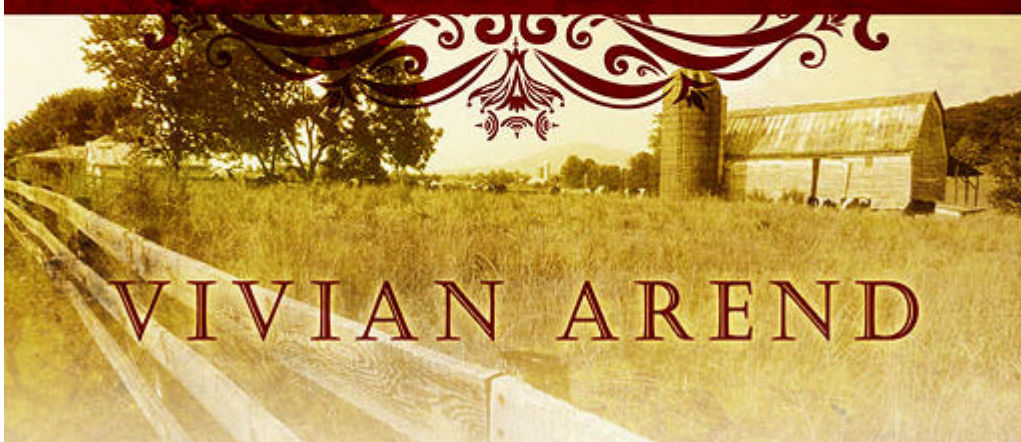




SIX PACK RANCH 2

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HAVEN



VIVIAN AREND

Rocky Mountain Haven

Book Two, Six Pack Ranch

Vivian Arend

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Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Maria Rogers

Cover Artist
April Martinez

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Blurb

Beth Danube has escaped to a small Alberta town to make a new start for herself and her three little boys. Her emotionally abusive husband may be dead and buried, but so is her heart. What she doesn't want is another man in her life—not now, maybe not ever. Yet when her libido reawakens after ten years of unsatisfactory sex in the missionary position, is any woman strong enough to turn down sex-in-boots, Daniel Coleman?

The middle child of the rowdy Coleman boys, Daniel's the quiet one who has always subdued his desires and acted as peacemaker. His powerful attraction to the young widow takes him by storm, and he's willing to pursue her until they both find satisfaction—in and out of the bedroom.

Only Beth isn't sure she's ready to cross the line. Becoming friends with blazing hot benefits means she's still the one in control. Letting her heart trust again? She isn't that brave—or foolish. Daniel is going to have to be mighty convincing to help her overcome the past.

Chapter One

July
Calgary, Alberta

She nursed her drink, waving back at her little sister who was jammed together with a hundred other people on the dance floor. Beth tried not to peek at her watch again, instead checking out the myriad of faces under the cowboy hats around her. She'd never seen so many boots and buckles in her life. Another round of 'Yahoo's' rose into the air from a few little-too-well lubricated throats.

While she appreciated Darleen's attempt at cheering her up and—how had she put it?—"pulling her back to the land of the living", the bar scene had never been her thing. It certainly wasn't tonight.

One song ended, melding into another ear shattering rendition of someone done somebody wrong and Beth held the cool glass of her drink against her temple in the hopes it would slow the throbbing.

"There she is. Hey, Beth, look what I found on the dance floor!" Dar approached the table like a runaway train, dragging not one, but two cowboys by the hand. "They're identical twins!" she shouted with glee.

Beth raised a brow. They certainly were, from the tops of their Stetsons, past the mischievous grins and the tight faded jeans to the worn shitkickers. "Well done. Now you just need a wandering gypsy and the arctic explorer and you'll win the scavenger hunt." She held out a hand to the first of the gorgeous specimens. "Beth."

A warm hand clasped her fingers and gave a firm shake while a pair of piercing blue eyes gazed into hers. "Jesse Coleman, that's my brother Joel. I can't help you with an arctic explorer but I might know where there's a gypsy or two."

Beth laughed. "Sorry, but Darleen is a little enthusiastic at times. I'm attempting to keep her centered in reality."

He pulled out a chair and sat in it backward, his mouth-watering smile never leaving his face. She sipped her drink. He was hot and kind of cute, but too young for her. Way too young.

"You dancing tonight Beth, or just exercising your imagination?" Jesse asked. She saw admiration in his eyes as he looked her over and it felt good. Maybe it *was* time to try to spread her wings again. She forced herself to take a long slow perusal of his body before smiling at him. His eyes darkened with interest. *That was the kind of response she needed to see.*

"Beth doesn't dance since the accident," Darleen piped up before she could answer for herself. "Oops. Shit, sorry sis. Shut mouth, throw away key."

Beth found both the boys staring at her. *Crap.* It's not like she planned on keeping it a secret.

She leaned back in her chair and pulled out her leg with its thick supporting brace. "I dance fine, Darleen, I just take up more room than is available on the floor. You go ahead, I'll watch."

The other twin spoke, adjusting the chairs until there was enough space for them all.

"I'm happy to sit for a while. It's been a long day and the dancing's pretty much worn me out."

Darleen rested on the arm of Joel's chair, her body leaning into him. Beth coughed softly. Her sister was grown up and could make her own decisions, but she didn't want to be in the know about any specific sexual escapades. From the looks Joel was bestowing on Dar, the potential for something to happen was high.

Besides, she had her own agenda tonight, and perhaps the young hotshot seated next to her would be a willing volunteer in her little research project. She sipped her drink and checked inwardly to see if she'd had enough to alcohol yet to loosen up her final inhibitions.

"So, why's it called Six Pack Ranch?" Darleen now sat firmly in Joel's lap and Beth blinked at having missed the movement that put her there. "You said the ranch has been around for generations, but six-packs are fairly new."

Jesse laughed. "The ranch is officially the SP Ranch, after the first initials of the original Coleman brothers who established her, but the smartasses in town decided it stood for Six Pack a few years ago and the new handle stuck."

Beth raised a brow. "The smartasses? Why would they do that? Usually nicknames have some basis in reality."

"You're pretty fixated on reality, aren't you, sweetheart?" Jesse leaned over and took her hand in his, stroking her fingers smoothly. If she weren't so sure she might have taught him only a few years earlier in one of her high school math classes, it would have felt even better. Now she wondered if he was of legal age to be in the bar. "You're right, there's more. Picture six boys growing up on the ranch. That started the idea. Plus, there's this..." He rotated smoothly to end up by her side, tugging her close. Yanking up the bottom of his shirt he slapped her hand onto his abdomen.

Rigid muscles flexed under her palm and she froze for a second, his hand trapping hers against his skin. *Oh God, she'd never felt anything like it before.* Beth involuntarily drew a finger along the well-defined ridges, mesmerized by the sensation of individual muscle strands under the skin. A soft laugh brought her back to realize she sat fondling a stranger's stomach in public and she snatched her hand away to safety.

She wiggled her finger in his face. "Bad boy."

He laughed and leaned in closer. "I think you like bad boys."

Beth shook her head. He had no idea how much she wanted the exact opposite.

Darleen giggled as Joel nuzzled behind her ear and Beth knew it was time to make a decision. She looked up from under her lashes to spot Jesse watching the other two at the table jealously, his attention back on her younger sister, and that was all the wake up call she needed. He might have thought she was amusing to tease, but she was way too old for him. She glanced around the dance floor. Damn it. Weren't there any guys over the age of twelve in the room?

"I need to powder my nose." She grabbed her purse and hid her smile as Jesse leapt to his feet to help her up. He was a polite thing, wasn't he? If she weren't old enough to have babysat him it might have been perfect.

It took a little maneuvering to make it through the crowd to the back of the room with her leg. The pulsing beat of the music stirred something inside her, the liquor setting her blood pounding for the first time in forever. The bodies tangling together on the dance floor made her jealous. How long since she had someone wanting her that badly?

Hands and mouths unable to resist touching, no matter how visible they were to the eyes watching around them.

Hell, she'd never had that kind of relationship. She cursed at herself and pressed the door to the washroom a little harder than she intended, the frame slamming into the wall with a crash. The girls at the sink touching up their lipstick eyed her cautiously and she shook her head in derision, stumbling her way to a stall.

Great, now she was freaking out the party animals. The whole bar trip had been a bad idea from the start. As for her underlying goal? Obviously getting hot and sweaty was not on the agenda for tonight. She had her answer.

She washed her hands and stared at herself in the mirror. Inside, she felt a million years old, especially after seeing Joel fawn over Dar. On the outside, the news was mixed. Her new short hairstyle suited her dark colouring, but the tension from the past years had drawn lines at the corners of her eyes and she clearly wasn't twenty anymore. She'd managed to keep her weight stable, even with the bummed-up leg. She missed her daily runs and the physical high she used to get from them. Those times alone had been her only moments of escape from the hell her life had become. In the six months since the accident there had been no more of that freedom.

Although the worst part of her prison was gone. Hopefully the bastard enjoyed burning in hell like the devil he was.

She made her way back through the crowd, bodies brushing her, knocking her, pressing her to and fro until it was difficult to keep her balance. She swore softly and clung to the railing blocking the dance floor from the rest of the chaos. If she could just catch Dar's eye. Asking for help stuck in her throat, but she'd prefer to beg than end up on her butt on the floor.

An additional body now sat at the table in the seat she'd abandoned and Beth prayed with three guys vying for her attention, her sister would remember not to leave her behind.

She waved, catching one of the twin's eyes, which one she couldn't tell. He nodded and rose, and she sighed in relief. The idea of fighting her way across the room left her aching. Then the newcomer stood as well and pivoted, his dark eyes seeking her out.

Her mouth went dry.

Oh my. If she'd thought the twins were good looking, this specimen was dazzling. He was still young, probably younger than her, but on him the tantalizing features of the other boys had matured, soft edges now harder, more pronounced. There was no doubt he was a member of the six-pack they'd spoken about. Whatever else the family raised out on that ranch of theirs, the men were certainly impressive.

She lifted her chin, her pulse quickening as the older cowboy waved his brother down and made his way to her side. People seemed to part before him and Beth got an eyeful of long, muscular limbs and smooth controlled motion as he approached. Suddenly her little side reason for the trip to the bar got pulled off the backburner and back into play.

She'd spent the past six months rebuilding her life. While there were still huge holes in her world, learning to retake control of her sexuality had finally made it toward the top of the to-do list. After years of dreading her husband's touch, she needed to know if she could stand physical contact with a man. The cowboy she was drooling over looked like a fine volunteer to experiment with—if she could get past her fears and seduce him, or at

least attempt to. If she had to call it off in mid-play, this was a safe site. He'd never be able to track her down, or figure out her real identity. She'd never have to see him again.

He landed at her side and dipped his head in greeting.

"Daniel Coleman. Can I give you a hand?" He offered his arm and she took it gratefully. The fragrance of his aftershave made her perk up. Her husband had never used any cologne. Claimed a real man didn't need anything but soap and water, and the gift she'd given him was thrown in the garbage along with a bit of her heart. Now this stranger wore the very scent she'd chosen for Samuel back when she was still young and thought she knew what love was. It had to be a good omen. Damn it, she was going to take it as a good omen because she needed one right now.

Back at the table it was a tight fit. Darleen now sat on both the twin's laps, their three bodies crowded close together. Beth found herself seated next to Daniel.

The noise level in the bar increased and Beth gave up trying to listen to a conversation three feet away from her. She'd have to shout to be heard. She turned to see Daniel frowning slightly as he watched his brothers.

"Everything okay?"

He smiled wryly at her. "Just getting tired of babysitting. Your little sister?"

She nodded. "Dar doesn't bite. Your boys are safe."

He laughed. "Then I'll relax. You live in Calgary?"

Did she really want to tell him anything about herself? *No*. Hell, she thought that at least she could handle some small talk after all this time. She threw back the last mouthfuls of her drink and changed the topic. The conversation needed to stick to what she wanted to discuss. Somehow she had to lead him into accepting her proposition.

"What's your favourite part of the Calgary Stampede?"

He paused and took a long drink of his beer before turning to face her. "I take it you don't want to answer my question."

Damn right, she didn't want to tell him any of her personal details. There was no way she would tell him the truth. But the best lies were made of a pinch of reality.

"I just want to enjoy myself and take a night to be whoever. Do whatever. I'm not into exchanging life stories. Sorry."

He nodded. "Understood."

She looked him over closer. A small scar marred the skin beside his right eye, and she touched it without thinking. "You were lucky."

"I deserved it."

Her involuntary reaction to his words was to stiffen in defense. Oh damn, there were still triggers that were beyond her control. She forced herself to relax. He didn't mean anything by it. He wasn't talking about her and scars, he was talking about himself.

They were crowded on either side as people forced their way past to reach their seats. His arm draped along the back of her chair, just touching her shoulders. It felt way better than she'd hoped—the riotous fear she had expected wonderfully absent. She deliberately made herself rest her hand on his thigh, trying to make it look casual, trying not to show how much effort it took to not flinch away. He moved slightly and the individual muscles shifted. Firm muscles pressed against the jean material and she sucked in a quick breath wondering what he was about to do. Heat radiated upward, and her core tightened. The twins took off, dragging her sister back to the dance floor.

She leaned closer under the pretense of speaking quietly. Her nose itched as it struck

the short hairs behind his ear. The scent of his skin, so different from her husband's, gave her courage. That wonderful mixture of man and aftershave, slightly rough, slightly wild. Damn. Her nipples tightened and between her legs her body ached.

Okay, that was a good sign. The whole libido thing wasn't completely broken...

"Dar's going to have a hard time picking which one of them she likes better, you know."

His shoulder pressed against her body as he leaned back, twisting his head to the side to reach her ear. He sighed, the warm air tickling her skin. "Are you going to go ballistic if I tell you they're going to try their best to get her to pick them both?"

She choked before pulling back to look him in the eye. "Hello?"

Daniel grimaced. "They won't force anything, but they like having one girl between the two of them. I don't get it, I don't understand it. But they've always been like that and so far I haven't heard any complaints."

She sat shocked for a moment, turning to watch the slow-dance taking place on the floor. There were more than enough bodies to explain why the three of them had to be dancing so close, but sure enough, the younger Colemans had trapped Darleen on two sides. Beth debated for a moment, her heart pounding. *What if...*

No, she couldn't start imagining what if her sister suddenly had to deal with two men who were overly aggressive. Not all men were like Samuel. If Dar wanted to cut loose tonight, hell if big sister was going to stop her. Life was short, and she should take what fun she could.

"More power to them." She said it quietly, but she knew he'd heard. He relaxed, his arm brushing her again. Onto other important issues. It was now or never, because she was one second away from fleeing altogether. "What about you, Daniel?" She pressed her hand against his thigh, letting the weight of it slowly brush the surface of his jeans. If she had the courage she would have reached toward his crotch, but that was impossible. This was as deliberate as she could get.

She held her breath waiting for his reaction. Would he ridicule her? Brush her aside?

He stared at her for a full minute and heat crept up her neck. It was one thing to act the hussy, and another to pull it off. *Fine*. The whole plan had been rotten from the word go. She dropped her eyes and retreated. She would have withdrawn her hand when he grasped her wrist, locking it in place with a steely grip. She bit her lip to hide the gasp of fear that wanted to escape, but his grasp, while it held her immobile, was gentle on her skin.

With a slow but deliberate motion he tugged her hand over his lap. He opened her fingers, curling them around his length. His erection bulged, a solid ridge under the fabric. She felt him grow firmer beneath the zipper.

He leaned in. "I'm not usually the type for this kind of thing, but if you're asking for a little something on the wild side, hell yeah, I can oblige you. I don't know why someone like you isn't getting well taken care of already. For tonight, if you want me to make you happy, I'll do my damndest."

She swallowed hard, his hand trapping her. No escape. Demanding. Her heart fluttered with fear and she closed her eyes to stop the shaking. Okay, this was why she was doing this, in public. It was safe. All she had to do was say stop and it would be over.

His grip loosened and he stroked his fingers over hers, a fleeting touch with the back of his hand caressing her skin. The coarse hair on his arm tickled her as he moved past

her wrist, his body tight to hers, his lips hovering over her ear. The loud beat of music shook the room. The table. Her body. It had to be the music; it wasn't her pulse making her shake so hard.

The warmth of his breath brushed her neck, sending a shiver through her. "You sure—completely sure—about this?" He drew back and cupped her chin in his hand, supporting her without locking her in place. "I've been around a lot of animals in my lifetime, and I know when one's skittish. You may have the most come-hither attitude and sexy stare I've ever seen, but your body is telling me a different story."

Beth wiggled uncomfortably but refused to drop her gaze. She had to bluff her way out of this. She was a grown woman, she was taking back control of her life. It was a step she wanted to take and she could handle it. *Couldn't she?*

His gaze descended her body, an intimate caress without physical contact. "What's it going to be? Do I grab my brothers and we pop you and your sister in cab so you get safely home? Or do you really want to have a little company tonight? Shoot straight with me. I won't accept any lies."

She licked her lips and his eyes darkened, his stare solid on her mouth. She stuttered for a second, then swallowed and took a deep breath. Part of the truth burst out.

"I need this. I need to know..." She couldn't maintain eye contact anymore and buried her head in his shoulder. *Shit*. It had been a stupid idea to begin with, and there was no getting around it. Now she sounded desperate, which she was, but actually acknowledging it was brutally difficult.

He'd turned out to be exactly the kind of person she needed for a one-night stand, compassionate and caring. Something inside her cringed a little with disgust at herself. When she thought about the fact she was using him as an experiment she felt dirtier than when she'd first come up with the idea.

He stood and helped her to her feet.

"What are you doing?"

"I thought we could dance." He moved slowly through the masses, leading her away from the crowded floor toward the bathrooms. There was a small landing kitty corner to the ladies room door, and he guided her there before pulling her into his arms and wrapping her close. She hid her face again, fear and rising desire fighting in her body. They were only steps away from the crowd. A constant stream of women passed by. If she got frightened she'd have help in an instant.

She relaxed, just a tiny bit and let her arms snake around his torso.

"Hmm, that's better. You're not going to bolt on me now, are you?"

She shook her head. "Feels nice."

He swayed with her, every inch in contact. Her cheek rested on his collar, letting his fragrance fill her head. Why was it that the smell of the man turned her on so much?

His heartbeat—she felt it against her chest. He adjusted them, somehow bringing her closer until they were intimately lined up, his erection now nudging her belly. "I still need to hear what you want, Beth. If it's a dance, I'm happy. If more ... say the word."

Oh God, he shifted his hands down her back, caressing, teasing. She sucked in air like it was courage. "I want something. I don't know what to tell you."

He lifted her face to his, their bodies still swaying, hips in intimate contract. Slowly, with lots of time for her to retreat, he lowered his head and brushed their lips together. A single touch. Chaste. When he pulled back, she followed him without intending to,

wanting more.

A bright light shone in his dark eyes as he examined her face. "That was something. Was it enough?"

She took it as a good sign that she definitely wanted more. "No."

"So tell me."

She hissed in frustrated. "Please."

He had a wicked smile. She'd noticed his good looks, but the smile turned his whole face into sin incarnate.

"You're having trouble articulating, darling. How about I give you a multiple choice. You look like the type who enjoys options."

He kissed her again. Light. Fleeting. The bathroom door opened and closed but Beth barely noticed. There could have been an audience standing around them and she wouldn't have cared.

"You want a kiss?" He brushed a thumb over her lips and brought it back to his mouth, licking the moisture from the pad. "Hmm, you taste good. You want me to kiss you for real? Like a man kisses his woman? Or are you happy with more pecks like you give your neighbour at the church picnic?"

She swore she spoke aloud. She knew her lips moved, but the deafening buzzing in her ears outweighed the sound of her own voice. Daniel gave her another of his sexier-than-sin grins and came back for a third pass. She closed her eyes and hoped like hell she'd said door number one.

He gripped her body tighter and lifted her, heavy brace and all, and she gasped in surprise. Then he tore the rest of the air from her lungs as he consumed her. Crushing their lips together, he thrust his tongue into her mouth and took control. She waited for panic to descend, but all she felt was a heavy pulse between her legs and the urgent desire to drop to the floor and rip off his clothes. She opened to him, accepted his demands. Clung to his neck and writhed shamelessly against him. He held her up, cupping her by the ass and now the cold of the wall met her shoulders. He leaned into her, supporting her with his torso and hands, pulsing with small movement so the ridge of his erection ground against the apex of her mound where the blood beat with an insane tempo.

He tasted fantastic. Clean and fresh, the hint of hops on his tongue from the beer, but beyond that nothing but heat and passion. Tingles spread across her belly from the constant pressure on her clit. When he lowered her slowly to the floor she whimpered, suddenly fearful he'd leave her at this point, frustrated and all alone again with nothing but her own hand to bring her over the edge.

He caged her against the wall, his lips brushing her ear, the arm away from the bar sneaking between their bodies until he cupped her breast in his hand. "Option number two. You want me to touch you over your clothes, or put my fingers on your bare flesh?" He licked her earlobe and tugged at her blouse, pulling it loose from the waist of her skirt.

"Skin." This was insane. She'd gone insane. This was no longer an exercise to discover if she could bear physical contact with a man again. It was a torture method to see how much her body could take before she exploded from the mere thought of a caress.

Whisper light, seductively slow. Inch by inch his hand crept up her waist, strumming the curve of her ribs gently like piano keys, lifting the bottom edge of her bra and forcing

it out of his way. He cupped her, his palm calloused and rough but so tender and careful she shivered. He distracted her with strokes of his tongue against hers as his fingers plucked her nipple to a hard peak.

"God, you're driving me mad." He rolled her aching nipple between thumb and forefinger and a piercing flash shot straight between her legs.

"More." Beth ached. It wasn't enough to have confirmation she could be touched. She wanted to come and she wanted Daniel to be the one who brought her over the peak. It had been too long, and something in this man made her think he'd understand if she told him what she truly needed. Why.

"Get a room!"

Laughter burst out behind them. Daniel twisted, covering her with his body, protecting her from the giggling girls exiting the bathroom and traipsing back onto the dance floor.

A cold flush raced over her. What was she thinking? Groping in a hallway with a stranger. All the passion she'd felt, the sense of being truly alive, drained from her like air from a balloon. She struggled back and fumbled to put herself back in order—her bra, her blouse. He helped her, his hands far more careful and slow, redoing the buttons that had slipped open, tucking her hair behind her ear.

"Beth. Don't. Don't start thinking this was a mistake."

She looked up at him in astonishment. "How did you—?"

He brushed a hand over her cheek and she stilled again, her skin burning hot. "The only mistake was thinking a short encounter in a back hall would be enough. I'm not that type." He shook his head, his eyes fixed on hers. "I don't think you're that type either. Not really."

She hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. He deserved at least that much honesty. It was all she was willing to give.

"Let me get to know you better. We know we've got the chemistry. I'd like to find out who you are when you're not trying to be someone else."

Every word drove another nail into her guilty conscious. "Sure. Let's go back to the table. Darleen must be wondering where I am."

He kissed her once more and she took it eagerly. Trying to store up the memory of his taste, the way he tugged his fingers through her hair just right. None of the fear she'd expected was there. When he pulled away she had to fight to keep tears from falling. He had no idea, but he'd help remind her she was free. Samuel had tied her in knots, and in one fell swoop, Daniel had cut some of the remaining cords that held her bound.

They headed to the table, but their previous space was filled with strangers. Beth spotted Darleen waiting by the door of the bar, a frown on her face.

"Shit. Looks like trouble in paradise."

Daniel pointed to the far side of the room where Jesse and Joel tossed back beers at the long bar counter. "Double shit. Jackasses. I'll whoop their butts if they—"

She shook her head. "Knowing Dar, it's just as easily her fault. It's only a night out on the town."

He turned her in his arms. "It's more than a night on the town for me. I like you, Beth. There's something about you..." His eyes traced her hair and she flushed. Damn it, she hadn't intended it to come to this.

Daniel pulled out his wallet and handed her a card. "It's for the family business, but

my contact numbers are on there. You can email me, or phone." He handed her an extra card. "Write your number on the back for me."

She nodded. He pulled her close and she used his chest as a solid base to scribble down her name. Beth Jackson. Jotted down a number. He took the card and tucked it away, his dark gaze burning a hole in her conscious. "I'll call you a cab."

She held up a hand, refusing his offer. "We have a car. We're fine."

Dar flounced out the door and Beth rolled her eyes. With all the other drama, dealing with her temperamental little sister was not something she had energy for. She took one last look at her cowboy wishing things could be different.

"Thanks, Daniel. It was great meeting you."

He brushed her cheek with a kiss. "I'll call you in the morning. I'd love to take you for coffee."

She smiled and backed away, the relentless noise and the situation making her head and heart ache equally. "That would be great," she lied.

The night air felt cool after the heat of the bar, and she sucked in a calming breath. Dar had already brought the car around and Beth maneuvered herself into the passenger seat, the leg brace frustrating and cumbersome.

"Where the hell were you?" Darleen griped. "I've been wanting to leave forever."

Beth dropped her head back on the seat and groaned. She was sexually frustrated, her leg ached and she really didn't want to listen to whining right now. "I thought you were busy. With two guys."

Darleen had the grace to look embarrassed. "Yeah, well, they were nice enough. Then one of the Stampeders asked me to dance. I mean one of the linebackers from the professional football team. I had to say yes, and when I got back, the guys had left."

Stupid child. "You went and danced with someone else and expected them to wait for you?" Darleen didn't say anything. Beth rolled down her window and let the sounds of the city streets soothe her soul. "Can't have it all, girl."

Darleen flicked a hand in her direction. "Whatever. It was still fun, I guess. How about you? Their older brother was hot. Did you hit it off with him?"

A pulse still beat between her legs. Did they hit it off? *Jesus.* "Yes."

"You going to see him again?"

Beth stared at the card he'd given her. She'd been clutching it like a lifeline. The dark look in Daniel's eyes scared her, yet gave her hope, and for one moment she hesitated.

No. It was time for a total break. She tore the card into tiny little pieces so she wasn't tempted to try and recover the numbers. "Nope. I'm leaving town with the boys in two weeks. Making a new start, and I don't need any baggage in the shape of male stalkers, thanks very much. Been there, burnt the T-shirt."

"Guys aren't all like Samuel, you know. There are good ones out there."

Like Daniel? She dropped the shards into the trash bag and adjusted her leg.

"Enough. I want to go home. Mom's bringing the boys by in the morning, so it's not like we can sleep in."

Beth stared out the window and wished more than anything Daniel were the one taking her home, and tucking her into bed.

