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Rita Sawyer

*Brazen Sisters 2*

To Unleash a  
Brazen Desire

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# TO UNLEASH A BRAZEN DESIRE

*Brazen Sisters 2*

**Rita Sawyer**

EROTIC ROMANCE



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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

**TO UNLEASH A BRAZEN DESIRE**

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With deep gratitude,  
Rita Sawyer

# DEDICATION

To my husband David, my invaluable pool of manly knowledge. My three kids for all their love and support. And to all of my family as a whole for their encouragement to keep going when things get rough or when my characters aren't cooperating is a gift I'll never take for granted.

# TO UNLEASH A BRAZEN DESIRE

*Brazen Sisters 2*

**RITA SAWYER**

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## Chapter One

“Mmm...Ohhh...” Samantha moaned and hugged the comforter tighter against her breasts, her whole body humming with excitement.

“Easy, baby, I want this to last,” Trent whispered, his breath a hot, moist caress on her cheek.

“All night, please.” Her greedy plea was accompanied by another pitiful moan.

“Hungry little thing,” he teased with a chuckle that shook them both.

She nodded and squeezed her thighs together, trying to quell the ache building there. His hands coasted along her body, leaving a fiery hunger in their wake. His cock was nestled at the crack of her ass. Following her natural instincts, she wriggled back against him. She needed this so badly. Her body had been aching for his touch, and she didn’t think she could wait much longer.

“Sam, baby, stay with me.” His voice seemed softer, farther away each time he said her name. “Sam...Sam...Sam.”

Soon his voice was completely replaced by the buzzing of her alarm clock. As she came awake, she realized he managed to invade her dreams yet again. She felt the sheets tangled around her legs and

knew if her alarm hadn't gone off she probably would have. And to top it all off, it would have happened in her sleep.

This couldn't continue. The past few weeks, she had way too many sleepless nights or nights spent dreaming of him. She couldn't afford to be losing sleep, either. She knew it didn't matter whether or not she was awake because she found herself thinking about him during the day, too. Sam just needed to get him out of her head. With the remodel project she and her sisters were about to start, she needed to be able to concentrate. Trent Weatherly managed to get in her head in a way no other man ever managed to.

"Son of a bitch." Samantha rolled over to look at the clock and instantly regretted it.

Whipping the covers off, Sam rolled out of the bed, rushing into the bathroom. She dropped to her knees in front of the toilet. The sour, bitter taste rose up in her throat, and she knew this was no false alarm. So much for hoping she'd shaken this bug.

She slowly got to her feet, pressed the handle, and took the few steps to the sink. She couldn't take much more of this, she thought, swishing the gulp of mouthwash from cheek to cheek. She spit it out, turning on the water and rinsing out the sink basin. She hated being sick. This afternoon she was going to call the doctor and see if she could give her something.

The sudden clattering down in the kitchen could only be one person. None of her sisters would be up yet. They at least waited for the sun to rise. It had to be her new, well, not new, just recently discovered, brother-in-law Victor. He'd been married to her older sister Jessica for the past three years, but unfortunate circumstances and bad timing separated them. Now that they had reconciled, Victor was staying with them.

Constantly leaving his coat tossed over chairs and his sneakers in the hall, she noted as she stepped over his running shoes. She guessed all those little things were just part of getting used to having someone new in the house. She laughed thinking they'd probably just get used



to him being there when the cabin he inherited from his uncle was ready for him and Jessie to move in. The sudden onslaught of tears at the thought of Jessie moving out was totally unexpected.

She wiped her cheeks and shook her head.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

She took the steps slowly, but halfway down the scent of freshly brewed coffee wafted up the stairs. The second it hit her, it was a mad dash for the sink. Making it barely in time, she emptied what little remained in her belly.

She rinsed her mouth again, then looked up at her brother-in-law. He had a piece of half eaten toast in his hand, but from the look on his face, she didn't think he was going to be finishing it.

"Sorry."

He dropped it onto a plate with a funny grimace on his face. "Are you okay?"

"Mmm...I just need to sit down for a minute." At least she hoped it was true.

Victor didn't look like he believed her. From the way he practically hugged the counter, he was probably afraid she was contagious.

"It's not catchy. At least I don't think it is. None of them has gotten it yet." Okay, so that sounded like she was complaining, but hey, misery loved company, so shouldn't they all be miserable together?

"That's okay. I have to get going. Um...Trent tried calling your cell, but he keeps getting your voice mail."

"Ugh. I must have forgotten to charge it again."

"He said to tell you he'd try again this afternoon." He glanced over his shoulder as he put his cup and plate in the sink.

Felling a little better, she got to her feet and went to the fridge. "Where are you going so early?"

"Meeting Jake and some of his buddies for a little sunrise fishing. You going into work?"

Probably the Mitchell cousins, she thought, pouring herself a glass of orange juice.

“Yup. Right after I take a quick shower.”

Thankfully today was only a breakfast shift. Lunch was soups and sandwiches. Her kitchen staff could handle that without her. Jessie would be right down the hall if they ran into any trouble.

“Maybe one of your sisters could fill in for you for a few days, just until you feel better?” His concern was so sweet.

“Nah, I’ll be okay. Besides, I only go in until ten today. If you manage to catch anything, bring it home, and I’ll cook it up for you.” She found that offering to do stuff for him came so naturally it was kind of scary.

“Thanks. I’ll see you later, but Sam, do me a favor and take it easy.” The tenderness in his voice brought tears to her eyes.

She forced a smile and nodded, unable to speak past the lump in her throat. The minute he was out the door, she dropped her head onto the table.

*What a lovely way to start the day.*

She’d only been up for a half an hour and she’d puked, cried, and grossed out her brother-in-law. Could it get any worse?

\* \* \* \*

Trent refused to leave Sam another message. He already left her three last night. How many times did she expect him to apologize for having to cut their call short yesterday? Damn it, he was trying to finish up all of his and Victor’s business so he could get back to her. Still, he could understand why she was pissed. It had been the first time they actually managed to catch each other all week, and he ruined it.

It wasn’t like he didn’t want to talk to her. The only thing he’d like more than to talk to her was to be with her. Couldn’t she tell by the hours they spent on the phone in the past few weeks? He loved

talking to her, and when she laughed it was infectious. The best and possibly the worst thing about talking to her was hearing her sigh.

Her sighs brought him back to that night. It was a night that would be forever imprinted on his brain. He would never forget the way she sighed in his ear. Her breath had been moist and hot on his skin as she panted breathlessly. The way they moved as one until she screamed out his name branded his soul. He wasn't a big enough sap to romanticize the whole thing, and he knew she wasn't, either. Raw lust had sent them into each other's arms for a night of wild sex, and the important thing was neither of them was sorry it happened.

Sure he wished they'd been in a nicer place. And in spite of the fact that he was sporting some colorful bruises the next morning, he still considered it the hottest, most carnal night of his life. It wasn't something he imagined happening when he decided to come up here. Sure, he wanted to be friendly with his sisters-in-law, but what they had done went far beyond friendly. He heard spontaneity was the mother of invention, and the shed was roomier than the backseat of a car. And a bed would have been good, too, though they improvised with the lounge chair cushions.

Her disappearing act the next morning left a bit to be desired, but he thought they worked through it over the past couple of weeks.

*Maybe she's having second thoughts?*

He needed to get back up there and show her just how much he wanted her. In and out of bed. He was going to have plenty of time to prove it to her since Victor convinced the Brazen sisters to let them handle the remodeling of their cabins and lodge. It would take them at least six months to get the project accomplished. While there, he wanted to get to know her sisters because they were important to her. And if things went the way he hoped they would, he would be sticking around, and he'd like to have them as friends rather than enemies.

He glanced at the phone, willing it to ring, but instead there was a loud knock at the door. Not really in the mood to schmooze clients, he

growled as he got to his feet. There was no getting out of it, so he pasted a phony grin on his face and opened the door. His grin morphed into a huge smile when he spotted Marjorie Weatherly standing there. She was tapping her foot looking a bit peeved, but still as elegant as ever.

Trent leaned in and gave her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek. “Good morning, Mother.”

“Darling, you’re looking a bit out of sorts.” She reached up and gave his cheek a pat.

“Thank you. You’re looking young enough to pass for thirty.” He meant it to be a dig, but, as always, she disregarded it.

“With an entire cosmetic company at my disposal, people would expect nothing less. I mean, really, it is not as if I have any grandchildren to parade around proving how old I am.” She must be in a rush today since she skipped the normal platitudes and went right for the jugular.

“You’re complaining to the wrong child, Mother. Victor is the one who’s married, not me.”

“Yes, I know, and your sister has to finish getting her degree before she’ll settle down.” She made herself comfortable in his chair and pinned him with her steely gaze. “What’s your excuse?”

He’d played this game long enough to know playing stupid was his best course of action. “For what?”

She smiled and shook her head. “Fine. I’ll let it go for now. When are you planning on leaving?”

“Soon. I need to finalize the sale agreement for Victor’s place first.” Sensing there was something else she wanted, he took a seat across from her and waited.

“Hmm...I was talking with your Uncle Clayton the other day. He tells me these Brazen women are quite remarkable. I spoke with Jessica yesterday, and she informed me they’re making some huge changes up there at their lodge and explained your sister and I would

be welcome at any time.” Victor obviously hadn’t told Jessie much about their mother.

“I’m sure she meant it, too. They’re all very lovely women.” Vague but totally honest was the approach he always took with his mother.

“So I take it this Sam you’ve been devoting so much time to over the past few weeks is your brother’s sister-in-law Samantha Brazen.” The disapproval practically dripped from her words.

*Oh, shit! Keep it short and simple. Don’t give her anything to go on. One slip and she’ll be here all day and on her way to interrogate Sam tomorrow.*

“Yes. We’ve been going over and over the cost analysis and working out a schedule for the kitchen portion of their remodel project.” It amazed him how much the omission of their personal relationship bothered him.

She leaned back in the chair and looked around the room. He knew it looked sparse, but he already packed anything that wasn’t essential. She narrowed her eyes and leaned forward, opened her monstrous purse, and pulled out a photograph. She laid it on the desk between them. It was a recent picture of Sam and her five sisters. They were all wearing pink and black bowling shirts matched with tight black pants.

Her older sister, Jessie, and her youngest sister, Bobbie, had their honey brown hair pulled up into playful ponytails. Joey and Georgie, the twins, had their dirty blonde hair tied up in matching girlish pigtails. Frankie’s dark auburn curls were piled artistically on top of her head. Sam’s light blonde hair was pulled back on the sides enough to show off her beautiful face. It was held there with a dozen or so little tiny butterfly clips. She looked so cute he had to fight back a smile.

His mother reached across the photo and laid the shiny light pink nail of her index finger on it. “I know this is Jessica. Which one is Samantha?”

He knew there was a trap lying here somewhere, but he just couldn't see it. Hopefully his mother wouldn't, either. He had no choice but to answer.

"This one." He pointed at Sam.

"Oh." She looked surprised and maybe even a little disappointed. "Do you have a marker handy?"

"Top drawer, to the left."

He watched as she labeled both Jessie and Sam. Then she looked up at him questioningly. Any other day, he would have been shocked by the fact that she hadn't gotten all the information before coming to him. Today he just didn't have it in him. He wanted her to be long gone before Victor's buyer got here.

"Francesca, Josephine, Georgina, and Roberta." He pointed at each of them respectively.

"Hmmm...I thought, well, never mind what I thought. It's of no consequence now." She stuffed the picture back into her bag. "Where are you and your brother planning to store your things?"

"I'm taking most of my stuff up with me, but I've added some stuff to Victor's rental unit."

"I'm sure your brother and his lovely wife won't mind putting you up for the time it takes for you to complete the project." Her sarcasm wasn't lost on him.

"Mother, they have sixteen cabins and ten rooms in the lodge. I'll be fine." There was no way he was going to stay with Victor and Jessie.

"I suppose. Well. I have to meeting to get to." His mother got to her feet, and the manners she'd managed to instill in him had him rising and following her to the door.

"Look, I promise we'll have dinner before I leave, okay?" He hoped his sacrifice would ease her angst about him leaving.

"All right. I'll even make sure your sister will join us." She offered her cheek, which Trent dutifully leaned down and kissed.

He closed the door and walked back to his desk. That was one of the more interesting meetings he ever had with his mother. Either she was slipping or he missed something. Or he could be so focused on Sam that nothing else mattered. He grabbed the phone and punched in her number and listened to it ring.

\* \* \* \*

Sam heard her phone ringing, but she couldn't tear her eyes off the computer screen. Pregnant! There had to be something else to explain her condition. She read the list of symptoms again.

Nausea sometimes brought on by smells or motion. Tiredness, emotional and mood swings, and, of course, the famous missed menstrual cycle.

Okay, she had the nausea. She glanced over at the tray of burned muffins and groaned. Her sense of smell was definitely out of whack. And, yeah, she was a little more tired than normal, but she chalked that up to her restless nights filled with erotic dreams. Remembering her tears that morning over nothing, she had to admit her emotions were a little wonky, too. But as for the missed period, she was only a day or two late.

She was sure it was something else, but since she couldn't get an appointment with the doctor until Friday, she'd swing by the pharmacy on the way home and pick up a pregnancy test. Just to rule it out, of course, because she *wasn't* pregnant.

## Chapter Two

“Fuck me!”

*Looks like Trent already did a damn good job there.*

Sam looked down at the little white plastic stick again, not sure if she believed what she was seeing. The little blue plus sign was still there. She slid to the floor as a picture of her struggling to get a car seat fastened into her truck popped into her mind. Her laugh sounded a little hysterical, but at least she wasn't crying.

*I'm going to have to buy a new truck.*

No matter what happened, there was no way she was buying one of those minivans. She hated everything about them.

Laying her hand on her belly, she told herself to relax. She'd have plenty of time to worry about that later. Right now she needed to concentrate on finding out what to feed this little creature growing inside her. Her normal diet of triple chocolate brownies and bits and bites of whatever she was working on wasn't going to be good enough.

Test stick still in hand, she got to her feet and walked down to the kitchen. The normal spring in her step was missing. It had been replaced by a weird calmness. She placed the stick on the counter and grabbed her purse.

Hand on the doorknob, she shouted to anyone in hearing distance, “I'm going to the store.”

If any of her sisters responded, she didn't hear them. She climbed in her truck and turned the key. The big black beast let out a rumble as the engine started. Her pride and joy was going to have some competition for a while. She'd never part with it. She'd just have to



store it in the garage until she could get her and the baby in and out without hurting either of them.

Sam drove in and out of town heading for the highway, happy for the first time that they didn't have a bookstore in town. Normally it was a huge inconvenience to have to drive over an hour away to pick up her cookbooks and Jessie's romance novels, which Jessie devoured, then hid in her closet. Sam would have to make sure Victor built Jessie a huge bookcase in their cabin for them. Maybe he could even add on a room for her to read in.

A few hours later, Sam found herself sitting in the baby care and pregnancy section. She felt even more overwhelmed than when she walked into the huge bookstore. She learned enough from glancing through the books to know she needed to see her doctor as soon as possible. There were vitamins and things she needed, like to know the baby's due date. She smiled thinking she could probably figure that out just by looking at a calendar.

As she got to her knees and began stuffing the books back on the shelf, she wondered whose brilliant idea it was to put them on the bottom two shelves. What pregnant woman would even be able to reach them? She decided to start with a book full of nutrient rich recipes for mom and baby until she saw her doctor.

Book in hand, she got to her feet and joined the other people waiting in line to check out. Standing there, she wondered if she should call and tell the doctor's nurse what was going on. Maybe they'd give her an earlier appointment. Probably not since Friday was only four days away. Maybe she'd ask Jessie to go with her?

No, she couldn't do that. Trent deserved to be advised of the situation before she told anyone else, even though whatever happened between them was most likely over now. For the first week after he left, he called a few times a day. They talked about everything and nothing, just wanting to hear each other's voices. The next week, it slowed to daily calls, but they both sounded just as excited. This past week they'd been playing phone tag, and his messages were rushed or

whispered. And the one time they did talk, he cut the call so short they barely said more than hello.

Now she was going to have to take the initiative and track him down. Or she could just wait until he came up to help Victor with the remodel and sit down and tell him. Maybe she could just send him a fax? That'd be good. Something short and sweet that got right to the point.

*Hey Trent,  
Surprise. You're going to be a dad.  
Thanks, Sam*

Maybe she shouldn't tell him at all? That plan was so full of problems it made her laugh. To start with the biggest one, it should take about six months to finish the remodeling, and he was bound to notice when she started getting fat. And once the baby was born, he could end up recognizing himself when he looked at him or her. She knew if Jessie put an ounce of thought into it she'd figure out who the father was in a heartbeat. Other people might think it was her ex-boyfriend Kurt's. That wasn't possible since they hadn't slept together in months, even though she just broke up with him three and a half weeks ago. It had only been a few nights later that she met and slept with Trent. She'd never acted so recklessly, and though she wished she could blame him, it was all her doing.

Having a handsome stranger show up in her kitchen had thrown her. Learning he was her new brother in-law hadn't diminished his appeal. The strangest part was how arguing with him had flicked some switch in her that set her on fire. It was the only explanation for the way she acted.

After paying and exiting the store, Sam realized she wasn't quite ready to go home yet. Spotting one of those chain discount everything-for-a-dollar stores, she headed over. Walking up and down the aisles, she found herself shopping, not just killing time. She stood

in the baby aisle for a while, just staring at the cute little bibs, colorful pacifiers, and other necessities. In the end, she bought a pack of pens, two journal-style notebooks, a bag of nacho cheese flavored corn chips, and a bib that said “My Aunts Love Me.”

And they would, too. This baby was going to be the start of the next generation of Brazen. Its aunts were going to spoil it rotten. Still, she couldn’t tell them until she told its father first. She was going to make sure his relationship with his child on the right note, even if theirs hadn’t.

\* \* \* \*

Bobbie dropped her bag onto the counter to switch her cell phone to the other ear. She listened to her friend Beth ramble on about how her boyfriend cheated on her yet again while she checked the message board stuck on the fridge. Not finding anything for her, she opened the fridge and grabbed a soda.

Heading back over to her bag, something on the counter caught her eye. She turned and looked at it. The soda and phone fell to the floor. She picked up the little white stick and stared at it. The smile came before the question.

*Who? It has to be Jessie, right?*

She probably planned on surprising them with the news. She heard someone coming down the stairs.

“Crap.” She grabbed the soda and her phone off the floor and her bag off the counter and ran out the back door.

\* \* \* \*

Joey chased Georgie down the stairs and into the kitchen. They laughed as they pushed and shoved each other, fighting to be the first one to open the fridge. Joey got there first. She reached in and

grabbed the plate with the last piece of the chocolate and strawberry cake Sam made for dessert last night.

Georgie popped her hands on her hips and said, “Hey, twins are supposed to share.”

Joey laughed as she lifted the fork to her mouth. “I don’t believe in sharing men or desserts.”

“You say that now because you have the cake.” Georgie hopped up onto the counter, her hand sending the white plastic stick to the floor.

Joey leaned down, picked it up, and shoved the cake at her twin. “Here.”

Georgie put the plate down and slid off the counter. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Mhmm...we are going to be aunts.” They stood there and stared at the stick for a few seconds.

“Who do you think it is?”

Joey shook her head. “It better be Jessie, or the shit, my friend, is going to hit the fan.”

“What should we do?”

“Put it back. We take the cake and scam. She’ll tell us when she’s ready.” Joey did exactly that, and Georgie followed.

\* \* \* \*

Frankie found Bobbie sitting on the porch reading. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Nothin’,” she said, stuffing the book into her bag.

“Oh-kay.” She figured there was more going on here, and whatever it was had Bobbie looking a little pale. “I’m going to grab a bite to eat. You hungry?”

She shook her head and got to her feet, and with a quick, “Nope. I have to go study,” she was gone.

Whatever it was would come out sooner or later, she thought, heading for the kitchen.

She grabbed a loaf of bread and tossed it on the counter. Holding the fridge open, she took out the cheese, lettuce, tomato, the sliced turkey, and mayonnaise. She put it all on the counter and opened the drawer and got a knife. Turning back to the counter, she spotted the little white plastic stick and froze.

Maybe Bobbie found this, or maybe it was hers? It would explain her behavior and that pale look she had.

Calm down and think, she told herself, quickly making her sandwich.

It really could be any of her sisters. So she needed to be objective and figure out who it was. Bobbie was hooked on Jake Gurion, the local sheriff, so Frankie couldn't see her having sex with anyone else. And Jake was careful to keep a respectable and safe distance between them.

So Bobbie was probably out of the running. Georgie and Joey hadn't been serious about anyone in a while, so they were most likely out, too. Sam, on the other hand, had been with Kurt for a long time, but she had always been super, super careful since he was such a dog. So, eliminating all other possible suspects, that left only one person who could be the owner.

*Jessie.*

She and Victor had been in full make up mode for the past few weeks, so it was possible. While cleaning up her mess, she decided that maybe a quick visit to Jessie at the lodge was in order.

\* \* \* \*

*Man, I need a nap. But first, something to eat.*

Her stomach let out another loud rumble as she climbed from the truck. She was positively starving, which didn't make sense since she'd eaten a whole bag of chips and she had two bottles of water.

Sam stood on her tiptoes, reached inside to get the bags, and growled. There would be no way she could do this once she got fat. Never mind trying to heft in a car seat. After her nap, she'd go on to the Internet and research some cool, super-safe cars. She carried the bags into the house and put them on the counter. Her eyes locked on the testing stick. As she scooped it up, half a dozen thoughts raced through her mind. Damn, she'd been so careful to hide all traces of the packaging, but she left this where anyone could find it.

What if one her sisters had seen it? What if Victor saw it and mentioned it to Trent? She stuffed the incriminating piece of plastic into her pocket, grabbed her bags, and practically ran up to her room. She had to call him first. He had to hear it from her. She'd never forgive herself if he found out he was going to be a father from someone else.

\* \* \* \*

Trent tossed the file onto the coffee table in disgust. He was beginning to think this was useless. For what should have been a simple sales deal, Victor couldn't have chosen a more difficult buyer. Too bad he couldn't ask his sister to handle this. She was way too naïve to deal with such a domineering personality. His mother could definitely handle it, but he was afraid she might, subconsciously, of course, sabotage the deal just to keep Victor close.

He had a feeling he might be taking all the delays and questions so hard because they were keeping him from being with Sam. Rationally, he knew every deal, whether it was buying a car or a house—shit, even buying a dog—could run into problems. Still, he just wanted to get this over with and get on the road. The sooner he left, the sooner he could barge back into Sam's life. Back into a life where he finally felt like he belonged.

Like his brother, Victor, Trent didn't really fit in with the high society crowd his mother and sister mingled with. He could schmooze

with the best of them when he needed to, but he didn't want people kissing up to him because of who his family was. No, he wanted to make a name for himself. He could've followed his brother's footsteps into architecture. He had the talent and eye for detail, but he hated even thinking about being stuck behind a desk all day. He'd rather be out in the fresh air or doing something with his hands.

The minute he drove into town three weeks ago, he felt like he found a place where he could relax and be himself. It was no wonder his uncle had chosen to live up here when he semi-retired. Trent's role in the company he formed with his brother and cousin would have him going to job sites and overseeing certain projects, but he was going to need a place to come home to. Home, that was a perfect way to describe how he felt. It was like coming home, and Sam just made him want to settle right in. He figured he could stay in one of the cabins until he could work out a more permanent arrangement with Sam.

Permanent was a strong word, but it felt right when it came to her. Though he just met her, he knew she was the one for him. Sure, it was sudden, but sometimes love struck like lightning. It lit up everything so the person affected could clearly see how it was supposed to be. At least that's how it felt for him. Now he just needed to make her see it, too.

He tried calling her earlier to check in and just talk, but Victor said she was out somewhere. When Trent asked Victor to ask his wife where her sister might be, Victor said something was going on and now wasn't the time. What the hell was that supposed to make him think? Cryptic comments like that weren't helping him keep his cool. If there was something going on, he wanted to be there for Sam.

He grabbed the phone and punched in her cell number. While he waited for her to answer, his anger and frustration built up like a lead ball in the pit of his stomach. She said she understood why he had to leave, but their parting hadn't been smooth or easy. He guessed he had Victor to thank for her not hating him after the way he made her

cry. He hated himself for it even though he hadn't meant to do it. He just hoped he never did it again. Unless they were tears of joy. Passion would be even better. Her voice came on the line instructing him to leave a message. He hit the off button and threw the phone across the room. It hit the wall and shattered into pieces.

"I swear, Sam, once I get my hands on you, I'm never going to let go." He dropped his head back against the couch and laughed at himself. "Now you've got me talking to myself."



## Chapter Three

Trent looked at the buxom redhead and swore if she found one more thing to bitch about he'd yank the contract right off the table, literally. Victor would have to find himself another buyer. It seemed to him like she was trying to tank this deal on purpose. She flashed him a clear view of her ample cleavage and a come-hither smile, which made him want to cringe. Truthfully, a few weeks ago he might have given her a second look. Now, suddenly, he was craving a more subtle sexiness. He wanted something less in-your-face, more don't-you-wish-you-knew-what-was-in-here? He only encountered it once in the northern Maine woods, and he couldn't wait to get back for another taste.

Not being able to get a hold of her on the phone over the past few days only made him want her more. It was driving him crazy. And hearing the growing doubt in her voice when he listened to her messages didn't help. Or it could have been she'd already gotten over the madness that overtook them. He sure in hell hadn't. Every night since he left, he'd been plagued by the most carnal dreams, all starring sweet, but not so innocent, Samantha Brazen. He hoped once they were face-to-face he could reignite the flame between them that had caught before.

It still burned deep inside him, so hot that, as soon as he got done with this meeting, he was going to try calling her again. He wanted, no needed, to hear her voice. He wouldn't make her any promises, but hopefully he'd be heading back up to her by the end of the week. Three more days. Then maybe he could persuade her into sneaking away with him for a few days.

Now that her sister Jessie and his brother had reconciled, their marital woes now relegated to the past, he didn't see any reason why either of them would see anything wrong with him and Sam hooking up. Sam's other four sisters might find issues with them getting together, but he'd show them how serious he was about her and alleviate their fears. Even if they did, he'd just have to show them all, including Sam, he could be trusted not to hurt her. He had a feeling if anyone got hurt it was going to be him.

When Victor first told him how he felt about Jessie, Trent didn't believe he'd ever feel that strongly for a woman. He listened to him rant about how, if he lost her, it would be like losing a part of himself. Trent told himself it was infatuation and Victor would get over it, but once he saw the way he looked at Jessie, he knew it went deeper. And when Jessie smiled at him, it was obvious she felt the same way. It was love.

And he had a sneaking suspicion what he felt for Sam could easily grow from passion to love if they let it.

*Was it even something I could stop from happening? Would I want to?*

The toothy, full breasted barracuda finally flipped to the last page of the contract. Trent breathed a sigh of relief. He watched as she tapped her bright red nails, which matched her lips, on the page.

"So, Ms. Clairmount, is everything to your satisfaction?" He didn't really care because he refused to change anything else.

"Well, actually, I would like to walk throughout the property one more time." He had no idea what she thought she was going to accomplish by delaying yet again.

"Are there any questions I can answer for you? Maybe it would save us a trip."

*Please just sign the papers before I lose my fucking mind.*

"No questions, not really. I just want to be a hundred percent sure. Buying a home, even a luxury condo, is a big step. If I'm going to be

spending time there, I need to be sure it's really me." This was the first justification she had that made any sense.

"Understandable. We can head over there now, if you'd like." Anything to get these damn papers signed, the lawyers could take it from there.

"Unfortunately, I have another appointment I really can't reschedule. Can we meet there, say, around six?"

"Sure. I'll bring the documents, and we can take care of everything then." And if she didn't sign them, then the deal was off.

\* \* \* \*

Sam dialed his number so many times, but each time he didn't answer it got harder and harder to dial. Her finger shook as she punched in the numbers. It rang once, then went straight to his voice mail. There could be plenty of reasons why. Maybe his phone was off or something. Or it could be he was purposely avoiding her. Probably not, but he might once he heard her news.

Keeping it to herself wasn't easy. So far, none of her sisters mentioned seeing the test stick, so some of the urgency in telling him was gone. Still, she didn't want to take any chances. She had to be the one to tell him. She'd give him until Friday. After she saw the doctor and had her confirmation that she was pregnant, there'd be no way she could hide it from her sisters. If she didn't get a hold of him by then, she'd drive down and see him. It might be better to break the news in person and in private, where she could be sure no one overheard them.

"Sam, are you in here?" Bobbie yelled, rushing past the laundry room where she was standing.

She headed for the door but jumped back as Frankie flew past.

*Whoa, something major must be going on.*

She took off after them, coming to a stop at the front door. Sam had to stand on her tip toes to see over their shoulders. She instantly

found the reason for the commotion. Joey and Georgie were standing on the porch, staring at the flashy red sports car parked at the base of the stairs.

