



When an old flame reignites the passion within.

Jaclyn Kelly's love life is as dormant as a mausoleum. Since failing to become pregnant, Jaclyn has endured years of her fiancé's ridicule and infidelity. Fed up and ready to leave she stumbles into another dire predicament.

Old flame, Danny Cameron returns home from a decade of military service, he's all grown up, looking better than ever and knows precisely what he wants.

His priorities include only one thing: Claiming Jaclyn as his own

Stake His Claim

By

Lisa Perry



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ISBN: 978-1-60435-693-9

Cover Artist: T.D. McKinney

Editor: Lisa J. Jackson

Line Editor: Bernadette Smith

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Chapter One

Son of a Don Juan. The scent of seduction swam across the room and smacked Jaclyn Kelly in the head.

An orphic moan emerged from behind as a large hand sculpted her hip through the wool-knit dress and applied a gentle pressure. Jaclyn felt his arousal pressed snugly against her. Smiling, she nestled her backside closer into the groove of his lower body.

He squeezed tighter. She sighed louder.

His hand roamed further and cupped her breast through the thick fabric covering her.

Jaclyn kept her voice low, whispered hungrily, “I want you.” She reached a hand up to cover his, pushing his palm firmly against her, yearning to be touched in such an intimate way. She sighed as he freely accommodated her unspoken request to tempt and tease her budding nipples, unyielding and with more intensity than she had ever remembered.

How long has it been?

No. It was better not to venture down that road.

It remained dark and dreamlike behind her closed eyes. His embrace heated their bodies in a trance of pure serenity. Drawn together like kinetic energy, they held onto one another.

Tender lips brushed the skin along her neck before a hot, ragged breath followed. She shuddered at the sensations ebbing through her. She was on fire. Her blood pulsed as though a blood-pressure cuff squeezed her limbs. She felt the ache deep down inside.

He was back. And he wanted her with a desperation all his own. Not daring to lose the moment, Jaclyn lifted her hand from his. He continued his kneading of plump flesh. She went in search of her panties.

She caught the hem of her knee-length dress, raised it along her thighs. Using her thumb and forefinger to flick between the thin elastic of her sheer black panties, she hastily slid them down the length of her legs. Bringing her knees closer to her body, she leaned over and ushered the panties down to her ankles. She kicked the scrap of material off into the darkness.

He growled behind her. “God, you’re sexy.” He left her to tend to his own clothing.

Jaclyn heard the rustling of fabric being moved and discarded. The unbuckling of his belt was swift. He had his slacks unzipped and, along with his underwear, at his feet in no time at all.

She used her foot to help slide the clothing bunched around his ankles off his body and onto the floor below.

Feeling heated skin on skin, her body began to writhe against his as his erection poked at her ass. She felt faint, her lower body flooded with a rapid heat.

She tilted her hips back, raised her bare bottom further up against his taut stomach. “Sweet Jesus,” he rasped, before nipping at the base of her neck.

Jaclyn opened her legs and he slipped between her thighs to find her wet, eager center. She suppressed a gasp at the swift, multifarious movement. It was unlike any she had felt before.

She wanted to cry with joy, scream at the ecstasy she had craved, longed for, and wished they had shared a decade ago when they first got engaged. This would surely have had Tripp racing her down the aisle and not just slipping a three-carat diamond on her finger. Unfortunately, they never set a date, let alone felt the need for a piece of paper. But Tripp had also never quite made love to her like this. *This* was beyond her wildest dreams, her deepest fantasies.

He plunged into her and she angled further back to adjust to the full length of him. A loud groan erupted from both of them as his hard heat filled her completely, sliding even deeper into her slickened pussy.

His hand slipped beneath the hem of her dress and traveled up her body as his fingers journeyed back to her breasts. He clutched her softly and she seemed like the perfect fit for his strong, capable hands. He pulled the bra over her skin without bothering to go in search of the clasp. Her nipples were already tight and rigid when his fingers brushed over them.

The friction was electric as he glided in and out of her. She bit down on her lower lip to suppress her need to moan out loud.

He caressed every inch of her body—inside and out—stroking her to the point of pure bliss, she didn't want it to ever end.

“Baby, you feel incredible.” He panted. She imagined the visual he was getting. Modesty wasn't a quality worthy of worry right now, although in the past it had been her first reaction. She had never been quite this adventurous and wondered why.

It must be a dream.

A thumb rubbed across her nipple. She felt a flutter of coils spiral through her. The tweak of the rosy tip between his thumb and forefinger left her reeling. She thought she might explode if he didn't stop. She rushed to talk. “Touch me, please, touch me.”

He seemed to need no more instruction. As her body lay, emitting a desperate plea for fulfillment and release, she needed a reason to forget the past, to let go of the burdens that kept them apart for so long.

Never in all their years together had it ever felt quite like this. It was a rebirth. The sex was better than it had ever been because they wanted it so badly. She believed it with every aching, palpating pulse inside of her. Every nerve beneath her skin tingled with an electric force. She was ignited, on fire. She had only the man behind her to thank for reawakening her.

And now that she was wide awake—aroused and alive like never before—she would never go back.

Jaclyn purred at the lingering touch before he brushed over the smooth skin of her breast and ventured down her flat belly and across her pubic area. With her legs parted and angled back, he reached further across the soft skin. She was so wet, so hot. He easily slid his fingers across sensitive-silken skin.

“Ahh.” She gasped as he flicked over her hard nub. Her heart pounded like a jackhammer. She thought she was likely to start convulsing at his touch. He teased and tortured with deft caresses, masterful movements, and finesse as he thrust faster from behind.

Waves rippled through her. On the verge of crashing, she held on for dear life in fear of drowning under the sea of emotions that threatened to take her under. But there was nothing to cling tight to. Her explosion came on strong. Her body shook with the current. Her moan echoed across the room.

Not a dream. Oh, hell, it was real.

She filled with a liquid heat that warmed her to the soul. Hugged from behind, she was enveloped by a snug, musky-scented body as he released his own muffled groan of ecstasy.

As the flow began to subside, he removed his hand from between her moist thighs, brought it back up to her breast where he covered her. Her nipple still strained as he swept his palm over it before settling on the underside of the smooth skin.

He remained inside her until she let her hips fall back into place, where he was quick to nestle up against her. Her body, now relaxed and limp, wallowed in the alluring aftermath. The ambrosial scent of sex and sweat and heat strolled around the room filling Jaclyn’s senses.

As the moment allowed her to regain some semblance of focus, thoughts of what just occurred embraced her. And it was a delicious, glorious delectation.

He moved behind her, swept light kisses along her neck, all the way up to her ear where he nibbled at her lobe.

“That was unbelievable,” he said gruffly against her ear.

“Yes, it was.” She chose to keep her eyes closed. Opening them would conclude the lovemaking. *Not yet.*

“I didn’t think I was going to last that long.”

“I’m glad you did.” She laughed softly at the craziness of how long it had taken her fiancé to want to make love to her again. And she with him. They had been distant so long, she would think it impossible to reconnect after all they had been through. Jaclyn had been more than ready to leave him for good. She had thought he would jump right on

board with the decision. Perhaps not. She whispered hesitantly, not sure what to make of the whole situation, “I’ve been waiting a long time for that.”

Dead silence.

Jaclyn stirred at the sudden hush of uncertainty shooting through her. Her gut clenched at his deep, husky drawl. Her body went rigid.

“I’ve waited all my life for that moment,” he whispered. And her dread was confirmed.

Jaclyn’s eyes flew open.

To her surprise, it was still daylight outside. It wasn’t the middle of the night. And it wasn’t some salacious dream she was having, either.

The room was oddly familiar, but it wasn’t her bed. She glanced down at the hand on her breast, touching her as if it had always done so.

There was no ring on the hand that had just brought her to the most powerful climax of her entire life. A hand that touched her like she had never been touched before.

That hand... *wasn't* her fiancé's.

Chapter Two

“Talk to me, Jaclyn.”

“I have to go. I need to—”

“Turn around.” Danny Cameron moved forward to stand directly in Jaclyn’s path, blocking her hasty propulsion and forming a large barricade in the doorway which was her only means of escape.

Avoiding eye contact, she could feel his overbearing presence, his heat, and his frustration. She fumbled with the charcoal dress she was still wearing, the material bunched around her thighs as she desperately tried to cover her now horrifyingly modest body. The trouble seemed to be in the long zipper that trailed down her back to rest on the flair of her hips.

Jaclyn chanced a sideways glance at the man standing before her. Dare she even ask him to help her get the damn zipper up? It was his fault she was still half-naked after all.

His voice shot right to the pulse of her distress. “Look at me, please, Jaclyn.”

Jaclyn snapped her head up and let her eyes wander over his body. His pants were already back on, buttoned, zipped, and belted. His polo t-shirt returned to the original level of neatness it had been in the moment he first arrived at the house. He was back to looking impeccable and handsome, serious and downright delicious.

What a mess I’ve gotten myself into.

Jaclyn shook her head vigorously, her thick and dark chestnut hair cascading around her features, her eyes on the verge of tear shed, her lips trembling. “I can’t, Danny. Just, please leave. I have to get dressed, I have to—” She broke down as she still fought the zipper behind her. Her arms were now aching, her limbs numb from being held at a

bizarre angle at her lower back. Her bare skin remained visible to the man who had touched her so intimately moments ago.

“Hey, baby, come here.”

The endearment, along with the deep sexy growl in which he said it, caused a torrent of shivers to snake along her spine.

How could you do such a thing!? Jaclyn cursed herself at what she had so freely allowed to happen. “No.” She spoke tightly, moving away from him inching closer. “Stay where you are.”

Danny stopped a foot away, leaned down to the floor. Jaclyn tried to keep her eyes off him, but as he stood back up to his full height, her black lace panties dangling from his right index finger, she almost lost her breath.

“You may need these before heading downstairs,” he said in apparent amusement.

Jaclyn wasn’t impressed in the least. She marched forward, reached out, and snatched the scarce underwear in one quick swoop. “Give me those.”

Danny lost the slight grin he had managed to award her, and placed both hands onto his hips. “So that’s it, huh?” his voice issued defeat. “You have nothing to say to me? I’m just supposed to walk out of here and forget what just occurred between us?”

“Yes!” She had since hung her head again, unable to look into those sexy blue eyes.

Instead, she went in search of a place to stash her underwear as she wasn’t about to pull up her dress in front of Danny’s prying eyes, just to walk out of the room looking somewhere between discombobulated and half-decent again. Nobody would know she was going commando anyway. Most of the guests should have left by now. Her fiancé and his sleazy business associates were probably still thinking of their bank accounts, the next big deal, and a two-week trip to Vegas—purely business they would assure her—over whether or not the hostess had a visible panty line.

“You need to leave, Danny. Completely dismiss what has happened. It wasn’t meant to. We made a mistake, a big one. And I, for one, don’t ever want to think about it again—”

“That’s the grief talking, Jaclyn,” he said softly. He moved up behind her despite her constant protesting. He pushed her hands aside and zipped her dress in one fluid motion. She bit the inside of her cheek. She *had* been grieving in a way. The last few years of her

relationship with Tripp had been almost unbearable. But it didn't justify her current actions. Her fiancé may be fine with adding a little infidelity to his amazing slew of immoral adventures. Jaclyn was not.

"No, that's the guilt talking, Danny. And now I have enough of it to last me the rest of my life," she fired back.

Danny blew out a long, exasperated breath. "This isn't over, Jaclyn."

Jaclyn swiveled around so fast she almost lost her bearings. She knew her face paled at such a comment. His eyes bore into hers, as the intensity left her weak, wavering on the spot.

