

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Wild
Irish

*Waiting for
Wednesday*
MARI CARR

Waiting for Wednesday

Mari Carr

Wild Irish, Book Three

Tristan Collins knows Lane Bryce is strictly hands-off. She's smart, funny, kind...and married. But he still looks forward to her once-a-week visits to the family pub where he tends bar. When she fails to arrive one Wednesday, Tris is concerned. When he learns she's in the hospital, brutally beaten after attempting to leave her unhappy marriage, he's enraged. Tris vows to protect her, but doesn't get the chance—Lane checks out of the hospital and disappears without a trace.

A year later, newly divorced Lane is back, and enjoying her independence too much to embark on a relationship. Tris intends to prove she can have freedom *and* love, and he's not above using seduction to do it. The more she resists, the more he sets her body ablaze with pleasure the likes of which she's never known.

After a lifetime of disappointment, trust doesn't come easily for Lane. But when her ex-husband reenters her life, threatening her independence, her happiness, she could discover too late that Tristan is the one man worthy of not only her trust, but also her love.

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Waiting for Wednesday

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WAITING FOR WEDNESDAY

Mari Carr

Dedication

This story is dedicated to Kelli and Jillian, the best tag-team editors in the USA, and to Raelene for making Ellora's Cave such an awesome place to be!

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Stanley Cup: National Hockey League

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Monday's Child

Monday's child is fair of face,
Tuesday's child is full of grace,
Wednesday's child is full of woe,
Thursday's child has far to go,
Friday's child is loving and giving,
Saturday's child works hard for a living,
But the child who is born on the Sabbath day,
Is bonny and blithe and good and gay.

~Traditional nursery rhyme

Prologue

One year ago

“Lane?” Tristan looked down at the frail form of his best friend lying in the hospital bed and gently took her hand in his.

Her eyelids fluttered and one—the right one—opened slightly. Her left eye was bruised and swollen shut.

“Tris.” Her voice was hoarse, drawing his gaze to her throat where he could see the faint marks left by her abusive husband’s fingers.

“I’m right here, kitten. How are you?” He mentally chastised himself for the stupid question. She was a billboard for domestic violence, every inch of her pale, delicate flesh covered with bruises and cuts. In addition to her black eye, she had a split lip and several stitches above her brow. It hurt him just to look at her and he had to swallow back the murderous rage building in his chest.

“Oh, you know,” she said. “Pulled a double shift at work. Got a paper cut. Same old shit.”

He grimaced at her joke. It was so like her. Damn woman hated anything even resembling pity, but this time he couldn’t let her make light of her predicament.

“Dammit, Lane.” He dropped down into the chair by the side of her bed. “Don’t do that, babe. Don’t make a fucking joke of this.”

She winced at his words and he instantly regretted them when she closed her good eye against the tears gathering there. It took her several moments to compose herself enough to speak again. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, Lane. Just tell me what happened.”

“I took your advice. Got up the nerve to leave. Apparently James wanted me around more than he let on.”

Tristan tightened his grip on her hand, trying to hide the fact his was trembling in the face of what she'd gone through. Her husband had always been distant, cruel in an emotionally abusive way, according to Lane. As she'd said once, she'd been miserable in her marriage since "about five minutes after the vows". That's when James had started criticizing every aspect of her personality, her looks, her housekeeping. She'd spent two years living in wedded hell with the man.

"I didn't know he would..." he started, guilt crushing him. He'd been encouraging her to leave James for weeks. Trying to convince her she didn't have to spend the rest of her life paying for one mistake. She'd simply fallen in love with the wrong man. With that love gone, he'd assured her there was no shame in admitting defeat and moving on.

"Oh no, Tris," she said, squeezing his hand. "I'm not blaming you. Leaving was..." She paused for a moment. "Leaving *is* the right thing to do. I was a fool for not realizing how angry James would be, but I swear to you, he's never lifted a finger to hurt me. Not once in these past two years."

Tris nodded, wanting her to know he believed her. She may have stayed in an unhappy marriage because of her sense of responsibility, but she would never have remained in a dangerous home. "I know that."

"I honestly, foolishly, thought he didn't give a damn about me."

Tris wanted to reassure her that thought was correct. No man would hurt his wife like this if he gave even the tiniest shit about her. Again, his temper spiked and he suspected if James wasn't already in police custody, Tristan's next trip would have ensured Lane's husband would need similar medical care. Still, he worried about what her words meant.

"You can't go back there, Lane. You can't go back to that marriage."

"I'm not," she added quickly. "There's no way in hell. I just wanted you to know that while I was unhappy the last couple of years, I wasn't a battered wife or anything."

He took a deep breath and fought the urge to disagree with her. James Bryce may not have hit his wife, but his words had beaten down and chiseled away her confidence for years. Saying so, however, would upset her, and he refused to add to the pain she was suffering.

"I know that." If he'd ever once seen a bruise on her, he would have dragged her out of her home and away from the asshole she called a husband. "I was worried when you didn't show up tonight," he said.

Every Wednesday night after her nursing shift, Lane came into his family's restaurant, Pat's Irish Pub, where he was the bartender. She'd plop down at the end of the bar and they'd talk for hours while he served drinks and she sipped her white wine.

Originally, they'd talked about politics, sports, music, movies. For months they had chatted as acquaintances until at some point—Tris had no idea when, exactly—the relationship had evolved into a genuine friendship and the conversations had become much more personal. They'd talked about their childhoods and dreams for the future. He'd known from the first she was married and he'd respected that. Despite a reputation—according to his sisters—as a ladies' man, he never hit on married women.

Lane was the only woman to ever test his resolve on that unwritten edict. He simply couldn't resist the allure of standing—and yes, flirting—week after week across the counter of the bar from her. She was funny and sweet, smart and sexy. She drew him like a moth to a flame and somewhere along the line, she'd become his best friend.

"I thought Wednesday would be the best night to leave. It's James' late night at the store."

He nodded. One of the reasons why Lane came to the pub Wednesdays was because her husband worked the late shift at a local business, not returning home until after midnight. He glanced at his watch. It was only a little past one in the morning. Too early for James to have wrought so much damage. "So what happened?"

"He came home early. Said he had a headache, but I think perhaps he suspected my plans. I don't know."

"You should have called me. I would have helped you pack up. Helped you leave." Even as he spoke the words, he knew she would never have asked for help. She possessed more than her share of independence. Lane Bryce was determined to be a woman who took care of herself. Her childhood had molded that trait, set it in concrete, and he knew it was hard for her to depend on anyone.

She sighed heavily and he could see how much their conversation was zapping her remaining energy. "Are you in pain?" he asked. "I can call for the nurse."

"She already gave me something. I think it's kicking in."

He'd called her cell phone several times when she'd failed to show up at the pub. A gut feeling he couldn't explain had told him something was wrong. She'd never missed a Wednesday. Not once in almost a year and a half. She'd confessed once to waiting for Wednesday the way some kids waited for their birthday—with anticipation, excitement.

An hour earlier, she'd finally called and told him she was in the hospital. He'd told Ewan to take over the bar and he'd driven through the city, breaking every damn speed limit to reach her.

"I'm just so tired," she said.

"I'm here now," he said as she appeared to drift off to sleep.

"I knew you'd be worried," she mumbled. "I don't know what to do now."

And it was that softly spoken admission that broke what small part of his heart hadn't shattered upon first seeing her so battered in the bed.

"You don't have to do anything, kitten. I'm here now. I'll take care of everything. I'll take care of *you*. I promise."

He was confused when her gaze refocused on him and he sensed her quiet tension. Then she nodded and he breathed a sigh of relief. Accepting help didn't come easily to her, but she had to know, had to realize there was nothing he wouldn't do for her.

"I'm going to go to sleep," she said. "Why don't you go on home for now?"

He shook his head, but she cut off his refusal.

“There’s no way you’ll fit on that tiny couch, Everest.” She’d jokingly begun referring to him by the pet name several months ago. He topped her by at least half a foot and a hundred pounds. “Go home and get some rest. James is in jail and I’ll still be here tomorrow.”

It was those words that reverberated in his mind when he looked at the empty hospital bed Thursday morning. She wasn’t there. She was gone.

Gone.

Chapter One

Present day

"I need two gin and tonics, Tris, and another Guinness."

Tristan Collins nodded to acknowledge he'd heard the order and started making the drinks.

"My, my, my," Keira said, leaning over the bar. "Aren't you the stimulating conversationalist tonight?"

Tris gave her a dirty look and tried to ignore his older sister's assessing gaze. The last thing he needed was to be analyzed and dissected by Keira. Lately, she'd been giving him hell about his lack of social life, trying to set him up with one friend after another. She simply wouldn't listen when he said he wasn't interested in dating. He figured her sudden obsession with his love life had something to do with her being madly in love. Her boyfriend, Will Wallace, had proposed over Christmas, which meant Tris had been subjected to hour after hour of wedding planning. He wished the day would come already, so they could get it over with and life could get back to normal. Unfortunately, June was still two very long months away.

He put the drinks on her tray and turned around to polish a glass that didn't need polishing, hoping it would deter Keira from continuing. No such luck.

"Oh yeah, Tris. Turning your back will definitely make me stop talking. *Not*. You men are all the same. So who stuck the stick up your ass tonight?"

He sighed and shook his head, refusing to face her as he spoke. "No one, Keira. I'm just tired."

"You're always tired lately. What's up, Tris?"

He knew what was up, but there was no way on earth he'd confess the truth to his sister. It had been a year since Lane Bryce had disappeared from Baltimore, from his

life. For months he'd managed to hold that thought at bay, ignore the pain that accompanied the memory of her, but tonight he couldn't seem to shake off the recollections that assaulted him. It was Wednesday night—*their* night. Yet for the first time in a year, he hadn't looked at her usual stool and expected her to be there. It was as if the realization she was gone had finally sunk into his thick skull.

When he'd last seen her, he hadn't realized she'd leave town without a word. And he definitely hadn't known she'd be taking off with his heart. He closed his eyes. He'd been so stupid. She was married, unavailable, and he'd foolishly convinced himself she was off-limits. Christ, she *was* off-limits.

Then he'd seen her in that hospital bed, learned she was serious about her intention to leave her husband and in a few hours, everything had changed for him. He'd gone home that night feeling hopeful and happier than he'd ever been in his life. She was going to be free and he'd fully intended to grab her. To hold on to her with two hands before any other man realized what a gem she was and snatched her up. So much for that idea. She'd disappeared without a trace and weeks of searching hadn't given him a clue to her whereabouts.

"Earth to Tris," Keira said from behind him.

"Just deliver the drinks." His reply was harsher than he'd intended and he heard his sister's slight intake of breath, knew he'd hurt her feelings. Shit. He was a regular asshole these days. He turned to apologize but Keira had already stormed away from the bar.

"Damn, man." Sean came behind the bar to drop off some clean glasses. "No wonder you don't have a girlfriend. Must be all that charm you *don't* have getting in the way."

"Fuck," Tris muttered. "I didn't mean to snap at her."

"You've been walking around here all night like a bear with a thorn in his paw. You wanna talk about it?"

He shook his head. "Not particularly." He refused to tell any of his siblings what a fool he'd been. He'd fallen in love with a woman who didn't love him back. It was as simple—and as complicated—as that. He was never going to make that mistake again. As far as he was concerned, his future relationships would never advance beyond casual, no-strings-attached sex. He was perfectly content running the bar, watching sports on television, hanging out with his guy friends on his days off and finding a woman when he had an itch to scratch.

"Okay. Well, it's a standing offer," Sean said. "Coming over Sunday afternoon to watch the Orioles?"

Tris nodded, pleased that at least his younger brother could appreciate he meant it when he said he didn't want to talk. Sean didn't even take offense. Just another reason why women were a pain in the ass. They always wanted to poke and prod at every sore spot they could find.

"Yeah. Wouldn't miss it. I'll bring the pizza." He and Sean had a regular Sunday-afternoon routine that involved watching baseball, NASCAR or whatever other sport was in season while devouring two large pizzas and sucking down soda.

"Cool. Hey, I think I might knock off early tonight. Do you mind? I've got a date and I want to go home and change first."

"No problem. It's Wednesday and slow as shit. Keira and I can handle it."

Sean grinned. "Try not to piss her off any more than you already have, okay? I'd hate to break up a fistfight between you and Will. He's too damn protective of her and he'll be ticked if you make her cry."

Tris saluted. "I'll try my best."

He watched Sean leave then glanced at the clock. It was nearly eleven. Only one more hour to go before he could hit the sack. Sunday's Side, the adjoining restaurant named after his mother, had just closed, and a couple meandered through the connecting door between the bar and dining room, clearly not ready to call it a night.

There were less than a dozen people scattered around the pub and he wished they would all go home.

Keira came back over to the bar. "Where did Sean go?"

"He had a date. I told him he could take off early. Listen, Keira, I'm sorry about snapping your head off. I really am tired."

Her face lit up at his apology and she smiled. He had to admit the best thing about his sisters was they never held grudges. "It's okay. I never know when to shut my mouth. I'm worried about you."

"I know, but you're just gonna have to believe me, sis, when I say I'm fine."

She nodded and went to take drink orders from the two newcomers. He walked to the storeroom to grab a couple cases of beer, returning to restock the cooler behind the bar. The bell above the front door rang and he fought back a growl at the thought of more people coming in. He'd never get out of here early tonight at this rate. He didn't even bother to look up as he continued loading the cooler. Keira could get their orders.

"Hey, Everest."

He stopped moving at the sound of Lane's voice and for a moment, he thought he'd imagined it. He'd purposely tried to put the woman out of his mind for months, until tonight when the memories simply wouldn't stay away. He slowly rose, bracing himself to find an empty barstool.

And she was there.

He stared at her for a moment until her friendly smile began to waver and he realized he was frowning at her. He blinked a couple times, forcing himself to snap out of it.

"Well, well, well." His lighthearted tone was rusty from disuse. "Look what the cat dragged in."

She grinned at his comment. "You always did call me kitten. Been a long time."

He nodded, wanting to drag her over the bar and scold her for disappearing on him, for vanishing without a trace and driving him crazy with worry.

“Almost a year,” he said instead. “Want a drink?”

“I’d love a glass of white wine.”

He turned to grab a wineglass, proud that his hands were steady. It was obvious seeing him again after a year’s absence wasn’t tearing *her* insides to shreds. Apparently he was the only one feeling the painful effects of this unexpected reunion.

He poured the wine and set it in front of her, trying to ignore how pretty she looked. She was lovelier now than she’d ever been. Her skin radiated with a healthy glow and she had a tan. Her dark brown hair was a bit longer and he detected lighter streaks that could have been brightened by the sun or a bottle. He loved when women put those highlights in their hair. The thick tresses looked as soft as he remembered. He’d often fantasized about running his fingers through the silky mass, spreading it out over his pillow as he kissed her, touched her, loved her. He shook himself for staring at her like a lovestruck fool.

He cleared his throat. “So what brings you back to Baltimore?”

Some small, stupid part of him hoped she would say him.

“I thought it was time to come home.”

“Home?” Jesus, was she coming back for James? After she’d disappeared, Tris had torn the city—hell, he’d torn Maryland—apart looking for her. Through it all, his only consolation had been that wherever she was, she wasn’t with her husband.

James, after spending a few days in jail, actually had the nerve to come by the pub asking about her. Ewan and Sean had physically restrained Tris from pulverizing the man while Pop escorted the asshole out. If his family ever wondered about his intense reaction to seeing Lane’s husband, they’d never mentioned it. As far as they knew, he and Lane were friends and he’d been furious with her husband for hurting her so badly. No one seemed to suspect how deep his feelings really ran.

"To Baltimore," she said. "I tried a year in San Diego, but the entire time I just wanted to get back to the East Coast. Back to four distinct seasons, Phillips crab cakes and the Orioles."

He grinned. Lane was the only woman he'd ever met who followed sports more religiously than he did. And that was saying something.

"Yeah well, maybe this isn't the year to come home for the Orioles. Their fucking pitching game—"

"I know!" she interjected. "What the hell is their problem? Why can't they get a decent guy on the mound? After last Tuesday's walk-off against the Rangers, I just wanted to put my head down and cry."

"Amen. That game was brutal." Tris leaned his elbows on the counter, struck by the familiarity of their conversation. She'd been gone a year and yet, within minutes, it felt as if she'd never left at all.

"Why, Lane?" He didn't explain his question, didn't need to.

Her smile saddened and she shrugged slightly. "I had to leave, Tris. Had to get out of here and get my head screwed on straight."

"I didn't notice anything wrong with your thinking." He hadn't. "Seems to me before you left you'd started making some smart decisions. Leaving James was a step in the right direction."

She laughed mirthlessly. "Yeah, leaving James was such a great idea I ended up in the hospital with two cracked ribs and ten stitches in my forehead."

"You regret leaving him?"

"Holy shit, no. The guy was an asshole. I just didn't handle the situation very well. I thought I could sneak out like a thief in the night. Thought I could leave and he'd accept it and there wouldn't be any ugliness, any conflict."

He grinned. Lane hated fighting and dissention of any sort. She was the ultimate peacekeeper. "Divorces aren't usually known for being easy, kitten."

"I know that...now. Back then, I wasn't thinking too clearly. Speaking of divorces, mine's final. I'm finally free and I have to tell you, Tris, I love it. Love not having to answer to anyone. Love making my own decisions. I can't tell you how great this last year has been."

Her words, the ones he'd waited years to hear, hit him squarely in the chest. She was free. And despite that freedom, she seemed more unattainable than ever.

"Congratulations." As he spoke the word, he realized he actually meant it. He'd never wanted anything more than for Lane to be happy, and discovering she was lightened some of the heaviness weighting down his heart. He'd never seen her so at peace. It looked good on her, even if her newfound happiness was tearing him apart. "So what's the plan now?"

"I'm staying with my friend Joy until I can find a place of my own. Then I suppose I'm on the hunt for a job."

"I'm sure the hospital would take you back in a heartbeat."

She shook her head. "I worked in private care in San Diego and loved it. I don't think I want to go back to working all those crazy swing shifts at the hospital. At least not if I don't have to."

"Sounds like you've got it all figured out." He silently wondered where he fit into her plans, and then sadly he knew. It was Wednesday night and she was here. Once again, he'd no doubt be relegated to her once-a-week friend, keeping her company while she sipped her wine and unwound after work.

"Sort of," she said. "I..." She paused and he could see she was struggling to find the words to speak what was on her mind.

"What is it?"

"I owe you an apology, Tris. A big one."

"What for?"

"I don't think I was wrong to leave town, but I think in my haste for a fresh start, I didn't stop to think about our friendship getting thrown out with the dirty dishwater. I mean, I don't know if you were worried or —"

His temper spiked at her comment and he felt his tenuous control of his emotions give way. "You didn't know if I was worried? Are you kidding me, Lane? What the fuck did you think I would do? Shrug and say no big deal? Last time I saw you, you were beat to hell in a hospital bed. Next day, you're gone without a trace."

"I know." She cut off his tirade with her anguished tone. "It was wrong of me to take off like that without a word. Wrong of me not to call. It's just—" She stopped and took a deep breath. He could see her analyzing her words, trying to say the right thing to calm him down. "I was scared."

"I would have protected you from James."

She raised her hand, pointing at him, her voice raised. "And *that's* why I had to leave. I wasn't afraid of James. I was afraid I'd let you—" She took another deep breath and her calm demeanor returned.

"I didn't want your protection, Tris. I didn't—I *don't*—want anyone to feel like they have to take care of me. I can take care of myself."

Her words came crashing down on his head and at last he understood why she'd run. She hadn't left town because she was afraid of her husband. She'd left town to escape *him*. His heart shut down with the realization and the last vestige of hope for a future with Lane Bryce floated away.

Lane watched Tristan's face go hard. She'd hurt him with her words. Regardless of his reaction, she steeled her heart to the fact she was doing the right thing. Tris had always viewed her as weak, helpless—a kitten—and she was determined to break that misconception. She wanted him to see her as she was—a woman in charge of her own life, not some pitiful creature in need of his protection.

"I see," he said. "I accept your apology."

Yeah right.

She could tell from his tone, from his wooden features, she had a hell of a lot of making up to do.

She'd missed his easy smile and friendship this past year more than she cared to admit. He was actually a large factor in her decision to return to Baltimore. It had taken her months in San Diego to come to grips with the royal mess she'd made of her life, then several months more to find a way to be comfortable in her own skin again. James had destroyed so much of her self-esteem during their two-year fiasco of a marriage, and only through serious soul-searching and a bit of therapy had she managed to rebuild it.

One night a couple of months earlier, she'd had an epiphany. She realized that throughout the darkest times of her marriage, it was Tris who'd kept her afloat, kept her head from going underwater. Without him, she would have drowned in a sea of misery and regret.

She looked around the bar and grinned. "I can't tell you how much I've missed this place...and you."

He smiled at her, though she noticed the pleasure of it didn't seem to reach his eyes. "I missed you too, Lane. Football season was a killer. Fucking Ravens." She sensed him struggling to put them back in familiar, comfortable territory and she appreciated his effort. She took the ball and went with it.

"Ugh. Don't even mention that team to me. It's going to take me until at least summer camp to forgive them for playing like dog shit all last season."

He laughed and her heart sped up at the familiar, well-loved sound.

"Better not let Pop hear you criticizing them. Even after that crappy season, he won't sit still to hear one negative word against them."

"How is your pop? And your brothers and sisters?" She'd always liked Tristan's family. She'd met and chatted with most of them on various Wednesday nights in the past.

"They're the same. Annoying as hell."

She grinned, recognizing his words as a joke. One of the best things about Tris was his devotion to his family. He adored them—each and every one—and it showed. There was nothing he wouldn't do for them. She wondered what it must feel like to be included in that net of *family*. A product of the foster-care system, Lane found the concept of family as foreign to her as living on the moon.

"You look great, Lane."

She smiled. "Sweet talker."

"Want another glass of wine?"

She glanced down, surprised to discover she'd drained her glass. She couldn't even remember drinking the wine.

"Sure." She was in no hurry to go back to Joy's apartment. For the moment, she was exactly where she wanted to be. Home in Baltimore, back with her best friend Tris, relaxed, comfortable. She wasn't sure how she'd survived an entire year without this...without *him*.

"So who do you like for the Stanley Cup?" she asked, and they were off.

Lane was surprised later when she looked around and realized all the other patrons had left, as well as Tristan's sister. She vaguely recalled saying good night to the other woman, remembering the curious look Keira had given Tristan. Lane assumed it was because Tris had given up his station behind the bar and was sitting on the stool beside her. A quick peek at the clock confirmed it was nearly two o'clock in the morning.

"Oh my gosh." She stood quickly. "I can't believe how late it is."

Tris followed her gaze to the clock and shared her surprise at the hour. "Where did those three hours go?"

She laughed. "I have no idea, but I didn't mean to keep you so late. I'm sure you had better things to do than entertain me."

He shook his head. "Actually I didn't. Come on." He stood as well, taking her hand and walking her toward the door. "I'll drive you home."

"I have my own car," she said. "I only had two glasses of wine and those were consumed a while ago."

"I don't like the idea of you driving home alone so late."

"Tris, I'm a big girl. Besides, Joy's apartment building has its own well-lit parking garage. I'll be fine."

"Well, let me walk you to your car at least."

