



Turn It On: Turner Twins, Book 1
Vivian Arend

Pushing the sensual limits can set off all kinds of alarms...

Turner Twins, Book 1

Inheriting her grandmother's home is a dream come true for web designer Maxine Turner. She's looking forward to a little freedom from the constant demands of her beloved, crazy mob of a family. When vandals expose just how vulnerable she is living alone, she seeks help.

Ryan Claymore's well-thought-out life was wrenched out from under him when responsibility for his special-needs stepbrother landed on his shoulders. Going from military man to business man hasn't been easy. He counts himself lucky he's found Maxine to trade his security-system knowledge for her website expertise.

The red-hot chemistry that sizzles between them comes from out of the blue, and they both fight a losing battle to resist. Even the secret Ryan hides isn't enough to keep Maxine from working her way into his heart--and his bed.

But something else might tear them apart. Whoever seems determined to destroy her home, and her sanity along with it.

Warning: Realistic multiple orgasm sex scenes, men getting in touch with their emotions, brothers being--well--brothers, and a very tempting back-porch swing...you have been warned.

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Dedication

Mom and Dad--I said you couldn't read my books, although I suspect you still do. Thanks for showing me the journey is as important as the destination.

Jess and Joy--for helping me wade through the possibilities to find the real story.

As always to my hubby, who reminds me that family is always worthwhile.

Chapter One

The scent of cinnamon and fresh coffee rushed to greet him as Ryan Claymore yanked the door open with more force than necessary. It might be the most talked-about coffee shop in the county, but it was fucking hard to find, and only minutes remained until his meeting was scheduled to begin.

"What can I get you, darling? Other than a black coffee, dark and strong?" His attention swung to the petite package of a woman hovering behind the counter.

He smiled in spite of himself. "Do I seem the plain, dark-coffee type?"

She nodded, a bright smile crossing her face. "You don't seem the fussy double-double soy-no-foam yada-yada-yada kind, that's for sure." She poured him a cup the size of a small soup tureen and winked at him. "I think today's special might be your type as well." She bustled off before he could stop her.

Ryan surveyed the room while he waited. Cozy little tables filled all the available space, and there were few empty chairs in the crowded room. He glanced around, searching for his appointment. There was a lone male in a business suit in the far corner who looked in his direction, and Ryan nodded briefly at him.

A buxom redhead seated alone at the front of the shop caught his eye, her long legs stretched into the aisle as she sipped from a steaming cup and stared out the window. Hmm, now she was something he could go for. Something a little exotic, a little spicy. Her dark sweater hugged her full curves and he reluctantly pulled his gaze away.

Business first. Pleasure whenever the hell he found time for it, which lately seemed to be fucking never. Since returning stateside six months ago on emergency family leave, his life had turned upside down. Retiring his commission and setting up a security installation firm seemed the best way to regain some of the control that had been wrested from him, but the constant demands were beginning to piss him off. A cup of coffee, a quick discussion of his website and advertising needs with Max Turner, and there might be time to catch up on a few tasks at his apartment before heading to the nursing home to visit his brother.

He turned back to the counter to see the waitress holding out a pair of the largest cookies he'd seen in his life. "Gingersnap? Today's special. Sweet, crisp with just a touch of spice." She pushed the plate at him and gave him little opportunity to refuse. "Go on, you know you want it."

The spicy scent rose to his nose like a beacon. "Thank you. I'll drop these off and come back to pay."

She shook her head. "No need. You're meeting Max Turner, aren't you? Everything is taken care of, you go ahead and enjoy yourself." She beamed at him for a moment before turning to greet the next customer.

Balancing his load carefully, he headed toward the empty chair by the single male. He extended a hand in greeting. "Ryan Claymore."

The man looked around in confusion before answering. "Jim Mitchell. Do you need a place to sit?"

What the fuck? Max had paid for the coffee, where the hell was the man? Ryan glanced back at the counter to see the waitress shake her head. She held up a hand and motioned in an exaggerated manner toward the front of the shop, silently mouthing "Max is there." She pointed

at the redhead, who stood to greet him, her laughing eyes showing her amusement.

Ryan hid his own grin. *Bring it on.* This was the best thing to happen to him in days.

Max gestured to the empty seat across from her. She wasn't sure if she should say something to put his mind at ease. She wasn't sure she *could* say something right now without laughing, and Ryan didn't appear the type who got laughed at very often.

Instead she reached out a hand. "Maxine Turner. Glad to finally meet you."

His dark brown eyes sparkled at her and she reconsidered her earlier assumption that he might not have a sense of humor. "Maxine Turner. I see. Assumptions have a way of kicking us when we least expect it. Good to meet you as well. Ryan Claymore, call me Ryan."

Maxine gave his hand a firm shake, casually admiring him as he sat. He was older than her, she'd guess in his late thirties, and definitely drool worthy in the tall-dark-and-dangerous kind of way. Everything about the man was neat and trim, from his short dark hair to the cut of his suit. She knew from his business profile he had a military background. It was obvious he'd kept up his physical conditioning. The fingers encasing hers were strong and for a moment she wondered what they would feel like on her body. She retrieved her hand with reluctance, exchanging it for the presentation packet waiting on the table. "Your assumption wasn't far off," she said, taking pity on him. "If you turn to the first page, I think you'll feel a bit better."

Ryan raised a brow as he examined the document. She knew when he spotted the picture of her and her twin brother. His gaze flicked between the photo and her face, his rapid perusal of the company introduction intriguing her. It was easy to admire someone who moved so decisively, especially after too large of a dose of her wishy-washy ex, but that was a distraction to put aside for now. *Concentrate, Max. You've got some fast-talking to do in a minute.*

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, the folder held casually in one hand and Maxine's mouth watered. *God, men like him should be illegal.* The thickness of his thigh muscles stretched the fabric of his pant legs, and when she caught herself staring at his crotch she jerked her gaze away.

Becoming sexually distracted was *not* what she needed right now. This was an important contract for her and her brother's business. She took a swallow of her coffee and silently ordered herself to behave.

"Your parents have a strange sense of humor, Ms. Turner. It must have been interesting growing up with a twin who was also called Max."

She smiled at him. "It wasn't too bad because Maxwell always got called Junior." This time when he responded with a jerk of surprise, a laugh burst free. "Yup, dear old Dad is Maxwell Senior the twelfth--or something just as ridiculous. Having 'Max' in our names is a family tradition and there's money tied up in it. I would have told them to forget the cash and name me whatever they wanted, but I was too young to voice a complaint when they made the decision."

It was time to ignore the steamy sensations he caused and get down to business. Maxine folded her hands and headed into her summary of what the Turner Networking Team could provide as website and advertising options for his company. He nodded as she spoke, flipping through the pages of the file. While he listened attentively, his gaze spent more time on her than on the papers in front of him. Max paused and took another sip of coffee to moisten her suddenly dry mouth.

He was distracting. Mind-boggling, body-achingly distracting.

"We can make most of these decisions in short order. I am curious about something, Ms.

Turner." He dropped the information back on the table beside the plate of cookies. "Why did we have to meet in person to go through this? I'd think most of it was a standard contract."

She nodded slowly. *Now or never*. "It's Max, please. I...I wanted to meet you in person." His brow went up again. Damn, the expressions this man pulled made her stomach do back flips. "I need a security system installed and I wanted to ask if you'd consider it. It's not for an office space and I know that's your preferred setting."

"I've only started the business recently, and don't want to overextend myself. The company is fully capable of doing other locations. I'd be willing to take a look, but I still don't see why the personal touch was needed." Her cheeks flushed with heat as he continued to stare, his gaze tracing her hair. "Not that I mind getting to meet you."

"It's for a house I recently inherited, part of the Max thing in a way. It was my Gramma's home and now that she's moved into a retirement community, the house passes down to the oldest grandchildren. A cousin, my twin and myself are all twenty-five this year. My cousin travels a lot and already owns condos in a couple cities. Max Junior is recently married, and he and his wife just finished building a house they designed. I've got temporary possession of the family homestead to myself."

Ryan stared at her with his dark mesmerizing eyes. "And...?" She shrugged, blinking in confusion. "There must be more to the story."

She worried at her bottom lip with her teeth. This was a step she needed to take. She needed to do it for herself and not let her brother, or father, or one of the clan take over like usual. While she loved her family, they were always in each other's pockets. Now that she finally had a place to call her own, she needed to practice a little more independence. Taking a deep breath for encouragement, she looked Ryan in the eye and spoke firmly. "Two days after I moved in, vandals caused extensive water damage to the walls and floors. I locked up when I left for work in the morning, but someone managed to sneak in and turn on all the taps full blast. By the time I got home it was a mess. Insurance will cover most of the repairs, and fortunately I hadn't brought over all my possessions. I don't want it to happen again."

He leaned forward in his chair. "Kids playing pranks?"

She shook her head. "They got in through a locked door. No broken glass, no open windows. I had changed the exterior locks so it wasn't a loose key Gramma gave out and forgot. I'm supposed to move back in a couple of weeks but something isn't sitting right with me. Also, I don't want to mess up the character of the home while adding the system."

Max watched him closely as she spoke. His face was hard to read, his expression now guarded. Her family hated the idea she would be living on her own. They hated that she would be out in the country and not sharing an apartment with one of her cousins. Heck, even her aunts and uncles had weighed in with their opinions. The universal agreement amongst the clan was to put the place up for sale.

Maxine couldn't bear the thought. Not only was the homestead the most beautiful house she'd ever seen, it was full of memories. She *needed* to keep the home in the family, only there was no way she could live there if she didn't feel safe.

The fear he would turn her down motivated the whole truth to come blurting out. "I'm nervous about being where I'm not sure I'm safe. This is the first place I'll live that I've been all alone and the idea of a home invasion terrifies me." She forced herself to speak around the knot in her throat. "I needed to see you in person to decide if I trusted you to arrange this."

"And you've decided already I can be trusted?"

Oh yeah. Everything about him eased her concerns. Made her excited too, although she'd

just have to ignore that part if they were going to be business associates. "There are things I... Well, can we just call it woman's intuition and leave it at that?"

He held out his hands palm up as he winked at her. "I would never presume to argue with woman's intuition. Let's check our calendars and arrange a meeting. I'm booked for most of this week, and I'll need time to drive to Frazer--"

"My house is in Thompson," she interjected.

The confusion on his face made her smile again. "Why did we meet at the Sugar Shack if you live in Thompson?"

"I'm staying temporarily with my brother and he lives in Frazer. Whenever you're free I'll make sure the house is open for your inspection."

Maxine relaxed back in her chair, her heartbeat slowing to a regular tempo. A good contract for the business and a successful start to making her new home secure. Ryan's dark eyes stayed on her and she felt a blush rise again. She certainly wasn't going to object about getting to spend more time in his presence, either. Her gaze caught on the cookies on the table and her stomach grumbled.

Ryan smiled at her, the twinkle in his eyes sending a shiver down her spine as he offered her one of the giant treats. He tapped the edges together in a toast.

"To new beginnings."

As the spicy flavor filled her mouth, she wondered just exactly what they were starting, because it felt very right.

Chapter Two

Three days later Maxine smiled in admiration as she watched his long strides eat up the distance between his car and her front door. Ryan wore beige cargo pants and a dark brown T-shirt instead of a business suit. His chest and biceps muscles stretched the shirt fabric, and she enjoyed the view as she rose from her deck chair to greet him. "Thanks for coming so soon."

"You're not far from where I need to be by three p.m." Ryan's gaze swung around and he gave a low whistle. "It's a beautiful house, and the neighborhood is fantastic. Your grandmother must have been sad to leave."

"Yes and no." Maxine led him inside. "Grama said the work was too much for her to keep up with alone. She's got a lot of friends in the seniors home and she'll come to visit often, especially since most of the family gatherings will still be held here."

Max stepped back and tried to see the house through new eyes but all she saw was the damage. While the hardwood floors had been refinished, the baseboards were still missing and the carpets had yet to be replaced. The usual welcoming first impression was marred by the sight of workers' tools and piles of rubbish in bins. A gentle touch landed on her arm and she looked up into his sympathetic gaze. "Again, it's a beautiful home and the repairs will make it as good as new," Ryan said kindly.

She nodded. "It's the indignity of it. Old treasures of a house like this should be treated with respect, not deliberately damaged." She forced a faint smile. "I'm also a tad ticked I didn't even get to hold a proper housewarming party before having to do fall cleaning. Again."

His laughter fell soft and smooth on her ears, and a trickle of warmth raced over her body. She had to turn away to avoid staring at him. Memorizing his features.

"May I?" he asked, and when she gestured him forward, he paced carefully through the main-floor rooms, taking notes in a small leather-bound notepad. Maxine wandered behind him,

attempting to not stare at his butt, nor admire the ease with which his body moved. The strength in his arms as he cranked open one of the old casement windows, muscles stretching the fabric of his T-shirt, drew her attention.

Eventually she gave up and enjoyed the view. He couldn't see her ogle him and it was too good an opportunity to miss. Leaning on a wall, her feet resting in a pile of carpet liner, she observed him as he worked. *Damn, he was fine.* She wasn't the kind to jump someone's bones right after meeting them, but in Ryan's case she'd think about making an exception.

It wasn't just his good looks. Her conniving ex-boyfriend had been easy on the eyes as well, but his lack of direction had recently made her call their relationship off. She had more trouble convincing Jamie Daultry they were through as a couple than she'd expected from someone her twin had nicknamed Twinkle Toes. Jamie never had a firm answer, always made his decisions at the eleventh hour and expected her to fall in line with his panic-stricken requests. He'd been shocked to hear she was calling it quits.

Ryan didn't seem to have any trouble making decisions. He approached his job in a straightforward manner, with no wasted movements, as he examined her home. The contrast between the men was very attractive, in Ryan's favor.

The sun shone through the stained glass window above the front door and hit the wall she leaned against, the heat and color lulling her eyes closed. She was in the midst of a lovely fantasy involving Ryan and her checking out the springs on her bed when a gentle cough startled her. She jolted upright, stumbled on the tangle beneath her and fell.

Ryan caught her, lifted her away from the rubble and carefully placed her feet on the floor. Every inch of her body burned where they touched. Solid chest muscles teased her palms, the beat of his heart under her hands. He felt even better in real life than in her fantasies, and she clung to him for a moment while the blood settled in her brain.

Searing heat covered her face. Daydreams were one thing, molesting the man was another. She jerked her hands back and would have stumbled again if he hadn't continued to support her.

"You've been burning the candle at both ends, haven't you?" His voice soothed her taut nerves and Maxine fought the urge to nestle closer into his embrace. "I shouldn't have startled you like that." Slowly, as if making sure she would remain standing, he released her, one hand accidentally stroking the side of her body. A tingle shot straight to her core. *Oh my goodness, he was a dangerous man.*

She straightened and shook her head like she was waking. His eyes shone at her and his smile rocked her. *Think, Max, you do know how to speak.* "It's been tough between getting repairs done here and the job and there's the new baby at my brother's so..." She smiled ruefully. "Sorry for sleeping on the job. What do you need to look at next?"

Ryan's gaze trickled over her and her body reacted like she'd been hit with an electric shock. She sent up a prayer of thanks for her lined bra that hid how much a simple glance from him affected her. Fortunately, he turned away to stand at the bottom of the stairs.

"Upper floor and attic. I'll have a crew come do the detailed measurements we need, I just want to see what kind of access we're looking at for the higher levels. Then I'd like to walk the perimeter of the building."

She led the way up the wide, curved stairwell, pausing at the upper landing to open the doors to the side rooms. "There's way more space in this house than one person needs. In its heyday there were twelve family members and a passel of servants under this roof."

"There are servant quarters in the residence?"

She nodded. "The attic level has a few. There used to be a caretaker's home on the land as well. It was rented out until someone got careless with the gas stove and burned it down a few years ago."

He entered the first room and left her alone on the landing. Max sagged against the nearest wall and let out the breath she'd held. Holy crap, her libido was in overdrive or something because being near the man made her wet. She needed to cool off. She scooted down the hall to the bathroom to take a long drink of water and splash her face.

Lifting her gaze to the mirror, she realized it was no use. The attraction she felt and the effect on her body would be damn hard to hide from his perceptive gaze. Her pale skin was flushed red with desire.

She blew an exasperated puff of air that lifted her bangs from her forehead. Maybe, just maybe, it wasn't a bad thing at all. He was a grown-up. She was a grown-up. Maybe he would be interested in getting to know her a little better. That is, if he felt anything like she did.

Oh hell, she hoped so.

Ryan took the corner into the room faster than he should have and clutched his papers to stop them from flying from his fingers. Climbing the stairs behind the delectable Ms. Turner and her shapely ass gave him a massive hard-on he'd hidden behind his notepad like some teenager in high school.

The scent of her perfume lingered in the air, and he fought to stop the growl of need that rose in the pit of his stomach, and lower. Watching her in the sunlight, he'd been captivated by the warmth of her skin, the expression on her face as she momentarily shed the strain of worry haunting her since the first time they'd met. He longed to pull her back into his arms and drag his fingers through her sunlit hair, cup her to his body to consume her lips at his leisure.

Fuck, forget the lips, he wanted to consume her. Every scrumptious, voluptuous inch of her.

He dropped the notepad on the wide window ledge and braced his hands on either side. Pushing aside his body's urging to go find Ms. Turner and demand a far more personal inspection than she had requested, he stared out the window and concentrated on the job at hand.

The house was massive, and the yard on either side opened to vast wooded forest. The back faced a small lake according to the paperwork he'd checked at the surveyor's office. Forty plus acres of land surrounded the house that was one step shy of a heritage home, luckily for Ms. Turner. Having to do the restorations to heritage-home standards could be a pocket breaker, even kicking in insurance money.

Finally distracted enough to ignore his still-throbbing cock, Ryan worked his way through the first rooms of the upper floor. It was difficult to see any signs of water damage. Max's repair crew were fantastic, although he was surprised they weren't hard at it this afternoon.

By the time he reconnected with Maxine, things were under control. Things that needed to stay under control, at least until he decided what to do about his attraction to the woman.

"How come there are no finishers working today?" he asked when Maxine met him in the hall outside an ornate door.

"The owner of the crew is a family friend. He got a call for an urgent fix from a regular client. Since he's doing me a favor working me into his schedule I'm not going to complain about him pausing this job. It's tough to get good workers. I'll live with the mess until they find the time to come back."

Ryan frowned. "I thought you were living at your brother's?"

She shrugged. "Until this weekend. The house was supposed to be completed this week and I made arrangements to leave. It's a little...awkward staying with Junior, what with the new baby and friends always visiting."

That explained the tiredness. In spades. "You're moving back in already?"

"Most of the house is livable again. It makes sense." She led him into the next room and gestured. "The renovations in the master bathroom were completed before the damage occurred. In fact, the new drains they installed in there dealt with the excess water and all that had to be done was mop the floor."

Ryan strode through the door and his limbs involuntarily froze. The largest bed he'd seen in his entire life occupied the center of the far wall. Pillows were piled high at the headboard and thick corner posts supported a heavy canopy. The curtains at the tall windows to the right hung wide open and sunbeams fell on the quilt-covered monstrosity.

All he could see was the image of Maxine Turner spread for his pleasure, light reflecting off her skin as she waited, naked, on the satin sheets. He shook his head to clear his lust-filled fantasies and followed Max's hips into the bathroom. An antique claw-footed tub twice the size of a regular tub sat opposite a glass shower enclosure covering an entire wall. The buzzing in his ears grew loud enough to drown out whatever she continued to tell him and suddenly it was imperative he get the fuck out of the room.

Before she found herself on her bed with her legs over his shoulders.

"Where is the access to the attic rooms?" he asked abruptly, interrupting her.

Maxine jumped at his tone and drew in a quick breath. Her gaze darted past him and he knew she was looking at that bed. She immediately flushed red, swallowing hard before guiding him from the room. When she would have led him up the stairs he held up a hand.

"I'll go look around myself. You don't need to stick around." God knows if he could stand watching her ass for one more second without pouncing on her.

Max nodded, stumbling backward. "I'll go make some...ice tea. When you're done, join me in the kitchen and we can have a drink before I show you outside." She barely waited for his acknowledgement before fleeing.

He adjusted his raging erection before climbing to the third story. Holy fuck, the reaction between him and Ms. Turner should be classified as a dangerous weapon.

The third floor contained typical small servant rooms from the turn of the century with an additional microscopic bathroom. The only item of real interest was the attic crawlspace, filled with boxes and baskets and trunks. The usual assortment of generations of treasures and trash, all mixed together.

While he wandered, Ryan debated the wisdom of getting involved in a physical relationship with Maxine. Oh hell, his body had no qualms, it was his head that doubted the merit of the idea. Since his brother's care had been thrust upon him, it seemed his personal time was nonexistent. Maxine didn't seem the type for casual sex, no matter how good her legs would feel wrapped around him. By the time he approached the kitchen, he had it all figured out. The logical thing was to keep his hands off her and make sure this stayed a purely business relationship. He opened the door to the back section of the house and Maxine's seductive perfume with its trace of apple blossoms assaulted him. His entire body tightened with need and his blood roared through him.

Fucking logic. He would kill for a taste of her right now.

Chapter Three

Sunlight flooded the kitchen. Solid oak cabinetry lined the near walls while at the far end of the room a massive dining table filled the open space. Earth-tone tiles covered the floor and the whole space screamed comfort. A pitcher of tea and a couple of glasses of ice waited on the island but Maxine was nowhere to be seen. Ryan strode toward the floor-to-ceiling windows and stared through the French doors at the pond visible across the expanse of green lawn bordering the deck.

A muffled curse reached his ears and Ryan swung around, searching for the source. Where in the devil had Max disappeared to? A crash sounded from behind a door in the corner of the kitchen. Ryan yanked it open to find Maxine struggling under the weight of a dislodged shelf. The rest of the pantry goods on it were perilously close to joining a broken jam jar on the floor.

"Damn it, why didn't you call for help?" Ryan asked as he reached around her to grasp the shelf. He took the weight and she sighed in relief, dropping her arms to her sides for a moment before grabbing at the loose goods and transferring them to another shelf. Ryan clenched his teeth as her ass rubbed his groin and reawakened his cock.

"I did call." Her voice was gravelly and rough. "For a while. You must have been too far away to hear me."

"Don't talk until you get a drink." The shelf grew lighter as she removed the cans and jars, and Ryan lowered it to waist height and placed it to the side. Maxine remained trapped within the circle of his arms and she eased back, her head on his shoulder.

"Sorry. Need to rest for a minute," she croaked.

Ryan let her lean on him, massaging her arms to bring back the circulation. This wasn't how he'd imagined getting to hold her, but who in the hell cared? She was soft and warm, and damn it all, she smelled wonderful. He fought the urge to take advantage of the opportunity and stroke her torso more intimately. Cup her breasts and see if they really would overflow his hands like he'd pictured. A little groaning noise slipped from her lips and he envisioned her under him making those sounds, and his cock hardened even more. Shit, he had to get his mind on other things.

She shifted position and her butt cheek brushed his zipper. His dick jerked in response. *Fuck*. If he didn't get some control fast, he was going to explode.

He forced himself to concentrate. "How long were you standing there?"

"Too long."

She melted against him. Holy shit, there was no way he could survive much more of this. Looking around for a distraction, he spotted the shelf hooks still hanging precariously from the wall. The support screws seemed to have ripped clean out of all six holes at the same time.

Maxine shifted her feet slightly and something crunched.

"Shit. Grandma's jelly."

Ryan looked down to see dark purple spreading at their feet, sharp shards of glass poking through the gooey mass. He glanced at the thin-soled slippers she wore.

"Don't move, I'll take care of it." Her cry of surprise rang in his ear as he lifted her, and she whipped her arms out and clung to his neck. The tantalizing sensation of her breasts pressed tight against him made his mouth water, but he ignored the temptation. He stepped to the edge of the pantry, pausing to kick off his shoes before walking to the island and depositing her carefully on the countertop.

"Ryan, I--"

"Sit and relax for a minute. The floor looks freshly tiled and grouted in here, and we don't

want to get Gramma's jelly all over it. Right?"

She wrinkled her nose at him and nodded.

"Good. Drink this." He poured her a glass full of tea. "And take it easy while I dump the evidence." He poured himself a glass and raised it in a toast before chugging it down and retreating to the pantry with the garbage pail.

He needed the drink to cool himself off. The feel of her in his arms, the scent of her body, both drove his simmering desire for her up to a boil. Everything about Maxine attracted him, especially her bullheaded stubbornness in refusing to simply let the shelf fall to the floor.

He dropped the glass pieces into the pail carefully before scooping up the jelly and wiping everything with the wet dishcloth Maxine threw him. He watched her clandestinely through the open door. She pulled off her slippers and deposited them in the sink, her long limbs twisting. Her shirt rode up and glimpses of her bare belly teased him as she wiggled her way around. Ryan took a deep breath and beat down the violent need he felt to lick her skin, starting at her belly button. Damn, he hadn't been this horny since he was a teenager.

She peered in at him. "Almost done?"

"It's clean. I'll check the rest of the shelves while I'm in here." He held the pail out to her. God help him, maybe a little normal activity would break his train of thought. Anything to keep from heading into no man's land.

"You don't need to do that. I just bumped it too hard or something."

"It's part of the inspection." When a confused expression crossed her face, he winked. "I've got to check you don't have any items past their expiration date. They're a high security risk."

She laughed and accepted the pail, grabbing his shoes from the floor. "Then I'll clean these for you."

They each turned to their tasks. Ryan picked the screws off the floor and compared them to the ones still intact. It looked as if someone had exchanged every screw on the faulty shelf with a slightly smaller size. He took his time to make sure the rest of the room was secure, tucking the remainder of the jelly jars into a solid corner cupboard before rejoining Max in the kitchen. She handed him his shoes solemnly.

"Am I safe? No rancid flour or dangerous canned beets about to make a break for it?"

Ryan shook his head. "Did anyone work in the pantry when they did the floors?"

She frowned. "They weren't supposed to. Is something wrong?"

He smiled to reassure her. "No, the rest of the shelves are good and sturdy. The one that fell can be fixed easily as well." Maxine stared at him strangely. "What?"

She reached forward and brushed her fingers down his cheek, drawing them back to show him bright purple. The touch of her hand set the alarms ringing through his body again.

"You're wearing war paint," she murmured.

Ryan couldn't stop himself. It was too much to resist. He circled her wrist with his fingers and tugged her hand toward him. Watching carefully for any sign she wanted him to stop, he brought her sticky fingers to his lips and licked them clean. Heat sparked between them and he leaned closer until their mouths were mere inches apart.

"It's very good jelly. I'd hate to let it go to waste."

She nodded seriously, breathlessly, then closed the distance between them and their mouths touched.

Ryan's mouth brushed hers. The air around them filled with the heady scent of the man

standing before her. He gently cradled her head as their lips caressed, a barely-there movement that sent a shiver up her spine and longing down to her toes. His tongue begged for entrance and she opened her mouth, letting the enticing strokes of his lips and teeth melt her limited defenses.

Low moans rose involuntarily to her lips as his body trapped her against the island. Rock-solid muscle pressed into her, his heat scalding nerves and firing synapses of pleasure deep within her core.

He supported her head with both hands as he took the kiss deeper, stroking with his tongue and exploring every inch of her mouth. When her hair tumbled around his fingers, he clasped a handful, tugging gently until he exposed her neck, his mouth descending on the pulse point she felt throbbing just under the skin.

Maxine groaned with need, her hands clutching at his shoulders, holding him, wanting him to continue but afraid of how quickly her desires grew. She wanted to drag him upstairs to her bed and spend the rest of the day exploring his body. Letting him explore hers. Ryan rasped his teeth along her neck and she shook with delight. Forget making it to the bed, she was willing to let him take her right there on the kitchen floor.

No one had *ever* made her feel this way before.

She felt wanton and sensual, a goddess being worshipped, as he kissed his way back up her neckline to nuzzle the sensitive spot under her ear. Heat from his mouth spread over her whole body until she was red hot, limbs shaking. Returning to her lips, Ryan kissed her savagely, then eased off, soothing the nips he'd just given, lapping at the corner of her mouth with butterfly soft strokes of his tongue.

One final gentle press and he pulled away to stare deep into her eyes.

His were dark and smoky with desire and she leaned forward, without thinking, to offer herself again, to return to his intoxicating embrace. He pulled back a little more, lifting his thumb to stroke her swollen lips.

"I need to be going soon and I still have to check the perimeter of the house," he whispered, his voice husky and low.

Max flushed hotter. "Of course. I'm sorry, I didn't mean..." It was just a kiss. It was wishful thinking to imagine the chemistry between them meant anything more. "I'm sorry," she repeated, "I shouldn't have done that." She tried to back away but he restrained her.

"Damn it, Max, what are you talking about? I kissed you because I wanted to. And I want to kiss you some more only I've got an appointment I can't miss." He stepped away slowly, seemingly hesitant to peel their bodies apart. The temperature in the room dropped in spite of the sunlight shining in and Maxine bit back a complaint.

Ryan cursed. "Ah, fuck it." He dragged her against his body and ravished her lips, taking her by storm. Nothing gentle this time, nothing hesitant. He took control and offered her complete proof that his desire for her was real. His hardness against her softness, the rigid length of his erection pressed into her belly. Her body responded immediately, a tingling sensation in her core spreading fingers of delightful tension throughout her system.

It was only a moment later he released her, stepping away and dragging a hand through his hair. Her breathing took forever to return to normal, especially since he kept looking at her with an intense stare that said she was the next thing on the menu.

Damn, she wished...

"Do you still need to see outside?" Max tried to speak normally. Lightly, not out of breath like she was ready to pass out from a lack of oxygen. *Oh my Lord, he was potent.*

He scowled as he flicked a glance at his watch. "I'll look around and make a few notes

before I have to be on my way."

She led him to the French doors where he paused to slip on his shoes. Maxine clung to the door handle. It was the only way to stay vertical with her shaky limbs. "So I guess I'll see you when you have a quote for me?" she asked with false brightness. What was she supposed to say? *You want to come back tonight and ravish me? Please?*

Ryan stopped in the doorway, flashing her a smile that grew larger and larger. "You'll see me before then."

Max returned his smile. She wished she were brave enough to say what she was thinking. *See him? All of him? Oh yeah.* "I'd like that."

"What are you doing for dinner?" he asked, his dark eyes staking her in place.

She stuttered for a moment. "I...I had no plans."

"I'll pick you up at seven."

The train was moving fast and they weren't even out of the station. Out-of-this-world kisses aside, she didn't really know him. Was it a good idea for them to get involved? She knew what her family would say. He was much older and more experienced, and they knew nothing about his background. About *his* family. The fact she and Ryan would work for each other was another negative factor. Perhaps the best plan would be to wait a little longer. She opened her mouth to tell him she was unavailable and then hesitated.

Holy cow, she was doing it again. They weren't even here and she was doing everything exactly how her family would expect. Her whole life she'd waited for permission, and in the end she'd missed so many opportunities. Damn if she wanted to miss any more. Ryan was an intriguing man, and he turned her on like no one she'd ever met before. She was an adult. Why not go out with him?

Before she could change her mind she blurted out, "That would be great. Do you have somewhere in mind?"

"Dress casual, bring your appetite." His gaze flashed to her feet. "Wear runners."

Runners?

He stepped closer and lifted a hand to stroke her cheek. Her throat choked tight, whether with unrequited desire or plain old-fashioned embarrassment she wasn't sure. He winked and backed away. "See you tonight."

