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Brazen Sisters 1

A Brazen Love Worth Fighting For

Rita Sawyer

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

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A BRAZEN LOVE WORTH FIGHTING FOR

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DEDICATION

I'd like to thank my husband David for his never ending support.

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Brazen Sisters 1

RITA SAWYER

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Chapter 1

Victor Weatherly grimaced as another thorn jabbed deep into his skin. The intensity of the sharp pain made him swear violently before grumbling, “Damn you Jessica Brazen, you’re stubborn, hard-headed, beautiful and the bane of my existence. If I didn’t love you so much, I would climb back down this death trap and find a woman or two to help me forget all about you.”

He stuck his thumb in his mouth, bit into the thorn and yanked it out. The unmistakable salty tang of blood hit his tongue. Looking at the offending vine covered with pale pink flowers, he grimaced at the thought of something so fragile and beautiful being so menacing, much like their owner. He spit the thorn out, staring at blood welling on the offensive wound. *Maybe this is a sign of things to come*, he thought, shaking his head.

Then again a little pain and bloodshed would be worth it if it got her back in his arms. Victor carefully moved the rest of the vines out of his way as he continued to clamber up the rose-covered trellis that led to the small balcony he knew Jessie shared with one of her sisters.

As an educated man he should have been able to come up with something better than this. He let out an angry growl. Hell, being an

architectural engineer, creativeness was a major requirement. It just went to show that whenever Jessie entered his mind, all his normal reasoning capabilities shifted out.

His inability to come up with a better solution to his problem proved that since the moment he received her curt note attached to a set of divorce papers, his mind hadn't been quite right. He didn't even rank high enough to get one of those sappy Dear John letters, just a terse *please sign these*. His foot missed a board and went through the diamond-shaped slats, leaving him tilting precariously. Barely quelling the urge to curse as loud and long as he could, he pulled it free. He refocused himself on getting to the top where he would finally have a face-to-face with the little missus.

"I must be fucking crazy." With a grunt, he tugged himself up, surprised by the hands that reached out and grabbed his fingers that at this second groped for the railing.

"You'll get no arguments here, now shut up," The feminine voice that drifted down from above sounded familiar. Definitely one of Jessie's sisters, though he wasn't exactly sure which one of the five it belonged to.

Quickly regaining his balance, he finished the climb. Once over the railing, he looked at the young woman standing there glaring at him. After a brief appraisal her eyes settled on his. The brilliant shade of green was so different from Jessie's mesmerizing whiskey color. He instantly knew which one of the six Brazen sisters stood there glaring at him. He'd met them all at one time or another, but he'd always had the feeling there might be more to this one than met the eye.

"Evening, Samantha." He glanced over, judging the distance between her and the door he hoped was still Jessie's, wondering if he could make it before she screamed.

Jessie had managed to avoid him long enough. Tonight she was going to see him whether she wanted to or not. They both had to deal with the decisions they'd made in the past, and agree on the ones that

would affect their future. The time had come for her to face the fact that he wasn't giving up without a fight. He figured just showing up might be the only way he could get her to meet with him. Calling or knocking on the front door would give her enough warning to make up some lame excuse or run.

He never should've listened to his uncle and her grandfather when they told him to give her the time and space to grieve. All it had done was give her time to harden her heart against him.

"You wouldn't have made it this far if I wanted to stop you." Sam crossed her arms across her chest, flashing him a smile that probably drove most men wild with lust.

He wiped his hands on his thighs. "I wish I knew that before. I would've just knocked on the front door."

"Where's the excitement in that? So I take it you're finally here to claim what's rightfully yours?" He could hear the condemnation in her voice, along with what could have been a hint of amusement, and his frustration at the whole situation broke free.

He slapped his palm on the railing. "It wasn't my choice to leave it behind," he grimaced at her sudden frown, "son of a..." He paused, took a deep breath and tried to recapture his composure. "Sam, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I know Jessie had to stay here, but damn it, we could have found a better way to work things out."

"Victor, I know it wasn't your decision to go. You and your firm had already committed to doing that project. You had thousands of people depending on you. Jessie once told me it might have been your only chance to step away from your family and prove yourself. I can understand why she wouldn't want to take that away from you, not that she could have. Chalk it up bad timing, that's all." She looked away from him, and he couldn't read her face to see if she believed what she'd just said.

He cringed inwardly at the understanding tone of her voice. Sacrifices were something that Jessie and Sam understood all too well. *They knew you did what was best for the long run.* He knew as

the oldest, Jessie took the brunt of it.

Three and a half years ago he'd roared into the small town ready to spend two weeks in the Maine woods roughing it with his uncle. It had been a good plan until he spotted Jessie. His uncle took him to the diner for lunch and there she was with her sister Sam and some friends. Her long, light wheat-colored hair pulled up into a ponytail high on her head. The short jean shorts she'd matched with a tiny pink spaghetti strap tank top exposed a lot of skin to the warm summer sun. Suddenly he had a new goal. To make her his, even if it only lasted a little while. He set out to sweep her off her feet, but had a lot of hard work ahead of him. It started with getting past her father, grandfather, and five sisters. His two week visit had turned into nine, which he'd enjoyed every minute of.

He learned a lot about her that summer. The most telling being that at just sixteen years old, she basically gave up the rest of her childhood to help her father raise her five younger sisters after their mother died. He remembered the way Jessie's eyes filled with tears when she told him about it. She sniffled as she explained that her youngest sister, Bobbie, had just turned ten. It struck him hard that she hadn't been crying for herself, but for her sister. He wondered if she ever did. Her compassion had been only one of the things that made him fall in love with her. Though she was only twenty-two, well almost twenty-three, and him not much older at twenty-seven, he knew he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. He thought he'd have a lifetime to make up for everything she missed out on.

He arranged to take her away for a romantic weekend for two where he unexpectedly proposed, surprising them both. It had taken a lot of sweet talking and pleasant persuasion before he got her to agree. Then, after barely forty-eight hours of wedded bliss, they returned home to learn her father was having what turned out to be a fatal heart attack. She chose to give up on him and all their plans to take care of her sisters and aging grandfather. He understood she thought she didn't have any other choices. She just was just doing what needed to

be done. She was determined to give her sisters the chances she never had.

He knew that letting her push him away after a tragedy like that only added to the things Jessie had lost. If he had fought harder and found a way to stay with her, he would have been there for her when her grandfather passed. She had her sisters, and his uncle had done what he could too, but it wasn't the same. He wanted to be the one to comfort her. Things had changed now. From here on out, his only commitment was to make sure that for the rest of her life she had his shoulder to lean on. Whether she wanted it or not.

"It didn't help that we had so many delays and setbacks, the eighteen-month deadline ended up taking three years." He thoughtfully rubbed his index finger on his chin.

"No, it didn't, but you're back now. I take it you plan to prove you're worth her love." Her frown morphed into a small, teasing smile.

"I've been trying to do that this whole time!" He sounded defensive, even though deep down he wished he'd found a way to get through to her.

He did everything he could think of to ease his way back into her heart. He had no idea if he would ever find a way to make up for being a fool who left his woman due to his sense of duty? The only thing that kept him hanging on all this time, other than the fact he seemed to love her beyond reason, was knowing she thought she was doing her duty by letting him go without a fight. They'd both done the wrong thing, and if it was the last thing he did, he'd to prove it to her.

"Yeah, well, pretty little gifts and sappy letters just don't cut it. Subtlety doesn't always work on the women in this family. I think it's about time you've come to fight for her, or *with* her, as the case may be. Do you need any more help?" Sam stepped out of his way, motioning for him to go on.

"I'm good." He moved towards the door only to have her reach out and grab his arm.

She pointed her finger at his shoes and shook her head. “Take those off or you’ll track mud all over the hall, and I’m not cleaning it.”

Sufficiently scolded, he did as she instructed. Rising to his feet, he turned to thank her and found her gone. He was glad she hadn’t asked what he planned to do, because truthfully, he had no idea. Making it up as he went along didn’t really suit him, but he couldn’t come up with any better options. He made the decision to come, and before he could think twice, he got in his car and drove the eight and a half hours to get here, stopping only for gas. Now here he stood, probably about to make a complete fool of himself.

He smiled thinking he could always surrender to his prehistoric instincts and toss her over his shoulder and whisk her away into the night. No, he couldn’t do that because her sisters would be frantic, and pissing them off would be like deliberately shaking a hornet’s nest.

Besides, he wanted to make a more solid showing. Something that told her he was back and here to stay. He needed something she couldn’t deny. Like a wedding band on her finger, or a framed certificate hanging on the wall where everyone could see it. He sighed, running his hand through his hair. Those things hadn’t helped him so far. He had their marriage certificate locked up safely out of her reach, he knew she wore her wedding ring on a chain around her neck. His uncle noticed, and made a point of mentioning that she never took it off.

The truth was he’d claimed Jessie years ago, but with her father dying, it hadn’t been the right time to tell everyone about their new marital status. He told his family, but until now, after talking with Sam, who obviously knew, he thought she hadn’t told anyone. He couldn’t see any reason why everyone couldn’t know it now. Except for whatever had caused her to suddenly send a note demanding a divorce.

He opened the door, glancing over his shoulder as he slipped

inside and closed it softly behind him. The darkness of the room enveloped him, which was fine for now. He looked at the moonlight slashed across the bed and wondered if she'd ever thought about sharing it with anyone else. He felt the burn of jealousy deep in the pit of his stomach. He'd never been in it, since her father had a rule about no boyfriends upstairs, but he wasn't a boyfriend, so that rule no longer applied to him. If he accomplished nothing else tonight, he would make sure whenever she climbed into this big empty bed she'd hopefully think of him.

Victor dropped his dirty shoes on the floor next to the chair by the door. As he moved to the end of the bed he stripped out of his t-shirt and jeans along the way, leaving a trail behind him. He dropped onto the bed smiling at the bounce of the mattress. Using a few of the half dozen pillows piled against the headboard, he made himself comfortable and waited.

* * * *

Jessie took her time walking up the steps to the house she shared with her sisters and their grandfather until he died a few months ago. She missed the old man, but could have done without his final act of interference in her love life. As she opened the front door and entered the inner sanctum of madness, her feeling of dread grew. She stepped over her youngest sister Bobbie's useless guard cat and softly closed the door behind her. Music rocked out from somewhere and she had to step over a pile of shoes and coats lying in the hall. For a late night study group, Bobbie and her friends always seemed to have a great time. As long as those A's kept piling up, she had no reason to suggest any changes.

It was hard, but she ignored the delicious aroma coming from the kitchen. She slipped off her black work pumps and headed up the front stairs to her room with them dangling from her fingers. Skipping the customary "Hi, how was your day?" she shared with her sisters

felt pretty shitty, but it went right along with the way her day was going. When she stepped on the third step from the top, it let out a loud creak that had her scrunching her face, hoping nobody heard. Okay, normally she would have come in the back door and taken the stairs off the kitchen to get to her room. So if she was being truthful, she would have to admit she was hiding from her sister Samantha. Taking the cowardly way out sucked, but she just didn't have the heart to tell her she hadn't heard from Victor yet again.

The man sure did know how to get to her. He hounded her for the past two and a half months since he got back in the country. His daily phone calls and the letters that arrived every other day, which she ignored or sent back, came as constant reminders that she needed to bring things between them to an end. Now she finally contacted him, and he didn't even answer. He probably thought she deserved getting huge a dose of her own medicine. A month ago his silence would have been a blessing, but if her and her sisters had any hopes of getting their plans underway within the next month or two, she needed him to sign those damn papers. As it was, they had an appointment tomorrow, which she dreaded, with the biggest contractor in town.

Things weren't going well at all. They had a lot of great ideas, but they needed to hire the right people to get them implemented. Other than changing the direction of the lodge, which was a big enough endeavor in itself, they also wanted to do their share to help the environment by going green wherever possible. Her grandfather told her the lodge and campground was their birthright, and he made her promise they wouldn't sell it, or let it waste away like he did. Not that he had really. If they wanted to they could just spruce the camp up and they could survive. The place was a favorite for many hunters and fisherman who visited the area. But they wanted more than to survive. They wanted to *thrive*. So no matter what she had to do, she was going to keep that promise and turn it into a place they could all be proud of.

Jessie opened her bedroom door and froze as the light spilling in from the hall streamed across the hardwood floor, bringing an unfamiliar trail of masculine clothing into view. It started with a pair of jeans, which led to a t-shirt, then a pair of gray boxer briefs lying on the corner of her bed. She dropped her shoes to floor with a clunk as her eyes landed on Victor Weatherly.

“Holy shit.” She gasped, unable to hide her surprise at seeing him. Her mind screamed *Whoo-Hoo!* at the sight of his glorious naked body.

It had been a long time since she’d seen a naked man in the flesh, and her body responded quickly. The way her throat went dry and her palms began to sweat, a telling sign of her awareness, but the stirring that started low in her belly let her know just how dangerous this man could be to her plan. He lay there on his side, bold, gorgeous, and naked as the day he was born. Stretched across her bed, propped up on her pillows, he looked way too comfortable and tempting for her peace of mind. His deeply tanned skin stood out against the dark blue comforter. He didn’t move or speak. His smile never faltered. She had to remind herself to breathe.

He can’t be here. He’s down in Massachusetts. Maybe she was having a really good hallucination. *Yeah, that’s it.* The stress caused by waiting for him to reply had manifested itself into a very graphic figment of her imagination lying in her bed.

“Hi, honey. I’m home.” His deep voice shattered all her hopes that her mind had been playing tricks on her.

“This is not your home! How did you get in here?” Though she spoke softly her voice came out in a higher pitch than she’d ever heard it.

His eyes blinked, and his lips twitched before a slow smile took them over completely. “They say ‘home is where the heart is’. That means I’m home since you will always have my heart.”

Her eyes filled with tears she refused to shed. She wanted to tell him he still held her heart captive, too. Every time she tried to set it

free, he'd call or send her a heartfelt letter fastening the lock as tight as it had been when he put it there years ago. The only difference this time was that she erected some walls of her own, making it harder for her to let him in or out.

"Bullshit! Did anybody see you come in here?" She gripped the doorknob so hard she thought it might come off in her hand.

"That's not a very wifely response," he replied softly, staring at her.

The corners of his mouth turned down making his lower lip stick out a tiny bit. His eyes half-closing drew his dark brown eyebrows lower. The mixture of disappointment and sadness managed to make a few dents in a wall or two.

"Victor!" The stomp of her foot sounded so loud, and she hated that she lost the battle to keep him from seeing he could get to her so easily.

"I climbed that rickety trellis and only Samantha saw me. Umm... don't you think you should close the door before one of your other sisters comes along and gets an eyeful?" He carelessly shrugged, but her stomach dropped at the thought.

Oh no! Shit, they couldn't see him here. Especially not like that. Her heart raced, and she swore she could feel her blood rushing through her veins. How the hell would she explain a naked man in her bed? Or the fact that he had on a wedding ring? As if he read her thoughts, he moved his hand making the ring shine in the light. Would they think her as shameless as he made her feel?

"From the look on your face I take it you haven't told them about me. I guess I shouldn't have been shocked to find out Sam knew, since you two tell each other everything." She would have loved to tell him he was wrong, but she hated lying.

Stepping inside, she reached for the light switch as she closed the door. Immediately it felt like a thousand butterflies took flight in her belly. Harsh light filled the room, but it did nothing to diminish his good looks. He crooked his finger at her, beckoning her closer. Not a

chance, she thought, leaning back against the door. He smiled and made a tsking noise.

“Afraid of me?” He rose higher on his elbow and let out a deep chuckle that made her want to sigh.

Deathly! Obviously her body didn’t feel the same way. Her breasts ached to be touched, and wet heat pooled between her thighs. She knew there was no way she could be that close to him and be able to keep her hands to herself. She refused to admit it. She shook her head, watching his muscles ripple with every move he made. He always looked great, but his shoulders were broader, if that was at all possible. And she definitely had trouble keeping her eyes from straying below his belt, well, where his belt would have been if he were wearing one.

“Then why don’t you come on over and sit with me?” She would have taken a step back when he patted the bed next to him, but there was nowhere to go.

She felt the cold wood of the door pressing against her back. The way he watched her made her squirm. She felt guilty and foolish. She wondered how one man could induce so many different emotions.

“W-Why would I want to do that? What are you doing here?” She straightened as he got to his feet.

“I wanted to see my wife.” He slid off the bed and walked over stopping just a few inches from her.

“Tell the truth,” she said softly, a mistake since he leaned in close, swamping her with his heat.

“I thought it would be obvious. Me being here is my answer.” He slowly ran his finger around the top button of her shirt while his other hand started tugging it from her skirt.

“You,” she gasped as the back of his fingers moved across her belly.

Her mind warred. *Please tell him to stop. No don’t.* She wasn’t supposed to want him anymore, but she was finding it so hard to fight it. The touch of his fingers made her shiver, and the bastard smiled.

She pulled in her stomach muscles in trying to minimize the contact. He just changed the angle of his hand, sliding it towards her bellybutton. The air felt so thick, which explained why she couldn't breathe right. Did he feel it too? He had to feel the heat. She felt so hot she thought she might melt.

"I," he said, reminding her she'd been about to make a point, as he popped open one button after the other.

"You...could have...done...that by...mail...and fully dressed, too." Her breath caught each time his fingers touched her skin, but she fought to get the words out, the last one ending on a deep sigh.

"Oh, but honey, what would have been the fun in that? Besides, you used to like me like this," he whispered, his warm breath moist on her cheek.

"You have to go." She put her hands on his chest, fully intending to push him away.

But, just as her hands settled on him, she felt the smattering of dark hairs on his soft, hot skin. He pulled her against him, and her whole body tingled with desire.

"I'm not going anywhere." He jerked her up into his arms, laughing as she squealed in shock.

Her treacherous heart leapt at his declaration, even though her mind knew it was a promise he couldn't keep. A little voice in her head screamed for her to run fast and furiously as far as she could. She couldn't let this happen, too much rested on her shoulders for her to give in now.

"You have to. Put me down." She squirmed in earnest as he walked over to the bed, ignoring her protest.

"Kick, fight and scream if you want to. One way or another, you and I have to talk." He dropped her onto the bed and stood there staring at her.

His eyes went wide, and his breathing got louder and more ragged. Her skirt had slid up around her hips. She briefly hoped he liked her matching colorful polka-dot bra and panties. Why couldn't

she have worn something sexy today? *What do you care? You're supposed to be making him want to leave, remember?*

"Is that what you want to do? Fight?" She wriggled backwards across the bed and onto her feet, feeling much better with the bed as an obstacle between them.

"Do I look like I'm dressed for a fight?" He boldly held his arms out to his sides, letting her look her fill at the body she had once craved more than breathing.

From the lack of oxygen making it to her lungs, it was obvious she still did. *That was a long time ago and you've grown a backbone since then*, she reminded herself. She already faced the facts that she had no choice but to let this practically perfect male specimen go, and this time for good. She tried to find any other way to make this all work, but she couldn't. The reasons weren't all that different from the first time she sent him away. Their futures traveled on different paths. Hers lay here with her sisters, and his just wasn't. Nevertheless she couldn't refuse the chance to look at him at least this one last time.

Her gaze started at his bare feet, cruised up those toned calves, to his thick powerful thighs. Her eyes flashed up to his broad chest and shoulders. She spent a lot of time on his face. She hated to admit it, but that stubborn chin and his high cheekbones only enhanced his masculinity. His sharp emerald eyes really got to her. She knew having the deep intensity focused on her would eventually make her want to do anything thing he asked. Already starting to feel their effect, she tore her eyes off his and moved up to the top of his six-foot-two frame. She noticed his thick, wavy brown hair could use a trim. She let her eyes drop back to the nest of hair at the base of a mighty impressive erection—thick and long, at least seven and a half inches of pure pleasure just waiting to be given or taken. Or maybe both at the same time. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep the pitiful noise building in her chest from getting out.

Why couldn't he have gotten fat, or lost a lot of weight? She hated men with skinny legs. No, he hopped back into her life, and bed, even

more bold and sexy than when he left. Just the sight of him had her wanting to throw caution to the wind and promise to do whatever he wanted, as long as they stayed together. She knew that if she ever saw him again she would be hard-pressed to get away with her heart intact. Damn it, that's why she'd written to him instead of calling or going to see him.

"Baby, you obviously like what you see. Why not give it a go?" He moved towards the foot of the bed, his nearness threatening her sanity.

"I like strawberries too, but I know what'll happen to me if I eat just one of those suckers," she said, shaking her head in hopes it would rattle enough sense to get her out of this mess she'd created.

"Eat as many as you want. I'll kiss every itchy blotch just like last time. Mmm...I remember every little detail about that crazy, sexy, exhausting night." He took another step in her direction.

She shuddered as she remembered it too. Just thinking about the way he'd stripped her bare, kissing each blemish before applying the hydrocortisone cream made her wet. She squeezed her thighs together trying not to think about how his hands had touched and teased. He worked her into such a frenzy they ended up making love, wiping half the lotion off. Of course he'd only been too happy to reapply it, that time leaving her aching for another release.

His laughter raked across her nerves as she backed into the bed, falling flat on her back. She rolled to her stomach, pushed up onto her hands and knees and tried to scramble away. *Damn he moved quick*, she thought with a groan when his hand wrapped around her ankle and yanked her back to him. As he flipped her over, she closed her eyes, not wanting to see that sexy smile of his. The bed dipped from his weight as he leaned over her.

"We can't do this." The weak half-hearted attempt to stop him wasn't going to work, and she knew it.

"Yes we can, Jessie, we're married and *that* is *not* going to change." His calm and firm voice felt like a splash of cold water.

As she wiggled out from under him, she felt the rage building. “Yes, it is. Now get out!” she seethed, pointing a shaking finger at the door.

“No.” He got to his knees and shook his head. His deep, smooth voice got rougher and thicker as he added, “I’ve let you have your way long enough. I’m here to stay whether you like it or not. You look ready to scream. Go ahead. I’m sure your sisters would all come running to your rescue.” He wore a satisfied smile she felt like smacking off his face.

“What do you mean you’re staying?” A sense of panic washed over her, as she locked her eyes on his.

The room swirled a bit around the edges before she realized she’d been holding her breath. Inhaling deeply, she twisted the rumped comforter in her hands trying to gather her wits. *I will not faint!*

“Until we work a few things out, I’m staying right here.” He settled himself against the headboard, looking way too comfortable in her bed.

She could tell by the look on his face he wasn’t leaving until he was good and ready. Her whole body trembled at the implications of him staying here. She had been such a fool to hope he’d just give up. Victor’s tenacity had been one of the reasons they’d gotten together in the first place. He had refused to take no for an answer and finally wore her down. He swept her off her feet in the process. Before she knew it he’d almost talked her into going to Tanzania. Something had to be done before he sweet talked her into doing whatever he wanted. Why could she hold her ground with anyone but him? She couldn’t think with him so close. It was as if he fried all her circuits.

“You can’t stay here. For tonight you can go stay in one of the cabins. Tomorrow you can go home.” Jessica said, buttoning her shirt as fast as possible.

“Nope. I’m staying right here with you.” Victor lurched forward and yanked her to his side.

His fingers tangled with hers keeping her from getting the last few

done up. She slapped at his hands trying to stop him, but soon realized she wasn't getting anywhere. His quick agile fingers had all the buttons undone again. He slipped her shirt off, kissing her shoulders as he tossed it aside. *His hands are still magic.* She had to bite her lip to hold back a moan.

They were big and slightly rough, but oh-so gentle as they stroked her skin. His fingers left a tingling sensation everywhere they touched as they slid down her back to the zipper of her skirt. Too quickly he managed to get it off and tossed it to the floor too. He groaned, pulling her up against him. His lips trailed up her neck to nibble on her ear. Tremors of excitement surged through her, and in response her hands grasped onto his shoulders. Her body arched into his without her permission, and a perfectly natural impulse took over her body. She rocked her hips, rubbing her barely covered mound against his stiff cock. She couldn't think. All she could do was feel. Her head tilted to give him better access. His body rubbed against hers, the friction driving her insane. God, she had missed this so much. She wanted to beg him to never stop, but she knew where that would get her. Sooner or later he would leave again, and she'd be alone and fighting to regain the control of her body and heart. She needed to stop this before it went any further.

"Are you trying to get back at me for sending you away?" She fought back the tears she felt coming on.

She remembered so clearly, as if it had happened just yesterday. It had been one of the hardest things she'd ever done. They'd been standing up on the ridge in front of his uncle's cabin staring out over the valley. She knew then like she knew now that he deserved to be free. Just because she took on the responsibility of caring for her sisters didn't mean he had to. He married her not them. He had plans and dreams she refused to get in the way of. Years ago she looked at him through her tears and begged him to go. When that didn't work, she did the only thing she could. She lied, and told him she made a mistake in marrying him. She promised herself when he got back she

would apologize and see if they could work things out. She'd had no idea he would be gone so long, or how much things would change during that time, but she'd been right about never getting over him.

"No. I'm here to see if we can save each other from making another huge mistake." He smoothed his thumb across her trembling bottom lip then leaned in and followed the path with his tongue. "Damn, baby, I've missed you. You have no idea what I've dreamed about doing to you once I had you in my arms again."

Oh, yes she did. She had plenty of fantasies about him too. Jessie learned how to take care of herself and even purchased a vibrator she read about in one of the hotter romance novels she chose to fill her empty nights.

Thanks to Victor she knew the exact way she liked her breasts to be touched, well squeezed actually. A little bit rough, but never to the point of pain, so it was easy to mimic. When she slid her fingers between her slick wet folds finding that little nub, she pretended it was him touching her. She rubbed hard and fast, but was never able to get the pressure and speed that he did. Jessie had learned to deal with the slight disappointment and focus on the pleasure.

It was harder to imagine the silly pink toy as his solid cock, but she did the best she could. She often resorted to imagining what he would do to her with the toy. Sometimes her fantasies took her to a dark place where he would punish her for using it. And others he'd watch her with those intense eyes as she pleased herself. In some of her best carnal thoughts, she'd close her eyes and picture him pleasuring himself while she did the same.

All in all her trusty light up battery operated substitute did the job, but her climaxes never reached the mind blowing peaks like they did each and every time with him. It was sad to think that most women fantasized about sleeping with movie stars, but in her most intimate moments she thought of her husband.

He had no idea how many nights she'd cried herself to sleep over missing him. At first she lost weight and felt so drained that Sam

suggested she should see a doctor. She knew they wouldn't be able to do anything for a broken heart so she refused to go. It had been a turning point though, and from that day on she pushed him to a part of her mind where he was only allowed to come out at night, where he invaded her dreams and nightmares. Some nights she woke up panting with desire, while others she'd be covered in sweat, her heart racing because she'd been unable to find him. She could never tell him how intensely he got under her skin. Unable to express herself without crying, she nodded. This was as close as she would let herself get to admitting she missed him too. She let him ease her to her back, unable to fight it anymore.

His hands cupped her face as he kissed her. Softly avoiding her mouth, obviously teasing her because he knew kissing, when done right, it really turned her on. He scattered kisses over her face, continuing down to her neck and shoulder where he bit her softly, but hard enough to break the moan free she'd been fighting to hold back. His hands drifted over her shoulders to her sides. Every inch he touched, well more like caressed, went lax under his ministrations. Her arms wrapped around his shoulders where she hung on so tightly she was afraid she'd choke him.

His hands moved to her hips, and then he began to slide them upward ever so slowly. Finally they closed over her breasts. His hands kneaded her as his thumbs swept back and forth across her hardened nipples. She wished her body was completely bare so she could feel the heat of his skin against hers. Surprisingly her bra and panties acted as more of a barrier than she thought they would. His touch felt like a hard rain hitting drought-ravaged land. Her body absorbed his touch, soaking in his heat.

Why is he here? Can't he just let go? "Why do you have to make things so hard?"

"Hard is necessary for what I want to do to you." He pressed his lips to hers in a teasing kiss.

She groaned, realizing she'd spoken that last thought out loud.

She had a bad habit of speaking her thoughts out loud, and would have to be very careful while he was around. Hopefully, it wouldn't be very long, she thought, wishing it could be different. Jessie needed to be strong. She closed her eyes and pictured her sisters' disappointed faces. The image served as a perfect reminder there was more at stake here than just satisfying her sexual needs, she reached up and pinched his arm as hard as she could.

"Shit. What the hell did you do that for?" He grabbed her hands, holding them over her head.

"I can't do this. We can't. It's over." She tried to buck him off her as he straddled her thighs, using his strength in an unfair advantage to hold her down.

Leaning in so close she could see the faint scar on the bridge of his nose, he growled. "I told you. I'm here to stay."

Chapter 2

“Oh no you’re not. Just sign the papers so we can both move on.” Somehow Jessie tears fled as she unleashed the shaky hold she had on her temper.

This is why she mailed him the papers instead of delivering them in person. Well, that and the fact she considered herself a big chicken. But really it was the fact that just being near him made it hard to keep her emotions in check.

“Damn it.” Victor rolled off her onto his back. He rubbed his arm, where she’d left a big ugly red mark, letting out a deep growl vibrating the bed.

Good, she hoped it bruised. Getting up, she grabbed her thick bathrobe, belting it so tightly it hurt. Their getting a divorce would be the best thing for everyone involved. There’s no way this could work no matter how sexually combustible they seemed.

One night during the summer he’d come to town to pick her up after dinner. Her father and grandfather had insisted he join them in the study for a drink. Afraid to leave him alone with them she followed. When her father had started telling Victor about all the stuff he could do during his visit, she got brave. She recklessly brought up the notion of finding some stuff at the lodge for females to do so the guys could bring their wives if the wanted too.

Victor joined her father and grandfather in their loud, raucous laughter. Since Victor balked at their ideas back then, he was most likely going to say no now. His negative reaction could blow their whole plan. More importantly, it was beyond time to set him free. She’d love him forever, but she couldn’t see a way for them to be

together. Not now, not ever.

“Tell me why now? I know it’s not another man,” he said confidently, which irked and pleased her at the same time.

Did he think he’d ruined her for all other men? He had, but that he possibly knew it, really pissed her off. Then it occurred to her that his cocky demeanor could be because he trusted her not to break the vows she’d made to him. She wanted to smile at that, but her anger overrode any gratification she might have felt. Jessie narrowed her eyes staring at him. Hopefully he’d be able to determine how angry she was without her actually saying the words.

The truth wouldn’t set her free in this case, so she lied. “It’s time.”

“Fuck that.” She jumped back as he surged to his feet. A little squeal escaped her and she almost followed it with a nervous giggle. “That’s bullshit! You’ve had three years to make a move. You expect me to believe that one day you just woke up and decided you didn’t love me anymore.”