She nodded her assent, trying to ignore the fact he hadn't released her hand. Why did holding hands with him feel so natural, so good? She'd come home secure in the knowledge she could resist this, could resist *him*. She'd always been physically attracted to him and, to ward off those inappropriate feelings, she'd worn her marriage like a suit of armor. Now that she was divorced and on a path she could tread comfortably on her own, she suddenly realized she was tempting fate by putting Tris back in her life.

God, what was wrong with her?

She'd fought too hard the last year to reclaim her life, her freedom. To become a woman she could face in the mirror each morning, a woman who held her head high and didn't have to rely on a man to take care of her. She was the new-and-improved Lane Bryce.

To add insult to injury, Tris had never indicated he wanted to be more than a friend. She was probably alone in her lust and setting herself up for a fall if he ever discovered her desires. Jeez, she needed to get laid. Find some faceless stranger and get rid of all this trapped need. Maybe then she could be near Tris without images of their naked limbs tangled together taunting her.

He opened her car door after she hit the lock release and she turned to thank him, only to have the words lodge in her throat.

They were standing closer than she'd realized and her quick turn left her far too close to him—her nose brushing against his chest and the soft cotton of his shirt. She tried to covertly sniff his lovely scent—peppermint schnapps and...hmm...maybe rum. She wasn't sure of anything except that he smelled like Tris—yummy. He bent slightly when she lingered and as she looked up, she found her lips only a breath away from his.

"I'm glad you're home, kitten." He pressed a platonic kiss to her forehead and she kicked herself for thinking his kindness meant anything more than companionship.

She should have been grateful he didn't share her attraction, but she couldn't summon the emotion. While she was having some serious dirty fantasies about the man, it was obvious he still viewed her as a helpless woman and his "protector genes" had come riding to the rescue. Now she was horny...and pissed off.

She needed to get control of herself. They were best friends—and friendship was all she could handle with Tristan Collins. Anything more would definitely be dangerous to the feeble grip she held on her newfound freedom, her independence.

"See you next Wednesday?"

She nodded. "Sure. Next Wednesday."

Chapter Two

Lane stood outside Pat's Irish Pub on Wednesday evening and took a deep breath. She'd expected the week to drag as she anticipated seeing Tris again, but it had actually flown by. She'd had a great time reconnecting with Joy and catching up with some old colleagues and high-school friends. She hadn't made much headway in the hunt for an apartment or a job, but she hadn't expected either chore to be easy or quick.

As she opened the door she was surprised to see the bar quite busy. At second glance, she realized it was packed. That certainly explained her problem finding a parking spot. She'd figured it was Murphy's Law working against her since she was so anxious to see Tris again. She fought her way to the bar and watched as Tristan and his brother Ewan entertained the crowd with some crazy drink-mixing antics. Tris caught a glimpse of her and she fought to ignore the sudden pounding of her heart at the breathtaking smile he gave her. He leaned over the bar toward her.

"My sister Teagan and her boyfriend Sky are in town. They're going to sing a little later." He spoke loudly, fighting to make himself heard over the crowd.

"Oh." She'd read about Teagan's splash in the music arena and her budding relationship with Sky Mitchell. "Maybe I should come back another night." She tried to hide her disappointment at the thought of waiting another whole week to see him again.

"Freeze!" he said as she turned to leave. He gestured with his head, indicating he wanted her to follow him to the other side of the bar. She pushed her way through the crowd, fighting to get to where he waited.

"This place is crazy." She stepped up to the bar and grabbed a napkin, blotting the front of her shirt. "Some drunk just spilled beer down my blouse."

Tris grinned at her, wiggling his eyebrows. "Maybe we should start a wet T-shirt contest," he teased. "You'd win for sure."

"Very funny." She returned his grin and gave up on the blouse. She was drenched and there was no hope for it.

"I was hoping I could recruit you," he yelled, fighting to be heard when Teagan and Sky started playing.

"Recruit me?"

"To tend bar. We could use an extra server. If you help here, Ewan can go out and start taking orders."

"I don't know anything about mixing drinks."

"You can fill the beer orders. Anybody can run the tap." He lifted the hinged entry to the bar before she could refuse him.

Ewan grinned when he realized help had arrived, kissing her on the cheek as she stepped up to relieve him.

"You are a lifesaver," Ewan exclaimed as he left her and Tris alone behind the bar. After a super-fast instruction on how to operate the tap, Tris began filling the mixed-drink orders. They worked together quickly and efficiently, and Lane tried to ignore the heat growing in her body from their proximity.

More than a few times, Tris scooted behind her to retrieve a bottle of liquor. Each time, his chest pressed against her back. He constantly put his hands on her waist to steady her whenever he passed. Twice his arm had accidentally rubbed her breast as he wiped up a spill on the counter in front of her, her breath catching at the sensual rub.

At one point, after watching her continually push her hair out of her face, he stopped to fasten it with a ponytail holder his sister Riley had brought at his request. He ran his fingers through her hair in such a provocative way her nipples went hard. The beer on her blouse, though starting to dry, did little to hide her body's reaction to his touches.

“Cold?” he whispered, his hot breath driving her arousal up another notch. She narrowed her eyes and shook her head.

Oh yeah. Accident, her ass. He was deliberately trying to provoke a response, but why? He’d never touched her in a sexual way before. Of course, she’d never been divorced before.

The realization hit her like a ton of bricks. Tristan *was* interested in her. The thought simultaneously thrilled and terrified her.

Oh fuck. Definitely in over my head now.

Unfortunately, she didn’t have time to ponder the situation as the orders continued to fly, the entire pub pulsating with the loud music from the stage.

For nearly two hours, they served drinks as Sky and Teagan performed. The entire time, Lane fought her arousal as Tristan’s touches became more frequent, longer, less subtle. Her face was flushed, her breathing labored and, after yet another “accidental” touch from Tris—this time a squeeze to her rear-end—she considered murdering the man or throwing him on the floor and riding his hips—drunks be damned. She was horny and wet and her pussy was crying out for some serious stimulation.

Finally, Teagan and Sky left the stage to very loud cheers, ushered by bodyguards out the front door to where a limo was waiting to take them back to their hotel. Once the couple left, the crowd quickly thinned and the orders slowed. During a lull, Lane took a moment to regain her composure, leaning against the counter behind her and trying to figure out what the hell she was supposed to do now.

Tris watched Lane with quiet pleasure. He’d been annoyed as hell when he realized word of Teagan and Sky’s impromptu performance had gotten out. Half of freaking Baltimore had come knocking and he knew his quiet evening with Lane was ruined.

Then he’d decided to use the show to his benefit. He’d spent the days since her reappearance trying to figure out what the hell to do about the woman. He wasn’t so thick he couldn’t admit she’d wounded his pride. Before Lane, Tris had never fallen for

a woman who didn't fall right back. He'd also never been dumped. Whether she realized it or not, Lane had done both. By returning and waving that "I'm free" flag in his face, she'd reopened the cut and he'd been determined to get back a bit of his own.

He'd intended for his heated touches to make her regret what she'd so easily cast aside. It was petty and small, but he'd discovered with Lane, all his preconceived ideas of how a gentleman should behave were tossed out the window. He was reduced to a wounded beast, lashing out in any way he could.

His plan had worked great. Until he realized the more aroused she became, the more ravenous he grew. Her nipples were so taut beneath her blouse it was all he could do not to strip the scrap of material off her and take them into his mouth. He'd witnessed her covertly pressing her legs together twice and the subtle movements had him convinced he could smell her sweet juices even over the potent odor of the alcohol. He imagined lifting that skirt she was wearing and dragging his fingers along her slit before pushing them deep inside her wet pussy.

This was why revenge was never a good thing. In his quest for vengeance, he'd merely taken himself down as well. He'd untucked his shirt earlier because there was no other way to hide the raging erection being strangled by his jeans. He glanced at her again and noticed the rapid rise and fall of her chest. Oh, she was hot all right. Hot and horny. Problem was, so was he. Painfully so.

As he studied her flushed face, another truth came crashing down on him. She wanted him. If she didn't, his touches would have done nothing more than annoy her. She was currently staring at him like a starving woman presented with a thick, juicy steak.

Jesus, what had he unleashed? The thought that she was physically attracted to him reignited the fire he'd been sure he'd smothered, sparking hope once more. She desired him sexually, and a new plan emerged in his mind. He smiled, silently enjoying the way his heated look was making her squirm.

Seduction. It was so simple. He would seduce her into falling in love with him. Oh yeah, Lane Bryce's days as a free woman were numbered.

"You're doing a great job," he said, coming to stand beside her.

She nodded, her smile nervous. He wanted to laugh, aware she was worried about him touching her again. Unable to resist, despite its impact on him, he put his arm around her shoulders and tugged her toward his chest. She fit him perfectly. She was a bit taller than most women he dated which, given his too-large frame, meant she was the ideal height in his mind. He wouldn't have to bend down so far to capture those lush, plump lips when he kissed her.

"You holding up okay?"

"Great." Her voice was too falsely bright, too tight to fool him.

"You really saved the day." Even as he spoke the words he realized they were the truth. She'd been a tremendous help.

"I had no idea bartending could be so physically exhausting. My feet are killing me."

He glanced down, disgusted with himself when he realized she was wearing heels he hadn't noticed before. She'd dressed for a quiet night sitting at the bar and he'd thrown her behind the counter, keeping her on her feet for hours. "Dammit, Lane. Why didn't you say something?"

He waved his hand, trying to get his brother's attention.

"Do me a favor," he said when Ewan came over to the bar. "Take over for a few minutes." There were only about thirty people left in the pub. His brothers and sisters could manage fine without him. He grasped Lane's hand.

"Where are we going?" she asked as he led her through the pub to a set of stairs.

"Up to my family's apartment."

"Why?"

He pointed at her feet, frowning when he noticed her limping.

"Hell's bells." He led her through the doorway. Before she could refuse him, he bent down and picked her up, carrying her upstairs and not stopping until he'd placed her on the couch.

"Tris," she said as he sat beside her. He reached down and grasped her feet. "What are you doing?"

"Paying you for all your hard work."

"Isn't payment usually in the form of money?"

He grinned. "Do you want money?"

"No."

"Good, then you're getting a foot rub." He quickly slipped her shoes off, gripping her right foot firmly in his palm, squeezing gently at first. He suspected she'd intended to refuse his offer, but when he increased the pressure on the ball of her foot, she groaned with relief and threw her head back.

He reached behind her, placing a pillow against the arm of the couch. "Lie down," he commanded, relieved when she did so without argument.

"I cannot believe how good that feels."

"Haven't you ever had someone rub your feet before?"

She shook her head.

She wouldn't have. Lane never asked anyone for anything, never wanted to put anyone out.

They sat quietly for several minutes and he worked his hands along the sore muscles in her feet. She sighed and he grinned, wondering if she'd fallen asleep when her eyes drifted shut. How would she react if he moved his massage up her legs and under her skirt?

She dispelled that thought by speaking. "Your sister and Sky Mitchell look happy together."

"They are. Sky's a pretty decent guy. Actually, both my older sisters have been lucky in love."

"That's right," she added. "You said Keira is getting married in a couple of months."

"Yeah and it can't come soon enough for me," he grumbled.

Lane laughed. "Wedding planning?"

"It's nuts. I've never seen grown women spend so much time debating such stupid shit. Pink or purple flowers in the bridesmaids' bouquets. Chicken or beef for the rehearsal dinner. Band or deejay at the reception. Christ. You would think they were plotting out designs for world domination rather than a silly party that will be over in five hours."

"Tris, I had no idea you were such a romantic," Lane teased and he laughed.

"Yeah, well, when I get married, I can promise you right now, it will be no muss, no fuss."

"Good luck with that." Her tone was rife with sarcasm and he knew she didn't think he had a leg to stand on.

Then he realized she was right about his unlikely "no frills" wedding. If he were marrying *her*, he'd give her pink *and* purple flowers, chicken *and* beef, a deejay *and* a band. He'd teased Keira's fiancé about his concessions on the wedding, calling the man whipped, but now that he thought about it, Will was the luckiest man alive.

He wondered what Lane's wedding had been like. She'd never mentioned it and suddenly he found himself hoping she'd gotten the day of her dreams. The marriage and the man may have failed her, but he silently prayed that for one day, one moment in time, she'd felt cherished, adored. She deserved that.

As if she could read his mind, she answered his unspoken question. "I suppose I shouldn't joke about your no-muss-no-fuss wedding. That certainly described mine."

"Oh?"

“James and I went to a justice of the peace. We coerced the couple getting married after us to stand in as our witnesses. After the ceremony, we went to an Italian restaurant and had spaghetti. Just the two of us.”

“You didn’t mind that?”

She shrugged. “It didn’t really matter where or how we did it. I don’t have any family and James is estranged from his. I would have liked to invite a few of the girls from work and some friends from high school, but James didn’t like the idea of spending a lot of money on ‘such foolishness’.” She punctuated the last two words with finger quotes, no doubt mimicking her prick of an ex. “Guess I should have seen the writing on the wall with that.” She laughed uneasily.

His thoughts turned to her comment about family. She’d confided in him that she’d grown up in a long line of foster and group homes, a ward of the state for as long as she could remember. His heart had ached to hear her talk so nonchalantly about her childhood, spent drifting from one set of foster parents to another. He’d gotten the impression a couple of the places she’d lived had not only been uncaring, but unsafe. While she swore she was never molested or beaten, he had a strong sense there had been some verbal abuse.

Until hearing her story, he’d never appreciated how truly blessed he’d been with his family. As the third child of seven, he probably should have felt lost in the shuffle, but he never had.

His mother died when he and his twin brother Killian were fifteen, and not a day passed that he didn’t miss her. Sunday Collins had been his idea of the perfect female and, until he’d met Lane, he hadn’t expected to ever meet a woman like her. His mother had been compassionate, beautiful, patient and loving. As he looked down at Lane, he realized she shared the exact same traits.

She caught him staring and offered a timid smile. “You’re deep in thought.”

He nodded as she lowered her feet from his lap and pushed herself to a sitting position.

"I suppose I should go—"

Tris cut off her words with a kiss. He reached over and pulled her to him as she spoke, unable to bear the thought of her leaving without sampling a small taste of her sweetness. He'd expected her to fight him and was thrilled when she returned his kiss, wrapping her hands around his neck to hold him closer. Her response broke the chains on his restraint and he gripped her hips, dragging her leg over his lap. They both moaned when he shoved her skirt up and positioned her over his covered cock. The heat of her pussy penetrated the thick denim, and he pushed against her.

"Want you," he murmured when they broke away from the passionate kiss. Her reaction was detonating electrical impulses in every nerve ending in his body and he thought he would go mad with the intensity, the power of her touches.

"God, Tris," she breathed against his lips. "I—"

Footsteps on the stairs halted her words and he felt an honest-to-God pain reverberate through his body when she quickly stood, her skirt falling back into place. He'd been a fool to start this on the living room couch and he felt guilty when he saw her flushed face. He rose and took her shaking hand in his.

"Sorry," he muttered as he turned toward the entrance of the apartment, surprised to find Sean and Ewan on either side of Pop.

"What's going on?" Tris asked as an anxious Riley and Keira followed them into the room.

Their fiery interlude was forgotten in a moment and Lane rushed to help as his brothers put Pop on the couch. His father tried to speak, but his words sounded like gibberish.

"Riley." Lane bent over to look into Pop's eyes. "Call 9-1-1. Right now." Her anxious tone alarmed his sister.

"What's wrong with him? What is it?" Riley asked, her voice trembling.

"Just do what Lane said." Tris realized of all of them, Lane was probably the best equipped to deal with this situation.

"Mr. Collins?" Lane tried to capture Pop's wavering attention. His father, always sharp as a hawk, looked dazed, confused. "Mr. Collins," she repeated louder. "Can you tell me how many fingers I'm holding up?" She held two fingers in front of his face.

Pop tried to answer, but his word was garbled, unrecognizable.

"I called," Riley said. "The ambulance is on the way."

Lane nodded as Ewan—visibly shaken—stepped forward. "He said his leg was numb. I figured he'd been on his feet too long. It was a helluva busy night. I told him he should come upstairs and lie down. He took two steps and almost fell. Thank God Sean was right there and caught him or he would have hit the floor. Pop told us to get him upstairs, but then his talking turned...well, we could barely make out what he was saying after that."

Lane looked back down at Pop, her gaze betraying how worried she was.

"What is it?" Tris asked, repeating Riley's questions. "What's wrong with him?"

Lane glanced at him, distress written on her face. "I'm not a doctor, Tris. I can't—"

"You suspect something. What is it?" he demanded. When she hesitated, his temper flared. "Dammit, Lane. I'm not going to sue you for malpractice. Just tell me what you think is wrong with Pop."

"I think he's had a stroke." Her answer was punctuated by the sound of sirens wailing in the distance.

"A stroke?" Keira asked, tears forming in her eyes. "No."

"I need to call Teagan," Ewan said. "She and Sky will be back at the hotel by now." He reached into his pocket for his cell.

"Keira." Riley handed her cell phone to her distraught older sister. "Call Will. Tell him to meet us at the hospital."

"Who's downstairs?" Tris was surprised he could ask the question so calmly with his insides churning like an angry ocean.

"The crowd is all but gone," Riley replied. "Joyce started shooping the rest out when Pop nearly fell." Tris was grateful for Joyce's help. A family friend, she'd been waitressing at the restaurant since before his mom died.

The sound of sirens outside the building alerted them to the arrival of the rescue squad. "Sean," Tris said. "Go down and show them the way up. Might be a tight fit for the gurney."

Sean left the room and Tris turned to see Lane sitting beside his pop. She was holding his hand and murmuring something to him. Her calm manner appeared to be comforting his confused father.

"Will you ride with me to the hospital?" he asked. She looked up and for a moment, he feared she would refuse. Knowing her, she'd be worried about being in the way.

Something in his face must have betrayed his need and she nodded. "Of course I will."

When the EMTs entered the room, Tris and his siblings stepped back as Lane calmly described Pop's symptoms and her suspicions. He could see the rescue workers agreed with her assessment. They loaded Pop into the ambulance as Lane led Tris to her car.

"I'll drive," she said. He was too numb, too worried to deny her. He merely nodded as she followed the rescue squad. They didn't speak during the trip and Tris was grateful for the silence. He needed time to get himself together. As the oldest son, his siblings would look to him for reassurance. Keira and Riley had ridden in the ambulance and, given their worried tears, he knew they were on the verge of falling apart. His younger brothers were in the car behind them and remembering the terrified look on Sean's face when they loaded Pop on the gurney was almost more than Tris could bear. Memories of the day his mother died assaulted him. He couldn't lose Pop. He just couldn't.

When they drove into the hospital parking lot, Lane grabbed a spot close to the emergency room entrance. She stopped him when he turned to open the door, her hand reaching to grasp his.

"Tris." She halted his retreat. "Your pop will be fine. He's a strong man and he'll make it through this. You just need to hold on to that thought and forget about everything else. Okay?"

He closed his eyes, nodding slowly, praying her words were the truth. Somehow she'd found just the right words to calm him down. Pop wouldn't die. Pop would recover.

"He'll be fine," he repeated aloud before leaving the car.

* * * * *

Several tense hours passed as he and his siblings awaited word on Pop's welfare. Lane stayed with them, making endless trips for coffee and getting status updates from the nurses on duty with whom she used to work.

His pop had indeed suffered a stroke, and he was currently with a physician who was administering a clot-busting drug. The good news was, the stroke had been relatively mild and, though he would require rehabilitation and care, he was expected to make a full recovery. The doctor praised them for their quick response and for getting him to the hospital so quickly. Tris knew they had Lane to thank for that.

It was so late it was early, and they were currently taking turns visiting Pop before returning home. They'd decided to go in small groups so as not to overwhelm him. Will and Keira were with Pop now while the rest of them remained in the waiting room.

Throughout the evening Lane had remained unruffled and Tris realized her reaction to the situation had helped keep his fairly excitable family calm. He watched as she handed Ewan a cup of coffee, saying something that made his brother laugh. She turned and he caught the slight wince on her face.

Damn shoes. He'd forgotten. He rose, grasping her hand. "Sit down before you fall down," he murmured in her ear.

"I'm fine, Tris."

"You're dead on your feet and torturing yourself in those shoes. They aren't practical."

She laughed. "They aren't practical for a night with the Collins clan, that's for damn sure. In any other situation, they're just fine. When I left home tonight, I thought I'd be sipping a glass of wine at the bar. I had no idea I'd be tending said bar and hanging out in the emergency room until the wee hours of the morning. You sure do know how to show a girl a good time, Tristan Collins."

He grinned, too tired to even chuckle at her joke. "You were a godsend tonight." He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. She tensed up for a moment, but he kept applying pressure until she relaxed into his hold.

"I'm a nurse," she said, as if that simple statement should explain it all.

"It was more than that and you know it. I'm not sure how this night would have gone if you hadn't been here." Although he certainly had some idea, as he pictured his sisters crying inconsolably and he and his brothers ranting and raving at every poor medical professional they could find.

Keira and Will entered the room as Teagan and Sky stood to take their turn visiting Pop. Keira smiled tiredly at Lane and Tris, turning to whisper something to Will before crossing the room to join them.

"Lane, I hope to hell my brother is thanking you for all you've done tonight."

"He is," Lane assured her.

"I spoke with the doctor after seeing Pop. He said even after he's released, he's going to need care."

Lane nodded. "That's true."

"I know you're a nurse," Keira said, "and between jobs. I was wondering...well, I was hoping you would consider coming to stay at the apartment for a while to take care of Pop. We'd pay you, of course," she added quickly when Lane appeared ready to refuse.

"I'm flattered by the offer, but—"

"Pop knows you. He'll be comfortable with you and I know he'd prefer to be at home versus a rehabilitation center. Please say you'll consider it," Keira pressed. "He'll still be here for a few more days. If you agree, you can move in the day after tomorrow and be settled by the time Pop is released. I know there isn't a lot of room in the apartment, but I'm sure with some juggling—"

Riley had come over in the midst of Keira's speech, quickly picking up the gist of the conversation. "You can stay in my room with me. Or Tris can bunk in with Ewan and you can stay in the attic room. Of course, that would probably be too far away from Pop."

"All of that can be worked out. We can arrange the rooms however you think best," Keira interjected.

"I'll think about it." Lane's tone suggested she would say anything to escape this discussion.

"You will?" Keira asked, disbelief lacing her voice.

"Yes. I will. Promise."

"Wonderful. Well, Will's gone to get the car. I'm pooped. Want a ride home, Riley?"

"Hell yeah. I'm done in."

"I'll talk to you in the morning, Tris," Keira said.

"Bye, sis," he said, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. "See you at home, Riley."

They watched his sisters leave before Lane turned to him.

"I can't—"

"Yes, you can. You should. I really wish you would." His tone was somewhat pleading, but he was too tired to give a shit. Lane had saved him tonight and the idea of having her close at hand while Pop recovered was the answer to a prayer.

His words seemed to take some of the wind out of her sails. "I just—"

"Think about it," he said, cutting her off again. "You're between jobs. You don't have an apartment yet. You could take your time looking for both those things while taking care of Pop. I don't know what else to say to convince you, Lane, other than please. We need you. *I need you.*"

She sighed tiredly before nodding. "Okay. I'll do it."

Chapter Three

Tris and Ewan carried her suitcases upstairs to the Collins apartment, and Lane tried to sort out what the hell was going on in her body. Her stomach was full of butterflies, her heart racing, her hands shaking and her head pounding. This could *not* be a good sign. What was she thinking to agree to such an arrangement? She followed the brothers' progress down the hall as they put her belongings in Riley's room.