"I will leave for now. You need time, I know that." He ran a large hand through his disheveled chocolate locks and clenched his jaw. "I never planned for this to happen right now either, Jaclyn. Christ, not the way it did. But it *was* going to happen. I've wanted you since high school; we were such good friends once upon a time. What the hell happened since then?"

"I fell in love with Tripp." She rushed a little too hastily to sound remotely convincing. "I am about to marry him. The rest, as they say, is history."

"I'm a part of your history, Jaclyn. A huge slice, in fact. And the man you insist you love has been dangling the promise of marriage in your face for years. If that was me, you would have a gold band on that finger right alongside the pretty rock you got now."

"You don't know him—"

"Damn straight I don't. Don't care to either. But he doesn't want you. Not the way I want you. *That* I do know. I'm back now and figure I have the right to lay claim. It was inevitable we were going to be together—"

"That's where you're wrong." She fired back, flustered and unable to clear the fuzziness from his paralyzing words. *Oh Jesus, he can't be serious, not now!* "We are never going to be together." Jaclyn sidestepped around the strong statue of a man in the exit and yanked open the door. "Excuse me, but I have a luncheon to finish up."



"Sweetheart, come and meet Malcolm Lamonte. This guy is a fucking genius. Made *Minton & Montague* five mil on the Malibu Night workers' comp account. Five million

fucking big ones on one account...” He caught Jaclyn tightly around the waist as she made her hasty descent from the stairwell into the throngs of clients filling the Dubois great room.

Men and more men, along with an occasional scowling female in a designer cocktail dress and strappy heels, painted the carpet with their presence. Jaclyn cursed beneath her breath thinking she had been tucked away upstairs longer than she anticipated. Not expecting so many remaining patrons in her home, she felt her cheeks flush a radish hue.

Could they tell what the hostess had been doing? Jaclyn felt ill to her stomach. Although her body still tingled from Danny’s touch, her tormented psyche was battling her physical elation. She felt the room closing in on her. Dizzy. Disoriented.

Tripp Dubois, senior financial advisor to the Minton and Montague law firm, had a degree in civil law to go along with his impressive financial credentials which awarded him the status of ‘one of the boys’, when it came to blending in with a bunch of shady lawyers.

He drew Jaclyn near, his arm tightening around her body, way too tight for comfort as she covered his hands with hers to try to discreetly peel them off of her. She moved her neck to distract his touch, not that he cared one iota, “...enough to give a grown man a fucking boner the size of California, hey darlin’.” He whooped loud and brash at his entourage, brayed like an ass, then swooped down and slapped a wet kiss across her cheek, she fought the urge to turn around and slap him hard. He was an ignorant son of a bitch.

Jaclyn attempted to force a smile out of her cringe as the potent stench of booze-breath assaulted her. She mumbled, “That’s wonderful for you, Tripp, I was just on my way to get myself a drink. Excuse me.” She glanced at the man standing like a Cheshire cat across from where she and her fiancé stood, wondered, briefly, if he noticed the embrace was an awkward one at best. “Nice to meet you.” She lied easily and disengaged the handle Tripp had on her. Any touch he had issued over the last couple of years was unnatural and unwelcome. But knowing she must have the slight scent of sex still remnant on her skin, she balked at his closeness.

Tripp dropped his grasp on her and continued to engage his companion in business talk as Jaclyn made her way to the outdoor patio and the wet bar located by the pool. The

sangria she sipped was refreshing, shot right to her lower body as the heat filled her with thoughts of Danny inside her, which only muddled her thoughts even further.

She had said yes to Tripp's marriage proposal right out of high school. He was everything a girl could want and more: a real charmer, debonair looks, and a smart head on his broad, tanned shoulders. He treated her like an equal. He was an attentive lover and a thoughtful companion. Until a few years ago, when Jaclyn was unable to give him a child.

His frustration and anger became evident in every touch, every glance, every hateful word he threw at her. She came from a conservative family, believed they weren't able to become pregnant as they weren't married—God's little trick to coerce Tripp to commit. Jaclyn, sadly, now believed Tripp was devious enough not to marry her until she proved she could give him a child.

She stayed, thinking she would conceive eventually. And things would go back to the way they were before the bitterness bogged down the fun times. But still nothing. And then he strayed. It was subtle at first. He would come home to her, pour his heart out with believable remorse. Her insecurities enabled him to manipulate her weakness for his charm.

It wasn't always her nature to need somebody in her life. As a little girl—and only child—Jaclyn found great comfort in animals and the wonders of nature along the river below her parent's farmhouse. The open meadows were her sanctuary. She would spend hours chasing stray puppies and picking fresh fruit from the orchids. Her mother would bake pies as she would sit and listen to her father's stories of days gone by on the porch swing, or run wildly catching fireflies in a vintage jar thinking they would last forever cooped up in something so void of freedom and happiness.

She was wrong, of course. After the buzzing beauty of nightlights dimmed, they lay dead on the bottom of the glass. Jaclyn had been devastated at the thought of having killed such magical creatures. Only to have grown into a woman and realized fate had a cruel way of finding her. Her mother's illness and death had lingered in her heart, and becoming caged in the Dubois household was still better than being alone in her mind. She dealt with a magnitude of confusion when all she wanted was a distraction. It worked for a long time, too. The drama surrounding her relationship certainly took her mind off

the pain that still lingered at her mother's death years prior, her father's current ailing health, and Danny Cameron's heartbreaking rejection ten years ago.

She skulled the remainder of her drink, felt the cold rush of sharp alcohol graze her throat. Her flesh tightened at the sensations and she felt the instant need for another sweet release. She had been planning her escape from the jar and knew it was as good a time as any. She was finally at peace with the breaking of her engagement, considering her fiancé clearly had no desire to marry her.

And then Danny returned.

He left for the Marine Corps a decade ago. They had been the closest of friends throughout their teen years, although never pursuing a relationship. Jaclyn had always wanted more, held back for the longest time, only to muster enough courage to lay her heart on the line. But Danny held back. It was a rejection which almost killed her, and their friendship began to fall apart. She took up with Tripp, the rich kid, the handsome, charismatic stud of San Jose high, just to get Danny out of her head and ultimately out of her heart.

Then Danny joined the military. Just like that.

She couldn't fault him, really. She had been the one to move on with her life, and more importantly, without him in it. But why decide on such a career move so dangerous, so suddenly? He had never talked of being a soldier beforehand. It hadn't made sense then, and it sure as hell made no sense now. He had come home. Why, if running off to the military was what he so passionately wanted to do with his life, would he return so abruptly?

He was a changed man, that was for sure. *The way he made love, so fluid, so sensual.* He no doubt saw and experienced so many great and devastating things while gone. He had been deployed to Asia, Australia, and then the Middle East. Her father had caught wind of conversations at his workshop, as Danny's cousin was doing an apprenticeship for auto mechanics and liked to talk to the other guys about his big cousin being a brave marine being shipped abroad to all those exotic locations.

Her father spoke to her of Danny's travels knowing how close they had been, even though they had lost touch completely. For ten whole years, Jaclyn wondered what adventures the love of her life had sought and conquered. And she remained in San Jose,

stagnant, staid, and lived life with a broken heart, a wounded spirit, and a hunger never satisfied by Tripp Dubois.

In the beginning, she thought her inability to feel for Tripp the way she did Danny was due to the destruction her relationship was enduring over time.

Apparently not.

Danny was home.

And this time he wanted her.

Chapter Three

“It might help if you talked to someone about this.”

“About what?”

“Your shambles of a relationship, Jaclyn. You’re not married to the guy, and you don’t have kids to drag through a divorce—”

“Why does everyone think they know what’s best for me?”

“Honey, Collette’s newborn could tell you it’s over. Just leave the cad, he was out there flaunting that redhead all over Vegas last month, Jimmy was there for a poker tournament an’ he told Gus who told Jalil, an’ you know my man tells me everything. Worse’n a giddy teen drama queen that one.” Jasmine Walker put a meaty fist on her oversized hip and gave Jaclyn a stern talking to.

“Collette’s baby is colicky, can’t be easy for a new mom to deal with.” Jaclyn pledged in attempt to switch gears and use the excuse to flee. She busied herself by moving about the office where she filed away all the folders for the day and readied herself for the takeover of the night shift obstetric nurses.

It was a natural progression for Jaclyn to go to nursing school and work her way towards being a neonatal nurse. She loved the whole amazing prospect of pregnancy and birth and babies. It was a rewarding career path and she thoroughly adored her job, the staff she worked with, and the mothers with whom she built more than a short acquaintance with. To Jaclyn, they were friends. And like the scarce amount of family she had, they managed to fill a void.

With the look the older woman gave her, she could have been on her way to the emergency room and it would cause a cease and desist.

Jasmine moved to the center of the pathway, stood in front of Jaclyn halting her brisk movement, gripped her forearms, and looked her dead in the eye. “Collette needs to name that baby girl so we can stop calling it *Collette’s baby*.”

At the attempt of humor, Jaclyn hitched the corner of her lip up into a lopsided smile.

Her co-worker and all-around mother hen of the medical clinic, Jasmine added softly, “And you, baby girl, need to live again. Jalil an’ I been together since junior high. We love deeply and we laugh often. You and that millionaire man of yours do those two things and I’ll say no more. If you don’t, Jasmine gonna be all over you to change that, you understand me, Jaclyn?”

Jaclyn licked her lips and smiled at Jasmine’s gentle stare. “I was already planning on sitting Tripp down to talk about going our separate ways. We’ve been together too long to just pack up and leave quietly. I’ve given him too many years to just walk away in the middle of the night—”

“What brought this on?” Jasmine raised a thick brow, her lips pursing thickly.

Jaclyn sighed, then slightly shook her head. “Does it really matter, Jas? I mean, you just said—”

“I know what I said, baby girl, but I only just said it. You been thinking about this move for a lot longer, or has something—”

“Yes, I’ve been thinking about it a hell of a long time, Jasmine.” She cut in before her confidante went any further.

Jasmine wasn’t going to let it drop so easily. Jaclyn felt her heart rate pick up and pummel against her ribcage at Jasmine’s deep voice. “Is there another reason driving this...” Jaclyn was already shaking her head no, “...because thinking about this for weeks, months, or even years to finally doing something about it usually indicates a reason to take that next step.”

“It’s time, Jasmine.” Jaclyn squeezed her hand firmly to let her know she needed this issue to drop.

Jasmine smiled ruefully. “Where will you go? Your daddy is all alone in that big house across town, getting up there in years, he would enjoy having his only child come home for a while, I’m sure.”

“It’s an idea. I would love to be close enough to help him out more now that the arthritis is getting worse. And I don’t plan on dating for a long time to come. I plan on working out the kinks in my life before I do anything else. So yeah, I will probably move home again.”

Jasmine chuckled heartily, pulled Jaclyn close and encompassed her in a hug, whispered in her ear, “I understand why you would think that’s what you need, but honey, there ain’t nothing like a strong, sexy man to wake up next to every morning. Just don’t go leaving it too long, okay? You may dry up and forget how good a night of real lovin’, with a real man, can be. That fiancé of yours may have made you a tad jaded, but there are a few good men left out there honey, and I want you to have yourself one of ‘em.”

“I do, too, Jas, eventually. As soon as I’m through with this complication. I just don’t need another one right now.” Jaclyn pulled back and sucked in a lungful of frigid air, attempted a shaky smile and added, “But thank you for caring about me, Jas, you’re a true friend.”

“Always.” She swept forward and embraced Jaclyn in another bear hug. Jaclyn hugged her back, tightly, inhaled the wild orchid scent while closing her eyes to hold back the tears of joy. Freedom was in her sights. In almost a decade, Jaclyn saw the world *very* clearly.



