

LooseId

IT CAME UPON
A MIDNIGHT
CLEAR

Michelle Cary

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Chapter One

Thank God for twenty-four-hour gas stations. Abigail Dalton set her steaming cup of java in the console holder, put the overloaded car in gear, and pulled onto the main road.

The idea of driving on Thanksgiving Day was a good one, at least from a traffic standpoint, but she probably should have considered not all restaurants would be open on the holiday. While food itself wasn't an issue, feeding her growing coffee habit was.

Thankful to now have enough fuel, for both her and the car, to get her through the last half hour of her trip, she pressed the radio's Scan button and settled into the driver's seat. The numbers on the radio screen scrolled, then stopped on a country-music station. While she had nothing against country music, Abby really wasn't in the mood to listen to singers drone on about how their wives left them and their dogs died.

She blinked hard, stemming a sudden need to cry. Lately her life had played out much like some twangy, cliché song. The difference being that instead of the entire country listening to a fictional breakup play out on the radio, she'd had to face Baltimore's elite while her real-life marriage disintegrated.

Ten years!

Her fingers curled around the steering wheel as the radio changed to a rock station. She'd given that bastard ten years of her life. In return he'd run off with his twenty-three-year-old administrative assistant. *Speaking of cliché!* Her grip tightened around the wheel as she closed her eyes for a second and swallowed down the all-too-familiar lump in the back of her throat.

Determined not to give up her husband without a fight, she'd even gone to the hussy's home and confronted them both. The only thing her endeavor accomplished was to make her feel fat and worthless.

"Maybe," the little blonde tramp had begun, *"if you'd spent more time in the gym working off those love handles, he might have stayed. Though..."* She paused and tapped a finger to her

chin as if in thought. *"From what Brad tells me, you're nothing but a cold fish between the sheets, so maybe not. Face it, Abby. You couldn't satisfy him in bed, let alone give him the child he wanted. Why would he want to stay with you?"*

The tramp's words stung, but Abby could have brushed them off if it hadn't been for Brad's silence.

Angry for crying over the asshole yet again, she wiped at a tear trickling down her face and forced her attention to the road. Not once while the younger woman screeched had he said anything to stop the bloodbath. He'd simply stood there, looking on with what Abby had interpreted as abhorrence.

She'd left them that night, broken and ashamed, knowing there wasn't any way she could stay in Baltimore. Now, with a substantial divorce settlement and the home she'd inherited after her mother's death, her path was clear. She'd return to Bethlehem, Virginia, and start fresh.

The radio changed again, this time landing on a station playing Christmas carols. She pushed the button, turning off the scanning process. What she needed was to find her lost holiday cheer. So what if she'd be spending Christmas alone this year? It was, after all, just another day on the calendar. Besides, she could use the time to decide what to do with the rest of her life.

The soft sound of Beethoven rose from the passenger seat, causing Abby to jump before reaching for her cell phone. She glanced at the name on the caller ID. *Megan Fowler*. Abby stifled a groan and pushed the Send button, connecting them, then switched on the speakerphone so she could talk hands free. "Hi, Meg."

"I know you really don't want to talk to anyone, but I was worried and had to call to see how you're making out."

"I'm doing fine," Abby replied, suddenly feeling guilty for not wanting to speak with her best friend. "I'm driving into my hometown now, so I should be at the house in about ten minutes."

"I still don't understand why you couldn't stay with me on Thanksgiving and drive back on Friday."

"I know you don't, Meg, and I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings, but I'm not much for celebrating the holidays at the moment. It seemed like the right thing to do." Like every other time they'd talked lately, somehow this conversation with her friend would inevitably lead back

to Brad and Abby's self-esteem issues. They weren't topics she wanted to face right now. "Listen, Meg. I hate to cut this call short, but I really need to go. I'll call you once I'm settled. Maybe we can make plans for you to visit."

Abby could almost picture the frown on Megan's face as she spoke. "Well, okay, but be sure you do call. I don't care if Brad is my stepbrother. As far as I'm concerned, he's an ass, and my friendship with you comes first."

"I appreciate your loyalty, Meg, and you're absolutely right. My relationship with him, or lack thereof, is separate from my friendship with you, and I won't let my feelings about him come between us."

"Make sure you don't. And, Abby, if you need anything, just call, okay?"

"I will. Bye, Meg."

Once disconnected, she turned up the radio and worked to focus her attention on more-cheerful thoughts. "Jingle Bell Rock" ended, and a much-slower song filled the car.

It came upon a midnight clear

That glorious song of old.

Slowly, she steered her car through the downtown area of Bethlehem, known to the locals as "the square." The hub of law enforcement and most municipal business sat to her left, its dome rounding up to the police radio tower that pointed up to the sky. Roads skirted the courthouse on all four sides, with turn-of-the-century brick buildings three and four stories tall lining the streets like a giant wall.

From angels bending near the earth

To touch their harps of gold.

She bet in its prime, the square was a hopping place for business. Now, with many of the stores sitting empty, it served as a reminder of days gone by.

Maybe, she considered as she passed yet another empty storefront, she could open a craft store in one of the old buildings. The town's population consisting of young and old would certainly patronize a store where they could purchase both yarn for knitting and paper for scrapbooking.

A smile tipped Abby's lips upward at the idea as the car's tires bounced over the old railroad crossing at the far end of the square. Running the business would be easy. After all, she'd gone to college to earn a business degree. Yet somewhere along the way she'd put her dreams on hold for a husband and future family. Only now she didn't have either.

Somehow the idea of opening a craft store felt right, though. As soon as she was settled into the house, she'd inquire about renting one of the buildings.

Still through the cloven skies they come

With peaceful wings unfurled.

She passed through the end of town and found herself back in the country. To her left, the farthest pastures of Werner Dairy Farms came into view with a herd of Holsteins grazing on a hill in the distance. Her heart gave a little flip. Did Talon and Teagan still live there? Back in high school, thoughts of the Werner twins occupied nearly every waking moment of Abby's day and many of her dreams at night. Way out of her league, the brothers, both talented and good-looking, were vastly different in their endeavors. While Teagan headed up the local FFA chapter and kept his nose in textbooks all day, Talon spent his time playing quarterback for the football team and getting himself into as much trouble as possible. Back then she would have been happy dating either of them.

Her smile slowly faded. Wasn't it her obsession with the twins that, in a strange and sad way, had dictated her life up to this point? If she hadn't shared one of her more private and explicit dreams with her then-best friend, she wouldn't have needed to leave school her senior year and move to Baltimore to live with her elderly great-aunt.

Her mother never brought up the subject, but Abby knew in a small town like Bethlehem people had talked about her long after her departure. To this day, she still harbored the shame and guilt her unveiled fantasy caused her parents. After all, no normal, God-fearing Christian had erotic dreams about sleeping with two men at the same time.

Look now, for glad and golden hours

Come swiftly on the wing.

Suddenly dejected, she turned off the music, leaving only the sound of the tires on the pavement humming in her ears. One bad thing about small towns was that people never forgot. Would her return stir up old ghosts? Was she simply moving from one bad situation to another?

Abby turned her car onto the tiny, snow-covered driveway and parked in front of the detached garage. She rested her head on the steering wheel, turning to the side to focus her attention on the old clapboard house. The homestead held so many memories, both good and bad. With the peeling paint and rotting window casings, she should be ashamed at having allowed her birthplace to fall into such disrepair.

When her mother had finally passed away the previous year, Brad had given Abby one week to get her parents' affairs in order and return to Baltimore. Grieving and under pressure, she'd hurriedly packed away her parents' belongings, placed the totes in the garage, and covered the larger pieces of furniture with tarps.

A shiver rippled up her spine, and she pushed open the car door. No use sitting in a cold car when she, with any luck, had a warm home to provide shelter. She stepped out into the cold, dark night, closed the car door, and went to the trunk to retrieve her suitcase. Hopefully Old Mr. Sawyer had made it out to the house to get the heating-oil unit up and running, and the electric company had turned on the power.

Deciding on the smaller case with her pajamas and toiletries, Abby headed inside. Relieved to feel the warmth when she walked into the back door, she flicked the light switch and watched the kitchen glow in the fluorescent light. *Thank goodness!*

She locked the door behind her. Then choosing to leave the kitchen light on, she walked through the house to her old bedroom. Exhaustion filtered through her muscles. What she needed was a good night's sleep. The right thing to do would be to go back out to her car and find the box that held the clean sheets. Even that chore seemed more work than it was worth. The sheets on her bed were clean, just dusty from nonuse, and would do for one night. Tomorrow she'd go to town and purchase all the supplies she'd need to start getting her new home in order.

After shaking the pillow to remove any excess dust, she crawled into bed and pulled the sheet up over her tired frame. Her mind drifted back to the song she'd heard earlier. *Look now, for glad and golden hours. Come swiftly on the wing.*

She snorted at the lyrics and closed her eyes. She couldn't be lucky enough to have glad and golden hours come swiftly.

Twenty minutes later, on the verge of sleep, Abby rolled onto her side and wrinkled her nose at a foul smell. What could possibly be causing such a stench in a home that hadn't been

occupied in over a year? In an attempt to block out the odor, she put the pillow over her head, yet it grew stronger, thicker, reminding her of so many bonfires from her childhood.

Bonfire? Abby threw the pillow off the bed and opened her eyes. A thin layer of smoke trickled in beneath her bedroom door, turning the air rancid. *Fire?* For several seconds Abby watched the smoke build while her brain tried to process what she saw. This couldn't be happening. It had to be some sick dream.

She drew in a breath and let out a cough in response. Fear propelled her out of bed. It wasn't some horrible dream but was quickly becoming her nightmare. She raced to the window and pushed, trying to open it. Years of nonuse combined with several layers of paint to keep the window firmly in place.

With little choice but to face what lay on the other side of the door, Abby grabbed the handle, only to jump away in pain as heat infused her hand. *I'm trapped.* Panic gripped her throat and gave a vicious squeeze. There had to be a way out. She spun to face her room, in search of something, anything, to help her escape the inferno that would most certainly engulf her bedroom shortly. *The window.*

She pulled the neck of her nightgown over her mouth and nose, then raced to her desk across the room. There, she picked up the chair and, using all her strength, swung out at the panes. The sound of glass shattering combined with the growing crackle of burning wood increased her fear even as fresh, cold air poured into the room. With shards now all over the floor, she'd need her shoes or risk ripping her feet to shreds. Surely she could spare the ten seconds it would take to shove her feet into her sneakers.

Spots floated in front of her eyes, and a sudden weakness captured her limbs. Even with the fresh air now filtering in from the window, it wasn't enough to overcome the oxygen-stealing smoke slowly blanketing the room. The need to flee surged through her. Grabbing the comforter and her purse as she went, Abby stumbled toward the window. Her throat constricted, causing her coughing to increase. The black dots in front of her eyes grew, eventually connecting until her vision tunneled.

All she had to do was get outside and she'd be okay. Barely managing to find the window, she covered the bottom of the casing with the comforter and threw her purse outside. With one

hand on the window, her vision disappeared completely, taking with it her one chance at survival. On a cough and a wheeze, she slid down the wall, collapsing mere feet from safety.

Chapter Two

With a languid stretch, Talon Werner leaned against his bed's headboard and stared up at the painted ceiling. Stuffed with turkey and the trimmings, all he really wanted to do was roll over and drift off to sleep. On call for the fire department, he instead waited for the inevitable event to come that would pull him from his nice warm bed and out into the cold, dark night.

That wasn't to say he didn't love his job as a volunteer firefighter—he did. Yet in the last five years, he'd repeatedly seen devastation strike at the worst possible times. Holidays seemed to be a magnet for that exact type of scenario.

Knowing sleep wouldn't come easily, he climbed from his California king and crossed the room to the entertainment system. In the mood for some music, he dialed through the stations, before finally settling on a local channel already playing Christmas carols.

Wearing just his dress pants from dinner, he eased onto the couch in the sitting area of his room and stared out the French doors leading to his private deck and then on into the night.

It came upon a midnight clear

That glorious song of old.

Ever since his parents had died eight years earlier, holidays always seemed a bit sad. This Thanksgiving was no exception. Oh, he loved the idea of him and Teagan opening their home to those farm employees who didn't have families and sharing their dinner with them. It was during that first holiday after their parents' accident that Teagan had come up with the idea of opening their home and hearts. If nothing else, the action helped to chase the sadness away, at least until the dinner was over and everyone returned to their respective homes.

From angels bending near the earth

To touch their harps of gold.

Talon leaned back against the couch and rested one arm over his head. He'd been angry and hurt at his parents' sudden deaths, leaving him and his brother to run the family empire at the

ripe age of twenty-two. Eight years later, Teagan headed up the farm's day-to-day operations, while Talon still struggled to find his way in life.

Between the two of them, Teagan had always been the business minded one, while Talon seemed to attract trouble and danger at every turn. Still, turning thirty this year had brought with it an unsettled feeling, one he couldn't quite put his finger on.

It was only one short year ago that he'd finally made peace with his parents' deaths and with God for taking them so soon. Yet even after he'd allowed the festering wound to close, a gnawing emptiness remained. Unsure of how to handle the restlessness he felt, he'd taken on more challenges: rock climbing in the Rocky Mountains and dogsledding in Alaska. He'd even recently tried to shoulder more of the work with the farm. That aspiration failed miserably too, when he realized he was encroaching on Teagan's domain.

Still through the cloven skies they come

With peaceful wings unfurled.

He'd quickly accepted the fact that while the farm and all its riches belonged to both him and his brother, it was Teagan who truly loved the farm, which still left Talon feeling out of sorts. After Christmas he'd take the firefighter's exam and hopefully go from being a volunteer to a paid member of the staff. Not that he needed the money. The position was more for his peace of mind, another attempt to put some sort of direction to his life.

Look now, for glad and golden hours

Come swiftly on the wing.

The police and fire scanner next to his bed crackled to life; varying tones poured through the speaker, telling Talon exactly what was going on. He pushed off the couch and raced for the nightstand, where his cell phone sat, and it began to ring just as he picked it up. Thanks to the automated call center's newly enabled texting service, the location of the emergency appeared on the screen at the same time the dispatcher's voice sounded on the scanner.

“Engine one twelve, truck one sixteen—structure fire at sixteen sixty-two North Amber Mill Road.”

Talon stared down at the screen of his phone. Why did that address sound so familiar? It took only a moment before awareness struck. The address belonged to the old Bennett place. *Abby's childhood home.*

He shoved the phone in his pocket, grabbed a shirt from his closet, and stomped into his boots. The house had been empty since her mother passed away a year earlier. Talon was surprised it had taken this long for the dilapidated building to burn. Pretty much abandoned, it was a prime target for vandals and squatters.

