

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Lynn LaFleur
Randi Monroe

A Different Path

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Lynn LaFleur & Randi Monroe

Part of the Tarot Café Series

Rock superstar P.J. Kendall has it all—fame, money, women. Instead of being happy, he wonders how he can disappear and leave all his obligations—and the drinking, drugs and too many women—behind. A freak accident turns out to be the chance P.J. needs to follow a different path. He alters his appearance and now using the name James Parker, he heads for Texas.

It's lust at first sight when Teanna Caldwell sees the handsome yet oddly familiar stranger outside her family's pharmacy. Passion soon erupts between them. James is an incredible lover, and a kind and understanding man. Still Teanna cannot stop the niggling suspicion that he's hiding something from her.

With Teanna, James has found his soul mate and the life he's always wanted. But will Teanna still love him when she discovers their relationship is built on lies?

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Coke: The Coca-Cola Company Corporation

Crown Royal: Diageo North America, Inc.

*The Ten of Wands
The Weight of Ambition ~ The Burden of Success*

Chapter One

*Tahoe Towers, Lake Tahoe North Shore
December 12*

The cheering and applause of eight hundred people filled the room, rising to a deafening level. P.J. Kendall shot one fist into the air, his signal for the end of the concert. The din rose even higher, along with chants of "P.J.! P.J.! P.J.!"

Sweat poured down his face and neck. Adrenaline rushed through his body, as it did after every concert. No matter if he played to five hundred or fifty thousand, he still felt the audience's energy flow into his body.

No drug had ever given him such a high.

The thought of drugs made him hesitate in mid-step while leaving the stage. The routine never changed after a show. The band members would congregate in his Tahoe Towers suite for an after-concert party. There would be food, drinks and the band's pick of women for the night. It wouldn't take long for the lines of coke, X and joints to appear. Soon clothes would start to disappear. Hard cocks would fill mouths, pussies and asses. There would be one mass of bodies, impossible to tell which arms and legs belonged to which person.

It happened after every show. It would happen again tonight.

Security quickly ushered P.J. and the other band members toward a service elevator. Closing his eyes, he leaned against the back wall, the voices of his band members buzzing around him. It all sounded like gibberish.

He jerked when someone slapped him on the shoulder. He opened his eyes to see Will Bonner grinning at him.

"Hey, P.J.! Time to par-tay!"

"Yeah," he said, his voice flat. Will was a great lead guitarist and vocalist, but he was always the first one at the bar.

Will's grin faded. "What's wrong, man?"

"Just tired."

"Well, I know how to fix that." His grin returned and he slipped an arm around P.J.'s shoulder. "A cute little honey with a nice tight cunt will bring you back to life."

P.J. managed a weak smile. "Yeah. That'll do it."

The elevator doors opened. P.J. waited for the rest of his band to exit first. They each went to their own rooms to clean up and change clothes before they wound up in P.J.'s suite. They'd be there until early morning.

P.J. saw the closed deadbolt resting against the strike plate of the door to his suite. That must mean Rusty was already here. Rusty left the door ajar so people could come and go at will without a key card. P.J. pushed the door open to find his brother pacing in front of the large plate glass windows, cell phone pressed to his ear. P.J. headed straight for the bar. Instead of his usual beer, he opened a bottle of water.

"No, that won't work," he heard Rusty say. "The band will be in Seattle then... Yeah, all over the west coast before we head east... You'll guarantee that? In writing?" Rusty smiled. "Great. Email the details to me."

Still smiling, Rusty disconnected his call and faced P.J. "Got the band bumped up to May in Atlantic City."

"Great."

P.J. had tried to sound excited, but his voice had come out flat. Rusty's smile disappeared. "You okay?"

"Yeah." He drained the bottle in one long gulp. "It's been a long week. I'm glad this gig is done."

"I'm glad we were rescheduled after you lost your voice last month. Leon Blackstone was very understanding about us canceling at the last minute."

P.J. turned away from Rusty so his brother wouldn't see the guilt in his eyes. He'd pretended to lose his voice. He knew it wasn't fair to the fans who had paid for tickets, but he simply hadn't been able to take another night of the insane after-concert activities. Pretending that he couldn't sing had given him a week off...a week of solitude away from his band, away from Rusty, away from everyone.

Rusty told him Leon Blackstone, the owner of Tahoe Towers, had honored the price of the tickets for a future concert of the ticket holders' choice. That helped ease his guilt.

"You sure you're okay?" Rusty asked.

No, I'm not okay. I gotta get out of here.

"I'm not in a partying mood tonight, bro. Give me the keys to the SUV. I'm gonna take a drive."

"A *drive*? It snowed six inches today."

"The roads were plowed. I checked."

"They're plowed *now*, but it's supposed to snow again after midnight."

"I'm a big boy, Rusty. I know how to drive in snow."

"But it's dark outside. You won't see anything now."

"I just want to unwind a bit. Driving relaxes me, you know that."

Rusty didn't look convinced. If his brother didn't give him the keys to his rented SUV, P.J. would simply rent a vehicle himself.

Instead of the argument P.J. sensed coming, Rusty dug the keys out of his pocket and handed them to P.J. "You want some company?"

"No. But thanks for the offer." He squeezed Rusty's shoulder. "I'm gonna change out of these sweaty clothes before I go."

He headed for the bedroom, but stopped halfway across the living room when Rusty spoke again.

"P.J.?"

He looked at Rusty over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"You know I'm here if you need to talk."

P.J. did know that. Rusty had always been there for him, no matter what. He smiled. "Yeah, I know. That means a lot to me."

* * * * *

P.J. had planned to only change clothes, but decided he wouldn't be able to stand himself closed up in that SUV unless he showered. He heard the voices and laughter as soon as he turned off the water, proof that some of the band members were already here. They must be in a hurry to get the party started. Saturday nights were always the rowdiest since the band didn't have another concert until Wednesday night. They could party until morning, then sleep off the hangovers on Sunday. P.J. knew the routine since he'd participated more times than he could count over the last nine years.

He tugged on faded jeans and a navy T-shirt. A dark red billed cap with the Tahoe Towers logo sat on the dresser, a souvenir he'd bought yesterday to add to his collection of caps. Fans would recognize him in a second by his long blond hair. He gathered it up on top of his head and covered it with the cap. He bypassed the large, dark-shaded glasses he always wore in public, choosing a pair with small clear lenses instead.

P.J. slipped the glasses case into his pocket and checked himself in the mirror. Without the long hair hanging down and shaded glasses covering his eyes, he should be able to make it through the hotel without anyone recognizing him.

He hoped.

Laughter and music greeted him when he opened his bedroom door. Will was already guzzling down a beer while Rusty spoke with him. A.B. Lowder hadn't wasted any time in picking up a couple of cuties. The band's drummer sat on one of the long couches, a brunette straddling his lap. Her blouse lay open and he sucked on one of her

nipples while the second girl sucked on the other one. Normally P.J. would join them. Tonight, he only wanted to get away.

Rusty glanced his direction. P.J. nodded his head at his brother and headed for the door. Luckily Will's back was to him and A.B. was occupied, so they didn't see him leave.

His luck ran out when he opened the door to see Art McGill, Dane Atkins and Neil Truesdale. The rest of his band walked down the hall toward him.

"Where ya goin', P.J.?" Art asked. His voice sounded slurred, his eyes looked glassy. Apparently he'd already started partying before he got here.

"I'll be back later. You guys have fun."

"Wait a minute," Neil said. "We got some hot gals on the way." He winked and nudged P.J. in the ribs. "Found a blonde with big tits, just the way you like 'em."

Art and Dane laughed while P.J. did his best not to grimace. "You guys get her all warmed up for me, okay?"

"Will do." Neil leaned closer and spoke into P.J.'s ear. "I like blondes with big tits too."

"Hell, man," Dane said, "you just like pussy."

Still laughing, Art and Dane went into P.J.'s suite with Neil close behind them. P.J. slipped on his jacket as he walked toward the elevator. He pulled up the collar, hunched his shoulders to hide his beard and buried his hands in the pockets, trying his best to blend into the surroundings.

He passed dozens of people while he walked through the casino and lobby and out to the parking lot. No one gave him a second look, but he didn't breathe easier until he sat behind the wheel of the SUV.

P.J. took a deep breath, released it slowly and backed out of the parking space. He turned the radio to a New Age station...far different from the rock his band played. He

had no set destination in mind, no place in particular to go. He wanted to escape, to distance himself from the insane mess his life had become.

If only for an evening.

* * * * *

The cold seeping into his bones woke P.J. He opened his eyes slowly and frowned, unsure of his surroundings. The previous evening came back to him when he saw the tall trees all around him. He'd pulled off I-80 when he began to get tired and parked beneath the trees to catch some sleep. He hadn't wanted to chance falling asleep behind the wheel. With his heavy jacket and the couple of blankets Rusty had in the SUV, P.J. had stayed warm until a few minutes ago.

A glance at his watch showed him it was almost seven-thirty. He raised his seat from reclining to upright. More snow had fallen during the night, dusting the windshield. He started the motor and turned on the wipers to clear the snow. A shiver flowed through his body. Coffee would be a really good thing right now.

P.J. made his way back to I-80 and turned east. He thought he was close to Truckee. He hoped so. That coffee was sounding better and better.

He took the first cutoff for the town and slowly drove down the street. This early on a Sunday, he might have a hard time finding a place open. Right now, he'd settle for a fast food restaurant as long as he could get caffeine.

A large wooden A-frame caught his eye. As he drove closer, he could make out the sign above the entrance—The Tarot Café. There were only two cars in the lot, but he could see lights inside, so it must be open.

P.J. pulled into the lot next to another SUV. He checked the mirror to be sure his hair was still under his cap. Satisfied with his disguise, he left his vehicle and headed for the front door.

A tall, slim brunette stood at a hostess stand inside the door. She looked up and smiled at him. "Good morning. Welcome to The Tarot Café."

P.J. gave a slight nod of his head. "Mornin'."

"Would you like a table?"

He almost said no, that he just wanted a cup of coffee to go, but the enticing aromas coming from the kitchen changed his mind. He hadn't eaten since late yesterday afternoon. "Yes, please."

He followed her to a table for two next to the stone fireplace. "Coffee?" she asked, handing him a menu.

"A gallon would be good, to start."

The brunette chuckled. "I'll make sure you get lots of refills."

He watched her walk away. She wore a maroon sweater and a long flowing skirt in shades of wine. Very feminine.

P.J.'s growling stomach drew his attention away from the hostess. He felt as if he could eat everything in sight. Slipping off his jacket, he let it fall to the chair behind him and opened his menu.

He glanced up at the sound of the front door opening. Two women stepped inside, one with honey-blond hair and one with dark brown. The brunette was attractive, but the lovely blonde snagged his interest. He'd always had a weakness for blondes, especially if they had brown eyes.

He watched the hostess lead them to a table across the room from him. The blonde sat so she faced him, giving him the chance to study her. Her hair brushed her shoulders in soft waves. She removed her coat and scarf. P.J.'s cock twitched when he saw how her full breasts filled out the front of her red sweater. He couldn't tell the color of her eyes at this distance, but he'd bet they were brown.

She glanced in his direction, long enough for him to nod his head in greeting. She gave him a small smile before looking back at her friend.

The hostess blocked his view as she filled his coffee mug. "Your server will be right with you. Or I can take your order now if you know what you want."

P.J. had been too involved with looking at the blonde to peruse the menu. He said the first thing that came into his head. "Ham and eggs, over easy."

"White or wheat toast, or a croissant?"

"Surprise me," he said with a smile.

She smiled back. "You got it."

Once she left, P.J. looked back across the room at the blonde. She quickly lowered her head, but not before he'd caught her watching him.

Apparently she felt the same spark he did.

Spark or not, he couldn't approach her. He'd be here long enough for breakfast, then he had to head back to Tahoe Towers. Rusty would start climbing the walls in another hour if P.J. didn't check in with him.

But until he left, he'd enjoy the view.

* * * * *

"Is he still watching you?" Becca Marino whispered.

Teanna Caldwell chanced another quick glance across the restaurant at the hunk sitting by the fireplace. She shook her head. "He's drinking his coffee."

"Can I look now?"

"No! I don't want him to think I'm staring at him."

"You *are* staring at him."

Teanna frowned. "Sometimes I wonder why you're my best friend."

"Because I'm lovable."

Teanna laughed while Becca grinned. "Yes, you are that." Her laughter abruptly stopped. "Look quick. He's heading for the rest room."

She turned her head at the same time as Becca did to watch him walk into the hallway where the restrooms were located. Becca released a low whistle.

"Damn. Great ass."

Teanna agreed with that. He wore a pair of tight faded jeans that cupped his buns perfectly.

“Follow him.”

Grateful she hadn’t sipped her water yet for she surely would’ve choked, Teanna set the glass back on the table. “You aren’t serious.”

“Why not? You can just happen to run into him when he comes out of the men’s room.”

“And do what? Drag him off to the storage room for an early morning quickie?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“No. Absolutely not. I don’t pick up strangers.”

“C’mon, Tee, we’re here to have fun. Do something different, something daring.” Becca pushed back her chair. “I’ll do it.”

Teanna reached across the table and grabbed her friend’s wrist. “You will not.”

“Not for me. He’s been staring at you, so he’s obviously interested. I’ll invite him to join us.”

“You will not,” Teanna repeated. “We’re here to have breakfast and we’re heading for San Francisco after that. Our plane leaves at four, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.” Becca sighed heavily. “Lousy timing. Too bad you couldn’t have met him yesterday.”

Teanna thought the same thing. She would’ve enjoyed spending an evening—and night—with him.

She watched him as he made his way back to his table. Once seated, he looked at her again. Goose bumps broke out over her skin. She would swear she could feel his gaze touching her.

She’d never been fond of men with beards, but she’d make an exception for him.

The spell was broken when he received his breakfast and stopped looking at her. Teanna tried to focus on her menu so she could order, but all the words ran together.

Here was a man who made her stomach flutter, despite not one word spoken between them, and she'd never see him again.

Sometimes life simply wasn't fair.

* * * * *

P.J. had eaten slowly, enjoying the view of the blonde far more than the delicious food on his plate. With a clean plate and a full stomach, he had no excuse to remain here any longer.

The hostess, Leandra, returned to his table with his check. "One more refill?"

"No, thank you. I need to go."

"How about a reading before you leave?"

P.J. had no idea what that meant. "A reading?"

Leandra nodded. She slid into the chair opposite him. "We offer Tarot readings along with your meal." She smiled. "No extra charge."

Before he could agree or disagree, she pulled a velvet pouch from a pocket in her skirt. P.J. watched her remove a well-used deck of colorful cards. He knew about the Tarot, but had never given any thought as to whether or not it was "real". He had little faith in psychics or palm readers or people who claimed to have visions.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm not into this kind of stuff."

"I'll keep it simple. How's that?" She shuffled the cards quickly and fanned them out on the table, face down. "Pick one card."

"One card is supposed to tell you all about me?"

"One card tells me a lot. Unless you're afraid to find out."

Afraid of a slim brunette and some funky cards? Not a chance. P.J. leaned forward and studied the deck spread before him. He reached out to choose a card in the middle, then stopped. His gaze shifted to the card on the far left. He picked it up and turned it over.

The Ten of Wands.

Leandra bit her bottom lip and P.J. thought he saw her wince. "What's wrong?"

"The Ten of Wands is the Weight of Ambition card. Upright, the way I see it, means you're carrying a heavy load. You're struggling to meet all the commitments you have. You've taken on too much and you're trying to do everything yourself instead of delegating some of the responsibility. You *have* to delegate or your health will start to suffer."

P.J. stared at Leandra. She couldn't possibly know how stressed he felt, unless she knew his true identity. "Do you know who I am?"

She shook her head. "Should I?"

"No." He stared at the picture on the card of a young man carrying a load of long sticks. He had no doubt Leandra had done these readings enough so she could pop out meanings for whichever card her customer picked. Still, it was spooky how close she came to describing his life perfectly. "Don't most people carry too much responsibility? It's the kind of world we live in today."

"True, but this card tells me you need to make some major changes in your life, perhaps take a different path."

P.J. had thought the same thing over the last few weeks. He loved singing, he loved performing for the fans, but didn't know how much longer he could keep up the insane schedule without completely falling apart. He was only twenty-nine, yet most days he had less energy than someone three times his age.

He pulled his wallet from his jacket pocket. "Thanks for the great breakfast. And the reading."

She reached over and lightly touched the back of his hand. "Whether or not you believe in the cards, they don't lie. Take care of yourself."

P.J. sat still a moment after Leandra left, thinking about what she'd said while chills ran up and down his spine.

It's a gimmick, something to entertain the customers. It doesn't mean anything.

He took a twenty from his wallet and laid it on top of the check. Movement to his right drew his attention and he lifted his head. The two gals stood to leave. Once the blonde headed for the exit, the brunette gazed at him. She pointed toward the other gal and held up what looked like a business card, then laid it on the edge of their table before following the blonde out the door.

P.J. wandered over to their table and picked up the card. He saw a logo of a mortar and pestle, and the words:

Caldwell Apothecary

Teanna Caldwell

Accounting and Billing

Teanna. A beautiful name for a beautiful woman. He noted the address listed as Lanville, Texas. He'd never heard of Lanville, much less had any idea where it was located in Texas. That didn't mean he couldn't find it.

He slipped the card into his jacket pocket.

Chapter Two

San Francisco, California

December 20

P.J. awoke when the sun's warmth touched his face. He must have forgotten to close the heavy drapes last night. Slowly, he opened his eyes. Drapes in some kind of geometric print hung open on either side of the window. He frowned. That wasn't right. The drapes in his suite were dark blue.

He rose up on one elbow and gazed about the room. He didn't recognize any part of it. He also didn't recognize the two women in bed with him.

P.J. untangled his legs from the sheet and eased to the side of the bed. His head and stomach both rebelled at the movement. He had to wait a moment to be sure he wouldn't lose whatever was in his stomach before he moved again. A wave of dizziness hit him when he stood. He remained still, waiting for the dizziness to pass. Empty condom packages littered the floor, along with beer bottles and a half-spilled bottle of bourbon. He wondered how much whiskey he'd drunk before the rest soaked into the tan carpet.

Fear gripped his throat, made his heart pound. He began to shake when he realized he didn't remember anything of what happened to him since late last night. He'd often partied hearty, but he'd never had a problem remembering everything he'd done.

He had to get out of here.

He found his briefs under the bed next to his shoes and socks. His jeans lay crumpled in the corner of the room. Luckily his cell phone was still attached to his belt so he could call someone as soon as he dressed. Picking up his jeans to add to the pile of clothing in his arms, he left the bedroom in search of his T-shirt, jacket and cap.

The apartment was small but neat. It didn't take P.J. long to find the rest of his clothing thrown over a recliner and his glasses on the coffee table. He dressed quickly and left, closing the door quietly behind him.

Standing on the sidewalk in front of the apartment house, he took several deep breaths of cool air to try and clear his head. He rubbed his forehead while he thought back to last night. The band had gathered in his suite, as usual, for the after-concert party. Dane had talked him into staying instead of hiding in his bedroom the way he'd done the previous three nights. It was their last night in San Francisco, their last concert before they took a break for the Christmas holidays. P.J. decided he should spend time with his band since he wouldn't see them for three weeks.

One drink led to two, then three, then four. By the time the rest of the invited guests arrived, he'd been well on his way to feeling no pain. But he still couldn't remember leaving his suite with those girls.

P.J. heard traffic close by. He removed his cell phone from his belt and punched in his brother's number as he walked toward the sound of the traffic. Four rings and it went to voice mail.

"Shit." He disconnected the call, knowing it wouldn't benefit him to leave a message when Rusty wouldn't check his messages until much later. His brother was probably sleeping off a hangover, the same as the rest of his band.

He came to an intersection. He could see his hotel in the distance, maybe three blocks away. Perhaps the walk in the crisp air would finally clear his head so he could remember what happened last night.

* * * * *

P.J. searched every pocket, but couldn't find a key card to his suite. He didn't have his I.D. with him either, so couldn't stop at the desk for another card. He'd have to depend on someone to open the door for him.

Not an easy task at seven in the morning after a night of partying.

He punched the doorbell buzzer twice. Several seconds passed with no response. He buzzed again, punching it three times. When that didn't get a response either, he pushed in and held the buzzer.

Almost thirty seconds went by when the door opened, revealing a bleary-eyed, half naked Art.

"P.J. Hey, man."

"Hey, yourself." He brushed by his bass player and into the living room. A quick glance around revealed a girl wearing only a pair of panties sitting on the couch. He prayed she was at least eighteen, though she didn't look much older than fourteen. "Where is everyone?"

"Don't know." Art rubbed one hand over his face and hitched up his unfastened jeans. "I think Rusty's in his bedroom. The other guys left earlier."

The girl stood up and thrust out her small breasts. "Hi," she said with what she probably assumed was a sultry smile.

"P.J., this is Rosie. She's been waiting to meet you."

Translation – she's been waiting to fuck me. No way, little girl. "You've met me. Get dressed and get out."

Her smile faded. "But-but I thought we could... You know."

"Yeah, I know, but I don't fuck minors."

"I'm nineteen!"

"Sure you are." He scowled at Art. "Get her out of here."

P.J. headed toward Rusty's bedroom. He heard Rosie whining that she didn't want to leave. Tough. He wasn't about to get caught with a naked minor in his suite.

Rusty lay sprawled on his stomach in his bed, snoring softly. P.J. didn't want to wake him since he didn't know when Rusty finally went to sleep, but he couldn't leave without telling his brother. He shook Rusty's shoulder. "Wake up."

Rusty didn't move. P.J. shook his shoulder harder. "Rusty. Hey, wake up."

His brother stirred, burying his face in his pillow. "Go 'way."

"That's my plan, bro."

His words must have finally sunk into Rusty's brain. He slowly raised his head and peered at P.J. through one eye. "Huh?"

"I'm going home. I didn't want to take off without telling you."

Rusty raised up on one elbow. "You're leaving? Now?"

"I'm gonna rent a car and drive home."

"You aren't flying back with us?"

"No. I need some alone time, Rusty, some time to think about...things."

Rusty pushed himself to a sitting position and leaned against the headboard. "You've been acting weird for a week. What's going on? Talk to me."

P.J. had always idolized his older brother, especially after they lost their parents four years ago. Rusty had been the strong one, the son who took care of all the details following their parents' death. P.J. had always depended on Rusty, had always been able to talk to him.

"I'm burned out, Rusty. I'm tired of the partying, the women, the booze. Nine years is enough." He sat on the bed, knees wide-spread, hands dangling between them. "I don't remember what happened to me last night," he said softly. "I woke up in bed with two women in some dinky apartment three blocks from here. I have no idea how I got there."

"That's never happened to you?"

P.J. shook his head. "I've gotten drunk, I've gotten stoned, but I've always known where I was and what happened. Last night..." He stopped and swallowed hard. "It scared the shit out of me."

