



Dean's Caitlyn List Willows

DEAN'S LIST

by

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Amber Quill Press, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

Dean's List
An Amber Quill Press Book

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ISBN 978-1-60272-658-1

Cover Art © 2010 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting
Provided by: Elemental Alchemy

Published in the United States of America

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Chapter 1

She wasn't his first wet dream...or his last. But she was definitely his best.

Dan Jefferson nursed the hard-on from hell beneath the postage stamp-sized wood that served as a desk. He'd barely been able to fit into the student desks when he was in high school. He sure as hell couldn't do it now at age twenty-eight and bulked up from years serving in the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, especially with an elephantine erection swelling his jeans.

Using his worn three-ring binder as a shield, Dan tried making some adjustments. The gum-smacking blonde to his right shot him a glance, then smiled. She probably thought the hard-on was for her. He winced at the thought. The gum cracking was bad enough, but the multiple piercings, shaved eyebrows, and necklace that said "Fuck You" made even being in her vicinity difficult. The complete opposite of the classic beauty who'd walked into the classroom less than a minute before.

Dan had to blink at the time to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. But there she was--Leigh Miller in all her exquisite glory. Actually, she was Leigh Dean now...or rather, L.E. Dean, according to the class schedule. He'd never learned what the "E" stood for. She'd taken her birth name back, probably after her divorce from that jerk-face son of a bitch she'd been married to.

She'd be thirty-six now, though you couldn't tell from looking at her. She'd pass for ten years younger. Her smile lit up the classroom. Heat basked in his groin. In the short space of time she and her good-for-nothing husband lived next door to Dan's family, Dan had rarely seen her smile like this--bright and open. Maybe that's what divorce had done for her--made her happy. Unless she'd remarried and was so in love with her husband the feeling transmuted everything she did. Maybe she had children, too.

Dan's erection deflated at the thought. *Please don't let her be married.* He glanced at her left hand--no wedding ring in sight. A woman like Leigh would wear a wedding ring...right? As for children... Dan shook his head, then dashed a quick look from the corners of his eyes to make sure no one had seen him do it.

As far as he knew, Leigh hadn't been pregnant when she and Jerk-face separated. But there were a lot of years between then and now. She could have been married and divorced again with kids on top of it all. That might put a crimp in his rapidly forming grand plan.

Screw it. Dan didn't care if she had twenty kids. He was going to go for it. One thing serving in a war zone had taught

him--you only live once; don't live it with regret. And if he didn't go after Leigh Dean, Dan would regret it the rest of his life. What's the worst that could happen? That she'd shoot him down? Well, he'd been shot at a lot over the last several years and had survived. He could survive a blow to hopes and dreams that had actually helped make him the man he was today.

Dan had learned a lot from watching Leigh's marriage disintegrate. There were right ways to treat the woman you cherished. Jerk-face didn't know any of them--not that he even remotely cherished his wife. He knew how to humiliate his spouse and how to fuck the neighbor across the street. That marriage hadn't lasted long either.

Dan's heart had broken a thousand times over at the devastation on Leigh's face when she'd found Jerk-face and what Dan guessed was his latest conquest writhing in her bed. But damn if she didn't go after them good. The two hadn't even seen her coming until the riding crop cut into Jerk-face's buttocks. She whipped them both good and proper, even drawing blood on her errant spouse's bubble butt.

In the aftermath, Leigh had turned her tear-stained face toward her bedroom window. Those big green eyes caught Dan watching the whole scene. Her chin came up in defiance, and Dan did the only thing an almost sixteen-year-old boy could do. He gave her a thumbs-up, pumped his fist in the air, and gave her a high-five she couldn't return. And Leigh had smiled. Nodded. Then closed the curtains, ending his brief stint as a voyeur. He hadn't seen her since. He'd returned from school a couple of days later to find a moving van in the driveway. She'd left Jerk-face to deal with the neighborhood repercussions of his wandering dick. More sweet justice.

Dan was sorry she hadn't stuck around to watch the fireworks. Sorrier still he couldn't see her anymore, wouldn't be able to talk with her as he did so often. He wanted to help her deal with all the hurt and pain Jerk-face had caused, just as Leigh had helped Dan through the grief he'd suffered months before. In truth, she'd been his strength, his greatest confidante, able to sort through the jumble of emotions life brought and understand everything.

Yeah, Dan had missed her something fierce after she left, but he supported her decision one hundred percent. If only he'd gotten the chance to say...a thousand things he'd wanted to say to her. Things Dan didn't realize needed saying until years later, things he hadn't realized, things he lacked the skill to express at the time.

But that was then, and this was now. Fate had brought them together once more. The chance he'd wanted was here. The playing field was clear--he hoped--and they were both adults. Granted there was still the minor issue of eight years between them, but it was just that--minor. He was a man now and she a woman of certain needs; that much he'd figured out for himself over the years. And Dan knew how to take care of those needs very, very well. His cock agreed.

Dan squirmed in his seat, trying to find a comfortable position. His jeans weren't cooperating.

"Wanna skip out during break?" the blonde whispered, unleashing a fog of ashes on her cigarette-tainted breath.

Dan leaned away. "No, thanks."

"Are ya sure? Only take a sec."

Yeah...if he was still fifteen and didn't have standards or the notion of what good sex really was. "I'm positive."

She shrugged, plucked her gum from her mouth, and aimed for the underside of her desk.

Dan grabbed her arm. "Whoa there. What do you think you're doing?"

"I was about to ask the same question," Leigh said from the front.

Dan released the girl and eased back in his seat. The power in Leigh's voice sent ripples down his spine. His imagination flashed on a schoolmarm from the Old West, sweet but stern, reaching for a cane and tapping it against her palm while she pondered her student's misstep.

Take me, baby. Take me now, his cock screamed, pushing for freedom from its jeans prison.

"I'm pretty lenient as teachers go, but come on..." Leigh flicked her palms up. "Gum under the desk? Did I blink and we're all back in junior high?"

A deep flush spread up blonde's throat and covered her face. She glanced down at the gum stuck between her fingers as if debating what she'd do with it now. A tissue fluttered over her shoulder from the middle-aged woman behind her. Blonde took it with a muttered thanks and poked the gum into it, then stuffed it between her boobs.

Classy all the way. Dan bit back the urge to utter the sarcastic thought.

Leigh's demeanor shifted back to happy, as if the confrontation had never happened. The tension in the room faded.

No canings tonight, people. Dan fought a smile. The schoolmarm and the cane...and the cowboy she craved would use it on her.

"Welcome to English Composition." Leigh retrieved a binder from the biggest purse Dan had ever seen and slipped a piece of paper from the front. "I'm Leigh Dean. Leigh. Because we're all adults here, and I'm not fond of division and lording my exalted power as teacher over you."

That earned her laughter from the room, and a little more of Dan's already captivated heart.

She handed a paper to a guy on the first row. "This paper is my roll call. It's simple. Sign next to your name to indicate you're here. No signature means you're absent. If you're absent without cause three times, it's between you and the admin office."

She wore black flats, gray slacks that loved her curvy hips, and a red blouse that skimmed her torso to perfection. Her long blonde hair swung with every move, mesmerizing, tantalizing, and promising full sensual delight to the man lucky enough to park his fingers in its depths.

"You have a text book. Read it. I won't waste class time reiterating what's in it. If you have questions, ask them. This is a required course, and I know that's why most of you are here." Leigh tucked the small binder on the lectern as she stood behind it, cutting off Dan's view and jerking his daydreams and rampant imagination to a halt. "I want to make this course as entertaining as possible. I know some of you would rather chew ground glass than write. Unfortunately, writing is what you're going to be doing. The process will educate you, and some of you might even enjoy it.

"We'll talk about structure and mechanics as well as the writing process. Maybe even share a few stories. If this is not what you envision or want from your educational experience, there is another, more traditional, English Composition instructor at this facility. Feel free to request a change. My feelings won't be hurt."

She scuffed her hands together, green eyes gleaming. "Let's start. Class is normally two hours with one break halfway through. Tonight I want you all to write about firsts. It can be your first anything, but I'd like it to be about something that had meaning for you. When you're done, give the papers to me. This will allow me to evaluate the class as a whole and the educational needs of the group. Once you're finished, you're free to leave, even if it only took you five minutes to write. I will, of course, be noting how much effort you put into this and it will be reflected on your grade."

Leigh cocked her head. Her hair fell over her shoulder down to her breast. Dan's balls clenched. Oh, for the chance to bare her breasts and tickle that hair over her nipples. To see her lips part on a gasp, feel the tension in her body as she bowed into the caress.

"Questions?"

Let me love you, Leigh. The way I know you want to be loved. I promise you won't regret it.

He'd been waiting for this moment and only tonight realized it. Fate had intervened and brought them together in the right place...and, he prayed, the right time.

"Then let's begin," she said. "Be warned...I wander. After all, I have to do something while you're writing." Again, her smile warmed the room.

Dan's brain shut down. He was half-aware that he'd opened his binder to an unsullied piece of notebook paper. His pen hovered over the top line, waiting for inspiration.

Firsts.

The point touched down. *The first time I saw her...*

By the time he dotted the last period, only he and the middle-aged woman remained. It was five minutes before eight; he'd been writing for an hour. Leigh stood at the lectern reading what he presumed were the other papers. She looked up when he stood, his treatise in one hand, binder in the other.

Her smile was more hesitant this time, yet still open. Dan wondered if she'd read the roll call sheet and realized their connection. Surely, she couldn't have pieced that a bulked up man was the scrawny next-door neighbor from years

before. Now that he had her attention and they were virtually alone, what should he say? *Remember me? I used to cut your lawn. We shared lemonade, ice cream, and long talks. And, oh, by the way, I was watching you on the most humiliating day of your life.*

His bravado took a nosedive. His newborn erection didn't. Thankfully, his binder guarded him well, just like it had in high school. *Some things never change.*

"All done?" She reached for his paper, slipping it gently from his grasp.

"It's a little long." Dan felt his cheeks heat. Great, now the rest of him was behaving like he was in high school, finding innuendos where none existed. He hoped Leigh didn't think he was being a smart ass.

"Then it must've been a very happy first." Her smile brightened. Her gaze went right to his name at the top right corner.

Some instinct told him she wanted to ask. He'd save her the trouble. "It's been a long time," Dan said. "We used to be neighbors."

"I remember. Hard to forget the best yard worker I ever had."

There was that. Dan had been dedicated to those lawns under his care. "You made the best lemonade."

"Secret family recipe," they said together, then chuckled.

It was nice to have a safe subject they could hide behind, but safe wasn't going to get Dan what he wanted--her.

"I know a great place that has the best ice cream," he said. "Want to go grab a cup with me and we can catch up?"

Her cheeks pinkened as she shuffled all the papers together, but she did keep her gaze on him. "I'm so sorry. College policy forbids any type of fraternization between student and teacher."

"Ah, I see." Dan nodded. "Well, see you tomorrow night." He headed toward the door and lifted a wave her way. She waved back and turned toward the older woman bringing her tome forward.

Not a yes, but not exactly a no either. Rules were rules. If fraternization wasn't allowed between student and teacher, there was little else Dan could do--he grinned--except switch to a different teacher.