He took the steps two at a time and raced past the kitchen staff still cleaning up from dinner toward the attached four-car garage. He hit the button for the automatic door over the fourth bay and hopped into his midnight blue 4x4. His tires squealed on the blacktop as he backed out of the garage, put the truck in gear, and sped down the lane. Making a left onto the highway, he gunned the engine and headed for the scene. Amber Mill Road was on the north side of the county, less than a mile up from the Werner farm. It made no sense for Talon to drive into town to the station when he could just as easily meet the engine there.

He made a right onto Amber Mill Road, and his heart jumped as he spotted the eerie glow in the distance. For a split second he worried about anyone being inside the structure. The only person who had a right to be there was Abby. As far as Talon knew, she was still living in Baltimore with her stuffed-shirt husband, hobnobbing with the crème de la crème of society, which meant if anyone else was inside the home, they were trespassing. Not that it mattered to him either way. His job was to save people and put out the flames, not to pass judgment. He'd leave that unenviable task to the judicial system.

The building came into view, and adrenaline began to pump through his veins. Flames projected a bright orange glow from behind the still-intact windowpanes. Black smoke seeped from beneath the windows and doors.

First on the scene, he slid his truck into park near the ditch at the end of the short drive, making sure to give the fire engines room to get down the road. He scrambled from the cab and reached into the storage box inside the truck bed to retrieve his spare gear. It was then he spotted the silver sedan parked a few feet away from the burning building.

Talon's eyes widened, and a new sense of dread tugged at him as he read the license plate, noting the Maryland tag. *Abby!* What was she doing home, and more importantly, where was she right now?

Sirens wailed in the distance, growing closer with every passing second, but he knew help wouldn't be able to get there quickly enough. It was up to him to attempt a rescue. With more

speed than he realized he had, Talon donned his gear. Without oxygen and a mask, going into a burning, smoke-filled building would be like signing his death warrant. Yet he couldn't simply stand by and wait for the engine to arrive. He raced toward the home, yelling as he went. "Abby! Abby, where are you? Abby, can you hear me?"

Pausing, he strained to listen, to hear her voice over the roar of the flames and the pounding in his own head. *Nothing*. With a silent curse, he pushed forward and began to systematically check the outside of the house. The beating of his heart echoed in his ears, drowning out the sounds of the raging fire. She had to be all right. He turned the corner and spotted the smoke pouring from a broken window and took off at a run. As he neared, Talon noted the blanket covering the bottom of the casing. He drew in a deep breath and stuck his head through the open pane. Smoke stung his eyes and burned his nose as he struggled to focus. To his left, just beyond his reach, lay a body. *Abby!*

The sirens grew louder, giving some comfort to Talon as he climbed through the window. If something bad happened, his fellow firefighters would be there within minutes to help. Only once inside, he saw something that made every fireman's heart stop in fear.

The smoke around the edges of the bedroom door was disappearing, being sucked back into the main fire area.

Backdraft.

If he didn't get them both out right now, it wouldn't matter if the other men made it there in time. Quickly Talon grabbed her under her arms, pulled Abby to her feet, then slung her over one shoulder, letting her arms and head hang down his back. He turned to the window and climbed back out.

Mere feet from the building, Talon felt the impact of the explosion before it registered in his ears; the force of the detonation knocked him off his feet and caused him to lose his grip on Abby. She tumbled out of his arms, landing with a *thud* a few feet from where Talon smacked the dirt face-first.

He turned over and struggled to gain a grip on the situation while avoiding the fiery debris now raining down on them both. Before he could get his hands up for protection, a large chunk of wood thwacked him in the head, hitting him with enough force to rattle his teeth.

"Talon!"

He turned to spot fellow firefighter Garrett Miller racing toward him with Colby Johnson and Patrick Donahue in tow. Garrett dropped to his knees beside Talon while Colby and Patrick assessed Abby.

"You okay?" Garrett asked, even as Talon pushed up to his elbows.

"Yeah," he replied as he struggled unsteadily to his feet. "I need to help Abby."

Garrett grabbed Talon by the elbow. "Colby and Patrick are helping her. Right now, I need to see about you."

"I'm fine." Talon jerked free of Garrett, only to have him regain an immediate hold.

"I saw that debris hit you in the head, and you have a nasty cut to show for it. So, no, you're not okay until a doctor declares you healthy. Now stop being a pain in my ass, because I have enough on my plate already."

Ten minutes later, Talon climbed into the back of the ambulance and sat on the bench next to where Abby's gurney rested. She looked so frail and broken beneath the white sheet, her face covered in soot. At least she was finally breathing, though she still hadn't regained consciousness.

A strange pull made him reach down to lace his fingers through hers.

Back in high school he'd noticed the pretty, shy blonde who always made honor roll and would never meet his gaze head-on. He could remember catching her watching him and Teagan, only to have her look away when she realized he knew.

Then there was the rumor, the one so naughty, so downright sexy, he couldn't ignore it. When he'd first heard about it from one of his teammates, he'd discounted it as libel. No way would someone as good and innocent as Abby think anything that taboo. Yet even days later he couldn't shake the feeling, or maybe it had been hope, some part of the rumor was true.

He'd returned to school the following week, only to discover she'd moved, left town to live with a distant relative in Baltimore.

Now she lay in front of him, injured but very much alive, and Talon knew he'd been given a second chance to find out the truth.

Chapter Three

What do you say to a person you only know of from afar? Talon asked himself that same question over and over while he paced outside Abby's hospital room. He paused, looked at the closed door, and raked a hand through his hair. How easy it would be for him to turn around, walk away, and leave her to her life. After all, it wasn't as if he owed her anything.

He started to walk away, only to stop and look over his shoulder. There wasn't anyone else found, dead or alive, anywhere near or inside the house, which meant she was more than likely alone. According to Garrett, by the time they put the fire out, the house was completely gutted, a mere shell of its former self. *She's alone, injured, and homeless, you jackass. Are you really so callous as to simply walk away?* Even he wasn't that cold.

Steeling his nerves, Talon turned on his heel and marched toward the room, this time not giving his brain time to think about his actions before he pushed through the door. Other than offering her his friendship, he didn't have a clue of what, if anything, he could do for her. Still, having a shoulder to lean on during a tough time would be better than nothing.

He'd barely stepped inside the threshold when reality slammed into him like a sucker punch to the gut. Looking much like a broken and battered doll, her head rested against the pillow as she stared aimlessly at the television. She turned her head, meeting his gaze, and the tight fist that gripped his heart began to twist as her sad, hopeless eyes bored into him.

Not once in all the times he'd visited rescue victims had he ever experienced such an intense feeling to protect as he did at that moment.

"Abby," he whispered as he let the recovery-room door close behind him. The girl he remembered from high school might have been shy, but she was also healthy, vibrant around her friends, and happy. It was hard to believe the woman in front of him could be the same person. Thin, with sunken cheeks and sullen eyes, something more than just the fire had ravaged her.

She swallowed hard. "Hello, Talon." Her voice was slightly hoarse.

His lips tipped up at sound of his name. "I wasn't sure you'd remember me."

She barely managed a slight smile of her own. "You haven't changed so much I couldn't tell it was you."

Wishing he could say the same thing about her, he scuffed his boot along the tile and struggled to come up with something to say. "So how are you feeling?"

Using her hands, she pushed herself upright a little more. It was a move he knew was meant to project confidence. "My chest and throat hurt, but it's not so bad, considering I could have died." She tilted her head to the side, appearing to study him for a moment. "From what I hear, I have you to thank for that."

Feeling more uncomfortable than he had in years, Talon shoved his hands into his pockets. Being a fireman wasn't about becoming a hero or basking in praise, it was about helping people, and if he were truly honest, the adrenaline rush that came with job. "I was just doing my job."

"That may be, but if you hadn't pulled me from the house, I wouldn't be here now. Thank you."

Talon opened his mouth, then promptly closed it again when the door opened. In walked the attending doctor with Abby's chart in hand. "Good morning, Mrs. Dalton."

"Good morning, Dr. Carrington."

The doctor paused. "Hey, Talon."

"Mark." Thankful for the break in tension, Talon reached out to shake hands.

"I hear you were a hero last night."

Even after living thirty years in the small town of Bethlehem, Talon was still amazed at the speed which gossip traveled. The nightly news certainly had nothing on the Bethlehem Knitting and Crochet Club. "I wouldn't go that far."

"I would," Abby said from her bed.

Talon's gaze followed Mark's back to where Abby lay in her bed. Dr. Carrington cleared his throat. "Well, I've had a chance to look over your chart, and you've made substantial progress since last night. However, I'm still a bit concerned about the amount of irritation in your airway. You've had several bouts of coughing overnight that were only relieved with medication. Because of that, I'd like to keep you for at least another day or two."

Her eyes grew wide, and she shook her head. "I don't have any health insurance right now. I don't know how I'm going to pay for the treatment I've already received."

"But you're married. Surely your husband has insurance on you," Talon offered. At least the last he'd heard she was married.

"Ex-husband," she corrected. "And he dropped my health insurance the moment our divorce was final."

Well, that explained why she was alone at the house and probably the reason for her somber and somewhat-malnourished appearance.

She turned her attention to the doctor. "I already don't have money to pay my bill. Please don't make it worse for me."

Talon stepped forward. He placed a hand over hers. "Abby, your homeowner's insurance will pay for your hospital stay."

"No, it won't. When the company discovered the house was unoccupied, it dropped me. I inquired about insurance before I came back, but I was denied until I fixed everything wrong with the place and brought it up to code. That kind of work takes time, and I needed a place to stay." Her gaze drifted toward the sheets. "Guess the insurance company was right after all, huh?"

"That's not for me to say." Dr. Carrington consulted her chart. "My only concern is your health. Even if I did agree to release you, where are you going to go? From what the firemen told me, your home isn't livable."

"She can stay with me and Teagan." Talon heard the words tumble from his lips but couldn't believe he had said them. Since when did he take in strays?

Abby's attention darted to Talon, her fearful eyes meeting his, making him realize exactly why he made the offer. "I couldn't possibly—"

Talon lifted a hand to caress her chin, cutting her off midsentence. "You can, Abby."

"Well, I might be willing to release her if I knew she wouldn't be alone."

"But—" She started to protest, only to have the doctor cut her off again.

"If you want to leave the hospital today, then I suggest you rethink your position, Mrs. Dalton." He turned to Talon. "I'll write up her release papers and get a prescription filled for a

bronchial inhaler to treat any future coughing she might have. I will also want her to follow up with a physician of her choosing a week from now. I'm trusting you to keep an eye on her. If she has any serious problems, you need to bring her back here right away."

Talon nodded, taking in all the information Dr. Carrington rattled off.

Between them, Abby sat silent, apparently realizing just how limited her choices really were.

"I'll need to call Teagan and let him know what's going on, so he can get a spare room ready." He turned back to Abby. "I'll be back in an hour, and we'll get you out of here."

Talon made it all the way to the elevator before he finally allowed himself the luxury of thinking about what he'd just done. While Teagan had no issue with opening the family home for special occasions, Talon wasn't sure how his brother would react to having someone living in the house, especially when that someone was not only a woman, but Abby Dalton.

* * * * *

Abby sat inside Talon's 4x4, wondering how in the world she was supposed to live for even a day at the palace known as Werner Farms.

"I know this probably isn't the most ideal situation for you, Abby, but I promise we'll make the best of it, okay?"

She nodded, unsure of what she could possibly say to the man who used to haunt her dreams with regular frequency. Had he and Teagan ever caught wind of the rumor, and if they had, would either of them remember?

This was simply another tangle, another complication she didn't want or need. She leaned her head against the seat back. Maybe there was some slim chance she could go back to the house. Maybe she was simply fooling herself, hoping against hope that her life wasn't really still on a downward spiral. Either way she needed to see for herself. God, she was so tired. "Before we go back to your place, I'd like to see the house first."

His face twisted with concern as he made a right onto the main road leading north out of town. "I really don't think that's a good idea, Abby. It would be better if you waited until you were a bit stronger."

"Please, Talon."

For a moment, he seemed as if he wasn't going to grant her request; then they drove by the entrance to the farm. "You need to prepare yourself, sweetheart, because from what I've been told, the place is a total loss."

If she'd thought her life couldn't get any worse, she certainly wasn't prepared for what came into view when Talon rounded the bend. One charred support beam and an ash-covered concrete slab were all that remained of the only home she'd had left.

Before Talon had the truck in park, she'd opened the door and stepped out.

"Abby," he called after her, quickly skirting the front of the vehicle toward her.

Tears blurred her vision, and a weary exhaustion washed through her veins. "I have nothing," she whispered while she sucked back a sob.

Talon's warm arms wrapped around her, providing support. "That's not true." He turned her toward the detached garage. "They were able to save the garage and the contents inside. They found photo albums, dishes, and bedding in some of the totes. I'm guessing you packed things away when your mom died?"

She nodded. "I didn't want her possessions getting ruined by mice or mold, so I put everything I could in totes and put them in the garage. It was too painful to..." She sucked in a ragged breath and lifted a hand to her mouth.

His arms tightened around her, providing Abby with strength and a warmth she desperately needed. "It will be okay, honey. You have to believe that."

She turned to him, sinking into his embrace as she began to sob. For years she'd remained strong through one devastating event after another. She simply didn't have it in her to be tough any longer.

Talon pulled her closer, his hand rubbing soft circles along her back. "I can't claim to understand how you're feeling right now, but just know that I have you. Go ahead and let it out, sweetheart. I'm not going anywhere."

Chapter Four

Talon parked the truck in its assigned bay inside the four-car garage. “If you need a minute before we go in, I’ll understand.”

She drew in a deep breath and gave him what he knew was a forced smile. Despite her feigning strength, her puffy red eyes reminded him of just how emotionally fragile she still was. “I’m good, but thank you.” She pushed open the passenger door and stepped out. Talon grabbed the small bag containing her medication, exited the driver’s side, and joined her in front of the vehicle.

With one hand on Abby’s lower back, Talon guided her toward the door leading from the garage into the house. For over an hour they’d stood in front of the charred remains of her childhood home while she cried in his arms. While he knew the purging was good for her, he couldn’t help but wonder if it was for more than just a home she hadn’t occupied in twelve years.

He’d felt not only every racking sob that shook through her body but also her pain and suffering. Whatever had happened to bring her back to her home must have been pretty nasty to inflict the type of emotional anguish he’d witnessed. Especially when he considered just how quickly she managed to regain her composure once the tears subsided. There wasn’t any doubt in his mind that she was normally an emotionally strong and willful person. What had gone so wrong in her life that she could so easily be reduced to tears?