She'd elected to room with Tristan's sister—despite the potential problems involved with that decision—rather than ask Tris to uproot and move into Ewan's room. For one thing, she really did feel she should be close to Mr. Collins, especially during his first few days home. Secondly—and most importantly—she thought there might be some protection in staying with Riley. Surely Tris wouldn't try to sneak into her bed with his sister sleeping a few feet away. She would have to figure out how to stay away from Tris until she managed to control her attraction to him.

It had been four days since his pop's stroke. Tris had been working double shifts at the pub and visiting his father in the hospital, so they hadn't had more than a few minutes to talk about her new position in his family's household and they'd had *no* time to talk about what had happened on the couch. If his family hadn't come upstairs when they had, she would have had sex with him.

Tris came out of the room with a too-pleased grin on his face and she wondered if she'd bitten off more than she could chew. He continued toward her, wrapping a possessive arm around her waist and holding her close. She struggled when Ewan followed Tris into the living room, but her big-as-a-mountain friend refused to release her. Short of kneeing him in the balls, which she seriously considered, she saw no way to avoid his grip.

Ewan smiled at them, shaking his head. "Are you two going to need a chaperone?"

"I won't. Tris might," she said as Tris released her and gave his brother a dirty look.

"I'll bear that in mind. I've got some work to do in the restaurant office. Freaking tax time. Kicks my ass every year. You coming, Tris?" Ewan asked.

"I'll be down in a bit," Tris said.

Ewan pretended to give Tris a stern look before grinning at her. She rolled her eyes as he headed downstairs, chuckling to himself. Riley was already in the restaurant kitchen working on the lunch special, which left her alone with Tris.

She took a deep breath and prepared to issue the speech she'd been practicing for days. "Tris—"

"Save your breath, Lane."

"What?" She was taken off guard by his no-nonsense demeanor.

"You intend to warn me off. Tell me how you're here to serve as my pop's nurse and that's all. You'll mention how you just got out of a crappy marriage and you'll probably build up to some bullshit about being free and enjoying it and then you'll wind down with the old 'I'm not interested in a relationship right now' line."

She stared at him, dumbstruck.

"How'd I do?" he asked with a cocky grin.

She sucked in an angry breath at his smug attitude. "Wanna play, do you?"

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Play?"

"Since you think you've got me all figured out, why don't I take a stab at *you*? Let's see. You'll probably push your chest out like a cocky bastard and strut a little." She threw her shoulders back to illustrate her point.

He chuckled at her imitation. "Damn, sweetheart. I sure do like the way I look on you." His gaze fell to her out-thrust breasts and she groaned.

"Ugh. You're so frustrating."

"So what do you think I'll say?"

"You'll not only ignore everything I say, dismissing my feelings as inconsequential and unimportant, but you'll probably even think I'm stupid enough to fall straight into your arms and bed with no more than a 'howdy do' just because you flash that charming grin at me. So," she asked with a smirk, "how did I do?"

"You think my grin is charming?" He showed her firsthand just how charming it could be.

She rolled her eyes and tried to ignore the heat building in the southern region of her body.

He shook his head at her reaction and she noticed he was amused, a fact that began to piss her off.

"You're cute as hell when you're fired up. And just so you know, you lost the game. None of that was even close to right."

Her anger vanished at his words. "It wasn't?"

"I respect your feelings, Lane. I always have. I held my tongue and my temper for months when I knew you were living in a miserable home. I did that because I knew you weren't ready to leave, that you hadn't given up hope for your marriage, and I didn't want to influence your decision."

She nodded and tried to push back the tears clogging her throat. He hadn't uttered the word *divorce* to her until she'd spoken it aloud, and even then he'd merely listened and offered support as she'd tried to find a way out of her marriage. He'd never come on to her in a sexual way until last Wednesday.

"I only want one thing for you, kitten, and that's for you to be happy. But maybe I am a cocky bastard because I sure as hell think I know the best way to make you happy."

"Sex?" Her tone was pure smartass, but she was struggling to regain her footing. As always, Tris had knocked her down a peg or two.

"Among other things," he replied. "We're friends and we're attracted to each other. I don't see any harm in mixing the two a bit."

"I'm not ready for this."

He nodded. "Tell you what, why don't we just take it a step at a time? There's no reason to rush. My pop needs you a helluva lot more than I do, although my cock is certainly disagreeing with those words at the moment."

She laughed.

"You've been gone a year, Lane. Let's take some time to get to know one another again, try to piece out where this thing is taking us."

"So you won't touch me?" She needed to be clear on their parameters, their limits. She couldn't spend the next few weeks anticipating and wondering what he might do.

"I can't promise you that. Is that what you want from me?"

Was it? No, she thought. She liked holding hands with him, loved his sweet kisses—whether they were on her forehead or her lips. His foot rub had been paradise incarnate.

"No, that's not what I want." She might go to hell for her desires, but she wanted him—badly. She would just have to find a way to keep their relationship physical. Surely she could do that.

"Thank God," he said with a relieved laugh. "That was gonna be a tough promise to make. You're one hard woman to hold at arm's length." To prove his point, he pulled her toward him. "How 'bout a kiss to make up?"

"Were we fighting?"

"Nah, but I have a feeling any fights we have will be few and far between. Gotta snatch up my free kisses where I can."

Lane smiled. He leaned down to brush his lips against hers, the initial touch soft, sweet.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she remembered her impression of Tristan Collins when they'd first met. He'd been this huge, gruff bartender with his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows. Her first night in the bar, he'd tossed out two rowdy drunks without even breaking a sweat. She was continually intrigued by all the facets that resided within him – part grizzly, part teddy bear.

Tris deepened the kiss and Lane knew it would be an impossible task to fight off his advances. She tangled her fingers in his thick, dark hair and reveled in the feeling of being held in his arms.

Despite the progress she'd made over the past year to better herself, to shrug off some of the baggage she was still carrying around from childhood and a bad marriage, she simply couldn't let herself get wrapped up too tightly in Tristan's world. She was in the apartment to care for his father, but while here, she may as well enjoy some of these stolen, oh so hot kisses. She was an adult. Surely she could maintain this friendship with benefits without sacrificing her hard-earned independence.

She stepped away and he let her go, looking at her curiously. "I can't get caught in your web." She was surprised she'd voiced her fears aloud. She never told anyone what she was thinking, always playing her cards close to her chest. Yet with Tris, the words seemed to just fall out.

"I'm a spider?"

She shrugged and laughed. "Sometimes it feels like you have eight hands." She recalled the other night behind the bar – his teasing touches.

"You know, kitten, you might like getting caught in my web." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and she laughed.

"Why do you assume it's a web of seduction?"

He frowned. "Do I make you feel trapped?"

"Oh no." She wanted to dispel that misunderstanding. "It feels more like a web of protection."

He considered her words and nodded. "That's probably accurate. I'll always keep you safe, Lane. Even from me."

"I can take care of myself, Tris. I don't need protection."

His eyes lowered and she sensed she'd upset him with her words. "Don't run away again."

She was confused by his abrupt change of topic. "What?"

"If I say or do something that scares you, don't run away. Stay and we'll talk it out."

"You don't scare me." She sensed he was trying to tell her something and she was missing it.

He smiled, but it wasn't a happy look. "I terrify you and you know it. You like being independent, self-reliant. I get that, Lane. I'm not trying to steal that from you. I'm not like your fucking ex."

Truer words were never spoken. Tristan and James were night and day—physically, emotionally, mentally. Her ex-husband hadn't been much taller than her and his build could only be described as slight, while Tris towered over her. After their marriage, James became a cold, distant man while Tristan tended to wear his emotions like some folks wore clothes. She could always tell how he was feeling and she liked that.

"I've never confused you for James. I never would."

"He hurt you, Lane, and I'm not just talking about the beating. For two years he put you down, tried to make you feel small, stupid and insignificant. I can only assume that was his way of feeling like a big man. But he failed."

She considered his words. James had been an ass, constantly berating her until most days she'd dreaded going home.

"You forget I was there. I saw you once a week, every week as you were going through all of that, and you know what I saw?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I saw a pretty, intelligent woman who, despite her miserable home life, still came in every week with a smile on her face and brimming with self-confidence."

She snorted and tried to refute his comment, but he continued. "You didn't tuck yourself away in the corner booth. You sat down at the end of the bar and you struck up a conversation. Regardless of the fact your marriage was shitty, you didn't let James strip away your personality and you didn't give up this freedom you seem so hell-bent on flaunting in front of me. If James had won, you never would have stepped a foot in the pub."

She'd blown thousands in therapy the past year to figure out exactly what Tris had said in three minutes. The thought made her want to laugh and cry at the same time. "You missed your calling," she said, trying to lighten the mood. "You were born to be a psychiatrist."

He shrugged. "Figure the only difference between that and a bartender is a diploma. And since I wasn't going to spend eight more years in school..."

She rose on her tiptoes to place a kiss on his cheek. "Why did you tell me all of that?"

"You ran away the last time I said I wanted to protect you. You left for a whole year, Lane."

She was taken aback by the sadness in his voice and for a moment she wanted to disprove his words, deny the true reason she'd left, but she wouldn't tell him a lie. "I needed to know I could survive on my own. You don't know what it was like for me growing up. Always at the mercy of whoever agreed to let me live in their house. And then with James, no matter how hard I tried, I was never good enough. I've spent a lifetime trying to make people want me, Tris. And for what?"

"Lane—" he started, but she kept talking, a lifetime's worth of pain pouring from her.

"I woke up one morning and realized there was only one person whose approval I needed and that was mine." She turned quickly, unwilling to let Tris see the tears forming in her eyes.

Footsteps on the stairs saved her from having to see the pity in Tristan's eyes over what she'd just revealed. Jesus, where had all that come from? Staying here was going to be harder than she'd thought if she kept baring her soul at every turn.

Sean entered the room, grinning when he spotted her.

"Hey, Lane." He came across the room and gathered her up in a big bear hug. Though only nineteen years old, Sean was as massive as his older brother but lacked the physical restraints that age and experience had taught Tristan. Sean was in the height of his youth and his exuberance was contagious, as he barreled through places like a bull in a china closet. She laughed as he picked her up and spun her around, and she silently rejoiced at his very timely interruption.

"I'm glad you agreed to take care of Pop. The old guy is crazy about you. Besides, with you here, maybe Tris will stop being such a prick all the time."

Lane looked toward Tris then back at Sean, shaking her head. "I've never seen your brother act like a —" She paused, uncomfortable repeating Sean's word.

"A prick," Tris finished for her while Sean laughed at her modesty.

"You've never seen it," Sean continued, "because he's only a prick when you aren't around." As he said the word *prick*, he tapped her on the nose to punctuate it and she swatted away his hand playfully.

"You might want to watch your mouth there, brat," Tris said.

"Oh yeah?" Sean dared Tris to come closer, wiggling his fingers in invitation, and for a moment Lane was afraid they were going to get into a fight. "I don't see anybody around here who's man enough to make me watch what I say."

Tris grinned and took two steps closer to his brother. Lane struggled to decide if his intimidating stance was real or pretend.

"Is that right?" Tris goaded.

"Um, guys?" she said, but they ignored her as Sean shoved Tris away.

"Back off, bro. You *do not* want a piece of this," Sean taunted.

Tris moved in so quickly, Lane had to jump back as the two enormous men fell into a heap and started wrestling on the floor. She circled them, frightened they would seriously hurt each other. Tristan's leg knocked against a table and the vase of flowers on top would have fallen if she hadn't managed to catch it.

Sean cursed as Tris got him in a headlock.

"And you need to keep your hands off my girl," Tris said, his face red with the exertion of trying to hold Sean down.

His girl? Oh shit. That was *not* supposed to make her feel so good.

Neither man seemed inclined to give up and Lane almost cried with relief when Keira entered the room.

"Jesus Christ. Aren't you guys a bit old for this shit?" She stepped over the two men flailing on the floor and headed toward the kitchen. "Hey, Lane. All settled in?"

Lane nodded, wondering at Keira's calm countenance in the face of two of her brothers trying to pummel each other to death.

"Want a sandwich?" Keira asked. Lane looked back at Tris and Sean, sweating and panting, still wrestling on the floor.

Keira followed her gaze and yelled at her brothers. "Either one of you dumbasses want a sandwich?"

Tris had Sean trapped beneath him, but the younger man was still giving him a pretty hard fight. "I'm waiting to hear Sean cry uncle."

"Hell will freeze over," Sean said.

Keira walked over to the men and gave each a kick. "I'm gonna uncle both your asses if you don't stop that and get up. You're scaring Lane. She's not used to the way you two carry on."

Her words seemed to take the wind out of their sails as Tris stood quickly, reaching to offer Sean a hand up. Both men turned to Lane with guilty expressions.

"Sorry, kitten. I thought you knew we were wrestling, just messing around."

"We do it all the time," Sean added.

She laughed lightly, trying to pretend she hadn't been worried they'd seriously hurt each other. "Oh, I knew that." She hoped they'd buy the lie.

Tris frowned. He walked over and placed his large palm against her cheek. "I think we're going to have to keep in mind you aren't used to big families."

"Big, insane families," Keira added. "Come on, Sean. Help me make some lunch."

Sean started to follow Keira to the kitchen but stopped as he passed Lane. "Sorry if we scared you." He bent to give her a brotherly peck on the cheek.

"No worries," she said, "but I think you and I are going to have to talk later about your hip position. You went down *way* too fast."

Sean laughed. "I'll look forward to your coaching."

* * * * *

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly as Keira, Sean, Tris and Lane mapped out a plan for their pop's return to the apartment. The siblings were determined to make sure the transition was easy and Lane was touched to see how much they all loved their father.

She didn't even know who her father was. Her mother, a drug addict, hadn't known who'd gotten her pregnant. Lane could only vaguely recall the grandmother who'd kept her when she was a baby while her mother lived her life strung out on heroin. Her mother had disappeared a few months before her grandmother died and when she was seven, Lane had become a ward of the state.

"Lane?" Tris said. She looked up and realized they were all staring at her.

"Sorry. Drifted off there for a minute. Did you ask something?"

"We wanted to know if you needed anything else. Is your room okay?" Keira asked.

Lane had unpacked her belongings earlier. Most of her things were in storage for now. "It's fine." Sharing the room with Riley, however, was going to be problematic for reasons she wasn't about to admit to anyone, least of all Tris.

"Well, sounds like we have everything in hand. Just remember, Lane, no one expects you to do it all. There are five of us around and we intend to help out as much as possible. If you ever need a break, just give a shout and one of us will relieve you." Keira rose from the table.

"Hey, Kiki," Sean said, standing too. "Can you give me a ride back to my apartment? I let a friend borrow my car."

"Sure. Come on. See you tomorrow at the hospital," Keira said to Tris. They were bringing their pop home first thing in the morning.

Keira and Sean disappeared down the stairs and Tris leaned toward her, placing his arm across the back of her chair. "I need to talk to Ewan about tax stuff for a little while. Do you mind if I leave you alone for an hour or so?"

"I'll be fine. I borrowed a couple of books about caring for stroke victims. I've been reading them the last few days, but I'd like to take another peek, make some more notes."

He nodded and rose, taking her hand to help her up as well. "Okay. I'll see you later then." He bent down and kissed her. She expected his kiss to be a quick one, but as always happened with the man, he threw her for a loop. His arms engulfed her as he used his tongue to push her lips open. She clung to his shirt as he took complete ownership of her lips. When he finally moved away, he grinned at her. "I guess that will tide me over 'til I see you again."

"You're only going to be gone an hour. That felt like a farewell kiss to cover months of separation."

He shrugged and her heart gave a painful lurch as she realized he truly was afraid of her leaving again.

"I'll see you later," she whispered, offering him another quick kiss. "Promise."

* * * * *

Tris walked upstairs with a distinct spring in his step. Then he realized he was grinning. Shit, he had it bad. The fact that Lane was now living in his family's apartment thrilled him. The last year had dragged by relentlessly from one nothing day to another.

While he didn't pretend it was going to be easy to break through the barriers she'd built to protect herself, he sure as hell intended to give it the old college try. Her words earlier had broken his heart as he considered how much she'd suffered in her young life. Despite her assertions about being a strong, independent woman, Tris could see the scared, lonely little girl still cowering inside—desperate for love and acceptance. Somehow he had to prove to her she could have it all—freedom, love, companionship.

He was determined to win her heart and, to achieve his goal, he'd decided to proceed with his plan to seduce Lane into falling in love with him. She seemed much more comfortable with the idea of a physical relationship. While he'd prefer to win her heart first, he knew—with Lane's inability to get close to people—he'd have to start at the end.

He looked around the living room, surprised to find it empty. Walking down the hallway, he saw the door to Riley's room ajar. He stepped inside and found Lane curled up on her side on Teagan's old bed, fast asleep.

No time like the present to advance his plan.

He closed the door, then tiptoed over and took the book she'd been reading out of her hand. She stirred, her eyes opening slowly.

"Hey." She looked around the room and he watched her become aware of her surroundings.

“Must have been some stimulating reading,” he teased.

She grinned. “Not really. Medical texts. Better than counting sheep on restless nights. The journals never fail to put me out in seconds. How are the taxes going, Everest?”

He laughed at her use of his nickname and realized, with her lying down and him standing over her, he probably *did* resemble a mountain. He sat on the edge of the bed, pleased when she didn’t stiffen up or try to move away. He was making progress.

“I don’t want to talk about taxes.” He studied her lips, his arousal growing when her tongue darted out to lick them nervously.

“You don’t?”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to talk at all.”

He bent over to kiss her, giving her time to balk, to refuse him if that was her intent. When she reached up, threading her fingers in his hair and pulling him closer, he knew he’d found heaven. For several minutes they kissed as he played with her soft hair and drank in her sweet breath. She unleashed his hunger for more when she tugged his shirttail from his pants and her hands began exploring his bare chest beneath the cotton.

He moved away for a second, taking her hands from under his shirt and dragging her to a seated position. “I want to see you.” He grasped the hem of her T-shirt and tugged it off. His gaze drifted down her body, savoring every bare inch of skin revealed to him. Her bra was dark pink, delicate and surprisingly feminine. He’d pictured her as a no-nonsense kind of woman when it came to underwear, so he was pleased to discover this sexy side. “That bra is hot.” His fingers traced the tops of her breasts exposed by the lacy material.

“My turn.” She pulled his shirt over his head and he was amazed when she leaned forward, teasing his small, tight nipples with her tongue. She nipped his pec with her teeth, the small bite painful and erotic as hell. She soothed the sore spot with a soft kiss.

Jesus. Lane was going to be a firecracker in bed.

Tris hadn't planned beyond a little bit of making out, some touching and kissing, but Lane triggered something inside him that was going to be hard to corral. He gripped the top of her bra, drawing it below her breasts. The lace held her tits up and out and his mouth watered for a taste. Bending down, he took one turgid nipple into his mouth, sucking on the warm flesh.

"God," she whispered as he increased the suction. Her fingers tightened in his hair and he gave her a bit of her own medicine, teasing her nipple with his teeth. "Harder," she pleaded and he complied. She cried out and he had to fight not to take her right then and there.

"Pants off." His hands wrestled with the button and zipper on her jeans.

She hesitated and he stopped, waiting until her gaze rose to his. "I just want to touch you, Lane. Nothing more, I promise."

A shy smile crossed her lips and she helped him remove her jeans, lifting her hips and kicking off the denim and her panties in one quick movement. He pushed her back onto the bed, his lips covering every bare inch of skin with kisses, licks, nips.

She gripped his waist, tugging him over her, ankles wrapping together at the base of his back. She used her legs to draw his hips to the vee between her thighs. He thrust his covered cock against her pussy, the wet heat of her body penetrating the thick material of his jeans. He thrust over and over, using the rough denim to stimulate her clit as he kissed her and his hands cupped her breasts, squeezing the firm, soft mounds. He literally couldn't get enough of her, couldn't touch enough of her.

She lifted her hips, rubbing her cunt against him, her fingernails scratching a path across his back that was painful and sexy as hell. His mind whirled as he tried to make this wild woman fit the image of the staid, calm friend he thought he'd known until this moment.

He fought to pull himself together. He was humping Lane like a dog in heat in his sister's bedroom. This hadn't been his intention when he'd come into the room. He moved away and grinned at the dazed look in his kitten's eyes.

He pushed himself to lie beside her and watched a frown cross her face. "I'm not going to leave you." He caressed her stomach, letting his fingers travel lower to tangle with the dark hair covering her pussy. "Open your legs."

Her thighs parted and he wasted no time pushing two fingers deep inside her. She groaned, her eyes drifting closed.

"Watch me," he demanded. Her eyelids fluttered as he dragged his fingers out. "I want to see your eyes when you come."

She smiled for only a second before her lips parted on a gasp. He added a third finger and increased his pace. Her hips thrust in time with his motions and she gave an adorable squeal when he applied pressure to her clit with his thumb.

"Tris," she hissed as he moved his fingers within her, faster and harder. Something about her hungry response urged him on, encouraging him to take her as he'd always dreamed—rough, unrestrained. She obeyed his command, her gaze never faltering from his, and he saw her eyes cloud over as she reached the peak just moments before she came apart. Her inner muscles clenched his fingers tightly and she trembled as the orgasm raged through her.

"Shit," she whispered breathlessly as she slowly began to recover.

"Was that a good shit or a bad shit?"

"That was a 'you blew my mind' shit." She turned on her side to face him and he savored the closeness and the complete lack of strangeness. Being half-naked with her felt more natural than anything he'd ever done in his life. He could see from the relaxed expression on her face she agreed with the sentiment.

They were a tight fit on the twin bed and she scooted over to give him more room on the tiny mattress. She glanced down and he knew she was looking at his cock, straining against the material of his jeans.

She dragged her hand across the front placket and he sucked in a breath. "Damn I love your hand on me."

"I loved your hand *in* me." She applied more pressure and he covered her fingers, moving his in time with hers as she continued to speak. "I have to admit it's been a while since I've had an orgasm I didn't give myself. I can't quite believe I just let you do that. Only excuse I have is extreme horniness."

He laughed. "It's good to know you didn't go on some wild sex spree out there in California."

She grinned. "Hardly. I honestly can't remember the last time I had sex. James and I sort of stopped..." She paused and he leaned forward to kiss her gently.

"I'm glad I could be of assistance."

She started to unbutton his jeans and he halted her. "Dammit Lane, I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I don't think we can take this any further right now."

"Why?"

"Well, for a couple of reasons. Number one, a member of my family could come walking through that door any minute now."

Her gaze traveled to the bedroom door—the one he hadn't bothered to lock.

"Secondly, I promised you we'd take things slow. Take the time to get to know each other again. I mean to keep that promise."

She nodded. "You're absolutely right. God, I'm not sure when I turned into such a slut."

He laughed. "You're about as far from being a slut as I am from being a priest. We're attracted to each other. I think we always have been. Things are different now."

"I'm not married anymore."

"Thank God. Kitten, I'm gonna make love to you until your hair curls, but when I do it, it's going to be somewhere private, on a big bed, and we're going to have lots and lots of time to do it right."

She closed her eyes and sighed sadly. He wondered what she was thinking.

"I don't want a relationship, Tris."

He leaned forward to kiss her softly. "I know that, Lane. I'm not saying I accept it, just that I understand how you feel and why you feel that way."

