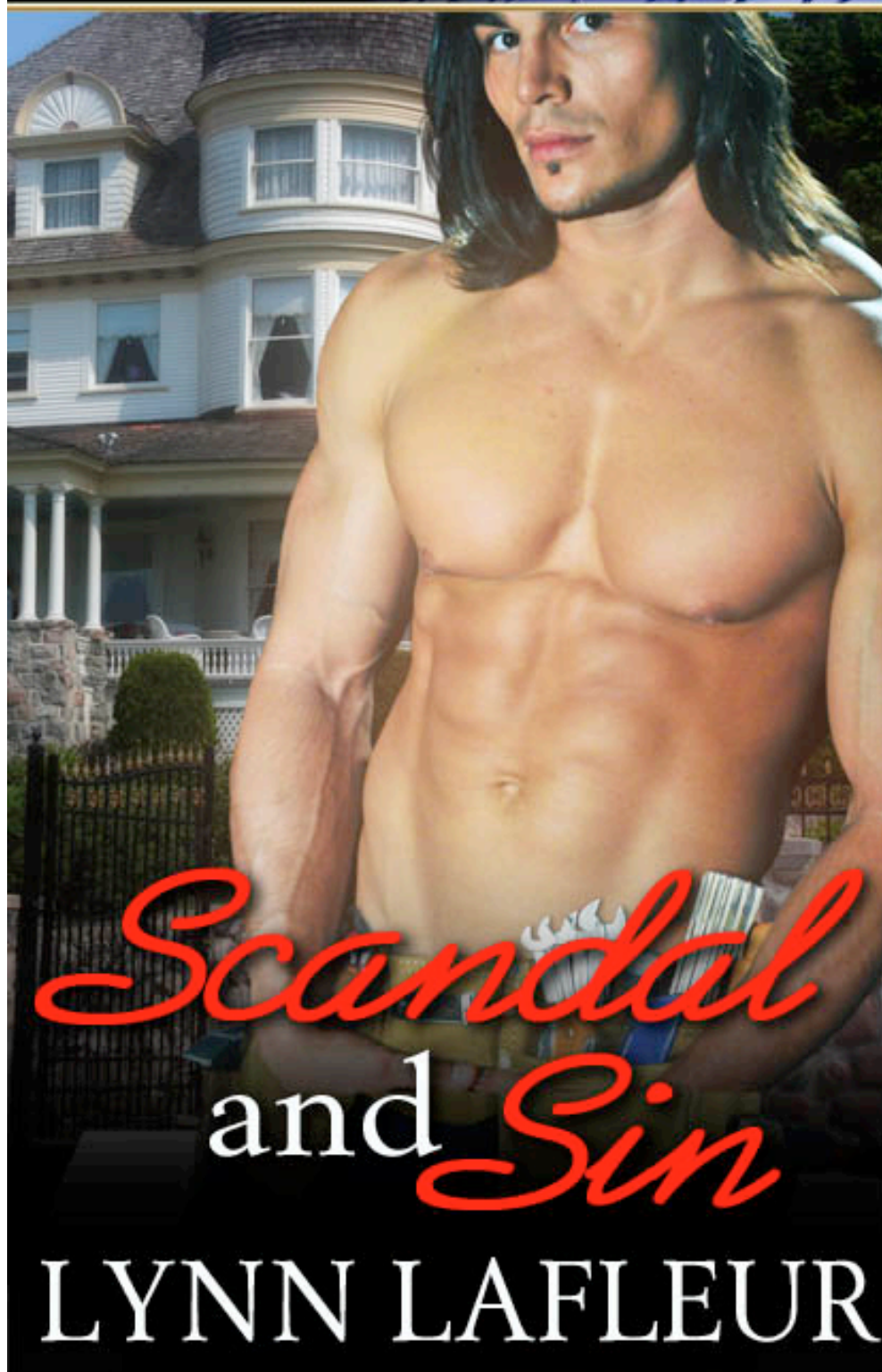


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Scandal and Sin

Lynn LaFleur

First in the Men With Tools series.

Rye Coleman falls in lust with Alaina May the first time she walks into the office of his construction firm. During the tour of the old house that she wants to renovate, that lust takes over when Alaina falls on a broken step, right into his arms. Sex is hard and fast, and he imagines a lot more of it—until she tells him she’s the sister of the woman who humiliated him in front of the entire town three years ago.

Rye accepts the remodeling job, but refuses to have anything personal to do with Alaina. He can’t be sure she won’t treat him like her sister did. But Alaina is determined to convince Rye she’s nothing like her sister. A picnic meant to thank him for his hard work turns into the first of many nights of lovemaking.

A murder from seventy-five years ago, a ghost in the old house and a modern-day man determined to stop the remodeling threaten the blossoming love between Rye and Alaina.

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Scandal and Sin

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SCANDAL AND SIN

Lynn LaFleur

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Chapter One

April 4, 1937

I watched him yesterday afternoon. He stood in the doorway of the bank and ogled every woman who walked past him. He tipped his hat as a gentleman would, but I could see the evil in his eyes. Some women returned his smile, some avoided looking at him, some stepped into the street to keep from walking close to him. I saw fear on some of the women's faces. They wouldn't be afraid of him without a reason.

I don't like the way he looks at Laura. I see that same evil in his eyes when he is around her. I've told Laura that, but my sister always tells me I am imagining things. Laura is so trusting of everyone, so sure the good in a person always outweighs the bad.

I don't think he has any good in him at all.

* * * * *

Present Day

"Yes, Mrs. Olinghouse," Rye Coleman said into the telephone receiver. "The doors were delivered about an hour ago. My crew will be out first thing in the morning to install them."

"Not before eleven o'clock. I have a breakfast meeting. Your crew may come tomorrow afternoon."

Rye was glad Bella Olinghouse couldn't see him roll his eyes. He did his best to be considerate of other people's schedules and work around them, but Mrs. Olinghouse was always a pain in the ass. The elderly widow had way too much money and thought that gave her the right to inconvenience everyone around her. "No problem, ma'am. I understand about meetings. Unfortunately, my crew won't be able to install the doors tomorrow afternoon. They're already booked."

"Oh."

He pictured Mrs. Olinghouse lifting her chin and sniffing in disdain. He'd feel sorry for her if he didn't know she loved to make people bend to her will. She took after her father that way. The ornery bastard had lorded his money and power over everyone in Lanville until the day he died.

"You aren't the only construction firm in the area, Mr. Coleman. Perhaps I should order the doors from someone else."

Since she'd paid for the doors in advance, Coleman Construction wouldn't be out any money should she decide to use another contractor. Rye doubted it would come to that. Bella had threatened to take her business elsewhere in the past when Rye didn't jump at her command. She never had. "You're welcome to do that, ma'am. They're a

custom size and it took four weeks for them to arrive. It'll take at least four more weeks for another firm to get them."

"Oh."

Rye knew she wouldn't want to wait any longer. She'd already waited a month for her fancy French doors.

"When could your crew install the doors, Mr. Coleman?"

He looked toward the entrance when he heard the bell over the door jingle. His brother, Dax, came inside, dressed in a paint-spattered T-shirt and faded jeans. Rye motioned him forward. "Thursday."

"That's two days from now."

"That's the best I can do, Mrs. Olinghouse."

Dax also rolled his eyes as he slouched in the chair before Rye's desk. Rye grinned. Dax and his other brother, Griff, had dealt with Bella Olinghouse enough to know how difficult she could be.

"I suppose Thursday will be fine, if that's as soon as you can do it."

"Would you prefer morning or afternoon?"

"Two o'clock works best for me."

"Two o'clock it is. See you then."

Rye hung up the receiver to Dax's laughter. "The old biddy got you again, huh?"

"Actually, I got *her*. I refused to give in to her. This time, I made her play by *my* rules."

"Good for you. If more people in this town didn't bow down to her, she'd probably be a lot nicer."

"She's a lonely woman, Dax. She doesn't have any family here. Her children moved away a long time ago."

"That's her own fault. Who would want to be around her for longer than ten minutes? You know that feeling you get when someone scratches a chalkboard?" He shuddered. "That's how I feel around her."

Rye studied the carbon copy of himself sprawled in the chair. Dax's hair was longer and a neatly trimmed beard and mustache covered his face. Otherwise, people wouldn't be able to tell them apart. His mother had delivered them via Caesarian section, so he was two minutes older than Dax, four minutes older than Griff. Being one of triplet brothers meant very little time to himself while growing up. Rye had resented his brothers for the lack of privacy. Now, he couldn't imagine his life without them.

He felt sorry for anyone who didn't have family close by.

"Is the courthouse done?" Rye asked.

Dax nodded. "I put the final coat on the ladies' room half an hour ago. It looks really good."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you."

Dax shifted in his chair and rested his ankle on the opposite knee. "So, what's next?"

"Nothing until Thursday morning. That's when we start on the mayor's house."

A wide smile crossed Dax's lips. "You mean I have a whole day off? I can sleep in tomorrow?"

Rye chuckled. "You have a whole day off."

"Hot damn!" Dax clapped his hands. "Now I have to find someone to spend the night with so it'll be worth sleeping in."

"I doubt if that'll be a problem for you."

"Nope. I just have to figure out which lovely lady I'm going to grace with my presence and my body." Dax grinned wickedly. "See you later, bro."

Still chuckling, Rye watched his brother stroll to the door. Dax turned the knob at the same time as a woman's face appeared in the glass pane. He opened the door and stepped back so she could enter. She looked surprised, as if she hadn't expected anyone to be on the other side.

"Excuse me," she said in a soft, lilting voice.

"No problem. You can run into me any time."

Rye recognized the interest in Dax's eyes from across the office. Rye didn't interfere with his brother's love life, except when it came to business. He didn't approve of Dax coming on to a potential customer. "Dax," he said in his "big brother" voice.

"Yeah. Right." He shrugged one shoulder and grinned again at his brother. "You can't blame a guy for trying." He waved at Rye. "Later."

Rye slowly stood and stared at the woman who had entered his office. An oval face, big brown eyes, high cheekbones, and full lips combined to make her stunning. Wavy auburn hair fell past her shoulders to curl over full breasts. She wore a plain brown T-shirt and jeans that gently hugged her generous curves.

His heart thudded in his chest, blood rushed toward his cock. It'd been a long time since he'd reacted so strongly to a woman.

You just reprimanded Dax for coming on to a customer. Business and pleasure don't mix.

She gazed at Rye, frowned, and looked back out the door's window. He assumed she was looking at Dax. People who met them for the first time often thought they were seeing double. It was even more interesting when Griff was with them.

"My brother," he said, adjusting his fly while her attention was focused on Dax.

"Apparently." She turned back to him. "The resemblance is amazing."

"We're two of triplets. Our other brother looks just like us."

Rye doubted if she'd come in here to talk about him and his brothers. Finding out what she needed would also help him get his mind off his burgeoning hard-on and back to business. "How can I help you, Ms..."

"May. Alaina May." She approached the desk and held out her hand for him to shake. "I'm looking for Mr. Coleman."

Alaina. Not exactly a common name. A vague memory flashed through his mind of a girl named Alaina, but he couldn't associate a face with the name.

Rye jerked himself back to the present. "You found him." He took her hand. It was soft and warm, with medium-length fingernails painted a pale coral. He had the strongest urge to raise her hand to his lips and kiss the back. "Rye Coleman at your service."

She blinked. "You can't be Mr. Coleman."

Rye raised his eyebrows. He almost laughed at the shock in her wide brown eyes. "Why can't I?"

"You're too young."

"Should I be flattered or insulted?"

She released his hand and curled her fingers into her palm. She'd been as affected by their hands touching as he had. "You own Coleman Construction?"

"Yes, along with my brothers."

"I assumed you'd be older. Your reputation is outstanding."

Rye tipped his head. "Thank you." He motioned toward the chair Dax had recently used. "Please, sit down."

She did, crossing her legs and tossing her hair over one shoulder. He recognized the get-down-to-business look in her eyes. Rye returned to his chair and waited for her to speak.

"I want to purchase a house here in Lanville. I'd like to get your opinion on refurbishing it."

"You're moving to Lanville?"

She nodded, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "I'm going to turn the house into a bed-and-breakfast."

Rye thought that was an excellent idea. The small town had two bed-and-breakfasts, but a lot of tourists passed through their area in the summer to visit the state park. The park was the largest in the area and drew hundreds of people, especially in the summer. Tourists often had to go to nearby towns to find a place to stay since the two B-and-Bs filled up fast. It would be much better for Lanville's economy to keep those tourists – and their money – in town.

"I know I have to check on zoning and all that legal stuff, but there's no reason to do any of that if the house can't be repaired."

"Where is the house?"

"On County Road 311."

Rye knew every road in the area because of his business. There was only one house on that road that wasn't occupied. "You aren't talking about Stevens House, are you?"

Rye sat up straighter in his chair. That house was the last place in town he wanted to refurbish. If it were up to him, it would've been demolished years ago. "Ms. May, you don't want to buy that house."

The excitement in her eyes dimmed, to be replaced by confusion. "Why not?"

"It hasn't been lived in since..." He stopped and tried to remember so he could tell her how long it'd been vacant. "I'm not sure of the exact year, but it's been at least fifteen years. I don't know why it hasn't fallen down."

"It definitely hasn't fallen down. I looked at it this morning." She uncrossed her legs, leaned forward and gripped the edge of Rye's desk. "I can see so much potential there. It makes me think of the house in *It's A Wonderful Life*. Did you ever see that movie?"

"Only about two dozen times. It's one of my mom's favorite movies."

Alaina smiled. "Mine too. I'm a sucker for a romance."

Her smile suddenly faded. Straightening her shoulders, she sat back in her chair, once again all business. "Can it be refurbished, Mr. Coleman?"

"Rye, please. Yes, it can probably be refurbished, but I'll have to look at it to be sure."

"When can you do that?"

"Ms. May, have you contacted the owner about purchasing the house?"

"If you're Rye, I'm Alaina. I haven't talked to the owner yet. But that won't be a problem. I can be very persuasive."

Rye didn't doubt that. Self-confidence practically oozed from the young woman. However, he doubted if Alaina May had ever dealt with someone as unreasonable as the person who owned Stevens House.

For now, he'd go along with her and check out the house since it was so important to her. He looked at the large schedule on his desk that listed all his employees' names and where they were to work each day. He was supposed to have lunch with the sheriff at one o'clock, but that was pleasure, not business. Instead, he could grab a quick bite and meet Alaina at Stevens House in an hour.

He didn't want to step through the front door, but business came before his own bad feelings about that house. "How about one-thirty to look at the house?"

"One-thirty will be perfect." Her smile returned when she stood. "I'll see you then."

Rye admired the gentle swing of her denim-covered ass as she walked toward the door. Alaina May had a very nice body...one he wouldn't mind taking several hours to explore.

Some men liked a woman to be model thin. Rye preferred curves, and lots of them. He'd much rather hold onto a plump bottom than be jabbed with sharp bones when he made love with a woman. He especially loved large breasts...caressing them, sucking the nipples, sliding his cock between them.

Alaina May's body would give him a lot of pleasure in bed. Or on his desk. Or up against the wall.

Something about her seemed so familiar. He knew he'd never met her before today. He would've remembered that mane of auburn hair and those big brown eyes.

Whether he knew her or not didn't matter. Rye didn't mix business with pleasure. While he loved where he lived and couldn't imagine living anywhere else, there was a downside to a small town. Everyone knew everyone and loved to talk. Dax had no problem sleeping with the local women. Rye preferred to travel to other towns to find lovers. It made things less...messy.

The Coleman family had endured one scandal over seventy-five years ago, plus his own personal scandal three years ago. Rye wouldn't do anything that might cause embarrassment to his family for the third time.

* * * * *

Alaina slid behind the steering wheel of her car and blew out a deep breath. She'd been surprised to see Rye and Dax instead of their father Kenneth at Coleman Construction. She hadn't considered the fact that the father had passed the company down to his sons. It had taken some quick thinking on her part to pretend she didn't know them. She couldn't admit her true identity, not yet. If she did, the company would never agree to refurbish Stevens House.

The brothers were even more handsome than they'd been sixteen years ago. And neither of them had recognized her.

That was probably a good thing. She was here on business, not to chase after hunks, even one she'd had a crush on as a teenager. Besides, it had been so long since she'd been with a man, she wouldn't know what to do. Sex was highly overrated anyway. Making love usually left her frustrated instead of rolling around the bed in orgasmic bliss.

Alaina snickered at that last thought. It sounded like a line from a really bad book.

Her cell phone chirped as she pulled away from Coleman Construction. She pulled over to the side of the road and dug through her large tote, hunting for the phone she misplaced at least twice a week. Finally locating the electronic nightmare, she tugged it from her tote and flipped it open. She smiled when she saw her housemate Emma Keeton's name.

"Hey you."

"Hey you back," her friend said. "How's it going? Did you buy the house?"

Alaina laughed. Emma's enthusiasm was one of the reasons Alaina adored her. "I haven't even talked to the owner yet."

"Well, what are you waiting for? I'm ready to start my new job."

Ever since Alaina had told Emma and her other best friend and housemate, Kelcey Ewing, about her plan to open a bed-and-breakfast in Lanville, they'd hinted about

working for her. Kelcey was a whiz with numbers and organization. Emma could create something delicious with little more than flour and water. Yet Alaina worried their friendship would suffer if they went to work for her. She'd rather hire complete strangers than lose the two women who meant so much to her.

"I have an appointment with a local contractor to look at the house at one-thirty to see if it can be repaired."

"What if it can't? Will you start looking at other houses?"

"No. It's that house or nothing."

"Why? What's so special about that house? There have to be other houses you can refurbish. Or think about building brand new. That might even be cheaper."

Alaina hadn't told her two best friends why Stevens House was so important to her. She hadn't wanted to say or do anything that might jinx her buying the house. "You know the cost doesn't matter."

"Yeah, I know, but you need to be reasonable too. You haven't even met this contractor and you're going to believe whatever he tells you?"

"Actually, I *did* meet Rye Coleman."

"Rye, huh? Sexy name."

"It fits him. I swear the gods were having an orgasm when they created him."

"Oh yeah?" Alaina clearly heard the interest in Emma's voice. Her friend's radar always picked up an attractive man. "Maybe I should drive down there and help you research that house."

"I think you'd better stay right there in Dallas and do the job you have now."

"You're no fun." Emma sighed dramatically. "If you won't let me see the sexy contractor, I guess I'll go to work. Call me the minute you know about the house. I'll give my boss notice."

Alaina winced. "No you won't. Lanville is a lot different from Dallas, Em. There can't be twenty-five hundred people in the whole town. No nightclubs, no fancy restaurants, no —"

"I don't care. I want to help you. Kelcey and I both want to help you. That's what friends do."

A lump tightened Alaina's throat. Kelcey and Emma had been there for her for years, always available any time of day or night. She couldn't ask for better friends. "You are not going to give up your job in that beautiful restaurant. And Kelcey certainly isn't going to give up her job that pays a hundred grand a year to work for me. It's insane for you to even consider it."

"Maybe I'm sick of the job in that beautiful restaurant. Maybe I want a change, just like you."

"This would definitely be a change."

"Hey, you're talking to the gal who can always find a party. If I can't find one, I'll make my own."

Alaina chuckled. She'd always loved Emma's positive attitude.

"Go look at the house," Emma said. "Find out if it really is your dream. Then let me and Kelcey know. I'm already sorting recipes and planning menus."

"Em—"

"Stop worrying so much. It'll give you wrinkles. Go meet your hunky contractor. If he's as gorgeous as you say, you should push him into a corner of that house and attack him."

"I do *not* attack men."

"You need to attack more and worry less. There's no law that says you have to marry a guy just because you fuck him."

"I know that."

"Then let go and have some fun. Forget about the three or four dates you think you should have with a guy before you get naked with him."

Alaina couldn't help chuckling. When Emma got on a track, there was no getting her off it. "I'll think about it."

"Great! Call me as soon as you know something."

"Deal."

Still smiling, Alaina closed her cell phone and dropped it back in her tote. She looked up in time to see Rye slowly drive by her car in a dirty pickup. He nodded his head when their eyes met. She returned the nod and continued to gaze at him as he drove past her. He watched her in his rearview mirror.

Her heart thumped heavily in her chest.

Alaina sat up straighter in her seat. She couldn't let herself become distracted by a handsome face and incredible body. She'd softened for a moment in Rye's office, when they'd talked about *It's A Wonderful Life*. It had been easy to imagine curling up on a couch in front of a fireplace, wrapped in Rye's arms while they watched the old movie. Once the movie was over, they'd make love on the carpet in front of the fire. She'd be willing to bet her first year's profits that Rye was an incredible lover.

It was a nice fantasy, but couldn't possibly come true. She planned to concentrate on her career and Stevens House. Nothing else mattered. If her hormones didn't like that, too bad. Men and sex were out.

Including the hunky Rye Coleman.

Chapter Two

April 6, 1937

I overheard the Sullivan sisters talking in the drugstore today. The old biddies love nothing more than to gossip. They were talking about Charlotte Vandorn and her "problem", as Stella described it. Stella said she'd heard Charlotte was pregnant and didn't know who had fathered her baby. Sophie said she'd heard Charlotte knew who the father was, but refused to tell anyone. Her parents were so embarrassed, they could barely show their faces in town.

I remember seeing Charlotte two days ago while I watched him. She was one of the women who had avoided looking at him. She'd walked near the edge of the sidewalk, her head down, not making eye contact with anyone. She didn't even look up when he spoke directly to her.

I wonder if he's the man who fathered her baby. If so, he is even more vile than I thought.

I have to keep Laura away from him.

* * * * *

Rye led the way around the outside of the house with Alaina close on his heels. They didn't have permission to go inside, so he could only check the exterior for now. They trudged through weeds and cactus that were almost as tall as Alaina's knees.

"Why can't we go inside?" Alaina asked once they reached the back of the house.

"Because we don't have permission and that would be trespassing."

He heard her blow out a breath. "Who would know? We're in the middle of the boonies on a dead end road."

"I would know. I don't trespass." He stopped and turned to face her. She almost ran into him since he'd stopped so abruptly. "And you don't trespass as long as you're with me."

A guilty look flashed through her eyes before she lifted her chin. "Of course not. I wouldn't think of it."

Rye almost grinned. Alaina May had spunk. He liked that.

"What do you think?" she asked. "Is it worth repairing?"

Hands on hips, Rye studied the back of the house. What little paint remained had faded over time to a dull gray. Several shingles were missing from the roof, leaving gaping holes. Boards had been nailed over broken windows on all three floors and in the turret. Porch posts were split or missing. The back door also had boards nailed across it and hung at an awkward angle from a broken hinge.

It must have been a magnificent house in its time. It would take several months of work, but Rye saw the potential. The house could be repaired to look exactly how it did one hundred years ago.

Despite the large fee his company would make, Rye wasn't sure if he wanted to do the job. Not on *this* house.

"You're looking at a lot of money, Alaina."

"I didn't think it would be cheap. But it can be done, right?"

"I'll say yes, but I'll know more when I see the inside."

"Do you know who owns it?"

Rye nodded.

A huge smile spread over Alaina's mouth. "If you know the owner personally, there's no reason why we can't go inside."

She headed toward the porch steps. Rye grabbed her arm to stop her. "Alaina, I promise you, the owner won't like it if we go in without talking to her."

"Be real, Rye." She waved a hand toward the boarded-up back door with the large hole in the bottom. "You think teenagers haven't crawled through that hole and gone in there to drink or smoke pot or have sex?"

"I'm sure they have. But we aren't teenagers, Alaina. We're adults and we know better."

"Okay, okay. Sheesh, work on my conscience, why don't you?"

Rye grinned. She definitely had spunk. "I'll call the owner and find out if she'll see you. I can't promise she will. Bella Olinghouse isn't known for doing favors."

* * * * *

Alaina had always thought "Olinghouse" sounded like the name of someone who was filthy rich. One look at the mansion that Rye pulled up to confirmed her belief. It stood three stories high and made her think of a castle instead of a house. She was surprised it didn't have a moat surrounding it.

Bella hadn't lived in this house sixteen years ago. Alaina had learned through her research of the old Victorian that Bella's husband died from cancer fourteen years ago. Bella must have had this monstrosity built shortly after her husband's death.

She knew little about the woman or her history. Alaina had been thirteen when she and her mother moved away from Lanville. Her family hadn't traveled in the same social circles as the Olinghouses and the Stevenses.

Rye had told her on the drive here that Bella Olinghouse was a cantankerous woman who rarely smiled. Alaina had been sure she could charm the woman into selling that house for practically nothing. Now she wasn't sure. A woman didn't live in a mansion like this without knowing how to manage her money. She'd probably want a

fortune for the old house, even though it looked like it would fall down in the next windstorm.

"It's nice of her to agree to see me."

"It's weird," Rye said. "I've never known her to be so agreeable." He faced Alaina after parking his truck, his left arm over the steering wheel. "A maid will answer the door. She'll take us to the living room, where Bella will be sitting on her throne."

From the twinkle in Rye's eyes, he had to be teasing. "Throne?"

"It looks like one, I swear. The woman thinks she's a queen. She won't stand, she won't offer her hand. Don't offer yours 'cause she won't shake it. She believes handshakes pass too many germs."

Alaina couldn't remember Bella's age, but she had to be on up in years by now. "How old is she?"

"Late eighties. Maybe ninety. She's lived in Lanville all her life. Her family owned the bank—and a big percentage of the town—for three generations. She's still a shareholder at the bank, and still owns most of the buildings downtown as well as a lot of land. The city council jumps at her command. So does the county judge. She's a powerful woman."

Alaina appreciated Rye's warning, but she'd never backed away from anyone. She wasn't about to start now. She reached for the door handle. "Let's go have our audience with the queen."

Rye placed his hand on the small of her back to guide her up the stone steps to the front door. Alaina appreciated his thoughtfulness. She liked everything she'd seen so far about Rye Coleman. He was definitely a gentleman. The fact he wouldn't go inside the old house without permission proved he was honorable.

She'd almost told him her true identity, but decided to wait. She had to know for sure Rye wouldn't judge her by something her family had done so long ago.

He dropped his hand from her back when he rang the doorbell. Several moments passed before a very petite, dark-haired woman opened the door. She couldn't have been much taller than four-ten and appeared to be in her early fifties.

Rye smiled. "Hi, Susan." He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

The maid blushed. "You are such a devil, Rye Coleman."

"I'd marry you in a second, Susan. Just say the word."

Her blush deepened as she opened the door wider. "I'm old enough to be your mother."

"Older women are sexy."

She shook one finger at him. "You can still be spanked."

Rye growled playfully and grinned. "That could be fun."

Susan laughed, then turned toward the left. "Mrs. Olinghouse is expecting you. She's in the living room."

He gave Alaina an I-told-you-so look. She bit her bottom lip to keep from grinning.

Rye hadn't exaggerated when he said Bella Olinghouse would be sitting on a throne. The wide, tall-backed chair with gold and purple accents looked like the perfect throne for a queen. The slim woman with short white hair removed a pair of glasses when they walked into the room. She didn't smile. She might be in her late eighties, but she was still a lovely woman. She'd be even lovelier if she smiled. "Mr. Coleman," she said, looking directly at Rye.

She said nothing to Alaina, or even bothered to look at her. Alaina felt like a bug that Bella Olinghouse would gladly order to be destroyed.

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, Mrs. Olinghouse."

"You said it was important." After another moment, she finally turned icy gray eyes on Alaina. "And you are...?"

"Alaina May."

She closed the book that lay open on her lap and laid it on the table next to her chair. "What can I do for you, Ms. May?"

Alaina noticed Mrs. Olinghouse hadn't invited them to sit. The woman not only thought she was a queen, she was rude too. But she was the answer to a dream, so Alaina had to be nice to the old bat.

"I'm interested in looking at and possibly purchasing a house you own."

One perfectly shaped eyebrow rose. "Oh? Which one?"

"Stevens House."

Alaina thought she saw a flash of fear in Bella Olinghouse's eyes. It disappeared so quickly, she couldn't be sure she actually saw it. Mrs. Olinghouse looked at Rye for several moments before she motioned toward the long couch across from her. "Sit down. Susan will be here shortly with iced tea."

"Thank you, ma'am." Alaina perched on the edge of the couch. She didn't think the queen would like it if she got too comfortable.

"Why are you interested in my ancestors' house, Ms. May?"

Alaina glanced at Rye. He sat with his elbow propped on the arm of the couch, his fingers supporting his face. He didn't return her gaze, but looked straight at Mrs. Olinghouse. His blank expression didn't give her a hint to his thoughts.

He didn't have to say anything. Alaina knew he was thinking about the past and how much his family had suffered because of something that happened inside Stevens House seventy-five years ago.

Susan arrived with a tray holding three glasses of iced tea and a plate of shortbread cookies. She set the tray on the coffee table before the couch. After placing two of the small cookies on a saucer, she set it and a glass of tea on the table next to Mrs. Olinghouse's chair. With a nod toward her employer, she left the room as quietly as she'd arrived.

"The tea is sweetened, Ms. May," Mrs. Olinghouse said. She daintily broke one cookie in two and nibbled on the half. "If you prefer unsweetened, I'll have Susan prepare a glass for you."

"This is fine. Thank you." She took a sip of her tea to wet her dry throat. Mrs. Olinghouse's words were polite, but there wasn't a trace of kindness in her tone. Alaina didn't think she'd ever been in the presence of such a formidable person.

"You didn't answer my question, Ms. May. Why do you want to purchase my house?"

"I want to turn it into a bed-and-breakfast."

"Do you have any experience running a bed-and-breakfast?"

"No. But it's been my dream for a long time, and I have a lot of experience in the service industry. I was one of the assistant managers at a large hotel in Dallas until a few weeks ago."

Mrs. Olinghouse laid the rest of her cookie back on the saucer. "How are you involved in this, Mr. Coleman?"

Rye leaned forward and clasped his hands together between his wide-spread knees. "Alaina wants to hire Coleman Construction to do the refurbishing."

"I'm surprised you'd even consider such a thing, after what happened there."

Alaina saw Rye's jaw clench, but his face remained expressionless. "What happened there was a long time ago, ma'am. It has nothing to do with what Alaina wants now."

Mrs. Olinghouse remained silent for several moments before speaking to Alaina again. "I'm not convinced I should sell the house to you, Ms. May. As I said, it's been in my family for a very long time."

