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Once Upon a Time...



MIDNIGHT MINE

ANNA LEIGH KEATON
MADISON LAYLE

Once Upon A Time...
Midnight Mine

By

Anna Leigh Keaton
&
Madison Layle

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Midnight Mine

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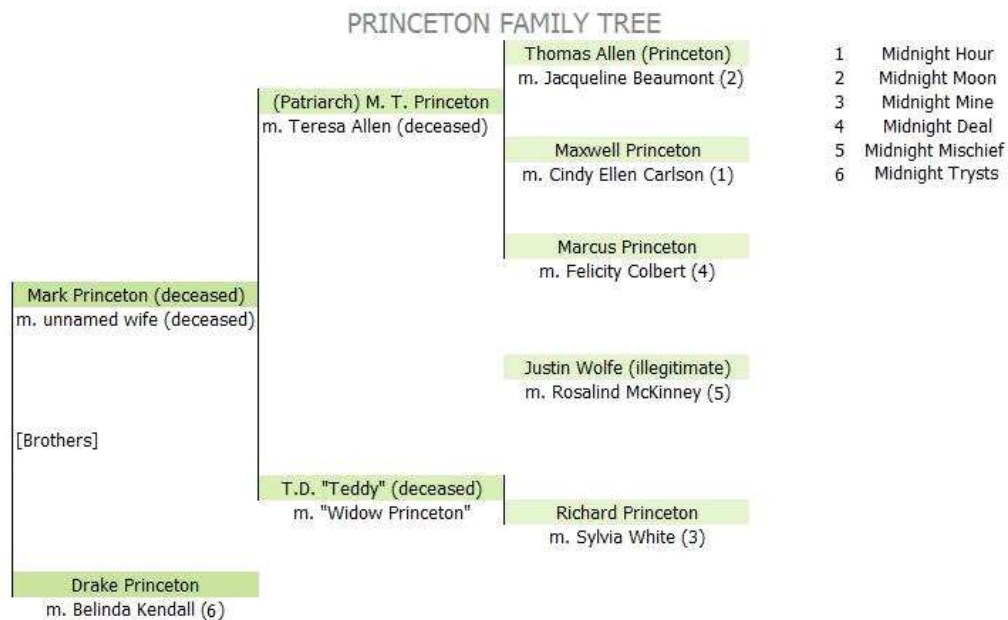
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Authors' Notes

Midnight Mine is book #3 of the *Once Upon a Time* series that delves into the fantasy world of the Princetons, a prestigious family in a town called Everland.

Here, we provide the Princeton's family tree and a map of their world, and we hope you enjoy the many erotic adventures of our sexy Princeton men as they discover true love amid pursuits of pleasure.





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Chapter One

The Everland Gazette

Princeton Mine tragedy one year later.

We remember Theodore Princeton and Charlie White.

Sylvia White took a deep breath, laid the hairbrush down on the scarred oak vanity, and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was done. Her makeup in place.

I can do this.

She'd planned for weeks to go to the Princetons' annual masquerade ball, the first time in her life she'd ever considered it. The evening gown she'd meticulously prepared by altering her mother's wedding dress lay ready on the bed next to a satin mask fashioned from remnants of the longer train. All she had to do was put them on, but she couldn't do that until...

No, she wouldn't sneak out of the house like a thief in the night. She was twenty-four, a grown woman, and she had every right to go to a party if she wanted. Her resident guard dogs—the hungry, boisterous, overly protective males downstairs—would just have to deal with it.

Pushing to her feet, she tugged the strings of her apron tighter and headed downstairs to set the table and check on the chicken casserole in the oven. Damon would arrive soon, and the others would expect to be able to dig in then.

The aroma that hit her in the face and the creak of the oven door made her smile. She loved cooking. The casserole was ready, so she pulled

it out and set it in the center of the dinner table, long enough to seat ten, though there wouldn't be that many coming to the table tonight.

The front door opened, and Damon appeared in his usual dark blue EMT uniform.

"Mmm, smells great, Sylvia."

"Thanks."

He kissed her on the cheek and pulled out his chair next to the vacant one at the head of the table. "I only have about forty-five minutes."

"That's fine. Everything is ready."

He eyed her. "You get a new haircut or something?"

"Why?"

"You look nice with it all curled up like that." He made a circle around his head with an index finger and grinned. "I guess slaving over a hot oven'll do that to a girl."

She laughed. "Thanks, I think." To the rest of her brothers, she called out, "Come and get it!"

Someone clicked the TV off, cutting off a commercial in mid-rant. Heavy footsteps pounded down the stairs. As the brothers streamed into the dining room from elsewhere in the house, she told them, "Grab your own plates and forks. I haven't had a chance to set the table."

Sylvester did the honors of passing around the dinnerware, while most of the rest took their usual spots along the table's sides.

Sylvia set the salad bowl down next to a basket of buttery dinner rolls and said, "Excuse me," before heading to her youngest brother's bedroom.

The sounds of gunfire and rock music met her despite the closed door. She shook her head as she opened it and peered around the door. "Dinner is ready, Doyle. Turn off the video game and get in there."

She waited, counted to three, and flicked the overhead lights off and on. He finally looked over his shoulder at her. "Oh, hi, sis."

"Dinner..."

"Right!"

The teenager paused the game, left the controller on the unmade bed, and followed her back to the dining room.

"Wash your hands."

"Did they?" he quipped.

She turned to her other brothers already seated at the table. Everyone nodded, whether it was true or not. She crossed her arms, and Damon decided, "I should probably do a better job on mine anyway." He got up, and then one after another crowded around the kitchen sink to rinse off their hands. She chuckled and finished bringing out the last side dishes of the meal, along with two, gallon-sized pitchers of iced tea. After the men were seated again, as she walked down the length of the table, she chided Harland for whistling at the table and then popped Steven on the hand when he reached across Gregory to snatch a roll.

"Manners..."

"Serves you right," Gregory muttered to his twin.

Sylvia smiled. They might be twins, but the two men were like night and day.

Though she didn't take her usual seat opposite her father's vacant chair at the head of the table, she stood behind it and nodded to Damon, who called the family to order and said grace. As soon as they chorused, "Amen," her brothers dug in, but Bartholomew—ever the observant one—asked, "You're not eating?"

This was it. This was her chance.

No, not yet.

Chicken.

She shook her head at the self-deprecating thoughts and removed her apron, draping the material over her ladder-back chair. "Not yet," she admitted into the awkward silence that followed Bart's question. "I have something to do upstairs. You guys go ahead. I'll be right back."

With that, she ignored the curious glances and escaped to her room. Once behind a closed door, she called for a cab and quickly finished getting ready for the ball. The fact she was so nervous about going alone to a party frustrated her, but perhaps it would've been easier if she had put her independent foot down sooner.

Her hands trembled, which made zipping the formal gown in place all the more difficult, but finally, she was ready. Her mask was folded up inside a small clutch purse. It could wait until she got there.

The cab pulled up outside.

It was time.

She could put it off no longer. Not unless she really was a coward.

I can do this.

She made her way back downstairs and tried to breeze past the dining room on the way to the front door. "I'm going out. Don't wait up."

"Stop." Damon stood in the doorway to the dining room.

"My cab is here."

As if the driver had heard her, he chose that instant to press the doorbell.

Damon went to the front door, opened it.

"Someone call a cab?"

"Yeah," Damon told the driver. "She'll be just a minute."

"Where are you going?" Gregory and Sylvester wanted to know. Now they stood in the dining room doorway. "And dressed like that?" Gregory added, his eyes narrowing.

"Does it matter?" she challenged with a frown. "I'm a grown woman. I should think I could come and go as I please."

Steven pushed through his other brothers and whistled at her. "Hey, if it's a date, I'm picking up...uh...what's her name?" Steven's bedroom eyes met hers, his expression changing in a flash from confused to cocky. "I'll think of it when I pick her up. Anyway, we could double tonight!"

"Look at her," Gregory snapped at his twin. "You'd never take any girl anyplace where you'd have to wear a tux."

"You don't know that."

"Does he even have a tux?" Doyle asked, though his question barely registered from his seat at the table, where he remained, still digging in to dinner with the guiltless appetite of a teenager.

"Stop talking with your mouth full, Doyle," Sylvia said, hearing him snicker. She looked at Steven. "Regardless of what you might or might not have in your closet, I'm not going on a double date with you, and you should be ashamed for not remembering Chloe's name."

He snapped his fingers and grinned. "That's her, but how'd you know?"

"She called an hour ago to make sure you didn't get stuck working

a second shift at the mine *like last time*."

"Last time?" Damon asked. "I didn't think they let new hires work double shifts at the mine, especially after they implemented all of those new safety precautions after the accident."

Sylvester agreed and ruffled his younger brother's hair. "They don't. That's just Stevie's way of solving the problem of having asked two different girls out on the same night."

Steven's grin was unrepentant. "It's tough to keep up... So many women, so little sleep." He yawned and let his eyelids droop, then chuckled. "But someone's got to do it."

Sylvia rolled her eyes, but her nervous grip on her clutch bag made her fingers hurt. "In any case, it's rude to make the cab wait. You all enjoy your dinner and don't wait up."

"Hey, now wait just a minute." That was Damon, the eldest and hardest one for her to stand up to. He looked so much like their father, and although he was married and lived down the street, he was still the one most turned to now that their patriarch was gone. "The least you can do, little sister, is tell us where you're going."

"Why?" So they could ruin it for her?

"I have to when I go out!" shouted the youngest nosey eavesdropper of the bunch from the dining room.

"Fine. I'm going to the Princetons' masquerade."

"Oh no, you don't," snarled Gregory, glancing at Damon. "You know what happens at masquerades—"

"Greg, chill," Sylvester said, trying to calm their most volatile brother. But his own concern became apparent when he retrieved his asthma inhaler and used it.

"Why would you want to go to some formal ol' dance anyway?" Harland asked, peering at her over Sylvester's left shoulder. "If you want to dance, all you have to do is come down to the club some night while me and the band are playing, and you can dance until your feet hurt."

"It's not the same, Harland, but thank you anyway. And you..." She pointed at Greg. "You're not my father, Gregory. And you should know me well enough to realize I'm quite old enough to take care of myself, thank you very much." She stood her ground and stared at her

eldest brother while her tummy churned.

They loved her. She knew that. They were all she had, and she loved them, too, but she couldn't let them keep her from living. And she feared that was exactly what was happening. She'd spent so much of her life caring for them and helping raise them, even though many were older than she was. After their father's passing, the siblings had stuck together because it was what family did for one another. She could accept their worry, but she couldn't take the overbearing protection any longer.

Damon opened the door and looked at her.

"Damon—"

He raised a hand to cut off Sylvester's protest. "Have a nice time, and be safe, sis."

She thanked him with a relieved smile and a quick kiss to the cheek and, grabbing her coat, out the door she went.

* * * * *

"Ladies and gentlemen," the Princeton butler formally announced, "May I present Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell Princeton."

Richard Princeton clapped along with the rest of the guests while the newlyweds made their way down the staircase to greet the flood of well-wishers. He smiled at witnessing the happy glow on Cindy's face and the love so evident when she looked at her husband, his cousin.

Lucky bastard, he thought good-naturedly.

"I thought I told you to wear the tux."

With a sigh, he turned to face the wrath of his mother and grabbed a champagne flute from a passing servant. Taking a sip first, he eyed his mother while gathering his composure. As usual for this annual affair, she was decked out in full, formal regalia, complete with ostentatious gemstones and a feathery, sequined masquerade mask on a stick, currently clasped in a tight fist. "I doubt Uncle will toss me out on my ear because I didn't show up in top hat and tails."

"That's the not the point, Richard. You are a Princeton. This is Maxwell's finest hour. You should present yourself accordingly. This is a formal affair."

Another sip. "Be that as it may, my suit is fine enough. What is it you really want, Mother?"

She huffed, her face frozen in a perpetual frown that no amount of makeup or plastic surgery could alter. "For you to grow up and become a man worthy of the Princeton name. Look at you. You haven't shaved —"

"I shaved this morning." So what if he had a five o'clock shadow by three in the afternoon. He didn't look unkempt.

"You're in need of a barber. Your hair's too long."

It barely reached his collar. He sighed and downed the last of his champagne.

"I guess I should be glad your father didn't live to see what you've become."

"Enough," he gritted out, trying not to make the scene she apparently wanted. Far be it for the other Princetons to have the spotlight one minute longer than she thought she deserved herself. "If you're so disgraced by my presence, then why are you standing here?"

She pressed her lips into a thin line for several heartbeats. "You've left Mr. Kohl waiting long enough." *At last! We get to the point.* He knew her pique had nothing to do with his attire. "The man came all this way to meet with you about expanding mine operations beyond the borders. The least you could do is listen to his joint venture proposal."

"Like I told you at last year's ball when you cornered me with that banker, I don't do business at family functions. This is a family function. I'm off the clock. If you want to wine and dine the man, fine, but leave me out of it."

She grabbed his arm. "I can't negotiate a deal. You're the legal owner of the mine. He wants to speak with you."

"Then *you* shouldn't have suggested he ambush me here."

"What else have you to do here?" she snapped. "The best debutantes available from the finest families the town has to offer are all here, and all you do is stand here trying to hold up this damn wall. You haven't danced even once."

He dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Mother, such language for a genteel lady."

"Don't smart-mouth me, young man. You're still my son, and you

should show me the respect I deserve.”

And here he thought he’d shown her both respect and infinite restraint. He closed his eyes. “I came here tonight to visit family and show support for my cousin and his new bride. I didn’t come here to do business or let you rope me into the marriage market.”

“How can you deny me the pleasure of being a grandmother?”

He’d heard the argument before, and at first he’d wondered whether she’d changed, but she didn’t want grandchildren to dote over. She wanted them because all of her peers at the country club bragged constantly about Lil’ Tommy or Pretty Julie, how talented or smart their grandkids were. His mother could buy a better car than anyone else, flash more diamonds than her friends, or outbid a competitor at an art auction. But only he could provide her with grandkids.

“Fine,” she was saying. “Be a wallflower. What do I care?”

Maybe a dance would resolve his problems. At least he’d be on the dance floor and away from his imperious mother.

“What do you want me to do, Mother? Ask the next person who comes through that door to dance?”

“I would prefer you speak with Mr. Kohl, but at least dancing would be better than standing here drinking your weight in champagne.”

“Here.” He all but shoved his empty glass into her hand and walked toward the door.

A masked woman in white was just handing her coat to the butler when he asked her, “May I have this dance?”

“Oh.” Somewhat startled, she turned to face him, and after a brief hesitation, she smiled. “Okay.”

She took the hand he held out to her and let him guide her through the partiers, past a decked-out Christmas tree, and into the library-turned-ballroom where a slow song had just begun. When he pulled her into his arms, he gave her a closer inspection and thought he recognized her despite the small silk mask.

The slim young woman had coal black hair, long but pinned back with loose curls cascading about her shoulders. Her full-length dress was pure white silk, unadorned, yet elegant in its simplicity. She wore no jewelry, but a sheer white wrap draped around her back and over each

arm completed the look.

"Are we going to dance?" she asked with a grin and mischievous twinkle in her pine-green eyes.

He realized he was just standing there immobile, staring at her face, with her in his arms. "Yes, yes, of course." He began to move. "My apologies for staring, but I think I know you," he added after several steps.

"You do?" She held his gaze, and he admired that.

He nodded. "I'm Richard Princeton."

"I know." Her smile never wavered as she followed his every movement. "You aren't wearing a mask."

He grinned. "Right." Another thing for which his mother had chastised him.

"You're the White brothers' sister, aren't you?"

She flashed pearly whites. "You're very good, Mr. Princeton."

"Please, call me Richard. When people say mister, I turn to look for my father or uncle."

"Okay...Richard."

Her bare back was so soft, as were the curls of her hair that brushed across his hand. "I'm sorry. I don't know your name."

"It's Sylvia."

"Pretty name."

"Thank you."

"I've seen you at the mine before."

"Yes. I bring my brothers their lunch most days."

"Right. You have...four brothers?"

"No. Seven, actually."

He blinked at that. He hadn't known the White family was so large. He did recall meeting their father at the mine, back when he was little, before his parents sent him away to boarding school. "Must be nice having so many siblings to play with growing up."

"I wouldn't say that." She laughed, which both surprised and pleased him.

He pulled her a fraction closer while they continued to dance. "Why not?"

"You try dating or doing anything remotely risky with seven overprotective brothers following you around."

He grinned and searched the perimeter of the dance floor for his mother or Mr. Kohl. "I see your point. I guess family can be rather overbearing at times."

"A little," she agreed.

When the music slowed to an end, he stopped dancing but wasn't ready to let her go. She'd been the one bright spot in an otherwise wearisome evening. "Would you like something to drink?" he ventured, hoping she'd say yes.

"That would be nice." She took his proffered arm. "Thank you."

