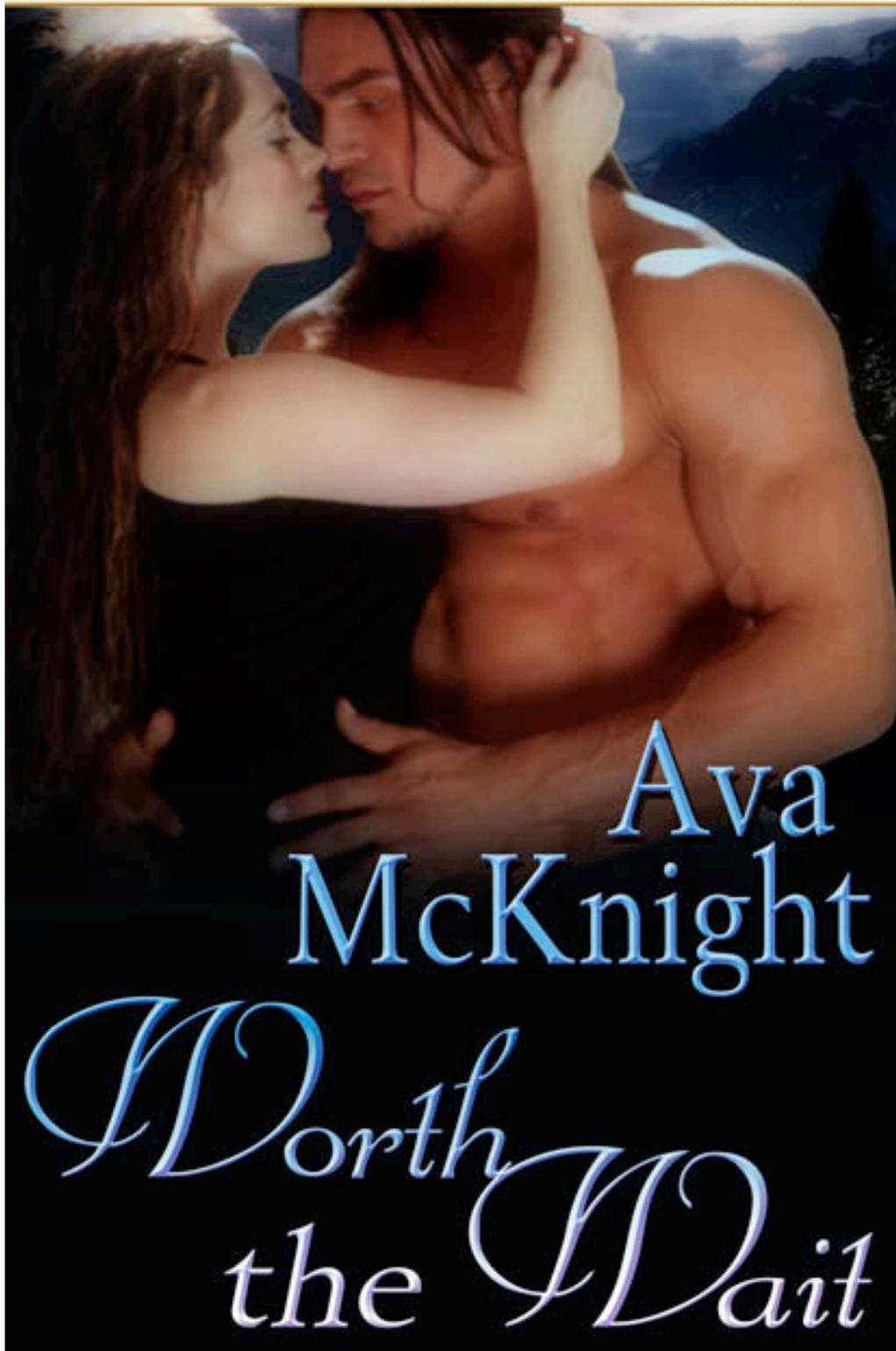


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Ava
McKnight

*Worth
the Wait*

Worth the Wait

Ava McKnight

Jade's law-enforcing, gun-toting relatives scare off every potential love interest she has in the small town of Moon River, Montana, leaving her frustrated and sexually deprived. Until bad boy Vin D'Angelo roars into town on a bad-ass motorcycle...along with his devilishly handsome friend and business partner, Noah Riley.

For one night of her very sheltered life, Jade gets everything she wants, needs and desires during an intense ménage with the two men. Come morning, though, it's Vin's sinfully delicious body she still craves – making him more than worth the wait.

Unfortunately, Vin has come to Moon River to reveal secrets he's kept for eight years. Shocking revelations that threaten his new bond with Jade when she discovers who he really is...and how intricately he's entwined with her painful past.

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Worth the Wait

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Edited by Briana St. James

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WORTH THE WAIT

Ava McKnight

Acknowledgements

One of my closest friends had the extreme good fortune of meeting the man of her dreams when she was just sixteen years old. Circumstances prevented them from attending college together and they lost contact with each other for a couple of years, but reunited when he showed up unexpectedly at her mother's house after graduation. At the time, they were following different career paths in different cities and had completely different ideas of what they wanted for the future. But they had one thing in common—they were still in love with each other. After much agonizing over how to make a relationship work, they eventually found their groove and have been happily married for over fifteen years.

Their love inspired this story in that they, like my characters Jade and Vin, connected on a soul-deep level the first time they met and nothing broke that bond—not even time or distance. Sometimes it's hard to see the forest for the trees, but when true love is meant to be, it simply can't be denied.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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AAA: American Automobile Association, Inc.

Barbie: Mattel, Inc.

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Cristal: Champagne Louis Roederer

CSI: CBS Broadcasting, Inc.

Harley: H-D Michigan Inc.

iPhone: Apple, Inc.

Levi's: Levi Strauss & Co.

Chapter One

"This town passed a law I didn't get to vote on," Jade Taylor said as she slid into a bright-red vinyl booth in the bustling Starlight Diner. A fully loaded hamburger and steak fries awaited her.

"Which law is that?" Cami Winters asked around a bite of her own burger. She always arrived first for lunch, so whatever she was in the mood for was what they ate. She never waited to dig in.

"The one that says 'touch my daughter and die'."

Cami snickered as she returned the mammoth sandwich to her plate. Pulling a paper napkin from the metal dispenser, she wiped her mouth and said, "Honey, that law was written before we were of legal voting age. Signed, sealed and delivered to City Hall the moment you were sprung from the womb."

Not exactly news to Jade or anyone else in the small town of Moon River, Montana. Her father presided over the sparse population of two thousand and eleven as mayor. Her uncle was the sheriff, her cousin the deputy. No wonder she couldn't get laid.

"I demand a repeal."

"Yeah, good luck with that." Cami laughed good-naturedly.

She was perky and blonde, with a figure that had reached mature and womanly by the age of fifteen. A voluptuous figure Jade envied. At fifteen, she herself had been ridiculously tall and gangly and had scarfed down burgers and fries just to keep the weight on. Luckily, some of the calories had stuck over the years and her freakish growth spurt had abruptly ended her sophomore year, leaving her at a comfortable five-foot-seven.

"The sexually deprived needs a man," she said. "Maybe two."

"Oh please," Cami scoffed. "As if you'd know what to do with two men at once."

"You'd be surprised at what I know. Although...not from personal experience," she added with a slight pout. "As you are well aware, that Catalina cruise we took three years ago was the first and last time a man laid a hand on this body. And it was a piss-poor job at that."

Cami winced. "That's a damn shame. On both counts." She paused a moment, then asked, "Didn't you have a date with Rand Stevens last night? Your third one?"

"Yes," Jade commented, rather unenthusiastically, before going to work on her lunch.

Cami stared at her, waiting for juicy details that were not forthcoming.

"What?" she asked after swallowing down a large bite.

Two blonde brows lifted. "Well?"

"Well, what?" Jade shrugged and reached for a fry while still holding the burger in her other hand.

"Well," her friend prompted in an exasperated tone. "What happened?"

"The same thing that always happens. Absolutely nothing." Despite her usual good manners, she spoke with her mouth full because her lackluster love life was not worth missing a single bite over. "He didn't even try to hold my hand at the movie theater. Not even an arm around the shoulders."

"Goodnight kiss?"

"Not a chance." Jade's finger and thumb pinched the straw in the chocolate milkshake Cami had ordered for her. She took a deep sip before saying, "He walked me to the front door and shook my hand."

"Are you shitting me?" Cami's hands, with her perfect French manicure, flew up in the air in apparent exasperation on Jade's behalf.

"Shh!" Jade's eyes grew wide. Leaning forward, she lowered her voice and demanded, "For God's sake, does everyone in town have to know my personal business?"

Cami shot her a droll look. "Like it's some big mystery." To prove her point, she turned in her seat and tapped Jack O'Conner, sitting in the booth behind her, on the shoulder. "Hey, Jack. What time did Rand drop Jade off last night?"

"Let's see," said the older gentleman. "CSI had just started, so I'd say about nine fifteen."

Jack lived at the bottom of the hill that led to Jade's house, making him her closest neighbor. Since hers was the only residence beyond his, it didn't take a super-sleuth to track her comings and goings. Making it difficult to sneak around. If there were any sneaking around to be done, that was.

Cami returned her attention to Jade, the cocking of her head and the amused expression on her pretty face screaming *See?*

Jade let out a sigh as she set her burger on the plate. She sat back in the booth and said, "This sucks. Every eligible bachelor within a fifty-mile radius is either too scared to make a move on me because of my gun-toting relatives, or not the least bit interesting to me in the first place."

"No offense, girlfriend, but your expectations of men are a bit high."

"What expectations?" she scoffed. "I've given up on the whole Prince Charming bullshit. Give me a guy with a pulse and few brain cells in his head and I'm game for anything."

"Liar," Cami said with a smirk. "You're all about sparks and fireworks. You want the complete package. And Rand Stevens is *so* not it."

Jade groaned. "I've got to find a bigger pond to fish in."

“Uh-oh. I know that look.” Cami eyed her suspiciously. “What do you have in mind?”

“Not sure yet. But I think a full-blown manhunt is in order.”

“Ah, Christ,” Cami groaned. She went back to her lunch. After a few bites, she said, “Not that internet dating thing again. I tried it when Alex and I split for a few months, remember? With hellaciously disastrous results, I might remind you.” She used her napkin again, then dropped it on her empty plate. “I agree your only hope is to find someone out of town, who’s unaware of the branches on your family tree. But let’s find a man you can touch and kiss and fondle, not just chat with electronically.”

“Have to admit, I’m all over that touching, kissing, fondling thing,” Jade said.

God, could she use some fondling! She didn’t even bother getting herself off these days. What was the point? An orgasm delivered by a G-spot vibrator with bunny ears was gratifying for all of five seconds before her insides chilled and she was left with that painful void again. More than just a sexual yearning. A soul-deep longing for a man who was not only an amazing lover, but also a kindred spirit.

He had to be out there somewhere. She’d thought she’d met the latter once, when she was sixteen and her mother had run off with a river guide from Lakeside. One of the students she’d tutored online had become a confidant. An anonymous friend, since the tutoring program prohibited them from corresponding outside the school system’s intranet. But just as she’d come to rely on him as an empathetic sounding board during the worst time of her life, he’d disappeared into cyberspace. *Poof*.

Jade had never fully recovered from the unexplained rejection. Causing her to say, “Maybe it’s me. Maybe I give off a vibe that makes men keep their distance. You know, once bitten and all that.”

Cami shook her head. “Hardly. You’re very approachable. I think you’re right about needing a bigger pond. You really don’t have geography on your side, my friend. And you’re certainly not going to win the numbers game with our meager population. But the internet is *not* the way to go. We’re both painfully aware of that.”

Jade had to concede the point, especially after recalling the heartbreak she’d experienced with her cyber friend years ago.

Cami seemed to give Jade’s predicament serious thought. Suddenly, her green eyes lit up and she waved her hands in the air again, excited over whatever idea had just popped into her head.

“We should take a trip!”

Jade perked up. “Hey, you may be onto something there.”

“How about another cruise? But not just any old sail across the ocean,” Cami said, her smile widening. “A *singles’* cruise!”

Jade frowned. “You’re not single.”

Cami thrust her left hand across the table. “Do you see a ring on this finger? I’ve dated Alex for five years—excluding that three-month breather—and there still isn’t a

hint of a proposal coming my way. Maybe I should see what other fish are out there too."

Jade didn't comment. Her friend's relationship was rocky at best, but at least she had a warm body lying next to her at night. Lips pressing to hers. Hands squeezing her breasts. Fingers rolling her nipples. A hard cock sliding in and out of her body whenever the urge struck.

Ugh.

Jade wasn't doing herself any favors by thinking about what *she'd* never have.

Ever-optimistic Cami continued. "Let's put our heads together and figure out—" She raised her voice over the sudden roar that filled the restaurant. "What to do—" She paused, her head whipping in the direction of the parking lot. Covering her ears with her hands, she demanded, "What the *hell* is that noise?"

Jade peered over her right shoulder, looking through the open blinds that covered the large windows of the diner. A big, shiny black motorcycle with fat tires rolled over the curb and pulled into an empty parking space, in line with the steel-frame-and-glass front door.

She bit back an instant smile, her teeth clamping down on her bottom lip in excited contemplation.

Well, well, well... Someone new.

Granted, he was likely just stopping in for directions. Moon River was too far off the beaten path to see many tourists. Glacier National Park, Whitefish and Kalispell were the general hotspots in this part of the state, all some hundred miles away.

"For God's sake," Cami grumbled, dropping her hands when the biker cut the engine. "Isn't there a noise ordinance in this town?"

Jade's gaze remained on the motorcycle. Or rather, the man swinging one long, leather-clad leg over the back of the seat as he climbed off the bike. "Holy cow." She whistled under her breath while taking in the tall, dark and hunky stranger. "Would you look at that?"

Cami sighed, not the least bit interested in the intrusion. "Look at what? That big-ass bike?"

"No. That bad-ass guy riding it."

Briefly returning her attention to the parking lot, Cami said, "He's not wearing a helmet. Sheriff Taylor will rectify *that* in short order."

Jade's teeth gnashed at the mention of her authoritative uncle. "Don't remind me."

As Cami reached across the table and plucked a fry from Jade's plate, Jade continued to admire the view outside. The biker stretched his long, powerful-looking limbs and then planted large hands on narrow hips as he assessed the front of the diner. The extreme hottie was a living, breathing fantasy come to life—precisely what she needed!

Adrenaline shot through her veins and her pulse accelerated as she eyed the Harley rider, who was at least six-two, lean-muscled and dangerously cool looking.

Along with his black leather pants, he wore an untucked, oatmeal-colored Henley shirt with the sleeves pushed up to the elbows. All three buttons at the neck were undone, revealing more of his bronze skin and part of his collarbone. Around his neck was a black strand that held some sort of neutral-colored stone. His strong jawline sported a day or two worth of stubble, as dark as the too-long hair that grazed the collar of his shirt in the back. Long bangs were pushed away from his perfectly sculpted face in a haphazard, windblown way. He was breathtakingly handsome and oh so hot.

"Now here's a man with potential," Jade mused. Her nipples tightened behind the lacy bra she wore under her fitted, white button-down blouse. A prickly sensation along her clit made her shift on the seat. Excitement shimmied through her, causing a soft moan to fall unexpectedly from her parted lips.

"What's happening over there, girlfriend?" Cami asked, her tone suspicious.

"Just enjoying the view." She knew it wouldn't surprise Cami that the mere idea of a stranger in town made her instantly wet. Especially one who looked as sinfully delicious as this one.

"Uh-huh." Yes, Cami was onto her. But she didn't encourage Jade. "Hey, we need to talk about this singles' cruise."

"Yeah, yeah." She waved a dismissive hand in the air. "The cruise. Sure." Though it was now the farthest thing from her mind. The only cruise she was interested in was the one she wanted to take on the back of the Harley with Mr. Bad Ass.

"He's not even your type," Cami pointed out, as though reading her thoughts.

"He's breathing, isn't he?" Jade didn't bother to tear her gaze from the super-hunk whose hands looked more than capable of bringing her pleasure. Along with a mouth that just might be ready and willing to please.

Changing her mind about settling in to watch the show outside, she uncrossed her legs, scooted toward the end of the booth and stood.

She was in the mood to take the bull by the horns. Those hands and lips were too tempting to pass up!

"What are you doing?" Cami asked, sounding instantly alarmed, as though she already knew the answer to her own question.

Jade retrieved the lightly tinted sunglasses from her purse and smiled. "Going fishing, of course." She slid the frames up her nose and headed toward the door.

"Hey!" her friend called after her. "You don't even know him!"

"And he doesn't know my family!"

Jade reached the glass door and swung it wide open. She sauntered across the sidewalk to the parking spot occupied by the motorcycle. When the biker whipped off his shades and hooked one arm in the opening of his shirt, she drew up short as her breath caught. Ocean-blue eyes framed by long, black-as-night lashes stood out against

his tanned skin. The vibrant irises were positively mesmerizing and his heated gaze lit her insides, effectively warding off the chill in the early autumn air.

Mr. Bad Ass gave her an appreciative once-over as she boldly resumed her mission and took a couple more steps toward him. The look of approval that flashed in his eyes and crossed his devilishly handsome face made the slow burn in her belly turn into a five-alarm fire.

She was delighted she'd bypassed her usual jeans and tank top on a whim today in lieu of a short black skirt and high heels. An unwittingly good call, especially when the stranger's gaze dropped to her legs again and one corner of his very appealing mouth lifted in a half-assed, yet sexy-as-hell grin.

In the most flirtatious voice she could muster—lack of practice not helping her plight—she said, “I wouldn't park there if I were you.”

She stood toe-to-toe with the hunk du jour, who would no doubt be the new star of all her wildest fantasies. A nice change of pace from the faceless man she'd conjured years ago, an imaginary, grown-up version of her anonymous teenage cyber friend.

“Well,” he said, his beautiful blue gaze returning to her face. The playful smirk he gave her nearly made her knees knock together. “You're not me. Are ya, sweetheart?”

Her heart beat a little stronger in her chest at his bad-boy attitude and a tantalizing tickle teased her clit. Terribly distracting, but she stayed the course.

Lifting her chin a notch to show he didn't intimidate her, she said, “This is a private parking space.”

He peered easily past her shoulder, since he towered over her. Even with her three-inch heels. “I don't see a sign saying it's a reserved spot.”

“It's assumed.”

His gaze shifted back to her and he grinned. Still lazy and half-assed. Still sexy as hell. “By whom?”

“By everyone.”

“I see.”

He rested a palm on the handlebars of the motorcycle, his fingers wrapping around the steel. She could only imagine how wonderful they'd feel wrapped around her ankles as he spread her legs wide and thrust his thick cock into her throbbing pussy.

She swayed a little on her high heels as the unexpected visual flickered through her mind, evoking a physical jolt that left her a little off kilter. She'd never taken one look at a man and fantasized about making love with him, but this guy inspired a whole movie reel of erotic images that made her think of nothing but hot-and-sweaty sex.

“Exactly who is this space designated for?” the sexy stranger asked in a cocky tone that was deeply arousing. One more stimulant to make her insides hum with an energy she'd not felt before.

“The sheriff,” she managed to say. Her voice sounded a bit lower and more sultry than before.

Mr. Bad Ass didn't falter in the least. "Might make for an interesting conversation...if he happens to show up."

Jade reluctantly tore her gaze from his in order to consult her wristwatch. "Should be here in about fifteen minutes."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, really. He eats lunch at the same time at the same place, five days a week."

His eyes glowed with mischief as he stared down at her. "So when the sheriff arrives at high noon and finds my bike in his unmarked spot, he's going to...demand a duel?"

She smirked at him. He chuckled.

"Give me a ticket?" he amended.

"Of course not."

"Well, then." The gorgeous biker relinquished his grip on the handlebars and stepped away from the motorcycle, starting toward the door. As he passed by her, he leaned in close—giving her an intoxicating whiff of male heat and expensive-smelling cologne. "Guess that solves that problem."

Jade stared after him, a smile teasing her lips, her stomach fluttering. Liquid fire flowed through her veins, making her insides blaze and her skin tingle. Sensations no man had ever evoked.

He stopped at the entrance to the diner, pulling the door open. With a sweeping hand, he silently invited her to join him inside the building. "Buy you a milkshake?"

What else was he going to offer her? It was a retro '50s diner. Clearly there'd be no cocktails on the menu. Still, Jade's toes curled in her black leather shoes at the thought of a pseudo-date with the super-hunk.

Yet she hedged as she said, "I already have one."

She didn't move from the bike, trying to come up with some other way to get him to move it. She knew as soon as her uncle saw the motorcycle, the biker would be on his radar screen. Crimping Jade's style and cutting the line on her fishing expedition.

With a low grunt, the hunky stranger released the metal handle he held and the door of the diner swung shut, leaving him outside. Crossing his arms over his expansive chest, he eyed her curiously. "Now what's wrong?"

"You really ought to move this monstrosity."

"Is it marring the local scenery?"

Said scenery was a spectacular view of tall mountains in the distance and lush trees in the foreground. Pines and elms, mostly, the leaves on the latter already turning orange and gold with the onset of fall.

"The sheriff may not give you a ticket for parking here, but he will cite you for not wearing a helmet. And for having a taillight out."

Dark brown brows knitted together. "I've got a taillight out?"

"Saw it when you pulled in."

"Fuck." He unfolded his arms and gave a lackadaisical "well, shit" gesture with the lifting of his hands and the shrugging of his shoulders, then turned back to the door of the diner. Not waiting for her this time.

Jade's mouth gaped for a moment. Then she rushed after him, her heels clicking on the concrete in a quick rhythm, echoing her disconcertion.

"Aren't you going to move that bike?" she asked as they stepped inside the building.

"Nope." He grinned at her over one impossibly wide shoulder as he straddled a round stool at the counter.

Damn it! Her fists clenched at her sides and one foot stomped the linoleum floor. He had no idea the microscope she lived under, which she'd thought would be a good thing. Apparently not!

Shaking her head, she started to walk away, heading back to her booth and a gawking Cami. Before she got too far, the biker's arm shot out and his large hand gripped her forearm, sending bolts of electricity shooting through her from head to toe.

Jade's gaze snapped to the long fingers circling her arm. No man had ever touched her like that. Not menacing, by any means. Just warm and firm and...confident.

"How 'bout that shake?" he asked in his sinfully sexy voice.

Jade could barely breathe. She eyed the empty seat next to him as her inner thighs quivered and her nipples tightened again. One simple touch, one simple question and she lit up like a slot machine with a winning combination.

From further down the aisle, she heard Cami clear her throat in an obnoxious way. Jade sighed and rolled her eyes behind her sunglasses. "I'm with someone. Sorry."

He released her and shrugged again. "My loss." Then he turned to Connie, the waitress behind the counter. He must have given her that crooked smile because she practically melted in her old-fashioned saddle shoes.

"Want to see a menu?" the older woman asked, her voice as breathless as Jade felt. Apparently, Mr. Bad Ass had the same effect on women of all ages.

Turning away, Jade walked back to the booth she shared with Cami and sat down.

"What was that all about?" her friend demanded.

"Just a little harmless flirting."

"Oh yeah. Right."

"What's the big deal?" Jade asked as she removed her glasses and set them on the silver-speckled table.

"Are you crazy? He could be some deranged psychopath. Or in a motorcycle gang."

"Oh Jesus," she groaned. "Not you too."

Her friend crossed her arms over her ample chest and sulked. "I'm not trying to perpetuate your problem."

Jade smiled and lightened her tone. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Well, the bad news is that you're in seriously hot water now," Cami warned. "Remember that law you didn't get to vote on? Half the people in this diner will tell your father, or your uncle, or your cousin—or all three—about the way that guy manhandled you."

"He didn't do it to hurt me, Cam. He did it to get my attention. And it worked." She could still feel his strong fingers on her arm. Wanted to feel them sliding over her naked body, pinching her tight nipples, pushing deep into her aching pussy.

Sexually deprived was becoming the understatement of the century for her current state. She wanted more than just a casual fling, of course, which made Mr. Bad Ass a terrible candidate, considering he was likely just passing through town. Still, beggars couldn't be choosers and she could certainly use a wild ride to help take the edge off.

"He wasn't afraid to touch me," she said, admiring his confidence. "How many guys can we say that about?"

"Tell it walking, sister. Marty Alderman was *this close* to jumping out of his seat and taking down your new friend." She pinched her finger and thumb together for added effect.

"He's already sitting, Cam. You can't take down someone who's already...down."

"You know what I mean."

Jade's gaze shifted to the stranger at the counter. Connie had just taken his order, but still lingered close by, her eyes glassed over in a lusty way.

"I gotta tell you," she said, feeling exhilarated to the core of her being. "There's something about him that makes me feel...supercharged."

"Sure. He's fucking hot."

"Oh finally noticed, did you?"

Cami shrugged. "You'd have to be blind not to. Just don't tell Alex. We've got enough problems to contend with."

"You and me both."

Cami reached a hand across the table and covered Jade's. "Sorry, sweetie."

"Not your fault." Though she deeply appreciated her friend's empathy. "The truth is, I'm as much to blame as everyone else."

"How do you figure?"

Jade sighed. "I let this happen to me. When my mother left and my father was completely and utterly devastated, I let him and the rest of my family get all crazy-protective of me. I was all he had left. I think he thought I was going to run off and leave him too. Even though I was only sixteen years old at the time."

She'd never gotten angry over the close tabs everyone kept on her. Just frustrated by the outcome. It hadn't been such a big deal when she was a teenager. But it was

something altogether different now that she was twenty-four. A grown woman with womanly needs.

"How about we commiserate with wine tonight? My place, seven o'clock." Cami consulted the old-school Coca-Cola clock on the wall behind the counter and cringed. "I've got to run. You know how maniacal Jo Beth is about me punching in on time."

"Yeah, sure. No worries." Being self-employed, Jade didn't have the same constraints. Though she did tend to lose track of time when she worked on new fashion designs, so she set the alarm on her watch to ensure she wouldn't be late to Cami's. "I'll bring a cheese and fruit platter."

"Excellent." Cami pulled a ten from her purse and dropped it on the table to cover her meal and tip. She stood and smoothed a hand over the slim, turquoise-colored skirt Jade had made for her last birthday. She cast an expectant look Jade's way.

"What?" she asked.

"Aren't you coming with?"

"Oh...uh..." Jade spared a glance toward her milkshake. "Think I'll finish this."

Cami shook her head. "You are just itching to get yourself into trouble, aren't you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Of course not." She hooked the strap of her purse over her shoulder. "Don't be late tonight. I'm going to want details."

Jade knew her smile was a wicked one. "You might finally get some."

Better yet, I might finally get some!

Chapter Two

After Cami left, Jade eyed the melting milkshake she'd only taken a few sips of and decided to play with fire. She dropped enough money on the table to pay her bill and tip, then grabbed her small leather clutch, jacket and sunglasses and strolled over to the counter.

Sliding onto the stool next to Moon River's hottest visitor *ever*, she said, "I like my shakes with malt in them. Chocolate today."

Mr. Bad Ass flashed her a cocky grin – since he'd been the one to bait, hook and reel in the catch. He turned back to their waitress and said, "A chocolate malt for the meter maid, Miss Connie." He'd either read her name tag or she'd introduced herself. Likely the latter, since Connie seemed to be a smitten kitten. Either way, Jade liked how personable the sexy stranger was. His causal demeanor was as enticing as his rock-hard body.

While Connie worked the milkshake machine, Jade set her belongings on the counter and crossed her legs. Leaning toward the gorgeous biker, she said, "I'm not really the meter maid. I'm Jade Taylor."

He looked taken aback, his mouth gaping slightly in surprise. His eyes widened as he muttered, "You don't say?" He stared at her for a few moments, undeniably perplexed, yet unmistakably pleased. Contradictory expressions she couldn't explain. He let out a soft chuckle and gave a slight shake of his head, confusing her further.

He extended his right hand and Jade's cunt clenched at the sight of it, so big and strong-looking. He had long tapered fingers and short blunt nails. All covered by smooth bronze skin. Definitely a hand that would feel like heaven on her body.

Sliding hers into his firm grip, she reveled at the slightly calloused palm. A little added friction on all the sensitive parts of her body would feel damn good too.

"And *you* are?" she prompted with a lifted eyebrow.

He laughed again before saying, "Vin D'Angelo."

"I missed the joke," she said, her voice a bit breathless as an electrical current zinged through her from head to toe with Vin's warm skin against hers.

He gave her a full smile this time, revealing gleaming white teeth. "No joke. You're going to find this hard to believe, but I was actually look –"

"Oh shit," she interjected as she snatched her hand from his, hating that the intimate moment vanished so quickly. "Sheriff's here."

She'd caught sight of her uncle out of the corner of her eye and turned on her stool to face him as he walked in. He looked disgruntled, no doubt because someone had snaked his parking spot.

“Afternoon, Jade,” he said as he passed through the door and approached her at the counter. He was a mammoth of a man, almost as tall as Vin, she suspected, yet much wider. His dark blond hair was cut in military style and he had big brown eyes that seemed to miss nothing. He took in the scene before him with both interest and disapproval. She could read him that easily.

To lighten the instantly tense mood, Jade smiled. She hoped she looked innocent, though it was quite obvious what she was up to. Especially when Connie delivered her milkshake and Vin’s burger at the same time.

Jade said, “Nice to see you, Uncle Bob.”

Vin’s head whipped in her direction. “*Uncle?*”

Jade laughed, despite the damper her relative put on the party. “Sheriff Taylor,” she said, making the introductions, “this is Vin D’Angelo. Vin, meet my uncle, the sheriff.”

The two men shook hands, then Vin crooked a brow and cast a “you could have warned me” look her way.

“Guess I failed to mention we’re related.”

This time, his look was clearly a smart-assed “no shit” one.

Biting back another laugh, Jade said to her uncle, “I told him not to leave that monstrosity in your spot. He didn’t believe you’d actually show up.”

The sheriff looked displeased and not just because Vin had dared to take his primo parking space. Obviously, he wasn’t happy to find Jade having lunch with a stranger. A biker, no less.

“Didn’t notice a helmet when I passed by your motorcycle,” he said to Vin. “We’ve got laws in this town, son.”

Vin nodded. “Yes, sir. I’ve got one in my motel room. I’ll be sure to wear it from now on.”

“He’s got a taillight out too,” Jade offered, just because the situation was so amusing. Served him right for not taking her advice and moving his bike.

Vin shot her another look. “Thanks,” he grumbled.

“You heard the man,” she said. “We have laws in this town.”

That unwritten one she’d mentioned to Cami earlier being the bane of her existence. She had a feeling her fun with Mr. Bad Ass was about to come to a screeching halt if her uncle had anything to say about it. Which she knew he would. She had no doubt he’d be on the phone with her father, the mayor, within the next five minutes. Giving a full report as though he’d just caught them going at it in the back alley.

“How long will you be in town?” the sheriff asked Vin.

“Few days. I’m staying at the Moon River Inn and Suites. On my way to L.A. from New York. Thought I’d take the scenic route.”

Clever of him to unload all the information the sheriff would want to know about him. Though Jade suspected her uncle would run his license plate number as soon as he

got back to the station. Hell, he probably wouldn't even wait that long. He'd likely call it in after he got off the phone with her dad.

Jade cringed inwardly. Yes, her fun had just gone to hell in a handbag.

"Well." The sheriff eyed Vin a few seconds more. "Enjoy the sights." His voice was amiable enough, though there was a hint of warning in his tone.

Stay out of trouble in my town. And don't even think about laying a hand on my niece.

Jade could practically hear the words! Damn, she seriously could *not* catch a break!

To her, the sheriff suggested, "Why don't you grab your stuff and come have lunch with me?"

Jade's heart sank. If she didn't join him, it would make the situation worse. But when she slid a glance Vin's way and saw the challenge in his beautiful blue eyes, as though to say "Dare you stay with me?" that little tickle along her clit came back full force.

Yes. She *did* dare!

She said to her uncle, "Thanks, but I already ate. I'm just having a shake with Vin before I head back to the boutique. You know, welcoming him to our community."

The sheriff gave her a sardonic look, silently calling bullshit on her. He said, "I'll swing by the shop later. I told Maureen I'd check on the progress of the bridesmaids' dresses for Nelly's wedding."

"Almost done," Jade said of her aunt and cousin's special orders. Though she knew her uncle was just making an excuse to look in on her and ensure she made it back to the boutique instead of roaring off into the sunset with the mysterious motorcycle rider. He'd also want to report whatever he discovered when he ran Vin's plate. And warn her to stay away from him, even if he had no rap sheet and was as clean as a whistle. Her uncle would insist he was trouble. He wasn't a fan of bikers or drifters.

But the only way for Jade to find *the one* was to test as many waters as possible, right? Even though the sexy stranger was just passing through, she'd already convinced herself it was worth exploring the chemistry that obviously existed between them.

All part of the process, she mentally rationalized. Besides, a little harmless flirting with a man who actually sparked her interest just might help her to ascertain what she was really looking for in a date.

"Well," the sheriff said again, clearly reluctant to leave Jade alone with someone he had yet to check out in an official capacity. "I'll see you a little later." Finally, he sauntered off toward his usual booth, another unreserved space that no one claimed during lunchtime.

Jade turned back to the counter and reached for the straw in her shake. She took a long sip, surprised by her nerve when it came to her uncle, but also wondering how badly it would come back to bite her in the ass.

Pushing that dismal thought from her mind, she returned her attention to Vin and asked, "So what's in L.A.?"

“Movie premiere.”

Her brow jerked up. If he were a movie star, the world would know about it. He was much too sexy to not burn up the big screen. He had an edgy look about him, reminiscent of Colin Farrell, yet with a more chiseled bone structure. And a much hunkier body. Yes, put this guy in front of a camera and there’d be wet crotches aplenty in theater audiences across the country.

