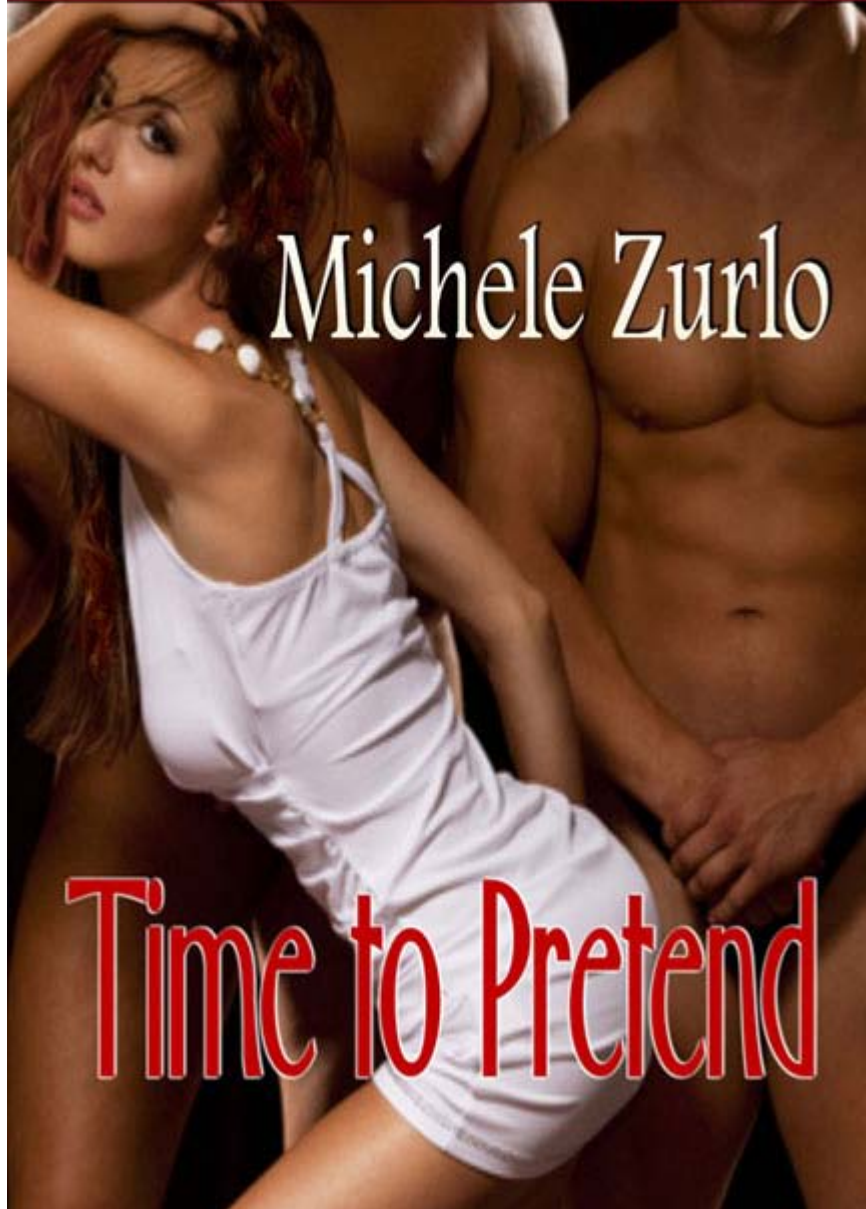


Siren Publishing

Ménage Àmour

Michele Zurlo

Time to Pretend



Awakenings 4

Time to Pretend

One glimpse of Daniel DiMarco sets Alaina Miles's hormones into overdrive, but she cannot act on her feelings. Not only is he ten years younger than her, he's a notorious womanizer. When the tension between them escalates into one night of passion, Alaina takes it in stride. It's a dream come true, but it's only one night.

When a leak in her roof forces her to hire a contractor, Evan Carrico, Daniel's best friend and secret lover, is the man for the job. It doesn't take long for Alaina to realize that her attraction to Evan is much more serious than it should be.

As she falls in love with them and they fall for her, Alaina discovers their secret, but she wants to wait for them to build enough trust in their relationship to tell her themselves. When she stumbles upon them locked in a passionate embrace only hours after a tragic event, will the explosion destroy everything they've built?

Genre: Contemporary, May-December, Ménage a Trois/Quatre

Length: 99,369 words

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MENAGE AMOUR



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Ménage Amour

TIME TO PRETEND

Copyright © 2011 by Debora M. Ryan

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-298-4

First E-book Publication: March 2011

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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PUBLISHER

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DEDICATION

Thanks to Nick S. for the football lessons. It almost makes up for the basketball thing.

Thanks to Mike D. for double-checking the biology.

Thanks to Melissa P. for the fresh perspective.

This is dedicated to the fans who asked for Daniel's story.

TIME TO PRETEND

Awakenings 4

MICHELE ZURLO

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Prologue

The headlights of a car turning a nearby corner lit the truck's cab, blinding Daniel with its brilliance before plunging it back into darkness. In so many ways, that was the story of his life. Flashes of light punctuated the nothingness of normalcy.

Oh sure, he laughed and had fun. He had a great family, wonderful friends, and some pretty spectacular-looking dates. Right now, the light for which he lived was threatening to spit out its batteries.

"I just can't do this anymore, Dan. I can't live like this."

If he let himself think about it, Daniel knew he understood exactly what Evan was saying. Embracing his stubbornness all the more, he concentrated his attention on the place where the armrest molded into the door frame dipped. Two balled up gum wrappers lay there mocking him. Daniel hadn't put them there. Someone else had.

"Nothing has changed. I don't get why you're all of a sudden pissy about this."

Next to him, Evan gripped the steering wheel, grinding his fingertips into the soft vinyl. The tips turned white, a translucent color that had no problem leaping from the shadows. "That's my point.

Nothing has changed. Maybe when we first started fucking, it was for fun. It was something different.”

Daniel snorted. Neither of them had been with a woman before the age of seventeen. “We were sixteen. It wasn’t different. It was all we knew.”

Evan shook his head. Daniel didn’t need light to know the short bangs falling over Evan’s forehead were light brown, streaked from working outdoors all summer. His blue eyes evoked memories of the summer sky.

Daniel ground the heel of his hand into his eyeball, as if that slight pain would chase away the feelings he had for Evan boiling just below the surface.

“I can’t sit by while you stick your dick into every wet pussy that walks by. I want more, Dan. I want a relationship. If that’s not what you want, then fine. It wasn’t meant to be. I’m not saying I won’t be your friend. I’m saying that I want someone who wants to be with me.”

Expletives fell from Daniel’s lips. From experience, he knew Evan would wait until he ran out of curses. “It’s not enough for me, man. I like women, too. One in particular. I don’t want to stop fucking you, but I need more than what you can give me.”

Evan sighed. “I’m willing to share you, but not with a hundred women. I like pussy, too. I’d miss it if I had to stop, but I think a loving, committed relationship is worth the trade-off.” Evan glanced toward Daniel, his gaze searching for something. “How about this? You settle on one who is okay with what’s between us, and I won’t walk away.”

Had Evan just suggested a ménage? Daniel’s jaw fell open as he scrambled for words.

He reached out a tentative hand and rested it on Evan’s thigh. The tight muscle clenched and jumped, reacting to his touch in the way that sent blood to his growing erection. “Let me get this straight. You

want me to choose a woman for us who will look the other way when we have sex?”

Evan shrugged. “I’ve always wanted to share a woman with you. From the look on your face, I think I can guess who you have in mind.”

Daniel nodded, his gaze fixed on the middle distance as he considered the woman who invaded his fantasies. They had enjoyed one half of a really good date. Then it all went to hell, and Daniel had no idea what happened. Sometimes he caught her looking at him as if she wanted to throw him to the mat of his martial arts studio and have her way with him. Other times her neutral expression made him want to run in the other direction.

Though he rarely discussed his dates with Evan, he had talked repeatedly about this rare gem of a woman too often. Daniel knew that was why Evan chose this summer to push for something more. He’d be damned if he would lose them both, not that he really had either of them.

“I think we should make sure she falls for us both before we spring the gay thing on her.” Evan tugged Danny’s hand closer and set it on his thigh.

Daniel rubbed his hand along Evan’s leg before moving it up to cup his erection. He didn’t have an issue with gay people, just with being called gay. His Catholic upbringing was too deeply embedded in his head. Somehow, if the words weren’t used, it wasn’t the same thing. He didn’t want to think about his hypocrisy or his creative logic. “I’ve never been attracted to another man, Evan. You know that.”

Evan unbuttoned his jeans and drew out his hard cock. He wrapped Daniel’s fist around it, pumping up and down. “That doesn’t make you not gay. Now suck my cock.”

Shifting in the long seat, Daniel leaned down and took the thick head of Evan’s cock into his mouth. He loved the smell and the texture and the flavor of Evan.

“You do realize that the chances of getting her to agree to this are slim to none, don’t you?” Evan wrapped his fist around a handful of Daniel’s thick hair and thrust into his mouth. “This might be your last night with me.”

It would be a good night. From the first fumbling kiss in the locker room after football practice, it had always been a good night. Daniel couldn’t count the number of times he’d dropped a date home early only to rush over to Evan’s to get laid.

Daniel would be extra-attentive tonight, just in case. The woman he had in mind wasn’t a sure thing. While he knew Evan would flip for her the same way he had, Daniel couldn’t guarantee his perfect lady would even consider giving him or Evan a chance.

Chapter 1

The woman dressed in clingy black cotton pants and a red sports bra was more than prepared to take on the man throwing a kick aimed squarely at her midsection. Whirling out of the way, she responded with a roundhouse kick of her own. The man skipped out of the way just in time. Her momentum carried through, putting her in a vulnerable position.

In the silence of the abandoned martial-arts studio, the smack of skin on skin and the thud of feet against the floor mats echoed from the high ceiling of the older building.

Alaina Miles clenched her fists, silently rooting for the woman to recover. She was average height for a woman, but she was tall when compared to Alaina, towering seven inches above Alaina's five-foot-even stature. Her athletic build put Alaina's curvy frame to shame. No matter what form of exercise she tried, nothing seemed to make a dent in those curves. Clearing her freezer of mint chocolate chip ice cream might help, but she was loath to forego comfort food.

Alaina's mental encouragement was futile, though. In two moves, with chess master-like precision, the man had the woman pinned to the mat. The few times she watched them spar as a warm-up before the scheduled self-defense class, he usually won. Of course, the woman got him back later when she used him to demonstrate the best techniques to fend off an attacker.

The man was a sight to behold. Broad, strong shoulders were corded with long, lean muscle. His massive chest tapered to trim hips and an ass that demanded attention. Though she had never seen him shirtless or in shorts, Alaina was certain every inch of his body was as

well-defined as the biceps and forearms not covered by his blue cotton T-shirt. He was the tall-dark-and-handsome man of her fantasies. Literally. She was even tempted to name her newest vibrator after him.

Standing, he extended an olive-toned hand to the similarly complexioned woman and helped her to her feet with all the respect one athlete had for a colleague. "You left your right side open," he said somewhat unnecessarily.

"Yeah, I figured that out when you got a hit in." The woman headed to the bench next to Alaina and grabbed her water bottle. "I can't think of how to counter that without committing to the kick."

"Bring your arm down." He demonstrated the move she should have made.

Alaina watched with casual interest. Later, in the privacy of her own home, with all the shades drawn, she would practice the moves the pair demonstrated.

The woman sat down heavily on the bench next to Alaina. Thinking of her as "the woman" and thinking of him as "the man" helped distance herself from both of them. Though they were both highly charismatic, friendly people, Alaina knew distance was necessary. She'd made the mistake once of thinking she could have a relationship with either one of them that was more than business. She wouldn't be humiliated that way again.

To be fair, Sophia hadn't meant to humiliate her. She had been distraught over her relationship with her boyfriend, Drew Snow. She had worked past it, and now they were engaged and planning a wedding for the following summer. It was scheduled for Midsummer's Eve, to be exact. It had something to do with the Shakespeare play. Alaina tried to keep the conversations on business-related topics, so she didn't know true details.

But she did know that Sophia hadn't recognized her, despite having co-written the grant that brought Alaina to the free program Sophia put together for women who had been victims of violence.

Alaina had made the mistake of thinking she was developing a budding friendship with Sophia and in thinking the fact that she was ten years older than the pair didn't matter.

When Sophia had called her brother, Daniel, to pick her up from Drew's house, Alaina had been about to end her disastrous date with Daniel. How had she ever thought dating a twenty-six-year-old, party-minded bachelor would ever work out? Even if the age difference wasn't a factor, they led completely different kinds of lives. She didn't judge Daniel or his life choices. They were simply vastly different from hers.

She knew very well she wasn't Daniel's usual type. A man as sexy and handsome and charming as Daniel DiMarco had his pick of women. He preferred tall, skinny, sexy, sultry blondes with large breasts. Alaina was short and curvy and ten years *older*. Various men had found her sexy over the years, but no one had ever referred to her as sultry.

Intelligent. Sharp. Brainy. Smart. Most people described her intellect and failed to notice she even had a body. She never understood why Daniel had asked her out in the first place. They'd spent the majority of the evening arguing. Their personalities just didn't mesh.

Sophia had even commented on how unusual it was for Daniel to date someone like Alaina. Hearing his sister express Alaina's deepest insecurities had been humiliating. She covered it up well, and now she kept a professional distance between them. She was polite and friendly, but not overly so. Six weeks had elapsed since that debacle, long enough for Daniel to have forgotten it completely.

Her relationship with Daniel was a little different. He contrived to treat her as if the date never happened. He was respectful of her role as a therapist.

He greeted her with a polite nod and no words. Snagging Sophia's water bottle, he drank deeply. "I figure this will make us about even

for what you did to me last week,” he said, continuing his conversation with Sophia as if Alaina wasn’t there.

On the surface, she smiled blandly and pretended a disinterest in their conversation. Inside, she seethed. How could a man who had the nerve to order her dinner without asking her what she wanted treat his sister with such obvious respect?

Easy. Sophia was family. Family meant everything to Daniel. It was the way he had been raised. It was part of his identity. Women on the inside of his familial circle could be respected as people. Women outside that circle were pieces of meat meant to be pawed and coddled until they spread their legs and gave him what he wanted. Then he moved on to fresh pastures.

Oops. There was a little of that bitterness leaking out. Why did she still find him so attractive? Just looking at him made her body respond with shivers of anticipation.

Breathing through the sudden twinge, Alaina brought her attention back to the present.

Daniel’s sweaty body was the first thing she saw. More breathing exercises were required.

Daniel was a poor choice to help Sophia demonstrate self-defense. In Alaina’s opinion, most of the women watching would never try to fend off any advance Daniel made. He was single, good-looking, and charming. He owned his own business. He behaved like an alpha male. On all the psychological and sociological factors that mattered, Daniel DiMarco was a good catch. Sophia’s repeated warnings about Daniel’s womanizing only seemed to make him more desirable in those women’s eyes.

On Alaina’s personal scale, he fell short. She wanted a man who respected her mind and her body. Daniel couldn’t care less about her mind, and he hadn’t been all that thrilled with her body. He hadn’t even tried to kiss her, and he had avoided any physical contact that wasn’t necessary.

It wasn't a bad body. She didn't dress in tight or revealing clothes, and she eschewed bright colors. Still, she could hold her own in a bathing suit, especially a one-piece with lots of Lycra.

Had he lost a bet? Was that why he asked her out in the first place?

Sophia smiled at Alaina and oriented her body to include her group's psychologist in the conversation. "I didn't do anything unfair last week, did I?"

Alaina didn't need to answer. She glanced toward the door. Though Sophia tried to include Alaina, Daniel ignored her attempt. "You kicked me in the balls."

Sophia shrugged. "You were supposed to stop me. Besides, you were wearing a cup."

She didn't usually watch Sophia and Daniel sparring as part of their warm up. Usually, she ran a group session before Sophia's lesson. However, nobody had arrived. That was worrisome. What if none of the women came? While Alaina kept records of who came to the sessions, she didn't have contact information for any of the women. Most of them wanted anonymity, and this program promised that kind of confidentiality.

With her attention elsewhere, Alaina became uncomfortably aware of the silence. Slowly, she turned back to an expectant Sophia. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you."

"I asked if you were okay. You seem distracted." The concern in her big brown eyes was reinforced by the hand she closed over Alaina's fist in a brief, reassuring squeeze.

Daniel handed Sophia's water bottle back. Sophia squinted into it, searching, probably for backwash. It was a pointless exercise. The bottle was empty.

"You've built some pretty solid relationships this summer," Daniel said, looking at Alaina fully for the first time. "I don't think those six women would skip. Remember Sophia could only secure

funding for child care for two hours. She chose to schedule it for the later therapy session.”

Alaina stared at Daniel. It amazed her how someone who acted like such a Neanderthal could be so perceptive. “I was expecting someone early for a private session. I thought...” She trailed off as the door chimed. “There she is.”

Jumping up, Alaina went to the door to greet Tamara. While she couldn’t promise Tamara a true private session, when Sophia began offering child care, Alaina predicted the majority of the women would begin staying later. That’s why she suggested Tamara come early. It increased their odds of having time alone.

That was another thing that surprised her about Daniel. He had been the one who suggested Sophia provide child care. He had researched grants and hired the two teens who would be doing the babysitting.

Alaina guided Tamara into the back room where chairs were set up for the therapy sessions. When she first began coming, Alaina had arrived early to set up the chairs only to find them already arranged. She had assumed Sophia was doing the set up until she saw that Sophia’s arrival time wasn’t consistent. More often than not, Sophia arrived later. Daniel had joked about his sister’s lateness enough for Alaina to figure out it was a lifelong problem that wasn’t going to go away.

The joking had taken place before she made the mistake of going out with him. There was no more lighthearted banter and no more joking between them anymore.

Pushing away thoughts of Daniel, Alaina focused on Tamara. Later, she watched Sophia pummel Daniel as she demonstrated self-defense techniques on her brother. Then she conducted a group session where she felt several of the women made real progress. She was glad to see some of them coming consistently. The women were bonding, learning they weren’t alone in the world.

It was a shame there were only two sessions left. Sophia was moving on with her life, and these classes didn't fit into her new schedule. Alaina was happy for Sophia, but there were so many more women who hadn't yet arrived at that point in their recovery. Alaina had found alternate programs for many of the women, but she doubted they would attend.

Still, confidence and self-esteem were on the rise. A pleased smile brightened her face and lightened her step as she folded the chairs and stowed them in the closet. Daniel and Sophia had disappeared upstairs over forty minutes ago. She didn't expect to see either of them again.

That's why she jumped when she turned around to see Daniel in the room with her. He was dressed in jeans and a light blue polo shirt. His hair was damp from his recent shower. The room was a good size for ten women to sit around and talk. With just Daniel in the room, it seemed suddenly too small.

She wanted to drag her hands through his dark brown hair and jerk his head down until his lips met hers. Hand over heart, Alaina closed her eyes. "Did you need something?"

Daniel's chuckle had her eyes flying open. He folded a chair. "I thought I would help you clear the floor."

Glancing around, Alaina counted two chairs not put away. "I'm fine," she said. "I'll be out of your hair in a minute. I can tell you want to get out of here."

"Can you?" He seemed amused.

Yes. Just as much as she did.

"Well, yes. You obviously have a date, and I'm keeping you from locking up and leaving." She reached for a chair at the same time he did. His fingers brushed over hers. Alaina yanked her hand back, feeling as if she'd been burned. She hated the adolescent way she reacted to him. She'd never behaved this way around a man before, even ones who were better looking than Daniel. Admittedly, few men existed who were better looking than Daniel, but still. She hadn't been sixteen for twenty years.

“What makes you think I have a date?” His head cocked to the side, and a slight frown marred his mouth.

Her eyes flicked up and down his body, taking him in and striving to dismiss him in one gesture. She grabbed the remaining chair and turned away. “You’re dressed nicely, you fixed your hair, and you’re wearing cologne. You don’t go through all that trouble just to go to bed.”

She wanted to shrivel up and die the moment she alluded to his bed. The image of him lounging, tangled in the sheets, that dark hair tousled from wild sex, was too much. Why couldn’t she get him out of her head? He’d never even kissed her!

“Maybe I just wanted to give you a hand,” he said. “Maybe I’m that kind of guy.”

She nearly snorted out loud. “Controlling?” She was baiting him, and she needed to stop. “If you’re helping me, it’s not for altruistic reasons. You either don’t trust me to put the chairs away correctly, or I’m not moving fast enough to suit you.”

As she spoke, she stowed the last chair and closed the closet door. It was white. Everything in the room was painted white, except for the yellowed trim along the floor. Alaina noticed stupid little details when she was nervous, and Daniel made her nervous. Turning to leave, she crashed into his chest. Instead of reaching out to steady her, he pushed her against the door she had just closed.

Alaina gasped, her chin rising sharply to direct her glare at his face. If she didn’t, his chest would bear the brunt of her anger. She had time to notice how the thin cotton of his shirt molded to the dips and planes of his muscles. Her hands itched to feel something that looked so good.

“I thought you might appreciate the help,” he said, ignoring her outrage. The baritone in his voice vibrated from his chest to hers, though inches separated them. “I see I was wrong.”

Something was wrong with her breathing. Air wouldn’t seem to fill her lungs. Frantic, she did the only thing she could think to do.

Borrowing a move from Sophia, she brought her knee up sharply between his legs. Unwittingly, she squeezed her eyes shut and waited for contact.

Hard muscle clamped down on either side of her knee, holding her leg hostage. Alaina pried open one eye and looked down. He had countered her move. Only the white, painted door at her back helped keep her balance.

Now she could breathe, but the air came out in short little pants. His heat penetrated the pale nylon covering her legs. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips, a move she knew communicated desire, but she couldn't help it. If he kissed her now, she wouldn't stop him. She didn't want to want this kind of attention from him. It made her seem as cheap as the rest of the women he'd been with.

Desperately, she lashed out at him, swinging with her right fist. He captured it, and the left that followed, pressing her wrists to the door. She whimpered with need and hoped he took it for fear. As much as he used women, he did it honestly. Daniel wasn't a man who would force his attentions on a woman who didn't want them.

"Are you finished?" His lips hovered near hers. She felt his breath on her cheek, but he made no move to actually touch her anywhere except her wrists and knee. "You have a lot to learn about taking a swing at a man, Lainie. Maybe you should join class instead of watching."

He was the only person who had ever shortened her name like that. It was too intimate, as was the heat smoldering in his eyes and the way her thigh was pressed between his. She closed her eyes, but that proved to be a mistake. It focused her senses on his smell. He wasn't wearing cologne. She had been wrong about that earlier. The scent was a combination of his shampoo and soap and something distinctly Daniel. It was a heady aphrodisiac.

Gathering her courage, she hit him with words. At least she was good with words. The articles she'd published in various medical

journals over the years had been well received. “What now, Daniel?” Okay, she used to be good with words.

His lips traced patterns over her cheeks and down her neck, teasing her with their proximity but never coming close enough to actually touch her. Breathing stopped. Her body arched forward in a vain attempt to press against his. All of this happened without her permission and without her approval.

“You tell me, Lainie. Tell me what you want.”

She wanted him to kiss her. It was obvious she wanted his kiss. Her head darted forward, trying to mash her lips against his, but he moved out of range.

“You want me to kiss you, don’t you? I see you looking at me when you think I’m not paying attention. I see the way you’re licking your lips now. You want to devour me. Say the words, Lainie. Tell me you want me.”

He wanted her to beg. He wanted to humiliate her even more. He talked in that low, seductive voice of his. He was smooth and suave. She knew his kind. The moment she admitted her weakness, he would use it to reduce her to nothing. Alaina refused to submit to him. She would not let him humiliate her.

Taking a deep breath, then another and another, Alaina gathered her wits. “I want you to let go of me, Daniel. I want you to get out of my personal space.”

Disappointment and frustration took turns crossing his face. With obvious reluctance, he admitted defeat and released her wrists and her knee.

The distance between them widened. Remnants of his heat against her body faded. Alaina wanted to call him back. She shivered instead.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs outside the room. Why hadn’t Alaina heard them when Daniel had come down? Hastily, she turned to the counter on the other side of the door. Her purse was there. Unzipping the top, she dug deep in search of her car keys. The faster she was out of there and in the safety of her own home, the better.

“Daniel? Are you ready? Did you invite Alaina?” Sophia’s presence did nothing to diminish Daniel’s.

Alaina didn’t turn around to see the negative answer. Deep, cleansing breaths would help her biorhythms return to normal.

Sophia didn’t appear to notice that Alaina was avoiding turning around. “Alaina? A friend of mine is having a poker game tonight. You’re welcome to join us.”

Finally, Alaina turned to face the siblings. “Thank you. I have plans tonight.” Her smile was tight, but it was the best she could do under the circumstances.

Sophia’s eyes flashed with excitement. “With that new doctoral candidate?”

Alaina forced her smile to widen. “It’s only coffee.” Technically, they did have plans to meet for coffee, but the only topic of discussion was going to be a critique of his proposed research procedure.

“That’s great.” Sophia clapped Daniel on the back. “I told you she’d get up the courage eventually.”

Daniel’s look was black. He didn’t respond to Sophia’s enthusiasm.

Alaina excused herself and fled to her car. If she didn’t feel such a strong responsibility for the women in the support group, she would have found a way to stop coming. She had no problem running from a man like Daniel, a man who could completely absorb and obliterate her very existence. But she couldn’t abandon women who had already been hurt by people they trusted.

She arrived home close to ten. The meeting with Robert, the doctoral candidate she was mentoring, had been short and to the point.

Alaina locked herself in her study and tried to transcribe her notes. Images of Daniel eventually drove her upstairs. She pictured his hands on her body as she turned the setting on her vibrator to high.

Chapter 2

“You know she was totally lying, right?”

Sophia’s assurance did little to alleviate his black mood. Daniel wasn’t a man used to failing with a woman. He didn’t know what it was about Alaina that drew him to her. There were plenty of willing women out there. He just couldn’t seem to reconcile himself to dating any of them. Plus there was Evan to consider.

Evan was picky when it came to women. Daniel had no idea why. They were plentiful, and they rarely turned either of them down. Unfortunately, Evan’s standards were nearly unachievable. From the first moment he’d set eyes on Lainie, Daniel knew she was the perfect woman. But if he couldn’t get her to admit she wanted him, how could he ever get her to accept both Evan *and* him in her life?

He’d been so close to getting her to admit she wanted him. Every tiny move her body made, every breath, every sigh, all betrayed her desire. He’d almost had her. He’d come so close to tasting her lips. She smelled like the mint gum he’d watched her take from her purse earlier when she thought no one was paying attention to her.

She liked to pretend, his Lainie. She liked to pretend she didn’t care whether or not people noticed her. She liked to pretend she wasn’t hiding ten kinds of sexy behind those professional skirts and matronly blouses. She liked to pretend that curly, auburn hair could be tamed with pins and sprays, when it belonged spread wildly across his pillows or tickling his chest as her mouth made its way down his body.

“I hate when women lie.” Daniel’s lip curled in disgust. “I hate head games, Sophie. Why can’t women just come out and admit what they want?”

Life was difficult enough without all the drama women brought with them. Lainie was supposed to be different. She was older, smarter, and more experienced. She was supposed to be above all that crap.

Sophia laughed as she headed out of the studio and toward his truck. “She went out with you, Danny. You were a jerk to her. Not only did you guys have a huge fight, you cut your date off early to take care of my drama and never called her again. What do you expect?”

“I wasn’t a jerk,” he growled. It hadn’t been the first time Sophia had interrupted one of his nights to deal with her panic attacks. Who knew how much worse—or better—the date would have become without her interference? “I opened doors, and I kept my hands to myself. I was polite and respectful. I took her to her favorite restaurant, and I even remembered her favorite dish and ordered it for her. Scallop-stuffed flounder with the white sauce. How many men are that thoughtful? How many men remember details like that?”

Sophia grinned at him as she slid into the passenger seat and closed her door. “Drew would.”

Daniel’s glare didn’t dim in the face of his sister’s amusement. Sophia’s fiancé was a chef. “Drew remembers everything where food is concerned. Believe it or not, Sophia, most men are only thinking about one thing when they take a woman out.”

“I know, I know.” She sighed. “Am I gonna get lucky?”

He snorted. “Luck has nothing to do with it. It’s all about skill and setting a scene.” He broke off when Sophia melted into paroxysms of laughter. As a dominatrix, Sophia set scenes regularly with her submissives, a practice to which Daniel frequently and vocally objected. Falling in love with Drew hadn’t changed that particular

habit of hers. He knew she was dying at the irony of his statement. "It's not the same thing."

"Bullshit," she said, wiping away tears with the palm of her hand. "The difference is that I knew when I was going to have sex. And I didn't have to play the dating games. There was no dinner and no conversation involved. I didn't have to pretend to be interested in their great-aunt Gertrude's lack of understanding of how a VCR works."

Daniel shot Sophia a look, which melted to a smile the second he set eyes on her. For the first time in far too long, Sophia was happy in a relationship. Meeting Drew was the best thing that ever happened for her. But, damn it, Drew had put up with a lot of crap to winnow his way into Sophia's heart. Dating shouldn't be so hard.

"Drew's great-aunt still has a VCR? I hate to burst your bubble, but a lot of people don't know how those work. Do you know most of the kids that come to my studio think every TV pauses and rewinds?"

Sophia reached over and squeezed his hand. That was another thing Drew had done for her. For years, Sophia neither voluntarily touched anyone nor allowed herself to be touched unless she invited the contact. Daniel turned his palm over and squeezed back.

"Why don't you just apologize and ask her out again? She's totally into you, Danny. I think you hurt her feelings."

He had no idea what he had done wrong. The scene replayed in his head repeatedly. One minute, everything was going well. The music and lighting were soft and the flowers on the table were pretty. Then Alaina's smile tightened. Eventually, her lips pressed together, and her shoulders stiffened, and her responses became monosyllabic.

She accused him of seeing women as objects, a means to an end. The moment she said that, he knew the night wasn't going to end well. It hadn't. Sophia's interference hadn't even mattered.

He shook his head and answered Sophia. "She hates me, and I was sort of an asshole to her before you came down tonight."

"Now who's playing head games?" she teased.

“She accused me of having a date tonight,” he mumbled. He hadn’t been on a date since he’d gone out with her six weeks earlier. Evan helped temper some of his frustration, but it was a temporary fix. He wanted Alaina. He wanted her to admit she wanted him, too.

“A date? You? What an outrageous assumption.” Sarcasm was an art Sophia mastered early in life. “Did she forget the two of you pledged your troths to one another? Maybe you should tell her you spend all your free time with Evan.”

Daniel ignored Sophia’s feigned surprise. He had a three-date rule for most women. Even the few who had made it beyond that limit hadn’t lasted much longer. He was looking for something more. His parents were deeply in love with one another. He wanted what they had. He wanted what Sophia had found with Drew. It was something he’d never felt for a woman, and he desperately wanted to. He was sure he and Evan could have that with Alaina, if only she would give him the time of day.

“Who is this doctoral candidate she wants to date?” He didn’t bother to hide his jealousy. Sophia was his little sister by ten months. They were as close as any twins could be. She would see through any attempt he made to obfuscate.

Sophia shrugged. “I ran into Alaina last week in a coffee shop in Royal Oak. It was just down the street from Sensual Secrets. She was with this guy, so when he went to the bathroom, I snuck over and grilled her about him. He seemed nice, and he was interested in her.”

“He asked her out?”

Another shrug. “They probably have rules about candidates dating mentors. It makes sense.”

A doctoral candidate. Great. Daniel owned a martial arts studio, but he was no slouch when it came to intellectual matters. He dutifully completed a bachelor’s degree in political science, but he felt no calling to continue with schooling. Alaina was immersed in academia. There was no way he could compete in that arena. That left one thing.

He glanced over at Sophia, who was checking messages on her phone. “Was he good-looking?”

* * * *

Drew showed up at the game to take Sophia home, so Daniel used that as his excuse to leave early. Evan had a date tonight, but he would be home by midnight. He wasn’t into staying out too late, and he never brought women to his condo. It was thoroughly a bachelor’s pad. Though Evan was a certified builder and he had worked in construction all his life, the furniture inside the condo was Spartan at best, and none of the walls were painted with anything more than primer.

They had been friends since freshman year of high school. As the only two freshmen to make the junior varsity football team, a bond formed between the pair.

Daniel used his own key to let himself inside. The main floor was dark and quiet. “Hello? Evan?”

The answer boomed down the stairs. “Bathroom.”

A spark lent a spring to Daniel’s step as he bounded up the steps. The upper floor contained two bedrooms and a single bathroom. None of them were painted, either. No pictures hung on the walls. Nothing marked this place as a home, yet Daniel felt more at home here than anywhere else.

Wisps of steam wafted from the door. Daniel paused at the entryway, letting the blasts of hot, humid air wash over him. This way, he could blame the ambient temperature for the rise in his body heat. It had nothing to do with the fact that Evan wore only a small, white towel wrapped around his waist. The threadbare scrap, stolen from some hotel years ago, barely hid the corded muscles of Evan’s upper thighs.

Daniel forced his gaze and his thoughts away from the way the cloth molded to Evan’s ass. “I fucked up.”

Evan rubbed another towel over his short, brown locks, leaving them standing on end. He let the towel fall to the floor and used those blue eyes to level a steady stare at Daniel. "Are you sure about this chick? She sounds like she's more trouble than she's worth."

Ice stabbed inside Daniel's chest. He was already half in love with Alaina. "She's worth it, man."

Those broad, naked shoulders lifted and fell. "Why don't you let me give it a try?"

Daniel shook his head. "If she passes me over, then it won't matter what you say or do. She won't accept me back, and we'll both lose out on something wonderful."

A sigh escaped Evan. "Struck out with my date, too. Not that I was trying overly hard. She didn't know the difference between a two-by-four and a floor joist."

Not many women would, but Daniel refrained from mentioning that. He had no idea whether or not Lainie knew anything about construction. At the end of the day, it wouldn't matter. She was the kind of woman who would learn about it because the topic was important to someone she loved.

Daniel closed the distance between him and Evan with one step. He tugged the edge of the towel, but he kept his eyes on the prize as the terrycloth slid to the floor. He followed the thick muscles of Evan's sun-starved thigh up over his hip. "No woman is worth that much hassle."

"No," Evan agreed. He was a few inches shorter than Daniel's six-foot frame. The slight disparity forced him to tilt his head up to meet Daniel's lips. He grasped the nape of Danny's neck, threading his fingers through the thatch of short hairs there, and feathered his lips across Daniel's. "No woman."

Danny increased the pressure of the kiss, thrusting his tongue inside Evan's mouth to deepen it. The sweet, hot taste of Evan's kiss never failed to excite him.

He caressed Evan's damp skin, running his fingers down Evan's back in a series of firm strokes. He kneaded Evan's ass with one hand, squeezing and pressing the taut muscle there. The skin was smooth, but not soft. With his other hand, he reached between them and wrapped his fist around Evan's growing erection. One thing he liked about being with Evan was that neither of them needed much foreplay. Sometimes they teased one another for hours. Other times, like now, they skipped the preliminaries.

Evan moaned into Danny's mouth. He used the fist still wound in Daniel's hair to pull his friend and lover away. "Fuck, man. You got one week. I'm not waiting any longer. If she's half the woman you say she is, then I'm not going to let her get away."

His chest heaved, starved for oxygen and for the feel of Evan's skin. Daniel nodded and stripped off his shirt. Evan unsnapped Danny's jeans and shoved them down. Danny turned and planted his hands on the counter. It was warm, covered with a damp film from Evan's shower. The drawer next to him opened and closed. Daniel closed his eyes, bracing himself for an experience that never failed to send him over the edge.

He heard the wet squishing sounds of Evan massaging lube onto his hard shaft. The fingers on his anus were gentle, spreading the jelly outside before venturing in. Evan was always so gentle with him. It was something else he loved about his friend. Somehow, Evan always knew that Danny needed this tender care, just as Danny knew Evan needed it to be rough when he was on the receiving end. It was yet another way in which their personalities perfectly complemented one another.

Evan's finger withdrew. The hard, mushroom-shaped tip of his cock pressed against the tight muscle guarding Daniel's entrance. Daniel moaned in anticipation, his hard cock throbbing.

"You might try apologizing," Evan said as he breeched the resistant ring. "You can be such an uncompromising asshole sometimes, but I still love you."

That heady feeling overwhelmed Daniel. He knew Evan didn't expect a response. In all the years they'd carried on their odd affair, Daniel had never once professed his feelings.

Evan sank into Daniel, burying his full length with agonizing slowness. Soon, the coarse hairs of Evan's thighs pressed tight against the backs of Daniel's legs. Evan gripped Danny's hips, those strong, work-roughened fingers digging into a bruise from one of Sophia's more vicious kicks. No pain registered, only the feel of Evan's thick cock sending shocks of pleasure through Danny's body.

Evan pulled out just as slowly, but his next thrust was faster. Danny wrapped his fist around his own cock. He imagined it thrusting into Alaina's soft wetness as Evan filled him like this. Ragged moans filled his ears and pressure built.

The thrusts came faster and faster. Evan's hips smacked against Daniel, sticking briefly to the sheen of sweat that now covered them both. Hot shocks shot to his core, and Danny knew his climax was moments away. From the way Evan's moans peaked, Danny knew Evan was close, too.

Jets of hot semen shot into his rectum at the exact moment Daniel spilled his ejaculate all over the counter. The cock in his ass slid out, and Danny turned to mash his lips against Evan's. He toed off his shoes and shed his jeans the rest of the way.

"Shower," Danny growled as he moved his mouth to nip at Evan's neck. "My turn."

Evan nodded and shoved Daniel away. "There's not much hot water left. I didn't know if you were going to come by."

Daniel twisted the knob. Water hissed from the head. The tingling in Daniel's ass wouldn't subside for some time. Though he had just climaxed, Daniel's cock was already hardening in anticipation.

Danny smiled and ground his hard-on against Evan's thigh. Wind shrieked past the window, shaking the pane. "Looks like a killer storm. We've got all night to screw around."

Evan's mouth turned up in a wicked grin Danny knew all too well. This was going to be a good night.

The wind picked up outside, howling in concert with the noises they elicited from one another.

Chapter 3

Her home office was just as messy as her office at work, but she knew exactly what was on her desk, and she knew exactly where it was. Colleagues had long ago learned to keep their hands away from her desk. If they had something to drop off, they left it with the department secretary or in the tray strapped to her door.

Alaina prided herself on being able to find anything at a moment's notice. That's why it pissed her off so much that she couldn't remember where she put Tamara's phone number. The woman needed individual treatment, which Alaina wasn't in a position to provide. However, she could pass Tamara's name and information on to a friend who could help, if she could only find it.

Sinking into her nicely padded chair, Alaina mentally reconstructed the events occurring after Tamara wrote her number and address on a slip of scratch paper. It was a painful exercise because it necessitated reliving her encounter with Daniel.

Visualizing always worked for Alaina. She saw Tamara searching for paper. She saw herself giving Tamara a pen. She saw the paper next to her purse. Had she folded it and put the paper inside? No. She'd already ransacked the oversized handbag.

Sophia went upstairs. All the women left. Alaina put the chairs away. Daniel teased the hell out of her and didn't kiss her. Sophia returned. Alaina grabbed her purse and fled.

Ten million curses flowed through her head in the blink of an eye. She had left the damn paper on the counter. Pacing her office did little to dispel her anger at herself for such a stupid accident. Had she put

the damn paper in her damn purse, she wouldn't have to contact Daniel.

A glance at the clock showed no reprieve. It was only two in the afternoon. The studio would likely be open. She couldn't think of a single, believable reason to put off her task until the following Wednesday. Though it was Friday, Daniel ran classes on Saturday. He would be open then as well.

Throwing caution to the wind, she phoned the studio and prayed for one of his employees to answer the phone. The machine picked up. After listening to a lengthy message detailing the studio's hours and online registration procedures, the thing finally beeped. She left a message.

An hour later, nobody had returned her call. She ended up leaving three more messages, the last with her cell number. Nobody called back, and she headed home for the night.

By the next morning, nobody had called. Her empty voicemail box was pathetic on so many levels.

Tamara was expecting a call. At the very least, Alaina owed her an explanation as to why no one had contacted her. She was going to have to go to the studio and find out why nobody returned her call. She finished loading the dishwasher with her morning dishes, slammed it shut, and grabbed her keys. If she didn't get this over with, she would chicken out, and Tamara would be the one to lose.

She climbed into her car and headed over to Daniel's studio. It would be open. Daniel would be busy with a class. She could just go into the back and look where she'd left the number. Maybe she could avoid Daniel entirely. After their last encounter, which left her with an insistent throbbing between her legs that her vibrator couldn't seem to quite cure, she didn't want to face him.

The parking lot was a mess when she arrived. Cars and trucks littered the lot, and a giant bin occupied all the prime parking spots. Workers stood on the roof and threw things into the giant dumpster.

Alaina stared at the disarray. Most of the shingles on the roof were missing. Even on the flat part, men peeled back sheets of something black and heavy, or so it appeared from the effort they had to put into it.

She had dressed informally today, though she did want to maintain a professional appearance. She wore a pale sage sundress and strappy sandals. She'd wrestled her unruly auburn hair into a French braid.

A large-brimmed hat would have been the appropriate accessory, but Alaina hated wearing hats. At least her skin wasn't the kind that normally came with reddish hair. She had a few freckles, but not the amount found on some of her red-headed relatives.

Taking a deep breath, she picked her way through the parts of the mess that hadn't made it into the dumpster and headed toward the front door.

Someone grabbed her arm. "You shouldn't be here."

Looking up sharply, Alaina took in the features of a deeply tanned, shirtless man. He was large, definitely not someone with whom one should mess. His broad shoulders topped a thickly-muscled torso that tapered to hips that might have one day been slim, but that were now just as bulky as the rest of him. He wasn't fat, just fantastically built. She bet he could move an entire refrigerator without breaking a sweat.

He was handsome for an older man. Alaina studied him silently. He looked familiar, friendly and comfortable.

"I left something inside," she said. "I won't be long."

He chuckled as if they shared a private joke. "Classes have been cancelled. See the website for make-up dates."

"I'm not a student," she said. "And I really need to get inside."

His grin didn't fade. "I expect you're looking for Danny?"

She'd rather not encounter Daniel if it was at all possible. "That's not necessary. I just need..."

“There he is.” The man bobbed his head, indicating a place behind Alaina. “Danny, someone here to see you.”

She willed herself to turn around and face him and just get it over with. Dread made her feet slow to obey. Surely he wouldn’t do or say anything in front of all these people?

Oh, Lord. He wore jeans and no shirt. The definition to which his shirt had hinted three days before far exceeded her imagination. He was rock solid. Sweat glistened over his entire torso. She followed the expanse of skin down to where his jeans rode low on his hips. The tool belt helped to reveal more than the jeans intended. Alaina couldn’t find it in herself to be sorry about that. And she couldn’t stop looking.

“Alaina.” Surprise was the dominant tone in his voice, but pleasure was there, too. He was *happy* to see her? This didn’t bode well.

Moistening her lips was essential if she was going to form coherent words. “I’m sorry,” she managed at last. She knew she was staring. She just couldn’t seem to stop. “I came at a bad time. I just need to get inside. I left contact information for one of the women on the counter in the back room. I need it.”

Daniel looked toward the front doors. They were completely blocked by stacks of what appeared to be shingles. “I can take you around to the other side.”

“Daniel.” The warning came from the big man who hadn’t moved from his position behind Alaina.

“I’ll just be a minute, Dad.” Glancing from Alaina to his father, Daniel gestured to the man. “Alaina, this is my dad, David. Dad, this is Alaina. She’s the shrink that helps out with Sophie’s class.”

David nodded, and his entire demeanor became more welcoming, not that he had been foreboding before. He tugged off a dirty work glove and held out a hand, which she took. “It’s a real pleasure to meet you, Alaina. The kids were just raving about what a good job

you do counseling the women. They said they haven't seen that many people come consistently the whole time they've been doing this."

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. DiMarco." Alaina strove for polite. The whole time, all she could think about was how good Daniel would look when he aged. He looked a lot like his father. Sophia did, too, for that matter. It explained why he looked familiar.

He closed both of his hands around her much smaller one. It was a dominating move, but she knew he meant it as reassurance. "David, please. Anybody who does the good things you do doesn't have to stand on formality."

"David, then." She smiled, and he finally released her hand.

Daniel motioned in the direction he wanted her to take to the other entrance to the building. Alaina knew he expected her to go first. It was one of the things he did that made it seem like he had good manners when he was really establishing his control of the situation. She gritted her teeth and allowed him that control. She didn't exactly have a choice.

"I did call," she said, turning to direct her voice over her shoulder. "I didn't know you were doing construction." She stumbled over a twisted, wayward shingle, and he caught her elbow to steady her. Chagrined to be caught in that position, Alaina reddened. "Thanks."

"That storm we had on Wednesday night knocked some of my shingles loose. I knew the roof needed replacing, so I decided to do all the work at once." He didn't release her elbow, even though the ground around the corner of the building was clear. "Lightning hit the back corner of the building. I had a little fire, mostly electrical. It fried my phone."

Alaina didn't know how to respond. She wanted to express the appropriate reaction to the horrible things that happened, but he didn't seem too fazed by it all. His apartment was above the studio. Glancing up to where he pointed, she saw that the fire had been on that part of the roof.

"Were you home?"

Daniel shook his head.

She wasn't surprised. Sophia had said more than one time that Daniel's social life was quite active. She hadn't said it to warn Alaina. She had meant to be helpful, to explain why it was best that the women in the support group should avoid serious thoughts about Daniel. Alaina hadn't heeded the warning until it was too late.

"Oh, well, that's fortunate."

He snagged keys from his tool belt and opened the door. She hadn't used this door before, but she knew it was the one he typically used to enter and exit the building. It led directly to the stairs to his apartment.

"The phone company was out this morning, but they said it'll be a few days before they get things working."

As she wondered why he was sharing so much information, an incongruity occurred to her. "I got your answering machine when I called."

"It's voicemail," he said. "It's tied into my Internet, but I haven't had a chance to check messages." He followed her to the back room. Pausing in the doorway, he leaned a shoulder against the jamb. "I would have called you back."

Alaina wasn't so sure about that. She had more faith in the high school kids who worked at his studio in the evenings and on the weekends. Her eyes went directly to the spot on the counter where she remembered putting Tamara's information. The paper was still there. She looked at it to make sure then shoved it into her purse.

"Thanks," she said. With her eyes, she indicated he should move to let her pass. He didn't move. His gaze dropped to the floor, and he wiped his palms on his jeans. He looked nervous.

"About what happened Wednesday..."

She waved her hand, dismissing the entire day. "Let's not talk about that."

His low chuckle found a response deep inside her. She buried the reaction. Reaching out, he rested his fingers lightly on her arm.

Gooseflesh broke out where he touched her. That reaction was much more difficult to bury. And why couldn't he be wearing a shirt?

"I never thought I'd hear a shrink suggest avoidance."

Without batting an eye, she said, "Sometimes we need avoidance. It's a coping mechanism."

He removed his fingers from her arm, but he shifted his body to block her escape. "I don't want to play those kinds of games, Alaina. Not with you."

That sounded too intimate by half. With a sigh, Alaina stepped back. He wasn't going to move without a direct request. "Look, Daniel—"

"I wanted to apologize." He was intelligent enough to know she was seconds from ending their conversation. He shoved one hand deep into his pocket, and the other worried at the stubble on his jaw. "The way I treated you Wednesday was inexcusable. I shouldn't have pushed you like that."

Given that one of his former friends had date-raped Sophia and their family had spent years trying to come to terms with that violent act, Daniel would be more sensitive to how Alaina perceived their interaction. This was a dynamic she understood. "I wasn't afraid of you, Daniel. I never thought you would hurt me."

His nod was brief, and he bit his lip. "But you didn't invite that kind of attention." Now he looked at her lips, his eyes tracing their shape and his expression revealing a longing she didn't want to analyze. "I don't want you to think I think of you as a piece of meat or that I don't respect you."

Alaina had no idea how to respond to that admission. He was sincere in his apology, and he actually believed he respected her. Yet, he looked at her as if he wanted nothing more than to devour her. Meat, indeed. Unfortunately, her body responded to both his look and his voice. And his bare chest.

"It is possible for a man to both respect you and find you attractive," he said as he stepped back out of the doorway.

"I'm aware." She scooted past him, exiting the building as fast as she could without actually breaking into a run.

Outside, the warm, breezy air did nothing to still the rapid beat of her heart. She kept waiting for the time when she could be around Daniel without her hormones going haywire, but that didn't seem to be on the horizon. In a little over a week, she wouldn't see him in a professional context again. She considered taking a class from him. That was such an obvious, pathetic attempt to keep seeing him. She shook her head, disgusted.

A shout and the sound of something scraping pulled her from her reverie.

She stopped short as a large piece of something fell to the ground, crashing right in front of her. Suddenly divorced from her body, she stared at it, not comprehending what it was or where it had come from.

Daniel jerked her backward against his chest, moving her away from the building as a sheet of plywood thudded to the pavement where she'd been standing.

"Watch where the hell you're throwing that shit!" His bellow was directed at a shirtless man whose build equaled Daniel's.

"Sorry, buddy. Didn't see you there. You okay, little lady?"

Alaina's eyes had followed the direction of Daniel's shouted reprimand. She smiled serenely. "I'm fine. Thank you for asking." Daniel's arms were around her. She leaned back against his chest and enjoyed the safety and protection of his embrace.

He turned her to face him, gripping her shoulders firmly. Something about his face seemed unreal. Alaina recognized the signs of shock. The sheet of black plywood on the ground had missed her by inches. She breathed deeply and fought her way back to reality.

"I'm fine," she repeated. "Nothing happened."

"You're green," he said. "You're not fine."

"I lost shingles, too." She was aware that she wasn't entirely making sense, but she knew a response was required, and that was all

that popped into her head. “In the storm. I lost some shingles. But my roof doesn’t have the black stuff on it. Where are you staying while all this construction is going on?”

It finally dawned on her that those things she picked up from her driveway and her lawn Friday morning came from her roof. It was so high up there, and she really couldn’t see it all that well. She should probably call the insurance company.

“Come back inside. You can sit down, and I’ll get you some water.” Daniel’s voice was quiet and soothing. He spoke to her as if she was a child. That, more than anything, jerked her wits from the edge of oblivion.

“I’m fine,” she said again. This time, she meant it. She could feel blood returning to her extremities. “I have to give Tamara’s information to a friend, a doctoral candidate who can get her into a study.”

Daniel stiffened, and she didn’t understand why. For the first time since before their acquaintanceship had gone south, she thought they had been getting along. Of course, the peace never lasted.

Still, she attempted to salvage their *détente*. “I told her she would hear something this weekend.”

With a terse nod, Daniel let Alaina go.

She drove away thinking three things. First, there was no way Tamara would hear about the study that weekend. She would have to call and explain the situation. It was another way in which someone was letting Tamara down. She hated the thought of what this might do to the trust she had worked so hard to establish with the emotionally scarred woman.

Second, Daniel actually apologized. She really craved an apology for the way he treated her on their date, but this was a start.

Third, Daniel’s friend had called her “little lady.” Given the way his father also treated her, it didn’t look like that apology would be forthcoming any time soon. Daniel, his father, and his friends were all stuck in the alpha male mentality. Women were objects. They might

treat them well, as they would a prized possession, but they weren't people. *Little lady, indeed.*

She called Tamara after her lunch. Midway through her effusive apology, Alaina realized she never accepted Daniel's apology.

That was definitely something that could wait until Wednesday.

Chapter 4

Daniel headed back up onto the roof. The crew of friends working with him required food and beverages as payment. He would do the same thing for every single one of them, and he had helped a few of them with remodeling, landscaping, or roofing jobs before. He was fortunate to have such good friends.

Evan caught him the moment he stepped onto the flat part of the roof. “Look, man, I’m really sorry about that. I lost my balance. It was either the plywood or me, but one of us was going over the edge.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Daniel said. He adjusted his tool belt and snagged a bundle of shingles, lifting the hundred-pound pack easily. “She’s fine.”

Evan stared for a second, then snagged his own bundle and joined Daniel. “Was that her?”

Daniel’s nod was brief. “Yeah. That was her.”

A smirk settled on Evan’s mouth, but it didn’t ruin anything. No matter what expression was on Evan’s face, he was exceptionally handsome. He was tan, and bleached highlights streaked his brown hair from working long hours in the sun. “You’re welcome, then.”

“For scaring the hell out of her?” Daniel frowned. She had settled in his arms nicely, not even realizing she clung to him, but he would rather have had her there for other reasons.

Evan shrugged. “Whatever works. It’s a start, Danny. She snuggled right up to you, and she seemed to be enjoying it.”

Daniel didn't comment. He didn't want her afraid. He liked that she was spunky and strongly opinionated and she wasn't afraid to express those opinions.

And what had she meant when she said her roof didn't have the black stuff on it? How could she have a roof without tar paper? What was she planning to do about it? She likely didn't even know what the black stuff was called. He wouldn't put it past her to have memorized a neurological map of the human mind and still be completely ignorant as to the minimum code requirements for a roof.

"She's hot." Evan's observation interrupted Danny's musings. "Are you sure she's thirty-six? She doesn't look like she's that old."

Daniel already knew all of this, but he smiled indulgently at Evan as he remembered the first time he had seen Alaina. She had bowled him over, and he knew she had done the same thing to Evan.

"She needs a new roof."

Evan grunted. "And you're going to volunteer us to put it on? I think I need to remind you that this is my job, Danny. I actually need projects that generate income."

"If you're putting a new roof on her house, that puts you in close proximity to her." Daniel secured a safety line to his belt and headed up the ladder to the part of the roof that sloped.

Evan did the same. Daniel set out shingles, and Evan pounded nails into place with one well-placed blow to each. "I don't think she's the kind of shrink who pitches in to help reshingle her roof. Besides, I don't need to nail her roof in order to get into her pants."

No, Evan didn't, Danny silently agreed. He had witnessed the phenomenon of women flocking to Evan on more than one occasion. Daniel tamped down a rising tide of jealousy. Having Alaina in their lives would solve that problem once and for all.

This time, Daniel grunted. "She still needs a new roof. She said her shingles blew off. That's never a good sign."

* * * *

Work on his roof finished late Sunday afternoon. After the requisite consumption of beer and pizza, he dropped off to sleep with every intention of heading to Alaina's house to check her roof in the morning. Alaina would be at work. It was safer to visit when she wasn't there.

Of course, one thing led to another, especially after being unexpectedly closed for three days, and by the time he arrived at Alaina's house, it was early evening.

She wasn't home.

However, there was a tarp on her roof. From where he stood, he could see it flapping at one corner. Frowning, he returned to his truck and took out the extension ladder he had the foresight to bring.

Once on the roof, he found problems that were more serious than what prompted him to replace his entire roof. The storm had blown off a relatively small section of shingles. Elsewhere, scattered gaps showed where a shingle or two had come loose.

The tarp hadn't been nailed down. Heavy bricks were left, unsecured, to keep it from flying away in the wind. The wind had already used the tarp as leverage to move one of the bricks to the edge of the roof. One more good gust, and it would fall on whomever happened to be standing in the driveway.

Of course, all of that was nothing compared to the complete absence of tar paper, or "black stuff," as Alaina had phrased it. The plywood beneath the shingles was soaked. In some places where Daniel picked up shingles, he found it completely rotted through. He needed to get inside. At the very least, he needed to see the attic. She probably had damage down the inside of her walls all the way to the basement. He would need to check that as well.

He nailed down the edges of the tarp and swore liberally. He would need at least four more tarps. As creative and impossible expletives fell from his lips, he glanced over at the garage. Was it locked?

At that moment, it turned out to not matter. As he watched, the door lifted, and Alaina's car pulled into the driveway. A minute later, the door closed. Daniel watched the side door of the detached garage with an urgency that couldn't be denied. There was no doubt in his mind she was going to be upset when she saw him on her roof. Lainie didn't like to be taken by surprise.

Of course, he loved taking her by surprise. It was the only time he felt her reaction wasn't weighted and measured. It was truth. Alaina dealt in reality, but it was the kind of her own making. He badly wanted to bring her into his world.

After an eternity, that door opened. Sunlight glinted from her hair, highlighting the spectrum of reds and browns she sported. She had pulled it back, as she always did, pressed tight to her head. He wanted to see it free, to watch it burst into dark flames.

She wore, as she frequently did, a grey skirt that reached to her calves and a white blouse. In deference to the heat, it was short-sleeved, the neckline plunged, and it pulled tight enough to outline her breasts.

She was so different from the women he usually dated, women who had no problem wearing clothes out of which they needed to be peeled.

Shockingly, Alaina wore heels instead of flats. Daniel tilted his head, estimating them to be a whole two inches high. His jeans were growing tight. It was time for that inevitable confrontation that would make them loose again. He hated arguing with her, but every conversation they had tended to end that way. At least she hadn't thrown his apology in his face and stalked away Saturday.