Chapter 2

Leigh dreaded the first class of the semester. Strangers filled her room with uncertainty. There were a few people she'd taught previously in other classes. Those with whom she'd formed a rapport and they'd fallen into the easy rhythm of an established relationship. It was the getting-to-know-you stage that always put her on edge. It wasn't so bad one-on-one, but in a class of thirty adults--or wannabe adults as the case might be with the blonde faux-Goth girl--it was a daunting task. Still, she pasted on a smile, projected openness, and prayed the transition would be seamless.

Unfortunately, she knew from the start where her first problem lay--the gum-smacking blonde putting it on for the to-die-for man sitting across the aisle from her. The girl, who Leigh suspected had recently graduated from high school and was making a big show of how grown up she was, laid it all out for the man. If she pulled her skin-tight black T-shirt any lower, her boobs would pop out. But the man didn't take the bait. He barely glanced the blonde's way. His eyes--a soft brown that looked like melted chocolate--stared exclusively at Leigh.

Her heart raced at the attention. There was a familiarity to him she couldn't quite place. Had they met before? Surely she'd remember. A man like him wasn't forgettable. His brown hair was military short. Given the population of the area, Leigh tagged him as a Marine, maybe Navy. A former student? No...she'd remember a guy like him. He made the student desk look like it came from a kindergarten class, though, considering the college's funding issues, that could very well be the case. The desks were hardly comfortable, yet there was no hint of complaint from her hunk.

The man reeked of self-confidence and managed to keep his ego in check as far as Leigh could tell. He wore jeans and a pink pullover shirt that looked killer-hot on him.

Now that took guts. Only a strong man could pull off a pink shirt in the good-ole-boy military, or anywhere else for that matter.

The thought made her smile. She forced her gaze away from the lean muscle cutting his biceps and arms, away from his broad shoulders, and long legs. Away from speculating how tall he was, how great it would feel to rest her head on his hard chest. Away from the heat in his eyes that perked up her nipples and stirred the juices deep inside her until they wicked into her panties. And yet her gaze lingered at long fingers on big hands, hands that could cradle a woman, rock a baby in comfort, provide a haven for puppies and kittens. Hands that knew what hard work was all about and wasn't afraid to do it. Callused fingers that would skim a woman's curves and show her what pleasure was all about.

Leigh was about to start her intro when the blonde leaned closer and whispered something. The man edged away. Leigh watched in outraged shock as the girl plucked her gum from her mouth and aimed for the underside of her desk. The man placed his hand over her arm, gently yet firmly. In command, but not flaunting it. Her heart raced at the possibilities that simple touch created in her sex-starved body.

"Whoa there. What do you think you're doing?" His voice resonated throughout the room and landed right in Leigh's gut, where it quivered like a tuning fork.

God...whoishe?

"I was about to ask the same question," Leigh managed to say.

He released the girl and eased back in his seat. Leigh lectured, taking brief discomfort in the flush spreading over the girl's face. She suspected the girl would be gone the first chance she got. *Good riddance*. Actions like these were the reason Leigh taught college courses rather than lower grades. She hated having to essentially babysit.

Leigh shrugged the incident aside and went on with her introduction, then set the class loose on their first assignment. She wandered as she often did, peeking over everyone's shoulder as she strolled to get a glimpse into what they wrote. It wasn't as if she weren't going to see it eventually. Leigh liked to watch their process. Few things thrilled her more than the touch of pen--or pencil or keyboard--to paper. She studied body language, watching for that first instant when an idea gripped a person. For the most part, everyone embraced the assignment. It was going to be a good semester; Leigh felt it in her bones.

Tonight her goal in wandering the room was duplicitous--she wanted to find out this man's name. Yes, she could have waited for the attendance roster to make its way into her hands. Doing so wouldn't have given her the sweet ripple of sensation at that first subtle whiff of Brut from him. She wouldn't have felt the heat trickle from his body when she neared, or been able to see the flex of muscle in his forearms. Or thrill in the race of his black Flair pen across the white notebook paper. Have the catch in her breath when she spied those first words--*The first time I saw her...*

Her heart raced and she forced her gaze away from words clearly meant to be savored in the privacy of her own home. Drawing in breath to her oxygen-deprived lungs, her vision settled on the name at the top of the paper. *Dan Jefferson*.

Dan Jefferson? As in Danny Jefferson?

Her gaze ping-ponged between the name and the man. There was little doubt now. *Holy shit, has he filled out well!* He'd been a good-looking guy all those years ago. Every teenage girl from miles around found a way to show up whenever he did yard work...shirtless, of course, to soak in the California sun and let the breeze off the Pacific Ocean cool the sweat glistening over his torso. Though eight years separated them, Leigh could certainly understand and appreciate the appeal, especially now.

The first time I saw her, my world changed. She was the light, all that would ever be. My breath, my hope, the path I'd take on the long road to manhood.

Leigh returned to the lectern before someone caught her ogling. The words made love to her. This was wrong. So, so wrong. He was eight years younger than she was. Her student, for God's sake! Yet, in one brief moment of insanity, their tight bond was further sealed. Danny--Dan--had seen Leigh at her very worst. And he'd cheered her on. It was days later when she wondered how much more Dan had seen through those open drapes.

Movement snapped Leigh from her thoughts. The attendance roster appeared before her. She slipped the paper from the woman's fingers with a smile. Leigh recognized her from the Spanish class she'd taught last semester--a divorced

mother of three trying to earn her degree in the hopes of getting a better job. She didn't know how the woman managed, but she also knew strength came to a person when they least expected it. That thumbs-up, fist pump, high-five Dan Jefferson had given Leigh at one of the darkest moments of her life had helped give Leigh strength to move on.

Now he was here, in her class, looking like every woman's dream. But not hers. *Student, younger. Student, younger.* She chanted the words, hoping they would sink into her addled brain and raging libido. She had a hard enough time with men her own age or older, she certainly didn't have the time and patience dealing with someone younger.

Eight years isn't that much older.

Stay to the list.

Age isn't specified on the list.

Leigh hated when the good fairy and bad fairy started to argue in her head. No, age wasn't on her oh-so-important list of things she required in a man. Other things were, like the physical requirements Dan nailed to perfection. And the way he seemed to love to write because that pen flew across the paper.

No, no, no! Student, younger, and you have a past with him. He used to cut the grass!

And did a very fine job of it, too. Excellent work ethic.

Another check on the list.

Dogs, cats, and children had flocked his way then, too. Leigh remembered how his face lit up. He always managed to have time for them all, and still get his work done. He was a magnet that drew a person near. Every living thing wanted to be with him. Just like she did now.

More checks.

Leigh tried not to laugh. She was putting the proverbial cart before the horse. A man like this had a girlfriend, or a wife. Perhaps children, too.

No ring. No wife.

He might not remember who she was. They'd been neighbors for a year, a little less than the length of her disastrous marriage. How many neighbors had he had since then? Probably not many who'd taken a riding crop to a cheating husband and whoring neighbor. Leigh had burned the crop in their barbeque grill after that. She'd never been able to use it after that. What once had given her private pleasure now sparked bad memories. Bert's blood had tarnished the leather, a permanent reminder of his betrayal and her foolishness for not seeing his true colors from the start.

How many times had Dan been witness to those private pleasures? Closing the drapes was part of her routine, but had she forgotten? She'd indulge in the middle of the day, when she was certain Bert couldn't catch her, couldn't humiliate her as he'd done the one time he'd caught her in a moment.

You disgust me.

The words still hurt. They also prompted the number one item on Leigh's list--a man who knew and accepted her sexual needs. A man who would fulfill those needs without question. So far, Leigh had never found that man. She'd also been too uncertain of the reception to ask for what she really wanted. It took tremendous trust to open that door to another person. Leigh couldn't do it. The man on her list would know without being asked. Somehow, some way he'd just know.

Like Dan?

Leigh refused to entertain the idea. Rules were rules. List or no list.

Or maybe he sat there now, remembering what she'd done and judging her, mocking her, sneering at her actions. She refused to entertain that idea, too, despite the inexplicable shame crawling over her skin. She'd done nothing wrong. Nothing. God, the years it'd taken to help her realize that.

One by one, her students brought their papers forward. No surprise Blondie was the first or that she'd barely bothered with a scribbled sentence: *I knew the first time my parents told me I'd have to go to college or get a job that this class*

would suck.

It was going to be a long semester if she remained. Leigh still smiled and thanked her, gleaned pleasure from the fact her lack of anger pissed the girl off.

And then she was down to two students--Dan and a middle-aged woman Leigh believed was Lois. Her heart skipped a beat when Dan ordered his papers and stood. He smiled; she smiled. She measured time in his footsteps tapping a steady rhythm as he walked her way. His scent, his heat. The strength rippling beneath his clothes. Leigh felt like prey--no, like a princess--*no*! Like treasure waiting to be plundered.

"All done?" One shaking hand reached for his paper and slipped it from his grasp.

"It's a little long."

She had no doubt about that. You might not be able to judge a book by its cover, but she'd never been wrong measuring a man's penis from the size of his fingers. And Dan's? Yes, another check in the box. Her list was growing short.

"Then it must have been a very happy first." She forced herself to smile and kept her gaze on his name at the top right corner and not devouring the words he'd written. Did he remember her...remember anything?

"It's been a long time," Dan said. "We used to be neighbors."

He *did* remember! But how much? How fondly? *Student, younger*. "I remember." She sounded like one of the breathless teenagers who used to stalk him. "Hard to forget the best yard worker I ever had."

He smiled. His gaze landed on her mouth. "You made the best lemonade."

"Secret family recipe," they said together, then chuckled. It was Countrytime Lemonade and they both knew it.

The tiny bit of camaraderie chased some of her nervousness away.

"I know a great place that has the best ice cream," he said. "Want to go grab a cup with me and we can catch up?"

Leigh did want it, more than she could say. She also wanted to retreat into her shell before each of them revealed too much, before one of them got hurt. She shuffled all the papers together and somehow managed to keep her gaze on him. "I'm so sorry. College policy forbids any type of fraternization between student and teacher." And right now those rules were the protection her heart and body needed.

"Ah, I see." Dan nodded. "Well, see you tomorrow." He headed toward the door and lifted a wave her way. She waved back while guilt burrowed under her skin.

His had been a friendly gesture. She'd been making something out of nothing. She was pathetic...and horny. Thank goodness she hadn't been stupid as well. Still, rules were rules and even overtures of friendship had to be set aside to avoid possible conflicts of interest at the college.

Leigh reached for the stack of papers Lois handed her way, but her eyes kept drifting to those words Dan had written. Words she couldn't wait to savor in the privacy of her home. Words she prayed would be horribly written, illegibly scrawled, so she could find some flaw to crush her raging hormones.

Chapter 3

Midnight and Leigh had yet to read Dan's paper. It was the last of the bunch, resting in the center of her brick red kitchen table...waiting. Vegas lights weren't as bright as that white rectangle of presumably innocent paper.

She paced the floor, eyeing it while she sipped a second glass of chenin blanc. Or was it her third? Second, since the

heat thrumming in her pussy had yet to quell. A third glass would have numbed everything. Presumptuous on her part to think the words were written just for her--well, technically they had been since it was her assignment that had set the ball in motion.

It was his invite to have ice cream. Old acquaintances catching up. He'd been a kid at the time, and Leigh a young woman. It was a gesture of friendship. Like asking someone out for coffee. Why was she making something out of nothing?

Because it was *ice cream*. Sweet, cool, make all your cares go away ice cream. The kind of feeling she was supposed to be getting from this wine, but wasn't. It could have only meant more if he'd invited her out for lemonade. Temptation niggled at the corners of her resolve and steered her toward a path Leigh shouldn't take.