“You’re a director?” she ventured.

He seemed pleased she hadn’t pegged him as an actor. His grin widened before he said, “Writer, director and producer.”

She whistled. “Impressive.”

He shrugged nonchalantly as he held her gaze for a few breathless seconds, making Jade swim in ocean-blue eyes and erotic thoughts.

Oh to be alone with this guy for an hour! Naked and sprawled out on a big bed was how she wanted him. He exuded raw sexuality and supreme male confidence that told her he knew how to please a woman. And she was more than ready to experience whatever he had to offer – and to reciprocate in turn.

Actually, an hour wouldn’t be enough. She needed a long, hot and steamy night with Mr. Bad Ass.

Tearing her gaze from his, she spared a glance over her shoulder, only to find her uncle watching them with an eagle eye as he spoke on the phone. Two minutes more and her cell would probably ring, her father on the other end of the line.

Jade had no desire to upset the apple cart when it came to her family. She knew how difficult it had been for everyone when her mother had left Montana with the river guide from Lakeside, leaving everything and everyone behind. She hadn’t even given them a forwarding address or a phone number. Nor had she offered a significant reason for running off. She’d merely left a vague note for Jade and her father, telling them she wanted more from life and had found it with someone else. Excruciatingly painful words to read and damn near impossible for Jade’s father to understand, let alone Jade herself. Sadly, they’d had no choice but to let her go.

Unfortunately, the damage to the family still lingered.

Giving serious consideration to this forced Jade to rethink her blatant flirting with a stranger in front of everyone in the diner and her uncle most importantly.

Grinding her teeth, she turned back to Vin. “I should head over to my boutique.”

One corner of his mouth lifted. “Need a ride?”

His suggestive tone made her internal debate even more agonizing. But her uncle’s gaze practically burned a hole in her head, so she took the safe route. “I drove, thanks.”

He nodded, though he looked disappointed that her bravado had waned. She felt a twinge of regret as well, but what could she do? Jade was more prone to keeping the peace than disturbing it.

As she considered her extremely limited options, Vin surprised her by saying, "I'd like to see you again."

Her stomach fluttered. "It's a small town. You'll run into me."

"I wasn't thinking in random terms." His gaze was intense, as though he didn't plan to let her off the hook so easily. Clearly not, because he asked, "How about dinner tonight?"

Impulsively, Jade opened her mouth to say yes, but immediately clamped it shut.

Sure, testing the waters was the only way to find Mr. Right. But this guy would never equate to anything more than Mr. Right Now, another reality she had to face before their flirtation went any further. Besides, she had a date with Cami this evening. And the fact was, even if she blew off her friend in lieu of a date with Mr. Bad Ass, any place they went would likely be filled with people who would out her. Not to mention her father, uncle and cousin would probably be on high-alert this evening, keeping tabs on her. There really wasn't anyplace to escape their watchful eyes, making her waffling moot.

Except...

Jade smiled as a thought teased her brain. A very forbidden one she really shouldn't even consider. And yet...she just couldn't help herself.

Vin crooked a brow. "Got a better idea than dinner?" The wicked grin he gave her – as though he knew she was up to no good of the sinful variety – made her squirm in her seat.

She said, "There's a cocktail lounge in the same strip mall as my boutique. I've never been in, but it's just a walk down the way for me."

Meaning she could leave her car in front of her store with the lights on inside the boutique. If anyone happened to drive by to check on her, they'd simply assume she was working on new designs in the back studio, as she was prone to do. Her family would never suspect she was at the bar. Not in a million years.

It sucked that she'd have to sneak around if she wanted to see Vin, but it was also less messier this way. Though she'd been eager earlier to get to know him – in front of all of these people, no less – she'd quickly come to realize that being on public display would only create strife for her family. Not her intention at all.

Vin eyed her curiously as he said, "I didn't take you for the cocktail lounge type."

"I'm not," she agreed. "But it's kind of...private. All the shops around it close early and I never see much of a crowd coming or going."

"Mm," he mused, his blue eyes glowing seductively. "Private sounds right up my alley."

Jade's toes curled in her shoes once more. A curious reaction she'd never experienced before, but which seemed to happen in spades around this guy. "See you there around eight?"

"Count on it."

She pulled in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. She was definitely going against the family grain and would never hear the end of it if anyone found out. But she felt confident she had her bases covered. Sure she was being secretive, but if it kept the peace...

"The strip mall is on the east side of town," she told Vin, "on Logan Street. The Well is on the opposite end from my fashion boutique."

"Which is called...?"

She smiled and said, "Taylor-Made, of course."

"Of course." He grinned back. "Eight o'clock, then."

"Yeah." Scooping up her belongings, she stood and said, "Thanks for the shake."

"Anytime." His heated gaze slid over her once more, keeping her in a constant state of arousal.

Her excitement escalated at the thought of the evening ahead of her. Trying to keep her grin and tone casual, she said, "See you later." She turned on her high heels and walked off, swaying her hips a little, hoping he watched her go.

To hell with what her uncle thought about *that!*

* * * * *

Vin stared at Jade's retreating backside over his shoulder. She had a killer ass. Sexy, bare legs. Breasts that looked to not quite be a handful, but definitely perky. She wore her long, loosely curled auburn hair in a high ponytail. Strands of gold were woven through the thick mass and they complemented her amber-colored eyes. She had a fiery spirit to go with the red hair. All-in-all, an extremely enticing package. One that made his gut tighten and his cock stir behind the fly of his leather pants.

As Vin turned back to his lunch, he caught the sheriff watching him watch Jade. Vin gave a slight nod of his head and a quick grin before he shifted his attention to the counter.

On the one hand, he'd lucked out today. On the other...*not so much*. He was now under scrutiny from the local law as he pursued a woman he'd come looking for—one who was not at all what he'd expected to find.

Jade was a kindred spirit from his teenage years. Obviously, she had no idea he was one of the students she'd tutored online when they were both sixteen. Back then, he was Vincent Morelli from Lakeside. But his uncle had adopted him after his mother had committed suicide. With that legal action came a different last name. At age eighteen, when he'd started film school at NYU, Vin had opted for the shorter version of his first name so, of course, Jade hadn't made the connection.

Probably for the best. Under the watchful eye of her uncle and everyone else at the Starlight Diner, which steadily filled with the lunch crowd, was not where he wanted to reveal his true identity. Mostly because she might be pissed to learn he was the kid who'd left her high and dry after she'd shared soulful confessions during a difficult and

complicated time in her life. They'd corresponded for nearly five months, their discussions quickly evolving from homework help to her mother's abandonment and Jade's broken heart.

Unfortunately, he suspected he'd damaged it further when he'd abruptly stopped communicating with her. For reasons he hadn't had the opportunity to explain back then, all related to the traumatic events occurring in his own life, which he hadn't fully divulged to Jade.

He'd lost access to the Montana school system's intranet when he'd moved out of state to live with his uncle, thereby losing contact with Jade. Devastating for him and possibly for her as well, considering how close they'd become.

Vin had never forgotten her. The girl whose pain was practically a living, breathing, underlying current in her email and instant messages, tugging at his heart and making him wish he could console her in person, not just with electronic correspondences. Her suffering and, conversely, her determination to get herself and her father through the heartache had touched him.

To this day, he was haunted by the memory of her...and the guilt he'd always felt over not explaining why he couldn't continue their online friendship. The changes in his life had come as quickly as the ones in hers.

But he'd found her again, as he'd hoped.

Vin had decided this road trip from New York to L.A. was the perfect opportunity to roll into Moon River and see if Jade still lived here. He'd been from Lakeside, another small town over a hundred miles away, so they hadn't attended school together. He didn't know much about her life or her family. It'd been a crap shoot as to whether or not he'd find her, since she hadn't been listed in the local directory.

He'd arrived this morning, settled into his motel suite and then toured the small town. Learning the diner was the local lunchtime hotspot, he'd assumed it'd be the best place to ask around about Jade. Never had he imagined she'd come to him!

He bit into his burger as he considered how fortuitous his decision to have lunch here had been. Not only had he found what he'd come looking for, but the grown-up Jade came in a sexy, sassy package he desperately wanted to unwrap. The sparks had flown between them—the attraction unmistakable, if the way she'd kept sizing him up were any indication.

Damn, she was a pretty little thing. He hadn't put much thought into what she might look like when he'd started this quest. He'd simply wanted to reconnect with her and offer her an explanation and apology he thought she deserved. But his need to simply right a childhood wrong was quickly morphing into something more mature and sensual. His body responded innately to her and Vin now had a whole lot more on his mind than conversation.

"You realize you've opened a can of worms," Connie said as she brought him a fresh bottle of ketchup for his fries.

Vin nodded. "Think I get the gist of it."

The waitress chuckled. "You don't know the half of it. Her cousin's the deputy in town. And Jade is the first daughter of Moon River."

He swallowed down a bite and stared at Connie. "Jade's father is the mayor?"

She merely smiled.

Holy hell. That put a different spin on things. Especially now that his suddenly raging libido was involved. He had a date with Jade tonight and more on his mind than just a drink. Thoughts of indulging in what that tight little body of hers might have to offer would surely warrant a bullet—likely in the vicinity of the man parts he cherished.

Not that he wanted to do anything illegal with Jade...unless this remote town still enforced a "missionary position only" law.

"Well," Vin said before he dug into the fries. "Guess I'd better tread lightly."

"That'd be my recommendation." She turned away to help her other customers.

As Vin was finishing up, his cell rang. He whipped out his credit card for Connie to run, then answered the call.

"You make it into town?" he asked his friend and business partner, Noah Riley.

"Not yet. Stopping for a bite. Still about three hours out." Noah had parted ways with him in Whitefish, heading up to Glacier while Vin traveled to Moon River, where they'd planned to meet up. "I scouted a few locations we might want to consider for our next project."

"Excellent."

"How'd *you* make out?" Noah asked, a hint of teasing in his voice.

"Not too bad. I'll tell you about it when you get here."

"So you found her?"

Vin grinned. "Oh yeah."

"Hmm. Judging by the sound of your voice, I'd say you got a little more than you bargained for."

Both good and bad. "You can't even imagine."

"Looking forward to hearing all about it. I'll buzz you when I roll in."

"Talk to you later." He disconnected the call and slipped the iPhone back into its holster, attached to his front pocket. As he signed the bill, he asked Connie, "Is she married?"

"Jade?" She gave a slight laugh. "Are you kidding? With that overprotective brood keeping such close tabs on her, it's a wonder she's not still living under her daddy's roof with bars on the bedroom windows and a nightly curfew."

Vin winced. "I get the feeling I just became a moving target."

"I'd keep my wits about you, if I were you. You seem like good stock. Hate to see you lose a hand for laying it on Jade." She gave him a quick once-over, then added as an apparent afterthought, "On the other hand, you don't seem easily intimidated. Maybe you're the break the poor kid needs."

She winked at Vin, then strolled off, only to grin at him over her shoulder after she got a load of the hefty tip he'd left her.

Never hurt to have an ally in his front pocket when he was in hot pursuit of a woman with gun-slinging relatives.

Chapter Three

Resisting the urge to bite her nails as she nervously eyed the selection of dresses she'd pulled from the racks up front, Jade debated her options for the evening. Excitement over seeing Vin kept her in a constant state of anticipation and exhilaration. So much so, she'd had to back off the venti caramel macchiato her uncle had brought her when he'd dropped by "to check on Nelly's dresses". *So ridiculous.*

First of all, the dresses were nearly complete, as she'd said earlier. Second, Jade thought it was unfair her older female cousin had never suffered through the scrutiny Jade and her dates had. Granted, Nelly had met her true love in high school, long before Jade's mother had skipped town and everyone had wiggled out. Nelly and Josh had been engaged since their senior prom, but held off on the wedding until Josh was more settled in his military career. With back-to-back deployments, he hadn't had the heart to move Nelly away from her family until he'd been stationed in San Diego as a navy captain.

So, Uncle Bob had made his visit and eyed the dresses for all of two seconds before he'd launched into a lengthy diatribe about drifters and Jade's need to be careful about with whom she chose to associate. As if she didn't already know that. Of course, he'd felt compelled to tell her Vin was on the up-and-up as far as the law was concerned, but one could never be too careful when it came to strangers.

His warning once again brought to mind how uptight the family was about her safety. She was also reminded of how important it was to all of them that she follow the path they deemed appropriate, which didn't include dating outsiders. Yet another dilemma to ponder.

When her uncle had finished his litany, she'd thanked him for his due diligence and concern for her well-being. Then she'd sent him on his way so she could do her own digging. The internet had been most helpful, telling her about Vin's movie projects and some of his past conquests, though he didn't seem to have anyone special in his life of late. Not that that mattered in the grand scheme of things, but it was nice to know.

Now, as she considered her clothing options for the evening, she phoned Cami to break their date and warn her what she was up to—much to Cami's shock and delight, an amusing combination as her friend lectured her. Jade promised to be safe. Keep her cell phone close at hand and a few condoms stashed in her purse.

Before she hung up, Cami said, "Hey, we seriously need to talk about this cruise."

The reminder made a few of the disjointed thoughts in Jade's mind snap into place. "I'm not discounting the idea, mind you, but I'm not sure the timing's right."

With all the internal debate taking place over one night out with a stranger in town—because she knew the impact it would have on her family if they found out—she

really had to give thought to how her father had reacted the last time she and Cami had taken a vacation away from Moon River.

The guilt she'd suffered over her father's response to the news had lasted during the cruise and for sometime thereafter. He'd feared she'd disappear like her mother had. He'd worried she was interested in exploring life outside of Moon River. Jade had finally calmed him down enough to convince him she merely wanted to get away for a week and take a break. Soak up some rays and sip a few cocktails poolside. Not vanish off the face of the earth for the rest of eternity.

But the truth was, Jade *had* been interested in exploring life outside of Moon River. It wasn't as though she was looking to uproot her life and go elsewhere. Yet it was impossible not to be curious about what lay beyond the county line.

"I know it's important to you to keep your father in his comfort zone," Cami said. "But you're an adult now and you've got your own life to live."

Jade sighed. "I know. You're right. I just... I don't want him to ever think I'm like my mother. Like I'm running away."

"It's just a cruise."

"Yes, but when you and I were on that last cruise and we'd met those guys from Seattle, we'd talked about what it would be like to move to a big city. We got all excited over the prospect of a new adventure and had even agreed to investigate Seattle on the internet when we got back home."

"And that makes you feel like you're betraying your dad?"

"In a way."

"Jade," Cami said in a sympathetic tone. "At some point, you're going to have to stop trying to make up for your mom's shortcomings."

Jade cringed. "That is so much easier said than done."

"I understand." Cami paused for a moment, then repeated, "But you still have your own life to live."

She nodded, though Cami couldn't see she agreed with her. She said, "I've got to go. I told Vin I'd meet him at eight and I haven't even decided what to wear yet."

"Considering the hoops you're both jumping through, it'd better be something sexy," Cami told her. "Have fun – but be careful!"

"Of course. Call you tomorrow."

"I'll be waiting with bated breath."

"Let's hope I have something steamy to report."

"Yeah, I'll keep my fingers crossed for that."

Jade snapped her cell shut and shifted her attention to the display in front of her, where she'd lined up several outfits for consideration. She pulled the first three, overly conservative dresses from the rack and returned them to the storefront. Definitely *not* what she was looking for. She evaluated the next two in line, quickly discarding them.

Leaving her with the final option she suspected she'd subconsciously had in mind all along.

She locked the front door of the store, since it was after business hours, and, with a wicked grin, she headed into the dressing room.

The little black number she'd selected had extra-long sleeves that were strategically bunched around her arms. The front of the dress was drapey, with a simple, modest neckline. Her breasts were small enough—and the bodice blousy enough—that she could skip the bra. Soft jersey fabric rubbed against her bare nipples, making the little buds pucker tight and sending an erotic thrill down her spine. The material gathered at her waist before giving way to a curve-hugging skirt that ended mid-thigh. Her back was completely bared, the material dipping low, draping gracefully at the base of her spine.

As Jade eyed herself from every angle offered by the three-way mirror, she wondered if she really and truly had the nerve to wear such a provocative dress. She'd designed it on a whim, knowing no one in Moon River would stir up the rumor mill with such a hot item. But she intended to set up a virtual shop online, where she'd sell her more risqué designs, so she'd moved forward with creating the dress. Never had she considered it would end up in her own personal wardrobe. Yet that supercharged feeling she'd been experiencing since she'd first laid eyes on Vin D'Angelo had her singing a different tune.

Tonight, Jade had the desire to be the kind of woman who would wear a dress such as this. The kind of woman who would meet a man she barely knew at a cocktail lounge her family didn't deem appropriate for her to set foot in. The kind of woman who just might go to a sexy stranger's motel room for one night of uninhibited sex. The really dirty kind.

Her clit tingled at that deliciously wicked thought.

True, she was out of her element—something that added to her excitement, because she was clearly taking a walk on the wild and forbidden side. But she was smart enough to evaluate the situation before she went too far. Of course she understood the dangers of sex with a stranger. But Vin D'Angelo did not strike her as the type who would force himself upon her or do anything she didn't want him to do. He had a reputation to protect. And he knew her uncle was the sheriff. Plus there was something in his ocean-blue eyes that made her feel she could trust him.

Maybe it was a ridiculous sentiment, but there was a peculiar undercurrent that ran between them. She couldn't explain it and had no idea if she were merely imagining it. Yet she couldn't deny how quickly she'd reacted to him on a physical level. How easy it had been to flirt and talk with him. How comfortable she'd felt with him, while still being on edge in a really good way as her excitement mounted.

Granted, she was likely getting in over her head. Vin was probably the sort of man who would blow her mind in the bedroom, particularly with her lack of experience. But

mind-blowing sex was something every girl deserved at least once in her life and Jade was certain she'd paid her dues.

Finishing her preparations for the evening, she pulled the holder from her ponytail and fluffed her long, loose curls. Using the cosmetics in her handbag, she darkened her makeup just a bit, making it more dramatic to go with the dress. She slipped on her high heels again and left the dressing room. Raiding the display jewelry, she paired her new outfit with a square, silver bangle on her left wrist and a large, fake onyx ring on her right middle finger. Sparkly, chandelier earrings and her small black clutch completed the ensemble. She was officially ready for her first attempt at being a very bad girl.

It was just past eight when she finally locked the store behind her and walked on slightly shaky legs to the cocktail lounge. A half-dozen or so motorcycles were lined up in front, one of which belonged to Vin. The jolt she felt at the sight of his bike—and the thrill of the evening ahead of her—echoed throughout her body, making her practically vibrate from head to toe.

Stepping into the dimly lit lounge, she found a small crowd, raucous conversation and hard-driving music. She didn't expect to blend in—of course everyone would recognize her. But she hoped the noisy environment would offer a buffer, so no one could overhear other's conversations or pay much attention to whatever they were doing.

Though she'd told Vin this bar offered privacy, she'd meant her family's prying eyes wouldn't watch their every move here. That did not mean others wouldn't take an interest in what she was up to, though she suspected this particular crowd wouldn't give much thought to the mayor's daughter letting her hair down for once.

She crossed to the bar, greetings shouted her way along with gawking stares. She pretended not to notice, but she left jaws on the floor behind her.

"Hey, Jade," said Max Donnelly, the bartender. They'd gone to high school together. "Never seen you in here before." He eyed her closely as she dropped her clutch on the scarred wood that stretched along the back wall of the lounge, adding, "You look smokin'-ho—" He swallowed hard, then amended, "Nice. You look very nice tonight."

She smiled as he all but drooled over her, though he clearly knew what trouble even that minor infraction could cause him.

"Thank you, Max." She appreciated the ego boost. "I'm meeting a friend here. But let's keep that between us, huh?" She pulled out a twenty—hopefully a big enough tip to buy his silence—and dropped it on the bar. "How about a dirty martini? Extra olives."

He reached for the bill just as another hand swooped in and snatched it up. "No woman who looks like you do should have to pay for her own drink."

Jade didn't recognize the deep voice coming from behind her. She turned to find yet another devilishly handsome stranger, dressed all in black, smiling down at her. Was

this her lucky day, or what? She grinned, despite the urge to pinch herself. Was she actually asleep, having a wonderfully wicked fantasy, or were there really two of the hottest men she'd ever laid eyes on in Moon River tonight?

"Oh wait," she said as her gaze slid over his strong jawline, chiseled cheeks and melted-chocolate eyes. He had obsidian-colored hair that was strategically mussed. A gleaming white smile that rivaled Vin's. Thinking of her date, she said, "You're Noah Riley." She'd seen his photo along with Vin's on the internet. "You're Vin's business partner."

His grin widened, causing little lines to crinkle around his warm, dark brown eyes. He had to be a good five or six years older than her, but was in stellar shape regardless.

"You must be Jade." He whistled under his breath. "Damn, my boy knows how to pick 'em." Then he frowned. "Too bad."

"I'm sorry?"

He leaned close to her and whispered in her ear, "I got hard the second you walked through the door."

Her breath caught in her throat. She stared up at him, thinking he was probably an inch or two taller than Vin.

Good Lord.

Tall, dark and hunky did neither man justice.

She extended a hand to him and he took it, lifting it to his warm mouth. Her insides ignited. Her inner thighs quivered.

"Oh my." The unexpected sentiment fell unbidden from her lips.

His look turned downright lascivious. "Vin said you blew his mind. Goddamn." He eyed her from head to toe in a slow, I'm-picturing-what-you-look-like-naked-and-spread-eagle-on-a-bed kind of way. Then he said, "You are one hot number."

Between Vin and Noah and the way they looked at her, she wondered if she'd ever get her breath back. Her chest rose and fell much quicker than was normal or maybe even healthy. Her nipples scraping against the soft fabric did nothing to help calm her raging pulse. It raced as fast as the titillating sensations shooting through her.

"So, um, where is Vin?" Christ, she could barely speak. Her voice was but a breathy huff, all sultry and provocative. Not the least bit familiar to her.

"Shooting pool. Care to join us?"

"Sure."

He released her hand and gave back her twenty. Turning to Max, he said, "The lady's drinks are on me tonight."

"Very good, Mr. Riley. I love your work, by the way. I saw *Beyond the Cherry Blossoms* at the Helena Film Festival last year."

“Thanks, man,” he said to Max. He turned to Jade and added, “Title’s deceptively innocent. The film is a political thriller set in D.C. A major studio bought it a few months ago. It’ll eventually make it into national theaters, we hope.”

“That’s wonderful.” She could kick herself for not having something more clever to say. But damn if she could barely think over the passion-induced haze clouding her mind.

“Are you considering filming here?” Max asked excitedly. “Is that why you’re in Moon River?”

“Yes,” Jade was quick to answer, shocking herself she could come to her senses enough to latch onto a viable reason for why she was with these two men tonight. “That’s precisely what they’re doing here. And, as the mayor’s daughter, it’s my duty to show them around town.” She gave Max a bright smile, then linked arms with Noah and practically dragged him to the back where two pool tables sat. “Sorry. I’ll explain later.”

“No need,” he said with a chuckle. “Vin already told me about your family tree. Must be hell finding a date.”

A thought suddenly occurred to her that made her pull up short and unhook her arm from Noah’s. Staring at Vin, who gave her that sexy, half-assed smile when he lifted his head from a shot he was about to make, his eyes locking hers, she said, “Finding a date isn’t really the problem. Finding the *right* one is.”

Why had she even wasted her time on a third date with Rand Stevens? Or any other man she’d seen more than once, none of whom she’d ever sparked with the way she instantly had with Vin? And with Noah, to be honest.

Perhaps she’d been so ready, for so long, to hook up with someone—on both an emotional and physical level—that she’d blamed her relatives for keeping everyone at bay. When, in fact, maybe those lukewarm romances hadn’t gone anywhere because, if they had, she’d be settling. Not really going after what she wanted—the sparks and the fireworks Cami had mentioned earlier.

It was entirely possible she *did* exude a “hands off” vibe that kept her from making a love connection, as she’d told her friend earlier. Because while she might have been willing to settle for an evening out with someone who didn’t light her up sexually, subconsciously she must have known not to settle in the bedroom.

Interesting revelation.

She couldn’t deny the lights were flashing now that she’d met Vin. Lord knew she’d never responded to a man the way she did him. Well, with the exception of Noah, who also enticed her. Though she noted that, while the sexual intensity was strong with him, it wasn’t quite as off the charts as with Vin.

Stepping away from Noah, who carried her dirty martini over to a high-top table in the corner, she passed a speechless Jason Doherty, who’d been waiting for Vin to make his shot, and approached her date.

“Jesus,” Vin said under his breath as he straightened. “If I’d have known you were going to wear a dress like that, I would have insisted on taking you someplace else.”

“Like where?” she asked, her breathing quickening, making her wonder if she could hyperventilate from one naughty, I-want-to-devour-you look from the big bad sexy wolf.

Vin held his pool stick out for Noah to make the shot for him. Then he pulled Jade into the shadowy corner and said in a low, intimate tone, “Like my motel suite.”

She took him in from his tousled dark brown hair to his black leather boots. He’d changed into black jeans and a black dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, revealing strong-looking forearms. His shirt was open at the neck and Jade had the overwhelming desire to slip a few more small disks through their holes so she could press her palms to his chest. The urge to touch him rose within her, fast and furious.

“That’s not a bad idea,” she said of his motel suite. “Though...” Her eyes locked with his beautiful blue ones as she added, “It’s all the way across town.”

A mere twenty-minute drive and they both knew it. His jaw clenched, as though knowing she wanted him so bad she couldn’t endure another minute without his hands on her body or his cock in her pussy.

His head bent to hers and he asked in a slightly strained voice, “What’d you have in mind?”

Jade was shocked once more by her nerve as she said, “I think I need to go powder my nose.”

He groaned. “Yeah, you go do that, sweetheart. I could use a pit stop myself.”

“Finish your game first.”

She slipped away from him and headed toward the opposite end of the lounge, amazed she managed to stay upright on her high heels because her knees were weak. She pushed the door open to one of the two unisex restrooms along a dark, empty hallway and went straight to the sink. Cranking on the cold water, she washed her hands, then wet a paper towel and lightly dabbed at the nape of her neck and her forehead.

Holy Christ. She was burning up. It was early autumn and so chilly outside at night she’d shivered on the walk from her shop to the lounge, opting not to blow the outfit with a jacket. Yet now she was hotter than the freakin’ sun. Her skin was flushed and her insides felt singed to the core.

Admittedly, both Vin and Noah had her more turned-on than ever before. But she felt a peculiar connection with Vin. The way he looked at her, the way he touched her... Like he knew her intimately, though of course, that was impossible. Still, he looked deep into her eyes when he spoke to her. He touched her confidently. He evoked passion and desire, but also stirred emotions she hadn’t felt in a long time. A sense of being wanted—something she’d lost when her mother had left and her online friend had vanished. Both leaving her life faster than she could blink an eye and with absolutely no explanation or a way to reconnect with them.

Jade stared at her reflection for a few moments. Maybe that was another reason she hadn't sparked with a man all this time. With rejection and abandonment issues, it could be that she hadn't put her faith and trust in anyone.

Why she was doing it now with Vin was beyond her. One of those cosmic things she couldn't explain. Yet here she was, opening up and taking a risk with him.

Hell, to be honest, she was willing to take a risk with Noah too. Hadn't she told Cami she might need *two* men to satisfy her? And here were the most alluring ones she'd ever laid eyes on.

But, no! Of course she couldn't have them both.

Or...*could* she?

I got hard the second you walked through the door.

Noah's words echoed in her head, causing a twitch deep in her cunt—that itch she desperately needed scratched. She continued to stare at herself in the mirror, seeing a different side of herself tonight.

Opportunities like this come but once in a lifetime for girls like me...if at all.

She couldn't deny the thought that flitted through her head. Didn't really have time to negate it, either, as the door to the restroom opened and Vin stepped inside.

Jade's stomach fluttered and the twitch in her pussy turned into a dull throbbing. He locked the door behind him and walked toward her, his stride wide and cocksure. Jade found herself backing up against the wall, nary a breath left in her body.

God, he was unbelievably gorgeous. And the way he feasted on her with his intense gaze... Like he needed her as much as she needed him.

She seriously doubted that was true—women likely flocked to him in droves. But still, it was exciting to see the lust and desire burning in his blue irises.

"I should warn you about something first," he said as his hands clasped her hips, holding her in place. His gaze locked with hers. "I know who you are."

She nodded. "Connie told you. I figured she would. Being the mayor's daughter is—"

"I know more than that," he said, his expression serious.

Okay, so he knew about her cousin being the deputy, in addition to Dad being the mayor and Uncle Bob being the sheriff.

"Don't let all that scare you off," she said, hearing a slight plea in her voice.

He pinned her with an intense look. "I'm not scared."

"Should I be?" A legitimate concern on so many levels, she realized.

"Depends," he said as his head dipped. In a softer tone, he added, "I took one look at you today and wanted you in ways you can't even begin to imagine. Tonight it's even worse."

A moan fell from her lips.

Fucking in a public restroom wasn't exactly her idea of romantic, but the soft golden glow from the lone bulb that cast shadows and light over the brown brick walls and the faint sound of the music from the lounge, which had changed to a sexier, bluesy-ier tune, did wonders for the ambience.

"You put different music on the juke box, didn't you?"

One corner of his tempting mouth lifted. "Thought you might like it."

"I do."

"We could wait, you know?" He made the suggestion, though his head bent further and his lips brushed along her cheekbone.

Jade's heart fluttered. "Maybe you can," she said as her hands moved over his strong biceps, up to his broad shoulders. "But I can't. I wanted you earlier too. When you climbed off your motorcycle at the diner and I got a good look at you. I wanted you in a way I've never wanted any man. It's almost...painful."

His brows knitted together. "Don't say that," he whispered. "I don't want you to feel any kind of pain. Not physical or emotional."

She stared at him, her eyes searching his. There was nothing but raw honesty reflected in his shimmering blue pools, tugging at Jade's heart. "You have no idea... It's been such a long time..." She shook her head, not getting the words right. "It's been...*never*. I've never wanted a man the way I want you. It's overwhelming and scary. Yet amazingly exhilarating."

His grin deepened. "Now that's what a guy likes to hear." His lips grazed hers, teasing her until her body burned for him.

"It's just... Oh God." She pressed her mouth to his. He kissed her back, making her mind reel and her cunt ache. In between kisses, she said, "I *need* you in ways you can't even begin to imagine."

That seemed to flip a switch for him. His arms wrapped around her waist as he crushed her body to his while his tongue plunged deep into her mouth, kissing her passionately, silently conveying all of his wants and desires. His hard cock pressed against her belly, making her desperate to have him inside her.

Breaking their scorching-hot kiss, which left her trembling in his strong embrace, she whispered in his ear, "Fuck me, Vin."

Chapter Four

A primal sound Vin had never heard before fell from his lips. It was almost a low growl. Territorial. Possessive. Hungry.

Jade's body pressed against his was enough to make him rock-hard, her sizzling kisses and sexy words pushing all the right buttons. But she also stirred his emotions. He'd been so wrapped up in her pain years ago that it had never left him. She'd haunted his memory all this time and now here she was, in his arms, begging him to fuck her.

His conscience warred with his libido. He hadn't fully explained how he knew who she was. More than just who she was related to in town, but that he knew about her mother and her teenage heartache. He should tell her now. It was the right thing to do.

The words retreated to the far recesses of his mind, though, when she stared up at him with her big amber eyes. As though his hesitation made her doubt herself.

"Unless...you don't want to fuck me," she said in a soft voice. Her palms splayed over his chest and she gave him a slight push away from her. "I got carried away. Doesn't necessarily mean it's what you want."

His jaw clenched for a moment as he made up his mind. His admission would have to wait. "I told you what I want. I'm sorry we're not somewhere more romantic or even halfway decent, but my suite seems like a million miles away." His tone dropped a notch. "Too damn far."

"Oh...*kay*," she said on what sounded to be a sigh of relief. "Just making sure I'm not the only one—"

"You're not," he quickly assured her. His mouth pressed to hers again, proving his point.

He kissed her, long and deep, as his hands roamed her luscious body. He palmed one breast through the thin material of her dress, giving it a rough squeeze that made her tear her mouth from his and gasp for air. His thumb swept over her hard nipple as his jaw tightened again. He knew to take this slow. There was something borderline innocent about Jade. Not that he expected her to be a virgin—she clearly knew what she was doing tonight. Seducing him with a dress that did everything to evoke a man's desire. Staring deep into his eyes. Kissing him like she had carnal cravings she wanted him to sate.

Taking it slow, however, didn't seem to be an option. For either of them.

She reached for the buttons on his shirt and deftly worked them from their holes. When her warm, shaky fingers swept over his bare skin, it was all Vin could do not to strip her bare and thrust his hard cock into her.

"You're magnificent," she whispered on a sharp breath as she leaned toward him. Her soft lips brushed over his skin, making his muscles flex beneath her light touch. His erection pulsed behind the zipper of his pants, straining against the material, demanding release.

When the tip of her tongue swiped at one of his nipples, his hips jerked. "Shit," he muttered. "You're not making this easy for me, sweetheart."

"Good." Her mouth closed over his nipple and she suckled it gently, then flicked it again with her tongue.

He groaned, low and guttural. Reaching for her hand, he dragged it down to his cock, pressing her palm tightly to his erection.

"You make me so damn hard," he told her in a strained voice.

"Do something about it."

She pulled her hand from his and went to work on the silver buckle at his waist. Unfastening his belt and then his jeans, she slid a hand inside and cupped his cock again, behind his briefs.

"You don't play fair," he said. Here he was, trying not to lose control, and she was pushing him right to the edge. So easily.

"You don't know how long I've waited for this," she countered. "How long I've waited to meet someone I want so much... Every second you're not inside me is killing me."