"So it'll just be sex, right?"

He shook his head. "Do you want me to lie to you? Look at you and say, 'Sure, Lane, we're just going to fuck'?"

"That would be a lie?"

He chuckled. "That would be a whopper."

"But I told you earlier —"

He interrupted her. "I know what you told me. But I didn't have a chance to respond. I can understand your reasoning, but it's not quite sound."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It seems to me you've spent your entire life surviving on your own. Your problem isn't living alone. You've mastered that. Your problem is letting people in."

He tapped her forehead lightly. "In here." His finger moved to touch her heart. "And in here."

Was he right? Had she run for the wrong reason? Was she fighting the wrong demon? For her entire life, she'd felt trapped—with James, caught up in the sticky fingers of the foster-care system—always held, restrained, at someone else's mercy. In her struggle for freedom, had she closed herself off from others?

"Don't look so worried. It's not hard, Lane. I'll show you the way."

"The way?"

"The way to be your own person and still share your life with someone."

"That's not possible," she whispered.

He laughed. "Sure it is, kitten." Tris glanced at his watch and grimaced. "My shift starts in fifteen minutes. I'm going to need a cold shower before then if I'm going to make it through the night."

She grinned sheepishly. "I feel guilty leaving you like this while you made sure I'm all warm and fuzzy inside."

"Warm and fuzzy, eh? I like that."

"Yeah, well, I think I'd like to return the favor sometime."

Tris wrapped his arms around her, kissing the top of her head. "It's a date."

Chapter Four

Lane sat on a bench near the waterfront, stifling a tired yawn and reflecting on the past week. Tristan's pop had returned home from the hospital and the past few days had been hectic and stressful for the family and for her. Though Mr. Collins' stroke had been relatively mild, she'd seen the worried looks on his children's faces as he struggled to speak clearly. Always a vibrant and lively man, he now moved slowly, cautiously, and it hurt them to see it. Just yesterday he'd forgotten her name. Lane had assured the others memory loss was common and nothing to worry about, but she'd seen the pain lingering behind their forced smiles.

Tristan was still spending long hours in the pub, working the lunch and dinner shifts most days. Lane knew it bothered him to see his father so frail and she wished there was some way to make him realize the progress Mr. Collins was making. It wasn't going to be a quick road to recovery but, like his children, he seemed to have an indomitable spirit and Lane truly believed he'd be back to his feisty old self soon.

Keira was spending the morning with him. Lane knew the woman wanted to have some time alone with the man. She'd watched Tristan's sisters with their father, a spark of envy growing as she sensed the special bond each of the women shared with their beloved pop.

She and Tristan hadn't had the opportunity to say more than a few words in passing. Her work with his pop and his seeming avoidance of the apartment had put a definite halt to any progress they could be making in the bedroom. She recalled the orgasm he'd given her with his hand and sighed. She was definitely going to have sex with the man. There was no doubt about that. Their brief afternoon tryst had proved their compatibility stretched well beyond the walls of friendship.

She rubbed her eyes sleepily. God, her thoughts were a jumbled mess as her tired mind jumped from one worry to the next. She'd spent the last week trying to determine if Tristan had the right of it. Perhaps she *had* been fighting the wrong demons, shutting herself off from others, from love, all in the name of self-reliance. She wanted to be independent, but she wanted Tris. What if he was correct? What if she could have both? She'd tried with James and her ex had only proven to her once again she'd been a fool to believe she could have it all.

She was running on empty and she knew it. Trying to sleep in the same room with Riley was wearing her out. Every night she fought to remain awake until she heard Tris retire to his bedroom. As the one who closed down the bar each night, he usually didn't head to bed until after one, or even later on the weekends. Once the coast was clear, she'd sneak out to the couch to try to grab a few hours of sleep where no one in the family could hear her.

She cried in her sleep. It was an odd thing, she knew, and she was too embarrassed to let anyone see it. She grimaced. Why couldn't she be normal and sleepwalk or snore? Her nighttime tears had driven James crazy and he was glad when she'd suggested separate bedrooms, claiming he was tired of being woken up every night, having to listen to her stupid crying.

"Lane?"

She felt the hair on the back of her neck rise at the sound of the familiar voice.

Glancing up, she saw her ex-husband. It was as if thinking his name had summoned him and she took a deep breath in hopes of remaining calm. She was too tired to deal with this.

"Oh my God," he said, stepping closer. "I was just heading out for some lunch and I saw you sitting here. When did you come back to Baltimore?" His voice was charming and kind and for a moment, she was reminded of the man she'd fallen in love with all those years ago.

"I've only been in town a few weeks."

"I wish you would've called me. I've been so worried about you. You just disappeared."

She'd pursued her divorce strictly through lawyers, managing to never have to see James during the process. Since he'd beaten her and put her in the hospital, the lawyers never questioned her desire to handle the whole ordeal by proxy.

"I needed to get away." She wished her voice didn't sound so tight, so strained. "I'm sure you can understand that."

"Lane, I've been destroyed this last year. Eaten up with guilt. I...I wanted to say I'm sorry. To apologize for hurting you. God, I never meant to hurt you like that. It's just, I was so scared when you said you were leaving—"

She held her hand up, desperate to halt anything else he might say. While James had been a distant, cruel bastard for most of their marriage, there had also been a few good times. His childhood, in many ways, had been as shitty as hers. His parents—both alcoholics—took turns using him for a punching bag, and for years she'd allowed her pity for the abuse he'd suffered to excuse so many of the mean things he'd said to her.

They'd been fools to believe they could actually achieve a normal relationship when neither of them had a clue what that entailed. Having spent the past week with the Collins clan, Lane's eyes had been opened to what it meant to be part of a large and loving family.

James was out of her life now and she'd moved on, but she truly did believe his words were genuine.

"I accept your apology."

"I can't tell you what it means to me to hear you say that," James said. "I was on my way to pick up some lunch. Would you like to join me?"

She fought against the urge to laugh in his face. While she may have accepted his apology, she would never forget what he'd done to her. Never forget the hell he'd put her through.

He smiled and she was shocked to see what looked like blatant desire in his eyes. He'd never wanted her. Sex with him had been an unpleasant chore...for both of them. James' ability to find fault with her extended from housework and daily routines to the bedroom as well. He pointed out every flaw with her body. She'd worried after her divorce that James had killed all her desire, but one minute in Tristan's presence had proven that fear unfounded.

"Maybe we could spend the afternoon together. Catch up."

She shook her head. "No thanks. I really need to get back home."

"Home? Where are you living?"

"I'm staying with some friends until I find a place of my own." Her answer was purposely evasive.

"You look great, Lane."

She looked around, uncomfortable under his intense stare. She had nothing left to say to him. "I suppose I should be going." She rose and turned to leave when the silence between them stretched out uncomfortably.

"You left a few things at the house," he added quickly. "I kept them for you."

"You didn't have to do that. I took everything I wanted."

"I have your grandmother's picture."

She took a deep breath, shocked by his words. When she'd returned to their house the morning she'd checked out of the hospital, she hadn't been able to find the picture. In her haste to escape town, she hadn't had time to do a thorough search. It was the only thing she'd managed to hold on to throughout her twisted childhood. It was quite simply her most precious possession, the only thing that had ever given her some sense of identity. She didn't remember her grandmother well, but she did recall that the woman loved and cared for her as best she could.

"I want it back," she said.

"I knew you would. That's why I kept it. Why don't you give me your phone number? We'll work out a time for you to swing by the house to pick it up."

She nodded, giving him her cell number. She'd thought the picture lost to her for good.

"I'll call you." His grin was wide and she was struck by the odd notion she'd just offered her throat to the vampire. James had won her over with the same boyish good looks and charm on their first date. The difference was, now she knew it was all an act.

"Goodbye, James." She headed back toward the pub, walking nearly six blocks before she managed to calm her racing heart. She wondered if, by returning to Baltimore, she hadn't tempted fate just a bit *too* far. First with Tris and now with James.

* * * * *

"How about one more, Mr. Collins?" Lane coaxed, guiding her patient through his daily exercises.

"How m-many times do I have to tell you to call me P-Pat?"

She grinned. He'd extended the same offer every Wednesday as she'd sat at the bar talking sports with him or Tris. She'd always refused, saying it would feel strange. However, this was the first time since his stroke he'd protested her calling him Mr. Collins. Even though his words were still slurred, she felt like hugging him. Each day, she watched more and more of the boisterous man re-emerge.

"I've told you a million times, Mr. Collins. It wouldn't be appropriate for me to call you by your first name."

"Why the h-hell not? I've told you to."

She grinned and let the discussion drop. "You know you aren't fooling me by trying to pick an argument. You're going to finish your exercises—all of them."

"Slave driver," he muttered as they resumed their work. He was all bluster. She'd never seen anyone so determined to recover and she suddenly understood where Tris got his stubbornness. He was very much like his father.

"How does your leg feel today? Any numbness?"

He shook his head. "You're a good n-nurse. Not m-many women would p-put up with me."

She grinned. "Thank you. Funny though, I don't remember you saying that earlier when I was making you do your speech exercises. Seem to recall you telling me to buzz off."

"F-feel like a damn fool. I know how to t-talk."

"You're right. You do. In fact, you talk too much. Now stop trying to distract me. You're not finished with your workout."

He chuckled at her joke and continued his exercises. He was quiet for several minutes before starting a new line of conversation. "Your p-parents must be very p-proud of you, Lane."

His comment seemed to come out of the blue and the shock of it caught her off guard. "I didn't know my parents." She shrugged lightly, trying to blink back the tears that had snuck in and attacked her. "I'm a foster kid."

Mr. Collins frowned and shook his head. "I'm s-sorry," he slurred. "Did I know that?" She knew of all the lingering effects of his stroke, the memory loss bothered him the most.

She shook her head. "No, I'm sure you didn't. I don't tell a lot of people."

"Tristan knows."

She nodded, unsure if his comment was a question or a statement. "He knows."

"He's a g-good man, my Tristan," Mr. Collins said and Lane had to swallow against the lump in her throat. No man loved or doted on his kids more than Mr. Collins. After a week in his company, she thought she should be used to hearing him sing their praises, but it never failed to touch her.

"Yes, he is. We're very good friends." She was unsure how else to respond.

Mr. Collins nodded. "He's a h-hard worker. He'll make some lucky girl a g-good husband."

Lane laughed, leaning over to kiss Mr. Collins on the cheek. "You aren't trying to set me up by any chance, are you?"

Mr. Collins chuckled. "You c-could do worse, my girl."

"I have." The words slipped out before she could think better of them and she watched the older man frown.

"Your ex-husband h-hurt you."

She shrugged. "Yes," she whispered. "He hurt me."

"Tristan nearly k-killed him that day he came to the b-bar looking for you."

Lane gasped. "James came to the bar? When?"

"Year ago. Took Ewan *and* Sean to p-pull Tristan off the man. I'm thinking now we should have l-let Tristan finish."

She grinned. "Oh my. You Irish are a bloodthirsty lot, aren't you?"

He laughed and nodded. "I th-think we are at that."

"I'll keep that in mind. Now we're going to—" A noise at the bottom of the stairs distracted her.

"Ewan and Tristan," Mr. Collins said when they heard heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. "Always sound like a h-herd of cattle, those two."

Lane was surprised to discover the man was correct as Tris and Ewan entered the room.

"'Bout time," Mr. Collins said. "Woman's about to d-do me in with her infernal exercises."

Lane put her hands on her hips and raised her eyebrows. "Throwing me under the bus, old man?"

They all laughed and she watched as Tristan studied his father's face.

"You up for some ESPN, Pop?" Ewan asked. Tristan's brother had gotten into the routine of spending an hour with his pop each afternoon, watching sports highlights on TV.

"H-hell yeah. I missed the end of the Orioles g-game last night." Mr. Collins raised his hand before anyone could speak. "D-don't tell me how it ended."

Ewan laughed. "Wouldn't dream of it." He followed his pop down the hallway to Mr. Collins' bedroom. Pop still walked slowly and with the assistance of a walker, but he was decidedly steadier on his feet. He and Ewan watched the television in the older man's room as he almost always fell asleep after his exercises. Lane was touched by Ewan staying with his pop even after he fell asleep.

Tris looked at her and she noticed he seemed uneasy. "Pop seems chipper today," he said, pausing awkwardly.

"I told you he was getting better."

Tris nodded and dropped onto the couch, rubbing his eyes wearily. "So you did. Fuck, I'm tired."

She sat beside him, deciding it was time to confront him about his absence from the apartment, especially when he took his hands away from his face and she saw the pain in his eyes.

"So, what's up with you, stranger?"

He swallowed heavily. "I'm sorry I haven't been around much this week. It's been really busy down at the pub."

"Ah, has it?" She let her question hover, certain he could tell from her tone she didn't believe him. "From my perspective, it seems like you're avoiding this apartment like the plague."

Originally she'd assumed he was working longer hours to cover for his pop, but as she observed the time each of his brothers and sisters devoted to their father, she began

to suspect his absence was based on something else. She could see by the guilt in his features, she'd been right. "Why, Tris? Is it me?"

"God no. I've missed you like crazy this week."

"Then what?"

"Did I ever tell you how my mom died?"

Lane shook her head.

"It was cancer. Her death was slow and painful."

"Oh Tris." She placed her hand on his cheek as she recalled him mentioning that he'd only been fifteen when he lost his mother. She couldn't imagine how hard it had been for a young boy on the verge of manhood to watch his mother suffer so, knowing there was nothing he could do to help. Tris was a born protector, like his father. How hard must it have been for them to stand by and watch, helpless to defend a woman they clearly adored? "I'm sorry."

"She went through chemo and for a while we thought she was going to recover. Then it came back. She wanted to die at home, so we took turns taking care of her. She died on my watch."

"What?"

"She was sleeping a lot at the end. The pain was unbearable so the doctor gave her morphine. I was sitting with her. Her breath was raspy, labored. It was like there was a rattle in her chest."

Lane nodded. She'd heard the sound many times over the years as she worked in the hospital with dying patients.

"I was sort of drifting off to sleep in the chair when I heard it. Or rather, I *didn't* hear it. The room had gone quiet. She'd stopped breathing. There wasn't time to call for help or to even say goodbye. She just...stopped."

Lane felt tears streaming down her face and she fought to find some words to comfort Tris. Her mind kept coming back to the fact he'd been avoiding the apartment, avoiding his pop. "You don't think it was your fault your mother died, do you?"

He shrugged. "No, not really."

"Not really? Tris, your mom was sick—*very* sick. There was absolutely nothing you could have done."

"Maybe not, but I can't do it again, Lane. I can't watch another parent die. I'm not strong enough for that. Maybe I will be in fifty, sixty years from now."

"Your pop's not dying."

Tris nodded and when he looked at her again, she noticed a glimmer of hope. "He really did seem better today."

She smiled, wiping the tears from her face. "I told you so."

He reached out and drew her close. She buried her face in his chest and she felt his heart beating fast and hard against her cheek. He rested his head against hers. "I'm sorry I've been such a bastard this week."

She hugged him tighter. "You haven't been a bastard at all."

"I'm so glad you're here."

"Me too," she replied. "Me too."

* * * * *

Lane stared at the clock the next afternoon and wondered if she could squeeze in a short nap while Tris and Ewan took their pop down to the restaurant for a little while. Today was Mr. Collins' first day out of the apartment and she knew he was looking forward to the opportunity to get back to his beloved pub and his friends.

There was an afternoon Orioles doubleheader and they thought it might do the old man some good to watch a bit of it with his mates. She wished she had the energy to share his enthusiasm about watching the game.

She'd been living on four or five hours of sleep each night since her arrival in the apartment, in her attempts to hide her strange problem. Last night, after Tristan's confession, she'd tossed and turned, unable to put the image out of her mind of a fifteen-year-old boy sitting with his dying mother. As a result, she'd slept less than two hours.

"You look like shit."

Lane looked up and realized Tris had come down from his room. "Thanks."

He plopped on the couch next to her. "What gives?"

"Didn't sleep well last night. Worried about your pop's first venture downstairs."

Tris frowned. "He'll be fine, right? Because if you think he's doing too much, too soon—"

She immediately regretted her lie. "Oh no, he's perfectly capable of going downstairs. Don't mind me."

Ewan and his father came down the hall before Tris could make any further comment.

"You ready?" Mr. Collins asked and Lane grinned.

"I think I might let you guys get started without me," she said. "I have a few things to do up here." Like sleep. "I'll come down later."

"Okay," Ewan said. "But you're running the risk of missing a helluva game."

"I won't be long," she promised. Just two hours. If she could just sleep two hours...

Tris bent down to kiss her on the cheek and his look said he wasn't finished with their conversation.

Great.

She observed their slow progress down the stairs, holding her breath during a large part of their descent, only breathing easy again when she heard Mr. Collins greet his friends as he disappeared from her view.

She'd started down the hallway, dragging her feet, when her cell phone rang. She almost ignored it, but turned back to the living room to retrieve it from the coffee table.

"Hello," she said, not recognizing the number, but noticing it was a local one.

"Lane," James said.

She closed her eyes wearily and fought the impulse to close her phone. "Hi."

"You okay, baby?" he asked and she felt anger build that he dared use a term of endearment.

"I'm fine. What do you want?"

He fell silent for a moment and she could tell she'd surprised him with her shortness. She'd never been much for confrontation or fighting, even though there had been times in their marriage when she'd practically bitten her tongue off to remain silent.

"I was calling about your grandmother's picture."

She'd forgotten about the picture.

"Oh."

"I was wondering if you wanted to swing by tonight to pick it up. I'll even make you dinner."

"James, you aren't really asking me out on a date, are you?"

She heard him clear his throat and she could only imagine how much her condescending attitude was annoying him. "Well, yeah. I guess. Why not?"

"Why not? Should I make you a fucking list of reasons why not?"

"Lane," he said. "I don't understand why you're so angry. You accepted my apology."

She took a deep breath and tried to calm down. It wasn't James' fault she was exhausted. "I did." She tried to force civility into her tone. "I can't come tonight. I'm working."

"Oh yeah, doing what?"

"I have a job as a nurse in a private home. I'm caring for a stroke patient."

"What about tomorrow night?"

She closed her eyes and prayed for patience. "I'm not comfortable coming by the house, James. Why don't I just swing by your work and get it one afternoon this week?"

Even through the phone, she could tell he wasn't happy with her answer. "I'm not working right now. I got laid off."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Why don't I bring it by *your* work?"

She remembered Mr. Collins telling her about Tristan's response when James showed up at the bar. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Jesus, Lane. I just want to give you the picture. I was hoping to be able to make things up to you. Prove to you how sorry I really am."

She sighed. While the words sounded sincere, she couldn't forget his face the night she'd tried to leave. She pushed that thought aside.

James was obviously trying to make amends. He'd hand her the picture and she'd send him on his way. Regardless of his apologies, she never wanted to see or speak to him after this. She'd simply make it clear that she was moving on and he needed to do the same. "I'm staying in the apartment above Pat's Irish Pub with the Collins family."

"Tristan Collins?" James asked, and for the first time, Lane could hear the familiar thread of anger that had tainted his voice during their marriage. Oh yeah, she'd just fucked up.

She rubbed her eyes wearily. "That's right. I'm taking care of his father. Why don't you call my cell when you're in the area and I'll come down to the pub to meet you and get the picture?"

"Fine," he snapped.

So he was mad. She couldn't have cared less. Maybe now he would leave her alone.

“Goodbye.” She hung up without waiting for him to return the farewell. She went back to her bed in Riley’s room, but sleep continued to elude her as she worried about what she’d just unleashed.

Chapter Five

Lane jerked awake, sitting upright on the couch. She jumped again, alarmed by the shadow of a man perched on the coffee table in front of her.

"Ahh," she said, sucking in a deep breath.

"It's me," Tris said softly. "I didn't mean to scare you."

She placed her hand over her heart. "Give me a minute." He remained silent for a few moments as she attempted to compose herself.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'm fine. You startled me."

"What the hell are you doing sleeping on the couch?"

Lane sighed. She'd been a fool to think she could keep up the illusion of sharing a room with Riley. Fact was, she was exhausted from too little sleep. Tris stared at her, waiting for an answer, and she struggled to come up with one that would appease him.

"The bed in Riley's room hurts my back."

"Try again."

"I was restless tonight and I didn't want to keep your sister up with my tossing and turning."

"We're probably getting closer to the truth with that one. The dark circles you've been carrying under your eyes the last couple days make me think this isn't the first night you've moved to the couch."

She shrugged. "I'm not a great sleeper."

"You were crying," he said, and her concerns about coming to stay with the Collins family came crashing down on her. Her erratic sleeping was one of the main things she

didn't want anyone—especially Tris—to know about. It was embarrassing, weird, disturbing.

"Really?" she asked weakly. "That's strange."

Tristan shook his head. "No, I don't think it is. You gonna tell me about it?"

"Please don't ask me."

He considered her words and she felt the weight of the silence surrounding them crushing her. Then to her surprise he rose and, for a minute, she thought he was going to grant her a reprieve. She should have known better.

He bent down and picked her up from the couch as if she weighed nothing. "What are you doing?" He turned toward the stairs to the third floor, to his bedroom, and her cursed heart starting racing again.

"You don't want to talk, so we won't."

His words left her speechless and he chuckled lightly when he looked down and spotted the nervousness on her face.

"Don't worry, kitten. We're not going to do *that*, either. We're going to sleep. Looks like you could use about forty-eight hours of it."

"I can't sleep in your bed. What will your family say?"

"They'll probably say it's about damn time."

She looked at his room as they entered, taking in the simple décor. His was the one room in the apartment she'd yet to see. In fact, this was the first time she'd come to the third floor. Riley had told her that—aside from the twins' bedroom—the top floor of the building was used primarily for storage. Lane could only assume as the family had grown, so had the need for more bedrooms.

Tris placed her on the end of his bed, lightly pushing her. "Slide over."

It was a king-size bed and because his room wasn't that big, one side of it butted up against the wall.

"Big bed," she murmured as she moved as close to the wall as she could.

"First thing I did when Killian left for the military was pitch the single beds and buy myself a man-size one." He gestured to himself. "I might *be* a twin, but this body was not made to sleep on a twin mattress."

She giggled. "Must have been a tight fit."

"I hit my growth spurt at fourteen. For four years I slept with my feet dangling off the end of the mattress."

"I shouldn't be here," she whispered when he crawled in beside her, pulling her into his strong embrace.

"This is exactly where you should be." He turned slightly, bending to kiss her. As always, the moment his lips touched hers, she lost all sense of right and wrong and all the fight left her as she let herself be carried away by him. He surrounded her with such a feeling of peace she wanted nothing more than to wallow in it. She was through fighting, through pretending.

"Make love to me, Tris," she whispered when his lips traveled along her cheek to her neck.

He leaned on his elbow and looked at her. "You're tired."

She grinned. "Tired of fighting *this*. Please," she added when she sensed he might refuse.

"You're sure?"

She nodded.

He helped her to a sitting position, sliding her nightgown over her head. She was naked in an instant. He rose from the bed, taking off his own clothes as she watched, transfixed. He was a large man. His chest was broad, his upper arms thick with muscles. His height, rather than intimidating her, had always made her feel tiny, delicate—even though she was certainly not short.

As he pushed his jeans over his hips, she was graced with her first look at his cock. He was *definitely* a large man. She bit her lip, her gaze flying back to his face when he chuckled.