Returning to the Dubois mansion, Jaclyn dumped her purse on the kitchen counter and switched on the radio to fill her mind and put her in a mellower mood. She started singing along to the words of a country tune, ‘*girl, I just got started lovin’ you...*’ as she went about fixing some dinner.

Scouring the refrigerator for lettuce, tomatoes, and cucumber she swayed her hips to the deep croon of James Otto and hummed along feeling chipper about the talk she had with Jasmine earlier. She also figured shrinks weren’t all wrong, and that getting personal issues off your chest helped alleviate the anxiety deep within. It was something she had never been good at. Keeping her hurt buried deep down always worked for her, or so she believed. How wrong she had been for twenty-seven-years of her life. But thankful she

would not go another day with such a ridiculous notion. A weight had lifted. All she had to do now was wait for Tripp to return home.

She kicked the door closed and went about preparing a side salad while thinking of what meat to cook to go along side it. She was gearing herself up to engage Tripp in a talk about ending their engagement and figured steak was the way to go.

She went back to the fridge and pulled a tray from the crisper holding two filet mignons wrapped in bacon and closed the door again with the heel of her foot. She swung her eyes past the phone hanging on the wall and saw the neon orange light flashing.

Placing the meat on the counter she leaned forward and pressed the button to hear the message. She felt her heart drop at her fiancé's nonchalant tone. *"Darling, meeting ran late, on my way to Henderson, Nevada to calm down an irate client. Big mix up—not my fault—but you know how it is, someone needs to be the hero and take one for the team. Don't wait up."*

At the beep to indicate the message had ended, Jaelyn jumped from the counter, bumping her hip against the granite edging. She winced at the pain. Rubbing the sore spot, she grabbed the tray and opened the fridge, shoved the meat back where it came from and slammed the door closed.

Frustrated by Tripp's constant need to avoid her, she continued to make her salad, added a few bacon bits, sliced a ripe avocado, boiled an egg, and poured in an abundant of garlic-crusting croutons, and even shook almost half a bottle of creamy ranch dressing on top to smother the elements, no longer caring about the possible calories involved. She would gladly die in her sleep from a massive coronary and be satisfied she no longer had to deal with her life.

She pushed the off button to the radio, muting Toby Keith's song about putting off a list of things he had to do today. She snorted annoyingly in understanding, knowing they weren't quite on the same page, but felt like she had an ally on her side at least. Taking her oversized bowl of a heart attack into the family room, she cozied up on the massive leather sofa, grabbed for the remote, and surfed channels until she found a cheesy reality show and settled in for the evening.

Dumbfounded how these people treated one another with such disrespect, Jaclyn wondered about reaching for the phone and calling the local hotels for an available room. She could pack up and leave tonight. After all, who knew when the man was due to come home.

And then felt guilty at even perpetuating such a thought. *Coward!*

Jaclyn couldn't quite believe the amount of backstabbing the people on these shows seemed fine portraying to the world. Didn't they realize how idiotic they looked? A stab of guilt over her own cheating mere days ago had Jaclyn taking back her judgmental attitude. She was an imperfect person herself. Who was she to judge these people she didn't even know?

She would wait for Tripp to return, talk to him face to face, admit her affair, offer an apology, and confirm their engagement was over. Then together they would proceed on parting ways. She was steering clear of Danny, so what did it matter if she had to wait another day? It wasn't like she had any crucial engagements pressing.

She would *not* be engaging Danny Cameron anytime soon.

The sheer prospect of having to reassure herself of that caused Jaclyn another wave of frustration.

Tripp Dubois may be a jerk more often than he wasn't, but he deserved respect and consideration from the woman he planned to marry a decade ago.

Regardless of the fact that Jaclyn, it seemed, no longer owned such respect and consideration from the man she made a promise to.

Chapter Four

Jaclyn left the San Jose Medical Clinic as the sun was setting. Work was always a way to keep her mind busy and off her tattered home life. Tripp had returned late last night. She stirred and woke wanting to talk. He insisted he was beat, stripped, and headed for the shower before climbing into bed beside her where he turned his back to her and was snoring before Jaclyn could rouse herself enough for the confrontation.

She gave up. Let it drop for yet another night.

It had been almost a week since Danny bulldozed back into her life, too, and thankfully there had been no sign of him since. He must have gotten her message. She wouldn't be giving in to his wiles ever again, she knew, and she felt a pang of loss. A pain she remembered the day her father made mention Danny Cameron joined the Marines and was shipping off to boot camp in three days.

Three days! Jaclyn cried herself to sleep for the first two. And being almost certain he would stop by to say goodbye on the third, she waited. He never came.

Why come back now, then?

The skies were ignited a deep gray as the clouds rolled in, deepening the dusk. A chill flowed through the air and caused a shiver in Jaclyn's bones. She hugged her lightweight coat around her blouse and jeans. Her heeled boots click-clacked on concrete as she fled the oncoming storm and made her way across the near-vacant parking lot to where her car sat.

She gasped aloud and stopped dead in her tracks as she came upon Danny leaning insouciantly against the driver's side door. He had his opaque aviator sunglasses plastered to what Jaclyn knew to be a pair of incredible blue eyes underneath. His nose,

straight and narrow, elongated his face and positioned his eyes to be the main focus of his features, along with his lips, that now held a tight and unmoving line across his lower face. He was one gorgeous specimen.

She tried to ignore his overbearing presence by rummaging through her purse to locate her keys and only prolonged the inevitable.

“Heard you were working over here.” Even his voice, every time she heard it, sent a jolt through her. It worked its way beneath her skin and melted away any ill feelings she had at that moment. Damn him!

“Oh, yeah? Who told you that?” She glanced upwards at the dreary sky as a boom of thunder threatened to mute their conversation should they even allow one to commence.

“Your dad. Went to see him at the shop. He still looks the same. Caught him with his head under the hood, like always.”

“A mechanic’s life—rarely room for advancement.” She drolled tartly, not wishing to like the fact that her old friend-slash-crush was already doing the rounds with her family.

It made him feel close. It brought up memories of her youth. Her desire for him, back when it was puppy love. She shook the idea from her mind. Now it was different. Now it was pure, dirty lust.

He peeled the sunglasses from his face and she couldn’t help but draw her attention to him. He was magnetic. He folded and slid the lenses into his front shirt pocket, his gaze never leaving her face.

She looked at him, a low, gazing ascent from his scuffed leather boots and up relaxed, slightly loose-hanging jeans. The swell of his sex caused her tummy to coil, she swallowed hard, remembered the size filling her from behind. Her pussy creamed at the reminder, her mouth turned arid as the Arizona desert.

He wore a thin chambray shirt, blue and white checkered. It meshed with his stunning eyes. He smiled back at her, a slightly uneven set of lips, she felt the drive to stand up on tip-toes, lean into his strong arms and kiss them. She had never felt his lips on hers. His mouth had only rubbed eagerly against the base of her neck.

To feel it rub against hers, open, as he caught her and ravished her until she went numb with need. His hot tongue swirling inside her mouth, trailing her body and sinking deep into her pussy. *No, don’t go there!*

“Jaclyn.”

Before she could think about what he was about to do, he was already doing it. He stepped forward, his arms wrapped tightly around her waist as he pushed her back against the heavy metal of her vehicle.

The thunder above her was no match for the fire within her. Her ears thrummed along with her heartbeat. She could hear nothing but the pulse of blood flowing throughout her body.

Jaclyn kissed him back with an urgency she hadn't recalled ever feeling before. He was confusing and intoxicating in one hot and delectable package of strength and man. He smelt of cologne, cinnamon, and rain.

She hadn't noticed the rain beginning to fall. It was a soft shower which was quickly turning into a torrent. It felt good, refreshing, if not suffocating.

When Danny pulled back slightly, he growled. “Open the damn car, Jaclyn.”

She struggled for the right key, found the hole and inserted it, turned it swiftly and pulled her door open, Danny ran around to the passenger side and got in.

They slammed their doors closed and as Jaclyn had time to gather her senses, she went to push the key into the ignition. “Want me to take you home?” She blurted, not knowing what else to say at this point.

Danny used his hand on her chin to force her to face him. She held her breath thinking he would speak. He didn't. He reached under his seat, pushed it back as far as it would go, then he leaned forward, grabbed Jaclyn around the waist and pulled her forward. She sprang from her seat by his brute strength and landed on his lap. Almost kneeing him in the groin, she quickly angled her body to avoid the collision.

The outcome had her sliding onto him, straddling him, her body conforming to his lap atop his parted legs. His thighs beneath her were corded muscle and felt incredible holding her weight. She squirmed closer, rubbed her crotch against his bulging denim and heard him moan. “Ahh, that's it, Jaclyn.”

“I shouldn't be doing this, Danny.”

“Oh, yes. You should.”

“I have to take you home, right now.”

“You have to take me to heaven, Jaclyn... *right now.*”



Danny let his hands travel the wet clothing covering Jaclyn's body until he curved his fingers along her neck, pulled her near, and melded a kiss against her soft, pliant lips. She ignited a raging inferno inside of him. Always had. But a horny fifteen-year-old kid had no business killing a friendship because he wanted to screw his best friend's brains out.

She remained a constant wet dream. Jaclyn Kelly flooded his thoughts since they met as kids. He had never loved anyone with such a passion. A decade later, he still hadn't been able to squelch such a raw desire for this woman.

Woman. Jesus fucking Christ, she was *all* woman now. Round and soft, firm and fuckable from every angle he could imagine. Danny hadn't soothed his libido since his return. He had watched Jaclyn from afar for two months now. Like a coward. No, a *stalker*, of all things, as he figured out how to reintroduce himself into her life.

She was still engaged to that rich prick, Dubois.

Engaged, but not married. What the hell was the bastard waiting for all these years? Danny would have made an honest woman out of Jaclyn on day one. Had he known earlier the two were never legally wed... His family always referred to Jaclyn as a Dubois. He figured it was true, not figurative of their long-term relationship and where it was ultimately headed.

Not that it mattered. Danny had nothing to offer her. They both grew up lower- to middle-class, she upgraded well above her status. What the hell kind of chance did he have to win her back?

But then last week, the day he followed her home from the markets, a party was in full swing as expensive vehicles lined the long driveway of the Dubois residence.

She pulled up out front. Classy black dress wrapped tight around her sexy stature, Danny could wait no longer. He figured he could hide out back, pretend to mingle with guests until he found an opportunity to get her alone. He had to make his move. She would either reject his advances or allow him back into her life.

Years and scores of women had passed. Harsh memories, hard knocks, and a major reality check as to what the hell was important in life since his stint in the military, gave

Danny the determination to go home, seek out his lost love and make her his. The Marine Corps taught him everything he knew. It had been a journey and adventure like no other.

But he missed Jaclyn.

He needed her and a life everlasting with this woman who consumed him.

He had waited in the wings for weeks, watching from afar until he just couldn't wait any more. There was a party going on and he saw Jaclyn slip in a side entrance to the place she called home.

He gathered some courage, not exactly sure of what he was going to do once he got her alone, and failed to care at that point. He followed her up to the second story where she entered a room. He didn't bother to knock, simply slipped inside before she turned and closed the door behind her. Danny reached out, grabbed Jaclyn around the waist, and kissed her neck to stop her from turning around to face him head on. God, she felt incredible.

When she abated her initial protest to his touch and fell into his embrace, he led her forwards to a bed. He prayed he wasn't about to lure Jaclyn into her and Tripp's sordid sheets, but with the flow of heated blood increasing faster than he could think, he didn't care if he was about to take her on a bed of nails, he'd gladly puncture his own spleen to have her naked against him.

At the sound of her purr, he followed her down to the soft, pliable surface, where he continued to bury his kiss in the nape of her neck. The heat intensified. His want, more potent than ever, made him unable to stop the stupidity he was about to commit. He would deal with the backlash later. Right then, hell, he didn't care. He needed Jaclyn.

