

The book cover features a black and white photograph of a woman in the foreground on the left, looking over her shoulder at the camera. She is wearing a patterned halter top, a large ornate necklace, and jeans with a prominent belt buckle. In the background on the right, a shirtless, muscular man stands in a field, looking towards the camera. The title 'A Matter of Honesty' is written in a large, red, serif font at the top right. The author's name 'Stephanie Morris' is in a white serif font at the bottom left, and the publisher's name 'Red Rose Publishing' is in a red script font at the bottom center.

# A Matter of Honesty

Stephanie Morris

*Red Rose Publishing*

*A Matter of Honesty*

*by*

*Stephanie Morris*

### *Dedication*

*To my brother Broderick. Without you this book would have never been written. Thank you for all the good trips to Norman with Dad and Mom. It is times like these when I truly cherish them.*

*Because of you I will always have Sooner Pride. Congratulations on your recent accomplishment. I am proud to call you my big brother. I love you.*



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A Matter of Honesty By Stephanie Morris

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## Chapter One

“Help me! Somebody help me, please!”

Lauryn Anderson heard a soothing, calm voice reply to her. “Keep calm, ma’am. I’m almost to you.”

“Hurry, please!”

When had the tornado started? She had known that there was a tornado watch out but nothing had been confirmed. The last thing Lauryn remembered was going to sleep watching *King Arthur* in her motel room. Clive Owen was one of her favorite actors and she made a point of watching his movies every time one came on. During the movie she had made sure to flip back and forth to keep an eye out for the tornado watch. Evidently it had elevated from a tornado watch to a tornado warning. Had the sirens sounded? If they had she hadn’t heard them.

Tornados weren’t uncommon in Norman, Oklahoma, but they didn’t happen that often. During tornado season this was a risk you had to take if you had nowhere else to go. Right now she was stuck. Down on her luck and having very hard times.

She closed her eyes and tried to think about something else. It was hard to do. Her life was in such turmoil. Due to the downturn in the economy she had lost her job a few months ago. The company hadn’t been thoughtful enough to give her a

severance package and unemployment benefits were barely enough to scrape by on. She tried not to complain because she had heard many sad stories of other people who had lost everything and had no one to turn to. However, she had never imagined being one of those people. Now she was. She wasn't at a true point of desperation, but she was getting there. She had tried living at the homeless shelter to save money but some of the characters there were a little too rough for her.

To be honest, things had been in a downward spiral for her for a while now. She had lost her mom at a young age. A year ago she'd lost her father to lung cancer. Her mother's side of the family had never liked her father much, so she'd never had a real relationship with any of them. Her father also distanced himself from his side of the family. It had pretty much just been her and her father over the years. He had been a hard man to live with. He'd never hurt her physically, but he had done a great deal of damage to her mentally and emotionally. She became the loner that he'd bred her to be and had a hard time building emotional relationships with people, especially men. She was young, but there had yet to be a serious relationship with the opposite sex. Her experience with men was abysmal. Lauryn was pulled out of her internal musing as she felt a hand grab her ankle.

"Can you move?"

"Yes," she called out, her voice hoarse from shouting.

"Is anything broken?"

“I don’t think so.”

Lauryn used her arms to keep the tree branch that had fallen into her motel room at bay. She couldn’t believe this was happening to her. She was a quiet person who never bothered anyone and had managed to dodge any major trouble up to this point. It wasn’t that she was an overly cautious person or anything; she just made a habit of not going out to look for trouble.

“Ma’am.”

“Yes?”

Lauryn looked in the direction of the voice that was speaking to her. It was very soothing—and he had very nice hands. They were a little rough, an indication that he had experience with hands-on labor.

“Is your name Lauryn?”

She hesitated before answering. How did this guy know her name? She always kept up on current events and there were plenty of strange people in the world. On the other hand, she was trapped under a tree; she wouldn’t be able to make it out from under it by herself. She needed this man’s help. She quickly decided it was okay to confirm who she was.

“Yes, it is.”

She thought she heard a sigh of relief from him before he spoke to her again.

“Okay Lauryn, I’ll pull you out of there in a second. What I need you to do is to



scoot toward me as I lift these branches. We're going to work one section at a time."

"Okay."

"Now."

Lauryn felt the branch near her shift, and she scooted down. They continued the process until she was free of the tree.

She looked around in shock when she saw the early morning sky. The roof of the motel was gone.

Slowly, she became aware of the hand grasping her elbow to steady her. She looked at the man who'd helped her escape and her breath caught in her throat. For a moment she forgot to breathe. Even in the dim lighting she could tell she was staring at one of the most handsome men she had ever seen in her life. She stared at him for so long that he looked at her with concern. The experts were right. Suffering a traumatic experience did have a way of affecting one's rationale.

"Are you okay?"

Embarrassment surged through her and she hoped it didn't show. Even though she was a woman of African-American descent her skin tone was light enough to show her embarrassment. She averted her gaze before answering him. "Yes."

She followed his gaze as he surveyed the area. She couldn't help but gasp at the sight of destruction the tornado had caused. She looked at him in horror.

"Where is everyone who was in the motel?"

She saw a few people milling around and prayed that no one had lost their life or been seriously injured.

“Everyone who was in the motel is safe. You were the last person we were looking for.”

She sighed in relief, studying him carefully. “Is that how you knew my name?”

He nodded. “You’ve suffered a shock. Are you sure you’re okay?”

She looked at him with confusion. “Who are you?”

He smiled, causing her heart to skip a beat. She would never have thought it possible for a man to become sexier by the minute, but this man was most certainly the exception to that rule.

“I’m Steve Mitchell.”

“Were you staying at the motel?”

He shook his head. “No. I was visiting my friend Dillon who lives a few blocks away from here. We took shelter when the tornado hit, then we came out to see if anyone needed help.”

She shivered and wrapped her arms around her body. She liked the sound of his voice and was content to listen to him speak.

It was drizzling rain. Even though she was dressed warmly in cotton sleepwear, she was completely soaked and starting to catch a chill. She hadn’t realized the tree had been giving her some shelter from the rain. He tightened his grip

on her elbow.

“Let’s get out of here. Be careful; you’ll need to watch your step. The rescue teams are having a hard time getting through. There appears to be widespread damage.”

“Why did you come up here?”

He smiled. “Because I heard your cries for help. I didn’t want to wait for rescue. Who knows how long it would take the Fire Department and EMTs to arrive? Believe me, it was worth the risk.”

She remained silent while he looked for a safe path out of the rubble, and then took a step. Her legs wobbled and he turned to look at her.

“Whoa. Watch your step. A few people injured themselves trying to escape. I don’t want you to be another.”

She wondered if she was going into shock, and wasn’t sure if it was from the sight spread out before her or the news she’d just received. She swayed again and he stopped, looking at her with an expression full of concern.

“You still seem unsteady. I think it might be better if I carry you until we’re on steadier ground.”

She didn’t have a chance to protest before he swept her up into his arms. He carried her down the rubble of what was left of the motel. She didn’t consider this to be a small feat, considering she was five feet eight inches tall. However, Steve towered

over her by a good five inches at least. She could feel the solid build of his body against hers.

He didn't stop to put her down once they were safely out of the motel. Instead he carried her toward a double cab truck and placed her inside. She saw him run over to a man, shifting carefully through debris, and speak briefly to him before heading back to the car. He slid in the driver's side next to her and started the engine. She was thankful when he turned on the heat. The warmth took some of the chill from her bones but she still shivered.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked through trembling lips.

"To the emergency room at Memorial."

She shook her head. "No. I can't afford it. I don't have a job or medical insurance."

He didn't respond, but his grip tightened on the steering wheel. When he didn't stop the car despite her protests, she turned to look at him. His light brown hair had started to dry with the car's heat, leaving him with a shaggy look that made her want to run her fingers through it. Dark green eyes were focused on the road ahead of them. Maybe he was concentrating hard on maneuvering through the debris and people crowding the roads and not paying attention to her.

"Did you hear me?"

He nodded without sparing her a glance. "Yes, but you need to go to the

hospital. You're cut and scraped up, a tree fell on you, and you're in shock. You need medical attention. We can work out the payment situation later."

Not knowing what else to say, Lauryn sat back and huddled into the seat. It had been a while since someone had shown true concern for her well-being. When they pulled up to the hospital's emergency room, Lauryn was fully prepared to get out and walk in on her own but he surprised her by sweeping her up in his arms again. He carried her inside, depositing her in a waiting room chair.

He checked in at the counter, picked up the necessary forms for her to fill out, and snagged a blanket which he wrapped around her shoulders. "Here. Fill out as much as you can while I park the car."

She looked down at the forms, not really seeing what was on them. Her hand began to tremble and tears blurred her vision. Everything she had was *gone*. All had been lost to the tornado, and she'd been forced to sell her parents' house to pay off the outstanding debts her father neglected to pay.

Ironically, some bill collectors still came after people even in the event of their death. She would never understand how her father had managed to hide the fact he hadn't been paying property taxes. Once she'd lost her job and didn't have enough savings to keep the house she'd had to give it up. As she sat there, with tears streaming down her cheeks, Steve reappeared. He took the clipboard from her hands and sat down beside her.

“What’s wrong?”

She looked over at him and his expression tightened, seeing her fight to hold back a sob as she tried to answer his question. But to no avail. Her sentence came out on a hiccup. She shook her head and tried again. “I don’t have anything left. Everything that I owned was at the motel. I don’t even have my ID to prove who I am.”

Steve took Lauryn’s trembling hand in his. “You said you lost your job?”

She nodded. “Yes, I was laid off about five months ago.”

“So what are you going to do?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m out of options.”

Steve shook his head. He knew the economy was in bad shape. Many businesses were going under, or having to reduce staff. There just wasn’t enough revenue to pay employees and keep the company afloat as well. He and his business partner Dillon were lucky their business was still up and running. They had experienced a few hard times right after the downturn in the economy but then again, so had a lot of people. It took a lot of good planning to keep the company profitable and in business.

Lauryn released a shuddering breath. “I have to try to find another job so I don’t end up on the street.”

Steve frowned at the idea. “How old are you?”

“I just turned twenty-two.”

Steve had to keep his jaw from dropping. He had figured she was young, but he would never have guessed eight years younger than him. She seemed very mature for a twenty-two-year old, but he wondered why she was by herself.

“Don’t you have family you can call?”

Steve wished he hadn’t mentioned family; she became even more saddened at the mention of the word.

“No one I can turn to. My mom had me late in life. Her family didn’t approve of my father, and he didn’t get along with his family, so we lived a very secluded life.”

He couldn’t keep his surprise hidden. “You don’t have any brothers or sisters?”

She shook her head no. “Like I said, my mom gave birth to me just after she turned forty. The pregnancy was an accident.”

“Your parents didn’t want you?”

The smile she gave him was a sad one. “My mother did.”

She was silent several minutes before she spoke again, her voice laced with pain. “My father was a hard, selfish man. He convinced me not to go to college because it would be too time-consuming. I wouldn’t be able to take care of him like he needed to be provided for.”

Steve clenched his fists as the anger rolled through him. The fact that a parent could be so cruel to their child ate at his gut. Lauryn was going to struggle if she

didn't get any help. Hell, she was *already* struggling, but she was doing a good job of holding it together. One thing he was sure of, he would love to help her. Frowning to himself, he realized there wasn't any reason why he couldn't. Lord knew he had more than enough money.

An idea popped into his head, causing the corners of his mouth to curve upward. When his smile grew into a fully fledged grin, she looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

"What are you happy about?"

"I have an idea."

She looked at him, her expression a mixture of anxiety and curiosity. "Which is?"

"Come work for me."

Her mouth fell open. "Okay. Now I *know* you've lost your mind. You don't know me. You don't even know what type of worker I am. Besides, what would I do for you?"

He thought about it for a moment before opening his mouth to answer her, and she held up her hands. "Wait. You're taking too long to answer. I don't think I *want* to know."

He chuckled. She had a sense of humor. He liked that. She was also beautiful. Her dark hair was short, the ends barely reaching the tips of her ears, exposing her



perfect oval-shaped face. Her creamy cocoa brown complexion seemed to be flawless. She was also tall, legs a mile long. When he'd had her in his arms earlier, he'd been taken aback by how light she was. He wondered if she was eating well. If she wasn't, he would see that all the food she desired was provided for her if she accepted his offer.

He tried to think of how to answer the question delicately. She was very skittish and he didn't want to do anything to scare her off. He had a feeling she would work out well.

“Clean my house and babysit for me.”



Lauryn paused before speaking, giving herself time to think. This had to be a hallucination. She was going to wake up any moment now. Although she didn't want to if it meant Steve was going to disappear. Biting her bottom lip, she was tempted to reach down to pinch herself. But if she wasn't dreaming it was going to hurt, and she bruised easily. But whether this was a figment of her imagination or not, if there was one thing she needed right now, it was money.

Wanting to find out more about what he was offering before she agreed to anything, she spoke hesitantly. “I'm very good at cleaning and cooking. I did it for my father for years, but I'm not good with animals, especially the scaly kind.”

Steve laughed out loud, causing a few people to look at them. She noticed it

was a nice laugh, and she would like to hear it more. Still, she couldn't believe she was entertaining this idea. They were strangers. But she needed a job.

He leaned closer to her. "Well, I promise that cleaning my house will be easy. I'm a neat person. I also don't have any pets."

She looked at him with raised eyebrows. "Well, I think you are a little old to need a nanny."

He chuckled. "You're right, but my four-year-old daughter isn't."

Lauryn couldn't hide her shock. "Daughter?"

He nodded. "Yes, I have a little girl. Her name is Hannah and she is an angel."

Lauryn remained quiet, not sure what to say. She didn't see a wedding band, and he'd never mentioned a wife, but that didn't mean anything. A lot of men walked around without wedding rings on. "Your wife won't mind?"

He smiled. "I'm not married. Never have been."

"Girlfriend?"

"No."

"What about Hannah's mother?"

"She hasn't been in the picture for a while."

Relief flowed through her veins to find Steve wasn't involved with another woman. Even though she might not stand a chance with him, she could see herself being jealous when it came to Steve. He was a very attractive man. Any woman in her

right mind that was dating him would probably feel the same way.

She released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. But she was concerned about Hannah's mother abandoning her. She knew what it was like to grow up without a mom. It had been tough.

"Why is Hannah's mom not in the picture?"

She watched as Steve stiffened. *Hannah's mother must be a sore subject.* Lauren really didn't want to push him to talk about something that obviously bothered him. She was about to tell him he didn't have to talk about it if he didn't want to when he began to speak.

"The main reason is she didn't really want a child, but was convinced that if she had Hannah I would marry her. I proposed to her for Hannah's sake, but our relationship fell apart and Tina left us."

A chill settled over Lauryn at the thought of a person being so selfish that if they didn't get what they wanted, they would just up and leave. She could never do that to her child. She had to give her father credit because he had never left her. Yes, there had been several times in her childhood where the idea wouldn't have seemed so bad. But no matter how bad things got in life, leaving her children would never be an option.

*Her children. Right.* She'd never even had a serious boyfriend. And so far her sexual experiences weren't anything to brag about. Her biological clock was a long

way away from ticking. She startled as Steve spoke, bringing her out of her thoughts.

“So what do you think?”

She looked at him in confusion. “About what?”

He smiled, and time slowed down. “Being my housekeeper and Hannah’s babysitter.”

“I don’t know,” she replied hesitantly.

“My house is a two-story home. I have five bedrooms, three full bathrooms, one half-bathroom, a living room, dining room, and a playroom for Hannah, which is where the main destruction of the house occurs.”

Her eyes widened as she remembered the destruction she’d seen on the way to the hospital. “Is your home okay?”

“Yes, it is. I talked to Johanna, Dillon’s wife, after the tornado dissipated. She said everything was fine.”

“Does Johanna watch Hannah all of the time?”

“No, only when it’s last minute and I can’t find anyone else. But Hannah needs stability. I want to find her a permanent sitter. Also Dillon and Johanna have two little girls that are five and three. She is also five months’ pregnant. If I need a last-minute baby sitter she brings the girls over so that Hannah can have someone to play with, but she already has enough to deal with.”

He paused, picked up the clipboard and handed it to her. “Now, you fill this out

while we finish talking so we can get you examined.”

“But I can’t pay.”

“You will be able to if you accept my job offer.”

Her eyebrows rose. “How much would you pay me?”

“How much did you make when you were working?”

“Less than I was worth. My annual salary was twenty-eight thousand a year.”

“Okay, well, I’m offering you thirty-thousand plus a five-thousand bonus for taking the job at the last minute. That is, if you decide to accept.”

Lauryn’s mouth dropped open before she could stop it. “What kind of money do you make that you can afford to pay me that?”

Guilt flashed through his eyes, but it was gone so quickly she thought she might have imagined it.

“Dillon and I are business partners and we own a sporting goods store here in town.”

“Oh, okay.”

Lauryn began filling out the medical form. Something in her gut told her this was an opportunity she couldn’t pass up, especially with her current financial situation.

“So I take it you are taking the position?”

She looked up at him. “Yes I am, but I must warn you I don’t know a lot about

kids.”

Steve chuckled. “That’s okay. Hannah’s four going on thirty. I’m sure she’s going to love you.”

Lauryn frowned. “She won’t be bothered by my ethnicity, will she?”

Steve shook his head. “No. Hannah’s mom is Cherokee. So is Johanna. I also have a wide variety of friends. I’ve raised my daughter to be open minded. Believe me, your race won’t bother her any more than it bothers me.”

She nodded. “Good. By the way, I’m not sure when you’re going to pay me, but would it be okay if I used one of your rooms until I can afford to get out on my own? You can deduct it from my pay.”

“Um...to be truthful, I was hoping you would be a live-in housekeeper and babysitter, but if you want to get out on your own, I can give you the five-thousand-dollar bonus up front, and pay you weekly after that. Is that okay?”

“What? You’d let a perfect stranger live in your home? Take care of your daughter?”

“Of course not. As any employer would do, I’m going to run a background check and make sure there aren’t any skeletons in your closet.”

She laughed. “Believe me you won’t find anything. Just let me know what information you need and I will be happy to provide it.”

“Good. Give me your date of birth and social security number. I’ll have Dillon

run it while we're waiting for the doctor."

She paused trying to take it all in.

"Lauryn?"

She looked up at Steve. This was an opportunity of a lifetime and she couldn't pass it up. Not right now. "Yes, that's okay."

She lowered her head and began to write, but paused.

"Would it be better for you if I were a live-in babysitter?"

He nodded. "It would be, just in case something last-minute comes up. I won't have to feel guilty about waking you up in the middle of the night then making you drive across town to get her. Of course, there'll be days when you won't be needed and you can feel free to have personal time."

She hesitated, hoping she wasn't about to cross a line she shouldn't, but she had to know. "That sounds okay, but don't you date?"

He shook his head. "Not at this point in time. If I do bring home a date, I will be discreet. I would expect you to be as well."

She laughed. "That wouldn't be a problem. I don't date either. I need to get myself together first."

Lauryn held out her hand and Steve took it. "Mr. Mitchell, it looks like we have a deal."

"Good. I'll have a contract drawn up and call Dillon to have your background

check started.”

Within half an hour they called Lauryn. After diagnosing her in good condition, the doctor cleaned her cuts and scrapes before sending her home. Dillon called Steve with the results from the instant background check while she was being examined. All negative.

Steve led her to the car, making sure she was seated before going around to the driver’s side. The sun was up and Lauryn could see the extent of the damage caused by the tornado. She turned to look at Steve.

“I wonder what the tornado rating was?”

“I heard it was an F3, almost an F4, from some of the other people in the ER.”

She shook her head. She was lucky to be alive, not having had proper shelter to take. “Wow. No wonder the motel ended up in the shape it did.”

“From the looks of things it did some skipping.”

Steve cleared his throat. His expression indicated he was going to tell her something she might not find pleasant. She tried to brace herself.

“I spoke with Dillon while you were being examined to see if they found any of your personal belongings. None have been located so far.”

Lauryn’s heart sank at the news. Thankfully she didn’t have any credit cards. There was only five dollars in cash in her purse, so if someone did steal it they were welcome to it. She would also have to get a new social security card and driver’s



license.

Several moments later they pulled up in front of a lovely two-story house with a nice front yard. She stared at the beautiful home that sat in front of her. “Your house is lovely.”

Steve turned and smiled at her. “Don’t say that yet. You haven’t seen the inside, and there are three little girls under the age of five in there. So you might have your first cleanup task.”

He assisted her out of the car and helped her up the walkway. The front door opened and an attractive dark haired woman stood on the other side of it. Judging from the way that her stomach was starting to protrude, Lauryn was sure this was Johanna. Steve stepped forward and kissed her on the cheek before whispering to her.

“Are the girls awake?”

She nodded. “That’s why I was listening for you. I didn’t want you to get them riled up. They’re eating breakfast now, but Hannah is very anxious to see you.”

“Did Dillon come by? When I spoke to him earlier he said he would.”

Johanna smiled and rubbed her stomach. “Yes, he stopped by to check on us and entertain the girls for a while. He’s just headed to the store to see if there was any major damage.” She looked over at Lauryn.

Lauryn laughed when Steve hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Johanna, I would like you to meet Lauryn. Lauryn, this is Johanna.”

Lauryn held out her hand. Johanna shook it briefly. Lauryn felt slightly self-conscious at the hospital scrubs she was wearing in lieu of her wet and muddy pajamas, and how she towered over the attractive woman. Johanna was barely a few inches over five feet. Johanna stepped back as they entered the house.

“Lauryn is going to be my housekeeper and Hannah’s babysitter.”

There was obvious shock at the announcement; Johanna’s next words confirmed that.

“Lauryn, would you excuse us for a moment?”

Lauryn watched them walk away.



Johanna pulled Steve out of the front foyer and into another room. She whirled and looked at him. “Are you out of your mind?”

Steve smiled and folded his arms over his chest. Johanna was a firecracker who packed a punch for such a small woman, but they had been friends for years and he knew how to handle her.

“Actually, I have never been more sane in my life.”

“You don’t even know her.”

“I know enough.”

Johanna began to pace the floor. “This is absolutely crazy, Steve. How do you know she isn’t after your money?”

“Because she doesn’t know about it.”

Johanna looked at with wide eyes. “*What?* What do you mean she doesn’t know?”

Steve shrugged. “I didn’t tell her how much money I have.”

Johanna bent over, groaning in pain, and for a moment he thought something was wrong with the baby. As he went to step forward, she looked at him and shook her head.

“This isn’t good, Steve. You shouldn’t do this. You have more than enough money to find a babysitter for Hannah.”

So he did. He’d also been conducting interviews over the past few months to find a suitable candidate, but hadn’t found any until he had met Lauryn. The funny thing was she hadn’t been looking for the job, but he knew that she was right for it.

“I know I do, and I just did. I promise you, Lauryn is the right person to take care of Hannah.”

Johanna knew Steve well enough to know when he made up his mind there was no changing it. She also knew he would never do anything that would hurt his daughter. Hannah was his life. The reason he breathed.

She started to say something else but stopped. Steve looked at her, full of assurance. “Trust me, Johanna. I know what I’m doing. I would never put Hannah in danger. I had Dillon run an instant background check on her. Nothing came back. I’ll

run a more detailed one as well, but I know it isn't necessary. Lauryn is going to be great with her. I have a feeling that Lauryn needs Hannah as much as Hannah needs Lauryn."

Johanna took a deep breath. "Okay, Steve. I know when your mind's made up. Plus I've never known you to make an awful decision. Irrational on occasion, but never bad. If you trust her, so do I."

Steve smiled. "Thank you."

Lauryn was still standing in the foyer, hugging herself and looking completely lost. Where most people would have been looking around, she was staring at her feet. Steve knew then he was right. Lauryn couldn't hurt a flea. The background check Dillon ran also reaffirmed it for him. She didn't even have a speeding ticket. Lauryn was the right woman for this job.

Johanna smiled warmly as she walked over to Lauryn.

"Please excuse my earlier rudeness, Lauryn. It isn't anything personal. I promise. I've been looking after Steve and Hannah for so long sometimes I'm a little overprotective. But if Steve trusts you, I do as well. Now, I'm sure you want to get cleaned up so I'll go back and tend to the girls."

Lauryn watched Johanna leave before turning to look at Steve, a wary look in her eyes.

"Maybe I should leave?"

Steve stood and studied her a moment before responding. “And go where?”

Lauryn shrugged, and Steve stepped closer to her. “Don’t pay Johanna any attention. She meant what she said. I promise you she won’t give you a hard time. Now, let’s get you upstairs so you can freshen up.”

She followed him through the foyer into what looked to be the living room before following him up the stairs.

“You can have your pick of these three rooms. I’m down the far end. Hannah’s room is across from mine and connects to that bathroom. If you choose *this* room it connects to Hannah’s bathroom.” He pointed to two rooms on the same side as his. “These two rooms connect to the last bathroom. It has an oversize bath tub.”

“I’d like that one.”

“Okay. Let me go grab a few clothes I think may fit you.”

He returned a short time later with a few T-shirts and sweat pants. “Your bathroom should have towels, a spare toothbrush, soap, and shampoo. Go ahead and freshen up. I’ll meet you downstairs shortly.”

She closed the bedroom door behind Steve, walked into the bathroom and looked around. Once she’d located everything she would need, she hopped in the shower. She hadn’t realized how unclean she felt until the warm spray hit her body.

Taking longer than she normally did in the shower, she bathed several times until she felt squeaky clean and her skin began to prune. She stepped out of the

shower stall and stopped in front of the mirror. It was hard not to gasp at her reflection. But she had just survived a tornado. What was she supposed to look like: a beauty queen?

Heading downstairs, she heard the giggles of a little girl and followed the laughter into what appeared to be Hannah's playroom. Steve's massive frame lay on the floor and he was holding a little girl above him. She giggled again as Steve made the airplane motion and sound. Lauryn's heart tightened.

Lauryn could tell in that instant Steve was a good father, one who would do anything for his little girl. Steve's trust in her with Hannah made her vow to do her best. Steve looked over and noticed her. Bringing Hannah down to his chest, he sat up, turning Hannah so she could see Lauryn as he spoke.

"Hannah, I have someone I want you to meet. This is Lauryn. She is going to be our live-in housekeeper, and your babysitter. Can you say hi to Lauryn?"

Lauryn was a little shocked at how honest he was with his daughter, but that was a good thing. She believed in being honest, even if it led to undesirable results.

Hannah nodded. "Hi, Lauryn."

Lauryn went farther into the room, eased her long frame down on the floor, and held out her hand to Hannah. Her heart melted as Hannah shyly stuck her hand out, placing it into hers.

"Hi, Hannah. It's nice to meet you. I've heard some wonderful things about you

from your dad.”

Hannah turned to look at Steve, as if needing confirmation. Lauryn couldn’t get over how much Hannah resembled Steve. Her skin was darker, a sign of her mixed heritage, but she had Steve’s dark green eyes and light brown hair, giving her an exotic look. How could a mother walk away from this lovely and gentle child? She made a promise right then never to allow anything to happen to Hannah. “What do you think about me being your babysitter?”

Hannah shrugged her shoulders. “It’s okay, I guess.”

Lauryn laughed at her honest response. She was definitely her father’s child. “We’re going to have a lot of fun. I promise.”

“Speaking of fun, we need to give you a tour of the house.”

Hannah tugged on the leg of his jeans. “Can I help, Daddy?”

“You sure can, pumpkin. As a matter of fact, you can be the head guide of the tour.”

Hannah clapped her hands and did a little dance before running out of the playroom. Steve called out after her, “Hannah, no running in the house.”

“Where’s Johanna?”

“Ariel and Octavia were restless so she took them home.”

Lauryn wondered if that was the real reason.

Hannah came back in. “Come on you guys, hurry up.”

"Come on, Lauryn. You don't want to miss all the excitement, do you?"

Lauryn held back her laughter as she took the hand Steve held out to her and let Steve and Hannah lead her on a tour of the house. When they reached the living room, she paused. She hadn't noticed the room's decor when she first came in. The room was decorated in rich, earthy colors, and full of warmth.

"Who decorated this room?"

Steve smiled. "My sister Sabrina. She's into interior design. Even went to school for it. I gave her a little money to spruce up this room and she went wild."

"She did a good job."

"I'll be sure to tell her."

Hannah led them through the living room and into the dining room. From the look of the room it was only used on special occasions. The china inside the china cabinet looked to be very nice, very expensive. She looked over at Steve. "Your house is beautiful."

"Thank you. I also want you to feel free to make any changes you need to make things more accessible, as long as the changes aren't too dramatic."

Lauryn nodded as she continued to look around.

"Are you ready to see the kitchen?" Hannah asked

Lauryn looked down and smiled. "Yes, I am."

Hannah tugged her hand. "Then follow me."



She followed her small tour guide into a large and roomy kitchen; a cook's dream space, in her opinion. She was a pretty good cook herself. She could definitely have some fun in this kitchen. Steve opened different cabinets, showed her where a few important items were. Her eyebrows rose when she saw the amount of peanut butter they had and she made a mental note of things she would need to buy at the grocery store the first chance she got.

"Well, that's it."

"Okay, so is there anything you need me to do right now?"

Steve shook his head. "You've been through a lot this morning. Why don't you just rest?"

Steve didn't have to say it twice. She was exhausted. She smiled at Hannah. "It was nice to meet you. I'll see you in a little while."

"See you later," Hannah replied.

Lauryn walked out of the kitchen, pausing when she reached the other side of the doorway. Steve stood studying her silently.

"Did you need something else?"

She shook her head. "No. I just wanted to tell you thanks again for everything."

"You're welcome, Lauryn."