She watched in a daze as he walked the length of the wide veranda, disappearing from sight around the corner before she released the breath she hadn't realized she held. Holy Hannah, they were potentially explosive together. She lifted a hand to her lips, still able to feel his mouth on hers, her skin tender from his touch, his caresses. Her whole body hummed, yet other than her mouth and neck he had barely laid a finger on her.

She wandered back into the house and distractedly packaged up the garbage with the sticky glass in it. She'd held the damn shelf up for half of forever before Ryan had arrived. There was no way she would let the last batch of preserves her Gramma made be destroyed. Saving the jelly had been the goal but the prize was better than anything she'd ever expected.

She laughed out loud. "Thank you, Gramma!"

Chapter Four

He'd driven like a madman, but it was already five minutes after the hour before Ryan flew into the nursing home and past the security desk, one of the nurses jumping up to get the door for him.

"Sorry, ladies."

He didn't stop to explain. The quicker he arrived the better, at this point. He slid into Carl's bedroom and dropped into his usual chair. One of the male nurses was in the room, and he rose from Carl's side. He shook his head at Ryan and then slipped out, leaving them alone.

"Four hundred sixty-nine." Carl sucked in a ragged breath and rubbed his arms. He stared blankly at the opposite wall and rocked his wheelchair. Small repetitive movements jerked his head and torso. "Four hundred seventy-four. Four hundred seventy-five. Four hundred--"

"I'm here, Carl, I'm here. I'm sorry I was late. I came as soon as I could." Ryan rose to lay a soothing hand on Carl's arm as his brother continued to shake his chair with his agitated movements. "I'm going to read to you today, remember? You'll have to sit still if you want me to read."

There was no use in further explanations. He squatted quietly by Carl's chair, resting a hand on his brother's thigh until the youth's breathing calmed. The frantic rubbing slowed and Carl tilted his head to the side. "Hello, Ryan. You are going to read to me today. You promised. You promised to come to see me." He hiccupped unsteadily a few times and continued to stare at the wall. His anxious movements increased in pace again.

Ryan sighed. He hooked his foot around the nearby chair, dragged it closer and prepared to wait out the storm. Today it looked like it was going to be the long route to settle Carl down. There was no set pattern, although he had begun to recognize some of the triggers that set his brother off, plus the few responses that helped calm him.

The most difficult part of the whole situation for Ryan was Carl's astonishing intelligence didn't jibe with his childlike behavior. Instantaneous math calculations would be followed by temper tantrums. Photographic visual recall--especially of faces--that Ryan would have loved to have while on active duty, vanished when Carl grew upset.

He stared at the baby-smooth skin of Carl's cheek. The mind of a child, mixed with the mind of a genius, in the body of a fifteen-year-old. Ryan sat quietly and hummed a favorite tune, soft and low. A light flickered in Carl's eyes, and Ryan's hopes rose. He gave Carl's thigh a squeeze.

"Hey, buddy, how are you? You want me to read a story to you?" It was a chance in a thousand this would be one of the rare occasions the situation passed without hours of painful intervention.

"You said you would read to me. We can read together. Hello, Ryan, I'm your brother Carl."

"You sure are." Ryan sat back in his chair, the tension peeling away one layer at a time. A faint smile pulled at the corners of Carl's mouth, the tears in his eyes already forgotten. Ryan grabbed a tissue and dried his brother's face gently. "There you go. Now, why don't you pick a book?"

Carl nodded, then wheeled himself away to peer at his bookshelf. A constant flow of words issued from his lips, barely audible. By the time Carl picked a story and Ryan read it to him, they were both back into the normal routine of a visit. Ryan read the familiar picture book out loud without having to concentrate, his gaze instead on his younger sibling.

He hadn't even known he had a brother.

Now as he examined Carl surreptitiously, he spotted small resemblances between the youth and the hardhearted man who he remembered as his father, with his heavy fists and a wandering eye. Home to Ryan had been little more than a battleground. When his mom died, Ryan said goodbye to the constant fighting in a shot, not caring that he was barely old enough to

legally leave home. He'd wanted nothing more to do with family. Blood might be thicker than water, but that only meant it was messier to clean up. The anger and frustration of those early years was a burning ache in his belly he'd ignored while building his military career.

Four years ago he'd received word of his father's death. The news didn't make his heart leap or bring any feelings of regret for missed opportunities. He'd felt like he'd buried the man years before. Only through his father's will, Ryan discovered he had a half-brother. He'd contacted the number he was given and had a long chat with Carl's mom, Vicky. She was happy to hear from him. And more than happy to tell him not to look them up, especially since he was uncertain how often he could come around.

"Carl's not like other kids. He requires special care and attention. I've got everything in place he needs, and we're doing all right. I don't want you to come into his life unless you're in it for good. It hurts him too much, he just doesn't understand."

Ryan breathed out slowly as Carl rolled off to do something intricate, detailed and totally incomprehensible at his desk. Now that he'd been with Carl for six months he understood far better what Vicky had meant. She'd been a good mom to Carl.

Caring. Giving.

Drunk drivers never hit the people who deserved it.

"Ryan. You got a minute?" Jon was back, the attendant from earlier. "Hey, he's doing better than I expected. I was worried I'd have to give him a sedative if you didn't show up."

Ryan glanced at his brother. Carl was busy at his desk, seemingly unaware of Jon's arrival. "I hate it when you use that shit on him. It might take a while, but you know he settles down if someone stays with him."

Jon sat next to him. "We've got the info on his chart, but it's not always possible to provide one on one with our staffing situations. I wanted to let you know Carl's physiotherapist said he's doing wonderfully. She hopes to have him up and out of the wheelchair by Christmas, maybe sooner."

"That's great news."

Jon smiled. "Carl's stubborn. In this case it's working to his advantage because he's improving in huge spurts. His muscles are strong enough, it's the neurological pathways that are being retrained. Anyway, thought you should know." He glanced at Carl, still fussing with whatever had caught his attention. "Funny how life changes in a moment, especially with him. Devastated one minute to happy and content the next."

Crap, yeah. Wasn't that just about the sum of the whole situation? Carl's life had changed in an instant with the car accident that had taken his mom's life. For Ryan? Six months ago he was Captain Claymore, a lifetime of service to his country mapped out in his future, his only family the men with whom he served. Now he was permanently relocated stateside, with a fledgling company and a youth who needed more of him than he knew how to provide.

Funny? That wasn't exactly the word Ryan would have chosen to describe it.

The phone rang and Maxine raced to answer it. Pulling a sweater over her shoulders as she flew down the final steps to the living room, she snatched it up on the seventh ring only to hear the buzzing of the dial tone. "Damn. I need to get my answering machine set up soon."

She turned away, adjusted her sleeves and buttoned up. It was warm enough that with the sweater she wouldn't need to take a coat. She sat in her favorite chair to tighten her runners, bouncing up as the phone rang again.

"Hello?"

No dial tone, but also no answer.

"Hello? Who is this?" Stupid telemarketers with their dialing machines, you never knew if you were going to hang up on a real person or not.

A piercing screech waisted in her ear and she dropped the phone in surprise. The receiver bounced on the hardwood, the shrill sound loud even from a distance and Max swore. She grabbed it, hit the talk button and hung up on whatever had gone off on her.

People needed to rethink the whole fax-machine business.

A firm knock on the front door announced Ryan's arrival. She peeked through the side window to double check before swinging the front door open. His dark eyes flashed at her, the grin she'd seen that afternoon lighting up his face. One hand remained hidden behind his back and she paused before greeting him. "Hi, Ryan. I'm ready to go when you are." She tried to casually glance around him and he laughed.

"Curiosity killed the cat."

Max stood and crossed her arms in front of her chest, pretending to be upset. "That's not the story I heard. Someone killed the cat because it teased for too long."

Ryan reached his free hand to her and led her out the door, waiting for her to lock it behind them. "Yeah, I heard that version too. Poor cat, either way."

He wore an old pair of runners that looked comfortable and lived in. Faded blue jeans fit nice and snug around his thighs, cupping his butt like a glove. His white button-down shirt fought his biceps. Max tried not to drool as she linked her fingers around the elbow he offered to escort her to his car. At the door he stopped and faced her.

"Now you can have your surprise." He handed her a set of envelopes, all tightly sealed. "You get to help plan the evening. I've arranged the locations, you pick the order we do things." Max turned over the envelopes, looking for a clue of what they contained.

"What's inside?" she asked. "Tickets? Coupons?"

"I'm not giving away any secrets. Pick one and let's get started."

She selected one from the pile, and he tucked the rest away, seating her before walking around to the driver's side. Maxine took a deep breath and ordered herself to calm down. The chance to enjoy time with another adult who wasn't family--especially one who made her tingle just being close to him--was going to be wonderful. The edge of arousal bubbling through her all afternoon had left her aching for his touch. His presence. This mischievous side was a treat she hadn't expected.

The last date she'd been on with Mr. Wishy-Washy, she'd planned the whole thing, and then Jamie had arrived an hour late and messed it up. Max glanced at Ryan as he sat behind the wheel smiling at her.

"Are you going to open it?" he asked.

She slipped the card from inside and read out loud. "*Chinatown*."

Ryan nodded and put the car in gear. "A wonderful choice. I knew you had exquisite taste."

Max laughed at him and made herself comfortable. "I never realized you were this much of a goof. Chinese food for supper?"

"Appetizers only. I've planned a progressive dinner, and we'll walk between courses."

"Seriously, a progressive dinner? I haven't done one of those since I was a teenager," Maxine said.

He gasped. "What? It's the best way to dine out. There's no way I can chose one type of food. This way I get to indulge in all my favorites in one evening."

Maxine stared out the window at the passing scenery, enjoying the cool evening air rushing past. "I didn't picture you as the type who had trouble making decisions."

Ryan didn't respond immediately and she wondered if she'd offended him. "Thank you. I'm very good at making decisions when it comes to things like security systems, and personal safety." His tone of voice lightened and he joked, "But picking a favorite food, that's damn near impossible."

He fell silent, and she watched the traffic go by outside and tried to relax. She snuck secretive glances at Ryan, admiring his rugged good looks, his firm control behind the wheel. The kisses they'd shared were scorchers, but they were still getting to know each other. He was very different from her ex--older, rougher--something wild and untamed showing in his eyes at times. The wildness made her heart race with desire, not fear. She'd dated before, only never with a man like Ryan, someone more mature and experienced. Jamie had been her first serious relationship, her first lover, although curiosity more than passion had encouraged that venture.

Ryan pulled into a parking spot and turned his full attention on her.

"All our stops for the rest of the night are within walking distance. Let me know when you're getting tired."

Chinese spring rolls and pork dumplings were followed by a bowl of Thai sweet and sour soup. They shared an enormous Greek salad then wandered across the street to an Italian restaurant to enjoy a slab of lasagna big enough for a family. In between courses they strolled, arm in arm along the boardwalk, the crash of the ocean and the wind blowing over the sea adding to the magic of the evening.

Ryan shared stories from his military background involving his travels to other countries. The gentler stories, Max was sure, as they were all about the children and the villages, the communities where he'd been stationed before resigning. He was fascinating to listen to, and she found herself staring at his animated face as he described the settings with great detail.

Three hours passed in a blur. Eventually they sat on a bench overlooking the ocean. As the lights sparkled on the water Maxine sighed, far more relaxed and content than she'd been in ages. Had she ever had an evening like this where none of the conversation involved extended family? He hadn't monopolized the conversation, but when he asked about her, he asked about *her*, not the clan.

It was strange, unfamiliar and very, very nice.

"It's been a wonderful evening, Ryan. Thank you so much." One strong arm slipped around her and she snuggled in a little closer to the warmth of his body as the breezes cooled. Oh yes, this was very nice as well. She stared into the waves and wondered if she had the nerve to ask him inside when he dropped her off. Not for a cup of coffee, but for more of those dynamite kisses and wherever else it might lead. Her breasts felt heavy and she squeezed her legs together to stop the ache between them. She'd never had sex on a first date. The woodsy scent of his skin floated past and she took a deep breath. She'd never *wanted* to have sex on a first date before. Would he think she was too forward? Too easy? Indecision rocked her.

"You've got one more envelope to open."

She was sure she'd finished them. "Ryan, I couldn't eat another bite if I tried. The cheesecake was fabulous but a few spoonfuls more than I should have enjoyed."

He laughed and handed her one last slim paper. She slipped it open. "*Porch swing*." She twisted in his arms. "What kind of food is that?"

Ryan tugged her to her feet. "It's another location. I made an amazing discovery this afternoon when I checked outside your house." His smile melted her defenses and heated her

body. "There's a bottle of wine waiting for us to enjoy as well."

Maxine's heartbeat increased in tempo. Maybe she wouldn't have to say anything at all. If she only had the nerve to let herself do what she really wanted to do. She glanced into his dark eyes. Oh yeah, he was something she'd like to do, she was sure of it.

Chapter Five

He slowly removed the cork from the wine, using the time to breathe deeply and calm his overactive body and mind. Spending the whole evening in Maxine's presence triggered the desire to do much more than simply sit on the giant porch swing and share a glass of wine as they admired the view of the lake. Ryan was pretty sure the wine would taste far better if he got to lap it off her skin, especially the warm scoop of her belly. And lower.

The dinner invitation had been an impulse. He'd puzzled over it as he walked away from her earlier. Yeah, she was hot enough to ignite a missile, but the timing sucked. Maybe after they'd finished working for each other, maybe after shit settled with his brother, he'd arrange to meet on a nonprofessional basis. But with her taste still in his mouth, the look in her big eyes egging him on, he'd spoken without thinking.

He'd considered the situation the whole drive to the nursing home before coming to a decision. Fine. They'd go out, have a simple meal together. He'd drop her off at the end of the evening and that would be all--at least for now.

Sometime during the visit with his brother, he'd changed his mind. There in the small room, with a relative he barely knew, the message of the past months smashed into him with the weight of an anvil. Life was short. There was no reason for him not to reach out and clasp hold of something special.

Maxine Turner was something very special.

She sat curled up in the corner of the swing leaning on a pillow. She had her long legs tucked under her while she focused on the lake. Her rich auburn hair draped over her shoulders and her eyes sparkled. His body tightened and he longed to stroke her skin to see if it was as soft as it looked. After handing her a glass of wine, he settled in the opposite corner to admire her better.

"The view is spectacular, isn't it?" Max spoke quietly.

He sat mesmerized by the sight of her. The arousal pounding through his blood shouted for him to hurry up, while his instincts warned him to move with caution. They both fell silent, sipping their wine and staring at the dark lake reflecting twinkling lights from a distant house.

"When I was little I always wanted to sleep on the swing. We'd come for family dinners, and there would be major chaos, with the cousins and aunts and uncles everywhere. I'd get tired of the noise after a bit and come here and curl up with a book. In my imagination I was on a pirate ship and this was my hammock, but no matter how much I begged at the end of the evening, Mom and Dad always insisted it was time to come home and sleep in my proper bed."

She played with a curl as she spoke, seeming not very much older than the child she would have been all those years ago. She took a deep breath, and his gaze was riveted by the sight of one open button too many, the curve of her breast visible under the light fabric of her blouse. He was suddenly very aware she was no child, and his body tightened with desire.

He put his wine glass away and took hers from her fingers. She stared at him, puzzled, until he reached for her and pulled her into his arms. He cradled her, nestling her body into his and adjusting until they were half-reclining, half-leaning on each other. Her head rested against

his chest, the warmth of her body sizzling into him but he kept his touch gentle. The swing swayed and she sighed, a long, low sound of pleasure. Her body relaxed against his and he stroked her arm slowly until her breathing settled as well.

Small noises in the air created a lullaby. The wind stirred the trees, leaves rustling, branches rubbing on each other. The sound of cars and the city faded to nothing, and the quiet of the country surrounded them. They lay quietly and Ryan realized it was a long time since he'd known peace like this.

Maxine stirred in his arms, rolling to face him. Her eyes were bright and she snuggled closer, her torso melting into his as she wrapped her arms around his neck and drew their mouths together.

The kiss started gentle yet the desire was there underneath. Tongues caressed, lips and teeth feasting on skin soon heated to boiling. Ryan loved how she tasted, loved how she felt under his hands that had taken a life of their own and now explored the full curves of her body. He stroked the swell of her breasts and she moaned, pressing into his touch. He didn't stop, continuing the journey down her waist, over her hip, circling the flesh of her ass before returning up her body once more. All the while he kissed her, feasting on the flavor and softness of her mouth.

She combed her fingers through his hair and tugged, wiggling upward until his lips met her neck. She dropped her head back, offering him a clear path down the pale skin, the pulse in her throat beating time with the pulse in his body. He rolled her, pleased to find the swing had an extra-wide seat to allow the room they needed. Ryan nibbled and licked his way down her throat, pressing her sweater and blouse to the side to allow him access to her collarbone. He unhooked one button after another, slowly revealing the creamy swells of her breasts above the pale yellow of her bra. She quivered under him, a small whimper escaping her throat that made his blood race. He dropped kisses over her heart, enjoying the scorching heat of her skin under his lips.

Ryan lowered his face to the valley between her breasts and breathed deeply. As much as he wanted to consume her completely, as much as he wanted to continue nibbling the length of her whole body, he needed to proceed carefully. She'd responded enthusiastically to his touch, to his kiss, but from hints she'd let slip during their dinner conversation, and her current full-body blush, he knew she wasn't very experienced. She needed more than a rush to the bedroom.

Yet he had no intention of letting her get away. He knew how to take his time, make it good for both of them. He rose over her, staring into her passion-darkened eyes. "I want you, Maxine." He kissed her lips tenderly. Her tongue teased his and the pressure built.

Damn, if he was inside her in ten seconds it wouldn't be soon enough.

Pulling away, his desire reflected back from her eyes. "I'm going to make love to you, Maxine. I'm going to remove every stitch of your clothing and touch every inch of your skin. I'm going to spend hours learning what your body needs, learning what you enjoy and then hours more giving it to you."

Her eyes widened, her face flushed crimson, her mouth open in a circle of awe as he spoke. Her tongue slipped out to moisten her bottom lip, and he nipped at the plump wet surface, the burst of her flavor sending his arousal even higher. He lowered his torso on top of her slowly, his rigid cock pressing against her yielding body. Their lips were mere inches apart and she continued to stare at him, her eyes showing desire and panic in equal proportions.

The porch boards creaked to their left. "Maxy? Are you out here?"

Fuck.

Maxine squirmed under him, pushing at his chest until he sat back, his body hard and

aching. "It's my brother." She scrambled to button her blouse. "I'm sorry, I don't know why he's--"

"Maxy? Where are you? Are you okay?"

This was not fucking happening. Ryan dragged a hand through his hair and tried to calm his body down before he did something stupid, like pick Maxine up and carry her into the house under her brother's nose.

"We're over on the swing." She turned her wide eyes on Ryan, her lips swollen from his kisses, her breathing erratic. "I have no idea what he's doing here," she whispered.

Maxwell rounded the corner. "Why are you...?" He spotted Ryan and his forward momentum ceased, his gaze snapping back and forth between them. Ryan guessed their disheveled condition encouraged Maxine's brother to assume the worst.

Of course, if he'd been half an hour later, he might have been right.

He glared at them, his disapproval clear. "I tried calling, but got no answer. I was worried when I didn't hear from you."

Beside him on the swing, Maxine tensed. "I'm not twelve anymore, Junior. I'm fine. Ryan and I went out for dinner."

"Ryan? With Claymore Security?"

There was no way around it. Ryan stood and held out his hand. "That's me. I take it you're Maxwell."

Maxwell shook his hand, his body language relaxing off high alert. "Call me Junior. You'll find everyone in our family has a nickname."

Ryan nodded politely then turned back to Maxine. She stood beside the swing, her fingers twisting together, her bottom lip tight between her teeth. Her hair jumbled around her shoulders, all the gentle curves of her body calling to him as his cock throbbed. "You want to--"

"Come on, I'll take you home," Maxwell announced.

She sighed and shook her head. "This is my home. I'm staying here, you know I've moved back in."

"It's not ready yet."

"I'm not having this conversation with you again. The house is fine and I live here. What are you doing anyway? Shouldn't you be with Natasha and the baby?"

"I had to drop off some boxes with Uncle Maxum, and when I called home, Tasha said you weren't there. So I thought I'd stop by on my way and check to see you were all right."

"I'm fine. So...good night."

The air crackled with tension. Maxine's eyes shone brightly, her skin flushed with embarrassment. While both embarrassment and arousal suited her, personally he enjoyed the arousal better.

Maxwell looked pointedly at Ryan, his gaze steady. "I'll walk you to your car."

"Junior. What are you doing?" Maxine demanded. She stepped closer to Ryan, taking him by the hand.

Ryan laughed as he heard a growl rise from her brother. There was no way on earth Junior would leave his sister alone with Ryan tonight. Protective mode was written all over the man.

Maxine tugged his fingers. "I need to..." She glared at Maxwell, who stood like a bump on a log, eyeing them both. She gave a frustrated groan before pulling Ryan around the corner, away from Maxwell's view.

Ryan caught her against him and kissed her thoroughly, his hands holding her close as

their lips and tongues tangled together. She twisted, her body rubbing desperately against his. Already aching, he separated them. Things were going no further tonight, and he'd reached the limit of his tolerance.

She rested her head against his chest and let out a huge sigh. "I'm so embarrassed. You must think I'm sixteen."

He laughed again. "You've got a brother who cares for you. That's nothing to be embarrassed about." He breathed out, low and slow, to try to force his dick to relax enough he could walk back to his car without pain.

The window behind them cranked open an inch and Maxine jerked. "I'm going to have a beer. You want one, Ryan?" Maxwell asked from within the house.

Ryan snorted. The man was unbelievable. "No thanks, I think I'll be going." He lifted Maxine's chin to gaze into her eyes. Maybe it was for the best. His body thought it sucked big time, but there would be another night. The chemistry between them wasn't going away anytime soon. "I'll call you tomorrow."

She nodded, the rosy hue of her skin muted in the porch light's dusky illumination. He dropped a kiss on her nose before walking her to the front door.

He was still chuckling when he pulled away. Maxine stood in the open doorway, while a grinning Maxwell waved from behind the living room window.

Chapter Six

Maxine peered over her brother's shoulder into the pantry area. "Are you sure you don't need any help replacing the shelves?"

He growled, and bright laughter sounded from the kitchen behind her. She turned to face her sister-in-law where she sat at the island cuddling the baby.

"Maxine, this is your brother we're talking about. Offering to help him with home repairs is taking your very life into your hands. Don't insult his manhood like that." Natasha held Samantha out to her and Max accepted the newborn greedily.

"He's not very good at taking advice, is he?" Max kissed the peach fuzz on her niece's head, cradling her tenderly.

"Your brother? Bossiest man on the planet, as far as I'm concerned." Natasha leaned back on the island and winked at Maxine as she raised her voice to make sure Junior could hear her over his fidgeting on the shelving. "Nags until he gets his way...but he's great in bed, so I'll forgive him."

"TMI, Tasha." Maxine wrinkled her nose. Okay, talking about sex in a generic manner with her sister-in-law was one thing, getting specifics--she wasn't going there.

"What's this I hear about you and a certain ex-military man? You've got a new sweetheart?"

Maxine's cheeks heated and she cast a dirty look in the direction of the pantry. "Nice to know Junior can keep a secret."

He stepped out and dumped a handful of screws onto the countertop. "Hey, I didn't think it was a secret. I mean, you were making out with the man on the porch, so you couldn't have been too worried about people finding out."

Natasha hummed for a second. "Making out on the porch, were you? That porch swing comes in handy, doesn't it?"

"Tasha..." Junior warned.

She shrugged. "I'm just saying I've got some good memories of the place, that's all." She plunked down on the closest stool and rested her chin in her hands. "So tell me about him. Tall? Dark? Handsome?"

Junior snorted and left the room, and Maxine breathed a sigh of relief. "Look, Tasha, it's bad enough he pulled Overprotective Brother From Hell on me the other day. You want me to dish about Ryan, at least wait until he's out of earshot."

"So..."

Maxine couldn't stop the smile. "Yes, yes and oh my God, yes."

Natasha laughed. "You going out with him again?"

"I think so. He left a message on my cell phone, but I haven't reached him yet. Coffee tomorrow, if the time works for him." Maxine paused. "He's incredible, although I'm not sure what the family will think. He's older than me."

"Crap, girl, don't you start that. Don't push those buttons with me. How much older? Twenty years? Thirty? Because if not, there's no problem and I don't want to hear about it, capiche?"

Maxine smiled. "So speaks the older woman, right? It's not an issue for me, really. There's something amazing about being with a man who actually knows what he wants in life."

"Which your ex had major issues with." Natasha wandered the kitchen to the fridge and started pulling out lunch supplies. "Right on. You get to date a grown-up for a change. Make sure you have lots of fun, and practice safe sex."

Maxine buried her face in the baby's neck to hide her flushed skin. Safe sex had been the farthest thing from her mind. She wanted hot, steamy and invigorating. Not safe.

Natasha continued piling food on the counter. "You're old enough, and now that you've got the house, it's not like you'll have hide out from the cousins anymore." She shivered from head to toe in an exaggerated fashion. "You know I love your brother, and you. But at times the whole mess of Turners is too much to bear. Give me a small intimate gathering of...oh...twenty of you, and I can handle it. Having to live with the mob for years--unbearable. You're a saint to have survived this long."

Sainthood felt achievable at times. Maxine nestled Samantha back into her car seat and carefully placed the whole contraption on top of the kitchen island. The baby had fallen asleep and her soft curls were damp from where she'd been snuggled against Maxine's body. "I love the family, but I hear what you're saying. There are times I think about moving away. Then I see another miracle like Samantha added to the clan, and I can't bear the thought of missing a single moment. I'll accept the bad to enjoy the good. But yes, I plan to take advantage the opportunity of having a place to myself for the first time."

Guilt rocked her again. "Are you and Junior *sure* you're okay with me living here? I love the place so much, but I'm keeping you from getting your share of the money from the sale."

Natasha put her hands on her hips and glared at Maxine. "Shut. Up. We've had this conversation a million times. We have a new house we love. You're already making monthly payments to us and Maximilian, and when you have a bit extra to spare, you can buy out the rest of the shares. We'll all be square within the next couple of years. We can wait, Mill can wait. God knows how many times we've heard him say how fabulous he's doing--with two condos here and another one there--like he needs the money. We're not hurting, and it's the only way to keep the house in the family."

Maxine held up her hands and grinned. "Okay, fine. Shutting up. Thanks, Tasha, I appreciate the support."

"Yeah, whatever." Her sister-in-law hip-checked her out of the way with a laugh and dove into the fridge again. "Hey, you got any pickles somewhere else? This one is dead." Natasha held up a nearly empty jar.

Pickles. Maxine blinked at the abrupt change of topic. "I don't think there are any in the pantry, but there's an additional storage cupboard Gramma kept food in over there." She pointed to the far wall.

Natasha chuckled as she strode over and swung the door open. "Seriously, that porch swing? Fabulous location for playing."

"I don't want to know--"

Natasha's cry of disgust interrupted her. A mess of wood shavings poured out the open door along with dozens of squirming brown mice. The rodents scattered through the room, disappearing under the bottoms of doors and scurrying under the fridge.

"Crap, we'll have to clean the whole kitchen again." Natasha grabbed a broom and started sweeping.

Maxine groaned in frustration. "What is with the silly mice? I don't remember Gramma having these problems." She hung her head out the kitchen door and hollered at Maxwell. "Hey, bro, where'd you put the extra mouse traps?"

One of the rodents scrambled over her foot and disappeared into the living room, and she shuddered. It was going to be a long afternoon.

Ryan stirred another sugar into his coffee before he realized it already contained two spoonfuls. Maxine grinned at him and sipped her steaming cup, the curls of her hair falling like autumn leaves in the wind around her shoulders.

"You saw that, did you?"

She nodded and smirked at him. "I thought you took it black."

"Usually, but you're not being fair to me."

"It's my fault you can't remember how you take your coffee? Hmm, this is going to be good. Let's hear it." She recrossed her legs, stretching them farther in front of her as she leaned back in her chair, and Ryan groaned. His cock was so fucking hard he would be lucky to be able to walk when it was time to leave the table.

The outdoor deck of the coffee shop was empty. With the cool wind blowing off the ocean, everyone else remained huddled indoors. Maxine had picked one of the corner tables and at first Ryan had enjoyed the location. Until she began to torture him. It wasn't deliberate, he was sure of it. She was too guileless for that, but as she spoke she stretched and twisted, each movement showing off the long length of her legs in her short skirt. Her breasts were clearly contoured by the stretch of the sweater caressing her curves and Ryan longed to touch her.

"Ryan?"

Damn, he'd done it again, gotten lost staring at her. "Sorry." He lifted his gaze from her chest to see her smiling at him, her cheeks bright red.

"Maybe we should--"

"When do you think--"

They spoke together and cut off simultaneously.

Maxine giggled. "You've got the most amazing expression on your face right now."

Ryan shook his head. "It's called 'going insane by stages'. Damn it, woman, you're

dangerous. We've been out a half a dozen times and you get more fascinating each time I see you."

He moved his chair around so they sat next to each other and casually draped his arm across the back of her chair. Leaning closer he breathed in deeply, brushing his lips against the smooth skin of her neck. "I hope you don't mind me admiring you. I plan to do a lot more of it."

The gingery scent surrounding her tickled his nose, and he cupped her face in one hand to turn her mouth to meet his. He traced her lips slowly. The flavor of the coffee faded as their tongues brushed together and her sweet taste overwhelmed him. She pressed into him, her head resting on his shoulder as they kissed. The waves and the cries of the gulls in the distance were a gentle backdrop to the pounding in his ears. He gave to her tenderly, enjoying her response as he hooked a hand around her waist to draw her closer. Lost in her taste and touch he was unaware of the door opening from the shop until she stiffened and pushed against his chest. The new couple barely looked in their direction before finding seats, but Maxine continued to attempt to put space between them.

"I think the installation is going well on the house." She fidgeted with her spoon and cup, inching her hips to the far edge of her chair away from him so his arm slipped off.

Hell if he was going to let her get away with that. He slid closer and she stiffened even more. Had he read all her signals wrong? He didn't think so, but he had to ask. "Maxine, are you embarrassed to be seen with me?"

She jerked upright. "Of course not! I'm just...it's just...I'm sorry. Guys don't like public displays of affection. I got a little distracted and forgot where we were."

Ryan couldn't stop his chuckle. "Where the hell did you get that idea? I was the one kissing you. I don't give damn who sees."

"Jamie didn't like--"

"He's your ex? He's a jerk." Ryan wrapped his arm around her again and this time she softened. "You need a little lesson in what I like. Come here."

She squealed as he lifted her and placed her on his lap. Her gaze darted around the deck, but the other couple remained busy chatting. "Ryan, I'm not sure--"

"You said the first time we met you trusted me. We've seen each other for a couple weeks now. Do you still trust me?"

She swallowed hard but nodded.

"No one cares if you're sitting on my lap." He stroked the back of his knuckles along the column of her throat and buried his fingers in her hair. She was absolutely gorgeous. "No one's watching to see if we're doing anything. Do you want to kiss me?"

She nodded, her eyes hidden as she stared at the ground.

"Then kiss me."

She raised her head slowly and the brilliant shine in her eyes nearly blinded him. Her kiss started tentative, then grew stronger. She wrapped an arm around his neck, like she was clinging on for dear life. His cock ached where it pressed into her hip. She had to know what she was doing to him, how much her touch turned him on. He dropped a hand on her thigh and stroked the line where her skirt stopped, the warmth of her skin radiating out, pulling him like a magnet. Tracing small circles with a fingertip, he moved slowly to the inside of her leg. She quivered in his lap and a small pleading noise escaped her lips.