"And it's falling down from neglect."

Alaina swallowed when she saw that eyebrow arch again. She'd probably spoken her mind too quickly. She did that more often than she liked.

She'd gone this far. She might as well go for everything.

"What good is it doing you, Mrs. Olinghouse? It hasn't been lived in for years. Let me buy it and turn it into something beautiful, something people will enjoy."

"Why do you want *my* house, Ms. May? What is so special about it?"

Alaina wasn't sure how to answer her questions without revealing more than she wanted to. She decided to tell her the truth, or as much of the truth as she was willing to share now. "It's...a feeling. The first time I looked at it, it called to me. I'm supposed to live in that house, Mrs. Olinghouse. I'm supposed to remodel it and turn it back into the beautiful house it was a century ago. Don't you want that? Wouldn't you like to see your family house restored?"

Again, the long silence. Alaina decided perhaps Mrs. Olinghouse needed some time to think about the sale. While she wanted to start the renovations today, even before a contract was signed, she understood giving up something that had been in her family for decades would be hard for the older woman.

"Rye thinks the house can be refurbished with no problem, but he'll know for sure after looking at the inside. May we have the keys to the padlocks?"

"You hardly need keys, Ms. May. Despite my having the doors and windows boarded up several times, the local hoodlums continue to break into the house. God knows what they do in there."

"I told Alaina I won't go into a locked house, ma'am."

Mrs. Olinghouse looked at Rye. Alaina saw a hint of softening in her eyes. The older woman obviously liked Rye, even though she wouldn't show it to him.

She pressed a button on the table next to her chair. The maid arrived in less than twenty seconds. "Susan, please get the keys to Stevens House for Ms. May and Mr. Coleman."

Surprise flashed in Susan's eyes, but she quickly controlled it. "Yes, ma'am."

Two minutes later, Alaina's heart pounded as she clutched the keys in her hand. This was what she'd wanted for two years. Her dream was about to come true.

"You may bring the keys back to me tomorrow."

"Thank you, Mrs. Olinghouse." Alaina stood when Rye did. "I appreciate this so much."

"I'm only agreeing for you to *look* at the house, Ms. May. I haven't agreed to sell it."

"I understand."

Rye clasped Alaina's elbow and urged her toward the door. "Thank you again for seeing us, Mrs. Olinghouse."

She inclined her head. "Mr. Coleman."

Alaina waited until she and Rye had stepped outside before she released a loud squeal. "Ohmigod, I'm so excited!"

"Don't get too excited yet. She didn't agree to sell the house."

She waved a hand in the air while descending the steps. "Details, details. That house is mine. I know it."

* * * * *

Bella pushed aside the curtain enough to see the two young people climb into Rye's pickup. She sighed. The Coleman triplets favored Raymond so much, it hurt her heart to look at one of them.

"Raymond," she whispered, tears filling her eyes.

She quickly blinked away those tears. Crying solved nothing. She'd had no choice all those years ago. She'd done what she had to do.

She'd kept the truth locked inside her for almost seventy-five years. Perhaps it was time for the truth to be revealed. That young woman who wanted to buy her house could uncover the secret she'd kept hidden for so long.

Then, perhaps Raymond would rest in peace.

Chapter Three

April 7, 1937

I tried to talk to Laura today and tell her what I overheard the Sullivan sisters say. She told me I shouldn't listen to those two women. They'd lived their entire lives interfering in other people's business and were happiest when they could spread gossip.

When I told her I believe he was the one who'd fathered Charlotte's baby, she became angry. She told me I shouldn't talk that way about such a fine man. He was an outstanding member of their town and always did whatever he could to help people. She'd never believe he could ever intentionally hurt anyone, especially a woman.

I reminded her about the gossip that had gone around last year, when Maria Campos suddenly left town. Her parents said she'd gone to live with her aunt and uncle in Virginia to finish school. The Sullivans said that Maria was pregnant and left Lanville so she wouldn't disgrace her family. I'd seen him talking to Maria several times in the store. They always stood in a corner in the back and he would touch her shoulder, her arm, her hair. She didn't move away from him, but she never smiled. I don't think she liked him touching her.

Laura ordered me to stop talking about him that way, that I was beginning to gossip as badly as the Sullivan sisters.

I have to come up with something to prove to Laura that I'm right about him.

* * * * *

Rye shook his head and chuckled. He didn't think he'd ever seen anything as entertaining as Alaina flitting from room to room while she oohed and aahed. The inside of Stevens House was a total disaster, yet that didn't seem to matter to her. She only saw the beauty.

He saw the beauty in *her*. The way she tilted her head to the left when she studied something. The way she bit her bottom lip and drew her eyebrows together when she was thinking. The way her eyes sparkled like a kid's on Christmas morning when she entered a new room in the house.

Her eyes also flashed with desire when she gazed at him. He'd caught her looking at his fly several times. She'd always quickly glance away, but not before he could see her brown eyes flare with heat.

She obviously wanted him as much as he wanted her. Rye was trying to be a gentleman, trying to be professional. The longer he was with Alaina, the more difficult it became to ignore the sparks between them.

"Ohmigod, Rye, look at this fireplace."

Rye followed her voice to the library. The rock fireplace still stood, although several of the rocks were missing and others had crumbled. Even with the physical evidence of age, he could see the beauty of the craftsmanship.

It was the same everywhere he looked in the old house. Time and destructive people had almost destroyed it, but he could tell skilled people built the house.

Alaina turned in a circle, her eyes wide, her mouth open. "This is more amazing than I imagined. It'll be sooo beautiful when everything is finished."

"You realize the repairs will take months." He noted the water-stained ceiling, proof that the roof leaked. "More like *several* months."

"I don't care. However long it takes, however much it costs, it'll be worth it."

Repairs this extensive would be very expensive. He wondered how she planned to pay for them. "You have a banker in your back pocket?"

"Something like that." She faced him again. "I want to see the kitchen."

"It's this way."

He headed toward the kitchen, Alaina by his side. "You seem to know a lot about this house," she said. "Why is that?"

"Remember what you said earlier about teenagers breaking in here to drink or smoke pot or have sex?"

"Yes."

"I was one of those teenagers."

"Oh really?" Her eyes twinkled with amusement. "Which did you do—drink, smoke pot, or have sex?"

"All of the above."

"You wild thing."

Rye shrugged. "I did it on a dare. I wouldn't have come in this house otherwise."

"Why not?"

"Long story." One he had no intention of sharing with a woman he barely knew.

"Now I'm intrigued."

They reached the kitchen, with its missing cabinets, rotted woodwork, and gaping holes where appliances once stood. Assessing the damage gave Rye the excuse not to comment to Alaina's last statement. Rye decided out of the rooms they'd seen so far, this one would need the most work. There were holes in the floor big enough to hold a full-grown man. "Damn. It looks like a tornado struck in here." He looked at Alaina. She turned in a slow circle again as she took in all the damage. "Are you sure you want to mess with this?"

He expected to see defeat in her eyes when she faced him again. Instead, excitement made her eyes glow. "I absolutely want to mess with this. It'll be stunning when all the work is done."

"You have more faith than I do."

"I trust my contractor."

Her words surprised him. "Alaina, you don't know me."

"You'll soon learn I'm very meticulous and careful. I don't do anything without thoroughly researching it. I checked out your company, Rye. I told you when we met that Coleman Construction has an outstanding reputation. I wouldn't have hired you otherwise." The excitement in her eyes faded and she bit her bottom lip again. "You haven't changed your mind about doing this, have you?"

"No. If you still want to fix up this house, I'll do it. That is, if Bella agrees to sell it."

"Why wouldn't she? The house certainly isn't any good to her this way. If she'd wanted to fix it up, she would've done it by now."

"She's a bitter old woman, Alaina. She might hold onto this house simply because you want it."

"That wouldn't be very smart, business wise."

"She doesn't need the money."

Her shoulders slumped. He saw defeat in her eyes this time, but it lasted only a moment. She lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. "Then I'll have to convince her to sell it to me even though she doesn't need the money. Piece of cake."

Rye chuckled. If anyone could convince Bella Olinghouse to do something she didn't want to do, he believed Alaina could. "Do you want to see the upstairs?"

Alaina grinned. "Absolutely."

"There are stairs through that door."

She scurried from the kitchen with Rye right behind her. "Be careful," he called out when she started up the steps. "Those stairs probably aren't sturdy."

He heard the loud crack when she touched the fourth tread. She grabbed for the railing, which broke as soon as she grasped it. She squealed and fell backward...right into Rye's arms.

One arm wrapped across her abdomen, one across her breasts. Rye automatically clutched her to keep her from falling. Her plump breast overflowed his hand.

Rye's cock responded to the feel of Alaina's nipple in his palm. He closed his eyes as he imagined unhooking her bra and letting her breasts fall into his hands. They'd be warm and soft, except for her nipples. The pink tips would grow firm when he caressed them with his thumbs, then his tongue.

Rye gently lifted her down from the steps and helped her stand on the solid floor, her back to his chest. She didn't move, she didn't try to pull away from him. The fact that she was his customer and he didn't mix business with pleasure meant he shouldn't take this any further. He should release her right now and continue the tour of the house.

Instead, he tightened his arms around her and gently squeezed her breast.

She whimpered.

That sound traveled straight to his cock. He had a full erection in only seconds. He pressed his fly against her ass so she could feel how strongly she affected him.

She dropped her head to his shoulder and closed her eyes. Rye ran his tongue around the rim of her ear. He breathed directly into her ear, and saw her throat work when she swallowed.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked, his voice low.

She shook her head.

He nipped her earlobe and worked it between his teeth. She whimpered again. "What do you want me to do?"

"Touch me," she whispered.

Cradling both breasts in his palms, Rye lifted and pressed them together as he thumbed the hardening nipples through her shirt and bra. He heard Alaina's breath catch. "Like this?"

"Yesssss."

She arched her back and pushed her breasts harder into his palms, her ass against his groin. Rye kneaded her breasts while brushing his shaft back and forth across her buttocks. He plucked at her nipples, rolled them between his thumbs and forefingers.

Her breathing became heavier, deeper. Rye continued to caress her breasts with one hand while he slowly slid the other down her stomach. He stopped at the waistband of her jeans, unsure how far she wanted him to go.

She answered his unasked question by pushing his hand between her thighs. "Here. Touch me here."

The heat of her pussy through her jeans made Rye groan. He rubbed his fingers along the seam, using a firmer pressure on her clit. Alaina dug her fingernails into his thighs and spread her legs wider apart.

"That feels so good."

It certainly did, but it wasn't enough. He needed to touch her without anything between his fingers and her silky flesh.

Unfastening her jeans, he tugged them and her panties past her hips. He slid his hand between her thighs again, and groaned once more at the feel of her creamy folds.

"Damn, you're wet."

He circled her clit with the tip of his finger. Alaina moaned and gripped his thighs tighter. "Mmm, yes."

Rye gathered her cream on his fingertips and spread it over her clit. He circled it again, then rubbed back and forth. She began to move her hips in time to his caresses.

"That's the way." He nipped her earlobe again, nibbled on the side of her neck. "Take what you need."

"I-I can't."

Her words made him hesitate a moment before he continued the intimate caress. "I want to feel you come."

"Rye, I..." Her voice trailed off.

"You what?" He pushed two fingers into her channel and pressed upward. She gasped. He could feel the strain in her legs as she tried to widen her stance. Rye wished he'd taken the time to completely remove her jeans and panties before he touched her. He couldn't stop now, not when she was so aroused.

She didn't answer him. He moved his fingers over the sensitive spot inside her, pressing, caressing. Little sounds of pleasure came from her throat. "Do you need more, Alaina? Do you need my tongue?"

"Oh God!"

The walls of her pussy contracted around his fingers. Her head fell forward and she trembled in his arms.

Rye waited until her body stilled before he pulled his fingers from her body. She lifted her head in time to see him lick her cream from them.

"I knew you'd be delicious."

Fire flashed in her eyes again. "You are a very sexy man, Rye Coleman."

She turned, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

That full lower lip had tempted him ever since she'd walked into his office. He tugged it between his teeth, soothed the bite with his tongue. He tickled each corner of her mouth with the tip of his tongue before he thrust it into her mouth. She pulled it even farther into her mouth and sucked on it.

He had to get inside her.

With his lips still pressed to hers, Rye grasped Alaina's ass and lifted her feet from the floor. He took the few steps necessary until her back touched the wall. One more deep kiss and he dropped to his knees in front of her. Her shoes landed on the dusty floor. Jeans, panties, and socks soon added to the pile.

Rye pulled his wallet from his back pocket as he stood again. Alaina watched him, her eyelids heavy, her chest rising and falling from her rapid breathing. Her gaze dropped to his hands when he unfastened his jeans and pulled his hard rod from his briefs.

He sheathed his cock with a condom. Slipping his arms beneath her thighs, he lifted her and thrust inside.

Tight.

Hot.

Wet.

Rye buried his face against her neck. He wanted to pump. His hormones screamed at him to pump. But first, he simply absorbed the feel of Alaina in his arms.

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. Despite her recent orgasm, he could see the desire in the brown depths. He thrust once and was rewarded with her breathless moan.

"More," she whispered.

Rye kissed her as he thrust again. She clutched handfuls of his hair. He gave her complete control over their kisses—tilting his head when her hands guided it, parting his lips when she drove her tongue into his mouth. She fucked his mouth with her tongue the way he fucked her pussy with his cock.

"You're an incredible kisser," Alaina said before kissing him again. She tightened her hold in his hair. If Rye hadn't been so turned on, he might have winced in pain. "I could kiss you all night."

So could Rye. He couldn't get enough of her mouth. Or her pussy. He lifted her higher against the wall and pumped faster. Fucking her once wouldn't be nearly enough.

Alaina's breath hitched. "God!"

Rye winced in sympathy when Alaina threw back her head and hit the wall. She didn't seem to notice any pain as her second orgasm hit her. Her channel milked his cock, even harder than it had milked his fingers.

She pushed his hair back and blew into his ear before whispering, "I want to feel you come."

The sharp bite on his neck pushed him over the edge. Rye thrust inside Alaina as far as he could and groaned through his climax.

Several moments passed before Alaina spoke. "You don't know me, do you?" she asked softly.

Rye somehow found the strength to lift his head and look into her eyes. They still showed the lingering effects of her orgasm, yet he could also see trepidation. "We met before today?"

Alaina nodded. "My last name used to be Pearson." She bit her bottom lip. "I'm Alesia's sister."

Chapter Four

April 8, 1937

He was in the store again today. I had to wait on him since my father was busy with another customer. He stared at my breasts the entire time. I was so uncomfortable, I wanted to crawl beneath the counter and hide until he left. He clutched my hand when I handed him his bag and smiled at me. His smile makes me think of a snake.

Perhaps if I can switch his interest to me, he'll leave Laura alone. The idea turns my stomach, but I'll do what I must to protect my sister.

* * * * *

Rye didn't move. He didn't breathe. He didn't blink. His body completely shut down at Alaina's words. He swallowed hard, hoping that would make his tongue work. Alaina was the sister of the woman who had humiliated him in front of the whole town? "What?" he asked weakly.

She bit that luscious bottom lip. The action sent a surge of fresh desire to his cock. He could take her again if he had another condom. Luckily for him, he didn't. This wasn't the time to think with his dick.

He lowered her legs until she stood on the floor, then slipped his rod from her channel. A trickle of her cream traveled down her thigh. Rye turned his back on her before he did something stupid, like drop to his knees and lick it from her skin.

"Tell me again what you just said."

"I'm Alesia's sister."

Rye tied the condom into a knot and crammed it in his pocket. He tucked his cock back into his briefs and fastened his jeans before he faced Alaina again. He turned in time to see her button her jeans. "I don't remember you."

"I'm not surprised. I'm three years younger than you. We didn't have any of the same classes in school. I moved away with my mom when I was thirteen after my parents divorced. Alesia stayed here with my father."

Rye remembered the scandal of Alesia's father fucking any woman in Lanville who would drop her panties. Word traveled fast in a small town. His eldest daughter had followed in his footsteps. Apparently, so had his youngest.

"I notice you conveniently forgot to tell me about your relationship with Alesia until after we fucked."

She winced, then straightened her shoulders and looked him straight in the eyes. "I didn't start that. *You're* the one who grabbed my boob."

"I grabbed your *body* to keep you from falling. I acted on instinct. I didn't plan to grope you."

"I didn't plan to fuck you either. It simply...happened."

"Yeah, right."

She stood taller, her hands clenched at her sides. "How could I have planned us being together? I didn't know I was going to fall."

"I warned you the stairs might not be sturdy."

"After I'd already stepped on one."

Rye crossed his arms over his chest. Just like Alesia, Alaina had a ready answer on the tip of her tongue. "You're definitely Alesia's sister."

He would swear he could see the hair on her arms bristle. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, she always had the perfect reason for whatever she'd done. Even when I found her fucking another guy, she swore he'd forced her. She was bouncing up and down on his dick like she couldn't get enough. It didn't look forced to me."

The shock on her face appeared real. She was a good actress. Rye almost believed she had no idea what her sister had done.

"Rye, I-I'm sorry. I didn't know."

He barked out a laugh. "Sure you didn't."

"I didn't!"

"You knew we were engaged."

"Yes, I knew that, but not until after it was over. She didn't tell me your name until y'all broke up. She said you ended the engagement."

"I did, after I caught her with one of my friends...who, I add, is no longer a friend. Before he left Lanville, he informed me he wasn't the only guy in town Alesia was fucking. The list was staggering. I don't know how she could walk."

"You believed him?"

"I had no reason *not* to believe him after what I saw. So I did some investigating. Turns out he'd told me the truth."

"Rye, I'm not close with Alesia. We talk on the phone a couple times a year and email maybe half a dozen times. I haven't seen her in two years. I don't even know where she lives. She's had the same cell phone number and email address for years, but I know she's moved around a lot. She contacts me when she wants something from me. That's the only time I hear from her." She took one step toward him. "I'm nothing like her."

"Pardon me for being skeptical after what happened here a few minutes ago."

Her cheeks turned pink. She bit her bottom lip again. Rye stopped himself before he groaned. He wanted to bite that lip...and every other part of her body.

You're an idiot. You should've learned your lesson with the first Pearson sister.

"I don't have sex with men I've just met."

"But it's okay to have sex with men you haven't seen in...what? Fifteen, sixteen years?"

She shook her hair back from her face and sighed. "I let my hormones overrule my good judgment. Haven't you ever done that?"

"Yeah, about ten minutes ago."

Alaina frowned. "Are you always this rude?"

Rye huffed out a breath. He saw no reason to continue this conversation. "You wanted my professional opinion about refurbishing this house. Yes, it can be done. Despite the holes and broken boards and rotted wood, it's structurally sound. Will Coleman Construction work for you? No. Find yourself another company to do the work."

He made it halfway to the front door before she grabbed his arm to stop him. "Wait, please! I want you and your brothers to do the work. Your company has an excellent reputation and you know the house. I don't want strangers in here who only work to get paid and don't care about the job they do."

"I can give you the names of several good firms. Come by my office tomorrow morning and I'll have a list for you."

"I'll pay whatever percentage you want —"

"This has nothing to do with money, *Ms. May*." He leaned closer until his nose almost touched hers. "I will not work for *you*." He tugged his arm away from her. "Goodbye."

Rye didn't wait to hear any more from her. He strode from the house and got into his pickup. Loose dirt spewed from beneath his tires as he sped away from Stevens House.

Once back on the county road, he flipped open his cell phone and punched in Dax's number.

"Yo, bro," Dax said. "What's up?"

Rye could hear country music in the background. "Where are you?"

"Boot Scootin'. I'm having a beer with Dad."

Perfect. Rye liked that his father would be present for the discussion with his brothers. "Have you made plans for the night?"

"Not yet."

"Good. Stay there. I'm gonna call Griff and tell him to meet us."

"What's up?"

"I'll tell you when I get there."

He ended the call and punched in his other brother's number. Griff was scheduled to work at one of the restaurants today. A quick glance at his watch showed Rye it was ten after five. Griff should be through by now.

"Hey, Rye."

"Hey, Griff. Are you through for the day?"

"Will be in about five minutes."

"Great. Meet Dax and me at Boot Scootin'. I need to talk to my brothers."

Silence. Rye waited for the inevitable excuse his brother would come up with why he couldn't meet his brothers. Ever since his wife died five months ago, Griff avoided people whenever possible. He was an excellent electrician and did his job well, but hid in his house after the workday ended and didn't leave it again until the next morning when it was time to go back to work.

"Can't we talk in the morning at the office?"

"I want to tell you and Dax what happened today. Dad's there too. He and Dax are having a beer right now."

Silence again, for several moments. "You and Dax can come out to the house."

Rye pulled into Walt's gas station to fill up his pickup. "Dax and Dad are already at Boot Scootin'. I'll be there in five minutes, after I get gas."

Rye sighed when his brother pulled the silent act again. He'd tried his best to be patient with Griff, to give his brother time to heal after losing his wife. Griff would never heal if he didn't get back out in the world. "Griff. I need to talk to my brothers."

He heard Griff blow out a heavy breath. "Give me fifteen minutes."

"Great. I'll buy you one of Dolly's greasy cheeseburgers."

Rye snapped his cell shut before Griff could change his mind. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Walt Kinney hobble out of the station as Rye climbed down from his truck. Despite celebrating his seventy-eighth birthday last month and having to use a cane to get around, Walt refused to sell his station and retire.

Walt was good friends with Rye's grandfather, so Rye had known the older man since he was a kid. Some people thought he looked more like a bum than a businessman with his unkempt gray hair and ragged overalls. Rye knew a deep intelligence lay behind those blue eyes. Walt saw a lot more than people realized.

"Hey, Walt," Rye said, unscrewing the gas cap on his truck.

"Rye. How's it goin'?"

"Good."

"Stayin' busy?"

"And then some."

Walt leaned against the side of Rye's pickup. "Had to fix a flat out Bella's way this afternoon. Saw you with a pretty little redhead in your truck."

Rye had learned a long time ago that Walt never hesitated to say exactly what was on his mind. He'd also learned that the older man wouldn't give up until he knew everything he wanted to know. "She's interested in buying Stevens House to turn into a bed-and-breakfast."

Walt's bushy eyebrows arched. "She want your company to do the work?"

"Yeah. I turned her down."

"How come? Seems like that would be a good-payin' job."

"She's Alesia's sister."

"Hmmp." Walt tucked one hand inside the bib of his overalls. "Can't see where that makes any difference."

Rye assumed telling Walt that Alaina was Alesia's sister would be explanation enough for why he turned down the job. "I got burned once by a Pearson girl. That won't happen again."

"Can't see where it would happen again, as long as everythin' is strictly business."

Rye thought of the used condom he had in his pocket. He had to look away from those shrewd blue eyes so Walt wouldn't know he and Alaina hadn't exactly conducted business in Stevens House a short time ago.

"Seems like you should put aside any personal feelin's you might have for the girl if it's a good job."

"I don't have any personal feelings for Alaina."

"Then what's the problem? It'd be a long job for your workers. Good money for 'em and your business."

"I can't work for Alesia's sister."

"She's Alesia's sister. She ain't Alesia."

Rye replaced the handle on the gas pump. Everything Walt said made sense. Still, he didn't know how he could look at Alaina and not remember what her sister had done.

"What that young gal did to you was a long time ago, Rye. Time to let it go and move on."

Easier said than done. "Yeah, I know, but..." He stopped long enough to screw on the gas cap. "Sometimes letting go isn't easy."

"Yep. Know that. But sometimes you gotta think of other people more than yourself."

Rye clapped Walt on the shoulder. "How did you get to be so smart?"

He grinned, exposing the few teeth he had left. "I'm old. Ain't much I haven't heard or seen."

Chuckling, Rye opened the door to his truck. "Thanks for the advice."

"Got a lot of it. And it's free."

Walt moved away from the pickup and Rye climbed in behind the steering wheel. "Put this on my account, okay?"

"Will do."

Rye thought about what Walt had said on his way to Boot Scootin'. He knew the older man meant well, but Rye doubted if his brothers would agree. They'd side with Rye and say he was right to turn down Alaina's job, even though it would bring in a nice amount for Coleman Construction.

He spotted Dax's pickup as soon as he drove into Boot Scootin's parking lot. He pulled into the space next to it and headed for the entrance.

Kenny Chesney was belting out his latest song from the jukebox when Rye opened the door to Boot Scootin'. He saw his dad and Dax at a table in the corner. Both of them were sprawled in their chairs, looking as if they planned to stay there a while. With his mom out of town visiting her parents, Rye knew his dad would avoid going home to an empty house as long as possible.

He squeezed his father's shoulder when he passed him. "Hey, Dad."

Kenneth Coleman smiled and patted Rye's hand. "Hey, son."

Rye took the chair to the left of his father, facing the door. He wanted to see Griff when he arrived. "Who's buying?"

"You are," Dax said.

"Figures." He caught the eye of Lana, the waitress, and twirled his finger upside down over the table to indicate another round. She smiled and dipped her head.

"Is Griff coming?" Kenneth asked.

"He said he would."

"If you can get him here, you're doing better than I am." Dax set his beer bottle on the table. "I've invited him here for burgers and pool more times than I can remember. He always turns me down."

"He turned me down too at first, until I used guilt. I told him I needed to talk to my brothers. He couldn't say no to that."

Lana arrived with three bottles of beer. "Hidy, Rye. Dax told me to put everything on your tab."

"I'm sure he did," Rye said, scowling at his brother.

Dax grinned. "You're the oldest. You're supposed to buy."

"I'm the oldest by two minutes."

"Oldest is oldest."

"What about Dad? He's the oldest at the table."

Kenneth picked up his fresh bottle of beer. "I stopped buying when my sons got jobs."

Lana laughed. "You're a very smart man, Mr. Coleman. Holler if y'all need anything else."

"One more beer, Lana," Rye said. "Griff should be here soon. And cheeseburgers and fries all around."

"You got it."

"Speak of the devil," Dax said, nodding toward the entrance.

Rye gazed that direction to see Griff making his way toward their table. His brother looked tired. Griff had lost a lot of weight since Jana's death. Rye doubted if Griff had more than one meal a day. He definitely needed one of Dolly's cheeseburgers tonight.

"Hey, Dad," Griff said, sliding onto the fourth chair at the table. "Good to see you."

"Dax invited me to have a beer with him. But now that you're here, I'll take off so y'all can talk business."

"No, Dad, don't go." Rye looked from each of his brothers back to his father. "I want to tell you what happened today too." He took a swallow of his beer and set the bottle on the table. "Miss Alaina May came in the office this morning."

"Is that the hot redhead who came in when I was leaving?" Dax asked.

"The same. She wants to buy Stevens House and turn it into a bed-and-breakfast. She wants to hire us for the work. I turned her down."

"You did *what*?" Dax jerked forward in his chair. "How could you do that? That job would bring a shitload of money into the business."

"You really want to work in that house? With our family's history?"

"I agree with Dax," Griff said. "What happened there was a long time ago. It shouldn't interfere with a job that'll keep our employees busy for months."

"I haven't told you everything about Alaina May." Rye once again looked at everyone at the table. "She's Alesia's sister."

Dax and Griff glanced at each other, then at their father, before turning their attention back to their brother. "Look, Rye, I hope this doesn't sound heartless to you," Dax said, "but the fact we'd be working for Alesia's sister shouldn't make a difference in the job."

Before Rye could demand what the hell Dax was talking about, their father spoke. "I agree with Dax. You and Alesia broke up three years ago. I'm sorry you were hurt. We're all sorry you were hurt, but don't let what happened with her keep you from accepting a great job."

Kenneth sounded just like Walt. He could understand Dax wanting to accept the job. Dax never dwelled on anything that happened before yesterday. He always said life was made for living now, not in the past. Griff was more levelheaded. "What do you think?" he asked his youngest brother.

"I agree with Dax and Dad. It's a good job, Rye. With new housing construction down, this will keep our employees busy all summer."

"Y'all really think we should work for Alesia's sister?"

"We'll have a contract," Dax said, "and we'll collect part of our fee up front. Yeah, I say we go for it."

Griff nodded. "So do I."

The Coleman brothers had decided a long time ago that majority ruled. If Dax and Griff wanted to accept this job, Rye would go along with them. He would treat Alaina as their customer and nothing else. There would not be a repeat of what happened between them today.

“There’s no guarantee Bella will even sell that house to Alaina,” Rye said. “But if she does, I’ll tell Alaina tomorrow that she’s hired a construction firm.”

Chapter Five

April 11, 1937

I had to go to the drugstore to pick up cough syrup for my mother. She's had a bad cold for two days that's settled in her chest. I saw him when he left the bank. He strolled down the sidewalk with his head high and an arrogant expression on his face. He knows everyone looks at him, everyone envies him and his position.

Almost everyone. There is nothing about him I envy. I loathe every hair on his head.

I followed him. He seemed to be heading to the drugstore too. That will give me the perfect excuse to bump into him. Perhaps I can strike up a conversation and find out what he plans to do about Laura.

* * * * *

Alaina sat cross-legged in the middle of the library floor. Cobwebs hung in every corner, but she could picture how the beautiful room would look after the refurbishment. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, large windows to let in lots of sunlight, cozy chairs where her guests could sit and read, a huge fire in the stone fireplace. She knew exactly what kind of floor covering she wanted, exactly what color paint and wallpaper, the decorations. Coleman Construction could do that for her.

She'd spoiled everything by telling Rye she was Alesia's sister.

Rye never would have known if she hadn't told him. She favored Alesia, despite their different hair color, but not enough for Rye to immediately recognize her. Her mother had remarried when Alaina was sixteen. Her stepfather had legally adopted her, so Rye wouldn't have known her by her last name. The only way he would've known of her relationship with Alesia was by Alaina telling him.

Not wanting to start their business dealings by holding anything back, she'd decided to be honest with him from the start.

Big mistake.

The one person she wanted most to work on this house wouldn't speak to her, much less make love to her again.

Her tummy quivered when she thought of the way Rye had touched her yesterday. Neither of them had planned it. The step had cracked, she'd lost her footing and he'd caught her. She could've pulled away from him and nothing would have happened.