He climbed down the ladder and rounded the corner in time to meet her at the back steps. She jumped. A little yelp escaped before she could cover her mouth with her hand.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Daniel knew her growled question was more a reaction to the surprise than indicative of true anger. He smiled, hoping the

expression that charmed hundreds of women would work on the only one who mattered. “You said you lost some shingles.”

The smile must have mollified her a little. She stammered, looking from him to her roof and back before gathering her wits. “I didn’t mean for you to replace them. I called the insurance company. They sent out someone this morning. That’s why I was late to work.”

Daniel’s smile didn’t fade. God, but she was beautiful. Those almond-shaped brown eyes were tilted up at the corners, making them catlike. Feline was a good description of his Lainie. She was smart, sleek, and skittish. He knew she had claws, and he longed to sandwich her between him and Evan and make her purr. “Who put the tarp up there?”

A breeze lifted a strand of hair from her ponytail, blowing it across her forehead. She brushed it away with an impatient hand. “That’s the blue thing?” At Daniel’s nod, she continued. “The man who came this morning. He wrote up an estimate, and now the insurance company must approve the claim. He covered up a section. He said it would do the trick until he could get his company out here in a few weeks.”

Daniel’s jaw dropped. “A few weeks? That damn tarp was flapping in the wind when I got here. It wouldn’t have held for more than a day. Idiot didn’t even nail it down. What’s the name of the company? Did you get the name of the guy who came out?”

He was angry. She knew nothing about building, and now some dickhead was taking advantage of her. He’d beat the shit out of the bastard before he’d let him scam Alaina. Plus, he wouldn’t trust anyone with the repairs except for Evan. One look at the magnitude of what needed to be done and Evan would certainly agree with him. That carefree, relaxed expression Evan usually sported would tighten and crumble. His mouth would compress to a grim line, and he would set to work.

Alaina stepped back, distancing herself from his anger. She shifted her shoulder bag to the other side. "I fail to see why any of this concerns you."

He held up both hands in a gesture of surrender. He didn't want to fight with her. She was so sensitive to hostile moods. "Lainie—"

She stalked up the three steps and unlocked her back door. "I didn't ask you to come here, Daniel. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself and of my house. I don't need a man to come over and show me how it's done."

Shoving the door violently, she set her bag inside and whirled on him. He mounted the bottom step, which put them face to face. "Alaina—"

She jabbed an angry finger into his chest. "You think wearing a tool belt that pulls your pants down so they ride extra low and placing a phallic symbol in plain sight right there in your groin area is the kind of advertisement that will make me swoon at your feet and worship your male superiority, but you're wrong! I'm not stupid, Daniel. I can see through your posturing and your accessories, and I'm not impressed!"

He adjusted his opinion of provoking her temper. With those light brown eyes flashing, she was a feast for the eyes. The tightness in his jeans wasn't going away. He climbed another step, forcing her to tilt her head back to look up at him. Her chest brushed against his. "You're not?"

She crossed her arms, barricading her breasts from him. "No. I'm not."

"That's too bad," he said, running a hand through his hair and hiking up his tool belt, which he had never before considered a seductive accessory. "I wore it just for you."

Her mouth opened and closed, but she didn't move, not one inch. He wanted to kiss her so badly, but he wasn't going to make the first move. He couldn't give her that ammunition to throw at him later. Finally, she settled on something. "You're impossible to talk to."

His arms itched to hold her close. The grin that wouldn't leave his face had everything to do with the fact she wasn't retreating. If she truly didn't like him, she would have moved away by now and slammed the door in his face. "I only asked who your contractor was. You're the one who brought up sex."

"Oh, hell," she said. Reaching up suddenly, she fisted his hair and yanked his lips to hers. Before Daniel could process anything, her tongue was in his mouth, introducing him to her sweet brand of heaven.

Chapter 5

Alaina had lost her mind.

Arriving home to find Daniel at her back porch wearing jeans that showed off every sinew and bulge, after pictures of him wearing that tool belt and no shirt haunted her dreams for the past two days, his proximity had proved too tempting.

From the moment she saw Daniel, she had wanted him to pull her close and kiss her breathless. The sharp tone of her initial question was purely defensive. She was glad he only seemed amused by something that was essentially bitchy.

Those arms closed around her now. A strong, wide hand gripped her ass as the other did something to her hair. She was too preoccupied with enjoying the fact he was kissing her back to give much thought to the disarray that couldn't help but result from what he was doing to her hair.

He lifted her through the open doorway and into the house. The door closed behind him. Alaina couldn't get enough of his kiss. She clung to him, too hungry to be gentle. She'd waited far too long for this. His lips were firm, commanding, but they gave just as much as they took.

They stumbled farther into the house, until the massive Shaker dining table halted their progress. He lifted her onto the top, shoving at her skirt and working his thigh between her legs. Those firm fingers caressed her face and fanned through her hair. It was loose now.

He broke the kiss, turning her head to the side to access her neck. She had no need to breathe, but he gave her oxygen just the same. Shivers raced through her body, and she trembled. She knew he

wouldn't be the one to stop, and she desperately didn't want him to stop, even if that meant she joined the ranks of his conquests.

"Lainie." He whispered the word, her name, the name only he used, against the heated and sensitive skin just below her ear. Two hands tilted her head back as his lips found her throat and he kissed lower. One hand followed his lips, freeing buttons to open her blouse.

Her hands had yet to release his hair. They did so now, falling to his shoulders. She wrapped her legs around him, vaguely wondering where his tool belt had gone. Her shoes were in the way, and so she kicked them off. They fell to the laminate wood floor with a sharp thud that probably meant another dent in the damn thing. She didn't care.

She wanted to push at his shirt and do the things to him that he was doing to her, but her precarious position on the edge of the table put him in charge. "Dan?" She managed the word as more than the moan and sigh it wanted to be.

His lips stopped working their magic on the valley between her breasts, but his head didn't move. Beneath her hands, his shoulders tensed. "Yeah?"

"Let's go upstairs."

He relaxed, his muscles once more fluid and firm. "Point the way, sweetheart." Hiking her legs more firmly around his waist, he cupped her ass with one hand and pressed her chest against his with the other.

Her bedroom was at the top of the stairs. She'd left unfolded laundry on the chair and a box of paperback novels she had picked up at a garage sale in the middle of the floor. Daniel stumbled over the box, falling onto the bed. Alaina broke his fall. Air whooshed from her lungs, but when he tried to lift himself from her, she tightened her arms around him.

He stared down at her, a frown pinching between his dark brows. "Did I hurt you, Lainie?"

Shaking her head, she dismissed his concern and tugged at his shirt. They were pressed too close together for it to move much. Heat

fueled her, and months of desire spurred her to action. She pushed him onto his back and straddled his hips.

Looking down at him was a dizzying thing. Daniel was in her bed, lying on top of her rose coverlet and letting her undress him. His hands, knowing and rough from use, caressed her thighs from knee to ass. Those warm brown eyes gazed at her in wonder as she finished unbuttoning her blouse and shrugged out of it.

Her body was small, and it was curvy. She thought he might see her imperfections first, but he appeared to not notice anything displeasing. Hot hands spanned her waist and caressed upward, thumbs pausing just under her breasts.

Impatience set her in motion. Reaching into the waist of his jeans, she found the edges of his shirt and shoved at it, pushing it up and out of her way. She wiggled down his body to put her mouth in the same area as her hands. Daniel lifted his hips and shoulders to help her remove his shirt.

Alaina was in heaven. Her hands explored every inch of his chiseled chest, and her mouth followed, drinking in his male scent and the surprisingly silky feel of his skin under her lips. Her forays led her to his side, and she shoved at him until he turned over onto his stomach.

She kissed and licked him, finding the valley of his spine irresistible. Tracing a path to his neck, she found how to make him quiver beneath her lips.

With a groan and a well-executed arm movement, he drew her beneath him. "Lainie, you're going to kill me if you keep that up." Before she could think of anything clever to say, he devoured her lips. His hands were everywhere, touching and stroking. Her skirt disappeared, as did her stockings.

Tension marked the lines of his body. One of his thighs burrowed between her legs and pressed against her core. She moaned and rocked against him.

He reached beneath her and unhooked her bra with practiced precision. Leaning up, he peeled the white lace away from her breasts as if he was opening a long-awaited gift. His eyes never left those round globes. Daniel, she concluded, was definitely a breast man. She was glad genetics hadn't skimmed in that area.

The fingers of one hand circled her left breast, slowly winding their way to her nipple, which was already pebbled in anticipation. He rubbed his thumb lightly over that peak before taking it in his mouth. Almost viciously, he sucked at her nipple, drawing it into his mouth to stretch and bite the tender skin.

Alaina's moan came out more like a shriek, a louder noise than she'd ever made in bed with a man, and she lifted from the bed, arching into his face. Never had anyone treated her so roughly, and she loved it. Her senses were already alive, awake, but he shot liquid heat straight from her nipple to her vagina. What had been moist became a flood.

His other hand closed around her right breast, teasing and plumping it to the same rhythm his mouth used.

Alaina dug her fingernails into the pillow beneath her head and tightened her thighs around Daniel's, pressing against the rough denim even harder.

By the time he switched breasts, she was kindling, smoking, in need of just a few strokes to break into a full-out blaze.

Frantic, she shoved against him. She pulled and pushed, writhing and squirming, but she was unable to go anywhere. He held her in place with his hips and the hands that cupped her breasts as his mouth alternated between the two peaks begging for more.

"Danny!" She cried his name, a nickname she had never used because it implied affection and familiarity.

His head lifted, and he regarded her with eyes heavy-lidded with desire. That lazy, knowing smile lifted the corners of his lips. "I've waited a long, long time for this, Lainie. I'm not going to rush."

He'd waited a long time? He hadn't even noticed her for the first two months she counseled women at his studio. Alaina had been forced to join the ranks of women gazing lustfully and longingly after his retreating figure when Sophia finished using him as her punching bag. The six weeks after their date hadn't been any different.

Using strength she didn't know she had, she flipped him onto his back and wrestled him naked. The chuckles issuing from him died down to nothing when he looked up to find her kneeling between his legs, studying him with a predatory gaze. She felt like a hawk in the midst of a spectacular dive. She could only imagine how her expression might worry him.

He leaned up on one elbow. "Alaina?"

This wasn't real. Her eyes roamed up his legs to his hips, up his chest to his face and back down, finally stopping at his erection. He was magnificent. She wanted to touch and taste everything. The voice inside her head warned her that Daniel was a one-shot deal. She wanted to have no regrets.

Trailing her hands lightly up his inner thighs, she ignored his question.

"Lainie?"

One hand pushed at his chest. "Relax." Her head bent to his cock. She licked her lips as she fixated on the glistening head. "I won't hurt you."

Hair curtained most of her face, shielding her from his expression. She wasn't sure she wanted to see what he thought of her wantonness. She had never been passive in the bedroom, and she wasn't about to start now. Opening her mouth, she licked him first, lapping up the salty liquid leaking from the tip and before swirling her tongue around the head.

Daniel moaned, and his body jerked. He writhed underneath her. When she closed her mouth completely around his cock, his hips shot from the bed. He swore.

His hands locked on either side of her head. He pulled her away from him and flipped her onto her back, plundering her mouth with his tongue to silence her protests as he covered her body with his.

One hand wandered down and pushed between them. A tug did nothing to move her underwear because he wouldn't free her enough to help. With a low growl, he ripped them from her body.

"I want you, Lainie. I love the way your mouth feels on me, but I don't want to come in your mouth, not our first time together. I want to be inside you. I want to feel your body suck me inside as it pulses around my dick."

He spoke in breathless whispers as he kissed her. His knees separated her legs. The hand between their bodies found her wetness. He pulled at the folds in her pussy, plucking and rubbing until she stiffened and arched, the sweet waves of a small orgasm washing over her. She closed her eyes to focus the feeling.

"Open your eyes, sweetheart," he commanded. "Open them, Lainie. Don't hide this from me."

She did as he ordered, and his fingers entered her vagina slowly, massaging the responsive flesh there. Alaina thrust against his hand, keeping her eyes open and focused on his. Tension coiled. Her limbs tingled, and her hands lacked the strength to grip his shoulders. Her breaths came faster and faster.

"That's it, honey. Let me see you come."

She wanted to come, but she needed something more from him. Reaching between her legs, she closed her hand around his and pushed it up, angling his fingers to press up against her G-spot and down against the back edge of her opening. "Like this," she said between ragged breaths.

His grin was something to see. Alaina wasn't worried about bruising his ego. She knew her body, and she knew he was the kind of man who kept the goal in mind.

He plunged his fingers into her, adding a third and keeping the angle she wanted. "Like this, honey?"

“Yes,” she said as her hips shot off the bed. “Oh, god, yes!” The orgasm took her hard. Her entire body quaked, and his heat disappeared.

He fished off the side of the bed for something in his pants. A condom. Alaina didn’t want to think about the fact that he’d come prepared. She had condoms in the bathroom, but she didn’t keep them in her pocket.

He unrolled the lime green sheath over his erection. Positioning himself between her thighs, he leaned over her and brushed his lips against hers.

The kiss was tender, but his warning wasn’t. “I’m not a gentle lover, Lainie, and I’ve wanted you for too long.”

“I can take it,” she said, still breathing hard from what he had already done to her. She guided his lips back to hers and kissed him with undiminished passion. “I can dish it out, too.”

Desire honeyed his eyes. His lips found hers again, and his hands roamed her body, claiming and tantalizing, until she moaned and reached between them.

He lifted his torso, watching her face as she guided him to her entrance. “You’re mine, Lainie. Mine.” The last word was lost as he plunged into her.

Alaina’s eyes rolled back, and her mouth dropped open. He filled her. He took her prisoner. In that moment, she was his, completely his. She arched her back and met his thrusts, crashing into him faster and faster. Heat coiled, bringing the beginnings of sweet tension with her. This wasn’t going to be a short, quick orgasm. This was going to be major, soul-sucking and earth-shattering. She expected no less from this Casanova.

His fingers threaded through hers, and he pressed her hands to the bed as he held his weight away from her chest. Alaina took in the sight of his long, lean body hovering over hers. Her feet planted on the mattress, using the position to give her thrusts more power. Her pale legs pressed against his darker thighs. She liked the contrast.

“Lainie,” he moaned. “You feel so good, Lainie.”

She clenched around him. “Don’t come yet,” she warned. She was close, but not that close.

He lowered his lips to hers and kissed her hard. His thrusts slowed. She moaned in protest. Dropping down suddenly, he hiked her knees over his shoulders. The change let him go deeper into her. He thrust faster and harder, and she was unable to move, to control anything.

Her climax broke, and she screamed, her pussy contracting around him violently and wringing the climax he had held off.

He collapsed, rolling them both to the side and held her tightly in his arms. She listened to his heartbeat filling the massive, comfortable silence. She didn’t want to move. She didn’t want to make the silence uncomfortable. She knew it was coming. It couldn’t help but come. When two people who fought as much as they did suddenly leapt into a postcoital situation, discomfort was the inevitable outcome.

She braced herself for it, and she prepared to make the transition easy. There was nothing emotional between them. Incredible sex had a way of making it seem like an intimacy existed that wasn’t truly there. As much as she craved that intimacy, she knew it would never happen, not with Daniel. Not with a man who carried around condoms because he never knew when he’d find a willing partner.

Or maybe he did know. Maybe he had plans that evening. Maybe somewhere a date waited impatiently for him to pick her up and take her to dinner. Her stomach growled before she could imagine the specifics of him hopping from her bed to a bed that probably belonged to one of the blonde bimbos he preferred.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Sounds like you need dinner.”

“I was going to make spaghetti,” she said, rolling away from him to snag a T-shirt and a pair of light sweats from the pile of laundry in the chair next to her bed. She didn’t want to suggest take-out or something that implied she expected him to stay.

"I like spaghetti," he said, responding as if her statement had been an invitation. When she turned around, he greeted her wearing his jeans and a lazy smile. Pulling her close, he pressed an equally lazy kiss to her lips. "This is the first time I've seen you not dressed up as the good doctor. I like it."

Ahhh, there it was. Her label. She was The Good Doctor, the unattainable woman. It was a safe title, one that provided the necessary distance so that he could abandon her without regret. She wasn't of his social group, so a dalliance of this sort was destined to be short-term, a one-night stand.

Alaina could wear her armor well. She had plenty of practice. Drawing back, she ran a hand through hair that had to resemble something from a horror movie or a comedy. "Are you staying for dinner?"

Daniel drew a finger along her jaw, refusing to accept the openings she gave him to leave. "You can't dangle spaghetti in front of a man who needs to refuel for the next round and expect him to refuse."

She blinked at him. "The next round?"

Twisting one finger in the waistband of her sweats, he tugged her closer. "Sweetheart, we've only just begun. The night is young."

The spicy scent of his skin and the cocky grin on his face finished his promise. She was curiously relieved that he didn't plan to run away until later. Now she could pretend he was hers for just a little longer. That thought nearly made her feel as cocky as he looked.

His smile widened. "I've got more overused lines, but I can see by the laugh you're trying to stifle that you get my point."

He bent to kiss her, but his phone rang, and he hesitated.

"You can get that," she offered.

"I don't know if I want to," he said. "That's my dad's ringtone, and he's pissed at Sophia."

Alaina didn't ask why. Daniel stayed with his lips millimeters from hers. At last, the ringing stopped, and he kissed her.

When they were both breathless, he released her. “I’d rather check voice mail and call back. I could give a shit whether or not Sophia and Drew make everyone in their wedding dress up like fairies.”

That took Alaina by surprise. Sophia didn’t strike her as the fairies and unicorns type of person. “Fairies? Is she making your father wear wings and a gossamer shirt?” That would be in direct opposition to the elder DiMarco’s rigid definition of masculinity, a definition he had passed to his only son.

Daniel laughed. “I have no freaking idea. They’ve hired a wedding planner and a fancy costume designer. They’ve got this Shakespeare thing going on between them. Whatever they do, I’ll be wearing a tux.”

Alaina raised a brow at that. “Are you not in the wedding?” She wasn’t under the impression anyone in a wedding got to choose their clothes unless they were the bride. Goodwill now had some really ugly dresses that fit Alaina and had been used for just the one occasion.

“I am,” he said. “Sophie’s usually reasonable. I can’t see the value in making a big deal out of this. My dad, on the other hand, is fit to be tied. He liked Drew until he found out the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* theme was his idea. Now he thinks Drew needs to grow a pair.”

She didn’t comment on that. Alaina’s father had used such macho terms her entire life to explain why men got to do things that women did not or to emasculate men who didn’t fit his preferred stereotype. It was a dichotomy Alaina hated, and one she encountered too often in her line of work.

“I’m going to start dinner,” she said, extricating herself from Daniel’s arms.

He frowned, but he did nothing to stop her. “Okay. I’ll be down in a few.”

Alaina set a pot of water to boiling and broke the long noodles in half. Grabbing another pot from her cupboard, she placed it on another burner and poured sauce from a jar into it. If Daniel wanted

gourmet cooking, then he was going to have to do it himself or hope to catch her on a good day. Though Alaina was a decent cook, she hated doing it. She didn't mind making sandwiches, salads, grilled cheese, spaghetti, or mac and cheese.

Given the way Daniel had been raised, she should count herself lucky if he could make toast. That wouldn't stop him from being critical of her cooking, however. Well, she could tell him exactly where to shove his criticism.

She was stirring the sauce when he came into the kitchen and stuck his face in her neck. Warmth from his body penetrated the thin cotton separating her back from his chest. "Smells good," he said.

Whether he meant her neck or the sauce was unclear.

Pressing a kiss to the same spot, he said, "Looks good, too." His arms came around her waist. "I need to get into your attic."

Alaina continued stirring the sauce, but that one brought a frown to her face. "If that's a sexual term, it's one I've never heard."

He laughed. "No, that was literal. It's the reason I came over in the first place, to check out your roof. I need to see the attic."

She sighed and pushed him away. "The insurance adjuster was up there this morning, Daniel." Her short temper brought out her sharp tone. "The problem is being addressed. I am perfectly capable of taking care of this on my own. Now, why don't you get the plates? Dinner will be done in five minutes."

He stared at her back for five full seconds. She felt the heat of his eyes. She didn't know if he was angry at being pushed away, upset that she didn't need a man to save her, or watching her ass as she bent to rummage for the strainer.

"Is this your way of changing the subject? I should warn you I was raised in a conversationally disorganized household. I know how to drop a topic and pick it up later."

She carried the pot of boiling noodles to the sink and poured it into the strainer. Daniel opened random cupboards until she pointed

out the right one. He loaded two plates with noodles and handed them to Alaina so she could ladle on the sauce.

“And I know how to keep your mind away from topics that are none of your concern,” she said. “There’s parm in the refrigerator.”

Daniel paused, his hand on refrigerator handle as he studied some artwork hanging via magnet in a place of honor. “Are these from kids of your patients?”

Alaina filled two glasses of water from the tap and took them to the kitchen table. She did have art from the children of some of her patients. Kids were grateful to anyone who helped their parents stay sober. “My little brother drew them. He’s eight.”

The pictures were the kind a son drew for his mother. There were reproductions of them holding hands and eating ice cream. Zach had taken to labeling her *Alaina/Mom* with big, bold crayon letters. Did she imagine Daniel freezing for a few seconds before he grabbed the grated parmesan from inside and settled at her table?

She wasn’t sure she’d ever mentioned Zach to Daniel. Almost none of their conversations had been personal. On their date, Dan had begun with complimenting her appearance before migrating to weather and sports-related topics. He’d mentioned some of his friends, but Alaina hadn’t contributed much. She spent most of the time wondering what she was doing on a date with someone so handsome and so much younger. After he ordered her dinner without even asking what she wanted, she gave him an earful, but her tirade had been predicated on moral grounds.

“My dad always wanted a son,” she added. “He was stuck with just me for a long time, but my mom finally came through. Of course, now he’s too old to deal with a little kid. Zach spends much of his time with me.”

Daniel lifted his head in acknowledgement as he twirled noodles around his fork.

Her dining room was empty, and she didn’t feel the need to fill it with a formal table just yet. The blocky Shaker table that was painted

in white had been a gift from her mentor, an elderly psychologist who had been selling off her things as she downsized for retirement. Dr. Gambino's unflagging support had been the only reason Alaina made it through the PhD program at the University of Michigan. The table worked well enough for her and Zach in the kitchen.

Her parents had certainly not encouraged her to pursue higher education. Her father was of the opinion that education ruined a woman. He was fond of saying if he wanted her opinion, he'd give it to her. Her mother, who had wed Alaina's father as soon as it was legal, adopted whatever opinion her father held. She avoided contact with them as much as possible, but Zach's birth had changed all of that. Alaina had never planned to have children of her own. It had taken that little guy all of ten seconds to wrap her around his tiny, clenched fingers.

Drawing his fingertip over a curl, Daniel noted the peeling paint on the leg of the table, but he wisely didn't offer to refinish it. She might have kicked him out if he tried. He returned to swirling noodles and sauce around his fork. "So, how are you planning to divert my attention?"

Alaina finished chewing before addressing that opening. "You said something about a next round?"

"That's how I'm going to divert your attention, Alaina. What are you gonna do?"

He was teasing her. The analytical side of her brain noted that he was attempting intimacy, flirting with her.

She let her eyelids fall to half-mast. "I thought I'd play along until it's not fun anymore."

"Until it's not fun?" He shook his head. "Why do I get the feeling you're just waiting for me to fuck up?" He reached out to smooth a stray curl away from her face.

She was definitely waiting for him to do or say something to sour the mood. People didn't change, especially not when an attitude is so deeply rooted in their psyche. It wasn't his fault. He had been raised

this way. He probably thought he was setting himself up as a hero by performing caretaker tasks.

She deflected. "Interesting choice of words."

"Interesting way of not answering," he shot back. "Come on, Lainie. Tell me the truth. I'm a big boy. I can handle it."

He wasn't angry. She was amazed that he seemed more amused than anything else. It was likely he was just looking forward to more sex. What they had done so far had been incredible. She could definitely see where he would have a problem ending his dalliances. Though she had just had him, Alaina wanted to strip those jeans from his delectable body and have him again, right there in the kitchen. She imagined he regularly experienced women begging and pleading for another chance.

With no great leap, she could see her head bent over him, sucking his cock. She could see herself straddling him and riding until they were both covered with sweat and screaming meaningless and incoherent things.

"Alaina?" He waved a hand in front of her face.

She smiled sheepishly. To her credit, she didn't blush. "Sorry. I was picturing you naked. Since you're only wearing jeans, it didn't take long to get you that way."

He set his fork on his empty plate and pushed it away, never taking his warm brown eyes from her face. "Ask, honey. That's all it would take. Anything you want, Alaina. Just ask, and I'll make it happen."

She licked her lips and ignored anything he implied that wasn't sexual. "Will you strip for me, Daniel?"

He stood, sliding his chair away from the table with the back of his calves. One flick and the button on his fly opened. She gripped the edge of her chair, determined to stay put and watch.

The zipper was next. The jeans fell from his hips to pool around his ankles. A push, and his boxers joined them. He kicked the clothing

aside and presented himself to her. As she watched, mesmerized, his cock lengthened, hardening.

She swallowed.

“What now, Lainie? I stripped for you. Will you strip for me?”

Her heart beat hard, thudding against her sternum. She didn’t want to undress, not yet. Shaking her head, she stood and pushed lightly against his chest. “Sit back down, Daniel. I want—”

The kiss cut off whatever she had planned to say. His hands were adept at finding their way under her clothes. One hand cupped her ass, and the other crept up her shirt to knead a breast. The sucking circles his tongue made in her mouth were echoed in the way he kneaded her flesh. Sensations combined. Her pussy swelled and throbbed.

Alaina broke the kiss. She was going to get her way in this. She pushed against his chest, her palm flat against his well-defined pectoral muscle. “Sit.”

He sat, but he stared up at her with a wary expression.

“Relax,” she said, unable to stop the devious smile from lighting her eyes. “You’ll like this. I promise.”

She pushed his knees apart and knelt in front of him.

“Lainie, you don’t have to...” Alaina raked her nails along his inner thigh, cutting short his protest.

“Hush,” she said. “You can take my name in vain, but that’s about all the talking I want to hear out of you.”

Using a light touch, she caressed his sac. It twitched and tightened beneath her fingers. She inhaled his scent before adding her tongue. She swirled it around his base and worked her way up his shaft. Moisture leaked from the tip. Between that and the sounds of uneven breathing Daniel was making, she knew he enjoyed her technique.

She licked the tip, lapping up his saltiness. This time, when she closed her mouth around the crown, he didn’t pull her away. She worked her way down, taking as much of him as she could, and she wrapped one hand around the base.

Her other hand fondled his sac with a light touch. She sucked him hard, moving her tongue to wrap around and caress his cock. His hands tangled in her hair, and he moaned, saying her name over and over. She lost herself in the act, and the moment boiled down to just Daniel, his flavor, and the sounds he made.

Then his hands tightened in hair. He tugged in warning, but she didn't want to release him. She gripped him harder, and he came in her mouth. Her throat contracted, and she swallowed everything.

Lifting her head slowly, she licked her lips as she looked up at him to gauge his reaction. His half-closed eyes and dreamy expression made her smile. He wrapped his hands around her upper arms and yanked her onto his lap.

The kiss was different from before. It was just as full as passion, but now it was also tender. "You were right," he said. "I liked that."

He lifted her shirt and removed her sweats with a tug and a yank. She felt tiny in his arms. Her rational self reasoned that it was natural since Daniel had nearly a foot on her in height. Her irrational self reasoned that it was because she was just another notch on his bedpost. Well, at least it would be a memorable notch.

Daniel set Alaina on her feet and reoriented the chair. When he pulled her back, he situated her so that her back was to his chest. Looking straight forward, she saw what he had done and why.

They faced her curio cabinet. There was almost nothing in the cabinet. It had been an item she found at a resale shop for only a few hundred dollars. There was something wrong with the wiring, so it didn't light up, making it an undesirable item. She had meant to collect something to put in it or to have the wiring fixed, but she never got around to it.

However, enough sun and artificial light streamed into her kitchen so that extra lighting wasn't needed. In the back of the cabinet, she could see the reflection of her naked body seated on Daniel's lap.

"What are you doing?"

His chin brushed against her temple and the charming smile that starred in her fantasies appeared. “You’ll like this. I promise.”

He brought his knees together, hooked hers on either side, and parted her legs with his. She watched the reflection in the tall cabinet, unable to tear her eyes away from the erotic tableau there. In the bedroom, he’d asked her to keep her eyes open so he could watch her face when she came. That meant she watched his face, too. The intimacy had been unexpectedly hot.

But she hadn’t watched herself, and Daniel hadn’t narrated anything.

“Look at yourself, Lainie. Look at these luscious breasts.” He palmed them both, plumping them and pinching the nipples between his fingertips. Alaina jumped at the unexpected sharpness.

A moan sounded in the back of her throat, but it was the expression on her face that held her interest. Her eyes widened, and her lips parted. Her breasts swelled, seeking more of his touch. All of this had happened without her being aware of it. If she hadn’t been watching in the mirror, she would never have seen just how responsive her body was to Daniel.

His hands traveled lower, stroking his rough palms against the sensitive skin below her navel and her inner thighs. He parted her even more. “Look at this glistening little nub, swelling and throbbing, begging to be touched.”

Christ, he was good. Who talked like that when they didn’t need to?

“Do you want me to touch it, Lainie? Do you want me to rub your clit?”

Breathlessly, she nodded, a quick, jerky movement. Her hands gripped his thighs, anchoring her body as she watched and waited.

Slowly, his fingers moved, gliding through her wetness. He circled her clit, pressing hard. He hadn’t lied when he said he wasn’t a gentle lover. His touch was precise and confident. Alaina arched,

pressing against his fingers. She wasn't about to complain about his technique, not when it wrought such wonderful sensations.

She watched his fingers playing over her folds, teasing moans and gasps from her throat. The visual both distracted her from coming and heightened the tension coiling down low, just behind where he touched.

His fingers lifted away, taking the sweet bliss with him. She whimpered in protest.

Those wet fingers, dripping with evidence of her arousal, slid into his mouth. He licked away the juices, savoring her taste much more than he had savored the spaghetti. He watched her watching him.

"Have you ever tasted yourself, Lainie?" She shook her head. "Oh, honey, you're missing out." The fingertips returned, but his touch was agonizingly light. He gathered her cream and lifted his finger to her lips.

She hadn't realized she had been holding her breath. She breathed in now, inhaling the sweetly musky scent he held to her lips. He pressed the finger to her lips, and the image in the mirror opened her mouth. Her tongue wrapped around it, scraping and sucking.

In the mirror, she watched Daniel's eyes, heavy-lidded with desire, flare hotter. She was floored by the emotion. She thought his enthusiasm for their sex play would wane much, much faster.

As if he knew it would be her undoing, he used that finger to turn her head, to make her face him, and he kissed her. It was tender and passionate, and she surrendered to him. He could have asked her anything right then, and she would have given it to him.

While she drowned in the sensations his kiss aroused, his finger returned to her pussy, plunging deep inside. Her body jumped under the impact. She wanted to squeeze her legs together to concentrate the sensations, but he wouldn't let her move.

Though he broke the kiss, he stayed close, his mouth inches from hers. Her breathing had been ragged before, but now she panted,

thrusting against uncooperative fingers. He moved them inside her, feeling his way around her vagina.

“You have a rough patch right here,” he said, turning his fingers slightly to the side. “It moves, Lainie. Did you know that?”

She shifted on him, wanting him to fuck her with his fingers. “Daniel.” It was a breathless plea. Yes, she would beg. He had reduced her to begging. He hadn’t meant to bring humiliation into this, but she was dangerously close.

“Earlier,” he said, sliding his fingers halfway out and pressing up, “it was here.” He thrust lazily, giving her a little of what she wanted. “I wonder how many different places I’ll find it tonight.”

“Jesus, Dan, does it matter?”

“I’m going to make you scream.” He smiled smugly and thrust his fingers faster.

Her eyes rolled skyward. “You’ve already made me scream. Now you’re just playing with me.”

“I like playing with you like this. I like this look on your face.” Lost in the heat blazing beneath his fingers, Alaina had closed her eyes. “Open your eyes, Lainie. See what I see.”

She did as he asked, and she saw a woman lost in the sweetest bliss. His fingers moved faster and faster. She alternated between watching what he was doing to her pussy and watching their faces. Her face interested her, but it scared her, too. It revealed too much. It showed a woman who wanted a man she shouldn’t want much more than was emotionally safe.

She came, contorting her body and screaming her climax, just like he promised. Before she came down, before she could fully process the movement, the top of the table was pressed to her stomach and breasts.

The orgasm still pulsed inside her channel. The muscles of her inner thighs still throbbed. He turned her head so she could see her body in the curio’s mirror. The flush of color on her skin brought out the red in the wild jumble of hair cascading around her shoulders.

Daniel reached into the pocket of the pants he'd left pooled on the floor and pulled out another condom. Closing her eyes, she tried to push away the numb feeling that came from being with a man who carried multiple condoms in the pocket of his jeans. Had he meant them for another woman? Had she sidetracked him by kissing him like she had on her back steps? He didn't look like he regretted the turn the evening had taken.

She heard the foil rip. He lifted her hips. "Open your eyes, Lainie. I want you to watch. I want you to see how much I want you, how long I've waited for this."

One thrust, and he was inside her before she could will her eyes to open. She watched him in the mirror, fascinated by the image of his long, lean body, and the cock pumping into her. The heat in her pussy contrasted with the coolness of the table under her, just as the solidity of the wood juxtaposed with the feel of his hips slapping against her ass.

He was magnificent.

Silently, she thanked him for giving her this, for giving her these visual memories. Then the moment was gone. The throbbing between her legs turned to liquid fire. A moan began low in her throat, and sharp screams spilled from her lips. Biting her lip didn't help. The sounds came out anyway. She wanted a pillow in which to bury her face, but Daniel didn't give her that. He didn't want her passion hidden or muffled or silenced. He went to great lengths to make sure she couldn't do those things.

"Yes, Lainie, yes." He moaned, and her name was a reverent plea. His hips pumped faster, driving her to a place where she was nothing but the sharp pleasure spiking through her body. "You're mine, Lainie, completely mine."

At that moment, she was, and she was okay with it.

The climax took her hard and left her trembling and weak. Daniel scooped her up in his arms and carried her up the stairs.

“We’ll rest a bit.” He kissed her forehead. “Please tell me you have more condoms.”

She laughed softly. So he didn’t have an endless supply after all. “Yes, Daniel. I have more, but they’re not neon green.”

His mouth opened and closed, and his olive skin turned a shade ruddier, but he said nothing. She couldn’t tell if he was embarrassed or excited.

Chapter 6

She was gone when he woke up. Vague memories of her delicate hand shaking his shoulder surfaced at the back of his mind. She had been dressed for work. Had she asked him if he wanted the alarm set?

Cracking one eye, he noted that sunlight streamed through curtains that were more decorative than functional.

More dreamlike memories came back. She had made coffee.

He sat up and planted his feet on the carpeted floor. His place was all wood, and so was Evan's. He often made mental notes to buy a rug for under his sofa-sleeper, but he never followed through. Carpet would be nice in the winter. He couldn't sleep with socks on, and he hated cold floors.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he stumbled into the bathroom. His clothes were draped over the towel rack. He probably should have told her he was a solid sleeper. He wondered if she had been frustrated or amused by her inability to wake him.

Had she waved a mug of coffee under his nose? It wouldn't have mattered. Over the years, his parents had tried different things to wake him up for school. The only thing that consistently worked was taking away his covers and dropping snow on his skin. Smashing Sophia's sno-cone maker wasn't something he regretted.

Okay, when Sophia began sneaking into his room and putting makeup on him while he slept, that had worked, too. She took pictures and showed them to his friends at school. More than one of them told him that he would make a pretty girl. While he did exact revenge on both Sophia and his friends, he learned to be wary of anyone touching his face while he slept.

He wondered if Alaina had tried touching his face. How long would it take her to learn that a simple caress would rouse him, but she could jump on his body and nothing much would happen? If things worked out like he wanted, Evan would be able to tell her long before she would have the chance to figure it out for herself.

His survival instincts took him downstairs to the kitchen where he poured a mug of coffee and popped it into the microwave. Alaina had left a note on the counter.

Daniel - Cereal in the cupboard. Milk in the refrigerator. Coffee in the pot. Stay out of the attic. Please lock the door when you leave.
Alaina

It wasn't what he expected. The cool tone of the note woke him faster than the caffeine. She hadn't alluded to the passion they shared until late into the night, not even a little bit. She hadn't mentioned seeing him again. Logically, he knew he would see her the next evening when she came for the group therapy session.

Perhaps she knew he would realize that, and she didn't feel the need to remind him. She wasn't one of those needy, clingy types. She was confident and logical. That was it.

He remembered feeling uncertain like this after the first time he'd slept with Evan. They had been sixteen, experimenting with expressing desires neither of them had ever put into words. Daniel hadn't wanted to compromise their friendship. Nervousness had twisted his stomach until he saw Evan the next afternoon, and his friend had greeted him with a slap on the shoulder and a reminder that basketball tryouts were after school.

Daniel made an omelet. The dishes from their dinner were in the sink. The sauce on the plates had dried to a crusty firmness. He set them to soaking and took a shower.

Then, in direct opposition to her note, he hauled his ladder into the house and climbed into the attic. Pulling away vapor barrier and

insulation, he found evidence of a former leak. The roof had been repaired haphazardly under the section where the shingles had taken flight. The rest of the roof was hidden by insulation. He pulled it away in several spots where it looked as if water had damaged it, and he found rotten, wet wood.

How had a claims adjuster done an accurate inspection without removing anything? Daniel snorted in disgust and headed to inspect the rooms directly below.

The open door of the first room down the hall from Alaina's beckoned. Peeking inside, he noted the blue walls and the cowboy theme. It made him feel slightly nostalgic. His cowboy phase held fond memories. Once, his father had even taken him to a rodeo. It was the best birthday gift he'd ever received.

He sank down on the chair at Zach's desk. Her eight-year-old brother had his own room at her house. This was no guest room. The bedspread was rumpled, as if a child had hastily straightened it out before running down to breakfast. Dirty clothes sat in a laundry hamper in the corner. A paperback novel lay face down on the desk, splayed open to mark a page. This boy meant a lot to Alaina. One of the pictures on the refrigerator had labeled her as *Mom*. Given the relative ages of her parents and the comments Alaina had made, she more than likely had a parental-type relationship with the kid. He was a huge part of her life, and she'd never once mentioned the boy to him.

She had definitely placed Daniel firmly in the "temporary" category. He needed to change that perception. He was good with kids. Sophia had commented on the fact several times.

Many of the parents who watched their kids' lessons had commented as well. Kids didn't intimidate Daniel, so why did the prospect of meeting this one little kid with Alaina's almond-shaped eyes scare the hell out of him? Simple. If Zach didn't like him, then neither he nor Evan had a chance with Alaina.

With a sigh, Daniel pinched the bridge of his nose. First, he needed to figure out what kind of damage the leaks in her roof had caused.

He found wet drywall on the outer walls in Zach's room and the empty dining room directly below. There was more damage than she thought. The longer she waited to make these repairs, the worse the damage would be. He had spied a notepad on her kitchen counter with the name and number of the contractor and insurance agent. It wouldn't hurt to call to find out what was going on. Evan's company needed to be the ones to repair everything. They would deal with the inevitable argument when it came.

He still didn't know what he had done to upset Alaina the night of their ill-fated date. She had knocked him on his ass the moment they met, and she hadn't even known. Sophia hadn't noticed, for that matter, which was unusual. Sophie was fairly observant. Of course, she had been busy with her own problems at the time.

When he first met Alaina, he hadn't been sure she was a good fit for the group. She had greeted him coolly, in a wholly detached manner, a manner which had disappeared the moment she introduced herself to the group of wary women eyeing her from a safe distance. He found that her reserve was reserved for him alone.

Did she know he had been the one to research and write the grants that brought her there in the first place? They bore Sophia's signature, but he had done all the paperwork. Did she know the grants providing child care each week were his doing?

It wasn't that he wanted her gratitude. He just wanted her to know more about him. Daniel was under no illusion that she knew the man he really was. Besides Evan, nobody did. He wanted that to change. He wanted her to know him as well as Evan knew him. He didn't know how he would accomplish that without telling her about his sexual relationship with Evan. Daniel shook those thoughts from his mind. That was a problem for a later date.

His search brought him to her office. The moisture creating blisters in the ceiling didn't hold his attention. That went to the wall of diplomas and recognitions, each bearing the name *Alaina C. Miles*. He wondered at the initial. His own diploma, granting him a degree in political science, listed Daniel David DiMarco. It was shoved in a drawer somewhere.

They hadn't given him the choice of using his middle initial. How had she managed that?

Pictures filled the other walls in her office. Most were professional in nature. Everyone in them was dressed for a formal or semiformal event. Various people, but mostly Alaina, were holding plaques. They were award ceremonies. Many of the photographs showed her with other people. In each picture, they were arranged for the photo. There were no spontaneous shots anywhere.

One small two-by-three picture, the frame hung off to the side like an afterthought, captured his attention. He pulled it from the wall to see it in better light. It was a younger Alaina. She looked like she was barely out of high school. She posed with people who were obviously her parents, given the familial resemblance.

Alaina stood next to her mother. Both women had the same auburn curls. Sunlight glinted from them, highlighting the red over the brown. Both of them wore forced smiles that didn't reach their eyes.

Her father stood behind the pair, towering over them like a cross to bear. He was tall and handsome. His shoulders were broad and muscular. His expensive, designer shirt fit perfectly, and the arm he draped over his wife's shoulder featured a Rolex. His plastic smile puzzled Daniel.

Neither of the women sported jewelry of any kind. Alaina always wore earrings and a necklace. She frequently accessorized with bracelets and rings. Daniel frowned. The only picture he found of her family didn't show people who seemed to like one another.

Then he noticed the mortarboard in Alaina's hand. She looked fresh out of high school, so he figured it was from when she achieved her undergraduate degree. Even now, she looked younger than her physical age.

He set the picture back on the wall, careful to put it back how he found it. Somehow, he doubted she ever looked at it.

A title on her desk drew his attention. He hadn't meant to snoop through her things, but he never before knew her exact area of study. He knew it wasn't domestic abuse or rape. She did say one time that her Wednesday sessions were a departure from her usual work.

The title had him flipping through all the papers on her desk, and then sinking down to sit in her very comfortable chair to rest his head in his hands.

She was researching serial dating, infidelity, emotional abuse, and the links between the three. That gave him pause. Did she lump him in with serial daters and, by default, emotionally abusive men and cheaters?

His eyes wandered to the portrait hanging not far from her desk. He could barely see it. Given her short stature, Alaina wouldn't be able to see it at all. Her father's hard eyes glared at him.

Slouching down, he tried to view the room through Alaina's eyes. The keyboard sat on the desk in front of the comfortable chair. Large, framed photographs of Zach would be the first thing she saw when she looked up from the keyboard. The flat screen monitor sat off to the right.

With a sigh, he pinched the bridge of his nose. Her office raised more questions than it answered. Alaina was nothing if not complicated. His father always said that anyone worth the time wasn't going to be easy to win over.

He ambled toward the kitchen. There were some phone calls that needed to be made.

* * * *

Alaina slowed her car as she approached her house, and her jaw dropped open. Men on her roof ripped up shingles. A huge, rented dumpster completely blocked her driveway. All of the street parking close to her house was filled with huge pickup trucks. She drove past her own house to park in front of a friend's house three doors down.

She emerged from her car with her mouth still open. What the hell was going on? The contractor hadn't called to say he was going to begin the job. The insurance company hadn't approved anything. Alaina was still waiting on two more bids.

Understanding dawned rather slowly. This was Daniel's doing. This was exactly the kind of thing she hated about the men to whom she was invariably attracted. What was it about biology that demanded some kind of virile alpha male even though the sociological factors necessitating them were long gone?

Why couldn't she find an intelligent, thoughtful, enlightened man who could make her thighs quiver the way Daniel did?

Like he had done the one night she actually went out on a date with him, Daniel had taken control of the situation. The contact numbers of the various companies she needed to reach in order to coordinate the repairs to her roof and interior were all neatly written on a notepad sitting in plain sight on her kitchen counter.

Even though she specifically told him to stay out of her attic, meaning she wanted him to stay out of the entire situation, he had gone against her wishes. This was not the kind of thing that made her want to continue associating with him.

And what the hell was he thinking, anyway? They had a one-night stand. So what? The self-defense classes at his studio would be finished in a little over a week, and the need for her services would come to an end. She had spent far too much time today reliving the events of the night before. If his intention was to provoke her in such a way as to remind her that she didn't want anything permanent with him, then he had succeeded.

“Alaina.”

The familiar, soothing tones of her friend’s voice stilled Alaina’s rising panic and quelled her immediate need for Daniel’s blood.

Alaina stepped on the sidewalk between her car and Camilla’s front lawn. The bright smile on her face was genuine. She had been so busy over the past few weeks, and it had been far too long since she and Camilla had a chance to hang out. Camilla’s son, Mario, was Zach’s best friend.

Camilla hopped down her front steps, practically skipped across the lawn, and came to a halt inches from Alaina. Her brown eyes sparkled with glee. “I wanted to thank you, Alaina.”

Alaina shifted the briefcase she had forgotten she was holding to her other hand. Knitting her brows together in confusion, she cocked her head to one side. “For what?”

“Well, first for signing up the boys for karate. Mario is so excited. He put it on the calendar, and he crosses off each day. When do you have Zach next?”

Alaina lifted her shoulders in a quick shrug. She invariably ended up with Zach when her mother was too tired to deal with him and her father had other things to do. While her father was pleased to have the son he’d always wanted, that didn’t mean he was willing to change his life to spend time with a child. They had been on vacation for the past several weeks, and Alaina missed the little guy horribly.

“What else is going on?”

Camilla’s grin grew. If her lips stretched any wider, Alaina feared they would split open.

Alaina waited impatiently. Camilla never got this excited over anything. She was the quintessential stoic mother, the kind who wandered through life apparently unfazed. Alaina often wished for Camilla’s ability to remain unperturbed at the sight of a bathroom spattered with fluids that should only be found inside a toilet. The last time Zach had thrown up at her house, she had called Camilla to deal with the mess. Alaina’s stomach couldn’t handle that kind of stuff.

Curiosity was going to make her snap if she didn't watch her temper. "Cammy, I have no idea why you would be thanking me."

"I spent the day in my backyard watching your house. Those guys are hot, Alaina. I can think of a million things I suddenly need fixed. Thank you so much for hiring based on physical appearance."

Alaina shook her head. "I didn't hire anybody. I have no idea what is going on at my house. I'm heading down now to find out."

Cammy's eyes glowed, and she grabbed Alaina's wrist. "I would love to come and watch, but I have dinner on the stove. You will call later with details, right?"

Alaina sighed. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll hear me yelling just fine." She squeezed Camilla's wrist and continued down the street.

As she got closer, Alaina saw that her shingles were completely gone. Chunks of rotted plywood flew over the edge of her roof, landing in the large metal bin with a regular clatter. The lack of a metallic ringing told Alaina that the bin was at least half full.

She approached the first worker she saw. He was tall and skinny. His T-shirt hung from a belt loop and sweat glistened from his torso. "Excuse me?"

He looked down at her, meeting her query with a polite raise of the brow. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Who is in charge?"

He pointed behind her to a man wearing jeans, work boots, and a hard hat, studying a clipboard and chewing on a pen cap.

Alaina flashed a smile. "Thank you."

He nodded, dismissing her. Based on the boss's appearance, Alaina deduced the man was probably used to women headed in his direction. Though Alaina had Daniel firmly entrenched in her head as the ideal male body, this man fit the mold every bit as well. He wasn't as tall as Danny, but he towered over Alaina's five-foot frame. Broad shoulders topped a well-defined chest that his work shirt did nothing to hide. A tool belt encircled his slim hips. Alaina's pussy dripped, triggered by the simple sight of the functional belt.

What was it about a man wearing a leather belt laden with tools that turned her on so much? It couldn't be just the memory of Daniel. Other workers in the area had belts, but none of them made her imagine what it would be like to be sandwiched between him and the wall with nothing between them but shared desire.

But this man definitely triggered those kinds of carnal thoughts.

She skittered to a halt in front of the man in charge and checked her breathing. A vision of her naked, sweaty body pressed between Daniel and this stranger danced in front of her eyes until she shook it away.

He lifted his eyes from the clipboard, a hearty smile lifting his lips into a wide grin. "You must be Alaina." He stuck out a hand. "It's so nice to finally meet you."

Faced with such an outward display of friendliness, Alaina had no choice but to take his hand. "Finally?"

His grin grew. "I'm Evan Carrico. I carry the titles of general contractor, builder, and Dan's best friend."

Her eyes widened in understanding, and her foot took an unwitting half step backward as she recognized him. "You nearly dropped roofing materials on me."

The grin faltered a bit, and heat ruddied his cheeks. "Sorry about that. Nobody was supposed to be there. We had the sidewalk blocked off." He massaged her palm before releasing her hand. "I wanted to thank you for giving us this opportunity. We do good work, but we're a newer company, so our reputation isn't quite built. This means a lot."

In her mind's eye, Alaina watched her figurative sails deflate. Had Daniel arranged all of this to help his friend or to show Alaina he had no problem taking the reins in her life? Both thoughts were disturbing and curiously soothing. She couldn't be too mad at him for being loyal to his friend, but at the same time, why wouldn't he have just given her the contact information and a recommendation? She would have called this man based on Daniel's word.

“I know this is a lot backwards,” he continued as if Alaina wasn’t standing before him waging a battle with uncertainty. “But I have the bid and all the paperwork finished. I talked with your insurance company. We’re licensed and bonded, so they’ll accept us if you do.”

Alaina shook her head, not believing the speed at which he worked. None of the other companies had been able to fit her into their schedule so quickly. Even the one who had managed to come by the house hadn’t yet prepared their bid. “But why would you start this when you have no contract, no right to be here?”

Evan grinned and winked. “I have faith in a higher power, little lady.”

Before Alaina could do more than inhale sharply, a large, brown paper grocery bag dropped into Evan’s arms.

“Hold this.”

The voice sent a flutter of desire coursing through Alaina’s body when it should have triggered every nerve ending that was currently annoyed with Daniel. She glanced up to find Daniel smiling at her as if he hadn’t seen her in a really long time. Only nine hours had elapsed since she had shaken his shoulder and asked him if he needed the alarm set. She could still feel the heat and softness of his bare skin against the palm of her hand. The memory had tugged at her consciousness all day, leaving her with a longing to have that contact again.

She hadn’t thought to see Daniel until class the following evening. She had planned to be polite and friendly, but not overly so. Their dalliance was finished, and she expected nothing more from him.

He said nothing, and he didn’t give her the chance to say anything, either. Without asking permission, he snaked his arms around her waist, pulled her close, and laid a long, open-mouthed kiss on her. Alaina felt her bones melting as her body softened to fit against his.

He released her too soon, and she felt special for all of two seconds before she remembered his three-date rule. She wondered if

their disastrous date from earlier in the summer counted. There was no way she was going to turn down another night or two in Daniel's arms. These were memories she fully intended to cherish.

Alaina shoved all of those thoughts away. No doubt he was just there to smooth things over so that Alaina would hire Evan to complete the repairs on her house.

Daniel slung his free arm around her waist. "I brought dinner. Chinese." He smacked a kiss against her cheek. "I didn't know what you like, so I got a lot of different stuff. I figure you can eat first and yell at me after."

"Or we could take this food inside and kick him out." Evan evaded Daniel's attempt to take back the sack that smelled so sumptuous. The smile he leveled at her was cocky and knowing. "That'll teach him to mind his manners better, and then you and I can get better acquainted."

Little thrills ran down Alaina's spine at the suggestive tone Evan used. This was a dangerous pair of men to be around. She wasn't sure how to take Evan's blatant flirting, and she wasn't sure how to handle the fact his flirting affected her far more than it should, especially with Daniel's hand covering most of her hip. Her time with Daniel was temporary. She would play the role of the older lover for as long as he would let this farce continue. When he decided to walk away, she would remember him fondly.

She wouldn't, however, miss the way he continually tried to take over her life, as if she couldn't handle it all on her own.

Facing the issue head-on, Alaina decided to respond with an equally suggestive tone to her banter. "That sounds like fun."

Evan grinned until Daniel wrestled the bag of food away from him. With the gentle pressure of his fingertips on her back, Daniel guided her up the driveway and around to the back door.

She knew it was wrong to like the way this gesture made her feel protected, so she chalked it up to the anticipation of his touch in other places once they were alone. Unless he didn't plan to stay.

At the door, Daniel handed her the heavy bag. “I’m going to help Evan finish up, and then we’ll be in. Why don’t you go ahead and get things ready?”

“I see,” Alaina said. “The woman will take care of the sphere of domesticity while the men handle the sphere of adventure.”

Daniel grinned, not taking the bait. Perhaps he didn’t understand her reference. After all, he ran a martial arts studio. He planted another loud kiss on her cheek. “Works for me, Lainie, but don’t forget who cooked. I’m just asking you to lay it out on the table and get the plates down.”

He disappeared around the side of the house, dragging Evan in his wake. Evan looked back over his shoulder and threw a wink at Alaina. She smiled, the tension washing from her shoulders in response to his easy charm.

Slinging her bag on the floor near the door and her purse on the table, Alaina put the brown bag on the counter. The contents were hot, the heat seeping through the bag to scald the tender skin of her forearm. She headed to the bathroom to freshen up.

The woman in the mirror looked a lot like the person who usually appeared there. The pale green blouse was the same one she’d put on that morning. A matching layered necklace, a birthday gift from Zach, lent a splash of personality and color. Small emerald studs brought a sparkle to her ears.

Her face was mostly the same. The day had taken its toll on her makeup. Eyeliner blurred the edges of her eyes instead of sharpening them. She used a tissue to clean up those lines. The French braid into which she had wrestled her hair showed worse for the wear. Frizzled strands had pulled free. She loosened her hair and ran a brush through it.

The result brought a frown to her face. She massaged some product into it to tame the worst of the frizz. Leave-in conditioner only worked for so long, but she reasoned Evan would be leaving soon. If Danny stayed, he was going to leave her hair looking wild no

matter what. He seemed to enjoy it that way. She had no idea why. It looked so heathen and untamed, completely wanton and lacking in sophistication.

At last, she accepted facts. There was nothing else she could do to improve her appearance. Doors slammed, and the sounds of engines flaring to life let her know the workers were leaving. She hurried to the kitchen to set out plates and drinks for her unexpected dinner guests.

* * * *

“That smells so good.”

Alaina turned to see Evan padding across her laminate floor in sock-covered feet. She smiled to thank him for remembering to remove his boots so they wouldn’t scuff her floor. It wasn’t the highest quality flooring, but it was all she could afford. She wanted to keep it looking nice for as long as she could.

He set a folder on the counter. His presence filled the kitchen, making her very aware of him, even though he no longer wore the tool belt. He returned her smile, drawing her attention to his soft, kissable lips. “The estimate and all the paperwork is in here. I thought maybe we could eat first, then I could go through it with you. I’m starving.”

How could she be so attracted to Evan when Daniel was only a few feet away? What kind of fickle woman was she? Alaina nodded and set the roll of paper towels on the table near the plates. “That’s fine.”

The bulk of her attention centered on Daniel, who had headed straight for the sink and was now washing his hands. Evan joined him. Alaina watched. Her breath caught, and her pulse rate soared, and Daniel hadn’t even looked her way. Conflicting emotions churned in her stomach. The food did smell good, but there was no way she could eat it, not when her brain kept flashing images of her body

pressed between theirs as their mouths explored her neck and shoulders, pausing to nibble at her lips every now and again.

Alaina shook her head, chasing away the fantasy she knew would fuel her next date with her vibrator.

As if he could sense her trouble, Daniel dried his hands on the dish towel she had hung over the top of a lower cupboard door and crossed the room. He stopped just behind where she stood. Her body faced the table, but her face turned toward him. The image of the two of them bent over the table, Daniel grasping her hips to hold them still as he thrust into her, clouded her vision. He had insisted she watch in the curio's mirror. Did he know the vision would haunt her and make her wet with remembering?

He rested one hand lightly on her hip, the suggestion of a caress in his touch. "Did you want to yell at me before you eat?"

Alaina swallowed, suddenly aware of the silence in the kitchen. Evan didn't bother to disguise his interest in her response.

"How about we go into my office?"

His nod was barely a movement. He caught Evan's eye. "Go ahead and eat. We may be a while."

Heat flooded Alaina's cheeks as Evan's knowing gaze settled on her. "Okay, but I'm not promising to leave any shrimp for you."

The heat still burned her skin a minute later when Daniel closed the door to her office. She whirled to face him. "A phone call would have been nice."

He grinned. "You would have said no."

"You don't know that." She frowned because he was right. While she would have followed up with Evan based on his recommendation, she wouldn't have let him make the arrangements.

"You told me to stay out of it, Lainie. If I asked you to let Evan take a look at your house, you would have yelled at me for not staying out of your attic. Then it would have come out that I was in your basement and all the other rooms in your house looking for more damage."