Talon reached for the door handle, only to have it fly open and Teagan’s frame fill the space, his face a mask of frustration and concern. “It’s only ten minutes from the hospital to here. Where have you been?”

Not wanting to talk in front of Abby and risk upsetting her again, Talon shook his head and helped her move past his brother. Apparently getting the message, Teagan backed away, waited for them to pass, and then closed the door.

When he spoke again, his tone had changed. “Abby.” He took one of her hands in his. “I’m so sorry about your house and very glad to see you’re okay.”

“Thank you,” she replied and pulled her hand free from Teagan’s grasp.

Teagan slid Talon a sideways look, then turned his attention back to her. “Talon managed to retrieve your suitcases from your scorched car. I have the maid washing out the smoke smell from your clothes.” He nodded to Talon. “I also figured she wouldn’t want to be all by herself on the third floor, so I had Millie set up the guest room across the hall from us.”

Hearing the unspoken message in Teagan’s words, Talon gave a slight nod in agreement. While their foremost concern was for her well-being, there was also the lingering curiosity surrounding the rumor. Having her sleeping across the hall from them would not only afford them the opportunity to keep a critical eye on her during her recovery, but to maybe finally learn the truth.

“I really appreciate your letting me stay here,” Abby began. “And I promise I’ll do my best to stay out of your way.”

Talon eased up behind her, placing a gentle hand on the small of her back. It was a move as natural for him as breathing and one that, for some reason, provided him with a comfort he hadn’t experience in a long time. “That won’t be necessary, honey. For now, our home is your home.”

Her gaze moved from Talon to Teagan, before she turned back to face Talon. She brushed a gentle hand along his cheek. “Thank you, Talon.”

He pulled her hand away, holding it between his palms. “There’s no need to thank me, Abby.” He’d barely finished his sentence when she began to sway, her other hand reaching for her head. His heart jumped as he gathered her in his arms. “Abby?”

“I-I’m okay,” she replied, even as Teagan moved in to help steady her. “Just tired, I think.”

“Maybe,” he replied, studying her with a critical eye. While she looked better than she had in the hospital, it was obvious that she still didn’t feel well. “You have had a tough twenty-four hours. Resting might not be such a bad idea.”

Teagan stepped between them, taking her hand from Talon’s grasp and guiding her toward the main staircase. “Then let’s get you upstairs and settled. There will be time later to decide what needs to be done next.” Talon followed, fighting the sudden burst of jealousy chewing on

his insides with every step. Knowing what she'd already been through, he was sure Teagan's intention was simply to help. So why did he suddenly feel as if his brother was trying to steal Abby from him?

* * * * *

With both men in tow, Abby stepped into the guest room and stopped short. Sheer awe shimmered through her system as she took in her surroundings. Colored in deep mauves and gold tones, this room alone was nearly the size of her childhood home and certainly larger than the master suite of her former home back in Baltimore.

To her right sat a four-poster bed with a mauve flower-print duvet. At the foot of the bed was a tufted bench covered in a taupe and mauve diamond print. On the bench lay a white T-shirt.

Teagan motioned to the fabric. "Since Millie is still cleaning your clothing, Talon and I thought you might like to borrow a T-shirt to sleep in. She should have your clothes cleaned by morning."

The gesture both touched her on a level she couldn't imagine and caused her mind to swirl with images of her, Teagan, and Talon making love. Feeling both men's gazes boring into her, she managed an audible swallow before she squeaked out, "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Abby. I'll let you get settled. If you need anything, just let me or Talon know, okay?"

She nodded. "I will."

Teagan exited the room, casting a glance at Talon on his way out. Instead of following his brother, Talon remained rooted in place, causing Abby's already-overstimulated senses to heighten more. Tamping down her conflicting emotions, she turned to face him. "I really appreciate everything you and your brother are doing for me."

Talon shook his head. "No thanks is necessary, Abby."

"Yes, it *is* necessary," she argued. "If it weren't for you, Talon, I'd still be in the hospital, worrying not only about how I would pay for the bill, but where I'd go when I"—her voice cracked, causing her to pause—"when I was released." She finally finished as she fought back a new deluge of tears.

Talon stepped forward, closing the distance between them and taking her hands into his. “What happened, Abby? I mean, besides the fire. Back in high school, you were always a bit shy, but you were never sad. The gleam in your eyes is gone, and you look like you haven't eaten in weeks. What happened to bring you back home in the first place?”

Several long, silent moments passed while Abby worked up the courage to speak. “I had no place else to go,” she whispered as first one tear, then another, broke free and slid down her face.

“Why?”

The pain in her chest grew as she thought back on the past twelve months. “I was staying with a friend while my divorce finalized. I was even going to try and find a place of my own in Baltimore when the papers were signed, but then I found out that my ex had announced his engagement to the tramp he was cheating on me with.” She shook her head as she choked back a sob. “We shared the same friends and the same social circles. I couldn't stay, not with the possibility of running into them at every turn.”

“So you came back here instead?” he prompted.

She nodded, her forehead brushing over the cotton of his shirt. “I knew this was one place where Brad would never come.”

“I'm sorry you've had such a hard time lately, honey.” He slid a hand beneath her chin, lifting her head until she looked up into his sapphire gaze. “I know this may be hard for you to believe right now, but it will get better.”

More than anything she wanted to take his words as a pledge that everything wrong with her life would indeed right itself. To do so would be a foolish gamble, one she couldn't afford to lose. “I want to believe you, Talon. I really do, but I can't.”

“Then believe this.” His lips were on hers almost before the words registered, sliding across her mouth with a gentle need, teasing her with unspoken promises.

His cool hands cupped her face, holding her steady while his tongue followed the seam of her lips, coaxing them to part. They bade welcome to his ministrations, opening for him on a whimper. He deepened the kiss, plunging into her mouth with an urgency she'd never felt before.

Her arms lifted, sliding over his shoulders to wrap around his neck. When, she dimly wondered through the murky haze of lust slowly gripping her body, was the last time she'd reacted with such fervor to a simple kiss? When was the last time someone *wanted* to kiss her?

His hand slid away from her skin, to graze along her neck. His fingers traced a path on her collarbone and continued downward. She shuddered when he brushed a knuckle along the curve of her breast, reveling in the feel of his touch. For once in her life, she didn't hear the condemning voices telling her how her fantasies and desires were wrong. Instead she sank into the kiss, enjoying the moment she never thought would happen in her lifetime.

Abby combed her fingers through his hair, taking pleasure in the way the silky strands slid through her grasp. She held his head in her hands, meeting each thrust of his tongue with an eager one of her own.

When his hand finally came to rest on her ass, he gave a gentle tug, bringing her body closer to his. Waves of awareness ran along her skin, gathering into a pool of need as the hard ridge of his cock pushed against her belly. What they were doing was wrong. After all, she'd only been with him for a total of four hours. To so easily give herself over to him would be asking for heartbreak during a time when she didn't need any more complications in her life. Yet the need to feel desired trumped her conscience. Even if she only ever had this one night with him, it would be enough to give her what she needed to pull herself out of the abyss and move on with her life.

Could she be as bold with Talon as she wanted to be?

Early in her marriage to Brad, she'd tried to show him what she wanted when it came to sex, only to be told that women of society didn't think such taboo thoughts. It had only taken a few encounters ending in disaster before she'd given up and allowed Brad to be in charge. During the final days of her marriage, he'd called her a cold fish in bed. If she had been, it was because he'd made her that way.

"Abby?"

Talon's voice pulled her from her thoughts. Still it took a couple of seconds for her to realize that he'd stepped back and was now looking at her with a concerned gaze.

Her face flushed, and she quickly looked away. "I'm sorry, Talon."

With a knuckle beneath her chin, he coaxed her gaze upward to meet his. “I don't want an apology, Abby. I want you to tell me what was going through your head that caused you to pull away.”

Should she risk telling him that she was thinking about her ex while she was kissing him? The last thing she wanted was to upset him after he'd been so good to her. “My mind just got in the way,” she replied as she lifted a hand to touch his face, running a thumb along his bottom lip. “I want this—you,” she corrected. “But it's too soon.”

He appeared to consider her words before nodding a grim acceptance. “I understand. Though I have to say, I'm happy to hear you say that you want me, because I've wanted you since high school.”

Her eyes widened with his admission. The man of her dreams had wanted her all along? “You have?”

His lips tipped into a grin as he took her hand in his. “Are you surprised by that?”

“Well, yes, actually. I mean, you were on the football team and dated cheerleaders. I didn't even realize you knew I existed.”

“Oh, I knew all right, but you'd never meet my stare, and you walked away during the few times I tried to talk to you.”

“I-I was—” She paused, trying desperately to make her brain function amid the confusion running amok in her head. “I was shy and stupid,” she finally said, realizing the last part of her statement held more truth than she liked. If she'd had more guts in high school, her entire life might have been different, and she wouldn't be in her current situation.

Chapter Five

With his cock still as hard as a steel bat, Talon eased into the chaise lounge positioned in the corner of the room, picked up the remote, and pushed the button for the television. It flickered to life, helping to tamp down the sound of running water drifting out from behind the adjacent guest-bath door and all the erotic images the sound evoked.

Finding out after all these years that Abby was indeed attracted to him was a welcome surprise, but one that only bolstered his desire to bury himself between her long, lean legs. He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and carefully adjusted his erection, easing the pressure from the zipper.

As much as he didn't want to admit it, she was right about the timing of their encounter. It was too soon for them to be jumping between the sheets, though his reasons for waiting were different than hers. Quite frankly, he didn't give a flying fuck about her needing space to recover from her divorce. In his opinion, the best way to bounce back from such a hurt was to find another source of pleasure.

It was obvious to him that this Brad jackass had broken down her spirit and reduced her to a shell of her former self. Oh, there were some signs that the Abby he remembered still existed, but she'd been badly wounded by her husband's wandering eye. Talon was happy to take on the task of healing those wounds and soothing away the scars.

She'd nearly lost her life less than twenty-four hours ago and needed some time to rest and build up her strength. Experience had taught him that while a victim could appear to recover quickly from smoke inhalation, its effects sometimes lingered for days, even weeks, after the event. As much as he didn't like it, right now she needed a friend, not an overzealous lover.

A low *thud* yanked Talon from his thoughts and sent him scurrying off the chaise.

"Abby?" He banged on the bathroom door. "Abby, are you okay?"

Several silent seconds passed before she finally answered with a weak "I think so."

“What happened?” he called back while he tried to regulate the pounding of his heart and push back his almost-instant fear.

“I got dizzy and slipped.”

“I’m coming in.” He turned the knob and wrenched open the door. It hit the wall with a *bang* and vibrated as he raced to the tub. He grabbed the curtain and yanked. The metal rungs *clinked* against the curtain rod as the fabric retreated. His gaze immediately dropped to tub floor, where Abby gripped the sides and struggled to stand.

He reached down, hooked his hands beneath her arms, and pulled her up and out of the tub. Her wet, naked body slid against him, soaking his clothes. “Talon, I’m okay.”

“No, I don’t think you are. Now be quiet and let me take care of you.” He grabbed a towel off the bar, wrapped it around her body, then picked her up and carried her to the bed. Gently he placed her on top of the covers. “Stay put,” he ordered, then, wincing at the harshness of his words, added a “please” as an afterthought.

She pulled the edges of the towel against her but didn’t make any move to rise from the bed. Talon rushed back into the bathroom, turned off the taps, grabbed the T-shirt she’d intended to wear off the counter, and returned to find her still lying on the bed.

“I’m sorry I growled at you.” He eased down next to her. “I’m a little wired, and when I saw you in the shower like that, well...” *It took ten years off my life.* He let his sentence drop, knowing he couldn’t possibly explain the panicked feeling that had claimed him. “Here’s the shirt for you to wear.”

Her fingers grazed his as she took the shirt from him, once again sending that familiar spark zipping through his already-overloaded system. “Thank you.”

His brow knit at her breathy reply. It wasn’t lust he detected in her tone, but something else. “You’re welcome.” He eased in closer and detected the faint whistle in her breath. “Honey, I think you’re wheezing. I’m going to get the inhaler Dr. Carrington prescribed.”

“Okay.”

He pushed up from the bed and hurried downstairs to retrieve the medicine he’d left on the bag on the entryway table. Lack of oxygen combined with the heat of the room had more than likely caused her fall in the shower. If she continued to wheeze like that, he’d have her ass back to the hospital pronto, whether she liked it or not. In the meantime she’d need constant

monitoring, which he wouldn't be able to do from his own bedroom. Convincing her to let him stay in the guest room with her tonight wouldn't be easy, but it was necessary.

"How's Abby settling in?" Teagan yelled from the couch in the den.

Talon crossed the room and snagged the bag off the table. "She's struggling a bit, but considering what she's been through, I'd say that's to be expected."

Teagan nodded. "Makes perfect sense to me. Do you need any help?"

The covetous feeling Talon experienced earlier reared its head in protest. "Nah, I've got things under control." He started to walk away, only to pause and turn back to Teagan. "Oh, and I'll be sleeping in the guest room with Abby if you need me."

Teagan raised an eyebrow. "Moving a little fast, aren't we, Bro?"

Talon hated the fact that his brother could read his motives so well, though at the moment his intentions were completely honorable. "She's wheezing, and I'm not comfortable having her sleep alone when technically she should still be in the hospital."

Teagan raised his hands in defense. "I understand how you feel, Talon. I'm concerned about her too. I'm just offering you a bit of advice. Be careful. She seems skittish and wounded. If you push her too hard, she might run, and then we'll never know the truth."

Talon's fingers flexed around the bag, and he tried to control the wayward emotions coursing through his system. "She's special to me, Tee. She always has been."

Teagan nodded. "I know, but remember, Bro, she's emotionally broken right now. More than likely you'll only get one chance with her before she shuts you out."

* * * * *

It was still dark when Abby stirred. Foreboding dreams filled with fire and heartbreak had once again pushed her from sleep, increasing her pulse rate and shortening her breathing.

She turned over and spotted the figure stretched out on the chaise in the corner. For a split second fear claimed her thoughts. She bolted upright, only to realize the figure was Talon. Despite her protests, he'd insisted on sleeping in her room, citing the need to keep tabs on her breathing as his reason for staying. With everything she'd been through, quite frankly, it was an argument she hadn't been all that interested in winning.

Now, in the pitch-black of the night, she felt foolish for overreacting and started to lie back down, but not before her motion caught his attention. "What's wrong?" he asked as he quickly climbed from the chaise.

"Nothing." She placed a hand over her still-racing heart. "Go back to sleep, Talon."