But she hadn't wanted to pull away. She'd had a crush on the good-looking teenager when she was barely a teenager herself. One look at the handsome man had her heart fluttering in her chest. Curiosity and old feelings—and hormones—had played a part in her surrendering to him.

He'd taken her against a wall. She still hadn't gotten over how hot it had been.

Orgasms were rare for her during sex, especially ones as powerful as she'd experienced with Rye. She'd usually get right to the peak, yet wouldn't be able to get over it. Rye had not only pushed her over the top, but had done it twice.

She longed to feel him inside her again.

She'd hire another construction firm to refurbish the house, but it wouldn't be the same. She wanted the best to do it, and she knew that would be Rye's company. Plus with his company working for her, she'd have the excuse to see him every day.

A vehicle pulled up to the back of the house. With her lousy luck, it was probably a deputy sheriff coming to arrest her for trespassing.

"Alaina?"

Her heart stuttered in her chest when she heard Rye's voice. She scrambled to her feet and dusted off the seat of her jeans. "In the library," she called out.

He stepped through the doorway, looking absolutely edible in tight, faded jeans and a dark brown T-shirt that matched his eyes. She loved the thick mustache over his upper lip. It had felt incredible when he'd kissed her.

She wondered how it would feel against her pussy.

Right now, that mustache framed lips that were tight with disapproval, or perhaps disgust.

"Good morning," she said softly.

"I talked to my brothers last night," he said without returning her greeting. "They both agreed we should take this job."

Alaina blinked. His comment surprised her. "They did?"

"Yeah."

"But you still don't want to?"

"It doesn't matter what I want. Majority rules with me and my brothers. They say it'll be a great job for our employees."

"You don't believe that?"

He looked away from her. She saw his chest rise and fall with his deep breath before he looked back at her. "Yeah, it'll be a great job for our employees. New construction is down around here, so this job will keep them busy for months."

"I hear a 'but' after that sentence."

"I don't want to work for Alesia's sister. Her betrayal was a long time ago, but it taught me to be cautious where women are concerned. I know about Alesia's reputation, and your father's. I can't help but think you're exactly like your sister and father after what happened here yesterday."

His words hurt, but they also made her angry. He'd given her earth-shattering orgasms, but that didn't mean she had to accept his bullshit. He had no right to judge

her based on what her father and sister did in the past. "I'm nothing like my sister or my father."

"You'll have to prove that to me."

"I don't have to 'prove' anything to you, Rye."

He stared at her and she stared right back. She refused to back down when she'd done nothing wrong.

"We need to take the keys back to Bella," he said after several moments of silence.

"Okay." She noticed he'd said "we" need to take the keys back. "Are you going with me to her house?"

"I called and told her we'd be there by nine-thirty."

"Thank you for doing that."

He gave her a single nod, then turned and left the room, leaving her to scramble after him.

Outside, she started toward her car. Rye's voice stopped her before she could open the driver's door.

"What are you doing?"

"You said we're going to take the keys back to Bella."

"We are. You're riding with me. We'll go to my office after we see her. We have a lot to talk about."

She wasn't sure if it would be smart to ride in the same pickup with an angry lion. From the stern look on his face, he wasn't about to take a no from her. "Let me grab my purse."

He had his pickup started and the air conditioner running when Alaina slid onto the passenger seat. She didn't try to strike up a conversation with him, suspecting he'd either not answer her or grunt out a one- or two-syllable response. She stared out her window, watching the wildflowers. The bluebonnets were in full bloom. Seeing them always made Alaina smile. She hadn't noticed any around Stevens House. Planting bluebonnet seeds this autumn was a definite must.

She had to remember to ask Bella how many acres went with the house. She wanted to create walking paths for her guests through the gardens and trees. Right now, the only gardens around that house were of cactus and weeds. It would take a lot of time and effort to make the grounds beautiful. Alaina looked forward to every moment of pulling weeds and planting seeds.

If Bella sold her the house.

Positive thinking. She will sell the house to me. She has to.

Fifteen silent minutes later, Rye pulled up in front of Bella's house. Alaina didn't wait for him to come around and open her door since she doubted he would today. Nor did he place his hand on the small of her back when they climbed the steps as he had yesterday.

Alaina began to feel like a contagious disease.

"Am I supposed to let you do the talking?" she asked once he'd rung the doorbell.

"I'm here because Bella knows me. You can do your own talking."

The maid once again answered the door. For the first time today, Alaina saw Rye smile.

"Hiya, sexy," he said to Susan.

She blushed all the way to the roots of her hair. "What would your mother say if she knew you were flirting with someone old enough to *be* your mother?"

"She'd say I have good taste."

Susan laughed. "I still say you are a devil, Rye Coleman." She opened the door wider. "Come in. Mrs. Olinghouse is waiting for you."

Bella sat on her throne, a delicate china cup poised at her mouth. She looked at Alaina over the rim of her cup, then past Alaina to Rye. She gave a small nod.

"Ms. May. Mr. Coleman."

"Thank you for seeing us, Mrs. Olinghouse," Rye said.

"You looked at the house?"

"Yes," Alaina answered, even though Bella's attention was still focused on Rye. "It will be breathtaking after the remodel."

One white eyebrow arched. "That's assuming I agree to sell it."

"Yes, of course." Alaina swallowed the sharp retort she wanted to make. The old biddy must love to make people squirm.

Bella waved her free hand toward the couch. "Sit. Would you like tea or coffee?"

"None for me." Rye took the same spot on the couch where he'd sat yesterday. "Alaina?"

"No, thank you." She perched on the edge of the couch close to Rye, but not close enough to touch him. "Are you going to sell the house to me, Mrs. Olinghouse?"

She didn't flinch when Bella Olinghouse turned those sharp gray eyes on her. Alaina saw no reason to be coy. She knew what she wanted and this woman could give it to her.

"You're rather impulsive, aren't you, Ms. May?"

"No, ma'am, I'm not. I've thought long and hard about this. I want to buy your house. I know with the Coleman brothers' help, I can turn it into the most beautiful bed-and-breakfast in North Texas."

"You're very ambitious. Or naïve."

Alaina caught herself before she gritted her teeth. She didn't want Bella Olinghouse to see any kind of weakness. "I'm a hard worker. I'm not afraid to get my hands dirty. I'll work right alongside the Colemans in that house. I'm not very good with power tools, but I can use a hammer or screwdriver and I'm a great painter."

"Perhaps you'd be in the way more than you'd help. Isn't that right, Mr. Coleman?"

Alaina looked at Rye to find his gaze on her and not Bella. She couldn't make out the emotion in his eyes. It drew her to him, made her want to know his thoughts. "I'm sure we could find things for Alaina to do."

Bella took a dainty sip of her tea. "You have the necessary financing to buy the house, *if* I agree to sell?"

It was difficult for Alaina to look away from Rye, but she forced her attention back to Bella. Hope bloomed in her chest. If Bella asked about money, then she must be considering selling the house. "Financing isn't a problem. I can give you a check now for the down payment."

"You're determined as well as ambitious."

"Yes, ma'am."

After one more sip of tea, Bella set her cup on the table next to her chair. "I looked at the house two weeks ago. You're right that it's slowly deteriorating. There's no reason for it to remain standing. I should have it torn down."

Alaina's stomach leaped into her throat. She opened her mouth to protest. A firm squeeze on her arm stopped her. She looked at Rye. He shook his head slightly. Alaina closed her mouth again.

"I'm curious to see what you'd do with my old home, Ms. May. I know with the Coleman brothers doing the work, you'll get the best construction firm in a three-hundred-mile radius."

Rye tipped his head. "Thank you."

Bella laced her hands together over her stomach. "I've decided to sell the house to you."

Alaina wanted to jump up and do a happy dance. She didn't think Bella would appreciate the outburst, but it was difficult to remain seated. "Thank you, Mrs. Olinghouse. I promise you won't regret it."

"I don't expect to."

Alaina opened her purse and removed a checkbook. "I'll give you a down payment right now. How much do you want for the house?"

"Twenty-five thousand."

That seemed like a fair down payment. Alaina found a pen and opened the checkbook to write out the check. "I don't have a problem with twenty-five thousand for the down payment. How much do you want for the house?"

"That isn't a down payment, Ms. May. I want twenty-five thousand for the house. Period."

Alaina's mouth dropped open. She lost the strength in her hand and dropped her pen. Rye picked it up and handed it back to her. "You aren't serious."

"Don't I sound serious?"

"But-but I want the land too."

"Yes, I assume you do."

"You'll sell everything to me for twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"That's what I said, isn't it? Do you have a problem with your hearing?"

"No offense, Mrs. Olinghouse," Rye said, "but that's ridiculous. There has to be twenty acres with the house."

"Twenty-two."

"Land in that area runs for ten thousand an acre. You could get a minimum of two hundred thousand without the house."

"I'm aware of land prices in our area, Mr. Coleman."

"You're willing to throw away over a hundred thousand dollars?"

"I believe the deal is between Ms. May and me. It's none of your business, Mr. Coleman."

"Mrs. Olinghouse, are you sure?" Alaina asked. "I appreciate the low price, but I don't want you to have any regrets."

"Shall I take back my offer to sell, Ms. May?"

"No!"

"Then do not argue with me." She held out her hand and wiggled her fingers. "The check, please."

Alaina scribbled out the check and handed it to the older woman. Bella laid it on the end table without looking at it.

"I'll have my attorney draw up the necessary paperwork. As far as I'm concerned, the house is now yours to do with as you please."

"So Rye and his brothers can start the remodeling now?"

"Mrs. Olinghouse," Rye said. "Again, no offense intended. Alaina can't do anything with the house until the land is rezoned as commercial property."

"You take care of whatever building permits you need, Mr. Coleman. I'll take care of the rezoning."

Just like that, Alaina owned the house. She didn't want to breathe, to move, for fear she'd awaken and this would all be a dream. She'd wanted this ever since her grandfather died five months ago.

"You'll have to excuse me," Bella said. "I have an appointment at ten."

"Of course." Alaina stood. "Thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me."

"I expect it to be glorious when it's finished."

"It will be. I promise."

"We'll see ourselves out." Rye took Alaina's arm. "Thank you, Mrs. Olinghouse."

Once outside the huge house, Alaina couldn't contain her glee any longer. She gave a loud "Whoopee!" and turned in a circle, her arms flung wide. "Ohmigod, I can't believe the house is mine!"

"I can't believe it either. I don't understand why she sold it to you so cheap."

"I don't care. All I care about is she *did* sell it to me and it's *mine*!" Clasp ing her hands together in front of her breasts, she gave Rye a huge smile. "When can you start working on it?"

"We have a lot to talk about before any work is done."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. I'm too happy right now to let anything bring me down."

* * * * *

The fact that Bella had sold the house and land so cheaply made Rye suspicious. There had to be something seriously wrong with either the house or property for her to almost give it away. He decided he'd do some checking on his own and find out what had made Bella agree to almost give away her place to a virtual stranger.

"What's first?" Alaina asked once they were back in his pickup. "Do I have to hire an architect? Can I tell you my vision and go from there? Do I sign a contract with you? Do I pay you a flat fee or by the hour? You hire all the subcontractors, right? I don't have to worry about that?"

She was shooting questions at him so quickly, he had trouble understanding all the words. "You don't have to hire anyone. I'll take care of that. We'll talk about my fee and the contract at the office."

"Okay." She shifted on the seat and turned toward him. "I have a notebook in my car with my ideas. I want to keep the same layout of the house. I researched what colors were used in houses when it was built. I want to use some of those colors, but also mix them with a more modern color scheme."

"Dax can help you with that. He has a great eye for color. He's also blunt. If you pick a color he feels won't work, he'll tell you."

"That's good. I want the house to be magnificent when it's finished."

"We'll do our best."

"I know you will."

He could feel her watching him, yet she didn't say anything else. He glanced at her. "What?"

"I didn't expect it would be you and your brothers who own the company. I thought it would be your father, or even your grandfather."

"Why?"

"Because of Coleman Construction's reputation. I assumed it would take someone older to build up such a sterling reputation."

"Our dad started the business. We started working for him when we were barely teenagers. As I got older, I wanted to expand the business to include other areas of construction. I talked to Dax and Griff and they agreed it was a good idea. Dad said he'd give us the business and we could do whatever we wanted, as long as he could work for us."

"What other areas of construction?"

"Anything a person needs. Plumbing, electrical, roofing, flooring. You need it, Coleman Construction can do it."

"Sort of a one-size-fits-all."

"Yeah."

"Your idea worked. Even the queen said you're the best."

Rye glanced at Alaina again to see her grinning. He chuckled. "I suppose I should feel honored to get a compliment from Bella. She doesn't give out many of those."

"Do you know why she's so bitter and rude?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "Could be she's lonely. She doesn't have any family who lives close. I doubt if she has any friends."

"That's sad. A person needs friends. I don't know what I'd do without my two friends, Emma and Kelcey. They're the best."

"I have my brothers. They're my best friends."

"No arguments with them?"

"Hell, we argue all the time, but it doesn't take us long to get over it."

A comfortable silence fell between them. Rye felt at ease with Alaina, and he didn't want to. He didn't want to think about how good she'd felt in his arms yesterday, how her pussy had fit his cock so perfectly. He didn't want to think about that sexy little sound she made in her throat when she came, or how much he longed to feel her in his arms again.

He couldn't get involved with another Pearson sister. Alaina was off limits.

Rye had to remember that.

Chapter Six

April 12, 1937

The Sullivan sisters intercepted me at the drugstore, so I did not get the chance to speak to him. Laura is visiting our grandparents in Fort Worth until the weekend. That gives me the chance to try to speak with him again while she isn't here.

I know she would tell me not to bother him, that he's a very busy man. I don't care how busy he is. I must get close to him to protect my sister.

* * * * *

Alaina walked into Coleman Construction after Rye opened the door. She tried not to touch him, but her arm brushed his stomach as she walked past. Just like that, she was thrown back to Stevens House yesterday afternoon when Rye had taken her against the wall.

She hadn't had a vast number of lovers in her lifetime, but that had been the hottest sex she'd ever experienced. His cock had been so hard, so thick...

"Are you planning to live in the house?" Rye asked, taking the chair behind the large desk.

His question snapped her out of the erotic trance. She cleared her throat so her voice wouldn't sound hoarse. "I'd like to. What do you think?"

"It's been a long time since I was in the house, but I think there are four bedrooms on the second floor. There's also a large attic that runs almost the entire length and width of the house. It could easily be turned into at least two bedrooms, maybe three."

Goose bumps erupted on Alaina's skin. She could hardly wait to jump in and start the remodeling.

Rye reached inside his desk and withdrew a yellow legal pad. "Guess I'd better start taking notes." He selected a pen from the holder on the desk. "I assume you'll want to add private bathrooms to each of the bedrooms."

"Oh definitely. Can you do that?"

"Sure. Walls will have to be moved, but that isn't a problem."

"What about an elevator?"

"An elevator?"

"Don't I need one in case I have a guest who has trouble climbing stairs? Isn't it a law about handicapped access?"

"I've never remodeled a house that old. I'll have to check to see what the law requires."

"It doesn't matter. I want an elevator for my guests' comfort."

He rubbed his knuckle across his mustache. Alaina remembered the feel of it when he'd kissed her. She wondered how his mustache would feel tickling her nipples, brushing down her stomach to between her thighs...

"Before we get too far into this, I'll call my dad and see if he can meet us at the house in about an hour."

The mention of Rye's father quickly doused her desire. "Your dad?"

"He's an architect. I can do the structural stuff, but I'm lousy at designing."

His eyes twinkled with humor. Alaina liked this Rye much better than the rude man of earlier today. She smiled and he returned it.

As quickly as it had formed, his smile disappeared. He frowned and looked back at his legal pad. "I'll start with the roof. That needs to be repaired first."

Okay, what just happened? They seemed to be getting along fine, then the light went out in his eyes and he became stiff and wooden again. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No."

His voice said no, but his tone said yes. "Rye, what's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong, Alaina. This is a business arrangement, nothing more. You need to remember that."

She had no idea why he'd say something like that. "What did I do to make you think I don't know that?"

"You smiled at me."

"I *smiled* at you? Since when is that a sin?"

Scowling, he tossed his pen on top of the legal pad. "I don't want you thinking there will be a repeat of what happened between us yesterday, because there won't be."

Alaina had met some arrogant men in her life. She never would have believed Rye was one of them. He'd just proved her wrong. Yes, the sex had been scorching. That didn't mean she planned to drop her panties every time he looked at her.

"This meeting is officially over. Have a nice life, Rye."

She made it three steps before Rye grabbed her arm to stop her. "Where are you going?"

She jerked her arm away from him. "I'm not going to spend the next several months with someone who glares at me and snaps at me when I did nothing wrong. We had sex, Rye. *We*, as in you and me. It happened. Neither of us planned it. But you're treating me as if I'm Alesia and I'm not. See?" She picked up a hank of her hair and waved it in his face. "Red hair, not blonde. I didn't plan what happened between us. I wasn't trying to use you. But you can't seem to get that through your thick skull. Don't worry. You don't have to worry about me attacking you again. I'll find another construction firm to work for me."

"All right, all right! I'm sorry."

"That's the lousiest apology I've ever heard."

If possible, his scowl deepened. "What the hell do you want from me?"

"I want you to treat me with the same respect you'd treat any other customer. If you can't do that, then give me that list of construction firms you mentioned and I'm outta here."

He looked away from her and blew out a deep breath. She waited, unsure if he'd agree she should leave or admit he was wrong.

"I'm sorry," he said again, his tone more convincing. She saw the sincerity in his eyes when he looked back at her. "I mean that. You're right. I should treat you the same way I treat all my customers. You're also right that it was both of us yesterday who got carried away."

"Thank you for admitting that."

He stared at her for several moments. "You look like Alesia, but you don't look like Alesia."

"We favor a little, but she took after our father's side of the family. I'm the image of my mother."

A hint of a smile touched his lips. "Then your mom must be a fox."

Alaina chuckled. "I'll tell her you said that." She quickly turned serious again. "I'm like my mom in every way, Rye...not my sister or my father. I've never gotten off by hurting people."

He looked at her for several moments, his gaze moving over her hair, her face, her body. It lingered on her breasts longer than anywhere else before returning to her face. "I won't be rude to you again, Alaina."

"So we'll start fresh." She held out her hand to him. "Hi. I'm Alaina May. I have a remodeling job for you."

With humor twinkling in his eyes again, Rye shook her hand. "I accept your job."

She held back the gasp of pleasure at the touch of his skin on hers. It wasn't easy. Being close to Rye kept her hormones in a constant frenzy.

Rye released her hand. "I'll call my dad and see if he can meet us."

"Okay."

He turned and walked back to his desk. Alaina admired his broad shoulders in the brown T-shirt, his ass in the tight jeans. Doing physical work for a living had given him an amazing body.

He's off limits, Alaina. He's made that very clear.

Besides, she had her bed-and-breakfast to occupy her life. She didn't have time for a man, not even one as sexy as Rye.

She slipped back into her chair as Rye hung up the receiver. "Dad will meet us there in twenty minutes. That gives us time to stop at the donut shop for coffee and hot apple fritters."

She smiled. "Perfect."

* * * * *

Alaina had barely known Kenneth Coleman when she was in school, but she did remember him as a kind man who served on the volunteer fire department and the city council. She didn't remember him as being so handsome. Streaks of gray highlighted his dark brown hair. A neatly trimmed Van Dyke reflected the same brown with gray streaks. He was trim and fit, having a better body in his mid-fifties than a lot of men she knew in their twenties or thirties. There was no doubt where his sons got their looks.

He greeted her with a warm smile after Rye made the introductions. "It's nice to meet you, Alaina."

"You too, Mr. Coleman."

"Kenneth, please. We'll be working together for a while, so there's no reason to be formal."

"Alaina has a lot of ideas of what she wants to do, Dad. I told her I can do the work, but want to leave the designing up to you."

Kenneth lifted a leather portfolio holding a white legal pad. "I'm ready. Let's go through the house room by room, Alaina, and you can tell me your ideas."

It became obvious to Alaina within five minutes that father and son had worked together many times as they bounced ideas off each other. It was also obvious that they were very close. Jealousy curled in her tummy. She'd never had a close relationship with her father. Luckily her mother had always been there for her, even when she was hurting so much from her husband's infidelity. Alaina thanked God every day that her mother had finally left her father and started a new life in a different city. She adored her stepfather. He made her mom happy, and that made him very special in Alaina's eyes.

They spent over two hours going through every room on the first two floors while Kenneth and Rye took notes and measurements. There wasn't anything Alaina suggested that the men said couldn't be done. They sometimes offered a different suggestion than her original idea, which was always better than the way she'd imagined something.

Coleman Construction's impeccable reputation wasn't an exaggeration.

"All that's left is the attic and turret," Rye said to Alaina. "Do you want to look at it now?"

Alaina nodded. "I want to see it all."

Rye led the way to a small door at the west end of the second floor. It fell off the hinges when he pulled it open. He leaned it against the wall. "I'm surprised more doors haven't fallen off the hinges when we've opened them."

Alaina peeked through the opening to see a set of narrow stairs. Only one person at a time would be able to climb them. "I'll let you go first and knock down the cobwebs."

Rye's mouth twisted to one side. "Gee thanks."

She followed Rye up the stairs, biting her lip to keep from laughing when she heard Kenneth's chuckle. Each step creaked when Rye put his weight on it, but none broke. The temperature rose as they climbed, until it was quite warm in the stairwell. She was no construction expert, but knew it would be unbearably hot in the attic during the height of summer.

Tiny dust particles danced in the sunlight flowing through the east-facing turret. Alaina immediately fell in love with the charming area. A dusty, faded cushion covered the window seat that circled the three sides of the bay window. The tall glass looked as if it hadn't been washed in a century.

She turned and walked farther into the attic. It ran the length and width of the house.

"This is amazing," Alaina said, smiling at the two men. "I love it."

"I told Alaina she could make two or three bedrooms up here," Rye said to his father.

"That won't be a problem." Kenneth made another note on his pad. "There's plenty of room for three suites with private bathrooms."

"Will it be too hot for guests?"

"Not when I get through with it," Rye said. "Each floor will have its own central heating and cooling unit. The whole house will be well insulated and have new windows and doors besides the new roof. Basically, we'll gut the house and start fresh. New wiring, new plumbing, the works."

"Can my room be here?"

"Is that what you want?"

She gazed at the turret, imagining the sun waking her every morning. She'd like nothing better. She nodded. "Yes."

"Then that's what we'll do. Unless..." He stopped.

"Unless what?" Alaina asked.

"I haven't computed out the cost yet, Alaina. You're looking at a lot of money to do the job right."

"The cost doesn't matter."

"Cost *always* matters."

"Rye, I promise it doesn't matter. I have the financing. I won't give you a blank check, but I want the house to sparkle when you're finished with it."

"I'll give you every break I can."

"I appreciate that."

He continued to look into her eyes. The room suddenly seemed warmer and Alaina didn't think it had anything to do with the sun shining in the windows.

Rye cleared his throat and faced his father. "Do you have everything you need, Dad?"

"For now. I'll start a draft of the plans and let y'all look at them for approval." He looked at Alaina. "Do you have any questions for me?"

"Not that I can think of now."

"Rye will give you my cell phone number. Call me if you think of anything."

Alaina smiled at him. "Thank you, Kenneth."

"See you later, Dad."

Kenneth waved at them over his shoulder as he started down the steep staircase. The large room now seemed smaller as well as warmer with just her and Rye in it. She wasn't sure what to say to him now that they were alone.

"Do you have any questions for me?" he asked.

Yes. Will you take me against the wall again?

Alaina slipped her hands into the back pockets of her jeans to keep from reaching out for Rye. "Do you need a deposit from me before you start anything?"

"I usually get one, yeah."

"Can I write a personal check to you or would you rather I get a cashier's check?"

"A personal check will be fine." That crooked smile she was starting to recognize touched his lips. "If Bella Olinghouse accepted your check, I can too." He slipped his pen above his ear. "Are you ready to go?"

Alaina nodded. She turned and started for the door. A cold blast of air flowed over her once she stepped close to the turret. She shivered.

"Did you feel that?" she asked Rye.

"Feel what?"

"The cold air."

"You couldn't have felt any cold air. It has to be at least eighty degrees in here."

"Then explain this." She lifted her arm, which had goose bumps scattered across it.

Rye ran his fingertips over the pebbled skin. "Strange. I didn't feel any cold air, Alaina."

"You don't suppose this house is haunted, do you?"

She'd asked the question in jest, yet a part of her wondered if there could be something...otherworldly in the old house. It held a lot of history for Rye's family.

And hers.

"Lanville is a small town with a lot of people who like to spread gossip," Rye said. "There isn't much that goes on that doesn't get back to me. I've never heard of anyone claiming to see or hear ghosts in this house, not even as a joke."

Alaina slowly looked around the large room. She felt...something. She didn't know what to call it, whether a presence or simply a feeling of something—or *someone*—here with them. It didn't frighten her, but intrigued her.

"Maybe it's just the excitement of knowing the house will be mine soon. When will you start working on it?"

"Dax, Griff and I will pick up supplies this weekend. We may be able to start as early as Monday."

Alaina clasped her hands together beneath her chin. This was really going to happen. Stevens House would be her new home in a few months. She could hardly wait to tell Kelcey and Emma.

"Knowing how quickly my dad works, he'll have that draft for you to look at tomorrow. And you can get together with Dax to talk about paint colors. It'll be a while before we'll do any painting, but he can pick up some of those paint sample cards for you."

"I already have dozens of them. I've been checking out the building supplies warehouses for weeks. I've already picked out most of the light fixtures and ceiling fans. Oh, and the crown molding."

Rye chuckled. "You were determined to buy this house, weren't you?"

She nodded.

"Why this house? You told Bella it called to you the first time you saw it. What's so special about it?"

Alaina thought of the book she carried in her purse...the book that explained so much about her family, yet left many questions unanswered. She hoped to find all the answers in this house.

Until she found the answers, she wasn't ready to tell anyone about the book.

"My purse is in your truck. I can write that check to you now before I leave Lanville."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to Dallas. I want to tell my housemates my good news. I'll spend the night at home and be back tomorrow."

She turned and headed for the staircase, Rye close behind her. At her car, she removed her purse, dug through it for her checkbook, then joined Rye at his pickup. She snagged the pen from behind his ear. "Is five thousand okay?"

"That'll be fine."

She wrote out the check and handed it to Rye with his pen. She had no reason to hang around since their business for today was done, yet she didn't want to leave him. Despite their shaky start this morning, they'd been civil to each other for the last couple of hours.

"I have an appointment with the sheriff in fifteen minutes," Rye said.

"Oh sure. I'll, uh, be on my way."

"See you tomorrow."

Alaina slipped into her car. Once she pulled away from Stevens House, she looked in her rearview mirror. Rye stood by his truck, watching her drive away.

Chapter Seven

April 15, 1937

Laura came home early to help our mother. She has been ill for several days. We thought it was just a cold, but it may be something more serious. Her cough has grown deeper and more persistent. Laura insisted we need to take our mother to see the doctor in Dallas. That would be a long and expensive trip, but our father agreed with Laura. He said we would take our mother first thing in the morning.

That despicable man showed up at the store this afternoon with his "personal physician". Laura was so grateful, I thought she would hug him. I managed to smile and thank him, but I doubt if there was any sincerity in my eyes. He didn't bring in a doctor simply to help my mother...he did it to get closer to Laura.

* * * * *

"You didn't even get the house appraised, Alaina," Kelcey said. "How do you know it's worth anything?"

"It's worth everything to me." She glanced at her housemate and good friend in the passenger seat. She knew Kelcey couldn't help but think like an accountant. "Bella Olinghouse sold the house and twenty-two acres to me for twenty-five thousand dollars. The land alone is worth over a hundred grand. It was a bargain."

"I still think you should've talked to other construction firms before you hired that one. You gave him a deposit without even talking about a contract!"

Alaina bit her tongue to keep from sighing. Kelcey was a year younger than she, but she acted so much older. She was so intelligent, maybe even a genius, yet she didn't know how to let loose and have fun. Her whole life consisted of numbers and spreadsheets. Alaina had lived with the two women for three years. In that time, she couldn't remember Kelcey having one date.

Emma, on the other hand, dated a new guy practically every week. Glancing in the rearview mirror, Alaina saw the petite brunette was still curled up in the backseat, sound asleep. Alaina had woken Emma at six-thirty this morning, much earlier than her friend normally rose after the dinner shift as a chef at one of Dallas' finest restaurants. She'd grumbled about people who woke up at the crack of dawn until she got in the car, where she promptly went to sleep.

"What do you know about this construction firm?" Kelcey asked, bringing Alaina back to the present.

"I know they have a sterling reputation." She'd debated whether or not to tell her friends that she knew the Colemans, or had known them when she was a young girl.

She'd already decided she wouldn't tell them about the incident with Rye in Stevens House. Emma would think it was cool, but Kelcey would harp on Alaina about having spontaneous sex with a man without knowing his medical history. "I went to school with them when I was barely a teenager. I trust them to do a great job on my house."

"Went to school with whom?" Emma asked.

Alaina glanced in the mirror again in time to see Emma yawn. "The Coleman brothers."

"You didn't tell us that," Kelcey said in a tone that implied Alaina was hiding more information.

"I didn't know until I saw Rye. I assumed his father owned the business. It was a shock to walk in Coleman Construction and learn that Rye, Dax and Griff own it."

"Rye, Dax and Griff." Emma released a sexy growl. "Damn, I love those names. And you said they're triplets?"

Alaina nodded.

"Three brothers, three of us. Perfect."

"Rye is single," Alaina said, taking a right on the road that led into Lanville. "I don't know about the other brothers."

"I'll find out."

"Not for me," Kelcey told Emma over her shoulder. "I'm not interested."

"How do you know you're not interested until you meet one of them? A Coleman triplet might be the perfect man for you."

"I don't have time for men. Besides," Kelcey said, turning in the seat to look at Emma, "we're both going to be busy helping Alaina."

"We can help Alaina and still have fun. You are way too serious, Kelc."

"And you're way too easy, Emma."

"What, I'm easy just because I don't shy away from a man I find attractive? I like orgasms, Kelc. Maybe you'd lighten up if you had more of them."

"Okay, that's enough, children." Alaina turned onto County Road 311. "We're three miles from the house. Play nice."