"Jesus." She was making it worse. He wanted to take his time. Touch and taste her. Make her come a few times before he fucked her. But his patience and restraint were about to snap.

She stared up at him with lust-filled eyes. As though she knew exactly what he was thinking, she said, "Do it. Fuck me."

Her hands left him and she grabbed fistfuls of her tight skirt and tugged the material up to her waist, revealing a silver satin and black lace thong that barely covered her.

Vin sank to his knees before her. As much as his cock strained against his briefs, seeking the heat and moisture of her pussy, he couldn't pass up the opportunity to taste her first. His fingers skimmed over her damp crotch, jolting her. Making her gasp.

"You're already wet for me," he muttered as he leaned forward and pressed his mouth to the satin and lace covering her pussy lips.

"Since you rolled into the parking lot at the diner," she admitted in a throaty voice. Her hands gripped his shoulders and she spread her legs a little wider for him.

"That's it, sweetheart. Let me make love to you with my mouth."

"Oh." Her fingertips pressed into his bunched shoulders. "That's, um... I've never... Oh shut up, Jade."

He glanced up at her, a brow lifting. "Never?"

She shook her head as her cheeks flushed. Her chest rose and fell quickly, enticing him. Knowing she wasn't wearing a bra and thinking of licking and sucking her hard nipples almost made him change his mind about where to start. But he was much too interested in his current mission to deviate from the plan.

"Let's give it a try," he said as his attention shifted back to the damp panties that he swept aside, exposing a nearly bare mound and slick, swollen pussy lips.

"No protests here. You have no idea how long I've wanted a man like you to do things like this to me."

"This is just an appetizer, sweetheart," he said as his tongue whisked over her dewy flesh, making her moan and his cock throb. "I've got a whole menu planned." A multitude of ways in which he intended to pleasure her.

"Be still my beating heart," she said before a sharp cry fell from her lips as his mouth pressed to her and he suckled her clit.

One of her slender hands moved from his shoulder to his hair, her fingers twining in the strands. The tip of Vin's tongue flicked over the knot of nerves between her legs, slowly at first, until her breathing picked up and her fingers twisted more firmly in his hair. He increased the speed and pressure on her clit, causing sexy little moans to fall from her lips.

"Oh God." She inched her legs a bit wider and thrust her hips forward, pressing herself against his mouth.

She tasted so damn good. Vin drew her clit against his teeth and sucked again, gently, but with enough force to make her body jerk.

"Holy cow." Her legs trembled. "Oh, Vin. That's...amazing."

He was only getting started. He released the swollen bud and used the pads of two fingers to work her clit, rubbing fast and forcefully.

"Oh Jesus." She moaned.

"Come for me, Jade," he said as he stood, while still massaging her clit. His lips and tongue twisted and tangled with hers as his hand between her legs shifted and he thrust two fingers into her wet cunt, stroking her inner walls while the pad of his thumb worked her clit.

Her grip on his shoulder tightened. Her breath came in sharp pants. She whimpered softly as her pussy squeezed his fingers and her body vibrated against his.

"Oh yeah," he whispered into her open mouth. "Come all over my fingers."

Her head fell back and her eyes closed. He watched her as the erotic sensations obviously welled within her, making her head roll from side to side against the brick wall, causing the soft whimpers to turn into sharp cries. He worked her a little harder, a little faster. His free hand swept around to her backside and his fingers slipped behind the thin strand of her thong, nestled in the cleft of her ass. The tip of one finger circled the rim of her anus, making her body jolt against his.

“Wait!” She gasped for air, as though shocked and excited at the same time. Vin’s finger on her anus stilled. She shook her head suddenly, her eyes still closed. “No, don’t stop. I just didn’t expect... Never mind. Don’t stop. Do whatever you want.”

“Careful there, sweetheart,” he said. “I’ve got a long list developing in my head.”

The corners of her mouth lifted. “I’m sure you do.”

His finger pressed into her small hole as he continued to finger-fuck her pussy and rub her clit with his thumb. Her head came forward and rested on his shoulder, her warm, martini-laced breath teasing his skin.

Her lips brushed his neck as she said, “I can’t believe how incredible this feels. I don’t want to let go of it. I want to enjoy it for a long, long time. But... Oh God.” She moaned again. “I can’t stop...”

“Don’t stop. I’ll give you more of what you want.” His fingers pushed deep into her cunt as he said, “Come, Jade. Come with my fingers inside your pussy and your ass.”

That seemed to be her undoing. Her body tightened and trembled. Her breath turned to short cries of pleasure. And then her head lifted and her eyes snapped open, her gaze locking with his.

“Oh God, Vin! Oh yes!”

She quaked from head to toe as her cunt contracted around his fingers. It was all Vin could do to keep from pulling his fingers from her pussy and thrusting his cock inside her instead. But he continued to finger-fuck her while she rode the wave of her orgasm. A seriously powerful one, if the way she clutched at him was any indication. Her tight pussy squeezed his fingers and her hands clasped his shoulders, as though to steady herself.

A short grunt escaped Vin’s mouth. He’d never wanted to make a woman come so quickly and wildly as this one. Like he had something to prove to her – that he was the man capable of giving her everything her body craved. The only one she needed.

Admittedly, he’d felt a tinge of jealousy as she’d smiled at Noah when she’d ordered her drink. And the way she’d linked arms with him. Noah would likely have no qualms about sharing her, but Vin was most definitely marking his territory.

When her lips pressed to his again, he found his own idea of heaven. He kissed her softly as he withdrew his fingers from her body and reached into his back pocket to pull out his wallet. He managed to keep kissing her while he extracted a condom. She shoved his jeans and briefs over his hips, freeing his cock.

Vin rolled the latex over his erection and as he whispered against her lips, “Still want me to fuck you?”

She didn’t hesitate a second. “Oh God, yes!”

* * * * *

Why would he even have to ask? she wondered. For Christ's sake, she was on fire! Even after that electrifying orgasm that had set every nerve ending ablaze, doing very little to take the edge off. Instead, that quick and powerful release made her hotter.

"You're very talented," she told him, a flirtatious smile teasing her lips. Her fingers slid over his bare chest. She loved the feel of his soft skin covering such hard muscles. He was warm and tan and positively delicious.

One of his hands lightly gripped hers and he brought it to his mouth, kissing the inside of her wrist, which caused a shiver of excitement to race down her spine.

Then he wrapped both of her arms around his neck and said, "Hold on, sweetheart."

His hands moved to her ass and he lifted her up, her back pressing to the brick wall. He must have realized it through his own lust-hazed mind because he added, "Hold me tight," as she wrapped her legs around his hips and he peeled off his shirt. Her inner thighs squeezed him, keeping her steady as she eased forward slightly so he could drape the material over her shoulders to cover her bare back.

"A bed would be much better," he said.

"You inside me would be much better." She knew he was going to take her on a wild, erotic ride. She couldn't wait any longer for it. What he'd just done to her was supposed to have calmed her raging libido, given her a little reprieve from the stored-up sexual tension. It had the opposite effect, making her want more. So much more.

"You're ready for me?" he asked, murmuring in her ear as his lips grazed the shell, sending a wicked thrill through her.

"Oh yeah." Her hands cupped his face and she forced him to stare deep into her eyes as she added, "Don't hold back. I want this. I want *you*."

He let out one of the sexy groans that drove her crazy. "Be careful what you wish for."

"Don't tease me." She wiggled in his embrace, her slick pussy lips sliding along his hard cock. He was big and thick, exciting her further. "Fuck me," she said as her hips gyrated against his. "Now, Vin. *Please*."

"Pretty little thing like you should never have to beg for it."

"So stop making me."

He chuckled, though it was a strained one. Shifting slightly, the tip of his cock nudged her opening, rubbing against her, barely pressing in. His hands returned to her ass, holding her steady.

His head dipped to hers and he whispered, "I should have left the rock music on the juke box."

"Why?" she asked, his dark tone stealing her breath.

"Because I want to make you scream my name when you come."

"Oh God," she groaned. "You are a dream come true."

He laughed a bit heartier this time. "You are not at all what I expected."

"Stop thinking of me as some fragile virgin. Fuck me, Vin," she repeated. "Do it. Fuck me hard. Make me come all over your cock."

Where her inhibitions had gone, she wasn't sure. Nor did she care. She knew what she wanted. And even if she had to borrow some of Vin's terminology, she was determined to make this the most erotic experience of her young life. She had no desire to be prim and proper. What she wanted was to be wild and wicked. All night long.

His hands clutched her bare cheeks a bit more firmly as the head of his cock pushed slowly into her. Jade gasped. He'd barely entered her, but she could feel how thick he was.

"Not so careful," she said, dying to have him all the way inside her, thrusting hard and fast.

"Yes, so careful," he said with a sharp grunt.

"I can take it. I can take all of you. I want all of you."

"Ah, fuck," he groaned. "You're too much." With that sentiment, his cock rammed into her, making her cry out.

"Oh yes!" Her arms tightened around his neck. "Oh God, yes. That's what I want. *Exactly* what I want."

He pushed a little deeper, filling and stretching her.

"Holy shit," she muttered as her already molten insides sizzled. "That's so amazingly good." She squirmed in his arms, wanting more. Wanting so much more. Her mouth was close to his neck and she leaned into him, kissing his slightly salty skin before nipping at it. His hips bucked, his cock pushing further into her. "That's it," she whispered. "Deeper."

He groaned. He pulled his cock almost all the way out of her before thrusting back into her, pushing the air from her lungs.

"Yes," she encouraged, breathless and tingling all over. "Fuck my pussy, Vin. Make me come. I want it. You know I want it."

His strokes become long and full as he pumped in and out of her. Fast and furious, until Jade was biting back screams of delight. This was exactly what she needed. Vin's raw intensity and his hard cock. His determination to get her off.

She clung to him as he fucked her, inhaling his masculine scent, his rich cologne, his male heat. Her fingers twined in his hair and she continued to kiss his neck, finding that every time she lightly bit his flesh, he hammered a little harder into her.

She longed to be completely naked with him, but he was giving her more than she'd anticipated and she didn't care that they weren't in a bed. Weren't someplace more romantic. Oddly, this was perfect. The perfect setting because they were alone. The perfect moment because he was deep in her cunt, confirming her earlier suspicion that her subconscious mind had known better—to hold out for this and not settle for anything less.

"Christ," he muttered a bit breathlessly. "You are so tight. So wet. So hot."

"You made me wet and hot. Restless." Not to mention completely turned inside out. "As for the tight part, that's just because you're so huge."

Another sharp grunt. "Sweetheart, my two fingers inside your pussy were a snug fit."

"I like it," she said. "All of it. Your fingers and your cock. I want more, Vin." The restlessness was unrelenting. She really and truly wanted to be thoroughly fucked. Until she was limp and sated and deliriously happy.

His weight against her pressed her more firmly against the wall and he shifted one hand to the front of her, palming her breast and squeezing it before rolling her hard nipple between his finger and thumb. That hand then slid down the front of her and between them. The pad of his thumb covered her clit and he rubbed it feverishly, making her breath hitch and her pulse race.

"Vin." A ripple of excitement caused her eyes to flutter closed. The beautiful sensations she'd experienced with that first orgasm returned, building fast. His thick shaft pumped in and out of her. "Yes," she said. "Like that. Oh Christ. That is so good." The sensations were powerful and erotic and all-consuming.

"Come for me," Vin whispered in her ear in the edgy voice that drove her wild.

"Fuck me harder," she demanded.

"Jade."

"Do it. Oh God. Do it now!"

His hips jerked as he hammered into her, making her lose all control. Her legs gripped him tightly, her cunt pulsed and throbbed as she squeezed his cock. With her arms around his neck, she held on for dear life.

Her moans and whimpers were unstoppable. He fucked her harder and faster and she felt every single nerve ending light like a fuse leading to a powder keg. The steel rod inside her cunt stroked her inner walls and hit all the right spots.

"I'm going to come," she said against his neck. "Oh God, I'm going to come." The sensations escalated, the pressure inside her built. It was almost too much. The acute feelings, the erotic pleasure.

For a split second, she was worried about the fiery release that was imminent. She felt the scream rise in her throat, but knew she had to keep quiet. She couldn't draw anyone's attention to their intimate rendezvous. But for the love of God! She wanted to shout at the top of her voice, cry out her pleasure as it swallowed her up.

"Stop holding back," Vin said.

"Trying to be careful, like you said."

"I want you to come," he urged. "I want to feel you come with my cock inside you."

"I'm afraid I'll scream," she said, her voice breathy and rough.

"I don't care. For fuck's sake, let me feel you come when I'm inside you."

Clearly he was as lost at sea as she was when it came to staying in control. He kissed her again, hot and demanding, making her climax swell like a static-laced balloon inside her cunt until it burst and every electrifying sensation shot out in a dozen different directions.

“Oh Christ!” she called out as she tore her mouth from Vin’s. “Oh God!”

Her body quaked and her inner thighs burned as she held him tight. Her pussy milked his cock as she hung onto every glorious feeling that crashed over her.

“I knew it,” she barely managed to say as she still reveled in her powerful release. “I knew I was missing out on something amazing. I knew there had to be more to sex than a little groping and poking.”

He let out a low, albeit strained, chuckle. “You’ve been with the wrong men, sweetheart.”

“*Man,*” she corrected in a breathless tone as the sensations began to ebb. “Just one. Just once. No need for a second go-around with him.”

She unraveled herself from Vin and stood on slightly shaky legs. He withdrew from her, grabbed her hand and pulled her over to the vanity. His shirt fell from her shoulders, but he didn’t seem to give it a single thought.

Instead, he said in a tight voice, “Not quite done with you.”

An excited thrill shimmied down her spine. He positioned her in front of the vanity and she bent forward, her palms flattening against the stainless steel before her. Vin’s hands gripped her waist as he stood behind her. The head of his cock nudged her opening from behind and she spread her legs a little wider to accommodate him. She anticipated his entry, knowing any way he fucked her was going to be spectacular. Everything she’d always wanted, but hadn’t been able to find.

His cock eased slowly into her pussy. He pulled back slightly, then pushed in deeper. He repeated the movement, slowly stroking her inner walls, filling her in a way that made her feel like every moment she’d agonized over not knowing how incredible it felt to be made love to with such intensity and skill was worth it. Yet also wondering how the hell she’d survived so long without knowing this kind of pleasure.

It was more than just a physical passion that gripped her. She still felt that peculiar undercurrent that gave her a sense of reassurance—that she’d chosen the right man at the right time. Maybe doing him in the bathroom of The Well wasn’t the most glamorous way to fulfill a fantasy, but how could she complain when Vin was delivering such earth-shattering orgasms?

“Clearly you have more restraint than I do,” she said to him as she watched him in the mirror hanging before her. His strong jaw was clenched tight and there was a look of determination and concentration in his beautiful blue eyes.

“Just enjoying how tight and wet you are. Liking the visual too,” he said with the lift of an eyebrow.

She said, “I think you’re being too careful with me. Remember, not fragile.”

“You have no idea how good this feels and how long I want it to last.”

She bit back a grin. “Oh. In that case...”

He continued to move inside her with long, full strokes, gradually picking up the pace until his hands on her waist held her firmly and his cock pistoned in and out of her, making her cunt clench around him. He fucked her harder, without her asking – or begging. The sound of her sharp breaths mingled with his low, guttural grunts and the slapping of the front of his thighs against the backs of hers.

“You’re giving me exactly what I want again,” she said. “And it so damn good.”

“I’ve got more to give.” One of his big hands moved around to the front of her and his fingers covered her clit.

“Oh yes,” she whispered.

His other hand moved between the cleft of her ass again and his thumb covered the small hole, rubbing, then pressing in. She lifted her hips, thrusting her butt further in the air, wanting him to have full access to her. She’d instantly become addicted to his touch and the way his cock felt inside her, the way he fucked her.

Her body vibrated again with the rush of feelings coursing through her. She squeezed him tight and he groaned.

“That’s it,” he said in a rough voice. “*You fuck me.*”

She had no idea she had that sort of power. But she found that grinding her ass against him and clenching and releasing his cock as he pumped in and out of her caused his own breathing to turn harsh and his low grunts animalistic. Thrilling her all the more.

“I want to feel you come inside me,” she said, her gaze locked with his in their reflections in the mirror.

“I’m damn close.”

She grinned, though it was a tight one. “Don’t hold back. I want to know what it’s like.”

The look on his devilishly handsome face turned dark and edgy. He removed the hand from her ass and flattened his palm next to hers on the vanity. His large body nearly curled around hers, his hard chest pressing to her bare back as his hips jerked and his tempo increased. A flash of raw intensity in his ocean-blue eyes made her breath catch, but she continued to stare at him as they both worked each other a little faster, creating a frenzy of erratic breaths and demanding whimpers to mingle with the sound of slick body parts smacking together.

The excitement arced between them and reached a fevered pitch. Jade was instantly overwhelmed by the rise of erotic sensations once again and couldn’t fight them back, finding them much too enticing and arousing to not give into them. She bit back a loud cry, but a strangled sound squeaked out of her anyway.

“Oh God, Vin.” Her cunt contracted around his cock. “Oh shit. That is so good,” she mumbled as her orgasm crashed over her, searing her insides, tightening her nipples, making her pussy throb.

“That’s it,” he whispered. “Squeeze me tight. Just like that.”

One low, deep grunt from Vin was followed by a sinful-sounding groan. His body convulsed as his cock seemed to surge inside her, swelling and exploding with the same intensity she’d felt.

“Jesus,” he ground out between clenched teeth, obviously trying to keep from drawing attention to them as she’d done. “Holy hell.” His hips jerked forward as he pushed deeper into her, moving inside her as though trying to steal every ounce of pleasure her body had to offer.

The pads of two fingers still covered her clit and Jade reached a hand between her legs and pressed his fingers more firmly against that sensitive bud as his cock throbbed inside her, still plunging deep. Her inner muscles contracted around him, exciting her all over again. With his fingers rubbing her clit, she felt another orgasm build.

“Just a few seconds more.” She barely got the words out before another release oozed through her, this one not as powerful as the last ones, but just as stimulating and welcome. “That is *so* good.” Her pussy continued to clutch at him until her climax waned and she let out a long, happy sigh.

“Christ,” he said as he straightened and slowly withdrew from her. “You are way more than I expected.”

Chapter Five

Jade watched as Vin shoved a hand through his tousled hair, then whipped off the condom and tossed it in the trash. He reached for his briefs and pants, yanking them up. Jade moved her panties and skirt back into place just moments before he reached for her and pulled her against his hot-'n-hunky body. He was still shirtless and she splayed a hand over his pectoral muscles, loving the feel of the hard ledge and the way he flexed, seemingly involuntarily, beneath her touch.

Her other hand slipped around to his back and she pressed a cheek against his chest while she waited for normal airflow to return to her. And for her heart rate to slow.

Vin wrapped his arms around her and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "That was something else," he told her in a low voice. His chest rose and fell as quickly as hers still did. "You sure you've only done this once?"

She grinned, her cheek still resting against his hot skin. "Honest to God." Her hand on his pecs swept downward to his rigid abdomen. Her fingertips caressed his stomach for a moment before she glanced up at him. "So...you enjoyed it?"

He smirked at her. A sexy, playful look that made her stomach flip. "I'm not even going to dignify that question with a response."

She laughed softly. "Fine. I'll forever be left in suspense."

"Yeah, right." His head bent to hers and he kissed her. Another scorching-hot kiss that did everything to assure her he'd had a good time...and ignite her insides once more.

A low moan fell from her lips when he pulled away. "Oh how good that is."

"Interested in more?" He challenged her with a crook of a dark brow.

Jade's inner thighs quivered. Her stomach tumbled. Her clit tingled.

Was she interested in more? Hell, yes! The mere thought of what "more" might entail sent her straight into sensory overload again!

Flirting back, she said, "I'm not even going to dignify that question with a response."

He chuckled. "Little vixen."

"Actually," she said as her fingertips grazed his warm skin. She drew lazy circles in the center of his ripped abs. "I was thinking I'd like to go back to your motel with you."

"I've got a two-bedroom suite with Noah, but I can convince him to book another room so he doesn't bother us. Or," Vin said with a suggestive grin, "*we* don't bother him."

The erotic thrill that raced down her spine was the equivalent of a shameless devil sitting on her shoulder, prodding her to be wicked, giving her the courage to say, "I don't mind if he's there."

She stared up at Vin, wondering if that was enough of a hint.

Clearly it was.

His brow furrowed as he studied her for a moment. Then he said, "Do you have any idea what you're suggesting?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but instantly snapped it closed. The answer, of course, was no. Sure she'd read enough books and downloaded a few erotic movies to know a wide variety of possibilities existed. The question, really, was whether or not she knew how to get what she wanted out of an uninhibited night with two sinfully delicious men.

Being completely honest about her desire to experience something she knew she'd never have the chance to experience again, she said, "I've come so far tonight. The Well, this dress, the bathroom... Everything I've done so far this evening is totally out of the norm for me. And you know what? It feels good to finally let loose. For one night. It feels *really* good."

His lips twisted in apparent contemplation for a moment as he seemed to consider her predicament. Then he said, "You're sort of the equivalent of the proverbial Catholic schoolgirl who's just escaped the convent where she's been locked away for most of her life."

Smiling up at him, she said, "Pent-up frustration, naughty fantasies and all." To prove her point, her hand skimmed lower to cover his cock as she craned her neck to kiss him. As her tongue tangled with his and he responded by tightening his arms around her, she shifted her hand to cup his balls, giving them a very gentle squeeze.

Vin ripped his mouth from hers. A dark look flickered in his eyes, telling her she was playing with fire. Which excited her even more.

"They always say to watch out for those Catholic schoolgirls," he muttered before his head dipped and he pressed his mouth to hers, continuing their kiss, ratcheting up the heat as his tongue delved deep to explore her mouth and tango with her own tongue.

When they came up for air, he added, "And to beware of women with relatives bearing arms."

She lifted her hand to his face and the tip of her finger grazed his chiseled cheekbone. "Too late for you to pretend that scares you."

"Mm, you're right. Obviously I'm willing to risk a bullet to the brain."

She smiled. "I'll protect you."

Vin chuckled again. "You're quite the spitfire. I imagine you have them all wrapped around your little finger."

"Hardly," she said with a long-suffering sigh. "But let's not dwell on my family. Spoils the mood."

"I think I can help recover it."

"I'm sure you can." He kissed her again, then she coyly said, "So about Noah..."

Vin groaned. "I'm not exactly interested in sharing you, sweetheart."

"It's not really sharing me," she reasoned. "It's...doubling my pleasure. And by all counts," she rushed on when he frowned at her, "you have to admit I have a lot of time to make up for—and a lot of fantasies to fulfill. There's zero potential for that to happen...except with you and Noah."

His jaw clenched.

Too bad she had no practice with using her feminine wiles to persuade a man to do her bidding. She wasn't even sure she possessed feminine wiles. But she wasn't above batting her lashes as she stared up at Vin with what her father had always called "imploring, whiskey-colored eyes".

The fact that her body sizzled with a feverish afterglow and the anticipation of another wild go-around with the ultra-sexy Vin D'Angelo—and possibly the gorgeous Noah Riley—had her pulling out all the stops.

"Truly," she said in a tone that had dropped a notch, "would you want to leave me high and dry when I'm so willing to explore a world that's never been open to me?"

He swore under his breath. "You definitely don't play fair."

Vin had told her that earlier and it made her smile now. Returning her hand to his crotch, she slowly stroked his balls as she said, "I'm all about mutual pleasure. All the way around. How can you pass that up?"

He seemed to swallow down a hard lump. His jaw worked for a moment before he said, "I want you to be satisfied, make no mistake about that."

"This is a step beyond," she was quick to add, because he'd certainly given Jade her money's worth when he'd fucked her. "Fantasy fulfillment for the sexually deprived."

With a groan, he conceded. "Not saying I like the idea."

"You don't want to fuck me again?"

"That's not the issue and you know it. Yes, I want to fuck you again. No, I don't want Noah to do it."

"But if it gives me pleasure..."

He shook his head. "Stop trying to sell me on this, sweetheart. I'll do what you want. But you're the one who has to set it up with Noah."

She gnawed her lower lip for a moment. A test. That was what this was. Not just Vin challenging her to ask Noah to join them back at the motel, but a challenge for Jade to actually go through with this. Because once she set it in motion, she'd be a tease for backing out.

But to have two mega-hot men give her everything she'd needed for so long... Maybe it was crazy and greedy and even a bit slutty. But she wanted it.

God how she wanted it!

Stepping away from Vin, she said, "Think I'll go shoot some pool."

He nodded, obviously knowing what she was up to. She turned back to the vanity, reached for her purse and retrieved the tube of lip gloss from inside. After applying a fresh coat while Vin watched her, she straightened her hair and her clothes. Her gaze caught Vin's in the mirror again and he gave her a long, meaningful look.

A hot, searing, intense look.

Did she really need another man?

Once.

Just once.

* * * * *

Vin watched her go. Myriad emotions swirled around in his gut, all very strong and contradictory.

On the one hand, he really wasn't interested in a threesome. But what if she sought out Noah on her own, without him? Maybe his friend wouldn't pursue her, maybe he would. They'd never competed for a woman's attention before. True, Noah knew of Vin's interest in Jade, but not the full extent. Vin had told him about their past, but he hadn't verbally laid a claim on Jade. How could he, really? He was just passing through. It wasn't like he could demand exclusivity from her just because he'd fucked her once.

The other hand was a bit more unsettling to face. While Vin didn't want to share Jade, the thought of watching her in the throes of passion, watching as she came—*really* watching from a detached standpoint while Noah fucked her—turned him on. Just a little.

He got the gist of her problem and he understood how sheltered her life—and sex life—was. In his heart, he didn't want to deny her anything. Nor did he want to lose her to Noah.

But she wasn't really Vin's to begin with, was she? Doing her in the bathroom of a cocktail lounge did not give him the right to call dibs on her. And she clearly wasn't looking for a commitment from him.

With all this raging in his head and his cock already stirring from the mere thought of being inside Jade again, he resigned himself to the inevitable.

And the blatant reality of the situation.

It's just sex.

Chapter Six

Jade pulled her cell phone from her clutch and pretended to speak into it as she emerged from the dark hallway and walked into the cocktail lounge. Hoping no one suspected what she'd really been up to while she'd been gone. When she was sure curious minds saw her nodding her head and "talking" on the phone, she hit the disconnect button and dropped the cell back into her bag.

Strolling over to the bar, she said to Max, "Word travels fast in this town when there are filmmakers afoot." She glanced around the room and then added in a tone she hoped didn't reveal her excitement over her recent and potentially upcoming guilty pleasure, "Have you seen Vin?"

Max looked around and shrugged. "He was at the juke box for a while. Maybe he stepped outside for a smoke."

"Well, no worries," she said as nonchalantly as possible. She didn't want anyone to be suspicious over what she'd been doing for the past twenty minutes.

Wandering over to the pool table where Noah had just racked the balls, she flashed him a sexy grin. Or at least, she hoped it was sexy. No telling, given her limited experience.

"Mind if I try a shot?" she asked as she took the stick from him, not waiting for his answer.

His gaze slid over her from head to toe, as though he were trying to ascertain whether or not she'd gone at it with Vin in the restroom. Or maybe he was wondering why she was suddenly flirting with him.

"Be my guest," he said.

She eyed the cue ball, her mouth dipping slightly in a frown. "What's the most advantageous way to do this so I break up all those balls?"

"You've never played pool?"

Shaking her head, she said, "I've never done *a lot* of things."

He stared at her a moment, as though trying to decipher her meaning. Seemingly intrigued, he followed her around to the opposite end of the table, back by that dark, shadowy corner where she'd hit on Vin.

Returning to the scene of the crime sparked her verve again. Holding the stick, she leaned over the table and attempted to line the tip up with the cue ball. Glancing over her shoulder at Noah, she asked, "Like this?"

"Yeah. Aim for the yellow ball off to the side. Hit it hard enough and you'll break up the cluster."

Turning her attention back to the table, she lifted her ass a little higher in the air and gave a slight wiggle of it, hoping Noah was watching her, not the racked balls.

She waited a brief moment, then asked, "How hard?"

"What?" His voice sounded lower and rougher than before. A telltale sign he was enjoying the view she presented.

"How hard?" she repeated.

He cleared his throat. "To hit the ball? Moderately."

"No," she said as she shot a quick, hopefully wicked grin over her shoulder. "How hard did I make you when I walked into the bar?"

His jaw clenched and a heated look flashed in his chocolate-colored eyes. He stared at her again, as though trying to figure her out. Trying to deduce what she was up to. Then he stepped behind her, surprising her. His groin pressed to her backside, his erect cock nestling against the cleft of her ass as she continued to lean over the table.

With an equally wicked grin, he said, "As hard as you're making me now."

Jade's pulse spiked.

"Oh my," she mumbled before turning her attention back to her shot. It was entirely possible she was asking for trouble. But when it came in the form of two ultra-hot men with dark, dangerous looks and smoldering gazes, she couldn't quite convince herself to behave. Or even to tread lightly.

As she went back to lining up her shot, she shifted her weight on her high heels, effectively rubbing her ass against Noah's cock. His low groan told her she was pushing all the right buttons with him.

He rested a hand on the table, next to her side, and bent toward her. His chest pressed to her bare back as he whispered in her ear, "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were flirting with me."

"What makes you think you know better?" She pulled her arm back and then jerked it forward, causing her pool stick to hit the cue ball forcefully. It rolled swiftly along the green felt and smacked the yellow ball as Noah had instructed. The conglomeration scattered and two stripes fell into the pockets at the end of the table.

Noah straightened, but didn't back away. "Nice shot."

She managed to pull herself upright as well, though her knees were a little weak at Noah's closeness, the heat that emitted from his skin and the sensual scent of him that wafted under her nose.

"And that's one hell of an ass you've got," he murmured in her ear.

Had she just hooked him?

Turning to face him, though where her bravado came from she had absolutely no idea, she flashed him a quick smile. Then she said, "Vin and I are going back to the motel for a drink. Care to join us?"

His jaw worked again, as he seemingly debated this turn of events and how he ought to play his hand. When he spoke, his voice was low and intimate. "Three's not a crowd?"

"I think it's just the right number."

He let out a soft chuckle. Oh yeah. He definitely knew what she was up to...and he was definitely hooked, if the fire in his eyes, melting those chocolate irises, were any indication. "What does Vin think about this?"

"Vin is very...generous." Hadn't he doled out the orgasms like they grew on trees? "And empathetic."

She doubted she had to tell Noah what a sheltered existence she led. He'd already said Vin had told him about her family.

"I see." He stepped away from her and went for his cocktail.

Remembering she had a drink she'd barely touched, she joined him at the high-top table. She pulled the toothpick from her dirty martini and sucked on a plump olive before biting into it.

Noah groaned. "The sheriff know how lethal you are?"

Jade swallowed. "This has nothing to do with the sheriff. Or his deputy. Or the mayor."

"Are you bad by nature or is this a new development?"

"Definitely new."

"Hmm." His gaze locked with hers as he said, "You're not exactly easy to resist."

This made Jade smile. Relief washed over her, along with a tingly sensation elicited by sheer excitement. The way Noah practically devoured her with his eyes told her he was onboard for the threesome she was proposing. The nervous anxiety that naturally accompanied her wicked suggestion took a backseat to the thrill racing along her spine. She'd been blessed tonight with the breakthrough she'd needed for far too long.

"Feeling's mutual," she said. "All the way around, apparently."

Noah regarded her a moment more, as if challenging her or silently calling her bluff. She didn't vacillate or hedge, though, despite the slight trembling in her fingers.

When Vin joined them, he slid an electronic card key along the tabletop beside her and whispered in her ear, "Suite 216. We'll be about ten minutes behind you. Gotta wrap up the bar tab."

She was grateful they'd be leaving separately. Less fodder for the rumor mill. She might get away with her secret rendezvous, after all. A double one, in fact. In more ways than one.

Discreetly palming the key, she returned her cocktail to the table and said, "Thanks for the drink."

She gave Noah a smile, then flashed a more pointed look at Vin. As her insides flip-flopped like they were engaged in some elaborate big top circus act, she turned on her

high heels and sauntered out of the bar, waving to Max on the way, making a big production out the fact that she was leaving alone. Anything she could do to keep the talk to a minimum.

Hurrying down the walkway, she slipped into her boutique and turned off the lights, save for the security ones, and reset the alarm. Then she climbed into her car and cranked the heat to high to ward off the chill. She backed out of her parking spot and headed toward the Moon River Inn and Suites, the key to Vin's room practically burning a hole in her hand.

She was nearly giddy with excitement and anxiety. Parking in the back to keep her car out of sight, she crossed the sidewalk and used the key to let herself into the building through the side door, per the posted instructions. Sneaking around wasn't her forte, but it was relatively easy to do when curious eyes weren't upon her. She ignored the guilt that naturally came from her shady doings this evening. She wouldn't even begin to consider how ashamed she should be at her behavior in the bathroom at The Well, her flirting with Noah or her bold suggestion that they all spend the rest of the evening together.

Sometimes a girl had to let her sexual side reign supreme.

She took the elevator to the second floor—the top floor, actually, given the small size of Moon River's only multistory motel—and used the key again to gain access to the suite. The tiled entryway housed a small kitchen with a tall, semicircular counter, accompanied by two high-backed barstools. The foyer gave way to a decent-sized living room with two doors on the opposing walls—presumably the bedrooms. In the far corner by the floor-to-ceiling windows was a minibar.

The Plaza Hotel this was not, but at least there was booze. She could use a little extra fortification.

Dropping the key on the counter, along with her purse, she crossed to the bar and searched it, happy to find martini fixings. Olives, even. She mixed up a pitcher of dirty martinis and garnished them. She was on her third sip when the door opened.