"You like that?" he whispered. She tucked her chin into his neck but he could still hear her quiet response.

"Feels so good to touch you, and have you touch me. Oh my, what--"

"Shhh, it's okay. No one can see." His finger skirted the edge of her panties and he rubbed the silky fabric covering her mound with a single digit. "You're wet, Maxine."

"Oh God."

He laughed quietly. "It's a good thing. I'm glad I'm not the only one feeling the heat."

She sat upright and glanced around the deck before turning back to stare into his eyes. "I can't believe you've got your hand..." He rubbed a circle with his thumb over her clit and she whimpered, squeezing her eyes shut. Fuck, he could watch her for hours, loving the play of emotions across her face. She instinctively inched her legs apart to ease his way and he knew he'd better stop before he took them past the point of no return.

He took one final brush against her body before dragging his hand back down her thigh and leaning forward to take her lips again. He kissed her more forcefully this time, putting some of his need into the motion. Maxine relaxed further in his arms, all the tension gone from her body as she accepted his lead.

When he finally drew back she gasped for air then stared at him.

"What?"

"You made me totally forget where I was." She glanced around again and laughed softly. "I've never done anything like that in public before."

"I should have made you climax."

"Ryan!" She wiggled off his lap but moved her chair to remain close enough to touch. "You're such a joker."

Really? He cupped her chin and lifted her face toward him. "Sweetheart, when it comes to giving you pleasure, I'm not kidding." He watched her bite her bottom lip again as the thought of what he suggested registered more fully. Damn it, the need to take her home and bury himself in her warmth grew by the minute. "What are you doing tonight?" His voice was deeper than usual, his desire strong and clear.

Maxine's eyes grew wide at the intent of his words and she licked her lips before her gaze darted away from him. "I've got a family thing. The nieces and aunts are doing a girl's only spa night."

Fuck. "Tomorrow?"

She shook her head. "Gramma's got people coming over to go through photo albums. And Thursday I'm making cards with the kids." He couldn't stop his laughter from escaping. She smiled back at him. "It's like a conspiracy, isn't it?"

"Your family makes a damn fine chaperone, even when they aren't around. That's okay. We'll get out. Friday? Saturday? Pick a night and block it off for me. In the meantime, coffee tomorrow?"

She nodded. "I'd like that very much. Ryan, thanks for being so understanding." She leant over to pick up her purse from where it had fallen on the ground. The rounds of her ass cheeks pressed her skirt and his cock throbbed against the zipper of his pants.

Hell, he was going to be fucking his fist again tonight.

Chapter Seven

Ryan paced toward his brother's room. The nurses at their station waved a greeting, but he barely noticed. Even the one who'd been flirting with him on a steady basis got no more than a quick nod when he passed her in the hallway.

It was all he could do to put one foot in front of the other without thoughts of Maxine

interrupting his concentration. He had it fucking bad for her, and there seemed to be no relief in sight. Their weekend date had been canceled when her cousin Maxella's kids all broke out with chicken pox, and she got called in as back-up baby sitter. Then she had an appointment out of town on Monday, and tonight he had meetings all evening. It was enough to drive a man to drink, except he'd sworn to never use alcohol to deal with stress. There was no way he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps.

He stopped in the visitor's room and hauled out his cell phone. There was enough time to spare to pin her down for this weekend. The answering machine kicked in, and Ryan heard the mind-numbing tones of automation instead of Maxine's sultry voice. Finally--he'd been after her to change her response to a safer, more generic one.

"Five-five-five-six-one-nine-seven is not available. Please leave a message."

"Hey, Max, it's Ryan. Glad to hear the answering machine. While I'd prefer--"

"Hello?" Max cut in with a gasp. "Ryan? Is that you?"

"It's me. You screening your calls or did you run for the phone?" She sounded breathless. There was a suspiciously long pause before Maxine replied, and Ryan's curiosity grew. *What was she up to?* He'd never had a relationship like this before. There was something growing between them, something other than the pulsing desire he had to carry her into the bedroom and possess her for days without coming up for air.

"Someone's fax machine keeps going off in my ear. It's annoying, so I changed the settings like you told me. Now I can wait to see if it's a real person before picking up."

"Good for you. I've had a machine shriek in my ear before and it's a pain. Heads-up, we're done with most of your security install. It'll be completed by Saturday. How about I come over Friday night to show you the ropes? I'll sweeten the pot and bring dinner." Between his commitment to drop in on Carl, and the family emergencies keeping Maxine running in circles, they'd canceled dates too many times. He was getting desperate to see her again.

To taste her again.

"I'd like that." Maxine's soft response sent a shot of lust through him. "Wait, the system is ready this soon? I thought it would take much longer for a house this size."

It *should* have taken longer but he'd ridden herd on the team to get everything in place as quickly as possible. Maxine might protest if she knew he'd worked everyone overtime, but there was no way he wanted her in the house without the system up and running for any longer than necessary. Especially since someone had already broken in.

"Things worked out well and we're done. I'll see you...at five? I'll be there with the crew."

She agreed and he headed to Carl's room with a lighter step than before.

"Hello, Ryan."

Carl stared at the wall beside him as Ryan shrugged out of his coat. "Hey, buddy. How are you today?"

"Good. I want to show you something." Carl wheeled over to his desk and lifted a...thing...into the air.

Ryan stepped closer and tried to figure out what it was. "Interesting."

"I made it."

"Right on." Still uncertain what the object was, Ryan figured the effort was worth something.

"For you."

Ryan nodded slowly. "That's very considerate. Thanks."

Carl put it back on the desk and wheeled to his bookcase. He pulled out a familiar story

they'd read a thousand times already. Ryan struggled with the thoughts racing through his mind. It was difficult to go from wanting nothing to do with family to being the only family a person had. He had come to care for the youth. Hell, he certainly felt responsible for him, but he didn't quite know how to do this sibling thing yet.

And now with Maxine... Ryan was drawn to her, in spite of her relatives controlling so much of her life. She was attempting to spread her wings, and he'd love to be the one to help her explore the world outside Turner Territory, as she called it.

But he refused to allow his growing connection with Carl to suffer. The tightness in his shoulders increased. He couldn't bring Maxine to see Carl without worrying about the repercussions if things didn't end up long term with her. Somehow he suspected if he mentioned Carl she'd want to meet him and that was impossible right now. Even talking about Carl seemed totally unfair to Maxine, who needed another responsibility like she needed a hole in the head.

As much as he wished he could mesh the two areas of his life where his heart and mind were focused, he couldn't see any way to make a balance that wouldn't hurt someone in the end. Between wanting to do what was right by Carl and wanting Max--*fuck it*.

He accepted the book Carl offered and sat back to finish his visit. He'd try to come up with a solution another day, right now it was Franklin time again.

Ryan was on his way out the door when one of Carl's regular caregivers caught him. "I need to speak to you."

They sat in the small reception room at the front of the home, cheerful pictures and bright pillows contrasting with the gloomy expression on Shannon's face. She hemmed and hawed a few times then sighed. "I'm sorry to tell you I've given my notice. I'll be leaving in two weeks."

The pit in Ryan's stomach yawned deeper. "I thought you were on a four-year contract."

She shrugged. "I've had to break it. I realize this is going to be troublesome, but I have no choice. We'll do the best we can in the next two weeks to prepare Carl for my departure in the hopes he will be able to handle the change better this time."

Ryan eased open his fists, fighting the tension that had wrapped around him instantaneously at her words. "I made special arrangements that all caregivers for Carl were to be long term and committed. Do you understand what your leaving is going to do to him?"

Shannon frowned. "Mr. Claymore, I understand the issues Carl faces better than you, but I also have personal commitments. I regret the trouble my departure will cause, but this is the best I can do. Over the next weeks Marie will do a co-shift with me to allow Carl to get used to her presence--"

"So that when Marie decides to up and leave she can tear my brother in two as well."

The nurse stood. "I'm sorry. There's nothing further that I can say that will make this any easier. I've become attached to Carl, as I have to all my patients, and I never intended to hurt him." She stepped quickly out of the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

Ryan saw the tears in her eyes before she left, but hell if he was able to reassure her. Having to watch his brother go through the pain of another caregiver not showing up limited his sympathies. He dropped his head back on the headrest and closed his eyes in frustration.

Maxine raced in and snatched up the phone, dropping the grocery bag in her hand to the

floor to juggle the receiver. "Hello?"

"Fucking bitch."

She froze. "Who is this?"

Rough laughter followed and the line crackled like there was interference or a weak connection. "You live alone." The whispered words scratched in her ears and she fought to remember if she'd ever heard the voice before.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

The dial tone rang in her ear and Maxine shuddered. She phoned the police and waited anxiously until a marked car pulled into her driveway. An hour later when they left she was still shaking and now spitting mad. She was in the middle of calling Natasha when she realized the last thing she needed was family getting involved. They were already upset enough that she chose to live in the house by herself. There would be no chance she'd be able to fight off their objections if they found out she had a crackpot calling her. And while Natasha wouldn't tell the family, she'd tell Junior, and that would be as bad as the whole clan knowing.

Maxine paced, putting away her groceries and swearing into the air, wishing there were some way to make sense of it. The police offered nothing more than a promise to do the occasional drive-by and to get her phone records checked. They figured it was likely a prank call. Their suggestion--go on with your life, but keep your eyes open.

Another mouse scrambled across the floor and Max threw a can of soup at it in frustration. She'd been emptying traps for the past week and there seemed to be no end to the mouse hoard.

After putting away her final purchases, Maxine collapsed into her favorite couch in the living room with a cup of tea and tried to relax. All the strange occurrences jumbled together in her brain. The water damage, the phone calls--first the fax machines and now some prankster. Junior had told her he thought whoever put up Grandma's shelf should be shot, since they'd used smaller screw sizes than building code called for. Even the mouse invasion seemed wrong.

The rest of the house repairs were complete, but there was a sense of unease hanging over her like she'd never felt before. Like something watching her. Waiting.

She snorted into her teacup at her overactive imagination. There was no reason to feel like this. The security system was going in. The police were alerted so if she did have any disturbances she'd be on the quick response list. She lived in Thompson, not New York, for heaven's sake. This was small-town America, where people looked out for each other.

Still.

She made a face at herself as she wandered down to the basement, looking for where the game equipment was stored. She'd just pulled a baseball bat from the pile when the scent of something rotting hit her. Following the aroma, she ended up at a stack of boxes near the furnace. It took a few minutes to check through them all, but when she opened the right one her eyes watered and her stomach turned over in protest. Whatever had been in the box was in the advanced stages of decomposition, and the stench made her gag. Maxine quickly tossed it into a plastic bag and sealed it tight.

It took another hour to get the putrid stuff to the garbage, and the remaining boxes back in order. She picked up her bat and headed up to her bedroom. She propped the solid wood club in the corner of the room, feeling a little silly. Then she crawled into a tub full of bubbles to try and rid herself of the sensation of the filth that clung to her. Thank God she'd found the box before the furnace had turned on and sent the smell throughout the whole house.

Time to make some plans. The weekend approached and she swore she'd get to see Ryan.

No one in her family was going to mess it up this time. Chatting on the phone with him daily was nice, but getting to see him in person? She relaxed into the warm water and sighed. A dose of Ryan was totally what she needed right now to chase away the rest of the gloom and doom hanging over her.

Chapter Eight

"Boss, all the final checks are done on the second-level windows. Did you want me to link the last relays or do you still plan on completing the hookup?"

Ryan watched through the living room window as Maxine pulled into her driveway. He gave a distracted wave to his foreman. "I'll finish up, Keith. Thanks, and thank the boys for putting in the extra energy. I appreciate it."

Keith grinned at him. "I bet you do." He flicked his head in Max's direction. "She's a nice-looking girl, boss. She got a sister?"

Ryan slapped the man on the shoulder and pushed him toward the door. "Cousins only, and even the oldest is too young for you. Besides, I think she's called Maxilla or some awful thing."

Keith snickered. "She could be called Godzilla for all I care if she's got legs like her cousin." He pulled open the door to admit a smiling Maxine. "Ma'am. Have a great evening." He slipped out, shooting a thumbs-up at Ryan behind Max's back.

Ryan shook his head. Damn crew. Usually he had no troubles with the ribald comments from his blunt-spoken employees, but today he could have done without the smart-ass remarks. The discussion as the guys worked the wiring on the master-bedroom windows--suggesting the bedroom calisthenics possible on the football-field-sized bed--had driven him crazy.

Probably because he had the same fucking thoughts running through his mind.

"Hi, Ryan. Long time no see."

She lit up the room and he couldn't resist. It had been too damn long since they'd touched, and hearing her sultry voice day after day made his desire for her rocket. He dipped his head to kiss her, soft and gentle, on the cheek before brushing his lips over hers. She leaned into him, her sweet lips clinging to his as she wrapped her hands around his torso to mold them together. He licked her lower lip, sucking it into his mouth, brushing his tongue over her teeth. She made a tantalizing little noise deep in her throat that shot a thrill through him. He cupped her neck in one hand, tugging her hips closer with the other as he continued to consume her mouth, slowly and yet completely. One thumb touched warm, satiny skin where her blouse separated from the top of her slacks, and he rubbed back and forth, teasing her.

Tormenting him.

She was submissive under his touch, curving her body against him. She lifted her head to ease his tongue's path, allow his lips to glide down her throat as they shared the heat growing between them. A distant buzzing broke through his desire-clouded mind.

Fuck, the oven timer.

Ryan kissed her once more before retreating, pulling away from her taste and her touch and the thundering need ripping through him. He smiled down at her. "Welcome home."

She flicked her gaze to the floor before tilting her chin up in a determined fashion. "Thanks. I'm glad you're here."

They stared at each other for a moment and Ryan's heart thumped hard. *Concentrate.* Finish the system first, then dinner, and then see where this goes. Oh Lord, he hoped she was

finally ready, and that there were no Turner emergencies to interrupt them.

Max licked her lips. "I need to change out of my work clothes."

Ryan held himself back. Fuck, did she know her husky voice sounded like an invitation to join her? He took a deep breath--after waiting this long he was not going to ravish her before he fed her. After? All bets were off. "I need to finish hooking up a few things on the system and I promised I'd provide dinner. The cannelloni is nearly ready. You go ahead, I'll pour you a glass of wine."

Her eyes glinted as she backed away, teasing him with her smile. "I love Italian food."

Ryan waved a hand at her. "You love all kinds of food. That's why we get along so well."

She made her way up the stairs and he stared after her, admiring the sway of her hips, his body tightening with need. She turned at the top and winked at him. "I knew you'd still be watching me."

Ryan held up his hands in defeat. "What can I say? You've got a great...staircase."

Maxine laughed. One of the many clocks in the house sounded the top of the hour and her laugh died away. She grasped the banister so tightly her knuckles changed color.

"Maxine, what's the matter?" He was on the stairs, racing up them two at a time to reach her, pulling her back into his arms.

She shook her head and opened her mouth to answer when the phone rang and her face went white. She stared at him like a deer in headlights.

"Is it the damn fax machine again?" he asked, pointing to the phone on a writing desk adjacent to the window. "I'll get them to stop."

She mumbled something so quietly he barely made out the words, but it sounded like an apology. She buried her face against him.

The answering machine kicked in.

"...one-nine-seven is not available. Please leave a message."

Following the beep, a stream of foul curses carried over the line, calling Maxine by name and threatening her with horrible, crude words. Ryan grabbed the phone. "Who the hell do you think you are, asshole?"

The line went dead.

Ryan swung on Max. "What the fuck was that all about?"

Her complexion was paler than before, her eyes huge in her face and Ryan swore under his breath at his stupidity. She was scared to death. The last thing she needed was him going apeshit on her.

"Damn it, this has happened before, hasn't it?" He forced himself to speak calmly, quietly.

When she nodded he wrapped his arms around her and held her close until the blood pounding through him slowed enough he could hear normally again. He tugged her down the hall toward her bedroom. While he wasn't sure what else was happening, he knew this.

He protected his own.

It took mere seconds to find a bag in her closet shelf and toss it on the bed. She looked at him, a silent question in her eyes. "Pack enough things for a couple days. You're coming home with me," Ryan said firmly.

"But--"

He held up a hand, restraining his temper with an iron grip. "Max. Trust me, you don't want to argue with me right now. Pack the damn bag and meet me downstairs in five minutes or I'll carry you out of here with nothing but the clothes on your back."

Ryan caressed her cheek to reassure her--hell, to reassure himself--then turned and made his way to the kitchen, pulling out his cell phone to place a few vital calls.

Whatever the fuck was happening, it stopped now.

The silent ride to Ryan's house tortured her already jangled nerves. The dark expression on his face worried her more than if he'd been loud and angry. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back on the rest. She'd never seen a man switch so quickly and completely from lust-filled to furious, and it scared her a little, even though she knew the anger wasn't directed at her.

Yet she had to be honest--as horrible as she felt right now, the fear that had increased each time she received another call faded mercifully with the knowledge her secret was out. She'd managed to keep the prank calls from her whole family. For some reason, she had wanted to tell Ryan, *wanted* to confide in him, but she'd thought it was too small of an issue to bother him with. It was only a few prank calls. The police had assured her there was nothing anyone could do to deal with the situation other than screening calls. According to them she wasn't unsafe, just being annoyed. She didn't think she should mention the calls to Ryan.

Obviously she'd thought wrong.

Max sat quietly until the door beside her opened. Ryan hoisted her bag over his shoulder before holding out a hand. Wordlessly, he led her to the entrance of a tall apartment house. By the time they were in the elevator, tears had begun to form.

He punched the button for his floor with more than adequate force before pinning her to the back of the lift with his body and taking her lips in an assault that left her breathless and needy. She closed her eyes and tangled her fingers in his hair, accepting his silent chastisement for not sharing with him, answering with powerful desires of her own. The bell rang, the elevator doors slid open and Ryan pulled her out, his lips hovering over hers. He walked only far enough to press her back against the hallway wall before dropping his mouth on hers again, binding her wrists together in his clasp. Max kissed him fiercely, needing his touch to chase away the rest of her anxiety.

Ryan dropped his head on her shoulder and slowed his breathing. His hand rose to cup her cheek. Max remained still, welcoming the warmth of his body against hers, the gentle caring in his touch.

"Don't keep secrets that hurt," Ryan said quietly. "I'm here for you. Not just for coffee and laughing and Italian food. You should have told me. Understand?"

Max nodded, meeting his gaze as he lifted his head. He brushed away a tear lingering in the corner of her eye. "Good."

He hurried her into his apartment. Max glanced around curiously until he blocked her view, caging her against the hall closet. "Ryan, are you planning on hanging me up for the night? Or gluing me to the wall?" she teased, trying to lighten the mood.

He tugged at her light jacket. "I'll tell you what I am planning, so there's no further confusion. First, I'm sending you to my room to unpack while I reheat the dinner I made at your house. After we eat, I'm taking you to bed and making love to you until you forget everything else and sleep like a baby. And I'm planning on waking you in the night to make love again." As he spoke he removed her outer layer and slipped open the top buttons of her blouse. Her heart pounded as the back of his knuckles brushed her skin.

She stared at him, blood rushing through her as she considered his words. Considered the proprietary expression in his eyes and on his face. The day had turned out to be an emotional

roller coaster. She'd longed to see him since his call, longed for his kiss and his embrace. The past days she'd thought hard about what getting involved with him would mean. He was more than she'd imagined and everything she wanted. It wasn't because being with him wiped away the fear right now. She wanted him in spite of the fear clinging to her soul.

It was past time for this to happen.

"What if I told you I'm not hungry for dinner?" she whispered.

Fire rolled through his eyes and ignited something deep within her. "Good." He swept her into his arms and carried her through the apartment. His gaze stayed steady on her and she brushed a hand over his cheek, nodding her approval. The walls passed in a blur of beige and brown until she was lowered carefully onto a cool cotton quilt, Ryan joining her on his bed.

Around her was dark wooden furniture, the deep mahogany colors of the bedding and the curtains creating a neat and tidy haven. His military background was apparent in the room, softened only by a few personal touches on the dresser and walls. Then she couldn't see anything as he possessed her lips once again.

Ryan took the lead and demanded a response, nibbling and licking, biting and soothing away the snap of pain that followed. His hands cradled her head, angling to new directions as the whim took him, his tongue in possession of hers, stroking, teasing.

Lighting her on fire.

Breathless, she pushed him away, sucking in oxygen in the hopes the spinning would settle and let her see more than stars swirling around them. He lowered his mouth to her neck, his fingers completing the journey down her blouse, unbuttoning, and pulling away the fabric until her body lay exposed to his assault. Leaning back, he let his gaze fall on her torso. A groan of desire escaped him as he cupped one of her lace-covered breasts in his hand.

"I want you so badly. I want to taste your skin, suckle your breasts, kiss my way down the length of your body until I'm buried between your thighs. You drive me insane." Ryan grabbed her hand and tugged it to his groin, pressing her fingers against the swell of his cock behind his jeans. "You drive me insane with need for you."

Max closed her eyes and felt. Felt his lips return to nuzzle her neck before he bit her softly then laved away the pain. Felt his kisses flow down the curve of her bra until he suckled her nipple right through the fabric and she gasped at the lightning that shot from his mouth to her core. Felt his response as he thickened and grew more rigid under her fingertips. She stroked him shyly and he thrust into her fingers, a deep moan escaping him. It was all she'd dreamed of, and yet not enough. Her heart beat wildly as she took in all the sensations.

He shifted her on the bed and stripped off her bra in the same motion. She opened her eyes to see his gaze burning down on her as he dropped slowly to lap at one needy breast and then the other. His fingers pinched lightly, raising the peaks to tight nubs that throbbed with anticipation for the warmth of his mouth to return. He sucked harder and she bit her lip to stop from crying out, grasping his head in her hands to keep him in place.

He trailed his fingers like the brush of butterfly wings over the sensitive skin of her belly, slipping under the waistband of her slacks, under her panties. She sucked in a breath as he cupped his hand over her mound. Liquid trickled from her and she squeezed her legs together, the throbbing pulse too much to bear. An edge of uncertainty arose. He was touching her, intimately. Her ex had never done that, not without her being scrubbed and clean. She wiggled, wondering if the awakening excitement she experienced would fade when he demanded she go shower.

He rose up on one elbow to stare at her and she watched his eyes darken. His hand shifted

slightly and slowly one finger pressed into her core. Her chest grew tight and it was hard to breath, so much tension and need were wrapped up in the connection between them and still he pressed farther in.

"Oh, Ryan." She gasped as he flicked his thumb against her clit. Her passage tightened around his single digit and he swore.

"You're so wet." He stroked small circles around the hypersensitive skin at the apex of her mound and she quivered. "You're so hot. And tight." He pulled out slowly and pressed in again. His pupils were dark pools, mesmerizing, taunting her to take the next step. She let her legs fall open, unable to stop from pressing her hips upward against his hand. She waited impatiently for his next touch, his next glance to light her further on fire. Maxine was torn between the sheer pleasure racing over her body and the unspeakable embarrassment she felt.

Smooth, even strokes followed as he continued to watch her. He opened her pants with his other hand, freeing more room for him to maneuver.

She couldn't stand it any longer. "Please." She wiggled away, her breathing erratic, small puffs of air all she seemed to be able to take. Confusion spread over his face as she crossed her arms to hide her breasts.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm...I..." Steam could be rising from her skin from the extreme heat rippling through her. She couldn't look him in the eye. "I need to have a shower. I'm not..." That's as far as she could get before her tongue struck to the roof of her mouth and froze there.

"You're kidding, right? I can't stop touching you, tasting you." He dipped his head and tongued his way along her collarbone. "You don't need a shower. You need to lose the rest of your clothes."

Maxine panted at his words. He wasn't going to make her wash? She considered for a moment before twisting her body away. She wanted his touch, wanted everything with him, but... "Please can I have a shower first?" she whispered.

He laughed softly. "You think I'm concerned about--"

"I can't. I thought I could, but I've never made love without..." She blushed harder. It was too embarrassing to think about, let alone talk about. The idea of Ryan touching her without cleaning up first made her squirm.

"Damn it, there is nothing unattractive about you. Not the way you look, not the way you move, nor the way you taste. Anywhere." He brushed a hand over her mound and she wiggled in an attempt to stop him from touching her. A growl rose from him as he cupped her more firmly. He stared at her for the longest time before nodding curtly. "We'll hit the shower tonight, but this is something else you need to trust me on. I want you, and we're not always going to be squeaky clean, fresh from a shower. Sometimes we're going to get dirty and rough and raw. You need to be ready for it. You need to be ready for me."

He stared intently until she nodded. Then he helped her off the bed and led her into the bathroom.

Chapter Nine

Ryan peeled off his T-shirt and turned on the taps. He pivoted to help Maxine and found she had already stripped off her slacks and was in the middle of wiggling out of her excuse for a pair of undies. A goddess, naked in his bathroom. She hesitated for a moment before approaching and tugging at the button of his jeans. He fought the urge to take her right then and

there, and instead enjoyed the sight. Enjoyed how her flush of embarrassment blended with the rising color of arousal. She slipped his button and zipper open, releasing his cock from the tight confines of his jeans. Commando, he spilled into her eager fingers, his erection growing stronger with the soft tease of her exploration.

He'd had women who were wild cats in the bedroom and ones who were shy, but he'd never had one like Maxine who was such a balanced combination of the two. It was as if she didn't understand how enticing she was, how erotic her movements were. The way she flicked glances over his body as he reacted to her touch made him hot. The way she nibbled on her lower lip had him thinking up all kinds of things to do the tender curve, and where specifically he'd like to have her place her pouting mouth.

Except he was going to have to go much slower than the fire raging through his veins demanded. He kicked off his jeans then brought her into the shower stall with him, rotating her under the spray, admiring the way the water droplets clung to her full curves. From the sounds of it, her ex had a fucking issue or two, and he'd managed to teach Maxine to dread what should be enjoyable experiences, in and out of the bedroom. Tonight Ryan would practice the fine art of seduction. He was thankful her natural passions seemed to still be intact.

Her curiosity as well. He sucked in a breath and controlled the urge to thrust into her hands as she returned to her exploration of his cock, touching him as thoroughly as if she was using Braille. He dropped a hand over hers and wrapped her fingers around him. He helped her to stroke his shaft the way he liked it, increasing the pressure and the tempo.

"Doesn't that hurt?" She watched him anxiously, one breast pressed into him as they shared the spray of the showerhead. Her gaze never moved from their joined hands. He hummed inside from the feel of her fingers on him and had to work hard to speak.

"Feels great. Wonderful. Fucking amazing."

"It looks..."

Ryan slowed their strokes, fighting the urge to come. He wanted to be inside her more than he could bear. "Looks what?"

Maxine laughed. "It looks painful."

He grabbed the soap and washed her torso, enjoying the smooth swells of her body under his hands. "Haven't you watched a guy jerk off before? Or helped?"

She fell silent. "You want to know my full sexual history before we go any further?"

Ah fuck. "Sweetheart, you are all I want, not the guys you've been with before. I'm just curious because there is no way I'd resist if you wanted to touch me." He let his hands slip lower on her body, bringing the soap briefly between her thighs. "There's no way I can resist touching you."

"Oh my."

He slipped a finger between her curls and flicked her clit.

"Oh, do that again."

He laughed and pressed her back to the wall, nudging her knees apart before grasping her chin. "Watch my fingers. Don't turn away," he ordered. Slowly she lowered her gaze and once he was sure she was watching, he separated her russet curls with one hand. Taking his other hand, he skimmed his fingers around her labia, circling the nub of her clit at the apex each time. He dropped to his knees to gain a better view as the sweet heat of her body drew him like a magnet, and he pressed a finger into her core.

Fascination and hunger were both visible when he glanced at her face. He slid his finger in and out. Her passage clung to him and his head spun as he thought about burying himself in

her tightness. His thumb on her clit, he increased the depth of his possession. When she rewarded him with a full-body shiver, Ryan slowed enough to add another finger.

"Oh damn, that feels good." Maxine opened her legs wider, inviting him in, giving him better access to her succulent core.

"It's going to feel even better." He thrust his fingers in and covered her clit with his mouth.

"Ryan!"

He held her in place, licking and sucking in spite of her protests until she stopped trying to squirm away and instead relaxed again. The sweet scent of her cream filled his nostrils as he settled between her thighs to tease the hard nub of her clit. Slow circles around the sensitive point with his tongue countered with smooth strokes of his fingers had Maxine quivering in moments.

He set an even pace, enjoying the small noises escaping her lips. The groans and throaty cries urged him on and he increased the speed of his tongue. Liquid trickled from her, and he lapped it eagerly, enthralled by her taste, her reaction to his touch. Her sheath tightened around his fingers, clasping him in a way that had his heart pounding as he imagined her squeezing the daylights out of his cock.

Maxine dropped a hand on his head, her fingers shaking as they tangled in his hair. The water poured around them, steam filling the shower enclosure. A stream of water trailed past his lips as he increased the pressure on the sensitive skin of her clit until she cried out in delight. She rocked on her feet, holding on to him for support as she shook with her climax. Rewarding her with more stimulation Ryan refused to leave her, instead removing his fingers from her pussy and replacing them with his tongue. He delved deep into her passage, flicking and licking, his nose buried in the curls of her mons. Her body responded, flowering open more, releasing the scent of desire around them.

"So good. That feels so good." The whispered words floated down to his ears like praise from heaven and he smiled as he continued to worship her. She didn't protest his touch anymore. In fact, her hips rocked toward him when he sat back to see if she still watched. Her pale green eyes were slightly out of focus, passion-glazed. Her face flushed with color and she breathed in ragged gasps. He leaned closer and deliberately licked the entire length of her slit. Maxine's gaze wavered for a second before she managed to smile down at him.

He licked her clit softly, then planted a kiss on the tender junction between her leg and torso. Ryan stood, cupping her ass cheeks in his hands as he pulled her close. That had been a good start on satisfying her body's desires, yet left her in anticipation for the next round. She was responsive and sensual, and he wanted inside her badly. Their skin-on-skin caress lifted his need for her another notch, and he'd already been on overdrive before they'd begun.

She dropped her head on his shoulder. "That was amazing." She leaned closer, causing her breasts to brush his chest. She stiffened slightly as if embarrassed and Ryan eased away. The vixen was feeling shy again.

He laughed quietly to relax her. "Don't thank me yet, we're nowhere near done. I'm getting out. There's robe on the back of the door. I'll wait for you in the bedroom when you're ready."

Something told him she needed a little space before taking the next step, and that's what she'd get. A little space, like five minutes maximum, before he exploded. He kissed her nose and left her in the shower.

Maxine stood alone in the shower and tried to let the heat of the water wash away her fears. Ryan had already touched her more intimately than Jamie ever had before she'd bathed and scrubbed. Her skin tingled with desire for more, more of his mouth on her skin. Everywhere. Ryan could teach her a few things in the bedroom, and she knew she needed the lessons. Sex was supposed to be a pleasurable first choice, not a second-class alternative to climaxing by her own hand.

She wrapped herself in a giant towel and stared at her reflection in the foggy mirror. He'd had no issue with touching her. Oh Lord, she'd loved his touch, loved touching him. Maybe it was time for a few other changes in the bedroom. Time to move forward and thoroughly enjoy her sexuality. She brushed the final moisture from her skin and paused in the process of reaching for the robe. Her modesty was unnecessary--he'd already seen her nude. She could walk right in and crawl into bed with him. The thought made her dizzy for a second and she beat down the urge to hide.