A shiver rattled through her. Leigh brushed away the explosion of goose bumps. The image of an Adam's apple bobbing with each thirst-quenching gulp didn't help. She tried to superimpose teenager Danny on it. Grown up, hot as hell Dan refused to disappear.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered to herself. She was making something out of nothing.

Leigh stabbed the papers with one finger and pulled them nearer. The words sank into her pores.

The first time I saw her, my world changed. She was the light, all that would ever be. My breath, my hope, the path I'd take on the long road to manhood. It was because of her I realized the type of man I wanted to be and, more importantly, the type I didn't want to be. Although, if truth be told, I'd have to give credit to my dad and older brothers for setting a good example for me as well. From them, I learned respect and teamwork. Love was a given--at least in our family. I learned yet again that fateful summer others weren't as fortunate, and it damn near broke my heart.

Leigh's hand shook as she flipped the page. She steadied herself with another sip of wine. It didn't help. She couldn't get a good breath. One part of her continued to fear reading on; another part couldn't wait to read the next word.

She was blonde with eyes that said, "I love you." Big eyes that could swallow a person whole, if that person had a decent soul. I've been sucker for blondes with big eyes ever since...more or less. Even I have standards, which I admit are fairly easy to please when it comes to dogs. I was six years old. She was the runt of a litter of eight. I named her Goldie. Go figure.

Leigh laughed. It was the dash of reality she needed. She remembered Goldie very well. The little cock-a-poo followed Dan wherever he went.

More firsts came with the responsibility of adopting my little canine friend. I'd like to say I cherished every one, but I was only six years old. Goldie forgave my missteps. I forgave hers--never leave Star Wars action figures out where a pup can chew them. Goldie taught me that sometimes the best course of action is retreat. That when all else fails, take a nap. That you've got to take the time in life to sniff the grass. She'd fight a grizzly if she thought I was threatened. Truth is, I would have fought one for her. One thing I couldn't fight for her was old age.

Tears welled up. Leigh knew where this was going. Her heart clenched at the memory.

When you spend every minute with someone, it's easy to miss the subtle changes that occur. That's how it was with Goldie. She looked thinner. I realized she'd drink a lot, but food didn't seem to set well anymore. By the time we realized she was sick, it was too late. She was close to ten years old. I was on the cusp of being sixteen, caught in between a kid and a man. I did what any man would do for someone he loved; at least I'd like to think so. Goldie passed on in my arms. The last words she heard were me telling her how very much I loved her. And then I cried, harder than I thought it was possible for anyone to cry.

Leigh let her tears fall unrestrained. The emotion was raw and fresh, even for someone who hadn't been there.

Goldie's loss hit the whole family hard. Friends, too. She was a much-loved pup. We scattered her ashes throughout the neighborhood, hitting all the places she loved to visit with me. The grief stayed. It was another blonde with big eyes who helped me get through it. She kept me busy that summer. She let me share my grief and get it out. Lemonade and long talks. Backyard barbeques and ice cream sundaes. My friend, my confidante, my advisor, my strength. She was friendship and love, married to a man who was everything but.

I cursed the day he revealed his true self. I'd never wanted to hurt a person more and I was seconds away from going over there myself to let the son of a bitch have it. But she found them first. I felt her pain, then felt her power and

cheered her on. I knew then this was a woman to cherish. The kind of woman who'd fight grizzlies for someone she loved and wouldn't take shit from anyone. The kind of woman I'd want for myself. What I didn't realize was that I'd be walking back into her life years later. It was the first time all over...only better.

I couldn't tell her then how much she meant to me, how much she influenced my life. I didn't have the words then or the life experience to know how to tell her that. But I have it now and I'm going to tell her, because there's one other thing Goldie taught me--never miss an opportunity. This is mine.

Leigh stared at the words and tried to figure out exactly what they meant. The bold strokes rolled across the paper in homage to her, thanking her for the friendship they'd once had.

The kind of woman I'd want for myself.

Why did it feel like Dan was staking a claim on her? Why did she want him to? Her body ached for possession. To be swept off her feet and laid out for loving. Fingers and lips seeking out those places longing for attention. Holding her captive and...

Leigh gulped down her wine and shoved away from the table to get a third glass. Something, anything to deaden the ache in her pussy. She would not make herself come thinking of Dan Jefferson. He was a kid. Her former lawn boy. What would his parents say? What would the world say?

She forced the image of Danny the teenager into her head. Again, it refused to stay. It was Dan the man who usurped him every time. Dan with the sharp brown eyes. Dan with broad shoulders and strong arms a woman could cling to. Dan with those big hands, long fingers that zipped across the paper with ease. Leigh could easily imagine how they'd feel stripping her naked and roaming over her body. She could imagine it too well.

Leigh wandered back to the table and stared down at the paper. *The kind of woman I'd want for myself.* She snickered at her foolishness. It was rather like saying *I want a woman just like my mom.* The whole essay was rather innocent now that she looked at it objectively. Dan was thanking her, or was going to. Nothing wrong there. She was the one making something out of nothing at all simply because she'd gotten the juice-churning hots for the man before she realized who he was.

Now that she'd put things into proper perspective, she could bring herself under control. Thank God, she had the wall of student-teacher to shore up her resolve. He was no different than Lois, or Blondie, or any other person she'd taught. Her professionalism would keep her in line. They could re-establish a friendship within those parameters. Perhaps even have a laugh down the line over her rampaging hormones.

Very bad idea.

True, better to leave it untouched. Besides, he'd do this class and move on to the next. Their paths were likely never to cross again. Odd how the thought made her sad.

"Too much wine." She poured glass number three back into the bottle. It was late and she had an American Lit class in the morning.

She stacked the papers, put them in her English Comp folder, then returned the wine to the refrigerator and washed the glass. She'd showered and dressed for bed shortly after she'd gotten home that night--a delaying tactic while she'd pondered Dan's work. All her stewing made her feel a little silly in retrospect. At least she'd learned the lesson on her own and not made a fool of herself in public.

Of course he'd want to do a little catching up. It was the polite thing to do, especially considering how she'd apparently influenced his life. Leigh could tell him how his show of support had strengthened her. It wasn't exactly fraternization, just old friends getting together. Why not over ice cream? They'd had their best talks over lemonade or ice cream.

She crawled beneath the cool, crisp sheets, turned off the light...and wondered if Dan was thinking about her tonight. Had he looked at her and judged her old? Laughed at himself for building this image in his mind only to have reality crush it? Or did he stroke his cock in the shower while dreaming of sinking it into her body?

Leigh shivered at the image and placed herself in the scene. Rubbing suds over his shoulders and chest. Lathering it through the hair around his dick. Listening to his mounting groans as he thrust his erection into her hands, clutched her head and urged her to her knees to suck him. Turned her around to take her deep and hard while his fingers circled her clit. Another shiver rattled her bones.

God, he was handsome! Tendrils of want curled at the base of her spine, then around her clit in a chokehold.

There was no harm in fantasizing, was there? It was no different than imagining a movie star like...like... No one came readily to mind. Dan was all that existed.

Leigh reached over to the nightstand and fumbled in the drawer for her favorite vibrator. She knew it wouldn't be enough before she grabbed it. Flinging back the covers, she charged to her dresser drawer and yanked out her favorite pleasure tool--a wooden hairbrush. She wouldn't need the sting tonight, just the promise of it, the warmth of the wood rubbing her bare skin while she came.

Leigh snagged her toy from the nightstand drawer as she crawled back onto the bed. Then she lay there in the dark, building her fantasy. Hard nipples tented her nightgown, juices sopped into her panties. She inched her nightgown up slowly, the way she wanted a lover to do. He'd be cautious, perhaps afraid she'd say no, but determined to reach his goal. Big hands would cup her breasts, plump the flesh until she ached, then pinch her nipples until she cried out.

He'd pull her arms up with the nightgown and bind her wrists firmly to the spindles on her headboard. Panties would crawl down her legs at his will. Protesting at this point would be out of the question. Doing so would earn her the spanking Leigh coveted and had yet to receive from another person. He'd roll her to one side and slowly, methodically, warm her ass until she squirmed. He might let her come...or he might bind her facedown and find another implement to make her squirm. Make her come again and again this way, letting her know he cared enough to give her this. Then he'd release her legs, roll her back over, and give her a fucking to match the spanking she'd received--thorough, hard, relentless.

Had Dan seen her that long-ago day? Watched her lean over the bed, peel her panties down, and whip her ass with the leather crop she'd acquired? Watched her come? It should make Leigh sick inside to think of him watching. It didn't. Because there was no then, there was only now and it was Dan the adult who lived in her fantasy, watching, wanting, stroking his cock. Dan who loomed over her and wrapped his maleness around her.

Leigh pushed her panties down and off her legs. She seated the dildo with a single thrust. The clitoral stimulator cozied into place. She clamped her legs together and rolled to her stomach. Fingers curled around the hairbrush handle. She needed this. She always had. She always would. One hard swat warmed her ass. Leigh gasped at the pleasure racing through her and imagined herself at Dan's *smercy*. Reaching beneath her, she turned the vibrator on high and spanked herself to sweet orgasm...twice.

Fantasy was always so much better than reality. She'd be doing good to remember that. It saved a lot of heartache in the long run.

* * * *

Dan didn't show up for class. No matter what her resolve the night before, his absence crushed Leigh inside. Everyone else was here, even Blondie, whose real name was Gretchen Carlson, this time minus her piercing adornments and the "Fuck You" necklace. Makeup stood in for the shaved eyebrows and she wore a turtleneck T-shirt, jeans, and clogs. The attitude lurked behind her bloodshot eyes. Leigh wondered if Gretchen had cleaned up hoping to impress Dan, then had to admit that her own extra spritz of apple blossom body scent in the privacy of her car had been for him as well.

Leigh focused on teaching, not on her disappointment at Dan's absence. That didn't stop her gaze from wandering to the door for the first half hour or the next. By break time, she knew he wouldn't be coming. The second hour crawled along. The end of class couldn't come soon enough. It looked like her students felt the same way. None of them wasted time leaving. Leigh kept her smile to herself. It was that way every semester. She filled them with so much information they were exhausted.

"All done?"

She jumped at the sound of Dan's voice, scattering the contents of her folder across the floor. He knelt with her to pick them up.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you."

Their fingers brushed, sending little fireflies dancing up her arm. "You're...you're late."

"Nope, just switched teachers."

Leigh jerked her head up, spilling the papers once more. "You did what?"

Dan grinned and picked everything up. "Switched teachers." He tucked the papers into her folder and handed it to her. "You said college policy forbids fraternization between student and teacher. Well, now we're no longer student and teacher. We can *fraternize* all we want."

His emphasis on that word pierced Leigh's protective barrier. She slipped the folder from his hands and tucked it into her tote. "Oh." Clearly, she'd lost the use of the English language, or any other.

"So..." Dan cupped her elbow to steady Leigh as they stood. More fireflies, on a path right to her pussy.

"You ready for that ice cream now? I know I am."

That's when she knew. Dan Jefferson was coming for her, and it scared her half to death because she didn't think she'd be able to say no.

"Where in the world are we going to get ice cream this time of night?" She actually managed a light-hearted laugh with her words.

Dan's hand slipped to her back, barely touching as he maneuvered her toward the door. It burned through her blouse like a branding iron. "I know the perfect place."

The words whispered against her ear and slithered into her racing bloodstream.