Emma leaned forward and wrapped her hands around the headrests. "I can hardly wait to see it. What does the kitchen look like?"

"A mess. The whole house is a mess, but there's so much potential there. It'll be amazing when the refurbishment is done."

Alaina's breath caught in her throat when the house came into view. That happened every time she saw it. She still had trouble believing it belonged to her.

She wished she could snap her fingers and all the remodeling be done now.

No, that wasn't true. If it was done now, she wouldn't have any reason to see Rye.

Alaina drove around to the back of the house and parked. She took a deep breath and faced her friends. "What do you think?"

Emma's eyes sparkled with excitement. "I love it. I agree with you, Lainy. It'll be amazing."

Alaina turned to her other friend. Kelcey didn't look nearly as excited as Emma. "What do you think, Kelcey?"

"I, uh... Well. It's definitely... Hmm."

"C'mon, Kelc, show a little enthusiasm. This means a lot to Alaina."

Kelcey looked at Alaina with concern in her eyes. "I'm worried you're getting in over your head. You're going to have to spend so much money to fix up this... monstrosity."

"I know that. I have the money. *You* know that."

"Yes, and luckily I convinced you to invest half of your inheritance for the future."

Alaina caught herself before she rolled her eyes. Emma was right. Kelcey needed to let go and have fun much more often than she did. "This is important to me, Kelc. This is what I want to do with my life. You can understand that, right?"

Kelcey reached over and squeezed Alaina's hand. "Yes, I understand that. I support you one hundred percent, even if sometimes it sounds like I don't."

"Okay, now that we're all friends again," Emma said, "show us your house, Lainy."

Alaina led the way through the back door and into the kitchen. "Here's the room you'll want to see, Emma."

Emma stood in the middle of the room, eyes wide and mouth open. She slowly turned in a circle, gazing at everything from ceiling to floor. "Oh wow. Look at the woodwork in those cabinets. Well, what's left of the cabinets." She faced Alaina. "Are you going to duplicate the way the house looked when it was built?"

"As much as possible. I've done a lot of research about Victorian houses in this area. I want to keep the flavor of the house, yet have all the modern conveniences for my guests."

"And your cook," Emma said with a grin.

Alaina slipped her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "Emma, I don't think you—"

"Don't even go there if you're going to tell me I can't quit my job and work for you."

"You saw the town as we drove through it. There's nothing here that you're used to...no shopping, no movies, no theater, no—"

"I don't care. I told you I can always make a party. And Dallas isn't that far away. When we feel the urge to hit a club, it's only an hour's drive."

"I can't pay you what you earn now, at least not at first."

"I'm not worried about that. I have a nice nest egg."

"That nest egg won't last long if you don't contribute to it."

"If I didn't earn a dime, I could still live for a year. Will you stop worrying so much? You'll give yourself wrinkles. You're too young for Botox." Emma walked over to the cabinets and ran her hand over the dirty countertop. "I want either quartz or granite countertops. And ceramic tile behind the stove."

Apparently Emma had already made this her kitchen and the remodeling hadn't even started. "What else is on your wish list?" Alaina asked.

"I'll let you know," Emma said with a grin.

Alaina laughed. "While you're thinking about how else you can spend my money, I'll show you the rest of the house. Then I have an appointment at Coleman Construction to look at the draft of the blueprints."

"When do we eat?" Emma asked. "I'm starving."

"Alaina and I ate before we left Dallas," Kelcey said.

"Goody for you. I needed sleep more than food this morning."

"We'll have an early lunch, after I talk to Rye. How's that?"

"Works for me." Emma grinned again. "As long as you're buying."

* * * * *

"I think you need to widen that staircase to the attic, Rye," his father said.

"I agree. Griff will add more light fixtures too." He pointed to the area on his father's drawing that indicated Alaina's suite in the turret. "Alaina will love this."

"I hope so. Of course, this is simply a draft. She can make any changes she wants."

"You drew everything exactly how she described it. She can't help but love it."

"It's going to be a big job."

"Yeah. It'll keep us busy for several months."

Kenneth leaned back in his chair. "You still have reservations about accepting a job from Alesia's sister?"

Rye considered his father's question for several seconds before answering. "No. Dax and Griff were right. I can't let what happened with Alesia cloud my judgment. It's a big job, like you said, and good for the company. Alaina and I will work together, but that's all."

A flash of what happened between him and Alaina in Stevens House almost made Rye squirm, but he caught himself before he did anything to draw his father's suspicion.

He must not have succeeded, for his father's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure that's all?"

"Dad, I'm not going to get involved with Alesia's sister. That would be stupid, don't you think?"

Kenneth shrugged. "Not necessarily. She seems to be a lot different than Alesia. You and Dax and Griff are brothers, but you're completely different people."

His father had a point. Rye doubted if there could be any siblings as individual as he and his brothers.

"She's a lovely young lady," Kenneth said. "You can't deny that."

"No, I can't."

His father continued to study him, as if he expected him to say more about Alaina. "What?"

"Nothing." Kenneth looked back at the blueprint drafts. "I wonder if Bella has pictures of the house she'd share with Alaina. I'm sure Alaina wants it to look as much as possible like the original house."

Grateful for the change of subject back to Stevens House and off Alaina, Rye opened his mouth to comment when he heard the front door buzzer, announcing someone had entered. "I'll be right back, Dad."

Rye stepped into the front room. Alaina held the door for two other women to come in behind her. He glanced at the petite brunette and tall blonde, but his gaze quickly returned to Alaina. His heart did a funny tap dance in his chest at the sight of her.

Alaina smiled. "Hi. I brought my housemates with me to look at the house. This is Emma Keeton," she said, pointing to the brunette, "and Kelcey Ewing. Gals, this is Rye Coleman."

"Hi," Emma said with a huge smile. "Alaina said you're one of triplets. Are your brothers as gorgeous as you?"

A sputter of laughter escaped before Rye could stop it. No one could say Emma wasn't direct. "We favor each other."

"Great. Are they single?"

"Emma, behave!" Kelcey said sharply.

Emma waved a hand in the blonde's direction, but continued to look at Rye. "So, are they?"

Rye struggled not to laugh. He thought Emma was a little outrageous, which was exactly the type of woman Griff needed in his life. "Yes, they are."

"Goody."

He looked at Alaina to see her eyes sparkling with laughter. "We usually keep her on a leash, but she got free today."

Emma frowned at Alaina. "You're the one who told me Rye is gorgeous."

A blush filled Alaina's cheeks and she bit her bottom lip. Rye liked knowing she found him attractive.

So did Alesia. And look where that got you.

That sobering realization erased any thoughts of Emma, Griff or anyone else except Alaina and the fact that she was Alesia's sister. He couldn't trust her, and Rye could never become involved with a woman he couldn't trust.

Kenneth peeked around the corner. "Rye, invite the ladies in here to look at the drawings." He switched his attention to Alaina. "I have a rough draft. I'll make any changes you want before creating the final blueprints."

Rye led the way to the large table in the break room, where he and his father had laid out the house drawings. Emma made a detour toward the counter where the coffeepot sat. A sound of distress came from her throat. "There's no coffee!"

"I'll make another pot," Rye said.

"I'll do it," Kenneth said. "Show Alaina and her friends the drawings."

"Actually," Kelcey said, "I'd like to borrow your restroom first."

"Sure." Rye led Kelcey to another doorway. "To your left, turn the corner, and it's on the right."

With Kelcey gone, and his father and Emma across the room, that left him alone with Alaina. She wandered over to the table and touched the top sheet of the house drawings almost reverently. "Oh, Rye. This is wonderful."

"Sit down and look through all of them."

"Can I?"

Her wide smile and bright eyes reminded him of a child on Christmas morning. He couldn't help smiling at her. "Sure. They're for your house."

She sat and he took the chair next to her. Her eyes grew brighter and her smile widened with each page that she turned. "Kenneth, these are perfect. I love them."

Full mug of coffee in hand, Kenneth came back to the table. "These are only drafts. I can easily make changes."

"No no, they're perfect as is. I don't know what I would change."

"Dad has this really neat 3-D program. It almost feels real as you walk through the house. He can put in furniture, carpeting, paint on the walls, whatever you want."

"Sounds like fun," Emma said before she sipped her coffee.

"Sounds like something Kelcey would like to play with," Alaina said. "She loves technology stuff." She shifted in her chair to face Kenneth. "When can you have the actual blueprints done?"

"Probably tomorrow, but it might be Saturday."

Alaina clasped her hands beneath her chin as she looked at Rye. "Can you start working Monday, like you said?"

"I'll know for sure tomorrow. The city council meets tonight. I'm helping install some French doors at Bella's house this afternoon. I'll find out if she's done anything about applying for the rezoning."

"Ohmigod, I'm so excited, I can hardly stand it." She picked up the house drawings. "Can I keep these?" she asked Kenneth.

"Sure. I have everything on my computer."

"Great." She jumped up from her chair and turned to Emma. "Let's go back to the house and compare these with the rooms."

"Not until you feed me."

"Okay, okay, but you have to eat fast. Where's Kelc?"

"I'm here," Kelcey said, walking into the room. "What did I miss?"

"Lainy will tell you all about it while we eat." Emma hooked her hands around each woman's elbow. "Let's go."

Alaina waved with her free hand. "Call me when you know something, Rye."

"Will do."

Rye chuckled. "Quite a trio, aren't they?"

"It feels like they took all the oxygen with them," Kenneth said, grinning.

"Yeah."

"I didn't get the chance to speak to Kelcey, but Emma is a little spitfire. I like her almost as much as Alaina." Kenneth sipped his coffee, looking at Rye over the edge of the mug. "Yep, I really like Alaina."

Rye knew what his father was doing and he wouldn't let it happen. "I told you, I'm not getting involved with Alaina."

"Now did I say a word about you getting involved with her? I just said I like her."

"Yeah, and the next thing you'll be doing is having Mom invite her to Sunday dinner."

Kenneth grinned. "There's an idea."

"Dad—"

All traces of humor disappeared from Kenneth's face. "I want you to be happy, son."

"I know that, Dad. But Alaina May isn't the woman for me."

Chapter Eight

April 17, 1937

Our mother is much better, and Laura is sure it's because his personal physician helped her. He seems to be drawing her in tighter and tighter, like a spider wrapping a trapped insect in its web.

I'm so worried my sister is going to get caught in that web and never get out.

* * * * *

Dax greeted Rye with a huge smile. "Mornin', bro. Ready to start a new job?"

Rye stood in the middle of the living room of Stevens House, blueprints spread out on a piece of plywood held up by two sawhorses. "I'm ready, but knowing exactly where to start is a bitch."

"Someone's already working somewhere. I hear a lot of noise."

"Dusty, Jerry and Reuben are tearing off the roof."

"I noticed you've already arranged for three Dumpsters."

"We'll fill them up fast. Just about everything in this house will have to be replaced."

Dax peered over Rye's shoulder at the drawings. "Do you want me to work in a room with you, or stick me somewhere else?"

"Let's wait for Griff. We need to know how much electrical work he'll have to do."

"Is Fred coming?"

"Yeah, he'll be here about eight-thirty. He had to take his daughter to school this morning."

"He'll probably have to do as much plumbing work as Griff will electrical."

"Yeah." Sighing, Rye glanced around the room. "I don't know why Alaina was so adamant that she buy *this* house. She could've built a brand new house for less than what it's going to cost her to fix up this one."

Dax followed Rye's gaze around the room. "Yeah, but this house has a history."

Rye snorted. "That's for sure."

"I'm not talking about our family's history with this house. It has...character. A new house would be sterile with no emotion to it. This house has a heart."

It was no wonder his brother was such a hit with the ladies. He had a poet's soul. "You spout off drivel like that to your dates?"

Dax flashed Rye a wide grin. "Works every time."

Rory and Paul came in the front door, tool belts around their waists and lunch boxes in their hands. Rye pointed the way to the dining room so his workers could put away their lunches. He'd arrived almost an hour ago with enough cleaning supplies to make a spot for his men to take their breaks without having to sit in filth. He'd also brought two card tables with folding chairs, a small microwave, a coffee pot and colorful plastic mugs, and a huge ice chest full of bottled water and other cold drinks. Coleman Construction didn't furnish the workers' lunches, but Rye always made sure there was plenty on hand to drink.

The rest of Coleman's crew arrived shortly after Rory and Paul. As soon as Griff and Fred arrived, Rye could call everyone together to discuss who would do what and where.

Rye returned to studying the blueprints and making notes on his legal pad. A movement in the doorway leading to the hall caught his attention. He looked to his right to see Alaina walking toward him. She wore jeans so faded, they should've gone into a rag bag a long time ago. Her loose navy T-shirt hung to mid-thigh, a red kerchief covered her hair. Her eyelashes had been thickened with mascara, but he couldn't see evidence of any other makeup. She carried a large plastic container and a matching smaller one.

"Hi," she said, smiling. "I'll put my stuff in the kitchen and get started."

"Get started with what?"

"Whatever you want me to do. I'm here to work."

When he'd called Alaina Friday to tell her the city council had approved the rezoning and his company would start work Monday as planned, Rye never imagined she would show up today. He had assumed she'd do some minor painting when it was time for that, but there wouldn't be any need for painting for several weeks. "What?"

"I told you I'm going to work right alongside your men."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you meant *now*. There's nothing for you to do."

"Hey, I can lift a hammer just like you. I may be a woman, but I'm strong. I can tote and carry and do...stuff."

"Alaina –"

"I brought cookies." She lifted the large plastic container in her hands. "Emma baked last night. I have chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin, and peanut butter. You haven't lived until you've eaten Emma's peanut butter cookies. She would've made snickerdoodles too, but ran out of time. They're my favorite."

"Alaina, I haven't talked to my men yet about who will be working where."

"I waved to the guys on the roof and told them about the cookies."

"Who has cookies?" Dax asked, walking up behind Alaina.

"I do." She turned and smiled at Dax. "My housemate baked last night." She opened the lid so he could peek inside.

"I think I'm in love. Is your housemate single?"

"She is."

"Hot damn," Dax said as he snatched one of the oatmeal raisin cookies.

Rye frowned. "Could we get back to business, Dax?"

"Don't mind him," Dax said to Alaina. "He's always grumpy when we start a new job. I'm Dax, Rye's younger brother."

"Alaina May."

"I'll show you where to put your stuff."

"Thanks." She glanced at Rye over her shoulder as she followed Dax out of the room. He could see the satisfaction in her eyes that she'd gotten her way.

It appeared Alaina was staying, whether Rye wanted her to or not.

A moment after Alaina and Dax disappeared, Griff walked into the room. Rye winced. His youngest brother had lost more weight. He would be nothing but skin and bones if he didn't start eating. Rye had ordered a cheeseburger and fries for Griff when he met with his brothers and father at Boot Scootin' last week. Griff had taken three bites and pushed away the plate. He'd finished his beer and ordered another one, yet Rye knew Griff needed to eat solid food.

He understood his brother's grief and wanted to help him, but didn't know how. Nothing he or his family had done had snapped Griff out of his I-don't-give-a-shit-what-happens-to-me attitude.

"Hey, bro," Rye said.

Griff nodded in greeting.

"How's it going at the mayor's house?"

"Good. That's why I'm here. I have to pick up some supplies in Stephenville. Thought I'd check if you need me to pick up anything for this job too."

"I haven't made a list yet. But if you want to take the blueprints and my notes and wander around, you can get whatever you need for the electrical stuff. Or at least a start of what you'll need."

"Okay."

Paperwork in hand, Griff turned to leave the room. He almost ran into Alaina as she came back in, coffee mug in hand. He quickly stepped back to keep the hot liquid from splashing on his chest.

"I'm so sorry!" Alaina said.

"My fault. I wasn't watching where I was going."

"Alaina, this is my brother Griff. Griff, Alaina May, the woman who bought this house."

He dipped his head in greeting, yet didn't smile. "It's nice to meet you."

"You too. I'm sorry again about the coffee."

"No problem." He glanced back at Rye and gestured with the paperwork. "I'll bring this back to you in a few minutes."

"We'll have our meeting as soon as Fred gets here."

Griff waved again with the paperwork before leaving the living room. Alaina watched him go, a frown on her face.

"What's wrong?" Rye asked.

"He seems...sad. Is he okay?"

Rye didn't feel it was his place to talk to Alaina about Griff losing his wife. "Yeah, he's fine."

She didn't look convinced. "He's a lot thinner than you and Dax."

Rye was saved from thinking of an explanation about Griff when Fred came into the room. Now that his entire crew had arrived, they could all sit down and discuss a work schedule.

"Alaina, do me a favor and round up all the guys and tell them to meet me in the dining room."

"Sure."

She set her mug on the piece of plywood and strode from the room. Rye glanced at Fred in time to see his gaze fastened on Alaina's ass. Jealousy surged through his body so quickly, it almost stole his breath. No one had the right to look at Alaina but him.

Fred grinned. "Damn, I do like a woman in tight jeans."

Rye wanted to yell at his plumber to keep his eyes off Alaina's ass. He cleared his throat to keep from doing that. "You're married."

"And I adore my wife, but I ain't dead. Alaina is a mighty fine-looking lady. Will she be around here all the time?"

"She said she's going to work right alongside my men."

Fred tapped Rye lightly on the upper arm. "Well, she beats looking at your ugly mug all day."

Rye chuckled. He couldn't argue with that.

Alaina came back in the room. "They're all on their way."

"Good. Grab your coffee and we'll meet them in the dining room."

* * * * *

Rye sat on the floor in the turret. Just sitting wasn't enough. With a groan, he lay back on the floor, his arms straight out from his body. He didn't think he'd ever worked so hard or been so tired in his life. The last five days, he'd worked from seven a.m. to at least seven p.m. in Stevens House. He didn't demand the same hours from his workers, or his brothers. There was so much to do here, he felt as if the extra hours were necessary. Normally the one in charge, doing so much physical work had proven to him that he wasn't in as good a shape as he'd thought.

Dax had offered to stay late every evening. So had Griff. Rye knew Dax had a date almost every night. Griff spent his evenings alone in his house, nursing his grief. Just because Rye felt a need to work didn't mean he'd ask the same of his brothers.

He stared up at the inside of the new roof. His guys would start putting on the shingles next week. Then the inside work began here in the attic with insulation and a new ceiling. Every room had been gutted. Walls had been torn down, flooring torn up. The house was little more than a shell. That would change beginning Monday.

Each step in the process made Alaina as giddy as a six-year-old. She hadn't kidded him when she'd said she planned to work with his guys. She'd pulled nails, hauled flooring and pieces of wood to the Dumpsters, swept up sawdust and trash. As quickly as the crew made a mess, she was right there to clean it. She got along with everyone. All his guys adored her like a little sister. Of course, part of their adoration had to do with her bringing goodies almost every day that her housemate baked.

Rye didn't think of her as a sister. His feelings ran much deeper than that. So deep that he hadn't taken a warm shower in a week.

She not only filled his mind during the day, but also at night. His dreams were filled with the two of them together here in Stevens House, or his house, or his office at Coleman Construction. He'd kiss her until they were both breathless, then thrust his cock into her hot, creamy pussy. He'd fuck her over and over, never able to get enough of her body. Those little sounds in her throat that signaled her climax were sweeter than the most beautiful music. She'd throw back her head, arch her back. Rye would feel the spasms in her channel milk his cock, driving him to his orgasm.

He'd awaken sweaty and tangled in the sheets, his heart pounding, his shaft so hard he could drive nails with it.

His hand was a poor substitute when he wanted Alaina.

Rye knew the history of her father, a heartless rogue who fucked any woman who spread her legs. Alesia had been the same way, gladly spreading her legs for a hard dick. He wished he could be sure Alaina hadn't inherited the same genes as Alesia or their father.

She'd left at three today, stating she had some personal things to do. Rye couldn't help wondering if she'd gone home to get ready for a date. Maybe she'd go out to dinner with her guy, talk and laugh while they ate. Then she'd go home with him and spend the night making love.

Rye rubbed his stomach. A hollow feeling always formed deep inside his gut when he thought about Alaina with another man. He didn't want anyone else kissing her, touching her. He sure as hell didn't want another man making love to her.

"Rye?"

He lifted his head when he heard Alaina's voice. That wasn't possible. She'd left over four hours ago. His thoughts were so filled with her, he'd started imagining he could hear her when she wasn't there.

"Rye, where are you?"

Okay, that definitely wasn't his imagination. Rye sat up. "In the turret," he called out.

Footsteps sounded on the steps. A few moments later, Alaina appeared in the doorway. She smiled. "Hi."

"Hi." His gaze passed over her, noting the gold sleeveless shell, ivory slacks and high-heeled sandals the same shade as her slacks. Her makeup made her eyes look twice as big as usual, her hair fell in a tumble of curls to her breasts.

Stunning. That's the first word to pop into his head to describe her.

"You look amazing."

"Thank you." She glanced down at herself. "I've worn work clothes all week. I thought I should show you that I do know how to clean up." She tossed a thick blanket at him. Rye automatically caught it. "Spread that out on the floor."

Only then did he notice she carried a large wicker basket. "We're having a picnic?"

"We are. Emma made some of her specialties."

Rye stood, shook out the blanket and spread it over the floor. "You're lucky to have a housemate who cooks or you'd starve."

She shot him a look that clearly said she didn't appreciate his comment. "For your information, I do know how to cook, and pretty darn well. But Emma *loves* to cook and she's incredible. Why should I say no when she offers?"

Dropping to her knees on the blanket, Alaina lifted the lid of the basket. Rye looked at his hands. Dirt filled every crease of his palms.

Before he could leave the room to wash, Alaina handed him a package of moist towelettes. "Clean your hands, then you can open the wine."

She could be a bossy little thing when she wanted to. Rye struggled not to laugh. "Yes, ma'am."

"I brought merlot. I hope you like it."

"I'm sure I will." He sat on the blanket, cleansed his hands, and opened the bottle of red wine. He splashed a generous amount in the two crystal wineglasses she handed him.

"I popped these in the microwave downstairs to heat everything." She removed a plastic lid from one of the to-go plates. The scent of beef curled around Rye's nose and sent his salivary glands into overdrive. "Beef tenderloin stuffed with lobster, twice baked potatoes, and fresh asparagus."

"Wow."

Alaina grinned. "Does that mean you approve?"

"What's not to approve?"

She handed him the plate, then a linen napkin wrapped around silverware. "I also have Emma's melt-in-your-mouth yeast rolls dripping with butter. *Real* butter. Emma doesn't believe in margarine. And quadruple chocolate brownies for dessert."

A sharp knife was wrapped inside the napkin along with the fork and spoon, but Rye didn't need it. He cut into the tenderloin with his fork and took a huge bite. His taste buds immediately did a happy dance in his mouth.

His expression must have shown Alaina his pleasure for she grinned again. "Wonderful, isn't it?"

"My mom is a great cook, but I haven't had anything that tasted this good since the last time Griff prepared a gourmet meal."

"Griff cooks?"

"He did before..." Rye stopped, still unwilling to talk about Jana. "He doesn't cook much anymore, or eat much."

"That's obvious by how slim he is. Did something happen to make him lose his appetite?"

"I don't feel comfortable talking about it, Alaina."

"Oh. Okay. I didn't mean to pry."

"You weren't. I understand your curiosity." As much time as Alaina spent with his guys and around town, she'd learn about Jana eventually. Rye decided he might as well tell her now. "Griff's wife was killed in November in a bank robbery. He's having a hard time getting on with his life."

"I can understand that." She removed her plate from the basket. "Were they married very long?"

"Seven years."

She winced. "How sad. I'm so sorry for him."

"Me too. They were very happy. He adored her."

"Thank you for telling me. It explains a lot about his mood. Does he ever smile?"

"I haven't seen him smile since Jana died."

Alaina reached back in the basket for the container of rolls. The cowl neck of her shell meant Rye received an enticing view of her cleavage every time she leaned over. He remembered the feel of her breast in his hand. He'd only touched her through her shirt and bra, but he'd felt her hard nipple in his palm, beneath his thumb.

Thoughts of Griff and Jana and everyone else fled from his mind as he imagined sucking Alaina's nipple into his mouth, feeling it on his tongue. He hadn't seen her body when he'd taken her against the wall in this house. The next time, he wanted her completely naked so he could lick every part of her.

There isn't going to be a next time, so get that thought out of your head right now.

"I've met a lot of people at the post office, grocery store, places like that." Alaina tore her roll in half. "They're all very curious about me and the house."

"Word gets around quick in a small town."

"Most of them have been very nice and friendly. Some of the older ones have pointed out what happened here so long ago with your great-grandfather."

Rye forked up his last bite of beef, his gaze focused on his plate. "You know about that?"

"I lived here until I was thirteen, Rye. I was young, but I heard all about the murder. How could I not have known about the only murder in Lanville for over two hundred and fifty years?"

Setting aside his plate, he looked at Alaina again. "My great-grandfather didn't kill that woman."

"He was convicted and hanged for it."

"I don't care. I'll never believe he did it. My grandfather was only two months old when Laura Cummins was murdered. Why would my great-grandfather risk his marriage and the future of his new son by stabbing her? That never made sense."

"You're right. It doesn't make sense."

Rye set his empty plate on the blanket. "My great-grandmother had nowhere to go, no family to help her. She moved in with my great-great-grandparents because she had no choice. She couldn't go anywhere in town without people whispering behind her back about her husband being a murderer."

"I imagine that was very hard for her."

"*She* had nothing to do with the murder, yet people still blamed her for it."

"I could never blame anyone for something a member of their family did."

"Neither could I."

"Really?" She tilted her head and looked him in the eyes. "Isn't that what you're doing with me?"

Chapter Nine

April 18, 1937

It was such a beautiful day, Laura and I walked home from church instead of riding with our parents. One of the nice things about living in a small town is that everything is close. We live only half a mile from the church. It's nice to stretch our legs after Brother Winston's sermon.

He pulled up beside us in his fancy car and offered us a ride home. Laura smiled and blushed. I know she would've accepted his invitation if I hadn't quickly declined it. The black look he gave me chilled me to my soul. Why can't my sister see what an evil man he is?

* * * * *

Bull's-eye. Alaina had gotten Rye with that question...one he obviously didn't know how to answer. He stared at her, his last bite of roll halfway to his mouth as if he'd forgotten he held it.

"You're nice to me when other people are around. But if I get too close to you or accidentally touch you, you skitter away like you've been shocked by a live wire. I promise I'm not poison."

He laid the roll on his empty plate, his eyes downcast. "I know that."

"Whether you believe me or not, I don't make a habit of having sex with a man the first time I meet him. I know technically I knew you years ago, but you didn't remember me and I've changed a lot in sixteen years."

"We both have."

"We were scorching together, Rye. And to be honest with you, I wouldn't mind it happening again."

His gaze met hers, but she couldn't tell his thoughts by his blank expression. "Is that why you brought the picnic, to put me in the mood?"

It hurt that he thought she would try to trick him. Alesia must have trampled his heart into little bits. "No. I brought the picnic to thank you for all your hard work. I know you've put in longer hours than anyone else. I wanted to do something nice for you. I obviously made a mistake."

Alaina began to gather up their items to put in the basket. She hoped she could get out of here before she burst into tears.

Rye's hand wrapped around her wrist. "The picnic was nice. I appreciate it."

Not a word of apology for the way he'd treated her. She should finish packing up the basket, get out of here and never come back. He had all her ideas. She wouldn't have to step inside Stevens House again until the last coat of paint dried.

Deep inside her soul, she knew it hadn't been simply sex between them. There had been a connection, something she'd never experienced with any other man. He was still a little broken from his relationship with her sister. That shouldn't keep him from looking for love again.

It was right in front of him if he'd open his eyes and see her.

His hand tightened on her wrist as she reached for the empty wine bottle. "Alaina, I'm sorry."

The damn tears were almost choking her. She kept her head lowered while she continued to pack the basket so he wouldn't see them shimmering in her eyes.

"Hey." He cupped her chin and turned her face toward his. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

A tear escaped her eye. Alaina reached up to wipe it away. Rye caught her hand before she could. He sipped the tear from her cheek with his lips.

The sweet gesture melted her heart. She turned her face and touched her lips to his.

He tasted of wine mixed with the flavor of man. His lips were soft and a bit slick from the butter he'd eaten. His mustache felt almost as soft as his lips.

His hand cradled her neck, his thumb brushing the sensitive area beneath her ear. He tilted his head ever so slightly and parted his lips. The tip of his tongue slid along the seam of her mouth, making the kiss even more delicious. Wanting more, Alaina touched his tongue with hers.

It must have been the signal Rye needed. The kiss went from gently exploring to hot and passionate in a heartbeat. His other hand cradled her neck too, holding her head in place while he ravished her mouth.

A kiss shouldn't make her so weak. A kiss shouldn't make her breasts swell so quickly, her pussy moisten in mere moments in anticipation of Rye's possession. Desire took time to build...or at least it always had for her. With Rye, everything was different than with other men. A look from those deep brown eyes was all Alaina needed for her body to respond.

She couldn't help the moan when Rye drove his tongue into her mouth. She wanted to feel it on her nipples, between her legs...

"You kiss like you can't get enough," he whispered against her lips.

"I can't. Not from you."

He pulled back a few inches, looked into her eyes. His thumbs stroked her lips, over and over. Alaina nipped the tip of one, then licked the bite.

Desire flared in his eyes. "This isn't exactly the best place for a seduction."

"I don't need candlelight and soft music, Rye." She took one of his hands and drew it down to her breast. "I only need you."

He watched his hand as it molded to her flesh. Alaina's eyes wanted to drift closed in pleasure, but she forced them to stay open so she could see him.

"Your breast is so firm." He squeezed her gently. "God, you feel good."

She couldn't stop her eyes from closing when Rye cradled her other breast. Alaina arched her back and pressed her breasts into his hands. He kneaded and lifted the mounds as his thumbs circled the areolas...coming close to but not touching her nipples. She was ready to grab his thumbs and guide them where she needed them the most when he flicked her nipples.

She gasped in pleasure.

"Do you like this?" he asked, rubbing her nipples with his thumbs.

"Yesssss."

"What do you want me to do?"

Alaina opened her eyes and gazed into his. Rising to her knees, she ran her fingers into his hair. "Make love to me."

A pained look crossed his face to mix with the desire in his eyes. "Alaina, I've worked all day. I need a shower before—"

She covered his mouth with her fingers. "If you don't get sweaty making love, then you aren't doing it right."