Chapter Two

August Rocky Mountain House, Alberta

"What do you mean I can't get keys to the apartment? I've got one week to settle in before school starts. I need the key now."

Damn hick leaned back on his beat up truck and shrugged in slow motion. Beth wanted to scream. She wanted to kick something. Most of all she wanted to start unloading the boxes of things she'd brought with her from Calgary before she completely ran out of energy. Her boys had crawled into the front seat of the moving van, three sets of eyes gazing down at her silently.

"Sorry, Ma'am, but see, that's what I'm trying to tell you. There was a fire a couple of nights ago. Far end of the complex, but the fire inspectors shut down the whole place until the wiring can be inspected."

She tapped her good foot. If he would talk a little faster the conversation might be done by the end of the weekend. "Are there any other apartments for rent in town?"

A slow shift of the shoulders. "There were. Until yesterday. All the other occupants of the apartment house had to find alternative arrangements too. I think just about everything available got snapped up."

The throbbing in her temples couldn't be good for her. She rubbed her fingers against her forehead. Now what? Head back to Calgary and beg for her parents to let her stay with them again? Drive three hours every day to get to school once her teaching position began?"

"I'll have to check into a hotel or motel." She couldn't afford it, but... "Do you know which one would be the cheapest for a long term stay?"

The old codger raised a brow. "Well, now, you could try the motel, but if you give me a minute, I bet we can do you one better. Since it's partly my fault you're in this mess." He gestured at the U-Haul. "You need a place to dump all that anyway. Won't fit at a motel, I'm guessing."

He hauled out a cell phone and she turned her back to stop the hysterical giggles wanting to rise up and overtake her. The incongruity of his worn overalls and the shiny new phone was too much to handle when she stood on the verge of a breakdown.

"Mommy. Are we lost?"

She smiled up at Nathan with his blond head poking out from the window of the truck. "No, we're in the right spot, only there's a little mix up. We'll get it figured out."

Lance popped up beside him. "Are we still going to live here? It smells."

Oh lord. "Yes, we're moving here. You're going to school here. I'm teaching here. Nothing has changed since the last time you asked, twenty minutes ago. And it doesn't smell any worse than your bedroom before we cleaned it up to get ready to move." Nathan laughed at him and Lance stuck out his tongue.

Robbie forced his way between his brothers, all three of them hanging precariously out the window. "I have to go pee."

Beth sighed. She glanced at her erstwhile landlord who was still talking on the

phone. He laughed at something then waved at her, flashing a thumbs-up while he continued to yatter. Across the street she spotted a 7-Eleven and she motioned for the boys to back up.

"Bathroom break for everyone. I'll buy you a Slurpee, and then I expect you to stay quiet until I get this little issue figured out. We'll hit a park as soon as we can, okay?"

They clambered down and she pulled them in tight for a hug. Moments of life had been hell, but these dirty smiling faces made it all worth it. She held up a finger to Mr. Jordon and pointed across the street. He nodded and never broke stride in his discussion, which now seemed to be about feeding tomato plants with fish fertilizer to get the best yield. She really hoped somewhere in the conversation he managed to find them a temporary home.

They re-crossed the street ten minutes later, three contented boys clinging to sweet frosty drinks. Didn't take much to make her crew happy.

Mr. Jordon grinned at her, pride filling his face. "I talked to my friend, Mike. He said there were no troubles with you taking possession of the Peters' homestead for a bit. His oldest sons have been living in it, but there's plenty of room at home for them temporarily like. You're even welcome to rent the place with the furniture if you need it. Six months sound good? I'll promise you space back here at the end of that time, since we weren't ready when we promised."

"A house?" Hopefulness brightened her heart. What she wouldn't give for a house to live in, instead of an apartment. It would be so much better for the boys, but she knew exactly what her expenses were going to be, and the cost for a house was probably out of reach. "How much does he want for rent?"

Mr. Jordon snorted. "He didn't want a damn thing, but since I figured you'd have issues with that, he said to tell you he'd take what you were going to pay me. No first and last. Just get him the money when you can. Any furniture you want to use, you use. Anything you don't want, there's an outbuilding to store things in." He eyed her leg brace. "Who's helping you unload the truck?"

"We are." Lance spoke up. He'd been hanging back politely, but now marched forward to stand wide legged in front of her, his little fists resting on his hips. Her heart ached at the sight. He was only eight, and he already tried to take care of her. "We're Mommy's helpers."

Mr. Jordon nodded sagely. "And mighty fine ones too, I bet. But you see, I know a few other young men, strapping strong fellows like yourself. Perhaps I can get them to help as well. You know, so you can show them how it's done."

Lance's face lit up at the commendation and Beth breathed out slowly. It looked like her insane idea to take her family to a place with a quieter pace of life might work out after all.

She smiled at the older man. "I'd like to see the house before I make any commitments, but I really do appreciate your help."

He laughed, peeling himself off the truck and yanking the door open. "Didn't do nothing. Tell you what, you follow me. We'll take a spin out to the Peters' place. Everyone's working right now, so we won't be disturbing anyone. If you're happy with it, we'll come back here and put you up for the night at the hotel. That'll give the boys time to clear out their things, and tomorrow I'll get my grandsons to help your fine moving team get you settled."

* * * *

Beth nodded at another of the adults she recognized from parent/teacher interviews she'd held a couple weeks earlier. Settling into the community had gone far better than she'd expected. Lance and Nathan loved their teachers in the small elementary school, and Robbie's kindergarten class seemed to spend more time outdoors than in right now, which was exactly what the active little boy needed.

Nathan tugged at her shirt. "There's Mikey. Can I go with him?" He was away before she could confirm or deny his request, tackling his friend, the two of them rolling on the ground like puppies. The other mom grinned at her. "Hi Beth. They are excited today, aren't they? I can take your boys with me to the kids play area, if you're okay with that." Lance bounced on the spot, eager to go as well, but unwilling to leave without permission.

Another joy she'd discovered over the past month, living in the smaller community. She had never before felt comfortable leaving her boys in someone else's company. Since she'd always been home with them, they'd never gone to daycare in Calgary. Samuel had discouraged any regular playgroups. She'd never wanted to get too close to one and have too many questions asked anyways. Here people went out of their way to say hello, to get to know the boys and offer her help.

She nodded assent and the older boys roared off like airplanes to the colouring contest and penny carnival. Robbie clung to her hand as they walked the grounds, the crowds of families racing past and the clatter of the music making him shier than usual.

"Well if it isn't my lovely neighbour and her escort. Hey Robbie boy, you enjoying the picnic?"

Beth smiled at the older man as he adjusted his crutches so he could bend over and ruffle her son's hair. Her temporary landlord had turned out to be nothing short of an angel. He and his eldest son, Blake, had cleared out the Peters' house and arranged for storage for all the household goods she didn't need.

Now a month later, she was even more grateful as she saw her sons bask in the warmth of the community. They needed this. In fact, she needed it too—a chance to see there were good people in the world.

"Mike, it's good to see you. Is Marion here as well?"

He shook his head. "She's feeling under the weather. But you need to drop by the house soon and join us for dinner like you promised you would. Marion thinks you're avoiding us."

Beth lifted a brow. "We'd love to come by, but if you remember, a couple days before we were scheduled to drop in last time you decided to play chicken with a moose." She pointed to his cast. "Is your leg healing well?"

He shrugged. "It'll be fine. The boys are taking care of the harvest, so I'm sitting back and being a man of leisure this fall." He winked at her. "You and me, we could enter the three legged race and still be a leg short."

They laughed, the common bond of their injuries another link between them.

Robbie tugged on Mike's one good pant leg. "How do chickens and moose play together?"

A serious expression crossed the older man's face. "Excellent question. How about I explain while you enjoy some picnic food." He glanced at Beth for permission and she nodded. A little bit of positive male interaction in Robbie's life was exactly what he

needed right now. "We'll meet you for coffee and dessert later."

Beth wandered freely, the bright sunshine lighting not only the sky but some of the dark places in her heart. She became more and more certain moving to Rocky Mountain House had been the right decision. The pace of life was slower. The people, while not all friendly, were a lot more open to talking to her on the street corner than in Calgary where she'd barely known her neighbours after ten years of living in the same house. The sense of being an outsider hadn't struck her yet, perhaps because she'd stepped into the school system and had an automatic group of associates. Some of her co-workers were locals who had returned to teach in their alma mater. Some were newer teachers putting in time at a smaller school in the hopes of transferring back to the big city.

And her. Wondering where she fit in for the long term.

Working fulltime for the first time in years was physically draining, especially with the brace and her leg injury still giving her grief. The boys were a handful, brimming with energy and excitement. They were easier to deal with now that she didn't have her husband's exacting demands to meet as well.

She sat by the outdoor stage to listen to a local band, and let her mind wander. Her husband—being free from his overbearing expectations and his downright emotional cruelty made every day worthwhile, no matter how exhausted she was at the end of the day when she fell into bed. The pain in her leg and hip were nothing compared to the pain he'd caused in their lives on a regular basis.

No, life was good. She had little to complain about.

If the house occasionally creaked at night and frightened her, or the wind blew around the porch with a lonely sound, she was better off by herself than letting her family continue to suffer under the hands of a tyrant.

She closed her eyes and listened to the music. The band played a few country songs, followed by some hard rock. The electric guitar was slightly out of tune and it made her smile. The heat of the sun pulled her into drowsing, laughter and voices and music melding together into a far more relaxing lullaby than the clatter of the city. Beth breathed deep. Even the smells of the country felt right.

A long time later a clanging bell shook her from her tranquil rest. The community people congregated around the food tent for coffee and dessert. She ambled over slowly, reluctant to lose the relaxed state she'd achieved. Lance and Nathan raced up, faces glowing with excitement to chatter about all they'd done. Other boys gathered with them, pushing and wrestling good-naturedly. The adults in the line up worked together to calm them down and seat the unruly crew at the long tables. Pies and cakes before them, the clamour of little boy voices vanished as their mouths filled.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Mike patted Robbie on the back and he scrambled up between his brothers, eager to attack the plate presented to him. "The only time our house ever got quiet when my boys were little was during meals."

Beth smiled at him. "I don't mind the noise. Especially the laughter."

Mike shook his head. "Well, they laughed, but with six boys, the shouting is the thing I remember most."

She frowned as they headed over to the table to grab coffees. "Six? I've only met two of your sons. Blake and Travis. I didn't know you had more."

"Are you serious? I thought you'd have met them all by now. It's not that big a town. Although, they're not round the school that much since they're all older. Come on, I'll

introduce you to two more. They're right up here."

He gestured her forward. Up ahead, standing behind the coffee table, were familiar looking identical twins. She frowned as she tried to place their faces. Maybe she had seen them around town. They looked somewhat like their older brother, Blake.

One of them glanced up and smiled, a devastating and seductive grin and memory rolled over her. *Oh shit*. It was the pair from her disastrous bar adventure back in July.

"Beth, I'd like to introduce Jesse and Joel, my youngest boys."

Twin number one grinned wider. "I know you. You decided to try and find the gypsies?"

She swallowed hard and mindlessly accepted the cup of coffee he offered. *No*. No, this was not real. "You live here?"

He nodded, his brows rising. "And someone else lives here too you might be interested in. I know he was mighty vocal when a certain phone number turned out to be disconnected."

Beth froze in dismay. This couldn't be happening. Not when she'd started to find a place to set down roots. Could one night of foolishness really ruin her plans?

"Speak of the devil..." Jesse's bright blue eyes stared past her shoulder and she cringed inside. She held the coffee cup up like a shield and rotated on the spot to see her handsome cowboy approaching. His gaze met hers and the expression on his face changed in an instant. The friendly smile vanished, a look of shock replacing it, followed by a tinge of anger.

Her coffee cup slipped from her trembling fingers as fear and regret took control.

Chapter Three

Daniel forced himself to keep moving forward. She looked different than he remembered. Somehow happier and more content, at least until the panic set in. Her face went completely white and she trembled before him, her coffee cup at her feet. She rubbed her fingers together nervously.

"Beth, you okay?" Mike reached for her, but Daniel stepped ahead of his father. He had no idea where in the hell she came from, but there was no way she would get away from him again. He scooped the cup from the ground and then turned her, his one arm loosely around her waist as he stepped to a nearby chair.

"Sit down, Beth, before you fall down." She shivered and he barked at his brother. "Pour her another cup of coffee and add a couple of sugars to it."

"I don't need anything. I'm fine." She glanced around nervously and Daniel finally realized she was embarrassed by the attention they were drawing. He rose from where he'd squatted beside her, seating himself on the next chair.

"Of course you're fine. Now can I get you a piece of pie to go with your coffee?" They could just pretend this was normal day at a picnic until everyone found something else to look at. He would wait until he got her alone to wring some answers from her pretty little lips.

He'd been surprised how upset her deception had made him. Somehow he'd imagined she'd felt an inkling of what he had, that night in the bar. He could have sworn there was a connection between them. When he'd reached an out of service number, and found out she'd used a false last name, he should have simply laughed it off and counted it as an interesting night on the town.

Only, he couldn't. She haunted him. Her confused eyes full of passion and fear, her stubborn determination to try to seduce him. Hell, the only reason he'd even gone out that night was because the twins had taunted him to the point of insanity. Meeting her—he thought it had been his reward, especially when she softened in his arms. When she switched from trying to be a sex kitten into a warm submissive woman, curved in all the right places. He thought he'd finally found someone he really wanted to get to know better.

He accepted cups of steaming hot liquid from Jesse, motioning his brother to step away and leave them alone. Mike watched with curiosity for a moment before tapping her on the shoulder. "You relax for a bit, Beth, I'll go deal with the boys. Okay?"

She nodded rapidly, her eyes downcast at the table.

They sat quietly for a few minutes, the crowds of curious onlookers slowly wandering off in search of action. Daniel coughed. "This is a tad awkward, isn't it?"

She lifted her eyes to meet his slowly. "I'm so embarrassed right now."

He shrugged. "People drop coffee cups all the time. Not a worry."

A laugh burst from her lips and he enjoyed the way her whole face changed as she smiled. "You're a surprise. That's all I can say."

It was mutual. He stared out over the picnic ground. Activities were starting to break up and out in public probably wasn't the best place for the discussion he wanted to have anyway.

"I assume you're living in town?" *Hell*. There was another possibility, although she seemed to be alone. "...or are you visiting someone?"

There was a moment's hesitation before she spoke. "I live here. Moved out in the middle of August to start a job at the high school."

Oh yeah, that was what he wanted to hear. He pushed back his chair.

"Can I give you a ride home?" He wanted her alone to continue the conversation he'd planned on having three months earlier.

"Daniel!" A swarm of little arms choked the life out of him and he pulled back to grin at the three little troublemakers he'd been watching over lately.

"Hey guys. Was the picnic fun?" They had dirt on their jeans, grass in their hair and the littlest one had smears of chocolate on his face from his pie. "You look like you had a good time."

Three voices all sang out in unison and he could barely understand them.

"I hit the target a zillion times!"

"I wanted another corncob, but they ran out."

"Can we go swimming again?"

Daniel laughed. "Slow down. One at a time and..." He froze. Holy shit, he was a stupid son of gun. He stared at Beth in shock. "These are *your* boys?"

She had a frown on her face. "Lance, how do you know Daniel?"

The oldest boy went completely silent and kicked at the ground. "Umm..."

Oh hell. "You boys never told your Mama you were playing at the swimming hole, did you?"

From her reaction it was the first she'd heard of the place, ever. Two bright spots rose on her cheeks, her face suddenly gone white. Her lips tightened. "You mean they've been down by the water without me knowing..." She swallowed hard and wavered in her seat. He could see the guilt, and the fear, in her eyes. Damn it, he shouldn't have assumed just because he and his brothers had spent their summers running wild on the ranch that everyone would be okay with that for their own kids.

Beth pushed back her chair and spoke firmly to her sons. "We'll talk about this on the way home. Come on, it's time to go."

Daniel rose with her, steadying her when she landed on a rough section of grass. After all this time, she was living not more than five minutes from his front door. His mind reeled.

"I'll walk along with you."

"That's not necessary—"

Mike swung past, moving on his crutches far faster than a man his age should. He blocked their path and grinned at Beth. "I take it you've met my middle boy before." She nodded quickly and Daniel looked off into the distance to hide his face. His father was being a stubborn ass. It wasn't like him to get in the way and be so curious about the women his boys took a shine to. What was he playing at?

"Daniel, if you've got a minute, could you go and make sure the heating coil is turned on around the water pipes at the Peters' house? It's getting colder and I'd hate to forget to do it before it freezes."

"Oh, I can do that." Beth stuttered. "Just tell me where to look and..."

Mike shook his head. "I'm not letting a lady crawl under the house. Daniel knows where it is. It'll only be a minute's work, right, son?"

"Yes, sir." Daniel watched Beth closely. He wanted to talk to her, needed to talk to her, but if it were too much today, he'd back off.

He knew where to find her.

She watched him from under her lashes and his body tightened. She may have been surprised to see him, but she was interested. She wrangled her boys toward the parking lot, the three tykes suitably subdued.

"I'll meet you there," Daniel called after her as he chuckled to himself. He'd love to be a fly in the car and hear what the boys had to say about the swimming hole. Smart little kids, only in a heap of trouble at the moment.

He followed her van back toward the house where he'd lived until a month ago. As they approached the original sprawling ranch house Daniel had to admire the layout of the Six Pack Ranch. His Great-Grandpa had done well when he and his brother had set up the place. Of the two homesteads, what they still called the Peters' house was slightly smaller. It had been built after the two bachelor brothers both gotten married and started families within a year of each other. The second house stood on the other side of the coulee and creek. The layout had given both families privacy, and yet easy access to the barns and storage for the joint field equipment.

Now, years later, it had provided a wonderful opportunity for the oldest boys to get out from under their parent's roof without having to move into town. At twenty-six, Daniel had been batching it with Blake and Matt for the past eight years. It felt awfully strange to have moved back and spend so much time at the big house, especially now with his Mama and Dad recovering from a car accident.

On an impulse he turned down a side gravel road leading to the back of the barns. He left his truck parked there and strode through the trees, crossing the small bridge to access the other side of the property. He made it to the Peters' house just as Beth pulled in. The boys poured out of the van and raced for the door.

"Night, Daniel." Three sets of hands waved as they all shot up the wide porch stairs to disappear in to the house.

He laughed. "I see you've been living in the country long enough you're not locking your doors anymore."

Beth opened her mouth and then closed it tight. She wrinkled her nose. "You're right. I hadn't even thought about that." She moved slowly and he hurried over to offer his arm.

"Your leg sore?" he asked.

She sighed. "Just not looking forward to doing the 'Mom speech'. I decided to save it until we got home so I could concentrate on the road."

Damn, no wonder the kids ran off so fast. "For what it's worth, the creek is a pretty harmless place. It's not very deep, and usually a whole lot of mud. I think I caught them the first time they were down there, so they've been safe."

She nodded.

"Thank you for that." She opened the door. "Goodnight."

"I'll just wait here once I'm done with my chore, until you've got a minute to talk."

Beth swallowed, clutching the doorknob so hard her fingers were going white. "I have to put the boys to bed."

"No troubles. I've got nowhere I've got to be. I'll wait outside." Panic flashed in her eyes again, but he refused to back down. He wasn't going to push this too far, but now that he'd found her—she could run, but she couldn't hide. He dipped his head,

maintaining eye contact until she had to pull her gaze away.

* * * *

Three little faces stared at her, lips quivering. She barely had the strength to finish her lecture on staying safe, and making sure Mom knew where they were at all times without breaking into a smile.

"We're sorry, Mommy."

She hugged them all close. Now that her heart had slowed from the fear of having them near the water unsupervised, she understood the attraction. Although, they hadn't been unsupervised—her mysterious stranger Daniel had been around. He seemed to tangle himself into her life whether she wanted him there or not.

"Okay dudes. I know you're still excited from the picnic, but it's time to start slowing things down. I want all of you in the tub, and then we'll have time to read before bed."

The boys raced off to the bathroom, voices raised in energetic shouts. Beth breathed a contented sigh until she remembered Daniel waited on her deck. What in the world was she going to do?

She placed a trembling hand on the backdoor. There was no unwind button she could push. No way to make the past disappear. He was probably stubborn enough if she didn't go out now he'd sit there all night like he'd threatened. She sucked in her courage and pressed the door open.

The porch boards squeaked softly and he looked up from where he'd settled on the porch swing. "You've got awesome kids. I'm sorry again about the swimming hole thing. It really never crossed my mind you didn't know."

She waved it away. "I'm embarrassed I didn't figure out where they were disappearing to. I should have kept much better tabs on them. I'm so grateful you had an eye on them."

He stood and peeked in the window. "Will you need to go and get them into bed?"

She nodded. "They'll start on their own, but they'll get distracted soon."

Daniel smiled. "I think my Mama used to say it was like trying to herd cats to get us all in bed on time. I won't keep you long, but..." He reached for her hand, linking his fingers in hers. She swallowed hard. Oh lord, it felt so good and scared her mindless. She stood, as still as a statue in spite of her pounding heart.

"I'd like to see you, Beth."

She bit her lip. "I don't think that's a good idea."

He turned over her fingers, his thumb brushing the groove on her ring finger that was slowly disappearing. After ten years of wearing her wedding band, the sign was still there, even though the ring was not. "You're not married."

She shook her head. "He's gone." He raised a brow and she had to say it, knowing the confusion not speaking plainly would cause. "He's dead. He died in the accident that injured my leg." Her throat went tight. Images flashed through her mind, the icy road, the glaring lights. The pain.

The guilt.

His fingers stilled. "I'm sorry."

He pulled away, and she caught at his hand. Damn her indecision.

"It's ... okay. We were having troubles when he died, and I'm not grieving for him. Not really. I just don't think it's a good idea for you and me..." She couldn't speak

anymore. What she wanted and what she should do—why was it so damn hard to know which was which?

He squeezed her hand softly then let go and paced away. "There's a whole lot I think you're not saying right now. That's fine. I'm still the man you met one night while you were in a drunken state and you don't really know me."

"I wasn't drunk."

He chuckled and she felt her face heat. "We call that liquid courage around here, darling, and you had some. I just want you to know I was serious back then when I said I was interested in you. I'm even more interested now, knowing you're not a city girl living in some high-rise apartment hours away from me."

"Maybe I'm not staying."

"And maybe I'll have time over the next months to convince you staying is what you need. I'm a good man, Beth. I'm not talking about taking over your life. I'm saying you intrigue me and you make my body ache. I think our attraction is something worthwhile exploring together."

He moved closer. Her pulse pounded and she tilted her head up involuntarily to keep their eyes in contact.

Another step.

"I want to kiss you," he growled. Their bodies were close enough their heat meshed and a little gasp of need escaped her throat. "Do you want to kiss me?"

Oh God. "I shouldn't."

"But do you want to?"

Desire and being responsible warred within her. Accepting his touch tonight would make it all that much harder to turn him down the next time.

He pressed still closer and their torsos connected, his erection rubbing her belly. Her back hit the wall as he caged her without using his hands. Their lips brushed together and she sucked in his air, the full body of his flavour rolling over her tongue like a fine wine. He kissed her tenderly, not the white-hot passion she'd replayed over and over in her mind from the bar scene, but a worshipful caress that started and finished with their lips.

When he pulled away his pupils were huge, his smile even wider.

"Goodnight, Beth."

And he walked away, down the path that led into the trees.

Chapter Four

Daniel wandered on his way home, stopping by the swimming hole to stare into the swirling water. It was his thinking place; the spot he'd always retreated to when the noise and bustle of being a part of huge family grew too much.

He'd always been the quiet one. The middle child of six, as his daddy joked, the peacemaker and the one who walked the quietest path possible.

At least in the public eye.

A ripple spread out from the rock he tossed, small waves carrying across the slow moving section of creek. Beth was a widow—he hadn't expected that. Something in her actions in the bar had struck him as desperate and needy, and he wanted so badly to explore the way she had let him take control of her in that hallway before the time and place ripped them back to reality. She hadn't acted like any grieving widow. She'd said as much, but she must have been with the man for a number of years. Lance had to be at least eight.

Did he really want to get involved with her?

Heck, the boys were another whole issue. He loved kids, but they weren't what he was thinking about right now. It was the woman who fascinated him. If he did get involved with Beth she'd probably have all kinds of rules about not seeing the kids and keeping things secretive. He had a buddy in town who was dating a single mom and he'd shared stories that reminded Daniel of having to crawl in the windows at 2:00 a.m. to avoid the wrath of his daddy for missing curfew.

He stood and dragged his fingers through his hair. *Ahh, shit.* The vision of Beth's eyes haunted him. Why in the hell couldn't he just walk away? Did he want to have to hide and balance dealing with kids? The ache in his belly screamed at him far louder than the finger in his brain warning him away. It wasn't about being totally in lust, although his groin ached with the thought of continuing the little adventure they'd interrupted so long ago. No, it was something else altogether. Something drew him to her and damn if he could deny the need.

Baggage and all, he was determined to see where this thing between them could go.

He strode through trees, the twilight just enough to guide his path. Before he even hit the porch he smelt his Daddy's pipe, the aromatic tobacco lingering on the still air. Daniel took the steps two at a time, dropping himself into one of the comfortable chairs on the deck.

"Beth and the boys get home okay?" Mike puffed his pipe then blew a long slow stream of smoke into the air.

Daniel shook his head. "You adopting more strays? They got home fine."

His father rocked a few times in his chair. "She was a little surprised to see you today. You want to share what that's about?"

Daniel coughed. Last thing he possibly wanted was to tell the truth. "No." His father raised a brow. "Sir."

Mike didn't say a word, just lifted his pipe to his lips again. He smoked in silence and Daniel tapped his fingers on his leg. *Damn it.* His father did it to him every blessed time.

"I met her in Calgary when we took in a shipment of furniture at the start of the summer. I hoped to see her again, but we ... lost touch."

Silence reigned again. The fall noises were subtler than the spring. The crickets were falling silent earlier as the temperature dropped quicker in the evening. The soft sounds of the animals in the coop and the barns carried on the air occasionally, but it was a calm night. Peace started to fill his soul, his father rocking, even and slow. In the distance the sound of the guest cabin door closing rang out.

"That'll be Blake saying goodnight to Jaxi. He'll be here soon." Mike pointed the mouthpiece of his pipe at Daniel. "I don't know it all, but that lady in the Peters' house needs some caring for." Daniel moved to speak but his father held up a hand. "If you're interested in her, you treat her nice. Understand, son?"

"I always treat ladies nice."

The firm look in his father's eyes made him hesitate. It was outrageous how he could be in his mid-twenties and still reduced to a schoolchild by the man.