She watched as her ex-boyfriend, Kurt, slid out of the car. He was five feet, eleven inches of smooth talking male. This time he was wearing in a T-shirt, tight black jeans, and an expensive brown leather jacket. She often thought the car and jacket bolstered his self-image, making him way too cocky. His smile clearly said he thought his presence would be welcome. His arrogance always amazed her. Now it irritated her as well.

Whatever he wanted he wasn't getting, so he may as well climb back into his obvious excuse for overcompensation and drive away. She was just about to tell him so, too, when Jessie's dark blue Mustang came flying down the driveway. It was followed seconds later by Victor's pickup truck.

Bobbie nudged Frankie with her shoulder. "This should be good."

"Who called them?" Not that it was surprising, but it would be a good idea to know who she should thank later.

If anyone answered, it was drowned out by the siren blaring as the sheriff's truck pulled into the driveway. Sam figured Bobbie probably called Jake. She took advantage of any chance to see him or actually to make him see her. Victor wrapped his arm around Jessie's shoulders as they walked over to the bottom of the stairs. From the way he was holding her so tightly, Sam guessed he was probably trying to keep her from getting too close.

She held her breath as Jake climbed from his truck. He rounded the hood looking meaner than she'd ever seen. She heard Bobbie sigh and had to admit seeing him look so fierce was a mighty impressive sight. Too bad he never tickled her fancy. She glanced over at Bobbie, who was practically drooling, and laughed.

Kurt didn't seem impressed or intimidated by Jake at all. He crossed his arms and leaned against his car. Sam wasn't surprised by his cavalier attitude. He thought the world was his oyster and every

woman was supposed to fall under his spell. Everyone stood there waiting. For what, she didn't know. Someone needed to say something.

She pushed Bobbie and Frankie out of the way and moved to the porch railing. "Kurt, why are you here?"

He looked up at her and flashed a toothy grin. "I figured you'd had plenty of time to cool off enough for us to talk."

"You and I don't have anything to talk about. I said it's over, and I meant it." Why didn't he just give up already?

"You've said it before."

All right, so she had threatened him before, but this time she was serious.

Jessie answered before she could. "Well, she's said it again, so you can go now."

"She's a big girl, Jessica. Why don't you let her talk for herself?" The look of utter contempt he gave Jessie had Victor taking a step forward.

She needed to hurry up and do something before things got out of hand. "Jessie, I can handle this. Please take everyone else inside."

Jessie did as she asked, but she didn't look happy about it. Jake, of course, stood just inside the door where he could be seen and could surely hear everything they said. She couldn't see Victor, but she knew he had to be there with him. Kurt moved to the bottom of the steps and looked up at her and flashed that smarmy smile of his. And she wondered, not for the first time, if he practiced it in front the mirror. It was hard to believe at one time she found it charming.

"Now that we're all alone, why don't we stop playing games? I know you were just using that guy to try and make me jealous. It didn't work, but I'm still willing to take you back." He was totally insufferable, and it was going to be her pleasure to finally put him in his place.

"The guy has a name. It's Trent Weatherly. And in no way did I use him or try to make you jealous. I didn't ask you to take me back.

And for the record, since I'm the one who dumped you, it would be me taking you back, which I'll never do again." She heard Jake's smothered laughter and smiled.

"Baby, I know you're mad, but come on, we can work this out." He leaned against the railing, reached up, and laid his hand over hers.

She pulled her hand out from under his but refused to back away. "Mad doesn't even begin to cover how I feel when it comes to you. You've lied and cheated. There is no way I could ever trust you again. What happened to that sleazy chick I caught you in bed with? Did she come to her senses?"

"I realized what a mistake I'd made and cut things off." His smile faded, and his tone got softer.

It didn't matter. She planned to stay firm this time. "Well, I'm glad you realized you made a mistake, but it still doesn't mean we should get back together."

The change that came over him was instant. His relaxed stance went rigid, and his hands clenched into fists. A muscle twitched in his jaw, most likely because his teeth were clamped together.

When he spoke, his voice sounded rougher than she thought possible. "It's that guy, right? Well, he's gone now. Did your sisters scare him away, too?"

He could say anything he wanted to about her, but there was no way she'd stand there and let him make baseless accusations against her sisters. "They never did anything to you. And my present and future relationships are none of your business. Just go away, and don't bother me anymore, or I'll let my sisters sick Jake and Victor on you."

She barely finished speaking when both men appeared on either side of her. Even though she didn't think Kurt was bothered by them, it felt good to have them there. And she wasn't fool enough to think this was over. He wasn't going to give up until he was good and ready.

"Sam, go in the house," Victor said, and she fought the shiver the rough timber of his voice caused.

When she didn't move right away, Jake took her by the shoulders and turned her toward the house. "Go ahead. I won't let things go too far."

She opened the door and was yanked over the threshold. Joey dragged her over to the window where the rest of her sisters were watching to see what was going to happen. If this were happening to one of them, she would have been just as intrigued, but since she happened to be the object of this display of machismo, she wished it wasn't happening. After a brief conversation, Kurt walked to his car, followed by the other men.

"What did he want?" Jessie and Frankie asked in unison.

Sam shrugged her shoulders, then said, "He said he made a mistake and broke things off with his little tart so we could get back together."

"You told him to get lost, right!" Bobbie wasn't really asking. It was more of a statement.

"Yeah, but his skull is so thick it might take a while for it to sink in. I'll steer clear of him for a while." Their heads all bobbed in agreement of her choice.

Victor and Jake stood in the driveway watching Kurt drive away. Sam saw Victor pull his cell from his pocket. Was he answering a call or making one? If he was hoping to report this little scene to his brother, she hoped he had better luck getting him on the phone than she did.

\* \* \* \*

Trent grabbed his new cell phone and hit the little green talk button. "Hello."

"Hey, we need to talk. You busy?"

Even if he had been, he would've made the time because when Victor's voice sounded soft and deadly like it did right now it meant trouble.

“I’m waiting for your buyer. What’s up?”

“Sam just had a really unwelcome visitor. That ex-boyfriend of hers showed up wanting to get back together. You need to get that deal settled and get the hell back up here.”

Shit, he expected her ex would come around sooner or later. He just hoped he’d be back in time to set him straight about her availability.

He was almost finished packing. He just had to have dinner with his mother like he promised, and then he could hit the road. Until then, he’d have to trust his brother to make sure that swine stayed away from her.

“I’ll get the contracts signed tonight and be there in a few days. Don’t let her out of your sight until I get there.” Whether the buyer signed or not, he was out of here in two days.

“You got it. Jake’s going to have one of his guys keep an eye on Kurt, too.”

He’d have to thank him when he got there. But first he was going to pay little visit to Sam’s ex. He was going to make sure he completely understood that she was off limits. If he needed some convincing, Trent had no problem being the one to do it.

For now, he thought, opening the door, he had to get this damn woman to sign these fucking papers.



## **Chapter Four**

Sam felt nauseous, and this time it nothing to do with her stomach, but her nerves. The fifteen minutes she'd been sitting in the waiting room had been the longest in her life. Now, after a brief chat and the nurse taking some blood, she was instructed to change and that the doctor would be with her in a few minutes. So here she sat on the exam table waiting for the doctor to come in. She wiped her sweaty hands on her thighs.

A light knock sounded on the door as it opened, and Dr. Ashleigh Summers came in. She'd known her for as long as she could remember. Just seeing the older woman's friendly smile settled her nerves a little bit.

"Samantha, how are you feeling today?" She laid the clipboard on the counter and sat down on the stool, giving Sam her undivided attention.

"Nervous."

The doctor nodded and laughed, which help Sam to relax enough to join her. "Then let's get right to it, shall we?" Sam nodded, and Dr. Summers picked up the clipboard. "You are definitely pregnant. According to this, I'd say you're a little over four weeks along, which means conception was..."

"On May tenth," Sam said, cutting her off since she knew the exact date.

"Absolutely sure?" The doctor asked, and when Sam nodded, she pulled a little wheel thing out of her pocket and twirled it around. "Okay, so that gives us a due date of...well, my, my, aren't you

lucky? Looks like you'll be getting a very special delivery for Valentine's Day."

"Oh my gosh. Are you serious?" How friggin' awesome would that be?

"It depends on the baby, but that's when we should expect an arrival. Some first babies like to take their time. Then again, some can be eager to make an introduction. We'll start you on some vitamins, which should help with the tiredness. I'll need to see you every four weeks for now, and as you get closer to your due date, we'll shorten the time between your appointments."

Sam nodded. Suddenly, all her nervousness turned into excitement. She was going to have a baby. A little girl or boy of her own to love and cherish. She rested her hand on her stomach and smiled. The doctor got to her feet and opened the cabinet. It was full of stacks of the same book. She recognized it from her trip to the bookstore.

She pulled one out and carried it over to her. "This book will answer a lot of your questions. If there is anything that's not in here, you can call me or ask at your next appointment. I'm taking it from your smile this is a good thing."

"A surprise, but a happy one." One she wanted to let out in her own way and time. "Um...Dr. Summers, if you run into any of my sisters, could you not mention this?"

She scribbled on a prescription pad, then ripped the top sheet off and held it out to her. "Okay, but Sam, they're going to find out sooner or later."

"Sooner, I hope. I just want to tell the father first," Sam explained, and the doctor laughed.

"I see. All right, mum's the word until you tell Kurt the good news."

It was no surprise she thought he was the father. Everyone in town knew everyone else. And they all knew that she and Kurt had been dating for the past three years.

“Um...Dr. Summers, Kurt’s not the father.”

Her eyes went wide, and her jaw dropped open, though she recovered quickly with a smile.

“Well, then, I’ll let you tell your sisters in your own time. Just take it easy until the morning sickness passes. And I heard you ladies are about to begin some work up at the lodge. Nothing heavy or dangerous for you, got it?” She pointed her pen at her, emphasizing her words.

“Yes, ma’am. Jessie’s husband, Victor, is bringing in a crew to do the work. All we have to do is tell them what we want.” She was going to do the best she could to protect her baby.

“Okay, I’ll let you get dressed. Take this sheet to the nurse, and she’ll set up your next appointment. And Samantha,” the doctor waited for Sam to look at her and smiled, “congratulations.”

“Thank you.” Now all she needed to do was go home, call Trent, and tell him.

She made her next appointment and left the office, planning on going straight home. A few feet from her truck, she heard Kurt shout out her name. Not even bothering to look back, she picked up her pace. She made it to the truck, but in the time it took to unlock the door, he was there by her side.

“Hey, I was calling you.” Being an ass as usual, he leaned against the door so she couldn’t open it.

“And I was ignoring you. Now move.” She tightened her grip on the book and keys.

“Look, I was just thinking now that your sisters aren’t around we could really talk. Why don’t we go over to the diner for a cup of coffee?”

God, he was thicker than two-by-four.

“Sorry, but I have plans. Can you move now?” With her free hand, she reached into her pocket and wrapped it around her cell phone.

Before she could press a button calling in the calvary to rescue her, Kurt grabbed her arm. He squeezed so hard she yelped, dropping her book and keys to the ground.

“We are going to talk.” His voice had taken on a hard edge.

“No, we’re not,” she said, trying to yank her arm free.

He held tight, but he wasn’t even looking at her. His head was down, and his eyes were locked on the book she dropped. Self-preservation kicked in, and before she knew what happened, in a very unladylike manner, she raised her knee fast and hard, connecting solidly with his groin. He hissed out a curse as he fell to his knees.

Taking advantage of his momentary loss of ability to move, Sam opened the door, knocking him the rest of the way to the ground. She bent down and grabbed her stuff and tossed it into the truck. With one foot braced on the running board, she climbed in, slammed the door shut, and slapped the lock down. The second the truck rumbled to life, she stomped on the gas. Once she hit the exit of the parking lot, she dared a quick glance in the mirror and saw Kurt slowly getting to his feet. She could hope he missed the title, but he would’ve had to have been blind to miss the pregnant woman on the cover.

\* \* \* \*

Trent thought he learned his lesson the last time he made this drive, but obviously he still had more to learn. He tossed his wallet and the ticket onto the passenger seat. Maybe Jake would be able to take care of it since one of his stupid deputies had given it to him. Five miles from her house and he had to sit and wait while the guy ran him through the system. He wasn’t going to dwell on it right now. With Sam only minutes away, the only thing he could think about was getting her in his arms. It was torture to keep himself from going over the thirty-five mile an hour speed limit, but with the cop following right behind him, it was a necessity.

Finally, her driveway came into view. His heart began racing, and his palms got all sweaty. Rounding the bend, he spotted a red sports car parked right behind Sam's big black truck. He pulled up behind it and shut off his SUV. As he opened the door, he heard shouting. Breaking into a run, he followed the loud, angry voices around to the back of the house.

Sam was sitting at the top of the porch steps with her face in her hands, crying. Four of her sisters, Bobbie, Frankie, and the twins, Georgie and Joey, were standing at the bottom, blocking Kurt, Sam's ex, from getting past. With them all shouting at the same time, he couldn't make out exactly what was wrong. He decided he'd figure it out later and shoved his way past Kurt. To his shock and ultimate gratification, her sisters parted to let him through. He didn't bother to mount the steps. Trent just leaned forward and scooped Sam into his arms.

She squealed and began to pull away.

"Sam, it's me."

"Oh, thank God." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and buried her wet face against his neck.

He turned to walk away, expecting Kurt to put up some kind of fight, but her sisters must have been thinking ahead. The same cop who pulled him over was now standing between the women and Kurt. Her sisters followed Trent to his SUV and watched as he put Sam in. Her sisters snickered behind him when he had to pry her arms loose.

Finally free, he walked around and climbed in beside her. Still crying, she had pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. Her sobs shook her whole body. He wanted to get somewhere where he could hold her tight. Trent need her know he was here now and whatever was wrong he'd take care of it, including her ex. He pulled into the lodge's parking lot and parked as close to the trail leading to the cabins as he could. He got out and rounded the SUV and opened Sam's door.

“Come here,” he said and smiled when she willingly moved into his arms.

Trent slid one of his arms under her legs and lifted her against him. He shut the door with his hip and headed for cabin sixteen. Instead of going inside, he walked right past the cabin and onto the dock. He sat down on the steps and settled her in his lap. Sensing she wasn’t ready to talk yet, but not knowing what else to do, he just rocked her a little and rubbed her back.

When he couldn’t take it anymore, he stupidly asked, “Sam, are you okay?”

That brought on another bout of loud, racking sobs as she scooted off his lap. He didn’t want to let her go. He had no idea how to handle this. He just wanted her to stop crying.

“Sam, please tell me what’s wrong.” He was a step away from begging, and he really didn’t want to go there.

She shook her head and swiped at her cheeks. He knelt down in front of her, putting his hands on her knees. She tucked her chin against her chest and let out a shuddering breath.

“You know you can tell me anything. Pretend I’m Jessie. You tell her everything.”

Her hair hung like a curtain in front of her face. It swayed from side to side when she shook her head. “Not...this.”

“You haven’t told her? Do you want me to call her for you?” If it got her to stop crying, he’d call anyone she wanted.

She shook her head again, faster, her hands grabbing his. “No.”

“Okay, then you need to try and tell me what happened back there.” If that bastard had laid a finger on her, he was going to lose it. “Did Kurt hurt you?”

She took a deep breath and raised her head. He took a chance and slipped his hands from hers and reached up to push her hair back. He tucked it behind her ears, then used his thumbs to softly wipe her cheeks. Even with her red nose and puffy eyes, she was still a

beautiful sight to see. He leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to her lips.

“Sam, tell me, please.” Okay, he was begging, but damn it, she was worth it.

\* \* \* \*

Sam closed her eyes and nodded. She blew out a breath. She could do this, had to do it.

*Now.*

She raised her shaking hands up and covered his. Lowering them to her lap, she squeezed his fingers. As soon as she caught her breath, she’d tell him.

“Did he hurt you?”

She thought about her arm, where there were bound to be bruises. She knew she should tell him but didn’t want to give him a reason to kill Kurt until she gave him a better reason not to. The only problem was he might want to kill her, which wouldn’t be fair because he was partly responsible for the condition she was in.

“No,” she lied, and his shoulders dropped in what she hoped was relief, “Trent...”

He smiled and gave her hands a shake. “It’s okay. Go ahead.”

“I—” *No, too harsh.* “You are—” *Too cold.* “We—” Oh shit, she had no idea how to do this.

“Sam, whatever it is, it’ll be okay.” His cell phone started ringing, but he didn’t even pull it out of his pocket to check the number.

She felt like running. It wasn’t that different from the morning after they spent the night together. She thought back to the morning she woke up naked beside his hard, warm body. At first, she was thrilled, but within seconds she panicked. She quickly got dressed, being careful to be extra quiet, and just to be sure he didn’t wake up and follow her, she took his clothes and left him asleep in the shed.

She ran up to the lodge parking lot, climbed into her truck, and drove home as fast as she could.

She couldn't do that to him again. She needed to face things. They were going to have to deal with this. She just needed a minute or two to work out how to tell him.

Grabbing the lifeline someone was tossing her, she almost shouted, "I need a few minutes to get myself together."

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and said, "Okay. I'll take this and then we'll talk."

"Hey, Vic," he said, walking a few steps away, giving the space she asked for. "We're at the lodge. What's up?" He turned back to her, smiled, and winked.

That was the way she wanted to remember him. Sam had no idea what was it about his brash, sexy demeanor so enticing? She didn't know, but she wished she was willing to take the time to find out.

"What?" His sharp tone had her lurching to her feet.

He dropped the phone to the dock, and it bounced into the lake. She ran to the edge to try to save it, but he grabbed her arms and stopped her. She looked up at his face taking in the wide-eyed stupor. Oh, this wasn't good.

His voice cracked as he said, "You're pregnant."



## Chapter Five

Sam should have felt terrible that someone else had told him she was pregnant before she did, but it came as a huge relief. Now all she had to do was tell him he was the father. First, she needed to find out just how much he knew.

“What did Victor say?”

He pulled her flush against him, wrapping his arms around her, holding her there. His lips hovered over hers, and she wished he’d kiss her before he had time to process everything. It might be the last time, and she wanted to make sure he had something to remember. Maybe after kissing him she’d be able to think clearly, because with him holding her like this, she couldn’t.

She put her hands on his hips to brace herself and pushed upward, closing the space between their lips. He quickly took control of the kiss. One of his hands wrapped in her hair, tugging her head back. She gasped, and he took her by surprise by nipping her lower lip before sliding his tongue past. She made a weird little noise she knew had never come from her before and squirmed against him. His arms got so tight she could barely breathe. Suddenly, he yanked his mouth from hers and loosened his hold.

“You’re pregnant,” he repeated, this time his mouth curved into a smile.

“Yes, we’re pregnant.” Okay, that was the coward’s way to tell him, if he even caught it. “Now what did your brother say?”

“He said I have exactly ten minutes to get you back home, or your sisters are sending out a search party. I’m not taking you back until you tell me everything. Start with why Kurt was at your house.”

“He caught me coming out of the doctor’s office and followed me home.” It was the truth, or at least as much of it as she was willing to tell him, for now.

“Did he know?”

She nodded.

“And he thought the baby could be his?”

She shrugged, not having any idea what had been going on in Kurt’s mind. “I don’t know how. I haven’t been with him in four months, and I’m only four weeks along.”

“You saw a doctor, and he was positive?”

She nodded, waiting for the ultimate question, but he just stood there wearing a sappy smile. “She confirmed it. She also gave me a book about what to expect every month for me, a prescription for prenatal vitamins, and the baby’s due date.”

He nodded, and his hands dropped from her arms. He began patting his pockets. Why wasn’t he angry or upset? He didn’t even ask if she was sure he was the father. After the way she acted, he would’ve had every right to wonder, even though she already told him she’d never done anything like that before. She watched him spin around in a circle and walk back and forth on the dock.

Unable to take his silence anymore and knowing they were running out of time, she grabbed his arm. “What are you looking for?”

“My phone, I had it here.” He pointed to a spot about a foot away. “Then...shit!” He ran to the edge of the dock and looked into the water.

“Here, you can use mine.” She took her phone out of her pocket and handed it to him. “Who are you calling?”

“My mother. She’s going to die when I tell her she’s finally going to be a grandmother.”

Her heart stopped. She was sure of it. There was no pain, but she couldn’t breathe or move, so something was wrong. At the sound of the phone beeping as he punched the numbers, she forced her feet to

move. She reached for the phone and accidentally knocked it out of his hands onto the dock. Sam watched as it skidded along, then fell into the lake with a resounding plop.

“Sam, what the hell?” He rushed after it, but it was too late.

“I’m sorry, but Trent, we really should talk before you go calling your mother.”

“Am I the father?” Finally, he got to the question she’d been dreading and yet knew needed to be asked.

“Yes.” It surprised her how good it felt to say it out loud.

“Then what else is there to say other than will you marry me?”

Run...Run...Run! her brain screamed, but she couldn’t move.

What a thing to say. His smile grated on her nerves. It would serve him right if she pretended his proposal was real and accepted it.

“That’s not funny.” She poked him in the chest with each word to make sure he got the point.

“I wasn’t kidding.” He sounded serious, which was even worse.

*Do I have a thing about attracting mildly insane men I’m unaware of?*

He had to know it was crazy to even think about marriage. Didn’t they have enough to deal with without heaping on more complications? None of this was going the way she thought it would.

He took her by the shoulders and looked at her with those deep, intense brown eyes of his. “Sam, I’m serious. Will you marry me?”

She pushed at his chest hard enough to make him take a step back. “We can’t get married. We’ve only known each other for a little over a month.”

“We can’t get married, but we can have a baby together?”

She threw her hands in the air, growling as she turned and walked away. She got in his SUV, leaned her head back against the seat, and closed her eyes. For her, this conversation was over. It didn’t take long for him to join her. Without a word, he started the SUV and began to drive. In the small space, she could smell his spicy cologne.

Inhaling deeply, she bit her bottom lip. Without warning, the SUV came to an abrupt stop.

Trent got out and walked to the side of the road, where he paced back and forth a bit before coming to her door. Sam fought with her seat belt, getting it off just as he opened the door. She slid onto his seat and leaned as far back as she could. He didn't get in or try to reach for her. He just stood there staring at down her.

He rested his arm on top of the car, and in a very even tone he said, "I've decided we are going to get married. It's the right thing to do."

*The right thing to do.*

Oh, the man was just full of brilliant thoughts today. She moved her leg, and the keys jingled in the ignition.

He just needed some alone time to consider the ramifications of what he was suggesting, she thought, fighting back a smile.

She knew it was wrong, but she'd been dealing with all her doubts and fears for the past week. It was only fair that he be put in a similar situation. She moved to the edge of the seat, hoping to make him think she was willing to discuss it.

"Trent, we have plenty of time to talk about this later. If we don't get me home soon, my sisters are going to come looking for me."

"You're not fooling me," he said with a shake of his head. "I'll let it go for now, but we will talk about this later."

She nodded and smiled as he closed the door. Lucky for her, he headed around the back of the car. Listening to the impulsive voice in her head, she settled into his seat and turned the key. She stepped on the gas and drove off in a cloud of dust, leaving him standing by the side of the road. She figured it was only a five mile walk down to her house or a mile back to the lodge. Trent was in good shape. He could make either one without a problem. She hoped he'd use the time to really think about what he wanted.

\* \* \* \*

Trent laughed as he watched her drive away in his new car. If she thought he was going to let her get away with it, she was wrong. He'd have to make sure her punishment fit the crime. Her habit of running from him needed to end now. She was too skittish for her own good. They'd have to work on that since he intended for them to spend the rest of their lives together, and he didn't want to be chasing her around. Unless it was in the bedroom. Then he wouldn't mind giving it a go.

Without his cell phone, he was left no other choice but to walk. He'd only gone a short distance when he spotted his SUV pulled over to the side of the road. He broke into a run, and as he got closer, he could see Sam. She was still in the driver's seat, but she was slumped over the steering wheel. The fear that swamped him in that moment almost brought him to his knees. He reached the car and whipped open the door. She was crying again, not the huge sobs like before, just little hiccups.

Her head popped up, and she dove into his arms as far as she could with the seat belt holding her in place. He reached over and undid it and helped her out of the car. Her arms wrapped around his neck as she snuggled against his chest.

"Baby, are you okay?" He asked his anxiety level dropped back to three, when she nodded. Just minutes ago, she hiked it up to twelve. He rubbed her back hoping to soothe her. "Honey, talk to me. Tell me what's wrong."

"I'm sorry." Her words uttered so softly tugged at his heart.

He spent enough time on the phone getting to know her to feel pretty confident that she wasn't done, and with a little prodding, she'd get it all off her chest. "For what?"

"I did it again." She shivered, her whole body shaking against him.

“You mean running away from me? Not me, us?” He couldn’t fight the smile that tipped the corners on his mouth. He just hoped she didn’t hear it in his voice.

She nodded, emitting a growl as she pulled out of his embrace. “Why do I...? You make me...? Damn it, I freaked out, okay?”

“You’ve got a damn good reason to be freaking out. And I didn’t make it any easier on you.” He reached out and took her face in his hands and tipped her face up to his. “But, Sam, I promise I will. And you can run all you want. I’ll just follow you.”

She laughed a little hysterically, but it was better than tears. “Promise, because I really need you with me when I tell my sisters.”

“I’ll be there, and when you finally come to your senses, we’ll get married so I can promise to be there forever,” he said, lowering his lips to hers.

She stiffened, probably wanting to argue that last point. But as he toyed with her lips, she melted into him. He slid his hands over her shoulders, down her back, and onto her hips. Somewhere in the back of his mind, there was a part of him that told him to ease back. The problem was a more primitive part of him backed her against the truck. He bent his knees enough to align their bodies perfectly. He wanted to shout when her hands fisted in his shirt, trying to pull him closer.

He slid his lips from her mouth, across her cheek, to that spot below her ear he knew drove her crazy. Her breathing was ragged, but so was his. She was close, so close. He slipped his thigh between her legs and applied pressure against her mound, making her moan. He knew this wasn’t the right place for this, but it may help her to relax a bit. Ever so slowly, he let his hand drift from her hip upward, settling on her breasts.

She arched her back, pressing herself into his palms as her hips rocked, rubbing her against his thighs. In response, he pressed his leg higher, actually lifting her to her toes. She ground herself against him, and her heat seeped through her jeans to his leg. Her head dropped

back, clunking on the truck, but he could tell she was too far gone to care. He loved that he was able to bring her to such heights so quickly. One night in the very near future, he was going to see just how high he could get her and how long he could keep her there.

“Sam, just let it go,” he whispered before nipping her earlobe.

“Oh, my God.” She moaned and did a full body shudder.

Her thighs clenched around his, and she lifted her head, briefly looking him in the eyes before her forehead dropped forward to his shoulder.

Trent held her still for a minute, letting her catch her breath, then lifted her up into his arms. He carried her around the car and lowered her feet to the ground. Keeping one hand on her shoulder, he used the other to open the door. After he helped her, he pressed a gentle kiss on her lips.

He reached over her and clicked her seat belt into place. “Now you sit right there and relax.”

As he closed the door, he thought he heard her say, “As if I could do anything else.”

## Chapter Six

Jessie forced herself not to run out of the house the second they pulled into the driveway, unlike her other sisters, who were all standing on the porch. Instead, she stood there wrapped in her husband's arms, watching through the living room window as Trent climbed out of the brand new blue SUV. He walked around the car and opened the door. Her heart pounded as he reached in and helped Sam out.

When Sam didn't let go of his hand, Jessie sighed. And from the way he was keeping her so close and staring at her sisters, Jessie could tell he was protective of her. Okay, there was obviously more than a one-night stand between them.

*Duh, there's a baby, you idiot.*

Victor leaned down and pressed a kiss to her cheek and said, "Honey, it'll be fine. My brother wouldn't have it any other way."

"I wish I could be so sure." She shook her head, hoping he was right. If not, Trent was going to regret it, brother-in-law or not. She'd make sure of it.

They turned to the door as one, watching as Sam and Trent entered into the room. Their sisters, Joey, Georgie, Frankie, and Bobbie, followed them. Trent led Sam to the love seat and waited for her to sit, then joined her. The women moved to the couch across from them. Victor steered her toward the recliner and sat on the arm, keeping her hand in his.

\* \* \* \*



Sam wasn't afraid to tell her sister she was pregnant. She wasn't afraid they'd be angry or disappointed. She was, however, embarrassed to explain that she slept with Trent just hours after meeting him. Well, there was no time like the present to tell her sisters she was a shameless hussy. Of course, she'd leave out the fact that this man had the skill to make her climax without even removing a strip of their clothing.

Trent reached over, put his hand on her knee, and gave her a reassuring squeeze. "I have some exciting news. You guys are going to be aunts. Kurt's not the father. I am," Trent added, and she could clearly hear the smile he was wearing in his tone.

"But you guys..." Joey stopped, and the rest of her statement hung in the air.