It was *all* he needed.

He wanted to lay beside her, hold her, reminisce about the years gone by. But it didn't happen that way.

He hadn't planned to nail her right then and there. But hormones made him human. And he couldn't control his natural urges. Not after ten years of not seeing her.

And neither could he now.

"I'm going to fuck you, Jaclyn." He groaned against the hammering of rain on the glass surrounding them and the thwack, thwack on metal shielding them. The windows fogged up fast from their heavy breathing.

Danny trailed hot kisses down her neck, his hands roaming over her breasts as they inclined up to meet his grasp. He found the hem and tugged it up and over her head, threw it to the driver's seat and went behind her to unleash the bra she wore. His mouth was on target as the fabric fell away and her breasts popped from their casing.

His mouth covered a tight nipple, his hands cupped her full fleshy breasts as she threw her head back and pushed them further into his touch. "Oh, God, Danny, don't stop."

Music to his ears, he rolled her beaded areola around his tongue, his teeth grazed lightly as he felt Jaclyn grind her middle harder against his.

He couldn't hold on much longer. This had been a dream, a fantasy so long fought. Having her at his will was too much to bear. Holding off was not an option.

His fingers unbuttoned and unzipped the opening, allowing his hands to shove down the denim of her jeans, he cupped her butt cheeks and shifted her higher where she helped navigate the pants down her legs where they were thrown into a pile beneath their feet.

"Stay there," Danny demanded. Jaclyn held her body weight above him while he went to work relieving his fully loaded hard-on and heavy balls from their restrictive cocoon.

As his pants joined hers on the floor of the car, Jaclyn uttered a frantic, "Do you have protection?"

"Jesus, Jaclyn." He groaned angrily, pulling her down onto his lap, his palm encasing her neck and bringing her lips back to his for a full fledged kiss. "I'm not gonna stop for that." His hips lunged towards her as she slid down into the crook of his hips, her pussy nudging his erection into position.

Too eager to wait, Danny used his hand and shifted his rock-hard shaft between her legs where he probed her opening and whispered in useless desperation, "Fuck me, Jaclyn, before I explode all over you."

She sunk down over him, wrapped her throbbing, moistened pussy over him, and clenched tightly. "Oh, God, yes." She sighed heavily before releasing and pulling out slightly, only to crash into him again, her rhythm becoming a fluid dance between their bodies.

Sweat broke out along Danny's skin, mingling with the rain and sex, and Jaclyn's scent of woman. He wanted to go on like this forever. He wanted to lift her up and suck on her juices, taste her from her most cherished parts, flick her clit until she screamed for more.

He would always give her more.

She thrust harder, faster, her soft soothing voice in his ear took him over the edge and he pushed up to meet her where he exploded into a magnitude of convulsions. His body, a rigid machine of power pouring into her everything he had. She clung tight, her breasts smothering his face as he nuzzled deeper into the heat.

As the eruption wore down, Jaclyn sat back and Danny felt a twinge of resentment. "You didn't finish, did you?" He wanted to go again, make her squeal at his touch, beg for more, chant his name and tell him he was the best she ever had.

An ego stroking wasn't bound to come from that performance. "Shit, I'm sorry, Jaclyn. I couldn't hold out—"

"Don't, Danny." She whispered gently.

"You just feel so incredible. I've wanted this, wanted *you* for so damn long, it's killing me inside."

Jaclyn tensed as though his words made her uncomfortable. She made a move to unstraddle his hips and find her jeans where she busied herself shifting clothing into place, her voice was light, barely audible as Danny felt a crushing blow to his vulnerability. "That's twice we didn't use protection."

It was all she said. After all they had done, two mind-blowing screw-sessions and that's all she had to say for it?

His anger pushed through his calm, sated state of mind. "Fuck the protection, Jaclyn. I get you pregnant and it gives you more cause to leave that asshole you insist on marrying and—"

Her head swung around so fast she almost took out the rear-view mirror. "You did that on purpose?"

Danny exhaled a long breath, ran a hand through his cropped hair. He had been growing it out since leaving the military and was happy it no longer resembled a razor sharp buzz cut.

“My *purpose*,” he stressed the word realizing that anything he said would set her off right now. He knew Jaclyn well enough to know she was truly struggling with cheating on her fiancé. At this point, he didn’t give a shit. He was steamed. “Was to fuck you. Mission accomplished, I say.” He said it to sting and wasn’t sure why.

He watched as her face fell, hostility abated, but she didn’t soften towards him either. “Yeah, mission accomplished.” She turned the engine, looked straight ahead. “Now get out of my car.”

Chapter Five

The call came through at a little after dusk the next night. Tripp was nowhere to be found. No note had been left and none of his closest friends or business associates knew where he was. Jaclyn fought the urge to call his parents, only to dismiss such an insane thought before it came to fruition.

The Dubois family despised her almost as much as her own fiancé did, she was sure of it.

And Jaclyn was ready and eager to seek out said fiancé and tell him their engagement was over. It was high time to end this pitiful excuse of a lifestyle which had become worse than hostile roommates. It wasn't healthy. It was depressing her even further and if she didn't get out now, she'd likely jump off the attic roof before the year came to an end.

And then the call came through.

Her father was in the hospital. Jaclyn felt the weight of the world on her shoulders as her aging father lived all alone, somehow managed to take care of himself, the shop, and still survive the day to day activities of ranch life.

Not that it was much of a functioning ranch at this point. Looked more like a petting zoo in a broken-down landscape of overgrown meadows and dying fruit trees. Over the years, Jeb's stubborn pride had refused Jaclyn's help to fix it up. He was clear she would not be using Dubois funds to re-establish his family's land.

But he couldn't do it alone.

Jaclyn used what money she saved to do the little things, like make sure his well was full and clean and have a ranch hand stop by quarterly to fix any kinks in the fence, knowing her father yearned for the day his land would flourish with cattle and horses as it

did when his forefathers rode the land. She had to lie, of course, anyone offering to work on his property had to use the old ‘I’m a neighbor and our fences need fixing,’ for him to allow anyone to work on it.

She would stop by for visits every week and bring a load of groceries, the essentials, and some fresh produce from the town market. He always did enjoy her visits. As long as she was alone.

Jaclyn had stopped by late that afternoon after work for a brief visit, she was eager to tell her father she was likely to move back home for a while. Give him a heads up before she turned up unannounced on his doorstep, suitcase in hand and have the poor man have a heart attack thinking she was in trouble. But he looked overly tired, and she didn’t risk bringing it up just yet. Not that it mattered, she hadn’t been able to pin down Tripp yet either.

Her father sat quietly while she peeled an orange for him. His joints were giving him trouble, and something as simple as pulling a peel from a piece of fruit was an almost impossible task despite Jeb’s stubborn efforts to try. The weather didn’t help much, dry heat in summer and then the rains coming in only stiffened his old bones up ten-fold.

She had gone so far as to mention he move to Florida where the humidity would oil up his joints, only to garner a scoff in response. Silly to have thought Jeb Kelly would dare leave Kelly land.

Jaclyn knew her father wished to be laid to rest on his land. He had said so that afternoon as she was leaving. Could he have known something was about to happen? Jaclyn fought the tears rimmed at her eyes as she needed to stay strong. Her heart raced uncomfortably, so much it hurt. She felt a numbness take over her body as she remembered her last minutes with her father mere hours ago.

He had walked her to her car. She had climbed in and let the window slide down to allow his usual kiss of her cheek. He slipped a piece of flimsy note paper into her bag before she disengaged it from her shoulder and threw it down on the passenger side seating. “In case you need anything, anything at all, Jac.”

Jaclyn dismissed it, assuming it was a number to one of her father’s co-workers at the shop. She was more concerned with the man’s lack of color. “You okay, Daddy?”

He smiled as he always did and answered accordingly. “Course I am, sweetheart. You go on home now. I’m going inside to watch a movie, get an early night.”

Jaclyn perked up, “Want some company to watch that movie, I could hang around—”

He had stopped her with a wave of the hand. “A woman should be at home with her man, Jac, as much as I’d like you to stay, you should spend some time with—”

“Yeah, I know, Dad. I understand.” She honestly did, but she felt hurt by his brushing her off, after all, she knew he never approved of Tripp being a decent husband for her. She figured he’d be begging her to stay. She also knew the man was a believer in marriage vows. It wasn’t helping him that Tripp was holding off on signing *those* papers. Jaclyn would constantly remind herself ‘*you made your bed, now lie in it.*’ It was, in her mind, her father’s unspoken belief.

Sure he worried about her happiness over the years. Had even asked her point blank if she was happy with her decision. Not wanting to upset him, she skirted around the truth until a lie was all that would stop his asking.

Jeb Kelly’s distaste for Tripp Dubois wasn’t lost on Jaclyn, but she didn’t believe in running from a relationship at the first sign of trouble any more than her parents did. But ten years of progressive downhill bobsledding and she finally knew it was something she should have done a hell of a long time ago. Like her father wished she would have.

And now he may never know her daughter would be moving on to a better life.

Jaclyn grabbed her purse and keys, revved her vehicle in a mad panic, and raced to the public county hospital, praying her father was still breathing.



Jaclyn paced the hallways unable to sit still and await the arrival of a nurse or surgeon to inform her of her father’s status. A stroke was all they said over the phone. Her father had suffered a stroke and was in the critical care ward being closely monitored. She felt her chest constrict so much so she could barely draw breath and the back and forth motion didn’t help her cause.

The walls were bare and discolored. The old public hospital needed some major funding and upgrading, that much was clear. It was jarring, to be cooped up inside such a

building after so many years. She remembered having her tonsils taken out when she was seven, and then a broken arm two years later, in the very hospital her father now lay ill in.

She thought nothing of the peeling drywall and chipped linoleum flooring back then. The overwhelming odor of ammonia wafting through the corridors made her cringe now, made her feel like a total first-rate snob.

Perhaps she was. Money usually made one forget or forgo their roots, especially if they were broken or less than average. Jaclyn went over to a chair and slumped down into one where she stared ahead at the double doors which held her father.

She loved him so. And she wasn't ashamed of the life he and her mother had provided her. She remembered a very happy childhood up until her mother's tragic death. She never wanted for anything fancy or frivolous. Just acceptance and love. And her father adored her, she knew well enough.

Resting her elbows onto her knees Jaclyn lowered her head into her hands and cried. She was exhausted and frustrated. Moody and confused. She wanted the strong protector and provider who was her father to be okay. She wasn't sure she could handle his leaving her right now.

She wasn't sure she could be alone, either. The peace and quiet too reminiscent of a vacant household, void of laughter and chatter a family should be enjoying. She was likely to go insane if left alone to obsess over Jeb Kelly's fate.

She lifted her head, swiped at her cheeks to alleviate the wet tracks and pulled her purse onto her lap. She dug in and scoured the bag for the paper he had shoved in earlier that afternoon.

The crumpled piece was smoothed out by her shaky fingers as she sat staring at the name: Danny Cameron. Alongside the bright blue ink was a phone number. She didn't recall seeing a cell phone anywhere on him while in his company, or even while undressing him for that matter. Well, obviously he must live somewhere since his return to town, she figured. A 'duh' caused her to almost slap a palm to her forehead.

A moment of doubt washed over Jaclyn's common sense. She knew she shouldn't call him. But at this point, she also knew she had to do something that would help her cope.

Danny Cameron was nothing if he wasn't reliable.

Chapter Six

Darkening shadows rolled in faster than Danny, and the construction crew he had been working for since his return from Afghanistan three months ago, could have possibly predicted. A previously clear-blue sky with virtually no cloud cover became a bleak, overcast horizon within an instant. Rain threatened the worksite as the dismal grey sky hovered over them.