Rusty blew out a heavy breath. "Did you drink or take something different last night?"

"I was drinking whiskey, like always. There were at least thirty people here. Hell, someone may have slipped something into my drink, thinking it would be funny to get me high."

"Yeah, that's possible."

P.J. straightened and faced his brother. "We don't have another concert until mid January. That gives me three weeks to be by myself and get my head together. I'll take the long way back to L.A., maybe through Yosemite and Death Valley. Then I'm going out on my boat for a few days of fishing."

"You want some company on your boat?"

"You hate fishing."

"Who says I have to fish? I can lie in the sun and read while you put worms on the hooks."

P.J. knew the offer came from Rusty's heart. As manager, he had to look out for the band's best interests. As his brother, he'd put P.J. above anything else. "I appreciate that, bro. Maybe after I have some time alone, I'll take you out with me."

Rusty still looked concerned. P.J. smiled to reassure his brother. "I'll be fine. I just need a break."

"I'd feel better if I went with you."

"I'd feel better if you took care of the guys instead of worrying about me."

"I'm supposed to worry about you. I'm your big brother."

"And you'll never let me forget that." He cradled Rusty's jaw and dropped a smacking kiss on his brother's forehead, simply because he knew Rusty hated that. "I'm gonna shower and pack."

* * * * *

In his bathroom, P.J. quickly stripped and stepped beneath the warm shower. He tilted his head back and let the water beat on his head for several moments, hoping that might jar his memory about last night...and the two girls in bed with him this morning.

How could I have sex with two women and not remember it?

P.J. assumed he'd had sex with them. There'd been empty condom packages on the floor next to the bed. Plus he'd been naked when he awoke. Pretty strong evidence that sex had been involved.

He squirted liquid soap on a washcloth and began scrubbing his skin. Despite the condom packages, there was a chance he'd had unprotected sex. He'd always been very careful to use a condom. Fatherhood could be proven—or ruled out—with a DNA test. Diseases were another matter.

As soon as he got back to L.A., he'd make an appointment with his doctor for tests. A clean bill of health would go a long way in making him feel better about last night. That meant no sex until he saw his doctor, which wouldn't be a problem. After the fear he'd felt earlier today, he didn't feel like having sex with anyone.

Unless it could be *her*...the woman from The Tarot Café.

Her image filled his mind every day, and every night in his dreams. He imagined gathering up all that honey-blond hair in his hands while he kissed her. He loved long, unhurried kisses that went on and on. Her lips would be soft, silky, giving beneath his. She'd part her lips for the thrust of his tongue, then nip his tongue with her teeth.

Kissing was something intimate, something special. Groupies didn't get kissed, they got fucked. He spent just enough time with them to get off before sending them away. He hadn't taken the time to truly savor a woman in...he couldn't remember how long it'd been.

He would savor Teanna.

P.J. palmed his hardening cock in his soapy hand. He imagined tugging off her sweater to find a lacy bra cradling her breasts. Not white. That would be too plain for her. It would be ivory or pink or blue. He'd pull the straps down her arms until her breasts were free. Her areolas would be dark pink, her nipples hard and big as a pencil eraser. He'd caress them with his thumbs before opening his mouth over one to suckle.

He'd move back and forth between her nipples, thumbing one while licking and sucking the other, until she came.

Closing his eyes, P.J. leaned against the shower wall and pumped his rod. After he made Teanna come by sucking her nipples, he'd explore the rest of her body. He'd tug down her pants, exposing her legs a bit at a time. Once her pants were gone, he'd remove her panties. He wondered if she wore bikinis or thongs, or maybe the kind that looked like men's boxers. Whatever she wore, he knew she'd look incredibly sexy in them...and even sexier out of them.

Neatly trimmed blonde hair would cover her mound, but her lips would be bare. P.J. would part them with his thumbs to see her clit peeking out from beneath the hood. She'd be wet from her orgasm. He'd swipe her pussy with his tongue, dart it inside her channel. She'd taste delicious, a combination of sweet and salty and woman.

"Damn." P.J. stroked his cock faster. Teanna would moan and arch her hips. He'd lick her pussy over and over, up to her clit and down to her anus, letting her sweet juices roll over his tongue and down his throat. He wouldn't stop until she came again. Then he'd enter her, moving slowly, letting her desire build once more. He could hear her soft voice begging him for more as she met every one of his thrusts.

P.J.'s balls drew up tight to his body. Pleasure rushed up and down his spine. He gripped his cock and angled it so his cum shot down the drain.

Weak and breathing heavily, P.J. stayed in the same spot until he was sure his legs would work. He quickly rinsed the soap from his body and turned off the water.

Teanna stayed on his mind while he dressed and packed. He didn't understand this sudden obsession with a woman he'd never met. He'd seen lots of women in restaurants, bars, stores...many even more beautiful and alluring than Teanna. None of them had stayed in his mind once they were out of his sight.

P.J. had looked up Lanville and discovered it was about sixty miles from Dallas. The band had two concerts in Dallas in March. A visit to Caldwell Apothecary would definitely top his to-do list while he was in Texas.

* * * * *

Teanna shut the door and leaned against it. She sighed. She should've known the evening would be a disaster. She hadn't had a date in the last year that hadn't ended badly.

Eligible men in Lanville were sparse. That meant going out with losers again or trying to meet men in other towns, like Dallas. Becca had set up Teanna with a friend of a friend of a friend. Ten minutes into the date, Teanna knew she'd made a mistake.

She'd endured his endless chatter about himself and his net worth. He was quite well off, which he told her at least six times throughout dinner. Teanna had never let money be the measurement of whether or not she became involved with a man. With the trust fund she'd inherit in two years, she'd have more money than most of the men she'd met.

No one but her and her aunt and uncle knew about her inheritance. If news of it got out, even more losers would show up at her door.

She curled up in a corner of the couch and looked around the living room. Her aunt and uncle had added her apartment onto the back of their house for her twenty-fifth birthday. She had her privacy, yet remained close to the couple who had raised her after her parents died twenty years ago. Her apartment had a living room, bedroom and bathroom. She still used the kitchen and laundry room in the main house, but the apartment had everything else she needed. She'd decorated it in hues of brown and green with a splash of orange thrown in to make it cheery.

Her perusal stopped at the private entrance that led outside to her carport. One of the nicest features of the apartment, it let her entertain friends without disturbing her aunt and uncle. It was also handy for a man to leave in the morning after he'd spent the night with her.

A man hadn't spent the night in months. With the way her dates had gone lately, she doubted if she'd have an overnight guest any time soon.

She drew a throw pillow to her chest and wrapped her arms around it. It wasn't the first time she'd gone weeks without sex, but it seemed so much bigger this time...ever since she'd seen *him* a week ago at The Tarot Café.

Teanna blew out a breath. How stupid to keep fantasizing about a man she'd seen one time, but she couldn't help it. She kept picturing him sitting by the huge fireplace. The short-sleeved T-shirt he wore let her admire his muscled arms. He obviously worked out to have arms like that. Add broad shoulders, wide chest, flat stomach and tight butt, and he equaled a woman's fantasy man. She'd never cared for facial hair on a man, yet even his beard had been sexy.

She wished she'd seen him one day earlier to give them time to meet and talk. Maybe she would've discovered in less than five minutes that he was as big a jerk as her date tonight.

She didn't believe that for a second. She knew, deep inside, that he would be as charming as he was handsome.

Tossing the pillow aside, Teanna rose and walked to her bedroom. She flopped down on her bed and stared at the ceiling. His image immediately popped back into her mind. Something had passed between them when they'd looked at each other, something she'd never experienced with any other man. A lover's touch hadn't affected her as deeply as a look from him.

She thought of him lying here beside her, their fingers entwined while they talked. They'd share little tidbits about each other, learn about their pasts, their families. Soon talking wouldn't be enough and they'd have to touch...a caress on a cheek, a whisk of fingertips across a bare chest, a slow drag of fingernails down a stomach. He'd lean over her and kiss her lips, her neck, the top slope of her breast. He'd wrap his lips around her nipple and suck while his hand cradled her mound.

Teanna slid her hand inside her slacks and panties. She moaned when she discovered she was already wet. She circled her clit with the tip of her finger, caressing it the way she imagined he would. He wouldn't rush her orgasm, but keep kissing her,

touching her, while it slowly built. He'd whisper words of encouragement, tell her he loved watching her come. His urging would push her over the top. The climax would rush through her body, leaving her weak and breathless.

"Oh, yes!"

Teanna arched her hips off the bed and pushed two fingers inside her pussy. She could feel the walls contract around her fingers, squeezing them until the last wave of her orgasm faded.

She lay still, her damp fingers resting on her stomach. Someday, her fantasies would come true. He'd lie here beside her, kiss her, touch her, the way she imagined every night before she fell asleep.

She'd see him again. She didn't know when, she didn't know how, but she was certain it would happen.

Chapter Three

Malibu, California

December 31

P.J. checked his supplies one more time to be sure he had everything he wanted to take on the boat with him. He'd packed enough food to last a week. He might not be gone that long, but would rather have too much than not enough.

The last ten days had been the best P.J. had experienced in a long time. He'd taken five days to get from San Francisco to Los Angeles, just driving and enjoying the scenery. When he got home, he made an appointment with his doctor. Although he still couldn't remember what happened the night he was with those two girls, his doctor proclaimed he hadn't picked up anything he didn't want to have.

He inhaled deeply of the crisp, early morning air and smiled. He couldn't wait to get out on the water.

He was about to cast off when his cell phone rang. Tugging the phone from his zippered sweatshirt pocket, he peered at the display. Rusty. Probably checking on him. He flipped open the phone. "Hey, bro. What's up?"

"Just checking on you."

P.J. chuckled. He knew his big brother so well.

"I haven't talked to you in a couple of days. You okay?"

"I'm great. I'm getting the boat ready to go out."

"P.J., it's New Year's Eve. You don't want to be alone on New Year's Eve. I'll pick up some steaks and champagne. I'll even spring for the good stuff. We'll have dinner and watch the fireworks on TV. How about it?"

He hadn't touched a drop of liquor since San Francisco. It would be nice to bring in the new year with a glass or two of champagne with his brother. But not tonight. "We can have a private party when I get back."

"When will that be?"

"I haven't decided yet. Three, four days."

"I can't believe you're going out on that tub for four days. When are you going to buy a new boat?"

"Hey, don't knock my boat. You'll hurt her feelings."

"I went out with you a couple of months ago, remember? The gas smell was horrible. Are you sure it doesn't have a leak?"

"Rusty, stop worrying. I'm fine, my boat is fine, everything is fine except I should be fishing. I'll call you when I get back."

P.J. shut the phone and slipped it back in his pocket. One more quick check of the rods and bait and he was ready to go.

He turned the key in the ignition. P.J. heard the motor fire, then a loud explosion. He felt as if he were flying before he hit the water. After that, nothing.

* * * * *

Water lapped at P.J.'s prone body. It filled his nose and mouth, making him cough. He slowly lifted his head and blinked to try to bring everything back into focus. He lay between two pilings beneath a pier. The waves washed over him every few seconds. He shivered with every lap of cold water.

He pushed himself up on his hands. Pain flashed through his head with the slow movement. He closed his eyes while the pain subsided. Opening his eyes again, he saw his boat seventy-five yards away, engulfed in fire. He'd lost his glasses so things were a bit fuzzy, but he could see flames shooting into the air.

He moored his boat at a small private marina south of Malibu. All the other boat owners knew his boat. Someone would call the authorities as soon as they saw it on fire.

The media would soon be on the heels of the officials, looking for a juicy tidbit for the tabloids or news programs.

P.J. moved away from the piling. He was only a few feet from where Bud Elliott's boat was moored. He and Bud often went fishing together and had developed a comfortable friendship. Bud had told P.J. he was welcome to use his larger, newer boat any time P.J. wanted to. Right now, he wanted to get out of the water so he could call for help.

He knew Bud had left four days ago for Arizona on vacation with his family. He also knew where Bud hid the keys to his boat.

Weakness and fatigue made it difficult for P.J. to climb up the ladder on the side of Bud's boat. He dropped to the deck, too tired to move. Everything ached...his head, his chest, his legs. He wondered for a moment if he had a concussion. He touched his forehead and discovered a large knot, but no blood.

Drawing on what little strength he had, he crawled to the spot where Bud hid the boat's keys. P.J. unlocked the cabin door and slipped inside. It took him three tries to unzip the sweatshirt pocket where he kept his cell phone and shaded glasses. He wasn't surprised to discover the phone no longer worked.

He heard shouts and sirens in the distance. P.J. thought about opening the cabin door and waving to someone so they'd know he was alive. His eyelids grew heavy and his head throbbed. He'd tell someone he was here as soon as he rested a bit.

He closed his eyes and slumped to the floor.

* * * * *

P.J. moved through the dark house. Even wearing his shaded glasses, his steps were sure since he'd walked this same path hundreds of times. He heard the eleven o'clock news on the television in the living room, blaring out the weather report of sunny skies and a chance of rain by Tuesday.

He stopped in the living room doorway and peered into the room. The only light came from the TV screen. Rusty sat on the couch, his elbows propped on his knees, both hands holding his head. A half-empty bottle of Crown Royal and a glass of melting ice sat on the coffee table before him. He wore faded jeans and a T-shirt that should've been tossed months ago.

Unsure how to approach his brother so he wouldn't be frightened, P.J. took a few steps into the room. Rusty jerked up his head, hands clenched into fists, ready to fight.

P.J. gave him a small smile. "Hey, bro."

Rusty's eyes widened. Even in the dim light from the television, P.J. saw all the color drain from his brother's face. His mouth moved, but no sound came out. P.J. took another few steps closer. "You aren't seeing a ghost. It's really me."

"P.J.?" Rusty's voice sounded hoarse. "You... How..."

He bolted off the couch and grabbed P.J. in a fierce hug. "Jesus Christ, I thought you were dead." He pulled back and scowled at P.J. "God damn it, where the fuck have you been the last three days?"

"Hiding. I had to get —"

"*Hiding?* I've been going crazy and you were *hiding?*"

"I can explain —"

"You're damn right you'll explain. *Shit!*" Rusty poured a shot of whiskey into his glass and downed it in one swallow. "Do you know half of L.A. has been looking for your body? The police, divers, Search and Rescue... Hell, I think even some forest rangers have been searching for you. Your disappearance has been on the news almost nonstop."

"Yeah, I know."

"How do you know?" Rusty poured himself another drink. "Where have you been?"

P.J. gestured toward the bottle of Crown Royal. "Can I have some of that?"

"You know where the glasses are," he said before tossing back the whiskey.

P.J. returned to the living room, glass in hand, to find Rusty punching in a number on his cell phone. "Who're you calling?"

"The police."

"No." P.J. grabbed the phone out of Rusty's hand and disconnected the call before it could go through. "I don't want you to call the police. I don't want anyone but you to know I'm alive."

"You don't want... That doesn't make sense! I'm supposed to let the press, your fans, the guys in the band, think you're *dead*?"

"Yeah."

"P.J., that's *insane*! You can't pretend to be dead. Why would you want to do something so stupid?"

"Hear me out, okay?" P.J. poured two fingers into his glass and sat on the couch. After a few moments, Rusty sat down also. "I need some time alone to think about what I want to do with the rest of my life."

"You can have time alone without letting the world think you're dead."

"No, I can't. Not really." He stared into the amber liquid while he swirled it in the glass. "This is the first alcohol I've touched in two weeks. For the first time in nine years, I'm completely clean and sober. If I admit I'm alive, if I get back with the band and start touring, the cycle will start all over again." He looked at his brother. "Somewhere along the way, I've lost Parker James Kendall. P.J. Kendall totally took over my life. I'm almost thirty years old and I'm still running around the country with four other guys."

"So you'll take an extended vacation—"

"That won't be enough, Rusty. Once I came back, everything would go right back to the way it was. I need more than that. There has to be something out there, something more fulfilling than strumming a guitar and fucking a different woman every night."

Rusty ran a hand over his face. P.J. noticed the tightness around Rusty's eyes, the lines around his mouth. A heavy stubble covered his lower face, proof Rusty hadn't shaved in days. These last three days must have been hell for him. He hated that. He never wanted to hurt his brother in any way.

"What about the guys in the band?" Rusty asked. "You have to tell them the truth."

"I can't." He didn't know what to say to make Rusty understand. "I don't want to hurt them, but I can't tell them the truth. They might swear they wouldn't tell anyone, but one drink or joint too many and the truth would come tumbling out."

"So what are they supposed to do now that their leader has 'died'?"

"They're all talented and successful. Will is a great singer. He can easily lead the band, especially with you as their manager."

"No." Rusty slammed down his glass on the coffee table and surged to his feet. "You can't expect me to be around the guys all the time and lie to them about you. I can't do that."

"Okay, it was just an idea." P.J. set his untouched drink on the table and stood next to his brother. "I wouldn't ask you to do anything that'll make you uncomfortable."

Rusty snorted. "Yeah, right, like me pretending you're dead isn't going to make me uncomfortable."

P.J. tucked his hands into his back pockets. "I have to do this, Rusty. I have to get away for a while."

"How are you going to do that? You may have hidden for three days, but you can't hide from your fans forever. One look at your hair and you'll be recognized."

"Not any more."

P.J. took off his cap and shook his head. Instead of the long fall of hair he'd worn for years, his hair fell to just past his ears.

Rusty's mouth dropped open again. "Wow. What a difference."

"I'm gonna shave my beard off too. And I'm thinking about dying my hair dark brown. I'll wear plain glasses instead of these shaded ones, or maybe get contacts or have LASIK done."

"You'll look like a completely different person."

"That's the plan."

Rusty remained silent for several moments. P.J. assumed his brother was trying to digest everything P.J. had said. "What else are you planning? Are you staying here in L.A.?"

"I'm gonna drive across the country. I really enjoyed it when I drove home from San Francisco. There's a lot of the U.S. I've never seen. This will give me the chance to do it." He cleared his throat, not quite sure how to ask Rusty for a huge favor. "I'll need a driver's license under a new name so I can open a bank account. I'll use cash when possible, but I should probably have a debit card too. And a birth certificate and Social Security card."

"That won't be a problem. I know the guy who can do that for you."

P.J. had never asked, but figured Rusty knew some shady people. He was always able to get drugs for their parties without any problems.

"What name do you want to use?" Rusty asked.

"How about James Parker?"

"Yeah, that'll work. It's close enough to your real name that you won't fuck it up."

P.J. frowned while Rusty grinned. "Thanks for your vote of confidence, bro."

"Anytime." Rusty's grin faded. "It might take a couple of days."

"That's fine. Okay if I crash here? I can't go to my house."

"No, you can't. I hired a security detail to watch it, but there are still reporters and media everywhere. There will be until your body is found, or the search is called off and you're presumed dead." Rusty shook his head. "I can't believe I just said that."

P.J. clapped Rusty on the shoulder. "Thanks, bro," he said softly. "I appreciate everything you're doing for me."

"You owe me. *Big* time."

"Speaking of owing, I'll need some cash."

Rusty nodded, then led the way to the storage room off the kitchen. P.J. and Rusty had decided a long time ago that having cash on hand in each of their houses would be a good idea. Opening the chest freezer, Rusty dug beneath several packages of meat and frozen vegetables. He pulled out a zippered plastic bag filled with twenty-five thousand dollars in one-hundred-dollar bills.

"How many do you want?" Rusty asked.

"How many do you have?"

"Five."

P.J. had six of the same type of bags hidden at his house, but had no way to get to them. "I have to pay cash for a car and have enough to live on for a while. Better give me four packages."

"Grab a bag from under the sink. This sucker's cold."

P.J. held open the plastic grocery bag while Rusty dropped the package of money into it. "The definition of cold cash."

"Yeah." Rusty added three more packages to P.J.'s bag. "Is this enough? You could take all five. It's your money."

"It's *our* money. We're a team."

P.J. knew his band would never have made it to the top so quickly if Rusty hadn't been their manager. He didn't think to add Rusty to all his accounts until their parents died. The accident made P.J. realize how quickly life could end. Even though he left everything to Rusty in his will, P.J. didn't want his brother to have any problems getting what was rightfully his. Now he and Rusty shared everything—bank accounts,

house deeds, vehicle titles. It would make it easier for Rusty to take care of all the legal stuff now that P.J. had “died”.

“I can get the rest of the money from your house, except I can’t take out a lot of stuff with all the media around it. I don’t want anyone asking questions.”

“This will be plenty for now. We’ll work out a way for you to get more to me when I need it.”

“Okay.” Rusty shut the freezer and faced his brother again. “Are you really sure you want to do this? Can’t you simply retire? The P.J. Kendall Band is the biggest thing since Elvis, but your popularity will die down in time.”

“How much time? A year? Two? Ten? I don’t want to wait that long. I *can’t* wait that long.”

Rusty tilted his head. “Does this have something to do with that night you can’t remember?”

“It has a *lot* to do with that night. I lost control. I can’t let that happen again.”

Rusty stared at him, long enough to make P.J. squirm. “What—”

“Are you all right? That night, then the boat explosion. Is there something you aren’t telling me?”

“I saw my doctor when I got back from San Francisco. My blood work all checked out. Other than a nasty bump on my head and sore muscles when I was thrown from the boat, no complications from the explosion.”

“So there’s no health reason why you want to disappear?”

“Only my sanity.”

A hint of a smile turned up Rusty’s lips. “Well, we both know you lost that a long time ago.”

P.J. chuckled at his brother’s teasing. “True.”

He could see the fatigue in Rusty’s eyes. He doubted if Rusty had slept well since the boat explosion. “Hey, I’m getting tired. I think I’ll take a shower and hit the bed.”

Rusty rubbed the back of his neck. "Bed sounds really good. I might even sleep tonight."

"I'm sorry I worried you. I couldn't get here any sooner —"

"It's okay. I understand. You're here now, and you're alive. That's what counts."

P.J. pulled Rusty close for a quick hug. "See you in the morning, bro."

Chapter Four

Lanville, Texas

March 3

James parked his SUV between two pickups. He looked across the street and saw the large sign that said Caldwell Apothecary. It had taken him two months to get here...two months of driving and seeing parts of the United States he'd never seen. The snowy weather had kept him from the northern states, but he'd made it all the way to the East Coast before he'd backtracked to Texas.

Now he was here, only a few yards from where Teanna worked.

He ran his damp palms over the steering wheel. He'd never experienced the apprehension gripping his stomach. From the time he was twenty and formed The P.J. Kendall Band, women had been easy. With the band's first number one song, they'd lined up for a chance to fuck him and the other band members.

P.J. Kendall was gone. James Parker had to impress Teanna on his own, without the glitter of fame that used to surround him.

James took a deep breath and stepped down from his vehicle.

* * * * *

Teanna gathered up her hair and lifted it off her neck. She wished she'd worn it up today or at least in a ponytail. She'd lived in Texas all her life, yet doubted she'd ever get used to the crazy fluctuations in temperatures. Uncle Lloyd had run the heat in the store last week. Today, cold air filled the store from the central air conditioning.