Her sisters all looked at each other. No one said anything, though she knew they were all thinking the same type of question. She wished they would just ask them and get it over with so things could get back to normal.

"Sam, are you okay with this?" Jessie asked getting to her feet.

"Yes," she said laying her hand on her stomach.

"Then congratulations are in order." Victor got to his feet, walked over, pulled her to her feet, pressed a huge, noisy kiss to her cheek, and then slapped his brother on the back.

"I'm going to be an aunt!" Bobbie cheered, hugging her.

"When are you due?" Frankie asked.

"February," she said, wanting to keep the exact date a surprise until later.

"Victor and I will be moving up to the cabin soon, and then we can turn my room into a nursery."

"No. Um...I was thinking, after the remodel, I could move into one of the cabins." It wasn't fair to expect them all to deal with a baby.

"Why?" her sisters demanded, obviously not happy with the idea.

“Actually, I was thinking we’d start looking for a place together.” Trent managed to get all of her sisters’ attention turned to him with his announcement.

“You really want to move out?” Bobbie’s voice trembled, and Sam felt a pang of guilt stab her heart.

“Sam, this is your home. You’ve decorated it, and the kitchen would never be the same without you. We’ve all always known the house would be yours someday.” Joey’s tears made her eyes fill with them, too.

“No, I don’t but—” In truth, it was going to kill her to leave, but it was the right thing to do.

“Good. That’s settled then,” Frankie said as if it had all been decided.

“I’ve asked Sam to marry me,” Trent said, and the room went silent.

Sam turned to him and said, “And I told you no!”

“You told him no?” Jessie asked, her head bouncing between them.

“Once I get her to agree, and I will, it’ll probably be a good idea to have our own place.”

His argument was reasonable, but she didn’t plan on marrying him, so it was a waste. Sam threw her hands in the air. He just wouldn’t listen to her.

She turned to his brother, hoping maybe he could help her to get him to see reason. “Victor, can you do me a favor and knock some sense into him?”

“Sorry, honey, I’ve been trying to do that for years.” His teasing helped to lighten the mood a little bit.

“Look, we have eight months to work out all the details. It’s been a rough morning, and I really need a nap.”

\* \* \* \*

Trent watched her walk up the stairs knowing the second she got out of hearing range the questions were bound to start. His brother would be a little bit of a buffer, but he figured Victor had questions, too. He was going to be completely honest with them all, even if it hurt. They were an extremely close family unit, and he understood, in their eyes, he was essentially encroaching. It may take a while to make them see he only wanted the best for Sam. Whatever made her happy, he'd do his damndest to give it to her. A clearing of someone's throat had him turning around.

"Why did she say no?" Victor asked before her sisters managed to get a word out.

"She claims we haven't known each other long enough." He shrugged, dismissing her reason, knowing he would eventually overcome it.

"Why do you want to marry her?" Her sister Frankie's question wasn't one of the ones he'd been expecting.

"Because it's the right thing to do," he said, and they all groaned, including his brother.

"You didn't tell her that, did you?" His brother's wife, Jessie, asked, and from the look on her face, he realized he might have made a crucial mistake.

He nodded, and her sisters, the twins, laughed. Frankie and Jessie looked at each other and nodded.

Bobbie, the youngest of the Brazen sisters, laid her hand on his bicep and gave it a squeeze. "But that's not the only reason, is it?"

"Bobbie, did you ever think that maybe he hasn't figured out he's in love with her yet?" Her sister Georgie, the other twin, ignored the caustic glares her sisters were giving her as she spoke.

"Love, is that all? Of course I love her. Who wouldn't?" All heads turned in his direction except for his brother's. He was looking at the floor trying not to laugh.

Jessie punched him in the shoulder, knocking the laugh out of him. "So you really do plan on marrying her?"

“Yes. I know we may not have taken the traditional route, but we’re going to get married and have a baby. In that order, too.”

“We’re not going to let you force her into anything,” Frankie informed him, though he already knew that, but he liked that they weren’t afraid to let him know it.

“But you’re not going to stand in the way of her happiness, either, are you?” He turned what normally would have been a statement into a question in hopes they’d see he didn’t want to be their enemy.

Jessie tugged Victor back over to the chair and sat down. Her sisters took the silent hint and made themselves comfortable on the couch. Judging by their stoic expressions, they weren’t convinced yet. He waited for one of them to say something. At this point, even a slight smile would have been nice. If they wouldn’t give him one freely, he’d just have to earn it.

“Look, it’s not like I’m not going to pluck her from the ample bosom of her loving family.” Her sisters giggled while his brother groaned, giving him a dirty look.

When Victor let Trent tag along on his trip halfway across the world, their mother had been furious. She accused Victor of taking him from her. Victor obviously didn’t appreciate him using the argument his mother had. At least he was promising not to take her away.

“I’m more than willing to share her. Just make no mistakes. I plan on sticking around. That’s my baby she’s carrying.”

After giving his wife a look Trent couldn’t read, his brother turned to him. “You know, you look tired. Why don’t you go upstairs and take a nap?”

“You can use any room you want.” He didn’t miss Bobbie’s hint. Neither did anyone else since it was accompanied by an exaggerated wink.

They didn’t bother to wait for him to be out of earshot to start discussing the situation amongst themselves. He’d just have to hope his brother, who he knew would have his back, would be able to make

them see how he was serious about Sam. He debated standing on the stairs and listening to every word, but knowing Sam was upstairs lying in her bed all alone had him taking the steps two at a time.

\* \* \* \*

Victor knew he had some fast talking to do. Jessie and her sisters needed to give Trent a fair chance. Once they did, they'd see he was going to do whatever he had to do to keep her safe and happy.

"We're really just going to let him break the rules," Joey whispered to Georgie.

But it was Jessie who answered with a laugh and said, "Victor already broke the rule. Besides, Daddy made that rule to keep us from getting into trouble. Seems to me they've eliminated the need for the rule in their case."

"I still can't believe Sammy is pregnant. I thought it was you," Frankie said, and the women all laughed while he fought off a sudden wave of panic clawing at him.

"Not yet. I plan on enjoying him for a while first," Jessie teased, giving his thigh a pat.

"So are we in favor of this union or not?" Joey asked, and Victor wished his vote counted, but he knew at this point it didn't.

"I think we should wait and see how she reacts and go from there." He was beginning to learn that, though Frankie looked utterly feminine, she was way more than a pretty face.

"I think he's going to need help. I mean, 'the right thing to do'? He's lucky she didn't deck him," Georgie said, and they all nodded, even him.

"We're all missing something," Jessie said, garnering everyone's attention. "He wouldn't have gotten past the front door if Sam didn't want him to. Other than buying that monster of a truck, she's always been a very good girl. I think, no, I know Trent brings out a part of

her she may not be ready to face yet. The more she's around him, the harder it's going to be to ignore it."

Frankie nodded in agreement and added her own two cents. "Desire can be a strong emotion."

"Should I be hearing this?" Victor asked, more than willing to leave them alone to talk if they were going to get all touchy-feely.

"Probably not, but we may need you later, so you're in." Bobbie was right, and he knew it. He just hoped they didn't go into too much detail.

"I read somewhere that the best good girl makes an even better bad girl," Joey said, and when everyone looked at her, she quickly added, "Maybe Sam just needed the right guy to come along and make her want to be bad."

"Okay, so we wait and watch. If, or when it looks like Trent is in trouble, we find a way to help him?" Georgie's smile led Victor to believe she fully agreed with that plan.

"Yeah, but we'll make the first move for them." Jessie tilted her head to the side and looked at him.

Her sisters copied the move, and with five sets of eyes locked on him, he fought against squirming in his chair. He refused to let them know they scared him. Besides, it wasn't really fear he felt. It was more of an anticipation. He wanted Jessie happy, and that meant seeing to it that her sisters were happy, too. There was no doubt in his mind that Trent felt the same way about Sam. So he'd forgive them for any scheming, but it might take Trent a little while longer to forgive him for not giving him a heads-up.

Deciding he could use the shaking up, Victor smiled and winked at Jessie. "Go ahead."

Her smile had a sexy tilt he noticed she only gave him. "The cabin's finished, and Victor and I are ready to move in." Her voice got softer, and she batted her eyes at her sisters. "But I'd feel so much better about it if there was a big, strong man in the house to protect you guys."

“Oh, the shame,” Frankie said before she let out a loud groan and shook her head. “Can’t we come up with a better excuse than the ‘I’m just a girl’ card?”

“If we put Trent in your old bedroom, they’ll be close enough to drive each other crazy, but with the rooms kind of adjoining, how are we going to know if it’s working?” Bobbie asked, reminding Victor of how young she was.

“Trust me, we’ll know. We won’t need to see them sneaking around the halls for us to know their getting it on.” Joey gave Georgie a nudge, and they both laughed.

“Real mature.” Bobbie rolled her eyes and turned to Frankie and Jessie. “What I meant was what happens behind closed doors is none of our business, but we all know how Sam is about keeping up appearances. So if things don’t move along quick enough, we could just orchestrate a few public displays.”

Finally, Victor had an opinion he could share that wouldn’t get him into trouble. “I’d be willing to bet big money Kurt will be dumb enough to do it for you.”

“Jake’s been keeping an eye on Sam I’ll stop by and ask him to beef it up,” Bobbie said, and Victor knew it wouldn’t be the only thing they talked about.

From the things Jessie told him about Bobbie’s crush on Jake, she’d take advantage of any chance to see him. And if the way Jake was avoiding her was any sign, he was doing his damndest to fight the attraction between them. He could let her go, leaving Jake to fend for himself, but he wasn’t the type to ignore a friend in trouble or need.

Taking a chance on alienating Bobbie, he did what he thought was the right thing. “I have to bring some paperwork over to him. I’ll talk to him.”

Bobbie’s face scrunched into a pretty little pout. He wondered if Jake knew she had it in her bag of tricks. He’d be hard-pressed to walk away from that look. Telling him about it would give him an

edge. From the way it jerked his own heart, he knew Jake wouldn't be able to fight it for long. Still, a warning was better than nothing.

He was about to cave in and let her go when Jessie bumped her hip. "Just let him go. Sam's tired, and we have to make a nice dinner for our guest."

That's all it took. They all charged into the kitchen, Jessie pausing to kiss him as she passed. Flashes of his first dinner with all six Brazen women popped into his head. His brother was in for an experience he'd never forget.



## Chapter Seven

The smell of something burning pulled Sam from the most delicious dream. She had been licking chocolate sauce off Trent's broad chest while riding him. She gently rocked her hips in a slow teasing motion. Sam loved the way his shaft felt lodged deep inside her. He wrapped his fists in the comforter and squirmed under her ravishment. She had dozens of dreams like this since she met him, but this one felt so real. It was probably because his body was plastered to her back. His heat seeped into her and urged her to get closer.

"Are you awake?" His whisper was warm and moist against her cheek.

"Mmm..." She felt his hand slide over her hip and settle on her stomach.

A loud clattering downstairs made her wince, and he yanked his hand back. "Sorry."

She caught his wrist and tugged his arm back around her. "You're fine. It's them I'm worried about."

"Why?"

A scream followed by a rainbow of curses was shouted loud enough to reach them.

"I should go down before someone gets hurt." Sam knew they'd manage to scrape together something edible, but one of them would no doubt end up cut or burned.

"Protecting your domain or your sisters?" The teasing lilt in his voice had her smiling.

"Both." She eased out of his embrace and slowly got to her feet. "You should probably wait up here for a little while."

He leapt to his feet and rushed to her side. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” From the way Trent was staring at her, some would think she fainted or something equally drastic.

He took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. “No, you’re not. You’re really pale. Maybe you should lie back down?”

“Relax, I’ll be okay in a few minutes.” She gave his chest a couple of calming pats.

“Why, what’s wrong? Maybe we should call the doctor?”

She took it from the way he tightened his grip he was beginning to panic.

“Trent, calm down. I already saw the doctor.” She grabbed his shirt and gave him a shake.

He took a few visible deep breaths before saying, “Did you tell her about this?”

“Of course I did. She said it’s just morning sickness, though it can hit at any time. No quick movements and I should be okay.” She tried to sound reassuring, but it didn’t look like he bought it.

Then she got an idea. She pulled out of his embrace and walked over to her nightstand and got the book the doctor had given her.

*This should answer all his questions and keep him busy while I face my sisters.*

She couldn’t keep the smile from curving her lips as she walked back to him.

“The doctor told me I could call her anytime, but this should answer any of my questions. So it should answer yours, too.” She held the book out to him, enjoying the confused expression that covered his face.

He took the book from her, dropped it onto the bed, and followed her to the door. “I don’t want you to face them alone.”

“I need to do this. I know they have questions for me, ones they won’t ask in front of you.” It wasn’t a lie. She was sure a few questions would only be asked in private, but she also knew they were going to enjoy putting the screws to him.

He took her hand in his and pulled her close. “Sam, I’m going to be there for you every step of the way, including dealing with your sisters or anyone else who thinks they might have a say in any of this.”

“You don’t have to protect me from my sisters.” It felt good to have someone who wanted to shield her, but there was no threat from her sisters, and he needed to know that right off the bat.

“Fine, I’ll wait here until you come for me, but Sam, we’re partners in this, so you should get used to the idea.” She nodded and walked out the door feeling better than she had in a long time.

\* \* \* \*

Trent wanted to follow her. To let her take the brunt of everything on those slender shoulders of hers went against everything he’d been raised to think. He was supposed to protect the women in his life. His mother and sister, both strong women like the Brazen sisters, bitched and moaned whenever they thought his father was being overprotective. After his death, it hadn’t taken much for him and Victor to take over that role. It was something he and Sam would have to work out because he knew he was going to piss her off sooner or later, most likely sooner.

He ran a hand through his hair and wondered if he could creep down and make sure everything was okay without Sam or her sisters catching him. Probably, but instead he realized she’d given him the chance to examine her private space unobserved. He looked around the pink, frilly room with a smile. He was happy to see there wasn’t a masculine touch in sight.

He’d change that, he thought, running a finger along the row of cookbooks she had stacked on her desk.

Moving to the bookshelf, he found more of the same, but there were also few well-worn paperback romance novels on one of the shelves.

The big bed that took up a good portion of the room drew his attention. It, too, was covered in pink, but with white accents. The pillows still held the imprints from their heads. But it was the bright orange colored book lying on the pale pink comforter that stood out like it was calling to him.

He picked it up and sat down, making himself comfortable. With an ounce of fear countered by curiosity, he flipped the book open and started reading.

\* \* \* \*

Sam walked into the kitchen and watched the flurry of activity happening before her. Everyone was too busy to notice her, so she took a moment to survey the damage. No fire, check. No visible blood or bandages, check. And no broken dishes, check. A mess on every possible service, check.

The twins, Joey and Georgie, were tossing everything for a salad into a big bowl. Bobbie was taking golden brown rolls off a sheet pan and putting them in the breadbasket they used for special occasions. Jessie was growling at the roasted chicken she was trying to get onto a platter. Frankie was staring into a smoking pan on the stove.

“How the hell do you tell if this is done?” she asked anyone who wanted to answer.

“What is it?” Sam laughed when all heads swung toward her.

“Rice pilaf, and I think I’m burning it.” Frankie leaned over the stove and waved her hand over the pot.

Sam walked over, turned the burner’s dial to the low heat setting, and took the wooden spoon from Frankie’s hand. She gave the rice a stir and taste. It was fine, and she said so, putting the cover on the pan. She moved over to Jessie and held out her hands. Jessie smiled and handed her the serving fork and knife she was using.

“Where’s your fiancé?” Bobbie asked, covering the rolls with a towel.

“He’s upstairs, and he’s not my fiancé.” She lifted the chicken out of the pan, surprised that it wasn’t stuck to the bottom since they hadn’t used the roasting rack.

“Does he know that?” Joey asked.

“Yes, so don’t encourage his fantasies.” She ignored their laughter as she carried the chicken into the dining room.

They set the table using the good plates and best silverware. Obviously, they wanted Trent to think this was going to be a civilized meal. She knew better but had a few ideas to steer the conversation onto a safe path. She heard the back door open and close, followed by Jessie’s laughter.

“Uh-oh. Sam is so going to kill you guys when she sees what you’ve done to her kitchen. You know, I don’t think is the way to get her to stay. Knowing you can cause this much damage may send her running,” Victor teased, but there was an ounce of truth in it.

“Yeah, well now you’re drafted to help us clean up after we eat,” Jessie said, and he groaned, which made all of her sisters laugh.

Sam decided to come to his rescue, just this once. “Hey, he didn’t make the mess. He shouldn’t have to clean it. You know the rules.”

He stepped behind her, laying his big hands on her shoulders. “Yeah, what she said.”

Jessie shook her head as she took a bowl into the dining room. “We’ll discuss it later.”

He groaned, and Sam laughed, knowing he would have offered to help clean it anyway. “Well, everything’s just about ready. Why don’t you go get your brother? He’s probably worn a hole in my carpet by now.”

Victor nodded and turned to do as she suggested, but Trent barreled down the stairs and into the room, almost knocking him over. Her sisters came to a halt, waiting to see what was going to happen next. Sam noticed Trent held the pregnancy book in his hand.

Victor stepped out of his way and said, “Hey, I was just coming to get you.”

Trent ignored him, coming to a stop in front of her. “We need to talk.”

She took it he wasn’t happy about something he read, but it was going to have to wait. “Later. I hope you’re hungry. My sisters prepared a feast.”

“Sam, I have questions, and I’d like the answers now.”

His tone told her he wasn’t going to budge, so she did the only thing she could. She walked away. She quickly crossed the room, grabbed the bowl of rice from Frankie’s hands, and headed for the dining room. He followed her, as did Victor and her sisters. They all quickly found their seats, leaving the two of them standing there staring at each other. It wasn’t a game of wills, not really. It was more a case of who was going to win the first skirmish in what she expected to be a long, drawn-out war.

Victor cleared his throat loudly, and without even glancing at him, Trent pulled out her chair for her. She didn’t smile, though she wanted to. He had to realize he was on her home turf, where she had the support of her family and friends. He was fighting a losing battle unless she decided to call a truce.

“I want to meet your doctor.” He walked around the table and chose the seat directly across from her.

“You will.”

*Business, talk business, and he won’t have time for questions, and hopefully neither will my sisters.*

“Victor, when is your crew scheduled to start arriving?”

“Two weeks. And if all the permits go through okay, we’ll start work the third week of June and be done by the first week in October.” He sounded confident that it would be done.

She hoped he was right. Thanks to Trent, they already lined up most of the materials needed. The biggest and most expensive being the two person whirlpool tubs. Frankie insisted they need to put one into each of the cabins.

“Who’s coming first?” Jessie asked, taking the bait like Sam hoped.

“Hal, one of our foremen, but he won’t be available for the entire project. He’ll work with Trent for a week or two, and then he has to go take care of a job he previously committed to. Trent will be in charge after he leaves.”

“So, Trent, you’ll be with us for the long haul?” Bobbie asked, handing him the bowl of salad.

“No.”

All eyes swung to him.

“I’m here for good.”

Jessie’s cough sent a mouthful of rice across the table. “Sorry.” She reached for her drink and took a sip before saying, “Have you told your mother that yet?”

“Yes, and even though she wasn’t happy, I’m sure her attitude will do a one-eighty when I tell her she’s going to be a grandmother.”

From the look Victor gave him, Sam wondered just how his mother was going to take the news.

“I’m surprised you haven’t already called her,” Victor said, shaking his head.

“How do know he hasn’t?” Frankie asked.

“Because she would have called me by now,” Victor explained.

“I was going to, but I accidently dropped my phone in the lake when you called. Then Sam so sweetly lent me hers, but once I told her who I was calling, she threw that one in, too.”

Sam stared at her plate, knowing her sisters hung on his every word.

“Aren’t you supposed to wait, like, three months before telling anyone?” Frankie asked, coming to her aid.

“That’s why I want to see that doctor. I have a few questions.” He tapped the book as he said it, making her wish she’d never given it to him. “This says the first and last three months are the hardest on the

mother. I want to make sure I do everything I can to help keep you and our baby safe.”

Jessie reached over and took the book from him. She flipped it open to the page Trent marked. Great, just fucking great. The last thing she wanted was for her sisters to worry about her.

“I read that part, too. It also says the best thing I can do is eat right and get plenty of rest. Frankie, have you decided on the color schemes for the cabins?”

Please help me, she begged with a subtle tilt of her head in Trent’s direction.

Frankie nodded and blinked, since she couldn’t wink. She’d never gotten the hang of it. “Yeah. Each one will be a different color palette, but they’ll all have the same basic neutral foundation so we can do a quick change if we have to. I’m leaning toward a nice off-white ivory color. Then we can add some deep, rich colors like hunter green and burgundy. We need to sit down and make the final choices for your kitchen linens.”

“Is tomorrow after breakfast good for you?” Sam tried to ignore the way Jessie and Trent were bent over that damned book.

“Do you still have your budget sheets?” Joey asked, and when they both nodded, she said, “Good, stick to them. Now I have a question. You said you’re due in February. What day?”

“February fourteenth.” Sam could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed.

“What?” Victor asked, and she wondered if he hadn’t heard or just wanted to be sure.

“The fourteenth, but the doctor said first babies can be very unpredictable.”

“Valentine’s Day. You’re kidding,” Trent said, and she shook her head, he slapped his hand down on the table. “Hot damn.”

“Now you have to call Mom,” Victor turned to Sam and added, “She’ll never forgive him if he doesn’t tell her right away.”



Jessie's hand covered hers and squeezed. "It'll be okay. Trust me."

"Wouldn't it be best to wait until you guys work out your issues first?" Joey, practical as ever, was right. They did have some stuff to get straight, but Victor and Trent shook their heads, vetoing the idea.

"I'm sure she's going to have questions like 'How can she be pregnant when you've only been there for a day?'. And when you tell her it happened on your last visit, which lasted a whole two days, what's she going to think?" The tenderness in Frankie's voice didn't help take the sting out of her words.

Sam knew the answer to her questions. Mrs. Weatherly was going to think she was a slut.

"She's going to think I was so far gone that I jumped the gun, but I'll just tell her that I would've begged Sam to marry me sooner or later."

Her sisters must be able to see he was certifiable.

At least the woman was four hundred and fifty miles away. She'd have plenty of time to find a suitable way to explain how she'd lost her mind in a haze of lust and ravaged her son. And in six months, when their project was done and Trent left, they'd work out a visitation schedule so they'd get to see the baby as often as they wanted.

She knew better than to believe that once his lust was sated he'd still want her. All she could do was hope they'd become great friends. There was nothing sadder than to have parents fighting over a child, well, except for not having parents at all. There was no way she'd put her child through that. He was right about one thing. They were in this together.

And she might as well start right now. "You know, it's not all his fault. We both got carried away."

"But, Sam, you've never...You don't..." Bobbie blushed as she floundered.

Not as worried about being tactful, Frankie came to her rescue and very bluntly said, “It’s just strange to us because you’ve always been the one who warns us about being careful and reminds us to think before we act. Trent must push buttons no one else even knew you had.”

Of course, she had to look at him to gauge his reaction. He was wearing a huge grin, and those green eyes of his twinkled devilishly. So what if what they were saying was true? She wasn’t going to let her body overrule her brain. She closed her eyes on the thought, adding she wasn’t going to let it happen again. She was strong, and if she could just hold out long enough, everything would get back to normal. Well, not the normal she was used to, but a new version of normal.

Jessie disrupted her thoughts with a loud “Uh-hmm.”

She opened her eyes and found everyone looking at her. “What?”

“Nothing. Well, something, but nothing about you. Then again, I guess it does have to do with you. With all of us, really.” Jessie was trying to distract them by rambling, something she did when she was going to give them bad news.

“Spill it!” Frankie said before Sam could.

“Victor and I are moving out, and Trent’s moving into my room.”

“What?” Sam, Bobbie, Frankie, and the twins all asked, but Sam thought hers was the only one that held any real surprise at her statement.

“It’s just I’d feel better if Trent stayed here.” Jessie would bend the truth a bit to help her cause, but Sam knew there was a bit of truth woven in her words.

She knew she could have debated it and had him stay in one of the cabins, but having him close by might help them work through some of their issues. “When?”

“This weekend. Until then he’ll sleep on the couch,” Victor said, and Trent nodded his agreement, but his wink told her he didn’t think he’d be spending much time on the couch.

## Chapter Eight

Two days went by pretty normally. Sam and her sisters got up and went to work or, in Bobbie's case, school. Though Trent hadn't attempted to sneak into her bed yet, he made a point of joining her for breakfast each morning. And if he complained about getting up before the sun, it was in a joking manner. Victor and Trent were always somewhere around the lodge doing something, so they'd stop in for lunch and he'd insist she join them.

Every afternoon she took a short nap before making dinner. And after dinner, she'd sit on the couch and double-check the menu for the next day for both the lodge and home while he watched a movie. There'd been no more talk about calling his mother. Thankfully, there'd been no sign of Kurt, either. Even her morning sickness was beginning to ease.

It was the third morning when the problems started. She'd promised her friend Claire Dionne that she'd make a couple dozen muffins and a few strudels for a breakfast meeting the Literacy For All Ages program was having at her restaurant. Claire's husband, Mike, would be handling the rest of the food, but Sam's muffins were blue ribbon winners three years running, so it was a special treat. Of course, as a member, she'd be staying for the meeting as well.

Sam planned on going in early to make everything they'd need for the meeting and the lodge that day. Jessie was going to come in around seven thirty and cover for the day. Somehow, she forgot to mention this all to Trent. So at four thirty, an hour before the time she usually got up, she was quietly sneaking out the back door, careful not to make a sound and wake her sisters up.

It was two hours later when she heard car doors slamming in the parking lot near the kitchen. She wiped her flour covered hands on her apron as she walked over to the window. Victor and Jessie were trotting along right behind Trent as he strode toward the building. The buzz of the oven timer filled the air. She rushed to the oven and opened the door. By the time she had the two trays of muffins out on the cooling racks and the strudels in the oven, she heard heavy footsteps coming down the hall.

“Hi, guys. I’ll be right there,” Sam called out, heading for the sink to wash her hands.

“Did you stop to think that when I woke up and found you gone I’d be worried?”

She’d never heard his voice that deep or harsh. The fact that he had the balls to even act like she had to answer to him instantly put her on edge. “Actually, no. I have a life, and if you want to be a part of it, then you should rethink your current attitude.”

“Baby, whether you’re ready to admit it or not, I’m in your life for good. Now back to the matter at hand. Why the hell did you sneak out without telling me?” He didn’t waver in his conviction that she did something wrong.

Maybe she should have told him, but really, it wasn’t that big of a deal. She didn’t expect him to account for every minute of the day, so why should she? She glanced over at Jessie and Victor hovering in the doorway, wearing nervous expressions. Sam tipped her head, telling Jess it was okay to go.

“Look, we’ll have to deal with this later. I have a lot of work to do.” She walked over to the worktable where she had the basket and parchment paper she was preparing.

He leaned against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’ll wait.”

Ally, one of her waitresses, came in, took one look at them, and backed out into the dining room. Irritation swirled around her stomach, or maybe it was just the morning sickness rearing its ugly

head. Either way, it didn't matter. He had to go now so she could focus. She could practically feel the heat from his stare on her back. She took a deep breath and blew it out and turned around to face him.

It only took her a second to realize she would have been better off if she kept her back to him. His eyes followed every move she made. From his stance, anybody walking by would have thought he was relaxed, but being this close, Sam could see the way his muscles tensed. He reminded her of a jungle cat who hunted its prey and was ready to strike. With a tip of his head and a rise of his eyebrows, he demanded a reaction.

She could give him what he wanted. Her response came from somewhere deep and unexpected. Her body hummed with excitement. She felt a wet heat between her thighs, and her already tender breasts began to tingle as her nipples tightened, pressing against the lace of her bra. She had the urge to see what would happen if she acted on her growing hunger.

She tucked her hands behind her and grasped on to the counter to keep from reaching for him. It wasn't enough, so she leaned against them. To let him think he could turn her on with just a look was wrong, but to let him think she'd let him boss her around was worse. So she did her best to look indifferent, which was hard since she was so angry. She pictured herself tying him to one of the stools, stuffing a muffin in his mouth, and totally ignoring him.

Even Kurt had better sense than to invade her space and insinuate he had the right to be informed of her every move. She'd gone from a conniving, yet sexy guy to a controlling, but hotter-than-coals-from-hell sexy guy. It stung her pride a little to think she was drawn to the bad boy image when all she wanted was to settle down with a nice, stable guy.

"I'm sorry if I sounded harsh, but I have lot to get done, and I can't have you scaring my help away. Can we meet for lunch and talk?" She saw the tilt of his head and hoped that meant he was considering it.

It hit her right then that they really did have a lot to learn about each other. Physically, they were like a match and gasoline, totally combustible. And from their hours of talking on the phone, she knew they liked the same authors, types of movies, and foods. It was the more personal things she wanted to know. Little things like which side of the bed he preferred and how to read his body language.

