive tonight. "Yeah, I think you've made a cameo appearance in a daydream or two."

"A cameo?" She leaned down and captured his ultraresponsive ridge in her mouth and heard him draw a quick breath.

"Okay, a starring role." He stroked her hair.

Jessy rubbed her tongue along the length and slipped the full knob into her mouth with a sweet suck.

"Oh fuck." He pushed her head down onto him and thrust his hips. Jessy had never taken him all the way and thought tonight might be the night. Then,

with a sudden, urgent motion, he sat up. "Jess, sometimes I can barely find my way home, I'm so wrapped up in fantasies of you." He pulled her to his lips.

"That's better."

"Turn." With gentle hands, he urged her to spin around. Kneeling on the bed, she presented her backside to him.

"Your skin is so soft. Your curves. That's what drives me wild." His hands caressed the length of her body, and she reached above her, piling her hair in her arms. Con adjusted his position behind her, and her heart pumped into rapid fire. His hands glided like quicksilver over every inch of her, rounding to the front to squeeze her nipples between his fingers. He buried his nose in her neck and inhaled.

"Do I smell like flowers, Con?"

"Yes, you do." His low voice and delicious nibbling at her neck sent a gush of hot cream to her pussy. His hands spun a web of magic on her skin, and she craved his touch, his fingers, his cock. Jessy bent down on her hands and knees and arched her back to cascade her curls loosely over her shoulders. Con's hands slid down her spine and curled around her waist as he positioned himself between her legs. He ran his slick fingers softly along the length of her slit, and she trembled with anticipation, reaching for him. He pushed her hand away and massaged her clit, teasing her opening with the round tip of his cock. "Let me play, Jess."

She bowed low and gave in, letting him toy with her, moaning softly. His hand ran the length of her back and pushed her hair to the side, still brushing his cock in her cream. Jessy shivered and whimpered, wanting desperately to be filled. "Please, Conman."

At last, long fingers slipped inside and satisfied her. Jessy squeezed her hands into the bedding, longing to kiss him and feel his tongue, but this...this was new and wonderful. Con's fingers pulsed rapidly inside her while the others massaged her clit. This was too much. From somewhere deep inside, a

star radiated and exploded. She came hard with his fingers sliding over everything sensitive, every secret that only Conrad knew.

Still lying low to the bed, she trembled and arched her back. He grabbed her hips and held her secure while he slid his cock slowly inside her. She raised her chest back up and arched once again, pushing against his entry. "Deeper, Conrad."

It felt like he touched places he'd never touched before, awakening nerve bundles for the first time. Con's cock felt longer and slicker than ever as he drew out and glided into her again. A shiver rippled through her, and she mewled her approval. He continued to probe, nice and easy, wobbling her clit between his fingers.

Oh God, what was he doing to her? How could there be more unexplored places inside her? She bucked gently toward him.

"Spread for me, girl." Con thrust into her with greater speed, smooth and hot. He held her hips in his strong hands, pulling her back to meet his surging cock. She was at his mercy, his to dominate and devour. "Oh, Jess..."

"Take me, Con," she whispered.

Supporting herself on shaking arms, Jessy heard his heavy exhales with every deep push as her muscles milked his meat. Con's frantic humping drove her senses into oblivion, and she threw her head back. A tidal wave coursed through her body and gripped her, and she screamed his name. "Conman! Yes!"

Her arms collapsed beneath her as Con's momentum reached its peak. Her body electrified when he finally came, his heat surging inside her. Con's strength turned her on so much, and when he came inside her, Jessy felt like she'd fed him. With each pulse of his orgasm, he whimpered her name. "Jessy. Jessy. Jessy." She was so happy to be his dream.

\* \* \* \* \*

They spent the night in Jessy's room and barely let go of each other. In the morning, she awoke early and sat up to watch him sleep. He looked so sweet with his hair still frosted from the summer sun and gorgeous little squint lines forming around his eyes. How on earth could she be apart from him? His smile, his smirk, his strength, and the sex sent her into orbit every single time he touched her.

They emerged from their love nest in the morning, tired and dreamy, not interested in greeting the day. She grabbed Con's arm and escorted him to the sunroom. Brad joined them, and the men chatted about the fisheries program. Jessy resented every word that came out of Brad's mouth. How could he monopolize these precious minutes that she had with Conrad? She wanted to pick him up bodily and shove him out the door. Before she knew it, it was time for Con to catch his flight. He thanked Brad for the hospitality and kissed Jessy warmly, cradling her face in his hands.

"Good-bye, Conman," she whispered. "Remember, it's only until Christmas."



## Chapter Seventeen

Washington DC shivered under a cloak of gray clouds, and Jessie cursed the rain, her umbrella, and her big, frizzy hair. As the holidays grew closer, she was dismayed to see a Christmas concert in Baltimore on December 23. She would need wings to get to New Hampshire for Christmas Eve. When she told Conrad, he was crushed. He didn't want Jessie to spend her holiday in an airport.

"I bet Baltimore would be a wonderful place to spend Christmas. Let me come to you. You don't happen to know where I can get a ticket to that concert, do you?"

"You would do that for me?"

"Oh, girl. The way I've been missing you, I'd meet you on the deck of the Titanic."

The crowd was an eclectic mix of yuppies and wealthy family folks with a smattering of younger, hipper-looking fans. Con had a balcony seat and already wished he had taken Jessie up on her offer for a backstage pass. His legs were cramped. But he wanted to see her the first time like a regular concertgoer. He looked at the broad stage where some instruments stood, waiting for action. This was Jessie's world. He laughed as he thought of her reaching into a bucket, grabbing a rainbow trout, and carefully laying it on the board to get its length. Those hands were meant to make music, not wrestle fish.

The lights dimmed, and the musicians filed out onto the stage for an opening bow. Jessy stood in the middle, arm in arm with a young blond—Hawk, he assumed. She wore an elegant red holiday dress, cut low and tastefully short to show off her long, shapely legs. She waved to the crowd like a movie star, and the lights caught the shimmer of the diamond bracelet around her wrist. Con smiled with pride, and his heart swelled to see her so happy.

Jessy took her place behind a complicated set of keyboards, which reminded Con of a pilot in a cockpit. The beginning songs were upbeat and brassy, and the audience loved them. Now Con was glad he was not backstage. The energy of the crowd was contagious. Hawk played a bright trumpet, and the other brothers jived and swung their horns. A woman in a green dress strolled onstage and belted out a few songs in a big voice, and then slid off to the side to bang a tambourine. The whole stage was electric. Jessy looked busy and totally beautiful. Con noticed her blonde-streaked hair, even from his distant perch in the balcony. Those weren't the same delightful highlights she'd gotten from a summer of fishing. He felt a twist of...something. Jealousy? Resentment? He brushed it aside.

At intermission, he stood to regain feeling in his toes. He enjoyed the music but looked forward to seeing Jessy. His girl. *His*. That was it. He felt threatened. The sensation hit him like a tidal wave. Suddenly he felt like he shared Jessy with thousands. He already felt guilty for prying Kevin out of the threesome. Con eased himself back down to his seat, feeling like a bastard—a selfish bastard. A threatened, selfish bastard.

When the curtains opened again, a grand piano sat in center stage. Hawk strode out, and the crowd welcomed him with howls and cheers. He bowed and graciously accepted the accolades.

"Thank you. Tonight we are going to do a special song featuring our newest band member. She's a talented songwriter and the gifted pen behind many of our new songs. But first and foremost, she is an accomplished pianist.

We'd like to feature one of her most beautiful instrumentals tonight, called 'The Landing.' The song's delicate melody is diminished only by the beauty of the piano player herself. Please welcome the talented Jessie Tanner."

Jessy walked—no, floated—onto the stage on million-dollar legs made even sexier by a pair of red pumps. She took a bow, pulled her bench up to the piano, and began to play. Conrad recognized the song. It was the one she'd played for him in the apartment the first night they made love. The night she'd stood to face him and called him out. "*I'm right in front of you. What are you waiting for?*" She'd stolen his heart then and was wrenching it now. He loved her with all his heart.

The only accompaniment was a flute and a guitar player. The rest of the stage belonged to Jessy, and she commanded every inch of it. Con couldn't take his eyes off her. He sat, enraptured, as Jessy's song billowed through the crowd—and his heart.

When she finished, the crowd went wild. She stood next to the piano and bowed. Hawk came out and hugged her and gave her a kiss. Conrad felt a pang of jealousy. For the rest of the concert, he sat in his balcony seat, planning his future. With Jessy.

When the concert was over, Con went backstage to find her. It was a zoo back there, and he felt foolish and out of place. Everyone hustled around him, carrying this or that, yelling at everyone else. All of a sudden, a flurry of curls and a red dress came flying around the corner, knocking him to the wall. At last Con held Jessy in his arms.

"Oh my gosh, it's you." Her voice was breathless, almost frightened. Then she calmed down. "I was afraid I wouldn't find you." She melted her silken lips onto his, slow, wet, and hot. "God, I've missed you."

Con looked down at his beautiful girl. She had makeup on and looked more like Morgan than ever. But she still had that gentleness, a softness that had captivated him from the start. "Congratulations. You were amazing."

Jessy draped her arms over his shoulders and danced her fingers in the waves of hair at the nape of his neck. "Thanks. That song I played? 'The Landing'? That was inspired by a fisheries biologist I used to know back in New Hampshire."

"Oh yeah? Nice guy?"

"Bastard stole my piano." She pulled her arms down and began to fiddle with the buttons on Con's nice navy blue dress shirt. She got one undone and spilled hot liquid kisses on his chest.

"Jessy, we're still in the hallway, you know." Con waved a casual hand, smiling at the guys passing by with their arms full of musical whatevers.

Jessy reached a hand down to his crotch to find his cock already straining against the silky fabric of his dress slacks. Con started to laugh and grabbed her hand, then turned and dragged her down the hallway. He didn't know where he was taking her, but they needed to get out of public view. As he walked, he checked doorknobs, looking for an unlocked door. Finding one open, they went into the darkened room. "You horny little thing, you."

Jessy attacked his mouth, working his zipper open to touch him fully. Con lifted the slippery fabric of her dress to find...nothing. "Jessy," he whispered around her kisses. "You're not wearing anything under this dress."

"Really? I must have forgotten." She continued her hungry feeding.