Becca lifted a box from the dolly onto the counter in the storeroom. "Geez, do you believe this heat? It must be close to ninety today."

"Springtime in North Texas."

"Hell, it isn't spring for two more weeks. I hope this isn't an indication of how hot it'll be this summer."

Teanna hoped the same thing. She wasn't a fan of temperatures over eighty-five...and the severe thunderstorms that came with those warm temperatures.

"Is this the last box?" Teanna asked, picking up her box cutter to open it.

"Yeah, thank God. I don't want to go outside again."

Teanna folded back the box flaps to expose a new shipment of greeting cards. The perfect project to keep Alessia busy this afternoon. The twenty-one-year-old clerk was a good worker as long as Teanna gave her specific projects. Alessia had trouble finding things to do on her own.

"I need a drink," Becca said, pushing her bangs back from her forehead. "Let's get a limeade."

"Sounds good."

Teanna led the way from the storeroom to the soda fountain at the front of the store. Every time she looked at the red vinyl booths and chrome fixtures, she was swept back to her childhood. Her parents brought her here whenever they visited her aunt and uncle. Aunt Ruth would fix Teanna a mini banana split with extra nuts and three cherries on top. She'd sit by herself on a stool and happily eat her treat while the adults sat in a booth with glasses of iced tea or lemonade and talked away the afternoon.

Teanna filled two glasses with ice and fresh limeade she'd made less than an hour ago. Limeade and lemonade had been huge sellers this week with the little taste of summer that had hit Lanville. She made a mental note to stop by the grocery store on the way home tonight and pick up more lemons. With their heat wave predicted to last at least another week, she'd stay busy serving cold drinks.

She handed Becca one glass and was about to take a sip of her own drink when she saw Becca's hand freeze halfway to her mouth.

"What's wrong?"

"Major hunk at three o'clock."

Teanna turned and looked out the large plate-glass window. A dark-haired man stood on the sidewalk, examining the front of the store. He appeared to be reading the list of soda fountain goodies Teanna posted in the window.

"He is *gorgeous*," Becca said. "Look at those shoulders. Yum-yum."

Heat rushed through Teanna's body that had nothing to do with the hot temperature outside. She didn't speak for her tongue refused to work. Her heart thumped in her chest. Her breathing became deeper, heavier. A fluttering flared up in her stomach. She'd admired many handsome men, but only one man had ever caused such an instant reaction in her.

The man at The Tarot Café.

It was ridiculous to compare him to the man she'd seen in December. They looked nothing alike. That man had worn a cap, but she'd seen blond strands peeking from beneath the rim. He'd also had a full blond beard and worn glasses. This man had dark brown hair, no glasses and was clean shaven.

And yet...

There was something about him, something that tugged at her memory. She felt as if she *should* know him.

"Oh, goody," Becca said, setting her glass on the counter, "he's coming in."

He opened the door and stepped inside. He scanned the right side of the store first, then turned to his left. His gaze stopped when it met Teanna's. Peering into her eyes, he sauntered over to the soda fountain and slipped onto a stool at the counter.

"Hi," he said with a friendly smile aimed at both women.

His eyes were an amazing icy blue. High cheekbones, strong jaw line, straight nose and full lips all combined to make him incredibly handsome.

Becca wasted no time in stepping forward. "Hi," she said, returning his smile. "What can we get for you?"

He glanced at Becca for a second, then turned his attention to the glass of limeade in Teanna's hand...the glass she was in danger of dropping soon. "That looks refreshing." He looked back into Teanna's eyes. "What is it?"

"Limeade." Her voice came out much lower and sultrier than she'd intended. She thought she saw his eyes flare with heat. She cleared her throat. "I made it about an hour ago."

"I'll have one."

Teanna turned and set down her glass. She wiped her damp palms on her thighs. For a moment, she forgot what she should do. She sensed him watching her, probably staring at her butt. Testing her theory, she glanced at him over her shoulder. Yes, that's exactly what he was doing. His gaze slowly lifted to her face. The corners of his mouth rose in a grin and he shrugged his shoulders as if to say he knew he'd gotten caught but wasn't sorry.

Teanna stopped herself before she grinned back at him. She finished drawing his limeade and set the glass in front of him. "Would you like a straw?"

"Real men don't use straws."

"Really." Becca leaned against the counter, one hand on her hip. "Tell us more about real men."

He grinned, slow and easy. "I think I'll keep quiet. I don't want to get in trouble."

It usually amused Teanna to witness Becca flirting with a man. Not this time. She didn't want her friend anywhere around this man. "Don't you have a lunch date?"

Becca shrugged one shoulder. "I can cancel. It's more interesting here."

"Don't cancel your lunch date because of me," he said. "I won't be here long."

"You aren't staying in town?"

"Just passing through."

"Oh. I thought maybe you..."

Becca stopped. Teanna looked at her friend to find Becca studying her face intently.

"But I guess that would be rude of me to cancel at the last minute." She flashed another smile at the customer, one that was friendly instead of flirtatious. "Enjoy your time in Lanville. See you later, Tee."

Well, that was certainly an about face, Teanna thought. I wonder what happened to her?

Once Becca was out of hearing range, he chuckled. "Not exactly subtle, is she?"

"No. I apologize for that."

"You have no reason to apologize. Her flirting is good for my ego."

"Does your ego need a boost?"

"No. It's pretty big now."

He grinned while Teanna laughed. He twirled his glass in the ring of condensation on the counter. "I'm James."

"Teanna."

"That's a beautiful name."

"Thank you."

"What do you do here, besides make delicious limeade?"

"I take care of the books and insurance billing."

"Is this a family business?"

Teanna nodded. "My uncle is the pharmacist, my aunt the manager. They've owned the store for as long as I can remember."

"Is the brunette family too?"

"Becca is one of our pharmacist assistants and my best friend. We've known each other most of our lives."

James took another big sip of his drink. "I'm not keeping you from lunch, am I?"

"No. We lunch in shifts so the store is always covered." She gestured at his half-empty glass. "Would you like a refill?"

"No, thanks. I'm thinking about something to eat. What do you recommend?"

"Mona's Place is really good. She makes everything fresh and isn't skimpy with the portions. That's the café on the north side of the square."

"Sounds like a real down home place," he said in a slow drawl.

Teanna laughed. "You definitely aren't a Texan."

His eyes twinkled with amusement. "And how do you know that?"

"Because that was the worst drawl I've ever heard. Besides, you have a West Coast accent."

"West Coasters don't have accents."

"They do to Texans."

She liked the way the skin around his eyes crinkled when he smiled. She couldn't find a flaw with anything physical, yet he also had a great sense of humor. If a man couldn't make her smile, Teanna lost interest in a hurry.

"I guess I should get out of your way and let you get back to work. How much do I owe you for the drink?"

"Ninety-two cents."

He stood, dug a five-dollar bill out of his jeans pocket and laid it next to his glass. "Thanks."

"I'll get your change—"

"Don't bother. I'm a good tipper."

He grinned again and winked at her, then turned and left the store.

Teanna placed one hand on her stomach, where the fluttering had gone crazy with his wink. Closing her eyes, she imagined him giving her that same sexy wink before his lips touched hers. He'd kiss her gently at first, then with more passion. His tongue would push past her lips to explore her mouth as he took her in his arms. He'd hold her tightly against his body, letting her feel his hard cock brush her mound...

"You okay, Teanna?"

She jerked back to the present and opened her eyes when she heard Alessia's voice. The young woman stood on the other side of the counter, curiosity in her eyes. Warmth crept into Teanna's cheeks. "Yes. Of course I'm fine. Just...thinking."

"Oh. Okay. I'm back if you want to go to lunch now."

"Great. Thanks."

"Is there anything special you want me to do?"

"We received a new shipment of greeting cards. You can work on those. I'll see you later."

Teanna hurried away before Alessia could question her further. She grabbed her purse and car keys from her small office and headed for the back door. The employees parked their vehicles behind the store. Since Teanna lived only three miles away, she usually went home for lunch.

She stopped before she opened her car door. Leftovers or a sandwich waited for her at home. One of Mona's chicken Caesar salads would taste so much better.

And if she ran into James at the restaurant, that would be even better.

* * * * *

James expected Mona's Place to be a dive with an inch of grease crusted on every surface. He was pleasantly surprised to find a light, clean restaurant that was obviously popular, judging by the full tables and booths.

He slid into the only empty booth. A young woman with a long dark ponytail soon appeared with a menu. She wore a skin-tight white T-shirt with "Mona's Place" over her left breast and even tighter jeans.

"Hi," she said, her wide smile exposing a full set of braces. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Just water for now, thanks."

“Okay. Our special of the day is pork roast with gravy, mashed potatoes, green beans, hot rolls and peach cobbler for dessert. The soup of the day is vegetable beef. Be right back with your water.”

He watched her sashay away, her hips swaying from side to side. He imagined she got a lot of tips from men admiring her ass in the tight denim.

James opened his menu. The special of the day sounded good, but he didn't want that much food. He'd had a late breakfast, so wasn't very hungry. He would've gladly stayed at Caldwell's and stared at Teanna all day. Not the brunette. She was attractive, and he was grateful to her for leaving Teanna's business card on the table at The Tarot Cafe, but she reminded him too much of the groupies on the road who looked at him like he was a steak dinner. There was nothing wrong with a sexually active woman yet, as he'd told Rusty, he was tired of fucking a different woman every night. He wanted something more real in his life.

Someone more real...like Teanna.

He hoped he hadn't made a fool of himself. She'd caught him staring at her ass, but hadn't seemed upset by that. In fact, it appeared she was on the verge of laughing before she turned away from him to draw his drink.

He'd been involved with so many women, yet one honey-blonde Texan made his palms sweat.

He didn't have to see Teanna to know she'd come in the restaurant. His heart did a dive into his stomach, his senses went on full alert. Lifting his head, he saw her speaking to a table of four women close to the door. She stood in profile, giving him the chance to admire her full breasts and rounded ass. Teanna had the type of figure James loved, with enough curves to more than fill his hands while he drove deep into her wet pussy.

His cock responded to his fantasy, lengthening and thickening inside his briefs. Regular sex had been part of P.J. Kendall's life. James Parker was sadly lacking in the sex department.

Teanna glanced around the restaurant, perhaps looking for a place to sit. Her gaze collided with his and stopped. James raised one hand and motioned to her. She spoke to the ladies again, then walked to his booth, smiling at some of the other customers along the way. She obviously knew a lot of people in the small town.

"We meet again," he said with a smile. "Join me, please."

"I don't want to intrude on your lunch."

"You aren't. I haven't ordered yet." He gestured to the seat opposite him. "Sit."

"Thank you." She slid into the booth. "I forgot how crowded Mona's is on Wednesday."

"What's special about Wednesday?"

"Her pork roast. Most of the men in town come in for lunch."

James had noticed the men far outnumbered the women in here. "It's that good?"

"Oh, yes. I came in for her chicken Caesar salad, but I may change my mind."

The waitress came back with James' water. "Hi, Teanna."

"Hi, Kit."

"Iced tea?"

"Please."

"Need a menu?"

"No. I'll have the chicken Caesar salad."

James closed his menu. "Make that two. And iced tea also."

She flashed a bright smile on James. "Coming right up."

Once she left, James leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table. "You didn't change your mind."

"If I eat that much food for lunch, I'll be sleepy all afternoon."

"Just like at Thanksgiving."

"Exactly."

Her eyes sparkled with humor. He loved the color...a shade somewhere between milk and dark chocolate. Perhaps they turned a deeper brown when she became aroused.

He hoped to find out for sure...tonight.

Chapter Five

James waited until the waitress set their glasses on the table before he spoke again. "What do the people of Lanville do for excitement?"

"There's very little exciting about Lanville." Teanna added two packages of artificial sweetener to her tea. "We had a movie theater, but it closed down about three years ago. We drive to Dallas for any kind of entertainment."

"Have you lived here all your life?"

"Since I was eight."

She didn't explain further, which probably meant she didn't want to talk about where she lived during the first eight years of her life. She stared into her tea while she swirled her straw through it.

James could feel the sadness seeping from her. "Did I ask something I shouldn't have?"

"No." She lifted her head. He could see the sorrow in her eyes. "I shouldn't let something that happened twenty years ago still upset me."

He remembered she'd talked about her aunt and uncle owning Caldwell Apothecary, but hadn't mentioned her mother and father. "You lost your parents."

Teanna nodded. "They were killed in a tornado. I came to live with my aunt and uncle after that."

James winced. How sad for her to lose her parents so young. He'd been twenty-five when his parents were killed and it had hurt like hell. He couldn't imagine the pain a child would feel. "I'm sorry."

"Thanks. I can't complain because I've had a wonderful life. My aunt and uncle are the most wonderful people in the world. I'm blessed they love me as much as they do."

He couldn't see how anyone wouldn't love Teanna. He'd watched her interact with the people here in the restaurant, how they'd stopped her to talk as she passed them. It was obvious more people than her aunt and uncle cared about her.

"You told Becca you're passing through Lanville," Teanna said after sipping her tea. "Where are you from and where are you going?"

James drank from his glass to stall before he answered her question. He couldn't tell Teanna the entire truth, but he could give her bits and pieces. "You guessed it right about the West Coast accent. I'm from Southern California. I recently quit my job and decided to drive cross country. I managed to save up a nice nest egg, so I'm taking my time and seeing as much as I can."

"So you're unemployed?"

"For now."

She didn't say more, but James sensed she had a specific reason for her question. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

He would've questioned her further, but Kit arrived with their salads and a basket of hot rolls. Teanna dug right into her meal, as if to avoid speaking to him.

Perhaps he imagined it, but he thought a blush filled her cheeks.

She not only made his cock hard with one look into those gorgeous eyes, she intrigued him. Getting to know Teanna Caldwell would be very interesting.

* * * * *

Teanna couldn't believe she'd almost offered James a job. When he'd mentioned he was currently unemployed, she almost told him there was a position open at the store and he should apply for it. It would give her the perfect opportunity to keep him close.

You're an idiot, Tee. He's already told you he's passing through Lanville on his Great American Adventure. He obviously has a very nice nest egg to be able to afford to quit his job and simply drive. Why would he want to stay in Lanville and work in a drug store?

Her bite of chicken turned to a lump in her mouth. For the first time in her life, she'd met a man who heated her blood and he'd be gone by tomorrow.

"I'm thinking about staying in Lanville a few days," James said.

Teanna jerked up her head at his announcement. She quickly swallowed her chicken before she choked. "You are?"

"Yeah. I've been driving a while and it'll be nice to relax. I'd like to get in some fishing if there are any good fishing holes nearby."

"My uncle could tell you the best spots. He goes almost every week."

"Great." He tore a roll in half and spread butter over it. "How about a place to stay? Is there a motel in town?"

"No motel, but we have two bed-and-breakfasts. I'd recommend the Country Woods. It has individual cabins with small kitchenettes that are only a few yards from the river. The cabins are surrounded by trees, so they're very private."

"Private is good."

He stared at her as he slowly chewed his bite of roll. Teanna didn't imagine the flare of heat in his eyes this time. He looked at her as if he'd rather be tasting her than the roll.

She'd never hesitated to go after what she wanted. She wanted James, so knew of no reason why she shouldn't have him.

"Country Woods is a little hard to find if you don't know the county roads. We have maps at the store, but I'll be happy to show you the way."

"You wouldn't mind?"

"Of course not."

"Should I call first and make sure there's a cabin available?"

"I doubt if that'll be a problem in March. I can call from the store. I know the owner."

"Don't you know everyone in town?"

"Just about. It's a small town."

James pushed aside his empty plate and rested his arms on the table. "So there's no visiting company, no marital affairs, no getting in trouble without everyone knowing about it."

"You got it."

Kit came back to the table and gathered up their dirty plates. "Do y'all want dessert? We have fresh peach cobbler and buttermilk pie."

"None for me," James said. "Teanna?"

"Not today, Kit. Thanks."

The waitress laid their ticket on the table. "Have a great day."

James picked up the ticket before Teanna had the chance. "My treat for helping me find a place to stay."

She wasn't about to tell him her offer of finding him a place to stay was for her own selfish reasons. The longer he stayed in Lanville, the better for her...and her hormones.

* * * * *

James stepped out of the Country Woods office, cabin key in hand. Teanna had called the owner, Helen, from her store and made the reservation for him. Only two of the eight cabins were occupied, so he had his pick of the other six. He chose the largest, most secluded one.

He didn't want any interruptions when he made love to Teanna.

She walked by his side to their vehicles. She had no reason to stay any longer. Helen had shown him the location of his cabin on a map of the grounds, so he'd have no problem finding it.

Teanna opened her car door. "I'll show you where the cabin is."

James had expected her to tell him she was leaving, so didn't argue about being with her a bit longer. He slid behind the wheel of his SUV and followed Teanna the short distance to cabin number five.

She met him at the back of his vehicle. "Do you need any help?"

He didn't, but he wouldn't pass up an opportunity to be with her a few more minutes. "Sure." He opened the back hatch and reached for his suitcase and garment bag. "Will you grab my tackle box?"

Teanna held his bag while he unlocked the door. Smiling his thanks, he pushed it open and let her enter before him. The cabin was warm, but not uncomfortable.

She set the tackle box on the floor, then passed the bed and crossed to the window air conditioning unit. "It shouldn't take it long to cool off in here." A flick of a dial and cool air began to flow from the unit. "If you stay longer than three days, you'll probably need the heat again. That's controlled by the dial on the wall by the bathroom."

"How do you know so much about the cabin?"

"I worked for Helen for two summers when I was a teenager. I know every inch of every cabin and the grounds."

Leaning against the wall by the front door, James crossed his arms over his chest. "I'll bet you could tell some wild stories about some of the guests."

"I learned more than a young girl should," she said with a grin.

James laughed. "I think I might like to hear some of those stories."

"Maybe I'll share them sometime."

"How about tonight? Have dinner with me."

"I'd like that."

He stared into her eyes for several long moments before he pushed himself away from the door and walked closer to her. "I'm going to be honest with you."

He saw her throat work when she swallowed. "All right."

"I don't intend for our evening to end after dinner."

"Neither do I."

All the blood in his body rushed to his cock. He took another step closer and lifted his hand to touch her face. Her cheek was as soft and smooth as he'd suspected. He rubbed his thumb over it and saw her swallow again.

"Do you feel it?" he asked, his voice a ragged whisper. "This... I don't know what to call it, but there's something happening between us."

"I feel it too."

He lifted his other hand to her face and cradled her jaws. It had been months since he'd kissed a woman...much longer than since he'd bedded one. Kissing was meant for two people who cared about each other, not simply a prelude to fucking. He didn't kiss a woman unless she was special to him.

Tilting her face ever so slightly, he lowered his head until his lips touched hers.

Instant heat.

James didn't think his cock could get any harder, but it did the moment he kissed Teanna. The heat burned even hotter when she parted her lips. James brushed them with the tip of his tongue, silently asking for more. She gave it, answering his request with a gentle lick across his lips.

Groaning deep in his throat, James tightened his hands on Teanna's face and kissed her deeper. His tongue stroked against the corner of her lips, drove inside her mouth to wrap around her own. He felt Teanna's hands on his waist, kneading his flesh as she returned kiss for kiss. Her warm breath brushed his cheek.

He was two seconds away from lifting her and laying her on the bed when she pulled back from him. She rested her forehead on his chest. He slid his hands down her back and over her hips, again and again, waiting for her to speak.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. She lifted her head. He clearly saw the desire and longing in her eyes. She was as affected as he by their kisses. "I can't."

His cock didn't like hearing that, but that part of his anatomy didn't rule him. If Teanna wasn't ready to make love, he accepted that. "It's okay. I won't push you to do something you don't want to do."

"You wouldn't have to push me. I'd make love with you right now, but I have to get back to the store. My aunt and uncle are gone today and I'm in charge. I should've been back half an hour ago. I'm surprised Becca hasn't called me by now."

"I understand." His hands swept over her hips again, tugging her a bit closer to his body. James almost groaned again at the feel of her soft belly cushioning his hard rod. "Once we start making love, I don't want any interruptions."

James kissed her again before reluctantly letting her go. He entwined their fingers together and led her to her car. After she slid behind the wheel and lowered her window, he leaned in for another kiss.

"Do you have a preference for where we go?" he asked.

"Surprise me."

He liked that she had a sense of adventure. "Shall I pick you up at the store?"

"No. I want to go home and change first."

His gaze quickly passed over her sleeveless gold shell and dark jeans. "You look great."

"Thank you, but these aren't going-out-to-dinner clothes." She reached into the compartment between the seats and removed a business card and pen. Turning over the card, she scribbled a phone number on the back. "Here's my cell. Call me when you're ready to come to my house and I'll give you directions."

"What time?"

"The store closes at six, but I have things to do after that. How about seven?"

"Seven it is." He couldn't resist giving her one more lingering kiss. "See you later."

* * * * *

Teanna hurried into her apartment and headed straight for the shower, dropping clothes along the way. A rush of last-minute customers meant she hadn't locked the doors until six-fifteen. She did the bare minimum to close up the store for the evening, promising herself she'd go in early tomorrow and catch up the paperwork before the store opened.

Naked, Teanna stepped beneath the warm spray. The afternoon had been busy with teenagers coming in after school. Becca had pounced as soon as Teanna walked back into the store, yet Teanna had very little time to talk to her friend. Between the teenagers, other customers and another delivery, Teanna could barely breathe much less talk to Becca.

Becca had managed to corner Teanna long enough to whisper, "I want *all* the details tomorrow."

Fat chance of that, Teanna thought as she turned off the water. She wouldn't share details of her time with James with anyone, not even her best friend.

She placed her hand over her quivering stomach. Butterflies had flown around inside her all day. Her breasts felt tight, her pussy wet and empty. She thought about bringing herself to a climax in the shower, but didn't want to do anything to spoil her time with James tonight.

A quick glance at the clock showed her she had twenty-five minutes before he should arrive. She hurried to her closet and threw open the door. She knew exactly what she wanted to wear—a new dress she'd bought on her last shopping trip to Dallas with Aunt Ruth. A deep cranberry in color, the A-line skirt fell to just below her knees and swirled around her legs when she walked. The scooped neckline showed a hint of her breasts. The lacy bra and thong in pale ivory she'd also bought on that shopping trip completed her outfit.

Her cell phone rang twenty minutes later while she attempted to sweep up her hair to the top of her head. She didn't recognize the 310 area code, so assumed it was James. "Hello?"

"Are you ready?" he drawled in a low voice.

Now there's a loaded question. "I will be by the time you get here."

"How do I do that?"

"Take the main road west through town. Drive about three miles and turn left on County Road 2012. I'm the second house on the right, number 406."

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

Teanna's butterflies took flight again. She could still masturbate before he arrived. As hot as she felt right now, it wouldn't take but a few swipes across her clit.