"Follow me?" he asked.

This couldn't end well. The age difference. Their past association. *No, the answer is no.* "O-okay." She hoisted her purse over her shoulder and let him sweep her away.

"How did class go tonight?" He kept a minute yet respectful distance from her as they walked to the parking lot. The question calmed her jitters; the distance had her second-guessing his intent all over again and calling herself foolish.

"Very well." Leigh clutched her tote bag with both hands to keep from giving in to the impulse to touch him. "The papers they turned in gave me good insight into where we need to focus."

"And did mine give you insight into that as well?" he asked.

He'd bent closer, his breath trickling down her neck and into her blouse. The fairy twins argued his intent. Leigh couldn't take it anymore. She jerked to a stop in the middle of the sidewalk. He stopped with her, turning to face her fully. Caught between the security lights from the college buildings and those of the parking lot, a silvery glow bathed them in an otherworldly light. Leigh wanted to call it magic; right now, it felt like hell tearing her apart. Fear fought with want. Uncertainty warred with confidence. Society's condemnation battled what her heart and body wanted more with every second.

"What do you want from me, Dan?" she asked breathlessly.

Hands that could crush her gently cupped her upper arms. He drew her closer, lifting her to her toes until the tips of her breasts kissed his chest.

"You, Leigh," he replied. "I want you."

Her gaze dropped to his mouth, to lips parted and aiming for hers. She closed her eyes on an exhale, waiting while her heartbeat drummed out the rest of the world.

Outraged shouts of "What the fuck," "Goddamn it," "Oh, my God," and "Noooo" yanked them apart. Fifty feet away people circled their vehicles or stood to one side, hands clutched to their faces, chests, or hips as personalities decreed, and stared. Leigh and Dan moved at the same time, quick strides keeping time with one another. She heard the jingle of keys and looked down to see Dan pulling a small flashlight from his pocket.

"Oh, so that's what was in your pocket." The words slipped out on their own. Leigh clamped her hand over her mouth before anything else untoward came out.

Dan, however, grinned despite the urgency ahead of them. "My manhood and I are insulted you would demean us to such minuscule proportion. Your anatomy lesson will begin at a more opportune time."

Leigh squelched a giggle. "I look forward to it."

He made a sound somewhere between a groan and a growl, then turned his full attention to the problem ahead. "What's wrong? Oh...shit."

That's when Leigh saw the slashed tires, hers included. Every. Single. One.

"This is not how I wanted my evening to end," she mumbled.

"Night's not over yet," Dan replied under his breath.

Her body tightened at the declaration, then had a mini-orgasm as she watched Dan take control of the situation.

"Everyone, calm down." He raised his palms. "Try not to touch your vehicles for now. There could be evidence on them the police want."

The others flocked his way, drawn to a natural leader. *Like a magnet*. Just the way he'd been years ago. Unfortunately, Gretchen used the moment to throw herself against Dan.

"What are we going to do?" She sobbed into his chest.

"As I said...calm down." He wrapped an arm around her and eased her away and into Lois's arms. "Has anyone called the police?"

"It was probably some damn gang!" someone shouted.

"I'll take that as a no," Dan said. "I'll call them. Now...those of you with a photo application on your cell phones take pictures of the damage. Your insurance company and the police will thank you for it."

"And call roadside assistance if you have it," Leigh added.

"Yes." Dan nodded and turned to call the police.

The group obeyed him without question.

Within ten minutes, police and sheriff deputies had arrived. It didn't take much longer afterward for the place to become a hive of activity with tow trucks responding to calls for roadside assistance and reporters drawn to the scene by the flashing lights. It was obviously a slow news day, although in this small military community anything could be news. If gangs were moving into the area, local law enforcement and all the town councils would be jumping on ways to nip that in the bud.

Dan greeted the law enforcement personnel like they knew each other. When the deputy called Dan by name that impression was confirmed. Based on Dan's knowledge of the procedures and the way the deputies and police officers conferred with him, she surmised he was also involved in Marine Corps law enforcement or military justice.

No, his hair was a little long for him to be a Marine. She should have realized that earlier, but Leigh guessed she was too caught up in her lust and then her surprise at whom she salivated over to pay much attention.

So was he a local cop or sheriff? Leigh raked her brain, then hit on so many other possibilities her brain nearly exploded as her imagination took flight. CID, NCIS, FBI, DEA, ICE...and a host of other acronym agencies. But if any of those were true, then Dan would already have a bachelor's degree. So why was he bothering with an English composition course at a community college?

Undercover?

The thought gave Leigh shivers. Maybe that's why all the tires were slashed--as a warning to him. She reeled her imagination back in and focused on the now and facts as they existed.

The men turned their collective knowledge into investigating the vandalism. Dan observed and kept order, while the civilian authorities took the lead. Leigh swore testosterone fogged the air. It was a little...heady.

She snickered at her pun, earning a quizzical eyebrow arch from Dan that set off a heated flush from head to toe. A look that said so much, promised much more.

I want you.

Night's not over yet.

Odd how so simple a statement could set her thighs to trembling. There was nothing coy in his approach. She liked that...a lot. Too much.

"Are you all right?"

Leigh jerked around at the question asked much too closely, then took a step away from Greg Reed. Someone had alerted him to the vandalism--standard procedure since he was the dean for the college. She wished she'd been on her guard for him. He was a pleasant enough man, good at his job, not bad looking. A hint of silver shot through his blond hair, he was more or less in good shape, and intelligent. Away from the job any pluses the man had were washed away in a sea of minuses.

Two dinner dates six months ago with Greg were enough for Leigh. He complained incessantly about his ex-wife and yet aggressively pursued a replacement. The man couldn't understand that Leigh wasn't interested. His persistence was sad in more ways than one. She appreciated the man was lonely and socially inept with women. He'd been married for twenty years and now found himself thrown back into the dating pool. Unfortunately, he hadn't realized there were other fish in that pool besides Leigh. His attention had gone from annoying to creepy and was now bordering on stalker-like, a shark in the pool where he fished.

"I'm fine," she replied, taking another step away. "Just waiting with everyone else for the tow truck." She doubted roadside assistance would be able to replace all these tires. The best they'd be able to do was take vehicles and owners home or to tire repair facilities.

Greg edged into her personal space once more. Leigh loved dominance and aggression in a man, just not this kind. She wanted a man equal to having her. Greg wasn't it. His aggression reeked of desperation and impatience, perhaps even undertones of violence.

"If the police have your statement, I'll be glad to take you home," he said.

"Waiting to see about tires," she repeated, putting yet another step between them.

"Then I'll wait with you."

"I'm sure the rest of the faculty here tonight appreciates your concern," she replied, then took a decided step toward Dan.

Gretchen cut her off, reaching Dan first. "I think it might have been my boyfriend." She rested her fingers on Dan's arm, big brown eyes glistening up at him with unshed tears.

Leigh waited, breath held, for Dan to cave in to damsel-in-distress act. He didn't.

"What do you mean?" He motioned a deputy sheriff over.

Gretchen sniffled. "He knew I was upset and didn't want to go to college yet. He said he'd fix it so my parents wouldn't force me. Said that if they thought it wasn't safe they--"

"He made a threat against the college, and you didn't bother to report it?" Dan's voice was low, yet anger rippled with every word.

"I...I..." Gretchen moved away.

Two deputies flanked her, then led her to their patrol car for further questioning. Her eyes never left Dan, even when he turned his back on her and headed Leigh's way.

"Problem here?" He didn't touch Leigh, didn't muscle his way between her and Greg, didn't do anything but be there. But his stance was clear even to an imbecile like Greg. *This woman is mine...stay away.*

A man couldn't get more alpha than that. Leigh nearly melted at his feet.

"None at all," Greg replied. "Just checking on all my people."

Dan jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "I haven't seen you check on them."

"Making the rounds." Greg took a step back and then walked away.

"Are you going to club me over the head and drag me off to your cave next?" she whispered to Dan.

"Not yet." He closed the space between them, the briefest touch of heat to her body. "Soon, though." A wink and a grin backed up the words. When he stepped away, it was all Leigh could do not to haul him back and let him take her on the hood of her car.

The man drew people to him, so why should she be any different? Was it so wrong to want him? Clearly, his signals responded in kind. Hell, he'd staked his claim tonight, and she'd loved every minute of it.

Yes, he was younger. Yes, they had *history*. And if Leigh thought too much about it, that history really freaked her out. Danny the teenager versus the Dan who now stood near her.

Leigh couldn't remember the last time she'd had sex. Why bother when she couldn't get everything she wanted and needed from a man? Now she felt the ache. It built with every second and wouldn't be appeased by anyone or anything other than Dan Jefferson.

Maybe sex with him wouldn't be all Leigh wanted--she'd realized long ago she'd never have that. But it would be good sex nonetheless. Very good. That much she did deserve, and she was having it as soon as...

She hid a smile. Oh, the difference a strong man made. She'd hated Greg's relentless pursuit; now she craved that same thing from Dan. She wanted him something fierce, but Dan was going to have to come to her. Have to continue doing exactly what he'd already been doing. It was by far the best foreplay she'd ever had.

Deep in conversation with yet another law enforcement someone who'd arrived, Dan glanced up at her. The look in his eyes said volumes. Her body responded, heart beating so loudly it muted the sounds around her.

Yes...it would be very, very good. Sadly, it wouldn't be tonight.

Chapter 4

This wasn't how Dan envisioned the night going. Amid the furor over this crime, he'd had to step in to protect his fledgling rights for Leigh. He didn't care who the guy was, the man had no right cornering her the way he had. Dan had no choice but to protect her. But man, oh man, the way Leigh had responded had given Dan another hard-on from hell. He wanted more than anything to show her how caveman he could be.

Now, while his fellow law enforcement associates dissected theories of the why and who of the crime, all Dan could think about was pressing Leigh up against the side of the nearest vehicle, yanking her skirt up--yes! a skirt that showed those trim calves that could lock around a man's waist and give him the ride of his life--shoving her panty crotch aside, and plunging his aching cock inside her.

Was it his imagination that she looked at him with raw hunger? Or had cum backed up so far it had seeped into his brain and made it impossible to think beyond the need to finally make her truly his?

"I don't buy that the girl's boyfriend did this," Watson was saying.

Dan didn't buy it either, but it honestly wasn't his problem. The college was in civilian jurisdiction, not military. NCIS had no responsibility here unless it somehow might involve a military crime or person. And as much as he loved his work, Dan wasn't about to waste time expounding on who did what when it didn't involve him and he had much better things to pursue. Like the woman standing not twenty feet away, hugging herself against the kiss of autumn in the desert air. The combination of red, white, blue, and yellow lights flashing made the moment surreal, like they were caught in some crazy dream.

"Hello? Are you with us?" Watson jabbed him.

Generally, Dan could put up with his antics. Not tonight.

"What do you think?" Watson asked when he realized he now had Dan's attention.

Dan shrugged. "I think it's possible she did it herself for the attention. What else is there to think? Any other theories I might have would be too far over the top. The college is too isolated for anyone to gain anything from this type of damage. Drug running's the only plausible thing that comes to mind, and if that's the case, then why draw attention with vandalism when they know it will bring the police."