It was a good thing he didn't try to touch her right then. She might have hit him. Angry words swirled through her head, dozens of ways to point out all the things he had done wrong. Yet she bit her tongue. He knew she wouldn't want him to do the things he had done, and he had done them anyway.

She rubbed a hand down her face, trying to erase the stress pressing the inside of her skull.

"Aren't you going to yell?"

He sounded upset and a little afraid.

Alaina dropped her hand and folded her arms across her chest. She pinned him with the full weight of her resignation. "No, Daniel, I'm not going to yell. There's nothing I can say that will make a difference at this point. You completely disregarded my wishes and disrespected me, but I can't see that you actually care about any of that."

And it didn't matter. It wasn't like they were developing a long-term relationship here. One more class, and she wouldn't have to see him again. Camilla would take the boys to karate lessons if Alaina asked.

He approached her, a mulish set to his jaw announcing his reaction to her accusation. One hand lifted to lightly touch her hair. "I love it when you wear your hair down. I almost never get to see you like this."

Shivers ran down her spine, and he hadn't really even touched her yet. She batted his hand away when she really wanted to turn her cheek into his palm. "Don't change the subject."

"The subject, Lainie, is that you think I don't care about you. You're wrong. If I didn't care about you, I wouldn't have been over here to check out your roof in the first place."

His voice was soft and deep, washing over her in waves, wearing down her resistance. She wanted to look away from the sincerity in his bottomless brown eyes, but she couldn't break free of his spell.

Daniel wrapped his hand around her upper arms, massaging from her shoulders to her folded elbows. “I trust Evan more than anyone in the world. He’s been my best friend for twelve years. He’s honest, and he does good work. He’s the only person in the world I trust to do right by you.”

She realized he felt responsible for her because of their previous relationship. Her voice wanted to lodge in her throat, but she forced it out anyway. “Daniel, just because we slept together doesn’t mean you have any obligations toward me.”

“I realize that,” he said. His hands continued their trek, stroking more and more longing into her. “I didn’t come over here yesterday with the intention of wrangling an invitation into your bed. I came over here because I was concerned about you. I had every intention of calling Evan no matter what happened between us.”

He moved a lock of hair from where it curled over her temple.

“Danny—”

He cradled her face in his hands and brushed his lips over her eyelids, temples, and cheeks. His lips grazed across her skin, setting every synapse to firing. “You’re stressed, honey.”

His mouth closed over hers, claiming what he wanted. One arm snaked around her waist and held her body against his. Delicious heat rose from every place they touched. Clothing didn’t seem to matter. Her nipples pebbled, and her breasts swelled, pressing closer to him, begging for his caress.

Danny didn’t disappoint. His palm closed over her breast, and he kneaded one soft globe through the fabric of her lacy bra and the thin, green cotton blouse. Unable to control her reaction, she moaned into his mouth.

His kiss moved to explore her neck, unerringly finding those small spots that sent tremors racing through her body. “Let me take care of you, Lainie.”

Before she could think what he meant, he fisted the material in her skirt. Without seeming to move, his hand slid under the black poly-

blend and found her wetness. She hadn't been able to find a clean pair of hose without a run that morning. Since it was August, she reasoned that it would be all right to forego the nylons today. Thank goodness she hadn't done her laundry in a while.

Daniel tugged at her panties. They fell to her knees. Alaina didn't want to risk narrowing her stance to get rid of them on the chance he might stop. Air hissed from between her teeth when he ran his knuckles along her slit.

"Like that, honey?"

She curled her fingers, grabbing handfuls of his shirt in her hands. With her head thrown back and her body arched into Daniel's, he was the only thing keeping her upright. Her answer came out on a breathy whisper. "You have to ask?"

He nibbled at her collarbone, and he parted her lips with his fingers, running them along her folds. "I like hearing you talk."

She wasn't much of a talker during sex. She gritted her teeth together. "Yes, Danny. Please don't stop."

"Not a chance." Two fingers probed her entrance, taking their time about sliding in when she wanted them faster and harder. "I like the way you scream when you come."

Alaina didn't answer. She couldn't. Those fingers finally did what she wanted them to do. However suave Daniel was when it came to picking up the ladies, he was a beast in the bedroom, and she really liked that about him. He made her feel possessed, owned, and cherished all at the same time. It wasn't something Alaina ever thought she would enjoy, but she was finding she couldn't get enough of the way he handled her.

His fingers thrust inside her so deep his knuckles pummeled the sensitive tissues around her entrance. Sparks exploded behind Alaina's eyes. The tiny convulsions that preceded an orgasm made her pussy quiver. She bit his shoulder as she buried her face in it. He might like to hear the noises she made when she climaxed, but she

didn't want Evan to hear them in the kitchen. How could she face him afterward?

He pumped into her, and she ground against his hand, urging him to move faster.

* * * *

Small squeaking sounds escaped from the place where Alaina bit into his shoulder, causing Daniel to grin. His dick was so hard it hurt. He wanted nothing more than to spread her over the top of the desk and tell her to hang on for dear life. He wanted Evan to be in there with them to help hold her in place, not out in the kitchen having dinner. Evan's mouth should be leaving damp trails of kisses across her exposed breasts. Maybe he would kneel up on the desk and thrust his dick into her mouth as Daniel pounded her pussy. Lainie liked it rough. Whenever he lightened his touch, she whimpered in protest.

Her nails dug into his arms, and her whole body tensed. He slowed the rhythm of his thrusts, circling his fingertips on the place where her smooth walls roughened. He tightened his hold on her waist, knowing she needed the extra support. She jerked and cried out. His shirt and shoulder absorbed most of the sound. He fought the urge to fist his hand in her hair, tilt her head back, and let Evan enjoy the loud, throaty cries she made when she climaxed.

He held her while her body spasmed and shivered as waves of pleasure washed through her. When she quieted, he pulled her face away from the warmth and safety of his embrace. He trailed kisses across her temple, and he captured her lips in a long, slow kiss. She melted against him, completely boneless. God, how he wanted Evan to see her like this.

Daniel had no trouble seeing that Evan found her attractive. Now he needed for Alaina to develop feelings for Evan. In order for that to happen, they needed time together. He needed to disappear.

He motioned to a digital display on a small end table in the corner of the room. "Is that clock accurate?"

Alaina lifted her head and glanced to where he indicated. Her eyes took a moment to adjust, never losing the dreamy quality that told him she still felt the effects of her orgasm. "Yeah."

"Shit. I have to go. I promised my dad I would help him put up a new garage door." He set her back, making sure she could balance on her own before releasing her completely. Daniel wanted nothing more than to stay, but he needed this to work. He knew he couldn't have a successful relationship unless Evan was part of the equation.

Plus, he owed his father for helping repair the roof over his studio.

She frowned, and he knew she wasn't happy with him. She fixed her clothes. He had no idea where her underwear had gone, but he was reasonably certain she hadn't put them back on. The idea of her wearing nothing beneath her skirt only made him harder. He would definitely be stopping by Evan's condo when he finished at his parents' house.

"I'm sorry, Lainie. Have dinner with Evan and listen to his proposal. Let him take care of you, honey. If you don't want to hire him, I understand. Neither of us expects special treatment from you."

Her mouth opened and closed. The frown returned, and then it disappeared on her sigh. "Daniel, I really wish you would just talk to me about things like this before you act. I don't have an issue with hiring Evan. I just wish you would have gone about it differently."

God, he loved her. The words popped into his consciousness and nearly fell out of his mouth. He pressed a hard kiss to her lips to keep it all inside. "Thanks, Lainie. I'll see you tomorrow night, right?"

* * * *

Evan checked the time on his cell one more time. There was no way he was going to eat without her. Daniel could be such an asshole sometimes. Several times in the course of the day, he had called Dan

and told him to call Alaina. This wasn't the right way to surprise a woman. Flowers, chocolate, and mowing her lawn were good surprises. Undertaking major repairs on her house without her permission was not. Once again, Evan would be in charge of damage control.

Daniel burst into the kitchen, and Evan recognized the unsated sexual energy pouring from him. Alaina followed him. Her demeanor was much calmer, and the frown she had been wearing was mostly gone.

Evan derived a special glee from the fact that Daniel had been denied. Tonight was a pivotal moment for the three of them, even if Alaina didn't yet realize it. He agreed wholeheartedly with Daniel that she needed to have feelings for them both separately before she would consent to being with them together. Though they had been offered the chance, they had never before shared a woman. Both of them were too afraid that their feelings for one another might show.

That's why this presented the perfect solution. If they both developed feelings for Alaina, she wouldn't think anything of an accidental touch or a look of love. Hopefully, she would be too wrapped up in keeping up with both of them that she would never notice. They would make her the happiest woman alive, and they would be able to snatch moments with one another until they were sure about her.

Evan didn't exactly love their plan. It presented obstacles that could be avoided with simple honesty. Daniel was vehemently against it. The problem seemed to be Dan's perception of his sexuality. While Evan frequently found other men and women attractive, Daniel maintained that he had never wanted to sleep with another man. Women were another matter. While Evan had enjoyed some serious relationships with persons from both genders, Daniel went through women rather quickly. He'd never once called a halt to their affair in order to be faithful to one person, and he'd been hostile to all of Evan's boy or girlfriends whenever Evan stopped sleeping with him.

Alaina represented a last-ditch effort to save his relationship with Daniel. While he would never turn his back on his friend, Evan would not continue to sleep with Dan if this fell through.

Evan didn't mind sharing. He also craved a woman's touch. However, he hated watching Daniel deny what was between them while he stuck his cock into any wet pussy. Daniel had referred to Alaina as their fate.

Evan reserved judgment. Alaina was certainly attractive enough. She was tiny, much smaller than he thought she would be. Her light brown eyes slanted up at the corners like a cat, and her auburn hair burst with red where the sun glinted from it.

It had been pulled back in a braid when she arrived home from work, and now it fell freely around her face. Either way, she was incredibly hot. She cast an uncertain smile at him, and he knew she was about to apologize for leaving him alone for so long.

Daniel preempted anything she might have said. "I'm out of here. I promised my dad I'd help him hang a new door on his garage."

"I hope you didn't promise him I'd help." Evan narrowed his eyes at Danny. It was something his infuriating lover would do.

Danny slapped a hand on Evan's shoulder, letting it linger there for a gentle squeeze, all the affection he would show when another person was around. "Nope. You take care of Lainie tonight."

The heat of Dan's touch lingered on Evan's shoulder. He was acutely aware of it as he watched Daniel press a kiss to Alaina's temple and whisper something in her ear. She blinked hard and exhaled. Evan recognized the restraint she displayed. He often suppressed the urge to smack Daniel.

The back door closed behind Daniel, and an awkward silence filled the room. Evan searched for the words that would put her at ease.

"Dan has a good heart. He means well."

A wry smile twisted her lush, full lips. She tore her eyes from the door and looked directly at him. "I'm well aware of Daniel's good qualities. I think it's the reason nobody's killed him yet."

Evan laughed. "Does this mean you want to see my bid?"

Her gaze moved speculatively over the containers of food dotting the kitchen counter. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving. I say we eat first and discuss business later." She glided to the table and handed him a plate. "Do you mind if we do this self-serve?"

"Not at all." Evan held his hand out. He didn't bother to hide his amusement when she dug right in, exclaiming over her favorites and offering him the cartons.

"Tell me about yourself," she said when she slowed down a bit.

Here came the job interview.

He finished chewing before answering. "Well, I graduated from Central Michigan University with a degree in structural engineering about three years ago. I love building, and I knew I eventually wanted to open my own company. I worked for someone else for two years, and I officially started my business this past spring."

She listened intently, but she laughed when he finished. It was a rich, soft sound that made him want to hear it again. "I wasn't looking for your resume. Daniel already vouched for your skill and ethics. I was actually asking about you, Evan. All I know about you is that you're Danny's best friend."

Was the plan coming along more successfully than he imagined? It was hard to tell. Daniel had said she was an amazing woman. Not only was she every bit as beautiful as he said, but her personality drew Evan in as quickly and completely as Daniel had predicted.

Evan shrugged and shoved a bite of something that was mostly rice into his mouth. He mumbled his response. "Not much to tell."

"That's what they all say."

Those feline eyes of hers bore a hole into him that led directly to his soul. For a second, he thought she could see all of his secrets.

Then he remembered her profession. “Are you hatching a plan to get me on your couch, Dr. Miles?”

She started, her whole body twitching as if she’d been caught doing something she shouldn’t. Then the corner of her mouth lifted in a flirtatious smile. “Only if you want to be there, Mr. Carrico.”

The tip of one finger disappeared into her mouth. She sucked it briefly, and then released it with a loud smacking sound. Evan couldn’t peel his eyes from the sight. He wished his dick was coated with soy sauce. His pulse went into overdrive as he fought the urge to offer his finger.

He settled for drawing one finger across the sensitive skin on the back of her hand. “Where are you in this scenario?”

Alaina leaned forward, and the world narrowed to include just the two of them. “Where do you want me to be?”

Throwing his usual reticence to the wind, Evan bent his head closer until his face was less than a foot from hers. “Lying naked beneath me with your thighs spread wide.”

Chapter 7

Alaina's breath caught at Evan's proposal, and it *was* a proposal. When he first flirted with her, she hadn't known whether he meant it or if this was the way he behaved with every woman. Daniel was a natural charmer. It stood to reason his best friend would also be gifted that way.

She didn't feel guilty about flirting back. Daniel was gone. He had placated her earlier in his office and handed her off to Evan without a backward glance. He was finished with her. Of that fact, she was certain.

It had been years since two such handsome men expressed such blatant interest in her. She shoved aside the flattered feeling and seized the moment. These were memories she would definitely cherish.

Evan wasn't finished. The finger caressing a path on the back of her hand moved to include her wrist in its sensuous circling. "I'm holding down one of your thighs, and you can't move at all. I tease you with my tongue and my fingers. Your muscles tense as you try to buck and wiggle closer, but Alaina, I'm going to make you wait."

Her mouth went dry, and her breaths came in short, quiet bursts. Except for Daniel, men had always come easy. Until now, she had chalked that up to the age difference. What kind of twenty-six year old man would be interested in someone ten years his senior? Now she might add two cougar notches to her bedpost in less than twenty-four hours.

"I'm not into waiting." She had to establish some control. Passivity, especially where sex was concerned, had never been

something that appealed to her. She itched to feel him between her legs, but it would be on her terms.

He grinned, widening those full lips. Amusement sparkled in his eyes, rendering them a lighter blue. “The rewards are worth it, Alaina.”

She shook her head. “I’m not into humiliation, Evan. I like sex as much as the next person, but I insist on equality.”

“I have no intention of humiliating you, honey. I’ll be waiting, too.”

He stood abruptly, the hand on her wrist tightening as he pulled her up with him. One hand on her hip held her so close to him, yet he didn’t press her body to his. His gaze locked to her lips. She felt them swell in anticipation, and her breasts followed suit. He bent his head, closing the inches between them, but he stopped centimeters away.

“Anticipation makes it sweeter. When you come apart beneath me, I want to know it’s because I drove you there.”

The air-conditioning inside the house chased away the August heat and humidity, yet Alaina felt as if it was no longer on. Evan’s heat tantalized her. She leaned into him, pressing her breasts against his broad chest. “And then I’ll tease you.”

He chuckled. The vibrations rumbled through his chest, stimulating her already aroused nipples. “Will you wear one of those white lab coats and nothing else?”

“Will that do it for you?” Part of Alaina’s brain couldn’t believe she was behaving so wantonly. There was a certain freedom in fucking around with men who were so much younger. Like Daniel, Evan wasn’t part of her social circle. He wasn’t someone she would see at a conference or seminar. She wouldn’t have to collaborate with him on a paper or a study.

And he wore a tool belt. Her clit swelled in anticipation. If wearing a lab coat would do to Evan what the sight of him wearing a tool belt did to her, then she would gladly grant his wish.

Caught up in her spell, he nodded. The hand encircling her wrist tightened, and the one on her waist held her close. She wanted to know his kiss, but he needed to make the next move. She was too short, and her heels had already given her all the extra height standing on her tiptoes would bring.

She brought her free hand to his shoulder. "Are you going to kiss me?"

"Do you want me to kiss you?"

Given that she was pressed to his body and they were both stiff with sexual tension, she thought it was a fairly straightforward assumption. "Yes."

He didn't bother tantalizing her by brushing his lips against hers. He closed his mouth over hers and claimed what he wanted. Wet heat poured over her body, coating her from the inside out. Her panties were neatly folded in her pocket. Without that barrier, cream dripped from her pussy to smear across her thighs.

Dominant men didn't usually turn her on, but something about Evan was different. His words rang true. She didn't sense he wanted to strip her of her pride and dignity. Rather, he found it erotic to drive her to the heights of pleasure, to make her lose control.

He broke the kiss and lifted his head to look at her. She studied him, too, and found no gloating or cockiness in his eyes. Desire and determination blazed from them, searing the places on her face where his gaze landed.

Without warning, he bent and lifted her, throwing her over his shoulder.

"Hey!" she protested, but he didn't seem to hear.

She bounced on his shoulder as he bounded up the steps. He set her down, and she looked around in surprise. They were in the bathroom.

"I don't have a couch in here."

He drew back the shower curtain. The squeak of the knob sounded and water hissed from the head. "I've been working all day, honey."

He turned back to her sporting a huge grin. “Plus I have a thing about showers. Don’t worry, Alaina. I’ll make sure this is the best shower you’ve ever taken.”

Evan reached back behind his head to tug off his shirt. Something about the way his method required him to lift his arms and flex his muscles kept Alaina’s attention riveted. His chest was incredible. Broad shoulders topped an incredible mass of ripped muscles. A light sprinkling of hair began just below his ribs. It trailed down six-pack abs and disappeared into his jeans.

She couldn’t help but compare him to Daniel. By no means a small man, Evan was still both slimmer and shorter than Daniel. His build was slightly smaller, but he was a force nonetheless. Fantasies of having both of them at the same time, naked and in her bed, were going to haunt her for decades. She shoved the image out of her head for now.

He parked his hands loosely on his hips and inclined his head in her direction. “Your turn.”

Without tearing her gaze from him, Alaina removed her earrings, necklace, bracelets, and rings. She dropped them onto the countertop. Amusement quirked Evan’s full lips, drawing Alaina’s attention there. One finger tapped at the waist of his jeans, the only sign of impatience.

She unbuttoned her blouse, shrugged out of it, and let it fall to the floor. She placed her hands on her hips in imitation of him.

“Funny,” he said. Heat darkened his eyes. “Lose the bra, little lady.”

Alaina wasn’t sure she liked being called by that name. She didn’t hate it as she had when he’d first used it, but she wasn’t sure she would ever come to love it.

“It’s your turn,” she said. “You took off your shirt. I took off my shirt. We’re even.”

Evan rolled his eyes, peeled off his jeans and underwear so quickly she didn't get to see whether he wore boxers or briefs, and stepped into the shower.

"Hey! That's not fair."

That low chuckle came from the other side of the curtain. She could barely see his outline through the translucent plastic. "I'm naked and wet, little lady. I suggest you even up the score fast or you'll find yourself wet and not naked."

Alaina didn't waste time. She had no doubt he would pull her in there fully clothed. Her clothes joined his on the floor. She slid the curtain back and held it open to let the cooler air wash over him. Her plan backfired.

The spray pelted his face. White suds tracked down his back as he rinsed the day's grime from the light brown hair plastered to his skull. The sight of him hit her in the stomach. He just looked so right in there. A flash of him in the same position in ten years imprinted in her brain, a *déjà vu* tucked away for the future.

Alaina swallowed and forced her foot to lift over the edge of the bathtub's rim. She was reading too much into this.

He turned and impaled her with that knowing smile as he finished washing. Tiny droplets of water reflected from the wall and onto her body. Mist clung to her skin like dew.

She tried not to flinch as his gaze drank in the too-generous curves of her figure. This was truth in advertising. She didn't wear sexy clothes, and she never claimed to be svelte.

He reached out. He traced his fingers everywhere his attention roamed, leaving scorched trails along her hips and thighs.

"My goodness, you are one little lady, aren't you?" He dipped his head and flicked at her hard nipples with his hot tongue. "So tiny and delicate, yet so full of passion."

He murmured the words against her breasts, his voice filled with wonder, and then his mouth locked onto her nipple. He sucked hard, stretching those rocks as far as they would go.

Alaina whimpered and fisted her hands in his wet locks. He supported her with one hand at the small of her back while the other kneaded and plumped the breast he wasn't sucking. He nipped her with his teeth, and then he released the tortured little peak to lick his way to her neglected breast.

Pangs of desire shot straight to her core. Alaina moaned. The only part of her body that touched his was her breast. She needed more contact, yet when she pressed closer, he moved the hand on her back to her hip, holding her in place.

She growled.

He broke off and straightened. "Anticipation, little lady. Have patience. I'll make you scream my name soon enough."

Rather than argue, Alaina slid her fingertip down the length of his engorged cock. "Don't you want me to touch you?"

The challenge in her question was implicit. The idea that Evan was more than a one-night stand wouldn't vacate her mind. She needed him to say something to restore her sanity.

He lowered his lips to hers, sealing them together as he filled her senses. The moisture on her skin that would bother her under other circumstances ceased to matter. The temperature of the water was warmer than she liked, and it didn't matter. When he broke the kiss, she didn't know where she was.

"More than you could possibly understand."

Still dazed, she blinked up at him. "What?"

He grinned as he guided her to lean against the wall. He kissed his way down her body until he knelt before her. He pressed one more kiss to her swollen nether lips. "You'll get your turn, Alaina, but I get to go first, if only because I'm bigger and stronger and I get grouchy when I don't get my way. Don't worry. You'll come to love my faults as much as you love Danny's."

There was no time to analyze that claim because he parted the lips of her labia and kissed her there the same way he kissed her mouth.

Alaina's body jerked as if she'd been electrocuted, and then she melted.

Evan lifted one of her legs and propped it on his shoulder. "I've got you, little lady. I won't let you fall."

She leaned her head against the tiled wall, but her hands roamed the hard planes of his shoulders in search of something to hold. His teeth grazed her clit as his tongue traveled in long laps, pausing to circle her hole whenever it came close. He alternated sucking her clit and nibbling at it.

Never had a man been more gentle while maintaining the firmness and pressure she needed to climax. Tiny waves pulsed through her tissues, and her moans came faster and higher pitched. Evan added two fingers, moving in time to the rhythm she unwittingly set with her pelvis.

He pumped his fingers into her faster, increasing the frequency of her cries. When she was close, he slowed down. She dug her nails into his shoulders, not caring if she marked him.

"Evan, please."

Whatever he said in response was lost because he didn't move his mouth away from her pussy. The sounds were nothing more than intimate vibrations. His fingers slid from her hole to caress the needy tissues just outside of her vagina. Alaina whimpered and thrust her pussy against his fingers in an effort to maneuver them inside.

He sucked harder, and one wandering digit found her back entrance. Alaina was no stranger to this kind of stimulation. She usually waited until she knew a man better to ask him about anal interests. For her, this was something guaranteed to make her come fast and hard.

She relaxed against his finger and whispered consent. Even with her eyes closed, she could sense the surprise in his expression. She grinned at finally having the trump card.

He circled his finger before pressing it gingerly into her anus.

Sweet pleasure made her buck hard against his mouth. “You don’t have to be so gentle.”

He inserted a second finger, thrusting them into her as slowly and gently as he had fingered her pussy. The effect was stunning and immediate.

Alaina lost control as her climax smashed through her body. She barely noticed the chill air raising gooseflesh over her flushed skin as Evan opened the curtain and closed it again.

He sheathed his erection with a neon green condom and lifted her. Oh, she wanted to feel him inside her, but now that she had a taste of what he had to offer, she wanted to feel him in more places than just her pussy. The fantasy of having both Daniel and Evan at the same time reasserted itself. Once again, she tamped it down. Men didn’t really do those kinds of things, no matter how close their friendship. There would be too much incidental touching.

She spread her legs, automatically responding to Evan’s need, and wrapped them around his hips as he slid into her pussy. It still pulsed with aftershocks that caressed Evan’s cock, pulling it deeper. His blue eyes darkened even more, and Alaina glimpsed a stark loneliness and fierce possessiveness she would never have predicted.

The feeling that he was more than what he seemed gripped her, and she submitted to him, trusting him with a part of her soul she had vowed never to give away.

He twisted his hand in her hair, yanking her head back in that sweet-tempered way he had of handling her. With his mouth, he branded the skin at the base of her neck. A series of sharp pains let her know he was leaving his mark, and for the first time, she didn’t care. He claimed her with every thrust, chaining her to him with pleasure.

The sound of bodies slapping in the wet spray competed with the sharp cries wringing from both of them. Alaina climaxed first, and she didn’t bother to mute her shouts of pleasure. Her violent contractions wrung one from him.

He collapsed against her, pinning her to the wall. She fought for air as he panted into her shoulder, and she held him as the last of the tremors shook his body.

At last, he pushed himself back. When she met his gaze, she found awe and a bit of reverence there. The emotions were disconcerting. She reached over and turned off the water. The hot had long ago run out, and his heat was the only thing that kept her from shivering.

With the urgency sated and the last vestiges of the climax receding, commenting on the intensity of the sex seemed like a bad idea.

As they towed dry, she noticed he kept sneaking glances at her. Finally, she lifted an inquiring brow in his direction.

He leveled a direct stare at her and responded to her silent urging. "Most women are very against being touched the way you seem to like to be touched."

Alaina lifted one corner of her mouth in a coy smile. "I could argue that most men are against touching a woman's anus. I think it turned you on as much as it turned me on."

His speculative expression encouraged her to continue.

"If I'm not wrong, you're imagining using more than your fingers, aren't you?"

His eyelids fell to half-mast, and his cock lengthened, halfway there. "Have you ever had a man's cock in your ass, little lady?"

It was definitely a term of endearment, but Alaina couldn't help wonder how often he had used that line. Amused by his apparent awe, she laughed. "That happens to be one of my favorite positions. How about we give it a whirl after we put away the leftovers downstairs?"

Evan glanced from her to his fully erect cock and back again. His sapphire eyes sparkled with mischief. "Or we could head to the bedroom and worry about the cleanup later."

With a laugh that was a bit huskier than usual, Alaina reached behind the bathroom door and snagged her bathrobe. It was a plain, white robe much too large for her, but she found it to be the perfect

size for cold winter mornings. She tossed it to Evan. “Temporary covering.”

Opening the door that led into her bedroom, she threw a directive over her shoulder. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

* * * *

Evan frowned at the heavy material balled in his hands. It felt like a man’s robe. He knew it wasn’t Daniel’s. Jealousy gripped him, and he hated it. This was the emotion from which he was trying to escape. He already felt too much of it where Daniel was concerned. He didn’t want that poison to spill over to his relationship with Alaina.

She wasn’t theirs yet. Swallowing his pride, Evan donned the robe. A quick sniff revealed nothing but the scent of her bath products. As he now smelled of her shampoo and soap, the odor told him nothing.

By the time he made it to her kitchen, his mood was black. He wished Dan was there. Alaina was everything Dan had promised, and she was so much more. The loss for words Daniel had experienced when he described Alaina now made sense. Did she feel the same connection to him that he felt for her?

Though Daniel’s charm would calm him considerably, Evan reminded himself of the reasons for courting her separately. She had to fall in love with each of them. Dan had the advantage of time, and Evan wondered what ground he had gained that evening.

His eyes fell on the folder with the contract for fixing her house. She didn’t seem like the sort of woman to sleep with him just to get a discount.

“Why the scowl?”

Her voice rasped a bit, no doubt from the amount of screaming she had done in the shower. Evan shook his head. “Just thinking.”

He hadn’t turned to face her. From the corner of his eye, he watched her come closer. She wore something white. He closed his

eyes, fervently hoping it wasn't the women's version of the robe he wore.

Her scent invaded his nose, and he could feel the little electrical sparks she caused whenever she came near. The folder slid from beneath his fingers. "Oh. The contracts. You didn't change your mind, did you?"

His eyes flew open. "No. Did you?"

She turned a thoroughly cocky grin on him. "Oh, Evan. Even if we never do this again, I'm going to have stimulating memories whenever I look at you. I think I have a thing for tool belts. You wear yours well."

He knew exactly what she meant. Daniel looked damn good in a tool belt. Hell, he looked damn good in nothing.

She rummaged around in her purse and pulled out a pen. "Let's get these out of the way. I want to see how much stamina you have."

She flipped through the pages and signed her name in the places he indicated.

"Don't you want to read them?"

She shook her head and threw the pen on the counter. "I don't understand the majority of what's in there. Don't tell Daniel, okay? I'll never hear the end of it."

Her grin was contagious, but he knew the reason for the secrecy. She had gone out of her way to assure Daniel that she knew what she was doing when it came to the repairs on her home. The little minx didn't know Daniel all that well, though. Danny wasn't the kind of person to lord it over her. Besides, Daniel already knew she was in this over her head. Otherwise, she wouldn't have waited so long on companies to submit bids.

"Evan, I don't want you to feel like you have to stay here. If you want to leave now, I won't be upset. A little regretful, maybe." She shrugged.

Shock hit Evan, smacking him upside the head like his mother used to do. Did she want him to leave?

Alaina licked her lips and tugged at the lapel of her robe. "I mean, I didn't sleep with you because you're working on my house. These are completely separate events. I don't want you to feel obligated or anything."

It wasn't a robe. Her nervous gesture brought his reluctant attention to her attire. She wore a lab coat. It was loose, not the tight kind the female doctors always wore in porn films.

He reached for her, grasping her hips to pull her closer. "I don't feel obligated to sleep with you. I feel a driving need and a crippling desire, but definitely not an obligation."

She shook her head as if she didn't believe him. "There are so many women out there who are younger and more attractive. I don't understand what draws you to me."

Younger? Yes. More attractive? No. Evan decided to not say anything about the age difference. It was only eleven years, and she wore them extremely well.

He caressed her face, tracing the contours with the tip of his finger. "Alaina, you're the most incredible woman I've ever met. The first moment I saw you, I knew I had to have you. I'll admit you're not my usual type, but I see the error of my ways. You're sexy and passionate. You're not shy about what you want, and you don't expect me to do all the work. You have to know how hot that is."

As he spoke, he moved closer and closer to her lips. Her breath caught and released in short, soft bursts. By the time he finished, the words were a murmur against her lips. He loved the taste and texture of her kiss. It was so different from Daniel's, soft and sweet where Dan was hard and frequently beer scented.

Evan pushed thoughts of Daniel out of his head. Tonight was all about Alaina and the hope she offered.

He closed his mouth over hers, taking everything he wanted. She pressed her hands to his chest and moved them up to grip his shoulders, giving him everything he demanded.

Without breaking the kiss, he lifted her, cradling her small frame in his arms. She settled into his embrace perfectly, snuggling against him and straining to get closer. He tightened his grip and headed toward the stairs, vowing to never let her go.

He released her lips when he set her down next to her bed.

Her chest heaved. When she looked up at him, her heavy-lidded cat eyes blinked blearily. "You're damn good at that."

Evan unhooked the three buttons holding her coat closed. It was a shame for so few buttons to cover so much lusciousness. "Kissing?" When she nodded, he grinned. "You're pretty damn good yourself."

He kissed a path down her chest and across her stomach. Lifting the lab coat, he paid special attention to her hips and thighs before turning her around. While he didn't want to rush her, he had been hard and ready for nearly a half hour. His cock needed to feel the tightness of her ass very soon.

The scent of her arousal made his mouth water. He bent her over the edge of the bed and nudged her legs apart. Kneeling behind her, he spread her cheeks wide and licked from the tight puckered ring to her clit and back again. She tasted sweet and tangy. He wrapped one hand around his cock, torn between wanting to sample her further and wanting to bury his throbbing length inside her tiny hole.

"I have lube in the drawer." She reached back and shoved his head away. "I'm sorry, Evan. I know you really like oral sex, but I need to feel you inside me or I'm going to go insane."

He chuckled. "Actually, I'm not a big fan of oral sex." *Not with a woman, anyway.* "I just can't seem to get enough of you."

She rummaged in the drawer of her nightstand until she found her prize. Turning to him, she flashed a spicy smile that accented the feline slant of her eyes. Then she set more than just a tube of jelly on the bed. In addition to the special, heat-inducing variety of lubricant, she also produced a vibrator.

Evan had seen vibrators before from a distance. He understood their use, but he didn't understand why she would bring one out now.

Was she planning to have him watch as she used it on herself? The thought made his cock twitch, both in anticipation and jealousy.

Wordlessly, she squirted the jelly onto her fingertips. She coated the vibrator with it. “This stuff is a bit hot for what you want to do. If you’re up for another round later, I’ll put this on you, but there’s no way this is going in my ass.”

She rubbed the rest between her legs, parting those intimate lips and moaning as she touched her clit. For the first time in his life, Evan felt at a loss. He thought he knew what she wanted, but now he wasn’t so sure.

A shiver ran through her, quaking her body from her hips to her shoulders. She licked her lips. He couldn’t resist the impulse to capture them with another kiss. At least he knew she liked those. Heat erupted between them. The quivering of her body increased. He knew she was close to coming apart, but he didn’t want it to happen until his full length was buried inside that sweet ass of hers.

Her hand massaged his cock, and he broke the kiss. Her touch was firm, confident. She knew what she wanted, and she was going to take it. Slowly, she unrolled a condom, caressing every inch of him before it was covered. Never had Evan given up so much control to a woman. Until now, Daniel was the only person who had ever pushed him to a place of wild abandon.

“Do you want the coat on or off?” Her question was breathy and unsteady.

Evan smiled, joyous to know she was as affected by him as he was by her. “On.”

She climbed on the bed and waited on all fours, looking over her shoulder at him. The coat rode up, but it still covered most of her ass. Just below where it ended, her labia, swollen and pink, glistened with evidence of her arousal.

Evan lifted her hips and pulled her off the edge of the bed. As inviting as she looked, she was up too high. He placed her feet on the floor, spreading them for better access. She tilted her hips, rolling

them back to lift herself to his level. He flipped up the bottom of her white coat. It was sexy, but it was in the way.

“Beautiful,” he said as he caressed her lower back. “So fucking beautiful.”

He grabbed the second tube of lubricant, the no-frills kind, and coated the condom. Then he placed the engorged head of his cock against the tiny ring surrounding her opening. She moaned and pressed against him. It was all the urging he needed, yet he kept his wits about him. He had no way of knowing what size she was used to feeling, and Evan knew his cock was wide.

“I’m going to go slow, honey. I don’t want to hurt you.”

She sighed and relaxed against him. He felt the weight of her trust, and it buoyed his spirits. This was the kind of partner he needed. He pressed forward, stretching the ring wider until at last he was inside. She was as tight and tiny as he thought she would be. Her rectum hugged his cock, squeezing it tight.

Her breaths came faster and shallower, and her fingernails dug into the bedding.

“Alaina? Talk to me, honey. Are you okay?”

The sound she made was half growl and half moan. “If you stop, I will kill you. I’m going to come, Evan.”

He worked his way deeper, thrusting in slow increments until he was seated all the way.

She whimpered. Her face was buried in the bedding, so the sound was muted. She wiggled against him, but his height forced her to balance on her toes, robbing her of leverage.

“Are you all the way in?” Her voice sounded surprisingly strong.

“Yeah.”

She spoke before he could tell her anything more. “Don’t move, not yet.”

The toy in her hand disappeared underneath her. He felt the hardness of it sliding against his cock, and he jerked, thrusting into her deeper and harder than he intended.

“Sorry.” He rubbed a hand along the smooth polyblend of the lab coat covering her back.

“It’s okay. I promise you’ll like this.”

Evan didn’t want to tell her that she was the first woman he had taken this way. He had no idea if she could climax without vaginal or clitoral stimulation. He would have provided it if she didn’t already seem to be taking care of herself. Though he preferred to be the one dishing out the pleasure, if she wanted this kind of release, he wasn’t going to deny her.

Those thoughts were chased from his head when the vibrations began. They teased their way through the thin wall of tissues separating the toy from his cock. The base rested against his balls. Electricity shot from his dick to all points in his body. Even the bottoms of his feet tingled with rising pleasure.

Guttural sounds ripped from his chest.

“You can move now.”

He didn’t need to be told twice. With a loud cry, he withdrew until her sphincter stopped his head, and then he plunged into her fiercely. He lifted her hips, digging his fingers into her flesh because he couldn’t think to do anything else.

She came with that first thrust. Her body spasmed, bucking against him violently. The cry issuing from her mouth went on and on. She pressed her face into the mound of covers she’d gathered, muting the sound. He thrust into her, using long, slow thrusts to stave off his own climax.

Alaina came apart in his hands. She was a caged panther come to life. Her body jerked and flailed. If he didn’t stop her soon, she was going to hurt herself.

Wrapping one arm under her hips, he lifted her from the bed and floor. While it greatly hindered her movements, she still bent and bowed, fighting him. Sobs and cries poured from her mouth, most of them incoherent. Now that he had control of her body, he resumed thrusting, finding a rhythm roughly in sync with her wildness. Never

in his life had he driven a woman to this brink, and Evan loved every second of it.

He and Daniel had their hands full with this one. Evan wondered if they could contain her passion together. He couldn't tell how many climaxes she experienced because she never seemed to come down from that peak.

Every single one of his nerve endings was on fire. Giving in, Evan finally increased the pace of his thrusts. Alaina met him each time. He came hard, the waves of the orgasm sweeping through him and leaving behind a metallic flavor. He collapsed on top of her body, pinning her between his body and the bed. Mustering all of his energy, he reached between her legs to remove the vibrator. It dropped to the floor, still vibrating, with a dull thud against the carpet.

She dug an elbow into his rib, and he took that as his cue to roll to the side. Alaina lifted her head only to drop it back to the bed with it turned slightly away from him. He held her in silence until her chest stopped heaving.

"Damn, you're good at that. Most men aren't quite sure what to do."

Evan started. Did she know? No, she couldn't know. He stroked the hair that spilled down her back. No sunlight snuck into the room to streak her brown with reds, but it was still rich with color. He'd never liked curls much, but now he found he couldn't imagine an attractive woman without them. Hell, he couldn't imagine an attractive woman who wasn't Alaina.

"Glad you enjoyed it. I'm surprised you aren't hoarse."

She coughed out a short, pathetic laugh. "So am I."

"I like that thing you did with the vibrator."

Now she lifted her head and pushed her torso up with her hands. The gleam in her eye was decidedly naughty. "I know some more interesting things to do with a vibrator."

Evan didn't know how it was physically possible, but his cock began to harden again. "Little lady, we've got all night."

Chapter 8

By the time Wednesday evening rolled around, Daniel was a bundle of nerves. Sophia got several good hits in on him during their warm-up session. She was a good sparring partner, one against whom he'd practiced his entire life, and she was an excellent martial artist. Both of them were skilled in multiple disciplines, and both of them were good at combining the skills for a really good fight.

The bell indicating the front door had opened gave Sophia an opening to flip him over her shoulder and slam him into the ground. He hit hard.

She looked down at him. Normally, she would gloat about her feat, but this time, she only looked worried. "Your concentration is shit, Danny." She held out a hand to help him up. "You okay?"

He glanced toward the door. Alaina had come in, looking exceptionally stunning in her low-key skirt and blouse combination, but she wasn't looking his way. She hadn't called him since he left her house the night before. Neither had Evan, who hadn't been home when he had stopped by after he finished helping his father. "I'm fine. I have some stuff on my mind. Nothing big."

"It must be big if it's ruining your concentration." She lifted a brow at him. "I smell girl troubles. What's the matter, Danny? Did you finally meet a woman who won't fall at your feet?"

The bell chimed again. Several women came in. Alaina greeted them and led them to the room she used for meetings. He exhaled sharply as he stared at the closed door, and his shoulders sagged.

"Alaina? Really?" On the verge of laughing, Sophia pressed her lips together. Danny appreciated her effort to not mock him.

For their entire lives, people assumed he and Sophie were twins. They looked a lot alike, and she was only four inches shorter than him, the same height as Evan. Her dark lashes made her eyes appear even wider. She bit her lip, but she let loose the laughter once the door closed behind Alaina. He used his frustration as a focal point and flipped her to the ground the same way she had flipped him.

Sophia groaned. "Damn, you must have it bad. I don't think I've seen you so on edge since Suzette Morrison at your senior prom. I thought you were going to pound her date into the ground."

"She was supposed to go with me," he said, stepping back and preparing to be attacked. Once Sophia regained her footing, she was going to head straight for him.

She didn't charge him. She stood with her hands on her hips. "You didn't have a problem finding a replacement date, and I'm pretty sure you got laid. You have nothing to complain about."

Though he had gotten laid, he hadn't slept with Suzette, not that anything would induce him to correct Sophia. He waited. "Are you going to work out with me or flap your lips? Has living with a chef made you soft, little sister?"

Sophia tilted her head. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." Really, he didn't want to talk about it. He wanted to march in that little room with the Do Not Disturb sign on the door, grab Alaina, and demand to know how things went with Evan. Then he wanted to kiss her until she quivered in his arms and demanded he take her upstairs and do something about it.

"Are you sure?" The amused tone didn't dampen the seriousness of her offer. "I'll let you put your head in my lap and cry, and I won't tell anyone you had an un-macho moment."

He attacked first, not because he didn't trust Sophia enough to let down his guard, but because he didn't know if he'd be able to put it back up in time to face Alaina.

After the session, he rushed upstairs to shower and change. When Alaina had accused him of having a date last week, she hadn't been

far off the mark. He'd wanted to take her out. They didn't have to go to the poker game. As long as they were together, Daniel didn't care where they went. He'd chosen his clothes with care and put on aftershave.

Now he hesitated. Would she think he was trying too hard? Fuck it. The stuff had pheromones in it, or something like that. Evan had bought it for him for his birthday. He wanted all the help he could get.

Sophia appeared. His loft apartment was one large room with a kitchenette at one end and a sofa-sleeper at the other. The only room that had a door was the bathroom. She lingered in the doorway, leaning against the jamb, and studied him.

"You look good, Danny, but we already know she likes your looks. What's your plan of attack?" She pulled the band from her hair and brushed it out, a precursor to kicking him out so she could shower. Both of them had been sweaty and stinky after their workout. Sophia hadn't spared him, and he had returned the favor.

"I wasn't planning to attack at all," he said. "I was just going to ask her to come play poker with us tonight."

Sophia flipped her head up to narrow her eyes at him. "Seriously? You think that'll work? Hey, Alaina, want to come over to my sister's friend's house where you will only know me and my sister? By the way, it's a date. I'd like to put you in a high-pressure situation while we get to know one another."

He scooted out of the bathroom. "You're right. I'll just ask her to go for coffee. She said she likes that coffee bar down the street."

"That's a great idea," Sophia said, poking her head through the door. Behind her, the sound of running water let him know this would be her last salvo. "Way to set up the 'let's go back to my place' scenario. You do realize she's not one-night stand material, right?"

"Yeah," he said. He wondered if *she* knew it, and he wondered if Evan had said anything to her about their plan.

A half hour later, the last of the women left, and Daniel found himself pacing through the kitchen. Sophia watched him, first with amusement, then with worry.

“You really like her.”

Daniel rubbed his hands together. “She’s going to say no.”

Sophia got to her feet. “Nice pep talk.” She sailed out the door and down the stairs.

The door to the room where Alaina was even now putting away chairs was at the bottom of the stairs. As soon as Daniel realized what Sophia meant to do, he dashed down the stairs. He arrived just in time to hear Alaina politely turn down the invitation.

“Thanks, but I have plans tonight.”

“With the doctoral candidate?”

Alaina looked over Sophia’s shoulder. Her eyes met Daniel’s briefly before moving away. “I’m meeting friends.”

Daniel’s lips clamped together. It was a nice evasion, one he had used himself to let a woman down gently. His gut clenched. He hated having the tables turned. Damn Evan for not returning his calls. Daniel had no idea what happened the night before.

He kept his gaze turned toward the door to the parking lot. “Ready to go, Sophia? Is Drew meeting us there?”

His sister, bless her soul, got the point. He wouldn’t be asking Alaina out for coffee, or anything else, tonight. Sophia eyed Alaina with sincere regret. “Maybe next week?”

Alaina shrugged. She didn’t look at him. “Poker really isn’t my thing.”

The knife twisted.

“Do you like to hang out?”

Okay, he *thought* Sophia had gotten the point. He tugged on her arm. “Let’s go.”

She shook him off. “A bunch of us girls are going out this Friday night. We usually dress up and go out to dinner, and then we go to a dance club or two. I’d love it if you came.”

Alaina studied Sophia closely, no doubt looking for the rotten worm. She wasn't going to find one. On one hand, Daniel was glad to see his sister making overtures of friendship. It had been too long since she let anyone new into her life. Drew had opened her up in so many ways. On the other hand, he wanted to know what the hell she meant by inviting Alaina to hang out with her.

A small nod. The uncertain smile reached those brown eyes. "I'd like that."

"Great," Sophia said. "I'll pick you up Friday at six."

As they climbed into Sophia's car, Daniel threw baleful glares at his sister. "I can't believe you just asked out the woman I told you I liked."

Sophia laughed. "I don't think she's into threesomes. Besides, if I was going to make a move on Alaina, I would have done it months ago."

Daniel desperately hoped Sophia was wrong about that. In addition to having claimed a large piece of his heart, Alaina held his last chance with Evan in her hands. He swallowed the censure in Sophie's declaration. It lingered, a lump in his throat that too many drinks couldn't shrink.

Later, Drew and Sophia loaded him into Sophia's car and drove him home. Daniel sat in the back seat and watched the streetlights spin by the car.

Daniel liked Drew. They had begun with a rocky dislike of one another because Drew thought Daniel was one of Sophia's submissives, and Daniel thought the same thing about Drew. Daniel never liked the path his sister had discovered after her rape. He didn't mind her working at Ellen's club, beating the shit out of people who paid her to do so, but he hated that she built her sex life around the concept. She didn't have relationships, she had sex.

But Drew had changed all of that. For starters, he wasn't a submissive. While he hadn't completely changed that particular habit

of Sophia's, he had reined it in considerably. And the two of them were madly in love.

The pair held hands over the console while Drew drove.

Daniel sat in the back and wished Alaina was with him. He'd never held her hand, not as a simple act of affection.

"Sophie?"

She twisted in her seat. "Yeah?"

"Do you think Alaina had plans with that doctoral candidate? Maybe she wasn't lying last week. Maybe she's involved with him."

Drew hissed something that sounded like "Yes!"

Sophia punched him in the arm. "This isn't a cause for celebration."

"I bet Jonas and Ellen that Dan was having girl problems. He was awfully quiet tonight." At her continued glare, he added, "What?"

Daniel's laugh was pathetic. "I think that means you're sleeping on the couch tonight."

"Please," Drew said, waving away the idea. "She can't keep her hands off me. If I'm sleeping on the couch, then she's sleeping there with me."

Sophia released her seat belt and crawled into the back seat. She put her arm around Daniel's shoulders and pulled him so that his head rested on her shoulder. That, combined with the motion of the car, made him feel nauseous. The number of shots he had done during the game didn't help the problem. "Even if she is seeing someone else, she's not serious about him."

Daniel bit his lip, mostly to keep from vomiting in his sister's lap. "I slept with her."

Now Sophia punched him hard, but, thankfully, not in the stomach.

"What the hell was that for? She kissed me first."

"Have you even called her, Danny? You didn't ask her out. You didn't make plans to see her again. Everything you did screamed one-night stand. And you have the nerve to get drunk and depressed

because she had other plans tonight? What kind of imbecile are you? I *told* you she wasn't one-night stand material."

From the front seat, Drew laughed. "You used to be so suave with the ladies."

Daniel straightened. "I hired Evan to do some repairs on her house. I brought Chinese food for dinner. That was yesterday. She didn't call me, and neither did Evan. What if she likes him better?"

Sophia stared at him. The passing headlights lit up the incredulity in her face. "I didn't think you were that drunk."

"I'm pretty wasted," he said. "But you gotta admit Evan's attractive."

Sophia said nothing. She stared at him with a thoughtful expression on her face, and Daniel didn't want to know what she was thinking. The car stopped in the parking lot of his studio. For the first time since he'd bought the place from his grandfather, Daniel looked at the building and didn't want to go inside. He wanted to go to Alaina's house and crawl into bed with her. He wanted to smell her scent and feel her warm little body pressed against his. He wanted Evan in the bed with them, but he wasn't sure if he wanted him next to him or next to Alaina. How would Alaina take that?

He climbed out of Sophia's car. She came out after him. He thought she would get back into the front seat, but she shoved something into his pocket. "These'll help you keep the next one."

Daniel tried to glare. Her expression didn't change. He gave up and stumbled to his door. Digging in his pocket for keys only produced a set of handcuffs. He rolled his eyes at Sophia's gift. She and Drew were into bondage and those kinds of games. Daniel was not.

Daniel turned to wave as Drew drove away, and that's when he noticed Alaina's car still parked in his lot. Did that mean she was still out with the wannabe doctor? It was after midnight, but the coffee bar served food and stayed open until almost two.

Chapter 9

It was late. Alaina hadn't meant to stay as late as she did, but the coffee and the conversation flowed. She met up with the friends she had made in graduate school once every few months. Their sessions invariably ran late as they caught up on one another's lives and talked shop. She had purposely not scheduled any meetings or appointments for the next morning.

The group of seven had taken over the sofa and chair grouping toward the back of the rather large, yet quaint, shop. They could be loud, and they didn't want to be interrupted by people coming in and out. Alaina had risen several times with the intention of leaving, but somebody always tugged on her hand and urged her to stay. So she sat back down on the chair's soft cushion and had another coffee.

Mostly, it was Trent. They had flirted for years and even dated on and off. From the signals he had been sending her way, Alaina had figured out that Trent was open to discussing more permanent terms.

They suited one another. Trent was intelligent. His research was in a different field than hers, but he understood the time commitment required by the university system. He understood the pressure to publish, yet he also shared her deep commitment to helping people.

Though he was missing some of the light blond hair he had in college, he was still handsome. They had shared real passion in the past. Trent liked sex as much as she did. His blue eyes sparkled with warmth and affection.

Alaina wasn't moved. She didn't want those blue eyes smiling at her, and she wanted a mass of deep brown hair in which to tangle her fingers. She wanted that head between her legs while the right pair of

blue eyes penetrated hers as Evan leaned in for another soul-deep kiss. She wanted...

"Daniel?"

As if he knew she was thinking of him, he appeared, standing behind the couch in front of her like a Roman god in sexy jeans. He wore the same polo shirt he had been wearing earlier when he had stood behind Sophia and refused to look at her. It was as if he knew she had slept with his best friend, and he didn't like it. Well, what man would? The rigid set of his shoulders had betrayed the intense emotion he had been trying to hold in.

The way he looked at her now betrayed those emotions, too, only Alaina didn't know exactly what emotion he was showing. Was it just lust? After their night together, she knew she wanted a repeat performance. Did Daniel simply want her again?

When he left that morning, Evan had mumbled something about having to go home for clean clothes, but he had said nothing about seeing her again.

Daniel ran a hand through his hair. The cowlick just above his right eye stayed standing on end. If she didn't know him better, she would think he was nervous.

"It's late," he said. "I thought I would walk you back."

The slight slur in his voice made her glad he mentioned walking. She wondered just how drunk he was. Rising to her feet, she flashed a smile at her friends. "It is late," she said.

Trent rose with her. "I'm headed out, too." He flashed a glance at Daniel, recognizing competition. "I didn't think this neighborhood was unsafe, though, and I know you can take care of yourself."

Daniel looked Trent over, raking his gaze from head to toe and dismissing the smaller man outright. "Alaina parked at my place."

Alaina had never seen Trent in a pissing contest, and she didn't want to see it now. Visions of Daniel having a similar fight with Evan made her sick, but she couldn't bring herself to regret sleeping with

Evan. Something about him tugged at her soul, just as Danny did with the cocky, confident set of his jaw.

With a sigh, she rounded the couch with the intention of laying a placating hand on Daniel's arm and leading him from the café.

As soon as she was within striking distance, his arm snaked out. Her chest slammed against his wall of muscle, and his lips claimed hers. She should have been upset with his macho display of territoriality, but she was too busy drowning in the heat and languor of a skillful kiss that should have been sloppy. Nobody should be able to kiss that well and reek of alcohol.

When he lifted his mouth from hers, he stumbled forward, knocking her against the back of the sofa. "Sorry." His apology was automatic, and his eyes blinked uncomprehendingly.

"You smell like a brewery, Daniel. How much have you had to drink?"

He shrugged. "I counted six shots and three beers, and then I stopped."

"You stopped drinking or counting?" Her lips twitched, holding in a laugh. She'd never seen him like this before. She wondered how many condoms he had in his pants and if he was up to using them.

He swayed, rocking on his feet. "Counting. Jonas was trying to outdrink me. I couldn't let him do that."

She had no idea who Jonas was, but she understood the sort of male bonding ritual to which he alluded. "Did he?"

Daniel started to shake his head, but then he appeared to reconsider the movement. "No. His wife's pregnant."

"I see," Alaina said. She didn't, but that didn't matter. She slid her arm around his waist, a gesture she wouldn't have had the courage to make if he wasn't so wasted. It was a detail that would escape his notice once he sobered up. "Let's get you home."

Daniel draped his arm across her shoulders. "Don't you think you should introduce me to your friends?"

The smile that had appeared on her face the moment she saw him turned to a grin. “Why? Do you think you’ll remember any of this in the morning?”

Those luscious pools of chocolate, ringed in red, narrowed at her. “I’m not that drunk, Lainie. I’m still on my feet.”

She didn’t point out her help in the matter. He was resting more than a little of his weight on her. She made the introductions. Daniel held together quite well, nodding and greeting each person in turn. He didn’t let go of her to shake anyone’s hand, and she didn’t mind.

Then she introduced Trent, who was waiting patiently to walk out with her. Daniel stuck out his hand. Trent reached out cautiously. Trent’s grip was firm, but Daniel didn’t play fair. He squeezed Trent’s hand more than necessary. Alaina tugged at his arm and hissed his name.

He ignored her. “I don’t need help taking care of Lainie.”

With a disgusted exhalation, Alaina dropped her hand from Daniel’s arm and left the building. Daniel’s footsteps caught up with her just on the other side of the door. He reached for her hand, threading his fingers through hers. “Are you mad because you wanted to go home with Trent?”

Alaina exhaled, but she didn’t attempt to sever their contact. “I wasn’t going to go home with Trent.”

His eyes took a moment to focus. In that moment, he appeared to sober up significantly. “Are you still mad at me for hiring Evan?”

She stopped walking, jerking his hand to make him stop and face her. “I wish you would have asked me first, but no, I’m not mad at you, Danny. I’m sure he’ll do a good job. You can’t go around making major decisions for me like this. Just because I’m short doesn’t mean I need a knight in white armor.”

He grabbed both of her hands. “Even though you’re damn sexy up there on your high horse, I don’t wanna fight with you, Lainie.” Lifting her hands, he brushed his lips over the backs of her fingers. “Come down and admit you want to come back to my place and make

out. We can do a night in white satin. No, white cotton. I don't have satin sheets."

She had to smile. He was charming and sexy, and she did want to go back to his place. She didn't know how far they'd get with the making out, though. Tilting her head, she nailed him with her most charming smile. "Aren't you too drunk to get anywhere?"

Laughing, he dropped one of her hands and began walking toward the building that housed his studio and his apartment. Since he kept hold of her other hand, Alaina was pulled along with him.

He swung their hands playfully between them. "I'm twenty-six, Lainie. Erectile dysfunction is still a few years away."

She breathed an accepting sigh. "If you say so." Glancing up at him, she pondered the ethics of sleeping with a man who wasn't fully sober, especially given that she'd slept with his best friend the night before. Which one of them saw her as a one-night stand?

The slurred speech had disappeared, and he appeared capable of rational thought.

"You're giving me one of those looks," he said, quirking one brow at her. "What kinds of dissection are going on in that pretty little head of yours?"

She didn't care for the condescending description of her head, but she let it slide. "I was wondering if sleeping with you was ethical, given your current state of intoxication."

"And you are a very ethical person." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it again. "How about a compromise? You let me lick you until you pass out, and then we can have sex in the morning."

The invitation and the tone in which it was delivered made her pussy wet. Remembering how impossible it was to wake him the last time, she quirked an eyebrow back at him. "Are you going to actually wake up this time? I rubbed my breasts all over your body, and you didn't move the other day. It was very bad for my ego." She had barely touched him at all, but this seemed an appropriate time to attempt flirting and banter.

They rounded the corner of his building. Like the rest of the buildings on the street, it was older and made of brick from back when bricklaying was an art form.

He released her hand to fit the key into the lock. "I'm a solid sleeper." He turned the handle and pushed the door open before turning his body sideways to indicate she should enter first. "But I'll wake up if you touch my face lightly."

The expression on his face was a strange mix of regret, longing, desire, and something else Alaina couldn't quite identify. She lifted a hand and touched his face lightly. His eyes closed. He swayed, rocking forward.

She thought he was going to fall on her, but he locked his arms around her waist and claimed her lips in a kiss that set her stomach to fluttering. She played her hands over his chest, gripping his shoulders hard.

