

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



ANN JACOBS

GRIDIRON  
LOVERS



*Hot in the*  
Clutch

## **Hot in the Clutch**

*Ann Jacobs*

*Book 3 in the Gridiron Lovers series.*

After twenty years in the NFL, Dave Delaney's playing days are over and he's back home in Hedgecock, Texas, coaching football at his old high school. He's tired of meaningless sex and his empty lifestyle. Dave is ready for change and sets his sights on the girl who got away.

Diane Connors is attracted in a big way, but Dave is used to being chased by groupies almost young enough to be his daughters. He's still a chick magnet with a wild reputation, and she's gun-shy after escaping a miserable marriage with a bully – another local jock.

Thing is, neither of them can forget what might have been.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Hot in the Clutch

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# ***HOT IN THE CLUTCH***

**Ann Jacobs**

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Jacuzzi: Jacuzzi, Inc.

Jenn-Air: Maytag Corporation

NFL, NFL Network: NFL Enterprises LLC

Pinot Noir: Williams Selyem Winery, Sonoma, California

Prestige Rose: Taittinger, Reims, France

Reeboks: Reebok International Limited

Super Bowl: National Football League unincorporated association

Tiffany's: Tiffany & Co.

Viagra: Pfizer, Inc.

## *Author's Notes and Glossary*

I'm a rabid football fan, or rather a rabid fan of several generations of quarterbacks I've watched play on TV and in person. This fandom caused me to come up with an idea for the Gridiron Lovers, a series of erotic romances about four star quarterbacks who just happened to have grown up in the same small west Texas town and who went on to fame and fortune as professionals. All of these guys and their teams are fictional, and any resemblance to an actual NFL player or team past or present is purely coincidental.

The four books' titles apparently need some explanation for readers who haven't been watching games every fall since...well, for quite a few years. Suffice it to say, I've watched every Super Bowl since number three, when Broadway Joe Namath came through on his guarantee of a win for the New York Jets. I was just a baby then (wink-wink).

So here we go. Mind you, these definitions may not all be technically correct, since they're based on my personal observations and comments I've digested from the media personalities who call the games on TV every Sunday from August through December and early January. Take a minute and read these pages first, or as my Aussie editor says, you may become totally confused.

*Naked Bootleg.* This is a play where the quarterback takes the snap, fakes a handoff to a running back but keeps the ball. He runs the opposite direction from the runner without a lineman protecting him – this makes the bootleg “naked” – and either passes to a receiver downfield or runs downfield himself. I thought it was a great play for Bobby Anthony to make during his first NFL appearance, as well as a sexy-sounding title for the first Gridiron Lovers book.

*Forward Pass.* The quarterback drops back from the line of scrimmage and throws the ball forward to an eligible receiver downfield. Eligible receivers, I think, are the

backs, tight ends and wide receivers. Keith Connors is a master of the forward pass on the field, but he's pretty hot in the bedroom, as well.

Clutch, as in *Hot in the Clutch*. A player, usually a quarterback, who's especially good at coming through with points when the team needs them most. Dave Delaney's career is almost over, but he can still be counted on for a great play in the clutch, whether it's on the field or in a woman's bed.

Coach, as in *Coach Me*. The masterminds of the game, often former players great or average. Each team has several coaches, with the "head coach" in charge of it all. Colin Zanardi's playing days are over, but he's still in the game, not only with his team but also with the hottest of the local ladies.

Now for the glossary, which I'm putting in alphabetical order so you can refer to it as needed while you read:

*Athletic waivers*: a certain number of exceptions a college coach can use to recruit top athletes who don't meet minimum academic standards for the institution which are determined by a combination of high school grades and standardized test scores.

*Audible*: when the quarterback calls out a change of the play at the line of scrimmage.

*Block*: what linemen do to keep defensive players away from the quarterback, as in "throw a block" or "miss a block".

*Center*: the player on the offensive line who snaps the ball to the quarterback when he's "under center" or "in the shotgun".

*Clipboard*: the object that all backup quarterbacks almost always have in their hands while standing on the sidelines; a backup quarterback's assignment, as in "carry the clipboard".

*Depth chart:* a chart that shows each player's status at his position—starter, second string, third string, etc.

*Double coverage:* two defensive players are covering (chasing) one potential receiver for the offense at the same time.

*Field position:* the spot on the hundred-yard field where the ball is spotted—the closer to the defense's goal, the better the field position is for the offense.

*First down:* when the offense starts a series or moves ten yards down the field toward the opponent's goal—can be a longer or shorter distance if penalties are involved—and is then given four more tries to make another ten yards or a touchdown, or kick the ball away.

*Fumble:* when the football gets loose from whatever player had it in his hands and is fair game for any player, either offensive or defensive, to pick up and claim—called a fumble recovery.

*Groupie:* a woman who's obsessed with professional athletes and wants any athlete, but preferably a star, for a day or night's fun and games.

*Handoff:* when the quarterback takes the snap from the center and immediately hands it to a running back.

*Huddle:* a gathering of the entire offense around the quarterback, who gives them the play the coach has sent from the sideline or via a speaker in the quarterback's helmet.

*Interception:* when an opposing player catches a pass, thereby causing the defense to get the ball.

*Linebackers:* defensive players who often break through the offensive line and go after the quarterback (there are three of them in some defenses, four in others); they also break up pass plays downfield by stopping the receivers who are trying to catch passes and/or get additional yards after catching the ball.

*Line of scrimmage:* the point on the football field where the ball is placed.



*Nose tackle:* a defensive player who lines up in front of the center, usually a huge beast of a man who opens up holes in the offense so other defensive players can get to the quarterback (Note: this assumes the defense is what's called a three-four where the nose tackle and two defensive ends line up in front, with four linebackers behind them—the setup is different, although I can't explain how, if the defense is a so-called four-three with two tackles and two defensive ends in front and three linebackers behind them).

*Penalty:* a misdeed on the part of an offensive or defensive player that causes the team to be penalized from five to fifteen yards, and sometimes—in the case of a penalty on the defense—to create an automatic first down for the offense. Some of the reasons penalties are imposed are for holding, roughing the passer, unnecessary roughness, illegal motion before the ball is snapped, extra man on the field, or illegal formation.

*Pick-six:* an interception that the defensive player runs back for a touchdown.

*Punt:* kick on fourth down, so the opposing team will get the ball as far as possible downfield; *punter:* the player who kicks punts.

*Receiver, or wide receiver:* an offensive player whose main function is to catch passes from the quarterback.

*Running back:* offensive player who takes handoffs from the quarterback and runs the ball, or who catches short passes “out of the backfield” and then runs for yardage.

*Sack:* when a defensive player gets to the quarterback before he passes the ball and throws him to the ground.

*Scout team:* a team of non-starting players who study and then try to duplicate the plays of an opposing team while the first team practices against them during the week before the actual game (the backup quarterback usually runs the scout team, although sometimes that job goes to the third-string guy).

*Shotgun:* a formation where the quarterback stands a good distance back from the center to take the snap.

*Snap:* the movement of the ball from the center to the quarterback.

*Taking a knee:* when the quarterback takes the snap and goes down on one knee instead of initiating a play as the time is winding down to zero at halftime or at the end of a game.

*Three-and-out:* an expression that describes an offensive series where the offense goes three snaps without getting a first down.

*Tight end:* offensive players who generally line up at the ends of the offensive line (if there are two of them in for the play) and who block as well as catch passes.

*Turnover:* the offense gives the ball to the other team because of a fumble or interception rather than after three-and-out or a touchdown.

I hope you all enjoy this series as much as I've loved putting it together. *Naked Bootleg* started it all, and it's the only book that takes place during football season—so you won't see a lot of actual playing—at least on the field—in the stories that follow. Kick back now and enjoy *Hot in the Clutch*, the story of how a former MVP's career ends and his new life begins.

## **Prologue**

As two teammates helped him limp off the field, Dave Delaney finally understood why Rosa had wanted him to retire. His right knee—the one the surgeons had put back together two years ago—hurt like hell. Yeah, he'd managed to get another shot at the Lombardi Trophy, but at what cost?

Lying on a stretcher on the sideline with worried-looking doctors and trainers examining him as if he were a side of beef was no damn fun. Neither was listening to hordes of Maulers fans screaming over his carcass like forty thousand predators ripe for the kill, or the smaller group of Rebels fans yelling at him to get up and back into the game.

"You're done, Delaney," the doc said, his tone funereal.

*What the fuck?* After today Dave's career was history, but he'd go out like a man, not a sniveling coward. "Like hell. Tape it up good and tight and put my brace on." Bad as he hated wearing the clumsy device he'd had fitted after his first knee surgery, it was the only way he was going to be able to walk back on the field.

"You'll hurt yourself worse."

"No matter. I'll survive until we win this game. Then I'm done."

It wasn't as though Coach had anybody else to put in. The Rebels' emergency quarterback was just that—an emergency waiting to happen. Dave had to go back in or they might as well forfeit the Super Bowl. He winced at the pressure the trainer applied while taping his swollen knee. Head Coach Colin Zanardi stood over Dave, a worried look on his face. "You gonna make it, Dave?"

"I'll be okay. No need to panic." Of course that was wishful thinking. The likelihood was that the Rebels' current lead wasn't going to last, especially not with him off his game. He'd lie to Coach but not to himself. Not particularly mobile in the best of

times, Dave figured he'd be a statue out there now, the way he was hurting. A sitting duck waiting to be shot down. "Just have the guys protect me better than they did on that last play."

"They'll do their best."

Dave hoped so. He also hoped his linemen would put a hurting on the Maulers linebacker who'd laid the late hit on him. Bastard deserved to feel more than the five-figure fine the league would probably levy after reviewing the game tape.

This was it. His last football game. He couldn't fool himself anymore. The throbbing in his knee told him as certainly as the sober look in the doc's eye and the reservation in the coach's. A win would be sweet, but he could deal with an honest loss. It smarted to think he might be going out a loser because some asshole Maulers defender wouldn't play by the rules.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back home in Hedgecock, Texas, Diane Connors stretched out on the couch, watching her younger brother Keith march his Maulers team up and down the field. Dylan, her son, lay sprawled on the rug in front of her, his eyes glued to the TV.

Diane knew Dave Delaney, the Savannah Rebels quarterback, from way back. Despite being past forty years old, Dave was holding on to a lead in the tight game. Or at least he had been until a minute ago when two Maulers defenders turned him into the filling for a human sandwich. Without his helmet, Dave looked a lot like she remembered from long ago. Older now, obviously, he still had the wavy black hair and electric blue eyes that proclaimed his Black Irish ancestry. Pain registered on that handsome face as two of his teammates helped him off the field.

Why was he still punishing himself? Diane shuddered as she watched the coach, a doctor and a trainer on the sideline looking at Dave's right knee. If she wasn't mistaken, that was the same knee he'd had surgery on a couple of seasons ago.

"Hey, Mom, Uncle Keith just threw for a touchdown." Dylan sat up, shot her a frustrated look. "Why couldn't we go to the game?"

"Because I said so." Diane wished Keith hadn't sent them tickets, sort of an apology for having contacted her last fall about a nanny for his motherless baby when they hadn't spoken for years before that. He'd been well-intentioned, for sure, only he hadn't thought about how the tickets weren't even half the cost of attending the game. She wasn't about to accept charity from Keith—he hadn't put her in the financial straits she'd been in since she'd let Frank talk her into buying a struggling rodeo stock operation that eventually went belly-up. "It costs a fortune to get from here to New Orleans—not to mention we'd have had to stay in a hotel and pay somebody to look after the animals. If your uncle wants to see us, he can come here."

She turned back to the screen, registered that the Maulers had tied the score—and that Dave was standing on the sideline now, helmet in hand. Tall, rangy-looking even in pads, he still was a chick magnet just as he'd been in high school. Briefly she wondered if he knew his old girlfriend, Edie, had died last fall.

Probably not. Dave had walked away from Edie when he left for college, and as far as Diane knew, he'd never looked back. On the few occasions he'd come to Hedgecock, he'd stayed briefly to visit his grandma and an elderly aunt. The last time, two years ago when he'd come for his grandma's funeral, he'd brought along his country-singing-star wife and their two kids, not too long before a very public split-up. Maybe he'd come back here after he retired, but Diane doubted it.

She shot one last glance at the screen and saw Dave limping onto the field, a broken gladiator refusing to give up the fight.

"Looks like Delaney's hurt pretty bad." Dylan reached into the popcorn bowl, found it empty. "Hey, do we have any more popcorn, Mom?"

"There's another bag on the counter. You can microwave it during the commercial."

Dylan shot her a surprised look, probably because he thought she'd volunteer to go make another bag. But she hadn't wanted to see the end of a game this much since she was in high school and Dave was throwing passes right here in Hedgecock.

She must be losing her mind! Squinting a little at the screen, she picked out the Maulers guy who'd put that vicious hit on Dave, clenched her fists. *Dirty bastard*. It looked like he could hardly wait to lay a hurt on somebody again.

The huge, menacing hulk reminded her of her ex-husband and the fact he'd been thrown off the Hedgecock High team years ago because he took pleasure in hurting opponents. The guy grappling now with a Rebels offensive tackle might have been better off working off his aggression by taking up bull riding the way Frank had. She'd like to see Keith's teammate taking on an opponent that outweighed him by a thousand pounds or more and was at least twice as mean.

Dave handed off the ball before the hulk got to him, but he got tackled anyhow. Miraculously he heaved himself up off the ground and lined up in shotgun, completing a short pass before getting knocked down again. This time the referee called the hulk for a personal foul—unnecessary roughness. That gave the Rebels a first down.

Just looking at that hurt. Diane had watched a lot of football games in her life, and she'd never seen such patently dirty play. Good thing she and her brother weren't close or she'd have felt bad for praying his team would lose. Why did the referees let the Maulers' defense get by with flagrant violations of the rules?

"Mom, would you please fix the popcorn? I don't want to miss any of the game." Dylan held up his empty bowl.

Diane wasn't sure she wanted to watch any more. She wasn't at all certain she wanted Dylan to watch the carnage, either. She hated that he seemed to relish the violence—just as Frank always had. "Sure. Do you want another Coke?"

"Yeah. Hey, see that guy McRae on Uncle Keith's team? He's putting a real hurting on Delaney."

Diane didn't want to watch some bully trying to hurt the long-ago heartthrob of her own high school. She sighed, turned back toward the kitchen. "I think the idea is to keep the quarterback from passing, not grind him into the turf after he's already thrown the ball. I hope you don't think unnecessary violence is cool."

"Nah. It's sure likely to help Uncle Keith's team win, though. The Rebels' backup quarterback has never thrown an NFL pass." Dylan paused, glanced over at her. "You knew Delaney when you were a kid, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh. He used to date Edie when we all were in high school."

Dylan grinned. "Then I won't cheer for McRae to knock ol' Dave out of the game."

"Okay. I'm sure he'd appreciate that."

By the time she got back to the TV, the two-minute warning had sounded. The Maulers had tied the score. They had the ball and were moving close to field-goal range.

Dylan muttered a brief thanks and stuffed his mouth with popcorn, never taking his gaze from the screen. He watched the screen with what looked like morbid glee while his uncle moved the ball downfield, but Diane couldn't help concentrating on the sideline when the cameras panned that way. It tore at her, seeing the pain and disappointment in Dave's expression as he sat, his face pale beneath normally swarthy skin, plastic bags of ice packed around his knee.

She'd rather remember Dave the way he'd looked after his last high school victory. Totally pumped, that engaging smile warming everybody around him as he found and kissed every one of the cheerleaders, Diane included. Seeing him again, even through the electronic magic of TV, made her remember his soft lips and hard body and the shiver of desire his touch had sent coursing through her veins.