All Con could muster was a growl. He hiked her dress up and lifted her to him as she wrapped her legs around him. He knew sexy red pumps dangled at the end of those goddamn gorgeous legs, and his cock jumped for relief. In a whirl he turned around and pinned her against the door, thrusting himself inside her. She cried out in pain and pleasure, too loud for their surroundings, but they weren't thinking about that. "Oh God, Jess."

Conrad slammed her hard as he supported her light frame, kissing her with a fire he'd been keeping on low heat. Now it was an inferno. He felt her

clutch at unknown objects in the dark to brace herself as she arched her back, her hot muscles tightening around his meat.

She gasped as he took her body, her beautiful chest heaving against his. At last she cooed with a soft shudder. Her orgasm was so sweet, and he slowed his frenzied push to feel her release. "Conman, I love you."

A few more long, glorious strokes in her creamy heat and he spilled inside her. "Say you're mine, Jessy Tanner." He breathed onto her sweaty neck.

"I'm yours."

They stood united, panting, hearts pounding.

A knock on the door brought them both to attention. Con slipped out of her, and Jessy's feet went to the floor. He zipped up, and they stood in the dark. Jessy muffled a laugh into his chest.

Another knock. "Jessy?"

Jessy moved away from the door and opened it a couple of inches, peeking out through the crack. "Yeah?"

It was Hawk. "Are ya done?"

She opened the door and pulled Con into the hallway. "Hawk, this is Conrad. Con, Hawk Wilson."

Conrad extended his hand and smiled weakly. Hawk shook his hand. "Holy crap, you're a big one. Jessy told me about you, but she didn't say you were such a grand specimen."

Con didn't know what to say to that. "I enjoyed the concert."

"Sounded to me like you were enjoying the after-concert entertainment with my keyboard player better." He turned to Jessy. "Should I check and see if you have slivers in your back? It's a wooden door."

"That won't be necessary. Thanks for your concern." Jessy grabbed Con's hand, and they headed down the hall. Con felt a little foolish having gotten caught in the heat of passion, but he didn't appreciate the tone of that little twerp.

They strode to the band's dressing room to get Jessy's things. "I don't care for him."

Jessy laughed. "Hawk is a character. He enjoys putting people on the spot and watching their reactions. Never mind him." She slipped on her coat and looked into Con's eyes. "I wish we hadn't been interrupted. Basking in the afterglow is the best part of making love to you."

Con raised an eyebrow. "If the afterglow is the best part, I'm doing it wrong."

"Oh my God, you are so not doing it wrong." She became serious and caressed his cheek. "Do you have any idea how much I've missed you?"

"I'm getting some sense of that, yeah. Hey, since when do you strut out in front of an audience of thousands with no underwear on?"

"Look at this dress. Where would I fit a pair of undies in this tight thing? I went and got a leg wax so I wouldn't need stockings." She hiked her dress to show her smooth legs.

Con growled again. "Damn, girl, let's get to the hotel."

Con and Jessy spent Christmas Eve together, mostly in bed, occasionally running to get a beer or a quick bite. All they wanted was each other.

Con gave Jessy an elegant sapphire necklace. "I wanted to get you something musical, but I don't know enough to pull that off. I asked the guy in the jewelry store if he had anything shaped like music, and he just looked at me. He's probably still scratching his head over that."

"It's beautiful. And it *is* musical. It's in the perfect shape of a whole note."

"Really?"

Jessy smiled to herself. This guy knew nothing about music. She wasn't going to tell him that the lint in his pocket was also most likely in the shape of a whole note. He seemed pretty pleased with himself as he lightly touched the orb dangling at her neck.

She handed him her present. "Welcome to the twenty-first century."

Con opened his present. "A BlackBerry?" He started to laugh.

"Look, it has GPS. And e-mail, and a camera, and...a whole bunch of other stuff I can't explain. But now you can call me when you take my sister out for drinks. Or get trapped in a camper. Or lost in the woods. I put the contract in my name, but you're paying the bill."

"I'll do that." He started fiddling with the buttons, until Jessy took it away and slipped the blouse from her shoulders.

"Why don't you push my buttons instead?"

Jessy came out of the shower on Christmas morning, and Con sat on the bed, legs crossed, watching *SpongeBob*. "What the hell is this?"

Jessy burst out laughing. "You *are* old, aren't you."

"Is this guy actually a sponge?" He shook his head. "Jess, come and sit. I need to update you on the investigation."

Jessy sat wrapped in a towel at the foot of the bed.

"Okay, you need to get some clothes on. I can't talk to you with just that towel on."

Jessy reached to feel, and sure enough, his cock was hard as stone in his sweatpants. She giggled and went to put on her own sweats, then sat back down on the bed.

"I got a call from Mark Ashe. Red is still on the lam. And there's something else I haven't told you. You've had so many other things to worry about."

"What is it, Con?"

"Red's a murderer. He killed a man back in New York State."

Jessy's look betrayed no emotions. He grabbed her hand. "But they did track down the video. It was on a pretty raunchy site hosted by some guy in the

Czech Republic. This thing is going to go on for a long time, trying to piece together who's behind it all."

"Is there more?"

"Yeah." Con released a big breath. "You won't believe this. The video was uploaded from a Hotmail account under 'lbriggs.' And they tapped into the wireless account at the resort in Pittsburg. That's why they would disappear for so long and leave us in the camper. I kept wondering, if these guys are making so much money, why aren't they cranking out these videos faster? Not that I wanted that, but it was just another puzzling behavior that didn't add up. They needed to edit the stuff—or whatever the hell they did—then get to town and connect with this dealer."

"Why us? Was it random? That's what I can't figure out."

"Not random." Con narrowed his eyes and pushed at a curl on her cheek. "Remember how we thought these guys had to know who we were and where we would be? I guess Larry was reading Lon's e-mails at work."

Jessy looked at Con with confusion. "Didn't Lon know?"

"I guess not. His brother had access to his computer after-hours."

She picked at some lint on her sweatpants. "So have they taken the video off the Internet?"

"They shut the site down. So nothing is being sold. At least, not from that location. But, Jess, Mark told me it's impossible to trace what's already out there. I'm sorry to have to tell you that. I know it's not what you wanted to hear."

Jessy tilted her head and looked at Con. "Kevin and I knew that. I just hope I never have to see it, or you never see it, or my kids won't ever see it."

"Kids?"

Jessy said no more as she settled onto his chest.



Con sighed and gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Do you ever stop to think how much has changed? Four months ago you were slipping in a stream, netting fish. Now here you are, a famous piano player. I'm proud of you, Jess."

"I always felt like I wasn't man enough for you." Jessy found a button to spin on his shirt.

This was a doozy. Her wistful tone smothered his happy sentiments. Con pushed her off his chest and looked her square in the eye. "You're going to have to explain that one."

"I thought maybe you wanted a woman who was tougher than me. If I could just be a stronger, better biologist, then maybe you'd ask me out." She snuggled back down on his chest. "There were days that I would have been completely shot without Kevin's help."

This revelation surprised Con. Jessy had never failed to impress him with her skills, and with so little training. Plus it was her feminine qualities that he loved so much, then and now.

"Listen to me. You did your job every single day. You pulled your weight and more. But I'll be honest. There wasn't a minute that passed that I couldn't see you're all woman. And don't ever apologize for that." He rolled her over and perched above her. "I love your softness." Conrad spilled liquid kisses all over her neck. "I love everything about you." His lips finished their luxurious trip and landed on hers. "But I like your curves most of all."

"Oh, then you'll love this one. Hawk's thinking about getting my boobs done."

Con froze and sat up. "What?"

"Hawk said it might improve my look if I were bustier. He's always managing our image, ya know?"

Her words were so cavalier, and Con was about to blow his stack. He inhaled. "Hawk wants you to get breast implants? And you'd consider doing it?"

"I guess I haven't given it much thought. I take it you don't like the idea."

“Jessy, you're beautiful, inside and out. I love your body. It's my favorite place on earth. And when some fuckin' trumpet player wants to start remodeling—” Con's possessiveness reared its head.

“Con, don't worry.” Jessy reached out to soothe him. She had every right to be pissed off, but she wasn't. “Hawk just throws out ideas. During one brainstorming session, I was going to be a blonde with a Hawaiian tan.”

Con looked at her, completely appalled. “Do *not* tan that gorgeous skin of yours.” He raised a warning finger at her. Then he looked at the end of his finger and felt stupid. Jessy burst out laughing.

“Okay, Conman. No tan.” She was still laughing. “No tan, no boobs, no blonde hair.”

He wrestled her back down to the bed. “What's so funny, Miss No Underwear? You don't think I have a right to protect what's mine? Huh?”

“Hmmm. I like the sound of that. Don't worry about Hawk. He's more businessman than musician. Always worried about the image.”

“Just tell him to leave your body alone.”

## Chapter Eighteen

The winter flew past Jessy in a dazzle of parties and concerts and rehearsals. The memories of Christmas with Conrad in Baltimore kept her warm, but loneliness crept in. Even in a room full of like-minded musicians, she'd glance out the window and dream of curling up in front of the fire with Con in the New England winter. Brad and Alisha's family were wonderful to her and welcomed her to all their family gatherings. Still, Jessy longed for a family of her own, with Conrad.

Her inheritance check found its lonely way into her hands and brought a wash of memories of her father. His last legacy simmered in her bank account, which already boiled over from her new career.

She hadn't had the chance to see Con since Baltimore. Valentine's Day was too busy, with back-to-back concerts. Conrad offered to fly to Virginia Beach, but Jessy's schedule was packed. When she had an hour or two of free time, she spent it writing new music. Hawk and Wilson Brass gobbled up every note she wrote, and begged for more.

Their telephone relationship broke her heart. "Conrad, I need to see you. None of this makes any sense without you. When can you get away?"

"Jess, I can get away the minute you tell me when and where."

"Have you found my replacement yet? She better not be curly-haired and curvy."

"Well, I did interview a curly-haired blond, but he didn't look particularly curvy to me. Are you worried?"

Jessy smiled into the telephone. God, she missed him. "I'm worried a little."

"I'll be right here, brushing the snow off your truck. Hey, you'll never guess who applied for the job. Cory Johnson."

"Interesting. Did you interview him?"