“It’s late enough for pack-up time. Let’s get this place covered and get out of here for the night.” His foreman called out to the group of guys working the site to leave everything as it was and bring out the tarps.

Thankfully, everything had been packed away and covered up before the first pellets of water hit.

Danny limbered his heavy body across the dirt and dust of the building site before it quickly turned to mush and mud beneath his feet, jumped into his dually, and left the property to the elements of Mother Nature.

It was a forty-minute drive through the winding back roads, a scenic route he hadn’t had the time, or inclination to see as he traveled the rest of the way to the river where his trailer sat.

The isolation was peaceful enough, and it would be ideal if it didn’t allow him to think. Somehow the two went hand in hand. A cruel joke on him, he guessed.

Danny would drive up to his lonesome little trailer, watch the moonlight bounce off the water, and drink until he forgot. Until he fell asleep and stopped the echoing whispers of the name that still haunted him.

Jaclyn Kelly.

Like a knife through the heart. She was trouble without even trying. Danny knew he couldn't be around her if he couldn't have her. And if he couldn't have her—he was better off alone.

He didn't like that option one little bit.

He yanked the truck into park and elbowed his way out the door. Stalking to his trailer, he thrust open the door and made his way down the short corridor. He threw his keys down on the kitchen bench and grabbed the refrigerator handle.

He aimed a fist directly for the loose bottles that filled every shelf, save for the corner which held a half-eaten slice of meat-lover's pizza, hardened to inedible proportions from the frigid air. He hadn't bothered to throw it away, simply opened his hand and lunged for a beer.

Pulling it out just as swiftly, he turned and swiped the bottle opener from the bench where it sat as if it were an appliance all on its own. Popping the top, he kicked up his leg to close the fridge door from behind.

The rain had picked up considerably since Danny left work, the sounds somewhat soothed his antsy demeanor as they pelted against the metal roof. He flopped down onto the unmade bed and stared at the ceiling. His thoughts reverted directly to the source of his loneliness. Go figure.

Damn you, Jaclyn.

As Danny's head began to numb, his crotch started to throb. There was little to no chance of falling asleep. He would gladly give up a kidney to be inside her right now. Hell, he'd sell his soul to the devil if he could feel her lips on his.

Life's little displeasures, he scoffed as he placed the bottle to his lips and drank. He finished his beer off quickly and shot up to grab another. Tonight was going to be another binge-drinking session if he could help it. He had been experiencing nightmares since his return from the battlefields of Afghanistan and he wasn't happy about those either.

If he wasn't careful, he'd be sent to a shrink claiming he had P.T.S.D. And he needed that status like he needed a hole in the head. He knew he wasn't crazy. He was in love. And struggling with a woman hell bent on pushing him aside to ride out a stormy relationship was as depressing as it got.

His thoughts stopped short as his body relaxed and his eyes closed against the melodious sounds of rain on his roof. He slept. He dreamed. And he hardened.

And the phone blasted from the other side of the room. Groaning at the build-up of blood that was flooding his hard-on and slamming against his briefs to the zipper of his jeans, he sat upright, wide awake at the assault, where he rolled off the bed.

In three long strides, he had made it to the screaming telephone, where he wrenched the receiver from the cradle that hung on the wall and barked in annoyance, “Yeah?”

“Danny? I’m glad I caught you, it’s Jaclyn.”

His stomach almost bottomed out at the desperation in her voice. His pulse pounded through his body and he felt a jarring numbness take over. What the hell was she calling *him* for?

He shook the initial concern aside. The fact she was calling was huge. But the only person she could have gotten his number from was her father.

His heart stopped beating as he realized this wasn’t a *can we meet somewhere and get it on*, kind of call.

At his hefty pause, Jaclyn continued, her tone picking up a notch. “Are you busy? It’s just that, well, I have some news. It’s not good, Danny, it can’t wait.”

“Then stop apologizing and tell me what’s going on.” His heart hammering deep in his chest caused a series of panic attacks, and his response came out overly stern.

“I just had nobody else to call and I didn’t know—”

She was rambling and sounded on the verge of a breakdown. Danny used a soothing tone. “Jaclyn, what happened? I’ll come get you. Tell me where you are.”

“It’s my father, Danny, oh, God.”

She let go and sobbed into the phone line. Danny’s heart stopped beating and almost catapulted up his esophagus and out of his mouth. Fear hit him like a four-by-four at a Scottish games tournament after a premature cable-toss.

He leaned slightly at the waist, one hand on his hip, a knee bent and hitched onto the cushioning of the kitchen nook, as he resumed his tall posture not sure what to do at this point. Sit or stand? The trailer had always been small, but now it felt as though the walls were caving in on him.

Slowing his erratic heartbeat, Danny took a few long breaths while the phone remained clutched to his ear. Heat swarmed throughout the interior of his trailer, the scent of damp earth making its way inside and gloving Danny like a sweaty baseball mitt.

“What happened, Jac?”

“He had a stroke.” It was barely a whisper.

Danny cursed beneath his breath before adding, “How bad is it?”

Jaclyn didn’t respond.

Danny closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the splintered wood of the cabinet. “Is he alert? Alive?”

“Yes, he’s alive. At least, I think he is—”

“You think? What the hell?”

“He’s been in the CCU for—”

“Where are you, Jac? Which hospital?”

“San Jose County Pub—”

“I’m on my way.”

Not waiting for a final response, Danny threw the receiver back onto the cradle like a hot coal. He slid his body down out of the bench seat of the breakfast nook and raced to his truck.

Chapter Seven

Jaclyn felt his foreboding body before he even made it all the way down the hallway to greet her. She remained frozen on the hard plastic seats of the waiting room.

“Where is he?” Danny hustled around a mother-daughter team teetering in the doorway ogling over a glossy magazine, and came to sit in the chair beside her. She felt his heat, his familiar scent, and the look on his face said he had made a frenzied drive over as she had a couple hours ago.

Jaclyn inched her chin in the general direction of the Critical Care Unit. “He’s been in the CCU for over two hours now. He’s alert but they won’t let me in to see him yet, I don’t understand why, if he’s—”

“Whoa.” Danny pushed the hair off his forehead and spun around to face her quizzically. “You’ve been here for two hours already?”

Jaclyn bit her lip, rolled the flesh around until she could think up a decent thing to say to him. She was an emotional train wreck right now, how could she think of appeasing this man and his ever-critical eye of her.

“Jesus, Jaclyn. Why the hell didn’t you call me—”

“I did...” She exhaled a sigh. “Danny, considering what happened last week, not to mention last night, I couldn’t just pick up a phone and call you to come sit with me while I wait for these damn medical experts to let me see my father.”

She could no longer hold back. She lashed out at him and the medical staff, knowing it wasn’t any of them she wanted to hurt. She had spent those couple of hours calling Tripp only to get his voicemail every time.

She felt stupid for thinking he would care enough to drop whatever it was he was doing and come running to be by her side. Her father was all she had in the world.

So she called Danny. And berated herself every millisecond since.

“Considering I’ve known your father since I can remember, I’d soon enough say I don’t give a damn what anyone thinks about your calling me to let me know.”

She curled back into her seat for comfort. He was about to let her have it. Again.

“And as for the other issue between us, I still don’t give a fuck what anybody thinks. I will have you, Jaclyn, God help me, you will be mine.” He stood at that moment and stalked off down the hall. Jaclyn exhaled the breath she had been holding and stared at the doors to the CCU.

Closing her eyes, she said a prayer. It had been too long since she had been to church, but it felt like the right thing to do. She had to do something before she came unglued all over again.

A few lengthy minutes passed and a slight nudge in the elbow had Jaclyn open her eyes to Danny holding a cup of steaming coffee to her side. She took it and nodded her head. She couldn’t speak. He sat beside her again and also remained mute.

It should have been an awkward moment, neither one speaking, both holding in some explosive, bitter rage, but it wasn’t. Somehow Jaclyn felt more comfort, more secure than she had felt in her entire life. Her panic over her father’s condition soothed and she actually felt her body relax.

After forcing down the coffee, she reached out and placed it on the side table. She fought the lethargy inside her as long as she could, until ultimately sleep took over. She laid her head on Danny’s shoulder and slept.



“You called *him* didn’t you?”

“He’s practically my husband, Danny.” She spoke low enough to try to disguise her clenched teeth. She felt the need to yawn as she remained lethargic after waking to find her head propped up on Danny’s broad shoulder. It felt incredible, if not completely wrong. She wanted to lay her head back down and sleep for a week against his strong body. Curl into him and nuzzle his t-shirt, the smells defined the man she wanted so

desperately to be with every night. Instead, she looked up and outwards toward the vacant hallway leading to God only knew where. Her voice a hollow echo as she said the words she also hated.

He's practically my husband. Her disgust for the word itself apparent in the stuttered tone. Tripp Dubois hadn't been a model of a husband to her, not recently. But Danny didn't need to know that. He was simply another distraction she didn't need right now.

"Yet he's not here. With you. His *almost wife*, when you need him the most."

"No. He's not." She used a clipped response not wishing to start a flame-war all over again.

All Danny wanted was sex. She had gone without for over a year herself, and it was an incredible luxury to have Danny want her with such fierce desire.

Danny would never know that either.

She decided she, too, was using him for sexual release. She had been repressed and he allowed her the pleasure and gratification that came with unattached, uncommitted sex.

It was simply a need he fulfilled.

She had promised herself she would stop.

Calling him was her last resort, knowing it would give him the upper hand in thinking he could claim her as his own. But she hadn't felt such a dreaded pain of losing someone since her mother passed fifteen years earlier. The thought of losing her father tonight was unbearable.

She needed someone to occupy her panic.

Danny was that someone.

Again.

"Jaclyn." His hand curled behind her neck, under her hair, and lifted the hot strands off her skin. She felt a slight cooling breeze glide past before she felt Danny's hot lips on her.

The base of her neck rippled into goose bumps as he applied the softest touch with his tongue. His voice, a searing brand on her flesh. "He doesn't deserve you."

Jaclyn allowed her eyes to flutter closed. Swallowing hard at his touch, she felt weightless as he continued to torment her with his mouth. His large hands trailed effortlessly down her spine where they settled on her lower back and rubbed slightly.

An uncontrollable sigh had him apply more pressure, his fingers working out the ache in her muscles. She wanted to turn and lean into him again, but refused to give in to temptation.

“He won’t make love to you like I can, Jac.” He replied after a lengthy silence, jarring Jaclyn from her glorious daydream.

She opened one eye and peered at him beside her. “Is that what you call what we did?”

He ceased doing what he was doing and lifted his left hand to her chin where he turned her face to look at him. “Listen to me, Jaclyn—”

“Ms. Kelly?”

At the sound of the nurse, Danny’s hand fell away. Jaclyn, torn at making him finish what he was about to say and rushing to the nurse to see how her father was doing, she chose the latter.

Jumping from her chair she raced forward. “My father, how is he?”

The nurse smiled warmly, stuffed her hands on the hips of her scrubs and said, “He’s stable and awake, and would love to see you now.”

Jaclyn pulled the strap of her purse higher over her shoulder to keep it from sliding down her arm. “Thank you,” she gushed, almost hugging the nurse. The uniformed woman opened the door for her, continued to explain her father’s condition, and told her to keep the visit short.

Jaclyn looked over her shoulder to toss Danny a quick nod of gratitude for staying with her and smiled as he simply nodded in understanding. The line on his face was still hard. He was still no doubt mad as hell at her.

Chapter Eight

Tripp's office door hung semi-open as Jaclyn walked up to it and stopped. Her intentions were to firstly confess her affair to him. And let him know their union was over.

She also wanted to let him know how upset she was over his refusal to answer her damn phone call, but thought she'd prefer to keep her anger at bay, leave him, and never worry about the life they shared again. He didn't care about her father's condition, so why tell him. It would only hurt her to see his nonchalant response.