As he escorted her toward a refreshment table near one wall, he watched her look around in apparent awe at his uncle's grandiose home.

"Over the top, isn't it?" he asked, handing her a crystal flute.

She blinked at him. "What is?"

"The mansion."

"I think it's beautiful...and very big." She smiled at him, her eyes so bright with honest joy. "I've never been in it before."

"My uncle spared no expense after he married Aunt Teresa."

Taking a sip of her champagne, she nodded. "They were in love."

"Yes." More so than his own parents. "But it's the Princeton way, too, I suppose."

"What way is that?" She reached for a strawberry on a small platter and took a bite.

"Flaunting wealth."

She shook her head. "Oh, I don't think they mean to do it. Your father was never like that."

"Have you seen our house?" The monstrosity was a showcase for overindulgent excess.

"Yes, I've been there."

That surprised him. He didn't remember her as a child.

She grinned. "We always attended the company New Year's Eve party with my father. When I was little I pretended it was a castle."

He didn't know what to say. His childhood had been far from a fairy tale, but then he hadn't really grown up in what was now his

residence. It still didn't feel like home.

"The Princeton family is very generous when it comes to charities and good causes. I mean, take this ball, for example."

"This ball?"

"Yes, everyone in town is invited. They don't exclude anyone."

What she said was true, though he knew most of those who accepted the invitation and dared to show up were of his mother's ilk. Socialites or matchmaking mothers. Still, Sylvia was a miner's daughter, not at all the country club type, and she was here. Far be it for him to rain on her parade, especially when he was enjoying her company.

He glanced up in time to see his mother bearing down on him.

He bent toward Sylvia. "You remember what you said about your brothers?"

"Yes."

"My overbearing relatives are headed this way. Would you do me a huge favor and let's continue this delightful discussion elsewhere?"

She chuckled and took his arm. "Certainly. Where to?"

Chapter Two

He led her through the crowd in the opposite direction from which his mother came. "Do you like flowers?"

"Yes, but it's winter." Confusion marred her brow. "None are blooming now. It's far too cold outside."

"Never fear, my dear Sylvia," he said with a wink. "I know the perfect place." They exited the library through a side door instead of the main entrance, and he briskly led her down a long corridor, hoping—praying—his mother didn't follow. When he realized Sylvia nearly ran to keep up, he slowed his pace. "Sorry."

Sylvia laughed a little breathlessly. Excitedly. "It's all right. But where are we going?"

He smiled down at her, rounded the corner at the end of the hall, and pushed open a solid mahogany door. "Here we are."

"Oh..." She stopped just outside the door, her eyes wide, sparkling under the sun lamps his uncle kept burning day and night. "It's..."

"Come on in. We can't let any of the butterflies escape." He tugged her hand, and she stepped inside so he could close the door behind them just as a monarch butterfly flitted by.

It had been years since he'd been inside his uncle's garden room, and he was amazed himself at how much it had changed in the past two decades. The tropical foliage that had once been small plants had turned into massive trees, and cobblestones had been laid over the floor rather than the wooden planks he remembered from childhood.

Orchids bloomed everywhere. Some in pots, some from mossy

places in the V of tree branches. Other flowers had been added, though he had no idea what they were, but the scent of the massive glass-enclosed room was heavenly.

"I've never been anywhere like this before," Sylvia said, turning a circle as she looked up into the branches of leafy trees. She gasped and pointed. "Look there."

Richard moved behind her, taking in an even sweeter scent than the humid air surrounding them. She smelled of spring berries.

"See it?"

He dragged his gaze from her glossy black curls up into the greenery and spotted a colorful blue and red parrot. "Mm hmm."

She turned toward Richard, then smiled shyly and stepped back. "It's beautiful."

"It's my uncle's hobby. The orchids, I mean. He raises them and makes hybrids, which he enters in flower shows. He even created one he named after his late wife."

"May I see it?"

Richard looked around, and then he realized there were tiny markers near each of the plants with their names on them. "Well, I remember it's a spectacular shade of red." He reached for her hand, and she took his without hesitation, which made him smile.

"There's a red one," she pointed out.

He read the name and shook his head, looking around some more. "Darker red, if I remember correctly. Ah, there it is." They walked hand-in-hand a few feet farther into the room. On the small marker in front of the plant was the official Latin name with "Teresa" underneath in a beautiful script.

"I don't really know anything about orchids, but it is very beautiful," Sylvia said softly. She turned around, released his hand, and took the few steps to a small pond in the center of the greenhouse. "This is all so...magical."

"When I was little," Richard said, "my cousins and I would play in here. We weren't allowed to touch anything, but in the middle of the winter, when it was too cold to go outside, we'd sit on the floor and play jacks or go fish. Sometimes we'd even bring in our Hot Wheels and..." He

chuckled, a little embarrassed. It was a fond memory of his childhood he hadn't thought of in years.

She turned and smiled at him. "I have a spot in the woods behind our house kind of like this. I mean, it's nothing like this, but it's my special place to go. And in the spring the birds sing, baby bunnies eat the tender grass, and little white flowers bloom all over the place like a carpet."

"And you still go there, don't you?"

She frowned a little and nodded. "Of course."

Since moving back to his hometown, he hadn't had a real place of his own—a private spot where no one could find him. For a fleeting instant, he wondered if Sylvia would be willing to share hers.

She cleared her throat and glanced away, then back. "I read in the newspaper last year, after the...uh..." She made a face of pain, but it quickly cleared.

He touched her arm. "I know your father died in the same accident as mine did. I'm so sorry for that."

She nodded. "It's been a tough year." She brushed the sad feelings aside with the wave of her hand. "Anyway, I read in the paper that you came back to take over the mine, but I was wondering what you'd been doing before that."

Richard sucked in a deep breath. "You get right to the heart of things, don't you?"

She grinned. "I'm learning lately that I have to, or I don't get anywhere."

"Okay. Let's sit?" He motioned toward a wooden bench set in a small alcove surrounded on three sides by flowers and foliage.

Sylvia sat down, and he sat close to her, but refrained from touching her. She didn't seem nervous anymore, and he liked her soft smiles. She reached up and pulled off her mask, folded it neatly in half, and tucked it inside her little purse.

"The simple answer to your question would be that I worked on off-shore oil rigs," he said.

"And the not-so-simple answer?" she inquired with a lift to her beautiful black eyebrows.

He grinned. He knew she would ask something like that, and to his

surprise, he wanted to share with her. "Well, I've been away since I was ten. I loved the mine and spent my summers going to work with my father. My mother..." He blew out a breath. "Well, let's just say she didn't care for little boys who played in the dirt and caught frogs and bugs for fun. She wanted to send me away to boarding school."

"That's awful. All little boys do that stuff." Then she chuckled, a sweet, warm sound. "Most of my brothers are adults, and sometimes they still bring home frogs, or toads, or garden snakes because they expect me to freak out about it." She shook her head and rolled her eyes, a smile curving her full, red lips. Leaning closer, she lowered her voice. "Silly them. I got over that when I was about three years old, but I still play along."

That made Richard laugh. "I'm guessing with that many brothers, you've learned to deal with a lot."

She nodded emphatically. "More than you can imagine."

Still smiling, Richard continued, "Anyway, when I was ten and at the mine, I fell and broke my leg. Totally my fault. I was climbing on the talus piles—the big rock piles where they dump the stuff they pull out of the mine—and slipped. Dad had told me not to climb on them because they weren't safe, but I didn't always listen. The day my cast came off, I was sent to a boarding school in Europe." His mother had finally won the battle and convinced his father it was for the best. Richard disagreed then and still did even now.

Sylvia made a face of sympathy. "That must have been very hard on you since you were so young."

"Yes, it was. And the fear of the unknown turned into anger. I stayed there for eight years until I graduated."

"You didn't see your parents in all that time?"

He shook his head. "Well, once. My father sent for me over the holidays." He stopped, not really wanting to relive that time in his life. Bitter over being sent away, he'd made it hard on his father, who'd attempted to make amends. And his mother hadn't helped bridge any gorges between father and son. "After graduation I came back but decided to go to college on the coast instead of returning to my parents' home or working for my father at the mines."

"What did you study?"

He gave her a humorless smile. "Ironically, I got a degree in mining engineering." He shrugged. "I guess it was always in my blood." He'd still been trying to make his father proud, even when he'd thought he hated the man.

"And then you went to work on the oil rigs? Isn't that a dangerous job?"

He nodded. "Very dangerous, but the pay is good, and I had student loans to pay off."

"And then your father died."

"Yeah." What a fool he'd been. When he was given ownership of the mine and more money than he'd ever know what to do with, it meant nothing until his father's lawyer handed him a small leather-bound journal. His father's words, his father's handwriting. His father's life instructions, lessons, and love to the son who shunned him, returned his letters unopened, refused to see him.

"I'm so sorry," Sylvia said and took his hand in hers. "I know how hard it is."

Richard sighed. "You never hated your father, though. Or thought you did."

"No. Never. My father worked so hard to raise us all on his own."

"You didn't have a mother?" he asked.

"She died giving birth to my youngest brother, Doyle, when I was seven."

"Oh, Sylvia," he said, his heart hurting for her. "You grew up too fast, didn't you?"

Her smile was a little sad. "I learned to cook for a herd of boys and men before my eighth birthday, and to tend to a toddler and baby. But other than wanting a mom, I wouldn't trade any of it. I love my brothers."

"What do you do now?" he asked. "For a job, I mean."

Her face split into a grin, and the sadness left her eyes. "Well, let's see. I'm a chef, a gardener, a housekeeper..." She ticked the items off on her fingers. "...an accountant, personal shopper, and often a time management counselor. Oh, and a social director."

Richard's brows drew together. "That's an awful lot for one person

to do."

She burst out laughing. "Would you please tell my brothers that?"

He shook his head. "I don't understand."

"My only job right now is to make sure their lives run smoothly, that there's food on the table, the house is in some semblance of order, the laundry is done, and that Steven doesn't pick up the wrong date on the wrong night."

"How much do they pay you for all that?"

She shrugged and shook her head.

"You don't get paid?"

"Our house doesn't really work that way. I mean..." Her face scrunched up all cute as she tried to explain. "Everyone works outside the home. The four at the mine, then Harland is a musician who plays guitar and sings in a band in nightclubs on the weekends, and a few evenings during the week he plays at The Copper Room downtown during the dinner hour. Even Doyle, who's only seventeen, works summers at the Colbert farm."

"That's six, where's the seventh brother?"

"He doesn't live with us, but he's there all the time." She grinned. "Damon's the oldest. He's an EMT, married to an ER doctor, and lives a couple of houses down the street from us."

"Okay, so what does all that have to do with you not getting paid?"

"My brothers who still live at home pull out some spending money from their checks, and the rest all goes into the family bank account. Out of that I pay the bills, buy the food, and use what I need for...you know...personal stuff."

Richard turned toward her more fully and laid his arm along the back of the bench. "And this is something you're going to do indefinitely? Take care of them?"

"Oh, Lord, I hope not," she said with real feeling and look of exaggerated agony on her face.

"Then what do you want to do? How old are you?"

She lightly slapped his thigh. "You're not supposed to ask a woman that."

"Come on," he said with a grin. "You're in your twenties, right?"

How long do you plan to feed and tend to your brothers, who are mostly older than you?"

She sighed and tipped her head to the side a bit. "I'm twenty-four, and I've been thinking about my escape for a while now."

"Escape? That sounds ominous."

"Not really. Escape into the real working world."

"So, what do you want to do?"

She shrugged, but he could tell from the look in her eyes that she had dreams.

"Come on, Sylvia. Just us here. Tell me your secrets."

Her smile was a little shy. "It's silly."

"Dreams are not silly."

"Mine is, because it'll never happen."

"Tell me anyway."

She looked at him, seemed to study him as if deciding if he was worthy of hearing her deepest wishes. Then she ducked her head slightly and dropped her gaze to her lap. "My dream is to open a little café on Main Street. Just breakfast and lunch, light fare like croissants and individual quiches, and deli sandwiches made on homemade bread, and hearty soups and stews to go with the sandwiches." She raised her eyes and smiled. "And specialty coffees and teas. Maybe a few pies. Cakes even. Everyday a different one offered. Buy a vanilla caramel latte and get a slice of almond coffee cake. That kind of thing."

Richard was smiling. He couldn't help it. It was her dream, and there was passion in her voice, in her demeanor, as she continued to talk. "Then do it," he said. "It sounds wonderful, and there's no place like that in Everland."

She nodded. "I know. But I can't do it."

"Why? It's a fantastic idea."

She stared at him a long moment, then stood up and left the alcove, heading back toward the little pond.

"Sylvia?" he said, following her. "I didn't mean to upset you." He took her arm and gently turned her toward him. "What did I say?"

She stared into his eyes. "I have no formal training. I have never taken a single cooking course. I'm self-taught. And I have no money. What

bank would give a small business loan to a twenty-four-year-old woman who's never even had a paying job?"

"Anyone who saw your passion," he answered honestly. He'd give her the loan right now if he didn't think she'd hate him for the offer. "Can you really make croissants?"

"The best outside of France," she said with conviction, which made him grin.

"I've had them in the best cafés in Paris. Why don't you let me judge?"

"You've been to Paris?"

He nodded.

She frowned at him, but soon broke into a smile. "Maybe I will."

"Promise?" He edged closer and slid his hand down her arm.

"I said 'maybe.'"

"You turned a horrible night into something special," he said softly as he ever so gently pulled her into his arms.

She smiled at him, her eyes sparkling like the deepest emeralds in his mine. But she was worth more than all the gems in the world. "It's been a night to remember."

"May I kiss you, Sylvia?"

Without the slightest coyness she said, "I think I would like that very much."

He leaned down and lightly brushed his lips over hers. Her breath caught for an instant, and he felt her tremble. He wondered if she'd ever been kissed before. Then he just didn't care. He pressed his mouth to hers and teased her closed lips with his tongue until she parted them. He didn't invade, though. He took his time, nibbled her juicy bottom lip, tasting the cherry sweetness of her lipstick. It wasn't until the tiniest sound came out of her, not quite a whine or whimper, but a sound of pleasure, that he dipped his tongue into her mouth to taste her.

She was sweetness personified, and she melted against him, her arms rising to encircle his neck, her body molding to his in the most perfect way.

It was the world's sweetest kiss.

A hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him away. He heard, "You

son of a bitch," an instant before a wrecking ball slammed into his jaw and knocked him back.

Sylvia shouted, "Gregory! Stop!"

Richard saw stars. He stumbled, the back of his knees hitting a low brick wall surrounding the pond, and he plopped down onto it, nearly toppling backwards into the water.

"How could you?" Sylvia cried.

"Stop, Greg," a man said. "That's..."

"Oh, fuck."

"Yeah."

Richard's eyes began to clear, and he blinked, looking up at the men standing near Sylvia. Gregory and Sylvester White. Sylvia's brothers. Two of his employees.

Then Sylvia was in front of him, touching his jaw. "I'm sorry, Richard. So sorry." There were tears in her eyes, but they didn't fall. "I'm sorry." And then she turned away and fled at nearly a run.

Richard turned his gaze on the brothers.

"We...uh..." Sylvester pointed after his sister then grabbed Gregory's arm and dragged him from the greenhouse.

Richard raised his hand to his face. His lip was split, beginning to swell, and his jaw hurt like hell. A chuckle rose up from inside of him. He tested his jaw, opening and closing it. Nothing broken.

"That poor girl," he whispered into the silence of the garden.

* * * * *

Sylvia made it through the maze of hallways to the front door of the Princeton mansion without having to enter the ballroom. It took a moment for the butler to retrieve her coat, and by that time her two stupid brothers had caught up with her.

"Sylvia," Sylvester said in a tone meant to calm her down, but there was nothing that could remove the utter embarrassment they'd caused her.

She ignored them both, and when the tuxedo-clad butler handed her the coat and opened the door for her, she rushed out into the frigid

December air and headed for one of the taxicabs lined up in the circular drive.

"Sylvia, stop," Gregory said, grabbing her arm.

She jerked free and fed on the fury inside of her, not the humiliation. "Don't you dare touch me. How could you have done that to me?"

"That man had his hands all over you. What was I supposed to do?" he demanded with a good dose of anger.

"All— Oh for God's sake, Greg, we were kissing. Kissing! That was all! He wasn't mauling me, so you don't have to call out the National Guard. I'm twenty-four years old, and a man can kiss me if I let him. Did you even stop for one second to see if, maybe, *just maybe*, I liked it? Well I did, right up until you had to act like a Neanderthal!"

"Settle down, sis," Sylvester said.

"You shut up. What were you thinking letting him do that? You two are gonna be lucky not to lose your jobs."

"We didn't realize—"

"No, you didn't because you didn't take the time to *think*. You just tried knocking out your *boss* because he *kissed* your little sister. You can be such a hothead sometimes," she said, aiming the last comment to Gregory.