"Don't look so scared."

She watched him grab a condom from the nightstand drawer, throwing it onto the pillow beside her. "Last chance," he warned. "If I get in that bed, we're not stopping until I'm buried inside you."

"Hurry," she said, raising her arms. "For once in my life, I can honestly say this is what I want. No doubts, I promise."

He grinned and crawled onto the bed, not stopping until he'd caged her beneath him. He hovered over her on his hands and knees and she marveled at how completely he covered her. He gave her a long, thorough kiss, not touching her with anything more than his lips. She squirmed, wanting to feel his weight on her, dying to have his skin against hers.

"Tris," she whispered, moving away.

"Shhh." He cupped her cheek with his hand, pulling her lips back to his. "I'll give you what you want, kitten, but we're doing this my way. You belong with me and I'm going to spend the rest of tonight proving that to you."

"All I want is sex."

He laughed. "Well, you're going to get sex *and* a lover. This is one of those package deals."

She trembled at the deep confidence in his voice, the word *lover* hovering between them, resonating inside and frightening her.

"Everyone already assumes we're in a relationship, Tris. You've sort of made sure of that." Tris had gone out of his way to proclaim to any man in the pub who happened to glance in her direction that she was off-limits. She had to admit, every time he thumped his chest like Tarzan over her, she felt excited, warm inside.

"What everyone assumes and what's true are two different things. Tonight we're making this true." His eyes dared her to contradict him, his hand leaving her cheek to stroke her hair. "I've dreamed of seeing you in my bed, just like this. Your hair flowing over my pillow." She moved restlessly beneath him, but he didn't acknowledge the intense need she was suffering.

His fingers stopped caressing. Instead they tangled in her tresses, directing her face toward his. He kissed her and she felt the effects straight to her core. His eyes narrowed as he pulled back and she saw his gaze travel down her body. She could feel her nipples tauten under his intense scrutiny.

"Is your pussy wet?"

She pressed her legs together, nodding, stunned by his frank question. In some ways he felt like a stranger to her at this moment. Tris, her affable friend, had never been anything less than courteous, caring, gentle. This mountain of a man felt as if he'd been ripped from her naughtiest fantasies.

"I want a taste." His lips traveled along her jaw, down her chest. She gasped when he enveloped one of her nipples with his mouth, the suction sending a tingling current to her cunt. He was still hovering on top of her and she marveled that he could provoke so much passion with just his lips, his mouth, his teeth. He left her breast, drawing a line with his tongue from her breast to her pussy.

He pushed her legs apart, holding them open with his knees as he knelt at the foot of the mattress. The look he gave her should have had her trembling in fear. He was intent, hungry, and she realized the teddy bear had turned into the grizzly. "Feed me."

She knew instantly what he wanted and reached down as he watched, slowly dragging her finger along her wet slit. She held herself open with one hand while touching her clit with the other. Her gaze never left his face as she played with herself. She gripped her clit, pinching it, while pushing two fingers inside her hot cunt. His eyes narrowed when she began to thrust her hips.

He shook his head and grabbed her wrists, drawing them toward his mouth. He sucked each of her wet fingers, cleaning them thoroughly with his tongue. Then he bent forward, pressing her hands firmly into the mattress beside her head.

"Leave your hands there. The only thing they're going to be touching from now on is my cock."

He quickly returned to his position between her legs, his face so close she could feel his hot breath on her aching flesh.

"Please," she whispered when he failed to move.

"I like the sound of that, Lane," he said. "Say please again."

"Please, Tris. Please put your mouth on me. Fuck me with your tongue." Her voice betrayed her need.

He grinned at her naughty request. "Oh, I'm not just going to fuck you, kitten, I'm going to lap up every drop of your sweet juice—and then I'm gonna make you feel *really* good."

The last word had barely left his mouth before he put his gorgeous promise into action. No part of her pussy was left wanting as he licked her mons, nipped her clit with his teeth and drove his tongue deep within her. His touches literally drove her out of her mind as she thrashed against the bed, desperate to drive him deeper.

"Hold still," he said, but she couldn't contain her motions.

"Can't," she gasped, shocked when he moved away and slapped two light smacks against her cunt.

She cried out at the lightning bolt of sensation his hand unleashed. He chuckled at her response, and then slapped her again. No one had ever touched her in such a way. Her body lurched in response as she was engulfed by an orgasm she didn't see coming. She fought back the scream clawing at her throat, one tiny brain cell clinging to the knowledge his entire family was sleeping on the floor below them.

She'd barely recovered from her climax when she heard Tris wrestling with the condom, felt him place his cock at the entrance to her body. Her eyes flew open as he started to push in. Her pussy was sensitive to his every move and she was afraid she wasn't ready for this. He was far thicker than any lover she'd ever had. While her body cried out for his possession, her mind wondered if she'd be able to accommodate him.

"Need a second. Too soon," she whispered, but he shook his head.

"No, it's not too soon. Open up and let me in, kitten."

His words, along with the relentless drive of his cock as it tunneled its way inside, triggered a mini climax and her inner muscles began to spasm again.

"God, Tris, can't—"

Her words disappeared on a cry as he shoved his dick in the last few inches. She felt impossibly full, completely claimed by his thick flesh. She shuddered, wondering if she'd ever felt anything so incredibly wonderful and frightening at the same time.

"Open your eyes, Lane." She complied, wondering when they'd drifted closed. "Am I hurting you?"

She shook her head. He wasn't hurting her. "You're big."

He smiled. "You sure do know how to stroke a man's ego. I'm going to fuck you now. Gonna try to do it slow and gentle—at least this first time. I know it's been a while for you. Thing is, I want you, need you too bad. There's a demon in me that wants to make sure you can't walk right for a week."

"I don't need gentle, Tris. I'm not made of glass."

He gave her a sad, guilty look and she wondered what he was thinking.

"Yeah, well, you might not get gentle. I only said I'd try, not that I'd succeed. I feel the need to make sure you remember who you belong to. Probably makes me a chauvinistic asshole, but I can't help it. You okay with that?"

Her inner muscles clenched at his words and he chuckled. "Guess you are. Your pussy is gripping my cock like a clamp. Leave your hands on the mattress, no matter what. You touch me and I'm likely to go off like a volcano."

She nodded only once before he retreated, thrusting back into her so deeply she saw stars. He moved slowly at first, but soon he came into her just as he'd warned—his actions gaining strength and speed until the combination of immense pleasure mixed with the slightest bit of pain. It was more heavenly than anything she'd ever experienced. Tris was holding back nothing, giving her everything he had and more. That realization—more than his passionate loving—drove her to the brink of bliss once again.

She cried out as her orgasm claimed her and he dropped from his hands to his elbows, still thrusting inside her cunt. His lips devoured hers as his tongue mimicked the motion of his cock.

"So good," he said as his lips moved to her ear and she trembled as her climax began to subside—his thrusts driving her insane. She'd never felt so taken, possessed, claimed.

"That's right," he praised. "God, I love how you come on my dick. So hot and wet. Oh kitten, I'm never gonna be able to get enough of this...of you."

She thought his softly spoken words sounded almost apologetic as they dragged her from the euphoria pulsating through her body. She'd already come twice and she could feel the third building with each powerful stroke.

"Can't hold back anymore."

He'd been holding back? When?

"Come with me." He lifted one hand to her breast, his fingers firmly tweaking her tight nipple and this time, she did scream. Tris swallowed the sound with his mouth and she felt each pulse of his cock as he filled the condom. For several moments they were frozen together, both of them gasping for air, a slick sheen of sweat covering them.

Tris moved out slowly and she shivered, even that soft motion wreaking havoc on her too-sensitized nerve endings. He disposed of the condom before turning back to her.

"Shhh," he soothed, as she rested her head on his chest. "Give me a minute to figure out if I can walk again and I'll go downstairs to get us a washcloth."

She pressed her legs together. She was sore in places she didn't know existed and her legs felt like Jell-O.

"You okay?" he asked gently.

"I'm trying to decide."

He laughed. "Can I decide for you? You're better than okay. You're amazing."

She lifted her head and looked at him. Her heart lurched at the sight of his dear face and she realized she was in way over her head. "Tris, I think I should warn you. I'm a bad bet."

His eyes narrowed and she wondered if she'd angered him with her words. "How so?"

"I don't have the first clue about how to be in a relationship that isn't dysfunctional as hell."

He shrugged, unconcerned. "That's not a problem. I'll teach you."

"Is that something you can teach someone?"

"Of course it is. How do you think I learned? I watched my parents when I was growing up. My mom and pop were the real deal—lovers in every sense of the word. That's what I want with you, Lane. The only reason you have a problem reaching out and trusting someone is because no one in your shitty past earned your trust. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not going to leave you or let you down. I promise."

Her throat clogged with unshed tears at his vow and she struggled to respond. "When I left last year, I hurt you, didn't I?"

He smiled. "You came back. That's all that matters."

"No, it's not. Not at all. I'm so sorry, Tris, but I think that should prove to you what I'm saying is true."

Tris came over her, his chest pressed to hers, his hands gripping her head, holding her in place. "I'll never let you leave again. I intend to do everything in my power to keep you right here, in my bed, in my life. I'm going to make you so happy you'll forget what it feels like to be lonely or hurt or sad or scared. I love you, Lane, and I'm going to show you exactly what that means." He sealed his promise with the sweetest kiss she'd ever received. She could feel the tears flowing down her cheeks, but there was no force on earth that would stop them. He'd spent the last hour filling her body and now, with his words, he filled her heart.

He broke their kiss and gently wiped away her tears. "Go to sleep, kitten. We have plenty of time to figure out everything. A lifetime."

He wrapped her in the cocoon of his arms and, despite the riot of emotions rampaging through her thoughts, her body agreed with him and simply gave in to sleep.

* * * * *

Tris awoke in the middle of the night, wondering what had roused him. He usually slept like the dead after sex. Then he heard it again. Lane was whimpering. He looked over and realized she was asleep. Asleep and crying. Moonlight shone through the room's single window and provided enough light for him to see the tears streaming down her face. His heart broke at the image.

She sobbed again and he wrapped her in his arms, pulling her head to his chest as her shoulders shook with her cries.

"Shhh," he whispered, afraid to wake her though the sounds of her crying ripped through his gut like a bullet. "Shhh, kitten. I'm here."

He tightened his hold on her, running his hand through her hair.

"I'm here," he murmured over and over. Eventually, her quiet sobs subsided and he felt her drift into a deeper sleep.

Tris lay in bed with Lane in his arms, sleep eluding him as he tried to figure out what he was going to do. How was he ever going to be able to make her trust him and feel safe? For now it seemed all he could do was stay on this path, offering his love and protection. Only time would heal the wounds Lane suffered from.

Time and patience.

He sucked at patience.

Chapter Six

Tris woke up to find Lane curled up on his chest. He grinned and ran his fingers through her soft hair, relishing the tickle of her breath. He marveled that his dream of holding her had come true. A month ago, he hadn't dared to wish for this anymore and now, as if by magic, she was here.

A movement in the doorway caught his eye and he glanced up to find Riley standing there with raised eyebrows. He slowly disengaged from Lane, taking care not to wake her. He motioned for Riley to step out in the hall as he rose and shrugged on some jeans before joining her.

"Haven't you ever heard of knocking?"

Riley grinned. "You never see anything interesting if you knock first."

Tris rolled his eyes. "What do you want, Riley?"

"I was worried about Lane when I couldn't find her in the apartment. Pop is asking for her."

He frowned. "Is Pop okay?"

"Oh yeah, it's just time for his morning exercise and he's getting antsy. Letting him watch that baseball game yesterday only made him more stir-crazy. I swear that man will be back in the restaurant serving dinner again before the week is out."

"He's doing great, but don't mention the restaurant to him. I'd like to see him take a good long break from doing any serious physical labor. He's always worked too hard. Regardless of how well he's doing, I don't want to see him overdo it."

"He loves work, Tris. That restaurant is his life. The reason he's doing so well and working so hard to recover is so he *can* go back to work. Lane has dangled the restaurant under his nose since day one."

"She has?" Tris asked, feeling guilty once more for hiding from Pop during his recovery. He had a lot to make up for with his old man.

"Lane knew from the first that Pop lives for work. She said he needed something to get better for and I agree. I don't think we should take that goal away from him. Lane said that as soon as he's able, he could start taking orders, talking to the customers, and Ewan can do the serving and the lifting. He liked that idea. You know Pop. He loves being around people and he hates feeling useless. Lane's given him a pretty strong incentive for making a quick recovery."

"Lane seems to know Pop pretty well."

Riley shrugged. "She knows all of us, Tris. That girl must have memorized every word you ever said to her on all those nights she hung out at the pub. She remembers things I've done even *I* don't remember doing."

Tris wondered about Riley's comment. Lane had often asked about his family during their weekly chats and she'd been delighted by his stories about his childhood. "I didn't realize."

"I get the impression she didn't have much of a childhood. I think you sort of gave her a taste of what a good one could be like when you told her about us."

Tris looked at his little sister and realized she had a point. "I guess I did. You're pretty smart sometimes, brat."

"I'm smart all the time. You're just not always smart enough to realize it."

He laughed, but it was cut short when he heard Lane moving around behind him.

"It's nearly ten o'clock," Lane said.

He'd been filling the doorway and when he turned, he saw she'd put her nightgown back on. She blushed when she realized Riley was there.

"Hey, Lane," his sister said cheerily.

"Oh, Riley. I'm so sorry I'm late. I just need to change and then I'll be ready to start your pop's exercises."

Tris wanted to protest her haste to leave. He wasn't finished talking to *or* touching her. He knew a lifetime of kisses wouldn't be enough for him. He also knew if she left before they'd settled a few things, he'd be starting from scratch tonight.

"Actually, I was just coming to tell Tris that Teagan's here. She's going to stay for a few days while Sky is doing the interview circuit, promoting his new album."

"I thought she was going with him," Tris said.

"She wants to spend some time with Pop," Riley replied before looking back at Lane. "She and I were wondering if we could take Pop for a short walk outside this morning instead of him doing his daily exercises. It's a gorgeous morning."

Tris grinned at his sister. She was giving him the perfect opportunity to be alone in the apartment with Lane.

"Oh, I think your pop would love that. I'll get dressed and join—"

Riley interrupted Lane, who was clearly trying to escape his room. "Ewan is going to help us get him downstairs and then try to clean up the mess he made in the office when he was doing those bleeding taxes. Jesus, he's an ass at tax time. Glad it's over. Teagan was going to sleep on the couch while she was here, but seeing as how..." Her words drifted off and Tris finished her line of thought.

"While you two take Pop out, Lane and I can move her stuff up here. Teagan can have her own bed."

"Tris," Lane said softly.

He turned and grinned at her. "You can sleep in here from now on."

"No, I can't."

Riley smiled widely. "Oh yeah, this is gonna be fun to watch."

He scowled and crowded Lane back into his room while stepping through the doorway. "Go take your walk, brat." He closed and locked the door before turning and leaning against it, ready for the onslaught. Lane didn't disappoint him.

“What the hell are you doing? Why did you tell Riley I would move into your room? Do you have any idea how inappropriate —”

He cut off her chastisement with a kiss. She fought him for a second, but he had no qualms about using his strength against her in this instance. He grasped her wrists as she fought to push him away and he held them together one-handed behind her back. With his other hand, he gripped her head, holding her lips to his, pushing his tongue into her mouth.

Her fight was short-lived and he quickly sensed the change in her demeanor as she started to return his kiss. She struggled to regain the use of her hands and he released them, rejoicing when she gripped his waist, dragging his lower body toward hers.

He raised her nightgown to her waist, swallowing her moan when he dragged his finger over her clit. She was soaking wet and he knew the talk they needed to have would have to wait. He was hard and aching and only Lane held the cure. He moved away from her lips.

“I want to suck your cock,” she whispered.

He was blown away by her request and before he could think beyond his next breath, she dropped to her knees.

“Fuck.” He wondered if he’d ever seen anything as sexy as Lane kneeling before him, working his jeans over his hips. Once the material fell to his ankles, he kicked it off, gasping as Lane took his cock in her firm grip.

“God, Lane.” She ran her tongue around the head, teasing him with the contradictions in her touches. Her too-light licks were an incredible contrast to the rough strokes of her fist. Over and over, she ran her grip along his aching flesh, hard and strong, while only giving him a small bit of her mouth. He’d never felt anything more erotic.

“Stop messing around. Take me in your mouth.” His balls were already threatening to blow and there was no way he wasn’t coming in her mouth. “Please.”

She looked up and smiled for just a moment, and then he watched his cock slowly disappear between her lips. He groaned when his dick hit the back of her throat. "So fucking good."

She kept her hand at the base of his cock, gripping it and moving her hand and mouth together in unison. When her other hand grasped his balls, he knew he was a goner. Stars flew behind his eyes as he felt his climax build, as he reached the peak.

"Gonna come." He gripped her head in his hands, thrusting into her mouth like a drowning man swimming for shore. Lane matched his pace and when he came, he watched in amazement as she swallowed every drop, her gaze one of complete and utter happiness.

He slowly withdrew his cock from her mouth and dropped to his knees, grasping her face as he kissed her. He could taste his come on her lips and the flavor drove him mad. Gripping the hem on her nightgown, he dragged it over her head.

"Naked," he said. "I want you naked." He pushed her onto her back on the floor. He was distantly aware that he should put her on the bed, but the three feet between them and the mattress was too far to travel. He needed to taste her, touch her, have her. He shoved her legs apart and leaned forward, dragging his tongue along her wet slit.

"Tris," she cried out as he consumed her. His tongue toyed with her clit as he pushed two fingers inside her hot pussy. She thrust her hips toward him, her erratic motions reminding him of his own during the blowjob. Would it always be this way for them? Would they ever come together without this sense of urgency, of intense need?

He nipped at her clit and she moaned, the sound driving him higher.

"More." He wanted more. He wanted everything.

He drew his fingers out and they traveled lower. When the tip of his index finger rimmed her anus, he heard her gasp. He paused for only a moment, waiting for her to refuse, to deny him, but she merely rose up on her elbows to watch him.

"Mine," he said, wondering how she'd managed to bring him down to caveman level. He couldn't utter anything beyond one-syllable commands. She was seriously fucking with his vocabulary.

She grinned. "For now," she taunted and his eyes narrowed. Part of him wondered if she knew what she was doing. If she wasn't purposely daring him to stake a stronger claim.

He shook his head. "Forever." He punctuated the word by pushing his finger inside her ass to the hilt. She trembled. He knew it wasn't pain shaking her body, but desire.

"Say it, Lane." He pulled his finger nearly all the way out. He wiggled his thumb against her clit and was rewarded by the sharp thrust of her hips.

"God, Tris." Her breathing was labored as he pushed his finger back into her ass, harder this time, faster. He left it buried there as he used his other hand to torment her clit, her pussy. She was shaking violently as he kept her on the verge of an orgasm for several minutes.

"Let me come," she demanded when he lightened his touch once more.

He shook his head. "We have a few things to settle."

"Now?" Her eyes widened with disbelief.

He chuckled, even though his cock was reading him the riot act for prolonging this agony. Despite having just come down her sweet throat, his body was ready and dying for round two. He tried to ignore the insane need he felt to thrust into her cunt until his cock fell off. She was driving him crazy. He added another finger to the one in her pussy, thrusting a few times as she thrashed on the floor, reaching desperately for her climax.

"Say you'll move into my room." He halted just as she was on the verge of erupting. He realized his tactics were underhanded, but he didn't give a fuck. He wasn't going to start over every day with her. From this point on, they moved forward, not back and forth.

"Fuck you," she yelled, sexual frustration rife in her voice. He laughed.

"Oh, you're going to get fucked, kitten. Just as soon as you tell me what I want to hear. Are you moving into this room?"

He wiggled his finger in her ass and she yelled, "Yes!"

"Are you going to stop fighting the relationship idea?"

Her fingers curled into fists, gripping his carpet as he scissored his fingers inside her cunt.

"Please," she whispered. "Let me come."

"Tell me you'll be my lover, my girlfriend. Tell me you're mine, Lane." He moved the finger in her anus back before shoving in again with more strength than before.

"You aren't playing fair."

He closed his eyes and sighed heavily. "I can't be fair with you, Lane. You make me want too much."

She gasped as he showed her with his hands, his lips, his teeth and tongue just how much. He staged a full-scale attack on her body and her damn protective shell. He was going to drag her out from behind her fucking self-imposed walls if he had to dismantle them brick by brick.

She was out of control, mindless beneath him as he brought her to orgasm. She screamed and he let her, silently praying his family was out of the apartment already. She quivered with the aftermath and he grinned ruthlessly as he resumed his torment.

"Tris." He sensed the slightest bit of panic in her tone. He wouldn't relent until she surrendered the words he wanted.

"Tell me you're mine." He fucked her pussy and her ass with his hands. Her inner muscles clenched against his fingers and he knew it wouldn't take much to push her into another climax.

"Please," she cried.

"Say it." His fingers moved harder, faster. She reached the pinnacle in an instant and as she came, she said the words he'd waited through a lifetime of Wednesdays to hear.

"Yours!" she cried as her orgasm subsided. "I'm yours."

"Good. Now hold on." He quickly donned a condom and slowly pushed his way into her body. They made love leisurely as he tried to prove to her with his cock, his words, his kisses how much he loved her. They cuddled on the hard floor after their climaxes and he heard her soft breathing as sleep claimed her again.

He grinned as he noticed they were in the same position they'd been in when he'd woken up this morning, give or take the bed. Then he realized they were actually miles from where they'd been. She was his. She'd admitted it. Now he just had to make sure she believed it.

Chapter Seven

Tris mixed two martinis and handed them to Keira before strolling back to the end of the bar where Lane sat sipping her glass of wine. It was Wednesday night, Lane's night off. When she'd agreed to take the nursing position with Pop, Tris had made sure she would have every Wednesday night off. The first two weeks she'd refused to leave the apartment, too worried about moving even one floor away from his pop, but tonight Pop insisted she get out and have a little time to herself.

Tris couldn't restrain his grin as he recalled his pop winking at him after making the suggestion. He'd worried initially about Pop's reaction when he learned Lane was going to be staying in his bedroom. He obviously needn't have wasted the time or the anxiety. Pop had returned from his walk with Teagan and Riley the morning his sister had spied Lane naked in his bed. Tris could only assume Riley hadn't been able to resist filling Pop in on exactly what she'd seen in his bedroom. Pop had drawn him aside and asked if he'd remembered to use protection. When Tris assured him he had, he was shocked as hell when the old man muttered something under his breath about never having grandkids before walking away.

"You want another glass of wine?" he asked.

She hesitated. "I probably shouldn't stay much longer. I'm worried —"

"Teagan and Sean are upstairs with Pop. If they need you, they'll come get you. Besides, you aren't leaving until after closing."

She gave him a confused look. "I'm not?"

He shook his head. "I've spent weeks imagining how you would look half-dressed and bent over this bar with me fucking you from behind."

She sucked in a deep breath at his words and he let his gaze drift to her T-shirt. Sure enough, her nipples were poking through the thin material.

"Stop that," she whispered.

"I love your pretty nipples. They always let me know ahead of time if I'm getting lucky or not."

Lane snorted. "I think this past week has proven you must live at the end of the damn rainbow."

He chuckled and agreed. Moving Lane into his bedroom had unhooked the leash on all his pent-up lust and he couldn't resist indulging in her body several times a day. Lucky for him, Lane was as insatiable as he was.