One hand slid up her back to free her hair from the French braid she had so carefully arranged that morning. Warning bells had her pushing him away. Her curls would rebound from their prison with wild abandon, giving her a heathen, hoydenish appearance. Even though it didn't seem to turn him off last time, she didn't want him to see her so undone. Curiously, she had been all right with Evan seeing her this way. Why was she holding back with Danny?

Hastily repairing her hair, she brushed past him and headed up the stairs she knew would take her to his place.

The loft apartment stretched almost the entire length and width of the building. The practice studio downstairs was divided into several large rooms. Alaina thought the second floor would be similarly divided, but she was wrong.

It was a nice apartment. The walls were painted sage green while the ceiling and moldings were a creamy white. It made the room seem even taller.

Three skylights interrupted the roof on the back side of the building. Venus winked at Alaina. She took it as a positive sign.

At the side where they entered, a kitchenette curved along two walls. An island counter sat slightly off-center. Looking closer, Alaina realized it had wheels.

In front of that was a formal dining table that would have looked great in her dining room. She thought it needed a centerpiece or a runner and candles.

Noting the details gave her a purpose, something on which to focus that wasn't the swarm of moths swirling around in her stomach. She continued looking around.

The other side of the loft featured a living room group with two sofas and two oversized chairs. Situated on either end of each sofa and between the chairs, walnut end tables supported a few small bowls and sets of coasters. Mounted on the front wall, a flat screen television filled the space. Speakers were strategically placed around that side of the loft.

A square room along the back wall did its best to divide the loft, but the vast space swallowed it. She deduced it was the bathroom. Looking around, she noticed the absence of bedroom furniture. There was no dresser and no bed.

Metal hitting wood drew her attention to the island counter. Daniel's keys were there. She put her purse and keys next to his. Nosy habit had her checking the pile of metal and noting the number and type of keys and key chains.

Long, strong fingers pressed into her hips. Daniel turned her to face him.

She wrapped her hands around his biceps as far as she could, loving the solid feel of him. Teeth worried her bottom lip. Daniel's pile included handcuffs.

"Handcuffs, Dan?" Alaina had engaged in that kind of sexual behavior before, enough to know it didn't appeal to her. She wanted to know what Daniel planned.

Daniel bit her bottom lip, nipping at it gently before deepening the kiss. He wrapped his arms around her. Heat flooded her system. His lips moved to her neck, feasting on the tender skin there.

“Sophia put them in my pocket.” He nibbled lower, heating her neck with his breath. Her pussy throbbed. “She told me you were a keeper.”

He pushed his hips into her, guiding her across the room toward the sofa. Alaina felt drugged and magnetized. She couldn’t move away from him, and she couldn’t get enough of him.

“I agree with her, but I don’t think I need to force you to stay.”

The sofa cushion pushed into the backs of her knees, forcing her to bend them. She sat heavily, bouncing on the surprisingly firm cushions. Her panties shoved against the wetness between her legs, soaking them through.

“Of course, if you won’t let me take your hair out of that ridiculous braid, I can use them to keep your hands out of the way.”

He straddled her, kneeling so that his weight rested on his own calves, but his heat still pressed against her. She ran her hands up his thighs. With quick, practiced motions, he freed her hair, running his fingers through it.

Alaina closed her eyes. Heat stained her chest, and she willed it to stay there and not travel to her face. She didn’t want to see his reaction to the disarray he was causing with her hair. The last time, he had only pulled out her ponytail. He hadn’t combed it out, teasing it into something that people would have killed for in the Eighties.

“You’re a tigress in bed,” he said.

The breathlessness and awe had Alaina opening her eyes.

Daniel gazed at her with undisguised adoration. “You dress in such sedate clothes, and you try to tame this passionate red hair. I like seeing you like this, Lainie.” In a fluid motion, he removed the red polo shirt he had been wearing.

She liked seeing him like that, bronze and hard. She wanted to lick her way along each valley crossing his chest and abdomen.

With graceful athleticism, he backed away to kneel on the floor in front of her. "I like unleashing your inner sex kitten."

His words and his voice contributed to the moisture between her legs as much as his kiss had. He ran his hands up her thighs, bunching her skirt on his forearms as he went. The skirt was loose below the knee. It tightened considerably as it approached her upper thighs.

Daniel exhaled at the restriction. Hastily withdrawing his hands, he reached behind her. The zipper ripped open. Daniel hooked his fingers into the waist of her skirt, hose and panties. Before Alaina could utter a word of protest or point out they weren't in a bed, she was naked from the waist down.

The quick motion slid her bottom half toward him. Her head reclined against the back of the sofa. Alaina held her breath and hoped he would touch her weeping pussy.

One hand traveled up her abdomen and over her blouse to envelop her throat in a possessive caress. His dark chocolate eyes impaled her. "Don't hold back, Lainie. I want to see your face when you come in my mouth."

She hadn't held back with him last time. With a lover as demanding as Daniel, holding back wasn't an option. Her entire body quivered, acquiescing to his dominating gesture. She consoled herself by promising it was just this one last time.

He waited, forcing her to respond. At her meek nod, his hand relaxed and slid down her body, ignoring breasts that ached to be fondled.

He gripped a knee in each hand and pushed her legs apart to stare at the evidence of her arousal. Never tearing his eyes away, he licked his lips. Alaina felt like the main course at a banquet for one.

A single finger slid between her exposed folds, flicking back and forth in short bursts. Alaina moaned. She angled her head to watch him. Two thumbs parted the blend of red and brown hair she had so carefully trimmed that morning. Gears turned behind Daniel's eyes.

“I like what you’ve done to your pussy,” he said. “I want to do it next time.”

Alaina started, jerking because of what he said and how he touched her. “You want to trim me?” It was a stupid question, but his declaration took her by surprise.

He shrugged. The rise and fall of those broad shoulders didn’t interfere with the swirling of his finger around her hole. “I like anything you have going on between your legs as long as I’m part of it.”

Putting a halt on anything further her nervous mind might think to say, he lowered his head. Alaina watched the bottom half of his face disappear from view. She liked that Daniel was into having her watch what he did to her.

Gripping her pussy lips more firmly, he peeled them back to open her completely. The stretching sensitized her skin even more. His tongue lapped at her juices. Alaina gasped at the light contact. Tiny moans sounded at the back of his throat.

His tenderness didn’t last long. In the grip of passion, Daniel was not a gentle man. He pushed his face into her, sucking her folds into his mouth. Alaina yelped in surprise and in pain. Daniel ignored the implied protest. His teeth joined the act, pinching tender skin.

She yelped again and pushed her pussy tighter against his mouth. The sweet sharpness heightened the pleasure. She bucked and surged, both craving and dreading the next punishing pinch of his teeth and tongue.

His hands released her, but it didn’t matter. His cheeks and jaw kept her parted for him. Arms circled her legs from underneath, holding her immobile. Her legs rested on his shoulders, and she clenched at his hair, pulling hard. She screamed in fear, wanting him to release her from this new experience and afraid he would stop.

He ignored her protests and the deep moans of pleasure issuing from the same place. Some of the pain faded when he thrust his

tongue into her hole, licking and sucking the juices that spilled uncontrollably from her core.

There was no tight coil of tension or heat building in her womb, heading toward release. The maelstrom mastered her entire body, concentrating nowhere. Alaina screamed again and again, long, loud cries that were meaningless. She lost track of the orgasm that had too many breaking points.

Her body writhed, jerking wildly, but he held her still.

Then she was free. The heat was gone, but she was changed, a docile thing temporarily incapable of movement.

Daniel was back on the couch, kneeling over her. "Your mouth," he panted. "I need to feel your mouth on me, Lainie. Can you do that for me?"

Dazed and glazed from the electricity still running through her body, Alaina stared up at him. Did she want to do to him what he did to her? Yes. Could she move? No.

A flick and a push and his jeans opened, lowering just enough for Daniel to pull his fully erect penis from his pants. Her tongue darted out, spreading moisture to her lips. Fresh moisture spurted between her legs. She wondered if he had a condom in those jeans, too.

He slipped a finger in her mouth, testing her consent. She sucked on it, tasting the mixture of her cream and the delicious saltiness of his skin. He added a second finger, rocking them in and out of her mouth.

She made a small sound of anticipation at the back of her throat when he withdrew. He grasped his cock with one hand, feeding it to her slowly.

His good intention was lost when she sucked him deep and hard, forcing him into her mouth faster. Weakly, she gripped his hips. Daniel leaned one hand on the back of the sofa and wound the other in her wild curls. He thrust into her, his pace increasing in time to the kittenish sound of satisfaction she made in the back of her throat.

The hand in her hair tightened, pulling her away in warning. As she had before, she sucked him harder. He came, and she swallowed, greedily sucking him even after the warm saltiness stopped spurting from his cock.

Daniel extracted himself and collapsed on the couch next to her. Alaina let her head drop against the cushion. Her eyes closed as a wave of exhaustion swept through her bones.

“You don’t have a bed,” she murmured.

It was a minute before Daniel answered. “We’re sitting on it.”

Alaina opened her eyes and looked between the two sofas in the room. “I guess this is a good way to prevent women from overstaying their welcome.” She laughed as she said it, not offended to count herself among the notches on a bedpost that turned out to be very figurative.

Rousing herself, she rose unsteadily, snagged her skirt and headed to the bathroom. She needed to freshen up and splash cold water on her face if she was going to be awake for the short drive home.

Alone in the bathroom, she studied the figure in the mirror. Clad in only a white, short-sleeved blouse and with her mussed, untamed hair falling to her shoulders, she wondered what Daniel saw. Her entire appearance was unorganized. Any semblance of class was absent. She was sex incarnate, a wild, fantasy woman.

Alaina wasn’t sure she liked the stranger in the mirror. Her hair ties were gone. She had no idea what Daniel had done with them. She did her best to tame it into a loose braid, splashed water on her face, and pulled on her skirt.

She emerged from the bathroom to find the living area transformed. Daniel did have a bed, and they had been sitting on it.

The sofa-sleeper was made up with a sheet and a thin blanket. Daniel had opened some of the windows along the front to let in the warm August breeze. The sounds of cars and the light tinkling of distant music drifted inside.

He had stripped down to boxers that didn't hide much. The shorts hugged the succulent, rounded cheeks of his muscular ass. He pulled pillows from a closet she hadn't noticed earlier. When he saw her, he threw them on the bed and snagged a T-shirt from the back of the sofa.

He held it out to her. "I thought you would be more comfortable sleeping in this."

Alaina looked at the shirt, but she didn't take it. He was being polite, that was all. "I was going to go home. I have to work tomorrow."

"All the more reason for you to stay."

She crossed the room, targeting her purse and keys while tamping down a rising guilt. Would he still want her when he found out what she had done with Evan? For that matter, did she want to be finished with Evan? The idea of choosing between them lodged a large, salty stone in her chest. "Thanks, Daniel, but I really do need to get home."

"Lainie." He had followed her to the kitchenette. His breath heated her neck when he said her name, and his hands heated her hips where they rested.

She turned to face him, using a regretful smile to soften her refusal. "It's not a line. I really have to work tomorrow. Why don't you text me and let me know when you have a free night? We could do this again."

Cold metal encircled her right wrist as a handcuff clicked into place.

Alaina stared down at it, amused to find he had handcuffed himself to her.

"You're tired," he said. "And I'm not finished with you. Sleep here, with me, in my bed. You won't regret it in the morning."

She smiled. She didn't regret any of the time she had spent with him, not even the disaster of a date they had six weeks earlier. The serious look in his eyes sobered her. "All right, Daniel. I'll stay, but take off the handcuffs."

A cocky smile lit his face. He framed her cheeks with his hands and kissed her with extreme tenderness, his lips and tongue stoking the slow-burning fire he seemed to find every time he touched her. Because she was still linked to him, her hand moved with his. She gripped his wrist and returned the kiss.

When the kiss ended, he lifted his wrist and studied the handcuff. He frowned. "I need a key."

Alaina waited for him to do something. When he didn't move, she gestured to the handcuffs. "Where is the key?"

Leaning over the counter, he lifted his key ring, examined it, and then he dropped it back on the counter. He slipped his hand around hers, holding it as he led her to another closet she failed to notice. This one had a stacked washer-dryer unit and a laundry basket. Daniel snagged a pair of jeans at the top and searched the pocket.

Turning to Alaina, he bit his lip. She stifled the urge to take over.

"I don't have the key."

Who handcuffed themselves to another person when they didn't have the key? She had no idea how to respond.

"I'll call Sophia," he said, reaching for his phone. He tore his eyes from her reproving look to punch buttons on the keypad.

Thankfully, Sophia answered. Daniel's end of the conversation lacked detail, but Sophia seemed to fill it all in for herself. Alaina heard the laughter through the phone.

Finally, Daniel sighed. "I'll call you in the morning." Facing Alaina, he heaved another sigh. "Sophia is in bed. She and Drew both have early starts tomorrow. We can meet her at Drew's shop in the morning."

Fatigue had turned her body to jelly. Alaina was too tired to argue, and she was more amused than upset to find herself handcuffed to Daniel. Her tired nod had him exhaling in relief.

She slipped her hand back into his. "Let's go to sleep."

Chapter 10

Alaina woke on top of Daniel. The bright light of dawn streamed through the windows, undiminished by clouds or curtains. She had fallen asleep next to him, and she had slept deeply. She had no memory of how she ended up sprawled across his chest. His pecs pillowed her head. The warm, male scent of Daniel's skin kept her from waking completely. Lying this close to him soothed the nerves she should have upon waking this close to a person she had already betrayed.

Her torso lay diagonally across his, and her legs tangled in the sheet and between his legs. The handcuffs had made it impossible for her to remove her shirt, but her bra converted to strapless, so at least she hadn't been forced to sleep with underwires poking at her ribs.

He supported her with one arm around her back. His hand rested just above her ass. She was sure if he was awake, he would have inched it lower to cup one of her cheeks. His other hand, the one connected to her, held on to her wrist.

She felt protected and cherished, an accident of position and of the necessary intimacy dictated by their circumstances.

Alaina lifted her head and studied him. He was a sound sleeper. That much she knew from experience. Slate lashes shadowed darkly-tanned cheeks that glowed bronze in the morning light. She wondered what he looked like after a long winter bleached color from his skin. How pale did he become every year? Judging by the skin tone below his tan line, not very.

His cheekbones were high and prominent. Dark stubble stained his chin and cheeks, giving him that sexy, grungy appearance that he

wore so well. The first time she met him, he hadn't been clean-shaven. Looking at him had been the equivalent of being sucker-punched in the stomach, only by desire instead of a fist. It had been true then, and it was true now. She wanted to wake him up and have her way with him.

Of course, when they met, she had hidden her reaction, hoping only a polite veneer was detectable. What would he have done if she had gaped at him, agog over his physical attractiveness? He probably would have turned down the charm and blasted her with some frosty politeness.

As it was, he had ignored her anyway.

The cowlick over his right eye stood straight up as it always did. Sunlight glinted from it. She had fantasized about running her fingers through his thick, dark brown hair. Throwing caution to the wind, she did it now, shifting her body over him so that she could use her free hand. It was silky and soft, and it rebounded the moment her fingers weren't holding it down anymore.

He didn't stir at all.

Emboldened, she peeled her body away from his, intending to explore a little more. He shifted, rolling them both to their sides and tightening the arm around her. "Don't go yet." He mumbled the words into the top of her head.

"I can't go," she said. "I'm handcuffed to you."

A sleepy smile was his only response. Even breathing told her he wasn't awake. He had done this the other morning at her house. She had asked if he wanted the alarm set and if he wanted coffee. His responses had been vague and indistinct, yet pleasant.

Lifting a hand, she drew the back of her fingers down his cheek. It was a caress she wouldn't have attempted if she thought he would ever know about it.

His eyes opened, focusing that chocolaty goodness directly and alertly on her. Against her thigh, she felt the hardening evidence of his morning arousal.

“Good morning,” she said. “Are you actually awake, or is this practice for the real thing?”

He smiled sheepishly. “I’m awake now. Did I say something amusing in my sleep?”

Alaina laughed at the way he asked the question. He had apparently been caught in a vulnerable position before. It was another good reason for him to keep his bed hidden from women he didn’t want staying the whole night.

“I’m not sure if you were asleep or not. You were remarkably coherent.”

The arm wrapped underneath and around her body slid down so his hand could cup her ass. “I’m always coherent. It’s not so much that I talk in my sleep as much as it is I’ll answer you when I’m not quite awake. I have unclear memories of the conversation when I wake up.”

Emboldened by his continued interest in her body, she splayed her fingers over his chest and traced light designs on the warm flesh there. “You spoke first.”

He grasped her wrist so that her movements weren’t inhibited by his weight. “Did I come on to you?”

Alaina shook her head.

“My mistake,” he said, rolling so that she was underneath him. “Let me remedy that, Dr. Miles.”

His hard body pressed hers into the mattress while he kissed her. All evidence of the sleepy man who asked her not to leave had vanished. The hand encircling her wrist shifted to hold her hand. Leaning his weight on one elbow, his fleet fingers made short work of the buttons on her blouse, the only piece of clothing between the two of them.

“We can have sex now, Lainie, and you won’t have to have any ethical concerns about taking advantage of an inebriated man.” Peeling back the white shirt, he kissed a path between her breasts.

“For the record, I fully disagree with you.” His palm closed over one breast, kneading it.

Alaina looked up at him, unable to figure out what she had said that was disagreeable. “We had sex last night, Daniel. Don’t you remember?”

“Oral sex doesn’t count.” He replaced the hand on her breast with his mouth and sucked hard, stretching her nipple.

She cried out, the pleasure and pain mixing to flood her pussy with anticipation. Evan hadn’t once failed to be gentle in bed, and she had loved everything they had done. She wanted to label this treatment as brutish and disrespectful, but she was finding she had as much of a preference for this kind of lover as she had for a gentle one.

She writhed under him, arching to lessen the sharpness of the sensation. By the time he released her, she could only manage short, panting breaths. “Oral sex does too count as sex.”

He subjected her other nipple to the same treatment. “I know. I just love giving you an excuse to use that tone with me.”

She reached between them to grasp his hard cock with her free hand. “What tone?”

Daniel closed his eyes and held his breath, thrusting his hips against her grip. “The bossy one.”

She gripped him harder. He moaned, and his movements stilled. Alaina licked her lips, a purely predatory gesture. “Are you saying you like me being bossy as long as you’re the one in a position of power?”

“I think,” he breathed, “you’re the one in a position of power.”

“Daniel.” The growled word was a warning.

He rolled them both, careful not to jar her hand too much. “Now you’re the powerful one, Lainie. Be as bossy as you want. It turns me on.”

She straddled his hips, sitting up to stare down at him. Mussed, deep brown hair spilled in tufts over the white cotton pillow. His bedroom eyes, heavy-lidded with desire, gazed up at her. His long,

olive torso filled the center of the bed, contrasting with the white sheets beneath. One hand rested beneath his head. The other wasn't allowed to get too far from her hand. It rested on her thigh. He was a fantasy man, sin and satin, fully aroused and awaiting her whim.

"I like this," she said.

His gaze traveled from where she held his cock so close to her wetness, up her body to her breasts and the wild hair of which she was so self-conscious, and back down. His cock jumped in her hand. "So do I."

"Where are your condoms?" She was going to ride him hard. He could take it. She wanted no interruptions.

He gestured to the table next to the couch. Convenient. Wordlessly, she scooted to the edge. He rolled a bit to give her more freedom to move. Ripping a foil package open with her teeth, she pushed Daniel back to the bottom position.

"I don't want you to move," she said.

"Anything you say, Doc." His smirk turned to a gasp as she fondled his sac.

Alaina was heady with the power she had over this strapping man. Wetness dripped from her pussy, an ache that needed massaging. She used both hands to sheath him.

Returning to her straddle position, she smiled impishly at Daniel. His eyes fevered with need. "You are so incredibly lovely," he said.

She slipped the tip of his cock between her folds, moving it forward to rub against her clit. Closing her eyes, she rocked her hips in a circular pattern. Her wet nub swelled. Cream dripped from her vagina.

Daniel's hips rose, surging closer, begging for more contact.

Lifting herself, Alaina repositioned him to slam down and seal them together. She inhaled at the sudden fullness inside. Her vaginal walls contracted, spasming in anticipation of what was to come.

She rocked, grinding hard against him. Heat spiraled from their point of contact, shooting electricity through her body. When orgasm

was close, she changed the rhythm, lifting up to slam down on him faster and faster. She leaned back, letting her curls spill in a wild fall down her back as she rode him.

Alaina let herself go, giving in to every sensation, every urge. The hand with the extra bracelet stroked between her legs. Two sets of fingers, one smaller and one larger, rubbed her clit as hard and fast as she fucked him. The pinches were sharp and sweet. The soaked slapping of flesh filled the room.

Her walls contracted sharply, sending her into a violent paroxysm. Her body stiffened, unable to move, as she shouted her orgasm. Daniel's followed seconds later.

He sat up, unable to stay still. His arm came around Alaina, holding her close as his firm, full lips captured her.

When he released her lips, she collapsed against his shoulder, their chests both heaving as they waited for breathing to normalize.

His fingers played up and down her spine. "Did I tell you how much I love it when you get bossy?"

A weak laugh was her only response.

"Do you want breakfast or a shower first?"

The gurgle in his stomach answered that question. "What do you have?" She envisioned cold cereal, but she was a picky eater who didn't care for most cereals.

"Since we have limited movement, how about something simple?" He lifted her off him and moved to the side of the bed to peel away the used condom. "I make really good French toast."

She regarded him with no small measure of surprise. "You cook?"

He grunted in an imitation of a caveman. "Yes. Dan cooks." In an exaggerated display of alpha-maleness, he threw her to the mattress and held her down to bite at her shoulder and throat.

Alaina was ticklish on a normal day. Given their activities of the morning, she was extra-sensitive to stimulation. Her surprise dissolved into uncontrollable laughter. She squirmed under him, squealing at him to stop. The protest only fueled his actions.

“I have to pee!”

That made him stop. Gingerly, he lifted himself off her. “You know, for an educated, enlightened woman, you sure have a dim view of men.”

“Yes, well, for a man who cooks, you sure behave like the stereotypical bachelor.” She said it with a smile, but he still flinched at the implication.

To cover his sudden frown, he turned away and got to his feet, pulling her with him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Alaina indicated his apartment with the sweep of her hand. “Everything is in easy reach. You have a tiny kitchen and a large television.” She glanced around with a fresh frown. The place was clean and free of clutter. “You must have a cleaning woman who comes by at least once a week to keep the place looking nice for your revolving door of women.”

Daniel’s brows drew together in a sharp scowl. “I like variety.” His eyes closed, and his lips moved to form a curse word. “I clean my own place.” He set off in the direction of the bathroom, dragging her along.

“Where are you going?” Panic edged her question, but not in response to anything he said. She already knew he liked variety.

“To the bathroom. You said you had to pee. So do I.”

She jerked her hand, halting his forward progress. “Are you sure you don’t have the key to these things?”

His scowl turned to a smirk. He dragged her into the bathroom. “What’s wrong, Alaina? Afraid the slutty caveman won’t let you go first?” He tossed the condom into the trash and washed his hands in the sink.

Her mouth opened and closed. When words came, she tripped over them. “I don’t think I can do this with you in the room.”

“You will if you have to go bad enough.” Daniel laughed. “The toilet isn’t that close to the door.”

The bathroom was large. Though he had shut off the flow of water in the sink, the sound made her have to go all the more. In the end, Daniel turned the tap back on and turned his back to give her privacy. She had to look away from his chiseled ass and close her eyes in order to make herself relax.

“You know, I haven’t been with as many women as you think.” He threw that nugget over his shoulder. It was laced with more than a little defensive hostility.

They switched positions without Alaina responding.

“I bet you’ve been with just as many men,” he said, not suffering from the same issues with privacy. “You’re pretty wild in the sack, Alaina. You’re not at all shy or reserved. Don’t get me wrong. I like that about you, but you’re not in a position to be judgmental.”

They washed their hands together, and Daniel continued his tirade. “I have no idea why you think I’m incapable of cooking for myself or cleaning my own apartment.”

Alaina stared at him as he pulled sweats from a drawer. She had already buttoned her shirt. It hung to her thighs.

“I like a clean living space. I was raised in a house where everyone pitched in for all the cooking and cleaning.” He threw his sweats back in the drawer. “You know what? We’re going to shower first, then eat.”

Alaina bit her lip to keep the smile hidden. He was working himself into a fine tizzy, and it amused her to see it. She trailed him to the kitchen first. He extracted a plastic baggie from a drawer and unbuttoned her shirt.

She looked down, watching his progress. “What are you doing?”

“You can’t shower with this on,” he explained. The impatient scowl was back. “You have fantastic tits. I’m all for carting you to Royal Oak in a wet, white shirt, but I think you wouldn’t like it so much.” He rolled it into a small bundle and shoved it into the bag. Then he secured it with duct tape. It dangled from the metal links between the handcuffs. “That should stay dry.”

It amazed her that he could be so thoughtful, so indignant, and so condescending all at the same time. He probably thought there was nothing wrong with the way he complimented her breasts.

In the bathroom, he held out a hair tie. "Do you want to wash your hair or put it up?" When she stared at the pink elastic circle, he exhaled sharply. "It's Sophia's. I'm sure she won't care if you use it. I also have some of her clothes here. I'd offer you her underwear, but I don't think women like to share those things."

Alaina took the band and put her hair up, studying him silently the entire time. She wondered if she should have insisted he eat first. Zach also became cranky when his blood sugar was low.

The spray of water was warmer than she liked, but she didn't say anything. He held their hands with her shirt out of direct contact with water as he soaped first her torso, then his. Silence fell as he cleaned the smell of sweat and sex from both their bodies.

"You know," she said at last, breaking the pensive silence, "you kinda did the same thing to me. You climbed up on my roof and inspected my house like I had no idea how to identify what needed to be repaired."

Reaching behind her, he snagged the showerhead and rinsed away the soap on her body. "You had no idea what needed to be repaired. You didn't even know that your roof needed tar paper in order to be water tight."

"I didn't put that roof on," she said primly. "I had the garage roof replaced, but the previous owners were the ones who did the house's roof."

"Alaina."

She ignored the warning in his voice. "I know how to handle insurance adjusters and contractors. I'm not completely ignorant about construction matters. I can read a contract, and I can see where my drywall has water damage."

"What about your structural problems?" He gritted the words through clenched teeth. "What about the beams in your attic that are

rotting away? They're supposed to be holding up your roof. Your insulation is wet. You have moisture where you shouldn't. If you don't completely replace all of that, you're going to have mold. I'm surprised you don't already."

Alaina's eyes widened. "You're really pissed about this, aren't you?"

"Yes," he growled, shoving her against the wall. His hands rested on either side of her head, holding her right hand captive. The tile was cool against her back.

She regarded him warily. She wasn't afraid he would hurt her, but she had no idea where this display of temper would take them. Perversely, his display of such strong feeling aroused her. Did this mean she had to turn in her feminist card? "Are you afraid I'll ask you to stop seeing other people? I won't."

His hand rose, hovering next to her cheek as if he couldn't decide how he wanted to touch her. It dropped away. "I haven't been with another woman since you walked into my life."

She doubted he actually remembered the day they met almost as much as she doubted he had been celibate for four months. "Bullshit."

"April twentieth. Sophia and I met with you to do the paperwork for the grant. I had a date that night. I didn't even kiss her." His eyes flickered between her eyes and her lips. "I couldn't stop thinking about you."

Alaina was struck speechless. She hadn't begun coming to the sessions until the beginning of June. He hadn't asked her out until July.

"It took me some time to get up the courage to ask you out. You seemed so uninterested in me. Even afterward, I tried to go out a couple of times. It didn't work out. I want to be with you, Alaina. I don't know why you hate me, and I'm getting sick and tired of this low opinion of me you seem hell-bent on having. I am not an asshole, and I'm not stupid. Maybe I don't have a PhD, but I am just as intelligent as you are."

She stared at him, vaguely noting the water washing over them both. It might have turned icy, and it wouldn't have mattered. The heat darkening his chocolate eyes and emanating from his body warmed her from the inside out. "I never doubted your intelligence," she breathed. Her breasts strained, yearning for his touch. "And you are damn sexy when you're mad."

His lips compressed into a thin line. He turned, shoving his head under the shower's spray. "And you have the nerve to accuse me of seeing you as a piece of meat."

Wary, but no less aroused, Alaina said nothing.

Soap and water cascaded from his hair. "That's it?" he said. "You have nothing to say to that, Dr. Miles? No clever psychobabble response?"

"I think we should wait until after breakfast to continue this discussion."

The quietness of her response must have penetrated because he said nothing until they were both dressed and in the kitchen. Alaina wore her clothes from the previous day. Daniel pulled on a fresh pair of jeans, but he remained shirtless. The handcuffs prevented him from dressing completely.

She helped gather the ingredients for French toast. Daniel skillfully tackled cooking duties with his one free hand. Next to him, Alaina browned sausage. She didn't care for the little pieces of intestine filled with spiced meat, but Daniel needed more than just bread dipped in egg to balance his blood sugar and restore his mood.

Seated at his table, she waited until he was half-finished with his meal before speaking. "Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"I don't rate an apology?" He popped half a link into his mouth.

His defensiveness wasn't gone. She felt a bit on the petty side. "If I don't rate an apology after all this time, then neither do you."

He finished chewing and took a huge swig of orange juice before answering. "I'm not going to apologize for being concerned about

your well-being. You wouldn't even have called your insurance company if it wasn't for me."

A long stream of air exited her nose, a sound of disgust and frustration. "I'm not talking about that."

"Then what?" His steely glare penetrated deep. "List my sins, Alaina. I've done everything I can think of to get you to like me, yet you still seem to concentrate on my flaws. I have no idea why you're here with me."

She held up her wrist in response. "You wanted me here, Daniel. You came to the café, staked your claim, and then brought me back here and made sure I couldn't leave."

"Our date," he snapped. "The one night you looked at me and your smile was genuine, not that measured crap you use on everybody else. I did something to piss you off, and I have no fucking idea what it was. You don't seem inclined to let me in on that secret."

Alaina looked away, sadness sweeping over her. When they were having sex, she and Daniel were so compatible. It wasn't until they spoke to one another that things fell apart. "This is a mistake." When she turned back to him, her composure had returned. "I think it's time we headed out to your sister's house."

His hand closed over hers. "Lainie."

She stared at his hand, reveling in the warmth enclosing her fist. "I don't want to argue with you, Daniel. I enjoyed last night and this morning with you. I think we argue because we're just two very different people. I'm ten years older than you. I'm in a different stage of my life. You're still exploring your options. I'm at the point where I'm looking for someone who complements me, who understands and respects me. I'm not judging you, Danny. There's nothing wrong with the way you live your life. We're just not compatible."

He regarded her with somber eyes and stiff shoulders. "I disagree."

Alaina smiled and turned her hand to grasp his. "I know. You're opinionated and tenacious. I admire those qualities."

“You have those qualities,” he interrupted.

“I know,” she said. “It’s another reason we disagree so easily.”

He rose, gathered their empty plates, and led her to the sink to deal with the dishes. “So, your theory is that we don’t get along because we’re so alike, yet we have nothing in common.”

He rinsed the plates and loaded them into the dishwasher. Alaina didn’t see how she could help without getting in the way. She handed him the pan he used to make the French toast. “That’s accurate.”

“I treat you like meat. You treat me like meat. I stereotype and underestimate you. You stereotype and underestimate me.”

She winced at his use of straightforward terms. They sounded like such horrible people.

He turned to her, grabbed her ass, and pressed his pelvis into hers. “We blow each other’s minds sexually.”

Alaina’s breath caught. He did blow her mind. “That’s not enough to base a relationship on.”

He leaned closer. His lips brushed against hers. “I am husband material, Alaina.”

“I know,” she whispered, finding it difficult to breathe when all she wanted to do was throw her arms around his neck and mash her lips against his. “Just not mine.”

Daniel’s eyes closed, not quite hiding a flash of pain. “Don’t make that decision yet, Alaina. We could have a really good thing here.”

She could think of nothing to say.

“All successful relationships take work. Anything worthwhile takes work.”

Alaina didn’t have it in her to end their folly just yet. She nodded, unsure as to exactly what her consent meant.

Chapter 11

They took her car. Getting inside proved to be an acrobatic feat that wasn't at all unpleasant. Daniel slid into the passenger seat first, forcing her to bend over him as he adjusted the seat backward to accommodate his long legs. Alaina tried to climb over him, something both difficult in her skirt and impossible given the amount of head room leftover in her Sonata with Daniel already inside. Until that moment, she always thought her sedan was a good size.

Daniel chuckled as he grasped her hips and pulled her so that she sat across his lap. "You don't have to avoid contact with me, Alaina. That was kind of the whole point of the handcuffs. I want you close to me."

She had no problem resting her weight on him. Though she wasn't petite, he often made her feel as if she was. He seemed to appreciate the voluptuous curves that made her reluctant to look in the mirror when she wasn't wearing clothes.

This position put her face at the same level as his. She liked not having to tilt her neck back to look up at him. "Did you call Sophia to tell her we were coming?"

"She's at work," he said. "She said to stop by anytime."

"But you didn't call?" she clarified.

"She didn't say to call." He smiled at her, amused. "What's the matter, Lainie? Afraid you'll have to spend all day chained to me?"

She smiled back, taking his teasing in the manner intended. "No. I'm afraid of spending another day in this shirt. It's beginning to have an unpleasant odor."

He leaned in, planting his head between her breasts to inhale her scent. She was right about him being a breast man. “Worse comes to worst, we can launder it in the shower.”

Swinging her leg over the console and gears, she slid into the driver’s seat. “I’m sure a locksmith can take care of this beforehand. Or you probably have something in that tool belt of yours that can cut through the links.”

His grin was undiminished. “You’re assuming I want to be free of you.”

The drive from Daniel’s studio in Northville to Sophia’s office at Sensual Secrets didn’t take very long, even though they caught the tail end of the morning traffic rush. Daniel held the hand linked to his and used the other to search through her satellite radio stations.

He stopped on a Snow Patrol song and settled back in his seat. “I have classes running until nine tonight.”

Alaina navigated the convoluted exit ramp from 696 to Main Street in Royal Oak. She pursed her lips. “Okay.”

“I take a dinner break at five. Can I see you then?”

She shook her head. “I have dinner with Zach Thursday nights.”

“Friday?”

“I think I’m supposed to be doing something with Sophia on Friday. She wasn’t very clear about what.” Finally, she made the turn to head north on Main. “Which parking garage is closest?”

Daniel directed her to the one closest to Sensual Secrets.

She found a parking spot almost immediately. Daniel had her seat belt off before she could kill the engine and on his lap as soon as she did. She pressed her free hand to his bare shoulder, wanting one last intimate touch before they headed out into public.

A lock of dark hair curled behind his ear. Lifting a hand, she took that short lock between her fingers and stroked the silkiness there.

His lips closed over hers. The kiss was deep. It melted her bones and made her tremble from the feelings behind it, yet he hadn’t said one word about seeing her again.

When it ended, she sighed and reached for the door handle. The car was becoming hot and stuffy.

Daniel clapped a hand over hers.

“Why did you get mad at me on our date?”

With a roll of the eyes, she pushed the door open. A breeze moved the still air. She wanted to exit the car, but he held her on his lap with two hands on her waist.

His face was grim, and his jaw was set. “Lainie, I need to know what I did to piss you off so completely. You’re still carrying a chip on your shoulder about it, too. It’s going to come up sooner or later, and I’d rather we clear the air now.”

She clamped her teeth together, grinding them in frustration. “Fine. You ordered dinner for me without even asking me what I wanted. What kind of person does that?”

His expression didn’t change. “You didn’t want the flounder?”

“That’s not the point,” she gritted out.

“It kind of is the point, Lainie.” His lips flattened in a look she was coming to know well. “I took you to that restaurant because you said it was your favorite. I ordered the flounder because you said it was the best thing you’d ever eaten. You called it a slice of heaven. I wanted to show you I listen when you talk.”

That took the wind from her sails. In her mind, she could see the figurative white sheets change from billowing to flaccid. She had stereotyped him more than she ever thought. She’d misinterpreted his gesture.

“I’m sorry. I misunderstood your intention.”

“I’m sorry, too,” he said. His apology came when she no longer thought it necessary. “Even if it was your favorite dish, I should have asked. I shouldn’t have assumed. I think that’s a mistake both of us are guilty of making.”

Alaina’s nod was small. “My father used to do that to me and my mom. Whenever we went out to eat, he would order our food. When I

was sixteen, I went on my first date. I was dumbfounded and flattered when my date expected me to choose my own food.”

His silent stare was too knowing. Somehow, he understood things she hadn’t said. “Does he still do that to you?”

Alaina shook her head. “We’ve called an uneasy truce since Zach was born. My parents are older. They don’t have the energy to keep up with an eight-year-old boy. He spends a lot of time with me.”

He ran his free hand up and down her leg in a gesture meant to soothe. She liked the way he made her feel when he touched her. “How about you tell me right away when I do something that pisses you off? Waiting two months to clear the air has robbed us of a lot of time we could have spent together.”

She slipped her hand into his. Did this mean he was angling for a relationship? “Deal. Now, let’s go find your sister. I have a meeting in an hour.”

Accompanying a handcuffed, shirtless man down the street in Royal Oak turned out to be a nonevent. They passed people dressed in full bondage gear, and they passed people dressed for the office. Alaina and Daniel didn’t stand out in the least. They passed by cafés with outdoor seating. It was a lovely day. Alaina wished she had time to lunch with Daniel.

Sensual Secrets was three blocks from the parking garage in a brick building sandwiched between other brick buildings. A sign on the door indicated admittance by appointment only.

Daniel pounded on the door to the exclusive bakery. It was opened by a rounded woman whose apron was covered in some kind of white powder. Her friendly smile morphed to a perfect circle at the sight of Daniel wearing just jeans.

Daniel ignored her appreciative stare. “Sophie is expecting us.”

The woman stepped aside, holding the door open with her back as Alaina and Daniel entered the store.

“Danny!”

A petite woman wearing a dusty apron hurried over to the door. She shook the bangs of her pixie cut out of her eyes, blowing away some of the more stubborn, straight brown strands. Without hesitating, she threw her arms around Daniel's neck and smacked a loud kiss on his cheek.

"Hey, Gin. How's it going?"

"Couldn't be better. Your sister has created a completely new invoice and billing system. It's all computerized, and it's so much easier than what we were doing."

Alaina couldn't decide whether to glare at the woman or stare quizzically. She was a bundle of energy in a tank top, apron, and jeans. She was very pretty and petite. Though she was a couple of inches taller than Alaina, her slim build made Alaina feel dumpy and fat, especially after the way Daniel accepted her enthusiastic greeting. Yet she seemed harmless.

"Ginny, this is Alaina."

A squeal sounded from across the room. The trio turned to find Sophia hurrying toward them. She wore jeans and a light blue T-shirt with a grayscale picture of Drew Snow's face on the front. *Sensual Secrets* was printed in a fancy script on either side of his face. "The handcuffs worked. That's fabulous."

Studying the metal encircling their wrists, Ginny frowned. "I've never tried that before." She moved her hand, trying out different positions. She glanced between the pair, puzzled. "I can't see how that's better than cuffing her to the bed."

"I wasn't thinking," Daniel said. "I'll do that next time."

Ginny tilted her head to the side. "Yeah, Drew said you were awfully vanilla. Do you need some pointers? Nobody is better in bed with a woman than me. I'd be happy to help out."

Mouth agape, Alaina stared at Ginny. Had she really just invited herself into bed with Alaina and Daniel? It did help her decide whether or not she should be jealous of the pixie-like creature. Ginny was obviously a lesbian.

Sophia's laugh bubbled out of her. "Gin, you really gotta start thinking about what you say before you say it." To Alaina, Sophia smiled, but it turned into a barely-suppressed yawn. "Ginny didn't mean she wants to sleep with you. She was speaking theoretically."

Ginny's smile wasn't at all bashful. "I'm married in four states and three countries, just not this state or this country. Michigan sucks that way."

Daniel had been rendered speechless by Ginny's offer. "I'm so glad I don't have to respond to that."

Sophia held out a small key. "Do you want me to do the honors?"

Without consulting Daniel, Alaina held out her hand. She was distinctly uncomfortable in this situation. "Please."

Two clicks and they were free. "Thanks," Daniel said.

Sophia held out the key and the cuffs. "Do you want to keep them?" Barely contained amusement threatened Sophia's calm demeanor.

"No." Daniel's ears burned red. "I'm not into that kind of stuff."

Sophia raised a brow at Alaina. "You want them?"

Alaina shook her head. She had tried light bondage before. It did nothing for her. However, Daniel standing next to her in all his bare-chested glory definitely did something for her. She was going to need to reschedule that meeting because she definitely needed some quality time alone in the shower.

A piece of cloth landed on Daniel's chest. Alaina peered around Sophia to find Drew Snow standing two feet away. She had seen him once before when he came to the studio to pick up Sophia, and she had caught his show on TV several times. The women in the group had fixated on him and nothing else for the remainder of the night. Even after Sophia excused herself, Alaina had limited success in turning the topic away from their local celebrity.

Drew Snow was sex personified. Broad shoulders tapered to a trim waist. His build was very much like Daniel's. However, where Daniel turned his charm on and off, choosing to affect an

unapproachable air much of the time, Drew didn't seem to have an off switch.

He wrapped an arm around Sophia's waist, parking his hand possessively on her hip. "Put the shirt on, Dan. You're compromising productivity."

Daniel glanced at Alaina. She shrugged. "I've had a productive morning."

Unfolding the shirt, he held it up. Drew's face smiled out from the front of it. He threw it back to Drew. "I'm not wearing your face on my chest."

"Drew," Sophia said, grabbing his attention by laying her fingertips along his jaw. "This is Alaina, Danny's girlfriend."

Alaina felt sixteen again, a feeling she didn't particularly like. The way Sophia drew out the word *girlfriend* was decidedly juvenile. Plus, Daniel hadn't said anything about wanting a relationship. So far, they had slept together and nothing else. Perhaps there was a future for them, but Sophia really jumped the gun with this.

Drew's hands enveloped Alaina's before she even thought to offer them. "I've heard so many good things about you, Alaina. It's a pleasure to finally put a face to the image. You and Daniel will have to come for dinner. How about Friday night?"

Sophia punched Drew in the arm, a big grin splashed across her face. "Sorry, Tiger. She's mine on Friday."

"She's coming out with us?" The excitement behind Ginny's question took the sting out of it. "Oh, that's fabulous. All the Spencers are in Kentucky this month. We could use another pretty face."

Ginny had a quality about her that made Alaina not mind being described by her physical appearance.

"Next Thursday." Drew hadn't switched topics. The skin between his brows creased. He was likely already planning the meal. "Do you like seafood?"

Alaina glanced at Daniel. "Thursdays are my nights with Zach."

Daniel nodded thoughtfully. "Does he like seafood?"

“Who is Zach?” Sophia frowned at Alaina as she inserted her indignant question in line ahead of Daniel’s.

Well-versed in the art of diffusing situations, Alaina addressed Sophia before she could take up arms in her brother’s defense. “He’s my eight-year-old brother.” To Daniel and Drew, she said, “Saturday or next Friday would be better for me.”

Sophia’s stare had Alaina squirming. She had no idea what Sophia was thinking. The woman was difficult to read under the best of circumstances.

Daniel shot his sister a warning look. Sophia’s posture altered immediately.

“Alaina has to be at work, so we’re going to take off,” Daniel said. His hand rested on the small of Alaina’s back, a move that was both possessive and reassuring. A few days ago, she would have found it invasive and controlling. Even the possessiveness of his action didn’t bother her.

“We’ll see you next Friday, right?” Drew said, flashing that familiar smile. “We have plans for Saturday. Daniel, you can get one of your assistants to cover your classes, right?”

“I’ll swing it,” he said, steering her out the door.

Sophia grabbed her arm. “I’m picking you up at six tomorrow. I’ll get directions to your house from Danny.”

“Dress to kill, sweet thing. You’ll have men falling at your feet all night long.” Ginny’s catlike smile all but purred. “Unless we go to a gay bar. Then you’ll have to contend with the women.”

What had she agreed to do? Overwhelmed and a little numb, Alaina nodded. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Chapter 12

A knock on the front door startled Daniel from his thoughts. He had been in the midst of spraying the practice mats with a fungicide cleaning solution. The vast number of bare feet trudging through the studio made this weekly practice a priority.

The last of his students had left over an hour earlier. A glance around told him nobody had left anything behind. Alaina was likely at home preparing for bed. They had been up pretty late the night before. If Evan had been successful Tuesday night, then Alaina would have been up late that night as well. Daniel wondered for the hundredth time why Evan hadn't yet called him. Alaina had given no indication that anything had happened between her and Evan.

Daniel wondered what she wore for sleep. Did she have actual pajamas or did she prefer something from the pile of T-shirts that were on the chair in her room when he had been there Monday?

He ruled out the idea of something sexy or skimpy, but that didn't stop him from imagining her dressed in a see-through teddy. It would be white. He noticed she never wore red. He liked that. Nothing to compete with that silky auburn hair.

Knocking from the vicinity of the front door, more insistent this time, caught his attention.

Tamping down the stirring below the waistband of his practice sweats, he peeked around the corner. The door was all glass, but only half of the front wall had windows. Though he knew Alaina wouldn't show up without calling, he hoped it was her. If it was anyone else, he would ignore the tapping. He wasn't in the mood for visitors.

It was Sophia. She knocked louder.

With a sigh, he revealed himself. Flipping the locks, he wrenched open the door. "It's after ten, Sophie. What are you doing here?"

She breezed past him, carrying the scent of vanilla and cinnamon with her. "I knew you'd be up."

"So?"

She waited for him to lock the door. "I thought you'd want to talk about this morning."

When they were teens, Daniel didn't talk to Sophia about his love life because half the girls he liked had been her friends. After her rape, he didn't bring up the subject because his thoughts inevitably led back to the guilt he felt for giving his blessing to that relationship. Charlie had been one of his best friends. Now he wanted to kill the bastard. That feeling didn't abate, no matter how much time passed.

Why had he broken the long silence by admitting his problems with Alaina to her and Drew?

"You could have called."

She grinned at him, her brown eyes twinkling with delight. "You wouldn't have talked to me, Danny. I know you too well. This'll work face-to-face."

He hated this touchy-feely crap. To keep that thought under wraps, he bit the inside of his cheek. "There's nothing to talk about."

"You've been lusting after Alaina for at least a month. When did you find out she had a kid?"

He'd had a crush on Alaina for four months, but he wasn't about to correct Sophia. The last thing she needed was more ammunition. "He's her brother, but I think they do have more of a mother-son relationship. She made dinner for me Monday. I saw drawings on her refrigerator, and then I saw his room." He also decided against mentioning he only saw it because he searched her house for water damage after Alaina had expressly forbidden his involvement.

Sophia's head tilted. Her hair shifted, falling to obscure part of her face. She brushed it aside. "Have you met him?"

Daniel's patience was running thin, and not only because he knew Sophia was bound to ask questions to which he didn't know the answers. "No. We're not even officially dating. She's being cagey about being with me. What's with the third degree?"

She came closer. With her heels on, she didn't have to tilt her head much to look him in the eye. Her hands came up to rest on either side of his face. "Danny, you've never had a serious relationship in your life. Now you're dating a woman who is ten years older than you. What's going on?"

The brush-off he wanted to say didn't come to his lips. His brain thought it and willed it to his tongue, but his tongue didn't listen. "When did you know Drew was the one?"

Sophia chewed at her lip. "I think I knew the first time I saw him, but it took me a lot longer to admit it to myself." She released her hold on him and stepped back. That annoying look she affected when she dissected him settled on her face. "You're thinking she's the one? Are you in love with her?"

He shrugged, but he knew it was a lie. He knew exactly how he felt about Alaina. "I knew the first time I met her. That whole time we met with her, I just wanted to... I don't know. Something." He ran a hand through his hair.

"Why didn't you?"

"She didn't seem interested. It wasn't until that Wednesday session before we went out that I got up the nerve to ask her out. I was shocked when she said yes."

"That was the date I interrupted." She perched on the merchandise counter, scooting back to sit cross-legged. "You were a jerk to her."

Daniel shook his head. "That was a misunderstanding. We cleared it up."

She was quiet for a minute, lips pursed in thought. "So, what now? You're in love with her. Are you ready for the whole sphere of domesticity thing?"

He laughed softly. Hoisting himself up, he joined her on the counter. Sophia watched him, waiting for him to speak. He liked that about her. She was a good listener.

"I don't know about that yet. I'm taking it slow. I don't want to mess it up."

Sophia nodded, but her thoughts appeared to be a million miles away. Finally, she looked up at him. "What about Evan?"

Daniel's breath caught. He didn't know how to answer that question. Evan had a definite role in Daniel's life. He couldn't imagine living without his best friend and lover. Not seeing Evan or hearing from him for these past two days was beginning to take its toll on Daniel.

Finally, he settled for an evasion. "What *about* Evan?"

"Look, don't take this the wrong way because I'm totally cool with it, but I always thought there was something between you two." She gripped his arm, which was a good thing. The urge to bolt was almost too strong to ignore.

"I don't know why you would think that." Another evasion. He felt like shit for denying Evan, but it was all he could think to do.

She chewed her lip for a moment. "I saw you guys kissing one time. I've never seen you so passionate about anyone. Pieces of the puzzle clicked into place." Sophia sighed. "Look, Danny, I want you to be happy. But I can't help wondering if you're fixated on Alaina because she's older and maybe she won't notice you screwing around with Evan because she'll feel so lucky to have you in her life. If that's the case, you're underestimating her. Also, that's mean to do to both her and Evan."

"Sophia." He growled her name as a warning. He didn't want to admit anything.

"Mom and Dad are perfectly aware that Evan has a thing for you. I don't think they'd be too shocked if you guys wanted to be together."

“I want to be with Alaina.” He cut off the flow of her words. If she said much more, he might break down and admit thoughts and feelings he’d never allowed to manifest completely.

Evan’s ultimatum burned in his chest. Time was running out, and the motherfucker hadn’t bothered to call him since Tuesday morning.

* * * *

A long string of hot cheese stretched from Zach’s mouth to the rest of his pizza slice. He sucked at it, trying to find where it might end.

Laughing, Alaina reached across the table and broke it with her finger. A bit of it wrapped around her finger, so she popped it into her mouth. “Mmmm. I love cheese.”

“That’s my cheese.”

She lifted a brow at him and smacked her lips. He loved cheese pizza as much as she did. Of course, he wouldn’t eat any other toppings, so when he was around, she went without mushrooms and peppers. “If you want it back, you’ll have to come after it.”

That challenge proved too much for Zach to resist, as she knew it would. His eyes narrowed as he studied her with that calculated look that didn’t quite fit his face. She resisted the urge to laugh because she knew what his next move would be.

He sank down beneath the table. She thought he would attack her from below, but he surprised her by popping up in the aisle next to the table. The bench seat dead-ended at a wall on one end. The back and the table blocked her escape from those directions. Zach’s maneuver boxed her in.

He pounced, launching himself across the short distance. She caught him and used the force of his attack to twist him in her arms. Banding one arm across his chest, she went for the ticklish spots on his sides. He squirmed and giggled, but he sacrificed his defenses to stick a finger in her mouth.

“You nut,” she said through her laughter. “I already swallowed it.”

All bets were off now that he had no other goal. He retaliated by tickling her sides. They were, unfortunately, ticklish in all the same spots. She shrieked, and Zach nearly upended the table with his flailing.

“I think we better stop,” she said as she glanced around. Not too many people were staring at them. Good thing this establishment catered to kids.

He returned to his side of the table, but not before stealing half the cheese on her slice. Opening his mouth, he regarded her with twinkling eyes and lowered the gooey mass of cheese inside.

She let him have this victory. Their parents had never been the kind of people who played around or had much fun. Time hadn’t changed a thing.

As if he read her mind, he grinned big. “We have fun together, don’t we?”

Alaina returned his grin. “Always.”

“Even though you make me do my homework and study and clean my room and stuff.”

She grabbed another slice of pizza from the tray between them and dabbed it with a napkin to soak away some of the grease. “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.”

“I asked Dad if I could come live with you, and he said maybe.”

The little pools of grease gone, Alaina set aside the orange-stained napkin. This wasn’t the first time he’d broached the topic. “Zach, don’t you think Mom and Dad would miss you if you did that?”

He regarded her with a solemn expression. “Dad said I might as well be your kid because you missed your window of opportunity and you’ll never have kids of your own.”

If Zach lived with her, then she wouldn’t have to spend so much time explaining the ways in which their father’s statements were incorrect. He already spent several days each week at her house.

She took a bite to buy time. Knowing her father, he had also ranted about how no man would ever marry her because she spent too much time filling her head with nonsense. Women who could support themselves turned men off.

“Did someone mistake him for your grandfather again?”

Zach licked his fingers and sucked away some of his pop before answering. “That happens all the time. He doesn’t correct them anymore.”

Their father also had an incredible ego. He had been proud to impregnate his wife. For months, he went around telling everyone that he might have been sixty, but he was still a stud. “What about Mom?”

Zach shrugged. “Mom’s always taking a nap or going to the doctor or bingo or getting her hair done. She doesn’t take me with her.”

Alaina held in a sigh. She knew from the beginning she would need to be more than a sister to Zach. Her parents hadn’t been too active in her life. Age had already slowed them down before Zach came along. She loved the little guy so much it hurt.

“Alaina?”

She snapped out of her thoughts. “Yeah?”

“Karate lessons start on Monday, right?”

She shook her head. The next session didn’t begin for two or three more weeks. “They start the week after school starts or maybe the week after. I’m not sure.”

He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “Dad said karate is for pansies, and I should play a real sport like football or basketball. What’s a pansy?”

Unfortunately, this wasn’t the first time she’d been forced to explain a derogatory term to Zach. She took a deep breath and tried to figure out the best way to explain her father’s idiocy without calling him anything nasty.

* * * *

Construction on her house should have been completed for the day by the time she arrived home from her dinner with Zach. It didn't take too long to eat pizza and play a few video games. The sun had only just begun to blind her below the visor in her car. Yet Evan paced around the back of her house with a tape measure and a clipboard, gazing up at the window to her office.

He turned, an expression of surprise on his face, when her car passed him on the way to the garage. She parked inside, using the side door leading to the back yard to exit as she usually did.

What was he doing there still? Either he was as dedicated as Daniel said, or he was waiting for her to get home.

Standing in the shadow cast by her house in the evening sun, Alaina smiled at Evan as he approached. Not knowing what he expected, she worked to keep it friendly.

He lifted his baseball cap, and a shaft of sunlight glinted momentarily from his hair, disappearing once he joined her in the shadows. "I didn't know what time you'd be getting home. I wanted to talk to you about some of the interior repairs so I could finalize a supply list."

Alaina's smile cracked a bit. In her mind, she could see the crevices opening, and she could hear the porcelain as it shattered. He was there to discuss business. Why did that fact resonate like a blow to the chest? Just because Daniel seemed to be interested in continuing to sleep with her didn't mean Evan felt the same. Perhaps they had compared notes and found out what a slut she was. Or maybe they flipped a coin to see who won the right to have her again.

Neither of them were forever material, not for her, and she was playing a dangerous game.

"Of course," she said. "Come inside."

He followed her, setting his hat on the counter just inside the back door. "Do you always work late on Thursday?"

Alaina set her briefcase on the kitchen table and shrugged out of her jacket. Office dress was a style that happened in the air-conditioning. It didn't care whether the hot August sun turned her house to an oven or not. "I had dinner with my brother. We have a standing date for the Thursdays he's not with me."

Evan nodded, watching her with a thoughtful expression.

She didn't want to know what he was thinking. Jerking her thumb toward the stairs, she ended the stilted conversation. "I'm going to change. You know your way around, right?"

Changing her clothes turned out to be a tricky endeavor. The sight of her rumpled sheets reminded her of rolling in them with Evan. He was a phenomenal lover who understood and enjoyed the same things she did. Drifting into the bathroom, heat suffused her body, sending messages to her pussy that short-circuited just before they arrived. Now that she had showered with both Daniel and Evan, the memories clashed, dueling for dominance. Perhaps Evan would want to shower with her again.

Alaina tried to shake them away. Nothing good could come from this game. Daniel had indicated an interest in seeing her again.

As she tugged a tank top over her head, a realization dawned. Evan didn't need a shower. His skin and his clothes were clean.

She jerked her favorite shorts over her hips and zipped them. They made her ass look exceptionally good, but she wondered if it was necessary. She ran a hand through her curls and tightened her ponytail. That morning it had been in a French braid, but those annoying curls always seemed to pull free by the end of the day.

Once downstairs, the metallic scrape of a tape measure rewinding pulled Alaina in the direction of her office. Evan squatted in front of the window behind her desk, a pencil clasped between his teeth as he inspected something on the low sill. In the summer, the big window let in plenty of light. In the winter, condensation built up on the panes something awful.

"Find anything interesting?"

He removed the pencil from his mouth and pushed himself to standing. Powerful quads flexed, pulling the denim tight against his thighs. "Mold."