"Don't you speak to me that way, Sylvia."

"Why? Because you're my *big* brother? Because you can beat people up?"

Gregory's scowl darkened as he tried to shift blame. "Just what are you doing kissing *our boss* anyway? You don't even know the man."

She poked him in the chest. "Get this through your thick head. I'm a grown woman, and if I want to kiss someone, it's none of your damn business." The tears burned her eyes, so she whirled away and marched toward the nearest cab.

"We brought the truck," Sylvester said.

"Like I'd go anywhere with either of you," she said as the driver opened the rear door for her.

"Sylvia, don't leave—"

The door shut on whatever else Sylvester was about to say, and the driver took his place behind the wheel.

"Where to, ma'am?"

She sighed. She really had nowhere else to go but home, so she gave the driver her address and leaned back in the seat.

Stupid brothers!

It had been the most magical night of her life, and they'd ruined it. Richard Princeton was a gentleman who'd actually asked permission before he kissed her, and now two of her brothers would probably lose their jobs over this. Because they were so, so *stupid*.

She closed her eyes and took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm herself down. As her anger slowly eased, she raised her hand and touched her fingers to her lips. His kiss had made her feel things she never knew existed. Excitement, pleasure, a tiny bit of fear over her body's reaction to him.

He'd been so gentle, yet there was a slight bit of demand in his kiss. He obviously knew how to handle women, because she'd been putty in his arms. Nothing like the few boys who had dared her brothers' wrath when she was in high school, that was for sure.

But above all else, he'd listened to her. She'd once tried talking to Damon about her hopes and dreams, but, as usual, he'd been too distracted to listen. When she'd voiced her desire to open her own café, he'd said, "Sure, sis, whatever you want. Sounds good." Which meant he hadn't heard a word she said.

Richard Princeton, who hadn't even known her other than by sight an hour ago, had told her to reach for her dreams.

She had a strong feeling *he* would be what she reached for in her dreams tonight.

Chapter Three

I thought of you today, my son, as the sun set over the evergreen pines. I wonder if you remember the time you slipped on pine needles while chasing a bunny across the yard. You were so mad at the tree for foiling your attack that you wanted to cut the tree down, until I showed you how it was home to other woodland critters.

Perhaps I was wrong in sending you to school abroad. Like the pine tree, I've stood by waiting for the ax of your anger to fall. But you are a good man, son. And I know someday you'll realize that I wanted you to see so much more of this world than this little town. Not because I didn't want to keep you near, but because in seeing other lands you might come to truly appreciate the beauty of your home.

This earth, my boy, has plenty to offer us. From the minerals and gems we mine from its depths to its lush growth that feeds and sustains us. I hope someday you'll understand how proud I am of the man you've become.

Yes, I know you're angry with me still. But anger builds determination in the strong, and you are strong, son. You don't know it yet, but I've kept tabs on the young man you've become as you continue to chase your dreams—your rabbits of a different sort. Perhaps, once you've succeeded, my dream will come true. I've only wanted the best for you, and I know you have become the honorable man worthy of continuing my life's work. One day, I'll

entrust it to your hands. I know you'll make me proud. You already have.

Richard had just shut his father's journal and stashed it in the desk drawer when his secretary buzzed twice without saying a word—their signal that his mother was here. Seconds later, she stormed in as if she owned the place, which he was sure she thought she should even though she didn't know a thing about the business of mining—had never *worked* in a real job a single day in her life.

"Good morning, Mother. What can I do for you?"

"Explain to me where you went with that tramp last night?"

He frowned at her but tried to keep his temper in check. Any volatile reaction would only spur her on to more insults, or more interrogation. "Such malicious quips are beneath you."

"Who is she?"

"And against a woman you don't even know." He tisked.

His mother glared at him from across the desk. "And I suppose disappearing with a woman from a family function is the pinnacle of propriety?"

"I didn't *disappear* with the lady in question. We had a very pleasant discussion in Uncle's garden room."

"A discussion?"

"Mm hmm."

"About what?"

He smiled. "As I recall, we talked about beautiful flowers and overbearing relatives."

She snorted and finally sat in one of the two plastic chairs, but not before wiping off the seat with a handkerchief. When she looked up, she eyed him with obvious suspicion. "And I'm supposed to believe that's all you did when you never returned to the ballroom?"

"Believe what you like. She left with two brothers as chaperone, and I left the masquerade alone, as I'm sure my uncle's butler can attest...should you lower yourself to spying on me via the hired help."

She waved her hand toward him. "I suppose the brothers are guilty for making you look like you lost a barroom brawl?"

He grinned. "It's so nice to know you care, Mother, and think so highly of me that you'd believe I could be outnumbered two-to-one and escape with only a tiny bruise and busted lip. I'm fine, by the way. A minor accident. Clumsy of me, really. Do you wish to hear details?"

"Save it." She straightened in her chair. "It was very rude of you to leave last night without speaking to—"

He held up a hand. "I've already spoken to your Mr. Kohl earlier this morning."

"Oh?" A hesitant smile began.

"Yes, and I told him I'm not interested in aligning my business with his."

"Why?" The frown returned.

He laced his fingers together and leaned his elbows on the arms of his chair. "His safety regulations leave a lot to be desired, as do his hiring practices."

"But—"

"My decision is final. I will not risk the reputation of the Princeton Mining Company. I don't care how profitable his margin."

"You just dislike my involvement."

He stared at her and didn't deny the statement. He loved his mother. She was his mother, after all, but she had no experience running the business, and why she wanted to try to butt in now was mystifying; she'd never shown this much interest in "dirty rock smashers" when his father was alive.

His secretary buzzed in over their intercom. "Sir, Sylvester and Gregory are here to see you."

He pushed the button. "Thanks. Tell them to wait. I'll be right with them." Releasing the intercom, he looked at his mother. "Was there anything else you needed?"

She scraped the chair's legs across the floor as she got to her feet. "Who was the woman you...chatted with...at the party?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Why do you want to know?"

She attempted an innocent wide-eyed expression. "Is there a reason her identity must remain a secret?"

"Not at all. Her name is Sylvia."

"Never heard of her."

"That's odd. She's been to parties you and Father hosted in years past."

He almost chuckled at her confused look but didn't offer further details on the identity of the woman he hoped to get to know better.

"She must not be that memorable," his mother quipped before she turned on her heel and left.

He couldn't disagree more, but he kept the thought to himself as he buzzed his secretary and awaited the arrival of two of his employees. When the men entered, Richard motioned for them to each take a seat while he pulled up their employee records on his computer. Four White brothers had followed in their father's footsteps and worked for him in the mine—three for several years. The fourth, Steven, although as old as one of the men who sat before him, was a recent hire but a quick learner. No disciplinary actions were in their files. Two had received commendations for their efforts during last year's accident that had claimed the life of their father as well as his own.

He looked at the two silent brothers, their skin and work clothes already showing signs of a hard day on the job despite the early hour. Regret was evident on Gregory's face, and more so on Sylvester's. It was all he needed to see, but he let the silence stretch a few more tense seconds until the older brother spoke up.

"We want to speak to you about last night."

"I'm listening."

Sylvester looked at Gregory and elbowed him. "Actually, Gregory has something he wants to say."

Richard waited.

"I'm sorry," Gregory began. "I didn't know it was you."

"And that would've made a difference?"

"Not really," Gregory admitted before grudgingly adding, "Well, maybe I would've hesitated a second."

Richard chuckled. "I see. You would've given me a slightly better chance to defend myself."

"Something like that," Gregory muttered, a perpetual scowl marring his forehead.

"So long as it doesn't happen again—"

"It won't," Sylvester assured him.

Gregory remained tight-lipped.

"Then I see no reason why what happened in private should have any bearing on what occurs here at the mine."

Gregory blinked. "You're not firing us?"

Richard gave a nonchalant shrug. "You were protecting your sister, or rather thought you needed to, and you reacted."

Both men nodded and glanced at one another.

Richard smiled. "She's a very beautiful, high-spirited lady."

"Tell us about it," Gregory muttered, making Richard grin.

"Give you an earful, did she?" He wished he could've seen it. He much preferred the passionate fire he'd glimpsed in her eyes instead of the unshed tears he'd witnessed before she spun away and left.

"Read us the Riot Act."

"I'm surprised she didn't box our ears," Sylvester added.

"She's certainly worth protecting, though." Surprised stares were Richard's reward for that statement. He leaned forward, elbows on his desk. "I must admit that if I were not an only child, if I had a sister like Sylvia, I might've—no, I'm pretty sure I would've been tempted to do the same."

The brothers dared to smile.

"Listen. You two worked for my father before me. You're loyal, dependable, and hardworking. I don't want to lose either of you over a misunderstanding. We're all gentlemen here."

"Thank you, sir." Sylvester's thanks came accompanied by Gregory's relieved nod.

"But..." He thumbed his swollen bottom lip.

"Sir?" Gregory tensed.

"Raise a fist to me again without true provocation, and I will not be so forgiving. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir," both men replied.

"Dismissed."

The two shot out of their seats and turned to head back to work, but they hesitated a second when Richard added, "Oh, and gentlemen..."

Just so we're all aware this time around, know this. She is not my sister, so I do intend to call on Sylvia and, if she permits, kiss her again. It's *her* choice."

The brothers nodded and exited without a word.

* * * * *

Sylvia's arrival at the mine was timed perfectly with the miners breaking for lunch, her brothers included in the bunch.

Steven was the first to spot her as he reclined on a patch of dry ground beneath the thick leafless oak where her siblings usually congregated during their breaks. "Hey, sis." His words formed white puffs in the chilled air. His eyes drifted closed.

"Stay up late again, Stevie?" she asked, already knowing the answer by his smug grin.

Sylvester and Gregory walked up, removing their work gloves and eyeing her quietly. Bartholomew relieved her of the heavy picnic basket she always used to bring them their lunch. Although this time, they might not be so thrilled by the delivery.

She was still piqued over their actions at the ball and chose to blame the whole lot because the two hadn't shown up without the others' blessing. They didn't have to admit that for her to know it was true.

"Thanks," Bart said in his typical soft-spoken manner. "You're the best sister ever."

She rolled her eyes but smiled despite herself. "I'm your only sister."

His gaze dropped to a smaller basket in her other hand. "Is that dessert?"

"No, it's not for you. Enjoy lunch, guys."

Bart tore into the picnic basket as she walked away, but she wasn't far before she heard, "Liverwurst and limburger cheese! Oh, damn, that shit stinks."

Gregory cursed. Stevie laughed. Sylvester said, "I told you. I knew she was still mad at us." And Bart hollered, "But Sylvia, I wasn't even there!"

"You gave your blessing!" She kept walking.

"Damn it," Sylvester said. "She even put onions on the sandwiches. I hate onions."

Chuckling to herself, Sylvia headed across the expansive parking lot to the brick building that housed the offices of the mine. Her nerves jangled a bit. Would Richard accept her apology? Would he consider letting her brothers keep their jobs? Would he even want the lunch she'd prepared specially for him?

Just as she reached for the door to pull it open, it swung outward, almost knocking into her. "Oh!"

"Hey, you okay?"

She looked up to see Richard standing there, one hand on the open door. He looked good enough to eat in faded jeans and a button-down shirt. But the collar was open, as was his black leather bomber jacket.

"Sylvia?"

"Hm? Oh, right. I'm fine." She forced a smile and made herself make eye contact with him, but spotted the slightly swollen corner of his mouth and a small cut on his bottom lip. Damn her brother.

He smiled in return, but his reached his gorgeous blue eyes. "I was just on my way to lunch. Care to join me?"

She was tempted to say yes, and hide in her car what she'd spent hours slaving over at home. But she had come here with purpose, and she couldn't let herself chicken out. "Actually..." She lifted the small wicker basket she held. "I brought you lunch."

His eyebrows shot up, and his smile returned full force. "You did?"

She nodded. "As a peace offering."

"Well, come on inside then. You must be freezing."

Actually, she felt rather warm under his gaze, but she nodded.

"Hold my calls," he told his secretary as he led the way past her desk.

"It is chilly today," Sylvia added. "There's just enough breeze to bring the temperature down." She rolled her eyes at his back while they walked down a hallway. Could she be any lamer? Talking about the weather? *Get a grip, Sylvia!*

At the end of the hall, he opened a door and stepped inside, then

waited for her to enter before shutting it behind them. The office wasn't very spacious, not as she'd expected anyway. She'd pictured him behind a massive mahogany desk with bookshelves filled with first editions and... That was silly. He ran a mining operation; he wasn't a lawyer. The room suited the job, she supposed, with several metal filing cabinets against one wall, a scarred oak desk, and a couple of molded plastic chairs. He did have a fine-looking leather executive chair behind the desk, though.

"May I take your coat?" he asked.

She let him help her remove her coat and watched as he hung it, along with his, on hooks attached to the wall near the door.

"So," he said and glanced at the basket.

A little nervous giggle slipped out of her, and she held the wicker basket out to him. "Just a little something I whipped up this morning." She hoped he didn't see through the lie. She'd been up since three that morning working on the perfect croissant. She hadn't made them in a while and had forgotten what a total pain in the butt they could be to get just right. But she hadn't been able to sleep, so she'd decided staying in bed staring at the pattern of leafless tree branches reflected on her ceiling wasn't doing her any good.

He took the basket, leaned down, and kissed her cheek. "You didn't need to bring a peace offering. But I wanted to get my hands on the food before I told you that."

"I didn't?" She wished he'd kissed her lips instead.

"You did nothing wrong."

"No, but my brothers—"

"I had a talk with your brothers this morning." He rounded his desk, set the basket on it as if it were made of expensive china, and sat down in his chair. "What happened last night has nothing to do with their jobs. They're good workers, as I told them."

Her knees wobbled in relief, and she sat down in the plastic chair closest to the desk. "I'm so glad. I was really worried...."

He waved away her comment and opened the lid on the basket. "Mmm. Whatever it is, it smells amazing." He pulled out a plastic container she'd wrapped in a kitchen towel to keep warm.

"It's just some mushroom soup, a little bread, and a blackberry

coffee cake."

Then he lifted out the brown sandwich bag containing the croissants. When he unfolded the top and peered inside, he glanced up at her with a look of disbelief. "A little bread?"

She tucked her bottom lip between her teeth. She had no idea why it was so important to her he liked her offering, but it was. Very important. Felt like it might be the most important thing in her life in that moment.

Richard pulled one of the perfectly browned, artistically shaped croissants from the ugly brown bag. He lifted it to his nose and inhaled deeply, then smiled. "Smells good." Then he broke off a piece, and the flaky interior pulled apart so beautifully her stomach tightened. "Nice texture. Light and fluffy." He stuck the smaller piece in his mouth. "Ohh..." His eyes closed as he chewed slowly. "I feel my arteries hardening."

Sylvia burst out laughing.

"You were definitely telling the truth last night, Sylvia. I haven't tasted anything that good since Paris."

Her grin was so wide it hurt her face. "Really?"

"Yes, really. Absolutely." He took another bite. "This is... Wow."

"Try the soup."

He set the rest of the pastry aside, carefully unfurled the towel from around the bowl, and then pried off the lid. Leaning over, he inhaled again. "This is definitely not from a can."

She shook her head. She'd picked those mushrooms herself last fall, freeze-dried them, vacuum-packed them, and had been waiting for the perfect recipe to use them. Just the other day she'd found a creamy mushroom soup recipe that had sounded marvelous. She'd had a bowl that morning and had to admit she'd been right.

"There's a spoon in the basket," she said when he began looking around.

When he peered into the basket for the spoon, he also pulled out the other little plastic container. "Blackberry coffee cake?"

"Yes. I pick a lot of berries in the summer and fall and freeze them so we have them all year. So, essentially, they're fresh."

He put the cake aside and scooped a spoonful of soup. "And the mushrooms?" he asked, his eyes narrowing a little, a smile tilting his lips.

She nodded. "Those too."

"I'm not going to start seeing little blue men after I eat this, am I?"

She laughed. "I promise, they're not *those* kind of mushrooms."

He put the spoon in his mouth. His eyes closed. He slowly chewed the thick-cut mushrooms then swallowed. When he looked at her, the corner of his mouth tipped up in a mischievous grin. "Well. If I'd actually fired them, I'd rehire them on the condition you cook for me every day."

"You like it?"

"Sylvia, this is incredible." He took another spoonful. "Just amazing. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Warmth infused her whole body. It was so nice to be appreciated. All she heard lately from her brothers were complaints if she forgot something, like putting the ketchup on the table.

Richard ate a few more bites of soup and finished off the first croissant. She was glad now she'd packed four for him.

"Your brothers eat like this every day?"

"Oh, no," she said, shaking her head. "They don't like this fancy...crap." The word hurt saying it. It was why she quit making croissants last year, why she hadn't wasted her precious mushrooms on them. Her father had been the only one who enjoyed her culinary experiments. But Richard had spent years in Europe in probably a very expensive boarding school. If someone could appreciate her love of cooking, of what she wanted to cook, it would be him. She was so glad now she'd been correct.