No. The next time I come, I want it to be with James.

The doorbell rang as she tucked her cell phone into her small purse. One more quick look in the mirror, one more deep breath to calm her racing heart, and she hurried to the door.

She forgot to breathe when she saw him. He wore a dark blue button-down shirt with the long sleeves rolled up to the middle of his forearms. His baggy navy pants were creased, his black shoes shiny. His hair was clean and brushed back from his face. He looked like he'd stepped off the page of a men's fashion magazine.

"Good evening," he said softly. His gaze passed over her from head to toes and back again. "You look amazing."

"So do you."

He dipped his head, then held out one hand to her. "Shall we go?"

She let him guide her outside to his SUV parked in front of the garage. He opened the passenger door and helped her onto the seat, his hand trailing over her bare arm.

"I'm sorry to mess up your lipstick, but I have to kiss you."

His lips covered hers in a kiss full of desire and a promise of what would happen between them later this evening. Teanna parted her lips, brushed the tip of his tongue with hers. He touched her cheek with his thumb, caressing it while he kissed her so tenderly.

She would gladly say to hell with dinner and take him to bed right now.

James ended the kiss with one more tender lick of her lips. He closed her door, rounded the hood and climbed into his seat. Once they'd both fastened their seat belts, he started the engine.

"I made reservations at a steakhouse in Dallas. Is that all right?"

"I could probably find a frozen pizza in the house. Then we wouldn't have to leave."

Chuckling, he slid the gearshift into reverse. "That idea is tempting, but no. I want to take you someplace special." He gave her a heated look that sent the butterflies into flight again. "We'll have plenty of time for dessert later."

Chapter Six

James pulled onto the county road that led to Teanna's house. In only a few minutes, he'd get to hold her, touch her, the way he'd longed to since he'd picked her up earlier this evening.

That first tumble with Cindy Perkins when he was fourteen convinced James that he liked sex. When he formed the band and their popularity took off, his sex life took off too. A different woman every night fit him perfectly. He didn't care if he saw her again as long as he could sink his cock into a wet pussy.

He'd never realized how pathetic he'd been until now.

It was different with Teanna. Yes, he wanted her. He'd longed to make love to her from the first time he'd seen her at The Tarot Café. But that was the difference. He wanted to *make love* to her, not just fuck her and be on his way to the next conquest.

He looked at their entwined hands resting on the console between the seats. He ran his thumb over the back of her hand. Her hands were soft, her fingers long and slim. He imagined them running through his hair, touching his skin...

The gentle squeeze of her hand drew him back to the present. He glanced at her. "Almost there."

"I know."

James turned into the driveway and headed toward the pad in front of the garage. "No, don't park here," Teanna said. "Take that driveway to the left."

James did as she said, following the graveled driveway to the back of the house. Teanna's car was parked beneath a carport next to what looked like an addition that had recently been built onto the house. James pulled in behind her car and turned off the engine.

The sudden quiet was broken only by the hoot of a nearby owl. James smiled. So many things he'd experienced for the first time on this trip.

"Why are you smiling?" Teanna asked.

"Just enjoying the sound of the owl. You don't hear many of those in L.A."

"You're from Los Angeles?"

Damn it, he hadn't wanted to admit that. He'd told Teanna he was from Southern California and planned to leave it at that. "Yeah."

"Lanville is very different from Los Angeles."

"True. But I like it. Everyone I've met so far has been friendly. I'm glad I decided to stop here." He took her hand again. "For a lot of reasons."

His eyes had adjusted to the darkness enough to see her smile. "I'm glad you decided to stop too."

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze before releasing it. "Shall we go in?"

James rounded his vehicle and helped Teanna from the seat. Placing his hand on the small of her back, he followed her into the house.

She led him into the living room. A single lamp burning low on an end table by the couch cast a soft light around the room. Bright and cheery but also cozy, the room reflected Teanna's feminine style. He wouldn't be surprised to learn she decorated it herself. "Nice."

"I love it. My aunt and uncle built this addition onto the house three years ago. They never interfered when I had friends here and we took over the house, but the privacy has been nice. I have everything I need except a kitchen. It's through there." She pointed to a door in the center of the wall. "Very handy for a midnight snack."

James chuckled and rubbed his stomach. "I doubt either of us will want a midnight snack after that huge meal."

"It was delicious." Teanna laid her purse on the coffee table. "I think the only thing we need after such a wonderful meal is a brandy." She gestured toward the

entertainment center. "Why don't you look through my CDs and find something to play while I get our drinks? I'll warn you, I listen to classical."

The P.J. Kendall Band had played rock, but James had always enjoyed a variety of music. "I'll bet I can find something I like."

She smiled. "I'll be right back."

James knelt before the stereo and rummaged through Teanna's music. She'd told the truth when she said she listened to classical. Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, Chopin. She had several CDs by every classical composer, plus modern composers like Andrew Lloyd Webber.

He drew out a CD and slipped it into the player. The soft strands of Pachelbel filled the air. Teanna came back into the room with two snifters of brandy. Standing, he took one snifter and gazed at her over the rim of his glass as he sipped the smooth liquid. "Very good."

Teanna led the way to the couch. James sat on the opposite end from her. The couch was small, not much bigger than a loveseat. He didn't touch her when he sat, although their bodies were less than a foot apart. He wanted to touch her, so much that his cock had been half hard all evening.

Although he desired her fiercely, he also enjoyed simply being with her. Conversation had flowed easily between them during dinner and the drive to and from the restaurant. There had been an undercurrent of desire, yet James had truly enjoyed talking with Teanna. She was charming and intelligent with a great sense of humor. He didn't think he'd ever "clicked" so perfectly with a woman.

But then, he'd never taken the time to get to truly know a woman in the last nine years. It'd been "thanks for the fuck, have a nice life, I'm outta here."

"Where are you going when you leave Lanville?" Teanna asked.

He had no intention of leaving Lanville, but knew it wasn't time to tell Teanna that. "I don't have any plans. I'm just driving."

She swirled the brandy in her glass. "It must be nice to have that freedom, to drive without a destination in mind."

"I've enjoyed it. Although it would be nice to have someone with me. Someone to talk to." He couldn't ignore the need to touch her any longer. Stretching his arm along the back of the couch, he brushed his fingertips over her upper arm. "Eat with." One finger trailed down her arm to her hand. "Make love with."

He looked back at Teanna's face in time to see her swallow. "You're an extremely handsome man, James. Surely you met women during your travels who were willing to...be with you."

"Thank you for the compliment, but I wasn't interested in anyone." He drew small circles on the back of her hand with his fingertip. "Until you."

James chuckled at how much that sounded like a pick-up phrase. "I'm surprised you aren't rolling your eyes. That was a really bad line."

"It isn't a line if it's the truth."

"It's the truth, Teanna. You make me feel..."

For the first time in his life, he truly wanted to impress a woman and had no idea what to say. Words flowed easily when he wrote songs. Now, they completely deserted him.

She tilted her head. "I make you feel what?"

The next song on the CD gave him the opportunity to ignore a question he didn't know how to answer. He set his snifter on the sofa table behind the couch, stood and offered Teanna his hand.

"Dance with me."

She set down her glass and took his hand. James pulled her into his arms as the strands of *Canon* filled the room. Teanna's living room had little space for dancing, but they didn't need much. He wrapped his arms around her waist and swayed to the music.

Her warm breath brushed his throat, her fingers played with the hair on the back of his neck. He hugged her closer to his body until they touched from chests to thighs. Her soft breasts flattened against his chest sent a surge of lust through his whole body. James' cock grew heavier, harder. Sliding his hand down to her ass, he tugged Teanna even closer so she'd have no doubt how she affected him.

She moaned low in her throat. "That feels good."

"*You* feel good." He tightened his grip and shifted his hips from side to side, brushing his hard rod against her mound as he dropped kisses from beneath her ear to her shoulder. "I've wanted you since the first moment I saw you."

"I've wanted you too."

James pulled back so he could look into her eyes. He saw the proof of her desire in the brown depths. He slid his hand behind her neck. Her lips parted in silent invitation. Slowly, he lowered his head and kissed her.

He'd kissed her with hunger at the cabin, with tenderness in his SUV. This was a kiss of hello, a kiss that said he wanted to get to know her better. He moved his mouth over hers one way, then the other. He didn't use his tongue, but simply kissed her, again and again.

Her lips were soft and giving beneath his, with a hint of the brandy she'd sipped. James kept the kisses easy and gentle, even though he wanted to ravish her mouth. He wanted to claim her as his, with his kiss, his cock, his body.

His soul.

Moments passed before James raised his head. He watched Teanna's eyes struggle to open. Her breathing sounded raspy, her breasts rose and fell rapidly. If he slid his hand inside her panties, he knew he'd find her pussy wet and open.

He reached up and removed the clip from her hair. The blonde strands fell past her shoulders in soft waves. He buried his hands in it and kissed her once more. "We can keep dancing and enjoy our brandy, or we can make love. It's up to you, Teanna."

She didn't answer him with words, but took his hand and led him to her bedroom.

James waited by the end of the bed while Teanna turned on a lamp. Soft light fell on the queen-sized sleigh bed. He glanced at the many pillows piled on it in the same colors as the living room furnishings.

After that, he saw nothing but her.

She stepped in front of him. Looking into his eyes, she released the first button on his shirt.

James laid his hands on her hips. His gaze traveled between her hands and her face as she moved to the next button. She released each one, pulled the shirttail from his pants and spread his shirt wide.

"Oh my," she whispered.

Her obvious pleasure at the sight of his chest pleased him. Exercise had helped to work off the booze. He'd stayed in shape for himself, not to please anyone else. All those hours of sweat had been worth it to see the desire in her eyes now.

He sucked in a sharp breath when Teanna kissed the center of his chest. With her lips still pressed to his flesh, she tugged his shirt down his arms to fall to the floor behind him.

James tunneled his hands into Teanna's hair. He lifted handfuls to his nose and inhaled deeply, savoring the flowery fragrance of her shampoo. Every time he'd gotten close enough to her tonight to smell her hair, desire had curled in his stomach. He'd imagined that mane spread over a pillow while he thrust inside her. Or spread over his stomach as she took his cock deep in her mouth.

She reached for his belt buckle. James laid his hands over hers to still her movements. "I think it's only fair that I get to remove something of yours now."

A lovely blush filled her cheeks. "Am I going too fast? I want to see you. *All* of you."

"No, you aren't going too fast, and I feel the same way about you." He twirled one finger. "Turn around."

She obeyed him instantly. James slid down the zipper on the back of her dress, exposing her creamy skin an inch at a time. The zipper stopped right below the elastic band of her thong. He moved aside her hair and kissed her nape as he slid the dress off her shoulders. It slithered past her hips and landed at her feet.

He had only a moment to admire her ass before Teanna leaned against him. James wrapped his arms around her, one hand splayed low on her belly, one cradling a lace-covered breast. The firm flesh more than filled his hand.

"You have a beautiful body, Teanna." He worried her earlobe between his teeth. Her nipple beaded in his palm. "And very responsive."

She groaned when he slipped his hand between her thighs. Her panties were warm and damp. He cupped her mound, his fingers gently massaging the swollen folds. "Tell me what you need me to do. I want to make you come."

Teanna clasped his hand and pushed it inside her thong. "Touch me."

His cock grew even harder at the feel of her smooth, creamy pussy. He danced his fingertips across her clit and along the slit. One finger ventured inside her channel. "Where? Here?" He pushed his finger farther inside her and pressed up, searching for her G-spot. Her quick intake of breath proved he found it. "Or here?" He withdrew his finger to rub it across her clit.

Her head fell forward, her fingernails dug into his thighs. "I think you vote for your clit." James nuzzled beneath her hair so he could whisper in her ear. "Maybe you'd rather have my tongue than my hand."

She whimpered and her body trembled. James nipped her shoulder. "How about hand now and tongue later?"

"Stop teasing me."

"I'm not teasing you. A slow buildup is nice."

A quick flick of his fingers and he unsnapped her bra. He tunneled his hand beneath the lace to caress her bare breast. He moaned at the feel of the soft weight in his hand.

"Your breasts are incredible." He plucked at her nipple until it peaked. More cream oozed from her channel to wet his fingers. He spread the moisture over her clit and circled the swollen nub with two fingers. "Big and full and firm. I'll bet your nipples are delicious. I can't wait to have one in my mouth."

Teanna spread her legs and arched her hips toward his hand. "More," she breathed. "Faster."

Her skin grew damp. Soft pants came from her mouth in time to her movements. Her heart pounded beneath his palm. Her nipples became even harder. James knew those were all signs that Teanna was close to orgasm.

He pressed his cock against her ass. He was so hard he ached, but Teanna's needs were more important than his own. He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, pushed two fingers deep inside her pussy. "Come for me, Teanna."

He'd barely uttered the words when the walls of her channel clamped onto his fingers, milking them with each contraction of her climax.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh." Teanna's entire body shuddered. "James. Yes!"

He held her as she came down from the heavens, his hand on her breast, his fingers inside her. Eyes closed, she laid her head on his shoulder. James kissed the sensitive area beneath her ear. "You okay?"

"No. All my bones are gone."

He smiled. He liked that she could tease, even while the tremors of her orgasm still flowed through her body. "Then it's a good thing I'm holding you."

His fingers slipped from inside her when she turned to face him. She wore the look of a well-satisfied woman. "I needed that."

"I'm happy to serve."

She ran her fingers into his hair and tugged his head down for a kiss. She swiped her tongue across his lips, pushed it inside his mouth to touch his. James clasped Teanna's ass and pulled her tight against his shaft. He didn't know how much longer he could wait to be inside her.

The abrupt end to their kiss surprised James. Teanna pushed hard on his chest, hard enough that he lost his balance and fell back on the bed. Before he could move, Teanna straddled his hips.

She gave him a wicked smile. "Now it's *my* turn to tease."

Chapter Seven

Her legs were weak, yet Teanna still found the strength to straddle James' hips. He'd given her a staggering orgasm with his hands, but she'd wanted more. She'd wanted to see his body, touch it. She'd wanted to feel his hard cock slide into her pussy.

So now, it was her turn to play with him.

First she simply stared...at his wide shoulders, muscled arms, broad chest. A fine web of light brown hair spread over his chest and narrowed down his belly to swirl around his navel. Teanna ruffled it with her fingertips. "I love hair on a man's chest. It's so sexy."

She moved her hands over his stomach, his chest and up to his shoulders. Starting at his collarbone, she dragged her fingernails down his body to his belt. James hissed and arched his back.

"Hurt?" she asked, even though she knew she hadn't scratched him hard enough for pain. The heat in his eyes proved that.

He shook his head.

"Maybe I should do it harder." She scratched him again, making sure to touch his nipples this time. They beaded beneath her nails.

"Damn, Teanna."

He grabbed her wrists and tugged, but Teanna refused to let him pull her closer. "I don't think so. Now you do what *I* want."

She removed her bra and tossed it to the floor. James' gaze snapped to her breasts. He cradled both globes. "My God, these are beautiful."

"I'm glad you think so."

"How could I not think so?" He lifted her breasts, kneaded them. "They're perfect."

Teanna accepted the pleasure of his touch for several moments before she shifted farther back on his thighs, moving out of his reach. "Hey, come back here. I wasn't through."

"You touched me the way you wanted. Now it's my turn."

She unfastened his belt and button on his pants. His chest rose and fell with his deep breath as she reached for the zipper. Instead of lowering it, she laid her hand over the hard bulge behind it. She ran her hand up and down his impressive length and width, reached between his legs and gently squeezed his balls. "Very nice. I'm going to enjoy playing with this."

The fire in his eyes almost scorched her. He clenched his fists at his sides when she slid down the zipper. "Lift your hips." He did, and Teanna tugged his pants down to his thighs. She scooted back until she stood on the floor, taking his pants with her. Shoes, socks and pants landed on the floor. He lay on her bed wearing nothing but a tiny pair of black briefs that outlined his cock and left nothing to her imagination.

She straddled his hips again, then slowly lowered her torso until her breasts grazed his chest. She leaned down until her lips were a whisper from his.

"Your body is amazing."

"So is yours." He gripped her ass and lifted his hips, pressing his rod against her mound. "The most beautiful I've ever seen."

"Thank you." She brushed her breasts over his chest again, earning a soft groan from James. "You like this?"

"Oh yeah." He squeezed her ass before sliding his hands up her back to between her shoulder blades. He urged her closer until her breasts flattened against his chest. "I like this better." Tangling his fingers in her hair, he outlined her lips with the tip of his tongue. "And this."

He kissed her deeply, hungrily, outlining her lips again before darting his tongue into her mouth. Teanna sucked it farther inside, nipped it with her teeth. James drew in

a sharp breath through his nose. The next instant, Teanna found herself on her back with him lying between her legs.

"I promised myself I'd make love with you." He kissed her mouth, her jaw, beneath her ear. "I didn't want this to be a fast fuck." His mouth covered hers in a kiss that stole Teanna's ability to think. "You aren't making it easy for me to keep my promise."

"Good," she managed to say once she recovered her voice. "We have all night to make love." She pulled his bottom lip between her teeth, soothed the bite with her tongue. "Fuck me, James."

He rose to his feet and shucked his briefs. Teanna caught herself before she gasped at the sight of him. Amazing wasn't a strong enough word to describe his body.

Grasping the elastic band at her hips, he tugged the thong down her legs. He stared at her pussy a moment before parting the feminine lips with his thumbs. Teanna opened her legs wider to give him more room.

"You surprised me," he said in a low voice.

"How?"

"I didn't picture you with a shaved pussy."

His comment surprised her. "You pictured me?"

"I've fantasized about you a lot." He looked back into her eyes. "Ever since I first saw you."

She'd fantasized about him too, practically all day. She glided her fingertips across her smooth mound. "You thought about my body?"

His teeth flashed in a wicked grin. "Oh yeah." He slid his thumb through her cream and spread it over her clit. "You're beautiful here. Pink. Wet. Swollen." He leaned forward and swiped his tongue across her clit. "Delicious."

He licked her again, up and down her entire labia. As hot as she felt, Teanna knew it wouldn't take long for her to come again. The next time she had an orgasm, she wanted James inside her.

She slipped her hands beneath his jaw and lifted his mouth away from her. "Fuck me. Now."

He flashed her that wicked grin again. "I can't argue with a lady."

James picked up his pants long enough to remove a condom packet from the pocket. Teanna moved lengthwise on the bed, pushing throw pillows out of the way to make room for him. He moved between her legs, slid his hands beneath her ass and plunged inside her.

His moan echoed her own. Teanna wrapped her legs around James' waist, her arms around his shoulders. She kissed him as he began to pump. Every shift of his hips bumped her clit.

He bit the pulse in her neck. "Do you want to be on top?"

"Not...now. Just keep...mmm, *yes*...just keep moving like that. *God*, it feels good."

"*You* feel good. I can't..." He drove into her faster. "I need more of you."

Teanna placed her feet on the bed and met each thrust. A low growl came from James' throat.

"That's the way." He lifted her ass higher, angled his hips to drive deeper. "I want to feel your pussy squeeze my cock when you come."

Teanna wanted the same thing. Desire curled low in her belly. Perspiration dotted her skin. The tingling started in her toes, but stopped there instead of whooshing through her body. She needed something more, something to push her over the edge...

One finger caressed her anus. She drew in a sharp breath at the intense pleasure. James pushed his fingertip inside her. The juices seeping from her channel made his passage easy. "Okay?"

"Yes."

"More?"

"Yesssss."

He pushed his finger all the way inside her ass. The tingling started in her toes again. This time it traveled up her legs, into her chest and exploded deep inside her pussy. Teanna bit her bottom lip and arched her back as the orgasm consumed her.

His body tensed in her arms. "Oh yeah. Oh *yeah!* Fuck!"

She could feel his cock pulsing inside her. Sweat pooled in the small of his back, broke out on his forehead. Teanna pushed his damp hair back from his face and held him close until his body stilled.

James managed to lift himself to his elbows so Teanna could breathe, but that was all he could move. His orgasm had drained every bit of strength from his body.

He looked down into her heavy-lidded eyes, saw the satisfied smile curving her lips.

"Hey," he whispered.

"Hey back."

"You okay?"

"I'm much better than okay."

"That's for sure." He kissed her lips once, twice. "I knew you'd be hot, but I didn't know you'd be explosive."

She lowered her gaze a moment before looking in his eyes again. "I'm not, normally. I guess I had the right partner this time."

James didn't like thinking Teanna had been with guys who hadn't taken the time to satisfy her. "That sounds like true confessions time."

She laughed softly. "Oh no. I refuse to bore you."

"You could never bore me, Teanna."

"Talking about other men when I'm in bed with you would be extremely tasteless."

"Want me to tell you about other women?"

"No!"

James grinned. He liked seeing the fire in her eyes when he teased her. "I agree. That would be tasteless." He dropped a quick kiss on her lips. "Be right back. Don't cover up this gorgeous body."

He made a detour to the bathroom before heading for the living room. A quick glance at the CD player showed him the CD was almost over. James set it to repeat, then picked up their brandies and returned to the bedroom.

Teanna lay where he'd left her. He paused in the doorway, drinking in the sight of her. Her eyes were closed. One leg was bent at the knee, letting him see her creamy pussy. Her arms lay above her head. Her nipples stood up, as if begging to be sucked.

He'd hadn't played nearly enough with those gorgeous breasts. He planned to remedy that right now.

She opened her eyes and watched him approach the bed. Despite the strength-zapping orgasm he'd experienced a short time ago, his cock responded to the desire in her eyes. It filled with every step he took until it was half hard again.

Teanna rose up on one elbow and openly stared at his shaft. "You recuperate quickly."

Quicker than usual with Teanna. Something about her drove his desire higher than he had ever experienced.

He crawled onto the bed on his knees and held out one of the sniffers to her. Instead of taking it, she wrapped her hand around his cock. It grew completely hard in seconds.

James hissed. "Damn."

Her hand was so soft, her touch light yet knowledgeable. She slid her hand from the head to his balls and back up again, then repeated the process. A drop of pre-cum formed at the slit. She swiped it off with her tongue.

"You smell like sex," she whispered.

The crystal sniffers would be nothing but chips in his clenched hands if he didn't set them down. He managed to find the nightstand without looking away from

Teanna's mouth on him. She engulfed the head, slowly moved down the length until she reached the base. James leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Her warm mouth moved up to the crown again, slid down the length. This wasn't what he'd planned. Teanna's pleasure was the important thing, not his.

But God, her mouth felt good!

"You taste like sex too." She gave the slit another lick. "How would you taste mixed with brandy?"

She dipped her finger into one of the snifters and spread the drop over the head of his cock. Another dip, another drop. After coating the crown liberally with brandy, she took it in her mouth again and licked off all the liquor.

Stars flashed behind his eyes. The pleasure of her touch pushed him closer and closer to orgasm. James couldn't allow that to happen, not until Teanna came again.