Of course, back then he'd belonged to her best friend Edie. She could think about what might have been, but the truth was that Frank Granger had claimed Diane early her freshman year and they'd stuck together even after he'd graduated two years before

her. Now, twenty-some-odd years later, Edie and Frank were gone. She and Dave had managed to survive in their respective worlds, miles apart.

Even so, she hated seeing him this way now, apparently torn up not just on the outside but inside, too. And it hurt her, knowing his marriage had broken up and that he might be all alone with the injury she sensed was serious. When the game ended a few minutes later after a Maulers field goal for the win, Diane sensed this gridiron warrior had played pro football for the last time. Though she told herself she was fantasizing, she wondered again if he might come back to Hedgecock not just for the reunion this spring, but to stay. After all, his grandma had left him her place down the road, and as far as she knew, he hadn't made any attempt to sell it.

If he did, their paths might cross again.



## **Chapter One**

*Hedgecock, Texas, a few weeks later*

It turned out that Keith did come to see them—in a roundabout way. He came back to Hedgecock to get married. Diane was still in a bit of a shock over it. That nanny her brother had needed turned out to be none other than Tina Black, Edie's daughter. And they'd come back to Hedgecock to tie the knot.

Diane felt good that she'd encouraged Keith to hire Tina, but she couldn't help feeling guilty that she hadn't stuck by Edie after she'd married Edgar Garcia. The man had always given her the creeps—he was as much a bully as Frank but a sexual predator to boot. Edie had been the sort of woman who needed a man—any man—to take care of her, and old Edgar had taken advantage.

If Diane had known at the time what Edgar was doing to Tina...but she hadn't. It didn't matter now because Tina seemed crazy in love with Keith and a loving stepmom toward his year-old son.

Smiling, Diane turned to her friend Melanie Tate, who was hosting the reception for Keith and Tina. Good thing, because the Tate house was the only place in the county big enough to hold most of Hedgecock County's population plus fifty or so of Keith's Maulers teammates, coaches and front-office people who'd come for the wedding. Even their mother had come from Colorado, as much as she hated everything about Hedgecock. She'd be taking Keith's son home for a visit while Keith and Tina jetted off to Hawaii for their honeymoon.

"They make a nice couple. Guess I was right after all, sending Tina to Memphis after Edie died and Garcia started stalking her." Mel smiled at Diane. "Tina and Keith seem so right for each other."

"Yeah. They do. Makes me feel old, though, seeing my baby brother marrying my best friend's little girl."

"Uh-huh. We're all pushing middle age." Mel glanced across the room at her new husband Cal Tate and grinned. "I've found the best cure for feeling old is falling back in love. You ought to try it. Maybe make a play for Dave. If I remember right, you were pretty starry-eyed over him way back when."

Diane glanced across the room at the subject of Mel's teasing. Even using forearm crutches and walking with a limp, the guy was still incredibly hot, with that brooding Black Irish look about him. Well over six feet tall, though a bit shorter than Keith or Bobby, he had a rough-edged look she imagined had intimidated a lot of opponents over the years. "He and Edie were joined at the hip until he left for college. I didn't have a chance." She wasn't sure she'd have wanted one, deep down, because even Edie had always said the star quarterback was too wild for any girl to tame.

"Not to mention that Frank had laid his claim on you." Mel's smile faded, and she slapped a hand over her mouth. "I shouldn't have said that."

"It's okay. I've had plenty of time to regret Frank Granger and everything about him. Other than Dylan, of course. It's a good thing for my son that he hardly ever reminds me of his rotten father." Diane glanced back over at Dave then turned to Mel. "You know, if Tina were a couple of years older, she could have been Dave's daughter."

Mel shook her head. "Dave was too smart to have let that happen. He had things to prove, places to go. Women to seduce, if what I've heard is true."

"Yeah." For a minute Diane let herself imagine how different her life could have been if she'd been with Dave instead of Frank, who'd bullied her into marrying him more than twenty years ago when she'd been too young and foolish to be cautious of his possessiveness and evil temper. She took in Dave's studied bad-boy pose, his tousled black hair, his electric blue gaze lazily perusing the scene. She wished for a minute that he'd chosen her, not her best friend, to take under the bleachers for those after-game celebrations under the west Texas moon. If he had, she might have learned

sex was fun, not a painful necessity to maintain some semblance of peace with Frank. "I wonder why Dave's wife left him."

"From what Bobby told me, they were both into partying, and not necessarily with each other. Of course that's just what he's heard from other players. It's too bad. They've got two kids, a boy and a girl who're with their mom in California. Nice-looking kids. Remember, he brought them with him a few years ago when he came home for his grandma's funeral."

"Yeah. It is too bad. For the kids, at least." Diane thought of Dylan, who despite his interest in watching his uncle play pro ball on TV, usually preferred to escape into his books. She knew their relationship had been strained since she'd tossed Frank off the ranch nearly five years ago, though Dylan had witnessed Frank hitting her more than once. She hadn't had much choice in the matter after Frank had used his fists and broken her collarbone when she'd tried to pull him off Dylan. Up until the day he died, she'd been afraid for Dylan as well as herself. "I'd bet good money that Dave never hurt any of them."

She couldn't imagine him being anything but great with his own kids. Earlier in the week she'd seen him out on the high school field, tossing footballs with kids way too young for him to be recruiting for his team. His dog, a sooty gray standard poodle, retrieved balls for him when the boys threw them out of his reach. Diane hadn't been able to resist stopping to watch for a minute, wondering if he'd be as patient and gentle with a woman as he seemed to be with the children. He laughed when he missed catching a ball thrown right at him, shrugged as though it didn't matter that he had to lean on a crutch to keep his balance.

When he'd called the boys to him, the dog had trotted along, too. He'd bent to stroke her curly topknot then looked Diane's way. For a few seconds their gazes had met, and she'd felt recognition as well as a sexual heat that made her cheeks burn. Embarrassed, she'd put her truck in gear and pulled away.

Now she sensed he was looking at her and glanced his way. She read sadness in his brooding expression, wondering if he missed his family, wished things had been different.

She recognized the perfect drape of his dark suit that practically screamed “custom tailored”, and she’d have bet money that the ivory silk shirt he wore open at the collar bore some pricey designer label. Those clothes came from Dave’s other life, reminding Diane that he might have come back, but he wasn’t the same boy who’d left so long ago. “I wonder how long he’s going to stay.”

“For a while, I imagine. He’s taking over for Coach Williams next week, coaching the high school football team. If you’re still attracted to the guy, you should go after him. You know you would have back in the day if it hadn’t been for Edie.”

Had Diane been that transparent? “I’d have never done anything to hurt Edie.” Petite, pretty and easily led, Edie had always seemed to need an extra dose of protection from her friends since she’d never gotten it from her lovers. Diane wondered if Dave had even thought about the tears her best friend had shed when he’d walked away from her and Hedgecock toward a future that hadn’t included nurturing a high school romance.

Maybe...

No. Although Diane had always been a lot stronger than Edie, that didn’t mean she was strong enough to weather falling for the bad boy of her generation now, after her own marriage had shattered. Her experience with Frank had left her brittle and pretty much expecting the worst from members of the male persuasion.

On the other hand, she might not be averse to having a fast fling with Dave, for old time’s sake. She bit her lip, startled at the unexpected thought. She was a mom, for heaven’s sake. And yet...she still had all the female hormones. Her memories of sex with Frank were more or less a waking nightmare but maybe, with the right partner, she might find gettin’ it on was fun.

And with it being a fling, it didn't have to involve Dylan or her responsibilities toward him. She wasn't about to let a here-today-gone-tomorrow male role model into his life, that was for certain. But for herself...she tried to push down the reaction of her body to such a thought. If Mel's knowing grin was any indication, she wasn't successful.

Ah, hell, forty was damn young to give up on sex, even for a woman who no longer believed in love. Whatever else he might be, Dave Delaney was one tasty-looking hunk, at least to Diane's deprived eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keith Connors was nothing if not a lucky fucking bastard.

Dave shifted to take pressure off his knee and leaned against the wall, watching the guy who'd beaten him in the Super Bowl last month celebrating his wedding—to Tina Black. Ironical, Connors marrying the pretty daughter of one of Dave's own old high school lovers.

He and Keith had been nodding acquaintances since Dave was a teenager and Keith an annoying snot-nosed kid. The best man, a fresh-faced rookie named Bobby Anthony, quarterbacked the Orlando team Dave owned a piece of. By the time Bobby had been pestering a teenaged Keith, Dave had been long gone, enjoying the best seasons of his career. Bobby, a big, gangly kid with huge hands and feet, seemed happy as a clam, showing off the sexy cheerleader he'd married a few months ago.

The reminders of his knee and his retired status in the face of Keith's having beaten him in the Super Bowl and Bobby's freshness in the game almost had him escaping as soon as Connors got hitched. Unfortunately Rosa, his ex, had always insisted it was rude for guests to leave events like this too soon. So he'd stayed and tried not to feel jealous because his career was over while Keith and Bobby had years to anticipate as players.

He'd wolfed down a dozen or so fancy girl-sized sandwiches, some meatballs and a big chunk of wedding cake, made small talk with old acquaintances. And he'd just fended off a blatant advance from Susan Anderson, a classmate who apparently still would fuck any guy she could talk into unzipping his pants.

He'd been careful not only to give Susan a friendly "no thanks" but also to take it easy on the high-priced champagne he doubted many Hedgecock locals had ever seen before. After all, he didn't want the locals seeing their new football coach womanizing and slugging down the bubbly as if there were no tomorrow. Particularly since his penchant for partying used to be one of the media's favorite topics when he was riding high, winning playoff spots nearly every year.

Damn. He had to squash the self-pity, so he focused on something that made him feel better. Although it still shocked him, he was actually looking forward to following old Coach Williams as coach at the high school where he'd once been a star. Yeah, it was a far cry from the NFL, but a man had to have something to occupy his days, and Dave hadn't been able to picture himself doing color commentary on TV for games he no longer could play.

A month ago he wouldn't have given a shit, but somehow...

Losing everything—Rosa and his children, his career, a decent chunk of the money and things he'd amassed over the years—had eventually made Dave realize he wasn't the same smartass kid he'd been when he left Hedgecock twenty-four years ago for college, fame and fortune.

When he'd found out Keith was marrying Edie's daughter, that had been a shock. But it had floored him to learn Edie had passed away. She'd been his age, maybe a little younger. That underscored how life was way too short. Maybe his having to retire wasn't such a bad thing. At least he had thirty or forty years of living to look forward to, the Lord willing. Time to focus on more important things.

As if his mind had been cued by the thought, Dave's gaze strayed to the opposite side of the room where Diane, Keith's sister, was talking with Mel Tate. He'd heard

she'd divorced Frank Granger, hoped she'd gone back to Connors. It kind of surprised him to have that reaction. The surge of attraction he'd felt for her back in high school came back today, even stronger.

She still had that cool, collected look about her, and time hadn't done anything to make her look any less hot. He liked the way she wore her blonde hair down today instead of in the ponytail he remembered, imagined it would feel like silk in his hands.

Wearing a simple blue dress almost the color of her eyes, she looked even prettier than he remembered her. He'd had the hots for her back then but kept his distance, though her cool blonde beauty had made him wonder if she'd be as hot in bed as she was calm and collected in school. She'd been joined at the hip with Frank Granger, one mean SOB if Dave ever met one—and the three-hundred-pound bully had made mincemeat of more than one underclassman who'd tried to hit on Diane.

Somebody ought to have clued her in on what a creep she was dating. Somebody probably had, but Diane had seemed to like the fact that Frank was so possessive—and Frank apparently had reserved his physical violence back then for other guys. From what he'd heard from Keith when they spoke a couple of days ago, Frank had graduated from verbal to physical abuse pretty soon after they'd married against their mom's wishes, but Diane had been too proud to let anybody know until he started in on Dylan.

The bastard. When Dave heard Granger had gotten killed a while back while riding a bull at some rodeo up in Denver, he'd figured uncharitably that Frank had finally got his comeuppance. He felt even more so now that he knew what a hell the creep had made of Diane's life.

He'd squelched the urge to pursue Diane years ago. He wouldn't do it again. Straightening up and making his way around a dwindling crowd, he stopped when he reached Diane and Mel. "Congratulations on marrying off your pest of a brother, Diane."

Both women laughed, as though they recalled how Dave had always grouched about Keith following him around all the time way back when. "I was sorry to hear the pest got the best of you in the Super Bowl," Mel said. "But we're all glad you've come back home."

"Yes. We were wondering if we'd ever find a good replacement for Coach Williams. Now we have." Diane paused then smiled up at him. "I saw you playing on the field with some grade-school kids the other day. You're going to be a great coach. You are planning to stay awhile, aren't you?"

"I'm not sure but I'm giving it a shot. I've had Grandma's house remodeled and enlarged and so far I'm enjoying the peace and quiet out there. Daisy—my daughter's dog—seems to like the wide-open spaces, too, though she's spent all her life until now in big-city apartments."

"Has Daisy met any of our local cacti yet?" Mel asked. "Cal's and my Jack Russell terrier had to learn about their spines the hard way."

Dave grinned. "Not yet. She's awfully smart, and she seems to have a sixth sense about strange-looking plants that could stick her. Sort of like I remember cows and horses used to have enough sense to give a wide berth to cacti out in the pasture."

"How does Hedgecock seem to you now?"

"Weird, mainly because nothing much seems to have changed. As soon as my knee gets better, I want to get around and meet all the players' families. Right now, though, I have to baby it so it will heal." He might always have to favor it, or so the doctors said—but he intended to do whatever it took to get back his mobility.

They made small talk for a few minutes, with Dave wishing all the while that Mel would find something she needed to do so he could try putting a gentle hit on Diane. But she didn't.

Okay. He had time. Hedgecock being as small as it was, he'd likely run into her again within a day or so. Keith and Tina had already made their escape, and he'd had all he could take of small talk and the sound of clattering dishes in a nearby kitchen.



"Speaking of knees, mine's telling me I've been standing for too long, so I'd better get on home and soak in the whirlpool tub. It was a nice wedding. I'm sure Keith and Tina will be very happy."

Diane laid her hand briefly on his shoulder. "Say hello to Daisy for me. She's quite the dog. I saw her playing catch with you and the boys."

"I will. See you later." As Dave made his way home he remembered Diane's comment about seeing Daisy on the high school field. She'd stopped and watched, though she'd bolted like a calf at branding time when she realized he'd seen her. She might very well be gun-shy but she wasn't oblivious to him. Meanwhile he'd go hang with his daughter's poodle. He'd brought her with him into exile, and she'd proven to be better company than a lot of humans.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back home, Dave sat on Grandma's porch the way he'd taken to doing every day at sunset. Despite his need to get away from the reception for solitude, now it seemed too quiet. He realized he hadn't wanted to be alone as much as he'd desired to be *here*, sitting quietly *with* someone. With a woman, to be specific. Hell, seeing Diane was really playing with his head because he was already imagining her on this porch, sitting in a rocker, her bare feet tucked up underneath her, sipping wine while her hair fluttered along her shoulders. Maybe her sweater would be falling off one side, showing a bare collarbone he might stroke or kiss. Maybe he'd bring her onto his lap for some slow, easy lovemaking that would eventually get as hot and steady as that pumpjack, ticking off time like a metronome.

Yeah, it was too damn quiet out here all alone except for his cell phone and his dog and that slow-pumping oil well half obscured by a tumbledown fence. Keeping his legs straightened out in front of him, he sipped a Coke. If he was serious about going after Diane, and he thought he was, he'd better get a contractor out here to replace the fences and repair Grandma's rickety old barn. As he recalled, Diane used to love riding horseback, so he'd need someplace to keep a few if...

No need to count his blessings before they materialized. Dave concentrated on the pumpjack, followed its slow movement on the sparse horizon. Like Hedgecock, it moved at a snail's pace, much slower than the sometimes-frantic tempo of the NFL. Dave wondered how he might manage spending the rest of his life here, teaching kids to play the game he loved but could no longer play. He'd start finding out next week.