Just as she suspected, he ignored her request and eased onto the edge of the bed. "Oh no. Something woke you, and I want to know what it was."

His protective nature brought a smile to her lips. How long had it been since someone had cared about her well-being, either physically or emotionally? As much as she shouldn't like the feeling of being coddled, she did and answered him without question. "I forgot you were sleeping in here, and for a second I thought someone was in the room."

"Is that all?" He brushed a lock of hair from her face. "Something must have happened to wake you in the first place."

Knowing now that he'd prod for more information, and not quite ready to share her dreams yet, she feigned a smile. "I guess it's just being in a strange place has me all out of sorts."

He nodded. "I know the feeling. When I first arrived in Afghanistan, I didn't sleep for weeks. Then, when I returned home after my tour, I had the same problem."

He'd served overseas? "I didn't know you joined the military."

Talon shifted to face her and took Abby's hand in his. "The army, actually."

"Wow, the army. I always assumed you'd take over the family business."

His smile faded, and he turned to stare out the window. "I'd intended on running the business, even though it really wasn't what I wanted. Then my parents died in the helicopter crash." He paused and drew in a long breath. "Their deaths devastated us both. Teagan buried his pain by throwing himself into the business. Me, well, I ended up feeling lost, with no real direction for my future. Nothing seemed to inspire me, until one day I walked by a recruiting office."

His smile slowly returned as he shook his head. "Teagan was pissed when I told him I'd enlisted, but I needed to feel like my life had a purpose. I needed a direction to focus my unresolved anger over my parents' deaths. The military provided me with all of that and more."

His sorrow washed over her in waves, sinking into her flesh, pouring into her soul. While she'd been wallowing in self-pity over the loss of her mother to cancer and the subsequent demise of her marriage, Abby had forgotten that Talon had had his own demons to face.

The need for contact drove her to reach for him, and she lifted a hand, cupping his cheek in her palm. "I never got the chance to tell you how sorry I was to hear about your parents' deaths."

He turned into her touch. "Thank you, sweetheart. I could say the same thing to you though. I was off mountain climbing when your mom died last year. It wasn't until I arrived home that Teagan informed me of her death. By then I'd missed the service."

Even though Abby knew her mother was in a better place, it still hurt to talk about her. There were days, especially early on in the divorce proceedings, that she'd grieved hard, wishing more than anything for her mother's wisdom and caring. "You didn't miss much," she replied, remembering how only about a dozen people or so had shown up for the funeral.

"I missed you." His heavy-lidded gaze bored into her, and in an instant the mood in the room changed.

He slid a hand beneath the tee, placing it over her belly. A zing of electricity shot straight to her pussy, causing a tiny gasp to tumble from her lips. Never in all her life had she ever experienced the pull she felt with Talon. Was it latent desire demanding to be heard or something deeper, more primal, that made her want him on such an elemental level? Still injured, she should make him wait, but that would mean making herself wait too, and she wasn't willing to do that.

"I want you, Abby," he spoke, his voice raspy with desire.

"I know."

His fingers slowly walked along the edge of her shirt before finally gathering the hem, revealing her skin inch by inch.

This was it, the moment she'd both dreamed about and feared. While she wanted nothing more than to make love to Talon, self-doubt crept into her mind. Being lean and wiry from childhood, she'd never had the lush body with big breasts and curves in all the right places that turned men on. The recent events in her life had led to a loss of appetite that caused her to be skinnier than normal.

Would he find her gaunt frame a turn-off? Would he be disappointed by her tiny breasts? Brad had offered on more than one occasion to pay for a boob job, and each time she'd refused. She'd told herself that if he didn't love her for who she was, then she deserved better. Maybe her unwillingness to be so accommodating was the exact reason why he'd left.

“You're thinking way too hard, sweetheart. Just let go of your worries and lift your arms. I promise I'll make it good for you.”

Even if they only had this one time, she could at least live out her dreams. She pretty much had nothing tangible in her life to hold on to. Living out one of her most coveted desires would at least be something that neither fire nor ex-husband could take away from her.

Taking the plunge after a second's hesitation, she did as Talon asked, allowing him to strip the thin material up and off.

Chapter Six

If Talon's cock hadn't already been as hard as a damn cinder block, it would have gotten that way at the sight greeting him. Yes, Abby was a little on the thin side. He chalked it up to life's stresses. Nothing a little good food wouldn't fix. It was the perfect firm breasts, just enough to fill his palms, and the neatly manicured runway of hair at the apex of her thighs that did him in.

From the moment he'd reached for her, he'd chastised himself for touching her in this manner when she was still injured, but his body wasn't listening. Desire, strong as a roaring river swollen by rain, washed through him, propelling him forward. Earlier he'd seen the need in her eyes and knew she wouldn't keep him from his task.

As he looked down at her now, he was thankful for that fact.

Her brow knit at his apparent appreciation of her body, and she crossed her arms over her chest. "They're small," she whispered, her voice almost cracking with self-doubt. The bastard she'd married had done a good job of stripping her of any confidence she'd had about her body. Well, Talon would just have to change that. No way could he allow her to continue to think she was lacking in any way.

"They're perfect," he replied as he slowly coaxed her arms away so he could once again see her completely. He rasped his thumbs across her nipples, causing the tiny buds to draw into tight points. He continued to watch Abby's face the entire time and noted the dilation in her eyes at his actions. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she liked what he was doing.

"And now they're mine." Unable to resist even the smallest of tastes, he lowered his head and took one of the petal pink tips in his mouth. She arched into his touch. Could she possibly know how sexy she looked when she did that? While he continued to lave one nipple, he tweaked the other with his fingers, tugging on it until she gasped. The sound pulled Talon from his task. Redirecting his attention to her mouth, he let go of her nipple with a wet *pop*.

His lips found hers, nibbling gently at first, before he licked at the seam. She granted him access, parting her lips on a sigh that had him taking everything she was willing to give. Hard and greedy, he covered her mouth with his own, his tongue probing, searching the recesses to learn every nuance, her very essence.

When her arms wound around his head and linked at the back of his neck, he nearly lost complete control. Next time, he silently promised. Next time he would slow down and savor every inch of her gorgeous body, worship her the way she deserved to be worshipped. Right now carnal need demanded he bury his cock inside the warm depths of her pussy.

Still devouring her mouth with his own, Talon trailed a hand along her belly, until his fingers slid between her thighs.

Abby tensed beneath him. Her hand came down to cover his, stopping his progression. While he allowed her to block his path, he refused to pull away. “Do you trust me?” he whispered as he pressed his lips to her temple.

“Yes,” she replied without hesitation.

“Good, because I’m not your ex-husband, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let his lousy treatment of you dictate what happens in this bed. Now let go, sugar.”

With some reluctance, she slowly released her grip, giving Talon the room to burrow deeper.

He watched her eyes close and her mouth open slightly while he used two fingers to part her folds. Finding her already sopping wet caused his heart to jump with joy. As nervous as she was about the situation, she definitely wanted him.

Using the same two fingers, he breached her entrance, pushing deep into her pussy. Her eyes flew open, and she squeaked in surprise.

A grin slowly enveloped his face as her passion-filled gaze locked onto him. “Talon?”

“Shhh.” He gently kissed her cheek. “Just feel, baby.”

Much to his surprise, her legs parted, giving him better access. Talon nearly moaned in appreciation. He eased his digits out, then thrust them back in, repeating the process until her hips began to canter to the rhythm he set.

Soft moans tumbled from her lips as she writhed beneath his ministrations. While he desperately wanted to shove his cock deep into her waiting core, he also wanted to see the pure, untouched bliss on her face as she came.

It didn't take long for his wish to come true.

She tossed her head from side to side, crying out in pleasure, while her channel clenched against his fingers with more force than he thought possible. God, how would it feel to have her do that to his dick instead? Ready to find out, Talon quickly shucked his jeans, remembering at the last minute to pull out the condom he'd stuffed in the front pocket earlier in the day. He'd done it more to satisfy his hope that something might happen between them, though at the time he'd doubted it would. Now he was glad he had.

He smelled her desire on his fingers as he lifted the packet to his mouth to tear it open with his teeth.

Once properly sheathed, he positioned himself between her legs. "Abby, look at me," he ordered. The need to watch her, to see her expression as they became one for the first time, gnawed at him. Her gaze settled on him; the look of ardor in her eyes bored directly into his soul. Without taking his gaze off hers, he settled the head of his cock at her entrance and thrust, burying himself deep. There was a momentary flare of pain on her face, but before he could do anything to ease her discomfort, the pain disappeared, replaced quickly by passion. Never in all the times he'd slept with women had he ever felt the connection he now shared with her. Holding himself up on his elbows, Talon waited for a sign from her to move. "Okay?" he murmured.

"Yes," she replied, slightly breathless.

Taking her signal, he pulled back, until only the head of his cock remained inside. Needing to come nearly more than he needed his next breath, but wanting to make it good for Abby, Talon slowly pushed back in and held there. On the verge of climax, he struggled for control.

Beneath him, Abby wiggled her hips, apparently wanting him to move.

"Baby, please," he begged, dropping his forehead to hers. "You have to give me a minute, or this will be over before it gets started."

Instead of granting his request, Abby arched her hips, impaling his cock farther into her. "Baby," he ground between his teeth, pinning her with a threatening look. "I'm not kidding, Abby. I'm hanging on by a thread here, and I'd appreciate it if you would just give me a second."

A tiny smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “Okay, one. Your second is up.” She raked her nails along his ass, grabbing his cheeks and pulling him back inside her.

His knee-jerk reaction was to smack her on the ass, pulling a yelp from her. “Behave, baby, or things are going to get rough.”

The gleam returned to her eyes, the one he'd seen back when they were in school all those years ago. “You never know,” she teased. “I might like rough.”

His eyes narrowed as he considered her statement. Damn, this woman was just full of secrets. “I would have never guessed.”

“Honestly, me either, but I used to have fantasies about... Well...”

Intrigued, he gave a slow thrust forward. “I'd be happy to explore those fantasies with you, sweetheart, but not right now.” He dug his fingertips into her hips, trying not to grip too tightly and hurt her. Then he began to move in earnest, pounding into her with a fervor that spoke volumes about his lack of control.

He could feel her inner muscles clench with each drag of his cock, heightening his senses even more. Lightning shot down his spine and into his groin. Unable to stave off his inevitable release, he moved one hand to her clit and pressed with his thumb.

A cry tore from her lips as her pussy walls clamped down tight, sending Talon right on over the edge. “Fuck,” he mumbled and slammed into her one last time, holding there as he filled the condom. Her pussy continued to clench and pulse in rhythm, milking every last drop from his release. One thing was for sure, letting Abby go would be infinitely harder than he imagined, after what they'd just done.

* * * * *

Talon put the truck in park in front of the post office. “Are you sure you don't want me to come in with you?”

After nearly a week of constant doting by Talon, she'd finally insisted on getting out of the house and addressing some of her business.

Abby shook her head. “I can handle a simple address change, but thank you.” What she hadn't said was how his presence with her would only add fodder to the flapping gums of the

town. It was inevitable that people would eventually notice her with Talon, but why make it obvious?

Talon nodded. "I'll just wait here, then."

"I'll only be a minute."

She eased out of the truck and grabbed the collar of her coat, pulling it tighter around her neck as she noted the drop in temperature. When she was little, the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas used to be her favorite time of the year. Now it was nothing more than a painful reminder of what had been. Bolstering her nerves, she walked into the building and went to the counter against the window in search of a change-of-address form. How many more times, she wondered, would she need to change the destination of her mail delivery? Maybe she should just invest in a post-office box instead. It would certainly be easier than writing down the address for Werner Farms and facing the scrutiny she'd no doubt receive from the counter person.

Of course, even if she rented a box, she'd still have to provide a physical address. Might as well save the money at this stage, especially when she wasn't sure what the future held.

Abby scrawled her information across the yellow paper, then turned and approached the counter. Her stomach dropped when she recognized the person on duty. Why couldn't she catch a break and get someone who wouldn't recognize her? With only one window open, that little hope wasn't going to happen. Might as well face the impending disaster directly.

"Hello, Kirsten."

The woman's mouth dropped open. "Abby Bennett. Oh wait. I heard you got married a while back, so it's not Bennett anymore, right?"

This so wasn't a conversation she wanted to have. "No. It's Dalton."

"Oh right. You married some banking executive in Baltimore. I heard about your parents' house. Is that what brings you back to little old Bethlehem?"

"Not exactly." The last thing she wanted to do was feed the gossip chain that sustained this town, but she couldn't continue to have her mail delivered to an address that no longer existed. "I just need to put in for a change of address." Abby held her breath and slid the change-of-address slip across the counter. It was only a matter of seconds before Kirsten figured out whose address was on the form.

Kirsten's eyes widened as she read the form. "This is the Werner Farms address."

"I know. I'm temporarily staying there."

Kirsten's gaze raked over Abby. *Assessing? Judging?* She finally stopped at Abby's face and shot Abby a smile she knew was fake. "I'll get this put in for you today, Abby. Will there be anything else?"

Abby shook her head. "That's all, Kirsten. Thank you."

"No problem at all. It was good seeing you again."

"You too," Abby mumbled as she walked away from the counter.

"Oh, and Abby?" Kirsten called out loud enough that the other patrons in line could hear.

She stopped at the glass door and drew in a breath before turning to face Kirsten. "Yes?"

Kirsten's lips tipped into an evil smile. "Tell Talon and Teagan I said hello."

Without responding, Abby pushed through the door and quickly made her way back out to where Talon waited. Knowing how the gossip mill in this town functioned, she imagined the news would be all over town before they'd returned to the farm later in the afternoon.

"Everything good?" Talon asked as she climbed into the vehicle.

"Yep," she replied, trying hard to project a happy face. There really wasn't any need in dragging Talon down with her worries. "I just need to go to Walmart and pick up a few things to replace what was lost in the fire, and I'll be ready to head home."

He pulled out of the parking lot and drove toward the store on the outskirts of town.

"I still don't see why you didn't let me give that list to Millie. Then you wouldn't have to do this yourself."

"I'm not going to put my chores on someone else, Talon. I'm sure keeping up with you and Teagan is enough for the poor woman without my adding to her burden." Inwardly, she cringed at the bitchy tone. It wasn't Talon's fault she was feeling self-conscious and out of sorts.

"Then let me come in with you."

"I'd really rather you didn't. Not that I'd mind the company, but I'm really not comfortable having you standing next to me while I pick out tampons."

Talon's lips tipped into a grin. "Gotcha. Well, then I'm going to put fuel in the truck and check in at the firehouse. I'll be back in a half hour for you. Is that all right?"