"We're just making up for lost time."

"We didn't lose *that* much time, Tris."

He bent forward and kissed the end of her nose. "Will you stay and help me close?"

She nodded.

"Good. Here, have some more wine. I want you nice and relaxed for what I have in mind."

She squirmed on the seat and leaned forward, obviously anticipating more details. Lane was a sucker for dirty talk. Before he could proceed, her cell phone rang.

"Damn," she muttered, reaching for it. She glanced at the number and frowned.

"Telemarketer?"

"No," she said quickly. "Just Joy. I better take this." She stepped away from the bar and into a quiet corner. He watched her, wondering about the lie she'd just told. He was becoming very good at reading her face. When she lied, she looked away and flushed slightly. He couldn't hear what she was saying, but he could tell she wasn't engaged in a friendly conversation.

"I need two pints of Guinness," Keira said, walking up to the bar and giving Tris the order.

He nodded and poured the beer.

"How are things with you and Lane?"

"Great." He glanced back at Lane, still talking on the phone. If he wasn't mistaken, she was arguing with the person on the other end.

"She's the one, isn't she?"

He looked at his sister and considered avoiding her question. He nodded instead.

"She was always the one," Keira said.

He nodded again.

"I'm glad she came back."

"Me too," he confessed.

"The two of you are a good fit."

He grinned. "I wish you'd tell her that."

"She'll figure it out. She's had some rough times. It may take awhile. Which means..." Keira paused and gave him one of her annoying sister smiles. "You're going to have to practice patience."

He narrowed his eyes. "And I assume from that smirk, you think I can't do this?"

"I think you're going to have to work very hard not to pull a typical macho Tris move. You're not going to be able to power your way through this. Lane has issues with trust. I can't blame her really. If I'd grown up the way she did or been stuck in a shitty marriage like hers, I'd have a hard time trusting someone too."

"I love her, Keira. I'm not going to hurt her or betray her trust."

"I know that, but you can't expect her to trust you overnight. It takes time."

"We've known each other for nearly three years."

She shook her head. "No dice. You were acquaintances, friends that first year, and the second year she was on the other side of the country. You're starting from scratch, brother dear."

"Fuck," he muttered as Keira laughed. "You'll be fine. Just be patient. Don't try to push her too hard, too fast."

His sister took the tray of drinks as Lane returned to her seat.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

She nodded and he could tell she was upset.

"You sure?"

"Everything's fine, Tris."

He wanted to press her on the subject, but Keira's words hovered. "Great."

* * * * *

Tris locked the door behind the remaining customers and Lane wondered how she'd made it through the last two hours. Between Tris whispering all the naughty things he wanted to do to her and her anxiety over James' phone call, she was a horny, emotional wreck.

Her ex clearly wasn't happy about her new job and had called—as a friend, he'd said—to tell her of a position in one of the nursing homes in the city. Apparently the manager of the place was an old high-school pal and James offered to pull some strings if she was interested. She'd tried to tell him politely that she wasn't. When he argued that her job with the Collins family was only temporary, she'd lost her temper. She'd been about to hang up on him when he mentioned her grandmother's picture again. He didn't seem inclined to simply drop it off at the pub and he'd invited her out for lunch the next day. She'd told him she was busy and repeated her request that he bring it to her, but she had a gut feeling he wasn't going to make anything easy. What else was new?

She jumped as arms enveloped her from behind.

"Hey," Tris said, tightening his grip. "It's just me, kitten. You okay? You were a million miles away for a minute."

"Just thinking," she said and she felt his smile against her ear.

"About us? About tonight?"

She nodded, grateful he couldn't see her face as she lied. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, forcing James out of her head. He was the past, an ass. She was

moving forward, moving on. Trying like hell to figure out how to be in a normal relationship. Tris was a natural at it and she was following his lead, but she still felt herself holding back a bit. She knew he could sense it, but she couldn't find a way to make the final leap. Hell, the final seven leaps. She was drifting in no man's land without a clue as to where she was supposed to go next.

Tris stepped away and turned off the lights in the pub. He'd lowered the blinds on the front windows, but a small shaft of light streamed through from the streetlights outside. She thought for a moment the lack of lighting should make the place frightening, but instead it was actually quite romantic.

Tris walked over and took her hand, leading her around to the side of the bar and through the hinged opening until they were standing next to the taps. The light aroma of beer hovered in the air and she smiled, the delicate scent reminding her of the man standing beside her.

"I've imagined this so many times," he said softly.

She smiled. "Tell me."

He took a step closer and lightly grasped her waist. "I'm going to show you."

He tugged her T-shirt from her jeans, slowly dragging it up her body until her bra was revealed. She started to help him by stripping it off completely, but he stopped her.

"Leave the shirt there. As much as I love you naked, kitten, there's something very sexy about a half-dressed woman."

"Any woman?"

"My woman. You."

She giggled. "Good answer."

He reached behind her and unhooked her bra, dragging the lace away until it lay gathered above her breasts with her T-shirt. Tristan's gaze drifted down and she shivered under his seductive look. "Beautiful." He bent forward and took one of her taut nipples into his mouth.

Her hands reached up to tangle in his hair, her fingers playing with the thick strands as he made love to her breasts with his mouth. For several minutes, he worshiped at the altar of her body and she felt very much like a pagan princess. She gasped as he increased the suction, the throbbing pleasure weaving its way through her. She was straddling his thigh, riding him in a vain attempt to find relief.

"Shhh," he whispered as he stepped away. "Let's get rid of these jeans. They're in the way."

She helped him push the denim over her hips and once again, he stopped her before she could kick them off. "Turn around, Lane." He helped her spin and pushed her upper body down until she was bent over the low counter behind the bar. His hands caressed her bare ass and she trembled.

"God. I can't tell you how many times I've imagined you like this. Your clothing in disarray, your body spread out over this bar, waiting for me to take you."

She looked at him over her shoulder, her breathing erratic, her heart racing with excitement.

"I'm going to take you, Lane. I'm going to take you hard and fast and just when you think you can't stand any more, I'm going to do it all over again." His hand moved from her ass cheeks to the line between and she groaned when he thrust two fingers inside her pussy.

"Hurry, Tris," she begged, but he didn't respond to her plea, by word or action. His fingers moved too slowly inside her.

He bent forward and kissed her ass, his rough cheek scratching the sensitive skin and driving her arousal higher. She loved his five o'clock shadow, although she'd had some embarrassing moments trying to hide the love marks he'd left on her neck the past few days.

"I don't think you're hot enough," he murmured.

"Dammit, Tris. If I get much hotter, I'll singe this bar. Fuck me. Please."

"No. I'm hungry. Think I'll have a little snack before we get down to business."

"I'm going to kill you if you stop now," she muttered and he laughed.

"I changed my mind. These jeans are in the way. Take them off. I want you wide open for this."

She fought to kick off her pants, her body pulsating with need.

"You know, there's something very kinky about the idea of popping your cherry."

She glanced over her shoulder when she felt him rummaging around on the bar. "What?"

Her breath caught when she saw him pick up a bright red cherry from the garnish tray, removing the stem. "What are you going to do with that?"

"Eat it," he replied. "Now hold still." He nudged her legs farther apart with his foot and she sucked in a breath when she felt him place the cool piece of fruit at her opening.

"God," she whispered when he pushed the cherry inside.

"How many should I eat?" he asked, but she was too focused on the idea of what he was about to do to answer.

He pushed three more cherries into her hot pussy before she felt his lips touch her aching flesh. His tongue caressed her opening before thrusting inside.

"So sweet," he murmured as his fingers moved beneath her to play with her clit. She groaned as he worked the tiny nub while fucking her with his tongue. She tried to thrust against his mouth, but he used his free hand to hold her to the counter.

"Please," she begged when she felt his tongue move the cherries around inside her.

"Watch me," he said, moving back a bit and replacing his tongue with his fingers. She glanced over her shoulder just in time to see him...*feel* him...pop the first cherry out. He moved the fruit to his mouth and ate it. She groaned at the sexiness of his actions. He took out two more of the cherries and ate them as she watched. When he dragged out the last small piece, he leaned over her, his back caging her to the counter

as he pushed the fruit between her lips. She was assaulted by contrasting flavors – the sweet juice from the cherry and the tartness from her body's liquid.

"Delicious," he whispered in her ear. She felt him fumbling with his pants, heard the crinkling of a foil wrapper and then she felt heaven. The head of his cock nudged her opening and she growled. He'd pushed her beyond needy, beyond hungry. She was ravenous.

"Sounds like my kitten's turned into a wildcat. Hold on, Lane."

His warning was no empty threat. He came into her body just as he'd promised – hard and fast and perfect. She climaxed after only a few thrusts, but Tris gave her no reprieve. He pounded into her greedy body as she fought to restrain her screams. Her first and second climax seemed to be connected and she wondered if it was possible to come for so long. Tris kept her at the edge, never allowing her body to rest, to recover. He took her like a man possessed, or in the act of possessing, and she willingly surrendered her body into his all-too-capable hands.

His hands were wrapped around her, gripping her breasts firmly, moving her body toward his. The sound of their labored breathing, her soft moans and his whispered praises filled the bar.

"So good," he murmured. "So fucking hot. God, I love you, Lane."

She came, his proclamation and hard thrusts triggering the response. He followed her into the white-hot bliss and she shuddered, trying to regain control of her body. He remained above her for several minutes, his head resting against her back as hers lay lifeless on the counter.

"Just like you imagined?" she asked.

"Better."

"I think I'm going to sleep here," she murmured, deciding there was no way she could make her limp muscles carry her up two flights of stairs.

He chuckled. "Not that I don't think my brothers wouldn't love to get a glimpse of your sexy bare ass first thing in the morning, but I think you might be more comfortable in my bed."

"Problem is, I can't get there."

"I'll carry you," he said.

She looked at him. "Is this going to become a habit?"

"Maybe."

"Cool," she answered. "Have to admit it's pretty sexy."

He rose and helped her to a standing position. He lowered her shirt and bra, not bothering to hook it back up. While he zipped his jeans, she put hers back on. The second they were decent, he bent over, hefting her over his shoulder in a fireman's lift.

"Hey!" she protested as she dangled upside down, looking at his back.

He laughed. "Not what you had in mind?" He headed for the stairs.

"You know it wasn't." She tried to push her way down, but he stopped her struggles by pinching her ass.

"Ouch," she cried.

"Hush," he said as they neared the top of the first landing. "You'll wake up my family."

They passed through the living room and up the second set of steps to Tristan's room. Once there, he tossed her on his bed while she giggled.

"Take off your clothes. I like sleeping naked with you."

"Haven't you ever heard of asking nicely? Maybe saying the magic word?" she teased, though she starting taking off her jeans.

"Will you take off your clothes?" he asked. "So I can *please* you until your toes curl?"

"Mmm. Much better. I like how you use the magic word."

"I thought you might. Are we finished with the lesson on manners for now?"

She nodded and grinned.

"Good." He finished undressing and joined her on the bed.

Her eyebrow rose when she spotted his erection. "You're kidding, right? I thought that magic-word line was a joke."

"There's nothing funny about the magic word. Are you sore?"

She shook her head. "No, but God knows I should be. We've been fucking like bunnies for days."

He laughed. "We don't have to do it if you're too tired, Lane. I pretty much walk around with a hard-on all the time now that you're here."

"Oh my. Well, I certainly can't have that on my head." She lay back and reached up, beckoning him to her. "Fuck me, Tris," she whispered.

He paused, cocking his head to the side as if waiting for something.

"Please," she added with a giggle.

As they drifted to sleep nearly an hour later, Lane curled up in his arms and whispered one word. "Magic."

* * * * *

"It's a beautiful day," Lane said a week later as she and Mr. Collins took a short walk around the block. The sun had come out full force, gracing spring with a gorgeous burst of warm weather.

"Yes, it is," Mr. Collins agreed. His walking had improved greatly and he'd moved from the walker to a cane a few days earlier. Lane knew he was suffering from serious cabin fever and she'd begun to wonder how much longer she'd manage to keep him from work. Tris was worried about his pop pushing himself too far, too fast, but she knew there was also a danger in allowing Mr. Collins to languish too long. The problem was finding the happy medium.

"So how is my son treating you?" he asked.

Lane grinned. Mr. Collins had been surprisingly close-mouthed about her budding relationship with Tris, though she knew he was consumed with curiosity. The fact he was questioning her was a clue he was definitely on the mend.

"Tris is a perfect gentleman."

Mr. Collins laughed. "You'll have to sell that line to someone who doesn't know my son, my dear. His mother used to say he was too much like me. Too old-fashioned, set in his ways. Called us her cavemen from time to time when we annoyed her."

Lane giggled. "Apparently Tris has hidden this alter-ego you all refer to from me. Sean insists Tris is a—" She paused and blushed, realizing what word she'd almost used in front of the older man.

"I know perfectly well what word Sean uses to describe Tris and I have to confess I'm appalled by his language. Of course, Riley's is worse. Sunday must roll over in her grave to hear the way her children talk. I don't know where they get it from."

Lane bit her tongue, fighting against the impulse to mention that no one's vocabulary was more colorful than Mr. Collins' when watching one of his beloved sporting teams losing.

"Um, me neither," she said quickly and Mr. Collins laughed.

"Such a sweet girl. So what are the chances of you marrying Tristan?"

Lane sucked in a breath at his unexpected question and started choking as her spit went down the wrong tube. "M-marry?"

Mr. Collins patted her on the back as she fought to recover from her coughing jag. "Better?"

She nodded.

"Damn fool hasn't asked you, has he?"

"I've only been seeing Tris for a few weeks. It's way too soon to be thinking about marriage," she said. "Oh, look at the blooms on that tree. What kind of tree is that?" She hoped to divert the conversation to something a lot less embarrassing. They were nearly

back to the front door of the pub. If she could distract him for just a few more steps, she'd be free and clear.

"Hell if I know," Mr. Collins said. "I was just wondering—"

"Well, well, well," a voice said from behind. "What a pleasant surprise."

Lane closed her eyes and fought to hide her grimace. Suddenly, Mr. Collins' third degree didn't look so bad.

She took a deep breath and turned to face her ex-husband. "James." She watched Mr. Collins turn to face the man, scowling.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

James shrugged. "Just taking a walk, enjoying the sunshine and I happened to see you. What a coincidence, eh? I was wondering if I could talk to you for a minute, Lane."

Mr. Collins looked ready to commit murder. Problem was she *had* invited James to the pub to deliver the picture, foolishly thinking it was a safe place to make the exchange. Suddenly she was sorry they were so close to the entrance and she shuddered to think what Tris would do if he saw her ex-husband talking to her.

"Um. Sure." She turned and saw the look of surprise on Mr. Collins' face.

"Lane," he said softly. "You don't have to talk to this man. Come back in the pub with me."

"I'll only be a minute," she promised. "I swear."

Mr. Collins narrowed his eyes and she knew he wasn't happy with her answer. "One minute." He turned and walked back into the pub.

"Shit," she muttered. "Did you bring the picture?" She knew she would have much less than sixty seconds to recover the photo and get rid of James before Mr. Collins managed to round up the troops. She glanced back at the door, expecting to see Tris and his brothers storming through like avenging angels.

"I forgot it," James said and she felt her temper rise.

"You walked all the way here and forgot the picture."

"I really was just out for a stroll. Didn't actually intend to run into you."

Sure he didn't.

"Mr. Collins seems to be recovering nicely. Have you changed your mind about the job offer I told you about?" he asked.

"No, I haven't."

"Seems to me you aren't being very smart, Lane."

"Seems to me you're the one not being smart," Tris said from behind her. Lane sighed and turned slowly. She knew before she looked at his face what she would discover and she wasn't wrong. Tris was pissed as hell. It was written in his rigid posture and stone-like features. His eyes were shooting daggers at James and she wondered if her ex-husband realized the danger he was in.

"Collins," James said, his tone belligerent. Lane fought not to roll her eyes. Clearly James hadn't gotten any brighter. He'd always suffered from what her friend Joy referred to as "short-man syndrome". If there was a bigger man around, James almost always tried to start a fight.

"Hey, Tris." She forced a smile to her face. "I was just about to come inside."

Tris glanced down at her and nodded. "Go on in now. I'll be in soon."

"Tris," she started to protest.

"Go inside, Lane. Pop's asking for you."

She narrowed her eyes at his tone, recognizing the caveman Mr. Collins had just alluded to. She looked back at James and then stood her ground. "I'm not going inside without you."

Tris seemed surprised by her refusal. "I just want to have a little man-to-man chat with your ex-husband. I won't be long."

He stressed the word *ex*, and Lane was certain she heard James growl at the distinction.

"Anything the two of you need to say to each other can be said in front of me. Especially since this heart-to-heart is no doubt *about* me," she said.

James snorted. "Much as I'd love to stay and watch this touching lovers' spat, I have shit to do. I'll catch up with you later, Lane."

"No," Tris said. "You won't. Take a good long look, Bryce, because it's the last time you're ever going to see her."

James clenched his fists and Lane took a step closer to Tris.

"Is that right? Baltimore's a big city, but it's not that big, Collins. You planning on locking her inside or something?"

"Nope. I won't have to. You're the one who's going to ensure you never lay eyes on her again."

James narrowed his eyes. "If you think you can threaten me into leaving town, you're —"

"You don't have to go anywhere. You see Lane on the street, you'll cross to the other side. You run into her in the grocery store, you'll walk on. You will never approach her again and you'll never speak to her."

"Who says?" James taunted.

Lane took a step to her left, placing herself directly between the two men. She felt Tristan put his hands on her shoulders in an attempt to move her, but she refused to budge. Instead, he stepped around her and she could see from his face he wasn't happy with her maneuvering.

He looked at James. "You come near her again and I'm going rearrange that ugly face for you. You try to talk to her for any reason and I'll rip your throat open. Lane's mine now, so fly away, gnat."

James' face turned a mottled red and Lane knew the conversation was over. Before her ex-husband had a chance to throw a punch, she turned and pushed Tris toward the door to the pub.

"You've issued your warning," she said. "Let's go inside."

Tris narrowed his eyes and she knew the coming argument wasn't going to be pleasant.

"Next time," James yelled as they walked away. "Next time, maybe you'll be a fucking man and won't hide behind a woman."

Tris stopped, but Lane wouldn't be deterred. "Get inside," she said. "Please."

Tris allowed her to push him through the door and she was relieved when it closed behind them, shutting out James' taunts.

Her heart was thudding loudly as she looked around the pub. "Where's your pop?" She was surprised to find the room devoid of Collins men.

"Ewan took him upstairs. I told them I could handle your ex."

"And they believed you?" She was shocked Mr. Collins and Ewan would leave Tris alone, knowing what he'd try to do to James. Mr. Collins' words drifted back to her. *Took Ewan and Sean to pull Tristan off the man. I'm thinking now we should have let Tristan finish.*

"Apparently my family knows me better than you do. What the *fuck* was that out there, Lane?" Tris roared.

She winced at his anger. "I didn't want you to get into a fistfight with him."

"You think I can't take that little punk with one hand tied behind my back?"

She took a deep breath, speaking calmly, hoping the feeling would rub off on him. "I don't want anyone fighting over me. It's stupid and unnecessary. James and I are divorced. I'm never going back to him. You know that. The last thing I want to do is patch you up after some cockfight."

Tris ran an agitated hand through his hair. "Don't ever step between me and that asshole again. I don't need your protection."

She laughed. "You thought I was protecting you? Jesus, Tris. I was trying to protect James."

Her comment, rather than lightening the mood, made him even more furious. "You were protecting him?"

She closed her eyes briefly, trying to hold herself together. She hated confrontations. "That was a pretty impassioned speech you made. Rearrange his face. Rip open this throat. Christ, *I* was scared and your threats weren't even directed at me."

"Do you think I won't follow through on those if he comes near you again?"

"This isn't a spitting contest, Tris."

"I said I would protect you, Lane. I meant that."

"And I told you —"

He held up his hand. "Don't," he said. "Don't tell me you don't need my protection again. That bastard beat you. He put you in the hospital. He's lucky I let him breathe the same air as you. Dammit, Lane. Do you know what it did to me? Seeing you in that hospital bed."

She shook her head. Tristan's pain was almost tangible.

"It killed me inside. I don't ever want to see you hurt or in pain again."

"You're setting yourself up for failure, Tris. There's no way you can stop that."

"I can try. I *have* to try. I already failed you once. I won't —"

"Failed me? Is that what you think? That it was your fault James beat me?"

"I should have known what he was capable of. I should have seen —"

"So you're a mind-reader now? I lived with the asshole for two years and didn't expect, didn't realize what he'd do. Dammit, Tris. You've got to stop trying to save the world."

He grinned ruefully. "I'm not trying to save the world, just you. I don't know how to make you understand what you mean to me, Lane. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

She blinked hard, trying to ward off the tears gathering in her lashes. "I know that," she said softly.

"You still cry." His voice was quiet as he spoke, but her heart shattered at the sound of those three words. "In your sleep."

"I—" She swallowed heavily, uncertain what to say.

"You cry almost every night." The anguish on his face was more than she could bear so she looked away.

"I didn't know," she whispered. Usually her crying woke her and she'd foolishly spent the last week believing she'd broken the habit. "You never said anything."

He shrugged. "I hold you until you stop."

"You hold me?" She considered his words. Had anyone ever held her as she cried at night? James always just woke her up, usually to bitch that she was disturbing his sleep.

"What are the nightmares about, Lane?"

She turned and walked to the bar. She was grateful it was still morning and the pub was closed. It was rare when she was alone with Tris—outside his bedroom. She sat on one of the barstools, startled to discover him beside her.

"I don't know," she said.

He studied her face and she knew he was trying to decide if she was hiding the truth. He sat on the stool next to hers and grasped her hands. "You don't know?"

She shook her head. "I don't think it's a nightmare. I don't know why I cry or what I'm dreaming about. Honest."

He nodded. "I believe you."

"I didn't mean to disturb your sleep. I'll crash on the couch from now on. Your pop is much better. In a couple of weeks, he won't need me at all anymore. I really should start looking for a permanent job and a place to live."

"No."

She studied the implacable look on Tristan's face, uncertain what his reply meant. "No?"

"I think maybe it's time we had a talk. We've been letting things ride, but I have some expectations for this relationship and I'm sure you do too."

"Expectations?" she asked.

"You want to look for a job. Fine. I agree it's probably time. Pop's not gonna be kept away from work for much longer and he's much better."

"I've been putting out feelers with some of my old colleagues about a job. I have a few leads."

"Good. You're a terrific nurse and you know we'll give you a great reference."

She nodded. "Thanks. I'll finish out the two weeks and then I'm sure Joy won't mind if I move —"

"Don't even waste your breath, kitten. You aren't moving out of the apartment. At least, not without me."

"I assume this is the 'expectations' thing you were talking about." She tried to make light of the conversation, but her heart was beating a thousand times a minute.

He nodded. "I'm in this for the long haul."

"Long haul?"

"I've been giving it some thought and I think we should get our own place. Move in together."

She shook her head. "It's too soon. Surely you can't think —"

"Just hear me out. I know you aren't ready for what I want, but I'm not going to lie to you about my intentions. I want us to make a life together. Living together is the perfect way to start. It'll give us a chance to get to know one another better."

She laughed. "God, Tris. Has anyone ever mentioned that your thinking is a bit backward?"