He tilted up her face until their lips almost touched. He swept his tongue across her lips and they parted for him. As soon as the tip of her tongue met his, he kissed her. Soft at first, he slowly deepened it, lips and tongue mating with hers. He swept one hand down her back and beneath her ass, pulling her to her knees. He clasped her head with his other hand, holding it still so he could ravish her mouth. She returned kiss for kiss, one hand tight against his mid back, the other gripping his cock.

With his lips still pressed to hers, he lowered her back to the bed. He linked her hands with both of his and pulled them above her head.

"I want you to come again." He kissed her lips. "And again." Her jaw. "And again." Her throat. "And again."

He latched onto a hard nipple and suckled. Teanna bowed her back and writhed beneath him. She tried to move her hands, but he held them firmly.

"Let me touch you."

He ignored her plea and sucked harder. After giving her nipple several moments of attention, he switched to the other one. She moaned loud and long. Squirming on the bed, she tried to get loose from his hands again.

“James! Let me touch you.”

“Not yet.” He moved her wrists to one hand and cupped her mound with the other. One fingertip followed the line of cream oozing from her channel down to her anus. “You’re so wet. I love that.” He raised his finger to his mouth and licked off her juices, then went back for more. Pushing his finger far inside her, he gathered up more of her essence and licked it off his finger.

The third time he coated his finger with her cream, he spread it over her nipple. James licked it off as he caressed her clit. He loosened his hold on Teanna’s wrists. She tunneled her fingers into his hair and held his head at her breast.

“Harder. Suck harder.”

He did as she ordered and was rewarded with a keening moan before her body bucked beneath his. He pushed two fingers inside her pussy and felt the walls clamp around them.

Now that he knew she’d come, he listened to his hormones that were screaming for attention. He licked each nipple and kissed her fiercely before climbing off the bed for his pants. His cock once again sheathed, he grabbed Teanna’s ankles and tugged her to the edge of the bed. Hooking the back of her knees over his elbows, he entered her.

James kept his thrusts slow and steady, trying to build up her desire once more. He watched her breasts jiggle every time he pumped. So round, so full. He couldn’t resist caressing them again. Letting her legs fall to the bed, he leaned forward and cradled both mounds. Her nipples pebbled in his palms.

“I can’t get enough of touching these.”

“Good.” Her voice sounded raspy, breathless. “I like you touching them.”

He squeezed her breasts, pumped his hips faster. Teanna propped her feet on the bed and met each thrust with a circle of her pelvis. She gasped and froze. Her eyes drifted shut.

"Did I hit the right spot?" James asked.

"Yesssss."

He placed one knee on the bed and lifted her hips so he could drive deeper. Teanna ran her hands over her breasts, plucked at the nipples. James' balls tightened as he watched her play with the hard peaks. He moved one hand beneath her ass and raised her another inch, needing to get as far inside her as possible.

Sweat dripped down his face. His lungs burned from breathing so hard. His balls drew up closer to his body, a sign of his approaching climax.

"James!"

She dug her fingernails into his arm. James didn't let the discomfort stop his thrusts. His orgasm swept through his body and grabbed his cock mere seconds after Teanna came.

His legs were so weak, he could barely crawl back on the bed to lie beside her. He fell on his stomach, one arm around Teanna's waist. He'd almost fallen asleep when he remembered he had to dispose of the condom. He pushed himself up on one shaky elbow.

"Damn, woman. You're trying to kill me."

Her satisfied smile made him think of a cat who'd just devoured a saucer full of rich cream. She stretched her arms over her head and arched her back. "It was wonderful."

Her pouting nipple begged to be touched. James circled it with a fingertip. "Don't think you can get any more out of me by showing off your breasts."

"Only two orgasms and you're done? Hmmp!"

Oh, the little vixen was in trouble now. "Done? I'll show you done."

He tickled her stomach. Teanna curled up in a ball to get away from him, but James wouldn't quit. He tickled her until she laughed so hard, tears filled her eyes.

"I'm sorry!" she managed to gasp between bursts of laughter.

"That's better."

She returned to her back, looking at him with an impish grin on her lips. "I couldn't resist."

"Never go for a man's ego. It's very fragile."

"Yeah, right."

James grinned, then kissed her. "I'll be back. Do you want me to turn off the music?"

"No, leave it on. I like it."

He returned to the bedroom to find Teanna lying in bed. She had the covers pulled up to her waist, leaving her breasts bare. He stopped by the side of the bed, unwilling to climb in beside her until he knew for sure she wanted him to stay.

"I want to spend the night with you, unless you'd rather I go."

She shook her head and pulled back the covers on his side of the bed. "Stay with me."

James turned off the lamp, then climbed into bed beside Teanna and pulled her into his arms. She laid her head on his shoulder with a soft sigh. "Good night."

He kissed her forehead. "Good night."

Chapter Eight

Teanna woke to low music filling the air. James must have set the player to repeat and the CD had played all night.

She smiled. She liked waking up to music, and with James beside her.

Sometime during the night, the covers had slipped to the end of the bed. He lay with his head on her tummy, his hand resting on her hip. She could feel his warm breath every time he exhaled. His breathing was easy and deep, proof that he still slept soundly.

She carefully turned her head to avoid disturbing him and looked at the digital clock. 7:12. Normally she'd be in the shower and getting ready for work. Hopeful that her date with James would end exactly as it had, she'd called Dona Gibbons yesterday afternoon and asked her to fill in this morning. Dona worked part-time at the store and told Teanna she'd be happy to cover her shift this morning. That meant Teanna and James could shower together before she cooked breakfast for him.

Teanna lightly ran her fingers through his hair, over and over. The strands curled around her fingers. His hair was long enough to cover his ears and collar in back. She'd always liked longer hair on men, if they took care of it. James' was shiny and clean and almost as soft as hers.

He inhaled deeply and exhaled sharply. Teanna waited, still caressing his hair, to see if he'd awaken. He stirred and rubbed his stubbly chin on her belly. She sucked in her stomach at the ticklish sensation.

James raised his head and opened his eyes halfway. A sleepy smile curled his lips. "Morning."

"Good morning."

He dropped a kiss on her navel, then an inch below it. He continued to drop kisses as he traveled down her abdomen. When he reached her mound, he pushed her legs apart and moved between them.

"Mmm, breakfast."

Teanna's laugh soon turned into a moan when James licked her clit. He gently swiped his tongue across it again, licked up and down her labia. His movements were easy, unhurried, lapping at her flesh as if nothing was more important than tasting her.

"James," she whispered.

He lifted his gaze to hers, but continued to lick her in that same slow way...over her clit, down her slit, across her anus, back up to her clit. Teanna hooked her hands behind her knees and drew her legs to her chest, giving him more room. His long growl vibrated against her sensitive flesh.

Her eyelids slid closed and her lips parted. Her heart beat faster. She began to pant. Each stroke of his tongue felt better than the last one.

She gasped and arched her back when he darted his tongue into her ass.

No longer gentle, James clutched her buttocks and fucked her ass with his tongue. Teanna pulled her legs closer to her chest, tugging her legs as far apart as she could. He growled again and moved his tongue faster, drove deeper.

Teanna's legs trembled. The orgasm curled her toes, then skittered up her legs and enveloped her body. She could feel the contractions inside her pussy as the walls pulsed.

Her strength gone, she released her legs and let them fall to the bed. She was still trying to catch her breath when James straddled her body on his hands and knees. A pained expression crossed his face.

"Please tell me you have condoms."

"Second drawer of the nightstand."

"I love a modern woman."

James quickly located the condom and rolled it onto his cock. Lying on his back, he tugged Teanna on top of him. He held his rod straight up. "Ride me."

She impaled herself. "Jesus," he muttered. Her channel was so tight, so creamy. She took him perfectly, as if their bodies were created for each other.

He cradled her breasts when she began to move. He plucked at her hard nipples, kneaded her firm flesh. He could spend the rest of the day playing with her breasts and never get tired.

The scent of her arousal grew stronger the longer they fucked. James licked his lips, savoring the taste of her pussy juices that clung to them. He kneaded Teanna's breasts more firmly, squeezed her nipples harder. Placing his feet flat on the bed, he thrust up into her as fast as he could.

His balls drew up tight to his body, his cock grew longer and thicker. He released one breast and placed his hand low on her belly so he could stroke her clit with his thumb. He drew circles over it, rubbed it back and forth. Her breath hitched. She closed her eyes and grabbed the breast he'd released, twisting and pulling the nipple. James copied her movement on the breast still cradled in his palm, wanting to give her as much pleasure as possible.

"James! Yes! Oh yes!"

The walls of her pussy milked his cock. He groaned as his orgasm raced up and down his spine. Holding tightly to her waist, James arched his hips and tried to push his balls inside her along with his pulsing shaft.

He collapsed on the bed, breathing as if he'd just run a marathon. Teanna lay on top of him, her breathing as unsteady as his. He kissed the top of her head, slid his hands up and down her damp back. "God, that was amazing."

"And then some." She crossed her arms over his chest and rested her chin on them. He knew by the devilish look in her eyes that she was about to tease him. "You only had two condoms with you?"

"I haven't been with anyone in months. I was lucky to find those two in my suitcase."

"Lanville is small, but we do have stores."

"I figured I could get them at your store, but I didn't want to buy them there and maybe embarrass you."

"You're very sweet. Next time, check out the convenience stores."

"Good idea. I didn't think about that." He hooked his fingers together in the small of her back. "Does your suggestion mean I'm going to need more condoms?"

"Well." She circled his lips with one fingertip. "I wouldn't complain about a repeat."

Neither would James. He hoped to make love with Teanna every day for the rest of his life.

One day and night with her, and he was already thinking of forever.

He cradled her face and kissed her tenderly. His heart seemed to swell until he swore it filled his entire chest. Women had flitted in and out of his life for years. He'd never felt this way about anyone.

He was falling in love with her.

He kissed her again, even more tenderly. "What do you think about showering together?"

She smiled. "I think that's a wonderful idea."

* * * * *

Teanna took eggs and cheese from the refrigerator and pushed the door shut with her hip. She glanced at James, who sat on the counter that separated the kitchen from the breakfast nook. His lips twitched with laughter.

"What's funny?"

"Not funny. Cute. You have very talented hips."

She set her items on the counter by the sink, then stepped in front of him. He wore only his pants. She laid her hands on his chest, her fingers playing with the soft web of hair. "I have lots of talented things."

"You certainly do." He cradled the back of her neck and lowered his head for a kiss. "I'm looking forward to learning more of your talents."

A loud gurgle came from James' stomach. Teanna giggled. "Sounds like I need to show you my cooking talent first."

"I worked up quite an appetite last night. And this morning."

Teanna's knees grew weak at the thought of what they'd done after their shower. Their bodies were still damp when James had scooped her up in his arms and carried her back to bed. She didn't think there was a spot on her body he hadn't licked before he fucked her into a glorious climax.

She planned to return the favor later today.

The last burble from the coffeemaker signaled the pot had finished brewing. Teanna took two mugs from the cabinet and filled them with the hot liquid. "Do you take anything in your coffee?"

"Nah. Real men drink it black."

She handed him one of the mugs. "Don't let my uncle hear you say that. He drinks his with cream and sugar."

"Oops." James sipped his coffee and smiled. "Very good. You definitely know how to make coffee."

"One of my many talents."

He winked at her and took another sip. A dozen butterflies took flight in her stomach. Men had spent the night with her. She'd made breakfast for them. But this... Everything with James seemed bigger, more special.

She didn't know how long he'd be in Lanville, but he'd leave soon. If she didn't guard her heart, he'd take it with him.

All traces of teasing disappeared from his face. "What's wrong?"

She'd never been good at hiding her feelings. He could read her already. "Nothing." She quickly turned away from him and picked up her mug. She had it halfway to her mouth when James took it away from her.

"Hey, what is it? You can tell me."

She almost admitted her growing feelings, but knew that would be incredibly stupid. "I'm hungry. I need to start breakfast."

He pulled her into his arms. "You need to tell me what's on your mind."

"I just..." She stopped, unsure what to say. She touched his chest again. His heart beat steadily beneath her palm. "I don't want to fall in love with you, James. I don't want my heart broken when you leave Lanville."

He brushed his thumb across her cheek, a tender gesture that brought a lump to her throat. "I'm not in any hurry to leave."

"But you will. There's nothing for you here."

"You're here."

Hope bloomed inside her. As quickly as it blossomed, Teanna tamped it back down. "You'll go back to Los Angeles soon."

"Teanna, I have nothing in L.A. I left that life behind. There's no reason why I can't settle somewhere else." He brushed his thumb over her cheek again. "I want to stay in Lanville a while, get to know you better. Would that be all right with you?"

The butterflies took flight again. "That would be very all right with me."

James pressed his lips to hers, pouring all the feelings growing inside him into the kiss. He'd never been in love, but had no doubt of what was rapidly growing in his heart.

He slid his hands down Teanna's back to her buttocks and pulled her closer to him.

"Excuse me."

James stopped the kiss at the sound of a man's voice. He quickly pushed Teanna behind him to protect her before he turned to face the man in the kitchen. Tall, lean, around fifty years old, with salt-and-pepper hair and the same brown eyes that Teanna possessed. James' gaze passed over him, noting he wore a plain white T-shirt and sweat pants.

He didn't look like a rapist or murderer.

A ball of dread formed in his stomach. *Please, God, don't let this be Uncle Lloyd.*

"Uncle Lloyd," Teanna said from behind James. "When did you get home?"

James closed his eyes. *Shit. Great first impression, Kendall. Teanna's uncle caught you with your hands on her ass.* He opened them again and dared another look at Teanna's uncle. Lloyd's eyes twinkled with laughter.

"Late last night. I smelled coffee and thought I'd take a cup to Ruth."

"I thought y'all were staying in Corpus until Sunday."

"Rain moved in. It was forecast to rain for the entire weekend. We'll go back when the weather is more cooperative." He switched his attention to James. "I'm Teanna's uncle. And you are...?"

James cleared his throat. "James Parker." He wiped his hand on the side of his pants before he offered it to Lloyd. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

Lloyd took his hand in a firm grip. Humor still shone in Lloyd's eyes. "I'm sure you're thinking my timing could've been better."

Warmth crept up James' neck into his face. It had been years since he'd blushed.

"I was about to fix cheese omelets and fried potatoes for us," Teanna said to her uncle. "Will you and Aunt Ruth join us for breakfast?"

"No thanks, honey. I'll get the coffee and leave you and James alone. Ruth and I will have breakfast later."

James stepped aside to let Lloyd get to the coffee pot. He wasn't sure if he should speak to the man again or not. He suddenly wished he'd put on his shirt.

He looked at Teanna. She set potatoes on the counter and picked up a knife, apparently not the least embarrassed that her uncle had caught them in a passionate embrace.

Lloyd picked up the two mugs and kissed Teanna on the cheek. "You off this morning?"

Teanna nodded. "Dona's covering for me. I'll go in this afternoon."

"Ruth and I will go in for you." He glanced at James. "I'm sure you can find something better to do than work."

She smiled and gave her uncle a quick hug. "Thank you."

Lloyd winked at James, then left the kitchen.

James watched Lloyd until he was out of sight before he looked back at Teanna. She motioned for him to come closer. He did, and she kissed him.

"You're cute when you blush."

"Shit."

Teanna laughed while James scowled. His scowl soon faded and he chuckled along with her. "I doubt if I made a very good first impression on your uncle."

"My aunt and uncle are wonderful people. They never interfere with my life. I live here, but come and go as I please."

"You've had other men spend the night with you?"

"Yes." She laid down the potato she'd peeled and picked up another one. "Surely that doesn't surprise you."

Surprise him? No. Eat him up with jealousy? Yes. Which was stupid. Teanna was a beautiful, sexy, single woman. She had the right to fuck a different man every night if she chose. He'd certainly fucked more than his share of women in his lifetime.

He walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "After what we shared last night and this morning, I'm feeling...possessive."

She smiled at him over her shoulder. "I like that."

Resting his chin on her shoulder, he watched her peel the second potato. "So you have the whole day off. What do we do with it?"

"We could drive around and I'll show you the area."

"Sounds good." He nuzzled beneath her hair and nipped her earlobe. "Maybe I'll take you to my cabin and ravish you."

She looked at him again, mischief dancing in her eyes. "I'm counting on it."

Chapter Nine

Teanna took off her reading glasses and pressed her fingertips against her eyes. Figures and words were one big jumble today. Lack of sleep would do that to a person. But Teanna would gladly give up a few hours of sleep in exchange for James' lovemaking.

She smiled at the memory of waking up in his arms at his cabin this morning. They'd spent the entire day driving on the back roads of the county so she could show James the area. That evening, he took her to Dallas for dinner. When their waiter had inquired if they wanted dessert, James had said yes, but to go. The wicked look in his eyes proved he had other plans for their dessert than simply eating it.

He'd dabbed cheesecake with caramel sauce on her body and licked it off. Not to be outdone, Teanna had repeated the same path on James' body until he'd lost control and flipped her to her back. He'd taken her again and again, until she lay exhausted on the bed, unable to move.

A delicious shiver raced through her body. James certainly had stamina. His cock grew hard again with the slightest bit of encouragement from her.

She loved to encourage him.

The rumble of thunder in the distance sent goose bumps across her skin. Strong thunderstorms were predicted this afternoon. A cold front would barrel down from the north later today, days earlier than the forecasters predicted at the first of the week. While the end of the early taste of summer would be welcome, Teanna dreaded the approaching storms. Thunderstorms always brought back bad memories.

A soft knock on her open door jerked her from her memories. She looked up as her Uncle Lloyd entered. She smiled at him. "Good morning."

"Good morning." He sat in the chair beside her desk. "Everything okay?"

"Great. I'm almost caught up from being gone yesterday."

"I'm not worried about the paperwork. I know you'll take care of everything." He folded his hands over his flat stomach. "Tell me about James."

Teanna had expected the request. While her aunt and uncle didn't interfere with her life, she knew they loved her and only wanted the best for her. That included checking out the men she dated. "What do you want to know?"

"Whatever you'll tell me."

She swiveled her chair to face her uncle. "He's from Los Angeles. He quit his job there and is driving cross country. He arrived in town Wednesday. I met him when he came into the store for a drink."

Uncle Lloyd said nothing for a moment. "That's it?" he asked, surprise in his voice.

"Pretty much."

"What does he do for a living?"

"I don't know. He hasn't told me."

"Must have paid well for him to afford to quit and take off cross country."

"Maybe, or maybe he comes from money."

"But you don't know for sure?"

Teanna shook her head.

"Does he know about your inheritance?"

"I don't see how he could. I didn't tell him."

"Con men have a way of finding out things."

Teanna drew up straighter in her chair and frowned at her uncle. She would never believe James would deliberately lie to her. "James is *not* a con man."

"How do you know that?"

"I just do."

Uncle Lloyd rubbed his nose. "How long will he be in Lanville?"

"I don't know."

Teanna could tell by the way her uncle's eyebrows drew together that he didn't like her answers. "You're a grown woman, Teanna, and I won't tell you how to run your life, but don't you think you should've learned more about him before inviting him to spend the night?"

Teanna looked down at her clasped hands in her lap. She considered herself lucky that she could talk to her aunt and uncle about anything. They'd never shied away from answering her questions, even about the most personal items. She wouldn't hide anything from Lloyd now.

"It felt like all the air was squeezed out of my lungs when I saw him. I've never felt that way about a man. He invited me out to dinner. When I accepted his invitation, I knew the evening wouldn't end with dinner. I wanted to be with him from the first moment I saw him."

Uncle Lloyd sat silently for several seconds, his fingers once more entwined over his stomach. He moved his thumbs in circles over and over, a mannerism that Teanna knew meant he was examining the situation in his head before he spoke again.

"I was fourteen the first time I saw Ruth. I fell in love with her on the spot. I think, when it's right, you know without a doubt. If James is the man you're meant to be with, I won't stand in your way."

A lump formed in Teanna's throat. Her uncle was such a special man. "Thank you."

"That doesn't mean I don't reserve the right to...talk to him."

Teanna pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. Uncle Lloyd's "talks" usually ended up comparing fish stories, after he'd subtly drilled her current beau. "I understand."

She jumped at an even louder rumble of thunder and whipped her head toward the window. Dark clouds were quickly filling the sky.

"You want to go home, honey?" Uncle Lloyd asked, concern evident in his voice and his eyes.

"No. I'm fine." She looked back at her uncle and gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "I have a little more to post, then I'll make those deliveries for you."

"I can make the deliveries later —"

"You're going to the nursing home this afternoon. You don't have time to do both."

"That's true." He sighed heavily. "The help wanted ad comes out in next week's paper?"

Teanna nodded. "I put in both display and classified ads. I tried to get them in this week's paper, but I was past the deadline."

"Ever since Billy started back to school, it's been crazy around here. I really need someone to help out, especially with the deliveries."

"We'll get someone. For now, I can do it. I'm not going to let a little rain stop me."

"We're due more than a little rain, Teanna. It could get messy."

She would not give in to her weakness, no matter how much she'd rather hide beneath her bed. "I won't melt. I'll be fine."

Once Uncle Lloyd left the room, Teanna thought about what he'd said. She knew little about James' background. They'd talked a lot last night, but mostly about his travels. It was fascinating to hear about some of the things he'd seen while driving cross country.

Still, it would be nice to talk about his past, his family, what he did for a living...all those things a couple discussed when they were getting to know each other.

Tonight, after supper with her aunt and uncle, she'd ask him about his family. That would be a start to getting to know James better.

* * * * *

James grabbed the door of Caldwell Apothecary before the wind could snatch it from his hands. It had been calm this morning when he said goodbye to Teanna. After she'd left his cabin, he'd driven back to the river that ran through the county. He'd found a spot that looked great for fishing during his outing with Teanna yesterday.

The sudden appearance of the wind and dark clouds made him give up his fishing long before he wanted to. Since Mother Nature changed his plans, he decided to take Teanna to lunch. She'd invited him to her home tonight to have dinner with her aunt and uncle. He'd accepted her invitation, but didn't want to wait that long to see her.

Plus, he had a sinking feeling in his stomach that something was wrong. He needed to see her, to be sure she was all right.

Several customers were in the store. A twenty-something brunette rang up purchases while a woman who appeared to be in her early sixties helped a couple in the greeting card section. A stunning blonde stood behind the soda fountain. James did a double take when he saw her. Her hair was much shorter than Teanna's and she stood a couple of inches taller. Her eyes were blue instead of brown. Other than those differences, he could be looking at Teanna in twenty years.

James straightened his shoulders. He wanted to make a good first impression on Teanna's aunt...a better one than he'd made on her uncle.

She smiled at him as he approached the fountain. "You have to be James."

His steps faltered before he caught himself. Teanna must have described him to her aunt for Ruth to recognize him on sight. "Yes, ma'am."

Her smile widened and she held out her hand to him. "I'm Ruth Caldwell."

"I know." He took her hand and shook it. It was as soft as Teanna's, with the same slim fingers. "I mean, Teanna looks just like you."