"Nope. He got a nice rejection letter. I never trusted that guy."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was springtime in Washington DC. The cherry blossoms exploded in a stunning display, and they helped to brighten Jessy's mood. One sunny Saturday she took time out of writing and asked Brad for a ride to the nearest Jeep dealer. She was tired of public transportation and bumming rides. She plunked down a down payment and drove out with a peppy Wrangler. After a few death-defying trips on the DC freeways, she realized the manual transmission was probably a mistake. Oh well. She imagined her and Conrad driving the Kancamagus Highway with the top down, wind in their hair. Con's birthday was coming up, and she wanted to ask Hawk for a few days off. When she got to the studio, Hawk was waiting for her.

"Hey, I was hoping to find you here before everybody else arrived. There's something I want to talk to you about." Jessy's upbeat voice faltered when she saw Hawk's face, drawn and cold.

"We need to talk, all right." Hawk drummed a pencil on the desk.

"What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I feel like I have. Your ghost. In a scary movie."

Jessy reached for a chair as the feeling drained out of her legs. "What are you talking about?"

"You know Arnie, our manager? He got a package in the mail the other day. He's always getting stuff from fans or wannabe musicians singing and playing music on CDs."

Jessy's hands trembled as she swept some hair behind her ears. She knew where this was going and instinctively looked to the door for a way out.

Hawk held up a DVD. "He showed me this, Jess. Can you imagine my surprise? I couldn't believe my eyes." He paused and then slammed his hand down on the desk in front of her. "When did you make this video? And why didn't you tell me, Jessy?"

"It's not what you think, Hawk."

"It's not a professional job. I could see that. Are there a whole bunch of these circulating out there?"

Jessy's thoughts came in rapid fire. Where did she start? She looked out the window at the sidewalk traffic for guidance. "Last fall I was on a fishing trip. My crew—we were kidnapped." She turned to look Hawk in the eye. "Of course it's not a professional job. It's my coworker and I forced to have sex at gunpoint."

Hawk's jaw dropped. A horn beeped out on the street, and Jessy measured her breaths as he stared at her. Then his eyes narrowed. "Didn't look like you were protesting, Jessy. What I saw were two people fucking each other's brains out. Pretty willingly."

Jessy inhaled and closed her eyes. "I swear, I never thought I would have to deal with that video. At least I hoped I wouldn't." Her voice had no timbre and barely carried in the thick air. When she opened her eyes, Hawk's stare was still fixed on her.

"Where did this come from? Who has these copies?" Again he waved the DVD in the air.

Jessy let out a weary breath. "I don't know. The police have been trying to track them down. They were sold on some Internet porn site. They shut that down, but..." She shook her head. "Who knows what's out there. I've never even seen it." Jessy's mind flashed to Larry, setting up his camera in her

bedroom. And Red. They still didn't have a lead on him. Was he still making money off the video of her and Kevin "*fucking each other's brains out*"?

"Jessy, this is bad." Hawk ran a slim hand through his hair, and it snapped back into perfect position. "We're a wholesome family band. Most of our fan base is in their fifties. We got rid of our last keyboard player because she got pregnant without a husband. We have an image to consider."

Jessy's thoughts whirled. Wholesome family band? "Hawk, you wanted me to be hot. Sexy. Maybe..."

"Maybe nothing, Jess. That's eye candy for old farts. They sit next to their fat wives during concerts and fantasize about you. It keeps 'em buying tickets. This kind of shit won't sell tickets." He waved the DVD in the air, making Jessy want to rip it from his hand.

"What do you want me to do?"

Hawk sighed. "I'll talk to Arnie and our marketing agency." They both looked out the window as a late-spring snow scurried around the sidewalk. "I wish I knew where this came from. Or how many copies are floating around out there."

"You and me both." Jessy's comment was almost imperceptible, and she imagined the people at the ad agency viewing the video. No way. Not if she could help it. "I should probably take that to the police, Hawk. Could I?" She held out her hand.

He seemed reluctant to give it to her. Jessy was taken aback by his coldness and sudden lack of trust in her. "Hawk, please. There's an ongoing investigation. They should know about this." He handed Jessy the DVD.

Jessy went home with a DVD in her bag showing her in the most intimate, personal position imaginable. As much as she welcomed the awakening of the sexual Jessy, the DVD made her sick. There was a time when she thought she wanted to see it. To watch Kevin's youthful, perfect form pin her to the rocks

and send her to the moon. That experience now seemed like a lifetime ago—a strange and erotic memory.

She'd always known this was a possibility. The video turning up. She just wished Hawk hadn't been the one to see it. She felt used and wanted Conrad's protective arms around her so badly. She called him and told him the news with deadened emotions. Con, it seemed, took it harder than she did.

"Ah, Jess. This is so wrong. Did you tell Hawk what happened? Explain to him that it was a crime? You were a victim. You shouldn't be punished over and over again for this." Con had himself a good rant and finally settled down. "I just wish there was something I could do."

"Can I send you the damn thing so you can get it to Detective Ashe?"

"Yeah, we should get it to him. Maybe there are fingerprints or some digital attachment that might help in the tracking."

"Con?"

"Yeah, Jess?"

"Please don't watch it."

Con was silent for a few seconds. "Jess, I would never do that."

"I'm sorry. I know you wouldn't. That wasn't fair. I'm just feeling a little bruised right now."

"Hawk was pretty hard on you?"

"His empire is threatened. I don't blame him." A great big lump formed in her throat. "I think this might be the end of my days with Wilson Brass."

\* \* \* \* \*

On a drizzly April morning, Jessy sat in the Deals' sunroom. Her favorite time of day had lost its appeal. Her coffee grew cold as she stared out the window, watching the quiet street come to life. She was jolted awake by her calypso cell phone ring. She recognized Kevin's number.

"Hey, tall, dark, and nineteen. What's shakin'?"

"Ah, but I'm not nineteen anymore. I had a birthday in February."

Jessy's heart flumped, realizing she'd forgotten. Did she know Kevin was a Pisces? "Kev, I'm so sorry I blew off your big day. Next time I'm in New Hampshire, I'll make it up to you. I suppose you're too old for ice cream."

"There's only one gift I want from you, and we could probably work ice cream into it somehow. And some spanking... Oh, man, I'll be playing with that image all day. So much for my organic chemistry test tomorrow."

"Jeez, don't make me responsible for that too. But, Kev? I do have something for you. It's a movie. A DVD."

There was silence on the other end of the phone line. "Does this movie have any familiar faces?"

"Yup, a couple I think you'd recognize." Jessy played the game, but her voice wavered as she fought back an avalanche of tears.

"What's going on, Jessy? Tell me."

"Somebody sent the band's manager a DVD with us on it."

"Whoa. So the dang thing surfaced." He said this more to himself than to Jessy. "What happened? I mean, he must know that you weren't making those movies as some wild weekend project."

"I explained it all. But they're pretty concerned about the image of the band. I don't know what will happen, but I wanted you to know. Con's getting the DVD to Detective Ashe. I've been trying to call you for a couple of days to tell you. Where ya been?"

"Spring break."

"Did you say studying?"

"Yeah, studying."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jessy kept a low profile and even lower spirits for the next few days. When Hawk called and asked her to come to the studio, it felt like a summons. She



wasn't sure what his verdict would be, but she had already made up her mind. Sometimes life delivered a swift kick in the ass, but she sure as hell wasn't going to bend over twice. If Hawk's cold *image management* was more important than Jessy's well-being and friendship, not to mention talent, he could kiss her ass. She was prepared to walk away.

His rainbow-colored shirt was in plain view through the menagerie of studio glass, and Jessy tried to catch a glimpse of his face as she approached. She pushed the door open with a whoosh as new air entered the soundproof room. Her hands were fisted around the straps of her satchel, and she decided to keep them like that. Her little demonstration of power. "So?"

"Hello to you too." Hawk had no smile, and Jessy had little desire to banter. Her future dangled like one of her delicate mobiles on an invisible string.

"Just tell me, Hawk. Does Wilson Brass want me on board or not?"

"Jess, you're a fabulous musician and a gifted composer." Jessy resented his eyes on the ceiling, not her.

"Thank you."

Now he looked at her. "We just can't have a porn star in the band."

Jessy's fists tightened. *A porn star*. Her heart sank to hear those words. How could he say that? She held on to the shoulder straps like a lifeline and stared at him. He was about to say more, but she cut him off.

"You're making a mistake, Hawk. Letting me go. The band needs my songs. The crowds love every one of them."

"Let me finish." He raised his hands, as if to stifle a hysterical woman. "We'd like to continue to buy the rights to your songs. You could write under a pen name. Nobody would need to know it's you. No harm done. You're happy, we're happy."

Jessy was ready for this. In her deliberations over the past few days, it was one of her "last straw" options. But Hawk's presentation of the offer

punched her in the stomach. "*Nobody would need to know it's you.*" Suddenly the meanness of his words turned into hilarity in her ears. Without thought, she burst out laughing.

Hawk was visibly befuddled but laughed a little too. "Does this mean you like the idea? Ghostwriting?"

Ghostwriting. Before her eyes, Hawk morphed into a snake. Jessy drew in an energizing breath and tried on one of Con's smirks. "You can shove your pen name up your ass, Hawk." She let loose her fisted grip on the straps and shook her hands to escort blood back to her fingertips. "And while you're at it, get some real shoes. Who the fuck wears ballet slippers?" She turned and pulled open the heavy glass door. A blast of air assaulted her senses, and she smiled. Inside her heart, the trampled Jessy McNair celebrated. She'd be fine...just fine.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the end of the week, Jessy was packed up and ready to leave DC. It was fun while it lasted. Ghosts of humiliation still loomed in corners, but she beat them back. She knew she'd taken the high road. She'd done nothing wrong and refused to tuck her tail.

The Wilson Brass band rolled merrily along and avoided any scent of a scandal. Whoever sent the DVD could have easily sent a copy to the media, but they didn't. It seemed their aim was to freak Jessy out and mess with her life, not destroy a perfectly good musical ensemble.

At least she'd be with Conrad on his birthday.

## Chapter Nineteen

Conrad paced the cabin and paused to adjust the lilies, putting their best faces outward. Jessy hadn't been to his cabin since she left for her musical debut. He'd asked her to move in with him again, and she seemed agreeable but cautious. She still seemed concerned that he would long for the solitude of the bachelor life. Not a chance. She was the light of his life. Con had spent a small fortune buying up Easter lilies and had them perched and poking out of every corner in his cabin. She needed something to brighten her life these days.

Warm spring air filled Con's lungs when he stepped out onto the porch, and he wondered if Jessy would drive with the top down on her new Jeep. He figured it might be a bit chilly on the highway, but he grinned at the thought of Jessy's hair after a long road trip in a convertible.