Closing his eyes, he tried to clear his mind, but he recognized the simmering tension that had dogged him since the reception and seeing Diane. He needed to get laid. No, it was more than that. Yeah, it had been almost two months since he'd made a shockingly young groupie's day by fucking her after the division championship game. But he'd awakened the next morning feeling more than a little ashamed of himself. He could have taken Susan Anderson home from the reception since she'd made her no-strings-attached fuck invitation loud and clear. But he hadn't wanted that, either. And though he could deny it, he knew damn well why.

He and Rosa had had an open marriage for nearly fifteen years. He'd had enough of that sort of relationship to last a lifetime. If he ever went for a woman again that way—as in something intended to be permanent and lasting—he'd do it the old-fashioned way, looking for fidelity and complete commitment for both of them. He wondered if Diane were that kind of woman, the faithful kind he was looking for.

He thought she would be, if she could trust any man after Frank. She certainly had stayed loyal to him through high school, though he'd already graduated. Dave considered what she'd been through, wondered if she'd ever heal enough to want a forever kind of love. She would if he had half the ability with women as media people used to credit him with. If she'd even give him a chance, considering his well-publicized sexual history, both truth and rumor.

Darkness was beginning to cloak the scene. A brilliant sunset crept down in the western sky. Dave whistled for Daisy and went inside, letting the rustic ambience of his grandma's living room with its rocking chairs and tinware geegaws on the hearth

transport him to a time when he'd had everything to look forward to, when everything had been possible and nothing lay beyond his reach.

He'd wanted to keep this room the way he remembered it being since his mom dumped him on Grandma Delaney and never came back. He'd been just three years old at the time, but he'd never forgotten the sense of wonder he'd felt when he first saw Grandma's cast-iron piggy bank—the same one that sat smugly on the mantel, across from a collection of framed photos, including several of him in uniforms of pro teams he'd played for over the years.

The architect who'd designed the remodeling had tried to talk him out of keeping this room and the porch as they were, but Dave had insisted. He didn't give a damn that the old-fashioned room seemed out of synch with the rest of the house that he'd had enlarged and updated.

When Daisy laid her head on his knee, Dave scratched her topknot while he called Cathy and DJ for their weekly phone visit. "I miss you, too, guys. Maybe you can come out to Hedgecock for the summer."

He doubted Rosa would okay them coming to visit for more than the two weeks the judge had awarded him. Well, maybe she would, now that he no longer was playing pro ball. She might even take her new boyfriend along on her summer concert tour instead of dragging the kids with her on her tour bus. When Dave stripped down and crawled in bed after hanging up the phone, he closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind.

Faces flashed on the screen inside his head. Happy faces, sad ones, even Rosa's smug visage. Dave saw thirteen-year-old DJ tossing a football with one of the band guys, eleven-year-old Cathy looking lost and lonely without Daisy at her side. Trying to push down the nagging pain of things he currently didn't know how to change, he went back to the faces he'd seen at the wedding, attempting to distract himself.

Restless, Dave turned onto his side, propped his bad knee on an extra pillow and balled another one up under his head. The image of one pretty blonde wouldn't go

away, so he fixated on it, on her sky-blue eyes and hot body. He imagined those legs that wouldn't quit, wrapped around his waist, killer heels and all. He could almost feel them digging into his naked butt.

He fisted his cock, tried to fantasize that a hot groupie was blowing him. Instead he saw Diane, her shoulder-length blonde hair tickling his belly as she lowered her face, took his swollen flesh between her soft, wet lips.

Her hair felt like silk beneath his fingers when he cupped her head, encouraged her to take him deep. The warmth of her breath sent shivers through him, made him want much more. Not just sex but the sensation of them touching shoulder to hip, of her raking her nails down his back then caressing where she'd scratched, as though she wanted more than an orgasm. A relationship. Commitment.

Fuck, he was insane. No good woman, let alone one as gorgeous as Diane, was going to fall for Dave Delaney and take on all his baggage. Trying to put her image out of his mind, Dave tightened his fingers on his cock, beat out a cadence, first slow then faster and harder, until finally he found, if not contentment, then temporary release.

But when he finally slept, he dreamed about Diane.

\* \* \* \* \*

And he dreamed again the following nights although he'd sworn he wouldn't. It wasn't as though he could avoid seeing Diane. Hedgecock wasn't a big enough place so anybody could be invisible. At the only grocery store on Monday, he had spotted her talking with Melanie Tate in the small produce section. Today when he saw her go into the feed store, he moved as fast as he could to join her, wondering as he crossed the street what he could buy since the store didn't sell dog food and he had no other animals at his place.

He didn't have to torture his brain because she was coming out with a huge sack of something by the time he caught up with her. "Damn, I wish I could help you with that," he said, shooting her his best grin.

"You can. Open up the tailgate on my truck so I can stuff this inside." She indicated a beat-up blue pickup that happened to be parked right at Dave's feet.

The latch thankfully was loose enough that it popped open when he applied one hand, since he dared not set aside both crutches at the same time. "Here you go." When she set the sack down, he helped her push it inside then slammed the tailgate closed.

"Thanks. Usually I try to corral Dylan so he can do the heavy lifting, but today he's still at school."

"I'm just sorry you couldn't have corralled me. I promise, I'm gonna be off these crutches before long, and then I'll be your pack mule."

"Sounds as though you're angling for a part-time job. I'd love to have you but I doubt you'd appreciate the pay."

Dave grinned. "You never know. Maybe I'd want my pay in hugs and kisses and a little bit more."

Diane's cheeks turned a pretty pink. "If you're anything like I remember, you'd be wanting a whole lot more."

"Guilty as charged. I remember kissing you once. You tasted mighty sweet then. I'm anxious to find out if you taste as sweet as I remember."

"A lot of years have gone by." She paused, then met his gaze. "I remember that kiss, too."

"Good. By the way, who's Dylan?"

"He's my son."

During his teenage years, Dave had helped Grandma around the ranch, none too willingly. But he'd done it. Now he tried to imagine DJ helping with chores, but he couldn't. "I hate to say it. My boy's so spoiled he has no concept of honest labor. You're lucky that Dylan helps out."

"I know. He's fourteen going on thirty. Not at all like I remember the boys we went to school with. He'd rather stick his nose in a book than do most anything except take

care of the animals. Or watch pro football on TV." A shadow crossed Diane's face. "Sometimes I think maybe he's trying too hard not to be like Frank."

Dave didn't know how to respond to that, so he just shook his head and smiled. "DJ—he's my son—is thirteen. I hope he doesn't pick all my bad traits to imitate."

As they talked he walked Diane to the driver's side of her awful excuse for a truck and opened the door for her to climb in. "Does this thing run?"

She shrugged. "It did until I parked it here. Let's not give it any ideas about making a visit to Artie's Car Repair. Aren't you supposed to be over at school, doing whatever it is that football coaches do?"

"Not until school lets out. Until then I'm all yours if you need me."

When Diane wrinkled her nose at him, she looked cute. And sexy—but nice, too. "I'll have Dylan unload it when he gets home from school. This smelly stuff, as you call it, is fertilizer for my veggie garden. The soil out here's not too kind, so it needs a lot of help."

"Hmmm. Maybe I'll sneak over and steal a tomato or two."

"Feel free, only there won't be any for a couple of months yet. You know, I haven't said it before, but I'm glad you came home."

"Me, too. I'd like to take you out sometime soon, talk about old times. Share some meals, make a few new memories." *And find out if this attraction I'm feeling goes both ways.* "How about it?"

"I'd like that, anytime I can park my son somewhere so he doesn't get ideas that maybe his mom's wanting another man in her life. Come by, or give me a call sometime. You'd better run along now or you'll be late for the first day of spring practice." The smile she shot his way had to have packed at least a thousand watts. As he limped to his silver Escalade, he waved back and grinned. His cock swelled against his jeans.

“Down, boy. This one’s a keeper. And she’s been burned. Slow and easy – she’s no groupie and no one-night stand,” he muttered as he slid behind the wheel and started the engine.

## **Chapter Two**

Football had been Dave's whole life since he was the age of these boys who'd come out for spring tryouts. Palming a ball, enjoying the familiar feel of the textured leather, he stood by his old coach who'd retired but apparently couldn't stay away from the sport any more than Dave could. "What do you think, Coach? You spot anybody special this afternoon?"

Coach Williams stared at the boys on the field for a long time. "Don't think so, not this year. Of course it would help if you could talk Dylan Granger into playing. Kid's got an arm on him. Big, too, though he's just fourteen."

"Why isn't he out here at tryouts?" As best Dave could recall, every boy at Hedgecock High had gone out for football when he was a kid. Except for one poor kid who'd gotten crippled in an accident at his family's ranch. "I imagine that if Frank were alive, he'd be out here, pushing his boy to play."

Coach shook his head. "Frank was out of the picture at least two years before he died. Diane threw him out. The boy's a real good student, more interested in his studies than football. Shame, though. I imagine he could be good. His dad was a decent lineman back in the day. Too bad he couldn't harness whatever anger it was that drove him."

"Yeah." As Dave recalled, Frank Granger had played dirty—even dirtier than the Maulers lineman who'd recently torn up his knee. "There are too many of them around, for sure. At least you had the balls to throw him off the team my sophomore year."

"Couldn't let the guy cripple somebody. He was a loose cannon, always trying to knock a chip off somebody else's shoulder. But Dylan isn't like that. You ought to talk to him about playing. If nothing else, the kid needs exercise."



Dave had trouble imagining Diane having a son old enough for high school before realizing she could easily have one way older than that. After all, she was only a year or so younger than he was. "Yeah. I could go talk to his mom. There's no doubt the boy has some talent, with Keith being his uncle." That would give Dave an excuse to talk with Diane, see if he could hurry along developing the chemistry he'd sensed sizzling between them.

The old coach's gaze settled on a rut in the playing field. "You need to keep telling the boys to watch out for those ruts. There's a shortage of boys in school this year. You don't need any of them breaking bones on that beat-up field."

"I will. It's got to be damn hard, growing grass around here. Maybe we should try to get the school board to spring for Field Turf." It worked well in outdoor stadiums, so he figured it should do as well on the arid field. "Boys, be careful not to step in those holes," he yelled. With any kind of luck, the school district would raise enough money from the reunion and football camp to update the field as well as the bleachers and field house that hadn't been worked on significantly since he could remember.

Though he'd enjoyed the hell out of the afternoon with the boys, he couldn't deny he was now eager to turn his mind to the pretty blonde who kept invading his dreams.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Connors place, like everything else Dave had seen since coming home, was just as he remembered it, only a little shabbier. Paint was peeling off the wood trim of the stone-faced ranch house. Times must have been hard for Diane, he decided, glancing at the barn that obviously needed a paint job. Ruts on the drive made him slow to a crawl. Only a couple of horses grazed in the fenced field behind the buildings, but at least they looked healthy and well-fed.

What a nasty-looking bull! The ugly creature stomped and bellowed in a separate paddock away from the horse pasture. Dave made sure he drove past that animal before stopping his SUV and climbing out.

He walked carefully, mindful of what tripping on the uneven ground could do to his bad knee. Though he hated feeling like a timid old woman he held onto the stair rail when he climbed the four steps to the porch. The door swung open before he had time to knock, and Diane greeted him with a smile. "You're a little early for tomatoes, my friend. Seriously, come on inside and tell me what brings you out here so soon?"

"Just chasing down another player for my football team. Unless you object to having your son play." Grateful to get off his feet, Dave sank onto an overstuffed chair and propped his leg on the matching ottoman. Glancing around the living room, he saw more signs of genteel poverty – a worn sofa and arm chair, sagging drapes and a faded blue carpet with a hole half-hidden under the leg of the sofa.

Diane sat on the end of the sofa, her expression challenging. "Stop it. I know you're thinking the place is a wreck. It is. But it's not my brother's fault. He's offered to fix things up. He actually begged me to let him do it when he was here for his wedding. So did our mother, who hates nowhere on Earth as much as she hates this ranch. But it's mine. Daddy left it to me because he knew Mom didn't want it and Keith was just a kid. It's nobody else's fault that I let Frank start a rodeo stock farm here, or that the operation went belly-up not long after he did. And I can't blame anybody because the one oil well on the property went dry a few years back. Dylan and I are getting along just fine. We don't need anybody's charity."

"Actually I wondered. But I remember you always had more pride than sense. I assume that creature you've got penned up outside is a leftover from the stock farm, since I didn't see any cows for him to service." Dave visualized the bull, shuddered when he thought of her having to deal with him.

"Bullyboy? Yes, he is, but he's so gentle nobody would take him when I sold off the rest of the rodeo stock so I guess he's our pet until he dies of old age."

"He sure as hell doesn't look gentle to me. Do you put him out at stud?"

Diane laughed. "He's hardly a purebred, prime specimen. He was bred to fight, but he must have gotten all the peaceful genes from both of his very nasty parents. Besides,

since he was born the same day as Dylan, I don't have the heart to sell him for dog food. He's just another member of our family." She paused for a minute. "Could I get you a sandwich and something to drink?"

"Can't say I'd mind. I'm getting tired of cooking for one, but I hate eating out all the time, so I manage."

"You and that frou-frou poodle?"

He grinned as he got up and followed her into the kitchen. "Yeah, it's just me and my little girl's dog. My ex tossed us out together, said we were too much trouble for her to put up with anymore. Daisy doesn't eat nearly as much as Bullyboy, I don't imagine."

"Probably not." When she smiled, it warmed him all over.

He wanted to hear her laugh out loud. "It probably costs me more to keep Daisy groomed than it does for you to feed Bullyboy. I have to drive her all the way to Pecos whenever she needs a trim."

"Poor baby. You, not the dog." She chuckled and struck a comically grave face, though her lips quivered against more laughter. "Did you ever think about grooming her yourself, tough guy? You could even paint her toenails that pretty hot pink."

He liked hearing her laugh. A lot. And it did other things to him as well. If it weren't for his bum knee, he'd chase her around the counter for her teasing, threatening to retaliate. Then he'd kiss her until neither of them could stand.

Instead he answered her as though she were serious. "Yeah, I've thought about doing it myself. I even bought a set of dog clippers a while ago. But Cathy likes to keep her dolled up with the pompoms and such. I doubt I could manage a fancy trim, so..." He shrugged. "There's not a whole lot I won't do to keep my little girl happy. And she expects to see Daisy with all her frou-frou every time we talk on the webcam."

Diane paused, apparently trying to digest the fact that he doted on his daughter. "I hear you've turned your grandma's place into a showplace. Seems a lot of doing unless

you're planning to make this your permanent home. Keith said something about you being offered a job doing color commentary for one of the networks."

"I was also offered a gig advertising Viagra, but I told my agent to say thanks but no thanks. I want to stay close to football. Coaching's my best option now, with my knee torn up the way it is. If I get the right offer sometime from a pro team, I may take it, but that's not likely. As Buddy—he's my agent—says, I was too much of a hell-raiser for too long for a team to hire me to coach their innocent babies except out of sheer desperation. I pretty much imagine I'm back in Hedgecock for good."

Diane took a ham and some cheese out of the refrigerator and sliced some onto a plate. "So the swimming pool, fancy gourmet kitchen and gussied-up bedrooms I've heard so much about are just for you?"

"And my kids, when I get them for a couple of weeks each summer. They're not used to roughing it. Rosa, their mom, has always liked living the good life. So have I," he added, not willing to lay all the blame on his ex-wife.

"I see. You want mayo and mustard?"

"Sure." He watched her assemble three sandwiches between thick slices of what looked like homemade bread. "That looks real good. Thanks." What really looked good to Dave was Diane, the perfect, sexy homemaker, a role Rosa rarely had played between concert tours. If Dylan weren't right outside... But he was. Dave doubted Diane would appreciate him scooping her up in his arms while she was setting out food.