She offered him a small smile then turned toward the stairs. Sleepiness was tugging at her. As soon as she made it upstairs she was going to give in.

## Chapter Two

The sun peeked through the curtains, waking Lauryn slowly. It was then she realized yesterday hadn't been a dream. She glanced at the clock on the bedside table; eight-thirty. Throwing back the covers, she spotted the check and cash on the dresser. Steve had left her the five-thousand-dollar bonus he'd promised her. He'd written a four-thousand-dollar check, and left one thousand in cash in case she didn't have a bank account, with instructions to set one up if she didn't.

She did have a bank account. She needed to stop at the bank first thing this morning to alert them of her lost card and change of address. Steve's note said he had Hannah with him, but he would drop her off at one o'clock this afternoon. He wanted her to spend the morning shopping so she could have everything she needed. The keys to the spare car were on the coffee table. Yesterday afternoon Steve had driven her back to the motel to see if anything of hers had been salvaged. All her belongings were gone but now, thanks to Steve, she had the means to replace them. Yet all the things she had to remind her of the good times with her parents were gone.

A short time later she headed downstairs. She planned to stop by the bank and hopefully a few stores that hadn't been too badly affected by the storm would be open

so she could get some errands done. A phone rang in the seat next to her the instant she slid into the car, causing her to jump. She smiled when she saw the name on the caller ID.

“Good morning, Steve.”

“Good morning to you too. Did you sleep okay?”

“I slept better than okay.”

“Good. Just to let you know you are using your cell phone.”

“But I don’t need a cell phone.”

“This coming from a person who was trapped under a tree less than twenty-four hours ago, and really could have used a phone.”

Lauryn laughed. “I probably wouldn’t have been able to get to it or use it if I’d had one, anyway.”

“Hmm, you have a point there. If you need to use it when you’re driving, connect it to the cell phone holder on the dash.”

Lauryn spotted the holder. “Okay. Hang on a second so that I can set the phone in it now.”

Surprisingly it only took her one try to get it right. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can. Where are you headed?”

She pulled up to a red stoplight. “To the bank to put the money you paid me in my account. Then I’m going to head to the mall, and maybe to the grocery store.”

“Sounds like you have a busy morning planned.”

“I do, but I will be back at the house around one o’clock.”

She turned down the street leading to the bank, taking in all of the debris still littering the street. Her heart squeezed painfully. There was so much destruction.

“Okay take your time, get everything you need, and don’t spend anything on the house. I have a separate budget for that. This is your money, so spend it on you, and only you. I have a feeling it’s been a while since you have. I don’t want to hold you up, so have fun and I’ll see you later.”

After her tour of the kitchen yesterday and the interesting food selections, a trip to the grocery store was on her priority list, separate budget or not. She would just leave him a receipt on the counter if he wanted to reimburse her. However, she had no plans to tell him or he might want to have a long, drawn-out discussion about it. “Okay...and Steve.”

“Yes, Lauryn?”

“Thank you.”

She could hear the smile in his voice when he responded. “You’re welcome, Lauryn.”

Steve disconnected the call as his good friend and business partner Dillon came back into the kitchen with Ariel in his arms, Hannah trailing behind them. Hannah ran and jumped into his lap. He’d brought her with him this morning because her

school was closed owing to the tornado damage. They wanted to repair the school today in time to have it open tomorrow. He'd come over to his friend's house early to discuss store business. Even though he had more money than he could ever spend in his lifetime, he wanted to work—needed to work.

The store had sustained minor damage, mainly broken glass, and they were going to open a little later, once the cleanup was finished. The tornado had never touched down by the store, but strong winds had definitely done some structural damage.

Dillon sat down across from Steve, settling Ariel on his lap. She was barely there a moment before hopping down, leaving the kitchen with Hannah hot on her heels. Dillon spoke, bringing Steve out of his thoughts. “So, Johanna tells me you hired the woman that you saved the other morning.”

Steve sighed. He had been waiting for this conversation since he'd first walked in the door. “Yes, I did.”

“She's very pretty.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Yeah, but it's more than that. She's a lovely person and she'll take good care of Hannah.”

“Does Hannah like her?”

Steve nodded thinking about the interaction between the two of them yesterday. “She seems to.”

Dillon studied him intensely for a moment and Steve knew what was coming.

“Does Lauryn know you’re a millionaire?”

“No.”

“Are you going to tell her?”

Steve stood up and walked over to the coffee pot to refill his cup. “Yes, but not yet. If I do, I think it will scare her off.”

“Well, when she finds out later she’s going to be upset you didn’t tell her right off.”

Steve knew that Dillon was right but he would wait a little longer. Until he felt more secure about revealing his well-kept secret. “I’ll deal with that if it happens.”

Steve walked back over to the table and sat down. “When will the repair guys be finished with the windows?”

“They say noon.”

“Good, that gives me time to run Hannah to the house, then meet you at the store by one-thirty?”

Dillon nodded. “Fine with me. I doubt we’ll have much business today. Tornadoes have been sighted in Moore and Oklahoma City. They could be heading back this way,”

Steve groaned. “I hope not. We barely had time to recuperate from the last one.”

“Tell me about it. So, what do you have planned for this morning?”

Steve took a sip of his coffee. “Nothing much, really. I’m just going to keep Hannah busy until Lauryn takes care of everything she needs, and then we can get busy assessing everything at the store.”

Johanna walked into the room rubbing her slightly rounded stomach. “I thought you said the damage wasn’t bad.”

Dillon walked over and kissed Johanna, placing his hand on her stomach. Steve felt a pang in his chest at the sight. Having a beautiful wife to come home to and a houseful of kids was something he looked forward to one day. He wondered if Lauryn would look any more beautiful than she did now if she were pregnant. Whoa, that was a visualization he shouldn’t be having about a woman he’d just met. Not to mention a woman who probably wasn’t even thinking the same thing, at her age. He heard his friend reassuring his wife.

“It isn’t bad. The store’s still standing, but there’s some cleaning that has to be done. It won’t take long. I’ll be home before dark.”

Steve stepped forward, placing his hand on Dillon’s shoulder. “I’ll see to it.”

Johanna stretched upward, and Steve leaned down to meet her halfway so she could kiss his cheek. “Make sure you do.”

“Well guys, Hannah and I have to get going. We’re going to the movies to see a kid flick.”

“Sounds like fun.”

Steve gave Johanna a wry look. “Oh, it will be. I just hope I can survive the attack of the Hannah.”



Lauryn hung up the last shirt and collapsed on the bed, exhausted from all the shopping. Starting over from scratch had been fun. She had even managed not to spend a lot of money. The room was starting to feel a lot like it was hers. Right now she was still trying to decide if she would be a live-in sitter and housekeeper, but she wasn't going to stress over it. There was time for her to make her final decision regarding her living arrangements.

Steve and Hannah were due in a little under an hour. She'd nap until then so she'd have the energy to keep up with Hannah. What seemed like only minutes later Lauryn heard a knock on the bedroom door. Waking slowly she called out, “Yes?”

Steve's voice traveled through the door. “Just wanted to let you know Hannah and I are here.”

She yawned. “Okay, I'll be down in a moment.”

“We came back a little early, so take your time.”

Going downstairs, she found Hannah in the living room watching television, and sat down beside her. “Hi.”

Hannah replied shyly. “Hi.”

“What are you watching?”



“Sesame Street.”

Silence fell between them and Steve entered the room. His step faltered as he saw her, and Lauryn’s heart skipped a beat. Lord, the man was handsome.

He recovered first. “Hi.”

Lauryn cheeks warmed at her runaway thoughts. “Hello.”

“Did you get everything you needed today?”

She nodded. “I got everything I needed as well as a few things I didn’t.”

“Really? I can’t imagine you being an excessive shopper.”

“I’m not, but it’s different when you’re starting over.”

He looked down at his watch. “Well, I’m glad you got everything done today. I have to get to the store but I should be home by seven. If I see that I’m running late, I’ll give you a call.”

“Okay. If I have to put Hannah to bed, what time do you normally do so?”

“I’ll be home unless something wild happens. I promise. But she’s normally in bed by nine. No later than nine-thirty.”

“Okay.”

Steve walked over and picked Hannah up, throwing her up into the air in the process. Hannah squealed with happiness before claspings Steve around the neck.

“Daddy has to get to work, but be a good girl for Lauryn.”

She nodded her head very sincerely. “Okay.”

He gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I love you, Hannah."

She returned his kiss. "I love you too, Daddy."

Looking for a way to break the ice Lauryn knelt down to Hannah's level. "Are you hungry?"

Hannah nodded. "Well then, let's make lunch."

She stood and held out her hand. Hannah took it and allowed Lauryn to lead the way to the kitchen.

Hannah tugged her hand. "What are we going to make?"

Lauryn smiled. "What would you like to make?"

Hannah's face scrunched up while she thought about it. Suddenly her face lit up. "Peanut butter and jelly."

Lauryn wrinkled her nose. "I noticed a lot of peanut butter and jelly around here, but maybe we can try something different."

"Like what?"

Lauryn pulled a chair from the kitchen table and slid it up to the counter for Hannah to stand on.

"Stand right here and I'll show you. Yesterday when you took me on a tour, and today when I was putting away the few groceries I bought, I thought about a few things to make a really neat snack. Now, the first thing we need to do is wash our hands, then turn on the oven. Now let's separate the bagels before we place them on

the cookie sheet.”

While Hannah did as instructed, Lauryn reached over and opened up a small jar of pizza sauce.

“What do I do now?”

Lauryn picked up two spoons. “We’re going to place our toppings on the bagels.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I found lots of cheese, some mushrooms, green olives, and black olives.”

Hannah made a face. “No green olives. I don’t like those but Daddy does.”

Lauryn smiled, making note of the information for future purposes. “Okay then, everything except green olives it is.”

Lauryn’s mouth was watering by the time the bagels were ready. She was almost embarrassed when her stomach grumbled, but she hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

She sent Hannah off to the playroom while she loaded the dishwasher, then headed for the playroom herself, thinking about what she would make for dinner. Having no idea when Steve would actually be in from work, she would aim to have dinner ready by seven o’clock, his estimated time of arrival. If he showed later, he could reheat it.

Lauryn joined Hannah on the playroom floor and picked up one of the extra

dolls. “What are you playing?”

“Dress up. I’m changing all of their clothes.”

Lauryn reached for a doll. “Do you mind if I help?”

Hannah shook her head. “No. After I finish changing them I’m going to put them down for a nap.”

“Are you going to lie down and take a nap with them?”

Hannah’s body answered the question before she could reply by yawning and rubbing her eyes. “Yes. Daddy says I’m cranky when I don’t have a nap.”

Lauryn leaned in closer to Hannah. “I’ll tell you a secret.”

Hannah’s eyes widened before she leaned in closer to Lauryn and whispered. “Okay.”

“I get cranky if I don’t have a nap too.”

“Really?”

Lauryn nodded and she watched as Hannah began to contemplate something. “Are we going to take a nap together?”

“Sure. I may not sleep as long as you do, because I had a short nap earlier.”

Hannah thought it over briefly. “Well, I’m ready to take my nap now.”

“Where would you like to lie down?”

“In your room with you. Daddy normally takes a nap with me in here. I get to sleep on his chest, but I think I may be too heavy for you.”

Lauryn laughed. “You might be right.”

They headed up the stairs to Lauryn’s room. Lauryn held back the covers for Hannah to climb in and then went around to the other side of the bed and slid in.

Her heart gave a hard thump as Hannah scooted closer to her and she in turn draped her arm around Hannah. Hannah was definitely a well-mannered child. Steve had done an excellent job in raising her. She was definitely going to enjoy her job of caretaker for Hannah. Now if she could only concentrate on not enjoying taking care of Steve as much. She was doing all she could to keep their relationship professional, but she had a feeling that Steve was as attracted to her as she was to him.

Noticing that Hannah had grown quiet, Lauryn glanced down at her and smiled. Hannah had already drifted off to sleep. Lauryn didn’t know a lot about kids but she knew enough to know she had gotten lucky to watch someone as well behaved as Hannah. Closing her eyes she joined Hannah in slumber, finishing the nap that she hadn’t gotten the chance to complete earlier.



Lauryn looked up as she heard the front door close. A moment later she heard Hannah’s squeal of happiness. She pulled the chicken and rice casserole she had made for dinner out of the oven and placed it on top of the stove. Steve appeared a second later, carrying Hannah into the kitchen on his shoulders. Her heartbeat sped up at the sight of him. He made her mouth water when she looked at him and she couldn’t

understand why. She couldn't recall having such a strong reaction to a man, especially when she had never dated outside of her race. There never had been an opportunity to. Yes she was attracted to white men, hence her crush on Clive Owen, but she knew a relationship between her and Clive wasn't going to happen in this lifetime. A relationship with Steve was more of a reality, but even then she wasn't sure how much.

"Good evening."

She cleared her mind of any thoughts that might get her in trouble. Given her track record lately, trouble might not be far away. "Good evening. How was work?"

"Pretty busy with the cleanup, but we did have more business than I thought we would. How was your day?"

"It was good."

"Did Hannah behave herself?"

"Yes, she did."

Steve took a deep breath and sniffed appreciatively. "What did you cook? It smells great."

She flushed at his compliment. "Chicken and rice casserole."

He looked at the dish with anticipation. "Is it ready?"

She nodded, unable to speak.

Steve sighed, and removed Hannah from around his shoulders. "Good. I'm going

to take Hannah upstairs to wash up.”

As Steve left the kitchen, Lauryn turned back to the cabinet and pulled down three plates, trying to get her heartbeat to return to normal.

Steve was very attractive. He oozed charm and sex appeal. He was someone she would probably date if she were a little older, or he a little younger. Even though she had seen older men who dated younger women, there was no doubt in her mind that she wasn't Steve's type.

She glanced up as she heard Steve and Hannah return, Hannah praising the braid that Lauryn had fastened her hair up in. Picking up the casserole she glanced up in surprise as Steve took it out of her hands.

“Your workday is over. Have a seat.”

Lauryn started to protest, but at the look he gave her, kept quiet and took a seat next to Hannah, who was rubbing her hands together in anticipation. Hannah had assisted in making the casserole dish. The miniature version of Steve was looking forward to trying it. Bowing her head, Lauryn blessed her food before she began to eat. She looked up as Steve moaned in pleasure. The look on his face was indescribable

“This tastes great.”

Lauryn blushed. “Thank you.”

He shook his head making another sound of appreciation. “If you cook like this

every night, I'll have to give you another bonus."

Lauryn's blush deepened. "That won't be necessary."

Before Steve could reply, Hannah spoke up. "You were right, Lauryn, the peas do taste good."

Steve reached over and ruffled Hannah's hair, which earned him a frown. "Since when have you started eating vegetables without complaining?"

"Since Lauryn told me it would help me to grow tall like her. I want to be tall and pretty just like her."

Steve looked over at Lauryn while speaking to Hannah. "And you will be."

Lauryn felt warm all over at Steve's comment but she didn't reply. She didn't want to embarrass herself by reading more into it than he meant.

They finished their meal and both Steve and Hannah helped her with the dishes. When the last dish had been dried, Steve turned to Hannah.

"Well Hannah, it's bath time."

Hannah looked at him with a pleading look. "Can Lauryn help me?"

Steve looked up at Lauryn and caught her gaze. "It's up to Lauryn."

She was forced to break eye contact with him as Hannah bounced over to her, dancing around her, singing "please" until Lauryn laughed and gave in. "Okay, I'll help you."

"Yes! Daddy, you can read me my bedtime story and tuck me in."



With that said Hannah took off for the stairs, leaving Lauryn and Steve standing together in an awkward silence.

Lauryn broke the silence first. “You don’t mind me helping her with her bath, do you?”

“Not at all. You ladies have fun.”

Lauryn followed after Hannah. When she reached the bathroom Hannah was already down to her underwear. Lauryn leaned over to turn the water on, then added Hannah’s bubble bath to the water. Hannah slithered into the tub and began splashing before the tub was even half full of water. It was hard not to smile at the sight Hannah made. It brought back memories of bath times that Lauryn had shared with her own mother.

Lauryn bathed Hannah thoroughly and washed her hair, only after promising the little girl that she would braid it again, before taking her out and wrapping her in a towel.

“I’ll tell your daddy you’re ready for your bedtime story.”

Hannah hugged Lauryn around her legs. Lauryn bent down to pick Hannah up.

“Goodnight Lauryn.”

“Goodnight Hannah.”

Lauryn set her back on her feet and Hannah hopped into the bed. Just as she turned around Steve entered the room. He paused as he walked by her.

“Would you like to stay for the story?”

Lauryn shook her head. She felt she had already intruded on enough of their time. “Maybe next time.”

“You sure?”

She nodded and backed out of the room, watching as Steve walked over to Hannah’s bed, a small part of her wishing she were the one being tucked in. Lauryn turned, heading to her own room. A short time later she stepped out of the shower and dried off, stopping in front of the full-length mirror. She ran her hands over her smooth stomach before turning to the side to check herself out from that angle.

She had indeed lost weight. She couldn’t be classified as thin because she still had ample hips, but she was smaller than she used to be. She walked over to the dresser and pulled out the satin slip she had bought today. Her weight loss had been due to stress. Eating hadn’t been high on her priority list; then again, prior to now she had to be careful of how she spent her money. There had even been times when she had gone without eating. Thanks to Steve that was something she didn’t have to worry about anymore.

Now she realized it gave her time to worry about other things. She pulled on underwear then slipped into her robe and headed downstairs to the kitchen. Her throat was so dry she had to have a glass of water before going to bed.

The house was so quiet. She wondered what Steve was doing. He should

definitely be finished with the bedtime story.

“Couldn’t sleep?”

She started as Steve’s voice pulled her out of her thoughts. Her hand froze halfway to her mouth when she caught sight of Steve. He had on flannel pajama pants but no shirt. His chest was mouthwatering. Her gaze lowered. His stomach was flat and defined, his chest muscular, and his arms nicely built. Her gaze followed him all the way to the refrigerator.

Closing her eyes when he reached it, she took a deep breath. The man had an awesome butt. He poured himself a glass of orange juice. Lauryn watched him perform what she thought may be the sexiest thing she had ever seen. She flushed when she realized where her thoughts had drifted. Dropping her face into her hands to hide her shame, a groan escaped her when she saw her nipples had grown hard. She jumped at the sound of Steve’s voice, lifting her head slowly to look at him.

“Are you okay?”

She looked at him with puzzlement. “What?”

The corner of his mouth tilted upward. “I asked if you were okay. You groaned.”

She waved her hand in dismissal, embarrassed she had been caught making a fool of herself. “I’m fine. I was just lost in thought.”

“What were you thinking about?”

She shook her head. “Believe me, you don’t want to know.”

Steve remained quiet and took another sip of his orange juice. “Well, I just came down to get a drink before I went to bed. See you in the morning.”

“Would you like breakfast?”

“Only if you feel like cooking it.”

“I do. What time will you be up in the morning?”

“Eight-thirty. Goodnight.”

She smiled. “Goodnight.”

Lauryn watched as he left the kitchen, secretly wishing she were leaving with him, to go up to his bedroom where he would make love to her the entire night. She choked on a gasp when she realized where her mind had just gone to in her reverie.

Not wanting to get carried away with her wicked thoughts, she stood and walked over to the sink, pouring away the remaining water in her glass. Tomorrow was probably going to be a long day because she doubted she was going to get any sleep tonight.

Several hours later Lauryn groaned in frustration, reaching out for her alarm clock for the umpteenth time. She was almost tempted not to go for her run but she had to. Exercise and eating right were important to her. She would never let her health deteriorate the way that her father had let his.

Yet it was a struggle to open her eyes fully, so she settled for squinting. After meeting Steve last night it had taken her forever to fall asleep. She had resorted to

reading a book to get her mind off him, but a romance novel was the only thing she had bought while out shopping. The steamy cover had captured her attention. Considering her already salacious thoughts about him it hadn't been a wise choice. So she had resorted to just lying in the dark, hoping she could get all her Steve-related thoughts out of her mind. Then maybe she would be able to go to sleep. It had eventually worked, but judging from how tired she felt, it might not have been soon enough.

Opening her eyes, she groaned in relief when she noticed it was still dark out. She always went for her run in the early morning so the sun was rising by the time she made it back in. It gave her time to cool down and take a shower before her day got started. Forcing herself to get out of bed, she stepped out of the satin slip and into her workout outfit, making her way to the kitchen. She had to make sure the coffee was ready to brew.

With that done, she did a little stretching to warm up before taking off in a light run. The rhythmic patter of her feet against the sidewalk was comforting to her. She ran her usual mile, then turned around and headed back to the house. The two miles had become easy to her. It was probably time for her to up the mileage a little. A smile came to her face as she entered the house that was now her home. She believed everything, even the bad things, happened for a reason. But in a way she was thankful for the tornado that had come through Norman, for it had brought with it a second

chance for her.

She wouldn't have time to take a leisurely bath, but she could take one once she had gotten Hannah off to school and finished fixing Steve's breakfast. Right now she would have to settle for a shower to clean the evidence of her morning run from her body. Initially, she had felt a little guilty taking the job once Steve told her Hannah went to school for half of the day. Then she realized she could use that time to clean as well as plan dinner and the guilt had faded away.

She entered Hannah's room and crossed to the bed.

"Hannah, time to wake up, sweetheart."

Hannah grumbled before turning and snuggling deeper into the covers. Steve had been right. Hannah was definitely hard to get up in the mornings. Still, she had learned a little trick yesterday morning when she had been going through this ritual. Lauryn pulled the covers back and whispered to Hannah, "If you don't wake up there won't be time for blueberry pancakes. Then you'll have to eat the breakfast they serve you at school."

Hannah moaned and shook her head against the pillow without opening her eyes. "But I don't want to eat breakfast at school." Lauryn helped the grumbling Hannah hurry getting ready and they were fortunate to make it downstairs in what she knew was record time.

Lauryn breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't easy taking over Steve's morning

ritual but he'd relinquished the duty to her, while assuring her there would be mornings when he would step in if necessary.

Hannah sat at the table patiently while Lauryn whipped up the blueberry pancakes, eggs, and sausage. She sat down across from Hannah to eat. When they were done she let Hannah help her load the dishwasher; they had a few minutes to spare.

Lauryn helped her put her backpack on. She knelt down and hugged Hannah. "You be good and have a good day."

"Will you have my snack waiting when I get home?"

Lauryn smiled. "You know I will."

They shared one last hug before she walked Hannah down to the bus. Lauryn waved as it pulled off. Steve would be up shortly and she would have to focus on serving him his breakfast. Pancakes, eggs, and sausage seemed like it would be sufficient. But for future reference she would have to find out what his preferences were

She went about cleaning up Hannah's playroom until she heard Steve moving around. Heading into the kitchen, she saw he was sitting at the table reading his paper and drinking his first cup of coffee.

"Good morning."

He looked at her, one of his heart-stopping grins in place. "Good morning. Did

you get Hannah off alright?”

She nodded as she went to the microwave and pressed the button that would heat up his breakfast. “Much better than yesterday.”

“Good.”

“Are you ready for breakfast?”

He nodded then turned the page on his paper. “Yes, I am.”

She smiled when he made exaggerated sniffing sounds.

“What are you heating up?”

She jumped when his voice sounded next to her ear, realizing he was right behind her. How that had happened she had no idea. She hadn’t heard him move. Or had she just been so deep in thought? She moved away, putting space between them, trying not to be obvious about it. “Your breakfast. I went ahead and made enough for you when I cooked for Hannah and I.”

Seeming satisfied with the answer he returned to his seat, which she was glad about because the last thing she wanted to do was ruin his breakfast by overheating it. With him standing so close that was very likely to happen. Her concentration seemed to be lacking anytime he came near. “What kind of flowers do you like?”

Lauryn looked over at Steve in surprise. *So much for her concentration.* “What?”

He chuckled. “What kind of flowers do you like?”

Lauryn shrugged. She’d never really thought about it. Living at home with her



father she'd always tried to bring home a bunch of flowers on a weekly basis, because she thought it brightened up the place. It had never been anything fancy. Just daisies here and carnations there. "I don't know. Why?"

"Just asking. I once heard that the type of flower a person likes says a lot about them."

She frowned. She had never heard that before. "Um...okay. Sterling roses."

"Sterling roses?"

"Yes."

Sterling roses were nice. She had only bought them one time because they were expensive. The lavender-colored roses had caught her eye when she'd gone into the florist one day. She'd set the roses in the middle of the table and sat there staring at them for a long time. Enjoying their beauty.

"What do you like about them?"

She shrugged her shoulders again, at the back of her mind hoping it wouldn't become a bad habit. It wasn't often that she shrugged her shoulders but she seemed to be doing it a lot of it lately.

"They're pretty. I love purple."

He smiled when she placed his plate in front of him. The blueberry pancakes did look very appetizing, even though she had already had her share. She cleaned up quickly before leaving the kitchen. It was hard not to run out of the kitchen, yet she

knew if she stayed any longer she would do something she shouldn't. Something she really wanted to.

## Chapter Three

The doorbell rang. Lauryn's surprise cleared when she saw who was standing there: Johanna, Ariel and Octavia. Hannah came running down the hall and the girls squealed in delight when they saw one other before running off down the hallway together, giggling all the way to the playroom. Lauryn shook her head. She could only imagine what it was going to look like once the girls were through playing.

Lauryn had been so wrapped up in her new romance novel she'd almost forgotten about Johanna coming over today. The girls were supposed to have a play date. Two months had passed since she'd signed on as Hannah's babysitter. She pretty much had the routine down.

"Sorry to drop by a little early, but we were out and the girls asked about Hannah so I figured we'd stop by."

"Oh, it's no problem, Johanna. Hannah and I were just sitting here being lazy."

Johanna rolled her eyes. "There's no such thing as being lazy with Hannah. You're working even when you think you aren't. But if you're ready, how about we go ahead and take the girls to Fun 'n' Games? They can run wild while we can chat over pizza. Plus, I've been craving pizza since I woke up."

"Sounds good. I'm sure the girls will love it, but we need to try to make it back

here by five. That way I can have dinner ready by the time Steve gets home.”

Johanna smiled. “We will be. I promise.”

They rounded up the girls and headed out. Once inside Fun ‘n’ Games, the party began.

Johanna set her half-eaten slice of pizza back on her plate and wiped her hands with a napkin. She took a sip of soda before speaking.

“So, how is Hannah behaving?”

Lauryn smiled. “Very well. I haven’t had any problems with her.”

Johanna nodded her approval. “I’m glad. Steve has done a good job raising her by himself. He’s had a little help from us but he’s done all the hard work.”

She laughed. “I’ll never forget the first time he changed a diaper that wasn’t just wet.”

Lauryn could only imagine Steve’s surprise, but it seemed he’d hung in there, and he was doing a fine job of raising Hannah. She was sure it was hard raising Hannah by himself because she’d watched her own father struggle to raise her. Even though she hadn’t been a difficult child, there’d been several times where her father had thrown his hands up in despair and given up completely.

“So, tell me something about yourself, Lauryn.”

Lauryn picked up her slice of pizza and took a bite, feeling a little panicky. Something told her to prepare herself to be grilled. “What would you like to know?”

“Where you’re from, your family, things like that.”

“Well, I was born and raised here in Norman. My mother had me late in life and passed away in a fatal shooting accident when I was twelve. She was an innocent bystander hit by a stray bullet. My dad raised me from that point on. I have family on both sides I’ve never met, because of my father. I don’t even know where to begin to find them.”

Johanna gave her a look of compassion. “Do you intend to?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’m only now in a position where I can actually think about myself first. My main goal right now is to figure out what I want to do with my life. I’m still young and have yet to experience a lot in life. I can actually go to college now. I’ve always wanted go but my father got sick and I had to take care of him. There was no one else who could, so I didn’t have much of a choice.”

Johanna reached across the table and took Lauryn’s hand in hers. There was true sincerity in her eyes when she spoke. “Just don’t give up. If this is something that you really want to do, go for it.”

They sat there in silence before Johanna finally spoke again. “Dillon, Steve, and I have known each other a long time. We all met our freshman year in college at orientation and we’ve been inseparable ever since.”

Lauryn’s jaw dropped. “I didn’t realize you guys had known each other for that long.”

Johanna smiled and nodded. "Going on twelve years."

"Were you all born and raised here?"

Johanna reached for her soda. "I was, but Dillon was born and raised in Oklahoma City and Steve in Stillwater. Most of his family is still there. They have a family ranch where they breed and train horses."

Lauryn looked at the other woman in amazement. She hadn't even thought to ask Steve these questions. Truthfully, she didn't feel they were appropriate questions she should ask her employer. But since the information was being volunteered by a third party it was okay. "How much family does Steve still have in Stillwater?"

"Everyone from grandparents to cousins. Only Steve and two of his cousins have moved away from Stillwater but they're all still close enough to get back quickly if they need to."

Lauryn smiled, trying not to let her envy show. "So he has a large family?"

Johanna shook her head. "Not really. His maternal and paternal grandparents, his parents, one sister, an aunt and uncle and three cousins."

"Well, that's large to me. It's more than I have right now."

Johanna was silent for a moment as she studied Lauryn. When she leaned forward Lauryn unconsciously moved back. Johanna might be small in stature, but she had a dominating persona. "Why all the interest in Steve?"

"What do you mean?"

“Why are you asking me questions you should be asking him?”

“Well, you were asking me questions about myself, then you started talking about your relationship with Steve, so I just assumed I could ask questions about him. Besides, I wouldn’t feel right asking him about personal stuff.”

“Why not?”

Lauryn looked at Johanna as if she had lost her mind. “As far as I know, you don’t ask your employer personal questions that could be taken out of context.”