He had a point, and it hurt to admit it. She could have sent him the papers a long time ago. It would’ve been easier on both of them, and a hell of a lot safer since there would’ve been no way for him to come here and try to stop her. *Have I waited just to see if he would come?* The question haunted her, but it was too late to think about should haves, they had to deal with what was.

“No, it wasn’t that sudden. I had plenty of time to think about it.” She watched him lower his chin and stare at the floor before closing his eyes and taking a deep audible breath.

“Jessie, I won’t let you do this again.” Hearing his voice soften and seeing his eyes glisten with tears scared her. “I may have been young and stupid enough to let you push me away before. I almost believed you when you told me we made a mistake. It took me a little while to get past my own anger and realize that you lied when you claimed you didn’t love or trust me enough, and that stupid shit about you being glad you figured it out before we were half-way across the world. You did it for me as much as your sisters. I see that now. The

thing is I still love you and deep down I think you still love me too.”

“How do you know that? Three years is a long time. We’ve both changed.” She hoped to put some doubt in his mind.

“Because you’re still wearing my ring, and from the way you tremble when I get close. Someone once told me ‘lust is a cousin to love.’ Your head maybe saying no, but your body can’t deny the truth.” He slowly took two steps her way.

“Who told you that? Never mind. I’d hate to think you passed on some poor woman’s pillow talk without her knowledge.” She walked calmly into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her, looking down at her shaking hands.

The irrational anger she’d buried deep down inside about him not coming to her sooner bubbled dangerously close to the surface. Along with it was the lingering fear that he was going to see right through her act. Added to those two *small* issues, she had to deal with the fact that she had no way to hide the way her heart was racing. It felt like it wanted to burst out of her chest. Her mind swirled with doubts. Why couldn’t he just sign the papers and let her get on with her life? Hadn’t she held on long enough?

* * * *

Victor tried to stop her, but he wasn’t quick enough. The door closed in his face.

He rested his head on it. “There hasn’t been anyone but you since the first time I saw you. I knew then and there you were the only one for me.”

Damn, that hadn’t gone well at all. He walked over and grabbed his underwear from the bed.

But I’m still at square one, okay maybe two, since she hasn’t thrown anything at me yet, he thought, tugging on his boxers, *and I’m still in her bedroom, which has to count for something.*

Victor let himself drop on the bed flat on his back. He stuffed a

pillow under his head, knowing she had to come out of there sooner or later. He slammed his hand on the mattress. The soft bounce of the springs didn't give him the gratification he wanted. He wished for something harder, louder to hit. At least she'd basically admitted she missed him. More importantly, he was right. No other man had been involved in her decision to expel him from her life.

Listening to her slam stuff around, he decided to move things along instead of just waiting. After all, if they garnered a little attention from her sisters, it wouldn't hurt his case any. It would probably take him a while to get Jessie to talk to him again though. The one thing he knew for sure was his wife knew how to hold a grudge.

Speaking loudly he called out, "I guess we can talk through the door."

He watched as the door eased open a few inches. He assumed she did it so she didn't have to shout. Whatever her reason, he was good with it since it made her face him. The more time they spent together the better his chances, so every little bit counted. His lips curved into a grin. Negotiating with suppliers and hostile, or just plain confused, contractors had become one of his fortes. He learned to keep calm and think clearly. Keep his options open, expect the unexpected, watch for an opening and move quickly. It looked like his well-honed skills were about to come into play.

Jessie peeked out through the crack clutching the robe closed at her neck. "Be quiet. Better yet, why don't you just go away."

He took a deep breath, removing all the emotion from his voice. "Come out here and tell me what I want to know and maybe I'll leave."

"Get dressed," she countered, making him smile. She always liked to call the shots, and he let her think she did. But from now on, he planned on making sure she knew who was really in charge.

"I have my shorts on, and that's all you get until we talk," He hoped she'd give in since he still had hopes of getting her back into

bed, and he figured the less they had on the better.

“Not good enough. Put your shirt on too.” Her voice cracked, and he smiled glad he had his back to her so she couldn’t see.

So the sight of my chest got to her did it? He searched for his shirt. It gave a little boost to his ego to learn his body still pleased her. He might just have to use that against her as a last resort if everything else didn’t work. He’d rather have her come back to him willingly, but at this point he wasn’t beyond fighting dirty.

“Fine.” He tugged on his t-shirt. “You can come out now.”

* * * *

Jessie walked back into the bedroom and realized having him put clothes on made no difference. She could make him wear a dress, and he’d find a way to make it look sexy. She pictured him standing there in four inch black heels, a skin-tight pink mini skirt, and a black spaghetti strap tank top. His hairy legs and ripped muscles would really made the look complete. The image flashing in her head brought on a bout of laughter she was unable to hold back. His narrowed eyes and raised brows only made her laugh harder.

Struggling to catch her breath, she asked, “What do I have to do to get you to go away?”

“Tell me what I want to know. Why now?” His eyes searched hers, probably looking for some sign of her weakening.

The way his eyes focused so intently on hers made her want to tell him all her secrets, just like she had the first few weeks that summer she fell in love with him. They were so sincere, drawing her in, but she knew they had a cutting edge too. It wasn’t fair that he was born with good looks and the ability to make women want to tell him anything he wanted to hear. Turning her back on him, she hoped she wouldn’t be so easily swayed.

“I already told you I want to move on with my life.” Alright, so she wasn’t exactly telling him the whole truth, and she wasn’t

planning to.

She wished she'd found another way to handle things, one that didn't involve hurting him, her, or both of them. He couldn't really still love her after all this time apart. Maybe his wounded pride kept him holding on. She craved him, but then again she hadn't had a man in three years. Not that she'd wanted one. Had he been with anyone? He denied it, but in a stupid way that hurt more. What if he lied? She didn't want him to have been with anyone else. Her head hurt just thinking about it, but he's a man after all, and their needs tended to be stronger. Did she really even want to know?

His deep chuckle broke her from her musings. "You lied, and we both know it. Now you can tell me the truth and take a chance, and I'll leave, or keep lying and I'll stick to you like glue until I know everything."

If she told him then he'd know he still had a hold on her. And not just physically, but mentally. No, this time it would be financially, too. No way she'd let that happen without a fight. She could take care of herself, and her sisters. She'd been doing it for the past few years, and they were getting by just fine.

"Good God, you have gotten paranoid and mean in your old age. Why do you think I'm hiding something? Have you even considered that just because there's no man right now doesn't mean I don't want one eventually?" As she turning to face him, she fisted her hands and jammed them on her hips.

* * * *

Oh, she'd perfected that look. He wished he'd been there to watch it go from the cute little pout to this fierce scowl. He missed so much, but he planned on making up for it. He already put the plans in motion. He'd make her see he wasn't going to leave her again.

Barely keeping the frustration from his voice, he said, "Babe, you've already got a man. Any itches you have I'll be the one doing

the scratching.”

“Thanks, but I’ve been scratching my own itches for a long time. And just to clarify, I didn’t say need. I said *want*,” she taunted, which made him wonder if she forgot how he reacted to her challenges.

“So you see you can sign the papers and go home.” He watched as Jessie reached up and started twirling a few strands of her hair around her fingers nervously. There was no missing the telltale sign she was most likely hiding something.

“Maybe you just don’t know what you need.” Possible and probable since she always put her sisters first, but that didn’t mean he had to like it.

Shit! Why hadn’t he considered that earlier? One of her sisters might be in trouble? If so, how the hell would them getting a divorce help? Not that it mattered, because it wasn’t going to happen. His stomach rolled at the idea of her giving up more for them. Though he shouldn’t be surprised, because he knew she’d do anything for them. The time for playing these stupid guessing games was over.

He got to his feet and grabbed her by the arms, pulling towards him until they were nose-to-nose. “Who’s in trouble? You or one of your sisters?”

“Even if something is wrong, which I’m not saying there is, what makes you think I’d come to you for help? I’ve handled everything up to now without coming to you. Haven’t I sent back every check and gift you sent me?” Her tone sounded angry, yet, when she looked up at him, he saw the tears brimming in her eyes.

His own anger came dangerously close to spiking out of control. He gave her a hard shake. “That’s shows how much you know. All of your sisters’ scholarships were given by a subsidiary of Weatherly Cosmetics Corporation. Yes, I went to my mother and sister for help. Don’t say a word,” he said as soon as she opened her mouth, “you may not have come to me for help like you should have, but I’ve done what I could to take care of you. As for the checks, I opened an account for you. The gifts are sitting in a box in my closet waiting for

you to open them.”

He hadn’t planned on telling her he’d helped take care of them all this time. Eventually he would have gotten around to it. They were able to survive on what they made from the lodge and cabin rentals. Still he knew there’s no way she could’ve afforded her sisters’ educations and kept up the lifestyle they’d been accustomed to growing up. Without those scholarships, they would have ended up taking whatever jobs they could find to help pay for school. He wasn’t about to let his wife or her sisters suffer when he could help. Judging by the calculating look on her face, she was probably trying to figure out how she’d go about repaying him.

Tears began rolling down her cheeks unashamedly and she asked, “Why?”

“Because I take care of what’s mine. You and your sisters are my family whether you like it or not.” Her jaw dropped as she stood there staring at him.

She shook her head, “My sisters are not your responsibility. They never were.”

Letting her go, he turned away. Her tears weren’t going sway him this time. He couldn’t afford to let them. “Don’t do that. I would have stayed here and helped you, but you made me leave. I never wanted to go. Damn it, I begged you to let me stay and help you work things out. I would have found a way to get out of those damn contracts.”

The past didn’t matter anymore, because this time around he planned on calling the shots. The first thing he had to do was figure out what they were hiding. It shouldn’t be that hard. If he called in a few favors, he could probably have every dirty little detail of the past three years within twenty-four hours. A loud knock on the door had them both spinning towards the door.

The way Jessie slapped her hand over his mouth made him think she was afraid he might say something. He thought about it as she called out through the door. “Yeah?”

“Jessie, there’s some hot, really hot, guy downstairs asking for

you,” Bobbie chirped excitedly.

“Okay, I’ll be right down.” She glared at Victor as she listened to Bobbie’s footsteps retreating down the hall.

“Is there a problem?” He flashed her a smug smile.

Wiping her wet hand down his chest, she said, “Yes, there is. You licked me.”

“You never complained about me doing it before,” he said insolently as he stuffed his legs into his jeans.

* * * *

“Oh shut up.” She walked right past him and yanked open a drawer on her big cherry dresser.

The little statues and row of oversized paperbacks on top shook from the force. She reached in and tossed a pair of shorts and a tank top onto the bed behind her. She slammed the drawer hard enough to rattle the whole dresser, which impressed the hell out of her. She would have figured out a way to provide her sisters with a college education. It was a hard pill to swallow learning he had gone behind her back and done something so...generous. She hated owing anyone, and having it be him she owed really rubbed her the wrong way. And he hadn’t done it on his own either. Knowing he’d gotten his mother’s approval for those scholarships made it worse. He always said he wanted to make it on his own, and she’d taken that from him, however inadvertently.

She shook her head letting out a frustrated growl. “Errgh!”

It was one of the reasons she sent him away to begin with. After graduating from MIT, he’d signed on with a prominent architectural firm, who’d won a huge contract with the Advantage Coalition based on one of his designs. They’d be helping to design and build a school and hospital in an underprivileged area where it was desperately needed. The only problem was as a condition of the contract. The designer had to be on site at all times to oversee the project.

He deserved the chance to see his vision through to the end. He'd decided to take a huge a step away from the cosmetics business his mother and sister owned as he could, and she hadn't wanted to take that away from him. She felt sick to her stomach knowing he'd gone to them for help on her behalf.

* * * *

"Who's the guy? And what is he doing here so late?" he asked, watching her walk away.

For less than a minute he wondered if she lied about another man being the reason for her sudden demand. Then he remembered the sight of her wedding ring nestled between her breasts. There was no way she'd still be wearing his ring if she wanted another man. He felt like a complete ass for even considering it, but she always managed to make him react before thinking. Still, just because she wasn't the type to betray him didn't mean the guy waiting downstairs had virtuous motives.

She shrugged. "It's only ten-thirty. Maybe it's a delivery of some kind. I guess I'll find out when I go downstairs."

"Yeah, you're probably right," he said sarcastically with huge roll of his eyes. "I'll just go on down and introduce myself to your *visitor*."

"No!" She quickly wedged herself between him and the door.

"Hiding something, are we?" he asked, slapping his palms against the door on either side of her head.

She jumped and shrieked. Victor was damn close to being beyond caring if he scared her. His fear of losing her, the long lonely nights he spent missing her, and his building resentment that she kept pushing him away were driving him to the breaking point. He couldn't take much more of this. Looking into her eyes he found himself pleasantly surprised to see them filled with excitement, not fear.

“Yes. You.” She placed both of her hands on his chest, and he hoped she could feel the way his heart raced at her touch as she tried in vain to push him away.

“You don’t think your sisters would buy the old friend routine?” He didn’t even try to disguise the way his dick surged towards her.

At this close distance she had to be able to feel it pressing insistently against her. Sure enough, she sucked in breath, holding it. She held her body perfectly still and tilted her head back to give herself some room to breathe.

“Don’t act so surprised sweetheart, you always did have that effect on me. I guess that part of my body hasn’t gotten the message you don’t want it anymore. My head and heart haven’t either. Maybe there’s some way you can explain it to them.” The last of his request came out as warm moist whisper on her neck.

She shivered, and her body rubbed against him deliciously. “I wish I could.”

“Love isn’t a weakness. It’s a strength. One you have in spades. Please don’t throw mine away.” He nuzzled the curve of her neck, smiling when she moaned and let her head drop to the side giving him more access.

* * * *

Loud shouting coming from downstairs had them breaking apart. He shoved her out of the way and whipped open the door. She quickly tore her off her robe and slipped into her shorts and tank top. Within seconds, she pounded her way down the stairs.

Samantha’s strident voice carried up to her. “I don’t care who you are. You had no right. This is my kitchen, and I made that cake for tomorrow.”

“I said I’m sorry. I just couldn’t resist. Victor, can you help me out here?” a deep male voice said.

Jessie pushed her way past her sisters Georgie, Joey, Frankie, and

Bobbie, and her friends who all stood there taking in the fascinating scene. She moved over to Victor, taking her place at his side. It was clear to her just by looking at the guy Sam cornered that he was closely related to Victor. This meant he had to be the one and only Trent Weatherly. Victor had told her dozens of stories about how many times his mischievous younger brother had gotten him into trouble.

“What is your brother doing here? And why is my sister threatening him with a chocolate covered spatula?” She ignored her sisters’ pointed stares and waited for his answer.

“I have no idea, but that cake does look and smell amazing,” he said with a shrug.

“You’re a big help, you know that?” She walked over and reached out to lay her hand on Sam’s shoulder just as Sam spun around.

She swung the spatula and thick chocolate frosting flew off, splattering across Jessie’s chest. Looking down, she watched the creamy concoction settled in between her breasts. Warm and gooey, and the smell, she inhaled deeply, absolutely intoxicating.

A strangled noise had her looking at the small group. Her sisters and Bobbie’s friends all wore shocked, but wore enthralled expressions. Victor’s wide-eyed gaze locked on her breast. Obviously given enough incentive, the seductive temptress she’d locked deep inside sprung free.

Sticking her finger into the frosting she brought a clump up to her lips and sucked it off, moaning as the sweet sugary icing coated her mouth. Watching Victor swallow along with her, she couldn’t keep the satisfied smile from crossing her lips. Feeling bolder with her sisters around her, she didn’t think twice about teasing him. She dipped her finger again just to see if he’d snap. This time she licked a bit then slid her lips closed over her finger. She moaned as she swirled her tongue around her finger and slowly slid it out of her mouth. Victor’s stance went rigid. With his broad shoulders set straight and his chest puffed out, it gave him a rougher, sexier edge.

She realized her mistake, but it was worth the trouble she'd be in when he got her alone.

Smiling she grabbed a handful of paper towels and began cleaning herself up, careful not to look at Victor. "Mmm... Oh my goodness. Sam, this is delicious, but next time let's keep it on the cake. Now tell me what's going on here."

"I left the room for one minute and came back to find this...*lummo*," she used the spatula to point at Trent who took a bite of the cake in his hand, "helping himself to a huge piece of *my* cake." Sam's hands were shaking angrily. Jessie watched her take a deep breath before asking the question she'd been dreading. "Who the hell is he anyway?"

"I'm..." He started to explain, but she cut him off, needing to protect her secret and her sisters.

"This is Trent Weatherly, and that's his brother, Victor. They're old friends and they stopped by to say hello." She could see the obvious confusion on Trent's face and wondered exactly how much Victor had told him. "Bobbie, why don't you and your friends go finish studying. Frankie, would you please call and have cabin sixteen readied?"

Frankie leaned her head to the side, her forehead scrunched drawing her eyebrows together, but she must have noticed the plea in Jessie's eyes because she nodded and walked away. Jessie thanked her lucky stars for that one. She turned to the twins to send them off on some fictitious errand as well, but she was pleasantly surprised to see Georgie and Joey look at each other and nod. Neither of them said anything before they turned and walked away. They'd corner her later and demand more details. She was sure of it.

Sam wasted no time after the room had cleared. She turned to Victor and blasted him. "Did you really feel it was necessary to bring in reinforcements this early?"

"Hey, I came on my own," Trent said. "You know, to offer moral support and all that. What I want to know is why they don't know

who you are.” Trent stared at his brother, waiting for an explanation.

“Look, things are complicated.” Victor released a huge sigh, finally tearing his eyes off Jessie’s chest.

“I’d say it’s pretty cut and dried. Either you’re married or you’re not,” Trent said, and to her dismay, Sam nodded in agreement.

“We are,” Victor declared loudly.

To which she added equally adamantly, “Not for much longer.”

“What?” Sam and Trent asked in unison.

“She wants a divorce, and I came up here to tell her she’s not getting one.” From the angry glare Victor pinned her with, he obviously didn’t care if they knew he was angry with her.

“Why are you so mad? I’m the one whose house has been invaded and privacy torn to shreds. As for you,” she turned to Trent and said, “you are welcome to stay, but don’t say a word about any of this to my sisters.”

“Jessie, please rethink this,” Sam laid her hand on her arm, but Jessie pulled away.

She wanted to scream and shout. They all stood there staring at her. Victor looking angry as Jessie expected, Sam so upset she might burst into tears or start screaming at her, and Trent looked utterly confused. And contrary to what people may think, she had feelings, too. None of them took into consideration that she’d dwelled on her decision to ask him for a divorce for months. She looked at it from every point of view before deciding on a course of action. Obviously it meant nothing to them, which totally pissed her off.

“I’m done thinking. Sam, we talked about this. You said it was time for me to do something about this, so I did.” She fled the room so quickly so almost missed seeing Trent try to ease his arms around Sam’s shoulders.

Chapter 3

Victor dropped onto the bed and looked around the large, sparsely furnished one-room cabin. Two twin beds and a small table with two chairs. No fridge, stove, or TV. Things must be worse than he'd been led to believe. Lack of money could be the issue. Then again, maybe she told him the truth and she just wanted to be free of him. Maybe he'd finally lost touch with reality.

"She still loves you," Trent said, staring out the window towards the lake.

Victor laughed. What he really wanted to do was go find a bar, drink too much, and get into a fight. "She has a real funny way of showing it."

"There's something else going on here." Trent sounded confident enough that he sat up and waited for him to tell him what he thought it might be.

"I thought that too at first, but I'll be damned if I can figure it out." Relief surged through him. At least he wasn't the only one who'd sensed it.

"So how did things go?" Trent asked, looking at him over his shoulder.

He cringed remembering the look on her face when he slipped. "It could've gone better. I lost it and told her about the scholarships."

"Wow. I would've liked to be a fly on the wall for that. How did she take it?"

"Better than I expected, but then again, someone interrupted us." He looked at him with a smile that Trent could've interpreted as *thank you*, or *you bone head*, "I don't think she really had time to process

it.”

“Ooh, so we should expect some really good fireworks when she realizes what you’ve done,” he said teasingly.

“Probably.” Victor knew it was just one more thing they were going to have to deal with.

At the time helping her and her sisters without telling them seemed like the best thing to do, because in his opinion he needed as many strings binding them together as possible. Family, love, sex, and money. What else in life ranked more important than those?

“Victor, you did the right thing. Think about it. Mom wouldn’t have pulled those strings if she didn’t think so.”

He looked at his brother and shook his head. “Mom didn’t know the whole story. I just hope Jessie can forgive me when this is all over.”

“You need to think about something else for a while. Why don’t you tell me more about her sister, Samantha?” Victor raised his eyebrows, and Trent held up his hands, but his smile made his interest clear.

Deciding if he really wanted to know he could find out on his own, Victor ignored the question. Besides, he wasn’t about to do anything else that may give Jessie any more reasons to be angry with him.

“Okay, how about what’s up with this cabin? Are they all like this?”

Victor didn’t have to look around the room he knew why his brother was having such a hard time coming up with a word to describe it. “I have no idea, but I intend to find out. Hopefully Jessie’s going to be too busy explaining our appearance to her sisters to worry about us doing any digging.”

* * * *

Jessie knew her sisters weren’t going to let her get away with that

flimsy explanation. She would have been fooling herself if she thought otherwise, and she was only a fool when it came to one thing. *Victor!* She knew they'd all be waiting for her the minute she came out of the study. She dropped onto the couch wishing she could just disappear. Better yet she wished he would just disappear and go back into the section of her mind she visited in her most erotic dreams.

A loud knock had her lurching to her feet. "You know you can't hide in there forever, don't you?"

"Come on in, Sam." She might need her help deciding just how much she should tell the rest of their sisters.

* * * *

Sam came in closing the door tightly behind her wanting to evaluate the situation before letting Jessie face everyone else. "You okay?"

Jessie shrugged, curling up in the corner of the couch. "I think I'm numb. I mean he just shows up unannounced, now I have to explain who he is."

"Did he say why he came?" Sam asked, taking a seat across from her.

"He said he's staying, and he's right. He's staying, but only until I get him to sign those damn papers." Sam could hear the determination in her voice, but she could tell from the way she said it she really didn't feel it.

"You know when I said you should deal with him I didn't mean you have to get a divorce." Sam's heard her own voice crack.

She swallowed back her tears, knowing they wouldn't do either of them any good. Jessie and Frankie were the strongest of her sisters, while she and Bobbie could fall to tears when they watched sappy commercials. But she was determined to be there for Jessie through this, and that meant being strong. Jessie and Victor had created this mess all by themselves, and they'd have to clean it up, but she'd help

if she could.

“I know that’s not what you meant, but it’s the best thing to do,” Jessie said as if that explained her decision.

“Not to be the voice of reason here, but wouldn’t it just be easier to tell him what we’re planning and ask him to go along with it?” Sam held up her hands when Jessie shot her a murderous glare. “Time-wise it would work out better for us.”

“Sam, we’ve worked all this out down to the last detail. I...*we* can’t take the chance that he would cause trouble. I know he wouldn’t do it on purpose, but he’s a guy, and they think differently than we do. Do you remember how Dad and Grandpa laughed themselves silly when we told them they should fix the place up so guys could bring their wives along?” Jessie gave a shake of her head, rejecting the idea of telling him the truth and having him laugh at them again.

“Maybe he’s different? You know the next generation and all that crap Joey spouts on about. We can break it all down for him. It’s not as if we’re going into this blind. With just about all the businesses in Juniper Valley and the surrounding towns catering towards sportsmen, we’d be unique. Look at the Mitchell’s. They focus on companies and elite clients and they’re doing great.”

“I know, and we’ve all agreed. I just don’t know if he’d see us turning the lodge and cabins into a romantic getaway as a smart, responsible business decision.”

Sam, being her annoying self, cut away all the bullshit and went right for the heart of the matter. “Okay, just tell me this. If it wasn’t for our plans, would you have asked him for the divorce?”

Jessie could lie to her, but Sam would know and was prepared to call her on it if she had to. “I don’t know. I kept thinking he would eventually.”

“So it would have been okay for him to give up on you, but you didn’t want to be the one causing him pain.” Jessie nodded, and Sam felt the urge to throw something at her.

“Damn it! Would you stop looking at me like that? I’m doing

what I think is best for everyone involved.” Sam understood that what she was doing now would keep her past from interfering with their futures.

“You always do.” Sam got to her feet and headed for the door, but she stopped halfway there and shook her head unable to just let it go. “Just tell them that. They’ll understand.”

* * * *

Ouch. That hurt. Okay so maybe she had some major control issues. And yeah, she kept her sisters in mind when making decisions. It wasn’t like she was missing out on life. She had friends and a good life. If she felt like crying every now and then, that was her business. And maybe after they got things up and running the way they wanted, she’d think about playing the field a bit, because the last thing she planned to do after this mess was settle down.

“Sammy, I’m sorry I let you down,” she said as Samantha reached the door.

Looking back over her shoulder, Sam didn’t bother to hide her tears. “Jess, if anything, it’s us who let you down.”

It took Jessie a minute to process what she said, but once she did, sadness replaced any other feelings she may have been dealing with. Did her sisters really think they let her down? How could they think such a thing? Everything she’d done, all the choices she’d made and was making were so they’d have more options than she did. And they had never, and could never let her down.

The sudden need to make sure they knew it took precedence over everything else. She stormed out of the room and walked into the dining room where she found Bobbie, Joey, Georgie, and Frankie sitting at the table waiting for her. She was about to sit down when she heard Sam’s truck start up. At once they all ran to the bay window that overlooked the section of the driveway where they all parked. The big black truck, so contrary to her sister’s normal sweetness,

fishtailed, sending a spray of gravel towards the porch as she peeled out of the drive.

“What did you say to make Sam tear out of here like that?” Bobbie asked, looking at Jessie with concern flooding her face.

“She’ll get over it.” *I hope*. “I’m guessing you guys have some questions for me. Why don’t we all sit down?” She spent a few minutes thinking about where Sam might have run off to before giving her sisters her undivided attention. “Before we get into this, I just want to say none of you have ever let me down in anyway. If I ever made you guys feel like I did, I’m sorry.”

“That’s good to know, but you haven’t. So stop stalling and tell us about that old friend of yours,” Frankie said, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms over her chest.

“And his brother,” the twins chimed, showing where their interest in the debacle laid.

“Victor and I dated for awhile a little, like three years ago. He’s been here for dinner before with his Uncle Clayton,” she explained, planning on being as truthful as she could without telling them she’d gotten married and kept it a secret from them.

Her eyes narrowing suspiciously, Bobbie said, “I thought he looked familiar, but that doesn’t explain why he was standing in our kitchen barefoot. Or why he came running down from upstairs.”

“And if he’d been wearing more,” Joey said, and after a giggle or two, Georgie added, “or less?”

“Now, girls,” the corners of Frankie’s mouth tipped up fighting to hold back a smile of her own, “Jessie’s an adult. She can entertain whoever she wants. And personally, I don’t think she owes us any explanations, but I have to ask. Is it serious?”

“A long time ago, but he’ll be leaving again, soon. I don’t plan on ever seeing him again after that.” She truly believed Victor would see in time she was right and sign the papers.

“Then I think you should take some time and enjoy his company as much as you can until he leaves. We’ll cover for you whenever you

need us to.” Frankie rose from her seat, a clear indication the conversation was over, for her at least.

“You can start tonight.” Bobbie got up and walked over to the counter where a stack of blankets sat and slapped her hand on them, “I don’t think there’s enough blankets down there. You can bring them these.”

“Fine.” She walked over and hefted them into her arms since they gave her an excuse to go see him.

* * * *

Bobbie knew there was more to the story than Jessie was telling them. And whether her other sisters knew it or not Sam knew what Jessie was hiding. Bobbie was willing to bide her time and see what her older, but not necessarily wiser, sisters were up to. *Hopefully it has something to do with Jessie hooking up with that hottie.* As their little meeting broke up Bobbie moved to the window and watched Jessie pull out of the driveway. She smiled deciding she’d keep a closer eye on everything from her on out. Her sister may need a nudge or two and she was just the girl to give it to her.

* * * *

“What are you doing here? Spying on the enemy?” Something in Trent’s voice made Victor look over.

There stood an innocent looking Samantha glaring up at his brother. Less than an hour ago she had been threatening him with a chocolate covered spatula and her anger didn’t seem to have eased any.

“Oh, shut up!” She put her hand on his chest, pushing him out of the way to enter the cabin.

“Hey there, Sam, switching sides already?” Victor didn’t bother to get up from his comfortable position lounging across the bed.

She jammed her fisted hands on her hips, looking more and more

like her sister, she said, “No! I came to see if you worked out a plan yet.”

“You could make it easier for him and just tell him what the hell is going on.” From the way she glared at Trent for his comment, Victor felt grateful he wasn’t on the receiving end of the anger stirred up in this particular sister. Then again, he had his own pissed off vixen to deal with.

Spinning on her heels, she stabbed her finger at Trent, stopping about an inch from his chest. “Would you?”

Victor wanted to laugh at the confused expression on his brother’s face. “Would I what?”

“Betray your brother’s trust for a woman?” She threw her hands in the air in a move Victor had often made himself when Trent was being obtuse, usually deliberately.

He shook his head, but Victor knew his answer wasn’t that simple. “For a woman no, but his happiness maybe. I know he loves her. Damn it! He’s crazy about her. Why else would he wait three years for her to make a move?”

“You’re as dumb as your brother. What makes you think a woman will recognize your willingness to let her go as love? Okay, we needed her, but she needed him, and he just let her push him away.” She sounded so passionate he would have thought she was talking about herself.

“He didn’t just let her go. He hounded her night and day until he shipped out. Then he tried to make sure she knew he thought about her all the time.” Trent’s claim made him sound like a lovesick fool.

Dropping his head into his hands, Victor wondered if he had really been that bad. Probably worse. Everyone had told him to stop moping and do something, but her tears had just been too much for him to deal with so he gave in to her wishes and backed off. Was it too late to make her see he still and would always love her?

At the growl and squeal, he looked up to find Trent holding Sam by the arms, their noses touching. Hopefully whatever happened

between those two, and yeah even a blind person could see something starting to brew between them, would turn out better than it did for him and Jessie.

“Sam? Sam? *Sam!*” he shouted, moving to the window.

“What?” she asked.

Looking back over his shoulder, he asked, “Does Jessie know you came here?”

“No. I didn’t plan on coming here. I drove up to the lodge, but instead of going in I found myself taking the path down here. Why?” She struggled out his brother’s grip and rushed to his side.

“Because she just pulled up,” he said, stepping aside as Sam reached to the window.

“Oh shit. Shit... shit... shit...” She grabbed his arm, her short nails digging into his skin, “She can’t find me here.”

“Come on, we’ll go out the back. Vic, I’ll be back in the morning. Don’t let her leave until you clear the air.” Trent pulled Sam out the door, closing it just as Jessie’s knock on the front door sounded.