Blake wandered around the corner, his expression so dreamy Daniel couldn't hold in his chuckle. His father joined in and Blake grinned sheepishly.

"I look like a love-struck fool, don't I?"

The three of them laughed together, sitting on the porch in the full dark, and Daniel relaxed again. Whatever his father's cryptic words meant, he'd have time to ponder them alone later.

* * * *

Beth wandered the house after the boys finally settled. She wished it were as easy for her to put aside the excitement of the day and fade into sleep. The water boiled and she made a cup of tea and carried it onto the porch to sip while she stared up into the dark September sky.

Tell the truth, Beth. She sighed into her cup. Yeah, what she really wished for was someone to tuck her into bed.

And not just any someone—Daniel.

Would it be so terrible?

There was a part inside her that was scared to death of getting involved with a man again, but as her sister and parents had pointed out, not all men were like Samuel. Not everyone had the desire to control every facet of her life until she couldn't breathe.

But her late husband hadn't started out that way either...

The next days passed in the usual blur of activity, getting the boys to school on time and rushing to her own teaching. Arranging play dates and settling further into the community. She saw the Coleman boys around town occasionally, once Travis and once Blake, and both times her mind shot back to Daniel. No matter how full she made her to-do list, the damn man preoccupied her mind. After asking a few casual questions of her coworkers and other people she'd gotten to know, Daniel had come through with a squeaky clean report.

Would getting involved with him really be so terrible?

By Friday, after a week's worth of crappy sleep where she tossed and turned all night, she'd come to a conclusion. She could wear out the battery-operated boyfriend she's finally had the courage to go and purchase or she could deal with the lust driving her another way. She didn't need a man in her life full-time, but she sure as hell could use

one part-time.

He'd offered. She knew he was attracted to her. Maybe he'd even be willing to show her a little of something other than sex in the missionary position.

As long as she was the one who got to call the shots.

The house was quiet, the boys all off at a birthday party. She stared at her reflection in the mirror, tucking her T-shirt in a little more, buttoning and unbuttoning her sweater. It was one thing to decide she was ready for some casual sex, another to actually go and tell Daniel. Beth plopped down on her bed and sighed, her reflection taunting her. Yeah, the sleepless nights really added to her appeal as a sex symbol, dark shadows showing under her eyes. It took a rush of energy to force herself out the door and across the small bridge before she could change her mind, again. She'd never know if she didn't take the chance.

The barns and outbuildings on the other side of the trees were brightly lit and she hesitated. She wasn't sure if she'd even find him at home on a Friday night, but there was no way she was going to phone. If nothing else she'd walk to the main ranch house and say hello to Marian and Mike, and then retreat back to the Peters' house to wait until it was time to pick up the kids.

She found him in the barn. Her throat and mouth grew completely dry as she watched him rake something straw like from a stall. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up and his biceps rocked with every pull of his arms. Tight muscles showed under the jeans, his hair was slightly mussed. A throb hit between her legs and she bit her lip. Oh yeah, there was nothing wrong with her physical response to him.

She took a deep breath. "Hey."

The look of delight in his eyes started a fluttering in her belly. "Beth. I didn't expect to see you here."

She glanced around. None of the rest of the Colemans seemed to be near. "You got a minute? My boys are at a birthday party and I..." Holy cow, this was harder than she thought it would be. She forced her head up and met his gaze. "We need to talk."

Daniel grinned at her, a panty twisting expression that made her knees weak. He propped his rake up against the wooden wall and tilted his head toward the door. "Come, we can talk while we walk."

"No." Her fingers were tangled together and she dragged them apart, not sure where to put her hands. She felt about twelve years old with a first crush. "Just, if we're private here, that would be better."

He nodded slowly then gestured to a bale. "Have a seat."

Okay. She'd practiced this so it didn't sound too desperate or sluttish. She hoped. "I was thinking about what you said the other day—"

"About us seeing each other?"

Oh damn, he sat beside her, their thighs touching as he faced the opposite direction. The scent of his skin rolled over her, the earthy fragrance of a man who'd done physical labour, raw and powerful. She barely stopped herself from leaning into him and offering her lips.

She nodded.

Daniel chuckled. "You're getting all tongue-tied again, Miss Beth."

"I'm interested in you, but I'm not looking for a long term relationship." The words burst out like she'd rehearsed them. She twisted to face him, determined to finish. "I think

we should just have some fun together."

There. She'd said it. Maintaining eye contact was impossible and she stared down at her fingers twisted together in her lap. She watched as he reached his hand for hers.

"Now why did I think you were going to go and say something like that?"

He did? "I mean, you're very attractive, but I don't think I should get involved with anyone right now. It's too soon and I don't want—"

"The boys, right?"

Exactly. She relaxed a little. "I don't think it's fair for them to see me with another man right now." Oh lord, he was kissing her knuckles, his tongue teasing the seam between her fingers. The pulse between her legs quickened and she had to force herself to stay still.

"Hmm. Makes sense, I guess." He opened her palm and kissed it. "So, you're interested in me sexually, but we can't see each other in public. Is that what you're saying?"

A shiver raced up her skin as he licked her wrist, then suckled the skin there gently.

"Yes. No. I mean..." Oh God, how was she supposed to think with him touching her? When he leaned closer and nibbled on her earlobe? "Daniel, please."

"I aim to." He smoothed a hand over her shoulder, tangling his fingers in her hair. He pulled her head back so they could see each other's eyes. "You want to spend time with me."

"Yes."

"But the boys can't know?"

She swallowed, watching his lips move closer. "Right."

"Hmm." He kissed her, lips faintly brushing back and forth as he directed the speed, the pressure. She slipped out her tongue to touch his bottom lip and he captured her, sucking her tongue into his mouth. The kiss deepened and she wrapped her arms around him, pressing as close as she could while seated side by side. The desire and need that had haunted her since the start of summer built to a high boil and she gasped for air when he broke contact.

He traced a path over her body with his gaze. "How are we supposed to see each other without the little tykes catching on? And if they did find out, wouldn't that cause more trouble?"

Damn. She didn't want to analyse this anymore. She'd already had five restless nights trying to figure out how to satisfy the craving in her belly for him. "They won't know. We'll keep it quiet."

He reached for her chin. "So what you're saying, and pardon my crudeness, is you want a fuck buddy."

She cringed. It sounded worse than she thought when he said it out loud.

Daniel stroked his thumb over her cheek. "You're not looking for a friend with benefits because I ain't allowed to be your friend."

"It's not that, it's just—"

"Don't know if I can do that." She squeaked as he picked her up and sat her on his lap. "If all you're looking for is some sex, I'm not interested. There's a part of me that says, *hell yeah*, and I could be fucking you up against the wall in two minutes flat."

Oh God, the images racing through her mind.

"But if you remember our conversation in the back hall of the bar, I don't think

you're that type of woman. I'm not that kind of man. Honesty is one of the things that makes us who we are, and I'm going to be honest with you, darling."

Beth held her breath as he cupped her face, then stroked his other hand down her body intimately. He opened her legs, and settled his fingers over her crotch. Could he feel how hot she was through her jeans?

"I find you very attractive, and I don't just mean your body. I don't know what troubles you've had in your past, but I hope we'll get to talking them through at some point. So here's what I suggest—you tell me if you agree. You and I do both. We fool around like you want, as long as you let us try to learn to be friends, like I want."

It sounded so reasonable. Then he pressed a finger to the seam of her jeans and rubbed and all logical thought fled. The slight friction against her clit was enough to cause an instantaneous reaction. She trembled in his arms. "I can't..."

He hummed, caressing the tender skin behind her ear, tracing patterns down her neck with his tongue. "I think you can do a lot of things, Miss Beth, if you put your mind to it."

The constant motion of his hand was driving her wild. "Please..."

Kisses descended on her again, and for the first time in a long time Beth let go. All her tension and fear she let fall away and simply accepted the passion rising in her body. He was a thorough kisser, tasting her lips, her cheeks, brushing his fingers through her short hair and tugging her closer so their bodies melted together.

His hand moved relentlessly, and Beth widened her legs, rocking into his touch harder, needing just a little nudge to push her over the edge. He slid his other hand under her sweater and cupped her breast through her T-shirt and bra, pinching her nipple. She teetered off the cliff, her sex pulsing out her orgasm as she moaned into his mouth. It felt so much richer than when she brought herself to a climax and she closed her eyes to enjoy the sensations rocking her body.

It had been a very long time since a man had touched her like that.

When he finally separated them her whole body buzzed. His grey eyes were dark, his pupils huge as he stared at her. Stared at her lips, her hair, her body. "You're beautiful when you come."

Beth glanced around the barn and then laughed softly. "Jesus, what the hell am I doing?"

Daniel lifted her chin and those eyes mesmerized her again. "You're dealing with the passion you've locked up inside, for whatever reason." He didn't let her look away. "You on the pill?"

Oh shit, this part of the conversation. She'd thought this through as well, but it was still tough to say. "I'm protected, but I want to use condoms."

Daniel shook his head. "We'll use them until we get a clean bill of health to show each other. If this is supposed to be fun for us both, condoms won't cut it for the long run. There's just too many things I want to do with you, and I want you to know I'm clean and not going to hurt you in any way."

Beth opened her mouth to protest and then closed it. It made sense, even if the thought of anyone finding out he'd had blood work done scared her. She didn't want the whole town talking about them. She nodded slowly. She could make that change to her plans. "I'll get it done when I go to Calgary at Thanksgiving. I have to see my doctor then anyway about my leg."

He touched the brace lightly. "Anything I need to know? Any positions we need to

be careful with while we're playing?"

"As if I would know," she answered without thinking.

"Beth?"

She flushed hard at the expression on his face. The half savage animal, half confused human thinker. He kissed her temple then lowered her to the bale before rising and pacing a few steps away.

"I think I need a few more details, darling, before we continue this little adventure. You haven't had sex since your accident? Is that what you're saying?"

She nodded but hesitated. *Take control, Beth. Tell him what you want. Stay in charge.* "I haven't had sex, but I also..." The words choked off in her throat.

"You have three sons. I didn't imagine you to be a blushing virgin."

What was it he had said? Be honest?

She lifted her chin and spoke as boldly as she could. "I've had sex on my back for ten years with one man. I want to do something different. I want to..." Damn, this conversation got harder and harder to continue. "I want to try it all."

He froze in mid-pace, rotating slowly to face her. "What if your 'try it all' and mine veer apart?"

Oh shit.

Daniel continued, his voice husky and deep. "How about you make a list. Sound alright?"

She nodded, unable to push out any more words. Had she actually just agreed to make a wish list of sexual positions and experiences?

Daniel held out his hand. "Come on, I'll walk you home."

She glanced at her watch and swore. "I need to pick up the boys soon."

"I'm just walking you home, not ravishing you." He kissed her knuckles. "Not yet."

Beth swallowed hard. Holy crap. What had she done?

Chapter Five

Daniel leant on the wall opposite her classroom, nodding to the few students already dismissed from their classes. Two teenage girls giggled as they passed, eyeing him carefully, and he fought to hide his smile. Seventeen year olds just didn't do it for him, not when there was a woman waiting for him behind that door.

Even if she didn't know he was here yet.

After he'd dropped her back at the house on Friday and left her without a kiss, he knew she'd been confused. And still aroused, even after the climax he'd brought her to. Shit, he'd wandered back into the trees and wanted to jerk off like some horny teenager himself, staring up into her room at her silhouette as she moved around the house.

She'd taken the room he usually slept in. Poetic as it was, he could picture clearly in his mind what she saw around her and the thought of being with her in bed made his cock ache even harder.

Then he'd called. Saturday. Sunday. Monday. Nothing but the damn answering machine and now that it was Friday he'd had enough. If she'd changed her mind about wanting to see him, he wanted to hear it from her own lips. Otherwise, enough of this pussy footing around—she'd asked him for an experience and he was dying to give it to her.

The bell rang and he uncrossed his arms, shifting his weight forward as the door swung inward and a long line of students flooded out, laughter and chattering filling the air as after school excitement rolled through the student body.

"Daniel."

He acknowledged the local boys they hired on a part-time basis to help around the Six Pack Ranch.

"You here to see Ms. Danube?" The youth grinned when he nodded, and turned around to shout back into the room. "Hey Ms. D, you got a hot date or something?"

Shit. Daniel gave the kid a thump on the head with his knuckles. "Be polite, or you're mucking stalls all day long tomorrow." He eased past the rest of the bodies exiting and stepped to the side of the door, searching for Beth.

She stood behind her desk, frozen as she stared back. The room quieted quickly and she shook herself, turning away to stuff papers into a folder. She kept her eyes averted from his. "Daniel. I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting you."

"If you answered your phone, it wouldn't be a surprise."

She laughed, a snuffily little sound that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. While she probably won't appreciate being told it, she was kinda cute when she was embarrassed.

Her upper body shifted as she took a deep breath before facing him. "I'm just not sure how this is going to work."

"You changed your mind?" He spoke quietly, pulling the door shut behind him. She shook her head and he let his satisfaction show in his grin. "Then we need to find a way to make it happen. Avoiding me isn't going to do the trick."

Her gaze flicked past him to the door. "You're not planning anything here, are you?"

Oh damn. He hadn't, but her expression made him change his mind. "You thinking

about naughty things to do in a classroom, are you now?"

"Daniel—we can't get caught."

Oh yeah, she definitely had something on her mind he hadn't expected. He paced back to the door and locked it, pulling down the blind. He pivoted slowly on one heel to see she had the desk clutched so hard with both hands her knuckles were turning white.

"Boys bus gets home at 4:30, right?"

She nodded.

He stepped closer, his cock pressing into the zipper of his jeans. She watched him warily, a mix of anticipation and anxiety in her eyes. "What I'd like to do is strip your clothes off, lay you flat out on the surface of your desk and fuck you senseless."

"Jesus, Daniel." The words escaped in a whisper, her eyes huge.

He dropped a hand over his cock and rubbed, attempting to get the damn thing to stop throbbing so hard. He swore he could hear the thumping in the back of his brain.

"You like dirty talk, don't you?"

She breathed rapidly as he approached, the pulse in her neck drawing him like a magnet. "It makes me feel weak."

He lifted her and sat her on the desk, spreading her knees carefully, the heavy brace surrounding her leg clunking on the wooden surface. He hated to see the contraption on her, a constant reminder of the pain she must have experienced. Must still experience. One step took him between her thighs, the warmth of their bodies connecting. She gave a little moan and his dick jumped involuntarily. Fuck, this was going to kill him.

"You made me a list yet?"

"I ... I started to. It's at home." He lifted her chin and licked her lower lip. Sweetness flooded his system. Damn she tasted good. He nibbled on the pouting flesh, and stole one swipe into her mouth with his tongue.

She shivered.

He leaned away enough to stare into her eyes. "You keep the list. If I do anything you don't feel comfortable with, you just say no, and I'll stop."

"You don't want to read it?" The tension in her torso decreased a notch and he smiled. They were now in full body contact and she was relaxed against him, all warm and soft, her breasts nudging his chest.

"I don't need to. If I miss anything you really want to try, I hope you'll tell me in person." He brushed their lips together, needing to taste her. Every time he'd kissed her up until now he'd been on the frantic side, not knowing where it would lead. Now that he knew where they'd end up, although not the when, he could enjoy and take his time.

She was a woman meant to be savoured, not gobbled down in a rush.

*

If her heart beat any faster she was going to fall over. The whole long masculine length of him pinned her in place, one hand on either side of her thighs as he leaned his torso against hers. The kiss he pressed to her lips was soft, gentle, his tongue and lips moving over her like a placid breeze. She let herself reach up and stroke his chest, palms to the soft cotton of his shirt, the firm muscle underneath tempting her.

She checked her anxiety level. Nothing but the buzz of sexual desire ran through her veins, and she was so relieved. It had been too long since she'd touched a man because she wanted to. Their frantic scramble in the hallway of the bar had been long months ago, and she drank in the sensation of power and passion mixing together in his touch.

Oh damn, she was really going to do this. She wanted to. Needed to. It was another step in taking back control of her life. The life that had changed so subtly and invasively over the years she was still shocked by her husband's deception. He had made her feel incompetent and undesirable. The emotions Daniel raised were completely different.

He held her in place, his hips rocking slowly, the ridge of his cock branding her body as he dipped his tongue into the tender part of her ear. A shiver took her and he chuckled. "Miss Beth, you are making it very difficult to go slow."

She didn't want slow, not if it meant she'd get to touch him sooner. She grasped him by the collar and pulled his lips back to hers, driving her tongue into his mouth and groaning as he pulled his groin over her clit again.

They feasted on each other and time slipped away. Beth grew light headed, her limbs heavy. Blood pooled in her breasts, her sex, an aching tingle of need. She wanted so much right now.

Daniel broke away and they both gasped for air. His eyes twinkled with mischief. "Sweet Lord, you're making me drunk on kisses alone." He held her cheek for a moment, brushing a thumb over her lower lip. "Hold still."

One button at a time he slipped her blouse open, their hips still in contact as he opened the fabric to reveal her skin, her bra. Her breasts showed through the thin fabric, nipples puckered tight.

"That a favourite bra?" He ran a finger along the edge of the lace. Lord, he must be able to feel her heart pounding.

"No. Why?" He kissed her cheek again, a brief chaste kiss before pulling away, reaching for something on her desk. When he held up a pair of scissors her throat went dry. "What...?"

"Trust me?"

She fought down the tremor of terror in her belly. She was in a classroom, for heaven's sake. He was a well-known and reliable man around town. Images of knife-wielding maniacs had no place in this fantasy.

"Yes," she squeaked out.

"I'll buy you a new bra." He pulled the fabric away from her body and slipped his hand between the elastic and her skin. Then he put the tip of the scissor against his fingers and snipped. Deliberately, carefully, he cut away the supporting fabric of the cup, leaving behind the bones of her bra. The swells of her breasts were completely bare, the underwires remaining for support. He put the scissors away, slowly closed the drawer and piled the shreds of fabric on the edge of her desk. Even, controlled movements that made her expectations rise by the second.

Then he sat in her chair, adjusted the height and rolled between her legs. He kissed her belly button before looking into her eyes with that dark dangerous expression she was coming to recognize and anticipate. It stole her breath away. Leaning forward, he licked a line up her torso, tonguing the fabric under her right breast. Another lap took him higher, drawing a circle around the tingling peak of her nipple. He sucked the whole tip into his mouth, pulsing his lips around her and a line of heat drove from his mouth through her body straight to her core.

Oh lord, it felt good. Every suck, every brush of his teeth on her skin made her feel more and more alive. From one side to the other he alternated, the cool air of the room brushing the wet skin left behind, contrasting hard with the heat of his mouth. One hand,

then two, came into play, cupping and lifting, massaging and pinching until she bit her lip to keep from crying out.

"You're beautiful, Beth, curvy and womanly in all the right ways." Another nip to the tender undercurve made her gasp, her panties soaking with the moisture flooding from her sex.

"Oh shit..." He suckled hard and stars formed before her eyes. "Daniel, please..." She wasn't sure what she was asking for, only that she needed. Needed something more than what he was currently giving her.

He rose from the chair and caught the back of her head in one hand, drawing their mouths together while he played and teased her body with the other. Her muscles felt tight, ready to explode and she rubbed wantonly against him, trying to find the missing component that nagged her.

Then he pulled away.

He stepped back, still breathing heavily, and his gaze swept her body like a heated brand. He wiped his mouth carefully, then lowered a hand and adjusted himself through his jeans. A wave of desire rolled over her. Fucking on the desk sounded better and better by the minute.

They stared at each other, Beth clutching the edge of her desktop. The solid surface prickled her fingertips, the minute scratches from a thousand pens and touches itching her hypersensitive skin.

Daniel stepped closer and tugged her blouse together, slowly doing up the buttons. The cool fabric brushed her nipples, driving her crazy with need.

"You have to pick up anything on the way home?" He smoothed his palms down her waist, then lifted her off the desk top.

What the hell? "Daniel, I..." Her nipples stood proud, stabbing the front of her blouse. "Aren't we...?"

He chuckled as he touched a fingertip to one of the points. "I came to talk to you, to plan a date. You've got enough time to beat the boys home if we head out now."

Shit. The boys. Her blood was boiling and she was going to die if she didn't get ... something. But he was right.

"I can't believe you're stopping now." Samuel would never have left himself unsatisfied.

"We've got time, sweetheart, and anticipation is a part of the fun. If you've had nothing but slam-bam sex, you may not know it, but delayed gratification is very rewarding."

She shook her head in frustration and turned to gather her things. "Didn't have it on the damn list you made me start, that's for sure."

He held out his hand and she accepted it, his clasp warm and solid. The admiration in his eyes felt good, even as the fabric rubbing her nipples sent shivers down her spine and made her sex ache. He unlocked and opened the door and offered his elbow to her.

"You really surprise me, Daniel." He made her body tingle, and not knowing what the hell he was going to do next had the potential to drive her nuts. But it was a good uncertainty. She didn't feel like he was a moment away from taking a swing at her, more of a 'what's inside the box' kind of curiosity. She adjusted her jacket to cover her breasts a little better, her damn nipples still standing at attention.

"Because I think your body is beautiful?"

She stumbled and he caught her, steadying her on her feet. That mischievous twinkle in his eye made heat flash across her face.

"Shh, not in the school." The hallway was empty now, doors wide open, many of her fellow teachers gone already, but the echoes of voices grew louder as the two of them moved toward the stairs.

"You planning on hiding from me some more, Miss Beth, or are you going to start answering my calls?"

Somehow she had to make this work. No matter how awkward, she wanted it. "I'll answer. It would be best to talk when the boys are gone to bed. Can you call later in the evening?"

"I could. I could also come over."

The way her whole body reacted she figured something had to give, and soon. But she would stay in control of the situation.

"I don't think that's wise."

He tugged her to a stop, turning her to face him. "I'm not going to do anything to upset the boys on purpose, but either you're serious about this or you're not. I'm not going to be led around like some dog for you to pet when you get the urge. Either you say no right now, and I'll bow out of your life, or you stop saying yes with your body and no with your actions.

"What's it going to be? Do you still want to go ahead? You think about it, and let me know, because while I'm a patient man, Beth, I won't let you yank my chain like this. I won't let you start one way and expect you to change later. It's all or nothing. So why don't we make it your call. You contact me if you want to go ahead any farther."

She nodded, knowing she wasn't being fair, even if she had damn good reasons for it. "You know it's impossible to think straight with my bra in pieces in your pocket."

He grinned at her. "I'm hoping when you call, you say yes. Then the next time I cut something off you, it'll be your panties."

Beth swallowed, the racing beat of her heart making her lightheaded. He was right; she needed to stop being wishy-washy about this. When they did find a time and place to be truly alone, she wasn't sure she was going to survive. But she was growing willing to take the risk.

Chapter Six

Dinner dishes were being cleared away and Beth looked longingly at the recliner in the living room. A simple flick would help light the gas fireplace and she could lean back and rest her head on the soft cushions. The incredible sexual tension Daniel had lit in her body after school refused to settle down and she ached. Combined with the sheer workload of being a single mom—she was beat. A chance to put up her feet, even for a few minutes, would be sheer paradise.

A crash jerked her from her blissful daydream. Nathan gasped and then complete silence reigned. At her feet the broken bowl from the evening pasta dish lay in pieces, a few noodles clinging to the surface limp and scattered like miniature snakes.

"Shit." Lance turned from the fridge where he'd been putting away the milk.

"No swearing." She held out a hand to keep the boys in one spot. "Don't move, I don't want you to cut yourself on the glass."

She grabbed the dustbin from under the sink and picked up the larger pieces. Lance got the broom and by the time the mess was cleaned up the lethargy that had crept over her was gone. Which was good, since she still had papers to mark and a lesson she wanted to revise for next week's classes. The boys also needed homework spelling words checked and...

A soft sniff interrupted her mental rambling. Nathan stood to the side of the kitchen, eyes wide, his face white.

"Nathan? You okay? Did you get hurt when the bowl fell?"

He shook his head rapidly, tucking his hands behind his back.

Shit.

"Honey, it's okay. It was an accident." She held out her arms and he moved towards her slowly, warily. *Damn bastard of a husband.* "Mommy's not mad at you. I bet the bowl was slippery from the butter on the edge. We've cleaned it all up." She wrapped her arms around him and held him close, the rapid pitter-patter of his heart as it pounded in fear making her crazy.

She should have known better. She should have been stronger and dealt with Samuel long before he began to be such a dangerous influence in his sons' lives. He'd been so damn demanding and easily irritated as the years passed they'd all learned to walk on eggshells around him.

Breaking something had been akin to murder in Samuel's books.

Lance glanced at her from where he stood at the sink, his young face twisted into a grimace as he fought not to cry. When he turned and started washing the dishes, Beth's soul ached a little more. It was so like him—her firstborn—once again stepping up and being the grown up. Caring and acting beyond his years.

A sense of frustration swept her. What was she doing? There was so much she needed to deal with, repercussions from ten years of mental abuse. How was she supposed to be able to make things better for her boys when she still felt instant fear when the situation deviated even minutely from the 'proper way'?

What she wouldn't give for a cup of coffee and a good long talk with a sympathetic ear to listen. She didn't want to talk to the school counselor and bring the whole mess into

her new work place. She didn't want to return to the stony faced therapist she'd been seeing in Calgary.

Daniel crossed her mind again and her face warmed. She stood, still cuddling Nathan, and shuffled her way into the living room. Her leg ached, but she wasn't about to put him down. He needed her. Heck, she needed him. They settled together in the big armchair. The grading could wait. The lesson—she'd make time to look it over during the next couple of days.

Tonight her boys needed a reminder that life was not as confining as it used to be.

"Lance, honey, leave the dishes. I need your help here."

He joined her, sitting next to his little brother on the couch. Robbie clutched his security blanket in his hand, a defiant look in his eyes.

Her husband had hated that blanket.

"I think we're settled into the school year enough we need to start planning some fun activities to do together. You guys got any ideas? What would you like to do as a family?"

Nathan wiggled a bit, his face brightening. "You mean, like going swimming or stuff like that?"

Beth groaned inside but hid it behind a smile. "Yup. Only I don't think we'll use the swimming hole anymore this year, right? We'll go to the pool. Anything else?"

Together they made a list of suggestions and the mood in the house lightened. Beth gave thanks the kids were resilient

A couple of hours later, after multiple games of Snakes and Ladders, cups of hot chocolate—with marshmallows—and an endless number of mindless tunes bellowed out during bath time, they were finally all tucked into bed. A glance at the clock showed it was only nine p.m., but she could have sworn it was close to midnight. She was ready to crawl into her own bed and take the weight off her aching limb.