Johanna shrugged. “It’s been a while since I worked nine to five, but these are questions I would ask my employer if I were living in his home.” She smiled. “Besides, you should ask if you’re interested in your employer; therefore your questions couldn’t be taken out of context.”

Lauryn’s jaw dropped. How had Johanna found out? She thought she had been discreet. Trying to recover, she cleared her throat, trying to speak. Her voice came out on a croak and she cleared her throat again. “I’m not interested in Steve in that way.”

Johanna laughed. “You want to try that again?”

Lauryn shook her head and dropped her face into her hands, groaning. She should have just kept her mouth shut, instead of stepping in it like she just had.

“Well, let’s say you aren’t interested in Steve. Then why are you here?”

Lauryn eyes widened. “You invited me out to lunch.”

Johanna laughed. “That isn’t what I mean.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you agree to take the job that Steve offered you?”

“Because I needed the job. I had nowhere to go. My money was pretty much nonexistent. This was an opportunity I couldn’t pass up.”

Johanna nodded, accepting the explanation. “Do you like Steve?”

Lauryn nodded. “Of course. He’s a wonderful guy and a great father.”

Johanna sighed and shook her head. “No. Are you attracted to him?”

“I just met Steve! I’m not really sure how I feel about him.”

“Oh, please. I’m a woman. I know how our minds work. You know whether you want Steve or not. You knew it when you first met him.”

The funny thing was Johanna was right. Lauryn had been fighting her attraction since she had first laid eyes on Steve. She hesitated slightly before answering. This was the woman who had pretty much shunned her the first time she met her. Now she was pumping her for information. This could all be a setup. Yet as she studied Johanna across the table, she saw nothing but sincerity there.

“It isn’t whether I know what I want or not, but more will it cause trouble.”

Johanna frowned. “Do you think he’s attractive?”

“Yes, I do.”

Johanna tilted her head to the side. “Nice?”

“Yes.”



“Do you think he’d make a good boyfriend?”

“I think he would.”

“Then ask him out.”

Lauryn looked at Johanna as if she’d gone crazy. Maybe she’d just misheard.

“*What?*” A few heads turned their way.

“Ask him out.”

“I hardly even know him!”

“You knew him well enough to accept a job from him and move into his house.”

Lauryn shook her head. “That’s different. It’s also the other reason why I shouldn’t ask him out. He’s my *employer*. Besides, he isn’t interested in me.”

“How do you know?”

“Because we’ve been in the same house for two months and he hasn’t shown he’s interested in me.”

“Then take the chance and show *him*. I have a feeling you’ve been playing it safe for a long time, and now’s your chance to cut loose. Give into temptation for once in your life. You said yourself you haven’t lived life to its fullest.”

Lauryn sighed in frustration. “I don’t even know him.”

“You know him well enough.”

Lauryn shook her head. “I don’t know about this.”

Lauryn sat back and thought about the ramifications this decision could bring

about. Not only would this affect her and Steve, but Hannah as well, and she never wanted to do anything to hurt Hannah. She'd never experienced her father dating another woman. According to her father, his reason was he had loved her mother so much, another woman had never crossed his mind. Even though she'd been young, she'd known her mother and father shared a love like no other. In the end, she realized it had been a major reason why her father had gone downhill even more after her mother's death. Her mother really had balanced her father out.

Johanna laughed and Lauryn looked over at her. "I mean no offense, Johanna, but you could hardly stand me when you first met me. Now you're convinced I should ask Steve out. What gives?"

"Nothing gives. I've had time to get to know you, and I know you're attracted to Steve and he's attracted to you. I haven't seen him look at a woman the way he looks at you in a long time. Both of you also seem to be the type of people who won't make a move unless you're forced to. You and Steve are good people. I believe the two of you are compatible. Steve hasn't been completely happy in a long time. If you're the person who can give him that, I'm all for it." Johanna smiled. "I would like to see the *both* of you happy and if it's together, I won't complain."

Lauryn dropped her face into her hands, trying to take in the overwhelming information.

"I know it's confusing, but it really shouldn't be. If you like Steve, go for it. He

isn't seeing anyone; I know he's available."

Lauryn leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms across her chest. "How am I going to get Steve to go out with me?"

Johanna shrugged. "Ask him."

A burst of laughter escaped Lauryn before she could stop it. It was an insane idea. No, it was *beyond* insane.

"What's so funny?"

"Imagine me, plain Lauryn Anderson asking a drop-dead gorgeous man like Steve out."

"What do you mean 'plain Lauryn Anderson?' You're anything *but* plain. You are tall and slender with a nice figure. Besides, Steve has a thing for women with brown eyes."

"I don't think I'm Steve's type, even with the brown eyes."

Johanna pulled off another slice of pizza. "Why?"

"I don't think I look like the sort of woman Steve would date."

Johanna chewed her bite of pizza. "I disagree. All you need to do is let your hair down a little. The outfit you're wearing today is a good start."

Lauryn looked down at the blue lace-edged tank top and khaki oxford shorts she had on. She fluctuated between sizes eight and ten. She wasn't flabby; it was just her hips got in the way most of the time. But Lauryn had to admit she was looking

good. “I am trying out a new wardrobe.”

“Well, you look nice. If I had your legs they would never be covered.”

Lauryn blushed at the flattering remark. She hadn’t received that many compliments in life. When she did, they gave her immense pleasure. “Thank you, but do you really think I should ask Steve out?”

“Why not? What could it hurt?”

Lauryn couldn’t hide her shudder at the potential answers to the question. The real question was, what would happen if things went wrong? Still, she couldn’t deny she was attracted to Steve and wouldn’t mind getting to know him better. She looked up at Johanna, “Okay, I’ll ask Steve out, first chance I get.”

At the gleam that began to appear in Johanna’s eyes, she felt she’d said the wrong thing. Johanna’s next words confirmed it. “Good. Why don’t we round the girls up and stop by the shop?”

Lauryn agreed reluctantly, knowing she was taking a step she might regret later. Johanna maneuvered the car through the streets until the group reached the store. Lauryn took as long as she could to get out of the car, trying to calm her nerves in the process. By the time she made it into the store Johanna and the girls had already found Dillon.

Johanna had gotten lucky to find a husband like Dillon. He was a tall, attractive man with wavy dark brown hair and brown eyes. Even though Lauryn hadn’t spent a

lot of time with him, she could tell he and Steve were like two peas in a pod. They were both very caring people. Steve had proven it to her over and over again. Dillon smiled warmly when he saw her and gave her a hug.

“Hi, Lauryn. How are you?”

She embraced him back. “I’m fine and yourself?”

He nodded. “I’m fine. Thank you for asking.”

Steve came around the corner. Her heart sped up and he froze when he saw her. She saw him give her a slow once-over, starting at her legs. When his eyes finally met hers she caught a glimpse of the desire there before he disguised it. A quick glance over at Johanna told Lauryn that Johanna had seen the look as well. Lauryn jumped as Steve spoke to her.

“Hi.”

Lauryn tried not to fidget but it was hard not to when his gaze was on her. He warmed her skin with just a look. “Hello.”

“I heard you took the girls out for pizza and games.”

She nodded. “Yes, and they had a blast.”

Steve looked at them wryly. “They’re probably having a blast in the back destroying everything I just put away, as well.”

Dillon excused himself from the group. “I’ll go and keep an eye on them. Even though Wayne and Trisha are back there, they don’t know how to tell the girls no,

and they will definitely manage to get into trouble.”

Johanna jerked her head toward Steve in what was supposed to be a discreet motion. Knowing what Johanna was getting at, Lauryn shook her head. She knew what she had promised a little while ago but now that she was here she wasn't ready yet. This was harder than she'd thought. Plus, she had never asked a man out before. Johanna crossed her arms over her chest and mouthed words that made her want to faint.

*If you don't I will.*

Lauryn shook her head again and Johanna started to speak. “Steve, Lauryn has something she wants to ask you.”

He looked at Lauryn, concern marring his face. “What is it? Do you need something?”

Lauryn took a deep breath and plunged in. If she didn't, Johanna was likely to beat her to the punch and end up causing more embarrassment than there was already going to be. “I was wondering if you might like to go out with me sometime?”

Steve looked at her in shock. His mouth opened but no sound came out. He closed his mouth then opened it to try again. “When?”

Lauryn ran through her mind quickly for a good day. She hadn't thought that far ahead. Her expectation had been that he would turn her down immediately. “How about Friday night?”

“Not a good night for me. I already have plans.”

The joy Lauryn had felt was quickly squashed. Still, she pretended she wasn't affected, keeping the smile plastered on her face, nodding as though she truly understood. So this was what it felt like to want to die from mortification. She wanted to crawl under the nearest table and hide. “It's okay.”

This had been a horrible idea. How could she have let Johanna talk her into doing something so out of character for her? She backed away, avoiding Steve and Johanna's gaze. The last time she'd cried was a few weeks ago, but she was close to it right now. She was hurt, disappointed, *humiliated*. It wasn't until she'd asked him she'd realized how much she'd wanted Steve to say yes. She turned and walked blindly down the aisle. She needed time alone.



Johanna punched Steve in the arm.

“Ow! What did you do that for?”

“Because you deserved it!”

He looked at her with confusion. “What did I do?”

Johanna rolled her eyes. “You just blew the chance you've been dying for, Romeo. Lauryn really likes you. She also wants to go out with you, but if you're so blind you don't realize it, then she doesn't need to waste time on you. It took a lot of courage for her to ask you out and you turned her down.”

Johanna shook her head. “Let me tell you something. You’ll never find another woman like Lauryn. At first I was wary of her. Thought she was another gold digger looking to latch onto you. Then I found out she didn’t know about the money. However, the more I got to know her the more I realized the money wouldn’t matter to her anyway. Seeing she is a low-key woman, she might even run in the opposite direction if she knew you had it. I see things in her I don’t see in your average woman. In the two months since she started watching Hannah, I’ve seen her blossom in a way I never thought she would.”

With that, Johanna stormed down the aisle in the same direction as Lauryn as fast as her pregnant body would allow.

“Johanna!”

A groan escaped him. He had screwed up royally. But he couldn’t help himself. He’d been caught off guard when he came around the corner and saw Lauryn standing there—with legs that went on forever. He thought her shape was lovely. If he were ever given the chance to touch her, he was no longer afraid that he would hurt her.

She didn’t look as physically fragile as he’d originally thought. Then again, he was willing to bet she’d put on a few pounds since he’d hired her. It was in all the right places. He didn’t mind in the least. A woman who had curves was a turn-on for him.

He could still remember the night he’d come down to the kitchen and found



her sitting at the table. The vision of her in her satin slip had plagued his dreams for weeks. That night it had taken all of his self-control to keep from pulling her into his arms and dragging her down onto the cool tiles.

If Lauryn had known what he was thinking that night...hell, even at this moment, she would probably smack him. Although something told him her thoughts weren't too far from his if she'd just asked him out. But seeing her long legs exposed up to her shapely thighs made him wonder what it would be like to have her legs wrapped around his waist while he thrust himself deep into her. He shook his head to clear it. The last thing he needed to do was embarrass himself by getting a hard-on.

This wasn't the road he needed to go down. In the past two months he had learned something new about Lauryn every day. She was definitely an intriguing person. He liked her a lot. She was quiet, kept to herself, but he could get her to open up if he really tried. He also knew Lauryn was fragile. The one thing he would never forget was the amount of trust he'd heard in her voice when he had rescued her from the tornado. She still had trust in him and he didn't deserve it. He would have to do his best not to touch her in any sexual way.

However, none of it would matter if he didn't make this right. He berated himself mentally for hurting her, even unintentionally. Smacking himself in the back of his own head would have been his next step if he thought it would do any good. He had just been given the chance to get to know Lauryn in the way he desired to. In all

the ways a man could get to know a woman. He wanted to see what made her tick, if they were compatible. Stupidly, he had turned it down.

But what could she want with him? She was young, just beginning her life. He was already settled in his. He began to pace back and forth, looking down the aisle where Lauryn and Johanna had disappeared. He had an important decision to make and not a lot of time to do it.

Lauryn continued down the aisle, hoping there was a way she could get out of the store before anyone saw her break down. She sniffled, wiping away the tears threatening to escape before they became visible on her cheeks. She saw Johanna coming and groaned.

Johanna's look of pity made her feel worse. Lauryn dropped her head and tried to wipe away more tears. She had never been so embarrassed in her life. Johanna rushed up to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "Lauryn, you have no reason to cry."

"*Oh my God*, Johanna, I'm so humiliated. I knew it was a stupid idea to ask him out. I'm not that kind of woman that asks guys out!"

Johanna shook her head. "No, it wasn't."

"The way I feel right now it was."

Johanna pulled back and made Lauryn look her in the eyes. "It wasn't Lauryn. Steve likes you. He is interested in you."

Lauryn swiped angrily at her eyes. “Then why didn’t he say yes? You have no idea how embarrassed I feel right now. I probably look like some desperate crazy woman.”

“I don’t know why he didn’t say yes. Maybe because he’s an idiot, but believe me, you don’t come across as desperate or crazy in any way.”

“Well, I feel like a fool and it isn’t because he is an idiot. It’s because I’m unattractive. A man as handsome as him can have the woman of his choice. I probably don’t even register on his radar.”

“No, you are attractive, but it doesn’t matter. You took a chance. It might not have gone like you wanted it to, but now you know. Besides, if you’re with someone, you should be with them because they like you for who you are.”

Lauryn groaned. “You can’t tell me it doesn’t help if you’re attractive.”

“No, I can’t—”

“But you are very attractive.”

They both looked up at the sound of Steve’s voice. Lauryn hadn’t heard him come down the aisle. Judging by Johanna’s expression, she hadn’t either. Lauryn stepped back from Johanna, making a quick attempt to wipe her face. It was hopeless. She was one of those people whose eyes turned red, her nose runny, and her cheeks splotchy. No, she wouldn’t win any awards for beauty after a crying spell.

“Could I speak to Lauryn alone?”

Johanna looked at Lauryn. Lauryn nodded. As far as she was concerned the day couldn't get any worse, so there was no harm in talking to him alone. She lived with him, so avoidance wasn't an option. Johanna paused at the end of the aisle. "Yell if you need me."

Lauryn nodded, averting her gaze from Steve. She couldn't even look at him, she was so mortified. He came closer to her and took her hand in his.

"Lauryn, I didn't mean to offend you."

Lauryn shook her head and tried to pull her hand out of his but he wouldn't budge. "Don't worry about it."

"But I would like to explain."

"It doesn't matter."

Steve caught her chin in his hand, and forced her to look at him. "Yes it does, or you wouldn't be standing here with red eyes."

"Look, I don't why I did that. I shouldn't have asked you out."

He smiled. "To tell you the truth, I'm glad you did. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings but this weekend isn't a good time for me to go out. I'm going to be covering for Dillon here at the store Friday night. Johanna doesn't know because it's a secret. Dillon plans to surprise her with a getaway, because after she has the baby it might be a while before they're able to have a weekend to themselves. But I wouldn't mind going out next weekend."

She laughed, but it was devoid of humor. “Please don’t try to pacify me by making it up to me.”

“I’m not.”

She looked up and saw the seriousness on his face. “Are you sure?”

“I should be asking you that. I can’t figure out what you could want with an old man like me.”

A true smile came to Lauryn’s face. “You’re only thirty.”

“Eight years older than you.”

“Well, regardless of the age, I’m interested in going out—” She paused, a look of worry crossing her face. “Wait, before we do this. What about Hannah?”

“I think we should approach it slowly. Hannah has made it clear to me on several occasions that she wants a mother. I don’t want her, or anyone else, jumping to conclusions. I want to take this slow. See what we have between us first before we bring her into it. Besides, you know as well as I do she’ll be excited. Hannah adores you.”

She wanted to ask him if he felt the same, but there was no way she could squeeze the words out. Steve saved her by speaking first. He ran his hands down her arms, making her shiver. “Now, let’s round everyone up and get out of here a little early today.”

“Sounds good to me,” she managed to murmur.

She just wanted to get somewhere and sit down before she fell down. It had taken all of her strength to ask Steve out, the last of which had disappeared when he touched her. She had never wanted a man so badly in her life. It scared her. She had already taken one chance by accepting his job offer, now another in asking him out. Still, she was more than willing to take this one to get to know him on a more personal level.

## Chapter Four

Laurn tried on her third dress, groaning in frustration. Maybe this was why she never dated. All the preparation for going out was nerve-racking. She reached for the fourth one she'd picked out. That didn't look right either. She took off the disappointing fabric and picked up the last outfit. If this dress didn't work, she was going to have a fit.

She felt kind of foolish because she was fretting and it wasn't like her to fret. Cool, calm, and collected was normally what she was. Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the dress and smiled. This was the one she was going to wear. It was perfect.

"Johanna, could you zip me up?"

Johanna called out from across the hall. "Yeah, just a second."

Johanna had come over to pick up Hannah for the slumber party she'd planned for the girls and Laurn had talked her into staying to help her get dressed. Tonight Steve was making good on the date he'd promised her, but they were going to stay close to the house since bad weather was forecast.

Still, she was excited about tonight just for the simple fact it was her first *real*

date. The guy she'd given her virginity to hadn't really been a date in her opinion. He'd taken her to a burger place to pick up some food, and then they had gone and parked by the lake. It didn't take a genius to figure out what happened from there. That was the last time she had focused any attention on a man other than her father, basically because her first lover had proven her father right.

Not wanting to think about bad memories on a good night, she crossed the room and went to stand in front of the mirror. The knee-length spaghetti-strap dress was going to have Steve's jaw clanging to the ground.

The form-fitting black knit dress was a little snug around her bottom, but Steve seemed to like her shape. She had caught him staring on more than one occasion recently, so why not show it? Johanna walked into her bedroom and whistled.

"Wow. You look great. Steve just might start drooling."

Lauryn felt her cheeks heat at the compliment. "Thanks. I just hope you're right."

"Trust me on this one. He'll be drooling."

A short time later she realized Johanna had been right. Steve hadn't taken his eyes off her since she'd come downstairs. Lauryn glanced across the table at Steve when he spoke.

"How's the food?"

"It's good."



“Are you sure? You haven’t really eaten anything.”

She reached for her glass of soda. “Yes, I’m sure and the food is wonderful.”

“Good.”

She took a bite of food and looked outside. They weren’t seated next to a window but close enough so she could keep an eye on things. So far the weather seemed to be holding. It hadn’t even rained.

She looked back at Steve when he called her name. He leaned back in his chair and studied her before speaking. “Tell me something about yourself.”

She shifted in her chair at the loaded request. “What would you like to know?”

“Everything I don’t already.”

“Well, that could be a lot. How about I start with the basics first then go from there?”

He nodded his agreement and she continued. “Well, let’s see. I like to cook and love the outdoors. I’ve always wanted to travel but I haven’t had the opportunity yet.”

“You are definitely an excellent cook.”

She chuckled. “So are you.”

Steve had surprised her with a meal he’d prepared this past weekend. He’d put some steaks on the grill, served with loaded baked potatoes, roasted ears of corn, and a dinner salad. She glanced up at Steve who was studying her intensely. Glancing down at herself, she made sure she wasn’t wearing any food on the front of her dress.

When she didn't see any she relaxed a little before looking back up to meet Steve's gaze.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Have you ever been to Stillwater?"

She frowned at the odd question. "No, I haven't."

"Would you like to go?"

Her eyes widened. She realized the potential implications of his question and her nerves threatened to take over. There was only one reason she could imagine Steve would be asking her to travel with him to the city where he'd been born. The place where most of his family still lived. She tried not to let her nerves show. "When?"

"Next weekend. My family is having our reunion."

She inhaled sharply, and then choked. She reached for her glass, ducking her head when other patrons began looking in their direction. It took her several moments to compose herself. "Are you sure you want me to go?"

He smiled. "Yes, I do. I want you to meet my family. Besides, I think Hannah would be disappointed if you didn't come. And so would I."

Warmth fused through her. She tried not to get too excited at the idea of Steve inviting her to meet his family. This didn't mean anything. She was Hannah's sitter. He probably needed her to go to keep any eye on his daughter so he could enjoy himself. Lauryn stifled a sigh. She would just go and have fun with Hannah.

“I would love to go with you to the reunion. Is all of your family going to be there?”

He chuckled. “Yes. I haven’t heard otherwise, so my father, Alan, and my mother, Kathleen, as well as both my paternal and maternal grandparents are going to be there. My uncle and three cousins will also be there. Last but not least, so will my younger sister Sabrina and her boyfriend Will, if they’re still together, that is.”

Lauryn hadn’t even met his family and she already felt overwhelmed. She could only imagine what it would be like to meet them in person, especially since she had never really been around family. It might be a nice change and she would welcome it. “Well, it sounds like you have a wonderful family.”

He smiled. “I do.”

He told her a little more about Stillwater while they finished their dinner. She turned down dessert because she couldn’t eat another bite. It was hard for her not to fidget while he took care of the check. He made her nervous. The wind had picked up a little by the time they made it outside. She huddled close to Steve for protection, not able to relax until he pulled into the driveway. He helped her out of the car and she smiled. It felt good to have someone wait on her for a change.

Steve was such a wonderful person it was hard to imagine him being single. Any woman in her right mind would snatch him up if given the chance. She laughed to herself. Here she was presented with the chance, yet she wasn’t taking full

advantage of the opportunity.

“Why haven’t you ever been married, Steve?”

Steve body stiffened. She felt apprehensive about asking a question that caused him so much discomfort. She opened her mouth to tell him he didn’t have to answer but he started to speak. “I thought I would have married Hannah’s mother, but let’s just say she showed her true colors in time, so it didn’t work out. I haven’t met anyone I’ve wanted to get serious with since.”

Lauryn remained quiet, mulling that one over, while she followed him into the kitchen.

He continued talking. “To be honest, I proposed to Tina more for her sake. It just took me a while to realize it. I wanted to pacify her. If I hadn’t, she would have terminated the pregnancy without any hesitation. Or at least she always used the threat.”

Lauryn gasped in shock. This Tina sounded like a piece of work. It was a horrible ultimatum to issue to a person.

“From the moment I found out my child existed it was the only thing I lived for.” He cleared his throat, smiled, but it came across more as a grimace. She studied him as he turned to open the freezer. He was very attractive, even when he was upset. “Now, dessert.”

“Actually, I’m not sure I have enough room. My eyes were bigger than my

stomach at the restaurant.”

Steve laughed at her expression. “Nonsense,” he replied as he pulled out the vanilla ice cream.

“We’re going to have ice cream sundaes. What kind of toppings do you want?”

She stifled a sigh. What she wanted to do was go to bed, or at least get away from him. She had been thinking about kissing him since before they left the restaurant. It was something she knew wouldn’t be a good idea.

She looked over at him. His gaze met hers. His expression told her there would be no argument about the sundaes. Knowing she would be fighting a losing battle she raised the white flag. Lauryn didn’t have to think about what she wanted on her ice cream since she was the one who’d purchased all the toppings during her last trip to the grocery store. “Alright, you talked me into it. But just one scoop or I’ll have nightmares.”

“Okay.”

She bit back a smile at his boyish grin. “I’d like almonds, whipped cream, and a cherry.”

Eating her ice cream, she was unable to hold back her moan of pleasure. She was going to be a complete pig about this, but it just meant she would have to run a few extra miles this week or her dress would be snugger than it already was.

Still, her one scoop of ice cream was nothing compared to his three. She picked

up her spoon and dug in again. “You are going to be bad for my butt and thighs.”

A blush stole to her cheeks when he chuckled, indicating her words had been spoken aloud. She wanted to die from mortification. When she was able to look at him, his expression told her he had no problem with how she looked. His words confirmed it.

“Your body is fine. Besides, I see the workout you do in the mornings.”

She looked up at him in surprise. He was asleep when she left for her run so she had no idea how he knew. “You do?”

“Yes, I do. I see you sometimes. When I look out my window after I wake up, sometimes I see you running back.” He took a bite of his ice cream sundae before speaking again. “Now, Ms. Anderson, tell me *why you’re* single. You’re a very attractive, intelligent woman but I haven’t heard you mention anyone casual or serious in your life.” He grinned. “I have to say I don’t mind, because we wouldn’t be here like this if you were. Yet I can’t help but think that someone has hurt you. You’re so wary. I want to know what I’m up against.”

Lauryn laughed before answering. “Are you always this forward?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I guess it could be a good thing.” She paused and ate a spoonful of her ice cream. “Well, to begin with, I don’t think I’ve really been with anyone long enough for it to constitute as dating.”

He frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"Because it's true. My judgment in men is usually lacking, so I just figured I would stay away from them." Lauryn sighed heavily before continuing. "I've really just dated one person, if I think about it. My father was strict and very protective. He chased off anyone brave enough to come around. Plus, there's the height factor. I'm not supermodel tall but I do tower over most men."

Steve leaned forward. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"Sure."

"I think your height is sexy. I won't even get started on how hot your legs are."

Lauryn knew without having to look in a mirror that a flush was beginning to make its way up her throat. "Thank you, I think."

Steve's grin was full of wickedness. "Oh yeah, it was definitely a compliment."

She was glad the remainder of their conversation lagged while they finished up their desserts. He had given her enough to think about. When her ice cream was gone, Lauryn looked up at the clock then flinched. They had spent more time over dessert than she'd thought. It was almost midnight. She truly was going to have nightmares from eating so late. "Oh my goodness, it's late."

Steve turned and looked at the clock. "You're right." He held out his hand to her and led her upstairs until they reached her bedroom door. Lauryn's heart rate sped up as Steve stepped closer to her. This was the moment she had been looking forward to.

Hopefully, she could make it through without passing out.

She tried to relax as Steve pulled her close. Her eyelids fluttered closed as he lowered his lips to hers. It took her a few heartbeats to get over the initial shock and respond, but when she did she responded fully. She liked the feel of his lips against hers. They were nice and full, and very kissable. Steve deepened the kiss even more, teasing her bottom lip with his tongue and she emitted a small sigh before she parted her lips to allow him entry. She felt the tip of his tongue enter her mouth with a strong, deep stroke.

His tongue continued to assault her mouth with confidence, and her hands slowly slid upward around the back of his neck. Steve Mitchell definitely knew how to kiss. His demanding mouth sent a tremor through her so intense if his body hadn't been pinning her against the door she would have slid to the floor.

A heat she had never felt before shot through her. He slid his hands down to her rear end and cupped it in his hands. He arched into her, bringing her more snug against him. His taste was different, unique, in a way which made her crave more. He drew her tongue into his mouth, sucking gently, passionately, sending desire rushing through her entire body. She couldn't recall ever feeling this way before. She moaned when Steve lifted his head. The look that she saw in his passion-filled gaze shocked her. No man had ever looked at her the way he was right now.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. She leaned forward, resting her head



against his chest. Her body felt tingly, excited, and she didn't know what to do. The sensations she was experiencing were foreign to her. She felt Steve's hand sliding up and down her back.

"Wow," she whispered.

Steve released a deep breath. "I second that and I think I'd better go to my room before I forget I'm a gentleman."

"I think so too. I had a wonderful time tonight."

He smiled. "So did I."

He placed another brief kiss on her lips before stepping back. "Goodnight, Lauryn."

"Goodnight, Steve."

Lauryn backed into the room, using all of her inner strength to close the door behind him. What she really wanted was to pull him in with her. But she couldn't. Not tonight, not when there was so much left unsaid between them. She leaned against the door, sighing heavily as she heard his footsteps fading down the hallway. Her heart rate slowly returned to normal. Once her hands were steady she reached behind her to unzip her dress, imaging what it would be like to have Steve doing it instead. Her eyes widened at the thought. What was she doing? These thoughts would lead to nothing but trouble. She changed into her nightclothes and climbed into bed, staring at the ceiling. Tonight had been wonderful but she had a feeling that

Pandora's box had just been opened.



Lauryn exhaled deeply as she stopped in front of the house. Even though she'd barely slept a wink last night after the kiss she and Steve had shared, she had still been able to get up and go for her early morning run. The meal from last night guaranteed her extra pounds that would be split between her butt and thighs if she didn't get up and work out this morning. Her butt jiggled when she ran as it was.

The coffee maker had been set to brew the coffee because she knew Steve would come downstairs to get a cup then take it back up to his room.

Glancing down at her watch, she saw she had enough time to complete her cool down, catch a shower, and have breakfast ready by the time Hannah was up.

Smiling to herself, she thought about how much she enjoyed working out. It not only kept her in shape but it started her day off right. She felt like she had energy for the rest of the day. Moving on to the next stretch she felt a muscle tighten in resistance and moaned. She might have overdone it today. She bent over and grabbed her ankles, hoping her muscles would cooperate. She didn't have time to waste today.

Steve walked by just as Lauryn moaned and almost scalded his tongue on the hot coffee he was sipping. Lauryn had never realized he saw her running, and she probably wouldn't have if it hadn't been for his admission last night. Still, he enjoyed how relaxed she looked when she was running. As if she didn't have a worry in the

world.

Sometimes he felt like a Peeping Tom, but it was moments like this that made him glad he sneaked a look. Lauryn was wearing a workout outfit they sold at his store. It had never looked that good on the rack. Attempting to take another sip of coffee, he ended up pausing as she bent over. A grin came to his face as he thought about the things he could do to her while she was in that position. Her bottom was round and full, his every dream.

Not being able to help himself, he placed his cup quietly on the counter and walked up behind her. Just as she straightened up he ran his hand across her bottom. He smiled as she shrieked, jumping up in the air before whirling around to look at him. She narrowed her eyes and glared at him as she held a hand to her chest.

“You just took ten years off my life.”

He winked at her. “Sorry, but I couldn’t help myself.”