“Jess, come on in.” He glanced behind him briefly wondering if Sam and Trent had their ears pressed to the other side of door before he swung the door wide enough for her to get through with the bundle she carried.

“Where’s your brother?” Jessie’s eyes darted around the room nervously.

Unable to hide his smile, he turned his back on her, closing the door. “He went up to the lodge to search out some food.”

“Oh. Um...Bobbie thought you might need some extra blankets. And I came to say thank you for what you did for my sisters.” She put the stack on the small table.

Leaving the discussion on the state of the cabin for another time, he grabbed onto the more important part of her comment. “Jessie, there’s no need to thank me. I did what I needed to for my family, but I am curious just how did you explain our situation? I mean I’d hate to let something slip.”

He liked the way she watched him as he walked across the room, dropping onto the twin bed, his head landing on the pillows, his feet dangling off the end.

"I didn't tell them about the scholarships, because none of them need to know. By the way I plan on paying you back every penny. Other than that I kept to the truth. We dated a long time ago. No sense in telling them we're married since we won't be for much longer." She was wrong and he planned on proving the first chance he got, but for now he just sat back and waited to hear what else she'd told them. "And that you'd be leaving soon, so we'd probably never see each other again."

He laughed, swinging his feet. "Babe, you lied like a cheap rug, because I'm sticking around."

"I know you said that, but I thought if we could just talk things over calmly and rationally, you'd come to see this is the best thing for us to do." She lowered herself into one of the chairs, rubbing her hands on her thighs.

"I have a better idea. Why don't we go away for a few days and see if we can burn out that flame you sparked up." He gave her a wink, enjoying watching her squirm.

"Even if I wanted to I can't. We have some things we're working on here and I have to be available. Can we just go over the papers so you can sign them and go home?" She looked everywhere but at him.

He ignored her question since he already gave her his answer. "What kind of things?"

"Some maintenance stuff." She glanced at him then quickly looked away, which told him there had to be more to it than that.

Fine. She wanted to play he'd play. He could be strong enough to call her bluff. It would serve her right if he decided to drag this out. He took a deep breath counting to a hundred, watching her squirm.

"You can go now." He got up, crossed the room and opened the door, letting her think he no longer wanted her there.

"W-What?" she squeaked, getting to her feet.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets to keep himself from reaching out for her. “I’ve decided I’m not in the mood for playing games. You’re obviously not ready to tell me truth so talking would be a waste of time.”

She chewed her lip as she walked towards the door, stopping a few inches from him, close enough for her sweet berry scent to reach him. “Victor, I know it may seem like I’ve led you on, but I didn’t mean to. I tried to let you go.”

“But I held on. I get it. Jessie, I know you might not believe me, but I’ll say it again and again until this sinks in. I still love you. I think if we gave it a try we could make things work.” Giving into the need to touch her, he cupped her cheek.

She leaned into his palm, her eyes closing, but not before he saw they were filled with tears. “You deserve more, so much more, than I can give.”

“Damn you.” He pulled her into his arms, his lips covering hers in a hard, bruising kiss.

Her mouth opened under his assault, and he slid his tongue inside, coaxing hers into an intimate game of cat and mouse. Lifting her, he spun around, pinning her against the door. Knowing if she touched him he’d completely lose it, he grabbed her hands and held them against the door on either side of her head. She moaned and wiggled driving him insane. Using his hips he pressed his cock, which was trying to bust free from it confines, at the apex of her thighs. For Christ sake, he was going to explode. He let go and tried to step away, but she wrapped her arms around his waist clinging to him like a vine.

Breathing hard, he pressed her head against his chest, holding her still while he tried to get control of himself. She trembled in his embrace, but held him just as tightly. God, this woman had a hold over him he would never understand. The connection between them went far beyond the physical appeal. It was something he knew he’d never be able to find with anyone else.

“I never did like it when you tried to tell me what was best for

me.”

Her muffled, “I’m sorry” against his chest sent a wave of guilt over him.

“I know its second nature for you. You’ve always had to be in charge. It’s going to be a hard habit to break, but I think I’m the man for the job, don’t you?” He didn’t wait for an answer. He picked her up carried her over to the bed.

He eased her to the floor, taking her mouth in another powerful kiss before her feet even made contact. Wrapping his fingers in her hair, he pulled her head back giving him more of her. His kiss wasn’t gentle, and she whimpered under his ravishment, yet her hands fisted in his shirt pulling him closer. He knew he needed to keep her from thinking. He wanted her to focus on his touch and how her body reacted to it. This chemistry between them wasn’t something that could be faked or ignored.

“Victor. This is crazy.” She sighed, but she didn’t pull away.

Sliding his hands from her hair to her shoulders, he said, “I know.”

Without waiting for her response, he grabbed the straps of her spaghetti strap tank top and bra, pulling them down to her elbows. She could still move her arms, barely. Cupping her breasts, he squeezed them together, lifting them as he lowered his head. He took one of the pebbled tips into his mouth, while he used his thumb to rub and torment the other.

He felt her groping for his zipper. Reveling at how eager she was, he shifted his hips, placing his bulging erection directly in her path. She cupped him with one hand, and the other fumbled with the button on his jeans. Finally getting it free, she found the tab for the zipper. One swift tug was all it took, and his dick surged through the slit on his boxers ready to greet her.

He bit down gently on her nipple, groaning as her hand wrapped around his shaft. Her firm grip felt so fucking great it sucked the air from his lungs. He released her breast and took a much needed a deep

breath. She squeezed, stroking him twice before he lost it. Their clothes flew here and there as fast as they could get them off. She laughed as he pushed her down onto the bed. Stripping his jeans, he followed seconds after.

* * * *

Jessie couldn't deny him. She knew it was crazy. A huge mistake, but tonight he still belonged to her, and she wanted him. Her mind shifted beyond caring about anything but getting Victor buried as deep inside her as possible. He settled between her thighs, his hard-on slipping between her curls coated with her wetness. She squirmed, trying to get him right where she wanted him.

"Victor. Now please," she begged breathlessly.

He slowly, inch by agonizing inch, slid his shaft inside her. When he was finally lodged as deep as he could get, he let out a deep breath that shook his body. He stretched her unused muscles filling her completely. His started moving in and out slowly. His groans and her moans filled the air. She grabbed his ass, pulling him deeper with every thrust. His strokes grew more frenzied. Harder, faster their bodies moved together bringing them both to the brink.

He pushed himself up and slipped his hand between them. He dipped his thumb through her curls finding the sensitive little nub. She gasped as he applied pressure to her clit. He rubbed hard as his hips plunged in and out. The combination was too much. It sent her over the edge. She came hard, her whole body feeling the spasms her orgasm created. She screamed out his name, digging her nails into his arms.

"You're amazing." He grabbed her hips, pulling her up higher as he drove into her again and again.

She felt the pressure building again. She didn't think she could handle anymore. She wouldn't have tried to get away, but he held her in place. It didn't take long for him to tightly stretch her every nerve,

ready to snap at any second.

“Victor!” she screamed as her body shattered again.

He stiffened, letting out a yell of his own before dropping his head to her chest.

“Give me a minute to catch my breath and we’ll go for round two.” He playfully nipped at her breast when she laughed at him.

Chapter 4

The early morning sunlight streamed into the room and brought Jessie back to reality with a sharp sting of mortification. Last night had been the worst thing that could have happened, even though it had been impossible to avoid. Feeling her eyes flood with tears, she turned her face into the pillow knowing there'd be no holding them back. It was no use trying to hide them from Victor. The irritating son of a bitch knew. He ran his hand slowly up and down her back in a comforting non-sexual way. She wanted to pull away from him, since this was all his fault, but she found herself rolling towards him.

He rocked her slowly, murmuring promises she knew he couldn't keep. Everything *was not* going to be okay. He *could not* take care of everything. If only it could be that easy. How had her life spiraled out of control like this? Her choices all sucked. No matter what she did she was going to lose. Big. She had to decide between being able to have sex with him whenever she wanted or her sisters' futures. *Is there even really a choice?*

"Jessie, babe, you're killing me with those tears. But, honey, I can't give in this time. And you won't tell me what's going on so I'll just have to make you think of something else." She felt him smile against her neck before nibbling on her earlobe. His hands cupped her ass, and she wiggled against him. The slight movement was enough to make her feel his rapidly hardening erection.

She laughed through her tears. "Didn't you get enough last night?"

His laughter shook her against him, pressing her breast into his hard chest. "Jessie, it's been three long years of me, myself, and I

fantasizing about you. We have a lot of time to make up for.”

Panic set in with his words. “Victor, we can’t. Last night was a one-time slip.”

His phony shocked expression almost made her laugh. “One time. Excuse me, but I seem to remember someone screaming out more than once.”

“Shut up,” she said, wiggling out of his embrace. “You know damn well I meant we can’t make love again.”

Luckily he didn’t protest. He just laid there and watched her as she got dressed. She tried to ignore him, but there were certain things she wished he wouldn’t notice. Her slightly rounded belly for one. He shouldn’t be surprised to see she no longer had the tight firm body she had when they first met. She’d grown up and filled out in some places. Jessie thought she still looked good, but did Victor? She liked being a woman, not a stick. And normally she was damned proud of her curves. His gaze felt like a long steady stroke as it drifted over every inch of her. Ready to let him have it, she looked up into his ravenous eyes and choked on her words.

Settling himself against the headboard, he smiled and said, “I know no such thing. And I’ll have you know I’m taking that as a personal challenge.”

He would, she thought, shaking her head. Turning her back on him, she finished tugging her clothes on. She smiled once or twice when he sucked in a breath quite loudly. She headed towards the door, trying to think of something, anything she could say that would make him change his mind.

She paused, turned back and glared at his smiling face. “No you won’t! You’ll consider last night one final grand hurrah. Sign the divorce papers and go home.”

She slammed the door on his laughter. Why had she even bothered coming here last night? She knew she turned into a weak fool when it came to him. Did he really think that because she caved in at a moment of weakness it gave him the right to assume that she

would roll over and let him have his way with her? Remembering how she'd done just that last night, she kicked a rock on the path, which bounced off a stick and popped up, hitting her car door and leaving a small ding. Rushing over she ran her hand over the spot. Her poor baby. Her anger at herself ratcheted up another notch.

* * * *

Victor stood in the window, a sheet wrapped loosely around his hips, unable to tear his eyes off the willful creature storming away from him. He watched as she made her way to her car. *God, she's beautiful.* The past few years had taken her from a fresh young girl to a woman, and he'd missed it. Well. Not really. He'd gotten dozens of pictures and videos from his Uncle Clayton, but they didn't compare to seeing her in the flesh.

And oh what flesh it is. Soft and supple, begging to be stroked. He made a mental note to pick up some lotions to use on her, with her. Her claim that they wouldn't be together again should have bothered him, but he knew if he could get and stay close enough, the passionate side she kept locked up tight was bound to break free.

Smiling, he watched as she sped off, a small cloud of dust following her. He walked over and dropped onto the bed, planning on trying to get a few hours sleep before chasing after her. Who knew? Maybe letting her stew and wonder what he'd do next might help him to somehow stay a few steps ahead of her. Covering his face with the pillow helped block out the cheery morning sun, but it swamped him with her scent. He remembered the way she rolled her head from side to side calling out his name as he licked and teased her into submission.

Slam!

He bolted upright, the pillow falling onto his lap. Thankfully it covered where his unruly cock, which had hardened at the thought of tasting her, had tented the sheet. He looked up and what he saw had

him too stunned to speak. Apparently he could laugh though, and probably wouldn't be able to stop for awhile.

After all, it wasn't everyday you saw a six foot-four guy standing there wearing cushions from the deck chairs tied together draped over his shoulders with his arms sticking out of the middle like an advertising sign. With a growl his brother picked up his duffel bag and tossed it onto the other bed, flashing Victor enough skin to assure him Trent was stark naked underneath those cushions. It seemed he wasn't the only one having trouble with a Brazen woman.

Victor had to take a few deep breaths before he managed to get out. "You know as your older brother I should probably ask where you spent last night."

The look Trent gave him promised severe retribution, but it just made him laugh harder. He couldn't remember the last time he felt this good. Great sex does work wonders, he thought, dodging the pillow that came flying across the room. Trent headed for the bathroom, not even glancing back to see if he hit his mark.

"So did you and the little wife get everything all ironed out?" he shouted through the door.

"No, but I'm working on it." He shoved the pillows under his head in an attempt to get comfortable.

As he looked around the room he decided they'd need a few essentials if they decided to stick around a while. He'd planned on staying up at the cabin his uncle had given to them, but staying here might suit him better. He heard the water turn on and his brothers muffled cursing. Tossing the pillows and sheets aside, he figured he might as well get up and start getting to know his sisters-in-law. He may even run into Samantha. Then maybe he'd be able to find out what kind of mischief his baby brother had been up to. Slipping on his boxers, he went into the kitchen area and started opening and closing cabinets. All he found was a tin of crackers and a can of prunes. *Who the hell stayed here last?*

"Anything to eat?" Trent asked as he walked out of the bathroom.

He rubbed his head vigorously with a towel As he looked over at him.

Victor nodded and held up his meager bounty. “We’ll have to go up to the lodge for breakfast. We can hit town for supplies later. I need a quick shower first.”

“Hope you like it ice cold. You know I think those conniving women gave us their worst cabin. I bet they’re trying to scare us away.” Trent came to the same conclusion he had late last night.

“Gee ya think?” he said, rolling his eyes.

Trent flashed that pretty boy smile of his that women went gaa-gaa over. “Guess they don’t know Uncle Clayton used to insist on taking us camping every summer. And the only way to bathe was to take a quick dip in the lake.”

“Except for that summer you broke your leg and I came up here for a visit.” Victor would never forget the night he’d arrived in town.

His uncle took him to the lodge for lunch, and he saw Jessie for the first time. She’d walked into the dining room wearing a pair of short-shorts, white t-shirt and a pair of sneakers. Her long brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail that brushed her shoulders. He wasn’t sure if he would have remembered every little detail if she hadn’t been covered in paint splotches, in a variety of colors. But he would never forget the second she looked at him. His whole body had jerked from the instant connection he’d felt.

“Hey!” Trent waved his arms in the air. “Don’t go getting all mushy on me. We’re here to win your woman back, and I don’t think these Brazen women like wishy-washy men. Maybe that’s where you went wrong. Instead of sending her sappy love letters you should have slung her over your shoulder and taken her to bed until she agreed to go with you.”

“She wouldn’t. I just want her to give me another chance. Besides, do you think something like that would work on Sam?” Ducking, he barely missed getting hit by the pair of balled up socks Trent whipped at his head.

"I'd have to tie her there," he grumbled, and though Victor knew his brother liked to play in bed, just like everywhere else, Trent didn't sound happy about it.

Leaning against the doorjamb, he had to admit the idea had some merit. "I'll consider it as a last resort. I'd rather have her come to me willingly."

"Then we're going to be here awhile." Trent made a snort noise as he fell onto his bed, which made a loud cracking sound before it crashed to the floor.

"The sisters aren't going to be happy about that. Maybe you should call and let them know it almost killed you. It might earn us some sympathy." Victor laughed as he headed for the shower.

"Fine. I will," Trent said, climbing from the rubble.

* * * *

Jessie grabbed the phone to stop the incessant ringing. "Hello."

"Hello, this is Trent Weatherly in cabin sixteen," the angry voice announced from the other end.

"Good morning, Trent, this is Jessie. What can I do for you?" Curious about why he was calling, but also a little annoyed, she waited anxiously for his reply.

"You mean other than stop making my brother miserable?" His pause had her heart thundering until he said, "Actually I wanted to talk to you about our accommodations. I know I should have called the lodge, but I didn't think you'd want me telling people how dangerous your cabins are." She didn't like that his tone had taken on a cocky edge.

Knowing everything had been fine when she'd left an hour ago, she shook her head wondering where he was going with this. "Really? And how is that?"

"When I came in this morning and laid down on my bed, it collapsed under me." He said it without an ounce of humor.

The professional side of her instantly took over. “Are you injured in anyway?”

“No,” he replied, and she wondered if he just called to let her know.

“I’ll send someone down to replace the broken bed. Will that be all?” She cringed and gave herself a mental slap.

She needed the reminder that she wanted them uncomfortable enough to leave, but she didn’t want them hurt.

“Actually I’d prefer you don’t. I’ll leave the frame outside, unless you’d like us to use it as firewood.” She had to bite her tongue to keep from telling him to go right ahead.

“That’ll be fine. I’ll send someone down to pick it up. Is there anything else I can do for you?” She looked up in time to spot Sam sneaking in the back door looking rumpled and out of sorts.

Not really listening as he went on about softer sheets, she waved her into the room. “Trent, I’ve got a bit of a situation here right now. I’ll stop by this afternoon to address your issues.”

“Fine.” He sounded pleased.

That’s something I’m going to have to change. She watched Sam take a seat on the edge of the couch. Hanging up the phone, she tried to come up with the right way to ask what she knew was none of her business. She couldn’t ignore it. Sam wasn’t the type to make rash decisions, and Jessie was worried enough to face things before they got out of hand. And she knew for a fact a Weatherly man was a force to be reckoned with. She wondered if there would ever come a day when she wouldn’t worry about her sisters.

“Are you okay?” Jessie took a seat next to her and laid her hand on her thigh.

That did it. Sam burst into tears, throwing herself at Jessie. Wrapping her arms around her, letting her cry it out, Jessie decided she really had to hurry up and get rid of Victor, hoping Trent would leave with him. Whatever happened between them, Sam needed her support.

“Honey, come on. It’s okay. Calm down and take a few deep breaths. Now tell me all about it,” she said, rubbing her back.

“I don’t know what came over me,” Sam said. Getting to her feet, she began pacing back and forth. “One minute I was standing there wanting to beat him senseless, the next I was ripping his clothes off.”

“I know that feeling all too well. It happens.” She wondered how Sam had gone this long without it happening before.

“Jessie, you don’t understand. I’ve never... He must think... What did he say?” she asked in a defiant tone, which was much better than the tears.

“His bed broke, and he just wanted to let us know. Why would you think he’d call and say anything?” *This doesn’t sound good*, she thought, trying not to overreact.

Sam turned several unattractive shades of red. “He might be a little angry.”

Jessie took a deep breath before saying, “Do you want to tell me why?”

Sam shook her head, her eyes cast down on the floor. “Not really.”

“Alright, but, Sam, you know I’ll be here if you need me,” she said, watching her cover a yawn. “Too bad we have an appointment with K.C. to go over his estimate, you look like you could use some sleep.”

“You look like you could use a few hours yourself,” Sam retorted, walking out of the room.

Yeah, well, I felt like I look, she thought, going back to the desk. Gathering everything they’d need for the meeting with the construction firm they were thinking about using, she tucked it all into a thick folder. Bobbie bounced into the room, looked her over from head to toe, gave her a strange and headed for the door. *Would she be acting so nonchalant if she knew how much is at stake?*

“Bobbie, come right home this afternoon. I may need your help,” she called out, knowing she’d feel better having her close by until

Victor and Trent left town.

Bobbie stuck her head back in the room. "I'm babysitting Charlie this afternoon. Beau and Jake are going to pick up her birthday present."

Jessie wondered if Jake knew that, or if he did something recently to piss his brother Beau off and she was a surprise. Growing up in a small town like theirs everyone knew about the attraction between Jake and Bobbie, but Beau like to use it to torment Jake. He'd been doing it for years. Of course it had been easier back when they were in school and Bobbie was too young to hide her affections. Someday Jake would get his revenge, but until then all she could do was hope Bobbie used some discretion and realized how much the seven year age difference bothered Jake.

"Okay, but Bobbie, please take it easy on Jake." She couldn't help but wonder how much longer her sister and the sheriff were going to dance around each other before one of them finally gave in.

"Where is the fun in that?" she teased, hopping on one foot while she put her other sneaker on.

Shaking her head, she added another warning to the thousands she'd already issued. "Bobbie, he's a grown man, not some boy you can play with."

"She knows that. That's why she's so interested. The question is, can she handle what comes next?" Sam countered as she walked into the room, looking surprisingly refreshed.

"You can get over that old kick. He's hotter than eighty percent of the guys in this town. Besides it's only a six year difference." Bobbie walked away, her confidence a vivid reminder of the way Jessie once acted herself.

"He's toast," Sam said with a huge smile, which made Jessie wonder if she found some kind of happy pill and wasn't sharing.

"He hurts her and he's burnt toast," Jessie said, knowing he'd have to deal with five totally pissed of women, and that wouldn't be a pretty sight.

“Too true. You ready to go? I’d like to hit the market while we’re in town. I have a few new recipes I’d like to try out.”

So the happy-go-lucky attitude was just a camouflage. Whenever Sam got nervous or upset she retreated into the safety of her kitchen. Obviously she thought she’d be able to avoid Trent there, but Jessie wasn’t so sure. If he turned out to be anything like his brother unfortunately they’d be seeing a lot more of him.

“Yeah, let’s go. And add some brownie mix to your list.” Maybe they’d be able to take the edge off her other cravings before she ran into Victor again.

Chapter 5

“So I take it you didn’t work things out with Victor.” Sam followed her out of the house, but beat her to the car.

Just three years of built-up lust. “Nope. He’s still refusing to sign.”

They climbed into the car, and Sam huffed like she wanted to say something, but instead she picked up the folder and began flipping through the construction company’s estimate. Jessie knew the silence wouldn’t last, but it gave her time to think. Pulling out of the driveway, she wished she just called and cancelled the meeting. She already knew she didn’t want to go with this firm. What she should be doing was finding a way to deal with Victor that kept them on even footing. That meant no more private meetings.

“Well, since you refuse to tell him what’s going on, maybe we could just forge his signature,” Sam said, breaking into her thoughts and making her laugh since she had considered it too, briefly.

“Sam. That would never work. I’ll just have to reason with him again.” She groaned as they entered Juniper Valley’s town proper, as they affectionately called the center of the town.

“You know there could be an easier way around this.” She knew from Sam’s tone she was just thinking out loud, so Jessie just listened. “What about a legal separation? I mean it’s been three years. Or hey, maybe an annulment. I don’t suppose it’s possible you never consummated the marriage?”

“You’ve seen him, and met his brother. What do you think?” She slipped into a spot right in front of the construction firm’s building.

“I think we’re in major trouble here.” They got out of the car and

Sam rounded the hood and joined Jessie on the sidewalk.

“We’ll talk about it later. Let’s go.” She took the file from Sam and headed for the office before she could change her mind.

* * * *

Victor turned onto Main Street intent on heading for the diner he often went to with Jessie that fateful summer. He turned the corner and spotted Jessie’s navy blue Mustang. He whipped his truck over to the side of the road. Trent swore, leaning in front of him to look across the street. With a growl, he pushed him back into his seat. Jessie and Sam climbed out of the car, obviously totally unaware they were being watched.

Trent let out a whistle. “Shit. Talk about timing. Are we going to say hello?”

“Not just yet. I think we should lay low and see what the hell they’re up to.” His anger spiked as he read the sign above the door. They went into K.C. Matthews Design & Remodeling.

“I’m not going to just sit around wait.” Trent whipped out his ever-present cell phone and punched in a series of numbers.

Victor felt the growl in his chest before it escaped. His mind whirled. Her using another architect felt almost as bad as her having an affair. He should be the one filling those needs, and any others she had. *This can’t be the reason behind the divorce papers, can it?* He fought the temptation to go in there and drag her out, Sam too, and ask them. Trent was too busy jabbering away on the phone to notice his struggle. Victor glanced over and saw him scribbling notes on the pad balancing on his knee. From the way Trent squinted his eyes, Victor could tell he wasn’t happy with the information he was getting. Damn it, how long had they been sitting there? He reached for the door handle, deciding it had been long enough.

Luckily before he got it open Jessie and Sam came storming out of the building scowling at each other. Jessie threw something into the

car before turning and stomping off down the sidewalk. Sam tossed her arms in the air before walking across the street in the other direction heading towards the grocery store.

Trent snapped his phone shut, tossing the pad at him. “I’m off. I’ll call if I need a ride.”

“No. You take the truck. I’ll catch a ride back with my lovely wife.” Victor tossed him the keys and watched as he ran after Sam.

Note pad in hand, he walked over, opened the door and slid into the passenger seat of her car. He reached over and picked up the folder from the driver’s seat. He had a moment or two of indecision before he opened it. He glanced back over his shoulder knowing she was going to be pissed enough to find him here. Getting caught rummaging through her stuff would only make it worse. After he quickly scanned the papers, he determined that they wanted to freshen up the outsides of the cabins and the lodge, while completely remodeling the interiors. Shutting the file, he tossed it onto her seat, turning his attention to Trent’s notes.

Shoddy work, always comes in over estimates and budget, doesn’t stick to client’s specs. Especially if client is a woman.

Under all that he wrote, *No way in hell. Find out what’s going on now!*, and he’d underlined it twice.

Leaning back against the seat, Victor closed his eyes letting the rough breeze ruffle his hair. Grateful they left the windows open he took a deep breath of the clean crisp air. The smell of baking bread floated into the car and distracted him from his musing. His mouth watered and his stomach growled. He hoped Trent thought past his lust enough to remember to pick up some food while he no doubt trailed Sam through the store. He never should have let Trent talk him into grabbing a bite to eat in town.

Victor heard footsteps beside the car and turned as Jessie opened the door. He expected her to be mad, or surprised, to see him. From her pale face and wide eyes, he’d go with surprised. But the way those amber eyes sparkled and her lips pressed together, he’d say furious.

Either one would do as long as it got her to show she felt something for him.

She picked up the folder, putting it and the handful of mail onto the back seat before sliding in beside him. “What are you doing here?”

“You know we’re going to have to work on that,” he said with a shake of his head.

“What?”

“That. You know most wives at least give their husbands a kiss on the cheek after being separated for a few hours.” He leaned across the armrest laughing when she tried to back away.

“You can’t do that. People will start talking,” she said, nervously looking around.

“And you wouldn’t want that. Are you ashamed of me?” he asked, surprised at how deep the question cut.

“No.” She shook her head, her eyes filling with tears.

Settling himself back into his seat, he ignored the stares from a couple of young girls standing on the sidewalk. “You know, you’re right. This isn’t the best place to talk.”

“You should go before Sam comes back,” she said with a fake smile he never wanted to see again.

“We can go whenever you’re ready. Trent will be bringing Sam home.” *When he’s done with her*, he thought, wondering if they’d see them before dinnertime.

“Where are they?” Her voice cracked and he hoped it meant she was nervous at being left alone with him.

His stomach growled at the thought of food. “Shopping. Unless you plan on taking me back to your place, where we’d no doubt be all alone at this hour, we should probably find someplace public where we can grab a bite to eat.”

* * * *

Without another word, Jessie started the car, pulling into the street and heading to the diner a couple of blocks away. It could have been the guilt eating away at her, or that he suggested someplace public where they'd be likely to keep their hands to themselves. At least she hoped they would. Since his scent, clean and spicy, drifted in the air she wasn't so sure. It teased her, making her want to get closer.

Mostly it was the fact she wanted to be with him that had her agreeing so quickly. She glanced at the grocery store in a feeble attempt to spot Sam. She was going to have a lot of explaining to do. They both were.

She pulled into the small parking lot and chose a spot far away from all the other cars. "Victor."

"Just think of this as a business breakfast. I promise to be professional as long as you are." He climbed from the car and waited for her to join him.

Pulling herself together, she got out of the car and walked side by side with him to the door. Sadistically she spent the short walk wishing he'd take her hand in his. He opened the door, motioning for her to go in first. He stood a bit too close and her shoulder brushed his chest causing a jolt of heat to surge through her. It seemed to her like everyone in the place turned and looked at them. All right, since the diner was filled mostly with women, and they were looking at him, which just pissed her off even more.

It was pretty obvious, at least to her, that she wasn't going to be able to pull off a professional act when it came to him. Victor chose a booth in the middle of the row along the windows where anyone going by could see them. Suddenly that didn't seem like such a bad thing. Maybe it would keep the women around here away from him. One of the older waitresses, Mildred, who worked there for as long as Jessie could remember, came over to take their order.

"Jessie girl," she said, using her father's pet name. "It's been way too long. Sammy's keeping you guys all to herself, huh?" She let out a laugh. "Always knew that girl was too classy for this place."

“She loved working here, but having her own kitchen to manage has always been her dream.” Jessie missed having a reason to come and hang out here.

“Well, with your drive and her way with food, she’ll be getting it.” Mildred gave her a nudge of approval.

“Yeah, well, you know how she is about trying out new recipes. The fridge is full of enough leftovers. We could probably withstand the next snow storm without a hitch.” They both laughed because it was true.

“And you, aren’t you Clayton’s nephew?” Victor nodded and she lowered her voice a little bit. “Back in town for another try at our Jessie?”

“Mildred.” Jessie glanced around to see if anyone overheard.

Mildred laughed, pressing her hand on her ample yet modestly covered cleavage. She had to be at least fifty, but she still had her looks and body. She wasn’t your typical blue-haired grandma. Nope, no heavy makeup, with her hair meticulously swept back from her face making her look young and beautiful. Mildred tossed her long black and silver braid over her shoulder. Jessie could only hope she would age as gracefully.

“What? Do you think I’m the only one who’s going to remember how hot and heavy you two used to be?” She gave Victor a wink, bumping his arm with her ample hip.

Victor laughed, looking over at Jessie with a strange look on his face. She couldn’t believe she was actually jealous of the older woman flirting with him. It wouldn’t be a good sign. She could probably deal with it better if one of those young vipers who might actually have a chance with a guy his age came on to him. Could he feel them staring at him from across the room? Mildred, on the other hand, was probably close to the same age as his mother. Still she knew if he wouldn’t be above using her jealousy to his advantage.

“Mildred, can you keep a secret?” She nodded eagerly and he leaned closer and whispered, “She stole my heart all those years ago

and won't give it back."

"Good for you, honey." Mildred cackled, giving her a wink. "Now what can I get you two?"

Jessie ordered a veggie omelet, while he chose the more manly steak and eggs with a side of home fries. Mildred left, and neither of them spoke. Victor laid his hand over hers, smiling when she didn't try to pull it away. She'd give him that for now.

"Jessie, I have no idea what to say to you. I mean, shit, just tell me what you want me to do."

"I have," she said softly, and he leaned closer.

"Can't you ask me for something I can give you?" His voice sounded strained, as if he'd held back from saying what he really wanted to.

"You can give it to me, you just won't." She pouted, but at least she didn't feel any tears coming on. Hopefully that meant she made some progress.

"I'm not going to argue with you about this anymore until you're ready to come clean, so let's talk about something else." Victor let her hand go and leaned back in his seat. "How are your sisters handling the idea there's a man in your life?"