Alaina sighed. "It's usually gone this time of the year. I scrub it with bleach, but it comes back each spring."

"Seals are broken. The mold is in the wood. You need new windows. I'm going to look at all of them to see the extent of the problem."

She wished he wouldn't. Sure, his company was new, and her house could use some updates, but she wasn't rolling in the necessary cash. Still, he wasn't looking at her like he was interested in her windows. She folded her arms under her breasts and leaned against the side of the desk separating her from Evan.

"Evan, why are you really here? Contractors don't go home, clean themselves up, and go back to a job site for measurements."

He peeled his eyes from her breasts with obvious difficulty. She knew this tank rode low and her pose pushed those beauties together enough to strain against the thin fabric. He slotted his pencil onto the top of the clipboard and threw it on the desktop.

Alaina had one of those hard mats on the floor below her chair to protect the carpet and make rolling the chair back and forth easier. Short legs left her without leverage when it came to pushing it in and out on carpet using only her feet.

The chair made a smooth scraping sound as Evan pulled it out and sat down heavily. He sighed and bit his lip, but his shoulders didn't droop. For the longest time, he rubbed one hand over his thigh, watching it move.

"Have you ever met someone, and it seems like you've always known them?"

Alaina nodded. Meeting Camilla had been like that. Though she had only known the woman for a few years, it seemed like they had been friends since childhood. But she knew he wasn't talking about a

relationship like that. He was talking about them, about how they seemed to know one another's bodies before the first kiss.

Evan looked up in time to catch her nonverbal response. His eyes penetrated to her soul. "Have you ever had sex with someone, and it was so incredible that you can't get them out of your mind? And it wasn't just great sex, but it was the kind of connection where you develop an instant addiction?"

Numbly, Alaina nodded. Her situation was a little more complex, and she was addicted to sex with two different men who were completely ignorant of the other's role in her life, but she knew exactly what he meant. Even when she had been with Daniel, thoughts of Evan had invaded her mind. Thoughts of having both of them together at the same time robbed her of breath.

She broke Evan's spell over her as embarrassed heat crept up her neck. His feet moved as he walked the chair closer. He tugged at her crossed arms and pulled her onto his lap. She let him.

"Alaina, I can't get you out of my head." His fingertips grazed a path up and down her arm, the soft touch generating tremors and gooseflesh. "I like your spirit and your sense of humor. I like the way you blush when I tell you I like having sex with you, yet two days ago you broke out a bunch of sex toys and used them in ways that I'm sure are illegal in many states."

The giggle erupting from her chest was more of the nervous variety than anything else. If he only knew that thoughts of having both of men together had caused the blush. Playing with a few vibrators wasn't enough to embarrass her. She folded her hands together in her lap and concentrated on the warm feelings seeping from everywhere her body pressed into his.

The fingertips on her arm moved to follow the scooped neckline of her tank. When he caressed the top of her breast, her breath caught, and she closed her eyes to focus the sensation. Heat seeped through his cotton shirt, branding her arm, hip, and thigh. The arm he looped

around her back and waist for support seared the clothes from her body, or at least it felt like it. She sat perfectly still.

His thumb brushed the tip of her nipple through the layers of shirt and bra, pebbling it instantly. Sparks arced from there to her pussy. Air hissed from between her teeth.

“You’re a tigress, Alaina.” He flicked the other nipple with the same results.

Though her breast swelled, seeking more of his touch, she struggled to remain still. She did her best imitation of a derisive snort. “More like a cougar.”

He chuckled. The motion shook her closer to him. “Whatever the title, you’re a wild thing, and I can’t seem to get enough.”

Abandoning her nipples, he used his free hand to turn her face toward him. Her lips parted, anticipating his kiss. She didn’t know if it would be slow and teasing or hard and possessive, but she welcomed either.

He hovered an inch away. Heat from his breath fanned across her lips and chin, bringing the promise of Evan’s brand of passion. Just when Alaina thought she would go insane from waiting, he adjusted his grip on her jaw. His thumb brushed across her lips, stealing her ability to breathe.

“So soft, so beautiful. I’ve never felt about a woman the way I feel about you, Alaina. What is it about you that makes me question everything I ever assumed to be true?” The words whispered across her skin and her consciousness.

Alaina had no idea what he meant, but his question flew from her mind as he captured her mouth at long last. He slanted his lips over hers in a tender kiss that turned hard as passion grew. His hand dropped away to slip under the hem of her shorts, cup her hip, and pull her closer.

A soft moan, half sigh, half protest, caught in the back of her throat as he ended the kiss. The fingertips on her thigh moved in small circles, and he rested his forehead against hers.

“Tell me you want this.”

Need made the hand she brought to his cheek tremble. “I want this.”

His lips claimed her again. There was something both desperate and deliberate in the way he seemed to savor every second of their kiss. He let the heat build slowly, coaxing it on the path toward inferno, but not hurrying it along.

Alaina shifted gears much too easily. Evan was such a different kind of lover. Where Daniel was fast and frantic, driven by passion even when he slowed down, Evan stayed in the moment. How could such different men make her so completely horny?

Evan’s hands explored the exposed skin of her arms and legs. He caressed her shoulders and traced her collarbone with his fingertips. Need trailed in his wake. She shifted, trying to follow his touch, trying to capture the unspoken promises he made.

When his mouth released hers, Alaina realized she hadn’t been breathing, and she could only gasp as he found the sensitive places on her neck and shoulder. She threaded her fingers through his short hair, holding him loosely because she knew a stronger grip wouldn’t hurry him along.

By the time he lifted her shirt over her head, Alaina was tight with need. Her pussy wept for want of attention, and he hadn’t even removed her bra.

He tilted her, cradling her head and back with one strong arm while the other tantalized the oft-neglected skin of her stomach. Alaina stiffened, suddenly nervous that he would find out she wasn’t flat there. Then she let the thought fly away. He’d seen her naked before, and he hadn’t done anything except call her beautiful.

He enveloped her nipple through the thin satin of her bra with his hot, wet mouth. Vibrations echoed through her body, pinging through her system only to end up in her core. Alaina moaned, so close to an orgasm, and he hadn’t yet touched her pussy.

“Evan.” His name felt so right falling from her lips like that. She said it again and again, the syllables as erotic against her tongue as his tongue had been against her clit two nights ago.

He paid the same attention to her other nipple. She had no idea if he heard the way she said his name or not. Her lips and tongue moved to form the words, but the rush of blood in her ears drowned out any sounds she might have been saying.

At long last, the heel of his hand came to rest on her mound. Alaina rolled her hips and ground against the light pressure. The hard denim of her jean shorts dug into the sweet spot just south of her clit, but it wasn't enough. She needed more.

He shifted, the movement as relaxed as everything else he'd been doing. The world tilted again, stopping when everything was upright. She once again sat up in his lap, and his lips hovered inches from hers.

She thought he would kiss her again, so a surprised gasp of protest grunted from her throat when he stood up and set her on her feet. The sound wasn't ladylike or sexy at all, but she didn't care.

“Oh, honey, we're just getting started.”

He reached around behind her. She luxuriated in the feel of his heat so close and in those few places where he brushed against her. Then he straightened, and her bra fell to the floor.

She couldn't comment on his smooth move. Words wouldn't form. She understood the rules of this game. Evan was calling the shots this time. Need blazed from every pore, and she could only hope he would remove her shorts next.

He didn't. Alaina sagged against the edge of the desk as his head bent to worship her breasts without the fabric barrier between them. Searing heat coated her areolas while his tongue danced lightly over her erect nipples.

Alaina pressed closer, and he responded by sliding his thigh between her legs, at last giving her something to grind against.

Reaching between them, she outlined his hardness with her hand. Evan's hips pressed closer, and his groan sent tremors into her skin.

They stayed like that for a while, maintaining the holding pattern until at last Evan ripped his mouth from her breast. One hand loosened her shorts and pushed her panties down. The other guided her backwards to lie on the desk.

Alaina kicked away the clothing that had fallen around her ankles. She wanted—no, she *needed*—to feel him inside her, pounding away with sweet abandon until they both screamed out their releases. When he lifted one of her legs and positioned it over his shoulder, she almost sighed in relief. Then she noticed he was still dressed.

She frowned, but Evan only smiled in response, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief and desire. Then he bent, kneeling on the floor in front of her. He pushed her other leg up and out of the way, opening her to him completely. His tongue danced across her clit, blazing liquid fire in its wake.

He licked her, alternating long and short strokes. He traced circles and hexagons around her throbbing clit. Every time she settled into his pattern, he changed it. It didn't take her long to realize he meant this as foreplay and nothing more. He didn't intend for her to orgasm that way.

Then he pushed both of her knees up. "Hold these."

She hooked her hands under her knees, and he slid his hand under her ass to lift that as well. She was split wide open and completely vulnerable, yet she trusted this man she had only known for two days. She breathed his name, both as a question and a plea.

He answered with his tongue on the tight muscle ringing her anus. He circled her there the same way he had circled her clit. She sucked air in small, gasping inhalations. Nobody had ever rimmed her before. Somehow, Alaina hadn't imagined this as an erotic act, and now she couldn't breathe because she no longer remembered how to exhale.

Her body trembled, and she barely kept her grip on her knees. When he flicked his fingertip over her clit, her breath released in a

long, low moan that sounded a lot like his name. Two long, thick fingers entered her vagina while his thumb pressed against her clit and his tongue seared that tiny ring. She was close, so incredibly close.

Then he stopped, lifting all stimulation away from her body.

Alaina groaned when she realized he wasn't repositioning himself for something else, and she sat up to find Evan finally removing his clothes. Need darkened the blue of his eyes to a stormy blue-grey.

He sat heavily on her chair and sheathed his cock with a bright green condom, the exact same kind Daniel had used with her only three days beforehand. Now she knew where he got it. Guilt seeped into her heart, dampening the desire for Evan rampaging through her system.

When he held his hand out to her, she hesitated only for a second before accepting it. Guilt had no place in her life. Daniel hadn't made a single promise. He hadn't even mentioned that he would see her next week at the final counseling session. She had plans to spend time with Sophia this weekend, not Daniel.

Maybe she was reaching, but Evan was here and now. He said he was addicted to her, and she knew what he meant by it. She couldn't get enough of him, either. And so she accepted his hand, and she allowed him to guide her closer, not stopping until she straddled him.

He traced her folds with the crown of his penis, teasing her until she couldn't stand it anymore. With a roll of her hips, she captured him and sank down until he was fully inside. She stayed still, savoring the feel of him and allowing her body to adjust to his large girth.

"I love that look on your face. It's so hot, Alaina."

Until that moment, she hadn't been aware that her eyes were closed. They flew open, asking the question she didn't put into words. Did he have feelings for her?

Evan's slow smile triggered an unexpectedly deep response. That connection she felt before, the one she had denied so far, burst to the front of her consciousness.

"I like that look, too."

His quiet revelation said so much more than actual words. She had no idea what she was doing or where this was going. Circumstances were stacked against this being anything but temporary. She was ten years older than him. She woke up that morning handcuffed to his best friend. And her younger brother, who was more like a son to her than anything else, had begun a campaign to move in with her that she fully supported.

Alaina tossed aside all of those barriers. She leaned forward, closing the small distance between their mouths. She devoured his lips, pouring everything she felt into that one kiss.

Beneath her, he moved, thrusting upward as she ground against him. Before long, the rhythm spiraled out of control. The kiss faltered and broke, unable to continue when their attention was demanded elsewhere.

The orgasm broke, washing over her in violent waves. She didn't breathe. For the longest time, she floated along, battered by uncontrollable sensations. As she came down, she realized the reason she couldn't inhale. Evan held her so tight, he cut off her oxygen. He relaxed his hold as he followed her back to Earth.

His thumb played over the ridges of her lower spine, and he pressed a kiss to her neck. "I want to know everything there is to know about you, Alaina."

Was this the part where she shattered his illusion? The pessimist in her, the part that looked at the facts and didn't see a happy ending, took control. "Well, I'm a lot older than you, and I have an eight-year-old brother who is here often enough to warrant his own room. He's called me mom on more than one occasion."

Then she stopped speaking. Even her internal pessimist wasn't willing to ruin things by revealing her involvement with Daniel just yet.

Besides, she didn't know if that was over. She wasn't willing to end things with Daniel, but she wanted something with Evan, too. The conflicting wants spun through her head and left her dizzy.

He pulled his face away from where it lay against her neck, amusement glittering from his eyes and quirking from the corner of his smile. "So you're mature, big-hearted, and you love kids. Works for me. I have three older brothers, two sisters, and a slew of nieces and nephews. You'll fit right in."

Then his lips were on hers again, brushing a light stroke over them before his tongue teased its way inside. Alaina didn't want it to end.

He carried her up the stairs and to her bed. He set her down gently. His hands explored her body with infinite care and tenderness, and she took her time enjoying and memorizing his body as well. When he entered her again, there was no doubt in her mind that this was more than just casual sex to him.

And it meant so much more to her, too. She hoped to hell he wouldn't walk out on her when she got up the courage to tell him about Daniel. It would have to be sooner rather than later.

Between bouts of lovemaking, they spoke of many things, chipping away at opening the doors to many topics while not spending too much time on any one thing.

She fell asleep in his arms, wishing for it to never end even though she knew their time of bliss was doomed to a finite existence.

Chapter 13

The knock on Alaina's front door sounded at five-thirty. She glanced at the clock, frowning, before hurrying down the stairs to answer it. Having only been home for ten minutes, she hadn't even changed out of her work clothes.

She didn't expect Sophia for another half hour. Given her penchant for being late, Alaina wouldn't have been surprised if Sophia didn't show for another hour. Yet, there she was, standing on the front porch dressed in a blue and gold wraparound dress that accentuated her curves nicely. She reminded Alaina of the summer sky.

Pushing open the screen door, she invited Sophia inside. "I just got home. I haven't had a chance to change."

Sophia grinned. "For once, I'm not the one who's late."

Alaina's eyes wandered to the ceiling as she tried to recall the time Sophia said she'd pick her up. "You said six."

"Oh." Sophia's smile morphed from gleeful to bashful. "I meant we had to be at the restaurant at six. No matter. I'm always late. I think people would die of shock if I managed to show up on time. Drew and I haven't had a fight about that yet. He thinks it's an endearing quirk."

Well-versed in the ways endearing quirks turned annoying, Alaina nodded. "I'll finish changing so we can go. Make yourself at home."

Sophia followed her up the stairs. Alaina didn't quite know what to say. When she invited Sophia to make herself at home, none of the likely scenarios that presented themselves included Sophia accompanying her to her bedroom.

Sophia perched on the edge of the bed and flopped down. “I’m so freaking tired. I don’t know why Drew is making me do this.”

Alaina disappeared into the adjoining bathroom. Snagging her makeup bag from under the sink, she began repairing the damage of a long day at work. “What is Drew making you do?”

A loud sigh issued from the bedroom. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m looking forward to hanging out with the girls, but this is my first time. I’ve known Ellen forever, and I feel like I know Ginny better now that I’m working with her, but I don’t know Lara very well. Sabrina, Sammy, and Amanda are all on vacation in Kentucky. I know them all pretty well, but they won’t be there.”

When Alaina had first begun counseling the women who attended Sophia’s self-defense classes at Daniel’s studio, Sophia used to come and share her story. From some of the things Sophia had said and some of the comments Daniel had made, Alaina knew that after Sophia’s rape, she cut herself off from friends as well as lovers. Letting Drew into her life had also opened the door for Sophia to take other emotional risks, like deepening her relationships with friends.

“What’s Drew doing tonight?”

“Working. He has a black-tie event to cater for the CEO of some company. He won’t be home until late.”

Sophia appeared in the open doorway, leaning against it in a casual way that reminded Alaina of Daniel. With those spiky heels on her feet, Sophia was nearly as tall as her brother.

“He says it’s healthy to have strong friendships. His mom is a psychologist like you. I think she gives him advice about me.”

Names and dates raced through Alaina’s head. “Miranda Snow is his mother?”

“Yeah.” Sophia nodded. Her eyes landed on the tube of mascara in Alaina’s hand. “You know her?”

Miranda Snow had worked with women who were victims of domestic abuse. Alaina had encountered the woman a few times, and

she had read Miranda's published works more recently as she edited a colleague's paper.

"I've met her," Alaina said. "But I haven't seen her in a few years."

"She's retired." Sophia kicked at the flooring strip separating the bedroom carpet from the bathroom tile. "I think she misses working and is practicing on me."

"You should invite her to help out on Wednesdays. This is her area of expertise. I work with drunks and drug addicts all day." It was in that capacity that Alaina had first encountered Miranda Snow. Some of the women in the shelters needed help with substance abuse issues. While pursuing her doctorate, Alaina had done some work at a shelter where Miranda consulted.

When Sophia said nothing, Alaina added, "I won't analyze you. I promise."

A small, reluctant chuckle escaped, more of a snort than anything else. "I'm not worried about that. I feel a little guilty about discontinuing the self-defense classes, but I just don't have the time I used to have."

"You shouldn't feel guilty, Sophia. You're ready to move on. That's a good thing."

Sophia grinned. "You have analyzed me." Before Alaina could counter Sophia's accusation, Sophia tilted her head and continued. "Have you analyzed Danny?"

Alaina tried to avoid thinking about Daniel too much. A hollow ache formed in her core when she did. She had no idea how to read him. Anything she assumed about him so far had been wildly off. A big part of her wanted to ask him if he would mind sharing her with his best friend. As quickly as the thought appeared, she shoved it away. Men like Evan and Daniel were territorial. There was no way they'd share a woman, especially not one who was older, a bit overweight, and only moderately attractive.

She threw her mascara back into the bag. “No more than I should. Why?”

“Are you going to wear that?” Sophia frowned at Alaina’s work clothes. “Don’t you have anything fun? A little black dress?”

Alaina motioned to the door behind Sophia. A soft peach dress hung there. The straps that held it in the front multiplied at the shoulder and crossed in the back. The sweetheart neckline was one of the lowest Alaina owned. It would dip to reveal the swell of her breasts.

The hem fell to mid thigh. It had been years since Alaina had the occasion to wear something like this. She looked good in this dress, but it was too risqué for the type of occasions she tended to frequent.

Sophia took it in and dismissed it with a glance. Any semblance of gaiety disappeared. “You should get changed.” She turned to leave the bathroom, but Alaina stopped her with a hand.

“Why don’t you just ask me what you really want to ask me?”

Sophia’s hand fisted and relaxed. “I just want to know what you’re doing with Daniel. He seems a lot more serious about you than you seem about him.”

Alaina took a deep breath. It was best to clear the air now. Well, she’d clear it as much as she could. “What has he told you?”

She shook her head. “He got drunk Wednesday because you wouldn’t go with us. He’s nervous around you. He’s been quiet and moody. The whole time you were at Sensual Secrets, he kept looking at you like he was checking to make sure you were okay with the situation. I’ve never seen him behave this way.”

Alaina didn’t know she had been the cause of his overindulgence, and she refused to feel responsible for it. That was a choice he’d made.

Divorcing herself from her feelings for Daniel, she faced Sophia. “You’re in love, Sophia. It’s changed you for the better. Your smile is genuine. You don’t mind when people touch you.”

Sophia frowned. “I don’t see what this has to do with Daniel.”

“He spent the summer watching you fall in love. When we came to pick you up from Drew’s house, he was a mess the whole way there. The two of you are close. He had no idea what could have happened to make you have a panic attack.”

Out of spite, Alaina had waited until they were near Drew’s house to tell Daniel that setbacks like that were part of the healing process. She didn’t mention that to Sophia.

“When things turned out well for you, I saw a change in him, too. He wants what you have. He looks at me, and he sees someone who is stable and mature.” Alaina cringed. “Mature” was never an adjective she pictured herself using to describe her age.

Sophia shook her head. “I don’t understand. He’s crazy about you, Alaina. Every single one of his friends knows about you. You messed with his head something awful.”

“I’m not saying he doesn’t have feelings for me.” *Just that I’m not sure what those feelings are.* “I’m not saying that I don’t have feelings for him.”

“Then what?” Sophia’s toe tapped impatiently. Her lips pressed together into a grim line.

Daniel was play-acting. The more she thought about it, the more the idea made sense. He never claimed to have feelings for her. He never asked for more than sex. It explained so much, and it made her decision to end things with him a little easier. “I’m not stupid, Sophia. He wants what you have. I represent a domestic ideal he thinks will make him happy. I’m the dress rehearsal. He’ll play house with me for a little while then he’ll move on when he meets someone who better represents what he wants for a permanent partner.”

Sophia’s mouth dropped open. She came closer to Alaina and placed her hands on either side of Alaina’s face. The sympathy pouring from Sophia took Alaina by surprise. “You poor, delusional thing. I don’t think you quite understood me when I said Daniel has never acted this way before.”

Slipping from Sophia's grasp, Alaina snatched her dress from the hanger. "I did understand you. I think there is no point to discussing this further. We both see the issue very differently."

That knowing smile never melted from Sophia's face. "I'll leave you to get dressed."

If there was one skill at which Alaina excelled, it was in forgetting unpleasant encounters. Growing up, she'd had so many with her father that she stopped trying to remember her childhood.

By the time they arrived at the restaurant, the three women they were scheduled to meet had already ordered appetizers. Alaina recognized Ginny from *Sensual Secrets*. The attractive blonde in whose lap Ginny was nearly seated had to be Lara, Ginny's wife. She wasn't at all what Alaina had pictured.

During the drive, Sophia had described Lara as average in height, athletic in build, and aloof—a classy, cool blonde.

The woman Alaina saw was tall. A glance at Sophia reminded Alaina of the perception difference. Lara and Sophia appeared to be around the same height. Alaina had pictured Lara's "athletic" build as a euphemism for chunky, but Sophia had actually meant athletic. Lara looked like she worked out regularly. With her sun-kissed skin and hair, Lara could have stepped from the pages of a television ad for feminine hygiene products.

The last woman was a brunette. Straight brown hair fell to her shoulders, and a wide grin split her face, giving her an unexpected brilliance. When she stood to greet Sophia with a hug, Alaina saw that the women were around the same height.

Alaina was relieved to see someone there who wasn't young and stick-thin. This woman was real. She had curves, and she projected the same air of confidence that Sophia often affected.

She extended a hand to Alaina, her eyes sweeping up and down in quick assessment. "You must be Alaina. I've heard so much about you. I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to meet the woman who brought Daniel DiMarco to his knees."

Sophia smacked the woman on the arm. "You make him sound like some kind of ogre."

The woman winked at Alaina. "He's too hot to be an ogre. I'm Ellen, by the way." She swept an arm toward the seated couple. "You've met Ginny. This is Lara."

Ginny smiled. "Ignore Ellen. She's always like this."

Ellen struck Alaina as a bluffer. Somewhere under that tough exterior, the woman was probably a marshmallow. Alaina raised a brow and gave in to the impish urge to exacerbate the situation. "Like what?"

Ginny groped for a word.

Sophia sat down and watched, her big brown eyes sparkling with amusement.

"She wants to call me a bitch, but she knows her sister will kill her for it when she finds out." Ellen didn't bother to hold back her laugh.

Ginny glanced to Lara, who smiled and said, "Opinionated."

"Nosy," Sophia added. "Bossy, tactless, offensive..."

"Hey," Ellen warned, a mock frown pursing her mouth.

With no rescue in sight, Alaina sat down and did her level best to be polite. In general, the conversation was relaxed. Dinner was good, and the chef came from the kitchen to kiss Ginny's cheeks and make sure she found the dinner to her liking.

Alaina found out their group was missing three members, all of whom were on vacation. When they reconvened next month, an event for which it was assumed Alaina would attend, they would have a full crowd.

"You'll like Sabrina," Ellen said. "You have a lot in common."

Ellen, whose demeanor vacillated dangerously from genuine glee to barely concealed callousness, seemed to have plenty in common with Alaina. That kind of toughness found frequent use when trying to have a conversation with a junkie who just wanted his next fix or an alcoholic who thought one more drink would make everything better.

Afterward, they went to a dance club that was new to Alaina. From the way they were greeted, she gathered that Ellen and Sophia were regulars. She followed the four women to the VIP lounge. Security guards, bulging with muscles and attitude, parted to let the women through.

“Ellen owns the club,” Sophia whispered to Alaina. “The second we entered the front door, somebody started clearing customers away from Ellen’s table, if they let them sit there at all. I don’t know that she always tells them we’re coming.”

Alaina considered this. “A dominant personality like Ellen’s wouldn’t warn her employees consistently. I imagine she’s a difficult boss because she is demanding. Those employees who respect that probably work for her for a long time. Those who don’t wouldn’t last more than a few weeks.”

Sophia laughed, and Alaina wanted to take back everything she said.

Biting the inside of her cheek, Alaina blushed. “Sorry. I promised I wouldn’t do that.”

Sophia rested a hand on Alaina’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. That’s who you are. Plus, you’re right about Ellen. She’s definitely a dominating presence.”

“I do like her.” Alaina scrambled to assure Sophia of this fact. Sophia’s bond with Ellen ran deep.

Sophia wagged her head as she considered this. “She isn’t done with you, Lainie. You might end up not liking her. Don’t be afraid to argue.”

Alaina stiffened at Sophia’s casual use of the name that only Daniel had ever used. With effort, she shook off the uneasy feeling that she had once again assumed things about Daniel that weren’t true. Why couldn’t she get an accurate read on him?

Not long after they settled in and ordered drinks, Ginny and Lara drifted to the dance floor.

Ellen watched them go. When her head turned to Alaina, it seemed to zero in on her with digital accuracy. "I want to hear how you landed Daniel."

Alaina laughed. She hadn't done much, and Evan occupied just as many of her thoughts. "He's not a fish or a spaceship."

"Daniel is slippery," Ellen said, setting her virgin daiquiri to the side and leaning closer. "I've watched him dodge some pretty attractive nets."

"Ellen," Sophia said.

Ellen ignored the warning. "Come on. I want the details. How did you two hook up?"

"You don't have to say anything," Sophia whispered in Alaina's ear.

Alaina would give anything to have Camilla here. All she needed was one good friend to bolster her courage. Camilla would laugh at Ellen and shake her head at Alaina's predicament.

Ellen swatted the air in front of Sophia's face. "She doesn't need a lawyer."

"It's fine," Alaina assured Sophia. Though she wasn't too keen on recounting events in a way that excluded Evan, Alaina wasn't quite ready to admit to these acquaintances that she was involved sexually with two men. She focused on Monday. "I don't know how it happened. I came home from work Monday to find him on my roof."

Sophia's brows shot up. "What was he doing on your roof?"

"He was under the impression I didn't know it needed to be replaced. I set him straight. We argued." Now Alaina frowned. She had been much more invested in the emotionality of the fight than he had been. "I argued."

Sophia laughed. "That's why Dad wanted him to be a lawyer. Daniel is really tough to beat in an argument."

"He didn't argue so much as point things out. It was infuriating."

Ellen tsked. “It’s impossible to win an argument if you don’t keep a level head. Daniel is good at the level-headed thing. That’s why it was so surprising to see him in a snit Wednesday night.”

“He wasn’t in a snit.” Sophia rolled her eyes.

“He told me to keep Ryan on a shorter leash. He never makes references to bondage if he can avoid it.”

Alaina was losing the conversation. What the hell were they talking about now?

Ellen tapped the table impatiently. “You were infuriated. Go on.”

“I—Well, I kissed him. I wasn’t very nice about it.”

Ellen nodded knowingly, something Alaina was beginning to recognize as a meaningless gesture. The implied familiarity would necessarily make her listener think she knew more than she did, thereby tricking them into revealing sensitive information.

Alaina said nothing. She could play these games with a fair amount of expertise.

Sophia wrinkled her nose. “You are way off, Elle. Danny isn’t into that.”

Alaina looked to Sophia. “Into what?”

“Bondage. Domination. He didn’t even use the handcuffs correctly.” Shifting her gaze to Ellen, a short laugh bubbled out. “After we left you guys on Wednesday, he handcuffed her to him.”

Ellen did the same thing Ginny had done when she saw what Daniel had done. Her face took on that faraway look as she openly imagined things in her head. When she returned to the conversation, she frowned at Alaina. “Why would he do that?”

“He didn’t want me to leave.”

A server replaced Ellen’s drink. She sniffed it before taking a sip. “Then what?”

Several things clicked into place for Alaina. Ellen’s domineering personality, combined with snippets of things she’d heard Sophia say from time to time, came together. Ellen was a dominatrix. She

expected that either Daniel or Alaina would assume that role in their relationship.

Alaina dashed Ellen's hopes. "Then we went to sleep."

"Sleep?" Ellen's dark eyebrows rose and fell independently of one another as she took it all in. "Just sleep?"

Alaina smiled. She ran her fingertip over the rim of her drink, enjoying the smooth coolness of the glass. "Just sleep."

She snorted. "I'm so disappointed in that boy. Sophia, what the hell is wrong with your brother?"

Sophia shrugged. "I didn't think he was that drunk."

Alaina's smug smile had everything to do with the details she kept to herself.

Sophia read it accurately. "You had sex before he handcuffed himself to you."

Her smile grew. "I did say he didn't want me to leave."

Ellen laughed infectiously. "I like you."

* * * *

Daniel used his key to let himself into Evan's condo. Fuzzball, the black and tan striped cat that had wandered up to Evan's one afternoon and never left, greeted him at the door with a loud, demanding cry. Having watched over Fuzzball whenever Evan was out of town, Daniel knew the sound meant Evan wasn't home and the sleek male cat wanted food and fresh water, preferably from the bathtub faucet.

"Hello, cat. Did Evan happen to mention what time he'd be home tonight?"

The cat yowled again, arched its back, and brushed against Daniel's leg.

"I didn't think so." He headed to the kitchen and threw some dry food in the bowl. Fuzzball sniffed it briefly before lifting his head to stare balefully at Daniel.

With a sigh, he headed into the bathroom and turned the tap to let just the right amount of water flow. He sat on the edge of the tub and watched the cat lap at the steady stream. Evan should be home soon. The bastard hadn't called or texted since Daniel had introduced him to Alaina. Was Evan mad at him, or had he flipped for Alaina the same way Daniel had? Did that mean he no longer wanted to continue with the sexual aspect of their friendship?

The slamming of the front door roused Dan from the worry that gripped him. The cat had abandoned him while he wasn't paying attention. He turned off the tap and headed down the stairs to confront Evan.

Even if Evan had decided to focus on Alaina and change the nature of his relationship with Daniel, he owed Dan an explanation. After everything was said and done, Daniel could live without having sex with Evan, but he couldn't imagine living without his friendship.

He found Evan in the laundry room. The sweat-soaked, dirty shirt he had worn that day lay in a heap of similarly grimy clothing. Evan hooked one hand under his arm and gripped his shoulder, stretching the arm and back muscles there.

Daniel took a moment to admire Evan's chiseled muscles and the way his jeans curved over an iron-hard ass, and he ignored the way his heart pounded with fear and anticipation. Evan looked different now than he had the first time they had slept together. Back then, they had been teenagers. Neither of them had finished filling out. Daniel really liked the man Evan had become, and he knew Evan had a similar opinion of him.

When he found the courage to speak, Daniel attempted levity. "You don't call. You don't text. Was it something I said?"

Evan whirled, surprise widening his eyes and parting his lips. "Daniel. I didn't see your truck outside."

"I parked the same place I always do." Daniel pressed his lips together. "You just weren't looking."

The surprise left his eyes, but his mouth didn't quite close. "I guess not. I'm beat. I didn't get much sleep last night."

Daniel looked at Evan closely. Shadows smudged the thin skin beneath Evan's eyes, but tension lined the muscles cording his shoulders and torso, making it difficult to see the fatigue there.

Evan brushed past him, exiting the laundry room. "I'm gonna grab a shower. Why don't you throw some dinner together?"

Then he was gone. This wasn't much different from their normal interaction. Daniel had skill in the kitchen that Evan did not possess. Dan couldn't count the number of times he had made dinner while Evan showered away the evidence of a day's work. For someone with a physical, dirty job, Evan sure hated to be unclean.

Daniel didn't care. He thought the sweaty, disheveled look suited Evan just fine. He also liked the look on Alaina, though he'd only seen her that way after sex. The earthy look turned him on, especially when someone he loved wore it.

He headed to the kitchen, not bothering to rifle through the cupboards because he knew exactly where everything was. He spent more time in this kitchen than Evan did. A half hour later, the tell-tale whoosh and squeak of a door opening upstairs meant Evan would be down in a few minutes. Daniel stirred the sauce in the pan on the stove. He'd thrown together a pretty good chicken parmesan, something he'd made a hundred times in his mother's kitchen. The DiMarcos were all adept in the culinary arts. Alaina's assumption he couldn't cook still rankled. One day soon, he would show her exactly how good he could cook.

Evan padded into the room, his bare feet slapping against the linoleum floor. He had changed into a pair of cut-off sweats and a white cotton T-shirt. Daniel suppressed the urge to run his tongue over the column of Evan's throat and grind his half-erection into the cheek of Evan's perfect ass.

He waited until dinner was almost over before bringing up the topic that plagued his mind. "So, how did things go at Alaina's house after I left?"

Evan shrugged as he finished chewing. "Fine. She signed the contract without really looking at it."

Daniel narrowed his eyes. "That doesn't sound like something she'd do."

"Well, she did." He pushed his last bite of food around his plate, collecting more sauce. "I've been there all week. She has a lot of damage, some of it structural. I'm going to have to do a lot of work in the rooms below the leak. I was going to ask her if she wanted help clearing out those rooms, but she hadn't come home by the time I left."

"She's out with Sophia tonight, one of those girly nights where they paint each other's toenails and go clubbing." Daniel still wasn't sure how he felt about Sophia hanging out with Alaina. Nevertheless, he knew Alaina had contracted Evan's company, and Evan hadn't answered his question. "Did you at least kiss her?"

Evan's grin turned wicked. "I did a lot more than kiss her, Danny. She's exactly how you described her. Beautiful, spunky, outspoken, funny, interesting, and wild as hell in bed. Completely irresistible."

Thoughts raced through Daniel's head. They'd slept together? When? It couldn't have been Tuesday because Alaina hadn't hesitated with him on Wednesday. Tiny twinges of jealousy assaulted him, but he wasn't sure as to the exact cause. The idea of Evan and Alaina having sex was something that appealed to him. He wanted them to fall for one another. He wanted to watch them together, to participate in the lovemaking with them. He wanted time alone with Alaina, and he didn't begrudge Evan the same thing. What then?

"She loves anal sex. I thought the neighbors were going to call the cops with as much noise as she made."

Daniel started at that. Though he had imagined what it would be like for the both of them to have Alaina at the same time, he'd never

really believed she would allow anyone that kind of access. He especially thought she would deny Evan. The man's cock was thick. It filled Daniel nicely, but Alaina was so tiny. "Anal sex? She let you fuck her ass? This was last night?" The evening after she had woken up handcuffed to him and rocked his world?

Evan's light chuckle jerked Daniel from the ugly edge of jealousy. "She all but begged for it. Oh, man, is she going to love having both of us fucking her together. I could barely hold her in place without leaving bruises because she was so out of control. It'll be nice to have your help."

There weren't many dishes to clean up, but Daniel focused on them with ferocious intensity. It wasn't supposed to have been this easy to convince Alaina to accept them both.

The feel of Evan's hand on his shoulder made Daniel pause his attack on the pan in the sudsy water.

"I really like her, Danny. I know you and I have had our differences in the past. When you brought up this idea originally, I didn't think it would work. I only tried it because I know you can't handle being with just me. I've been really pissed at you about it, but it didn't take more than ten minutes with Alaina to understand how you fell for her."

Daniel shut off the faucet and turned around to face Evan. He studied the sincerity in his friend's eyes. Familiar pangs of guilt and desire flooded his system. Evan was the only man to whom he'd ever been attracted. However, Evan had widely and openly dated both men and women.

Given the emotion blazing from Evan's sexy, light blue eyes, Daniel knew his lover felt something deep for Alaina. "You fell for her, too."

Evan nodded. "Yeah. I love her, Dan, and I love you, too. But I'm going to be honest with you. We have to tell her about us eventually. If we expect to build a life with her, an omission like this will destroy everything."

Stubborn obstinacy welled in Daniel. He did nothing to stop the mulish set of his jaw. "Not yet. First we need to tell her we both want her. We have to let her get used to that first. We can't just dump all of this shit on her and expect her to not run the other way."

Evan ran one strong, thick finger down the center of Daniel's chest. His heat burned through the thin cotton of Dan's shirt, branding a trail of need that didn't stop at the waist of his jeans with Evan's finger. "I'm wondering if you can handle watching me come inside someone else, Daniel. You might be mired in the denial of your bisexual desires, but you're one possessive bastard."

In response, Daniel snaked his arm around Evan's waist, planted one hand on the back of his head, and pulled him close. He devoured Evan's firm lips, luxuriating in the feel of something so opposite of what he loved about being with Alaina. It was a paradox he didn't understand, one he didn't particularly want to understand.

It was also something he never wanted Alaina to know about. He would work on convincing Evan later. For now, harsh desire centered in his core, a desire only Evan's taste and touch could quench.

Soon, the feel of Evan's hands on his chest, pushing his shirt up, forced Daniel to break the kiss. He leaned away, panting as he pulled the garment over his head and tossed it on the counter. Before he finished, Evan's mouth and tongue were blazing trails of heat and need down his chest, pausing briefly to tease his nipples.

Evan tugged at Daniel's jeans, unbuttoning and unzipping with deft fingers. He pushed them down Dan's hips as he dropped to his knees.

Daniel looked down at Evan, watching as his lover licked his lips with anticipation.

"Ask for it."

The command was issued quietly, almost pleadingly, but Daniel knew Evan wouldn't even lick him until he asked for it. It wasn't a dominating thing; it was Evan's way of trying to prove to Daniel that he liked having his cock sucked by a man.

Daniel's point of view differed widely from Evan's. He didn't want just any man to suck his cock. He wanted Evan, only Evan, and now they both wanted Alaina. Daniel wasn't sure about this. He didn't know where it was going. He only knew it felt right. The three of them belonged together.

The words rasped from between Daniel's dry lips. "Suck me, Evan. Let me fuck your mouth."

Evan's tongue, like his cock, was long and thick. He bathed Daniel's dick, licking light flicks and long swipes until it was slick enough for him. Then he opened his mouth and took all of Daniel, sliding him deep until his tip touched the back of Evan's throat. Daniel gasped and pumped his hips back and forth. Knowing Evan could take it all, he didn't hold back.

Faster and faster, he thrust into Evan's mouth. Vibrations from tiny moans heightened the experience. All too soon, the orgasm ripped through Daniel. He tapped Evan on the shoulder in warning and cried out. Evan dug his fingers into Danny's hips, holding him closer and sucking harder. He swallowed everything before releasing Danny and settling back on his heels.

Daniel stared down at the most handsome man he'd ever known. "I want to know everything that happened with Alaina. I need to know, Evan."

* * * *

Evan rocked on his heels and, in one fluid motion, pushed himself to standing. He had expected Daniel to be insecure if this plan worked out. Originally, he had wanted to use this jealousy to his advantage. He'd wanted to help Daniel accept they belonged together.

Now that Alaina was part of his life, Evan sincerely wanted this to work out. He knew the odds were against them. She was over a decade older, and relationships were difficult enough when only two people were involved.

He met Daniel's gaze, searching those deep brown irises for the determination that motivated Danny to insist on trying a threesome in the first place. "We were together Tuesday and Thursday. I know you were with her Monday. She didn't say a word about seeing you on Wednesday, though she was a bit hesitant. There were a few times when she seemed like she wanted to say something, but she held back. I didn't force the issue."

They had talked about everything under the sun, chatting between bouts of spine-melting sex. This explained Alaina's hesitancy when it came to certain subjects. She wanted to tell him about Daniel, but she likely wasn't sure how he would take it.

A little of the jealousy faded from Dan's eyes. "She didn't say a word about you, either."

"She probably feels guilty. I don't get the sense she's the kind of woman who has meaningless sex or one-night stands. I mean, she fell into bed with me pretty fast, but we have this connection. It's like we've always known each other."

Dan nodded knowingly. "Yeah, that's what it was like when I met her, too, only I thought it was one-sided. She has very sexy eyes."

Evan wholly agreed. He loved the feline tilt to her eyes. "And she has a lot of battery-operated boyfriends."

"What?" Daniel's nose wrinkled in bafflement.

"Vibrators, all kinds, clitoral stimulators, butt plugs. She's got a wicked imagination, Danny. I came so hard I saw stars." Evan grinned in remembrance. He gloated a little, too. "We'll have to get her to try out some things on you. If you tell her you like anal sex, I bet she'll let you use her plugs."

Daniel's eyes darkened, and Evan recognized the first stirrings of desire returning to his lover. "Let's go upstairs, and I'll show you exactly what kind of sex toy you need."

They raced through the living room and up the stairs. Daniel fell onto the bed, drawing Evan down on top of him. Evan ran his hands over Daniel's smooth, defined chest as he leaned down for a kiss.

Passion exploded.

Chapter 14

Alaina woke late. Sophia hadn't brought her home until nearly three. The conversation had flowed long into the night. Drinks turned into coffee, though it didn't save every topic from turning sexual. Those women had the special ability to make every single comment seem to have a sexual undercurrent. Before too long, Alaina was on the same page. It had been a very fun night out.

She stumbled down the stairs well after eleven in the morning. Usually by this point in her day, she had either taught a class or completed rounds at the hospital. The summer session was over, and she wouldn't have a class this upcoming semester. She did, however, have several doctoral candidates to mentor and a research study to design.

The topics on her mind this morning were breakfast, a headache aid, and then she would tackle packing up her office and Zach's bedroom. Evan had been quite explicit that he needed both rooms cleared so he could begin repairing the interior portions of the damage.

She had just begun imbibing her caffeine IV when the doorbell rang. She hoped to hell it wasn't her father. They never saw one another without having at least one good argument. The situation didn't matter. Somehow Alaina would do or say something to piss him off, and he would fire off some nasty or sexist comment. It never ended well.

She only put up with him to maintain a good relationship for Zach's sake. He should have been her child. Her parents were too old

and out of shape to keep up with an energetic little boy. The proof was in the fact that he spent weeks on end at her house.

With a resigned sigh, she pushed a mass of frizzy curls out of her face and shuffled to the front door. The weather had been nice for late August, not too hot or cold. The air-conditioning was off, and she had opened the front door to let in the freshness.

“You look like you had fun last night.”

That voice jerked Alaina’s gaze from the floor to the door and stopped her in her tracks. She took in Daniel’s height and broad shoulders as he nearly filled the entire screen. He wore a red polo shirt and jeans that molded to every sinful curve they hugged.

Next to him stood Evan. His arms were crossed, which only emphasized the muscles that rippled across his chest and arms. He was a little shorter than Daniel, but he didn’t appear any smaller. He dressed similarly to Daniel, though he wore a white tee instead of a polo shirt.

Evan elbowed Daniel sharply in the ribs. “You’re an ass.” To Alaina, he flashed a smile that set her pulse fluttering, which was a good thing because seeing the two of them together like this had stopped more than just her feet. “Good afternoon, Alaina. We’ve come to help you clear out those rooms.”

What the hell are they both doing here?

Alaina panicked. The two men who rocked her world, whose friendship she might be jeopardizing, stood at her door together. She had not anticipated seeing both of them at the same time. She had no idea what to say, and she wasn’t ready for a messy confrontation. There was no way this wasn’t going to be messy.

It was on the tip of her tongue to turn down their offer when images of the heavy furniture in her office and in Zach’s room haunted her. Moving it by herself was going to be a problem. She wasn’t weak, but she did lack the necessary leverage to lift or push some items. If she kept them busy, then nothing personal, like the fact she had slept with both of them, could come up. Right?

“Great.” She pushed open the screen door to let them in. “I’m not quite dressed. I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

Daniel grinned as he brushed past her. Her nipples were apparently more awake than her mind. They pebbled and swelled, straining against her too-big shirt in a vain attempt to get closer to a man who had worshiped them so well.

Evan stepped over the threshold and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Did you have fun last night?”

The question whispered across skin that was suddenly oversensitive. Alaina shivered and thanked God she had showered before going to bed. “Yes. Sophia’s friends are an interesting bunch.”

Alaina blushed uneasily as she remembered how they all assumed she was Daniel’s girlfriend.

Daniel offered his opinion. “Ellen takes some getting used to, but she has a good heart underneath all that Dominatrix crap. Ginny’s pretty friendly, though.”

Daniel stood in the center of the room with his hands on his hips. He looked around the room. Alaina had no idea what he was looking for. She was just glad he hadn’t seen Evan kiss her.

“Yes, well, I’m going to go change. I’ll be down in a few minutes. There’s coffee in the kitchen.”

She fled to the relative safety of her bedroom and coached herself through some breathing exercises. Was having them here to move heavy furniture worth risking the heart attack or stroke she was sure awaited her from the vast amount of stress those two were sure to generate?

Some of Zach’s things were already boxed up. Perhaps she could have them start there while she packed things in her office. A careful plan took shape in her head as she tugged on a pair of jeans and dug through a pile of unfolded laundry to find a suitable shirt. While she didn’t want to look too fat or scrubby, she also didn’t want to wear something provocative.

With a frown, she wondered if her attire mattered. Both men had seemed to find her bland work clothes attractive.

At the very least, she needed a bra with a good amount of padding. If her traitorous nipples were going to point the way to Danny, she needed something to hide them.

Lastly, she wrangled her wild hair into a tight braid.

When she breezed into the kitchen, she found both of them leaning against different counters, laughing and holding steaming mugs of coffee. They stopped chuckling when she entered the room.

She headed to a nearby cupboard and extracted a toaster-friendly breakfast. "I haven't had breakfast. Why don't you two head up to Zach's room and start moving stuff to the room across the hall? I need his furniture set up. He stays over a lot once school starts back up."

Daniel set his cup on the counter and exchanged a glance with Evan before turning his attention to Alaina. "You okay, Lainie? You seem a little on edge."

"Fine." The stiffness of her response belied her intention to assure him she wasn't on edge. She broke a corner from her cold pastry and popped it into her mouth. "I just need to eat something."

Daniel's mouth softened into a relaxed grin that made Alaina want to launch herself at him and wrestle him naked. "I can make you some French toast if you want."

The memory of their postcoital argument refreshed itself in the form of heat on her face. She shook her head. "If you haven't had breakfast, you can make something for yourself."

Evan chuckled. "We've had breakfast and lunch, little lady." With a quick jerk of his head, Evan urged Daniel from the room. "C'mon. Let's get started."

The sounds of thumps and scrapes telling her they were doing as she asked did little to calm her nerves. They were both entirely too relaxed to have disclosed the events of the past week. How long would it be before one of them spilled the beans to the other?

Alaina crumpled the foil wrapper from her breakfast and tossed it into the trash. It was time to head upstairs and face the music.

Turning around had her smacking into Daniel's chest. He reached out to steady her, but that move morphed into an embrace. He pulled her close and tickled her senses with the scent that was uniquely him.

He leaned down to kiss her, but she turned her head and pushed him away. She was only partially successful in eluding him.

"Danny, this isn't appropriate right now."

He traced his thumb from her temple to her chin. She closed her eyes to focus the sensation.

"Afraid Evan's going to see? Are you shy, sweetheart?" At her brief nod, he laughed. "Don't worry. He's gone out to the truck to get some more boxes."

Before she could tell him she had plenty of boxes in the basement, his mouth closed over hers, devouring her in a hungry kiss. She melted against him, pressing her swollen breasts into his chest. Heat raced along her spine. A whimper, equal parts need and protest, escaped.

He cupped the back of her head with his huge hand, and she was grateful he refrained from pulling out her careful braid. His other hand squeezed and kneaded half of her ass. Need pulsed through her body and moistened her pussy.

The metallic slam of the screen door had her pulling from Daniel's embrace with lightning speed. He let her go without protest.

"Dan, come get these boxes."

Guilt welled inside Alaina. She closed her eyes and turned away from Daniel. With extraordinary care, she rinsed her mug and set it on the counter next to the sink. She tried not to think about the hurt that would darken Evan's eyes if he found her kissing his best friend.

"Alaina?"

She jumped at the unexpected closeness of Evan's voice. Clapping a hand over the heart pounding in her chest, she whirled to

face him and hoped he couldn't see the guilt seeping from every pore in her body. "Evan. I thought you went upstairs."

One side of his mouth quirked up in a lopsided grin that set her heart racing for a different reason. He parked one hand on her hip and cupped her cheek with the other. His kiss was slow and inviting, a good morning or a welcome.

Moments ago, Daniel's lips had claimed hers, and she thought she had died and gone to heaven. Evan kissed wholly differently, equal instead of dominating, and yet he elicited the same response from her body. She sighed and pressed closer, gripping the front of his shirt with tight fists.

When the kiss ended, Evan released her and reality crashed through. Half of her wished Evan had dropped that piece of plywood on her. Maybe it would have knocked some sense into her. What if Daniel had come in while Evan kissed her?

How in the world had she come to be in this predicament?

"Why don't you come on upstairs and tell us where you want everything, honey. You've got two strong men willing to do your bidding, and we're yours for as long as you want us."

Alaina's knees weakened at the picture he unwittingly painted. She wanted both of them, together, at the same time, exactly as he described. Unfortunately, that wasn't what he meant.

Her nod was a tad unsteady, and words failed her, but she managed to follow Evan up the stairs without the world collapsing around her.

The afternoon progressed no differently from the way it began. Whenever either man had a moment alone with her, they stole a kiss, sometimes two. By the time their stomachs growled for a dinner break, Alaina's nerves had reached their breaking point.

She fled to the bathroom to wash the dust and dirt from her hands and face. Until now, she thought she'd kept a fairly clean house. Moving things revealed vast deposits of dirt she had missed while vacuuming or dusting. It took some time for Alaina to convince

herself to head to the kitchen. Given the heavenly smells emanating from that direction, she half expected to find take-out from the Italian place in town.

Shockingly, she found only Daniel. He stood at the stove, stirring something in a pot. He turned one of those smiles on her, the kind that turned her knees to jelly and made her want to collapse in his arms. Now that she knew the flavor of his kisses, the need was even more acute.

She tried to respond with a friendly smile, but she wasn't sure if she succeeded. "Smells good. That's not from a jar."

He chuckled and shook something else into the pot. "This recipe has been handed down in my family for generations. It has won awards all over Italy and Brooklyn. Drew is still trying to get my mom to spill her secrets."

Alaina wondered why Drew didn't just ask Sophia. Perhaps she was making him wait until after the wedding.

Waving her closer, he lifted the spoon and blew on the small puddle of sauce. "Taste this. Tell me what you think."

Flavors exploded on her tongue. Alaina couldn't have identified them all if she tried. Her awareness of Daniel was temporarily diverted. "Wow. You really can cook."

He lifted a brow and set the spoon on the counter. "I've cooked for you before, Lainie. You still doubt me?"

She shook her head. All doubt about his abilities in the kitchen fled. Daniel was a man of many layers. Part of her wanted to peel them back and get to know him in ways no one else ever had. The rest of her was divided between being afraid he would reject her once he knew the truth about her relationship with Evan and the fear of losing Evan.

Words stuck in her throat. There were so many, and yet none were appropriate. Tears burned behind her eyes. This was all too much to handle.

Confidence fled from Daniel's stance. He pulled her close, surrounding her with his arms. Alaina lost her fight with the tears, and they leaked from her eyes. She gripped at his biceps, worrying them with desperate clenches.

"Hey, Lainie, don't cry. Oh, shit. I'm sorry. I never meant to make you cry." Daniel pressed urgent kisses to her forehead. He tried to tilt her face up, but she wouldn't move away from where she buried her face in his shirt.

She wanted to tell him it wasn't his fault. She knew he had been teasing. Their fight over their misunderstandings had been resolved before they parted ways two mornings ago. She wasn't the kind of person who carried groundless grudges.

When she lifted her head to tell him those things, he captured her lips in a tender kiss that only brought more tears gushing from her eyes. This one simple act communicated his feelings so clearly, just as Evan's kiss had done two nights ago.

She was trapped in a hopeless, helpless situation.

Gentle hands trailed along her hips. Heat seared her back as those hands traveled upward and moved her braid out of the way. When a second set of lips seared her neck, she realized Evan was behind her, kissing her neck while Daniel claimed her lips.

With a startled gasp, she jerked away from both of them. Her actions bordered a little on the violent side, but she didn't care if one or both of them suffered bruised lips.

Anger made her body and her voice shake. She pointed an accusatory finger at both men. "You did this on purpose!"

Daniel held his hands up in a supplicating gesture that managed to also be condescending. "Lainie, there's no need to get upset."

"No need? You lied to me!" Her gaze bounced between Daniel and Evan. "You both lied to me. You used me, and you lied to me."

Evan took one step forward, but he checked himself when she took another step backward. "Alaina, honey, we didn't use you. We aren't using you, and we didn't lie to you, not really."

“Not any more than you lied to us.” Daniel turned off the sauce boiling on the stove and crossed his arms over his chest. The popping sounds from the boiling concoction slowed and stopped.

Alaina’s sharp intake of breath should have been warning enough, but Evan shot Daniel a warning look just the same.

Daniel ignored them both. “Lainie, we wanted you to get to know us separately before you had us together.”

Her wildest dreams were coming true, but she was too angry to take solace in that fact. “Did it ever occur to you to let me in on your little plan beforehand, Daniel? You go on and on about hating women who play head games, yet this is exactly the kind of thing you bitch about.”

He took a step toward her, but she backed around the island counter. He stopped, letting her have something between them. “This is different, Lainie. We’re both in love with you. We both want a relationship with you, and I think you want a relationship with both of us, too. Why don’t you just calm down now?”

The world exploded in red as Alaina’s fists came down on the counter. She wasn’t the kind of person who yelled, but she definitely had the lung capacity when she needed the volume. “Calm down? Damn it, Daniel! You both used me for a one-night stand, and then you both came back for another night. I’ve been out of my mind, confused by the fact I was falling for both of you and afraid of hurting either of you and afraid of damaging your friendship, and you expect me to calm down when I find out you planned this all along? I’m a woman, not a blow-up doll!”

Daniel’s face had taken on that ruddy undertone it got whenever he lost his temper with her. Curiously, Evan seemed completely unaffected by their angry outbursts.

Planting his hands firmly on the counter opposite Alaina, Daniel leaned closer. “So we went about this the wrong way. It’s not like we’ve ever done something like this before. Cut us some slack.” He

glanced at Evan before focusing his gaze back on Alaina. "Or at least cut me some slack. You don't seem pissed at Evan."

She growled, a snarling sound she'd never made. "He didn't even know me when you invited him into my bed. At least he fell for me honestly. He treated me with dignity and respect. I'm sure this wasn't his idea."

Evan's shadow fell between them, diverting the flow of anger that seemed to amplify between Alaina and Daniel. Needing to know his place in all of this, she lifted her face to meet his gaze.

"It wasn't my idea, Alaina, but I wasn't against it. After I met you, I was all in. I've never shared a woman with anyone, not even Danny, yet the idea of the three of us together just seems so right." His blue eyes searched hers for something. "I know you're angry. You have every right to be. Maybe we went about this the wrong way. We're sorry we hurt you. But we'd like to ask you to put that aside for now and seriously consider having the both of us in your life."

"You made me feel like a slut." Hurt suffused her quiet words. Alaina no longer had enough anger to power her lungs.

Daniel's aggressive stance relaxed. "Don't say that, Lainie. It's not your fault. We're just irresistible."

Alaina sighed at Danny's attempted levity. Her gaze fixed on her hands still curled into fists on the countertop. "I've never had casual sex, not once in my entire life before I met you."

Evan rested his hand over her fist. She didn't unfurl it, and he didn't force the issue. "What you have with us isn't casual."

Just like that, a switch was thrown in her head. She understood what they had done and what they were offering. This was her dream. This was what she wanted. It didn't seem quite real, not yet.

"A-laii-naaa!"

Alaina's head jerked up and swiveled to face the voice shouting her name. The front door slammed, and heavy footsteps followed the lighter ones pattering toward the kitchen.

A streak of boy rounded the corner, veered around Daniel, and slammed into Alaina's side. She caught Zach in a hug, lifting him from the floor until he squirmed to be put down.

"Dad says I get to stay the night with you. Can I go to Mario's?"

Daniel cleared his throat. Alaina glanced up at him, her protective instincts in overdrive. The warning in her look died when she saw he was okay with Zach being there. "Dinner will be ready in a half hour."

She pressed a kiss to Zach's cheek. Thank goodness they had moved all of his things first. Zach never showed up for a simple visit. He always stayed for a night or two, sometimes longer. "You have time to say hello and make plans for the morning."

Zach turned to face Daniel. Alaina held her breath as the little auburn-haired boy faced one of the men she wanted to have in her life. "Who are you?"

Daniel offered a hand to Zach. "I'm Daniel." He nodded to Evan. "This is Evan. We're friends of Lainie's."

Evan smiled at Zach, but his welcome was more tentative. "Hi, Zach. It's nice to finally meet you. I saw your baseball trophies. Very cool."