He watched her try to slow down her breathing. She looked more shocked and surprised than scared and upset. He could imagine the last thing she expected was to feel his hand caressing her butt. She had no idea how many times he had watched her go through this same routine daily. How many times he had to take a cold shower afterward. He let his gaze roam over her body, unable to keep his eyes off her. When his gaze finally met hers he saw the budding desire there. He slowly pulled her into his arms.

“You know, you look extremely sexy.”

Her eyebrows arched high on her forehead. “You have to be delusional. I’m dripping sweat and probably a little smelly too.”

He smiled wickedly. “Actually, I think it’s sexy. I also plan on making you a whole lot sweatier.”

He moved closer to her. She tried to step back, but he held tight. Yes, she was perspiring, but he was aroused to the point that he wanted to take her upstairs and throw her on the bed. But he knew that she wouldn’t go that far, at least not right now. Lauryn still had reservations. Something he was hoping to get around, and soon.

He lowered his head and inhaled her scent. His chest brushed hers. He looked up as she gasped. He saw the signs of arousal on her face. Her nipples had hardened and were peeking through the sports top. Wanting to feel her lips against his again, he slowly lowered his head, hoping she tasted just as sweet as she had last night. Brushing his lips against hers, he almost moaned in pleasure. Even though she had been up for a while and gone for a run her mouth still tasted minty from the toothpaste she’d used earlier.

He deepened the kiss. At the slight pressure of his tongue she opened her mouth a little. She moaned as he gently began to explore her mouth with his tongue, pausing to lightly suck on her lower lip. Her lips were soft, gentle, and he could feel himself getting lost in the kiss. He lifted his head, drawing in a much-needed breath.

“Do you have any idea how much I want you right now?”

Before she could respond he lowered his head again, cupped the back of her neck, and brought his mouth to hers. His heart pounded hard in his chest the moment their lips touched. And when their tongues began mating with an intensity that shook every nerve in his body, he had to fight the urge to break the connection for fear of losing control. In that moment he wasn't aware of anything but the feel of her tongue stroking his, the feel of his stroking hers, the rush of sensations flooding and overpowering him. He also became aware of the growing erection between his legs, the way his body was beginning to ache with need. Slowly, he pulled back, their lips reluctantly separating, and he felt a tremendous sense of loss. He had to stop before this got out of control.

Lauryn wasn't having it. She grabbed the back of his head and pulled his mouth back down to hers. He groaned and let her, opening his mouth so her tongue could duel with his again. He tightened his grip on her curvaceous bottom, pulling her up into his erection and moaning in the process. Lauryn didn't make it any better by assisting him. She pressed herself against him, practically sealing their bodies together.

Fighting the need to lay her on the floor and undress them both, he slowly eased back from the kiss again. “We'd better stop before we end up getting ourselves in trouble,” he rasped. He put more distance between the two of them. “I don't think

that either of us is prepared for this.”

He meant it literally. It had been a long time since he'd needed condoms and with her lack of experience with men he doubted she was protected. He exhaled harshly. It was a problem he planned to take care of before he came home tonight. After the kiss they'd just shared, it was only a matter of time before he and Lauryn would feel compelled to give in to their desire. He brushed her flushed cheek with the back of his hand. She looked adorable, sexy as hell, and he told her so.

“You're breathtaking.”

“Thank you.”

He pulled back, dragging his hand down the side of his face. “I need to get ready for work.”

She nodded but remained silent. Steve gave her one last look before walking away. He didn't know what he'd been thinking of, giving into his sexual urges this morning, but he was glad he had. There was no doubt in his mind that once he had Lauryn underneath him the results would be explosive. He looked forward to it.

Lauryn watched Steve walk away before leaning down to pick up her discarded towel. She was glad Steve had backed off. He was right; she wasn't prepared for complete intimacy with him. Not mentally, anyway. Physically, she was going to need a long, cold shower to get herself together. Her body was overheated in a way she'd never imagined it could be.

She made her way upstairs, unable to keep her mind off of what just happened. Who would have guessed the chemistry between Steve and herself would be so strong? There was going to come a time when they finished what they started. She just hoped they could survive the explosive results when they did. She shook her head. Hopefully by the time she came back downstairs, she would have herself together and ready to face the rest of the day in an unaroused state.



Steve sat down at his desk in his home office to make a phone call. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hello, son. How are you?”

He smiled as he heard his mother’s response on the other end of the line. She was a wonderful woman. When it came to advice about Hannah, she had been a huge help. “I’m fine and yourself?”

“I’m wonderful now I hear your voice.”

There was a pause as he heard his mother sit down. He leaned back in his chair.

“And my granddaughter?”

Steve smiled as he eyed the picture on his desk of Hannah and him horseback riding. “She’s doing great. Can’t wait to see you guys of course. How’s Dad?”

His mother laughed. “Same as usual, but no trips to the emergency room, so all’s well.”

Steve chuckled. His parents were a riot, kept things lively. He didn’t want to

think about the antics his father had been up to lately.

“So, son, I’m sure there’s a reason you called.”

He rolled his eyes. “Leave it to you to get straight to the point.”

Just to let his mother stew in her curiosity he paused a moment before continuing. “Actually, I was calling to let you know that I’ll be bringing someone with me to the reunion.”

He didn’t miss his mother’s sharp inhalation. “Male or female?”

“Female.”

He held the phone away from his ear as his mother let out a screech of joy. It took her a few moments to calm down but when she did she was in full investigative mode.

“How good a friend is she?”

Steve closed his eyes. “Well, that remains to be seen, but let’s just say good enough that I want you guys to meet her.”

“What’s her name?”

Steve hesitated, wondering what his mother’s reaction was going to be to the information he was about to reveal. “It’s Lauryn, Mom.”

He sat still, waiting patiently for his mother’s outburst, but it didn’t come. This wasn’t the response he’d expected in the least. “Did you hear me, Mom?”

“Yes I did, son. Now, you know I don’t like to jump to conclusions but I have to



assume you mean your new housekeeper and Hannah's sitter?"

"Yes, Mom, your assumption would be correct."

"And how long has this been going on?"

Steve exhaled slowly. "It's very recent. And before you ask, I didn't plan on this happening."

Kathleen laughed. "I'm sure you didn't, but if you're okay with it, so am I. Believe me when I say I'm happy for you. I haven't seen you show any interest in a woman for years. Tina really did a number on you."

"Yeah, Mom, I know, but she's out of the picture now. I'm ready to move on. However, I warn you, Lauryn is very shy."

"Well, if she's around us long enough that will change."

Steve laughed. "Don't plan the wedding just yet, Mother."

Kathleen made a sound of protest. "I won't. I'm just happy you're dating again."

"Yes, well, we're both new to this, so make sure you tell the gang to be on their best behavior, although I'm not sure that's worth much."

"I promise you I will make sure everyone is on their best behavior. But just promise you'll be careful on your way down here. No tornados have touched down in Stillwater but there are still plenty in the area. Make sure you listen to the weather updates the entire trip."

Steve smiled. No matter how grown he was, his mother would still worry about

him in a way only a mother could. “I promise to check the weather before we leave and check it periodically on the way. I need to get going now, but I love you and I’ll talk to you later.”

“Love you too, Steve. Give Hannah a kiss for me.”

“I will, Mom. Tell Dad I said hello.”

“Will do.”

Steve chuckled. His family was something else. Strange in many ways, but he loved them dearly and he knew life would be dull—boring—without them. He looked up as he heard Hannah laugh. She had been doing a lot more of it since Lauryn had come to live with them. He was glad because he loved nothing more than having his little girl happy.

Lauryn also seemed to be happier as well. Even if nothing happened between the two of them he wanted to make sure she stayed that way as well. Hopefully, she would get a kick out of his family, maybe adopt them as hers. Reaching the doorway of the playroom, he saw Lauryn and Hannah rolling on the floor together wrestling playfully. They both looked up in surprise when he spoke.

“Is there room for one more?”

Hannah giggled and nodded. “Yes, Daddy. Come and join us.”

Lauryn shook her head.

“Steve, no.”

Instead of heeding her warning he walked slowly toward them. Lauryn shook her head again and his smile broadened. When he reached them Lauryn began to scoot back, but he reached out and grabbed her ankle as he lowered himself to the floor. A loud shriek escaped her as Steve flattened himself out over her and began an assault on her ribs. She began to laugh uncontrollably while trying to push him off and Hannah joined in. Lauryn was strong, but not strong enough, so he won the battle. The last thought that went through his mind before she fell into another fit of laughter was he could definitely get used to coming home to this.

## Chapter Five

Lauryn knelt down and picked Hannah up, loving the feel of her small arms going around her neck. She turned as she heard Steve's footsteps on the stairs.

"Are you ready?"

Her breath caught in her throat. It didn't seem possible, but every time she saw him he seemed to become more handsome, and so sexy. They had both taken extreme care not to be alone with each other for too long. The explosive session they had experienced the morning he came in and caught her cooling down after her workout had been enough to let them know they had to be careful. She had even gone to the extent of getting up a little earlier so she would be in the shower when he was downstairs.

But it was going to be impossible to stay apart this weekend. She had a feeling it was going to be a very eventful family reunion. She blinked as he called her name again, blushing when she realized she had gone off on a tangent in her mind.

"Where are your bags?"

"By the couch."

Steve picked them up. When he turned around he stopped dead in his tracks. She looked down at herself then back at him.

“Is something wrong?”

He studied her for a few more moments then shook his head. “Nothing at all.”

Lauryn looked down at her outfit again, trying to figure out what it was. She couldn’t find anything off with the powder pink T-shirt and khaki shorts she wore. She took Hannah outside to the SUV and buckled her into the child seat. Hannah was completely secure when Steve joined them. A short time later they were on the road.

It hardly seemed like any time had passed before Steve pulled up to his family’s land. It was a rustic rock ranch home. It was so stunning on the outside she couldn’t wait to see the inside.

Then again, when she spotted all the other cars parked in the yard, she wasn’t so sure. Lauryn looked over at Steve. “This house is beautiful.”

“Wait until you see the inside. It looks like my cousins and sister are already here.”

An older couple stepped out onto the porch. As soon as Hannah’s feet hit the ground she took off running to greet them. Lauryn was able to gather they were Steve’s parents by Hannah’s excited shouts. Steve took Lauryn’s hand in his and led her up to the house. She tried not to let it show how much his touch affected her.

When they reached the porch, Hannah was in her grandmother’s arms. Lauryn did her best to fight back her nerves. This was the first time she had ever met a man’s parents, yet their warm expressions reassured her.

“Mom, Dad, this is Lauryn. Lauryn, this is my mom and dad.”

Lauryn held out her hand to Steve’s mom. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell.”

Kathleen shifted Hannah on her hip, ignored Lauryn’s hand and pulled her into a tight embrace instead. “We don’t shake hands out this way dear. And call me Kathleen. It’s nice to meet you.”

Lauryn turned to look at Steve’s father. “A pleasure to meet you as well, Mr. Mitchell.”

She received another warm embrace. “A pleasure to meet you, too, Lauryn. Call me Alan.”

Lauryn nodded. She could already tell where Steve got his easygoing personality and his looks. He was a carbon copy of his father. They were the same height. Alan’s eyes were a darker shade of green than Steve’s and his once-brown hair was mostly gray.

She smiled at his parents. “Steve has told me a lot about all of you.”

Alan chuckled. “I hope it was all good.”

“Don’t go fishing for compliments, Dad. You won’t find any.” He looked at Lauryn. “I’m going to get our bags and take them upstairs.”

Kathleen led her into the house. “Come on in. Let me show you around and introduce you to everyone.”

The four men spread out between the couch, sofa and recliners looked up as the two women walked in. But Lauryn was busy looking around, not really noticing the men, until her attention was pulled from her inquisitiveness to a brown haired man who let out a wolf whistle as he stood up. “Well, who’s this pretty lady?”

Her skin heated as she held out her hand. “I’m Lauryn, and you are?”

He grasped her hand in his. “I’m Dean.”

He pointed at the three other guys as he introduced them. “Nathan, Daniel, and Will.”

Lauryn smiled at the mention of Will’s name. This was the man Steve’s sister was dating. Sabrina seemed not only to have excellent decorating taste but good taste when it came to men as well.

Steve came in. When he saw the guys, he put the bags down and engulfed them one by one in a bear hug. The men were close, it was obvious. Kathleen appeared by her side with a smile, distracting Lauryn from Steve. “Why don’t I show you to your room while Steve and the guys catch up?”

They headed up the stairs. “I didn’t know if you wanted to share a room with Steve or not, so I gave you your own, but the rooms are connected by the bathroom.”

Lauryn couldn’t hide her surprise at the statement. Her cheeks flushed and the nervousness that had begun to dissipate roared to life again. “We don’t stay in the same room at home,” she replied, hating the shakiness in her voice.

Kathleen gave her an amused grin. “Technically, you won’t be sharing a room here either. So don’t worry.”

Kathleen set Steve’s suitcase inside his room before moving on to show her to her room. Lauryn gasped when Kathleen opened the door. “This is a lovely room.”

Kathleen smiled. “Thank you. My husband and I had this house built from the ground up. I like the rustic style. It’s what we went for.”

“Well, it’s very charming. Your entire home is.”

“I’m glad you like it, dear. I’ll leave you to unpack. When you’re done come join us downstairs. We’ll go horseback riding, then have lunch.”

Kathleen left the room and Lauryn began to unpack. She had packed for every possible occasion to be prepared for whatever could happen. After the unpredictable life she had had, she did her best to control the things she could. A knock sounded on the door.

“Come in.”

Hannah came bouncing through the door. “Lauryn, Lauryn, you have to hurry up and come downstairs. Everyone is here and they are dying to meet you.” Hannah danced from one foot to the other. A look of consternation appeared on her face. “They say you’re the first woman Daddy has brought here in a while.”

Panic flared through her at Hannah’s innocent babbling. If one thing made her feel flustered, it was being the center of attention. Being secluded as she had while



growing up she was more comfortable in one-on-one situations. As an afterthought Hannah padded: “What does that mean?”

Lauryn smiled at Hannah’s innocence. She loved the precious little girl. But she was still distraught at the thought of being under the scrutiny of Steve’s family.

She leaned down to scoop Hannah up. “I’m not sure what it means, but I bet we’ll find out shortly.”

Lauryn paused to check her reflection. The outfit looked good on her and even though it was casual it would still make a good first impression, although she could make a wardrobe change if it would make her appear more sophisticated. But a few of his family members downstairs had already seen her. She didn’t know what they would think of her if she came downstairs in a new outfit. The last thing she wanted to do was come across as strange.

She carried Hannah downstairs. The conversation dwindled as every eye in the room turned to look at her. Steve got up and walked over to her, pulling her forward, closer to the eyes that seemed to examine with the intensity of a well-trained physician. Lauryn blushed at their direct stares and scrutiny.

“Everyone, this is Lauryn.”

There was a chorus of hellos. He then went down the line introducing her to his family members. “It’s nice to meet all of you.”

Steve must have heard the nervousness in her voice: he placed both his hands

on her shoulder and pulled her close to him. Her back met his hard front, distracting her. He took it a step further, placing a kiss on the ticklish part of her neck, causing her to shiver and pull away. His touch served as the distraction she needed.

“I’ve made my family promise to be on their best behavior. I informed them you’ll let me know if they aren’t.”

Her eyes widened at his words but he forged along as though he hadn’t said anything out of the ordinary.

“We were just planning a horseback riding trip before lunch. Are you interested in going?”

“Sure, but I’ve never been horseback riding before.”

Gail let out an exclamation of joy. “Yes! Now I’m not the only greenhorn around here anymore.”

Her husband, Steve’s cousin Dean, leaned over and gave her a reassuring kiss on her forehead. “You do fine, sweetheart, once you get on the horse.”

There were a few snickers as everyone filed out of the house. Steve scooped up Hannah and reached for Lauryn’s hand as they walked over to where the horses were waiting. He led her over to a brown mare. “This is Princess. She’s going to be your horse for today. She’s gentle and familiar with the terrain.” Steve rubbed the horse’s neck. “Even if you get lost, she won’t. She won’t stray off the path, even if you give the wrong command. Now come around to this side.”

He put Hannah down and showed Lauryn how to mount the horse. Lauryn surprised herself when she did it on the first attempt. It brought a sound of protest from Gail while Steve leaned down to adjust the strap on her stirrups. He handed Hannah up to her. "Hold Hannah for me while I mount my own horse."

Princess stood there patiently as if she had been through this same routine thousands of times. Lauryn looked down at the horse, wondering how smooth this ride was going to be. Steve distracted her as he swung up onto the back of his horse. Lauryn could tell that he was a pro. He reached over for Hannah. Hannah clapped her hands in delight as Steve placed her in front of him. Steve looked over at Lauryn. "She loves to lead."

Lauryn laughed. "What woman doesn't like to be in control when she's with a man?"

A wicked gleam appeared in Steve's eyes before he replied. "I'll have to remember that."

Driving cars was what she had been referring to, but she had a feeling they were no longer talking about driving cars, or steering horses. Turning her gaze away from Steve's she looked over just in time to catch Dean lifting Gail onto her horse. A look of pure disgust was on Gail's face. Still, she was gracious enough to lean down and gave her husband a kiss as a reward.

Not wanting to intrude on their private moment, Lauryn turned her attention

back to Steve, who gave her a crash course in how to steer the horse. A few moments later everyone was heading down the trail, she and Steve near the front. A mistake because she could feel everyone's eyes on them, but the trail was so beautiful that it was an afterthought.

"This trail is breathtaking."

Steve nodded as he looked around, taking in the scenery. "Yes, it is. I used to take this trail all the time while I was growing up."

She could tell he enjoyed being here. She couldn't begin to imagine how much he missed it when he was back in Norman. "Was it hard for you to leave Stillwater?"

He shook his head. "No. I was only supposed to go to Norman for college. It ended up lasting a lot longer. I can always come back home when I need to, or when I want to. Once I arrived in Norman, I fell in love with my surroundings and decided to live there permanently."

Lauryn pondered his statement. Personally, she couldn't see how he could leave Stillwater. As she took in the exquisite scenery around her, she was tempted to stay here as long as she could.

An hour later, they returned to the house. Kathleen called out to them. "Everyone wash up and be in the dining room in fifteen minutes."

Lauryn headed up the stairs followed by Steve and Hannah. She smiled when his gaze met hers. "I enjoyed horseback riding."

“I’m glad. Just make sure you take a warm soak tonight, otherwise you might have sore muscles in the morning.”

“I will. Do you think we can we go horseback riding again before we leave?” she asked, hoping he would say yes. She had found a new hobby.

He grinned. “Yes. We should have time to go again before we leave.”

She stopped in front of her room. “We are sharing a bathroom, so let me know when you want to use it. I normally don’t take long but sometimes I can get carried away.”

He chuckled. “I’ll remember that. “You go ahead. Let Hannah wash her hands with you and once you’re finished, let me know.”

A short time later they were heading back downstairs. Lauryn took her time on the stairs, stopping to look at the childhood pictures of Steve. He had been just as adorable then as he was now. She smiled at the pictures of him and Sabrina together. In all of them they were smiling. She could tell they shared a bond.

Moving on, the pictures depicted them getting older. She came upon the most recent pictures of them as adults. There were several pictures of Steve holding Hannah when she was a baby, more when she was a toddler. She always seemed to be on his shoulders or in front of him on horseback. What she couldn’t get over was how happy they looked together. Lauryn tried to recall if she had ever been that happy when it had just been her and her father. If she had been, she couldn’t remember.

“There are a lot of them, huh?”

She turned and looked at Steve. Nodding, she replied. “Yes, there are.”

“After lunch, I’ll let mom show you the embarrassing pictures.”

She looked at him in surprise. “You’d let me see those?”

He nodded before giving her a wink. “Of course, because I’m sure before the weekend’s over you’ll have a few of your own.”

Before she could ask what he meant, he led her into the dining room. Both sets of his grandparents were already sitting at the table. Everyone else began to trickle into the dining room, making sure to be back before Kathleen’s deadline. Steve was gazing at the food on the table. Lauryn turned her own attention to it, trying not to drool at the selection.

Kathleen had prepared a feast. If this was just a light lunch, she couldn’t wait to see what dinner consisted of tonight or what was on the menu for the reunion tomorrow. There was regular green salad, pasta salad, chicken salad, and tuna salad. There was an assortment of bread, crackers and chips to accompany it. The feast was finished off with a large bowl of fruit salad for dessert. Everything looked delectable.

“I see everyone is here, so let’s say grace then we can start.”

Lauryn bowed her head and listened to Kathleen’s heartfelt blessing of the food. It reminded her of the dinnertimes she had shared with both of her parents when her mother was alive. Once her mother passed it had been rare for Lauryn and her father

to have dinner at the table together, let alone say grace when they did.

When grace was over, the assortment of bowls were passed around the table. By the time Lauryn was done she had a little of everything on her plate. She took a bite of her sandwich and moaned in pleasure. Besides her own cooking and her mother's, she couldn't remember having food this good. She looked over at Kathleen with a smile. "This tastes wonderful."

Steve nodded in agreement with her. "Yes it does, Mom. I also should tell you if you need any assistance in the kitchen, Lauryn is the person you want to go to. She's a wonderful cook herself."

All eyes turned to Lauryn. She had to concentrate on swallowing the bite of sandwich she had just eaten so she wouldn't choke.

Kathleen paused with her fork halfway to her mouth. "I'll keep that in mind."

Thankfully not much more was said, and everyone went back to eating. She looked up as Matthew, Steve's uncle, spoke to her. "Do you like the layout of the land?"

Lauryn smiled. "I think it's beautiful. I was asking Steve earlier how he ever left this place."

Kathleen laughed. "Truth be told, he never left. He's always down here doting on us, spoiling us rotten."

Lauryn could attest to that. He was always spoiling her rotten too. She

watched as Alan leaned over, pulling Kathleen closer to him. “Yep, I have to say my son gets it from me.”

Everyone laughed. She wondered if Steve knew how lucky he was to have such a close-knit family. She glanced over at Sabrina. She was reserved, yet very funny. Everyone brought something to the table, whether it was charm, wit, or humor. She liked that about them and wished for a family that was similar. But she never thought she would have one.

Not wanting to ruin the day with sad thoughts, she tried to focus on the conversation Sabrina struck up. Steve nudged her, making her glance over at him. He winked at her. She smiled at the jovial action before returning her attention to her food.

Once everyone was finished with lunch they helped clear the table. Hannah began to rub her eyes, causing Steve to excuse himself to take her upstairs. Lauryn had been enjoying herself so much she’d completely forgotten about Hannah’s naptime. Sabrina approached her.

“Hello. Do you mind if I join you?”

Lauryn shook her head, moving over to make room for her. “No. Please do.”

“What do you think about my family so far?”

Gail walked over to join them. “Well, I don’t know about Lauryn, but I know I was overwhelmed when I first met you guys.”



Sabrina and Lauryn looked up at Gail. Valerie and Bethany, Steve and Sabrina's cousins, were standing next to her. The three women took a seat where one was available.

"Well, I think you have a lovely family. Like Gail, I felt a little overwhelmed in the beginning." Lauryn laughed. "I still am."

Gail smiled. "Well, believe me when I say their bark is worse than their bite. Especially Valerie here; pregnant and grumpy."

Valerie huffed indignantly. "I am not."

Lauryn turned her attention to Valerie. She was glowing in her pregnancy. A twinge of jealousy traveled through her. Not only was Valerie part of a wonderful family, she was creating her own.

"How far along are you?"

Valerie rubbed her stomach. "Six months and counting."

Lauryn's eyes widened. "You have got to be kidding me. You're hardly showing. Steve's friend Johanna just reached her sixth month and she looks like she is way farther along than you are, but then again she's shorter than you."

Valerie shook her head. "Well, the baby is healthy. Not to mention I eat like a horse. I don't know where it goes."

Bethany laughed. "Well, I can vouch for her eating like a barnyard animal. She wolfed down two and a half sandwiches at lunch that were just an appetizer."

Valerie turned and gave Bethany an evil look. “Just wait until it’s your turn, little sister.”

Sabrina laughed. “You guys stop before you scare Lauryn.”

“Too late,” Lauryn replied jokingly.

All eyes went to her as the women began to laugh. Bethany shifted to look at her. “I really like you. I can see why my cousin is attracted to you.”

Valerie studied her closely before speaking. “So what attracted you to Steve?”

Lauryn paused to think about what she should say when answering the question. She knew they wouldn’t want to hear about Steve’s butt and chest, but she could tell them the other reasons. She would definitely stick with the G-rated answer. “Well, he’s intelligent, nice, and very good looking.”

Sabrina leaned closer to her. “What about his financial status?”

Lauryn shrugged. “Well, he probably has a little more money than most because of the business he has, but it doesn’t matter to me. No matter how poor or rich Steve is, his personality is the reason I’m attracted to him.”

The women shared a look that Lauryn couldn’t decipher. Had she said something wrong? If so, what? The last thing she wanted to do was leave Steve’s sister and cousins with a bad impression. There was no way it wouldn’t get back to Steve if she did.

After a few seconds of awkward silence Valerie yawned and stood up. “I think

I'm going to follow in Hannah's footsteps and take a nap myself. I'm tired."

They watched as Valerie made her way up the stairs. Gail stood up next. "If I thought I could sleep, I'd take a nap as well, but I can't, so I'll just go see if I can find my husband. Maybe I can talk him into joining me for some afternoon fun."

Lauryn struggled to keep her expression from revealing every ounce of the shock she felt. Steve's family dynamic could only be described as interesting. Bethany laughed. "I'm sure it won't be too hard for you to do. Just make sure you two keep it down."

Gail didn't seem to be at all bothered by the statement for she gave them a saucy wink. "We'll try."

Bethany turned to Sabrina. "What's the scoop on Will? I thought the two of you were broken up?"

"We were, but I took him back." Sabrina rolled her eyes. "Or rather he took me back."

Bethany giggled. "Well, pretty soon we're going to be hearing wedding bells."

Sabrina made a gagging sound before agreeing with Bethany. "I know, but they'll be yours."

Bethany groaned before looking over at Lauryn. "If a man asks you to marry him say no. Planning a wedding isn't fun."

Lauryn laughed. "Well then, elope."

Sabrina and Bethany looked at Lauryn as if she had lost her mind. Bethany shook her head. "I would get disowned from the family."

Sabrina nodded in agreement. "Yeah, our parents and grandparents make such a big deal about it. It's the reason why I make sure I only get involved with people that are non-marriage material."

Bethany laughed. "Hence she's trying to get rid of Will. He's a good guy, most definitely the marrying kind, therefore he makes her nervous."

Sabrina frowned and elbowed her. "Shut it, Bethany."

Lauryn looked over at Bethany "Then concentrate on how happy you'll be once you are married. I'm sure it will make the wedding planning go quicker."

Bethany exhaled heavily. "I can always hope."

When the conversation stayed on the wedding Lauryn excused herself and made her way toward the front door. Her head was reeling from the conversation she had just been a part of. Walking outside, she took a deep breath of much-needed fresh air. It was a very beautiful day. The weather was holding up nicely, considering what they'd had to deal with lately.

She saw the older generation of men standing around chatting and headed in their direction. They all greeted her warmly.

Alan stepped closer to her. "What brings you out here?"

She patted her full stomach. "I needed a little fresh air after the wonderful lunch

we had.”

Edward, Steve’s maternal grandfather, chuckled and rubbed his own stomach. “After all these years of good eating, it’s amazing I can still see my feet.”

They all shared a laugh while Lauryn stood watching them. It was amazing how well they all got along. If her family had been able to do the same she might not be in the process of trying to find them now. She wasn’t wholeheartedly looking for them because she wasn’t quite sure it was a step that she wanted to take yet. There had to be a reason that her family hadn’t been able to get along. She wasn’t sure she wanted to reignite a conflict if it still existed. Bottom line was, she couldn’t face another rejection.

She looked up as Russell, Steve’s paternal grandfather, called her name. “Yes?”

“What’s on your mind?”

She looked at him with puzzlement and he smiled. “You looked like you were in a faraway place, so I figured I’d ask.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I drifted off into my own thoughts for a minute.”

“What were you thinking about, if you don’t mind me asking?”

She stared at the older man, wondering if he would understand her dilemma. “Well, I was wondering how you guys get along so well.”

His brows furrowed together in an adorable fashion. “What do you mean?”

She sighed heavily and told him about the feud on both sides of her family that

had left her without a family. Russell nodded his understanding, placing an arm around her. “Well, the thing that keeps us from feuding is we all understand each other. We respect one another’s opinions even when they differ.”

Lauryn understood the importance of tolerance. She had seen enough conflict at her old job as well as in society to know that if some people would just mind their own business, there would be a lot less of it.

“My grandson must have missed you.”

She looked up and saw Steve was heading their way. Her heart rate sped up and he smiled as he neared them.

“Hey Dad, Grandpa Russ, Grandpa Ed.”

He stepped up on the other side of her. “You ready for that ride?”

She blushed slightly at the seeming double innuendo. Anyone who hadn’t heard their earlier conversation would have no idea what he was talking about. She hoped he was referring to horses, otherwise she would die from mortification. “Yes, I am.”

“Good. We’ll saddle up Bruce.”

She waved at the men who had briefly kept her company. “It was nice chatting with you.”

She allowed Steve to lead her in the direction of the barn. She watched him pull a saddle and bridle off the wall, but she could hardly focus. Even through his shirt she could see his muscles ripple. She bit her lip to hold in a whimper. Lord, the man was

walking temptation.