About an hour later than expected, Jessy drove up Con's wooded lane. He went to meet her and noticed the ragtop was on. She looked sad and worn. She'd pulled her hair up loosely into a high clip, with wisps dancing at the nape of her neck. He leaned down to the window.

"Are you okay, girl?"

"After the shortest music career in history, I'm glad to be right here at this spot." She expelled a pent-up breath. "I feel better already. You make me happy, Conman."

"There's no way your music career is over. Just redirected. Wait until you see what I have inside." He opened her door, not taking his eyes off her.

Jessy's face brightened. "Really? Something for me?"

Con grabbed her hand, and they headed for the porch. He noticed the flow of her soft flowered dress. Every move she made seemed delicately feminine, and Con thought again how much he missed her touch in his life.

"Close your eyes." He waited until she complied, then pulled her inside the cabin and into the heady, overwhelming fragrance. She opened her eyes and gasped. "Con, the lilies! Where did you get all these?" She inhaled deeply and started moving around the room, poking her nose into the flowers, one after another.

"Do you like them? The pup—I mean, never mind."

"You're so thoughtful." She looked back at him with a beautiful smile. "It's a wonderful surprise. Thank you."

"Oh, that's not the surprise. Why don't you open that door?" Con motioned to his bedroom.

With an adorable frown of suspicion, Jessy cautiously opened the door. Nothing happened. She looked at Con and shrugged. In another second a little black puppy strutted out, tail erect and wagging for all it was worth.

"Oh my goodness, who's this?" Jessy scooped the little thing up in her arms. "She's beautiful. What's your name?" She spoke in a funny little voice as she rubbed the puppy's ears.

"Ah, she can't talk yet." Con scritchd the wiggly black bundle in Jessy's arms. Jessy looked at him and laughed.

"Seriously, what's her name?" The puppy licked and nipped at Jessy's face.

"I haven't decided. Why don't you come up with something?"

"All right. Let me think about it."

Conrad's heart thrummed happily as he watched his new puppy settle into his favorite girl's arms. Jessy was so easy to love.

"Well, you sure are a mood brightener, you adorable little thing." Jessy rubbed the puppy's belly. "I could snuggle with you all night."

“Oh no. You're not throwing puppy breath on my plans for you tonight.” Con took the pup and set her on the floor. He grabbed Jessy around the waist and pulled her close, looking into her eyes. “The puppy can find her own fun for a while.” His voice dropped a notch. “I'm so glad you're here.”

Jessy raised her arms over his shoulders. “I'm a little tired, Con. I think I might just put on some sweats and curl up with a book.” She diddled with the hair at his neck.

“Sweats and a book.” He gave her a look. “Jessy, I want you so much right now, I can barely walk. I'm afraid I might just take you, willing or not.” Con inched her closer to the bedroom door.

“Oooo. I sorta like the sound of that.” Her brown eyes glittered with playful challenge. “Tell me more.”

“Yeah? You wanna hear me talk dirty? You want me to tell you how I've imagined laying you out, pinning you down, and fucking you six ways from Sunday? You're mine, girl. I wanna sink into your tight, hot—”

Jessy put a single soft finger to his lips. “I get the picture. And I will give myself to you, happily. Just let me touch.” She smoothed the tousle of his mustache, returning to trace the shape of his lips.

Conrad closed his eyes and inhaled, kissing her fingers. Her touch sent electricity to every nerve center and made him long for more. “I love your touch. Your fingers are magic to me.”

Jessy gently swept her fingers up the sides of his face and into the loose waves of his hair. Standing on tiptoe, she stretched to brush her lips to his—just a brush—then continued to sweep moist lips on his cheeks. “Are my lips magic too?”

“Yes, they are. Am I under a spell?” Conrad enjoyed this little game of hers. He toyed with a loose spiral of hair that sprang down her neck, then leaned down and kissed her. Here, then there, and back over to there.

Jessy cooed with pleasure. He tugged on the zipper in the back of her dress and pulled her to the doorway of his bedroom. "Come with me."

She offered no resistance. He reached to open the hair clip and watched her curls fall loosely over her shoulders. The highlights framed her face, and he escorted a wandering spiral away from her eyes. Unable to wait a second more, he grabbed her face and kissed her, swirling his tongue inside her mouth and reaching deep to claim her. Jessy responded with a cry of animal desire.

The dress slipped from her shoulders and onto the floor, leaving her standing in nothing but lacy white panties. Con came unglued at the sight of her and grabbed her ass. He lifted her off the ground, and she wrapped her legs around him, consuming his lips with gasps of passion.

They made their way to the bed, and Con lowered Jessy down, still lost in the rapture of the kiss he'd missed so much. When he stopped and looked into her eyes, he saw her desire and felt her love. His swollen dick pulsed in his pants, wanting freedom. Not yet. Not yet. He wanted this feeling to last. Jessy reached for him and rubbed his hardness against his zipper. Con groaned with her touch. *Not yet.*

He leaned back and danced his fingers over her abdomen and across the flat stomach that he loved so much. "You're so beautiful. I love you, Jessy." The words spilled out and felt so right. He came to her again and kissed her. "I love you," he breathed onto her skin.

Jessy stopped and pushed him up gently. "I love you too." She paused and stroked his cheek. "Send me to the stars, Con."

Oh, man, he needed to set himself free. He was hard to the point of agony, waiting to send her to the stars. Her hips rose with wanting as she writhed beneath him and opened the buttons of his shirt. As he pulled out of his sleeves, Jessy was already moving on to free his cock, eager and hungry to get to him.

*Oh, that first touch.* He moaned at his weakness. He couldn't stop her if he tried. She pulled the shaft, snugly cradling it in her hand. He held himself

suspended above her and took a second to free himself from the last of his clothes.

The only thing between him and heaven were the panties, and he delicately rolled them down as Jessy raised her hips. He touched her pussy and felt the abundance of silky cream. With a smooth glide, he slipped his finger inside, exploring her tightness, while his thumb wobbled on her clit. Jessy slid her lips to his ears, biting on the fleshy lobe. "Oh, Con. Your touch..."

Conrad sank down and pulled a hardened nipple into his mouth and sucked possessively, as if he could take her softness, make her his forever. While his fingers fucked inside her, Jessy ran desperate hands through his hair and pulled his head harder against her breast. She quivered and tightened, gasping with kittenlike cries. He loved the way she melted under his touch, how she gave in to him, letting him have his way with her body. She was *his*.

"Con, I need you inside me. I need to feel you." She reached for his arms to urge him to her lips. As Con lowered himself onto her and smothered her with kisses, they heard a whimper.

The puppy had had enough solo play and needed some attention.

"Oh not now, little gal, not now." Con had a tough time ignoring the cries of the puppy, but an even tougher time ignoring the pain in his throbbing erection.

The puppy became more pathetic. "Con, she needs you," Jessy whispered in his ear.

"But, Jess, you just said *you* needed me, and I'm more interested in your needs at the moment."

The whimpers erupted into howls. With a sigh, Con slid over to the edge of the bed and looked down at the sad little black face. "Damn, your timing stinks." He swung down to pick her up and rolled onto his back with the puppy

in his arms. Clearly this was just what she had in mind. She settled down to chew on Con's thumb.

Jessy scratched the puppy's ears. "Midnight? Smoky? Shithead? How about something to do with fish?"

"Minnow, bass, sucker—that doesn't sound good."

"River, stream, brook? She's such a pretty little girl." Jessy studied the puppy. "How about Brook?"

Con tested it a few times, calling the name to get the puppy's attention. He got up from the bed. "I think I better take Brook outside for a nature break." He looked at Jessy's tousled hair and red lips. "Grab that blanket and come with me."

Jessy stood on the front porch and watched Con and Brook play in the yard. That morning she'd left Washington DC feeling like a failure. She felt pretty sure she'd ended her one chance at a music career. Now none of that mattered. She felt only gratitude. She wanted nothing more than that man out there throwing a stick for his new puppy. Con had slipped on a pair of sweatpants, but his gorgeous chest and sculpted arms were still in view, glistening in the fading sunlight. *How could I be so lucky?*

He climbed the steps with Brook in his arms. "There. I think I tuckered her out. A chew toy and a fuzzy blanket will keep her busy for a while. She's only been with me a week. I'm sorry to say she's been sleeping on my bed."

Jessy shook her head, not with reproach but with love. She loved a man with a soft heart. "What you mean is, she's been snuggled under the covers with her nose in your ear, right?"

"Ah, yeah. I guess that's more like it. But hey, I was dreaming about you the whole time. I swear."

Jessy cracked up and petted the puppy in Con's arms. He leaned down and kissed her neck, sweeping little mustache tickles along a slow path to her



lips. Jessy felt a sensation of hot liquid sliding down from Con's lips to her sex. This man knew exactly what she liked, wanted, needed. "Can we put the puppy in the house?"

Without a word, Con sat Brook inside the door, followed by a *squeak*, *squeak* as he tossed the toy in after her. Then he turned his attention back to Jessy. She held the blanket loosely around her, gathering it in the front. He reached for her hands and pulled them out, and the blanket fell to the porch floor. Jessy made luxurious sweeps with her hand over her belly and along the curve of her waist, watching Con's eyes. He came to her and grabbed her face, burying his hands in her thick curls, kissing her deeply. She reached around and slipped her hands in the back of his sweats and eased them down over his butt. His cock bobbed free and large in the cool night air.

Jessy slid down Con's muscular form and settled on her knees on top of the blanket, grasping his massive manhood in her hand. She still marveled at his size and tingled to know the luscious tip would slide to some deep, sweet spot inside her. With the softness of a kitten, she began to work her tongue on the ridge and heard a gratifying rush of air as Con responded. Maybe tonight she'd take him all the way.

She slid her mouth down his shaft and pulled up tightly. Con spread his legs to lower himself, letting Jessy have him, if only for a moment. In a single powerful motion, he scooped her up. "I can't wait a second more."

Conrad grabbed the blanket and quickly spread it on the porch table, pushing cans of bug spray and citronella candles to the floor. He reached for Jessy's hand and eased her down onto the smooth, cool surface. He melted down onto her, and she touched his cheek. In the weak light of dusk, Jessy drank in Con's face. "You're my world, Conman," she whispered.

She felt his heart thunder against hers, and the hunger in his eyes made her crazy. Christmas was a damn long time ago, and she needed to feel every inch of him inside her.

