



*Stronger
Than Me*
Shara Azod

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by
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to every woman who ever found herself caught up with no way out. There is hope. Even if there is no Emory, you can make it. Dig deep and just let go. I will be praying for you.

*Love Always,
Shara*

Chapter One

"Hey baby, I need you to call Tawny to pick you up or let you use her car and come downtown to get me. I'm at Red's Bar, my truck broke down again. And hurry up, I'm tired as shit. Thanks, baby."

Kennedy stared at her cell, tempted, oh so damn tempted to place it carefully on the floor and stomp the little black bearer of bad and worse news beneath the worn out heel of her boots. But that would only mean she was out a couple hundred dollars she just didn't have. Damn the man to hell and back. Closing her eyes she fought back the burning behind her lids. She's sworn she was never going to cry over Darryl Carter again. A stupid promise she's never be able to keep while living together. She could've left, should've left a long time ago. Just said fuck it to the last twelve years and everything they had supposedly built up together while preparing to marry. Thank the Good Lord that day had never come. Darryl had been too lazy to drag his ass down to the courthouse to get a license, and there had never been enough money for a wedding.

Yeah, all they managed to build was a pile of debt and in Kennedy's case, a raging case of broken heart. Darryl wasn't capable of making adult decisions; not rational ones. There was always some kind of scheme or big plans that never panned out. He was always working on something big, something that would make their lives easier. Just as soon as he had the capital, as soon as he could get a loan, as soon as he could get together the right partners, location, equipment – the list never ended.

Meanwhile Kennedy was working one full time and two part time jobs, trying to keep their heads above water. She'd given up even trying to pay for extras like basic cable or even the newspaper subscription. They needed the phone in case the "big call" came. From who, Kennedy had given up trying to figure out a long time ago. They needed a three bedroom house because Darryl needed a room for his office and another to work on his music, because that was his fallback plan. A music contract that was never going to come unless he learn to sing on key or at least learn to play the instruments he'd had to have. But rent was cheap and even though it would've been cheaper to stay in a one bedroom, nothing was in her name.

Thinking back over the long line of events that'd led her to this place just didn't do any good. She'd believed Darryl when he told her he'd take care of her after her parents died and there'd been nowhere to go and no one to turn to. In the beginning he really had. But somewhere, somehow things had turned and she found it was her taking care of him instead of the other way around. She'd spent so much time in the beginning trying to repay him for giving her a place to stay in any way she could, he'd stop trying, stopped working, stopped being a damn man.

Yeah, she could call Tawny alright; whom Kennedy suspected might just be sleeping with Darryl given the time the two spent together while she was at work. Call Tawny while packing her shit and walking away. If only she could bear the humiliation; her pride simply wouldn't allow her to beg someone to allow her to stay at their place until she could find a home of her own. Besides, her so-called family had all turned

away after the death of her parents, offering her nothing but a pat on the head. They knew she had nothing, and not one of them had given her so much of a sympathy card. She'd taken one hell of an emotional beating already, she didn't think she could take the questions or the pity, or, hell the *I-told-you-so's* would make her want to curl up in a little ball and hide from the world. Besides, she had done this to her life, damn it, she would dig herself out of the Olympic pool-sized whole even if it killed her.

It just might, her tired body screamed as she flipped through the numbers on her phone. *Leave him there; make him find his own damn way home.* Oh how she was tempted. The only reason she allowed her fingers to press Tawny's name was the specter of one of her many male cousins happening upon Darryl's favorite watering hole. She really didn't need to hear more shit from her family about her life choices. Yeah, she had made a colossal mistake, her bad. Not like any one of them could do a damn thing to help. They would just shake their collective heads and *tsk*. Tawny at least would keep her mouth shut, having finally just crawled out of her very own shit hole.

Thirty minutes later she was driving towards what the small southern town called downtown. In reality it was little more than a strip from one of the major highways that ran straight through Georgia and just happened to run through the center of town. Roberta, Georgia wasn't exactly the cultural mecca. Salty tears made a slow trek down her face despite her best efforts to keep them at bay. There was a time when she swore she would claw her way out of this place one way or another. The dreams she'd once had about how her life was going to turn out. She'd flushed them all but good hadn't she? And for what?

Once she walked these streets head high, chest out. She was smart, pretty, and dating one of Roberta's finest offerings. He was even going to the junior college in Fort Valley. She'd thought when she graduated they would go together. But life just has a way of kicking you in the teeth, didn't it? Both her parents had been killed in a house fire right after she received her diploma. Kennedy had been at Tawny's at the time, which had saved her life. While her cousin had offered, there was no way Kennedy could stay with her at the time. Tawny's ex-husband had been a little too vocal about how much he'd enjoy *having* her there. Kick her in the head for being all kinds of a fool, but she'd let Darryl talk her out of the modest insurance policy. He was going to start a contracting business; fix up some of the old houses and business in the county, maybe get a contract with one of the major home improvement stores.

He'd bought a truck, some tools and pissed the rest away. Not that she'd been blameless. When Kennedy thought back to the trip to Atlanta, the clothes she'd bought but never had any place to wear, the gadgets and gizmos, the cute little sports car she couldn't afford to get fixed. What a blind idiot she'd been. In the beginning it had been feast or famine, more famine than feast. She hadn't seen the harm or damage she was doing until it was too late, until they'd sunk so far down she couldn't see a way up.

Pulling up to Red's, she made sure to carefully pat the wetness away from her face, applying a little face powder and lip gloss. Appearances were everything to Darryl. Everybody and their dog knew what a sorry, lazy no account the man was, but he had never quite figured that out. He honestly believed all those people smiling in his

face were his friends and no one knew they didn't have two nickels to rub together. Hell she had three jobs while he couldn't be bothered to work up enough energy to find work...upon occasion anyway.

Kennedy had to swallow the bile that threatened to erupt. Her grandmamma used to warn against calling anybody a fool, but damn! How blind could one person be? The town had the total population of a little over eight hundred damn people. Someone not knowing your business was about as rare as a Big Foot sighting, but then again, Darryl swore he saw one once. It took a few minutes to squash the anger and disgust enough to walk into the dimly-lit bar.

She didn't have to look for Darryl. The grating sound of his cackling laugh hit her eardrums as soon as she walked in. He was sitting in the corner near the back, flanked by two men too polite to call him on whatever bullshit he was spitting out. *Fuck!* Of all the people for Darryl to be hanging out with, it just had to be Byron and Emory Daniels. The pair of them had joined the Marines back when she was in junior high and quickly became town legends. Not because of any war they might have been in, but they had pooled their money and bought out half the viable businesses in the county – not just the town.

The duo was actually half brothers, though it was never discussed out in the open Byron being black and Emory being lily white. Their daddy wasn't the discriminating type, shocking old ladies into a coma by openly dating whoever the hell he pleased and spreading his seed just as generously. Rumor had it he'd been run out of town by many an irate daddy back when both men were babies. Roberta was a backwards little place at times.

Kennedy knew both men had returned a few months back. It had even made the papers. She hadn't seen either man though, not that she'd want to. Whereas once she might have teased and flirted, now she just hid in the shotgun house she and Darryl rented. It saved her from running into anyone Darryl might've owed money to, or more importantly any of her many cousins and aunts.

"Hey baby, come on over here!" Shit. Darryl was drunk. His words not so much slurring as running together to over exaggerate his slow, lazy drawl. "You ain't gonna believe this shit."

Kennedy's stomach dropped. Her steps were heavy as she slowly made her way to the table. She really hadn't wanted to stick around here. She'd worked the midnight to seven shift at the gas station, and then gone straight to her part time job at the grocery store, where she's been on her feet for five hours straight. All she wanted was some sleep before the nightmare that was her life started all over again. The bills weren't going to pay themselves and Darryl hadn't worked in over a month. He kept telling her there were "things in the fire". All she heard was more money stomping out the front door.

She made her way to the table, mentally reminding herself to keep her head up, spine straight. It was a damn shame she had to remind herself to do that. She looked Byron and Emory directly in the eye and wished like hell she hadn't. They'd been cute older boys when she was little, now they were full grown and drop dead freaking

gorgeous. She stifled the urge to try to hide the boots that had seen better days or cross her arms over the sweater she was wearing to hide the obvious age and wear.

The Marines had taken prime male specimens and turned them into living, breathing statues of Greek gods. Byron's hazel eyes swept her figure in a quick assessment before he caught himself. Obviously what he's seen made him pity her, and damn it that was something she really didn't need. She could keep her cool when people whispered when she walked by, ignore the knowing smirks and stare down anyone daring to throw a disapproving frown in her direction. The one thing she couldn't fight back at was pity; a wasted emotion that stuck in her craw and made her want to throw up whenever she actually remembered to eat. She glared right back at him, letting him know just what he could do with his damn pity. She had no need for it.

Emory, on the other hand never let his amber eyes waver from her face. She didn't detect he felt sorry for her, but then he could've been better at hiding it than his brother. She was shocked when he actually got out of his seat when she made it to the table, holding out the chair next to him.

Wasn't expecting that one.

"Baby, Emory here decided to go into business with us, you know fixing houses and shit."

Kennedy winced but managed to bite her tongue. Damn, one more person she was going to have to be sure to avoid in the future after the money had dried up and there were no construction jobs.

"That's, uh..." Wait, did Darryl just say "us"? "Did you say *us*?" She directed the question squarely at Darryl. Oh hell no! She wasn't getting involved in his shit. She finally had money going into her secret account three towns over. She was not quitting any of her jobs to help Darryl do a damn thing.

"Yeah baby, Emory and Byron own the gas station, the grocery store and it ain't like the pizza place is gonna miss you none."

Just like that. He really believed he could just decide her life over some beers with two men she didn't even know well.

"No." Kennedy stood, not really caring who was watching or what they'd say about it. "I'm not quitting any of my jobs for whatever hare-brained scheme you've suckered these poor bastards into." And if they didn't appreciate being called bastards, they'd get over it. She really couldn't be bothered to care. By all that's holy she'd reached her limit. She wasn't going down this road again.

"Shit Kennedy, don't get your panties in a bunch. Why don't you sit the hell down and listen for once?" Darryl was actually pouting. Pouting like some toddler.

"No, I won't."

Let him find his own damn way home. She was tired; she was going home and going to bed.

Chapter Two

Emory threw a helpless look in his brother's direction, confident Byron would get the message as he lit out after Kennedy as fast as he dared. Running would've just caused a whole lot of interest in what he was doing, and she didn't need that. She didn't need a hell of a lot of things she seemed to be going through, but he was counting on changing that. He should've considered she wouldn't go for this. She knew Darryl too well to trust he would actually do some work instead of talking about doing it. You didn't have to be in town long before hearing of the sad tale of the girl who was supposed to be somebody and her no account boyfriend.

That was the thing about small towns; you couldn't keep a secret worth spit. For that reason alone he'd approached Darryl instead of going to Kennedy head on and telling her that-.

Well, Emory wasn't altogether sure what to tell her. When he and Byron returned to the area, they'd both been planning on settling down, growing some roots, maybe starting families. For years they'd pooled their money and bought up as much of their hometown as possible. Emory would freely admit he'd done it in the beginning for spite. These people had treated him and his brother like crap when they were growing up. It wasn't like he and Byron were their father's only children; they were just the ones the old man had never bothered to marry their mothers. Byron had the added sin of being black. They'd been ostracized for being bastards, criticized for recognizing one another as family, and looked down upon because they were dirt poor. Roberta and its inhabitants never thought they'd amount to anything.

The plan had been to show them all. Only, the older they'd gotten, the less it seemed to matter. Now the objective was to make sure the small town didn't die out. The last thing Emory expected to do when he came home was to become completely fascinated by a woman with sad, deep brown eyes and a weary smile. It was impossible not to notice Kennedy Wright; even if he'd been careful to make sure she never caught him watching her. She had this quiet dignity she wore like a security blanket around her even though her life was quite plainly shit.

All he'd wanted to do was to make it better. To see a genuine smile on her face. But most of all, he couldn't take seeing her working herself to death only to be kept down time and time again by her lazy selfish asshole of a boyfriend. He didn't wonder why she stayed with Darryl as so many other people had lamented under their breaths as she walked by. He already knew. His own mother had been trapped like that. Every time she tried to pull herself up, her boyfriend managed to knock her back down. It wasn't like anyone in the family had any extra money to take them in when he was a kid. His mother had done what she could, but hadn't been able to escape until he left home.

Kennedy's story wasn't new. Emory just wanted to make sure she got her happy ending while she was still young enough to enjoy her life. And if she would give him a chance one day, well, all the better. It was one hell of a long shot. Byron aside,

interracial relationships didn't usually happen in the bright light of day around these parts, and Emory wasn't about to sneak around. Not with her. She didn't deserve that.

"Kennedy, please wait up."

She stopped a few steps from the car she'd borrowed. He knew it was borrowed because he knew she didn't have one that ran. That would change as soon as he could figure out a way to get it to her without it being seen as charity or something worse. Not because he was trying to buy her affections either. He hated the fact she was often dependent on a man who forgot to pick her up after work, or demanded she beg a ride from any and everybody under the sun. If he saw her walking home one more time he might blow a gasket.

"Look y'all can do whatever you want. I want no part of it." Her back was as rigid as an ironing board, and she didn't turn around. "Good luck to you."

Kennedy took another step towards the car, but Emory wasn't about let her go that easy. Reaching out he grabbed her arm; not hard, just enough to stop her.

Aw, hell he shouldn't have touched her. Despite it being full winter, she was wearing a short sleeved shirt. Her uniform from the gas station actually. What the hell had she been doing working a double shift? She was supposed to be off at seven this morning, it was well after five. As soon as his palm touched her skin a little electric zing shot up Emory's arm, spreading throughout his body. His mouth went drier than the freaking Afghan desert, the rest of him harder than stone.

He should let go. He meant to. But she turned those incredible eyes on him and he just couldn't. Damn, she was beautiful. She didn't have on a single item of make-up, but she looked better than any supermodel he'd ever seen. Except for the faint bruise under her eye from lack of sleep and those incredibly kissable lips turned downward.

"I promise you I won't let this fail. No matter what." Why he was promising that he had no clue. It would fail with Darryl at the helm. Byron had warned him, cussing a blue streak when Emory refused to be dissuaded. He had to do this. For Kennedy. "And it would really help a lot if maybe you could take a few classes at the junior college and run the office." He was making shit up at this point. There hadn't been any concrete plans other than funding. To make this even halfway believable he would have to work closely with Darryl. Something Emory wasn't really looking forward to. Byron was going to have him locked up in the loony bin. "I would do it myself, but I'm going to be working with Darryl."

"And why would you do that?" Kennedy was apparently a hell of a lot smarter than she let most people know. She saw through his bullshit. Everything about the way she was looking at him declared it, but he wasn't backing down now.

"I think this can really work." It could technically; most of the contractors had moved on to greener pastures. Not many folks had money for home repairs. "And I'm good at construction and such." Technically true. "If I can get in on the ground floor, I think this can become something."

Oh this was bad. He was starting to believe his own bullshit.

"And you want Darryl as your partner." It wasn't a question it was bold faced accusation. And yep, he was guilty as sin on a Sunday. "You haven't heard a thing about him since you've been back."

Emory shrugged. "If it doesn't work, it doesn't work, but I am willing to give it a try. Look, this is a great opportunity for all of us. Plus it comes with benefits. "

Kennedy shook her head, but he had her. He could tell. Thank goodness because he'd almost threw her three jobs in her face, which was probably not a real bright idea.

"Fine. I'll give it six months. But if this doesn't pan out, I want my jobs back." Kennedy looked pointedly down at her arm.