He drew her out of her wicked thoughts as he opened the door to the horse's stall and stepped inside to saddle the horse. He caught her watching and pointed out the steps to her as he went along. Still, she knew if she had saddle a horse on her own she would be in trouble. It was labor intensive and she didn't have the upper body strength needed to lift the saddle.

"This is Bruce. Bruce is the first horse I bought."

She looked up at the horse and stroked his powerful neck. This horse was in a different league from Princess. "How long ago?"

"About four years ago."

Steve led Bruce outside and she saw the horse had a pretty brown coat. It glistened in the sunlight. She hadn't noticed earlier because she'd been distracted. "Is this the horse you rode earlier?"

He nodded and she watched as he double-checked the girth before swinging up into the saddle. He held his hand out to her. She looked at him in surprise. "We're riding together?"

The answer was obvious before it was completely out of her mouth, but she was caught off guard. He nodded.

Shaking her head, she took a deep breath, held out her hand and placed her foot in the stirrup. He helped her up into the saddle and she slid into place in front of him.

He was keeping his word on letting her be in front. But there was no doubt who was in control. It definitely wasn't her.

“You ready?”

She nodded and he eased the horse into a slow walk, then an easy trot. When the horse was warmed up, he tightened his arm around her waist before he gave the command for Bruce to gallop. He led them over the land at a quick speed and she loved it. The wind was blowing through her hair and the sun was shining brightly on her face.

He slowed Bruce back down to a trot, then a walk, before pointing out different landmarks to her. He took her to the edge of their land before turning around. She was surprised when he handed the reins to her. It had actually been the first time she had seen someone lead the horse from the back. She knew it probably wasn't easy, but he managed.

“You lead us back to the house.”

Her eyebrows arched in his direction. “You trust me enough to do it?”

He nodded. “You can do it. Bruce is just like Princess. Just let him know how fast you want to go. He'll take us back.”

She took the reins and gave the horse direction to lead them back to the main house. The horse reacted well to her, and began to walk back to the house. She chose to keep the pace slow. They were in no rush to get back, plus she had felt enough of



the wind against her cheeks on the way out. Besides, she was sure Bruce needed a little break. She didn't want to tire the beautiful horse out. "How long has your family had this land?"

Steve shrugged. "At least since the late 1800s. I'll have to ask Dad for the specific year."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Really?"

He nodded. "This ranch has been in the family for years."

They rode in silence for a few moments before she looked back at him. "Would you ever consider moving back here?"

He shook his head. "No. Don't get me wrong, I love the land and my family. I just like having my own space. Far enough away from the family so I have privacy, but close enough so I can get home if needed. Then there's the store. I definitely can't give that up."

Lauryn turned her gaze back to the scenery. She liked the land here as well, but if their relationship did blossom into something more permanent, she wouldn't ask him to move to Stillwater. She wanted to be in a place where everyone would be happy. Right now that place was Norman for her, in spite of a few bad memories. They made it back to the main house and he told her to lead Bruce up to the front porch. When they reached it, Steve took the reins, and then assisted her off the horse, before leaning down to place a kiss on her lips.

“I’m going to take Bruce for one more run and then I’ll be back inside.”

She nodded. “Okay. I’ll check on Hannah.”

It was quiet; everyone must be upstairs or off somewhere else. She walked upstairs, heading for Steve’s bedroom. A smile made its way across her lips the instant she opened the door. Hannah was still asleep. Her expression was so peaceful it seemed to be a good idea to join her. She liked having Hannah curled up against her. The two of them had developed a close bond in a short amount of time. No, she wasn’t Hannah’s mother, nor could she ever take her place, but she nurtured the little girl the way she had been before her mother passed. The way she had wanted to be cared for by her father.

She made her way through the bathroom into her room, where she lay down on top of the covers with a low chuckle as she thought back over the events that had occurred since arriving late this morning. The Mitchells were very lively. They were also wonderful people. She could only imagine what they had in store for tomorrow, but whatever it was, she would be ready.

## Chapter Six

Steve turned to glance over his shoulder as he heard hoofbeats galloping up behind him. When he saw Sabrina he smiled until he saw the look on her face. Whatever was on her mind had her pretty upset. She slowed the horse as she caught up to him.

*“Are you crazy?”* she hissed.

Steve looked at her with puzzlement, having no idea what was wrong. “The last time I checked I was sane.”

Sabrina shook her head, her expression full of disgust. “Well then, you might want to check again.”

Steve sighed. “What is this about?”

Sabrina glanced around before squaring him with a hard look and whispering angrily.

“You haven’t told Lauryn how much money you have!”

Steve groaned, knowing he was going to get an earful. His sister’s eyes were flashing with anger. He had learned at a young age that when Sabrina was mad there was going to be hell to pay. So far, he had gotten an earful from just about everyone who found out he hadn’t told Lauryn about his financial status. Now it was Sabrina’s

turn.

“No, I haven’t told her.”

“Why not?”

“Because I didn’t think she should know. When we met she was already skittish enough. I didn’t see any reason to scare her any further. Now that a relationship might be developing between us, I want to make sure it’s me she actually wants.”

Sabrina shook her head. “It’s obvious that Lauryn isn’t anything like Tina. So don’t give me that.”

She leaned back in the saddle and folded her arms across her chest. “This is more about you and your fear because of what happened in the past. The real question now is *when* are you going to tell her?”

Steve shrugged because he didn’t know when he would tell Lauryn. He knew he needed to, and soon, but the idea of telling her he had the amount of money he did scared the hell out of him. He didn’t know how she would react. Would she still want to be with him, or worse, use him for his money? Both potential outcomes worried him. He wasn’t going to rush it. He looked over at his sister. “When the timing is right.”

Sabrina’s laugh was devoid of humor. Her infamous index finger came out and found his chest. The first poke hurt just as it normally did. He winced, content to let

her have her say or he would never get any peace.

“That constitutes never in my book. But I tell you what, Steve. This one is going to come back and bite you hard.”

With one last glare she turned her horse and headed back toward the house. Anger surged through him, more at himself than at Sabrina, because he knew she was telling the truth. He pushed Bruce into a fast gallop. If he had been looking ahead he would have noticed the hole in the ground before he got to it, but it was too late.

Steve yelled as Bruce stopped to avoid it, the horse rearing up on his hind legs. He was unprepared for Bruce’s reaction and was thrown through the air. He landed hard on the ground, groaning from the impact. He had a hard time catching his breath, not to mention he couldn’t move without wincing. A moment later Sabrina was back by his side, concern etched into her features. “Steve, are you okay?”

He groaned. “No.”

She dismounted from her horse, rushing over to him. “Can you move?”

He closed his eyes, taking a deep shuddering breath. “Yes, but it’s going to hurt like hell so I prefer not to.”

His sister made a sound of sympathy. “Stay right here while I run to the house and get the car.”

Steve opened his eyes to look at his sister but refrained from asking her from where he would go, instead trying to smile through the pain. “Okay, and Sabrina?”

She stopped in the middle of remounting her horse. “Yes?”

“Hurry.”

His sister didn’t respond but he heard the profane word she muttered under her breath. Steve chuckled before groaning. Sabrina attached a lead rope to Bruce and called out a command for him to follow before taking off in the direction of the house. Steve lay there holding his arm to his chest. It hurt like hell.



Lauryn stepped outside onto the front porch. She had tried to take a nap but it hadn’t worked. Bethany and Sabrina must have grown tired of talking about wedding plans because neither of them were where she’d left them before her ride with Steve. She looked into the distance and frowned, thinking her eyes might be deceiving her. She covered her eyes, squinting when she saw dust kicking up in the distance. The wind wasn’t strong enough to send the dirt into the air in such a fashion. Concern traveled through her when she saw it was Sabrina, and that she was leading Bruce back without Steve. Her heart dropped, and she was out in the yard by the time Sabrina reached her.

“Where’s Steve, Sabrina?”

Sabrina dismounted quickly, handing the reins to Alan and Edward. “Steve was thrown off and he’s hurt. I need my keys so we can get back to him.”

Lauryn didn’t have time to respond before Sabrina sped past her to the house

faster than she thought possible, to reappear with Kathleen.

Lauryn sought out Valerie. “Steve’s had an accident. Can you keep an eye on Hannah?”

Valerie nodded. “Sure.”

The three women rushed toward Sabrina’s SUV.

“What happened?”

Driving, Sabrina focused on the terrain. “Bruce threw Steve. He must have gotten spooked or something. I don’t really know. I was riding away when I heard Steve yell. I came racing back and found him on the ground.”

They pulled up to where Steve was sitting. Lauryn was out of the car before it came to a complete stop. She was afraid to touch Steve, but she knelt down beside him.

“What happened?”

He gave her a reassuring smile. “I wasn’t paying attention to the path. Almost ran Bruce into a hole. However, Bruce was paying attention and stopped. He just happened to throw me in the process.”

Kathleen’s expression was full of concern. “How many times have I told you to be careful?”

Steve shifted and groaned. “More than I can count, Ma, but I really need to get to the hospital. It feels like I’ve dislocated my shoulder again.”

A distressed sound fell from Kathleen's lips. "Oh, no."

Lauryn looked at Steve. "Do you need helping to your feet?"

He nodded. "Yes, but give me a moment. I need to brace myself."

When he was ready Lauryn offered him her shoulder while Sabrina took the other side. Either they did a good job, or Steve put on a brave front, because he made it through with just one wince. They helped him into the back of the SUV, Lauryn climbing in beside him once he was settled.

Sabrina drove them to Stillwater Medical Center in silence. Steve was more vocal along the way, groaning every time his shoulder was jarred. She helped him to the entrance while Sabrina parked the car.

Kathleen walked ahead of Lauryn and Steve at a brisker pace, reaching the front desk first to pick up the necessary paperwork and inform the attendant of what had happened. Lauryn helped Steve into a wheelchair with minimum complaint from him. She started to walk along with Steve and the attendant but he stopped her.

"Please stay out here."

A look of hurt crossed her face. "But I want to come back with you. You shouldn't be alone."

"It isn't going to be a pretty sight when they set it back."

He closed his eyes as they began to roll the chair along. Lauryn fell in line behind the attendant. The young woman gave her an all-knowing look but remained



silent. There was no way she wasn't going with him to make sure he was okay. Kathleen was busy filling out the paperwork and Sabrina still hadn't appeared yet. She was the logical choice.

She waited while they took Steve for X-rays. He frowned when he saw her as he came back.

"When did you come back here?"

"I was right behind you. I've been sitting here waiting for you."

He tried to respond but the nurse requested he get up on the examination table. Lauryn flinched at his groan of pain as the nurse assisted him. She slipped her hand into his as soon as he was reclined. He squeezed it, giving her a grateful look. She sat there and held it in silence, waiting for the doctor to come in to update them on Steve's diagnosis.

The doctor appeared right on cue. He had Steve's X-rays in his hands and placed them up on the view box before turning it on. He turned to face them. "Bad news is your shoulder is dislocated, which I'm sure you are aware of, considering you've had two dislocations before. Good news is it's an anterior dislocation which I can take care of right now."

Steve nodded. "I'm ready, doc."

Lauryn went to move so the doctor would have more room but Steve didn't let go. Her gaze traveled to his and what she read in his expression made her keep her

grip on his hand. The doctor urged Steve to relax before he began working on resetting his shoulder. Lauryn tried not to wince when Steve's grip on her hand tightened. He let out a loud groan and then his body relaxed completely. When the doctor stepped back, she assumed the shoulder was back in place. It was quicker than she'd expected.

Steve opened his eyes and looked at her. She could see remnants of pain there. His grasp loosened a little as he gave her an apologetic smile. "I hope I didn't hurt your hand."

She shook her head. "No need to apologize. You were there for me when I needed you. I wanted to be here for you."

He squeezed her hand gently, before bringing it to his lips. "Thank you."

The doctor smiled at both of them. "The nurse will be back in a moment with a sling to immobilize your arm. I am also going to write you a prescription for pain killers. I would suggest you follow up with an orthopedic specialist within the next five to seven days. Keep your arm immobilized until then and no strenuous activity until you're cleared."

Steve nodded. Lauryn moved closer to him, brushing away a lock of hair that had fallen across his forehead. By the time they arrived home, Steve was already complaining about the confinements of the physical activity limitations. Lauryn smiled, struggling not to laugh at Steve when he whined like a child. She no longer

had to wonder where Hannah got it from. Kathleen reasoned with him while they helped him into the house.

It was quiet. Bethany, Valerie and Gail had taken Hannah to the store to distract her. Lauryn was sure the men would be home soon. They had been near the barn when they pulled up. The way Steve was talking, she hoped Kathleen and Sabrina could help her get him upstairs before they did. Steve wasn't happy about being incapacitated and it was hard enough to get him to cooperate with the orders he had been given by the physician.

"The doctor gave specific instructions for you to rest for at least twelve hours and not to lift anything heavy for the next week."

"What does he know?" Steve grumbled.

Lauryn did laugh this time as she folded her arms across her chest. "I would assume enough to become a doctor."

Steve scowled at her, seemingly not happy with her amusement. "You never know. People can buy diplomas online now."

Lauryn laughed again. "Well, if he had, they would have caught on to him by now. He looked old enough to be both of our fathers."

Thankfully, he remained quiet as they trudged up the stairs. She had a feeling it had more to do with him needing to exert all of his focus on the task. Not that she minded in the least. Her heartbeat still hadn't returned to normal. The way Sabrina

had come flying up to the house earlier had nearly sent her into cardiac arrest. She had assumed the worst when she hadn't seen Steve on the back of Bruce. It was probably going to take some time for her to recover. She led him to his bed and helped him into it. "Now, lie down and try to get some sleep."

"Where's Hannah?"

"Gail called and said they took her to the store. She was worried about you and they wanted to distract her."

Steve frowned. "I hope they don't let her run them ragged. They can't say no to her."

"I'm sure they won't."

His eyes began to droop and she could tell that the pain pill she had forced him to take at the hospital was kicking in. She stood there and watched him drift off to sleep before she went to the connecting bathroom to find some aspirin. Stress and anxiety always gave her a headache. Right now she had a lot of both.

Not finding any, she headed downstairs and found Kathleen.

"How's Steve?"

"Finally resting but I want to keep an eye on him. I just came downstairs to see if you have any aspirin."

"Yes, I do." Kathleen returned a few moments later with a small bottle.

"Thank you." Lauryn murmured before she headed back upstairs to check on

Steve. He was out. She smiled as she closed the door behind her. The man was sexy as hell when he was awake and adorable when he was sleep. *Yeah, she was a goner.*



Steve woke himself up with his own groan. It was dark and his shoulder was throbbing. He tried to call out to Lauryn, but his mouth was dry. He managed to roll himself out of bed and stumble through the bathroom to Lauryn's room. Thankfully her door was open. He didn't think he had the strength or coordination to operate any doorknobs. He leaned heavily on the doorframe. The sight that greeted him warmed his heart. The sheets on the bed had been thrown aside for the most part. Hannah was tucked under Lauryn's arm. Lauryn had a good grip on her as if protecting her from falling out of bed. Not wanting to disturb them he turned to head back into his own room. There was a slight rustle in the bed.

"Steve?"

"I didn't mean to wake you."

She yawned. "It's okay."

He watched her untangle herself from Hannah before sitting up. She slid her feet over the side. "Is everything okay?"

He nodded then winced at the movement. "I'm fine."

She stood up and walked toward him, her steps light and graceful. She was beautiful beyond words. A thought he shouldn't be having considering how much

pain he was in. “Is your shoulder hurting you?”

“A little.” *Hell, it hurt a lot.*

She moved into action before he could say another word. She was gone a few moments before she returned with a pitcher of water and pain pill for him. He took the pill first then drank the glass of water she poured him. It felt refreshing going down his dry throat. He drank all of the water in a few gulps. She smiled.

“Would you like some more?”

“If you don’t mind. I feel like I’ve swallowed sand.”

Lauryn helped him back to his room before pouring him another glass and setting the pitcher on his nightstand.

“Thank you, again.”

He sat down on the bed and lay back. She pulled the sheet up over him. He smiled at the nurturing action. “You can bring Hannah in here if you like.”

“No, she’s fine with me. I don’t want her to cause you any more pain than you’re already in. I also want you to be able to sleep comfortably.” Lauryn gave him a rueful smile. “She’s already elbowed me twice.”

“No wonder you had such a tight hold on her.”

Lauryn’s smile widened. “Goodnight, Steve.”

He closed his eyes. She caught him off guard when she brushed a light kiss across his lips. His eyes snapped open but she was already pulling back. If he could

muster the strength he would have stopped her, his arm be damned. Instead he was forced to watch her return to her room. He wondered if she had any idea just how much he wanted her to crawl underneath the sheet with him. As soon as his arm was better she would.



What seemed like mere seconds after she'd closed her eyes, she woke to Hannah's gentle shaking.

"Lauryn, I think breakfast is ready. I can smell it."

Lauryn opened her eyes, meeting Hannah's expectant expression. "Okay, get up, brush your teeth, wash your face, and then get dressed. Try to be as quiet as possible. Your dad is probably still asleep."

Lauryn rolled over and stretched before throwing back the covers and getting out of bed. She threw on a simple dark green athletic T-shirt and matching denim shorts before heading into the bathroom. Hannah had just finished up. Lauryn sent her back into her room to dress in the outfit that Hannah had picked out the night before.

She brushed her teeth and washed her face before she ran the brush through her hair a few times. She stuck her head into Steve's room to check on him. He was sleeping soundly so she decided not to wake him. Obviously he needed his rest.

Lauryn headed downstairs. Everyone greeted her as she walked into the dining

room. She said her greetings in return as she sat down.

“How’s Steve?” Sabrina asked.

Lauryn smiled. “Sleeping like a baby. He only woke up once during the night.”

Silence resumed as everyone began to eat. A few moments later Steve stumbled into the dining room. Literally. It was clear that he was still under the influence of the pain pill, his steps quite unsteady. She didn’t know why he wouldn’t ask for help when it was clear he needed it. Lauryn stood up and walked over to assist him to the table.

She stifled a gasp when she touched him. The sensual heat he gave off made her shiver. It was all she could do to stay upright. She shook her head, not sure what was wrong with her. Her thoughts had never been this sexual in nature. Maybe it was because she never had the right motivation. How could a woman look at him and not think of sex?

She looked up at him and he gave her a grateful look, making her worry about how much longer he could have supported his weight. She helped him into the seat next to hers.

“Thank you.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Kathleen fixed her son a plate and sat it in front of him. Steve dived into the bacon, eating heartily, which was understandable since he hadn’t eaten anything



since lunch yesterday. She watched him move on to a muffin. He had an appetite to rival that of an entire football team. She wondered if he was the same way in the bedroom.

She gasped, inhaling sharply at her inappropriate thoughts and began to choke. Reaching for her glass of orange juice she tried to control her choking, while wanting to crawl under the table and hide. Everyone's eyes were on her. She didn't have to look at them to know it.

It took some time, and a few more sips of juice, but she was finally able to regain control of herself. When she looked up everyone's eyes *were* on her, but the one gaze that mattered was Steve's. He was looking at her with open concern.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'm fine. Just went down the wrong pipe."

He nodded then resumed eating. She lowered her eyes back to her plate, hoping to get on with breakfast without any more indecent thoughts. She jumped when Steve leaned closer to her.

"I know what you were thinking, Lauryn."

Her head snapped up and she looked at him. "What?"

He gave her a knowing look. "I know what you were thinking about that made you choke."

Her eyes widened. She was glad she hadn't eaten anything else or she would

have started choking again.

She continued to stare at him unsure of what to say. He leaned closer to her, brought his free hand up, and tilted her chin upward. He lowered his head until his lips met hers. She leaned into the kiss, increasing the pressure. He pulled her tongue into his mouth, teasing hers with his own, sucking on it, gently making her moan at the sweet flavor of the blueberry muffin he had eaten. She heard someone clear their throat and even though it registered she couldn't force herself to pull back, but Steve had the self-restraint to do it for her. When she opened her eyes everyone's gaze was on her and Steve. They were wearing identical smiles. Hannah chose that moment to giggle.

"Lauryn and Daddy are kissing just like cousin Dean and Gail do."

Lauryn felt her face grow even hotter. The instant Steve touched her she forgot all about keeping things platonic in front of Hannah. This man was dangerous. She buried her face in her hands as a few people around the table chuckled. Steve drove her to distraction sometimes. If no one had bothered to clear their throat, they could possibly have ended up naked at the table in front of his family. Lifting her head she realized that most everyone had returned to their own conversations or plates. Steve reached out and touched her hand. She looked over at him.

"I didn't mean to embarrass you. I just got a little carried away."

She shook her head. "It isn't entirely your fault."

She was just as much at fault because she could have pulled away. She looked away from Steve when Kathleen began to speak.

“Okay everyone, the festivities will begin in one hour. Don’t be late or you might miss out.”

“I’m going to miss out anyway,” Steve grumbled.

His mother smiled. “No, you won’t. I’ve come up with something for you to do.”

Lauryn looked back and forth between mother and son, trying to figure out what was going on. With all of the unexpected events so far she wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Steve chuckled. “Oh, I’m sorry. Did that sound like a complaint? I didn’t mean for it to. I’m more than happy to sit and observe from the sidelines.”

Kathleen stood, placing her hands on her hips. “Did you dislocate your shoulder on purpose?”

Steve hung his head in mock shame. “Aw, shucks, you caught me, Mom.”

Lauryn laughed. If she had a family like this she would love it. The Mitchells had a close bond she envied. Lauryn picked up her plate and Steve’s, but Sabrina came over and took them both out of her hands.

“You help bonehead here back up the stairs. I’ll take care of these for you.”

She didn’t bother to argue with Sabrina. Steve needed her help, but how much was the question. She walked toward the stairs with him, Hannah bouncing along

happily in front of them. They made it upstairs and to his room in one piece.

“I’m going to start with a shower first because I feel nasty. I think I might have dirt in places that it shouldn’t be,” he complained

She laughed as she helped him into the bathroom.

“Do you need any help?”

He shook his head. “If I do I’ll call you.”

“Okay.”

He looked at her in surprise. “Will you really come to help me?”

She smiled wickedly. “Nope. I’m going to send your dad in.”

“And what if you can’t find him?”

“Then I have several other men to choose from.”

He chuckled. “In that case I can definitely handle this by myself.”

She left the bathroom as he began to strip. The last thing she needed was more temptation. She was already on the verge of tumbling to the floor with him to have her wicked way with him. Her hormones were definitely out of whack. Regardless, she had to get herself under control. Anything physical with Steve right now was out of the question.

*Now, once his shoulder healed...*

What was wrong with her? Why was she lusting over the man as though she had no common sense? Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and willed her mind

to focus on the task at hand. She needed to finish helping Hannah get ready. Besides, if she were busy, she was less likely to think about Steve in the shower with water sluicing over his rock-solid body. She bit back a groan. Wicked thoughts like this weren't going to help the situation.

She was almost finished when a knock sounding on the connecting door. Steve. Lauryn couldn't stop the fluttering of her heart. The only thing that saved her was Hannah's laugh of excitement.

"Hi, Daddy. Did you have a good bath?"

He walked over to Hannah and leaned down to give her a hug and kiss. "Yes, I did. Thank you for asking. Did you?"

She nodded. "But I took mine last night."

"That's good."

He surprised Lauryn by walking behind her and hugging her with his good arm. "How about you? Did you have a good shower?"

She looked at him blankly, having a hard time focusing on his question. If she weren't careful, he was likely to think her dimwitted. Yet how was she supposed to concentrate when this man was inquiring about her being naked in the shower? If he wanted to act like he hadn't just asked her an abnormal question, she could play along. She gave a brief nod.

"Yes, I did. I took mine last night as well. Thank you for asking," she replied,

hating the trembling in her voice.

Her gaze narrowed when she heard what she thought was a chuckle, but his facial expression hadn't changed. Maybe she was delirious. Lord, if she became this distracted with a simple look, it was definitely going to be interesting when they came together. She turned her attention back to Hannah's hair, feeling his gaze roam over her, making it difficult not to squirm. Somehow she managed to hold it together. Finishing Hannah's hair, Lauryn sighed with relief when she placed the last rubber band on.

As far as she was concerned, it wasn't a moment too soon. She headed downstairs with Steve and Hannah. When they walked outside onto the porch she noticed they were the last ones out.

"Okay, is everyone ready to get started?"

There were a few excited agreements, as well as a few dejected ones, but they headed out to the barn where a table had been set up. Lauryn took one look at the table, instantly knowing they had a long day ahead of them, but she was game. This outing in a family environment was a first for her and she planned to enjoy it.



"How's the shoulder?"

Steve looked up from the television screen to see Nathan and Daniel entering the living room. He was lying on the couch resting. The women had gone shopping,

while his dad, Will and Dean were out in the fields. He still wasn't allowed to do anything strenuous, so he was catching the early evening game between Oklahoma State University and Oklahoma University. Having been raised in Stillwater but attending Oklahoma University, he was always torn between who he wanted to win.

"It's fine right now."

Nathan walked over and sat in the recliner. "Who's winning?"

"The Sooners, up by two touchdowns, four minutes before halftime."

They sat there in silence for a moment before Daniel spoke. "I like Lauryn. She's nice."

The mention of her name brought a smile to Steve's face. He nodded his agreement with Daniel's statement.

"Yes, she is."

Nathan reclined back in the chair. "So, have you told her you're loaded?"

Steve shook his head, biting back a groan. This seemed to be the question of the hour. When had everyone become so damned nosy? He tried not to let his frustration show. "No, not yet."

Daniel looked over at him in surprise. "You're kidding, right?"

"No."

Nathan sat up straight. "When do you plan on telling her?"

"I'm just waiting for a good time."

Daniel chuckled. “Well, they say no time like the present.”

“I know. I just want to be sure it’s me she wants.”

Nathan chuckled this time. “Well, if you aren’t sure now you probably won’t ever be.”

Daniel laughed. “It probably won’t matter. When Lauryn finds out you’ve been keeping this from her she’s gonna dump your sorry butt.”

Steve hoped Daniel was wrong. Still, deep down he knew Lauryn would be angry, yet every time he went to tell her, something stopped him.

“She probably will, but I’ll tell her when the time’s right. After what I went through with Tina, I have to do it my way this time.”

Nathan finally changed the subject, to Steve’s relief. Over the past forty-eight hours Steve had learned Lauryn had earned her place in his family. Everyone was looking out for her. His family members had made their point clear. If he hurt her, his family was going to kill him.

“Hannah has definitely grown.”

Daniel nodded his agreement. “She makes me look forward to Valerie giving birth to our baby.”

Steve smiled. “I’ll never forget when Hannah was first placed in my arms.”

Hannah had been placed in his arms because Tina hadn’t wanted to touch her. He had fallen in love with Hannah from the first sonogram and feeling the weight of



her little body in his arms sealed the deal. She'd been deep in his heart ever since. He knew he wanted more children at some point. He wondered if Lauryn wanted children. Yes, she took care of Hannah, but she wasn't Lauryn's. It would definitely be something for the two of them to discuss as their relationship progressed—if it progressed.

Steve cleared his throat and looked over at Daniel. “Have you and Valerie discussed any names?”

“We’ve discussed a few, but no decision has been made.”

Steve had named Hannah when she came into the world. Hannah Marie had been the name that first came to him when he found out she was a girl and the one that had stuck with him. He looked over at Nathan when he let out a cheer only to realize that his attention was glued to the television. Steve turned his attention back to the television; OSU had just scored a touchdown. There was a little less than two minutes in the game. Enough time for OU to go back down the field the other way if they really wanted to.

Not really caring about the game anymore, Steve drifted back into his own thoughts. Closing his eyes, he began to try to imagine what Lauryn would look like pregnant with his child. Would she welcome the changes pregnancy brought to her body, or despise and try to prevent them, like Tina had?

He actually wondered what Tina was doing now. The last time he'd heard

anything about her had been via the private investigator he'd hired to keep an eye on her. Periodically he would track her down and send word of Hannah's progress to her. Did she deserve it? No, absolutely not. Still, when Hannah came to him and asked, he would be able to explain to his daughter that it was her mother who'd decided not to participate in her life.

Tina was in California right now. She didn't try to make any contact with Hannah. First, because she didn't want to and secondly because she had voluntarily signed over all her parental rights. He also did it to keep an eye on Tina to make sure there wasn't anything going on in her life that could come back and affect his or Hannah's. He didn't like the fact that Tina had abandoned Hannah with what seemed to be no remorse. His daughter craved a mother figure. Even though there were plenty of women around to nurture her, it still wasn't the same.

Still, he had to admit Hannah seemed to be getting that from Lauryn.

Steve noticed Lauryn was very careful in how she handled the situation with Hannah. Lauryn had mentioned to him her concern about Hannah getting too attached, but he hadn't seen any danger signs. He also had to admit he was selfishly hoping Hannah would be another reason to keep Lauryn interested in being around them.

He looked up and groaned playfully as the front door opened, pulling him from his internal musings. The women filed in with Hannah leading the pack. She was

holding two shopping bags of her own, looking every bit the professional shopper. Hannah's face lit up when she saw him. His heart melted every time his daughter looked at him with such adoration.

"Daddy, Daddy, look at what I bought."

Steve gently eased himself into a sitting position so he could see what Hannah had in her bags. There were two complete outfits in one bag and matching shoes in the other. He smiled as she dug into the pocket of her jeans.

"Here is your change."

Nathan pulled Bethany into his arms. "Did you bring me any change?"

Bethany shook her head. "No, but I did bring you a surprise." She gave him a wicked look. "Although you have to come upstairs to see it."

With that said Nathan grabbed her hand, pulling her toward the stairs. "Mom said dinner is in an hour," Sabrina called after them.