She really should get back to her to-do list and not give into the temptation to soak for an hour and then head to bed herself. And yet, damn it, why not? Abandoning all plans of productivity, including ignoring the dishes in the sink, didn't mean she was evil. She had two days on the weekend to get her chores done.

Mom break, coming up now.

She started the tub running before grabbing a glass of wine and her book. Steaming in the hot water made her start to feel halfway human again. It also gave her plenty of time to daydream about the sensations Daniel twisted round in her body. Her book abandoned to the floor she wondered again where the line was between getting what she wanted physically and discovering what Daniel offered in addition to the sex.

Friendship.

She dried off and pulled on her thick pajamas, all the while debating with herself. Daniel wanted an answer. She stared at the phone. *Damn it*. Without letting herself think it through anymore she dialed and waited for a response.

Enough. She'd had enough years of waiting and being careful and it was time to keep this ball rolling.

"Coleman's," a deep voice answered and she hesitated. It kind of sounded like him but...

"Daniel?"

The man at the other end laughed. "You're close. Only five more guesses."

She smiled in spite of her nervousness. "Jesse."

"Now how did you do that?"

It was her turn to laugh. "Of all the boys I figured you were the only one who'd play games on the phone."

"Yeah, well, don't tell my Mama. Just a minute, I'll get Daniel for you."

The echoing silence gave her enough time for the image of Jesse and Joel dancing with Darleen to pop back into her brain. What was it that Daniel had said? The boys ... shared? The thought intrigued her. Not with them per say, but the whole two guys paying attention to her—about as far from the vanilla missionary sex forced on her over the years as she could imagine.

The temptation to add to her 'list' was strong. Daniel said he didn't want to see it anymore, so why the hell not? It would be one of those inspirational things—find a few books, read about it and get all turned on. Reading about it was enough for now.

Actually, having more than one guy paying attention to her at one time was probably one of the 'better imagined than done' things. Wouldn't there be too many limbs and body parts touching and connecting? A sudden throb in her clit surprised her. Okay, lots of body parts touching *her* would be fine. But the guys with her—she wouldn't want them to touch.

"Beth?"

How had she ever mistaken Jesse for Daniel? The deep timbre of his voice made her toes curl. It took a few seconds to drag her mind back to the reason why she was calling.

"Hey, you asked me to phone. I know it's late, but do you have a few minutes to talk?"

A pause. "Is this going to be a good talk or a bad talk?"

"I'm not calling it off." *There*, it had been said. "I need ... I need some advice, beyond the ... issue we're going to..."

He laughed. "You can't even say the word sex when you're on the phone. Damn, you are one hundred percent charming."

"And you're a tease."

"What kind of advice can I get for you tonight?" There was a creaking sound, and the voices in the background faded away. "I'm out on the porch and no one's listening. We can chat if you'd like. Or I can come over there."

Beth glanced at her watch. Damn, she was going to be bagged tomorrow. "I'm all ready for bed, and really I need to get up early. I slacked off on all my chores tonight putting out fires."

"Troubles?"

She sighed. "Kind of, but it was a good evening in the end. The kids and I made a list of things they want to do. Only some of them..."

He sat silently on the other end of the line, waiting for her to continue. He chuckled. "You're going to have to help me here with a few more details. I can't tell if that's a 'some of them require snow to fall', or 'some of them need you to have twelve hands and you'd like my help'."

Damn, for not wanting to get involved with him the temptation to have him around grew by the minute. The boys liked him; by all reports he was a safe guy to do things with around town.

Her body craved him.

She couldn't decide if that final reason held her in restraint or egged her on. She

hummed for a minute. "Daniel, can I back up about twelve paces and ask a real big favour of you?"

"What's up, darling?"

"They want to go swimming."

He whistled low. "Water's going to be fairly brisk this time of—"

"At the pool. But with my bad leg it's hard for me to play with them. Would you be willing to come with us sometime? I hate to disappoint them, and it might be a good way to ... well, you know. Your part of our deal."

"Become friends?"

"Yeah." She stumbled down the stairs to turn off all the lights and make sure the door was locked. Leaving it unlatched—she couldn't believe she'd done that the other day. "There's an open swim both days of the weekend. The times are listed online. If either of them work for you."

"You want to go tomorrow?"

That easy, huh? "You don't have commitments already?"

His rich laugh spread over her like a balm. "I've always got stuff on the go, but that's the good part about having friends—they make time for each other. I can take a couple of hours off to join you and the boys. The twins came home this weekend from college, so they can help out around the ranch. You want me to pick you all up? The kids would love riding in the jump seat of my truck."

Oh, they would, but she didn't want to push this that fast. "I'll meet you there. Thanks, Daniel."

"Not at all. I get to see you in a swim suit out of the deal as well, right?"

With one sentence, he stole her voice. She was going to see him in not much more than his briefs and suddenly this wasn't sounding like a very safe public activity to do.

"Beth, you still there?"

"I'm..."

"You're blushing, aren't you? Is the thought of me looking you over making you tingle in certain spots?"

"Oh God, stop it."

He chuckled again and the tingles he'd mentioned spread. "You ever have phone sex, darling?"

He paused until she had to answer. "No."

"The boys in bed?"

"Yes."

"Hmm, then I think you have to give me a minute." The squeak of the porch door carried over the phone and voices flickered in and out of the background. "I want to be able to join you."

"Join me?" *Phone sex. Holy shit.* Her panties were wet, and getting wetter by the second.

"Beth, are you in your bedroom?"

"No," she squeezed out through a throat gone dry. Her heart pounded, and her clit thumped in time with her heart.

He sighed, a long relaxed sound. "That's better. I'm in my room. I want you to go to your room and lock the door so you're not worried about the boys interrupting you."

"Daniel, I..." Oh God, her feet moved up the stairs involuntarily, like puppets strings

drew her forward.

"You don't want to do this, you just tell me, but I think you'll enjoy it."

She swallowed hard. "I want to." Oh yeah, she really wanted to.

"Are you in your room?"

She turned the lock. "Yes." The whole space somehow looked different. Brighter, cozier. More sensual. The sound of his breathing on the other end of the line teased her. Heat her already steamy blood.

"Take off your clothes and crawl under the covers. It's cold in that big room this time of year. You got any toys handy?"

Holy shit. "Toys?" she squeaked.

"If I were there, I'd be touching you. Running my hands over your skin. Kissing your beautiful breasts. Stroking your pussy. If you got a vibrator or something go grab it, just to help out a little, until I'm really there."

He was asking if she had a vibrator. A man who made her blood boil with a single glance was talking about sex toys. A shiver ran over her skin and her breathing sped up. "I've... I've got to put the phone down." *Oh God, did she just admit to him she had one?*

"I'll be here when you pick up. I'm taking off my clothes as well. Thinking about you is getting me harder than a spike."

Beth lowered the phone to the bed, her hand shaking slightly. *Holy shit, phone sex?* She hadn't been this turned-on in forever. The teasing anticipation brought by Daniel's touch at the school raced through her body. She pulled off her robe, opened her side drawer and grabbed her vibrator. A laugh escaped her as she tossed it on the bed. She wasn't going to need much to go off tonight, her body already tight and aroused from the sound of his voice. A couple of wiggles took care of her pajamas and she dove under the thick quilt.

Suddenly she felt very lonely and a little shy. Phone sex. *Sheesh.* If she weren't so excited she'd think it was a little pathetic.

She took a deep breath to steady her nerves before picking up the phone. "Daniel?"

"Hmm, right here, darling. You all cozy in that big bed? Your nipples still tight from the cold of the room or you warming up already?"

A flash of electricity shot up her spine. "Holy shit, you just jump right in, don't you?"

"Are they tight?"

"Yes." Like rocks. And they ached for his mouth, for the pull of his lips she'd felt that afternoon.

"Touch them. Damn, I loved seeing you today. Sexy as sin with your tits showing through the fabric of your blouse, like they were playing peek-a-boo for me." He hummed, a deep vibrating noise that stroked her eardrums and melted something inside. "You tasted like pure pleasure. Rolling my tongue around your nipples and sucking on them made my cock ache. I want you to touch yourself. How do you like it? You like your breasts massaged? You like what I did to you today?"

Beth had lain back against the pillows when he started talking, propping the phone up by her ear. To hell with being embarrassed, this was damn hot. She cupped her breasts in her hands and squeezed and rubbed like he had earlier in the day. Slow tugs on her nipples as she imagined him sucking them.

"I liked it," she whispered, the words sultry and deep to her own ears.

"You like it hard? If I were to lean over you on the bed, press my weight on top of

you and suck your nipple into my mouth hard, would that turn you on?" He paused, his breathing rough on the other end of the line. "Or you want me to play with you slowly? Tongue around your sweet red nipples again and again?"

"Tonight I want it hard." She pinched as she answered, the tingle in her groin growing as her breasts grew more sensitive.

"Shit, yeah, tugging and biting until you make those little moaning sounds deep in your throat." He growled, low and husky. "You taste so good, your skin is hot against my lips. I'm going to touch your pussy the next time I see you. Slowly take my fingers and open you up to find out what pleases you.

She whimpered, wishing he were there, doing it right at that moment.

"Touch your clit, Beth, use your vibrator if you want, but imagine it's my mouth, and my fingers down there. Licking and exploring, circling your sweet pussy and dipping inside."

She fingered and teased herself, flicking the vibrator on and following his voice, moaning as his directions brought her closer to climax by the second.

He panted in her ear. "I can imagine how you're going to taste and I can hardly wait. I'll push my tongue into you, deep inside, reaching for the sweet cream from your body. Circling your clit again." He swore softly. "Oh God, Beth, I want to touch you so fucking badly right now. Want to fill you up. Put something into your pussy for me, so I can think about being the one to press in. Stretch yourself full."

The vibrator was cold and plastic and she would have given anything at that moment to have him really there with her, his hot skin over hers, his breath warming her, the scent of sex in the air.

"What are you doing, Daniel? While you're talking to me? You ... hard?" Her inhibitions melted away with the heat of desire rippling through her.

"Shit yeah, I've got my fist around my cock and it's not enough. I can't wait to have your mouth on me. To see your lips surround me and have you suck me hard." Beth let out a little moan, wondering what it would feel like to touch him that intimately. To hold him in her mouth and taste his seed. "I imagine your tongue touching me, my balls ache. I want more than your mouth—I want to fuck you hard. Slip the head of my cock against your sweet pussy and drive in like a hammer."

She groaned, the wicked words making her hotter than she'd ever expected. She pressed her vibrator against her clit. "Where are we?" Her voice sounded hollow, her ears full of the rush of blood pumping through her veins.

"I've got you bent over the seat of my truck, your ass bare, your pussy all wet and ready for me." The soft echo of a slapping sound carried over the line. Oh my God, that was him, jerking off in the background. The knowledge was so naughty and hot she could barely stand it. "I get to watch every second of fucking you this way, your pussy lips hot and swollen around my cock."

From behind. Beth flipped her mental image and rubbed her clit harder, plunging the now warm plastic into her needy core.

"Your ass looks so good, I'm tempted to take my cock and squeeze my way in there, let you—"

"My ass?" she gasped. The tingling grew harder and hotter than before. Anal sex had never been on the agenda. Until now.

"Oh, you like that idea, do you?"

She couldn't even breathe.

"Not this time darling, I'm getting too close. I want to feel you come around me. Squeeze my dick when it's buried deep in your body. I'm gonna fuck you hard until you can't stand it anymore, my fingers on your clit, my cock—"

"Daniel ... oh shit." She came, the waves fast and hard, shaking her body and making her gasp out in pleasure.

"Oh yeah, do it. Fuck I can't..." He groaned in her ear and another delicious pulse struck her. She let it take her, the vibrator slipping from her body, her touch on her clit slowing as her sensitivity rose. The blood pounding in her ears deafened her for a second, her climax rolling slowly down as she pictured him bent over her, still buried inside. Sweet Jesus, it felt like the earth had moved. They both lay speechless for a moment, the echo of their harsh breathing the only sound carrying over the receiver.

"Holy hell, woman, I can't wait until I'm really with you."

She laughed revelling in the sense of freedom washing over her. "I feel like I'm about sixteen years old. Except I'd never dreamed of phone sex at that age."

"I'm damn glad you're not sixteen. Shit, I'm getting hard again, just thinking about what you must look like right now. I bet your skin is flushed and warm, and you're all soft and cuddly."

Boneless was a better word for it. It took actual effort to answer him. "You like cuddling, Daniel?" He hummed, soft and low and a trace of a shiver flitted over her skin. Damn, he turned her on.

"I like sex, and cuddling is a part of it. I love how cuddling slips into sex."

"Really?" She rolled over, slipping the vibrator into the drawer with her last burst of energy. She'd wash it when she woke. Right now, sleep beckoned.

"Hmm, really. I'm going to take you in the morning sometime, darling, when you're all soft and drowsy. I'll slip into you and bring you to an orgasm as you wake."

"Jesus, stop it. You'll be getting me all worked up again."

He laughed. "You relaxed now? Feel a little better?"

"Hmm, yeah." Thinking about anything right now was virtually impossible. "See you tomorrow?"

"Can't wait. Sleep well."

Beth clicked off the phone and dropped it on the side table. After turning off her light she buried herself in the now toasty quilt. The sexual euphoria in her body lulled her off to sleep. Tomorrow would be soon enough to think things through.

Chapter Seven

Daniel waited by the pool doors for them to arrive. This was their third meeting to take the boys to the pool and he was so looking forward to today's swim.

Getting involved with Beth had pretty much worked out like he expected. Trying to find time to spend together with the boys around made life very difficult. Oh, the two of them had met for coffee, and he'd joined her picking up groceries. They'd even managed to 'accidentally' meet while out walking a few evenings. But none of these circumstances offered any real time alone, and there were only so many things they could safely talk about in public or while around the kids. While he was fine with taking his time to romance the woman, they weren't going to ever get past this stage if he didn't do a little wrangling.

Luckily, wrangling was something he was damn good at.

Beth pulled up in her SUV. The boys poured out as soon as the lights dimmed and the engine turned off.

"Daniel! Come on, hurry, hurry." Excited beyond belief, the three of them had enough power to drag him off his feet without even trying.

"Hey guys, let me help your mama for a minute and then we're good to go." Lance eyed him as he moved forward, offering a hand to Beth. The kid watched him like a hawk around Beth, and there was no way he wanted to be explaining anything to an eight-year-old when there still wasn't anything to explain.

"Morning, Daniel."

He loved how she blushed at him. "Morning. You ready for some fun in the water?" *Oh hell, he hoped so.*

She gave him a suspicious look. "Come on boys, let's not keep Daniel waiting."

Inside the doors the little guys scattered, pulling off their boots and bouncing outside the change room door like grasshoppers. Beth laughed at them, a light and rested sound and Daniel felt something inside turn over. The draw he felt toward her wasn't diminishing, and it wasn't just sexual frustration.

"Sleep well?" he asked softly.

She flicked a glance at him. He'd phoned last night and wanted to come over but she still didn't think it was wise, so he'd bought her to a climax again, describing making love behind the barn. He was getting damn good at talking dirty. "Like a baby."

They grinned at each other and Daniel had to adjust his stance to make room to take the pressure off his rising cock. Fuck, getting into a swimsuit was going to be dangerous.

Beth paid their entrance fees. Daniel coughed to get her attention. He leaned toward the attendant. "You still have room in the water games program?"

She pulled a clipboard out and checked it. "Five slots available."

Beth frowned for a second. "What's that about?"

The girl perked up. "Oh, it's a program we're trying out. You sign up the kids and we've got instructors to supervise and lead the kids through all kinds of games and activities in the pool. There's no extra charge, and they get to try diving and water polo, and use the equipment. It's a lot of fun."

"Mommy, can we do that?" The bouncing bodies slipped over to surround them,

little hands clutching at Beth, their eyes pleading. Daniel smiled at her expression, her sheer delight at seeing the enthusiasm of her boys.

"Of course you can. If you're old enough." Beth turned to the counter. "Eight, seven and six. Is that okay?"

The girl nodded. "Definitely." She held up wristbands and three little arms shot out to get tagged. She gave out instructions while she fastened them on. "You need to get changed, have a shower then join the group in the kiddie pool. That's where you're starting in..." she checked over her shoulder, "...ten minutes. But remember to walk on deck, right guys?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Excitement carried in their voices.

Nathan tugged on Beth's arm. "Are you going to play with us too, Mommy?"

"I think it's only for big boys like you guys. I'll just take it easy in the hot tub. Is that okay?"

He nodded. "Daniel can play with you. That way you won't be lonely."

Oh yeah, that was exactly what Daniel had in mind. He looked up to see Beth's flushed face staring back at him as her sons tugged her toward the change room.

Daniel winked before turning to double check. "The program runs for an hour?"

The girl behind the counter shook her head. "An hour and a half. That okay?"

Daniel nodded slowly. "That's just fine." *In fact, it was fucking marvelous.* He slipped his shoes off at the rack and made his way down the hallway to make sure the second part of his plan would work as well. Once the boys were happy and cared for, he and Beth were going to have a little alone time.

Hallelujah.

*

"You planned this, didn't you?"

"I did." Daniel put her crutches to the side and helped her down the stairs into the hot tub.

She took another glance around the pool area. Her boys were already having a blast, screaming and yelling and doing cannonballs with the group. Daniel slipped her hand off her shoulder and tugged on her waist, drawing her to his side. There were a few other moms sitting on the deck in the plastic chairs, noses buried in books or chatting quietly together. A few smiled in her direction but no one seemed to think anything of her and Daniel sitting intimately together in the hot tub.

"I saw the notice last week when we were here, and thought it might offer a solution to our problems."

His lips hovered over her ear, the hand at her waist rubbing the bare skin of her back. She didn't do bikinis, not after three kids in three years. She was glad that the mess on her leg didn't seem to bother him at all either. The scars from the car crash were beginning to fade from her leg. The scars on her heart ... maybe they were starting to go as well.

Fingers fleetingly brushed her thigh, and she took a quick breath.

"Our problem?"

"Getting alone."

Another stroke, higher this time. She shivered in spite of the heat of the pool.

"Daniel, what are you doing?"

He leaned back, resting his head on the tiles. "Trying to decide what I'm going to do to you first." His dark grey eyes bore into her and she swallowed. Her libido kicked up a

few notches.

"First? Here?" The words squeaked out of her. *Shit, shit, shit.* "Daniel, we're in public. We can't..." He grabbed her foot and tugged it into his lap, rubbing her insole hard with his thumbs. "Oh damn, that feels good." She adjusted until she sat across from him, propping her other foot on him without any hesitation.

He chuckled. "You mean I just needed to offer a massage all this time to get you into my evil clutches?"

She returned his grin and winked. "Yeah, I'm easy that way." The instant heat that smouldered back made her sex ache. Beth closed her eyes and sank into the water, enjoying his touch far more than any massage she'd gotten since the accident.

The last couple of times they'd come to the pool Daniel had been all about the kids. Oh, he'd been courteous and helped her get where she needed to go, but he'd kept most of his attention on the boys, enticing them to try a few floats and swimming strokes. Playing tag and generally wearing them out. She'd relaxed in the warm water of the kiddie pool, clapping and nodding when the request 'look at me, Mommy' rang out for the millionth time.

Something warm had sprouted in her heart as she watched him with her sons, seeing him move without an agenda except to have fun and enjoy their company.

It gave her hope, far more than she wanted it to.

Now he turned all that focused attention on her. He rubbed and caressed her feet, one at a time, then switched back and did her calves. By that time she was boiling alive between the heat of the water and the heat of his touch. Her breasts ached and the core of her body felt hollow and empty. When he tugged her by the hand she shook herself alert, slightly dazed.

"Come on." Daniel helped her out of the hot tub, draping her towel around her neck before offering his elbow to her. She limped at his side, leaning on his arm for balance. He carried her crutches in his other hand, the ones she used to get around in the change room until she put the brace back on.

"Where are we going?"

"For some non-vanilla."

She stumbled and he steadied her quickly. "You're not serious," she hissed.

"Never been more serious in my life."

Holy cow, he was too.

He nodded politely at the ladies as they maneuvered past the deck chairs. One woman eyed him hungrily and Beth wanted to hang a sign around his neck saying 'Taken'.

Where the hell had that come from? She beat down the feelings of jealousy as fast as she could. Daniel and her were just ... friends ... although it appeared they were about to enjoy some benefits. *Oh, sweet Jesus.* The heat racing over her skin had nothing to do with the hot tub they'd just left.

Daniel turned down a side hallway between the men's and ladies change rooms, glancing behind them cautiously before opening a door and leading her in. It was one of the family change rooms. The rectangular room held a small wall mounted bench and a larger shower enclosure at the far end. He closed the door and the click of the lock echoed loud in the room.

"Holy Shit, Daniel, what—"

He spun her in his arms, and swallowed the question. He took control of her lips, clutching their bodies together tightly, kissing her madly. She gave in, the need for him having built too high over the past days to try and deny anymore.

Teeth and tongues, wet touches, simmering need. All she could do was feel, all she could think about was the way her body reacted. He peeled off one shoulder strap of her tank top suit and fastened his mouth to her breast. Sucking the tip hard, he nipped and licked and drove her mad. He leaned her back on the wall and torn down the other strap, one hand cupping the round of her breast before feasting on it in turn. Every nerve in her body sang out, the constant ache in her leg fading to nothing as pleasure rose higher and higher. She ran her fingers through his hair, holding his mouth to her intimately. The repetitious tug of his lips teased and ramped up her need.

It only took a second for him to strip away the rest of her suit, and her hands flew up in an attempt to cover her torso.

"Oh darling, you're gorgeous. Don't hide, don't let yourself doubt how fucking incredible it makes me feel to see you naked in front of me." Daniel spoke quietly, his hands clasping her fingers gently and tugging her arms to the sides. Beth planted her palms against the wall for balance, her legs spread wide.

"Oh sweet mercy, woman." He drew a finger down her torso as he knelt at her feet and her belly fluttered under his touch. He leaned closer and took a deep breath in through his nose. "I can smell your desire. You're wet, just thinking about what we're going to do, aren't you?"

Her legs trembled. "What are we going to do?"

His wicked grin flashed up at her. "I already told you. Non-vanilla. We've got forty five minutes left."

With one hand he separated the curls of her body, touching her slowly, his gaze never leaving hers. Again and again he circled a finger along the sensitive skin of her sex, her labia and her clit pulsing in time with her heart. A single finger slipped into her depths and he licked her clit and she moaned.

"You can make some noise, but no screaming, okay? I'll take you somewhere for the screaming sex another time."

"Jesus, Daniel, shut up already and ... holy fuck." He bit her clit and the top of her head nearly blew off, it felt so damn good. Another finger joined the first and he stroked and teased her, inside and out now, his tongue moving rapidly against her throbbing clit. His fingers plunged into her faster and faster until there was no hope of holding back and her orgasm flashed like a wild fire. He slowed his strokes, drawing out the waves until she grasped his head and dragged him away from her now too sensitive center.

He rose and those eyes caught her in his spell. He stripped off his swim trunks and she swore at the size of him, his erection slamming into his belly as he stood. He pulled a condom from the towel on the counter, rolled it on and stepped closer.

"Daniel, how are we going to—"

He kissed her wildly, that massive cock caught between their bodies, the heat of it branding her belly. When he finally pulled away they both gasped for air.

"Fucking need to be inside you. Now."

"Yes, please ... yes." She would have begged for longer but there was no need. Her desperation was reflected in his eyes as well. He stood her on her good leg and took hold of her injured one.

"Tell me if this hurts."

He lifted her thigh slowly, cautiously, watching her face the whole time. The angle took the pressure off the nerves that were usually pinched and sore and she nodded at him, tugging his hips to try and get him closer to where she needed him. "It's good, it's good. Oh God, now, please..."

He lined up the head of his shaft, nudging against her labia, slowly opening her up. He rocked his hips a few times, slipping against her and it felt so amazing she panted for air, clutching him to try and pull him farther in.

He clasped her chin with his free hand and as their eyes met, powered into her body. Full.

Stretched apart.

Aching and wanting and—damn, it felt amazing. She watched his eyes flicker for a second before he dropped his forehead to hers. "That is about the hottest sensation I've ever felt. Oh fuck." He took a deep breath. "You good, darling?"

There was no way on earth she could speak. She nodded.

Slow, even, tortuous, wonderful. He withdrew, paused, then thrust in again. Her breath shot out as his cock rocketed in, and she clutched his shoulders, closing her eyes to let the sensations take control. Let him take control.

He filled her completely, his girth stretching her more than she ever remembered. Maybe it was the angle, maybe it was because they were both panting with desire. Maybe it was the fact that outside the door there were people innocently swimming laps but she'd never been so turned on before in her life. Every plunge rubbed spots inside that in turn lit nerves on fire in chain reactions throughout her body. Her breasts bounced as he rammed himself deep into her core, the broad expanse of his chest rubbing her now screamingly sensitive nipples on every stroke he delivered. Beth's world diminished to the sensory overload enclosed in the small chlorine scented space.

Everything moved in slow motion as she opened her eyes and gazed into his. He returned her stare, his dark pupils mesmerizing, his wicked, sinful grin breaking at the corner of his mouth.

"Fucking against the wall. You ever done this before? Feel the cold of the concrete behind you, feel the heat of my cock as I ream you in two. It's good, ain't it darling? All for you. Every succulent, desirable..." He slammed into her harder still and alarms went off in the back of her brain. This wasn't going to just be an orgasm; it was going to be cataclysmic. "...every fuckable inch of you."

Her climax drew closer, hovering just out of reach.

"Come for me again. I'm going to..." A deep-seated thrust. "...take you with me..." Another. "...you feel so fucking good squeezing my cock..." Another. "...come on, darling."

She came undone. Between the relentless strokes, the dirty talk and the whole naughtiness of the situation, the earth unravelled and took her with it. His mouth clamped down on hers as she started to cry out, the need to express the pleasure tearing her apart, overriding the logical sections of her brain. His tongue slammed into her mouth as his cock drilled her once again and he jerked within her, his release shaking them both as he pinned her to the wall with his weight. Their kisses changed slowly, turning back into caresses, wet pleasure passing back and forth as their air exchanged—open mouths now gasping against each other.

Daniel lowered her leg slowly. She let out a squeak of pain, the return of weight on the limb a stark contrast to the endorphins of pleasure still racing through her. He soothed her, stroking his hand over her hip, kissing her forehead.