Shit, he'd been actually stroking it. He hadn't even realized he'd been doing it. Reluctantly he removed his hand, immediately missing the soft heat of her skin.

"Good. I'll come by tomorrow and we can fill out some paperwork, go get a couple of trucks and your car- "

"Wait, what? My car? Why would you buy me a car?" The suspicion was back, mixed in with a healthy dose of confusion.

He was really botching this badly. One step forward, two giant steps back. "I need you to take some classes at the city college, like I said before. Just accounting and business if you don't mind. I expect to be out in the field a lot, drumming up business and such. You may need to go out to customers' houses from time to time to take invoices." Fuck! He had to think. What else, what else? "You'll need to pick up permits, and since I'm planning on servicing the county, you may need to go to different towns occasionally." That sounded believable. He hoped at any rate. Truthfully, he didn't want to see her waiting for the bus with groceries. He damn sure didn't want her borrowing a car from the cousin who was sleeping with her so-called man.

Kennedy wasn't fully convinced; she was staring at him like he was about to ask her to go around the building and bend over any minute. So not ever going to happen. He'd rather cut off his right arm than disrespect her like that. One day she'd know that. Maybe one day she'd appreciate it.

"This car won't be in my name."

"Of course not," he readily agreed. It would be in the company's name. If by some miracle this thing was successful, at least part of the company would be in her name. God help Darryl if he fucked up too badly. Emory wasn't sure he would be able to stop his foot from going up his ass if he did.

"Emory Daniels, I don't know what the hell you game is, but this better be on the up and up."

"It is." As much as it could be. "You won't be disappointed."

She actually gave him a *hrmph* before taking the additional two steps to her cousin's car and driving away. Emory watched until the tiny car was no more than a dot on the horizon. Byron was going to kick his ass when he found out all he promised her. Not as if he could help it though. Yeah, he was probably going to end up losing a hell of a lot of money on this thing, but he had to give Kennedy a chance to get out, if that's what she wanted. He would be paying her an excellent salary without her knowing he was doing her any favors. He could've easily given her a raise or a

promotion at one of the places she already worked for him, but that would've caused all kinds of speculations and talk. That was something she didn't need any more of.

"How bad is it going to be? How much are we in for?" Although Emory hadn't heard his brother walk up, he wasn't the least bit surprised he'd come out to find him.

Byron detested Darryl. No doubt he'd had about all he could stomach of the man. Too bad, because they were going to need a couple more hours now while Darryl was still half drunk. He would sign just about anything. Emory wanted this endeavor off the ground as soon as possible. He refused to take another night sitting in his car across from the gas station making sure Kennedy was safe. It was all so sad, but he just couldn't help himself. He wanted, needed to take care of all the important things that had been neglected in her life. Just once, he wanted to see her smile, really smile, without looking all tired and worn out. Most of all he wanted to give her the means to move the hell out of that pathetic house with Darryl. Thinking of her sharing a bed with a man so unworthy of her set his teeth on edge.

"You don't have to be a part of this." He loved his brother, but he wouldn't be deterred. "I'll do it myself."

"My ass, you'll wind up killing that stupid bastard in there." That was the best thing about Byron. He didn't mince his words. "We will be doing this. I just hope she's worth it."

It was the first time in his life Emory felt like hitting his brother. Really hitting him, not just the horse play bullshit siblings went through.

"She's worth it. I'll spend what I have to; I'm not asking you for a dime."

"Fuck off and calm the hell down." Byron sighed, shaking his head. "It's *we* Mr. Sensitive. Always have been always will be. Just—just be careful okay. You've really got it bad for this woman, and she's taken. I don't want you getting hurt."

"Yeah, well I'm tired of seeing her hurt."

Chapter Three

"Son of a bitch has me working like some kind of field hand. We're supposed to be partners – equals, yet I'm the mother fucker on the roof all damn day."

Despite the pathetic whining, Kennedy knew very well Darryl hadn't been on anybody's roof anytime lately. The problem was he really had to work, every day, and couldn't blow it off or blame anyone else. With Byron and Emory working side by side with him every single day, he couldn't get away with doing just enough to get by. She was amazed how many people really did need some sort of home repairs. Because the two brothers owned the hardware store, they got materials at cost, which meant they could charge a hell of a lot less than the bigger chain stores. Just four months in and business was brisk, with more new customers every day.

She hadn't taken over doing the books yet. Emory took care of that end, but her pay was nice and steady, and Darryl was getting a steady paycheck now, they should've been much better off financially. Going to school full time, it was all she could do to keep up with the contracts, orders, jobs ongoing and such. Emory was teaching her way more than she was learning in school, but she loved being able to actually attend college. She loved her classes, the debates, even the school work. It was like she'd gotten a new lease on life- as long as she was away from home.

While on one hand things had gotten better on the work front, they'd gotten worse on the home front. Kennedy thanked God every day that she had more money to put into her secret get-away account because now that Darryl had steady income, he was spending steadily, away more often, and when he was home, he was working her last nerve. The latest was the flat-screened TV that greeted her as she walked through the door after one of her late classes. It was insane; the cable still wasn't on and she damn sure wasn't about to pay for it. Four-thirty and Darryl was already there, getting ready to go out.

"Hey baby, I need to meet the boys." Yeah, meet the boys dressed like a wanna-be player and smelling like a male whore. There wasn't any point in arguing, she had work to do and didn't want him around bugging her anyway. "Can you pay the cable bill? I forgot that the cable's off. You know I need to keep up on things. Don't wait up."

All said in less than a minute on his way out the door. He had better be damn glad he moved quickly because Kennedy was a hop, skip and a jump from bashing something over his head. Forgot to pay the cable bill? His ass didn't forget, it hadn't been on for months. She had no idea where his money was going, but it damn sure wasn't coming home. That would be the third month in a row he forgot to pay a bill, which would leave her to pay it. Her head hurt when she thought about the cost of paying that by herself, coupled with the rent and utilities that had to be paid. Since nothing on earth could keep her from the hundred dollars a paycheck she put in her secret account that would leave her with nothing, which meant no gas, no food.

Fuck!

Kennedy sank down in the middle of the floor, her former good mood evaporated. She couldn't do this anymore. She'd thought with the new business, Darryl would finally start acting like he had some sense, but he was only getting worse. Who went out at four-thirty on a Wednesday? The day Tawny had off and her kids were at their daddy's house. And that son-of-a-bitch had taken her car! Well, it was technically the company car, but it didn't have *The Home Specialists* blazoned down the side, unlike Darryl's new truck. She hadn't even seen him grab her keys off the counter. But she sure heard the engine crank and speed away.

Kennedy knew she was at least a year away from being able to walk away clean. There was no way she could keep her job once she moved out, not with Darryl being a full partner in the company. She was only an employee, he would definitely fire her. But she could at least have had an Associate's Degree. That could set her up fine in someplace like Macon or Savannah. But she knew down to her soul, she wouldn't last a year. She had to get away from Darryl, and there was just nowhere to go.

The tears came silently, without permission and refusing to stop. Darryl would sneak in, sometimes in the middle of the night, kissing her shoulder, hands roaming while she slept. It was enough to make her want to scream. She didn't want him touching her, kissing her, didn't want him anywhere around her. Oh God she couldn't take it. She couldn't take her life another fucking second.

"Kennedy?"

The sound of her name made her jump. It made her want to fall over and roll to her side, which only made her cry harder. Damn it to hell and back! Of all the people to walk through her damn door, it had to Emory. Not that his brother would've been any better... Well, yeah, she would've preferred his brother seeing her like this. Why, she really couldn't say; she never wanted Emory to see her at less than her best. Byron, well he was more like a good friend, she wouldn't have minded so much if he saw her all red and puffy-eyed.

"Kennedy, honey what's wrong?"

It was too much. When she knew she was going to be working with Emory it was all too easy to get herself together before she actually had to face him. No matter how bad the day had gone. Him catching her like this, at her most vulnerable, it just made her feel worse. Raw and exposed. She wanted to dig a whole and hide, but it was too late. He was already squatting down on the warped wood floor, pulling her into the shelter of his arms. Oh God, this is the last place she needed to be. It was too easy to feel a false sense of security. And Lord it felt so good! He didn't say anything for a while, just held her and let her cry while rocking her gently, rubbing up and down her back. Kennedy buried her face in his chest, trying not to notice his clean, woodsy scent.

This was wrong. So very wrong, in so many different ways. Emory wasn't for her. She had no business taking the comfort he offered. After all, wasn't she the one that despised pity? And that was all he was offering, pity. It took more willpower to pull away than for an unrepentant alcoholic to turn down a free drink, but she managed, turning her face so he wouldn't see evidence of her weakness.

"I'm sorry I don't know what got into me." She put a little laugh in her voice; sounding pathetic even to her own ears. "I'm fine really. Guess I am just feeling all...female today."

"Kennedy, don't do that. Please." He reached out to hold her shoulder when she would've walked away.

Kennedy should've been able to keep walking; should've put as much space between them as possible, but she didn't want to. She loved the fact he wasn't letting her walk away even at the sake of her pride. It was getting too damn heavy in the first place. She damn sure didn't want to turn around though, but she let him whirl her to face him anyway. Keeping her head down didn't help either because he only lifted it so she was forced to look at him.

"Look, I don't need to know what that was about. I want to know, but I understand if you don't want to tell me." He had hazel eyes, just like his brother, only his were heavier on the green and gold. They looked at her with such genuine compassion it was hard not to be affected. "That doesn't mean you can't lean on me a little." There was a full minute pause before he added, "As a friend."

Her heart slammed into her chest hard. It didn't look like he wanted to add that last sentence. Too bad Kennedy didn't believe in fairy tales, Emory could almost be a Prince Charming. Things like that just didn't happen; they damn sure didn't happen in Roberta.

"Thanks, Emory I appreciate it." She did too. She especially appreciated him pulling her into his embrace again.

This felt entirely too good. And he was really good at the whole hugging thing. That he didn't seem inclined to let her go suited her just fine. What would it be like to have a real man like this to lean on? Someone she could depend on, someone who wouldn't let her down time and time again?

He should let her go. Emory knew it, but yet he couldn't get his arms to let go. He'd knocked, but there'd been no answer. He'd seen Darryl speeding down the road as he drove up, in Kennedy's car. There hadn't been anyone in the passenger seat. Originally he'd come by to talk to Darryl knowing Kennedy got in late from school on Wednesdays. He thought about turning around. What he had to say he really didn't want Kennedy to hear. Thought about it as he headed steadily toward the small house the two shared. He had no clue what he was going to say when he knocked on the door, but when he opened it, sensing something wasn't right and saw her; hell, he wanted to beat the living shit out of Darryl.

Truthfully he wanted to punch the lazy ass most days, but managed to walk away. Sooner or later Emory knew Byron was going to do or say something that would lead to Darryl being seriously hurt. His brother couldn't stand trifling men. The fact that Darryl was fooling around with Tawny, the woman Byron had wanted since way back in elementary school didn't help matters any. Between the two of them, Darryl was lucky to be breathing.

As long as Kennedy was involved with the asshole, Emory was determined to do everything he could to make sure she was okay, and hopefully help her get away if that's what she really wanted to do. God, he prayed that's what she wanted to do. He'd watched them, looking for any sign that he was wrong. Kennedy didn't look at the other man with love in her eyes; it was something a hell of a lot closer to disgust. He'd move heaven and earth to help her. Honestly he'd do it even if she never left Darryl. More the fool he.

But standing here in this moment, holding her close to him, that was just a little slice of heaven. Not letting go, he shifted so she was pressed more into his side. The last thing he needed was for her to discover his erection, one that hadn't been present when he held her on the floor. That had just been about comfort. Man, it killed him to see her in tears like that. He was going to have to kick Darryl's ass on general principle. A woman as strong and loyal as Kennedy was should never be in tears.

How such an asshole got such a woman was a mystery.

"Why don't we sit and watch some TV for a little while, maybe order a pizza." Cause he wasn't leaving. He knew as soon as he was out the door she'd break down again, and he just couldn't handle that.

"Um, I -uh, I was going to go to the library and study a bit."

Her face was actually hot. He could feel it heating through his shirt. Son of a bitch. No cable. He was willing to bet the rent and utilities were probably due too. Well that explained the tears.

"What are you studying?" As soon as he said it he could have bitten off his own tongue. She'd used it as an excuse no doubt. Dang he was dumb as shit when it came to this woman.

"I have a short paper on the Revolution due next week. I wanted to get a jump on it."

"Hey, Byron has a crap load of history books over at the house!" Thank God that was true. His brother was something of a history buff. "Come on, I'll take you there. Use whatever you want in the peace and quiet of my study, and I'll grill us up something to eat."

She looked up at him like he'd just grown horns. Shit, that did sound a little like a date. He needed to think of something fast.

"There are some other office duties I'd like for you to take on if you can. That's why I came by. I can just show you if you come over. I was in the neighborhood so it just seemed like a good idea to stop and tell you face to face." Emory was tap dancing pretty fast but he really, really wanted to get out of this house, away from the depressing air that seemed to suck the life out of anybody unwise enough to cross the threshold.

He really needed to get Kennedy out of here, for a while anyway.

"I don't think I-"

"Byron will be there, so you won't be alone with me if that's what you're worried about." May the Good Lord forgive the lie. Byron would be out tonight, he'd left him a note.

"I'm not afraid of being alone with you Emory Daniels." There was the spunky Kennedy he loved to see. She tried to move away from him, but he just wasn't ready to let go. "Fine. Let me get my backpack."

Of course he took it from her as soon as she bent and tried to pick it up and hustled her out the front door before she could change her mind. He even managed to get her into his car without a fuss.

Well that part was easy. He just had to hope he didn't do or say anything stupid to mess up the tentative friendship they'd formed. It was going to take some doing. He knew for sure once he had her in his home, he wouldn't want her to ever leave.

Chapter Four

Tawny had done a lot of things she wasn't proud of. As a divorced mother of two she had regrets piled sky high, and an extra dose of bitterness to add a little extra flavor to her b.s. The one thing she didn't need any more of was guilt. Well, guilt and shame. And the absolute last thing she needed was Darryl Carter sniffing around her skirts anymore. Apparently he wasn't taking hints because he kept coming around every Wednesday and Sunday when her kids were supposedly with their daddy. In reality, the trifling ass dropped them off at his parent's house, but she wasn't supposed to know that. She wished her ex would just say he didn't have time for his own children. At least that would give her an excellent excuse to turn Darryl away.

This was all her fault, she knew. In a moment of extreme weakness and more than just a little bit of jealousy against her oh-so-perfect cousin, she's slept with her cousin's man. It didn't make her feel like she got one over on Kennedy, didn't make her feel like she was getting back at all the family members who'd endlessly compared everything she did to Kennedy. It just made her feel like shit with the bonus of hardly being able to look at herself in the mirror. No matter how much she washed, she couldn't get rid of the stain on her soul, and there was no one to blame but herself.

That's why she was sitting in the tiny diner out on the highway a few miles from town. She didn't want to be anywhere near her house. No matter how many times she told Darryl it was over, he still came around. Still holding what she'd done over her head. Oh she was sure Kennedy suspected something. Tawny just didn't want those suspicions confirmed. Sooner or later she was going to have to deal with Darryl. She just hoped and prayed Kennedy would leave the no good, no account bastard before she had to find out the truth.

Her cousin was sure taking her sweet time about it. Tawny would've been gone years ago, but for some reason Kennedy was still hanging in there. It had taken Tawny three years after marrying James Monroe to leave. Everyone had warned her, but she'd been dead set on marrying, even getting pregnant just so she could. As a result she'd had to drop out of the regular high school and attend a school for pregnant teens to graduate. At least she managed to do that. Two years after high school, her rat of a husband gave her a very special gift; a sexually transmitted disease. Thank God it was the kind that you could get rid of. Tawny often woke at night with cold sweats thinking of all the things he could've passed on.