The only reply was a giggle from Bethany. Daniel stood up and took Valerie's bags from her as she sat down with a grateful sigh in the seat he'd just vacated.

"Tired?"

She nodded. "Yes, but we had fun. How about you guys?"

Daniel nodded before lowering himself to the floor. He took off Valerie's shoes and began to rub her feet. When she moaned in pleasure a surge of jealousy traveled through Steve. He had missed out on so much during Tina's pregnancy with Hannah.

Sometimes he was amazed his child was so well adjusted as Tina had been an emotional wreck, screaming or crying if he looked at her. Touching her had been out of the question.

“I’m going to tell the guys dinner will be ready in an hour. Gail, call our grandparents to see if they’re coming over for dinner.”

Gail nodded to Sabrina. “Will do.”

Steve smiled. His grandparents had all gone back to their respective houses since technically the family reunion was over. The festivities had gone well and it had been fun. He and his cousins were sticking around until tomorrow, then they would all be heading back home as well. Steve looked over at where Lauryn was standing quietly. She held three bags of her own in her hands.

“What do you have in your bags?”

Sabrina giggled as she walked over to Lauryn. “That’s for her to know and you to find out.”

Lauryn’s cheeks began to redden, which made him feel all the more inquisitive, but he would have to find out later since Sabrina was dragging her out the room. Hannah followed hot on their trail. Valerie smiled at him.

“Cousin, I would love to be a fly on your bedroom wall when you get back to Norman and that shoulder heals.”

His jaw went slack at Valerie’s words. What the hell had Lauryn bought? Not

able to stand the suspense he stood up and headed upstairs. He would try to see what Lauryn had purchased. Even though he might not be successful, it was always worth a try.

## Chapter Seven

Steve paced the floor one more time. He headed down the hall toward Lauryn's room. Her door was open and she was sitting in the middle of the bed reading a book. It had been three weeks since they'd returned from the family reunion. The kiss he'd shared with Lauryn in front of his family had caused a lot of speculation that neither Steve nor she denied or confirmed. Hannah was ecstatic that he and Lauryn were involved. Everything seemed to have fallen in place. Well, almost everything. Though he may have started dating Lauryn on a tentative basis, it was now something more. Something neither of them could deny. The elephant in the room that no one wanted to discuss...*until now*.

His shoulder was better. It was still a little tender but not painful. He was ready to take what he and Lauryn had to the next level. If he had read the signs right, so was Lauryn. She was giving every indication that she yearned for physical intimacy as well. He had stayed away as long as he could, sneaking in the occasional passionate kiss. He'd known he didn't want to touch her until he could do so and enjoy it. Tonight was that night, if he had anything to say about it.

He reached out and knocked on the doorframe. She looked up at him, smiling,

before placing the book aside.

“Hi.”

“Hey.”

“I missed you.”

Lauryn laughed. He had a good idea as to why, since he just seen her a few minutes ago when they had tucked Hannah in and read her a bedtime story. “It’s only been a few minutes. I haven’t even made it past two pages in my book.”

He smiled. “But I still missed you.” He walked over to the bed, leaning down to scoop her up. She squealed in surprise but automatically wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Put me down before you hurt your shoulder,”

“Be still and I won’t.”

She stilled instantly, holding herself as motionless as possible. He carried her out of the bedroom and down the hall.

“Where are you taking me?”

“To my bedroom.”

She didn’t respond but he studied her expression, keeping an eye out for any distress and finding none. Steve reached his bedroom, stepped inside, and kicked the door closed behind him. She jumped at the low thud but he knew it wasn’t loud enough to disturb Hannah. He had been sure to make sure his daughter was

completely asleep before going to Lauryn. Since they'd been back from Stillwater, Lauryn had spent a few nights in his bed. While they had shared a few heated kisses, it had never gone beyond that. Tonight was going to be different.

He walked over to the bed, letting Lauryn stand on her own beside it. She stepped back and he saw she was fidgeting nervously.

"We need to talk about this," she stammered.

Steve sighed. He knew she was inexperienced but he planned to take care of her. When he entered her, she would be ready. "Okay."

"Um, do you have any protection?"

He went to the drawer and pulled out an unopened box. Her mouth dropped open in a cute fashion. He watched a blush creep up her neck to her cheeks. She began to wring her hands nervously.

"Do you know what—?"

Steve nodded before stepping forward to take her hands in his. "Lauryn, I want to make love with you as much as you want to make love to me. We are both prepared for this. We've both waited for this moment a long time. So let's make it as special as possible, without worrying. I'll take care of you. I promise."

Lauryn stared at him for a moment before she smiled and nodded her head. He pulled her close and his lips claimed hers as he held her tenderly. It was as if her lips where drugging him, the taste of her was so intoxicating. Steve's mouth slipped away



from hers to whisper against her cheek.

“You are so exquisite.”

She smiled, reaching up to touch the untamable lock of hair she seemed to love so much.

“You’re pretty sexy yourself.”

He smiled and brought his mouth down on hers. One of his hands slipped between them. He could feel the shock run through her body when he cupped one of her breasts. He had to remember to take this slow. She’d confided to him that she wasn’t a virgin but she wasn’t all that experienced either. Gently he stroked her breast through the gown. He knew the silky material was one of the surprises she’d bought in Stillwater. The filmy material didn’t provide any barrier between his palm and her hardened nipple.

Lauryan moaned and he covered her mouth with his. He could feel her going limp in his arms. He felt his semihard erection stiffen even more, and pressed himself against her. She gasped in response, but he didn’t move, allowing her body to get used to his. Before the night was over he planned to make sure there wasn’t a part of him she didn’t know.

It was his turn to gasp when she caught him off guard, lowering her hand between them, exploring until she found what she was looking for. When she started stroking him he could hardly control himself, the pleasure was so intense. Her touch

was a little hesitant, but her eagerness to explore his body spurred him on.

“Lauryn, stop,” Steve whispered, his voice deep with huskiness.

When she didn’t comply, his hands slipped down and grasped hers, slowly leading her fingers away from his hard shaft. It had been so long since he’d been with anyone. He didn’t want to find his deepest pleasure with her from being caressed. He stepped back then slipped the gown over her head, leaving her naked. She made a move to cover herself but he gently caught her hands. “Don’t.”

She blushed heavily and he smiled to reassure her. “You are too beautiful to cover up.”

“I’m not comfortable like this.”

He gave her a reassuring smile. “Believe me, honey, you haven’t a thing to be uncomfortable about. But if it makes you feel any better...” He kicked off his boxers until he stood naked with her. Her gaze lowered, roaming over his body slowly, slightly widening when it traveled over his hard arousal. She seemed to forget about her own discomfort, as he’d intended. She placed her hand on his shoulders when he picked her up. He laid her down on the bed before following her down. When she went to move over to make room for him, he shook his head.

“Come here.”

She moved back into his embrace and he lowered his mouth to hers. He moved over her, nudging her legs apart. He fought a shudder as his aching erection brushed

the juncture of her thighs, her heat and wetness tormenting him. She moaned and arched into him as if suffering from the same agony. He groaned, needing to slow down, or he was going to burn out of control. It took everything he had to pull back. She reached for him but he eluded her hands. He ran his hands down her body, wanting to learn every curve of her lush body.

“You’re so gorgeous, so sexy.”

He felt her shiver against him in response to his compliment. But he wanted more from her. He traced his finger lightly over her breasts, pausing to place a kiss on her collarbone and neck. She moaned in pleasure, her legs moving against his restlessly. He felt her squeeze her thighs together, knowing what effect he was having on her. It was the same one she had on him. He ached from wanting her.

He trailed his hand down her stomach, in between her thighs, moaning as he felt the wetness that had gathered there. Moving his hand, he slowly began to stroke her. Lauryn’s head fell back on the pillow and she cried out. He lifted his head to watch her, wanting to see the pleasure he gave her play out over her face.

“Does that feel good?”

“Yes,” she managed to choke out. He continued to stroke her gently, smiling as he watched her movements become more lithe as he pushed her toward an abyss he wasn’t sure she had ever been to before. Her body stiffened with each stroke of his fingers as more low sounds of pleasure escaped her. He knew she was right where he

wanted her when her thighs tightened around his hand, almost making it impossible for him to move, but he didn't cease. She was going to experience a wealth of bliss tonight, if he did nothing else. The corners of his mouth curved upward as she clutched blindly at him. He gathered her close to him with his free arm, whispering in her ear, "Just relax and go with it. Let it come."

It seemed to be all the reassurance she needed because she stiffened, then gasped, burying her face into his chest as her body convulsed around his fingers. He stroked and caressed her until her muscles went lax, telling him he had accomplished his goal at least once. The plan was to take her to the pinnacle of release several more times before the night was over.



Lauryn lay still trying to figure out what had just happened to her. There were no words to describe it. Now she knew what she had been missing all this time. Could relate to the ultimate pleasure she had occasionally heard some of her female cohorts whisper about during the "women only" lunch outings.

All thoughts were suddenly pushed from Lauryn's mind when Steve's fingers began to stroke her again. She shivered as she recalled the passion he had just sent surging through her. It didn't seem possible for her to be able to achieve such a high level of pleasure again, but with the skill of his fingers, it wasn't long before he had her entire body quivering. There was no doubt in her mind that his intimate touch

was being branded on her brain. Sensations were roaring through her and she bit her lower lip to stop from crying out.

She met his gaze and saw the heated lust that darkened his eyes and knew it had to be a mirror of hers. He was purposely teasing her feminine core, making her want him to the point where she was almost ready to plead.

“You’re extremely wet, Lauryn,” he said in a low throaty voice as he continued to stroke her with expert precision. “Do you like what I’m doing to you?”

*Did he really expect her to be able to answer him?* Even if she wanted to, she couldn’t. Her vocal cords didn’t seem to want to work, not to mention she couldn’t form a coherent thought. But he was looking at her, waiting. It was a struggle but she forced herself to respond, “Yes, I like it.”

“I want to taste you, Lauryn,” he murmured as he shifted until he came to rest on his knees between her thighs.

When he lowered his head between her legs it hit her that he had been serious. He was taking what he wanted. And when his tongue thrust out and gave her that first intimate touch, she felt boneless pleasure of the most intense kind oozing through her pores.

“Steve.” She closed her eyes on a pleasurable sigh as he continued to kiss her in the most intimate way a man could. Even while part of her mind was telling her to resist him—to reach out and jerk his head up—the only thing she could do was reach

out and grab his head to hold it in place.

But it didn't look as though he planned to go anywhere anytime soon. He was assaulting her with thorough, leisurely strokes of his tongue, relentless in his actions. And she was brazenly enjoying it. A shiver raced through her body as his tongue probed deeper, becoming more insistent, ravenous.

She let out a passionate moan from deep within her throat. Her hands holding his head tightened as if to draw him closer and he continued, as if her taste was something he couldn't live without. Her body exploded, seemingly into a thousand pieces, and she let out a low, deep moan as fulfillment seared through her. She realized his hold on her was just as firm as her hold on him. He had an unyielding grip on her thighs, not intending to let her go anyplace until he'd gotten his fill, and that thought sent her over the edge again.

Never in her life had anything like this happened to her before. Never had she thought she would be here, like this, with a man as potent as Steve. She finally felt her body floating back to Earth when he lifted his mouth from her.

He raised his head to stare down at her while licking his lips in the process, and the gesture was so erotic she reached out and pulled his mouth to hers. She tasted herself on his lips, his tongue, leaving her in no doubt of how intense his intimate kiss had been.

She glanced down to watch his hand stroke her nipples as he spoke, using the

same skilled fingers he'd used to stroke between her legs. His fingers were moist as he spread her wetness over the hardened peaks of both breasts. She couldn't prevent the quiver that traveled up her spine.

*What was he doing to her?*

"Steve..."

"Just close your eyes and relax. Let me pleasure you. I want to take care of you."

She did as he asked and the moment her eyelids fused shut she felt his tongue flicker out and capture a bud, flickering over it, tasting her before closing in and taking it fully into his mouth. Need, the kind she only knew with him, consumed her insides as she felt his mouth on her breasts, tasting and teasing her in a way that was simply his. He devoured one and then the other, almost depleting her of her wits, her reason and her self-discipline. And when his mouth found the smooth skin of her stomach and began placing kisses all around it, she became lost within a vortex of sensations that had her giving in to pleasure of the most erotic kind.

His warm breath fluttered across her belly as he placed a kiss there. His nonverbal commands were making her surrender to emotions she was trying to control and didn't want to feel. They were also causing another deep hunger to grow inside her. Then she felt the warmth of his breath move lower and she held still, knowing what he was about to do.

*Again.*

She should have grown accustomed to him kissing and caressing her there, but she wasn't. It couldn't be helped. He had a skill with his tongue that she just couldn't control, deny or resist. Not much time had passed. After what they'd shared she wasn't sure she could withstand another onslaught of pleasure. She didn't know if she could take her body exploding into a million pieces again.

She opened her eyes to tell him but all she saw was his head down between her legs, and she could only close her eyes the moment his tongue flicked over her sensitive flesh. Automatically her body, still sensitive from the last release, came up off the bed. He grabbed her hips, holding her to his mouth as he consumed her with a sense of hunger that left her panting for breath. She closed her eyes as sensations tore into her body once again.

She reached out for him, holding his head in place, inviting him to go deeper, and he did, as his sinfully skilled and seductive tongue continued nonstop, increasing the pace, redefining the urgency. Her senses were being driven wild and her fingers threaded through his hair as he continued to barrage long, deep, drugging kisses into her.

She whimpered as a powerful throb overtook her. And then she felt it, some part of her that his tongue touched that sent her over the edge, fragmenting her into several pieces and making her bite her bottom lip to keep from shrieking at the top of her lungs. Slowly, deliberately, he continued to bestow his intimate kiss on her and



she felt waves of heated pleasures float all through her, continuing to squirm beneath his mouth.

He held her as she regained her breath. Coming up over her he reached for protection. After he donned it he moved between her thighs and slowly pushed inside her. He paused, leaving himself only a fraction inside of her. He lowered his mouth to her breast. As he gently sucked her nipples Lauryn flung her head to the side and cried out. He covered her mouth, muting the sound before it had a full chance to escape. He stilled, teasing her with gentle kisses until her body opened to him.

His kisses changed, becoming heated as he pulled her close. His hips began to move, delivering powerful thrusts that left her breathless and feeling as if she had lost all control. She moaned and stretched up to kiss him, reveling in the way her body accepted his. Loving the way his body felt within hers. Lauryn wrapped her legs around his waist, drawing him deeper inside her, his bold strokes giving her great pleasure.

It produced sensations in her, leaving her yearning for something more. Suddenly the wonderful sensation took her way again. She gasped as the ultimate bliss swept through her, loving the way Steve quivered and shook against her. She arched her hips instinctively, drawing him deeper within her. His hold on her tightened as he lowered his head, shouting his pleasure into the crook of his neck as he came. She lost track of how long they lay there until he finally moved away from

her.

She missed his warmth instantly. Rolling over onto her side, she drew in a shaky breath and closed her eyes. Her eyes remained shut when he came back to bed. She couldn't muster up the energy to open them, even when he snuggled up next to her.

"Are you awake, Lauryn?"

She made a noncommittal sound, still unable to form a complete sentence.

"I wasn't too rough with you, was I?"

She shook her head, willing her mouth to cooperate with her brain. "No, you weren't. It felt wonderful."

He pulled her closer to him. She yawned and Steve laughed. "Sleepy?"

"Exhausted."

Steve pulled the blanket up over them and turned the lamp off. He brushed his lips against her temple. "Sleep," he murmured. It was a command she had no problem following. Steve had ravished her.



Steve's heart plunged to his stomach when he answered his cell phone and heard Hannah's frightened voice on the other end. "What is it, sweetheart?"

"Lauryn is lying in bed crying and she won't get up."

"Is she hurt?"

“I don’t know, Daddy.”

“Is she talking?”

“Yes,” Hannah whispered. “She just won’t move. She hurts, Daddy.”

“Do you need to call 911?”

He had taught his daughter the importance of knowing the number a long time ago, but he’d never thought she would have to use it.

“No, Daddy. She said she just needs a nap. But she’s crying, Daddy.”

He heard his daughter’s voice break as she sobbed. “Okay sweetie, put Lauryn on the phone for me.”

Steve took a few deeps breaths in an attempt to calm himself. He had to remain calm. Lauryn’s voice finally came over the line.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” she rasped, her voice full of pain.

“What’s wrong, Lauryn? Do I need to call an ambulance?”

“N-no, Steve. I just need to rest but I do need you to come home. I thought if I lay down for a while I would be okay. I just didn’t know I would worry Hannah this much.”

Steve closed his eyes and rubbed the back of his neck. “Don’t be sorry, Lauryn. I’ll be there soon. Let me speak to Hannah again.” He waited while the phone was transferred back to his daughter’s hands.

“Yes, Daddy?”

His chest tightened at the tremble in his daughter's voice. "Don't worry. I'm on my way home. I need you to be brave for a few more minutes. Go sit with Lauryn and hold her hand. Take care of her until I get there."

He heard Hannah snuffle. "Okay, Daddy. Just hurry."

"I will, baby. I will."

Steve hung up the phone and went to find Dillon. Dillon looked up in concern as Steve burst into the office. "I have to get home. Hannah just called, upset. Something's wrong with Lauryn. I need to home."

His friend looked at him with concern. "Is it serious?"

"Serious enough to scare Hannah into calling me. I spoke to Lauryn and she doesn't sound good but she says she doesn't need an ambulance."

"Call me and let me know what's going on as soon as you get home."

"I will."

Steve fought to drive within the speed limit as he raced home. The fear he'd heard in his little girl's voice worried him. Whatever was wrong had to be painful if Lauryn couldn't make it to the phone to call him herself. He pulled up into the front yard and was at the door before the engine completely shut off. Hannah met him. He could tell she'd been crying. He stooped down, drawing her into his arms, and rubbed the back of her head.

"It's okay, sweetheart. I'm here. What I need you to do for daddy is to go to

your playroom, pick your favorite doll and dress it up nice and pretty for Lauryn. You know she likes your pretty dolls. It will help her to feel better.”

Hannah gave a jerky nod. “Okay.”

He walked Hannah to the playroom, hoping the task he had given her would keep her busy long enough for him to find out what was wrong with Lauryn. Once Hannah was occupied, he took the stairs two at a time. His heart almost stopped as he walked into Lauryn’s room. Even though they were intimate Lauryn insisted on sleeping in separate rooms. Even though Hannah was accepting of the relationship between him and Lauryn, Lauryn wanted to keep their relationship respectful in front of his daughter.

Lauryn was lying in a fetal position. Her back was to him but he could hear her low sobs. He walked over to the bed, walking around until he could see her face. He knelt beside the bed, reaching out to touch her face. The pain he saw in her eyes gripped his heart.

“What’s wrong, Lauryn?”

She tried to speak but the words came out on a groan and unintelligible. She licked her lips and tried again. “Cramps...bad cramps.”

She winced and closed her eyes. He was confused. “Cramps?”

Lauryn nodded. “Yes. They started this morning.”

His puzzlement grew. “Started?”

“That time of the month,” she rasped.

Steve was speechless as what she said dawned on him. His heartbeat returned to normal when he realized this wasn’t a medical emergency that required a trip to the hospital. “What can I do?”

“Pain medicine,” she whispered.

Steve rushed down the stairs to the kitchen and poured a glass of water. He ran back up the stairs to his room hunting down a few over-the-counter pain pills. When he returned to her room Lauryn still hadn’t moved. He gently helped her sit up so that she could take the pills before easing her back down.

“Is there anything else I can do?”

“Hold me.”

Steve quickly stripped off his shoes and climbed into the bed, careful not to jar her. She eased closer to him. He held her as tight as he could without hurting her. Just then Hannah peeked around the corner.

“Is it okay to come in?”

Steve nodded and Hannah came over to him. Lauryn stirred next to him and smiled at Hannah. “Hi, sweetheart.”

“Hi, Lauryn.”

She held up a doll. “I dressed Sara up for you.”

Lauryn reached out and took the doll. “She looks beautiful.”

“Do you feel better now?”

“Yes, I do.”

Hannah seemed to have run out of questions but Steve could tell his daughter was still a little worried. Finally she spoke. “Can I get up there with you?”

Steve looked down at Lauryn who nodded. “Yes, you can, but only if you’re very careful.”

Hannah nodded her agreement very solemnly before climbing up onto the bed as carefully as she could. Reaching across Steve, she wrapped her frail arms around Lauryn’s neck. Steve could tell the pain pills were starting to work on Lauryn. Her eyelids were drooping, her breathing becoming deeper. Moments later she was asleep. He looked down and saw Hannah starting to drift off as well. Steve lay there for a moment recalling how helpless he’d felt when he’d seen Lauryn lying in bed looking so fragile.

He never wanted to feel that way again. Reaching over to the nightstand he picked up the phone and called the store. Dillon wasn’t available so he left a message with Wayne passing on the update of Lauryn, and that he would call later. He hung up the phone, yawning. The stress of the situation had taken his energy. His eyelids became heavy. It seemed he needed to rest for a while as well. He wasn’t sure what condition Lauryn would wake up in but either way he wanted to be well rested. As much as she had taken care of him and Hannah, the least he could do was return the

favor.

A few hours later Steve stirred as he felt Lauryn move. She climbed out of bed, her destination the bathroom. The water came on a few minutes later. When it didn't go off after a few moments he realized she was taking a shower. A short time later she stepped out of the bathroom wrapped in a robe, looking freshly scrubbed and relaxed. Hannah was still asleep so he spoke in a low tone to Lauryn.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Lots and thank you."

She came back and got back into bed with him. He pulled her close to him. "Is it always like this for you?"

Lauryn shook her head. "No, just every once in a while. Normally I can get up and walk around to get rid of them, but I couldn't do that this time. Thank you for being here. I know I scared poor Hannah to death."

They both jumped in surprise as Hannah spoke. "But I'm not scared anymore, because you're okay."

Lauryn held out her arms and Hannah clambered into them. He watched Lauryn hold Hannah close, inhaling deeply. Lauryn finally pulled back with a bright smile. "You did the right thing by calling your daddy."

Hannah pulled back and looked at her, budding hope in her expression. "I did?"

"Yes, you did."



“I’m glad.”

She handed Hannah over to Steve. “Well, I need to get dressed and get some lunch going. I know that Hannah is starving.”

“Are you sure you’re up for that? I can cook something.”

Lauryn nodded. “Yes, I’m sure. I need to get up and move around.”

“Okay. I will see you downstairs in a few.”

He held out his hand to Hannah, who looked at him with sad eyes. He could tell she was still a little upset from earlier. Her words confirmed it. “I want to stay with Lauryn.”

Steve looked over at Lauryn. “Is that okay?”

One corner of Lauryn’s mouth curved upward in an adorable smile. “Yes, that’s fine.”

As Steve left the room, closing the door behind him, his hand trembled. He realized that somewhere along the way, Lauryn had slipped behind the barrier he had put up to guard his heart. It hadn’t been in his plans, but he was falling in love with her.

## Chapter Eight

Steve looked at Lauryn as she gasped out loud at the letter she was reading. He studied the expression of pure shock on her face, trying to decipher why it was there. When she didn't speak, he was by her side in concern. "What is it?"

She looked at him in shock. "They found me."

"Who found you?"

"My family."

Lauryn pressed the letter in his hand, and then slid out of bed to pace the bedroom. He read the envelope, seeing that it had been forwarded a few times. So many times, he couldn't tell what the original address had been. He unfolded the letter. It was from a maternal aunt who had found out Lauryn's father had passed away. They were looking for her, wanted to meet her. Catch up on the lost time if she was willing to give them any of her time.

It seemed her family gathered for dinner every Sunday. Lauryn was receiving an official invite for any Sunday that she was able to attend. Lauryn's aunt had left a number for her to contact her. From what he could tell, Lauryn's family was looking forward to hearing from her. He looked at Lauryn then opened his arms. She rushed into them and he held her tight against him.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded, slowly. “Yes, just shocked.”

“But this is a good thing. This is what you’ve been waiting for.”

She exhaled softly. “I know.”

“Are you going to call them? Tomorrow’s Sunday.”

She pulled back to look at him. “Do you think I should? It’s a little late.”

He chuckled. It was only nine-thirty and it was a Saturday night. “Somehow, I don’t think they would mind if you called and it really was late. They just seem to want to hear from you.”

She bit her lower lip, a clear sign to him that she was nervous. “Do you think I should?”

He brushed a wild strand of hair out of her face. “That is ultimately your decision, but it is something I know you have been wanting.”

She nodded. He had lost track of how many times she’d said she’d always wanted to meet her family. If for nothing else, just to see where she had come from, to know and understand her background and family history.

“You’re right.”

She took a deep breath. “I need your support on this one.”

He took her hand and squeezed it. “And you have it.”

She reached for the cordless phone and then moved closer to him. Steve gave

her hand a further reassuring squeeze and she took a deep breath. He could hear when the phone began to ring, willing to admit his nerves were elevated as well. A female voice answered and Lauryn froze, but he nudged her. She cleared her throat and her hand tightened around Steve's before she spoke. Even when she did, his heart went out to her. Her voice shook.

"Yes, can I speak to Audrey?"

Steve listened to one side of the conversation, hearing bits and pieces of what Lauryn's aunt said. One thing was clear. She was surprised to hear from Lauryn and she wanted to see her as soon as possible. He smiled when Lauryn accepted the invitation to dinner tomorrow. Steve had known Lauryn's family would want to see her. He felt bad that it had taken this long. She didn't deserve anything so rotten.

He nodded when Lauryn informed her aunt that she would be bringing him and Hannah along. There was no way he would leave Lauryn to face them by herself. He had some uncertainty about taking Hannah, but she might provide the perfect excuse to escape if needed. Lauryn finally said good-bye and hung up the phone.

"I did it."

He placed a kiss on her forehead. "Yes, you did."

"They're having dinner tomorrow evening and would love to have us."

"Are you nervous?"

Lauryn laughed. "A little, but I expect I'll be a wreck tomorrow."

He brought her hand up to his mouth. “No, you won’t. Hannah and I will be there for you.”

“Thank you. You are truly a wonderful man.”

“And you are an amazing woman.”

“Thank you.” She released a deep breath. “I think I’m going to make something for tomorrow.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know yet, but a side dish. Something versatile to go with anything, since I don’t know what we’ll be having.”

She leaned back into his embrace, picking the letter up and clutching it to her chest. He smiled at the sight. He could tell by her expression that she was already working herself up.

“I have a feeling that if I don’t distract you, you won’t be able to sleep.”

Lauryn shivered at the wicked gleam in Steve’s eyes. “What do you have planned?”

“It will be so much better if I show you. Let me just go check on Hannah and make sure she’s settled for the night.”

Lauryn nodded. The trip to Hannah’s room didn’t take him long. He looked in on Hannah, tucking in the loose covers around her sleeping figure. Once he’d made it back to his room he closed the door. Lauryn sat on the bed watching him, her

expression unreadable. At least she'd put the letter away. He stepped near the bed slowly. How had he gotten so lucky? A flash of fear traveled through him. When Lauryn sat on the bed looking at him with all the trust in the world, trust he didn't completely deserve, it ate at him. Now was the time he really needed to come clean and tell Lauryn his secret, but he couldn't do it. She needed to know now because it was really going to hurt her when she found out later.

He had to tell her the whole truth and soon. His relationship with her was going places he'd never thought it would. He didn't want to lose it. He would tell her the complete truth soon, but not right now. He didn't want to give her anything else to worry over. Instead he would focus on distracting her by showing her how he felt, one caress at a time.

"You are so beautiful."

Lauryn didn't bother to contain the pleasure she received from his words. She loved to hear Steve compliment her. He told her she was attractive all the time, and more importantly, she believed him. She knew it was heartfelt. He smiled wickedly before joining her on the bed. She helped him disrobe, but he brushed her hands aside when she tried helping him undress her.

Once they were both unclothed he laid her down gently before joining her. Lauryn twined her arms around his neck, drawing him to her so she could touch her mouth to his. Cupping each of her breasts with the palms of his hands he began to

caress them. She moaned softly into his mouth. His touch was so gentle and warm. But it wasn't all that she wanted.

"I want you inside me," she whispered. She slid her hands down his back, over his muscular rear end. She loved the feel of his skin under her hands. It did something to her just to be able to be with him like this. To share herself on a level she hadn't done with any other man.

Moaning, she arched into Steve as he ran his fingers over her breasts, and then lower across her stomach. He splayed a hand over the hair that framed the part of her he hungered for. When he thrust a finger inside her, she closed her eyes on a sigh and ecstasy surged through her. He stroked her center, preparing her to receive him in a way only he could. When he pulled away, she automatically went to reach for him until she saw him reaching for protection. Her eyes didn't leave his as he rolled the latex on.

She closed her eyes when he leaned low over her, flicking his tongue over her nipples. He slid his hands underneath her hips, urging her to wrap her legs around his waist. A sigh slipped from her lips when he slid inside her. She threw her head back in a guttural sigh of pleasure when he began to move with deep, sure stokes.

"Open your eyes, Lauryn. I want to see your pleasure. I want to look into your eyes as you come for me."

She obeyed his request, unable to deny him anything he asked. He smiled then

leaned down to kiss her while thrusting deeply inside her. Catching her cry of delight in his mouth, he continued to kiss her deeply while pushing her toward the edge again. He broke off the kiss, breathing heavily, trailing kisses down her throat until he reached her breasts. Her mind shut down completely and her body took over. A gasp escaped her as he shifted slightly and came directly in contact with the spot where she needed him most.