She had spent the last couple of days at the hospital by her father's bedside. She rarely slept, barely ate, and the late evening hours when Danny would turn up to sit with him, she would leave the room for the two men to talk. Honestly, she didn't want to be in such close confines with Danny knowing she was falling for him all over again.

Her father was well enough to be discharged from the CCU and taken home where he begged to be. He had a physical therapist scheduled to come by and spend the day going through the motions of his exercises. It would be months of work, but Jaclyn had faith her father would push through. She inherited her stubbornness from the man and it had gotten her in enough trouble over the years. She was adamant Jeb Kelly would put that inner-mule to work to regain his life back.

She allowed Danny to help out, and together they brought her father home, settled him in, and let him know she would be back in the morning. She had an important errand to run. Neither man needed to know the specifics.

She would end things now, go on her own, and redefine who Jaclyn Kelly really was. Go back to being the energetic, fun-loving girl she used to be. She owed it to herself to establish what it was she truly wanted out of life, as it sure as hell wasn't this.

Jaclyn deserved better than the treatment endured for too long from Tripp. And as her body yearned and her heart ached for Danny, she also deserved more than the soldier-returned was willing to give at this point.

What happened to unattached, uncommitted sex?

Clearly it was one-sided, but once she and Tripp were done, she would fill her life with taking care of her father and throwing herself into her work, pursue social friendships, and begin dating again. Surely all of the above would eventually rid her of any attraction or emotional attachment to Danny Cameron.

He was obviously still finding himself after getting out of the Marines, being home, and completely out of a rigid routine. All Danny wanted was a welcome home hump. Mission accomplished.

Those words still hurt like hell.

Her heart beat viciously in her chest as she splayed a palm over the rich wood and pushed gently to enter the elegant and expensive suite.

Tripp sat in a leather loveseat across from his desk, one leg bent and resting on his opposing knee. He wore dress slacks and the same shirt he wore to work that day. In his lap was a newspaper, his hand held the flimsy composition up to eye level, while his other held a glass of what Jaclyn assumed was his nightly drink of cognac.

He didn't look up from his reading as Jaclyn advanced deeper into his private work room. She went timidly and sat in the single recliner beside him and leaned an elbow onto the arm rest to angle her body and give him her full attention.

"Tripp, may I have a word?"

"Mm hmm." He murmured beneath his breath. Still he sat unfazed by her presence.

"Could you perhaps look at me while I say this?"

He shuffled the paper into a loosely scrapped heap on his thighs, turned to place his snifter onto the small table beside his seat and looked back at her and smirked with indignant pride. "Well, what do you have to say for yourself, Jaclyn?"

Jaclyn reeled back as though he had reached out and slapped her. “Well, I came to explain a situation I found myself in.” She frowned at her use of words. “I have a few things I need to discuss with you.” They weren’t coming out right, but Tripp had just thrown a monkey wrench into her spiel and she wasn’t sure she could recuperate. “We should talk about the engagement, and I—”

“I know all about him, Jaclyn.” He sat back with a childish pout. “I hired a P.I. to follow you around since the luncheon when you came downstairs with a glowing aura of fucking bliss surrounding you like someone had just fucked you senseless.”

“What? Why?” She shook her head. “How come you didn’t say anything to me then? Or sooner than now, at least?”

“I’m a patient man, my love. Quite capable of biding my time until it’s right to strike. Maximize impact to benefit my own interests.”

“Sounds like a business deal,” Jaclyn scoffed, feeling the heat rise across her skin.

A cocky smile graced Tripp’s face. “Business is what I do best, darling.”

“Our relationship is nothing more than another business deal to you.” She all but spat the statement back at him. There was no need for him to respond. She already knew it.

“This way it gives me proof, Jaclyn. I didn’t marry you, which saves me divorcing you, and you don’t get a penny for your trouble.”

She found strength in her legs and stood, peered down at him, and placed her hands on her hips. “Who the hell said I was in this for your money?” She wanted to slap the shit out of him. Claw at his eye sockets for all she had endured in a decade of waiting to be a wife, and in return all she wished for was his love, respect, and a child to nurture.

She got none.

“Once again I was wrong, assuming you deserved the respect of a face to face break up. I’ll be happy never to see your smug face again.” She turned and fled from the room.

In her bedroom, she packed a small bag with essentials, grabbed her keys and purse from the foyer, and slammed the front door closed. She tore the car out of the pebbled driveway and headed out of the house she had known for so long, yet never truly thought of as home.

She found a cheap motel downtown and booked a room. She thought of her father’s ranch house, and the fact that he was home now, but she didn’t want to lay this burden on

him during his recovery period. She needed a night to be angry and vent. Then she would go home to him. Take care of him. Occupy herself by catering to his needs.

They could help each other in a sense. Jeb was always a tough man with a gentle spirit and loving heart. They could heal one another. Like they had fifteen years prior after the devastating death of her mother and the love of Jeb's life.

Inside, she showered and dried her skin, pulled on a pair of panties and a singlet top, and slipped between starched sheets where she cried. Not for the breakdown of a long-term relationship going nowhere, in her heart she knew it was doomed since day one. But for the wasted years she spent pining for Danny.

Chapter Nine

Danny lined up his cue to the white ball, pelted the ball a little too aggressively so it sent the cue ricocheting off the green felt. The white ball rolled like a snail to one side. He ducked his head and exhaled an air of frustration.

He was mad as hell at Jaclyn for thinking she could make love to him like that. Twice. Only to go home to her *fiancé*. He ended everyday this week at the worksite only to go home to his trailer, grab a shower and clean clothes, and head out to the hospital to be by her side. To support and care for her during an emotionally draining time. To talk with Jeb, help his motivation to overcome a setback due to his stroke. It had hurt the old man, no doubt about that. He would need some physical therapy, but it hadn't debilitated him. He was one of the more fortunate ones.

Danny had even helped Jaclyn get Jeb home and in bed, taken her onto the porch where he attempted to tell her how he felt, again, only to have Jeb wander like a crippled man outside to his cushioned chair in need of some fresh air.

Settling the old man in a comfortable place, Danny walked Jaclyn to her car. She got in and was ready to veer off before Danny stopped her. She didn't look at him, not really. Simply avoided his words, his actions, and said she had to go talk to Tripp.

Danny never did tell her how he felt.

Hell of it was, he only had himself to blame. He should have made her his back in high school. Should have gone off to college and made himself a fortune she couldn't have resisted ever leaving him for.

Standing up to full height, he stalked over to the wall and replaced his cue, waved off the other men's efforts to have him continue the game. His heart wasn't in it.

He put the bottle of beer to his lips and guzzled thirstily. It was his third and he was feeling the effects from such a torturous day. He hadn't eaten all evening and the rain outside was making him sleepy. Realizing he hadn't slept in almost twenty-four hours, he fisted a hand into the front pocket of his jeans and relieved his keys. He headed outside to the parking lot of the bar where he hauled himself into his truck.

All he could think about was Jaelyn's face, her soft luscious body, that delicate voice against his skin, her scent... *oh, Jesus, she smelt like heaven.*

And all she cared about was that he hadn't used the baby-making precautions. Danny's head snapped to attention. He stared over the windshield and pounded a fist into the wheel. Since he could remember, Jaelyn had talked of the day she would marry and have children. A decade of near-marital exuberance with rich-shit Tripp Dubois, and no sign of babies? What the hell was wrong with *that* picture?

Danny had a sinking feeling creep down and clench his gut, he tried to shake it, but couldn't. Maybe Tripp was sterile. He had a whole lot of cash, and some may say the man was overcompensating for *something*.

But he struggled with believing Jaelyn—*his* Jaelyn—was capable of the unthinkable. He had joked about getting her pregnant and rightly hated himself for it when he was the one who made mention of such a terrible thought. Jaelyn's stunned disposition couldn't have meant... surely...

That Jaelyn had allowed him to screw her with the possibility of becoming pregnant and raising the baby as a Dubois?

Like hell!

Danny tore out of the parking lot and pummeled his vehicle through the storm en route to the millionaire's ranch to confront the woman who may very well be carrying his child. And to make sure everyone involved knew that the child—*his* child—would be calling him, and only him, *daddy*.



Danny leapt the short stairs to the Dubois residence's front door. The large mission-style home emitted a Californian/Spanish influence as it stood amongst San Jose's more prominent neighborhood.

It was a warm stucco building with rustic-infused red and beige coloring set within lush green foliage of acres and acres of welcoming landscape. A stone fireplace sat snuffed out on the porch entrance as Danny continued his brisk tread over the fieldstone mosaic paving all the way to the thick mahogany *Carrara* front door to the house.

After a round of knocking, Tripp opened up and stood in the doorway, a scowl evident on his flawless face. “I would have thought you two would be popping champagne in a hot tub right now.”

Danny shook his head in disbelief. “What the hell are you talking about?” Balling his fists, he refrained from decking the pugnacious face of Jaclyn’s future husband.

Husband. Fuck, just the thought of Jaclyn being intimate with this man made Danny want to hurl his belly full of beer onto the clean-swept doorway.

Tripp smiled lasciviously, stuffed both hands into the front pockets of his designer slacks and rolled back on his heels, his lips pressed inwards as though holding back the need to smile. Finally he spoke. “Jaclyn left. I have no idea where she would have gone, and frankly I don’t care to know.”

“What the hell?” Danny felt like his head was going to explode. The beer, the lack of sleep, throwing himself physically into work to imagine a world without Jaclyn in it, Jeb’s stroke, and now this clown stating he didn’t give a flying fuck about his fiancée’s whereabouts, it was all too much.

“You’ll be happy to know there will no longer be a Dubois wedding.”

Danny stepped back, repelled the need for a physical fight, and said joyfully. “That is good news. For me. Not so much for you.”

At that point Tripp laughed, an ugly howl erupting from his face. “Don’t get any brilliant ideas that the two of you will be running off into the sunset to be all happy and in love on my dime. She gets nothing. A de facto relationship may mean long-time commitment, but legally I had the good sense not to sign my life away to her.”

Danny took a giant step forward. “You sick son of a bitch.”

“Careful jarhead, you touch me, you’ll go down hard. I know people.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you do.”

“Tell me, Danny Cameron, did you leave with an honorable discharge or did the Marine Corps throw your ass out for sleeping with a *taken* woman?”

Danny held his breath, his nostrils flared, and his blood pumped wildly throughout his core. *Don't bite, Danny.* "Honorable as they come, Dubois."

"I see no honor in your screwing my fiancée."

"I see none in neglecting her."

"She has been unable to conceive." Tripp's eyes held Danny's, intense and harsh. He looked as though he were holding back until his voice deepened with unreasonable fury, the vein in his temple throbbing wildly. "You wouldn't know what that feels like, to have a woman you plan to marry and spend eternity with, who's defunct in what should be a simple, natural procedure."

Danny clenched his fists, heard the knuckle joints pop, and aligned himself ready to dish out a swift upper cut. "Maybe that's because you weren't doing your husbandly duties, rich man." He snarled and held his ground with remarkable control.

"She no longer wanted me. Not like that." Tripp's tone dropped a few decibels as he relaxed his heated stance. Danny fell back a step to allow slight breathing room. He released the squeeze he had on his fists to allow the blood to flow.

"We ceased having a sex life at least a year ago when she couldn't get pregnant." Danny felt the wind escape his lungs like a bat to the solar plexus. "I know I blamed her for it. She knows I blamed her for it. I couldn't rectify it, nor could I hide the frustration I felt."

Danny gnawed on the inside of his cheek. As long as they were being hospitable, he was appreciative of the story he was receiving. It explained a hell of a lot.