She squared her shoulders. Ryan was gorgeous, generous and he'd made it clear he wanted her. Why couldn't she just accept that and enjoy the experience? Taking a big breath to steady her nerves, she opened the door, ready to slide under the covers and hide in his arms.

There were no covers left on the bed. The quilt and top sheet were removed, leaving only the smooth cotton of the mattress cover. Even the pillows were gone.

"Ryan?" She wandered in a little farther, covering her breasts with her hands. Suddenly the melodious tones of soft rock filled the room and she glanced around in confusion for the speakers. A couple of candles sat on the dresser and she lit them before sitting on the bed to wait. She crossed and uncrossed her legs and arms, wishing for something to hide herself. The bedroom door opened and she slid back toward the wall, tense until Ryan stepped though carrying an odd assortment of items with him. He glanced up and froze, the pupils of his eyes dilating until there was almost nothing left but the black centers.

"Oh God, you're beautiful."

She felt the blush race over her face and down her torso. She couldn't think of what to do with her hands. Her feet. She hugged her legs and forced herself to stop biting her lower lip.

"Thank you. What's that?"

He sat next to her on the bed and dropped a kiss on her hot cheek. "You weren't in the shower as long as I thought you'd be. Give me a minute."

He lowered his burden and organized the objects. A small electric heater he placed on a table beside the bed, arranging it until a waft of warm air floated over her still damp skin. The bottle of wine he popped open and poured out two glasses, offering her one. She sipped at the dark red liquid, amazed at his total lack of modesty as he wandered the room, his erection bobbing as he moved. He returned to the bed and caught her staring at him. She dropped her gaze to the floor, her face flushed hot with embarrassment.

Ryan laughed. "You've seen my cock before. You've touched me. You can look if you like." He lifted her chin. "I like it when you watch me."

Max took another sip of her wine, scrambling for words. He made her melt with the expression in his eyes, the glide of his hand on her shoulder. "I like looking at you too, Ryan, but... aren't you going to close the curtains?"

He shook his head, his gaze following his fingers as they trailed along the swell of her breast. "No need. We're high enough no one can see in." He dropped a kiss on her nape and she shuddered.

"But it'll be darker if you close them." The words popped out before she could stop them.

Ryan leaned away from her, one brow expressively high. "You want to make love in the dark?" He shook his head and took her glass from her. "Oh no, I'm not missing a single minute of watching you. Of watching your skin flush with desire, your breasts tighten with need. Touch and taste and sight are all wrapped together, and I want the whole meal, not just parts."

He pushed her gently to her stomach. "There's another sense involved with lovemaking as well. Smell." Max lifted her head to see him take a small bottle from the bedside table. He smiled at her. "Relax. I'm going to give you a massage."

Lowering her head to her arms she waited, nervous to think he was staring at her butt. Part of her couldn't believe she was lying there, naked on his bed. Part of her couldn't understand why they weren't to the full-body-contact point yet.

"Ryan, aren't we going to have sex?"

His fingers slicked over her back and shoulders, the warmed air from the heater carrying the scent of almonds to her nostrils. "We are having sex."

"Never had sex like this..." she mumbled, and he laughed out loud.

"Good. While I love a good hard fuck as much as the next guy, I thought our first time together should be special. What do you think? Are you okay so far?"

He dug his thumbs into the tight muscles of her neck and she groaned loudly without thinking. "Sorry. Too noisy, but that felt really good. It's more than okay. It's just this isn't like the sex I've had before."

Ryan continued to massage her, silent for a moment, and she wondered if she'd said too much. Guys didn't like to be compared as lovers, did they?

When he finally spoke the steely tones were there under his gentleness, the firm decisive man who she found extremely attractive rising to the forefront. "Maxine, we're going to make love, as in physically coming together, very soon." He ran a hand over her butt, his fingertips slipping lightly between the cheeks and she sucked in a quick breath. "But it's *all* making love. The kisses, the touches. All our senses involved at the same time, including hearing. I love hearing you groan. Hearing you cry out as you climaxed in the shower added to my enjoyment."

His hands slid down her legs, separating them slightly on every stroke until he nudged the warm wetness of her pussy. He leaned over her, his hard cock pressing against her leg, and when he kissed the lower swell of her back just above her butt she gave a small cry of surprise. The need to have him inside grew heavy in her core, liquid trickling from her opening. She wiggled her hips and he ran his tongue down one cheek, holding her in place. He slipped his fingers between her legs and found her clit, rubbing in smooth slow circles until she thought she would explode.

When he rolled her she went with no protest. He didn't immediately move to enter her and she complained bitterly, only to find his tongue ready to silence her. His body pinned her to the bed, his full length weighing her down and heating her up. They kissed, slowly and thoroughly, and she tried to concentrate on all the different sensations pouring over her. His taste, the smooth slick of his tongue against her teeth, the glide of his hand between their bodies as he cupped a breast, rubbing his thumb back and forth until the peak ached with need. The smell of almonds grew stronger, as well as the scent of passion, their bodies and their breath warming the air. Ryan rocked his hips, dragging his turgid cock against her body, groaning with need.

"Are you ready for me?" he asked and she opened her legs eagerly, spreading her knees wide to encourage him to fill her aching core. She'd never been this ready to be taken.

When he drew away she cried in protest. "Don't stop."

"Condom," he grumbled.

She yanked him back against her. "Just do it. Oh please, I need you."

He shook his head, swore softly and grabbed a condom from his bedside table. He was covered and hovering above her in a second. "I swear you'd try the patience of a saint."

Maxine clutched his shoulders, desperate to have him back skin to skin, stoking her fires higher. He stared into her eyes, adjusted his hips and nudged her body with his erection. She reached down to help guide him, all the while watching in fascination. As he slowly possessed her, the myriad of changing expressions on his face tore her apart. The careful consideration, the tightly leashed passion. He rocked into her a bit at a time, the hard head of his cock fighting to open her passage. It had been a while since she'd had sex, and she'd never been with anyone of his girth. Every motion let him slip a little farther into her sheath, every press ricocheted small bolts of lightning through her, making her gasp in need. She'd never felt so full in her life, so completely consumed by a lover as his gaze continued to mesmerize.

Finally he was all the way in, seated deep, complete satisfaction all over his face.

"Fuck, you feel even better than I imagined," Ryan confessed, pressing a kiss to her collarbone. He gave a few slow pumps with his hips, groaning with pleasure. She closed her eyes and tried to remain as still as possible, tried not to shift and lose the amazing sensation of his cock brushing against her sensitive flesh. Suddenly he resealed himself and froze in place, his body suspended over hers.

Max opened her eyes to see him watching her closely. "What are you waiting for?" She squirmed under him and received a small roll from side to side. Even that little bit of encouragement sent shockwaves through her. "Oh, that's nice."

"Nice? Sweetheart, you know the way to burn a man's ego. Sex isn't supposed to be nice. It's supposed to be earth shattering. I need to work harder." Ryan lowered his torso onto hers again to whisper in her ear. "But first I'll tell you a secret. If you want great sex, you need to participate. Use your hands and touch me. Lift your legs and wrap them around my hips. Use your nails, hell, use your teeth if you feel like it."

He turned his head quickly, catching her neck in his teeth and nipping at the tendon there. The thrill of it made the pressure inside her build higher and she called out in approval. She locked her fingers in his hair and dragged his lips back to hers and he rewarded her with long smooth strokes of his cock in and out of her passage.

"That's it, you take what you need and I'll give to you and we'll both be very happy."

Maxine relaxed under him. Letting go of her inhibitions took deliberate thought, but she tried to follow his lead. She allowed her hands to wander his body where they wished--caressing, stroking. When she brushed one of his nipples and it tightened under her fingers, she was fascinated, but sidetracked by her next discovery. Every time she touched him or made a noise or wiggled her hips, Ryan gave more back. It was like a treasure hunt and she'd figured out the secret key to unlock the hidden gold.

Passion. Delight. He slipped a hand between them and brushed her clit again and her orgasm started deep, his cock stroking her just right to encourage the waves to go on and on, rocking her body as she called out his name. The shudders of desire spread, her breath coming in short gasps, her mind spinning. Above her, he cheered her on with words of encouragement. Praise and kisses rained down on her lips and neck.

Ryan dropped his head on her shoulder and increased his tempo, thrusting hard enough the bed rocked, her body compressed against the mattress on each stroke. She remembered his earlier words and lifted her legs up, pulling her knees to the sides, digging her heels into his butt.

His cock pressed farther in and she gasped, the rigid thickness seeming to grow and fill her even more. As he continued to take control, her desire built again, his body rubbing her clit and the relentless motion of his firm thrusts taking her back up toward another climax.

The air around them grew hotter and moister as sweat broke out on their bodies. She threw her head back and welcomed him in, dragging her fingers down his back, feeling the flex of the muscles under her palms. She'd never been so cared for and so consumed at the same time. Each time he shifted position, adjusted her slightly, it changed the sensations hurtling her back to the edge of the chasm. Her nerves were on overdrive, her skin suddenly too sensitive to be touched for much longer and still he held her body in thrall to his touch.

Ryan grasped one of her legs, propping his arm under her knee and opening her even farther. The crown of his cock drove so deep she swore it ripped her in two as explosions set off once more. Her pussy clutched him, and he slowed slightly before locking their hips together. His cock jolted within her, heat scalding even through the barrier. They stayed frozen like some erotic statue until Maxine laughed out loud and pulled him on top of her. He collapsed gratefully, molding her to the bed with his weight for a moment before rolling them both to finish with her resting, panting for breath, on his torso. Still intimately connected, she closed her eyes and listened to the rapid beat of his pulse under her ear.

"That was sex," she said quietly.

He laughed and wrapped his arms around her. "Well, it's one way to do it. Give me a little while to recover and we'll try again."

"Hmm." Maxine could barely keep her eyes open. Peace rolled over her. Every muscle in her body was relaxed and happy. Naked, and cradled in his arms, all she needed was a rest. Tomorrow would be soon enough for discussions.

Ryan twisted them to the side, leaving her for only a moment before returning to spoon together, his hand taking possession of one of her breasts in an intimate cuddle. The warmth of the heater on their bare skin was enough to feel like a quilt. Maxine closed her eyes and the world faded away.

Chapter Ten

The scent of bacon, eggs and coffee pulled him toward the kitchen. He paused in the doorway to watch Maxine bustle around. Something tightened deep in his belly as he noticed how wonderful she looked in his robe, how natural it was to see her in his home. It surprised him to be making those kinds of observations. If this was supposed to be about friendship and sex, nothing more, he'd already stepped over the line.

Sexually, she was even more inexperienced than he'd expected, but he could deal with that issue. *Had* dealt with it twice already, and since the teaching experience seemed pleasurable for both of them, it was certainly no hardship.

She raised her head in the middle of pouring two coffees and smiled at him. "I was going to bring you breakfast in bed," she said, her voice low and sultry.

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her thoroughly. When he finally drew away he was sure his foolish grin matched her own. "I was hoping for something else in bed but you were gone when I woke up."

She laughed. "You couldn't possibly want to fool around anymore."

He finished preparing their coffees. "Max, you'll find the words 'couldn't possibly' and anything involving wanting you just don't go together. But you're right, we need to eat and then

we need to talk."

They moved to the table in companionable silence. Maxine pulled a hotplate filled with scrambled eggs and bacon slices from the oven. They ate hungrily, suddenly ravenous. Ryan watched her openly, her enthusiasm for the food pleasing him. The way she licked her fork drove him nuts, but it was wonderful to see a woman who didn't hide her appetite. It boded well if he could continue to convince her to release that passion in the bedroom.

When the mountain of food trickled down to a small molehill, Maxine laughed. "I love breakfast, but that was ridiculous."

"We never did eat dinner last night." Ryan pointed out.

"Whose fault is that? I mentioned it a few times but you seemed to have other things on your mind."

He grinned at her. "I still have other things on my mind, but food finally trumped the rest. Thanks for fixing the meal."

She shrugged. "I like to cook, which is good since I like to eat." She refreshed their coffees. "This is nice. I thought it might be awkward, but it feels good."

"What might be awkward?" he asked, leaning back and enjoying the rich flavor of the drink and the view across from him. Her robe had loosened and the curve of her breasts teased him.

Max waved a hand. "This. The morning-after-sex thing. I thought it would be tense and uncomfortable but...it's not. It's right to be here." She lifted her gaze to meet his. "It's right to be here with you."

Ryan frowned. He felt the same, but what the fuck? "You keep saying things that confuse the hell out of me." Her expression clouded over and he hurried to reassure her. "I'm not talking about you and me. I agree, this feels wonderful, and the only thing that will make it better is when we head back to bed. But it sounds like you've never woken up at a lover's house before. Didn't you ever spend the night with your ex? Didn't anyone ever stay with you?"

She shook her head. "Jamie had a roommate and I did too, and it just never happened. The house Gramma gave me will be the first place I've lived on my own."

He kept forgetting how much younger she was than him. "For the record? Jamie is a fucking freak." When she opened her mouth he cut her off. "Don't defend him. Makes you take a shower before you make love? Only makes love in the dark, and then doesn't stay the night? Freak. Jerk. Asshole. *Complete* asshole."

Maxine giggled as Ryan held out a hand. He pulled her onto his lap and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. There was no way he'd had enough of her, in the bedroom or out of it. While part of him wondered what the hell he was doing, he couldn't stop feeding his new addiction for her. "Spend the weekend with me?" *Fuck*. He was expected at his brother's. "I have to go out for a couple of hours, but I'll be back as soon as I can." He hesitated. Maybe he should tell her about Carl. Just to let her know about him, even if she couldn't meet him.

"I need to plan the menu for Thanksgiving dinner, but that's all I've got on my schedule." She buried her face in his neck, her soft breath floating over his sensitive skin, tickling and priming him once again. "You want to help? You're invited."

"Are we talking a small intimate gathering, or is this an invasion of *maximum* proportions?" he teased.

She poked him gently. "Boo, like I've never heard that one before. Yes, it's the entire clan gathering. I offered to host so Gramma could feel like she still had the house to return to as often as she wants. I feel like I'm cheating, in a way, having the house and the grounds before she's

gone."

Ryan soothed a hand down her back. "But you said she couldn't really take care of it by herself anymore. It's not like you've taken advantage of her."

She nodded slowly. "I still feel like I'm rushing, taking my inheritance early. While a family legacy is nice to look forward to, it's not sitting as comfy as I hoped it would, what with all the issues."

Ryan held her chin. "Speaking of issues. Why didn't you tell me about the obscene phone calls?" She stiffened in his arms like he thought she would. Fuck it, he wasn't going to skirt around the topic. He'd left it alone for the night, but he didn't care how uncomfortable the conversation made her feel, he wasn't going to let it slip past. Forget the fact they were now lovers, he ran a security-system business--what the hell had she been thinking? "Hey, I'm not mad. Well, at least not at you."

She wiggled to get off his lap and he let her go. Max dragged a hand through her hair, the tight curls bouncing everywhere as she paced the small kitchen. "I know, but it didn't seem like a huge deal. It started shortly after I moved back in with the fax-machine calls, and I told you about them. Then this week on Tuesday the guy phoned. I contacted the police right away. They traced a couple of calls and discovered the prankster uses a disposable cell phone--there's no way to track him."

Maxine fidgeted with the dishes, stacking them as she spoke. "I didn't know how to mention it to you. He called the last few days at dinnertime, and again around midnight. I've been turning off the phone so I can ignore him."

Ryan reached to clasp her hand in midmotion. "Ignore him? Sweetheart, while I agree some things in life have to be accepted, others are warning signs of danger. This is one you don't ignore, you fix."

She pulled her hand away firmly and picked up the pile of dirty dishes. "Well, I'm not sure how you fix a person who's got a juvenile sense of humor, when it's impossible to track him. The police said they didn't think there was any danger but they have been doing drive-bys every day since it started. I refuse to let some jerk chase me out of my home. Occasionally it just scares me a bit more, but that's my imagination going overtime, not any real danger." Maxine turned to the sink and started the water.

Ryan joined her at the counter, caging her in his arms and kissing her neckline. "Let me do some looking into it, okay?"

"But the police said nothing could be done."

He laughed, nudging her out of the way to take over the dish washing. "Maybe the police can't catch him, but let's see if I can't come up with a few other solutions. In the meantime, I've got my foreman completing the hookup for your system. Later today I'll take you home and show you how it works."

The musical notes of the "Ride of the Valkyries" rang through the room and Ryan searched for his cell phone.

"It's not yours, it's mine." Maxine reached into her purse and checked the display. "Shit." She made a face before answering it. "Hi, Auntie Maxena." For the next five minutes, she barely got a word in edgewise. Ryan snorted as she rolled her eyes and attempted to rein in her aunt's rambling discourse.

By the time Maxine broke free, the dishes were done and put away. Ryan looked at her expectantly from where he leaned on the counter.

"I have to go shopping to pick up some last-minute things for a surprise birthday party for

my cousin. I'm sorry, Ryan, I...I just couldn't say no." She stepped between his legs and nestled into him.

"That's fine. I told you I have to go out for a while myself." He held her close and let her warmth soak into him. Oh God, he could get used to this. Maybe he was ready for more than he thought. He stared down at the top of her head. The urge to tell her about Carl rolled over him again. She'd understand if he explained how important it was to not upset the boy.

Maxine looked up at him, a curious light in her eyes before she grabbed him and pulled their mouths together. Her kiss was ferocious, almost desperate, and while he enjoyed it, he couldn't stop from chuckling when she pulled away. Her hands clutched at his shoulders as she grinned back.

"What was that all about?" He squeezed her waist, letting her bright smile dazzle him.

"That was because you've done nothing but give and be there for me. You haven't demanded I show up at work parties at the last minute like Jamie did. You haven't dragged me off to family gatherings. God, you don't know how tired I am of having to jump through hoops for all my relatives. I mean, I love my family, but I'm reaching the point I need to break away. I'd like to go one day, just one miserable day, without anyone needing me to do anything for them. *That* would be heavenly. Just me responsible for me."

Fuck. The image of his brother waiting impatiently for his daily visit rose to Ryan's mind. Yeah, wouldn't she be thrilled to add another needy person to her to-do list. Disappointment washed over him at the missed opportunity to share, but he had to be realistic. His relationship with Carl had nothing to do with Maxine, not yet. He couldn't let his brother get attached to someone when at this point he had no idea where this situation with Maxine was headed. And obviously she didn't want any more commitments right now either.

Maxine seemed oblivious to his distraction. She tugged his belt loop. "If you want to drive me home I can get my car. Otherwise you'll have to run me around on my errands. Or I can drop you at your appointment, if you don't mind me driving your car."

Ryan hesitated. If she dropped him at the nursing home he'd have some serious explaining to do. There was no fucking way he was telling her about Carl, not today when she was pissed about her family being demanding.

She laughed and walked toward the bedroom. "Seriously, guys and their cars. Forget I asked. I guess we're back to option one or two."

Ryan followed her. The last thing he wanted was to scare her off before they'd even had a chance to really get to know each other. He would give them more time to see if his brother needed to become an issue. He'd find some way to deal with it, eventually.

"You use the same ring tone I do," he pointed out, trying not to get too distracted watching her dress. He glanced at his watch. Maybe he could arrange a return visit to his place when their chores were complete.

She smiled back at him. "Wagner rocks."

It was early afternoon before they received the call to say the security installation was complete. Which was fine with Ryan, since it was well after lunch before he finally let her out of bed where they'd returned once their morning commitments were complete. He spent a long time simply touching Maxine, watching her reactions to his caresses and enjoying her ready ability to flush. She slowly became more vocal about what she liked as they went along and he eagerly

obliged each of her requests. By the time the call arrived they were both sated.

Heading up the path to her front door, he tugged their joined hands, pulling her against him. He kissed her, needing another taste of her lips. She was becoming a serious addiction and he wasn't sure he wanted to be free of her. In fact, there was something that would make their situation even better and he'd forgotten to mention it before.

"What do you think about us both getting checked out at the doctor? And would you be willing to get the shot for birth control? I want to make love with nothing between us." He kissed the spot in her neck that pulsed with a rapid beat.

She blushed again. "Do you always talk about sex just...anywhere?"

He glanced around in surprise. "There's no one here to overhear us."

"Still."

Ryan stroked his hands up the sides of her body, smoothing the sides of her breasts in passing. "You know, I bet you'd enjoy making love outside."

"Ryan!"

He laughed and picked her up, spinning her in a circle before planting her feet back on the ground and escorting her to the front door. He hadn't felt this light-hearted in months. He kissed her again, their lips and tongues stroking smoothly together. His body tightened, his cock rising as he imagined slipping into her warmth, skin on skin. He pulled away slowly, lingering on the sweet flavor of her mouth.

He showed her how to work the access for the main door and together they set up the codes on the internal panel.

"I have one other addition I want to show you." He took her by the hand and led her up the stairs to the master bathroom. After listening to Maxine chat for the last couple of weeks about how much she loved the house, inspiration had hit hard. She would appreciate this as much as knowing she was secure at night.

"You put a security system in the bathroom? What in heaven's name?"

He shook his head. "It's a part of the system, but it's a water sensor. I put at least one on each floor next to the main water source and wired it in as a secondary alarm. If you had a water-main break, or a pipe bursts and the contact gets wet for an extended period of time, it will trigger the rest of the system with a special code. You'd know quick enough to be able to stop extensive damage from ever occurring again."

He knelt and showed her the sensor location. "It's not on a hair trigger, you don't have to worry about it going off if you happen to splash it or get it wet while cleaning. The liquid has to be in contact for at least a minute. And you can turn it off at the main panel if you did happen to accidentally set it off having a water fight or something." He stood and gestured toward the floor. "Take a look. It's not very noticeable--I didn't want it to stick out. There's one in every bathroom plus in the basement behind the washer and in the kitchen."

Maxine's eyes were moist and she hugged him tightly, burying her face against his chest. Her voice was muffled when she spoke. "Thank you." There was a volume of gratitude in the simple statement.

He kissed the top of her head. His guess had been right. "You're welcome. I know how much sentimental value this house has for you. It's just a little thing to help you be able to relax more completely."

She slipped her hands under his shirt and stroked his bare skin. He froze. Was that her tongue on his neck? He stood stock still as she nuzzled closer, yanking his shirt free and pushing it up his body. "Max, what are you doing?"

Her eyes twinkled at him and she laid a finger on his lips briefly before dropping her hands and tugging on his jeans. "We're done with the system checks, right? I thought we could relax for a while. If you're interested."

He clasped her fingers to still them. "Relax? Sweetheart, what you're doing is not calming me down."

Max leaned against him, rubbing like a cat. "Good."

Ryan eyed her suspiciously. "Are you hoping I'll let you have a shower since we're already in the bathroom? Because it's not happening."

"I wanted to..." She hesitated.

He stepped closer, running his hands up the sides of her torso to cup her breasts through the cotton fabric of her dress. "Want to what?"

Barely above a whisper her voice rose to his ears. "Make love in the shower."

He laughed. "Now that's an interesting twist on the issue."

"I've never done it before and it sounds like fun. I've got a good shower for it." She gestured to the wall-to-wall enclosure and his libido rocked off the charts. She wanted to try it in the shower? *Hell, yeah.*

But under his rules. He took his wallet from his back pocket and pulled out a condom, dropping both items on the counter. Her eyes widened to the size of saucers. Lifting her chin, he leered at her. "Take off your undies." She reached for the buttons of her dress and he shook his head. "Leave it on. Panties, off." He held out his hand, waiting expectantly.

The adorable red flushing her skin reached her hairline in mere seconds, but she obediently reached under her dress and wiggled her hips. His groin tightened, his cock fighting against the confining material of his jeans. She dropped a flimsy bit of blue lace into his palm before stepping back, hiding her hands behind her back like a demure maiden.

She was absolutely delectable and he fought to stop from coming right then and there. Unzipping his jeans with caution to avoid damaging anything, he released his already throbbing erection. She stared in wide-eyed wonder. It was ego-stroking how fascinated she was with his dick. The urge to command her to her knees to get an up-close and personal view was strong, but he hid the need from her. With her lack of experience what he had planned would be enough of a challenge already. He stood back and crossed his arms, his cock thrust out in front of him. "Cover me."

She blinked in confusion. "What?"

He reached around her, his erection poking her in the belly. She shivered and he couldn't resist dropping a kiss on the racing pulse point in her neck. Tucking the condom packet in her palm he stepped back half a foot. "Cover me."

The tentative touch that followed was torture beyond anything he'd experienced for years. He forced himself to watch her, to make sure she was comfortable with each new sexual experience they shared. Seeing nothing but delight in her eyes, he smiled and promised his dick relief very soon.

The instant she finished rolling down the latex he picked her up around the waist and dragged her into the stall.

"Ryan, what are you doing?" she protested.

He spun her around, spooning her ass against his cock. He reached out and flicked on the taps. The cold water hit his back and he swore it instantly turned to steam, his body so overheated with the burning desire to bury himself in her. Wrapping an arm around her torso, he dropped one hand between her legs, the other sliding up to cover her breasts. The water warmed

slowly and he turned them to soak their clothing. He tore open the top buttons on her dress and thrust a hand under the fabric to clutch one nipple between thumb and forefinger. The nub hardened instantly and he groaned into her hair. He rocked his hips against her ass, unable to stay still.

Moisture flowed from between her legs as he rubbed at her slit. Maxine moaned and squeezed his hand between her thighs, and he saw stars. Increasing the pace of his questing fingers, he continued stroking until she cried out, shaking in his embrace. Unable to wait any longer he twirled her, yanked up the soaking material and cupped her ass cheeks in both hands. He lifted her, pressed her shoulders into the tiles and rammed his cock home in one thrust. They both shouted, her in surprise, and him in relief at being finally surrounded by the scalding heat of her sheath.

"Wrap your legs around me," he ordered, and when she complied he slipped another inch farther into her tight channel. She gasped and he swallowed the sound, taking her mouth under his control. He slammed his cock in again and again, the hot slick of her body welcoming him as their tongues tangled, frantic, desperate.

Water streamed down, material sticking to their bodies. The skirt of her dress clung to the wall behind her, her gorgeous hair hung in strands over her shoulders. He'd never seen anything as beautiful as the expression on her face as he pulled back to watch. He thrust harder, dragging his abdominal muscles along her clit until he felt her fingers tremble where she clutched his shoulders.

"Oh Lord, Ryan, yes!" Her head fell back and her sheath squeezed around him so hard he lost all semblance of control, fucking into her body like a madman. When his climax hit he cried out her name, struggled to stay on his feet as his cock pulsed within her. Somehow he supported them against the tile until they both could breathe again.

He carefully lowered her, cradling her against his body as she rocked on unsteady legs. He was shocked at the depth of emotion racing through him. Every challenge he made she met with enthusiasm. They fit together perfectly, sexually, as well as interests outside the bedroom. Maxine was everything he'd dreamed of in a partner.

Ryan stripped off their wet clothing then took his time drying her. He carried her to the giant bed and tucked her into his arms for a nap. She rolled and snuggled in tighter before giving a happy sigh. She pressed a sleepy kiss on his chest. He stroked her hair and put aside the rest of his concerns, at least for now. Tomorrow would be soon enough to deal with the issue of where this was headed.

Chapter Eleven

She wandered down the wide staircase, an apple in one hand and her novel in the other. Crawling into the overstuffed chair in front of the fireplace, Maxine got lost in a world of fantasy. An hour later she sighed in satisfaction, dropped the book to the floor and stared into space. Her thoughts drifted from the book to the fantasy she was enjoying right there in the real world. Ryan. Just imagining him made her toes curl, her body wet, and brought a smile to her face. It wasn't only the physical attraction they had for each other. In the weeks since she and Ryan had become lovers, she'd learned a lot about the man. About his wicked sense of humor, his strong sense of responsibility. His imaginative lovemaking. Some nights he stayed with her, a couple she'd remained with him at the apartment, but they had also enjoyed simply talking on the phone and going out on dates.

And did he ever know how to make dating fun. In comparison to her relationship to Jamie--there was no comparison. Ryan's intensity carried through in the way he dealt with everything in his life. She was back in her own house, security system at full alert. The mysterious caller was gone, although she now had an unlisted number for her home and a separate cell phone for her business calls. Except for the silly mouse issue, problems around the house seemed to have slowed.

She rose and wandered the room, tracing a finger around a favorite antique plate hanging on the wall beside the fireplace. The matching teacup and saucer were absent from their usual spot on the mantle and she frowned. Someone must have moved them, but she didn't remember anyone mentioning touching the valuable set. Turning a slow circle she eyed the other familiar objects in the room, but nothing else seemed out of place.

She twirled a lock of hair between her fingers. Another thing she'd appreciated was Ryan's guidance in learning to deal with her family. He wasn't bossy, just listened and occasionally made suggestions that allowed her to participate with her family without letting them take over her life. Watching his example helped her keep a firm backbone when it was time to say no to the more outrageous demands. Ryan was almost frighteningly decisive, and there was no mistaking his take-charge attitude. In contrast, his leadership in the bedroom, with his patient attention to her needs, thrilled her. It felt like he treasured their time together. A few times she'd caught him staring at her with a sad expression in his eyes. He always became sexually aggressive following these moments, wiping away the opportunity to question him further.

The phone rang and she ran to answer it, a warm sensation filling her with pleasure when the call signature identified Ryan's landline.

"Hi." She never knew what else to say. He made her feel as giddy as a schoolgirl.

"You ready for tonight?"

"Ready? You still haven't told me what we're doing." She sat again, staring out the window across the water. The weather promised to be fabulous for next week's Thanksgiving celebration.

"What?" He feigned disbelief. "I never told you what we're doing? Are you sure?"

"Ryan, stop teasing. Please, I want to know. At least tell me what kind of clothes I should wear."

"Something like that pretty blue dress you had on the other day." He lowered his voice and the deep tone made her heartbeat race. "Don't wear anything underneath."

She choked.

His chuckle did nothing to relieve the tight sensation in her chest. It only increased the flood of moisture to her pussy. Every day he challenged her sexually in some new way, starting with leaving the lights on and curtains open to last night's demand she masturbate in front of him. It had turned out to be an incredibly sensual experience and the perfect start to the heated lovemaking that had followed. She trembled slightly at the realization that the next time they made love they wouldn't need protection--all their records had finally cleared.

"Did we get cut off, Max, or are you simply blushing too hard to speak?"

"Stop laughing at me. Yes, I'm blushing, as you well know. You say the most outrageous things." He intended to make her pulse increase, she was sure of it.

"Hmmm, outrageous or not, I'm serious, and I'll be checking. I'll pick you up at six. I have an emergency meeting to attend, so I'll be unavailable for the afternoon. I can't find my damn cell phone, and I didn't want you to try calling me and wonder why you couldn't get a hold

of me."

She laughed this time. "You? You lost your cell phone? That's so...bizarre."

"Yeah, I guess even organizational freaks lose things occasionally. See you later, sweetheart."

Max put the phone down and stretched lazily. With the home office she'd arranged, it felt like she was playing hooky half the time, but since she was contracted on a per-project basis she was done work for the day. A whole lazy afternoon to wander the finished house and appreciate the beautiful fall weather. On an impulse, she changed into her workout gear and took a run around the property. She was barely back in the door when the phone rang again, this time with Ryan's cell phone tone.

She was still breathless from her run as she answered. "You found it!"

It sounded like him, but there was a slight tonal variation. "I need Ryan."

"He's not here. Who is this?" She tried to push down her rising panic. Who else had access to this line and this phone?