She lifted her head and bit his shoulder as she went over the edge. He followed close behind, groaning his pleasure into the pillow as he came, her body contracting tightly around his. She lost track of how long she and Steve lay sealed together before he was able to summon the strength to move. If it were up to her they would have had to wait a lot longer.

It took everything she had just to roll over while he made a quick trip to the bathroom. She willingly let him draw her into his embrace when he returned to the bed. Whenever he touched her, whenever he was near, everything seemed so right. For once, she had a man in her life that she felt secure with. A man she could completely trust. While it was a foreign concept to her, she had grown used to the wonderful feeling. She didn't plan on letting him go anytime soon and hoped he felt the same.



Lauryn shifted underneath the covers, trying to turn her head away from the



sunlight starting to peek through the windows. She wanted to sleep for a few more minutes before she got up and started moving around. After last night it was hard to muster up the energy. She felt good and sated. Still, there was a lot to do to get ready for the upcoming week and not a lot of time to do it. Never in her wildest dreams had she ever thought she would be making plans to meet extended family. Now that she was, she didn't really know what to think, what to expect. Not that it really mattered. With Steve by her side she was prepared to face anything.

She relaxed and rolled onto her side to study Steve. A man shouldn't be allowed to look so delectable in the morning. She smiled, wondering if he would be up for a repeat performance. Her eyes widened at the thought. He was corrupting her, but in such a delicious way.

She let her eyes drift over him. The sunlight shone through the window on him at an angle that made her insides flutter. He was a very attractive man. She shifted in bed and the ache she felt in certain muscles quickly reminded her that he was also a skillful lover.

She lost track of how long she lay there and watched his boyish expression while he slept. But he finally stirred and his eyes opened slowly. When she came into view he smiled and reached for her. She went into his embrace without protest.

“Good morning, beautiful.”

“Good morning.”

He brushed his lips against hers before pulling back to look into her eyes. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long at all."

"Good. Are you still feeling nervous about today?"

She opened her mouth to say no but no sound came out. There were a few flutters in her stomach but she couldn't tell if they were coming from nerves or being in such close proximity to him. "Um...well, not really. I think I'm more anxious than nervous."

Steve rose up over her in a smooth display of rippling muscles. "Hmm, I guess I didn't do too good of a job last night."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, no. You did a wonderful job. Trust me you did."

He chuckled. "You sure? I could always try again."

She tried to pull out of his embrace but he wouldn't let her. If she stayed in bed next to him any longer it wouldn't be a good idea. "I'm certain. We have a lot to do today. We need to get the day started."

"We can get our day started right now if you like." He tightened his embrace slightly. "How about a little reinforcement of last night to get rid of that apprehensiveness you feel?"

She shook her head. "Not a good idea, Steve. There really is a lot to be done and I still don't know what I'm taking to my aunt's for dinner."

“I beg to differ. I can’t have you stressed out all day. I have just what you need to make sure your day starts off right.”

She stifled a gasp, having a good idea what he wanted to give her. It was just her luck to find a man who couldn’t seem to keep his hands off her. Not that she really minded. To have a man like him crazy about her wasn’t a bad thing at all, in her opinion. Yet, it was hard for her to think lying beneath him. As soon as he rolled over on top of her, she lost the ability to focus completely.

“So, what do you say, Lauryn?”

Steve’s question made her stomach lurch in heated lust. She had awakened wanting him, but tried to ignore the blooming desire. Now, with his simple but loaded words, an ache started at the juncture of her legs. He was still nude and she let her eyes roam over his magnificent body. She couldn’t see the part of him that she wanted the most, and so focused on his arms instead. They were such magnificent arms. She cleared her throat to swallow the hard lump that had formed there. *Did he really expect her to say no?* He was insane if he thought she would. Reaching upward, she brushed a rogue strand of hair off his forehead. “I say you have a good idea.”

Seeming satisfied with her answer, he released her and rolled away from her, confusing her more than she already was. “Where are you going?”

He looked amused at her statement. “Why?”

*Was he serious? Were they even taking part in the same conversation?*

“I thought you were getting out of bed.”

He gave her a smile that intensified that ache in her body. “Believe me; I’m not going anywhere anytime soon.”

“You sure?” she asked in an incredulous tone when he moved even farther away from her.

He stared at her for a moment in a way that always got to her, making her hot all over, as his gaze traveled up and down her body.

Finally, he said, “I have never been more sure of anything. I want you. I want to pleasure you.”

Steve chuckled as she shivered. How could she not at the heat she saw in his eyes as she felt the lust and desire in them? She was no novice at being wanted by a man but this was the first time she could actually feel the intensity. And what was so amazing was that she craved him just as much.

“I want you, too,” she said softly.

She decided to put her feelings out there since he was doing the same. He reached for protection. Once it was in place, he moved back toward her. “Come here, Lauryn. I want to start your day off right,” he stated in a husky tone.

She met him halfway, holding her breath and his head lowered to hers. After all, the man could kiss and she was looking forward to it. Her lips began to tingle at the memory of their last heated kiss.

“Lauryrn?”

She shifted her gaze from his mouth to his eyes. “Yes?”

She’d been caught staring. He didn’t say anything for a moment. He just continued to look at her, especially her mouth. And the more he stared, the more her lips itched for him to taste them.

“I really like waking up next to you.”

She opened her mouth to respond to his compliment but couldn’t because his tongue found its way inside, instead. At that moment she forgot about everything else except what his mouth was doing to hers. She would even go as far as to say he was an expert. She’d been kissed before but never like this. When their mouths touched, time seemed to stop.

Instinctively, she angled her head to get more of the pleasure. If this was what he wanted to give her to think about, then he was succeeding. The only thing she could think about was the dampness he caused between her thighs.

He released her mouth but didn’t move away. They were lying close together, their lips mere inches apart, as if ready to go at it again, devour each other senseless, when she discovered the kiss wasn’t all he wanted to give her to think about. She sucked in a deep breath when she felt his fingers touch her breasts. At that moment her brain seemed to turn to mush.

He cupped her breasts in his hands and began ardently caressing them, letting

the tips of his fingers rub gently across her hardened nipples. He met her gaze and the heat she saw in the depths of his green eyes made her a lost cause. At that moment she wanted to make love to him and she didn't care if they talked or not.

He lowered his mouth to her breasts and sucked a hardened tip into his mouth. Then his tongue went to work like a man starving for the taste of her. She responded with a soft moan and reached out and sank her fingers in his hair to hold his head to her, experiencing a fiery breakdown of all her senses. Her stomach began trembling with a need that was as intense as anything she'd ever experienced.

She let out a deep, startled moan when he suddenly slipped a warm hand between her legs. His fingers dipped inside her sensitive flesh and he began stroking her intimately. She wasn't sure what was sending her over the edge the fastest; his mouth or his fingers. She released a soft sigh when he intensified the kiss at the same time he increased the tempo of his fingers.

He was showing no mercy. She called out his name when a shudder of immense proportions rammed through her, shaking her to the core. She squeezed her eyes shut when everything in the room seemed to come rushing together, bearing down on her.

She could barely breathe and her mind was devoid of any conscious thought except the intense pleasure ripping through her. When his fingers finally stilled it took her a few moments to get her mind back in check. She opened her eyes and nearly lost it again when he took his fingers, the same ones that had intimately

stroked her, and brought them to his lips and tasted them.

That image stayed with her for the rest of the day, keeping her distracted right up until they arrived at her aunt's home. Now Lauryn fidgeted nervously, smoothing the imaginary wrinkle in her ivory knee-length dress. Steve gave her hand a reassuring squeeze with his free hand since he was carrying the cheesy vegetable casserole she had made. She had been so nervous she'd almost dropped it. She jumped slightly when Steve spoke.

"Everything will be fine. If you get too uncomfortable, just let me know and we can leave. They'll understand."

Lauryn nodded her agreement before taking a deep breath and ringing the doorbell. Her heart rate slowed a little as she felt Hannah's small hand grab hers. A moment later the door swung open. Lauryn was greeted with a sight that took her breath away. She unconsciously took a step back from the group of people crowding the doorway and Steve reached out to steady her. A woman looking to be in her early sixties stepped forward.

"Lauryn?"

Lauryn nodded an affirmation because she didn't trust her voice. She was looking at the image of her mother had she lived.

"I'm Audrey. Please come in. You have to excuse everyone. We're all excited to see you. Let's all go into the living room where we can get comfortable."

Steve spoke up. "Lauryn made a casserole; you might want to put it in the kitchen."

Audrey looked over at Lauryn with a brilliant smile. "Oh, you didn't have to do that but thank you. Caleb, put this in the kitchen."

Audrey led them to a sofa. Steve scooped Hannah up into his lap. "I'll introduce you to everyone as soon as Caleb comes back."

As if on cue the teenage Caleb returned. Audrey went around the room introducing everyone. There were so many names and faces to remember. Lauryn couldn't help but smile at the chorus of warm greetings. She did her best to take it all in. It seemed as though her dreams were coming true. She had a family, a loving family, from the looks of things. Something she had never thought she would have again. In reality she had three families now. Steve and Hannah made her feel like family. So did Dillon, Johanna, Ariel and Octavia. But these were her blood relatives. Her heart was filled with happiness.

"It's wonderful to meet all of you. I've waited my whole life for this moment and now it just seems so surreal."

Her uncle Frank spoke. "We know that it's a lot to take in at once, but we've really missed you."

Lauryn's brow wrinkled in confusion. "I'm sorry that I don't remember any of you personally. I always knew you existed because Mom talked about you. But I can't



really remember your faces.”

Audrey looked over at her. “We don’t expect you to. You were a young child, about five or six years old, when we last saw you in person. But your mother made sure to send us pictures of you when she could.”

The statement saddened Lauryn, bringing up a question she’d always wanted the answer to but never had anyone to ask. “Do any of you know why my mother was so weak behind my father?”

Audrey shook her head. “Oh no, Lauryn. Your mother wasn’t weak, in fact she was the very opposite. She loved your father and he loved her. Unfortunately your father suffered from Anti-Social Personality Disorder.”

Lauryn frowned. That was something she had never known. In some ways the answer made a lot of things clear to her. Still, she didn’t know how her mother had given up so much for a man who seemed not to have cared less about her in return.

Audrey walked over to a shelf of pictures and picked up a few to give to Lauryn. Tears came to Lauryn’s eyes as she looked down at the framed pictures. They were of her and her mother at different ages. She stopped when she got to one of her mother, father and her. Lauryn could tell it had been taken shortly before her mother had died. She remembered the picture being taken, but she’d never seen an actual copy of it.

“Where did you get this one?”

“Calleen sent it to us right before she passed. It was the last picture we ever got

of you.” Audrey smiled as she looked at the picture of her departed sister. “Calleen did whatever she could to make sure that everything was okay. She didn’t like conflict and normally did whatever she could to avoid it.”

Lauryn nodded her head. She could attest to the fact that her mother had done whatever she could to maintain the peace, although at the time she had thought her mother was giving in to her father’s every request. “I remember when this was this taken, but I’ve never seen it.”

She remembered it so vividly because it had been the only time her father had ever gone out to eat with her and her mother. He had always been a secluded person who’d never liked to go out. Now she understood why. The day her mother had convinced her father to go out with them there had been a street vendor taking photos. The vendor had snapped the picture before they had time to pose. Her father looked so relaxed. The most relaxed Lauryn had ever seen him look. She handed the pictures back to Audrey.

“Thank you for letting me see those.”

“You’re welcome.”

“The ones I was able to find after mom died, I lost in the tornado.”

Steve rubbed a soothing hand down her back. He knew how hurt she had been when they hadn’t been able to salvage anything from the motel or her car.

A look of concern fell over her cousin Helen’s expression. “You were affected by

the tornado?”

Lauryn nodded before relaying the story of how she'd ended up at the motel.

“You weren't hurt, were you?”

She looked at her other cousin, Patricia, and shook her head. “No, I wasn't, although I could have been if Steve hadn't saved me.”

“Well, we're glad you are okay, dear.”

She smiled at Victoria, elated at being in the presence of her grandmother.

“Thank you.”

Audrey walked back over to the fireplace mantel. “Well, you can take any of the photos here that you want to.”

“Oh no, I couldn't do that.”

“Yes you can, and I want you to. I have pictures just sitting around that aren't even being looked at. As a matter of fact I'll get the box out and let you look at it before you leave.”

Lauryn couldn't believe her aunt's generosity, but she was willing to accept it.

“Thank you.”

There was a moment of silence in which Lauryn mentally berated herself. She looked over at Steve and Hannah before looking back at her family. “I was so overwhelmed when I first arrived that I didn't introduce my guests. This is my boyfriend Steve and his daughter Hannah.”

At the mention of her name, Hannah looked up then clambered over into Lauryn's lap. Steve smiled as he spoke to everyone. Jacob, Helen's husband, looked at Steve curiously.

"Do I know you?"

Steve shook his head. "Not that I know of."

Jacob tilted his head to the side. "You look real familiar."

Audrey nodded. "I was just thinking the same thing. I've seen your face somewhere before."

Lauryn glanced at Steve out the corner of his eye when he stiffened slightly. Maybe she would have to be the one to put *him* at ease. "He has a sporting goods store here in Norman, D and S Sporting Goods Store."

Jacob snapped his fingers. "That could be it. I'm there a lot. Audrey, I've dragged you along with me a few times."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, you have."

Lauryn didn't miss Steve's small sigh of relief when Audrey saved him from any further interrogation by standing up. "Well, let's eat before it gets too late."

Had he really been bothered Jacob's line of questioning? She had to admit Steve was a low-key person. It was one of the things she liked about him. She was pulled from her internal musings as everyone headed into the dining room. The feast that was laid out before them took her breath away. She had learned her cooking skills

from her mother, but judging by the food on the table, it was a family trait. Audrey disappeared in the kitchen and came back with her casserole. “This smells heavenly.”

“Thank you.”

Steve leaned over to Lauryn and whispered. “I told you everything would work out okay.”

She smiled at him. “Yes, you were right.” She placed a brief kiss on his lips. “Thank you for being here.”

“I wouldn’t have missed this for anything.”

Lauryn sat back as the food was served. She felt whole now. Deep down she had a feeling that things were going to keep getting better.



Lauryn knelt before her father’s grave to arrange the flowers she’d brought with her. It was the first time she had been back to his gravesite since she’d buried him and the first time she’d seen the headstone she’d purchased for him. She hadn’t been able to afford it until after Steve gave her a job. She’d told Steve what she wanted to do today and without hesitation he had nodded his understanding.

Lauryn had done some reading on her father’s disorder. She now understood a lot more than she had when she was younger. Maybe if she had understood some of those things back then, life might have been a little easier growing up. She fussed with the flowers until she could arrange them no more. Her throat clogged up and she

could feel the beginning of tears but she didn't want to cry.

She brushed the tears away and took a deep calming breath before standing and sliding over a few feet. Her father had picked out a plot of land for himself next to his wife after she had died. He hadn't been able to pay it off, but Lauryn had to finish the payments so they could be buried side-by-side. She smiled and arranged the flowers she'd bought for her mother. "Well, look at the two of you now. I'm sure both of you are together again causing trouble once more. I hope you can see me now. Hopefully, I've made you proud."

She swept away a speck of dirt on the headstone. Standing up she looked over her shoulder at Steve and Hannah who were hanging back, giving her the privacy she needed, and held out her hand to them. Steve pulled her to him and brushed a stray tear off her cheek. He looked deep into her eyes. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Yes, I am."

She pulled him and Hannah forward before turning back to her parents' gravesites. "Steve, Hannah, these are my parents, Calleen and William. I wish the two of you could have met them. I wish they could have met the two of you, Steve and Hannah. They were such good people. I know we would all have gotten along."

A light breeze began to blow. Lauryn lifted her face, looking into the blue sky before smiling. Her parents would always be with her, even if just in spirit. Steve and Hannah would know her parents through her. Taking a deep breath, she squared her

shoulders and took one look at her past before turning to face what she hoped was her future. She and Steve had so much to talk about. Everything in her life seemed to be coming together. This was just one last thing she wanted to be sure of.

“Are you ready?”

She watched Steve study her before nodding. When they reached the car she turned for one last look at where her parents lay. She watched Steve out the corner of her eye as they drove back to the house. The trip to the cemetery had done her some good. Dinner with her mother’s side of the family had done a lot of good. She had found some of the answers she needed. Now she wanted to locate her father’s side of the family. Steve promised to help her if she wanted him to.

“Daddy, I’m hungry.”

Hannah’s voice pulled Lauryn from her thoughts. “So am I, sweetheart.”

Steve smiled at both of them. He pulled out his cell phone. She watched him dial a number, then stick the phone to his ear. “Hey Johanna, what have you cooked?” Lauryn didn’t hear the response but whatever it was Steve laughed. “Well then, round up the kids and your husband. Be at my place in half an hour. I’m going to fire up the grill.”

She listened to him and Johanna exchange a few more words before he disconnected the call.

“How does grilled steaks and hamburgers sound?”

Hannah bounced up and down in glee in her car seat. “Can we have hotdogs too?”

Steve chuckled. “Sure, why not?”

Lauryn smiled. Never had she imagined she could be this happy. She was home and it felt good.



## Chapter Nine

Lauryn awoke slowly and rolled over. The corners of her mouth curled upward as Steve's arms tightened around her. He snuggled closer to her and she felt his smile against her neck. It was later than they normally awoke in the morning, but they had had a late night.

"Good morning, beautiful."

"Good morning."

He shifted against her. "I guess I should get my morning kiss since Hannah will be in here any moment now."

She grinned. "You're probably right."

Just as his lips were getting ready to meet hers, there was a knock on the door. Steve groaned, dropping his forehead to hers and placing a quick kiss on her lips before rolling away. She looked over at Steve as he called out to Hannah.

"Come in."

Hannah opened the door, bouncing in the room, heading straight for Lauryn. Hannah wrapped her arms around Lauryn's neck before hopping over to Steve's arms and wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Good morning, Lauryn. Good morning, Daddy."

“Good morning, Hannah,” Lauryn and Steve responded in unison.

“Are we leaving for the water park now?”

Steve groaned and Lauryn laughed. Ever since Steve had told Hannah he was going to take her to the water park it had been the number one topic. Lauryn glanced over at the clock. It was almost nine o’clock. If they got up and started getting ready now they could be in Oklahoma City by noon.

“As soon as we get ready.”

With that promise made, Hannah bounced out of the bed and took off running as soon as her feet hit the ground. Lauryn went to roll out of bed, but Steve caught her and pulled her back down next to him. She let out a shriek of surprise.

“What are you doing?”

“Finishing my good morning greeting.”

Lauryn pushed at him playfully. “Later, or we’ll never get out of here on time, and you promised Hannah.”

She gasped as his hands slipped under her gown and between her legs. Before she could react he had her underwear pushed aside and his hand on the center of her desire.

“We can’t,” she whispered frantically.

“Why not?”

“The door is open and Hannah is up.”

A wicked look fell across his face and he began to move his hand. “Well then, let’s make it quick and you can’t make a sound.”

Lauryn wanted to protest but his touch felt so good. His mouth came down on her and she moaned.

“Does it feel good?”

She nodded, closing her eyes and clutching the sheets, struggling to keep from crying out. All it was going to take was a few more strokes and she was going to go over the edge. He delivered without hesitation. Unable to help herself, she threw her head back, her mouth falling open, a cry of pleasure ready to escape. Steve was prepared and before any sound could escape he covered her mouth with his. She rode the strong wave of pleasure until she was boneless. A shiver traveled through her body and she tried to catch her breath. Steve placed another brief kiss on her lips before getting out of bed, surprising her. She smiled at the tent in front of his boxers. He noticed what she was looking at and smiled himself.

“Nothing a cold shower can’t fix.”

Lauryn forced herself to sit up. “I’ll have you know that was an evil thing to do. If Hannah walked in—”

“She wouldn’t have seen anything. I was blocking you from view and what I wasn’t hiding, the cover was. Besides, Hannah is busy getting ready. Her sole focus is on the water park and doing whatever she needs to in order to get there.”

One corner of her mouth curved upward. “Speaking of which, I need to go check on her and help her, and by then you should be out of the shower. If not, I’ll use the other.”

“Okay.”

Lauryn stopped in the doorway of Hannah’s room and laughed to herself at the sight of Hannah hopping up and down trying to get into her swimsuit. Lauryn caught her just as she toppled over.

Once Hannah was fully dressed she sent her downstairs to the playroom until she and Steve were ready. It didn’t take long. When she got downstairs both Steve and Hannah were waiting on her.

“Are you guys ready to go?”

Steve nodded. “Yes, we are. Are you?”

Hannah began to jump up and down, clapping her hands in excitement. Lauryn buckled Hannah in her car seat while Steve locked up.

“All set?”

“All set.”

Hannah leaned forward. “How long until we get there?”

Steve looked at Hannah in the rearview mirror. “Hannah, if you’re going to ask questions all the way to the water park then we aren’t going to go. The most important thing is we are going. We’ll be there soon enough. Okay?”

Hannah nodded her agreement. Lauryn reached down into the travel bag. She handed Hannah her favorite book, which she knew would keep her busy for at least half the trip if not more. Crayons and a coloring book would keep her busy when she got tired of the book

“Good thinking.”

Lauryn nodded, feeling like she was starting to get a grasp on the nanny thing, at least enough to know how to keep Hannah occupied when she needed to be.

“Thanks.”

After the Stillwater trip she was better prepared this time. Hannah was restless when it came to long car rides, but then again, most kids were. Steve spoke again.

“How did lunch with your cousin go?”

Lauryn smiled. “It went very well.”

She had had lunch with Helen the other day. It had been nice. She enjoyed being around family again. They were even helping her to track down her father’s side of her family, as was Steve. The last she’d heard, some of his family was in Perry and the rest were in Edna. Steve was helping her to plan a trip to both cities to see if she could locate them in person, but she was still working up the courage to go. Thinking that it was too quiet in the car, she turned on the radio. One of her favorite songs was on and she began to hum to it. She felt very happy and more stable than she had in her entire twenty-two years of life. Still, she couldn’t fight the sense of dread she felt. Life

had never been so pleasant for her. She couldn't help but feel as though something was going to go wrong. She just hoped that if it did, Steve would be there to help her through it.



Lauryn tilted her head back under the water, washing the last of the shampoo from her hair.

They had spent the entire day at the water park and she was bone tired. The heat from the sun had been draining. She gasped in surprise as the shower door opened. Steve stepped inside with nothing but a tired yet seductive smile.

“I figured we could save water.”

The corners of Lauryn's mouth curved upward. “Is Hannah asleep?”

“Almost in a coma.”

Lauryn laughed. She wasn't too far from one herself. Steve began to lather himself up while Lauryn finished rinsing herself off. It was hard to keep her hands off his delectable body. As a matter of fact, he looked like he could use her help. She reached out, taking the soap from his hands.

“You keep that up and you're going to get yourself in trouble,” Steve growled playfully.

She looked at him from underneath wet lashes. “Well, you know how much I like trouble.”

He disappointed her when he pulled away, taking the soap from her hands. However, the heated look of lust didn't disappear from his eyes. He finished the job of washing himself quickly, then rinsed off, his eyes never leaving hers. She exhaled softly as he turned off the water, all thoughts of sleep leaving her mind. It was difficult to stand still as he began to dry her off with the towel. She tried to pay him back in return, but instead he took the towel and did a haphazard job before tossing the towel aside. He tugged her into the bedroom, his goal visible in his eyes, but she didn't plan to let him have his way so easily. Not after this morning. He led her to the bed and she surprised him by pushing him onto his back. She smiled as surprise flickered across his expression.

“My turn for a little payback from this morning.”

He tried to speak, but Lauryn climbed over him, straddling his waist, lowering her mouth to his. When her lungs began to burn from the lack of oxygen, she pulled back. She ran her hands down the chest she loved so much.

“I love the way your body feels.”

She leaned down and alternated between light nibbles and kisses on his lips, smiling to herself as he moaned in pleasure. She strove to drive him mad now like he had driven her to the brink of insanity earlier. She loved the empowering feeling of having him under her control. Sliding her hands downward, she grasped his manhood firmly and gradually began to move her hand up and down. He moaned, arching

upward and she increased the speed. Wanting to add to the sensation, she lowered her head, touching him lightly with her tongue. He almost came up off the bed, a low growl rumbling in his throat as she took him into her mouth. He gasped, reaching down to thread his fingers into her hair.

“Oh baby, I’m not going to last long if you keep that up.”

She lifted her head and looked at him before speaking. “I don’t intend for you to.”

She lowered her head once more and Steve’s hands clutched the sheets. She alternated between using her hands and mouth. When he could no longer stand the pleasure he pulled her up and under him. She went willingly but she wasn’t done with him yet. She inhaled deeply when his thumb brushed over her nipple and he cupped the full globe, bent his head to kiss it, and then looked up to meet her gaze.

“I want you, Lauryn.”

“I want you too,” she whispered. She didn’t doubt his words in the least as he stared deeply into her eyes, feeling the proof of his desire for her in his touch.

He raised his head, sealing his mouth to hers, while his hands continued to knead her breasts, his mouth dueling with hers, his stiff sex between her thighs, taunting and torturing her as it rested against the juncture of her thighs. This was supposed to be about payback for this morning but now she could no longer bring herself to care.



His hands skimmed down her body then back up again. He kissed her throat, then licked and lightly sucked as if he couldn't get enough of the taste of her. He was beyond sexy to her. Beyond size and strength and manliness. The pressure that had been building in her very center was coiled tight, waiting to burst free. She reached for him when he moved away but he was back before she could. He placed a condom in her hand.

"You do the honors," he whispered.

He didn't have to ask her twice. She took the condom out of his hand and ripped the package open. She sheathed him, smiling at the primitive sound he made. A gasp of surprise escaped her when he rolled onto his back, pulling her with him. Before she could draw her next breath he was lifting her over him. She braced her hands against his chest, lifting slightly then easing down, encasing him within her slick heat.

She moaned, tightening her thighs against his hips as she moved together with him. Her back arched and she took him as deep as she could, relishing in the feel of his body against hers. He penetrated her, filling her, and filled the emptiness that had been inside her for the past several months. She had never been so physically possessed.

She moved with him as if she had been doing it all her life. Moved as gracefully as horse and rider. Excruciatingly slow at first, getting her bearings, adjusting to the

thickness of him. She rocked her hips, pushing lower and lower until her cleft pressed directly against the base of his hard arousal.

“Yes, Lauryn, that’s it, that’s it,” he whispered.

She continued to move, spurred on by the passion in his voice, until something changed. A deep need raced through her. Her body opened even more to accommodate him and slowly she sat up. This time when she began to move it was with urgency. To obtain something they both had denied themselves for too long. Her hips began to move again in the age-old rhythm, speeding up with each rise and fall until her bottom was smacking against his hips, extracting the most erotic sounds from him she had ever heard.

Soon it seemed the whole room was vibrating from the frenzied motions of their bodies. She tried to prolong the pleasure but it was a waste of effort. Her body flew apart, her climax hitting her with the force of a battering ram hitting wood. Her entire body was engulfed in a scorching, quaking release that started between her legs but unfurled throughout her entire body. She gasped incoherently, shuddering, holding on as Steve threw his head back and groaned her name, delivering three long, deep thrusts into her. His whole body convulsed underneath hers as he reached his own explosive release.

She collapsed against him and lay her head on his chest. His heart was pounding and his breath matched its rhythm. They were both covered in sweat but

the moment couldn't be more perfect. She snuggled into him, feeling him kiss her forehead. Several minutes later he surprised her by maneuvering her so that she was under the covers before joining her. Worn-out, she cuddled closer to him and tried to stay awake. She wasn't going to spend the night in his bed. She needed to return to hers. There would be fewer questions from the already inquisitive Hannah. Yet the warm coziness of his arms overpowered her and she fell asleep. His gentle kiss on the tip of her nose was the last thing she remembered.



Lauryn opened the door, not able to hide her surprise at who stood on the other side. Sabrina smiled weakly at her before stepping over the threshold. Lauryn looked at the other women with concern.

“Are you okay?”

She turned and looked at Lauryn. “Is anyone else here?”

Lauryn shook her head. “No. Steve and Hannah have gone to the store. I’m sure they’ll be back in a while.”

Sabrina nodded as she walked past her into the kitchen, going straight to the liquor cabinet and pulling out a bottle. Sabrina tilted the bottle in her direction.

“You want some?”

Shaking her head, Lauryn leaned against the counter and watched Sabrina pull out a glass and pour herself some then toss it back. What in the world could have

brought her from Stillwater to Norman in the shape that she was in? Whatever it was, it had to be serious. She had to find out so she knew how to deal with the situation. She sat down at the table, hoping Sabrina followed suit, because Lauryn didn't know if she had enough strength to pick her up if she fell down drunk. The way Sabrina was sucking down the liquor that could be a real possibility. A sigh of relief escaped her when Sabrina did sit down at the table with her.

“What happened, Sabrina?”

Sabrina laughed. “What didn't happen?”

“Okay then, tell me everything that happened.”

Sabrina shrugged her shoulders in a nonchalant manner, but Lauryn knew something major had happened. “Where should I start, with the part where Will asked me to marry him, or the part when he broke up with me when I told him that I wasn't ready for that commitment?”

Lauryn could barely keep her mouth from dropping open. This was more serious than she'd thought. She knew how Sabrina felt about committed relationships. Still, there had to be more to this. “Why did you turn him down?”

Sabrina looked at her as if she had grown two heads. “What do you mean why did I turn him down? I don't want to get married.” Sabrina dropped her face into her hands and groaned. When she lifted her head again there was a wild look in her eyes. “I don't even want to be in a serious relationship. I should have broken up with him

when I had the chance.”

Lauryn frowned. “Did he do something?”