Vin stepped into the living room first and the mere sight of him made Jade's heart leap into her throat. An odd sensation, but a vehement reaction she couldn't dismiss. Something about the ultra-hot biker made her pulse race and her stomach flutter.

Behind him, Noah strolled in, dropping a small, brown paper bag on the coffee table. Condoms?

Jade turned away as her face flushed. She busied herself pouring the men cocktails. She heard them divest themselves of their leather jackets, which made her heart thump even harder in that strange place she'd never felt it reside before. The heat in her cheeks intensified. There was no debating whether she'd go through with whatever was about to transpire. She'd made up her mind and wouldn't back down.

That, of course, did not preclude her from being monumentally nervous. At least she wasn't questioning her decision.

Noah joined her at the minibar and she handed him a glass. Vin, however, stood just inside the living room, his hip propped against the end of the dove-gray leather sofa. Jade hadn't bothered turning on extra lights. One glowed softly in the opposite corner from where she and Noah stood and she'd deemed the dim lighting sufficient when she'd walked in.

She held a martini out to Vin, but he shook his head. As she returned it to the bar, Noah stepped behind her and deposited his there too, after taking a couple of sips. He stood so close to her, she could smell his warm, masculine scent. He rested a hand on her hip, which made Vin tense.

He studied the scene before him for a moment before finally moving toward her. In a low voice, he said, "I have ground rules."

From behind her, Noah let out a soft chuckle.

Vin continued. "No kissing her on the mouth," he said to Noah, his tone deadly serious. His gaze shifted to Jade and he added, "And no sucking his cock."

She was a little confused by the rules. Noah helped her out. "He's either homophobic or marking his territory," Noah said. "Or both."

Jade's stomach took to flight again, fluttering vigorously. Vin didn't want his friend to kiss her, but he certainly had no qualms about doing just that himself. He closed the gap between them and pressed his mouth to hers. A soft moan fell from her parted lips as she let him inside. His tongue swept over hers, tangling and teasing in a slow, erotic way.

When he pulled away, she was breathless. From behind her, Noah's large hands slipped under the material at her shoulders. He pushed her dress down her arms, pausing just long enough for her to whip off the bangle at her wrist so he could get the tight sleeves off her. She slid the bracelet back on as Noah worked the snug skirt over her hips and down her legs. Flattening her palms against Vin's wide chest, she steadied herself so she could step out of the dress and the panties that followed the same path.

Vin's jaw tightened as he stared at her naked body. The lust that lit his beautiful blue eyes made her cunt clench.

"Damn, this really is a nice ass," Noah muttered while kneeling behind her. His hands swept up the backsides of her legs and cupped her bare cheeks. He gave them a firm squeeze, jolting her to the core of her being. Luckily, she was still leaning against Vin, because she swayed a little on her high heels.

Vin's head bent to hers and he kissed her again, this time in a very hot and demanding way. *Definitely marking his territory.* The thought made her shiver.

Noah's hands shifted to the front of her as he stood. He palmed her breasts, massaging them. Her nipples puckered. They ached for attention, which Noah paid them as he rolled the hard buds between his fingers and thumbs. All the while, Vin's kiss deepened, making her hungry for more.

Her arms slipped around his neck. When Noah's hands moved to her backside again, Vin crushed her body to his. She loved the feel of his rigid muscles pressed against her, but hated that he was still dressed.

Regardless, the way he kissed her made her lose herself in the intimacy of the moment and her fingers twined in his thick, silky hair as she held his head in place, keeping his mouth on hers.

Noah's hands roamed her backside. One of his hands rested on her hip, the other skimmed along the crevice of her ass. His fingers swept forward until one plunged deep into her wet pussy. She shuddered, the erotic invasion oh so welcome.

That overwhelming sensation she'd felt when Vin had fucked her in the restroom—that sensory overload, *I need more now!* feeling—welled within her once again. She untangled herself from Vin and worked the buttons on his shirt, impatiently shoving the material over his broad shoulders and down his thick arms. He was so magnificently built that she sighed with longing as she stared at him.

He kissed her again as his hand covered her bare mound, the pads of two fingers finding her clit and rubbing it feverishly as Noah pushed a second finger into her cunt. Her arms wrapped around Vin's neck once more and she held him tightly as both men worked her into a sexual frenzy.

Jade's chest pressed to Vin's and she reveled in the skin-on-skin contact and his male heat. From behind her, Noah leaned in close, his hard cock pushing against her hip, his chest melding to her back.

Good Lord, if only she could get him stripped down too! But she didn't want to break the connection of his fingers in her cunt, stroking quickly, pushing her close to the edge with the help of Vin vigorously massaging her clit.

Tearing her mouth from his, she let out a deep moan. "Oh God." She felt the sensations collide and race toward a crescendo. The difference in technique and knowing two men were pleasuring her intensified the eroticism of the moment. "That is so good!"

Her legs trembled. She was still unstable on her heels, which Noah hadn't removed when he'd undressed her.

Vin whispered in her ear, "I want to be inside you."

Another moan slipped from her lips. The man was a godsend, doing all sorts of wonderful things for her ego and her body. In fact, he applied a little more pressure to her clit, rubbing a bit faster until she gasped for air. Noah picked up the pace as well, finger-fucking her quickly and more forcefully from behind.

The trembling in her legs shot upward, making her entire body vibrate. Her tight nipples scraped against Vin's bare chest, the sensation as titillating as all the others she experienced. She could barely pull in a full breath as the excitement within her escalated to a breaking point.

“Oh God!” she cried out as every beautiful sensation erupted inside her. Spasms rocked her body. “Holy Christ!” Her release was a powerful one. Her inner walls squeezed Noah’s fingers, drawing out every ounce of pleasure possible.

When she was steadier on her feet, Vin backed away from her. Noah withdrew his fingers from her pussy and took her by the hand, leading her over to the couch. He silently guided her onto her knees on a plump sofa cushion so that she faced the rolled arm. He joined her, lying on his back and prompting her to spread her legs farther apart as his head poked between them. His hands gripped her hips as his tongue swiped over her pussy lips, making her nearly jump out of her skin.

“Oh!” she gasped, a bit shocked by the intimate act, as she’d been when Vin had gone down on her earlier.

He stood on the other side of the sofa arm, unfastening his belt and pants as she watched. He toed off his boots, then shed the remainder of his clothes.

A grin played on her lips. He was simply too glorious for words. She reached a hand out and slid her fingertips along his cock before wrapping her fingers around the base. His eyes darkened in color and his jaw set.

As Noah tongued her clit, she leaned forward, wanting desperately to taste him. Her body responded to Noah’s ministrations as he licked her pussy. When her mouth closed over the head of Vin’s cock, her exhilaration mounted.

He let out a sharp hiss as she took him deep in her mouth. All the while, Noah alternated between teasing her clit with his tongue and suckling the swollen bud, making her inner thighs quiver and her stomach clench. It was more difficult than she’d imagined to concentrate on pleasuring Vin when Noah was doing such wickedly delicious things to her body. When he worked a finger into her cunt as he continued to lick and suck her clit, her head snapped up and a small cry fell from her lips.

Her reaction seemed to spur on both men. Noah worked her more zealously. As she took Vin’s cock in her mouth again, his upper body stretched forward and his large hand splayed over her ass. One finger slid along the cleft to that small hole he’d fingered during their bathroom interlude. That forbidden spot she’d never considered an erogenous zone, but had found it to be a particularly sensitive one. Maybe it was its forbidden status that made it such an erotic area.

The pad of Vin’s finger circled the rim of the hole, increasing the challenge of staying focused on her task. Jade’s body was on fire, her insides sizzling, her skin tingling. She had no doubt she was wetter than ever, making it easy for Noah to thrust another finger into her pussy and stroke her with long, quick movements. Her breath lodged in her throat and she had to lift her head again, relinquishing her hold on Vin. Her hand slid beneath his thick erection to cup his balls. She wasn’t sure how much pressure was just enough, so she glanced up at him, looking for guidance. His grin was a knowing one.

His hand covered hers and he gave it a gentle squeeze, silently demonstrating the right touch, for which Jade was grateful. She wanted to give him as much pleasure as he

gave her. Ditto for Noah, but Noah seemed hell-bent on making her come while providing no opportunity for her to reciprocate.

As she carefully massaged Vin's balls, he said in a strained voice, "Suck my cock again."

She did, her head bobbing up and down as she took him deep, then nearly let him loose, before pulling him into her mouth again.

He let out a primal grunt. One that made her cunt clench around Noah's fingers.

Vin's hands shifted and plowed through her hair, pushing the long strands away from her face and off her bare shoulders. She put extra effort into the blowjob. She wanted to get him off, but also wanted him inside her. The contradictory desires warred with each other, but didn't really stand a chance of resolving themselves because her attention was divided by the enticing sensations between her legs.

Noah suckled her clit, gently drawing the sensitive bud against his teeth as his fingers twisted in her pussy.

Her orgasm hit her hard and fast, making her release Vin.

"Oh yes! Oh God!"

She gripped the arm of the sofa, pressing her fingertips into the soft leather. The release was an explosive one, stealing her breath.

Noah moved away from her as she closed her eyes and lost herself for several moments in the sinful feelings that consumed her. Before she'd even gotten a full breath back, a strong arm hooked around her waist as Noah hauled her backward. She landed in his lap. He'd removed the rest of his clothes and sheathed himself with a condom. His hands clasped her hips and he lowered her down onto his hard cock, filling her and making her moan.

Her back was to him and her thighs straddled his. They rocked together in a slow motion as Vin moved in front of her again, standing between their parted legs. She leaned forward and dragged her tongue up one side of his thick cock, then sucked him deep again, making his pelvis jerk. As she rode Noah's cock, she sucked Vin's. Noah palmed her breasts and caressed them before he toyed with her tight nipples, pinching and rolling them until they were tingling.

When she pulled her mouth from Vin's cock, he planted a knee on the cushion next to Noah, who eased her back so she was lying against him, her back pressed to his muscular chest. He continued to tease her nipples as Vin leaned forward and flattened two fingers against her clit. He rubbed her quickly, faster than ever before, with more pressure.

"Vin," she gasped as their gazes locked.

His jaw tightened. "Squeeze him tight, sweetheart."

There was no way she could stop herself from doing just that. Her inner walls squeezed Noah's shaft, responding to his forceful thrusts and Vin's feverish rubbing.

"Oh yeah, that's it," Noah said on a half-groan. "Fuck my cock."

Her hips moved with his as the tempo increased. Vin's fingers on her clit made her restless...and breathless. She felt another orgasm building. Wanted it as much as she'd wanted all the others. She'd long since lost count of how many she'd experienced this evening, but knew she was more than deserving of them. Making up for years of deprivation.

"I'm going to come," she said, wanting to hold back until Noah climaxed, but not sure she could. "Oh Christ."

Vin's fingers on her clit were making her crazy, but she wouldn't for a million dollars tell him to stop. Every nerve ending snapped and she was too immersed in sexual bliss to give up one pleasure for the other.

She wanted to give something back to Noah, so she continued to squeeze and release, squeeze and release, pushing him closer to the edge if the sound of his raspy breaths in her ear were any indication.

When Vin leaned in for a kiss, she was a goner. Her cry of pleasure was caught in his mouth as she came. Her inner walls contracting around Noah's cock made him come too.

"Oh fuck, yeah," he growled as he thrust up into her, rocking her to the core of her being.

Jade tore her mouth from Vin's and sucked in a sharp breath. "Oh dear God!" Her heart hammered in her chest and her pulse raced. Every inch of her seemed to ignite.

Vin gave her but a moment to recover. He clasped her hands and helped her off Noah's lap, who let out a low groan as his cock withdrew from her body.

"On your knees," Vin instructed as he directed her to the other couch.

She knelt on the cushion, her hands gripping the back of the sofa. She watched over her shoulder as Vin rolled a condom down his thick shaft. She knew she was about to get what she really and truly wanted. He entered her from behind, thrusting into her in one powerful movement that jolted her, but which also shot pleasure through every inch of her.

She cried out, the stimulation intense and welcome. Vin's large hands held the dip of her waist as he pulled almost all the way out of her body and then plunged deep into her. He fucked her hard and fast and it felt damn good. But there was something missing.

While still staring over her shoulder, she saw Noah stand up. With a satisfied grin on his handsome face, he blew her a kiss and then left the living room, closing the door behind him after he entered his bedroom.

He knew what she was missing too. It was so obvious. So blatant and inescapable. She'd felt it building since the moment she'd laid eyes on Vin. And now it was perfectly clear in her mind what she really wanted. What she really needed.

"Vin," she said.

He stopped fucking her instantly, as though her tone and the look she gave him spoke volumes.

"You okay?"

"Better than okay," she said, meaning it. "I just...want something else. Something more. From you."

He stared at her for a moment, curious and confused. But then the hard, concentrated angles of his devilishly handsome face softened. As if he knew what she *wasn't* saying—what she was trying to convey, but couldn't quite verbalize. She didn't know the right words.

Vin pulled out of her and helped her stand. He scooped her up in his strong arms and carried her into his bedroom.

As he deposited her on the king-size bed, she said, "I don't regret tonight, but I suddenly realized I was wrong."

He settled on the thick comforter next to her. "Wrong about what?"

She reached for him, pulling him to her. He rolled on top of her and situated himself between her legs.

Yes, that was exactly what Jade wanted. Exactly what she needed.

Her fingers tangled in his hair as she sighed contentedly. "This feels right."

He grinned down at her. "Thought I wasn't enough for you."

Jade frowned. "That was never the issue. I thought..." She shook her head and let out a sharp breath. "I've been so twisted in knots for so long, I thought I needed more than you'd be able to give me. But I was wrong. Everything you do to me is...just right. More than enough, really." Her brow furrowed. "It's more than that."

Vin stared down at her, his azure eyes inquisitive, yet full of emotion. "Tell me," he said on bated breath.

She swallowed hard. She'd never been in this position before. Had never bared her soul to anyone. Well, once, of course, with her cyber friend. But that had been all about her mother leaving her and her father and family falling to pieces. This was something altogether different. This was about her sexual health and well-being. And her emotions. Emotions she'd never felt so strongly before.

"I like how this feels right now. Right this very second," she told him. "With you lying on top of me, staring down at me. Our naked bodies pressed together."

He nodded.

She continued. "Every orgasm tonight has been mind-blowing and so needed. But this feels just as good. Maybe better."

His head dipped and his lips brushed over hers. He murmured, "You can't even begin to imagine how that makes me feel."

"I never imagined feeling it myself."

His mouth pressed more firmly to hers. He kissed her deeply, his tongue delving between her parted lips. His hands roamed her body as his hard cock slid into her pussy.

Jade moaned into his mouth. She lifted her leg and draped it over his backside, holding him to her as he moved inside her, slowly and sensually.

This languid, easy lovemaking was more erotic than anything she'd experienced thus far. As much as she'd believed she needed two men to satisfy her, that she'd needed a fast and furious fuck to satiate her desires, making love with Vin was equally satisfying. *No*. It was more satisfying than anything she'd ever imagined.

And *that* spoke volumes to *her*.

Chapter Seven

Vin stared into her amber eyes and fought back the wave of emotion that rose up, catching him by surprise. The intensity of his feelings was shocking enough, but the way it felt to be stretched out on a big bed with Jade, buried deep in her tight pussy, her leg wrapped around his waist, was more incredible than anything else he could name at the moment.

His body pressed into her soft curves. Her small breasts were nestled beneath the ledge of his pectoral muscles and her fingers were twined in his hair. He'd found his idea of heaven.

She smelled like lilacs and sex. An intoxicating scent he'd never forget. Would crave for the rest of his days, he was sure. Her lips were rosy and plump from his kisses and her breath came in heavy pulls, as though she were as excited as he was. More than they'd both been before in the restroom at The Well or with Noah in the living room.

He was alone with her in a private room. Sprawled out on a bed. Making love to her.

This went way beyond what he'd expected or even considered when he'd set out on his road trip in search of her. But his quest had turned out perfectly. Sure it'd gotten a bit derailed when she'd expressed interest in Noah. Yet she'd come to a different conclusion in the end, hadn't she? It was him she wanted, not Noah. It was *his* bed she was in, not Noah's. It was *his* cock –

"Hey," she whispered in a teasing voice, interrupting his thoughts. "You planning on rocking my world or just staring at me the rest of the night?"

He grinned at her. Slivers of moonlight filtered in through the vertical blinds on the sliding glass doors, sending glittery rays across the room, softly illuminating Jade's beautiful features. She was positively breathtaking. Perfection personified.

"Such a smartass," he mumbled as his head dipped and he kissed the corner of her tempting mouth.

She sighed. "Whatever it takes to entice you."

"Oh I'm enticed," he assured her. "Hot and horny for you, if you want to know the truth."

Her laugh was sweet and soft. "Feel free to be direct," she teased again. "If you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly quick on the uptake. Lack of experience and all that."

"Oh I don't know," he mused as his lips grazed her jaw. "You seem to know what you're doing."

His head lifted slightly and his tongue flicked her earlobe, making her body jolt beneath his. He fought back a triumphant grin. She'd had him tied in knots all night, it was only fair he turned the tables on her.

He kissed the side of her neck, working his way down to her prominent collarbone. When his head dipped lower, she tensed beneath him. He glanced up at her.

"Problem?"

Her teeth clamped down on her lower lip for a moment. Her eyes closed, then snapped open. "No, no problem, really. It's just...I'm not exactly...endowed."

His brow furrowed. "You seriously think that?"

Jade shifted beneath him. He'd made her uncomfortable.

She said, "I'm sure you're used to women with more, you know, enhanced body parts."

"You're perfect," he said. "Seriously."

She stared at him, clearly not believing him.

Vin kissed her. Long and leisurely. When he pulled away, she sighed.

He said, "You're amazing. In so many ways."

He kissed her again as he moved inside her, pushing deep into her cunt, making her muscles tighten all around him. He took his time building the momentum, rocking his hips slowly, only slightly retreating from her warm depths before plunging back in.

Her arms wrapped around his neck as she held him to her. Her body responded to his, moving with the same slow, sensual rhythm. He lost himself in her heat and her tightness and her sweet smile. Her erotic scent. The suppleness of her skin. The soft moans that seemed to stick in her throat.

Unfortunately, he reached a boiling point faster than he'd anticipated. Vin was about to alleviate the problem by slipping a hand between them and rubbing her clit, helping her to catch up to him, but found it wasn't necessary.

He'd barely shifted on top of her when she broke their kiss and gulped down some air. She said, "Oh God, Vin. I'm going to come."

"Please," he ground out. "I want to feel you come with my cock inside you."

"It feels so good. I don't want to let go. But I can't...stop..." She sucked in another breath, then let it out in a short puff. "Yes," she whispered. "Oh God, yes."

He felt the quaking of her body, then the tension, then the powerful release. She gripped him tighter inside and out – her limbs holding him close, her cunt milking him.

"Vin!"

Her head rolled from side to side on the pillow. Her nails dug into his shoulders.

Her orgasm sparked his own. He felt the intensity build and then explode within him, making him call out her name. His cock surged and pulsed inside her as he pushed deeper, stealing every bit of pleasure her tight pussy had to offer.

"Jesus," he whispered in a harsh breath as his head dropped to the crook of her neck and his body convulsed. He needed a few moments to regroup.

Jade continued to hold him to her, once again sighing contentedly. "That was worth waiting for," she said. "Really and truly."

Vin lifted his head and stared down at her. "You should never be deprived."

One corner of her mouth lifted. "I wouldn't be if you weren't just passing through."

He considered this for a moment. He *was* just passing through. But that didn't mean *she* was a passing fancy.

"Let's not dwell on that right now," he said, not wanting to think about leaving her when he heave-ho'd on his way to L.A. On top of that, he still had to tell her the truth about who he was. Something that lingered in his mind, but which he hadn't found the opportune time to divulge. It certainly didn't feel appropriate when he was inside her, though he couldn't deny the admission welled within him.

Perhaps he wanted to reassure her that he wasn't some arbitrary guy who'd just popped into her life. One who would leave as unexpectedly as he'd arrived.

He debated telling her now, but instead said, "I'm going to take a ride out to the lake tomorrow to scout the scenery. Never know what might come in handy when I'm filming future projects. Want to go with me?"

She smiled. "Yes."

He would have breathed a sigh of relief—thrilled they had more time together—but she kissed him. The passion behind that gesture was enough to convince him he'd made the right decision by coming to Moon River to find her. Or maybe he'd been convinced of that the moment he'd laid eyes on her. Either way, he was damn glad he'd made the trek.

When he pulled away, he said, "You do the most insane things to me."

She stared at him again, as though in disbelief. "Me?"

"Yeah, you."

"But I'm so—"

He cut her off immediately. "Smokin' hot. Incredible in bed. Intensely passionate." He grinned again. "I could go on and on."

"Oh." She seemed taken aback. "Well. If you say so." She smiled again, the tension leaving her body.

Vin moved away from her, hating the loss of contact, but he wanted to change positions and hold her. He ducked into the bathroom to toss the condom and wash up. Then he returned to the bed and pulled her into his arms.

She rested her head on his shoulder and her palm on his chest as she said, "I've never had to apologize and thank someone in the same sentence."

"Why are you doing it now?"

“Because,” she said before taking a deep breath. “I wanted something you didn’t but you gave it to me anyway. Then when I realized what it was I truly *needed*, you gave that to me too.”

His arm was draped along her shoulders and his fingers stroked her arm. “Sometimes it works out like that. You don’t know what you really need until someone gives it to you.”

He could certainly find validity in that sentiment. He hadn’t been thinking about Jade on a sexual level when he’d sought her out. Hadn’t been thinking of his own needs, which had taken a backburner to his budding career over the years. After he’d met up with her at the diner, though, the floodgates had opened. Now he knew what he needed in his life. Unfortunately, a future with Jade couldn’t possibly be in the cards.

Again, not something he wanted to dwell on. He’d leave in a couple of days and life would go on for them both. She had her boutique and her family and friends here in Moon River. He had a premiere in L.A. and, beyond that, he and Noah had new projects awaiting them.

He and Jade were from two completely different worlds with two completely different career paths. Different goals. Different ideas of how to live their lives. He could no more ask her to leave with him than she could ask him to stay. If he were to ask her, wouldn’t that create the same strife she and her family had suffered years ago? Whisking her off on the back of his bike and taking her away from her family and friends and Moon River—taking her away from her father—would be right up there with what they’d experienced when her mother had run off with another man.

Vin knew how Jade and her family had agonized over the unexplained abandonment all those years ago. He’d experienced something similar and though he’d kept his personal hell a secret, he’d been able to empathize with her because he’d known exactly what she was going through.

So even if there was something substantial enough between them to warrant giving a romance a try in the same city—preferably Manhattan—how could he possibly even suggest it or wish for it without suffering the guilty conscience he’d come here to alleviate in the first place?

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he realized he’d dug an even deeper hole from himself rather than filling the void he’d had and smoothing over the inadvertent transgression he’d committed years ago.

Adding to his dilemma was the fact that Vin didn’t believe in long-distance relationships. Especially with the kind of chemistry he and Jade shared. He’d want her in his bed every night and would probably go half out of his mind worrying about her straying into someone else’s while they were apart.

He didn’t have time for those sort of distractions. So he was resigned to the inevitable. He’d enjoy his time with Jade while it lasted. He’d tell her who he really was tomorrow when they rode out to the lake. Then his past would be reconciled and he could get on with his life.

That was the sane and sensible path to take, his reasonable mind assured him. Too bad his heart wasn't completely onboard with the plan.

* * * * *

Jade woke with a warm, hard body curled around hers. She smiled in delight as she snuggled deeper into the cocoon Vin created for them. The covers were pulled up to her ears and his arms were wrapped around her, keeping her close to him as they spooned.

She'd rolled away from him in the middle of the night, but he'd followed her into the new position, for which she was grateful. She honestly hadn't known what to do when he'd fallen asleep while her head rested on his chest and his arm was draped around her shoulders. She'd wondered how long was *too* long to stay there. Surely her head felt like dead weight after awhile. And how long before the arm around her fell asleep? How uncomfortable was it to have her lying partially on top of him?

She had no idea. Nor did she want to overstay her welcome. So she'd lingered there for a bit—because it truly was a beautiful place to be—and then when she'd heard the soft snoring that indicated he'd drifted off to sleep, she'd carefully extracted herself from his embrace and rolled over. Only to have him shift behind her and cuddle with her.

Not at all a hardship. In fact, there was something warm and intimate about their isolated haven. She didn't even bother consulting the clock on the nightstand, even though she knew she'd eventually have to get up and go to work. Sooner rather than later, really, if she wanted to keep the busybodies from discovering she hadn't been home all night.

Thinking of her very wicked evening—and the fact that she'd spent the night in Vin's bed—made her shiver with excitement, causing Vin to stir behind her.

"Cold?" he asked in a sexy, sleepy voice as his arms tightened around her.

"Hardly," she whispered back. "You're the best personal heater a girl could have on a chilly autumn morning."

"Give yourself the credit," he murmured. "You make me hotter than hell."

She giggled. Not a sound she was accustomed to hearing from her own mouth, but she felt positively lighthearted and giddy. Not to mention sensual and seductive. Everything Vin did and said made her feel feminine and alluring. Yes, indeed, he was very good for her ego! And for her libido...

His hand moved from her stomach and cupped a bare breast, giving it a gentle squeeze before he slowly rolled the nipple between his finger and thumb, pebbling it. He lightly pinched it, igniting a spark between her legs. The prickly sensation along her clit and the tingling of her nipples made her wiggle against him, her ass rubbing his hard cock, which was nestled between the cleft of her naked cheeks.

Vin groaned. His hand left her breast and skimmed down to the apex of her legs. He fingered her clit as he nibbled on her neck. She was wet in a heartbeat.

Her wild night had left her a bit sore – her long-neglected body parts had gotten quite the workout. But she wanted him now as much as she had last night. As much as she had when he'd rolled into the parking lot at the diner.

"Make love to me again," she said, her soft words drifting on the quiet air.

"Gladly."

He pushed a long finger into her cunt, making her moan. As he stroked her inner walls, the heel of his hand rubbed her clit. All the glorious sensations she'd experienced the night before welled within her. Only they were more intense this morning. More substantial and vibrant.

She was hot and bothered in no time flat. Wanting and craving more, yet loving how she was so easily drowning in the feelings Vin evoked.

"That's fantastic," she muttered.

"I want to make you feel good."

"Mission accomplished. And then some." His mouth on her neck was driving her wild, along with the fervent stroking deep in her pussy.

"Come for me," he whispered in her ear.

It amazed her how very close she was to doing just that. He turned her on like the brightest light bulb, making her radiate heat and excitement. And with his hunky body melded to hers, she felt wrapped in sexual bliss.

"I like having your body pressed against mine," she told him.

"We fit well together."

This was infinitely more personal and intimate than what she'd experienced last night when Noah had joined them. That had been sex in its most carnal form. A physical act that had helped to alleviate the tension and fill some of the holes inside her. But the way Vin touched her and snuggled with her and kissed her – hell, even the way he spoke to her – was on a completely different level. For Jade, what she experienced with Vin went far beyond sex. She felt a physical and emotional connection to him. A bond she'd never truly known could exist between two people who weren't in a movie or on the pages of a book.

That bond was what intensified her reaction to everything Vin did to her. It made the sensations he elicited more thrilling and more meaningful. It made her tingle from head to toe and made her heart swell with feelings she'd given up on long ago. She'd long since let go of fairytale dreams and the hope of an intimate love connection.

Yet as Vin pushed her to all-new emotional and physical heights, she had a better understanding of why she'd never experienced this sort of ecstasy before. It was meant to be shared with the right person. And despite all the signs that pointed to a nonexistent future for her with this man, he was, in her mind, *the one*.

That revelation added to her pleasure. As Vin worked her a little more feverishly, she closed her eyes and let the erotic sensations consume her. They crashed over in

wave after wave of hot, gooey lava that burned her insides and made her cry out his name.

He continued to stroke her as she savored the beautiful release. When she caught her breath, he withdrew from her and slipped from the bed, causing her to whimper in protest.

Vin chuckled. "Just going for the condoms."

He was gone mere seconds. When he returned to the room, he snuggled close to her again, spooning with her. His hands roamed her body as his warm lips and tongue teased her neck, gently nipping, then kissing away the slight sting. Everything he did to her sent shivers of anticipation down her spine.

When he finally eased into her wet pussy from behind, she sighed happily. He moved slowly, like they had all the time in the world. Like she didn't have to be at work and he didn't have to be in L.A. Like her nosy family didn't matter. Nor did their guns.

She giggled again.

"I'm pretty sure that's not the appropriate response when a man's cock is inside you, sweetheart."

She laughed a little heartier. "That's not exactly what amuses me. Although it does make me deliriously happy."

"That's better."

"I was just thinking how perfect this is without my family's interference."

"Oh yeah. *Them*. I suppose they'd consider this a felony."

"Believe it."

"Well, I'd happily do the time for the crime." With that, he thrust a little deeper inside her, making her gasp.

"Do that again," she said.

His cock slid along her inner walls, almost coming out of her slick cunt, then thrusting back in.

"Oh yes," she whispered in a throaty voice. "Just like that."

He repeated the movement, increasing the tempo and the force in which he plunged into her. One of his large hands cupped her breast, the other returned to her clit, stroking her quickly as he fucked her.

Little whimpers and moans fell from Jade's lips as her eyes closed and she lost herself in the wondrous sensations that took hold of her again.

"You're so tight and wet," he murmured in her ear. "You feel so damn good. Like nothing I've ever felt before."

She found herself desperate to believe his words, so she did. The swelling of her heart made her wonder if it'd burst with emotion. A crazy thought, but then, when one was drowning in a beautiful, sensual abyss, crazy thoughts came naturally.

Her cunt contracted around the steel rod inside her body, making Vin groan. She loved how she affected him, loved that she could excite him and satisfy him. It wasn't about feminine power. Nor was it just about giving him something in return for what he gave her. Really, this was about sharing something profound and significant. Something unique and special in her very sheltered world.

"Come inside me," she urged him, wanting to feel his cock swell and his body convulse. She wanted to give him as much pleasure as he gave her.

His lips grazed her throat as he let out a soft groan. "You're a strain on my stamina."

"It's not about longevity," she told him. "It's about pleasure. And it's not fair that I'm the only one racking up orgasms."

"But I like making you come."

To back up his statement, his hips jerked forward and back with such intensity that his cock plunged deeper inside her, making it damn near impossible to hold back another shattering climax.

"I want to feel you come inside me," she said. "You have no idea how incredible it feels."

"Oh believe me," he said, his tone as raspy as hers. "I know how incredible it feels."

She squeezed him tighter and he grunted. A manly, sexy sound that made her clit tingle.

His head dipped to her shoulder and his lips slid over her skin as he fucked her harder, stealing her breath. Jade's fingers curled around the bedding surrounding them as he jolted her body and brought her the most amazing pleasure known to woman.

"That's it," she muttered. "Oh God, Vin. I'm going to come."

"Keep squeezing me," he demanded. "Christ, yes. Just like that."

Their bodies moved as one as they both reached for the brass ring. Jade's stomach coiled tight and her flesh quivered. Her breathing escalated and her heart pounded in her chest. Every nerve ending jumped to attention and blazed with excitement.

She could pinpoint the exact moment Vin fell from his precipice and she gripped his cock fiercely with her cunt, making him growl, then shout out her name as he came.

The spasms from his body echoed inside her, sparking Jade's climax.

"Oh, Vin! Oh God, yes!" she cried out.

His cock continued to thrust into her and she clutched his thick shaft, loving every single second of their releases and the feel of him deep inside her.

They stayed huddled under the covers as the sensations ebbed. Jade's breathing slowed, but her body hummed with that vibrant energy only Vin evoked.

His arms wrapped around her and he held her close in his tight embrace, his mouth grazing her shoulder as he spoke. "That's one hell of a way to wake up in the morning."

"I'll say. I never thought I'd be a morning-sex person, but I guess when you're with the right per—" She cringed as her mouth snapped shut.

Oh good Lord! Now was *not* the time to get all sappy and mushy and "Oh, Vin, you're the one! Please don't ever leave me!"

In fact, not only was now not the time, *anytime* wasn't the time!

Shit!

Her entire body tensed as silence ensued. She'd said too much. She'd said *way* too much!

Damn that sexual bliss that made her all giddy and happy-go-lucky! No one had ever told her that afterglow could be such a buzz-kill, but here she was, on the verge of spilling her guts because her brain was scrambled from too many earth-shattering orgasms!

Vin shifted behind her, unraveling himself from her. She pried her eyes open and glanced at him over her shoulder, fearful of the expression he'd be wearing.

She was so certain she'd killed the moment that she was monumentally shocked to find him grinning down at her.

"So you're over Noah?" he asked in a playful tone that was laced with a hint of male supremacy. And perhaps a bit of relief? Dare she hope that was what she heard in his voice?

Sitting up, she said, "That was a misunderstanding on my part. I hope I didn't cause a problem between you two. Or for Noah..."

Vin shook his head. "He got the message loud and clear. I just want to make sure you ended up in the bed you wanted to end up in."

Her heart seemed to twist. A peculiar sensation. She said, "It was your bed all along that I wanted to end up in, so yes, it worked out the way I wanted it to. I just...got a little sidetracked along the way. You have to understand, I—"

He shook his head as he pressed the tip of his finger to her mouth, silencing her. "I get it. Ye of the sheltered life wanted an adventure."

She brushed aside his finger. "Yes. And I would have gotten it without Noah. I just didn't realize that until you were inside me when I was on the couch and all I could think of was how badly I wanted you on top of me. I wanted to feel your weight on me and I wanted to watch the expression on your face as you made love to me."