"Fine. One o'clock right here," he said, and she nodded, accepting his mandate.

She expected him to walk out of the room, but he was full of surprises. He walked over, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her. It was a rough and angry kiss, and she bent to his will, allowing him to ravage her mouth. As suddenly as he grabbed her, he set her away from him and headed for the door. She watched him go, enjoying his confident swagger. She was still trying to catch her breath when Jessie and Ally burst through the door.

"Are you okay?" Jessie asked, her head swiveling between Sam and the swinging door.

"Yes." The buzzer went off, and she went to the oven.

"Who was that?" Ally asked, her awe and interest coming through loud and clear.

Yeah, he had that effect on her, too. She'd been expecting Jessie's question, so it was easy to answer. Ally's question was more disturbing because she wasn't exactly sure how to answer. He was Victor's brother, their soon-to-be project foreman, her unborn child's father, and, lastly, taken for the time he was here. She wasn't foolish enough to believe they wouldn't make love again. She wondered what title he'd give himself if someone asked him who he was.

"He's my brother-in-law, and he has a serious thing for Sam."

Ally smiled and nodded at Jessie's explanation and moved off to prepare for the start of her shift.

"Thanks." She was going to have to come to terms with things so her sisters wouldn't feel it was necessary to come to her rescue.

“I remember what it felt like when Victor came back and I had no idea how to introduce him. I knew better than to let him introduce himself because he wouldn’t have had a problem telling everyone he was my long-lost husband.” Jessie loaded the muffins into their baskets as she talked.

Sam slid the warm apple and raspberry strudels into the travel cases. “After the meeting, Trent and I are going to sit down and talk.”

“Good. You two need to set some guidelines. And don’t let him get the upper hand like his brother did with me. Remember, you’re in charge.”

“As long as he’s six feet away and we’re not alone,” Sam mumbled, knowing the second he got his hands on her she’d turn into a whimpering fool.

Jessie grabbed her arm and spun her around. “Sam, you’re stronger than that, but more importantly, you’ve got him wrapped around your finger and don’t even realize it.”

“It just lust. Once it wears off, he’ll come to his senses,” she said, fumbling with the straps on the baskets.

“That man is gone. You should’ve seen him freaking out this morning. And lust doesn’t prompt a man to offer marriage.” Jessie pushed Sam’s trembling hands out of the way and did up the straps herself.

“That just because of the baby. He even said that’s why he asked me.” Jessie’s choking laughter had Ally rushing over to them. “Ally, can you take these out to Jessie’s car for me?”

“Sure thing.”

Sam waited for the young girl to leave before she turned on Jessie. “Knock it off. You know I was on your side when Victor showed up. How about a little show of solidarity?” She yanked off her apron and threw it at her as she stomped into her office, slamming the door behind her.

## Chapter Nine

*Wow!* Jessie stood there staring at the door, wondering when Sam had become so expressive. Sure, she slammed things and yelled when she was good and angry. If it was important to her, then she made damn sure everyone knew it, but this was different. It felt different, like she was tired of holding it all in. Whether it was Trent or her hormones going nuts, in Jessie's opinion it was about damn time. Unlike Frankie or herself, who had no problem telling people what they thought, Sam had always gone for tactfulness over bluntness.

She heard Victor and Trent out in the dining room, so she grabbed a basket of muffins and went to see what they were up to. If she had to admit it, she didn't want to be there when Sam emerged from her office.

"You need to take a step back and think before you act, or you're going to end up pushing her away." Lucky for her, Victor had his back to her, because his words brought tears to her eyes.

It hurt knowing she caused him so much grief. At least she would have the next fifty years or so to make it up to him.

"Or I could resort to blackmail like you did," Trent countered, and she hated the way her husband's shoulders drooped.

"I was wrong, and deep down I think Jessie knew I'd never follow through with my threats." He was right, but without the push, she might have fought harder against her heart.

She heard the swish of the swinging door behind her. Trent's head popped up, then dropped back down to stare at his coffee mug. She glanced over her shoulder at Ally, who walked over and put baskets of muffins on the "help yourself" table, as Jessie liked to call it. Then



Jessie walked over to the table and placed the basket she held between her husband and his brother.

“Hey, handsome.” She leaned down and brushed her lips across his.

It wasn’t the first time they shared a moment in public, but it was the first time she could remember being the one who initiated it. His eyes widened, but his lips curved into a smile. And never one to let a good chance slip by, he grabbed her hips and tugged her onto his lap.

“Hello, beautiful.” He covered her giggling mouth with his.

Trent groaned, obviously unhappy with their public display of affection, or PDA, as Bobbie called it. Well, he was just going to have to get used to it, because she planned on doing everything she could to show her husband how much she loved him. She turned on his lap and reached for a chocolate chip muffin. Instead of eating it, she turned back and fed it to Victor. She hoped his moans were due to the fact that she wiggled against the erection she could feel beneath her ass. She’d be really upset it was a product of her sister’s cooking.

“Oh, please. Rub it in, why don’t ya? Where’s your sister?” Trent’s harsh words held an amused tone, so Jessie flashed him a smile.

“She’s changing. I thought you two were getting together this afternoon.” She leaned back against Victor’s chest as he wrapped his arms around her.

He nodded and looked at the door that led into the kitchen. “We are. I just want to make sure I say good-bye.”

“I would just give her some time to calm down,” Victor volunteered with a shake of his head.

The door behind them swung open, and Jessie heard heels clicking on the floor. Jessie watched Trent carefully as he raised his head, locking on Sam. His eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open. As if catching himself, he snapped it shut with a loud click of his teeth. Victor turned and let out a slow whistle. Jessie peeked over his

shoulder and smiled. Damn, her sister could really shine when she wanted to.

Her hair was brushed out into loose waves instead of pulled back into her customary ponytail. She had a pale pink blouse on matched with black dress pants and black heels. Her favorite matching amethyst necklace and bracelet glimmered in the light. And from the distance, Jessie could see she applied a light layer of makeup. She figured Sam must have to lead a discussion today. Otherwise, she would have changed into a presentable pair of jeans and a nice top.

“What the fuck?” Trent said when she bent over and helped Ally slide the table closer to the wall.

Victor shook his head and laughed. “Dude, you are so screwed.”

“Bite me!” Trent got to his feet, took a few steps aligning him with their chair and froze.

Was he nervous? Jessie would never have expected it from him. Especially not after the way he barged into her, no, their bedroom this morning. He stood at the end of the bed and demanded to know where Sam was. Shy or nervous were emotions she would have bet he hadn’t experienced since he hit puberty. The naughty imp Victor managed to set free from where she locked it deep inside her momentarily took over.

She raised her foot and put it on his butt, giving him a shove. “Well, go say something.”

\* \* \* \*

Trent heard Jessie and Victor laugh behind him, but didn’t look back.

Damn these Brazen sisters, he thought as he walked over to where Samantha stood talking to her waitress.

He knew she liked Sam better, but dressed like that, looking so poised, he couldn’t think of her as Sam. She would fit in at any of his mother or sister’s charity lunches he was always asked to attend. He

was going to have to buy her a few gowns for the evening functions, but he knew her beauty would outshine anything she wore.

As he approached, he heard her explaining to the girl that Jessie was covering for the morning and she'd be back by lunchtime. And then she was his. They were going to sit right here in this dining room and get a few of their more important issues ironed out. He had to call his mother soon, which meant she'd be showing up soon.

It was Sam's nasty little disappearing habit that made him freak out this morning. He'd been anticipating her running, but not so soon. And if she hasn't been thinking it yet, she might once she met his mother. He stood back, waiting until the young girl turned and walked away before he reached out and caught her hand.

"Can I just say *wow*? Baby, you look amazing." He gave her a tug, and she quickly closed the distance between them.

She tipped her head up and gave him a shaky smile. "Thank you. So you aren't mad at me anymore?"

"I wasn't mad. I was vexed."

She tilted her head, and he smiled.

"Okay, I was a little irked. Honey, I don't want to fight. I just wanted to say I was sorry for overreacting and give you a kiss good-bye."

"Well?" She said when he didn't make a move.

Had he expected her to apologize, too? Did it matter if she did? Not right now, he decided as he leaned in and pressed his lips to her soft, silky ones.

He hadn't expected more than a sweet, innocent brushing of their lips, but as with every other time he touched her, he felt the flames ignite. He touched his tongue to her lips and, instantly, she opened for him.

Oh man, she tasted like strawberries and vanilla, and he couldn't get enough. His heartbeat was like a drum beating in his chest. Her fingers tangled in his hair while he slid his hands to her hips and pulled her flush against him. He heard someone clearing his or her

throat, followed by deep, rumbling laughter. He didn't care. A marching band could parade through the room and it wouldn't get her out of his arms. Her fingers left his hair as her hands slid to his shoulders. Sensing their moment was over, he ended the kiss and eased back.

She looked at him and rubbed her lips together. "Ah, I really have to get going."

"Okay." He kept his hands on her hips and waited for her to shift her weight before he let go.

He watched her walk over and hold her hand in front of Jessie, who gave her something. With a quick wave and a smile, she walked out the door, and he fought the urge to follow her. He went over and sat with Victor and Jessie, ignoring their sappy smiles. With a groan, he turned away and looked over at the two men sitting nearby who must have come in during their kiss. They wore similar smiles to his brother. He didn't feel like being the center of attention, so he returned their nods, got to his feet, and went to find something to do. He needed something that would keep him busy and his mind off Sam until she got back. He walked down the hall to the huge room they used as a lobby greeting area. He reached the doors just in time to see Sam pull around the side of the building.

\* \* \* \*

As Sam eased Jessie's car around the side of the lodge, she felt like she was driving a go-kart. She saw movement to her right and slowed down even more. Trent stood at the top of the steps. He didn't look angry, but the almost scowl he showed wasn't happy, either. Not wanting that to be the last image in her mind, she blew him a kiss and smiled when he laughed and shook his head.

That was better, and when she got back, she planned on taking him into her office to follow up on the promise his kiss made. She sang along with the radio for the quick fifteen minute ride into town.

There were only a few cars in the Dionne's Family Dining parking lot so far, not unusual since it was barely eight o'clock on a weekday morning. She pulled around to the back, parking a few feet away from the employee entrance. She grabbed one of the travel cases off the backseat and went inside.

The kitchen was a buzz of activity. Claire and Mike were nowhere to be seen, but their assistant, Cliff, rushed over to where she stood. "Morning, Sam. Claire left orders for you to join her in the private dining room."

"And we know how she is about people obeying her orders." She handed him the case holding the raspberry strudel. "I have more in the car."

"Don't worry. We'll take of it as long as you take care of her." He tossed his head toward the dining room door.

"That bad, huh?" She would have laughed if he didn't look so serious.

He nodded, and as she walked away, she thought she heard him mumble, "Worse."

She wasn't surprised. Claire always got a little nutty when they held the meetings at the restaurant. Sam knew it had a lot to do with her being a newcomer to town. A few years ago, Mike had gone down to Massachusetts to visit his cousin and came back with a wife. She had been one of the first ones in Juniper Valley to meet her, and they'd quickly become good friends. It seemed like everyone instantly liked Claire, but she wasn't settled enough yet to notice.

She wondered if Victor felt the same way. Of course, he made quick friends with the sheriff, Jake Gurion, and his brother Beau when he'd come up here that first summer. And she knew they probably already introduced him to the Mitchell cousins. With connections like that, he'd have no trouble fitting in. She reached for the door to the private dining room, but a hand latched on to her wrist.

"I'd wait a few minutes if I were you." She recognized Oliver Mitchell's sexy voice, and its playful tone instantly made her smile.

“Really, and why is that?” Oliver just shook his head and laughed, and seconds later she heard feminine giggles on the other side of the door.

“Oh, what a pretty blush,” he teased, which she was sure made her blush darken.

“What did you do to get chosen to attend the meeting this month?” It was a running joke between her and Claire that whichever one of the seven Mitchell cousins misbehaved the most was sent to sit in their boring meeting.

“I volunteered, much like I suspect you do every month.”

She hadn’t expected that for an answer or for him to know she was the Brazen emissary for this charity.

Their father and grandfather always made sure they found ways to give back to the community. Even though it was a small town, there were a lot of ways to volunteer their time. And since there were six of them, they all agreed upon which areas deserved their time and which one of them wanted to be the one to represent the Brazens as a whole. The Mitchells were on a lot of the same committees with them, so they interacted with them a lot.

She wondered how long it would be before she started to show and Oliver took the news back to his cousins. She had no clue if they even met Trent yet. Learning she was pregnant before they met Trent would give them a reason to think badly of him, and her. Maybe she’d ask Jake to introduce him to them as soon as possible so Trent would at least get a fair chance.

As for her, she figured she earned their disapproval, but she wasn’t going to be ashamed of it. She was going to love this child with all her heart, and if anyone in town chose to think ill, then they probably weren’t worth her time anyway. The silence between them was growing uncomfortable. One of them needed to get the conversation going.

“So should we expect you from now on?” He nodded and tipped his head to the side and glanced down at her belly, then back to her face.

“Most definitely. And how’s your little project coming along?” As always with Oliver, he seemed to know everything.

Not wanting to confirm or deny his suspicions, she forced herself not to cover her stomach. “Good. Victor and his brother, Trent, plan on getting started in the next couple of weeks.”

“Seems Trent may have jumped the gun.” He said it softly, but she heard him loud and clear.

“Maybe it was me who jumped the gun.”

His mouth curved into a sexy smirk, and luckily for her the dining room doors opened before he could speak.

If Mike and Claire noticed the slight tension in the air, neither of them said anything. Then again, from Claire’s rosy cheeks, they were probably too busy hoping they hadn’t overheard them in the other room. A loud clattering had them all turning toward the kitchen doors. Cliff and three waitresses rolled carts full of food toward them.

“Oh, Sam, you’ve outdone yourself.” Claire’s appreciation was unnecessary but nice all the same.

“I won’t mention this to my cousins, or they’ll be trying to find ways to get into trouble hoping to have to accompany me next time.” From the way his eyes latched on to hers, she got the feeling he wasn’t just talking about the food.

“Yeah, well, it’s usually coffee and cookies at the town hall, both equally stale if you ask me.” Mike’s exaggerated grimace had them all laughing.

## Chapter Ten

Trent glanced at the clock again. Only ten minutes passed but added to the first twenty meant she was a half hour late. Realistically, he knew she probably just got hung up talking with the other women. He'd been to enough functions where he had to practically drag his mother away to know whenever a group of women got together they talked, and talked, and talked.

Still, she knew he was waiting, and damn it, he wanted to be important enough to her that there'd be times when he came first. He tossed the tape measure he was supposed to be using to measure the spot for her new stoves and a commercial size dishwasher. They were a little bigger than the ones she picked out, but he wanted her to have whatever she needed to make the kitchen and dining room the place of her dreams. He enhanced the plans for the dining room as well. She might want to make a few changes, but he hoped she'd be happy with the new designs.

He walked down to Jessie's office to see if maybe she called her to check in. He passed a couple of women around Sam's age who looked at him with an attentive gleam in their eyes. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered if Sam would be jealous if he stopped and talked a bit. Not that he would, but it'd be nice to know.

He knocked on the frame of the open door and stuck his head into Jessie's cramped office. "Any word from your sister?"

"Which one?" She slammed a file down on the desk, which sent a nearby stack of papers to the floor.

"Never mind. What's wrong? Where's Victor?" He moved into the office and crouched down to pick up the papers.



“Where do I start? Victor went down to the town hall to pick up some of the permits. He'll be gone most of the day. As for what's wrong, Bobbie's car chose today to break down, again. So she's stuck at the library until Sam gets back and I can go get her. In the meantime, I'm trying to get all the research my sisters have gotten done in order for tonight's meeting.” He watched as she scribbled something on a sticky note, slapped it onto another file, and slammed it down on top of the other one.

“Why don't you give me directions and I'll go see if I can fix her car? If not, I'll drop her at the house before I come back.”

Her head popped up, and she really looked at him for the first time. “You're waiting for Sam.”

She shook her head, and he decided it was time to show her he was a team player, because he fully intended on being part of the Brazen team.

“It's okay she's running late.” She looked like she wanted to say yes, but something was holding her back. “I finished what I was working on, and I really could use some fresh air.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, but he could tell she was ready to take him up on the offer.

All she needed was a little push. “It's either I go or stay here and keep you company until Sam gets back.”

Jessie didn't stop and take time to think it over. She grabbed the notepad on her desk and scribbled the directions. He watched with a strange sense of satisfaction as she ripped off the page and held it to him. Trent turned and left her office without leaving a message for Sam. It might help his case if she didn't know he was willing to sit around and wait on her. He glanced around the parking lot for Jessie's Mustang as he made his way to where he parked his SUV.

If he knew she had the meeting, he would have offered her his car. It might not have occurred to her yet, but her truck was totally impractical for a pregnant woman. They'd have to find her a nice, safe, dependable car. He knew it was a subject he was going to have

to broach carefully. She loved her truck in a way he hoped someday she'd love him.

*How fucking sad. I'm a grown man jealous of a truck.*

He pushed the thought from his mind as he drove out of the lot and headed for town. Her car was just one of the many things they needed to discuss.

It wasn't even in contention with the important issues they had to work out. To start with, he wanted to deal with their getting married. Then there was the fact that he still hadn't told his mother about the baby. If she somehow caught wind of Sam being pregnant before they told her, there would be hell to pay. Not for Sam, of course. His mother was going to treat her like a queen for giving her a grandchild. And being the first, he expected his son or daughter to be spoiled beyond belief.

When he reached Main Street, he glanced down at Jessie's directions. He followed her instructions and easily found the community college campus. He drove around, keeping his eyes open for the library building, but he spotted Bobbie first. She sat on her car surrounded by a group of young guys. Studs, his sister would have called them. He pulled up behind her car and just stepped out when Jake Gurion's Chevy Blazer pulled into the parking lot.

Trent watched in awe as Bobbie's admirers took one look at Jake as he stepped from the truck and dispersed. He wondered if it was the man himself or the boldly painted SHERIFF on the side of the truck that had them scurrying away. Bobbie slid off the car and waved as they walked away, and to his amazement a few of the guys actually had balls enough to wave back. Jake scowled but didn't say anything.

"Hey, Trent, Jessie said you were playing my knight in shining armor." She turned to Jake and flashed a huge smile. "So what are you doing here?"

Shocking Trent yet again, Jake glanced down at his feet, then back to her face, and launched into an explanation. "I spotted Trent as he

drove by, so I decided to stop and invite him and Victor out for a few beers and a game of pool tonight.”

“Oh, that’s nice.” Bobbie nodded.

As he watched Bobbie open her car door and lean in to get something, Jake asked, “So how about it?”

“Sounds good if Victor’s up for it.” Trent hoped he would be because he could use an infusion of testosterone.

“And if Sam has plans for you two?” Bobbie’s tone held a teasing note, but the way her eyebrows pulled together told him she was angry.

He realized his mistake and backtracked. “I’ll check with her, too.”

She slung a huge pink and black bag over her shoulder. “Good. Alec over at Twines Service Station will come and pick up my car and bring it out to the house, so we can leave whenever you’re ready.”

He knew auto repairs could cost a hefty chunk of change, so Trent offered to try to help her save it if he could. “I can see if I can get it started and save them the hassle.”

“Thanks, but Alec obviously needs the practice since he got it wrong the last two times.”

“Probably on purpose. Maybe it’s time you got something more dependable,” Jake opened the passenger door of Trent’s SUV for Bobbie, “and stopped giving the kid false hope.”

Trent watched Bobbie walk over and put her hand on top of the door, bringing them face-to-face. “Are you accusing me of leading him on?”

To Trent’s surprise, Jake covered her hand with his and in a softer tone said, “That’s not what I meant, and you know it. I just suggested you get something more dependable. Something safe and reliable.”

From her smile, Trent gathered he missed something really important. It was as if she won some argument without pouting or screaming, which he’d never seen a woman do before. He figured it was one of the things he had to learn about the Brazen sisters. Trent

knew not all women were into direct confrontations. Some liked to subtly push a guy into winning arguments for them. He was pretty sure that was what had just happened, and with a speed and accuracy that was, quite frankly, frightening.

"I guess we'll have to think about it." She pressed a kiss to his cheek before climbing into the car.

Jake nodded, closed the door, and turned to him as if nothing strange just occurred. "So we'll be at Squire's—Victor knows where it is—around eight."

"We'll see you then." He climbed in beside Bobbie, whose smile hadn't faded at all.

He watched Jake head for his truck in his rearview mirror. "So what's up between you two?"

"Nothing. Why did you think there was something?" Man, she could act, he thought, because she damn well knew there was something more besides the electricity arced between them.

"So did you and Sam make up?"

No, er...yes, but not to his satisfaction.

"So what will it be, your house or lodge?" Either one was fine with him.

"Ooh, you do know when you answer a question with a question it answers the question, right?"

He didn't respond, but that just seemed to make her laugh. Shouldn't she be angry or irritated? He would be if his car left him stranded. He hoped her cheery attitude would rub off on him. Chatty little thing she was, Bobbie told him a tale about a bad test grade that started her day into a tailspin. He listened as he drove through town, but when they reached the common, she suddenly stopped talking. He glanced over and saw she was looking behind them.

"What's the matter?" He slowed down, thankful for the stop sign up ahead. When she didn't answer, he added, "Hey, you can trust me."

“It’s nothing. I just saw someone I know, that’s all.” Her smile wavered, and he knew there was more to it than she wanted him to know.

“Do you want me to turn around?”

“No!” Her instant, adamant response had his head turning to her. “I mean, thanks, but it’s not necessary. I’ll talk to her later or tomorrow. Umm...I think I’ll head up to the lodge with you.”

Bobbie had no reason to lie or hide anything from him, did she? He didn’t think so. Maybe she just didn’t want to have to explain who he was? Or maybe...hell, he thought as he drove on, there could be dozens of reasons why she hadn’t wanted him to turn around. Truthfully, it was fine with him since he hoped Sam was back by now.

\* \* \* \*

Sam wasn’t surprised when, the second the meeting ended, Oliver took her by the elbow and walked her to Jessie’s car. He waited patiently while she opened the trunk for one of Claire’s kitchen staff to load in her baskets and pans. She looked at him standing by the car door as she closed the trunk. His thick, muscled arms hung loose by his sides. Not an ounce of stiffness showed in those broad shoulders. She knew it was a picture of calm before the storm since he must have something he planned to say to her. She joined him leaning against the car.

With a smile she bit the bullet. “So what did you want to talk to me about?”

“Not so much talk as offer to do what your daddy would have. Minus the shotgun, of course.” His smile told her just how much he’d enjoy doing it, too.

“That’s really sweet, but the offer has been made and refused.” That seemed to take the wind out of his sails for a minute.

“Man’s a goddamned fool,” he grumbled as he opened the door for her.

She moved to get it, then stopped and put her hand on his chest and looked him in the eye. “Oliver, I know word’s going to get out soon enough, but do you think you could keep it to yourself for now?”

“I won’t lie to my cousins, but I can promise it won’t go any farther than that on my end.” She expected that he’d share the information with his cousins, since they were as close and she and her sisters were.

Sam leaned in and pressed a friendly kiss to his cheek. “Thank you.”

As she backed away, she thought she saw Trent’s SUV drive by. Was he out looking for her? It had to have been her imagination. She slipped into the car, and Oliver closed the door for her. She started the car, and with a quick wave she was off.

A glance at the clock told her she was almost an hour late. It was her fault, but she couldn’t leave before the meeting was over. Guilt crept in. They agreed on a specific time, and she hadn’t shown. At the least she owed him an apology. She’d give him one and the explanation behind it. It would be his choice whether or not to accept it.

A huge yawn overtook her as she pulled into the lodge’s parking lot. She drove around to the kitchen’s side of the building. Her truck was parked in its normal spot, right where she left it. Trent’s SUV was a few feet away. Had it been moved? Possibly, but it wasn’t like she expected him to sit here all day. Between him and Victor, there was a lot to get done so they could start the remodel on time.

She parked the car and shut the engine off. The door was whipped open before she could reach for the handle. Bobbie grabbed her arm and yanked her out. Sam stumbled to keep upright, and she laid a hand protectively on her belly.

She latched on to the door with her free hand. “Damn it, Bobbie, be careful.”

“Sorry.” She even sounded it for a second before she tossed her hands in the air and said, “But maybe you should take your own advice. I know he may have screwed up his proposal, but do you really want him to leave?”

“Why would Trent leave just because I’m a little late?” Bobbie’s eyebrows raised, and her mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. “Well?”

“I was talking about him seeing you with another man.” She clenched her hands into fists and jammed them on her hips. “Oh, and not just any man, but a Mitchell. Sam, what are you thinking kissing another man?”

“You saw me with Oliver?” It had been an innocent act, and she didn’t see a problem with her behavior.

“Anybody who drove through town could have seen you.” Bobbie’s voice held a tone on the edge of hysteria.

“Oliver has decided to be the Mitchell delegate for the literacy group. He walked me to my car, and I kissed him on the cheek for being so sweet.” Why the hell was she even bothering to explain this to her?

“Sam, you have to be aware that Trent might feel a little insecure about things between you two. I mean, after all, you refused to marry him. If he saw you, or even hears about it, he might not understand.” Bobbie had a valid point, but her fears could be allayed with a quick explanation.

First, she needed to set her baby sister straight on a few things. “Bobbie, my relationship, whatever *I* choose for that to be, with Trent has to be clear from the start. I don’t plan to act differently toward my friends because he’s here. Would you change who you were if it meant you could have Jake?”

Bobbie closed one eye and winced. “No.”

“Good.” Sam pushed the door shut, and she and Bobbie headed for the lodge, but Sam wasn’t about to let a golden opportunity like

this pass. “And the next time Jessie tells you to take it easy on Jake, maybe you should listen.”

“All right, I get it. If I want you guys to trust in my decisions, then I have to trust you in yours.” Bobbie tossed her hair back and let out a loud laugh that shook her shoulders.

Sam opened the door and motioned for her to go in first. “I always said you were a smart girl.”

“Funny, I thought you said she was a smart-ass.”

“Yeah, she's that, too.” Sam looked over at where Trent stood taking up a good part of the doorway.

“I’ll go get the stuff out of the car.” Just to prove how smart she was, Bobbie made herself scarce.



## Chapter Eleven

“You’re late.” Even though his tone hinted that he didn’t care, just saying the words told her he did.

“Sorry, the meeting ran over.” She watched him carefully as he closed the distance between them.

His movements were relaxed, but Sam didn’t like the way his eyebrows were pulled low. It wasn’t anger. She’d seen that, and this was different. He got so close she had to tip her head back to look up at him.

He lifted his hand and stroked her cheek with the back of his finger. “Anything wrong? You look tired.”

She couldn’t stop herself from leaning into his touch. “No. We had a few new members who needed to be brought up to speed, and our new financial officer had a couple of things he wanted to put up for a vote.”

“Tell me about him.” His voice sounded a little strained.

“Oliver Mitchell. Your brother has hung out with him and his cousins a couple times. He hasn’t told you about the Mitchell cousins?” Victor played pool with them a few times, so she just assumed he would have at least mentioned them.

“He’s told me a few stories about them. So this Oliver, he’s a good guy?”

Was it casual interest, or was it jealousy?

“Yeah. He’s a good guy. His grandfather was really good friends with mine. So all seven of them are kind of like extended family.”

He nodded and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Do we still have time to sit down and talk?”

Sam wanted to set him straight on a few things right away, so she nodded. “Why don’t we go to my office?”

The way he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and ushered her along was sweet. She spotted Jessie and Ally as she entered the kitchen. Jessie looked from her to Trent and smiled.

“Jessie, give me about five minutes, okay?”

Jessie nodded and turned back to the sandwiches she had been assembling.

Once inside the office, Sam kicked off her shoes and motioned to the chair. “Why don’t you take a seat?”

“I don’t think so.” He took her by the shoulders and eased her into the chair behind her desk.

He crouched down and took her foot in his hands and, with his fingers, pressed and rubbed.

“Oh my God, that feels so good.”

He put her foot down and picked up the other one and began to administer the same techniques. “So I ran into the sheriff today, and he invited me and Victor out for a few drinks.”

“Mmm...you should go.” It would be good for him to get out and spend some time with his brother and the guys.

“Eager to get rid of me?”

She picked up the hurt in his tone and pulled her foot from his hands. “No.” She got to her feet, walked past him, and opened the closet door.

“Good, because I’m sticking around.”

She glanced back in time to see him slip into her chair and pop his feet onto her desk. “We can talk about it after the project’s finished.”

She stripped off her blouse and put it on the empty hanger on the back of the door. Sam ignored the clearing of his throat. The way she felt right now, she was afraid even the smallest argument would get blown out of proportion. She undid her slacks and let them slide down over her hips. She carefully lifted one foot then the other out to keep

the slacks from dragging on the floor. She heard a click and turned to see Trent standing by the door.

He leaned back against it and crossed his arms over his wide chest. "It almost worked."