"It's Carl. I want my brother. They took Jackson away. I told them not to." The male voice trembled. "I want Jackson back and they say I can't have him."

Maxine's mind raced. Ryan's brother? He hadn't mentioned a brother. Carl sounded about twelve and on the verge of bursting into tears. "Ryan is busy. Is there someone with you I can talk to?"

"I want Jackson..." Carl whined, his volume increasing, his breathing rapid and panic filled.

"Carl, are you on Ryan's cell phone?" Maxine tried to think of how to calm the boy and get in touch with Ryan at the same time.

"He left it here yesterday. I want Jackson..." and the sobbing began.

Max called into the phone to get his attention, but it was clear Carl was far too upset. An extended period of time passed before other voices joined in the background and a female spoke on the line.

"Hello? Is there someone there?"

Max sucked in a breath. *Thank goodness.* "Is Carl okay?"

"He's pretty upset. Did he say what was wrong?"

"Something about Jackson getting taken away. With whom am I speaking?"

"Nancy. I'm one of his day nurses. Jackson had to be taken away, the bear was filthy and it's washday. Okay, we'll try to settle him down. Could you tell Mr. Claymore to stop by as soon as possible? Carl could use a little extra attention."

"Wait..." Max hesitated for only for a second. Ryan was in meetings all afternoon. Only one solution sprang to mind. "Where are you? I mean, what's the address?"

Ryan swore violently as he tried to find a parking space at the nursing home. What a fuckfest. His meeting had run late and he'd exited to find a series of panicked messages from his brother's care center. When he attempted to call Maxine to apologize for having to cancel their plans, he had no luck getting through.

He slowed from his run as he reached the door, taking time to calm himself. Whatever was wrong with Carl, arriving angry or anxious would be inappropriate, and there was no way he wanted to upset the boy more. Once he could speak normally, he headed toward his brother's

rooms, his route leading him past the nurse's station.

He waved a greeting. "Evening, ladies. I came as soon as I got the message. How's Carl?"

The two nurses on duty smiled at him.

"He's fine. We were worried for a while we'd have to sedate him, but as it turned out he settled down amazingly well." She led the way toward one of the side halls, away from Carl's room.

"Where are we going?" His brother did best in familiar settings. He rarely left his room for any other part of the care center, no matter how hard anyone urged otherwise.

"The library. Your fiancée started reading to him and before we knew it, Carl insisted they go to the library for the rest of the books in the series."

Ryan stumbled. "My fiancée?"

The nurse gestured toward the door. "He's very taken with her. Ms. Turner has been wonderful with him. Still, if you can try to get him back to his room in the next half hour, it would be best. He's tired from his earlier tantrum, and an early night would do him good."

His fiancée? Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit. Ryan peeked through the doorframe. Carl sat in his wheelchair, rolled as close as possible to the edge of the couch where Maxine sat, her long legs curled under her. She held the book toward him and read with exaggerated expression as Ms. Frizzle shrank the Magic School Bus and flew into the center of a flower patch. Carl stared at the book but his hand rubbed Maxine's arm, his fingers moving in steady repetitious strokes.

Something in Ryan's belly tightened and it was hard to breathe. He never dreamed keeping his mouth shut was going to come and bite him in the ass this hard. What the hell was he going to do?

Maxine's reading trailed off and their eyes met. She flushed and unfolded herself, rising to greet him, her gaze darting warily at the nurse by his side. "Hi," she said softly, then tucked herself into his arms and kissed him.

The room spun.

"I'll leave you for a bit," the nurse announced, smiling sweetly at them. She strode to Carl's side. "It's almost time for bed, Carl. Set your watch for thirty minutes, then you need to get ready."

He nodded and fidgeted with his watch. Ryan held Maxine until the nurse left, then released her to greet his brother. "Hey, Carl. How's everything?" He needed time and space to figure a way out of this landmine of a situation. Both things he was unlikely to get.

"Twenty-nine minutes until bedtime. Maxine knows Ms. Frizzle. They might be related. Jackson is back." Carl held out his watch and showed it to Ryan. "Bedtime soon."

"Right about that, buddy. You want me to take you to your room so you can get ready?"

Carl shook his head. "Maxine will take me." He resumed stroking his hand repetitively down his own arm, and Ryan's stomach took the final plunge. There was going to be no explaining this away.

Forty-five minutes later Ryan led Maxine out of the complex toward the parking lot. His mind continued to churn. How could he want two things at the same time? How could he want so badly for Maxine to know about his brother and still wish she were ignorant?

"Where's your car?" he snapped. He damned himself for his reaction but...*fuck*.

Maxine had grown quieter and quieter over the past half hour, no doubt reacting to his increasing tension. "I took a cab. My car had a flat tire."

He breathed out, long and slow, before escorting her to his car. Heading toward her home he kept his teeth tight together, refusing to say anything because he wasn't sure he could speak

politely. The situation wasn't her fault, he had to keep that in mind. This mess was of his own damn making for not telling her sooner, but shit, what was he going to do now?

She didn't speak until they'd traveled a fair distance, as if she was hesitant to brave his mood. Her fingers tangled together on her lap. "Why didn't you tell me about your brother?" Her big green eyes bored into him.

"I can't talk about it yet."

Maxine turned away to stare out the window, her back twisted toward him. She sat silently, her head resting on the glass and his muscles tightened into a mass of knots.

Damn it. Hurting Max more wasn't making this any better. He sighed and relented, speaking quietly. "He's my half brother. I didn't even know he existed until a couple of years ago when my father passed away and it came out in the will. This summer Carl and his mother were in a serious car crash and she died. He's still in physical therapy, relearning to walk. There's a list as long as my arm of his syndromes and symptoms, but the bottom line is he's not socially capable. He's fifteen and not much more advanced than a six-year-old. He has to live in the care facility, but I get out to see him daily."

She nodded then returned to staring out the window. They sat in silence until he pulled into her yard, the tension between them building like a tangible wall. Maxine sniffed and he hardened his heart, fighting the need to drag her into his arms and comfort her.

She tugged him to a stop at the base of the stairs. "I'm sorry I lied and told them I was your fiancée, but they wouldn't have let me in otherwise. Is that why you're upset with me?"

He paced away a few steps. "You have no idea what you've done, do you?"

"I had to go. He was upset and crying and--"

Ryan dragged a hand through his hair, lowering his voice to keep from yelling at her. "So he was upset and crying, but he would have settled down eventually. Now he's going to be wanting to see you all the time, and when you don't show up, he'll get upset and start crying and we'll be no further ahead than we were at the start."

She dropped a hand on his arm. "I'll go see him. I don't mind. He's a lovely boy."

"Fuck, Maxine, you still don't get it. Carl has the mind of child, and he always will. But one thing he's got is the ability to fixate on people. He's never going to forget you, he's going to ask for you daily. You should never have gone, never let him know about you."

A flash of fire shot through her eyes. "Then if it's such a big deal, and something you desperately wanted to avoid, you should have told me and I would have known not to go." The hurt in her voice choked him. "You didn't tell me about your brother and it's obvious you don't want me involved. So you're saying I'm good enough to eat dinner with, and have sex with, but other than that you don't want me in your life. Got it."

She turned her back on him and stomped up the stairs. Ryan wanted to shake her. He followed, slamming his hand on the door to prevent it from opening. "That's not it at all. I didn't tell you because it's a huge commitment and I didn't want you feeling trapped into anything. It's also not fair to Carl for people to wander in and out of his life. He doesn't understand why they don't come back and it hurts him. There was no way I was going to introduce you to him unless I knew you'd be in his life long term. With his issues he'll be my responsibility for the rest of his life. It's like I have a child."

"So what? Big deal. Holy cow, you're the one acting like a child. He's your family. How could you put him in a little box, and me in another, and think it was going to be okay?"

"I wasn't putting anyone in a box," he denied. "I was trying to protect you both."

"Bullshit. You take off for a couple hours every day and I didn't know why. You get calls

and take them in another room. I had no idea Carl existed and he's your *family*." She stood at the door, her fists resting on her hips. Her eyes were bright with tears and her anger brought bright color to her skin.

Ryan took a deep breath and stared off into space. His blood pounded through him like he'd just finished a marathon. "Yeah, well, sweetheart, not everyone's family is like yours. Some of us have families more like Attila the Hun's than the Brady Bunch." Maxine gave a little gasp, and he balled his hands into fists. "Crap, I didn't mean that. I was trying to do what's right by Carl, and by you, but I don't even know what the right thing is anymore. You *said* you wanted no more extended family commitments. You told me one thing you appreciated was not having to deal with my relatives. What else was I supposed to think?"

Her face went completely white. "Oh my God, that's not what I meant. I would never have said I wanted you to deny you had a brother."

"I'm not denying him. Hell, I've changed my whole fucking life to be there for him."

Comprehension floated across her face and her eyes widened. "He's the reason you resigned, isn't he?"

There was no use denying it. "He needs someone around on a consistent basis and damn it, he's my brother." Ryan was a tight bundle of nerves, and nothing was going the way he'd planned. "Look, you meant well, and I appreciate that, I just don't know... *Fuck!*" He turned and paced the length of the porch, desperate to get away for a minute.

The worst part was seeing her with Carl lifted his hopes, making him wonder if he might be able to have it all. To keep his obligation to provide and care for his brother and feed his newfound desire to have Maxine in his life. Shit, it was too unrealistic to be true. She was so young, why in the hell would she consider taking on a situation that would tie her to a person she didn't even know? Her family monopolized and controlled so much of her time, what right did he have to force more commitments on her? Just when she was finally getting a chance to be free.

He collapsed onto the porch swing, dropping his head into his hands. For all his strength and abilities, it was more than he could fathom. Making instant decisions during missions and about security matters was easy compared to this.

He truly didn't know what the hell to do.

Chapter Twelve

Maxine watched Ryan storm down the deck, thankful to see him head that direction instead of back to his car and away from her. His words cut deep, causing an aching hurt in her soul, but she didn't want him leaving before they got a chance to deal with this mess. She slipped into the house with a heavy heart.

He'd been in her life for only a short time, but everything else in their relationship pointed to his depth of character. There was no one he expected more of than himself. She constantly found him taking care of more than she expected simply because he thought it was the right thing to do.

He'd retired from the service for Carl's sake.

Now she kicked herself for overreacting. Oh, she was still mad as hell he hadn't told her about Carl, but her responses over the past weeks to her family issues made his reaction far more understandable.

While he made sure she felt comfortable and cared for, he hadn't asked for anything in return. She wiped away her tears and paced the hallway with nervous energy. Why couldn't he

understand this meant she finally had something she could provide, something she could help with? After all the things he'd taught her, about standing up for herself, about moving forward with her life, now there was something she could teach him. It didn't mean they were committed for life, just that Carl would have another person to rely on. She was more than capable of being a big-sister figure. With the size of her extended family she was always on call. Yeah, she complained about it, but caring for family was what she had always done, what she'd been taught to do. It was a part of what made her who she was.

Fighting for balance was a good thing, but she didn't want to be rid of her family.

She wasn't sure how long she walked, trying to figure out the correct response when movement on the porch caught her attention. Ryan stood outside her living room window, his forehead resting against the glass. He lifted a hand and splayed it against the pane, a pleading expression in his eyes. Her breath caught in her throat and she moved toward him.

He mouthed the words "I'm sorry".

Maxine refused to let the tears come. Lifting her own hand, she matched fingers to his on the opposite side of the glass. They stood for a long time, staring into each other's eyes, before he smiled wryly. "Can I come in?"

She licked her lips and nodded. When he joined her there was no hesitation. He scooped her up and hugged her tightly, squeezing away the hurt clinging to her soul. He smelled like a fall breeze, fresh and sensually masculine. She shifted in his arms, slightly embarrassed at the scent of her own perspiration. She'd been in such a hurry to reach Carl she still wore her sweaty running clothes.

He leaned back and brushed her cheek with the back of his knuckles. "I really am sorry. I was wrong. I should have told you. We'll figure out some way to keep Carl happy and not lock you into any commitments."

She laid a hand over his mouth. "Stop it. Just stop, don't try to solve the whole problem right now. I know about your brother. I'm glad. We'll deal with the rest one day at a time. But there's one thing--you told me before not to keep secrets that hurt. Feeling like you're all alone with no one to help you hurts. You need to trust me more. I don't know where this relationship between us is going, but we've got to be friends first. You don't always have to be in control. Okay?"

Ryan kissed her fingers and she trembled. His arms were still wrapped around her and the warmth of his body melted into hers. She laid her head on his chest and listened to the beat of his heart. When he reached up to caress her back she closed her eyes.

"Do you still feel like going out tonight?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head. "Not really. I don't think I'd be great company."

He loosened the clip holding her hair and pulled the curls over her shoulder. As he stroked and petted her, tension drained away and a new sensation start to rise, one of longing and desire. Ryan turned her on faster than anyone she'd ever met.

"Hop in the bathtub with some bubbles. I'll make a quiet dinner for the two of us." He lifted her chin until their eyes met. "If I'm welcome to stay."

Maxine stood on tiptoes to brush her lips against his. His flavor lit a fire inside and another shaky breath released, bringing her closer to being at peace. "Please stay."

She stepped back slowly, watching him carefully. His dark eyes sparkled at her but tension still crinkled the corners. He appeared tired and much older than usual. She brushed a hand down the side of his face and leaned closer to kiss him again, wanting to wipe the worry away. He cupped her face in both hands and kissed back, lingering, brushing his lips and tongue

gently with hers. Light and sweet and reassuring. They pulled apart at the same time and finally a small smile hovered on his lips.

"Go, take your time. Dinner will be ready when you are."

Ryan waited until he heard the water stop running before raiding the fridge and concocting a simple supper of soup and sandwiches. It gave him plenty of time to consider the rashness of his earlier actions, and way too much time to think about what Maxine would look like in the tub, nipples playing peek-a-boo through a layer of scented bubbles.

He'd suspected keeping Carl's existence a secret would hurt. He'd tried to bring up the topic but there never seemed to be an appropriate time. And now this was the result. He was thankful Max was so forgiving. He'd acted like an ass.

She still didn't understand. She couldn't have, or there was no way she would have agreed so quickly to getting involved with Carl.

Hell, he still wasn't sure what he really felt for the boy. Responsible--that emotion was more than clear. He hated to see Carl's pain-filled eyes, hated to see the confusion and the emotional upset that came from what would be a simple misunderstanding for another child. Carl's existence had come as a shocking surprise and was a constant reminder of their joint father's undisciplined lifestyle. Exactly the behavior Ryan strived to avoid.

An hour passed as he sipped the wine he'd found in the pantry and waited for Maxine to join him. Finally, curiosity got the better of him, and he ascended the stairs and went to find her.

Twilight shone in the windows of the master bedroom, shades of silver and grey falling across the bed where Maxine lay, tangled in the duvet. He approached slowly to make sure he didn't frighten her, but she was fast asleep. He sat on the edge of the bed and watched her for a long time, her breasts rising and falling peacefully, bare skin open to his gaze where the quilt had slipped from her grasp.

She was beautiful. Everything about her made him hard and needy, but her compassion and caring touched him in places he had never imagined. Maybe it was possible to dream of forever with this woman. Right now she deserved to be cherished for the heart of gold she shared at every turn.

Reaching out carefully, Ryan tugged back the covers an inch at a time, his cock rising in anticipation as more of her warm flesh became exposed to his hungry eyes. Gentle as a whisper, he smoothed a hand up her thigh, the feel of satiny skin making his mouth water and his heart rate increase. He sat back and stripped off his clothing before joining Maxine on the bed.

She rolled toward him, all sleepy and warm, nestling into his arms like she belonged there. Their mouths met briefly before he brushed a line of kisses across her cheek. A low hum of arousal rose from deep in her throat to stoke his already primed nerves. *Slow down*. He needed to move slow and easy, but the urge to consume her grew with every moment.

Maxine lifted her hands and caressed his torso, her eyes still shut and a mischievous hint of a smile teasing the corners of her mouth. "What a wonderful dream. There's a Greek god in my bed."

"Goddess. You're a goddess."

"Hmmm, we're both crazy, you know that?" She stretched lazily, her body arching against his fleetingly, and he sucked in a quick breath.

Slow. Keep it slow.

Ryan kissed a path down her throat, murmuring encouragement as she writhed under his caresses. "Goddess," he repeated. "I'm going to worship you."

Then there were no more words, just sensation. Just touch. The dimming light of the sky cast lengthening shadows over their bodies, the wind rattling the windowpane. Their lips joined, tongues entwined. Ryan stroked his fingers over her breasts, priming the tips to taut peaks, cupping the tender flesh in his palms and circling again and again until she thrust her chest up, asking for more. His mouth followed the path of his fingers, covering the tender mounds with licks and nips and gentle sucking that had Maxine panting for breath.

He slipped between her legs, the need to taste her impossible to ignore any longer. One hand opened her curls, the other soothed her hip and held her in place as he kissed her intimately, his tongue sliding over her labia and circling the sensitive swell of her clit. Teasing, licking, he savored the unique scent and flavor of her cream as her body responded to his caress. Taking the time to slowly lap the entire length of her slit, he dropped his hand and dipped a finger into her depths. Scooping the moisture he found there, he slid it lower to carefully brush the tight rosette hidden between her cheeks.

Maxine protested, gently wiggling her hips away from his seeking hand. He answered by slipping his tongue deep into her core again, alternating between thrusting through the sensitive tissue and then sucking the nub of sensitive flesh at the apex of her mound. Again he circled her anus, and this time she accepted his touch and he smiled. She readily explored new territory with him.

And it was new. The thought of taking her virgin ass thrilled him, but he'd save that adventure for another day. Now was about Maxine, and her pleasure, although the moans and panting emitting from her lovely throat made his day as well.

He turned his full attention on her, rubbing and suckling, pumping two fingers into her sheath and curving against the front wall of her passage to stroke the delicate tissue there.

"Ryan! Oh my word." Maxine opened her legs wider, pressing her crotch against his face, her fingers buried in his hair to clutch him close. There was no way he planned on stopping, not with the rush of liquid from her body easing his fingers, mixing her sweet flavor into an aphrodisiac of the finest caliber. Under his continued ministrations she climaxed, her body squeezing his hand, a throaty cry leaving her lips and urging him to rise up and capture one rosy nipple in his teeth. He gave just the briefest bite, a slip of pain, before soothing it, but she leapt under him, her whole body jerking in response.

"Please, I need you now." Maxine pulled at his shoulders, urging him over her body, reaching to guide his rigid cock.

As he pressed in for the first time without any barrier between them, the sensation was enough to make him groan aloud with pleasure. "So fucking good. You feel like heaven." He dropped his head on her shoulder for a moment, savoring the sweet, tight heat squeezing his cock. She lifted her legs and he settled deeper and they both responded with moans.

"You feel amazing inside me," Maxine whispered. "It feels so right." He stared into her face as he withdrew slowly, until the tip of his erection clung to her heat. Then he thrust his hips forward and watched her eyes close and a satisfied smile cross her face. "Yes! Again," she demanded.

He chuckled. "Yes, ma'am."

Long stroke followed long stroke, the slow withdrawal teasing his nerve endings as he dragged out of her tight passage. Each forward thrust tapped the end of his cock into her cervix, and it was enough to start his ears ringing. It felt so overwhelmingly fabulous he fought to maintain tempo. He wasn't going to last much longer in this position.

So he swung them around, placing Maxine in the driver's seat. She sat up and he slid even

deeper and she gasped.

"Oh, my."

"Set the pace, sweetheart." He clasped her hips, lifting and lowering her, showing the range of motion. She took over, strong thighs flexing as she set a smooth pace designed to torment him. Slow enough she controlled the movement, fast enough his cock felt gripped in a hot hand, stroking and massaging him to the breaking point.

He cupped her breasts, tweaking the pouting nipples to hard points, twisting gently until Maxine's breathing deteriorated to ragged panting. Then he dropped his hand and found her clit, priming her for combustion.

"More, oh please, a little more," she begged, and he thrust with his hips, increasing their speed, pressing hard on her clit. With a cry she threw back her head, and the forceful squeeze of her climax exploding ripped a response from him, tore his seed from his cock to spurt into her pulsing depths. Maxine collapsed onto him, heart pounding, body shaking with tremors. He held her close, still buried in her heat, his shaft jerking in response to her convulsing channel.

She sucked in a deep breath and let it out in a slow exhale. Pressing her hands to his chest, she leaned back to sit on his cock, wiggled her hips and smiled. "I like this position."

He brushed her cheek with his palm, sliding intimately down the length of her torso to finish cradling her hips in his hands. "I could tell. I like it too." She flushed red and he chuckled. "What are you thinking to make you blush?"

"Not going to tell you." He tickled her gently and she squirmed away with a smile. "No fair, no torturing answers from your victim."

"Hmm, victim. I could have some fun with that idea." She swatted him on the arm and he tackled her to the mattress, rolling together until they were both laughing and giggling like children. Then he kissed her soundly, nestled her in his arms and held her close.

She sighed contently. "You're a marvelous lover." Her stomach growled and they both laughed.

"It's not my fault we didn't have supper. Really, this time it's yours," Ryan explained seriously, as they rolled off the bed to find their clothes.

Maxine smiled at him from across the room. "I believe you, but I do need food. Have to keep my strength up."

"Hmmm, any reason why?" he teased, raking her body with his gaze.

She raised her brows at him. "Insatiable, that's what you are."

Ryan shot his hand in the air. "Guilty." He paced over to hold her close and drop a kiss on her uplifted lips. "As far as you're concerned, I can never get enough."

Chapter Thirteen

Thanksgiving Day dawned far too bright and early. Maxine crawled out of the warmth of her bed with reluctance to get the turkeys in the ovens on time. Everyone joining the celebration would bring a casserole or dessert, or a bottle of wine, but as hostess she was responsible for the main course.

Ryan shifted as she tried to sneak away, reaching out to pull her back. She attempted to avoid him. "I need to get up," she whispered, biting back a yawn.

"It's still the middle of the night, come back to bed." He tugged the wrist he'd captured and for a second she was tempted to crawl back and snuggle against his firm body. Let his warmth cover her and seep in again. But cuddling would inevitably lead to sex, and there was no

way she wanted to live through the same disaster Aunt Maximina had experienced two years ago, when the turkeys were still half-raw by dinnertime.

"I need to get up," she pleaded, kissing his fingers.

He squeezed her hand before releasing it and pushing back the covers. "I'll put the coffee on, you can grab a shower."

She shook her head and let the yawn overtake her for a moment. "Once things are cooking we can come back to bed. Everything else is ready. In fact, you don't need to get up."

Ryan closed the distance between them and kissed her tenderly, his hands soft on her body as he held her in a close embrace. He'd spent almost every night with her this past week. "I want to get up. Let me help, I promise not to burn anything."

She laughed and grabbed her robe. As they made their way downstairs she wondered at how much difference a week made. Since she'd discovered Carl's existence, the mood between her and Ryan had changed. The strange sadness haunting him had fled. His decisive manner and tender touches remained, yet there was an extra component accompanying not only his lovemaking, but also his teasing and his companionable silences.

Whatever had exorcised his ghosts, she liked it. Liked it a lot.

They hadn't solved everything. She'd created a royal mess telling the nurses she was his fiancée. A couple of times already she'd been asked to make an official decision regarding Carl's care and she'd quickly deferred to Ryan.

Carl was overjoyed when she joined Ryan twice on his visits. The times she hadn't gone, the youth had been satisfied with the promise she would return another day.

What it all meant for the future was still up in the air--Maxine wasn't ready to talk about more than the commitment they had right now. A couple who enjoyed each other's company. She was beginning to hope there might be the potential for more, but it was too early for serious discussion, and with Carl content, Ryan's fears had settled as well.

Setting both the wall ovens to heat, Maxine turned to manhandle the massive birds to the island to finish stuffing them only to find Ryan had everything including the premade ingredients lined up in rows waiting for her.

"Wow, you're efficient," she complimented him.

He wiggled his brows at her. "You said something about going back to bed when we're done, so I'm willing to make the chores go by as rapidly as possible."

She shook her head. "You're bad." Picking up the bowl with stuffing she made a face before grabbing a handful and sticking it into the first bird. Ryan stepped behind her. His hands caressed the sides of her torso, skimmed her breasts then slipped around to loosen the knot of her robe. "Stop it, you're not helping get the job done any quicker."

She wiggled but his grasp remained firm. "You go ahead and do your job and I'll do mine. I won't get in your way," he promised. He licked her earlobe and she smiled in spite of it all. She had her hands full of savory bread and raisins, and her belly was tight with waking desire. Ryan stroked her breasts before sliding his hands down her belly to bury his fingers in her crotch and lightly massage her slit.

"You're a bad boy, and if you keep this up you're getting nothing but a lump of coal for Christmas. Oh my God, what are you doing?"

He had slipped his hand around to her butt, his fingers slick with moisture as he prodded the rosette of her anus. "It's Thanksgiving. It's time for stuffing, right? I have a little present for you."

She had no way to stop him, no way to protest unless she took her sticky,

stuffing-covered hands out of the turkey to defend herself. "You're not really going to... Ryan, I know I told you the other day I was willing for you to teach me about anal sex, but not now. Oh God!"

He suckled on her neck as he slipped his finger in. Her heart pounded. It felt far better than she wished, because she really wanted a reason to get angry.

"We're not going to have sex," he said reasonably. "You're just going to wear a plug for a little while to start getting you ready."

"Plug?"

"You're not doing your job, sweetheart," Ryan pointed out. "Stuffing, right?"

"Bastard." She finished the first bird and shuffled to the second, his one arm holding her tight to his torso, the other doing wicked, wicked things to her body. She slammed a fistful of stuffing into the avian and cried out with pleasure as he brought both hands into play, one in front, one back. "I'm going to kill you when this is over, you know that, don't you?"

He laughed and rubbed her clit, rolling it gently between his fingers. Her legs started to shake. Something cold and hard poked at her butt, and she sucked in a quick breath.

"It's okay, Maxine, keep breathing. Feel and enjoy." He increased his fingers' tempo against her clit, and warmth pooled in her belly. The stretching sensation in her anus dropped to a pleasurable...presence. And then the distraction of her breaking climax made everything else fade away.

He held her as she came, the waves of release slow and drawn out, his continued touch lightening as her body grew more sensitive. Then he kissed her cheek and walked to the sink, washing his hands thoroughly before coming to lift the heavy roasting pans into the ovens.

Maxine walked gingerly until she grew used to the plug. It didn't hurt, but she was wet and excited, and he was driving her crazy. Only Ryan would think of such a trick.

"You still plotting to kill me?" he asked, handing her a coffee mug across the island. He tried to look apologetic, but there was too much delight in his eyes for the innocent expression to work.

She shook her head. "It's a good thing you're cute. A bastard, but cute."

Ryan frowned at her. "Cute? What kind of compliment is that? I'm old, ugly as sin, bossy, and all kinds of other grievous sins, including devious." He patted her lightly on the butt and she sucked in air as the plug shifted.

"I'm not wearing this all day," Maxine warned. She couldn't imagine what disasters would happen if the sexual fever building inside distracted her while her family descended on the house.

"Of course not. Only for the morning." He nibbled her lips, rubbing small circles on her lower back. "Can we go back to bed? I have a few things I want to try while you're wearing that thing."

Her mouth went dry. She gulped a mouthful of her drink in defense as his expression turned wicked. "I need my coffee."

"I need you." He pointed at her mug. "Drink up. You'll want to be awake for this."

Ryan wrapped himself around her, keeping their bodies in full contact even as he consumed her. Her sweet flavor mixed with the after taste of their coffee, creating an exotic blend. The sensual touch of her fingers as she clutched his shoulders made him forget exactly what he had planned. He guided them blindly through the house, his thoughts jangling together in a heap of desire and obsession. There wasn't an inch of her body he hadn't explored, and he

still couldn't get enough of her.

They paused at the doorway to the main dining room and he dropped to his knees, opening her robe to press kisses across the smooth slope of her belly. When she instinctively opened her legs wider, he ran his hands up her thighs, massaging her silky skin. He used his thumbs to tease the pale red curls hiding her pussy, pausing to stroke one finger the length of her wet slit.

She panted, her torso shaking under his caress. "Too much. I'm throbbing. Everywhere. Your touch is too much." Maxine groaned in frustration and let her head fall back. It hit the doorframe with a *thunk*. "Shit!"

He smothered his laugh and stood to rub the sore spot. Her lashes fluttered as he stared into her eyes, her pupils dilated wide, drawing him in like a magnet. "Dangerous things, butt plugs."

"Please, I need...something. It feels good, yet it burns."

"That's because you're so hot you're on fire, sweetheart." And he lowered his head to her lips to continue his assault, stealing her breath away.

Making it up the stairs and back to her bedroom took a long, long time, as he got lost in her body again and again. At one point he carried her before lowering her to the top of the stairs and lapping at her pussy until she convulsed under him. He pressed her against the window in the master bedroom, her breasts in contact with the still cool glass. She cried out as he nibbled his way down her back, begging him to touch her, to give her what she needed.

When he peeled her off the windowpane and laid her on the bed her nipples had crinkled to tight buds of rosy pink. He admired them for a moment before warming them under his tongue, drawing another cry of delight from her lips.

He was staking his claim. The house would be filled with people in a few short hours, but for now there was only her. Only him. Together--and he reveled in it.

Then he couldn't wait any longer. Maintaining eye contact, he slipped off his pants to stand naked over her where she sprawled on the oversized bed. His earlier vision, from when they first met, returned to him and he was tempted to grab some scarves and tie her to the bedposts. She dropped her gaze and licked her lips, her rosy cheeks flushed with arousal. His cock throbbed in response and he shifted her position, bringing her hips close to the edge of the bed, her knees wide to the side. He rubbed the aching head of his cock against her open pussy lips, spreading the sweet cream over his shaft. When he brushed her clit with his thumb she whimpered and he slowed, wanting to make the experience last as long as possible. Back and forth he dragged, touching the sensitive bud at the apex of her slit gently. He wiggled the butt plug and her eyes rolled back in her head, her belly tightening.

Then he slid into her welcoming body with one smooth glide, a long gasp of air escaping her lungs as if pressed from her body by his cock.

"Oh my." She rocked with tiny motions against him. Her thighs remained wide open, supported by her hands and she slowly relaxed. Her eyes twinkled as she smiled up at him, a hesitant but happy smile. "I'm very full."

"You're very tight. And you feel wonderful." He leaned forward to kiss her, the new angle drawing another gasp from her lips. "Okay?"

She nodded rapidly then grasped his shoulders and pressed her hips up. He pumped slowly at first, but Maxine arched into him hard, increasing their tempo and the pressure of his thrusts. The sounds of pleasure she made drove him crazy and when she cried out her release he went with her.

Somehow the next thing he knew they were cuddled together in the middle of the bed.

"Wow." Maxine tucked her head under his chin and sighed happily.

He chuckled. Damn, the sex between them just got better and better. He stroked a hand down her hair, very content with his lot in life at that moment. "Glad you liked it. Hey, how about I take you out for a quick bite on our way over to visit Carl?"

She poked him in the chest and he glanced down to see her grinning face. "On one condition. I get to take this thing out of my...well, you know. I'm not going to wear it any longer."

He kissed her, rolling her on top. She giggled and kissed him back eagerly. When they separated for air they were both smiling. "I guess we can take that thing out of your 'you know'." He patted her ass and she sucked in a quick breath, her eyes wide, and he laughed. "Come on, let's hit the shower before I get distracted and we end up still in bed when your family arrives."