"You're welcome. Why don't we sit in here and eat? Dylan should be in from feeding Bullyboy and the horses. You can ask him then if he'd like to go out for the team. He's never played any organized sports. Frank was always away, out on the rodeo circuit, even before we divorced, and I've always considered football a spectator sport."

Dave thought of his boy and DJ's apathy toward the sport that had always kept him in electronic games, golf lessons and the other activities Rosa thought were important. "Most women think that way. Good thing. I doubt too many guys would feel right,

knocking the crap out of a girl. If Dylan wants to play, I can spend some time bringing him up to speed with the rules and such. Frankly, I can't imagine any kid with relatives like Keith and Frank wouldn't have a lot of raw talent."

"Yeah. Well... To tell the truth, I've always worried that Dylan might be a bully like his dad. That probably doesn't make a lot of sense..."

"In a way, it does. I'm sure you've got some misgivings. But playing high school ball doesn't necessarily mean a kid's going to end up a pro...or a bully for that matter." Dave reached out, took Diane's hand. The softness of her wrist and the tops of her fingers amazed him since he had a good idea about how hard she must work.

"'Bully' fit Frank right well. And Dylan knows it." When she met his gaze, he saw disappointment and maybe a little guilt. "He doesn't know my brother well enough to form an idea..."

"Keith's no bully. As far as pro football players go, he's one of the cleanest. On top of playing clean, he's never chased groupies or partied hard like a lot of us do. If Dylan needs an idol, he'd do well to pick his uncle."

"Not you if you're his coach? You had a pretty good career, too."

"Yeah. I did. But I was nobody's poster boy for the good guys. Your brother is. Besides, he's still got some years left to play. I'm finished."

Diane frowned. "Keith's team played dirty in the Super Bowl. I saw you get hit. I hope that guy McRae got punished."

Her concern gave Dave a warm feeling. "He got fined, five figures. So did several other defensive players for the Maulers. I can't say I didn't enjoy hearing about the hits to their wallets while I was laid up in the hospital."

"I guess fines like that don't bother you guys a lot, considering how much you earn. I think the League should have suspended them." She stood, as though she needed to put a little distance between them.

"I imagine thirty grand stung McRae pretty good, though it probably won't pauper him. He's not a star—probably plays for veteran minimum. Not all players make the kind of money teams pay their starting quarterbacks. Not that most of us would shrug off a big fine even if we wouldn't feel it as hard as some other players."

"Have you ever been fined?"

Dave shot her a self-conscious grin. "A few times but not for anything I did on the field. I tended to do my hell-raising in other places, especially when I was still young and foolish." He pondered explaining some of the exploits that had cost him money and the respect of some of his coaches but was saved when Dylan came in the back door.

"Hi, Mom. Mr. Delaney. Sorry it took so long to feed the animals. Bullyboy wanted a little extra attention."

Diane indicated the sandwich at the empty place on the table. "Sit down and eat. Dave wants to talk to you about going out for the football team."

"You want me to?" A surprised look crossed the boy's face when he looked over at his mom.

"It's up to you. Dave says he can spend some extra time with you, teaching you the rules and so on. I explained that you've never played before." The way Diane looked at her son, Dave had no doubt that he was pretty much her world. "Of course you'll have to keep up with your studies."

"No problem, Mom. School's easy. I'm just wondering if I'll have time to do my chores and play football, too."

Dave cleared his throat. "I managed to. So did your Uncle Keith, I imagine. Practice is an hour and a half after school every day but Fridays when we have games. If you need a ride home, I can drop you off since my place is right down the road from here." He hoped Dylan would decide to play, not only because the boy would improve the team but also because it would provide more opportunities for Dave to see Diane.

"I'll try out for the team. Mom's telling the truth. I've never played football. I've watched a lot of games on TV, though."

Undoubtedly the kid had seen the Super Bowl where he'd gone down since Keith had been playing for the other team. "High school ball's a little different. I think you'll have fun."

"I'm sure I will. Thanks for offering to help me. I've got to finish polishing up the report that goes with my project for the science fair. See you tomorrow, Mr. Delaney." With that Dylan wolfed down the rest of his sandwich and practically ran out the kitchen door.

Diane shook her head. "He's like that, always in a hurry to get his chores done so he can hit the books."

*If only I'd been so interested in my studies, I might have earned a degree in something more marketable than recreation.* "You must be very proud of him."

"Yes. Frank wasn't, though. He wanted Dylan to act as macho as he liked to think he was." Diane smiled but Dave saw pain in her blue gaze. "Thanks for coming out and encouraging him to play. Boys need some exercise other than doing chores for their moms."

"No thanks needed. I need him on the team. Not to mention, I wanted to see you again. Is Dylan going on that science-class trip to San Antonio this weekend?"

"Uh-huh. No way would he let me keep him from going to show off his stuff at the district science fair." The sadness drained from her eyes, replaced by obvious pride. "He built a model irrigation system, pipes and water and all. His teacher says it has a good chance of getting a prize at the state science fair next month."

"That sounds like quite a project. I know I said it before, but you must be very proud." Dave paused but held her gaze. "I thought maybe we could go out while Dylan's away. I'll help you do his chores." Dave worried that his knee wouldn't be up to doing a lot, but at least he could make the effort. "At least I'll help with whatever I can do, considering this leg's not quite healed."

"I'd like that." Diane stood, following Dave as he made his way through the living room. "You know, you don't have to go."

He wished he could stay, but he wanted to sample her soft lips, run his fingers through the pale blonde hair that swung just past her shoulders...and more. Much more that wouldn't go over, not with her son likely to walk in on them any minute. "Yeah. I do. How about if I pick you up after practice on Friday?"

"Okay." She stepped up to him, stood on tiptoe and brushed her lips across his cheek. "Much as I love Dylan, I'm looking forward to a break from being Mom. Especially now, since I'll be spending part of that time with you."

"Until Friday then." Dave wanted to kiss her, really kiss her. But he settled for turning his head, briefly joining their lips. Only Diane didn't cooperate. When she held his face and deepened the contact, the little taste he'd expected turned quickly into a deep, tongue-thrusting feast that fired a hunger he had a feeling wouldn't be easy for either of them to deal with until Friday rolled around.

\* \* \* \* \*

His kiss lasted in her mind long after he'd left her standing on the porch watching his shiny new Escalade bounce down her rutted driveway in a cloud of dust from the worn-down sandstone gravel.

As kisses went, Dave's had started out pretty mild, almost brotherly. But by the time it ended they were both breathing hard and wanting more. Diane's lips still tingled hours later, as though he'd recharged her sleepy libido. She lay in bed, unable to help imagining how Dave's big, calloused hands would feel as they learned all the spots that made her shudder with long-suppressed need.

Strong. Everything about him showed her strength. Not quite perfection but reassuring maleness that fostered desire, not fear. His long fingers bore healed dings and one surgical scar that ran the length of his left index finger and snaked its way to his wrist. Battle wounds, she guessed, like the one that still had him depending on forearm crutches as his knee healed.



He'd told her he had surgery the day after the Super Bowl. Now, around six weeks later, he was still feeling the pain. Damn it, she hated the violence men seemed to relish so much. *Idiot. It isn't like Dave is asking you to marry him. You're only going out on a date. Besides, he's retired now. Even if he weren't, playing football's not likely to kill him. After all, he'd be tangling with other men, not bulls bred to be killers.* Diane curled up under the covers, reminded herself she'd lost Frank—or rather thrown him out—long before she got the call saying he was dead. But she had a feeling it would have hurt a lot more if Frank's untimely demise had followed a happy marriage, not years of misery punctuated with pain and fear for Dylan and herself.

No matter. That part of her life was history she didn't intend to repeat. She touched her cheek, recalled the feeling of Dave's shadow of dark beard stubble against her skin, imagined how it would feel when he suckled her breasts...buried his face between her legs to taste her honey.

Edie used to brag that Dave was an imaginative lover, not afraid to do anything that would make her come. Back then Diane had hidden her jealousy behind childish lies that Frank was equally exciting when they had sex. Now, though...

Now she could hardly wait. The courtship dance would be short, because they were no longer kids. In Dave's kiss she felt banked urgency, much like what she'd experienced at the mere sight of him a week ago at her brother's wedding. No, she wanted to have sex with Dave Delaney and she wouldn't hesitate to let him know it.

She shifted in the bed, her senses heightened. Her old, soft sleep shirt tangled between her legs, brushing flesh that hadn't been touched in lust for far too long. Worn bed linens bound her, limited her motion, let her fantasies take her, carry her away from the daily drudge of keeping this place going and the responsibility for bringing up her son alone.

In her mind the covers were Dave's arms, binding her to his hard body. They were his strong hands, molding her to his heat and strength, his long, muscular legs tangling with hers. The dark dusting of hair on his chest, his thighs, his belly would tickle her, a

reminder that this was a man, a capable lover taking her into a world where nothing existed but him—his heat, his strength, his uncompromising maleness conquering her and taking her to a world of hot sensation. Passion.

Yet something more. Diane sensed he wouldn't be satisfied to claim her body. He'd want her soul. That scared her. She wasn't ready to relinquish her hard-earned independence. Probably would never be.

*Fool!* Wishful thinking, pure and simple. From all she'd heard, Dave might steal hers, but he wasn't a man to offer his soul. It bothered her a lot to know he'd cheated on his wife. Never mind that she'd reportedly cheated on him, too, in some strange celebrity-type arrangement where fidelity apparently wasn't desired or expected.

Momentary pain gave way to relief, and Diane untangled herself from the covers. She sat up, staring out the window at a bright new moon. Dave was the ideal casual lover, easy to desire yet not a likely candidate for permanency.

Exactly what she wanted. A man she imagined must have honed his bedroom skills with the best of them, whose killer smile and hard body could melt the reserve of a nun. A man who'd fulfill all her late-night yearnings for a little while and leave her with memories she'd cherish the rest of her life.

## **Chapter Three**

Where the hell did an adult male take a date in Hedgecock, Texas? Dave lay back in his whirlpool tub, his bad knee positioned to get maximum benefit from the swirling water. Closing his eyes, he imagined taking Diane to the spots he'd visited as a kid, reacquainted himself with in the short time he'd been back here.

He visualized the Burger Den, still the same when he'd eaten there last Monday as it had been years ago—a kids' hangout where the fare consisted mostly of greasy fries, fried chicken and burgers floating in fat. Even the advertising posters on the wall were the same faded ads he recalled from his high school days. Not exactly where he'd choose to feed a woman he wanted to impress.

There was always the café—no name that he'd ever heard of, just “the café”. The steaks there came pan-fried and the beer was served in pitchers kept cold with zip-lock plastic bags full of ice. Since coming back, he'd passed a couple of evenings there listening to music from a jukebox and watching a few folks dance on the postage-stamp-size wooden floor. He imagined Diane had, too. It was Hedgecock's version of a family-style gathering place. Not that the café was bad—it was just that Dave didn't particularly want to watch his date dancing with other guys. Too bad his knee wasn't well enough to try a two-step, let alone the spirited line dances he'd watched while nursing a beer at the bar.

There was always the Hedgecock Inn, a small, square sandstone hotel that rose three stories high out near the county line, situated at the intersection of two sleepy blacktop roads. The hotel had been there for nearly a hundred years, when somebody apparently thought Hedgecock was going to grow into a major town. Dave had even been there on prom night and remembered that dinner had cost an arm and a leg, considering his limited teenage budget. He doubted he'd consider the hotel's food that

good now or the price high enough to raise concern. As he remembered, the décor had been pretty run-down back then. He imagined it would be shabbier now.

Dave sank as deep as he could into the swirling water, let strong hot streams of water help work kinks out of his shoulders and back following an afternoon of tossing footballs to next year's would-be receivers. Until he could teach Dylan and a couple of the other boys who showed a little potential as quarterbacks how to throw decent spirals, he'd be doing most of the passing—making almost as many throws every day as he'd been doing in pro practice the past couple of years.

Eyes closed, he pictured Diane the way she'd looked that afternoon when she came to pick up Dylan from practice. Was it his imagination or had she changed out of the worn jeans and work shirt she usually wore, to remind him she wasn't always a tomboy? Fuck, he hadn't needed reminding. But he'd liked watching how that pale-blue dress swung against her gorgeous bare legs almost like an invitation. And his fingers had itched to bury themselves in her blonde hair that she'd let loose to brush her shoulders.

He wanted to show her something special tomorrow night. Hell, he wanted them to have a night together that neither of them would be likely to forget. But he didn't want to spend hours driving to San Antonio or Midland, or even to nearby Pecos where he doubted the choice of dining facilities would be much more impressive than the ones right here. Damn, he should have learned to fly and bought himself a plane, like most rich guys who lived in the middle of Texas nowhere.

He could always arrange for a charter over at Billy Joe's crop-dusting and charter service on the other side of town. But then Dave had never been all that keen on flying, particularly in anything smaller than a 737, the model most teams he'd played for usually chartered for cross-country road trips. Besides, he was pretty sure Diane wouldn't be the least bit awed if he flaunted his money. A stubborn expression had taken over her face when she insisted that she wouldn't take any financial help from her brother Keith to fix up her ranch. It was certain she wouldn't take any help from him,

either. He doubted she'd even agree to something as insignificant as letting him pay a high school kid to feed and water her horses and that snorting pet bull for the weekend. Which pretty much shot down the possibility of them flying off somewhere romantic for a date.

Hell, he'd just fix dinner here. After all, he liked to cook, which was why he'd included a gourmet kitchen when he decided to renovate. Yeah. Dave imagined sitting on one of the padded loveseats in the garden room next to the kitchen, telling Diane all about the collection of exotic plants Grandma had left in his care. The moon would be glowing overhead and with any kind of luck something would be blooming and it would make the air in the room smell sweet. Maybe they'd even take a swim, although the heater wasn't hooked up yet and he imagined that water would still be too cold for comfort. Daisy would chase fireflies until they bored her. Then she'd make friends with Diane before stretching out on the rug and taking a nap.

He liked the setting he'd just imagined. And he was pretty sure Diane would like it, too. There'd be plenty of time later for San Antonio and Dallas and faraway places he'd love to share with her. Time when they could include Dylan and maybe his own kids in their plans. If he got lucky, he'd even find the time to make up to her for things they hadn't done together when they were young. Visions of lounging lazily at luxurious Baja California resorts, taking in the sights of Paris and Rome... Yeah, he and Diane could do plenty together, all in good time.

His date plan settled, Dave got out of the whirlpool tub, emptied it and toweled dry. First thing in the morning, he'd take some steaks out of the freezer to thaw in the refrigerator, and he'd make sure he had all the stuff he'd need to complete the meal. He'd also change the sheets on his bed. Just in case.

Just in case she was longing for him the way he longed for her. He'd figure a way to give her pleasure without frightening her—just in case he was right and Frank the Bastard hadn't treated her any better in bed than he had anywhere else. For the first time he was almost glad his knee put limitations on how he could move around because

he wanted her to feel in control. If she had the least bit of fear, she wouldn't need him pinning her to the bed, making her feel helpless beneath his substantial weight. Nope.

If they made love tomorrow, it was gonna be her way. Meantime he'd work out then rest his knee. Just because he was retired and gimp didn't mean he intended to let himself go to flab, especially when he had such a good reason to stay in shape.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diane woke the next morning looking so forward to being with Dave that she barely worried about Dylan being away for four whole days showing off his project at the area science fair. She'd go to the state fair, of course, assuming Dylan made it that far. But she completely trusted the teachers and other parents who'd be watching her son. What was worrying her at the moment was the question of what she was going to wear for her first date since high school.

Not that she had a lot of choice other than the jeans and shirts she wore around the ranch and two dresses she had for PTA meetings and going to the café for the occasional meal out with Dylan. Dave had seen and commented on one of them already earlier this week when she'd decided to dress up a bit to pick up Dylan from football practice. The other one, also blue but a little dressier, she'd worn for Keith and Tina's wedding, so he'd seen it, too.