"Crap?" Richard asked, showing his surprise. "This is the best meal I've had in years."

She shrugged. "They're more into mostly raw steak, beef stew, and anything covered in spaghetti sauce."

He made a tisking sound. "I bet you make homemade spaghetti sauce, though."

"Of course. But the more it tastes like Ragu, the happier they are."

Richard shook his head in obvious disgust. "You're wasted on them. What did you make them today?"

She bit her tongue, trying not to smile. It was futile though. She laughed. "I'm still mad at them. Although only two were there, they were all in on it." She shook her head. "So they're going to have to suffer through my wrath."

Richard chuckled. "And that would be...?"

"Liverwurst and limburger sandwiches. And just because they all hate them, salt and vinegar chips to go with it."

"Good Lord. What's for dinner tonight?"

She laughed. "I haven't decided yet. Possibly nothing."

"A woman scorned, huh?"

She stared at the cut on his lip and frowned. "They had no business doing what they did. Not to you or anyone else I might want to kiss. They followed me there because they didn't trust me. None of them wanted to go to the ball, so I went alone. Yet they show up anyway and act like animals."

"They thought they were protecting their little sister," Richard said in a gentle voice.

"I'm not a baby."

He nodded. "Believe me, I know that." His gaze moved down her body and lingered on her chest a moment too long, making her face grow hot. She wore a respectable sweater, but that didn't seem to stop him from seeing what lay beneath.

She stood up. "I should be going. I have to...um..."

"Come here, Sylvia," he said softly.

When she didn't move, he pushed his chair back from the desk and crooked his finger at her.

Her heartbeat quickened, and she took the few steps to round the desk. He turned his chair toward her, slipped his arms beneath her knees, and lifted her right onto his lap, her legs dangling over the padded arm of the chair. Her breath caught at the quick strength he exuded.

Richard smiled at her. "I told you I had a talk with your brothers, and they can keep their jobs because what happened last night was personal, not work related."

She clasped her hands together on her lap and nodded. He was so close, and she could smell a sweet, spicy scent she hadn't noticed the night

before. Probably because all of her other senses had been so overloaded. His cheeks were smoother than they had been last night, and she wanted to touch them.

"But I also told them that I planned to call on you, ask you out for a proper date."

Her eyes widened as she met his gaze. "You did?"

He nodded. "I think you are a very special woman, and I'd love to spend more time with you, get to know you better."

A smile spread over her lips. "I'd like that."

"You would?"

She nodded. "But what did they say when you told them that?"

"Nothing. What can they say? You're not a little girl anymore."

"I'm sure they'll have a lot to say when they get home tonight." She frowned.

He laughed. "I'm sure they will, but you can stand up for yourself. And I'm sure they'll want a return to raw steak, beef stew, and anything covered in spaghetti sauce."

She smiled.

He gazed at her. "You deserve to have everything you want."

She licked her lips and glanced at his. What she wanted was for him to kiss her again. "Does it hurt much?"

"What?"

Reaching up, she traced her fingertip over the bruise.

"No. Not at all. I've had worse, believe me."

She looked into his eyes again and thought she could drown in them. "When?"

"When what?"

"When did you have worse?"

He laughed. "You mess up my mind, Sylvia. And that's a story for another time."

"Your soup is getting cold."

"There's a microwave in the break room."

Why wouldn't he kiss her? "Is there something special you'd like me to make for you? I can cook French, Italian, German—"

His mouth covered hers. *Thank goodness!* He was more demanding

today than he'd been the night before. His tongue swept into her mouth, stealing her breath, possibly her very soul. She moaned, unable to stop the sound, and wound her arms around his neck.

He nibbled her bottom lip, licked, tasted, and as it had the night before, her body seemed to melt against him, into him. All she wanted was to be part of him.

With one hand, he held her snug against him. The other cupped her cheek, his fingers ever so lightly touching the hair at her temple. She wished her hair was down so he'd run his fingers through it.

Something hard pressed against her thigh, and Richard groaned, breaking the kiss. He held her gaze, though, and she wondered if he could see into her deepest desires.

"We need to stop."

She wanted to deny it, but they were in his office. And her brothers were outside. They saw her walk into the building, and she wouldn't put it past them to do something idiotic if she didn't surface soon.

Still, in her entire life she'd never truly wanted to be with a man as much as she wanted to be with him. Richard did something to her. Not just physically. On a very deep level, she experienced a closeness she'd never known. How could that be? She'd known him less than twenty-four hours.

"Sylvia. Stop looking at me that way."

"What way?"

"Like you want to eat me for lunch."

She dipped her head and laid it on his shoulder to hide her smile and blush. She'd gladly eat him up.

He ran his hand up and down her back a few times, and she toyed with the soft hairs at the nape of his neck.

"Tomorrow night," he said softly. "The Copper Room. How's that sound?"

It took a few moments for her to straighten out her jumbled thoughts and consider the question. "Umm. Can we go somewhere else, maybe?"

"Okay. Any particular reason? They serve the best food in town."

"Yeah, my brother Harland is working there tomorrow. He has a

happier disposition than the hothead Gregory can be sometimes, but I'd rather avoid a reoccurrence of fisticuffs if possible?" She sat up and looked at him, touched his lip again. "And knowing my brothers, he'd probably spy on me and report home."

Richard smiled. "I understand. I know a little Italian place in Newmarket, if you don't mind a bit of a drive."

"That's fine with me." She sighed. "I should probably go."

He nodded. "Yes, you should. Before I do something that might shock you."

She was very tempted to tease, but she knew what it was pressing against her thigh, and to bait a bear you had to be ready to deal with a wild animal. She wasn't sure she was ready, yet. Soon, but not quite yet. Maybe tomorrow night...

Leaning in, she gave him one more quick kiss, then got up off his lap. When he tugged on his pant leg and cleared his throat, she laughed. "Don't get up," she said with a wink. "I wouldn't want you to injure yourself."

Richard laughed. "I'll have to remember you have quite a nasty streak, too." He winked. "I'll pick you up at seven tomorrow night."

Grabbing her coat off the hook, she opened the door. "Maybe not so nasty as just naughty," she said right before she left, and Richard could see her blush.

Chapter Four

6:55 P.M.

Richard drove around the block one more time. He'd already looped the small neighborhood three times trying to kill minutes. He'd bet the mine all seven of her brothers were in there waiting for him. He wasn't afraid; he just didn't want to upset Sylvia with another confrontation.

She saw it as their interference in her life, but he had a feeling he understood, even though he was an only child. If he had a younger sister as smart, talented, and beautiful as Sylvia, he'd want to kill any man who came near her.

She wasn't his sister, though, and his thoughts about her were as far from brotherly as they came. Letting her go yesterday had been one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do. If they'd been anywhere other than his office, he might not have let her go until they'd both been too sated to move. He respected her too much to have a quickie on his desk. He even respected her brothers too much to do that. Their sister, his Sylvia, deserved better for her first time.

As he pulled up in front of the White house and shut off the engine, he had to remind himself yet again that they'd just met. She barely knew him. A woman needed to trust the man she gave herself to the first time. Sylvia was definitely the type of woman who expected more than a one-night stand. Not that he planned on letting her go. Not at all. His thoughts about her ventured far, far into the future. Their future. Together. He figured those thoughts might scare the hell out of her,

though.

He stepped out of the car and quickly made his way up the frozen walkway. The cement was cracked and heaved a bit here and there. The house itself was an old, humongous, two-story Victorian, set in a neighborhood of older houses of all shapes and sizes. Nothing like the new developments cropping up all over the country that made Richard wonder how anyone found their own house at night since they all looked identical.

He took a quick, deep breath, blew it out in a plume of white reflected by the porch light overhead, and knocked on the dark blue painted door.

After a count of three, the door swung open. "Yeah?"

Judging by the man's dark blue uniform and the medical patch on the sleeve, Richard held out his hand and said, "You must be Damon."

The man, about the same height as Richard but slightly bigger built in the shoulders and chest, eyed him up and down with eyes a little paler than Sylvia's. "Yeah. And you are?"

As if he didn't know. "Richard Princeton. I'm here to pick Sylvia up for our date."

"You're early."

Richard let his hand drop. He'd thought just maybe the married brother would be less hostile, but apparently he'd been very wrong. "Better early than late. Is she ready?"

"Is that him?" Richard heard from behind Damon.

"Yeah, it's him," Damon answered, keeping his tone all business.

Richard pasted on a pleasant smile when Gregory moved up beside Damon to form a formidable-looking barrier into the house. "Gregory. How are you this evening?"

"I've been better." Gregory stepped forward, out onto the porch, forcing Richard to take a step back and brace for another blow that, fortunately, never came. Instead, Gregory said in a low, gravelly voice, "What happens right now is just between us? It's personal, not business, so it has nothing to do with my job, right?"

Here it comes.... "That's right. Me taking your sister for a date has nothing to do with your job."

"Gregory," Damon said in a warning tone.

"I'm not gonna hurt him...unless he does somethin' foolish...to *provoke* me." To Richard he said, "You aren't the foolish type, are you?"

He wasn't the type to like threats either. "I'm no more the fool than you, Gregory, but just to be perfectly clear, what type of provocation would you consider foolish?"

"If you hurt my baby sister, I'll hurt you." He pointed at Richard with a beefy finger. "Is that clear enough for you?"

"Crystal. I assure you, I will not harm Sylvia," Richard said solemnly, meaning it with all his heart.

"I don't just mean you hitting her or something. I mean, if I see my baby sister in any kind of upset over you, you'll pay."

"I understand fully."

"Good. Then we understand each other."

"Hey!" someone called from inside. "Is that him? She's really dating your boss?"

Gregory's expression changed to one of exasperation, and when he turned to go back inside, Richard caught a glimpse of a tall, gangly teen with hair hanging over his right eye.

"Get back inside, Doyle."

"Hey, Mr. Princeton," another young man said, showing much more politeness than Gregory or Damon. Damon had stepped back from the doorway to let the latest brother through, but still stood guard, arms folded over his chest. "Sylvia's on her way down. She was...fixin' stuff." He made a motion with his fingers in front of his face and over his head, which Richard took to mean Sylvia was finishing her hair and makeup.

Richard smiled. "Thanks. And which one are you?"

"I'm Harland." He held out his hand to Richard, and Richard shook it. "Nice ta meet'cha. Excuse me." He slipped on a coat as he crossed the porch. "I've got to get to work." He headed down the sidewalk and got into an old pickup truck parked at the end of the driveway.

Sylvia had said Harland played The Copper Room tonight.

"You give him the talk?" Doyle asked.

"I thought I told you to go back inside," Gregory challenged.

"Go do your homework," Damon said.

"It's done. Did you?" Doyle stood his ground.

Richard tried not to grin. He still stood on the porch, freezing, the front door left wide open with Damon and Gregory standing like stone sentries. Doyle looked like a sapling next to his older brothers.

"Where you takin' her?" Gregory asked, ignoring Doyle's question in favor of interrogating Richard.

"That, dear brother," Sylvia said as she came around the corner into sight, "is none of your business."

"It damn well is my business," Gregory said, grabbing her by the arm when she moved to pass him. "It's our job to keep you safe since Dad's not around. He wouldn't let you go out if he didn't know where you were going."

Richard closed his eyes for a brief moment. That was a low blow, he thought.

"Stop it," Sylvia said in a soft voice. "I'm going out on a date. One I told you about yesterday. That's all you need to know. I'm not telling you where we're going because I don't want you showing up there and ruining my evening." She pulled her arm from Gregory's grip and turned toward the door, taking her coat down from an overloaded coat tree. As she put the coat on, she faced her brothers again. "And at least Dad trusted me. Don't wait up."

With that, she turned toward Richard and gave him a forced smile. "I'm ready."

"Have her home by midnight," Damon said.

She stopped on the top step of the porch, spun around, and glared. If eyes really could shoot daggers...

"Listen up," she said, her tone cold. "I'm neither your wife nor your daughter, Damon. I do not live under *your* roof, so you will not dictate to anyone when I must be home. Shut up, Gregory." She held up a hand before he could get a word out of his open mouth. "It's not *your* house; it's *our* home, and I will be home whenever I decide to be home." She faced Damon again. "For the last time, I am twenty-four years old, not twelve. You don't set curfews for Steven or the others. You aren't going to do it to me. Got it?"

"Sylvia—"

"No. This discussion is over. You've kept me from my date long enough. Goodnight."

Damon came close to her, looked over her shoulder and gave Richard a hard glare, which prompted him to take the last step off the porch and onto the walkway. Then Damon pulled something from his pocket, forced it into her hand, and whispered something in her ear.

"Fine," he heard her say.

Damon said a few more words, and Richard saw her shoulders droop a little.

"I love you, too, brother," she said. "Goodnight."

She turned back toward Richard, and he held his hand out for her. She took it and walked by his side to the car, where he opened the passenger door and waited until she was in before shutting it. As he rounded the car, he saw that the three brothers still stood in the open doorway, watching.

"So, where are the other three?" Richard asked, keeping his tone light as he started the car and turned on the heater.

"Stevie's out on a date, as usual, Bartholomew was watching some game on TV, and Sylvester is watching us from the upstairs window—Don't look!"

He grinned. "They're certainly a lot to deal with."

She sighed. "I'm sorry. I should have just met you somewhere."

"It's okay."

"I didn't realize what a third degree you'd get; didn't figure they'd be so rude after the other night."

"Sylvia, I understand." The youngest sibling's mention of *the talk* made it clear their heavy-handedness was standard procedure when it came to their sister's protection. It made him sympathize with what she was going through, but he understood the men meant well. He pulled the car away from the curb and headed toward Newmarket about twenty miles east of Everland.

"The point is, you shouldn't have to understand, and I shouldn't have to deal with this." She huffed out a breath. "You'd think they'd be less...overbearing...since they know you."

"Sweetheart, they don't know me." He reached across and took her

hand, but she held something in it—the thing Damon had made her take. She shoved it in her coat pocket before she laced her fingers through his. “I’m just their boss. They don’t know what kind of person I am, what I might be capable of.”

She turned her head and stared at him. “Now you’re going to tell me you’re a serial killer or something?”

He chuckled. “No. Haven’t killed anyone.” He glanced at her then back to the road. “And I’ve never hurt a woman, either.”

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

“I can tell.”

“Oh? How so?” He glanced at her again, but there was no smile on her sweet lips. She was deadly serious.

“For one, you keep sticking up for my brothers’ bad behavior. The other night you didn’t hit back when you were attacked. And you didn’t fire them. If you were some kind of monster, your actions would be very different.”

“Maybe I’m just trying to get in good with you, and my true colors haven’t come out, yet.”

She laughed at that, the soft, sweet sound soothing yet exciting at the same time. “I guess I’ll just have to wait and see then.” She settled into the leather seat and relaxed. “Nice car.”

“Thanks. It was my dad’s. Not really my style, but I haven’t bothered to trade it in.” The sleek black Mercedes was definitely his father’s type of car. Richard was more into SUVs and pickup trucks. But the car fit the image of the business owner he was, so he had kept it. For now.

Sylvia leaned her head toward the window and peered up at the sky. “It’s a pretty night. The stars are out.”

“And there’s been no snow for over a week,” he added.

“Don’t like snow? I love it.”

“I don’t mind the snow so much if I’m out doing something in it. Skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling. It’s the going to and from work in the crap that gets on my nerves.”

She grinned. “I went skiing once. It wasn’t a pretty sight.”

"I find that hard to believe," he said, dropping his voice to a seductive timbre.

She looked at him. "I spent more time on my butt than on the skis."

He grinned back. "Still know you'd have been gorgeous."

She snickered and shook her head. "You may not be an axe murderer, but I'd say you are trying to get in good with me."

If she only knew what he wanted to get in, she'd probably jump from the car and go screaming home to her brothers, who'd kill him.

"So, what did Damon give you? A Tazer? Mace? Something to permanently injure me if I make a move on you?"

"No," she said around a little laugh. "His cell phone. Told me to call if I needed a ride home."

"That was nice of him."

She was quiet for a few minutes then said, "I guess I didn't realize they thought they had to take Dad's place. But he would have been happy for me if I started dating, unlike them."

He gave her hand a little squeeze and thought how much his own father would have liked her. She was a real lady and had more class than any of the country club set his mother had tried aligning him with all year. More heart.

"I'm surprised they haven't had me fitted for a chastity belt."

Richard burst out laughing at her tone of disgust. "Sweetheart, they haven't needed you to wear one. We're here." He released her hand, though he hated to do so, and pulled into the parking lot of Paliotti's Italian Restaurant.

He parked and turned off the car, but Sylvia got out before he could make it around to help her. He figured she was so used to doing for herself and didn't expect the little extras. But this was their first official date, and he'd wanted to hold the car door for her.