"Except for the eyes. She inherited the Caldwell brown eyes. Teanna's mother was my twin sister. Her father and Lloyd were brothers."

"Wow. Two sisters married two brothers? Isn't that unusual?"

"Not as unusual as you might think." She gestured toward one of the stools. "Sit down. Would you like something to drink?"

"No thank you. I came to take Teanna to lunch."

"She isn't here. She's making deliveries to our customers."

A flash of lightning lit up the dark sky, closely followed by a loud clap of thunder. Ruth bit her bottom lip as she looked outside. "She should've been back by now."

"Are you worried about her?"

"I always worry about her when there's a storm." Ruth looked back at him. "Did she tell you about her parents?"

"She said they died in a tornado when she was eight."

"Teanna has been terrified of thunderstorms ever since. She tries to be brave, but I know how scared she gets at the first sign of dark clouds."

The sinking feeling that had gripped James' stomach earlier today came back even stronger. "Did you call her cell?"

Ruth nodded. "She didn't answer, which isn't unusual when she's with a customer. We make deliveries to a lot of elderly people. They all love Teanna. She'll usually visit with them and won't interrupt their conversation to answer her cell."

It didn't surprise James to discover Teanna was considerate and caring as well as beautiful and sexy. That didn't get rid of the tightness in his stomach.

He had to find her.

"I can run a couple of errands while Teanna is finishing her deliveries. Will you ask her to call my cell when she returns? I'll come back and take her to lunch."

"Certainly. Are you still coming to supper tonight?"

He smiled, even though he had to force it. "I'm looking forward to it."

* * * * *

"Shit." James disconnected the call when he heard Teanna's voice mail. He didn't want to leave a message, he wanted to talk to her. Now. He had to know she was safe.

He had no idea where to look for her. One leisurely drive through the county wasn't nearly enough for him to know the area, even with help from the GPS in his vehicle.

James glanced at the clock on the dash to see it was almost noon. Taking a chance that Teanna went home for lunch, he made a quick U-turn and headed for her house.

The clouds grew darker, thicker, lower. He pressed the gas pedal harder and squealed around the corner of County Road 2012.

"Jesus." James slammed on the brakes. His heart shot up into his throat when he saw the funnel cloud. Less than two miles away, it hung down from the heavy clouds, tail almost touching the ground. It appeared to be on a direct course for the Caldwell house.

If Teanna had seen it, she had to be scared out of her mind.

He hit the gas pedal again and sped toward Teanna's house. He whipped his SUV around the driveway. All the breath left his lungs in relief when he saw Teanna's car parked beneath the carport.

The wind was even more fierce, whipping at his hair and clothes as he ran to her door. He glanced over his shoulder at the dark sky. The tail of the tornado rose back up into the clouds and disappeared. He didn't know if that meant the danger had passed, or if the worst was yet to come.

He opened the unlocked door to Teanna's apartment and slammed it behind him. "TEANNA! Teanna, where are you?"

He checked her bedroom first, then ran through her living room and into the kitchen. "Teanna!" He stood in the middle of the room, unsure which way to go. The muffled sound of crying drew his attention. James hurried through the kitchen and into the breakfast nook. He found Teanna huddled in a ball in the corner, her knees drawn up to her chest, her arms covering her head.

His heart swelled with sympathy. In that moment, he knew he loved her.

He dropped to his knees before her. "Hey, it's okay," he said softly. "I'm here." He tried to tug her arms away from her head, but they were stiff and unmoving. "Teanna, let me hold you."

The tension relaxed in her arms. Slowly, she raised her head. Her face was pale and tears flowed down her face. "James?"

"I'm here, sweetheart." He tenderly wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs.

"Did you see it? The tornado is coming right at us!"

"No, it isn't. We're fine."

He could tell by the terror still filling her eyes that she didn't believe him. He tightened his hold on her face. "You're safe, Teanna."

"A-are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I watched it go back up in the clouds. It's gone."

More tears flowed from her eyes. "I-I'm so scared!"

"I know."

"Hold me." She lowered her legs to the floor. "Pl-please hold me."

She came up on her knees and wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her body against his. James spread his legs and held her as close as he could. A loud clap of thunder made her jump. He tightened his arms around her. "I've got you."

"Don't let go."

"I won't." He dropped a tender kiss on the side of her neck. "Nothing is going to happen to you. Not as long as I'm here. I promise."

* * * * *

All through supper, Teanna had expected Uncle Lloyd to have his "talk" with James. The four of them had discussed today's storm, and how lucky Lanville had been

to avoid any serious damage. The conversation then turned to local people, upcoming events, the best fishing spots. Aunt Ruth had looked at Teanna with a teasing grin on her lips when James brought up fishing. There was no quicker way to win over Uncle Lloyd than to talk about his favorite sport.

Even though she'd expected her Uncle Lloyd's interrogation, it surprised her when he started it during dessert.

"Teanna told me you're from Los Angeles."

James swallowed his bite of peach cobbler. His eyes showed that deer-in-the-headlights shock, as if he never expected that comment. "Yes, sir."

"What kind of job did you have?"

Teanna watched James lay down his spoon and wipe his hands with his napkin. She could feel his discomfort from across the table. He obviously had a problem with talking about his past.

He laid his napkin on the table and looked at Uncle Lloyd. "I worked in the entertainment business."

"Movies? TV?"

"Music."

Uncle Lloyd leaned back in his chair. "Let me guess. It wasn't for a country band."

James chuckled. "No, sir. Rock."

"Why did you quit?"

"Because I didn't want that kind of life anymore." He glanced at Teanna before looking back at Uncle Lloyd. "I did some things I'm not proud of and don't want to do again. I thought the best way to avoid temptation was to get away from that life totally. I'd managed to put away some money, enough to get by until I decide what I want to do with the rest of my life."

"Savings won't last unless you replenish it."

"Yes, sir, but I'm okay for a while."

Uncle Lloyd entwined his fingers on his stomach. "Are you interested in a job?"

James blinked. "A job?"

"My assistant, Billy Bradley, has gone back to pharmacy school for his degree. He made all the deliveries for me. I do them when I can, but I'm usually needed to fill the prescriptions. That's why Teanna took over and made the deliveries today."

James gazed at Teanna. She remembered how he'd found her this afternoon, shaking and scared out of her mind. She didn't know how long he'd stayed on the floor and held her. When she'd finally pulled back from him, he'd kissed her with a tenderness that brought tears to her eyes.

She could tell by his eyes that he, too, remembered their time together. He'd insisted she call Ruth to let her aunt know she was fine before he took her hand and led her to her bedroom. Fully clothed, he'd lain on the bed with her and held her while she fell asleep. He was still holding her when she awoke. Her kiss of gratitude turned into slow, sweet lovemaking.

He shifted his attention back to Uncle Lloyd. "Your offer is very generous."

"You haven't heard the salary yet," he said, his eyes twinkling with humor.

James chuckled. "I'm sure it would be fine, whatever it is. But I don't know the area well enough to make deliveries."

"You'll learn it, in time. That is, if you plan to stay around a while."

He looked directly into Teanna's eyes. The heat she saw sent butterflies zinging through her stomach. "I plan to stay for a long time."

* * * * *

James carried the stack of plates from the dining room to the kitchen. Teanna had volunteered them to do the dishes while her aunt and uncle left to visit friends. He didn't mind helping her, especially when it left them alone in the house.

"Is that everything?" she asked while placing a glass in the dishwasher.

"That's it. Anything else you want me to do?"

She gave him a devilish smile. "Not until the dishes are done."

He laughed when she bobbled her eyebrows. Tugging her closer, he wrapped his arms around her waist. "Why, Ms. Caldwell, that sounds like a proposition."

"We do have the whole house to ourselves."

"When will your aunt and uncle be home?"

"Not until really late."

"Really late is really good."

He kissed her, slowly, deeply, then held her close so their bodies touched from chests to knees. All the blood in his body rushed to his cock at the feel of her soft breasts against his chest. Dropping one hand to her ass, he pulled her even closer and kissed her again.

He nipped the spot beneath her ear that he'd learned was so sensitive. "I think we should continue this in your bedroom."

"I think we should finish the dishes first."

James lifted his head and sighed heavily. "Do you have to be so practical?"

"Apparently one of us has to be."

"*You* started this with that eyebrows thing."

Her grin turned impish. "Yes, I did."

"You realize I'll make you pay for this."

"I'm looking forward to it."

Chuckling, James squeezed her cheek before he released her. "Work fast."

He pulled himself up on the counter and watched her load the plates into the dishwasher. He had to fight himself to keep the silly grin off his face. When he left the city limits of Los Angeles two months ago, he'd never imagined he'd find a new life in Lanville, Texas. He knew he'd find Teanna. The main purpose of his trip to Texas was to find and bed her. One look at her in Caldwell Apothecary and he'd known she would be so much more to him than a fast fuck.

Teanna's aunt and uncle liked him. Lloyd had invited him to go fishing Sunday morning. He looked forward to spending time with the man who already treated him like he belonged in Lanville.

Life couldn't get any better.

"Which group did you work for?" Teanna asked as she filled the sink with hot water.

Her question surprised him, so much that he couldn't think of anything to say. She looked at him, a curious expression on her face. She obviously expected him to answer her question.

"Group?"

"You said you worked for a rock group. Which one?"

He scrambled for a convincing lie and couldn't come up with one. He said the first thing he could think of to stall. "You listen to classical."

"That doesn't mean I don't recognize the names of other musicians. What Texan hasn't heard of Willie Nelson? Becca always has rock music blaring at her place. I know a lot of the songs from groups like The Rolling Stones and The P.J. Kendall Band."

He flinched at the mention of his band. He couldn't help it. He hoped Teanna didn't notice it.

His hope quickly died when her eyes widened. "Did you work for The Stones?"

James didn't want to lie to Teanna, but he couldn't tell her the whole truth. He carefully chose his next words. "I worked for Kendall's band."

She smiled, apparently pleased with his answer. "Becca will have a fit. That's her favorite band. She has all their CDs, ticket stubs from concerts, magazine articles. She even has a huge poster of P.J. Kendall on her bedroom wall."

James knew exactly which poster Becca had. The almost life-size picture had been taken outside on a breezy day. The wind tousled his hair and blew open his unbuttoned shirt. His faded jeans rode low on his hips, the top button unfastened. He had his

thumbs hooked through the belt loops, which pulled the jeans even lower. One knee was bent, his foot braced on the tree behind him. The position emphasized the bulge behind his fly...a bulge made even more prominent by him stroking his cock moments before the photographer snapped the picture. The poster had earned him almost as much money as one of his CDs.

"That poster is very sexy."

Teanna's eyes twinkled with humor while James' stomach tumbled. "Yeah."

"You've seen it?"

"Yeah, I've seen it."

"Oh, of course you have since you worked for him." She placed a casserole dish in the soapy water. "What did you do?"

"Just...stuff."

He couldn't say any more for fear of giving himself away. He slid off the counter. "I'd better get out of here before your aunt and uncle come home."

Teanna faced him, her expression now baffled. "You're leaving?"

He didn't doubt her confusion. He'd done a complete one-eighty from a few minutes ago when he'd propositioned her. "Yeah." He dropped a quick kiss on her lips. "I'll call you in the morning."

"Wait." She grabbed his arm with a soapy hand. "I thought you'd spend the night."

"I don't think that's a good idea." He kissed her again, longer this time. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"James!"

He hurried out the back door before Teanna could stop him again.

Once out of the Caldwells' driveway, James hit the steering wheel with his fist. *You're an idiot, Kendall, to think Teanna wouldn't be curious about your past.*

Of course she wanted to know about him, the same way he wanted to know about her. People in relationships talked to each other. James had talked a lot with Teanna, yet

he'd been careful to always turn the conversation back to her and her interests to keep the focus off him.

That dodge wouldn't last forever. The longer he put off talking about himself, the more curious she would be.

He could give her information in little dribbles, enough to satisfy her. He could tell her about his childhood. Up until he formed the band, he'd been a regular teenager with all of a regular teenager's problems. He'd had parents he adored, a brother he fought with almost daily just like normal siblings. There'd be no harm in telling Teanna about his life before The P.J. Kendall Band hit it big. He could even tell her the truth so he wouldn't get any lies mixed up in his head.

That would work. He'd *make* it work. Now that he'd found a new life and a woman he wanted to be with, he wouldn't do anything to lose either one.

Chapter Ten

April 3

Teanna withdrew the small card from the envelope and read it for the fourth time in the last hour.

You changed my life one month ago. Please join me for dinner tonight and a special weekend.

James

She'd found the note on her desk this morning. A call to James' cell had resulted in leaving a message on his voice mail. He hadn't called her back yet.

Teanna kept a large calendar on her office wall of the employees' schedule. Her name was written on the calendar in James' handwriting showing the afternoon off. Since the store was closed on Sunday and she had Mondays off, that would give her almost three full days alone with him.

Her heart beat a little faster when she thought about what he had planned for the weekend. She knew it had to be spectacular.

Becca came in and hoisted herself up on Teanna's desk. "I thought you had the afternoon off."

"I do. Or I will whenever James gets here."

"Are you running away for the weekend?"

Teanna nodded. "I found this on my desk this morning." She handed the card to her friend.

"He's a romantic guy," Becca said after reading it.

"Very."

Teanna studied Becca's face. She'd known Becca long enough to read every emotion that crossed her face. Something obviously bothered her friend. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Becca laid the card back on Teanna's desk. "Where are you going for the weekend?"

"Becca. Spill it. What's wrong?"

She looked down at her swinging feet. "Teanna, you're my best friend. I don't want to rain on your parade."

"You can say anything to me, you know that."

Becca sighed heavily, then lifted her head and looked at Teanna again. "There's just something about James that doesn't add up." She held out a hand as if to stop Teanna's words before she uttered them. "He's a great guy and I like him. Really. I mean, I know y'all are together, but that doesn't mean I can't look at him and drool. He is a major hunk."

"Drooling is allowed."

"Good. Great."

Teanna had never seen her friend so uncomfortable. She laid a hand on Becca's knee. "Tell me what you think doesn't add up."

Another long pause while Becca studied her feet again. "Has he told you any more about his past?"

"Some. I know he has a brother and his parents died four years ago in an accident."

Becca looked back at Teanna. "What kind of accident?"

"I...don't know. He didn't tell me."

"Did he tell you about his time with the Kendall band?"

Teanna shook her head. "I've asked him several times. He always says that was a bad time in his life and he doesn't want to talk about it."

Becca wiggled her mouth back and forth. Teanna recognized that mannerism. Becca was trying to decide whether or not she should say what she wanted to.

Her friend slid off the desk and shut the office door. Becca tugged the extra chair close to Teanna's, sat down and leaned forward.

"Remember a couple of weeks ago when I brought in my camera and everyone posed for me? James wouldn't. He wasn't rude about it, just teased me and said taking pictures of him would break my camera. But he wouldn't let me take *any*, not even of y'all together."

"Becca, lots of people don't like their picture taken."

"There's more. Last week, I was behind the soda fountain counter and looked out the window to see James talking to a couple I didn't recognize. He wore sunglasses and the sun hit his hair just right to make it look golden. He looked just like P.J. Kendall."

A lump formed in the pit of Teanna's stomach. She ignored it as simply hunger pangs. "So? Remember that guy you dated last year, the one who looked so much like that retired Bills quarterback?"

"Brett Kincade."

"Yeah, him. You said people actually stopped him on the street and asked for an autograph."

"Wait, there's more. A couple of days ago, I came back from lunch early. James was unpacking boxes in the supply room. I thought he was singing along with the radio at first because I heard P.J. Kendall's voice." She shook her head. "Nope, it was just James. As soon as he saw me, he stopped singing." Becca took both Teanna's hands in hers. "Tee, I think he's P.J. Kendall."

The lump grew larger. Again, Teanna ignored it. "Becca, that's crazy! P.J. Kendall is dead."

"His body was never found."

"The authorities figured it washed out to sea. The tide was going out when his boat exploded."

"I told myself all the excuses too, Tee, but I still had this gnawing in my gut. I decided to do some research. I read every article I could find in print and on the internet. P.J. was nearsighted and had to wear glasses all the time."

"There, see? James can't be P.J. Kendall. He doesn't wear glasses."

"Does he wear contacts?"

"No."

"Maybe he had LASIK."

Teanna tugged her hands away from Becca. "You are really grasping at straws."

"I don't think I am. I didn't recognize him immediately because James looks so different without the long blond hair and beard and shaded glasses. But seeing James in those sunglasses with the sun shining on his hair convinced me I'm right. I went back to the internet and tried to find pictures of P.J. without the shaded glasses he always wore to compare his eyes with James', and to show the pictures to you. I couldn't find any. He always wore those dark glasses in photographs." Becca leaned back in her chair. "P.J. had blue eyes, Tee."

"How do you know if you didn't see a picture?"

"I read. Just because there weren't any pictures didn't mean there weren't articles describing him, right down to the size of his cock. Which, according to one fan site I visited whose owner claimed she had sex with him, is quite impressive. You told me yourself that James is hung."

Teanna decided she had to stop confiding in her friend.

"A couple of P.J.'s band members had tattoos, but he didn't," Becca said. "No birthmarks either." She patted her lips with a forefinger. "Damn it, there has to be *something* to prove I'm right."

The lump in her stomach now felt as large as a bowling ball. Still, Teanna couldn't believe Becca was right. James wasn't P.J. Kendall. He wouldn't keep something so huge from her.

"What's James' brother's name?" Becca asked.

Teanna hated telling her friend *again* that she didn't know, but she had no choice. "He didn't tell me."

"It's Rusty. Well, that's actually his nickname and what everyone calls him. His real name is Eugene. He was named after his father and grandfather. P.J.'s mother's name was Pauline."

A sharp rap on the door interrupted Becca. "Come in," Teanna called out.

James entered the office. "Hey, ladies. Am I interrupting anything?"

"Nope. Just keeping Teanna company until you got here." Becca stood and pushed her chair back in place. "You here to whisk her away?"

He grinned. "Yeah."

Becca first gave Teanna a quick hug, then James. "Y'all have a good time. See you Tuesday."

James took Teanna's hand and pulled her from her chair. "Are you ready to go?"

"Do I get a hint about where we're going?"

"Nope."

"If we're going somewhere for the weekend, I need to pack—"

"I asked Ruth to pack some things for you. All you need is your purse."

His obvious excitement rubbed off on her. The tension slowly seeped out of Teanna's body. Becca had to be wrong. James was simply James, the man she loved, not a man who had lied to the world about his death.

She removed her purse from her desk drawer. "Let's go."

* * * * *

James stood back and let Teanna enter the suite before him. He wanted to enjoy her reaction when she saw the luxurious room for the first time.

"James," she whispered. "It's beautiful."

He smiled at her wide eyes and open mouth. That reaction was exactly what he wanted. "I'm glad you like it."

She turned in a full circle before wandering to the large window. James followed her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and gazed at downtown Dallas spread out before them.

"I take care of the payroll, James. I know you don't make enough to afford a room like this."

"I told you I have a nice nest egg."

"You won't have it long if you spend it on me."

"I can't think of anything I'd rather spend my money on than you." He kissed the side of her neck. "C'mon, I'll show you the rest of the suite."

"You've been here?"

"Yeah." Taking her hand, he led her toward the bedroom. "I came up last week when you and Ruth went shopping for the day. I wanted to make sure everything would be perfect."

He opened the French doors between the living room and bedroom, and again stepped aside so Teanna could enter the room first. Her gaze passed over the king-size bed, the intimate seating area, the door that led to a private balcony. She walked past him into the bathroom. He followed close behind her. He smiled at her gasp when she saw the whirlpool bathtub that could easily hold four people, the shower area that could do the same.

"James, it's so beautiful." She faced him, her eyes shining with pleasure. "I can't believe you did this."

"This is only the beginning." He held out his hand to her. She stepped into his arms. "Dinner will be served at six-thirty. Then we have tickets for the symphony at eight. It's an evening with Tchaikovsky."

Her smile lit up her face like a child on Christmas morning. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him fiercely. "Thank you!"

James reluctantly released her when he heard the doorbell. "That's probably our luggage." He kissed the tip of her nose. "We have three hours before dinner. How about if we try out that big bathtub?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea."

James hurried back to the bathroom after taking care of the luggage to find Teanna on her knees by the bathtub, moving her hand through the swirling water as it flowed from the faucet. She picked up one of the several colorful bottles that sat on the shelf behind the tub and opened it. He grinned when he saw her wrinkle her nose in distaste. She replaced the bottle and picked up a second one. The scent of it made her smile. She poured a generous amount of the liquid beneath the faucet. Foamy bubbles soon floated on the surface of the water.

"What fragrance is it?" he asked.

Teanna looked at him over her shoulder. "Jasmine."

"Smells good." He walked to her, took her hands and pulled her to her feet. "But nothing smells better than you."

She gave him the loving smile that always made his heart beat faster. "Thank you."

"Since the tub is almost full, I guess it's time to strip. You first."

Her mouth dropped open. "Why *me* first?"

"Because I like to watch."

"I like to watch too."

Leaning forward, he nuzzled the sensitive spot beneath her ear. "You just like looking at my body."

"Mmm, yes."

James gave her earlobe a playful nip. "You realize if you stand there and watch me take off my clothes, a certain part of me will grow."

Teanna grinned. "Mmm, yes."

"You are a wicked woman."

"And you love that about me."

"True."

He kissed her, slowly and deeply. That certain part of him began to grow, even before he removed his clothes.

Teanna stepped out of his arms and turned off the water. She sat on the edge of the tub and crossed her legs, obviously ready for a show.

If his lady wanted a show, he'd give her one.

James toed off his shoes. He bent down and took his time removing his socks. All the humor faded from Teanna's eyes when he unfastened his belt and dragged it from the loops. He slowly tugged his T-shirt from the waistband of his jeans, pulled it over his head and tossed it to the floor.

He heard Teanna's heavier breathing, saw the quickening rise and fall of her breasts.

"You have an incredible chest," she said, her voice low and husky.

He could see a hint of her cleavage in the V-neck of her T-shirt. His cock grew longer and thicker with that sexy view. "So do you."

She swallowed. "Keep going."

He loosened the snap on his jeans. Teanna's gaze flew to his hands. The rasp of the zipper sounded louder than normal. He hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his jeans and shorts. He pushed both down at the same time and stepped out of them.

Now free of the confining fabric, his rod stood up so straight, it almost touched his belly. Teanna stared at it, running her tongue across her lower lip. He watched her eyes

move while she gazed at his entire body from his feet to his face. With one finger, she motioned for him to move closer.

His cock jerked in anticipation.

He stepped forward until his shaft was even with her mouth. Teanna looked into his eyes as she ran her tongue around the crown's rim. James hissed in a sharp breath at the pleasure.

"Do you know what I love to do?" she asked.

"What?"

"I love to take your cock in my mouth when it's soft and feel it get hard. But it's already hard." She wrapped one hand around the base. "You spoiled part of my fun."