He eased between her legs and forcefully pulled her hips to him. Jessy leaned back on the table and felt a shiver and a rush of animal desire as he swept his cock over her clit. In the few months of their lovemaking, Jessy had come to realize Con loved it when she begged. But never did she do it simply for his ego. When he tempted her dripping-wet slit with his knob, her animal needed to be fed. "Please, Con, give it to me."

The blazing heat of his large cock slid slowly into her. She savored his delicious, slow entry, sensing each inch as it glided deeper. He held her hips and pulled firmly, pushing in to the limit. A shudder coursed through her limbs, and she raised her arms above her head. Total submission.

He was so strong, every muscle tight and hard and trembling as he struggled against his own savage desire. She always sensed he held his darkest desires at bay to protect her, and it thrilled her to know the well ran deeper. They had a lifetime to push boundaries. For now she felt the inferno of his breath on her neck and closed her eyes. Her universe collapsed to include only him, impaling her in the new moonlight.

"Oh God. Jess." He began to thrust his hips with an easy rolling motion, raising himself onto his hands. He planted one foot on the porch floor, getting leverage to go hard. Caged beneath his solid mass, Jessy rocked her hips to his. After one breath-stealing penetration, he pulled out.

"Can you put your legs on my shoulders, Jess?" Con's ragged breath filled the night air. With little effort he helped her fold her legs up. She felt his fingers rub her clit with a gentle milking motion that sent an instant wave of electricity rippling up her back. A little scream escaped her lips, and more were about to follow, but Con's mouth swallowed them. He was in a new place tonight, on an animal high, and Jessy knew she was in for the ride of her life.

His fingers rubbed with fervor on her pulsing bud. Jessy fed on Conrad's kisses and kept her arms stretched out above her. Her fingers trembled and tightened. The emptiness of her pussy was unbearable. "Fill me, Con. *Please...*"

"Beg me, Jess. What do you want?"

"I want you inside me, Conman." She panted and clutched at his shoulders. "Forever. Only you. Please, make me yours."

Finally, with his thumbs still brushing over her ultrasensitive hood, he drove his cock downward inside her. Oh God, she didn't know that was possible. The dual stimulation felt like a lightning bolt, sending shock waves throughout her body. "Conman! Conman...Con..." The rawness of his rapid thrumming on her bud and the smoothness of his cock sliding against new territory inside her robbed her of her senses.

He continued to push with long strokes that seemed to extend to her very center. She flexed her strong muscles around his meat and swallowed him into her body. Jessy whimpered and opened her eyes. Con's chest glistened with sweat, and she could tell he needed to release. "Conrad, I'm yours. Forever."

Con went at her with passion, pounding hard, skin meeting skin. A wave of love and surrender consumed Jessy as she cried out in ecstasy. Con drove hard inside her as the power of her climax exploded over her, draining the life from her limbs. At last she felt him release. With a final call of her name, he pulsed hot juice inside her.

When he lowered himself down onto her, onto the table, he continued to tremble, his muscles spent. Jessy stroked his soft sandy hair, now moist with sweat.

"Are you okay?" Her voice was soft and breathy.

"Are you kidding me? I have never felt anything—that was the best fuck I've ever had." He buried his face in her hair and started to laugh. "I'm sorry. That sounded awful. It just blurted out. God, you amaze me."

Jessy laughed softly. She listened to his breathing relax and lazily kissed his soft lips. She was panting too and felt a cool evening breeze on her sweat-moistened skin. "Can we build a fire tonight? Curl up with the puppy?"

"That sounds perfect." Con drew in a long breath and slid to the side, perching himself on one elbow. "Then maybe later, I'll see if I can reinforce this

table.” He reached to wipe his sweaty hair from his face. “I’m feeling a second wind coming on.”

## Chapter Twenty

Sunlight was just sprinkling in through the window when Conrad awoke Monday morning. Jessy slept peacefully in his arms. What a roller-coaster ride they'd had. A few months ago, he'd held her just like this and worried about getting in too deep. Not anymore. It was finally their time. He swept a hand over her soft shoulder, not intending to wake her. She cooed a sweet sound that made Con want to roll her over and do everything all over again. When she nestled up to kiss his neck, he knew he was a goner.

"I didn't mean to wake you. I'm just so happy to have you here, like this, safe in my arms." Jessy kissed his neck softly and climbed on top of him under the silky sheets.

"Hey, I should get up and let the puppy out. Make some coffee..."

Jessy kept at her task, snuggling herself against his growing erection.

"Pancakes. I feel like pancakes. You?"

"Well, aren't you just a bundle of ambition this morning." Jessy rose up and planted her hands on either side of his head, looking down at him. His dick lengthened to full command between them and begged for attention.

"What? You don't like pancakes? How 'bout scrambled—" Jessy cut him off with a sizzling kiss. He growled and started to laugh, rolling her over, matching her passion. Game on.

Later they sat on the porch in the morning light. Jessy rested her coffee cup on the table—it seemed more wobbly today than yesterday. It made her smile. Con got up and pulled his keys from his jeans pocket.

"What are you gonna do today, beautiful?"

“First, I'm going to go shopping for a birthday present. I don't want you to think I forgot about you with all my DC drama.”

“Jess...I'd say last night was birthday present enough for any man. I know it's been a rough pass for you, but I'm so happy to have you back. There's nothing else I want.”

She gave him a sneaky smile. “We'll see. Plus I'm going to call Kevin and take him a birthday present. His was in February, and I missed it.”

Conrad squinted his eyes. “Do I need to send a chaperone?”

“No. I just want to make sure he's okay. He says he is, but he seems so, I don't know, dare I say clueless? I don't think he realizes how this stuff could impact the rest of his life.”

“I understand. Tell him we're all in this together. Really. When will you be home?”

“I don't know. I'm also going to try to find an attorney. Wilson Brass has at least fifty songs of mine in their repertoire. I can hardly ask Alisha Deals for advice. Her firm has represented the band for years. Sorta puts her in a funny spot. But I'll see you tonight.” Jessy reached around and grabbed his butt, giving it a nice squeeze.

Con came as close to giggling as he ever had in his life, gave her a kiss, and headed for the door. Then he paused and turned to her. “How confident are you in that diaphragm of yours?”

Jessy laughed with surprise. “If we have more nights like last night, not too. Why?”

He came back and grabbed her around the waist. “We need to have a talk tonight.” One more kiss and a tap on the tip of her nose and he was out the door.

Jessy called Kevin, and they made arrangements to meet at the coffee shop. “Why not my dorm room, Jess? I'm starting to think you don't trust me.”

"I have complete trust in you. I trust you're a horndog." That earned her a laugh. "See you later."

When Jessy walked into the coffee shop that afternoon, she found Kevin sitting on a couch in the back. She walked toward him carrying a bowl of goldfish, sloshing water onto her blouse.

"Happy birthday, handsome." She set her bowl on the coffee table and kissed Kevin on the cheek.

"You got me fish?"

"Yup. Con wants you to stay sharp on your critter-keeping skills."

"I liked the box of condoms you got me better."

Jessy rolled her eyes. "How's school?"

"It's all right. I'm looking forward to another summer fishing with Conrad. I wish you were gonna be there." He paused. "Hey, Jess. Why can't you be the other summer intern? I bet Con would hire you. Ask him."

Kevin was visibly excited about the possibility. And Jessy didn't dismiss the idea either. Could she really go back to fishing?

"C'mon. It'd be great. We had so much fun—minus the last week, of course. And Cory won't be there. God, Jess. Talk to Con about it."

Jessy said she would, turning over the possibility in her mind. She didn't have anything in the queue for work. Figured she'd get the usual crop of disinterested piano students, write more songs, and look for a new band to play them. Yeah, the internship had possibilities.

They talked about a lot of things, but nothing in particular. He'd seen Cory around here and there at parties.

"He always asks about you. Said he found your band on the Internet. He asked me if you and I ever talked." Kevin leaned in. "I told him we were lovers." He winked at Jessy.

Jessy made a face at him. "That poor guy is so lost. I hope he finds a niche for himself."

"His breath smells like a bong all the time. He also pissed and moaned about Con not even giving him an interview for your old job. He heard you were coming back and figured you'd slide right back into your old job."

"How the heck would he know about my plans to come back?" Jessy asked this absentmindedly as she watched the fish. She wondered if her leaving DC was mentioned on the Wilson Brass Web site. "Remember, feed these guys only once a day, or you'll end up with ugly carp. I've gotta run."

They parted in front of the coffee shop, and Jess headed down the sidewalk. She paused, turned, and hollered back, "Kev?"

He turned and started back to her, holding the fishbowl away from himself so it wouldn't get him wet. "Yeah?"

Jessy hugged him warmly, careful of the goldfish bowl. "Thanks for not, well, begging me for sex. It feels like we're getting back to our old friendship."

"Ah, Jess. It's not that I've forgotten. As long as I live, you'll be the gold standard. But you're Con's girl. And I think you two are meant for each other." Then he shifted the bowl into the crook of his elbow and punched her in the arm. "But I'm still gonna admire your ass all summer when you intern with me. That doesn't have to change, does it?"

"Nope. See ya, Kev." Jessy walked away, this time feeling energized about the future and just a little wistful about the past. She'd ask Con tonight about his summer-intern plans.

In the meantime, she had a bit more shopping to do. Con was so into her soft, feminine side. She went lingerie shopping for something lacy and naughty.

Con left work a little early. He'd been putting in shorter days since he got the puppy. It had been a long time since he potty-trained a Lab, and this one would be a challenge. A truck drove up the lane, and he went to the front porch. It wasn't Jess. He didn't recognize the vehicle but soon saw Cory Johnson behind the wheel. Con went on instant alert with an uneasy feeling.



"What the hell is he doing here?" he muttered under his breath. He reached to his pocket for the BlackBerry. Not there. Cory hopped out and sauntered up to the porch, looking up at him.

"Cory, what can I do for you?" Con didn't feel like rolling out the welcome wagon and wondered how this guy knew where he lived.

"Hey, *Conman*." He stressed each half of the name in sarcasm. "I was in the neighborhood and thought I might check in with my old boss. Nice place."

"What do you want, Cory?"

"Like I said, just out for a drive. Where's that new pup of yours?"

Conrad eyed him with suspicion. How the hell would he know about her? "She's around." *Your move, dickhead.*

"I bet that made Ms. Tanner happy. Everybody likes puppies. I heard her big music career hit a snag." He gave a sarcastic, sad shake of his head. "Who knew she was making fuck-me movies with the interns? Hey, if I knew that, I sure woulda gotten a little action for myself. I'm not bashful."