He laughed before leaning forward to place a soft kiss on her forehead. "Just giving you something to think about. Like you said, we've still got a few weeks before you even have to start looking for a place."

"That's not what I said."

He ran his hands through her hair and pulled her close for a kiss. "It's close enough."

For several moments, their lips touched lightly, gently, and she wondered what she'd ever done in her life that was good enough to deserve Tristan's kisses.

"Are these make-up kisses?" she asked when he moved away.

"Were we fighting?"

"It felt like it," she said, recalling his anger when they'd come back into the pub.

He shrugged. "I wasn't mad at *you*, Lane. Just the prick." His eyes narrowed and he studied her face as if he'd just realized something. "You know, you didn't seem all that upset to see your ex again. I mean, it's been a year and he did hurt you pretty bad the last time."

She took a deep breath and struggled with the truth. She didn't think she was lying to Tris, but she hadn't exactly been forthcoming about the fact that she'd seen James at the waterfront and he'd been calling...a lot. "It all happened too fast for me to react. One minute he was there, the next you were and..."

Tris nodded and seemed to accept her comment. "If you run into the asshole again, don't stand there, Lane. Walk away and call me. I don't trust that little shit as far as I can throw him."

She kissed him on the cheek. "Okay."

"And just so there's no mistake tonight, until you do leave the apartment, there is no way I'm letting you sleep on the couch."

"But the crying—"

"Is something we're going to deal with. We'll figure it out. Leaving my bed isn't going to solve the problem."

Keira came into the pub. "I love the spring. What an awesome day." She looked over and spotted them on the barstools. "Hey, Lane. How's Pop? I thought I might take

him for a drive around town. He hasn't done anything besides putter around the apartment and pub for weeks. Thought it might be fun to take him to my last wedding dress fitting, and then over to the florist to see the flowers I picked out. What do you think?"

Tris rolled his eyes and muttered something under his breath about poor Pop. Lane tried to suppress her laughter and nodded. "I think he'd love it."

"Great. I'll run upstairs and see what Pop thinks."

Lane stood up to join her, but Tris caught her hand, held her back for a moment. "Promise you'll think about what I said? About living together?"

"I promise."

"And just so you know, Lane, Pop's gonna hate going to the florist."

* * * * *

Tris jerked awake, no longer surprised to find Lane trembling beside him. Hearing her soft crying was worse than seeing her in the throes of a nightmare. At least then she'd be able to get her emotions out properly with some thrashing and screaming. Her cries were quiet, muted, and he wondered if subconsciously she weren't trying to keep from disturbing him. It was as if Lane constantly tried to make herself as small as possible so as not to get in anyone's way. No doubt a foster child's way of adapting in so many different homes.

"Shhh," he said, running his hand up and down her back to try to soothe her, hoping she'd calm down and remain asleep. He knew how much her crying bothered her, embarrassed her, despite his assurances he didn't mind losing a bit of sleep.

Her hand pressed against his chest and he knew his wish had not been answered. She lifted her head, misery written on every line of her face.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I keep waking you up."

He smiled, wishing he could ease the guilt she was determined to cling to. "Kitten, I'm a young guy. I don't need that much sleep. Wanna tell me about it?"

She shrugged. "It's hard to explain. I'm not sure I can even understand it."

"Try."

She took a deep breath. "It's not a dream, so much as a horrible emotion. I feel so heavy, like there's a weight on my chest and I can't breathe. It's like somewhere inside I know that everything in the world is wrong and I'm helpless to fix it. It's always dark and I'm always alone."

He could see she was tired and he knew if she were fully awake, she'd never have revealed so much about her dreams, but tonight, while she was tired and scared, the walls surrounding her were lower, easier to scale.

"You aren't alone," he whispered, kissing her.

She tried to covertly swipe away her tears. "I love your kisses," she whispered against his cheek.

"Lucky for you, I've got a lifetime supply stored up," he replied softly. She giggled. He loved to see her smile, loved her soft laughter. He came over her body, caging her beneath him, letting her feel, letting her see that he was with her. He'd give anything to make her realize he'd always be with her. His cock nudged against her pussy and she grinned.

"Looks like I woke someone else up too," she said.

He pushed her legs apart with his knees. "You won't hear him complaining about losing sleep either. What do you say we try to replace some of those heavy, sad feelings of yours with the warm and fuzzy ones you like so well?"

He ran the head of his cock along her slick opening and she moaned.

"God, that feels good." Her hips lifted, trying to capture more of him, and he fought against the urge to thrust into her. He bent down and captured her hard nipple with his mouth, sucking on the soft flesh as her fingers tightened in his hair. He loved her rough caresses, the way she lost all control whenever he touched her.

He started to reach toward the nightstand drawer for a condom, but she grasped his wrist, holding him back.

“Lane?”

“I’m on birth control.”

It took a moment for her words to sink in and when they did, he couldn’t restrain his grin. Trust would always be a hard thing for Lane and her offer couldn’t be mistaken as anything other than solid proof that she trusted him. “Is that an invitation?”

“Do you need me to stick a stamp on it and mail it?” she asked, her lips turned up in a saucy smile.

He laughed long and hard at her jest. “Oh man. You are in for it now. Haven’t I ever told you what happens to smartasses in this family?”

She shook her head and watched him curiously.

“They get tickled.” As he spoke, he ran both hands along her rib cage, tickling her as she tried to get out from under him.

Her giggles were loud and unrestrained and he drank them down like a cool pint of Guinness.

“Stop,” she pleaded, trying to capture his hands and halt his teasing assault.

“Nope. Proper way to ask is to say uncle.”

She laughed harder, but he noticed she refused to give in easily. Finally, when she was breathless from her exertions and her laughter, she gave him the word.

“Uncle.”

“I didn’t know you were ticklish,” he said.

“Neither did I,” she confessed breathlessly and his heart lurched at the thought she’d never been tickled. The sudden urge to give her everything, show her everything, rolled through him.

He grasped her waist and rolled on the bed until she was sitting on top of him. "It's your party," he said when his cock brushed against her buttocks. "Ride me, kitten."

She smiled at his offer, rising onto her knees and gripping his erection in her hands. She positioned his cock at her opening before slowly sinking down. The sensation of being inside Lane's body without the protection of a condom was almost more than he could bear. He'd never felt so much. She was hot and wet and so tight. He closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. There was no way this would last long.

Her movements on his cock were slow and steady and nowhere near enough. He gripped her waist and lifted her until just the head was left inside. Then he pulled her down—hard—against his hips.

She shook her head, taking his hands away from her waist and placing them on her breasts. "It's my party," she said with a grin. "And I'll fuck how I want to."

He chuckled. "Don't want to seem like an ungrateful guest, but I wish you'd fuck harder."

She moved up and repeated his hard return. He gasped.

"Just harder?" she asked, thrusting once more. Stars flew behind his eyes and he knew what she wanted to hear.

"Faster would be nice too."

She picked up the pace as his hands closed around her breasts, tugging at her nipples as she fucked the hell out of his cock.

"Dammit, Lane." His breathing was labored and he found it hard to speak. He was certain he'd never seen anything more beautiful than Lane riding him, her hair loose over her shoulders. "I can't last much longer."

He reached down to stroke her clit, rewarded by her soft moan. "God, yes," she hissed.

He pushed the little distended nub harder as Lane's pace increased even more. Her thrusts were harder, wilder, and he put his other hand on her waist to help her when on

one movement, she lost his cock. Her eyes were glazed and he could see she was close as well.

"Fuck the ride," he said, flipping her onto her back. "Need you." He pushed into her body, penetrating her to the hilt. He kissed her as his hips moved against her relentlessly.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and he moved deep. "Tris," she cried as he felt her orgasm begin. Her inner muscles clenched against his cock and he gave up the fight to resist his own climax, pouring jet after sweet jet of come inside her welcoming body. As he came, he said, "Love you. God, I love you."

He hovered over her for several minutes, unwilling to give up the heat of her cunt. He kissed her until his arms threatened to give out and he pushed to her side. He wrapped his arms around her and savored the feeling of her soft hair draped across his chest.

"Warm and fuzzy?" he asked as her breathing started to deepen. She was drifting off to sleep.

"Mmm. Warm and fuzzy."

* * * * *

Lane was awakened the next morning by her cell phone. She sat up, disoriented, and realized Tris wasn't in bed with her. A glance at the clock showed nine o'clock. She was going to get fired if she didn't stop having all-night sex-fests with her patient's son. She laughed and decided she didn't give a shit. She was happier than she'd ever been in her life. She retrieved her phone, looked at the number and sighed. *So much for that good feeling*, she thought, as she opened the cell.

"James, I want you to stop calling me."

"Meet me at the waterfront at ten o'clock."

"Why?"

"You want your stupid picture, you can have it. You don't want to meet me in private, I got it. If you want the thing, you're going to have to come get it. I'm not coming anywhere near that fucking pub. I'm not gonna give Collins and his dumbass brothers a chance to jump me."

"They wouldn't—"

"Come alone," James interrupted. "Leave your Neanderthal boyfriend at home. You can take the picture and we never have to see each other again."

Lane considered his words. She wanted the picture. The waterfront would be teeming with tourists, so she would be safe. Besides, his promise of never having to see or talk to him again was simply too good to pass up.

"I'll be there."

"Fine." James hung up and she closed her phone.

Tris walked in with a washcloth and she was reminded that he'd taken her last night without a condom. There was an unfamiliar stickiness between her thighs that felt much lovelier than it should.

"I overslept...again." Her tone was accusatory.

Tris, the scoundrel, just wiggled his eyebrows at her. "You're not going to guilt me into leaving you alone at night, so you might as well start considering this your normal wake-up time."

"Your pop—"

"Is eating breakfast with Riley and feeling good enough to give me shit about keeping you up so late. We really need to find our own place."

Lane felt a blush creep to her cheeks. Usually they took care to keep their nighttime adventures quiet, but last night, things had gotten a bit out of hand...and loud. "He heard us? Oh God, I'll never be able to face your father again."

Tris laughed. "Yes, you will. The old guy's just razzing me. He and my mother weren't exactly experts at hiding when they were having sex."

Lane shook her head. "I don't think I want to know this."

"There are seven of us, Lane, and believe me, the stork didn't drop us off. I mean, it's not like they got it on in the middle of the living room, but when Mom and Pop disappeared behind the locked door of their bedroom, we knew what was going on. Mainly because that was the only time they locked their door. And their bed squeaked."

Lane put her hands to her ears and started humming. He grinned at her.

"TMI?" he asked.

She nodded, but smiled.

"Here." He held out the washcloth. "I thought you might be uncomfortable after last night."

Even more heat rushed to her face and she felt certain she must resemble a beet by now. She tried to take the cloth from him, but he held on to it.

"Let me." As he spoke, he pushed her back on the bed.

"Tris, I'm perfectly able to —"

He pulled the sheet down and placed the warm cloth at the juncture between her legs. "I've told you a million times, kitten. Being independent and letting someone take care of you aren't disconnected things. You can have both."

He gently cleaned her as she considered his words. In all her time with him, Tristan had never made her feel trapped. Quite the opposite actually. For the first time in her life, she felt free to be her true self with someone and it felt wonderful.

She remembered James' call and she glanced at the clock again. She only had forty-five minutes to take a quick shower and get across town. She started to tell Tris about the picture and about her ex-husband's demands, but she reconsidered. Today would be the last day she'd ever have to see or speak to the man. She'd get her grandmother's picture and close the book on that chapter of her life. She looked at Tris and smiled. She was looking forward to starting a new story with him.

Chapter Eight

Lane paced by the park bench, thinking about how much had changed in the few short weeks since the first time she'd seen James here. There was a confidence, an optimism brewing inside her and, despite her unease at meeting her ex again, she couldn't contain her happiness. Tristan loved her. He'd said it numerous times, but she'd never been able to say the words back.

Now she knew, somewhere along the line, she'd fallen in love with him too. She couldn't pinpoint the exact moment. She wasn't sure there was one. She just knew that Tris had been slowly scaling the wall to her heart and there was no doubt in her mind he'd not only climbed the damn thing, he'd torn it down.

"Hey, Lane."

She turned to see James standing closely behind her. She'd been so preoccupied with thoughts of her new lover she hadn't even seen him approach.

"James," she said. "Did you bring the picture?" She was finished with the niceties. She'd made excuses for James and his nasty behavior for years. She wasn't going to even attempt to make this anything other than what it was—a quick exchange and then goodbye forever.

James glanced around. "No shithead?"

"If you're asking me if Tris is here, he isn't. Now give me the picture. I'm very busy."

James reached into the pocket of his windbreaker and took out her beloved photograph. Her breath caught as she saw the familiar face of her grandmother smiling for the camera. The picture was worn, faded, and yet it never failed to evoke a feeling of peace inside her.

Lane realized as she studied the tattered paper that this time, the feeling was different. Until Tris, this photograph was the only proof she had that there had been someone in the world, in her life, who had loved her and wanted her. Now, though she was happy to see her grandmother's beloved face, she knew in her heart Tris wanted and loved her. She wouldn't be alone ever again.

She looked up at James. At one point, she'd foolishly believed he'd felt that way. Now, after spending the last few weeks with Tris, she realized what she'd felt for James hadn't been love. She'd been a silly, inexperienced young woman desperate to find a happily ever after with the first man who'd ever paid her even a little bit of attention.

"Thank you, James." Regardless of his cruel nature, she thought there must be some small part of him that was still good. He had kept and protected her grandmother's picture and he'd returned it to her.

"Don't thank me yet," he said. "There's something else in my pocket for you."

She frowned, uneasy with his words and the strange look on his face. "This is all I want," she said, looking around. There were people everywhere. The only reason she'd agreed to meet him here was because she'd been certain she'd be safe. Now she wasn't sure.

James turned slightly and moved closer so only she could see the gun he quickly flashed before returning it to his pocket.

"It's loaded and pointed at you. My finger is on the trigger, so you might want to listen very closely to what I'm about to say."

"James —"

"I said listen!" She jumped at his harsh tone, reminded of the night he'd come home and found her packing to leave him. Jesus, she was seventeen kinds of fool.

"You're going to come home with me, Lane. Back to our home. We're going to wait there until your fucking boyfriend comes looking for you, and then I'm going to kill the bastard right in front of you."

Lane tried to make sense of James' words. "Why would you do that? You'd lose everything. Your freedom, your life."

"I've already lost everything, you stupid bitch. My wife, my job. The bank's going to foreclose on the house. I've got nothing, Lane, and it's Tristan Collins' fault."

She shook her head. "No. Tris had nothing to do with—"

"You left me for him."

"I didn't," she interjected, but James continued speaking.

"When I tried to stop you—I didn't mean to hurt you so bad, but *you* were hurting *me* and before I knew it I was hitting you. The cops put me in jail. I wanted to tell you it was a mistake, but you disappeared. My boss found out about our fight and he canned me."

"There are other jobs," she said.

"We're in a fucking recession, Lane." His voice was so reminiscent of their years of marriage, she felt herself fighting to stop from closing down. It was always the same. She'd say something and he'd reply in that condescending tone, call her stupid.

"Fine. So you've lost everything. That's not Tristan's fault. It's yours." The words were the wrong thing to say to a man with a gun, but there was no way Lane was going to see Tristan endangered because of a mistake she'd made. Several mistakes she'd made. Starting with marrying the lunatic pointing a gun at her.

"Walk, Lane. We're going home."

She refused to move. If he was in the mood to kill someone, it would have to be her and it would have to be here. Besides, she knew what happened to women who moved off city streets. They ended up dead. James wasn't going to hurt Tris. If it was the last thing she did, she would see to that.

James chuckled. "I knew you'd be difficult. See that school bus?" Lane followed his line of vision and watched as a busload of preschoolers stepped onto the sidewalk in front of the aquarium.

"You wouldn't dare," she whispered.

"I have ten rounds in this handgun. That means I can take down eight of those little brats before killing you and then me."

"So this is a suicide?"

He shrugged. "It's a mystery. Who knows how it will all end? Now move."

She started walking, surprised when James waved down a taxi.

"We can't exactly walk all the way to our house. Same rules apply in the cab. You say anything to the driver and I kill him first. Got it?"

She nodded. As they rode in silence to James' house, Lane cursed her stupidity. Why hadn't she told Tris where she was going? She'd claimed to have errands to run, promising to be back in an hour as she'd kissed him goodbye. She knew Tris. If she didn't return home soon, he'd start calling her cell. She glanced at James and wondered if there was some way she could get her cell phone out of her purse. If she could just dial 9-1-1.

The cab parked in front of the small house she'd shared with her husband and she fought back the bile in her throat at the thought of entering it again. She closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe slowly.

"Pay the man, sweetheart," James said. She handed the driver a handful of dollars, then stepped out of the taxi. James had a strong grip on her arm and she couldn't loosen it without putting the older cab driver at risk. The car pulled away and James directed her toward the house. Lane felt the beginnings of a serious panic attack when James locked the door behind them. "Give me your cell."

Lane's hands trembled as she handed over her last piece of hope. He threw the cell phone on the front table and took the gun out of his jacket.

"When did you get a gun?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Start walking."

"Where?"

"The basement. Too many busybodies in this neighborhood. I want a little 'alone time' with my wife before things get bloody."

"James," she said. "It's not too late to let me go. No harm, no foul. I swear if you let me leave right now, I'll never say a word to anyone about this."

James laughed. "Get in the basement, Lane, and shut your stupid fucking mouth. One more word from you and I'll put a gag in it."

She turned and walked toward the kitchen and the basement door. Along the way she tried to find anything she could use as a weapon, but the hallway was empty except for piles of trash and dirty clothes. Bile rose to her throat as she was assaulted by the repugnant odors. How could he live like this?

"You'll have to excuse my mess," James said as she stepped over a pile of beer cans. "My wife left me for a freaking bartender."

As they reached the basement door, James surprised her by shoving her against the hard wood, his fingers gripping her hair. "You're going to pay for being a slut. I'm gonna make you pay for everything. Open the door," he added as he jerked her back by her hair. Tears streamed down her face, a mixture of pain and pure fear. She stumbled as he pushed her down the stairs, only just catching herself before falling.

At the bottom he released her and she turned. Strangely, she felt her fear, her panic giving way to something else. As she faced her ex-husband, his face demented with his desire for revenge, she realized she didn't want to cower in the corner and take his abuse. This time, she was ready to do battle.

Her poise, her fearlessness seemed to take him aback and she watched his eyes narrow as he assessed her stance. "You've changed."

She smirked. Whether he realized it or not, he'd just complimented her. "Yes, I have."

"I don't like it."

"I don't really give a shit what you like or don't like, James."

He slapped her. Pinpricks attacked her cheek, but she merely continued to face him, refusing to raise her hand to her face.

"Jesus. You really are an ignorant whore. Not even smart enough to know you've been beaten."

She laughed. "Beaten? By whom? You?" She used her most Tris-like voice, speaking to James as if he were nothing more than an annoyance.

He slapped her again. Her face was on fire and her eyes watered like mad, but she wasn't going to back down. Not now, not ever.

"You were my wife," he said, almost to himself. "Mine! He took you away."

"I. Left. You. I walked out of here on my own two feet because you were a shitty husband. Tris had nothing to do with our divorce."

James punched her in the stomach and she felt her knees buckle. She fought to stay on her feet, knowing if she went down, James would seize the advantage. There was a pipe running from the ceiling to the floor in the center of the basement. She reached out to grab it, holding herself upright against it.

"You sucked as a husband," she taunted, unsure where the words were coming from.

"Shut up!"

"You were lousy in bed, a nasty little snake. You repulsed me." All the rage, the misery, the pent-up anger she'd kept bottled up during their two years of marriage came flying out.

"I said shut up." She watched him put the gun on a table behind him before approaching her.

"Decide to fight fair?" she asked as she stepped closer to him. "I won't stand still this time, James. I'll hit back. Hard."

"You need to stop talking." He reached up and attempted to grab her upper arms. She dodged, pushing him hard before he managed to grip her shoulders, shaking her. "You're a liar. You *did* love me! It was that asshole. He told you to leave me."

She struggled to break his grip, kicking hard at his shin. He howled as her foot made contact and released her. She moved back, frantically looking around the room for a weapon. The gun lay on the table behind him, too far away to help her.

He rushed after her and she dodged again, trying to get around him, desperate to escape. His right hand captured her left arm and he spun her roughly, wrapping himself around her from behind, pinning her arms tightly to her side. She tried to kick him, but she couldn't connect with his legs, so instead she used her head – literally. She flung it back and head-butted him in the face. She heard his nose crack and when he dropped her, she turned to see blood streaming from it.

"You broke my nose." His voice was laced with disbelief. She tried to run around him, not sure whether she was aiming for the stairs or the gun. He grabbed her by the hair, jerking her back hard.

She cried out at the pain in her scalp.

"Bitch!" he shouted as she spun around and scratched his face. He shoved her away from him and she lost her footing. As she fell backward, she hit her head on a shelf – hard. Stars flew and the edges of the room began to go black. She blinked rapidly, trying to retain consciousness. Panic besieged her as the blackness grew. Her last vision was that of her ex-husband walking toward her, laughing.

* * * * *

"Where the hell is she?" Tris raged, slamming his cell phone closed. There were a few customers in the pub and he was fairly sure they'd never come back again. He'd been too preoccupied watching the door to remember their orders or even refill their drinks. Pop had come down and, even though Tris knew it was too soon, his old man was taking care of business while he called Lane's cell every thirty seconds.

"This isn't like her, Pop," he said, repeating the same line he'd uttered fifty times in the last few hours.

"I agree." His pop had been accusing him of overreacting all day so his answer caught Tris off guard.

"You do?"

"I asked Riley to call Aaron. He should be here in a few minutes. Maybe he can give us some idea of what to do next."

Tris nodded, pleased with his pop's suggestion. His father looked better today than he had in months. "That's a really good idea."

Aaron Young walked in and Tris waved the young police officer over. Aaron and Riley had been best friends since the cradle, a fact that always struck the family as funny. Aaron was the epitome of straight and narrow while Riley skirted the line between right and wrong on a daily basis. She wasn't a criminal, but she was reckless, wild and not averse to pushing the limit on pretty much everything. He was never sure how Aaron was able to keep up with her, but Tris had to admit, the man was better at controlling Riley than the men in her family.

"Lane's missing," Tris said as Aaron approached the bar.

Aaron nodded. He'd been to the house numerous times since Lane came to stay with them as a nurse. "How long's she been gone?"

"Four hours."

"Tris—" Aaron started.

"Don't, Aaron. Don't give me the legal bullshit about it being too soon to worry. I know Lane. For one thing, she said she'd be gone an hour. It's been four. There's no way she'd leave Pop alone that long without calling, which leads me to my second point. She's always got her cell phone on. She's not answering."

"Cell batteries die. Women get distracted. Maybe she went shopping," Aaron offered.

Tris narrowed his eyes, but before he could refute the policeman's words, Aaron waved him off.

"Where was she going? What were her errands?"

Tris shrugged. "She didn't say. Just said she had a few things to take care of."

"You're not giving me much to go on here, Tris."

"Her ex was around yesterday."

"Around?" Aaron asked. "The pub?"

Tris nodded. "He was outside. Lane and Pop ran into him. According to Pop, James asked if he could talk to her alone. She agreed."

"What did they talk about?"

"I don't know. Probably not much. Pop came in and got me so she wasn't alone with the prick for more than a minute."

"I guess you threatened him."