Maybe that's why she'd been so bitter. For a while there, it seemed as if Kennedy had the perfect relationship with the town's cutest male. What a joke that turned out to be. Darryl was selfish, in and out of bed. Tawny'd had no clue what a bastard Kennedy was dealing with until she let him in her bed. Now she had to live with the consequences.

"Now why would you be hiding all the way out here?"

Damn. Talk about the very last thing she needed.

"What makes you think I'm hiding Byron Daniels?" She purposely didn't look up. She didn't need to actually see that irritating knowing smirk on his all too handsome face.

A perfect reminder of the mess she'd made of her life, Byron was a walking, talking cautionary tale against snubbing someone in high school no matter what the reason. Hers had been seriously skewed. Byron was the poor half-breed bastard of a notorious womanizer. Not like that was anything new; but Byron and his white brother, Emory, had the unmitigated gall to recognize their relationship as brothers, and acted like it to boot. Both boys had been dirt poor, hailing from families others whispered about. It just seemed they flaunted their unorthodox relationship in front of the whole town, and the small minds in Roberta just didn't like that.

This was all way before both Byron and Emory ran off to the military then started buying up the county. All of a sudden they were hometown heroes instead of the outcasts they had been. Tawny wasn't any different from any other girl who'd refused to be seen anywhere near either boys. She was, however, the one Byron had been after way back since elementary school. And she was the one who'd personally, loudly, and repeatedly blew him off. She was the best target of "*How ya like me now?*" in all of Roberta.

Honestly he could've rubbed it in more, smeared her face in it so to speak. But he hadn't, not publically. The new and improved and all too-damn-fine-for-his-own-good Byron just gave her that knowing smirk whenever she was unfortunate enough to run into him, which seemed all too often for her peace of mind.

"I know you're hiding because it's Wednesday." As her heart stuttered, Byron calmly slid in the booth across from her. He couldn't mean Darryl. Oh dear God, please don't let him mean Darryl. "And your kids are with their grandparents, so you are hiding here instead of going home."

She couldn't look at him. She just couldn't. If she did he would surely see her secrets firmly stamped on her face. Of all the people in this backwater town, the only person she wanted to know about Darryl less would be her cousin Kennedy. Byron was a close second, and then only by a hair. She didn't want to see that smirk turn into disgust; it would be worse than one of the many local preachers calling her out on Sunday, had she even bother to attend church any more.

"Maybe I just don't like cooking for myself." It was plausible. Made sense. There was no reason to question the pithy reply.

"Or maybe you're hiding from a mistake that never should've happened."

Tawny's stomach dropped. She was going to throw up. Byron had muttered it, but she'd heard just as clear as if he'd shouted out loud to every person in the diner. Her eyes flew around the place, afraid someone had heard. Of course no one had. Byron had the decency to say it so that only she could hear it. Didn't make her feel any less exposed. All her dirt laid bare right on the formica table. Tear burned her eyes, but she refused to allow them release. He was *not* going to make her cry.

"Why don't you just tell him to fuck off, Tawny?" The question was soft, sincere, completely without censure.

She looked up into the saddest, prettiest hazel eyes she'd ever seen. There was no censure there, just hurt. Now, why would her sleeping around with Darryl hurt Byron? He couldn't still want her. Never mind she was a good twenty pounds heavier than when he'd last seen her, her hips spread from her two children, the bags under her eyes from the extra shifts she had to work to make ends meet. But Byron had been around the world; far, far beyond the borders of Roberta, Georgia. No telling what kind of women he'd dated before coming home.

"I wish I could." The ugly, nasty truth was Darryl had threatened her after the first time, when she'd known she'd made a horrible mistake. If she tried to deny him, he would tell. Not that she cared about most people, but Kennedy...although Tawny was four years older than her cousin they used to be close, like sisters. Tawny had hoped one day they could get that back. Silly perhaps, but there were so few people in the world whom she truly loved; with whom she was truly close.

Byron's hand covered hers on the table. Tawny jumped. She hadn't realized she'd even put her hand there. She was surprised to see her closed fist pulverizing a napkin. His hand was firm, strong, and Lord help her, comforting. She knew she should pull it away. She had no business taking comfort from Byron. She wasn't worthy of his solace. But she couldn't. She wasn't strong enough to move. Just for a moment, she wanted to believe someone decent could want her, at least want to be her friend. Tawny hadn't known too many decent men. She'd liked to believe for just a moment Byron was, before the illusion was blown to bits.

"What do you want Byron? You want to take Darryl's place? You want to sneak in my backdoor as soon as my kids are gone? Need an itch scratched?" How pathetic she sounded. Her voice should've been hard, without emotion. The hurt was shining through though, just as bright and blinding as her sin.

What is done in the dark...

Was that ever true. There was nothing to do but pay the piper. She wasn't a decent woman anymore; she couldn't be expected to be treated like one.

Byron hurt. He used to think that nothing could hurt worse than the way he was ostracized back when he was young. He was wrong. Maybe he was twice the fool his brother was, but he'd always loved Tawny. Way back in kindergarten, he's taken one look at her black, brown and red colored pig tails and fallen head over heels. He'd always told Emory that one day he was going to marry Tawny Wright. That plan had never changed.

It was a shock to come home and see Tawny like this. She seemed a shadow of her former self; all the spunk and verve had been sucked out leaving a bitter, sad woman behind. To see her like this, punishing herself for her sins just killed him. He couldn't make it better because she was a long way from letting him in. He was wise enough to know he couldn't change her back into the way she used to be. Only she could do that; and it wouldn't be for him or any other man.

But he could help. If only she'd let him.

"What the hell does he have on you?" Byron tried to keep the anger out of his voice. He knew he'd failed when Tawny winced at his question. She even tried to tug her hand away, but he wasn't having it. This was the only contact she'd ever allowed; it felt to damn good to let her sever the connection. "Whatever it is, you tell him to go to hell. He has a lot more to lose than you do."

He wished he could tell her about the new company. Unbeknownst to Darryl, he didn't own a third of the business like he thought he did. Kennedy owned a full half, and with some tricky legalese wording in the contracts and agreements Darryl had signed, he would never own any percentage of the business. Both Byron and Emory were just waiting for the day when Darryl pushed Kennedy one step too far. The man was a menace. He knew jack shit about home repairs and was lazier than a hot day in July. He wanted to tell her the only reason they even pretended to partner with Darryl was because Emory was so far gone over Kennedy he couldn't see straight. Somehow, Byron didn't think that would help much. And he couldn't tell her anyway. Emory had sworn him to secrecy. Not even Kennedy knew she owned a large chunk of *The Home Specialists*.

"What do you care?" Tawny shot back at him, still trying again to tug her hand away.

"I care, Tawny."

Her jaw dropped just a little as she stared at him like he had two heads. That just pissed him off further. Why did this woman believe someone couldn't care for her? He wanted to beat the living shit out of every man she's ever dated.

This was one of the things he'd always hated about living in a small town. There wasn't much of a dating pool to be had, therefore it was easy to be labeled, or placed into a certain category that was damn near impossible to get out of. Divorced women were sometimes seen as targets, desperate or loose no matter what their ex-spouse had been like. It seemed in the South, hell maybe everywhere, a man didn't have to worry too much about his own reputation unless he got ridiculous with it. It was the woman that got the raw end of the deal. Tawny was caught up in one of those Catch 22 things. Even if she's been pure as the driven snow, she was a divorcee, therefore free game.

That was going to change. Tawny would be his wife one day. It didn't matter if it took him twenty years to win her, he was going to make her his.

"Don't bother." She snorted, looking away. Her eyes were bright with tears he knew she'd never shed in front of him. He doubted she allowed herself to cry in front of anyone. "I'll be fine. Go to church; find yourself a nice, young girl."

And leave me the hell alone. He heard it even though she didn't say it out loud.

"I don't believe I will, Tawny Wright. I believe I've found what I'm looking for." There. Couldn't be any clearer than that.

"It's Tawny Carter now."

"Last I heard you're no longer shackled to that loser. Might as well get used to Daniels."

She turned, an eyebrow going up and a half smile on her lips. The words that came out were sugary sweet, the kind usually followed by something sharp going

upside a man's head. "Is that right, Mr. Daniels? And what in the world would make your warped brain think I would ever even consider such a thing?"

"I'm damned sexy." There was the woman he knew and loved. Any second now she was going to tell him off and make him feel all warm and cuddly. He almost rubbed his hands together in glee, but that would mean letting her hand go, and he just wasn't willing to do that. "I'm naturally brilliant. And woman, you know you want me. You always have. You're just afraid I'm too much man for you."

There it was. A volcanic eruption right under the surface just about ready to explode. "You pea brained, half-witted -"

"Not here, darlin'." He tugged on that hand, making her rise as he threw a couple of twenties on the table. "Let's go see a movie and you can cuss at me all you like."

"You can't cuss at a movie."

Sure couldn't, but she was so bewildered she was following without protest. Right into his car. It would be a good fifteen minutes before she realized they'd left hers at the diner.

If he wasn't so busy exchanging barbs he would've congratulated himself on a job well down. Their first real date, and he was going to enjoy himself immensely.

Chapter Five

The night had gone by way too quickly. Kennedy didn't want to glance up at the cable box to see what time it might be, she didn't want the night to end. There had been loads of books she used to get a jump on her report. The thing was damn near done. Emory had been a great help too, despite his claim not to know much about history. They'd researched, debated and argued about the information uncovered in Byron's large cache of history books. Afterwards they'd cooked dinner together, catfish and grits, then ate as they watched a couple of comedy movies.

A light pleasant evening between friends – that was all it was. That's what Kennedy tried to tell herself over and over again anyway. No good could come out of a crush on Emory Daniels. As nice as he was, he was not for her. It was just added complications she didn't need. Until she left Darryl, she had to do the right thing, even if Darryl didn't.

Everything you do comes back to you, she told herself, trying not to find so much comfort in the arm that was casually thrown around her. Her head was lying on Emory's shoulder, her body tucked neatly against his. It seemed he hadn't stopped touching her in some way since she got here. Each and every light caress, pat, or hug was strictly platonic, but that didn't stop Kennedy from having to keep herself from leaning into him just a little. Okay more than a little. But damn, it just felt so good to be surrounded by his strength for just a while. She'd had to be strong for herself and all those around her for so long. It felt nice to let it all go, even if it were only for a few hours.

But the night was ending. She needed to get back before Darryl did. It was just easier that way.

"I guess I need to take you home now, huh?" Emory sounded like she felt. She was probably just projecting, but she could swear there was regret in his words.

"Yeah, I need to get home. Early day tomorrow." That much was true. She had two morning classes, then she was supposed to work in the trailer that passed for an office for the new business.

Most of the time she was there alone, unless there was something Emory needed to show her how to do.

"I was thinking maybe tomorrow we will start working through the books." Emory broke through her thoughts, his arms dropping to actually rest across her back instead of laying on the top of the couch behind her. His hand cupped her shoulder as he pulled her a little closer. "Nothing too much, just some basic accounting. I know you'll catch on."

Kennedy looked up, a subtle tilting back of her head, then wished like hell she hadn't. Lord his eyes were beautiful, and they were staring down at her like she was something to see. Life had a way of knocking the conceit of youth right out of you. She knew she wasn't as hard looking as some, but there were perpetual bags under her eyes

that made her always look tired. Her figure had softened and widened some. She was a long way from being the perky, cute girl she used to be.

That's not what she saw in the glittering eyes that looked at her now. She saw desire, she saw longing, she saw...

"I'm going to kiss you, Kennedy." Damn. His voice dropped, sounding like hundred proof bottled sin. Those lips, nice and full, descended closer and closer. "If you want me to stop, say so now."

She should. No matter what Darryl had done to her, it wouldn't be right to allow this man to kiss her. It was wrong, she would be wrong. Not one single word of protest made itself known. Instead her head lifted, her own lips parting just a touch.

The first contact was light, gentle; just a brushing of mouths and not really a full kiss at all. Even so, it was electrifying. Actual heat sizzled between them. Kennedy swore the second touch was a magnetic pull, impossible to avoid and infinitely deeper. Their lips touched and clung, Emory angling his head just a little, his arms bringing her in closer. Right and wrong flew out the window as her arms wound around his neck, her mouth opening instinctively for his tongue. They pressed together closer, tasting each other, exploring.

Kennedy's body tingled from her head to her toes. She felt the contact everywhere. Even her hair felt electrified. She didn't want to stop, even when she was panting, a need she never knew she had building so strongly in every part of her being she thought she might scream if it wasn't satisfied.

"Honey, as much as I don't want to we need to stop." Emory removed his lips, a fact that made her groan in protest, but he didn't move away. "I'm not going to say I'm sorry, because I'm not, but I don't want you to do anything you'll regret."

He was right. Had it gone on much longer she would've regretted it, greatly.

"It's fine." Pulling strength from out of thin air, Kennedy moved back and scooted over a little, more for her own peace of mind than wanting to put distance between them. That was the last thing she wanted. "Just a little comfort between friends, right?" Seemed like as good an excuse as any. Anything else would just be messy wouldn't it? She clasped her hands together to keep from wringing them, looking any and everywhere but his face. There was no telling what was going on in his mind, and frankly she didn't want to know. It was a scary prospect no matter which direction his thoughts might be flying in.

"I think you know better than that." Even knowing that looking at Emory was a bad idea, the soft response followed by the gentle caress of his fingertip down the side of her face made her look up.

Yeah, that had been a mistake. His eyes bore into her, seeing everything she never wanted anyone to see, she was sure of it. And still there was no pity. She just had no clue what that steely look of determination was all about.

"He doesn't deserve you."

Well hell, no shit. But she had made her bed. "I know." The admission was a double kick in the gut. Knowing she had to leave and having the means to do it were two separate things. She would work her ass off, as she had for so long, but the money

she'd saved was peanuts. The job market was hell everywhere, not just Roberta. Then there was rent and transportation. The car she claimed belonged to the company Emory and his brother had created. And she knew it hadn't been because they thought Darryl was a good investment.

Damn.

"You did it for me didn't you?" She didn't know why she didn't put the pieces together sooner. Probably because she never imagined Emory was interested. Byron damn sure wasn't, not that he was anything less than a sweetheart toward her. But a woman knew, or at least should, when a man wants more than friendship. For whatever reason, she'd closed her eyes to everything Emory had done.

It could've been because he was white and she was black. Times had changed, but this was still a small town in the deep South. Sure these things happened, but it was usually the other way around, and it was still whispered about, frowned upon. No one was going to do anything to you outright, but there were still small minded attitudes. The situation between the brothers was a unique one, but one of those quirks people had learned to shrug off, especially seeing as how the two men were officially the richest in the county.

Then again, it could've been because she just couldn't see herself being attracted to another man. She may not have been contemplating batting for the other team just yet, but she was so tied in knots over her current situation, dating, sex or anything dealing with the opposite sex beyond work just didn't occur to her.

"I think it's best that I leave now." Kennedy jumped to her feet, unsure what to do with this newfound knowledge. She folded hands in front of her, only to drop them again, gnawing at her bottom lip.

Words failed her, thoughts refusing to come together in any kind of coherent form.

"Kennedy, I don't expect you to come running into my arms." Emory rose also, moving to stand too close. The space seemed swallowed up by his presence, the air permeated with his scent. Pure male; fresh, clean and strong. Her nose started to itch thinking about burying her face in that wide chest and forgetting everything outside this room. "I—look I'm not trying to scare you or push you." He took another step closer, his hand coming to rest on her arm. "Just know I'm here for you. For whatever you need."