Con stepped off the porch and grabbed Cory's shirt, pulling him up to his face. Cory's feet dangled in the air like a rag doll. "Shut the fuck up, you piece of shit. Guys like you shouldn't even be allowed to say her name, let alone talk like that about Jess."

Con heard the *click* of a gun in his ear. "Let him go." Con glanced to the side but couldn't see the man holding the gun. He didn't need to. He lowered Cory to the ground. The gun followed a slow path around to the front, and he saw Red's fat arm.

"I got a score to settle with you, *asshole*. My nephew and I don't like the way you've been treating us. We're here to make things right. Down on your knees, big fella."

Con looked at Cory's smug smile and did as he was told. In a flash, Red kicked him in the face. He tumbled to the side and then scurried to his feet, blood oozing from his lips. He put a hand to his mouth and looked with venom

at Red. "You want to fight me, put the gun down and let's do this. It's not a fair fight when you're holding that thing."

"As it turns out, I'm not a fair man. After what you did to my nose, I figure I owed ya at least a few loose teeth. But we're not here to beat you up. We're gonna hurt you, but not like that." Red stepped back from Conrad, still pointing the gun at him. Then he saw Cory swing a heavy board. He raised his arm to protect himself, but it was too little, too late. The lights went out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Con opened his eyes with the coppery taste of blood in his mouth. Objects around him faded in and out of focus, and pain drummed into his eye. He tried to reach for his head but couldn't. He sat in the grass with his back against a post, his hands bound behind his back.

*Where am I?* He blinked hard to clear his vision and recognized his backyard. He was tied to the fence post not far from the fire ring. He recalled Red kicking him in the face and Cory smacking him with a big wooden board. His thoughts tumbled over each other as he wrestled with the knot behind his back. With his shoulders wrenched and tied, he had little movement available to him. He looked at the sky. *How long have I been there?*

He was suddenly struck by the realization that Jessie would be home soon. If she wasn't already. He looked out of his good eye, shutting the other to get a clear view. The sun sat low in the west—nearing suppertime at least. He pulled his knees inward to gain leverage and stand, but he couldn't.

Horrible thoughts raged through his mind. Jessie had come home, and they already had her. Then the little nugget that had eluded him flashed into his mind. Cory was Red's nephew. He was in on this whole thing. That's why he was so pissed when Con wouldn't bring him on the trip. And that's how Red knew about the fishing crew.

"Hey, Red, he's awake." Cory walked up to Con and laughed in his face. Con closed his bad eye to look up at the little scumbag.

“So what's your plan, Cory?”

He squatted down to Conrad and offered him a toke on his joint. Con remained stoic, looking at him without flinching. “Untie me, and we'll party it up. Whateeya say? I'm a heck of a fun guy.”

“Oh we're gonna party, all right. You'll be watching while I slide my dick inside that little piano player of yours.”

Con's heart thundered against his ribs. “Goddamn it, you leave her alone.” Then he saw Red coming down the slope with Jessy, her hair in his grasp, gun under her chin. She tugged at his hold like a stallion, her bare feet struggling for purchase on the cold spring grass. Until she saw Conrad. She froze in place and looked at him with a fear that made Con's blood curdle in his veins.

Red pulled her along to where Cory had spread a shiny red quilt on the grass. Cory pulled a knife out of a leather sleeve and grabbed Jessy from Red's grip. He spun her around in his arms and attempted to put the knife to her throat, but she escaped and ran to Conrad.

“What did they do to you?” She lightly touched his bloodied eye with tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Jessy, run. Goddamn it, get out of here!”

Cory grabbed her and lifted her up. As they stood in front of Conrad, he slapped her across the face. Jessy fell to the ground with a squeal.

“Leave her alone. For God's sake, don't hurt her!”

Red came and hoisted Jessy up, pointing a finger at Cory. “Take it from your ol' Uncle Red. You don't want her all bloody. They're no fun to fuck when they're bloody.”

Conrad tugged and wrenched at his ropes, closing his eyes in disbelief. Red pulled Jessy back to the red quilt and threw her down. “Stay there.” Cory came over and straddled her, pinning her down.

Jessy cried and begged. "Cory, please. Let Conrad go. You and I, we can go away from here. We'll take my Jeep. We can make love all night long. I'll do everything you want. Just let Con go."

Cory ran the shiny knife blade under Jessy's chin, and that quieted her.

Con watched in horror. *He wouldn't cut her. He wouldn't.* Then he noticed Red dragging a tripod down the slope, with a camera in the other hand. He positioned the camera and yelled to Cory. "I'm all set here. Take your turn, and then I'd like to get one of me banging her. My ass ain't so cute, but I can still get it up." He looked at Conrad and laughed.

Red walked over and squatted down to his level, looking him right in the eyes. "That day I laid in my own blood and snot on the floor of that camper, I decided I'd give my left nut to torture you. And I figure this is better than any number of kicks to your face. She's gonna come, you're gonna watch, and we're gonna record the whole thing."

"Please, no. Just kill me. Settle this thing with me, but leave Jessy alone. She's been hurt enough." The fury in Con's fists found no relief as he tugged against the unyielding rope. Salty tears of panic stung his eyes. He was at Red's mercy, and Red was happy.

Red went back to the camera. "All right. I'm not as good with this thing as Larry was, but I'll do my best."

Conrad watched from twenty feet away as Cory ripped open Jessy's blouse with one hand and held the knife to her throat with the other. Jessy sobbed and repeated, "No no no." When her blouse was open, Cory took the knife and slid in under the front of her bra. With a single powerful upward motion, he sliced through the front, and the bra fell open, exposing her breasts. Cory grabbed one and squeezed hard, and Jessy cried out in pain.

"Jessy!" Con called to her in a futile gasp. He saw Jessy reach her hand to Cory's zipper and work to free him. Cory groaned with approval and lowered his face to hers, kissing her sloppily as he wrestled and forced himself between her

legs, one hand hiking up her skirt. Con saw Jessy's beautiful leg straining against the pressure of Cory's stocky body. He couldn't see the knife anymore.

Suddenly there was a flurry of screaming and scratching, arms flailing. Con saw the knife only briefly in Jessy's hand and heard Cory cry out in pain. Then she rolled Cory off her and flew over to Conrad.

"No, Jess, run. Run!"

Jessy stooped behind the post, sawing at the ropes with the knife. Red ran over and grabbed her. Con heard a scuffle but wasn't able to see what was happening. He heard Red say, "Goddamn it the hell," and Jessy grunting and struggling. "Give me the fucking knife. Oh, you bitch."

One final sobbing cry and Jessy was quiet.

"Jessy. Talk to me. Are you okay? Jessy!"

Con felt the seesaw of the knife on his ropes, and one by one they snapped. His hands were free. He spun around the post, and Jessy collapsed into his arms. He looked down and saw Red lying on his back, eyes wide, gasping. The knife was by his side.

"Jessy, are you hurt?"

"No, Con." His arms encircled her, but only briefly before she pulled away. They both looked over at the red quilt. Cory was gone.

The muffled sound of voices drew their attention back to the house, and they ran up the slope and around to the front. Detective Ashe stood with Cory slumped in his grip. Kevin leaned coolly against the squad car.

"You two okay? Looks like you need to see a doctor." Detective Ashe held Cory with little concern for the blood seeping through Cory's shirt and coating his fingers. "Kevin, dial nine-one-one." He pushed Cory to the ground and cuffed him.

"Red's in the back. He's got a knife wound." Con still held Jessy as she fisted her blouse closed. He looked at Kevin and Detective Ashe. "How did you guys know to come here?"

"We didn't. If I'd known what we were walking into, I would have brought some backup. You guys keep an eye on him. His wound's not serious." The detective hurried around to the back of the house while Kevin finished the emergency call.

"Con, let me get you a rag or something. That eye looks painful. Are you okay, Jessy?" Kevin started up the porch steps.

"I'm okay, Kevin. I think a warm cloth would be good." Jessy brought Con over to sit on the porch and sat down beside him. She looked at his face. "How bad does it hurt?"

"It's kind of numb. The magic Tanner Touch will help."

"I think an emergency-room touch might be called for in this case."

"Jessy, do you realize what you've done?" Con looked at her as she brushed the hair away from the wound. "You single-handedly put an end to this whole damn thing. How did you do it? I saw you reaching for Cory with your hand in his jeans. You knew what you were doing, didn't you."

"I just wanted that knife. Dumb-ass loosened his grip as I tightened mine."

"How did you manhandle Red?" Con mingled a weak laugh with a few tears. "What happened behind my back? You went quiet, and I thought he'd stabbed you." Now the tears came in earnest, and he let them flow. "I thought I'd lost you." He ran a trembling hand over her soft curls and pulled her to him.

"I think all the anger and helpless feelings I've had over the past year became my power. I had the knife, and he almost wrestled it from my hands, twisting and twisting. I bit him so hard. Yuck. I think I drew blood. But he let go, and I just jabbed." Con felt Jessy soften in his arms. Kevin came out with a warm towel for Con's head.

"Hey, Con, where did this little thing come from?" Kevin had Brook in his arms.

"Shit, I'm glad to see that little girl. I was afraid for her too." Con reached out to stroke the silky black head and noticed his wrist was badly bruised from deflecting Cory's blow. The rope had also left its mark.

"She was curled up on the couch," Kevin continued. "What's her name?"

Con scooped the puppy out of Kevin's arms. "Jessy named her Brook."

Detective Ashe came around the corner of the porch. "Is he alive?" Con had an unpleasant wish that the answer would be no. That son of a bitch had caused Jessy so much pain.

"He's got a pretty deep wound, but I think he'll be all right." The sound of approaching sirens provided a timely backdrop to his words. "Here's the ambulance now."

\* \* \* \* \*

Con spent the night in the hospital. Luckily Cory was high as a kite when he swung the board, and had the strength of a little girl. Con had deep bruises, but nothing was broken. Detective Ashe paid them a visit the next morning. Kevin sat with them too. Everyone had a million questions.

Con hated his vulnerability, sitting in the hospital bed with everyone gathered around. But Jessy was by his side and would have crawled into bed with him if they'd let her.

"What brought the two of you to my place?"

Kevin leaned in, eager to tell his story. "I got to thinking. All of a sudden, it seemed like pieces of conversations were bumping into each other."

"Like what?"