They were still connected intimately, his chest crushing her breasts. She swore his cock swelled even larger inside her, the skin of her passage unaccustomed to hard use for months. Hell, for years. Daniel kissed her again, dropping a line of tender caresses behind her ear, down her neck. His work calloused hands massaged her butt in smooth rhythmic circles.

He let out a slow sigh. "We've got ten minutes grace. I'm gonna head out onto the deck. If you want to hit the change room, I'll round up the boys and herd them in your direction when they're done."

She still couldn't speak. He kissed her cheek, kissed her lips. When he pulled from her body she shivered, sad at the loss of his heat. He twisted her around and sat her on the bench, stroking her cheek with his knuckles.

"You might want to hop in the shower for a minute."

She looked up at him, confused. Oh damn, he was fine. He dealt with the condom and pulled on his trunks, arranging his still-ample girth strategically.

"Beth? You gonna be okay?"

She pulled her towel over herself slowly, the rush of heat from the experience still flushing her skin. "I'm fine. More than fine." She made herself look up at him. "Daniel?"

He turned in the act of unlocking the door. "Yeah?"

"Thank you."

He shook his head and grinned at her and something inside came dangerously close to melting.

"Thank *you*. I've got to run."

She nodded and watched him walk out the door, locking her in the room alone. Her head touched back on the wall behind her as she sucked in deep breathes of air. She'd really done it. They'd done it.

Non-vanilla.

Chapter Eight

"So you going to be able to make it to both the wedding and the party afterward?" Daniel tossed a few coins in the tip jar and turned to carry the coffees back to their table.

Their table, sheesh.

She was doing it again. Since Saturday she'd been fighting to make sure she kept her head on straight and didn't read too much into Daniel's attentive behaviour. He'd picked her up every day when she was done with classes and taken her out for a coffee. They had just enough time for a quick conversation to unwind before heading home to meet the bus at the gate. She still didn't feel comfortable talking in public about her past, but they seemed to have enough to chat about anyway. Now that October had begun it seemed everyone was starting to get ready for the coming winter. They vented about her daily trials in classroom and his on the ranch and in the Coleman's furniture workshop.

The adult company was keeping her sane. Oh yeah, hello, the sex had rocked, and he was mighty easy on the eyes, but the companionship was another component she hadn't realized she'd craved so badly. This whole deal with Daniel was supposed to be about friendship and fun, not forever.

The part of her soul that occasionally wished that she'd found a man like Daniel in the first place? She wrapped that part up in ropes and tied it off real tight. It wasn't allowed to mess with the fantastic reality she was experiencing.

"Beth?"

She looked up into his eyes in confusion. "Sorry, wool gathering."

"No troubles. I just want to know if you're able to come to both the wedding and the reception. The boys are welcome."

Oh damn, hadn't she told him? "Daniel, are you talking about Blake and Jaxi? This coming weekend?"

"Of course. The wedding is at—"

"Daniel, the boys and I are headed to Calgary on Friday after school lets out. We're spending Thanksgiving with my parents and my sister. I'm sorry, I thought I'd told you."

By the expression on his face, she hadn't, or he'd forgotten.

"That makes sense. You drive safe, and I'll see you when you get back."

He switched topics to describe a woodworking project he was making special order for a hotel in Canmore and she fidgeted with her cup and tried to stay alert. She usually loved to listen to him, the rough timbre of his voice teasing all the spots in her psyche that needed a man's attention and sharing. In six weeks time a piece of him had wrapped its way around her and she was worried it would be impossible to not let it show.

"You think you'd like one?" he asked and Beth stumbled for an answer.

Somehow she got to the end of the visit without making too much more of a fool of herself. The tiny seed of hope in her heart she buried deep again, not letting it see any hint of light to encourage it. It was too soon to be thinking about getting seriously involved with another man. Heck, it hadn't even been a year since Samuel's death.

And although Daniel had been nothing but friendly and supportive, she still hesitated to take it any farther. She needed to stay in control. Call the shots.

It was the only way she knew she and the boys would remain safe.

Wasn't it?

* * * *

Daniel passed another round of drinks to the tables, then headed up the hill to spend some time alone pondering why he wasn't particularly happy today. The crowd was loud and boisterous, celebrating the end of another growing season but more importantly the wedding of his oldest brother to their next-door neighbour's little girl. Jaxi was all grown up now, although it had taken a bit for that information to sink through Blake's thick skull.

Thanksgiving weekend was as appropriate a time as any for them to have held the wedding, only there was a pit in Daniel's belly. He should have been pleased as anything. All his family was around and it looked like everyone was getting along today. With six brothers there had always been tough moments as they dealt with the reality of belonging to a big family. As six individuals they didn't always see eye to eye—yet for the most part they were tight.

The fact Beth had hauled her family back to Calgary for the weekend—*that* was the part that sucked. He hadn't realized how much he would miss her and the little tykes. He kept spotting things he wanted to show her, and his frustration made him irritable. He forced a smile on his face and tried to put her out of his mind.

"You planning on doing anything other than moping today, big bro?"

His youngest brother grinned at him from where he knelt at Daniel's feet, staring up with that wide-eyed expression that made the girls flutter around like butterflies.

"Stick it, Joel."

Another chuckle sounded on his other side. "Methinks someone is in love. His sweet princess is not here and now he's got no one to dazzle with his wisdom." Jesse poked Joel in the ribs and Daniel was tempted to smack their two heads together.

"Idiots. Don't you have things you're supposed to be attending to?"

Joel pointed to the outdoor dance area. "All set to go. Can't start anything else without the stars and they're taking a powder break."

With a wiggle of his brow Jesse gave a snort. "Probably trying to figure out a way to work in a quickie before they have to—"

"Do you mind?" *Holy shit*, but Jesse was annoying at times.

Joel smacked his twin on the arm and shoved him in the direction of the bar. "I see more customers for you. Quit being a jerk, if you can help it."

Jesse flipped him the bird behind his back as he good-naturedly headed to the bar area. Daniel shook his head and Joel laughed out loud.

"He's a pain in the ass, ain't he?"

Daniel raised a brow. "Like you aren't?"

"I know ... two peas in a pod."

Daniel had to smile. Of all the six brothers, he and Joel were probably the closest, even with the whole twins living in each other's pocket deal.

"You do seem like you're not all there today, and I don't think it's because you're upset Jaxi's joining the family." Joel pulled out a couple of chairs and sat in one.

"Shit, I'm not the one who wanted to get involved with her. How are you doing?"

Daniel watched the crowds of community that had come out for the wedding wander over the lawn area outside the sprawling main house of the Six Pack Ranch.

Joel laughed. "Don't try to change the topic. We were talking about the fact the lady you've been visiting with daily isn't anywhere to be seen."

Daniel shrugged. "Couldn't be helped."

"You really like her don't you?"

Daniel leaned back in his chair and thought about it. First reaction? "Yeah. I do."

Joel's quick gaze darted around the crowd celebrating on the lawn. "So we going to see you doing this kind of thing before long?"

Oh hell. "See, that might be a touch difficult. She doesn't think of me that way." The expression of shock on his brother's face made a laugh burst out.

"Fuck, no—are you sure about that?"

"Fuck, yes."

Joel shook his head. "But I've been hearing all kinds of stories around town about you taking her out all the time and shit like that. What the hell is going on if it's not you working your way up to proposing to the girl down the road? You said you'd had enough of the casual route after the whole debacle with Sharelle."

Shit. The reminder of his ex-girlfriend was enough to turn his stomach. "It's not as easy as all that, Joel. Beth's a widow—she's got the kids and—" The way Joel glared at him made him talk twice as fast. "It's not that I don't like the kids..."

"Glad you didn't try to bullshit me on that one. You know you sure as hell can't make me believe you're not at least a little bit excited about the thought of not only finding a woman who's a knock out, but one who's got kids."

Daniel ran a hand through his hair. *Shit*, why did that topic have to come up again? "I don't want to talk about that right now—"

"You told her? I mean, the fact you can't have kids was Sharelle's reason for calling it off, wasn't it?"

He flicked at a speck of dirt on his pants. "Shit, Joel—Beth and I have only been seeing each other for a couple of months. It's not like I'm going to go up and announce to her, 'Hey, by the way, you know you don't have to worry about me getting you pregnant since I only shoot blanks'."

Joel grunted, his face screwed up in disgust. "I guess when you put it that way..." He shook his head for a second and then checked his watch. "Damn, I need to get ready. Jaxi will kick my ass if I haven't got the dance music lined up."

"She and Blake do look good together, don't they?" Daniel stood as well, ready to head over to help visit with his mom for a while.

"Yeah. I guess Jaxi really did know which of us was best for her in the long run." Joel punched him in the arm and then set out whistling down the path. Daniel took a moment to center himself. His family all around, like always. Matt and Travis had smoke rising from the BBQ's, Jesse's grin flashed as he sweet-talked the girls congregating around the bar area. Daniel paced slowly toward where his mama sat chatting with the bride's parents.

His big happy family. What he'd always known and enjoyed and secretly hated at the same time. The beauty of the ranch and the never-ending chores. The support of family and the unceasing noise. It was a blessing and a curse.

At what point was what he wanted and loved—family and caring—able to separate from what he'd had enough of...

Living on the ranch was breaking him down. Tearing him apart and he just didn't

know what to do about it. The small town? Not a problem, but he didn't want to be mucking out stalls and driving tractors for the rest of his life. He didn't have the grades to go back to school like the twins were doing. So here he was ... trapped in a way. Trapped in the middle of love and caring and he felt like the most ungrateful creature around that he wasn't as pleased and happy as he should be.

If only he could find a way to work with his hands to make a living, without being held captive by the whim of the weather and the animals. If he knew for sure there was a future for him that involved a family, in spite of the fact he couldn't have any kids himself.

He thought about Beth. He still wasn't sure what drew him to her, although it wasn't just the fact she had kids. Damn, he'd been fascinated with her before he'd made that discovery. The lost expression in her eyes when she didn't think anyone was looking. The way she squared her shoulders and took a deep breath before barrelling forward the direction she thought she should go.

He wished he knew better what haunted her, but every time he tried to turn the conversation that direction it seemed the topic got changed.

She was running, he was searching.

Maybe Joel was right and each other was a part of what they needed.

He rose and headed back down toward the noise, wishing Beth were here, the boys racing around in circles with the other children. The wish made his heart ache even more.

* * * *

Beth sat quietly, staring down into her cup of coffee.

"You want another piece of pie?"

She lifted her head and made herself laugh. "Holy cow, Mom, you really want me to roll home tomorrow?" Her mom smiled at her and pulled out the chair next to her. Plopping her elbows on the table she turned and asked the question Beth had been dreading all weekend.

"So, how are you really doing?"

Could she answer without answering? Beth opened her mouth and her mom cut her off.

"Sweetie, don't try to pull a fast one on me either. I had enough of your lies over the years you were married to Samuel. I'm not going to let you slip one past me again."

The pain in her mother's eyes was real. "Mom, none of what happened to me was your fault."

"Well it wasn't yours either, but you still had to go through it. The fact you didn't tell any of us that Samuel had changed so much over the years—"

"Mom." Beth rose, ready to escape, but her mom laid a hand on her arm.

"Stay. I'm sorry, I won't bring it up again. I just need to know ... are you doing okay? The boys talked through the meal about friends at school and all kinds of things they've been enjoying. Sounds like they've settled into the community well. Just like you hoped."

Beth nodded. The boys rambling during dinner had been a saving grace. She hadn't been forced to add anything to the conversation, just smile and pass the food from one side of the table to the other. Her big happy family. Grandma and Grandpa doting on the boys and her sister and her new boyfriend laughing together about something. Beth managed to ignore the happiness radiating out from Darleen like a neon light. She

thought she'd had love in the beginning with Samuel.

"Rocky's been good. In some ways the fire in the apartment house was a blessing, since the house where we ended up has been fabulous to live in. I'm not looking forward to having to move again in a few months."

Her mom nodded slowly. "I think you should ask for an extension. Wait until the spring to move. Shifting stuff in the winter isn't a lot of fun."

Beth shook her head. "Us living there has already put the older Coleman boys into a tough situation. I'm grateful for how giving the whole family has been, but I don't want to take advantage of their goodwill."

"You know, there's times it's not goodwill or charity, it's just because people can see it's the right thing to do. Have you thought of that?"

The sad part was her mom was probably right. Mike had already told her there was no rush for her to move out, but she felt uncomfortable, like she was taking advantage of them.

Her mom folded her hands in her lap. "Tell me about Daniel. The boys seem to think a lot of him. He's an instructor down at the swimming pool, right?"

Beth snorted. "Where'd you get that idea?" Daniel would get a kick out his new profession.

"The boys said he takes them swimming every Saturday. I figured it must be the lessons they were in or something." Her mom's eyes narrowed and Beth blushed. "So he's not an instructor. Beth, are you seeing someone?"

"No." She shot out the word so fast she surprised herself.

Mom sat back and raised a brow. "Okay."

"I'm not." Beth felt her cheeks heat even more and scrambled for what to say to throw her suddenly very attentive mother off the track.

"All right. Relax. If you're not ready to talk about it, that's fine. But I was just going to remind you that if at some point you get involved with someone and need a few days alone, you give me a call. Grandma has wheels and loves to travel."

Holy shit. She forced her mouth closed. In spite of the fact her mother was close to the truth, Beth had no desire to confess anything quite yet. "Mom, what do you think I'm doing out in Rocky?"

"Hopefully you're starting to live a little again. Doctor said you could leave the brace off more often, right?"

"What does my brace have to do with..." Beth bit her lips together. She was not going to continue this conversation. She was twenty-nine years old and talking about sex with her mother had stopped when she was sixteen.

Mom rose and grabbed the coffee pot, refilling both their cups. She sat and let out a huge sigh. "I know you don't want to talk about it, but I'm going to talk and you can listen. Honey, you lived with an abusive man for ten years and you kept it from us for most of that time. Now that he's gone, you've been making changes I think most women with your history would be afraid to attempt. You're taking charge of your life, and trying to make sure you've got nothing but the best happening for the boys."

Her mom reached over and clasped their hands together. "I applaud your decision to make a fresh start in a small town, even though it means you and the boys are farther away from me. I want to help, okay? I love you, and you deserve to smile again like you used to when you were young. You are one of the strongest people I know, no matter

what Samuel used to tell you. You are beautiful and trustworthy and valuable and I'm very, very proud of you."

Beth watched with tear-filled eyes as her mom squeezed her fingers and then sat back to sip from her coffee cup. They sat in silence and Beth took her time to process the information. The shattered pieces of the past had cut everyone involved, and the lacerations went far and deep.

"You're proud of me?" She sniffed and wiped her mouth, taking a deep breath to try and slow her pounding heart.

Her mom nodded. "Very."

They sat in silence for a bit, the boy's laughter, Grandpa's deeper boom and the noise of the television mixing together and pouring from the room next door in a kind of harmonic soundtrack to her life.

Her world had changed so much from the rose-coloured future she'd imagined as a newlywed. Samuel's demands on her were slow to rise to the point that she was even aware he was abusing her. Controlling her, yes, and then making her dread making a mistake. He'd never physically threatened the boys, but even they had quickly learned when it was time to stay out of sight and sound of their father.

And when the day came he finally hit her...

Beth stared out the window. There were only a few leaves still clinging to the branches. Brown dead things, swinging in the breeze. She was tired of being dead.

Daniel made her feel alive.

"Daniel is..." She let out a quick puff of air, her bangs wiggling. "He's special." Beth lifted her gaze to see her mom smiling at her, the corners of her mouth twisted up just a tiny bit.

"You seeing him?"

Beth shook her head at first and then shrugged. "Kind of. He's been around a fair bit. Supportive, caring, fabulous with the boys."

"Good looking?"

"Jesus, Mom, you want a physical dossier?"

Her mom grinned. "Why yes, yes I would. So I take it he's not an instructor at the pool."

Beth shook her head. "He's one of the Coleman boys, from the ranch next door."

The smile on her mom's face faded a little. "Oh."

Beth frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Mom wiggled her nose. "I see why you said you felt like you were taking advantage of them." She took another drink and then put the cup down firmly. "Still, there's nothing wrong with it. You feel ... comfortable around him?"

Beth flushed at the thought of the last time they were together. Comfortable? Oh shit, yeah. She dragged her mind out of the gutter and concentrated on what her mom was really asking.

"I did take it slow at first, only seeing him in public, but he's been nothing but trustworthy. He's actually very gentle. It's kind of confusing. Even when Samuel was nice, you know at the beginning, he always added that underlying 'I'm the man, you're the woman, my way or the highway' component to our relationship."

"Daniel doesn't do that?"

Beth held up a hand and wiggled it. "He's confident, and a naturally take charge kind

of guy, but I never feel like he's pushing too hard. It's like what he wants the most is what I want."

Her mom made one of those *hmm* type sounds then nodded. "Then I'm going to be even nosier and ask. If you feel comfortable around him, are you planning on giving him a real chance? Or is this going to be something that you need more time on?" She shook her finger in Beth's direction. "Don't make that face at me. You know what I'm talking about. After all those years fighting, striving to keep your identity when all Samuel wanted to do was make you into the image he wanted to see ... it's got to be hard to know when you can really trust a person."

Beth lost the logic in that one. "You think I can't trust him?"

"I didn't say that. I said maybe *you* think you can't trust him. Or anyone except yourself, yet. There's a time when you're going to have to expand your trust out farther than just with your father and me. I'm not suggesting he's someone you're going to be with forever. I don't know anything about him except what you've just told me. Still, you need to think about if he does become someone you want around more permanently, how are you going to show him that you're ready?"

It was a lot to consider, so all Beth did was nod and then come around the table to give her mom the biggest hug possible.

A soft pat landed on her cheek. "Now, about another matter. We were wondering if you wanted to have Christmas at your place. Then you won't have to drive the winter roads with your bad leg and the three boys. I worry about you on the highway."

Beth shook her head. She was back to being the child and her mom taking care of her. "Mom, it's only a couple of hours."

"Still. We'd love to see where you've landed. You didn't want any help getting settled and I can respect that, but for Christmas, we want to come out."

They ironed out the details and another small part in her heart thawed. It would be their first Christmas without Samuel. Having a house full of family and being in a new location would be a good thing.

Chapter Nine

The light tapping on the door made her heart start pounding all over again. Every time she swore she wasn't going to let it happen and then it did.

Beth opened the door and then frowned in confusion.

"Hey, Ms. Danube."

Instead of Daniel, whom she'd expected, the tenth-grade student who usually babysat for her stood there, backpack slung over one shoulder. The girl slipped into the house and peeled off her bag and jacket, looking around the house in anticipation. "Where're the boys?"

"They're upstairs getting their pajamas on. Sandy, why...?"

"Beth." The door opened again and Daniel stepped in, his eyes flashing at her as he swept a glance over her body that heated her up in an instant. "Sandy's going to babysit for the evening, if that's okay. I have something I want to show you."

Sandy called out from the kitchen. "You want them in bed at the usual time, Ms. D?"

Beth nodded without thinking, watching Daniel stalk her across the room. That was the only way to describe what he was doing. He took slow deliberate steps toward her, his heated gaze melting her defenses. Then he was standing right there, inches away from her body.

She yearned to touch him.

"I want to kiss you," he whispered. "*I need* to kiss you."

She glanced at the stairs. The boys would be down in only seconds, but if this relationship had any chance of moving on, like her mom had suggested, maybe it was time to see how the boys reacted.

She tilted her head back and leaned in, letting him close the final distance between them so their lips could touch. Light. Gentle, a simple press together that still made her body sing.

They drew apart before anyone arrived. Except the fact she'd initiated the kiss, here where they could get caught—he'd noticed. He beamed at her and stepped back a pace. "Hey, no brace. Doctor say things are fine?"

There were two questions in his voice. "My leg is doing much better. He wants me to use the brace as little as possible. And everything else is good too." No condoms needed any more, if that's the other part of what he was asking.

The smile on his face grew. "That's great about your leg. I bet it will make it easier to get around, but you be sure to let me know if I ever need to help you, okay? Oh, and me too." He pulled a folded paper from his pocket, displaying the edge.

They stared at each other for a minute. Beth tried to decide if the naughty thoughts racing through her mind made her evil or if it was a good sign.

"You got a coat?"

She nodded, curious what he was up to. The boys poured down the stairs and surrounded him, shrieks of joy ringing out at his presence.

"Daniel. You going to read to us?"

"Did you see my bruise? It's huge."

Beth held onto the back of a chair as Daniel gave complete attention to the trio of

wet headed boys. He knelt down and talked to each in turn and Beth shook her head to fight off the urge to picture this more permanently. That was too soon and not what she'd asked for.

Her heart didn't care.

Daniel stood. "Well guys, that's all very fascinating, but you know what? I'm not here tonight to see you. I'm stealing your Mama away for a bit, so Sandy is going to take care of you."

Lance narrowed his eyes and Beth held her breath as she wondered how he'd react. "You going on a date?"

Daniel looked at her, waiting for her to respond. Letting her make the decision of what was said. She looked at three little pairs of eyes and hesitated for a second. Damn it, it wasn't fair to anyone to hold off on attempting to move forward. She smiled brightly. "Yeah, it's a date."

Her littlest one wrinkled up his face. "Mommies don't date."

Beth couldn't hide her smile. "It's a way of saying we're friends and we want to spend some grown up time together. Sandy will be here to take care of you."

Nathan tugged on Daniel's sleeve. "You still going to be our friend and play with us?"

"Of course."

That was enough for him. Nathan bounced off, dragging Robbie out of Beth's arms where he'd crawled for a kiss.

Lance exited the room slower, staring over his shoulder and Beth hesitated. Looked like her oldest son was having the most trouble with the idea, but any conversation with him would have to wait until the morning.

* * * *

He led her through the trees, rubbing her hand with his fingers where it lay on his arm. The leaves underfoot crackled as they stepped through them, tall grasses lying flat on the ground and the smell of winter coming closer all the time. They walked in silence for the longest time, and Daniel wondered at the best way to say what he wanted to tell her.

Beth tugged lightly on his arm and he slowed, turning her to face him. The warmth of her body spread, smearing over his limbs and driving into his heart.

"You okay with what I told the boys?" she asked.

He nodded, lifting her chin and taking her lips under his. She tasted sweet and needy, pressing closer to him like she wanted to weld them into one skin. He'd already decided he had to know where they were headed in the future. Maybe not asking her now, this instant, but soon.

"I told you from the start I wanted to see you for more than just sex. Although there's some wicked memories running through my brain—"

"Me too." She grabbed his face in her hands and grinned up at him. "I have no idea how you came up with that scheme, but holy smokes. You don't know how hot the whole situation was for me. How freeing and so much what I needed right then."

He stared into her eyes, the sincerity and intensity of what she said clear. Still...

"It wasn't very romantic." If he could pick her up and carry her to the king-sized bed in her room he would be in heaven. Cover her with his body and bury himself deep while

he watched her face every second.

There were some positive things about sex with a lady flat on her back.

She snickered. "It was fucking hot, and I told you before I've done romantic and I've done slow. What I'm looking for is more. You delivered, totally and completely."

"Really?"

She slapped his shoulder. "Holy shit, yeah. I want to know what you've got planned for an encore."

"Your wish is my desire." Daniel tilted his head to indicate their direction.

She glanced down the trail in confusion. "Outdoor sex? Okay..." Her enthusiasm faded a little and he laughed.

"It's a little chilly for that, don't you think?"

"I'm game."

"I think I can figure out something else that's not vanilla but still warm. Come on."

He tucked her under his arm and kissed her temple before guiding her through the trees.

They broke into the open just past the barns and outbuildings, close to where the heavy equipment was lined up neatly for the night. He sensed Beth's confusion as they continued to walk, as he guided her over the rough sections of trail to where the small guest cabin sat behind the main house. He opened the door and led her in.

"This is where Jaxi lives, isn't it?"

"Jaxi and Blake, but they're on their honeymoon. They'll be home next weekend. I cleaned it out a little and we're good. They won't mind at all."

Beth raised an eye at him. "There's a bed in here."

"Don't hold it against me."

"Don't hold me against it..."

He laughed. Damn, he loved her sense of humour. "I told you, I have a million things I want to do with you. It's warm and cozy and private here. You ready to play?"

Her grin lit up the room.

"I need to know one thing. When you said you wanted to try it all ... did that mean just me playing with you? Cause darling, I have to confess I have this one dream that's making my body ache and if you're interested..."

Her gaze dropped to his crotch. His cock somehow rose a little more, swelling behind his jeans, raising a bulge in the fabric that would have made their stud bull in the back forty envious.

"You want me to touch you?"

"Oh yeah."

She shrugged out of her coat and tossed it in the chair beside the door. The top two buttons of her blouse had slipped opened and he swallowed, shifting his hips to try to ease the pressure now flooding his groin. If he didn't get her sweet mouth on his cock soon he was going to explode right in his fucking jeans.

"I've never given anyone, I mean I've never done that." She straightened her spine a little. "I'm interested ... if you're willing to teach me."

Holy shit. "I think I could handle that." He undid his button, her gaze lowering to watch, her pupils growing huge. She licked her lips as he unzipped and his cock sprang free.

"You're not wearing any underwear."

"It's called commando, darling, and usually it's fine." He took himself in hand,

slipping from tip to root as he pushed his jeans farther open. "Only when I'm around you, it increases in danger. I swear I've got the imprint of the zipper on my cock."

She stepped closer and reached for him. He let her wrap her hand around him, holding in the swear words wanting to burst out, it felt so fucking good. Hesitant strokes up and down teased him. When she brought her other hand to touch his balls through the fabric of his jeans he sucked in air.

"You're killing me." She flipped her head up, her breathing hard, almost as uneven as his. "You like touching me?"

She nodded. "Oh yeah. My husband..."

He leaned in and swallowed the words. With her hands on his cock there was no way he wanted to be talking about that man. This was about her and him, and nobody else. When they drew apart he covered her fingers, stopping the torment as she'd continued to explore. "Let me lose the jeans, and we'll go on." He looked her over. "You want to take off your blouse and bra too? Cause I love watching you."

Her face flushed, but she loosened the extra buttons one at a time. He couldn't look away as the fabric floated apart to reveal her soft skin, the rosy flush of desire covering her neck and the firm swell of her breasts peeking out from under the lace of her bra. The very pretty and delicate yellow bra.

"You went shopping in Calgary, didn't you?" He pressed open her blouse, sliding his hands over the warm skin of her waist, lifting upward until his palms rested over the pale material hiding her breasts.

Beth grinned. "You're not allowed to cut this one off me."

"Hmm. Leave it on, I'll enjoy looking at you like this too."