Ay! There was another bungled sentiment! Talking about making love with a man when, in his mind, it was likely nothing more than fucking was yet another faux pas on her part. Seriously, she needed to head straight to the bookstore and pick up *The Idiot's Guide to Not Scaring the Hell Out of a Man After He's Just Delivered the World's Most Mind-Blowing Orgasms*.

But to her extreme good fortune, Vin didn't jump out of bed and put half the motel room between them. He continued to grin at her, giving her that sexy look she was hooked on.

He said, "I arrived at that place ahead of you, but it's nice to know you weren't too far behind me."

"You weren't mad at me, were you?"

"No. Just feeling a bit tense because I wanted you all to myself."

"Oh." She bit back a smile. Okay, maybe she hadn't totally botched things with her loose lips – either pair.

Her mind whirled with ways in which to come across a little more nonchalant. Less "You're the only man I will ever want to make love with for the rest of my life." As she put some thought into this, she heard the distinct sound of her cell ringtone coming from the living room.

She'd completely forgotten to look at the clock. She spared a glance toward the nightstand now and winced. "Holy shit," she mumbled as she tossed off the covers and climbed out of the bed. "It's after nine!"

Grabbing the complimentary robe from the bench that ran the width of the bed, she wrapped it around her body and raced into the living room. Retrieving her phone from her purse, she sighed with relief. It was only Cami.

"Hey," she said as she connected the call.

"Oh thank God! You're alive and now the sheriff won't string me up for letting you run off with a complete stranger!"

Jade smirked, though her friend couldn't see it. "Little on the dramatic side there, Cam. All's well, I assure you."

"Cept you're running late. I drove by the shop and guess what? It's not open at nine like it normally is on a weekday!"

"Yeah, yeah. I hear you. I'm heading out now."

"Where, exactly, are you heading out from?"

"I'll give you one guess."

"Ooohhh! Now that's what I like to hear. But oh shit!" She made a loud tsking sound. "Now I have to wait until lunch to get the details. Jo Beth just pulled into the parking lot. I've got to go."

"See you at eleven-thirty."

"Try not to be late."

Jade disconnected the call without further comment. As she returned her phone to her purse, Vin wandered into the kitchen to start the coffee.

"How do you take it?" he asked as he held up a mug.

"To go, if you don't mind. I'm seriously late. And we both know what trouble that could get us into."

One brow lifted. "So far, the trouble I've gotten into since I've been in town is right up my alley."

She shook her head as a blush turned her cheeks hot. "You are so bad."

He gave her a pointed look as he said, "So are you."

She could hardly dispute that, now could she? Turning on her bare heels, she said, "I'm gonna duck into your shower, if that's all right. I can find something to wear at the boutique."

"Knock yourself out, sweetheart."

Taking her purse with her, she raced into the bathroom, stripped off the robe and stepped under the hot spray of water. She showered quickly and used the blow dryer mounted on the wall before applying a little makeup from the stash in her bag. Unfortunately, she'd have to show up at the shop wearing the risqué dress she'd had on last night. She only prayed no one would be waiting for her when she arrived. Particularly no one bearing the same last name as hers.

Once she was fully dressed, she breezed by Vin, who handed her a to-go cup the motel provided with the coffee mugs.

"Bless you," she said as she accepted his offering and reached for the doorknob.

He cleared his throat loudly and she turned back to him. His brow lifted expectantly. A little thrill shot through her as Jade took two steps toward him, stretched up on tiptoe and gave him a long, leisurely good-bye kiss.

When she pulled away, she was honestly a bit lightheaded. With a sigh, she said, "You are one hell of a kisser."

"Ditto. Now don't forget, we have a date later. The lake at sunset. I'll bring the wine."

"I've got a couple of blankets in the trunk of my car. We can spread them out in the meadow alongside the shore."

"Sounds good. Want me to pick you up at the boutique?"

"That'd be safest."

He gave her a measured look, then said, "You know, at some point, people are going to put two and two together."

She couldn't think about that now. "Let's hope not."

Vin didn't seem pleased by her answer. Again, she had no time to dwell on the subject.

"I've really got to go," she said. "Thanks for the coffee."

She swung the door open and hurried down the hallway to the elevator. Once inside her car, her mind churned with a few viable explanations for her tardiness and her dress, should anyone be interested. But when she arrived at the shop, the parking lot was empty. Thank God.

She rushed inside and rummaged around the display area, snatching up a pair of jeans and a gray wool sweater with a long-sleeve, white cotton inlay to combat the scratchy, yet warm material. She swiped a pair of boots from a display mannequin and was feeling pretty damn crafty when she glanced out the window and noticed the white Cadillac that pulled into the spot in front of her store.

“Ah, crap,” she muttered as her father stepped out of his car and headed toward the front door of her store.

Chapter Eight

Where the hell had she left her coffee cup with the Moon River Inn and Suites logo on it?

Her gaze shifted from the door to the cashier's desk to the jewelry case. Where in God's name was that cup?

"Good morning, Jade," her father said as he entered the boutique, the glass door swinging shut behind him.

Her gaze snapped back to where he stood. "Hi, Dad."

He looked just like his older brother, the sheriff, only with a less severe haircut and a bit of gray at his temples. His warm, dark brown eyes were just as observant, which made her nervous at the moment. He wore a sharp suit in dark blue and a silk tie in pale yellow that complemented the suit and the crisp, white dress shirt he wore.

She gave him a smile she hoped was normal rather than ridiculously giddy. "What brings you by this morning?"

Her father studied her for a moment, as though trying to assess what was different about her. She doubted he could tell that, indeed, much was different about her this morning, but *she* certainly could tell! Her insides were still molten from her night with Vin and her stomach fluttered every time she thought of the sinful things he'd done to her.

"I just wanted to stop by before I fly out to Helena for the state economics conference I'm attending this week," her father said.

"Oh yeah, right. I totally forgot about that. When will you be back?"

She tried to keep the delight from her voice. One less pair of curious eyes on her this week would be such a good thing! Not to mention a huge relief to her guilty conscience.

"We wrap up Thursday afternoon and I'll fly back that night."

"Fantastic!" She cleared her throat. Could she be more enthusiastic? "I mean, I know you've been looking forward to this conference, what with the economic downturn and its impact on our town and the state. I'm sure it'll be very productive."

"Mm, yes." He continued to eye her as though he could see right through her. Then again, he was her father. It was entirely possible he had a sixth sense when it came to his daughter's love life. Did he have any idea that things were looking up this week?

"Well," she said, not wanting to give him more time to analyze her for fear of what he might deduce. She wouldn't be surprised if he cancelled his trip were he to find out where she'd spent last night. "I don't want you to be late. And I have to finish Nelly's dresses."

He nodded. "I understand. I just wanted to stop by before I left town."

She smiled at him. "I'm glad you did." Closing the gap between them, she gave him a kiss on the cheek and a big hug. "Have a safe trip. Call me when you land, please."

He laughed. "I won't even be in the air a full hour, Jade."

"Doesn't matter. I'll worry anyway. Humor me."

"Yeah, sure." He rubbed his jaw a moment, then said, "I heard you had lunch yesterday with someone who stopped into town on a motorcycle."

Oh here we go. She tamped down a sigh of exasperation. "His name is Vin D'Angelo. Uncle Bob already checked him out. No priors. And I can assure you, he's perfectly respectable. He's a filmmaker from New York, on his way to L.A. for a premiere."

Perhaps that was too much information?

Her father stared curiously at her. A dead giveaway he knew she was trying to cover something up regarding Vin.

That sigh slipped from her lips despite her efforts to suppress it. "Dad, he's just passing through and I was being neighborly. Nothing to be concerned about. He's a very nice guy."

"Rand Stevens is a very nice guy."

Ugh!

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, she said, "Yes, he is. Unfortunately, he's also as dry as toast and, seriously, Dad, there's no spark between us."

"Jade, that can come with time."

"How *much* time?" she suddenly demanded, surprising them both. "Because I've known Rand almost my entire life and we've been out on three dates. Really and truly, Dad, no sparkage at all, after all these years. But with Vin—"

Oops! There she went, spouting off at the mouth again. When would she learn her lesson?

Mouth shut, girlfriend! As in zip it!

Her father frowned. "Now, Jade. There's no sense in getting involved with someone who's just stopping in along the way to someplace else."

"I'm perfectly aware of that." *Painfully* aware was more accurate, but to say that out loud would only lead her to open a can of worms best left sealed shut.

"I don't want to see you get hurt," her father said, sapping some of the wind from her independent-girl sails.

"I know that, Dad. And I appreciate it. Really, I do. It's just...you know, I'm twenty-four. I'm fairly sensible. Good at managing my money and my business. Capable of taking care of myself."

Well, all of me except my heart, that is.

Because no two ways about it, she was wrapped around the axle when it came to Vin D'Angelo and she suspected there was a broken heart looming for her on the horizon.

Yet she knew, to the depths of her soul, that the heartache would be worth every glorious minute she spent with Vin.

Which made her say, "Dad, you have to trust me on this. I know what I'm doing. Vin is the kind of man I've wanted to meet my entire life. And maybe he is just passing through, but while he's here... I'm lucky to get the chance to know him better."

"I don't think I like the direction this is headed, Jade."

Squaring her shoulders, she said – for the first time in her life, "It's not really up to you, is it? I mean, I appreciate your concern for my well-being, but it's my life to live. I have to make my own decisions and choices. And accept the consequences."

Cami would be so proud of her!

Her father seemed to give this the thought it was due. Then he said, "Jade, when your mother left –"

"Dad." She had to head him off at the pass, lest they stray from the point she needed to make. "Talking about Mom isn't going to help either of us. You've been looking forward to this conference for months and this is not the way to kick it off. So go to Helena and I'll stay in touch. I promise, I'll be okay. We'll get together when you return and you'll see that everything's fine with me."

That I'm still here. That I didn't run off with the sexy filmmaker the moment you turned your back on us.

She wouldn't be surprised if that was precisely what he was thinking.

Planting her hands on her hips, she gave her father a stern look. She'd never stood up to him like this before. She'd always been the sympathetic shoulder, the one who nodded her head and went along with whatever everyone else wanted. The girl who kept the peace by dancing to whatever tune her family played.

But not this time. Maybe she was biting off more than she could chew, emotionally, by getting involved with someone who would only be temporary in her life. That was a chance she was willing to take and no one was going to convince her otherwise or talk her out of it.

"Dad," she said again, her tone strong and unwavering. "Go to Helena. I assure you, my little world won't crumble down around my ears in the two-and-half days that you're gone."

He smirked at her. "Not sure where you got that smart mouth, but... I know you're right. It's just that I worry about you, Jade."

"That's because I'm impossible not to love to pieces." She winked at him and he laughed. He'd told her that very thing more times than she could count. "Now, you go forth and do good things for our little town and I'll finish my dresses so Nelly doesn't have a massive coronary anytime soon."

He hugged her tight, then turned to go. Over his shoulder, he added a parting shot. "Bob and Brian will be keeping an eye on you. No getting around it. That's just the way our family is."

As if she needed the reminder.

"Then they'll be bored out of their minds, because I'm not up to anything." A blatant lie, but a necessary one to keep her father from obsessing over the situation when he should be focused on business. "Don't forget to call me when you land."

"Will do."

He left her shop, albeit reluctantly, she could tell.

Jade went in search of her coffee cup, finding it in the dressing room she'd used when she'd changed out of her sexy dress, thankfully before her father had arrived.

When she returned to the front of the store, two customers wandered in. She went to work, finding a perfect respite around eleven-thirty. She was ten minutes late to lunch with Cami, but that was nothing new.

Today's feast included pastrami sandwiches piled a mile high and barbecue chips. Jade slid into the booth opposite her friend and dug in.

"I'm starving," she said around bites.

She'd been too nervous about her date last night to eat dinner. And she hadn't finished her burger and fries at lunch yesterday. Since she'd slept late this morning and had then been treated to the kind of morning sex she wouldn't mind experiencing every day for the rest of her life, she'd missed breakfast. Even her coffee had gone cold and she hadn't had time to put on a fresh pot at the store because she'd had back-to-back customers. Some days were better than others at the boutique. Luckily, she had the special orders to help her pay rent on the space when the in-store patronage dwindled.

"Sooo," Cami said as she dabbed at her pink lips with a napkin. "Tell me everything. Leave nothing out, leave nothing to the imagination. Give me everything unsuitable for public consumption. I want the down-and-dirty details!"

Of which there were oh so many!

She squirmed in her seat, that now-familiar and nearly constant prickle between her legs making her think of how Vin cured what ailed her. So effortlessly.

"Well," she said. She took a quick sip of her strawberry malt before continuing on. "I got much more than I'd bargained for – in more ways than one."

"Do tell!"

Jade sat back in her seat, no longer interested in her lunch. Her heartbeat picked up and her pulse raced at the mere thought of Vin. She eyed Cami for a moment, then asked, "Do you believe it's possible to fall in love with someone you've only known for twenty-four hours?"

Cami gnawed her bottom lip as she considered this. Then she nodded her head and said, "I think so. I mean, if there's no such thing as love at first sight or true love or soul

mates, then why the hell do we even put effort into looking?" She too sat back in her seat. "Oh," she whispered. "Holy crap. Did I just slap myself in the face or what?"

Jade sighed. "Yesterday, I would have said definitely not. Today... I don't know." She wrung her hands, resting in her lap, as her mind whirled. "I mean, I've never been accused of being a hopeless romantic. And let's face it, the only thing I've truly been looking for these past few years is hot sex. After my mom left and then Vincent Moretti vanished into cyberspace, I seriously didn't think there was any point in thinking in terms of soul mates and true love. I just wanted to find someone who could relieve a little of my sexual frustration. But now..."

"Seeing the error of your ways?"

"Something like that."

Cami frowned. "Guess that means I can't hide from mine, either." She spared a glance at the ring finger on her left hand, adding, "There's likely a reason this finger is bare. And it might not entirely be Alex's fault."

Jade's brows lifted. "That's an interesting comment."

Her friend didn't elaborate. Instead, they picked at their food for a few minutes, until Cami finally asked, "So what makes you think it's love?"

Jade shrugged. "Well, let's not forget I have absolutely no basis of comparison, but..." She tried to find eloquent words for what she was feeling – what she'd felt from the moment Vin's motorcycle had roared into the parking lot of this very establishment. But the best she could manage was, "When I'm with him or when I'm thinking about him, which is just about every second of the day, I can't breathe. Seriously, it's actually a strain on my lungs, like I can't catch my breath or pull in an adequate amount of air."

"Oh." Envy flashed in Cami's green eyes.

"Yeah. But it gets worse. I'm practically vibrating from head to toe. I can't keep my thoughts straight for more than a few minutes, because my mind keeps wandering to Vin. And when I think of the things he did to me last night... Oh my God." She moaned as her eyes all but rolled into the back of her head.

Cami laughed. "Good Lord! Have you got it bad!"

Jade nodded. "You have no idea. I swear, my thighs are quivering, my pulse is racing, my palms are sweaty – and he's nowhere near me!"

"Oh Christ," her friend said. "You are so freakin' lucky!"

"Lucky! Are you crazy? The guy lives almost three-quarters of the way across the country. Lucky, my ass. He's a temporary fix to a permanent problem!"

"Well, when you put it like that..."

Jade shook her head, her thoughts shifting direction. "Still, I have to admit, I'd rather have just one night with him than none. To have missed meeting him... That would be a tragedy."

"Now *that's* romantic."

“Didn’t take me too long to realize how perfect he was for me, though I did get a little sidetracked along the way to this blissful state.”

Cami’s blonde brows knitted together. “How so?”

As Jade opened her mouth to speak, the familiar roar of two motorcycles disturbed the peace in the diner.

Jade couldn’t fight the smile that instantly sprang to her lips.

Cami’s eyes grew wide. “Well, fuck me. You really are smitten.”

“Here’s a bonus,” Jade said as she leaned forward. She lowered her voice and said, “He’s got a friend.” This was followed by a conspiratorial wink.

Cami perked up noticeably. “A friend, you say?”

Jade laughed. “He’s hot too. Not as hot as Vin, in my opinion, but you might beg to differ.”

Her friend’s attention shifted to the parking lot. With great interest, Cami watched as the two men climbed off their Harleys and removed their helmets, resting them on the seats in unison. Jade took in Vin from head to toe, finding him hotter than hell in his faded Levi’s and the black T-shirt he wore beneath his leather jacket, which hung open. His black leather boots added to his edgy look and his hair was sexily mussed from the helmet.

With a sigh of longing, she said, “God was all about the details when he created that man.”

“You said it,” Cami agreed in a breathy voice. When Jade’s gaze snapped to her, she found Cami staring at Noah. She was all but drooling.

Jade pulled a napkin from the dispenser and handed it over. “Might want to dab a little. You’re foaming at the mouth.”

Cami shot her a droll look. “You’re one to talk.”

“So is everyone else in this diner, so you’d better be careful.”

“Oh fuck.” She returned her attention to her lunch at the reminder they were surrounded by busybodies.

Vin and Noah strolled in. Vin headed toward their booth while Noah approached the counter and a now doubly smitten Connie.

Sliding into the seat next to Jade, Vin leaned in close and whispered in her ear, “You left something in my motel room this morning.”

“What?” she asked, eyeing him curiously, because she’d been very careful to collect all of her belongings.

He grinned mischievously at her. “Me wanting you.”

Jade’s stomach flipped. Her heart soared. And that absurdly giddy grin she was now accustomed to returned full force.

Swatting playfully at him, she said, “Behave!”

He groaned. “Impossible.”

Her face flushed. Trying to regroup, she turned to Cami and said, "This is Vin. Vin, Cami." Noah arrived at that moment and propped a hip against the side of the booth where Cami sat. Jade continued the introductions. "Noah, this is my best friend, Cami Winters. Cami, Noah Riley. He's a filmmaker in New York."

Cami's eyes lit up. "New York!" Then she gave a self-deprecating laugh and added, "Says the hick from the sticks."

Noah chuckled. "Not exactly the sticks. And you definitely don't fit my idea of a hick."

His gaze slid over her and Cami beamed brightly. She wore a hot-pink miniskirt and a white angora sweater that did everything to maximize her considerable assets. With her long blonde hair and sparkling eyes, Jade thought she looked like a real-life Barbie doll. Apparently, Noah felt similarly.

"Mind if I slide in?" he asked.

Cami immediately scooted toward the wall to accommodate Noah's large frame. He sat down next to her and Jade had to contain her smile. Didn't take a rocket scientist to see Cami was thrilled by the turn of events.

She left her friend to her own devices as she asked Vin, "What are you boys up to this afternoon?"

"Boys?" he scoffed. In another low tone, he asked, "Did I not prove my manliness last night? And this morning?"

"Shh!" She nudged his shoulder with hers. "The people in this diner have bionic ears."

"Can't help it." His eyes roved her body, making her squirm in her seat again. "Damn, you just get prettier and prettier."

She blushed. "Hardly. I barely did anything with myself this morning."

"You look great," he assured her with a pointed look. His gaze dropped to her lips, which she'd applied a hint of gloss to earlier. It was likely still there, since she hadn't really touched her lunch. Vin leaned closed to her again and murmured, "I want to kiss you."

"Not here."

His gaze dropped to her lap and one dark brow lifted.

Jade laughed. "Not *there*, either."

The man was incorrigible. And she loved every minute of it!

"All these rules," he grumbled in a playful tone as he reached for one of her chips and popped it into his mouth.

"I told you I'd ride out to the lake with you," she reminded him. "You'll have to wait 'til then."

He let out a low groan. "That's like asking me to go without water for a week."

"Hardly," she repeated.

Cami interrupted their flirting by suggesting, "Take the abandoned Miramax dirt road to the south end of the lake."

Jade instantly knew why she'd recommended that route and she smiled at her friend. "It picks up behind my shop and no one drives out that way. Especially not the local law. No need to since the high school kids party on the north shoreline."

Cami let out a half-snort. "You'd think those idiots would wise up and move the kegger to a different spot, but no."

"Hey, we were once those idiots," Jade reminded her. "My dad's Caddy would never make it along that narrow lane to the south end of the lake and there's no access to the east and west shorelines. What choice did we have when I talked him into letting me take the car out on Friday nights?"

"So true. That car looked like the Love Boat."

"Drove like it too," Jade added, remembering her father's first Cadillac. "But we could certainly pack it full of friends."

Looking amused by the conversation, Noah asked, "So you two were party girls?"

"Were?" Cami scoffed.

Jade laughed. "Cam, wine with cheese and crackers a couple nights a week does not make us party girls."

"Hey," she countered as she wagged a finger Jade's way. "I'll have you know that I've been to The Shimmy Shack twice in, like, I don't know...six months?" Her brow furrowed as her voice trailed off. She murmured, "Damn, I really am lame. I've got to get out more."

Noah said, "The Shimmy Shack. Sounds like a dance place."

"Moon River's main hotspot," she said.

Noah seemed to consider this a moment, then shot Cami a wicked grin. "You game for making a third visit in six months?"

Jade heard the hitch of Cami's breath—that same reaction Jade had whenever Vin looked at her. Diverting her attention and keeping her smile at bay, Jade said to Vin, "How about a double date after our sunset ride?"

Vin nodded and grinned as though warming instantly to the idea. Maybe because Cami would keep Noah occupied so there'd be no threesome incident again, in any form?

Not exactly something Vin had to worry about. Jade's interest in Noah had been fleeting. Her interest in Vin, however, continued to grow.

He said, "I'm up for some dancing."

"Great, so am I." Jade couldn't recall the last time she'd been out on a date that didn't entail a movie or dinner at the diner. With the exception of her trip to The Well last night. She was looking forward to a lively night out. And if they were all together, there might be less talk. Though Cami would have to square up with Alex, something Jade was certain she was ready to do after the epiphany she'd had earlier.

While they all talked about the evening ahead, Connie stopped by the table with a to-go order Noah had apparently placed when he'd been at the counter.

Vin said, "We're heading out for the afternoon. More scouting. But I'll swing by the shop at six or so."

"Sun usually sets around seven-thirty this time of year, so no rush."

He gave her a heated look that told her there actually *was* a rush. He wanted to be alone with her. She could see it in his vibrant blue eyes as lust flashed in them.

"Don't forget those blankets," he said with a wink. Then he moved away from her and stood. Noah followed suit.

"See you later," Jade said to both men.

Noah gave her a friendly smile. "Looking forward to it." His gaze flicked to Cami so fast, Jade had no doubt he'd taken a liking to her. The attraction was obviously mutual.

Vin scooped up their packaged lunch and the men headed out. When the sound of their bikes dimmed, Cami reached for her napkin and fanned herself.

"Holy cow," she said, her eyes bulging. "That is one hunka-hunka man."

"Had a feeling you'd think so."

"Geez Louise." She took a big gulp of soda, then said, "Of course now I'm dying to know if anything happened with you and Noah last night."

Jade hated to say yes, since Cami was blatantly interested in him. But she couldn't lie or withhold the truth. "As a matter of fact, I did instigate something with Noah."

"Greedy bitch," Cami said with a laugh.

Jade nodded. "Yeah, I know. But remember that conversation we had about two men? I honestly thought it was what I needed. And while I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of—"

"Shut up!" Cami balled her napkin and threw it at Jade, missing her by several inches. "You did *not* do them both!"

"For the love of God!" Jade let out a hiss. "Keep it down!"

She glanced around the diner, finding prying eyes on her table. She rolled her own eyes.

Cami folded her arms over her ample chest and pouted. "Unbelievable. You have all the luck."

"Yeah, sure," Jade said as she leaned forward and spoke in a low tone. "Like I'm the one who's been getting laid on a regular basis since high school graduation. *Not!*"

"Okay, but two of the hottest men to grace the face of the earth? I mean, seriously. Leave some scraps for the rest of us poor schmucks who are looking for love in all the wrong places."

"I did," Jade insisted. "Granted, I let things go much further than necessary in the grand scheme of things, but still. It occurred to me that what I really wanted was a real,

live, honest-to-God connection with a man. That happened with Vin." She gave the situation some thought, then added, "Subconsciously, I must have know it, but on a conscious level, I must have wanted to get the biggest bang for my buck, knowing I'd never get another chance like that. I mean, let's face it, men like Vin D'Angelo and Noah Riley don't grow on trees."

"Not here in Moon River, they don't."

"So you can see how blinded by the light I was, right?"

Cami's arms fell to her sides as she reluctantly said, "Yes, I can. I probably would have reacted the same way."

"There you have it."

"No, there I *don't* have it," Cami snapped. "And to be honest with you, I haven't had it in a very long time."

Taken aback, Jade said, "But I thought you and Alex...?"

Cami shook her head. "Not since March. He's been spending a lot of time in Kalispell."

"Yeah, because of his job."

"No, because of his secretary."

"Oh come on! You don't really think... I mean... That is so trite!"

Cami reached for Jade's malt. "You don't mind, do you?" Like the soda she'd drained, she sucked it down as though it were a shot of tequila and she was in need of a little fortification. Releasing the straw, she said, "I didn't want to say anything, because I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me. And let's face it, there aren't exactly options in this town. Without Alex..."

"Yeah. You're stuck with Rand Stevens. Whom I will happily hand over if you're interested." Jade meant it as a joke. Unfortunately, Cami's eyes misted over.

"All this time I've been so envious of you because men naturally flock to you," she said to Jade. "Even if it never works out for you, there's still interest on the guy's part. Since high school, I've been resigned to life with Alex. I mean, there are next to zero eligible bachelors in this town and the ones who do have potential are all gaga over you. Even if it's not mutual—and they're scared shitless of your family—at least they give you the time of day."

"Has it ever occurred to you that the reason they don't give *you* the time of day is because you're with Alex?"

"No," she said in a hesitant tone. "Not really."

Jade smirked at her. "Well, there you go."

"It's just—"

"It's just nothing. For God's sake, Noah Riley took one look at you and I ceased to exist."

Cami frowned. "That's only because you're with Vin."

"I am *not* with Vin. At least, not for more than the next day or two." A painful reminder she had to let roll off her back so she didn't get mired down in the depressing reality of the situation. Despite her best effort, though, she felt that now-familiar tug on her heart at the winless situation she'd found herself in.

Cami continued on. "I do need to be honest about my relationship with Alex. Clearly he's in need of something I'm not giving him and that's why he's running around Kalispell with his assistant. I've been pretending for the past several months it's not happening." She sighed. "Guess it's time for a reality check."

Jade reached across the table and patted Cami's hand where she'd rested it as she'd begun to toy with another napkin. "I'm sorry about Alex."

"I can't be," Cami said in a steadier voice. "I need to be bold like you. I need to face the situation head on and do something about it."

"For better or for worse," Jade said, "you have to follow your heart. That's one thing I've learned since Vin roared into my life." Of course, she had no idea whether or not she'd feel the same way when he roared out. For the moment, however, it seemed that facing the music was the right thing to do.

She only hoped she could pick up the pieces when he left as easily as she was tossing them into the air while he was here.

"I'm going out with you all tonight," Cami insisted, as though she'd reconciled her own dilemma in her mind. "I'll tell Alex about it beforehand. We need another break and this time I need to be honest about what it is I'm really looking for so that I don't wind up repeating this mistake over and over again."

"That sounds very reasonable."

Cami finally smiled. "Funny how one spark can make you see things so much more clearly."

"Oh yeah," Jade concurred. "I hear you loud and clear on that one."

She'd certainly woken up and smelled the coffee since Vin had arrived. She still needed to evaluate the big picture, though. Jade knew it was time *she* figured out what she was really looking for...and not just in the short term.

Chapter Nine

Vin liked Montana. No doubt about it, the scenery was spectacular and the fresh air was intoxicating. Most of the roads had liberal speed limits—seventy miles per hour even on the winding ones—and he felt free as a bird as he and Noah raced along the countryside, passing only two or three cars along the way. If either one of them ended up with a flat, there'd be no cell service to call AAA, not that roadside assistance would be able to find them, so remote was their location. But damn, it felt good to open up and enjoy the wind on his face and the solitude he never got in New York.

They stopped here and there to take some still shots of the scenery and shoot some footage with the video camera, finding the variance in landscape interesting. There were rolling hills and long stretches of meadow, followed by well-maintained ranches and ponds that gave way to winding roads, which twisted through the mountains as streams ran alongside the steep ledges. Vin could easily picture him and Noah filming here. The spectacular vista and the majesty of nature's truest elements were serene and captivating. Not to mention the prospect of returning for a project appealed greatly to him. He'd be able to see Jade again.

Funny how he was already missing her. He'd have to shove off soon. By midday tomorrow at the latest in order to make it to L.A. in time for his premiere.

Twenty-four more hours. That was all he had with Jade.

Unfortunately, he still hadn't done what he'd really come here to do. She still didn't know who he was. He had to remedy that situation quickly and resolved to do it during their trip to the lake.

Of course, he worried about what her reaction would be. Hell, she may call off their double date with Noah and Cami if she were pissed at him. Vin hated to even consider either possibility, but he had to be realistic.

If his worst-case scenario did come to fruition, he hoped Noah would still take Cami out. They seemed to have hit it off and Vin was glad for that. Noah was so consumed with his work that he rarely ever dated. In fact, Vin had been surprised by his friend's interest in Jade last night. Not that she couldn't get a rise out of a monk, but Noah seemed to be so singularly focused lately, Vin had begun to wonder if he even noticed women anymore.

When Vin had witnessed Noah's instant reaction to Jade upon her arrival at The Well, he'd realized that Noah was just in need of the right stimulation. Jade had provided that, but Vin suspected it had been on a strictly surface level. He'd left the proverbial party so quickly and quietly last night, Vin assumed he'd gotten what he'd needed on a physical level and had then disappeared into his bedroom to work on his laptop.

That Noah had wanted to hook up with Cami tonight and go dancing told Vin that perhaps Noah was seeing things in a different light. The way Vin was. If they worked nonstop, day-after-day, week-after-week, year-after-year and didn't step too far outside their productive bubble, what would they be left with in the end?

It was entirely possible they'd both been confronted with the need to answer that question during this trip.

Vin could accept his workaholic nature to a point. Noah had always seemed oblivious to his. Until now. Maybe this trip was the rude awakening they'd both needed. And maybe Jade Taylor and Cami Winters were the women they'd needed to meet in order to spark those awakenings.

He thought of this as they headed back to Moon River.

The problem with epiphanies was that once you had one, you needed to do something about it or you remained stagnant. For Vin, suddenly realizing he was looking for something different in his life—something *more*—and not doing anything about it would be a very hard pill to swallow.

Admittedly, he'd gotten more than he'd bargained for during this journey. Unfortunately, he had no idea what to do about all these new revelations. Worse, he wasn't the one in total control of making changes, if that was truly what he intended to do. Any decision he made regarding his romantic life was wrapped up with Jade, who had her own plans and life. Leaving him at an impasse unless he made a bold move and not only told her who he was, but also found out the extent of her feelings for him. Maybe then he could make a determination on what path to take with her.

Maybe.

* * * * *

Jade stuffed her two blankets into the oversize bag she had at the boutique and pulled on the winter coat she'd worn to work yesterday, but hadn't bothered with when wearing her skimpy dress to The Well.

She'd already called her uncle to say she'd visited with her dad before he'd left for Helena and that the dresses were all completed for Nelly's wedding. Thereby giving him no excuse to stop by her shop this evening.

It occurred to her as she bustled about the store, anxiously awaiting the sound of Vin's bike, that she wasn't actually sneaking around anymore. She'd been honest with her father about her intentions with Vin and tonight they'd be out in public.

She realized the reason she'd been so secretive until now was because she knew the inevitable outcome of her brief fling with Vin. And she knew she wouldn't be able to bear the sympathetic, so-sorry-it-didn't-work-out-for-you looks after he left her. The too-bad-you-couldn't-land-the-man-of-your-dreams pity that would inevitably come her way.

Because Vin was, without doubt, *that* man. The man she'd been waiting for her whole adult life. Maybe longer. But what was the point in spreading the glorious word that she'd finally found *the one* when her relationship with him, such as it was, would never equate to more than a few days of flirting and hot-and-sweaty sex?

Though everyone in town would invariably learn of her connection to Vin, they didn't need to know how deeply it ran. That would be something she'd share only with Cami, a friend and confidante who would commiserate with her, but not pity her. A favor Jade would return as it related to Cami's disastrous situation with Alex.

For Jade, her romance with Vin would be something she could reminisce over with her best friend when the mood struck. But if she were to walk into the diner for lunch every day and have to endure the "poor Jade" looks of the townsfolk, she wouldn't survive it. Therefore, she'd be careful to play it cool tonight at The Shimmy Shack. Lord knew it was bad enough everyone pitied her because of her family situation. To have them all feel bad for her because she wasn't able to land Vin permanently...well. A girl could only sink so low.

That reconciled in her mind, the only thing she truly had to worry about—other than her impending broken heart, of course—was Cami.

What if she ended up rowing in the same boat as Jade? Sure her romance with Alex was on the skids—big time. But what if Cami put her eggs in the Noah basket without fully recognizing the truth Jade had arrived at? That their romantic interludes with the sexy filmmakers were nothing more than fly-by-night flings?

Jade would feel horrible if Cami got hurt.

"Well, fuck me," she muttered as she stood at the cashier's desk, staring at the bag with the blankets in it.

"If you insist."

Jade laughed, despite her sudden melancholy. She turned to find Vin standing in the entryway of her boutique. He wore a lascivious grin that made her want to drag him into a dressing room and have her way with him.

"Is your mind always in the gutter?" she asked, hypocrite that she was.

He chuckled. "No, it's usually on making movies. But since I met you..."

"Oh." She smiled. Hard to be offended by *that* logic. It was also impossible not to wonder exactly what his thoughts were as they pertained to her. Luckily, she found the restraint not to ask or they likely would end up going at it in one of the dressing rooms and missing the sunset altogether. Not that Jade would mind.