The others nodded, scratched their heads, chins, and Watson, his balls. Dan tried to ignore them again. There was no way the four tow trucks would be able to handle damage to a parking full of vehicles. One or two flat tires, sure; four per car or truck, no way. They started loading vehicles to haul to repair facilities or homes. At this rate, it would take all night. Dan was inclined to cut the drivers some slack and have his car taken care of in the morning. Of course, doing so would leave him stuck for a way home, not that he couldn't call someone or even prevail upon his cop buddies to bend a rule.

Friends and family were starting to arrive to take people home. The dean was making his presumed rounds again, offering rides and heading straight for Leigh. And so did Dan.

She apparently didn't notice the dean behind her, but there was no doubt about the light in her eyes when she saw Dan coming toward her. She took a hesitant step toward him, then another. Dan moved into an easy stride, smiling, then cupping her upper arm when he reached her.

"Hey, Leigh." The dean burst up from the other side.

Leigh's head whipped around to him, but she backed against Dan. His body sang out at the contact. The scent of apples curled up his nose and into his blood. He fought the urge to close his eyes on a groan, wrap his arm around her, and bury his face in her hair.

"I'm taking a bunch home." He motioned to the Ford Explorer behind him. Its engine was running and the doors stood open.

"Wait for me." Dan's voice was low, for her only. Was that a shiver he felt? Sure enough. But was it his or hers?

"Dan and I would love a ride home." She looked up at Dan. He'd never seen such mischief dance in a person's eyes before. "Is that okay with you, honey?"

"There's only room for one," the guy said. He was starting to remind Dan of Jerk-face.

"That's okay." Leigh wiggled closer to Dan. "I can just sit on Dan's lap."

"But...that's illegal."

Dan slipped his arm around Leigh's waist. "I think any officer will give us a pass under the circumstances and once they realize who I am." He extended his hand. "I don't think we've been introduced. I'm Dan Jefferson, NCIS Special Agent."

Now that shiver was from Leigh. It empowered him.

"Greg Reed." He grudgingly shook Dan's hand. Dan made it a grip to remember. "I'm the college dean."

"Thanks for the ride. We appreciate it. I'll go grab my things from the car and tell the tow driver to leave mine until morning."

"Great idea. I'll do the same," Leigh said.

"I can take care of that for you, sweetheart, if you'd like to go on to his truck," he told her.

Leigh pressed her hand to his pounding heart. "That'd be great, but he'll probably need my direct authorization since we haven't put each other's information into their system yet."

Dan tried not to laugh. Inside he was beaming. They sounded like they'd been a couple forever instead of...never. He loved it and prayed she wasn't merely using him as cover to avoid Greg, although he'd easily forgive her for that. He'd forgive her anything for the implicit trust she placed in him right now.

"We'll be right back," he said to Greg, then he and Leigh walked off to their respective tow trucks hand-in-hand.

"Nicely played...sweetheart."

"Thanks...honey." She wrapped herself around his arm, snuggling it between her breasts. Sweet agony speared through him. "I appreciate the save. I'll try not to make you too uncomfortable."

"Too late...as you'll soon see. My apologies in advance, but I'll be poking your backside the whole trip."

A giggle trilled from her, along with a shrug. "I'll suffer through and try not to wiggle around too much. Wouldn't want to leave any wet spots."

Dan tossed back a laugh. "Yes, let's please don't blemish my oh-so-perfect reputation."

They stopped their verbal foreplay and gave their instructions to the tow drivers. Burly men with a day's end of whiskers thanked them for the consideration and looked like they dropped ten pounds instantly from having two burdens off their shoulders for the night.

Still arm-in-arm, or rather his arm clutched against Leigh's body, they walked on to his Honda. Silence accompanied them now, that and the hard beat of their hearts. Dan could feel hers pounding against his bicep. It matched the pulsing heat in his cock and he couldn't help wondering if her clit was in the same predicament. He imagined it slick with her juices, hard and red and ready to explode. He wanted it under his tongue, or surging beneath his fingers, or nudging his dick as he thrust inside. Wanted it all. Wanted it now.

He swung her gently against the side of his car when they reached it, then braced his arms on the hood effectively blocking her. Her eyes lifted to his, a silent plea or a warning he'd gone too far? He wanted to kiss her. God, how he wanted to kiss her. Instead, he pressed closer until her breasts scuffed his chest; both their nipples were pebble hard. Her breath hitched. Her lips parted. And those deep green eyes fell to his mouth.

"I...I have ice cream at my house." Her low voice shook with every word.

"Sounds like the perfect end to what's been a crazy night." Dan brushed his fingers down her hair and rested them against her neck. Her pulse fluttered against his thumb. "What flavor?"

"Vanilla."

"I love vanilla. It's my favorite."

Leigh tensed, and Dan suspected she would have moved back if not for the car and his body holding her in place. "It is?"

Ah, so they weren't really talking about ice cream right now. "Yes." He traced his thumb over her jawline. "Because the possibilities are endless. It might look like vanilla to the untrained eye, but it's really the cornerstone of many other wonderful things the uninitiated wouldn't understand."

Her eyes widened. Her mouth formed a perfect O. He'd surprised her. Good. Dan had a lot more surprises for her. Right now, though, he had to kiss her or he knew he'd die. He bent slowly, taking his time for what he knew would be damn sweet, and loving how Leigh's eyes tracked his progress. Loving the huffs of her breath brushing his face, the heat pooling from them, those heartbeats that raced in time for--

"If you two would hurry it would be greatly appreciated," Greg said from behind. "We'd really like to go. The others are waiting."

That was it. Dan was going to kill the fucker. Pulling in a deep breath, he faced the other man. "We're on it."

He opened his car door, grabbed a duffel that had a change of clothes, and secured the door once more. Greg hadn't budged. The pathetic attempt at dominance pissed Dan off. Should he let Greg have the moment, or make it a cockfight here and now? *Yeah, that'll be a good way to impress Leigh.*

He slipped his arm around Leigh, hugging her to him. "Ready, babe?"

"I am." The words slithered around him.

Dan wouldn't fault Greg if they'd given him the boner from hell either. There was a promise in those two words, uttered in a tone leaving nothing to the imagination, backed up by the press of her body against his.

Greg did a crisp about-face that would have done the grungiest Marine proud and marched back to his Explorer. Dan kept on his heels the whole way, though it meant separating himself from Leigh in order to do so. Some things he could let go, but he sure as hell wanted Greg to get a good feel of having someone dog^his ass.

"Hey, Dan," Watson called out, "where're you going? We could use your expertise."

"Heading home, buddy." He lifted a wave. "It's a civilian matter, out of my jurisdiction. Best not to muddy the waters."

"Uh-huh." Watson looked right at Leigh. "Yeah, got it. I'd take that stance myself."

Dan thanked his lucky stars Watson left it at that. There was no telling what was going to come out of his mouth ninety percent of the time.

The back door of the Explorer was open and the second row of seats taken. That meant he and Leigh had been relegated to the third row where they'd be squeezed in with another poor soul and no legroom. Frankly, Dan wasn't surprised.

He greeted the other passengers with a nod, then climbed in. His new English Comp teacher, Hilary Culpepper, age ancient, would be their seatmate. Pencil thin eyebrows and rheumy gray eyes perused them as he and Leigh settled for the ride. It was clear from the get-go that Leigh sitting on his lap wasn't going to work, logistically. So Dan gave up his seat and squeezed into the small space on the floor. His reward? Leigh's hand on his shoulder, her calf pressed against his bent leg, and the knowledge he wasn't going to be sleeping in his bed tonight...as long as he didn't screw this up.

He cupped her calf and enjoyed the ride.

Chapter 5

How could a fifteen-minute ride feel like eternity? Each brush of Dan's thumb over her calf telegraphed signals straight to Leigh's pussy. Wet spot imminent. Thank goodness, the seat wasn't cloth. Now all Leigh had to do was keep from sighing with contentment and groaning from need. Both were nearly impossible when her mind wandered to all the naughty delights of Dan slipping his hand under her skirt and into her panties to make her come here and now. That would give Hilary something to write in her diary tonight. Although they might wind up in the ER because Greg would sure as hell have a heart attack.

Leigh chuckled to herself. Dan glanced up, that lift of an eyebrow asking her to share the joke. How quickly they'd fallen into an easy rapport. Like they'd known each other for years. Well...they had.

She yanked the direction of her thoughts off that path. She didn't want to think about then, or the age difference, or anything. All she wanted was to explore the here and now. To have a great orgasm and a good fuck at the hands of someone other than herself.

No one said much. After the evening they'd all had, shock was setting in. Among the why and who, everyone would also be wondering if it would happen again and how to protect themselves and their property against it. Greg would be hard-pressed to hire security and upgrade their pitiful surveillance equipment. The sheriff, California Highway Patrol, and citizens' patrol from neighboring cities might offer drive-by checks as well. A determined vandal could work around that; so could vigilantes out for justice. She would hate to see it come to that, but Leigh also wasn't foolish enough to ignore the threat from either parties--vandals or vigilantes. Teachers would go to their cars in groups, be it day or night. She'd arrange it herself.

"There's my house. There's my house." Hilary jumped up, waving her hand. "Stop, Greg, stop!"

He slammed on the brake, nearly toppling her over the seat and people in front of her. Dan's quick reflexes saved her.

Hilary's thin lips formed a rarely seen smile. "A-plus, Mr. Jefferson." Then she crawled over them both and left the vehicle without a word of thanks to their chauffeur.

Dan slipped into the vacant seat and covered his hand over Leigh's. "My place is only about a mile or so," she said softly.

"Daisy, right?" Greg asked.

Leigh fought the urge to roll her eyes and bit off a smart-ass comment. "That's right." Then she spied Dan glowering holes through the back of Greg's head and giddiness welled up inside her once more.

Within a few minutes, Greg pulled to a stop in front of her house, an exact duplicate of every other house on the street with the exception of the house numbers--tan stucco, sand for a front yard. Yep, he'd given himself away with that small error. Leigh wondered how long it would take the three remaining teachers in the SUV to piece that together.

Greg barely let them clear the vehicle before he took off again, their thank yous swallowed by his exhaust.

"He been stalking you?" Dan asked.

"Let's just say he's been persistent," she said with a sigh, and pulled her keys from her tote. "You planning to kick his ass?"

"Thinking about it." He pulled in a breath and reached for her keys. "May I?"

Leigh relinquished the ring. "How do you know which one fits? Or were you going to keep poking until you got one in?"

He clutched his side in silent laughter. "You nailed me. That's my style."

"Thanks for the warning." She snagged the duffel strap around his shoulder and tugged him up the cement walk. "I'll make sure to provide you with a little extra guidance when we progress to that point."

"Which will be soon, right?" He let her lead him.

"Oh, yeah. Real soon."

"Isn't this the part where you play coy with me? Tell me you appreciate my help, but that I'm really not obligated any further and I can call a cab?"

Leigh stepped aside to give him access to the door. The motion-activated light overhead came to life. She'd yet to release his bag. "I would never play coy."

"I know. Me neither." Dan thrust the key into the lock on the first try.

"How--"

He dangled the keys. "It's the only Schlage key on the ring. I...deduced, based on the skills acquired in my many years as a criminal investigator."

"Well"--Leigh danced her fingers up to the nape of his neck--"then maybe you won't need any specialized guidance after all."

He slipped a strong arm around her waist and pulled her to her toes. "A friendly hand is always appreciated...and never refused," he finished in a whisper.

Leigh grinned. "Never say never."

"My feelings exactly." He pushed the door open and swung inside with Leigh firmly in his grasp. The man really knew how to take a woman's breath away.