How strange that big, pale hand looked moving leisurely up and down her arm like it was his right. How foolish of her to wish like hell it was; to wish away the sweater so he could touch her bare skin.

"Why? Why all this?" She wasn't going to bother to explain what she meant by that either. He knew good and well what she was talking about.

Emory just shrugged, never looking away or seeming the least embarrassed or contrite. Why she'd expected him to be she didn't know. Working with him had showed her he was one of the most direct men she'd ever met. This wasn't direct, but it had damn sure been calculated. Neither Daniels brother did anything without thinking every angle through.

"What would you have done if I just walked up to you and asked you to let me help you?"

The words were far worse than a slap in the face. The walls she'd erected to protect her ravaged pride trembled, threatening to crumble outright. Knowing you weren't fooling anyone by a show of bravado was far different when hit in the face with undeniable proof positive she'd never been fooling anybody. Before at least she could pretend. She was pitied; heads slowly shook as she passed by. Everyone and their mama knew she lived with a trifling man, worked her fingers to the bone to just tread water, and so much worse, she was stuck with nowhere to go. She hadn't been fooling anyone.

"Take me home, Emory." She didn't know how long she could keep the tears at bay. Her face ached from the strain of wanting so badly to let it out.

"Kennedy, please -"

Her sharply raised hand halted whatever he was about to say. "Not now. Just take me home."

The drive back into town down the dark depressing road to the row of shotgun houses that had seen better days was silent. Emory didn't stop touching her in some way; grasping her hand, pushing her hair away from her face, there wasn't a second Kennedy didn't feel his touch somewhere. She should've pushed him away. The well of strength she'd always relied on seemed to have dried up. She didn't want to stand alone, didn't want to face tomorrow bravely. She was tired, so damn worn out she just wanted to crawl out of her seat and lose herself in someone stronger than her.

Dread welcomed her in its cold embrace as the car rolled into the driveway. Darryl was there. No lights were on but the car he'd taken without her permission was there, parked on a crooked angle dangerously close to his new truck. He'd been drinking. Closing her eyes she sent up a prayer he'd be passed out, too drunk to hear her come in. He hadn't called, so he couldn't be too concerned with her whereabouts.

One hot tear escaped her lids, scorching a trail down her cold cheek. She couldn't take it if he tried to touch her, tried to...

Unable to deal with it, Kennedy tore out of the car, slamming the door behind her. Ignoring whatever it was Emory called out to her, she felt through her purse for the keys, her shaking hands managing to find them and unlocking the door before she got sick in front of him. That would be an indignity she just couldn't allow to happen.

The sounds slammed into her as soon as the door opened. They were unmistakable, though it had been so damn long it was a wonder she recognized them at all. And they were coming from her bedroom.

The son of bitch had brought some woman home – to the home she broke her back every month to pay for – and into her bedroom.

It had been inevitable with the way things had been going. In the back of her mind, she'd expected it long before now. Funny, she didn't feel any of the emotions she'd prepared herself for. The humiliation didn't come, the sorrow wasn't there. And while she was mad, she was a long way from being furious.

It was dead and gone. Any feelings for this man she'd loved with every fiber of her being once had fled a long, long time ago. With a strange sense of calm she hadn't experienced since before her parents died she walked into the dark house, straight to the tiny closet in the front room. Taking out the suitcase, she moved on autopilot, throwing small keepsakes into the interior, leaving any and everything acquired with Darryl in happier times. Moving into the bathroom her steps got light, more purposeful. There wasn't much, so it didn't take long. The bedroom was last.

The bastard hadn't bothered to close the door. She walked right in, ignoring the nauseously stale sweat and alcohol-scented mounds writhing on the bed. She took out the whole drawer of her under-things, walking back into the living room and dumping the contents in the suitcase. They hadn't stopped when she walked back to grab the clothes in the closet, hangers and all. It was on her way out that whoever the bitch on her bed was screamed.

Darryl mumbled something about crazy bitches, switching the lamp beside the bed on, but Kennedy didn't even pause. She deposited the load in the suitcase then went back for the rest. She didn't look in Darryl's direction, barely hearing someone she vaguely recognized stammering an apology in her direction. When she turned to leave with her last load, Darryl was there in front of her, naked as the day he was born, looking like he had a right to be mad.

Now wasn't that some shit?

"Come on Kennedy, stop being melodramatic. Baby, put your shit away, let's talk about this."

Kennedy blinked up at his face, trying to remember what the hell she'd found so damn attractive about him in the first place. Remnants of the handsome youth he'd once been was there, but deep under the layers of hard drinking and late nights that stamped wrinkles and blotched skin on his face. He stank. His body had begun to shape up, thanks to the work he'd been forced to do lately, but it was a long cry from the athletic build he used to have. He was in a word, repulsive; a ghost of someone she used to know.

"I'm not being anything Darryl, honey. Why don't you go on back to your guest? I'll be out your hair in just a second." How strange she sounded, like she was telling him dinner would be ready in a few minutes.

She really didn't care. It didn't hurt; he'd hurt her too deep for too long. She didn't even pity him. She felt...nothing.

"Damn it, Kennedy!" Darryl grabbed her arm, painfully, but as quickly as he grasped her, she was free.

Emory had followed her in, standing behind Darryl twisting his arm painfully behind him.

"Don't. Ever. Touch. Her. Again."

It was not the time to find a damn thing sexy. Didn't stop Kennedy's heart from speeding just a little at the man moving a naked, pitiful looking Darryl away from her. Damn, that was hot.

"Thank you." Seemed like a ridiculous thing to say, but it was all she had.

“Don’t think I didn’t know this was going on behind my back!” Darryl screamed after her. “Why do you think I had to go find someone else? Huh? Your legs are closed so damn tight...”

There was a curious screech, a little inhuman sounding, behind her. She didn’t pause to consider what it might be. Zipping up the suitcase, she grabbed the keys to the company car off the counter and left the house keys behind. She wouldn’t be coming back.

Chapter Six

Emory tried to wait until Kennedy left the room. Tried, but Darryl made that impossible. Something had told him to follow her, not to let her face Darryl alone; a Marine always listened to his instinct, and he was damn glad he had. This shit was something straight out of one of those over-acted soaps. Truth was Emory'd wanted to take a foot to Darryl's ass for a long while now. As soon as the other man opened his mouth Emory twisted hard, not enough to break, but just enough to make the bastard feel it.

"If I were you, I'd shut the fuck up before I really hurt you." Damn, he wanted to do some real damage. It was tempting as hell, but he was in this man's house, that wouldn't look good on a police report. There'd be another time. Darryl was too damn stupid not to give him an opportunity for some serious whoop ass.

He waited until he heard Kennedy before he pushed the naked man away from him.

"You think I didn't see you sniffing around my woman?" Darryl wasn't the brightest man on earth, but he was bright enough to take a step back. Snatching on his jeans he never looked away from Emory, fear behind the anger in his eyes. "She'll be back. You think she won't? We have history! And she wouldn't have job if it wasn't for me! You even think of pulling the plug and I'll sue!"

Emory had bet Byron a dollar Darryl hadn't bothered to read all the complicated contracts and legal paperwork he'd signed. He felt like cackling with glee, but that would only let Darryl in on his little secret.

"You come with five feet of Kennedy and I will kill you Darryl." He said it quietly, almost like a whisper. He wanted Darryl to fully understand what he was saying, and that he was deadly serious.

Darryl blanched, stumbling back another step. Good. He understood. Emory turned on his heel giving the other man his back. The bastard probably didn't even realize what a profound insult he's just thrown his way, but the hapless bar bunny who'd cowered silently in the corner of the bed would. This would be all over the county by morning.

And it was about fucking time Darryl experienced even a little of the humiliation Kennedy had suffered for so long at his hands.

It didn't take long to catch up to Kennedy's car. Shit, she was going to a motel located slightly out of town, right behind a truck stop. Not the safest place for a woman alone. He'd planned on just following her and staying in the car wherever she planned on stopping; he'd hadn't considered she wouldn't have the money for a safer, more decent hotel closer to town. Hell, he'd made damn sure her paycheck was good and padded. He just forgot the son of bitch she lived with was sorry enough to let her pay the bills even when he had steady income. Just one more reason he was really going to have to stomp a mud hole in his ass sooner rather than later.

If Emory thought for just one second Kennedy would stay at his place he would've seen her settled then gone back out to find Darryl. But he'd known better. The woman had far more pride than sense sometimes. While he loved the hell out of her for it, it could also be frustrating as all get out. He had no idea what kind of damage tonight had done to his chances, but he was in for the long haul. Sieges were things in which he happened to excel.

He waited until she got her room before leaving the car to approach her. And no the hell she wasn't dragging that heavy ass suitcase up the stairs like she was planning on staying a while. He'd give her tonight, but tomorrow she would be moving somewhere a hell of a lot more secure, even if it wasn't in with him. Moving quietly behind her, he grasped the bag easily lifting it from her smaller hand.

"Don't." He cut her off as soon as her mouth opened. "If you think I am allowing you to stay here by your lonesome, you've got another thing coming. I'll sleep on the couch."

There was no couch. The room was at least clean, but that was about it. Bare bones to the extreme, there was one hard arm chair and a bed that sagged a bit in the middle. The tub and sink had rust stains, the lone night stand boasted scratches and cigarette burns.

"No." This wasn't happening. She was just going to have to suck it up for a night. When he spied a roach making a run for it as soon as she flicked on the light, Emory had seen enough. "Come on."

Kennedy resisted of course, not that it mattered. He would throw her over his damn shoulder if he had to.

"They won't give me my money back." She pulled on the hold he had on her arm, but Emory wasn't letting go.

"I'll give your damn money back."

"No. You won't." The mulish quality that was Kennedy made its appearance with a fury. "And this is what I can afford, so this is where I'm staying."

Like hell. Having fairly warned her, he simply lowered his shoulder, pushed a little into her midsection and swept her up. Deed done. To her credit, she didn't fight him over it, didn't make a fuss. Not even when he placed her in the passenger seat of his car, buckling her in and throwing her suitcase in the back seat.

"What about the company car?" she asked, examining her nails as if she could see them in the dark.

"You locked it, right?" He decided against informing her it was her car. Fully paid for and insured up the ass. "Set the alarm, it should be fine." Then the thought occurred to him. "And what the hell would you have done if you heard the alarm in the middle of night?"

Just as calm as she pleased, Kennedy reached into her purse and pulled out a little twenty-two caliber, holding it careful like she thought it might go off. Unlikely seeing as how the safety was on.

"I'll be damned." If he wasn't head over heels already, he would've fell hard right then and there. "And what do you think you're gonna do with that cute little thing?"

It was all kinds of wrong to antagonize her about her gun, no matter how small and, well...pitiful the thing was. At least she had something. He was damned proud of her for it too.

"Look it's all I have okay? And where the hell are you taking me. I am not staying at your house Emory Daniels."

"You are tonight." Casting a sideways glance in her direction, he saw that set jaw he'd come to recognize so well. Stubborn woman. She wasn't going to give in. "It's only for tonight Kennedy. We'll find somewhere better tomorrow. I promise."

She didn't say anything but Emory was a long way from being fooled. It was a good thing he hadn't asked her to follow him. She would've been gone before he could blink. The woman just refused to let anyone help her. He couldn't imagine what it had been like for her, feeling so alone since her parents passed. Letting someone in, someone who really cared was so foreign to her she pushed against it with a fierceness.

"While you're at it, how about letting me have my old jobs back?" She was all full of vinegar and defiance but she wasn't kidding anyone but herself.

It would've been a hard night for anyone. Sure she was bearing up like a champ, but Emory had a feeling what she'd done hadn't really hit her yet. Tomorrow morning in the harsh light of day she will come to grips with the fact she'd done it, she'd actually left the bastard, and he wasn't about to let her go back. That was another reason he really didn't want Kennedy alone tonight. He didn't believe her so weak as to go back, but he just needed to be there when it all settled in. He needed to be the one who comforted her, who was there for her. She needed to see not all men were bastards who only wanted to use her.

Emory was proud of himself for showing her to the guest room the furthest from his bedroom. She would have to walk past his room to go downstairs just in case she thought about leaving of course; it would be something she might try doing. After getting her settled, he went downstairs to pour himself a drink and wait for Byron. His brother needed to know they had a guest, and what had happened tonight. Byron had his own reasons for wanting a piece of Darryl; and if Tawny was anything like her cousin, Emory didn't blame him one bit.

Kennedy stared up at the ceiling trying to quiet the jumble of thoughts racing around in her brain. She's done it, she'd really left Darryl. She had very little money and her savings wouldn't last her long, but it was a lot more than she'd previously been able to squirrel away. Because Darryl owned a third of *The Home Specialists*, she wasn't sure she wanted to keep the job even if she could. It paid more than her three part time jobs combined, but she didn't want anything to do with Darryl. She didn't want to breathe the same air if she could help it.

She'd been such a fool for so long. Hot tears filled her eyes, and although she tried to blink them back they fell down her face like hot summer rain. All the years she'd wasted, all the hopes and dreams she'd let die. And for what? Now here she was, with absolutely nothing to call her own. Even the car she drove in some way belonged to Darryl. All she could think of was her mother's warnings so long ago when she had first fallen for the pretty face and even prettier lies.

"Watch out for that one, Kennedy. He may be good to you now, but will be he good *for* you later?"

She hadn't understood what her mother was trying to tell her then, but it was all too clear now. All those years she'd spent trying to save her reputation, holding her head up when all she wanted to do was lay down. What a waste. Before she knew it she was sobbing, her heart broken in so many places she just didn't know where to begin to put it back together.

Tomorrow she would get up and go on, but right now she felt debilitated. Unable to move, unable to gather herself. Turning she buried her face in the pillow and let it out. She cried until she thought she had no more tears left, then cried some more. Cried for the girl she'd been, the woman she'd become and all the endless possibilities that had once been in between.

She had no idea how long she'd sobbed uncontrollably, trying not to make any noise that would carry outside the room. That was the absolute last thing she needed. The Daniels brothers were good people, but she could only take their charity so far. So tomorrow she would get up, gather her old suitcase and head to the bus station. Emory wasn't going to let her go back to working part time anywhere. She knew it like she knew her own name. Kennedy really had no idea why, but he had taken on responsibility for her, acting like he was her man. Lord was that man stubborn. Well, she could be even more hard-headed than he was. Whatever the future held, she had to let it come. She just couldn't stay stuck here anymore.

Chapter Seven

Hearing Kennedy trying to muffle her tears broke Emory in two. Unable to stop himself, he crept into the room, not hesitating to lie down next to her on the bed and fold her into his arms. He only meant to comfort, to find some way to stop her tears.

"God, baby your hurt is killing me."

Not knowing what else to do, he kissed the tear rolling down her cheeks away. He'd honestly meant to stop there, but the feel of her skin beneath his lips were a temptation he hadn't counted on and one he couldn't resist. His mouth traveled over her face, stopping as she lifted her lips to his. He really, really meant to stop. He didn't want to press her, not tonight. But when their lips merged, and hers parted so sweetly under his harder, more demanding ones, well all thoughts of stopping just flew out the window. She tasted so sweet, softened and melted into him so perfectly. Arms entwined pulling her closer. Still, he had every intention of pulling away eventually.

Instead, body strained against body in a desperate attempt to get closer. Much like the kiss earlier tonight, only with a clearly defined purpose, one singular goal. Maybe he would've been able to think more clearly if she had been wearing full pants pajamas, not the oversized night shirt that so easily rode up her legs to bunch at her waist. Or perhaps it would've been easier to stop his hands from caressing her bared skin had that skin not been so unbelievably smooth, so incredibly soft.