Vin, however, was obviously determined to keep their date. "You ready to head out?" he asked. "The motel staff packed up a bottle of bubbly and two glasses for us. Weather's nice tonight too."

Funny how her nipples tightened and her cunt clenched with just the hint of time alone with Vin, away from the curious campers around town. Leaving all her previous

ruminations and reservations behind to ponder at another time, she hefted the bag she'd packed earlier.

"Sounds like we've got everything we need." She walked toward the door, but before she passed through it, Vin's large hand shot out and gripped her arm. He pulled her to him and kissed her passionately, leaving her dizzy with desire. She let out a low sigh as he kept her close to him, her lips a mere inch away from his. "That's some greeting," she murmured.

The corner of his mouth lifted. "You have no idea how badly I wanted to do that when I saw you in the diner."

"Nice to hear, but thanks for not acting on it. I've already been read the riot act once today."

His brow furrowed. "By whom?"

"My father."

"Oh." He said the word on a heavy breath. *Apropos*, she thought.

Despite the massive downer she'd just unloaded on him, Jade laughed. "Yeah. Seems everyone has something to say about the things I do. But he's off to a conference in Helena, so..."

"One down, two to go?"

Smiling, she said, "Something like that. Shall we get a move on?"

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they headed out. Jade left the lights on again and set the alarm. She couldn't help but glance up and down the strip mall to see if anyone was out and about. Luckily, with her shop located in a lower rent neighborhood—the only space she could afford on her own when she'd decided to go into business for herself last year—it was hardly a high-traffic area.

When they reached his motorcycle, Vin handed over a helmet. "It's Noah's. He tracked down your friend Cami at the antiques store she works at and made arrangements with her for this evening's outing. She's going to pick him up at the motel."

"Really?" Jade was surprised, particularly because Cami hadn't called to tell her the news. But that was likely because Jo Beth never let Cami call or text from her cell during work hours. "Bold move. I guess she's decided to make a statement." Maybe Jade didn't have to worry about her after all. Cami was obviously taking her own bull by the horns.

"I didn't notice a ring on her finger," Vin commented. "She's not hitched, is she?"

"No, not formally. Or in any other form, as it turns out." She wouldn't divulge Cami's personal business. The situation with Alex was unsettling to Jade and she could only imagine how it affected her friend, though Cami seemed disinclined to admit its full impact on her.

Vin packed her blankets in one of the saddlebags, then started the bike. Jade climbed on behind him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, hugging him tight. Not out of fear of being on the big, bad-ass Harley, but because she loved the feel of

Vin's body against hers. She loved the smell of him. The nearness of him. She snuggled close to him as he rolled out of the parking lot and took the back road to the lake.

About fifteen miles out of town, they crested a hill and descended into the meadow with a sparse smattering of trees and boulders lining the edge of the water. The dirt path ran out and Vin rode through the tall grass, turning brown in patches here and there with the change in weather from summer to fall.

He scouted a spot under a tall pine tree with a thick trunk and pulled the bike alongside it. Jade slid off the seat and retrieved the blankets, spreading one out under the tree, facing west where the sun would set behind the mountains. The deep blue sky was enhanced by long streaks of wispy clouds, their edges already burning bright crimson and orange as the sun started its gradual descent.

Vin popped the cork on the bottle of champagne and poured two glasses. He handed both to Jade as he took the blanket she hadn't spread out on the ground and wrapped it around his shoulders. Then he settled under the tree with his back against the trunk. Creating a wide vee with his parted legs, he invited Jade to join him. She positioned herself between his thighs and leaned back against his hard chest.

Handing over his glass, she said, "Cheers." Then touched the rim of her crystal flute to his.

"We Italians say *salute!*"

She grinned. "All right. *Salute!*" She tapped the rims together again.

Vin took a deep sip, then said, "Good bubbly."

"Very good. I've never known anyone who'd pack up a bottle of Cristal for a Montana sunset, but I like it."

"Seemed appropriate for the occasion. My first sunset with a beautiful woman."

Her grin widened at the compliment. "You mean first sunset with a beautiful Montana woman."

"Nope. I meant what I said. I've been too busy to stop and smell any roses. Or catch any sunsets." He paused a moment, adding in a lower voice, "Not that I've met anyone I've wanted to share a sunset with, until now."

Jade's insides turned molten. "Well, put like that..." She was speechless, wanting to believe there was as much significance for him behind those words as there was for her.

Would that sort of wishful thinking be detrimental to her in the end?

Likely.

But she couldn't help herself.

"You know," he said as he wrapped one arm around her waist and rested the other hand, which held his glass, on his bent knee. "I'm not really good at expressing myself, but I have this odd compulsion to assure you the time we've spent together isn't the norm for me."

Her teeth clamped down on her lower lip, keeping her from saying anything. She wanted to leave the door open and see if he'd pass through it before she contributed to the conversation.

He was quiet for a spell, making her wonder if he'd said all he had to say on the subject. But he gave a short, self-deprecating laugh and added, "I've dated plenty, I won't lie about that. But it's always been about cultivating an image for the industry. Not about building something on a personal level. Does that make sense?"

"This is personal?"

"More than I've ever experienced before."

Her heart did a curious happy dance, eliciting that light feeling she enjoyed when she was with Vin.

The question was, did she reciprocate with the tell-all? Did she divulge her own feelings? Or was she supposed to hold them back? Let him embrace his emotions before she laid hers at his feet?

Holy hell. She really did need that stupid book she'd thought of this morning!

Thinking she had to say something – she wouldn't want to be left hanging if she'd just made such an admission – she dipped her toe into the water by saying, "I'm not very good at this either. As in, I've had zero experience."

His head bent to hers and his lips grazed her neck. Her long auburn hair blew gently in the light breeze, exposing her skin and giving him access to it.

Against her tingly flesh, he murmured, "I know it's selfish to say this, but I'm actually happy to hear that. Relieved, even."

She smiled as she settled more comfortably against him. He'd draped the ends of the blanket around the front of her, creating another cozy cocoon for them. She was warm and snug in his embrace.

"I don't think it's selfish," she said in a tentative voice, mindful not to go overboard, though every fiber of her being urged her to turn in his embrace, throw her arms around his neck and declare her love for him.

Reel it in there, silly girl. Stay cool.

"In fact," she continued on, choosing her words carefully. "I'm beginning to think I was supposed to wait this long for a moment like this. Maybe I wouldn't have appreciated it as much a year or more ago. Maybe I wouldn't have realized how special it was."

So much for not going overboard.

But Vin didn't seem to mind her admission. He said, "Yeah, I was kind of thinking the same thing. There has to be a reason I was suddenly so intent on sharing a lakeside, champagne sunset with you, when I've never thought about it in the past."

Her heart did so much more than merely pitter-patter. It threw a parade in celebration of its liberation.

"You really know how to make a girl's day."

He chuckled softly, the sound reverberating deep inside her. "You're not a girl, Jade. You are *all* woman."

No one had ever said anything like that to her. Finally shifting so she faced him, she said in all honesty – to hell with the consequences, "This is going to sound strange, I'm sure, but you made me that way. In a very short, but reflective and eventful twenty-four hours."

He grinned at her. That slight lifting of one corner of his mouth that made a sigh well in her throat. His ocean-blue eyes sparkled under the soft, golden glow of the setting sun, mesmerizing her.

Vin said, "Babe, I can't take the credit for that. But I will say that I'm glad you haven't let your family stand in our way."

She nodded. "So am I. For a long time now, I've felt so stifled. But you know what? It's not just them that caused the problem. I can honestly say I never really had a reason to stand up to them before."

"I don't want to cause tension between you all," he was quick to say.

"You're not. It's not really about you when it comes to dealing with them. It's about me. About standing up for what I want and what I believe in and...being a woman about it. Not little girl lost." She took a deep breath, adding, "My mother left my father and me when I was in my teens. That's what caused all this protectiveness on everyone's part. Not to mention my father's extreme fear that someday I'll leave too."

Vin's jaw tightened. He didn't say anything as he seemed to consider what she'd revealed. A few moments slid by before he said, "I'm sorry about your mom. Really, I am."

She smiled softly. "Thank you. It was over eight years ago. I think...maybe it's time I finally got over it. She made her choice. She wanted something different than what she had and that was her decision to make."

"Still hurts you, though," he ventured as his hand stroked her hair.

She nodded. "It always will. But if I spend the rest of my life resenting her or fearing I'll experience the same sort of rejection again if I put myself out there...I'm just perpetuating the problem, aren't I?"

His brow furrowed. "That's a very astute observation." He seemed to consider it further, as though applying it to some situation in his own life.

Jade felt like a small weight had been lifted from her shoulders at her acknowledgement and admission. No longer needing or wanting to discuss her mother's abandonment, she leaned toward Vin and kissed him. The liberation she felt did wonders for her confidence and her psyche.

He didn't hesitate in returning the kiss. Her lips parted and his tongue swept over hers, engaging it in a sinful dance that made her moan. The fingers of her free hand threaded through his hair as Vin deepened the kiss. The passion that arced between

them was all-consuming. Immediate and intense. Powerful. She melted against him as her body went up in flames.

Jade was wet in a heartbeat. She broke the kiss and shifted again. After draining the remainder of her champagne, she set the glass aside and reached for the hem of her sweater. She stripped off the suddenly confining material and tossed it toward the far end of the blanket they sat on.

Vin's eyes feasted on her as she unhooked her bra and threw it by the wayside as well. His dark brow crooked, making her laugh.

"You're so hot, you've made me impervious to the cold," she told him.

"Nice to know, but I don't want you to catch pneumonia, babe."

Regardless, he unwrapped the blanket from his shoulders and shimmied out of his jacket and pulled his T-shirt over his head. Jade continued stripping down, toeing off her boots, then pushing her jeans and thong down her legs. When they were both naked, Vin toppled her, the blanket around his shoulders once again to cover them.

She giggled as he nibbled on her throat before working his way down to her breasts. His tongue curled around one tight nipple, jolting her to the core of her being. His hand slid between her legs and he fingered her clit, inciting a riot of sensations that made her writhe beneath him. She was already wet, so when he pushed a finger into her cunt, it eased in slowly, but comfortably. He stroked her slippery walls as the pad of his thumb replaced his finger on her clit, his sexual ministrations heightening her arousal.

Her fingers were in his hair again. Her back arched, offering her breasts to him as he continued to lick and suck her pebbled nipples. She loved the attention and the feel of his hard muscles and smooth skin against her.

Vin's mouth left her breasts and his tongue and warm lips blazed a trail down her stomach, making her flesh quiver. He settled between her parted legs and used his tongue instead of his thumb to pleasure her. It flicked over her sensitive clit in quick, butterfly-wing movements that left her breathless. He pushed a second finger into her wet pussy and Jade squirmed against the soft blanket beneath her.

"Vin," she whispered as her fingers curled around the thick material surrounding her. "Oh Jesus." Everything he did to her was so amazingly wonderful, she was surprised she didn't come instantly.

Vin's head popped up for just a moment as he said, "We're not in a public restroom or a motel room, sweetheart. No need to hold back."

She got his meaning. She was always trying to be so quiet so she didn't draw attention to them. His encouragement to let loose sent a wicked thrill down her spine.

He went back to licking her clit and fingering her cunt. Jade's eyes closed and she lost herself in the beautiful sensations he evoked once again. More intense this evening, she had to admit, perhaps because of the day's revelations. And, it seemed, Vin was more determined than ever to get her off with an explosive bang.

She gripped the blanket more firmly as he suckled the sensitive knot of nerves between her legs and stroked her slick inner walls.

"Oh God," she whispered. A heartbeat later, a wild and wonderful orgasm tore through her and she cried out Vin's name as she came. That one word echoed all around them and it felt incredibly good to finally shout out her pleasure.

Vin seemed to be of the same mind, apparently liking her outburst. He let out a sharp groan, then moved away from her and retrieved a condom from his jeans pocket. Quickly rolling it on, he returned to her, draping the blanket over them again. His mouth was on hers a moment later as he thrust into her, making her body jerk and her fingers press into his shoulders.

When he rolled onto his back, he took her with him, his cock still buried in her pussy. Her legs straddled him and he sat up, forcing her to do the same. The new position caused his thick shaft to push deeper into her, filling her more fully than ever before.

"Oh!" she gasped at the intensity of sensation rocketing through her as his cock stretched her and made her inner walls naturally contract around him. "Good Lord," she said. "I thought you were big before."

He grinned. "Such flattery."

"This is *not* flattery. This is...unadulterated pleasure. Never-ending ecstasy."

"Mm, so good for my ego," he muttered as his tongue flicked over her nipple again before he drew the tight peak into his mouth and suckled it.

Jade tested their new arrangement by slowly gyrating her hips, loving how Vin felt inside her. When his fingers wrapped around her calves and he coaxed her from a kneeling position to a sitting one as she straddled his lap and wrapped her legs around him, she felt him even more intensely and fully inside her body.

"Holy shit," she said, letting out an unchecked squeal of delight. "That is unbelievable. But...I'm not too heavy for you?"

He groaned. "Please. There's not much to you. Don't insult my masculinity."

She smiled. "I don't think your masculinity could ever be in question. You are *all* man. Strong and virile and oh so sexy."

"That's better."

His hands cupped her ass and he guided her into a slow, easy rhythm that stole her breath. She moved with him, instantly addicted to this new way he felt inside her. Sex Ed had never been this informative—or as stimulating—in school.

"What's strange," she said, as her lips grazed his temple, "is that all this time I've thought I was missing out on something. But this isn't something I could share with just anyone. It wouldn't be the same."

His arms wrapped around her waist, pressing her chest against his as he held her tight. "You're right."

Sweeping aside a long lock of hair that fell across his forehead, she said, "I don't mean to get all sappy, but I definitely believe I was supposed to wait for this."

He stared at her a moment, his blue eyes blazing, his jaw set. His embrace tightened. Her breasts flattened against the hard ledge of his pectoral muscles as he said, "So was I."

She swallowed down a lump of emotion. Fought the prickle at the backs of her eyes. It was so amazing to share this moment with him. This special instant when she felt her soul connect with his. That it was a temporary moment in time didn't matter. All she cared about was how they bonded, in such an intense, meaningful way.

It would be greedy of her to wish for more—and unrealistic given their circumstances—so she held onto what was offered her this very second and appreciated the unexpected gift.

Her lips brushed over his as she murmured, "Makes you wonder why couples who had hot sex like this would even venture out of their bedroom at night."

He grinned. "I'd happily order room service 24/7."

A soft laugh fell from her lips. "We might need a shower from time to time."

"I could get creative in the shower," he mused. "In fact, I'm thinking of at least a dozen ways I still want to make love to you."

She sighed. "You're going to make me come."

"And that would be a bad thing?"

With a smile, she said, "Overall, I think I'm winning by about fifteen or twenty orgasms."

His laugh was a hearty one. "If only I were that talented!"

"Oh you are," she assured him.

Moments later, he whipped her onto her back, his cock still buried inside her. "You haven't had an orgasm in at least five minutes. We should definitely do something about that."

"You typically do."

He thrust deep into her, making her cry out with sheer pleasure. His strokes were long and forceful, hitting all the right spots and reigniting the spark inside her, stoking the flames until she felt like a bonfire blazed within her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and held him close to her. She writhed beneath him as his cock pumped in and out of her. His mouth on her throat made her even hotter.

"You do crazy-wicked things to me," she muttered as her excitement built.

"Ditto, babe." He fucked her a little harder, a little faster.

Jade moved with him, absorbing one erotic blow after another, seeking even more pleasure. Her euphoria was an emotional and physical aura that enveloped her from

head to toe. There wasn't a single inch of her that didn't respond to Vin's lovemaking and the intense feelings he drew from the depths of her soul.

When he kissed her again, his tongue delving deep, silently conveying his own desires, she lost more than just her heart. She lost all control.

Tearing her mouth from his, she screamed, "Oh God, Vin!" Her climax was a body-racking one, taking her by surprise as it erupted inside her and made her entire body quake.

"Christ, Jade," he muttered as he thrust into her. "Ah Jesus. Keep squeezing me like that."

She did, clenching him tight, not wanting to relinquish her hold on him. It felt too incredible to have him inside her. When he came, shouting her name and thrusting even deeper, she did everything she could think of to intensify his pleasure. Her teeth nipped his neck. Her fingers pressed into his shoulders. Her knees compressed against his hips. Her cunt contracted around his cock.

The feeling of him pulsing and throbbing inside her was as wonderful as her own release. His spasms set off more fireworks inside her and another orgasm hit her.

"Vin. Oh God." She would never know such beautiful, blissful sensations again, she knew it. When he moved on, her breathtaking orgasms would go with him. But she'd have some very vivid and titillating memories to remind her of how good sex could really be when it was with the right person.

She continued to hold him tight against her body and squeezed his cock again.

Vin's voice was gruff as he said, "Holy shit. I seriously could come again."

"Is that humanly possible?"

"I don't think so. But it sure feels possible."

Her cunt continued to squeeze him and he let out a low growl.

She said, "Seems unfair that I get more than one."

"I wasn't complaining about the quantity. I was just saying you feel so damn good, I could start up all over again."

Her smile was, no doubt, a teasing one. "I'll just lie here and let you regroup."

He chuckled. "It might actually be that easy with you." His head dipped and he kissed her again. When he came up for air, he added, "Still have those dozen or so positions to try out."

"Well, if you insist, I suppose I could be your guinea pig."

"Oh the hardship, you say."

"Indeed. This really is more than one woman should bear." She swept her fingers through his hair and smiled at him. "But I'll endure it."

"Smartass." He hauled himself off her.

As his cock slid from her cunt, she let out a small whimper. "I don't recall shooing you away."

He rolled off the condom and wrapped it in a napkin from the wine package. He dragged on his sexy black briefs, then refilled their glasses. Jade crawled over to him and draped the blanket over his broad shoulders before he settled against the tree trunk again. She returned to her spot between his parted legs and he wrapped the rest of the blanket around her naked body. From the gap in the top, created by her shoulders, she was able to lift her glass to her lips.

After a long sip, she said, "This puts a whole new spin on sunsets under the big sky of Montana."

"Glad I didn't miss it." His head was close to hers and he kissed her temple.

Jade stared up at the vast, deep-blue sky. The sun hovered above the mountain range in the distance and cast vibrant colors across the sky and the lake. Red, orange and gold made for a spectacular display on both surfaces and Jade took it all in. The crisp autumn air turned the tip of her nose cold, but with Vin's free arm wrapped around her and his bare chest pressed to her back, she felt comfortable and even a bit toasty.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" she mused.

"Almost as beautiful as you."

Her cheeks burned. "Talk about flattery."

"Not flattery," he whispered into her ear. "Sincere appreciation."

"Hmm."

She sipped her champagne and watched the sun as it began to slowly sink behind the peaks of the mountain.

Behind her, Vin's muscles tensed as he said, "I have something to tell you, sweetheart."

She twisted her body so she could stare up at him. "What?"

Admittedly, there was a spark of hope deep in her belly that made her think he was about to divulge his true feelings for her. Feelings that mirrored her own. Jade had never told any man who wasn't a relative that she loved him, but the sentiment lingered on the tip of her tongue.

She knew it was ridiculous to think she was in love after only a day and half and multiple orgasms, but she couldn't stop the emotions from welling within her. To think he felt the same way was absurd and maybe even a bit sadistic. That didn't stop her from holding out hope that he did, in fact, share her feelings.

Staring up at him, captivated all over again by his beautiful blue irises and his devilishly handsome face, she encouraged him to be forthcoming with whatever was on his mind.

"You can tell me anything," she assured him with a soft smile. "I've blabbed quite a bit. Maybe too much, but..." She shook her head. "I can't seem to help it. Please, don't hold back. Whatever you have to say, I want to hear it. Good or bad," she had to add. A hard truth to swallow, sure, but she wanted to be on solid ground with him. Wanted to

know exactly what he was thinking and feeling. It was the only way she'd be able to get through this convoluted, yet wonderful, short-term romance.

His jaw clenched for a moment. His azure eyes darkened in color. He seemed to search for the right words, finally settling on them. After a deep breath, he said, "I tried to tell you last night that I know more about you than I'd let on. I'm not a stranger, Jade. I'm someone you knew in the past. Someone you once confided in."

Her eyes narrowed on him. "I...don't know what you're talking about."

He took a quick sip of his champagne, then said, "I'm Vin D'Angelo today. But eight years ago, I was Vincent Moretti."

The name seemed to echo in her head. She stared at him, blinking once, twice. Her mind reeled as realization slowly dawned on her. Shaking her head—and unable to fully accept what her brain tried to tell her—she asked, "How do you know that name?"

She attempted to move away from him, but Vin gripped her biceps with the hand not holding his champagne glass.

"Don't go anywhere," he was quick to say. "Just listen to me for a minute."

She stared at him, dumbfounded.

He rushed on. "Jade, you tutored me when we were teenagers. Over the Montana State Educational intranet."

Her jaw quivered. Her eyes flooded with tears she couldn't fully explain. Her heart constricted, as though a fist squeezed it tight.

She searched her mind and her heart and her soul for the reason behind her sudden reaction to Vin—*Vincent*. His words. His admission. His...shocking revelation. What, exactly, did she feel? And why?

She took a moment to pull in a deep breath, then let it out slowly as she assessed the situation. Diverting her gaze, she sipped her drink while his name continued to ramble around inside her head.

Vincent Moretti.

Vin was Vincent Moretti? The confidant she'd trusted eight years ago? The "friend" she'd poured her heart out to, told all her darkest feelings to after her mother had left her and her father? The "friend" who had—

"No," she said on a sharp breath as she pushed away from him and stood. She tossed her champagne into the grass and set the glass next to the bottle. Reaching for her panties and jeans, she yanked them on as she shook her head.

This was the guy who'd encouraged her to spill her guts and had then vanished? The guy who had pretended to be her rock before he'd abruptly uprooted himself, disappearing from her life without a single word of explanation? Just like her mother had done!

Her temper flared. She scooped up her sweater and pulled it over her head. Vin stood as well, reaching for his jeans.

Jade said, "You son-of-a-bitch. How could you keep this from me?"

"Let me explain," he said in an even tone as he buttoned his Levi's and then bent down to retrieve his T-shirt. "Just...give me a minute."

"To do *what*?" she demanded. "Lie some more to me?"

"I haven't lied to you," he insisted in an indignant tone. He slipped into his shirt. "I haven't lied to you at all. I just didn't tell you we knew each other eight years ago."

"Oh is *that* all!" She searched for her boots. Finding them, she stepped into them as she said, "You made me feel safe and comfortable confiding in you when my mother left and then you vanished from my life. Now here you are, eight years later, doing the *exact* same thing! What kind of a person are you?"

He let out a sharp breath. "Would you just calm down for a second and hear me out?"

"Hear you out?" she demanded, her heart feeling as though that fist around it had sufficiently crushed it. "*Hear you out?* Are you crazy?"

She shoved past him and collected her blankets, effectively toppling the remainder of the expensive champagne.

Continuing on as Vin stood to the side and watched her, Jade said, "You knew all this time who I was. And you just waltzed in, swept me off my feet—*once more*—with every intention of waltzing out *after* I'd spilled all to you again. After I'd gone all soft around the edges over you and those stupid orgasms!"

He let out a hollow laugh. "Careful there, sweetheart."

"Don't call me that," she snapped. Bundling up the blankets in a tangled mess, she crammed them into the saddlebag, along with the empty bottle and the glasses, using the blankets as a cushion. Turning back to him, she said, "Take me back to town."

His jaw clenched for a moment. "Not so fast."

She planted her hands on her hips. "You can't hold me hostage out here. I'll walk back if I have to."

"Don't be ridiculous." Despite the tension that made his muscles bunch, his tone was even and steady. "Look, the fact is, I lived in Montana when I was in my teens. You tutored me and I valued the friendship we had. Then my mother killed herself and I went to live with her brother in New Jersey. My uncle adopted me. That's why the change in name."

She stared at him, a little of her anger slipping away at his own personal tragedy.

"It all happened so fast, Jade," he told her with a compelling look. "We packed up the house before we even had the funeral. I didn't have the chance to get online and tell you before I left. Once I was out of state, I was no longer eligible to connect to the intranet. Since that's the only way we were allowed to communicate when we were in the tutoring program, I didn't have an outside email address to reach you. By the time I got settled in New Jersey and worked through everything I was feeling about my mom's suicide, I figured you'd written me off and I didn't want to complicate things by trying to find you."

She stared at him, conflicted. If everything he said was true...

Her eyes narrowed on him as she studied him closely. He sure as hell didn't seem to be lying. In fact, he looked remorseful, apologetic and a little agonized all at once.

Jade sighed. Yes, he was definitely telling her the truth. "I had no idea..."

His look softened. "Of course not. But you probably thought it was your fault I'd dropped out of the program and stopped corresponding with you."

Nodding, she said, "I assumed you got tired of hearing about my problems."

"No," he insisted. "That wasn't it at all. I loved our communications. I used to wish we could meet in person."

She was still confused. "Why are you here now?"

He closed the gap between them and took her hand in his, which she allowed. The fury she'd felt moments earlier vanished with the earnest expression on his face and his admission of a painful past *he'd* had to reconcile.

"I never stopped thinking about you," he told her. "I always wondered what you'd thought about my disappearance. If it...hurt you."

She merely nodded.

His eyes closed for a moment. Snapping back open, they locked with hers. "I was afraid of that. I thought about it all the time. For eight years. I wanted to find you and tell you. I wanted to apologize and assure you that what was going on with me had nothing to do with you. That I didn't stop corresponding with you because of anything you said or did."

"I thought you'd lost interest. It was hard to understand how...*why*... It happened so fast. So suddenly. Completely out of the blue."

"I know." He gave a gentle tug on her hand and she stepped toward him, their bodies touching. Her insides lit up instantly. "I'm so sorry. Truly, I am."

She let out a long breath of air. Of course he was sorry. He wouldn't have come to town to find her if he didn't honestly want to apologize and set the record straight.

Jade said, "I'm sorry I overreacted. Old wounds and all that."

He pulled her into his arms and held her. "I was afraid of how you'd respond as much as I was afraid of how badly I'd hurt you when I'd abandoned you years ago. Maybe that's why I didn't speak up when I should have."

She gave this some thought, then said, "You tried to tell me in the diner when we met, didn't you?"

He nodded. "And last night at The Well. This morning... All day, I've been thinking about it. There's so much—"

"Wait," she interjected as she pulled away slightly and stared up at him. "You don't have to say anything else. It doesn't matter, really. I mean, I'm thrilled to finally know what happened—and that I didn't drive you away. I'm deliriously happy and flattered you came to town to find me. To tell me. But what we both suffered through happened

eight years ago, Vin. We're different people now and clearly we gravitated to each other despite the past. So...I don't need to know anything else and you don't need to feel guilty any longer about vanishing without a word. I get it. I understand."

"Yes, but —"

"Vin," she said, her heart filling with love again. "You came here to say you're sorry about something that happened when we were teenagers, but we're not kids anymore. Our response to each other is mature and what happened in the past...doesn't matter."

She realized that now. She'd been devastated when she'd lost her cyber friend and maybe she'd blamed that heartbreak and rejection for her lack of a love life in her adult years. When, in fact, that wasn't at all the reason she'd never made a love connection. The truth was, she'd just needed to find the right man.

Tightening her arms around his neck, she pressed her mouth to his, conveying her emotions with her kiss.

Vin held her tightly, returning the gesture with equaled passion. Their kiss packed a punch, more so than ever before. Perhaps because she now knew why she'd felt so connected to him from the get-go. That underlying current and sense of familiarity she'd experienced had been valid. They'd shared an intimate bond long before they'd even shared their first kiss.

When he finally pulled away, Vin stared down at her and asked, "So we leave the past where it belongs and try to figure out how we're going to make the present work?"

"Yes." Odd, but she didn't have that heavy heart she'd felt earlier. Vin would be leaving soon, but they wouldn't lose touch this time. She was certain of it. And if they'd found each other after eight years, didn't that mean Destiny might have a hand in how their romance played out?

With renewed hope, she added, "Things happen for a reason. Let's not obsess over this. Instead, let's enjoy our time together and see what comes of it."

He grinned. "So sensible." Untangling himself from her, he took her by the hand and led her to the motorcycle. "How about we head back to town now?"

"I could use a quick shower before we hit The Shimmy Shack."

"Why don't I pick you up at your house for our date? If you don't mind the bike."

"I love the bike," she assured him as she climbed on behind him.

He dropped her off at the boutique and she wrote out her address on a sheet of paper, along with a map so he could find her remotely hilltop home.

She walked out with him and he held her car door open for her.

"I really am sorry about the past," he told her.

"So am I. You suffered as much as I did. We both lost our mothers. Maybe that's one of the things that kept us connected after all this time."

"Maybe." He stared deep into her eyes as he added, "I hate that I hurt you."

She smoothed his furrowed brow with her fingertips. "I know now that it wasn't intentional. That means a lot to me."

He kissed her one last time before he climbed on his bike and headed to the motel to change.

As Jade drove home, she considered the bizarre twist of fate and Vin's sincere apology. The fact that they'd never forgotten each other was significant to her, adding to the feelings she'd developed for him in such a short period of time.

Conversely, his admission made it even more difficult to reconcile in her mind that Vin was only a temporary in her life in the physical sense. Even if they did manage to stay in touch over the phone or via the internet, that would likely be the extent of their future relationship because of their differences in geography.

A terribly depressing thought to ponder and one she chose to push to the back of her mind so that she could enjoy her last night with Vin.

Chapter Ten

Vin was monumentally relieved that Jade had accepted his apology and understood about his disappearance years ago. More importantly, she now knew it had nothing to do with her. Unfortunately, he had one more item to divulge, but what she'd said about leaving the past in the past made sense to him. She'd been through enough. They both had. The old wounds didn't need to be reopened more than they had been today.

He got what she meant by their association being different now that they were adults. What had happened in the past wasn't really any of their own doing and it was time to let it lie.

He'd move on, as she had. It was now time to focus on the present. Maybe the future too. If they both wanted their budding romance to work out, they'd find a way, right?

Vin decided to believe in that logic, thinking there had to be a reason they were both single, both waiting for that right person to come along. Well, Vin had done more than wait around. He'd sought Jade out when he could no longer stand to just think about her and not actually find her.

He thought about all of this as he showered and then dressed in black jeans and a long-sleeved, button-down burgundy shirt. He pulled on his boots and raked a hand through his hair after he blew it dry. Grabbing his jacket and the two helmets, he headed out the door.

Cami had already picked Noah up at the motel. He'd left a note for Vin, saying they intended to have dinner while Vin and Jade were at the lake and that they'd met up at The Shimmy Shack.

Vin wasn't much of a dancer, but that was irrelevant. All he cared about was spending time with Jade. Didn't matter where they hung out, as long as they were together.

He followed the directions to her house, parked in the gravel driveway and ascended the short flight of steps that led to a large porch in a medium-colored wood. Her front door was natural wood as well, with an intricate, crystal-cut inset that glittered from the light burning in the foyer. He rang the bell and only had to wait a minute or so before he saw her bound down the stairs that led to the entryway.

She pulled open the door and his jaw dropped.

"Now that's the kind of response a girl likes to evoke," she said with a smile.

"Wow," Vin said. "That's some outfit, babe."

She wore a pair of black leather pants and a black, off-the-shoulder sweater. High-heeled, black leather ankle boots with pointy toes completed her ensemble. He whistled

under his breath as he took her in from head to toe and back up. Her long auburn hair fell over her bare shoulders and down her back in soft, silky-looking curls, enhanced by the random streaks of gold. Her amber-colored eyes sparkled under the shimmering light from the chandelier. She'd applied a little more makeup than earlier in the day, but still wore the neutral-colored lip gloss that accentuated her plump lips and made them damn kissable.

Vin said, "We could skip the dancing."

She laughed. "Not a chance. I've waited too long for a date like this. You're taking me out tonight."

He stepped aside as she lifted her coat from the rack in the foyer, then passed through the doorway, locking it behind her. She dropped her keys into the small bag she carried and preceded him to the bike.

Vin said, "Sure you don't mind the helmet?"

"Are you kidding? With all this hair I have, there's no chance of it going flat."

He chuckled, liking how easily she adapted to his lifestyle. How she embraced every little adventure.

They rode back into town and she directed him to The Shimmy Shack. Walking into the joint, he wasn't surprised that the conversation and commotion virtually came to a standstill. Seemed to be the order of the day when he was with the first daughter of Moon River.

She slipped her hand in his and tugged him forward, a smile on her pretty face as she greeted the people they passed. It wasn't crowded by any means, but there were a dozen or so folks in the bar area, sipping cocktails, and several more scattered about. Round tables edged the dance floor, which no one occupied at the moment. A handful of guys were off to the side at the dart board. A live band was set up in the far corner, playing country-western music.

As they made their way to a table—Cami and Noah nowhere in sight—a tall, blond-haired man approached them. He was lean-muscled and about Vin's height. He squared his shoulders as he took in Vin and his date.

Jade greeted him with a smile. "Brian, this is Vin D'Angelo." Staring up at Vin, she added, "Brian Taylor. My cousin."

She mouthed the word *deputy*.

Vin bit back a laugh, but he heard the amusement in his tone as he said, "Nice to meet you." They shook hands, Brian giving him a hard shake that told Vin he wasn't pleased to see Vin with his cousin.

Get in line, buddy.

Granted, he hadn't experienced any problems with the sheriff while he was in town, but he had a feeling the slightest offense would be blown out of proportion strictly because of his association with Jade.

Brian's gaze slid to Jade. "What are you doing here?"

She sighed dramatically. "I am allowed out at night, you know."

Brian's grimace was a sarcastic one. "Ha, ha. This isn't exactly your style." As his blue-gray eyes swept over her, Vin got the impression he wasn't just talking about The Shimmy Shack.