His eyes sparkled with humor as he chuckled. He removed her hand from his mouth and kissed her palm. "You have a point."

"So," she said, running her free hand through his hair again, "are you saying you *do* get sweaty when making love?"

"Oh yeah." He kissed her palm again. "Sweaty." His teeth scraped over the side of her hand. "Hot." He moved up her arm and licked the inside of her elbow. "Wet."

Wet was definitely a good description. Alaina's channel blossomed, moistened. Her clit gently throbbed. She longed to feel Rye's touch against that intimate part of her body...first his fingers, then his tongue, then his cock.

He grasped the hem of her shell and pulled it over her head. His gaze snapped to her breasts. She'd worn the prettiest bra she owned, a wisp of ivory satin and lace. Cut low in front, it barely covered her nipples.

"Damn," he muttered.

"Is that a good damn or a bad damn?"

"It's a you're-so-gorgeous-I-can't-think damn." He cradled her breasts and lifted them until they bulged over the top of her bra. "These are beautiful, Alaina."

It took all of her concentration to speak when he started rubbing her nipples again. "Are you a breast man?"

"Guilty. I like curves." Leaning forward, he dropped a gentle kiss on each mound. "Lots of curves."

His mouth felt incredible on her skin. "Wh-what else do you like?"

The front clasp of her bra loosened. "Big, hard nipples." Warm lips closed over one tip. The flick of his tongue made her moan. "Soft skin," he mumbled before moving to

the other nipple for the same teasing flick. "Wide hips." His hands spanned her waist, slid down to her hips. "A firm, tight ass." Those magic hands traveled to her buns and squeezed. "You have it all, Alaina...everything I love about a woman's body."

She was about to say the same thing about his body when he drew her nipple into his mouth again and suckled. Any words she might have said died in her throat. She closed her eyes and let the sensations wash over her, through her. Rye continued to caress her ass with one hand while he kneaded her breasts with the other. His mouth moved back and forth between her nipples. He licked, nibbled, sucked. With each swipe of his tongue, each nip of his teeth, her clit pulsed.

She'd never come from a man's attention to her nipples. None of her past lovers had given them more than a few seconds of time. Rye seemed in no hurry to move on to other parts of her body.

That worked for her.

Perspiration popped out on her forehead, in the small of her back. Heat flooded her body. Her breathing turned choppy. Alaina clasped Rye's head to her breast, silently asking him to continue the sweet torment on her nipples.

Cool air flowed over the perspiration on her back when Rye unfastened her slacks. He slid his hand inside and cupped her cheek, left bare by her thong. She thought she heard him growl deep in his throat before he sucked harder on her nipple.

Pleasure exploded in her body, rushing up and down her spine, stealing her breath. Her body trembled as the walls of her pussy contracted. She pumped her hips as the orgasm went on and on, desperately needing a hard cock to fill her.

Rye gave each nipple one more lick. "You're even more beautiful when you come."

Alaina gazed into those dark brown eyes. She saw heat, longing, but also something more tender...an emotion she'd always yearned to see in a man's eyes.

She kissed him softly. The kiss didn't remain soft as desire flared back to life. Alaina shrugged out of her bra, tugged off Rye's T-shirt and tossed it aside. Then she froze.

She'd been intimate with this man, yet had never seen him without a shirt. She moved back enough so she could...well, gawk. He was ripped and buff and muscled, not from working out in a gym but from his profession. Wide shoulders, broad chest lightly dusted with dark hair, small brown nipples and areolas, biceps to die for, and a flat stomach and abdomen that she would swear had to be a ten-pack, not just six.

"Oh my," she whispered.

She touched the middle of his chest, let her fingers trail down the line of hair to his navel. The outline of his hard cock was clearly evident in his worn jeans. Holding his gaze with hers, she unfastened his belt buckle.

His hand tightened on the cheek of her ass.

She released the first snap on his fly. He laid his hand over hers after she released the second snap. "I don't have a condom."

"I do. In the basket."

One eyebrow quirked in an "oh yeah?" gesture. Heat flooded Alaina's face. "Just in case we decided to...do this."

"Just in case."

She refused to lie to him. "I was hoping. Rye, I've wanted you since I was twelve years old. I had no idea what sex was at that age, but I knew looking at you made my heart beat funny and my breath catch."

Afraid she would chase him away with talk of her feelings, she quickly spoke again. "I'm not asking for anything from you. No promises, no talk of tomorrow. Just us, tonight."

He pushed her hair back from her face, caressed her jaws with his thumbs. "I wish I'd known you instead of Alesia."

Her heart almost leaped out of her throat. "I wish you had too."

He tugged her close enough to kiss. Lips caressed, tongues slid together. The kiss deepened, grew hotter, until Alaina gripped Rye's shoulders to keep her balance.

"Get the condom," Rye said against her lips.

She heard the *clunk* of his work boots hitting the floor as she searched through the basket. Finally she located the box she'd bought this afternoon and dug out one packet. She turned in time to see Rye on his back, pushing his jeans and briefs past his hips.

His cock lay against his stomach, long and thick and hard. It was all she could see while he sat up and tugged off his clothes and socks. Now completely naked, he held out a hand to her.

"Come here."

She continued to stare at the male perfection before her until Rye wiggled his fingers to draw her attention. She reluctantly dragged her gaze from his body back to his face. His lips quirked as if he were trying not to grin.

"You're staring."

"Oh yeah."

Rye chuckled and wiggled his fingers again. "Come here."

"Hold this." She handed the condom packet to him, then stood and shucked off her slacks, panties and shoes. As naked as he, she dropped back to her knees before him, took the packet and tore it open. "Lie down."

Next time, she'd lick every part of his body. Next time, she'd taste that delectable-looking cock. But this time, she needed to feel him inside her as quickly as possible.

He obeyed her, lying back and holding his cock straight up so she could slip on the condom. She didn't waste any time straddling his hips and sliding her pussy down his shaft.

"Jesus," Rye mumbled. He grabbed her hips and arched into her. "You're so tight. And wet. And *hot*." He gripped her hips more firmly. "Ride me, Alaina."

She laid her hands on his chest, slowly raised her hips until only the head of his cock remained inside her, and lowered herself again. Each time she repeated the action, she moved a bit faster. She watched Rye's face the entire time, delighting at the fire in his eyes. He clenched his jaw, a muscle ticked in his temple. His fingers dug into her ass, holding her at the perfect spot for the base of his rod to rub her clit.

The pleasure began to build in her body again. Heart pounding, lungs burning, Alaina rode his cock faster. Her orgasm was *there*, ready to explode. Just a little more...

Rye squeezed her breasts, rolled each nipple between his fingers. "What do you need to come again?"

"Harder. Tug my nipples ha-harder."

She'd barely gotten the word out when Rye pinched her nipples. Alaina cried out at the sensation that raced through her body, even stronger than what she'd experienced with her first orgasm.

"Oh yeah," Rye groaned. "Oh *yeah!*"

He arched his hips, driving his shaft into her pussy all the way to his balls. Alaina released a keening moan when another, smaller climax ripped through her.

She melted on top of his body. Her skin stuck to his since they were both sweaty. She didn't care.

Rye ran his hands up and down her back and over her butt. "You okay?"

"I hope you don't expect me to move for at least half an hour 'cause it isn't possible."

His chest vibrated beneath her ear when he chuckled. He kissed the top of her head. "I have no problem with staying here."

"It can't be very comfortable for you, lying on a hard floor. The blanket doesn't have much padding."

"I'm not complaining." His arms tightened around her. "But I do know a place where we could be more comfortable."

She lifted her head so she could see his face. "Where?"

"My house."

Alaina hadn't expected an invitation to his home. "Your house?"

"Yeah. I can shower, then we can sit in the middle of my bed and eat those quadruple chocolate brownies you brought. Maybe some of the crumbs will fall on your breasts and I can lick them off."

He bobbled his eyebrows, which made Alaina laugh. "Sounds like a plan to me."

"Then get off me, woman, so we can get dressed."

Thinking about Rye licking brownie crumbs off her breasts gave Alaina new strength. She climbed off Rye and gathered up her clothes. It took her longer to dress than normal since she kept sneaking peeks at his body as he pulled on his clothes.

God, he was gorgeous.

After she finished dressing, she gathered up the rest of the food items and the basket. Rye folded up the blanket and draped it over his arm. "Ready to go?"

Alaina headed for the doorway, but stopped when cold air flowed over her. Goose bumps popped up on her skin. "Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

"The cold air." When he continued to look confused, Alaina huffed out a breath. "Don't tell me you didn't feel it *again*."

"Alaina, I didn't feel any cold air. It's cooling off in here, but it isn't cold by any stretch of the imagination."

"Look at this." She lifted her arm so he could see the bumps on her arm. "Explain these."

Rye shrugged. "You're probably just excited at the thought of going home with me."

"Oh yeah, I'm sure that's it," she said, somehow managing not to roll her eyes.

He grinned. "I like the thought of giving you goose bumps." Wrapping one arm around her waist, he tugged her close and gave her a quick kiss. "And lots of orgasms."

He said the last sentence right into her ear, which sent those little bumps scattering over her body again. Maybe Rye was right and it was simply a reaction to being with him. The last time she'd felt cold air here in the turret, she'd attributed it to her excitement over seeing Kenneth's plans.

She did get goose bumps when she was excited. That had to be the explanation for why she'd felt cold air when Rye didn't.

She started down the stairs with Rye right behind her. Perhaps she had no other explanation, but she did have a feeling that there was something in the turret, calling to her.

Or maybe *someone*.

Chapter Ten

April 20, 1937

Laura was so excited when she came home today. I saw her talking to him earlier in the store, but had been helping one of the Sullivan sisters and couldn't hear what he said to Laura. She told me he offered her a tutoring job with his son, Patrick. Patrick is thirteen and has a lot of trouble with mathematics. Laura is only two years older than Patrick, but she's brilliant, easily the smartest person in school. I can understand why he would want her to help his son.

I still don't trust him. I think it's just an excuse to get closer to Laura.

* * * * *

It had been a long time since Rye had invited a woman to his home. He realized that as he unlocked the back door. His mom made the rounds to her sons' houses every Wednesday to clean, but she hadn't been here this week. She wasn't due home until Sunday from visiting her parents. He'd changed the sheets on his bed Wednesday because she hadn't been here to do it, but little else had been done since he'd spent most of his time at Stevens House this week.

"I'm not promising how clean it is," he said, opening the door that led into the mudroom. "My mom wasn't here this week."

"Your *mother* cleans your house?"

"Yeah." He sat on the small bench built into the wall and pulled off his work boots. "She's been cleaning houses in Lanville for about six years. She said it gives her something to do since none of her sons have made her a grandmother yet."

"At least you get your house cleaned for free."

Rye laughed. "No way. Dax and Griff and I pay her just like everyone else in town. She said she took care of us until we left home. Now we can afford to pay her the same as we'd pay any other housekeeper."

Alaina's eyes twinkled with humor. "I think I like your mother."

"I've no doubt of that." He stood and took her hand. "This way."

He led her down a short hallway, past the laundry room, and into the kitchen. A quick glance at the cabinets showed him they were clean, but dishes were still piled in the sink. "I can hear my mom's voice now, telling me I never know when someone might stop by and should never have dirty dishes in the sink."

"Now I *know* I like your mother."

"I guess your house is always spotless, since three women live there."

She released a combination between a laugh and a snort that had Rye grinning. "We keep the living room and kitchen clean because you never know when someone might stop by." He laughed at her repeating what he'd said. "Just don't look in our bedrooms, and for *sure* don't look under the beds or in the closets. There may be something growing in the bottom of my closet. I'm afraid to look and find out for sure."

Before Rye could say anything, she spoke again. "Okay, I take that back. You could look under Kelcey's bed or in her closet. She is a neat freak. Everything is always right where it's supposed to be in her bedroom."

"But not you or Emma?"

"Emma's better than I am. I tend to...misplace things. If I can find my cell phone more than two days in a row, I'm on a roll."

Rye laughed again. He liked Alaina's sense of humor and the way she wasn't afraid to tell him something imperfect about herself. He set the picnic basket on the kitchen table. "Help yourself to whatever you want. There's wine and beer in the fridge, harder stuff in the great room bar. I'm gonna shower off the five pounds of dirt I'm wearing."

He peeled his shirt over his head while walking toward his bedroom. He paused only long enough to lay his belt and wallet on the dresser, then continued into his bathroom.

The step-in shower stall was twice the size of an average one. When Rye's dad designed the house, Rye told him he wanted a decadent shower. Six jets plus a handheld showerhead meant water hit him from every angle. There were times when he'd simply stand still and let the water pulse on his body, relaxing the tight muscles. He couldn't stay in here as long as he usually did since Alaina waited for him. Unable to resist the pleasure for a few moments, he closed his eyes and tilted his head back.

A warm, naked body at his back had his eyes flying open. Firm breasts pressed against his back, soft hands slid around his sides to splay over his stomach.

Alaina nipped his shoulder blade. "I thought you might like some company."

His cock liked that idea. Despite the powerful orgasm a short time ago, it immediately responded to the feel of Alaina's body.

"I like your shower." One hand slid up his chest, the other slid down to wrap around his shaft. "The jets are very...invigorating, aren't they?"

Rye laid his hands over hers. "Your touch is invigorating."

"Apparently so." She gripped him more firmly, moved her hand up and down as he grew harder. "I like the way you feel in my hand."

He arched his hips to drive his rod against her palm. She abruptly released him and stepped back so she no longer touched him. "How about if I wash your back?"

Wash his back? That wasn't what needed attention right now.

Rye looked at her over his shoulder. Her wet hair lay over her breasts. Water rushed over her arms, down her stomach and through the auburn curls on her mound. Her hard nipples peeked between the strands of her hair.

She looked so sexy, she stole his breath.

She picked up his washcloth and squeezed a generous amount of liquid soap on it. "Lean your hands against the wall and I'll wash your back."

There would be time for him to take her in every position he could imagine. For now, he would do as she said. Leaning forward, he rested his palms against the wall.

She ran the soapy cloth slowly over his shoulders, under his arms. It passed over his shoulders again before she dragged it down his back in a figure eight motion. It continued over each cheek of his ass, then between the cleft. Rye clenched his buttocks when she passed over his anus.

"Did I hit a sensitive spot?"

She passed the cloth over his anus again. He moaned at the combination of her rubbing that bundle of nerves combined with her rubbing her breasts across his back.

The cloth disappeared, to be replaced with her soapy fingers. She circled the tender hole, over and over. Rye spread his legs another few inches to give her more room.

"You like this, don't you?"

"Yeah." One finger pushed inside him. "*Jesus, Alaina.*"

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No," he croaked.

She added a second finger and started pumping them in, out, in, out. He'd been with women who enjoyed anal play, but they hadn't returned it to him. He'd never realized how incredible it felt.

When she pushed her fingers even deeper, Rye lost it. Spinning around, he grabbed her wrists and pinned her against the wall. He ground his cock into her stomach as he gave her an open-mouth, tongue-dueling kiss. She returned it, wrapping one leg around his hips to pull him closer. Rye bent his knees so his cock slid between her legs. He pumped his hips, sliding his hard flesh against her silky folds.

The whimper from her throat had him ready to fuck her, when he realized he wasn't wearing a condom. He ended the kiss and buried his face in her neck. "We have to stop."

"What?" Her voice sounded as breathless as his. "No! Don't stop, please."

He lifted his head to look at her. "I don't bring condoms into the shower."

"Oh." She closed her eyes, the disappointment evident on her face. She soon opened her eyes again and looked directly into his. "I haven't been with a man in almost two years. What about you?"

His gaze passed over her hair, her face. She was so gorgeous. "I haven't been intimate with anyone in several months."

"Then there's no reason why we have to stop."

"Birth control?"

"I get a shot every three months. I had one two weeks ago."

Rye studied her eyes. They were open and stared into his. He believed her. For the first time in three years, he was going to take a chance and trust a woman.

Bending his knees a bit more, he thrust into her pussy. Alaina dug her fingernails into his shoulders and threw back her head. Rye gripped her thighs and lifted her so he could thrust deeper. The water poured over them, steam billowed around their bodies. He thrust, circled his hips, thrust again. Her soft skin touching him, those incredible breasts pressed to his chest, her warm breath in his ear...everything combined to drag him closer to a climax much sooner than he wanted. Alaina needed to come before he found his release.

And he knew exactly what to do to help her.

Rye pulled out of Alaina and dropped to his knees. He spread her labia with his thumbs and swiped his tongue the full length.

"Rye." Her voice came out shaky. Her fingers tangled in his hair. "That feels so good."

Auburn curls covered her mound, but her labia were shaven smooth. Her swollen clit peeked out from beneath its hood, cream oozed from her channel. Rye licked the entire length again, then settled his mouth over her clit. He flicked it with the tip of his tongue, stroked it, sucked it. He speared her pussy with his tongue before returning to her clit.

She gasped. "There. Yes, *there*."

He knew she was close by her harsh breathing, the undulation of her hips, the way she spread her legs for him. Rye ran his tongue up and down the folds, across her clit. She shivered each time he touched the sensitive area.

Grabbing handfuls of his hair, she held his head in one place. "Lick me there. Right *there*. Yes!"

He surged to his feet and kissed her while he thrust inside her again. Her pussy pulsed around his cock as she came.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck, parted her lips for his tongue. He began to pound into that tight, wet channel that fit perfectly around his shaft. Her kisses turned hotter, more demanding. Rye gave her everything he could, driving her up the shower wall with every pump of his hips. His balls tightened, drew up close to his body. He wouldn't be able to hold back much longer.

"Come again," he said against her lips. "I want to feel your pussy squeeze my cock when you come."

Alaina jerked her mouth away from his and buried her face in his neck. Her body trembled, her pussy pulsed around his rod again. This time, he followed her over the edge into bliss.

His lungs fought for air as if he'd just completed a marathon. Rye locked his knees to keep from falling. That wasn't easy when his body felt like one big pile of gelatin.

"Wow," Alaina mumbled against his neck.

"Yeah. Wow."

She slowly unwrapped her legs from his waist and stood. Rye grabbed her when her legs buckled so she wouldn't fall.

"You okay?"

"Other than having no strength anywhere in my body, I'm great."

He rested his forehead against hers. "That was amazing."

"More than amazing. How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Get me to come like that?"

Rye hit the button to turn off the water. Silence filled the stall instead of the rush of water through the jets. "Is there another way you want to come? Because I'm willing to experiment."

He grinned while Alaina laughed. He couldn't remember a time that he'd joked after such an incredible session of lovemaking. His laughter soon faded when he sensed her question wasn't rhetorical. He reached for a towel and handed it to her, then took one for himself. "You have a problem coming?"

"Usually, but that hasn't been the case with you."

"Is this where I pound on my chest and give the Tarzan yell?"

She slapped at him with her towel. Chuckling, he darted out of the stall to avoid the damp terry cloth. He'd teased her, yet it bothered him that she hadn't found sex satisfying with other men. It couldn't have anything to do with Alaina. With that mane of auburn hair and curvy body, she should carry a sign to warn men about testosterone overload before she got within twenty feet of them.

She finished drying her body and stood with the towel clutched between her breasts. "Do you have a robe I can borrow?"

He did, but had no intention of giving it to her. He tossed his towel on top of the hamper. "What's wrong with naked?"

She gave him a look that clearly said he must be kidding. "You want me to walk around your house naked?"

"The only walking you're doing is to my bed. I'm not through with you."

A slow smile spread across her lips. "You aren't?"

"Not even close."

"Well then." She tossed her towel on top of his. "Naked works for me."

* * * * *

Alaina lay on her stomach, her hair covering her face. Her body had been weak after making love with Rye in the shower. It was now beyond weak to completely useless.

She could hear Rye's heavy breathing beside her. She managed to peek through her hair to see him lying on his back. His eyes were closed, his lips parted. One hand rested on his chest, as if to keep his heart from pounding out of it.

"If you...kill me with...sex," he said between heavy breaths, "who will...finish your house?"

"Hey, I was ready for brownies and a glass of wine. *You* started the whole sex thing again."

Eyes still closed, he grinned. "Yeah, I did."

She would've laughed if she'd had the energy. Rye had taken her hand and led her to his bed, where he'd proceeded to give her the long, deep, slow kisses she loved. She hadn't thought his cock could get hard again so soon, not after coming in the turret and again in the shower. He'd proven her wrong.

She loved being wrong.

It hadn't taken long for her body to react to his touch. Wanting to give him the same pleasure he'd given her in the shower, she'd taken his shaft in her mouth. He'd allowed that for only a few seconds before he pulled away from her, saying he didn't want to come again before she did. He'd proceeded to use his hands, mouth and cock to make sure she did exactly that.

What an incredible lover.

She rolled to her side and rested her head on her bent arm. She looked at him without speaking for several moments, simply enjoying the afterglow of great sex and the handsome man lying beside her. "You recuperate quickly."

He rolled to his side toward her, copying her position. "Not usually this quickly. You have quite an effect on me, Ms. May." He picked up a tendril of damp hair from her shoulder and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. "You make me feel like I'm seventeen again."

"I'm glad you aren't. That's way too young for me."

He chuckled while pushing her hair back from her face. "I doubt if there's a seventeen-year-old guy out there who wouldn't love to get you in bed."

"There isn't a seventeen-year-old guy out there who wouldn't love to get *any* gal in bed."

"True." He slid his hand down her back and over her hip. "I'm sorry sex hasn't always been good for you."

She shrugged one shoulder. "It happens. The few lovers I've had didn't know how to push the right buttons."

"There's no excuse for a guy not taking the time to please you."

"It didn't take much time for you to please me at Stevens House. We had sex for, what? Three minutes? I came twice with you."

"You've never come twice with another lover?"

"Rye, there haven't been that many. Four, I think. Maybe five. I've never been a very sexual person."

"You are with me."

Alaina knew he wasn't ready to hear words of love. Still, his comment deserved a response. "I guess you know how to push all the right buttons."

The air in the room seemed to grow thicker. Alaina decided it was a good time to change the subject. "I'm ready for a brownie. How about you?"

"I think that's an excellent idea." He pushed her to her back and leaned over her. "After I lick the crumbs off your breasts, it'll be time to make love again."

She laughed at his teasing, but quickly sobered once he left the room. She wanted so badly to tell him how she felt about him. The teenage crush had lain dormant all these years, flaring back to life at the first touch of his hand.

No, she couldn't tell him of her blossoming feelings. For now, she'd have to keep them all wrapped up in her heart.

Chapter Eleven

April 22, 1937

Laura is so proud to be tutoring Patrick with his mathematics. She told me she's sure she can help him improve his grades. I casually asked her where she's tutoring him. She told me at his home, which means he will be there too, at least part of the time. I asked Laura if it wouldn't be better to study at the library, where she could have access to other books if she needed them. She said there was a huge library in Patrick's home that contained all kinds of math books, as well as many others. Her eyes lit up when she said Patrick's father told her she could borrow any book she wanted for as long as she wanted.

I fear there's nothing I can do to stop her adoration of him.

* * * * *

A day much too warm for late April heated the turret to well into the nineties. Alaina wiped at the sweat over her lip and on her forehead, even though she knew it would pop back in about eight seconds. Rye had suggested she work on the bottom floor where it would be cooler. She'd refused. This was going to be her room and she wanted to work here.

After taking a long gulp of cold water, Alaina returned to sanding the window seat in the turret. Rye and Dax had examined it thoroughly and declared it could be saved, unless Alaina wanted it torn out and a new one built. So much of the house had to be replaced due to rotten wood that she loved the idea of keeping something original, something that had been built so many years ago. The cushions would have to be replaced, but the window seat only needed to be sanded and repainted.

Her heart stuttered at the sound of footsteps on the squeaky stairs, somehow knowing it would be Rye before she ever saw him. He stepped into the room, looking gorgeous despite the dirt covering his face and clothes.

He smiled. "Hey."

"Hey."

"How are you doing?"

"Other than sweating out every bit of the moisture in my body, I'm fine."

His smile faded. "Why don't you work downstairs where it's cooler?"

"Because I'm stubborn and want to work here."

He squatted in front of her. A drop of sweat rolled down her temple. He wiped it off with his thumb. The feel of that calloused thumb brought back memories of him swiping it across her nipples and clit so many times over the weekend.

The temperature in the room shot up another ten degrees.

"Do you want me to help you?"

She shook her head. "I want to do this."

"I'll have more of my crew next week, after they get through with the mayor's house. I plan to hire more workers, but I haven't had time—"

She silenced him by placing her fingertips against his lips. "I didn't expect the house to be finished in a few days. I know it'll take months. There's a lot to do here."

He kissed her fingertips, then removed her hand from his mouth and held it. "I don't want you to get too hot."

"You didn't mind my getting hot Friday night. Or Saturday morning. Or Saturday aft—"

"Okay, that's enough." The skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled when he grinned. "You're bad."

"That's not what you said Friday night. Or Saturday mor—"

He silenced her this time with a kiss. If Alaina hadn't already been hot, his kiss would've shot her temperature through the roof. She tilted her head and parted her lips when he deepened the kiss. Sliding her hands down his sides, she clasped the hem of his T-shirt to pull it off.

Rye grasped her hands before she raised his shirt more than a couple of inches. "I don't think that's a good idea when there are workers all over the house."

"Oh." One kiss from this man and she lost her head. "Sorry."

"I'm not. I'm glad you want me."

"I think I proved several times over the weekend how much I want you."

"Are you interested in proving it again tonight?"

She struggled not to grin at the teasing in his eyes. "I might be persuaded."

"I was thinking about taking you to Boot Scootin' after we leave here. You haven't lived until you've eaten one of Dolly's greasy cheeseburgers and homemade fries." He ran one fingertip up and down her bare arm. "After that, we'll need to work off all those calories."

"I'm all for working off calories."

"We'll leave about six. How's that?"

"Perfect."

He kissed her again, more gently this time. The sweet kiss affected her just as strongly as his passionate one.

She really had it bad.

Alaina focused on his ass in his faded jeans as he walked from the room. She'd dug her fingernails into that tight butt many times over the weekend.

With a quiet sigh, she returned to her work. She dropped her sanding tool when cold air washed over her. Alaina scrambled to her feet and turned, looking around the turret for the source of that cold.

The air shimmered a few feet in front of her, reminding her of the way it did over hot asphalt in the summer. Her heart began to pound as something formed before her. She could see a splash of brown at eye level, a bit of blue below that. Transparent features materialized. They were too fuzzy to see them clearly, yet she could make out shoulder-length brown hair, eyes, straight shoulders, small breasts, a tiny waist. She could see the wall through those features, as if she were looking at a...

Ghost.

Alaina couldn't breathe or look away from the figure. The face filled in a bit more, enough so Alaina could see a pained expression. The woman clenched her fists at her sides and squeezed her eyes shut. She threw back her head, her mouth open.

And disappeared.

Legs suddenly weak, Alaina dropped down on the window seat, her gaze still glued to the spot where the woman had appeared and disappeared. She thought about yelling for Rye, but didn't know what to tell him. She didn't believe in ghosts, but she'd seen *something*. She'd felt cold air wash over her three times in the turret. That hadn't happened in any other room of the house.

"Hey, Alaina," Dax yelled up the stairs. "Bella Olinghouse is here to see you."

She heard Dax, yet couldn't find the strength in her legs to stand. Several moments passed before she heard footsteps hurrying up the stairs. Dax stuck his head around the edge of the door. "Alaina?"

His eyes widened when he saw her. He hurried into the room. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I...got too hot, I guess."

He squatted before her and peered into her face. "Your face would be red if you got too hot. You're white, as if you saw a ghost."

She almost laughed at his choice of words. "I just need a break from the sanding."

"Good timing then, 'cause Bella Olinghouse is here to see you."

Alaina frowned. She didn't have a clue why Bella would be here. "Did she say why?"

Dax shook his head. "Nope. Just that she had something for you." He stood and held out a hand to help her stand. Luckily, her legs didn't buckle this time. She must've still looked like hell, for Dax's concerned expression didn't disappear.

"Maybe you should stay downstairs for a while and cool off."

"Yeah, I'll do that, after I talk to Bella."

"I'll go down the stairs first, in case I have to catch you."

She almost said her legs weren't *that* weak, but decided Dax going first might not be a bad idea.

Alaina found Bella Olinghouse standing in the foyer. Despite the warmth of the day and the dirt flying everywhere, she looked cool and perfect in an ice blue suit. She held what looked like a leather scrapbook. "Good morning, Mrs. Olinghouse."

She inclined her head an inch. "Ms. May."

"How can I help you?"

Bella lifted the scrapbook. "I have something to show you. Is there a place where we can sit down?"

"Yes, we have a table and folding chairs set up in the dining room."

She led the way to the dining room, which thankfully looked clean. The guys were usually good about picking up after themselves. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thank you. I won't be here long."

Bella looked at the chair seat, which didn't surprise Alaina. She wouldn't have been surprised if the woman took a snowy handkerchief out of her little blue purse that matched her suit and wiped off the seat.

Once Bella sat, Alaina took the chair opposite her. Bella set the book on the table and pushed it toward Alaina. "My granddaughter put this together several years ago. It contains some old pictures of this house. I thought you might like to look at them while you're remodeling."

Speechless at Bella's generosity, Alaina didn't know what to say for a few seconds. "That's very kind of you. Thank you."

"I would like to have the book back when you're finished with it."

"Of course." She lifted the cover and gasped. The first picture in the book filled the entire page and had been taken of the front of the house. A small caption in the right corner said 1902. "This is wonderful."

"They're all black and white, of course, and some are very grainy. There aren't very many. People didn't take pictures back then the way they do now. But they'll give you an idea of how the house looked when it was first built." She glanced around the room, sadness in her eyes. "It was a wonderful place to grow up. My mother made sure everything was always spotless." She released a small laugh that held no humor. "Of course, my father would not have had it any other way." She looked down a moment and straightened the top button of her suit. "You may keep the book as long as you'd like."

"I appreciate that."

Bella cleared her throat. "I have other errands to run."

"Of course."

Alaina closed the book and followed Bella to the front door. Rye walked through the same time they reached the entrance. "Mrs. Olinghouse. Hello."

"Mr. Coleman."