He stripped off his T-shirt and shucked his jeans, keeping his gaze firmly on her to enjoy every minute. The minx put on a show, shrugging her shoulders and letting the fabric fall to the floor behind her. She stretched her arms in the air, and her breasts rose, the tight nipples stabbing the lace and forming tiny ridges. When she reached for her jeans he held out a hand to stop her.

"Later. Sit."

He helped her settle on the edge of the low bed. For some reason Blake and Jaxi had their mattress and box spring resting on the floor. It must have made it awkward for getting in and out of bed, but there was one very obvious advantage. Beth's eyes widened as she stared at his now eye level cock. "Damn."

He chuckled. "Yeah, damn. Right now it's all about me." He watched her closely as he stepped between her thighs, his dick aimed at her like an arrow at a target.

Beth tilted her head up and smiled at him. "Can't be all about you when I'm the one who wants to try. What do I do?"

Anything you want. "Hold me. That's right. Now lick the head." She leaned forward and slipped out the tip of her tongue, tasting him. He was going to die. Her tentative touch sent a jolt of lightning through his entire body.

"Oh, you taste..." that sweet smile flashed again, "...good." She swirled her tongue around the crown of his cock, warm wetness coating him and he swore softly. The urge to thrust into her mouth was powerful but he held back, wanting her to enjoy this as much as he was. She opened wide and enveloped him and his heart skipped a beat.

"Oh hell, that's it. Get me good and wet. Use your tongue while you, oh shit, yeah..." She was a damn quick learner. She sucked and pulled back, her teeth lightly grazing his

flesh and he hardened impossibly. It wasn't going to take much to set him off tonight. Watching made every sensation that much more intense.

With tentative nibbles she set his heart pounding. The delicate rasp of her tongue on the tender underside of his shaft sent an icy tingle up his spine. She explored with her lips, her fingers, cupping his balls and rolling them lightly and he squeezed his eyes closed and fought for control.

Maybe she'd never gone down on a man before, but sweet mercy, if she weren't doing everything exactly right.

He lowered a hand to stroke his fingers through her hair, loving the way the strands shone in the light, the way their softness caressed his palm. He cupped her cheek for a second, brushing his thumb against the edge of her mouth. Touching where they intimately connected.

She slipped her lips a little farther down his shaft and the crown of his cock nudged the back of her throat. Her eyes popped open and she gagged for a second. "Ease off sweetheart. Only go as far as you want."

Daniel tried to retreat, not offer as much of his length but she let go of where she'd grasped his cock and grabbed both cheeks of his ass. Her fingernails dug into his skin like a kitten's. His cock jerked in reaction and she hummed.

He was a second and a half from all hell breaking loose.

"Darling, you need to decide if you want me to come in your mouth or not." *Decide fucking fast too.* Beth pulled him toward her, his cock spreading her lips wide, the moisture from his pre-come and her saliva coating him and shining in the light of the room. Another rock of his hips, and another, fucking her mouth slowly but firmly as she willingly lapped and sucked.

"Beth, I'm going to come." His balls drew tight, the tingling sensation at the root of his cock nearly numbing him. She flicked a glance upward, a sweet smile curving the edge of her lips where they stretched around him and he lost it. A jet of come shot from his tip into her mouth and she lurched down again, swallowing involuntarily. The additional suction blew his mind and dragged out another jolt of semen. Beth pulled back and he slipped from her lips, still coming. A strand flew out to land in her open mouth, another to lie in a sticky string along her cheek. "Fuck, that's hot."

Beth laughed aloud and opened wider, reaching with her tongue to try and recapture him.

Daniel grabbed his cock and pumped a few more times, aiming at her mouth as he shot the rest of his load. She yanked him close, pinching his butt until she once again enveloped the now softening length of his shaft. She swallowed and he swore. It felt so bloody amazing his legs grew weak. He stood on shaky limbs for a moment until his cock grew too sensitive for her continuing exploration.

She protested when he withdrew, squatting down to stare into her eyes.

"I was having fun," she complained. She poked out her tongue to gather some of the semen from her cheek and he sucked for air.

"Damn it woman, you undo me."

"Was I any good?"

Holy shit. "Any better and I'd be dead." He touched her cheek and her hand flew up to find the moisture there. A blush rolled over her skin and he dropped to his knees between her thighs. "Oh hell, don't be embarrassed. Do you have any idea how much that

turns me on? To see you marked with my come?"

She snickered and ran her hand through his hair, her eyes dancing over his face, his torso. "I'm a mess. Tasted different than I thought it would." Her gaze met his, heat behind the stare. "What's next? My turn?"

"Damn right. I need a few minutes to recover. You got any requests?"

"You're doing pretty good without any suggestions on my part."

He helped her out of her jeans and undies, holding himself back from attacking her. A long slow stare from bottom to top whet his appetite for much, much more. "Hmm, you're so damn beautiful. Crawl yourself up on the bed and grab hold of the headboard."

Chapter Ten

Confusion painted her expression for a second before she complied. It gave him a chance to watch her, gauge how easily she maneuvered. The range of motion in her injured leg improved all the time. The fact made him warm inside. He hated the flashes of pain marring her eyes when something bumped her the wrong way.

Oh damn. She knelt, legs spread wide, hands clutching the headboard. Her knuckles grew white as he circled the side of the bed to drag the pillows off the mattress, clearing the space between her legs.

"You planning on tearing that wood apart, darling?"

"Just not sure what you're up to." There was a slight tremor in her voice and he hurried to reassure her. He stroked a hand down her back, over the curve of her ass. Soft smooth skin, goose bumps rising beneath his touch.

"I won't do anything you don't like. Remember, you got total control here." He slipped his hand between her legs and cupped her pussy. The curls covering her were wet. "You got excited sucking me off, didn't you?"

"Hell, yeah."

He slid a finger into her sheath and she gasped.

"Hmm, very excited. You're dripping." He crowded her, rubbing his chest against her back, the length of his cock nestled in the crease of her ass. He nibbled on her neck, licking at her earlobe as she leaned her head to the side to give him better access.

"More..."

"More what?" She tasted so good. He scraped his teeth down the tendon, her shivering body making him respond faster than he thought possible. His cock was more than half way back to full steam. "Touching you? Like this?"

He slipped his hand up, drawing the cream of her body toward her anus. When he rimmed the tight hole she swore, tightening her body around his finger.

"Oh God, you're not going to..." She may have protested, but her body said otherwise, her hips pressing back toward him.

He slipped his finger past the tight muscle up to the first knuckle, just to torment himself. "Not this instant, but oh yeah, I want to." He nuzzled her neck. "You want me to fuck your ass, don't you? You curious?"

She nodded.

Hot damn. "Maybe next time. Right now, I have other plans." He dropped to his back and slid under her hips, covering her pussy with his mouth. She shouted with surprise.

The position was perfect and he took advantage of the easy access to both her pussy and her ass, squeezing her cheeks, massaging the fleshy globes hard then smoothing circles over her heated skin. All the while he explored her depths with his tongue, lapping eagerly. The sounds of passion from her lips encouraged him to flick harder at her clit, the bud swelling under his ministrations. He wet his finger and drew a line down her ass again and again, rubbing the rosette of her anus until she rocked against his hand. After one more pass to gather her cream for lubricant he pressed firmly, spearing her between his hand and his tongue. She screamed and came.

"Holy hell, you're responsive. You're not supposed to be able to come that quick."

Give me another."

"Fuck, I can't believe you've got your ... oh hell."

He didn't let up. He buried his tongue as deep as he could and set up a smooth pace with the finger in her ass. Touching her felt so bloody good he thought he was going to come again himself, without a single touch to his now rock solid and throbbing cock.

She may have complained about being inexperienced, but she was everything he liked for a woman to be in bed. The shy, flirty glances contrasted with the wild cat. She was so receptive to everything he suggested. Every time he touched her she held back nothing. And the noises she made—holy fuck, the squeals and moans made the whole situation way hotter than if she'd stayed quiet. He latched onto her clit and suckled, pulling the tender nub between his lips and pulsing in time with the assault on her ass.

"Yes, right there. Oh please, just a little more..." The words faded away into a keen of pleasure as she came. Like a whirlwind above him, Beth blew apart. Her whole body shook, her ass tightening around his finger. Her cream dropped to his mouth, hot and sweet, her passion unmistakable.

He continued to lap, slower now, softer. Slipping his tongue between her folds and licking her clean. The frantic motions she'd been making over his mouth calmed. When he pulled his finger from her ass she swore and leaned her hips back to stare down at him awkwardly.

"You're amazing. How did you come up with this one?"

Daniel kissed the inside of her thighs one after another and then tugged her hips until she sat on his chest. She protested, but he held her in place until she settled, the weight of her body so good on top of him.

"Since you've not had a checkered past, I guess you've never heard of a mustache ride before."

Beth laughed. "That's what that was. Okay, not exactly how I pictured it."

"But good?"

She held his face in her palms and nodded at him. A contented expression shone on her face and that pleased him no end. "Very good."

He massaged her hips, a soft touch, stroking her with tender caresses. "You up for a little more?"

She glanced at the clock on the wall. "We've got lots of time left."

Daniel nodded. "I still have something to show you."

"Really? I thought that was a ploy to get me out of the house so we could come here for sex."

"It was, kind of."

He shifted her, sitting beside her on the mattress. There could be no doubt he was still interested in more action, his cock fully erect and rising into the air. She touched him again, her continued fascination clear. He let her explore at her own pace, all the while wondering what the hell kind of man she'd been married to who didn't take advantage of the fire and blistering hot passion the woman was capable of.

Only this was not the time or place for that kind of conversation. He was going to have it soon though; no more letting her keep putting off the topic. Until they both spoke honestly—about a whole bunch of things—there wasn't much chance of this relationship going anywhere important.

He was more and more determined important was what he wanted.

He sucked in a breath as Beth leaned over and nibbled on his skin, just above his left nipple.

"So does your aversion to the bed include lying on your belly?" he asked.

Beth dropped a trail of kisses over his chest, letting her fingers tangle in the dusting of hair there. Teasing down to his belly button and southward to his cock. "The bed is fine. You know what I wanted to avoid, and if I can mention, so far you are doing simply excellent in your choices."

Her hands tickled and he grabbed her wrists in one hand to still them.

The instant fear that covered her came from out of nowhere, shocking in its arrival and its strength. *It was her wrists.* Having her wrists immobilized—that was the trigger. Icy dread raced through her and she gasped, her body freezing in position. Daniel quickly let her loose, but there was no hiding how out of place with their circumstances her response had been.

"Beth? You okay?"

Her heart pounded and she concentrated on breathing slowly to control her reaction. Concentrating on what the facts were helped—he'd done nothing wrong. He wasn't Samuel about to punish her for failing to accomplish to some unnamed standard. He wasn't restraining her to take a swing.

Oh shit, would the fear ever totally be gone?

She nodded and lifted her chin. She had to keep moving forward. Daniel was a good man, a trustworthy man, and she didn't want to keep letting the evils of the past rule her life. Pushing aside everything but how excited Daniel made her feel with a single touch, she took back control.

"You just surprised me." Deliberately, she lowered herself to the mattress then rolled over carefully to her belly. She swung her head to look at him over her shoulder. "Is this what you want?"

Her level of arousal had diminished, but she was sure he could bring her back up quickly.

Daniel nodded. It looked like he wanted to say more and she prayed he'd ignore her momentary lapse. He stroked a hand down the length of her body, starting at her neck, skimming over her shoulder blades, along the side of her waist. The gentle caress reignited all kinds of sensitive nerves and her sex tingled again, moisture leaking from her. Two orgasms weren't enough with this man. The motion of his hand carried over the swell of her butt before lightly tracing the scars of the cuts on her thigh.

She suddenly realized he'd never said a word about the scars, not a single time they'd been at the swimming pool together.

"Does it bother you? To see how scarred up my skin is?"

"Hell, no. It only bothers me that the accident must have hurt like blue blazes. I think you're very beautiful, Beth, and there's no way a few lines on your skin is going to change that."

She flushed at his compliment and her heart warmed a little more.

He straddled her hips and massaged her back, thumbing the tight muscles along her spine until they loosened up. The temperature in the little cabin was perfect for her bare skin and she relaxed. The sexual buzz in her body was still there but more importantly her sense of well being returned. Outdoors, faint murmurs rose on the air, the wind in the trees knocking branches against the roof. All the noises that sounded so frightening when

she sat all alone in the big house after the boys were in bed. Now they were a part of a symphony, a part of the sensory overload sweeping her.

Daniel leaned over and kissed the nape of her neck. "You really want me to go on? I'm fine with stopping if you've had enough."

She felt his skin against hers. His cock pressed her hip, the rigid shaft that she wanted inside her body. "Yeah, like you aren't sitting there with a massive erection."

He dropped to the mattress beside her, staring into her eyes like he was attempting to mind read what she had refused to share. "It won't kill me to wait. You already made me very happy once tonight."

The final edge of fear melted away completely. He was a decent man, through and through. She pressed a palm against his firm body, loving the feel of him, so intimate and close. Did she want to stop? No way.

"I'm fine. Better than fine and I'd really like for you to continue with your nefarious plans."

"If you're sure." He took the time to kiss her thoroughly, a tender meeting of mouths and tongues, his hands cradling her head. She rolled to her side to let the warmth of his body touch hers. For a minute she truly forgot everything, the past, the troubles of balancing each day in the present, the worries about the future. There was nothing but sensation and sweet warmth, the clean scent of his skin and the taste of sin from his lips. He whispered in her ear, "Lift your hips."

She complied and he slid two pillows under her, raising her bottom high into the air. It wasn't uncomfortable, but she felt a little silly, and very exposed.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he left her to go dig into the backpack he'd brought along.

"Getting the thing I wanted to show you."

"With my ass in the air..." What was the man up to now? He had already said they weren't having anal sex today. *Oh shit*. She swore before she even spotted the toys in his hand.

He chuckled. "You're a very smart woman." He lay on the bed beside her and she stared at the assortment of plastic he displayed.

She lifted up on one elbow to check them out. Sex toys were a new experience for her. Samuel never allowed her to have anything that could possibly challenge his manhood, and only months after she'd recovered from the accident had she worked up the courage to slip into an adult shop and blushingly purchased a vibrator. Lying next to her there was a slim plastic vibrator, a rubbery one with proceedingly bigger knobs and, if she wasn't mistaken, a string of anal beads. "Where did you find these? And please don't tell me here in Rocky."

Daniel continued to stroke her back as she picked up the items one at a time, checking them out. "There is a shop in town, but I didn't go there. I drove to Red Deer to get the blood work done. Figured that would give us a little more privacy than broadcasting to the whole community we were getting it on. After I was done, I spotted the shop and couldn't resist."

He kissed her cheek again, nuzzled her neck. "Enough talking. Close your eyes."

Beth let out a slow breath and returned the beads to the mattress. She lowered her head and shut her eyes and suddenly every inch of her grew hyper sensitive. "Warn me before you use those things." Control. If only a minute amount.

He laughed, a warm comforting sound. Pleasure slid across her skin with his touch, with the scent of his body so close. He nibbled on her earlobe. "You made a list, remember? Of things you'd like to try?"

Her eyes popped open. Oh crap, what had she written on that thing? Had he seen it? "You said you didn't need to look at it..."

"Don't worry, I didn't snoop, but there are a few things I thought you might have put on there that I'm just not comfortable with." He kissed her shoulder and crawled over her body, the heat between them wrapping together. "You remember what I said about the twins?" She swallowed, hard. It was not a thing most women would forget. "Oh, yeah, you know what I'm talking about. They have this thing for sharing a woman between them. They are pretty damn vocal about it too, so when I started thinking about all the non-vanilla things there are to show you, it kinda popped into my head. Only I realized there was no way on earth I could arrange that experience for you." With his tongue, he traced a line from her ear to between her shoulder blades and she shivered under his lips.

She cleared her throat, her voice coming out husky and his cock jerked where it rested against her thigh. "Two guys at once. You don't think it's a good idea?"

"Oh, I'm sure it's very good for the lady, but I'm afraid I've got a couple of troubles with it. I don't want my body that close to another guy when I'm aroused—I have no issue with it for others, but for me, it's just not a turn-on. But more importantly, when you're with me, I'm the one responsible for your pleasure. I'm greedy." He nipped her ass and she vibrated with need. "I want to know that what you're feeling is because of my hands. My mouth, my cock."

Delight bubbled up inside her and she couldn't stop the laughter. "Your toys?"

He chuckled. "Damn right."

Then it got quiet, except for the sound of their breathing. His hands seemed to be everywhere at the same time. The scent of vanilla rose into the air as a warm slickness touched her skin. Daniel lifted the slim vibrator from the bed and clicked it on, the soft buzz loud in the silence of the room. He trailed the tip down her back, over her buttocks, dipping the rigid length between her cheeks and running it all the way down to her clit. He turned it on real low and arranged the vibrator lengthwise to lean against her sex, not inside her sheath, merely nestled between her labia and over the hood of her clit.

The continual gentle motion made the blood pound between her legs. A tingle started in her clit and she held her breath waiting to see what was next.

It wasn't long in coming. Daniel's firm hands landed on her butt, massaging and squeezing. He separated the cheeks of her ass and drew a fingertip over her anus and she tightened involuntarily.

"Shh, don't worry. I'll go slow." Again and again he stroked, smooth liquid coating his fingers, easing his way. She forced aside all the thoughts about how wrong she'd always been told this was and instead concentrated on how very right it felt. Each time she relaxed a little more, her body melting into the bed, he praised her. When he rubbed his fingertip in one spot and she stayed open to his seeking touch he leaned over and kissed her.

Something soft and unfamiliar touched her skin and she cracked open an eye to see the bumpy vibrator was missing. Another touch to her anus, still soft, nothing more than the size of his fingertip.

He pressed a little harder and the tight ring of muscle guarding her anus stretched

wider, then relaxed. Oh God, he moved steadily, pushing the larger and larger swells into her. She breathed out slowly, trying to keep from tightening up.

Then there were too many sensations at once. Daniel moved the vibrator from between her legs, the absence making her crave a touch. Something wet and hot covered her and she felt his tongue laving her now ultra-sensitive clit.

The tingling sensation rocketed off low. The contrast with the aching need in her pussy and the unfamiliar burn in her butt made her breath catch. Another inch, another stretch and finally Daniel's hand rested firmly on her backside. He kissed his way up her body until his lips hovered over her ear.

"I'm so fucking hard right now after watching that toy sink into your ass. There's no way I could bear to have anyone touch you like that in front of me, so you're going to have to pretend." The toy rocked, wiggling inside and it felt so damn good she wanted ... she didn't know what she wanted anymore. There was nothing but sensation left and when he clicked the button and the vibration began again, this time inside her ass, she cried out with pleasure.

"Daniel, please..."

He crawled back between her legs and she pulled her good leg up a little, opening her to him. He dragged his cock against her wet center and then with one smooth motion buried himself deep.

Oh my God, the heft of his shaft filled her like never before. With the toy in her ass, his cock in her pussy, her climax rushed at her with a frightening speed. The thumping and throbbing was more than blood rushing through her veins, it was every inch of her skin reacting to his possession.

And when he touched the vibrator in her ass, dragging it out a notch and thrusting it back in at the same time as he speared his hips forward, she was lost.

The orgasm went from explosive to unending. The initial blast made her squeeze his cock tight and he swore, calling out her name as he plunged into her body. Aftershocks went off deep inside her core and in her ass, the muscles pulsing around the still vibrating toy.

There was nowhere to move, nowhere to go. Nothing to do but feel as Daniel held her hips and slammed into her, his balls bouncing against her sensitive lips, stimulating her clit even more. The speed of his thrusts picked up, each cant of his hips driving him deeper and deeper and the pleasure seemed unending.

He grunted on each stroke, his pleasure clear. Suddenly he slowed, concern in his voice as he spoke. "Is that okay? Tell me if it's too rough."

Screw that, it wasn't too rough, it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

"Harder." He reached under her to squeeze her now throbbing clit between his fingertips and the bolt of lightning that struck her was so good she screamed. "Oh God, yes. Please. Fuck me, harder."

"You need to come, darling. I need to feel you around me, so tight, so good."

He dragged her back as he thrust forward, slapping their thighs together, the sounds of grunts and groans and sheer decadent sex filling the room. Another orgasm hovered, volatile, dangerous.

Fiery.

Daniel took another pass over her clit, but this time he pressed his fingertips down hard on the aching bundle of nerves.

Every bit of her lit up like a firecracker going off. The sensation started in her pussy as her muscles clutched his cock tight. The rhythmic waves of pleasure rippled out through all her limbs and stars formed before her eyes.

Daniel thrust one last time and froze, their hips locked together, his cock jerking within her sex. The pulses inside her continued and he hummed with delight, rocking with his still stiff cock into her, extending the bliss until she could bear it no longer and begged for him to stop.

The vibration in her ass finally ceased, but her body's reactions continued. As he pulled from her pussy, slowly withdrew the toy from her butt—all the while sexual pleasure swept over her and fogged her mind.

The next thing she knew he was washing her with a warm cloth, tenderly kissing her. He wrapped himself around her body and nestled them under the quilt.

"Sleep. I've set the alarm and I'll get you home in plenty of time, but damn if I don't need to hold you for a while longer in my arms."

Another kiss landed on her temple and she spooned back into his warmth with a grateful sigh. There was no escaping the fact that Daniel was rapidly coming to be much more than just sex to her. But exactly what that meant for the future, she really didn't know.

Chapter Eleven

Beth leaned into his warmth a little harder and he squeezed her shoulders. Sitting hip to hip next to him on the bench seat of his truck felt fabulous. There was something so intimate about the way his fingers stroked her shoulder, twirled in the short hairs at the back of her neck.

"You sure it's okay for me to come along?" she asked again.

"Will you stop it already? For the millionth time, I want you to come." His hand slid behind her back and grasped her waist. He wiggled his fingers under her shirt to caress the bare skin and she squirmed a little. "Hmm, I want you to come all the time."

A full-fledged shiver rocked her. "Bad boy. Damn, did you take lessons on how to talk sexy somewhere?"

Daniel continued to stroke her skin as he pulled into the parking lot at the hall. "Just come by it naturally. You should hear Daddy when he gets going. My mama still blushes like a teenager when he's around."

Beth laughed.

"Besides, Jaxi asked specifically if you would be there. She said she was hoping to get to know you a little better. Travis and Matt said they could make it, plus a bunch of our friends. Just a chance to catch up now that Jaxi and Blake are back from their honeymoon."

"The twins can't make it?"

"No, they're staying at the college this weekend."

Daniel twisted in his seat to kiss her. Cupping her face in his hands he joined their mouths together for a long, slow, sweet kiss that made her knees weak and her panties wet. She dug her fingers into his hair and kissed him back, getting lost in the taste of him, the sensation of slow drags of his tongue against hers. When his hand left her cheek she barely noticed until his palm curled around her breast and it felt so damn good she was ready to crawl into his lap and mount him. Instead, she settled for savouring every stroke. She'd never known that kissing could get her so excited. She felt like one of her teenage students, starry eyed and romanticizing over a crush. Her body warmed under his attention and she let out a purr of satisfaction.

"Hey, break it up in there you two. You're fogging the windows."

Beth jerked her lips from Daniel's to stare outside. Or she would have stared out if she could.

"Shit, he's right." Daniel swiped a hand through the moisture clouding the driver's window to reveal Matt's grinning face. "Move your ass or you'll have my door in your ugly mug." He lowered his voice as he turned back toward Beth again. "You're mighty distracting, darling."

"I could say the same thing of you."

They smiled at each other.

"You ready for this?"

Beth nodded slowly. "It feels like I'm walking in blind and everyone's going to be staring at me."

"Hmm, don't worry, it's not you but me they're going to be looking at."

She frowned. "Why?"

He brushed a finger over her lips tenderly. "They're all going to be staring at me and wondering what the hell I did to deserve to be with a knock-out like you."

"Ooh, you're smooth, Daniel Coleman, you're smooth."

She could do this. Hell, they'd been in public together for months. Only this was the first night she'd really thought of it as them being *together*.

Why did it make such a difference?

He led her into the bar, friendly voices calling out as they slowly made their way to the back of the room.

"You planning on shooting pool tonight with us?" he asked, waving at yet another group that called his name.

Beth leaned her head toward him. "Is it a guy territory thing, or am I allowed to trespass, because I'd love to play. We had a table at home when I was growing up."

Daniel pulled her to a halt. "You mention that to my brothers yet? That you can play?"

She shrugged, "Not something that's ever come up in conversation."

Daniel nuzzled her neck and whispered in her ear. "Anyone makes a bet, you take it, okay? I'll spot you the money, but I can see some sweet possibilities for getting even with Matt for gloating about having no competition since the twins are off at college."

The pub was loud but it was mainly voices, the music of the dance hall pounding against the far wall and only softly piped into the pool hall side of the building. Beth glanced with approval at the rich dark tones on the walls, the scent of BBQ ribs making her mouth water. Since the bars and restaurants had gone smoke-free in Alberta, going out was so much more enjoyable.

The sound of familiar voices greeted them as they approached one large round table pulled off to the side of the busy room.

Jaxi was there, the pretty blonde tucked under Blake's big arm. Two couples and three more men waved hello. Beth recognized most of them from around town, or having been introduced during one of her outings for coffee with Daniel over the past months. Matt rose from his chair and came over, hand extended.

"Now that you managed to drag yourselves out into public, welcome to Friday night and our welcome back get-together. Jaxi isn't drinking anything stronger than root beer because of the baby, but we've got draft. Or if you want something else, I'll grab it for you." He gestured to the table where there were pitchers of beer waiting. Beth wrinkled her nose.

"Could I get a Rum and Coke? Not much of beer drinker. Sorry."

"Hey, no problem. I'll be right back." Matt took off and Beth glanced around the table counting heads. "I thought Travis was supposed to be here tonight."

Jaxi laughed and pointed with her thumb over her shoulder to the back of the room. "He's here. He's just ... busy." Beth followed the line of her finger and gaped in surprise.

"Holy shit."

Travis had a girl pinned against the wall, their hands all over each other. Beth felt a little embarrassed, even as she had to admit it turned her on to be a voyeur. Travis had a double dose of the Coleman good looks and even with Daniel at her side, she could appreciate a nice bit of eye candy. Although she didn't think it was legal to be doing in public what they were doing.

"Yeah, holy shit just about covers it." Jaxi kissed Blake's cheek and then sat up straighter, patting the seat next to her. "Come and be my buddy. I've been outnumbered for too long. It's good to see another woman hanging out with the Coleman crew."