"A girl can only watch so many movies, Bri."

He didn't look pleased with her answer. Vin found the exchange interesting and a little painful on Jade's behalf. She really was under everyone's thumb.

To defuse the tense situation, he said to Brian, "We're meeting friends for a night out. You're welcome to join us."

The other man was clearly taken aback at the gracious—and likely very unexpected—invitation. "Uh, thanks," he said, his gaze shifting as he briefly glanced over his shoulder. "But I'm here on a date."

"Lily Johnson?" Jade asked, obviously surprised. "Nice to see you finally manned up on that one. She's only been flirting with you for the past ten years."

He smirked at her. "She hasn't even been in town for ten years. But yeah, I finally asked her out. So... I'll see you two later." He said this as a warning, letting Vin know he'd have his eye on them.

Vin had to stifle another laugh. *Quirky little town.*

As Jade led him to a table, she asked in a low tone, "Feel my pain yet?"

He grinned as he pulled a chair out for her. "Guess it would be patronizing of me to say they obviously care about you and want to make sure you're okay. Not out with a lunatic motorcycle rider."

"Yes, it would be patronizing. But also accurate, which is why I tolerate it. They mean well. They just need to lengthen the leash a bit. This choke collar is strangling me."

Vin sank into a chair next to her. Reaching for her hand again, he gave it a gentle squeeze, then rested it in his lap. Leaning toward her he said, "Babe, I'm actually kind of glad they've all got their eye on you. Keeps the other wolves at bay."

She laughed good-naturedly. "Oh yeah, like that's a problem." Her tone dropped as she whispered in his ear, "There are no other wolves. Just one."

He couldn't resist stealing a kiss, not giving a damn what Deputy Brian had to say about it. Vin had the continual compulsion to mark his territory when it came to Jade, but more than that, she was simply irresistible.

She sighed again, this time dreamily. "Ah, you're a man who knows how to make a girl's toes curl."

"*Woman,*" he corrected once more.

She smiled. "Thanks for the reminder. And the vote of confidence. Now I need to prove it to my family."

"I think you're well on your way to standing up for yourself."

"Thanks to you."

* * * * *

Minutes later, Noah and Cami arrived at their table. Jade's friend positively glowed as her new man pulled out a chair for her.

Cami sat next to Jade and said, "You wouldn't believe the meal we just had. I have no idea how the zipper on this skirt is still intact."

Noah raised a brow. "Told you I'd fix that for you."

An innuendo lingered between them, which made Jade smile. She asked, "Where'd you go for dinner?"

The band had taken a break, so conversation was easy to maintain.

Cami said, "Cattleman's Steakhouse. We had lobster and filet mignon, then split a dessert that would make your eyes roll into the back of your head. French vanilla ice cream smothered in chocolate and caramel sauce and served with a ginormous, gooey brownie. Oh. My. God." She leaned in close to Jade, adding, "*Orgasmic.*"

Jade laughed. "Sounds like it'd kick the crap out of my malted shakes."

"Times a hundred."

Vin said, "Maybe we should have gone to dinner with them."

"Lovely as it sounds," she said, "I preferred our trip to the lake." She squeezed his hand, their entwined fingers still resting in his lap. For good measure, she leaned toward him and kissed his cheek. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Brian watching her closely. She gave him a little wave, just to let him know he was being a pain in the ass. His attention returned to his date.

The band came back and struck up another toe-tapping tune. Noah stood and asked Cami, "Care to take a spin around the dance floor?"

"I'd love it."

As Noah escorted her to the parquet square, Vin asked Jade, "Do you want to dance?"

"I'll wait for a slow one," she said with a conspiratorial wink.

He gave her a mischievous grin. "Good thinking."

The waitress arrived and Jade ordered Chardonnay for both her and Cami. Vin requested beers for him and Noah.

Jade didn't miss the curious look the waitress slid Cami's way. Nor did she miss Jason Scott, one of Alex's friends, leave his seat two tables over and approach the couple on the dance floor. Cami stepped away from Noah to speak with Jason, a tense look on both their faces.

"This won't go well," Jade muttered as she slipped from her own chair.

Vin followed, but kept a respectable distance as Jade approached Cami and Jason.

"It's really none of your business," Cami was saying to Jason as Jade joined them.

Jason said, "When my friend's girlfriend is stepping out on him, I *make* it my business."

"You hypocrite!" Cami shot back. "Are you going to stand there and tell me you don't know about Alex stepping out on *me*?"

The guilt that flashed over Jason's face gave him away.

"You're both jerks," Cami said as she turned on her high heels. Jade didn't miss the tears in her eyes.

Unfortunately, Jason wasn't willing to let the issue lie. He grabbed her by the arm, yanking her back toward him, causing her to stumble.

"Hey!" Jade was about to leap forward and catch Cami, but Noah swooped in and steadied her with his strong arms around her.

With a menacing look, he said to Jason, "Careful there, pal. I might have to kick your ass."

"Now damn it, Jade." Brian's booming voice from behind their small group actually caused the band to stop playing, as though in anticipation of a violent altercation. "We don't need trouble like this in our town."

"What the *hell*?" she demanded, turning her attention to her cousin. "He's the one who started it!" She lifted an arm and pointed to Jason. "You want to flex your muscles, do it with *him*. Vin and Noah have nothing to do with this."

"Yeah," Cami added in an angry tone. "And for everyone's information, Alex and I are no longer a couple. I told him fuck off this afternoon. So mind your own business, Jason."

"All right," Vin stepped in, literally. He positioned himself between Jade and Jason, his back to her as he squared off with the other man and Brian, since he'd joined Jason's side. "Clearly this was all a misunderstanding. Cami's here by choice and with no romantic entanglements to account for, so let's all take a deep breath and bring the testosterone level down a few notches."

Jade smiled. "So sensible," she said, borrowing his line from their outing at the lake. Around Vin's broad shoulder, she said to her cousin, "Let's not make our visitors uncomfortable, huh, Bri? They might do our local economy a favor someday and film here, but not if they consider it a hostile working environment."

Brian's teeth ground together as he seemed to debate his course of action. Finally, he said, "Try to keep things civil, will you, Jade?"

"Civil?" she scoffed. "Come on, Bri. These guys weren't doing anything. Neither are Cami and I, for that matter. Whomever we decide to *step out* with is our business and no one else's. Including yours. So go back to your date and let us enjoy ours."

Gaining some steam, she pointed to the band and demanded, "You guys—play something! Preferably a slow song, because that's all I can dance to."

Leaving everyone else to their own devices, she stepped into Vin's awaiting embrace as he turned and grinned at her moxie.

"Woman enough for you?"

He chuckled as his eyes glowed. "Oh yeah."

They fell into an easy rhythm together as the band struck up a sexy tune and the congregation dispersed.

"You sure know how to go off," Vin muttered in her ear. "All that stored up passion?"

"More like years of being told what to do and when to do it and hating that I never stood up for myself. Well, no more, Mister. Floodgates are open. And as for you," she said as her body pressed to his, "your level head is a nice complement to my apparent hot one."

"I don't think you're hot-headed. I think you've spent too much time bottling up your feelings."

She couldn't argue with that. "Feels good to finally speak my mind. In fact, I have something to say about how you're dancing with me."

His brow crooked. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. It makes me want to get naked with you."

Vin groaned. "That'll get me shot for sure. But it'll be worth it."

"Brian doesn't have jurisdiction over me. And Noah and Cami don't need chaperones."

"Look how easily you talked me into leaving with you." He released her and guided her back to their table with a hand on the small of her back. She collected her purse and coat as he dropped some money on the table for the round they'd ordered, even though it had yet to be delivered. Over his shoulder, he said to Noah, "We're heading out."

"Have fun," Cami said, all traces of tears and tension gone. She was snuggled in Noah's arms and looked perfectly happy to stay there the rest of the night.

"You too," Jade said. "Call me in the morning."

She left with Vin, not even bothering to check if Brian was documenting the time or placing a call to her uncle. She'd finally realized that the less she played into their overprotective behavior, the less it affected her.

Vin was right. She was a grown woman and it was time she started acting like one. Taking responsibility for her actions. Taking care of herself without letting others dictate what she should say or do. Not letting anyone else make her decisions for her and not basing her choices on what her family wanted for her rather than what she wanted for herself.

Yes, indeed. She was a brand-new Jade Taylor.

She climbed on the back of Vin's motorcycle and held on tight as they rode back to her house. When he pulled into the drive in front of her garage and cut the engine, she removed her helmet and asked, "Coming in, right?"

His grin was a wicked one. "Not even your gun-toting relatives could keep me away."

"That's what I like to hear."

She let them into the house and Vin nodded in apparent approval. "Nice digs."

The foyer faced a staircase split in two. The lower flight led to a basement entertainment room, a bedroom and an adjoining bathroom. The other flight went up to the main part of the house. It opened to a living and dining room combo on the left, along with a kitchen that had a good-sized island in the center of it and a deck off the back. To the right was a hallway where a guest bed and bath were located, along with her master suite. She left the foyer light on and took Vin's hand, leading him into her room.

"Thanks for the date," she said as they crossed the threshold.

Vin chuckled. "I'd hardly call that a date. One dance?"

"I'm the one who made it a short evening out, remember?" She wagged her brows at him as she shed her jacket and toed off her ankle boots.

"Believe me, I'm not complaining." He watched as she pulled the sweater over her head and tossed it toward a chair, not caring whether it hit the intended target or not. He added, "But we seriously do need to go out on a real date."

"You don't like fucking me?" she teased as she shoved her leather pants down her legs.

Vin groaned. His arms shot around her waist and he backed her up until she fell onto the mattress, with him on top of her. "I am all about making love to you."

He corrected her terminology, which made her heart soar. "Then you'd better get on it, because I'm horny as hell."

Laughing, he said, "And not the least bit ashamed to admit it, I see."

"Oh should I be?" she asked with mocked innocence.

Vin shook his head. "I happen to like your sexual appetite."

"Good, because I'm *starving*."

"Mm, can't have that." He moved away from her just long enough to get naked with her.

Jade shifted on the bed and reached for the box of condoms she kept in the top drawer of her nightstand. She ripped it open, then asked, "Do these things expire?"

Vin crooked a brow at her. "How long have they been in that box?"

"Since I was twenty-one, I think. I forgot to take them on the cruise I went on that year. Not that it mattered. That was the deflowering that left much to be desired."

He frowned. "That's too bad." He settled between her legs and gave her a long, sexy kiss before he murmured, "You should have had a better first time."

"Doesn't matter," she said. "I had a phenomenal second time. And third and fourth and fifth..."

He grinned. "Here's to a phenomenal sixth."

"Bring it on," she whispered as she tore into a foil packet.

Vin sheathed himself and asked, "Are you ready for me?"

"Oh God, yes. *Always.*"

The tip of his hard cock pressed against her opening. She spread her legs wider, wrapping them around Vin's hips.

He sank into her pussy, making her moan and writhe beneath him. "Date night has never been so heavenly," she whispered in his ear.

Vin moved inside her, slowly and leisurely. Her skin tingled and her insides burned. He kissed her deeply as his cock filled her completely. Her hands roamed his hunky body, sliding along the tops of his broad shoulders, then down his thick arms. She splayed her palms across his muscular back, pressing his body tightly to hers.

He let out a growl as he broke their kiss. "That's it, babe. Touch me. Do whatever you want."

"I want to come," she said, feeling the tension build within her. She squeezed his cock and then gasped for air as a powerful climax ripped through her.

Vin thrust into her a little harder and lot faster, keeping her in a constant state of arousal.

"You feel so damn good," he told her. "I could stay here forever."

"Okay."

He laughed. "Careful. I might take you up on that."

"Oh the hardship."

She squirmed beneath him, the erotic sensations building again as he made love to her with forceful strokes that caused her breath to come in heavy pants.

"Vin," she whispered as the fingers of one hand threaded through his thick hair. "Oh God, that's incredible. I love how you feel inside me."

"Come again, babe. Come for me."

Her body bowed off the bed as her soft curves melded to his hard muscles. Her legs gripped his hips firmly as she moved with him, barreling toward that explosive moment when everything inside her would collide and erupt.

Emotion welled within her too. All of the day's revelations and the knowledge that Vin was as ensnared as she was made her heart hammer in her chest. She'd thought it ridiculous to fall in love in twenty-four hours. But she knew why she'd felt so intensely drawn to Vin. He was meant to be in her life, in whatever capacity God deemed appropriate. He belonged in her heart and he'd stay there regardless of whether or not

their paths veered away from each other again. She would love him always. And he just might love her too.

The thought made the emotions coursing through her and the sensations crashing over her more vibrant and meaningful. They were too intense to hold back, so she gave into them.

"Oh God, Vin!" She held him tightly as her body trembled, then quaked with another breathtaking orgasm.

"That's it," he urged. "Oh yeah."

She felt his body jerk and spasm as he came with her.

"Yes," she whispered. "Oh God, that's so wonderful." She couldn't release him. Held onto him for dear life, in fact, unwilling to give up this precious moment before she had to. Vin seemed equally inclined to keep her body pressed to his and his cock inside her.

He breathed heavily in her ear as he said, "Goddamn. I don't think I'll ever build up stamina with you. The second I'm inside you, I'm pushed right to the breaking point."

"I hear ya."

His head lifted and he grinned at her. "Good chemistry."

"The best."

He stayed where he was for several minutes, then hauled himself up, much to Jade's dismay.

"Once again, I'm not shooing you away."

"Can't be comfortable to have me squishing you into the mattress."

"Oh yes, it is."

He chuckled, then gave her a quick kiss before disappearing into her bathroom.

Jade snuggled under the covers and watched as he returned, enjoying the view. "You are devastatingly handsome."

Crawling into bed beside her, he said, "Still stroking my ego."

"I call it like I see it."

He pulled her to him so that her head rested on his chest. He put his arm around her shoulders and she sighed happily.

After he dropped a kiss on the top of her head, he said, "I've got some things to wrap up in the morning, but maybe we could meet for lunch?"

Jade fought the sadness that naturally filled her heart at the thought of Vin moving on. She forced herself to cling to the optimism she'd felt earlier. They weren't just two ships passing in the night, she was certain of it. She just had to hold onto what they shared now and believe it was enough to lead to something more.

Even though she had absolutely no idea how that could possibly happen.

Her chest tightened. The hope she'd been hanging onto waned. She was completely deluding herself, she feared. But she refused to spoil what little time she had left with Vin.

Keeping her tone as even as she could, she said, "That'd be great. How about someplace different, like the Mexican place on Silverleaf Street?"

Vin eyed her suspiciously. "Away from Uncle Bob at the diner?"

"Ah, you catch on quick, Grasshopper."

He laughed. "Mexican sounds good."

When he yawned, it made her grin. "Wore you out, did I?"

"I didn't get a nap after our afternoon session."

"Poor guy." She shifted away from him and he followed her.

"Why do you do that?" he asked in a lazy tone as he snuggled behind her, his arms wrapping around her to keep her body pressed against his.

"Do what?"

"Roll away from me."

"Oh. Uh, I don't know. Doesn't my head get heavy on your chest?"

"Please." He squeezed her tight. "You really think that?"

She shrugged. "Not very experienced in this area, remember? Just seems like you'd get uncomfortable after awhile."

"Well, I don't. So stay as long as you want."

She smiled into the darkness. "Okay, I'll keep that in mind. Though...this is nice too."

He kissed her shoulder, then her neck. "Yeah, it is." One of his hands cupped a breast, the other splayed over her stomach. His cock nudged her ass and his brick wall of a chest pressed against her back.

"I should turn down the furnace," she murmured. "Don't think I'll be needing it tonight."

"Glad to be of service."

"In more ways than one."

His laugh was a soft, sexy one. Her insides fluttered and she tamped down a sigh of longing. She could seriously share her bed with him every night for the rest of her life. A strange sentiment, since she'd slept alone since birth. She'd come to enjoy spreading out, wrapping herself in the blankets and not having to listen to anyone snoring. But as Vin drifted off to sleep and his light snoring wafted on the quiet night air, she was perfectly content.

There was nothing about him that didn't seem right to her and she loved having him in her bed. Knew it would seem huge and empty and lonely after he was gone, but liking how he filled it at the moment. She knew his masculine scent would linger on her sheets until she washed them, which likely would be further down the road than usual.

As she reveled in his warmth and hunkiness, her eyelids grew heavy. She stared at the alarm clock, wishing she could turn back time and start her week all over again.

As the digitized numbers slowly changed, she eventually gave into her exhaustion. The last thought on her mind before she fell asleep, though, was on something Vin had said earlier at the lake, when he'd admitted he was Vincent Moretti. He'd said he'd tried to tell her who he was and then he'd said, "There's so much—" before she'd cut him off.

Why that conversation came back to her now, she wasn't sure. But it lingered in her mind, making her wonder what else he'd intended to say. *Was* there something else to be said? Was there more to his admission?

Granted, she'd told him that none of it mattered now. They were different people. Grownups, not teenagers. She'd honestly believed at that moment that all she'd needed to know about him was who he'd been eight years ago. But was there more to his story? Had he tried to tell her something else?

This weighed heavy on her mind, but there was no reconciling it. And perhaps there was no need to.

Giving a slight nod of her head, she decided that was a true sentiment. The past didn't matter. The present and future did.

Finally closing her eyes, she fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter Eleven

The next morning, Jade awoke to a hot, hunky body pressed against hers *and* the tantalizing smell of coffee, eggs and bacon.

Her stomach growled just as her libido sprang to life.

With a soft laugh, she turned in Vin's loose embrace and found him staring down at her.

"Watching me sleep?" she asked.

"Is that creepy?"

She smiled. "Not. It's kind of sexy. Your hair is mussed like I did a number on it last night when we made love and you've got a hint of scruff on your jaw and chin. Plus your eyes are soft and glowing." She sighed. "Guess I have to amend my previous statement. Not 'kind of sexy'. *Damn* sexy."

"Nice of you to say." He dropped a kiss on her forehead, then asked in a serious tone, "Do you know that you snore?"

Jade took a playful swat at him. "I do not!" She tried to glare at him, but ended up laughing. "Do I?"

"No," he said as he shook his head. "I just wanted to see how you'd respond to that."

"You're evil."

"Thought I was damn sexy."

"That too."

She started to sit up, but he pinned her down on the mattress. "Not so fast," he murmured before he kissed her.

Jade wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tightly. His tongue delved deep into her mouth and his hands roamed her naked body. One slid between her legs and his fingers rubbed her clit in a slow, circular motion.

Tearing her mouth from his, she said, "There you go again, lighting me up like a Christmas tree."

He let out a sharp grunt. "I didn't give you much by way of foreplay last night."

"Clearly I didn't need it." She pushed her fingers through his tousled hair as she added, "In fact, you gave me exactly what I *did* need. So no complaints."

He grinned sexily at her. "It's amazing how swept away I get when I'm with you. I can't seem to keep my thoughts straight or keep my cock from responding to you."

"Is it responding now?" she asked with the jerk of an eyebrow.

"As a matter of fact..."

"Oh goodie. I'm all about morning sex, remember?"

"I'm not quite done here, babe."

She smiled. "I have an entire box of condoms to use before they expire."

"I'll buy more."

His fingers continued to massage her clit, rousing her fully from sleep. "Well, if you insist."

He worked a finger into her wet cunt and stroked her inner walls while his thumb kept at it on her clit. He kissed her, then his mouth grazed her jaw before he nibbled on her neck. His head dipped lower and his tongue flicked over her puckered nipple.

Jade moaned.

He suckled the tight peak and electrical currents ran through her from head to toe.

"Right there," she whispered as the sensations escalated. "Vin...that is so good." The currents turned to bolts that zapped her everywhere, making her squirm. "Oh God." Her back arched and her jaw fell slack as her orgasm shot through her. A beautiful burst of energy and excitement radiated throughout her entire body.

"Now," she muttered as she clung to the euphoria Vin sparked. "I want you inside me now, Vin. Please."

He was sheathed in mere seconds and sliding into her before she'd even lost the glorious feeling of her orgasm.

"That's what I want," she told him as his cock filled her.

"You should have everything you want," he told her.

"Then this moment ought to be immortalized for all of time."

He groaned. "It's not leaving my brain anytime soon."

With that, he rolled onto his back, bringing her with him. Straddling his lap, she sat up and let out a sigh of pure ecstasy as his cock stretched her cunt and she felt him more acutely than before. She loved this position, especially when he sat up and wrapped his arms around her waist. She kissed him as her hips rocked in time with his.

They both seemed to lose themselves in the intensity and sensuality of their lovemaking. Jade knew better than to think of it as the last time they might be together like this. She kept her optimism in check, but didn't allow any dismay to overshadow it. She had to believe her time with Vin was not fleeting. Somehow, it would all work out.

When they reached the height of their arousal at the same time, she held him tight. Afterward, they took a quick shower together and then settled at the island in her kitchen and dug into the breakfast Vin made previously and had kept warm in the oven. He poured coffee as she scarfed down the food like a woman who'd been stranded on a deserted island for months with nothing more than coconut milk to sustain her.

Vin watched her, a smile on his face.

A twinge of self-consciousness made her ask, "I'm starving and could eat a house?"

He laughed. "No. I was just wondering where it all goes."

"If Cami were here, she'd say from my mouth straight to her hips."

Another chuckle. "She carries a couple extra pounds well. Very Marilyn Monroe."

"She'd kiss you for that."

He jerked a fork at her plate. "Keep eating."

"This breakfast is fantastic."

"You inspire me to feed you."

"I inspire *everyone* to feed me." She swallowed down a large bite, then added, "Metabolism's out of whack. I literally repel fat and calories."

Vin poured more coffee for her. "Maybe that's part of your problem."

"I don't follow." She dumped cream and sugar into her cup and stirred the coffee with a spoon.

Vin said, "You unwittingly inspire a 'let me take care of you' mentality, primarily because of your size."

"And here I thought Cami always ordered shakes with my lunch because she was trying to help me reach a bigger cup size."

He laughed. "I'd say it's more of a maternal instinct on her part."

"I never thought of it that way." She considered it now and added, "Do you think that's why everyone hovers? They don't think I can handle myself because a stiff wind can knock me over?"

"Maybe."

"Huh." She finished her first plate and went back for seconds. "Is that why you're so protective of me?"

He refilled his plate too. "I'm protective, yes. But more than that, I'm territorial."

That one word made her cunt clench and her heart soar. Treading lightly, she asked, "Haven't we established that no one's poaching?"

"No, we have not."

"Oh." She went back to her breakfast as he seemed to stew over this change in conversation. Finally, she glanced over at him and asked, "So, you're thinking you have competition?"

"I see how the men who aren't related to you look at you. Hell, even those who *are* related to you can see how men respond to you. In fact, I can feel your uncle and cousin's pain to an extent, because clearly you're oblivious to the jaws you leave dragging on the floor."

Jade had never considered that before. Setting aside her fork, she said, "I've been oblivious because it doesn't matter to me." That revelation she'd had the day before returned to her. "There isn't anyone in this town I've wanted to entice or land. I kept

thinking there had to be *somebody*, but never once did I see how anyone responded to me because I never responded to *them*."

She sipped her coffee, her fingers a bit shaky. Vin watched her closely as she continued. "The thing is, when I saw you roll into the parking lot the other day, I suddenly *did* want to entice someone. I was so glad I'd ventured away from my jeans and casual tops that day and was wearing a skirt and heels. I'd never before wanted a man to *see* me."

Yet another epiphany.

"So," she continued, "I guess that confirms there is no competition."

He pushed his plate away and rested his forearms on the granite-topped counter. "Why me?" he asked.

Jade laughed. "I can't explain that any more than you can explain why, after eight years, you still felt compelled to tell me why you'd stopped corresponding with me."

He nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Kismet or Fate or whatever?"

She'd been calling it Destiny, but it didn't really matter what label they attached to the beautiful thing that had transpired between them. It was magical no matter what they called it.

She said, "I honestly don't know. But I can't dispute the facts. We gravitated toward each other in the parking lot of the diner before we'd known each other. You didn't know I was Jade Taylor and I didn't know you were Vincent Moretti. And yet...we sparked."

"Oh, babe," he said with an amused look. "We did more than that."

Smiling, she concurred. "True. But you see what I'm saying?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I get the point." He stood and collected their dishes, rinsing them off in the sink before loading them into the dishwasher. "More coffee?" he asked as he turned back to her.

Jade shook her head. "No. I've got to get to the boutique. But... Maybe we can make lunch a bit earlier? Like, eleven?"

"More time together before I have to hit the road?"

"You see right through me," she said with a laugh.

"And I'm pleased with the suggestion." He returned to the island and wedged his large frame between her parted legs as she sat on the barstool. "Eleven it is. I'll pick you up at the shop."

"Okay."

He bent his head and kissed her. She expected a simple, quick kiss since she needed to get a move on and head to work, but once his lips touched hers and his tongue swept inside her mouth, she couldn't help but wrap her arms around his neck and hold him to her. She returned the impassioned kiss, savoring every private moment she had left with him.

When she finally pulled away, she reluctantly said, "I've got to go." Though for the life of her, she couldn't imagine what was so pressing at the boutique that she had to rush off and take care of.

It occurred to her that she needed the sane routine to keep her from wondering too much about what could be or should be or would be with Vin if circumstances were different.

Yes, she needed normalcy to get over him.

He eyed her closely for a moment, causing her to ask, "What are you thinking?"

"This might sound crazy, but..." He grinned sexily at her. "There's a lot of room on the back of my bike for such a tiny thing like you. Why don't you go to L.A. with me for the premiere?"

Jade's breath caught. "Are you serious?"

His grin widened. "Oh yeah."

Jade didn't know what to say. The thought excited her, no doubt about it. And she couldn't help but think his offer might suggest he was interested in continuing to see her.

But what would be the point of that, really?

Unfortunately for Jade, reality set in way too fast and it was way too depressing.

After gnawing on her lower lip for a moment, she reluctantly said, "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?" His brows knitted together.

She pulled in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "It's just that... We're not exactly on the same plane, you know? Or...in the same ZIP code."

His grin returned. "Oh hell, Jade. That's just geography. We can work with that."

"How?"

His gaze snapped away.

She let out a soft laugh, despite the prickle of pain in her heart. "Yeah, my thoughts exactly."

Vin sat back down in his chair. "At least spend the weekend with me."

Lord knew she wanted to. There was absolutely no denying how badly she wanted more time with him. But that conversation she'd had with Cami about the cruise came back to her. They'd been so enthralled with the guys they'd met from Seattle, so intrigued by a life elsewhere, that they'd Google'd Seattle to look at places to live. They'd investigated job opportunities. They'd been *this close* to saying "to hell with Moon River" and striking out on their own.

But they hadn't. For reasons Jade had to face.

Sure she had extreme fears of being like her mother—simply running off to find a better life and breaking her father's heart in the process. But the crux of her problem ran much deeper than that. She realized now that the guilt she'd suffered over the cruise

she'd taken and the return of that guilt when she and Cami had discussed taking another cruise was not related solely to fearing history might repeat itself. She didn't believe it would, because in all reality, Jade didn't want to leave Moon River.

Yes, she was frustrated with the fact that it was a small town with limited romantic possibilities. But she had family and friends here. And hadn't she launched her own business and was doing well enough to afford a house and a car and the rent on the boutique?

Those were all dreams she'd had growing up and fulfilling them had significant meaning in her life. Beyond being proud of her own personal accomplishments, she was eternally grateful for her father's support along the way. Not to mention the support and love the rest of her family gave her.

These revelations—and reminders—told Jade all she needed to know about what was happening in her life and with Vin.

Though a part of her heart broke to say her next words, she knew the inevitable outcome of her fling with Vin and knew there was no bridging the geographical gap between them.

"I can't go with you," she said. "It'd only complicate matters for us both and besides..." She gave him a sincere look, willing him to understand her position. "It wouldn't be enough. In the long run."

He shifted in his chair, leaning forward and capturing her hands in his. His intense blue gaze locked with hers. "You never know what might happen in the long run."

"I know. Yet at the same time, I also know that I won't ever leave Moon River. Not permanently. So what's the point in pursuing something that can never be, Vin? You have a life elsewhere. It'll always be that way and I'll always be here."

"Jade," he said as he released her hands and stood. He paced for a moment, then said, "I remember how torn apart you were when your mother left town. But that doesn't mean you have to stay here the rest of your life, making up for what she did."

"It's not about making up for what she did," Jade said, realizing that was true. She also stood and said, "Yes, for a while my guilt had stemmed from that. And yes, I've been frustrated with the watchful eye I'm under, but the truth is... I don't want to leave Moon River. I don't want to move away and I don't *intend* to move away. Ever."

Even for you.

The words were on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't—*wouldn't*—say them. As much as she wanted Vin, she had to accept the reality of the situation. She belonged in Moon River. And despite the strain on her love life that her family caused, she knew, deep in her heart, that they loved her. That their protectiveness was all due to how they felt about her. And she loved them in returned.

"Vin," she said, her heart constricting.

Her fairytale was rapidly coming to a close and that devastated her. But the facts were glaring and undisputable. They lived in two different worlds. She wouldn't move

to New York, even if he asked her to. He sure as hell wouldn't move to Moon River – that was a no-brainer, even though they'd never even broached the subject. He had an entire career in New York! And she couldn't for the life of her imagine trying a long-distance romance. She was much too hot for him to suffer through endless nights without him and she'd no doubt wonder what he was up to when she wasn't there to satisfy his needs.

Oh God.

Their affair had most definitely come to a screeching halt.

"Look," she said. "I think we both have to admit that this thing between us has a seriously short shelf life."

Vin's jaw clenched. "You might feel that way, but I don't."

"I'm being realistic, Vin." For both their sakes. "In fact," she added, "I think we should skip lunch and just...say our goodbyes now."

He looked crushed. "You don't mean that."

She wasn't sure if that was true or not. She only knew that her heart was breaking all over again and it was seriously painful. Why drag this out any further? Why make themselves even more miserable? "We have to face and accept the truth here, Vin. We're leading two very different lives. And always will."

He shook his head. "I don't want it to end like this."

"But it will end like this," she insisted. "Whether it happens at lunch or it happens right now, it will *end*."

For a few agonizing moments, he merely stared at her. As though willing her to reconsider. Or maybe wishing there was an alternate ending to their brief affair.

But he had to know the situation was hopeless, because he said, "I never intended to make things so difficult for us."

"It's not your fault," she assured him. "It's not anyone's fault. It's just...circumstances. And I don't regret that we got involved. I learned a lot."

Not that she had the vaguest idea what the hell she was supposed to do about all the revelations of late, but at least she felt as though she had a clearer understanding of what she wanted. A red-hot love *and* the ability to stay in close proximity with her family and friends.

Vin raked a hand through his hair and then let out a low sigh. "I guess there's nothing else I can say..."

He stepped toward her and pulled her into his strong arms. Jade's eyes instantly burned with tears she couldn't hold back. She wrapped her arms around Vin's neck and held onto him, committing to memory the feel of his body against hers. When he kissed her, she knew it was to convince her to change her mind. To prolong the inevitable.

As tempting as the prospect was, she knew she couldn't skip out of town while her father was away – that felt much too deceptive. Also, a fairytale weekend in L.A. with

Vin would only make her fall more in love with him. Making it so much more painful to watch him ride off to New York after he dropped her home.

Her poor heart was already suffering enough. If she had control over keeping it from breaking further, wouldn't it behoove her to exercise that control?

Pulling away from Vin, she said, "I think we're doing the right thing."

Chapter Twelve

Jade put on a pot of coffee at the boutique and bustled about, debating which of her new projects to start on. She had two new orders, but the deadlines were way out, by several months, so there was no rush. Yet she wanted to immerse herself in something challenging to help keep her mind off Vin and the fact that she'd let him walk out of her house an hour ago and was already regretting it. Already wishing she'd thought of a workable solution. Already missing the hell out of him.

Wandering about her small shop, she couldn't settle on a project, because her mind buzzed with thoughts of Vin. She contemplated diving into her website development, knowing that was something to roll out sooner rather than later, but she didn't really have the concentration for such a tedious job.

As she considered her options, her father's white Caddy pulled up in front of the store. Jade frowned as alarm skittered through her. He was supposed to be in Helena. She rounded the cashier's desk as he entered the boutique, looking disgruntled and deeply concerned.

Damn you, Brian! she instantly thought. She knew exactly why her father was here and not at his conference.

"Dad, you didn't have to come back!"

"Jade," he said in a tight tone. "How can I be in Helena when you're getting into trouble back here?"

"*Trouble?*" She had to tamp down her instant anger, though it simmered just below the surface. What the hell had Brian told him? "Dad, I assure you, I haven't gotten into any trouble."

"What happened at The Shimmy Shake last night?" her father demanded. "What in God's name were you doing *there*? Or The Well, for that matter?"

Her temper flared, despite her concentrated effort to keep herself on an even keel. "I have had enough of people spying on me! Yes, I was at The Shimmy Shack. And The Well. *So what?*"

"With the biker from out of town?"

"His name is Vin D'Angelo, Dad. He's from New York. And he's not just some biker passing through. He has a very good reason for being here."

"Such as?"

"*Me.*" She crossed her arms over her chest and stared defiantly at her father. Never in her life had she ever imagined taking a stand like this. Nor had she ever thought she'd get to say a man had traveled halfway across the country to find her, but she

found it particularly thrilling to say it now, regardless of the outcome of Vin's visit. "He came for me, Dad."

Her father's eyes narrowed on her. "I don't understand."

"You don't have to. Quite frankly, it's none of your business."

"Jade!"

She actually laughed at his indignant tone. She'd stepped out of her usual routine with him, which typically involved him telling her how it should be and her agreeing without argument.