Of course she could splurge and buy the skirt and top she'd been looking at for months over at Mabel Whatley's general store. By now Mabel would probably be willing to mark it down since she'd most likely have decided it would never fit her or her pretty but plus-sized daughter.

Yes. A date for the first time in more than twenty years was an occasion that called for at least a tiny indulgence. She could make meals from her freezer and pantry shelves for a couple of weeks without starving Dylan or herself. She just hoped Dave didn't show up wearing a suit, planning to take her somewhere far away from Hedgecock for a fancy meal.

Cal Tate had done that when he was dating Melanie last fall. They still took off for a few days in San Antonio or Santa Fe, every month or so. Diane considered how her brother, who lived the same sort of life Dave had recently come home from, thought nothing of packing up Tina and Jack and flying off to some faraway resort on a minute's notice.

"Mom?"

Dylan drew Diane out of her fretting. "What, son?"

"When I fed Bullyboy this morning, I noticed that cut on his leg looks like it's getting infected. You probably need to call the vet."

Oh, damn it anyhow. She'd really wanted that new outfit. But she couldn't let the dumb animal's leg rot off. Though Bullyboy had gashed it on the fence when he decided to scare the daylights out of a property appraiser who'd come too close to his pen two weeks earlier, she owed him proper medical care. "All right. Do you have everything you need?"

"Yeah. You already sent in the money for the trip. And I saved a few dollars of this week's lunch money just in case. I'll be fine. Gotta go. I hear the bus coming around the corner." One fast hug and Dylan was on his way.

"Be good."

Dylan grinned. "I will. See you Monday."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, boys. Pack it in for today and enjoy the weekend." With nearly a third of his team off on the science trip, there didn't seem to be a lot of reason to keep the remaining boys around until five. Dave figured he could head out to Diane's place and help her with whatever needed doing before they could start their night out.

A few minutes later he pulled in behind a dusty van parked next to Bullyboy's pen and made a wide circle around the far side of it. No way did he want to encounter the bull any sooner than he had to. "Diane?" he called out.

Then he saw her. She was holding the ring through the animal's nose and talking quietly to him while a gray-haired man did something to his broad, forbidding-looking shoulder and front leg.

"Hi, Dave. You're early. Hold on, Doc Evans is about finished here. I'll meet you up on the porch." She sounded a little distressed, as though he was too early and she wasn't ready.

He couldn't help feeling relief that he wasn't the one within reach of the huge animal's sharp horns and wicked hooves, but it scared him half to death to see Diane so close to the bull. She seemed to know what she was doing, though. Impressed by her competence and gentleness, and watching her pet Bullyboy's head, Dave couldn't help thinking about how well she'd soothe another big male animal with those fingers—or work him up.

He made his way to the porch and waited while Diane paid the vet and sent him on his way. "Is Bullyboy sick?" he asked when she joined him, pretty even with dirt on her face and her boots caked with mud.

"He cut his leg a couple of weeks ago. Unfortunately it got infected so he had to get an antibiotic injection. He didn't much like Doc Evans going into his pen, so..." She shrugged, looked down at the dirt she'd accumulated and shook her head. "I need to go shower before I'm fit to be around."

"What needs doing?"

She smiled up at Dave. "Nothing, unless you'd like to help clean me up. I went ahead and took care of the horses before Doc arrived, and Bullyboy has plenty of food in his trough." Her cheeks turned fiery red when she apparently realized what she'd just said.

Dave moved closer, trapping her between the rail and his body. "Is that an invitation?" he asked, his imagination working overtime, picturing him and her together in a steaming shower, him rubbing his soapy hands all over her lush body. Just the idea of it had him getting hard. "I wouldn't mind if it was."



She wedged first one boot then the other between two porch rails. "You'd be sorry. I'm a mess. I'd hoped to be finished and cleaned up before you got here."

He eased back, giving her space when he saw she was getting flustered. "I couldn't wait. I thought you'd let me help with the chores." He bent, gave her a quick kiss. "You're one damn exciting woman, mud or no. Go ahead, take your shower if you're sure you don't want my help. If it's okay with you, we'll eat at my place. If not, I guess it will have to be the Hedgecock Inn."

"I don't mind. I've heard about all the remodeling you had done and I've been dying to get a look. To tell the truth, I wouldn't mind taking a swim in that pool I've heard so much about. Come on in the front room and watch TV while I clean up. I won't take long."

Dave imagined them playing naked in the pool but thought better of the idea since the water temperature was hovering around sixty-five degrees, like the early March air. The hot tub in his master bathroom was almost big enough to swim in, if a swim was what his lady wanted. Oh yeah, that would work just fine if he could only be patient and wait, instead of plotting seduction like a horny teenager.

He tried to cool off his libido by watching the local news from Pecos. Not that there was much for the newscaster to talk about—a bar fight that sounded tamer than an average NFL game except for some of the participants winding up in jail and advance promo for an upcoming amateur rodeo featuring kids from area high schools. When he heard Diane coming downstairs he stood and held out both hands.

A vision in jeans and a pink top that draped over her shoulders and breasts, she came into his arms, no hesitation, as though she were as anxious as he to get on with getting better acquainted. "You clean up real good," he said, taking in her light, sweet scent and the softness of cheeks rosy more from excitement than from something out of expensive little jars like the ones that used to litter his ex-wife's makeup table. "Ready?"

"Do I need to bring anything?"

“Just yourself.” He’d have suggested a change of clothes but figured she’d look just as good wearing one of his T-shirts, or nothing at all. “I’ve got steaks ready to cook. Mel Tate helped me snatch one of the peach pies they sell in the cafeteria at school for our dessert. They taste as good now as they did when we were kids. In case you don’t want me nibbling on you for dessert.”

She stood on tiptoe, nibbled at his earlobe. “How about me nibbling on you? I always used to wonder if you’d taste as good as you looked.”

Her enthusiasm surprised him but he liked it. A lot. “Be my guest, anytime. We’d better go before I decide we don’t need to eat and get it on with you right here. God but you’re one dynamite lady.” Part of him again wished he’d acted on the attraction he’d felt toward her when they were kids, but mostly he was glad to be getting a chance now that they were all grown up and unattached.

She pulled away when he tightened his hold a little and shot him a serious look. “Let’s go to your place. I don’t want old memories to taint the pleasure I know I’ll have with you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*The pleasure I know I’ll have with you.* Diane’s words echoed in Dave’s head while he drove to his place and parked in the garage. Before she could open her door, he made an admonishing noise and, despite his crutches, came around the outside and opened her door. He was going to treat her right. No excuses. He could tell she appreciated the gesture, too, by the way her eyes sparkled and her cheeks pinkened like a girl’s. She touched his hand as she hopped down to the concrete floor.

“Like what you’ve seen so far?” he asked, taking her hand and herding her into the kitchen.

“What’s not to like? I love the sandstone slabs on all the outside walls and the way it’s built to look a little like some old-style Mexican hacienda. The kitchen’s gorgeous and huge. You must enjoy cooking.”

"Yeah. Not so much just for me, but I figure when the kids come visit, I'll be spending a bunch of time in here." He set down his crutches, opened the refrigerator and took out the steaks he'd thawed. "Want a quick tour before I start grilling our dinner?"

"Sure. I'd love seeing how the other half lives. All this space...and everything brand-new." She glanced around the kitchen, her gaze settling on the Jenn-Air grill next to where he'd set out the meat on a polished black granite countertop.

While he imagined most women would love the size and grandeur of the place, he remembered Diane wasn't most women. Trying to see the place through her eyes, he saw not so much a comfortable home as a sandstone-slab monument to his success as a pro athlete. "Not quite everything. Most of the original house was in pretty bad shape, but I wanted to keep the front porch and living room the way Grandma had them." Somehow that was important, he hoped as much so to Diane as it had been to him. "Come this way."

When he laid a hand at her waist, she turned and looked up at him as if she were reading his mind again. "I know you're filthy rich but I like you anyhow. Just because I don't choose to live off my brother's charity doesn't mean I begrudge him his success. Or that I resent you for having made a ton of money, either, for that matter."

Dave loved the way she smiled, the warmth she exuded when she cupped her hand over his chin and stood on tiptoe to give him a quick kiss. "I was worried there for a minute," he told her, tightening his hold on her and drawing her against his uninjured left side. "Come on, I'll show you the rest."

"Don't you need your crutches?"

"Not around the house, as long as I'm wearing my knee brace. The crutches are mainly to keep me from losing my balance on unfamiliar ground." He walked her back through the kitchen and garden room and opened another door so she could see the game room and beyond it, a lap pool and sauna inside a courtyard open to the sun and stars. "The heater isn't hooked up yet, but if you want, we can take a swim anyhow."

"I didn't bring a suit." From the way she looked at the sparkling water, he was pretty sure she did want to jump right in.

"That's okay. There's nobody here to see us if we want to skinny-dip."

"I don't know..."

He came up behind her, wrapped both arms around her waist. "I do. Think of it this way, honey. A long time ago, the kids in this town spent a good many hours screwing like minks under the bleachers at the high school field. A lot more folks could have seen us there than can see us skinny-dipping here, inside an eight-foot-high privacy wall."

She laughed when he bent and blew on her slender neck. "Speak for yourself. I never got naked under the bleachers. Not completely, anyhow." Then she went silent and her body suddenly stiffened beneath his hands. "Stop that!"

"Stop what?" He had no clue what he'd just done to piss her off.

"Stop reminding me of times I'd just as soon forget. For me, those teenage games were the prelude for...oh, never mind." As though she were consciously trying to loosen up, she turned in his arms and laid her head on his chest. "Just let's not take a trip down memory lane tonight, okay?"

She didn't have to say Frank's name and he didn't want that to be part of their evening, either. So he spoke from the heart. "Okay by me. What I want is to make some new memories. With you." He tunneled one hand through her hair, turned her head so her soft breath tickled his skin through his open collar. "Please." When she lifted her head he took her mouth, nibbling gently at first then coaxing her to open for his tongue.

She tasted good. He felt her relaxing in his arms, found her eager yet sweet and almost innocent. Her fingers tightened on his neck, shy encouragement that made him deepen the kiss, move her closer until their bodies came together, her soft curves brushing his growing hardness. He had to stop now while he still could because she deserved slow, careful loving, not the desperate fucking his body was starting to demand.

Especially since everything she'd said and he'd heard around town made him pretty damn sure old Frank had made her life miserable in bed as well as everywhere else. That pissed him off, made him wish her ex were still around so he could exact a few pounds of flesh in her name.

He didn't think she'd like for him to express that, so he kept his tone light. "Maybe we'd better wait to try the pool. The water in it comes from an underground spring, and it's damn cold. Daisy jumped in a few days ago and bounced right back out like she'd been shot out of a cannon. Let me settle you down with Grandma's plants and a glass of wine while I shower and change – unless you'd like to join me."

"I think I'll enjoy the garden room while you change. Not that I'm not tempted to check out your shower." She had a gorgeous mouth, especially when she smiled.

"Probably a good choice, or we might miss out on dinner." Dave took a split of Taittinger Prestige from the refrigerator, popped the cork and poured two flutes. "I hope you like sparkling rosé. One of my coaches sent me off with a case of these little bottles. It's champagne, pinker and sweeter than the Brut they served at Keith's wedding."

He picked up both glasses and handed her one. "Enjoy. I'll be back cooking dinner before you have time to miss me. Hope you don't mind me not dressing up for you."

"Of course not. I'd feel silly if you put on a suit while I'm wearing jeans."

"Think a fresh pair of jogging pants, honey. My jeans won't fit over the brace, at least not without a lot of time-consuming gyrations."

"All right. I like to see you looking like what you are – an incredibly hot jock."

She knew how to make him feel good. "Thanks. I'll be right back as soon as I clean up."

"I'll be waiting."

When she took a sip of wine and smiled, Dave knew he'd chosen well. He'd had the feeling Diane wasn't a wine connoisseur, also the feeling that she went for the substance, not the frills.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Dave came back downstairs and started grilling steaks, Diane came inside. He looked great in a navy blue Rebels jersey and matching loose jogging pants. He had white Reeboks with red and navy blue stripes—ones she thought she recalled having seen him advertising last season. With his black hair glistening and damp, he could have come straight from the shower after a game. "You're quick. You showered before I finished my champagne." She took one last sip and set the flute on the granite counter by the sink.

"I wanted to get back to you. How do you want your steak?"

Diane glanced at the grill. "Warm."

"Good. It's done, then." Dave lifted the two steaks onto a platter and held it out to her. "You can help here, by setting this on the table." He'd set it earlier, she guessed, because once she put the meat on plates, everything was ready. Ready and as good as anything she'd ever eaten.

"You make food that's better than anything at the café." The thick strip steak was tender as could be, grilled to perfection and served with a savory, sweet-hot sauce that had a hint of peppers and some spice Diane couldn't quite identify. Everything seemed to have come from Dave's own kitchen—even a Caesar salad and the big twice-baked potato they shared—except the peach pie from the school cafeteria. Though she didn't often imbibe, the Pinot Noir from Williams Selyem Winery in California that Dave had chosen tasted wonderful and added a glamorous touch to their meal.

"Thanks. I like to cook. Early on in my career, I learned I couldn't live on fast food and stay in shape—and I was married to a woman who didn't have a clue what a kitchen looked like, much less how to use it. Not to mention that Rosa had a cook who

only did Mexican food and went along on all her concert tours. Want some more wine?"

When she nodded, he topped off her glass then poured the rest of the bottle into his. "To us," he said, tapping the stemmed glasses together.

Considering she'd been trying to approach this as a temporary fling, Diane wasn't sure she was ready for "us", though she couldn't deny the uneasy feeling that "us" sounded good. She wouldn't worry about getting carried away, though. Dave wasn't likely ready for "us", either. Not beyond the pleasures of the night that promised to come soon, as the sun was dropping quickly in the western sky. She took a sip of the wine, liquid courage to grab for the pleasure he offered now and not worry about tomorrow. "To tonight."

"I'll drink to that, but to tomorrow, too." It seemed Dave was determined to keep her wondering if tonight was the beginning of something more rather than just a quick fix for both of them. He stood, held out a hand. "Let's go out and see if any of Grandma's flowers are smelling good tonight. A lot of the orchids only have fragrance at night."

"You sent her most of these, didn't you?" After they sat on a padded wrought iron loveseat, Diane inhaled the spicy-sweet scent of an orange-and-burgundy hued orchid hanging on a sandstone tree. "She always used to talk about how hard it was to make them bloom again after the first time."

"I guess Rosa picked most of them. More likely she just called a florist in Pecos and had something sent out for every occasion that called for flowers. Rosa likes orchids, the way a lot of women seem to go for roses. Daisy, no!"

When Diane shifted her gaze she found the poodle sitting, looking ashamed of herself as she held onto a spiny leaf she'd separated from a big plant by the door. "Go on, do your thing outside. Grandma would tan your curly hide if she found you messing with her flowers."

Even though Dave sounded stern, Diane doubted he'd let anybody, even his late grandmother, mess with the usually well-behaved poodle. "It's nice to see you love your dog. I kind of worried, after watching you cringe around Bullyboy."

Dave chuckled. "I tried bull riding once at an amateur rodeo years ago. Haven't cared much for the critters since I got bounced off on my butt. Daisy doesn't outweigh me by a thousand pounds, and she doesn't have foot-long horns she could ram right through me. Besides, I'd be good to her even if I didn't love her because my little girl made me promise."

Promises. Obviously Dave kept his, at least to his kids. And he'd made sure his grandma got presents, even if he'd had his former wife pick out most of them. Diane felt his arm slide behind her and laid her head against his knuckles, turned her face so she could taste him.