Tris shrugged, knowing Aaron's comment was rhetorical.

"I can't just go over there and accuse the guy of kidnapping his ex-wife. For one thing, she hasn't been gone long enough to be considered a missing person."

"I just want you to distract him. I want to take a look around his house."

"Oh, you just want to trespass, maybe do a little breaking and entering. Well, why didn't you say so? Don't know why you called me. You've got Riley on your team."

Tris sighed. "Can the sarcasm, Aaron, I can't sit here scratching my ass, hoping she'll be okay. I promised to protect her. What if it were Riley who was missing?"

"Your sister goes missing on a weekly basis, Tris."

Pop grinned and slapped Aaron on the back. He'd been quiet during their conversation, but he'd been listening intently. "And you always find her for us, son," he said to the young cop. "Help us find Lane too."

"This could mean my job."

"All I want you to do is distract James with a few questions at his front door while I peek in the windows. If I get caught, I'll swear I was acting alone. Please. I know you, Aaron. If James is up to something crooked, you'll sniff it out." Aaron was an excellent cop because of his ability to read people. Tris had no doubt the man would know immediately if James was up to no good.

"Shit," Aaron said. "Let's go. But I'm telling you right now, if I get fired, you're hiring me at the pub."

"Done," Pop replied.

"And I want benefits," Aaron added. "Decent ones."

"Anything you want," Tris said, happy to finally be doing something. Lane was in trouble. He could feel it in his bones. His promise to protect her hovered in the back of his mind.

God, please don't let me be too late.

Chapter Nine

Lane opened her eyes, blinking at the pain in her head. Light pierced her vision like laser rays and she fought back a groan as she closed her eyes again. She tried to stand up, but realized her hands were tied above her head. It took her several more attempts to focus on the room without crying. As she took stock of her surroundings, she realized she was lying on her back on the cold, concrete basement floor. Her hands were tied together with duct tape around the pipe in the center of the room.

A quick glance around the room confirmed she was alone, but she didn't know how long she'd been unconscious. It also confirmed James had the gun. From where she lay, she could see the weapon was no longer on the table. She needed to stand up and fight her way out of the tape. Maybe she could use her teeth.

She ignored the pounding in her head as she tried to roll to her side. Footsteps on the basement stairs told her she was out of time...and luck. She debated playing dead, but James had already seen her moving. As he walked across the room, she felt a small bit of glee at the bandage on his puffy, bruised nose and the scratches on his face. He looked like shit.

"It's about time you woke up. No fun playing with an unconscious woman. Your damn cell phone's been ringing off the hook."

Tris had gone into protector mode. He was worried and looking for her.

"You didn't answer it?" she asked, confused. "I thought this whole kidnapping game was so you could use me as bait."

James grinned. "It did start that way, but I have to confess I'm having too much fun to let the game end too soon."

Equal parts relief and panic flooded her. Tris was still safe. She was not.

"Untie me," she demanded with more bravado than she felt. She couldn't stand being helpless in front of him.

He shook his head. "Nope. They're my rules and they don't say anything about playing fair."

Before she could react, he straddled her legs, holding them to the ground with his weight. With her arms incapacitated, she knew what it meant to be shit out of luck.

"You don't want to do this, James." He started unbuttoning her blouse. "You hated sex with me."

He chuckled after releasing the second button. "This isn't sex, Lane. It's rape." With that, he ripped her shirt open the rest of the way, the fabric tearing.

"When did you become such a bastard?" She tried in vain to move her legs.

"I was always a bastard. You know that. For a while there, I actually thought you might save me, but then you started spreading your legs for Collins. How do you think I felt, Lane, knowing my wife was whoring at the pub week after week?"

"I wasn't whoring and I didn't think you cared if I went out for a drink. You never said anything. Never acted like you wanted me around."

He grasped her bra, pulling it up until her breasts were bared to his pinching fingers. She winced at his painful tugging.

"Well, you were right. I didn't want you around. You were a stupid, ugly bitch then."

"So what's this all about?" She tried to stem the tears he was producing with his hard pinches, trying to pretend she wasn't terrified, in agony.

"You were *my* stupid bitch," he replied with a nasty laugh. He scooted down her legs, careful not to lose his grip on them. He'd wised up to her kicking. He unbuttoned her jeans, released the zipper. She moved as much as her tight restraints would allow, fighting to break the tape at her wrists.

He dragged the denim over her hips, along with her panties, and she swallowed back the vomit rising to her throat. She didn't want his fingers on her, near her.

"Please don't," she whispered, her courage faltering.

He looked at her face and for a minute, she thought she saw a shadow of the man she'd married.

Then his face hardened with anger. "I bet you don't say no to *him*." He pushed one finger along her pussy, the touch of the single digit painful. "Dry as a bone," he laughed, though the sound held no mirth. "Guess some things never change."

She hadn't realized until Tris what it meant to desire someone so much her body would produce its own juices. She'd rarely managed that feat with James and they'd had to use lubrication more often than not.

"Stop." She tried to press her legs together when he continued pressing.

He rose to his knees above her ankles, pushing her jeans down and pulling one leg free, leaving her other foot trapped in the rough material. He worked slowly, carefully, keeping a tight grip on her legs to prevent her from flailing. Once he had her bare from the waist down, he shoved her knees apart and knelt brutally on her left leg, keeping a hard grip on her right thigh.

He began to undo his own pants with his free hand and she knew she was helpless to stop him. "This is going to hurt, you frigid bitch," he said as he released his cock. She closed her eyes, but he refused to allow her even that small bit of escape. He pinched her nipple cruelly. "Open your eyes. You're gonna know it's me who's taking you. Game's over, Lane. I'm the winner."

She opened her eyes. "Fuck you." Her words gave him a moment's pause, as did her penetrating stare.

For a moment, she thought she'd stopped him, but he merely frowned as he placed the head of his cock at her opening.

And then the doorbell rang.

For a split second both of them remained motionless, and then Lane opened her mouth to scream. James instantly covered her lips with one hand while reaching over and grabbing a rag from the floor. He stuffed the dirty cloth in her mouth and she struggled not to gag as he pushed it in, holding it in place with more of his cursed duct tape.

Then he rose, closing his pants. "Don't go anywhere. I'll get rid of our company and then we'll finish this party up right."

Tris crept up to the back door as Aaron spoke with James on the front porch. He'd positioned himself just outside the backyard, waiting for Ewan's signal. His brother was crouched behind a neighbor's hedge, watching the front door. Once Aaron left, he would signal Tris with a birdcall that the coast was no longer clear.

Tris tried to open the door, surprised to find it unlocked. His original plan had been to look in the windows, but Aaron had unwittingly planted the breaking-and-entering seed back at the pub. In for a dime, in for a dollar, he decided as he crossed the threshold. James clearly didn't feel threatened by thieves.

As he stepped into the kitchen, he understood why. The house smelled worse than a sewer and every surface was coated with stains, spilled food and garbage. He could hear Aaron and James talking toward the front of the house and wondered how he'd be able to get by them if he couldn't find Lane on the first floor.

He was walking toward the hallway when he noticed a door ajar. He heard scuffling sounds below and acted before he could think better of the idea. He crept down the stairs—relief and anger inundating him when saw Lane, bound and nearly naked, struggling to get to her knees.

"Jesus." He rushed across the room to free her.

Lane's bruised face went wild with panic when she saw him and for a moment, he wondered if she was frightened of him. His blood ran cold as murder flashed in his mind. He'd kill James Bryce for hurting her again.

He peeled the tape away from her wrists and together they fought to remove the gag. Lane bent forward to retrieve her pants. "Out of here!" she whispered, her words coming out in a rush. "You have to get out of here! James is going to—"

"Dammit, Lane," James said from the top of the stairs. "You always try to give away the ending. Put your hands in the air, Collins, and leave them there."

From where he knelt at Lane's side, Tris saw that James had a gun in his hands and it was pointed directly at him. Tris wanted to place himself in front of Lane, but as long as the gun barrel stayed on him, he didn't want to draw any more attention to her. He stood slowly and raised his hands.

James slowly walked down the stairs and Tris started to curse as Lane struggled to her feet and positioned herself between him and her ex...again.

"Lane," Tris said. "Move behind me. Now."

James smiled at his comments. "You're spoiling my surprise, Lane. My silly wife—"

"Ex-wife," Lane interjected.

Tris wanted to growl at her reckless behavior. "Why don't you let Lane leave, Bryce? This argument is between us. Get her out of here and we'll settle it like men."

James shook his head. "Nope. The whole point of killing you is so Lane can see what happens when wives cheat on their husbands. Nice of you to break in this way. As a law-abiding citizen, I have every right to defend my home. No one will convict me for killing an intruder."

Tris tried to step forward, desperate to get between Lane and the gun.

"Don't move," James said, lifting the weapon and pointing it directly at Lane's head. "Lane, step aside. Now."

"No," she said.

"Dammit, Lane," Tris pleaded. "Move out of the way, kitten."

She shook her head. "You'll have to kill me first."

"My game, my rules."

Tristan was unnerved by the pleasure James seemed to take in Lane's response. Lane's courage in the face of the escalating danger appeared to be egging the man on.

"Lane," Tris said. "Turn around and look at me."

James' gaze landed on him. "Go ahead," he instructed her. "Turn around and look at your lover. I want you to see the bullet as it goes in."

"Freeze!" Aaron yelled from the top of the stairs.

Tris only had a moment to comprehend the cop had his gun drawn. Then the events surrounding him began to play out in slow motion.

James lifted one hand off the gun in a sign of surrender. Lane turned, yelling at Tris to get down as James fired the gun. Lane fell into his arms, pushing him to the ground as another shot was fired, and then another. He felt a burning sensation along his rib cage as he quickly rolled and covered Lane.

When the last shot was fired, he glanced over his shoulder to find James' lifeless body crumpled at the foot of the stairs. Aaron was standing over him, his expression grim. Ewan rushed in, followed by more policemen. He heard someone call for an ambulance.

"You're bleeding," Lane said. Her voice sounded sweet and clear.

He looked down and saw a tear in his shirt. Apparently a bullet had grazed him. One quick look told him it was nothing more than a scratch. "It's nothing. What the hell were you doing putting yourself between him and me?"

"I couldn't let you die for my mistake."

"The guy was a psycho, Lane. Maybe it was a mistake to marry him, but you got out."

She was pale, her face white as a sheet. Tris feared she was going into shock over the ordeal. "Should have trusted you. Do trust you. Thought I would be safe..." Her words faded, her breathing harsh, labored.

"It's okay, Lane. Everything is okay now."

"Tris," Ewan said. "Tris, the EMTs are here. They want to check you out. See where all this blood is coming from."

Tris looked down and his heart stopped when he saw a pool of blood beneath Lane. He pushed off her, his hands dragging her shirt away from her. "The bullet," he said.

Lane blinked, pain filling her face. "It went through my shoulder," she whispered. "Still hit you. Unlucky."

"Jesus."

Ewan dragged Tris away as two EMTs applied pressure to her wound. He was vaguely aware of Aaron explaining to another cop about the kidnapping. He felt remorse for the pile of shit he'd landed the man in.

"You okay, bro?" Ewan asked. He knew his Ewen wasn't talking about his wound. Tris couldn't take his eyes off Lane as the EMTs placed her on a gurney. It was obvious she was in pain, but she didn't shed a tear.

"She stepped in front of a bullet for me."

"Helluva woman," Ewan said.

"I said I would protect her."

"You did, Tris. She was in danger and you broke in here like freaking Conan the Barbarian. Don't mind telling you I had a heart attack when I saw you walking around inside the kitchen. Aaron freaked when I told him you were in the house."

"Tris," Aaron said, walking over. "We need to get a statement from you."

"I'm riding in the ambulance with Lane. You can take my statement at the hospital." Tris knew Aaron wanted to argue, but then the other man just shrugged.

"Sure. No problem."

Tris followed the rescue workers as they carried Lane to the ambulance, hopping in behind them.

"Let me look at your wound," Lane said as he sat down next to her.

Tris laughed, though he didn't feel much pleasure. "You're not a nurse now. You're a patient, so be quiet and behave yourself."

"It's just a flesh wound. Bullet went straight through. I'm fine."

Tris lightly ran his fingers through her hair, grimacing when he pulled them away and found them coated with Lane's blood. The sight of it, knowing it was *her* blood, made him lightheaded, dizzy.

"You aren't going to faint, are you, Everest? It's just a little blood."

"It's *your* blood." He wondered when his body had gotten so cold, why his hands suddenly felt numb.

"Excuse me." He watched Lane attempt to get the EMT's attention. "I think my boyfriend is going into shock."

He grinned at her use of the word *boyfriend*. "I'm fine," he said, just before he passed out.

* * * * *

"You doing okay, Tris?" Ewan asked.

He nodded tiredly. Hours had passed since their arrival at the hospital, but it seemed more like months. He'd felt like a damn fool when he came to in the ambulance and realized he'd fainted like a little girl over the sight of some blood. His brothers were never going to let him live it down. Pop and all his siblings had come to check on him and Lane, and had long since returned home. Ewan had stuck around to talk to the police.

Tris and Lane had both given their statements as well and he felt sick at how close James had come to raping her. Lane had told the story in her calm, mild-mannered way and once again, he was struck by her strength.

Apparently, one of James' neighbors had called the police when she'd spotted Ewan in her hedge. Fortunately, Aaron claimed he'd been the first on the scene to investigate the neighbor's intruder call when he discovered a kidnapping in progress. Between

Ewan's, Tris' and Lane's statements, plus that of the cab driver who'd been tracked down, James' death was being treated as a justified kill by the district attorney. James had kidnapped Lane from a public street, and then shot her as Tris attempted to save her.

The ER doctor had patched up Lane's shoulder and put five stitches in Tris' side. He'd deemed Tris well enough to go home, but insisted Lane stay overnight for observation. She had a nasty concussion in addition to the gunshot wound. It was early evening and she was dozing as the pain medication the doctor had prescribed included a sleep aid.

"I'm going to head out," Ewan said, standing slowly.

Tris stood and put his hand on his younger brother's shoulder. "Thanks for everything today."

"No problem. I'm glad you and Lane are okay. When I heard those gunshots—"

"I know, man. I know."

Ewan shrugged and, in his typical fashion, sought to lighten the heavy mood. "Gotta admit, one of the best parts of being a Collins is the fact there's never a dull moment. Shit, Tris. I think you and Aaron gave Riley a run for her money today as far as wild schemes go."

"Guess we did. She looked pissed as hell at being left out too. Wouldn't want to be Aaron tonight. Got a feeling she's gonna chew him a new one."

"Like we'd let our baby sister storm into that lunatic's house on a rescue mission," Ewan said, shaking his head.

"I know. Good night, Ewan."

"Later." His brother left and Tris resumed his seat beside Lane. He took her hand in his, leaning back in the chair and closing his eyes. One thought kept passing through his mind. He'd almost lost her. Again.

* * * * *

"Go home, Everest. You're tired." She was watching him through drowsy eyes.

"Nope. I'm staying the night."

"You're too small to fit on that couch," she said.

He shook his head. "Not sleeping on the couch. Scoot over." He helped her move, taking extra care not to jar her injured shoulder.

"The nurses aren't going to like this."

Tris stretched out next to her on the hospital bed, propping his head on his hand and leaning over her. "The only nurse I'm afraid of is you."

She grinned. "You're not staying because you're afraid I'll leave again, are you?"

He shook his head once and then shrugged.

"I'll never leave you," she whispered, placing her hand on his beloved cheek. "I'm so sorry, Tris. So sorry I didn't tell you where I was going this morning. Sorry that I didn't trust you."

"What do you think I would have said if you'd told me you were meeting James to get that picture back?" She'd shown him the photograph of her grandmother earlier, explaining to him why it was so precious to her. He adored his family and if he ever lost them, he knew he'd cling to photos as well.

"You would have wanted to come with me."

He nodded. "You're right. I would have. Would that have been so bad?"

"In hindsight?" she asked lightly and he laughed. Then her face went serious. "No, it wouldn't have been bad. I needed you. I needed your help."

"Does that mean you're dependent on me? That you've lost your free will?"

She considered his questions. "No, it doesn't. You've never tried to tell me what to do, never tried to control me. I follow my own path."

He kissed her lightly. "That's right. You do. All I've asked is that you let me walk that path beside you, Lane."

She nodded, understanding sinking in. She took a deep breath. "I love you."

His eyes narrowed at her admission. "Is that right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

She watched him nod, wondering at his suddenly serious face. "Say it again."

"Why?"

"Because you made me wait ages to hear it. Say it again."

She laughed. "I love you."

"One more time."

"Now you're just being greedy."

He leaned forward, his face close enough she could feel the warmth of his breath.

"Say it again," he whispered.

"I love you, Tristan Collins. Love you, love you, love y —"

He cut off her last word with a long, deep kiss.

"And I love you. Go to sleep, kitten. We'll *both* still be here in the morning."

Epilogue

Lane grinned as she stood amidst Tristan's family. It was a Sunday afternoon and the family had closed down the pub for the day. The prodigal son, Killian, was returning home after an eight-year stint in the Army. He was coming off a one-year tour in Iraq, and Lane knew his brothers and sisters were grateful he was coming home in one piece. She had spent most of the past week helping Keira and Riley plan a welcome-home party. Teagan and Sky had arrived earlier this morning to be with them.

Tris wrapped his arm around her waist and placed a kiss on top of her head. "The place looks great."

She and Keira had spent most of the morning decorating the pub with American flags and yellow ribbons, while Riley prepared the appetizers.

"Thanks." She turned in his arms, grinning when she saw his big smile. The man had been beaming all morning and she wondered if any of the other siblings were as happy as Tris was at this moment.

"Glad to have him home?" she asked, though she knew the answer. It was written all over his face.

"I'm not sure I've ever been happier. There haven't been too many times these past few years when the whole family's been together. As we get older, it gets harder. I like having us all in one place. Feels nice."

She nodded and agreed. After being released from the hospital following James' attack, she'd returned to the Collins apartment. She'd joked on her first day back that she and Mr. Collins were now nursing each other back to health. She'd been sharing Tristan's room for the past month, their relationship getting better, stronger everyday. She was head over heels for the man.

"It does feel nice." She wondered if she'd ever get used to the concept of *family*, and that Tristan's had adopted her into their midst as one of their own.

"He's here," Sean yelled from his position as lookout at the front door.

They all turned and Lane sucked in an amazed breath as she got her first look at Tristan's twin. She knew they were identical, but she wasn't prepared for how strange it was to see Tristan's face on another man. Killian entered, his grin as big as his brother's as everyone yelled "Surprise!"

Lane watched Killian proceed around the room as everyone impatiently waited their turn to hug the returning hero. Pop was first in line and Lane brushed away a tear when the two men hugged. She could see the same anxiety in Killian's eyes that she'd seen in Tristan's shortly after his pop's stroke. Killian appeared to have prepared himself for the worst, and his joy at finding his father hearty and hale was evident.

"Hey, rascal," Killian said as he turned and picked up Riley, spinning the delighted woman in a circle.

He hugged Sean and Ewan, shook hands with Will and kissed Keira and Teagan on their cheeks. Teagan introduced him to Sky and the family laughed when Killian admitted to being a big fan.

Finally he turned to Tristan.

"Welcome home, bro." Lane could hear the husky sound of deep emotions behind Tristan's greeting. She knew he'd been worried about his brother and she could only imagine how happy he was to have him back, safe and sound.

"And this must be Lane," Killian said after hugging his twin.

Tris placed a possessive arm around her shoulders and she was touched by the sweet gesture.

"This is my Lane," he said, so proudly she didn't know how to respond.

Killian gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I've heard a lot of good things about you. Thanks for everything you did for Pop."

"Your pop's an easy patient," she said.

"Ah, no one warned me you were a pathological liar. My pop? A good patient?" Killian teased.

"Now that'll be enough of that." Mr. Collins walked over and slapped his boy on the back. "Riley's made enough food to feed an army."

"Good thing," Ewan said. "With all of us here, we probably outnumber the Army."

"Let's eat," Sean added. "I'm starving." He reached for a sausage roll, but Riley smacked his hand away.

"It's Killian's party. He gets the first plate."

"Well, okay," Sean grumbled, "but you better not pull that oldest-to-youngest shit on me. I'm really hungry."

"Language," Mr. Collins muttered.

They laughed and ate and talked for hours. Sky and Teagan brought out their guitars and played *Danny Boy*.

Riley grabbed her father's hand for a dance and Will led Keira out onto the floor as well.

"What do you say?" Tris asked. "Wanna dance?"

She nodded, sighing contentedly as he wrapped his arms around her. They swayed slowly to the song and she rested her head against his chest.

"Can I tell you something?" she asked.

"Anything."

"Promise you won't laugh?"

He grinned. "Do I have to?"

She giggled. "This has been the best day of my life. Thank you for sharing it with me."

Tris studied her face for a long time and she wondered what he was thinking. She'd never been around such a happy, loving family. Of all the things Tris had given her in the past couple months, the best thing was the sense of home he'd shared with her.

"You belong here, Lane. In fact, I think I might know a way to make the day even better."

As he spoke, he knelt before her and Lane gasped. "Tris?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small velvet bag. Inside was an engagement ring.

"I love you and I want to marry you, Lane. I know I said we could just live together for a while, but I'm afraid that's not enough for me anymore. I want you to be my wife and the mother of my children, and I want to spend the rest of my life giving you days just like today."

She felt tears begin to stream down her cheeks as he spoke. In her entire life, she'd never heard such beautiful words. She nodded once, her throat too clogged to speak.

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes," she whispered.

He placed the ring on her finger and his family broke into loud cheers. She didn't realize until that moment the room had been silent during his proposal. Everyone took turns hugging and congratulating them.

"It's beautiful," she said, looking at the ring for the thousandth time.

"It was my mother's," Tris said as his pop walked up.

"Oh, Tris, I couldn't..." She was speechless in the face of his lovely gesture.

"Sunday would have loved you." Mr. Collins stepped forward and took her hand to look at the ring. "And it looks as if my son has solved the problem of my name."

"What?" she asked.

"Well, it's clear you'll never call me Pat, and no daughter of mine is calling me Mr. Collins. From now on, young lady, you'll call me Pop. Should we start practicing?"

She laughed through her tears. "I think I can handle Pop." Her voice broke on the word.

Pop embraced her as she cried, feeling for the first time as if she truly had a father, a family.

"Come on. I want to dance with my soon-to-be daughter." He grasped her hand and led her to the floor as Teagan and Sky sang a fun country ballad.

When the song ended, Tris claimed her for the next dance.

"I love you, kitten," he whispered.

"I love you, Everest."

The End

About the Author

Some people fall apart on their 30th birthday, others on their 40th. For Mari Carr, 34 was the year that took her down. After she spent the day crying and saying, “I haven’t done anything I thought I would,” her husband finally asked what was left undone. Her answer was simple—she hadn’t written a book or decorated her house. “So do it,” he said.

Five years later, the house is sparkling with fresh paint and new furniture and her computer is jammed full of stories—novels, novellas, short stories and dead-ends. The lesson: It’s never too late to achieve a goal or two!

High school librarian and English teacher by day and mother of two busy teenagers, Mari Carr finds time for writing by squeezing it into the hours between 3 a.m. and daybreak when her family is asleep and the house is quiet.

With the publication of her first book, her latest goal—publishing before 40—has been achieved with a couple of years to spare. Phew!

Mari welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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