She picked up her napkin, folding it and unfolding it before confessing. "They don't know, well, other than Sam. She knows everything."

"So even after last night you're going to pretend there's nothing left between us?" She could see a muscle tick in his cheek as he clenched his teeth.

"Look, we had something beautiful, passionate, and reckless once. I've admitted I'll never be able to leave here. Truthfully I wouldn't even if I could. I love being a part of a small town community. I'd feel lost in the city." She hoped the emotions on her face didn't give away the turmoil she felt, though from the way he stared at her, he could probably tell.

"Honey, I know that, which is why I decided to come to you.

Trent and I, and our cousin Blake, you'll like him, are joining together to open our own firm Stages Design and Development. I can work from anywhere. Every so often I'll have to go on sight, but I'm hoping you'll come with me. You can think of them of as little honeymoons." If she hadn't anticipated him saying something along those lines sooner or later it would've gave her pause.

"I'm happy for you, I really am, but that doesn't fix everything." Jessie forced herself to look away from him as a young woman carrying a tray of food approached their table.

Saying nothing, the girl placed Jessie's plate in front her. She turned to Victor, suddenly all smiles. "Can I get you anything else, sir?" *Could she be anymore obvious?* Jessie thought.

"Not right now thank you." Victor bestowed a smile on the girl that made Jessie tingle even though it he'd aimed at someone else.

The girl let out an audible sigh as she headed back towards the kitchen. Glancing back at him once or twice, the little twit almost walked into another waitress, who wasn't happy about it and had no qualms about making it known. Jessie couldn't really blame her. After all she fell into bed with him when she went to have him to sign the divorce papers. Only now she had to get him to sign them, and make him give up on his idea of moving here to be with her. And no matter how much it hurt, she'd do it.

They ate quietly. Well, Victor did. Jessie picked apart her omelet. All this talking had ruined her appetite.

Mildred came over to top off Victor's coffee. "So, handsome, how long are you sticking around?"

Jessie's stomach dropped. The few bites she had eaten rolled violently. He wouldn't, couldn't tell her he planned on sticking around. "Actually my brother and I are thinking about turning Uncle Clayton's old place into a family retreat of sorts, so I'm not sure."

"Your brother, I haven't seen that scamp in years. He was such a cutie for a mud-covered little boy. Did he grow up to be as handsome as his older brother?" Mildred asked, her eyes gleaming at his nod.

Damn the woman and her questions. If Victor mentioned Trent's interest in Sam, it would be all over town within the hour. She knew his being here would be a major going to be a problem.

"Is he single?" she asked with a waggle of her eyebrows.

"Actually he's involved with someone right now." He smiled and winked at her, which had Mildred giggling like a schoolgirl.

Jessie waited until Mildred had moved far enough away that she couldn't overhear her before saying. "I don't like that your brother is playing with my sister."

Even if the slight growl hadn't come from his side of the table, the way his narrowed eyes would have conveyed his anger. Victor stood, pulled out his wallet and tossed some money on the table before grabbing her arm. His grip was firm, but not painful, as he urged her to her feet. He held onto her the whole way to the car. Once they got there, he opened the passenger door and pointed. She wanted to balk at his silent demand for her to get in. From the stiff way he held himself, she had to good sense to realize this wasn't a good time to push him, so she bit back the retort on the tip of her tongue and got in. He rounded the hood and slipped behind the wheel. He held out his hand for the keys, and one look at him had her handing them over.

For someone who hadn't been there in three years, he maneuvered his way out of town and up to his uncle's place as if he did it every day. She refused to drive herself crazy worrying about what was to come. Instead she focused on the fact that she had the right to want try and protect her sisters. As they drove up the mountain, the houses got farther apart, trees taking their place, but the beautiful scenery did nothing to quell her nerves. The abundance of lush green leaves promised a spot of shade for the next few months and through the summer, but come autumn they would bring a spectacular burst of color and dozens of tourists. He stopped the car in front of the small cabin. Victor got out and walked away, leaving her sitting there.

"Well, isn't this nice?" She debated following him, which she figured is just what he wanted her to do.

She got out of the car and leaned against the door. He'd gotten them alone again, but that didn't bother her as much as the location did. The first time they made love, impulsive, scary, and exciting as it had been, was around back on one of the deck lounge chairs. The day he asked her to sneak away for the weekend, during which they'd gotten married, they had been gliding on the porch swing. It figured he'd take her up here where he used to say "you can scream as much as you like" before ravaging her. And scream she had. Screamed, begged, and even demanded more.

"Jerk." She wiped a stray tear from her cheek as she stomped off to find him.

Victor stood behind the cabin looking out at the valley below. She stared at the man and the land she loved. Many of the town's residents had been upset a year ago when Clayton gave such a coveted piece of property to his nephews, ignoring a lot of more than generous offers to buy it. Secretly she'd been pleased, since it bordered their acreage. And it wasn't because she thought it would bring him back to her either. At least she didn't think so.

She couldn't afford to get emotional then or now, she thought, walking over to him. "Victor, I have a full day ahead and I need to get going."

"Fine, then go. I hope you enjoy the walk." The heat that emanated from him should have scared her, but she found herself wanting to go to him.

"I will." She turned and headed back to the car for her bag.

She took five steps before being swept off her feet. "Victor, put me down!"

"No. I have a few things to say, and damn it, you're going to listen," She found herself slung over his shoulder, and refused to let him get away with his extremely embarrassing Neanderthal behavior.

She wiggled, trying to get down, but it seemed useless. She gasped loudly when he slapped her ass, and told her to "be still". She did, but more from shock than his demand. He strode to the cabin,

jostling her a bit to get the keys out of his pocket. Finally he opened the door. He walked over and dropped her onto the couch, then stood there staring down at her.

He needed to know his intimidation wasn't going to work on her. She looked around, noticing how clean the place looked. There wasn't a speck of dust to be seen on the empty bookshelves. Even the boxes stacked around the room looked pristine. Clayton's beat-up dark brown leather couch and chairs gave the room a masculine feel. She looked up at him wondering what he was up to. There was no reason she could come up with for him to stay at one of their cabins instead of up here.

"Well?" she asked defiantly.

"I know you're protective of your sisters, but Sam is a big girl. Stay out of whatever is happening between her and my brother," he warned, folding his arms across his broad chest, challenging her to disobey him.

"If you think I'm going to just sit by and let him play with her—" She would have said more, but he cut her off.

"As for the playing, it seems Sam is the one playing games," he said, not taking a step back when she got to her feet, putting them chest to chest.

Insulted on Sam's behalf, she said, "Sam wouldn't do that."

"Really? Neither would my brother," he countered.

"Yeah, well, you won't have to nurse his broken heart when he leaves her behind." She poked him in the chest hard enough to hurt herself.

He leaned in until they were nose-to-nose. "Are you good and mad?"

"Yes, now give me my keys," she growled, needing to get out of there.

He pulled her into his arms, grabbed her hands and held them behind her back. "No, we're not done."

She squirmed trying to get free, and the struggle caused her

breasts to press into his chest. "Let go."

"I don't think so." He took her mouth in a rough kiss.

His tongue demanded entry, and she was all too willing to let him in. Already breathing hard from her struggle, she couldn't handle any more. Biting his lip, she pulled away panting for air.

"There's my wildcat." He easily held both her wrists in one hand while his other cupped her ass, pulling flush against him.

"Victor." She sighed and dropped her head to his shoulder, smiling when his chest rumbled as she rubbed against him.

Backing her to the wall, he pinned her with his body. "We're so good together, baby. Don't throw this away. Tell me what's going on and we'll find a way to work through it. I promise."

She looked up at him, not even attempting to hide the tears brimming in her eyes. "I wish I could, but it won't change anything."

"You won't know that until we try," he said then softer he added, "Just give me some time."

"I can't." She shook her head, causing her hair to swing in and out of her face.

"Okay, I've tried to be nice. You know you really don't have a choice. I, however, have dozens." He let her go, walked over and dropped into one of the leather chairs, propping his feet on the ottoman. "Like, for instance, I could put an announcement in the paper about our marriage, or I could just let it slip to Mildred and the whole town would know within a few hours."

"Victor, you can't do that." The panic in her voice sounded evident even to her own ears.

"Oh yes I can. And I will, too, unless you give me two weeks to prove we can work things out."

Jessie moved to the couch, sat down, and rubbed her wobbly knees. "You can't be serious."

"As a heart attack, and before you think that's all, I have a few more demands." He lifted a finger, "One, you tell your sisters about us. Not that we're married, but that we're together as in a couple. I'd

hate to have one of them freak out when, I mean if, they find us in a compromising position.”

He added another finger. “Two, you have to spend at least three nights each week in my bed. As your husband I do deserve some perks.” Adding another finger he grinned, a bad sign, she thought, waiting for him to drop his little bomb.

“Three, you tell me the real reason you decided you’re ready for a divorce. You must know I’ll find out eventually.” His satisfied smile irritated her so much she wished she had the upper hand to strike him with.

“Do you know what you’re suggesting is *blackmail*?” His laughter filled the air, pissing her off even more.

“Try to think of it as mediation. Most divorces have them.”

Narrowing her eyes, she began to think of all the ways she could make him miserable over the next few weeks. “Is it a common practice to include sex as a condition?”

“No, but our situation is far from standard. Besides, I never said we’d make love. I said I wanted you in my bed. It’ll be nice to have someone to hold for a change.”

Her heart clenched at the tenderness in his voice. Could she do this? Truthfully, she thought she might be able to handle all of his demands except the last one. She opened her mouth to agree when she realized he hadn’t said anything about signing the papers or leaving. He’d only agreed he wouldn’t tell anyone.

She pinned him with a look that hopefully said she wasn’t a fool. “Two weeks and you’ll sign the papers and leave.”

“Yeah, and to prove just how serious I am if I’m wrong, I’ll sign the cabin over to you.”

She couldn’t have heard him right. “What?”

“Well, if we aren’t together, it’s not like I’ll want to come up here.” She wouldn’t have to worry about seeing him with other women if he had no reason to come back. “But your uncle gave it to you and your brother,” she said, not sure she could take it from him

when he left, which he would, in two weeks.

“Trent already signed his share over to me. Do we have a deal?” Getting up, he walked over and took a pad of paper and a pen from one of the boxes.

She couldn’t turn him down, but she didn’t want to give in too early either. “Will you and Trent be moving up here?”

“Not for a few more days, closer to a week. I’m waiting on some supplies to come in. Besides, I want to be closer to you.” He took a seat at the table and began scribbling furiously.

“I agree to tell my sisters we’re seeing each other. That should explain my spending a couple of nights with you. As for the divorce, I already told you all I’m going to. So you’ll have to accept it or not. It’s your choice.” She leaned back, crossing her legs and bouncing her foot.

He stopped writing, glancing at her before he continued with a scowl on his face. Unable to sit still, she got up and walked to the window. The spectacular view didn’t have a bad angle. She knew his Uncle Clayton had designed the cabin and his good taste was visible in every aspect. She wondered if Victor and Trent acquired his capabilities naturally. Maybe talent could be inherited, like blue eyes. *Enough dwelling.* Clayton may have had seen a little something and helped them to develop it. She turned from the window ready to face him.

“Are you ready to go now?” She tucked her hands into her back pockets, understanding when his eyes locked on her breasts that the move had put them on display.

“No.” He got to his feet, following her as she backed across the room.

Bumping into the coffee table, she jumped. “Victor, I really do have a lot to do today.”

“Jessie, most people at least shake on it when they make a deal.” He captured her hand in both of his and brought it to his lips.

Trying to keep from melting into a puddle of goo at his feet, she

asked, “So you agree to my terms?”

He kissed her knuckles, stroking her hand. Rolling it over, he pressed a kiss to her palm as well. Slowly his lips trailed to her wrist where he nibbled, making her shudder. This wasn’t good. After three years apart, he shouldn’t be able to play her body so well.

“I agree to your terms, but I’m warning you, one way or another, before I leave here I’ll find out the truth. Then you’ll have no more excuses.”

Chapter 6

Jessie turned away from him to hide her smile. There wasn't much of a doubt that their secret was safe enough to last two weeks with Victor around. Their grandfather's lawyer couldn't tell anybody about the terms of the will. Her sisters may mention the upcoming changes they had planned, but she told him they had maintenance issues going on. Since only Sam knew Victor's husband status, there wasn't any reason for her other sisters to mention the stupid clause that gave their spouses an equal say in all the business decisions. Hopefully, Victor wouldn't read too much into their plans and start asking the right questions. It put Sam in a rough position since only she could spill the beans, but Jessie knew it would take a lot of serious persuasion to get her to talk. So it came down to her being her own worst enemy. Because in her opinion the biggest pitfall was the way her body reacted to his touch.

"Okay, so we're agreed. Two weeks. But Victor, I have a job to do, so we need to work around my schedule." She sighed as his lips touched the sensitive spot on the inside of her elbow.

Pulling her into a tight embrace, he chuckled against her neck. "Come on, you can spare a few minutes to seal the deal."

"If I remember right, your few minutes tend to turn into hours." Grasping handfuls of his shirt for balance, she tilted her head back, giving him better access as he kissed along her collarbone.

He began unbuttoning her blouse. Exposing her skin, he kissed and nibbled his way to her breast. His growl vibrated against her skin, making her giggle. With a quick bend of his knees, she found herself dangling over his shoulder again. This time she took advantage of the

situation, squeezing and slapping his jean-clad ass. He turned his head, nipping her thigh.

Dropping her onto the couch, he dove on top of her, catching himself on his arms before landing. They laughed as their clothes, well, her clothes were stripped off. His jeans and briefs made it down around his knees and his shirt hung from one wrist. She didn't care about finesse at this point. If he didn't get inside her soon, she'd scream. She giggled, knowing she'd be screaming once he got inside her too.

"I don't think this is a laughing matter," he said, laving her nipple. "Sighing, moaning, and squealing I'll take, but no more giggling."

She nodded as he slid into her, taking his time, dragging out her anticipation. An inch at a time, he drew out the pleasure. Her body accepted him, and her inner muscles clenched trying to hold him in place. His head lowered and his face landed between her breasts. He licked and nuzzled, driving her crazy. When she tried to urge him on, she found her body truly trapped beneath him.

"Victor, please," she whimpered. Her voice sounded needy and breathless.

He levered himself up on his arms and stared down at her. "I can't get enough of you."

He pulled back then lunged back into her. The way he smiled down at her made her wish she knew what was going on in his head. Her eyes fluttered closed as a smile crossed her slightly parted lips. She pressed her heels into the couch and brought her knees up higher, letting him surge deeper. His strokes were hard and rough, but she met his thrust with matched enthusiasm. Her nails scored his back and waist. Marks he'd hopefully wear with honor, she thought, as he latched onto one of her nipples. She arched her back, loving the way he suckled the hard little tip.

"Victor, wait," she said, pushing at his chest, while her hips wiggling a little.

He groaned, but stilled, looking down at her. "What?"

“I’m sticking to the couch,” she said, lifting her shoulder emitting a tearing sound.

He withdrew from her and got to his feet, his cock glistening with her juices. She immediately regretted saying anything. *What is a little raw skin compared to the loss of his warmth?* She watched him finish stripping off his clothes before crossing the room and rummaging through some boxes. His sculpted back and his firm, curved ass begged to be touched. Victor turned back to her and winked, letting her know he was fully aware she’d been checking out his ass. Wearing nothing but a smile, he held up a bright red sheet and waggled his eyebrows. Getting to her feet, she stood back so he could cover the cushions.

He shook out the sheet and a faded envelope fell to the floor, sliding under the edge of the couch. She bent over to pick it up and heard him growl. She looked up at him over her shoulder. Seeing his feral smile, she forgot all about the envelope. He moved in behind her, and settled his hands on her hips. His grip tightened as he pulled her back against him and nestled his cock between her legs. She reached out, and grabbed onto the couch to steady herself as she widened her stance, opening herself to him. She felt his knees brush the back of her legs when he bent his knees. He slowly eased into her, filling her. One his hands slid up her side to caress her breast, and the other tangled in her hair. Then he stopped moving altogether.

* * * *

Victor leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her back, between her shoulders. He held himself perfectly still, needing to calm down before he took her so roughly she wouldn’t be able to walk straight. Her head dropped to the cushions, she pushed her hips back, wiggling her ass against him. She moved forward, sliding herself on his aching cock. *Doesn’t she realize how close I am to losing it?* He barely controlled himself as each of his thrusts lifted her.

“Fuck, Jess.” He pulled out of her, using his hand in her hair to pull her up.

He spun her around, crushing her mouth with his. Somehow he managed sit down, dragging her with him. With her cooperation he settled her over his lap, her legs straddled his. He maneuvered her hips into place as he raised his hips, sliding into her welcoming heat. Shifting his hands up to her shoulders, he pulled her down as he jerked his hips upward.

Her moan pierced the air, urging him on. Harder and faster he lurched into her as she slammed herself down on him. Fisting his hand in her hair, he pulled her head back. She arched her back, putting her boobs right in his face. He latched onto her nipple, as he lifted and rolled her under him, letting it go with a pop.

She raised her hips, rubbing her pelvis against his as she ran her hands up his chest, pinching his nipples. He looked into her desire-glazed eyes as he brought her over the edge seconds later. Not wanting to crush her, he rolled them onto their sides.

She belonged there, right where he wanted her, in his arms with no walls between them. Now he just had to get her to see, once again, this is where she belonged. He smoothed his hand over her hair, soft and silky like the woman herself. As he leaned forward, he swept it back exposing her ear and neck.

He smiled against her sweaty neck. “I know you probably don’t want to hear this, but Jessie, I really do love you.”

* * * *

Jessie could have cried or laughed. He had a way of sending her emotions on a roller coaster ride. He would say something like that while her body still hummed with pleasure. If she was ready to be honest, which she wasn’t, she’d tell him she loved him too. For right now, she’d give him as much as she could. Besides, she wasn’t going to let him manipulate her.

Taking a deep breath, she got up and started putting her clothes on. “Why don’t you and Trent come up to the house for dinner around seven?”

“The house? Are you sure we shouldn’t do this at the lodge or some place in town? My treat.” The priceless look on his face made her laugh.

For someone so intent on her telling her sisters they’re a couple, he didn’t seem too pleased with the fact he had to face them. “My sisters are bound to ask you some delicate questions, and they aren’t known for discretion. Nope, dinner at the house is the only way to go. Just remember this is one of your conditions.”

He tugged his jeans on. “I didn’t plan on facing the firing squad so soon. At least I’ll have Trent there on my side.”

She blew a chunk of hair out of her face. “Let’s try not to look at this as taking sides.”

His sudden chuckle had her looking over at him. She watched him attempt to button his shirt, but a few must have gotten torn off in their haste. He tucked it in to his jeans ignoring the way it gaped in spots. She’d been so gone she hadn’t cared about anything but getting him naked.

Her face turned red. “Sorry about that.”

“I’m not. So should we bring anything?” She figured he probably hoped to score points with her sisters.

“A nice bottle of wine.” She knew they’d both need the fortification.

“Sure you don’t want me to bring something a bit stronger?” He ripped the page off the notepad he’d scribbled on and stuffed it in his coat pocket.

He followed her to the door so close she could feel the heat radiating off of him. They stepped out onto the porch as an angry looking Trent pulled up. She wasn’t sure she liked the way he looked at her. Jessie moved closer to Victor. Wrapping his arm around her shoulder, he walked her to the car. He took the keys from his pocket

and held them out to her.

“Maybe dinner tonight isn’t such a good idea.” She looked over to where Trent now stood, kicking a tree stump.

* * * *

“Oh no. If I have to chance it, so do you. Besides, his bark is worse than his bite.” He opened the door for her, knowing if they put it off it would just eat at his nerves.

She slid in behind the wheel glancing at Trent again. He hated seeing the worried look on her face. Trent tended to get riled up quite a bit, but he calmed down just as quick. She’d learn to deal with it eventually like they all did.

He closed the door and leaned in the window. “Will you do me a favor while you’re gone?”

“Maybe,” she said, giving him a smile.

He pressed his lips to hers. Her tongue touched his lip, and he opened his mouth, letting her take control of the kiss. She tilted her head back, sucking his bottom lip before pulling away.

Fighting not to smile at the satisfied look on her face, he said, “Try to think of a nice way to say hello tonight.”

“I’ll try,” she mumbled as she started the car.

He stepped back, watching her drive away. He looked over at where he’d stood a little over an hour ago, not surprised to see his brother standing in the exact spot staring out over the valley. He shook his head wondering *what the hell had happened to get Trent going this time*.

“She leave?” Trent asked as he approached him.

“Yeah. She’s gone.”

Trent turned around, looking him in the eye. “I didn’t mean to scare her off. Shit, maybe I did.” He ran his hand through his hair, “Look, I really hate to cut out on you, but I got a call. It seems the buyers are finally ready, so I have to head back. Hopefully, it’ll just

be for a few days. While I'm there, I'm going to tie up a few other loose ends, and see if Uncle Clayton can shed any light on what's going on up here. I hate to ask this when you already have so much on your plate, but I need you to keep an eye on Samantha while I'm gone."

He knew Trent felt attracted to Sam, but something about the way he said it set Victor on edge. "What happened?"

"Well, I met the local sheriff." Ignoring Victor's groan, Trent kept going. "His name is Jake Gurion. He said to say hi. I guess he remembered you from before."

"We hung out a few times. I take it you didn't just bump into him on the street." He watched his brother's face color.

"It wasn't my fault. Sam's ex showed up and started making a scene. She had a piece of some kind of cream pie the bakery girl wanted her to try in her hand. He bumped her arm and somehow the pie landed in his face. People around us started laugh. Shit it was funny as hell until he grabbed her. Next thing I knew we're all sitting in the sheriff's office." He reached up and plucked a handful of leaves from a nearby tree.

"Is she alright?"

He winced, closing one eye as he looked at him. "I think so."

Crud, this sounded bad enough that it might have the possibility to send him back to square one. "You think? Didn't you stick around to find out?"

"Of course I did. She was crying when I left, but that's probably because I asked her to come with me then called her a chicken when she said no." He tossed the leaves he'd crushed in his fist to the ground.

"Shit." He shook his head as an eerie sense of déjà vu washed over him.

Victor knew one thing for certain, dinner tonight was going to be very interesting. He couldn't fault him for rushing to Sam's rescue. It had been drilled into their heads from a young age that you never

strike a woman. Not even when she begged for it, like a few of his cousins had on occasion. Usually when Trent got them into trouble, he always helped get them out of it, too. Tonight Victor would be on his own.

“Sorry, I know this probably throws a monkey wrench in your plans.” It did, but Trent wasn’t to blame. They could lay most of the trouble at the feet of Sam’s ex.

“It’s alright,” he said, slapping him on the shoulder before they headed to the cabin. “Now tell me what you know about this ex-boyfriend.”

* * * *

Jessie crossed her fingers as she pulled into the driveway. Maybe if she was really lucky, she’d be able to take a quick shower and clean herself up before her sisters showed up. Rounding the bend, she saw Bobbie’s little compact already parked in front of the house. Worried, she jerked to a stop inches behind it and dashed into the house.

She found Bobbie sitting folded up at the bottom of the stairs. Bobbie had her back braced against the wall, her legs bent, feet against the rail. Her head rested on her knees. From her red puffy eyes, Jessie knew she’d been crying.

Jessie walked over and knelt down beside her. “Honey, are you alright?”

“Yeah, but Sam’s not. She’s been up there crying for over an hour.”

“And you’ve been sitting here crying right along with her.” She pressed a kiss to the top of Bobbie’s head as she smoothed her hair down.

Bobbie smiled and nodded. “She had a huge fight with that guy Trent.”

“I figured as much.”

“Did you figure that I had to go down to the police station and bail

them out? Well, Sam thought I did, but Jake already planned to let them all go once they calmed down.” Jessie knew she should be focusing on Sam, but she couldn’t help but notice the dreamy look in Bobbie’s eyes at the mention of Jake.

“Why were they in jail?” she asked, as she sat down and made herself comfortable.

Sam’s voice drifted down from above. “Because Kurt showed up at the grocery store, and like everyone else, he saw Trent practically glued to my hip. He demanded to know who Trent was. I told Kurt it wasn’t any of his business and to leave me alone. I started to walk away and he grabbed my arm, spinning me towards him. The piece of lemon crème pie I had flew and landed in his face.”

Sam stopped her tale and glared at Bobbie. “Stop laughing. It’s not funny. Kurt’s furious. I’ve never seen him so mad. He started to shake me. Trent decided he’d gone too far and got between us. I have no idea which one of them threw the first punch, but by the time Jake got there, Trent had Kurt on his stomach pinned to the floor, howling like the dog he is. After breaking up the crowd, Jake brought us all down to the station. So in a nutshell, Trent found it necessary to defend my honor. Now he’s gone.”

Jessie got to her feet, looking up at the landing where Sam leaned over the banister. “I’m sure he’ll be back since Victor’s planning on sticking around for a few weeks. As a matter of fact, I invited them for dinner tonight, but I’ll call and reschedule.”

Sam came flying down the stairs. “Don’t you dare. I doubt Trent will come, but you’re keeping this date with Victor.”

Bobbie stood up just in time or she would have been trampled. “I agree. I think company is just what the doctor ordered.”

“If you’re sure it won’t be too much trouble,” Jessie said, barely holding back a smile.

“What time will he be here?” Sam asked, wiping her hands across her wet cheeks.

“Seven.”

Sam nodded, heading for the kitchen, her words trailing her down the hall. “Good. Everyone should be home by then.”

“She’s gonna be fine,” Bobbie said with a huge smile.

Good, now I can focus on my own nervous breakdown. “I’m going to take a quick shower.”

“That’s a good idea,” Bobbie said, winking before she trotted off into the kitchen.

Chapter 7

This was huge a mistake, Jessie thought, straightening a fork. Her sisters were going to eat Victor alive. One little slip on either side, and this whole charade would be over before any of them knew what hit them. Her sisters' laughter wafted in from the kitchen along with the tangy smell of whatever Sam was cooking up. She glanced at the clock, which read six forty-five. She wondered if it was too late to call and cancel.

"Jessie. Put...the...knife...down," Sam said dramatically from the doorway.

She looked down, surprised to see she had a dinner knife in her hand. She was squeezing the handle so hard the design was probably imprinted on her palm. Laying it next to the plate, she took a step back, looking the table over. Sam laid her hand on Jessie's shoulder and leaned into her.

"Everything will be okay," Sam assured her.

Jessie hadn't found the time to tell her what was really going on. She needed to do it before Victor got here. Grabbing her hand, she tugged her into the study, closing the door behind them.

Leaning against it, she looked her sister right in the eye. "Sam, please don't go being all extra friendly to him. I mean be nice, but don't encourage him."

"Why not?" Sam asked. "You're the one who invited him here," Her look of confusion was totally understandable and expected.

Jessie shook her head. She couldn't come up with a simple explanation for what's going on. "I know, but it's not the way you think."

“Then tell me how it is.”

Jessie walked over and sat on the couch. “Complicated. I made a deal with him. I give him two weeks to prove we could work things out, and if he can’t, he’ll sign the papers and go.”

Hands on her hips, Sam gave her a stern look. “But you didn’t tell him what’s going on, did you?”

“No.” She shook her head emphatically.

“Then how the hell is he supposed to—”

“He’s not.” She seemed to be the only one getting that.

“You can’t keep doing this,” Sam said, throwing her hands in the air.

“Doing what?” Jessie pretended not to know what she meant.

“Protecting us. Giving up things you want to make sure we’re all okay.”

She got to her feet, not ready to admit it was herself she was protecting this time. “We can talk about this later.”

“No, we can’t. You did it to him too. Don’t you think he should have had a choice whether to stay or go?”

“He didn’t have a choice. He had to go. Besides, I wasn’t going to be responsible for him giving up on his future because he made a rash decision and married me.”

“Fine, he had to go, but he’s back now and you’re sending him away for good because of us. Shouldn’t we get some say in it?”

“No. Can’t I just enjoy what little time I do have with him?”

“You can and will,” Sam said, giving her a small smile. “But I still say he could help us with all this. He knows all the ins and outs of building. He must know how to remodel too.”

“Yeah, but at what cost? We know what we want. Are you willing to take a chance that he’ll just fall in line? Besides, how would I explain to everyone that I’ve been married for three years and never told anyone?”

“They’d understand. And he probably wouldn’t go along with all of our decisions. Even you’re not that persuasive,” Sam said, wiggling

her eyebrows playfully.

They both laughed. “Only you could make me laugh at a time like this. I really think this is the best way to go.”

“Don’t get mad, but I think deep down you just don’t want to give up all that control you hoard.”

“Oh yeah. The amount of control I have can be contained in my pinkie.” She held up her finger and wiggled it.

The doorbell rang, and they jumped into each other. “Sam?”

“Fine. I’ll follow your lead if you promise me you’ll really give him a chance,” Sam said as Jessie heard footsteps bolt past the door.

“I promise to try,” she acquiesced, nodding just as a quick knock sounded on the door before it swung opened.

Bobbie motioned for Victor to come in. “Your guest has arrived.”

He walked over and handed Jessie a bouquet of mixed wildflowers. Leaning in, he pressed a lingering kiss to her cheek. Her body hummed at the not-so-simple contact. This was going to be way harder than she thought. She felt a blush spread across her cheeks and dipped her chin trying to hide it.

“What a nice way to say hello,” he whispered, his breath warm and moist against her skin.

“Thank you,” she said softly as he pulled away, looking down at her with a smile. Jessie knew he was well aware they were being watched.

* * * *

Did you miss me? sat on the tip of his tongue, but he held back, not wanting to make her angry. He’d just have to take her blush as the confirmation he wanted.

So he turned around and said, “Hi Sam.”

“Hey, Vic. Nice to see you again.” Sam offered him her hand, which he used to pull her close, pressing a quick kiss to her cheek.

“That’s from Trent. He said to tell you he’s sorry and he’ll see

you in a few days.” Her cheeks went from pale white to a bright pink.

“Really?” she asked, looking up at him through watery eyes.

He nodded, wanting to reassure her. “He really didn’t want to go, but he had to deal with some really important business.”

“Ooh.” Her smile lit her up. “Jessie, why don’t you reintroduce Victor to the girls while I check on dinner.”

He turned to Jessie and watched her smile fade, because she obviously wasn’t happy with the way Sam greeted him. “I’d love to meet them all again.”

Sam left only to be replaced by four equally stunning young women. Their resemblance was plain to see. Especially the twins, who were practically identical, well except for their choices in clothes and jewelry.

“Victor, this is Georgie,” Jessie said, pointing to the flashier of the twins, then the more understated, “and this is Joey.” They both wore their dirty blond hair pulled back in ponytails, wore minimal makeup, and long dangly earrings. Their clothes really made the differences between them stand out. One was bright and playful, the other light and demure. They complemented each other perfectly.