"Look," she said, finding even ground again, pushing down her anger. She was an adult and needed to handle this situation in an adult manner. "Vin is someone from my past. I tutored him online when we were in high school. He remembered me and he wanted to meet me in person. That's why he stopped in Moon River on his way to L.A."

That news didn't quite have the positive impact on her father Jade had hoped for. Rather, her father asked, "Is he stalking you, Jade?"

"Oh my God!" Her hands flew up in the air. Why oh why couldn't her family see her relationship with Vin for what it truly was? Why did they have to make it dark and convoluted and...tainted? "You know what? This is my situation to reconcile. I don't need anyone to hold my hand through it. So go back to Helena."

He visibly bristled. "I can't do that when I'm hearing that your friend—and *his* friend—are causing trouble in my town."

"They're not," she insisted. "Jason was the problem last night at The Shimmy Shack. He grabbed Cami and she nearly fell over. Vin's friend stepped in and kept her from hurting herself. He took offense at the way Jason manhandled Cami and so did I. He stood up for her, Dad, and the fact that the heat's landing on him is incredibly insulting."

"Brian said he tried to instigate a fight."

"Brian wants to blow things out of proportion so Vin will stay away from me."

"I don't think you should see that man again."

Jade turned away as tears sprang to her eyes. She squeezed them shut for a few seconds as she dragged in a shaky breath. She wouldn't be seeing him again, most likely. A thought that tore her heart apart, but it was one she had to accept.

When she felt a little more in control of her emotions, she swiped at the drops on her cheeks and then returned her attention to her father.

"Dad, he's leaving today. I won't see him again unless we decide to occasionally visit each other." They'd exchanged cell numbers and addresses. He'd invited her out to Manhattan. She'd told him the door was always open for him in Montana.

But were those just words and actions people said to be polite and not hurt the other's feelings when they knew there was likely no chance in hell they'd follow through? After all, Vin had accomplished what he'd set out to do. Chances were good he'd move on from her, leaving her in the past.

Not a comforting or easy sentiment to accept, but she had to maintain her realism.

She also needed to *woman-up* with her father. Lifting her chin a notch, she said, "While I appreciate your concern, it's not necessary. The truth is, Vin asked me to go to L.A. —"

"Jade!" Her father's eyes widened as his hands flew up in the air. A moment later, he let out a heavy breath as he walked past her and sank into a chair outside the dressing rooms. He rested his forearms on his knees for a moment and his chin dropped to his chest as he seemed to collect his thoughts.

"I said no, Dad."

His head snapped up.

Jade continued on, the tears building again. "I wanted to go. More than I've wanted just about anything in my life. But it didn't feel right. Not while you were in Helena and I'd promised I'd be here when you got back. Not with the uncertainty of how a relationship could possibly work out between us." She let out a hollow laugh. "Not the 'uncertainty'," she corrected. "The *impossibility*."

Her father studied her for a few moments. "You really and truly care about this man, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"But you're willing to give him up for me. For our family. Why?" Not giving her a chance to answer, he rushed on, saying, "Because you fear we'll think you're like your mother? Because *you'll* think you're like her?"

"Wouldn't that basically solidify that I was?"

Something seemed to click in her father's mind, because he suddenly stood and closed the gap between them. "Jade," he said as his strong hands gripped her biceps. "You're *not* like your mother. Not at all."

Jade's eyes squeezed shut. "I'm so confused."

Her father released her and she opened her eyes.

"What is it that you want, Jade?"

"Vin," she said without hesitation. "But I also want my life here in Moon River."

"Did you tell him that?"

"Yes. And then I told him we had to end our affair because there was no point in continuing it."

"Doesn't sound like you put much effort into figuring out *how* to make it work."

"It's impossible," she repeated. "Utterly hopeless."

He scrubbed a hand down his face as he seemed to contemplate his next words. Finally, he said. "When your mother left, we were devastated. She *chose* to leave us and that was a very painful thing to accept."

"I know," Jade agreed. "She didn't love us enough to stay. She met someone else, wanted a different life and made a conscience decision to leave. She didn't want us to

know where she was going or who she was going with. She didn't want us to have any way to contact her, so she slipped out with nothing more than a crappy note. She left behind no hint whatsoever as to how to reach her."

"You'd never do that."

"Of course not! But, Dad, you're missing the point. *I don't want to leave!*"

"Did Vin ask you to? Other than the trip to L.A.? Did he ask you to move to New York?"

"Well, no. Not exactly."

He gave her an earnest look. "Did you ask him how he thought the relationship would work out?"

She shook her head.

"Why not?"

The answer popped immediately into her head. Jade said, "Because I don't want to get my heart broken again. It's easier to end it now than get further involved and suffer even more down the road because of it."

With a very serious look on his face, her father said, "You're not like your mother, Jade. But you are still affected by her actions. It makes you conscientious of how you treat others, which I'm proud of. But it also makes you scared."

More tears filled her eyes. "Terrified, actually."

His expression turned apologetic. "I haven't helped matters. Nor have Bob and Brian and the others."

She nodded. "I need a little space and freedom, Dad."

His eyes suddenly turned misty as he said, "We've all be holding onto you so tightly because we don't want to lose you. But I can see now the problem that's created." His lips twisted as he seemed to weigh his next words. Then he said, "Whatever you do is going to be all right with the rest of us. No, I don't want you to leave Moon River. But I also don't want you to be miserable. Or...lonely. I know how that feels, Jade, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone."

"Oh, Dad." She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a long hug. "I'm so sorry."

He held her tightly as more tears streamed down her cheeks. Then, unexpectedly, he pulled away.

"You're not to blame," he insisted as he stared down at her. "Jade, I want you to be happy. That's really all that matters."

Her arms dropped to her sides. "I am happy. I just wish I could have it all, you know? Love in Moon River."

"I wish that for you too. But the chances of it happening are pretty darn slim, aren't they?"

She let out a sharp laugh. "My options are a bit limited."

"Then why would you let go of Vin so easily?"

Jade shook her head. "I don't know. I guess it's because I'm scared, like you said."

"I can understand that. But maybe it's time to take a chance."

Jade wished the solution to her problem was that easy.

"Look," she said as she brushed away her tears, knowing there was no point in beating this subject to a bloody pulp. "Vin's heading out today and our little romance is over. Maybe I'm just not destined for a happily ever after ending. That's something I'll have to work through myself. But I promise you, I'll be fine. You have to believe in that."

"I believe in *you*."

The waterworks started again. "Thank you." She gave him another quick hug. Then, before she broke out in uncontrollable sobs, she said, "Please get in your car, drive to the airpark and take the plane back to Helena."

His large hand cupped her face. "I can't stand the idea of you being hurt again, Jade. By someone else's actions...or your own."

"I know, Daddy," she said as emotion gripped her. "You hurt for me as much as you did for yourself when Mom left. But we got through it together and we're stronger people for it. I'll get through this too."

"That which doesn't kill us...?"

"Yep."

He laughed softly. "Who raised you to be so sensible and tough?"

"You did."

"Well." He seemed to shake off the intensity of the moment with a shrug of his shoulders. "Here I thought I had something to worry about back home, but... Maybe that was just an excuse."

Her tone was gentle as she said, "You're always going to be my dad and I'm always going to love you. But I'm a grown woman now and I have to find my own way. You did a good job raising me, you know?"

"You did turn out well."

"Give yourself credit there. Know that you can trust me because of the ideals and values you instilled in me."

He actually rolled his eyes. "Put like that, I feel like a moron for leaving the conference."

"Well, I wasn't going to say anything about that..."

He smirked at her. "Again with the smart mouth." He gave her a peck on the cheek. "I'm going back to Helena. Call me if you need me."

"Don't hold your breath," she said with a wink that made her tears roll down her cheeks.

He brushed them away, then left her shop.

As she watched him go, her cell rang. Snatching it from the cashier's desk, she let out a sharp breath of exasperation as her uncle's photo flashed on her small screen.

Great. Someone else who had something to say about her association with Vin. But she'd set him straight just as she had her father. Her misguided love life was no one's business but her own.

* * * * *

Vin removed his helmet as a tall, well-dressed man in his mid-forties exited Taylor-Made. The man's gaze flicked to Vin and he came to an abrupt halt on the concrete pad just before the short steps that descended to the parking lot. He gave Vin a once-over, then continued on down the stairs. But rather than heading toward the white Cadillac parked in front of Jade's shop, he strolled over to Vin.

"You must be Jade's friend." Extending his hand, the man said, "I'm Martin Taylor. Jade's father."

Vin shook his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. Vin D'Angelo."

The mayor spared a glance toward the front of Jade's shop before returning his gaze to Vin. "You can call me Martin."

"Thank you." Vin pulled his hand away and gestured toward the boutique. "Care to go back in with me?"

Martin Taylor regarded him for a moment, a smile coming to his lips. "That's very considerate of you."

"I'm sure this is a strange situation for you to reconcile. You're supposed to be in Helena, right?"

"Indeed. As my daughter felt compelled to point out." He seemed to give his statement some thought, as though weighing the significance of it. "I'm on my way back there now. Sadly, I made the mistake of underestimating Jade."

Vin didn't need a map drawn for him to arrive at the conclusion of the turn of events. "She's got a strong constitution and a solid moral fiber. Thanks to you, no doubt."

"I've been overprotective," he said bluntly. "We all have. Because of the situation with her mother."

Vin shifted from one booted foot to the other. When he'd talked to Jade at the lake yesterday, revealing his true identity to her, he'd decided to let the rest of his past remain where it belonged. She'd even insisted that was the appropriate action to take. But there was something about this new predicament he'd found himself in that told him he needed to complete his quest. He had one more thing about himself to reveal and sharing it with Jade's father at this very moment seemed like the right thing to do.

So right, in fact, he didn't spare a moment debating his course of action.

He said, "Sir, I've got something to tell you. It will be difficult to hear and I'll understand if you want to take a swing at me when I'm done."

“Vin,” Martin said, a perplexed look on his face. “What —”

“Please,” Vin implored. “Just hear me out.”

The older man’s stance changed. He crossed his arms over his chest and regarded Vin a bit more warily. “Go on.”

Vin let out a quick puff of air. For a moment, he thought he was making a mistake by revealing his final secret to Jade’s father rather than sharing it with her first. But he quickly resolved that this was, indeed, the right thing to do. The correct place to start.

He said, “I came to Moon River in search of Jade.”

Martin nodded. “She told me that.”

Vin braced himself. “What she doesn’t know is that I tracked her down on the educational intranet eight years ago for reasons other than tutoring.”

Jade’s father’s eyes narrowed on him. “Why’d you seek her out?”

“Because I needed to meet her. I needed to know who she was.” Vin tried hard not to get lost in the past, to not be pulled under by painful memories. Memories that mirrored Jade’s, but which he’d fought to keep at bay so that he didn’t get swallowed up in the dark abyss they created. He’d easily empathized with her years ago because he’d secretly shared her misery.

In a cautious tone, Martin said, “I’m not sure I’m following you.”

Vin shook his head. “Yeah, well, there’s no easy way to say this. I just have to come right and...say it.”

“Why don’t you?”

Vin fortified himself with another deep breath, then blurted out, “I’m the son of the man your wife ran off with eight years ago, sir.” He had plenty of respect for Jade’s father, but he was also humbled by his less-than-stellar role in this dual-family tragedy.

Martin Taylor stared at him as though Vin had spewed his guts in Greek. “I’m sorry...*what?*” the older man stammered.

Vin had never felt lower than he did at this very moment. Making an admission he was loathed to say out loud, he told Jade’s father, “I’m Anthony Moretti’s son. He was the river guide from Lakeside that your wife met and left you and Jade for.”

Martin was clearly stunned. Speechless.

Vin rushed on. “I was sixteen when it happened, like Jade. I didn’t know what was going on. I only overheard one conversation—just bits and pieces of it that didn’t have enough context around it for me to figure out what was going on at the time. All I really got out of it was Jade’s name and that her mother was from Moon River. I had to put the rest of the puzzle together on my own.”

“Jade doesn’t know you’re... She doesn’t know your connection to the man her mother left town with?”

“No, sir. I tried to tell her yesterday, but she insisted the past was the past and it should be left there. I was inclined to agree with her at the time, but when I saw you...”

He shook his head. "How can I keep it a secret? Even if it hurts her to find out the truth, how can I keep it from her? She deserves to know. Just like you do. Which is why I had to stop by her shop and tell her before I left town."

"Vin." A troubled look crossed Martin's face. He seemed to consider the situation a moment—clearly taking a moment to reconcile how it affected him—before he said, "You're absolutely right. Jade does deserve to know the full truth."

A nightmare in the making, possibly, but if she were to find out down the road, it'd be so much worse. Vin had decided when he'd left her house this morning that he wouldn't lose contact with her ever again, so it was only natural she'd eventually learn the truth.

He said, "Please understand that the only reason I haven't told her is that I don't want to hurt her further. I didn't want to rehash the past and create strife for either of you. It's not fair. I know how it feels and..." Vin shook his head again as emotion choked him up.

It had been hell trying to wrap his mind around why his father had disappeared one day, with nothing more than a note that said he had a different outcome in mind for his life. Vin had agonized over the abrupt departure of his father from his young life. Sure, Anthony Moretti had always had that distant look in his eye, as though he were thinking of someplace else he preferred to be. And yes, he'd given off an air of detachment that suggested he wished life had turned out differently for him.

Tough nonverbal signals for a kid to interpret, much less accept. But Vin had never believed his father was so disenchanting with his life in Lakeside that he'd actually leave it without providing a forwarding address. He'd literally disappeared with Jade's mother, both of them leaving four or more people in pure misery and utter confusion, because nary an explanation for their departure had been proffered.

To this day, Vin still struggled with his father's actions. He wished he could fully reconcile his feelings of anger and abandonment, but knew that would never happen because he'd never hear the reasoning in his father's own words.

He hadn't wanted to rip off Jade's scabs any more than he'd wanted to rip off his own. All he'd really wanted, when he'd decided to come to Moon River, was to assuage some of his guilt and maybe relieve her of thinking she'd driven him away years ago when he'd vanished. Because Vin had been saddled with the fear that he'd done to Jade what their parents had done to them and he'd known all along how unfair that was.

He'd come here to be forthcoming with her. Never in a million years had he expected to divulge his secret to her father. Nor could he possibly anticipate Martin Taylor's reaction to him.

The older man reached a hand out to him and Vin prepared for a solid connection of a fist against his jaw.

It didn't happen, though. Instead, Martin clasped Vin's shoulder and gave it a sound, yet comforting shake.

“Son,” he said as emotion tinged his voice. “That’s one hell of a confession to make. To me, no less. But there’s something you’ve got to understand.”

Vin steeled himself for the “stay away from my daughter” speech.

But Martin shocked him again as he said, “What happened between your father and Jade’s mother has nothing to do with the two of you. They made up their own minds, chose their own paths. Their decision to leave us has nothing to do with you, do you understand that? It’s not your responsibility, not your fault. There’s no reason for you to feel guilty about what your father did.”

“But—”

“No,” Martin said with a sharp shake of his head and a slight mist in his eyes. “Good Lord, son. You’re nothing but a victim of circumstance. Just like Jade. And while I appreciate how forthcoming you are with me, the truth is... It’s not necessary. You’re trying to atone for something that isn’t your doing or your mistake.”

Vin had always considered his father’s abandonment his cross to bear. He’d always considered his mother’s suicide his fault, thinking he couldn’t help her past the pain.

For so many years, he’d thought that if his dad had actually been happy with his life in Lakeside, had loved Vin, he wouldn’t have left.

“Shit.” He shook his head. “It’s impossible not to shoulder the burden. If my father had been happy at home, he wouldn’t have taken up with your wife. They wouldn’t have left together. If he’d loved me—and my mother—we would have been enough for him. Clearly, we weren’t. I mean, for fuck’s sake,” he said, the rage he’d never quite let go of getting the best of him. “He didn’t want us to contact him! He just...disappeared!”

Martin nodded. With a solemn look, he said, “So did Jade’s mother.” He let out a long sigh, then added, “My wife. She didn’t want us to contact her, either. But maybe... Maybe they chose to distance themselves not because they didn’t want to connect with us ever again, but because they knew what they were doing was wrong. Maybe it was guilt that made them sever the ties.”

Vin had never considered that angle. It was a nice, convenient notion, but also one that held some merit. “I wouldn’t have forgiven him any easier if I could have reached him.”

“I feel the same way. Right or wrong, it’s true.”

“Maybe it *was* for the best,” Vin finally admitted. “I’m not sure what I would have done if I’d been able to contact him after my mother killed herself. In fact, I made it a point *not* to track him down after she committed suicide. I think I feared what my retaliation might be.”

“You had to reconcile it in your heart. And you’re right. It was probably for the best that they cut us off. If Jade had been able to make contact with her mother, she would have been torn between her loyalty to me and her loyalty to her mother. I’m grateful she never had to experience that, even if it does mean she suffered because of the severing of ties.”

Vin still felt her pain as acutely as he felt his own—and Martin Taylor’s. “I am sorry, sir,” he said respectfully. “Sorry that I’m related to the person who contributed to so much grief in both of your lives.”

Martin squeezed his shoulder again. “Son, you’re not at fault here and no one blames you for what your father and Jade’s mother did. If anyone needs to extend an apology, it’s me. I didn’t give you the benefit of the doubt when I heard of your interest in my daughter. I was wrong to jump to conclusions and for that, *I’m* sorry.”

“Believe me, I understand. I have the crazy compulsion to protect her myself.”

“That’s good to hear,” he said, finally mustering a smile. “I think —”

“Dad,” Jade interjected as she suddenly barreled through the front door of her shop and stalked across the concrete pad to the ledge, staring down at her father and Vin.

“Yes?” Martin inquired as he glanced up at her.

“Uncle Bob’s on the phone. He wants to talk to you.” She tossed the cell at her father, who caught it. To Vin, she said, “Shouldn’t you be on your way?”

Taken aback, Vin’s brow furrowed as he asked, “Problem?”

She huffed, then turned sharply and marched back into her shop. Perplexed—and alarmed—Vin took the steps two at a time and followed her inside.

“Hey, what’s up?” he asked.

She turned back to face him and demanded, “Why the hell haven’t you told me who you *really* are?”

“You overheard my conversation with your father?”

“No... *What?*” She seemed momentarily sidetracked before saying, “I didn’t overhear anything. My uncle called me. He said he did a little more digging on you and found out your original last name. He remembered it from an incident in Lakeside and pulled up old news articles.”

“About my mom’s suicide?”

“Yes. They mentioned your father was a river guide. He was the one my mother ran off with, wasn’t he? *Your father!* And you knew it. All this time, you knew it!”

Vin’s teeth ground together. “Let me explain, Jade.”

“You knew, way back when, that it was your dad my mom left town with. All that time, when I was spilling my guts to you and crying over the fact that my mom left me, you knew who she left with!”

“Yes.”

“But you never said anything!”

“No.” He shoved his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. In a very contrite tone, he said, “I knew who you were when I signed up for the tutoring. I’d overheard a conversation with my dad and your mom that I didn’t understand at the time, because I didn’t hear the whole thing. But I did learn your name and I searched the intranet looking for it. I discovered you were a tutor, so I signed up for the program.”

She glared at him. "Why?"

Vin said, "I wanted to know what you knew. About them. I figured you might have caught some bits and pieces too and maybe we could come up with a reason for why they'd left us."

"I didn't know *anything*," she insisted. "My mother never let on that she'd met someone. She never let on that she wasn't happy in our house. She never let on that she intended to leave us. She just...vanished one day, leaving nothing behind but a few words on a piece of paper."

"That's exactly the way it was with my dad," he told her. "But I didn't know what was happening in *your* house. I had to find out. I had to see if you knew something that would help me figure out why he'd just leave like that."

Vin stepped toward her, but she took several steps backward.

Raising her hand, keeping him at bay, she said, "You purposely sought me out, knowing who I was, but never intending to tell me who *you* were? Never intending to share what *you* knew about the situation?"

He sighed. Her hackles were up again. He'd experienced her quick temper at the lake when he'd told her he was Vincent Moretti. Now she was rankled again. Not that he blamed her, but he wasn't sure how to remedy this new situation.

When he'd come to town, he'd intended to tell her he was the son of the man her mother had run off with. Yet she'd insisted the past didn't matter and he'd hated to hurt her further with another admission that would force her to experience, once again, the pain of her mother's abandonment.

His reasoning, of course, didn't exonerate him from his omission. Though he truly had had the best of intentions.

He said, "Look. Be mad at me all you want. I'll understand it. But know that I did plan to tell you. When we were at the lake, I was going to let you know everything I knew. You said the past didn't matter. I should have pressed the issue, but I didn't. I suddenly realized that I didn't want to make things worse for you by making you face the rejection all over again. Because, Jade... I know how it feels."

She turned away from him. "You had no right keeping that information from me. Especially back then. You specifically tracked me down and used me to get what you needed to resolve the situation for *you*, but didn't tell me who you were or help *me* to better understand what had happened."

He couldn't deny that. Felt like a complete heel that she was right. Back then, he had purposely sought her out for his own personal gain. But... "I knew what you were going through back then. I was going through the same thing. I just couldn't express it in the same way. I couldn't say it out loud. I had no idea how to tell anyone how angry I was, how hurt I was, how confused I was. You were able to do that. And every emotion you poured into your emails when we started 'talking' about your mother leaving you mirrored my own emotions. I found that I...*needed* to read your emails. I could relate, but more than that, I could accept what I felt when you expressed how *you* felt."

She turned back to him, but didn't say anything.

From behind him, Jade's father said, "Jade, you can't let something yours and Vin's parents did eight years ago affect you today. Didn't we establish that earlier?" He stepped around Vin and approached his daughter. He set her phone on the counter and took her hands in his. "I'm sorry Bob was the one to tell you who Vin is. But it really shouldn't matter how you found out. I can see how you feel about Vin. And he feels the same way. What brought you together is a personal tragedy you both experienced. How it unfolded may not be ideal, but it's no more Vin's fault than it is yours."

Vin watched as she seemed to process her father's words. Vin wanted to say more, to convince her he'd never meant to betray her. He had a feeling it was best to keep quiet, though. To let her work through all of this on her own. Or with the help of her father.

Martin said, "I'm sorry for what you've been through and that I perpetuated the problem. But I learned today that it's time to stop trying to shield you from outside influences. Because I believe the one that's entered your life this week is a *positive* influence."

Jade's gaze shifted from her father to Vin. She stared at him a few moments and he fought every urge that rose within him to try to convince her he'd never meant to deceive her.

Pulling her hands from her father's and approaching Vin, she said, "You should have told me years ago."

"Yes."

"I think I understand why you didn't. I wrote all those things in my emails because I couldn't say them out loud either. I couldn't say them to my father. I couldn't say them to Cami. But I could write them out in an email and send those words to a complete stranger. If I'd have known you in 'real life'... I probably wouldn't have shared any of it with you. I wouldn't have shared what I was going through."

"I felt your pain," he assured her.

She nodded. "And I feel yours now."

Vin said, "We both agreed yesterday that it was time to let the past go. We had no control over what happened with your mother and my father. We all know it." His gaze lifted to Martin for a moment, before it returned to Jade. "But we do have some control over what happens between us now."

She shook her head. "Not really."

"Yes, really." He clasped her hands in his. Squeezing tight, he said, "Jade, we can figure this out. We can make it work. If that's what you want."

Her amber eyes clouded with emotion and uncertainty. "What do *you* want, Vin?"

He didn't even need to take a breath. His decision was already made for him. "To be with you."

She stepped away, turning her back to him again.

Vin said, "I love you, Jade."

She lifted a hand, covering her mouth. Her father wandered off toward the front of the store, giving them some privacy. Vin waited patiently for her to come to whatever conclusion she'd come to. He couldn't press her, couldn't push her to take the path he'd decided to travel.

When she turned back to him, her eyes were filled with tears. Vin wouldn't blame her or begrudge her if she decided the pursuit of a relationship with him was more than she could handle. They'd been through a lot, had experienced the worst that love had to offer as they'd been embroiled in a scandalous and painful affair played out by their parents.

They lived different lives, thousands of miles away from each other. Something they couldn't ignore.

He wished he knew the perfect thing to say to her at this very moment, that one magical sentiment that would convince her they were meant for each other and that come hell or high water, they'd make it work.

But he didn't have the details ironed out yet, so how could he possibly assure her?

The best Vin could hope for was that she believed in what they shared. That she understood they were connected in a way that was too powerful to walk away from.

But damn it! He couldn't just stand there and not say *something*!

He stepped toward her and said, once again, "Jade, I love you. I always have. I always will. Nothing has ever changed that, nothing ever will. I know now why I sought you out eight years ago. I know now why I had to find you again. Why I could never get you off my mind. Why I couldn't let you go."

She seemed to search his eyes for the answer. But doubt still clouded her gaze.

"Jade." He gripped her shoulders and held her steady as he said, "We're kindred spirits. Soul mates. We've shared something for the past eight years. It's bonded us together, even when we didn't know it. I can't let you go. I don't want to let you go. I...*can't*," he repeated.

Tears crested her eyes and streamed slowly down her cheeks. "I don't want you to either. But how...?"

He breathed a sigh of relief as he hauled her up against him and hugged her tightly. "I don't know exactly," he told her. "But we'll figure it out. We will."

She hugged him back, squeezing him tight. "Promise me," she whispered in his ear. "I need that, Vin. I need you to promise me it'll work out."

"It will," he said again. "I swear. I'll do whatever it takes."

She buried her face in the crook of his neck as she clung to him. In a muffled voice, she said, "I love you too. From the moment I saw you. The moment I met you online, even. I've always loved you."

Emotion swelled within him, making him spontaneously say, "So go with me today and let's take the time to talk through all of this."

She pulled away him from him and stared at her father around Vin's shoulder.

Martin said, "You'll regret it for the rest of your life if you don't go for it, Jade."

"And you'll be okay with this?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said, his voice strong and confident. "In fact, I think it's time you spread your wings. I'm always going to be here and we're always going to be a family. What I want now is for you to be happy. Do whatever you have to make that happen, Jade."

She threw her arms around Vin's neck again as more tears filled her eyes. "I'll go with you," she said between sobs. "We'll make it work. I know we will."

Chapter Thirteen

"You're seriously leaving me?" Cami asked with a pout. They were in Jade's bedroom. Cami was perched on the edge of the bed as Jade moved about the room.

"Uh, for like a couple of days." Jade laughed as she carefully folded the clothes she'd selected for her road trip with Vin.

"Okay, you realize we haven't been separated since the first grade, right?"

"Again," Jade said. "I'll only be gone for a couple of days. Vin invited me to the premiere of his and Noah's movie and I'm riding with them to L.A. The premiere's on Saturday and he says we'll be back in Moon River by Wednesday or Thursday, depending on where we stop along the way."

"You are so lucky," Cami said with a sigh. "Hot man. Cool new adventure. Meanwhile, I'm stuck here with drill sergeant Jo Beth at the antiques store no one ever visits."

Jade gave her an empathetic look. "We solved my problem, to an extent. I promise when I get back, we'll work on yours."

Cami eyed her suspiciously. "Sure you're not just going to blow on by and head straight to New York with Mr. Bad Ass?"

With a soft laugh, Jade said, "As if I could get away with that. Despite my new stance with my family, there's no way in hell they'd let me move away so abruptly. But that's okay," she added, "because Vin and Noah are interested in filming their next project here in Montana."

"Wha-hut?"

"Uh-huh."

Cami's green eyes lit up. "Noah Riley in town for a couple of months?"

"Yes. Vin too, by the way," Jade said as she playfully nudged her friend. "He told me this afternoon. *After* my dad left the shop."

"That couldn't have been a comfortable scenario."

"Ah contraire. My father is about as taken with Vin as I am. Dad headed back to Helena with good tidings all the way around."

"This is the mayor we're talking about, right?"

"I know. Total shock," Jade said. "But it was all okay. Vin squared up with my dad before he did his tell-all with me. My father definitely respected him for it. But more than that, I think he got a good dose of my reality when he learned how Vin was affected by the sordid affair our parents engaged in."

"And how's your dad taking all of this?" Cami asked.

“Okay, thanks for asking. He seemed happy about me and Vin. Again, shocking, but I guess he needed the eye-opener. And, surprisingly, he was totally onboard with me and Vin. He encouraged me to pursue this bizarre romance, in fact.”

“Holy Christ. A New World Order has come about.”

Jade laughed again as she stuffed her belongings into a canvas tote that would hopefully fit in one of Vin’s saddlebags. “Something like that.” She eyed her meager weekend wardrobe and said, “I’ll have to buy a dress for the premiere when we get to L.A. I’ll ship it back here.”

“I am so jealous.”

Jade grinned. “Noah would have invited you to come along, but I told him Jo Beth would fire you if you took unscheduled time off.”

“So true. Hey,” she said, “Maybe you can put a little thought into what I can do in this town besides working at the antiques store. I’m kind of in that same boat with Jo Beth that you were in with your family.”

“Choke collar?”

“Oh so tight.” She wrapped her hands around her neck and eeked out the word, “*Stifling.*”

“Hmm. I’ll give it some thought. Maybe Vin and Noah will need some help during their filming in the area. You’d make a fantastic caterer. I love your food!”

“No certified kitchen,” Cami said with a frown.

“Bet you could use the diner’s kitchen during off hours.”

She perked up. “I never thought of that.”

“See how much more creative I am now that I’m in love?”

Cami laughed. “Creative and not as grumpy.”

“Hey, I wasn’t grumpy!” She tossed a pillow at her friend.

“Yeah, says you. Anyway, things are definitely looking up. Take tons of pictures in L.A. and send them to me so I can live vicariously through you. Oh,” Cami added with a sharp look. “Feel free to send me pictures of Noah, but keep your greedy paws off him.”

Jade grinned. “I told you, *not* interested. I’ve got all I want, need and desire wrapped in one devilishly handsome package with the name Vin D’Angelo pinned to it.”

Cami sighed. “True love, huh?”

Jade shrugged, though her stomach fluttered. “Guess it really does exist. And wouldn’t you know, it’s one hell of a motivator.”

“Gonna kick those gun-toting relatives of yours into submission, huh?”

“I understand their plight. But now they have to understand mine. And I can assure you, they’re not going to stand between Vin and I. Nothing is.” She gave her friend a

bright smile. "That law that was laid down when I was born has officially been repealed."

Cami laughed. "Gee, it's like there's a new sheriff in town."

"Nope. Just a new Jade."

She picked up her cell phone from the nightstand next to her bed and sent a text to Vin, telling him she was ready for their adventure. They'd made arrangements for him and Noah to swing by her house after she'd packed. Her father knew she was on her way to L.A. and hadn't made a fuss about her plans before he'd flown back to Helena. She'd told her uncle and her cousin what she was up to—and that her father approved. They'd both been shocked into silence. A nice change of pace.

She'd closed the shop and had done everything she'd needed to do to take some time off and enjoy an impromptu trip with Vin.

Making a quick pass through the house to ensure everything was in order, she asked Cami, "You'll swing by the boutique and the house while I'm gone to make sure everything's okay?"

"Worry about nothing," her friend said. "Go to L.A. and have a fabulous time. I'll want the full details when you return, of course."

"Of course."

Jade gave Cami a quick hug. The sound of motorcycles made them both rush down the stairs and out the front door.

Noah cut the engine on his bike and climbed off. He ascended the steps to where Cami stood on the porch and Jade gave them some privacy. She approached Vin's bike and handed over her tote bag.

He eyed it curiously. "Really? This is all you're taking with you?"

She gave him a playful punch in the gut. "I believe the more appropriate response is, 'Wow, babe, you rock!'"

He grinned down at her. His head dipped and he whispered in her ear, "Wow, babe, you rock...my world."

Jade wrapped her arms around his waist. "That's so much better."

He kissed her, then said, "I'm glad you're going with me."

"I'm glad you invited me."

"We'll make this work," he assured her once again.

"How could we not? After all we've been through, I'd say we were destined to be together."

"Mm, destiny," he muttered. "I hadn't considered that one."

"I considered it for us."

He kissed her again, making her toes curl and her heart soar and her pulse race. She experienced all those glorious sensations he so easily evoked every single time she was

near him. Every time she was in his arms. Every time he looked at her, touched her, kissed her.

When she pulled away, she said, "I really and truly do love you. This is what I've been waiting for and it was *so* worth the wait."

"I couldn't agree more. Now..." he detangled himself from her. "Shall we head out? We're stopping in Idaho tonight and, personally, I can't wait to get you in my bed again."

Jade laughed. "Hardly logic I can argue with." Turning back to Cami, she said, "See you next week."

Cami stared up at Noah, not even sparing a glance Jade's way. "Hurry back," she said.

Jade snickered. "Look at them. So shameless."

"Uh-huh. You're one to talk."

"Well," she said as she climbed onto the bike behind Vin and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm a very bad girl."

"Woman," he corrected before he started the motorcycle.

Jade grinned. Yes indeed, she thought. *I am woman, hear me roar.*

Precisely what happened as Vin sped out of her driveway and down the hill. She gave a cheerful wave to her neighbor Jack, not giving a damn that he'd report to everyone who cared to listen that she'd ridden off into the sunset with the mysterious biker from New York.

Jade had finally come full circle...and knew she had endless amounts of adventures she'd never dreamed of waiting around the corner for her.

With Vin.

About the Author

Multi-published and award-winning author Ava McKnight's love of romantic fiction began as a teenager. She holds degrees in General Studies and Communications and has worked on newspapers as an editor and reporter. Most recently, she worked in PR, writing speeches and Congressional testimonies.

Ava is a member of Romance Writers of America and one of its Phoenix chapters, Desert Rose. She has served as a Board member, Newsletter Director, National Contest Chairperson and Arbitration Co-Chair. She is also published in romantic fiction as Calista Fox.

Ava welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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Scandalous

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