"Hey," he said, catching her hand as they walked toward the door.

"Hm?" she queried, looking up at him.

He stopped and gently pulled her against him in front of the door to the restaurant. "There's something I've got to do first."

She frowned, but her lips curled into a smile as he kissed her. Just a soft peck, really, but he'd needed to taste her. She tasted like cherries and

sunshine even in the dead of winter. He couldn't take it deeper, or his body would betray the fact his intentions weren't pure. He wasn't sure he'd be able to drop her off by midnight and let her walk away.

"Mmm. That was nice," she said, looking up into his eyes.

"Yes, very. Thank you for coming out with me tonight."

She grinned. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Come on." He reluctantly released her and held the restaurant door for her. She smiled up at him, making him feel about ten feet tall.

They were both a little underdressed for the restaurant; he wore black jeans and a button-down shirt, while Sylvia wore skinny blue jeans and a dark green sweater that looked soft to the touch and matched her sparkling eyes almost exactly. The maître d' didn't look at them oddly for their attire, so Richard figured it didn't matter, and he was glad. He wouldn't want Sylvia uncomfortable. He'd dressed down in case she did, which she had.

The maître d' took their coats, seated them, and gave them their menus, handing the wine list to Richard. "Your waiter is Sebastian, and he'll be with you to take your drink orders shortly."

"Thanks," Sylvia said with a smile. "This place is really fancy," she said in a whisper when the maître d' walked off.

"If you'd prefer someplace else..."

She shook her head emphatically. "Oh, no. I'm excited about tasting something prepared by real chefs in a real Italian restaurant."

He didn't bother to tell her this wasn't the best Italian place in the world. In fact, it was about a seven on the scale of ten, in his opinion. But it was the best nearby, and he wouldn't discourage her.

"Would you like a glass of wine or a mixed drink?"

She'd just opened her leather-bound menu and peered at him over the top. "The only wine I know is cooking wine." She made a little face. "I'm really not all that cultured, sorry."

He kept his smile to himself. "Okay, let's put it this way then. Would you like to try some wine, or would you prefer something like a strawberry daiquiri or maybe a margarita?"

She gave a small, shy smile. "You decide. The only thing I know is beer. Domestic or imported. Damon and Bart like imported, and the rest

drink domestic. I prefer wine coolers."

"What flavor wine coolers?" he asked.

"The orange and peach is my favorite, but I like the original one, too."

Richard smiled. "I know just what to order for you. Unless you'd prefer coffee?"

She shook her head. "No, I like trying new things." Then she looked back down at her menu.

He certainly hoped she liked trying new things.

"Good evening. My name is Sebastian, and I'll be your waiter tonight. May I start you off with something from the bar?"

Richard ordered Sylvia a blended fuzzy navel and got a Seven and Seven for himself.

The waiter left, and Richard asked, "Do you know what you're going to get?"

Sylvia lowered the menu, her eyes wide. "I want everything."

He laughed. "How about you go with the four-course dinner, and I'll do the same, and we'll share. That way you can try *most* of everything."

Sylvia leaned over the table slightly. "I don't think you're supposed to share in a place like this."

Richard raised his eyebrows. "We're not?"

She shook her head. "I don't think that's very...classy. Do you?"

His lips tipped into a smile. "Sweetheart, I'm paying for dinner. I can do anything I want with it."

Then she smiled at him. "Okay."

The waiter returned with their drinks, they ordered, and when he was gone again, Sylvia tried her drink.

"Oh, that's good."

Richard nodded. "Thought you'd like that."

"What's in it?"

"Orange juice and peach schnapps."

She licked a bit of sugar from the rim of the glass. "Mmm. That sounds pretty simple."

He chuckled.

"I have to ask you something," she said, her brow furrowed slightly.

"Ask away. I'm an open book."

"What did you mean in the car when you said my brothers didn't need to get me a chastity belt?"

He paused, lifting his drink to his lips, and stared at her. "What?"

"In the car, when I said I was surprised they hadn't had me fitted for one, you said they didn't need to. What did you mean by that?"

He took a hearty gulp of his drink. He was glad they were in an out-of-the-way corner of the restaurant, not to be overheard by other patrons. "All I meant was that you're so pure and innocent they haven't needed one. I get the impression until now you've never stepped out of their bounds."

Taking another sip of her drink, she glanced away, surveyed the room, then latched her gaze on his. She didn't look all that happy, either. "I'm not all *that* pure and innocent."

Richard leaned his elbow on the table and propped his chin in his hand. "You're not? I'd bet a full half of the mine that you've never let a guy get to second base with you. If you even know what second base is."

Looking down at her drink, twirling the straw in the melting ice, she muttered something he couldn't quite hear.

"What was that?" he asked.

Still staring into her glass, she said in a whisper, "You'd lose that bet. I'm not a virgin. I let a guy make a home run."

First there was a surge of jealousy that caught him off guard, then anger because she didn't seem happy of the fact, and then curiosity, but he was afraid to ask, to know. So he lifted his drink and finished it off instead.

"It was a long time ago," she said, finally looking up at him. "High school. Senior prom. Stupidity." She made a face.

"Did he hurt you?" was all Richard could think to say.

She shook her head. "No. Not at all. In fact..." Her lips turned up in a crooked, self-deprecating smile. "...I didn't feel much of anything."

"Nothing?" Maybe she'd been mistaken, and it hadn't happened.

She covered her face and groaned. "Yes, *something*." She dropped

her hand. "I'm sorry I brought this up." Her cheeks were bright red. "Long story short. I went to the prom with a friend—a girl—and met up with a boy I'd liked for a couple of years but who'd never paid any attention to me. Boy's locker room on a bench. Ruined my hair and my dress. The end."

Richard got the impression it had hurt her. She put on a brave face, but her eyes didn't sparkle when she told her short story. He reached across the table and took her hand in his. It was cold from holding her drink glass. "And afterwards, you decided it was better to stay home and take care of the men in your life who mean something to you, didn't you?"

Her eyes widened slightly.

"It's okay, Sylvia." He stroked his thumb over her fingers. "He was an idiot who didn't deserve what he took from you."

"It wasn't like that. I pursued him. I gave—"

Richard shrugged. "Doesn't matter, sweetheart. I know guys. I am a guy. I did some pretty shitty things to women in my lifetime. But I'll never do that to you."

Her brow furrowed. "You're never going to sleep with me?"

Richard sucked in his breath so fast he choked on it and grabbed his glass of ice water. When his eyes stopped watering, he looked at her. "Good Lord, Sylvia. I—" He drank down some more water while searching for the right words. He finally decided the truth was the best course with her. "I want nothing more than to make love to you."

"Oh." She smiled, reached for her drink, and visibly relaxed. "Okay."

Okay? What the hell does that mean? But he didn't have time to ask because the waiter returned with their first course. Minestrone soup for Richard, and a creamy mussel soup for Sylvia.

"Mmm. This looks good," Sylvia said. "I'll eat half of mine; then we'll switch?"

Conversation over, he thought, very confused by her reaction to his declaration of intent. "Sure."

"I think maybe I should have a cup of coffee, too, when the waiter returns." She blinked her eyes at him like an owl then giggled. "I don't

drink much."

He definitely needed her sober tonight so she didn't do anything she'd regret in the morning.

The conversation turned toward the mine, their fathers, and life in general in a small town that Richard had missed out on growing up. Halfway through their main courses, Sylvia pulled a small notebook and pen from her purse and started scribbling in it.

"What is that?" Richard asked.

"I had an idea to try this at home, with a few variations."

"Try what?" He leaned closer to the table, trying to see what she wrote.

"The chicken parmesan. I was just thinking that if you stuffed the cheese and herbs inside the chicken, the flavor wouldn't be lost like it is here. And the marinara sauce is much too sweet, but I like the herbs they put in it."

"And you can tell what those herbs are by eating it?"

She nodded as she wrote. "Oregano, basil, parsley, garlic of course." She looked up at him and made a face. "But I think they actually used canned tomatoes."

Richard laughed and shook his head as he continued eating his chicken cacciatore. "And that's a no-no?"

She huffed out a breath. "You don't use canned tomatoes when you're charging this much money."

"I did not know that," he said simply. "You ready to try my cacciatore?"

She nodded and lifted her plate. They switched, and Richard watched with interest as she used her fork to move around the food as if examining it. Then she cut into the chicken, put the bite in her mouth, and slowly chewed. She took another bite, and another.

"You're not writing anything down," he commented.

She gave a little one-shoulder shrug. "It tastes kind of like what I've made already. In fact, I think I like mine better."

He waited until she looked up at him to ask, "Is there someplace I could take you to eat that you would actually like the food?"

She laughed when he grinned at her. "I like it. I do. I promise. I'm

sorry." She rolled her eyes. "I don't get to eat out often, and when I do..." She shrugged again. "Sorry."

"I don't mind at all, sweetheart. I find you fascinating."

"Or a little loco?" she asked, reaching for her coffee.

Richard winked. "A little loco can be interesting."

She almost spit out her coffee when she laughed. "What's your favorite food?"

"Hmm, let's see." His first thought was the taste of her lips was his favorite anything, but he decided to steer clear of aiming back toward talk of sex. "The one thing I didn't have all my years in Europe. A big, fat, juicy barbequed burger loaded with pickles and onions and tomatoes. There's nothing better."

So the topic stayed on food until they'd both eaten their fill, drunk a couple of espressos with their overly sweet deserts, and Richard had paid the bill. Sylvia had three Styrofoam containers of food to take home on top of it, which seemed to please her, though he wasn't sure why, since she didn't seem to really like anything but the raspberry gelato.

Richard helped Sylvia on with her coat, and they walked out into the freezing cold night.

"Smells like snow," she said.

"Yeah, damn it."

Sylvia laughed. "We could go sledding."

"Now?" He opened her door for her.

"No, silly," she said and bumped his chest with her shoulder. "After it snows."

He took the bag of food containers from her, set them on the backseat, and pulled her into his arms. "That means the date wasn't a bust, and you want to see me again?"

She nodded.

He kissed her, letting his tongue seek hers, taste her. She'd reapplied her lipstick when she went to the restroom before they left. She tasted of cherries, raspberries and strong coffee. It was a million times more satisfying that their dessert had been, and he was loath to let her go, but they were in a parking lot, and her nose was ice cold when it bumped his. He pulled his head back but kept her wrapped in his arms.

"You ready to go home?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No."

He kept his smile of pleasure to himself. "No? But wouldn't you get in good with the brothers if you returned two hours before your curfew?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, which made him laugh.

"Okay, okay. It's too late to catch a movie unless we drive even farther from Everland. We can't go back to your place— Well, we could if you want to."

She shook her head. "No. I don't want to go there."

"My dad installed a huge flat screen television the year before he died. We could go back to my place, make some popcorn, and pretend we're in a movie theater."

She grinned and nodded. "That sounds fun."

"Okay. My place it is." He shut the door after she sat down, and then rounded the hood to the driver's side, wondering how in the hell he was ever going to keep his hands to himself with her in a house that held his bedroom—his *bed*.

Chapter Five

Sylvia was giddy, and she couldn't decide if it was because Richard was taking her home, or from the two espressos she'd had after dinner. She wanted to blame the coffee, but she didn't think lying to herself was a good idea. As Everland came into view when they crested the final hill, her tummy fluttered as if it'd been invaded by butterflies.

She'd spent all day yesterday and most of today wondering how the evening would end. If they'd find things to talk about during dinner. If Richard really liked her. When he'd said he wanted nothing more than to make love to her, it had taken all her control not to jump in his lap right then.

And now he was taking her to his house.

They drove through town, down Main Street, quiet and quaint at this time of night, and she glanced at the vacant ice cream shop as they passed it. That was her dream, right there. When Dairy Queen moved into Newmarket a little over a year ago, The Pint Pantry had lost too much business to stay open. Their homemade ice cream and gelato had been too expensive to produce for them to compete with DQ prices. But the little shop would be perfect for her café. She'd eyed that building almost daily since Pint closed.

"What?" Richard asked.

She looked at him. "Hm?"

"You sighed. Are you tired?"

"Oh, no. Sorry. Downtown Everland is just so pretty at night, especially at Christmastime with all the colored lights."

"Yes, it is." He grinned at her then turned onto the highway that led past the big Princeton estate, his uncle's home. It wasn't long until they pulled up in front of the smaller Princeton estate. The building was a hundred years old, made of red brick, with thick white columns supporting a deep balcony. It was similar in style on the outside to the other Princeton mansion, but on a smaller scale. Soft lights glowed from a few windows inside, and yard lights that looked like old-fashioned gas lamps lit the snow-covered lawn and cobblestone driveway.

"We'll just park out here instead of the garage," Richard stated. "You can leave your food in the backseat if you want. It'll freeze in no time."

Sylvia laughed and got out.

"You need to stop doing that," he said as he came around the hood of the car.

"What?"

"Getting out before I can open the door for you."

She laughed. "Sorry. If I waited in a car for my brothers to open the door for me, I'd be there all night."

"But I'm not one of your brothers." Richard kissed her quickly—too quickly—and took her hand to lead her up the wide stairs to the front door. He used a key on his keychain to unlock the massive door, and then held out his hand for her to enter.

It was exactly as she remembered from years past. Christmas decorations were hung in sparkling silver and royal blue from the oak banister on the curved staircase. A tree as tall as the cathedral ceiling was the centerpiece of the foyer, decked in silver tinsel and red balls, with white lights sparkling throughout the boughs. The only thing missing was her dad.

"What's wrong?" Richard asked.

She blinked back the burning tears. "Sorry. Last time I was here was two years ago for your father's New Year's Eve party. With my dad."

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her ear. "I'm so sorry, Sylvia."

She buried her face against his neck and breathed in his spicy scent. "It's okay. Sometimes it just comes out of nowhere." She swallowed hard

and breathed in deep. "I'm okay."

He rubbed her arms. "Let me take your coat and purse."

She let him remove her coat and then watched as he hung it up on a coat tree. He set her purse on the floor beneath it, took off his own leather jacket, and then turned the lock on the front door. "Come on, I'll show you around."

"I've been here before," she said, but took his hand.

"Right. Okay, so to the TV room?"

"Actually," she said slowly. "First, there is one place I'd like to see that I was never permitted to before."

He cocked a mischievous eyebrow at her.

She laughed. "The kitchen."

"Oh, right. The kitchen. Silly me." Then he laughed, and the rich sound skittered over her and made her tummy start fluttering all over again. "Right this way, mi'lady."

He led her through a couple of doors, down a short hallway, and she wondered if she'd ever find her way out if he didn't lead her. But then he pushed open a door, flicked on a light switch, and stepped aside for her to enter.

Her breath lodged in her throat. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. Something out of those fancy cooking magazines she bought now and then and dreamed over. Stepping into the room, she ran her hand over the wide, black granite-topped counter, smooth and cool beneath her fingers and so polished it reflected the copper pots and pans hanging from a rack above.

She walked around the counter to the island that had a small sink and two-burner gas grill inlaid in the granite. The chrome of the faucet and handles was perfectly polished, too, as were the fronts of the stainless steel over-under double oven and the refrigerator so big it could hold a week's worth of meals for her brothers. She touched the dials on the ovens as she stared in wonder at the massive six-burner gas stove.

She'd give anything to cook a meal here. To use those beautiful pots and pans and this stovetop. Even if she only got to boil water...

"You're awfully quiet," Richard said softly.

"It's so beautiful. More than I ever imagined." She turned and

smiled at him. "And I've spent a lot of time imagining the kitchens in the Princeton mansions."

Richard threw his head back and laughed. "You are something else, sweetheart. Most girls in this town—at least from what my cousins tell me—spend their time dreaming about the men in the mansions, not their cookware."

She shrugged, but her grin was huge. She loved how he teased. "I'm not most girls, now am I?"

"Oh, Sylvia, that's such an understatement."

She laughed. "Is it a good thing or bad thing?"

He approached her and wrapped his arms around her. "Good. The best." He kissed her softly, his talented lips dancing over hers, making her tingle all over. But he pulled back too soon. "I have an idea," he said with a wicked little grin.

"What?"

"Let's see just how good you are."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

He released her and opened a few drawers before he pulled out a tea towel. "You wrote all that stuff down in your little book, claiming to know what all the herbs and spices and stuff were in that food tonight. I want you to prove that you know what everything is."

He folded the towel corner to corner then wrapped it into a bandana-looking thing.

"You want me to cook for you?" she asked, eyeing the towel. "We just had dinner?"

He shook his head, picked up the towel by both ends and approached her. "Nope. I want to blindfold you and have you tell me what everything is that I find in the cabinets."

"Uh..."

He wrapped the towel around her head, covering her eyes. "You think you can?"

"Yes, of course I can."

He tied it. "Too tight?"

"No."

"Can you see?"

"No."