“That's perfect. Thank you.” She resisted the urge to lean over and kiss him and instead opened the truck door.

Once inside the building, she grabbed a cart and headed for the personal-needs section. While the small basket of travel-size products she'd found in the guest bath had sustained her over the last week, she'd certainly feel better using her own.

Abby turned down the hair-care products aisle and stopped, eyeing the pricey bottles of her favorite brand of shampoo. Considering her current situation, it wouldn't be wise to spend fifteen dollars for shampoo and conditioner when she could get them cheaper. Maybe once she was back on her feet she'd be able to go back to her favorite products.

Finally settling on a two-for-one sale of a name-brand product that touted lusher, fuller hair, she moved along the aisle and chose the same brand of hair spray and styling gel. She looked down at her list. She still needed deodorant, a new toothbrush and toothpaste, feminine-hygiene products, and makeup.

Abby walked to the end of the aisle and turned, only to stop short. “You'll never guess who I heard was back in town?” the female voice whispered.

“Who?” another woman asked.

“Abby Bennett.”

At the sound of her name, Abby's back straightened, and her heart jumped.

“Really. What's she doing in Bethlehem?”

“Well, I know her parents' home caught fire a few days ago, but I doubt that's why she's here. Personally I think it has more to do with her banker husband dumping her for a younger woman.”

Anger slowly began to boil low in her belly as she listened to the women talk. Why couldn't people simply mind their own business?

“How awful for her.”

At least somebody had a little compassion for what she was going through.

“Yeah, I felt bad for her too, until I discovered that she's staying at Werner Farms while she's here.” The scandalous tone in the woman's voice only served to fray Abby's already-worn

nerves. Yes, she'd slept with Talon. She'd yet to decide if that action had been a mistake, but what business was it of theirs either way?

"No way," the other woman replied, her tone projecting her shock at the first woman's statement.

"May lightning strike me down if I'm lying."

Abby could almost picture the woman holding up her hand as if she were swearing under oath. Oh how she'd love nothing more than to see a bolt of lightning right about now.

"Do you think she's sleeping with them?"

"Well, I'm sure you remember the rumor back in school. So what do you think?"

"You know," the second woman began. "I kinda felt bad for her after all that came down, especially when I found out she had to move away because of what was being said. Now I'm not sure how I feel. I mean, really, what kind of woman sleeps with two men, especially brothers, at the same time?"

Blinking back a fresh set of tears, Abby quietly backed the cart up and turned away from the conversation, scurrying into the next aisle. Instead of carefully considering her purchases, she grabbed this and that, tossing mascara, lip gloss, and blush into the cart without looking at the colors. She finished her list in a rush and made her way to the checkouts. Maybe it was paranoia, or maybe she was really feeling eyes watching her as she practically ran for the first open cashier. Either way all she wanted to do was escape.

Bags in hand, she rushed out into the cold, ignoring both festive music and the bell ringer taking donations in front of the store. She glanced around, noting that Talon hadn't returned, before walking several feet away from the doors to stand near a display of snowblowers chained together outside the building. Despite the cold temperatures, she felt nothing but the heat of contempt scorching her veins. Why did the people of this town have to make everything so damn hard? Hadn't she been through enough emotional upheaval without having to deal with the petty gossips who made up Bethlehem?

Ten minutes passed before she finally spotted Talon's 4x4 pulling into the parking lot. He drove alongside the building, and stopping directly in front of her. She yanked open the door, tossed her bags behind the seat, and climbed in, barely avoiding slamming the door in the process.

The smile Talon wore immediately faded. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she replied as she fastened her seat belt. "I just want to go home."

"Speaking of home," Talon said as he pulled out of the parking lot, "the fire marshal has determined that faulty wiring was most likely the cause of the blaze that gutted your parents' house."

Abby inhaled deeply as she considered how Talon's words only served to reaffirm those of the insurance-company representative. "*You have to bring the house up to code before we can insure it.*" With no money for the renovations, she'd instead chosen to gamble that the house would last until she could make the repairs. It was a gamble she'd lost.

* * * * *

Once on the outskirts of town, Talon pulled the truck to the side of the road, set his hazard lights, and put the truck in park.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking from him to the hood of the truck and back.

"I don't know. You tell me what's wrong."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The hell you don't," Talon argued. "From the moment we left for town you've been moody, and it's only grown worse. Something is seriously bothering you, and I want to know what it is."

"It's nothing." She shook her head. "At least nothing you can do anything about."

"How do you know?"

"Because you can't change people's perceptions of me, and you can't stop the gossip that is tearing through the town even as we speak."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about all the hypocrites who have nothing better to do than spread rumors that aren't true."

For several seconds Talon remained silent. She'd given him the opening he'd been looking for to broach the subject of the rumor. "Does this have anything to do with why you left school and moved to Baltimore?"

She swallowed audibly and turned her gaze out the window. Her silence spoke volumes. “Abby, look at me.” When she didn't move, he reached over and slid a palm under her chin, forcing her to face him. “Is it true?”

Her eyes widened for a split second before she schooled her features into a neutral expression. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“I think you do, but I'll make it crystal clear for you. I know about the rumor. I've known since before you left school. Is it true?”

Her eyes turned glassy, and she pulled her head from his grasp. “Please don't make me answer that.”

“Despite what the old fogies of this town think, it's okay to find two men attractive at the same time, Abby.”

“That may be, but it's not okay to fantasize about sleeping with them at the same time.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, her hand rocketed up to cover it. Tears broke free and streamed down her cheeks. He wanted to kick himself for hurting her, yet deep down he knew he'd done the right thing.

He reached down and unfastened her seat belt, then pulled her across the bench seat into his arms, burying his face in her hair as she sobbed against his shoulder. “I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to cause you more pain, but I had to know if it was true.”

“Why?” she whispered.

“Because even the idea of Teagan and my sleeping with you was such a huge turn-on.”

“It's also unacceptable, according to the church.”

He pulled back and cupped her face in his palms. “When, my dear, was the last time you went to church?”

Her attention fell away from his face. “Don't remind me.”

Despite himself, he chuckled. “That's exactly my point. You don't agree with the church teachings any more than I do, so why should you care what others think?”

“I cared because it was a huge embarrassment to my parents.”

“That may be true, but they're gone now. So what's your new excuse?”

Her gaze rocketed up to meet his. "Excuse?" she repeated, apparently made indignant by his accusation.

He grinned. "You heard me, Abby. You're all worked up over something you said twelve years ago, because others aren't willing to let it go. Well, I say that's too bad for them that they have nothing more important in their pitiful little lives than to drag up ghosts. Personally I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of being embarrassed, but then I think the whole idea of sharing you with my brother is hot."

"You do?"

He took her hand and placed it on the bulge in his pants. "Does this feel as if I'm lying?"

Her fingers curled, pulling the denim tight around his shaft, and Talon barely managed to swallow a moan. What he wouldn't do right now to have her lean on over and take him in her mouth right there on the side of the road!

With her current hang-ups on sex and gossip, there wasn't any way it would happen. "As much as you don't want to admit it, baby, you like the idea too. Otherwise you wouldn't be squeezing my dick."

"Even if I do, it's still wrong."

"Who says? And don't say 'the church.' We've been over that topic already."

She bit her lip, and Talon couldn't help the urge to soothe away the pain. He lowered his head and brushed a soft kiss over her lips, taking care to lick at the spot she gnawed between her teeth. "Honey, as much as I love having your hand on my cock, if you don't let go, I won't be held responsible for my actions."

She released him as if she'd been burned. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I enjoy your touch, but I didn't think you'd appreciate my stripping you naked along the side of a major highway."

Her cheeks turned a sexy shade of red that had him reevaluating his statement. Why did he get the distinct feeling she was way more wild than she let on?

"Tell me something?"

"What?"

"Do you still have that fantasy with me and Tee?"

She nodded.

“Then I say, if people are going to accuse you of the crime, you might as well commit it.”

Chapter Seven

Abby stood in the middle of the discount chain store located in the town of Red Rock, away from prying eyes, watching while Talon and Teagan assessed each toy carefully before either sitting it back on the shelf or dropping it into the cart. “What is it you're looking for exactly?” she asked, noting the already-overflowing cart filled with coats, hats, gloves, and clothing.

“The perfect toy,” Talon replied.

Astonished, Abby crossed her arms over her chest. “You are kidding, right? They're toys, for Pete's sake. I'm sure you could pick up anything and the children would be happy.”

Teagan frowned. “Buying a toy is serious business,” he replied and flipped over a Transformers box to read the back.

“Yeah,” Talon agreed. “It's not like buying clothing.”

She couldn't help but smile at the pair. Since their conversation in his truck one week earlier, Talon hadn't mentioned her fantasy or his craving to act on her desires. Maybe it was that he knew she needed time to mull over his idea. Then again, it was possible he never expected her to go through with it anyway. More than she could express, Abby wanted to be with both men, but letting go of old teachings and deeply painful criticisms wouldn't be easy.

Teagan picked up a large LEGO box with a pirate ship on the cover. “The two boys would probably enjoy something like this.”

Talon nodded. “You can't go wrong with LEGOs, and if we bought a couple of each, it would be enough to keep them busy for months.”

Abby looked down at the cart in front of her. Never would she have imagined that Teagan and Talon would be the type to get involved with charities. Oh sure, she could picture them writing out a check to some needy soul, but to actually see them doing the shopping floored her. She fingered the wish list Talon asked her to hold, and studied the requests the three children

listed. Coats, hats, gloves, and new shoes made the top of the list. Even items for their mother, such as a new handbag, snow boots, and a gift card to a local grocery store, peppered the paper, but not one child had asked for a single toy.

She thought back to her childhood. Her parents hadn't been rich by any means, but they'd always made sure she was well clothed, well fed, and had at least one present she'd asked for under the tree on Christmas morning. If it weren't for Talon and Teagan's generosity, these children might not have anything to open. "What about those Transformer things you guys had a minute ago? They make noise and do cool things. LEGOs are just blocks."

Talon looked up, mock horror shining in his eyes. "LEGOs are not just blocks, my dear. These"—he held up the box—"are the cornerstone of a child's imagination."

"Besides," Teagan added, "toys that light up, move, and make sounds require batteries that will eventually die and need replacing. If a mom can't afford to buy food for them, she's not going to spend what little money she has to buy batteries. So the toys will only be fun for as long as the batteries last. Toys like building blocks and wrestling figures, Hot Wheels cars and board games can last forever."

She'd never given the subject much consideration, but now that she thought about it, his words made perfect sense. This poor single mother was just trying to keep her children fed and clothed. Extras, even something as simple as batteries, would be out of the question.

She consulted the list, noting the five-year-old girl listed as the youngest of the three children. "Can I pick out the little girl's gifts?"

Talon looked up from the box and smiled. "I think that would be a wonderful idea. When we're done here, we'll head over to the Red Rock Mall to buy for each other, and then we'll go home and wrap everything."

Excited to be part of something so special, Abby turned and headed into the aisle containing Barbie dolls and dress-up stuff. She was going to enjoy this task immensely.

* * * * *

Abby pulled a piece of tape from the roll, folded over the last flap of wrapping paper, and taped it in place. "Done," she announced and placed the package on the pile with the others. "Next?"

“That's the last one,” Teagan said as he stood and stretched, raising his arms above his head and arching his back in a long, languid stretch. “Thank goodness. I'm getting too old to sit on the floor like this.”

She laughed and took the hand Teagan offered, allowing him to pull her to her feet. “You're the same age as me, so don't be talking like you're old and decrepit.”

Teagan's hand tightened around her wrist, and he pulled her tight against him. “Honey, if I looked like you, I wouldn't complain about anything.”

The warmth of his body against hers sent a shiver of awareness skittering through her body. Not once the entire time she'd been staying at the farm had Teagan shown any physical interest in her. To do so now was a bit confusing. “Teagan?” she whispered as he slowly lowered his face toward her.

“Yes?”

“What about Talon?”

“What about me?” Talon replied right before his heat infused her back.

Suddenly all too aware of what they were up to, Abby's mouth went dry, her words of protest sticking to her tongue. Talon's hands wrapped around her waist, holding her in place, while Teagan continued leaning toward her. “Let him,” Talon whispered against her ear just as Teagan's lips brushed across hers. Why she needed to follow Talon's instructions, she'd never know, but the urge to do just that had Abby parting her lips, granting Teagan access. His tongue darted out, teasing, tempting, until Abby had no choice but to relinquish control and feel.

For years she'd dreamed about sleeping with Teagan and Talon. They were obviously into the idea, so why did she suddenly feel so nervous?

When Teagan pulled away, there was a smile on his face. “You taste like chocolate.”

“Probably from the hot cocoa we had earlier,” she managed to reply.

“Probably.” He paused, his gaze moving to behind Abby. A silent communication took place between the brothers before Teagan looked at her again. “I think it might be best if we moved this party into a more-horizontal position. What do you think?”

Swallowing, she focused her attention on an oil painting of Werner Farms hanging on the far wall. “I-I don't know.”

Teagan leaned forward to kiss her on the forehead. "It's okay to be nervous, but you can't allow fear of the unknown to talk you out of something that could end up being a wonderful evening." He took her hand and placed it against the front of his jeans. The hard bulge straining behind the zipper had Abby's pussy flooded with anticipation. *Traitorous body!*

"I want you, Abby. Are you going to deny me what we both know you want, simply because you're afraid of what others will think?"

Abby barely resisted the urge to curl her fingers inward and squeeze the massive member locked away behind the denim. He had a point. After all, weren't people in town already wagging their tongues without any real proof? Whether she slept with him or not, she'd still be branded, so why not enjoy what he offered? "No," she replied.

"That's my girl," Talon said as he snaked a hand over her hip to the front of her pants. Slowly he pulled on her zipper, sliding down it. Once all the way open, he returned to the top of her pants and worked his way beneath her panties. The warmth of his fingers brushing along her skin seduced her. Without realizing she'd moved, Abby widened her stance, giving him the access he needed.

His warm chuckle whispered across her neck, sending a ripple of pleasure dancing across her skin at the same time his finger made contact with the tiny bud of nerves at her apex. She sagged against him as he worked lower, dipping his finger between her folds. "Damn, baby, you're soaking my fingers. Even if you don't want to admit the truth, your body knows what it wants."

Teagan leaned in closer and pushed her hair out of the way, his hands warm against her skin. "I bet you taste like ripe peaches," he stated as he slowly mouthed his way along the opposite side of her neck.

A hard shiver rocked Abby as a picture of Teagan with his head buried between her thighs while she sucked Talon's cock snapped into her mind. *Oh God!* No way could her imagination come close to what she currently felt, and they hadn't really started yet. Would she be able to handle them both in the throes of passion?