"What almost worked?" She had no idea what he was talking about, but whatever it was, she liked the spark it put in his eyes.

"Not all men are easily distracted by a beautiful half naked woman." His eyes roved over her as he swallowed.

He may not be distracted, but he was turned on. She looked down at her plain cotton bra and undies, wishing she'd chosen something more daring that morning. The way Trent's eyes devoured her told her he didn't seem to care. If he liked this, she couldn't wait to see the look on his face when she showed him the skimpy bathing suit she bought last year.

Still, it might be fun to play with him a little, she thought.

She held out her arms and turned in a small circle. "Half naked? Please, I've worn less swimming."

He started toward her but stopped about a foot away. "As much as I would love to play, we need to talk."

She closed the distance, put her hands on his chest, and slid them up to his shoulders. "And what is it you'd like to talk about, me not telling you I had that meeting?"

He shook his head as his big hands closed on her hips. "Nah, we're over that little speed bump."

"Good." She pressed her fingertips and thumbs into his skin, squeezing and releasing. "So you've got something else on your mind, huh?"

"I need to call my mother." His head dropped forward, landing on her shoulder, and he moaned.

"Now is not the time to talk about your mother. Pick a different subject." She laughed and rubbed harder, feeling his muscles loosen under her manipulations.

She felt his lips graze her neck. His hands slid from her hips to her ass, leaving a tingling in their wake. Their heat burned through the thin cotton of her panties. He growled, pulling her flush against his body.

“I thought you wanted to talk?” Her breath surged out with the words.

He nipped at her earlobe, sending shivers down her spine. “I do.”

“About?” She sighed, wishing he’d just get out whatever he had to say so they could get on with more interesting activities.

“Your truck.”

*Whoa.* Her whole body stiffened.

“My truck!”

“Now don’t go getting all pissy.” His hands moved to her hips, and he held her in place when she started to step away.

Sam gave up and sagged against his chest. “What’s wrong with my truck?”

“Not a thing. I was just thinking there is going to come a time when it won’t be practical for you to drive it anymore.”

“And what, you want me to sell it?” She blinked back the tears that filled her eyes.

Where the hell did they come from? She obviously wasn’t ready to have this conversation. Sam thought she would have plenty of time to decide, well, more like figure out, what to do about it.

“Hey, none of that, either. I was just thinking maybe we could switch cars.” He eased his tight grip on her hips a little, and he leaned back to look at her.

“You want me to let you drive my truck?” The look of shock on his face was priceless.

“Actually, I was hoping you’d drive my brand new top-of-the-line SUV.” The tremble she heard in his voice combined with the look made her lips twitch.

“It’s a sweet offer, but I don’t think it’s a good idea. I mean, the insurance situation alone would make me nervous.” She could have just told him that no one had ever driven the truck but her.

“If we were married, there wouldn’t be any issues with the insurance.”

“Switch the subject.”

He chuckled at her command and threw out a compromise. “We could always carpool. I’m going to be coming here anyways.”

“I’ll think about it. Anything else you want to talk about?” She pulled his mouth down to hers, cutting off whatever his answer might have been.

Trent’s hands slid from her hips to her ass and squeezed. With a quick bend of his knees, he lifted her feet off the floor. He turned and braced her back to the wall. Sam wrapped her legs around his hips. The barrier of her thin cotton panties and his thick denim jeans wasn’t enough to keep her from feeling the well-defined ridge of his cock behind his zipper. Trent used his body to hold her as his hands cupped her breasts. His thumbs rubbed and flicked her pebble hard nipples, and her hips bucked in response.

His mouth left hers, allowing her to take a much needed breath. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the wall. The breath she drew in turned into a gasp as his lips closed over the nipple he freed. She squirmed between him and the wall, wanting more. The friction she created with their bodies sent hot wet heat surging to those sensitive folds between her thighs. The little prickles that raced along her skin had her ready to beg for more.

Jessie’s laughter was followed by a loud pounding on her door. “Sam, delivery’s here.”

She ignored Trent’s shaking head and yelled back, “Okay, can you get started?”

“Ally already has. I think she has a crush.” Jessie’s laughter made Sam smile.

“Okay, I’ll be there in five minutes.” She heard Jessie whistled as she walked away. The tune faded with each step she took.

“We better hurry up.” Sam moved forward, intending to kiss him, but he pulled away.

“What delivery?”

His eyebrows pulled down as he narrowed his eyes at her, and she knew playtime was over. “Flour and some other kitchen supplies.”

“You’re not unloading it.” This time it was her turn to pull away.

It was a command, and she knew it. The thing was, she never unloaded the truck. Sam had a deal with the drivers. She provided lunch, and they did the heavy work. It was a win-win situation. Her deliveries were never late, and she knew for a fact her delivery route was one of the most desired among the drivers.

Of course, Trent didn’t know any of that. She would have told him if he bothered to ask. Instead, he jumped to the conclusion she would be insane enough to unload a truck. *Please*. Even if she weren’t pregnant, she wouldn’t heft fifty pound bags of flour. Still, to hear him issue the command rubbed her the wrong way.

She may as well let him know right off she wasn’t going to put up with it. “I guess we do have something to talk about.”

“Really?” His sarcastic tone wasn’t lost on her as he reluctantly eased her onto her feet and took a step back when she pushed at his chest.

“Yes. Before we go any further, you need to get rid of the notion you can order me around.”

He didn’t deny it or make any excuses. He just folded his arms over his chest and stared at her. She wasn’t into mind games, so she turned to the closet and pulled out her T-shirt and yanked it over her head.

She grabbed her jeans, turned back to him, and pointed them at him. “I wouldn’t have shown up at your place and started making demands. Insisting you inform me of your every move. Asking you to marry me at every turn.”

His arms fell, and his hand wrapped around the flailing jeans and pulled her close. “No, it’s more your habit to run away.”

“I never had that problem until I met you.” Her anger spiked when his mouth tipped into a smile, which he had the gall to accompany with a wink.

She tugged on the jeans, but he refused to let go. “That should tell you something.”

“It does. It says you’re insufferable. I should have run the second you walked into my kitchen and stole that piece of cake.” She would have kicked him in the shin if he hadn’t yanked the jeans hard enough to pull her against him.

\* \* \* \*

Trent wasn’t willing to let Sam know he was afraid she might actually believe what she was saying. Deep down he knew he had to change her mind, and fast. He grabbed on to the pants she was waving at him and gave them a tug. Caught off guard, she practically fell into his arms. He took advantage of her surprise and covered her mouth with his. Sam stiffened at first, but as his lips played with hers, she started to soften.

She was a contradiction of strength and weakness. And in his mind, it was a perfect combination. To have her stand up to him had the strangest effect. He was used to taking the lead, being the one to issue orders. More importantly, he was used to people following his orders without arguing. Knowing she was going to fight him every time she thought he was trying to control her, which he wasn’t, he was trying to protect her and his child, tempted him to push things.

It made him wonder how he was ever going to put his foot down and not get totally turned on by her response. Right now, things were new enough between them he could hide his reaction pretty well. Sooner or later, she was going to catch on, and then he’d be at her

mercy. He ended the kiss, unable to stop his smile when she let out a little whine.

He started to back away and made it halfway to the door when she said, “Where are you going?”

“Your five minutes are up. Maybe we can finish this,” he looked her up and down, “conversation when I get home tonight.”

Trent didn’t wait for her response. He turned and left the room. Feeling the need for more distance between them, he left the lodge completely. He stood in the parking lot and wondered how the hell he was going to get her to agree to marry him. He had to call his mother, and soon. Telling her Sam was pregnant was going to cause a lot of ripples in their calm little pond, but the aftermath of telling her they weren’t getting married immediately would be comparable to a hurricane that ripped through a small town. Having no idea where he was headed, he climbed into his car and aimed it toward town.



## Chapter Twelve

Sam ducked as a shoe flew out of the closet. The tears she'd been holding at bay started to fall at the sight of all the boxes stacked everywhere. She told herself for the thousandth time that this was a good thing. After all, it wasn't as if Jessie wouldn't be around. She'd see her every day at work. And she and Victor were only going to be living twenty minutes away, ten if she took the ATV trail.

She took a seat on the bed and wiped her cheeks. "Where's your husband?"

Jessie stopped tossing things and sat back on her ankles. "He went to get more boxes. Where did all this shit come from?"

Sam had to laugh. Among all of her sisters, Jessie was the one who never threw anything away. "Gee, I have no idea."

"Oh, shut up. I know you haven't asked, but I'll tell you, anyway. Yes, Trent's off with Victor."

Sam let out a sigh of relief and fell back onto the bed. "I can't take much more of this."

Hearing the pitiful whine in her voice, Jessie got up and came over and joined her on the bed. "Honey, he means well." She patted her knee and chuckled.

Sam knew his protectiveness might seem cute, but it was really a pain. Since their interlude in her office three days ago, he'd been everywhere. It was like he had a sixth sense as to where she was and what she doing. Just earlier today she had a nice roast she was about to pull out of the oven, and he popped up and took the potholders out of her hands and did it himself. Then, just as suddenly as he appeared, he gave her a quick peck of a kiss and disappeared.

Jessie wouldn't put up with behavior like this from Victor for long. Pregnant or not, the Brazens were raised to pull their own weight. She could remember when their mother had been pregnant with Bobbie. Nothing slowed her down. If their father ever attempted to bar her from doing anything, she probably would have clocked him. Since Jessie's temperament was the closest to their mother's, she would lay odds that if Victor acted like his brother, he would end up sporting quite a few bruises.

"Yuck it up. When you get pregnant, I'll be sure to remind you Victor means well while he's following you around. I'm sure you'll be just as understanding when he refuses to let you do stuff and is constantly getting underfoot."

Her laughter stopped, and Jessie got to her feet. "He knows better."

"Does he? It was only a few weeks ago he was dogging your every move." Sam was more than happy to remind her.

"Well, hopefully he's smart enough to learn from his brother's mistakes." Jessie knelt back down in front of the closet. "You know, if you'd agree to marry him, he might back off."

"No way. You think he's acting like this to get me to say yes? He hopes to wear me down?"

Jessie's shoulders rose and fell as she dug through the closet.

Sam thought about it for a few minutes. It couldn't be, because that seemed like something a desperate man would do. A man who was deeply in love. Not a man who was merely doing what he thought was the right thing.

"I don't think so. I mean, he doesn't even really want to marry me. Oh, I know he thinks he does, but that's because of the baby, which is the same reason he's being so anal retentive right now." It was sad, but ultimately it was true.

He said so himself. He wanted to do the right thing for him, his child, and she got the feeling to please his mother, too. She figured he felt it was his duty. Sam knew plenty about doing your duty and what

was best for your family. She also knew under the wrong circumstances, it could turn into regret and animosity. Those were two things she never wanted him to associate with her. They were going to be connected for a long time, so she wanted them to at least be friends.

Jessie turned and gave her a strange look. “Sam, I’ve seen the way you look at him when you think no one’s watching. Can you honestly say you don’t love him?”

“I didn’t say that I don’t, but aren’t you the one who said love isn’t always enough to make things work?” Sam knew it was wrong to throw her words.

“Yeah, but Sam—”

Sam held up her hand, cutting her off before she could tell her she was wrong. “Wouldn’t it be even worse if that love was one-sided?”

“It would if it was one-sided, but Sam, I really think he loves you.” She should have known Jessie wouldn’t give up so easily.

“Jess, half the time I’m around him, I want to throttle him. The other half, it’s all I can do to keep from ripping my clothes off and throwing myself at him.” It was embarrassing to admit she felt so out of control around him.

Jessie lay on the floor and laughed at her confession. “So you’re afraid of what he makes you feel. Do you think it’s going to go away? Sam, you’re going to have his baby. He’s going to be around a lot.”

Sam threw herself back on the mattress, hating that her sister was too perceptive. “I know. What am I going to do?” She grimaced at the pitiful whine she heard in her voice.

“Take some of your own advice. Stop running from what you want. Tell him what’s holding you back.” Jessie was right, as usual, but she missed part of the bigger picture.

Sam shook her head as she explained the flaw in Jessie’s idea. “I’m not going to force him to lie and tell me he loves me.”

“That’s not what I meant. I was thinking more along the lines of you telling him it’s too soon. You guys barely know each other. Let

him go from there. Either he'll admit you're right or realize it's more than duty making him stake his claim." Jessie's smile told her she was confident her plan would work.

Sam hated to be the one to burst her bubble. "I've already told him all that."

"Maybe it was the way you told him. I think he might respond better after a nice romantic dinner. Get some candles, add in deep, sensual music and great food to lull him into thinking it's just a night for you two to reconnect. Then bring up the future. You know, 'where does he see you guys in five years'. That type of stuff. When he seems ready, you tell him you think you guys need more time to get to know each other."

She realized Jessie put a lot of thought into this plan of hers. "Do you really think it'll work?" Sam had her doubts, especially if they were alone.

Every time she was alone with him, she had to work really hard just to keep her wits about her. He was sharp and spotted any opening he could use to persuade her to see things his way. It was the way her body reacted to having him close that scared her. She wasn't foolish enough to think she wouldn't cave. She knew she would, and she'd love every minute of it.

\* \* \* \*

Trent followed Victor around the home supply store. The three-hour ride to get there had been quiet other than the radio. He wasn't surprised when Victor asked him to come along. To tell the truth, he was going to hop in the truck either way. He had to get away from Sam for a little while and regroup.

He followed Victor in the paint aisle and stopped in front of a display of wallpaper borders. There were at least a dozen designs for a baby's room—boy, girl, and they even had some that could work for either sex. Would Sam at least let him help with the baby's room?

What about as *his* child got older? Would she let him teach her to ride a bike? Or teach him to tie his shoes? Without them being married, his say would mean next to nothing.

“Why don’t you grab some samples?” Victor said, jerking him out of his warped thoughts.

“Yeah, that’ll really push her buttons. She already thinks I’m intruding on her life.” But he picked up a couple of samples and stuck them in his pocket anyway.

“She’s dealing with a lot of shit.”

Victor was right, but damn it, all he wanted to do was help her through it. “Well, if she’d agree to marry me, I could help with some of the things she’s worrying about.”

“Dude, it could have something to do with the way you asked.”

He knew Victor was right. He’d totally blown the proposal. Most of his friends had gone the romantic route. Two had even gone all out. One asked with skywriting, the other on the scoreboard at a Boston Red Sox game. He, of course, just blurted it out. Not so much as an “I love you.” It was a wonder she was talking to him at all.

He tried to make it up to her by helping out whenever he could, but she took it the wrong way. She assumed he was being overprotective and arrogant, which also held a little kernel of truth. Now he had another gaffe he needed to make up for. He just wasn’t sure how he was going to do it.

“It’s too late to do it right now.” Wishing he could do it over wasn’t going to dig him out of the deep hole he dug himself into.

Victor turned around so quick Trent jumped out of the way of the shopping cart he was wielding. “You’re joking, right? A nice quiet sunset and boat ride on the lake, followed by a late picnic dinner on the little island. Tiki candles...Maybe if she’s in the mood you could offer her a foot rub. You wait until she’s all relaxed, then you beg. And if that doesn’t work, you let the boat go and hold her hostage until she agrees. You know, she once told me the Brazen women

don't get subtlety, so whatever you do, make it a bold and in-her-face move."

Trent laughed so hard everyone around them turned and looked. "Have you forgotten she has five sisters who would probably come rescue her and leave me there for dead?"

"Don't be such a dork. Trust me, they wouldn't let you keep sneaking into her bed if they didn't want you two to get together."

He stood there digesting that while Victor headed down the aisle.

## Chapter Thirteen

Sam looked around the cabin, making sure everything was in place. The curtains were pulled closed. The fire was lit, as were the candles on the table. She had soft music playing. As for food, she'd gone with his favorite, spaghetti and meatballs with fresh garlic bread. Then they'd share a dessert of strawberry and banana pieces with a chocolate sauce and whipped cream for dipping.

She looked at her watch and shook her head. He was late. Only five minutes, but it was enough to put her on edge. There was a light knock on the back door seconds before it opened, and Bobbie stepped in, quickly closing it behind her. The panic was easy to read on her face even though she quickly tried to hide it.

"What's wrong?" Suddenly, Trent's tardiness didn't seem so important.

"Sorry, I know you have a special evening planned for you and Trent." She looked around the room, then added, "Where is he?"

"Late. Now tell me what's wrong." Sam knew better than to let her switch the focus off herself.

"Um...I sort of pissed Jake off again." Normally, Bobbie would be smiling, so whatever she did, it must be really bad.

"I take it he's here somewhere?"

Bobbie nibbled on her lip and nodded.

"How mad is he?"

"Well, he used the siren to get here." She looked away, a sure sign she felt guilty.

"Did you apologize yet?" Sam wondered how easily this situation could be diffused.

Bobbie's gaze snapped to hers. "No, and I don't plan to, which is part of the reason he's so angry."

"Bobbie, I know Jessie has told you over and over again to stop playing with him. I'm beginning to agree with her. You can't keep doing this. What exactly did you do to him?" Sam dropped into one of the kitchen chairs and motioned for her to sit in the other.

Bobbie slid into the chair and glanced at the door. "You know that new waitress at Dionne's?"

Sam nodded. The flirty blonde had been getting on everyone's nerves.

"Well, she made a comment in front of someone from one of my classes about Jake and how she'd like to see if he was as good as he looked."

Sam grimaced, knowing Bobbie's affection for Jake was more than a crush. He felt something for her, too, even though he wouldn't come right out and say so. It would probably be serious between them if there wasn't such a wide age gap. Everyone knew sooner or later they were going to get together. It was only a matter of time. And if Bobbie kept jerking his chain, it was probably going to be sooner.

"So let me guess. You decided to prove to her Jake was unavailable." Sam knew Bobbie wouldn't have been able to resist.

"Actually, no. I ran into Travis, Jake's new deputy, and he asked me out for coffee. I was so angry I said yes." Bobbie shook her head. "We went to the diner, and Mildred pulled me aside and asked if I was okay. Sam, I swear I told her everything was fine, but she must have called Jake anyway. He came in and basically told Travis to get back to work."

"Okay, so far I'm not seeing a problem or anything that you did wrong." Sam glanced at her watch, wondering if they'd get this resolved before Trent showed up.

"Well, see, that was when Blondie walks in and winks at him, and he smiled and nodded. With me sitting right there. I sort of lost it."



Sam didn't like the sound of that. "What did you do? And to who?" Sam read the look on her face like a book. "How bad did you get him going before you walked out?"

"Well, I've been trying to cut down on the junk food I eat, so I keep a few lollipops in my bag. I pulled one out and popped it into my mouth. Really, it was to keep from saying anything, but when his eyes got wide, I kind of decided it might be fun to play with him a little."

"Oh, Bobbie, you didn't." Sam couldn't help but smile at the picture in her mind.

"I may have swirled it around and slid it in and out of my mouth a few times. It wasn't until I asked him if he wanted some that things got out of control. He grabbed my wrist and said it was time to go." She took a deep breath, and Sam had a sneaking suspicion things got worse.

"You know you deserved it. Right?" Bobbie nodded, and sensing there wasn't enough time for a proper reprimand, Sam moved on. "So then what happened?"

"He pulled me out of the booth and held me in front of him as we walked to the door. I was more than ready to go, but one of the waitresses walked in front of us, and I had to stop. He walked into me, and I may have wiggled my hips a little. He grabbed my hand and dragged me out of there. He walked me to my car and disappeared. It wasn't until later at school when someone asked me how long we've been seeing each other that I thought of how it might look to anyone watching." She sounded worried, and Sam knew that, for all Bobbie's teasing, she'd never want to put Jake in a bad position.

"Sweetie." Sam laid her hand on Bobbie's. There were a few things she seemed to be missing from this picture. "It can't be that bad. Trust me. If it had really gotten out, Jessie would have heard."

Bobbie crossed her arms on the table and dropped her head onto them. The door eased open, and Sam expected to see Trent, but Jake stepped in with his finger pressed to his lips. Shit, this wasn't going to end quietly.

“Who do you think I’m hiding from? He came in one door, and I ran out the other. No doubt by now he’s told her the whole story,” she mumbled into her arms.

“No, he hasn’t.” At the sound of Jake’s voice, Bobbie sprang to her feet. “What happened is between you and me.”

“We can’t do this here. Sam’s waiting for Trent, and I’ve already taken up enough of her time.” Bobbie started backing toward the front door of the cabin.

Jake was quick. He closed the small distance between them and took her hand. Bobbie froze, looking up into his eyes. They obviously needed some time to work this out. She could wait outside for Trent and give them some privacy.

Jake turned to her and said, “Actually, Trent asked me to send you out back. He’s waiting for you on the dock.”

“On the dock?” she echoed, and Jake nodded, but his eyes stayed locked on Bobbie’s.

Since neither of them was paying any attention to her, Sam decided to go see what Trent was up to. She found him standing on the dock. His back was to her as he stood there staring out at the lake. Arms hung down by his sides, he looked relaxed and damned sexy.

His T-shirt stretched across his broad shoulders, but it was looser where it ended right above his ass. His ass that was covered in worn-out denim jeans. She wished she had her camera on her so she could take a picture or two. She stepped onto the dock, and it swayed to disperse the water under it from her weight.

Trent turned his head and looked over his shoulder at her. As a slow smile curved his lips, her stomach fluttered. His brown hair was a little windblown, which just added to his sexy appeal, and looked lighter in the sun. He turned to her, and she couldn’t stop herself from taking a quick glance down at his crotch to see if the jeans were as worn in the front as they were in the back. She looked up, hoping he hadn’t noticed, but his wink let her know he had.

“I was waiting inside for you.” She felt dumb making such an obvious statement, but she couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“I know. When I saw Bobbie rush in, I thought it might be a good idea to give you two a few minutes alone.” He shrugged, probably trying to come off like he wasn’t Mr. Sensitive.

She’d never met anyone like him before. He was bold and controlling one minute, and then he was understanding and compassionate the next. It should have made her decision about marrying him easier, but it didn’t. She wanted to marry him and spend years loving him and their child. She just didn’t see that happening for them. At least not with the way things stood right now.

He jerked his head toward the cabin. “I take it she and Jake are going to be in there for a while.”

“Probably. I guess we could go up to the lodge and I could whip us up something for dinner.” She wasn’t happy with the thought of Bobbie and Jake enjoying the special meal she planned for her and Trent.

“Actually, this works in my favor because I have plans for us tonight.” He waved his hand toward one of the canoes.

“Where are we supposed to go?” It didn’t really matter. She was only asking so she wouldn’t seem too quick to agree.

“I thought we’d head over to the island for a little one-on-one time.” He held out his hand, and Sam laid hers in it before he even finished explaining.

He helped her into the boat, and once she was sitting, he climbed in. Neither of them spoke as he rowed them across the lake. Trent maneuvered the canoe into place beside the dock. Her grandfather put it out there years ago so their visitors could spend the night camping out on the island if they wanted to.

She let him help her out of the boat and didn’t bother to let his hand go as they made their way to the shore. The island was small enough they could probably cross it in fifteen minutes. She and Jessie

were able to walk all the way around in about an hour or so. Still, it was a good place to fish and spend a day away from everybody.

“So, are you hungry?” Trent asked, pulling her out of her reverie.

She stopped walking and looked up at him. “You want to go back already?”

“No. I had something else in mind.” He scooped her into his arms and carried her along the shore and around the bend.

Sam squealed and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Trent, what the hell are you doing?”

“You’ll see.” He jostled her a bit as he stepped over a log.

Sam closed her eyes and prayed he didn’t drop her. A slight breeze blew in off the water and swirled his citrus cologne around her. She inhaled deeper and pressed herself closer to his chest. He stopped walking, and she thought for a minute it was because of the way her breasts were crushed against his chest. Then she heard the music.

Sam opened her eyes and then blinked them a few times. A few feet away was a screen house with two lanterns lighting it up. Inside there was a radio, sleeping bags spread on the floor, pillows, an open cooler filled with ice and sodas, and another closed cooler. Outside the screen house was a campfire just waiting to be lit and two lounge chairs. It had to have taken him at least three trips to get all this stuff over there.

“Holy shit.” When and how were the two big questions floating through her mind.

Trent lowered her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her waist, then softly laid his palms over her belly. “I take it you approve.”

Unable to put her feelings into words, she nodded. With her back pressed to his chest, she could feel every breath he took. He nuzzled her neck, and Sam leaned back into his warmth.

“Why don’t you sit down while I get this going?” He let her go and squatted down in front of the stack of logs.

As she sat down and watched him fiddle with some kindling sticks, Sam wondered how long he'd been planning this. Had he planned on luring her out here after they'd finished eating? Then again, he didn't know about the special meal she planned. So maybe they were just thinking along the same lines.

Sam glanced at the sleeping bags and pillows. She quickly came to the conclusion his thoughts were probably more on the primal side. And now, thanks to her raging hormones and watching him pat his back pockets, hers were, too. Would it be too tacky to offer to help him check the front ones?

He looked at her over his shoulder, and she winked at him. There was no reason to pretend she wasn't blatantly staring at his ass. He stood and looked down at her, the flames behind him licking at the base of the logs. Sam waited for him to say something, but he seemed content to just stand there and stare at her. Two could play that game. She gave him a once-over, lingering on the bulge behind his zipper, before drifting up to his broad chest. Just looking at him, she could remember the feel of those hard muscles under her hands. She squirmed as a rush of hot wetness soaked her panties.

"Aren't you going to sit down?" She motioned to the other chair.

He smiled and straddled the bottom of her chair. Trent lifted her feet into his lap and rubbed his hands up and down her calves. His thumbs and fingers massaged her tight muscles as they relaxed. Sam let her head drop back against the cushion and moaned appreciatively. Trent chuckled, and his ministrations got harder.

"Are you hungry?"

She shook her head, knowing he was talking about food, which was the last thing on her mind.

"How about a drink?" His voice was rough, like he was holding back.

"I'm good." She waited for him to say whatever it was he had on his mind.

“So want to tell me what was going on back there?” He obviously wasn’t ready to spill his guts yet.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. Bobbie was just pushing Jake’s buttons again.” She scooted down, letting his hands reach up to her knees.

“Is pushing buttons something all you Brazen women excel at?”

Sam let out a laugh as she nodded her head. He probably already knew the answer by now, but if not, she may as well make sure he did. She closed her eyes and let all her muscles go lax.

“So is it a natural talent, or do you guys work at it?” His questions could have easily irritated her, but there was a playful tone in his voice, so she let him off the hook.

“My mother once said we only do it to people we care about.” With her eyes closed, she couldn’t see his reaction, but from the momentary stalling of his hands, she was pretty sure he hadn’t been expecting her answer.

“So I’m in good company?” Sam thought she might have picked up a tremble in his voice.

“You are,” she admitted, leaving the ball totally in his court for now.

## Chapter Fourteen

Trent had no idea what to say. He could be reading more into what she said than she meant. She could love a friend, or family. Was she considering him one of those, or did she mean for him to be more? If so, then why wouldn't she marry him?

While searching for clues to his answers, he plied her muscles. Soon, before he could dig any deeper, Sam let out a delicate snore. Not a promising way to start the evening. He eased out from under her feet and laid them gently on the cushion. Trent got to his feet and walked over to the screen house. He watched Sam to see if the rasping of the zipper woke her. She didn't so much as stir.

According to the pregnancy book, she needed her sleep. He moved the coolers over to the side and pulled the feather mattress out from under the stack of pillows. Trent splayed it across the floor, then covered it with the sleeping bags. After arranging the pillows on top, he went back outside to check on Sam. He heard her let out a delicate snore and smiled. Quietly, he moved his lounge chair next to hers. He sat down and stared out at the darkness. Sitting there listening to the night, he closed his eyes and thought of how he was going to ask her what he needed to know. More importantly, how was he going to tell her what he thought she needed to hear?

\* \* \* \*

At first Sam wasn't sure what woke her up. She quickly realized it was Trent's snoring, which sounded like a buzz saw. She looked over at him sleeping soundly on the lounge chair next to hers.

*The poor guy.*

She'd gone and spoiled whatever his big plans had been for the night. Funny thing was, she hadn't even felt tired. She shivered as the cool night air settled on her skin. The fire was dying down, but the soft music was still playing. She glanced over at the tent and wasn't all that surprised to see he had everything set up.

Sam smiled as she got to her feet. She leaned down over him and pressed her lips to his. His eyes fluttered open as she backed away. He reached for her, but she grabbed his hands and tugged him up. Once on his feet, he wrapped her in his arms and lowered his mouth to hers. Sam fell headlong into the kiss. Her lips parted under his, and their tongues tangled in a teasing dance. Breathless, she ended the kiss and eased out of his embrace.

The night was slipping through their fingers, and she had to go home soon. She wasn't waiting anymore. She took his hand and led him to the screen house. Once they were about a foot away, she dropped his hand and grabbed the hem of her shirt and yanked it over her head. So it wasn't the subtlest hint, but from the way his eyes lit up, he got it.