Daniel snorted. "Travis' woman doesn't count?"

Jaxi waved a hand. "His most recent flavour of the month? Hell no, we don't find out their names half the time. Nor the twins. I've never seen any of those boys with the same woman for more than thirty days."

They did a little wiggling to rearrange chairs and Beth settled next to the young woman. The few times they'd done things together Beth had found her easy to talk with, in spite of the difference in their ages. Jaxi made her laugh.

"Flavour of the month?"

Jaxi twisted to check out Travis again and slapped a hand over her mouth. "Or the week, as it looks like it's going to be this time."

Beth was just turning to examine what Jaxi was talking about when the woman with the flaming red miniskirt who had been lip locked with Travis only moments earlier swished past the table. She held her head high as she headed for the door. With every twitch of the hips, the bare length of her legs flashed.

"Hope she's got blankets in her car for if she gets stuck in a snow bank. Those shoes would be about as useful as a spit outside right now." The disdain in Blake's deep voice rang clear.

"Hush, she's trying to look hot." Jaxi slapped his chest lightly.

"Hmm." He grunted. "Not working. She should try a pair of cowboy boots. Or maybe a little less war paint."

"Now, Blake, the ladies can't all be the same." Travis sauntered up and unfolded himself into a chair. A bright red palm print decorated his cheek. He leaned back and stretched his limbs out in front of him.

"Damn it, Travis, you're a bastard sometimes," Blake muttered.

Beth watched the family dynamics with amusement as the boys proceeded to give Travis hell. There was something about him that seemed a little on the dangerous side and she was happy when Daniel casually draped his arm around the back of her chair. Travis raised a brow and whistled softly.

"So, the mighty have fallen, have they?"

"Shut up, you ass." Daniel threw a coaster at his brother, but Travis just smirked. "Looks like you've managed to piss off almost every female within a two hundred kilometre radius. What happened this time?"

Travis lifted his hands innocently. "Hell if I know. She wanted me to join her somewhere next Friday and I said I'd already made plans."

"She slapped you for that?" Beth asked in confusion.

Jaxi poked Beth in the side. "Travis is probably forgetting a key phrase or two, right?"

Travis broke out his wicked grin and shrugged. "What? It's not like I told her I had plans to go dancing with Ms. Sylvan Lake or something. Just wanted to hang out with the guys at the club."

"You're such a dog," Matt said. He shook his finger at his younger brother. "You're damn lucky we don't tell Mom and Dad what you get up to when you head into Red Deer on deliveries."

Travis sat up straight, all trace of his devil-may-care attitude gone. "Speaking of which, I need help. There's a rush order of furniture that I kinda accepted and while we've got everything we need..." He glanced at Daniel sheepishly.

Daniel leaned forward as he shook his head. "You didn't. Damn it, Travis, you know we don't mind helping, but could you try to not make it a last minute emergency every time you notice the sky is falling?"

"I hate the workshop." Travis refilled his mug and leaned back.

Blake spoke up. "It's not my favourite thing either, but it's a part of the family business. There's a lot less fieldwork now that the snow is down, so it makes sense to have something else to do to keep money coming in."

Beside her Daniel tensed for a moment, like he was about to speak, then sighed softly. She leaned into him and whispered in his ear. "You okay?"

He snuggled her tight to his side and kissed her temple. "Just something I've been thinking about. No firm answers yet, but I might be needing to borrow your math skills to see if what I'm pondering will even work."

The idea of being able to help him, in some area outside the bedroom, made her warm inside.

Matt rubbed his hands together eagerly. "Okay, now that you're all loosened up a bit, who's on the chopping block for pool tonight?"

Travis stood. "I'm in. All that money I saved on drinks for you-know-who."

Daniel groaned. "I'm in too. Beth, you joining us?"

She followed his lead and went for casual. "Sure. I think I know how." He squeezed her hand under the table and she fought back her laughter. To hide it, she turned to Jaxi. "Sorry, I'm not being a very good backup girlfriend for you here if I desert you. You want to play?"

Blake growled and the other boys laughed while Beth stared at Daniel in confusion.

"I'll explain later," he whispered.

Jaxi smirked a little as she leaned back into her husband, patting the soft rounding just showing in her belly. "Nah, me and Blake will sit here and argue about names for princess for a while."

Blake choked on his beer. "Don't start on me again."

"Why, Blake, I'm just suggesting you should be ready for anything, maybe even six daughters. That would be so righteous." Jaxi winked at Beth and motioned her off to the pool table.

Daniel held her hand as they walked to the side of the pool table. "Don't mind them. Jaxi likes to keep Blake off balance."

Beth grinned back. "I think her methodology is excellent." His fingers were warm around hers and she glanced around to see if anyone was watching before sneaking in to kiss him, a fleeting touch on the lips. He tasted good. Daniel reached around her to press a big hand to the middle of her back, holding her against his chest until she'd given him a proper kiss. When she pulled away, he stared at her, his gaze tracing her mouth, her eyes. His pupils were dark and growing wider.

"I'm looking forward to taking you home tonight, just so you know."

Beth licked her lips, and he groaned before turning away to grab her a pool cue. Oh damn, the things this man did to her, body and mind and soul.

* * * *

An hour later Beth dropped the final ball into the pocket, again, and held in her laughter as Matt swore.

"Shit. Daniel never warned us you were a shark." He slapped down a bill on the edge of the table and Beth waved it off.

"We're playing for fun. You can keep your money."

Travis grabbed the bill and stepped closer. "This is part of what makes it fun. People don't beat Matt very often, and it's about damn time. Go ahead, take the cash." He reached around her to slip the money in her back pocket and icy fingers slid up her spine.

She was in his arms, his hands resting lightly on the waist of her jeans. He grinned at her, and understanding rolled over her. The ass was testing to see her reaction.

"You lose something there, Travis? Or you waiting for me to make sure your next girlfriend likes to listen to men who sing soprano?"

Matt snorted and punched Travis in the arm. "Leave her alone, jerk, Daniel doesn't share."

Travis ran his gaze down her body and sighed as he stepped back to a polite distance. "True. Pity, that."

"You boys are something else." Beth crossed her arms in front of her. "How you've not all ended up on 'Wanted' posters all over the country is beyond me."

Travis winked. "Who says we haven't?"

"Where the hell did Daniel get to?" Matt glanced around the bar.

"Oh fuck, the witch is back." Travis tugged Beth's arm and pulled her toward the pool table, refusing to let her follow the direction of the stares. He turned his bright smile on her and motioned to the table. "How about one final game? Double or nothing?"

"Travis, what's your problem? Let go." She pulled free and found herself blocked by Matt's muscular frame.

He spoke calmly, like he was dealing with a skittish animal. "Now don't go getting the wrong idea."

She frowned at him. *What the hell was happening?*

"What kind of wrong idea could I get?" Travis glanced at Matt and the two of them fidgeted, just like her boys did when they got caught doing something wrong. "Stop it, you two, I'm not twelve years old." She shrugged off his hand and poked her head around Travis's big shoulder. "Oh."

Daniel was at the other end of the room, close to the bar counter, clutching their drink refills in either hand. A redheaded woman stood far too close to him, pinning him in place. As Beth watched the woman flung her hands around his neck and locked her lips on his like she was giving emergency resuscitation. A funny sensation tickled Beth's belly and she stepped back, considering carefully.

Before tonight they'd made no formal announcement in public that they were a couple, not really. They'd mentioned they were dating to the kids, but no one else. She had no right to be upset, but from a logical, analytical point of view—holy shit, some hussy was crawling over her man. Time for a decision, that's for sure. In fact it was past time.

"Beth, you okay?"

She turned and lifted a brow at Matt. He and Travis watched her with concern written all over their faces. She nodded then took the couple of steps back to drop into the seat next to Jaxi. This was one of those moments she wanted a female touch.

"Who's the woman with a death wish sucking face with my guy?"

Jaxi snorted behind her hand. "Daniel's ex, Sharelle. Affectionately known in our circles as the Wicked Witch of the West. She dumped him last spring. You want me to come help deal with her?"

Beth stopped to consider. This wasn't Daniel doing something deliberately to hurt her. In fact, when she really evaluated what she knew of his character, he would expect her to speak up if she wasn't happy.

Standing up for herself was slowly getting easier.

She took a deep breath. "He doesn't want her anymore, does he?"

"Hell no. I'm surprised to even see her here. We've all made it pretty clear she's not welcome in our circle. She turned out to be a self-centered bitch, if you'll excuse me for saying it."

Beth nodded. "Thanks. Okay, I think I can handle one hormonally-challenged, poorly-groomed woman."

Blake choked again and Jaxi patted his back. "Don't worry dear, it's a girl thing. Like you'll have to deal with our daughters down the road."

By the time Beth rose and made her way to where Daniel stood attempting to untangle himself from the woman's clutches she was still undecided what tack to take. It was obvious Daniel wasn't the instigator, but hell, he needed to learn there was a time to stop being such a gentleman.

She reached their side shortly after Sharelle finally let loose the vacuum seal and Daniel tried to get a word in edgewise. The creature covered his mouth with her hand and pouted prettily.

"I've missed you so much," she said in a husky voice.

Beth fought to stop from retching. The dramatic effect the woman was attempting was so pathetic.

"There you are, sweetheart, can I get that for you?" Beth carefully took one of the glasses from Daniel's fingers and smiled at him. Finally able to move, Daniel stepped clear of the clutches of his ex. He wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand and grimaced.

"Beth, you want to meet Sharelle before she leaves?"

Beth raised a brow and looked the woman up and down slowly. Okay, the redhead was good looking, but damn it, Daniel was hers now. Sharelle had missed her chance.

"Not really. Not unless she feels like explaining why she was clinging to my lover like a piece of Saranwrap?"

"Lover?" Sharelle sputtered. She glared at Daniel. "But you... But we..."

"Broke up. A long time ago now, and that's the end of it."

"But I thought—"

Beth sighed. Sharelle was obviously not one of the brighter bulbs in the room. There was no need to be unpleasant about it. As long as the bitch didn't even *think* of making another move.

Daniel wrapped an arm around Beth's waist as he shook his head. "You thought wrong. Beth and I are seeing each other, and if you don't mind, we'd like to return to our friends."

The redhead stared in silence as they walked away. Halfway back to the table Beth glanced up to see everyone was watching, eyes glued to the drama. Travis and Blake

wore matching smirks, Matt looked impressed. Jaxi pumped a fist in the air in victory. Yeah, there was a place for her in their midst, and she felt surprisingly comfortable with them. But the fact she hadn't even known Daniel had an ex in town bothered her. A lot. Heck she'd never imagined he was a monk before he met her. Suddenly she wanted to know it all. Who he had dated, what he had loved to do while growing up. What his dreams were for the future.

Holy crap, somewhere in the past two minutes she'd realized she really cared about the big cahoot. She almost felt like running after Sharelle and shaking her hand enthusiastically for pushing the right buttons.

She was falling in love and the thought didn't make her sick to her stomach.

Beth tugged his hand and led him to the side of the room. She stared up at him seriously for a minute.

Daniel touched her cheek gently. "I'm sorry about that. I had no idea she was going to be here, and then I couldn't figure out how to get away without—"

She pressed her fingers over his lips. Yeah, he should have cut the woman off a lot faster, but his tender heart was part of what she appreciated about him. Time to jump in with two feet and stop holding back.

"You know, we've spent an awful lot of time together in the past months and it appears we haven't talked about anything more important than the weather and where our next sexual tryst is going to be."

He frowned. "We've mentioned a few things but ... you're right. I was thinking that the other day as well."

Shit. "It's not easy, not with the kids around. And I know I haven't been the best at opening up. I'm going to work on changing that, okay?" There was a flash of delight in his eyes.

"You're not mad at me for that little display with Sharelle?"

She shook her head. "Not your fault. Only, if a woman does an octopus imitation on you again, you are allowed to *accidentally* pour the drinks in your hands on her. That would make her let go damn quick."

He chuckled. "Yes, ma'am, I'll remember that."

She wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his chest. The scent of Sharelle's perfume hit her and she wrinkled her nose and pushed away.

"Ugh. You smell like that woman." Daniel leaned over to kiss her. She pressed her hands against him and turned her face away. "No sir. You're sterilizing those lips before I kiss you again."

He laughed and tucked her fingers into the crook of his arm to lead her back to their table.

Chapter Twelve

The dishwasher swirled down the drain. The constant yattering of the boys as they dried the dishes and wiped the table felt comfortable and Daniel spotted the silly grin he wore in the hall mirror as he scooped up the littlest one and tickled him en-route to the living room.

"Okay, partners, your mama will be home in a couple hours, so let's make sure we've got everything shipshape. Lance, you got the list?"

"We've done it all." He held out the paper and pointed. "Homework, supper, dishes, chores."

"Everything?"

Lance nodded. Robbie squirmed out of his arms and climbed on the couch, bouncing up and down excitedly. "We get to play more games."

Chaos ensued. Beth was due back from her teacher's development day field trip by nine p.m. Daniel had been honoured when she asked him if he wanted to step in and take the boys for the day. Her placing that kind of trust in him was humbling and made him feel very hopeful about the future. Yet after a full day with all three tykes he was ready to admit he was exhausted. "Where you kids get your energy from?"

They'd played hide and seek outdoors in the snow and the trees. Nathan discovered one of the cats had a new batch of kittens, the family hidden in the far recesses of the barn. Throughout the day, while helping the boys make forts in the bales of the loft and chasing the rest of the barn cats in circles, Daniel had flashbacks to his own childhood. Roaming the countryside with his brothers like a wild creature during the hours of freedom between chores.

Robbie leapt off the couch and tackled him. Then all three boys were on him, wrestling him down and tickling him as he laughed out loud at their antics.

The roughhousing calmed eventually and Daniel guided them into playing a few final board games. He lit the fire and happily accepted the book Lance passed him. The kid's dark eyes bored into him for a minute, like he was offering a challenge. Daniel glanced at the tome in his hands and chuckled to himself. Another test. Lance seemed to be all about the tests.

"*Farmer Boy*. Awesome story."

Lance frowned. "Mom said we had to read it, but it's a girl's book."

Daniel let his mouth hang open in an exaggerated fashion, playing it up for the kids. "You're joking, right? Ain't you read the rest of the Little House books? My daddy read them to us when we were all little. We used to read out loud together every Friday evening."

"Really?"

"Really. They ain't books for just girls. Heck, the experiences that family had were tough, and exciting. I know when I heard some of the things they lived through it always made me real grateful for all the comforts of home I got to enjoy. And thankful for treats like ice cream in the freezer instead of only once in a blue moon."

Daniel settled on the couch and started reading at the bookmark. Robbie nestled against him and Lance and Nathan plopped on the floor. Every time he glanced over,

Lance's thoughtful expression made him wonder what the hell was going on in the kid's head.

Two hours later he finally had them tucked into bed, and a brand new appreciation for why Beth was often tired when he called her. The phone rang and he laughed as he spotted the number on the display.

"Evening, darling."

"Hey, Daniel. We're running a little late, and it's going to be an hour still before I get home. Everything okay?"

He collapsed into the La-Z-Boy chair in front of the fire, kicking the foot extension out and relaxing back with a groan. "Everything's great, but you are getting a massage the next time I see you. How the hell do you do this every day, woman?"

Her sexy voice lowered a little. "Welcome to my world. Oh, and I'm totally accepting your offer, I need the massage so bad. My feet are killing me. I swear they made us walk every inch of the Tyrrell museum. I'd sit through a million meetings before going on another 'teachers field trip'."

"Your leg sore?"

"Amazingly, not too bad. I think all the walks we've been taking have strengthened it." Static cut in on the line and she spoke quickly. "I'll see you at home as soon as I can."

Home. Home with him, where she belonged.

He rattled around the house for a bit, now too keyed up to stare into the fire and relax. The past couple of days they'd tried a few times to get together to talk, but it was like the kids had radar, and woke up right when the discussion got deeper than sharing growing up stories. There were just certain things neither of them wanted to discuss in a public coffee shop, or over the phone. Daniel sighed.

Tonight he intended on asking if Jaxi's offer of babysitting was a possibility. See if Beth were willing to go on a retreat, just the two of them, for a couple of nights. Not only to get to make love without pulling strings, but to talk—really talk.

A creak on the stairs sounded with a low whimper hard on its heels. A little head poked around the corner, Nathan's big eyes staring at him.

"Nathan? What's up, bud?"

"I'm thirsty."

Oh Lord. Daniel got him a glass of water and led the kid into the living to sit in front of the fire. Of course, this probably meant he'd be up right around the time Beth got home, having to pee.

Kids.

Daniel sat back in the recliner. Moving slow and staying silent. Whenever he'd tried to stay up past his bedtime that was what his daddy had done. Made it seem peaceful and quiet. To a seven-year-old, boring.

Nathan perched on his heels and sipped slowly, his eyes darting around the room and returning again and again to Daniel. There was almost nothing left in the glass and still he milked it. Daniel scratched his face to hide his grin.

"You ready for me to tuck you in again?"

Nathan put the glass down on the coffee table and turned those big eyes on Daniel. "I'm scared to go to bed."

Daniel frowned. Now what was going on? "Something wrong with your room? Did you know that's the room my brother Blake used to sleep in? It's a nice big space, and

you've got Robbie in there to keep you company."

"Not that." The tyke surprised him to pieces by crawling into his lap and tugging on his shirt. "Bad dreams."

Ahh. "Like there's something..." *Maybe giving the kid ideas wasn't the best way to go about this.* "What kind of dreams?"

"Of my daddy."

Oh fuck. For all the time they'd spent together, it had shocked him how seldom the kids ever mentioned their father. Hell at their age his daddy had been the center of his universe, and every waking minute he'd been home from school he'd tagged along, trying to keep up. Looking back he probably got in the way more than he helped, but Mike had never said a word.

"You miss him?"

Nathan stiffened in his lap. He swung his head up and glared at Daniel. "Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"You ever hit someone? Like punch them, and hurt them?"

Daniel chuckled. "I've got five brothers. You tell me, you ever scuffle with Robbie or Lance?"

Nathan's face folded into a frown. "Well, that's different. They deserve it."

"I expect they do, sometimes. I know my brothers certainly do."

"You ever hit a girl?"

"Hell no. I don't have any sisters, but I still can't imagine hitting one." The memory of Sharelle planting the kiss on him in the bar crossed his mind. "They can be very annoying creatures at times, girls, but I'd never hit one."

"What if a girl asks for it?"

Daniel frowned. What the hell kinda question was that from a seven year old? "You mean like teasing you? You still need to treat them nice, even if they call you names. Even if they poke you." He leaned over and lowered his voice. "I know at times it just don't seem fair, but if you can learn it now, it'll make things a whole lot better when you get older."

"Daddy said Mommy asked for it." His breath was sucked from his lungs as Nathan's thin little voice carried through the night air. Daniel held in the swear words wanting to escape. He'd wondered if her husband had abused her. He's suspected that was part of the secret Beth had kept and yet the absolute fury that rose in his belly was shocking.

Holy shit, now what could he say? "All I can tell you is what I've been taught. There ain't nothing a girl can do that makes it right for you to hit her. That doesn't mean you have to stand there and take it, your mama has strong opinions on that, but hitting them back? No sir. That's not what a gentleman does."

Nathan snuggled in tighter to Daniel's side and something twisted in his belly. The earthy scent of boy, familiar and yet strange, rose to his nose. He tentatively put an arm around the little tyke and gave him a squeeze.

"I didn't like it when he hit Mommy."

Another shot of pain streaked through him. "Of course you didn't."

"I wanted to hit him." The voice was so soft and low Daniel barely heard the words. Red-hot anger at the man he didn't even know blazed out. If the bastard hadn't already been dead, Daniel would have happily tracked him down and shot him.

Daniel rocked the boy, considering his words carefully. "Nathan, I ain't going to tell you that you're wrong. In wanting to defend your mama you were completely right. Now I didn't know your daddy, and I don't know all that happened along the way, but I can tell you this. Taking care of our mamas, and sisters, and women in general is supposed to be important to every man."

He lifted Nathan's chin to look directly into the tear filled eyes. "That what you having bad dreams about? Your daddy hitting your mama?" Nathan's little chin quivered as he nodded. "Shit."

Nathan's eyes grew wide. "You swore. Mama says we're not supposed to swear."

Daniel put his finger over his lips for a second. "You're right, and I try not to, but there's just some times it sneaks out. Like when I'm really mad."

The kid snorted. "You're not mad."

"Oh yes, I am. Not at you, but for you."

Nathan frowned. "But you're not yelling, or throwing things. You can't be mad."

Oh my Lord, give me the words. Daniel pressed his hand to Nathan's head and drew him up against his chest.

"Trust me, I'm real mad." How the hell was he supposed to explain to the kid that what he'd experienced should never have happened? "There're a few kinds of anger in the world. There's the throwing things kind of mad—that doesn't really get much done except hurt the things you throw and the people you throw them at, does it?"

"Hurts them lots." Nathan's voice shook.

Sweet Jesus. The whole conversation made his mind and heart ache. What kind of bastard could do this to his own children? To his wife? "Then there's the kind of mad that makes people want to make things better. That's the kind of mad I am. I'm upset for you and your brothers. I'm angry for your Mama's sake, but yelling and throwing things would only make it worse."

Nathan nodded rapidly.

There was no way he could continue this conversation tonight. "You just relax right here. I'll keep the bad dreams away. Deal?"

Nathan sniffed and wiped at his nose, then cocooned in like one of the kittens under their mom out in the barn. It only took a couple of minutes for his breathing to relax from the rasping little gasps of fighting back the tears.

The room quieted. The fire crackled softly, the chair squeaked on every rock. Above their heads the floorboards of the old house expanded and contracted. The snow slid off one section of the roof from the heat of the fire. Daniel leaned his head back and tried to sort out all the emotions racing through him.

Beth's husband had abused her. Emotionally abused the kids too from what Nathan let slip. They seemed to be dealing with it well and his admiration for Beth increased astronomically.

She was strong, desirable and damn if he was going to let her hide away from him anymore.

The time of waiting became like a time of prayer. He mentally listed all the things he was grateful for, all the things he wanted. And the longer he sat, with a child in his arms, waiting for his woman to return, the more he realized everything he still wanted was nearly within his grasp.

If Beth was ready to trust him with her heart.

The deck boards outside the door creaked a moment before Beth stepped inside. She came into the living room, sparkling snow crystals in her hair and her cheeks rosy from the cold. Daniel could have stared at her all night long.

"Hey, what's up?" she whispered as she knelt beside the chair, one hand resting on his arm, the other reaching to brush the hair from Nathan's face.

"He's okay. I just didn't want to take him upstairs in case we woke up Robbie and you weren't home yet. He had a bad dream."

"He has them occasionally." She stared at her son for a moment and written on her face was such sadness and loss he couldn't take it anymore.

"Beth, we need to talk."

She nodded slowly, her fingers fidgeting with the fabric of his sleeve. "Let's tuck him in."

They went upstairs together, and Daniel stepped back after carefully placing the now boneless Nathan on his bed. Standing in the doorway he watched Beth tenderly pulled up the covers and kiss both Nathan and Robbie. Then she slipped past him to check on Lance, closing his curtains and turning off his MP3.

When she would have walked down the stairs he grabbed her hand and tugged her toward her bedroom. "You must be tired. Come on, I'll give you that massage I promised."

Her breathing picked up as her gaze flickered to the closed doors of the boys.

Daniel lifted her chin in his hand. "Nothing will happen that you don't want to, okay? I promise. If you want me to crawl out the window so you don't get caught with me in your room, I'll do it. I even know which trees I have to climb down to get away safely."

That was enough to bring a smile back to her face and she laughed softly and pulled him after her, turning the lock. "I've been teaching the boys they are supposed to knock before entering, but they weren't learning very fast. So they're used to me locking the door now."

She pulled off her sweater and stretched her arms in the air. "I never want to go on another field trip in my life."

"Not into dinosaurs?" Daniel sat on the chair in the corner of the room and watched, mesmerized, as Beth sat on the bed and stripped off her socks and wiggled out of her slacks.

They needed to get to the real issue, but she was tying his brain in knots.

He joined her on the bed, crawling behind her to massage her shoulders, her neck. Pressing his thumbs into the tight knots until she slowly began to relax under this touch.

"We're not doing a lot of talking, are we?"

Daniel laughed. "Not really sure where to begin."

Beth placed a hand on his where it rested on her shoulder. Then she glanced up at him. "Did Nathan tell you what his bad dream was about?"

He moved in front of her, kneeling at her feet. "He did. Kinda, like a seven-year-old tells any story."

He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tight to him, just needing to squeeze out a little of the hurt and agony he could see in her eyes. Beth sniffed a couple of times and then swore.

"Shit, I promised myself I wasn't going to do this anymore."

"Do what?"

"Cry for the no-good bastard. Cry because of him. I want to move on, and forget what he did to me and the boys and yet he's still there, haunting us."

She tucked her tear-streaked face into the crook of his neck and his heart broke. "You go ahead and cry. You love your sons and until you know they are on the road to understanding what the real love of family means, you're going to have moments you cry. Hell, my mama still cries over the stupid things her sons do to each other, and she cries when we get our feelings hurt and we're all grown up. You're a good mama to your boys, Beth, and tears come with the territory."

She leaned back and cupped his face in her hand. "Oh Daniel, you are one in a million. That's sweet of you, but there are things you don't know. Like if I really loved my boys I should have left the man years ago, before he had a chance to make our life hell. I should have left the first time he hit me, but I was like every one of the women who think they'll be the exception. That he really was sorry for what he'd done. That he really never would do it again. That the boys were better off with a father who was decent most of the time."

Daniel held in his anger. "You shouldn't have had to make the decision. None of it was your fault, Beth."

"Nathan cries because his dad is gone, and you know what, that is my fault. I'm the one that killed him."

He choked back his surprise. "You said he died in the car crash."

"He did."

Daniel waited, stroking her hair gently, giving her the space to tell it her own way.

She wiggled back on the bed and wrapped her arms around herself, voice low, head dipped. "He'd found out something I'd done that he didn't like. Hell, I can't even remember what it was, and he was cursing a blue streak at me. The roads were icy that night and when I felt myself losing control of the vehicle I..." she paused, "...I yanked the wheel to the side and we spun into traffic with the passenger side leading. I made sure he was the one in the direct line of anything that hit us."

Crap. What kind of burden was that to carry?

"But if you didn't react you could have been the one killed. Or both of you."