He held her suspended for the space of too many heartbeats, watching her face, her lips. God, he was hard!

Everywhere! Was he waiting for a signal from her? Mustering control? Debating the whole thing? What--

Hot lips cut off the rambling dissertation. Such a soft kiss, firm, determined, yet not intrusive. As if he knew she'd needed something to silence her thoughts. Who knew so simple a kiss could be so overwhelming? Leigh let go of the moan she'd intermittently fought all night.

Dan deepened the kiss, nibbling her lips this time...once, twice. Over and over again. Leigh kissed him back, hungry for more. He drew in a deep breath through his nose, grunted, then slipped his tongue between her welcoming lips. Her knees buckled. That arm locked around her waist kept her upright. When the kiss finally ended, her head buzzed, her body sang. Any other man would have had her panties off and be fucking her bent facedown over the couch by now.

Another breath pulled his shoulders back. He combed his fingers through her hair, and she could feel the energy shimmering from him. Feel the demanding pulse in the erection wedged between them. And yet he waited.

Dan adjusted the duffel strap on his shoulder and turned her toward the room. Leigh kept her gaze on his face, searching for clues and hints of what to do, or what might happen next. A broad smile momentarily scattered the lust banked in his eyes.

"I love this. It's absolutely beautiful!"

She could tell he meant it, too. She thrilled at the knowledge. "With all the beige houses surrounding me, I needed some color." It existed everywhere one looked--emerald greens, ruby reds, golden yellow, purples, and blue. Somehow, she'd made it all work.

"Looks homey and comfortable, too. Like the sofa and chairs are waiting for you to sink into them after a hard day. Welcoming and peaceful. Soothing."

"Not too soothing, I hope," she said.

Dan cocked his head to one side as if thinking it over. "Nope, still locked and loaded. Waiting for a cavewoman to club me and drag me off to her lair since she's already lured me away from the safety of my own village."

Leigh laughed. "And here I was waiting for you to storm my battlements."

"In that case..." He ducked and tossed her over his shoulder.

She squealed. "Not exactly what I had in mind."

"Oh?" He twisted his head her way. "You were going to carry me?"

"Very well." She feigned a beleaguered sigh. "Carry on. You can use your keen investigative skills to find my lair."

He skimmed his free hand over her ass. "Getting sassy now, are we?" Hard circles brought heat rushing to her pussy. "There's a cure for that you know."

Leigh's breath caught. "Are you offering me a friendly hand?"

"Perhaps? Do you need one?"

She couldn't answer. Too many doubts swarmed her head. A sharp swat shocked an "Oh" out of her and yanked her back to the moment.

"Answer, please," he said. "You never play coy, remember?"

"I remember," she replied breathlessly, all the while fighting the need to squirm against his rigid shoulder and find some relief for the growing ache between her thighs.

"Do you need a friendly hand?" he asked again.

God help her, she wanted another swat badly. "I need many things, Dan."

There was a beat of silence, then... "I know, sweetheart, and I'm going to do my best to see you get them all."

A thousand questions, a million doubts, fear and craving both gnawing at her gut. Indecision.

Dan eased Leigh to her feet, but his arms still held her close. They were at the threshold to her room and she'd never realized they'd been moving. He shifted and tossed his duffel into it. The bag landed with pinpoint accuracy at the foot of her queen-size bed, but Dan made no move to join it.

"Every journey begins with a single step, sweetheart. Every step you and I have made over these years has led us here, equals. Man and woman. Journeys are meant to be savored. They aren't a race."

Leigh slowly shook her head. "I...I don't know what that means."

Her palms rested on the mesas of his pecs. She could feel his heartbeat in sync with hers, his erection pounding with as much intensity as her clit.

Dan cupped her ass, rubbing circles briefly before girdling his hands around her waist. "Lead me in the direction you most want and need, and I'll take it from there. The decision must always be yours. Saying no won't drive me away...unless that's what you really want."

"Goldie's rule...when in doubt, retreat?"

He smiled and slid his hands to the sides of her breasts. "Yes. And don't forget, when all else fails, take a nap." His thumbs brushed over her breasts, calming and exciting her at the same time.

"Never miss an opportunity?"

"Never. Unless, of course, it's superseded by the when-in-doubt rule. But there's one more..." He nuzzled his face into the crook of her neck, then flicked his tongue around her ear. "Patience has its rewards."

Leigh bit her lower lip and arched her neck for more.

"I know you're scared." He nipped at her earlobe. "I am, too." Teeth gently scored down the tendon along her neck. "I know you want me and did even before you realized who I was. And, God knows, I want you." His tongue branded her collarbones, melding into a line of kisses right to her lips. He stopped there, a breath away from searing her mouth beneath his. "But consider this, Leigh... We haven't seen each other for over thirteen years. We could be strangers to each other and yet we fell into a rapport most couples would kill to have. You trust me, more than you trust someone you see every day. Trust me now, sweet Leigh. We take this step-by-step, but you have to show me the next step to take. Forward? Or back?"

Leigh shook inside. Her body was on fire. How could she take any steps at all when it meant leaving the comfort of his body wrapped around her? Unless...

She closed the gap between their lips, gliding her tongue over his. Dan's breath caught, then he deepened the kiss and tightened his arms around her. Her toes left the floor and Leigh slid her leg up. Dan grabbed it and pulled it to his hip, then yanked her skirt to her waist. Leigh rocked back and gasped at the feel of his cock nudging her pussy. Dan cradled her as he walked into the room.

He eased them to the mattress without breaking their hold. Leigh snapped her other leg around his hip and dug her heels into his ass. Dan pushed them more securely onto the bed, nudging his jeans-clad cock into the thin shield of her panty crotch. Leigh wiggled against him, driven by only one thing--her desperate need to orgasm.

Dan broke off the kiss. "That's it, baby. Come; come hard. Then I'm going to strip you bare and make you come all over again."

He dug his fingers into her ass, lifting her higher, rasping the denim right where she needed. She rocked with him, riding him now, feeling the rise, muscles tensing in anticipation...

"I want to see your beautiful body laid out for me. Want to suck your tits and bury my face in your hot, wet pussy. Feel you come around my fingers, around my dick."

Leigh pressed harder.

Dan's chuckle cut through the haze. "You don't like when I talk to you."

No, she didn't. It--

"It distracts you. You're focused on coming. Living a fantasy in your head, rather than what's here."

Truth bolted through Leigh. Shame made her try to crawl away. Dan kept her in place, grinding into her clit.

"I want that fantasy to include me. Everything we can be. Everything we will be. Think of me and you, me doing what you most desire. Making you come. Loving you the way no one ever has. Fucking you," he finished in a whisper.

He caught her wrists and pressed them to the mattress on either side of her head. Then he levered up and rode her to the peak. "Imagine how it'll feel when I'm inside you, baby. Hard, so hard. Like fire consuming us both."

"Oh God," she whimpered.

"Yes, baby," he whispered. "That's it. Come for me, only me."

Leigh clenched her thighs around him and shuddered with her release. He rode the wave with her, hard breaths matching hers.

She waited for his frantic fumble to undo his jeans and sink inside her. It never came. Instead, he unhooked her bra and captured her breasts, tweaking her now sensitive nipples until she whimpered a complaint. Then he unbuttoned her skirt. The zipper sliced down. Hot hands pushed the skirt down and her panties with it. Dan crawled down her body, following the descent of her clothing with kisses, tiny sucks, flashes of his tongue along her skin.

Leigh watched him stand, waiting for the first glimpse of skin. Dan peeled his shirt up and over his head. Her mouth watered for the chance to trace the well-defined planes of his smooth, tanned chest. His hard nipples made peaks for his brown areoles. Her gaze wandered to the trail of dark hair starting just below his navel. His fingers rested on the metal jeans button, as if he'd waited for her arrival to continue. Her eyes locked onto the huge ridge swelling his fly.

Dan pushed the button through its hole and eased the zipper down. A glimpse of white boxers peeked out, then he pushed jeans and boxers down. A good ten inches of thick, meaty cock surged to freedom. Leigh knew her eyes widened. She couldn't help it. What else could a woman do when the penis of her dreams appeared?

"In case you were wondering, we won't be having anal sex," she told him.

He grinned as he stepped out of his clothing. "Never say never, sweetheart. One step at a time."

She pushed up on her elbows. "Name one woman who let you put that glorious erection up her ass."

Dan grinned. "I don't kiss and tell, sweetheart."

The reassurance touched her heart.

He cupped his tight balls, then stroked his hand up the length of his cock, catching the pre-cum at the tip.

Leigh rolled to her knees and crawled to him. She grabbed his hand and licked the salty substance away. "Nice." Easing to her heels, she unbuttoned her shirt and slid it and the bra off her shoulders.

Dan's eyes glazed over. "Yes, very nice." He cleared his throat and reached for his duffel. "Might want to move that beautiful bedspread out of the line of fire. It'd be a shame to risk staining it."

It was a paisley design of burgundy, hunter green, and gold. Leigh loved it for the old world feel and had decorated her bedroom around it. Hearing Dan's approval... Well, the man knew more ways to turn a woman on.

She crawled back up to the spindle headboard and shoved the bedspread down. Dan grabbed the edge and pulled it the rest of the way. His cock was fully sheathed; hunger blazed from Dan's dark brown eyes. She knew it had to kill him to wait; she wanted him more than she could bear. He knelt on the bed, lips branding her ankle.

"No," she gasped out.

Dan glanced up.

Leigh shook her head. "It's very fine for you to give me what I want and need, but I also get to do that for you, too." And she knew he needed her badly.

She reached for him. He didn't hesitate, though he didn't hurry either. He glided over her body, taking time to draw her

taut nipples between his lips when the head of his cock nudged her entrance. Leigh brushed her hands over his shoulders, silently begging for more, yet content to let Dan have his way with her. He suckled her breasts until she writhed, until her clit was hot, hard, and ready, then he eased his cock inside.

A moan of appreciation blessed his possession--a moan Dan answered with one of his own. She clenched her muscles around him, loving the shudder that rippled down his body.

Dan pulled her right arm from his shoulder until he could grasp her hand. He kissed her palm, sucked each digit between his lips, then braced himself on his forearm and guided her hand between them.

"Make yourself come while I fuck you, sweetheart." His voice rumbled over her, begging and ordering her at the same time.

Leigh slipped her fingers over her clit. His kiss rewarded her compliance. Then he plunged his tongue between her lips and really took her. Slow strokes built her up for what she knew was to come. Leigh savored every one, pushing her clit into each rake and letting him build her to the peak.

Strokes turned to hard, slow stabs. She locked her ankles around his waist and pivoted in time with him. "Give it to me, Dan. Don't hold back."

He froze, gaze locked on hers. Then he closed his eyes, clutched her to him and let go. He plunged into her with a speed and strength she'd dreamed of, growing harder and hotter with every stroke. Her clit needed no guidance now; his big dick dragged it with every thrust.

Leigh clutched his back, burrowed her face against his neck...and came. Dan tensed on a hard plunge, grunting, then groaning with force of his ejaculation. He pulled out and sank in again, grinding into her clitoris in its final throes. She thrashed against him, and he plunged again, then sagged with her in the aftermath.

She listened to their hard breaths, felt their pounding hearts gradually subside to normal. Bliss set in amid gentle kisses, caresses, and sexy glimmers that said they were definitely going to be doing this again.

"Ready for ice cream now?" she asked.