He looked from her to Alaina and back again. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine. I brought something to Ms. May I thought might help her. Now I really must leave. Charles is waiting for me."

"Have a wonderful evening, Mrs. Olinghouse," Alaina said. "And thank you again."

Alaina watched a man in his sixties hurry forward to guide Bella down the rickety steps. He held her arm to the car and helped her into the backseat. "I gather that's Charles."

"He's her driver and has been for years." Rye turned his attention from Bella to Alaina. "What did she bring to you?"

"A scrapbook. Oh, Rye, you have to see it. It has pictures of this house when it was new. They're all black and white so there's no help with colors, but I know Dax will help me with those."

"Speaking of Dax, he told me you looked like you were about to pass out in the turret."

She hadn't decided whether or not to say anything to Rye about her vision, so thought it would be better to gloss over her weakness. "Dax exaggerates. I just got a little too hot. I'm fine."

"To be sure you stay fine, why don't you take a break and have something cold to drink?"

"Can you join me and look at Bella's scrapbook?"

He glanced at his watch. "I'm supposed to meet Griff at the mayor's house in fifteen minutes. I'll look at it with you tonight, okay?" He ran his fingers up and down her arm. "Rest a while. I'll be back later and take you out to supper."

"Okay."

Eager to study the prize Bella had brought her, Alaina hurried back to the dining room. Preparing a tall glass of iced tea, she sat at the table and opened the book again.

It was an older scrapbook with the kind of adhesive pages that stuck to the pictures. Alaina wondered if Bella would let her take the book apart, copy the pictures, and then put them back in a more modern scrapbook without the adhesive pages. She carefully turned the page to see more pictures of the outside of the house, both front and back. A young girl, maybe eleven, stood next to a boy about seven or eight years old in the next picture. Writing beneath the picture said, *Bella and Patrick, July 4, 1932.*

Alaina slowly turned the pages as she sipped her tea. She assumed Bella's granddaughter had carefully written beneath each picture. Most of the pictures were of Bella and Patrick. One taken in the kitchen with Bella and her mother—according to the caption—clearly showed the cabinets and sink area. Emma would freak when she saw the picture.

She turned another few pages before a blank spot jumped out at her. A picture had been removed, the caption beneath covered with Liquid Paper. The white ink looked cracked, as if it had been used a while ago.

Curiosity gnawed at her. She couldn't help wondering what picture had been removed, and what the caption said. She carefully pulled back the adhesive sheet. She

hesitated, knowing she was invading Bella's privacy. There was a reason someone had removed a picture and covered the caption. Alaina felt as if there was a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other, one saying to go for it and the other saying she shouldn't.

The devil won.

Using her thumbnail, she lightly scratched at the white ink from left to right until it began to crumble. Letters slowly appeared. Once all the ink had been removed, Alaina brushed it aside and read the caption.

Patrick and his tutor, Laura Cummins, April 1937.

Chills raced up and down her spine. The missing picture had been taken a few days before Laura had been murdered in this house. Someone had removed it from the album and covered up the caption so no one could read it. *Who?* Alaina wondered. *Bella? Or someone else?*

She looked up at the ceiling and thought about the vision she'd seen earlier. Even though she knew the thought was crazy, she wondered if that had been Laura's ghost trying to communicate with her. She wished the vision had been clearer, that she could've made out more of the features. Then she'd know if Laura's ghost actually existed in the turret.

The only way for her to know for sure was to keep working in that area. She didn't have time today since Rye would return soon and they'd leave. First thing in the morning, she'd go back to the turret to work. Perhaps Laura—or whomever—would decide to pay her another visit.

Chapter Twelve

April 23, 1937

Laura wouldn't answer me when I asked how her tutoring session went with Patrick today. She mumbled something that sounded like "fine" and hurried to our bedroom. I almost followed her, but stopped when she closed the door. It wasn't like Laura to shut me out like that. Something is obviously bothering her.

I tried to talk to her after supper while we were doing the dishes. She insisted nothing was wrong. I know better. Something happened today, something that had nothing to do with Patrick's tutoring.

* * * * *

Alaina looked over her shoulder for what must have been the twentieth time since she'd started sanding on the window seat two hours ago. There'd been no visions, no cold air flowing over her, no sign at all of a ghostly figure.

She'd almost told Rye what she'd seen while they lay in his bed after making love last night. After debating with herself for several minutes, she'd decided not to say anything. The whole idea of seeing a ghost sounded crazy to her. She knew Rye would feel the same way. He'd already told her he'd never heard any stories of people seeing a ghost in Stevens House.

Their relationship was so new and fragile. She didn't want to do anything to mess it up.

Footsteps drew her attention back to the present. Rye came in the room, followed by a forty-something dark-haired man. Alaina laid down her sanding tool and stood.

"Alaina, this is Vince Seago. He's my glazer. Now that he's through at the mayor's house, he can take the measurements to make your new windows."

Vince smiled. "It's nice to meet you, Alaina."

"It's nice to meet you too."

"I'll show Vince around up here, then we'll move through the rest of the house. We'll be out of your way in a few minutes."

"No problem. I'm ready for a break anyway."

Rye ran his hand over the area she'd just sanded. "Nice. You're doing a really good job, Alaina."

His praise meant a lot to her. "Thanks."

Rye winked, then turned his attention back to Vince.

Picking up her bottle of water, Alaina stepped outside the turret and into the hallway. Jerry, Reuben and Rory had started putting up the two-by-fours yesterday to mark where the new rooms would be. It would be a while longer before any sheetrock went up, but she now had a better idea of the size of the rooms.

There was months of work to do, yet with each day that passed, she came closer to achieving her dream.

Alaina sat down and leaned against the wall. She lifted the bottle to her lips for a drink when cold air washed over her. She quickly swallowed before she choked. Gaze darting around the area, she stood and looked in every corner for a sign of the vision she'd seen yesterday.

Rye and Vince came out of the turret. Rye gave her another wink as they passed. She tried to look as normal as possible so she wouldn't draw his suspicion, although everything inside her tightened in anticipation of seeing the ghost.

Once the men had left the area, Alaina searched again for the vision. It began to form at the entrance to the turret.

Alaina stood still, barely breathing. The image was transparent, as yesterday, but with more shape. She could make out the short-sleeved blue dress and buckle shoes. Facial features slowly filled in—eyes, nose, mouth, chin. Once the brown hair appeared, Alaina had no doubt who stood before her.

Laura Cummins.

"Do you want something from me?" Alaina whispered.

The expression on Laura's face seemed to be a combination of pleasure and pain. Eyes closed, she clenched her fists in front of her chest. Alaina didn't know if Laura didn't want to appear, or was fighting like hell *to* appear.

"Can I help you?"

Laura opened her eyes. She stared at her hands as she slowly unclenched her fists, almost as if she couldn't believe she could see them. Alaina took a step closer to her. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Laura looked at Alaina. She opened her mouth, but no sound emerged. Frowning, she opened her mouth again as if to speak. Nothing.

"It's okay," Alaina said. "You don't have to speak for me to help you. What can I do?"

Motioning for Alaina to follow her, Laura glided into the turret. Alaina swallowed hard, then did as Laura requested. The vision stopped in front of the window seat, at a section Alaina hadn't sanded yet. She pointed to the seat.

"You want me to sit down?"

Still frowning, Laura shook her head. She held up her hands about twelve inches apart, then widened them to eighteen inches apart and pointed to the seat again.

"Is there something inside the window seat?"

Laura nodded vigorously. Alaina had already checked inside the seats and hadn't found anything except a lot of dirt and animal droppings. She didn't want to think about what kind of animals had left their mark. "I've looked in the seats and didn't find anything."

Laura held up her hands again, drew the imaginary box in the air and pointed to the seat. Then she disappeared.

Apparently, Laura wanted Alaina to look in the window seat for some kind of box. Setting her bottle of water on the floor, Alaina opened the three sections of the seat and peered inside. Nothing. She'd already vacuumed out the dirt and droppings, leaving the area empty.

I don't know what you want me to find, Laura.

Alaina dropped to her knees and looked inside the sections again. As she studied them for a third time, she noticed the floor of the middle section seemed to be about three inches higher than the ones on the ends. The section was about twenty inches wide and thirty inches long, so would easily hold something twelve-by-eighteen if that item was thin.

She needed some kind of tool to pry up the floor, like a screwdriver. She knew Jerry and Reuben were working on the west side of the attic. She could get a screwdriver from one of them.

Tool in hand, Alaina knelt before the seat and slipped the blade beneath the floor. It took several tries, but finally the false bottom came loose to expose a flat, thin item wrapped in burlap.

Heart pounding and palms sweating, Alaina lifted the item out of the seat and carefully unwrapped it. An oil painting lay inside the burlap. She recognized the landscape as an area close to the river that ran through Lanville, an area that was now a park where locals and tourists enjoyed the cool breezes on a hot summer day.

Delighted with her discovery, Alaina held the painting at arms' length to see it better. She'd have it framed to hang somewhere in the house so her guests could enjoy it.

She was so involved with looking at the painting that she didn't hear Rye behind her until he spoke. "What's that?"

She smiled at him over her shoulder. "Oh, Rye, isn't this painting wonderful? I found it in the window seat beneath a hidden compartment."

Rye squatted next to her. "There's a hidden compartment in the window seat? How did you find it?"

Unsure how to tell him about Laura, she shrugged. "Just lucky."

"Do you want to hang it in the house? I can have it framed for you the next time I go for supplies."

"Really? That would be perfect." She gave him a soft kiss. "Thank you."

A hint of mischief filled his eyes. "I'll want more than a kiss for such a huge favor."

She loved it when he teased her this way. "That can be arranged."

He slid his finger down her arm, which raised goose bumps on her skin. Her reaction must have pleased him for he smiled. "I'm going downstairs to help Vince get the rest of the window measurements."

"Okay."

Alaina returned to examining the painting after Rye left. She was happy to have found it, but also sad. Now that she had what Laura wanted her to find, there would be no reason for the ghost to appear again.

* * * * *

When Alaina told Rye she wanted to leave an hour early, he had no problem with that. He figured she had shopping to do, or some other "girl" thing, so volunteered to pick up their supper on his way home. Her thank-you kiss had all the blood in his body rushing south to fill his cock.

Sex had never been sweeter or more intense than with Alaina. Since Rye usually found his lovers outside Lanville, he never had a woman spend the night with him. He liked waking up with Alaina in his bed. He liked that warmth, that feeling of contentment he experienced when he reached out and wrapped his arm around her waist. She'd always come willingly when he tugged her closer.

As each day passed, he cared more about her. He liked to see her happy, like today when she'd found that painting in the turret. She'd been so excited and eager to hang it in her house. Her eyes had sparkled with excitement at his offer to have it framed for her. The offer had been spontaneous, but he'd meant it. He wanted to do whatever he could to make her happy.

Rye walked in the back door of his house and set down the takeout containers long enough to slip off his work boots. He padded into the kitchen to find Alaina setting the table. She must not have heard him come in, which gave him the chance to study her. She'd made good use of her extra time by showering. Her hair flowed over her shoulders in a riot of curls. She wore a tiny cropped T-shirt and a pair of low-riding denim shorts that exposed several inches of her stomach. He didn't know if she wore panties, but she obviously didn't wear a bra. Her breasts shifted with her movements, her nipples pushed against the soft cotton.

She walked to the refrigerator. His cock went from semi-hard to full-blown erection at the sight of her ass swaying in those tight shorts. He could have her naked and be buried inside her sweet pussy in four seconds.

What a tempting idea.

She saw him when she turned around with the butter dish in her hand. She smiled. "Hi."

"Hi." He set the containers on the table, then took her in his arms for a hug. The scent of flowers drifted up from her hair. "You smell good."

"I tried a new shampoo. Do you like it?"

"Yeah." He buried his face in her hair while his hands glided up and down her back. "I also like your outfit. Or what there is of it."

An impish grin touched her lips when she looked at him. "I was hot."

"You still are." One firm nipple begged for the caress of his thumb. "Nice."

He liked the little hitch in her breath when he touched her nipple. "Keep that up and our supper will be cold before we eat it."

"I have a microwave."

She laughed and gave him a quick kiss. "I'm starving. Food first, then sex."

"God, you're mean."

"I know." Stepping out of his arms, she went back to the refrigerator. "Iced tea?" she asked over her shoulder. "Beer? Wine?"

"Beer sounds good."

She carried two bottles of beer to the table. Rye opened one of the food containers to expose a large pile of barbecued ribs.

"Oh wow," Alaina said, her eyes wide. "Those look scrumptious."

Rye's gaze dipped to her breasts. "They certainly do."

A smile tugged at her lips. "I was talking about the ribs."

"Me too."

She chose the top rib from the stack. "You were looking at my breasts."

"Which is exactly what you want and that's why you're wearing that skimpy little top and no bra."

She didn't comment as she took a bite of barbecue, but her eyes shone with devilment. She slowly sucked the sauce off each finger of her left hand as she stared into his eyes.

His cock jerked. A quickie would work. They could get all this tension out of the way and make love later, slowly and thoroughly. "You keep looking at me like that, you're gonna get royally fucked."

"Not just fucked, but *royally* fucked? Oh my." Laying her rib back on her plate, she licked the sauce off the fingers of her other hand. "I'm not wearing panties."

A man could take only so much teasing. Rye rounded the table, jerked Alaina to her feet and pulled her over his shoulder in a fireman's hold.

Seconds later, he dropped her on his bed. A flick of his fingers and he unfastened her shorts. They landed on the floor.

She most definitely wasn't wearing panties.

Rye grabbed her thighs and tugged her ass right to the edge of the bed. "You play with me, you suffer the consequences."

Fire lit her eyes, turning them to the color of melted milk chocolate. "What kind of punishment do you have in mind?"

"This." He dropped to his knees and darted his tongue into her pussy.

She was already wet and swollen, her cream oozing from her channel. He inhaled deeply, taking her musky scent into his nostrils, his lungs. Her hair smelled good, but she smelled delicious here. Using his thumbs, he eased her labia open so he could see every bit of her sleek flesh. Her folds were dark pink, her clit nice and hard. He rubbed his thumb over it in little circles.

"Mmm, yes." She grasped her legs behind her knees and drew them farther apart. Rye liked that sign that she wanted more. He replaced his thumb with his tongue, flicking it over and around her clit, up and down her labia.

"My God, you're good at that!"

He would've smiled except she tasted too good for him to take his mouth off her. Pushing her thighs higher, he swiped his tongue across her anus. Rye held up her legs with one arm to leave his other hand free to touch her. He continued to flash his tongue all over her pussy while he rubbed her clit with his thumb.

"I'm going to come. Oh yes, I'm coming! Right...now!"

She grabbed his head, pulling at his hair as her hips bucked. Rye watched the entrance to her vagina pulse with her orgasm's contractions. He continued to caress her clit, but more gently now since he knew it would be tender.

Rye unfastened his jeans and tugged his hard shaft from his briefs. His cock screamed at him to take her, to give her the royal fucking he'd promised her. He couldn't do that, not yet. He wanted her so much, a few thrusts and it would be over.

He waited until Alaina lay still before he licked her again. Moaning loudly, she soon moved her hips in time to the strokes of his tongue. She clasped his head again, holding it firmly while he worshipped her with his mouth. He ran his tongue up one side, down the other, across her clit, over her anus. He fucked her pussy with his tongue, her ass with his thumb.

"Rye," she whispered. "Rye," she said, louder now. "God, Rye!"

Her anus squeezed his thumb when her second orgasm flowed through her body. Unable to wait any longer, Rye stood and whipped off his T-shirt. His jeans, briefs and socks landed on the floor next to Alaina's shorts. Leaning over, he rested his hands next to her hips and let his gaze travel over her. Alaina lay with her arms next to her head, her eyes closed. Her T-shirt had ridden up her body, exposing the bottom half of her breasts. Rye dropped a kiss on each one.

She opened her eyes. "Is this...when I get...royally fucked?"

"Yeah." His voice came out rough, guttural. "This is it."

He flipped her to her stomach, jerked her to her knees and rammed his cock inside her.

The sound that came from her throat was a combination of a gasp and a moan. Rye would stop if he thought that sound meant pain, but he knew it meant overwhelming pleasure. He bent over her body and pushed her T-shirt out of the way so he could cradle her breasts. Holding them tightly, he began to pump...hard, fast strokes that buried his cock all the way in her pussy every time.

"You feel so good." He pinched and tugged her nipples as he moved faster. "I can't get enough of you."

The building sensations tightened his balls, hardened his cock even more. Rye let it build, let the feeling take over his body. Pleasure swept down his legs, up to his head and back to his rod. Squeezing Alaina's breasts, he clenched his eyes shut as his climax gripped him.

Rye didn't know how much time passed before he opened his eyes again. He still gripped Alaina's breasts, his softening cock remained inside her slick warmth. "You okay?" he asked.

"Other than the top of my head getting blown off, I'm fine."

"You're lucky you have only one head to get blown off. I have two."

He slowly withdrew from her body. A drop of his essence mixed with her cream and trickled down her folds. He swiped it up with his thumb, then licked it from his skin.

Alaina straightened her legs and flopped down on the bed. "You'll have to bring supper to me. I'm too weak to move."

He nipped each cheek, kissed the small of her back. "If I got barbecue sauce on this bedspread, my mother would strangle me."

"I'll wash it."

Chuckling, Rye kissed his way up her spine to the soft spot behind her ear. "I'm gonna take a fast shower. I'll meet you in the kitchen."

"Kay."

Five minutes later, wearing only a pair of loose khaki shorts, Rye found Alaina warming the ribs in the microwave. She looked at home in his kitchen. He'd thought that ever since Saturday morning, when he'd awakened to find her preparing breakfast. He could easily imagine her here every morning and evening, sharing a meal while they planned their day or talked about what happened at work.

His stomach tightened and he felt as if his chest wasn't big enough to hold his heart. In that moment, he realized he was falling in love with her. He knew it was much too soon to think of happily-ever-after, but the idea of spending the rest of his life with a woman no longer scared him.

Alaina would never hurt him the way Alesia had. He had no doubt about that.

Chapter Thirteen

April 25, 1937

Laura avoided me for most of the weekend. We both had to work in the store Saturday, so stayed very busy. She spent the night with Mary Ann Saturday and attended church with Mary Ann's family. She came home after church, yet still managed to avoid being alone in a room with me until it was time for bed. She couldn't avoid me then.

But despite my almost begging her to confide in me, she turned away from me in her bed and said she was tired and wanted to sleep.

I'm so scared he's done something to her. Or is about to.

* * * * *

Rye never expected to see Rufus Olinghouse walk through the front door of Stevens House.

Rufus strolled toward Rye, wide smile exposing the perfect white teeth that no doubt cost Bella several thousand dollars. "How's it going, Rye?"

He offered a hand, which Rye accepted even though he wanted nothing to do with the man. "Good. How about you?"

"Can't complain." Setting his hands on his hips, Rufus gazed around the demolished living room. "Hard to imagine this place will look good in a few months."

"It will. I promise that."

Bella's grandson continued his visual inspection. Rye knew Rufus had made a shitload of money in real estate. He would probably inherit Bella's estate when she passed away since he was the only one of her seven grandchildren to stay in contact with her on a regular basis. Rye had always believed Rufus stayed close to Bella to ensure he got all those millions to add to his personal fortune someday.

Rye had heard through the grapevine that Rufus and his third wife had recently divorced. He wondered if Rufus was on the lookout for wife number four. "Are you in town on business or to visit your grandmother?"

"Both. I'm checking out some property in Johnson County." His gaze had continued to move about the room while he answered the question. Now he looked back at Rye. "So where's the young lady who bought my grandmother's place?"

"Working on the top floor."

One dark eyebrow arched over Rufus' eye. "Working? She owns the place and she'd doing physical labor?"

"She enjoys it. She wants to be involved with every aspect of the remodeling."

"Sounds like an ambitious lady." Rufus smiled. "I'd like to meet her."

Rufus' smile reminded Rye of a wolf. If Rufus thought he could sink his capped teeth into Alaina, he would soon learn that wouldn't happen. Rye would make sure of that.

Since he didn't know for sure that Rufus' visit wasn't simply out of curiosity, Rye knew he had to be civil. "Sure. This way."

Rye led the way to the attic. Alaina was almost finished sanding the window seat and had planned to complete that project this morning before she moved on to something else. She'd asked him if some of the shelves in the library could be salvaged, that she'd love to keep them if possible. He didn't doubt she'd be in that room, sanding tool in hand, as soon as she finished the window seat.

"Alaina."

She turned her head with a "come hither" smile on her lips. The smile slipped a bit when she saw he wasn't alone. Her gaze snapped from Rye to Rufus. "Hi."

"Alaina, this is Rufus Olinghouse. He's Bella's grandson."

"Oh." She stood and wiped her hand on her T-shirt before offering it to Rufus. "It's nice to meet you."

He smiled that wolf's smile again. Rye had to concentrate to keep from using his fists to knock out some of those pearly white teeth. "It's nice to meet you too, Alaina."

"Hey, Rye," Griff called out from downstairs. "You got a minute?"

He'd rather stay here and make sure Rufus didn't say or do anything to upset Alaina, but couldn't ignore his brother if Griff needed him. "I'll be right back."

"Take your time," Rufus said. "We'll be fine."

A tight, uncomfortable feeling drew up the skin on the back of Rye's neck. He wasn't sure why it bothered him so much to leave Rufus alone with Alaina, yet something deep in his gut told him this visit wasn't simply on a whim.

Rye found his brother in the dining room, taking a bottle of water out of the cooler. "Want one?" Griff asked.

"Yeah."

Griff tossed him a bottle. He unscrewed the cap on his while sitting down. "What's Rufus doing here?"

Rye opened his bottle after joining Griff at the table. "He said he's here to check out some property in Johnson County and to visit Bella."

"You don't believe that?"

"I have no reason to think he's lying."

Griff motioned toward Rye's abdomen with his bottle. "Except that feeling in your gut."

"Yeah."

"Where is he now?"

"With Alaina. He wanted to meet her."

Griff stopped with the water bottle raised halfway to his mouth. "You left him alone with her?"

"You called me down here."

"What I need can wait. You'd better get back up there and stop Rufus from sniffing around your woman."

Rye laughed at Griff's choice of words. "*My woman?* Isn't that a little caveman?"

"I know she goes home with you every night. A woman hasn't spent the night with you since..."

His voice trailed off, so Rye filled in the rest of the sentence. "Since Alesia."

"Alaina is nothing like her sister. She wouldn't trample on your balls the way Alesia did."

No, she wouldn't. Rye believed that or he would never have gotten so close to Alaina. He trusted her, and that hadn't happened with a woman in a very long time.

Griff made a shooing gesture with his bottle. "Go. We'll talk after Rufus leaves."

Rye bounded up the stairs to the second floor. He stopped halfway to the attic stairs when he heard footsteps coming down them. Rufus appeared, a smile on his lips.

Rye didn't like that smile at all.

"She's charming," Rufus said. "And intelligent."

"Yes, she is."

Rufus glanced at the fancy gold watch on his wrist. "I have an appointment in Cleburne in an hour, so need to go." He slapped Rye on the shoulder. "Good to see you again."

Walking to the window that overlooked the front yard, Rye watched Rufus climb into his luxury car and drive away. Once he determined that Rufus wouldn't return, Rye headed toward the attic stairs.

He found Alaina gathering up her tools and supplies. "All through?"

"Finally." She wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. "Now I can tackle the library shelves."

"You'd better hold off on those until my cabinetmaker looks at them."

"Who's that?"

"George McGettis. He's building new bookshelves at the mayor's house now."

Frowning, Alaina plopped down on the window seat. "The mayor's remodeling certainly messed up my plans."

"Sorry, but that was scheduled before you bought this house."

"I know. I just..." She sighed heavily. "I'm impatient. I want everything finished *now*."

"Yeah, I know you do." Rye sat beside her. "What did Rufus want?"

"I'm not sure. I'll find out tonight at dinner."

Rye stared at her, sure she hadn't mentioned Rufus and dinner in the same sentence. "What?"

"He said he wanted to talk business with me and invited me to dinner. I agreed to meet him at the restaurant where Emma works."

"You agreed to have dinner with Rufus?"

"Yeah. Is that a problem?"

"What kind of business could he want to discuss with *you*?"

She frowned and Rye knew he'd made a bad choice of words. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I meant he just met you. I don't know what kind of business he could want to discuss with you."

"I don't either, but I thought it would be polite to hear him out. I told you this morning that I'm going home tonight, so this works out perfectly."

"I don't know why you think you have to go back to Dallas."

"Rye, I have to do laundry."

"I have a washer and dryer."

"I know that, but I need more clothes and some other things from home. I need to check my mail. I'm sure there's a stack of bills I have to pay. Plus I have to go to the bank and transfer funds into my checking account. I'll be back tomorrow morning."

She'd told him over the weekend about the five million dollars she'd inherited from her grandfather when he died in December. She said Kelcey had convinced her to invest half of it for the future. She'd put the other half in savings and drew on it only when necessary. It wouldn't take two-point-five million to fix up this house, but it would cost a chunk.

Something still gnawed at Rye's gut, a feeling that something bad would happen if Alaina left Lanville today. "I'd like to see where Emma works. How about if I go with you?"

Both of her eyebrows shot up at his suggestion. Then she chuckled. "No. You aren't tagging along on my dinner with Rufus."

Rye looked down at the floor between his feet. He wasn't into guys, but he knew Rufus was a handsome man. All the money he would probably inherit from Bella had to be attractive to a woman who would spend a large portion of her inheritance on fixing up this house. What woman wouldn't be attracted to a rich man?

Blowing out his breath, Rye lifted his head and looked back at her. "I don't want you to have dinner with Rufus."

Her eyebrows drew together. "Why not?"

"I don't trust him."

Smiling, she touched his hand. "You trust *me* though."

He had, until she told him she was having dinner with Rufus. He couldn't understand why she would plan to see Bella's grandson even though he objected to it.

Her smile faded. "Rye? You do trust me, don't you?"

Not knowing what to say, Rye hesitated. His hesitation must have been enough for she drew her hand away from his. "Well, I guess that answers my question."

"Alaina —"

She stood and headed for the stairs. Rye caught up to her before she descended the first step. He took her arm, but she jerked it away from him. Her eyes flashed with anger.

"I have nothing more to say to you."

"Alaina, I didn't mean to hurt you. I just —"

Her humorless laugh cut him off. "For someone who didn't mean to hurt me, you did a poor job."

"Look, I told you I don't trust Rufus. He's recently divorced and probably looking for wife number four."

"Do you think I'm going to fall at his feet over dinner?"

Put that way, Rye had to admit his disapproval of her dining with Rufus seemed extreme. "No, of course not. But Rufus is filthy rich and will be even richer when Bella dies. You're sinking a lot of money into this place and —"

"And you think I'm looking for a rich man to replenish my bank account?"

"It's what Alesia would have done."

Pain flashed through her eyes now. She looked away from him, but not before he'd seen the sheen of tears. He knew it wasn't fair of him to mention Alesia, yet he couldn't help seeing the similarity. Alesia would have gone after Rufus in a heartbeat. Alaina's acceptance of his dinner invitation seemed to follow the same path as her sister.

"I've told you I'm nothing like my sister. You can't seem to understand that. Well, understand *this*." She dropped her tools and supplies on top of his feet. They didn't hurt him because of his work boots, but he still jumped back in surprise. "I quit. You have your father's blueprints and my ideas. I'm outta here."

She turned and hurried down the steps. Rye didn't catch up to her until she'd almost run down the stairs to the ground floor. She tripped on the bottom step and would have fallen if Dax hadn't caught her.

"Whoa!" he said, laughter in his voice. That laughter soon vanished when he looked at her face. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Ask your stupid brother."

Without looking at Rye again, Alaina pulled away from Dax and turned toward the back of the house. Rye stood next to Dax and watched her storm out the back door. She revved the engine of her car, the tires spewing gravel and dirt as she sped away.

Dax faced Rye, hands on his hips and a scowl on his face. "What the hell did you do to her?"

Rye didn't need his brother jumping down his throat too. "Why are you assuming I did anything to her?"

"Because she was crying. A woman doesn't cry for no reason."

"Who was crying?" Griff asked, walking up behind them.

"Alaina. Rye did something to hurt her."

Griff turned to Rye, a scowl matching Dax's on his face. "What did you do?"

"Why is it automatically my fault?"

"Because Alaina is one of the sweetest women I've ever met and she's crazy about you. She wouldn't hurt you for the world."

"Yeah," Dax agreed with a nod. "And don't you dare spout any shit about her being Alesia's sister."

Rye never would have believed his brothers would gang up on him like this. "You're taking Alaina's side without even hearing what happened?"

Dax and Griff looked at each other, then back at Rye. "Yes," they said at the same time.

"I don't believe this," Rye muttered.

"What did you do?" Griff asked again.

"I told Alaina I didn't want her going to dinner with Rufus."

He waited for his brothers to agree with him. Neither said anything. "Y'all think that was *wrong*?"

"Rufus invited her to dinner?" Dax asked.

"Yeah. She said he wanted to discuss *business* with her. The only business he could want to discuss with her is making her wife number four. I told her that."

"And *told* her not to go with him."

Rye nodded.

"You blew it, man."

"Telling her not to go to dinner with him was like a red flag waved in front of a bull," Griff said. "Alaina is independent and headstrong. She doesn't like to be told what to do."

Rye didn't realize Griff had spent enough time with Alaina to know her so well. "And you know this...how?"

"We've talked. She told me she was sorry about Jana and..." Griff stopped, looked down a moment, then looked back at Rye. "She's a special lady, Rye. Don't fuck things up and lose her. You'll regret it the rest of your life."

"Call her," Dax said. "You know you won't be able to think straight until you talk to her."

His brothers were right. He didn't want any bad feelings between Alaina and him. He cared too much for her to leave things unsettled. "I'm gonna take a walk."

Rye walked out the back door and far enough away from the house so no one would hear his conversation. Unhooking his cell phone from his belt, he punched in Alaina's number. Four rings later, he received her voice mail. Disappointed not to get her, he listened to her message while trying to decide what to say.

"Alaina, it's Rye. I'm sorry for the way things ended between us today. Call me, please."

He snapped his phone shut and replaced it in its holder. He had no choice now but to wait for her to contact him.