"Still, it was a conscious choice. I'd do it again in an instant." She was breathing so fast he thought she might faint. "Oh Jesus, I can't believe I'm telling you this, but I need to explain—"

He hurried to reassure her. "You don't have to explain anything to me. Not right now. I want to know, but only when you're ready to talk about it. Not because you think I'm expecting you to." He held her hands clasped in his, aching to help her, wanting to comfort her. Her fingers were icy cold and he warmed them gently in his palms.

"He was a bastard. Stole away years of my life. Made the boys quake in fear. Made me have sex when he knew it was dangerous. Demanded I keep going until..."

She stopped. Completely. Oh God, his heart was breaking for her, for every bit of pain she'd suffered.

"Until what? Oh God, Beth."

She whipped her head around, hair flying. Her eyes were dark, not with the heat of passion he was used to seeing but with pure unadulterated rage.

"My baby girl died because of him."

Daniel swore under his breath.

"He knew it was dangerous for me to get pregnant again but by then that was my only purpose in life, as far as he was concerned. Barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen." She dashed angry tears from her eyes. "I had completed all my training, finished my student teaching, and all the while he was trying to get me pregnant. I expected to stop work when I had babies, I did, but I never thought I'd have three children in less than three years. Then when I did get pregnant again so soon, the doctor said I needed bed rest. Samuel knew, but he didn't care, just cared about me having food on the table and warming his bed. And I lost her. My little girl."

The tears poured out and Daniel gathered her in his arms, pressed her forehead to his chest and simply held her.

She dragged for air. "I can't have any more children. When they went to do the d/c too much of my womb was damaged and they took it out. I can't have any more children." Another sob shook her. "I know that seems so silly to be upset about in light of the fact he used to hit me, but..."

He stopped dead in his tracks. This was one area he understood better than she could possibly image. There was so much tenderness in the kiss he pressed to her temple.

"It's the farthest thing from silly. I bet you've got people who tell you that you should count your blessings, right? That you've got three fine boys, and what more could you want." He laughed, knowing that it sounded hollow and cold. He buried his fingers in her hair and pulled her eyes up to meet his own. "It doesn't take away the hurt. You love them nonetheless, but the ones that you can't have, because the decision isn't yours. It hurts like blue blazes and there's nothing anyone can say that's ever going to make that feel better.

"It's like a piece of your future is dead, and people walk on all around you and expect you to keep going but there's nothing but a fucking hole in front of you and you're the only one who sees it."

The dark centers of her eyes glisten with her unshed tears. "How..."

"Because I know. I *know*."

He held her. Gently. His lips touching her forehead, and her cheek, and her lashes. Trying to pass over an inkling of compassion that she could appreciate and comprehend in the midst of her agony.

Beth tangled her fingers in his hair and kissed him. She held their mouths together until the kiss faded away and they hung, lip to lip, air mingling as they attempted to balance their breathing.

He pulled her into his lap, lifting her to straddle his legs. His hand caressed her back, massaging the muscles as he clutched her close, their torsos tight as they continued to touch and comfort each other. Beth curved a hand down the side of his face and tentatively brushed a tear that clung to the edge of his eye.

"What's your story, Daniel? You obviously have experience with my situation. I've never had anyone be able to..."

"Mumps. I'm sterile. There's no further Coleman clan springing from my loins and you wouldn't believe the shit I've heard over the years regarding the fact. I know what that part of it feels like." He took a deep breath and stared into her eyes. "As far as your husband is concerned? There's a special place in hell reserved for men like him. If you hadn't done what you did, you could be dead now. Or one of your sons..." His throat closed off at the thought of any of the tow-headed boys tangled in their beds down the

hall dead at the maniac's hands.

Beth held his face and he could have drowned in her tear filled eyes. Barely above a whisper, she spoke as she caressed his bristle-roughed cheek. "I know we have to talk more, but I need you. Need you to chase away the pain, just for a little while."

They moved together, willing accomplices. Lips and tongues tangling, taking turns to slip off their remaining clothing as they shrugged shoulders and wiggled limbs. When she stripped bare from the waist up Daniel took possession of one firm nipple, cupping her breast and lifting it to his lips to suckle.

"So good." Beth let her head drop back

"I want you tonight. All of you."

*

He made love to her that night. Lifted her and placed her with such care on the bed. Tugged off her panties slowly, careful of her still aching limbs. Somehow between kissing every inch of her body and arranging her naked form on the bed he shucked his jeans. Beth looked up from where she lay, the moonlight pouring in the window to illuminate every muscular inch of his body. His cock rose turgid from the tight curls at his groin and he slipped over her, the heat of his torso rolling ahead like a steamroller and pinning her in place.

"Tonight, you're mine. No games, no playing. Just open yourself up and give yourself to me, Beth. Let go and let me catch you."

Her throat was tight as he suspended himself over her, thigh to thigh, nose to nose. His eyes, oh damn—his eyes were beautiful. Full of tenderness and need and she wrapped her arms around his torso and pulled him down on top of her, sighing as his bare skin touched hers as if for the first time.

They touched and moved together, in perfect harmony. He kissed her mouth, her breasts, the indent of her belly. He lapped at her clit and she opened wide, letting him touch her everywhere, as hard as he liked, as soft as he wanted. Her first orgasm surprised them both as she rocked with the initial touch of his hand to her pussy. He covered her with his body while her sheath still convulsed and with one firm motion he buried his cock deep in her pussy. He locked their hips together, pulling her head to his, lips and tongues tasting and embroiled with white-hot need. Then he started, slow minute rocking of his hips that dragged his cock back an inch and then reburied him deep. Deeper as she pulled up her knees and spread herself wide.

"Oh God, Beth, yes." His strokes hesitated for a moment, uneven and broken in rhythm.

"Do it. Come on ... oh there, so good. You feel so good inside me. All I need, I..."

She wanted to confess with words what their bodies were saying but she refrained, instead staring into his eyes and saying it the best she could. It was love. It was physical connection that went soul deep and tears welled up as he stared at her. Another thrust, another. The rubbing intensified, every nerve on fire. He grasped her nipple and sucked hard and the spear of pain shot into pleasure that radiated over her skin, throbbing in her sheath. She grabbed his head and drew their mouths together again, needing the connection, needing to taste him. She bit his lower lip and licked the pain away as he erased the pain lingering in her heart. No, not erased, but eased. They were together, they belonged together.

The bed creaked in an easy rhythm and he groaned over her. "So close. You need to

come. I want to feel you around me. Squeezing me. Surrounding me." He adjusted the angle of her body, lifting her hips higher, tilting his pelvis up to thrust harder, more forcibly. Her clit felt the cool air move over it when his body pulled away and then he touched her, his fingers rubbing firmly and the pulse of sensation drove her over.

"Daniel, yes..." She clutched his neck tight and gave herself over to the pleasure; let it roll over her like the fall wind over the prairies. It was perfect when a second later he joined her, his harsh breathing giving way to a contented sigh as he jerked inside her, the heat of his release bathing her.

"Yes, oh damn, Beth." He dropped his head on her shoulder, covering her with his body and she didn't even try to stop the tears.

"That was perfect," she whispered.

He rolled them carefully, drawing her on top so they stayed intimately connected. His tender caress and consideration made her heart ache.

He rubbed her back, dragged his hands through her hair again and again, until their breathing calmed and only the rapid beat of his heart gave away the fact they'd been running a marathon in bed. He chuckled softly, like he was aware of keeping the noise down.

"Perfect, eh?"

"Hmm, I think." The languid sensation stealing through her limbs made it tough to fight the sleep now creeping up.

"Even though it was missionary vanilla sex?"

Something twigged in her brain and suddenly it was funny as shit. She was an emotional yo-yo. She giggled, and the giggle escalated to a snicker. She took a deep breath, still shaky from the bombshells of the evening. Daniel rolled them to their sides, keeping their bodies close and their spirits together as they snuggled under the covers.

Chapter Thirteen

"Mom. Mooooooom."

The rattling at the doorknob jolted her awake, and she slipped out a hand in search of Daniel. She could have sworn only seconds before he'd been wrapped around her, kissing her neck and whispering loving things in her ear.

The bed beside her still felt warm.

"Mom—mie."

Beth sat up, clutching the sheet to her chest as she looked around the room in confusion. The very empty room. She glanced at the window and then laughed. No, he hadn't dove out that way.

"Just a minute. Mommy's getting up."

She pulled on her sleep shirt before unlocking the door. Nathan and Robbie swarmed in and dragged her back to the bed for snuggles. Lance strolled in slower, almost suspiciously and she fought to keep from blushing. That wasn't in the cards yet, to try to explain to her eight year old why there was a man in his mom's bed.

And yet ... why not? Would the boys not understand that Daniel was someone who made her very happy? That maybe, possibly, could make them happy too?

She pondered the question the whole time the kids rattled about what they'd done with him the day before. While they helped make breakfast and then while she cleaned up the mess afterward. It wasn't until she finished cleaning she spotted the note he'd left for her propped up beside the phone.

I'm on early chores in the barn. I'll stop by to see you later. Take you out for a coffee?

Her mom's question came back to her: If Daniel was someone she was really truly going to trust, how was she going to let him know? Show him, and herself, she thought he was worthy of being trusted. Last night she'd shared things with him she'd never told another person. Did he understand how difficult that had been? What it really meant to have felt like she could tell him—everything? She'd already done something huge by leaving him alone with her boys. There wasn't a much more tangible way of saying she trusted him than that.

But she hadn't verbally said it, and she hadn't said what was really in her heart. And after dictating what she expected to him of this relationship all those months ago, if she was going to change the rules, she needed to tell him.

She made a quick phone call then called to the boys to get their things together.

"Where we going?" Lance checked the clock and frowned. "It's too early for swimming."

"Not too early for a visit. It's Saturday and Mr. Coleman said he needed you to show him where the kittens are you found yesterday."

Squeals of delight rose and Beth smiled. Yeah, and Marion Coleman needed to show them how to bake and eat too many cookies. And the rest of the Coleman boys needed to teach them how brothers could love and support each other even if they didn't always see eye-to-eye on everything. How to be a family, with strong men who weren't afraid to love their women whole-heartedly.

She blinked back the tears and hustled everyone out the door, desperately trying to figure out exactly what she was going to say to Daniel when she finally saw him.

* * * *

It was poetic she found him in the barn, the same place she'd searched him out three months earlier. He wandered from stall to stall, pouring grain out of a bag. One of the horses sniffed his hair and made little nickering sounds. Daniel laughed, reaching up to rub its nose, the easy way he moved speaking of his familiarity with the animals and his patience. Her physical pull toward him was incredible, even in dirty jeans with his hair all mussed up. She'd never seen him look more attractive, except maybe the previous night when he'd cradled Nathan so carefully in his arms.

She took a deep breath. "Hey."

He swung around and his face lit up.

"Good morning, darling." He strode forward and took her in his arms, planting a juicy kiss on her lips before he paused and released her, glancing around in embarrassment. "Shit, sorry. I didn't even think to check if the boys were with you."

"They're up at your parent's house."

"With my folks?" He frowned in confusion.

She twisted her fingers together, shy and nervous again. "You got a minute? We need to talk." Damn, how often had she said that to him? Or him to her?

He smiled. "I'm feeling a little like we're caught in one of those time warps. You want to walk or sit here in the barn with me?"

They laughed together and suddenly she wasn't anxious anymore. She tucked herself back up against his body, resting her head on his chest. "I missed waking up in your arms this morning."

He kissed her forehead. "I didn't want to push it with the boys, but damn you were hard to leave."

Beth looked up at his face, at the way he waited patiently for her to make the next move. To speak. She really did feel safe with him. "Remember when I said that I wasn't looking for a long term relationship and you said we had to be friends as well as lovers?"

He nodded.

"Do you feel like we're friends?"

Daniel held her for a minute, staring off into space over her head. Her mind darted with the possibilities of his response. Was she pushing too fast? Then he lifted her chin so their eyes met. She could see the caring on his face.

"I think in some ways we are, and others, we're still learning." He shook his head. "I can't believe that I never knew about your husband. I should have been so much more careful with you, so much gentler."

He had been. "Oh Daniel, everything you did was right, even if it was by accident. All our early visits were out in public, and you pushed my comfort levels the right way. You were yourself. I got to see how you dealt with the people around you, see what they thought of you. There was no pretending with you, ever. I don't think I could have been comfortable so quickly with anyone else."

"Do you think we're friends?" he asked.

She kissed him. "With benefits." He stiffened and she hurried on before all her hard won courage failed. "But it's not enough. Not anymore." She stepped back so she could

look him straight in the eye. "I think I'm falling in love with you."

"Oh, thank God."

His completely unexpected reaction made the last bubble of fear burst and joy well up in its place. She laughed out loud. "Daniel Coleman, you are impossible. What's that supposed to mean?"

He picked her up and spun her around in a circle, clasping her close to him. "Just that it's a good thing to know you're falling, because when you land, I'll be there waiting for you. I fell a while ago, and I've been hoping you'd catch up."

"Are you saying—?"

"I love you. I think the world of you and how you've faced your fears and made a new life for yourself and the boys. The way you smile and laugh, the way you pour yourself into your kids at home and at the school." He set her back on her feet and wrapped his arms around her torso, pressing their bodies together. "I love the way you feel under me and yet sex is a small part of it. I love the whole package, Miss Beth."

She hugged him tightly as he spoke. He loved her. She could see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice and every bit of it rang true.

"So ... what now?" she asked. He led her to a bale and once again the coincidence of the situation hit her hard. They settled next to each other, hands linked.

"If it were just you and me involved here, I'd be willing to do whatever you feel needs to be done. I'd go down on one knee and propose if that's what you wanted. I'd move in with you and we could be partners for the rest of our lives without the need for any piece of paper or fancy words being spoken. But what about the boys?"

She lifted their joined hands to her lips and kissed his knuckles. It was so like Daniel to try to think the whole thing through. If she could be any surer, that would have been the final nudge she needed, that he was concerned about her sons.

He was the one they all needed in their lives, for better or worse.

*

Daniel could barely breathe, the raw emotion running through his body drawing his throat tight. He was looking at the possibility of forever hovering in front of him and damn if he could figure out the right move to make.

"The way I see it, those kids have been through an awful lot over the past year, and they must be pretty confused. You were hurt pretty bad in the accident and suddenly their daddy was gone. Yeah, the man wasn't a good father, but he was still all they knew. You moved them to a new home and new schools, new friends. All that for the best of reasons, but it still has got to make their little heads spin. Add me now full-time? They might not take kindly to me coming in as someone other than a temporary babysitter."

Beth shook her head. "I do want what is best for my boys, and that doesn't mean letting them dictate what I do with my life. It's not going to be all sweetness and roses trying to make them understand who you will be in their lives, but just because they balk a few times doesn't mean it's not the best thing for them."

"But should we push them too fast? Do we have to push them?"

"What are you suggesting? That we just carry on like we have?"

"Oh hell no. I'm done with the hiding, and I thought you'd made it pretty clear the other day at the bar we were together. The boys can get used to the idea of me being around, slowly. It's only a couple of weeks until Christmas and while I want to be in your life and theirs, I don't see any reason to rush it now."

"So ... we date?"

"Yup. You stay in the house with the boys for a while longer. Then I have another plan I've been working on, but I need your help with the numbers. I've got the go ahead from Blake and Travis to buy out their portions of the furniture shop. Neither of them are interested in continuing, they'd much rather work the land and deal with that side of the ranch. I'm ready for a change, and willing to sell them my share. I thought about finding a place right in town, a house. I've got money saved up and my daddy's blessing to head into a new venture."

She looked shocked. "You don't want to ranch anymore?"

"Nope."

She laughed. "Daniel, we need to go somewhere, just the two of us and actually sit and talk for a couple days straight. How come I didn't know you wanted to get out of ranching?"

He tweaked her nose. "Because we were too busy trying every non-vanilla experience we could think of."

"True."

They sat in silence for a minute.

"My mom offered to watch the kids."

"Jaxi offered to watch..."

They spoke simultaneously and then broke off.

Daniel grinned. "Heck, I bet half of Rocky would offer to watch the kids to let us have a getaway."

"You really want to move into town?"

"Hell yeah. Beth, I loved growing up on the ranch, and I love my family, but I feel like I need to take the next step. What better time than now? We could find a house we both like close to the school for the kids. Easy for you to get to work." *Oh crap*, there was another example of how little he knew. "Shit, I don't even know if you still want to work if you don't have to."

They both took a deep breath and leaned together closer, her arms draped around his neck.

Beth shook her head. "This is one the strangest situations I've ever heard of. We love each other, but we're going to take it slow for awhile longer, until we can actually say that we're friends?"

"Sounds about right to me." He lifted her chin. "How long my folks thinking they got the boys?"

"Before I left I heard your dad agree to take over your duties at the pool today and your mom was asking what their favourite supper was. Does that sound like the whole day to you?"

Oh yeah. "How about we go back to the house, grab whatever you need and head out for the day? Spend some time doing some serious talking and planning and dreaming."

"You don't want to stay home?" She looked up at him with a hint of mischief in her eyes.

"Only if you promise not to jump me."

"What?" Beth laughed as he pulled her to her feet.

Daniel held her hands in his, rubbing his fingers over her knuckles. "We already know we've got the sex part down pat. If we can keep from getting distracted too much,

then the house would be fine. We'll light the fire and cuddle up on the couch and talk each other's ears off. And hopefully by the time we head over to join my folks for supper, we'll have an idea of how we're going to explain our plan to the boys."

Beth squeezed his hand. "I'm looking forward to becoming your friend."

The hopeful expression in her eyes made the future look damn bright.

Chapter Fourteen

Six months later

Daniel pulled up in front of the hardware shop with his dad riding shotgun just as Beth exited, two of the boys in tow behind her. All three of them had their arms full of paint cans and brushes.

"I'll stay in the truck," Mike offered. "You go help your damsel in distress."

Daniel hurried over to take her armload.

"Where's Lance?" he asked. Nathan and Robbie dumped their supplies into the back of his truck and swung over the edge to sit in the open box. "Hey, guys. What do think you're doing?"

Nathan popped up and hung over the edge, both arms wrapped around one of the ranch dogs. "We wanna ride back here."

Daniel hid his smile and jerked his thumb forward. "In the cab."

"Awww..." They complained but they moved, crawling through the open split window to land in puddles on the crew cab seat. Daniel chuckled until he looked back to see Beth watching him with a raised brow.

"What? I don't mind if they get in the cab that way. Better than thinking they get to ride in the back with the dogs."

She just shook her head. "You're such a male."

He leaned over and nibbled on her ear. "You were very glad of that last night, Miss Beth."

"Very."

They held each other close and Daniel counted his blessings like he had every damn day for the past six months. "Lance needs help. He can't make up his mind and I think he's driving the clerk insane."

"Really? Lance always seems to know exactly what he wants. And what he doesn't want."

"Well, this time there's a little trouble. Come on, I think you'll find it interesting." She walked with him toward the door, her smile blindingly bright.

Daniel made his way into the store about to burst with curiosity. Waiting to get to know each other better before doing anything formal with their relationship had been the best thing he and Beth could have done. They had no doubts about their feelings now, and more than just being lovers, they knew they were friends. They'd even taken a few classes together to help deal with the issues that continued to haunt Beth.

But it was the way the boys had slowly come around that made them both the happiest. Nathan accepted the idea of Daniel the fastest, maybe because he was the first to open up to Daniel and talk about his father. Little Robbie never said anything much, just crawled into Daniel's lap one day and kissed him straight out before kissing Beth and toddling off to bed.

Lance was the hold out. Still watching, still judging. Now that they were getting the house in town ready for moving in together, the kid seemed to finally be coming to a decision about the whole deal.

Daniel was worried it wasn't going to be pretty. Lance reminded him a lot of himself at that age. Stubborn, but quiet. The kind you couldn't move without a bulldozer.

Lance had both clerks trapped, cans of paint and wallpaper swatches littering the countertop. One of them spotted Daniel and relief showed in the man's eyes.

"Oh look, someone to help you decide. I'll be over here when you're ready." Both attendants fled.

Daniel laughed. "Lance, what are you doing? You've got more coloured bits of paper on the counter than there are jellybeans in the candy shop."

Lance snorted. "As if."

"So what's the trouble? I thought you had an idea picked out already."

"It was too girly."

Oh sweet Jesus, here they went with the girly business again. Just wait until the kid realized the female sex didn't have cooties. He was going to be a handful. "You want horses?"

"Nope."

"Race Cars?"

"Nope."

"Circus clowns, elephants and balloons?" He thought that one would make the kid take notice. Lance grimaced in disgust.

"I'm not a baby."

"No, you ain't." Daniel leaned on the counter and poked at the papers. "Seems to me most of these are a little on the young side for you. Tell you what, the room you picked out pretty much just needs a fresh coat of paint, and then you can add the things you want over the next while."

Lance stared at him in suspicion. "I thought we had to get everything ready for moving in a couple of weeks."

Beth stepped closer and Daniel wrapped an arm around her, pulling her tight to his side. She felt so good in his arms, so right and he couldn't resist stopping to drop a kiss on her cheek. She smiled at him, one hand behind his back, the other resting on his chest.

Lance checked every move they made.

"We have to be able to shift your furniture in, that's true. But there's no way that at the end of the day we're going to have everything the way we want it forever. In fact, that's one of the fun parts about having your own room. You get to keep changing things and making the things around you show off your interests and strengths. Find what you love to do and suddenly there's all kinds of projects you'll want to put in your room."

"Like the stuff you make?"

Daniel nodded. "Yeah, I suppose."

"You think I could make something in the workshop for my room?"

"Course you could. With supervision, but I'd love to help you."

Lance cracked a smile and pointed at the paint samples. "Which one?"

Daniel checked them out and pulled three to the side. "If you're going to make some furniture, pick your favourite of these. They're neutral enough to look good for a long time." He leaned over. "And they are not the least bit girly."

Lance nodded slowly and picked one up. "This one."

"Give it to the man, and he'll mix it for you." Daniel watched the boy track down the clerk. He turned back to Beth who was smiling at him, a twinkle in her eye. "What was

that all about?"

"He didn't like my suggestions." Beth said. "I pointed out almost the same things you did, but he didn't trust me."

"Hell, no, you're a girl. You might contaminate his room."

Beth poked him in the side and he laughed.

The clerk cleared his throat. "Excuse me, I need to make sure you approve this before I tint the paint."

"My dad said that was the best one. He's going to help me make things for my room too." Lance glanced up at Daniel. "Right?"

Daniel's heart leapt into his throat and beside him Beth's hands squeezed the daylights out of his arm. Did Lance even realize what he'd said? The word had popped out so casually.

"Right."

Daniel looked just about everywhere in the shop for the next five minutes as the paint shook in the machine, fighting to keep his emotional high from bursting out. Dancing in the aisles seemed like a marvelous idea, but it might freak a few people out.

Every bit of his world was finally coming together.

* * * *

The fire crackled softly, the sound mixing with the other familiar noises of the big old house. Beth leaned on Daniel's chest, cuddled between his thighs as they both stared into the flickering flames. The boys were all camped out for the night with a couple of their soon-to-be-official uncles, Jesse and Joel. She wondered if the twins realized just how little sleep the boys were planning on.

"I'm going to miss this house." Beth stroked her hand along his thigh, tracing circles with her fingertip. There were good memories tied up in the place. The kids laughing, schoolwork getting done. Everyday living that somehow felt just that much richer now. Deeper.

Safer.

"You'll be able to come and visit as often as you like since Jaxi and Blake are moving in with the babies."

She laughed. "Trust Jaxi to be the only person who could keep having twins secret her entire pregnancy."

"I think she just wanted to see the expression on Blake's face when the doctor announced there was another one about to arrive."

They grinned at each other.

"It's like this house has a revolving door. How do you decide who gets what?" she asked. She'd always felt like she'd hit the jackpot when she'd been offered the place.

Daniel rubbed her shoulders, running his fingers through the short hair of her neckline. "Whoever needs it the most, I guess. Daddy took over the main ranch house since he was the oldest, and for a lot of years this place had my uncle and aunt and cousins living here. Now they're all scattered around the area. Some built houses on the sections of the land they own, some moved elsewhere because they decided to get into something other than ranching."

"Like you."

"Like me, and you."

They were moving in together, they were getting married. Still, she'd put off the one last thing she still needed to do. She pivoted in his arms. Twisting was easier than a year ago, the flexibility and range of motion in her limb nearly back to one hundred percent.

"Daniel, I want to..." He had that sexy smile on the corner of his mouth and it distracted her for long enough he leaned in and kissed her.

Kissed her thoroughly, taking her mouth and lips by storm and turning the gentle caress into something on the hot and needy side. She dragged back with reluctance.

"Whoa cowboy, I want to do that too, but first we need to talk about something else."

He stoked her cheek and rearranged her in his lap so she could lean back on his legs. "We've gotten good at talking, as well as the sexin'. What's on your mind?"

She took a big breath. "What do you think about making the wedding a joint celebration?"

Confusion painted his face. "Who else you know that wants to get married?"

She shook her head. "No, I meant ... if you'd like... If you think you're ready..."

"Spit it out already woman, I'm dying here."

"Do you want to adopt the boys?"

Pure, unadulterated joy leapt into his eyes. "You mean it?"

It was exactly the response she'd hoped for. The kind of response she'd expected. With every action over the past months Daniel had shown time and time again he wanted only the best for her, and the boys. "I think they're all ready for the idea, and isn't that kind of what you're getting? A wife and kids? Let's make it official."

Daniel dropped his head back, but not before she spotted the tears in his eyes.

"I love them too, you know. Kinda crept up and swallowed me whole, even when I was trying to not hope for anything." He clasped her chin in his hand, his thumb reaching up to brush her bottom lip in a tender caress. "Falling in love with you has changed my entire life. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come dancing into my world."

"Stumbling in, more like it."

"I caught you."

She kissed his thumb as it passed by. "You did, and you held on until my world stopped shaking too hard to be able to stand alone."

"But you're not alone, Miss Beth, you got me. Forever and ever."

She drew him down to the carpet, and they made love. Slow and sweet, everything she had wanted for years and years and it was because they were friends and lovers.

They were everything important. They were family.

The End

About the Author:

Vivian was playing hooky the day they taught about the importance of getting a "real" job; she was hiding out at the local library rereading everything for the fifth time. Since then she's become a Jack-of-all-trades with a job-experience list only slightly smaller than the average phone book.

She's hiked, biked, canoed, kayaked and camped throughout Canada, Europe and the

States, including Hawaii and Alaska. All these adventures have now become settings for her overactive muse to wander.

Vivian lives in Western Canada with her longtime sweetie, two wonderful kids and a dog that looks like a stuffed toy.

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