He placed his hands under her arms. "Up you go." He lifted her, and she yelped and grabbed for him, but just as quickly as it started, her butt landed on the hard countertop. "Comfy?"

"I...guess so."

"Don't move."

She sat, her hands folded in her lap, as she heard doors opening and closing, things clanking as he set stuff on the counter near her.

"White wine okay?" he asked.

"What?" She had no idea what he was talking about.

"To cleanse your palate after you taste something."

"I guess so." What the heck might he try feeding her? After a few more minutes, she felt him in front of her, his body lightly brushing her knees.

"Okay, we'll start out easy," he said.

She heard a lid unscrewing. "Just sniff."

"Cinnamon," she said.

"Yeah, even I could get that one," he said with a slight chuckle. "How about this one?"

"Oregano."

"And this?"

"Cumin." They went through a few more spices and herbs. The only one that hung her up was mace, because she didn't cook with it often and only used it in her turkey stuffing.

"You're very good at this."

She grinned and reached to pull off the makeshift blindfold, but he stopped her. "Wait. Stick out your tongue."

"Why?"

"I can see your nose knows, but are you as talented with your tongue?" As soon as his words were out, her mind plunged from the spice rack into the gutter, and her cheeks heated at the double entendre.

She suddenly longed to lick him. Would his skin be sweet...or deliciously salty? He must've realized the naughtiness of her thoughts, because he adjusted his stance the instant she licked her lips.

After she stuck her tongue out, he used a spoon to place a tiny bit

of stone-ground mustard on it. Easy. As were another half dozen typical condiments and several varieties of pickles and olives. She sighed. "Come on, Richard. At least challenge me."

He laughed. "Okay." A jar was opened. "Try this one."

The flavor was a strange combination of sweet and tangy, something used in Chinese cooking. A thick sauce. "Teriyaki glaze?"

"Nope. Hoisin sauce."

Okay, she'd never used it. Most of her brothers didn't like Chinese food other than the deep fried stuff, and she tried to keep that to a minimum.

"How about this?"

She made a face. "Caviar. I've had it at your dad's parties."

Richard chuckled. "I can't stand the stuff either, but my mother is still under the impression it's a must have to throw a proper party."

After she'd sipped the wine and rinsed her mouth, he said, "Here ya go. What about this one?"

As soon as the taste hit her, she shuddered and spit it in her hand. "Gross. Sardine."

He laughed hard and wiped her hand with a warm, wet cloth. "Okay, you don't like fish-based stuff."

"No, I love fish. I hate...bait."

Richard laughed so hard he snorted, which made her laugh.

"Okay, drink your wine."

She did, swishing it around her mouth to rid her of the taste of salty, fishy grossness.

"A few more. Open up."

Reluctantly, she opened her mouth—worried he'd try to give her liver pâté or something just as disgusting, which she'd also tried at his father's parties.

This time, his finger touched her tongue, coated in whipped cream.

She closed her lips over his finger and sucked off the sweetness. "Mmm."

He started to withdraw, but she grabbed his wrist and blindly hung on while she swirled her tongue around his finger, sucking the full length of the digit into her mouth.

"Sylvia..."

She released his finger with a soft pop, hummed her approval, and grinned.

"What was that?" he asked, his tone huskier than before.

"I'm not sure," she lied. "Could I taste it again?" Still holding his wrist, she turned his hand and flicked her tongue along his palm, pressed her lips to his inner wrist.

"Okay, one more," he murmured, his voice deeper. Then his mouth was on hers as he pressed his body between her thighs and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against him.

She raised her hands to his shoulders, cupped his face, and returned the kiss with as much passion as he gave. Her body heated, her sweater feeling too warm and tight. Her thighs quivered as he ran his hands up and down them. She wrapped her legs around him and pulled him tight against her, moaning with pleasure as her breasts pressed hard against his chest.

"Sylvia," he said, pulling his mouth from hers. "We have to stop." He sounded winded, as if he'd just run a five-minute mile.

She shook her head. "Why?"

"Because if we don't, I'm not going to be able to until I have you in my bed."

"And then you'd stop? When I was in your bed?" She didn't know where the teasing came from, but sitting here alone with him in his kitchen, still wearing a tea towel over her eyes, it seemed right.

"Sylvia," he said, his voice little more than a growled warning.

She laughed and tightened her thighs around him. "I've never seen your bedroom, either."

He gripped her waist, flexed his fingers. "If I take you to my bedroom, I'm going to have you. All of you. Every gorgeous inch of you."

A shiver skittered over her skin. "I know."

He cupped her ass, hesitated.

She licked her lips, savoring the flavor of him.

"Later." His lips descended again, on her mouth, her jaw line, the slope of her neck.

"What's later?" she asked breathlessly as he pushed both of his

hands beneath her sweater. Then he squeezed her breasts, thumbing the tips through her bra, and her thoughts scattered. She clung to his shoulders, tightened her grip around his waist with her legs, and gasped when he yanked her firmly against his erection.

"The bed."

"Huh?"

He tore at her jeans while she blindly struggled to unbutton his shirt.

"The bed is later." He kissed her again, preventing any response on her part, other than savoring the delicious forays of his tongue. "I want you now. Here."

"Mmm—"

His kiss cut her off, but then he shoved her sweater up, and she raised her arms for him to remove it. Her makeshift blindfold came off in the process, but he didn't seem to mind as he busied himself with the clasp of her bra. When his lips closed over a bare nipple, she closed her eyes and clung to him, her fingers buried in his hair.

He continued to suckle while he helped her remove his shirt, which he tossed on the floor to join her sweater. When he reached for the snap of his own pants next, she started to lean back and watch him strip when her hand collided with the bowl of whipped cream, tipping it onto its side.

"Oops." She righted the bowl, but her fingers were coated with the white fluffy stuff.

He left his fly open, jeans hugging his lean hips, and grasped her wrist to lift her hand to his lips. Slowly, he drew one digit after another into his mouth. The slight suction sent a tingling pull all the way to her core, and she moaned, her breaths growing shallow. He licked each one clean while he stared into her eyes. By the time he finished she'd all but expired from asphyxiation. Although her lungs seemed unable to function, her heart hammered inside her chest.

He leaned down to remove her shoes and socks, and ordered her to, "Lift," when he unfastened and took off her jeans. And then he flashed the sexiest smirk, hooked his thumbs in her panties, and worked them down past her knees. They slithered to her ankles, and she kicked free of the lacy trap.

When her gaze lifted to his once more, the smirk was still in place.

"What?"

"My turn," he answered, then fingered a dollop of cream from the bowl and smeared it over her left nipple. Before she could draw breath, he latched onto her breast and laved the sensitive tip until she moaned with pleasure, gripping his head to hold him there.

Oh yes, he had a splendid way of taste testing. Playing with food had never proven this much fun.

Several blissful seconds later, he lifted his head to tell her to, "Lie back."

She didn't hesitate; however, she did proceed with caution, because there were countless bottles and jars of things around her on the island's countertop. She did as he said only to suck in a quick breath at the coolness of the granite, then again when he dribbled artistic spirals of red syrup across her abdomen, followed with a few squirts of chocolate sauce.

Her tummy fluttered as he eased her knees apart and bent over her. Warm puffs of air bathed her skin while he lapped at the mixture. "Mmm," he murmured. "Strawberries and chocolate...and Sylvia."

He dipped his head again.

She reached for him, combing her fingers into his soft hair, while he kissed and licked his way from her navel toward—

"Oh!"

He flicked his tongue across her clit, making her clench her teeth to keep from begging for more. Excitement coursed through her. This was so new, so unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. She panted while he played with her and drove her wild—so much so she forgot herself and flung her hands out in search of support.

Her glass of wine fell over, spilling the last of its contents, and several spice jars toppled from the countertop. But despite the accident, the tiny herbal bombs crashing at his feet, and her wince of dismay, he never paused, never wavered. Instead, he redoubled his efforts and explored her pussy with first one finger, then another. Then his tongue.

Surrendering to his masterful talents, she lifted both feet to the edge of the counter and hung on as her orgasm drew near.

So wet. So ready. So...close.

He suckled her clit, dipped a dampened finger toward her anus to tease the sensitive rosette, and she begged, "Please."

She needed his touch, his penetration. She wanted him. Now.

He pushed two fingers into her pussy and simultaneously slipped a third into the tight little opening of her ass. His entry, combined with a hard suck on her clit, snapped the thin thread of her control. The climax ignited a rush of electricity throughout her body, drawing every muscle tight as she groaned with the release. Her body trembled in the aftermath as she lay panting, splayed before him, a little lightheaded even though she sprawled across the countertop.

Just as her equilibrium began to return, he cupped the back of her head and lifted her up for a sweet kiss. It turned ravenous in an instant, and then he plunged into her, his hard cock filling her with an exquisite thickness and length.

"Ah!" She panted and gasped and moaned again with each new, irresistible, pulsating thrust of his hips.

Without pause, he pulled her toward him for another passionate kiss, and she hugged him tightly, riding out the storm of need.

More explosions seemed to erupt around them, but nothing else mattered beyond the feel of his hard body against her, inside her—the powerful strength and vigorous energy of the man in her arms.

Their tongues dueled. Their bodies collided. And he drove her over another edge of ecstasy before, with one final lunge, he joined her there.

"My God," he huffed in a breathless whisper near her ear, while his cock softened inside of her. "Are you all right?"

She smiled at that. She was way more than all right.

"I didn't hurt you, did I? My mind wasn't functioning enough to realize how hard this countertop is."

She opened her eyes to see he was serious and grinned as she touched his cheek. "I'm okay. Fine. More than fine. How about you?"

She loved it when he smiled at her like that. The tiny crinkles at the corner of his eyes...

His grin brightened. "Sticky," he teased, straightening up and looking down, "but I'm great." He licked his lips. "And you taste delicious."

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "You're quite tasty yourself, you know."

"I am?"

"Mm hmm. You might say you have the potential to become my favorite condiment."

With a hearty laugh, he said, "I think that's the best compliment I've ever received. Definitely the most unusual."

"That's me. Forever the unpredictable Sylvia."

"*Pleasantly* unpredictable," he corrected. After one final peck on the lips, he eased out of her, removed the condom—where he got it and when he'd donned it were a mystery to her—and tossed the thing in a trash bin under the kitchen sink. Then he pulled up his underwear and refastened his jeans.

Meanwhile, she sat up and surveyed the damage to his kitchen. More things had crashed to the floor than she'd realized, and she gave him an apologetic glance when he waded through the spicy debris.

"I thought I heard something shatter." He eyed the remains of the wine bottle, now lying in shards on the floor.

"I'm so sorry. I'll help clean it up."

"No." He put a hand on her bare thigh. "You're barefoot, and this can wait until later. First things first." He spun away from her, backed up between her knees, and said, "Hop on."

With a chuckle, she hugged him around the shoulders and let him lift her for a piggyback ride. "Where are you taking me?"

"Like I said. First things first. I owe you a VIP tour of my bedroom suite...starting with the shower."

Chapter Six

Richard didn't share with her how wonderful it felt to have her draped around him, her cute nose buried in his shoulder, or how much he enjoyed the light sounds of her merriment.

"I can't believe I'm riding piggyback naked as a newborn."

He grinned and twirled once in a quick circle, causing her to cry out with a startled, joyous yelp. "I'm glad you're here."

"I'm glad no one else is."

He seconded that. He couldn't imagine how difficult it would be to have privacy while living with a house full of nosy siblings. He had enough trouble with one busybody at home. She was conveniently absent tonight, however, and he was quietly grateful to his unsuspecting mother for having the foresight to reschedule her monthly Bunco club night, which had conflicted with the Princeton ball, to tonight. If the dice game progressed as usual, she'd arrive home sometime in the early morning.

At the top of the second-floor landing, he turned away from her rooms and headed down the long hall, through his bedroom door, and toward the newly remodeled bath.

"Oh, wow."

"You like?" he asked, already pleased by her reaction, which he watched reflected in the mirror over the dual sink vanity.

"What's not to like? It's beautiful. I love the tile and earthy tones. It's fancy but subtle."

He let her slide off his back and turned to face her. "The house still belongs to my mother, but she's alone now, so I agreed to stay here."

"I'm sure she loves having her son home."

He thumbed her cheek and cupped her face. She had such a sweet view of the world, as if everyone had only the best intentions at heart.

"Maybe so. In any case, the place is certainly big enough for two, but my old bedroom left a lot to be desired, so I hired some contractors to do a little remodeling."

She glanced around, reached out to brush the garden tub with her fingertip, and smiled at him. "You did a great job on it."

"Thanks." He wanted to forego the shower and haul her off to his bed, but instead said, "Shall we?"

She blinked. "Shall we what?"

By way of answer, he opened the glass door to the extra wide, tiled shower stall and turned on the water.

"Everything you need is in there," he offered as she stepped toward the stall and looked back at him with a smile. "I'll be right in, soon as I discard the last of these clothes."

He grinned when she groaned with pleasure after moving under the warm, pulsating spray.

"This feels wonderful."

He hurriedly undressed, opened the door again, and slipped his hands around her waist from behind. "I know what would feel better."

"Mmm, show me."

While she worked shampoo into her jet-black hair, he enjoyed free access to the rest of her slick, wet curves. With soapy hands, he massaged her body, bathed and caressed every inch, until she was clean and aroused again.

She turned, draped her arms about his shoulders, and pressed her luscious body against him. His cock reacted with a mind of its own, and he groaned.

He couldn't make love with her in the shower regardless of how badly he wanted to, and his restored erection made it clear that part of his anatomy wanted to very much. But he only had a couple of condoms, one already used, and the other was still in his wallet. Back pocket of his jeans on the floor. Outside the shower stall.

"You're tense," she observed, her wet lashes lifting as she looked

up at him.

"I'm hard," he admitted. "You have that affect on me."

She smiled. "Ah, so it's my fault?"

Mutely, he nodded and skimmed his palms down her back and over her sweet ass.

"I thought guys couldn't do it more than once a night."

"Only the unlucky ones."

She smiled and rose on tiptoes to plant a kiss on his lips. He hugged her closer and moaned.

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

She met his gaze. "Don't need one."

"Sylvia—" A moist fingertip pressed to his lips stopped any further comment.

She stared at him for a long moment, the water cascading over her shoulders, down the swell of her breasts, dripping from beaded, pink tips.

He swallowed hard.

"My turn," she whispered, soft enough that he barely caught the two words before she made her intentions clear by dropping to her knees.

He immediately grabbed her shoulders for support, his ability to stand questionable at best. "Sylvia..." He couldn't continue, the intended remark a lost memory as she massaged his thighs and reached for his cock.

The first light touch of her fingers on his aroused flesh nearly buckled his knees. His back struck the cool tiles of the shower wall, and he buried his fingers in her damp hair.

Water showered over the back of her head, his arms and hands, and added tantalizing flicks of sensation across his lower abs, but her hands became the focus of his universe.

And then she licked him.

He knocked his head against the tile wall and closed his eyes, his attention centered on the splendid feel of her lips and tongue as she first tasted him, somewhat shyly, but fully effective. He feared he might erupt prematurely. His grip tightened on her head, and he spread his stance.

She sucked a groan from his lungs with the first tight draw of her lips on his cock.

Damn if that didn't ignite his passion. He began to buck a little by way of encouragement and need. "That feels so good."

She cupped his balls with one hand and fisted him with the other while the rest of his length disappeared repeatedly into her mouth. And though he'd climaxed earlier, his heightened senses and awareness of her wouldn't let him prolong the pleasure or postpone his orgasm—the vision before him was too magnificent.

"Sylvia, I'm gonna come," he warned, his lungs seizing when her response was a stronger pull, a firmer grip. It was too much. With a raw shout, he came. The pleasurable current of sensations rippled like a wave through his tense frame, and he sighed with sated relief.

Once he opened his eyes again, he helped Sylvia to her feet, gave her a slow kiss, and then finished the shower. After turning off the water, they toweled off and walked hand in hand back into the bedroom. He glanced at the clock before he pulled back the comforter and suggested, "Want to rest a little while before I take you home?"

Dressed in one of his plush bath towels, she sat on the edge of his bed, bounced a little, and nodded. "That would be nice."

When he turned toward the door, though, she asked, "You aren't going to join me?"

"I will," he said, adjusting the tuck of the towel around his hips. "I'll be right back after I gather the rest of our clothes from the kitchen."

She reclined against a pair of downy pillows and sighed with a smile. "Okay." She tugged the blankets up and was closing her eyes as he glanced back once more before going through the door.

A while later, Richard stared at Sylvia while she drowsed. It had taken him longer to return than planned. He'd swept up the debris into a pile in a corner of the kitchen and dropped their clothes into the washer after discovering that both outfits were stained with a hodgepodge of herbs, whipped cream, and other foods. By the time he returned, she'd drifted off to sleep, and he hadn't the heart to wake her.