“Ladies,” he said, returning their nods.

“And this is Frankie.” She motioned to a tall, striking brunette.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, shaking her hand.

She smiled. “You too.”

She motioned to the young woman who from her honey brown hair and whiskey-colored eyes, right down to the way she shuffled her feet, looked like a younger version of Jessie. He could’ve been looking at Jessie when they first met.

“And I’m Bobbie,” she said before Jessie got the chance.

“Hello,” he said. He laughed when she kissed his cheek and discreetly whispered, “Knock her off her feet, she needs it.”

“Dinner,” Sam called.

Jessie reached out, yanking him back as her sisters fled the room.

“Well that was short and sweet,” he said, sliding his hand into

hers.

She laughed, leading him from the room. Once in the hall, he smelled something that made his mouth water. Sam came out of the kitchen and relieved Jessie of the flowers, going back the way she came.

Jessie turned and laid her hand on his chest. “We need some kind of sign to let me know if you’re get overwhelmed.”

The serious look on her face stopped him from laughing. “Like what?”

“You could squeeze my hand.” She looked over her shoulder in the direction of the boisterous laughter coming from the dining room.

Not about to let a chance slip by, he pressed his finger to side of her chin, and using a slight amount of pressure, he turned her face back to his. “You know, if you’re that worried, maybe you could give me a kiss for luck.”

“Well, I guess it couldn’t hurt.” She looped her arms around his neck.

A quick turn and he had her pressed against the wall. With a slight bend of his knees, he was able to line up their bodies perfectly. He stared into her eyes as he lowered his mouth to hers. She tipped her head back, which arched her shoulders and pushed her breasts into his chest. His lips feathered over hers, barely touching. Once, twice, then settled on hers. He stroked her bottom lip with his tongue, making her shiver.

“Tease.” Narrowed eyes accompanied her accusing sigh, yet a slight smile curved her lips.

“What can I say? You bring out the little boy in me. Wanna come out and play?” He couldn’t get over how easily she brought out his playful side.

“I don’t know if I remember the rules.” She smoothed her hands down his chest to his hips.

He barely held back his groan as she pulled him snugly against the apex of her thighs. “There are none. Besides I’m pretty sure you’d

make me break them all.”

“Maybe you two should think about getting a room,” Sam stuck her head into hall and Jessie spotted the huge platter in her hands.

Jessie pulled his head down, mashing her lips to his in a quick kiss. “Let’s go. Dinner is served.”

He followed, scolding himself for wasting time. A man on a mission didn’t have time to play, no matter how much fun he had. He couldn’t let her sidetrack him again. He needed her so worked up that she’d be ready to jump him at any second. Not the other way around. Jessie liked to think her needs didn’t matter, but she had a deep sexual side that she couldn’t deny. He lied to himself thinking she needed him to bring it out in her. In truth he didn’t even want to think of her with another man.

He no sooner sat down when someone slid a plate filled with spaghetti and two huge meatballs in front of him. He looked around the table at the six women and felt a sudden foreboding. They all looked to Jessie, who shrugged and nodded.

Instantly the questions came flying. They barely waited for him to finish answering one before asking another.

“So Victor what do you do for a living?” Bobbie asked.

“I’m an architect,” he replied.

“Does your wife know you’re here?” Frankie asked, and he saw Jessie flinch.

“Yes, she’s well aware of it.” He’d been expecting that one.

“And she’s okay with it?” the more demure twin asked, and Jessie coughed.

“Actually no. She’d rather I wasn’t here, but it’s something we both had to come to terms with,” he replied, and turned in time to see Jessie hide a smile behind her napkin.

“Did you come to help with the remodel?” the other twin asked, and before he could answer, Jessie jumped in.

“No, he’s sort of taking a sabbatical. He just got back from Tanzania, where he spent almost three years building a hospital and

school.” So shocked by the pride he heard in her voice, he had to take a drink to clear the lump in his throat before he could speak.

From there the sisters basically ran the conversation, asking him a question every now and then. He wondered if it meant he passed the inquisition. Not that it mattered, because, in the end, he didn’t find out any more than he already knew about their plans to “refresh the place” as Frankie put it. He managed to take a few bites, savoring the tang of the sauce and the texture of the al dente pasta.

Still when the women started excusing themselves, carrying their empty plates into the kitchen, he’d barely made a dent in his meal. He wondered if they ate like this all the time. None of them were stick thin, but they didn’t look like they indulged like this all the time either. *If, no, when, Jessie decides to let me back into her life, I’m going to have to start working out.*

He looked over at Jessie who just smiled and said, “Sam made a great strawberry torte for dessert. I think the girls *might* save us some.”

Sam laughed, shaking her head. He didn’t know if she meant they wouldn’t, or if was she sharing a private joke with Jessie. He continued to eat while trying to figure out if he passed the inquisition or not. Content to let Jessie and Sam chat, he sat back and listened, hoping one of them would let something slip.

Suddenly Sam pushed her empty plate away and turned her attention to him. “Okay, now that it’s just the three of us, it’s my turn to ask a few questions.”

He should have seen this coming when she hadn’t asked him anything earlier. “Shoot.”

“Okay. If blackmail doesn’t work, do you have any other tricks up your sleeve?” He inhaled sharply, choking on a mouthful of spaghetti.

Chapter 8

Damn her and her sisters. Whatever secrets they had, they kept them locked up tight. Four days had already gone by, and though he saw and talked to her daily, Victor hadn't gotten anywhere in his campaign to win her back. The one thing he knew for sure was Jessie told him the truth when she claimed she had a lot to do. She was one busy woman always on the move dealing with someone or something.

Her inattentiveness put a serious wrinkle in his plans. Either she really was ready to move on, or she had become a hell of an actress. From the way they burned up the sheets, he decided to go with the latter. He even caught her staring at him with a dreamy look on her face. He couldn't believe a woman would look at a man like that and never want to see him again. Not to mention the way she screamed out his name as she climaxed. Every time she climaxed. Oh yeah, she still wanted him, which gave his confidence level a boost.

Since he wasn't getting anywhere on his own, he ignored the little voice in his head telling him that it was rude to call people at five in the morning. He picked up the phone and dialed Trent, laughing at his grunt. "Whadda ya want?"

At least one of them had been getting some sleep, he thought with a grin. "Your help? What the heck is taking you so long?"

"Bite me. My lease is all set. It's that twit you're selling to that's slowing me down. She's a major pain in the ass. How's Sam?" Trent said, sounding a bit more awake.

He shrugged, laughing when he realized Trent couldn't see him. "As stubborn and secretive as the rest of them."

"I'll fax you the sales agreement tomorrow morning. I can't wait

to get this over with. Shit, it's five a.m. You're an asshole, you know that?" He let out a groan before throwing in a barb of his own, "Having trouble sleeping in that empty bed?"

"Fuck off. The woman works like ten men. She's always running somewhere. Even when I manage to corner her it's always a quickie."

"Dude, there's six of them. Can't she delegate?" Trent yawned, his words coming out distorted but understandable.

"They're all just as busy. They all have regular jobs, except for the youngest. She's still in school. But after work I see them working around here." Victor walked out onto the dock and stared out over the lake.

"Doing what?"

"One of the twins does the books, the other's always walking around measuring and jotting things into a notebook she's never without. Sam's always in the kitchen, the youngest Bobbie and Frankie are always on the computer in the office they all share, and Jessie oversees it all. Not to mention they take turns manning the check-in desk." He ran his hand through his hair, wondering where the hell they got the energy.

"Vic, it sounds to me like they're planning more than a simple remodel."

"I know, but none of them are talking. Jessie's getting more antsy with me popping up all the time, but she still won't crack."

"Yeah, well Uncle Clayton wasn't any help either. If he knows what the hell is going on he's not telling. I'll be back in a few days, and we'll divide and conquer. Dude, one of them must be the weak link. We just need to figure out which one. Now I'm going back to sleep. You should try it." The phone clicked in his ear.

Victor knew he wouldn't be getting back to sleep, so he got up and headed for the kitchen to start some coffee. He hadn't gotten more than five hours a night since he got home. He wondered if that would change once she was in his bed where she belonged. Pocketing his phone he headed off down the trail that led around the lake and up to

his uncle's cabin.

* * * *

Jessie watched him walk away from the cabin, feeling guilty and confused because of it. It wasn't as though she'd been avoiding him. But she was only giving him time when she felt in control enough to keep the ball firmly in her court. Still, she couldn't help but notice the hurt in his eyes every time she walked away. He really had changed from the cocky, boisterous guy who roared into town three years ago in a silver Mustang and swept her off her feet. Being the good girl her father raised her to be, she'd put up a token protest of course, but she wanted him just as badly then as she did now. The only difference was now she no longer believed in things like happily ever after. Life is complicated, and you have to roll with the punches, or get the hell out of the way.

The cool spring morning only enhanced the calmness she was feeling before she spotted him. Sure she could be philosophical sitting here on the hill looking out over the silent valley. Bundled in her favorite quilted flannel shirt and jeans nothing could bother her. It was a lot harder when he touched her.

"Does watching him from afar make it any easier?" Sam asked, plopping down beside her as he slipped out of sight.

"No, and I wasn't watching him. He just showed up again." She ignored Sam's smile, knowing that saying anything more would only make Sam's case stronger.

"Yeah, who would have thought the guy might like to stand outside on his dock and enjoy the fresh air? Anyways, I wanted to talk to you about a new construction firm I heard Millie talking about. I thought maybe I could call and set up an appointment." She rested her chin on her arms, closing her eyes.

"Do we know anything about them?" Jessie asked, more concerned with where the hell Victor had been going so early in the

morning.

“No, but they can’t be any worse than K.C. and his crew,” she said with a very unladylike snort.

“That’s not saying much,” Jessie said, shaking her head.

“Well, if it comes down to using him, at least we know he’s willing to give us a discount if you agree to work personally with him.” Sam waggled her eyebrows.

Jessie laughed, really laughed, for the first time in days. “As if. Married or not, K.C. is so not my type.”

Sam plucked a piece of grass and rolled it between her fingers. “Maybe not, but he’s had the hots for you since we were little kids.”

“Please. It’s more like he wants what he can’t have.” Jessie chuckled, getting to her feet. She brushed off her ass then held out a hand to Sam.

Sam grabbed on and pulled herself up. Instead of letting go she held tight, stalling her getaway, “Jess, you don’t think that’s why Victor’s here, do you?”

“No.” She knew his appearance went much, much deeper than that.

“That’s good to hear,” Victor said, making them both jump and scream.

Spinning around to where his voice came from, Jessie pressed her hand to her chest trying to still her heart. She spotted him right away. Standing a few feet away, he casually leaned against a tree looking all sexy.

“How long have you been there?” she asked, surprised she hadn’t heard him sneak up on them.

“Long enough to know I may have to pay this K.C. guy a visit,” he replied, plucking a handful of leaves from over his head.

“Don’t encourage him,” Jessie reprimanded when Sam laughed.

“Yeah, Sam, you wouldn’t want me to actually think someone around here likes me.” He pushed off the tree and walked away.

“Oh, come on, Bobbie and Georgie like everybody,” Jessie called

out teasingly.

“Jessie, you promised to try and give him a real chance. I’ve never once, not even when you’re furious, known you to break a promise.” Sam rubbed her shoulder before walking off in the other direction.

Oh how she longed for the days when she could jump up and down and scream, letting out all of her frustrations. Kicking a rock off the path, she reluctantly headed off after him. *He must be really angry*, she thought, speeding up when she didn’t see him up ahead. Scanning the area, she started to feel a sense of panic.

* * * *

Victor knew it was a mean-spirited thing to do, but seeing the look of concern on her face when she couldn’t find him, he decided it was a necessary evil. The need to make her see she cared more about *him*, and more than just whether he stayed or went had been eating at him. He wanted her to want him. As he shadowed her movements, that old Cheap Trick song started reverberating in his head and made him want to hum along. Slowly he moved in on her, keeping himself perfectly in line with her steps.

For each step she took, he took two, until he was close enough to throw his arms around her shoulders. In one swift movement, his arms wrapped around her, and he pulled her back against his chest. The next thing he knew her elbow connected with his ribs. The combination of surprise and pain knocked the air from his lungs. With a growl, her foot hooked his ankle as she turned, pushing him away and sending him to the ground.

“Jessie, it’s me,” he said, holding one hand to his ribs, the other waving his surrender.

“I know. Did you really think I didn’t know you were there? I heard every step you took, and I could smell you.” She stood over his sprawled form, looking down at him with a smile teasing her lips.

“You could smell me?” he asked, his eyes widening in disbelief.

She growled something under her breath, shaking her head. What ever she meant didn't sound good, so he just laid there rubbing his side, hoping she'd feel guilty and take pity on him. However, when she did look at him, she didn't look guilty. She actually looked proud.

"It's nice to see you can still take care of yourself." He grimaced when he realized how callous it sounded.

Of course she could. After all, no one else had been around to take care of her. But he was here now, and he wasn't about to give in so easily this time. He sort of wished she'd just flip out and let him have it. He deserved her anger and tears, but she kept it all bottled up inside. He knew something was going to have to break that dam in order for them to work through everything. His mother always told him he could make the mellowest person on the face of the earth lose their patience, so he may as well put the theory to a test.

He smiled up at her. "Were you looking for me?"

"Yes, but don't let it go to your head," she said, returning his smile and holding out her hand.

He ignored it, and with a grunt, he got to his feet, then wiped himself off. "I won't."

"Don't be like that." She stuffed her hands into her pockets.

"Like what? Angry? Frustrated? Hurt?" He knew she felt them all too. It was about time one of them finally brought it up.

"You left out horny," she said, and the way she rolled her eyes made him want to laugh and throttle her at the same time.

Not quite the response he wanted, so he tried to push a different button. "Projecting a bit are we?"

"You wish." She snorted, walking away.

Anger spiking to near out of control, he reached out, snagging her arm and tugging her around to face him. "Wrong. I wish you would stop playing games and talk to me. Tell me that you want my body, but that's all. Fuck, tell me you can't forgive me for leaving in the first place. Zilch. That's what you've been giving me. Has it crossed your mind I might need something from you other than your body?"

“Temper, temper,” she taunted, her whole body going stiff, and her hands clenching into tight fists.

“For the past three years I’ve dealt with alcohol swilling construction workers, irate villagers, and asinine bureaucrats, and none of them have pushed me half as far as you do,” he said before taking her mouth in a hard passionate kiss.

Why does it always come to this? Nothing was going to get resolved like this. He started to pull away, but she melted against him and made the sexiest sound he’d ever heard. It sounded like a combination of a purr and a growl. Her hands slid up his chest and over his shoulders, linking behind his neck. Reaching inside her jacket, he grabbed her waist and lifted her higher against him. In a move totally unexpected, she managed to knock them both to the ground, as well as the air from his lungs.

“Oh, sorry. Are you okay?” she asked, running her hands all over him.

“I’m fine,” he wheezed as he realized what she was up to.

She smiled down at him, her hand settling over his bulging zipper. “That’s good, very good.”

“Yeah, it is, because it’s going to make doing this a lot easier.” He pushed her off him and scrambled to his feet.

Though she looked up at him with surprise written all over her face he didn’t bother to stop and explain. He turned on his heel, walking away as fast as he could. He’d be damned if he’d let her distract him with sex. Once they started touching each other neither of them could talk rationally, and he was man enough to admit she had so much power. He wasn’t fool enough to let her wield it over him.

“Victor, wait a second!” He heard her shout, but he kept moving. He wasn’t planning on stopping until he had plenty of other people around.

* * * *

Jessie lay on the ground, looking up through the leaf-covered branches into the early morning sky. She wondered how that had gone so wrong. She wasn't going to chase after him. The leaves swayed with the cool spring breeze, and it reminded her of the times when her grandfather used to tell her and her sisters that it was fairies flying around. He insisted that they should make a wish. It couldn't hurt, she thought, as she closed her eyes. She held her breath and foolishly wished for the impossible.

Chapter 9

Sam pulled another tray of steaming muffins out of the oven. Sniffing the air, she couldn't help but smile. Her cinnamon apple muffins, made with apples from her very own apple trees, had won the blue ribbon at the county fair two years ago. Last year her apple stuffed pork loin took the prize. This year she wanted to go after the dessert ribbon. Dozens of ideas floated around her mind, but nothing really stood out just yet. Along with the contest rules, she had two requirements of her own to fill. She wanted something original and outstanding. Adding the apple muffins to the baskets of blueberry, cranberry, and banana walnut muffins, she pushed the cart out to the dining room just as Victor came stomping in.

"I want to talk to you," he demanded, oblivious to the stares from the girls setting the tables.

"Why don't we take this into my office?" She motioned towards the kitchen, relieved when he swept past her.

She followed, not really surprised when he walked through the kitchen straight into the small closet-sized room she used as an office. He'd been invading all their territories since the day after he arrived so she figured he knew every nook and cranny on the property. She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. He dropped into her chair and leaned forward. His head fell onto the desk causing a loud thunk.

"That had to hurt at least a little." She cringed, waiting for a response.

"Not as much as it did when I walked away from your bullheaded sister. Sam, I don't think I'll survive it a second time." His body

shook with his pitiful laughter.

She walked over and put her hand on his shoulder. She wished there was something she could say or do to make this easier for him, but they needed to work things out for themselves. They better do it soon because the sexual tension in the air had all of them jittery.

He sat up, looking at her, and she saw the pain in his eyes. "Sam, I'm not asking you to turn on your sister or anything. I'm just begging you to give me something to go on."

Could she give him a hint without risking everything? Surely there wasn't anything wrong with nudging them both in the right direction, right? She'd been so lost in her own relationship problems she hadn't put in enough thought to helping them fix theirs. It sure didn't seem like they're going to do it on their own. After all, if he found out, it would make things messy and drawn out, but she had a strong suspicion Jessie'd eventually get things to go their way.

"I wish I could. Too bad there isn't someplace around here where you could take her for a nice romantic dinner. Or better yet someplace romantic and secluded you could take her for the weekend." She hopefully sowed the first seed of many she intended to plant.

"Sam, I know you're trying to be helpful, but telling me what I can't do isn't helping." He sounded so despondent she wanted to tell him everything.

"Fine. I'll help you," she held up a hand when his head snapped up, "to a point. We're supposed to meet for lunch to go over some stuff. Be here at one and I'll have a romantic picnic lunch for two ready. You can take one of the quad runners and go up to The Peak. The view's breathtaking." His eyes lit up, and she knew she had him. Jessie on the other hand was going to be a little harder to maneuver.

"Sam, you're a godsend," he said, getting to his feet.

She took the seat he vacated. "I'm glad you think so, because if you mess this up, Jessie won't be liking me much."

"Not a chance." He pressed a quick kiss to the top of her head before rushing out of the room.

“Great. Now I’m officially a meddler. I guess I should at least do a good job.” She got to her feet and went over and pulled a large picnic basket out of the closet.

Now she had no other choice but to follow through. Jessie, or any of her other sisters, would do the same thing if they’d been in her place. Besides, if she worked this the right way, Victor might be more willing to go along with their plans. He just needed to be shown how a place like theirs would fill a void no one else acknowledged. And, as for Jessie, she needed to be forced to admit what an asset Victor could be, other than keeping her warm at night.

The problem was that she might need to bring in some help, and she wasn’t exactly sure how to go about getting it without telling her sisters everything. She’d have to deal with that later. Right now she had guests that would be showing up for breakfast and she needed to get everything going.

* * * *

Still stewing over Victor walking away from her earlier that morning, Jessie finally admitted she had no idea how to deal with it. Grabbing the weekly reports, she headed for the dining room and her meeting with Sam. As she entered the few groups of rugged-looking men seated at the tables spread around the room turned and looked. She smiled at them and took a seat at the table reserved for breaks in the corner by the kitchen door. Jessie scanned the room, wondering how much work it was going to take to get this room and the kitchen up to par. She knew Sam envisioned things much differently. She wanted candles, soft music, and elegant but simple place settings. The star attraction would be her delicious food.

Right now they served breakfast from six a.m. until ten-thirty, lunch from noon until three p.m., and dinner from five p.m. until nine. They had a few things on the menu that their customers raved about, but not many people ventured out of town and up here except on

special occasions. Once their renovations were completed, they'd be a full service restaurant, not just a place for their guests to grab a bite to eat. And Sam's menu was going to draw people in.

"Sorry." Sam came out of the kitchen looking a little frazzled.

Jessie watched her glance around the room before taking a seat. "No problem. Anything wrong?"

"Um... Nope." She fiddled with the paper on the clipboard she laid on the table.

"Okay. Do you want to eat first or do you want to jump right in?" Sam didn't respond. She was too busy smiling at someone coming in the door.

Jessie turned her head and groaned. Victor strode right up, pulled a chair over from another table and joined them. He leaned over and kissed her cheek then Sam's.

"Ladies." He oozed charm, and she figured her cheeks had turned as pink as Sam's.

"Hey, Vic," Sam said, and from her tone Jessie got the feeling she'd been expecting him.

"Are you joining us for lunch?" Jessie eyed him carefully for any sign of what they were up to.

"Actually you're joining me for lunch," he said, giving her a wink.

"Really? And where are you taking me?" One of their three waitresses came up to the table, carrying a huge picnic basket and blushed profusely when Victor smiled at her.

"You'll just have to wait and see." He got to his feet and held out his hand, not really giving her a choice unless she wanted to cause a scene.

Sam reached over and took the file from her hand. "I'll hold down the fort. You two have a good time."

She sounded way too happy for Jessie's peace of mind. With the picnic basket in one hand and hers in the other, Victor tugged her out of the room. His attitude seemed to have taken a one-eighty since

their interlude this morning, but she wasn't fool enough to fall for it. Letting go of her hand, he opened the front door and motioned for her to go first. She stopped on the top step and looked around for his truck, but she didn't see it anywhere.

She followed him down the stairs and around the side of the building. She watched silently as he strapped the basket onto the back of one of their four wheeler ATVs. He climbed on, turned and looked at her. The look clearly said "I dare you." Not one to be cowed, she climbed on behind him, wrapping her arms loosely around his waist. It would be useless to try and talk over the rumbling of the motor, so she decided to just enjoy the ride.

They drove across the campgrounds and headed up Mud Hill. She smiled knowing there's only one place he could be taking her. Fifteen minutes later they wound their way up to The Peak. Stopping next to a huge boulder, he shut the engine off. Neither of them seemed too anxious to relinquish their close contact, but eventually they both slid from the bike.

"Is there a bad view from up here?" he asked, undoing the straps holding the picnic basket.

She guessed coming up here had to be Sam's idea since he had that awed expression first timers usually got when they brought them up here. "Nope. We never got around to coming up here, did we?"

"I'm sorry we almost missed it. Wow, Sam had it right. The view really is breath taking." He moved over to where she stood staring out over the treetops.

"Mmm... When the sun sets and rises, it's like you could reach out and touch it. I love coming up here." She leaned into him as he draped his arm around her shoulders.

"This summer we'll have to bring up a sleeping bag and tent so we can enjoy it together." He looked down into her eyes, and she couldn't find it in her to remind him he wouldn't be there.

"Where should we eat?" she said, trying gently to keep things from getting to intense.

“Over by those trees looks level enough.” He pointed to a spot about a yard away.

It took him a few minutes to spread out the blanket he found inside the basket, along with enough food for a dozen people. All finger foods. She figured Sam probably hoped they’d feed them to each other. Sam was a hopeless romantic whether she admitted it or not. It showed in the things she said and did. Jessie would never fault her for it since she used to be the same way, but now she was wise enough to see things for what they were.

“So am I allowed to ask if you’ve taken anyone else up here?” he asked, putting the question out there as they sat down across from each other.

Couldn’t they just talk about the weather? Of course she had questions for him too, but she wasn’t quite sure she was ready for the answers. Still, Sam must have had her reasons for suggesting they do this. She popped a grape into her mouth and shook her head.

He picked up a plate and started to fill it with a little bit of everything. “Is that no I can’t ask, or no you didn’t?”

“You’re the first. I used to come up here to think,” she said, taking the plate he offered.

“About me?” He reclined casually onto his side, resting on his elbow, and stretched out his legs.

“And other things.”

He reached for a piece of fried chicken. “Such as?”

“You know there were a lot of other things we wanted to do before you left.” She switched the subject onto a hopefully safer path.

“We spent a weekend at the shore.” He waggled his eyebrows at her as he bit into a drumstick.

She couldn’t help but laugh at his antics. “Look where that got us.”

“I’d like to think with a little hard work things might turn out all right.”

“Your mother must be happy you’re back and in one piece.” She

once again tried to switch the subject.

“She was thrilled until she asked where you were, and I had to tell her you and I are having some issues. She told me to get off my ass and fix it. I think she’s been dreaming of having grandchildren.” He said it with a smile, but the way his eyes averted hers she knew it had to hurt him to hear his mother chide him.

“You know, maybe once we have all the renovations done, I’ll invite her up for the weekend.”

He dropped onto his back in a fit of laughter. Yeah, she couldn’t see his mother spending more than a few hours there with the way the place was now. But given the changes they’re going to put in place, she felt sure his mother would enjoy the chance to relax and be pampered. A romantic getaway wasn’t just for couples. She guessed half of the women would come alone or with friends to take time for themselves. Maybe someday they’d even hire a team to do spa treatments.

“Yuck it up, but just wait. She’ll not only come, she’ll have a blast.” She gave his foot a swift kick.

He rolled back onto his side. “Sorry, it’s just that my mother considers anything out of Boston rustic. I just can’t picture her in a place like this.”

“Give the woman some credit. She raised you to be the outgoing, adventurous man you are today.”

“Your father and grandfather didn’t do to shabby a job with you girls.”

“They did the best they could,” she said, knowing it hadn’t been easy for either of them.

He rolled onto his back, tucking his hands under his head and looked up at the sky. His silence was more than she could take. She got to her knees and started to repack the basket. The rattling of the containers sounded better than the quiet surrounding them. He closed his eyes, and after a few minutes, she thought he’d fallen asleep.

She jumped when he suddenly patted the blanket beside him and

said, "Come lay down with me."

Slowly closing the basket, she moved it out of the way. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"I promise to be a good boy."

"What makes you think it's you I'm worried about?" She moved across the blanket, lying by his side and using his arm for a pillow.

"Jess, I'm going to take a chance here. Why don't we forget the past and the future and just concentrate on the now?"

That sounded good to her. "I'd like that."

"Good, because I'm going to ask you something and I want you to be honest with me. Are you and your sisters financially prepared for the renovations?"

Oh, she walked right into that one. But she knew this question would come sooner or later. It would be good to get it out of the way.

"Between the income from the lodge and cabins, and my father's life insurance, we're doing okay. Added to that, my grandfather left us each twenty-five thousand dollars. We're all pooling that for the renovations, well, except Bobbie. She won't get hers for another three years."

"So other than finding a contractor, you're all set to move ahead?" Now this question hit the nail right on the head.

Her heart sped up, beating frantically in her chest. Had he found out something, or had he just been guessing? It didn't matter. She hadn't come this far to cave in now.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "No, not just yet."

"Why?" he asked just as the walkie-talkie on her hip started beeping.

Saved by the beep. Jessie sat up, fumbling a bit as she pulled it off. She held down the button that allowed whoever's on the other end to hear her.

"Hello."

"Jessie I'm sorry to bother you, but I need you to come back right away," Sam said loudly. Jessie could hear what sounded like voices

arguing in the background.

“What’s wrong?” She felt Victor sit up behind her.

“Hold on,” she said then to someone else, “*No!* I said I’ll be there in a minute. Jess, are you still there?”

“Yeah, Sam, I’m here. Now tell me what the hell is going on down there,” she said, trying to hold on to her temper.

“The lock on cabin six's door is stuck again. And, for some reason, none of the dryers will turn on. Before you ask, I checked the fuses. Oh, and did I mention the moorings on cabin one’s dock came off and we have two canoes drifting away? I could really use some help.”

Jessie groaned, shaking her head. “I’ll be right down. Meet me at cabin six.”

She got to her feet, not surprised that Victor followed suit. He grabbed the blanket and stuffed it in the basket. He held out his hand, and she slipped hers into it. The only sounds that could be heard as they made their way back to the ATV were the twigs and rocks that crunched under their feet. She watched Victor strap the basket down before climbing on.

Not wanting to end things on a bad note, she moved to his side and covered his hand before he could turn the key. He turned his head bringing his face mere inches from hers so she took advantage of their position and pressed her lips to his. His hands moved to her hips, and he pulled her closer. He turned the sweet kiss she’d planned into a full-on assault. His tongue pushed past her lips demanding entry, which was fine with her. Her hands fisted in his shirt, and she felt him growl. This could quickly get out of hand, and if it wasn’t for the fact that Sam needed her, neither of them would mind.

She pulled away panting, happy to see him breathing just as hard. “I just wanted to say thanks for lunch.”

“You know, you could use some help around here.” He said it casually, but they both knew the meaning to his statement.

“Tell me about it,” she replied with a laugh, hoping he’d let it go

at that.

“Incase you haven’t noticed, I’ve got some time on my hands. I wouldn’t mind picking up the slack.” She had a feeling he’d been waiting for an opening like this.

Lucky for him she wasn’t above using him. “I’d, no, *we’d* all really appreciate it.”

How long he would last would be a test of his manhood and resilience. After all, he claimed he wanted to stick around for good. It could be a test of sorts. She climbed on behind him so he couldn’t see her smile. He started up the ATV and they made their way back down the mountain.

Chapter 10

Jessie should have been furious. He wasn't a handyman, but he didn't seem to have a problem letting Sam use him as one. She'd caught on to Sam's plan. She could have told her and put a stop to the whole thing, but instead she found herself letting Sam manipulate the situation. She had really enjoyed having him around for the past few days. They only had a week left of their agreed upon two weeks.

She paused for a moment and watched Victor as he worked on the dock. She had to tear her eyes off him. He'd taken his shirt off and the midday sun glistened on his skin. She wondered who wouldn't take the time to enjoy the view. He chose that moment to turn around and give her a little wave. She felt the heat of the blush that came from knowing she'd been caught staring.

Okay, enough was enough. She turned and headed for the back door to the kitchen. The minute she stepped inside, all activity stopped. Sam's three helpers, there for the weekly meeting, all turned and looked at her as if they expected some big scene. Not liking to be predictable in any way, she flashed them all a huge smile as she grabbed a Coke out of the fridge and swept out of the room without even so much as a hello.