Teagan licked at her earlobe, then bit down gently. "Let go and enjoy yourself."

A gasp nearly caught in her throat as she tried to remember to breathe. Her clothes weren't even off yet, and she was already putty in their hands. What would these wonderful men do to her once she was naked? Her brain wouldn't let her think that far ahead.

Talon's fingers continued to pump into her channel while Teagan's hands slowly traveled beneath her blouse. With an ease that spoke of experience, he unlatched her bra with one hand, then pushed the barrier out of the way. "Are you enjoying yourself?" he asked as he kissed her neck just below her ear.

God help her, she was, but forming anything close to a coherent sentence was out of the question.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure she is," Talon replied, punctuating his sentence with a quick rub of his thumb over her clit.

"Oh." She grabbed both men in a bid to stay on her feet.

"Your nipples are so hard. So long..." Teagan pinched and tweaked the buds, sending tiny zings of pleasure racing through her body.

"Good girls don't have sex until they're married." Her mother's voice echoed in her head.

"And they certainly don't have sex with two men at the same time, including brothers." Her father's scolding tone filled her ears.

No one, not her best friend, her family, or her husband, had ever understood her needs and desires.

It took a moment before Abby realized that both men had ceased their movements. Two sets of eyes looked at her with a mixture of concern and desire. She must have stiffened without realizing it. "I-I'm sorry." Though to be honest she wasn't sure what she was apologizing for.

Talon removed his hand from her pants and stepped away, leaving her bereft of his touch. "What was going through your mind just now?"

She looked from Talon to Teagan and back. "I-I guess I was just having second thoughts."

Teagan released his grip and stepped away. Before Abby could protest, Talon took his place. His hand brushed along her cheek, and she could smell her desire on his fingers. "You can't deny your desires, baby. I know it must be difficult not to let the voices win, but that's all they are at this point—voices inside your head, controlling you from the grave, or in your ex-

husband's case, from another woman's bed. If anybody is in the wrong here, sweetheart, it's them for not allowing you to be who you are." He cupped her face in his palms and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. "I promise you, Abby, we'll never think any less of you for how you feel or think. Now are you going to let that bastard ex of yours continue to stifle your growth, or are you going to take charge of your life?"

How could she possibly argue with him when everything he said made perfect sense? If she didn't follow her heart's desire, then Brad would win in more ways than one. Enough was enough, and by God, she was going to live out her dream.

She reached out, taking both men by the hand. "Let's head upstairs."

With every step she took, Abby's heart pounded a little harder, until she swore both men could hear it beating. Why had she been able to sleep with Talon without issue, but the idea of sex with two men both aroused and scared the hell out of her at the same time? To say she was nervous would probably be the understatement of the year, but determined to see this through, Abby pressed on. It was time to stop hiding behind her fears and experience everything she'd ever dreamed about.

Chapter Eight

She'd barely reached Talon's bedroom door when a hand landed at the base of her neck. Talon's face appeared in her line of vision as he swooped in for a kiss. She whimpered at his aggressive nature and wrapped her arms around his neck, sinking into his warmth. The kiss wasn't one of the gentle explorations they'd so often shared over the last couple of weeks, but a rough and demanding need for something more. When he released her, Teagan dived in from the other side, also taking her in a kiss, though his technique was tender, licking and probing with his tongue until her head spun from sensations.

They didn't even have their clothes off yet and already she was on the verge of orgasm. Talon shoved the bedroom door open as she and Teagan broke apart. One look at the massive bed in the middle of the room had her stomach once again in knots.

The bed wasn't a stranger to her at this point. She and Talon had probably made love in it close to a dozen times since she'd arrived at Werner Farms, but it now represented a new frontier.

In a bid to hide the fresh onslaught of nerves now racking her body, she bit her lip and walked into the room with her head held high. Her ruse didn't work. Talon snagged her by the waist and spun her around. "What's wrong?"

She let a nervous smile break through. "Nothing, really."

"Are you having second thoughts again?" Teagan asked, closing the door behind him.

Second thoughts. Third thoughts.

"Of course not," she replied a little too quickly.

Talon arched a brow. "Oh really. Then you'll have no problem with my stripping you naked?"

Before she could protest, he grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled straight up, taking the garment off in one motion. Her already-loose bra hung away from her breasts with the straps

caught at her elbows. Using one finger, he yanked the bra off and tossed it to the floor with her shirt.

She started to cover herself, only to have two strong male hands stop her. “Nuh-uh, baby. No hiding.”

She didn't even have time to argue before each man took a breast in his mouth, and Abby went weak in the knees. “O-oh my G-God.” She wrapped an arm around each of them in an attempt to keep her footing.

Dual sensations vied for attention as Talon bit and tugged on her nipple, grazing his teeth over and over across the peak, while Teagan tongued the other bud, before sucking viciously.

Talon was the first to pull away, his eyes glazed with desire. “On the bed, on your knees, sugar.”

Without question, Abby turned and climbed atop the comforter and enjoyed the moments it took for each man to strip. Identical in nearly every way, both men had been blessed with long, thick cocks. Her mouth watered at the thought of taking either or both of them orally, and she licked her lips to keep from drooling.

Talon's eyes flared, emitting a heat that warmed her entire body. “Since you're so eager to use that talented mouth...” He stepped into her line of sight and pressed the head of his prick to her lips. “Lick it.”

Her heart pounded with anticipation as her lips parted and his phallus slipped inside. He sank into her with a groan. “I love your mouth.”

Abby smiled around his cock and wrapped one hand near his base while she palmed his balls with the other. Her hold was loose. She tightened it, wrapping her fingers around his stalk; he jerked in response.

Two hands landed on her ass with a tiny smack, causing her to jump. She started to pull away, to look over her shoulder, only to have Talon cease her motion. “Don't worry about Teagan, baby. You just keep your attention focused on me.”

The first long swipe of Teagan's tongue through her folds had Abby moaning around Talon's cock. Before Talon's thorough and enlightening introduction into oral sex, she had never experienced the wonderfully foreign sensation of having a man's face buried between her legs.

Now, with Talon in her mouth and Teagan between her legs, Abby suddenly realized she was in the moment, living her dream in Technicolor.

The only other thing she wanted to experience, she had no doubt these men would provide without her asking. Whether that moment came today or some other time, it didn't matter. For now she was going to enjoy the hell out of what they were offering.

As Teagan licked his way inside, pausing from time to time to suck on her clit, she bobbed her head, working Talon's massive girth until he could no longer hold still. His hips jerked in rhythm to her strokes, complementing her downward movement with an upward thrust. She'd never had much of a gag reflex, which helped when he began banging the back of her throat. Tiny, desperate grunts and moans spilled from his lips as his body jerked.

Beneath her, Teagan continued to spread her tissues and lick her in all the right places, until the coil in her belly slowly unfurled. Just when she was about to let go of Talon to scream her release, his hand clamped down on her head, holding her in place as ropy jets of semen splashed against her throat. She cried out around his cock as her pussy clenched emptily, begging for fulfillment, her voice drowned out by Talon's cry of release.

Instead of taking off the edge, her orgasm only heightened her need, making her ravenous with desire. She wrapped her lips around Talon's dick and sucked, cleaning every last drop of his release away. "Damn, baby." He pulled out, his dick still semihard from her care.

"I want some of that attention," Teagan said, sliding out from between her legs. Talon smiled down at her and touched her cheek with his palm before switching places with his brother.

"Up, baby," Talon ordered, giving her a light tap on the ass. She moved, stepping onto the floor with unsteady legs. Teagan lay back on the bed and palmed his shaft, his eyes boring into hers with unbridled desire.

Still on her feet, she leaned forward and wrapped her fingers around the thick base of his cock, noting how her fingertips barely touched. His eyes continued to hold her gaze, watching intently as she stared up at him. "Suck it, Abby." Talon's voice boomed from behind her as she heard the tearing of a foil packet.

His rough command sent a giddy thrill zigzagging through her body. Never would she have guessed that being ordered around would incite such a zing of need.

She opened her mouth, tentatively touched the head with the tip of her tongue, pulling a raspy hiss from Teagan. It was empowering to know she could cause such a reaction in not one but two men.

Talon drove into her from behind, causing her body to move forward and her to take Teagan fully into her mouth. "Oh fuck," Teagan growled and speared a hand through her hair. The biting sting of his fingers digging into her scalp only heightened her desire. Doing the best she could to steady herself against Talon's brutal assault, Abby placed one hand on Teagan's thigh while she continued to stroke his cock with the other. Her head bobbed up and down, her mouth leaving a slick trail of saliva in its wake.

"Yeah, sugar, that's it. Take him deep like you did me. Let Tee fuck that pretty mouth." A few times over the past couple of weeks, Talon had talked dirty to her while they made love, but his words hadn't held such urgency as they did now.

With a slight change of her angle, Abby let go of Teagan's dick and braced both hands on his legs. She opened her mouth wider and tried to breathe through her nose as Teagan's hips began to lift off the bed with force. "Holy shit," he murmured as he drove deep.

"Good girl," Talon praised, his words coming out in short bursts as his thrusts matched Teagan's. She loved that he was turned on by her willingness to follow his instructions, and couldn't get over the heady feeling she got from being fucked like this.

"Damn, Talon. I'm not going to last like this." Teagan gave one last thrust and pulled away, leaving Abby feeling remarkably empty. He stroked a finger along her cheek even as Talon continued to pound into her. "That was wonderful, sweetheart."

Abby tried not to frown as she stared at him, but she couldn't help wondering why he hadn't come in her mouth like Talon. Did he have issues that prevented him from getting hard again right away, or had he made some secret agreement with Talon that he wouldn't? Before she could ponder the question fully, Talon pulled out.

"It's time, baby," Talon said, helping her to her feet.

The meaning behind the words caused her pussy to flood and her body to stiffen. If these two gorgeous, wonderful men had their way, she was about to live out her ultimate fantasy. Would it hurt? Would they even fit?

Teagan rolled on a condom and shifted up the bed, leaning back against the pillows before motioning for Abby to join him. She climbed onto the mattress, and his hands snaked around her waist, lifting her up until she straddled him.

“Take his cock and guide him, baby.”

Abby followed Talon's instructions, grabbing Teagan around the base and guiding him into her sopping-wet core.

She enjoyed the delicious friction his invading shaft caused, and barely contained her moan of pleasure.

A squirting sound had her glancing over her shoulder, but Teagan caught her face in his palms and turned her attention back to him. “Down here, baby.” With a gentle swipe, Talon's finger slid into the crack and skimmed over her anus, causing her to stiffen.

“Have you ever had anal sex, sweetheart?”

Early in her marriage she'd asked Brad to try it, only to end up admonished for asking. After a while, she knew it would never happen and let the issue slide. “No.” She managed a nearly breathless reply.

His finger rimmed her, coating her puckered entrance with lube. “Good, because I'm going to be your first. Your ass now belongs to me.”

Just as Talon finished his sentence, Teagan lifted his head and took her nipple in his mouth, raking his teeth across the tiny bud. Between Talon's possessiveness and Teagan's talented mouth, her whole body tightened with pent-up need.

Talon's finger slid deeper into her hole, while an orgasm seized her body. Higher and higher it pushed her as Talon added a second finger, causing a burning sensation that only seemed to amplify her climax.

Without thinking, pushed back against his fingers.

His chuckle permeated her consciousness as she rode the aftershocks. “Greedy, are we?”

Heat crept into her cheeks with embarrassment for her actions. Before it could settle in, Talon added a third finger. “Talon!” She cried out at the sharp bite of pain.

A shot of cold moisture slid down into her, slicking his fingers. “It will ease, I promise.” Teagan slid a hand between them and rubbed a finger over her clit, sending a fresh wave of

desire through her system. Much to her surprise, her body relaxed, and Talon began spreading his fingers, prepping her for his massive cock. She'd barely adjusted to Talon's ministrations when the next orgasm struck her hard, leaving her trembling in its wake. Talon slowly withdrew his digits, once again leaving her with an unsettling, empty feeling. She didn't remain that way for long. Before the orgasmic effects wore off, she felt the hard push of his cock against her ass.

He paused, eased more lubricant inside her, stretched her more with his fingers, then repositioned his dick at her tight opening. "You're as ready as you're going to be," he said as he began the long, slow push against her muscle. "Remember to breathe, sugar."

Teagan tugged her toward him, pressing her breasts into his chest as he whispered in her ear. "Just relax, sweetheart, and breathe like Talon said."

She did as they instructed and nearly gasped as the muscle gave way under the pressure, allowing Talon the slightest penetration. "That's it, baby," he encouraged as he stopped to give her time to adjust. "You're doing great." He slowly moved forward, inching his way in, until Abby felt his hips pressed against her cheeks.

Feeling impossibly stretched with both men fully seated within her body, she moaned. How could something that felt this good be wrong?

"Easy, sweetheart," Teagan whispered, stroking a soothing hand over her back. "Take your time. We're not going anywhere."

"I'm good," she replied and dropped a soft kiss on Teagan's chest before turning her head to look over her shoulder at Talon. "Ready whenever you are."

He smiled down at her. "You are amazing."

Slowly Talon pulled out as Teagan pressed in, and Abby reveled in the delicious feel of their cocks rubbing against each other within her.

Deep down she'd always suspected that this kind of sex felt good. Otherwise, why would women do it?

She closed her eyes and let go, enjoying the sensation of dual penetration while the two men found a rhythm, moving in unison. They both pressed forward, filling her to capacity, stretching her almost to the point of pain, and giving her unbelievable pleasure in the process.

How she managed to accommodate them both, she'd never know, but she'd never enjoyed herself more than at this moment.

“You still good?” Teagan whispered against her hair.

“Oh yeah. Don't stop.”

Teagan's fingers tightened around her waist as Talon's laced through her hair. Ever so slowly her climax began to build, staying just out of her reach, until she thought she'd go insane. “I need to come, please,” she begged, even as her body fought to extend her pleasure.

“Let go, Abby. We've got you.” Teagan reassured.

Talon surged forward at the same time Teagan thrust upward, both men burying themselves in her deepest regions. The sharp pain of such a penetration was exactly what she needed to send her right over the peak.

“Oh God!”

Like a washing machine out of balance, her body spun out of control. She writhed between them, bucking and screaming as her vision tunneled, eventually going black when she erupted with such force, it stole her breath.

Talon surged against her one last time, his growl of release filling the room. Teagan quickly followed, matching her cry as he came hard, his entire body jerking with the spasms of his climax. Talon slumped against her back for only a moment before easing out of her and stumbling to his feet.