He seemed in no hurry, willing to go at her pace, to enjoy the closeness, watch a gentle breeze ruffling graceful leaves and feel it lifting their hair, tangling the strands lazily together. Frank would have fucked her by now, oblivious to everything but getting off as fast as he could. "I think you're a good man," she said, nipping at Dave's long, lean forefinger and savoring the unique taste of him.

"I want to be, for you." When he spoke, his warm damp breath tickled her earlobe. "Over the years I've had sex with a good many women but I've made love with very few. I've had enough mindless sex to last a lifetime. I want us to make love."

"Now?" Diane blew on his palm, felt his pulse quicken.

He tightened his arm around her, laid his chin on her head. "Whenever you're ready. Tell me, what's got you trembling?"

"Anticipation. Fear..."

"Fear? Baby, I'd never hurt you." Shifting on the loveseat, he looked her in the eye. "What the hell has somebody put in your head about me?"

She lifted her hand to his lips. "It's not you, Dave."



"Then what has you scared of me?"

"I've...I've never enjoyed sex but I so much want to — with you."

He cupped her chin, his warm fingers steadying her. "That bastard —"

"Don't go there. Please." She couldn't stand having him bring up the ghost of her miserable past. "Just help me make some new memories to wipe the old ones away."

He pulled her onto his lap, his grip sure but definitely not threatening. "I'll give it my best shot. Now's the time I'd scoop you up and carry you to my bed to show you how big and strong I am, except my knee's not big and strong at all right now. Let's get Daisy in for the night, and I'll show you where we're gonna play." When he took her mouth and claimed it in a long kiss full of promise, a curl of warmth surrounded her, chased the worst of her fears away. For the first time in longer than she could remember, Diane felt safe. Loved.

Then he set her on her feet and stood. "Here, Daisy. C'mon in, it's bedtime," he said after opening the garden-room door and stepping back when the dog bounded through. "She'll go to her room. Watch."

Daisy trotted up the stairs, pausing at the top. "She moves fast," Diane commented as she and Dave made their way at a slower pace. "Does she sleep with you?"

"Nope. Her bed's in Cathy's room. I haven't been able to coax her to join me even when I let her play in my hot tub. I think she recognizes some of Cathy's things, like the bed and chest I had shipped from Savannah. That's a good girl," he told the dog, bending to scratch her neck then opening the door for her when she barked.

"Woof to you, too," Dave said to the dog. "See you in the morning. Sleep tight."

Through the open door Diane got a glimpse of a room done in pink and lime green, with a big porcelain ballerina on the shelf next to a long, narrow window. Daisy made her way to a fluffy pink dog bed set at the foot of a people bed that was strewn with pillows and stuffed animals. Daisy had her own big rawhide bone on the floor beside her bed.

“Cathy likes girly frills – she hasn’t been here yet but she picked out the colors, in case you’re wondering. DJ’s more into electronic stuff. His room’s down the hall, and there’s a guest room between them. Come on, here’s where I hang out.” He opened another door, stepped back to let her go inside.

## Chapter Four

His large bedroom was sparsely furnished, just a king-size bed, a pair of nightstands and a couple of tall-boy chests. Some serious-looking workout equipment occupied the corner opposite the bed, and a huge flat-screen TV hung on the wall nearest to the foot of the bed. She liked the way a soft-looking comforter echoed various colors from the sandstone outer walls—beige and cream with brownish-red and dark gray highlights. Silky-looking dark-brown sheets and pillowcases peeked out from beneath the comforter, reminding her of smooth milk chocolate. *More like temptation*, she thought when Dave folded back the coverlet, sat on the edge of the bed and bent to untie his shoes.

His motions were sure, efficient. No wasted effort or macho posturing. Whether consciously done to put her at ease or simply his usual way, he was doing a good job at calming her nerves. A muted sound of rushing water called her attention to an open door to the side of the chrome gym stuff. “What--”

“That’s the hot tub. The jets turn themselves on this time every day.” He lifted his injured leg, wincing a little as he pulled off a white athletic sock. Somehow seeing his bare feet, long and narrow, made him seem vulnerable, eased her feeling of susceptibility to his superior strength. “Come here, let’s fool around a little. If you want, we can try out the hot tub later.”

She kicked off her sandals and sat beside him, surprised at the gentleness in his touch as he laid her across the bed and stretched out beside her. He stroked her over her clothes, his hands sure yet not at all threatening even when he found and caressed the upper curve of her breast. “Mmmm, that feels so good.”

“Yeah, you do feel real good. May I?” He slipped a finger under the neckline of her shirt then paused as though waiting for permission.

"Please do." She concentrated on the warm rasp of his fingertips on each inch of skin he exposed. His breathing, shallow and growing rapid, gave her the only hint that what he was doing was arousing him, too. He lay on his side, facing her, his gaze like blue fire as he played with the front fastener of her bra until it gave way and bared her to the waist.

"God but you're even more beautiful than I imagined." He cupped one breast in his big hand, bent and drew the nipple into his mouth. With a degree of care she'd never experienced before, he sucked gently, careful not to graze her tender flesh with his teeth. When Frank had bitten her breasts she'd hated it, but Dave's slow, tender exploration had her growing wet, her tissues swelling.

She wanted to see him, too, to touch the warmth of skin stretched taut over muscles hewn by years of daily exertion. Feeling no fear that the least bit of aggressiveness on her part would turn him into a mindless sex machine, she slid one hand under his T-shirt and splayed her fingers over his ridged belly. "You're one hot man. No wonder all the women —"

"You're the only woman I'm thinking about now. Go on. Touch me. I'm all yours." When he covered her free hand and drew it to his lips, the last of her worries slipped away. "Tell me what you want."

"You." His tight abs rippled beneath her fingers as she ran them over his skin, felt the warmth, the softness of a light dusting of hair. "I like that you don't have a lot of body hair." Somehow she'd assumed that because he was dark-haired, he'd be much furrier. She liked the tickle of the soft hair on her fingertips.

He slipped off his shirt and rolled onto his back, lifting her on top of him. His arms tightened around her like a vise, but she wasn't afraid even though she felt his hard sex pressing into her lower abdomen. Not tentative yet not urgently demanding, either. "I like everything about you. But then you can tell, can't you?" He slid his big hands down, pressed close enough that she could feel him throbbing through their clothes.

"I can tell. You know, you don't have to be quite so careful with me. I won't break."

"I think you might. You said you've never liked sex but that you want to...so it's up to me to see that you enjoy being with me tonight. Are you having fun yet?"

"Oh, yes. But you must be...uncomfortable." He was so hard but he seemed in no hurry.

He laughed then tightened his grip on her hips. "I'll live. Foreplay's a big part of lovemaking, at least for me. Yeah, I want to get inside you. But first I want to taste every inch of your gorgeous body, and I want you to want me so much that you'll beg me to help you come."

His warm breath on her throat when he spoke sent tiny shudders of anticipation all the way to her core. "I think I already do."

"You don't yet. But you will." She loved how he felt, calloused hands and soft skin stretched over rigid muscles. Strong yet tender, she loved the way he held her, coaxing the response that was building, bubbling deep in her core.

The way he ran his hands up over her jeans to the tingling skin of her bare back made her want him to cover her, claim her. Now. There was no meanness, no force, no sense of entitlement to whatever it was he wanted. "I want you now," she murmured, following up the plaintive statement by nibbling at his lower jaw, loving the scratchy feeling of beard stubble on her lips.

"Do you?" He slid a hand down, under the back waistband of her jeans. "I want to taste you here, on your firm, round butt. Your skin's so soft, I'll bet it tastes as good as it feels." Ever so gently he circled her waist, found the snap and zipper and released them, but instead of shoving them down he splayed his fingers over her belly, stroked her as though she were a favorite kitten, incredibly fragile. Extraordinarily cared for.

She wanted him to move lower, and when he did, he tangled his fingers in her pubic hair. "I hope you don't mind that I don't shave down there." Mel had told her how much Cal liked her pussy naked, and she wondered if Dave preferred that, too.

"Your pussy? No, baby, you're so soft there I can hardly wait to go down on you. I don't shave my crotch, either, but I've done it before and wouldn't mind doing it again

if you wanted me to. It's a different feeling, not having any hair in the way...but not necessarily better. If you're ready for us to get naked, raise up and shimmy out of those jeans. On second thought, roll off me. Taking off my pants over the knee brace takes some doing and I pretty much have to be sitting up to get it off without causing a bunch of collateral damage."

"Oh." She rolled over and glanced at his bad leg then wriggled out of her jeans and panties. "I hope I didn't hurt you."

"No, honey. I'll live. Not much can mess up the doc's handiwork as long as I've got the brace on. My knee doesn't look pretty, though." He set his dark-blue gaze on her, grinned. "You're the pretty one. Here, help me get these pants off."

"Okay. Tell me if I hurt you." She worked down his elastic-waist jogging pants, gasping when she first saw his long, thick sex jutting forward from a dark nest of curls. Any thought she might have had about getting a good look at his knee flew right out of her brain. His sex was ready even if he pretended to be in no hurry, with a drop of milky fluid glistening in the single eye. And it was beautiful, as beautiful as all the other parts of him.

She'd never thought that about Frank, but then he'd never given her much of a chance to look before he got down to business.

She wanted to taste Dave. She didn't understand why because she'd hated it when Frank forced her to suck his cock. Maybe it was because Dave hadn't even asked her, hadn't pushed her beyond what her own body wanted her to do. She bent her head, tasted him with her tongue. Wanted more.

Curious and more aroused than she could remember ever having been, she bent farther, molded her lips around the purplish head of his penis.

"Omigod, honey." He let out a tortured-sounding moan, and she sensed him working faster to unfasten the heavy metal and leather brace she'd been surprised to learn started just below his right hip and extended to his ankle. "No, don't stop. I'll get this damn thing off—just another minute. The hell with it, I'll leave it on for now."

Moaning, lifting his hips to her mouth, he lay back, his big hands bracketing her face. With passion but without force.

She wouldn't stop. Didn't want to. Emboldened now, she tangled her fingers in his dark pubic curls with one hand while she found his heavy sac and stroked it with the other. There was something about loving him this way, something arousing, something that made her hot and wet as no other man ever had. She wanted Dave inside her, wanted to know he was feeling the pleasure, too.

The pleasure of the sex act, mutually given and taken, with love.

Maybe not the forever kind of love but the kind that transcended the moment, providing a glow she knew wouldn't fade as soon as the act itself was over. Diane slid her mouth down on his cock and swallowed, tentatively at first. But she didn't gag. Relaxing her throat, she took him deep then moved up and down on his turgid length. Loving his strength and his gentleness, reveling in the generous way he'd made her want him...want this.

"Turnaround's fair play," he growled as he sat up and wrestled the brace off his leg, letting out a yelp when he hit his knee with the brace while tossing it to the floor. He lay back again, let her suck him for a few minutes. Then he lifted her backside and growled, "Straddle my face. I'm hungry, too."

When she settled over his face and lowered her sex to his mouth, she felt his heat, the slickness of his tongue when he flailed her clit. "Mmmm. You're wet and hot for me. I love it." Before she could protest, he cupped her ass and drew her down hard on his mouth, finding her pussy and stabbing his tongue inside. Embarrassed yet feeling hotter, needier than she ever had before, she ran her tongue down the length of his shaft then swirled it around the plump, rigid head. More milky, salty lubrication bathed her throat as he dug his fingers into her buttocks and held her when she'd have squirmed to get more of his delicious attention—or to alleviate the timidity she couldn't help feeling when she thought how they must look, feasting as they were on each other's most intimate parts.

Suddenly he pulled back, his big body trembling. "Diane. Stop now unless you want me to come in your mouth." His hot breath made her clit swell and harden, but she didn't obey immediately. When she did, he lifted her off him and swore softly. "Sorry. I can't move a lot with the brace off my knee. Need a condom. There's one in the nightstand drawer." Diane hadn't even thought about protection but she was glad Dave had. She reached over toward the drawer he pointed out and dug around until she found a small plastic-wrapped package that she placed in his hand.

She felt her cheeks burning. Looking at his rigid cock, still glistening wet from her mouth. It had seemed so natural and right a moment ago but a little voice inside her tried to tell her she'd done something wrong, something so pleasurable it must be forbidden—made her suddenly aware of her own nakedness. Of the hot, slick wetness between her legs.

When he ripped open the wrapper and rolled the latex barrier over his erection, he felt her withdrawing emotionally. "Don't go shy on me now," he said, keeping his tone light. "Come on, climb aboard."

She just looked at him, confusion evident in her expression.

Had the bastard she'd been married to only shown her one way to have sex? Dave didn't doubt that was possible. Frank had never struck Dave as being particularly bright or anxious to please anybody but himself. It made sense that he'd have carried that same attitude that had him kicked off the high school football team over into bed.

"We're gonna do this with you on top, honey. That way we can go as fast or slow as you want." He shot her a self-deprecating grin. "Not to mention my knee and the fact I'm pretty much at your mercy." Reaching over, he caught her at the waist and lifted her over him. "Easy now, come down slow and let me inside."

"I don't want to hurt you." She moved, slow motion, until she collided gently with the tip of his cock. Using one hand, he took hold of his erection and guided the blunt head to the wet heat of her sweet pussy. "Oh, yes."



Good. She liked it. He hadn't been sure she would. "Sink down on me. There's no way you can hurt me unless you suddenly decide to stop. That's it, take me all the way. God you're tight and so hot." When she took him so deep that her outer lips pressed hard on the base of his cock, he steadied her with both hands at her waist, watched her nipples tighten into rigid points that begged for his mouth. "I'm all yours, move however it makes you feel good."

Her moves were tentative, unpracticed, but they were getting him hotter than the most skilled groupie he'd ever fucked. He wanted to lift his hips, slam into her pussy hard and fast, control their lovemaking. But even more, he wanted her to feel at ease, know that with him, making love was a two-way street that she could travel without the stark fear he'd sensed whenever the subject of her ex had come up.

She stilled on him, met his gaze. "Help me, I don't know how..."

"I know, honey. Relax and enjoy the ride. I'll make you feel real, real good." He slid his hands lower and cupped her ass, brushing the tips of his fingers around her damp, warm rim. Taking control, he gripped her butt cheeks, directed her movement up and down on his cock. Slow at first, then faster, harder, he ground their bodies together then lifted her practically off him, only to slam her back down again. Each time he brought her down on him, he pressed one finger against her anal sphincter, going a little deeper each time until he had it embedded to the second knuckle in her rear hole.

Her vaginal muscles tightened on his cock, and when he felt the first spasms of her climax he slid another finger up her ass while moving her on him, thrusting deep, taking her mouth and fucking it with his tongue, feeling rather than hearing her moans of satisfaction. While she still spasmed around his cock, his own climax claimed him, a long series of staccato bursts that left him drained yet more satisfied than he'd been in years. Not wanting to let go of a sense of closeness he hadn't felt for ages, Dave slid his hands up her back, drew her flush against his chest.

"You're a wonderful lover. Thank you." Her soft voice resonated against his shoulder, gave him a sense of pride along with humility that he'd managed to wipe

away whatever bad feelings she might have had toward having sex—at least for the moment.

“Thank *you*. Let’s rest a few minutes then do it some more.” He ran his hands along her spine, loved the silky feel of her skin almost as much as he enjoyed feeling her breasts pressing into his chest, the nipples still so hard he wished he had the energy to move enough so he could suckle them.

“I never realized I might like having my rear end played with. Or that it would feel so good to have you use your mouth on me down there.” She raised her upper body, used one hand to explore his chest and nipples. “Your hair’s so soft, I like the way it feels on my skin.”

His nipples had never been particularly sensitive, and he was glad, because if they were he’d have been hard again in no time. “There are a lot of things we can do when we make love that you may like even better,” he said, catching one of her hands and bringing it to his lips. “Some of them will have to wait until my knee gets back closer to normal.”

“I can’t imagine...”