She smiled, bending down to get the zipper. Trent moved right up behind her, bringing him flush with her ass. She felt his erection and wiggled her hips. One of his hands slowly slid up her back as she straightened. The other held her hips in place. Sam pushed the flap aside, and as one they moved into the tent. Trent followed, pausing to redo the zipper. While his back was turned, she quickly undid her jeans and let them fall to the floor.

Standing there in her simple white cotton and lace bra and panty set, Sam held her breath waiting for him to turn back to her. She felt kind of wild around him, which she knew couldn't be a good thing. No other man ever made her want to strip naked and ravage him.

*Then why aren't I jumping at the chance to marry him?*

She'd been asking herself that since he asked and still had no answer that made any sense. The way his jaw dropped when he



looked at her almost wiped the question out of her mind. It definitely pushed it way into the back, where it wasn't likely to resurface for a while.

"This isn't what I had in mind for tonight." His voice was all husky, and her body trembled in response.

Sam closed the small distance between them and laid her hands on his chest. "I'm sure your plans didn't involve me falling asleep either, but it happened. Besides, you really don't want to deny me, do you?"

"No, but I brought a picnic dinner, and I was hoping we could talk." Though his words made it sound like he wasn't going to let her have her way with him, his hands were helping her to strip off his shirt.

Sam ran her finger across his pecs, loving the way his muscles flexed under her touch. "We can eat and talk later. Right now, I'd like to have dessert."

Sam pressed her lips to his chest. Her hands and mouth caressed and teased as she lowered herself to her knees. Trent groaned, but he didn't try to stop her. Not even when she tugged on the waistband of his jeans, urging him to help her strip them off. Trent's hands covered hers, and together they managed to get the button and zipper undone. His jeans hung loose on his hips. She reached for his briefs, but he stepped back and smiled down at her.

"Lay down." Recognizing the desire coating his voice, she did as he said, only she wanted to push him a little closer to the edge of reason.

Sam sat down and stretched her legs out in front of her. She reached behind her, arching her back, and used her arms to scoot herself backwards. His eyes got wider, if it was possible, and she heard the deep breath he sucked in. Emboldened by his response, she stretched her arms up above her head and slowly rubbed her legs together. He dropped to his knees next to her feet and grabbed her ankles. She let out low moan as he leaned forward, sliding his hands

up her legs, and hooked his fingers in the sides of her panties. He slowly slid them down her legs and tossed them aside.

He lifted one of her legs and kissed his way from her ankle to her knee. She squirmed, fisting her hands in the slippery nylon fabric of the sleeping bag. He stopped his teasing kisses and bit the inside of her thigh. Not hard enough to hurt or leave a mark, but firm enough to get her attention. She squealed, and they both laughed.

She tried to roll away, but he leaned his big body over hers and pressed a gentle kiss to her belly. "Not so fast."

"You're not playing fair." It was true, but after the way she ravaged him, more than once, their first time together, she figured it was his turn to have complete control.

"Honey, haven't you ever heard all is fair in love and war?" He was right, and she'd have to make sure he remembered that later on.

He licked his way up to her bra and then buried his head in between her breasts. Nibbles, licks, and lots of hot, wet kisses from his talented mouth whipped her into a frenzy. She was so far gone she didn't even feel him strip off her bra. His hands molded around her breasts, gently squeezing them together. She gasped in pleasure when his mouth closed over one of her hardened nipples. The hot, wet suction had her writhing beneath him.

Knowing they were totally alone, she didn't hold back the whimpers and moans. Surprisingly, they seemed to turn him on even more. She slid her hands down to his hips and started shoving his pants and briefs down. He got the hint and rolled off her, kicking them the rest of the way off. She took advantage of his position and straddled his hips. Not wasting any more time, he lined up his cock with her slit. A few quick rocks of her hips and he was coated with her wetness. He slid inside her easily, stretching her muscles in a delicious way.

She dug her fingers into his chest as she alternated between an up-and-down motion and rocking her pelvis against his. His groans matched hers, telling her he was enjoying it, too. It wasn't long before

he managed to roll them over, pinning her beneath him. Trent's hips rose and fell in long, hard strokes. Each one created more and more friction. His loud grunts were perfectly timed with her moans.

"Oh, Trent." She dropped her knees farther apart, letting him settle deeper in the cradle of her thighs.

He took over from there. Kneeling between her legs, he grabbed her hips and pulled her ass off the ground. Each time he drew back, he lowered her a little. Then when he lunged forward, he'd pull her to him. She grasped on to his arms her nails digging in.

"Oh my. Trent, it's so good."

"Fucking unbelievable." His hands slid to her ass, then squeezed.

"Please." She'd never begged for an orgasm before.

"Please what? Tell me what you want, baby."

She wasn't really sure what she wanted right that second, but she was sure it was something only he could give her.

"Come on, Sam, tell me what you need."

"Deeper. I want you deeper." More than willing to oblige, his strokes got them so close she would have heard their flesh slapping together if her moans hadn't filled the air.

Trent leaned down, his body covering hers. With her breasts pressed into his chest and his hips cradled in hers, she should have felt smothered, but she felt loved. Sam managed to wrap her heels around his powerful thighs and lift herself enough to make him slide harder against her. He groaned, so she did it again and again. Her orgasm was so sudden and potent her whole body shook from the force. It only took Trent a few seconds to find his own satisfaction. After shouting her name, he collapsed on top of her, but was quick to roll them both onto their sides.

She closed her eyes knowing she'd need just a few minutes before her brain would think clearly.

\* \* \* \*

The sun woke her up, but it was finding Trent's arms wrapped around her and the hard ground beneath her that was as jarring to her system as a dozen cups of coffee. *Oh, shit!* They wore each other out so much they fell asleep. She looked at the sun, surprised to find it was well overhead instead of just rising like she'd originally thought. Her sisters must be freaking out by now.

She crawled out of the sleeping bag and gathered what she could find of her clothes. She had her shirt, undies, and jeans. She yanked her cell phone from the back pocket of the jeans. It was dead. She started to get dressed, but Trent had other plans. He was so quick she found herself flat on her back with him on top of her.

"I thought we decided you were going to stop running out on me," he said through his teeth.

"I wasn't," she said, shaking her head.

He tipped his head, his lips curving into a nasty smirk. "Uh-huh."

"Really, I wasn't. Oh, come on. Do you really think I would leave you out here without a way back? I was trying to call my sisters and find out who is handling my kitchen." She held up the dead phone to prove her point.

It was the truth, but she couldn't tell whether he believed her or not. Not that it mattered. There were more important things for them to deal with right now. They needed to get home. She had to shower, check in, and get to work.

"I should have guessed." He shook his head, and his smirk slowly turned into a smile.

"What? My sisters will be worried." *Worried?* She'd be surprised if they didn't already have Jake out searching for her.

A little inkling in the back of her mind told her he was way too calm about the whole situation.

"Listen, I told Victor if we weren't home by midnight, we wouldn't be."

“You did what? I can’t believe...oh, never mind. We have to get going.” She pushed at his chest but didn’t get the result she wanted fast enough, so she pinched him, hard.

He howled, rolling off her as he rubbed the two big red spots above his nipples. “That was a girly thing to do.”

She wanted to tell him it was either that or a knee to the groin. The fact that he could bring out her anger as easily as he did her desire scared her a little. Until this point in her life, her sisters had been the only ones who were able to make her this mad. She was smart enough not let him see it, though. There was a chance he’d be like her sisters and enjoy getting a rise out of her since it didn’t happen often. Seething, she picked up her clothes and stormed out of the screen house.

As she walked away, she shouted, “You better be in the boat in less than five minutes, or I’m leaving your ass here.”

Yanking her shirt over her head as she walked was easy. She had to do some hopping around to get her underwear on. She stopped walking and huffed out a few breaths trying to calm down. The colorful words poured out as she tugged on her jeans. It was only then she realized she hadn’t grabbed her shoes.

“Screw it! I have more at home.” She marched ahead, trying to ignore the loud noises coming from behind her.

She heard him call her name but was too angry to answer. He planned on them staying out all night knowing she had to be at work this morning. Oh, but he took care of that, too. There was no doubt in her mind that it had fallen to one of her sisters to cover for her. It wasn’t fair for them to have to give up their time to handle the kitchen. *Her kitchen!*

“Sam!” His voice was louder, which could only mean he was getting closer.

She hoped he fell on his face and got a mouthful of sand. Keeping her gaze straight ahead, she kept walking. So far he’d done everything wrong. Okay, she hadn’t exactly gotten it right either, but, hell, at

least she didn't keep making things worse. From his uninspired proposal, to constantly getting underfoot while she was working, and now this, he was pushing all the wrong buttons. If he actually thought she'd let him get away with pulling a stunt like this, he was crazy.

It was obvious she was going to have to teach him a few lessons on how to deal with a woman. Or in this case, women, because she was going ask her sisters for their help giving him some much needed instruction. She was already unwinding the ropes holding the boat when he charged onto the dock.

He threw her shoes into the boat and held out his hand. "I'll do it."

She dropped the rope at his feet and climbed in. He sighed and picked up the rope. Living in the same house, she wasn't going to be able to avoid him, but she didn't have to talk to him, either. She knew it was childish to give him the silent treatment, but until she got a handle on her anger, she figured it was best if she just kept her mouth shut.

\* \* \* \*

Trent knew two things. The first was her anger gave her skin a beautiful glow. The second was he had done something wrong. *Again*. It seemed like all he did with her was make mistakes. She threw him off his game. How could two people so full of desire and totally compatible in bed mess things up so badly? Maybe it was because they had so much in common that they pushed each other's hot buttons so easily?

He climbed in, laying the bundle of rope by his foot, and picked up the oars. About halfway across the lake, he pulled the oars in and laid them on his lap. Now that he was sure she couldn't get away, he was going to get some answers.

"Are you going to tell me why you're so pissed off?"

Her head snapped up, and her eyes locked on his. She looked like she was going to say something, then shook her head and turned around on her seat so she was facing away from him.

“I’m not moving this boat until you talk to me.”

They floated around for a few minutes before she turned back to him. He expected her to say something, but she reached out and attempted to grab the oars. He moved them behind him. Knowing she’d have to climb over him to get them made him smile.

Sam’s eyebrows raised, and her mouth tipped up on one side. It only took him a second to realize he misjudged his control of the situation. She rose to her feet, but instead of attempting to take the oars, she dove over the side of the boat and disappeared into the deep, dark water.

He was debating going in after her when she emerged about twenty feet away. Without so much as a cursory glance in his direction, she swam farther away. Chasing after her would have made him feel better, but he decided it was best to let her have this small victory. Trent sat back down, taking a few minutes to admire her long, even strokes before setting off for the shore himself.

\* \* \* \*

Jake and Victor were standing in the lodge parking lot with one of the town’s inspectors when a dripping wet Sam stomped past and in the back door. Victor froze with his hand still hovering over the plans he was explaining so they could get the final permits. Jake had only been asked to come along and give his opinion on whether or not any part of the project was going to create any public safety issues. Seeing Sam, he was glad he was there.

She didn’t look hurt or anything, but there was something going on around here, and he didn’t like the vibe he was picking up. He followed Victor’s gaze to the woods, wondering what he was looking for. It didn’t take long, maybe a minute or two, for Trent to come out

of the woods. He scowled at the building for a minute, then walked over, climbed into his SUV, and drove away.

“Well, that was interesting,” the inspector said, and both he and Victor nodded in agreement.



## Chapter Fifteen

Sam hadn't seen Trent at all in the past three days. He stayed up at Victor and Jessie's the first night claiming he had some painting and stuff to do. She knew he was lying. Sure, there was some touching up that needed to get done before they moved in this weekend, but he didn't have to sleep there and watch the paint dry. Still, she decided if he needed some space she'd give it to him. The second and third nights, she heard him come in late and fumble around downstairs. He was gone each morning before she got up.

She tried to tell herself it was a good thing he decided to distance himself now before they got too close. If he was trying to punish her, it wasn't going to work. Sure, she missed having him in her bed and seeing him across the table in the morning. She was even starting to miss his annoying habit of popping up whenever he felt like it.

With the remodel about to get underway, they weren't going to be able to avoid each other much longer. Sam didn't want their private issues to create any problems for her sisters. If he wanted to end things between them, then they had a few decisions to make. She knew the only way that was going to happen was if they sat down and talked. So she got up an hour early and tiptoed down the stairs and into the living room.

Lying on his back, Trent covered the couch from end to end. His head rested on a pillow balanced on one arm, and his feet were propped up on the other. There was a sheet covering from just below his belly button to the top of his thighs. The rest of him was gloriously naked. She stood there staring at him, trying to ignore the fluttering of butterflies in her stomach. Suddenly it hit her—she should have

changed out of the tank top and boyshort panties she normally slept in before coming down.

She would've felt a little more in control if at least one of them was dressed. Still, she was not going to let her nerves stop her from dealing with their future. She walked over and grabbed his toes and gave his foot a shake. He let out a groan and pulled away. She hadn't really expected him to jump right up, but it would have been nice.

She grabbed the other one and did it again, adding a whispered "Wake up."

He groaned as he shifted into a sitting position. She swallowed hard as he stretched his arms out to the sides, knowing how those muscles would feel flexing under her touch. Okay, so it was possible she missed him more than she thought. He dropped back against the couch and looked up at her.

"We need to talk."

He nodded but stayed where he was—smack-dab in the middle of the couch.

Knowing if she sat on either side of him it would be too close, she sat on the coffee table in front of him. "Why are you avoiding me?"

"I haven't been avoiding you." She opened her mouth to debate that, but he held up his hand. "Victor wanted to make some surprise changes at the cabin for your sister before they move in today. Since that book said you need to get plenty of sleep and I was getting in so late and starting so early, I thought it would be better if I stayed down here."

"So the reason you haven't stopped by for lunch and haven't been home for dinner was because you've been working up there for the past three days?"

*Where the hell did that pitiful, needy sounding voice come from?*

He surprised her by reaching over and taking her hand in his. "That and I was trying to give you some space. Why, did you miss me?"

She nodded without any hesitation, even though she promised herself she wasn't going to admit it. She was weak when it came to him. That was something else she'd have to work on if she was going to have a shot at a real relationship with him. He smiled and tugged her into his lap. Sam wrapped her arms around his neck as his went around her waist. He buried his face in her neck, inhaling deeply.

"I missed you, too," he whispered. His breath, warm and moist against her cheek, made her shiver. "Three days is way too long."

"Too long for what?" she asked, snuggling into his embrace, enjoying his warmth.

He reached up and turned her face toward his. "To go without doing this."

His lips settled over hers in a rough, demanding kiss. He was right. It had been way too long. Sam could feel the hard bulge against her hip, but it wasn't enough. She needed, wanted more. Without breaking their lip-lock, she managed to turn so she faced him and straddled his hips. The second his cock pressed at that delicate spot between her thighs, they both moaned.

His hands grasped her hips as she rolled them, trying to get closer. Her panties and his boxers were only separated by the thin cotton sheet. It was enough of a barrier to keep things from going too far, but not to keep Sam from feeling the solid ridge of Trent's erection as she tipped her hips forward. His hand slid up her back and tangled in her hair. He tugged, pulling his mouth off hers and kissing his way down her neck to the tops of her breasts exposed by her tiny T-shirt. She dragged in a much needed breath, which happened to lift her breasts a little higher toward his exploring mouth.

He groaned, his hands sliding up her sides, holding her still as he dipped his tongue into her cleavage. Sam couldn't hold back the shudder that overtook her. Her heart and mind might be at war with each other when it came to her desire for him, but her body had no problem choosing which side it was on. She slid her hands from his shoulders to his waist. Of course, she couldn't help herself from

flicking his nipples with her fingernails as she passed. Needing to get closer, she used one hand pressing against his firm stomach to brace herself. She wrapped the other in the sheet and lifted her hips, ready to yank it out of their way.

“Wait.” He slid her back farther onto his knees.

Her hand still holding the sheet, she took it with her. Both of them looked down to where his cock escaped through the slit in his boxers. She couldn’t stop herself from letting her hand drift down to the stiff pink flesh bobbing for her attention. From the look and feel of him, she didn’t really think he wanted her to wait. To her it looked like he was more than ready to move things along.

“Sssam...” Her name came out on a hiss that turned into a guttural moan. “Your sisters are right above us.”

She hoped that was the only issue he had with doing it right here and right now, because she was pretty much past the point where that would be stopping them. God, she was close to begging. She never begged, and she had no idea what to say. All she knew was he couldn’t stop now. The slightest touch and she was going to shatter into a thousand pieces.

“I think I can be quiet. Can you?” It was a challenge in more ways than she could think, but she hoped he’d take her up on it.

“Fuck no, but I’m willing to try.” Before she had time to reply, the sheet was ripped out of her hand, and he was sliding her forward.

She felt a tug and heard a rip followed by his muffled, “I’ll buy you more.”

Her laughter was cut off when he yanked her mouth down to his and slid his cock deep inside her. She would have sworn she felt her body pulse around him. He held perfectly still, letting her squirm around, finding that little spot that so needed his attention. It didn’t take long before she gave up and tore her mouth from his.

“What’s wrong, baby?” The tightness in his tone told her he knew just what the problem was.

Sam had never been one for games in or out of bed, but if Trent wanted to play, she was willing to give it her all. She looked down at his face and rolled her hips forward, then pulled them back. A muscle in his jaw twitched, but it was the sweat beading on his forehead that had her smiling. Perversely, she just had to take their little power struggle further. She leaned back, which lifted her hips, making him slide out a few inches, and tugged her shirt over her head and tossed it away.

His growled filled the air as he grasped her shoulder, pulling her down onto him roughly. “You can never do anything easy, can you?”

“Sorry.” It was a lie, and she was sure they both knew it.

With an impressive lift and turn, Sam found herself flat on her back with him hovering over her. “Liar. Someday you are going to have to face the fact you love me.”

She gasped, more from his words than the way he cupped her breast and licked her nipple, or the way his slowly slid himself back inside her. His soft, gentle strokes never reaching all the way inside, but never coming all the way out either drove her crazy. Wanting more, she waited for him to lower himself and lifted her hips to meet him, not stopping until he couldn’t go any farther. His head dropped to her shoulder, and he let out a moan that vibrated through her. That was all it took to drive her over the edge she’d been on since she saw him lying there.

She turned her head and whispered into his ear, “I want and need you to make love to me like you did that first night.”

“How was that?” He turned his face toward hers, and she knew there’d be no lying or game playing on her part anymore.

“Like you...” *Say it, you big chicken.* “Need me as badly as you do your next breath.”

“Worse.” He proved it by ramming his hips against her as he drove into her.

“Oh, God.” She heard the words fill the air and knew anybody awake upstairs would have, too.

Biting her lip to stay quiet, she tried to hold on to his back and pull him tighter. Her hands couldn't seem to stay in one place for too long. She had no idea what came over her, but she dug her nails into his ass and held on tight. His hand grabbed on to her thigh and lifted her leg higher, which let him slide deeper inside her. The suction of his mouth on her neck got harder, almost to the point of pain.

He kept her balanced on the edge of desire. Smack-dab between hunger and satisfaction, just waiting to take a tumble in either direction. She knew from the strength of his thrusts and his loud, deep groans he was lost as she was. They needed something to push them over the edge. She managed to turn her head close to his ear and found the courage to taunt him with whispers of all the things she wanted him to do to her.

"Damn it!" he ground out through gritted teeth as he slammed into her.

Sam arched her back and let out a loud "*Yes!*" before his mouth closed over hers, silencing her.

She felt his body go rigid against hers as he joined her in her fall over the precipice. He groaned into her mouth, holding her tight in his embrace as if he was afraid she was going to disappear. Given her past reactions to his staggering lovemaking abilities, she guessed he had a good reason for that particular fear. He rolled to his side, pulling her along with him, stuffing her safely between his chest and the couch. She closed her eyes and rested her head on the pillow his arm made. His heavy breathing gave her a shocking satisfaction at having worn him out. Once she caught her breath, she'd make sure they'd finish the conversation they barely got started, but for now she was going to relax and enjoy the afterglow of his attentions.

\* \* \* \*

Trent couldn't believe what he'd just done.

*No, I'm not the only one who's going to taking the blame this time.*

Sam wanted it, too, and proved it by taunting him with those nasty little suggestions she whispered in his ear. Still, he should have been more in command of himself. Lust was a powerful emotion, one he was going to have to keep under lock and key until Sam agreed to marry him. Even then he was going to have to take it easy with her soft, lush body, no matter how she teased him.

He felt his cock stir and angled his hips away from her, hoping she wouldn't notice and think he was insatiable. Never since he'd realized girls weren't icky and actually smelled good had he had such a strong urge to touch, learn, and tease. Except for her tendency to run after intimacy, which he'd made sure wouldn't happen this time by sandwiching her between him and the cushions, Sam was amazing.

He looked down to tell her he loved her, but she was sleeping. Trent wouldn't have known if it wasn't for the very light snore that almost sounded like a sigh. Uttering those three simple words could wait until morning, but Trent couldn't help but look at her.

Her soft blonde hair tossed wildly about gave her a definite rumpled, sexy look. Her full breasts pressed against his chest, and just looking at them made his erection throb to attention. The way her naked body intertwined with his enhanced the difference in her creamy white skin to his worker's tan.

He heard noises from above them and stretched his arm backward to grab the sheet from where it landed on the coffee table. The last thing either of them needed was for her sisters to walk in and find her naked with him like this.

It would have been even worse for them have come down during, he thought, pulling the sheet around them.

Just as he finished, a very familiar sound of a clearing throat came from the stairs. Taking a deep breath, he looked over to find his brother and his wife standing there smiling at him.

“Jessie thought she heard a noise, so she thought I should check it out.” It was one of the flimsiest excuses he ever heard, but he was too wiped out, physically and emotionally, to deal with either of them right now.

“Everything’s fine. Go back to bed.” He waved his arm, shoosing them away.

“All right, we’ll go, but try to get a little sleep. We do have work to do tomorrow.” Victor was enjoying his discomfort now, but Trent knew sooner or later the tables would turn and it would be him teasing Victor.

Jessie was mellower in giving him her assessment of the situation. She turned Victor and gave him a shove up the stairs but turned back and, with a huge smile, held up her thumbs. Trent instantly had an image of the Fonz from that old TV show *Happy Days*, except it was Jessie’s face emitting the “Aaaay”. He couldn’t help but laugh as she scampered up the stairs after his brother. This family was too much. Yet he really couldn’t wait to officially become a member for life. Settling back down, he closed his eyes and let himself enjoy holding Sam and his unborn child in his arms.



## Chapter Sixteen

Sam was standing by the counter peeling apples when Jessie and Frankie walked into the kitchen wearing huge smiles. “What?”

Frankie looked around the room, even under the table, before saying, “Where is Mr. Wonderful?”

She knew she was blushing, but she couldn’t help it. Sam would have thought being found wrapped in his arms after their interlude the other morning was embarrassing enough, but since then they hadn’t been able to keep their hands off each other. Of course, that meant they opened themselves up to being caught in a lot of embarrassing situations over the past week and a half. All of which her sisters enjoyed immensely.

“He’ll be here any minute,” she said, realizing she was just making it worse by not answering right away.

“Are you making another pie?” Jessie helped herself to a few slices of apple.

“No, a cobbler, and I’m going to whip up some apple fritters tomorrow for breakfast.” She kept peeling as she watched them walk over and wash their hands.

Soon the three of them were working side-by-side peeling, slicing, and dicing apples from the huge basket on the table. Sam knew the easy silence wasn’t going to last long. She was pretty confident they’d come in here with a purpose in mind. Now that they knew Trent was coming soon, they’d want to get to it before he showed up.

She didn’t really have to guess what they wanted to talk about. All of them must be wondering where things between her and Trent stood. Honestly, she wondered it herself a time or two, but she was

happy with the way things were and didn't want them to change. He was no longer asking her to marry him thirty times a day. His brother asked if Trent called their mother yet, but Jessie dragged him out of the room, saving him from having to answer. Maybe if she was lucky, Trent would show up early and delay the inquisition she knew was coming.

"Jake was here a while ago," Frankie said. As a conversation starter, Sam thought it was pretty safe.

"What did he want?" She passed the peeled apple to Jessie and grabbed another from the basket.

"He wants us to talk Bobbie into getting a new car." She caught Jessie looking at her with a funny expression.

There was some kind of message for her intertwined in this banter. She just had to find it before they came right out and said it. All of her sisters had their own way of dealing with things, and these two were at different ends of the spectrum. Frankie wasn't the type for beating around the bush, so this had to be killing her. Then again, she wasn't one for getting involved in someone else's business without a good reason. Jessie, however, liked sticking her nose in where it didn't belong. She saw it as her duty since she was the oldest. But normally she eased into things, hoping to catch people off guard. Sam was somewhere in the middle, preferring to slip her questions or comments in whenever who she was talking to left an opening. Right now she was too nervous about taking Trent to the doctor's with her that she couldn't see the trap they were laying for her.

Sam knew how attached Bobbie was to that beater of a car, but she also agreed with Jake that she need something more dependable. "He's right. That thing should have been sent to the junkyard years ago."

Jessie smiled and nodded, but Frankie was obviously done waiting. "We were thinking you could let her use your truck for a little while."

Her peeler fell to the table with the apple, which rolled onto the floor with a thud. Much the same way her heart and stomach fell. Should she have seen this? She had no problem letting her sisters borrow her truck when they needed it, but that wasn't what they were suggesting. They wanted her to basically give it away. Had they both lost their minds?

Jessie slugged Frankie in the shoulder hard enough to make her wince before turning to her. "Sam, it just isn't practical for you to keep driving it in your condition."

Her condition. The baby. Right, she already knew her truck was going to become an issue, but she had plenty of time to decide what she was going to do. It would be at least a few more months before she'd have trouble getting in and out. But even then she wasn't going to get rid of her truck. Before she had a chance to wrap her tongue around a reply, the door leading to the dining room swung open.

The three of them turned as Trent and Victor came into the kitchen. Their deep laughter died when Trent's eyes met hers. He looked from her to her sisters and must have sensed something was wrong because he was instantly by her side. His arm went around her shoulder, pulling her close. She should have thought to hide her reaction, but instead she leaned into him. Trent didn't seem to notice the look that passed between her sisters and his brother.

He leaned down and pressed a quick kiss to her lips. "Are you ready to get going?"

"I just need to put these in the fridge and wash up." She moved over to the table and added the last of the apple slices to the bowl.

Sam put the cover on, making sure it was fastened tightly, before giving it a good shake. She made sure the little bit of orange juice she added to keep the apples from turning brown coated all the fruit and stuck it in the refrigerator. While she was doing that, her sisters cleaned off the table. They all met at the sink to wash their hands.

“We’re sorry,” Jessie whispered softly even though they were far enough away neither of the guys would have heard her with the water running.

“I’m not,” Frankie said a little louder. Ignoring Jessie’s glare, she added, “Jake would hate the idea of her driving that even more than the piece of crap she has now.”

“Whose side are you on?” Jessie asked, grabbing a towel off the bar next to the sink.

“Bobbie’s, of course.”

A little giggle escaped when Sam saw the stunned expression on Jessie’s face.

Obviously she’d thought Frankie was on her side, but it didn’t take her long to find her tongue. “What the hell happened to everything we talked about?”

“I listened to all of the reasons why you thought Sam shouldn’t be driving her truck, and they were valid, but it’s her choice, and she’ll make it when she’s ready. It made me think that if she let Bobbie drive it for a little while, just until she finds something else, the sheriff might not like the attention it gets our little sister. You should be happy I came with you like you wanted me to.” Frankie smiled and gave Sam a subtle nudge as they waited for Jessie to respond.

Jessie’s mouth opened and closed a couple of times before she managed to say, “Shit! I forgot about all the guys that came sniffing around when Sam first got The Beast. We can’t have Bobbie driving around in that.”

Sam felt relieved that Frankie hadn’t been asking because of the baby. Though she would have liked to have argued it out with Jessie for talking about it behind her back, she just didn’t have time. She glanced over to where Trent and Victor were standing by the door talking and wondered if they had been in on the conversation. Victor might have been, but she was pretty sure Trent hadn’t been. Not that it would have mattered, because they already discussed it amongst themselves.

They hadn't come up with any solutions to the problem, which she fully admitted was because of her. She hadn't mentioned it to him since then, but she was still considering Trent's carpooling suggestion. Maybe she just wanted to keep things on the smooth, even keel they'd been on, so she refused to consider that he may have gone behind her back and asked his brother and her sister to try to persuade her into changing her mind.

The only way to find out for sure would be to ask him. Would it start an argument? Possibly, but they couldn't live the rest of their lives not talking about touchy subjects because she was afraid it was going to make him mad. If he really wanted to marry her, then he was going to have to learn marriage was about love and the ability to take the good and bad. They may not have the love, well, on his part. On hers she was pretty sure she'd taken the fall a long time ago. Pushing that *little* problem aside for now, she had to hope the two of them could deal with things without being afraid. He had a brother and sister, so he had to know people argued but still cared about each other. After living with five sisters, Sam figured she was probably just as good at giving and taking as he was. If she was wrong and he didn't bring it up, or, hell, if she was right and he did, all the make-up sex would be worth it.