* * * * *

Alaina tossed her purse on her dresser. She removed her earrings as she stepped out of her heels. She'd taken a shower before her dinner meeting with Rufus, but felt as if she needed another one.

She didn't like him. She'd figured that out before they'd finished their salads. He made her think of a slimy snake in the bushes, waiting for a mouse to scamper by so he could attack it.

The thought of when he'd touched her hand made her shiver in disgust.

"Hey," Kelcey said, sticking her head in the door. "You're home early. I didn't expect you here until after midnight. How was your dinner?"

"Shitty."

Kelcey entered the room. "You had a shitty meal at Emma's restaurant? That's impossible."

Alaina waved a hand in the air, as if to erase Kelcey's question. "No, the meal wasn't shitty. It was wonderful, as always. The time with Rufus Olinghouse was shitty."

Kelcey crossed the room and sat on the bed. "What happened?"

After slipping off her dress and bra, Alaina pulled a huge T-shirt over her head and joined Kelcey on the bed. "I agreed to meet Rufus at the restaurant because he said he had a business proposition for me."

"What kind of business proposition?"

"He wants to buy Stevens House from me."

Kelcey's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open in obvious surprise. "You're kidding."

"Nope, I'm serious."

"How did he react when you turned him down?"

A chill passed through Alaina when she remembered the anger in his eyes before he masked it. "He wasn't happy. He was still cordial, but I could tell he was angry at my

refusal. Kelc, I don't think I've ever eaten so fast in my life. I just wanted to get away from him. I felt almost...dirty being close to him."

Alaina recognized that look on Kelcey's face...the one where she clenched her lips and that little furrow formed between her eyebrows. "What are you thinking?"

"I can't help but wonder why he offered to buy that particular piece of property from you. According to what you've told me, his grandmother owns thousands of acres around Lanville. She'd probably give him anything he wants." She tapped one forefinger against her lips. "There has to be something there, something he wants."

"But what? The house was almost falling down before the Colemans started working on it. It sits on twenty-two acres, and that's nothing but weeds and a few scraggly trees. Besides, like you said, Bella owns tons of property."

"Maybe you should ask Rye about the place. Maybe he knows something you don't."

Alaina hadn't told Kelcey about what had happened earlier with Rye. "I can't do that."

"Why not?"

Before Alaina had the chance to answer Kelcey's question, her cell phone rang in her purse. She'd given Rye's number a distinctive ringtone over the weekend, so knew right away that he was the caller.

"Are you going to answer that?" Kelcey asked.

"It's Rye."

"I repeat—are you going to answer that?"

Alaina shook her head. "We had a fight. I'm mad at him."

Kelcey's eyes softened in sympathy. "Maybe he's calling to apologize."

"This is like the fifth time he's called tonight."

"Then he's definitely calling to apologize. Talk to him, Alaina."

The ringing stopped. "It went to voice mail. Problem solved."

Giving Alaina the don't-be-stupid look, Kelcey stood and walked to the dresser. She pulled the cell phone out of Alaina's purse and handed it to Alaina. "Call him. I'll see you in the morning."

Kelcey left the bedroom, closing the door behind her. Alaina stared at the phone in her hand. She didn't have to listen to her housemate. Rye had practically ordered her not to see Rufus. That kind of caveman attitude did *not* sit well with her.

Except that Rye had been right. She never should have gone to dinner with Rufus. And she didn't like these bad feelings between Rye and her.

She unlocked her phone and punched in Rye's number.

Chapter Fourteen

April 26, 1937

I saw him outside the café with Ruthie. They stood against the building, but were in plain sight. Anyone could have seen them together, seen the way he ran his fingers up and down her arm. Ruthie batted those long eyelashes at him and kept licking her lips, as if begging him to kiss her.

I wish Laura was here to see him flirting with a woman who had the reputation of sleeping with any man who asked her. Then maybe Laura would realize what a horrible man he is.

* * * * *

He answered after the second ring. "Hey," he said softly. "Did you just get home?"

"Yes."

"Alaina, I'm sorry for hurting you. That stupid shit about not trusting you... It isn't true. I swear it."

She wanted to believe that, yet she couldn't. Despite his apology now, his hesitation earlier today when she'd asked him if he trusted her proved he didn't. Not completely.

She'd tell him to go to hell if she didn't truly believe he cared for her, and believe that caring could turn into something stronger in time.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to call you back. I was really pissed at you."

"You had a right to be pissed. And you don't owe me an apology. I owe one to you for being such an ass about Rufus."

"You were right to be an ass. He gave me the creeps. I've never eaten a meal so fast in my life. I couldn't wait to get away from him."

"Did he hurt you?" he asked, his voice now sharp, intense. "If he did I swear —"

"No, he didn't hurt me. He offered me seventy-five thousand for Stevens House. That's the business he wanted to discuss with me."

Silence. She didn't blame Rye for not knowing what to say. Rufus' offer had shocked her speechless too.

"If he wanted the house, why didn't he get it from his grandmother before she sold it?"

"That's what I asked him. He never actually answered my question, just gave me excuses about being out of the state on deals."

"Alaina, I don't want you..." He stopped. She thought she heard him blow out a breath before he spoke again. "I'd rather be with you if you see Rufus again."

"You don't have to worry about that. I have no intention of seeing him again."

"Good." She heard the clink of ice cubes against glass. "Did you finish your laundry and banking and paying bills?"

"I'm all caught up again. My Visa is back to zero, at least until I find another shoe sale."

He chuckled. "What is it with women and shoes?"

"It's in our genes. We can't help loving shoes." She stuffed a pillow behind her back and leaned against the headboard. "What are you doing?"

"Watching the baseball game."

"Who's winning?"

"To be honest, I don't know. I'm not paying attention to it." His voice lowered, turned more husky. "I keep wishing you were here with me."

Her chest felt tight as her heart seemed to swell. She wished she could tell him how much she loved him, yet knew he wasn't ready for that. Their relationship was too new for declarations of love.

"Give me your address and I'll drive to your house."

Logically Alaina knew it would be silly for Rye to drive to Dallas tonight when she planned to go back to Lanville tomorrow morning, even though she would love to see him. "You don't have to do that. I'm taking back my resignation, if that's okay. I want to come back tomorrow and work on my house."

"It's way more than okay." His voice dropped back to the soft tone he'd used earlier. "I've gotten used to falling asleep with you in my arms. That big bed is going to feel very empty tonight."

"So is mine."

"Will you stay with me tomorrow night?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation.

"Great." She could hear the smile in his voice. "Bring plenty of clothes so you don't have to go back to Dallas for a while."

"Okay."

Silence again for several seconds, then he asked, "Where are you?"

"On my bed."

"What are you wearing?"

His question surprised her. "What am I *wearing*?"

"Yeah."

She looked down at her body, not having a clue why he would ask such a thing. "A big blue T-shirt."

"Anything under it?"

"Panties."

"No bra?"

God, Alaina, you're such a dunce. He's starting phone sex! A delicious thrill shot through her body. She'd never had phone sex with a man. "No," she said, lowering her voice. "Just panties."

"What color are they?"

"Gold."

"Bikinis?"

"Hip huggers."

She thought she heard his breathing quicken. "Do something for me."

"What?" she whispered.

"Imagine I'm lying beside you."

His request made her pussy clench, her clit tingle. "Rye—"

"Take off your panties."

She knew what he wanted her to do. She'd pleased herself in between lovers, but she'd never done it in front of a man. The few lovers in her past hadn't been adventurous enough to try anything new or different. With Rye, she would be willing to try anything sexual he wanted.

Lifting her hips, she tugged on the waistband until it slipped to her thighs. She slid her panties down her legs and dropped them on the floor next to the bed. "Okay."

"You took off your panties?"

"Yes."

"Touch your breast. But imagine it's my hand on it."

Switching the phone to her left hand, Alaina slowly slid her right hand beneath her T-shirt until she cradled her breast. She lifted the heavy weight the way Rye would.

"Are you touching your breast?" he asked.

"Yes."

"How does it feel?"

"Good." She passed her thumb across the nipple. "Really good."

"Squeeze it."

She did as he ordered, kneading first one breast, then the other. Her mouth fell open as her breathing deepened.

"Touch your nipple and imagine it's my mouth sucking it."

A whimper slipped from her lips. Alaina thumbed her nipple over and over as she pictured Rye in bed with her, his tongue licking the hard tip. She imagined his hand sliding down her stomach to between her thighs.

"Is your nipple nice and hard?"

"Yes."

"Is your pussy wet?"

She touched her slick flesh and whimpered again. "Yes."

"Push two fingers inside you."

Her cream let her fingers easily enter her body. She moved them in and out, wishing it was Rye touching her instead.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Fucking myself with my fingers."

She heard him groan. "Make yourself come for me. I want to hear it."

Alaina closed her eyes and let the mental images flow through her mind. It wasn't her fingers inside her pussy, but Rye's. It was him touching her, sliding his fingertips over the sensitive place in her channel. It was him who withdrew his fingers and let them glide over her clit.

"What are you doing now?" he asked, his voice gruff.

"Touching my clit."

"I want you naked. Lay down the phone and take off your shirt."

Once her T-shirt lay on the floor with her panties, she picked up the phone again. "Okay."

"You're naked?"

"Yes."

"God, babe, I wish I was with you. I want to kiss you so bad, I ache."

Alaina touched her mouth. She spread her juices over it as she thought about Rye's lips pressed to hers, his naked body covering hers, his cock sliding into her pussy. It was always so hard, so big, when he took her. She licked her fingers and moaned at the taste of herself on her skin.

"Tell me what you're doing."

She almost told him, but stopped and asked him a question instead. "Are you touching your cock?"

"Yeah."

"Is it hard?"

"God, yes."

She slid her hand between her thighs again. More cream oozed from her channel. She gathered it on her fingers and spread it over her clit. "Are you going to come?"

"Not until you do."

Her pussy clenched at the thought of Rye sliding his hand up and down his rod, over the head, squeezing his balls. She'd love to watch him do that. "I'm close."

"Me too."

Alaina rubbed her clit faster. "Feels so good."

"Yeah."

His voice sounded as if he had gravel in his throat. The sexy sound sent heat through her. Sweat popped out on her skin. Her breathing quickened into little pants.

"I'm right there with you, babe," Rye said. "I'm right there beside you, rubbing your clit, sucking your nipple, kissing your lips. I'm gonna come so deep inside you."

His words pushed Alaina over the edge. The orgasm snaked up her legs, her torso, before centering in her core. Alaina moaned loudly and pushed two fingers inside her. The walls of her pussy pulsated with each contraction.

She heard a grunt over the phone, then a muttered, "Fuck!"

It took several moments for Alaina to find the strength to drag her hand to her stomach, and even longer for her breathing to slow. She could hear Rye's heavy breathing and knew his climax had been as strong as hers.

"You okay?" he asked.

"No. I have no feeling left in my body."

He chuckled, then his voice turned low and husky again. "I want to watch you make yourself come."

"I want to watch you too."

"Then maybe we should do that the next time we're together."

She swallowed hard. "Maybe we should."

"What time will you be here tomorrow?"

"As soon as I can. Probably between eight and nine."

"I'll be waiting."

* * * * *

The old-fashioned ringtone on his cell phone seeped into Rye's consciousness. He frowned and cracked one eyelid to look at the digital clock. 2:32. What idiot would call him at 2:32 in the morning?

Pushing up to one elbow, Rye picked up his phone from the nightstand and gazed at the display. He blinked when he saw Brad McGuire's number. Way too early in the morning for the sheriff to be calling.

Unless something was wrong.

Panic gripped Rye as he flipped open his phone. "Hey, Sheriff."

"You'd better get to Stevens House, Rye. There's been a fire."

Completely awake, Rye sat up and turned on the lamp. "A fire?"

"Yeah. The fire department put it out, but there's damage in the kitchen."

"Damn it," Rye muttered. A lot of supplies—including piles of two-by-fours—had been stored in the kitchen since that room wouldn't be refurbished for several weeks. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"I'll call Dax and Griff. You gonna call the owner?"

"Not until I see what happened. She'll have a thousand questions I can't answer until I look over the place."

Rye shut the phone and tossed it on the bed. He made a detour to the bathroom long enough to throw water on his face and rinse his mouth before he dressed.

He hurried through his house and out to his pickup. A fire at Stevens House. It had to be an accident, an electrical shortage or something. Arson wasn't logical. Everyone who had met Alaina loved her. He couldn't imagine anyone wanting to hurt her on purpose.

Dax and Griff pulled up to the front of the house seconds after Rye parked. He waited for his brothers so they could go in the house together.

Brad met them in the living room, along with Marc Bagwell, the fire chief. "What's up, Marc?" Rye asked.

"It started in the kitchen. We got here pretty fast so the damage is minimal...mostly smoke. Some of the lumber is scorched a bit on one end."

"Any idea how it started?" Dax asked.

Marc rubbed his chin. "I'll know more after I finish my investigation, but it looks like arson."

"Shit," Griff muttered.

"It would've been worse if it hadn't been called in when it was," Marc said. "A couple of teenagers looking for a place to park saw the smoke. The middle of the night on a dead end road means this house could've burned to the ground before we ever got here."

Rye and his brothers had served on the Lanville volunteer fire department for ten years. He knew all the firefighters personally and they did a damned good job. The fact that they'd stopped the fire with only minimal damage proved that.

Jaxon Greene walked into the room, steno pad in hand. It didn't surprise Rye to see a reporter from the *Lanville Journal* here. "Hey, Jax."

"Rye." He nodded at the other two Colemans. "Michaela is taking pictures. She'll have prints later today."

The object of their conversation walked into the room. Or Rye should say waddled into the room. He couldn't help grinning. She and Jax were expecting twins in less than a month. He gestured toward her round stomach. "How do you get around that bump to take pictures?"

Michaela rubbed a hand over her babies. "I get around just fine, thank you very much."

Jax slipped an arm around her waist and kissed her temple. Still grinning, Rye glanced at Griff. His grin disappeared. Griff stared at Michaela's stomach, a look of longing on his face.

Jana had miscarried two years ago, after she and Griff had tried for three years to have a baby. Seeing Michaela and Jax together had to bring back all the sadness from that time.

Griff looked away, but not before Rye saw the anguish in his eyes. He wondered if his brother would ever get over losing Jana.

"You call Alaina yet?" Dax asked.

Rye shook his head. "I wanted to get a better idea of what happened before I called her. I'll do that now."

He stepped outside for privacy. Hating to wake her but knowing he had to, he opened his cell and punched in her number.

Three rings later, a groggy Alaina said, "There'd better be an emergency for you to call me at this time of the morning, Rye."

He winced at her choice of words. "Yeah, it's an emergency. There was a fire at your house."

"What?" She no longer sounded the least bit sleepy. "At Stevens House?"

"Yeah. The fire chief hasn't finished the official investigation, but he told me it looks like arson."

"Oh God, Rye. Is it destroyed?"

"No, only smoke damage and some minor burns on the lumber in the kitchen."

"Who would want to burn down my house?"

"I don't want to speculate on anything until Marc finishes his investigation. I think you'd better get here as quick as you can."

"I'll throw on some clothes and be there in an hour."

"Drive carefully."

"I will."

Rye closed his phone and gripped it tightly. Anger swirled up inside him that someone would try to hurt Alaina this way. He swore whoever did this would pay with a lot of broken bones. Rye would make sure of that.

Chapter Fifteen

April 27, 1937

Laura tried to sneak past me when she got home from her tutoring session with Patrick, but I stopped her. I noticed how she clutched her sweater together and wouldn't look directly into my eyes. I followed my instincts, grabbed the edges of her sweater and yanked them apart. Laura's dress was torn and missing two buttons.

Before I could ask any questions, she said she'd tripped and fallen against a doorway with a loose nail. She'd accidentally caught her dress on that nail.

I didn't believe her. Laura is a horrible liar. He did something to her. I know it. What I don't know is how to protect my sister.

* * * * *

Alaina accepted the coffee refill from Dax with a smile. He and Griff sat at the folding table in the dining room with her and Rye. They could've gone home and back to bed, yet had elected to stay and give her support.

She'd liked Dax and Griff from the beginning. Now she admired them.

"Can you still use the lumber?" she asked Rye.

"Sure. We can cut off the part that was damaged by fire and water and use the rest. We'll recycle the damaged part."

Alaina rubbed her forehead. She still had trouble believing someone tried to burn down her house. "I don't understand why someone would do this."

Rye squeezed the back of her neck. "We'll find out who did it, Alaina. I promise you."

"How? It could've been kids goofing off, or teenagers acting on a dare."

Griff leaned forward in his chair. "If that's the case, they probably won't be back."

"I hope not." She set her coffee mug back on the table with a loud *thunk*. "It makes me so *mad* that *idiots* get off on hurting other people. I just want to...*hit* something!"

Dax held his hands up in surrender. "Don't look at me. I bruise easily."

She scowled at him while he grinned, then turned back to Rye. "Is there a wall somewhere I can hit with a mallet?"

"Most of the walls have been torn down, except for the library. You can take a crack at it. George said those shelves would have to be replaced."

Rye's eyes sparkled with humor, meaning he didn't believe she'd actually take a mallet to the library wall. Well, she'd show him.

The humor disappeared from his eyes when she stood. "Where are you going?"

"To knock holes in a wall."

"Alaina –"

Ignoring Rye, she took off for the library, stopping in the living room long enough to grab the large-headed mallet.

There weren't any overhead fixtures installed yet, but she didn't need one. Dawn was breaking in the east, giving her enough light through the window to see. There was a two-foot section of wall between two bookcases. Perfect. She lifted the heavy mallet over her shoulder and almost fell backward.

"Easy, slugger." Rye caught her by the waist to keep her upright. "I understand your frustration, but don't hurt yourself." He took the mallet from her and leaned it against the wall, then flipped a hammer until the handle pointed at her. "Try this."

Alaina frowned. "That won't make a big enough hole."

"So you make a big hole a little at a time. It's better than throwing out your back."

He had a point. She snatched the hammer from his hand. "Thanks."

"Dax and Griff volunteered to make a run to Sonic for breakfast. You want something?"

"A breakfast burrito."

"You got it." He gave her a quick kiss. "Want some help with this wall?"

Rye's cell phone rang. He glanced at the display. "It's my dad."

"Take it. I'll be busy here a while."

He stepped out of the room. Picturing the idiots who had set fire to her house, Alaina lifted the hammer and hit the old plaster right between the bookcases. Bull's-eye.

She swung the hammer a couple more times, making nice holes in the plaster, before she felt the cold air wash over her. Alaina dropped the hammer and whirled around. Laura stood two feet away.

The ghost was transparent, but Alaina could make out more of Laura's features. She seemed to be easier to see each time she appeared. She stepped closer to the bookcase on Alaina's right. Holding her hands in front of her body, she made two fists and pulled them close to her chest.

"I don't know what you want," Alaina whispered.

Laura pointed to the bookcase, then made the fists again and pulled them toward her chest.

"You want the bookcase moved?"

Laura nodded.

"I can't move it by myself."

Holding up one hand, Laura made a circle with her fingers and thumb. With her other hand, she pushed against the circle with one forefinger, as if she were pressing a button.

"There's a button that moves the case?" Alaina asked.

Laura nodded again.

"Where?"

The ghost disappeared.

"Laura, come back!"

No cold air and no ghost. "A button that moves the case," Alaina muttered. "How am I supposed to find a button? And will it still work if I *do* find it?"

Logically, it would be right in the middle of the case so someone could get to it easily. But if someone wanted it to be hidden, they'd put the button up high or down low. Alaina couldn't reach the top shelf without a stepladder, so decided to start at the bottom. Dropping to her knees, she felt all along the bottom shelf and up the sides.

Brown work boots came into her line of vision. Alaina looked up long legs covered with denim—stopping for a moment at the fly, which she easily recognized—and up Rye's torso to his face.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for a button."

His gaze passed over her body. "You're wearing jeans and a T. You don't have any buttons."

Alaina sat back on her heels. She'd debated with herself about mentioning Laura's ghost to Rye. Now seemed like a good time to tell him. She wiggled one finger at him, silently asking him to come closer. He dropped to the floor next to her.

"What's up?"

"First, this is going to sound really weird. Please hear me out and let me finish."

"Sure," he said, although he looked confused.

"Do you remember when I felt cold air in the turret?"

"Yeah."

"It happened again Monday, right before I saw the ghost of Laura Cummins."

Rye's eyes bugged out. "The *what*?"

"I saw the ghost of Laura Cummins. She pointed to the window seat. That's how I knew where to find the painting. She appeared again a few minutes ago. She can't talk, but told me through hand gestures that this bookcase moves by pushing a button. So I'm looking for the button."

Rye rested his elbow on his upraised knee and rubbed his mustache. He didn't look at her.

"I know how crazy this sounds. It sounds crazy to me when I say it, and I experienced it. But, Rye, I swear to you I'm telling the truth."

He blew out a heavy breath. "Alaina, I'm sure you believe you're telling the truth, but—"

"I've seen her three times. The first time I couldn't tell for sure who she was, but her image becomes clearer each time she appears." She reached over and clasped his hand.

"Rye, she's trying to tell me something. She helped me find that painting. Maybe there's another painting behind this bookcase."

"How do you know it's Laura Cummins?"

"I've seen pictures of her. I did a lot of research when I decided to buy this house." She squeezed his hand. "You have to believe me."

"I want to. I really do, but I don't believe in ghosts."

"Then how would I know about the button that moves this bookcase?"

"You haven't actually found a button yet, have you?"

"No, because you interrupted me." She understood why he didn't believe that she'd seen a ghost, but he could at least keep an open mind. "Work with me here, Rye."

"You're asking a lot, Alaina."

"I know that." If he couldn't trust her totally yet because of Alesia, at least he could trust that she told him the truth about seeing Laura's ghost. "Help me look for the button. If we find it, will that convince you I really saw a ghost?"

Without answering her question, Rye stood and began to feel along the edge of the bookcase. Alaina returned to the bottom shelf, running her fingers slowly along every part of it. Nothing.

"I think I found something," Rye said.

Alaina scrambled to her feet. Rye had his hand behind an ornamental facing at the top of the bookcase, a place she wouldn't have been able to reach without a ladder. "Is it a button?"

"Feels like an indentation."

A low rumbling sound came from the bookcase. Alaina stepped back, unsure what would happen next. Rye moved beside her. The case shook, hinges screeched, then it slowly swung away from the wall until it stood at a forty-five-degree angle.

"Wow," she breathed. "Laura was right."

"I'll get a flashlight," Rye said, not acknowledging her comment about the ghost.

Alaina waited, bouncing up and down on her toes, for him to come back. Finding the hidden space proved she wasn't lying about seeing Laura Cummins' ghost. Rye had to believe her now.

He returned with a large flashlight. "Stay behind me."

She had no problem with that. If there was something icky behind that bookcase, she'd rather Rye find it first.

Narrow shelves filled the space. There were also cobwebs and mice droppings, and something square wrapped in burlap sitting on one of the top shelves. He took it from the shelf and handed it to Alaina. Carefully, she unwrapped the burlap to find another painting similar to the one she'd found in the turret. It depicted a different part of the riverbank, one she didn't recognize.

"That looks like Mac Morrison's place," Rye said. He pointed to an old barn in the background. "That barn fell down about ten years ago."

"It's wonderful." She looked at the signature in the bottom, but couldn't make out a name. It looked like just a series of loops. "I wonder if Bella knows who painted it."

"She hasn't lived in this house in decades. After her father died, she rented out the house. There's probably been at least twenty people who've lived here. Any of them could've hidden the paintings."

Alaina stared at the beautiful picture another moment before looking at Rye. "Do you believe me now?"

He rubbed his mustache again, a gesture Alaina now recognized as when Rye was considering his words. "I want to say no, but this is pretty heavy evidence."

"What's heavy evidence?" Dax asked behind them.

Alaina turned to see Dax and Griff, both holding large Sonic sacks. "I'll tell you over breakfast. I'm starved."

* * * * *

Whether or not Alaina had actually seen Laura Cummins' ghost, she believed she did. Rye unwrapped his breakfast burrito. He decided to remain silent and let her explain the ghost and the paintings to his brothers.

"You've seen her three times?" Dax asked.

Alaina nodded. "I've felt cold air flow over me five times, but I've actually seen her three times. I think she tried to materialize those other times, but couldn't for some reason."

"You bought a haunted house." Dax grinned. "Cool."

"We don't know it's haunted," Rye said, trying to be the voice of reason. "We've never heard any stories about a ghost sighting here."

"Maybe that's because no one told us." Griff wiped his hands on a paper napkin. "Most of the people in Lanville know about our family's history. There could have been all kinds of things that happened in this house that didn't get back to us."

Rye unwrapped his second burrito. "No matter our history, we would've heard about a ghost in this house. Someone would have mentioned it."

"You could ask Miss Maebelle to be sure."

"Who's Miss Maebelle?" Alaina asked Griff.

"Maebelle Griffith, Lanville's historian. She's kept records of the town for the last fifty years."

"Gracious, how old is she?"

"Probably early eighties. She took over the job from her mother about fifteen years ago. Do you remember her mother, Lucille Griffith?"

She shook her head. "I moved away from Lanville when I was thirteen. There are a lot of people I don't remember."

"If anyone knows about ghost sightings in this house, it would be Miss Maebelle. She can remember dates and facts better than a lot of people half her age."

Alaina turned to Rye. "Can we go see her?"

He'd do whatever she wanted, yet couldn't ignore the doubt deep inside that Laura Cummins' ghost existed. "Sure."

His tone must have given away his feelings for Alaina sat back in her chair, a discouraged look on her face. "You don't believe me. Even with finding the painting behind the bookcase, you still don't believe me."

He glanced at his brothers. Dax gave a slight shrug. Griff frowned and shook his head, as if to tell Rye not to blow it. Rye decided his youngest brother was a very wise man.

"Alaina, I believe there are a lot of things in this world that can't be explained by logic. You believe you saw Laura Cummins' ghost. I don't doubt that."

He was rather proud of the way he'd commented without disputing her ghost sighting. She gave him a look that clearly said she knew he was dancing around the subject to keep from declaring his disbelief to her again. She didn't say anything as she picked up the rest of her burrito and popped it into her mouth.

He hated that he hurt her yesterday when he didn't answer her question about trusting her. He didn't want to hurt her again.

"We'll go see Miss Maebelle when she gets to her office."

Alaina's smile lit up her eyes. "Thank you."

* * * * *

Miss Maebelle looked like Mrs. Santa Claus. That was Alaina's first impression of the white-haired lady with the little square glasses on her nose. She wore a loose, short-sleeved print dress that hung straight to mid-calf. Her blue eyes twinkled when she smiled, just as Alaina imagined Mrs. Claus' would.

She thought Miss Maebelle was adorable.

The older woman took Alaina's hand in both of hers after Rye introduced them and squeezed it. "Welcome to Lanville, Alaina."

"Thank you. It's nice to meet you."

"So nice to meet *you*. Please, sit down."

She led the way to a sitting area with four overstuffed chairs set in a circle with a round table in the middle. A tiny kitchenette held a refrigerator, microwave and coffee maker. Bookshelves lined three walls and created aisles across the floor. Filing cabinets filled the fourth wall.

Alaina had always loved the smell and feel of books. She imagined working here, surrounded by the town's history, had to be very rewarding.

"Can anyone look at these books?" Alaina asked.

"Oh yes. I'm here from nine o'clock to four o'clock six days a week. The newer books can be checked out, but the older ones can't leave the building. That's why I have this sitting area so someone can be comfortable while they read."

"The county donated this building," Rye said to Alaina, "but private donations run it."

"Your family has been very generous with your donations, Rye."

"History is important. That's why we're here."

"I'm happy to help if I can. Would either of you like coffee or tea?"

"No, thank you." Rye leaned forward and clasped his hands between his knees. "Alaina bought Stevens House to remodel for a bed-and-breakfast."

"I heard that." Miss Maebelle smiled at Alaina. "I think it's wonderful. Lanville needs more places for people to stay."

Rye nodded, then looked at Alaina. "You want to explain everything to her?"

Alaina nodded and swallowed the lump in her throat. She didn't want to sound like an idiot. "Have you ever heard of someone seeing a ghost in Stevens House?"

Miss Maebelle picked up the strand of long pearls around her neck and ran them through her fingers. "I've never heard anything about a ghost. I don't have a record of any sightings. Are you worried the house is haunted?"

"Not exactly worried, but..." She scooted forward in her chair. "I've seen the ghost of Laura Cummins. Three times."

Miss Maebelle's eyes widened before a huge smile broke over her wrinkled face. "Really? How fascinating! Tell me all about it."

"You don't think it's strange that Alaina thinks she..." Rye stopped and started again. "That Alaina has seen a ghost?"

"Oh goodness, no! There's a ghost in the courthouse, you know."

Alaina looked at Rye. "You didn't tell me that."

"It's just an old wives' tale."

Miss Maebelle straightened and her chin lifted an inch. "It is not. I've heard it walking around, and so have a lot of other people."

Rye sat back in his chair again. "But don't you think it's strange that no one else has seen the ghost in Stevens House except Alaina? A lot of people have lived in that house over the years. You just said no one ever reported any sightings."

Miss Maebelle looked at Alaina. "Perhaps the ghost had a message for you."

"She did. She led me to two paintings."

Now smiling again, the older woman turned her attention back to Rye. "There you go."

“But that doesn’t make any sense! Alaina moved away from here when she was thirteen. She’d never stepped inside that house until a couple of weeks ago. It isn’t logical that this ghost would appear to her and no one else.”

“Yes, it is.” Alaina swallowed again and lifted her gaze to Rye’s. “Laura Cummins was my great-great-aunt.”

Chapter Sixteen

April 28, 1937

He came into the store after school with his son. I overheard him telling my father that his wife would leave for Oklahoma City this afternoon to visit her sister. He laughed and said he'd be a bachelor for the next week.

Laura hadn't said anything about a break in her tutoring lessons with Patrick. I casually asked him if his wife would be taking the children with her. He said no, that they had to stay in school. Plus, he didn't want to interrupt Patrick's tutoring lessons with Laura since they were helping so much. My father beamed at the compliment to his youngest daughter.

I headed to the back of the store to replace an item on the shelf that Mrs. Kinson decided not to buy. When I turned around, he was right behind me. His eyes looked like chips of ice. He told me he knew I didn't approve of Laura tutoring his son, but I would be wise to leave things alone.