"Tell me to stop, Kennedy." Because unless she actually said the words he knew he wouldn't stop. Not now, not ever. "If you don't tell me, I won't stop, baby, and I don't want to do anything to lose you." He was rasping, sounding almost outside himself. It was as honest as he could be given the circumstances. He was rock hard and ready, desperate for her. But hell, when hadn't he been?

"I need this." Oh God, her words seared his very soul. "I need you. Make it better, Emory. Please?"

No way he could say no. He should; this was so not a good idea. The right thing to do would be to ease away now, step away from the bed, and get the hell out of the room. He couldn't do that, couldn't stop touching her, feeling her. She was his own miracle, living proof love did exist and it was possible for a man to want a woman so much he'd move the heavens for her if he could. The one thing Emory just couldn't do was walk away. Not when she hurt, not when he knew he could make her forget for just a little while.

And he knew he would never be the same. He knew this moment would be burned into his psyche long after he was old and gray. She would resent it, deny it, push it away as far as she could. He understood that; it was for her own self-preservation. He just couldn't stop unless she told him to. And she wouldn't. As much as the knowledge beat at the edges of his consciousness that this would make her run, he knew she wouldn't say no. The magnetic pull was too strong, the feelings too real. She may dress it up in everything it wasn't but she couldn't turn away anymore than he could.

He didn't kiss her, he possessed her lips, hot and demanding. As much as he tried to hang on to his self control it was a losing battle and he knew it. Any material that blocked skin from skin was offensive to all his senses, almost sacrilege to the moment. It was only after every stitch of anything they didn't come into the world with was gone that Emory felt as if he was truly, finally at home.

Full body contact never felt so good. Silky smooth, her skin was made to be kissed, stroked, worshipped. His mouth couldn't seem to settle on one particular area. When he kissed along her neckline she sighed, moving to give him free and complete access. But then he missed her lips. By the time he worked his way down to her breasts he was ready to triple his tithes in thanksgiving for such perfection. Full, inviting, with nipples shaped to suckle. Emory groaned at the sudden vision of his children nestled there, in the arms of the only woman who'd ever complete him.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted you." A simple confession, truer than any words he'd ever spoken. "Promise me you won't leave after this, Kennedy. Whatever might come we can face it together."

Before laying eyes on this woman, he would've scoffed at any man uttering words like those in his hearing.

"Later." She arched her back into his hands, her voice a tormented moan. "We can talk later."

Emory wasn't so easily fooled. She didn't want to talk about it because she had no intention of staying. If he could've backed off at that moment, he would've; but as it was, his body was wedged between her legs. When she curved her back she threw up her hips, her hot sex gliding against his own throbbing erection. Resistance was futile. Especially with those insistent little hands running down his back to rest on his buttocks to try to pull him closer.

"Oh no, baby. It's not time for the main course yet." He had wrestled just a bit to get both of her hands and pull them above her head and holding them there with one hand. Her eyes widened, her pink tongue swiping along her bottom lip as she stared up at him in the most beguiling mixture of innocence and pure sin. "You didn't really think it would be that simple did you?" She had. He could read it in her eyes. "Sweet baby girl, we're gonna take our time, get to know each other real well." He watched her carefully while he spoke, all the while his free hand making light passes all over her torso, slowly working its way down between her legs. He didn't have to ask her to open her legs; her body did it beautifully on instinct, allowing him to press a single finger against her little pearl.

Kennedy whimpered, her hips rising off the bed as she tried to force his finger inside her. Emory removed it completely, reaching up and pinching each nipple. "Told you not so fast." And damn it he meant it. He was bound and determined to erase every memory of any other man out of her mind completely before the night was over with.

"Emory, you're killing me." There was the batting of those unbelievably sexy eyes of her, a little pout. Cute but not enough to deter him from his goal.

"No baby, I am loving you."

He lowered his head taking a nipple into his mouth while simultaneously pushing two digits deep inside her. Kennedy cried out, her pussy constricting around his fingers almost immediately. He curved both of them upward, seeking the tell-tale ridges of her g-spot. Her body bowed, trembling as she peaked. The sharp pain of her nails digging into his shoulders was the only thing keeping him anchored. The sound of her pleasure was balm to him, making everything he'd done up to this point worth it. He always wanted her like this for him; needy, open, honest in a way that people never were when fully dressed and presented to the world. Knowing he was bringing her this gratification, that it was his mouth, his fingers that were driving her toward bliss was a far greater accomplishment than anything he'd ever done.

And he was a long way from being done.

"You are so damn beautiful, Kennedy." He had to let her nipple go to say it. His mouth missed the texture of her skin, but the words needed to be said. There was so much he couldn't articulate he felt the need to tell her everything he could. "I love seeing you like this. I love having you in my arms."

Emory decided against telling her how much he loved her. She wouldn't believe him now, like this. He had to show her in all that he did.

"Emory, please. I need so much."

"I know you do, baby." More than she thought. "And I'm going to give you what you need, always. Remember that."

There was a lot Emory wasn't saying with his mouth. Kennedy sensed the deeper meaning behind his words. She wanted to run from it, to hide behind what she'd always known on some level was there but she couldn't. He loved her, or at least thought he did. The why's just didn't make sense to her. She wasn't supermodel gorgeous, wasn't polished or sophisticated. She was a normal small town woman with a high school education and nothing but her dreams of a better life to her credit. Even though she knew the right thing to do would be to stop this now, it was already too late.

Her body seemed connected to his in a way she couldn't escape. Under his hands it was like she was reborn each time he drove her over the brink, as he was doing again. His mouth burned a fiery trail from one breast to the other, latching on and tormenting her with suckling nibbles, all while his fingers repeatedly caressed the spot inside of her guaranteed to drive her insane.

"How do you feel, baby?"

There was no words. Looking down at where his head lay on her chest, she wished like hell she hadn't. It was there shining in his eyes as clear as day. He loved her, all of her. He saw her weaknesses, her hurt, all the pain she'd kept buried inside so deep half of the time she refused to acknowledge it herself. Saw it and wanted to make it better. No, he needed to make it better. She could see it as if he'd said the words out loud. And oh God, how she wanted to lay it all down at his feet, bury her face in his broad chest and let it go.

But these were not his burdens.

She would've said it, but as soon as she opened her mouth, his fingers hit *there*, like he could read her intentions and refused to allow her to deny what was between them. She couldn't escape it. His eyes held hers as her body fell apart under his command.

"Oh God, Emory I can't take anymore." She was holding on by sheer, stubborn will. Her mind was losing control over her actions; he laid her bare with every orgasm.

Sex was something adults did for pleasure, for control, for dominance. This was none if those things. He was merging with her, the way silly romances talked about but never could really express in simple words. He was reaching deep inside her and pulling her through what had been a murky, unloving existence into something all too real for her peace of mind. She couldn't escape, she wasn't even sure she wanted to.

"Yes you can, and you will."

The deep, sultry voice stroked her on the inside, warming her cold soul and letting in a light that blinded her. Those lips, sinfully enticing, destructive to her barren world traveled down, his hands cupping where his mouth had just been with something...reverence. That's how he touched her, how he kissed her; like she was something precious and sacred. She didn't even know a man could touch like that. It didn't hurt, it didn't feel indifferent. She felt loved, deeply. Respected in a situation that had never been respectful for her. He was cherishing her, and Kennedy wasn't sure she could deal with it.

"Emory, oh God not there!" She meant to yell it, to scream it, to say it as if she meant the lie. Instead it was a whisper that sounded too much like a benediction.

His mouth was hot against her sex, his tongue licking flames of fire straight to her core. Her traitorous hips rose to greet him, her body eagerly opening for him. She couldn't hold on. The flood gates opened and she gave him everything he demanded—all of her. Her heart filled to overflowing as she fell apart. Trying to swallow the words weren't going to hold it, nothing could.

"I love you so much Emory." And that scared the shit out of her. Love hadn't been gentle or kind. It hadn't been reciprocated the way she'd expected. It had grown complacent, neglectful; it had left her cold and wanting. She hadn't wanted to admit the feelings that had been welling since that fateful afternoon in the parking lot of Red's Bar.

Suddenly he was inside her, his larger body pressing against her, his face so close, those lips right there. She tried to lean up to kiss them, to silence whatever they would say to the confession she hadn't wanted to make.

He moved back, staring all too purposefully down at her. "I love you too, Kennedy. More than you know."

She knew it. On some level she'd known it for a while. Too late to take it back, all she could do was hold on. He powered inside her, driving so deep with so much purpose. He wasn't making love to her, he was possessing her. And she'd left herself open to be possessed.

Kennedy spiraled into a realm of pure sensation. Her body lifted, seeking to get ever closer. She wanted just for a time to be a part of this man, to become one with him

in the true sense of the phrase. Their lips fused, their bodies strained, arms entangled. Holding back wasn't inside the realm of possibility; he was too deep inside her to hide anything from him. He plundered, taking that fragile part of her she never thought to be able to give to another ever again. She was shuddering, trying to hold back, to hold on to some small piece of herself.

"Let go, baby. I promise to care for you always." The words were soft and low in her ears, like he knew she was terrified of the truth spoken out loud.

Too late. Her body obeyed his command. Kennedy shattered, screaming his name.

There was only one coherent thought as she drifted between space and time. It had been too much, too overwhelming. If it ever fell apart she wasn't sure she could survive. There was only one thing to do.

Run.

Chapter Eight

Kennedy snuck out at the crack of dawn. She worried she might have to call a cab, but fortunately Byron had just been coming in. It took a minute to convince him to drive her back to the hotel where the car was. He kept looking at the stairs expecting Emory to come down. So did she in all honesty. When he didn't show, Byron shrugged, lifted her heavy suitcase like it was nothing and drove her to the car. She was able to find a decent place in Fort Valley, one of those hotel apartment places that you could rent by the week. Seems she had more money than she'd originally thought in her account.

She wasn't fooled for a second about the reason why. Emory had done it, when? She didn't know. She thought about calling him to confront him on it but that would mean talking to him and she couldn't do that. She couldn't allow herself to think about Emory at all. Thankfully, she had classes most of the morning. She sat up front in every single class, focusing on every word out of each professor's mouth. Unfortunately her classes were scheduled to allow her to work in the afternoon after the hour and a half drive back to Roberta.

Today there was no Roberta to go back to. Maybe not ever. Oh damn it to hell and back, she just didn't know. Every fiber of her being wanted to run back to Emory's arms where it was safe and warm. Sitting in the two room rental, she tried like hell to concentrate on her studies, but her mind kept returning to the night before. Her body still sung an ode to the man she was far too frightened to believe in. Even if her heart did scream it was right. Her heart had been all too wrong before.

But what if this time my heart is right?

Then there was Darryl to consider. If she attempted to have the mythical happily-ever-after with Emory, Darryl was sure to try any and everything in his power to make both of them miserable. She didn't fear for Emory, she didn't need to have seen him twist Darryl's arm to know he could physically take care of himself. That wasn't the point. Darryl could be a pest at best, a waking nightmare at worst. He was sullen and resentful; her walking out on him wasn't something he would look on lightly. Not that he loved her. Kennedy couldn't really say what Darryl felt towards her or anyone else that wasn't himself. But he would think she had betrayed him, forgetting all the ways he had betrayed her own love and trust and focusing on his own hurt instead.

That was the way of some men it seemed. Tawny's husband had put her through pure hell when she finally left him; not because he loved his wife, but because she had the audacity to stand up and say no more. He felt it was some kind of slight to his manhood. It made no sense to her, but Darryl was cut from a similar cloth. It wasn't that they couldn't love, but they thought being there was enough. Giving a woman his name or his home meant he was doing all he had to do, and she should appreciate it. You couldn't reason with it, it was just one of those things.

So she couldn't go back she reasoned, especially with Darryl owning a third of the business. She didn't want to be the cause of problems for Emory. At least that was

what she kept telling herself over and over again. It was more comforting than the truth. The real reasons she ran were too humiliating to face, too close to the bone to be put into clear, concise thoughts. She didn't want to admit, even to herself, that she was scared.

No, that wasn't quite the right word. Throwing down the highlighter that hadn't managed to make a pass over a single word, Kennedy went to the sink in the tiny bathroom. The mirror held the reflection of a woman she didn't recognize. The features may have been the same, but there was something else there; wisdom in the eyes that had once been half blind, tension around lips that had known what it really was to be kissed. Her body wasn't one little bit out of shape. It was a body that knew what it was to be made love to, really knew a man down to the bottom of his soul. It was terrifying.

The real reason she ran wasn't that she was scared of bringing drama into Emory's life. The truth was she wasn't sure she was the woman she saw in that mirror. Being with Emory made her feel like all these years she's been playing at being a woman, like she never really knew what a woman was until he had shown her. She didn't know if she could live up to that.

Stupid, silly, idiotic. She was being all that and more, but she was so scared she couldn't be the person Emory needed or deserved. And she was shamed to her soul of the real reasons she'd stayed with Darryl for so long. She didn't believe there would ever be anything better. She'd lived in his house, paid his bills, accepted life as it was because she'd been too afraid to leave and search for better. She'd been comfortable in her own misery. It was familiar, something she understood. Until a man came walking in and shone a light on all those dark things she'd tried so hard to deny was there.

She couldn't blame anyone for her life but herself. She'd used everything under the sun as an excuse. But once her eyes were open, really truly open, closing them again wasn't an option. She wasn't trapped, never had been. She'd trapped herself. Walking away had been the hardest thing she'd ever done. Even with Darryl bringing some bar whore to her bed, the bed she had helped pay for, had worked job after job to make the payments at the rent to own place, she knew if there had never been an Emory, if there had never been this hope he represented, she would've stayed.

The knowledge cut deep. How low would she have sunken? How much would she have endured? She was lost, not sure what to do with the person she was becoming. Not sure who this person was.

Last night, packing had been a catharsis, a purification of her inner self brought on by too many emotions coming at her too fast. She was not so much better than Darryl as she was better than the situation they both had placed her in. Because the Good Lord knew, Darryl had helped place her in the box in which she lived for so long. Emory wasn't the salvation most women think would come when they were young and give up on as they age. He had merely shown her she was her own salvation. She'd always had the strength and the ability to just walk away. The money and transportation he provided was nice, but she would've made it without it.

And that left her with what, exactly? Half a broken life and nothing but dreams yet to be chased. What did she have to offer Emory? What did she bring to him? She

had to leave because she didn't have the strength to say no to him. She didn't want to. Staying in Roberta meant she would be facing herself, and she didn't really want to do that. It meant being a real grown up, not having anyone else to blame for the things that went wrong. It meant being a real woman for Emory; the kind that little girls could look up to and want to be. She didn't want to let him down, but even more she didn't want to let herself down. She didn't even know what it was to have an adult relationship. She couldn't rush headlong into one without really being sure who and what she was, could she?

God that hurt. She wanted him. With every breath it hurt more, not being able to have him. It was insane, she hadn't known him long enough to feel this deep, to want so much. He just made it too easy to lean on his greater strength. She wouldn't be the responsible one. She would be something she told herself she always wanted to be. Not weaker, not less, just different. Softer, gentler; she would be the woman and he would be the man. The kind every star-struck teenage girl dreamed about but so few really get the chance to meet.

Shit this was getting her nowhere. It was all a jumble anyway. Fleeting thoughts and emotions weighed heavy and heavier on her mind, but she was solving absolutely nothing by brooding on them. Sooner or later Emory would move on. She didn't blame him. She wasn't ready for him and what he had to offer.

Right?