"I started flaunting other women in her face. I had affairs left, right, and center. Honestly, I fell out of love with her."

"And you never thought to tell her that?" Anger flared up once again.

"We have been together so long. Breaking an engagement would have looked bad. Now that you're back, there's nothing keeping her here. I'll have to deal with rumors of an unfaithful fiancée, but I'll pull through, I always do."

"You're a coward." Danny spat back and turned to leave as he no longer wished to hear anymore. He'd damn well heard enough.

Over his shoulder he added a curt. "She doesn't want your money. *We* don't want your money."

He could only speak for himself at this point, but he'd be damned if he'd allow Jaclyn to stoop low enough to fight him on the financials. He would take care of her. He would do whatever she wanted to prove he could make her a home.

If only she were willing to give in and trust him.

Chapter Ten

“Where the hell are you, Jaclyn?” Danny cursed at the heavy downpour on his windshield, his wipers couldn’t keep up, and after turning up at the Dubois residence only to be told Jaclyn had packed her things and left, gave him no direction in which to pursue the woman. She could seriously be anywhere.

Driving at a snail’s-breath down the side streets towards Jaclyn’s father’s ranch, Danny had high hopes she’d be inside, safe and dry. Her father had raised her once her mother passed from breast cancer when Jaclyn was twelve years old.

They were close, had similar personalities, and enjoyed one another’s company. Danny remembered as much, and was assured that Jeb was a man who would welcome his daughter back into his home should trouble arise in her adult life.

But she hadn’t come home.

Danny stood on the front porch where Jeb remained after moving there hours ago. The place was in rough shape, degraded over the years. “Your sister still live across town, Jeb?” Danny asked, assessing the worn-through wood panels, hands on hips, as the rain eased into a soft shower. The glistening silver shards looked like glass in the dark distance ahead of them.

Jeb stared ahead at his land, shook his head. He fared remarkably well, and for that Danny was grateful. His speech audible, if not slightly slurred from his recent stroke, “Sarah passed away two years ago, Danny. Jaclyn wouldn’t be there. Haven’t known of any friends close by that she kept in touch with either. All’s I know is she kept to herself over at Tripp’s castle.”

Danny felt his fists clench at the word *castle*. Jaclyn's own father obviously had a certain distaste for the man his daughter planned to marry.

"She would have come home to you, Jeb, not to some friend's house to crash after a mere lover's spat. Tripp mentioned he was pulling out all the stops to protect his financials. Sounds as serious as it gets."

"Can't say I'm upset by such news." Jeb looked as old as he sounded. He and Barb had Jaclyn later in life and the pregnancy was tougher than Barb had thought at her nearly fifty years of age. They never tried again. They doted on Jaclyn with love and affection without spoiling her rotten.

Jeb's face looked hard. He seemed tired, and the stress of hearing Jaclyn was out in this weather at night, alone, probably didn't help his current state of mind.

Danny could claim that blame, too. He shouldn't have bothered an old man who had just suffered a stroke, but damned if he wasn't desperate enough to find Jaclyn safe and sound.

He turned to Jeb before he stepped out into the drizzle. "I'll find her, bring her home to you, Jeb. She'll need someone to talk to about all this. A support system, you know."

Jeb nodded slowly. "You do that."

Danny scraped the toe of his boot into the curling wood at his feet. "I'll come by and fix these slats. You shouldn't be walking on these." Without waiting for a response, he jogged down the steps into the flurry of wetness, jumped into his truck, and shook the rain from his head.

He had a feeling it was going to be a long night.



After driving all over town throughout the night, Danny found the flea-bag motel Jaclyn was holed up in. She had used her real name, thank God, and Danny stood outside her door at a little after three A.M.

He knocked quietly and garnered no response, then attempted harder, to hell with rousing her from her beauty sleep, he was ready to pound down the Goddamn door and throttle her.

"Jaclyn, open this door right this instant, or I'll break it down."

It worked. Jaclyn swung open the barricade enough to keep the safety chain in place and peer up slumberous and tousled from sleep. Danny leaned into the space between them, felt her sweetly minted breath on his face, and said through clenched teeth, “Let me in right now.”

She slammed the door on his face, clattered the chain around, and did as he asked. He helped her out by forcing himself through and coercing her to step backwards to accommodate his wide invasion, where he pivoted on his heel and slammed the door behind him.

She reverted back to the single room and slipped back into bed to cover her barely-clothed body with the sheet. Danny watched her movements and felt his cock twitch at the sheer sight of her in tiny white panties.

He decided to pace instead of pounce on top of her. Fisting an irate hand through his hair, he left it on his neck where he rubbed at the growing tension. He needed to take a few breaths before he railed on her for such a foolhardy action.

“What were you thinking, going out in this weather all alone?”

She gulped a few times, Danny wanted to grab her and shake her hard for giving him a heart attack, not knowing where she was all night. “Anything could have happened to you—”

“You’re not my father, Danny!” she threw back, grabbing the sheet and tossing it aside and getting herself to a standing position by the bed as though she had a better chance at a standoff if she were at least closer to eye level.

He strode forward and stopped, curbed his desire to reach out and embrace her. “Funny you should bring him into this. The poor guy is worried sick about you.”

Her face fell, from anger to surprise, she gushed, “You told him? Why would you run to him? He’s just had a stroke—”

“I couldn’t find you, Jaclyn! Jesus Christ, you take off and think nobody cares enough to come looking for you—” He snapped his mouth shut as he said the words. Of course she didn’t think anybody was going to come after her. Her fiancé seemed rather happy to be rid of her, as if he’d give a shit where she took off to in a nighttime rain storm.

He curled his lips inwards as he resisted the urge to take off for the Dubois homestead to go beat Jaclyn’s soon-to-be ex to a pulp.

Instead, he calmed himself down. “We have a score to settle.”

“Oh, and what might that be? What could you possibly want from me that you haven’t already taken?” At the hitch in her voice, Danny felt his gut clench. She was on the verge of tears and he was suddenly acting like a total jerk.

He softened his tone. “Could you be pregnant?”

She looked like he had stuck a stun-gun to her. She licked her lips and shook her head, her arms crossing against her breasts in a protective stance.

A slight shrug of her shoulders, she answered casually. “There’s the possibility considering we didn’t use protection and I’m not on the pill, but highly unlikely since I have been trying for a decade to conceive and have failed miserably.”

Again, Danny heard the scratchiness to her tone. He went to her, placed his palms along her bare forearms, and slightly rubbed. “Maybe there was something wrong on his end.”

“Not according to the specialists. Nobody knows why we couldn’t make a baby. And he refused to go the IVF route. Said it was unnatural.”

Danny scoffed, not meaning to add insult to injury, but he couldn’t fathom what Jaclyn saw in this guy for all these years.

“What if you’re pregnant now, by me?” It was a touchy subject for him as much as he felt from her tensing up, but it needed to be brought out in the open. He needed to know where he stood should a baby come into his world.

“Then I raise it—”

“Correction: *We* raise it.”

Chapter Eleven

At his piercing tone, Jaclyn lifted her head to look him square in the eye. Her heart hammered against her ribs. She felt an ache in her lower body to pull him close. A rigid jaw line covered in dark stubble caused an innate need to reach out and stroke him, feel the scratchy skin to let her know he was real.

“You’re over-thinking it, Danny, chances are that I’m not, so please stop—”

“I can’t stop, Jaclyn. I come undone every time I’m near you. I can’t turn it off.”

“You’re just glad to be back. Coming home to all that’s familiar to you has sparked a need to conquer. I’m just a girl, Danny—”

“You’ve never been *just a girl*, Jaclyn. No other girl has come close. I can’t even leave you. It doesn’t stop. It didn’t for ten years. It’s damn well not going to now that I’ve had you.” He raised a hand from her arm to her cheek and stroked her skin. She laid her head onto his palm and let herself cry.

Ashamed of him seeing her like that, she reached up and grabbed his shirt where she buried her head into his chest and bit down onto the fabric to squelch the desire to sob her heart out.

He let her, and when she was able to suppress her floodgates of emotion, she raised her head and hooked her hands around his neck and brought his mouth to hers. He opened up to her and she lapped her tongue freely against his warmth. He caught her around the waist and held her against his body.

Feeling every ridge of hard muscle beneath his shirt, Jaclyn yearned for the feel of skin. So far, the sex had been hot and fast, and as exciting as it was, she had been denied

the time to feel him. To touch every inch of his perfect body. To truly look at him, every rock hard ridge and permanent mark he had endured while away from her.

She unclasped her hands and pushed at him until she had him hitting the edge of the bed. He fell to his ass on the mattress, the sheets and blankets behind him were a tangled mess. Jaclyn smiled at him knowing they were about to get messier.

She had waited so long for this night. She wanted it to be enough to keep Danny coming back to her. He reached out and placed his hands onto her bare thighs. She reveled in the heat they omitted through her skin.

She pushed his chest and he eased back to a horizontal position on the bed, his arms curled behind his head for slight leverage as Jaclyn went to work unbuttoning his shirt. The flaps fell away and as she undressed him from the waist down, he leaned onto his elbows and discarded his shirt altogether, tossing it across the room.

Jaclyn stood before him, peeled her singlet up and over her breasts to free them from the constricting fabric. She watched Danny's eyes glaze over as he licked his lips, groaned aloud, and began to sit up again.

She attempted to push him back down, but his strength was too much for her. He caught her around the waist and turned his body, flinging her down onto the bed alongside his naked body.

"Hey, no fair!" She half barked, half laughed as he covered her body with his, the heavy pressure was welcome. It set her body ablaze. She felt the moisture between her legs. The sprinkling of chest hair tickled her nipples and at their tightening, Jaclyn tried to spread her legs wider with the desperate need of fulfillment.

"I owe you, baby. I owe you big time." His deep grumble caused a fluttering of butterflies in her belly, as he kissed his way down her neck and across her breasts where he teetered. Tasting, sucking, licking, and biting the rigid raspberries. Jaclyn gasped as he took her in his mouth, rolled the nipple around until she raised her hips begging for his full cock.

His lips alighted and traced the line down her belly as his hands remained on her tingling breasts, molding and squeezing between his hard-working hands. Jaclyn felt the roughened stubble from a night of unshaven panic searching for her and she felt her heart ache for him.

Who owed who?

Sliding lower, Danny's hands left her breasts and followed the wet trail his tongue had made and touched her ribs, her belly, and strayed to her panties, where he nuzzled her mons.

Laying on his belly between her legs, he used his fingers to pull the thin scrap of underwear aside as he pried her folds open with an artful tongue. Jaclyn sighed as her breath caught in her chest. She felt so alive.

Danny's tongue lapped at her opening as Jaclyn parted her legs further. The nip at her inner thigh caused her to tense at the sensations eddying through her. She wanted to close her legs at the onslaught of endorphins. She panted hard as Danny's slick tongue laved at her juices, his fingers holding her panties at bay grated against her clit, causing her body to move in sync with his.

When his tongue slid further inside her pussy, she lost all control and let go of all inhibitions completely. Her toes curled, her thighs tensed, and her ass lifted with the building pressure of her climax.

"Oh, God, oh, my God, Danny." She moaned as her voice turned to an uncontrollable shrill of delight, her body convulsing into a million pieces of pleasure.

She took a moment to regain her breathing as Danny leaned up onto all fours and kneeled over her like a bear studying his immobile prey.

His smile widened as he bent his head, he kissed her soundly, seductively. "Feel good?"

Speechless, she simply nodded her head against the bunched up sheets.

"See how amazing you taste?" His eyes were alert with lust, intense with a need of his own as he bent again and captured her mouth with his, ran a tongue along her bottom lip, and repeated his comment. "How amazing you taste. It drives me wild."