Once safely locked away in her office, she tried valiantly to lose herself in work, but more than once she found her mind drifting back to Victor and his sexy body. She came to the conclusion that she could go home and do nothing just as easily as she could do nothing in her office. It was about time she gave up pretending otherwise. She walked out to the check-in desk and scribbled a quick note so Sam would know where she if she came looking for her. Halfway home

she realized her mistake. Leaving only gave Victor the opportunity to explore and ask questions without her around to keep an eye on him. Sam wouldn't have time to do it either.

Pulling into the empty driveway, she tried to remember the last time she had the house to herself. It didn't matter. Such a rare occasion was obviously an excuse to celebrate. But how would she...no, not her. How would a normal woman spend at least an hour maybe two alone?

She couldn't hold back the smile as she said, "Well, by taking a nice long, hot, silky bubble bath of course."

* * * *

Victor worked hard, which always helped him build up a hearty appetite. Even though he was sure Sam had something amazing waiting for him in the dining room, he decided he wanted to take his wife to lunch in town. Pissed would be an understatement to explain how he felt when he found out she left without saying goodbye. Sam took one look at his face and started to stammer an excuse, but he didn't stick around long enough to hear her.

Less than three minutes later, thanks to the use of one of their ATVs and a network of trails, he pulled up behind their house. Knocking would have been the civilized thing to do, but at this point he'd gone beyond acting civil, so he let himself in. He made his way through the lower level of the house, checking each room for a sign of her. At the bottom of the stairs he came to a closed door. He knew it used to be her father's study, but he had no idea what they were using it for now.

As he wrapped his hand around the doorknob, he took a deep breath, remembering the last time he'd been in there laughing and joking with her father and grandfather. He couldn't remember now what had been so funny, but bonding with the two men had been the important thing. He opened the door and sighed. Other than a few

colorful pillows on the leather couch not a thing had changed.

Victor had a feeling all the answers to his questions lay somewhere inside this room. A less scrupulous man would be rifling through the desk by now. It would be so simple to take another step over the invisible line in his mind that he already crossed by blackmailing her. *Though it would serve her right if I did.* He pulled the door closed, the click a loud resounding reminder that he risked everything on his faith that he'd be able to reach her mind and heart before he ended up wringing her neck.

Shaking his head at his own bravado, he took the stairs two at a time. He almost reached the top when a step creaked loudly under his foot. He walked into the hall expecting her to dart out of one of the rooms that lined either side of the hall. When she didn't, he poked his head in each one looking for her. With each empty room his temper surged. Finding the last room, her bedroom, empty, his anger turned to concern. Maybe she'd already gone back to the lodge. He walked over to the nightstand and grabbed the phone. Just about to dial the lodge, he paused, being sure he'd heard a noise come from in the bathroom. He dropped the phone onto the bed, walked over and laid his hand on the door, easing it open.

As the sight of the huge claw-footed tub came into view, he inhaled a sharp breath. The smell of vanilla coated his senses. Jessie laid in the tub with her head back resting on a towel, eyes closed, and thin wires coming out of her ears. He took a step into the room and she didn't stir, which allowed him to take the time to really absorb her beauty. It wasn't her body that captivated him, thought it did take his breath away. The total picture did him in. One he knew he'd never forget.

He'd never seen a sexier sight in all his life. He could see the lower part of her legs from shins to feet, which she had propped up on the end of the tub. Her arms lay along the rim. Her neck and shoulders splattered with water droplets and her hair piled on top her head, which made her look elegant, yet so serene. The rest of her body was

covered by mounds of bubbles, which he figured accounted for the vanilla scent.

The urge to touch her made his palms sweat. In all the fantasies he had, and man he had plenty, this would have been the most guileless and erotic thing he'd never imagined. She made the perfect model for a work of art. His own private work of art, to be loved and appreciated. Treasured. She should be showed off and allowed to do nothing more than choose whether or not she felt like wearing silk or satin that day. *Maybe once we get things settled, I'll ask her to have a portrait of her done just like this.*

Cautiously he inched forward until he was about a foot away. He crouched down, reached out and wiped a curl of hair that had escaped off her cheek. She jumped at his touch, and he tried not to notice that her breasts were now barely covered. Her eyes opened, and as her head turned in his direction, his finger knocked the wire from her ear.

"Victor, what are you doing here?" She pulled the other wire from her ear and tossed them over her shoulder.

If they hit the floor, he didn't hear them. "I went to your office to offer to take you out to lunch, but you'd already left. So I came here hoping to find you.

"Mmm... Now that I have, I'm not sure what to do about it. That tub doesn't look like it'll fit two, yet you look so...let's just say it would be a shame to ask you to move." He watched her body relax, sinking back into the water, a small smile crossing her lips.

"It really would. It isn't like I get to do this very often, but you are right about there not being enough room for two."

"I think I could help you enjoy it a little more." He slipped a towel off the rack, folded it a few times and tucked it under his knees.

"Victor what are you thinking?" she asked as he reached across her and grabbed the bottle of body wash and poofy sponge thing.

"Baby, just close your eyes and relax." He loaded the sponge and moved to her feet.

Victor worked up a good lather, and slowly using his fingers and

the sponge, he washed and massaged her feet, then her calves and shins. He worked his way up her thighs, and his hands slid under the canopy of bubbles that blocked most of his view. Going by touch alone, he worked one leg, then the other. Every time his fingers brushed her curls, she sucked in a ragged breath. Wanting to keep her on edge, he removed his hands from the water.

Her eyes flew open, and she sat up. The bubbles dripped down her breasts. "Jessie, you're not making this easy."

He wanted to rip his clothes off and squeeze into the tub with her. If she sat on top of him, they could manage something, but it would be uncomfortable. She looked at his hands then settled back into the water with a smile curving her mouth. Victor moved behind her head and used his soap-covered hands to apply just the right amount of pressure as he rubbed her neck. He let his hands slide over the front of her down to her breasts. He cupped them, using his thumbs to tease her nipples into hard little peaks. She moaned and squirmed, sending the water splashing over the sides of the tub.

Jessie tipped her head back, and he covered her lips with his. Jessie, never one to hold back, reached up and tunneled her fingers into his hair. The greedy vixen took control, sucking his tongue into her mouth. Victor swung himself around the side of tub. He let one of his hands slither down to the patch of curls he'd carefully avoided earlier.

Now he delved into them, looking for the treasure hidden within. As he opened the folds with his fingers he slid them up and down a few times, she wriggled in his hands. Victor sensed she was getting close. Her moans and the way her body shook had him rock hard. Either he needed to end this soon or get her out of the tub so they could take this all the way. If not, he'd be doing something he hadn't done since he was a randy teenager. He'd really prefer to come in her instead of his jeans. She moaned when he slipped a finger inside her and worked it around. Her hips rocked, pressing her pelvis against his hand. Adding another finger, he used his thumb to apply pressure to

her clit, rubbing in a circular motion. He felt her stiffen then go limp.

“Damn, Jessie, you’re going to be the death of me.” He dropped to his ass, leaning against the door for support.

Jessie looked over at him and started laughing. He looked down at his clothes and groaned. He had huge wet spots on his clothes. A minor price to pay to see that satisfied glimmer in her eyes.

“Jessie, are you here?” someone yelled from downstairs.

Her face flushed. Being caught with him like this, however innocent as it may be since they were legally married, would mean a lot of explaining and embarrassment on both their parts. Being a smart man, he assessed the situation and took control. He got to his feet, grabbed the robe off the back of the door and tossed it over his shoulder. Reaching down, he helped her to her feet then lifted her out of the tub. Warm water and bubbles ran down her sides. Her skin soft and silky under his hands did nothing to help get rid of the raging hard-on he still sported.

Finally on her feet, she took the robe and slipped it on. He heard the step creak and knew they’d be discovered any second, so he shoved her out of the room and closed the door behind her. *Now what?* He walked over and looked out the window. Thankfully, the death trap of a trellis was out of reach, and he wasn’t jumping. *Maybe they have one of those emergency ladders*, he thought, opening the closet door.

Only it wasn’t a closet. He found himself standing in a pink room filled with ruffles. They were on the pillows, blankets, and curtains. He could still hear Jessie talking to someone in her room. Their voices were muffled so he couldn’t make out what exactly what they said. He walked across the room and peaked into the hall. Empty. He made his way down the hall and onto the stairs careful to avoid the creaking step. Once he made it outside he wasn’t quite sure what he wanted to do. He could knock on the door and pretend he just got there. Or he could just go back to the cabin and wait her out.

“Damn it, Jessie, would you listen to me!” Someone, Frankie he

thought, shouted loud enough for it to drift out to him.

He moved around the porch, closer to the corner of the house where the voice came from. "I'm listening. I can do more than one thing at a time."

"I'm sure we can fit whirlpool tubs for two people into the cabins. But I have no idea if the septic system is even up to code, never mind if it can handle it."

"Frankie, we need to make as many decisions as possible so we're ready to get started." Jessie's voice got a little louder every few words.

He plastered himself against the wall as they walked past the window. If he was spotted there would be questions asked, and he'd be the one giving the answers instead of getting them. He'd rather listen in and see what little gems of knowledge he could pick up.

"We need to sit down and go over everything and take a vote. You know it has to be unanimous or it's out." What the hell did that mean?

He peeked into the room. From what he could see, Jessie had changed into a pair of jeans and t-shirt, but she still her hair up showing off her neck. Why would they need tubs for two? Things around here got weirder and weirder by the day.

"I need another week to get everything together."

"Jessie, I know Sam's already pointed this out, but I think it's worth saying again. We have our very own specialist sleeping in cabin sixteen. Why can't we just ask him a few questions while we look for a contractor?" Frankie dropped onto the couch that faced the window, which forced him to lurch back out of view.

"We decided to keep this under wraps."

"I know I agreed to that, but once we start, you know there'll be no stopping the talk." About what damn it?

He found himself wishing he had his sister there with him. She was a master at eavesdropping would have this all figured out in no time. To him it was like they were talking in some kind of code he couldn't decipher. He wanted to walk in, take a seat on the couch and

ask them point blank what the hell's going on around here. He wondered if Trent would be any better at this. He should have just ransacked the damn office.

Screw scruples, they weren't going to keep him warm at night. The next time he got a chance like that he'd jump on it. What was the old saying, he thought, closing his eyes? Fuck if he could remember it now, but it would come to him later. Maybe he'd have it tattooed on his ass so he'd never forget it again.

He let his head fall back against the wall. His stomach rolled, and his temples throbbed. Manipulation, bribery, and now spying. Was there anything she wouldn't make him stoop to trying? He needed to get the hell out of there.

* * * *

Jessie spent the first fifteen minutes after Frankie left looking for Victor. Focusing on her anger, because he'd somehow managed to slip out without her noticing, wasted the next twenty minutes. It took her awhile to see it had been the right thing to do. He had no idea how long Frankie planned to stick around. Besides, he said he wanted to take her out. There's no doubt in her mind if he stayed, the only place they would have ended up was in her bed.

Jessie stopped her pacing in front of the huge, decorative wrought iron mirror that hung by the front door and stared at herself as she wondered what to do next. She wished her reflection would tell her some grand scheme. She shook her head at the foolish notion. This wasn't a fairytale, and if she wanted a happy ending, she needed to make it happen herself. One by one she removed the pins from her hair. It fell into loose waves reaching her shoulders. Using her fingers she gave it a quick fluff and turned for the door. There were no hard and fast rules that said she couldn't go take him out for a late lunch.

Chapter 11

Her lunch invitation had turned into a dinner invitation, and even that had been tenuous. Their reservations had dwindled down to a few guests each month since word got out that women were running the place. What people didn't realize is that women had been running it for the past five years. Still she was determined to make their guests' stay as pleasant as possible. And that meant, along with trying to get the place ready for its overhaul, she needed to keep everything running smooth.

"Sam, since we're going to have update this computer system anyway. I say we get Bobbie on it now." She stabbed at the keys rougher than necessary, but it made her feel better.

"Fine. Where are you taking Victor?" She made it sound like they had dozens of places to choose from.

"I'm thinking Dionne's." It's the best the town had to offer, other than Sam's kitchen, and everyone liked it.

"I could always set up a table for you."

"No, but thanks for offering. I feel like a night out. Especially after dealing with this hunk of junk." She slapped the side of the monitor a few times.

"That's good to hear." Victor leaned on the counter and flashed her a smile.

"Great timing. Will you get her out of here before she really breaks something?" Sam's playful tone grated on her nerves.

"Come on, beautiful, let's go." He held out a hand, which she willingly latched onto since it would help her escape for a few hours at least.

* * * *

Sam picked up the phone as she watched them go. She knew her friend Claire who had recently married Mike, the head chef and owner Dionne's, would help. Well she would once she filled her in on what was going on she'd do whatever she could.

After a few rings a feminine voice answered. "Dionne's Family Dining."

"Hi, can I speak with Claire please?" Easy, stay calm, she reminded herself.

"May I tell her who's calling?" the girl said. Obviously Claire and Mike trained her well.

"Samantha Brazen," she said, winding the phone cord around her fingers.

"One moment, Ms. Brazen," the girl said politely. Sam momentarily wondered if Claire would kill her if she stole her to man the check-in desk once they were done with the remodel.

"Hey, Sam, what's up?" Claire's melodious voice chimed, bringing her back to the matter at hand.

"I need a favor," she said, cutting right to the chase.

"Okay. Shoot." She knew she could count on Claire.

"Jessie's coming in with a guy, and I want them seated in your busiest section." Mean, true, but he needed to see how good their plan was.

If he saw first-hand the huge need for the kind of place they wanted to turn the lodge into then maybe he'd agree. They had a really good plan. Not just for them either. It would be good for the community once they started attracting new customers.

Once again, Claire's voice got her attention. "Sure. Want me to slightly burn their dinner too?"

"God no." She didn't want to scare him off, she just wanted to enlighten him. "But could you maybe...um...keep them from being

able to talk. Nothing too drastic, just a lot of little minor interruptions.”

“Okay, mind letting me in on the joke?” Claire said, and Sam laughed. She knew Claire’s curiosity would finally come out.

“I promise I’ll explain this all to you, but not yet.” Sam figured a bit of suspense couldn’t hurt. And it might make Claire stop by their table a few times trying to see if she could figure out the mystery for herself.

“Fine.” She sighed, but followed it with a squeal. “She just walked in. I gotta go.”

* * * *

Jessie and Victor stood by the hostess podium waiting to be seated when Sam’s friend Claire came out of the kitchen. She spotted them and headed in their direction. If it wasn’t for her huge smile, Jessie would have assumed someone was in big trouble. She walked up to them at the same time the hostess returned from seating the couple before them.

Claire took the menus from the young woman and said, “I’ll take care of them, Tara.”

“Okay.” The girl nodded and moved back to her station.

Claire led them to a table at the edge of the room. Jessie wondered if she’d been trying to give them a bit of privacy. The problem was the place was packed, so no matter where she sat them, getting any privacy was going to be a miracle. One look at Claire’s smile and Jessie knew she wasn’t about to slink off without asking a question or two.

“So, Jessie, are you going to introduce me to your friend?” Claire’s blatant perusal had jealousy surging through her even though she knew she wasn’t a threat.

“Victor, this is Sam’s best friend, Claire Dionne. Claire, this is Victor Weatherly, an old friend.” Something sparkled in Claire’s

eyes, and Jessie wondered if Sam had told her about him.

“It’s nice to meet you.” Claire offered her hand with a smile.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Claire.” Victor brought her hand to his lips and pressed a light kiss to her knuckles.

“Oh, Jessie, you’re in serious trouble. Your waitress will be right with you.” Claire blushed, and Jessie thought she giggled as she walked away.

“What the hell are you doing?” She lowered herself into the chair he pulled out, keeping her eyes on his the whole time.

“I’m trying to make a good impression.” He slipped into the chair across from her.

He wasn’t supposed to make an impression at all. She didn’t want or need people asking about him after he left next week. “Well don’t.”

“Right. The last thing we want is for people to like me, or think I’m a decent guy.” She cringed inwardly at the mix of anger and pain she heard in his tone.

“It’s not like that, and you know it.” She paused when the waitress came to take their drink orders and tell them the specials, “I want people to like you, but not enough to badger me when you leave.”

“We’re back to that, are we? You know this will all go much easier when you resign yourself to that fact I’m sticking around.” He said it all with that sexy smile of his, which annoyed her beyond words.

It was a good thing the waiter stopped by the table and deposited a basket of dinner rolls or she may have kicked him. More importantly it kept her from saying something she might regret. A cake being delivered to the table next to them followed. The whole place erupted into a loud chorus of Happy Birthday.

“That’s so sweet.” Jessie watched the older woman wipe tears from her cheeks.

“Yeah it is. I’m sorry I missed out on doing stuff like that for you. I’ll find a way to make it up to you.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“Damn it, Jessie,” he covered her hand with his, giving it a squeeze, “that’s for me to decide. I plan on being here and you’re going to have to deal with whatever comes with it.”

She pulled her hand away. “Are you going back on our deal?”

“You know me better than that. I never go back on a deal. I plan on winning.” His cocky smile and wink didn’t go unnoticed by the waitress who giggled as she delivered their drinks and took their orders.

“Why don’t we talk about something neutral? I’ll start. Have you and your sisters had designs drawn for the remodel or are you still looking for someone?” He knew way too much, she thought, but decided to be honest.

“We have ideas, but no, we haven’t had formal plans drawn up yet.” She reached for her drink, wondering where he was going with this.

“If you’d like, I could draw up a sample for you. That way, when you do find a contractor, you’ll already know what will work and what won’t.” Luckily the waitress showed up at that moment with the salads and an appetizer sampler courtesy of Claire.

She grabbed a broccoli ball and popped it into her mouth, chewing slowly, giving herself time to collect herself. The wicked temptation to jump on the offer coursed through her, but two things stopped her. One, she’d have to run it by her sisters. Two, in a warped kind of way, it allowed him some say in the project. Still, it would be a chance to see if he pushed his ideas on them. Or find out if he actually listened to what they wanted. None of her worries even mattered unless her sisters agreed to let him do it.

“I’ll ask the girls and see if it’s okay with them,” she conceded and found herself hoping they’d say yes.

Across the room a loud ruckus broke out. Jessie looked over and watched as some fool got down on one knee in front of everybody and held up a black velvet box to one of the waitresses. She nodded and the place erupted with shouts and whoops of congratulations. She

looked over at Victor, surprised by the frown on his face.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“Nothing.” He looked down at his plate, and she knew he was lying.

“Right. Whatever.” She picked up her fork and began to eat her salad, which could have tasted like sawdust for all she noticed.

* * * *

It amazed Victor that two people could sit in a noisy restaurant and yet the silence between them could be louder than anything happening around them. What good would it do to tell her what he’d been thinking? He wanted her alone. He wanted her to let him in. To let her sisters really get to know him. And damn it all to hell, more than anything, just once he’d like to hear her introduce him to someone as her husband!

“So are you going to sit there and pout all night?” Her voice had taken on an icy edge.

“Maybe. Is that against the rules?” he tossed back, his tone as terse as hers.

The waitress approached the table with their dinners. He could practically hear the wheels spinning as Jessie thought up a comeback.

“Nope. If you want people to think you just sucked on a sour grape, that’s fine with me. However I wouldn’t let Claire see you. She might take it as an insult to her menu.”

He laughed. God, this woman tied him up in knots. She made him want to be noble, yet at the same time, she had him willing to do anything to keep her. His usual iron firm control was ripped to shreds like a piece of tissue paper around her. He had to get her to see he needed her. He couldn’t live without her in his life.

He shook his head before throwing himself on his sword once again. “I’m sorry, Jess. I didn’t mean to get all pissy. I just want to

spend as much time with you as possible.”

“What do you call what we’re doing right now?” He had to lean forward so he could hear her over a group of girls walked past the table.

He motioned to the area around them with his fork. “This place is nice, but I’d rather be alone with you.”

Her cheeks pinkened, and she leaned towards him. “Low lights or better yet some candlelight, bottle of wine. Some soft music. Mmm... and maybe a chocolate and strawberry cream pie for two.”

He put down his fork and took her hand in his, stroking her knuckles with his thumb. “Sounds good to me.”

“Me too, but there’s no place like that around here for a good sixty miles.” Something about the way she said it that told him he must have missed something important.

Not only did he think he’d missed it, he thought it had a deep connection to why she wanted to get rid of him. He watched her eat while he pushed the food around on his plate. Was it something from the past? Did she have something planned for the future she didn’t want him to know about? What did any of this have to do with the lodge? Was she fixing it up to sell it? Knowing he wasn’t going to get the answers by driving himself insane, he took a deep breath and forced all the questions out of his mind.

He reached over and stabbed a piece of steak off her plate and ate it. She gasped at him as if he’d eaten the whole thing. He cocked his head, inviting her to say something, but she just went back to cutting her meat into nice ladylike pieces. He took a bite of his meatloaf and waited. Still nothing, and he was getting mighty sick of the silence.

Choosing a question he felt sure to get a response to he asked, “Are you ever going to tell me what’s going on?”

“So is Trent coming back soon?” she asked, ignoring his question.

“I’ll let you get away with that for now. Yes, he’s coming back. He, we, well to be truthful, I ran into a few problems with the person who’s buying my condo, and Trent is taking care of it for me. He’ll be

up as soon as it's all straightened out." Her eyes locked on his, and he felt as if he'd gained a few inches in the battle.

She swallowed a few times then took a drink. "If you're selling your condo, where are you going to live when you go home?"

He wanted to laugh, but knew better. "Jessie, I've told you a dozen times already, but I'll say it again. I. Am. Home. I want to stay with you."

Her eyes filled with tears, making him feel like a Class A jerk. She jumped to her feet and tore off down a small hallway a few feet away. Shit...shit...Shit. How the fuck was he supposed to take that? He had no idea of they were happy or sad tears? Should he follow her? Yes, he thought. He slowly got to his feet and calmly went in the same direction she'd bolted in.

Chapter 12

Jessie made it into the bathroom as the first tears dripped down her cheek. This was terrible. She never cried like this. And she never, ever, cried in public. God, the man's a menace. Alright so he's the dangerous sexy, hot, hunk of make-me-lose-my-mind-man women dreamed of, but a menace all the same. And she was losing the fight to keep her heart safe from him. He had to go and soon. She had to find a way to distance herself from him before she lost everything.

Sam had been keeping him busy, but if they took him up on his offer to draw up the plans, he might get so engrossed he'd forget all about her. She'd get her sisters to not only agree, but run every idea they had by him. For crying out loud, she may as well get something out of this relationship besides mind-blowing sex.

She went into a stall and grabbed some toilet paper, wiping her eyes and blowing her nose. The door opened and closed then she heard a loud click. Feeling better with a firm plan in mind she gave herself a shake and stepped out of the stall.

"*Iiiigh!*" Her scream bounced off the walls echoing back to her.

Victor grabbed onto her arms and steadied her. She pressed a hand to her heart just to be sure it hadn't flown out of her chest. The other she used to slap his arm. He let go and took a step back.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" she asked, in a loud whisper.

"I came to make sure you're okay. Why are you whispering?" She wanted to whack the smile right off his face.

The door handle jiggled, followed by a loud knock. Jessie rushed over, unlocked it, and peeked out, relieved to find Claire's husband,

Mike, standing there.

“Jessica, is everything okay? Someone thought they heard a scream.”

“I’m sorry. I saw a spider, a big one,” she lied, offering him the first excuse that popped into her head, even though it sounded totally lame to her.

He just smiled and nodded. “Good, well, not good, but you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do.” She faked a laughed, easing the door closed and dropping her head against it.

“Are you really okay?” Victor asked from behind her.

“I’m fine I just swallowed wrong and needed a second to catch my breath.” *Damn it, Jessie, if you’re going to lie at least do it good.* She shook her head.

“And the sky is purple and the moon is a balloon.” He chuckled as he grabbed her hand, pulling her to him.

“Whatever,” she said, letting him hold her.

“Are we ready to go back to the table?” She almost said no, but nodded. Fool she was, she even let him hold her hand on the way back to the table for everyone to see.

* * * *

Sam couldn’t stop pacing. She’d paused every so often and peeked out the window, but there was no sign of them. The twins sat on the couch, pretending to be absorbed in some movie of the week, but they kept looking at the clock too. She could hear Bobby grumbling in den as she scoured the internet for the perfect computer system. Frankie sat at the dining room table with her nose deep in one of her catalogues, picking out new sheets or curtains for the cabins. As long as she steered clear and wide of Sam’s kitchen, she could pick out whatever the heck she wanted.

“Sam, sit down,” Joey said. Georgie added, “You’re making us

nervous.”

“Fine.” She sat down and began drumming her fingers on the arm of the chair.

She couldn’t help it. She’d been a bundle of nervous energy ever since Jessie called and asked them all to meet her at the house. Sam hoped it meant she was finally going to tell them the truth about Victor, and the reason for him being there. Jessie deserved her shot at happiness, and deep down, Sam thought Victor would be a big part of it. It may mean her moving away, but they’d still see each other. She felt the tears coming on and quickly blinked them away.

“Sam, do you know something we don’t?” Frankie asked, as she walked into the room.

“Gosh, Frankie, give her a break. She’s just as jumpy as we are,” Bobbie shouted, saving her from having to lie to them all.

This was a good thing because no one would have believed her. She sucked at lying. That’s why she had always been the first one their Dad and granddad had questioned when something went wrong.

“Besides, you’d see it written all over her face if she knew something.” Georgie teased, but that’s where they were wrong.

As long as no one asked her a straightforward question that required a direct answer Sam could keep a secret better than any of them. She could edge around the truth with the best of them. A truck pulled up out front, and Bobbie and the twins flew to the windows, their charade of indifference completely disintegrating. She fought the temptation to join them, and she could tell by the way Frankie swayed slightly from side to side, she did too. The door opened and Jessie came in with Victor close on her heels. Sam expected her to be alone.

“Evening, ladies.” Victor nodded at them as Jessie led him to the dining room, and they all instinctively followed, murmuring hellos.

Jessie jumped right in. “As you all know, Victor’s been helping out around the lodge to stave off his boredom. I know we all really appreciate it.”

“You’ve done an outstanding job,” Sam said, and the others

agreed.

Where the hell is Jessie going with this? she wondered. *Does she have some point to her ramblings? Get to the part where you tell them who he really is.* She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from saying it out loud.

“Well, he’s offered to help out even more by drawing up a blueprint-type plan for us to show prospective contractors. I told him we all had to agree. So what do you think?”

Sam leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest. The others started asking him all sorts of questions. Jessie looked her way, and Sam inclined her head towards the kitchen. Jessie nodded then got to her feet.

“I’ll go get a pad and pen so Victor can try and keep track of your suggestions and questions,” she said with a smile.

Sam got up too, following her to the door. She stopped and looked back. “Victor, can I get you beer or soda?”

“A Coke would be great.” He had to raise his voice to be heard over her sisters.

Once they’d gotten out of hearing distance, she had to ask, “Okay, what was that all about?”

“I swear we sitting there trying to eat and he just offered to do it.” Jessie shrugged as if the situation wasn’t significant.

“I believe you, but I’m surprised you agreed. So again, what the hell was that all about?” Sam hoped Jessie wasn’t thinking what she thought she might be thinking.

“I thought you’d be happy. I mean all of us have ideas, and he can incorporate them into the drawings so we can see if they’ll work. And it’ll give the girls a chance to get to know him better.”

“And you? How does this benefit you?” Sam knew there was no sense in letting Jessie delude herself.

“Alright, so it lets me get some space.” Sam huffed and Jessie shook her head. “I can hope, you know.”

Sam needed to know what she was up against, and just how much

info she could leak without crossing the line. “Jess, not to be the voice of impending doom, but have you given any thought to how horrendously this could backfire?”

“Yes, but I’m running out of options.” Sam must have let her surprise show, because Jessie quickly added, “He hasn’t figured anything out yet.”

“Like how much he’s making you want to let him stay?”

“How long would that last? He’d never really be happy living here. No, a clean break will be better for everyone.” Her voice may have been strong and clear, but the way her hands shook, giving her away.

Sam wanted to tell her what an idiot she was being. They both were acting like idiots. She busied herself getting the drinks while Jessie grabbed a pad of paper and a pen.

Was there anything she could say or do to make her sister see how useless it would be to fight her emotions? Jessie loved Victor. Sam knew it, and though she could deny it all she wanted, it wasn’t going to change. Sam understood her fear of being left behind again, but things were different this time. She hoped that sooner or later Jessie would see that. Jessie had to know they all loved her enough to want to do the best thing for her. Even if somewhere down the line it meant letting her go live her own life somewhere without them. It wouldn’t be easy, but they’d pull together and make it work.

Chapter 13

Victor knew he must have lost his senses. Only an insane person would be out driving in rain on purpose. The rain poured down so thick and hard he could barely see out the windshield. Of course it hadn't been like this when he hit the road. His wipers had become totally useless now. Driving normally cleared his mind. Since the day he got his license he often took aimless rides whenever he felt stressed or needed to mull over a dilemma.

Right now the way he felt he could drive from coast to coast and it wouldn't help. In his younger days he never would have believed a woman had the power to cause such turbulence in his life. Go figure that the woman in question, the one who drove him absolutely insane, was none other than his wife. He hadn't seen her in three days. She'd effectively managed to pawn him off on her sisters. They dogged his every move with questions and ideas. Though none of them had given him any more insight on why Jessie wanted him out of her life.

His groan filled the cab of the truck. Damn it, he was running out of time. The truck fishtailed a bit in the mud, and perversely, he found himself smiling. He slipped the truck into four-wheel drive and gunned the engine, which sent the truck forward, spraying mud everywhere. He jerked the wheel to the right hard, sending the ass end whipping around and a wave of mud splattering against his window. He'd almost forgotten how much fun this could be.

* * * *

Bobbie sat in her car and slammed her hands on the steering

wheel. It wasn't going to make the beast start, but it made her feel better. She could easily walk the five miles back to the house, if it wasn't pouring. It had rained non-stop for the past four hours and it was driving her crazy. That's why she'd offered to run into town for groceries.

She reached for her cell phone and let out a groan when she remembered it was lying on her nightstand charging. Cursing her luck she reached for the door handle about to get out of the car and start walking when a familiar truck pulled over behind her. She watched as Jessie's *friend*, Victor, climbed out and dash to her car. Slipping into the passenger seat, he closed the door and shook his head, sending water everywhere.

"Everything okay?" he asked, wiping a hand down his face.

She laughed at the absurdity of his question. "Would I be sitting on the side of the road if it was?"

"Guess not." He chuckled. "Need a ride?"

"Yeah, that'll be great. If you can take me back to the house I'll take one of my sisters' cars into town. I'll let the mechanic know where he can find this beast." She lovingly patted the dashboard, belying her harsh words.

"What a coincidence, I'm going into town myself. I can drive you if you'd like. It'll be nice to have some company." He offered and seemed genuinely happy she'd be going along.