Laying there while Kennedy attempted to sneak out was the hardest thing Emory ever had to do. All he wanted to do was reach out and grab her, hold her to him with all he had. But she needed to run. She needed to think. There was no doubt in his mind that Darryl wasn't what was on her mind this morning. He'd seen it in her eyes last night. She'd told him with her own lips. She loved him, and that scared the shit out of her. He doubted she even knew the reasons why she was afraid. The woman was a jumble of emotions right now.

Which is why you shouldn't have slept with her, dumb ass.

Having a conscience really fucking sucked at times; however, this wasn't really one of them. He didn't regret a moment even if it wasn't the most ideal time for them to come together. Yes, she'd been vulnerable and yes he should've waited, but she had needed him as much as he needed her. There was a small twinge of guilt for waking her up and keeping her up most of the night, but if she was going to run from him, she would know he'd been there. He'd imprinted himself on her body, hopefully deeper. It was the only thing that would sustain him for the short time he would allow her to be away. There was absolutely no doubt he would be going after her. Unfortunately he understood she needed time, and maybe a little space.

Besides, she wanted him to come after her. She may not know it, but she needed him to come after her. Kennedy had been the man of the house for so long she wasn't really sure how to go about being vulnerable again. It made him want to jump out of the bed and go kick the living shit out of Darryl. She probably blamed herself. The

woman took on way too much all the time. Every problem she had to figure out all on her own.

Well those days were numbered. All he had to do was lay there and pretend to be asleep while she talked his brother into taking her to her car. He knew that's what she was doing because he heard when Darryl pulled up, right before she tried creeping down the stairs with that heavy beat up suitcase. Man, it killed him not to take the damn thing from her small hands. Indicative of the way she lived her life for entirely too long, she struggled and managed on her own.

Emory knew the long pause was Byron waiting to see if he would come down the stairs after her. His brother knew him better than any other. He knew damn well if Kennedy was here, Emory was aware of where she was. Knew he would've heard her trying to slip out of the house without his knowledge. So he lay there, dying a thousand times while his woman ran away from him.

He didn't trust himself not to run after the car, so he waited until he couldn't hear it anymore before rising and trudging downstairs in just his jeans. To keep himself busy he made coffee, poured himself a cup, then dropped down on a armchair staring at nothing. Sleeping with Kennedy in his arms had been so much sweeter than even his dreams. It'd felt so damn right. He didn't want to spend a single night without her.

"Why didn't you come down and stop her?"

Byron's voice surprised him. How long had he been moping in the chair?

"Because she needed to run." He absently ran his hand over his chest as he said it. Words shouldn't hurt like that.

"Here." The now cold cup of coffee was taken out of his hands, and a small crystal snifter half full of deep amber liquid was placed there instead. "You look like you could use this."

"Whiskey? By, it's not even seven in the morning."

Byron merely shrugged, pouring himself some of the liquid fire before holding it up in mock salute. "Five o'clock somewhere. And I am not inviting you to finish the bottle, just-hell, just drink."

If anyone understood what Emory was going through it was Byron. His brother had been in love with the same woman all his life, and he was just about as close to getting her as Darryl was to getting a PhD in Family and Relationship Counseling.

"Take it you saw Tawny last night?" Anything to get his mind off of Kennedy.

"Yep, and Darryl this morning, looking for Kennedy."

Well shit. Emory didn't think the bastard would actually go looking for her. He knew damn well she left with him. *But he didn't think she stayed with me. Why?*

"Did he now? And he believed she would be at Tawny's?"

"Hell no, but he was sure as hell hoping. Didn't think the bastard cared. Not really. But he was frantic."

Yeah, neither did Emory. A glance at Byron's bruised knuckles told him a lot though.

"That desperate, huh?" Emory looked pointedly at his brother's hand. "And he didn't mention my name?"

"Nope. Insisted Kennedy was there, among a few other things I had to set him straight on."

Self-delusion could be a mother fucker. Emory only wished he had a piece of the action. He found it interesting that even knowing he was there with Kennedy when she left, he didn't think she would come to him, be here with him. He expected loyalty even after what he'd done? It pissed him off to the highest level of pissitivity that the son of a bitch would really believe after what he'd done, Kennedy would stay true to him. It also made him wonder what the hell else the bastard might have done to her over the years that he didn't know about.

Shit, he was feeling downright homicidal at all the possibilities.

"You will not be going to see Darryl right now. Shouldn't you be going after your woman?"

Oh how he wanted to. Bare chest and bare feet be damned, he wanted to storm out into the cold and bring her luscious ass back to where she belonged, by his side. But he couldn't do that. It would be doing her a disservice. He owed her this time.

"Five days. I figure that should be enough for her to work it all out." If he could wait that long. Emory himself seriously doubted it.

Chapter Nine

Kennedy was proud of herself. Three whole days and she hadn't checked her messages, hadn't even turned on her phone. She'd been tempted to turn the thing on and make a call; especially since every day money was added to her checking account. Not a lot, almost like he was hoping she wouldn't notice a slow influx of cash. When a person didn't have much to start with, you notice an extra hundred or two. It would end one day, when he discovered she wasn't coming back. She just had to watch her spending and find a job as soon she could.

The paper hadn't looked promising, so every day she had taken to walking around the area where she stayed, looking for help wanted signs or just going in and putting in applications. She was careful not to list *The Home Specialists* on the work experience section, no matter how much she really wanted Emory to know where she was. A part of her wanted him to come get her. But that would be defeating the purpose. She had to stand on her own.

Three very long days, and the longing for the unfathomable man only grew with each passing day. She could still feel him all around her, inside her. It was insanity; she'd only spent one night with the man. But oh what a night it had been. She felt as if she was moving around missing a limb, one that kept itching, hurting, aching to be touched. She couldn't touch it because it wasn't there.

Trudging back to her room she tried to calculate how much she had and how long it would last. If she was careful about how much she ate and only used the car whenever she had to go anywhere too far to walk, she could go maybe two to three months before she absolutely had to find a job. And that wasn't counting the money that kept mysteriously appearing either. Sooner or later she would have to tell someone where to come get the car; it wasn't hers no matter what Emory kept saying. Hell by now Darryl might have reported the thing stolen. All she needed was the sheriff to show up and arrest her.

She decided to leave a message at the main office later on tonight. But she'd use a payphone just in case Emory or Byron had the phones forwarded to their cells—if they hadn't already replaced her that is—she used to do that, just in case a customer had an emergency. Darryl probably believed she'd be back, but this time she really wouldn't. It felt really good to be able to just think that and feel no remorse; no responsibility toward a grown man who should be taking care of himself. As for Emory...well, she just wouldn't think about it. She was tired of waking up with red, puffy eyes.

Yeah, right. As soon as you open the door you'll bust into tears again. Happened every day like clockwork. She managed to convince herself it was nothing; a way to get back at Darryl, a fling. As long as she kept busy it worked for a while. But sooner or later she returned to the tiny room, forced to think, to remember. In the end she'd end up in tears, wanting so much, craving so badly. She stood at the door, keys in hand, debating whether or not to go inside. She didn't think she could stand it another night. All she

had to do was call. Her pride could go to hell, at least she would know peace. That's the truth of what she found in his arms, peace.

For one night, the world outside ceased to exist. All the problems she thought she had had melted away. She'd begged Emory to make it better, and he had. Just like a child, his kiss chased the hurt away. Would it be so wrong to have that? Maybe...

"Baby, as much as I'm enjoying the view of you from behind I would appreciate it if you'd open the door."

Kennedy had to bite her lip to keep from crying out in relief. Emory. She'd hoped, even dared to pray he'd come for her. Deep down in a place she didn't want to visit, that place where hope sprung eternal, she knew he would. Her practical side had just refused to accept it. As it was, her relief was so profound her knees buckled just a little, her head resting on the door. And of course he was there, right behind her in an instant, his steely arm wrapping around her waist to steady her.

"Come on, Kennedy you knew I would come after you, didn't you?" God those words sounded so damn good breathed in her ear.

She had to swallow the sob that clogged her throat before she could speak. "I didn't know."

And that was the kicker; she had hoped, wished, dreamed and deep down known she'd see him again, that he would come. But she hadn't been sure when or how. She hadn't known if that "knowing" way down inside was just another pipe dream that would go poof eventually. She hadn't dared to believe it would be this soon.

She allowed him to take the key from her nerveless fingers, wanted to weep when he swept her up in his arms and pushed inside. When he frowned at the interior, she wanted to bury her head in his chest and hide, but Kennedy didn't dare. She wasn't the woman who hid – well, mostly. And she may have run away, but she stood her ground when faced with whatever life threw her way. Even if standing her ground meant snuggling on the lap of a man strong enough to hold her as he sat on the lumpy couch.

"I meant to give you at least a week." Emory's confession came with an impish smile that warmed her to her very toes. "I couldn't do it. It seems like I've been waiting forever for you. The last three days damn near killed me."

Her heart took an involuntary leap of joy hearing it. Still, she couldn't just go back. Definitely not to the house he shared with his brother. There would be talk enough after breaking up with Darryl; she didn't want to make it worse.

"I can't just go back, Emory. Darryl owns part of the company. I can't work there with him."

"No honey, he doesn't."

Kennedy's head swung up so fast she hurt her neck. "What do you mean he doesn't?"

But she already knew. Holding her breath she prayed she wasn't right, but secretly she was thrilled, honored, humbled. It was going to start a shit storm to be sure. Darryl would bellow and bay to the moon and anybody else who was in a five mile

radius. Her head started to spin with all the different ways this was so sweet, and so wrong, all at the same time.

"I started the company for you. I couldn't stand seeing you work your fingers to the bone day after day, night after night, while that...while Darryl sat in Red's Bar talking about working. All those papers he signed were really just signing away any legal right to *The Home Specialist*. You own half of that company, Byron and I own the other half. The car outside is yours, Darryl's truck is yours, and the money you refuse to touch is all legally yours."

Kennedy tried to get up but he wasn't letting her. Emory's arm locked her securely in place on his lap. She wanted to explode to her feet, yell and scream. How could he do such a thing? It was like buying a person, which was just as bad as all she'd been through with Darryl, just the other side of a dark coin. That was the right thing to do wasn't it? Sitting on his lap however, with his body pressing against her, his arms securely around her, it was really, really difficult to be mad. As it was, it was tough to wrap her brain around it. And she had thought the other night had been revealing. Knowing that he had created a business out of thin air for her had been mind blowing enough, but to own half of a company she knew next to nothing about?

"I never wanted it." She'd wanted to go to school, to get a degree in something. Pursuing a degree in Business had been a default choice because of the business; because that had been Darryl's dream. Kennedy had never really thought of life after that. She certainly hadn't decided what she really wanted to be. She always thought she had time. "That business was Darryl's dream. I - I don't know what I want."

That hadn't been easy to admit. Especially with Emory close enough to read her fear, to see her uncertainty first hand. Life just sort of happened; she always figured she'd fall into something. Having an education would garner a higher salary. That had been a primary focus for so long, things like hopes or dreams never entered the picture.

"Baby, you don't have to decide what you want to do today." Damn him to hell for sounding so reasonably assuring. She was a grown woman, she shouldn't have to lean on anyone like this. "And stop what you're thinking right there. Everyone needs someone to lean on. I just thank God I had my brother, because Lord knows there wasn't anyone else for either of us. Kennedy, everyone needs someone to lean on sometimes. Don't ask me to let you figure it out on your own, because as much as I love you I can't do that for you. It's the only thing I can't do for you - give you up."

He pulled her tighter against him as he said it. She couldn't really answer him because she didn't have the answers. All her life she'd wanted someone to say something like that to her, she just hadn't known it. Laying her head on his shoulder she let the tears come allowing herself to be vulnerable in front of this man yet again. There was just something about him that made her feel lighter, safe to be herself. The elemental Kennedy without her armor.

It felt real. It was peace.

They didn't move for a very long time. Emory didn't push her. He didn't try to make conversation. Didn't even comment on her tears though she knew she was soaking his shirt. He just held her, his hands soothing up and down her back and her

head. It didn't make her feel like a child. It didn't reduce her to less. It just felt right. Like the sun breaking through after days of gray, cloudy skies. She was loved. Just as sure as there'd be brand new problems and issues to deal with tomorrow, she wouldn't be facing them alone. And she didn't want to. Never really had.

The sun had long since sunk from the sky when Emory finally stirred. "Come on, let's get your things and I'll drive you home. I'll drop you to get your car tomorrow when you go to class."

Kennedy rose to her feet, facing her real future dead on.

"You know I can't stay with you and Byron. I don't care much about gossip, but I think I need to live alone for a little while." She held up her hand when he opened his mouth to argue. "Not be alone, just live alone for a minute. We have time to decide how we're gonna do this later."

She could tell by the way he pursed his lips the conversation was a long way from being over, though he didn't challenge her just then.

"Fine, but for tonight you're staying with me, in my bed." His voice brooked no argument, so Kennedy didn't offer him one when he paused, that eyebrow of his rising as if to dare her. "After classes tomorrow we'll go around to see about places for rent."

She turned around supposedly getting busy packing, but she was really hiding her smile. He was so obvious. She was going to have to do the searching on the sly. Emory would try anything in his power to keep her close. But she was serious about this. She needed to try out her own space, albeit with a very handsome, very loving boyfriend in her corner. Wasn't such a bad thing to have.

"And I'll deal with Darryl." Emory waited until they were walking out of the hotel, her suitcase in his larger, capable hand. "I'm dead serious Kennedy; I don't want you dealing with him right now."

"Guess he's pretty raw. Does he know about the business yet?"

"Told him the morning you lit out. He hasn't been at any of the job sites since." Kennedy winced, waiting for the rest. There was more, she was sure of it. Darryl had always expected things to just fall out of the sky in his favor. Having his good luck snatched from him wasn't something he was likely to take laying down, or standing either. "The first day he spent at Red's, until the whispers grew to be too much. He's been holed up in his house since then."

His house, the words were said distinctly and deliberately. Emory's jaw was like granite as he stared directly at her. Funny how she knew exactly what he wanted to hear. She would give it to him gladly.

"I'll steer clear of Darryl and let you handle it." She bit back a laugh when the man was visibly relieved. Men. "Not that he would do anything physical to me. Darryl's an ass, but he's not physically abusive."

"He was verbally abusive, he abused you by allowing you to work yourself ragged while he sat on his ass. I wouldn't put anything past him."

Man, what a feeling to have someone looking out for her well being for once.

Chapter Ten

Emory had never been so relieved to have a woman beside him in bed before. The past three days had been pure hell. He was aware he'd been a complete dick to everyone around him, but he just couldn't seem to help himself. Every second he'd worried about Kennedy. Where was she staying? Was she safe? Although he told Byron he would wait to go after her, he'd called around every town in the county until he knew where she was the very day she left. He drove to Fort Valley every night and slept in his car watching over her hotel room. He felt like a creep doing it, but he had to make sure she was alright.

He was going to have to tell her that, and everything else he'd done since he and his brother had returned to Roberta late last year. He'd been inspecting some of their business investments when he first saw her.

He couldn't really say what it was. Not love at first sight really, just an awareness of her, head down working hard at the hardware store. Then he'd seen her later on the same night at the gas station. She'd fascinated him. There had been something slightly sad about her, but underneath there was this spark of life. It was in her smile, in that soft honeyed voice when she greeted regulars, people she'd known all her life. He found himself wondering if she was even aware it was still there, or if she'd just given up any hope of better tomorrows.

What had started as fascination with a beautiful, if sad woman had turned into a deep admiration the more Emory learned about Kennedy. He found himself watching closer, listening more carefully. Somewhere along the line he'd fallen, and fallen hard, and without ever talking to her in person. Suddenly it was her well being, her happiness that became his primary concern.