Zach shrugged off the compliment and Alaina's hand on his shoulder. "They give those to everyone. You don't have to do something special to get them."

Brows drawn together, Evan frowned at Zach's flippant response. "You have to go to practices and games, and you have to work on your skills. That's important."

Zach looked up at Alaina with more wisdom than an eight-year-old should have. "Alaina practices with me all the time. Dad says she's got one heck of a throwing arm for a girl."

Alaina rolled her eyes and gave Zach a push toward the door before their father's chauvinistic opinions could come spewing from her brother's mouth. "You're down to twenty-five minutes."

The speed with which Zach left could put Superman to shame. All too soon, her father's stifling presence replaced Zach's refreshing one. A scrapbook smacked onto the counter in front of her.

"Your mother said to give you this."

She opened the front cover to find pictures of her from high school. Her mother had already made scrapbooks from Alaina's baby and childhood pictures. The next scrapbook would undoubtedly contain college photos. Alaina didn't particularly care for scrapbooks, but her mother had embraced the craze with fervor, and it was the thought that counted.

"Thanks." She closed the cover before Evan or Daniel could steal more than a cursory peek.

"Hired help?" Her father cocked his head in Daniel's and Evan's direction. "What's going on with your roof?"

The roof question was easier to answer, but it would lead to all sorts of opportunities for her father to remind Alaina about her gender-based failings. "No, Dad, they aren't hired help. They're my boyfriends. Both of them. At the same time."

Daniel's brows shot up to hide under the bangs brushing across his forehead. Evan's stoic expression didn't change. There was no doubt in Alaina's mind Evan had picked up on the tense undercurrents that always existed when she was in the same room as her father.

"Evan, Daniel, this is my dad, Alan Miles." She spread her hand to indicate who was who. The three men greeted one another awkwardly. The part of her that was still angry over the way they tag-teamed her reveled in their discomfort. If they wanted to have an unconventional relationship with her, then they needed to be prepared for the kinds of reactions they were sure to get.

Her father was a tall man with broad shoulders. He had been handsome when he was younger. That was before years of soft living left him with a rounded midsection, heredity had stolen his golden hair, and bitterness over having only a female child had permanently soured his expression.

Alaina hadn't inherited many physical characteristics from him. She was short, her auburn curls seemed to thicken with time, and her eyes were distinctly from her mother's side. Her mother was fond of pointing out that Alaina was just as stubborn and as intelligent as her father.

It may have been exceedingly obdurate of her to argue that her father lacked intelligence, but Alaina wasn't convinced her father was a smart man.

"Thanks for the phone call," she said. "It's so thoughtful to call ahead to see if I have plans."

Her father grunted. "You're an old maid. You never have plans." He eyed the men at the end of the counter dispassionately. "Your mother's not feeling well. She needs some time to rest without worrying about Zach. You can send your male hookers home for the night. How much did they cost you? I'll pay the fee this time."

Instinct had Alaina leaping in front of her father before Daniel could kill him. Still, Daniel had closed the distance. Due to the height disparity, Alaina wasn't much of a barrier.

While Alaina did her best to push against Daniel's chest, he glared at her father over her head. His cheeks weren't the ruddy tone they turned when he was furious. They hadn't colored at all, and his eyes exuded a cold calm.

"Danny, don't. He's a pain in the ass, but he's the only father I have."

"He called you an old maid."

Alaina felt the anger carried on Daniel's words and vibrating through his chest into her palms. The fact that he didn't appear to be outwardly upset made her panic in a way she had never experienced. She shoved against Danny, but he didn't budge.

"Evan! A little help, please."

Evan leaned both elbows on the counter, looking entirely too comfortable. "He called me a hooker."

With an exasperated grunt, Alaina faced her father. “Dad, you need to apologize.”

Her father’s lip curled. “Whether they charge by the hour or not, they’re whores. Two young men trolling about for an older, successful woman who’ll buy them things and support their lazy, party lifestyle. A whore is a whore, no matter what gender.”

Daniel’s shoulders relaxed, and he actually stepped back just when Alaina was sure he would attack. Her father’s accusation and the absence of Daniel’s physical threat combined to set off the temper she had been holding in check.

She slammed her fist on the counter and jabbed a stiff finger into her dad’s belly. “Daniel owns a martial arts studio, and Evan owns his own construction company. Did it ever occur to you that they might be here because they like *me*?”

Her father’s sallow brown eyes flicked between Alaina, Daniel, and Evan. He dug his keys from his pocket and twirled them around a finger. “I guess we’ll see.” He whistled as he walked away, turning in the doorway to render his parting shot. “Don’t let Zach stay up too late. School starts next week, and we have him on that sleeping schedule.”

Alaina gritted her teeth to keep from replying. *She* was the one who hounded them to alter his bedtime two weeks before school started so he wouldn’t be tired in class. It was just like her father to throw that back in her face.

As soon as he was gone, Daniel pulled her against him. She slapped her hand over his mouth before he could kiss her.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He grinned. She felt the movement under her hand. He encircled her wrist with one hand, dropped a kiss on her palm, and pulled her palm away from his mouth.

“You called us your boyfriends, and then you stuck up for us.”

She snorted at his confidence. “That doesn’t mean I’m not still mad at you, not to mention he didn’t believe the boyfriend part.”

Evan wandered to the stove and turned the burner under the pot back on. “He believed you, Alaina. That’s why he insulted us. He was just making sure we were good enough for his little girl.”

Alaina had a very different interpretation of the conversation. Now she understood why Daniel backed off. He probably thought the same thing. “No, Evan, he insulted you because, in doing so, he insulted me. Nothing in that whole exchange was about you. He honestly doesn’t give a shit about either of you.”

The two men shared a long look, the kind that communicated a lot of stuff about which Alaina had no clue. Daniel picked up a towel and used it to extract a glass pan from the oven. He ladled sauce and cheese onto something that looked like chicken.

Alaina snapped at both of them. “When I wanted to go to college, he told me sending a woman to school was a waste of time. My mom convinced him I would find a better husband there than if I stayed home. When I wanted to go to grad school, he told me it was a waste of time and money. I should be settling down and having kids. When I told him I was going to get my doctorate, he told me no decent man would ever have me. I had ruined myself. I was no longer mother material.”

Evan’s arms slid around her waist as he pulled her back against his chest and kissed the top of her head.

Daniel glanced up from whatever he was doing at the stove. “That explains why you hate men so much.”

“I don’t hate men.” The denial was automatic, but that didn’t make her statement less true. She didn’t hate men. She hated the idea of having one control her life. “I just don’t have the burning desire to settle down with someone like my father. I’m not sure I have the desire to settle down at all. Maybe that’s really why I’m willing to give the pair of you a chance.”

Evan tightened his embrace and pressed a trail of kisses up her neck. “We want to settle down, Alaina.”

“Yeah.” Daniel slid the pan back in the oven. “I like kids, and with Zach, it’s kinda like you already have a kid. Even so, Evan and I wouldn’t mind knocking you up a few times.” He crossed back to her as he spoke, and by the time he finished, Alaina found herself pinned between him and Evan.

They were getting a little ahead of themselves, but she never got a chance to tell them that. Evan turned her toward him and devoured her mouth. Daniel’s body pressed to her back, forcing her tighter against Evan. Alaina’s bones turned to jelly. When Evan finally released her lips, Daniel claimed his due.

Though she burned for more, she pushed them both away and wiggled out from between them. “Zach will be back in about five minutes. I want both of you on your best behavior. I haven’t told him I was dating anyone, and I want him to feel comfortable asking questions.”

Evan’s eyes twinkled. “But you’re not kicking us out yet, little lady. We’re not done moving your things.”

Daniel grinned and turned away, heading back to the stove. “Or rocking your world.”

She snorted and deflated their bravado balloons. “You’re not staying here tonight.”

Evan helped her set the plates on the table. “Tomorrow night?”

“We’ll see.” She couldn’t hold back her pleased smile. Having two men so centered on her added a wickedly fulfilling decadence to her life.

Chapter 15

Sunday was one of those perfect summer days where the humidity wasn't too high and the sun wasn't on a mission to fry everyone in ten minutes or less. Zach woke early and made breakfast for himself. Alaina found him eating a bowl of cereal at the table while playing his DS.

"Good morning," she said, kissing the top of his head. His hair stuck up in back, ratted into a ball from a night spent rubbing it against his pillow. "You have fifteen minutes left on that thing."

"I want to get to the third quest on this level," he mumbled. Milk dribbled down his chin.

She handed him a napkin and filled the coffee maker. "That might not happen today."

The day before had been a whirlwind of activity. After dinner, Evan and Daniel finished moving the majority of her office to the basement. The things she needed now, like her desk and active files, had been moved to the living room she never used. It was supposed to be the nice one, the one she used when company visited. Somewhere along the line, she had closed the door on it and forgotten to shop for furniture. It had nice carpet and only primer coated the walls.

Evan had offered to paint it, but Alaina declined. Their declarations of intent had shaken her more than she cared to admit. She had experienced several long-term relationships that hadn't been as serious as the looks in Evan's and Daniel's eyes.

She poured herself a bowl of cereal and joined Zach at the table. "Time is up, Zach. Now you get to socialize with your sister."

He made a big show of saving his game, closing the system and placing it as far out of his reach as he could. Alaina stifled the urge to laugh at her little drama queen brother. Maybe Zach had learned to be overly dramatic from her.

“Mario said I could come over his house today,” Zach said. Slipping from his chair, he carried his empty bowl to the counter.

“Rinse it,” she reminded him. “And put it in the dishwasher.” She watched him do as she directed. Last night, he hadn’t seemed at all fazed about having Evan and Daniel there. It was important to her that Zach feel comfortable with her men.

She sipped her coffee to check the temperature. “Zach, do you have any questions about Evan or Daniel?”

“Daniel is the one who teaches karate, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then, no. I’m gonna go to Mario’s.”

Alaina stood. “Wait, are you sure you’re okay with me dating two men?”

Zach rolled his eyes. “I had two girlfriends last year, but they got mad when they found out about each other. This is a much better way to do it.”

* * * *

Daniel made Evan stop at the florist on Second Avenue before they headed to Alaina’s. She wasn’t expecting them, but she had to be dying to see them. Because Zach was there, she had sent both of them home early and with minimal kissing.

As it had been the previous day, her front door was open, welcoming the fresh air coming on the gentle breeze. Evan grabbed a brand-new football from the back of his truck. At Daniel’s questioning glance, he shrugged.

“It’s football season. I thought Zach might like to play.”

Evan had stayed the night with Daniel. “When did you pick that up?”

“Friday on my way home from work.”

That explained why Evan had been so late. Given Evan’s lukewarm reception of Zach the night before, Daniel had begun to wonder whether Evan was okay with the kid’s role in Alaina’s life. By extension, Zach was going to have a major role in both of their lives as well.

Daniel chalked it up to nerves. Evan had a few nieces and nephews, but he didn’t spend as much time with kids as Daniel did. Not to mention that neither of them expected Zach to show up so suddenly.

No noises came from within the house. Cradling the flowers in one arm, Daniel knocked.

She rounded the corner from the hall to the front room. Surprise widened her eyes a second, before a smile softened the planes of her face. She wore jean shorts and a pink shirt that hugged her curves nicely. His eyes moved up and down her body, memorizing the picture of domesticity he now craved.

She pushed open the screen door. “I’m sorry. I didn’t hear the door.”

“We just got here.” He leaned down to kiss her cheek as he crossed the threshold, but she turned so that his lips landed on hers. Instantly, his nerves calmed. “Were you busy?”

“I was setting up my temporary office.”

She lifted to her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his cheek, and then she motioned Evan inside and gave him the same treatment. “You should have told me you were coming. I would have shaved my legs.”

He never had a chance to respond. The front door flew open. Reflexively, he reached out to grab the streak of lightning barreling into his leg and thigh before it could bounce off and hit the floor.

“Zach!”

“Whoa, there,” he said, circumventing the disapproval in Alaina’s voice. He steadied Zach, setting him back on his feet.

“Sorry,” he said. With a quick jerk of his head, Zach indicated the bouquet still cradled in Daniel’s arms. “Did you make her mad already?”

“Not that I know of.” He handed the flowers to Alaina. “These are for you.”

“Thank you,” she said. She buried her face in them, but even that gesture didn’t hide how touched she was by the unexpected gift.

Evan held the football out to Zach. “This is for you.”

Zach looked at the ball, a puzzled expression on his face, then back up at Evan. Hesitantly, he reached out and took it. “Thanks.”

Evan ruffled the kid’s hair. “You’re welcome.”

“I’m going to put these in water,” Alaina said, still smiling at the bouquet. “Don’t throw that in the house.”

The streak of lightning disappeared before Alaina finished her warning.

She sighed and turned to Daniel. “I’m sorry about his manners. He hasn’t seen Mario in over a week. Those two are inseparable.”

Evan nodded solemnly. “He’s fine.”

They followed Alaina into the kitchen.

She headed to the sink. “There is a vase in the cupboard over the refrigerator. Do you mind getting it?”

Daniel retrieved it. As he set it down on the counter next to the sink, he planted a kiss on Alaina’s neck. “You’re not going to send us away tonight, are you?”

She cut stems under the running water. “I don’t know.” A frown marred her brow.

He wanted to smooth it away.

“My dad didn’t say how long Zach was staying. I always assume he’s staying multiple nights unless I hear otherwise. My dad is seventy and my mom is fifty-nine, though she acts way older. I have

no idea why they thought it was a good idea to have another kid at their age. Another shot at a boy, I guess.”

Daniel watched her arrange the blooms to her liking. He hadn’t cared much for the way her father’s presence seemed to grate against Alaina’s nerves. He’d seen Lainie tolerate a whole host of different personalities, some of whom had irritated the hell out of Daniel. She seemed to have patience with pretty much everyone. He knew he rubbed her the wrong way more than once, and he desperately hoped it wasn’t because he reminded her of her father.

Evan slid closer. His hands spanned across her hips. Daniel kept waiting to feel jealous about the two of them, but the emotion didn’t happen. A vague sadness threatened. He wanted to do to Evan what Evan was doing to Alaina. A vision of the three of them loving one another swam in front of his eyes. He shook away the thought as Evan kissed Alaina’s shoulder. There was no way Lainie would go for that.

“Don’t mind Danny. He’s just horny.”

Her frown didn’t fade. As she cut and arranged, Daniel glanced out the window. He spied Zach in the back yard, throwing the football into the air and trying to catch it as it fell back down.

“He doesn’t know how to throw it.” He murmured the words softly and to himself, but she heard him over the flow of water.

“I haven’t taught him how yet.” She carried the flowers to the table. Daniel watched her peer out the screened door at Zach. “Signing him up for football is next on my list if I can get my dad to commit to the practice schedule. I work late some nights, so I can’t always get him there.”

Outside, Zach threw the football straight into the air. It spiraled out of control, duck-tailing its way back to hit him in the face. Daniel kissed the top of Alaina’s head. “He’s going to hurt himself. He needs help.”

* * * *

The men abandoned her. Five minutes on a pre-season Sunday and their attention was already elsewhere. The aluminum handle clicked as the door closed and voices floated through the mesh.

“You’re holding it too tight.”

Alaina drifted to the door, wanting to hover as much as she wanted to remain inconspicuous. Though she missed the feel of solid arms around her, the sight in her back yard made her heart thump madly in her chest. These were the kinds of men Zach needed in his life. Both Evan and Daniel were good, solid role models.

Daniel said something to Zach, who handed over the football. With wary eyes, he watched Daniel grip the ball, pointing to his ring finger and to the laces. Evan added his two cents. Zach nodded, the wariness fading with each word Daniel and Evan uttered.

Then Zach held out his hand for the ball. He positioned his fingers carefully. Daniel flexed his hand around an imaginary football and mimed throwing it.

Alaina could stand it no longer. She opened the door and crept down the three cement steps that would take her closer. None of them noticed her approach. She remained surreptitious, wanting their interaction undisturbed by her presence.

“You want to grip it enough to put a force behind the throw, but not too tight or else the tail end will wobble and the throw will be wild.”

“Isn’t that a Hail Mary?” Zach peered up at Daniel, regarding him in a purely businesslike manner.

“No.” Evan shook his head, fielding that query. “A Hail Mary is when you chuck it high and long and pray that one of your receivers gets free and under the ball before one of the defenders does. It’s still a good throw.”

Daniel crooked a thumb at Evan. “Evan was my go-to guy in high school. He was the best running back I ever threw to.”

Alaina could see the wheels turning in Zach’s head. Finally he nodded at Evan. “Can I throw it to you?”

“Sure.” Evan jogged down the length of the yard, putting about fifteen yards between them. Zach’s throw fell short.

Evan scooped the ball up from the ground and threw it to Daniel.

Daniel caught it easily. He tucked it under his arm and checked Zach’s stance. “Plant your feet shoulder-width apart. Step with your opposite foot toward your target. You’re right-handed, so step with your left foot.”

He demonstrated the way he wanted Zach to move his body. “Point your toe where you want the ball to go. It’ll keep your aim true.”

They both tried that movement a few times.

“As the ball rolls off your hand, you want your pinky pointing to the sky and your thumb pointing to the ground. That will give it the spin you need to make it go straight and far.”

Daniel handed the ball over. Zach threw the ball, not seeming to notice that Evan had moved closer. Like good coaches, Daniel and Evan didn’t correct every pass. They praised Zach’s good passes and pointed out what he did right. Zach responded by replicating what he did correctly. Soon, his aim was true, though his throws lacked much force.

Alaina was impressed by how well Daniel and Evan worked together. They were such close friends. Perhaps this was why they wanted to share a woman. Falling in love with separate women would necessarily draw them further apart as their obligations to their partners grew.

“Alaina!”

The warning jerked Alaina from her thoughts. Reflex had her hands in the air to snag the ball and bring it to her chest before it hit her face.

“Aim for the chest,” she said, throwing the ball back to Zach. It had been years since she had thrown a football. Without thinking about it, she put the principles Daniel had been teaching Zach into

practice. Her aim was a little off, but her form was good. Zach caught it.

“Nice,” Daniel said, his smile directed at Alaina. “You’ll have to play with us next weekend.”

Alaina looked from Zach to Daniel. “Me?”

“Can I play?” Zach asked.

“Sure,” Daniel said. “Everybody plays.”

Alaina cocked her head at Daniel. “What’s next weekend?”

Evan came in from the back of the yard. “Huge Labor Day barbeque at the DiMarco house. It’s a tradition.”

“Yeah,” Daniel said. “You wanna come? My entire family and most of Evan’s will be there.”

“I don’t know.” She pretended to think it over. Meeting Daniel’s family wasn’t a big deal. The only person she hadn’t met was his mother. And Evan had told her so much about his three brothers and two sisters that she felt she knew them already. “Can I be on your team?”

Daniel laughed and threw a gentle pass to Zach. “Nope.”

Zach threw to Alaina. He parked his hands on his hips. “Can I be on your team?”

“Absolutely,” Daniel said. “Be warned—I play to win. You’re going to need to keep practicing.”

Alaina nailed Daniel with a line drive. Her position between him and Zach put her close to them both. The throw had a lot of force behind it. Daniel caught it effortlessly and passed to Evan.

“You think I’m that bad?”

“No,” he said. The grin he tried to hide split his face. “But I can’t tackle you if you’re on my team.”

Alaina rolled her eyes and threw her last pass to Zach. “I’m going to make lunch. If you have a special request, now is the time to make it.”

“Grilled cheese,” Zach said, jumping excitedly. “With ham. And no veggies, Mom.”

She ruffled his hair as she passed him on her way to the house, purposely not commenting on his slip-up. "I can make the first part of that wish come true, but not the second. Daniel, Evan, would you like grilled ham and cheese?"

Evan threw to Zach. "Sounds good. Thanks."

Daniel studied Zach. His absentminded nod was answer enough.

As Alaina pulled a pan and ingredients from the cupboards and refrigerator, she had a smile on her face. Today seemed to be going well. Daniel and Evan seemed serious about wanting to have a place in her life, and she really liked having them there.

Chatter drifted through the open window. Sports and coaching talk turned to actual conversation. Before long, Zach's little voice was talking about who he hoped was in his class this year in third grade, the perks of no longer being a second grader, and his upset over the fact his cowboy-themed room was going to be ruined in the next week.

She called the boys in for lunch, so the last part of the conversation lingered in the air as they tramped up the steps and through the door wall into the dining area of the kitchen.

"Wash your hands," she reminded them. In a million years, this kind of domestic scene never entered her imagination unless it was accompanied by frustrated resentment. It was the exact future that her father had tried to force her to pursue.

Yet, she was content. The three men in her life were bonding.

Zach disappeared into the bathroom to follow instructions. Evan ran up the stairs to use the second restroom. Daniel turned on the faucet in the sink next to where Alaina was finishing julienning baby carrots.

"He's pretty good, Lainie." He pumped the soap dispenser and dropped a kiss on Alaina's shoulder. "You're not bad, either. For a girl."

Her head whipped around, but the ready glare faded when she saw him laughing at her reaction. "That's some sense of humor you have."

He chuckled. "So I'm told."

She handed him a dish towel to dry his hands. "My father didn't approve of women playing sports. He thought Title IX was a travesty."

Throwing the towel on the counter, Daniel snagged her by the hips and pulled her closer. "I have no idea what this Title IX thing is, but I do heartily approve of women playing sports. You'll notice I don't go easy on Sophia. That's not because she's my sister. It's because I'm a feminist."

Alaina laughed. Though the definition of the word was innocuous, most macho men declined an association to it based on how it was perceived. She prided herself on having an open mind, but the word still sounded funny coming from Daniel.

Catching the impishness in his mood, she slid her hands along his arms. She loved the solidness of him. "If I took lessons from you, would you go easy on me?"

"I'd have to," he said. "You don't have the skills for it to be a fair fight."

No, she definitely didn't. Daniel had a case of trophies from various tournaments from which he had taken home titles.

"And yet," she said, tipping her face to his, "I don't feel as if I'm at a disadvantage."

"That's because you hold all the cards, Lainie. I'd die before I hurt you."

His lips met hers in a long, slow kiss. Tender heat unfurled to travel through her body. She pressed against him, reveling in his simple affection.

When at last Daniel lifted his lips away, Alaina caught movement from the corner of her eye. Zach peered at them closely, seemingly more baffled than bothered.

"Zach?" She had never allowed him to see her kissing anybody before.

"I didn't know you knew how to do that."

Daniel hadn't released her. Against her chest, he shook with silent laughter. Alaina rolled her eyes and pried herself from his embrace. She threw carrots onto each plate, grabbed her plate and glass, and headed to the table.

"You two can serve yourselves."

Evan returned in time to catch the tail end of her pique. He snagged the last sandwich and slid into the chair next to Alaina. "You okay?"

She snorted. I was an affectation her father repeatedly warned her was unladylike. She had refrained from doing things like that in front of men for years, but there was something about Evan and Daniel that made her think it was okay to just be herself, for better or for worse.

"It looks like Daniel has the same sense of humor as an eight-year-old."

Evan's light chuckle eased her upset a bit. "Yeah, but it made everyone think he was precocious when he was six."

He leaned in and brushed a light kiss across her lips. A mountain of emotion shivered through her body. Alaina allowed herself to revel in the way each of these men made her feel. The guilt that had slowly built over the past week fell away, faded and forgotten.

This was the relationship for which she had been waiting. These were the men who completed her. Having Zach there only made things better. The four of them together made a family, and Alaina would be damned if she'd let anything tear them apart.

Her father pounded on the door before lunch was finished. His loud voice boomed through the house. "Alaina? Are you home?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to say something snide about the fact that her front door was open and her car was in the driveway. Where the hell else would she be? However, she refrained. Yesterday's exchange hadn't been pleasant, and she didn't want to subject Zach to more of the rancor that existed between her and their dad.

Zach groaned. “I was going to go back to Mario’s house. Camilla said I could stay the night.”

Alaina favored him with a sympathetic smile as she called an answer to her father. “In the kitchen.”

The screen door slammed, something only her father seemed to be able to make it do, and Alan Miles appeared in the kitchen. He hovered over the table, inspecting the remnants of food on Evan and Zach’s plates.

At last, he eyed Zach. “How you doing, kid?”

Zach’s lips pressed together for a second, and then he blew out a stream of air. “It’s weird having my room in a different room. Alaina said it’s only until Evan fixes everything.”

Air wheezed from her father’s lungs. Alaina looked closer, searching for signs of distress. “Dad, are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just tired. Like I said, your mom’s not feeling good. I was up with her a lot last night.”

Alaina’s mother had a long history of feigning fragile health. The doctors always sent her home with excellent reports. It wasn’t until she saw similar things in her patients that Alaina realized how much her mother played the helpless female card. It was a way to control her alpha-male husband.

She dismissed the concern. “Zach can stay with me as long as you like.”

“Maybe when we get back. We’re going to go to the west coast. Your mom wants to see Saugatuck Dunes again.”

That was a familiar vacation spot, one they had visited every year for as long as Alaina could remember. The state park had hiking and spectacular views of Lake Michigan.

Her dad leveled a look at Evan. “So you’re the one fixing the roof and the leak problems? I told Alaina she had a problem six years ago when she bought the house, but she didn’t believe me. Inspector said it was fine.”

Evan finished chewing his baby carrot and nodded thoughtfully. “The leak is years old. There’s some pretty significant damage. An inspector should have caught it.”

“So, what makes you qualified to fix it besides the fact that you’re dating my daughter?”

The edge in her father’s voice took Alaina by surprise. In the twenty years she’d been dating, he had never once taken an interest in anything her boyfriends had to say. Sometimes he had been downright rude. Her eyes met Daniel’s across the table to find his brows raised in a distinct I-told-you-so gesture. She didn’t know whether she wanted to throw her water at him or accept the fact he was right.

“In addition to ten years’ practical experience in the field, I have an engineering degree.” Evan answered Alan’s question with the appropriate gravity, submitting to her father’s macho requirements without protest.

Alaina knew all of this already. Evan had disclosed this passion between bouts of lovemaking.

Her father sat heavily in the only vacant chair. “Your family is into construction?”

Evan shook his head. “Just me. I started out volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. When I was sixteen, I lied about my age to get walk-on jobs at building sites. I’m the youngest of six kids, so I worked through college.”

Alaina shook away the urge to clear the dishes. She wanted to be close in case her father tried to intimidate one or both of her men. While she didn’t think Evan or Daniel would back off if confronted, she didn’t want something awful to start. Things were bad enough with just her and her father involved.

Alan turned to Daniel next. “What about you, pretty boy? What do you bring to the table?”

Daniel didn’t bother to smother an amused smile. “As Alaina said yesterday, I own a karate studio. It’s been in my family for generations.”

Alan jabbed a thick finger in Daniel's direction. "Are you involved in that self-defense crap that keeps Alaina out until all hours of the night?"

The growl was out before she thought about stopping it. "Dad, knock it off. Those women need help. Daniel provides a valuable service, and I'm usually home by ten, not that the hours I keep are any of your business."

As frequently happened, her father didn't interrupt. When she finished speaking, he dismissed her completely and turned back to Daniel. "So, you're one of those bleeding-heart types who tries to save the world. Great. She needs someone to rein her in, not encourage her. People make their own choices in life, son. If you're not going to curb her activities, then it's up to you to keep her safe."

Alaina pressed a hand over her eyes and groaned. This conversation wasn't going to go well, not that it had much of a chance from the outset. "Zach, go upstairs and get your things together."

His eyes rounded and morphed into that cute, pouty look he had used on her with varied degrees of success in the past. "Alaina..."

"Go." She made sure her tone was firm enough to get him moving. He went.

The amusement glittering in Daniel's eyes flared brighter as he faced her father again. "Absolutely. Though she has perfected the don't-mess-with-me glare, she is just a little thing. She needs a man to protect her."

Oh, this was just what she needed. Just her luck, her father was providing the perfect opportunity for Daniel to bring up the topic of more than one fight they'd had. Not much time had passed since she told Daniel she didn't need a man to protect her.

Alan's finger wagged harder at Daniel. Her father had no sense of humor. Even if he had known the exact cause of the sparkle in Daniel's eye, Alan Miles wouldn't have found it funny. "Don't fuck with me, pretty boy. It's a tough world, and I made my little girl

tough. This isn't a game. Alaina has thrown a lot of men in my face, but they've never been here the next morning."

"That's it." Alaina shot to her feet. She gathered the plates nearest her and threw them into a stack. "If you think you can come into my house, grill my boyfriends, and call me a slut, then you have severely misjudged the situation. Get out, Dad."

Daniel grabbed her wrist when she went for his plate, halting her furious cleaning. "Lainie, I don't think that's what he meant."

She turned her icicle glare on him. Frost formed on his eyebrows. It was figurative frost, but she knew he could feel it. "Do you seriously want to defend him?"

He thought about it for a moment. At least she could give him credit for considering the question. "Yes." Without releasing her wrist, he turned back to her father. "You owe Lainie an apology. She'll tolerate only so much before she kicks you in the balls. When she does that, you generally have it coming."

Nobody had ever spoken to her father like that before. For a moment, Alaina feared her dad might attack Daniel. She didn't fear for Daniel. He was an accomplished fighter. However, her father's ego would never allow him to forgive Danny.

When her father laughed, years of stress left Alaina. Somehow, Daniel had penetrated the asshole haze surrounding her father and come out smelling fine. Perhaps this could work.

He came around the table. Daniel released her wrist in time to let her father gather her in a tight hug. She allowed the act, but she didn't relax into his arms. He kissed the top of her head. "I'm sorry, Alaina. When we get back from Saugatuck, you're going to need to bring these two over. Your mother is going to want to meet them."

The next few minutes passed in a blur for Alaina. Zach hugged Daniel and Evan goodbye. Her father shook their hands, something he had never done with any of her boyfriends. She couldn't figure out if the events of the afternoon bothered her or not. Isn't this kind of

peace what she'd craved for years? How in the world had Daniel achieved it so easily?

At last the three of them were alone. Evan grabbed the rest of the dishes and helped her load the dishwasher. Daniel wiped down the table and the counters. She liked the way they all seemed to fit together, transitioning from chore to chore seamlessly.

Evan broke the companionable silence. "Your dad was right."

Alaina threw a sharp look to him. She was sure a dagger or two went with it.

He drew her into his arms. "Not your dad. Daniel's. He has long advocated for Danny to be a lawyer. He argues well, and he seems to be able to get anyone to like him, no matter the circumstances." He kissed her then, feathering his lips gently over hers before devouring her completely. Alaina leaned into him, giving herself over to his expertise. A solid wall of heat closed around her from behind, and she knew what came next. Wetness soaked her panties. This was her fantasy, her dream come true.

Still, she pushed away from them both, holding her arms out to keep them from resuming their seduction. "Wait. We need some ground rules."

That gleam was back in Daniel's eyes. "Rules are no fun, Lainie. I say we go upstairs, get naked, and see what happens."

She completely ignored his suggestion. "I'm not happy about the way you guys went about convincing me to fall for both of you."

Evan grimaced. "Alaina, we apologized for that."

"I'm not asking for another apology, Evan. I'm pointing out that, due to a lack of communication, you both made me feel things you didn't intend to make me feel. Mistakes like that can ruin any relationship, and ours is already facing some obstacles." Silence greeted her proclamation. She could feel each of their hearts beating just below her palms. Heat seeped through the cotton of their shirts, and carnal images flashed through her imagination.

Daniel backed away, a scowl on his face. “Okay, what are the rules, Lainie?”

“Honesty,” she said. “Complete and total honesty. We have to be honest with one another. Each of us has to feel comfortable sharing what we like and what we don’t like in this relationship. You guys have been friends for a long, long time. I’d hate it if something that happens between us chips away at that. Are you sure you’re both okay with sharing me?”

Both of them nodded in their characteristic ways. Evan’s answer was a measured and thoughtful assent. Daniel’s nod was curt and final.

Alaina let out the breath she had been holding. “Is there anything else either of you needs to get off your chest?”

Chapter 16

Evan checked Daniel's reaction to Alaina's question. He didn't think she was asking too much. If anything, she was taking steps to cement the permanency of their ménage situation.

As he suspected, the mulish set to Daniel's jaw meant there would be hell to pay if Evan said anything about their previous sexual relationship. Evan resolved to speak to Daniel alone before he spilled everything to Alaina, but he was going to disclose everything sooner rather than later. He shelved the issue.

Daniel scooped Alaina up and tossed her over his shoulder. Alaina squealed and beat her fists on his back.

"Put me down, you Neanderthal!"

Daniel grunted and caressed her ass through her denim shorts. "A Neanderthal wouldn't bother carrying you. He'd just drag you by the hair."

"You're not endearing yourself to...Ohhhh."

Her protest trailed off, turning into a moan as Dan's hand disappeared up the inside leg of her shorts. She lifted her head as they started up the stairs and grinned at Evan. Mischief sparkled in those warm brown eyes.

Lifting her torso, she put her hands on his shoulders so that Evan now carried her upper half. "Don't worry, Evan. Danny might be able to fool a lot of people with his charm, but I know better than to reward this kind of behavior. I'll let you have me first."

She did her best to kiss him given the way Danny bounced her body around.

They reached the top of the stairs, and Daniel turned right, strode into her bedroom, and tossed her on the bed. She bounced once before propping herself up on one elbow. Her chest rose and fell rapidly. Desire stained her cheeks pink.

“Damn, you’re sexy.”

Evan didn’t realize he said that out loud until he heard Daniel’s chuckle. “Yeah, and she’s ours.”

Alaina crooked her finger at him. “Come kiss me, Evan.”

He lost no time in shucking off his shoes. The khaki shorts and blue tee had been chosen with an eye toward looking attractive to Alaina. They were eons nicer than the cutoff jeans and faded tees he preferred. He joined her on the bed, and she drew him into her arms. She trailed the fingertips of one hand along his cheek. When he pressed his lips against hers, she opened to him. Her soft body molded to his harder one.

Evan was vaguely aware of the bed dipping under Danny’s weight. Alaina mewed into his mouth as Daniel spooned her from behind. Evan felt like moaning when Dan’s erection ground into the hand Evan had on Alaina’s ass. He wanted to cup Daniel’s cock, grasp it in his hand as he pumped his own cock into Alaina’s body. He knew Danny did that on purpose. It was his way of apologizing for denying the true nature of his relationship with Evan yet again.

Daniel pulled Alaina’s shoulder, breaking her kiss with Evan and rolling her onto her back. She palmed his cheek and smiled up at him. “We’re all wearing entirely too many clothes.”

Evan grinned at Daniel over her body. Within seconds, they stripped her naked. Each of them captured a nipple in their mouths. Evan licked and sucked, nipping at her the way he knew would make her gasp.

Her leg brushed against his, the smooth skin helping to rush more blood to his cock. She arched off the bed. “This isn’t exactly what I meant.”

His free hand wandered her body, coming into occasional contact with Daniel's hand. Together, they pulled her thighs to part her legs.

Daniel moved toward her pussy. Evan watched those talented lips kiss their way across her stomach. Dan moved into position between her splayed legs, and his head dipped. The sight of his lover's tongue licking Alaina's sweet nether lips was much more erotic than Evan imagined. His cock throbbed so hard it hurt.

* * * *

Alaina thought she was going to die. White-hot heat seared paths around her clit. Two fingers pumped into her hole. Evan's mouth tortured one nipple while his fingers rolled the other, sending sharp pulses of pleasure to her core. Unable to stay still, she writhed under the dual onslaught.

She had imagined this a hundred times over the course of the past week, but she was still unprepared for the havoc two lovers created. Though they had very different styles, each of her men was a fantastic lover in his own right. Together, they were incredible, and they hadn't even come to the good part yet.

"Don't stop." She was so close. Daniel's lips closed around her clit and sucked hard. Tingling heat concentrated at her core. Her hips rose from the bed, and she cried out as she came.

Her lovers shifted. Strength returned to Alaina. That had been a starter orgasm, one to prepare her body for the pleasure to come. She jabbed her elbows into the mattress and lifted her upper body to watch Daniel and Evan undress.

The show she caught was even more erotic than she could anticipate. Evan watched as Daniel dropped his pants. The hungry look in his eye betrayed something Alaina had never guessed. Her heart went out to Evan for a brief second, and then she noticed the way Daniel paused to display his body.

Daniel not only knew Evan found him attractive, he reveled in it.

Alaina wanted to continue her observations to see if Daniel would stare at Evan the same way, but she yielded to some instinct telling her they didn't want her to know yet. She hoped for "yet" because she didn't know how long they could keep it a secret before their reasons for doing so blew up in their faces. The fallout would destroy their perfect little threesome.

Mindful of sudden movements, she let her head sink back to the mattress and closed her eyes. How long had Daniel and Evan had feelings for one another? Were they already lovers?

What were they doing with her? She didn't doubt that both Daniel and Evan found her attractive. She might not understand it, but she didn't doubt it. She didn't understand why they hadn't shared their involvement—she still wasn't sure she could assume involvement—when she had given them the chance. Unwilling to confront them now, she refrained from doing anything that might indicate she had noticed more than they wanted her to see.

The mattress dipped on either side of her. Alaina opened her eyes and smiled up at her lovers, favoring each of them individually. She banished the worries from her mind. Given the way they were both looking at her, they were there because they wanted to make love to her. Thank goodness she wasn't an elaborate beard. Her heart was involved, and this meant a great deal to her. Though she wasn't ready to admit it to either Daniel or Evan, she was in love with them both. She couldn't say exactly when or how it happened, but things like that didn't matter now.

Evan's rough fingers traced a path down her arm, leaving gooseflesh everywhere they touched and expectant skin everywhere he didn't. "How are you, Alaina? Do you think you can get up on your hands and knees?"

She wanted to see them kiss, right there above her. Less than two feet separated their lips. Cream rushed to her already wet pussy, leaking down her crack to lubricate her ass. She was sure one of them would want to fuck her there. She wanted them both together, but she

wasn't sure she could handle it. They were both so much larger than her. Daniel's cock was long, and while it was thick, Evan's was even thicker. She'd never seen one so wide before.

Shoving that erotic picture away, she sat up and turned so that her bottom rested on her heels. "I'm game for anything you guys want to do." Even as her hands encircled their hard cocks, she flashed them her best wicked grin.

Daniel sat up. He threaded his fingers through her hair, which had come loose, and held her still for a kiss. His mouth opened, and he devoured her, dazzling her with his skill and finesse. The taste and scent of her climax lingered on his lips and tongue, creating a hunger that would soon need sating.

When he broke the kiss, Alaina looked into his face to find him similarly affected. He blinked at her through half-closed bedroom eyes, and he offered no smile. All amusement had vanished, leaving only a focused, serious man behind.

He scooted back to lie down, his head resting on a pillow and his long, muscular body filling half of the space. Evan had moved behind her. One hand on her ass urged her closer to Danny.

"Touch Daniel, sweetheart. I want to watch you suck him while I fuck you from behind." He caressed up and down her spine with his fingertips, sending waves of electricity straight to her nipples. "Are you okay with that?"

She leaned back so that his arms cradled her, and he planted a string of kisses on her neck. "Anything, Evan."

He rested his cheek on the top of her head. "You can ask for things, too, Alaina."

She laughed lightly. Daniel closed his hand around his erection and pumped it slowly. Her breath caught. "For now, just being with both of you is what I want."

Daniel's hand froze. He impaled her with a hard stare. "For now?"

She crawled across the narrow expanse of bed separating them. Using one fingernail, she grazed a path along his inner thigh. "For

now, Danny. Later, I'm sure I'll have a lot of requests. You know how demanding I am." Steel was softer than her tone. She didn't like the fact they weren't telling her they were both bisexual and in love with each other. Not wanting to ruin the mood, she favored him with a soft smile to make up for it. "For now, I'm content with letting you call the shots."

Before he could say anything, she bent down and licked the pearly drop of pre-cum beaded on the head of his cock. He sucked air and rested his hand on the back of her head. Giving head to Danny was something she enjoyed, and she wanted to prolong the experience.

She licked the length of him. She held him with one hand while the other caressed his sac. His hips rose from the bed, thrusting into the air, and his hand tightened in her hair. She loved him with her mouth, letting her lips wander where they pleased. She flicked her tongue over the sensitive skin of his balls before sucking one into her mouth. This wasn't something she had ever done before, but she figured Daniel would like it.

She was right.

"Fuck, Lainie. If you keep that up, I'm going to come in your hair instead of your mouth."

Behind her, Evan trailed kisses over her back. He was such a gentle, compassionate lover. She wondered if Daniel topped Evan or if it was the other way around. There was no telling with these two. In a lot of ways, Daniel seemed to be in charge, yet Evan had no problem calling the shots, either.

Evan's strong hands moved her hips and legs, positioning her to receive him. She cooperated, and when she heard the foil package rip open, she finally took Daniel into her mouth. She sucked hard, pulling him in as far as she could and wrapping her hand around the base.

Her hips lifted. Evan's fingers probed her slick opening, positioning his head at her entrance. She moaned in anticipation, and Daniel's grip pulsed in her hair, loosening and tightening in time to the rhythm she set.

One powerful thrust, and Evan filled her. Alaina made soft sounds of pleasure and need in the back of her throat, urging him to move. Finally, he pulled out almost completely and stayed there, teasing her with the promise of more.

She glanced up at Daniel to find his gaze locked behind her, and she knew Evan was taunting Daniel as much as he was teasing her. Daniel's body writhed under her onslaught, and the expression on his face pleaded with Evan on her behalf.

Then Evan moved. He pumped into her, matching the rhythm she used with Daniel. Tight coils of pleasure swept her away, and Alaina forgot all about the silent communications between her lovers. When Evan slowed down, she sucked Danny slower. When he increased his pace, she matched his actions.

Noises, cries of pleasure and impending climax, came from all around Alaina. The noises Evan wrung from her were absorbed by Daniel's rock-hard cock. In a torrent of heat, she came. Cream rushed down her thighs, her vagina milked Evan's cock, and still he didn't stop.

Daniel came next. Hot semen shot to the back of her throat. She swallowed it and licked him dry. He groaned beneath her.

Lifting her head, she glanced up at Daniel once more. She watched him watching Evan thrust into her body, prolonging the spirals of pleasure pulsing throughout her core. Her arms were too weak to hold her up. They trembled, a prelude to dropping her.

Evan hooked one arm under her torso and lifted her so that her back rested against his chest. He kneaded her breast, tweaking the nipple with soft pulls. Her head flopped back against his shoulder as he repositioned her legs on either side of his so that she essentially sat on his lap.

The gentle urging of Evan's thumb on her chin had her turning her face toward him and opening for his kiss. He ravaged her, worshipping and claiming her at the same time. His hand trailed heat down her front and parted the lips of her pussy.

He tickled her lightly, teasing circles around her clit until she couldn't hold in her moans anymore. Only then did he release her from the endless kiss and press the pad of his fingers against her swollen nub.

"Oh, Evan, yes. Don't stop."

He didn't. Beneath her, his hips pumped, and she matched his rhythm. His stiff cock jabbed a shallow thrust into her sweet spot as his fingers created a friction designed to leave her boneless.

Alaina opened her eyes to watch Daniel watching them. Desire blazed, and it seemed to hold equal parts for Alaina and for Evan. Having Daniel watch heightened the experience. She wanted to climax for herself. She wanted to please Evan, and she wanted to put on an unforgettable show for Danny.

Raising her arms behind her, she gripped Evan the best she could. She needed an anchor. She needed to feel his skin and hair beneath her fingers. Control slipped, and she let it go. Her body writhed, and loud moans ripped from her chest. Even though she knew she made the sounds, they were alien to her. She felt like she was floating. Electricity exploded, waves smashing against her from the inside, and the edges of her vision went black. Evan's climax followed her own.

Daniel lifted her from Evan's body and laid her on the bed next to him. The mattress dipped as Evan shifted into position on her other side. Two hot bodies cocooned her in bliss. Daniel caressed her face with a gentle reverence he'd never before displayed.

"This is right, Lainie. I wondered if I would be jealous to see the two of you together, but I'm not even close. This is perfect. The three of us belong together." He lifted his eyes to peek over her shoulder, and she knew he was asking Evan's opinion.

Evan's soft, warm lips pressed to her shoulder. "I agree. We belong together." His fingertips traced a path over her hip. "But we need a bigger bed."

Alaina laughed softly. She agreed on both counts. Daniel faced her. She pressed her palms to his chest and touched him everywhere

she could. "If only because Danny's a bed hog. I think he needs a queen size to himself. Do they make beds in double queen size?"

"Oh, please," Daniel growled. "You like sleeping close to me." He closed his mouth over hers and plunged his tongue inside. His fingers dug into her hips, pulling her until she rolled on top of him. His cock, hard and ready, pressed into her stomach.

"I want you both," she said when he released her lips to kiss her neck. "At the same time." Her earlier doubt resurfaced, but she pushed it away. They would be gentle, and anal sex wasn't new to either of them.

Evan's hand caressed her lower back. "You're so tiny, honey. Do you really think you can handle both of us?"

She curled her lips with the wickedest smile she knew how to give. Though she was short, she'd never thought of herself as tiny. She had too many curves to be considered petite. "Evan, I think you already know the answer to that."

Daniel lifted her shoulders and slid her up his body. Heat closed around her nipple, and he sucked hard. Alaina cried out. Her nails sank into Daniel's arms.

Evan scooted closer. He leaned up on an elbow. His lips, soft and firm at the same time, brushed against hers for a second before he sucked her tongue into his mouth. He played with her, licking and nibbling her tongue and lips until she forgot how to keep up with her end of the kiss.

Beneath her, Daniel worked his magic. His kisses and his hands awakened her already sensitive flesh, and fresh need filled her veins. All week, thoughts of having the two of them at the same time kept her distracted. Now her fantasies were about to come true.

Evan ended the kiss and rose to his knees. Two sets of hands moved her body, positioning her the way they wanted. Alaina straddled Daniel. Looking down, she saw his cock already sheathed in another lime green condom. Because his hands hadn't left her body once, she knew Evan had put it on him.

The desire to see that happen burned hot in Alaina's chest. She wanted to see them kiss one another. Would Evan be as gentle with Daniel as he was with her, or would he be rougher, the way Daniel liked it?

What would it be like to watch them fuck? Oh, she would definitely need a vibrator if she was going to watch them locked together that way.

Those fantasies fueled the need already throbbing through her pussy.

Daniel reached between them. He rubbed his cock against her clit, sending more sparks shooting into her system. She rocked against it, feeding her pleasure until she felt sweat beading along the back of her neck. Moving her hips forward, she rolled them to force him into her pussy. A moan escaped from them both as she sank down to take him fully inside.

Evan's rough hand pushed between her shoulder blades, guiding her to lie against Daniel's chest. Cool gel coated the finger he thrust into her ass. He massaged lubricant into her with practiced ease, wringing tiny moans from her.

Daniel jerked. His hips bucked off the bed, and his fingers dug into her thighs. She knew he could feel Evan inside her, stroking Daniel's cock as he prepared her for his own. Until this moment, it hadn't occurred to Alaina that having them inside her at the same time meant they would feel every stroke, every vibration of the other as they thrust into her. More cream gushed to her pussy, running down her thighs and drenching Daniel's hips.

The tip of Evan's cock pressed the tight ring around her anus. Alaina whimpered in anticipation of the sweet pinch and burn.

Daniel's thumb traced her cheek. "Are you okay, Lainie?"

Evan pushed harder, but not hard enough to breech her ass. "Are you kidding? She loves this. Get ready, Danny. You're going to have to hold her still."

Heat scorched her pussy, demanding friction to ease the ache. “Damn it, Evan, stop playing around. You know how I like it.”

Her vision went white the moment he did as she demanded. Daniel moaned, and his legs spread even wider apart, taking hers with them. The leverage she needed was gone. Alaina had no idea where the strength to buck against Evan came from, yet her ass lifted and pushed against him.

Four hands held her still.

Daniel kissed a trail from her temple to her lips. “Relax, Lainie. We don’t want to hurt you.”

“Yeah,” Evan echoed behind her. His thick cock filled her so deliciously. Combined with the feel of Daniel in her pussy, Alaina was sure an orgasm was seconds away. “This is our first time, too, honey. Let us get used to the way it feels, okay?”

The subtext was not lost on Alaina. She knew they were reveling in the feel of each other’s cocks while surrounded by her moist heat. It was the best of both worlds for her men.

She buried her face in Daniel’s shoulder and let them have their moment for as long as she could stand it. Of its own accord, her body squirmed, demanding to be fucked.

“Please,” she breathed.

The spell broke. Daniel gripped her hips to hold her in place. Then he moved her, withdrawing his cock from her pussy until his thick head stretched the sensitive tissues near her entrance. As he thrust into her, Evan withdrew. They set an opposing motion, one withdrawing as the other buried himself. Their movements were gentle and slow. Sweat coated their chests as they both struggled to maintain control.

Alaina didn’t even try. She welcomed the first orgasm, gripping the pillow under Daniel’s head so that her nails didn’t rip his skin open.

* * * *

Daniel was in heaven. Each delicious slide of his cock into her tight heat was accentuated by the feel of Evan's cock through the thin tissues separating them. He'd always loved the way being with Evan felt, but being with both Evan and Alaina completed him in a way nothing else ever had. This was the reason he had held out against Evan's subtle and not-so-subtle hints that the two of them should settle down together.

Now that they had found the perfect woman, he was perfectly happy to settle down with both of them. He wanted them both together, like this, and he wanted them separately. He loved watching Evan drive Alaina to the pinnacle of pleasure and push her over the cliff. He had locked his eyes to Evan's while Alaina had sucked his cock. Silent understanding had passed between them both, and he knew Evan shared his opinion.

Alaina's catlike mews pulled him from the thoughts distracting him from orgasm. He wanted to prolong this, to drive both her and Evan crazy. He wanted to climax at the same time as Evan.

"Harder." She whimpered as she pleaded. Her tiny body writhed between them. The hands curled into the pillow on either side of his head returned to his shoulders. She pressed her palms against his muscles.

Evan did as she asked, increasing the pace so that his rhythm was slightly off from Daniel's. The effect was incredible. With each thrust, Evan's head somehow hit the sensitive spot on the underside of Daniel's cock. Daniel bucked, unable to keep the slow, steady rhythm that had already pushed Alaina to the top once.

Alaina went wild, not that her movements had been controlled before. His Lainie, his uptight, proper little doctor-lady, came apart. She had let herself go with him before, but it was nothing compared to the catlike creature she had become. Her feline eyes lightened and her nails scratched paths into his arms and chest that were definitely going to show tomorrow.

Her head shot back, catching Evan's chin. She didn't seem to notice.

Evan's thrusts became jerky. "Hold her," he growled. "She's going to hurt herself."

Daniel wrapped his arms around her torso and forced her chest flat against his. He couldn't move like this. He couldn't thrust into her, but it didn't seem to matter. Her cries increased in volume, and her body writhed despite how tightly he held her. Sweat slickened her skin and his, making her even more slippery.

And the feel of Evan fucking them both sent him over the edge. Alaina's pussy contracted violently, squeezing him as she climaxed, and still Evan thrust into her. The man had amazing stamina. This was not news to Daniel. However, he had no idea how Evan could hold out under the dual onslaught.

Black spots dotted the periphery of Daniel's vision, and he felt lightheaded. His hold on Alaina slackened. Her frenzy had barely begun. Now he knew why Evan was holding out. Alaina wasn't finished.

Inside her pussy, his cock responded to the primal demands and to the friction of Evan's thrusts. He hadn't thought it possible, but his cock was once again hard and ready. Without thinking, he rolled the three of them so that Evan was on the bottom.

The shifted position brought a lift to Evan's brow, but Daniel didn't miss the relief in his best friend's expression. Evan was tired, but he didn't want to stop, and he didn't want to climax, not yet.

Head nestled against Evan's shoulder, Alaina stared up at him in shock. Her cat's eyes were large and round.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded, though the dazed expression in her eyes didn't change.

His nod was a curt acknowledgement of Alaina and a command to Evan. "Lift her knees." Daniel needed his own hands to hold his weight from crushing the two people he loved most in the world.

Evan did as Daniel asked, spreading Alaina wider. Alaina moaned. She lifted her hips to meet his thrusts, rolling in a large, curious kind of motion that puzzled Daniel until he realized she was also thrusting against Evan. He altered his rhythm to work with her.

Daniel was going to make damn sure Evan came this time. He had never been a gentle lover. It took all of his willpower to refrain from plowing into Alaina's pussy and claiming her the way he had before. He thrust into her, angling to hit her sweet spot and the underside of Evan's cock at the same time.

She went wild. The measured perfection of her movements went to hell as she surrendered to frenzy. She screamed, bucking with renewed violence. Evan's moans came louder and louder. He thrust, lifting her body to meet Daniel's. Her hips slammed into Daniel's. Her torso arched, and her pussy clamped on his cock. Evan's shout combined with Alaina's, and Daniel let himself surrender to this special kind of bliss.

Chapter 17

The amount of work a good construction crew could accomplish in one week amazed Alaina. For five days that first week, Evan's crew had slaved away on a new roof. By the end of the second week, they had completely repaired her attic, and most of the internal structural repairs had been made.

Daniel joined the crew for a few hours each day, donating his labor when it didn't interfere with the classes he taught at his studio. The sight of his shirtless form, sweaty from exertion, brought Alaina home from work for lunch several times during the week.

The last day of Sophia's self-defense class had come and gone. Alaina had found counseling placements for each of the women, so she wasn't upset to see it end. Now she and Daniel both had one more free evening to spend together.

Since something had come up and Drew had postponed their dinner, Daniel worked on Saturday. Alaina had been called into work, and Evan spent the day hanging drywall in Zach's bedroom. By the time Alaina made it home, the entire room was transformed. Gone was the cowboy theme. All four walls were white.

Alaina stood in the door, watching Evan sand the mud from the joints. The loud whir of the wet-dry vacuum gave her the opportunity to observe without Evan being aware of her presence.

White dust coated his jeans, giving them the appearance of having been bleached. They molded to his ass and thighs nicely, tightening over his muscles when he bent and loosening when he straightened. The original color of his tee was not discernable. Right now, it resembled some washed-out shade of grey.

An emotion welled in Alaina's chest. She wasn't comfortable enough to call it by its true name, not out loud. There was time still. Neither Evan nor Daniel had once hinted to her they were in love with one another. Daniel had expressed his love for her, and he had outed Evan as having the same feelings, but she hadn't reciprocated.

Whatever caused them to keep their love a secret also prompted her to keep her feelings to herself. So many things could go wrong. Too many variables made it difficult to be certain about anything. She did know that being with the both of them felt right. All these years, she had avoided relationships that might lead to marriage because she was afraid of ending up with some controlling bastard like her father.

Now she was contemplating the unfairness of not being allowed to marry two men at the same time. Her opinion of polygamists had undergone a radical transformation in the past week. She wasn't about to join a cult, but she did want to know there was a way to have legal permanence and recognition of their love.

The noise ceased, pulling her from her thoughts. Evan lifted the breathing mask from his face and let it hang loosely around his neck. He reached out and ran his fingers over the spot he had just sanded. A tremor ran through Alaina as she remembered the way he had touched her only that morning.

More often than not, he and Daniel stayed the night with her. She liked waking up sandwiched between their warm bodies. With those two, winter was going to be a lot warmer. Still, they needed time alone, without her. That meant she was going to have to kick them both out of the house tonight because neither of them was very good at coming up with lame excuses.

She sighed. It came out louder than she intended.

Evan turned, a smile lifting his sensuous lips and lighting his clear blue eyes. "Hey. You're home early."

"And I'm heading out in a bit. I'm working tonight. They called me in a little while ago."

Confusion clouded his brightness a bit. "But you spent the day working. You left at six this morning."

Alaina nodded. "It's not like this all the time. I'm on call one weekend a month, and this is it." Really, it was a pretty sweet deal. Though she taught at a university, she was affiliated with a hospital. Most of her colleagues were on call every other weekend, not one out of every four.

Evan frowned. "Does that include Monday? Daniel's family is really looking forward to having you at their annual Labor Day cookout. He's never brought a girlfriend before."

"But you've been?" She wanted to bite her tongue the moment she said it. Luckily, Evan didn't catch on to her actual allusion.

"Yeah. Dan and I go way back. I'm like part of the family." His frown turned to a brief grin that had her heart pounding. "They're going to love you."

Though she'd already met his father and sister, to her understanding, nobody knew that Evan was an important part of the relationship. "Has he told them about you yet?"

Evan shook his head. "He plans to spring it Monday. I have to go to my sister's house first, so I'll be by later."

This was news to Alaina. She hadn't known Evan's family was having a get-together of their own. Was he ashamed of their relationship? Her face must have shown her thoughts, because Evan was suddenly inches away.

"She needs me to install her new water softener. My family will all be at the DiMarco's, too. They're going to adore you." He pressed a brief kiss to her cheek. "I want to do more than that, honey, but I'm filthy and you're clean."

She crooked a smile at him. "I'd love it if I had time to get dirty with you."

"Will you be home tomorrow?" He wiped his hands on his pants.

"Possibly, but I'll be dead on my feet. I aim to sleep a lot tomorrow."

Evan sighed and nodded.