Chapter Fourteen

Maxine bent to kiss the top of Carl's head. He was busy at his desk and barely seemed to notice when they left.

"Happy Thanksgiving." The nurses waved farewell, the scent of the special lunch meal hovering in the air of the nursing home.

"It feels strange to leave him there alone and go back to where all my family will gather."

Ryan held the door open for her and they headed into the bright sunshine of the fall day. "He wouldn't be happy joining us. Too many people, too much noise. Even if your family were smaller it wouldn't work. He's content where he is."

She shrugged. It was all so different, trying to balance wanting to be with Ryan, meeting her family's needs, and now learning more about Carl. She snuck her fingers into Ryan's hand as they walked back to the car. "You're a good brother to him."

Ryan looked startled for a moment. "Thank you."

She grabbed him by the sleeve. "No, I mean it. I understand more why you hesitated to tell me about him. He's a very special person, and I do have a hard time remembering he can't just jump in and join us in the family events." She leaned against him and kissed him, lingering over the now-familiar flavor of his lips. "You've done your best to care for him. He doesn't say thank you, but I know he would if he understood all you've done."

Ryan held her close, his hands tight on her torso. She rested her cheek on his chest and drew in a long slow breath. The day so far had given her plenty to be thankful about.

They made it back to the house barely thirty minutes before the first of the horde arrived. She hugged her cousins, kissed her aunties and avoided Uncle Maxible, whose aftershave made her nose twitch. Gramma was taken on a thorough inspection of the house, clinging all the while to Ryan's arm as she admired the changes Maxine had made. After the initial questioning glances at Ryan were over, murmurs of approval rose as he plied his charm on all the relatives. A warm feeling built inside Maxine's heart.

Wandering toward the front door, she jerked to a stop.

He couldn't. He wouldn't.

She stared in disbelief as Jamie Daultry made his way up the stairs in the company of her cousin Maximilian. While Jamie's impressive good looks hadn't changed, she wondered why she'd continued to see him after their first date. Looks were all he had going for him because he was obviously lacking brains. What kind of jerk would show up at a Thanksgiving dinner with

his ex-girlfriend's family?

Scads of relatives wandered the house, children shrieking with delight as they raced around outside on the porch. Maxine glanced to see where Ryan had disappeared to before approaching to cut Jamie off at the pass.

"Maxine! So nice of you to offer to host this year." Maximilian dropped an air kiss by her cheek and stepped around her into the house.

He was not one of her favorite cousins to start with. She'd always found his boastful mannerisms over the top, and having seen him escort Jamie up the walk eliminated any positive familial sentiment she might have had before this moment. She jerked his sleeve, pulling him to face her. "Mill, what the hell is going on?"

"You know Jamie, right? We're doing some business together and I discovered he was planning on spending Thanksgiving alone. I didn't think you'd mind, so I invited him to join us. You know the clan motto--the maximum the merrier." Her cousin winked at Jamie over her shoulder and Maxine heated with anger.

She didn't want to have anything to do with either of them, especially Jamie. Lowering her voice she spoke directly at her cousin. "You should have asked, Mill. This is going to be awkward as hell." She dragged a hand through her hair and took a deep breath.

"Maxi, you look wonderful." She found her hand clasped in Jamie's as he approached closer. She took a fast step backward to avoid his embrace.

Something solid hit her and she gave a startled cry. Familiar arms caught her around the waist and the spicy scent of Ryan's presence eased her anxiety. He twirled her around and planted a firm kiss on her lips as he molded their bodies together. Forgetting where she was for a moment, she responded eagerly. She relaxed, drinking in his flavor, enjoying the possessive stroke of his hands. He was all she was aware of, all she could focus on. With a final lingering touch he stepped away, brushed a finger over her kiss-swollen lips and winked at her. "We need to take out the turkeys soon. The stuffing is more than ready."

She cleared her throat in embarrassment. The glint in his eyes said he was remembering their morning interlude. The heat of her blush covered her face and he smiled lazily. She hit his chest lightly. "Be nice," she murmured.

He raised a brow. "I thought I was more than nice." Glancing over her shoulder, he tilted his head at the newcomers as if he'd just spotted them. "Hello. More family?" he asked as he tucked her under his arm.

Maxine fought the urge to roll her eyes, instantly reminded of dogs marking their territory. She clamped a lid on her laughter before it burst out. Leaning back comfortably, she settled against Ryan's torso before making introductions. "Ryan, this is Maximilian and Jamie. Guys, meet Ryan Claymore, my..." *Shit*. What should she call him--boyfriend? Lover? One was too juvenile, the other too risqué for this crowd, no matter how much truth there was in the statement.

Ryan reached around her to clasp Jamie's hand in his firm grip. Jamie's eyes almost popped out his head, a grimace appearing on his perfect brow. Maxine nudged Ryan in the side. "Hey, stop the pissing match. You don't need to break anything," she whispered. He released his hold slowly, making a show of placing his now free hand casually on Maxine's hip, his thumb caressing under the edge of her blouse.

Maximilian gaped openly at Ryan. "Your what?" He spun around to glare at Jamie. "You told me you were--"

"I hear the turkeys calling us," Ryan interrupted, tugging Maxine toward the kitchen.

"You boys look big enough to get yourself a drink if you want one. We'll see you at the table when everything is ready." He wove through the crowd of bodies, clutching her hand tightly until they were back in the kitchen amidst the bustle of serving spoons and heaping full bowls of mashed potatoes and stuffing.

"What's come over you?" Maxine asked quietly as they slipped past Auntie Maxence, who stirred the gravy with a vengeance. "Ryan!"

He pulled her into the pantry and firmly closed the door after them. Then she couldn't speak anymore, couldn't breathe. He consumed her, his tongue demanding access to her mouth, plunging her into a maelstrom of passion with barely an effort. As he trapped her against the back of the door, his rising erection pressed into her belly and heat spread throughout her body.

This was insane. There were close to sixty family members ranging throughout her house, including her sweet Gramma, and she was allowing herself to be ravished in the kitchen pantry. She put her hands on his chest and gave a firm push, reluctant to have his mouth depart from hers, but frantic to stop before they were discovered necking like horny teenagers.

"Stop. What is your problem?"

He stepped back and crossed his arms casually across his chest. "You neglected to warn me your ex-lover was a dead ringer for Orlando Bloom."

She snorted in disbelief. "This is because you've got a case of elf envy? Trust me, he's nothing compared to you. He's got the looks, but you've got the moves." Ryan's grin lit up the small room. "Now can we please go make nice with the family without you killing anyone?"

He wrinkled his face, like he was considering hard, and she hit him in the gut.

Laughing like conspirators, they snuck out to join the throng.

Ryan behaved himself throughout the dinner. In fact, he relaxed enough to enjoy the zany camaraderie of Maxine's uncles as they tried to out do each other storytelling. Afterward Junior gave him the third degree as they passed in the hallway, but overall the afternoon was an enjoyable diversion.

He loved watching Maxine. She floated in and out of conversations, rescued children from precarious positions on the furniture and railings without a qualm and doted on her Gramma. Laughter rang loud and long throughout the house, and suddenly something inside Ryan pinched tight and he found it hard to breathe.

He'd never attended this kind of function before. He'd never experienced the swell of confusion and love racing through the old building like a tornado. The only family he remembered were grim-faced, judgmental people. And now he had Carl, who couldn't have sat in this chaos without working himself into an emotional frenzy at the noise and chaos.

Perhaps they had more in common as brothers than he first realized.

He slipped away to calm his jangling nerves and stepped into the master bedroom to use the can before turning down the hall. Slow footsteps descending the small stairwell from the servant's level caught his attention. It was the dark-haired cousin who'd brought Max's ex with him.

Ryan's fingers twitched with the urge to pound the man's face.

Maximilian jerked to a stop, his momentary expression of panic quickly exchanged for a smirk. "So, enjoying your day with the clan?" He skittered to the side, tucking his hand into his pocket surreptitiously.

"It's been fine so far. Great place for a gathering this size."

"I'm sure." Maximilian rolled his eyes and snorted.

Ryan eyed the man with derision. "You've got something to say to me? I don't think we're the type for small talk, *Mill*."

The cousin held out his empty hands and shrugged. "Plain talk? Fine. I don't know what a nice girl like Maxine is doing with someone like you."

"Someone like me? You claiming to know all about me and you've found something lacking?"

"Not sure you're the right guy for her, that's all. Just out of the service, new company. Gotta wonder if part of the reason you're with her is for the nice digs. Since I understand you're now an item."

Maximilian had the balls to sneer at him and Ryan counted to ten. Maxine would understand if he broke her cousin's nose, wouldn't she? He counted to ten again, to be sure his mouth would work faster than his fists.

"You're pretty cocky for a cousin. I've already been cleared by her dad and her brother, so fuck off, your opinion means very little to me. In fact, the only person's opinion I give a shit about is Maxine's and she's pretty damn happy as far as I can tell." A door creaked behind him and Ryan spun to watch Jamie exit the master bedroom. "What the hell were you doing in there? How did you get in?" he demanded. Less than a minute had passed since Ryan had exited the empty room.

Jamie retreated. "I was looking for Maxi. I...poked my head in. She's not there."

Ryan narrowed his eyes. *What the fuck was going on?* "If you need to speak to her I'd appreciate it if you'd look in more public places than her bedroom." He stalked closer to the blond and grabbed the front of his shirt in a fist for a second before smoothing it carefully. He straightened Jamie's shoulders and tapped him casually on the cheek. "You don't want me to get the wrong idea about your intentions, do you?"

Jamie shook his head rapidly before nearly leaping down the stairs to get away.

"Wow, that was a manly display of uber-arrogance. Maxine must love you for your gentle, debonair ways, right?" Maximilian taunted.

Ryan leaned back casually on the wall, his arms crossed in front of him. "I really don't like you, dickhead, so if you're done, I suggest you rejoin the rest of the clan before I give in to the urge to *maximize* my pleasure and rearrange your teeth for you."

The slimy little weasel snuck past him. Once he stood at the top of the stairs with a clear path to safety, Maximilian paused. "I always assumed one of the things a real man did was provide the home. You're too modern and sophisticated for that. Besides, leeching is more productive with a girl like Maxine and a place like this one. Have a nice day." He turned tail and ran.

Ryan stared after him in confusion. The asshole had run off at the mouth for a reason, but what the hell was it? There was no way he believed the jerk was actually concerned about Maxine or brave enough to issue a serious challenge.

He slipped into the master bedroom and took a long, hard study of his surroundings. Nothing appeared to be disturbed but it had bothered him greatly to see Jamie exit the room. Screw the man's excuse, he hadn't "poked his head in". Jamie had walked out.

When had he walked in?

Ryan carefully paced the walls, examining them closely, but spotted nothing out of the ordinary. Perplexed, he made his way upstairs to check out Maximilian's mischief. Maxine had locked the doors along the top hall as a precaution to keep the younger family members from hiding and getting lost, but now Ryan hit a brick wall. If Maximilian had a key, which Ryan had

to conclude was a possibility, there was no way to know which room the ass had entered. No way to figure out what he'd been doing wandering around away from the rest of the party.

Giving up in frustration, he returned to the second floor, stopping to stare down into the life-filled main-floor room from his high vantage point. The house was filled with loud voices and enthusiastic noises, and he wasn't sure where he fit into the picture. The past week he'd been trying his damndest to simply let go and trust his relationship with Maxine had a future. They came from vastly different backgrounds. Fuck, hers was something from a *Waltons* rerun, but most of the time they fit together well.

The chemistry between them was undeniable.

While they were happy together as a twosome, she was obviously a more social creature than him. Would she be willing to give up some of the liveliness surrounding her to be a part of his world, with his commitment to include Carl in his life? Was it fair to ask her?

He spotted her crossing the living room. She looked up and their eyes met. The sweet smile she bestowed on him made his body tighten and his heart pound. Yeah, there were no easy answers, but as he descended the staircase toward her he realized there was no way he'd willingly throw away what was developing between them. Not without giving it his best damn shot.

She slipped her hand into his elbow, falling into step with him easily. "You okay?"

He nodded briskly. "Where's Tweedledee and Tweedledum?"

Maxine guided their steps around a couple of kids playing jacks on the floor and chuckled quietly at his quip. "If you mean Mill and Jamie, I think I saw them leave a few minutes ago. Why?"

"Did either one of them try to talk to you before they left?" he asked, stroking her fingers where they rested on his arm. She shook her head. "Good. I said Jamie was an ass, but Maximilian comes close to beating him for the title."

She turned and straightened his collar, smoothing her hands down his chest before sliding them around his body to hug him close. "Everything okay? You seem a little quiet."

He laughed. "Sweetheart, I could be shouting and I'd still seem quiet amidst this bedlam. I'm fine. In fact I was just about to go see if your father was serious about challenging me at cards. You don't mind if I beat him, do you?" He kissed her cheek chastely before heading to join the men at the table. It looked like a bit of research into Maximilian and Jamie was in order when the weekend was over.

Chapter Fifteen

"They're all a little intense, aren't they?"

Maxine smiled at her old roommate. "Well, you know guys and their deep inner need to dominate. Playing Risk lets them give in to the urge to be Supreme Commander of the Universe or something."

Valerie shrugged. "I hope they don't mind getting their butts kicked by a woman. Natasha is doing her usual 'poor me, don't pick on me' routine. I figure she should have them all beat in another three rounds."

They laughed together as they grabbed an armload of drinks and chips to deliver to the living room where the game was underway. "You'd think Junior would know by now his wife is a wiz at these games, but he still falls for it." Maxine held the kitchen door open with her hip to let Valerie enter the living room first.

Contentment filled her as she snuck up behind Ryan. Friends and family lounged around

the large coffee table, those remaining in the game intent on the action of the dice. Natasha had a smug little grin starting to appear and Maxine suspected her sister-in-law was up to her usual tricks.

She slid in beside Ryan and he curled an arm around her, tugging her close, without losing concentration on the game. "I think your family should all sign up for a tour of duty. I've never played with such cut-throat, sneaky bastards before in my entire life," he whispered in her ear.

Maxine giggled softly. "Skills honed by years of competition within the family. There's always someone willing to beat you, at whatever game you want to lose."

"I don't like losing."

A round of groans burst out as Natasha eliminated another opponent and laid down her third set of cards in one hand. "Looks like you have no choice tonight," Maxine teased.

Ryan grumbled good-naturedly and scooped up the dice to defend himself. She squeezed his arm and rose to let him play. Movement outside the window caught her eye and she wandered over to gaze at the yard.

A large flock of crows was visible in the light from the porch. Maxine wondered what had drawn them, but she was distracted as baby noises rose from the monitor on the side table.

Maxwell leapt up. "And that's my cue. Tasha, stop playing with your victim and just kill him already. It's time to head home." He dropped a kiss on his wife's cheek and headed to the main-floor bedroom to gather his daughter.

Ryan's deep laugh filled the room. "I concede." He held out a hand to Natasha and they shook, the rest of the party heading toward the food and drinks. "You're a good player."

Natasha winked at him. "It's all in getting to know your opponent. Next time I won't be able to pull the same moves on you."

It wasn't until after the party slowed down and the final guest left that Maxine remembered the crows. She walked the porch hand in hand with Ryan.

"Are you staying tonight?" she asked. They'd spent more and more time together but they hadn't spoken of any formal commitments. There was no way she wanted to leave her house, and she wasn't sure how Ryan would react if she asked him to move in with her.

"I can't." He tugged her to a stop and drew her against him for a kiss. His touch was gentle tonight, teasing and brief, and Maxine melted into him. "I have a couple of installations I need to finish early in the morning and it would be easier to head out from my apartment." He tapped her on the nose. "I have a beef with you though. You never told me you had another flat tire yesterday."

The cawing of the birds grew louder and they headed onto the lawn to investigate the racket. "I had a spare, I fixed it. I do know how to change a tire."

"I assumed you did, but feel free to call me anyway." He squeezed her hand and she glanced at his smiling face. "I don't mind coming to your rescue, okay?"

She nodded then groaned in disgust as she spotted the reason for the bird's presence. "Oh shit." The contents of the garbage cans from outside her backdoor were spread over the lawn, the cans themselves bobbing in the lake.

"Maxine, get back in the house," Ryan ordered.

She turned from where she'd squatted to gather the mess into a pile. "Why? I need to clean this up."

"You need to go inside. I'll take care of it." He glanced into the trees and across the property, a stern expression on his face. "Whoever tipped the cans could still be around."

Maxine sighed. "Good grief. It's annoying as hell, but it's just garbage cans. It's kids, a stupid prank. They're probably home in bed laughing at the joke they pulled. I'm going to get some new bags. If you grab the cans we can get it cleaned up faster than if you stand there arguing with me." She stomped indoors.

Frustration rocked her again, mixed with a bit of fear. The vandalism around the house continued, but nothing more dangerous than these childish pranks. Was it a group of teens in the community with too much time on their hands? A couple of days after Thanksgiving she'd discovered all her deck chairs in the lake. She hadn't mentioned it to Ryan, but her flat tire the previous day was the third that week. Contacting the neighbors to ask them to keep a better eye on their kids hadn't worked. She was getting tired of dealing with the uncertainty of the mischief. Her imagination continued to suggest something more ominous was at the bottom of it. So many incidents couldn't be a fluke, but damn if she wanted to run with her tail between her legs just when she was starting to spread her wings.

Ryan shook his head. He hauled the second tire off and popped it into his trunk to take into the repair shop. He'd offered to help her but didn't think Maxine would have to call the very next day to inform him she had two flat tires. It was past noon before he got away from his commitments. "Did you drive over broken glass?"

"No, I don't think so. It's too much of a coincidence I keep getting flats. Is there a way someone is making them go flat? Damn, I need to visit my neighbors again and get them to rein in their kids at night." Maxine stood and brushed the dirt from her knees. "You want lunch before you head out?"

He laughed. "Nice attempt at changing the topic. No, I don't need lunch. Yes, someone could be messing with your tires. I'll visit the neighbors."

She paused, a frown creasing her face. "Why would you do that? I'll speak to them."

"Sometimes having a guy show up will intimidate the kids more. If it is kids, and I'm still not convinced." Maxine had had more troubles since moving into the house than any one person should experience. Something didn't feel right and Ryan wanted to get to the bottom of it. He worried about her safety when he wasn't with her. Worried something serious would occur.

The whole concept of what it meant to care for someone was driving him crazy. Carl needed his time and energy, and now Ryan found he constantly wanted to be around Maxine. She was on his mind most of the day. Not only because they were dynamite in bed, but because he wanted to make sure the strange occurrences were only pranks and not something darker.

By the time the tires were fixed it was after six, so he sweet-talked Maxine into going out for dinner. Sitting by the ocean, some of his concerns receded as they chatted about Christmas plans. He held her hand as they enjoyed each other's company.

It was becoming clearer someone like Maxine was what he needed in his life. What he'd done before wasn't living, not like he experienced now. Her attitude encouraged him to look around with new eyes, to appreciate the vibrancy of the moment. She gave so willingly, not even noticing how often she changed her own plans to accommodate others. She joined him when he dropped in on Carl, babysat cousins at the drop of a hat and worshipped her Gramma. Her generous heart floored him, and shamed him. Slowly he began to open up to his brother in an attempt to find a deeper place in his heart for the boy. The concept of family was evolving from an evil memory to a hopeful place--a place where he might be able to see a future beyond being

alone.

All because of Maxine.

They returned to the house and even as they drove up he saw the damage.

"Oh my God, Ryan, someone's torn up the lawn. How could they do that?" Maxine leapt from the car the instant he stopped, and he fought the urge to pick her up and carry her into her house. Deep ridges cut into the turf, the soil laid bare in semicircular tracks.

"It's not the neighbor's kids. Your pranksters were pulling doughnuts on the lawn with a half-ton truck or something. Call the police. They can check the tire tracks." Ryan glanced at Maxine's car. "Fuck."

He'd put the repaired tires back on and yet the car now sat impossibly low, the rims resting on the ground. There was glass on the ground in front of the shattered window and when he peeked inside the stereo was missing, cords dangling from the dash.

"Oh shit. Not again." Maxine continued to swear softly as Ryan debated what to do. One thing was fucking sure, she wasn't staying alone in the house until he had a chance to do a few more additions to the security system.

By the time the police had come and gone, Ryan had the first part of his plan figured out. "I'm going to install an alarm in your car and I'm adding cameras outside the house as well."

She stared at him in surprise as they sat at the island in the kitchen, drinking hot tea. They'd just finished covering the car windows with plastic to protect the interior until she could take it to the repair shop. "The outdoor cameras I can understand. I'd love to catch these jerks in the act and the house is too far from any neighbors for them to see the vandals. But an alarm--how would that stop them? It makes noise after they've already broken the window or whatever. That sounds a little over the top."

"Over the top would be not doing everything we can to stop these guys. So far they've just been vandals, we don't want to let them feel like they've got the power to make any further moves on your territory."

Maxine waved her hand. "You make it sound like I've got the Mafia moving into the area. I still think it's likely kids with too much time on their hands caused most of the vandalism. The truck is the part I don't understand. Add the outside cameras, they make sense, but I don't want an alarm in my car. I hear them going off all the time in the shopping mall parking lots. All it takes is a good hip check and you've got wailing noises. With my luck it would make the kid's day to have an alarm to set off every morning at three a.m."

"You're not thinking reasonably about this," he complained.

"You're worrying too much, Ryan," she insisted. "I know you do security for a living but this is just...I don't know, bad luck."

"Like the phone calls before were bad luck?"

She froze. "That's not fair. The two are not connected at all."

"You don't know that for sure, and that's why I want to do everything we can to make sure the house is safe. That you're safe." He rose, walked to her side and pulled her into his arms. "I want to take care of you, don't you see? Let me take care of you." God help him if anything happened to her.

And that knowledge scared him almost as much as the idea of her being hurt.

Chapter Sixteen

A bitter taste filled her mouth as she looked at the mess. She closed her eyes for a moment to settle her churning stomach, debating long and hard before pulling out her cell phone.

"Ryan, it's happened again. Someone's vandalized my car." She walked slowly back toward the house, glancing around warily.

He cursed on the other end of the line and she sighed, recognizing his tone. Shit, she shouldn't have called him. He was going to go ballistic on her. "Damn it, get inside the house and lock the door. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Don't come home early, it's only cleanup as usual. I'm getting used to it. Don't--" It was her turn to swear as the line went dead. She dropped her head into her hands and then went into the house to get a garbage bag and the hand vacuum. Hopefully most of the mess would be gone before Ryan got home.

This time the pranksters seemed to have put even more effort into the destruction. Both headlights were smashed, the side mirrors ruined, the upholstery sliced to ribbons.

It was enough to make her cry.

Other than the sheer inconvenience of having to get her car repaired, Ryan was driving her mad. She understood why he'd insisted on taking her home with him the first night when the lawn was damaged, but once he'd installed the outside cameras she'd expected him to lay off a bit. Instead, he'd continued to tighten security around her like she was a visiting diplomat.

At first it had been slightly endearing to see him hell-bent on taking care of her, but as the days passed he got more controlling. He arranged for her to call him at regular intervals. He slept over, and not because they were in the throes of body-melting sexual bliss. In fact he'd barely touched her since that night--certainly not with his previous enthusiasm and commanding nature. If she'd felt like her family had been demanding, Ryan now won the award for "most overbearing and possessive".

Her frustrations had nothing to do with his concerns for her safety--that she could accept. Yes, she was worried too. Yes, the whole situation had somehow gotten out of control and there seemed to be no easy solutions. She just didn't appreciate his attempts to hide her away. When he brought potentially dangerous activities to her attention, she'd accepted his warnings. She didn't go out on the porch alone at night, didn't leave the doors unlocked. Hell, she had police on speed dial and a baseball bat beside her bed. In the midst of the chaos, she wanted her lover back, not the overprotective bossy soul he'd become.

No matter what else, she was determined to talk this out with him today. He made her body thrill, and she cared deeply for him, but there was something really wrong with how he was treating her, and it was time it stopped. Maybe when he got to see the tapes off the security camera from this incident, he'd calm down.

She went to work, sweeping up the glass, removing the dangling plastic and wires. There was nothing to do about the seats except cover them with a blanket until she could make an appointment to get them fixed. She was tying up the garbage bag when Ryan pulled in behind her, his tires loud on the gravel approach to the house.

"What are you doing out here?" he demanded.

Maxine gave him a glare. "I'm picking daisies. What does it look like I'm doing?" She dropped the bag on the ground and gathered the broom and vacuum. "Did you want to have supper early since you're here already? I've got hamburgers in the fridge."

He blocked her path as she headed to the house. "Why are you acting like nothing happened?"

"Because there's nothing I can do? Just...grab the garbage for me and let's go inside."

He stared at her, his fists resting on his hips. The energy radiating off him made her weak at the knees with want. It seemed no matter what happened around them, he still made her hot. Made her wet.

"How could you not hear them breaking the glass?" he complained.

Doused by a bucket of cold water, her libido leapt off the fire into the freezer. So much for trying to convince him to forget the whole thing. "It's a big place. Maybe I was in the basement, or maybe I was working in the office at the other side of the house. When I'm busy I don't hear much of anything. It's just some kids getting off trying to mess with me."

"I'm installing a car alarm this time," he warned.

"But--"

"No, I'm not letting you refuse anymore. The alarm goes in, and that's final."

Maxine's temper flared. Enough was enough. "Shut up. I'm as sick of this as you are. Actually, I'm even more tired of it because not only do I get to deal with my insurance agency again, I get to deal with you, *again*."

He grunted at her. "What the hell is that suppose to mean? I'm here to help you, I'm not something you need to deal with."

She laughed at him, the sound coming out high and brittle. "Oh God, listen to yourself. You don't even know you're doing it. Ryan, I admire the way you're totally in command of yourself, and I love the way you take charge in the bedroom, but this is my life. You can't control every bit of me. So back off." She grabbed the garbage bag and vacuum, and brushed past him, feeling surprisingly invigorated by her shouting.

He was at her shoulder in a second, hard on her heels as they entered the house. She ignored him as she walked through the kitchen to dump the garbage in the can outside the backdoor. Ryan disappeared like a ghost and she was grateful for a moment by herself.

If she was honest, she *was* nervous about the vandalism. The whole bravado thing was her way of dealing with the fear that rose every time she imagined someone touching her things. The fear that grew worse when she imagined herself being trapped or assaulted. But being smothered by Ryan's good intentions wasn't the way to deal with it.

Maxine rested her head against the fridge door. Maybe she should put the house up for sale and move somewhere smaller and more protected. Even with Ryan sleeping over some nights, she still felt like she was rambling in too big a space. Oh crap, she was messed up. She loved this house, loved what it represented as a part of her family heritage. Yet she couldn't keep going on this way.

The door to the kitchen opened and Ryan wandered in, deep lines of concern on his face. "Did you turn off the security system? Or parts of it?" His voice was subdued.

She shook her head. "I haven't changed a thing since you added the camera link. What's wrong?"

"I must have forgotten to connect a line, the entire recording is blank. I was sure..." He stared distracted into space for a moment.

"There's no recording of who trashed the car?"

He paced the floor. "Fuck, I don't know how this happened." Guilt poured off him in waves and her impatience with him eased. His self-appointed task--to protect her--had gone wrong.

"Ryan, it's okay. Hey, I need to talk to you." She tugged his hand and led him to the loveseat in the cozy nook by the fireplace. He joined her and she snuggled in close. As his arm

cradled her, she breathed his spicy scent and her tension faded. They sat, curled around each other, for a long time, silence between them.

"Have I really been that big a jerk lately?" he asked quietly. He twisted his fingers in her hair as he pressed his lips against her temple.

She hesitated. He needed to change his attitude, that was for damn sure. He probably didn't realize he'd taken things too far. "Yeah, you've been an ass, but I understand your motives were good. That's not what I want to talk about." She leaned away enough to be able to look up into his face. "Do you think I should sell the house?"

His expression registered his shock. "Are you kidding? Why would you sell the house?"

She shrugged. "Because... Well, I'll admit it. You're right, there's something weird going on. It's too big a place for me all by myself anyway. You said it yourself, it's a tough location to make secure with the isolation, and the long driveway, and..." Damn it, she was not going to cry.

Ryan lifted her chin with a finger. He stared at her until she felt his compassion slide through her all the way to the bottom of her toes. "No way. You love this house. You love the memories and the history and the whole connection to your family. I'm sorry if me freaking out made you consider the option of selling. I think you need to do everything possible for security purposes, but sell? Not the solution."

She nodded slowly. "I wish it would all go away, all the uncertainty and confusion. I just want to keep on enjoying being with you, and enjoying my job. I love visiting Carl, and I've got a date to have tea with Gramma next Saturday, and, shit, life is so good. Except for this crappy feeling I have things aren't going to get better around the house."

He pulled her into his lap and rested his chin on top of her head. Snuggled tightly to his chest, the pulse of his heartbeat calmed and reassured her. "We'll do everything we can to figure out who's behind this. I've made sure the outside camera is working. And the rest? You tell me what I can do to make your life easier."

"You're not going to order me around?" She poked him lightly in the ribs with her finger before planting her whole hand on the firm muscles of his chest.

"Oh, I know what I want to do. I want to move in here and wrap you up in so many layers of protection you feel like a chrysalis, but I do have ears, sweetheart. I'm a good listener. You don't want me to organize your life, I won't. I'll wait until I'm asked." He skimmed a hand along her thigh, cradling her closer.

Maxine swallowed hard. She'd been wondering how he'd take the suggestion of him moving in. He seemed too much of an alpha to want to give up his turf. "Would you really move in with me?"

He tensed slightly under her and for a moment she thought she'd misspoken. "Is that a formal invitation?"

They stared at each other, probing for any hint of misgiving, any hint of concern it was too soon, too big of a step. All she saw was his love, the depth of his passion and caring for her. "It's more than an invitation, it's a bit of a plea. I need you. Not because of the vandalism, but because of who you are."

He smiled at her, sweet and possessive at the same time. "I'd be honored to move in." He lowered his head and their lips connected. His touch sent tingles down her spine. The nervous tension of earlier morphed into sexual energy and she shifted until she straddled him. Under her crotch she felt his body harden, pressing against her pussy.

Tongues and teeth, lips and hands. Everything moved at the same time, exploring, feasting, touching. Maxine let herself float off into sensation and desire, her body craving every

bit of him he could provide. She purred as something deep inside her clicked, more content than she ever remembered.

Suddenly she was airborne, and she automatically wrapped her legs around his hips to hang on for dear life as he strode through the house and up the stairs.

"What are you doing, Ryan?"

"Bedroom. Now." She laughed and dropped her lips to his neckline, licking and nipping at his chin. He lowered her to the bed and held her in place, his gaze wild and possessive. "Take off your clothes. Everything but your bra."

Maxine tugged at the button of her jeans, slowly opening and unzipping. "You're sounding a little bossy there, mister."

He crossed his arms and stared at her, the expression on his face heating her to boiling. "I told you, I'm a good listener. Get them off now and sit on the edge of the bed."

She stopped for a second, trying to remember what she'd said to make him even more dominant in the bedroom than usual. "Oh crap."

"Oh yeah, sweetheart, you like how I take control in the bedroom? Get ready for a wild ride. I've been holding back, but since you admit you like my style, let's have some fun."

Chapter Seventeen

A tremble shook her body, her crotch instantly soaking wet. His tone was frightening but an extreme turn-on as well. She tugged off her jeans and panties and snuck a glance at him. He winked.