Both he and his brother had left Roberta right after high school with a chip on their shoulders and a well defined goal. They would go out and make their mark on the world, then come home and buy out the whole damn town that had treated them like second class citizens while they were growing up. The military had assisted both men in maturing. Getting back at someone just because they were mean to them in the past no longer seemed all that important. But buying out the town...well, the economy had been hit hard in this part of Georgia. Businesses became affordable when they pooled their resources. They knew the county, knew the residents; they had been able to turn profits where others had failed. But it ceased being about revenge and started being about building a real, substantial life for themselves.

For Byron, there had always been one woman he would bend over backwards for. Emory knew deep down all they had accomplished had been in part for the one person Byron had carried in his heart since the first day of kindergarten. Emory hadn't understood the drive to build something all for a woman. Now he knew all too well. When he'd suggested befriending Darryl for the express purpose of giving Kennedy the security she deserved, Byron had laughed his ass off.

"See? Now you know what it's like," Byron had choked out between the gasping belly cackles.

Yeah, he understood.

He knew she'd be expecting him to be all over her tonight once he got her here. Lord knows he wanted nothing more than to make love to her all night until she swore she would never leave him again. He just sensed it wasn't what she needed right now. Instead he'd cooked them dinner, watched a movie and sat on his hands when she went up to take a bath and get ready for bed. Where she would sleep had been a mini battle but he wasn't backing down. He needed her here beside him, just to ensure himself she was safe.

Watching Kennedy sleep in his arms gave him such an overwhelming sense of right, he thought he might burst from being so full. This was where she was supposed to be. He just needed to get her to admit it. He understood all the arguments against jumping into a relationship after she just got out of one, but truthfully, she hadn't had a real relationship with Darryl for a long while. Long before he moved back home in fact. Once she'd caught his attention, he had made it his business to find out as much about her as possible. Plus, he'd watched them together closely. Her disdain for Darryl had been painfully apparent for anyone wise enough to look. The arguments be damned; he wanted Kennedy with him full time. He wanted to marry her, he wanted her to carry his babies. There wasn't anyone else on earth, including his brother, he wanted to grow old with but her. He could see them sitting on the porch, watching their grandbabies play in the yard, spoiling them rotten then sending them home to their parents.

That's why he'd started construction on the house he hoped eventually Kennedy would share with him. It was a little closer to town, which would be better for their future children, with a large yard and a lake out back. It was his own design—started about six months ago, the day he first laid eyes on her.

Oh he knew she'd fight him on it. That was just her way. She'd been struggling so long it was hard for her to accept what was intrinsically simple. But he would wear her down, his stubborn little woman. Eventually. Yeah he would help her find an apartment, but he had no intention of letting her sleep there alone. If he had to be sneaky, well then that was just what he'd do.

The thing was, Emory knew he wasn't capable of walking away. He saw his future in her eyes and he knew she saw it too. He could understand her fear and reluctance, but he wouldn't let it stop him. If she wasn't ready to be Mrs. Kennedy Daniels, well he would just wait until she was. That or talk himself hoarse until she agreed. *One way or another*, he promised both of them as he finally allowed his body to rest. Damn but it felt good to hold her.

Kennedy bit her tongue as she rolled her eyes. The man was seriously starting to work her last nerve.

"There is nothing wrong with that last place, Emory and you know it." It was seriously starting to wear on her.

One place was too far out. Three were in the wrong neighborhoods; as if there were that many neighborhoods in Roberta. He was nit-picking on purpose, hoping that she would just give up and agree to move in with him; knowing that didn't make it any less infuriating. Plus, there was no way in hell she was moving in with Emory and his brother. People had simple minds. Like it or not, they lived in a very small town. People would talk. It wasn't about caring what people said so much it was about not wanting to make waves.

"There were too many single men in that complex."

Kennedy stopped in the process of stomping back to his car, not quite believing he had actually said that out loud. She opened her mouth but no sound came out. She had to close it again and breathe real deep before she found her voice again.

"Emory Daniels, there wasn't a resident in that place that was under sixty."

"You think their sex drive dies after a certain age?"

He was dead serious. She realized it by that little tic in his jaw he got whenever he was irritated about something. She had to shake her head and let it go. He wasn't going to budge, and truthfully, the complex was a tad run down and depressing. Been there, done that, and didn't particularly care to do that again. She wasn't about to let Emory know his objections had been shared about each and every one of the places they'd gone to so far. His place was looking better and better. It may be pride or sheer orneriness on her part, but she didn't want to give him the satisfaction just yet.

"I think maybe I should just get a place in Fort Valley." She really didn't want to do that either, even if she did go to school there.

"There are two choices left. The new condos near the high school or my house." Kennedy wanted to laugh at the way he completely ignored her suggestion.

"Or I can start looking in other towns."

"Kennedy..." He sighed, shaking his head. She bit her lip, waiting to see what he'd say. "I want to show you something."

Instead of going out by the condos, which he and Byron owned, or going back to his house, he drove out of town a little ways, stopping at a new construction site by the lake. The place was little more than a frame, but from working at *The Home Specialists* she could see the beginnings of a beautiful home.

Her heart began to speed, her hands getting a little clammy. *Oh God not now, please don't let him ask me now.* There was no way she could possibly say yes; not yet anyway. She was serious about being on her own for just a little while. She couldn't just jump into anything right now, not any deeper than she already was anyway.

"Oh stop it, I'm not asking you to marry me." Kennedy didn't mean to sigh in relief, but she did anyway. Until his next sentence. "I'm telling you, we *will* be getting married. Not next week, or even next month, but soon. I love you, Kennedy, and I know you love me back. I'm willing to wait for a little while, but we are going to get married eventually. And this is going to be our home—if you like it."

Typical Emory. He had no idea of the magnitude of what he just said in under a minute. He just laid it all out there for her to accept or reject.

"Do you realize you just pretty much declared we are gonna get married, but you would scrap the house if I didn't like it?"

Just like a man, he blinked at her like he had no idea what she was saying. He probably didn't.

"Emory," she sighed. "How much would you say you spent on this house already?"

He shrugged, like it didn't matter a bit. "A little bit."

"And you would do what? Tear it down?"

"Yeah and start again with something you like better. Or if it's the location, somewhere you like better." He said it so adorably matter-of-factly; she couldn't help but fall even deeper in love than she already was.

"I love the house." And she did; what she could see of it anyway. "And maybe one day, I will marry you, if you show me the rest of the house."

Emory's smile could've lit up Las Vegas. He nearly jumped out of the car, dragging her toward the building.

"I knew you'd love it. And you are marrying me. I will cut you off of my fabulous love making if you don't."

Chapter Eleven

Emory smiled to himself as he watched Kennedy storm up the staircase—so much for the condos by the high school. The town wasn't all that big to begin with, so he and Byron had decided to build a rather smallish complex, taking advantage of the combining of high schools from the three surrounding towns. There had been new teachers that needed a place to live closer to the school. The last condo was rented out about thirty minutes before he and Kennedy had gotten there. There was no way she could claim that he'd done it on purpose this time; he'd spent the entire afternoon looking at places with her. Neither he nor Byron actually ran the property, they'd hired a property manager long before they'd ever moved back home. Didn't mean Emory wasn't damn glad about it.

Looks like the forces of nature wanted her to stay right where she was, which was more than fine with him.

"Hey, glad I ran into you." Byron came down the stairs a few minutes after Kennedy slammed the door to the bedroom. Their bedroom. Man he liked the sound of that.

"You going somewhere?"

It took a moment for Emory to notice, but Byron had a suitcase in hand and a duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

"Moving out. Rented one of the condos over by the high school."

"See! I knew it!" Kennedy appeared out of nowhere, her little finger wagging directly at him. "You kicked out your own brother just so I wouldn't be able to rent a condo, didn't you?"

It wasn't funny, at least not to her. It was just that she looked so adorably pissed, but secretly delighted. He could tell by the way her nipples hardened under the somewhat snug sweater. Her eyes may have been narrowed but there was a ghost of a smile on her lips. Then there was Byron looking hopelessly lost by the entire situation. He literally jumped out of Kennedy's way when she came barreling into the room, staring at her then back at him, then back to her again. Emory didn't even try to hold back the laughter.

"Um, at the risk of pissing you off, Kennedy I swear I have no idea what you're talking about." Byron even dropped his duffle and suitcase, holding up his hands in the universal sign of innocence. "I decided to move all on my own, I promise. And please don't take it out on my dunderhead brother. Have pity on his poor back from sleeping in his ca- OUCH! Damn it, Emory why'd you kick me?"

What he really wanted to do was get his hands around Emory's neck.

"Wait, now why exactly was Emory sleeping in his car?" Kennedy turned her back on him completely, leveling one of her no-nonsense stares on his brother.

Byron took an involuntary step back, his hands still up. Emory could see it coming; Byron was going to rat him out. His brother had a healthy dose of respect for women, all women. He could find the good in just about any female on the face of the

planet. Not that Emory didn't, but Byron took it to extremes. It didn't matter if the woman in question was the Queen of England or a two dollar whore on sale for fifteen cents, Byron was going to treat her like he would his grandmother. And Byron seriously loved his grandmother.

"When you left he slept outside your hotel room." Oh, the traitor. "He slept outside the gas station every time you worked nights. Not to be creepy or anything." The Benedict Arnold had the nerve to smile in his direction, like he was helping or something. "He was just making sure nothing happened to you. I would've done the same thing. Hell any man worth the name would. I'm not just moving so the two of you can have some quality alone time, I promise. I'm doing a little courting myself, and I need my own space away from my brother."

All that was followed by a shit eating grin, showcasing dimples and pride. If he wasn't his brother...

Kennedy moved in slow motion, pivoting on the balls of her feet so deliberately, so gracefully it was like watching a ballet.

"You want to explain this to me?" Even Kennedy's voice was slow and quiet like, the perfect calm before the storm. The only thing missing was an offer of some tea, then he would know he was in deep, deep trouble.

"Well, uh, I'll let you two talk it out." Byron picked up his bags and high-tailed it to the door. "I'll call ya tomorrow bro."

So wrong. The coward. Emory would've told him what he thought too, only he couldn't seem to look away from a beautiful if pissed Kennedy. She really did look intoxicating all mad. Not tired or beat down, but a righteous anger that would blow hard for a while before it turned into something else. Frankly he couldn't wait to get to the something else part, however explanations were in order.

"You can just be mad, Kennedy cause I'm not about to apologize." Emory even crossed his arms to add an extra *umpft* to what he'd said. Not that it would work but he was willing to give it a try.

It didn't.

"We can get to the apologies later. Right now what I want to know is how long have you been stalking me?"

"Stalking you?" Well hell, he hadn't expected that one. "You call trying to make sure you were safe stalking you? Woman, there is no way in hell you should have been working the night shift at a goddamn gas station."

"Don't you blaspheme to me Emory Daniels!" Kennedy poked him in the chest with her index finger to emphasize her point, he supposed. How twisted was it that he liked it? "You didn't even know me when I was working at the gas station. So why would you care what happened to me?"

"Because I loved you even then that's why!" Not what he meant to come out of his mouth. He seemed to have shocked the both of them. Well the cat was out of the bag now.

"How? Why? I don't understand how you can love me..."

He waited, hoping she would add something like "*...when you didn't even know*"

me,” or “...without meeting me,” but she didn’t. It made him want to go beat the shit out of Darryl on general principle. What Emory didn’t understand was how anyone could not love Kennedy? Beyond the beauty on the surface, she was gorgeous all the way down to her soul. There was a strength about her that was stronger than a lot of men he knew. She was loyal, smart, funny and quirky in her own way. The face and luscious curves were just a cherry on top of a very delectable treat.

“You want to add something to that sentence, sugar?”

As defiant as ever, Kennedy thrust up her chin and challenged him with her eyes. “No. I mean I am okay, passably pretty and all that. But I am a woman just like any other.”

She had to be kidding, even though he knew she wasn’t.

“If I were you I’d think real hard about that, Kennedy.” He kept his voice at a low purr, not letting on how upset he really was by what she was revealing; however unwittingly.

“Or what?” She poked him in the chest again, only this time with more force and anger behind the gesture. “What are you going to do if I don’t?”

“I’m going to spank you.”

Kennedy froze, looking up at him with her mouth just slightly open, lips pursed, breathing just a tad on the heavy side. Those nipples were rock hard again, her body trembling slightly. They were standing so close Emory could feel the heat from her body increase ever so slightly.

“You wouldn’t dare.” When her voice got all husky like that it sent shivers up his spine. She was a sexy little spitfire when she had half the mind to be.

“Oh baby girl, I would dare and make you like it.” Yes, he knew he was daring her to dare him; the best foreplay on earth, a war of words, the prodding of innuendo. “Try me.”

Kennedy, bless her heart, leaned into him until her front was barely brushing his. She looked up at him through her eyelashes. A coquettish move completely at odds with the hands on her hips and the dare sparkling out of those deep brown orbs.

“I. Dare. You.”

Despite all evidence to the contrary, Kennedy knew what she was doing. Sort of, anyway. She was deliberately goading him but not because she wanted to make him angry. It was just this burning need to see how far she could go and what he would really do. As a modern woman the idea of a man actually spanking her should be offensive, or at the very least distasteful. Looking down at his large hands, imagining them falling on her buttocks didn’t bring on disgust; it made her feel all hot and bothered. Not a feeling she would’ve thought she’d ever associate with the threat of a grown man bending her over his knees.

When Emory stepped closer, bringing them even closer together, Kennedy almost forgot to breathe. It wasn’t just his looks that made him so devastating to the female senses; he had this whole attitude about him. He walked, talked and acted like a

man. A real one too, not some pathetic overgrown boy pretending to be an adult. The knowledge called to her like catnip to a feline.

She stood stock-still as he reached down and unbuttoned the top of her jeans. Then, with exaggerated slowness, he pulled the zipper down, his large body following the direction of the tab as the metal teeth parted for him. Kennedy held her breath as his hands rested on her hips, his lips trailing soft kisses on her lower belly. She could have sworn he was trembling just a little as he did it. Goose bumps broke out all over her skin as the possible reasons skipped through her brain.

"Look at me, Kennedy."

When had she closed her eyes? She opened them, glancing down at those glittering hazel eyes looking at her with such tenderness it sent a bolt of lightning straight to her heart.

"When I say I love you," casually he pushed her jeans downward, taking her underwear with it, "the appropriate reply isn't '*I don't understand how you can love me*'." He was speaking like he might be discussing the weather while peeling a banana. She was willing to bet he never went this damn slow when it came to the fruit though. "I believe the correct response is something along the lines of '*I love you, too*'." Good Lord, the man was nibbling her inner thigh. It would've been downright embarrassing how wet that was making her, if she could've been moved to care. "But when you answer like you just did, well baby that just begs for a spanking doesn't it?"

Unbelievably, her head nodded yes without her permission. Had to be those eyes that had her spell-bound, or maybe the fact her jeans were now pooled at her feet. She sent up a prayer of thanks she had taken off her shoes, it was so much easier to step out of the denim that way. Her body was wound tighter than a drum, waiting to see what he would do next. Would he reach around her and do it, spank her with his face so very close to her sex? Or would he turn her around and do it? Would he stay on his knees in front of her? And why the hell did he look so masculine in that position?

With the same deliberation in which he rid her of the bottom half of her clothes, he rose to his feet taking the top half with him. The look in his eyes as she stood there in nothing but her socks scorched her. In his eyes she was woman, the very essence of the feminine. She felt powerful, desired and best of all deserving. All that with just a look.