“You and Danny should have a guys’ night tonight. Watch some sports, drink some beer, eat things that stink. You know, whatever you usually do when no women are around.” She was treading dangerous ground, but if she didn’t nudge them, they likely wouldn’t make any progress.

Evan’s eyes slid away from hers, suddenly interested in a distant point on the wall. “I’m almost finished with this room. Does Zach want it back the way it was, or do you think he wants something different? I was going to get paint tomorrow.”

She had no idea what color Zach wanted. “Tell me again why you ripped down all four walls?”

“It gave me a chance to make sure everything was up to code, and the wiring needed to be updated anyway.” He shrugged, still not looking at her. “This is your home, Alaina. I can’t have you living in a place that isn’t safe.”

He cared about her so deeply. Heavy emotions pounded inside her, touched by all of the things he implied. Evan was so easy to love.

“I love you.” The words were out of her mouth before she thought about what she was saying. Heat spread over her cheeks and suffused her chest. She had just been thinking about how she wasn’t ready to tell him that.

His rough hand cupped the back of her head. He pulled her close and slanted his lips over hers in a tender kiss that returned the sentiment wholeheartedly. He didn’t press his body to hers, and she was too stunned by her revelation to move.

“I love you, too, Alaina.” His mouth opened and closed as if he had more to say, but nothing came out. “It’s going to be fine, you know. I already told my sisters and two of my brothers. My mom took it well, though my dad thinks I’m nuts.”

Alaina cleared her throat. “Is it the age difference or the sharing thing?”

Evan laughed. "I haven't told them about the age difference. You don't look eleven years older than me. I don't think they'll figure it out on their own."

She smacked his chest playfully. A little cloud of dust wafted from his shirt. "I'm ten years older than you."

He scratched under the strap on his neck and adjusted the face mask hanging there. "I just turned twenty-five. Daniel is a year older than me."

Well, she was a month away from turning thirty-seven, so the difference was closer to twelve years. When she cleared her throat again, it was because of the dust. "At least I got the two best-looking cubs in the cradle."

Evan's nose wrinkled, and she knew he was going to say something suggestive and tempting. Maybe she would be late to work.

The vibrating phone in her hip pocket interrupted. She looked at the number, and then she smiled apologetically. "Hospital. I have to take this."

* * * *

Evan slept in his own bed for the first time in over a week. Peace of mind, something that hadn't come easily to him for the decade he'd known Daniel, allowed him the best night of sleep in his entire life. Not only was Daniel physically next to him, he was mentally and emotionally there as well.

They had enjoyed a romantic dinner, something they'd never done before Alaina came into their lives. Daniel had surprised Evan with his special mouth-watering lasagna, which they had eaten by the light of seven candles.

Streetlight filtered around the edges of the vertical blinds hanging over Evan's bedroom windows. Though they had already made love and showered, Evan knew Daniel wasn't exhausted enough to fall

right asleep. "I think we should tell Alaina the truth now, Dan. Her heart is involved."

Daniel sighed and pulled the covers more to his side of the bed. He kicked, freeing his left foot from underneath. "Her heart was always involved. Lainie isn't the kind of woman who sleeps around."

Smacking Daniel might make him feel better, but Evan knew he'd be on the receiving end of the retribution. His martial arts skills were nothing compared to Danny's. Another time, perhaps. Evan settled for something verbal. "I hate lying to her."

Daniel's hand crept across the small expanse between them where Alaina usually slept. "It's just for a little while longer. Evan, I couldn't stand it if she wasn't okay with this. I don't want to lose her or you."

Like a coward, Evan retreated. He said nothing as Danny's hand slid low across his abdomen, and he moaned when Dan's mouth closed around his cock.

* * * *

By Sunday night, Alaina was dead on her feet. How had she ended up stuck with a holiday weekend on call? Vaguely, she remembered she hadn't been dating anyone the month before when the schedules were being made. Spending the weekend at the hospital with her patients wouldn't have been so draining if she didn't miss Evan and Daniel so much.

She would be sure to use this against anyone who wanted her to pick up on-call duties for Thanksgiving or Christmas.

After a hot shower that, due to the fact she kept zoning out, lasted a lot longer than she thought it would, she crawled into bed.

When she woke, the brightness of the morning sun streamed across her face. She groaned and turned her face into her pillow. Her body ached, and her head pounded. It wasn't right to feel this way without having imbibed a ton of alcohol and danced on a few tables.

A little later, the staccato rhythm of someone pounding on her front door jolted her from sleep again. The sun was brighter, but it had moved on and no longer shone directly in her face. Since the noise wasn't going away, Alaina dragged herself from bed, made sure her clothes covered enough to be considered decent, and stumbled down the stairs.

Tall, dark, and handsome stood on the other side of the door. Belatedly, she ran her fingers through her hair. She had no idea what it looked like, but she knew she needed product and a hair tie. It was no doubt big and frizzy.

Her fingers were extraordinarily weak. It took most of her strength to turn the deadbolt. Three attempts later, she managed to twist the lock on the doorknob.

Daniel didn't wait for her to figure out how to open the door. He did the honors himself, pushing the door open only a little and waiting for Alaina to move out of the way before he finished opening it.

"You okay?"

She rubbed the sleep from an eye, or at least that was the plan. Her hand ended up rubbing her face from chin to temple, bypassing the eye completely. "I feel like I'm floating."

"What time did you get home?"

"Ten? Eleven?" She turned away from him, walked five steps to the couch, and flopped down, landing on her front side. Her eyes closed. "What time is it now?"

"Eleven."

"Shit. I'm sorry. I thought I set the alarm." Vague memories of turning it off surfaced. "I meant to be ready."

Today was the day she was scheduled to meet the entire DiMarco clan. Not only would Daniel's immediate family be there, but his extended family would be there as well. Evan's parents, two of his three brothers, and one sister were expected at some point in the day. If there was ever a day for her to look nice, this was it.

He turned her so that she lay on her back and tried to plant a kiss on her lips. She pushed him away. "I haven't brushed my teeth."

"I don't care. I haven't seen you since Friday night."

Evan had risen with her Saturday morning. He had made love to her on the bed right next to Daniel, who hadn't awakened. She cracked open an eyelid enough to see him through a haze of lashes. "I guess you'll be waking up early the next time I have to work all weekend."

He traced his fingers along her cheek. "Lainie, I'm dying here."

"Well, I'm half-dead, so I guess we'll be here together."

"What?" He blinked at her.

She struggled to sit up. When she was vertical, she opened her eyes completely to look at him kneeling on the floor in front of her. He was dressed in long shorts that had a green plaid pattern. His white T-shirt made his olive skin look even darker. His big brown eyes and full lips pleaded with her. "Did I not make sense? I haven't had coffee yet."

"We're supposed to be at my parents' house in an hour. I have to help set up. How about I get you some coffee, and then I can make you something to eat while you get dressed?"

Alaina groaned. Under the best of circumstances, leaving the house in under an hour was a stretch. Judging by the heat coming through the open front door, today was a shorts day. She needed to shave her legs.

"It must be nice to be a guy. Coffee, breakfast, clothes, done. You don't have to worry about your hair sticking up." She ran her fingers through the place where his cowlick was located, making it stand up even higher. He looked damn sexy. "Or shaving your legs."

He ran a hand up her leg, moving her sweats out of the way to feel her skin. "It's not bad, Lainie. If you had a tan, nobody would notice. And I like your hair this way."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Poofy?"

He fingered a strand of curls. "It's sex hair."

Pushing herself to her feet, she shot him a withering glare. “Yes, the perfect style for meeting your mother. It says, ‘Yes, she *is* a tramp.’ Way to make a girl feel better.”

Daniel laughed and hugged her close. “I like when you let your hair down, Lainie. It makes me want to take you upstairs and see how much bigger it can get.”

She melted against him, enjoying the moment and his company. She was glad they had come to the point where they could talk like this and neither of them took it the wrong way. Since the three of them had decided to be together, the enmity between her and Daniel had completely disappeared.

Forty-five minutes later, Alaina was pleased with the casual-yet-dressy look she managed to affect. The pale yellow skirt was short and had shorts beneath. Her blouse was both dressy and functional. She wrestled her hair into a French braid and brushed light makeup over the dusting of freckles, a redhead’s curse, on her nose and upper cheeks.

The heavenly aroma of coffee and bacon drew her to the kitchen, though the thought of Daniel in there was enough reason to head in that direction. Daniel turned away from the counter, raised his cell phone, and a bright flash indicated he’d taken a picture.

“What are you doing?”

He waved her toward the table where her late breakfast awaited. “I bet Evan you’d dress up for this. He thought you’d go with a more relaxed look.” He pushed buttons, and she had no doubt he was texting the picture to Evan.

“Is he almost finished at his sister’s house?”

Daniel shrugged. “He’ll meet us at my parents’ house at around three or four. He’s going to swing by a friend’s party before coming over.”

Alaina felt strangely left out. She hadn’t known he had plans. “Oh.” She knew she sounded disappointed, but she couldn’t help it. Besides Daniel, she hadn’t met any of his friends yet. Perhaps he

didn't want them to know he was dating a woman who was closer to forty than to thirty.

Grabbing the chair across the table, Daniel sat down with a cup of coffee. "A bunch of his employees are having a get-together. He's just stopping by for a bit. He'll be over as soon as it's polite to leave." He flashed the grin that never failed to melt her bones. "He missed you, too, Lainie. We both have."

She blushed, heat rising to let her know exactly how red she had become, and tried to change the subject. "Do you think I should change?"

"I love you just the way you are." He grinned in acknowledgment of the cheesiness of his answer.

"I love you, too, Danny." She hadn't told him that yet. She wanted him to know she was all in before he took the step he was about to take.

Suddenly serious, he set down his mug. Ribbons of steam rose into the air, and he pierced her with his chocolate gaze. "Marry me."

Shocked, Alaina didn't quite know how to answer. The idea that he would ask this soon in the relationship had not occurred to her. Unprepared to respond, she said the only thing she could think of. "Evan."

Daniel's eyes moved to stare into his coffee. "Yeah, you're right. This is something the three of us should discuss together."

Relieved, Alaina nodded.

* * * *

The suburban colonial where the DiMarcos lived wasn't very far from Alaina's house. It had feel of quiet anticipation a place takes on just before hordes of people arrive. Alaina stopped on the walk just below the porch and took it in.

"Who is coming to this?" She really wanted to know if she would know anyone besides him and Evan.

“Everybody.”

She ripped her eyes from the house that was very similar to her own. She sighed and glanced over at the handsome man standing next to her. She was coming to appreciate his sense of humor. “Daniel.”

He slung an arm around her shoulders. “Nervous, Lainie?”

“Aren’t you?”

“I think you can hold your own.” He grinned down at her. “You’re little, but you’re tough. Besides, they’ll all be too busy tripping over themselves to get a look at you to give you any grief.”

With that, he pulled her close and gave her one of those spine-melting kisses. If he had suggested leaving right then, he would have heard no argument from her. Just as the kiss was about to morph into something indecent, a low whistle caught Alaina’s attention. She opened her eyes to see Drew Snow’s million-kilowatt smile.

He wasn’t as tall as Daniel, but he was devastating nonetheless, especially when he watched the kiss with undisguised enjoyment.

Sophia came up behind him, her eyes glued to her cell phone as she finished a text. She looked up just before she crashed into Drew’s arm.

“What are you...Oh.” Confusion turned to joy, and Sophia’s mouth curved in a magnetic smile that was very similar to Daniel’s. Dressed in a simple tank top and jean shorts, she was just as beautiful as always. She shook her finger at Alaina. “You sly little vixen.”

Over a week had elapsed since her girls’ night out with Sophia, and there had been no opportunity for them to have any kind of a conversation at the last self-defense class. Alaina had no idea what Sophia was talking about. A glance up at Daniel showed him equally confused.

Sophia wasn’t done with her finger. She unleashed it on Daniel next. “You’ve spent years giving me shit about having threesomes, and now you’re in a ménage relationship. How’s that crow tasting?”

Daniel’s chest rumbled with a choking laughter. He hugged Alaina closer. “Pretty damn good.”

Drew slid his arm around Sophia, resting his hand on her hip, and grinned even wider at Daniel. "I told you so. I like the way that sounds. I think I'm going to say it over and over, just for fun."

"You do, and I'll mess up that pretty face of yours." Daniel didn't temper his threat with anything that might have made it less threatening.

It rolled away unnoticed. Drew smacked a kiss on Sophia's cheek. "Hear that, honey? He called me pretty."

Sophia rolled her eyes. "Way to feed his ego." She tapped him on the chest. "C'mon, pretty boy, let's head inside so my mom can put you in your place."

She was nearly to the door when she whirled on her heel. "Daniel, where is Evan? It's not a threesome with only two people."

Feeling decadent and brazen, Alaina fielded this one. "He's coming later. Don't worry, Sophia. We'll all leave together."

Daniel's arms tightened around her, and she thought he was laughing, but the strange expression crossing Sophia's face had her second-guessing her analysis.

"You better come inside, Daniel, or Mom will send Dad out here to put your ass to work. No slackers allowed on Labor Day."

Sophia's quiet admonition returned all the butterflies to Alaina's stomach. When Daniel turned to follow her, Alaina stopped him with a hand on his arm. She waited until they were alone before voicing her question.

"You did tell your family, right?"

"Yeah." His face was once more unreadable.

"How did they take it?"

He shrugged. "I think they think I'm lying, which puzzles them because I'm not known for lying." He tugged at her arm. "This will be proof, and then we'll get to see their reactions live and in person."

That didn't make Alaina feel better. She followed him inside.

The living room was empty. Noise came from the back of the house where the kitchen was located. Daniel headed there without

hesitating. He squeezed her hand. “It’ll be fine, Lainie. They won’t be able to help loving you.”

Sophia’s voice drifted through the open doorway. “Anyway, so I told Daniel that if he and Evan didn’t snatch her up, somebody else would. It’s amazing she was still single.”

As they rounded the corner and crossed the threshold, conversation halted. Sophia stood next to the island counter with a large knife in her hands and the guts of a watermelon splayed in front of her. Drew stirred something boiling in a pot on the stove that smelled strongly of ginger. He winked at her and returned his attention to the sauce.

David DiMarco squished hamburger patties together near the sink. When the silence fell, he glanced over his shoulder, a welcoming smile lighting his face.

A short blonde woman with full, generous curves presided over an oval table shoved against a wall. Her hair fell to just below her ears, and her face was lined with years of laughter, though no smile rested there presently. The ripping of the plastic seal on a package of deli meats tore through the silent room.

“Well, that was faster than I thought you’d make it.” Sophia tempered her observation with a wrinkled nose, and Alaina understood that her relationship with Daniel was now fair game in the DiMarco sibling wars.

Though nobody seemed overtly hostile, some strange undercurrent filled the room, and Alaina was thankful Daniel didn’t drop her hand. She followed him to his mother. He dropped a kiss on her upturned cheek.

“Mom, this is Lainie.”

The woman’s eyes traveled over Alaina, assessing her for something she didn’t seem to find. Though her lips smiled and her face maintained a polite, neutral expression, shades of bafflement were evident behind her brown eyes. She offered a hand to Alaina. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Lainie.”

Alaina had to disengage her hand from Daniel's before taking his mother's hand. "Likewise, Mrs. DiMarco. I've heard such great things about you."

She snorted and let loose a short chuckle. "Call me Anna, dear. I'm sure you didn't hear anything great from Danny."

Alaina laughed, mostly because Anna was correct. "I heard a little from him, but most of it I got from Evan and Sophia."

Anna looked Alaina up and down again, curiosity spilling from her eyes. "Evan's a nice boy."

"Where is Evan?" The stack of raw hamburgers next to David grew steadily. He threw another look over his shoulder to Alaina. "I'm glad you could come today."

Daniel headed over to the sink and washed his hands before diving into the mound of ground beef to help his father. "He'll be here around four. He has to make an appearance at another party."

"His parents are still coming?"

"And his sister. I think two or three brothers, too." Daniel favored Alaina with a smug smile. "They want to meet Lainie."

"Well, of course. We didn't think there was a woman in existence who could domesticate you two." Anna's voice held enough humor to make her statement seem like a joke, but Alaina knew enough about body language to wonder what Anna wasn't saying.

Alaina fidgeted under the constant speculative stare from Anna. The direct approach wouldn't work. Anna was obviously saving her questions for when Daniel wasn't around. Alaina tried to redirect the flow of conversation. "Can I do anything to help?"

Sophia pointed her knife at a stack of cheeses. "You can cube those. Danny, make sure we have enough ice. I hate warm cheese."

Two hours later, the buffet was ready. Daniel's family knew how to put people to work. The second Alaina finished with one task, Anna or Sophia seemed to have another thing that needed to be done. Alaina didn't mind. It gave her a chance to study the family dynamics.

Anna was the unequivocal boss. Though David seemed like the kind of man who didn't take orders from a woman, Alaina quickly came to realize he was nothing like her own father. He not only did what Anna asked without question, he managed to accomplish a good number of tasks she hadn't assigned.

And his mood stayed positive. Under these circumstances, her own father would have turned into a complete jerk by now. Alaina could now clearly see where her earlier assumptions about Daniel had been wrong. Yes, he was incredibly masculine. However, he wasn't raised to differentiate between "women's work" and "men's work" the way Alaina had been. He and Sophia had spent summers mowing lawns for their father's landscaping company.

Sophia and Daniel sparred verbally, but the teasing was all good-natured. Their close bond was evident and enviable. Until Zach came along, Alaina had been an only child. She had always wanted a sibling relationship like the one Sophia and Daniel seemed to have. And now that she was with Daniel, Sophia seemed to treat Alaina as a sister.

They settled into a comfortable pattern. The conversation ebbed and flowed, easily including Alaina as part of the family. Still, she caught Anna peering at her a few times, a thoughtful frown on her face. The unasked questions would come out sooner or later. Alaina banked on sooner with this woman.

Jennifer Carrico was simple to identify. Sporting Evan's straight brown hair, sparkling blue eyes, and angular face, she was definitely his mother. She breezed in with the man who had given Evan his broad shoulders and infectious smile. They greeted Anna and David DiMarco with open affection.

Evan's father, Jason, spotted Alaina first. She had graduated from cubing cheese to slicing vegetables. She set down the knife and dried her hands on a nearby dish towel. She held a hand out to him, intending to shake, but he pulled her into a bone-crushing hug.

Air whooshed from Alaina's lungs as a man who had to be the same age as her father lifted her from the ground and planted a kiss on her cheek. Behind her, Daniel peeled Jason's arms away.

"Jay, she's little. You're going to break her."

Alaina sent a grateful glance over her shoulder. Daniel's arm slid around her waist protectively. "You must be Evan's dad. I'm Alaina."

Daniel's laugh rumbled through her back. "These are Evan's parents, Jason and Jennifer Carrico. Jen and Jay, this is Dr. Alaina Miles."

Now he shook her hand. "I know who she is, boy. I'm not senile."

Jennifer Carrico slapped her husband's chest. "You could have fooled me." To Alaina, she offered a smile. "It's nice to meet you, Alaina. Evan has told us so much about you. Lots of good things. I was beginning to think he made you up."

Alaina murmured the appropriate responses, all the while wondering why Evan's mother would think he made her up.

More guests arrived. In a short amount of time, Alaina met a myriad of people, including three of Evan's siblings and too many of Daniel's aunts and uncles to count. They peeled Daniel away for his shift on the grill, and time flew. Alaina wasn't allowed a moment alone until she excused herself to use the bathroom.

She refreshed her braid and shook her head. Fighting humidity never worked. Three times, she had smacked Daniel's hand away when he tried to undo her braid. The man had no idea what heat like this could do to her stubborn curls. Alaina didn't mind the corkscrews, but she drew the line at the frizz-fest.

Luckily, the light amount of makeup had held under the extreme conditions. She cleaned up her eyeliner and smiled into the mirror. It amused her that people found her an interesting oddity because she was the first woman Daniel had brought home. All this time, she thought they would be drawn or repelled by the fact they were a threesome or the age difference. Those factors hadn't seemed to

matter nearly as much as the novelty of Daniel or Evan with a steady girlfriend.

When she finally convinced herself that her break was over, Alaina emerged to find Jennifer Carrico waiting for the restroom. Immediately aware of how long she'd taken, heat crept up Alaina's neck.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't know anyone was waiting."

She should have known. This was a large party, and the DiMarcos only had two bathrooms. Alaina had purposely sought out the one upstairs for the additional privacy.

A sad smile stretched her lips. "That's okay. I wasn't waiting for the bathroom. I was waiting for you. We need to talk."

Here it comes. This was the part Alaina dreaded, though she thought Daniel or Evan would have been with her when it happened. Alaina nodded and followed Jennifer to a bedroom across the hall. At least, it had originally been a bedroom. Now it was a computer and storage room. Sterilite containers were stacked along one wall. An older model computer sat on a massive desk on another wall, and a futon took up space across the room.

Jennifer sat on the futon. Alaina closed the door and joined her. The urge to blurt out reasoning and reassurances almost overwhelmed Alaina, but she held fast to the belief that she needed to listen before she spoke. This was, technically, Jennifer's emotional trauma, and she had to come to terms with it on her own.

Alaina watched as Jennifer studied her in silence. Finally, Jennifer looked away.

"I wonder if you know what you're doing."

It was a strong opening statement that threw the ball in Alaina's court. With a concerned frown, Alaina tossed it back. "I do."

Jennifer drew in a deep breath, held it for a moment, and exhaled slowly. She fidgeted with her hands, picking at her fingernails rather than meeting Alaina's eyes. "I have six kids, and I love them each. Evan is my youngest, my baby. Maybe I'm a bit overprotective, but I

know my son, Alaina. He might dabble with women, but his heart's not in it. I know he doesn't fit the gay stereotype, but he is who he is."

Keeping any sort of judgmental reaction from her face was a skill Alaina had practiced for years, yet she still found it challenging to do when the topics were personal. "Evan hasn't mentioned anything about that to me yet, but we've only been together for a couple of weeks. However, I can assure you that, if you want to label him, he's bisexual."

Jennifer had looked up at her while she spoke, but the shadows behind her eyes only deepened. "I'm not saying this right." Reaching out, she closed her hand over Alaina's. "You seem like a wonderful woman, and I like you. I can see that you have honest feelings for Evan. I don't want to see you get hurt."

Alaina wasn't naïve enough to think that love was enough to keep a relationship together. She knew the risks, and she knew they were multiplied by the complications of having three hearts in one relationship. "I don't want to get hurt either. Jennifer, I want to thank you for your concern, but Evan's an adult. He wouldn't be with me if he didn't want to be with me."

The hand on Alaina's retracted. Jennifer washed it over her face and sighed. "I'll be blunt, Alaina. Evan has been out to us since his junior year of high school. I'm okay with it. We all are. I want him to find someone to love, settle down, and be happy. I know he's in love with Daniel. And while Daniel loves Evan, it's purely platonic."

Realization dawned. Now Alaina understood why neither of them had broached the topic with her. Daniel was the holdout. "I'm aware of Evan and Daniel's relationship."

Jennifer jumped to her feet, shaking her head back and forth. "I've watched my son pine for Daniel since his first year of high school. Even if he's not aware of it, I think he's with you because it's the only way he can be with Daniel, too."

Shaking her head, Alaina also stood. She moved slower, trying to keep the atmosphere calm. She put her hand on Jennifer's shoulder.

The woman trembled under her hand. “Jennifer, Evan loves me, and I love him. Whether or not Daniel can admit his feelings for Evan doesn’t change what’s between Evan and me. I’m not going to pretend things are perfect, or that they ever will be, but I can assure you that we’re all committed to making this work.”

Cynicism narrowed Jennifer’s eyes and compressed her lips to a thin line. Before she could say anything, two sharp knocks on the door interrupted. It flew open to reveal Daniel. He grinned and winked at Alaina.

“Evan’s on his way. Your dad called and asked if he could pick up Zach.”

The pronouns confused Alaina. “My dad called Evan to pick up Zach?”

Daniel nodded. “We did promise Zach he could come to the barbeque.”

Guilt flooded through Alaina. She had completely forgotten. Even if lack of sleep was to blame, it was no excuse. Zach had been looking forward to this. He had texted reminders all week. It was a good thing Evan...Wait. “How did my dad know Evan’s number?”

“He let his fingers do the walking.” Daniel came into the room, filling it up with his magnetic presence. He slid his arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a half-embrace. “Don’t feel bad, Lainie. You worked all weekend. You weren’t even awake when I came by to pick you up.”

“Who is Zach?”

How had she forgotten Jennifer?

Alaina knew her entire face softened when she talked about Zach. She adored that little boy. She smiled at Evan’s mother. “He’s my eight-year-old brother.”

One of Jennifer’s light brown brows shot into her hairline. “I thought *I* had a huge gap between my oldest and youngest.”

Daniel snorted. “You had four kids in between. Alaina only has one sibling, and he’s more like her kid.”

Alaina's head jerked up, her eyes seeking out the shades of meaning dripping from Daniel's comment. The depth of acceptance she found there amazed her.

* * * *

Later that evening, as Daniel slept next to them and Zach occupied his own bed, Evan traced a feather-light caress down Alaina's arm. She rolled, turning to him with a sleepy smile on her face. He could barely see it in the dim light spilling into the room around the curtains, but he knew it was there.

The round softness of her breasts pressed into his chest, and he felt himself growing hard for her again. Her lips found a sensitive place on his collarbone. Air escaped from between his teeth, and he pushed his elbow into the mattress so he could lift his head enough to make sure the door was closed. Alaina often opened it after everyone fell asleep. With Zach down the hall, Evan didn't want to take any chances.

"It's still locked," she whispered.

He slid a hand over her bare hip. "Are you sore?" Daniel hadn't exactly been gentle with her. At first, Evan had been amazed to find that Danny was just as rough with Alaina as he was when it was just the two of them. Given the way Alaina's body arched from the bed and those sexy noises she made grew louder, Alaina enjoyed rough sex.

Yet Evan also managed to elicit the same response with far more reverent touches. As if on cue, Alaina shivered and brought a trembling hand to clutch at his shoulder. She trailed her fingertips along the line of his jaw, scratching at the stubble there. "Not too sore for you, Evan."

She pressed her lips to his, seeking permission to deepen the kiss. He met her halfway, using his tongue to draw her in. He liked the way she kissed, taking what she wanted when she wanted it and giving so

much of herself at the same time. In his entire life, Evan had never met a woman who moved him the way Alaina did.

She lifted her leg, hooking it over his thigh to move closer. Her hand found his cock, stroking his shaft until he was completely hard. She did all of this without breaking the rhythm of her kiss.

Reaching around her leg, he fingered her slick, swollen folds until she made those little sounds in the back of her throat. She was a noisy lover, and he could tell how hard it was for her to keep quiet. This wasn't the first time they'd fooled around next to Daniel while he slept. There was a certain decadence in making love to their woman when Daniel was so close, yet completely unaware.

Evan eased Alaina onto her back. He felt a fierce need to have her without a condom. Daniel, of course, was the only other person with whom he'd felt that need. But this was a bit different. Not only did Evan want to feel her warm, velvety pussy milking his cock without a barrier, he wanted to plant his child inside her. He wanted to put his hand on her abdomen and feel the baby kicking her response. He wanted a daughter with Alaina's eyes and Daniel's dark hair. He knew Daniel wanted the same thing.

However, Alaina didn't seem to be in any kind of hurry. She had taken her pale little pill before joining him and Daniel in bed.

He reached into the drawer in the nightstand and felt around for a foil packet. Alaina took it from him. He lifted his weight to allow her access, and he was unable to suppress a moan as she stroked him before rolling it on.

She positioned him at her entrance, and he sank into her warmth. He thrust into her slowly, withdrawing almost all the way only to slide back just as delicately as he had the first time. Beneath him, Alaina's body writhed and arched, reacting the same way she did when Daniel pounded his hips into her. She dug her nails into his shoulders.

He brought his hands up, twined his fingers with hers, and pressed her hands to the pillow beside her head. Alaina didn't like to be

pinned during sex, but she didn't protest. She squeaked and moaned, thrashing her head from side to side until he captured her lips in a dominating kiss.

She must have sensed something was different this time, because she calmed. When the kiss ended, her eyes opened, and he swore she could see his soul. "I love you, Evan. Always."

Yes, she understood that he was making love to her. He brushed his lips over hers, intending to return the words, but her climax blindsided him. Her tight pussy clamped down, demanding a climax from him. Her body arched, bucking against him, but he didn't stop thrusting into her until they were both completely spent.

He collapsed on top of her, and she wrapped her arms and legs around him, holding him in place when he would have rolled his weight off her. "I'm crushing you," he breathed into her ear.

"No, don't go, Evan."

He loved the way she said his name. Lifting her, he rolled so that she was on top of him. They were still sealed together, but now her lungs could expand. She rested her head on his shoulder, and he stroked his hand over her disheveled curls.

"Daniel told me that my mom cornered you today before I got there."

She pressed a kiss near his nipple. "She just wanted to make sure you were with me because you wanted to be with me."

His heart stuttered a few beats. Finally, he forced out the question. "She told you, didn't she?"

Alaina lifted her head and scooted up his body. His soft cock slipped from her pussy, and she looked into his eyes. "She didn't tell me anything I didn't already know."

That was too cryptic for Evan. He could glean too many meanings. "Alaina, I need to know exactly what she said."

She didn't move or otherwise try to avoid him or the topic. He liked that about her. She didn't shy away from anything that might

make her uncomfortable. “She said you were gay. I told her you were bisexual.”

He ran his fingertips over her shoulders, wanting to crush her in a tight hug but refraining because he knew it wasn’t the right time. “You’re okay with that?”

She traced her fingertip over his bottom lip. “I would have preferred to have that conversation with you first. I don’t want there to be secrets between us, not important ones like that.” She glanced over at Daniel. “But we’re just starting out. There’s plenty of time for us to have those deep, revealing conversations.”

Evan nodded, hoping the dark hid the furtiveness of his movement. He hated keeping secrets from her. She deserved to know the full story. “I’m not going anywhere, honey. We have the rest of our lives.”

Chapter 18

Bacon sizzled on the stove. Daniel used tongs to turn the pieces, and then he stirred the eggs.

Alaina poured orange juice into four glasses, nearly spilling several times as she sneaked peeks at Daniel's ass. He looked so good in jeans. After six weeks of seeing him wear them almost every morning, she thought she would have grown used to the sight or started taking it for granted.

Evan came in the back door and planted a kiss on her cheek.

"What were you doing outside so early?" He had come downstairs before she finished her shower. Since the repairs on her house were wrapping up, he had begun putting around with other items he felt needed attention.

"Checking to see if I had enough tile for the downstairs bathroom."

He had already replaced the washers to stop the sink from leaking. The tile backsplash did need new grout, but it wasn't cracked or ugly. "You're going to replace the backsplash?"

Daniel handed Evan a plate. A quick check showed he had already attended to Zach. Alaina took a glass of juice to the table and set it down in front of her brother.

Evan slid into the chair across from Zach. "I'm going to take out the closet and put in a shower. I can't be tracking all the dirt I bring home upstairs. Danny is likely to have a heart attack."

She and Daniel finished bringing plates and cups to the table. Dan's nose wrinkled as he sat down and faced Evan. "Grease stains are really hard to get out of carpet."

This wasn't a conversation she would have predicted a month ago, but now it didn't surprise her. Daniel turned out to be something of a clean freak. He constantly washed, dusted, and vacuumed. The ever-present pile of clean laundry on the chair in her room had vanished. It seemed Daniel never met a pile of laundry he didn't feel compelled to conquer.

Zach, who hadn't left after Labor Day, was now required to make his bed every morning and keep his things picked up. Every Saturday, he had to dust and vacuum his room.

They all pitched in to make sure the house was in order, but Daniel definitely did more than his share. At least he didn't hold the rest of them to his standards of cleanliness. Who else remembered to wash walls and dust molding? Who else cared if the things under the kitchen sink were neat?

Just Daniel.

"Why don't you get a surround?"

Daniel's question pulled Alaina back to the present. "What's a surround?"

Now Evan wrinkled his nose. "A pre-made plastic shower."

"Most people have them. You've got one upstairs." Daniel didn't laugh at Evan's disgust, but he did roll his eyes. "They work just fine."

"We need two showers." Zach chimed in before he finished chewing his mouthful of scrambled eggs. "You guys are always in them."

Alaina glued her gaze to her plate, but that didn't halt the heat creeping up her neck from manifesting on her cheeks. With Zach running around the house, the shower offered a level of privacy demanded by their new relationship.

Evan lifted a brow in Zach's direction. "Wait a few years. You'll be taking longer showers, too."

The topic needed to shift. Alaina didn't much care what Evan did around the house. He had great taste, and he was as particular about

the quality of his work as Daniel was about living in a clean house. “A second shower sounds great. I can’t wait to see it.” She glanced over at Zach. “Have you decided what you want to be for Halloween?”

They had plans to shop for his costume when she picked him up from school that afternoon. Her father had called to say he would come over to pick up Zach, but Alaina neither altered their plans nor told Zach about the call. In the past six weeks, their father had stopped by several times for visits, but he never took Zach home with him. She hadn’t seen her mother at all in that time.

If Alaina wasn’t so damn busy with work, her new relationship with Evan and Daniel that required a lot of time spent with their families, and raising Zach, she would be pounding on her parents’ door demanding answers.

Evan and Daniel didn’t seem to mind having Zach around. Evan had enrolled Zach in soccer at the Community Center. The two of them practiced almost every day. Twice a week, Daniel picked Zach up from school and took him to his studio for karate lessons. Sometimes Zach had nightmares, and Alaina would climb into his bed and sooth him until he fell back asleep. Often, she fell asleep in there, too.

Anytime she apologized for the inconvenience or the complications Zach’s presence caused, she earned a nasty look in response.

They had promptly taken her aside and assured her they loved Zach, too. A daily pattern had emerged where the three of them made sure Zach felt loved and accepted by them instead of abandoned by his natural parents.

This acceptance made it difficult for Alaina to push Daniel to admit his feelings for Evan. Ever since the morning Evan admitted his bisexuality to Alaina, the topic had been dormant. She liked this domestic bliss, and she didn’t want to do anything that would force Danny to leave. As much as she wanted their air cleared, she knew

pushing Danny right now wasn't the right course of action. He needed time, and she would give it to him.

Sometimes, though, she could tell Evan had been pushing. Small looks of irritation or obstinacy would cause a mulish set to Daniel's jaw and a tension in his body. He sometimes took it out on the equipment in his gym, and he sometimes spent more time cleaning the house. Alaina didn't ask, but she was pretty sure a fight between them had caused Daniel to spend three days cleaning and organizing all the crap in her basement.

"I want to be a Ninja."

Zach's answer jerked Alaina from her thoughts. "Did you want to wear your karate costume?"

Daniel snorted and shared an eye-roll with Zach. The two of them had taken to watching Bruce Lee movies together. Daniel had an entire DVD collection featuring his idol. Zach hadn't yet adopted Bruce Lee as his idol, but he was close.

Evan enlightened her. "Ninjas wear black, not white."

"We should all dress up as Ninjas," Zach said. His eyes widened with excitement and he hopped up on one foot. "We'll be The Three Ninjas!"

"Four," Daniel said. "Lainie can be a ninja, too."

Zach snorted in an imitation of Daniel. "Yeah, right. Alaina doesn't dress up for Halloween. She's too old."

"Finish your eggs." She snapped off a crisp piece from her bacon and popped it into her mouth, hoping the conversation ended there. "We'll all go together to get costumes."

Zach, her co-conspirator, got the message. Two weeks ago, he had surprised her by bringing home a birthday gift he had made for her in school. After she raved over the beaded bracelet, she had made him promise to keep quiet about it. As far as she was concerned, she was going to be thirty-six for the next ten or twenty years. Only then would she consider thirty-seven.

Funny how she hadn't been self-conscious about her age until she fell for two men in their mid-twenties. She knew they didn't care about the disparity, and she wished it didn't bother her. Sometimes it didn't, and sometimes it did. As time passed, she knew it would cease to matter. She just wasn't there yet.

Zach shoved a forkful of eggs into his mouth.

Unfortunately, Daniel didn't let her change the subject. He knew age discussions bothered her, but he didn't pussy-foot around the topic. It seemed his reluctance to face his sexuality was the only denial he would countenance. "Thirty-six isn't old. It's experienced. Now, thirty-seven is a completely different story. She'll lose her looks, and we'll have to get her a walker and some adult diapers."

She knew he was kidding, and the statement struck a nerve. Fuzzball curled around her leg, rubbing the top of his head against her nylons. Evan had brought the animal over several weeks ago. She'd never had a pet before, and she wasn't sure how she felt about it yet, but it was better than Evan having to return to his house so much to feed and care for it.

Leaning down, she scratched its head twice and stopped. The cat let out a loud meow in protest.

Zach seemed to take exception to Daniel's pronouncement on her behalf. He pounded his fist onto the table. "Alaina does not need a walker or diapers. She doesn't even look older than she did when she was thirty-six. I think she's still pretty."

As Zach's slip-up sank in, both Evan and Daniel nailed her with hard looks.

The color drained from Zach's face as he realized what he said. He turned to face her, regret written all over his features. She brushed his hair out of his eyes and tried for her warmest smile. "Thanks for calling me pretty."

"Lainie."

"Zach, go brush your teeth and make sure your folder is in your backpack. Put on your tennis shoes. You have PE today."

Relief flooded color back into his face, and he ran off. If Alaina could have run with him, she would have been right on his tail. Left alone with Evan and Daniel, she avoided direct eye contact.

She stood and began clearing the dishes from the table. Evan caught her wrist, halting her actions. "Little lady, did you have a birthday you neglected to mention?"

"I don't have birthdays anymore. They stopped at thirty." She tried to wrest her hand from his grip, but he didn't release her.

"Birthdays don't stop, and not telling us deprives us of an opportunity to do something nice for you."

She looked up, finally meeting his pale blue gaze. "You do nice things for me every day."

Daniel didn't have as much patience as Evan. He threw his fork on his empty plate and leaned back in his chair. That stubborn look in his eye didn't detract one bit from his sexiness. "Exactly when is your birthday, Lainie?"

"October first." She knew when she was beat.

A long string of curses fell from Daniel's lips.

Alaina's jaw dropped open at his vehemence. "Mouth, Daniel. You can't talk like that when Zach is here to hear it."

"Your birthday was two weeks ago, Lainie. You didn't say a word." His eyes narrowed. "Nobody did. It's not right."

"Zach made me a card and a bracelet." That probably wasn't the right thing to say. She could tell he wasn't pleased she had kept her birthday from him, but she really didn't want him to know about it. Maybe she was a little self-conscious about the age difference, and maybe she was a little vain. If she dug deep, she might admit to a little passive-aggressiveness, but she wasn't planning to dig deep today.

Daniel shot to his feet. Angry color stained his neck and face. Evan moved to stand between them, but he didn't release her wrist. Usually, he watched from the sidelines when they argued. Though the bulk of their disagreements were meaningless, she and Daniel still

engaged in frequent verbal sparring matches. They both enjoyed the banter.

He often tried to engage Evan, but it didn't work. Evan definitely filled the role of peacemaker. Somebody had to. Alaina liked that she could let go and argue with Daniel and that he wouldn't hold it against her later. She stepped out from behind Evan.

"Damn it, Lainie, you don't get to make those kinds of decisions. You can't keep secrets like this from us."

She ripped her hand away from Evan and rounded the table. Poking a finger into Daniel's chest, she met his chagrin head-on. "Everybody has something they keep to themselves. I don't make you tell me all of your secrets, so don't expect me to tell you every little detail, either. If I want to be thirty-six for another year, you don't have a say in it."

Daniel wisely didn't reply. Other than revealing his secrets to her, nothing he said could change her mind about this. He sank back down in his chair and stared at his empty plate.

She whirled on Evan, but he held his hands up to stop anything she might have said. "I'm okay with thirty-six. You can stay that age for as long as you want."

Alaina turned her attack on the dirty dishes. She had a few hours before she had to be at work. After the Wednesday sessions at Daniel's studio stopped, she hadn't adjusted her schedule to fill Thursday mornings with work. Sometimes she went into work early, and sometimes she stayed home and spent time with Evan and Daniel.

"For the record, I'm August eighth." Evan brought the rest of the plates over to the sink. The corners of his mouth lifted in a cheeky smile. "And Danny's June twentieth. We both like to celebrate with family and friends. Maybe a little bit of birthday sex."

If they had asked her what she wanted for her birthday, she would have asked to watch them make out. She dropped a plate into a slot in the dishwasher and looked up at Evan. "We had sex on my birthday."

"Sex on your birthday is not the same as birthday sex."

Before she could ask about the difference, Zach entered the room. "I'm ready for school."

A quick glance showed he had donned his jacket without being asked. His backpack hung from one shoulder. He came close so she could kiss his cheek. "Have a great day, Zach. Learn a lot. I'll pick you up at four."

Daniel approached behind Zach, who moved out of the way. "Lainie, don't be mad."

"I'm not mad." Well, she was a little mad, but not about her birthday. She wiped her hands on a dish towel and pulled his face to hers for a hungry kiss guaranteed to keep her in his thoughts all day. "Have a great day at work, Daniel. I'll see you tomorrow."

Seeing as she kicked them out of the house on Thursdays so she could spend the evening alone with Zach, Daniel didn't have any recourse. Technically, they weren't living together. However, both Evan and Daniel slept over six nights a week.

If they were honest with her about their love, she would have let them move in formally.

The back door opened and closed. Daniel's truck roared to life, and Evan helped her finish cleaning the breakfast mess.

Afterward, he threw her dish towel on the counter and perused her with his discerning gaze. "Do you want to talk?"

Did she want to talk? Hell, yes, but she didn't want to be the one talking. She wanted to be the one listening as they poured their souls out to her. She wanted to know they loved her enough to share absolutely everything. Until that happened, she couldn't move away from thinking of their relationship as finite.

"No," she said at long last. "I want you to show me what birthday sex is. Maybe you'll convince me to start celebrating again."

Relief flickered across his face for a brief second before his eyes darkened with desire. He pulled her close and brushed his lips against hers. "We're going to need to dig out your toy chest."

Ever since Daniel and Evan had come clean about both wanting to be with her, Alaina's toys had been sorely neglected. With two horny, virile men in her bed, she hadn't even thought to break them out.

She pushed away from him, breaking his embrace and diving for her purse. "Let me text my assistant. I think I feel a cold coming on."

Evan grabbed her around the waist and tossed her over his shoulder. She barely had time to finish the text before he snatched the phone away and tossed it in the nightstand drawer. Her toys used to reside there, but now it was full of condoms, lube, and tissue.

He threw her down on the bed. "Undress, little lady. I want you as naked as the day you were born. Where are your toys?"

"Shoebox in the closet. It's the one marked 'girl stuff'. That's Danny's label, not mine." Alaina peeled off her nylons and tossed them to the floor. She attacked the buttons on her blouse next.

Evan chuckled. "One day, we'll have to introduce him to your girl stuff." Though the closet was jammed full of clothes and things belonging to all three of them, he found the box without too much of a problem. "I'm going to need to remodel this so there's enough closet space for three. How about a walk-in just for you?"

She'd fantasized about having one of those. "I think I just came." Her skirt, bra, and panties joined the heap.

Evan threw the box on the bed. "Show me. Lie back and spread your legs."

If she hadn't already been wet with anticipation, the gleam in his eyes would have done it for her. She loved when he looked at her as if he wanted to eat her up. Frequently, he did eat her up. She did as he asked, situating her pussy so that it faced him where he stood next to the bed.

His eyes roamed her body, lingering on her face, breasts, and pussy the longest. "Beautiful. Lift your knees so I can see that sweet little ass of yours."

Evan had proven time and again just how much he loved every part of her body. Something seemed a little different today, but after

her argument with Daniel, she didn't want to spend time analyzing it. She lifted her knees and opened wider so he could see both holes.

"Are you deciding which one you want?"

He knelt on the bed, bending to hover over her body. The soft fabric of his shirt brushed against her nipples, teasing a gasp from her throat. Just above her breasts, Evan painted light kisses with his lips and breath, declaring his love with each tiny stroke.

She gripped his head, wanting to thread her fingers through his hair, but he'd cut it too short. Those boyish bangs that had fallen into his eyes when she met him were gone.

At last, he made it to her lips, peppering those with small kisses, too. "Both. That's what the toys are for."

Her favorite position had come to be the one where she rode one of her lovers while the other filled her ass. Nothing beat dual stimulation. Alaina was convinced she had a second G-spot in her rectum. Being fucked that way never failed to send her flying.

Though she knew Evan had sex with Daniel every Thursday, she knew he must miss the feeling of having something penetrate his ass the rest of the week. If he loved it half as much as she did, then he was definitely sacrificing for Daniel.

Clamping her knees together on his hips, she held him still while she pushed his face away from hers. "Evan, will you let me do something to you?"

He pushed a strand of her hair away from her neck. "You get anything you want on your birthday. Ask, and I'll make all of your sexual wishes come true."

"It's not my birthday."

His gaze roamed her face, the fierce edge of anger outlined on the lips he pressed together, and then his gaze returned to lock with hers. "Humor me."

She squirmed out from under him and scooped up the box of toys. As she rummaged through the plastic baggies containing her sterilized vibrators, dildos, plugs, and beads, she realized just how much this

secret cost Evan. Rationally, she knew she couldn't force either of them to reveal their secret before they were ready, but now she desperately hoped Daniel didn't wait too long. While she was confident Evan would never leave her, she suspected his legendary patience with Daniel was nearly depleted.

"Strip." She glanced up at him. He had rolled to watch what she was doing. He pulled his shirt off over his head and threw it to the floor where it landed in the pile of her clothes. Sliding to the floor, he lost his jeans and boxers in short order. "Bend over the edge of the bed. Feet on the floor."

He threw a mock salute at her and did as she ordered.

He had a beautiful ass. Smooth and perfectly rounded, she couldn't help but spend a few minutes worshipping it with her lips. Her forays extended to the flat plane of his lower back, and when she found the valley of his spine, she couldn't stop herself from licking a path to his neck. Evan shivered and moaned softly.

"You are wicked with that tongue, Alaina."

His compliment recalled her mission, and she reluctantly slid off his back. "Spread your legs a bit."

Metal runners scraped wood as she opened the nightstand drawer. He turned his head, watching as she extracted a bottle of lube. "What are you doing?"

She grinned. "I have a huge butt plug that I think you'll love." Reaching into the box, she found the open bag. Evan's eyes rounded as he took in the size of the plug in her hand. Though it wasn't much longer than a real penis, the girth definitely put a human male to shame.

He lifted his head from the coverlet. "There's no way that fits in you. You're too tiny. You barely fit me."

Alaina giggled. "This was a gag gift I won at a bridal shower. I never tried it in me, but I think it's perfect for you."

She watched shades of indecision flicker through his baby blues, waiting for the acceptance she knew he'd eventually find. At last, he

rested his head back down on the mattress. “Be kind. That thing’s huge.”

She squirted lube onto the palm of her hand and rolled it around to warm it with her body heat. She sometimes liked it cold, but she reasoned Evan wouldn’t want that kind of shock for his first time with a toy. After coating the flesh-colored plug, she slid her hand between his cheeks. For the past two months, she’d entertained fantasies of touching both of them the way they often touched her, but she hadn’t acted on them. This was yet another thing waiting for the wall of secrets to fall.

A tremor ran through Evan’s body as she found his puckered hole and ran her slick fingertip around the tight muscle. He fisted the comforter in his hands, completely wrecking the bedding Daniel had so fastidiously fixed only an hour ago.

“Harder, little lady. I like it rough.”

She bit back a comment on how Daniel was the perfect lover to take him this way. He already knew that. Giving him what he wanted, she shoved two fingers completely inside. He moaned and bucked against her, lifting his hips to beg for more. She finger-fucked him for a bit, teasing him with a varied pace.

At last she withdrew her fingers and spread his cheeks. The tip of the plug tapered to a point that was about as wide as her two fingers. She shoved that part in hard and fast, and stopped where it widened to twice that girth. He automatically breathed out, relaxing to accept the toy.

“I’m going to go slow now, Evan. Work with me.”

She pushed against the base, keeping a slow, steady pressure until it was lodged completely in his ass. He groaned and buried his face in the pile of covers he’d drawn under his upper body.

She ran a light caress over the curve of his ass. “Stay here for a minute and get used to it. I’ll be back.” In the adjoining bathroom, she washed the lube from her hands. The mirror in front of her showed that Evan hadn’t moved at all.

When she returned, she climbed on the bed next to him and caressed his shoulder until he turned to look at her. The blue of his eyes seemed to glow against the flushed skin of his face and neck. In one swift motion, he snagged her body and pulled her under him.

“Oh, my little lady, I owe you for this.” He growled the promise against her lips a second before he devoured her with one of the most demanding kisses he’d ever used on her.

When he released her, he slowly pushed himself up on his arms. Strain showed in the line of every tense muscle in his body. Alaina let her gaze wander down his stomach to find his erection, throbbing and almost purple. He was close.

She adjusted her position so that she lay below him with her legs open, inviting him to plunder her body and use her pussy as roughly as he wanted. When he didn’t move, she plumped one breast, kneading it for his benefit and pinching the nipple until she couldn’t hold back her gasp. With her other hand, she parted her nether lips and fingered her clit.

Evan watched, his tongue darting out to wet his lips until she could think of nothing else but the feel of it on her clit. Just the thought brought her to the brink.

“Faster.”

She hadn’t realized her eyelids had drifted closed. At his command, she opened them. Beads of sweat dotted his brow, but he didn’t touch her. She picked up the pace and pressed hard when her orgasm rocked over her.

* * * *

That little cry nearly sent him over the edge. Evan loved the way Alaina’s pale skin flushed when she came. Her lush lips parted to let out the short panting breaths she took as she came down from that small peak.

This was the first time he'd ever had a butt plug filling his ass. Though he had experienced sex with men of different sizes over the years, nothing any of his lovers had come close to the size of the toy Alaina had dangled from those delicate little fingers of hers.

She'd fingered him like a pro, and he recognized that she was replicating the things he did to her that drove her insane with pleasure. All this time, he'd been so afraid of bringing up his need for this kind of stimulation. She had seemed okay with the idea of his bisexuality, but she hadn't indicated a willingness to participate in this kind of sex play. His heart swelled with even more love for this lovely, generous woman who even now reached for his cock.

He jerked away, eluding her grasp. One touch of her talented hand and he would ejaculate all over her pussy and stomach. Somehow, he didn't think she would find that anything other than erotic.

The hurt expression on her face tore at his heart. "Honey, that plug is doing its job. If you touch me now, I won't be able to do mine."

That seemed to mollify her a little. She settled back on the bed. Her hands came up to pluck at her nipples. He reached for the box she had moved that now sat near a pillow. Rummaging around produced a peach-colored vibrator with a mushroom-shaped head. At the base, a flat piece jutted out. The part that would press against the clit was textured with bumps that would shake and quiver once power hummed through the device.

He lubed it up and teased it inside her opening. This one had an attached controller and a handle at the base. She quivered when he turned it on and she thrust her hips, urging him to bury it to the hilt. He fucked her that way until she clamped her legs together and cried out.

He couldn't wait any longer. "Turn over. Keep that thing inside and turned on. I want to feel it when I fuck your ass."

The languor of her orgasm fell away as her eyes flared with excitement. She scrambled to do as he ordered, and he fumbled in the

drawer for a condom. He coated his sheathed cock with lube and fought the urge to get rid of the condom. Soon, he promised himself. Soon they would get rid of all the barriers between them. He would talk to Daniel again tonight. Likely, they'd fight and have some furious sex, and then he'd bring it up again. Alaina deserved better from them. It wasn't a new argument, and Evan didn't hold out hope he was gaining ground.

He turned back to find her standing on the floor, her feet planted shoulder-width apart and her body resting on the mattress. One arm disappeared under her, and he knew she used it to hold the vibrator in place.

"Ready?"

"God, yes."

He buried himself in one thrust, knowing it would drive her to the edge quickly. She bucked, but he was ready. Where he would normally use his arms to brace himself on either side of her, he had learned to use one hand to hold her down. She didn't bother to temper her reaction to this kind of stimulation. Normally a wild creature, she came apart like this every time.

He planted his hand between her shoulder blades. "Easy, little lady. I don't want you to hurt yourself." He held himself still inside her. The vibrations from her toy teased through the thin membrane separating it from his cock, and the plug filling his ass moved with him, thrusting and pressing like a lover. This might be her birthday present, but she had definitely given him more than he could ever give her.

"Evan." She whimpered his name, and he gave in to her demand. He pounded into her. She writhed and screamed, bucking and twisting despite his best effort to hold her still. Then her body went rigid with her climax, and he fucked her faster until seed shot from his body with a force that left him light-headed.

He collapsed on top of her, but he didn't worry about his weight. This was something she liked, too.

“I love you, Evan.”

Using all of his energy, he pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “I love you, too, Alaina.”

* * * *

Snow had come early to Southeastern Michigan. With Thanksgiving two days away, Mother Nature was out to make it memorable. If the temperatures stayed down, the ski slopes would start their big snow machines and open early this year.

Daniel debated cleaning up the breakfast dishes before heading upstairs. Judging by the fact that nothing had moved since he’d left to take Zach to school, he knew neither Alaina nor Evan had made it out of bed.

Lainie needed to get to work. A quick glance at the clock put her at more than a half hour behind schedule. Last night had been another tough night. Zach had awakened in the middle of the night, crying. Alaina had crawled into the top bunk to calm him down, and she hadn’t returned to the king-sized bed Evan had built for them.

In the absence of a paying job, Evan had been fixing things around Alaina’s house. Her remodeled office featured built-in bookshelves, cabinets, and file drawers. When he had showed her what he had done to her office, she had cried with joy. If Zach hadn’t been with them, Daniel knew she would have christened the new room properly.

They didn’t live with Alaina yet, but that was just a formality. Except for the fact she kicked them out every Thursday, declaring it her night with Zach, they slept over every night. Not only did they find it difficult to not be with her, they had all settled into a very domestic routine. Since the Labor Day picnic where Evan picked up Zach to take him to the party, the kid hadn’t spent a single night with his parents.

Alaina had demanded answers several times, but her father always stonewalled. She hadn't been able to speak to her mother in almost three months. This, apparently, wasn't an unusual occurrence.

Daniel and Evan didn't exactly mind. They had both begun to think of Zach as their son. Though he hadn't slipped up and called them Dad the way he often called Alaina Mom, Daniel knew their role wasn't different.

Every morning, either Daniel or Evan took Zach to school. The three adults rotated breakfast duty. Evan or Alaina usually picked Zach up from school.

Though he rarely had Alaina to himself, Daniel couldn't be happier. Sophia almost never missed an opportunity to tease him about living in a ménage relationship when he had spent so much time giving her grief for the way she and Drew played around with various thirds.

For his part, Daniel didn't see the similarity. Three people might be involved, but it was an exclusive relationship, and they all loved one another. He wondered how much Sophia really knew about his relationship with Evan. She was usually very perceptive, and some of her looks and comments lately had been entirely too probing.

No shower sounds came from upstairs. He let the mess in the kitchen slide. Alaina had gone from shock at how clean he kept things to teasing him about his standards of cleanliness, especially when he power-washed her siding and told her she should be doing it twice a year. She had laughed and kissed his cheek before slapping his ass and telling him it was now his job.

The bedroom door was open, but the only light in the room came from the bright November sunlight streaming through the slats in the blinds he had installed. It was enough to see Lainie straddling Evan, though she didn't appear to be moving.

Sounds of contentment, similar to those that inevitably escaped during a massage, came from Evan. His hands rested on Lainie's thighs. A low hum reached Daniel's ears.

Evan sucked air, and his hips lifted from the bed.

Lainie giggled and adjusted her position a bit. With one hand, she flicked a lock of those luscious curls over her shoulder.

“When I recover, I’m going to bend you over and fuck that sweet ass of yours.”

Daniel raised a brow. He had awakened more than once due to the motion of the mattress next to him. Though Evan and Lainie often had sex in the morning while he slept soundly next to them, she had never allowed it to make her late for work. “Lainie?”

She turned her head, a devilish smile accenting the slyness of her cat eyes. “Danny, we didn’t wait for you, but don’t worry. We’re just getting started.”

“Don’t you have to go to work?”

He expected her to check the clock, but she didn’t glance away from him. “I called in a favor and got someone else to take the morning part of my shift. We have until noon.” Her eyes sparkled in the dim light.

Zach was supposed to return to his parents’ house after school. Evan had banked on it, planning a relaxing, sex-filled evening for the three of them. He had been after Daniel for months to tell Lainie about them. About six weeks ago, he had ramped up his campaign efforts. Evan was convinced she wouldn’t have a problem with it. Daniel wasn’t so sure.

Daniel hadn’t protested much. He had faith that Alan Miles would flake on his son yet again. Even though it put off the inevitable, Daniel hated how it was going to crush Zach. He planned to take the boy to an action flick they both wanted to see.

He didn’t wait to be told twice, however, especially since he knew they weren’t going to have privacy that evening. Daniel stripped naked, tossing his clothes over the back of a nearby chair.

Evan squirmed and swore. “You are wicked with that thing, little lady.”