Dan brushed his fingers over her cheek. "It'd be a great way to pass the turnaround time before we go again."

She giggled. "Yes, I suppose it would. I understand ice cream's better than sex."

"Depends on who you're having sex with." His voice was raw and husky...sexy all by itself. "It's definitely not better than making love."

What did he mean? Leigh didn't want to ruin the moment by tearing it apart with questions. She treated it as a tease. "Oh? Is that what we've been doing?"

Dan stared into her eyes with an intensity that made her heart skip. "If I'd wanted sex, any woman would do and I'd be home in pajamas by now scratching my balls and watching TV. I wanted to make love. With you."

Now how was she supposed to respond when he had her all choked up?

She cupped his face. "You did. We did." She kissed him and pressed her forehead against his. The emotion was almost too much to bear.

Leigh drew back. "You wear pajamas?"

Dan laughed. "I do. And you if make fun of me, I'll turn you over my knee."

"Weren't you going to anyway?" she asked.

"In due time, sweetheart." He gave her a coveted smack on her thigh, then rolled out of bed. "Turnaround time, you know."

Leigh smirked. "So I hear." She admired his backside while he hauled on his boxers, then crawled from the bed.

Chapter 6

Dan crushed graham crackers over his ice cream. The crumbs showered down the chocolate syrup, nudging Oreo cookie crumbs farther down the slope.

"Chocolate or butterscotch chips?" Leigh held out the two bags.

He weighed his choices, eyeing her concoction for ideas. She had a can of whipped cream at the ready to top off the treat. "Both," he decided. "I'll let you do the honors while I slice that banana."

"Good, and then I think that'll just about do it." She sprinkled the chips in the peanut butter base around the edge of the bowl. "I have to admit you have me curious." Leigh placed the banana as he sliced it. "If you're with NCIS, you already have a degree--"

"I do and will be starting on my masters soon." He got up to throw the banana peel in the trash and put what little remained of the ice cream into the freezer. It felt good, them like this, so easy with each other. He wore his boxers, and Leigh had on a threadbare green velour robe that had clearly seen better days and looked comfy as hell.

"Then why are you taking an English comp course from a community college?" A spoonful of ice cream was halfway to her mouth when she suddenly put it down. "Please tell me it's not undercover work and I'm collateral damage."

He lifted her chin on the pads of his fingers. "It's not, and you definitely aren't. You are like the bonus prize for me actually having the courage to take the course." He kissed her, then licked his lips. "Sweet...someone's been nibbling."

"So has someone else." A smile lit her eyes. "Courage?" She took up her spoon and then rolled her eyes closed with the first delectable mouthful.

"Don't laugh." Dan scooped up a healthy taste for himself.

"I won't," she said around her ice cream.

He knew she wouldn't, but he'd never told a soul. It'd been his little secret, nothing more than a fledgling dream. "I got an idea about a story. It just wouldn't go away, so I decided to write it. Only once I got started, I realized I needed a refresher on fictional composition. I couldn't believe how little I remembered. I've been doing reports and technical information all these years, but writing fiction is another thing entirely. So I finally decided if I was going to write, I needed to brush up."

"You write very well, by the way." She blushed and ducked her gaze. "Tell me about your story."

Dan wasn't going to, but the words poured out on their own. She listened with rapt attention, asking questions, helping him pull out threads and plot on details. By the time he'd finally shut up, the ice cream was gone and he was washing the bowls at the stainless steel sink, while Leigh put a pot of coffee on the timer for morning.

"I love it," she said, taking his hand. "Let's go sit on the sofa. You can tell me more while our dessert settles."

He let her lead the way. "I don't know if there's much more to say. I'm surprised it's taken hold of me the way it has. Now I have other ideas trying to nudge their way in." They sank onto the dark red sofa and stretched out, each taking an armrest so their legs draped over one another. "Another reason to take the course."

Leigh twirled a tendril of blonde hair around her finger. Her gaze focused outward. Dan knew that feeling well. He often zoned out when he was thinking about his crazy story.

"I wish I could say you were going to get some benefit out of Hilary's class," she said. "Her curriculum isn't exactly designed to nurture creativity. She's very methodical and by the book."

"Unfortunately for me, the cool teacher appears to be off limits." Dan kneaded her foot.

Leigh smiled and flexed her toes for more. "I would consider tutoring you privately."

"Would you now?" He winked.

She gave him a nod. "I'd consider it a pleasure."

"Honestly, so would I...and not in the context of bed and ice cream. You challenged your class to explore their minds and put those thoughts into form. Hilary...well, made me want to--"

"Cut your eyes out with a spoon?"

He laughed. "Yeah."

"Drop the class," she said, lifting her other foot. "You don't need her; you have me."

Did he? Dan liked to think so, in every context.

"So, why NCIS? I knew you'd probably wind up in law enforcement since you'd mentioned that before, but I figured you'd be local."

"One of those paths we take, I suppose." He moved up to her calf, working the muscles there. She had strong legs. "I was on the fence between joining the military or applying for NCIS. I felt the need to be somewhat out in the world, away from any home field advantage."

"If you hadn't, we might never have met now." That faraway look was in her eyes again.

"I like to think Fate may have found a way." Dan slid up next to her. She wiggled around until he was behind and she lying in front. "So how did you wind up living out here in the desert? Granted, it's not far from San Diego, but it is a world of difference."

She hugged his arms around her. "It's that difference that appealed to me. I came out here to explore the National Park. Once I saw the wide-open space, dark skies with stars so close you could touch them..." She shrugged. "I don't know. It was peace. I knew I'd found home. So I moved. I've been living here for about ten years. I finally found the perfect home out a ways on five acres. It's a fixer-upper, and I know it'll need work, but I've decided it's got my name written all over it. I put in an offer and am now holding my breath."

It sounded wonderful. "I've been known to be pretty good with a hammer and screwdriver. I'd loved to see the place."

"I'd show it to you, but the current lack of transportation..."

"There's always tomorrow." He pulled in a breath, hoping she wouldn't think what he was about to say was bullshit. "You know, this is my second time here. This was where I had my first assignment. I loved it here. I loved being able to hike in the National Park, to know I could easily go anywhere else I might want in under three hours. I loved the stars, the smell of the desert--"

"After the rain," they said together.

"I spent time in Iraq and then Afghanistan and needed a place to readjust, for lack of a better explanation." Leigh didn't need to hear about the horrors and fears of being in a war zone. One day, yes, but not now. "I asked to come back here. I've been back for about six months. And, believe it or not, I live about six blocks away."

That pulled her up. "Seriously?"

"Yep, it's what I mean when I talk about Fate. All the time we were both in the same place, a relatively small community, and yet our paths didn't cross until now."

"I wonder why." She settled back in his arms.

Eyes closed, Dan inhaled the scent of her hair. "Because, sweet Leigh, we were meant to be." How could he make her understand he meant that with all his heart, that he'd loved her for so long and hadn't even realized that himself until a few years ago? It sounded crazy, impossible...

Leigh rolled over. The edges of her robe fell open, pressing them skin-to-skin. Heat flared instantly. His cock swelled down the leg of his boxers. He cupped her head with one hand and her ass with the other. She kissed him without hesitation, dancing with her tongue, meshing the cacophony of flavors from the ice cream. She raked short nails up his

stomach, setting off goose bumps. Then she swallowed his gasp when she pinched his nipples.

Deepening the kiss, she straddled his hips and yanked the boxers down. His cock blessed the freedom and starting looking for a new home. Dan lifted her away before things went too far. He wanted inside her too much and his condoms were in the other room.

"It's time, sweetheart."

A deep flush covered her face and spread down her neck. He lifted her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze, praying he hadn't misjudged what he presumed she wanted.

"Go into the bedroom and get what you need for tonight, what you want." He stripped the robe down her body. "I'll be less than a minute behind you. And trust me, it's going to kill me to wait that long."

She swallowed, nodded, and stood. Her body quivered with every move. Dan hoped it was with anticipation and not dread, even while he admired her sweet ass as she walked away.

Chapter 7

Juices trickled down Leigh's thighs. She tried to be casual about this, tried not to run to her bedroom. Her pussy had other ideas. Her clit swelled the second Dan had uttered "It's time." Years of waiting for someone to know, to take the lead and give her what she craved. Not to humiliate her as Bert had. Not to have to be told. To just do.

She forced herself not to evaluate how Dan had come upon his knowledge of her private needs. If she did she'd never go through with it, never know what it was truly like to have this. But despite all her fantasies, Leigh didn't have a clue how to proceed from here. She'd never done this with anyone before, always alone.

Indecision played havoc with her senses. She stared at the rumpled bedsheets, their clothing scattered all over the room, his duffel lying open on the floor.

I wanted to make love. With you.

She buried her face in her hands, then yanked her fists to her sides and strode toward her dresser drawer. Fingers closed around the wooden hairbrush. Leigh left the drawer open, exposing her treasure trove of toys. Dan could do what he wanted with the stash. She'd trusted him enough to bring him home with her, to...to make love with him, share ice cream and secrets. She'd trusted him enough with her biggest secret of all. He'd opened the door with his promise to give her all she needed. All Leigh had to do was step through it.

Dan walked in the moment her knees hit the mattress. His erection thrust proudly from its dark nest. Muscles glided with every step. His gaze darted to the open drawer, then back at her. Leigh placed the hairbrush on the foot of the bed, an offering to the man who was going to give her all. He accepted it without hesitation and weighed it in his hand, eyes never once leaving her face.

"Have you..." Leigh swallowed. "Have you ever spanked a woman before?"

"I told you, baby. I don't kiss and tell."

Meaning what they were about to do would never leave this house. She was safe. Wasn't that why she'd let him so near?

Dan ran his hand over the bristles. She felt every one of those soft, white strands. Slow steps carried him to the side of the bed. She watched over her shoulder as he plumped the pillows against the headboard. Her heart jumped when the mattress sagged with his weight. Pulses leaped when his legs stretched out and his big hand closed over her forearm.

"Come to me, Leigh."

He drew her to him, and she went, gliding facedown over his lap. He draped one arm around her, holding her in place.

"I do need to know if you've ever been spanked by someone before," he said.

She quickly shook her head.

"It's very different than doing it yourself."

Did that mean he'd been on this end of things? She couldn't ask.

"The goal is pleasure, not punishment, sweet Leigh. You're trusting me to let me give you this gift; I'm trusting you to tell me what's too much."

"I will. I promise." She braced herself for the first hard smack, clenching butt cheeks together, fisting her hands into the sheets, digging her toes into the mattress.

"Relax." He gave her a little shake, then ran the bristles down her back.

Tickles sped over her skin, tightening her nipples and sending a new rush of moisture to her pussy. He did it again, and she bowed into the caress, smothering a moan as she tossed her head back. Dan stroked the brush through her long hair, draping it down her back, then doing it again, petting her, loving her, until she knew there were no tangles left.

The wood kissed her bottom, but didn't strike. He rubbed the brush over her ass, down her thighs, and back up.

"Open your legs."

Leigh obeyed, and he rubbed again. Over her bottom, down her thighs, between her thighs and up, nearly touching her pussy before running back down the other side, then up again to her other cheek. She lifted her ass for more. The caress was harder this time, more determined. She spread her thighs farther when he neared the top--he kissed her clit with the bristles.

"Oh!" she cried out.

"I know." He shifted a little, pulling his erection up between their bodies. "I can't promise not to come on you. There's only so much a man can take and I have never known a woman hotter than you."