I have to make sure Laura never goes back to that house.

* * * * *

Rye wrapped his hands tightly around the steering wheel and stared straight ahead through the windshield. He could feel Alaina's gaze on him, but refused to return it.

She'd kept something from him. Again.

He didn't expect her to spill her life story after knowing him for only two weeks. But he couldn't imagine why she didn't tell him that her family had a history in Stevens House, just like his family did.

Rye pulled into his regular parking spot at the back of the house. Turning off the ignition, he blew out a deep breath. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I was afraid," she said in a small voice.

Surprised at her answer, he turned his head toward her. "Afraid of what?"

She lifted her gaze from her clasped hands and looked at him. "That you wouldn't want anything to do with me when you found out your great-grandfather was hanged for the murder of my great-great-aunt."

"Why would you think that?"

"You didn't want anything to do with me because of what happened with my sister. Why would I think other members of my family wouldn't affect you the same way?"

He supposed she had a point, but things still didn't make sense to him. "I don't understand why I didn't know about your family's involvement in this whole thing. Alesia never said anything about it."

"Alesia didn't care about her ancestors. She didn't care about anything but herself. Plus our last name was Pearson. There was no reason for you to associate a Pearson with a Cummins." Alaina shifted in her seat and turned toward him. "After Laura was killed, her parents and her sister, Miriam—my great-grandmother—moved to Kansas. Miriam married and had two sons. My great-uncle had three children, my grandfather had my mother."

"How did your family end up back in Lanville?"

"My dad came through town on his fancy Harley and my mother fell for him with one look. He was the bad boy, the kind my mom couldn't ever date. He asked her to elope after four weeks. She agreed. They traveled around the country, my dad picking up work at the nuclear plants. I'm not sure what he did there, but he was really good at his job and made a lot of money at it. Alesia was born, then me three years later. My mom was ready to settle down with a home of her own. My dad got a job at Comanche Peak in Glen Rose and they moved to Lanville." She shrugged. "End of story."

"Not quite. How did you find out about Laura's murder and that you were related to her?"

"From Miriam's diary. My grandfather gave it to me. He'd found it in my great-grandmother's possessions when she passed away. He said he'd forgotten about it until he started going through his paperwork shortly before he died. He wanted to be sure everything was in order with his estate."

"He's the one who left you the five million?"

Alaina nodded. "We'd always been close while I was growing up, even though he lived in Kansas and we lived in Texas. We talked on the phone a lot and visited as often as possible. My mom inherited the rest of his estate, which amounted to about nine million."

"And Alesia?"

"One hundred thousand dollars. Which pissed her off royally since my grandfather was worth so much. I think he did that simply because she was his granddaughter. They'd never been close."

"Why did he give Miriam's diary to you and not your mother?"

"My grandfather moved to Texas and had a house built behind my mom's three years ago. He wanted to be closer to her and me, and we both wanted him to be close to us. I was visiting with him one day in December and we were chatting about family. I mentioned that I'd thought about researching my ancestors. I thought that would be fun to do. That's when he gave me Miriam's diary, because I'd shown an interest in ancestry." She looked down for a moment. "He passed away four days later at age seventy-seven."

"Is that why you wanted Stevens House so badly, because of your family ties?"

She nodded again. "My family lived in this area for generations. I wanted to be a part of that history."

"What happened to your father? I know he left town about eight years ago."

Alaina shrugged. "I haven't heard from him in years. I don't know if he's still alive." She reached up and laid her hand over his on the back of the seat. "I'm sorry for not telling you that I'm related to Laura, but do you understand why I didn't? I didn't want to lose you."

Rye took her hand, brought it to his mouth and kissed the palm. "No more holding back again. I want us to be totally honest with each other, no matter what. Okay?"

She gave him a tender smile. "Okay."

* * * * *

Alaina swept up sawdust and debris from the kitchen floor. All the lumber had been examined and moved, the damaged pieces taken to the circular saw on the veranda to cut off the wet, charred parts. Sweat formed between her breasts and ran down her back. Although barely eighty degrees outside, it had to be over ninety in the house. She'd be so glad when air-conditioning could be installed. The Colemans' crew would probably be glad too.

She dumped the contents of the dustpan in a large garbage can. As long as she had the broom and dustpan in her hands, she decided she might as well make a trip through the house and clean up after the guys. They were scattered over the top two floors, so Alaina headed for the stairs.

The sound of nail guns and hammers greeted her when she reached the second floor. Peeking into the bedroom on her left, she saw Justin and Rory hard at work. They'd torn out the old window and were building a frame for the new one. She paused long enough to wave to them, then walked between skeletons of two-by-fours in what would eventually be a hallway toward what used to be the master bedroom.

There was a large plastic garbage can in each room, and the guys were good about pitching their trash, wood pieces and old nails into them. Sometimes they missed the can, so there was usually quite a bit for Alaina to sweep up every day. She didn't mind. Every pile of sawdust she swept up brought her that much closer to her dream.

She dropped both broom and dustpan when she felt the cold air wash over her. Alaina turned around, searching for Laura. The ghost began to appear, but vanished again. As quickly as she'd disappeared, she reappeared, her eyes tightly closed, her fists clenched.

"You can do it, Laura. Concentrate."

Laura finally took form. Her head was down, her shoulders slumped as if it had taken a great effort on her part to materialize.

"Are you okay?" Alaina asked. *Well, that's a stupid question. She's a ghost. Of course she's not okay.*

Laura lifted her head and slowly straightened her shoulders. A determined look filled her eyes. Gliding to the other side of the bedroom, she pointed to the floor in the corner.

Alaina's heart slammed against her ribs. "Is there another painting under the floorboards?"

Laura nodded.

"Are there more in the house?"

The ghost shook her head. And vanished.

Crossing the floor, Alaina peered at the old wooden planks that hadn't yet been replaced. There must be a trap door of some kind, like there was in the turret window seat.

Screwdriver time again.

With Rory's screwdriver clasped tightly in her fist, Alaina returned to the master bedroom. Dropping to her knees, she searched for a latch or indentation in the wood that would indicate a door.

The jangling of items in a tool belt drew her attention from the floor. She looked over her shoulder to see Rye standing behind her. His eyes were narrowed.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for a trap door."

He squatted down beside her. "And why do you think there's a trap door here?"

"Laura told me."

"You said the ghost can't talk."

"She can't. But she pointed to this spot and nodded when I asked her if there's another painting here."

Rye rubbed his mustache. Alaina braced herself for the negative comments he would make. Instead of saying anything, he held out his hand.

"What?"

"Give me the screwdriver. I'll help you."

She gladly handed over the tool and sat on the floor. Rye took a hammer from his tool belt and dropped to his knees. After a moment of examining the boards much as she had, he slipped the screwdriver under the edge of a board and tapped the head with the hammer. The board came loose.

He pried up four boards that were hooked together. Alaina peered over his shoulder to see another rectangular item wrapped in burlap.

Rye drew the item out of the floor and handed it to Alaina. She carefully unwrapped it to find yet another painting of the riverbank.

"That's downtown, behind the feed store. The river makes a sharp turn and forms that deep cove. I've fished in there dozens of times."

Alaina gazed at the tumble of water over rocks, the trees swaying in the breeze. Everything looked so real. Whoever painted these landscapes was incredibly talented.

She wished she knew who had created them.

"Laura said this is the last one. I mean, I asked her if there are any more in the house and she shook her head."

Rye slipped the hammer and screwdriver into his tool belt. "Then I guess it's time to get them framed."

"Hey, Rye," Griff called out. "Vince is here. He has a couple of questions about the doors."

"Be right there." He took the painting from Alaina. "I'll put this in the living room with the other two. We can go to Fort Worth this weekend. After we drop off all three to be framed, we can have dinner and see a movie."

Alaina smiled, happy that he finally seemed to accept her visions of Laura Cummins. "I'd like that."

"You going downstairs?"

"I think I'll finish sweeping up here first."

He gave her a hand to pull her up, then headed for the stairs. Alaina picked up her broom and dustpan to finish her job. It was almost five-thirty, meaning the crew had already left. Every muscle in her body ached. Deciding the sweeping could wait until tomorrow, she set the broom and dustpan in the corner and walked toward the stairs.

Cold air washed over her before she could take the first step. She froze, waiting for Laura to appear.

She didn't have to wait long. Laura hovered over the stairs. She held her arms out, then brought her hands together and interlocked her fingers.

Alaina didn't understand what the ghost was trying to tell her. "I don't know what you want."

Laura held up three fingers.

Alaina felt like stomping her foot in frustration. She wished Laura could talk. "Three what?" Suddenly, it clicked in her mind. "You mean the paintings, don't you?"

Laura nodded. Once again, she held her arms out and brought her hands together, fingers interlocked.

"You want the paintings joined?"

Laura nodded even harder.

"How?"

The ghost vanished.

"Well, shit," Alaina muttered. "I wish you'd stick around longer."

She hurried down the stairs, eager to tell Rye what happened. She found him in the living room with his brothers and Vince. He gave her a quick smile before turning his

attention back to Vince. She wandered into the dining room for something to drink while he finished the conversation with his glazer.

The sound of a pickup starting signaled Vince's exit. She downed the rest of her Dr Pepper as Rye came around the corner.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Not yet. Come with me."

She led Rye back to the living room. Alaina walked to the corner by the front door, where Rye had leaned the three paintings against the wall and covered them with a plastic tarp. Picking them up, she carried them to the piece of plywood that Rye used as a makeshift desk.

"I just saw Laura again upstairs." She laid the paintings on the plywood, end to end. "She told me the paintings have to be put together."

"Put together how?" Rye asked.

"I don't know. She vanished again before I could get that information from her." Rye stood to her right, Dax and Griff to her left. "Y'all know this area. What's special about these, or what do they have in common?"

"They're all of the river," Griff said.

Dax nudged him in the ribs. "Way to be obvious there, bro."

Griff frowned. "Okay, smartass, what do *you* think ties them together?"

"I don't have a clue."

Alaina tapped one finger against her lips as she studied the three paintings. She changed the order, hoping something would jump out at her.

Nothing.

She changed the order again. When she still saw nothing special, she started to change the order once more. Rye laid his hand over hers before she could.

"Wait. Look at those rocks at the bottom of these two paintings."

As separate paintings, the rocks simply looked like rocks. Together, they seemed to fit and formed a shape. "What is that?"

"Look at this," Griff said. He pointed to a shape at the top of the third painting, the one closest to him. "It looks like the rocks in the other paintings."

Alaina pushed the two paintings forward on the plywood. Griff placed his in the middle of the others. A shape formed from the three, a shape that wasn't just a pile of rocks.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It looks like..." Rye stopped and turned around. He pointed across the room. "That."

Alaina, Dax and Griff also turned to see where Rye pointed. The white rock fireplace in the living room looked exactly like the object in the paintings.

Dax shivered. "Goose bumps just popped out all over me."

"What does this mean?" Alaina asked Rye.

"I think it means we'll find something inside the fireplace."

The fireplace would be torn down when the living room was refurbished, but that wouldn't be for several weeks. That's what Rye had told her. "So do we tear apart the fireplace early?"

Rye looked at his brothers. "What do y'all think?"

Dax grinned. "I say we get the mallets."

"Alaina?" Rye asked her. "What do you want us to do?"

The fireplace had already started crumbling, so Alaina figured taking mallets to it now would be a head start to tearing it down for replacement. "Go for it."

She stood back while the three brothers began the demolition process. Rocks tumbled, mortar fell to the floor in chunks. Dust floated in the air, covering the guys in a fine coat of white. She could tell they put all their strength behind their swings, but were also careful not to damage whatever might be hidden inside the fireplace.

Alaina had no idea how much time passed until Dax stopped swinging his mallet. "I think I found something."

Heart pounding, she moved closer to the fireplace as the guys picked up hammers and chisels for closer work. Dax reached inside the hole he'd made and withdrew something wrapped in burlap.

He handed it to Rye. "It's too small for another painting."

Alaina stepped up next to Rye as he unwrapped the bundle. A knife with a wooden handle lay inside the burlap.

"Holy shit," Griff breathed. "Do you think that's the knife that killed Laura?"

"Yeah, I do." Careful to keep the burlap over the knife so he wouldn't touch it with his bare hand, Rye examined the antique weapon. "The hilt is broken on one side. I'll bet this brown stuff in the wood is blood."

Alaina crossed her arms over her stomach, suddenly cool despite the heat still lingering in the house. "What do we do with it?"

"Take it to our sheriff. Brad can send it off for DNA testing. I'm sure Laura's blood is on it, but maybe the killer's is too. Our grandfather is still alive. His blood can be compared with the blood on the knife to see if it's a match. If it isn't—and I'm sure it won't be—that'll prove his father didn't kill Laura."

"I don't understand why Laura didn't just point me to the fireplace. Why the whole deal with the paintings?"

"Maybe there's a clue in the paintings we missed."

Alaina walked back to the plywood, followed closely by the brothers. There had to be something, something that would solve the mystery of Laura's murder once and for all.

"Too bad we can't make out the signature," Griff said.

Alaina had thought that with the first painting she'd seen. Where a signature should be was nothing but a series of little loops, almost like backward letters.

She drew in a sharp breath. "Oh my God."

"What?" Rye asked.

"I'll be right back."

Alaina hurried into the dining room and located her purse on one of the tables. She dug through a side pocket and withdrew her folding mirror. Clutching it in her hand, she jogged back to the living room.

"Alaina," Rye said, "what are you doing?"

"Watch." She held the mirror behind one of the loops on the painting. "The signature is a mirror image of the artist's real name."

Each brother closed in so they could all see the name in the mirror.

bella

Chapter Seventeen

April 29, 1937

My sister is dead. Laura is dead.

I can barely write these words for my hand is shaking so hard and I'm sobbing. I feel as if my heart has been ripped out of my chest. My best friend is gone. No more late night talks about boys. No more rolling each other's hair. No more borrowing each other's clothes. All that has been stripped away by a man with a knife.

My first thought was that he did it, but his daughter swore he'd been with her the entire afternoon. How convenient that his wife was out of town and couldn't back up his alibi.

Raymond Coleman was arrested for the murder. My father said Raymond was found standing over Laura's body, holding a bloody knife in his hand. I can't believe that sweet man killed my sister. It doesn't make any sense.

Whoever killed Laura will pay. I won't rest until he does.

* * * * *

Alaina slipped into the front seat of Rye's car while Dax and Griff took the back seat. "Are you sure we should just show up at Bella's house without calling?"

"I did call." Rye drew the seat belt over his chest. "I talked to Susan. She said Bella was in a meeting with her attorney, but would be finished by nine-thirty. She has nothing else scheduled until this afternoon."

Glancing at the digital clock on Rye's dash, she saw it read 9:25. Since it took less than ten minutes to get to Bella's house, they would arrive as she finished her meeting.

"Did you tell Susan we're coming?" Griff asked.

"I told her *I'm* coming. I didn't mention anyone else."

"She'll get all huffy and deny knowing anything."

"Probably." Rye turned the key and the car purred to life. "But we aren't leaving her house until we get answers."

The drive took eight minutes. Alaina slipped her hand into Rye's as he led the way to the front door. He pressed the doorbell with his free hand and gave her an encouraging smile.

"Everything will be fine. We're here for the truth, and that can't hurt us."

She hoped he was right.

Susan answered the door to Rye's ring. Her eyes widened as her gaze swung to Alaina and the brothers. It obviously shocked her to see four people when she was expecting one.

"Good morning, Susan," Rye said.

"Good morning. Mrs. Olinghouse is in the living room. I'll tell her y'all are here."

"That's okay. We'll announce ourselves."

He brushed by a sputtering Susan and turned to the left. Bella stood by one of the large windows, looking out at the backyard. She was dressed impeccably in an ivory suit and pearls, but seemed so much smaller today. She appeared sad and alone. Rye had told Alaina that Bella's three children rarely visited her, and Rufus was the only grandchild who stayed close.

She might own half the county, but that money didn't keep her family close to her.

"Mrs. Olinghouse," Rye said softly.

Bella straightened her shoulders before she turned. Surprise flickered in her eyes, but she quickly masked it. Her chin came up an inch. "I wasn't aware your brothers and Ms. May would be coming too, Mr. Coleman."

"We decided it was important that we all come to talk to you."

"Oh? For what reason?"

He motioned toward her "throne". "Perhaps you would like to sit down?"

She shook her head. "I prefer to stand. What is the meaning of this visit, Mr. Coleman?"

Dax withdrew the three paintings from their plastic cover and spread them out over the large table in the center of the seating arrangement by the windows. Bella's skin was light to begin with, but all the color drained from her face. Alaina tensed, ready to make a grab for the older woman in case she fell.

"We found these in Stevens House," Rye said to Bella. He pointed to the signature at the bottom of one of the paintings. "Is this you? Did you paint these landscapes?"

Bella clasped the strands of pearls around her neck. "Yes," she said softly. "Many years ago."

"Did you hide them in the house?"

Bella slowly sank down on the circular couch. She didn't say anything, but her silence spoke loudly. Sympathy touched Alaina's heart. She sank to her knees in front of Bella. "Why did you hide them?"

Bella pressed her lips together and remained silent. Hoping to get the older woman to confide in them, Alaina opened her purse and withdrew Miriam's diary.

"This is my great-grandmother's diary." She watched Bella's eyes widen. "You know who that is, don't you?"

She nodded again, but didn't say anything.

"You knew her?"

"Yes. I knew both Laura and Miriam and their parents."

"I'd like to read one of the entries to you." Alaina carefully opened the fragile book to a place she'd marked with a Post-It. "It's dated May 15, 1937."

She glanced at Rye as he and his brothers sat on the couch beside Bella, then began to read.

"Raymond Coleman was hanged today for the rape and murder of my sister. His trial – if that sham could be called a trial – had lasted barely a day. All the jurors found him guilty in less than an hour. The judge ruled that Raymond be hanged in three days. 'Justice' happens quickly when a county is ruled not by law officers, but one man.

"I could have witnessed the hanging. I couldn't bear to. I'll never believe that sweet, gentle man killed Laura.

"Raymond came into the store with his son a few days before Laura's death. Such a precious baby, and the exact image of his father. I've never seen a prouder man than Raymond when he looked at Ray.

"No, it wasn't Raymond Coleman who killed Laura. I'll always believe he did it – that awful Edward Stevens."

Alaina closed the diary. Bella sat with her head lowered, one hand grasping her pearls. "Edward Stevens was your father, wasn't he?"

Bella nodded.

"Did he kill Laura Cummins?"

"Don't say anything, Grandmother."

Everyone turned at the sound of Rufus' voice. He barreled into the room, fists clenched at his sides. "You don't have to tell them anything."

A scowl crossed Bella's face. "Do *not* tell me what to do, Rufus."

Rufus pointed at the Colemans. "They're trying to pass the blame for something their great-grandfather did onto our family. I won't allow that."

Rye tensed, as if he were about to stand and confront Bella's grandson, but her words stopped him. "Rufus, it's time for the truth to come out. It should've come out a long time ago."

"Grandmother, you –"

"Shut up, Rufus."

With a huff, he sank down in a wingback chair across from the couch and crossed his legs.

Alaina gently touched the back of Bella's hand. "Take your time. No one is going to rush you."

Releasing her pearls, Bella clasped her hands together in her lap. "It's true. My father killed Laura Cummins, after he raped her. I saw him do it."

"Why didn't you tell the sheriff?" Rye asked gently.

"I couldn't turn in my father. The scandal would have destroyed our family."

"So you let an innocent man be hanged for a murder he didn't commit."

She looked at each of the Coleman brothers. Alaina could see the regret and sorrow in Bella's eyes. "I loved Raymond with all my heart. But he married someone else and I was betrothed to another. I had to be my father's alibi. I had no other choice."

"There's always a choice, if a person is brave enough to take it."

"Okay, that's enough." Rufus scowled at Rye. "You do not take that tone with my grandmother."

Dax scowled right back. "You afraid if the truth comes out, you'll lose your inheritance?"

"You've already lost Stevens house," Rye said. "Although I don't understand why that house mattered so much to you that you offered Alaina three times what she paid for it."

"What?" Bella asked, the surprise evident in her voice. Her gaze whipped to her grandson. "Why did you do that?"

Rufus waved away her questions as if he had better things to do than answer them. "It doesn't matter."

"It does to me. Talk to me right *now*, Rufus Edward."

He blew out a heavy breath. "Okay, fine. I intercepted a letter meant for you about a gas lease for the property around Stevens House. That lease would be worth thousands of dollars every month for years."

"You stole my mail?"

"I didn't *steal* it. I just read it."

Bella's face turned red. Alaina shifted closer to her. She was afraid the woman would have an attack of some kind from her anger.

Instead of yelling at her grandson, Bella's voice was calm and clear. "Get out. I want you out of my house now."

Rufus couldn't have looked more surprised if a two-headed monster appeared in the middle of the living room. "You don't mean that."

"I mean every word I say. Do not come back unless I call you."

Rufus stared at his grandmother another moment, then rose from his chair and stormed toward the door. Rye caught up to him halfway across the room, grabbing his arm to stop him.

"What do you know about the fire set in Stevens House last night?"

A cocky smile tilted up Rufus' lips. "I don't know what you're talking about." He jerked his arm away from Rye. With a final look at his grandmother, he left.

Rye returned to his place on the couch next to Bella. Alaina smiled at him, hoping to cool off his anger. She knew he didn't doubt for a moment that Rufus set that fire, or paid someone to set it. But without proof, they could do nothing.

"Did you find the knife?" Bella asked in a low voice.

"Yes," Griff said. "The paintings led us right to it."

"Did you take it, Mrs. Olinghouse?" Rye asked. "After the murder?"

"My father's clothes were bloody after...what happened, from Laura's blood and his own. The hilt of the knife broke when he st-stabbed her and he cut his hand."

Alaina moved up to the couch beside Bella and slipped one arm around her shoulders in support.

"He had no idea I was hiding in the back hall and could see him. He stripped off his shoes and clothes, down to his underwear, and bundled the knife in them."

"Wait a minute," Rye said. "I thought our great-grandfather was found at the murder scene with the knife in his hand."

"That's what Miriam wrote in her diary," Alaina said.

Bella released a heavy sigh. "That's the rumor that traveled around town. My father told the sheriff that he'd walked in on Raymond standing over Laura's body, holding a bloody knife. The sheriff believed everything my father said."

"But there would've been an investigation," Griff said.

"There was. Raymond's house was thoroughly searched. Of course, no one ever found the knife since he never had it."

Rye ran a hand through his hair. "I don't understand how our great-grandfather could have been convicted of murder when no weapon was found."

"My father's word was law in this town. No one questioned that he'd seen Raymond with the knife. Everyone assumed Raymond had gotten rid of the knife after he ran out of Stevens House. He was convicted and found guilty by the people of Lanville before he ever went to trial."

"Why was he there in the first place?" Dax asked.

"My father hired Raymond to build more shelves in the library. Or that's what he told the sheriff. I don't know if that's true. Maybe he planned the rape all along and used Raymond as the scapegoat."

"What happened after your father took off his clothes?" Alaina asked.

"He changed into clean ones and carried the bundle out to the woods in back. There were many more trees back then than there are now. Many of the oaks died over the years from disease."

"I'm going to plant more."

"I hope you do." Bella drew in a breath and released it slowly. "He buried the bundle beneath a tree. I waited until he'd left and dug it back up. I took the knife and buried the clothes again. I wrapped the knife up in a kitchen towel I'd brought with me."

"Why did you do that?" Dax asked.

"I wanted the truth to come out someday. The new living room fireplace was being built, so I slipped the knife between the rocks while the mortar was still wet. No one knew I did it." She gestured at the landscapes on the table. "I painted those hoping they

would someday lead to the knife and Raymond would be cleared of the murder." She clasped her hands together in her lap again. "I was hoping I'd be dead by then and wouldn't face going to prison at age eighty-nine."

"You don't have to worry about going to prison, Mrs. Olinghouse," Rye said. "Dax, Griff and I will say we found that knife while remodeling, which is true. There's no reason your name even has to come up."

Tears filled Bella's eyes. "You would do that for me, after what I did?"

Dax and Griff both nodded. Alaina squeezed her shoulders. "The sheriff will send the knife off for DNA testing. Raymond Coleman will be cleared. That's what's important."

"I'll pay for any costs. It's the least I can do to help."

"We appreciate that." Rye looked at his brothers. "Guess we'd better get back to Stevens House and go to work."

Dax and Griff gathered up the paintings and replaced them in their plastic covering. Alaina offered a hand to help Bella from the couch. She accepted it and followed them to the front door. Her eyes glittered with tears as she looked at the brothers.

"You're all such good young men. If I'd had the courage to stand up to my father and admitted my feelings to Raymond, I could've been your great-grandmother. I would've liked that."

Each Coleman kissed Bella's cheek. Alaina thought it was the sweetest thing she'd ever seen.

* * * * *

Rye wouldn't let Alaina remove the blindfold until he'd lit the last pillar candle. "Okay, you can take it off."

Alaina removed the scarf from her head and blinked. Her lips parted, her eyes widened. "Oh, Rye. This is wonderful."

Rye had sent Alaina on a list of errands while he let his mother loose in the turret. Several blankets covered the floor, making a cushioned spot for their picnic. Candles sat on the window seat and circled the blankets, casting their soft glow around the area. A feast of finger foods had been laid out on the blanket, next to two crystal wineglasses and an ice bucket holding a chilled bottle of chardonnay.

"I can't take all the credit. My mom put everything together for me." He sat down and held up a hand for her. "Join me?"

She placed her hand in his and dropped to her knees beside him. Her lips met his in a gentle kiss. "Thank you."

"I could've had her do this at my house, but I thought you'd like it better here." He looked up at the ceiling. Rain pattered on the roof. "I like the sound of the rain."

"So do I."

Rye removed the plastic wrap from a bowl of bite-size pieces of roasted chicken. He held up a piece for Alaina to take from him. She chewed slowly, released a moan of pleasure.

"Yummy."

Rye took a bite for himself. The chicken was moist and tender and delicious. "Told you my mom's a great cook." He removed the wine bottle from the ice bucket and picked up the corkscrew. "I have cousins who own a winery near Fredericksburg. This wine is from their vineyards."

Alaina took a sip from the glass he handed to her. "Very nice. I want to serve my guests locally grown food when possible. Maybe your cousins would like their wine featured here."

"I'll talk to them about it."

He watched her as he sipped from his glass. She looked so lovely in the candlelight. He'd known her less than three weeks, yet had no doubt that he wanted her in his life for many years to come.

Taking her free hand, he tugged her closer to him. Smiling, she came willingly until she leaned against him, his arm around her waist. He kissed her neck, the curve of her ear, before his lips settled over hers. He kissed her slowly, tenderly, in no hurry to rush past their meal to lovemaking. They had all evening to love each other.

Love. A strong emotion, one that he'd felt for few people in his life. He'd thought he'd loved Alesia. Now, holding Alaina in his arms, he knew that what he'd felt for Alesia had been based more on lust than love.

This — what he felt for Alaina — was the happily-ever-after, forever kind of love.

He deepened the kiss ever so slightly, tickling the seam of her lips with his tongue. Her moan urged him to deepen the kiss even more.

Cold air washed over him. Rye jerked back at the same time that Alaina pulled away from him. She held up one arm, showing off her goose bumps.

"I felt it too, Alaina."

"You did?"

"Yeah."

The air shimmered in front of the windows. Rye pulled Alaina closer to his body. He knew she wasn't afraid of Laura, but he didn't know what would happen next. He gulped when the ghost formed a few feet in front of them.

"Holy shit," he muttered.

After Alaina found three paintings in the house, Rye had no choice but to believe that she had help from Laura Cummins' ghost. Seeing it for real made his head spin. He was thankful to be seated.

"That's Laura," Alaina told him over her shoulder.

"Yeah, I figured that out."

Alaina moved as if to stand. She relaxed back into Rye's arms when Laura motioned for her to remain seated.

"We found the knife," Alaina said to Laura.

The ghost nodded and smiled. Then she waved.

"Wait. Are you leaving?"

Laura nodded again.

"Will you be back?"

This time Laura shook her head. She blew a kiss to Alaina and disappeared.

The cold vanished, the temperature in the turret returning to the low seventies as it had been before Laura's appearance. Rye blinked his eyes, knowing that Laura had actually been here but still having a hard time believing it.

He looked at Alaina. The sparkle had faded from her eyes. "You okay?"

"Yes." She turned to face him and shrugged. "I know this is silly, but I'll miss her."

"It isn't silly. She's probably at peace now, since her murderer was revealed." He pushed her hair behind one ear. "I'll admit I'm more comfortable knowing she won't be around while we make love."

The sparkle came back to Alaina's eyes. "Are you planning to have your way with me after our picnic?"

"Absolutely."

"Then we'd better eat fast."

Rye laughed, but his laughter quickly faded when he thought about what he wanted to ask her. Setting down his wineglass, he took Alaina's hand in his. "Do you have your heart set on living here in the house?"

A suspicious look crossed her face, as if she wasn't sure why he would ask such a question. "Why?"

"I was thinking maybe you'd move in with me."

Surprise replaced her suspicious look. Rye hurried to give her all the reasons why it would be a good idea before she could say no. "It would leave this room free to rent out to guests. That's a plus. Once the house is done, there won't be a reason for us to see each other all day, so that would give us more time together. And we—"

He stopped when she laid her fingers against his lips. "Yes. I love you, Rye Coleman, and I want to be with you for as long as I'm breathing."

Rye turned her hand over and kissed her palm. Emotion tightened his throat, making his words husky when he spoke. "I love you too."

He sealed their love with a tender kiss.

The End

About the Author

Lynn LaFleur was born and raised in a small town in Texas close to the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Writing has been in her blood since she was eight years old and wrote her first “story” for an English assignment.

As well as writing at every possible moment, Lynn enjoys reading, scrapbooking, photography and learning new things on the computer. She’s a software junky and loves to try out new programs, especially anything to do with graphics.

After living on the West Coast for 21 years, Lynn now lives 17 miles from her hometown in Texas. She’s a romantic at heart and can’t imagine ever writing anything but romances. A full-time writer, she spends her days creating stories of people who find their happily ever after, sometimes with the help of an alien or psychic or vampire.

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

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