“No, not really. I just should have known better than to date a man who eats Twinkies. What kind of man eats a cream-filled puff pastry?”

Lauryn coughed to keep from laughing. Sabrina was really distraught and she didn’t want to make the situation worse. *What did the type of dessert a man ate have to do with anything?* Steve ate cream-filled desserts. He had even come up with a creative way to share them with her. Lauryn’s eyes widened. Maybe that was why Sabrina had a problem with Will eating them. That sort of intimacy could scare anyone if they weren’t prepared for it. She tried to think of a way to soothe Sabrina. What better way than to get to the bottom of the real problem?

“What are you more upset about, the fact he asked you to marry him, or that he broke up with you after you said no?”

Sabrina shrugged before slamming the bottle down on the table. Lauryn flinched.

“Both actually. Will knows I don’t want to get married.”

“Do you not want to get married now or do you never want to get married?”

Sabrina sunk down lower in her chair. “I never want to get married. He knew it from the beginning, so it was very selfish of him to ask me, then break up with me when I said I wouldn’t.”

Sabrina looked on the verge of tears as the words tumbled out of her mouth. Lauryn had a feeling Sabrina cared more for Will than she was letting on.

“Don’t you think it’s selfish of you to not give it any thought?”

Sabrina dropped her head on the table and a sound of distress erupted from her.

“I guess I was a little selfish, but I told Will the first time we met. I swear it. Why would he do this to me? I like him. I really do, but I don’t know if that’s enough of a reason to agree to marriage.”

Lauryn reached over to give Sabrina a reassuring pat on the back.

“Do you think you’re in love with him?”

Sabrina’s head snapped up. “What? Don’t be ridiculous.”

Lauryn rephrased the question. “Do you think you could fall in love him if you allowed yourself to be completely open to him?”

Lauryn watched Sabrina give her words some thought. Lauryn was positive Sabrina could love Will if she allowed herself to. He was a good guy. It was hard to believe Sabrina wouldn’t at least *consider* the idea of marriage to him.

“I don’t know, Lauryn. I love my independence and don’t plan on giving any of it up. Yes, maybe I could meet him halfway. Try moving in with him and see how that would work out. But right now, that is as far as I’m willing to go. Marriage is not on my radar at the moment.”

“What do you have against marriage?”

Sabrina shrugged. "I don't have anything against marriage. I just know it isn't for me."

"How do you know if you don't try? You haven't only made it obvious to Will that you don't want to get married, but also that you don't want a serious relationship either. I think that if the two of you went into this wanting to make it work, you could."

Sabrina didn't respond. Instead she took another drink. Lauryn watched her shudder after she swallowed. This was going to get messy soon if Lauryn didn't come up with the right words to say to get the bottle out of Sabrina's hands.

"Look Sabrina, all I'm saying is it wouldn't hurt to give Will a chance. Who knows what could happen? It doesn't mean the two of you have to get married, but you can at least give your relationship a chance. In the short time that I have known you and Will, I know he is crazy about you and he treats you like a goddess."

Sabrina stared at Lauryn for a long moment, then dropped her face into her hands. "Oh my God, Lauryn. What have I done? I've been such a fool."

Lauryn leaned forward and placed a hand on Sabrina's shoulder. "No, you haven't been a fool. You've just done what any irrational woman who is afraid things are getting out of hand would have done."

"I have been known to be irrational at times." She rubbed a hand over her eyes. "Lord, I'm so tired. A lot's happened in the last twenty-four hours, starting when Will

sprang his surprise proposal on me last night.” Sabrina shook her head. “I’ve never felt so overwhelmed. I couldn’t even sleep, which is how I ended up here. I was hoping to find refuge. You and Steve were the first people I thought of.”

The corners of Sabrina mouth curved upward. “I was right. You have been a good listener and great advice-giver, just the reality check I needed. I really appreciate what you’ve done for me and if there ever comes a time when you need me, I promise to return the favor. Now I need to lie down and take a nap before I get back on the road.”

Lauryn shook her head. “No. You’ll stay the night tonight. You’re likely to be more drunk when you wake then you are now. I have some clothes you can wear if you need them. I’ll wake you up when dinner is ready. Until then, rest.”

Sabrina looked like she wanted to refuse, but released a small sigh as if she knew it was the best thing to do. She had consumed a good bit of liquor in a short amount of time and wouldn’t be in any shape to drive. As if to prove Lauryn right, Sabrina tried to stand, but wobbled a little and giggled.

“I haven’t had a drink in a while. Now I remember why.”

Lauryn came around the table and lent Sabrina a hand to stabilize her. “Let’s get you upstairs.”

Sabrina flopped down on a spare bedroom bed with one bounce then groaned. Lauryn found a trashcan, placing it nearby in case Sabrina needed it. She went into



her closet and pulled some clothes out for Sabrina to borrow once she was able to move again. By the time she made it back to the room Sabrina was already asleep. Lauryn sat the clothes on the dresser along with a bath towel, drying towel, and soap.

In the kitchen, she put Sabrina's bottle of vodka back in the cabinet. She walked over to the wall, picked up the cordless phone and dialed the number she had come to know very well. Kathleen answered on the first ring.

"Hello, Kathleen, this is Lauryn."

"Hi, Lauryn. How are you?"

"I'm fine, and you?"

"I'm well. Thank you for asking."

Lauryn took a deep breath and got straight to the point now that the pleasantries were out of the way. "I was just calling to let you know Sabrina showed up here a short time ago. She was a little shaken, but she's okay." Lauryn heard the sigh of relief in Kathleen's voice.

"Thank goodness. Will called us and told us what happened. When we couldn't reach Sabrina we were worried but figured she would call us when she was ready."

"She agreed to stay here tonight and drive back in the morning."

Kathleen's breath came out in a rush. "Thank you, dear."

Hanging up the phone after a little more small talk, Lauryn looked skyward,

wondering what other excitement was to come tonight. What was Steve going to do when he found out? She exhaled deeply, then began getting dinner ready. Just as she was finishing up, she heard the front door open. A moment later Steve entered the kitchen with Hannah in his arms. Steve greeted Lauryn with a kiss, before letting the now wriggling Hannah down. Lauryn shook her head as Hannah ran out of the kitchen in the direction of her playroom.

“Something sure smells good.” He lifted the lid off one of the pots and inhaled deeply. Steve turned to look at Lauryn, his gaze filled with curiosity. “Is that Sabrina’s car I saw out front?”

Lauryn nodded as she took the lid out of his hand and put it back on the pot. Otherwise he would start eating out of it. A habit Hannah liked to mirror.

“She showed up earlier today and she was a little upset. It seems Will asked her to marry him. Your sister turned him down so he broke up with her.”

The look on Steve’s face was priceless. “*What?* When did all of this happen?”

“Last night.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

“Nope. She sat right there at the table, opened the bottle of vodka and took a few shots.”

Steve’s eyes widened in astonishment. “*Oh Lord.* Sabrina isn’t much of a drinker.”

“I didn’t think she was. That is why I made her go upstairs to sleep it off.”

Steve frowned. “Do you know if she had anything to eat beforehand?”

“I have no idea. She was really upset, so I asked her to stay the night. If you don’t mind, can you go and wake her up? Dinner is ready. She might want to talk to you for brotherly support.”

“How long has she been asleep?”

Lauryn glanced up at the clock on the wall. “About an hour and from the looks of the circles under her eyes she needed it. This really threw her for a loop, Steve.”

“Sabrina isn’t the lightest of sleepers. I’ll go upstairs and see if I can wake her up.”

She watched as Steve disappeared upstairs. She began setting the table with Hannah’s help. Several minutes later Steve and Sabrina returned downstairs. She was leaning on her brother heavily and already looking like she regretted drinking. Lauryn was glad she’d cooked a light dinner. The last thing that she wanted to do was have to clean up after an intoxicated Sabrina.

Dinner conversation was uneventful. Even though things seemed as though they might be on the mend, Lauryn and Steve were careful not to mention Will’s name. They finished dinner and cleaned up before heading into the living room to settle down to watch a movie. The first movie had finished and they were in the middle of a second one when Hannah drifted off to sleep.

The doorbell rang and Lauryn got up to answer since Steve was holding a sleeping Hannah in his arms. Looking through the peephole, she gasped in surprise before opening the door. Will stood before her with his hands in his pockets. He looked as forlorn as Sabrina had when she had shown up earlier.

“Come in, Will.”

She led him into the living room. Sabrina looked up and spotted him. Lauryn knew Sabrina wouldn’t admit it right now but she was in love with Will and cared for him deeply. Her eyes gave her away. When Sabrina stood up, Steve looked over at his sister to see what was going on. He spotted Will and stood up with Hannah in his arms, carefully, trying not to disturb the sleeping little girl.

“Hi, Will. Good to see you again.”

Will nodded his head in acknowledgment but he only had eyes for Sabrina. Lauryn and Steve said a brief goodnight before heading upstairs to give them some privacy. She helped Steve change Hannah into her pajamas and put her in bed. They walked across the hall to Steve’s room, which they now shared. He closed the door behind them then walked over to the dresser before looking at her.

“What do you think is going to happen?”

She laughed. “What always happens; they might argue a little before making up, although I don’t think arguing is on their mind right now. Regardless of whatever happens tonight, all will be well in the morning.”

“And how do you know?”

“Because he broke up with her, yet he came back. They care too deeply for each other. I promise you it isn’t over between them.”

“I guess we’ll find out in the morning, but until then I plan on getting some sleep. It was a long day today. I’m tired.”

“Steve, will you promise me something?”

“Sure.”

“If you ever screw up, promise me you’ll do whatever it takes to get me back.”

He stiffened against her. For a moment Lauryn wondered if she had said something wrong. A heartbeat later he relaxed again.

“I’ll do my best not to do anything to make you want to leave me, but if I do, you have my word. I’ll do everything I can to make you forgive me.”

Stretching up and over her he placed a kiss on her lips. “I promise this, but only if you assure me you will hear me out and take me back when it is all said and done.”

Lauryn found it easy to make the promise. Steve had been wonderful to her from the day they met. She found it hard to believe Steve would ever do anything to ever make either of them have to keep their promise.

## Chapter Ten

Lauryn looked over at Steve. They were having breakfast and Sabrina and Will had joined them. From the looks of things, they'd made up and all was well. She was happy for the couple. Hannah was enjoying having the attention of her aunt and Will. She was telling them all about her adventure at the store yesterday.

Sabrina was in better shape to pay attention to Hannah this morning. It didn't seem as if Sabrina was suffering from a hangover. Lauryn was happy for her because she'd been in bad shape yesterday. She hadn't known Sabrina for long, but she knew her well enough to know Sabrina didn't lose her cool very often. In Lauryn's opinion, Sabrina and Will would be married in the next two years. The two of them were made for each other whether they knew it or not. The way they moved their chairs closer together, sneaking in kisses when they thought no one was watching, was heartwarming. It made her think about her relationship with Steve. She was happier than she'd ever been in her life.

"Lauryn?"

From the looks on everyone's faces she had missed something. "Yes?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I am. Why? What happened?"

Steve shook his head. “Nothing. You just looked a little out of it.”

She did her best to pay attention to the rest of the conversation during breakfast. When everyone was finished, Sabrina and Will said their good-byes and headed back to Stillwater. Lauryn called Kathleen to let her know Sabrina and Will were on their way. Steve stepped up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist.

“I guess you were right.”

She turned around in his embrace, looking at him with mock surprise. “Did you think I wouldn’t be? You must remember I’m a woman.”

He ran his hand over her backside and grinned lecherously. “Oh, believe me, I know it.” He backed her up against the wall. “You know what I think?”

“No and I’m sure I don’t want to.” Lauryn stated wearily.

Steve chuckled. “Yes you do. You’re always curious. I say that we sneak upstairs while Hannah is playing and—” Steve broke off as the doorbell rang. He dropped his forehead against hers and moaned. “If they forgot something, I’m going to hurt the both of them.”

Lauryn ducked under his arm and headed for the door. “That may be a good thing because I think my virtue may be in trouble otherwise.”

She went to the door and looked through the peephole. She turned and looked at Steve. “I think we are going to be busy all day.”

“Who is it?”

Lauryn turned and opened the door instead of responding verbally. Johanna smiled as she stepped into the house, her husband and kids in tow. Lauryn heard Steve mutter a swear word under his breath before he pulled her into his arms. His warm breath brushed her ear as he leaned close.

“We will definitely finish this later.”



Lauryn hugged her aunt Audrey as she walked through the door. She had been thrilled when Audrey extended another invitation for her to come over to see if she had any pictures Lauryn wanted, since she hadn't taken any last Sunday. At first she wanted to say no, but she really wanted some of the photos. As her aunt Audrey said, they weren't doing anything but sitting in a photo box.

“It's good to see you, Lauryn.”

“You too, aunt Audrey.”

Audrey took Lauryn's hand. “Let's go into the living room. I have the pictures set up in there.”

“Where's uncle Frank?”

“Taking a nap before lunch.”

They entered the living room. Lauryn didn't want to seem anxious, but it was difficult. Actually, she was more excited than anything.

“I hope he's up before I leave.”



“There’s no rush, dear. I’m making lunch. Please stay.” Audrey patted Lauryn’s hand. “Take your time and don’t worry about bothering me if you have questions.”

She nodded. “Thanks, aunt Audrey.”

Audrey showed her the boxes of pictures. “These aren’t all of the pictures I found, but this is all we had to hand. I could have your uncle go up in the attic to get the rest of the pictures if you think you’ll make it through all of these.”

Lauryn surveyed the boxes that were laid out before her before shaking her head. “No, I think this will do.”

Audrey nodded before patting her hand again. “Okay then, you enjoy yourself. I’m in the kitchen if you need me.”

Lauryn sat down on the floor then opened up the first box and began pulling out pictures.

An hour later Lauryn sat up straight and stretched her back. Who knew looking through photos could be so taxing? She had seen a lot of pictures she wanted to take with her. Still, there were many more to go through. She reached over, picked up another box and opened it up. Just newspaper articles. Not wanting to disturb them she began to place them back in the box and in doing so ran across the obituary notices of her mother and father, which confirmed how the family had found out about her father’s death.

She placed those articles back in the box and continued reading the other

articles, a little more curious now. The next article she picked up was one featuring Caleb, along with other students in the area who were being recognized for their volunteer work. Her heart skipped a beat when she came across another story on the same page as Caleb's. Her hand began to shake and a cry of alarm escaped her. The article she held in her hand had to be a joke. She reread the title again before scanning the article. *Steve was a millionaire*. Five years ago he had won the Powerball lottery. Her heart dropped to her stomach. Why hadn't Steve told her? How could he keep this from her?

Not knowing what to do, Lauryn shakily put the remaining newspaper articles back in the box and stood up. Steve had been making a fool of her. He could afford to have any woman he wanted. Heck, he had bought *her* lock, stock, and barrel. She had only been a charity case. Pain encased her heart as she thought back to the times she had poured her heart out to him. The handful of occasions she had almost told him she loved him, only to stop herself because she was afraid of what he would think. Scared of how he would respond. Now she knew.

She had been a fool once more. Steve had manipulated her just like her father had. But she wouldn't be taken advantage of anymore. Setting her shoulders, she went in search of aunt Audrey, finding her in the kitchen fixing lunch. Audrey looked up with a smile that quickly turned to a look of concern.

"What's wrong?"

It took everything Lauryn had to keep her tears in check, to prevent her chin from trembling, her voice from shaking. “He lied to me.”

“Who lied to you?”

Instead of answering, Lauryn handed the newspaper clipping to Audrey. Audrey took the article and began to read it. She gasped as she put a hand to her mouth.

“Is this your Steve?”

Lauryn laughed bitterly. “Not anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

Lauryn shook her head slowly. “He lied to me. He kept this a secret. Now I can’t trust him.”

Lauryn took the article back, struggling not to ball it up and toss it in the trash like she wanted to. Unfortunately she needed it for proof. “Do you mind if I crash here a while until I get myself together? I have some money and can move out on my own, but without a job and the economy being in the shape it is, I’m not sure how long it’ll take before I can find something else.”

Audrey nodded. “Sure, hon, you are more than welcome to stay here. Uncle Frank and I would love to have you. But think this through before you do anything.”

Lauryn squeezed her eyes tight for several moments before opening them again. She needed to get away. Had to clear her head. Being around Steve wouldn’t allow her

to. "Thank you, aunt Audrey, but believe me, I already have," Lauryn said with finality.

There was no way she was going to sacrifice her feelings, her dignity, for someone else that she couldn't trust. In her few short years on Earth she had done it enough. Lauryn gathered up her purse. "I'll be back in a few hours."

Her aunt placed a gentle hand on her lower arm. "Okay. Just be safe. Make sure this is really what you want to do."

Not able to respond, she just nodded and headed out the door. The drive home seemed quicker than it ever had. Lauryn shook her head to clear it. Steve's home was no longer hers. How could she have been so foolish? The warning signs had been there. He had offered her an enormous amount of money without blinking. Sure, he didn't throw his money around, but when it came to her he was extravagant at times.

A fresh wave of anger rolled through her. Why had Steve kept the truth from her? She hadn't done anything to make him not trust her. Pulling up into the front driveway, she turned the engine off and sat there a moment to collect herself. Steve's truck sat in the driveway so she wouldn't be able to walk away without him knowing. Not that she really wanted to. He needed to know why she was leaving so he never made another attempt to contact her.

A sob threatened to escape when she thought about Hannah. She had grown to love the little girl, treating Hannah the way she would her own daughter. There was no use in putting this off. It was going to be difficult either way. She had given her

heart to him, even if she hadn't told him so. It didn't make it any less true. A stabbing pain traveled through her heart. She felt like the world's biggest fool.

She took a deep breath and got out of the car. Letting herself in the house she went straight upstairs. Hearing Steve call her name she ignored him and went into his room, where most of her things were. The items had been moved when he had convinced her to stay in his room, with him. She set her purse and the newspaper article on the dresser then began pulling some clothes out of the dresser and the closet.

She didn't even have her own suitcases. She would have to make do with anything she could find to hold her clothes, even if it were freaking trash bags. Wouldn't be the first time she'd had to use them because of an impromptu move. Unfortunately she wouldn't be able to take everything all at once. She was on the verge of breaking down. This conversation with Steve was going to be more difficult than she'd thought. She began to gather up anything that her medium-size overnight bag would carry. Steve approached the entrance of the room, looking at her in concern when he saw what she was doing.

"What's going on, Lauryn?"

She couldn't look at him. Never had she thought the sight of him would disgust her. "I'm leaving."

"Leaving? Why? Where?"

Not trusting her ability to speak, she walked over to him and slapped the newspaper clipping against his chest. “This is why.”

Out the corner of her eye she saw him glance down at what she had smacked against his chest. He flipped it over and looked at it. His horrified expression told her everything she needed to know. Steve had lied to her. It hurt even more now than it had when she’d first spotted the article.

“I can explain—”

“Save it, Steve. You should have shared the details from day one.” Lauryn slammed a dress down on the bed. “I have been such a fool.”

He came toward her. She took a step back, glaring at him. “Don’t touch me.”

Steve dropped his hand back to his side. The guilt she read in his expression made her want to kick him. Her heart squeezed painfully. How could he do this to her? What had she done this time to be treated so badly? “What did I do to make you not trust me? What did I do to make you feel that you couldn’t be honest with me?”

His shoulders dropped in defeat but she didn’t care. After what he had done, he would get no sympathy from her.

“It’s not that I didn’t trust you—”

Lauryn had never raised her voice before in her life and she was glad Hannah wasn’t around to see her do it. “*Then why didn’t you tell me?*” Taking a calming breath Lauryn laughed without humor. “Never mind. It doesn’t even matter.”

A flash of panic crossed his expression. *Good*. He understood the seriousness of the situation. He took another step toward her, faltering at the look she gave him.

“What does that mean?”

“What it means, Steve, is that we are over. Now if you would let me finish packing, I’ll be on my way. Don’t worry, I’ll hold up my end of the bargain and watch Hannah for the rest of the time left in my contract. I won’t make her suffer because of you. But you need to start looking for a replacement immediately.”

With that said Lauryn turned her back on him. She expected Steve to say something else, to attempt to convince her to change her mind. Instead he turned and left the room. Lauryn felt crushed. He really didn’t care anything about her. It had been a game for him. She felt the tears she had been holding back begin to fall and wiped them away angrily.

He wouldn’t have the satisfaction at seeing how broken she was over what he had done to her. She had given that power to her father and he’d held it against her to the day he died. No, Steve wouldn’t have the same opportunity. She finished packing what she needed and could carry. She found Steve in the living room sitting in the recliner with his elbows braced on his knees, cradling his face in the palms of his hands.

“I’ll need the car to get over to aunt Audrey’s, but I’ll bring it back tomorrow.”

“Keep the car. You’ll need it to continue to take care of Hannah,” he responded

without looking up.

*That was all he had to say? The bastard.* He really didn't care. She stopped herself. It didn't matter if he cared or not. He had hurt her. Lied to her. It wasn't important if he said he cared or not. His actions told her he didn't. Not knowing what else to say, Lauryn turned and headed for the door. "I'll be here in time to get Hannah off to school in the morning."

"That's fine."

She heard the defeat in his voice but refused to look at him. If she did it just might weaken her resolve. What she needed to do was get out of there. Lauryn closed the door behind her, flinching when she heard the sound of glass smashing. Every fiber in her body made her want to go back inside to see if he had hurt himself. Then again, why should she? He hadn't thought twice about breaking her heart. No, she had made the right decision. Steve didn't deserve her and she didn't want him. Now all she had to do was get her heart to believe what her mind said.



*She was exhausted.*

To be truthful, she was dragging because of the lack of sleep she had gotten. Half of her night had been spent lying on her back staring at the ceiling. The other half had been spent crying into her pillow. The hurt she felt from Steve's deception was indescribable. Never had she imagined he would keep something so significant



from her.

She yawned as she pulled into the Steve's driveway. Her goal today was to take care of her duties like she normally did, without any problems or complications. She and Steve would have to discuss what had happened at some point, but only after she'd had time to calm down and to rationalize what had happened.

Taking a deep breath, Lauryn calmed her nerves before opening the front door. She called out to Hannah and Steve let to let them know that she was there. When there was no answer, she frowned. She felt something crunch under her foot. Kneeling down, she saw it was a rose. Upon closer inspection she realized it was a Sterling rose.

She took a few more steps and saw another. By the time she'd made it to the stairs she had a dozen Sterling roses in her hand. She called out to Steve and Hannah, again with no answer. There was another trail of roses up the stairs. She climbed, gathering the roses as she went. By the time she'd reached the top she held two-dozen Sterling roses in her hands. There was another trail of roses leading to Steve's bedroom. She hesitated slightly before following the path, picking them up as she went.

The trail of roses ended. She took a deep breath and opened the door. Lauryn went still and gasped out loud at the sight that greeted her. The room was filled with Sterling roses and she was sure Steve had spent a small fortune on them. Her gaze

went around the room and came to a stop when she reached the bed.

The bed held a dozen more roses arranged in the shape of a heart. In the center of the heart was a small box on top of a note. She picked both up. The instructions read for her to open the box only if she was prepared to say yes. Not really sure if the box contained what she thought, she opened it hesitantly. Tears came to her eyes. Inside the box was a diamond ring so huge, so brilliant, she couldn't do anything but stare. The ring was so beautiful, it was breathtaking.

"So, I take it that's a yes?"

She jumped at the sound of Steve's voice. It hadn't been twenty-four hours since she learned of Steve's deception, but as he walked toward her, she remembered why she had fallen in love with this man. But she couldn't give in so easily. He had some major explaining to do and even then she would have to think about actually taking him back.

"I'm not sure yet. Is there a reason I should say yes?"

He took the box out of her hand. Their fingers brushed and a jolt traveled up her arm. Even after what he had done, his touch still made her weak.

"I'm sorry, Lauryn. I should have been honest with you from the beginning."

Tears sprang to her eyes as the fresh hurt bubbled to the surface. "Why weren't you?"

"Because of what happened between Hannah's mother and me. We'd been

dating a year and things weren't going well. I was struggling to hold on to what we had even though it was obvious Tina wasn't. Then she told me she was pregnant with my child. It meant the world to me. Tina didn't want a baby. I don't think she fully comprehended she was pregnant before she automatically stated she wanted to terminate the pregnancy. I wanted a family. She wanted to get married. I agreed to marry her if she had the baby. So in a way we were both going to get what we wanted. Then I played and won the Powerball lottery. Everything changed. Tina literally walked around with money signs in her eyes. But it all fell apart once she realized I was going to be responsible with the newly acquired money. Funny thing was I played on a fluke. In some ways, it was the best thing that happened to me. In others, it was the worst. Winning the money helped me to get rid of Tina, but it has cost me you."

Lauryn shook her head, as she placed a hand against his cheek. "Steve, it isn't the money that is going to cause you to lose me; it's your lack of trust in me, your lack of honesty."

"Lauryn, I trust you. I trusted you with the most important thing in my life. I hired you to watch my little girl. I wouldn't have done so if I didn't trust you."

She shook her head. "But you didn't trust me enough to tell me of your financial status. Just like my father didn't trust me enough to tell me he couldn't afford to pay all his bills." Lauryn looked unable to keep the feelings of sadness from swamping her.

“You can’t trust me halfway. It’s all or nothing. It’s a matter of honesty, of trust. Without it, we have nothing.”

Steve pulled her closer. This time she allowed him to without resistance. “I know that. And I’m sorry. I hope you will forgive me enough to say yes. Give me a chance to prove to you that I love you. I trust you. I’m sorry I wasn’t honest upfront. I just wanted to know that you wanted me for who I am and not the money I have.”

Lauryn dropped her head and looked at the ring box Steve held in his hand. She was head-over-heels for this man. There was no way she could just walk away and not look back. How could she blame him for being shaped by his past when she was influenced just as much by her own? She cared deeply for him. From what she could see, what she was hearing from him, he felt the same. Knowing she would never make a better decision in her life, she lifted her left hand, telling him with this simple action what she couldn’t force her voice to say. Steve took the ring out of the box and fitted it on her finger. He placed a passionate kiss on her lips. When he lifted his head, they were both breathing heavily.

“I love you, Lauryn.”

“I love you, too.”

Lauryn went up on tiptoe and placed another kiss on Steve’s lips. When she pulled back he was smiling. It was then she realized just how quiet the house was.

“Where’s Hannah?”

“With Johanna and Dillon. They kept her for me last night.”

“Why?”

He gave her a sheepish look. “Because I had this to take care of.”

He waved a hand around the room and she smiled. “And it is all very lovely.”

Steve took her left hand and lifted it to his lips. The diamond ring sparkled on her finger. The ring looked at home on her finger. It hit her. She had just said yes to marriage. Said yes to the man of her dreams. A man who was so attractive it was hard to keep her hands off of him. Couldn't see a reason why she should. Desire surged through her. She brought her gaze up to meet his. His eyes began to darken as they always did in the first stages of desire. He wanted her and she wanted him.

“When are you supposed to get Hannah?”

He began to back her toward the bed. “Later.” He pulled the T-shirt over her head. Her breasts came into view and he moaned. “Much later.”

## Epilogue

Lauryn smiled and rubbed her protruding stomach as she gazed out over the grassy fields of Steve's family's land. She and Steve had celebrated their two-year wedding anniversary a few months ago. Shortly after they'd got engaged he'd helped her to enroll at the University of Oklahoma. She juggled fulltime school, planning a wedding, and running a household. Fortunately, they'd smartly calculated the conception of their child. She was due to give birth during the summer sessions so she wouldn't get behind in school.

Her decision to major in Psychology had been a good one. It was something that she could actually do. Although she liked Meteorology it wasn't something she could see herself doing for the rest of her life, but working with people and helping them through life was. So she had satisfied her passion for Meteorology by taking a few courses. She was going to specialize in working with people who suffered from mental disorders. It was close to home for her because she had grown up in the house with a family member who had a psychological disorder and she knew how hard their life could be.

She had eventually met her father's side of the family and learned that he was the only one who'd suffered from the disorder. His parents and sister had also

admitted with shame that they hadn't made things easy for him, which was probably a part of the reason why he had distanced himself from them. But from being around them she knew they were good people who hadn't understood what her dad had been going through. No one really had, not even her mother in her opinion, but at least her mother had made the attempt to let her father be who he was.

Her hand caressed her stomach again, grinning as their baby shifted within her. Sometimes it was hard to believe she was happily married and pregnant. All of their family and friends were excited, Hannah probably the most excited of everyone. The thought of being a big sister was driving her wild. Hannah's new hobby was reading to the baby whenever she got a chance. Lauryn was brought out of her thoughts as Steve called her name. He stepped behind her before she had the opportunity to turn to look at him. Warmth fused through her at his touch.

"What are you thinking about?"

She tilted her head up to look at him. She couldn't imagine loving any man more. "About how happy I am."

He brushed his lips against her temple. "Are you?"

Lauryn remained quiet as she thought about it all. Lack of trust or honesty was no longer an issue with Steve. She trusted him with everything and he trusted her in return. What more could she ask for? Her husband was by her side and she was reunited with both sides of her family. It meant everything to her. In the past two

years she had gotten the chance to know both sides of her family very well and she felt whole. His hand caressed her rounded belly. She covered his hand with hers before looking up at him. The corners of her mouth curved upward.

“Happier than I ever thought I would be. I love you, Steve.”

“I love you, too, Lauryn,” Steve murmured before his mouth covered hers. Lauryn couldn’t be more grateful than she was right now for the eventful tornado that had brought Steve into her life. Whereas she’d originally thought she had lost everything, she’d ended up gaining so much more. She was right where she belonged.

*The End*



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