"I won't do anything you don't like. You know that, right?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. It felt strange to sit bare-bottomed wearing only her bra while Ryan remained fully clothed before her. He stroked her hair, removing her ponytail holder and pulling the long strands over her shoulders. Soft touches massaged her scalp, his knuckles brushing against her cheek.

He stood nestled between her legs, his erection bulging the fabric of his dress pants. The urge to touch him, to kiss him as intimately as he'd kissed her grew strong, and she buried her face into his belly and breathed deep. The spicy smell of his skin pooled around her, and she held onto his belt with both hands.

He'd never demanded anything of her in terms of touching him, except during lovemaking when he had taught her how he enjoyed being stroked. It was time to take another new step. She reached for his buckle, licking her lips in nervous anticipation.

Ryan shook his head. "No, sweetheart. I have other things in mind for tonight."

She ignored him and opened his trousers, slipping them past his hips. "You didn't say I had to, but I want to. May I?" She stared in fascination as his cock bounced free directly in front of her nose. Ryan's sweet musky scent greeted her and she took him into her hands.

"Fuck, yeah, you don't need to ask permission. Just watch your teeth."

Hard as steel under her grip, she felt his pulse through her fingertips. Thick veins stood in high relief under the satiny soft skin. A pearl-colored drop of fluid beaded on the slit and she reached with her tongue to lap it off. It was salty and warm, and far more pleasant than she'd expected. She licked again, this time letting her tongue explore the crest of the head, the spot where he'd shown her earlier he liked massaged with her fingertips.

Ryan shifted his weight, his hips jerking when she covered the entire tip with her mouth. The warmth of his cock felt strange but satisfying, especially when she glanced up to see him

standing with eyes closed, his chest shaking with each rapid breath.

There was so much of him, there was no way he would fit completely into her mouth. She wrapped a hand around him, first licking then sucking, followed by hard strokes. Maxine enjoyed herself, swaying her body back and forth in a comfortable rhythm. He grunted and made small moans of pleasure. Her own reaction startled her as she grew more excited. She dropped one hand to her crotch, rubbing her pussy, moisture dripping from her body.

He laced his fingers through her hair and stilled her, pulling his cock from her lips with a pop. Ryan knelt and pressed his lips to hers, reaching in to stroke her teeth and the roof of her mouth. Maxine unbuttoned his shirt, pushed the fabric off his shoulders as she suckled on his tongue.

He brushed his fingers along her skin, his knuckles stroking the top curve of her breasts. His muscular torso rubbed her inner thighs as he leaned closer. All these sensations dragged Maxine farther from her worries and pushed her hard into the place where there was nothing but need.

Desire.

Wanting.

She wiggled her hips to the very edge of the bed, attempting to bring her aching core into contact with his body.

Ryan adjusted the cups of her bra, folding the fabric in the cup in half to hold her breasts with the nipples visible, the pink circles drawn into taut peaks. Blood pounded through her, tingling heat shooting into fireworks as he lowered his head and moistened both nipples in turn with a suckling kiss.

"I love seeing you on display," he said. "I'm going to buy you sexy lingerie as a part of your Christmas present. Sheer bras with cutouts, crotchless panties." He lowered his gaze and Maxine blushed as she realized she was wide open to his vision, moisture leaking from her body and clinging to her curls. He touched her, one hand cupping her pussy gently, holding her. "I want to go all caveman and order you to never wear panties around the house. I'd love to know I could lift your skirt and bury my aching cock in your sweet, tight body in an instant. To know my fingers or my mouth could cover you and slip inside and drive you wild without a moment's notice." His voice grew darker, deeper, as he spoke, the thumb of his hand matching his words and pressing into her core.

Maxine grew very still, picturing herself stalked around the house, Ryan taking her anywhere, anytime, and a small whimper escaped her.

"Sweetheart?" Ryan leaned his bare chest against her, nuzzling the pulse point in her neck. "You okay?"

"Oh hell, that's hot. Don't stop." She panted the words out, images flashing through her brain of them having sex on the stairwell, him slipping into her while she worked in her office. All the naughty places and things she'd never dreamed she'd wanted.

She felt like she was emerging from a cocoon.

"Don't stop what? This?" He buried his thumb as far as it would go, the rest of his fingers sliding under her body toward her butt and she groaned. "Or do you like the dirty talk? You want me to tell you how I'd love to take you and bend you over the antique couch downstairs, rip your pants off your ass and thrust into you so hard you see stars? I'd pick you up and place you on the kitchen counter that's the right height for me to fuck you while I'm standing up. I'd drape your legs over my arms and pound into you until we're both screaming. Or how about one of my favorite fantasies? Someday we'll go outside and use the porch swing. I can see it, the sunlight

shining on your breasts, the gorgeous highlights in your hair dancing while you ride my cock."

Constant motion from his thumb and fingers combined with his words, and her body tightened with a building climax. Ryan licked his way along the edge of her bra cup, sucking the nipple into his mouth hard enough she shouted in surprise. While he alternated sucking and biting both breasts until they ached, Maxine clutched his shoulders, scraping her fingertips up his arms to tangle in his hair, dragging his head away from one breast when the nipple grew too sensitive to handle another touch. Below, his thumb stroked and circled her opening before plunging in time and again. He took the moisture from her body and pushed it backward with the rest of his fingers on each stroke, brushing her anus gently at first and then with more force. A second touch joined in and he pinched her clit between his fingers.

Her pussy clutched at his thumb, wanting more, needing to be stretched and filled, even as the waves of her orgasm rocked her core. "Yes, oh crap, yes, that's good."

He lifted her still-shaking body to the center of the bed and flipped her over, pulling her hips into the air. *Damn, she was fucking gorgeous.* "Yeah, it's good. But I never told you my absolute top fantasy, did I? Because that's what we're doing next."

He grabbed a couple of pillows and slipped them under her hips. She was mellow from her climax and he could barely see for wanting her. Stripping off the rest of his clothes, he grabbed a tube of lubricant from beside the bed and rejoined her.

She watched him, her pale green eyes wide as he stared down at her, running his hand over the curve of her ass, stroking her smooth skin. A tremor shook her. "Are you going to...?"

He smiled. In spite of the advances in her modesty over the past months, the words were still too much. "Take your virgin ass? Oh yeah, I'm going to make love to you a brand-new way and it's going to feel fucking great for both of us. Do you trust me?" She nodded so fast he had to laugh. "You want to try it, don't you?"

Maxine wiggled her hips and he smelt her arousal. Hell, the scent of sex hung in the air all around them. "I want to try it, but I'm a little scared. Oh please, I need you."

They kissed again and Ryan distracted her with his mouth on hers while he brushed a fingertip up and down the tender line of skin between her ass cheeks. He didn't penetrate, just stroked, and slowly the tension gripping her flowed away.

"Hmm, that feels nice." Maxine drew her legs wider apart, opening for him and he smiled.

He massaged her ass cheeks, one in each hand, the tight rosette between playing peek-a-boo with his vision. Ryan lowered himself between her legs and covered her pussy with his mouth, thrusting with his tongue. He ate hungrily, the sweet cream from her body teasing him, building the desire to bury himself deep, but he held off. Once she was making noises of need, he lapped the length of her slit, circling her clit before drawing a long stroke all the way to her ass. The first time he touched her anus with his tongue she hissed.

"Feels good, right?"

"I can't believe you're touching me there. Oh my God!"

Ryan had hardened the tip of his tongue and rimmed her hole, pushing against the tight muscle and slipping in a tiny way. Maxine fell completely silent. He drew back to check her expression. "Okay?"

"I'm very embarrassed by how turned on I am right now. How can that feel so wonderful?" She buried her face in the mattress, but didn't shift away from him.

He tugged gently on her hair until he could look into her eyes. "There's nothing wrong

with what we're doing. Close your eyes if you have to, but get the idea out of your head that this is dirty in any way. It's making love and whatever we want to do together is right."

Waiting for her response was brutal as his cock throbbed with the need to be surrounded by her tight warmth. If she wasn't ready for this experience yet, he'd give her time. He might spontaneously combust if she asked him to stop, but he'd do it for her. Being in control in the bedroom meant being in control of himself as well, and he was damned if he would push her faster than she could handle.

She rose on her elbows, auburn hair tousled around her shoulders, eyes bright as she stared at him. Then she licked her lips slowly. "Fuck me. Anywhere. Everywhere. I want it all."

Hallelujahs rang in his ears and Ryan moved over her like a wild thing, ready and eager. He drove two fingers into her cunt and curled the tips to stroke the sweet spot deep within. Burying his face between her legs, he feasted on her, lapping the cream that covered his fingers, coated her labia and smeared on the inside of her thighs. He stroked her anus again and again with his tongue, teasing while he continued to pump into her passage.

Maxine writhed under him, panting with excitement. Her hips lifted toward him, moving closer to his seeking tongue and he rewarded her enthusiasm by flicking her clit. She screamed out loud as her climax hit. He took advantage of the moment and pressed one of his now wet fingers into the tight rosette of her ass. The walls of her pussy pulsed with her orgasm on the other side of the thin membrane separating her passages as he slowly slid the digit in all the way.

"Hmmm, feels wonderful good." Maxine's voice had a slight slur as she wiggled against his hand.

"You're getting sex drunk, aren't you, sweetheart?" Ryan shifted position, added more lube to his fingers and squeezed a generous amount on top of her hole. "I love the sultry way you sound when you've just had an orgasm. You sound satisfied and seriously well fucked." He leaned closer and whispered as he slipped two fingers into her ass, working the lube inside. "I can hardly wait to hear what you sound like when we're done tonight."

"Oh, yes. Oh, you're killing me. Ohhhh!" Maxine lifted her hips higher, her knees spread to the sides. Everything was wide open to his vision, his touch. His cock. Ryan lined up with her sopping wet passage and slipped inside with one smooth thrust. Heaven wrapped around him with close, hot pressure. Her tight grip eased the pain of waiting, but threatened to pull him over the top. He pulled back slowly, rocking in and out only an inch or two while he concentrated on preparing her ass.

She groaned and leaned his direction.

"You're getting to be nice and loud in the bedroom. I like that, it lets me know what you think feels good, and what feels great." Carefully he added a third finger, fighting back the need to move faster. Slowly, carefully, he stretched her.

Maxine slammed a hand on the mattress beside her head and gave a throaty cry. "Shit, you want me to tell you what would feel great? Fuck me already. I need more, I need--"

He heard nothing more with the blood roaring in his ears. She wanted it now? Oh hell yeah, he could do that. He replaced his fingers with the head of his cock, and pressed. The sight of her hole stretching open around him was intoxicating. The sensation of the tight ring of muscle slowly relaxing until the fat head of his cock eased through numbed his brain. The slow hiss of Maxine's exhale broke through his fixated mind and he glanced up to see her staring over her shoulder at him, a happy smile on her face.

"Oh my God, I've never felt so full in my life."

"You're good?"

He watched carefully as her eyes rolled back in response to him pushing in another inch. "I'm fucking wonderful."

He gripped her waist, the softness of her skin reminding him to control the thrust of his hips instead of driving all the way in one hard blast. He squeezed his eyes tight and forced his way in, one small stroke after another. When his groin hit her ass he swore. It felt like he was inside a tightly fisted hand, massaging and heating him. Urging him to move.

Long, slow rocking movements followed, dragging him back and forth through her body. He reached around to manipulate her clit and Maxine gasped again. He was close, so close to blowing his wad before she had enough time to finish rising to another peak. At least that's what he thought until she threw her head back and gave a loud keen of delight. Her muscles grabbed him, attempting to lock him in place. He'd never been happier to release his control. Three final thrusts were as much as he lasted before his vision blurred and he slammed them together, his cock spurting semen deep into her ass as he cried out her name.

It was hell to leave her body. Hell to leave her on the bed to get a cloth to clean her up, but heaven to be able to arrange her boneless body so he could curl around her. He stared at her flushed skin, her glassy eyes and the sated expression on her face. She was beautiful to start with, but the look of her bathed with the afterglow of their lovemaking touched him deep inside. Longing for more of her, all of her, rose in his heart. He needed someone like Maxine to make him whole.

"Holy shit, that was the most incredible sex I've ever had in my fucking life. I need a nap. Two days, maybe three. Fuck." It took a few attempts for Maxine to get all the words out as she stopped to suck in air, tremors still rocking her body.

"You're getting to have quite the potty mouth, sweetheart," he teased.

Maxine blushed and Ryan roared with laughter. He rolled her under him. "Damn it, never change. You're delightful and sexy and you rock my world." He kissed her sweetly before turning her around to spoon against him, her calm breathing letting him know she was soon asleep.

"I think I'm in love with you," he whispered, just to try it out.

It sounded pretty damn perfect.

Chapter Eighteen

Maxine closed the door behind her, thrilled at the progress she'd made in redecorating the main-floor bedroom. Carl's head therapist had come over and made a few suggestions for final changes, but on the whole he thought she'd done a fantastic job of preparing the space for Carl.

She examined the posters and furniture. Everything was as close a duplicate as possible to what he had at the nursing home. It would make him feel more comfortable and increase the likelihood he could spend a night. After talking with the nurses and physicians, she understood Carl needed to remain at the care center most of the time. She wanted to at least attempt to provide an opportunity for the occasional overnight visit. Ryan had looked very surprised when she proposed setting up the room, yet she knew he'd been quietly pleased.

She ran down to the basement to grab a load of laundry, humming a carol. Walking back through the living room she could see the results of her morning's work. The house had begun to feel festive. She'd set up her laptop in the kitchen, working on a project while she baked cookies for Christmas. Last night Ryan had brought down the first couple of storage boxes of decorations and she'd already emptied them. She passed the garlands and streamers wrapped around the

railings of the staircase and many happy memories rose to the surface. There was a lot of house to decorate still, and yet she looked forward to it all. It was another chance to introduce Ryan to some of her family traditions.

Satisfaction welled up inside. He'd been much more careful to ask instead of order her around lately. Except in the bedroom. There he seemed to be getting bossier than ever, and she loved it.

She paused in the middle of folding towels in the master bathroom. She loved *him*. Time passed unnoticed as she stood silently, watching her reflection in the mirror as the knowledge swept over her. She was in love. And she suspected he might feel the same way about her.

While neither of them had said it, there was more to their relationship than the friendship they shared. Far more than the sexual games they played. The feeling inside when she woke in the morning with his arms around her, and the expression in his eyes when he kissed her good night--it was love.

Now she needed to find the right time and place to tell him.

She burst out of the bathroom filled with excited energy. A sudden movement to her left caught her attention just before pain exploded in the back of her head. She slammed into the nearby dresser, rolling off to crash onto the hardwood floor. Her arm and shoulder hit hard, there was a loud cracking noise and searing agony linked her head and her arm. Blackness enveloped her.

The world spun, pain throbbed through her arm and head, and something liquid and sticky clung to her forehead. Maxine rolled over and was violently sick, the vomiting racking her body with pain. She attempted to rise to her elbows to stop the splitting agony from taking over. She waited until the spasms stopped, gasping through her sobs, trying to focus. It took a while to remember where she was and the muted light around her echoed with the rasping sounds of her frightened breathing. The stabbing shards of pain that drilled through her every time she moved made her cautious, hesitant to shift position.

What the hell had happened? Had a floorboard collapsed? She found her mind flitting from idea to idea. Was it an earthquake, or had she fainted? None of it made sense and the world wavered again. Brightly colored swirls hung before her eyes, and she blinked back tears. She drew a shaky breath and let it out as slowly as possible, reducing the noise she made to listen for the sound of anyone near by. If she didn't move the pain in her head and shoulder reduced to a mild throbbing. It ached, but not enough to make her scream. Oh hell, she didn't think she could cry out for help, the idea of making any noise above a whimper hurt. She lay on the floor, cold creeping into her body. Shivers started, triggering the pain to return stronger.

She had to get help for herself. Ryan wouldn't be home for hours and she was sure she would lose consciousness before then. Nausea rose again and she fought it off. It was impossible to reach the stairs and crawl them. Her cell phone was downstairs. Slowly Maxine rolled to her belly, crying as she released the pressure on her injured arm and shoulder. Something trickled down the back of her neck. She realized it was blood and shuddered. Lowering her forehead to the floor, she cried as quietly as she could, attempting not to move, not to let her body become aware of the fear hovering around her.

She wanted Ryan. He'd take care of her; he was always taking care of her. She remembered his expression as they'd made love that morning, the passion and the tenderness wrapped together, their bodies and souls connected. A tear rolled down her cheek and landed on

her arm, and suddenly there was a thin glimmer of hope.

The sensor.

Ryan had installed a moisture sensor in the bathroom. If she triggered it, the alarm would call someone to check the house in less than fifteen minutes.

Dragging her body along the floor took forever, but when Maxine attempted to rise the room spun so hard she toppled to the ground, exacerbating her arm and shoulder injury further. Guiding herself with her good hand she stuck as close to the vanity as possible until she finally reached the other side. She had to get the sensor wet for long enough to make it react. Her mouth was dry, the water taps too far above her head to try and reach. She stared longingly at the tub, even the toilet, but the water in them was as good as being a mile away. Blackness covered her vision again and she laid her head on her arm willing it to pass. Just a little longer. She needed to stay conscious for just a little longer.

She shuffled closer to the wall to feel her way to the sensor. Desperation drove her and gave her more strength than she thought possible. It was there, the narrow tube, low to the ground. Touching her fingers gingerly to the back of her head, she drew them away sticky with moisture. It took a few repeats to gather enough blood. It was cold on the floor, her head ached, and tremors racked her body before the blessed sound of a faint beeping from the main floor reached her ears.

Maxine put her head down and let the pain wash over her, numbness and darkness taking control.

Machines hummed in the background, low and unnatural, and there was a lingering odor that reminded Ryan of antiseptic cleansers and recycled air. Hospitals tried to make their rooms as pleasant as possible but they still were fucking awful places.

He stared at Maxine, tightly clutching her hand that lay on top of the pristine white sheets.

"You should go get a coffee or something. They said they don't expect her to move for an hour with all the drugs they've pumped into her." Maxwell Junior slid into the chair next to him.

Ryan glanced up in surprise. He'd never been so distracted on a mission to miss the arrival of another person into his immediate area. Of course, he'd never been distracted by having to sit and watch someone he loved lie in a bed, beaten, with a concussion. "You're one to talk. Don't you have a wife and baby to go home to?"

Junior nodded. "I'll head home soon. I hoped I'd still be here when she woke. I need to know she's okay." He hesitated for a minute before lowering his voice. "You're going to make sure she's okay, right?"

This was about more than the injuries that caused Maxine to lie so still and pale. "You wondering about my relationship with your sister? That's a matter between us. I thought I made that clear the last time we talked."

Junior sighed. "I'm not asking what your intentions are or offering to meet you for pistols at dawn. I love my sister a lot and she means the world to me, but she's got a mind of her own. I'm just curious if you're planning on sticking around. The ass she was with before was all wrong for her, but there's something about you I like." Maxwell leaned back in his chair. "Even if you do cheat at cards."

Ryan laughed quietly. It felt good to release a little of the tension wrapped around his

brain. He liked Maxwell, liked how the man wasn't pushy but quietly stuck to his guns until he got what he wanted.

Kind of like having a mosquito in the room--you had to pay attention.

"You're jealous because you haven't figured out how to count cards. Stick on a nineteen, it's a very basic rule..." Ryan forced the light-hearted conversation out, but what he wanted to do was kick some ass. He'd known there was danger, and he'd screwed up somehow and let her down. She'd been hurt and it was more than he could bear. He twisted his body to be able to continue holding her hand and face her brother better. He considered for a moment.

"My first reaction is to say again it's none of your business what's between me and Max and tell you to fuck off, but your family is one of the tightest knit groups I've ever met. I can understand why you're asking and I'm willing to share I'm planning to do my damndest to make her happy. I'm also going to figure out what the hell is going on around the house so we never end up in this stinking hospital again."

Junior nodded slowly in response. "That's more than I was asking for, and about what I expected." He rose to his feet, brushed a kiss on Maxine's cheek and headed to the door. He turned back to stare at Ryan. "For what it's worth, I like you. I think you've got a good heart. You might even have the nerves it takes to be part of this family."

Ryan snorted. "I was in the fucking military and you wonder if I've got enough balls?"

"Oh, you're physically and mentally strong, but family comes in all shapes and sizes, there's no one size fits all. You get to pick your friends. You don't get to pick everyone in your family, and it takes a special kind of courage to survive that reality." Junior glanced at Maxine once more. "Call me when she wakes?"

Ryan nodded, his brain full and his heart aching, as Maxwell left the room.

How had someone gotten into the house to injure Maxine? All the safeguards had still been in place when the alarm went off. He'd made it to the house shortly after the emergency response team arrived and they'd had to break a window to get in. Seeing her white face and the bloodstains as the EMT carried her out on stretcher had wrenched something inside him, and he'd happily kill the bastard who'd hurt her when he found him.

A bigger question nagged at him. Why were all these things happening? It made no sense. Maxine's Gramma had lived in the house for years without any disturbances and suddenly, once she moved out, the place got taken over by fucking ghosts.

Maxine shifted on the bed and drew his attention. She was going to be frightened as hell to know someone had broken in. It was his damn fault she was hurt, and it was breaking his heart to see her lying there bruised and battered. He needed to make things better. Needed to heal the hurts and stop the insanity from continuing. If he had to sit on her until the bastard was caught, he'd be willing. This was not about ordering her around, it was about potentially saving her life. And his, because if something happened to her, he'd never recover.

Her eyes opened and his heart leapt to his throat. "Sweetheart?"

Maxine turned her head toward him and grimaced. "Crap, I hurt."

Ryan nodded, sliding forward so she didn't have to move to see him. "You're going to hurt for a bit, but there's nothing permanently damaged. Thank God. You've got bruises and you probably feel like there's a jackhammer going in your head but you're going to be fine." He lifted her good hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles gently. The tight knot in his belly released a tiny bit as he watched her eyes dart around the room, sharpness returning.

"I'm at the hospital?" she asked.

"Actually, I redecorated your bedroom. Like it?"

Maxine chuckled for a second before groaning. "Don't make me laugh, it hurts. What happened?"

"I hoped you could tell me. What do you remember?" He rubbed her fingers, touching her again and again to reassure himself she was okay.

"I was in the bathroom, and when I came out I heard a noise. Something hit the back of my head and..." She frowned. "I don't remember much else. My head hurts and my arm hurts."

"You've got a concussion, and your arm is in a cast because you tore some ligaments and cracked a bone when you landed on it. Your collar bone is bruised too."

Her eyes grew wide. "Shit. That's not good. I must look like a mess."

Ryan swallowed hard. "You're beautiful. And brave. You set off the alarm, sweetheart, and I'm so proud of you. You took care of yourself and got the help you needed when my security system let you down. I'm sorry, I'm the cause of this."

Confusion flashed across her face. "Did you hit me?"

He jerked back in surprise. "Of course not."

Maxine smiled at him. "Then don't be stupid, it's not your fault." Her eyes grew glassy again and she took a long breath in. "There's some seriously good shit floating through my veins."

"Maxine, I love you." Fucking great timing, but he couldn't wait anymore. It burst out of him like a breached dam and he needed her to know. "I love you and I want to marry you. I want us to be together and have kids and add to the insanity of your whole clan." He leaned closer and gently touched her face.

"I love you too, Ryan." She closed her eyes. It was quiet in the room for a minute before she cracked one eyelid open. "Did you just propose to me?"

He nodded.

"Hmm." And she fell asleep again.

Nurses bustled in to check her and there was no more time for talking, for seeing if she'd understood what he'd said. Ryan laughed at himself. All fucking month to figure out he needed her like he needed oxygen, and he had to go and propose while she was high on painkillers and totally out of it.

Later. He'd try again later, and do it right.

Chapter Nineteen

"You want me to wait for you?"

Ryan handed the cabbie money and shook his head. "I'll phone when I need a ride back."

He let himself into the house and mentally reviewed the list of things he thought Maxine would like to have at the hospital. She'd have to stay overnight, possibly two nights, and he knew she'd feel better with some of her personal possessions around. It was easier to leave his car parked and grab a cab than fight rush-hour traffic and attempt to park again. Taking the stairs two at a time, he headed toward their bedroom to grab her bag from the closet.

A loud clatter rang out from above his head and he ducked into the first side room, disappearing from sight. Swearing followed, and then rapid footsteps, and Ryan pressed hard against the wall. He could see the hallway through the narrow crack between the door and the doorframe. Someone with dark hair carrying a box in their arms raced past and disappeared into the master bedroom. Ryan glanced around for something to use as a weapon, anything, and ended up grabbing an antique bed warmer off the wall. He approached the doorway cautiously,

but when he entered the room it was empty.

He inched his way forward, checking the bathroom, listening for any noise to explain the disappearing intruder. Then he noticed the closet door was ajar, a faint light visible through the crack.

The closet had no interior light.

Brushing aside their clothing, he spotted a small opening in the back wall about three quarters the size of a regular door. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. There was a secret passage in the back of the fucking closet. After carefully putting aside the bed warmer, Ryan entered and followed a narrow hall to the top of a steep spiral staircase.

He tried to imagine where in the house the missing space was taken from. Ryan debated descending, but with no light other than the single bulb above his head, and no weapon, he wasn't going to be stupid and try to surprise the trespasser in the narrow quarters.

Distant shuffling noises drew closer and Ryan retreated. With more space around him he'd be very willing to meet the prowler.

When Maximilian stepped into the room and headed for the main hallway Ryan saw red. Her own cousin was the cause of Maxine's troubles? The fear and anger of the past months rolled together into a tight ball then burst out like an explosion. He caught the ass by the shoulder and flung him face first into the wall. Ryan yanked his arm up behind his back and the slimy bastard yelped in pain.

"What are you doing? Let me go," Maximilian pleaded.

Ryan shoved the arm he held captive higher, pleased with the gasp of pain Maximilian released. "Let's start this conversation over, shall we? This is not your house and I don't remember inviting you in. So your presence means you're here illegally and your rights have gone down to whatever I say they are--fucking nothing. Talk fast before I break your arm. What are you doing?"

Maximilian hesitated and Ryan felt a streak of pleasure rise at the asshole's stupidity. His actions wouldn't change the fact that Maxine lay in a hospital bed. Didn't change the fact she'd spent months scared to death because of this asshole. But it would feel damn good. Flipping Maximilian around, Ryan punched him. The man flew backward, splaying out his hands to stay on his feet. "Shit!"

Ryan had him by the front of the shirt in an instant. Caging the man against the wall, he spoke directly into his face. First to make sure his assumptions were right. "Did you hit Maxine?" he asked, his tone quiet. Deadly.

It was clear from the cousin's reaction he knew exactly what Ryan was talking about. He opened and shut his mouth, growing pale. "I didn't mean to hurt her."

Ryan punched him again. And again. White fury rode hard and removed rational thought. When Maximilian crumbled to the ground, Ryan was tempted to finish the man for good for daring to touch Maxine. Instead, he hauled him to his feet and dragged him to the nearest chair. Maximilian sat in a bleeding heap, whimpering lightly.

"You're in so much fucking shit, you have no idea." Ryan pulled out his cell phone and called the police, letting them know he'd interrupted an intruder and crime suspect. When he hung up, he dragged a second chair over to sit comfortably across from his captive. It was time to get to the bottom of the whole fucking mess.

"I assume the passage leads somewhere away from the house."

Maximilian wiped at the blood trickling from his mouth and nodded slowly. "There's a tunnel all the way across the yard to where the old caretaker's home stood. When the house

burned down a few years back, I discovered the access and decided to keep the information to myself."

Ryan frowned at him. "Why?"

Mill leaned back in his chair, groaning in pain. "Because it was a way to get into the damn house without anyone knowing I was here."

"But your grandmother lived here. You could get in anytime you wanted by visiting her. What the fuck were you up to?" Ryan stood, ready to beat the answers he needed out of the man if necessary. Maximilian held out his hands in defense.

"Stop, I'll explain. Everything." Defeat was clear in his tone and Ryan paced away a few steps. "I've been slipping into the house and sneaking up to the attic, removing small valuables to sell. I've got debts to pay. I didn't want the family to know, and if I was constantly visiting, I knew someone would figure out I was guilty when things were finally noticed missing. Since no one knew I was here, no one would suspect me."

Ryan froze in shock. It was the last thing he'd expected to hear. "I thought you were the family golden boy--financial king of the hill. That's all I've ever heard, how you'd made a killing in stocks and threw money around. Why the hell didn't you tell someone you had troubles?"

"Because I'd have to admit to the family I was living a lie. The investments failed, I've lost two of my condos and I'm barely making payments on the one left."

"So to pay your debts you've been stealing the family heirlooms. Nice tight-knit relationship you've got with the clan. Were you responsible for the vandalism too?"

Maximilian hung his head in defeat. "If Maxine would have sold the house, I wouldn't have had to try to scare her out."

Ryan fought down his temper. The ass dared to blame any of this on Maxine? "She offered to sell and you insisted she stay. What kind of royal bastard are you to tell her you were fine with her moving in and yet turn around and try to drive her out?"

"You don't understand what it's like living with this family. They would be all sympathetic and shit, but I know they'd never look at me the same again. I tried to find other ways to get her to move. Hell, I even hoped she'd move in with Jamie and turn down the house when it came available in the first place. I didn't count on the fact all he's got is a pretty face."

"Does Jamie know anything about this? Has he been helping?" Now Ryan understood how Jamie had exited the bedroom at Thanksgiving.

"Him? Hell, he's too stupid to trust with a secret. Somehow the door locked behind me when I used it last, so I snuck in at Thanksgiving to open it up. The ass followed me, and I had to make up this story about secret passages and shit. I didn't know he had gone in again for a lark when I slipped upstairs. He was damn surprised when he started to come out of the closet and heard you in the bathroom. I guess he hid for a bit before getting scared, which is why you saw him trying to sneak away." Wailing sirens floated on the air in the distance and Maximilian sighed. "He was still freaking by the time I got him home. Damn idiot."

"What about Maxine?" Ryan asked. "Why in the fuck did you hit her today? You might have seriously injured or killed her. Was it worth enough to kill your own cousin?"

"None of this was suppose to happen," Maximilian swore. "She surprised me. I didn't mean to hit her that hard. I had just come out of the closet when she left the bathroom, and I freaked out. The bat was sitting there, and I thought I could tap her lightly but I slipped. The bat swung heavier than I planned."

"You should have picked her up and helped her instead of leaving her." Ryan clenched his fists again, the urge to do permanent damage to the ass growing with every word.

"I was scared, okay?" Max shouted. "I totally lost it when she fell, and I ran. I hid in the passage for a while trying to decide what to do. I was going to come back and help her, I swear I was, but then the alarm went off and I was trapped into leaving her there. I'd already decided I'd had enough of the sneaking around, and I figured I'd take one final trip to store a few things away and then I'd leave it alone. I came back tonight and this was the last time I was going to be here."

Ryan was silent, fury whipping through him. The need to defend his woman from her self-serving cousin made it difficult to hold back his anger. All the frustration Maxine had gone through because of this man, all the nights of fear and the physical pain she was experiencing right now were his fault. Maximilian sat all smug and contrite and obviously didn't understand Ryan could kill him without a qualm. "Stand up. You're a disgusting piece of crap and I'll be glad to get your stench out of this house." He waited until Maximilian rose before gesturing toward the front door. "Your escort will be here shortly."

They made their way down the stairs. Ryan remained a few paces behind to make sure Maximilian didn't do anything stupid like try to make a break for it. There was one thing left to do. Just shy of the front door Ryan stopped him. Something of his intent must have shown on his face because Maximilian backed away rapidly.