"That'd be great. I really don't want to go back just yet." They both climbed from her car, racing to his truck.

They almost collided when they ran in between the car and truck heading for opposite doors. Bobbie jumped into the truck and looked at him, laughing and dripping wet, and couldn't help but join him. Until she looked down at her hands and her laughter came to quick halt. His only got louder. A thick coating of mud covered her hands. It seemed more like slime than mud. Being a quick thinker he grabbed a t-shirt off the back seat and handed it to her.

"Sorry about that. I spent a little time out running the trails

earlier.” Even though he laughed, she got the feeling he expected her to ream him a good one.

Bobbie, being a Brazen through and through, just laughed as she unrolled her window and stuck her hands out into the rain. “Did you go down the eight-forty trail? It’s the best.”

“No. I know it’s probably kind of lame, but I went over to the quarry.”

“Mud pit heaven, for the kiddies,” she taunted, tossing the now filthy shirt on the king cab’s back seat.

“Yeah, well, I figured since I’m a bit out of practice I’d fit right in. I mean I’ve spent a lot of time recently stuck in mud and gunk, but not on purpose.” He reached over and cranked up the defrost to clear the windshield.

She couldn’t help wondering, for like the thousandth time, why Jessie didn’t snap him up. Okay there was the wife issue. Jessie would never willingly be the other woman. Still the wife, *his* wife, hadn’t come looking for him. As far as any of them knew, she hadn’t even called. Stranger than that, none of them even knew her name. Whenever Victor mentioned her, he called her *the wife* and he always, always glanced at Jessie. Maybe he hoped he’d get a rise out of her.

Unless...

Oh shit. She barely held back a gasp. Could it really be possible? She glanced over at him, and in an instant, enough coincidences clicked into place to make her think it just may be. Ooooh, Jessie had a lot of explaining to do. Or maybe she could just let Victor fill in all the blanks.

* * * *

They drove along, the wipers and the music beating in rhythm. He tried to think of a way to ask her if she knew the big secret, without really asking. Being the youngest, how much did she really know? In most cases didn’t the youngest know everything?

He felt her turn on the seat so she was facing him. “Can I ask you something?”

“I’m an open book.” He hoped she would be too.

“Are you and your wife having trouble because of my sister, or the fact that you’ve been out of the country?”

“Both.”

He saw her nodding out of the corner of his eye. “But instead of being with her trying to work things out, you’re here working on my sister. Why?”

“Because right now this is where I need to be.”

“And your understanding wife, what a saint she must be, is just fine with it, right?”

He shook his head and sighed before saying, “Truthfully, she probably wishes I’d be anywhere but here.”

“Well, we could change that. Why don’t you call and invite her up for a visit?”

He glanced at her smiling face then back at the road. “Um...”

“Or, if you’d like, you can give me her number and I’ll give her a call. Really the two of you, well three if count Jessie, should really work this all out.”

“I really don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Afraid they’ll hook up and leave you out?” His laughter reverberated in the cab. The poor kid had no idea how ludicrous her assumption was.

“Maybe it’s the fact that your wife is right here and you’re here trying to win her back?” Her words penetrated his laughter, and he nearly lost control of the car.

He jerked the steering wheel to right and stomped on the brake pedal. They slid to a halt on the shoulder of the road. He threw the truck in park and turned to face her. She winked and nodded before collapsing in a fit of giggles.

“How did...? Did your...I mean did Sam...or Jessie? Damn it, Bobbie, stop laughing and talk to me.” He heard the panic in his voice

as it got louder with each word he managed to get out.

She reached over and turned the truck off. "I looked outside the box at everything I saw and added it up to you two being together, which could only mean one thing. Now calm down and tell me what's going on so I can help you."

He wanted to know where she was coming from. "You don't think helping me is a betrayal to your sister?"

"Let me guess. Sam?" He nodded, and she continued, "There's something it seems you haven't noticed about us Brazens. We stick together, but if one of us is acting or doing something stupid, we have no problem pointing it out. Besides, Sam has been helping you in her own way. It's one of the reasons I caught on so easily."

"And you think Jessie is acting stupidly?" He couldn't help but think there'd be more to it than that.

"I'm not sure, but it's possible. Let's just say I want to make sure she doesn't."

"And if she finds out you've helped me and things go south?"

"I plan on her finding out eventually, but it won't matter how things work out. Another thing you should know, no matter how or where the chips may fall, the Brazen sisters will always stick together. It's really simple. If someone messes with one of us, they mess with all of us."

"Including *me*." The force of his voice surprised him.

"There has never a doubt in my mind about that. It's obvious from the way you look at Jessie that you'd do anything for her. Now spill and we can think out of the box together," Bobbie said, and at last, he felt like he had a real chance to work things out.

* * * *

Jessie and Sam sat at the dining room table with the drawings Victor had done for them spread out. They were both surprised by what a thorough man he was. He'd attached a cost and materials sheet

to each one. If he'd figured out their plan, he hadn't said anything. He hadn't even dropped a hint. Then again, as Frankie had pointed out, most of the transformation was going to be cosmetic. The major remodeling stuff for the cabins would be the bathrooms. Up at the lodge, the kitchen and dining areas needed a major overhaul, a few new picture windows and stuff like that to cozy up the place.

Jessie only saw one problem other than Victor. The seasons up in northern Maine seemed short with winter starting in late October and lasting until to Mid-May. So they basically had five months to get everything done. If they pulled it off, they could even start advertising for a grand opening around Christmas time.

Sam stood up and sat right back down. Jessie noticed she looked a little green. The poor thing hadn't been sleeping well either, thanks to Trent.

"You feeling alright?" *Duh, dumb question*, Jessie thought as she watched Sam wave her hand in front of her face.

Sam dropped her head to the table. "I'm tired and my stomach is a bit queasy."

"Joey mentioned yesterday that a couple of girls in her office have been out sick this week. You probably caught whatever's going around." Sam's loud, pitiful-sounding groan told Jessie what she thought of her theory.

"Why don't you go up and take a nap? Maybe you'll feel better." She hoped it would pass quickly.

"You just want me quarantined so no one else gets it," Sam said as she gingerly made her way to the stairs.

"You're right, and we all appreciate it." She'd go up and check on her in a few hours.

She'd even bring her some tea to help settle her stomach, Jessie thought, as she gathered up the sketches. Damn, too bad they'd never be able to find someone as good as him. It really was a shame they couldn't hire him and Trent to do it all. Stunned by the tears that suddenly streamed from her eyes, she dropped into the closest chair

and covered her face.

“This changes nothing.” She wiped her hands across her cheeks.

Just because she let her emotions show didn’t make her weak. Her father made sure they all knew that being a woman put them in touch with emotions a man could only hope one day to feel. As long as they didn’t let their emotions rule them then they should be considered a huge asset. In her case, she tried to keep her feelings in check, but she still took everything into consideration. Staying the course was the right thing to do, she hoped. She was so close to reaching her goal, just a few more days and they’d all get what was best for them.

She heard the kitchen door open, followed by Bobbie’s sweet, infectious laughter. Jessie took a deep breath and finished gathering the papers. Headed for the kitchen, she froze when she heard Victor’s deep, rumbling laugh. What was he doing there? And what the hell was he doing with Bobbie? Knowing she wasn’t going to get any answers by standing there, she forced herself to walk into the room. Victor juggled oranges high over his head while Bobbie stared adoringly at him.

“You did that for me once.” She laid the stack of papers on the counter and opened the fridge, reaching in and grabbing an ice cold soda.

He kept his rhythm as he chuckled, his eyes locking on hers. “You’re comparing apples to oranges, literally. Apples are harder, they have less grip. Should have taken it as a sign that you’d slip right through my fingers.”

Bobbie turned her back to them, as she began unpacking the paper sacks. Jessie’s cocky nature bubbled to the surface. She put the can of soda on the counter then, with a wink, she hopped up taking a seat next to it. Victor winked back, but she noticed one of the oranges almost hit another. She held back her smile as she put her hands on her knees, sliding them slowly up to the edge of her t-shirt.

A quick tuck of her fingers under the hem, and she fisted the material. She let the smile break free when in a *Brazen* move she

lifted her shirt above her lace-covered, well, barely covered breasts. The oranges fell to the floor, three loud thuds, that left his now empty hands hanging motionless in the air. She tugged the shirt back down with a satisfied smile. Seeing the heat flash in his eyes, she was glad she chose the black frilly number instead of the plain white cotton bra she originally picked. Another good reason he wasn't going to be sticking around, because if he did, she'd have to have him build her a closet for all the sexy lingerie she'd buy to tantalize and tease him beyond reason.

Bobbie glanced over her shoulder watching as Victor stiffly collected his oranges and the unreasonable green monster roused its ugly head. "So, how did you two hook up?"

"My car broke down, and luckily Victor happened to come along to rescue me." Bobbie headed for the fridge, her arms laden with produce. Victor dashed forward to open it for her.

"Where's your car now?" She told herself there was no reason to feel antsy, because he most likely would have done it for anyone.

"In town I guess. The garage's closed so we stopped by to let Jake know where it is. After a lot of questions, he finally agreed to have it towed in." Bobbie headed back to the counter, wearing a sappy grin.

"Thanks for rescuing the brat. We would have hated for her to drown." Bobbie turned and stuck her tongue out an immature and rude gesture, which Jessie happily returned.

Victor's laugh made her stomach quiver. Instantly her moment of triumph at knocking him off balance was gone. It wasn't fair that her body reacted on such a natural level. She hated to wonder if there may be another man on the planet, or in the galaxy, that could make her blood pump and surge the way he did with just a look.

"Oh hey, did you and Sam get a chance to go over Victor's sketches?" Bobbie nodded her head in the direction of the papers stacked on the counter.

She laid a possessive hand on them. "We were actually looking them over just a few minutes ago until Sam turned green."

“She hated them that much?” Victor chuckled at his own joke as he began juggling the oranges again.

“Yeah. They made her sick to her stomach.” She watched as he tossed the oranges one at a time to Bobbie, who added them to the bowl on the counter.

“Well, anyway, I was thinking we should vote on hiring Victor and his brother to do the whole job.”

“Bobbie.” The warning in his voice came through nice and clear.

“What?” She gave him her best innocent look, one Jessie had grown immune to. “I’m just saying we’d have to vote on it. Grandpa said every member of this family has a say in its future, and Victor is—” Victor laid his hand on her shoulder and squeezed slightly, but it was the look he gave her that had her going silent.

Jessie felt the soda can give under the pressure of her fingers. They must have bonded pretty damn well in the short time they’d been together for him to be able to silence her with a look. Did Bobbie know their secret? He wouldn’t tell her, would he? Bobbie’s head swung nervously between them, giving her a glimmer of hope she stumbled right over it by accident. Oh shit, she hoped the look on her own face didn’t give it away.

Then she saw Bobbie wink at Victor before she said, “As I was saying he is, after all.” Jessie held her breath. “The best we’ve seen. We do want the best, don’t we?”

She let the breath out slowly. The little shit may not know yet, but she was circling around close enough to make Jessie nervous. The worst thing about it she was a hundred percent right. Not using Victor and Trent would be one of the stupidest business moves ever made. But if they hired them, she’d have to tell everyone the truth about them. Once she did that, she’d have to admit the real reason she wanted a divorce wasn’t only because of the clause in her grandfather’s will, but because she also knew Victor wouldn’t stick around in the long run. Personally she didn’t want to admit that she didn’t think she could survive it again.

“We’ll talk about it later when everyone’s home.” Okay, so she stalled, but she needed to talk to him alone before this went any further.

“What if he gets another job, or decides to leave?” Bobbie’s eyes went wide with panic.

“He’ll be around for a least a few more days, I promise we’ll talk about it before then. Why don’t you run up and check on Sam?”

“I’ve been dismissed.” She balanced up on her toes and pressed a quick kiss to Victor’s cheek.

Victor’s gaze stayed on Bobbie until she was gone and Jessie barely held back a groan. “It seems you’ve managed to sway Bobbie over to your side. Does she...did you tell her?”

“Would it be so bad if she did? If they all did? You know if you tell your sisters the truth about us, and me, why you’re so hell bent on ending what’s between us, you’d be able to stop trying to control every conversation.”

“I don’t control—” He gave her a fiercer version of the look he’d given Bobbie, which had the same effect.

* * * *

“I said try to, not did.” Victor took a step forward and she countered taking a step back. “I guess you could say you try to steer, guide, direct, no, I think the best description would be lead.”

“I do not.” She bumped into the kitchen island and grimaced, rubbing her hip.

He stalked her around the room like a hunter preparing to trap his prey. This sexy creature had a cagey edge though, and he knew she was looking for a foolproof way to escape. Knowing it wasn’t above using trickery to confound the hunter, he decided to do it first. He stared blatantly at her breasts as he reached down and adjusted himself behind his now straining zipper. As he hoped, her eyes followed, and she stopped moving.

“Wouldn’t you like to be free to say whatever you want? I’d like to be able to walk right up to you and say ‘I love you’ and do this.” He grabbed her by the shoulders and captured her mouth in a bruising kiss.

He must have startled her at first because it took a minute before she melted in his embrace. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, and he lifted her up. Two steps and he plopped her down on the counter, slipping between her thighs. Not caring who might catch them, he gripped her shirt, letting go of her lips only long enough to yank it over her head. She made the sexiest little whimper when his hands covered her breasts. The lace-covered peaks pressed into his palms as he gently massaged. She slid her hands down to his chest, her touch sending sparks straight to his groin. Suddenly she shoved him, and he stumbled back. With a smile she hopped off the counter, grabbed his hand, and dragged him down the hall.

She pulled him into the study and shoved the door closed behind them. She grabbed onto his belt loops and pulled his hips to hers. He fisted his hands in her hair, their mouths coming together in a soft, wet, passionate kiss. Her hands went for his zipper.

“Your sisters?” he murmured against her mouth.

She pulled away, walked over to the door, and turned the lock. She turned back to him and smiled. Instead of coming back, she popped the button on her jeans. He watched dumbfounded as she hooked her thumbs into the waistband and tugged them down over her hips. She shimmied a bit, and they fell to the floor. She stepped out of them, and with flick of her ankle, she kicked them away.

“You’re staring,” she said with a smile.

He nodded, wishing he had a camera to capture the sight in front of him. “I can’t help it. You could be gracing the pages of *Playboy*.”

She did a small turn, letting him get a view of her backside. The lacy material stretched across her ass held high on her hips by a thin strip.

Standing there in black lace, she crooked her finger at him. As if

an invisible string attached him to it, he was drawn to her. She met him halfway and pushed him down onto the couch. Jessie smiled as she climbed onto his lap, straddling his thighs.

“Let’s take this off.” She tugged on his t-shirt, and he helped her strip it off.

Their movements had her rocking back and forth. His cock surged against his zipper, demanding freedom. Her eyes widened, and her fingers squeezed his shoulders. His hands locked on her hips, and he pulled her close.

“These aren’t your favorites or anything, are they?” He twirled the elastic at her hips around his fingers.

“No, why?” she asked as he yanked them, grimacing when the popped free.

She looked down at him as she lifted her hips and let him pull the material out from in between them. “What’s wrong?”

“Not exactly the effect I was going for.” He slid one of his hands up her back, and with a flick of his fingers, he had her bra undone.

“Haven’t lost my touch.” She laughed as he slid it off and held it up in the air, twirling it around on his finger.

“I forgot how much fun you are.” She collapsed against his chest in fit of laughter.

He stroked her bare back, loving the way she arched into his embrace. “Is there anything else I can help you remember?”

“I’ve got it from here.” She pressed a few scattered kisses to his chest as she worked her way to his mouth.

Their kiss fried his brain. She tasted sweet, yet hot. Their tongues dueled in a frantic rhythm. She purred as her fingers fought with the button on his jeans. He tilted his hips, giving her the room she needed. Once she had them open, she reached in and freed his cock.

He groaned as she stroked him from tip to base. Her thumb ran over the sensitive head, and he thought he was going to lose it. She lifted up and guided him to her entrance, but instead of sliding him in, she rubbed the head of his erection along her slippery folds. It must

have felt as good for her as it did for him, because they both moaned. She trembled as she let the tip slip inside. He held her hips tight, urging her down.

“Oh my God,” Jessie moaned out on a long, drawn-out sigh.

He let her take it from there. Her hips rocked, then she added a lift and lower to the rhythm. His fingers pressed so hard he was afraid he was going to leave bruises, but he couldn’t let go.

“Jessie, shit, oh shit.” He couldn’t even manage to tell her how fucking unbelievable she felt wrapped around him.

The rush of blood to his groin cut off the rest of his body’s commands, including his capability of speech. Jessie didn’t seem to mind. Her shiny pink nails dug into his chest as she pushed herself up. Victor slid his hands up her back, closing over shoulders. With every downward motion she made, he pulled her harder. Her moans grew louder, and she began to increase the speed of her movements.

Victor looked up at her. With her head thrown back mouth open and eyes closed, she would make the perfect description of someone lost in ecstasy. The image pushed him closer to the edge of the abyss. He just hoped he could hold on until Jessie came first. At the same time, she screamed his name. He couldn’t hold back any more. He let go, following her over the edge. His body jerked with the force of his release. Jessie trembled as he held her in his arms.

“Hope that sticks with you forever,” he murmured into her hair and felt her smile against his shoulder.

* * * *

Bobbie leaned back, trying to blend in with the wall. What an enlightening pastime eavesdropping could be. What a shame she hadn’t tried it earlier. She’d watched Jessie drag Victor past the staircase. She couldn’t see to be sure, but she guessed it had been the study door that slammed shut followed by a couple of thuds and laughter. Once she heard moaning, she knew it was time to go.

Quietly she climbed the stairs, careful to avoid the squeaky one, third from the top. Sam's door stood wide open, and she lay propped up on pillows against the headboard. Bobbie figured now would be as good a time as any to let her know she knew everything. Well, not everything since Sam was still keeping whatever had happened between her and Victor's brother Trent under wraps.

"Well, you look fine to me," Bobbie said as she walked into the room.

"I know it's really weird. I'm okay as long as I..." Bobbie dropped onto the bed with a bounce, and Sam's hands flew to her stomach, and her face took on a green tinge, "don't move."

"Wow. Jessie wasn't kidding. You're turning into Kermit," Bobbie teased, leaning back just incase Sam threw up.

Sam inhaled and blew out a few breaths, her color coming back. "Did you want something?"

"Yeah, I wanted to ask you if you're keeping Jessie's marriage to Victor a secret by choice, or if Jessie *asked* you to do it." Sam's eyes went wide, and her hand slapped over her mouth. Bobbie moved back as she jumped up and ran for the bathroom.

Bobbie followed, grabbing a face cloth from the cabinet and ran it under the faucet. When Sam finally stopped retching, she handed it to her and helped her to her feet. They stopped at the sink so Sam could rinse her mouth.

She eased Sam back onto the bed, feeling guilty for upsetting her so much. "How did you find out?" Sam asked. Bobbie just smiled instead of answering. "Does anyone else know?"

"How should I know? I just sort of put it all together so maybe someone else has to. The important question is, do you think she's doing the right thing?" Bobbie started to sit on the bed then chose the desk chair instead, pulling it to Sam's bedside.

"It doesn't matter what I think. All we can do is support her in whatever she decides to do." Sam leaned back and closed her eyes, but at Bobbie's silence opened them again and she stared at her.

“What did you do?”

“I went the other way. I decided to give them each a push.” Sam’s jaw dropped open and the green tinge came back. “Relax. She doesn’t know I know. He does, and before you ask, no, I didn’t tell him about the clause, but I did tell him I’d help him win her back.”

“Damn it, Bobbie, what are you thinking?” Sam dropped her head back onto the pillow.

“I’m thinking she wants him whether she wants to admit it or not. And I, for one, intend to see she gets what she wants.” Bobbie knew she was doing the right thing even if Sam didn’t.

“Don’t you think she knows what she’s doing?”

Bobbie shook her head. “No. As usual she’s thinking of all of us not herself.”

“I know. I told her to tell everyone, but she has her mind set on doing this her way.” Sam sighed, pressing her hand against her forehead.

“Well, there’s no reason she can’t think she did. You know that old saying ‘you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink?’ Sam nodded so Bobbie continued, “I think we can make this horse quench her thirst.”

Sam busted out laughing so hard it took her a few minutes to get herself under control. “Did you just call Jessie a horse?”

“I should have called her a jackass, because she’s so stubborn.” Their laughter lightened the mood, but Bobbie knew Sam wasn’t done yet.

“Okay, here’s the deal. I won’t tell Jessie you know, and you don’t tell me what you’re up to.”

“What?” Bobbie was sure she missed something, because usually there was no way Sam would give in that easily.

“Look, I can’t lie. She’ll see right through me. The less I know the better. She has no reason to think you know, right?” Bobbie nodded, “Then she won’t ask me, and I won’t have to lie.”

“Alright I get it. I’m not to tell you what I’m doing, but can I

count on you for information?” It would help if she had an inside source privy to all of Jessie’s plans.

“Yes. And I’ll start right now by telling you there’s only four days left for you to magically make her see loving Victor is a risk she should take.” Bobbie opened her mouth to ask why, but Sam held up her hand. “I can’t tell you everything. I will say her feelings for Victor have her running scared.”

Bobbie got to her feet and gave Sam a mock salute. “Fine. So Operation Lovebirds is now in effect. Steer clear or you may find yourself as my next target.”

“Why me?” Sam shouted nervously as Bobbie walked away without even looking back.

Chapter 14

Jessie wrapped her hands around her mug of hot tea. Her loss of control yesterday had not only been completely unexpected, it could have been disastrous. If any of her sisters, even Sam who knew about their relationship, found her and Victor in the study they would have demanded to know what the hell was going on. She knew if she found any of them in a compromising position with a married man she'd freak out too.

A satisfied smile crossed her face as she replayed the scene in her mind. His rough kisses in the kitchen had spurred her into action. The more he touched and teased the more ravenous she became. She'd dragged him into the study, planning on having her way with him. Once the door shut, she was taken over by a greedy side she didn't even know she had. He'd been putty in her hands. She rode him like a wild woman, and he loved every minute of it.

"Well, someone sure looks happy this morning," Georgie said as she bounced down the stairs into the kitchen, joining Jessie and the rest of her sisters.

"I thought so too," Frankie agreed as she took a seat at the other end of the table.

"Could be the handsome visitor she spent the afternoon locked in the study with." Bobbie's announcement had everyone staring at Jessie for an explanation.

"Victor and I spent some time going over his sketches." She was careful not to look any of them in the eye.

Joey lunged to her feet and grabbed her bag, yanking out the folder holding the sketches. "But I found them on the counter

yesterday, and I didn't want anything to happen to them so I took them up to the lodge to go over the cost analysis again."

"See? I told you I didn't lose them," Bobbie said, giving her a quick wink as she took the file. "It's a good thing he had his copies. I can't believe I spent the whole time searching for these while you and Victor were discussing the time frames."

"Sorry." Jessie nodded, thanking her for coming to her rescue, and at the same time wondering why.

She had a feeling it wouldn't be long before she found out. Silently she watched as Bobbie and the others started flipping through the sketches. Sam walked over and eased into the chair next to her. Jessie hoped this bug passed quickly. Sam looked miserable.

"Listen, since everyone's here, I think it's a good time to discuss hiring Victor and his brother to handle the project," Bobbie said as she reached for a muffin.

Ooh, the brat. Jessie dropped her eyes to her cup, listening to her sisters as they all started talking at once. Bobbie had a knack for picking the perfect moment to drop her little bombshells. *There's no getting out of this now.*

"Jess, do you think he's available?" Georgie asked, and Jessie shrugged.

"More importantly, can we afford him?" Joey asked, being more practical.

Before Jessie could answer Bobbie said, "He should be able to give us break since he's Jessie's...*friend.*"

Jessie did the only thing she could. She played dumb. "I have no idea if he'll be available, or what he'd charge us over the cost of the materials he listed."

"We should do this right," Joey said as she plucked a yellow note pad and pen out of her bag. "We need to list any questions we have for them. Oh, and find out if he'll pull all the permits and everything too."

Jessie let them run rampant, all the while hoping he'd refuse, or be

way out of their price range. If she worked the conditions of the job right, he just might decline their offer. If he didn't, they were going to have to come to some kind of agreement.

* * * *

Victor had never wanted to hit something as bad as he did right now. His third lap around the lake hadn't abated the feeling at all. Now that he thought about it, a dip in the chilly lake might be the way to go. Something had to give soon or he'd lose her for good. He stopped running and put his hands behind his head, stretching his back as he glared into the woods. Bobbie said he needed try to think out of the box. So he did, but it didn't help. Now he'd moved on trying to think around the box, under the box, and within a fifty mile radius of the box. He began sorting through what he'd figured out so far.

He started with Jessie. It took one look for him to know Jessie was still sexy as hell. All those curves and her sassy attitude sent his blood pressure skyrocketing. She wanted him and enjoyed his body. It didn't take much to get her going either, though the same could be said for him. She just gave him her sexy little smile, and he was raring to go.

As for the sisters, they all had an equal say in how the lodge was to be run. They voted on everything. They were all single, though Sam had just ended a relationship, and if Trent had any thing to say, she'd be back off the market soon. Though Bobbie was free, she had a big thing for Jake Gurion, the local sheriff.

As far as he and Jessie went, only Sam and Bobbie knew the truth. He still had no idea if that going to help him. He'd just have to wait and see. Why hadn't she told them? She probably had dozens of reasons, but he hoped he had been ticking them off one by one.

Why the divorce? That was the big question. It nagged, keeping him up late at night demanding an answer he didn't have. Yet one

way or another he'd get it before he left. More determined he turned to head back to his cabin and came face to face with the sheriff.

"Morning, Vic." He said it with a smile so Victor figured he wasn't in any trouble.

"Hi, Jake. Nice to see you again." He offered his hand, which Jake gave a hardy shake.

"Yeah, I kind of expected to run into you sooner, but then I talked to Bobbie and learned how busy the girls have been keeping you." Jake's chuckle reinforced how pitiful the whole situation seemed.

"They say a man in love will do just about anything to prove he's worthy." It was a flippant remark, but true.

"Getting anywhere?" Jake asked as they started walking back to the cabins.

"Not a friggin' inch. Something special bring you up?" *Like a fucking clue as to which way to go next.*

Jake clapped his hand on his shoulder. "Actually I heard you might be sticking around for a while, and I wondered if I could get your opinion on this piece of land I've been sitting on for the past couple years."

He'd be glad to think about something other than his own problems. "Sure. I'm free this afternoon."

"Great. Why don't you meet me at the station around three?" He smiled and rubbed his hands together, his enthusiasm palpable.

"I'll be there. Hey, Bobbie wouldn't have been the one who mentioned my sticking around, would she?" He wouldn't put it past her to try and find another reason for him to stay.

"She dropped it into our conversation, but that has nothing to with me coming to you. No one around even here knows I own the place. It has a cabin, and well truthfully, it's more like a shack on it right now. If I ever decide to settle down, I'll need something sturdier and at least a two car garage." They walked out of the woods onto a path that led right behind Victor's cabin.

"Can I ask you something personal?" Victor knew Jake would

probably think he overstepped his bounds, but he nodded all the same. “Is there anything going on between you and Bobbie?”

“She’s too young for me. She’ll outgrow her infatuation sooner or later.” And pigs could fly, Victor thought, watching Jake avoid his gaze.

“Does she know this? Coffee?”

Jake nodded as he took a seat on the steps of Victor’s deck. “I’ve made it clear on more than one occasion. Can I ask why you’re asking? For a family friend, you’re awfully protective of the girls.”

Victor laughed as he opened the door and grabbed two mugs out of the cabinet. “I could say the same for you. I guess I want to make sure she doesn’t get hurt.”

“Yeah, if I had a sister in-law I’d probably feel the same way.”

“Shit!” Victor shouted as he poured coffee all over his hand.

Jake rushed into the room and turned on the cold water and shoved Victor’s hand under it. He finished pouring the coffee and put the pot back on the maker’s base. He picked up the cups and carried them to the table. Victor shut the water off, grabbed a bag of frozen corn out of the freezer, and slapped it on his scalded hand. Obviously Bobbie wasn’t keeping her newly discovered information to herself.

He may as well find out what else Jake knew. “What else did she tell you?”

“Who is she?” Jake asked.

“Bobbie.”

“Bobbie knows? Anyone else?” Jake leaned back in his chair, tapping his fingers on the table.

“Sam, but she’s always known. If Bobbie didn’t tell you who did?” Victor asked, curious as to exactly how Jake found out.

“I’m the Sheriff. I have access to all sorts of records. Including marriage certificates.” Damn, he should have thought of that.

“How long have you known?”

“About two years. So are you two going to make a go of it this time?”

“If she’ll let us. Jessie’s got something going on she won’t tell me about.”

“Does it have anything to do with their plans to switch the focus of the lodge from sportsmen to a more feminine clientele?” He filed that tidbit away with everything else he knew.

A few more of the puzzle’s pieces fell into place, but now he had new ones to deal with. Like why she kept their plans so hush-hush? Was it part of the secret she’s hiding from him, or did she just think he wouldn’t care? Did it have anything to do with the reason she claimed to want the divorce? Then he remembered Jessie and Frankie talking about keeping things quiet for now, so it seemed he wasn’t the only one they were keeping in the dark.

“Fuck me.” He slapped the table, jostling both their mugs. “I should have put it together. I mean I know they’re planning on fixing the place up and I thought the spa tubs they’d wanted were a bit of an odd choice. But, shit, I never even asked why. I just figured they decided it was time to refresh the old place.”

“Maybe you should pin your wife down on the specifics.” Jake’s smile took any bite out of the comment.

“She’s got a good head on her shoulders. It’s a good idea to give the lodge an angle no one else is using.” But why hadn’t she just told him about their plans?

“I know a few things you don’t.” Jake shook his head. “I can’t tell you either. The sisters have had a lot happen in the past few years, and recent changes have brought about some complications some of them aren’t ready to deal with.”

“They all seem to be doing okay.” Victor wondered where Jake was going with this.

“Yeah, but I’d rather see them all happy instead of just doing okay. I plan on making sure it happens one way or another.”

Victor nodded his agreement. “It’s good to know they’ve got someone looking out for them. I plan on doing it myself, but I like knowing I have backup if I need it.”

Jake got to his feet and headed for the door. "Glad that's settled."

The door opened, missing Jake by inches. He laughed with a shake of his head. With a wave of his arm, he motioned for Jessie to come in.

"Hey, Jake." She stepped inside, her cheeks tinged with a pretty shade of pink.

"Jessie." He leaned down and kissed her cheek as he passed, then turn back to Victor. "I'll see you this afternoon. Bring a notebook or whatever it is you use."