Jaclyn closed her eyes, lost herself in the feel of his lips on hers. She felt his body still heavy with arousal, his erection poking her with every dip of his head. She felt the heavy pulsing between her legs at the thought of his thick, long penis inside her.

"Danny, I want you." She whispered against his ear.

His response was a little louder, firmer. "Tell me where, Jaclyn, tell me where you want me."

She gladly rose to the challenge. His baiting only turned her on ten-fold. “I want you in my mouth...”

“Go on.” He coaxed.

“I want to run my lips over your bulbous head, my tongue along the vein beneath...”

“Sweet Jesus.” He hissed as he nibbled at her throat.

“Suck on your full, heavy balls.”

At that, he lifted his head, turned his body away from her, and climbed over her lounging body. He used his fingers to peel her panties away and down the length of her long legs. At his stretched body above her, Jaclyn grabbed his bobbing penis in front of her face and lowered it to her mouth where she sucked the tip.

She felt his body shiver and held on tighter, raised her head slightly and took him in her mouth. He was huge and coated with pre-cum. She licked it off and felt him tense. She heard a loud groan before he ducked his head and took her once again in his mouth.

As his tongue nibbled at her clit, she slid her mouth from base to tip and circled the head with her tongue. He jolted in a series of spasms as she applied more suction to the tip, then traveled her tongue along the underside and the massive vein caused his scrotum to fill out into a firm sack ready to fire.

He lifted his body and spun around, took her in his arms and forced his body into position. “Fuck, Jaclyn. I am a weak man.” He chortled and Jaclyn laughed as she laid her hands on the flats of his taut stomach and wrapped her legs around his slim waist. “Then fuck me good, Danny Cameron.”

He thrust his cock inside her and pushed to the hilt. “I love it when you talk dirty, Jaclyn.”

“It can get dirtier.” She teased.

Danny’s body hastened the pace, his erection pummeled into her with a driving force to stake his claim. “You’re mine now, Jaclyn. You know it as well as I do.”

She bit her lower lip. Yes, she was his. Always had been.

To curb her desire to cry at the love she felt for this man she played coy, and said, “Then fuck me like I’m yours, Danny.”

And he did.

Chapter Twelve

Another week had come and gone. Jaclyn sat on the oversized wicker chair on the porch of her father's ranch house. The evening was cooling down from the harsh heat of the day. She peered ahead at the stars as they began to sparkle against the dimming sky.

She reached forward and grabbed her glass, took a long sip of her iced tea, pulled her feet under her, and looked over at her father sleeping soundly in the chair beside her. He was an outdoorsman through and through. His skin, tanned and deeply etched, told a story in itself.

Her heart swelled. She wanted to lean over and stroke his aging face. Each line and crevice a testament to the life Jeb Kelly lived. Her train of thought distracted as Danny's truck pummeled up the front drive. He jumped out of the cab and jogged up the steps to join her and her father.

He leaned over her, braced himself on the arms of the chair, and planted a long, slow kiss across her lips. He lingered, his nose against hers for the longest time and his words were a faint whisper. "I love you." He pulled back and sauntered away from her, heading into the house. "I got you something."

Not willing to remain seated after such a move, she jumped up, placed her glass down on the table, and took off at top speed to catch him.

She did, halfway up the staircase, he turned and caught her as she lunged at him. He grabbed her around the waist, one hand catching her ass-cheek and hauling her up to straddle him. She flung her arms around him and cooed. "Not so fast, hot stuff. What have you got for me?"

Like a kid on Christmas Eve, her eyes wide in anticipation. Danny gained his footing and continued up the remaining stairs to reach the top floor where he navigated the hallway and went into their bedroom.

He kicked the door closed and crooned. “What do I get for my troubles?”

Jaclyn ground her crotch into his middle and leaned in to kiss his eager lips. Teetering before diving in she spoke softly. “Anything you want.”

Danny laughed, his body rumbling at the movement. “I could sure get used to that.”

“I hope so, because now that you’ve come back to me, I plan on keeping you forever.”

Danny kneeled down and placed Jaclyn onto the bed, crawled over her and situated his body half across hers, one thigh between her legs. “So, you’ll marry me?”

Jaclyn hesitated a moment and felt the awkwardness rising to the surface. She defended her pause as Danny looked hurt by it. “Why rush down the aisle, Danny? I don’t want to swing from one man to the next as though I can’t be alone or manage to take care of myself. Jaclyn Kelly couldn’t get Tripp Dubois to marry her after all those years, so she moves on to the next best candidate? And that is how people will see it—”

“Who the hell cares what anybody thinks?” He stressed every word.

“Why can’t we just be together? Like we are now. You know the saying, ‘*if it ain’t broke...*’ and all that.”

“What is it with you and sayings?” He frowned down at her.

She simply shrugged. Gave him a half-smile. She figured it was a gene passed down from her father. The old man was always using analogies to get his point across.

“I thought you wanted a baby, Jaclyn.”

Jaclyn reached a finger up and held it across his lips, her eyes filled with tears. “Don’t go there, Danny, you know that’s a sore point for me. I can’t have a baby, so why even talk about this?”

Danny alleviated the pressure on her and rolled to the side of the bed, he sat on the edge of the mattress and pulled the brochure from the back pocket of his jeans and handed it to her. “I thought we could give it a try.”

She lifted the pamphlet from the bed and peered over it. It was for an IVF clinic. Her heart hammered in her chest.

She didn't know whether to hug him or cry. She chose the former, assumed his intentions were for the good of their relationship.

As her arms circled his shoulders, he remained with his back to her and laid his head on her forearm, rubbing her arms with his hands in a comforting gesture.

Jaclyn murmured in his ear her uncertainty regarding their future plans, "What if we try In Vitro Fertilization and it still doesn't give us a baby?"

Danny uncoiled her arms and turned his body to face her. He angled a knee across the edge of the mattress and looked intensely into her eyes. His fingers stroked her cheek just below her eye, his tone calm and confident. "There's always options, Jaclyn. We will be a family."

Dismissing his response for now, she said, "It was a very nice gesture, Danny. I appreciate you thinking of it."

"I want to marry you, Jaclyn."

She shied away again. She was adamant she didn't want to jump into anything remotely like her past relationship. She wanted to date Danny, get to know him all over again, do all the things they never had the chance to do a decade ago. Enjoy one another before taking it to the next level.

She also understood Danny's level of anxiety. She had been immature in high school, took one stupid rejection from him as the end of the world, and ran straight into another man's arms.

"I'm not that girl anymore, Danny. You can't scare me off that easily."

"What if—"

This time she placed her mouth to his, his lips pressing harder against hers, seeking more from her. She pulled away. "No what ifs, Danny. We start our relationship today, forgetting the past. We start anew, right now. We've only just moved into my father's house like he wanted us to do, and now we renovate it from the ground up. We do it right this time around. We date, we fall in love, we build our house, and we start our family."

"In that order?" He smirked slyly.

"In that order. Everything just needs to fall into place as it was meant to."

"At what point do we get married?" He cocked a brow.

"When it feels right."

“Feels right about now.”

Jaclyn whacked his shoulder. “Let me get out of the last one first. People were actually referring to me as Mrs. Dubois around town, you know. Shouldn’t be hard for Tripp to slander my name and reputation before he moves on. He knows people.”

Danny scoffed, rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I’m sure he does.”

“See? It’s all coming together perfectly. No need to rush anything else. Let me enjoy loving you.” She kissed him soundly, hoping to stop his line of questioning and give in to her explorations of something a little more uplifting.

The kiss was hot. Danny coaxed her lips open and plunged his heated tongue inside for a taste. Jaclyn moaned, moved her body closer, and ran her hands along his chest. Suddenly, Danny pulled back. Breaking the kiss, halting the love play, and leaving Jaclyn consumed with fear.

“And the baby?” his voice lowered considerably as if he were scared to bring it up.

Looking downwards to avoid eye contact, Jaclyn slapped the brochure against her thigh, sucked in a deep breath and sighed heavily, after a moment she peered up and directly looked Danny in the eye and answered. “After we try to conceive all by ourselves. This will be our Plan B once we do marry and realize it’s time to try something else to help the process along.”

“So we at least get to keep trying the way God intended while we *date*?”

Jaclyn nodded. “Uh huh.”

Danny smiled, turned into her, kissed her swiftly, and crawled over her, taking her backwards onto the bed, laying her down where he went to work unbuttoning her top. He kissed firmly all the way down her collarbone. His hopeless urgency was evident with every groan, kiss, and touch. “Let’s get started right now.” He breathed seductively.

“What if my father wakes and comes looking for us?”

Danny chuckled, ducked his head, and nuzzled her chest. “Baby, a locomotive couldn’t rouse your father these days.”

Jaclyn laughed with him. “He really loves you, Danny. Thinks of you as his own son.”

“And I’m glad I can benefit him by helping him out with the upkeep of this place, all the while loving his daughter.” He stroked a nipple with his fingers, gently, sensuously, driving Jaelyn to distraction.

Jaelyn tried to divert his attention to the renovations they were planning to someday make her childhood home into their dream house. “We could build a barn, add stables, eventually get horses, and ahh, oh, that feels good.” Jaelyn panted at Danny’s sucking of flesh. He curved his wet, warm tongue under her breast, causing ripples of pleasure through Jaelyn’s skin.

“A barn has huge potential,” Danny murmured before latching onto a budding nipple. “My imagination is taking *a roll in the hay* to a whole new level.”

Jaelyn giggled, maneuvered her hands between their pressed bodies, unclasped her pants, and shimmied them down her thighs as Danny continued to nuzzle her full, firm breasts.

Once her pants were down, she went to work on his. He helped, and once the fabric was pulled over his ass, his penis popped out at full attention. Jaelyn ran her hands over his solid shaft, then dipped lower to clutch his heavy sac through his briefs where she squeezed gently.

“You could bend me over a hay bale and—”

“Damn, Jaelyn.”

On a moan, Danny rolled out of his pants and back on top of Jaelyn. Between her parted legs, he reached a hand down and moved her hand aside, grabbed his underwear and pulled them down far enough to pull his cock free.

“Or I could ride you—”

He clasped her upper arms and rolled over onto his back, tugging her with him where she landed on his chest. “Now you’re talking.” She shifted her leg over and straddled him. She slid onto his penis and felt him tense, stretching her inch by inch at the sheer length of him. He gripped her thighs and pulled her closer, groaned a heady, “Saddle up, baby.”

“So this was your mission after all.”

“To claim you as my girl.” He shrugged as though it were common knowledge. “Of course.”

“I guess you’ve officially staked your claim, like I’m some prime piece of meat.” She said it tartly, but didn’t care one bit how he did it, as she leaned down and rubbed her tongue across his lower lip before rising up and arching her back, thrusting her bare breasts in his direction, and grinding herself against his pubic bone to add friction.

She threw her head back as the waves of sweet pleasure tore through her, gasping as Danny’s cock stiffened and stretched inside her. She let out a howl of delight as she came hard and fast, rocked back and forth, her nerves on fire until a series of euphoric spasms took over and she fell limply onto his chest.

She lay depleted for the moment, breathing heavily on his naked chest when she heard him whisper in her ear, “Mission accomplished, babe.”

The End

www.lisaperryfiction.com

Author Bio

Lisa Perry was born in Australia. A middle child among two brothers, she became the quietly confident little bookworm. At 18, her fiercely independent streak broke free and Lisa embarked on a year abroad in the United States.

Having kept a journal of her adventures, she captured much more than mere memories. Four years later, she married her All-American boy (Cowboy boots and all), where they settled in Southern California. Three adorable children later—a lot less sane but a whole lot wiser—Lisa spends her days writing an array of genre-romances. Creating, researching, and beating her head against a wall, all the while living out her very own *Happily Ever After*.

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