Now, he lay nude in bed, memorizing her face in peaceful slumber and waiting for their clothes to dry. He lightly caressed her bare hip beneath the sheets and wondered idly when she'd discarded the bath towel. Not that it mattered; he preferred her just the way she was. Soft,

curvy, and naked.

His cock stirred at his wayward thoughts.

He should wake her and take her home. It was already well after midnight, and her brothers would be worried. But damn, he loved her right here, her black hair spilling over his white satin pillowcases, her lips red and swollen from his kisses.

Her dark eyelashes fluttered, and then she stared up at him with eyes he could look into for the rest of his life. A slow smile spread over her juicy lips, and she rolled toward him.

He wrapped her in his arms and held her softly curved body against his.

She sighed. "That was the most incredible thing I've ever experienced."

His ego puffed up, knowing she wasn't talking about the nap, but he simply said, "For me, too." It had been. Spontaneous and fun in the kitchen. Mind blowing and life altering in the shower.

"You're nothing like I thought you'd be."

"Well, from what you said before, your prior experience left a lot to be desired."

She laughed and pushed back so she could see his face. "That's not what I mean. I mean, you. All of you. Who you are."

"I don't understand," he said, frowning.

"You don't act rich."

The statement was so matter of fact, but he wasn't sure how to respond to it. "How does a rich person act?" He thought of his mother.

She shrugged. "Like your cousin, Maxwell. He wears suits all the time. You didn't even wear a tuxedo to the ball."

"Much to my mother's chagrin," he said, relieved that was what she meant. "But Max runs a huge corporation. He has to wear a suit. Can you see me entering the mine in an Armani when I needed to check on the men?"

She grinned. "I guess not. It's just that you seem a lot more...approachable."

"I take that as a compliment. Thank you." He tapped her on the tip of the nose. "We should get you home before the White brothers form a

lynch mob."

She sighed. "I guess."

He kissed her softly. "I don't want you to go. I laid here thinking of every excuse possible to avoid it, because I'd like nothing better than for you to stay here tonight. But I don't want to cause you problems with your siblings."

"I understand. Can I ask you something?" she said, and he saw the concern in her eyes.

"Anything."

"It's just something one of my brothers said..." She bit her lip, and her brow furrowed in worry.

"Go ahead, sweetheart."

"Will you want to see me again since we...had sex?"

His heart twisted, and he pulled her against him, burying his face in her hair. "Sylvia..."

"Just be honest," she said, her body stiff against his.

"Honest?" He leaned back and stroked her cheek. "Now that I've gotten to know you better, made love with you, I'm afraid you're going to get sick of me asking you out." He kissed her again, deep and hot, and rolled to his back, pulling her over him.

She straddled his thighs and rubbed her pussy against his growing erection, which made him groan. When she pulled away and sat up, she grinned at him. "You know, if you didn't put the moves on me tonight, I was going to try to seduce you."

His eyebrows shot up. "You were?"

She nodded as she ran her hand over his chest, stopping to toy with his nipples, which made his cock pulse against her silky damp heat.

"And what if your seduction attempts didn't work?"

She licked her lips. "Well, then, I guess I would have had to take more drastic measures."

"Such as?"

Her smile was seductive and wicked. "Hmm." She slid her hands down his arms, wrapped her fingers around his wrists, and lifted them over his head. Her breasts swung just above his face as she did so, and he leaned up and captured one pretty little nipple between his lips, making

her laugh.

"I guess, if you didn't like my seduction attempts, I would have had to tie you up and take advantage of you." She held his hands above his head as if her fingers were cuffs.

"Well. I'm pretty sure that might have worked."

"Yeah?" she asked with a grin. "You think so?"

He nodded slowly. "Especially if you were naked."

"You like me naked?"

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever known. Perfect."

"You're hard again," she whispered, stroking her pussy over him.

He laughed then groaned. "Sylvia, I think I could go all night with you."

"Really?"

He nodded.

"Don't move." She released him with one hand and reached over to the nightstand to grab a condom. "I think we should give it a try, then."

* * * * *

Sylvia eased out of bed and smiled down at Richard in a deep sleep. He looked so adorable with whiskered cheeks and mussed hair. A glance at the crack between drapes told her the sun was rising. Her brothers would be furious, but she didn't regret a moment of her night with Richard.

He'd been creative, funny, passionate, and deliciously thorough in loving her most of the night. She wanted to thank him with breakfast in bed, so she looked around for her clothes. Not finding them, she tiptoed to his closet and stole a button-up cotton shirt, and then made her way to the kitchen. Turning on the light, she blinked against the brightness and spotted where he must've made a half-hearted attempt to clean up their mess. The counter was still strewn with the toppled spice jars, but the floor had been swept with the broom propped in the corner next to the pile of broken glass and spilled spices.

She took a moment to familiarize herself with the space, find where everything was kept. Then she found empty counter space next to the

stove and raided the refrigerator for eggs, ham, and cheese. The first omelet was sizzling in the skillet when a gasp made Sylvia turn around.

"Who are you?" an older woman asked, eyeing her with surprise and apparent irritation. "And what are you doing to my kitchen?"

"Good morning, Mrs. Princeton. I'm Sylvia White." She left the omelet cooking and started to straighten up the items on the island. "I'm afraid we left the kitchen a bit strewn after dinner last night." Her cheeks felt hot, and she tried to ignore the realization that she stood before Richard's mother while dressed in nothing but his shirt.

"Sylvia?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Yes, um, are you hungry? I'm making omelets."

"No, I—"

"Good morning, Mother," Richard said, interrupting whatever the woman had been about to say. Wearing nothing but a pair of light gray gym shorts, he stepped around his mother and walked up to Sylvia, pulling her into his arms. "Mmm, something smells great." He gave her a peck on her cheek, and his hug helped soothe her nerves a little.

"I was hoping to surprise you," Sylvia said with a relieved giggle when he nuzzled her nape.

"Well, you certainly surprised me," his mother said, an obvious bite to her tone. "Richard, I'd like to speak with you...now and *alone*, please."

Richard squeezed Sylvia and murmured, "Be right back."

He'd barely stepped two feet outside the kitchen when his mother spun around and snapped in a piqued hiss, "Since when did you begin sleeping with the hired help?"

He frowned and moved farther from the kitchen doorway. "She's not hired help, Mother. Her name is—"

"I know her name! And she might as well be a member of the staff; most of her family works for us."

"Actually, four of her brothers work for *me*. They are aware that we are dating, as are you now, so I don't see any reason you should be so upset."

"No reason? I come home to *my house* to find you..." She waved her hand in emphasis toward him, gesturing from head to toe.

"...practically naked, and her wearing next to nothing, and I'm not supposed to be upset?" Her hands slapped onto her hips, a sure sign that she was on a tirade. "What if I'd brought friends here with me? How would I have explained her appearance? Or yours? Never mind the mess she left in the kitchen—"

"The *mess* is minor and *my* fault, not Sylvia's. And it may be your house, Mother, but I live here, too."

"I'll not have her in my house—"

"Then I'll move out."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm quite old enough to have guests of my choosing. But if your house rules are that only you can have friends over while I can't bring guests here, then I'll respect that and move out."

"That's not what I meant, Richard."

He leaned against the wall and crossed his ankles and arms. "What did you mean?"

"Her flaunting herself as your lover by walking around my house in, in, in..."

"My shirt."

"It's indecent."

"An accident in the kitchen resulted in her clothes being stained. They're in the laundry. Would you rather she walk around naked?" He fought the smile that wanted to bloom at that pleasant thought.

"No, of course not." Her gaze narrowed. "You mean to tell me you two didn't...that you aren't...?"

"Mother, you know a gentleman never kisses and tells."

"It's not the kisses I'm most concerned about."

"I know. I'm a big boy, Mother. Don't worry."

"Ha!"

He gave her a peck on the cheek. "Be nice."

His mother's eyes turned pleading. "But Richard, she's..."

"She's what?"

"A commoner."

"Mother, really? Contrary to popular belief, the Princeton family is not royalty. I'm as common as she—"

She scoffed at that, but her voice remained adamant. "Don't be surprised if she's after your money, son. I don't want to be the one to have to say, 'I told you so.'"

He laughed off the warning. "Be nice, Mother. Get to know her. Give her a chance. You'll see. Sylvia isn't like that. She's...very special to me."

He left his mother's side, her mouth agape, to return to Sylvia in the kitchen, praying she hadn't heard any of the barbs his mother had thrown. One look at the uncertainty on her beautiful face proved he wasn't so fortunate.

He crossed the room where she'd just set down two plates with piping hot omelets and buttery toast next to a couple of filled coffee mugs.

"Sylvia..." He brushed some hair from her shoulder.

"She cares a lot about you."

That made him pause. He hadn't expected her to defend his mother. "She takes some getting used to."

Sylvia turned to face him, glanced down, and fidgeted with the hem of his shirt she wore. She was the sexiest woman he'd ever seen. In that moment he wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms and hide her away from the world, keep her all to himself.

"She's right, though, in some respects," she murmured.

"How so?"

"We do come from two different worlds." Her gaze rose, and she looked him in the eye, which impressed the hell out of him. "And I shouldn't disrespect her by traipsing around in her home like this."

"She owns the house, but I live here, too. I see *nothing* wrong with what you have on. You can wear my shirt anytime." He kissed the tip of her nose. "I find you incredibly sexy in it."

She grinned up at him as he wrapped her in an embrace and snuck a fun grope of her sweet bottom, making her squirm. "You do, huh?"

"Mmm hmm. It's also no disrespect to come down here before the crack of dawn and try to surprise me with breakfast—one that smells great, by the way—or to offer to make her a meal." Another peck, this time on the lips. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Let's eat before I decide to whisk you off to my bedroom." He took her by the hand, grabbed one plate, and waited for her to get the other before he led her to a breakfast nook that could seat four at a round oak table. After holding her chair, he set his plate next to hers, retrieved the coffee mugs and silverware, and took his seat.

Three delicious bites later, he glanced at her to see she still hadn't taken a nibble, so he took her hand in his. "What is it?"

Again, she met his gaze. "I'm not after your money."

"God, Sylvia..." He pulled her until she moved to sit in his lap, his arms banding her slim waist.

"I'm not. I swear it."

"I know that. I'm sorry you heard my mother's suspicions, but you have to realize that's her concern because, well, it's what's important to her. She's wary of everyone."

Sylvia shook her head. "No, she cares about you and doesn't want to see you get hurt. I can't fault her for that."

"I know she loves me...in her own unusual way. But money is important to her, as is her reputation, her...*status* in the community. Money, to me, is just something I must work hard to earn. It's a bonus in life, but it's not what empowers me."

She draped her arms around his shoulders. "It's not vital to me either, although it doesn't hurt."

He chuckled.

"I just don't want people to think I'm some sort of gold digger."

"What's wrong with mining for precious metals?" he teased.

She smirked at him. "That's not what I meant."

He smiled but grew serious once more. "We can't control what other people will think. What we can do is spend time with the people who mean something to us, build memories together, and...enjoy this breakfast before it gets cold."

"Oh, right!" She jumped up from his lap but smiled at him after she took her seat.

Chapter Seven

Richard took a long lunch that day in order to go downtown and find Sylvia the perfect Christmas present. He'd been searching stores for that one item for nearly two hours and had yet to come up with anything.

He kept replaying their conversations in his head. She had little money, yet it didn't seem to bother her. She admitted to not being able to eat out at restaurants often, yet she hadn't said it with any contempt or hurt in her voice, simply a statement of fact. She wasn't ashamed she didn't have funds to do things. Wasn't upset by the fact. It was just the way things were in her life.

He could change all that for her. When he'd been in the jeweler's store, he'd spent nearly twenty minutes staring at the perfect engagement ring. If they were married, she could do anything she wanted. Open that café, eat dinner in every five-star restaurant anywhere in the world and write down recipes to her heart's content. She wouldn't have to slave for her brothers. She'd have free time to pursue her dreams. She could wear fancy clothes...or not.

He smiled to himself as he flipped through a pile of cashmere sweaters in a boutique. She didn't wear designer clothes and seemed happy that he didn't, either.

He'd passed up the engagement ring, as he did the cashmere sweaters, designer handbags, and lacy underwear. Though the last was the hardest to walk away from when he imagined her pale skin covered in a little black see-through teddy.

What to get a woman who doesn't seem to want for anything?

He wandered out of the boutique and into the next shop along Main Street, Market District as it was known to locals.

Ahh, now this place might offer some ideas. The gourmet cookware shop was filled to brimming with everything from silverware and cutlery to small kitchen appliances and pots and pans.

"Hello, Mr. Princeton," a pretty young woman in a gray skirt suit said as she approached. "Is there something in particular I could help you find today?"

He still wasn't used to being recognized everywhere he went. As a roughneck on an oilrig, he'd been as anonymous as any other blue-collar worker when on land. "Well, Patricia," he said, reading her silver-plated nametag, "I'm looking for a gift for someone who loves to cook."

Patricia laughed. "Then I do believe you've come to the right place. Anything in particular you know this person would like or need?"

In his mind's eye he saw Sylvia walking around his kitchen, touching, loving every surface. Yeah, she needed a state-of-the-art kitchen. But that would be jumping the gun as fast as buying the engagement ring he'd wanted to give her.

With a sigh, Richard said, "Why don't I just browse a bit. I'll let you know if I need some help."

Patricia smiled and gave a little nod. "Very well."

Richard scanned through the rows of items. He was clueless as to what some of this stuff was. Knives. That was it. All professional chefs needed the perfect set of knives. He was sure he'd heard that somewhere. "Patricia," he called.

"Yes, sir?" she said, seeming to step from the other aisle. Had she been spying on him?

"I would like to purchase the best set of knives you have. Not like these..." He waved at the blocks of knives that included steak knives and such. "I need something for a professional chef that will last her a lifetime."

Patricia smiled and her baby blue eyes seemed to sparkle. "This way, please."

He followed the clerk toward the front of the store, where a locked display case stood filled with glittering steel.

"Our best sellers," Patricia said, "are these." She turned the display and showed him a brand even he recognized. "They are mid-range on price and offer a lifetime guarantee."

"Best seller doesn't always mean the best, though."

"Yes, sir," she said, her grin widening. "These, in my opinion, are the best." She turned the display case. "Some of the top-rated chefs in the world use these. I have one, and I use it all the time. We have a three-piece set that comes in a box, or we have the nine-piece set that comes with a beautiful stainless steel block."

"Give me the nine and the block."

"Yes, sir. I'll just fetch the items from the back." She lowered her voice. "We keep them locked up."

He'd wager her grin was due to the fact these knives cost a small fortune and she worked on commission. "Merry Christmas, Patricia," he muttered when she disappeared into the back of the store behind a door marked Private.

When he signed the charge receipt, he nearly laughed. The knife set cost almost as much as his first car when he returned from abroad, back when he had been determined to make it on his own.

He took Patricia's offer to gift wrap the set, then headed off to his car so he could get back to the mine. He didn't like being a boss who wasn't there when needed. He liked making himself present, as his father always had.

As he passed a shop, he stopped and frowned. When had Pint's Pantry gone out of business? His father had brought him here often as a child for their homemade ice cream. He stepped back to the edge of the sidewalk and looked up at the awning overhead. The ghost of the letters that had once been there could still be seen against the red-and-white striped canvas, but they'd been peeled off.

A big blue-and-white For Lease sign hung in the window, and he moved to the side of it, cupped his hand against one side of his face, and peered inside. The counter was still there with the glass-enclosed ice cream cooler, but the rest of the space stood starkly empty, the black-and-white checkered floor coated in a thick layer of dust.

What a shame. Pint's had been a favorite place for kids after school,

and in the summer it was a hit with tourists and locals alike.

As he stared into the darkened interior of the little shop, he pictured the white-painted wrought-iron tables that had stood in the open space, the lighted board behind the counter with the weekly flavors.

And then the vision changed. A blackboard with colorful chalk menu. A few small round tables with bent oak chairs. A comfortable loveseat to the one side with two matching armchairs around a low coffee table. The glass case would display freshly baked croissants, mini quiches, and thick slices of pies. Behind the counter Sylvia would stand in a pretty apron, her hair pulled back into a ponytail, her emerald eyes gleaming as she took orders, made lattes, and greeted every customer with the quiet respect and warm smile that was so natural to her.

Richard turned around, rested his back against the window, and stared out at the street. There had to be a way....

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone, shuffled through his Contact List, and found the number for his step-cousin, Thomas Allen.

"Allen here," came after only one ring.

"Hey, cuz. This is Richard."

"Hey, man. How's the mining business?"

"Good, good. Listen, I need your real estate expertise. And I need it fast."

"I'm at home right now if you want to stop by."

"I'm on my way." Richard disconnected the call, glanced back at the vacant shop, then hurried to his car.

His cousin was a real estate whiz, and his last name was Princeton. If what he wanted to do could be done, together, they'd do it.