Jake closed the door, and instantly, Jessie turned to him, eyes wide and questioning. "Where are you going with Jake, and why would you bring your sketch pad?"

He considered telling her for a minute, but Jake had said no one knew about the place so he felt reluctant to give her any information. "He wants to show me something."

Jessie leaned casually against the counter, but the stiff way she held her shoulders told him it was all an act. He knew he could set her at ease with little effort. Offering her a cup of coffee would be the civil thing to do, but he wasn't feeling very accommodating right now. As he leaned back in his chair, he stuck his feet out in front of him and crossed them at the ankles. Keeping his eyes on her, he folded his hands over his stomach, letting her know he was waiting on her to make a move.

"Oh, Um...I, well...I stopped by because we all met this morning, and we're considering offering you and Trent the job, but we have some questions." She handed him a sheet of standard questions, proving they weren't fools.

"I'm sure we can cover all this." He laid the paper on the table and waited, feeling there was more to come.

"Good, but there are a few things I need to know." She licked her lips probably just to distract him.

"Like what?" He kept his voice low and calm.

"If you'll be comfortable working for your ex-wife."

It took every ounce of self-control not to shout. “We haven’t made that decision yet. But I don’t mix my business and personal lives, so yeah, I can handle it.”

“And taking orders from a bunch of women?”

“I’ve been doing it all week.”

“Still, I’d need to know we’d be your first priority.”

“You already are. Personally and professionally.”

“And you’ll stick around until the job is one hundred percent complete?”

“I’ve got nowhere to go.”

She shook her head, obviously not assured by his answer. “Right now, but that could change.”

He lost it and lunged to his feet, but instead of going to her like he wanted to, he headed for the door. He stood there staring at the lake realizing she’d never get over his leaving or forgive him for it.

“Damn it, Jessie, is that why you’re still holding back? You’re afraid I’m going to cut out on you again? Is there any way I can prove to you that this is where I want to be? With you forever.”

* * * *

Jessie wanted to believe him. The anger and hurt she felt coming from him had her second guessing her choices up ‘til now. He’d been right in accusing her of holding back. Could she keep doing it? In moments like this, she didn’t think so.

There might be a way to handle the business aspect of things. If she could get him to sign a proxy allowing her to cast his vote for the next year it would cover them until all the changes they planned were accomplished. And if he did walk away, they’d be okay, business-wise. Emotionally she wasn’t sure she could take another hit like that.

And it wouldn’t be fair to her sisters if she had two votes to cast. What if they voided his vote for the year she held his proxy? Her stomach rolled. This could never work. What the hell was she

thinking? That she could have her cake and eat it too. There was no way he'd agree to something like this. And could she really ask him to dangle at her beck and call, like a puppet on a string? If she was truthful with herself, she wanted an equal partner. Someone she could lean on, depend on if she needed him.

"Can you at least be honest and admit you still love me?" Victor asked. She felt like the question like a double-edged sword.

"Can you honestly say love is going to solve all our problems?" she countered, tactfully sidestepping his question.

"No, damn it, I'm not saying that. I would just like to know if you're playing with me." His voice dug a chasm through her heart.

"D-do you really think I-I'd do that?" She felt the tears building, but refused to let them fall.

He kept his back to her and shook his head. Jessie would have given anything to see his eyes right then. "Not intentionally, but I think you might be so twisted by your fear you're not thinking clearly."

"Yeah, well, my fear isn't irrational, is it? And I'm not letting it run my life." *Not completely anyway.*

"You're avoiding answering the question. It's an easy one. I love you. Do you love me?"

She sighed, hating that he was right. "Do you really need to hear the words?"

"It's not that I need to hear them as much as I think you need to say them," he said, turning to her, his eyes swallowing her.

"Fine. I love you." The tears rolled down her cheeks in torrents. "Are you happy now?"

Victor didn't say anything. He just walked over and wrapped her in his arms. He rocked her gently, letting her cry. This wasn't fair. He wasn't supposed to react like this. She'd expected him to not necessarily gloat, but to take some satisfaction in her defeat.

"Where do you want to go from here?" he whispered into her hair as he rubbed her back.

Jessie shrugged, not trusting her voice just yet. Did she wasn't sure how they should gone on now. She needed time to figure out exactly what this meant for them, and where they should go from here. How was she going to break this to her sisters?

"How about we sit down and talk?" It may have sounded like a suggestion, but he ushered her over to the bed and eased her down.

He knelt on the floor in front of her. "Jess, neither of us is ready to walk away. I know you think you are, but given time, you'll regret it. I don't want that for you, for either of us. We have to work something out."

She sobbed louder, and a fresh wave of tears flooded her eyes. He leaned forward, pressing her head onto his shoulder. His tenderness only made her cry harder. This was hard enough without his trying to make it easier. No one liked to admit they had made a mistake, or made the wrong choice. Taking it a step further and laying their heart on the line was even more difficult. She couldn't seem to catch her breath. Jessie couldn't decide if her heart raced because of her crying or his touch.

Suddenly the door flew open and Frankie charged in, looking ready to do some major damage. "What did you do to my sister?"

As she moved forward, Victor got to his feet, facing her. He protectively put himself between them. Jessie guessed most people would have looked defensive. She had a feeling he purposefully kept his posture relaxed. He held his shoulders back, his arms hanging loosely by his sides, his hands open instead clenched into fists. Unable to stop herself, Jessie reached out and slipped one of her hands into his. His fingers wrapped around hers in a gentle, yet firm grip.

"Frankie, he didn't do anything," she managed to say, not willing to let him face her sister's wrath alone.

She saw Frankie's eyes narrow as they zeroed in on their linked hands. "Then why are you crying?"

"I'm fine. We were just talking." She used her free hand to wipe

any stray tears from her cheeks.

Frankie didn't look a bit mollified. She waved her hand in the air as she spoke. "Listen, Mr. Weatherly, this better...let me rephrase, this will *not* become a habit. Are we understood?"

Jessie knew from the look on her face Frankie meant business. Most people couldn't seem to see past the five-foot-nine inch, pale moonlight beauty, as their grandfather called her, but there'd always been more to Frankie than that. She had a hidden steel core she kept under tight wraps. They all knew some man would eventually come along and spark the fury that lay beneath the surface. Victor must have sensed it, though, because he nodded his agreement.

He wasn't cowering to them. It seemed more like he was trying to prove he wasn't a threat. Why had it taken her so long to see it? She hated to admit it, but he might be right about her fears blocking her from seeing how things could work out. Frankie's showing up unannounced like this gave her the excuse she needed to get some time away from him and process everything.

Victor cleared his throat, and Frankie's attention snapped to him. "Is there a reason you stopped by?"

"Yes." She turned to Jessie. "Sam needs you up at the kitchen. Something about an anniversary dinner for a friend of yours."

"Shit, oh shit. I have to go. Can we please finish this later?"

"I have to meet Jake, but I'll meet you at your place around eight." She started to walk away, but he pulled her back and pressed his lips to hers.

She heard Frankie sigh, which she took to mean Victor had passed whatever barrier she may have constructed. He ended the kiss, spun her around, patted her butt, and gently shoved her towards the door. She laughed as she followed Frankie out the door. Funny thing was she didn't stop laughing until she reached the lodge. Even then her smile felt like it might become permanent.

Chapter 15

Victor hadn't seen another house since they turned off the main road on to one that wound its way up the mountain. As he followed Jake onto another road—well more of a trail—he knew they'd have to a lot to do just to make it so they could get any equipment up here. He pulled up beside Jake's Blazer and took a second to catch his breath. Jake hadn't been kidding. The weather beaten cabin did have a shack-like appearance. He wondered how much longer it would be standing. It was truly an eyesore, but the views more than made up for it. The whole area was beautiful, but a house built in this place situated on the side of a mountain with a great view of the valley in one direction and Canada in the other would be incredible.

He slid out of his truck and grabbed his bag. He couldn't stop the flood of images of cabins and house that slipped into his mind. They ranged from modest to luxurious. He'd have to find one that not only fit it with the land, but it also needed to fit Jake. That was the hardest part of designing a home. It needed to be personal. Most buildings ended up cold or ordinary. Sometimes they had a unique feature or two, but never really made someone really want to be there. In his opinion there should be no place like home.

"Whad'ya think?" Jake said proudly.

"It has amazing potential. How close are your nearest neighbors?" Victor asked as he pulled a digital camera out of his bag.

"I own a little over twelve acres. My brother and his daughter live a ways up-mountain, and an old friend of our fathers has a place about five minutes down the road. Most people tend to build lower since it's easier to get utilities and stuff."

“You’re not worried about that?”

“No. I have enough connections I should be able to cut through a lot of the red tape, and I’m not in any rush, so I can take my time.”

“That’s good, because even the best planned build will run into delays.” Victor lowered the camera and stared out at the view.

The radio in Jake’s truck buzzed a few times then a strident voice came on. “Sheriff, you there?”

Jake walked over, reached in the window, and grabbed the handset. “Go ahead, Reynolds.”

“You’re needed down at the post office. It seems Mrs. O’Malley stuck that little dog of hers in the mailbox to retrieve a letter she forgot to put a stamp on. Now she’s refusing to let Ed open the box and get him out.” This was all relayed between fits of laughter.

Victor couldn’t believe what he heard. Was someone really wacky enough to put a dog in a mailbox? Jake groaned, and Victor fought not to laugh.

“I’ll be right there.” Jake turned to him and Victor lost it.

By the time he stopped laughing, Jake already climbed in his truck. He stuck his arm out and tossed him a set of keys. Victor caught them with ease.

“I’ll give you a call tomorrow. Do me a favor and lock up when you leave,” Victor could hear him laughing as he drove away.

He chuckled to himself as he walked over and let himself in. it didn’t take long to check the place out. There was one room, two if you counted the closet-sized bathroom. A small table and chair sat across from a decrepit sofa. No fridge, but it did have an old wood stove and a rusty sink. Using his finger, he wrote his name on the ancient, dust-covered table. Hell, dust covered every surface, more than an inch thick in some places. Obviously Jake didn’t spend much time here yet. Looking out the one and only window, he decided that would be the main focus of his design. Windows that would allow Jake to fully enjoy his view from all angles.

Knowing the vista would be a great central point for the base of

his design, he went back outside. Tossing his bag on the hood of the truck, he walked around to take pictures from every angle. He searched for the perfect viewpoint. He heard a noise behind him and turned to see a bear coming out of the woods. His first thought was to run, but his legs refused to follow the command. The only part of his body that seemed to respond to the threat was his pinky finger, which twitched wildly.

It took him a few minutes to realize the beast hadn't seemed to notice him. He told himself his best bet for survival was to get inside until it left. As the bear ambled towards his truck, he forced his legs to inch him towards the cabin. He watched the bear reach into the cabin of his truck and pull out the bag of apples he's picked up earlier, hoping he'd be able to charm Sam into making him a pie. The bear had probably caught the scent of the half eaten one he'd left on the seat in the first place.

Victor made it within a few feet of the door when the bear turned, looked right at him, and roared. The sight of the huge mouth filled with all those huge sharp teeth was enough to have him bolting the rest of the way there. The deafening rumble he emitted may have added a little speed. Through it all, he insanely snapped as many pictures as he could. After leaning against the door taking a few much needed deep breaths, he moved to the window just in time to see the animal grab onto the door of his truck. With another mighty growl, he gave the truck a furious shake, rocking it back and forth.

After a few hours of him sitting there taking snapshots, it seemed like the bear started to get bored. He kept pacing between the truck and the tree line.

With a quick look back at the cabin, the bear actually took a step into the woods. Victor waved his hands, urging him on, but instead of going farther, he leaned against one of the bigger trees and rubbed his back up and down. For a few seconds he wondered if the bear just playing with him. He thought about making a dash for the truck. He could probably make it. He never minded taking a risk when he

thought the payoff would be worth it. In this case, however, he decided it wasn't. Leaving Jessie temporarily had been bad enough, but leaving her forever wasn't something he'd willing to do.

It was a good thing he'd taken the time to think because the bear was headed back for the truck. Of course that could have had something to do with the unmistakable ringing of his outrageously expensive phone coming from inside his bag. It was his own fault since by habit he always kept it on the highest volume setting. Victor snapped a few pictures of the bear as it walked over and scooped up the bag. He wanted to have irrefutable proof that bears could actually smile. Switching the camera to video mode, he shifted to the opposite side of the window to be sure he had a perfect angle as the bear cautiously examined his bag before dumping the contents all over the ground.

The now-silent phone bounced across the ground. It's been through worse, Victor thought, with a shrug. Luckily the bear ignored it and his sketchbook. Instead he decided to help himself to Victor's stash of nutritional fiber bars and Three Musketeers bars. Unable to do anything else, Victor watched and waited as the sun began to set. Every so often his phone would ring, catching the bear's attention.

At first he just batted it around on the ground. Finally when the bear got annoyed, or interested enough, he managed to pick it up. Victor grimaced as he put it in that mighty mouth and bit down. He knew he was too far away, but he actually thought he heard the phone crack. When the bear took it out and twisted it in his claws, Victor knew it was trashed.

Looking down at his wrist, he realized it had gotten dark enough he had to push the button lighting up the watch dial. Six-thirty. The damn thing better get lost soon so he could get going. Leaving his post by the window, he scoured a few cabinets and found a stubby little candle someone had stuffed in a Mason jar, and an almost empty box of matches. When he finally managed to get it lit, it cast a gloomy glow around the room. He walked back to the window, jumping back

when he was about a foot away. He cursed, bobbling the candle he'd come damn close to dropping. It seemed his new friend might have been attracted to the light, because now it was sitting right outside the window, still playing with his phone. At least he wasn't trying to get inside. One good slap of his mighty paw and the walls would probably tumble.

Victor lowered himself to the floor. The candle's flame flickered, making shadows dance on the walls. At least he'd learned something from this disaster. From now on, he'd keep his phone in his pocket at all times.

* * * *

Jessie slammed the stack of magazines down on the coffee table. With a huff of breath, she leaned over and fanned them out. She ignored her sisters' pointed stares that followed her as she walked over and looked out the window again. How typically male. She was finally ready to deal with things between them, and he makes her wait. She moved to the couch and began straightening the cushions. She picked up one of the accent pillows and shook it a few times then whacked it against her leg. She dropped it onto the couch and picked up the next one and gave it a good punch. Then, holding it in her fist, she pushed, tugged and twisted.

Sam ripped the pillow out of her hands and chucked it onto the couch. "It's dead already."

"Whatever," Jessie mumbled as she headed for the porch and hopefully some privacy.

The porch swing swayed from her weight as she sat down. The peaceful feeling she normally got sitting there looking out over the valley seemed completely out of reach tonight. She heard the unmistakable squeak of the screen door and held her breath waiting for the questions to come. Sam slid into the seat beside her and nudged her shoulder.

Relieved that Sam was the one her sisters had chosen to find out what was wrong, she let out a sigh. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Talk about what?" She could see Sam trying, but failing to hold back a smile.

Jessie got to her feet and paced back and forth along the porch. She could tell her all about it. Sam was more than just her sister. She was her best friend. They'd been through everything together. All the ups and down of dating and every other milestone in their lives. If anyone would try to understand what she felt it would be Sam. Still, she felt foolish for being angry because he was running late.

"It's nothing," she said, not wanting Sam to worry or read too much into it.

The phone rang, and she ran for the door, almost knocking Bobbie over in her haste. She hit the hall and slid to a stop as she watched Frankie lift the receiver off the wall. She waited, hoping it was for her, but she yelled for Joey who quickly took and ended the call. She'd almost reached the point where she was ready to bite the bullet, but instead she grabbed the phone and punched in the number for his cabin. Not getting any answer, she then tried his phone. Again, no answer. He couldn't be out of range since he had a satellite phone instead of a normal cellular phone.

She went into the study, planning to try and catch up on some paperwork. That lasted about fifteen minutes before she dialed his number again to no avail. She decided she'd watch some TV, but after spending about twenty minutes flicking through the channels, Georgie snatched the remote out of her hand and shut the TV off.

"Hey." Jessie watched as she sat on the couch.

"You're going to wear the button out if you keep that up." Georgie ignored her out stretched hand and tucked the remote under the couch cushion.

"What's wrong with you tonight?" Joey asked, dropping onto the couch next to her twin.

"Nothing," she claimed, glancing at the clock.

Nine-fifteen. *Damn it, he was supposed to be here an hour and fifteen minutes ago.* There was late, and there was *late*. He could have at least called. What if something happened, and he couldn't? Her anger took a turn towards panic. It was getting dark, and the chill of early spring hung in the air. She grabbed the cordless phone off the coffee table and dialed his number. After half a dozen rings, it went to his voice mail.

"Did you and Victor have another spat?" Bobbie's voice held a teasing note, but Jessie wasn't in the mood.

"No," she snapped and instantly regretted being so harsh.

"Jess," Sam said, sitting on the coffee table right in front of her, "We can all tell something's bothering you. If you don't want to tell us what it is, that's fine, but is there anything we can do to help?"

She shook her head and Sam patted her knee. "Alright, but if you change your mind we're here for you."

"She might be willing to let you off that easy, but I'm not." Frankie shoved Sam off the table and took her place. "After the scene I walked in on this afternoon, you need to come clean."

"What scene?" the twins and Bobbie echoed.

"Frankie," Jessie said in a low warning tone.

Frankie leaned forward and whispered, "Either you tell us what's wrong, or I tell them."

She looked at all their expectant faces. It was kind of humiliating to admit her anger and even anxiousness about being stood up. Add to all that, the more she thought about everything the more she wondered where the heck he was and why he hadn't called her. And why wasn't he answering her calls.

Bobbie laid a hand on her shoulder. "Jessie, are you okay?"

She started to nod her head, but it turned into an awkward shake.

Frankie laughed. "Well, that tells us a lot."

Bobbie started walking around the room. "Okay, you don't want to tell us what's going on, we'll figure it out on our own. Let's take this one step at a time. You were fine until after dinner."

Joey joined in, adding, "Then she started watching the clock."

"And jumping every time the phone rang. And she's made quite a few calls of her own." Georgie motioned to the phone lying on the table.

Frankie looked her in the eye and smiled. "She keeps looking out the window too."

"How late is he?" Sam said, putting it all together with ease.

Frankie groaned and looked at the clock and said, "Almost two hours."

Jessie nodded. Two hours and not a word. It might seem silly to them, but it really bothered her.

"And he hasn't called?" She shook her head at Sam's question fighting back the tears she felt building.

"When did you last talk to him?" Bobbie asked, reaching for the phone.

"Earlier this afternoon. He was supposed to meet Jake around three," she said, thankful they all ignored the way her voice cracked.

Bobbie passed the phone to Frankie who took it and walked into the hall, presumably to call Victor. Bobbie walked over and yanked her cell phone out of her bag and Jessie figured she had Jake on speed dial. Sam reached over and took hold of her shaking hand. Seeing the way Frankie, Bobbie and Sam reacted made her realize that Victor had already wormed his way into her family.

"I don't see what everyone is getting so worked up about. So he changed his mind. It's not like you guys are in the kind of relationship where he has to check in." Joey's comment struck a chord deep inside her.

Did he think that way too? She looked over at Sam who shook her head and gave her hand a squeeze. Georgie punched Joey in the shoulder, shaking her head. She couldn't blame Joey for thinking that way. As the most practical of all of them, and not knowing exactly what was going on between her and Victor, she would treat him just like any other friend of the family.

Georgie turned to her twin and said, “You know, sometimes you can be really dense.”

Joey looked totally confused. “What am I missing?”

“Jessie will tell us all in good time,” Frankie said as she walked back in the room. She pointed at Georgie with the phone. “and you be nice.”

“Tell us what?” Joey persisted, and Jessie was about to tell them when Bobbie rushed into the room.

“Jake left Victor around four and hasn’t seen or heard from him since.”

“Maybe he gave up and went home to his wife,” Georgie said softly.

“That would be hard to do since his wife is sitting right here. I am his wife,” Jessie said, closing her eyes so she wouldn’t have to see the shock and hurt at being left out of such an important part of her life on their faces.

Chapter 16

“You’re married!” the twins echoed.

She nodded, holding up her hand to ward off the questions she knew would be coming. “Yes, and I’ll explain everything later. Right now, though, I’d like to find Victor and make sure he’s okay.”

“Before you blast him for standing you up, and being too manly to call,” Bobbie said as she marched into the kitchen.

“Jess, you know he may have just gotten a flat or something.” Sam was right, but that didn’t explain why he wasn’t answering his phone.

“Or considering the shambles I found you in, he may have decided he was doing more harm than good and left,” Frankie said, taking the seat the twins vacated on the couch.

“Frankie!” Sam shouted, throwing a pillow at her, and Jessie found herself smiling at their antics.

“Now back to the subject of your missing husband. Should we go looking for him or what?” Sam had the right idea. They could leave one of them there incase he showed up, and everyone else could go look for him.

“Jake said we should stay put,” Bobbie said as she came back into the room. “He’s going out looking for him and will call as soon as he knows something.”

“And we’re supposed to sit here and wait like good little girls.” Frankie didn’t sound happy, or like she was about to follow Jake’s edict.

Bobbie shook her head. “I said that’s what he said to do, not what we we’re going to do. I say we split up. We send Georgie and Sam

into town. Joey and I will head up to the lodge. And, Frankie, you stay here, keep calling his cell phone, and keep Jessie from going crazy. First one to hear anything will call the others. We meet back here in an hour. Not one minute longer. Got it?"

"Damn, she's good. Jake's not going to be happy that you disobeyed him." Frankie was right, but they'd deal with him later.

"One of these days he's going lose it, and you're not going to like the consequences." Sam practically shoved the now giggling Bobbie out the door.

Jessie stood in front of the windows and watched her sisters drive away.

* * * *

Victor sat in the dark listening to the bear snuffle outside the window. He'd resigned himself to a few things over the past few hours. Being trapped alone with no distractions allowed time for a few eye openers. It made him face a lot of facts. First and foremost was the fact that he'd backed Jessie into a corner and that wasn't fair to either of them. When he got out of here, he decided to tell her he'd leave.

It wasn't a threat. He'd sign the damn papers and go. She'd been living her life in a holding pattern, and it was about time she'd able to do whatever she wanted without having to think about him. If sometime in the future they were brought back together, that would be great, but it wouldn't be because he'd managed to twist things around until they suited him.

In the distance, he heard the rumbling of what he thought might be an engine. He scrambled to his feet and looked out the window. Bobbie's little compact bounced down the rutted driveway, and he could see she had one of the twins with her. The bear rolled to a sitting position, not looking intimidated, but interested in the newcomers. There had to be someone they could call for help. Before

he could get the window open to warn her, she pulled to a stop and climbed from the car.

“Bobbie, don’t move!” he shouted once he had it wedged open a few inches.

She stopped and looked around, but it was so dark she looked at him then away. Obviously she didn’t see the bear either. He grabbed the camera and stuck it in the opening and snapped a picture. The flash lit the air, drawing her attention, and the bear’s. It growled, Bobbie shrieked, and Victor ran for the door. He opened it just as Jake’s black Blazer came whipping down the drive. Horn honking, he pulled up beside her car. Knowing he had to do something, Victor opened the door and stood on the threshold.

“Bobbie, ease back,” Victor said snapping the camera again, hoping to attract the bear.

No luck there, because the bear now had Bobbie locked in its sight. Bobbie took a step back, and the bear growled, leaning forward. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jake pull something out of his truck. Carefully Victor crouched down never once taking his eyes off the beast and picked up a big stone.

The bear rose on his back legs, and Victor clenched his fist around the rock. At least six feet, and five hundred pounds of muscle, and bristling black fur stood between him and his would-be rescuers. Bobbie froze in her tracks. He chuckled the rock at his own truck, which sat a good five feet away in the opposite direction. The loud clunk echoed in the night. The bear turned. Then he heard a loud shot, and the bear crumpled to the ground. Bobbie’s scream pierced the night. The sister in the car, Joey he thought, jumped out and wrapped her arms around her. Victor and Jake moved to the bear.

“Lucky shot.” Jake said, swinging the gun over his shoulder.

“Right,” Victor agreed, but he knew Jake lied through his teeth.

Victor’s uncle had told him all about Jake’s formal training when he’d been with the Border Patrol. The man was a crack shot and an excellent strategist. The military and FBI both tried to get their claws

into him at one point, but he wanted to stay close to home. When his brother suggested running for sheriff position, he agreed to run. Knowing everyone in town he won in a landslide. At twenty-nine years old, he became the youngest sheriff the town, actually the whole county, ever had.

He listened as Jake pulled a phone from his hip and called the kill into the game warden. “They’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Bobbie’s sobbing carried over to them. Jake shoved the gun back into his truck before heading over to her. She was obviously really shaken up. Victor thought Jake was going to comfort her, so when he grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a rough shake, Victor couldn’t believe it.

“Damn it, I told you to stay put,” he shouted.

“I don’t have to listen to you,” Bobbie cried, shoving at his chest, but he refused to let her go.

“Then why even call me? Never mind. I don’t want to hear your excuses. You risked not only your own life, but Victor’s and your sister’s too.” Her mouth formed a perfect O, and Victor got close enough that he could see her face turn beet red.

“Jake,” Victor said as two guys dressed in green uniforms pulled up on ATV’s.

“I didn’t mean to,” Bobbie whimpered, collapsing against Jake’s chest.

“I know, baby, I know,” he said, rubbing her back. “Joey, get in my truck. I’ll drive you two home.”

Joey didn’t even blink, she just walked over and climbed into the back seat. Jake scooped Bobbie up into his arms and carried her over to the truck and put her in next to her sister. Victor thought Jake looked reluctant to leave Sam. Eventually he came back over and together they walked over and explained the situation. Jake signed the report, and given the option, told the man he’d see to the bear himself. One of the guys tagged its ear and they left.

“I’ll follow you back to the Brazen place, where you, my friend,

have some very anxious women climbing the walls.” Jake clapped Victor on the shoulder.

* * * *

Jessie paced in front of the window. They’d finally gotten the call about ten minutes ago. Victor was okay, and everyone’s on their way home. Georgie passed on the sketchy details including a bear and game wardens. All she heard was that Victor was okay and on his way back to her. That was the important thing. Everything else they could deal with later. Sam’s truck came flying down the driveway.

“Where are they?” Sam asked as she came through the door.

“They’re not here yet,” Frankie said, laying her hand on Jessie shoulder. “Now tell us more about this bear.”

Georgie jumped right in. “Victor got stuck in this cabin with a bear sitting outside. He’s been there since like four o’clock this afternoon. Jake showed up and had to shoot the bear. The game warden had to be called and everything.”

A horn beeped, and Jake’s truck pulled into the driveway, followed closely by Victor’s truck. Jessie rushed onto the porch, her sisters close on her heels. Jake got out of his truck and walked around to the passenger. He reached in and helped Bobbie then Joey out. Victor stopped his truck and climbed out. Jessie held it together long enough for him to cover half the distance from his truck to the porch. Then she lost it. She took off running and leaped into his arms, knocking them both to the ground.

She covered his mouth with hers, and in that instant, everything around them disappeared. Loud laughter and cheering that brought her back to the present.

He sat up and settled her on his lap. “I take it I’m not in trouble.”

“No. As a matter of fact, I’ve told my sisters all about us.” She wiggled off him and held out her hand.

“Really?” He looked around the group of smiling faces, and she

got the feeling he wasn't happy about it.

"Yeah, isn't that what you wanted?" She dropped her hand and backed away from him.

"It is if it's what you want," he said getting to his feet, "but we still have a few things to work out. Like why you wanted a divorce."

"We can talk about that later."

"No, I don't think we can. I love you, Jess. And I want to make this marriage work, but I need to know why you wanted a divorce. And what's changed?" She couldn't tell him now, not in front of everyone.

Jessie looked at Sam for help, but Frankie spoke first. She grabbed her arm and spun her to them. "Shit, you were going to divorce him because of us."

"There's a lot more to it than that," Jessie said, backing away, right into Victor's hard body.

As usual Sam came to her aid. "Calm down and let her explain."

"Does this have anything to do with that stupid clause your grandfather put in his will?" Jake asked from his perch on the porch.

Everyone looked over to where he sat with his arm around Bobbie, who was still looking a little shell-shocked.

"That's the second time someone has mentioned a clause in the will," Victor said from behind her. She cringed, knowing he wasn't going to like this one bit.

Jessie turned to him and pressed her hand to his chest. "Can we please go inside and talk about this?"

"Actually we'd all like to hear this," Georgie said, taking a seat on the porch.

"Jessie, honey, this sounds like it involves everyone, so why don't we just get it over with?" Victor joined her sisters and Jake on the porch steps.

"Fine. My loving grandfather, the idiot, put a clause in his will that says we all have to agree on any and all changes for the lodge. We have a plan—"

“A good one,” he said, interrupting. “Sorry, go on.”

“And I was afraid that you may not agree. And I couldn’t let something I’ve done ruin their plans.”

“I was right,” Frankie said, slapping her hand against her leg.

“So it wasn’t because you don’t love me anymore?” Victor’s huge, sexy smile sent a jolt through her.

“Please,” Sam groaned. “Now tell him the rest.”

“There’s more?” they all said, and despite the importance of the situation, Sam laughed.

Jessie sighed, but knew she had to go on, because Sam wouldn’t have it any other way. “I was, no, I *am* afraid you’ll leave again. I know I’ll have to work on that.”

Victor didn’t say anything. He got to his feet and walked over. He dipped his finger under the edge of her shirt and lifted out the chain holding her gold wedding band. He undid the clasp and let the ring fall into his hand. Her heart raced, wondering what he was going to do with it.

He got down on one knee and held the ring up. Taking her left hand in his he slid the ring on her finger as he said, “No, Jessie, it’s something we need to work on. Together.”

She nodded, not able to say anything through her tears. Everyone on the stairs cheered and clapped.

“Guess I’ll have to turn that bear into a rug as belated wedding gift,” Jake said, and they all laughed.

“And from here on out, we all get pre-nups,” Joey added in a serious tone, her practical business nature shining through.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I live in northern Maine near the Canadian border, but have strong family ties down in Massachusetts. My husband and I have been married for what sometimes seems like forever and have three great kids. One girl, two boys, and a house full of pets. When I'm not totally caught up in getting my characters and scenes fleshed out, I can usually be found with my nose stuck in a book, or snuggled up on the couch watching a movie with my hubby or one of the kids. I enjoy spending time with my big noisy family and fishing when I get the chance.

When it comes to writing I've always made up stories to entertain my kids. As they grew up I began writing romances to entertain myself. I've been seriously focusing on writing for the past three and a half years. Luckily I have a wonderful supportive family, and friends that are willing to sit there and listen to me ramble on about what my characters have done, or are about to do. I am a proud member of Romance Divas and enjoys visiting the Romantic Times forum.



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