\* \* \* \*

Trent had no idea what Sam and her sisters had been talking about right before they came in. He wasn't sure he wanted to know, but the second he got her alone, he was going to ask. They were partners, whether she wanted to admit it or not. So if she had a problem, he wanted to be the one to help her fix it. It briefly crossed his mind he might be or could have caused the trouble in the first place.

"Dude, she's not going to disappear if you look away for a second," Victor said, giving him a none-too-subtle shove.

“Why would I want to look at you when I can stare at her?” The ribbing was done in love.

“That’s not the point. So how are things between you two? Any closer to getting a ring on her finger? Or calling Mom?”

“I’m working on it.”

His brother’s laughter had Sam and her sisters looking over at them.

“Laugh it up, but I haven’t sunk as low as you did to win your wife back.”

Victor winked at Jessie, who blushed as she turned and said something to Frankie and Sam. “Empty threats and pure love to back them up. She forgave me. I just hope you don’t take too long to make your move.”

“I haven’t done anything that needs forgiving. She’s just skittish.” He knew deep down she’d come around, and he was going to be waiting patiently until she did.

“You know this could all be solved with one quick call.”

“No.” Trent grabbed on to Victor’s arm and pulled him toward the door. “Damn it! Did you not hear what I just said? She’s skittish. You call Mom and she’ll be here in a flash demanding Sam marry me. Sam’s sisters will close ranks, and I’ll never get within two feet of her until my kid is ready for college.”

Victor shook his head, but Trent wasn’t willing to take a chance like that. “Jessie would never let her keep the baby from you. As a matter of fact, I think she’d agree that it’s a good idea you’re planning on staying in the picture.”

“Vic, this about more than the baby. I want to be with Sam. And I want her to want to be with me.” He didn’t care how sappy it sounded. It was the truth, and he didn’t want to take any chances on anything coming between him and Sam, not even his mother.

Victor nodded and smiled at the women as they approached them. Trent felt his shoulders go taut as he waited for one of them to speak. Sam walked over and tucked her arm around his waist, which eased

some of the tension. He knew it wouldn't go away until he had her away from everyone and all to himself.

"I should be back in time to get everything ready for dinner." Sam laid her free hand on his stomach.

Her touch was unexpected and uncoaxed. He took it as a sign she was getting more comfortable with having him as a part of her life. Sooner or later, she was going to see he wasn't going to run away, but more importantly, he wasn't going to let her, either. For right now, though, he was willing to take things slow, to a point. His brother was right about one thing. They needed to call their mother before too long.

"If you need extra time, give me a call, and I'll cover you." Frankie waggled her eyebrows, and he barely held back a laugh at Sam's blush.

"I just might take you up on that," Sam said, and from the look on everyone's faces, he saw she surprised them as much as him.

He figured now was a good time to get the hell out of there before her sisters found their tongues. "Well, that's my cue to get this sexy creature out of here."

Sam waved at her sisters as he tugged her toward the door. Frankie smiled and waved back, but Jessie turned on Victor with an angry glare. He'd find out what her issue was later, he was sure. Right now he wanted to make sure his girl was okay. They walked hand in hand to where their trucks were parked side by side.

"Yours or mine?" For a second, he thought he saw something flash in her eyes. Then she smiled and tipped her head toward his.

Trent chuckled and pulled her close for a quick peck at her lips before heading for the passenger door. She smiled as she pressed the button on her key ring, unlocking the doors. He climbed in beside her, loving the way she lit up when she slipped in behind the wheel of the huge truck. It was going to be a real shame when she was too big to climb in without help. She drove out of the lot and headed for town.

There were a few things he wanted to talk to her about. Knowing they didn't have much time, he decided to launch right in.

"Sam, I need to ask you something."

She glanced over and gave him a nod before quickly turning her attention back to the road.

"Did you tell your doctor I'm the father?"

"Nervous?" she asked, then laughed when he nodded. "Don't be. I told her Kurt wasn't the father. And I asked her not to mention my being pregnant to anyone until I had a chance to tell you."

"Okay. Are you sure it's okay if I come with you? Don't get me wrong. I want to be there. I just don't want you to feel uncomfortable or anything." The truck's engine rumbled like a loud purr as she took the corner bringing them into the town's center.

"I wouldn't have asked you to come if I didn't want you there." She laughed, and the sweet sound alleviated some of his fears.

She didn't seem as tense as she had been when he walked into the kitchen, but he wanted to know what set her on edge. "Okay, one last thing. Do you want to tell me what was going on back there with you and your sisters?"

"Not really, but your brother will probably tell you anyway, so why not? They decided it would be a good idea for me to lend my truck to Bobbie." Her flat tone was accompanied with a shrug of her shoulders.

"What? Why would they think that would be a good idea?" He couldn't believe they'd suggest such a thing.

"Gee...let me think. How about for the same reason you did?" She shook her head, insinuating the answer should have been obvious.

Damn, it wasn't fair for her to throw that up in his face. "I didn't mean now. I meant later, when it became necessary. Any fool can see this truck is like an extension of your personality. You can't just give it away. Besides, our kids will love riding in their mommy's big truck compared to Daddy's boring SUV."



She pulled into a parking lot in front of an old, big brick building and slammed her foot on the brake, sending him forward in his seat. “Kids?”

## Chapter Seventeen

Trent undid his seat belt and reached over and grabbed Sam's hand, wanting her close as could be while having this discussion. "Yeah, kids. Please don't tell me you want our kid to be an only child?"

Sam laughed as he undid her belt and tugged her onto his lap. "To tell the truth, I hadn't thought far enough past having this baby to even consider having more."

"Well, I have. Of course, I've pictured our kids having a mommy and daddy living in wedded bliss, not just living in sin." He tried to keep her off-kilter by pressing kisses along her cheek and neck, stopping briefly to nibble on her earlobe.

"Oh, that was slick." She giggled, pushing against his chest as she climbed back into her seat.

"Is that a yes?" He knew sooner or later he'd get her to say it. He was just hoping for sooner.

She laughed, slipping out of the truck and closing the door without giving him an answer. He got out of the truck and raced around the hood to join her on the path leading to the door. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder, only to have her shrug it off, but she did it with a playful smile teasing her lips. Trent reached for the door, but Sam laid her hand over his, keeping him from opening it.

He looked down and saw the look of flight on her face. Learning to read her so well so fast was helping him to stay one step ahead of her, but it also made him aware there were times when she was holding back. Now was one of them. It was obvious she wanted to say

something but wasn't ready yet. Trent enjoyed being the one to unleash her desire turning into a passion she couldn't hide. So far she'd only let it show in bed and in the kitchen. He liked to think it was because she felt safe in both situations. Now he wanted her to feel comfortable enough to let it show all the time.

He turned his hand over, giving hers a squeeze. "Sam, I have no problem waiting in the car."

"No, I really want you there. It's just Dr. Summers has been my doctor forever. She may ask us some very personal questions."

He realized she was afraid of what his answers might be. "Honey," he tugged her hand, bringing her close, and pressed her hand on his chest, "I promise I'll try not to say anything that will embarrass either of us."

"I don't." Her smile was genuine, but it was the sparkle in her eyes that told him he might be in some trouble.

"Please don't hold back on account of me." He tried to keep his tone light and playful as he followed her inside.

They walked up to the counter, and Samantha gave the nurse her name, ignoring the strange look she gave them. Trent made a mental note to ask her about it. Maybe they knew each other since it was a small community, but he couldn't see anyone having a problem with Sam. She was nice to everyone she met, and people were usually nice to her. It could be possible the nurse had a problem with her being pregnant and unmarried.

Times had changed, and in big cities it was more common, but in a small-town setting like this, Sam may run into a few people who still thought it was irresponsible. Not that it would even be an issue if she'd just agree to marry him. The nurse opened a door and called Sam's name. She clasped on to his hand and stood, pulling him with her.

"The room is small, and Dr. Summers will be doing an internal exam." That didn't sound very pleasant, he thought as the nurse

angled her head in his direction at him and added, “You may want to have *him* wait out here.”

From the way Sam’s nails dug into his hand, he knew she caught the pissy way the nurse said *him*. “He’s coming in unless *Dr. Summers* says otherwise.”

“Suit yourselves.” The nurse let go of the door and walked away, leaving them to follow or get hit by the door.

She led them down the hall to an exam room. After tossing a sheet onto the table and ordering Sam to strip from the waist down, she left, closing the door harder than she needed to. Trent wanted to go after her and ask what her problem was. No, more than that, he wanted to tell her to stay the hell away from Sam, but he promised Sam he would behave. Until she gave him some kind of sign letting him off the hook, he’d stick to his word.

At least until after they saw the doctor. Then if the twit of a nurse said anything else all bets were off. Sam had just gotten comfortable when there was a quick knock at the door. It swung open, and an older woman entered the room. She gave him a smile and nod as she walked over to Sam’s side.

“I’m sorry about Trisha. I’ve had a word with her, and there’ll be no more of her nonsense.” The woman’s light, easy tone and the way she patted Sam’s hand had some of the stiffness leaving her shoulders. It went a long way to calming him, too.

“I don’t want to cause any problems. I can find—” Sam stopped talking when the doctor held up her hand and shook her head.

“If you think I’d let anyone else deliver this child, you’ve underestimated me. Trisha’s position was tenuous enough, and she has been made aware that, after this stunt, her position is being seriously reviewed.” The doctor explained all this while washing her hands. “Now enough bad karma, are you going to introduce me to your friend?”

“Yes.” Sam looked at him and smiled as she laid her hand on his arm. “This is Trenton Weatherly. Trent, this is Dr. Ashleigh

Summers, the only physician my father trusted to take care of his girls.”

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Trent.” She offered her hand, and he took it, giving it a gentle shake.

“You as well. And I want to thank you for dealing with that woman so quickly. Sam may be too sweet to want to cause waves, but I have no problem, so would you mind telling me why she was treating Sam so harshly?” He saw the look pass between her and Sam and instantly knew Sam already had the answer.

“Trisha is Kurt’s cousin. His family is really close and loyal to a fault.” The way her hand tightened in his and the way her voice got softer, he figured she was afraid of how he was going to react.

“Makes sense, I guess. She’s angry because he was fool enough to lose a woman as perfect as you.” Sam and the doctor erupted into bouts of laughter.

“Oh, Sammy, I like him. Maybe you should think about keeping this one,” the doctor said, finally catching her breath.

“I’ve been asking her to do that for weeks. Now maybe since she’s gotten expert medical advice, she’ll follow doctor’s orders and marry me.”

Both women gasped, and Sam yanked her hand out of his.

\* \* \* \*

She was going to kill him. There was no other choice. As soon as she got him alone, she was going to find a way to make his heart stop like hers just had. Her mind still whirling with the possible ways she could enact some well-deserved retribution, she looked over at her doctor, and her brain froze.

Dr. Summers was gazing up at Trent with awe in her eyes. It was plain to see he won her over. She really didn’t need to have another one of his fans asking her what was holding her back from jumping on him. No, not on him, everybody knew she’d already done that. It

was his offer to marry her that she was avoiding. She should just tell him the answer why she wouldn't marry him? But, yeah, she was avoiding that, too.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before turning to him. He wasn't smiling, so she had to believe he wasn't teasing her this time. The statement being totally serious was even scarier than when he'd claimed that his marrying her would be the right thing to do.

Sam had no idea what happened next. One second she was fuming. The next she had tears streaming down her cheeks. She heard Trent's muttered curse, and then she felt herself being scooped into his arms. A fierce urge to pull away came over her, but the instinct to curl into his embrace was even stronger. She hated herself for not fighting harder as she buried her face into his neck. After a few deep, shuddering breaths, Sam was able to stifle her tears.

Trent eased her back onto the exam table and used his thumbs to wipe her damp cheeks. "Okay now?"

She nodded, reaching down to smooth the sheet over her legs. Her cheeks were on fire with embarrassment. Breaking down in front of Dr. Summers wasn't how she planned on introducing her to Trent. She was going to have to get a handle on her emotions if she was going to make it through the next seven months and stay sane. She felt a pat on her leg and looked up into her doctor's eyes.

"Now, Samantha, there's no need to be self-conscious. Your hormones are a bit haywire right now. You'll probably have a lot of ups and downs over the next few months." Her soft tone and the understanding look in her eyes had the tears brimming again.

She blinked them away, smiling as Dr. Summers turned to Trent pointing her finger at his chest. "As for you, good looks and smooth talking will only get you so far. You want this woman to spend the rest of her life with you, then you better give her a damn good reason."

Trent's hand landed on his chest with a loud thud. "I'm trying."

Sam almost missed the smile and wink Dr. Summers gave him before turning back to her. “Now let’s get you checked out.”

The next fifteen minutes were spent talking about how she was eating, sleeping, feeling, and her almost nonexistent morning sickness. The whole time, Dr. Summers was quite a busy woman. She felt her stomach and jotted something on her chart. She used a tape measure, probably surprised to see how her belly already started to round a bit. When it came time for the internal exam, Sam wasn’t surprised that Trent kept his eyes locked on her and his back to the doctor.

Sam let out a sigh as Dr. Summers stood up and help her slide herself into a sitting position. “Everything looks great.”

Trent smiled and kissed the top of her head, like she would a child who had done something good. The doctor finished washing her hands and picked up her chart. She scribbled a bit, then laid the chart on the counter and took a seat on the stool.

“Samantha, I’m going to have the nurse schedule an ultrasound for your next appointment.”

Sam instinctively reached out and grasped Trent’s hand. She knew her nails were digging in, but she couldn’t seem to ease her grip. “Why? You said everything looks fine.”

The doctor laid her hand on Sam’s knee and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “It is. Normally I do wait until a patient is a bit farther along, but in your case, I think it would be a good idea.”

“What’s special about this pregnancy that you want to do it sooner?” Trent’s voice was calm and strong, and she was glad he was able to ask at least one of the questions rolling around brain.

“Twins run in her family.” Dr. Summers laughed, but she and Trent just sat there staring at each other.

“I see that option never crossed your minds. Well, don’t get too excited. For now I’m going to assume there’s just one baby growing in there. After the ultrasound, we’ll know for sure.” She got to her

feet and handed Trent the form. “Why don’t you take this out to the desk, and I’ll help Sam straighten up.”

Still in awe, Trent took the sheet of paper and left. Sam waited until the door closed before pinning Dr. Summers with a knowing glare. She wasn’t necessarily hiding something, but she wasn’t telling them the whole truth, either. Well, at least she wasn’t telling Trent. The ease with which she got rid of him was pretty impressive, but Sam wasn’t going to be that easy to maneuver. She slipped behind the curtain and quickly cleaned up and dressed.

Sam knew they didn’t have much time before Trent came back. She whipped the curtain aside and said, “Okay, Doc, now tell me what you didn’t want to say in front of Trent.”

“Sam, every woman’s body is different at every stage of pregnancy. For most at this stage, it isn’t even noticeable, except for the morning sickness and tiredness. Yours, on the other hand, is definitely saying, ‘Hi, I’m pregnant.’ It may be this baby just wants everybody to know it’s in there, or it could be that, like your mother, your body decided you deserved a double dose of motherhood.” Being compared to her mother was heartwarming, but the thought of twins was terrifying.

She took a few minutes to let the news settle, then said, “Doc, she’d already had Jessie and me to practice on. This is my first.”

“You’ve had plenty of practice. Whether one, two, or an even dozen, I have no doubts you’ll be a great mother.” She opened the door and walked Sam out to the waiting room, where Trent was standing there waiting for her.

“Everything okay?” Trent asked, taking her hand in his.

Should she tell him or just wait until after the test? There was no reason to get him all worked up for nothing. On the other hand, he deserved to know what he might be in for. There was no sense in having them both spend the next four weeks dwelling on the possibilities.



She let a smile curve her lips, hoping it looked natural. “Fine. I’m starving. Want to stop over at the diner for a hot fudge sundae?”

“You got it.” He lowered his head and kissed her gently, but wanting more, she rose to her toes, pressing her whole body to his, and deepened his kiss.

The claps and hoots coming from the other women had her pulling away laughing. Trent’s red face just made her laugh harder. He took her by the hand and pulled her out of the office into the bright afternoon sunlight.

And her ex, Kurt.

## Chapter Eighteen

Trent tucked her behind him, placing himself between Sam and her bastard of an ex-boyfriend. If she wasn't present, he'd flatten the guy. He'd make sure Kurt knew never to come within a hundred feet of her again, or he'd be more than happy to remind him why. Sam's hand fisted in the back of his shirt, pulling it tight across the front of him. For a second, he thought it was because she was scared of Kurt, but when she tried to yank him backwards, he realized she was afraid of what he might do.

So instead of dragging the guy around the back of the building and teaching him a much needed lesson, Trent was going to give him a chance to do the right thing.

*That phrase has been getting me into a lot of trouble lately. It might be time to come up with something better.*

In this case it was okay, though, because the only option for Kurt was to accept defeat and bow out gracefully. He was going to give him one chance, and only one chance, because if he didn't do the right thing, Trent wasn't going to let him get close enough to have another opening. He didn't think Kurt was going to be smart enough to see things from his point of view.

Hoping he was wrong for Sam's sake, he did his best to keep his voice calm as he said, "Excuse us."

Kurt ignored him and laid his hands on the banisters, blocking them further. "Samantha, we need to talk."

She stopped tugging on his shirt and pressed herself into his back. "I've told you before, there's nothing left to be said."

“You’re wrong.” He took a step forward, and Trent’s instinct had him turning so she was completely shielded behind him.

“No, dude, you’re the one who’s wrong. What you have failed to notice is Sam is off the market.”

“I don’t see a ring on her finger,” he challenged, and Trent made mental note to remind Sam of his comment at a later time.

He smiled knowing there was something even stronger binding them together. “Not yet, but it’s my child she’s carrying.”

Kurt glared at him, not saying anything, but the fire in his eyes spoke loud enough.

“Look, none of us want to cause a scene here, of all places, so just move aside and let us go.” Trent knew Sam’s voice of reason was lost on both of them.

It was male rivalry at its finest. They both wanted Sam, but only one of them could have her. She deserved the better man. The man who was going to treat her with the loving tenderness a woman like her craved while still letting her be the woman she wanted to be. Not a man who would try to change her. He would accept her, faults and all. Take care of her and treasure her. To make it simple, he was the one she needed and the one he knew she wanted. Trent heard the door open and close behind them but refused to look away from his opponent.

“Sam, go wait inside while I have a little chat with your *ex*.” Even as he said it, he knew she wasn’t going to go, but it was worth seeing the way Kurt’s nostrils flared at his command.

“Get real. Talking is the last thing you want to do right now.” She gave him a hard nudge in his lower back.

Kurt must have read her hesitation to leave wrong because he said, “Come on, Sam, three minutes. I think a minute for each year we were together isn’t too much to ask for.”

Trent wasn’t about to let Kurt use any possible good memories she might have of them together to guilt her into talking to him. “If

you add in all the times you were unfaithful, I think it's way too much."

Sam's gasp cut right through him. They hadn't really talked about the shitty things Kurt had done to her over the years, but her sisters and Victor filled him in on every little sordid detail. From all the times she suspected him of cheating, to the last time in which she found him in bed with some sleazy little twit. He figured someday she would've gotten around to telling him about it herself and was willing to be patient. Then this prick goes and pushes him into letting her know he knows. Just another reason for him to want to teach the jackass a lesson he'd never forget.

"Look, asshole, you don't know what you're talking about. Why don't you climb into your fancy SUV and go back wherever the hell you came from?" Kurt's face turned a mottled red color as he huffed and puffed at him.

"Sorry to be the one to break this to you, buddy, but I'm here to stay." Trent wanted to add that he was going to be marrying Sam as soon as he could get her to agree, but after the tears in the exam room, he was afraid to push her again so soon.

"Good luck with that. Once I make a few calls, you'll be about as welcome around here as a plague. You're lucky you have a cabin at the lodge, or you wouldn't even have a roof over your head."

Trent laughed, knowing the guy's threats were nothing more than hot air. "The Gurions and the Mitchells might have something to say about that." Sam tossed out two of the most powerful names in town, not to mention the whole county. "Besides, his Uncle Clayton lived up here for decades and probably has more connections than you do. My family sure in hell does, so don't start something you can't handle."

At the same time, Trent decided to add his own piece of critical information. "And I'm not staying in one of the cabins. I'm living with Sam and her sisters."

“Jessie would never allow that.” Kurt took another step up, bringing them almost eye to eye.

“Actually, it was her idea, but we all agreed it was a good idea.” Sam’s voice was getting stronger, more confident.

“Your parents and grandfather must be rolling over in their graves.” Kurt’s voice was coated with disgust and jealousy, and it was clear to Trent that he was trying to strike out at Sam with anything he thought would hurt her.

“Since it was her grandfather who introduced her sister Jessie to my brother, Victor, I don’t think they’d mind the way things have come together.” He loved that they were whipping the wind out of Kurt’s sails.

This guy had thrown away any chance he had with Sam. Trent wasn’t going to make the same mistake. He knew he had everything to gain if he had Sam and her sisters on his side.

Kurt made a half-laugh, half-huff noise and said, “Yeah, right, they’d be fine with her shacking up with some guy and having his kid without being married.”

\* \* \* \*

For the first time since she met him, Kurt actually looked like someone managed to ruffle his feathers. She couldn’t tell if he was intimidated or just totally pissed off. It didn’t matter either way as long as he finally got it into his thick skull that they were over. Maybe this confrontation was what it was going to take to drive the point home. Everyone who knew them probably knew it was inevitable. Things had been building up between her and Kurt for a long time. She just hoped to avoid it for as long as possible.

“Kurt, I’m going to tell you one more time. We are over. You and I have nothing to talk about. No reason to speak at all.” She had no idea why it was so hard for him to let go, especially when it had been so easy for him to chase every piece of ass he could.

“I want a paternity test!”

She thought there was nothing he could’ve said that would have surprised her, but she was wrong.

She’d been holding on to Trent to keep him from going after Kurt, but now she was hanging on to keep herself from falling to the ground. “There’s no need for one. We haven’t slept together in, like, six, more like seven months.”

“I can’t believe you hooked up with this guy as quick as you claim, so you’re going to have to prove it’s not mine.” He had to be up to something because any fool could see she wasn’t seven months pregnant.

“Not that I have to explain any of this to you, but I’m only eight weeks along.”

“Doesn’t matter. Everyone in town knows we’ve been together for years, and now, all of a sudden, you’re pregnant with this guy’s kid. Sorry, not buying it. You’re not the type to just fall into bed with someone, so you’re hiding something.”

Sam was so close to Trent she could tell he was ready to pounce at any second.

Sam heard Trent growl, and she tightened her grip on his shirt, knowing deep down if he tried to pull away she wasn’t really going to be able to hold him back. “Listen, you little prick, the baby is mine. There’s no questions or doubts. You got that?”

Kurt’s eyebrows drew together, and one side of his mouth curled into a taunting smile. “Prove it.”

“If you have anything else to say, get a lawyer, a damn good one, because I’m calling mine as soon as we get back to the house.” Trent took a step forward, and Sam moved with him as if they were one.

“I will,” Kurt said, stepping up onto the landing and then added for Sam’s benefit, “and trust me, everyone in town will know what a slut you are. You made sure everyone knew all about my mistakes. Why shouldn’t they know about yours? That Little Miss Innocent act of yours isn’t going to work anymore.”

Trent was obviously done talking, because he grabbed her hand and kept walking. Kurt, however, wasn't done, and to prolong their escape, he grasped her other arm, yanking hard. The force coming from both sides brought her to a sudden stop. She yelped, more from the surprise than the stinging sensation in her shoulders. Trent eased his grip and immediately moved back to her side.

Kurt moved in, too, yanking her toward him at the same time. She rammed into his chest with such momentum she actually bounced back. Off balance and with nothing to clutch on to steady herself, she knew what was coming. She felt Trent's hands trying to clasp on to her as she braced herself for the impact. Instincts had her wrapping one arm around her stomach to protect the baby and sticking the other one toward the ground to try to cushion the fall.

Her palm hit the ground, sending a spike of pain up her arm, but it was quickly overshadowed by the jarring whack of her hip landing on the concrete. Sam heard loud voices, but all she could see was Trent as he crouched down in front of her.

"Are you okay?" The concern in his voice as he ran his hands over her had the tears the fall had brought to her eyes spilling over.

She was about to say she was all right when he touched her hand. The pain in her wrist amplified by a thousand. She pulled it away and cradled it against her breast. One look at his face told her the real trouble had just begun. She looked back over Trent's shoulder for Kurt as he scooped her up into his arms. He was lying on the ground holding his face and dark red blood seeped through his fingers.

Trent only took a few steps when a young pregnant woman, part of the small crowd who hadn't been there a few minutes ago, opened the door for him. Dr. Summers was standing just inside and escorted him directly into an exam room. Trent quickly explained what happened.

"The baby is well protected, but you'll want to take it easy for the next few days. My main concern right this second is this wrist," Dr. Summers said, probing the rapidly swelling flesh.

“Take care of her and don’t let her out of your sight until I get back.” The anger in Trent’s voice shook enough sense into her.

She reached out with her uninjured hand and grasped on to his arm, her nails piercing his skin. “Please don’t leave me.”

He nodded, moving back to her side, but every few seconds he glanced at the door. From what they could hear, there seemed to be quite a commotion going on out in the waiting room. She kept expecting to see one of her sisters come barging into the room. Dr. Summers wrapped a couple of ice packs around her wrist and said she would be right back, leaving them alone. Sam waited for him to say something, but he just sat there staring at her hand. None of this was his fault, and she needed him to know she didn’t blame him.

“Thank you for getting me out of there.” She figured it was a good way to break the ice, but she was wrong.

“You should’ve gone when I asked you to.” He looked away and shook his head, then said, “Better yet, I should have picked you up and walked away the second I laid eyes on that fucking prick.”

“I’m sorry. I never thought Kurt would’ve done anything like that.” The tears threatened again, but she managed to hold them back this time.

He reached over and gently pulled her into his arms as he sat down, easing her onto his lap. “It wasn’t your fault. My question is how did you ever manage to get hooked up with a bastard like him in the first place?”

“Someday maybe I’ll tell you, but right now I’d rather forget all about him.” She really wished Kurt would fall off the face of the earth and let them live happily ever after.

It hit her then like a ton of bricks. She loved him. So much that she knew without a doubt she wanted to be with Trent forever. They could be a happy little family.

*I deserve to be happy, don’t I?*

Sure, there were obstacles in their way, but she knew they could find a way around all of them but one. He didn’t love her. Trent



wanted her all right, but it was too bad he didn't want her for the right reasons. He kissed the top of her head, and she sighed against his chest.

"Consider it done. Is your wrist feeling any better?" He cradled her hand in his and brought it to his lips and placed a soft kiss to her palm.

She flexed her fingers against his lightly stubbled cheek and nodded. "With you holding me, everything feels better."

His pupils widened, and a sexy smile crossed his lips. He caught her hands and kissed each finger, but when he got to the middle one, he kissed the tip, then opened his lips and licked the tip. She shivered as his lips closed around it. With a little pressure of his tongue, he gently sucked on it, making her squirm against him. They both let out a little moan. Hers was of desire and his probably of pain if the bulge beneath her ass was anything to go by.

"Samantha, you drive me to distraction." The harsh breath he let out stirred her hair.

She looked up at his tense expression and smiled. "I hate to say this, but I'm not even the slightest bit sorry."

His laughter shook her against him. A loud knock sounded at the door, and his laughter turned into a groan. Quickly, but gently, he scooted out from under her. He stood by her side, his hand resting on her shoulder as the door opened. Dr. Summers stepped in, and with her came one of Jake's deputies. Neither of them looked too pleased.

"Mr. Weatherly, I'll need you to come with me," the deputy said. Sam shook her head, but Trent nodded.

He leaned down and pressed a quick kiss to her lips and followed the man out of the room.

## Chapter Nineteen

Dr. Summers took Trent's place by her side and held her by the shoulders, looking her in the eyes. "Samantha, I need you to stay calm."

How was she supposed to stay calm when they took Trent away? She wanted to be there for him like he'd been for her. If she could just go tell Jake what happened, he'd have to let Trent go. The only one who deserved to get in trouble over this was Kurt. And he was probably going to get off scot-free if she didn't do something about it.

"I need to go." If her baby was fine, then her hand could wait.

"No. What you need to do is let me finish taking care of your hand while we wait for Bobbie to get here." The doctor sat on the stool beside the exam table and took her hand in hers.

"Bobbie?" she asked, wondering what she missed while she and Trent had been waiting.

Dr. Summers nodded as she unwrapped the cold compresses from Sam's wrist. "The second I heard Kurt was here, I tried calling your sisters. I had no idea things would get so out of hand, but I thought they might want to know what was going on. Bobbie was the only one I could reach."