"No more hitting. How are you going to explain to the police you beat the shit out of me and not expect to be arrested?"

"Home invasion. I was protecting myself. You're fucking lucky you're family or I would protect myself even more. Knowing Maxine, she's going to be tender-hearted enough to want you standing when the cops get here." He slammed a final fist into Mill's gut and watched with grim satisfaction as the man collapsed to the floor. "I'll be sure to hold you up while they cuff you."

Chapter Twenty

Maxine laughed as Ryan led her up the wide steps at the front of the house. "Are you planning on telling me the surprise now?"

A gentle kiss brushed her cheek, and she turned her head to try and catch hold of his lips. He evaded her with a chuckle. "Patience. You'll see soon enough."

She clung to Ryan's arm as he entered the security codes to unlock the front door. She was so thankful to be able to be coming home and know the house was finally safe.

It had shocked her immensely to learn Maximilian was the cause of all her troubles. When the news spread like wildfire, the whole clan had gone quiet, almost like they were in mourning. There was anger at her cousin, but also guilt within the family as a whole for not recognizing the danger as it had developed. Her auntie and uncle were hardest hit--they'd apologized for Maximilian's action a dozen times before Ryan had whisked them out of the hospital room, insisting they join him for a coffee. When they returned an hour later, they'd kissed Maxine and said nothing more about their son's choices, instead helping plan Christmas activities.

"You never did tell me what you did to Maximilian's parents." She stroked her fingers down his arm and wondered at the rightness of having him with her. She still remembered the revelation she'd had before the accident. Hopefully she could share the news with him soon.

"I reminded them we make our own decisions in life. Maximilian decided he needed money to be important, and it messed up everything he had going for him. If there's one thing

I've learned about you Turners, in your family, it's not the money it's the relationships that are important. He lost sight of that, and now you're all suffering. But it was *his* mistake, not theirs."

"The family is still upset. It was a huge surprise to us all."

Ryan sighed. "It was, and it'll take time to get over it, but that's the one thing I think your family has going for it. Every new memory you make as a clan will help wash away a little of the hurt. And hopefully others have learned from Maximilian's mistake."

He led her into the house and helped her take off the poncho she wore in lieu of a jacket. Nothing else she owned fit over the bulky cast on her right arm. She took a deep breath through her nose. Spicy ginger, sweet cinnamon and the scent of pine lingered in the air.

"It smells wonderful in here, Ryan. What have you done?" She tried to peer around him, but he blocked her view of the living area with his broad shoulders.

"Hmm, you'll see. Are you ready?"

He bowed with a flourish, then stepped away. Maxine glanced around the room in amazement, her heart pounding. "Oh my word, how did you get this done so fast? How did you know where everything goes?"

The house was a wonderland. Garland and tinsel and antique silver ornaments sparkled in the afternoon sunlight that blazed in the windows. Life-sized Santa and Mrs. Claus snowmen held court in the middle of the living room next to the largest pine tree Maxine had ever seen. Trinkets and glass globes, bright red bows and hand-stitched pillows decorated the rooms. The family nativity scene with the manger as big as a dollhouse sat in its place of honor next to the grand staircase.

A sensation of wonder filled her, lifted her spirit and swept into all the corners of her heart that still held any fear or regret concerning the past months. "Ryan, it's gorgeous." She turned and tugged his hand until she nestled against him. She kissed him, trying to put her thanks into the touch. Let him know how much his gift meant. They parted slowly, staring at each other. He was everything she needed.

"How did you do it?" she asked again.

He chuckled. "We had an infestation of Maxes. It started innocently enough. I simply asked Junior if he'd be willing to come and help me put up the outside lights so you'd have the pleasure of seeing the house lit up when you got released from the hospital. The next thing I know I've got the family phonebook in my hand, and Junior's telling me who to call to put in charge of what and...presto! Decorated house." He led her toward the fireplace and the comfortable leather recliner placed near it for her to relax in. "Your aunties all think I can't cook and there are now a million casseroles in the freezer. And the Christmas baking is done, unless you think we need more than twelve dozen cookies and squares for private consumption."

Maxine sat back in the chair gingerly, happy to relax and admire the many things in the room. But of all the sights bringing her pleasure, the man kneeling at her feet was the most important. "You made one of those new memories you talked about happen, didn't you? Everyone here decorating instead of sitting at home worrying about what they could have done differently. Thank you so much. It must have been a bit of zoo." She stroked his cheek. "I know there's a lot of them, but they all mean well."

"--and they're your family and you love them. I know. They love you too." Ryan stopped and cleared his throat. "Maxine, I'm not sure you remember, but the first day you were in the hospital..." He paused then shuffled until he knelt directly in front of her. Taking her good hand in his, he kissed her fingers then held on tight. "I love you. I knew before you got hurt. I think I knew it the first night we went out and you told me about wanting to sleep on the porch. You've

touched me, deep inside. You've changed me and made me realize what I've been missing in my life."

Her throat closed tight with tears as she listened to Ryan, watched his dark eyes stare at her with such concentration and seriousness. His usual control wavered and he reached into his pocket with shaky hands. He pulled out a small grey box and opened it, displaying a very familiar delicate silver ring. "I've been missing family. I've been missing love. I had tea with your Gramma earlier today, to tell her I planned on asking you to marry me, and she insisted I have this. To give to you."

Tears filled her eyes and she bit her lip to keep them from flooding out.

"She said she'd worn this ring for almost sixty years. It's a little worn and scratched, but the marks on the band were all caused by love. By keeping a home and raising children and loving her husband. By living life to the fullest. She said if that's what we planned on doing, she thought she should pass the ring on, so it could continue to enjoy what family is all about."

He smiled at her, waiting, and she took a deep breath. Her heart filled to the top and overflowed. "So, are you going to ask me?" she teased quietly.

"You're so impatient, just like when we make love. Give me a minute, we've got plenty of time."

Maxine laughed and hit his shoulder.

He swallowed hard and stared into her eyes. "Maxine Adele Turner, will you marry me?"

She threw herself at him. Her plaster cast stuck out to the side but she still managed to get a grip on him, draping her good arm around and pulling in tight to drop kisses on his face. Her injuries responded with a twinge but the delight pouring through her far outweighed the pain. He stood and lifted her until they reached lip to lip, the long broomstick skirt she wore riding up to let her legs wrap around his torso. Mouths met and his intoxicating flavor rolled over her tongue, his hands caressing and supporting her and igniting her desire.

They pulled apart breathlessly and Maxine smiled at him sweetly. "Just so there's no misunderstanding, and you can't back out later, the official answer is yes. Now let me know which one of my family told you my middle name, so I can go kill them."

Ryan laughed. "Oh no, I like your brother too much to let you hurt him. I need to warn you, Gramma will be joining us for breakfast tomorrow, along with your parents. Junior, Natasha and the baby are coming as well. Afterward I'd like to go visit Carl."

"An engagement celebration?" she asked. "What if I'd said no?"

"I had all night to convince you. I figured you'd say yes eventually, if only to get me to leave you in peace."

He moved to return her to the recliner but she clung tighter. "Take me to the kitchen, please."

Confusion slid across his face but he obeyed and carried her through the living room. He opened the door to the kitchen with his hip. "Where now, sweetheart? You want to inspect the pantry, or have a snack?"

Maxine grinned. "You're getting warmer. Put me down on the island."

"Yes, ma'am."

A flurry of kisses landed on her lips and neck as he lowered her. Maxine was reminded of their first kiss, pleasure at how far they'd come in the past months filling her soul. She'd taught Ryan about the importance of family. He had taught her about embracing her passion for life, in and out of the bedroom. She reached under his shirt and slipped her uninjured hand up the solid muscles of his torso, dragging her fingertips over the firm ridges of his abdomen while she

kissed along his jawline hungrily.

"Hmmm, sweetheart. I like what you're doing, but you've got a cast and--"

"I don't want you to make love to my elbow, Ryan." She rubbed her palm briefly over the erection swelling behind his jeans. Then she caught his hand in hers and dropped it on her thigh, inching up the fabric of her skirt until his fingers touched bare skin.

He slid closer, his groin rubbing against the fabric covering her pussy and she moaned in delight. "Maxine, are you sure? You're not too sore?"

"Wait!" She tapped her lips with her finger, like she was considering hard. "You forgot something." She held out her left hand, wiggling her fingers.

He pulled out the ring again and slipped it on. It sparkled in the sunshine and she admired it, the sentimental value of the ring adding to her delight. There were many good memories in her past. She laughed. So many new memories to create, starting right now.

"Much better. Now, where were we? Oh yes. You were going to..." she rearranged his hands carefully so he held one thigh in each hand, "...explore." A quiver of delight shook her as Ryan took control of her lips, biting and nibbling, licking her teeth. He massaged her thighs, inching ever higher until he froze, his thumbs touching the wet curls of her body.

"Holy fuck, you don't have any panties on," he gasped against her lips.

"Really? How forgetful of me," she whispered.

He growled and ripped open his jeans. Maxine wiggled forward, bracing herself with her one good arm. She watched with delight as his turgid cock burst out and thrust toward her. There was no hesitation in his response as their need to be together grew overpowering. She opened her thighs as far as possible, eagerly waiting as he lined up the mushroomed head of his erection. He stared into her eyes and slowly buried himself in her depths. It felt so good she whimpered, letting the explosion of sensation sweep over her. He moved lethargically, stroking in again and again. His girth spread her wide and fired nerves that thrilled on each pass. He took her lips with his, holding their bodies close as he rocked his hips, driving his cock deep. Kisses consumed her like wildfire, branding her by his possession. Maxine closed her eyes to everything but the rising passion racing through her body. And when they both cried out, crossing the precipice at the same time, she knew it was another event to lock away in her treasure trove of memories. Another of many in the legacy they would build together.

About the Author

Vivian was playing hooky the day they taught about the importance of getting a "real" job; she was hiding out at the local library rereading everything for the fifth time. Since then she's become a Jack-of-all-trades with a job-experience list only slightly smaller than the average phone book.

She's hiked, biked, canoed, kayaked and camped throughout Canada, Europe and the States, including Hawaii and Alaska. All these adventures have now become settings for her overactive muse to wander through.

Vivian lives in Western Canada with her longtime sweetie, two wonderful kids and a dog that looks like a stuffed toy.

To learn more please visit www.vivianarend.com or you can send an email to Vivian at vivarend@gmail.com.

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Tidal Wave
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Forces of Nature, Book 1

From her first kiss to her first sight of dolphins dancing on the waves, Alexia Colten has always held a special place in her heart for Jaffrey's Cove. Now that she's back to help her grandmother settle into a home, she discovers this place has lost none of its remembered magic. In fact, it seems more magical than before--and more erotic.

After she's gifted with a beautiful, dolphin-etched medallion, she finds herself surrounded by the golden boys of summers past. Her body is filled with longings she can't explain and dreams of blue lights that turn into lovers.

Joshua Marley and his cousin Anthony are merfolk, a people capable of living beneath the waves as either dolphin or human. Alexia holds the medallion that marks her as the next in line to lead their people--if she can prove she can transform. Working in tandem, they're sure they can arouse her passion and protect her from those who would use her simply to gain power.

But their strength alone may not be enough to help her face the challenge of her new position...

Warning: This title contains a conniving granny, naked men in the surf and shifters who take fun in the water to new depths. Snorkels not required.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Tidal Wave:

Alexia wondered briefly what she was doing in Anthony's arms while Joshua wandered the room behind them. It was so different from anything she'd experienced before, the need welling from deep within calling her to keep these two men at her side. More than called, demanded. She longed for Joshua, a heady all-out desire that shocked her to the core, but she wanted Anthony as well. Alexia had never been one to fool around indiscriminately, always keeping sex in the context of long-term relationships. But there was no denying the urges sweeping through her now, harder and hotter than she'd experienced before.

It had to be something to do with the medallion, with the dolphins.

Did she want to be out of control like this? She'd accepted the medallion as a gift from her Gram. A trinket. Not some life-changing "now you are one of us" commitment. Yet here she

stood in Anthony's arms. Her hand throbbed from the smack she'd delivered to Michael's face. Her body tingled from head to toe with the need for...something.

Kissing Anthony felt right. Sweet, tender kisses that turned her inside out. Anthony's touch teased. Tentative at first, his lips on hers like a brush of the ocean on the shore at its very calmest. She stroked his lips with her tongue, and he drew a hand around her neck to adjust the angle of their mouths to bring them closer together. He nibbled on her lips, along her cheek to the V of her neckline and a shiver ran through her. Anthony was softness and intimate caring.

Then Joshua returned and the heat skyrocketed. Twisting her in his cousin's arms Joshua took possession of her mouth and controlled her. Tongues met, teeth bit. This was what she'd been longing for and she urged him on, her lips hot and moist on his. She wrapped an arm around his neck to lock him in place, the fingers of her other hand still tangled with Anthony's.

Three bodies close together, the rough fabric of their jeans brushed the bare skin of her legs and made her want more of their touch everywhere. Joshua's hands held her hips firmly to his groin, his erection a hard ridge against her belly.

Anthony nipped the back of her neck, then lapped to soothe the pain away. He pulled the zipper on her dress inch by inch to release the garment from her body. A trail of kisses flowed downward, laving her bare skin with his tongue.

"She's not wearing a bra," Anthony whispered in awe as a finger brushed softly over the exposed skin of her back.

Joshua pulled away and Alexia restrained herself from following him, chasing his addictive taste. His hands pushed the straps of her dress aside and the top pooled around her hips. Anthony stroked her shoulders and down the curve of her breasts. He cradled her in his palms, lifting the firm globes to Joshua like an offering. The heat of Joshua's stare hit her full on, and she forced her eyes shut to avoid going up in flames.

Then she was covered with caresses as her dress was lowered to the floor, and lips and hands touched her body again and again. She didn't know who kissed her neck, didn't care who caressed her breast. Skin to skin, moist kisses after searing hot touches. One of them flicked the pearled tip of her nipple, and her womb flooded with moisture.

"We want you, Alexia. All of you," Joshua said before his tongue slid along the edge of her soaking wet undies. She opened her legs voluntarily, wanting more. Offering more. He pressed a kiss to her heated core, his teeth snagging on the fabric covering her. Hot breath on hot moisture combined and whirled together into a flammable danger zone. He leaned in harder with his lips, licking the length of her slit over her panties and she shivered.

Take them off, please.

She wanted his mouth on her, no barriers. Joshua sucked the fabric again, the crotch sopping wet between her juices and his mouth. Alexia tilted her hips, attempting to make him touch her more intimately, and he laughed. His hands traced over her thighs, thumbs rubbing along the inside toward her tender core. He pushed into the material, his fingers probing her pussy ever so slightly.

"Oh sweet mercy," Alexia moaned. It was torment, the lightness of his touch on super-sensitized tissues.

Her panties slid away, and she rocked on suddenly shaky legs until Joshua's hands steadied her. One hand reached behind her to clasp her ass, his fingers dipped into the crease between her cheeks. The other stroked her slit, fingers dragging through the moisture to settle where her clit pulsed in time with her heart.

Then his mouth descended and his tongue claimed her again.

All this time Anthony worshipped her breasts, his fingers rolling the tips between thumb and forefinger before he suckled, one side and then the other until both tingled with need.

"You're beautiful, Alexia." Anthony pulled back, his eyes glittering with golden flecks. She watched in fascination as he palmed her, lowering his mouth slowly to suckle. She was quivering with anticipation before the moist heat of his mouth lit her on fire. He raised his head to stare at her again. Stars swirled in the depths of his gaze.

"Your eyes. They're alive with lights." Wonder and delight filled her heart.

Anthony rose and moved to the side, allowing Joshua more room to settle intimately closer as his tongue lapped at her. Sensation built, pleasure rising. One man between her legs and one caressing her torso became an exquisite form of torture.

"You see the fire rising in my eyes, don't you? It only shows in our human bodies when we feel extreme emotions," Anthony whispered, dropping a kiss over her heart tenderly. "I'd do anything for you."

A sensation like an electric shock hit her, pure energy settling on her body like a winter coat. Heavy, but comforting. She closed her eyes and still the haze of blue light surrounding them lit her vision. It was familiar and reassuring even as it sent her arousal through the ceiling.

Joshua flicked her clit with his tongue, two of his fingers buried in her sheath. He slid them in and out slowly compared to the extreme pace of his tongue, the contrast forcing her further toward nirvana. Anthony sucked a nipple into his mouth and his touch sent her over the edge. Her pussy convulsed, another flood of moisture dropped to cover Joshua's fingers. She moaned, a long, low satisfied sound, and Joshua chuckled. He planted a final kiss on her pussy before he rose to drop one more on her lips. He tasted of her juices and his own unique flavor, his mouth firm against hers before he stepped back and stroked her cheek.

A thrill shot through Alexia as she watched Joshua's expression. His face reflected the things she felt in her heart. Desire, hunger, yes, but also a deeper longing for companionship, for love. She lifted her hand to touch his face, letting her own emotions show. Their gazes locked and something sweet passed between them.

Anthony settled her carefully on the pillows and cushions gathered in front of the fire. The hard edge of desire that had ridden her all day had dulled slightly with her orgasm, but her body still called for them. Needed them intensely. She stared in amazement at the pale blue light hovering around the men, not so much above them but a part of them.

"We'll take care of you, Alexia."

It's just one little bet. Winner takes...all .

All Worked Up

(c) 2009 Cathryn Fox

Pleasure Inn, Book 2

Tired of aspiring actors using her to get close to her movie-producer father, Candace Steele has sworn off relationships. At least until she's achieved her dream of restoring an old inn on the outskirts of Mason Creek. The new carpenter who's been hired to help her create bedroom furniture designed for...*endurance*...is throwing a kink into her plans. Watching his athletic body pound wood is doing things to her hormones that have her rethinking her vow.

When he agreed to take the job, Marc Collins intended to keep the sexy spitfire at arm's

length. But Candace is giving him a run for his money in more ways than one. It's tough to keep just his eyes on--and hands off--his boss's daughter when she's hell-bent on seducing him. And when she pulls a fast one and wins an impromptu bet, what's a red-blooded guy to do except let her collect her winnings...*all* of them.

The heat they generate melts the fresh paint off the walls. But when seeds of doubt make Candace put on her running shoes to flee, Marc will have to talk fast--and run faster--to capture her heart.

Warning: This red-hot story contains graphic sex, frank language, wet play, use of orgasm-enhancing props, and to top it all off, it's all caught on film--just in case you missed anything the first time. <wink>

Enjoy the following excerpt for All Worked Up:

As he approached the spot where Candace had pulled him into the water, his pace slowed and his mind raced, recalling the way her nipples had tightened beneath her tracksuit. He spent a long moment staring at the water and considered taking a dip to cool himself down.

"Going in?"

He tightened at the sound of her voice behind him. When he spun around and took in the warm flush on her cheeks, the sexy way her nipples pressed against her tank top and the way her long, tanned legs looked in her provocative short shorts, he almost gave in to temptation.

The hungry look in her eyes made him ache. Fuck he wanted her so badly, he could barely think straight. Pleasure raced through him, and his cock swelled inside his running shorts. Candace cast a glance down, and when her eyes traveled back to his face, they were gleaming with mischief. Okay, he needed to put a stop to this and he needed to do it now.

As he ran over every reason to back away, he said, "Candace, I--"

Jesus, what was he going to tell her? That he was hired by her father to watch over her? That he wasn't who she thought he was? The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her or deceive her. After all, she trusted him enough to try to seduce him.

Okay, he needed to put some distance between them. But when she went up on her tippy toes and put her mouth close to his, every reason he had for keeping his distance suddenly dissolved.

"I think going for a swim is a great idea." The soft seduction in her voice pulled him in and shattered any semblance of control he thought he had.

Without warning, she climbed into the water. At the sight of her gorgeous, wet body, need exploded inside him.

Ah, Jesus...

Unable to contain the heat rising in him, he jumped into the water with her, knowing there was only one way to feed the hunger gnawing at his insides. When she stepped close, and skin touched skin, she poised her mouth open in invitation. His cock took over where his brain left off and his lips crashed down on hers. Aware of her desire, he gripped her by the hips and pulled her to him, meshing their bodies together and lining up their nether regions. When he pushed his cock against her pussy, she gyrated and moaned into his mouth.

As the warm afternoon sun beat down on them, it occurred to him that they were outdoors, in plain sight. Hell, he needed to get behind closed doors with her before someone stumbled upon them. "The path...people." He felt a tremor move through her and realized how much that excited her. He gave a low, heated laugh, intrigued by her boldness. "I had no idea you were so naughty," he whispered into her mouth.

Her laughter churned with passion and expressive eyes brimmed with desire. "Neither did I. Until just now. You must bring that out in me." She cupped his cock and gave a gentle squeeze. "Now let's see what I can bring out in you."

Christ, he knew better than to get intimate with her--especially in public--but the look in her eyes and the thrill it gave her to play this little exhibitionist game prompted him into action. Every damn reason he had for staying away from her suddenly seemed so insignificant, and giving her everything she ever wanted had become more important than his own well-being.

He gripped her tank top and peeled it over her head, exposing her luscious breasts. With pleasure racing through him, Marc moaned and wet his mouth. "So beautiful," he murmured and brushed the pad of his thumb over one perfect nipple.

She arched into him, and he could hear the note of desperation lacing her voice when she asked, "Would you like a taste?"

Cravings like he'd never before experienced swamped him. "Hell, you know I would." Trembling and entirely lost in the moment, he inclined his head and drew her hard bud into his mouth. *Fuck...* Her fingers raked through his hair and held him tight. As she swelled in his mouth, she gave a low erotic whimper and he damn near erupted on the spot.

Her hands raced over him with aroused eagerness, tugging at his shirt and shorts almost frantically. Wanting to slow her down so they could enjoy and savor every sinful moment, he inched back, gripped her hands and placed them at her sides. His gaze moved to hers, and when his glance was met with heat, passion and vulnerability swirling around in a sea of green, his heart softened and everything inside him reached out to her. Tenderness stole over him as emotions gathered in a knot deep in his gut, and he instinctively knew he had to make this good for her. So damn good it would help her fight every last demon that plagued her darkest corner.

He pitched his voice low. "Come here, sweetheart."

She stepped into him and he backed her up against the embankment. Once he had her caged between his body and the grass, he leaned in for a slow soul-searching kiss.

She tugged at him, heat reflecting in her eyes. "Easy, baby," he responded, and once again secured her hands to her sides.

Their gazes collided. "Marc, please..."

Reining in his lust, he took in the erotic sight of her and the way she had so readily opened up to him, trusting him with her pleasure. "You can beg all you want," he assured her with a grin, as the cool water lapped at his waist. "But I'm not in any hurry. Now that I have you where I want you, I'm going to leisurely explore your body." With that he gently shaped her contours, kneading her flesh and enjoying the feel of her soft curves in his palms. His mouth moved to her neck. With slow, easy movements, he properly introduced himself to her. Trailing lower, he paid homage to her breasts using his hands, mouth and tongue, sucking, nibbling and licking and taking his sweet-ass time before moving to her belly button, which was just inches out of the water.

Needing to go lower, he lifted her by the hips and set her on the bank, lining her pussy up with his mouth. He gripped her shorts and toyed with the waistband.

"Marc...?"

"Yeah, babe." The strange look on her face spoke volumes. She didn't understand his slow seduction, his need to please her. Didn't understand that it gave him pleasure just to pleasure her.

Her eyes clouded and he felt a curious shift inside him. "I...I--"

"I know, babe. Really, I do." And he did know. That every asshole she'd been with had

cared more about his needs than hers. Deciding to show her another side of lovemaking, Marc proceeded to inch her shorts down her silky legs, leaving her lacy panties behind.

She sat before him, quivering, her eyes watching his every move carefully. She reached for him, to touch him in return, her soft hands greedily sliding over his skin, and even though he liked it, he anchored her hands to her sides, intent on making this all about her.

Good things come to those who dare.

Sunset Knight

(c) 2009 Sami Lee

Lana Green is looking for a lover. At twenty-three, she's more than ready to shed her shyness and shake up the status quo. Lucky her, the aloof bad boy she's always wanted to shake it with, Brody Nash, is back in town. Too bad he barely knows she's alive. Then an unexpected kiss makes her think her days of lusting from a distance are over. Despite the fact she's no femme fatale and has zero clue how to seduce a man, she sets out to do exactly that.

Brody hardly recognizes the alluring woman as the same gawky computer geek he left in Graceville six months ago. Lana has him spellbound, but his temporary stay in town is strictly business--running his friend's restaurant while the man's on his honeymoon. Brody doesn't do relationships, and he doesn't do permanent. But when he finds her asleep on his boat, he can't keep his hands, or any other part of his anatomy, to himself.

Things get complicated when he discovers what he thought was a casual sexual encounter has just cured her of the one thing she wanted to get rid of--her virginity.

Warning: Contains sex that simmers and sizzles, featuring shenanigans in a moving automobile, light bondage, hanky spanky, chocolate cupcakes, chocolate condoms, and a good girl learning how much fun it is to be bad.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Sunset Knight:

"You shouldn't have come."

Annoyance sparked to life. "You asked me to."

Brody's touch was soft on her cheek as his eyes roamed over her face. "I know, but Drew reminded me we're supposed to be working together."

"So? I can handle going to bed with someone I work with."

He scowled. "Really?"

Lana realized she'd made it sound like a habit she'd acquired. Not wanting to follow that conversational path, she decided instead to concentrate on him. On the fact that he was here, that he hadn't moved away as a man who wanted her to leave might have.

The moonlight filtering in through the hatch in the ceiling of the cabin bathed him in cerulean light. He'd removed his bow tie and jacket, and the crisp white of his dress shirt took on a fluorescent appearance. Lana's gaze drifted downward to examine the V of skin revealed by the two buttons he'd undone, and her mouth dried out. Lana reached out and toyed with the shirt. She felt the heat of his flesh through the soft fabric and knew hers must be as hot to the touch.

His breath caught sharply when she released the next button, his shock mirrored by the way her heart slammed against her ribs. Even as the audacity of her own actions stunned her, Lana slid her fingers down and worked on the next button until it too was free of its hole.

Her question was barely audible. "Do you want me to leave?"

She was terrified he'd say yes, but he said nothing at all as she slowly, methodically released every last fastening. When she was done the material hung open to reveal a strip of his chest--toned flesh covered in fine dark hair. She'd never seen him with his shirt off before, and he looked better than she'd ever imagined.

Reaching out, she touched her fingers to all that hard packed muscle. He was so strong, so solid. Touching him alone made the wetness between her thighs increase, made her true feelings slip out. "Wow. You're so sexy."

"Hell, Lana." His voice was raspy, making Lana aware her actions had impacted him. "You make it impossible for a man to kick you out of bed."

"Are you trying to?"

"Yes." He encircled her wrist with his fingers, stilling the wandering exploration of her hand. Glancing up, she met his gaze. His dark chocolate eyes shone in the dim light, their depths reflecting the battle going on inside him. Tense lines bracketed his mouth, and his heart beat a rapid tattoo against her palm. "You should get out of here while you still have the chance."

Lana shook her head, never tearing her eyes from his. "I've used up all my chances tonight. If you want me to leave, you might have to carry me out."

He snaked an arm around her back and grasped her thigh with his other hand. For a moment Lana was sure he was going to do exactly as she'd suggested. Mortification ripped through her. That would be a great look, being hauled down the wharf and unceremoniously dumped in the parking lot.

Perhaps it was his intention to get rid of her, but the instant he pulled her forward and their chests meshed together, he stilled. The action had brought their faces close, and Lana watched as the fight in his eyes turned to surrender. His grip on her thigh tightened and he drew her leg snugly around his hip. Then he made a guttural sound and leaned forward to capture her lips with his.

He devoured her mouth like a man starved. Lana tried to keep up, to give as good as she got, but the sensuous thrust of his tongue, the tantalizing scrape of his teeth overwhelmed her so all she was capable of was a primal response. Where he led, she followed. When he touched--her face, her hair, her breasts--she offered herself outright. What he demanded, she let him take.

His movements were hurried as he pulled her arms out of the straps of her dress. "Do you have any idea how much I've wanted to do this all night?" His move had exposed her bra, and he brushed his fingers over the lace. "Pink. You're such a cute little surprise package."

With a deft flick of his fingers her bra disappeared. Instinctively, Lana crossed her arms over her chest. She'd tried not to think about the part of this plan of hers that involved Brody seeing her naked. "It was padded." From the astounded look on his face, she deduced he was wondering how her cleavage could have been so misleading. "I can eat whatever I want and I never seem to put on weight. Other women hate me for it but I always wished I had more..." She glanced down at herself. "Well, more of everything."

Something in his eyes softened, and his smile reassured her. His touch became gentle as he uncrossed her arms and set them away from her body. Lana tried not to squirm as he looked at her. "You're gorgeous," he uttered.

Lana released a nervous laugh, which died in her throat when Brody dipped his head and nuzzled her breasts. His breath was hot on her flesh, the slight rasp of his chin an erotic sensation. When he took her nipple into his mouth and rolled his tongue over it, she cried out at the shock of exquisiteness. All the times she'd imagined what this would be like hadn't prepared

her for the wonderful whirlpool of pleasure that spun inside her. "Oh, I can't believe how good that feels."

"You're unbelievable. Taste like honey. God, Lana." She fell back on the bed as he moved over her, his touch growing more urgent as it skimmed down her side and tugged off her dress. He slid his hand over her hip and into the valley between her thighs. When he encountered her exposed folds, a groan spilled out of him and his teeth grazed her throat. "No panties. *Jesus*."

Lana's hips jolted from the mattress when he ran his finger over her clit. She clutched his shoulders and whimpered, tugging at his dress shirt. "Off. Take this off."

With jerky movements, Brody stripped away the shirt and discarded it, falling on her once again to feast on her breasts.

Sensation burned inside her, heat mounting, spiraling from the inside out. His mouth on her flesh was incredible, the untamed desperation of his kisses exhilarating. Her hands moved to his waistband, a blatant urging that he had no trouble interpreting. He yanked down his zipper and pushed his pants down his legs.

He reached above her head to open a hideaway cabinet and rifle through it. Lana took the opportunity to satisfy her curiosity, slipping her hands down his hair-roughened chest and flat stomach until she came up against something rigid and hot. And *big*. She curled her fingers around it and her heart thundered. He was larger, thicker and more unyielding than she'd ever expected.

"You okay?"

Returning her gaze to his face she saw a sardonic smile curving his lips. Was he beginning to realize how inexperienced she was? She schooled herself to smile, hoping she would appear worldly and eager, instead of daunted by his potential to hurt her. "Never been better."

He moved his hips a little, the action causing his hard length to tunnel through her cupped hand. His skin was so smooth and sleek, the strain of his flesh so strongly masculine that Lana's feminine muscles quivered in anticipation, anxiety fleeing for the moment. Experimentally, she ran her fingers up and down his shaft, fascinated by the slight protrusion of veins running along the front of it. The tip of his penis was smooth and round, dampened by a drop of shiny, translucent liquid. Collecting some with her index finger, Lana brought it to her mouth and tasted him.

"*Fuck*. Lana, Christ, I need to..." He ran his hand up her thigh and dipped a finger into her moist center. "Tell me you can come while I'm inside you, because I don't want to wait."

Lana had no idea, but she doubted it, under the circumstances. She supposed now might be a good time to enlighten Brody of that particular situation, but somehow she knew he wouldn't be happy to hear he was breaking new territory. It was close to dark, he was half-drunk. If she could keep it together he might never know. Lana would much prefer he never knew. "Maybe. Let's try."



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