Daniel slid onto the bed next to them, his gaze drawn to the place where he knew they were joined together. The sight of Evan's cock never failed to excite him. Watching as it disappeared into Lainie's wet and waiting pussy made him ache with ten different kinds of need.

Except that Lainie wasn't sitting on Evan's cock. His cock lay, limp and lifeless, near her pussy. She hovered just above his balls, her pussy pressing lightly against those sacs.

Leaning to prop himself up next to Evan on one elbow, he wrinkled his nose at the pair. "She's wicked with what thing?"

Lainie giggled again. He loved hearing that sound. It was different from her laugh, which was something he heard quite often now. Her giggle was wanton and wicked. It meant she was up to something, and he had learned to love when she was up to something.

Then he saw it. Splitting the delicate lips of her glistening pussy, the tip of a clitoral stimulator peeked out. Daniel had seen all of Lainie's vibrators, though he hadn't yet seen her use them, and he knew this one was a full-size model with an attached arm to stimulate the clit. That was the part he saw.

He reached out and put his finger on the vibrating protrusion, pressing it into her clit. Her smile grew, and a tiny moan purred from her throat.

This was what Evan meant. Daniel knew Evan liked to play with Lainie's toys, but this was the first time they'd broken them out with him in the room. For his part, Daniel was a tactile person. He loved touching Lainie with every part of his body. If she was going to come, he preferred to be the direct cause. He didn't need battery-powered help.

The vibrator did double duty. Lainie had situated herself so that it tickled Evan's balls. She moved her hips, brushing it against different parts of Evan. Daniel chuckled. Without thinking, he slid his finger between the device and her clit, pressing the vibrator down harder on Evan's sac.

Evan bucked and swore.

Lainie giggled, her breasts shaking with delight. “He’s not ready for that yet, Danny.”

Evan turned his beseeching eyes to Daniel. “You could distract her, you know. I need about five more minutes.”

She reached over and wrapped her palm around his throbbing shaft. “I know how you can distract me.”

Daniel closed his eyes, enjoying the way her smooth palm worked up and down his cock. He knew what he wanted. She released him when he shifted and came to his knees. He snagged a condom from the drawer next to the bed and rolled it on.

Positioning himself between Evan’s legs behind her, he put one hand on her shoulder and pushed her forward. The hitch in her breathing told him so much. When Evan had first suggested she liked anal sex as much or more than she liked vaginal sex, Daniel had been skeptical. However, it only took once to make him a believer. Anal sex stripped her of all control, and her passionate responses bordered on violent.

Now Evan chuckled. “I love that look on your face.” He lifted his eyes to gaze over Lainie’s shoulder. Reaching behind Lainie, Evan grasped her cheeks and parted her ass. Lainie gasped and moaned. “She’s about to come just thinking about it.”

Daniel squirted some lube into his hand and massaged it up and down his covered cock. He wanted to take her with nothing between them, the way he did with Evan, but he knew she wasn’t ready for that yet. Or perhaps she was. Maybe it was Daniel who wasn’t ready for it.

He impaled her. His thoughts made him a bit rougher than usual. He stopped, running a hand over her rounded hip. The vibrator hummed against the length of his shaft. When he and Evan were both inside her, Daniel got off on the fact that he could feel Evan rubbing against him as much as from the actual, physical sensation. He had

never stopped to consider what it would feel like if she had a vibrator in her pussy.

Good God, he was going to die. His eyes rolled skyward, and he was powerless to stop them. His breaths were shaky, and he couldn't force words from his throat.

Evan chuckled again. "I told you it feels incredible."

"Yes," Lainie said. Her voice trembled, and her back arched. "Incredible. Now move. I need you to move."

He pulled out halfway, unwilling to completely abandon the sweet vibrations, and plunged back inside. She shouted, a high, thin sound of pure pleasure. She was tight and hot. Her muscles squeezed him viciously, and he knew he had touched off an orgasm.

"That's it, Lainie. One more for me." He pistoned his hips, pumping into her ass and abandoning everything to see to his own needs. She squirmed and bucked. Evan wrapped his arms around her to hold her steady and to prevent her from bashing her head into either of their faces. That black eye had been difficult to explain, though he had accepted more than one sympathy blow job from both of them.

The high-pitched noises she made came faster as she neared another climax. He gripped her hips and held her ass where he needed it. Looking over Lainie's shoulder, he saw Evan's lips move as he whispered licentious things into her ear. That particular turn-on was something Daniel had discovered.

His eyes locked with Evan's, and he read the raw desire written there. It took every shred of restraint for Daniel to resist sandwiching Lainie between them while he captured Evan's lips in a hard, hot kiss. Blinding love pierced his heart with the realization that he could never live without either of these two people. It hit just before his climax pulsed through his cock.

Evan pushed his shoulder so that he fell to the side instead of collapsing on top of Lainie. He reached under her, extracted the toy, and turned it off. Alaina lay on top of him, a limp puddle of sexiness.

Her face was turned toward Daniel, and he had no doubt the smile on his face matched the sated smile she wore on her lips. She lifted a lazy hand and rested it on his cheek. "I love you."

He melted completely, as he did whenever she looked at him like that and said those words. Energy returned to his limbs enough to lift his head. He kissed her with all the love and reverence in his heart. "I love you, too, Lainie."

The ache echoing at the end of those feelings stabbed deeper. He wanted to say those things to Evan, too. He didn't want to wait until Saturday, when they would attend a football game together that would afford them some precious private time.

Later, he made lunch. Evan's sister called with some emergency only he could fix, and Alaina went to work.

Daniel didn't have much he needed to do until the afternoon. In the past, he used to stop by Sophia's house and hang out with her. Now that she lived more than forty minutes away, it was no longer convenient. He dropped by his parents' house instead.

His father was at work, but his mother was home. She ruffled his hair as he sat at the kitchen table.

"Should I bother to send your Christmas card to your apartment?" She poured cups of coffee for both of them and brought the mugs to the table.

He shrugged. His mail still went to the apartment. "I'll get it either way."

She sat at the seat perpendicular to his own. "Daniel, I want you to level with me."

Since she often began conversations this way, Daniel did nothing more than give her his full attention.

"How serious is this thing with you and Evan and Alaina?"

He sipped the coffee. "Serious."

She tapped at the tabletop with one fingernail. "Serious enough for me to dig Grandma Zinelli's rings out of the safety deposit box?"

Gazing into the dark liquid, he looked for answers. The sounds and smells of his childhood always hit him full force when he was at his parents' house. Admonitions and expectations replayed in his mind. Men married women and had lots of children. Nothing in his upbringing addressed his current situation.

"Daniel, you're going to need to get them resized. Lainie is a tiny woman. Grandma had chunky fingers. If you're planning a Christmas proposal, you need to be prepared."

Though he had already done it once on the spur of the moment, he didn't want to propose to just Lainie. Her one-word response put things into perspective rather nicely. Evan was an equal part of things. He wanted to marry them both.

"Even if you plan to wait for, say, Valentine's Day, there are a lot of good sales now. I have a coupon for a jeweler in Northville. Fifty percent off, but it expires December twenty-fifth."

Before his mother could draw another breath, Daniel held up a hand. Much like Lainie, Anna DiMarco was a force of nature. If he let her go too far down this path, there would be no turning back. Though she wouldn't give up the topic, at least he could stall her a bit.

"Mom, I'm going to ask her, but now is not the right time."

She narrowed her eyes and pressed her lips together. "Daniel David DiMarco, don't tell me you're afraid because she's responsible for her brother. That boy needs a father like you. Or fathers like you and Evan. His own is inadequate."

Daniel let out a long stream of breath. "No, Mom. I like Zach. I like having Zach around, and so does Evan."

Anna nodded knowingly. "You and Evan are fighting over who gets to marry her."

Truthfully, they hadn't discussed it. He and Evan were fighting over telling her they were fucking each other. He tried to make his smile more wry than rueful. "Something like that."

She stared at him with a strange expression on her face, and he didn't want to know what she wasn't saying.

* * * *

The last karate lesson of the night was half finished. His student helpers were already wiping down the mats in the smaller practice room. Wednesday practice was cancelled due to the holiday. Daniel planned to set the crew on this room the second class ended.

When the bells over the front door chimed, Daniel didn't think anything of it. Many parents left for the duration of the lesson, running errands or hanging out at the coffee shop down the street where he had drunkenly accosted Alaina.

The tiny snuffle caught his ear in a really weird way. He knew without looking that it was the kind of snuffle that accompanied crying, and he knew without a doubt that the snuffle came from Zach. Only three months with the boy, and he already had Dad hearing.

A glance confirmed his suspicion. Zach sat on one of the plastic padded chairs lining the front of the room, his face buried in his sleeve. Alan Miles sat next to him. He leaned close to Zach's ear, his hand making short, curt movements to emphasize whatever he was saying.

Daniel didn't need to hear to know that the old man was abandoning Zach again. The bastard didn't have the balls to face Alaina, so he brought Zach to the studio, hoping Daniel would wordlessly accept responsibility as he always did.

Not this time.

Daniel jerked a finger at his assistant, a community college student who had worked for him on and off for several years. "Take over."

He strode across the room, anger rolling from him in waves so thick it rebounded from the walls and smacked against his body.

Alan looked up. His blue eyes hardened in response to Daniel's threatening demeanor. "Alaina said to bring him here."

In the past, Daniel had put Zach's emotional needs first. He had buried his anger and spent the evening soothing Zach's hurt. Right now, he was too furious. He wanted to kick the shit out of Alan Miles. The first time he met the man, he didn't understand why Alaina behaved so passive-aggressively toward her father. Now he understood. She loved the man even though he was a crappy father.

"This way," Daniel growled. He strode off, not bothering to make sure Alan followed. He half hoped the man stayed put. It would give him an excuse to drag him out of there. No doubt several well-placed blows would be necessary to subdue his adversary.

Alan had followed him. Daniel didn't have an office, but the empty break room would do. He paused to let Alan in first.

The man was tall, a little taller than Daniel. His shoulders were broad. In his day, he had been muscular and toned. At seventy, he hadn't let himself go too bad. A bowling-ball-shaped bit of paunch showed on his belly, but the man was remarkably slim elsewhere.

Seventy. Any other time, reminding himself of someone's advanced age would be enough to quell the worst of Daniel's temper. He had been raised to respect his elders whether or not he agreed with them. He slammed the door, causing the wooden frame to shudder.

Alan sank into a chair. He adjusted his coat so that his seated position didn't pull it down in back. Then he laced his fingers together and rested his hands on the table.

"I can't keep him." His gaze and his words were directed toward his hands.

"Then give him to Alaina. Make it legal. Stop jerking him around and making him think you actually want him." That wasn't what Daniel had intended to say, but once the words were out, he knew they were the right ones. It was far more productive to force his hand than it was to call him names.

Alan surprised him by bobbing his head in agreement. "She said that children want to be with their parents no matter what. I'm too old

for this. Alaina's mother has had some health issues, and that's all I can handle right now."

Daniel hadn't heard a word about health issues. He had yet to meet Alaina's mother, but it wasn't for lack of trying on her part. He dismissed the words as an excuse. Having a kid, especially one as young as Zach, was work. From what he'd heard about her life, Alaina had pretty much raised herself. Zach wasn't as independent. He didn't do his homework unless someone made him do it. He wanted and needed involved parents.

"If you're worried that she will refuse, stop. She'll take him in a heartbeat."

Sliding the chair back with his knees, Alan lumbered to his feet. "That's what we'll do, then. I'll meet with lawyers tomorrow. Please don't say anything to Zach or Alaina. Their mother and I want to explain things to them."

Keeping something this big from Alaina didn't sit well with him. He recognized and dismissed his own secrets. There was no way he could tell her now. She had too much on her plate already. Once she acclimated to being Zach's legal mother, he and Evan could divulge their secret.

Daniel folded his arms across his chest. "You have one week. I'm going to tell her everything next Monday evening if you don't."

Alan nodded stiffly and left.

When Daniel returned to the main room, he found Zach in the exact same place staring at the floor. The tears had dried. He sat down on the chair next to Zach and put his arm around the boy's shoulders.

"Well, Zach, it looks like you're coming home with me tonight. That movie starts in a half hour. Let me grab a quick shower upstairs, and we can go."

Zach didn't say anything, but he nodded. Daniel was at a complete loss. He knew there was nothing he could say to make him feel better. The best he could hope for was to help him forget for a while.

He texted Lainie and Evan to let them know where they'd be.

Chapter 19

The red brick house where she grew up wasn't her favorite place to visit. The fights she had with her father had mellowed in the months since she'd begun seeing Evan and Daniel, but the painful memories of her childhood were still fresh.

Evan and Daniel took having Zach in their lives in stride. Alaina could easily see how the three of them could successfully raise a family together. Though neither of her men showed signs they were pretending to enjoy the parental roles they had both assumed, Alaina didn't want to be selfish. As much as they all wanted Zach, he wasn't theirs.

And now he was depressed. He had been dealing with not seeing his parents very much, but when they declined to join them for Thanksgiving, he had broken down and cried all night. Later, after Zach finally fell asleep in the predawn hours, Daniel had growled threats toward her father.

Alaina had refrained from commenting on Daniel's changed attitude toward her father. She had always known it was only a matter of time before Daniel stopped trying to find reasons to defend her father's selfish behavior.

That morning, as soon as Evan and Daniel left to see Michigan play Ohio State, she bundled Zach off to Camilla's to spend the day with Mario, and she headed to her parents' house to figure out what the hell was going on.

Naked grape vines climbed a trellis that surrounded the front door. Tiny roots had embedded themselves in the brick, just as she had

warned her father would happen ten years before when he put it up. She inhaled courage and pressed the doorbell.

Nobody answered. Given that both of her parents' cars were in the driveway, and her father's car had been recently cleared of the light dusting of snow Mother Nature delivered that morning, she knew they were home.

She rang again. When still nobody came to the door, she pounded on it. She wasn't going to go away, not with Zach's happiness at stake. If they wanted to cut themselves off from her, that was fine. She loved her parents, but she had never been close to them. If Zach hadn't been born eight years prior, she could have cut back contact to the necessary holidays and not thought twice about it.

Finally, the door flew open. Red-faced with fury, her father glared at her. "What do you want?"

Shocked into momentary silence, Alaina gasped. She had expected mild, polite curiosity. She had expected him to pretend nothing out of the ordinary was happening. That would have been par for the course. When he sent her prom date packing and grounded her until graduation, his demeanor hadn't been different from the way he would order pizza over the phone. He had responded to her tears by telling her to grow up, and then he had sent her to her room. Neither he nor her mother had seen fit to tell her that her father objected to the low neckline of her dress, a dress she had purchased while shopping with her mother, until nearly ten years later when Alaina threw that episode in her father's face during another argument.

Anger, which wasn't difficult to find, bolstered her courage. Beneath her anger at them for abandoning Zach was fury that her mother had yet to meet the two men she wanted to marry. "I want to know why the hell you haven't seen Zach for more than ten days in the past three months. I want to know why you refused to spend Thanksgiving with your son, and I want to know what the hell—"

"Why don't you come in?"

The weak, thin voice floated through the growling and hissing of Alaina's demands. She wasn't the kind of woman who yelled in public, and her father hadn't yet invited her inside the house.

With a long-suffering sigh, Alan Miles stepped aside to let Alaina in. She slipped past him and stopped cold at the transformation of the room before her.

The house opened to a long room that doubled as a living and dining room. This was supposed to be the hub of the house, the place where everyone gathered. Alaina had avoided it for most of her childhood because it was where she could usually find her parents. Zach had never avoided it, though. Many of his toys were stored in a box on the far side of the room.

However, the chairs and loveseat were gone. The sofa had been shoved under the window where Zach's toy box used to be. Replacing all that furniture was a hospital bed, the kind of bed in which Alaina's most reluctant new patients could usually be found. Those were the addicts who had survived an accident or a suicide attempt.

An IV dripped fluids into the swollen woman on the bed. Though reality narrowed to include nothing except the bed and the woman on it, Alaina managed to navigate herself closer.

Her mother's body was misshapen. The soft curls and catlike eyes Alaina had inherited reflected dull, sad tones. Blankets covered the lower half of Barb Miles's body, and Alaina had no desire to lift them to see what kind of damage hid there.

Though Alaina had always fought with both of her parents, most of the battles were centered around her father's actions. The woman on the bed was an alien life-form, someone Alaina had always known but someone she'd never understood. And yet her heart pulsed painfully, pushing all the love she'd denied to the surface.

The clinical parts of her mind filed facts. The swelling meant her mother's kidneys weren't working. The IV pumped her full of fluid that had no place to go. A quick glance at the urine bag confirmed Alaina's assumption. Gasps and wheezes issued from between her

mother's parched lips. A cup with a straw sat on the TV stand next to the bed. It was full of water.

She touched her mom's face. Her mother's eyes closed, and a tear escaped. Alaina knew a twin tracked down her own cheek. "What the hell is going on?"

"Lung cancer." Her father's voice, sounding weak and old, drifted from the other side of the bed. He adjusted her mother's pillow. "Stage four. It came on quickly."

"How long?" She had to force the words out. She didn't know if she was asking how long they had kept this secret or how long her mother had left to live. She wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer to either question.

Nobody answered, but Alaina knew enough to guess the answers to both.

"It's wrong to keep this from Zach. He thinks you don't want him anymore."

"I call him every day." Indignation stained Alan's words.

Alaina glanced up at him. "Then you must have lost track of days, Dad. You haven't talked to him in four days."

"Maybe," he admitted. "I'm always surprised to see the hospice nurse."

A pile of blankets covered the sofa, and discarded takeout littered the dining room table. Her father didn't often leave this room. Alaina's heart broke a little more, but she didn't cry. There would be time for that later. Right now, her parents needed her. She sniffed and squared her shoulders.

"I'm going to bring Zach by tonight. Right now, we need to get this place cleaned up." Alaina made a move to step away from the bed, to get away from the specter of death keeping company with her mother, but her mother stopped her with a weak hand on her arm.

"Alaina."

She stopped moving and lifted her gaze to meet her mother's dull, glassy stare.

"I don't have much time left. I'm in a lot of pain, and the morphine isn't working. I want you to take care of Zach. I love your father, but he's not a good dad."

Alaina wanted to admonish her mom to not talk like that, but she knew it was a selfish sentiment. She shook her head. "Mom, you have to let Zach see you. You have to let him talk to you."

Barb mustered her tiny reserves of energy, and determination stained her cheeks red, the only color on her face. "No. I don't want him to remember me like this. I know I look bad, and I don't want him to see this. I didn't want you to see me like this, but you're too damn stubborn for your own good. Just like your father."

Her eyes shuttered closed, her lashes casting short shadows on her cheeks. Alaina waited for them to open again, but they didn't.

"It takes a lot for her to talk," her father said. He scratched the back of his hand. His nails needed trimming. "Let's let her rest now."

But Alaina knew what her father refused to acknowledge. She felt her mother's wrist for a pulse. She leaned over the bed and rested her ear over her mother's heart. All was silent.

Alaina didn't say a word to her father. She didn't tell him anything. She grabbed her coat and purse and left the house. In a daze, she drove to Daniel's loft, but his truck wasn't there. Of course, he and Evan were at the game. They wouldn't be home for several hours.

She drove aimlessly. When Camilla called to ask if Zach could sleep over, she gave automatic permission. When sunset streaked the sky, she headed to Evan's condo. Daniel's truck was parked next to Evan's in the carport. She parked in a visitor's slot and used her key to let herself into the darkened house.

Voices came from upstairs, so she followed them without thinking. The tableau that greeted her when she pushed open the bedroom door would have titillated her another time.

Daniel held Evan in his arms. The passion of the kiss filled the entire room. It lingered, hungry and expressive of something he held

back every time the three of them made love together. Danny cupped the sides of Evan's face in his large hands, his strong fingers tapering to hidden points under strands of Evan's soft brown hair.

Evan ran his hands up and down Danny's back, holding him in a close caress just like he frequently did with Alaina. The kiss went on and on. When Daniel finally broke it, he moved to explore Evan's neck. Evan hadn't shaved that morning. A day's worth of stubble would be chafing Daniel's lips, but he savored every inch of Evan's skin. Masculine moans filled the air with a quality wholly different from the sounds that happened when the three of them were together.

By some unspoken signal, both men shed their shirts at the same time. Alaina's breath caught, and her moist pussy ruined her panties. She scented her own arousal, wondering that the sight of them could affect her so much after the day she had endured.

Daniel's hands loosened Evan's belt and pushed his jeans from his hips, revealing the paler, smoother skin there. Daniel sank to his knees, kissing his way across Evan's bare chest. Evan's hands tangled in Danny's hair, and his eyes closed to focus on the sensations.

Danny stroked Evan with his hand, pausing to spend more time on the underside of Evan's hard cock, where he was more sensitive. Those strong, lush lips parted, and he took Evan deep into his mouth. Evan breathed deeply, and a soft moan escaped.

Alaina was struck by the similarities in the dreamy expression Evan wore now and the one he wore when Alaina went down on him like that. Love for her two men welled in her heart, but it competed with the pain of knowing they kept this from her. It was a quick, momentary feeling. Then the numbness of her mother's death chased away all feeling.

I shouldn't be here.

She must have voiced her thought. Evan's eyes flew open, and his expression changed from ecstasy to shock.

"Alaina." He whispered her name, jolting her from her reverie.

She clapped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late. Daniel broke away suddenly, his shocked gaze closing in on her with unerring accuracy. He held the base of Evan's cock with one hand while his other arm froze, wrapped around Evan's ass to hold him closer.

"I'm sorry." She muttered the words, but she didn't know if it was loud enough for them to hear. Turning, she walked away. If she were less upset, she could have run down the stairs and out of the house, making it to her car faster than Daniel or Evan could gather their wits enough to come after her.

But she was in shock. She knew she was in shock. She focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Usually, she dropped her purse and keys on the table by the front door. Today, she hadn't thought to put them down. She squeezed the keys in her hand just to remind herself they were already there.

Daniel caught her halfway down the stairs. The lights were off, and the sun had set more than an hour before. He barreled into her, reaching out to grab her before she fell the rest of the way to the landing.

His strong arms closed around her waist, holding her close. "Lainie." He breathed her name, the name only he called her, into her ear.

She barely heard him. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come here."

"Let us explain, Lainie. Give us a chance to explain."

The need to leave overrode any other logic. She fought his hold, tearing at his hands with her nails. "Let go. Let me go."

"No."

Anger lent her an energy her earlier, weaker attempt lacked. She stomped on his instep and jabbed backward with her elbow.

Other than to cough, he didn't react to her attempt to free herself. Lifting her as if she weighed nothing, he carried her down the stairs and sat her on the sofa in the living room. "You're angry, Lainie. You have every right to be."

He stood over her, a tall, hulking figure she didn't recognize. Light flooded the room, casting out the shadowy figure. Alaina stared up at him. She had no idea if her face formed any kind of expression. "I want to leave."

Evan sat next to her. The cushion sank next to her thigh, and she had to shift to avoid leaning toward his comforting heat. "Alaina, please. Just listen."

His jeans were fastened, and a fresh white cotton shirt covered the chest Daniel had so recently kissed. She wondered if his erection had disappeared yet. From the way he was sitting, she couldn't tell.

"I can't do this," she said. Her voice trembled no matter how she tried to keep it steady. "Not tonight."

"You knew." Daniel had hooked his thumbs through his belt loops. He moved them to splay over his hips. "How long have you known?"

"Please." Hot tears spilled, tracking salt down her cheeks. These were the tears she couldn't find as she stared at her mother's lifeless, bloated body. "I can't do this now."

"Why not?" He was angry now, and his volume adjusted to match his temper. "Isn't that why you came here, Alaina? Wasn't it your intention to catch us in the act?"

Pain curled up in her chest. Some clinical part of her brain labeled his attack as defensive. Guilt made him lash out. Evan's hand closed around the one on her lap that scrunched the fabric of her skirt. Why in the world had she dressed nicely to go see her parents?

Alaina stared at his hand. It was so much easier than confronting Daniel's rancor. Not trusting her voice, she shook her head.

"Damn it, Lainie! Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

Something snapped inside Alaina, flooding her system with fire when she desperately needed it. Her chin shot up, and she was suddenly on her feet. She jabbed a finger into his chest and lowered her voice. "You think this is some big secret you've been keeping,

don't you? Well, I have news for you, Daniel, I've known since the beginning."

"The beginning? Really? Then why haven't you said anything?"

He didn't believe her. Rage unlike anything she'd ever felt burned through her brain. She blinked away the fog of tears and took a swing at him. Evan closed his arms around her from behind, pinning her arms to her sides.

"Honey, I'd let you hit him if I didn't think you'd end up more hurt than him."

Evan's smooth tones washed away the worst of her fury. Alaina hated that because it made the pain easier to feel.

The anguish came through loud and clear when she answered him at last. "I wanted you to tell me. I wanted you to trust me enough, to love me enough to want to share this with me."

He reeled, backing away as if Evan hadn't stopped her from punching him.

Alaina wiggled in Evan's embrace, wanting to be free. The longer he touched her, the more acute the pain became. He made her relax enough to feel the way her mother's passing squeezed at her heart. She didn't want to feel that, not now. Not yet. She wasn't ready for it.

"Trust." Daniel snorted. "That's rich, coming from you. You have huge trust issues with men, Lainie. You have yet to fully trust either Evan or me."

In case he was unaware of the hypocrisy of his line of reasoning, Alaina was tempted to point it out. "Yes," she said. "I have issues with trusting men that stem from my fucked up relationship with my father. I'm well aware of my shortcomings, Daniel, but I'm not half as fucked up regarding men as you are."

Blood drained from Daniel's face. Evan's arms dropped away at long last, and he moved to stand next to her. He peered at her through eyes wide with shock. "Alaina, that's cold."

She turned on Evan. "Cold? *I'm* cold. He's been stringing you along for how many years, and you have the nerve to accuse *me* of

being cold?" A chilling thought made her shiver. Since she was already in for a world of hurt, she might as well go all in. "Tell me, Evan, was your mother right? Are you with me because that's the only way you can hold on to Daniel?"

He held up a hand. It was a strong hand, large enough to completely enclose one of her breasts. The pads of his fingers were rough because he frequently forgot to wear work gloves. His palms were callused for the same reason. She loved the way he scraped them gently across her skin when he touched her.

"Yes. No." That hand rose to beat a path through his hair. It was mussed from where Daniel had run his fingers. "Maybe that's why I agreed to meet you, but that's not why I'm still with you. Alaina, I love you. That's why I'm with you. No other reason."

She believed him. Of the pair, only Daniel set off the alarms in her psyche that made her distrust him.

"Don't be mad at Evan."

She swiveled back to look at Daniel. Blood had returned to his face with a vengeance, mottling his cheeks ruddy with embarrassment.

"He's wanted to tell you from the beginning, but I wouldn't let him."

Alaina nodded as if she knew. Perhaps on some level, she had known Daniel was the reason Evan had shared everything about his life, including past boyfriends, except his relationship with Danny.

"You're ashamed of your feelings for him."

Daniel flinched at her unvarnished assessment. "I didn't want to lose you, Lainie. I don't want to lose either of you." His gaze flicked to Evan as he spoke, fear and pain so palpable it slammed into Alaina's gut.

It was more than she could take. Sinking down onto Evan's sofa, she buried her face in her hands, curled into herself, and submitted to the urge to sob. The fit started slowly, with a hiccup and a few

shudders. From there, it escalated to the point where every muscle in her body ached.

Evan rubbed her back, and Daniel knelt at her feet. They both said things to her, apologies mostly, but the words were vague and meaningless. The events of the day had caught up with her. This confrontation with Evan and Daniel only delayed her tears. When she had envisioned them coming clean, she thought she would listen quietly and with the appropriate gravity. She planned to assure them both that their relationship could only improve with no secrets between them. She thought that when they finally stopped pretending there was nothing between them, everything would automatically turn to sunshine and roses. Birds would sing a symphony just for them.

She hadn't thought tears would be part of the process, and they weren't, not really. Grief over her mother's passing wrenched deep, buried emotions from her gut. By the time she was able to gather her wits, she found herself seated on Evan's lap, her face buried in his shirt, and her legs lying across Daniel's. He rubbed her calves and massaged her feet as he had done so often in the evenings.

Silence fell, and it was highly uncomfortable, but Alaina didn't care. She concentrated on the feel of Evan's arms around her. This was strength she desperately needed right now.

"I'm sorry, Lainie. I never meant to hurt you." The apology penetrated the stillness. "And Evan, man, I'm sorry for everything. I'm not as brave as you."

Evan reached out, twining his fingers with Daniel's. Their joined hands rested on Alaina's thigh, and things finally felt right, or as right as they could be under the circumstances. Alaina knew Evan would say nothing, so she filled the quiet.

"I'm not mad at you, Daniel. I am hurt a little bit, but I understood that you both needed to tell me in your own time. I never meant to force the issue, not this soon. I knew you weren't ready. That's also why I didn't ask you to move in with me even though you spend more time at my house than at either of your places." Her voice was raw

from crying, and speaking hurt, but she had to let him know he wasn't the reason for her tears.

She sat up, pushing away from the warm comfort of Evan so she could see them both. "When you deny your feelings for Evan, you hold pieces of yourself away from each of us. It seems to me that Evan is the only man you've ever loved, and that scares the hell out of you. You're extremely lucky that Evan is loyal, otherwise he would have moved on years ago."

Daniel looked away, shame darkening his features. "I wasn't raised this way, Lainie. You don't know what this means."

When Alaina had pushed herself upright, Evan hadn't done more than loosen his hold. The hand on her waist tightened. He pursed his lips. "It means you're going to Hell, Dan. This way, at least you won't get punished for lying, too."

"You've also had sex out of wedlock, used condoms, taken the name of the lord in vain, and failed to go to church on Sunday." Alaina tried to keep her face as serious as possible. She didn't want to add to Evan's dry teasing.

He stared at her, and she knew he was reasoning with himself. She let him have the time. Evan seemed to instinctually understand that Danny needed a minute to think, not that he was a big talker anyway. He reached over the arm of the couch and grabbed a glass of water one of them must have procured when she was crying.

"Drink this. I think you leaked at least this much on my shirt."

Alaina did as she was told. His shirt was very wet where her face had been. The water soothed some of the rawness in her throat.

"This is why you wouldn't marry me."

Evan and Alaina both waited for Daniel to continue. The bass of his voice rumbled through the air, nearly drowning out the whisper of his words.

"When I asked you to marry me and you said Evan's name, I thought you meant you wouldn't marry me because you couldn't

marry us both. You really meant you couldn't commit like that because I was hiding my feelings for Evan."

She hadn't meant that, but she wasn't going to correct him now. Just because it wasn't a correct assumption didn't make it wrong.

"I'm sorry." The intensity of his contrition penetrated to her soul. He followed it with a hard kiss that left her breathless.

Then he turned to Evan. "I'm sorry, Evan. I haven't treated you the way you deserve to be treated. I don't know why you've hung around for as long as you have, but I'm grateful. As long as I live, I promise to honor what is between us."

Sometimes Alaina forgot just how good Daniel was with words. From the look on Evan's face, he had forgotten, too. Daniel reached over and cupped Evan's cheek. He stared into Evan's eyes, making promises Alaina knew he would keep, and then he kissed him with a tenderness that brought fresh tears to her eyes.

When the kiss ended, Daniel ran a trembling hand through his hair. "This isn't going to be easy."

Alaina brushed away her tears. "Nothing worth having is easy. If we lie to each other, if we pretend things aren't true, then this thing between us won't last, and I really, really, really want it to work out."

Evan brushed another tear from her cheek. "Why are you still crying, honey?"

The tears came faster now that she didn't have an excuse to talk about something else. "When I told you I wasn't upset about this, I wasn't lying. I went to see my parents about Zach."

Beneath her, Evan's whole body tensed, but it was Daniel who spoke. "Did they come up with a good reason to justify abandoning their son?"

Alaina nodded, not that she agreed with her parents' reasoning. They shouldn't have hid this from either of their children. "My mom was sick. For the past few months, she's been fighting lung cancer. They didn't want Zach to see... They didn't want me to see..."

Sobs forced her to break off, and she hated it. She hated being so weak she couldn't get through a few simple sentences. Evan's hand played up and down her spine. He was a man of few words and infinite patience. Between her and Daniel, they both needed someone like him in their lives.

Daniel handed over a wad of tissue.

She wiped her face and breathed herself back into control. "She died. She asked me to take care of Zach, and then she died. She didn't say she loved me or Zach. She didn't say goodbye to either of us. She said my dad was a horrible father, but she loved him, and then she died. I didn't cry or anything. I just took her pulse and listened for a heartbeat, and then I left my dad all alone with her body."

Years of strained silence had destroyed any closeness she might have had with her mother. Part of the reason Alaina chose psychology was in hopes she would finally come to understand why her mother did the things she did. It hadn't worked. While she loved her mother dearly, they had never been friends. Now that she was gone, any chance they might have become friends was also gone. Alaina mourned that loss just as much as she mourned her mother.

Evan pried open her hands and took the remains of tissue from her. Daniel dried her tears with a fresh tissue and offered her more water. She didn't expect them to be broken up by her mother's death. They had never met her. Every time her father had come to the house to pick up Zach, her mother hadn't accompanied him.

Evan's kiss was gentle, not intended to be anything but a show of love and support. Desperate flames erupted inside Alaina. She needed more than a cuddle. Right now, she wanted to feel something other than the guilt and grief threatening to consume her.

She grasped his arms tightly and moved her hands under his short sleeves. He had a sensitive spot on a crease at the top of his shoulder where one muscle met another. A shudder shook his body as her fingers found just the right pressure for this caress. His fingers dug into her thigh as he moved her so that her body pressed closer.

“Evan.” Daniel’s warning broke the spell.

Alaina jerked away from Evan. She slid her hands away from his shoulders. “Sorry. This is your time together. I’m intruding.” She leapt up, intending to leave, but Daniel pulled her into his lap.

“Lainie, I don’t want you to leave. I just thought it was the wrong time for Evan to do what he was doing. You’re upset.”

She peered into his chocolate eyes and lifted a hand to caress his cheek. “I didn’t want him to stop.”

He lifted a brow and smoothed a strand of hair away from her face.

“I’d like for the three of us to make love together.” It was a bold move. They hadn’t exactly invited her to join in their sex play. She traced his lips with the tip of her finger.

His hand came up. She thought he might pull her closer for a kiss, but he stopped with his palm spread across her back between the shoulder blades. It was a possessive and dominating gesture, the kind of thing she had prohibited men from doing her entire life. With Danny, it had become something she desired. For the first time in her life, she wanted her men to take care of her.

She trembled, feeling naked without her barriers up. As much as she loved each of these men, this was the first time she truly let her walls down. She hoped they would be gentle.

Evan’s hand landed on her knee. His heat permeated the thin silk of her stockings. He slid his warmth along the inside of her thigh. Daniel took advantage of her preoccupation to remove the hair ties holding her usual French braid in place. He turned her to more fully face Evan, which gave him full access to her hair.

Rough circles sent Evan’s heat spiraling through her system. Daniel unraveled her braid. When he finished, his fingers dug in, massaging her aching scalp and rendering her hair a bushy mess. A thousand points of pleasure shot along her neural pathways. Alaina moaned.

Daniel drew her back against his chest. He lifted her hips to allow Evan room to maneuver her panties and stockings off.

Tossing them aside, Evan knelt on the floor in front of her. Her bare skin brushed against Daniel's jeans as he arranged her legs to fall to the outside of his. Evan pushed her skirt up, teasing with a light caress that promised so much more, and Daniel spread her open.

Being this close to either of them made her clit throb. It became unbearable when they mixed utter sweetness with their seduction. She choked back a sob. "This isn't what I meant."

Evan brushed a feathery kiss on her inner thigh just above the knee. "Let us love you, Alaina. Let us show you what you mean to us."

She didn't doubt their love. "I want to touch you."

Daniel slid a hand into the blouse he had begun unbuttoning when she wasn't paying attention. "You will, Lainie." He plucked her nipple, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger and sending spikes of pleasure radiating from where he touched. His other arm crossed over her midsection, belting her in place. "Later."

Evan's light kisses barely touched her skin as he traveled to her wet center. His hot tongue flicked over flesh that waited anxiously for the next caress. She was hypersensitive, and when he blew a short, scorching breath over her clit, she jumped. Cream gushed from her pussy as if rushing to meet his tongue.

"I got you, Lainie."

The hand on her breast withdrew. Daniel unbuttoned the rest of her blouse, pulling it from where she had tucked it into her skirt. Under his skillful hands, even the movement of fabric was an erotic sensation. He didn't remove it completely. He would have to tilt her forward to do that, and he wasn't exactly allowing her much wiggle room.

She wanted to feel the tickle of the sparse hair sprinkled across his chest on her back. The heat of him penetrated the thin poly-blend of her blouse, but it wasn't the same. She felt the hard outline of his cock

pressed to the seam of her ass. If this had been any other day, she could have suggested he impale her ass while Evan pleased her with his tongue.

But this wasn't any other day. This was the day she asked Daniel and Evan to strip themselves bare and let her completely into their lives. Now she needed to let them call the shots, accept what they had to give.

So instead of demanding what she wanted, she relaxed and let Daniel call the shots. At least, she was pretty sure Daniel was calling the shots. It was difficult to tell with these two.

Evan flicked his tongue over the tip of her clit, chasing all other thoughts away. Daniel had loosened her bra to expose her breasts. Now that she had submitted, he palmed them both, massaging and squeezing in a way that inflicted just the right amount of pain to be pleasurable. He kept her on edge, ensuring the million thoughts always bombarding her mind were kept at bay.

Between her legs, Evan flicked faster and faster, driving her to the brink without a chance of falling over. Alaina arched into Daniel's hands and thrust toward Evan's mouth. At last, he took pity on her. Two fingers pushed into her slick pussy, meeting no resistance. His strong lips clamped around her clit as he sucked it into his mouth. Her climax broke, slamming over her body and splintering her into a thousand pieces.

Evan thrust his fingers against her G-spot until the storm passed. He rocked back to sit on his heels, a superior look glinting in his eyes. It was so out of character from the way he usually looked at her that Alaina sat up, startled.

Daniel's hold had relaxed when her body turned to jelly. Now he sat forward, too. Evan knelt up, snaked his hand around Danny's neck, and pulled him close. Eyelids heavy with desire, he captured Daniel's lips, thrusting his tongue in Danny's mouth as if to share her flavor.

Daniel fisted the front of Evan's shirt, holding him close. Alaina slid to the side, trying to move out of the way in hopes they would escalate the passion between them. Her waning orgasm throbbed a little harder, and she whimpered in anticipation.

Clamping one hand to her thigh, Daniel halted her slide. Evan wound an arm around her waist, holding her and making her part of the embrace. As she watched, Daniel reversed possessiveness of the kiss. He licked Evan's lips, cleaning her juices from his face.

When he finally broke the kiss, chest heaving from lack of oxygen, Daniel rested his forehead against Evan's and smiled. "Damn, you taste good."

Evan grinned. "I've wanted to do that for months."

"There are other things you've wanted to do for months." Daniel ran the edge of his thumbnail over Evan's lower lip. "What do you say we head upstairs now?"

Evan nodded and stood. Daniel followed suit, hoisting Alaina in his arms. He cradled her this time, a testament to his changed mood. After her protest the first time, he had regularly made it a point to throw her over his shoulder to carry her up the stairs.

She traced light patterns across his cheeks and along his stubble-roughened jaw. "I love you, Danny."

A soft smile lit his face. "I love you, too, Lainie."

"I know this is hard for you."

"Being with you is the opposite of hardship." The crookedness of his smile belied his intent. He had purposely misunderstood.

"You've spent your life hiding your feelings for Evan from everyone, even him. I know what kind of man you were raised to be, Daniel. I want you to know that you can always be yourself with me."

His mouth opened and closed, sure evidence she'd taken him unaware. "You're not jealous?"

They had reached the bedroom. Daniel set her on the bed.

Evan lifted her legs, settled on the edge of the bed, and draped them across his lap. The predatory gleam in his eye was another new development that sent shockwaves to her pussy.

The smile she intended ended up being little more than the hungry licking of her lips. “I love that you love each other. It strengthens our bond. And now you don’t have to pretend you aren’t salivating over each other when we’re in bed.”

Shock knocked the gleam from Evan’s eyes. “I didn’t think you noticed that.”

“Noticed it?” She laughed. “I never stopped hoping you’d forget I was there and do what you really wanted to do.”

“Forget you were there? Never. We thought we were keeping you busy.” Daniel pushed her blouse from her shoulders. The bra came off with it. “I want to do this. Evan, get her skirt.”

In seconds, she was naked. They shed their clothes and soon their bodies flanked hers. Two sets of hands explored her flesh. Two sets of lips set fires everywhere they landed. She writhed, wanting more while wanting to see them touch one another.

With her usual boldness, she pushed for what she wanted. Evan’s bed was king size, which gave her room to maneuver. Rolling, she moved to the other side of Daniel. If she correctly interpreted that gleam in Evan’s eyes, he wanted Daniel, and he wanted to have Daniel in front of her.

Evan didn’t miss a beat. Using an elbow and a knee, he levered closer to Daniel. Now they flanked him. Daniel stiffened for a second, but Alaina pretended to not notice. She tongued the spot just behind his ear that usually made him moan. Evan closed his lips over Danny’s, muffling the low sounds of pleasure issuing from there.

The feel of Daniel’s soft skin juxtaposed with the hard muscle underneath never failed to excite Alaina. She caressed his chest and stomach, moving her mouth and hands lower. Evan’s hard cock rested near Daniel’s hip. She wrapped her hand around him, and he thrust against her.

He broke his plundering, lingering kiss with Daniel, leaned across Danny's chest, and pulled Alaina closer to demand the same from her lips. Already pulsing with need, Alaina whimpered. It was a little sound, but it was enough to get Daniel's attention.

Disengaging himself from the tangle of limbs, he left the bed, reached into the nightstand, and rolled on a condom. Alaina didn't know what to expect. In the past, she knew she would soon be filled with his hard, pulsing cock. Now her chances were diminished, but the idea he might take Evan excited her to a point very close to climax.

Evan, however, didn't seem to have the same quandary. He turned Alaina so that her legs hung over the side of the bed. Daniel spread her legs and pulled her closer to where he stood. Alaina quivered in anticipation. Her legs were liquid, trembling at each point of physical contact.

Daniel ran his hands over her hips, up her stomach and ribs, over her breasts, pausing at her neck before changing direction. The rough, possessive caress fueled the riot inside. Her pussy pulsed, begging with silent screams. Grasping his shaft, he teased her further with his thick head, running it up and down her folds.

"Daniel!" The desperate plea came out a little more sharper than she intended, but Alaina didn't care. She wanted him thrusting into her right now.

He smiled that cocky grin and slid home, halting anything further she might have said. Planting her feet on the bed frame, she lifted her hips to make sure the angle was right to take him fully inside.

Instead of pulling out, teasing her by lingering just inside her entrance, he stayed buried in her heat. He bent over her, pressing his chest to hers, and he kissed her, thrusting his tongue into her mouth to tangle with hers. Alaina recognized his desperation. His heart hammered against hers. She wrapped her arms and legs around him.

Evan's strong hands gripped her ankles, prying her from Daniel, and Alaina understood Daniel's fear. Breaking the kiss, she smoothed her hands over his shoulders, up his neck, until she cupped his cheeks.

He looked into her eyes for a second, naked anxiety dilating his pupils. Then he closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers. The confidence of the man she loved had vanished, revealing a rare vulnerability. "Are you sure about this?"

The words whispered heat across her lips and chin. She wanted him to move, to pound into her with his usual abandon, but she knew he couldn't. Not yet.

Her breaths came in short pants. "Yes," she said. "You have no idea how many times I've fantasized about this."

Given his sudden intake of breath, she knew Evan had penetrated the tight ring of muscle surrounding Daniel's anus.

"I think we should put mirrors on the ceiling."

Daniel's pathetic laugh was balm to her soul. Full of love and joy over her acceptance, it was weighed down by the need driving each of them. Finally, Daniel withdrew most of the way. This was the first time in this position for each of them, so the pacing took a minute to figure out.

Already so close to her climax, Alaina came before they established a rhythm. Her pussy squeezed around Daniel's cock. She arched and screamed.

"Fuck, Lainie. If you're going to do that, I'm not going to be able to last for much longer." He increased the pace of his thrusts. The slapping of Evan's hips against Daniel's ass competed with the wet sound of Daniel's thrusts into Alaina's pussy.

He didn't stop his onslaught, prolonging her climax until she was close to another, much larger, one. She put her feet back on the bed frame and caught the rhythm, lifting her hips to meet Daniel's thrusts. Molten heat concentrated in her core. Sounds ripped from deep in her chest. She dug her fingers into Daniel's shoulders, knowing she would leave marks and that he wouldn't mind.

Daniel planted his hands on either side of her head, and the sounds he made competed with hers. Behind him, Evan cried out. As if he had been waiting for that signal, Daniel roared his climax. Two more thrusts, and Alaina shuddered with her own orgasm.

It wasn't until her breathing returned to normal and she turned to sweep her gaze over her two lovers that she realized Evan hadn't used a condom. As she watched, he finished cleaning himself with a washcloth, and then he tossed it into an empty laundry basket.

"You two don't use condoms?"

Lying across the foot of the bed with one leg raised, Evan shook his head. "Not with each other."

This shocked Alaina. Both of them had assured her they always used condoms. Always.

Daniel had collapsed on the bed next to her. He closed his hand around her fist. "We were each other's firsts. We've used condoms with everyone else, Lainie. Neither one of us has ever had unprotected sex with a woman."

"Or another man," Evan added.

Daniel stared at the ceiling. "I've never been with another man."

Evan was quiet, but Alaina knew what he was thinking. Daniel had filled his void with dozens of women. The gender didn't make a difference. The fact that Daniel hadn't committed to him did.

"How did you guys figure out you wanted to add me to your little love nest?"

As she predicted, Evan laughed at her phrasing. It eased the tension she knew came from heartache. Things might be better now, but Danny had hurt him in the past.

Daniel was quiet. His gaze hadn't moved from a fixed point on the ceiling. "Evan said if I didn't stop screwing around, he would end things with me. I finally realized what Evan meant to me and how bad I was fucking things up by refusing to commit. And I was already half in love with you. I wanted you both. Evan agreed to try it."

Alarm bells should have been ringing through Alaina's head, but they weren't. Somehow, this was just data. It didn't matter how it happened, just that it happened. She had no doubt Evan also loved her, and that was enough.

"Lainie, it scares the hell out of me when you're this quiet. I know there's something going on in that beautiful little head of yours."

She reached over Daniel and grasped Evan's wrist. "I was just taking a moment to be thankful for Evan. He's the reason you started talking to me again, isn't he?"

Evan's lips lifted in a slow grin. "Sometimes Daniel needs a swift kick in the balls before he'll do anything. Even then, he usually reacts by digging his heels in a little harder."

Crawling over Daniel, Alaina settled her body over Evan's and gave him a quick kiss. "You took a terrible chance giving him an ultimatum like that. Thank you."

The heat of his body and the fire in his soul warmed her from the inside out. He cupped the back of her head and drew her closer for one of his patented kisses that short-circuited her brain.

"Marry Evan." Daniel's softly spoken declaration interrupted the kiss before it could lead to more.

Alaina laughed, and then she realized he wasn't joking. "Don't you think you're getting a little ahead of yourself, Daniel? That should probably come from Evan, and it should be in the form of a question. And it should be his idea."

Daniel narrowed his eyes a bit. "Lainie, none of us would be here without Evan. Plus, he could use the health insurance."

Before she could protest further, Evan drew his fingers down the side of her face, directing her attention back to him. "Marry me, Alaina. I know a reverend who will perform a ceremony binding the three of us together."

This wasn't what she had expected when she woke up this morning. She pushed away from Evan to stand at the foot of the bed.

Hastily, she snatched up the white cotton tee Evan had been wearing and jerked it over her head.

“Relationships between older women and younger men tend to not last for a lot of reasons, the most common of which is that the woman tends to want kids and the younger men aren’t ready for that kind of responsibility yet.”

They both sat perched on the edge of the bed, elbows resting on knees, watching her wring her hands under their scrutiny.

Daniel spoke first. “Alaina, Zach needs role models in his life. Good men, like Evan and me, who won’t dump him off with someone else for any reason.”

“I think we’ve proven that we’re father material, and that we’re ready and willing to take on those responsibilities.” Evan stood and took her hands in his. “We were pretty candid when we first started this relationship. We told you then that we wanted to knock you up.”

She noted that his nails were clean. Though his hands were rough from heavy work, his nails were always clean. The silly details failed to derail her thoughts. She wanted to say yes. She did not want to associate the image of her mother’s vacant, bloated face with a precious commitment to an event that would resonate for the rest of her life. “I don’t want to answer this today.”

Immediately, Evan’s face reddened. “Fuck. I’m sorry.” He ran a hand through his hair, leaving strands sticking straight up. “I forgot.”

Daniel pushed to his feet. He slid his arms around her waist. “We’ll do this the right way at the right time, Lainie.” He kissed her shoulder.

“Yeah.” Evan embraced her from the front. “Maybe we’ll even wear clothes. No guarantees, though.”

Chapter 20

The overpowering scent of vanilla potpourri assaulted him from every direction, yet it did nothing to hide the stench of death that marked the funeral home. Everywhere Daniel looked, he saw subdued groups of people mingling. Not many of them looked very sad. Most of them accosted Lainie at some point to give their condolences.

It didn't take long for Daniel to realize that most of the people in the visiting rooms were friends and colleagues of Lainie's. He had met some of them, but most of them seemed to know who he was without an introduction. He had already been propositioned six times. Across the room, the bored, hard look in Evan's eyes declared that he was also fighting off the advances of older women who saw him as fair game.

They had both decided to not mention this to Alaina. Their little firecracker was liable to punch someone. Since he had been working on self-defense techniques with her, Daniel knew she was in a position to take down most of the women in the room.

He hazarded a quick glance at his cell to check the time. Alaina and her father had been called into the director's office to finish up some paperwork that Alan hadn't completed in time. Daniel's parents and Sophia would appear within the next half hour. With a sigh, he shoved the phone back into his jacket pocket and headed over to rescue Evan.

Evan looked up at him, smiling, as he approached.

Daniel clapped Evan on the shoulder. "You're needed elsewhere." He flashed an apologetic smile at the woman swathed completely in

black. She looked familiar, but he couldn't place her. They had probably been introduced already.

He headed off with Evan close at his side. Both of them had dressed in suits. Daniel's actually belonged to him, though he'd owned it since high school, and it was a little snug in the shoulders.

Evan's suit was one he'd inherited from his second-oldest brother, Dean. As a successful lawyer, Dean shed old suits long before they had worn out. Being the same size as his brother had advantages for Evan. He looked spectacular.

When they had dressed that morning, Lainie had stood before them in her staid black dress and shook her head. "I look like your mother," she had said. "You're both so damn handsome. It doesn't seem like you should waste those clothes on a funeral."

He'd wanted to assure her they'd wear tuxedos to the wedding and look even better, but he had tried for a lighter topic. "My mom is blonde, and I think she's about twelve dress sizes bigger than you."

Evan had grinned. He had enfolded Lainie in his arms and kissed her temple. "And my mom is a bit taller, darker, and her eyes are blue."

Daniel had closed in on her other side and kissed her other temple. "You could wear that dress with all the straps instead of an actual back, but then we'd never make it out of the house." As he had spoken, he had caressed her breast through the soft silk of her dress, teasing the nipple to a peak.

The funeral home was equipped with several smaller alcoves. Daniel found one that wasn't occupied and motioned Evan inside. There was no door, but the angle of the entranceway gave the room the necessary privacy. He pushed Evan against the wall and trapped him there with his body.

Telling Lainie about them, though the timing had been just plain wrong, had lifted a huge weight from his shoulders. He found he really liked being able to openly display affection for both of the people he loved. So much time had been wasted not revealing this to

her. Every time she caught them kissing, her eyes would soften, and her gaze would lose focus. She honestly found it erotic and sweet to see them together.

The heady, masculine scent of Evan's skin chased away the cloying vanilla. Desire rushed straight to his cock. He ground his pelvis against Evan's. Evan moaned and dug his fingers into Daniel's hips a second before Daniel claimed the kiss he so desperately needed.

"Oh, hell no."

That voice jerked Daniel away from all erotic thoughts. The sense of freedom he'd enjoyed for the past four days fled. Daniel hadn't yet told his parents about Evan. He broke the kiss to face his father.

David DiMarco sported broader shoulders and more meat than Daniel, but that was the only significant difference. Daniel was his father's son. He worshipped his dad. He'd spent his entire life trying to be just like him. That's why he'd followed his dream and bought out his grandfather's share in the studio instead of going to law school like his father wanted. He had done with his life exactly as his father had done.

His dad looked handsome in the black suit that accented his dark hair and skin. Threads of grey popped at the temples, giving him a more distinguished air.

Behind David, Anna DiMarco stared at Daniel and Evan. Her wide eyes held silent recrimination.

Sophia stepped into the room, coming to stand between their father and Daniel. She cast nervous glances at each of them. Drew rested his frame against the wall in a way that blocked entrance to anyone else.

"Dad." *This isn't what you think.* How could he say that when it was exactly what it looked like?

His father's face turned ruddy with fury. He poked a finger in Daniel's direction. "I always knew there was something between you two, but when you brought Alaina into your life, I thought maybe I

was wrong. She's very different from the bimbos you used to run with."

Evan's hand tightened on his wrist, lending silent strength.

Daniel opened his mouth to respond, but his father held up a hand.

"She's a good woman. If you're going to break her heart, do it honestly. *Don't* do it at her mother's funeral. I raised you better than this."

Realization dawned. Not only had he not fooled Alaina, it appeared he hadn't fooled anyone but himself. The anger rolling from his parents wasn't over the fact he had been intimate with another man. It was over the fact they thought this meant an end to his relationship with Alaina.

* * * *

Alaina knew something was amiss when Drew flashed his TV smile and blocked the entrance to the room she knew held Evan and Daniel.

He took both of her hands in his, caressed the soft skin of her wrists with his thumbs, and kissed her cheek. "I'm so very sorry for your loss, Lainie."

Drew smelled good. It took Alaina a minute to realize he used the same aftershave as Evan. She smiled her thanks. "Drew, could you move a little to the left so I can get by?"

His light blue eyes sparkled like some pale blue gem whose name she couldn't recall. She preferred Evan's sapphire eyes, and not only because she could match them to a precious stone.

"I think maybe you want to wait a bit."

He was smooth, but she handled people who wanted their next fix all the time. Some of them could be quite charming when they still hoped to score drugs or alcohol. Alaina met his friendly smile with an authoritative nod. "Now."

With a loud sigh, he moved to the side.

She hurried into the room to find Daniel and Evan locked in a standoff with Daniel's parents. Sophia stood between them, the stern Domme come to keep the peace.

Alaina approached her men. She took Daniel's hand and squeezed. He squeezed back. "What's going on?"

David stepped forward. He hugged her tightly and kissed her cheek. "Nothing you need to worry about now, Lainie. Please accept my condolences."

"Yes, of course. Thank you." She peered up at Daniel, who watched his father with a dumbfounded expression on his face. Evan was equally flabbergasted. This wasn't going anywhere. She moved to catch Anna's eyes. "Anna? What's wrong?"

Anna didn't answer. Sophia moved to put an arm around her mother's shoulders.

"She knows," Daniel said, at long last breaking the tenseness. He squeezed her hand again. "She's okay with it."

The tension drained from the room. Anna wilted with relief. "Oh, thank God."

She closed the space between them and swept Alaina into the kind of motherly hug that had been in short supply during her own childhood. Alaina hugged her back.

"If you need anything, Lainie, anything at all, you call me. I may not be your mom, but I can be here for you when you need one."

Anna released her and threaded her arm through her husband's. She reached out and tapped her hand against the side of Daniel's face. It was an affectionate gesture with an implicit warning. She repeated the gesture on Evan's cheek.

"I want grandkids," she said. "You have Zach, so you're already off to a running start."

* * * *

Later that night, Alaina sat in the backseat of her car with Zach. Evan drove, and Danny sat up front with him. She watched as their hands met over the console, and they twined fingers. Love and contentment welled within her. She reached over to run her fingers through Zach's short blond hair. This was the perfect family she'd always wanted. She might not have known how it would actually look, and the reality made her dreams look like inadequate fantasies.

"Hey, guys?"

Daniel leaned over and twisted to see her. "Yeah?"

"I've always wanted a winter wedding. Something about wearing white when there's tons of snow around has always seemed so romantic."

The fading afternoon sunlight became insignificant next to Danny's smile. "That's funny. Evan's always wanted a December wedding."

Everything inside Alaina softened. She felt like melted butter. "What about you?"

"I want the two of you whenever and however I can get you."

Zach looked from Daniel to Alaina. "Do I get to be the best man?"

Evan chuckled as he turned into their driveway. "Absolutely."

THE END

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Michele wears many hats in the course of a year. She's a wife, a mother, a teacher, and a writer. When she's not busy with one of those roles, she's most likely sleeping or thinking of more ways to stretch her obligations.

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