"Okay, I'll head off to the sheriff's office. When she gets here, just send her over." She tried to scoot off the table, but the doctor had other plans.

She squeezed her wrist, sending pains shooting up her arm and down into her fingers. The same fingers that tingled when Trent kissed them just minutes ago. Tears coursed down her cheeks from the pain and torment knowing the doctor was right. Something could

be seriously wrong with her hand, and she needed to get it taken care of. Kurt was so going to pay for this when she got her hands on him. Preferably wrapped around his neck.

\* \* \* \*

Trent sat at a desk listening to the deputy read him his rights.

He never intended step foot inside this place again, not even to visit Jake, but he knew even the best of plans could go awry. He glanced around the room noting nothing changed since his last visit. In the outer office, there was the counter they had to pass to get into where they were now. Back here there were two cluttered desks, three cells lined against the wall, and a closed door labeled Sheriff. For a small town, he figured the setup was more than enough. This deputy wasn't the one who pulled him over on his way into town, which got him wondering as to how many Jake had on staff.

This guy hadn't cuffed him or made him ride in the back of his cruiser, but he hadn't been friendly or talkative, either. He figured Jake had something to do with that, but now that they were at the police station, he wasn't so sure. He had a feeling this guy didn't like Kurt and was possibly on his side.

Still, when it came to the law, he knew there was no way to be too safe. "If you don't mind, I'd like you to call the sheriff."

"Already done. He said he'll be here shortly. In the meantime, I need you to empty your pockets." He handed him a big yellow envelope with his name written on it.

"Would it be possible for me to make a call myself?" he asked, knowing he had the right to make at least one call.

Most people called their lawyer, but Trent had more important matters at hand. He wanted someone with Sam, and the only one he depended on in a situation like this was his brother. He stood and took his wallet and keys from his pockets. The handful of change came next. Then he pulled the black velvet box he'd been carrying around

with him for the past week. He was almost glad he hadn't gotten the ring on her finger yet. With the way his luck had been lately, they would probably be cutting it off right now.

He had no idea what was wrong with her hand, but from the way it swelled up, he figured it wasn't good. Added to that, she was bound to be confused and upset. Trent didn't want her getting behind the wheel in her condition. He had no doubt she was going to want to come here after him, so he was going to make sure she'd have to let someone else give her a ride.

"Sorry, no calls made until after the sheriff talks to you." The deputy took the envelope and tucked it in the desk's bottom drawer.

"This way." He motioned toward the cells across the room.

Trent followed the silly yellow arrows painted on the floor over to the large wall made of steel bars. The deputy stopped beside him and punched a few buttons into the panel on the wall next to them. There was a loud buzz, and the door on one of the cells slid open. Trent walked in before he was instructed to. All he could do was hope Jake got there soon so they could get everything straightened out.

The deputy yanked the door shut, the metal making a loud clang as it slammed closed. He just sat down when he heard loud, angry male voices coming from the outer office. The deputy rushed to the door and yanked it open. Jake and the other deputy, the one Trent already met, walked in, each holding an arm of his mortal enemy. Trent barely held back the growl he felt building up in his chest.

The only thing that kept him from letting it loose was seeing the condition Kurt was in. Trent thought he looked good with a bloody shirt and swollen eyes, and his nose completely covered in white gauze. Trent flexed his hand, glad the soreness in his knuckles wasn't a waste. He hoped Kurt's nose was broken. Not just broken, but the kind of break that would be noticeable for the rest of his fucking life. A reminder to stay the hell away from his wife, because she would be someday.

He stayed where he was sitting on the cot, watching as Jake and the other guy put Kurt none too gently into the chair he just vacated. After a few quick words with the two deputies, Jake glanced over at him. He shook his head, but instead of coming to talk to him, he went into his office and closed the door behind him.

Fuck! Self-defense, or however they wanted to look at him protecting Sam or not, this obviously wasn't going to go away easily. Maybe he should consider calling a lawyer?

\* \* \* \*

Jake was having one of those days where absolutely everything went wrong. Actually, everything would have been fine if he could just keep his mind off Bobbie. But thanks to her, he missed a few deadlines, misplaced three important files, and lost a sparring match with his brother. Every bone in his body ached, and he had a massive bruise on his thigh as a reminder of it. Now, to top it off, he had play referee.

First, he had to get himself under control. He never condoned violence, but he couldn't help but take pleasure in the fact that Trent finally gave Kurt what he deserved. The problem was, even though he agreed with him and knew Kurt had to have done something to ask for it, he was the law, and it was his job to reprimand people for taking matters into their own hands. Once his deputies got Kurt settled, he'd get the skinny on what happened, then talk to Kurt and Trent and see if this could be settled amicably and without further incident.

He wouldn't bet on it. Kurt was a major pain in the ass. Always had been, even when they were kids, but when it came to Sam, he was even worse. He reached for the phone, knowing he was going to need some major backup on this, because there was no doubt in his mind the shit was going to hit the fan.

\* \* \* \*

Sam refused to take anything stronger than Tylenol for the pain. Dr. Summers was as gentle as she could be as they wrapped her wrist in the bandage. Bobbie sat there holding her other hand, listening intently to the doctor's instructions.

"I'd like you to let one of your sisters take over for you for at least a week."

Sam wanted to scream that it wasn't fair that she was the one being punished because of Kurt's rash behavior, but she nodded, knowing if she agreed they'd get out of there quicker.

It had been about an hour since they took Trent away. Bobbie had no idea what was going on and refused to leave her to go find out. She tried calling the sheriff's office, but no one over there would tell them anything. Bobbie let the deputy she spoke with know he was making a huge mistake. He laughed like he didn't care, but she knew once Bobbie got a hold of Jake the guy would be caring a whole lot.

Jake and Bobbie had a weird relationship, which seemed to get stranger every day. He may not want to admit how serious things were getting, but everyone else could see the signs. He always took her calls, no matter what, and he called her at least once a day. That was if they didn't run into each other somewhere in town. She caught Bobbie taking a quick glance at her watch and saw the way her eyes narrowed. Yup, the deputy was going to get his ass chewed out over this, and Sam hoped she got a front row seat.

The doctor got to her feet and slid a white sling over Sam's head, then helped her maneuver her arm into it. "Bobbie, I'm trusting you to see that she takes it easy. I mean it, no lifting at all. This is a pretty severe sprain. There'll be some bruising and swelling, but the cold compresses should help with that. As for the baby, everything looks fine. If you start feeling crampy or anything, you're to call me immediately, but I don't foresee that happening. Your hip will probably bruise, too, but your hand took the brunt of the fall."

“I’ll make sure she follows your orders. We can take turns filling in for her.” Bobbie flashed that innocent smile of hers people kept falling for.

Sam wondered when they’d realize she wasn’t the little girl they all remembered. She was a grown woman whose charms, as disarming as they could be, were far from pure or innocuous. Maybe that was the problem. Jake knew the woman he wanted, but everybody else saw still saw her as the little girl. Part of the problem growing up in a small town was people never really let you grow up. Adding in a quasi-relationship with a seven year age gap made it harder for people to grasp.

“All right I’m going to let you go.” With Bobbie’s help, Sam shifted to the edge of the table, but as she stood, the doctor added, “And as soon as you’re done over at the sheriff’s office, I want you home, sitting with your feet up.”

Sam figured her face looked pretty much like Bobbie’s right then. Her mouth hung open, eyes wide as if she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. “Please, girls, I’m not a fool. Tell Jake I stalled as long as I could.”

“Jake...” Bobbie couldn’t seem to get her mouth working. “He...”

Sam didn’t have the same affliction. “Oh, he is in so much trouble.”

“Yeah, but it’s good for him,” the doctor said as she walked them outside.

The doctor told Bobbie she’d wait with her while she went to get the car. Sam stood there watching for Bobbie’s little beat-up compact. She was surprised when Trent’s SUV pulled up to the curb instead. The doctor helped her down the stairs, and Sam did her best not to wince with every step she took. Bobbie jumped out of the car and ran around the hood and opened the door.

“My car wouldn’t start, so I kind of borrowed Trent’s SUV,” she said as they eased her into the car.

Sam nodded as she struggled with her seat belt. It would be okay. Trent would understand. This was an emergency of sorts. Bobbie leaned over and did the belt up for her, then settled in behind the wheel and adjusted her own. She started the car and headed for the police station. Sam held her hand cradled against her breast, groaning each time Bobbie inadvertently hit a bump. Bobbie pulled into the town hall's parking lot and drove around to the back, where the sheriff's office was located.

The car came to a stop, and Sam leaned back against her seat and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath, pressing the button to undo her belt and opened her door. Bobbie was there ready to help her out. Arm in arm, they slowly made their way into the office. Between the pills and ice packs, her hand was just incredibly sore instead of throbbing. Well, that was unless she moved it. When she shifted it just the slightest bit, it basically felt like she could feel the blood pulsating through her arm.

She could have waited in the car and let Bobbie handle this on her own. Sam wanted to see Trent for herself. She knew physically he'd be okay, but she couldn't stop wondering what was going on. She hoped he wasn't locked up in a cell like some criminal. Maybe Jake was just asking him some questions. Either way she wanted to be there for him. After all, it was her fault he was in there in the first place.

Sam cleared her throat loudly, causing Edgar, one of Jake's dispatchers, to look up from the counter where he was standing. His gasp was audible as he rushed around the counter to assist her. Bobbie let him take her place by her side and ran for the door he swung open. Not making it in time, she let out a loud groan. Sam had seen that look on Bobbie's face before and from it she knew that she wasn't willing to wait for him to come and push the button to make it open again. Sam smiled as she watched Bobbie hop up onto the counter and swing her legs over and hop down on the other side.



“He’s going to chew me out again,” Edgar whined, opening the door and easing her through.

“Trust me, he’s going to be way too busy to even think about you.” Sam knew Bobbie was going to keep him occupied for at least a little while and then it would be her turn.

He shook his head as they entered the inner office and softly said, “Last time she got by without me announcing her, he made sure I knew what the consequence would be if it happened again.”

Sam looked around and spotted Trent sitting in one of the cells. His elbows rested on his knees with his hands hanging between them. The slamming of Jake’s door made her jump, and she sent out a little shriek from the pain it caused. Trent jumped to his feet and rushed to the bars, his eyes locking on her.

“Are you okay?” His voice sounded calm, but the way his eyes raked over her told her it was an act.

She needed for him to see it wasn’t as bad as it looked. “I’m all right. It’s okay. I’ve got it from here.”

Edgar let go, and she guessed he rushed to stand outside Jake’s door ready to explain. She slowly made her way to Trent. She was about a foot away when she noticed Kurt standing two cells down, leaning against the bars, his arms sticking through. The bandage on his nose didn’t hide the livid expression on his face. The way his lip curled into a snarl like a vicious dog, and his narrowed eyes, made him look like a total stranger. She’d never seen him look like that before, and it actually frightened her.

“Ignore the bastard.” Trent held out his hands, and she moved into them, letting him support her through the bars.

She took his advice and turned her back on him. A throat cleared beside her, and she glanced up, surprised to find Edgar standing by with a chair for her to sit in. She let him ease her into the comfy cushion with a sigh of relief.

"If you need anything, just shout." She nodded, and he walked back to the outer office, probably guessing from the muffled voices coming from Jake's office he was safe for now.

Trent didn't look too upset, but she couldn't help wondering how bad things really were. "What's going on?"

"Who knows? Jake's been in his office since he got here a few minutes after I did." He crouched down in front of her, bringing them eye to eye.

Sam glanced back over her shoulder and fought a smile. They'd know soon because Jake never stayed alone with Bobbie for long. Especially not behind closed doors where anything could happen. If she had to guess why, she'd say Bobbie was too much of a temptation for him handle without some kind of a buffer. Besides, she knew Jake hated to give people a reason to talk.

"And him?" She angled her head toward Kurt, keeping her voice low so he wouldn't know what they were saying.

"Came in at the same time as Jake. I don't want to talk about that. What did the doctor say?" He squeezed her hand, rubbing his thumb across her knuckles.

"The baby's fine." She raised her hand a little and said, "And this is just a really bad sprain. She said I could expect some soreness and bruising, and I'm to do nothing and lift nothing for at least a week, even if it feels better."

He chuckled, giving his head a shake. "She really thinks you're going to do as you're told and relax."

"Actually, she put Bobbie in charge of my obeying. She's a power-hungry little thing. Believe me, she'll make sure I follow orders." Not that she wouldn't anyway just to make sure the baby, or possibly babies, were okay.

Jake's office door flew open so hard it slammed into the wall. Trent stood, still holding her hand. She dared a glance at Kurt, who skulked back in the farthest corner of his cell.

Bobbie stood in the door with one hand on her hip and the other pointing at Jake, who was standing too close, staring down at her. Not the least bit intimidated, Bobbie poked him in the chest as she started speaking.

“One hour. If I haven’t heard from you by then, you had better be prepared for an invasion.” Bobbie stormed out of the office, leaving Sam sitting there in awe.

\* \* \* \*

Jake closed his eyes, letting out a harsh breath. His feisty little vixen was getting harder and harder to deal with. He had known she was coming and thought he was ready, too, until she stepped into his office and closed the door, stopping to flip the lock before confronting him. Her sweet cinnamon apple scent filled the air, making it impossible to ignore her the way he meant to. His plan had been to meet her out in the outer office, but somehow she managed to get past Edgar again. He was going to have to do something about that boy.

Jake just finished going over his officer’s statements of the incident, or what they’d been told happened, when he heard a noise outside his door. He hadn’t even gotten a chance to ask Trent or Kurt for their sides of the story before Bobbie marched in. She was bold and beautiful, ready to battle on Trent’s behalf. In his book, that made him officially part of the Brazen family.

*The lucky bastard.*

He was about to turn and go back into his office when he spotted Sam sitting there, holding Trent’s hand through the bars.

## Chapter Twenty

After a stupefied moment of observation and no coherent thoughts, he quickly walked over and squatted down in front of Sam. Other than her arm in a sling, she looked okay, but from the tightness of her features and the way she was holding herself really still, he could tell she was in pain. Why was she here instead of at home? He looked at the way Sam had Trent's hand clasped in hers and hazarded a guess she wouldn't be leaving until he could.

"What the fuck happened to you? The reports said he shoved you. Not..." He waved his hand between them, indicating her injuries.

"That stupid prick shoved her to the ground." The vehemence in Trent's voice had Sam's head spinning toward him as she gave his hand a shake.

"I'll get to you in a minute," Jake grouched, reaching out to turn her face gently back to his. "You are coming with me."

She shook her head, her pretty blonde hair swinging about her shoulders. "No! I'm staying right here with Trent."

"Damn it, Jake, call one of her sisters or my brother. Fuck, call them all if you have to. The doctor wants her home and off her feet."

She growled, tearing her hand out of his and wrapping it around her stomach. "I am off my feet, and I'm staying here until he lets you go."

"Honey, I can't let him go until I get to the bottom of this." He could tell she already made her decision, and the Brazen sisters were first class when it came to getting what they set their minds to. "Okay, you can stay with a few conditions."

“For crying out loud, she doesn’t need to be here.” Trent threw his hands in the air, pacing his cell.

“Name them.” Her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes, but it was better than her shedding the tears he could see welling up.

“You have to stay quiet and let me handle everything and answer any questions I ask with complete honesty, not that I would expect any less from you.”

She nodded, brushing away one of the tears that managed to escape.

He rose and walked over and picked up the phone. He informed Edgar to get his ass in there. Jake wasn’t surprised that, when he turned, Trent was once again holding her hand. Neither of them spoke a word. They just stared at one another. Edgar rushed into the room, and Jake motioned for him to follow him into his office. Each grabbing an end, they brought the comfortable brown leather couch Jake often took naps on out into the main office. They carried it over to where Sam was.

It took them a few seconds to ease her out of the chair and onto the couch. He leaned her against a pillow and put her feet up. The way she hissed and winced let him know more than her hand was injured. He glanced over at Kurt, who was trying to blend in with the wall. Jake was going to make sure he never did anything like this again.

He moved into the center of the little triangle he’d created. “Where should we start?”

Kurt moved to the bars to plead his case. “It was an accident. I just wanted to talk to her, and he was dragging her away. I didn’t mean for her to fall.”

“Jake, he’s lying. Trent wasn’t dragging me. We were trying to leave, and he refused to get out of the way.” He looked back at Sam, and she instantly leaned back on the cushions, a light blush coating her cheeks.

Jake turned to Trent, who was leaning against his bars looking at Kurt liked he'd like to hit him again. "All right, let me get this straight. You saw Sam fall, so you punched him?"

"I tried to catch her, but she slid through my hands. So I clocked him. What would you do if some jackass pushed the woman carrying your child to the ground?" Jake spun on his heel and stared at Sam, who let out a loud gasp.

Why was he just learning of this now? Bobbie hadn't mentioned it to him. Neither had Doc Summers when she called him to tell him there was trouble and to get someone over there. Accident or not, Kurt wasn't getting away with this.

"You're pregnant?"

She nodded.

"By him," he pointed at Trent, then Kurt, "not him?"

"That has yet to be proven." Kurt cowered farther into his cell at Jake's angry glare.

"I'm only eight weeks along, and yes, it's Trent's." She laid her hand over her slightly rounded belly and smiled, lighting up the room.

"What are your intentions?" he asked Trent, ignoring Sam's groan.

He knew he was losing track of the reason they were here, but this was more important. Sam didn't have a father or other male figure to ask, and he wasn't going to let Trent off because of it. After all, it wasn't like her brother-in-law could do it since he also happened to be Trent's brother. What a fucking mess.

Trent leaned his head against the bars and shrugged his shoulders. "I've been asking, begging, pleading with her to marry me since the day I got back, but she keeps saying no."

"Thank God!" Kurt shouted.

"Shut up!" Jake and Trent said in unison.

"Sam, do you want the baby?"

She nodded, the tears coming freely now.

"But not Trent?"

She shrugged, which confused the fuck out of him. Either she wanted him or she didn't. There may be other issues for them to deal with, but this one seemed pretty cut-and-dry to him. If she had cold feet, then he had no doubt Trent could warm them up given the chance.

"Oh, she wants me, all right. She just won't marry me," Trent said, and she gasped again, but louder this time as her cheeks turned bright red.

"Sam, now is not a time for playing games," Jake whispered softly so only she could hear him.

That brought on the tears in earnest. He obviously said the wrong thing, but he no idea why. He glanced over at Trent, who looked ready to rip the bars apart with his bare hands. There was more going on here than met the eye. And even though it really wasn't his job to find out what it was, he was going to do it anyway.

"Is that true?"

She shook her head, still not looking at him.

"It is, too. You and I have been living together for weeks. We eat together three times a day and sleep together, if you want to call it that, every night." Trent slapped his hands on the bars, pushing himself away.

"Cut it out. He doesn't need to know every little detail," she cried, and Jake didn't know if he could do what he decided needed to be done.

"Your sisters have allowed this, so I'm assuming they all know." She nodded, and he couldn't help but feel hurt because Bobbie hadn't told him.

He assumed she told him everything, but he'd deal with his own problems later. "So you're going to have his child and you're co-habiting, but you won't marry him. Want to tell me why?"

"Because I love him." It came out so softly he almost missed it.

He smiled, flooded with the relief that things just might be okay. "Honey, that's a good thing."

He stood frozen, unable to say anything as she shook her head, her sobs growing louder. He thought she might have mumbled something, but if she had, he couldn't understand. He was willing to wait and see if she'd try again, but Trent wasn't.

"Sam, honey, please calm down. All this crying can't be good for the baby. Remember Dr. Summers said you're supposed to be relaxing."

"Shut up. This is all your fault." She let out a sigh that shook her whole body. "Well, not this, but you know what I mean."

He grabbed the bars and shook them. "No, I don't. But I do think it's about time you told me."

Jake looked from one to the other, then over at Kurt, who was enjoying their arguing too much. He was about to make the point known when Sam decided to come clean. In front of him and Kurt, she broke down and told Trent why she was holding back. More or less. Actually, in a way, she blasted him with the truth, which he seemed to take very well.

"You see, Jake, the reason it's bad...is, well, because he claims he wants to marry me because 'It's the right thing to do,'" she said with a wince as she made quote marks in the air.

Jake barely held back a groan. Kurt, however, dissolved into a fit of laughter.

"It is the right thing to do, but that's not the only reason I want to marry you. Haven't I shown you how much I want to be with you?" He sounded sincere to Jake, but just having to have a private conversation like this in front of a hostile witness and a guy with a badge should've proved he was in love.

Sam didn't answer. All she could do was gape at him. Trent kept his gaze on hers, his expression begging her to say something. Jake thought it really sucked that she was too blind to see it. Suddenly, it dawned on him that maybe if it was shoved under her nose with a magnifying glass she might recognize the signs. He ignored their



staring match and walked over to the desk. He swore Edgar came rushing through the door before he even had the phone hung up.

Jake walked over, punched in the code on the wall panel, and the door to Trent's cell slid open. Trent started for it, but Jake stopped him with a shake of his head. Edgar moved into position at one end of the couch, and Jake took the other. Sam squealed and winced when they hefted the couch and her into the air. As carefully as they could, they moved the couch into the small cell, making it even smaller. He tried to ignore Trent's smile and Sam's angry glare as he walked out of the cell and slammed the door shut.

"I need to make a few calls. When I get back, we'll decide where things stand." His announcement was meant for everyone, so he left it at that.

\* \* \* \*

Sam had no idea how to deal with this. Trent lifted her feet and sat on the couch with her. Neither of them spoke, but he started rubbing his hand up and down the outside of her leg. His touch was soothing when it should have been anything but. They sat there like that for over an hour. She was ready to scream for him to say something, but he just kept stroking her until Jake came out of his office. He glanced toward the cells as he headed through the door into the outer office.

"I wonder where he's going," Kurt croaked, reminding her of his presence.

Before she or Trent could respond, he was back with a clipboard in hand. "I've spoken with the judge, and we've made a few decisions. Kurt, if you agree to anger management classes, and to stay away from all of the Brazen sisters, Samantha specifically, and not to press charges against Trent, we'll release you."

"Fine. I'll sign whatever I have to." The surprise in Kurt's voice was loud and clear.

Jake ignored his outburst and continued. "Trent and Sam will have to agree to this as well. Samantha can press charges on the assault, but since you're claiming this was an accident, she can sign a waiver that says the next time you bother her the charges will automatically go into effect."

Kurt paled a little but nodded. She looked at Trent, who was smiling for the first time since she arrived. It seemed like a good deal for everyone involved, and with the threat of formal charges hanging over his head, Kurt might actually stay the hell away from her. Jake walked over to their cell, obviously awaiting their decision.

Trent gave Kurt a look she couldn't quite decipher but wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of. "It's okay with me, but it's really up to Samantha."

"I just want this all to be over." She let out a wistful sigh wishing it never happened in the first place.

"Good, that's good. I just need you guys to sign these forms so I can get everything in order." Jake walked over and hit the wall panel, opening their door.

Sam took the pen he held out and signed and initialed where he indicated. Trent followed suit, glancing over at Kurt between forms. Jake smiled as he left the cell, closing the door behind him.

"I'll be back shortly," he said, leaving the three of them alone.

Sam just settled back against the arm of the couch when Kurt cleared his throat. "Sammy, I appreciate this. It really was an accident. I swear."

She looked over to where he was standing leaning on the bars facing them and hoped he was as sincere as he sounded. "You can prove that to me by letting me get on with my life in peace."

"But just keep the consequences in mind when you think about coming near her again," Trent added, and to her surprise, Kurt nodded and moved off back to his cot.

About ten minutes passed. The silence was beginning to get on her nerves. She figured since it was her choice to be there, she

couldn't really complain. She heard the door and craned her neck so she could see him come in. Instead of Jake, it was Bobbie and some guy she'd seen before but couldn't place. The door opened again, and this time her sisters Joey, Georgie, and Frankie came in, and all of them were wearing serious expressions. They converged on Bobbie and the man and started whispering frantically.

"Hello," she called out, and they turned and looked at her. "What's going on?"

"We don't like this. Who came up with this cockamamie plan?" Frankie always was one for speaking her mind, no matter the cost.

"It seems reasonable to me. Where's Jake?" she asked, wondering how they'd gotten past Edgar.

"He's on the phone. He'll be right in," Jessie informed them as she and Victor walked in.

"Umm...I have a surprise for you," Victor said, looking at Trent, then the door behind him.

Trent missed it, though, because he was trying to get out from under her legs without moving her. "Not now."

"Trenton Weatherly, I will not be put off because of your shenanigans," a striking woman claimed as she walked into the room with her hand on Jake's arm.

"M-Mother," Trent croaked out, looking torn between staying by Sam's side and rushing to hers.

"I was just having the most enlightening chat with Sheriff Gurion." She gave Jake's arm a pat as he led her over to where the others were all standing. "He tells me I missed the beginning to quite an event but arrived just in time to see it all end well."

Sam wished the couch would open up and swallow her. This was not the way she wanted to meet his mother. Truthfully, she hadn't wanted to do it at all, but knew the day would eventually come. Sam wouldn't have had much of a choice since she was going to be her child's grandmother, after all.

“Samantha Brazen, Trent Weatherly, this is His Honor, Calvin Murdock. He’s the judge overseeing everything today.”

Sam nodded, as did Trent.

“It’s nice to meet you both. I understand you not rising, dear, as does everyone else. Shall we get started?” he asked, looking back at Jake, who was holding the clipboard from earlier.

He handed it to the judge, who looked everything over. “Everything looks in order. Why don’t we move over this way so Samantha will be facing us?”

As one, the little group moved toward Jake’s office, where she could see everyone. Why they were all there to listen to him go over the agreements, she had no clue. It was possible Bobbie called them before and they were just showing up now.

The judge adjusted his coat and cleared his throat before saying, “Trent and Samantha, I have to admit this is a very strange way to start off a new life together, but I understand the circumstances were quite dire. That said, let us begin so we can get you two out of there.

“Trenton Weatherly, the woman beside you has family and friends that love her dearly. Do you promise to love her and guide her to standards they see fit?”

Sam couldn’t breathe. Her heart felt like it was going to beat its way out of her rib cage.

Trent dropped to one knee in front of her and took her good hand in his. “I will love her with everything I have and more.”

Her jaw dropped open at his declaration. “What?”

“I guess I wasn’t clear enough.” He brought her uninjured hand to his lips and pressed a warm kiss to her knuckles. “I love you, Samantha Brazen, probably have since the minute you threatened me with a spatula covered with chocolate frosting.”

Sam barely felt the tears on her cheeks, but she heard the judge say, “Okay, moving on. Samantha Brazen, Trent is a man, which means he may not always say, or do, the right thing. Do you promise

to look past his poor choice in words and into his heart for the real meaning and love him with all of your heart?”

Sam looked at Trent’s handsome smile and knew she was getting herself into a future filled of the unexpected, and she’d never been happier. “I do.”

“Lovely. Now due to this extraordinary ceremony being a surprise to both the bride and groom, I’m assuming there will be no exchanging of rings at this time, so...”

“Wait.” Trent got to his feet and moved to the bars. “I’m sorry to interrupt you, Your Honor, but if Jake will get my envelope out of the desk, I have the rings.”

Everyone stood there staring at him, except for Jake, who was busy searching the drawers. He found the envelope, ripped it open, and dumped it out on the desktop. He picked up the little black box and tossed it to Trent. Trent reassumed his position and opened the box. Inside sat a set of matching gold bands and an exquisite diamond solitaire.

The ceremony took on a more conventional feel after that. They repeated the normal wedding vows, exchanged rings, and Trent kissed the bride. Okay kiss wasn’t an apt description, it was more like he ravaged her mouth. Everybody clapped and hollered, except Kurt who let out a loud groan as he dropped onto his cot.

Trent hugged her gently, his breath warm and moist on her neck as he whispered, “I wish I could make love to you here and now. Slow and gentle, driving you wild enough to forget your pain, but we’ve got quite the crowd.”

She sighed, letting him help her to her feet. “I want a rain check.”

“Deal. Now let’s go find out who wrote our wedding vows. I’m betting we owe Jake for that and all of this,” he said, waving his hand at their family as the doors slid open, setting them free.

Sam decided then and there she was going to find a way to repay him someday. She turned to see that Bobbie had him cornered. Maybe he’d need them sooner than she thought.

**THE END**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I live in northern Maine near the Canadian border. My husband and I have been married for what seems like forever sometimes and have three great kids. One girl, two boys, and a house full of pets. When I'm not totally caught up in getting my characters and scenes fleshed out I can usually be found with my nose stuck in a book, or snuggled up on the couch with my hubby or one of the kids watching a movie. I enjoy spending time with my big noisy family and fishing when I get the chance. Luckily I have a wonderful supportive family, and friends that are willing to sit there and listen to me ramble on about what my characters have done, or are about to do. I am a proud member of Romance Divas and enjoys visiting the Romantic Times forum.

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