When he held out his hand she placed hers in his without a second thought. She followed as he led her to the couch. Before he had a chance to say another word, Kennedy returned the favor; slowly removing his clothing, Kissing his skin as it was exposed, loving the rougher texture, so completely opposite her own. She moved in to kiss him once they were both in the natural, but Emory moved back a step, halting the forward momentum scant centimeters from his lips with a firm hand tangled in her hair.

She moaned in partial frustration, partial longing. He wasn't yanking her hair; it was just a firm hold with just a touch of a sting. Oh God, that felt so good. The slight pull ignited sparks of an electric shock that ran straight down her spine. Just to test him a little more she tried to move forward, gaining a negligible amount before being halted

once more. Her eyes fastened on his lips, she needed to kiss them, wanted them in the worst way.

“Kennedy, do you believe I will never hurt you?”

She couldn’t escape from the probing direct gaze. Not that she particularly wanted to. Did she know that?

“Yes, I know.” With a certainty she would’ve called foolish had anyone else stated it, she knew he would never willingly hurt her. Not with casual indifference, not with forgetfulness, laziness or sheer meanness. Not to say she would never hurt again, but it wouldn’t be with the same dismissive apathy or self-centered orneriness that she’d lived with for so long.

She was rewarded with her kiss – a slow purposeful seduction of her mouth that left her weak and panting. A kiss never tasted so good.

“Then come here, lay across my lap.”

Chapter Twelve

The first one wasn't really a smack. It was much more a traveling caress across the expanse of her behind. It wasn't exactly sexual. Kennedy couldn't name what it was exactly, but it eased her, relaxed her until even her bones felt as if they were made of liquid. The second came down hard and sharp, stinging at first before slowly subsiding to a glowing burn. The third was something in between, a sting followed by a deep caress, almost as if Emory were massaging the feel of his bare hand into her skin, branding her. Hardly necessary. His love had already branded his name on her heart permanently.

By the time he gently moved her into a sitting position facing him, Kennedy was gasping, so wet her inner thighs were moist. But even more was the feeling filling her soul up to the brim. There were no words spoken, but there didn't need to be. Truthfully she didn't know whether to laugh or cry or perhaps do both. There was no way she knew to express all the emotions running through her. So she didn't. She surrendered. Not her soul or even who she was, but her well being, her love, her trust. She brought it all, placing everything she couldn't say in the seal of her lips on his, tongues entwined, bodies pressed together so that there was no air between them, and still it wasn't close enough.

"Kennedy, baby, you're killing me," Emory groan against her lips. "I love you so much. I need you."

"I love you." This time the response was automatic, but by no means with less feeling. "I want you, I need you. Please Emory, I hurt."

It *was* painful, not being connected; not being a part of him, one with him when at that second that was the only thing that mattered. She writhed against him, her wet pussy sliding against rock hard proof of his desire. Reason had left – perhaps Byron took it with him – there was only the need. Not of lust, it went so much deeper than the ghost of an emotion lust really was.

"Look at me, sugar." Her eyes swung up to his. The wealth of sentiment communicated with those orbs was deadly. They broke her down then built her up higher than she'd been before. She saw her future looking in his eyes. "I am right here for you. If you need, take. I will give you everything I have, all that I am, I swear, for as long as I draw breath."

This wasn't sex. Kennedy had had sex; she even thought she'd made love a time or two. This was so far outside that it wasn't funny.

She didn't move alone as she lifted slightly, allowing the crest of his cock to slide against her saturated opening, up to massage her pearl, then back down again. She bucked, trying to move the heavy shaft to where she needed it, but it moved away, tormenting her with its wickedly erotic touch. It took a moment to realize he was doing it on purpose, moving when she moved to frustrate her attempts.

"Emory! Damn it, it's mine, let me have it!" Doubts would come and go, just like the flow of the tides it was inevitable. The fact that Emory was wholly hers was equally

as certain, as she was his. Being a woman, she could demand her rights, knowing he would never do the same; a double standard, but one that she heartily agreed with. It felt so damn good to be a woman.

"I told you to look at me, Kennedy. I meant it."

The autocratic tone shouldn't have thrilled her, shouldn't have flicked on every nerve ending she had, but it did. She looked. Anything else was not an option. And as soon as she did, Emory pushed, sliding inside her in the most intoxicating mixture of measured calm and savage thrust. She didn't know both things were possibly simultaneously. Her nails dug into his shoulders, her body welcoming his home. But when she tried to move, two strong hands held her down, filled to the hilt.

"I have to move, I can't stand it another second." She sounded desperate, she knew it. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered besides the two of them, together, connected in the most elemental way they could be.

"Yes you can. You can take it, and you will."

His eyes wouldn't release her. Her own lids felt so heavy, but she kept them open, kept her sight directly on him. She wanted to make him as least half as happy as he'd made her. Half could've lasted her a lifetime, but Emory had to go and give everything. She could do no less.

"I love you, Emory. With all my heart."

A shudder raced through his body, a groan of a man who knew he'd been bested by his woman, and gladly so, came from his gut.

"Move baby. Show me."

He may have ordered her to move, but he was certainly the conductor of this symphony. As moving as Beethoven, as beautiful as Chopin, as deep as Listz, their bodies created a music that touched the very core and left it changed forever. Yes, he filled her to perfection, creating the agony of idyllic friction that both fed the hunger as it inspired even more. Even more than that was the baring of one heart to another, then joining in a way that couldn't be touched by any outside their intimate circle of two.

The whole world fell away as Kennedy became wrapped up completely in Emory; he was inside her, he was around her. Her body rocked, straining faster and faster, her anchor the strong arms that held her, the hands on her buttocks guiding her. She didn't explode or shoot off like a rocket. Kennedy burst from the inside out. Her entire world tilted on its axis, whirling completely out of control. She screamed; her limbs locking in place as if afraid he would somehow escape.

And he was right there, crushing her to him, lips on lips, hands grasping, holding on as if the other person were a lifeline.

This was the way it should always be. If only someone had told her so long ago, this was what love was supposed to feel like. It was okay to fear, to bring your insecurities. As long as the other was worthy, it was beyond beautiful. It was a sacrament.

Emory was shaking. He knew it and hoped like hell she wouldn't notice it. He'd never felt so bare, with or without his clothes on. She was going to kill him one day, kill

him with exquisite bliss. Good Lord she was clamped down on him so tight he thought he saw stars swimming before his eyes. But he wasn't about to let go. Not yet. He didn't want Kennedy to merely have an orgasm. He wanted, no needed to drive her senseless with nothing but joy; he needed to satiate her to the point there was no question where she belonged and with whom.

Picking her up off his pulsating hard-on was torture. He hissed through his teeth as he slowly slid out, wanting so bad to bury himself back home. There was no doubt about it, Kennedy was home. Dropping to his knees he rubbed his cheek against her leg, loving the contact, needing it. He found he was cold without her. Yeah he could handle it, but he didn't want to.

"Your skin is so soft." Looking up he snagged her hooded gaze. God, he could stare in those eyes forever. Trust, love, and something suspiciously like respect stared back at him, making him feel humble as all get out, yet ten feet tall. "You are shaking, baby. Is it that sensitive?" To test his theory he lightly ran his fingertips up the inside of her thigh. Kennedy shook, groaning while lifting her hips in an unspoken invitation. "I think you are, aren't you, sugar?" Placing on leg over his shoulder, this time Emory used his mouth to tease her legs, from her calve to her upper thigh.

Kennedy whimpered, her hips canting upward. On cue, Emory gave her sex a long, slow swipe of the tongue, pausing at her clit to flick it back and forth until she was squirming. He loved how receptive she was to his touch, how she stopped holding back and didn't even try to reign in her responses. Grasping her hips, he brought her to his mouth. He licked, he sucked, even nibbled just a little. He loved the way her body shuddered under him, the way she moved to ride his tongue. Her taste was addicting, her gratification fed his own pleasure. He drove her over the edge twice, not wanting to stop, loving the way she yanked on his hair, trying to push him away, then pulling him closer. He didn't stop until she was pleading, her body quivering like jelly in his hands.

"Emory, please, I need you. I need you inside me."

Lord, those were the sweetest words ever spoken. Still he took his time, afraid that if he didn't he would lose control. He kissed his way up her body, shifting them both so she lay sideways on the sofa.

"You are perfect to me in every way." And he meant that. He wasn't the romantic fool who believed she had no faults, or that she should be placed in an ivory tower somewhere. He loved her faults; they made her who she was.

Looking down now his heart swelled in his chest. There were times when he feared this day may never come-that they might never be together.

"I'm just a woman."

She had no idea how untrue that was.

"No, you are my woman."

Not willing to give her a chance to challenge him on it, he thrust inside her, deep and hard, all the way to the hilt. Kennedy's back arched, her hands clasp his back. Lowering his head, he took her mouth the same way he was taking her body, moving in slow but meaningful, forceful strokes. Her nails scraped along his back, leaving welts in their wake. He welcomed it, loved it, wanted more.

"Look at me, Kennedy," he ground out. He wouldn't last long this time, he could feel it building in his gut. He wanted her with him, he wanted to see her eyes when she went over the edge.

She looked up at him, all that she was feeling showcased plainly for him to see. It was beautiful, it was love.

"I love you, baby. I will always love you." Probably not the best time to tell her, but he couldn't stop it. He was so full of emotions; of feelings for her he couldn't hold back.

"Oh God, I love you too, Emory." Her voice was barely more than a whisper but he heard it. And loved hearing it.

"Come for me. Now."

It wasn't a request. He was gratified to see she didn't take it as one. With a broken cry she shattered around him, her walls milking him to perfection. Gathering her tight against him he came right along with her, giving her all he was.

"I meant what I said," Emory ventured after a few long, peaceful moments of silence. "I do love you Kennedy."

"I know." Damn but it felt good to feel her hands playing in his hair. He would never get tired of her touch. "And I love you back, Emory."

He reluctantly moved, taking her with him so that she lay on top of him. It felt so right just lying with her like this; no words necessary, just soothing touches. This was the way it was supposed to be. Every fiber of his being screamed it.

"Marry me, Kennedy." It wasn't the best time to bring it up, he knew that; that she would probably find a very nice way to say no. He would only ask her again. And again and again until she finally said yes.

"And if I said yes?"

Well damn. "You would make me the happiest man in the world."

Kennedy lifted her torso, smiling down at him. He loved that smile. It brightened any room she happened to grace with her presence.

"Well, then far be it from me to stand in the way of such happiness."

Emory's heart skipped a beat. He was afraid to move, didn't dare draw in air. "Is that a yes? Say it plainly, baby. Tell me you'll be my wife."

"Yes, Emory Daniels. I will be your wife."

Epilogue

Going back to work had been easier than Kennedy expected. It had been two weeks and so far no run in with Darryl. She'd gotten the occasional glare from his direction, but he hadn't approached her. She was certain Emory had probably dropped a bug in his ear even though she'd asked him not to. Of course, her engagement had been going around town like wildfire. She got looks alright, but this time none of them were from pity, even if some were downright hostile. Tough. It was high time the twenty-first century came to Roberta. If she could help speed it along all the better. Besides, Emory and Byron owned way too much for anyone to be overtly rude.

"Do you know what people are saying about you? We haven't been broken up for two weeks and you already shackled up with that...that white man?"

So much for Darryl not messing with her. The man stomped into the office like he owned the place. As soon as the thought entered her mind, she had to swallow back a fit of giggles. He might not, but she sure did, which gave her more than a little bit of the upper hand. She should've suspected he would wait until Emory or Byron were away from the office. She hadn't been left here alone much; it hadn't crossed her mind to wonder about it.

"Darryl, I would advise you to think about what you're about to say very carefully." It felt unbelievably good to stand there, facing her ex toe to toe and not feeling pressured to watch her own tongue or back down.

Darryl was a lot of things but stupid wasn't really one of them. Definitely lazy, trite, spoiled and full of himself. But he wasn't without brains, even if he did refuse to use them. He looked down at her engagement ring and took a half step backwards. Kennedy was sure he wasn't even aware he'd done it. He was grinding his teeth so hard, she could see his jaw working as he tried to tamp down his anger. If she didn't know any better she might've felt sorry for him.

"Do you know what people are calling you? Do you have any idea what they're saying behind your back?"

There was a time when that would've hurt – would've damn near killed her just thinking about whispers and speculation; funny how in such a short amount of time her eyes had opened to what was really important. Whispering busy bodies didn't keep her warm at night, make her smile, or fill the empty places inside. Emory did. And really that was the only thing that mattered. When all she'd had was her pride, well yes, then it mattered to her a heck of a lot more. And Darryl knew that. Bastard.

"Do you like driving that pretty new truck?" Kennedy cocked her head to the side, giving him a slow, easy smile. Yep, felt good to be completely free of his bullshit. "How about your job? You like that? You're gonna need it seeing as how you have to pay the rent and all the utilities by your lonesome."

Man she wished she had a camera; the look on his face was priceless. He'd forgotten all about the bills that would need to be paid. Now that there was no one to

remind him or pay what he pissed away, he was going to have to start living like a responsible adult. He hadn't considered that at all before now. Poor thing.

"It's criminal what you did to me. You don't know a goddamn thing about fixing shit. All this time you were just waiting to spread your legs like the whore you are, to try to get someone to take care of your-"

Neither one of them saw Emory approach from behind. Kennedy gasped, jumping back as Darryl was struck with such force she heard his jaw crack. That was the second eerily feminine, but still inhuman scream she heard Darryl bellow. Only this time she didn't cringe or feel the least bit of pity for him. The idiot man didn't know when to leave well enough alone.

"Sorry baby, I know I promised not to do anything to him, but you can't expect me to let him talk to you like that." Emory stepped over a fallen Darryl, like he hadn't just knocked the man down, and kissed her cheek while gathering her close.

"I'm going to sue both of your asses!" Darryl rolled to his knees before struggling to his feet, all puffed up on indignant fury. "I have been laboring under false pretenses. This was supposed to be my company!"

So much for Darryl not being stupid. Or maybe that punch to the side of his head had knocked something a little bit loose.

"You have the name and number of our attorney." Emory didn't even bother to turn to look at him as he spoke. His eyes never left her face.

And he'd said *our attorney*. This was really her life now. Sometimes it blew her mind. How long would Emory have waited if she hadn't wised up and left Darryl? It was a scary thought.

"Don't think I won't." Despite dire warnings of legal action, Darryl was moving steadily toward the door backwards like someone was going to come after him if he turned his back.

Kennedy almost warned him he was about to run dead into Byron, but decided against it. There was something brewing between those two, and it wasn't anything nice. Byron hated the man with a passion. For some reason, Darryl seemed skittish around him. The tension between the two was palpable.

"I will sue y'all both for everything you- *UMPFT*."

The elbow Byron put in Darryl's back probably hadn't been necessary, but it was funny.

"You should probably watch where you're walking."

Darryl had no comeback for Byron. Instead he scurried out of the office, not bothering to close the door behind him.

"And don't bother getting in that truck. You're fired," Byron called after him.

Darryl froze, his hands balling up in a fist. Kennedy started to pray he didn't do anything stupid. The years of living hell she'd spent with Darryl aside, she had no desire to see him seriously hurt or humiliated. It was all water under the bridge as far as she was concerned. Her life was full; vengeance wasn't high on her list of things she'd like to accomplish.

Luckily, he thought twice and walked away. She let out a pent up breath. It was over. She was free.

"Are you okay?" Emory turned her around, inspecting her face. "I mean really? He didn't say anything to upset you did he?"

"Are you going to go kick his ass if he did?" She was joking really.

"Yes." He wasn't.

"I'm fine. There's nothing Darryl can say to upset me. I have all I need, all I could want. He can't hurt me."

And she did have everything she wanted but never knew enough to ask for. *Finally*, she thought with a sigh. *A man stronger than me.*