He could. And he wanted to show her every trick he knew, see the look of wonder on her gorgeous face when he kept her coming for hours on end. “Don’t go anywhere, I’ll be right back.” Hopping along to the bathroom, he disposed of the condom and washed his hands. When he came back to bed, she’d turned on the DVD player. She was watching, wide-eyed, the beginning of a porn film he’d forgotten was in the machine. *Shit*. “I’m sorry, honey.”

“Sorry? Why?” She did seem to be interested in the film, in a clinical sort of way.

“Because I forgot to put that video away.”

She smiled at him then returned her gaze to the giant-screen TV. “You don’t think I should watch it?”

He sucked one of her fingers into his mouth then released it. “It’s okay with me if you enjoy watching. Sometimes it’s exciting, watching. At the very least you may get

some ideas you think you might like for us to try. This one's pretty raunchy. You sure you wanna see it?"

"Uh-huh. I can always use ideas for ways to please you."

He loved her attitude. "Then lie back and take a look. See if you like it. It's okay if you don't—I understand not too many women are into voyeurism, either live or on disk."

When she rolled onto her back next to him and tucked a pillow under her head, he put one arm around her and pulled her close. "Need some covers?" he asked, hoping she didn't because he liked seeing her there beside him, naked and flushed, her blonde hair tangled and her sky-blue eyes bright.

"Not if you don't." When the video started, she reached over and took his hand then let him slide it over to rest on his belly, just above his half-hard cock. "He's...huge," she said when the camera zeroed in on a naked porn star who was completely shaved, head to toe.

Dave laughed. "He's probably not much bigger than I am, it just looks that way because he's shaved off all the hair from around his cock and balls. Do you like the way he looks?"

When she didn't answer right away he figured his own pubes might not be long for the world. But then she gasped when an equally naked woman came in and attacked the man's crotch. Opening her red lips wide, she went not for the cock but for the smooth ball sac, sucking first one testicle then the other in while she lay between his legs and fondled his hard-on with both hands.

"Do you like it when a lover does that?" Diane asked. She sounded halfway between interested and mortified.

Dave did but he'd only had a few women focus their attention on his balls. "It's not something I'd ask a lover to do, but to be honest, the few times a partner did it to me, it felt good. Look, there's another guy joining them." This one was hairless, too, and he

had a ring in his well-greased, average-sized cock—and a big cock-shaped strap-on positioned directly behind his balls.

“Oh, my.” The second actor bent over the woman and squeezed her large, round tits, saying as he did that he was about to stuff her cunt and ass. “He wouldn’t, would he?”

“Yeah, he will. And she’ll like it. Not that I imagine there are many women who’d want that. Or many men who’d get off on it, for that matter.” Sensing Diane’s discomfort at the action on the screen, he drew her close when the woman moaned and reared back, apparently relishing the double penetration.

“Have you ever done that?” Diane’s voice registered shock as she watched the woman let go of the first guy’s balls and swallow his monster cock.

“Used a strap-on? No. Would you be shocked if I had?”

She sounded nervous when she laughed. “I don’t know. I’ve heard how you used to party...and that you and your wife used to...”

“The word is ‘swing’. You’re right. We used to like experimenting with different partners. I wasn’t averse to sampling some of the groupie pussy I ran into on the road. Rosa didn’t mind because she liked variety, too. Most of her lovers were musician types she ran into at work. I’ve played around with two women at the same time, and once in a while a teammate and I used to double up on one groupie.”

“Why did you divorce if neither one of you expected fidelity?” When Diane glanced at the screen where a third man had just arrived and shoved his cock up the first man’s ass, she yelped. “Omigod. Has anybody ever done that to you?”

He hesitated because she sounded horrified. He wouldn’t lie, though. Not to her. “Once. Because Rosa wanted to get it on with the guy’s wife while she watched him fuck me in the ass. That was a long, long time ago.” Dave felt his cheeks getting hot. Maybe it hadn’t been a good idea to show Diane the porn because she probably was getting the idea that he still wanted to fuck around that way. “I’m shutting this off so

we can talk,” he said as he made the screen go blank and rolled onto his side so he could concentrate on watching the expressions on her sweet face.

“As for why we split up, Rosa wanted me to quit playing football and go on her concert tours with her. I was determined to keep playing even after I’d done a number on my knee. Not this last time but a few years ago. I guess we grew apart. We probably would have had a better shot at forever if we’d concentrated on pleasing each other and nobody else.”

Diane rolled to her side and ran her hand down his leg, stopping at the large raised scar on his knee. “Did you want forever?”

“At one time I thought I did. So did she. We cut out the swinging after a few years and had DJ and Cathy. But I guess we were too used to fucking around, especially when our work kept us apart so much. Our divorce was friendly, as divorces go.”

When she moved her hand back up his leg and cupped his balls, his wrung-out cock came back to life. “I don’t think I could ‘swing’. I’d be embarrassed, watching stuff like what was going on in that video.”

He stilled her hand then moved it to a safer spot on his chest. “I d never ask you to. Tell the truth, I decided after the divorce that if I ever tried marriage again, it would be the old-fashioned way—just the two of us intending to keep those vows, including the ones about ‘forsaking all others’. I intend for us to try that out, see if it works well enough for us to make it permanent. Are you willing to see how far this can go?”

“With us?” She hesitated for a minute. “You know, when you asked me out, I was imagining this as just a fling. But yes, I’m willing to try, if we move really slow. You know I had the biggest crush on you back in high school but a lot of years have gone by. I went through a lot with Frank.”

“I know that, honey. Hell, I’ve lived in the fast lane a long time. I’m ready to slow down, find out all about the pleasures it can bring.”

After that serious exchange she looked back down at him. For a minute, he thought she was looking at his scar, but realized she was examining him a bit higher, her finger

grazing his pubic hair. "While I'm not into watching other people or doing those things in the video, I did like...this."

"What was it you liked, honey? Are you imagining how it would feel to have me eat your bare pussy, or how sucking my cock would feel if there weren't any hair to get in your way?"

She moved her hand back down his body and rubbed her finger over the tip of his cock, using a circular motion that had him instantly hard again. "How would it feel, Dave? I'm sure you know."

"Wanna find out? I've got clippers and a razor in the bathroom."

He liked the way her cheeks turned pink. "A friend told me she and her husband like the clean feeling..."

"Then let's do it." He'd kept his pubes shaved during offseasons because Rosa used to like it. Now that he didn't have to worry about getting razzed in locker rooms, he didn't mind going hairless again for Diane. As a matter of fact, he was downright eager. He liked eating naked pussy, and he loved fucking when neither partner had hair in the way. "Both of us, though."

"All right." She sat up, shot his scarred leg a doubtful look. "Do you need to put the brace back on?"

"No, just go over and grab that pair of crutches in the corner. I'd only be taking the brace off again as soon as we get to the bathroom." When she brought the crutches, he stood, doing his best to keep most of his weight off his knee. "Go on, honey. I'll follow you." It bothered him, having her see him as anything but fit and capable, though she'd already gotten a look at the ugly scars and she'd been seeing him use crutches away from home since he'd been back in Hedgecock.

Ego. He might not be a star quarterback anymore, and he might be moving around with a limp he wasn't sure would ever go completely away, but Dave still had some pride. Following her, he made his way into the bathroom.

## **Chapter Five**

Diane heard the thump-thump of his crutches before Dave showed up in what she'd call a playroom, not just any old bathroom. She was glad she'd had the chance to look around at the sunken hot tub he'd mentioned, with its water bubbling and churning and letting off a little steam into the chilly room. A skylight above the separate shower that was big enough for at least two people poured golden moonlight onto the slabs of creamy-veined black marble and red Texas sandstone that covered the walls and the edges of the hot tub. Dave hadn't lied. The tub really was big enough to take a swim.

The round vanity bowl, toilet and a bidet—she supposed that was what the thing by the toilet was because she'd never seen one before—were all glossy black and sparkling. Thirsty-looking ivory-colored bath sheets hung from hooks on the tile wall. There was even a massage table and what looked like a small, round stainless steel whirlpool tub like ones she'd seen in the hospital physical therapy department in Pecos, but never before in anybody's bathroom.

"Like it?" he asked, a grin on his face as he leaned hard on a crutch and took out a clipper, shave gel and razors from the top shelf of a linen closet. "We probably ought to do this in the shower since it has benches to sit on."

"Who wouldn't love it? This bathroom has to be one of your favorite places in the house. Here, let me carry the stuff." She took the supplies so he could concentrate on keeping his balance. "You really are okay with this?"

"Very okay. I'm already getting excited, just thinking about nibbling the soft, pink skin between your gorgeous legs." He paused then got into the shower, sat on one of the marble benches and adjusted the water so it sprayed just from the jets embedded

about knee-high. "Come on in, the water's nice and warm. You can do me first. After we're both smooth down below, we'll take a dip in the hot tub."

She tried to hold her hand steady as she watched the clipper make quick work of his black pubic curls, leaving short stubble in its wake. Bending closer, she licked his cock. "It does look bigger."

He laughed. "Told you the hair was hiding something. Go on, get rid of all of it," he told her, lifting his good leg on the bench. Now that she had better access to his scrotum and ass, she clipped the rest of the hair off and reached for the shave gel.

When she was finished he felt smooth as a baby's butt, but not as pink because the black roots under his skin lent a dark, dangerous appearance. She loved the look—the openness it suggested went farther than the baring of his sex to her gaze. "Here, see if I've done this right." When he explored himself with one big hand, she found it strangely arousing. "Did I?"

"Oh yeah. You did good. Your turn now. Climb up here." When she did, he grabbed a handful of folded towels, put them down in front of her and slid off the bench. Carefully he knelt on the padding he'd laid. "Gotta baby the old knee. Sorry, honey." He set her legs over his shoulders and kissed her clit before starting to work.

The buzzing of the clipper had her so hot and wet, she could hardly stay still. Particularly since he kept whispering to her in a rough, sexy voice, telling her what he was doing...what he intended to do to her later. By the time he finished she was close to the edge, but he told her to hold back.

And when he lathered her up and began shaving carefully... "Oh God, I'm about to come."

"Feel free, just stay still so I won't cut your pretty pussy." When he scraped away the last of the hairs around her ass she wondered aloud, "Do some women enjoy..."

"Anal sex? Some do."

She remembered the few painful times Frank had forced her that way, shuddered. "I don't."



He set down the razor, would have bent to taste her satiny cunt except that she sounded unreasonably afraid, so he used the strength in his arms to lever himself back onto the bench beside her and spoke against her cheek. "I'm not about to force you to do anything you don't want me to. Believe that."

"Frank..."

"I'm not Frank, honey. This is me, Dave. Look at me." He held her chin, looked into her eyes. "I'll do anything to bring you pleasure. Believe that."

She turned her head, kissed his knuckles. "I want to. It's just..."

"Come on, let's get in the hot tub. It's a great place to relax while we talk." When she seemed to hesitate, he took her hand. "We need to get a few things straight."

If he could, he'd have picked Diane up and carried her the few feet to the sunken hot tub. But since he couldn't, he leaned on one crutch and wrapped his other arm around her. His ego didn't matter anymore, not when she obviously was suffering from a bunch of painful memories.

He hoped he hadn't brought those memories to life by confronting his own colorful sexual past the only way he knew how to—by being completely honest about it. As he stepped over the edge into the tub and set the crutch down, a big part of Dave wished again that Frank Granger were still alive so he could choke the life out of him. "Come on, let's see how being really naked feels."

Besides the freedom of motion he had in the water, he appreciated the fact that he could lift her, use the buoyancy of the water to make up for what he couldn't do on dry land—at least not yet. He sat across from one of the sets of Jacuzzi jets, lifted her onto his lap, facing him, and lowered her onto his cock.

"Oooh." She laid her hands on his chest, smiled.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Damn, that was an understatement. She felt like wet silk surrounding him like a hot, arousing glove.

“Yeah. It feels great. So does the water.” When she wriggled her hips, the gentle friction nearly took his breath away.

He couldn’t help laughing a little. “I have to use a hot tub a lot for therapy, but I like the side benefits, too. Now tell me while we’re relaxing together, what did your ex do to turn you off? I need to know so I can be careful not to do it.”

She let one hand down to trail in the water, watched the bubbling waves roll over her fingers. “You sound like you want more than just a date or two and a few sessions of what I already know will be the best sex I’ve ever had. I want it, too, and that scares me. It’s not so much the physical intimacy—I love that part. But I’m not sure about the idea of handing you the control over myself that I had to fight so hard to wrestle away from him.”

“That’s right, honey, I want much more than a one-night stand with you. When I saw you again it all came back—the need to have the prettiest girl in school in my arms, my bed. My hot tub. Seeing you made me want to find out not just whether we’d be good in the sack but if the emotional pull I felt was real. It is. It’s too damn soon to start making lifetime vows—but for me, anyhow, my feelings are going in that direction. I want you to be my best friend, my lover. And I want us to be exclusive, the way we’ll be if I’m able to persuade you that loving me won’t mean you’ll have to give up anything of yourself.

“I’m not into thinking that just because I love a woman, she has to become my possession—or that being her lover gives me the right to do anything except to be the only man to give her pleasure.” Dave paused, considered what he’d just said. He’d always been a quick study, but he was pretty sure Diane had been in the back of his mind for years, never tasted yet lurking *there* as a hazy ideal too real to have let him dream about forever with anybody else, even Rosa. Yeah, he’d loved his wife but what he’d loved most was the fact she didn’t want a level of commitment he wasn’t ready to give. “To give you pleasure, honey, I need to know what I mustn’t do because it will

make you remember. From what little you've said, your married life was pretty miserable."

As though she were too shy to look him in the eye, Diane laid her hands on the rim of the tub on either side of Dave's head and lowered her gaze to his chest. "You've probably heard from folks in town that he got drunk and hit me. That was true. The drunker he got the meaner he became, and when the rough stock program didn't make money and he wasn't winning regularly at rodeos, he drank more."

"Why didn't you throw him out?"

"I did, eventually. I know now I should have swallowed my pride and called my mom or Keith for help. But I loved my dad and I didn't want to deprive Dylan of his. Not to mention that the idea of starting a confrontation with Frank terrified me. I guess that's why I hung on until it got so bad that it scared me more to let things go on the way they were."

It took all the self-control Dave had to listen while Diane explained some of what she'd endured sexually. The picture she painted of Frank was of a guy who, at best, didn't know the meaning of the word "foreplay" and, at worst, liked using sex as a weapon—especially the rough anal penetration she'd found degrading as well as downright painful. Sober, the man had possessed all the subtlety of a rutting bull. Drunk, he'd been a rapist—no other word for it.

Dave clenched his jaw but couldn't hold back his emotions or his words. "I wish I could have killed him for you."

"I was afraid that if I told Keith, he would have charged home and done just that. Even when he was a kid and Frank moved in at the ranch when we first married, Keith hated him. I didn't realize at the time how good my little brother's judgment was."

"I'm so sorry, honey. I can tell you this, I've never drunk to the point he apparently did. I don't foresee starting, now that I have to be an up-close role model for young boys. As I recall from my partying days, I'd laugh a lot, do silly things and pass out the

minute I hit the bed, floor or whatever flat surface. I'm pretty sure it's not in me to abuse a woman or child even if I were under the influence."

"I know not all men are abusers." She lifted her head and looked him in the eye. "I know you aren't, though you're big and macho and you make me feel more helpless than Frank ever did. Helpless in a good sort of way."

"Right now I want to show you how you've got me pussy-whipped the way no woman ever has before but first I promise you this—I'll never, ever use my size and strength to make you do anything you don't want to do, sexually or otherwise. Or my money," he added when he thought about how wealth apparently intimidated her.

She smiled, wriggled her bare cunt against his balls. "Somehow I doubt you'd have to force me. I love the way you make love with me." Her expression turned serious and she slid her arms around him. "I've been fucked hundreds of times, but tonight's the first time I've made love."