She swiped her tongue across the head. That simple act stole his ability to speak.

"No apology for spoiling my fun?" The tip of her tongue darted into the slit. "No promise that it won't happen again?"

She slid the velvety skin up and down. Her palm passed over the crown, then she moved her hand back to the base. She gripped it tightly while she took the entire head in her mouth.

"Jesus, babe," James managed to rasp. He tunneled his fingers into her hair. Her mouth slid down an inch, back to the head, down again. Up, down, taking a bit more of his cock in her mouth each time.

She released his rod, much to James' disappointment. His disappointment vanished when she licked the entire length from the base to the head, over and over, as if savoring an ice cream cone. She lapped at his balls, caressed the sensitive spot between them and his anus. James spread his legs another few inches to give her more room. She wet the end of her finger and circled his anus.

"Push it inside me."

She did as he said. James groaned. He grabbed her head, but immediately loosened his hold so he wouldn't hurt her. She moved her finger in and out of his ass with the same rhythm that she took his cock in her mouth.

He began to pump his hips, gently thrusting his rod into her mouth. Her mouth was so warm, so wet. She pushed another finger into his ass. His eyes crossed. "God, Teanna, that feels good."

"My mouth or my fingers?" she asked before licking the heavy vein that ran the length of his shaft.

"Both."

She took him in her mouth again...circling the rim with her tongue, licking the length, taking him to the base and sucking hard. Sweat broke out on his forehead. The impending orgasm tightened his balls. Another few seconds and he wouldn't be able to stop it. "I'm close, babe."

She moved her mouth faster, shoved her fingers farther up his ass.

"Fuck!"

James threw his head back and arched his hips. Pleasure raced through his body and exploded out the head of his cock.

It wasn't the first blowjob Teanna had given him, but it was by far the most powerful. He waited a few seconds to be sure his legs wouldn't give out on him before he bent over to kiss her. He tasted himself on her lips.

"That was incredible." He kissed her again, moaning softly when her fingernails dug into his ass. Although he'd had a staggering climax, his lady had not.

He planned to remedy that immediately.

James kissed her one more time, then climbed into the bathtub. The warm water swirled around his body from the jets, carrying the scent of jasmine. "Your turn."

She shed her clothes much quicker than James had. He offered his hand and helped her into the tub. She settled between his legs, her back to his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her breasts in his palms. "You feel good."

"You're definitely a breast man, aren't you?"

"I'm a Teanna man." He plucked at her nipples with thumbs and forefingers. "I love every inch of your body."

One hand held her breast while he slid the other down her stomach to between her thighs. Fresh desire surged in his cock when he felt her swollen labia and clit. "Put your legs outside mine."

Her new position left her pussy open. He caressed the satiny folds with light strokes until she arched her hips. His touch became firmer, faster. His fingers dipped inside her, then rubbed her clit.

"You like this?" he whispered.

She closed her eyes and rested her head on his shoulder. "Yes."

"You're so soft here, softer than silk." He passed over her clit again. "Except for here."

A low moan came from her throat. She gripped his thighs and propped one foot on the edge of the bathtub, giving his hand more room between her legs.

"You like me touching you, don't you?"

"Yes."

Her voice sounded strangled, her breathing uneven. James rubbed her clit with his thumb. "I like to hold you and feel your body tremble when you come."

He squeezed her breast and pushed two fingers inside her channel. He continued to rub her clit with his thumb while he caressed her G-spot. "Come for me, sweetheart. Let me feel you tremble."

She grabbed his wrist and rode his hand. James continued to fondle her breast and let Teanna move in whatever way she needed to for her pleasure.

"God!" She arched her hips completely out of the water. Her body shook, her channel milked his fingers. He waited until she'd calmed once again before withdrawing his fingers and resting them on her mound.

"A gal...shouldn't do this...in the bathtub."

He grinned at the breathless sound of her voice. "Why not?"

"Cause she could drown."

"Nah." He tightened his arms around her. "I've got you."

"Yes, you do." Teanna lowered her legs back into the water. "My leg muscles will probably be sore tomorrow from that crazy position."

"I'll massage them for you."

She shifted until she faced him. "Such a sacrifice you're willing to make."

"It's a tough job..."

He grinned while Teanna laughed. He loved the sound of her laughter, the way it made her eyes shine. Tenderness and love welled up inside him, feelings so strong that they had to be expressed. He cradled her cheek in one palm. "I love you, Teanna."

The laughter abruptly died in her eyes. James tensed, worried he'd admitted his love too soon. He was certain he'd fucked up when her eyes filled with tears.

Then she smiled and touched his lips with her fingertips. "I love you too," she whispered.

James kissed her softly, then drew her into his arms and held her close to him. Admitting his love wasn't the only thing he needed to say to Teanna. He didn't like lying to her about his identity, his past. It was time he told her the truth.

Tonight, after the symphony, he'd tell her everything.

Chapter Eleven

The sound of rain hitting the window seeped into Teanna's consciousness. She cracked open one eye and looked at the clock. Ten before seven. She groaned. It couldn't be possible for her to be awake so soon. It had been after two before she fell asleep.

Falling back to sleep would be impossible now that she was awake. That didn't mean she couldn't cuddle with James. She turned over so she could wrap her arm around his waist. He wasn't there.

She propped up on one elbow and looked around the bedroom. She didn't see him, but she smelled coffee. That proved he had to be close by.

Teanna climbed from the bed and slipped into the white terry cloth robe supplied by the hotel. After taking care of bathroom necessities and brushing her teeth, she padded out of the bedroom. She saw James sitting at the dining room table, also wearing one of the hotel's thick robes. A newspaper lay open on the table. He held one corner of it while he sipped from a heavy mug.

A mental picture flashed through her head of seeing James like this every morning for the rest of her life. Warmth flowed through her body at the pleasant image.

He looked up when she walked closer. A slow smile turned up his lips. "Good morning."

"Good morning." She bent over and kissed him softly. He tasted of coffee and mint toothpaste. "You're up early."

"Thought I'd let you sleep in while I read the paper." He wrapped his arm around her waist. "Want coffee?"

"I'll get it. Do you want a refill?"

"I'm fine."

She couldn't resist kissing him again before she went into the kitchen for her coffee. He folded the newspaper in half and pushed it aside when she sat across the table from him. "Hungry? We can order breakfast in or go out. Your choice."

"Neither yet. I just want to drink my coffee and enjoy the view."

"You aren't facing the window."

She propped her elbows on the table and held her mug with both hands. "Who said anything about looking out the window?"

James smiled. "Why, Ms. Caldwell. Are you flirting with me?"

"Shamelessly."

He winked at her and leaned back in his chair. His robe gaped open, giving her a mouth-watering view of his chest. She didn't think she'd ever tire of looking at him.

"I'm sorry about last night." She set her mug on the table. "You said you wanted to talk to me and I conked out after we made love."

"That's okay," he said, his voice tender. "That last round of lovemaking zapped me too."

"It was wonderful. The entire evening was wonderful."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I did. But I'm wide awake now. What did you want to talk to me about?"

He didn't say anything for several moments. "Let's go in the living room and get comfortable."

A feeling of unease skittered down her spine at the apprehension in his eyes. "Is everything okay?"

He stood and held out a hand to her. "Come with me."

Teanna took his hand and let him lead her to the couch in the living room. She sat facing him, her knees drawn up to her chest. He sat next to her, one knee on the couch, one arm stretched along the back behind her.

"You've asked me about my past and I've avoided giving you any answers. I don't want to do that any more. I want to be honest with you." He curled a lock of her hair around his finger. "Do you remember before we made love the first time, when I told you I'd fantasized about your body?"

She nodded. "I remember."

"What I didn't tell you is that I'd been fantasizing about you for three months."

That didn't make any sense. She'd known James for only a few hours before they made love the first time. "I don't understand."

"I saw you at The Tarot Café in December."

"You saw me... What?"

"I was the guy by the fireplace, the one wearing the hat."

She couldn't believe that. The man by the fireplace and James looked nothing alike. "He had a beard and wore glasses. I couldn't see a lot of his hair, but enough to know it was blond."

"Yeah, it was, and halfway to my waist. I shaved off my beard and had my hair cut and dyed brown. I had LASIK performed a couple of months ago."

A man wouldn't completely change his appearance for no reason. "Why did you do all that? Are you in Witness Protection or something?"

James chuckled. "No, nothing that dramatic." He continued to wrap the curl around his finger, over and over. "I wanted a different life. The only way I could get that was to change the way I looked so I wouldn't be recognized. So I changed my appearance along with my name."

"Your name isn't James Parker?"

"Actually, it's Parker James. That's my first and middle name."

That feeling of unease turned into a ball in the pit of her stomach. She knew what his answer would be before she asked her next question. "What's your last name?"

He hesitated for several seconds. "Kendall."

Parker James Kendall, better known as the leader of The P.J. Kendall Band and famous all over the world.

Becca had been right.

James' eyebrows drew together. "You don't seem surprised."

"I'm not. I mean, Becca told me —"

"Becca told you?" he asked, his eyes wide.

"She suspects it. She told me that yesterday."

Teanna saw his throat work as he swallowed. "How? What did I do to give myself away?"

"Nothing in particular. It was a series of little things that added up for her. Remember I told you she's a huge P.J. Kendall fan. If anyone could figure it out, it would be Becca."

"Shit," James muttered. "I've done everything I could think of to hide my identity."

"She won't say anything to anyone. Becca is very discreet. Besides, she doesn't know for sure. She only suspects it. And I won't tell her the truth."

"Thank you," he said softly.

Hearing James' confession should have solved everything. Yet the ball in Teanna's stomach stubbornly remained in place. She had so many questions, she didn't know where to start.

James cradled her neck in his palm. "I know you have questions. Ask me whatever you want to."

The love and sincerity in his eyes urged her to continue. "How did you stage your death?"

"I didn't. It was a freak accident. I had a leak in my gas line. When I turned on the ignition, the spark caused the fumes to ignite. I was thrown into the water. I climbed onto one of my friend's boats and passed out."

"You were hurt?"

"I had a hell of a headache when I woke up, but I was fine other than some bruises and cuts."

"What did you do when you woke up? Why didn't you tell someone you were alive?"

"I'd planned to. That was my last thought before I passed out, that I had to let someone know I was okay. But I decided to stay hidden on my friend's boat for a day or two, until the authorities gave up looking for me at the marina. It gave me the chance to think about my life and how I wanted to live the rest of it. Luckily Bud kept his boat well stocked with canned food and bottled water. I left him a note saying I was going out on my boat for a few days and borrowed some supplies. I knew he'd assume I got the stuff before the explosion, not after."

He brushed his thumb across her jaw. "The band's first single went gold in four weeks. The second went platinum in three weeks. Every concert was sold out within minutes of the tickets going on sale. That kind of success so quickly for a bunch of young guys was overwhelming. Money poured in. I spent it as quickly as I earned it for the first couple of years, until I learned to listen to my brother Rusty and started socking some into savings."

"Your nice nest egg?"

"Yeah." He looked away from her. Teanna could tell from the sudden tenseness in his body that whatever he would say next was something he didn't want to tell her.

"We partied after every concert." He met her gaze again. "There were drugs and booze...and women. A lot of women."

His confession didn't surprise her. A man as handsome as James must have had a number of lovers in his life.

Leaning toward her, he rested one hand on her knee. "I swear I'm clean now. I haven't done any drugs in months. And no women. I haven't wanted any other woman since I saw you at The Tarot Café."

She believed him. His eyes were too earnest for him to be lying. "Whatever happened with other women before we met is none of my business."

"I still want you to know everything. I want to be completely honest with you." He reached for her hand and intertwined their fingers. "I'd been feeling restless and unhappy for several months. I'd partied with the guys in my band after our San Francisco concert in December. The next morning, I woke up in bed with two women. I was in an apartment three blocks from my hotel. I had no idea how I got there. I couldn't remember anything past drinking with the guys in my suite. It scared the shit out of me. That's when I knew I'd lost control of my whole life."

Teanna squeezed his hand in support. James lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed the back. "As soon as I got home, I went to my doctor for a complete physical. I never had unprotected sex, but I couldn't be sure I didn't with those two women since I couldn't remember anything that happened. He gave me a clean bill of health, thank God. After that, I told Rusty I was going to take a break during the Christmas holiday and go out on my boat. He offered to go out with me. I turned him down. I wanted to be alone to think. That's when the accident happened."

"So you decided to take advantage of the fact that the world thought you were dead."

He nodded. "I had to change my life or destroy it."

"Changing your life meant changing your name. You used a credit card when we checked in yesterday. How did you manage that under a phony name?"

"Rusty helped me get the I.D. He knows some...interesting people. He opened a new credit card account and added me as an authorized user. I charge whatever I need to. The bill goes to him and he pays it. I opened a checking account under my new name. He's on it too, so he can transfer money when I need it. He was already on all my other accounts, including vehicle titles and house deeds. I'm on all of his too. We did that four years ago when our parents died."

"But you're on the accounts as Parker James Kendall, not James Parker. You have no access to anything."

"Which is why it's a good thing we planned in advance. Rusty can sell my houses, vehicles, whatever, and put the funds in the old joint account. When I need money, he'll transfer it to the new account."

"You aren't worried about getting caught?"

"Rusty won't sell anything for a long time. Neither of us needs the money. He's always been a tightwad. I don't need much, other than my cabin and gas for my SUV. I make more than enough at the store to pay for those."

"This suite isn't in a Caldwell salary budget."

James smiled. "I get to dip into the nest egg and splurge every once in a while on the woman I love."

She gazed about the spacious room. "Must be quite a nest egg to afford this."

"With real estate, stocks, investments, cash on hand and in the bank, I'm worth about twenty million."

"*Twenty mil...* Wow."

He grinned. "See? I'm a great catch." His grin faded as quickly as it had appeared. "It's meaningless if I don't have you in my life."

His tender words brought a lump to her throat. "I'm so glad you decided to stop in Lanville during your travels."

"I didn't decide to stop in Lanville. I drove there specifically to find you." He frowned. "I guess that makes me sound like a stalker."

"No, not at all. But you didn't know who I was or where I lived."

"Becca left one of your business cards on the table at the restaurant."

Teanna had no idea her friend had done that. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I picked it up and put it in my pocket. I still carry it in my wallet." He ran his thumb over her lower lip. "I fell in love with you the first time I saw you, Teanna. I had to find you. I knew my life wouldn't be worth living without you."

Such sweet words deserved a kiss. Teanna lowered her legs so she could get closer to him. She kissed him tenderly, pouring all her love into it. She moved her mouth one way, then the other, using her tongue and teeth to entice him.

James slipped his hand inside her robe and cupped her breast. He thumbed her nipple. Each pass of his thumb sent a zing to her clit.

"I want you," he said against her lips.

She lay back eagerly when he lowered her to the couch. He untied her robe and parted the lapels. His gaze passed over her body. "You're so beautiful, Teanna."

The love in his eyes made her feel beautiful. Tunneling her fingers into his hair, she lifted her head until their lips met again. He pulled away from her long enough to open his robe, then he stretched out on top of her, bare skin to bare skin. His kiss turned hungry, his tongue dueled with hers. His cock grew thick and hard against her stomach.

James rose to his knees between her legs. He shucked his robe and tossed it to the floor. Her pussy clenched at the sight of his nude body.

"We either have to move this to the bedroom or I'll go get a condom and be right back."

They'd used protection every time they'd made love. Teanna didn't want anything separating them...not anymore. She ran her hands over his thighs, his hips, his stomach. "Make love to me. Here. Now."

Heat flared in his eyes. He once more lay on top of her. She spread her legs wide, making room for him between them. He slid his shaft up and down her labia, brushing her clit with every movement.

"Do you want me inside you?"

She clutched his upper arms and arched her hips. "Yes."

"You need to be nice and wet first."

He had to be kidding. Her pussy was so wet now, it almost dripped. "That isn't a problem."

"I think I'd better make sure."

Before Teanna could say anything else, James leaned down and swiped his tongue across her clit. She arched her hips even higher at the intense sensation. He growled low in his throat.

"I love the way you taste."

He dropped to his knees on the floor. Dragging her butt halfway off the couch, he gripped it tightly and feasted on her pussy. His tongue darted inside her channel, her ass, back to her clit. He licked her fast, then slow, then fast again. Low growls continued deep in his throat. The sound vibrated against her labia. That, combined with his expert licking, and she knew it wouldn't take her long to come.

James pushed a finger into her ass. That was the last thing she needed to drive her over the edge. She grabbed his head and bucked against his mouth. Pleasure rushed through her body so quickly, it left her lightheaded. She closed her eyes while trying to catch her breath.

She opened them again when James took her hands and tugged her into a sitting position. One more tug and she stood on shaky legs. He pushed her robe off her shoulders to fall on the floor. Holding her hands again, he sat on the couch and pulled her down to straddle his lap. Teanna grasped his rod at the base and impaled herself.

Satin-wrapped steel, warm and pulsing, filled her channel. She held his shoulders and stared into his eyes as she began to move. He gripped her buttocks and lifted his hips, thrusting up when she moved down. She soon established a rhythm with him, lifting as he withdrew, lowering as he pumped. He brushed her clit with every thrust.

Pushing aside her hair, he fastened his mouth to her neck and sucked. Her pussy clenched with each movement of his lips.

"I love you," he whispered directly into her ear.

Goose bumps scattered across her skin at the feel of his warm breath. She picked up the pace, bouncing on his cock in time with his thrusts. Sweat broke out on her forehead, upper lip, between her breasts. Still she kept moving, faster and faster.

"That's the way," James said. He gripped her ass tighter. "Fuck me hard. Let me feel that sweet pussy grab my cock."

"Oh God!" Teanna threw back her head. She ground her mound against the base of his shaft, searching for that last bit of stimulation to drive her over the top.

"Do you want me to suck your clit?"

Simply hearing the words was enough. Pleasure sped through her body once more. She jerked and trembled while the waves washed over her again and again.

The sound of James' loud moan brought her back to reality. She could feel his cock pulsing inside her, his warm cum filling her. She clung tightly to his shoulders, dropping soft kisses on his jaw and neck while he rode out his climax.

"Jesus," he muttered. His breath sounded harsh and labored. "That was...intense."

"Yes it was."

He ran his hands over her ass, her hips, up to her breasts. "No woman has ever affected me as strongly as you do, Teanna. Orgasms have always felt good, but I've never felt like the top of my head was gonna blow off when I came."

Teanna grinned. "Which head?"

He returned her grin. "Both." He rubbed her nipples with his thumbs. "Everything is special with you."

She kissed him, long and deeply. He'd shared a big part of himself with her. It was time she did the same.

"I have a couple of things to confess to you too."

He tenderly pushed her hair back from her face. "I'm listening."

"When I saw that man who sat next to the fireplace at The Tarot Café, I forgot how to breathe. I felt so drawn to him, as if we were supposed to be together."

She caressed his lips with her fingertips. "Then I saw you outside the store and I felt as drawn to you as I had to the man at the restaurant. I didn't understand how I could experience something so strongly for two completely different men. Now I know why. It's because both men were you. My heart knew that, even if my head didn't."

He drew her closer and kissed her so sweetly, tears sprang to Teanna's eyes. He brushed the tears from beneath her lashes with his thumbs and cleared his throat.

"What's the second thing?"

"No one else knows about this, other than my aunt and uncle. I didn't even tell Becca and there's very little I don't tell her. I have a trust fund from my parents that I'll inherit when I turn thirty. By the time I can draw on it, it'll be worth about three million." She playfully tapped the end of his nose. "So see? I'm a great catch too."

Grinning, he tightened his arms around her waist. "You certainly are." The humor faded from his eyes and Teanna once again saw love shining in the blue depths. "But it has nothing to do with your money. You're kind and generous and loving and so damn beautiful, it almost hurts to look at you."

His kiss proved his words. The sweet kiss went on and on, until Teanna felt him harden inside her.

"I want you again."

"I can tell."

"Hold on. I'm going to carry you to the bedroom."

Teanna wrapped her legs around his waist and held on tightly as he walked toward the bedroom. Love welled up inside her heart. She and James had been completely honest with each other. They were committed to each other. Nothing could possibly go wrong for them.

She wondered how long she could live in her happy little bubble before it burst.

Chapter Twelve

April 14

James pulled his SUV into his parking spot behind Caldwell's and turned off the motor. He'd made the deliveries in record time today. He barely had to look at his GPS anymore since he had finally learned all the county roads.

He glanced at the foil-wrapped packages on the passenger seat and chuckled. Mrs. Hancock had given him a loaf of zucchini bread. Mrs. Cunningham had given him a dozen chocolate chip cookies. The fresh-out-of-the-oven apple pie came from Mrs. Hurley. All the elderly widows in the area must believe he needed to gain weight. They were constantly giving him goodies when he delivered their medicine.

Teanna loved Mrs. Cunningham's cookies, so he'd give those to her. He'd share the bread and pie with Caldwell's employees.

Maybe the cookies would bring a smile to Teanna's face...one that also reached her eyes.

It had been ten days since he'd told her his true identity. She'd seemed happy that he'd shared so much of himself with her. Yet he could tell something bothered her. He'd catch her staring off into nothing, a furrow between her eyebrows and a frown on her lips.

He wished she'd tell him what was wrong.

James went in the back door and turned toward the break room. He set down the pie and bread, then headed for Teanna's office. It surprised him to find her office empty.

Ruth rounded the corner and smiled when she saw him. "Through already?"

"Yeah. I'm getting good with the route." He hitched his thumb at Teanna's empty office. "Where's Teanna?"

Ruth's smile faded. "She went home about half an hour ago with a headache. She offered to stay, but I told her to go home and lie down."

A knot of apprehension tightened his stomach. He didn't like hearing that Teanna didn't feel well. "I'd like to check on her, unless you or Lloyd have something you need me to do right now."

"No, things have been slow today." She gestured toward the package in his hand. "Mrs. Cunningham's cookies?"

"I'm taking them to Teanna. Maybe they'll cure her headache."

"Let me know how she's doing."

"I will."

James hurried out the back door and to his SUV. That knot of apprehension grew larger as he drove toward the Caldwell house. Something was bothering Teanna and it was more than a headache.

He had to know. Now.

* * * * *

Teanna stared at the artist's drawing of the sprawling ranch-style house in the book of house plans. Three thousand square feet, three bedrooms, two baths, master suite with bath, kitchen, dining room, breakfast nook, great room, huge closets...everything she'd ever dreamed of in her own home.

Her aunt and uncle had given her the deed for five of their thirty acres when she turned twenty-one. Teanna could've built her own house then, or at age twenty-five instead of agreeing to the add-on of this house. But she wanted to build her home with the man she loved. She wanted it to be as much his home as hers, not something he moved into because she already owned it.

James would love this design. But he'd never see the plan, much less the house.