Abby couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't even think at this point. With her body reduced to a pile of mush, she lay sprawled across Teagan's chest. His softening cock remained sheathed inside her pussy while he held her in his arms. “Was it everything you imagined it would be?” he asked.

“More,” she replied, then squeaked when she felt the warm cloth on her bottom. Barely having the energy to lift her head, she turned to see Talon standing behind her, holding a washcloth in his hands. “I know you're probably going to be sore. I promise to be gentle.”

It was unsettling to have him washing her in such an intimate place, but she didn't have the energy to move or even argue. When he was finished, he tossed the rag on the floor, leaned over, and kissed her gently. “Thank you.”

She felt a wrinkle form in her brow. “For what?”

“For allowing us to bring your fantasy to life,” Teagan said.

“Exactly,” Talon added. “I know it wasn't easy for you, but from what I can tell, you enjoyed it.”

Her frown tipped into a smile. “I did, and if you two don't mind, I'd like to do it again someday.”

“Anytime,” they said in unison as they eased her down between them. “Anytime.”

* * * * *

Talon woke with a start, his body jerking awake for reasons he didn't quite understand. He reached for Abby, only to find cold sheets instead. *What the hell?* Taking a moment to let his eyes focus, he then turned to see her that side of the bed was empty, and he realized why he'd woken the way he did.

After the first night they made love, she'd all but moved into his room, taking up residence in his bed every night. He'd grown accustomed to not only falling asleep with her in his arms, but waking up that way too. The fact that she wasn't still in bed made his heart pound from fear. While last night hadn't been a typical lovemaking session for either of them, she'd seemed to enjoy the experience and had cuddled into his embrace after Teagan had excused himself.

She'd even thanked Talon for helping her realize that there wasn't anything wrong with having fantasies or knowing what she wanted in bed.

Still, the morning after could as easily bring regret as it could awareness. Caught in the aftereffects of passion, it was easy to admit to feelings and fantasies. Those same admissions became much more difficult after a good night's sleep. He should know, considering his sudden desire to keep her all to himself. While he'd enjoyed their experience last night, Abby wasn't like the other women Talon had on occasion shared with his brother. Maybe it was the deep feelings he carried for her that set her apart. Whatever the reason, he wasn't all that sure he wanted to share her again.

He tossed the covers off and grabbed his crumpled jeans from his pile of clothes on the floor. The first thing he needed to do was to find Abby and make sure she was okay; then he could figure out a way to confess his love without scaring her off. Still wounded from her recent divorce, she probably wouldn't respond well to any gesture symbolizing something akin to a real relationship. He'd simply have to take his time and win her over, because continuing on without her in his life would be sheer hell.

Talon checked the balcony, only to find it empty. No surprise there, considering the temperature had taken a nosedive overnight. The smell of coffee permeated his senses, making him smile. Abby was probably downstairs enjoying a cup of java while she and Millie talked over breakfast.

From nearly day one she'd taken to Millie, and the two were quickly becoming good friends. Talon was glad to see Abby coming out of her shell. Besides himself and Teagan, she'd avoided looking up old friends or making new ones.

His foot landed on the bottom step at about the same time he heard Teagan's voice carry out from the dining room. "I almost lost it when the heifer lifted her tail and shit all over his brand-new boots."

Abby's rich, warm laugh filled the air, and Talon's stomach tightened in response. "I bet the look on his face was priceless," she replied.

"Oh it was. He started cussing and waving his arms in the air, yelling that he was going to turn her into ground round. At that point I told him he was fired and not to come back. I didn't need workers who felt the need to pick on animals."

"Good for you, Teagan."

The admiration in her voice only served to twist Talon's stomach more. Was last night a mistake? Had he inadvertently opened the door for his brother to move in and sweep Abby off her feet? Talon's fingers curled into fists. Knowing how Talon felt about Abby, how could Teagan do this to him? He took a step forward and stopped. What in the hell was he doing? He couldn't very well walk into the dining room and beat the shit out of his brother simply because Abby liked Teagan better, could he?

With his stomach twisting and his heart aching, Talon turned away from the dining room and headed back upstairs to take a shower. Abby's happiness was the most important issue here. If she truly liked Teagan better, Talon would learn to deal with that fact.

Like hell he would!

Talon barely avoided slamming the bathroom door as he stormed toward the shower. While there wasn't any way he could possibly propose to her right now and have her accept, there had to be a way for him to declare his love for Abby without freaking her out.

An hour later, a still-frustrated Talon stormed down the steps through the now-empty dining room, past the kitchen, and out to the garage. He'd have to drive into Red Rock if he didn't want the cronies in town flapping their gums about the Werner boy's buying an engagement ring. It was probably better that he drove into the next town, since it would give him time to cool off and get some perspective before he made a total ass of himself.

Chapter Nine

Abby looked up from the newspaper she was reading in time to see Teagan walk through the door. “Hiya.”

She smiled. “Hi, yourself.”

“Whatcha doing?” he asked, easing down on the couch next to her.

“Looking at the classifieds.” She held up the paper, showing him the want ads. “The money from my divorce settlement won't last forever, and I can't keep sponging off you guys, so I figured it was time to start looking for a job.”

“You are not sponging off us, Abby. Talon and I love having you here.”

She thought back to the night before and barely contained a blush. “That may be, but I don't feel right staying here any longer than necessary, thus the reason for the paper.”

Teagan took the paper from her and perused the page, apparently noting the ads circled in red. “So Mrs. Watson decided to rent that apartment after all. It's in a really old building with oil heat and bad plumbing. If you decide to go look at it, let me know, and I'll go with you to check it out.”

“I will. Thank you, Teagan.” She took the paper back and folded it over. “Have you seen Talon today?”

He shook his head. “Not yet, but it's not unusual for him to disappear for the entire day and not show until dinner. He likes to spend time hanging at the firehouse, so maybe that's where he went.”

“Maybe.” She set the paper down on the coffee table. “I haven't had a chance to talk with him about moving out. I don't want to spring it on him.”

“He won't be happy, especially since you're sharing his bed.”

She scrubbed her hands over her face. "I know, and that's what worries me. I'd never intentionally do anything to hurt him, but I don't feel right staying here."

Teagan took her hand in his and held it between his palms. "I understand your need to stand on your own two feet. I'm sure Talon will also."

"I suppose you're right."

"In the meantime, would you like to take a tour of the farm?"

Right now she wanted to enjoy herself. "I'd love a tour."

"Good. If you have any boots, go put them on and meet me in the kitchen in five minutes. It's just about time for the herd to make their way up to the milking parlor, so we'll start there."

* * * * *

Talon palmed the small box stuffed in his pocket as he slowly made his way to the milking parlor. Returning home to find out that Teagan had taken Abby on a farm tour had pissed Talon off more than it should. Maybe it was the letdown of not being able to give Abby her present right away that had him upset. He certainly didn't want to think that it was because of his brother's sudden interest in her. *What else could it be, you moron?* After all, up until their encounter last night, Teagan had hardly paid Abby any attention. Now, all of a sudden, he was her best friend. It just didn't make sense, unless he now had feelings for her too.

Talon drew in a deep breath, enjoying the sting of the cold air in his lungs. He was probably making way more out of this situation than necessary. Wouldn't he feel like a total fool if he went into the barn all pissed off, only to find out his instincts were completely off the mark?

He opened the door and walked into the milking parlor. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust from the blinding sunlight outside to the more-moderately lit barn. When his vision came into focus, his blood once again began to boil.

At the end of one of the milking stations, Abby stood next to Teagan with her hand snugly tucked in his palm. Blind jealousy swirled through Talon, filling him with unfounded rage. "You son of a bitch," he yelled as he advanced on the pair. In an instant he grabbed Teagan by the jacket and slammed him against the wall.

"Talon," Abby cried from behind him.

Teagan's eyes widened in shock, but he didn't lift his hands to defend himself. "What in the hell are you doing?"

"I trusted you." Talon shoved his brother harder against the steel wall. "And this is how you repay me?"

"Talon, let go of him." Abby wrapped her hands around his biceps and pulled.

"Abby, back off before you accidentally get hurt. This is between me and my brother."

Teagan finally lifted his hands, but instead of attempting to throw a punch, he wrapped them around Talon's wrists. "It would be nice if you told me what you're talking about."

Talon looked at his brother, seeing him through a sheen of red from added rage. "Don't try and pretend you don't know what's going on."

The distinctive ring of Talon's cell phone broke the tension. He released Teagan and grabbed his phone, bringing up the text message. *Alarm GL Plastics Factory, one-two-two-seven Hennasey Road. All units respond. Red Rock Township units stand by.*

Talon cast one last angry glance at his brother and stormed out of the barn. The fire call couldn't have come at a better time.

"Talon," Abby called after him. He didn't look back. Right now it was better that he get away from both of them until he had a chance to cool off a bit. Fighting a fire would certainly help work off some of his anger.

He hopped into his truck and peeled out of the drive. If dispatch was putting the next town on standby for possible additional help, it had to be bad. Ever since GL Plastics went out of business five years earlier, the building had remained empty, a waiting target for vagrants and vandals.

With his blue light flashing, Talon whipped past cars and down side streets until he skidded to a stop in the fire-station parking lot. He shut off the truck, opened the door, and shoved his keys in his pocket as he headed for the engine sitting ready to pull out. He grabbed his gear off the rack and climbed aboard the truck. Yeah, a good fire to battle was exactly what he needed right now.

* * * * *

Still stunned by the raw violence she'd seen in Talon's gaze, Abby entered the kitchen and sat down at the table. She placed her hands in front of her, unsure what to do next. Despite Talon's behavior, she'd opted to finish her tour with Teagan. Now that it was over, she couldn't help but think about what had transpired between the brothers. "I just don't understand what got into Talon."

"I think I know," Teagan replied as he set a steaming cup of cocoa in front of her.

"Thank you." She picked up the mug, warming her hands with its heat. "Would you like to clue me in?"

Teagan eased into the chair across from her. "I'm not sure if you know it or not, but Talon's had a thing for you since high school."

She nodded. "He mentioned it to me the first night I was here. I told him then that I never thought he even knew who I was."

Teagan nodded. "Oh, he knew all right. When he heard the rumor about your wanting to be with us, he thought it would be his opening to finally get to know you, whether it was true or not. Then he learned that you'd moved, and he was crushed."

Abby raised a brow at his description. "Crushed? That's a little much, don't you think?"

Teagan took a small sip, then shook his head. "Not really. Don't get me wrong. He's dated—a lot—since high school, but I've never seen him get serious about anyone until you showed back up in his life."

Needing a moment to process Teagan's admission, Abby took a long, slow drink. The cocoa burned going down, warming her from the inside out. Wrapping her mind around the idea that Talon's attention hadn't been because he felt sorry for her but that he liked her instead was a hard thing to do.

"I don't understand." She set her mug down gently. "How do Talon's feelings for me play into his actions toward you in the barn?"

Teagan grinned. "He's feeling threatened, sweetheart."

Thankful she hadn't yet taken another drink, Abby gazed across the table at him. "You're telling me he's jealous?"

Teagan nodded. “You got it. Because of his insecurities—which, believe me, he has a ton of—he's worried that you like me more than him.”

“That's absurd.” Almost immediately, she clamped a hand over her mouth. “I'm so sorry,” she said from behind her palm. “I didn't mean to imply anything.”

Teagan chuckled. “No worries, hon. I'm perfectly comfortable with my manhood. Talon, on the other hand, is going to need some ego stroking if you don't want him acting like this again. I guess, though, you need to decide what your feelings are for him first.”

Teagan's words rattled around in her head like a loose marble in a jar. Exactly how did she feel about Talon?

She'd known him for years, yet she really didn't know him at all. That fact hadn't stopped her from sleeping with him, but the sexual attraction between them was undeniable. Could she in good conscience enter into a relationship that was based entirely on sex alone? She'd tried it the other way, dating Brad for months, going through a long engagement period, and for what? In the end he'd still left her for a younger woman, which brought her back to her current situation.

Then again, could her relationship with Talon be considered only a physical one when her feelings for him ran so much deeper than that of simple lust? If so, after what she went through before, did she really want to risk her heart again?

The scanner in the kitchen crackled to life, pulling Abby back into the moment. “What's going on?”

Teagan stood and walked over to the scanner to turn the volume up.

“RIT activated. Dispatch paramedics and ambulance to one- two-two-seven Hennasey Road.”

A sudden wave of fear gripped Abby's chest. “What is *R-I-T*?”

“It means rapid intervention team. It's a crew of men deployed for search and rescue when firemen are trapped and possibly injured.”

Abby's heart leaped into her throat and threatened to block off her air. “Talon?”

“I'm sure he's all right.”

More than anything Abby wanted to believe Teagan, but the uncertainty in his voice was clear and fed her fear. Suddenly restless, Abby pushed away from the table and walked to the sink, where she set about washing the few dishes that were there.

“What are you doing?”

“I can't just sit and wait to hear about Talon,” she replied as hot water filled the sink. “I need to keep busy; otherwise I'll go crazy.”

For the next twenty minutes she listened to the voices flowing from the scanner, her heart nearly stopping from fear each time they spoke. She'd finished the dishes, mopped down both the counters and table, and was looking for the broom to sweep the floor when the shrill ring of the cordless phone jerked her to a stop.

She watched, wide-eyed, as Teagan answered the call. “Hello? Yes, this is he.”

Silence filled the air, and Abby wished she could hear the person on the other end of the line. Instead she could only watch Teagan's facial expressions, hoping for some small sign that the conversation wasn't about Talon.

He turned to look at Abby, his face a mask of brotherly concern as he asked the faceless person on the other end of the receiver the question she'd feared most. “How bad is he?”

An immediate lump formed in her throat, and she forced herself to sit. Talon was hurt, and if some other person was contacting Teagan about his brother, she could only assume that meant Talon's injuries were probably pretty severe.

“Right. Okay. Yes, I'll be there shortly. Thank you.”

Teagan pushed the Off button and turned to look at Abby, his expression reflecting much of her own fear. “Talon?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“He's been taken to the hospital.”

“Is he badly injured?” *Please say no.*

“He apparently has a pretty bad leg injury, and he was unconscious when they pulled him from the rubble.”

Abby's stomach sank. Did that mean his injuries were life threatening? She couldn't lose somebody else she loved. *Loved?* The word slammed into her with such force, it took her breath

away. At what point had she fallen in love with Talon, and would it be too late to tell him? “Oh God, Teagan. I need to go to him.”

Teagan nodded. “I’ll get the car. You get your coat.”

Chapter Ten

Voices swirled around him, mixing with an incessant beeping that would surely drive him crazy if someone didn't shut it off. "Would someone please turn that thing off?"

"I can't, Mr. Werner. It's your heart monitor."