"You have no idea how good it makes me feel to hear that." Her admission stroked his ego, left him feeling as invincible as he used to after having a good game. "We're gonna make love a lot. When we wake up tomorrow morning, I want you to be snuggled in my arms. We'll go over to your place and feed your animals then spend the day in town. I'm anxious to show you off, not to mention there's a meeting I'm supposed to attend about the reunion. We'll have lunch at the café."

Dave felt the tension in her body lessen as he rubbed up and down her spine and the swirling waters surrounded them, a warm, wet cocoon that bound them together as tightly as any vow. As tightly as his sex was buried in hers, for a while he was content to stay there, not moving, savoring a connection more spiritual than sexual. He'd never felt closer to another woman, or so content to let his emotions have free rein.

"All right," she said as she broke out in a brilliant smile. "Meanwhile, let's make love and make the most of this time while Dylan's away."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You said you wanted more togetherness, to take this to the next level. I'm still a little freaked at the idea. Want to paint me a clearer picture about where you see this going?" Diane stretched out beside him once they'd climbed out of the tub, cleansed themselves on the bidet he had shown her how to use, dried off and adjourned to his bed. The incredibly soft sheets brushed her sensitized flesh while he stroked her with a slow, sensuous rhythm.

"Yeah, I want you here with me every day and night. It may sound crazy but I already want to be exclusive. I want to be the one who takes care of you, not because I'm a possessive asshole like Frank. That doesn't mean I don't have a bit of a jealous streak where you're concerned. The idea of you making love with another man makes me see red, sort of like Bullyboy seems to get whenever he sees me."

When he gave her a half-chuckle, Diane was surprised that the statement as well as the way he said it made her feel warm in all the right places. Not afraid, the way she'd been of Frank's jealous rages.

Dave stroked his hand along her spine. "I don't want to scare you, but I can imagine asking you to marry me a little way down the road, Diane, if we both decide we want this. It seems soon, I know, but I've reached the point in my life that I know what's real and what's not. What I'm feeling for you is real. I'll give you all the time you need. But will you at least give it some consideration?"

It took her a moment to digest his words but she wanted this as much as he did. "Yes, I'll think about it. But what if Dylan doesn't..." Suddenly needing space, she rolled onto her side facing the nightstand.

Dave followed her, curling around her like a big, warm spoon. "He likes me. And he seems like a good kid who'd want his mom happy. Do I make you happy?"

His hard, thick sex lay in the crease between her thighs, reminding her how she'd come three times—three times more than she had in the previous forty years of her life—in one incredible night. He had one strong arm around her, his touch protective as well as arousing. "Yes. You make me happier than I've ever been."

"You know, I'm pretty damn sure I've been half in love with you since high school. Timing was wrong for us then. I didn't want to have to look at Edie's sad eyes the way I'd have had to if I broke up with her before we graduated. So I took the easy way and waited until I was going away to college." He paused, looked away as though he hated to admit the rest.

Then he met her gaze, his expression pained. "To be honest, I wanted the hell out of you my entire last year of high school, and if I hadn't been scared of fighting Frank I'd have broken up with Edie and done my best to get you away from him. I was a fucking coward, and because of it, I floated around in a sexual limbo for too damn long. And you had a miserable marriage to a bully I should have put in his place."

"He'd have hurt you, and that would have nearly killed me." Diane recalled the boys Frank had beaten, regretted that she'd once seen his jealousy as proof that he loved her. "Not that you weren't plenty big and strong, but he had a mean streak worse than the wild bull that finally killed him."

"I should have found him and taken him apart limb from limb as soon as I was old enough and strong enough. I could have done it by the time I finished my first year of college."

"You didn't—and I married him like a crazy kid who wanted somebody to take care of me after Daddy died. We can't change the past. Only the future."

Dave took her hand, held it as though he'd never let her go. Yet she felt no force, just gentle persuasion. "Do you love me, honey?"

"Yes." She did. She probably had kept that flame going in the back of her mind for longer than she dared admit. "I love you."

"And I love you, too. I'll love you the rest of my life. I promise."

Diane trusted his word. No man who'd tell the truth about his sexual past when lies would have definitely served him better would lie about something as important to him as love. "I believe you. And I believe I'll never love another man the way I love you."

"Then let's take the plunge since we're both sure. We have kids to consider, ones I'm not anxious to have wondering when or if we're going to make it legal. Marry me. Come live with me here. You've worked too damn hard for too long. Let me take care of you and Dylan, and help me raise my kids when they're with us."

Diane's head was spinning. She'd known Dave when they were youngsters, heard a lot about his exploits while he was gone. Now she was deep in lust and certain she loved the man he'd become. "I don't know. What about my place, the animals? Aside from the fact that this place has all the creature comforts, I'd never feel comfortable making love with you where I lived with Frank."

When Dave spoke, his damp breath tickled her ear. "The animals aren't a problem. I have a contractor scheduled to come next month and fix up the barn and fencing. I intend to buy a horse or two for DJ and Cathy to ride when they visit and maybe one for me when my knee's in good enough shape for me to ride. Meanwhile we can drive over to your place every day and take care of Bullyboy and your horses."

One by one, Dave countered her arguments, and by the time the sun started shedding light on them through windows near the ceiling, Diane figured out what really mattered. She loved Dave and he loved her. They belonged together. All the obstacles, all the mindless details would work themselves out. For too many years she'd stood alone, now she'd stand with her strong, gentle lover. Together they'd guide her son and his two children for the few years until they'd go on their own, make their own lives.

"Dave?"

He stirred, cupped her bare sex in one big hand. "Yeah, honey?"

"I'll marry you unless my son has awfully strong objections."

"You won't be sorry, honey. I'll see to it." Nudging her rear hole with his erection, he bent and whispered in her ear. "I love you, too, more than I've ever loved another human being."

He stroked her, his touch light, not the least bit threatening. "You said you didn't like anal sex but I bet you will if it's done the right way. Are you game to try it, with me?" His motion easy, deliberate, he rubbed the tip of his cock around her rim.

"I'm not sure."

When he nuzzled her throat, he sent chills of anticipation all through her body. "It feels good when you play with me there. I don't know..."

"Let's find out. Reach over in the drawer and fish out another condom. There's a tube of lubricant in there, too. Grab it, please. God, baby, I hate that I can't do everything I want to do with you but think positive. My knee will heal, eventually. And as it does, the sex will get even better."

Diane was sorry his knee was messed up but glad to be starting out this way with him, knowing there were limits to what he could and couldn't do with her. She rolled over, found his huge, naked sex and stroked it with wonder while he moaned with obvious pleasure. She bent and kissed away the lubrication from his tip then moved lower, licked his velvety-smooth ball sac. Then, although she couldn't help being a little doubtful about taking him anally, she wanted to try because she trusted him not to hurt her – at least not much. Her fingers shaking just a little bit, she slid the condom on him. Opening the lube, she applied it over his turgid length.

"My turn." She turned, offered the tube of lubricant as she presented him her ass.

"Tell me if my scratchy chin hurts your pussy," he said, making a sweep along her smooth inner lips from her swollen clit to her vagina. His tongue slid, its wetness mingling with her own juices. Finally he kissed the sensitive tissue around her rim, only pressing his lubed finger past the tight sphincter muscle when she begged him for more.

She loved the feel of his early morning beard on her most intimate places. Knowing they'd cleansed each other thoroughly alleviated the queasiness she'd thought she might feel, preparing to participate in an act she used to fear and dread. "Do you want me to roll off you and get up on my hands and knees?"



"No, honey, this is gonna be your show. Climb on top of me, only this time you'll be getting a great view of my fucked-up knee that wouldn't like it at all if we did this doggie-style. I'll hold your butt in my hands to guide you down on me, but I want you to stop anytime you feel the least bit of discomfort. If you want to, you can play with my balls. God, yeah, I love how your hands feel on me."

The lube felt cold when he positioned the broad head of his cock at her rear entrance. "Come on down, you'll feel pressure as you let me in the door."

Pressure? More like excruciating pain but she didn't want to stop. She wanted to give him this, as she'd given him the rest of herself. Tears burned her cheeks as she made herself concentrate on his muscular, lightly furred thighs, the horrible scar on his knee, until suddenly the pain lessened. She felt a not-unpleasant fullness but also the smooth heat of his testicle sac nestled next to her pussy, a delicious friction where his perineum kissed her clit. When he let go of her ass cheeks and began playing with her breasts and nipples, a hard, fast climax overtook her.

"That's it, honey, see how good it can be?" He sounded tortured, as though holding back his own climax. "Quick, get off me and take off the condom and give me your precious pussy."

It was hours later and a noontime sun was beating down on the room when Diane remembered how great it had felt when Dave had come inside her, burst after hot burst of steamy fluid. She'd reveled in it, curled up next to him and slept...

"Dave?"

He stretched, pulled her back in his arms. "Yeah, honey?"

"What would you do if I accidentally got pregnant?"

He laughed. "It wouldn't be an accident. It would be a gift I hope we'd both cherish. Rosa and I waited a few years before starting on a baby. You and I don't have that much time left if we're gonna make one or two of our own."

“No, we don’t. And I wouldn’t mind having your baby at all. But, darling, I’d really like for people not to count the months, so you’ll need to use those condoms until after we get married. Let’s just hope we’re not already too late.”

“No. But I will promise we’ll get married very soon so at least the gossips will have to count almost all the way to nine. Give me a quickie and then we’ll get up and take care of business.”

She couldn’t tell him no, so she snuggled up at his side, draping one leg over his hip and holding onto him as he entered her slowly, gently, as though she were precious, fragile. She wouldn’t always want it this way but now it felt right. A benediction and a promise Diane could trust...now and forever.

## **Epilogue**

*A week later, and a week before the reunion*

The last place Dave would have thought he'd get married was in Hedgecock's only café, but its owner had offered the place to Diane for free—and she'd accepted. He had trouble getting used to her frugal nature, but he understood the pride that hadn't let her take help from Keith or her mom.

She damn well would take from him now that he'd just slid a plain gold band next to the hefty diamond solitaire he'd put there Wednesday, as soon as FedEx had delivered it from Tiffany's Dallas store. She'd practically refused it and probably would have if Dylan hadn't commented that it wasn't all that much bigger than the one Uncle Keith had given Tina. While Dave enjoyed seeing his woman decked out in diamonds by the pound, he also liked her lack of avarice that he'd encountered from a few gold-digging bimbos. Sitting at a table by the dance floor, he watched the lights reflect off that rock while Diane danced with Mel's son Bobby.

Big ego. Yeah, he had one, probably always would even now that having a healthy one wasn't a necessity for his profession anymore. He'd never admit it to a soul, but he knew deep down that part of the reason he'd gone for the big bling was that he didn't want his wife's ring overshadowed by the jewelry he'd noticed the other quarterbacks' wives were wearing. Someday he was going to have to lose the fierce sense of competition, or at least tone it down. But not now. He'd caught the best partner of the bunch and he was damn proud of it.

God, did he love her! Dave followed her with his gaze as she danced with the rookie while Bobby's wife chatted with her mother-in-law. Tina and Keith danced, too, but Dave was too happy to let himself be bummed because he was the only one too banged up to hit the dance floor.

At his bride's insistence, Daisy was here, sporting a fresh puppy cut and decked out in pale-blue bows on her pompoms. So were Cathy and DJ, accompanied by their mother, a wonderful surprise Diane had kept from him until an hour before the wedding. The kids seemed to be taking it all in stride, Dave thought, looking over by the buffet table to see them all chowing down on barbecued beef and baked beans. From the look of it, they seemed to be competing to see who could sneak the most treats to the delighted dog.

"Good luck, Dave, you deserve it." Rosa set her plate on the table and bent to kiss his cheek. "We had a lot of good times but they were bound to end. Maybe I'll be as lucky as you, second time around."

"I hope so. You'll always have a big spot in my heart. Thanks for coming and bringing the kids. It means a lot to both of us."

Bobby walked Diane back to Dave. "Thanks, old man, for letting me dance with your gorgeous bride. Diane and I go way back." The kid's grin took the bite off his words.

Diane laughed as she sat and laid her left hand on top of Dave's braced knee. "We go back so far, I used to change your diaper. Go on now, your wife's looking lonely over there." She turned to Rosa. "I'm so glad you're here."

"I'm glad, too, that I had an open weekend. DJ and Cathy would have had fits if they couldn't have come to their daddy's wedding, but I'm sure neither of us would have wanted them to fly by themselves and change planes." She grinned. "I imagined you and Diane would have better things to do than make a long drive to collect them in San Antonio. Dave, I'm surprised Colin isn't here."

"Mel said he'd be arriving in a day or so. He's driving from Savannah, stopping to audition a couple of rookie free agents along the way. Why don't you stay, enjoy the reunion with us? I'm sure Mel would jump at the chance of having you on the program opening night."

"I wish I could but it would look strange. Besides, the kids have to be back in school on Monday. I doubt the headmaster would be too happy if they missed ten days. I am going to send them here for the summer, though, if you two don't mind. Mother's getting too cranky to deal with their antics while I go on tour."

Dave looked over at Diane, saw her look of genuine pleasure. "That's the best wedding present you could give us, Rosa." Weddings didn't have to mean formal gowns and thousand-dollar wines served from crystal fountains. This one, with its barbecue and beer and side dishes guests had contributed, was good enough. Better than good enough. He stood and brought Diane up next to him when Cal Tate proposed the wedding toast.

Later, in their bed after Keith and Tina took Dylan to her old place and Rosa dragged DJ and Cathy to the hotel with a delighted Daisy, Diane watched moonlight bounce off the embarrassingly huge diamond on her hand as she stroked her husband's beautiful, delicious cock before bending and sucking on one of his nipples. "Your ex is gorgeous. Nice, too. Do you still want...are you still attracted to her?"

"No. Like I told Rosa, I'll always care for her as a friend and my kids' mom. But I love you and only want to make love with you. Tonight I'm gonna do it right. To hell with my knee."

"But Dave..."

"Don't worry, I'll leave the brace on but I've got to..." Rolling her to her back, he spread her legs, lay between them and buried his face in her wet heat until she squirmed with wanting him. When he finally raised his head, her juices glistened on his lips and chin as he looped both arms around her calves and lifted them onto his broad shoulders. "You're so fucking beautiful and I love you more than I ever thought I could love anybody."

With that he sank deep into her welcoming heat, in control yet never threatening the way she'd worried he might be when he took a dominant position. He moved in her, long and deep and delicious, slick flesh on slick, naked flesh.

As another orgasm racked her body she opened her eyes, saw her hands framing his beloved face as he began to come inside her. Her ring sparkled in the moonlight, illuminating his features as he claimed her with burst after burst of hot semen. She knew then. It was the spirit, not the price of his gifts, that she'd always savor.

She loved Dave Delaney with all her heart.

*The End*

## About the Author

Ann Jacobs is a sucker for lusty Alpha heroes and happy endings, which makes Ellora's Cave an ideal publisher for her work. Romantica®, to her, is the perfect combination of sex, sensuality, deep emotional involvement and lifelong commitment – the elusive fantasy women often dream about but seldom achieve.

First published in 1996, Jacobs has sold over forty books and novellas, some of which have earned awards including the Passionate Plume (best novella, 2006), the Desert Rose (best hot and spicy romance, 2004) and More Than Magic (best erotic romance, 2004). She has been a double finalist in separate categories of the EPPIES and From the Heart RWA Chapter's contest. Three of her books have been translated and sold in several European countries.

A CPA and former hospital financial manager, Jacobs now writes full-time, with the help of Mr. Blue, the family cat who sometimes likes to perch on the back of her desk chair and lend his sage advice. He sometimes even contributes a few random letters when he decides he wants to try out the keyboard. She loves to hear from readers, and to put faces with names at signings and conventions.

Ann welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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