Tossing the book aside, Teanna picked up her empty mug from the coffee table. Another cup of hot tea would be good. She rose from the couch, wincing when pain

shot through her temples. The pain medication she'd taken a few minutes ago hadn't kicked in yet. She sank back down to the couch, deciding the tea could wait a while longer until the mule inside her head stopped kicking to get out. She leaned her head on the back of the couch and closed her eyes.

The sound of someone coming in the door made her open her eyes again. James entered the room, carrying something wrapped in foil. Worry filled his eyes and drew his brows together.

"Hi," he said softly.

"Hi."

He pushed aside the house plans book without looking at it and sat beside her. "How's your headache?"

"Pounding."

"Would some of Mrs. Cunningham's chocolate chip cookies make you feel better?"

Normally, yes. But her headache, combined with the hollow feeling in her stomach, meant she wouldn't be able to eat anything. "Not now, thanks."

He set the package on the coffee table next to her mug. "Will you tell me what's bothering you?"

So much for my acting skills. Teanna had tried to hide her anxiety from James. Apparently she hadn't succeeded.

Picking up her mug, she walked to the kitchen. She didn't have to look to know he followed her. She poured more tea into her mug and stared into the hot liquid while trying to find the right words to say to him.

"Have I done something wrong?" he asked.

Her throat tightened and tears sprang to her eyes. She didn't want to do this, but she had no choice. "No," she whispered, her voice hoarse.

He took her arm, turned her toward him and lifted her chin. "Talk to me, Teanna."

The concern in his eyes caused more tears to fill hers. He caught each one on his thumbs as they fell down her cheeks. "Sweetheart, please talk to me. You can tell me anything. You know that."

Teanna swallowed several times to try and get the lump in her throat to move. "You can't do this, James."

"I can't do what?"

"You can't keep living a lie. You can't pretend to be someone you aren't. That isn't right."

James tilted back his head and blew out a heavy breath. "Teanna —"

"What about your family and friends? It isn't fair to them to believe you're dead."

"My brother knows the truth. I told you how he helped me. I don't have any other family."

"What about the members of your band, and your fans?"

He took several steps away from her and ran his hand through his hair. "I don't like lying to my band, but it can't be helped." He faced her again. "I was dying in that life, Teanna. I had to get away from it. That meant letting the guys closest to me believe P.J. Kendall died."

"But it doesn't have to be that way." She didn't know what words to use to make him understand. "It isn't right."

"Don't I have the right to live my life the way I want to?"

"Not at the expense of others." She moved closer to him. "This is fraud, James. Your brother could get in serious trouble for helping you. You're using a phony identity, phony credit card, bank account —"

"I know that," he said, scowling.

"What happens when some reporter starts snooping because P.J. Kendall's death doesn't add up? And what about Uncle Lloyd and Aunt Ruth? You decided to tell them the truth. That means they're accessories. Uncle Lloyd might lose his license if it's

discovered he's employed an imposter, maybe even go to jail. I don't know what the IRS might do —"

"All right, all right!" Placing his hands on his hips, James looked down at the floor. "Shit," he muttered. "You're really good at heaping on the guilt, aren't you?"

"I love you, James. I'm not trying to hurt you. But you have to realize I'm right."

"No. No." He sliced one hand through the air. "I won't go back to that life. I'm happy here. I love you, my job, the town, your aunt and uncle. Why would I want to give up everything?"

"I'm not asking you to give up anything. I only want you to tell the truth because it's the right thing to do. And because..." She swallowed when the tears threatened to start falling again. "I can't live the lie with you."

His expression shifted from anger to disbelief. "What?"

"I won't spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder, waiting for the press or police or whomever to show up and expose you or arrest you. If you..." Her voice broke. She took a breath for courage to force out the next words. "If you insist on living as James Parker, you'll do it without me."

He stared at her for several moments, then rubbed his forehead. "I never expected you would desert me."

"I'm not deserting you —"

"Then what the fuck do you call it?" He straightened his shoulders, every line of his body rigid. "It's your way or no way. That's what you said."

"I only want what's best for you!"

"Giving me an ultimatum isn't what's best for me, Teanna. Working with me, being my partner, is what's best for me."

Her stomach clenched. She hated hurting him, but she truly believed he'd never live a full life until he settled everything with his old one. "I can't," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry."

Pain mixed with anger in his eyes. He stared at her for several long seconds, then turned and went out the back door. A moment later, she heard his SUV start and peel out of the driveway.

* * * * *

James swallowed the last half of the bottle of beer in one gulp. He set the empty bottle in the cardboard six-pack container and selected a full bottle. He stared at his cell phone lying on the ground next to him while he unscrewed the cap, willing Teanna to call and ask him to come back. The only sound that broke the silence was the slowly moving river ten feet away.

He took a swig of the new bottle. He had everything a man could want...a wonderful woman, a nice job, great bosses, good friends. He still lived in the cabin at County Woods, but that was only temporary. He'd never doubted that he and Teanna would live together soon.

Would have lived together soon.

Lifting his knees, he propped his forearms on them and let the beer bottle dangle from his fingers. The mosquitoes would be out any minute and ready to feast on him this close to the river. He didn't care. He didn't care about anything right now.

James looked down at the ground between his feet. That wasn't true. He cared about a lot of things...especially Teanna.

He'd formed the band because he loved to sing. He'd never expected its popularity to skyrocket so quickly. The fame, the money, the women...he'd enjoyed all of it for the first year. Then, because the band was so popular, Rusty booked more concerts, more recording dates, more photo sessions. James knew one song that the fans didn't like could send the band spiraling downward as quickly as it had risen. So he held onto the fame, the money, the women, and added drugs and booze into the mix. He'd lived most of the last eight years in a haze, either getting high or coming down from a high.

His doctor had told him he was healthy. That wouldn't be true if he'd kept on the same course. He couldn't go back to that way of life.

Or perhaps he should call it the way of death.

He missed the band members. He missed his brother. He didn't miss the crazy concert and recording schedules, but he missed singing to the fans. Every night he picked up his guitar and sang, softly so no one would hear him. He'd written nine songs since he'd lived in Lanville...nine songs that no one would hear. Except Teanna. He could sing them for her.

Correction—he could have sung them for her if she hadn't pushed him away.

He understood why she wanted him to tell the world that P.J. Kendall was alive. He wished she understood why he couldn't.

The sound of his cell phone ringing sent James' heart into his throat. He dropped the beer bottle and grabbed the phone. His heart fell down to his feet when he saw Rusty's name instead of Teanna's.

"Hey, bro. What's up?"

"Just checking in. You haven't called in a few days. Everything okay?"

"Sure. Everything's great."

"You don't sound like everything's great."

James watched the beer flow out of the bottle and seep into the ground. "Just feeling a little low today. Believe it or not, I miss you."

"Miss you too, little brother."

Rubbing his forehead, James blinked back tears. So many emotions had hit him today, he had a hard time processing all of them.

"I'm thinking about visiting you," Rusty said.

His brother's statement left James speechless for a moment. "What?"

"I want to see the little town where you live. And meet the woman you've raved about."

He'd love for Rusty to meet Teanna, except there was no reason for that now. "Save the airfare, Rusty. Teanna and I broke up today."

"No way. You said you were crazy about her."

"I still am."

"What happened?" Rusty asked, his voice softer.

"She wants me to tell the world that P.J. Kendall is still alive. I told her I couldn't. She said she couldn't live a lie. End of story."

Rusty was silent for so long, James thought they'd been disconnected. "You still there?"

"Yeah."

"No comment about what she said?"

"You won't like my comment, so I'm keeping quiet."

"Say it. I want to know what you're thinking."

"You already know what I'm thinking, P.J. Teanna is right."

"Shit, Rusty. I don't need that from you too."

"I've never hidden the fact that I think what you did was wrong. You should've gone public and said you were retiring."

"That wouldn't have worked —"

"How do you know? You didn't try it."

"I did what I thought I had to do."

Rusty sighed. "Yeah, I know you did."

James decided it was a good time to change the subject. "How are the guys? Do you see them very often?"

"I saw all of them last week. They approached me about being their manager. They want to start recording again."

Finally, something good today. "That's great. Will's a fantastic singer. They can be very successful with you managing them."

"I don't know if I can do it, P.J. I told you it would be hard for me to be around them and not blurt out the truth about you. If I'm around them all the time, I don't know how long I can keep your secret. I promise you I'll try, but it'll be hard."

"So you told them no?"

"I told them I'd think about it."

James reached down to pick up the empty bottle, but froze at Rusty's next words.

"They want to call the band Kendall, to honor you."

Tears flooded James' eyes so quickly, he couldn't blink them away before they ran down his cheeks. He swiped at them with the heel of his hand. "That-that's nice."

"P.J. —"

"Look, I gotta go," he said after clearing his throat. "I'm outside and the mosquitoes are eating me alive. I'll talk to you later, okay?"

He disconnected the call before Rusty could say anything else and tossed the cell phone to the ground. He crossed his arms on top of his knees, rested his forehead on them and let the tears fall.

Chapter Thirteen

April 21

James stood outside the pharmacy, unwilling to interrupt Lloyd's telephone conversation. He dreaded the next few minutes, but he didn't know what else to do. He and Teanna had barely spoken in a week. He'd lost the enjoyment he received from visiting with the elderly women on his route. The songs he'd written since he and Teanna broke up were complete crap.

His happy life in Lanville had collapsed a week ago with Teanna's ultimatum.

As soon as Lloyd hung up the phone, James stepped into the pharmacy. "May I talk to you, Lloyd?"

"Sure."

Lloyd led the way to the empty break room. "Want coffee?" he asked, stopping at the coffee maker.

"No, thanks."

Lloyd poured coffee for himself and joined James at the table. "I have the feeling I won't like what you're going to say."

James leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table. "I'm giving notice. I have to leave."

"I was right. I don't like it." Lloyd set down his mug of untouched coffee. "I thought you were happy here."

"I was. I am. But things are...strained between Teanna and me. And I'm worried about you and Ruth getting in trouble with the law or IRS because of me. I care about you too much to let that happen. I think it'll be better if I go."

"I appreciate your concern for Ruth and me, but I don't want you worrying about us. My only concern is Teanna. She loves you. It will destroy her if you leave."

Lloyd's words sent a knife into James' heart. He'd rather cut off a finger than hurt Teanna. "I'm not the man she wants me to be."

Pushing aside his coffee mug, Lloyd leaned forward. "You did what was right for you."

James respected the intelligent man sitting across from him and valued his opinion. "Do you believe I was wrong to change my identity and walk away from everything?"

"It doesn't matter what *I* believe. It only matters what *you* believe."

"I'd really like to know what you think, Lloyd."

He looked down at the table for several long seconds. "I think," he said, lifting his gaze back to James, "the fact that you're still questioning your actions means things aren't settled for you. You won't ever find peace until they are."

With a heavy sigh, James leaned back in his chair. "I thought everything *was* settled. I thought I'd found the perfect life here with Teanna. But without her, it's nothing."

A sympathetic look crossed Lloyd's face. "What are you going to do?"

James shrugged. "I might head north first. I didn't see any of those states on my way here. Maybe I'll drive up into Canada too. Eventually I'll end up back in L.A. to see my brother. After that, I don't know what I'll do."

He leaned forward again and clasped his hands together "I know this is short notice, but I'd like to leave tomorrow."

"I won't hold you back, James. You do what works best for you."

What worked best for him would be to stay in Lanville with Teanna by his side. "I, uh, I'll come by the house tonight, after supper, and say goodbye to Ruth." His voice turned husky. "And Teanna."

* * * * *

Every muscle in Teanna's body tightened when she heard the doorbell ring. Uncle Lloyd had told her James planned to stop by the house after supper. That's all her uncle would tell her, so she had no idea what to expect.

"That's probably James." Ruth placed the last plate in the dishwasher. "I'll finish up here if you want to talk to him."

Teanna didn't get the chance to comment before James stepped into the kitchen. Her heart swelled at the sight of him. She'd never expected her request for him to do what she thought right and fair would cause him to break up with her.

"Hi, James." Ruth gave him a quick hug. "Would you like a glass of tea?"

"No thanks, Ruth." His gaze slid to Teanna. "Can we talk?"

Teanna nodded. "Let's go in my apartment."

She shut the door after James stepped into the living room and quickly wiped her sweaty palms on her thighs. She didn't know what he would say, but prayed it would be that he'd decided to tell the truth.

Teanna faced him and gestured toward the couch. "Sit down."

"I won't be here long, Teanna."

The flat tone of his voice told her before he uttered the words. "You're leaving."

He nodded. "My truck's packed. I'm heading out as soon as I leave here."

She folded her arms across her churning stomach. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know yet."

"So you aren't going back to L.A.?"

"Eventually. I want to see my brother."

His voice was so matter-of-fact, so devoid of emotion, but his eyes gave him away. He felt as much pain as she. "This is it? You won't be back?"

"It was your choice, Teanna, not mine."

His voice cracked on the last word. He turned his back to her, placed his hands on his hips and hung his head. "Fuck," he muttered.

She stepped closer and laid her hand on his back. He jerked and moved forward so she could no longer touch him.

"Don't," he whispered.

Her throat tightened, her eyes filled with tears. "I don't want to lose you."

"I can't do what you want, Teanna." He turned to her again. The agony on his face caused her tears to form even faster. "I can't be the man you want me to be. I didn't become an addict, but I used drugs every week and put away enough Crown Royal to keep the company in business. I lived in a fog for most of the last eight years of my life. I can't go back to that."

"You don't have to. You're a different man now."

"I don't know if I am. I don't know that I won't fall right back into my old routine if I return to the band." He rubbed his forehead and blew out a heavy breath. "When I was at The Tarot Café, the hostess gave me a reading. She said it was time for me to take a different path or my health would suffer." He looked back at her. It hurt all the way to her soul to see the torment in his eyes. "I'm not saying I believe what she said. I believe in Tarot readings about as much as I believe in the Easter bunny. But what she said described my life. I had to change it, Teanna. I had to change it or die."

She couldn't imagine not having James in her life. She couldn't imagine a day going by without seeing his smile, feeling his arms around her, tasting his kiss. "Whatever problems we have, we can work them out."

"No, we can't." He stepped closer to her. "I can't ask you to give up your principles. I love you too much for that. So it's better if I just go." He cradled her face and softly kissed her lips. "Goodbye, Teanna."

Her heart breaking into a million pieces, she watched him walk out the door...and out of her life.

* * * * *

May 2

James pulled into Rusty's driveway shortly before four in the afternoon. Fatigue pulled at him, making it difficult to keep his eyes open. He'd driven the last leg of his journey non-stop. Once he'd made the decision to head for home, he wanted to get there as soon as possible.

He climbed down from the SUV and stretched his arms high over his head, then twisted his body from side to side. He wanted a hot shower, a cold drink and something to eat...not necessarily in that order.

Grabbing his suitcase and guitar, James let himself in the back door. He didn't hear any noise from inside the house. "Rusty?" he called out.

Silence greeted him. James stopped in the kitchen long enough to take a Coke from the refrigerator before walking through the house. Today's newspaper lay scattered across the coffee table in the living room, so James knew his brother had been home today. "Rusty, you here?"

Still nothing. James made his way through the house and downstairs to the lower level. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and gazed about the large room. He and his band had spent a lot of hours here, fine-tuning their songs before they went into the recording studio or on tour. All the instruments were here, as if the guys had been playing only hours ago.

James wandered over to the piano. He'd written the words to nine songs, but hadn't put music to them yet. He ran his fingers over the ivory keys, playing with a melody to the song he'd entitled *Between Worlds*. He quickly disregarded what he'd played and tried again.

He'd started over for the third time when he heard a door slam and voices. Rusty had company. James didn't know whether to hide or stay in plain sight.

"He might be in the basement," James heard his brother say. Footsteps pounded down the stairs. Rusty appeared, followed by Will and Neil from his old band.

Moment of truth time.

"Hey, James," Rusty said. He smiled, but his eyes clearly showed worry. "I didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"I made good time." His gaze shifted to the two men. Neil studied him intently while Will's face turned pale.

"Guys," Rusty said to Neil and Will, "this is a friend of mi –"

"P.J." Will breathed out the name as a look of total shock covered his face. "You're alive."

Before James could agree with or deny Will's claim, his friend grabbed him in a choking hug. "You're alive!" Will released him and turned to Neil, a beaming smile on his face. "Isn't it great?"

"You really P.J.?" Neil asked.

James nodded. "Yeah."

Neil's fist connected with James' jaw. James fell backward against the piano, skidded over the bench and landed on the floor.

Rusty and Will both pushed on Neil's chest to keep him from getting any closer to James. "What the hell are you doing?" Rusty demanded.

"You fucking bastard," Neil spat at James. "We thought you were dead. Where have you been all this time? Drying out at some fancy spa in Switzerland?"

Holding his throbbing jaw, James slowly got to his feet. "No, I haven't been in Switzerland. I've been in Texas."

"What, you got a sudden urge to take in a rodeo or eat some barbecue? We *cried* over you, man. We agonized over your 'death'. How could you lie to us?"

"I'm sorry –"

"Save your apologies for someone who gives a shit."

He turned as if to leave. James quickly grabbed his arm to stop him. "Neil, wait. Hear me out, please."

Neil jerked his arm away from James. "There isn't anything you can say that I want to hear."

"P.J.," Rusty said, "the other three guys will be here any minute. Wait until they get here and tell everyone at once."

"Yeah, okay." He looked at Neil again. "Will you stay and listen to my story?"

"Only if it's the truth."

"It is. I swear it on my life."

* * * * *

May 6

Teanna turned off the lamp and fluffed her pillow. With a gentle sigh, she rubbed her cheek against the soft pillowcase and closed her eyes. Maybe tonight, finally, she'd be able to sleep more than a few minutes at a time. Ever since James left two weeks ago, sleep had been almost non-existent.

She didn't think it was possible to love someone so much. Or miss him so much.

Her eyes popped open when her cell phone rang. Muttering a curse about inconsiderate people who called after eleven at night, she picked up the phone and looked at the display. She didn't recognize the number. She almost ignored the call, but knew it would make her crazy not to answer the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi," James said softly.

Her heart kicked into overdrive at the sound of his voice.

"I know it's late there, but this is the first chance I've had to call you."

She quickly sat up and turned on the lamp. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm at my brother's house. I'm calling from his phone. I let my cell battery die."

She couldn't help smiling at his confession. "You do that a lot."

Teanna didn't know what to say next, or what this phone call meant to their relationship. When James had left two weeks ago, she was sure she'd never see or hear from him again.

"I wanted to let you know there's going to be a lot of stuff on TV, probably starting tomorrow. Rusty called a press conference today for me and the band. It was pretty...intense."

"You told your band the truth?"

"Yeah. I had to. You were right, Teanna. It wasn't fair to them or our fans to let them believe I was dead. And it wasn't fair to you," he said, his voice softer, "to ask you to live a lie with me. I know I hurt you and I'm sorry."

A lump formed in her throat and tears filled her eyes. But unlike the tears of the last two weeks, these were happy ones. "It's okay."

"It's far from okay. I have a lot to make up to you."

"You don't have to make up anything to me."

"Does that mean I can come home?"

She gripped her phone tighter. "Home?"

"Lanville is my home now. I want to build a life with you there, if you'll have me."

Her heart soared at the thought of being with James forever, but surely his admitting the truth meant he would go back to his old life. "What about your band? Aren't you recording and going on tour with them?"

"No. That part of my life is over."

"But you said you held a press conference and admitted the truth."

She heard him sigh heavily. "Okay, I didn't tell the *whole* truth. First of all, I wore a long blond wig, dark sunglasses and a baseball cap. I didn't want to reveal the way I look now. I said I'd disappeared for personal reasons. I refused to say what those reasons were."

"Didn't anyone ask you about the accident?"

He chuckled. "Oh yeah. Over and over. I just said the boat explosion was necessary to help me disappear for a while. My drinking and drug use wasn't a secret, Teanna. Most people will assume I went into rehab. I'm okay with that. They can think whatever they want to. As for the band, they'll record without me. Will Bonner is the new lead singer. He's great."

"Yes, he is. I'm sure they'll be very successful."

"They, uh, want to call the band Kendall. Even after I lied to them, they still want to name the band after me."

What a wonderful tribute. Teanna could hear in James' voice how much that meant to him.

"I'll still write songs as P.J. Kendall, but as far as the world is concerned, he's officially retired from singing and living in a mountain cabin somewhere."

Teanna laughed. "There aren't a lot of mountains around here."

"Then it's a perfect cover."

She snuggled down into her pillow. "When are you coming home?"

"Actually, I have an idea. How about if you meet me in Reno?"

"Reno?"

"I want to go back to The Tarot Café since that's where we met and celebrate the start of our life together."

More tears flooded Teanna's eyes. James was such a romantic. "I like that idea."

"After a special dinner, we'll get the best hotel suite at the Tahoe Towers and hit the gambling tables. And make love all night, of course."

She smiled. "Of course."

"Then we'll head back to Lanville and plan our future." His voice once more turned low and husky. "I want to marry you, Teanna."

"I want that too," she whispered.

“We’ll look for some land where we can build a house. Something sprawling with lots of rooms and lots of windows. How does that sound?”

Teanna thought of the five acres she already owned, and the house plan she loved...the one she knew James would love too. “It sounds perfect.”

The End

About the Authors

Lynn LaFleur was born and raised in a small town in Texas close to the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Writing has been in her blood since she was eight years old and wrote her first “story” for an English assignment.

As well as writing at every possible moment, Lynn enjoys reading, scrapbooking, photography and learning new things on the computer. She’s a software junky and loves to try out new programs, especially anything to do with graphics.

After living on the West Coast for 21 years, Lynn now lives 17 miles from her hometown in Texas. She’s a romantic at heart and can’t imagine ever writing anything but romances. A full-time writer, she spends her days creating stories of people who find their happily ever after, sometimes with the help of an alien or psychic or vampire.

Randi Monroe is part of that rare species—a native Californian. Born and raised in Southern California, she makes sure she never strays far from the ocean, which she considers essential to balance the fire in her Aries soul.

A romantic down to her toes, Randi wrote her first romance at thirteen, a short story based solely on her imagination since she wasn’t allowed to date until she was sixteen. As a Sweet Sixteen gift, Randi’s aunt treated her to her first Tarot reading. From the turn of the first card, she knew the metaphysical would always be a part of her life and her stories.

When Randi’s not writing scintillating tales of erotic romance, she enjoys painting and sculpting, jogging on the beach with her Great Dane, Shazam, and living happily ever after with her own Prince Charming of twenty years.

The authors welcome comments from readers. You can find their websites and email addresses on their author bio pages at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

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A Date with Mr. Wonderful

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And Best Friend Makes Three

Business and Pleasure

Capsized

Coopers' Companions 1: Rent-A-Stud

Coopers' Companions 2: Michelle's Men

Coopers' Companions 3: Almost Perfection

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Ellora's Cavemen: Legendary Tails I *anthology*

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One Night of Pleasure

Premonition



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