"Well, like when we talked yesterday, Jess. You asked how Cory would know about you coming back. I still don't know, but it creeped me out that he *did* know."

Kevin held up a finger and then added a second as he counted off the things that had plagued him about Cory. "And remember when you asked me if Cory actually mentioned Red's name when Larry attacked you? I said I couldn't

remember? I thought about it, and I did remember. Cory specifically asked if anybody knew where Red was. I knew it.”

A third finger popped up. “And I remembered how angry he was that he wasn't going up north with us. He seemed pretty sure he was going to score on Jessy that weekend. I remember looking at him at the time, thinking, 'You're dreaming.' Remember I told you he was loaded and saying disgusting things? I didn't want to repeat what he said, but I will now. First, he said some highly descriptive things about the most desirable parts of your anatomy, Jess. Then he said he knew for sure he'd be balling you all week.”

The pinkie finger popped up next to the others. “And then he said this: 'The plan is still a go, and I'll get my chance. Just not this time.' I thought he was talking about the fishing. I didn't know anything for sure.” He shrugged. “So I called Detective Ashe.”

“It's a good thing he did.” The detective poured himself a glass of water and offered one to Conrad. “In the search for Howard Boyd—Red—we contacted any family we could find. He only had a sister, who died a few years ago. We knew he had a nephew, but the name we came up with was Cory Boyd. The sister never married the father, Eldon Johnson. Apparently Cory goes by both names, whether or not it was ever legally changed. I doubt it. When Kevin called me and told me about your other intern, it seemed like a pretty wild coincidence. Now we had two Corys? We got a warrant to search his place. Turned up drugs and tons of pornography, and DVDs of these two.” Detective Ashe wagged a finger between Kevin and Jessy. “There were also signs that Red was hiding out there.”

“I went along when they searched his place. We saw a note on the table with Con's address on it. Detective Ashe decided to take a drive. I got to ride in the squad car.” Kevin winked at Jessy.

“I still don't know how Cory knew I was even in town. Was the little creep spying on me? How would he even know where to send the DVD?” Jessy held Con's hand, like she had been for all his waking hours since she'd untied him.



Detective Ashe scratched his chin. "Your band has a Web site. I was there myself. The contact information is there. But how he knew about you leaving—coming back to Manchester, I don't know that. It does seem like he had inside information. How have you two been communicating? Cell phone? E-mail?"

"Both. I got an e-mail from Jess the morning she left DC saying she'd take me for a ride in her new Jeep first thing." Con squeezed her hand. "I'm still waiting, by the way."

"How were you sending your e-mails, Jessy?"

"From Brad's computer, in his home."

"Con?"

"My new BlackBerry."

Detective Ashe nodded. "I'll need to see that BlackBerry."

## Chapter Twenty-one

Jessy kissed Con on the forehead as he waited for his release papers.

"You're a lucky man, Conrad. For your birthday, you get to take the long-awaited ride in my Jeep. I'll be your official chauffeur back to your cabin."

"Jess, will you do me a favor?"

"You know I will."

"Stop calling it my cabin. It's your home too." He looked at the diamond bracelet on her wrist and spun it with his thumb. "I'm so thankful Cory didn't hurt you. Or—" He swallowed. "Did I tell you about the lilies that we planted last fall? They're poking out of the ground. You know, the cabin is pretty small. I think this summer we'll add on. How about a music room? We have to get your piano back."

Jessy's heart hummed a happy rhythm in her chest. "It's going to be okay now, isn't it?"

Con grabbed her hand. "This is just the beginning."

Con had instructions to keep his excitement level low and his blood pressure down, to avoid pain and pressure in his eye. He didn't even consider the possibility that meant no sex. Jessy was stern with the rules and kept him comfortable with massages and delicate fingers through his hair. They spent a few days of delightful rest with Con's good cooking and Jessy playing guitar. Spring rains kept them inside, so they played with Brook and tried to keep their hands off each other.

One thundering evening, Jessy padded around the cabin in her fuzzy blue robe, fresh out of the shower. She stood by Conrad, seated at his computer crunching stock numbers. Lifting his head, she traced his cuts with a gentle touch. "It looks a world better. How's your vision?"

"Fine, I think. Although you seem to look more beautiful every day. Is that normal?" Con sighed with the pleasure of her touch. "How do you do that? Remember that first night in the camper? You rubbed my head, and I had to bite my lip to stop from groaning. Your touch was magic then, and it still is." He tugged at the tie of her robe. "Are you sure we can't have just a little sex?"

"I don't think there's such a thing as a little sex with us." Jessy slipped behind him and massaged his scalp with her hands. She leaned down and tickled her lips against his ear, biting the lobe and breathing butterflies onto his skin. Con smelled flowers.

"Oh, so now you're teasing me, is that it? Jessy, if you don't stop that..."

But she persisted. Her moist tongue swirled and prodded the length of his neck, and he felt little bursts of cool air in his ear. *What the hell is she doing to me?*

"Conman," she whispered into his moistened ear. "Your doctor called today while you were sleeping. I asked him if I could fuck you tonight, since you missed your birthday and all." Her hands slid down the front of his chest.

Con closed his eyes, and he drew in a long breath. His evening plans just got a whole lot more promising. He reached back and grabbed her hand, pulling her around. She stood before him, a vision in white. "Goddamn, girl."

The robe was gone, and a sheer, white satin camisole clung to her curves, and a tiny white thong arched high over her mile-long legs. He grabbed her hips and pulled her to him, spreading his wet tongue on her belly in the low scoop. He'd been without her body for too long.

"He said I should go easy on you." Jessy playfully coiled her fingers in his hair, holding his head to her abdomen.

Con breathed fire onto the flatlands, running his tongue along the edge of the satin fabric. "You put on something like this and then announce you want to go easy on me?" He ran his hands around the curve of her ass and down her legs.

"I said I couldn't promise that."

Then Con paused and looked up into her eyes. "Did you actually ask my doctor if you could fuck me?"

Jessy giggled and unbuttoned his shirt.

"I need to change clinics."

Jessy responded with more giggling as Con slipped his finger around the thin white strap of the thong and pulled it down her leg.

"Oh no ya don't." She brushed his hand away and pulled the strap back up. "I didn't put this on just so you could pull it off right away. I've got plans for you." Jessy slipped his shirt off his shoulders and leaned down to kiss his lips, deep and hot. Then she reached around his chair, and with a look that made Con's hard cock surge in his jeans, she handed him a red velvet bag. More giggles.

"Happy birthday."

Con peered into the bag, then looked up at her. "Whipped cream?"

"And cherry-flavored oil. Totally lickable." Jessy playfully circled around him, dragging her hand around his shoulders and back to the front. Damn, she was good at this game. A storm of desire whirled in his mind, and his heart provided the thunder. She pointed with a playful, swirling finger at the bag. He reached in again and found a soft pair of handcuffs. "I think I've had enough of having my hands bound."

"You've never had them bound by me." Jessy pulled Con to stand and stroked his throbbing cock through his jeans. "You're mine tonight, Conman. I'm in charge of this one." She pulled her hand away, leaving him reaching for his zipper and aching for more. When she turned to lead him into the bedroom,

he watched her smooth ass cheeks jiggle, looking absolutely delicious in the thong. He had only a moment for the indulgence, but he grabbed a tight handful before she turned back to face him.

Con had a need to control and a carnal desire to dominate Jessy. This time he'd let her have her way. For a little while. Lying on the bed, he spread his arms willingly, and she clicked his hands in place. He tugged and felt a surprising amount of resistance. The fuzzy cuffs actually felt like they could hold him...

She looked like a naughty angel in white as she drifted along his body with the aroma of cherry filling the room. His skin tingled as she rubbed the oil over the surface of his skin. When she followed with a trail of her tongue, Con began to resent the cuffs. His cock waved in the air, larger and harder than he'd ever been, and Jessy's soft curls swept over it on her travels around his body. Okay, enough silliness. Now he wanted to fuck her till she screamed, and he'd need both hands for that.

"Release me, Jess."

"Shut up, Conrad." With a mischievous smile, she sprayed a ridiculous mound of whipped cream on the tip of his dick. Her eyes sparkled. Clearly she was having a wonderful time. Con felt pretty certain he was still in charge, although the feeling was growing weaker...

"How you gonna get that off, girl?" He returned a smirk. "I'm gonna need that clean and ready for action—assuming you're still interested."

"Oh God, am I interested. And this stuff is perfectly safe—for eating and playing." She pulled the knob of his cock into her lips, and Con closed his eyes. How long would he let her play her little game? He tugged at the cuffs.

With his hands tethered to the headboard, Jessy licked his body and sucked whipped cream off his dick. He was dangerously close to losing control. But no... She came to his lips with a sweet vanilla taste, nibbling and swirling her tongue with his. "Conrad, come for me. Trust me."

Jessy slid down his chest and slipped his throbbing cock into her mouth, blanketing him once again with heat and stimulation. He'd never come in a woman's throat. Hard to be in total control when his dick was between someone else's teeth. Oh, but he could come for Jessy. She bobbed on his meat and sucked up tight—*oh God, yeah.*

“Release me, Jess.” He tugged at the cuffs.

“Not until you come.” Her tongue was pure magic, and she knew all his sweet spots, massaging and teasing each one in turn. An explosive thrill ran through him—he'd come for Jessy.

“Oh, girl...” He thrust his hips gently to touch her throat, and the room imploded to a speck. There was nothing but Jessy and her mind-blowing lips, delivering a blowjob to beat all. With a gasp of oxygen for his effort, he let it loose. His seed pulsed up, and she swallowed. He longed to touch her and tugged with fury at his cuffs. A thousand years passed as cum spewed from his dick.

With no breath left in his lungs and no feeling in his legs, he begged her to set him free and was close to snapping the spindles on the bed. Jessy took a leisurely stroll over the tiny buttons of her camisole and released her breasts. Then with an equally torturous pace, she massaged puddles of oil over her perfect flesh. Con tugged on his cuffs. When she leaned forward to urge her cherry-flavored nipples to his lips, he felt the release of his hands. Like an animal, he grabbed her and pinned her to the bed. Still hard as stone, he needed to fuck her, take her, ravage her. He drove his cock hard and fast into the flames, feeling a passion and urgency he'd never known.

Jessy raised her thighs, and he pinned them back and sank deep inside her with a freight train barreling through his shaft. “You're mine,” he groaned. As he spilled his seed inside her, he heard Jessy calling his name. His woman. His love. His life.