What did the voice just say?

Talon eased open one eye to assess his situation. The room was white, with a noticeable absence of fire. Drawing in a testing breath, he noted how the smoke had been replaced with the distinct smell of bleach. He opened the other eye and focused on the ceiling tiles. Yep, he was in the hospital. Thank God for his fellow firefighters. Somehow they'd managed to save his ass from the inferno.

A warm palm touched his arm, and he turned to see a pretty brunette standing next to his bed. "Are you in any pain?"

It was then that Talon noticed the cast on his right leg. He reached down and flipped the covers off to find plaster of paris covering the entire length of his leg, from ankle to hip. "What the hell?"

"You fractured your femur in the building's collapse." The doctor's voice carried from across the room.

Talon looked up to see his old friend Mark Carrington standing in the doorway. "I'm guessing it's bad if you have me in this thing." Talon tapped the cast with his knuckles.

"Bad enough," Mark replied. "You severed a blood vessel in the process. You're damn lucky you didn't bleed out before they managed to get you here. The cast"—he pointed—"is not only to give your bone time to heal, but to protect the incision site." Dr. Carrington stepped into the room. "There will be some discomfort, but if you're in any serious pain, let the nurses know, and they'll get you something to ease it."

"I guess I owe you a thank-you."

“Just doing my job.”

Talon nearly laughed at the standard response. He had said the same thing to grateful parents and pet owners hundreds of times over the past few years. “How is Garrett?”

Mark replaced the chart in the holder on the wall. “He's doing well. His injuries were mostly contained to his right arm and shoulder. Oh, and the police managed to find the teens who started the blaze. Apparently they were just playing around.” Mark air quoted with his fingers.

“Yeah?” Talon straightened slightly, pushing himself up a little more. “I wonder if they understand the severity of what they did?”

Mark shook his head and leaned a shoulder against the wall. “If they don't by now, I'm sure they will when they have to appear before the judge and explain what they were doing trespassing inside the closed factory.”

Talon sighed. Any fire where property and lives lay in the balance was bad, but arson fires were the worse, in his book. To this day, he still couldn't understand what would drive someone to actually set a fire. “Have you spoken with Teagan yet?” he asked, hoping to steer his thoughts to more-important issues.

“Actually I have.” Mark pushed open the door, and Talon could see Abby standing in the hallway, with Teagan not far behind her.

Her face twisted with pain and fear as she walked into the room, pausing briefly before rushing forward.

He reached out, pulling her down into a hug when she neared the bed.

“Thank God you're all right.”

“I'm sorry, baby,” he replied, feeling like the biggest jerk on the face of the earth.

“For what?”

“For acting like an ass back at the barn.” He slid a look at Teagan, who still stood across the room. “I don't know what I was thinking.”

“I do,” Teagan said as he inched his way to the opposite side of the bed. “You thought I had designs on Abby, and it pissed you off.”

Sometimes Talon hated the way he and Teagan could almost read each other's minds. It had to be because of that link they shared as twins.

“You were jealous, weren't you?” Abby said, her voice filled with awe as she pulled back to look at him.

Knowing that the best way to handle this situation was with complete honesty, Talon swallowed his pride. “Yes, I was jealous.” He reached out to touch her cheek. “The idea of you and Teagan together made me hurt. I know that doesn't make much sense, considering that we've really only known each other for a couple of weeks, but it's how I feel. I love you, Abby.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she smiled. “I love you too.”

* * * * *

Abby sat on the floor in front of the sparkling lights on the Christmas tree while holiday music filtered through the house speakers. “This one is for you.” She picked up a box wrapped in silver paper and topped with a red bow and handed it to Teagan. “I hope you like it. Talon helped me pick it out.”

Teagan reached over to take the package, his lips tipped into a grin. “If Talon was involved, I have reason to be concerned.”

Talon scowled from his place on the couch. “Very funny, jerk face. Wait and see how long it is before I help pick out a present for you again.”

“Promise?” Teagan ripped open the gift. His smile faded into shock as he opened the box. “You bought me a PDA phone?”

Abby nodded. “Talon said you're always working back and forth between your PDA and your cell phone. This will make it easier for you to conduct business. Do you like it?”

“I was actually looking to buy one myself.” Teagan's trademark smile returned as he eased out of the chair onto the floor to embrace her. “I love it. Thank you.”

“You're so welcome.” She turned back to the tree and pulled out the present she'd purchased for Talon.

“And this is for you. I hope you like it, because I wasn't sure what you were into or needed.”

Talon ripped at the paper, slowly revealing the box inside. He paused, his eyes going wide with shock. “It's amazing.” He opened the box and gently removed the rather-large figurine.

Made out of frosted glass, the scene depicted a fireman carrying a child from a burning building, while an angel watched over them from above.

Abby sighed with happy relief. She'd picked the figurine out of a catalog in a specialty boutique at the Red Rock Mall. While neither it nor the phone she'd purchased for Teagan had been cheap, she'd allowed herself the indulgence of buying them both something nice as a thank-you for helping her get back on her feet.

Talon gently placed the figurine on the side table and motioned to her. "Come here." She did, only to have him pull her into a long kiss. "I absolutely love it. Now I have a present for you." There was a noticeable twinkle in his eyes as he spoke.

She glanced back at the tree, noting the now-empty floor beneath the branches. "Okay," she replied with some hesitation. What did her lover have up his sleeve?

"It's hidden *in* the tree." Talon's gaze drifted up to the higher branches of the blue spruce.

"Very sneaky," she replied with a grin as she moved away to search the tree. After a minute or so she came across the tiny box wrapped in metallic green paper. No doubt so it would blend in with the branches, thus disguising its presence.

She grinned at Talon as she held the box in her hands. "You've already helped me so much. You didn't need to buy me anything."

"I wanted to. Now open it."

She ripped at the paper, letting the tiny pieces fall away until only the black velvet box remained. She worried that her heart might just pound right out of her chest. While she'd be the first to admit that despite not wanting to fall in love again, she had done just that. What would she say if an engagement ring rested beneath the lid?

"For Pete's sake, Abby. Open it already," Teagan prompted from the chair.

Slowly she opened the box and immediately wanted to cry. Nestled in the velvet lining was the most beautiful ring she'd ever seen. A heart dressed in white gold and surrounded by a layer of tiny diamonds glistened beneath tree's twinkling lights.

"It's beautiful," she whispered as she gingerly touched the ring.

"Bring it here," Talon requested, motioning for her to join him.

Careful of his cast, she did, easing down on the sofa. He took the box from her hand and removed the ring. "We both know it's too early for a proposal, but I do love you, baby. This ring represents my promise to you that when you are ready, we'll commit to each other and maybe even start a family."

For the first time in recent memory, happy tears blurred her vision. "I know it's not an actual proposal, but it's still a big gesture, Talon."

"I know, sweetheart, but neither of us can deny how we feel."

He was right, of course. She might be a little nervous about taking such a big step so soon, but the last thing she wanted to do was lie to him or herself about her feelings. She smiled. "So I guess this means I'm not moving out, huh?"

"That's exactly what it means." He slid a hand behind her head and pulled her down into a kiss. Their mouths tangled, inciting a passion she'd never managed to find with another.

"Ahem," Teagan interrupted. "I think it's time for the two of you to move this party upstairs."

Abby pulled back and shot him an embarrassed smile. "Sorry."

"Don't be." Teagan pushed up from his chair. "I'll clean up down here. You two go on upstairs and enjoy."

Teagan helped Talon to his feet, taking the brunt of the weight for Talon's bad leg. Abby slowly followed. Being an only child, she'd never experienced having a brother or sister. It was moments like these, seeing the brothers working together, leaning on each other, that made her sad that her parents hadn't been able to give her a sibling.

Once inside the bedroom, Talon removed his arm from Teagan and plopped down to the bed. "Thanks, Bro."

"You're welcome." He looked up at Abby and grinned. "Have fun."

Teagan knew what she and Talon were about to do, yet he didn't appear to be jealous even a little, though she did feel bad for excluding him from their obvious encounter. "You can stay if you like." She glanced over at Talon, looking for his approval. After the jealousy issue she'd had with him before, Abby couldn't help but worry that he might not agree with her offer.

She saw the flare of desire in Talon's eyes as he nodded, then stripped out of his T-shirt. Apparently now that he knew he alone held her love, jealousy wouldn't be an issue.

Teagan placed a hand on her shoulder and leaned over, planting a kiss on her cheek. "I appreciate the offer, but tonight is for the two of you. We'll all get together some other time." He released her and walked out of the bedroom, pulling the door closed behind him.

Abby turned her attention back to Talon. "So, Mr. Werner, it's just you and me tonight." She sauntered over to the bed and placed a knee between his thighs, watching out for his cast in the process.

Talon grinned up at her. "Tell me you're planning to have your wicked way with me."

She pushed at him, sending Talon sprawling back against the pillows. Then she stepped away from the bed and stripped, watching him watch her. He swallowed hard when she stripped away her bra, letting it fall unceremoniously to the floor. "You know, with this bum leg, you're going to have to do most of the work this time."

Once her panties joined the bra, she climbed onto the bed. On hands and knees, she crawled up his body, letting her breasts slide over the tops of his legs and then his abdomen.

She grinned. "I was counting on it."

Even his loose-fitting sleep pants, one of the few pieces of clothing that fit over his cast, couldn't hide the bulge at his crotch. She brushed a hand over it. "Is that for me?" she asked sweetly. She didn't miss his low growl as he snagged her hand and brought it back to his erection. "It's all for you, baby."

As much as she'd love nothing more than to continue cradling his cock, she knew the best was yet to come. She slid her hands along the waistband of his pants and began pulling them down, taking her time to work them over his cast. Once he was completely divested of clothes, she returned her attention to the impressive erection now straining between his legs. She leaned down and grazed her teeth across the sensitive skin, pulling a curse from him as his legs began to tremble beneath her. "Abby," he hissed.

"Yes?" She flexed her fingers around his shaft with one hand, while she skimmed down to the base and below his sac with the other. She fondled and rolled it in her palm until he arched his hips, straining for more.

“Stop teasing me and come here,” he rasped as he reached for her. Instead of going willingly, she moved out of his reach so he could only touch her hair.

“I *like* teasing you, and since you're at my mercy tonight, I'm going to do it until I choose to stop.” With that declaration, she licked along the bulbous head of his cock before taking him deep, until nearly every bit of his shaft rested inside her mouth.

He laced his fingers through her hair and pulled. “Fuck, baby. If you keep doing that, I'm not going to last.”

Heeding his warning, she let go of him with a wet *pop* before crawling up his body to reach for the box of condoms sitting on the nightstand. Maybe one day soon she'd make an appointment with a doctor and go back on the pill. While she'd love to have children, that dream was still a few years away.

Beneath her, Talon leaned up and caught her breast between his teeth.

Without pause, she returned to his shaft and unrolled the condom over him.

“Ride me, sugar,” he said as he lifted her upward. “You look so freaking sexy when you ride my cock.”

She straddled him, grabbed his stalk between her fingers, guiding him into position as she lowered herself down. His fingers curled around her hips, holding her in place for a moment while they both savored the feeling of being joined.

Slick around his shaft, she felt deliciously stretched and slid up and down with ease. “I love you,” she whispered.

He reached up, cupped her face, and pulled her down for a kiss. “And I love you,” he replied as he mouthed soft kisses along her jaw as he rolled his hips as much as he could, considering the restrictions of the cast.

Her mouth worked its way back to his, tasting him, reveling in his strength, his scent, his love. His arms encircled her, and she felt his hands stroking along her back before slid lower and cupped her ass.

“I'm yours, baby. Take me, use me, work me hard.”

With one last kiss, she pulled back, simultaneously rising over him and impaling herself on his rod. The feral look in his eyes filled her with power. He wanted her and was willing to give

himself over to her whims without question. Not once since they'd been together had he looked at her in disgust when she revealed a new fantasy. Instead, he'd done everything in his power to fulfill her utmost desires. Now it was her turn to make it good for him.

Palming her breasts, she pinched the nipples between her fingers, triggering a sharp bite of pain that caused her pussy to clench in response. "Yeah, baby." He growled as his fingers dug into her hips. "Play with your breasts, show me what you like."

She continued to work her nipples, until the elongated peaks were sensitive to the lightest touch. "Damn, baby. Now play with your clit," he ordered, his words coming out in breathless spurts while he did his best to work his hips beneath her.

Without pause, she followed his instruction. Using one hand, she pulled her nether lips apart, revealing her tiny, pulsing bud hidden inside. Then she lowered her other and began stroking herself in tiny circles.

Talon craned his neck, desperate to watch. "I'm close, sweetheart." He groaned. "Work that bud harder and come with me." She noted how the muscles in his abdomen clenched and rippled, and she picked up her pace. The spring in her belly tightened to the point of pain, then broke loose with such force, she couldn't help but cry out. Squeezing her knees against his sides, Abby threw back her head and rode the tidal wave of pleasure breaking through her.

Beneath her, Talon groaned, his fingers tightening their grip until she felt the bite of pain. His hands stilled their movements as his cock spasmed inside her, filling the barrier with a warmth she could feel.

Her body now limp and satisfied, she leaned forward, coming to rest on top of him.

"Can you reach the covers?" he asked faintly. "Because I know I can't."

She shook her head and turned to smile at him. "I think I'd better clean you up first."

Five minutes later, with the condom properly disposed of and Talon's shaft squeaky-clean, she climbed in bed and tugged the sheets over her tired body. Talon reached for her, pulling her against his chest.

"Are you sure you don't want me to move and give you more room to spread out?" she asked in a sleepy voice, knowing that with his cast he could use the extra space but having no desire to go anywhere.

"Not a muscle."

As she lay silent in Talon's arms, she listened to the Christmas music drifting through the house from the family room downstairs.

It came upon a midnight clear

That glorious song of old.

From angels bending near the earth

To touch their harps of gold.

Still through the cloven skies they come

With peaceful wings unfurled.

Look now, for glad and golden hours

Come swiftly on the wing.

Maybe, just maybe, she had found her glad and golden hours after all.

 THE END 

Loose Id(R) Titles by Michelle Cary

Husbands & Wives: For Better For Worse
It Came Upon a Midnight Clear
Sophie's Secret
The Price of Submission

Michelle Cary

So you really want to know about me? Well, actually there's not much to tell. Am I a mom? Yes, to two beautiful kids. Am I married? Yes, to one very happy husband (at least he was the last time I checked.) How long have I been writing? A long time, only recently did I decide to get serious and put my imagination to work. I love everything romance. I'm also a firm believer that no one should be afraid to explore their forbidden desires, a belief my husband is happy I embrace.