"Oh, Dan, please..."

"Please what, baby? Make you come? Because I can feel your juices soaking my thigh. Or paddle your bottom?"

"Both please," she gasped out.

"Sweetheart...it will be my pleasure." A sharp swat punctuated his sentence.

Leigh groaned. "Oh, God, yes. More. More. Please."

He smacked the other cheek twice, then rubbed his hand over his handiwork. "Harder?"

"I trust you." The words came out a whisper, and her spanking began...in earnest.

She writhed with every smack, loving the freedom, the fire that pooled blood to her pussy and swelled everything to bursting. Loved that someone else was in charge of her pleasure, her orgasm. He covered her backside thoroughly, leaving no part untouched, always to the edge of pleasure, never to the point of pain. Then he worked his way to the crease where ass and thigh met, and Leigh swore that would be the strike that would yank the climax right out of her.

"A strap would work better here, love." He ran the bristles down her thighs. Chill bumps erupted behind them. "I have many belts, some soft and worn, some stiff and new, wide, narrow...all with your name on them. Your choice, sweet Leigh. Your pleasure."

She felt the brush near her pussy and spread wide. She couldn't bear the wait much longer. As if sensing her need, Dan sank the handle inside and wedged his other hand beneath her, right to her clit. Leigh came fast, grinding into the orgasm like an animal unleashed. When the sensation blissfully subsided, she slumped over his lap, spent yet wanting

more.

"Good, honey?" His breath tickled her ear.

"So good," she somehow managed to say.

"But not nearly enough."

No, it wasn't. "I...I have belts."

"Special ones?" He combed the hair from her face.

"Hanging in the closet." She turned into his hand, sniffing her scent on his fingers. "I trust you."

He rubbed a palm over her warm bottom. "Then get ready and I'll find one. Facedown, pillows lifting that luscious heiny. I'll have to fuck you after this, Leigh. My cock is ready to bust open, but I'll hold on for you. Warning...I'll fuck you hard and fast, deep, but not long, because I'm too close to coming myself. But you'll come again, too, sweetheart, maybe more than once...or twice."

Dan slipped from beneath her then, leaving Leigh to do as he'd said. Her arms and legs felt weighted from the force of her climax. But once she heard him open her closet door, want propelled her to prepare.

She gathered the pillows and placed them in the center of the bed, then lay facedown, more or less spread-eagle for him. Already her clit had awakened, her pussy clenching for something to fill it.

The tinkle of a belt buckle alerted her time was approaching. She closed her eyes and waited. The rip of a condom packet. The sound of... He was going through her toys! The bed dipped and cool lubricant touched her anus, then the small butt plug plunged in.

"No anal beads, honey?" He kissed her ass. "We'll have to remedy that. They make you come like you've never come before." He moved away. Leather swished.

Leigh arched her back with the strike upon her thighs. Fire spread again quickly followed by another lash higher. Another higher still. She squeezed her thighs together to quell the ache in her clit.

"Nuh-uh, that's cheating," he said, slithering the leather down her back until it tickled the crack in her butt. "Only I make you come. Open."

"God, Dan! It just feels--"

"So good," he finished. "I know, sweetheart, and it's all for you. Ten more and then I'll have to fuck you, baby. I'm disappointed in my lack of stamina. I really wanted to suck your clit and make you come."

"There's always tomorrow," she murmured.

"I can't think of any better way to wake up," he replied, and struck again.

Leigh tried to count the smacks. She lost count after three, wadding the sheet in her fists to keep her hands out of her pussy. The instant she heard the belt fall to the floor, she rolled over and reached for Dan. He was already there, grabbing her legs and urging them up to his shoulders. He tugged the pillows under her hips, pressed his thumb to her clit, and plunged his cock to the hilt. She came hard, thrashing with the waves rolling through her.

Dan grunted, withdrew, then plunged in again...harder. A low buzz warned Leigh. She grappled for his shoulders and held on, but the sensation of vibrator against her clit had her fisting the sheets once more. He pounded into her as he'd promised--hard, fast, and deep. Sweat glistened on his skin.

"You look so beautiful," she cried out. "I want to lick you dry."

This time he whimpered.

"Suck your cock."

His body quaked.

"Feel your tongue slither deep into my pussy."

He plunged deep, grinding into her. Head tossed back, he groaned and let go. Leigh came with him, taking each thrust as jism shot from him, and knew she'd never seen anything as perfect as this man.

Somehow he dredged up the strength to put the bed to rights--heaven knew Leigh didn't have it. She tucked her head into the pillow he'd placed at the headboard, then curled into his body when he joined her there and draped an arm around her.

That's when reality hit her. Questions and doubts she'd tried to ignore assaulted her. The tears came out of nowhere, sobs right behind. Rough, heartbreaking sobs that carved out her heart and left it as roadkill for ravens to pick apart.

"What's wrong?" Dan sat upright, taking her with him.

Leigh batted him away and took refuge at the edge of the bed, her pillow clutched before her as if it could protect her.

"Are you hurt?" Devastation twisted his face. He reached for her. "My God, did I hurt you? Sweetheart...honey..."

"You peeped!" she shouted, slapping his hand away.

"I'm sorry...what?" He actually had the nerve to look confused, innocent even.

"You peeped me." Leigh smeared the tears from her face; more replaced them. "Back then...you peeped on me."

"I *did not*." He stabbed his finger onto the mattress. It came right back up. "One time I saw that jerk-faced son of a bitch fucking the neighbor and *you* came in to take care of his business." His finger came up again. "*Onetime*."

"Then how could you know about *this*?" She waved her hands. "No one knew. *No one!* Not even *Jerk-face*."

Dan's shoulders sagged with his sigh. "Oh, honey." His arms opened to her. "Please come here. I swear I didn't peep on you."

She ignored the attempt to placate her. "Then how?"

"I figured it out...eventually. Let's face it, my world experience was lacking in many areas at the time. I couldn't understand why you'd have a riding crop when I knew you didn't ride horses. Hell, with trying to finish your masters and working nights, you barely had time to breathe. And then that bastard had the nerve to cheat on you."

He reached for her again; this time Leigh relented. Dan cupped her shoulders, thumbs circling. "As time went on, I understood why you'd often close your bedroom drapes at odd hours of the day. I thought at the time you were taking a well-deserved nap. And remember, at that particular stage of my life, I often sequestered myself in the privacy of my room. For me...not to look in on you." He tapped her nose.

"That's quite a leap of your deductive skills." Leigh wiped anyway what was left of her tears.

Dan shrugged. "It's what I do. Considering what I do, please keep in mind it took me many, many years to reach said conclusion."

"And then you practiced?" A lift of her eyebrow dared him to use his I-don't-kiss-and-tell defense.

He splayed his hand against his chest. "Guilty. And very curious at the time. Practice makes perfect... Shall I go on?"

"No." Now she felt stupid, but what else was she supposed to have thought?

Dan lay down, taking her with him. Leigh rested her cheek on his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

"I meant what I said in what I wrote," he said after a bit. "I discovered that day the type of man I did and didn't want to be, but I knew long before then I did want a woman like you. It wasn't until years later I realized I didn't just want a woman like you...I wanted you. It hurt inside to know that would never happen, that I would never be able to tell you how I feel. Then there you were back in my life. Not only did I not want to miss this opportunity Fate had tossed my way, but I was also determined to keep you and prove I was man enough to do so--to be the perfect man for my perfect woman."

Damn it all, now she was crying again. Sitting up, she reached for a tissue from the box on the nightstand. Dan rubbed

her back, then sat up, too, and dotted kisses along her shoulder.

"I'm going to lay all my cards out, Leigh. I love you. Plain and simple."

A tinny ring like an old-time telephone broke the moment.

"Fuck," he muttered. "Of course." He swung his feet to the floor. "This time of night, it's got to be work." He dug his cell phone from his jeans, then punched a key. "Jefferson."

Leigh watched him brace his elbows on his knees. Frustration radiated off him. She crawled up behind him and did as he'd done for her--rubbed his back and kissed his shoulder. His arm came around to hug her.

"Yeah, but someone's going to have to come get me. No transportation. I'll explain later. But this is the third time that ass has fucked with my time off. If he's drunk yet again, it needs to go in his record." He ended the call. "Sorry...work."

"I know."

"Don't know how long I'll be."

"I know that, too."

He looked over his shoulder. "I meant what I said, Leigh. Every word of it. Are you...are you here for me? For now?"

"Yeah," she choked out. "I'm here."

He patted her thigh, then head for the bathroom across the hall.

Leigh waited until the door closed, then slipped on her robe, gathered his clothes for him and placed them on her bed. It didn't take him long. In fact, she'd never seen anyone move so quickly. He was ready to leave in under three minutes.

"Here are my numbers...home, work, cell, and my address." He scribbled the information on the back of one of his business cards as he spoke.

Leigh chuckled. "I'd give you my numbers, but I suspect you already have them."

Dan grinned. "I do." He placed the card on her nightstand, then leaned over and kissed her--once, twice...

Leigh cut him off after the third. "I promise I'm not going anywhere. I might even have hot coffee if you're back for breakfast."

"I'll probably be looking for bed and sleep by then."

"I have those, too."

Two more kisses before he pushed away. "Gotta go." He snagged his duffel and walked toward the door.

"Hey, Dan," she called out.

He turned back. "Yeah?"

"How do you feel about kids?"

He smiled. "I still love kids...and dogs, cats, animals in general. I'm onboard. Every journey begins with a single step, sweetheart. I'm taking it."

"Good to know." She grinned.

"Later." He winked and walked away.

It was only when she heard the door close that Leigh wondered if she should have given him a key. *What the hell...if he wants in that badly he could probably pick the lock.*

Leaning toward the nightstand, she opened the drawer and pulled out her list. No need to scan the items there. Dan met all her *requirements*. She tore the paper into tiny bits and watched them flutter into the small wastebasket below.

"And I'm pretty sure I'm going love you, too, Dan Jefferson."

Smiling, she picked up his card, then reached for the cordless. There were some things a man just had to know before heading off to a potentially dangerous night. This was one of those things.

The phone rang before she could dial. Caller ID showed it was Dan.

"Miss me already?" she asked.

Dan chuckled. "As a matter of fact, I do. I'd much rather be under the covers with you than heading out to work."

"I was just about to call you." Leigh's heartbeat slipped to her throat.

"Before you say anything I've got to clarify something." Hesitation lingered in his voice.

It scared her a little...okay, a lot. "Okay, I'm listening."

"The thing with kids and dogs... I am onboard, but I don't think I'm exactly ready to jump in with both feet just yet."

Leigh grinned. "Step at a time?"

"Yes, like start with a dog and work our way forward from there?"

"Sounds good. The condoms aren't necessary, by the way. All safety protocols are in place."

"Damn, woman, I want to run right back and give you a quickie."

"No turnaround?"

"Your powers are without compare."

"Flattery will get you anywhere, big guy."

He chuckled. "Who's flattering whom here?"

Leigh giggled, then said with all seriousness. "I'm with you, Dan."

"You are?"

God, she wished she could see his face. "I am, and I'm looking forward to sharing this journey with you. I'm right beside you wherever you walk, wherever the path leads."

Caitlyn Willows

Erotic romance author Caitlyn Willows weaves deep emotions and sizzling sensuality into her action-filled stories. Believing life is to be lived and felt, not merely watched, Willows delivers real-to-life characters in unforgettable tales of love, adventure, and always steamy passion.

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