“I'm yours, Jessy.”

In the morning, Jessy curled up on the couch with Brook while Con checked his stocks. She could get used to this routine. She watched him jot things down, going back and forth between computer screens. His broad shoulders stretched the fabric of his faded T-shirt, and his arms looked underutilized fussing away at a computer keyboard. What was the best part of Conrad? His mustache, his arms, his butt, his smirk, his heart. *It's all mine.*

"So, Con? Do you make money on that stuff? Is it fun? What's the point?"

Con gave her a sly look that took Jessy by surprise. "Well, you know the time I spend as a fisheries biologist?"

"Yeah?"

"That's just a hobby. Keeps me busy."

Jessy was stunned. "What do you mean?"

Con put his pen down, closed his laptop, and came to snuggle next to her. "I make my real money right there." He pointed at the computer. "My dad was a broker. It's in my blood." He cuddled her closer. "We'd spend weekends fishing on the Chesapeake, and he taught me the ropes. The ropes of catching striped bass in the bay and the nitty-gritty of the stock market. I inherited some pretty hefty holdings. I just need to manage them and keep them growing." He stroked her curls.

Jessy listened to his heartbeat, trying to understand what he was telling her. Con was a wealthy man?

"I recall promising you a trip to Paris. Should we go? We'd better hurry, so we can get it in before field season starts."

Still processing, Jessy replied weakly, "That sounds great." But she was reminded of her conversation with Kevin. "Hey, do you have your interns for the summer?"

"Ah, I suppose Kevin wants his job back. I have a stack of applications on my desk."

"Would you hire me?" Jessy didn't look at him. She just fiddled with his fingers in her hand.

"Would you like that?"

"I would love it. Now that I know I don't have to pretend to be tougher than I am."

"You got yourself a job, girl. The only thing you have to pretend is to idolize your supervisor."

"I think I can fake that."

Their conversation was interrupted by electronic cha-cha music. Con reached to the new holster at his hip, and Jessy smiled as he searched for the Talk button on his BlackBerry. She'd need to help him change that ringtone.

"Hey, Mark. What's up?" Con paused and absently played with one of Jessy's curls. "What kind of spy software?"

Jessy perked up and gave Con an inquiring look.

"Hang on a sec, will ya, Mark?" Con held the phone up. "Is there a Speaker button on this thing?"

Jessy grabbed the phone, and after a quick hunt, she pushed a button. "Hi, Mark. We're both here. You were telling Con about spy software?"

"Yup. It tracks your phone calls, e-mails, text messages. You can get a decent package for about a hundred bucks. Once it was loaded onto your BlackBerry, Con, he was able to monitor who you called, what you were saying."

"Are you kidding me? Is that kind of stuff legal?" Con furrowed his brow, and Jessy wanted to smooth it out immediately. Their life should have no more furrowed brows.

Mark continued. "The software is perfectly legal. It's a gray area for law enforcement. It's used a lot by private investigators looking for cheating spouses, or parents keeping track of rotten kids. That kind of thing. But like I



said, you have to physically have the machine in your hand, if only for a few minutes, to load the software.”

“I wonder if that little bastard broke into my cabin. I always have the place locked, but maybe—”

“Honestly, Con, it can be set up so quickly, he could do it while you're in the shower and be done before you get out. My guess is those two have been scoping out your place for a while. And he seems pretty computer savvy. At least now we know how they were keeping tabs on you guys.”

“Yeah. Thanks for the call, Mark.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jessy started to feel more like she was home rather than a guest at Conrad's cabin. They invited an architect out to discuss plans for an addition, and Jessy was awed by the scope of the plans Con had in mind.

“A hot tub? Really?”

“You want a full-size pool?”

“I thought you were thinking of a sunroom and a place to put a piano.”

“I want whatever puts a smile on your gorgeous face.” He turned to the architect. “Can you build us an outdoor shower?”

Con went back to work and kept Jessy happily in the loop with the fisheries program. In June, she'd blow the dust off her chest waders and start catching fish again. In the meantime her music remained her focus, and she hustled around New England to find bands in need of a songwriter. On one especially frustrating Friday, Jessy returned from an unsuccessful trip to Boston, feeling surly and messed with. Driving up the lane to Con's place, she remembered to count her blessings.

When she stepped onto the front porch, Con came out the front door to greet her. “Hello, beautiful.” He held the doorknob behind his back as if to block her passage.

“Are those canary feathers I see all over your face, Conrad? What are you up to?”

“Wow, I can't hide anything from you.”

“And don't you forget it. So are you going to let me in? After all, I live here, ya know.” She jingled a set of keys in his face and gave him a quick kiss on the lips.

“Step lightly.” He grabbed her hand and led her into the house. Jessy looked with astonishment around the room and then back to Conrad. The living room floor was covered with a trail of dominoes that snaked their way up and over obstacles and around corners and disappeared into the bedroom.

She softly stepped around the room, looking at his clever positioning of dominoes around table legs and over carefully staged bridges. She looked at him and laughed a little, shaking her head, unable to come up with anything to say.

Con brought her over to the rug in front of the fireplace, where a warm fire snapped. He handed her one single white domino with words engraved in gold.

*Will you marry me?*

Jessy's heart roared and her hands trembled as she reached for the domino. She hadn't expected this. Not the dominoes, and certainly not the proposal.

Conrad grabbed her hands and got down on one knee. “Jessy, I promise you, if you say yes, our dominoes will all fall as they should. I want to take all of our next steps together.”

Her gaze drifted around the room. This must have taken him hours and hours. She didn't need to think about her answer. Looking into his shining blue eyes, she clutched the white domino and knelt down in front of him and threw her arms around his neck. “Yes, Con. I will marry you.”

He showed her the starting point, and Jessy positioned the white domino at the front of the line. With a little nod of his head, Con gave her the go-ahead.

The dominoes tumbled one by one. They watched them *tappity-tap* around the living room and into the bedroom. He raised one finger to indicate for her to follow him. Jessy went into the bedroom just in time to see the end of the line falling. The last domino fell onto a black velvet box on the floor. Jessy looked at Con's uncertain face.

"I just followed my instincts on this one."

Jessy opened the box to find an engagement ring, the most beautiful she'd ever seen. She was speechless.

"Do you like it? It's an antique. I got it at an estate sale. See here? It has swans—" He didn't get the chance to finish. Jessy threw herself at him and smothered him with kisses and I love yous and pushed him onto the bed. As they fell back, Jessy didn't know what to do with herself.

"Con, you amaze me with your thoughtfulness. And this ring is perfect." She watched through a mist as he pushed it onto her finger. "I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kevin's prediction would come true. Con told Jessy she could have the romantic wedding of her dreams, but all she wanted was a beautiful spring dress and a fistful of flowers. She got both one beautiful May afternoon, and she and Conrad went to the courthouse to tie the knot. Kevin was their best man. When the justice of the peace announced them husband and wife, Con grabbed Jessy and leaned her down, cradled in his strong arms, and kissed her like they were alone in the room. Finally he came up for air and gave Kevin a nod and a sideways glance. "That's how that's done, boy."

Kevin just smiled and shook his head, tipping an imaginary hat to Conrad. Jessy was barely able to stand of her own accord. She gazed at her new husband, reeling from the kiss that left her weak and breathless.

With Brook safe in Kevin's care, they flew to Paris for a long weekend, cutting the honeymoon short to begin field season. Jessy joined Kevin in her

old intern position with her head in the clouds and her heart bursting. She had the love of her life and her best friend by her side. Everything was perfect, dominoes in the ready position.

One Friday in June, Kevin and Jessy were mending nets in the boat shed. Suddenly Jessy felt sick to her stomach and ran out to lose her lunch in the bushes.

“You okay out there, Jess? Did you have some bad egg salad for lunch?”

Nope. Not the egg salad.

That night Con and Jessy sat by the fire pit. “Con? Do you remember the morning when you asked me how confident I was in my diaphragm? You left, saying we needed to have a talk. That was the day Red and Cory paid us a visit, so we never got the chance. What did you want to talk about?”

Con sat in a lawn chair, poking at the fire. He looked into the fire a long time, and it unsettled Jessy. When he looked at her, his face was serious. He scooted off the chair and slid onto the ground beside her, reclining his long legs out to the side.

“This is probably something we should have talked about a long time ago.” He paused, struggling to spit the words out.

“What's up, Conman?”

“I thought maybe you should forget the diaphragm.” He glanced over at her and grabbed her hand.

“You think I should go on the pill?”

“I don't know. What about skipping it entirely, and let's just see what happens?”

Jessy tilted her head with a fluttering heart. “Are you saying what I think you're saying?”

Con's voice was soft and steady. “I'm saying, I think you'd make a terrific mom. And whenever you think the time is right, I'd love to take a shot at being a dad. I'm not getting any younger.” There was that million-dollar smirk.

Jessy blinked tight and took a deep breath. Then she reached into the folds of her skirt and sat a little statue in front of him. It was a swan with a nest of cygnets.

"I think you're gonna get your shot."

Con stared at the statue, saying nothing. Finally he spoke, still looking at the statue. "Are those baby swans?"

"Yes, they are. I don't know for sure, Con, but I'm late, and I've been getting sick over strange things. I've been worried about how you'd feel. You're right. We should have talked about this. Are you okay?"

"Come here." He reached for her and pulled her to him, rolling on top of her. "I'm more than okay." He looked with hunger at her face, her lips. "God, you make me happy. I can't believe I was afraid to let you into my life. Is it possible we could have missed this?" He leaned down and kissed her softly. "Are you ready to be pregnant? Is it what *you* want?"

Jessy nodded.

Con slipped to the side and stretched out on his back on the grass. He laughed, a big, happy, hearty laugh. "I hope it's a girl."

THE END

## Gemini Judson

Gemini is a biologist by training and an artist by heart. She's spent her career studying fish, birds, bugs, and many other critters, all providing a colorful tapestry for her stories. She writes contemporary romances with varying degrees of heat, but the common thread is a natural setting or a scientific twist.

Her first love was painting and came to writing romances only recently. "The similarities in the process amaze me. When I write, I lay down a background wash first and gradually add form and structure, just like I would with a blank canvas. The last step is adding nuance and balance. There's nothing more satisfying than a finished manuscript and a finished painting."

She makes her home in Minnesota with her husband and daughter and a pile of cats and dogs and horses. When she's not writing or attending assorted youth sporting events, she's painting, on canvas or digitally.