* * * * *

Sylvia glanced out the kitchen window in time to see Richard's car pull up along the sidewalk. Her heart pitter-pattered as she rushed to rinse turkey off her hands. "Be right back," she said to her sister-in-law, Jane, as she grabbed the towel slung over the oven door and dried her hands on the way to the front door, praying to beat her brothers to it.

Luckily, the boys were gathered around the coffee table, shouting and laughing as one of them tried to make some killer move in Jenga.

She pulled the door open as Richard came up the sidewalk carrying a case of beer in each hand, and a plastic shopping bag looped over one wrist.

"Hey, beautiful," he said as he came up the steps.

"Hi," she responded with a big grin. She'd done her best to be beautiful, since he was coming for Christmas dinner, but after a full day in the kitchen she was afraid to look in a mirror.

"Merry Christmas." He stopped in front of her and leaned down to kiss her softly. "I missed you."

"Mmm. I missed you too."

"Who's letting in the cold?" came Greg's bark from the other room, causing Sylvia to groan.

"Come on in," she said, wishing they had just a few more moments alone before he was subjected to her brothers. "They all know you're coming, but be warned..."

"I know. It'll be fine, sweetheart. Trust me." He lifted both hands to show off the beer. "If nothing else we get them wasted and sneak out."

She laughed. "Hope you got another couple cases in the car then." Stepping inside, she held the door for him, then shut it once he was in.

"Oh, it's you," Gregory said.

Sylvia rolled her eyes. "Be nice. He brought beer."

Gregory grunted but took both cases from Richard, held them up, and raised an eyebrow. There was a case of domestic and one imported, the good stuff, too. "Anybody want a beer?"

A chorus of, "Me," and, "I do," came from the living room, and Gregory headed that way.

"Thank you," Sylvia said to Richard. "That's what he meant to say."

Richard chuckled. "I took that from the slight lessening of his scowl." He winked. "Here. This is for you."

Out of the plastic bag he held, he pulled a box wrapped in metallic silver paper with a big blue bow on top.

Sylvia grinned. "I have a gift for you, too. It's in the kitchen." The

box was heavy, and she tried to guess what it might be. Too much weight for clothing. She went to shake it, but Richard caught her hand and shook his head.

"Don't shake it. Open it."

"That's no fun."

He laughed. "Go on. Open it," he said, as excited as Doyle had been five years earlier when he'd wanted her to open the pet rock he'd made her in school.

She moved over to the side table, which put her in view of the living room. The guys were quieter now but still played their game. Setting the package down, she pulled the bow so the ribbon slithered off the slippery paper. She carefully slid her finger under the tape on one side, then the other.

"Jeez, Sylvia," Richard whispered with a smirk. "Hasn't anyone taught you how to open a gift? Rip the paper."

She shook her head and bit her bottom lip. "No." She wasn't about to admit she'd probably keep the wrapping paper forever. Her first gift from the first guy she ever... She stopped before she pulled the last piece of tape and looked up at Richard. Loved? Could love be what she felt for him?

Her chest tightened. Yeah, she thought. It was.

"What is it?" he asked, his brow puckering into a frown.

She shook her head. "Nothing. I'm just glad you're here."

The frown turned into a smile, and he kissed her forehead. "Me too. Now open the damn present."

With a laugh, she popped the last piece of tape. The wrapping fell away to reveal a plain white cardboard box. She pulled the tab and lifted the lid, then gasped. It *couldn't* be.

With extreme care, she lifted the stainless steel block from the box and stared. "Global? Are these really Global knives?"

"Uh huh," Richard said.

"Oh my..." She held the block against her chest like a cherished baby and pulled the paring knife from it. The blade glittered in the light. "Oh, Richard..." She turned to him, a huge smile overtaking her. "This is the best gift I've ever—"

"You bought your girlfriend knives for Christmas?" Doyle asked, coming into the entryway. "Dude, you're brave."

Richard chuckled.

"Knives?" Greg said, following Doyle. When he reached for one still in the block, Sylvia slapped his hand.

"Don't touch," she said. "Don't ever touch. These are mine. In fact," she said, raising her voice and turning toward the men in the living room, who now all stared at her, "if any one of you ever touches these knives, I'll castrate you."

Damon chuckled.

She turned to thank Richard for the most amazing gift she'd ever received, to see him watching her, a smile tilting his lips. And then it hit her. She knew how much these knives cost. Knew because she went into Grady's Gourmet on a regular basis and drooled over them, knowing she'd never be able to spend that much on a set of knives—even one knife, for that matter, from the collection.

They'd known each other just days, and he'd bought her something so expensive. It wasn't right. "Excuse me," she said, grabbing the cardboard box from the table and hightailing it into the kitchen.

"The turkey's ready if you want to call the boys to the table," Jane said. "Whoa, those from your new beau?"

Sylvia set the box on the little kitchen table and stared at the beautiful knives. "Yeah." And then she gently placed the block inside the box.

"Need any help in—what are you doing?"

She turned to see Richard as he strode across the kitchen.

"Those are to go on a countertop, I'm pretty sure. I don't know much about all that stuff, but we've got a block of knives on our counter."

Sylvia shook her head and folded the lid down. "I can't keep these."

"Why not?"

"They cost too much. We barely know each other. It's not right."

"I'm going to take a platter of turkey out," Jane said, raising her voice.

Sylvia nodded.

As soon as the door swung shut, Richard said, "I thought money was the one thing we'd never argue about."

She frowned up at him. "I'm not arguing about it. I'm just saying that I can't accept a gift that costs this much."

"Just two nights ago, you said I didn't act rich, and I took that as a huge compliment. And now, because a gift costs too much for your liking, you won't keep it, even though I saw how happy it made you for about a minute."

His voice had risen, making Sylvia a little angry. So she grabbed the box she'd wrapped for him off the table and shoved it at him. "I can't take your gift because this is all I have to give you. It's not fair."

He ripped off the cheap snowman wrapping, lifted the lid, and stared at her offering. He reached into the box and pulled out a macadamia nut and white chocolate cookie, sniffed it, then bit into it. "That's bullshit," he said after he'd swallowed. "This is worth more than some stupid knives."

Her heart tumbled a little.

"You put your heart and soul into everything you make." He took another bite. "I just dropped a credit card at a store. Besides..." He set his box of treats on the table and pulled her into his arms. "They have a lifetime warrantee. So look at it this way. Divide what I paid for them by about...oh...eighty or ninety years, and it's less than ten bucks a year, right? You probably spend that on cheap knives."

"I guess," she said reluctantly, trying to keep herself from melting against him.

"How about if I swear to never buy you another knife as long as we live?"

She ducked her head to hide her smile.

"Sylvia." He lifted her chin with his fingers. "You want to know the truth?"

She nodded.

"That's the first Christmas gift I've ever purchased for anyone. Don't throw it back in my face."

Her mouth dropped open, and her chest squeezed tight. "Ever?"

He nodded.

She licked her lips and looked into his soulful eyes. "What did you do for the holidays all those years you were at boarding school?"

He gave a little shrug, but his eyes didn't reflect nonchalance. "The dean held a dinner for the boys who stayed at school over the breaks."

"And after you returned? When you worked on the oil rigs?"

He was silent for a moment. "I didn't have a bad life. Don't look at me like some wayward orphan."

"What did you do?" she urged.

"Volunteered to work so the other guys could be with their families."

She threw her arms around him and buried her face against his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

He held her. "It's not that bad, sweetheart. I just wanted to get you something you would like, something you could use. You're not exactly the easiest person to shop for."

She pulled back to look at him. "I'm easy to shop for. I would have been perfectly happy with a nice little paring knife, or even a new cutting board." She waved her hand toward the counter, and he turned to look. Her old wooden butcher block was in serious need of replacement.

Richard looked back at her with a tender smile. "Okay, for your birthday, give me a list."

She shook her head but couldn't keep the smile inside. "My birthday's in the summer. Who knows if—"

He kissed her, stopping her words. "I'm not going anywhere."

She stared into his eyes and prayed it was true, but they were too new, and she was just a miner's daughter. He'd stood up to his mother about her the other day, but how long could that last? When would his mother's ideas about money and class sink into his head? Sylvia wasn't delusional enough to think she belonged with a Princeton. But she sure would miss him when he left. It would break her heart.

"Okay?" he prompted.

She nodded. What was the point in arguing now, except to ruin what they had for the time being? "Okay."

"Good." He released her and pulled the knife block out of the box. "Now, where should this go?" He moved across the kitchen. "Probably

next to the cutting board, I'd guess."

The door swung open, and Jane came in. "The beasts are getting restless." She cast a glance at Richard. "We should feed them now."

That one quick glance told Sylvia that Jane had heard the discussion between herself and Richard, which meant the brothers probably had, too. *Great.* "Richard," she said, "this is Damon's wife, Jane. Jane, Richard Princeton."

They shook hands over the small island, exchanged pleasantries, and then Jane lifted the second platter of turkey and handed it to Richard. "Take this out to the table, please, while we get the rest."

"Sure." He winked at Sylvia then entered the lion's den.

"Everyone?" Sylvia asked, pulling the bowl of freshly made cranberry sauce from the fridge.

"I think Doyle was in the bathroom," Jane said. "Richard seems like a really great guy."

Sylvia sighed and picked up the massive basket of rolls she'd left warming in the oven. "He is. The best." She glanced at the gleaming knives. With or without expensive gifts, she thought, he was absolutely the best. "This room needs some soundproofing," she muttered as she pushed the door with her shoulder. "Okay! Dinner's ready!"

From the looks Richard received as everyone gathered around the table, he had a sneaking suspicion they'd all heard his discussion with Sylvia in the kitchen. Jane, a pretty redhead with chocolate brown eyes, gave him glances filled with pity. The rest just looked at him oddly, as if they didn't know what to do with him.

He waited to see where everyone sat, then looked at Sylvia for help when the only vacant seat was at the opposite end of the table from her.

"Stevie," she said a little sharply.

Her brother seated to her right glanced at her. "What?"

She cocked her head, an obvious sign for him to move.

"You're our guest tonight," Damon said. "You take the seat of honor." He pointed at the only vacant chair. The head of the table. What had probably, until just a little over a year ago, been their father's place.

He sat, and Sylvia gave a little shrug and mouthed, "Sorry."

He took the napkin from his plate and opened it over his lap. Just

another test, he supposed.

The brothers all linked hands, and Damon to his left, and Sylvester to his right, held their hands out to him. He took them, feeling a little awkward.

"Would you do the honor of saying grace?" Damon asked.

Oh, crap.

Sylvia met his eyes and gave a little nod.

He bowed his head and searched his mind. It had been years and years... "Heavenly Father, we thank you for the food before us." He cleared his throat. "Thank you for friendships old and new, and family here and far. Please watch over those less fortunate on this night." His throat grew tight as he pictured his father sitting at the head of their table, his uncle, aunt and cousins all gathered as he said grace before their own Christmas dinner. The last one he'd had with a real family until tonight. His voice dropped to a harsh whisper when he said, "Thank you, Dad, for watching over me and guiding me this past year. Lord, please keep our fathers safe in Your loving arms. In Your name."

"Amen," Damon said softly, followed by the rest at the table.

It took Richard a few moments before he could look up, and when he did, the table was silent except for the light tink and scrape of serving spoons as dishes were passed around the table. He met Sylvia's eyes across the table. She laid her right hand over her heart and gave a little nod. Apparently he'd done well in her estimation. He couldn't believe he'd gotten so choked up, and in front of all these people—virtual strangers.

People he hoped would be part of his family one day.

Damon held out the bowl of mashed potatoes to him. "Eat up. Food doesn't last long around here."

Richard nodded and took the heavy bowl.

"So," Gregory said, "how much did those knives cost anyway?"

"Greg!" Sylvia exclaimed.

"My God," Jane said in exasperation.

And then the table erupted as everyone started talking at once.

Richard used the serving fork and grabbed a few slices of turkey breast while noise rioted around him. As he poured gravy over his

potatoes, he glanced up at Sylvia, who was arguing with Stevie over something, and grinned. She turned and caught his gaze, and he winked.

She smiled and rolled her eyes.

He blew her a kiss.

She blushed in the most beguiling way and took the bowl of cranberries from Doyle.

This was a good night.

But he worried about his next surprise. If she got upset over the price of some kitchen knives, what would her reaction be over several thousand dollars?

Chapter Eight

Dinner went rather well, Richard thought as he joined Steven and Harland in the kitchen to help do dishes. He washed while Harland scraped dishes and Steven rinsed and stacked everything in the rack on the edge of the sink. No dishwasher in sight. "You guys do dishes every night?" he queried, his tone light.

"Naw, just on the holidays," Harland said. "We usually scatter after dinner," he added with a little snort.

So, she cooked for seven grown men and had to clean up after them, too. With not even the help of a dishwasher.

"She usually makes Doyle help her, though," Steven said. "She doesn't like us in her kitchen much. Says we mess everything up."

Okay, he could see that. She seemed the type to want things her own way in her space. He handed Steven the last fork and reached for the stack of serving bowls.

"We'll finish up," Harland said. "Go spend some time with Sylvia."

Surprised, Richard turned toward Sylvia's brothers and reached for the hand towel someone had left on the island.

They both laughed. "You're going to get enough shit from the rest of them," Steven said. "It's kind of cool seeing our sister with a smile plastered on her face all the time."

"Yeah," Harland said. "She wanders around the house humming and smiling. She hasn't been this happy since Dad died. You're good for her. She needed something to make her smile again."

"Well," Richard said, taken aback. "Thank you. I would like a little

while alone with her, if it'll be okay to take her away from her family Christmas party."

"Party's just about over. Dinner's done, and once the dishes are, everyone goes off to do their own thing. I'm sure Doyle's already in front of his computer, and Damon and Jane are probably ready to head home."

"I've got a date in about..." Steven glanced at his watch. "...thirty-five minutes."

Richard grinned and held out his hand to Steven. "Thanks." Then he shook Harland's hand. "You guys are okay."

"Yeah, well, we do agree with Gregory on one thing," Steven said. "Hurt her, and you're dead."

Richard nodded. "Understood. I'll see you two around." He left the kitchen and went in search of Sylvia. She wasn't hard to find, sitting in an easy chair in the living room, sipping a cup of coffee, smiling as she watched two of her brothers egg each other on as they pulled pieces from some kind of stacked-stick game.

She turned and smiled at him when he stopped in the entryway. He crooked his finger at her, not wanting another confrontation with the brothers—or rather with Gregory—right then.

She stood up, set her coffee cup on the end table, and came to him. "Are you leaving?"

He shook his head, then nodded. "Actually," he said in just above a whisper as he tugged her around the corner and out of sight of the brothers, "I was hoping you'd run away with me for a little bit."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Were you?"

"Mmm hmm. There's something I'd like to show you."

Her other eyebrow went up. "But I think I've already seen it."

He chuckled softly. "You bad girl. Not that."

She puffed her bottom lip out. "Oh."

"Can you slip away?"

She leaned backwards and glanced into the living room, then reached around Richard, grabbed their two jackets from the tree, and pulled open the door. "Quick, before they notice."

They both laughed as they hurried down the walkway hand in hand. He put her in the passenger side, then slid behind the wheel.

Sylvia laughed. "I feel so naughty."

"You are." He started the car as Sylvia zipped her coat. "But I like you that way." He leaned over and kissed her quickly.

"Mmm. Where we going?"

"You'll see." He pulled away from the curb. "So, I think it went well, all things considered."

"Very well," she said, smiling at him. "The beer mellowed them, I think."

Richard laughed. "I thought it was my charming personality."

"That, too." She leaned over and put her head on his shoulder. "And how you said grace. That was so nice."

He didn't know how to respond to that, so he didn't. The words hadn't been planned, but they'd come easily.

"Last year was so hard without him. Everyone stared at the turkey, and no one would carve the stupid thing. That had always been Dad's job. That's why I carved it and put it on platters this year. I didn't want to go through that again."

"Oh, sweetheart." He picked her hand off her lap and wrapped his fingers around hers.

"Finally Damon did it, but he barely made it without breaking down, which made me and Jane cry, and it was...horrible. This year was much better, but I still miss Dad so much."

Richard remained quiet, holding her hand, as he drove down deserted Main Street and stopped along the curb across the road from the old Pint's Pantry.

Sylvia sat up and glanced around. "What are we doing here?"

He shrugged, nervous—really kind of terrified. "You said you liked the way it looked down here at Christmastime. Come on." He got out of the car and smiled when she waited for him to open her door. "You're learning."

She laughed and looked up through the branches of the naked oak tree he'd parked beneath. "It's starting to snow."

Sure enough, as if she'd called it down, big, fluffy flakes started falling.

"Wonderful," he said, putting a nice dose of disgust into his tone.

Sylvia laughed and shoved him with her shoulder. "It's so beautiful." She stepped out into the empty street and spun a circle, her head tipped back as snow landed on her cheeks and eyelashes.

She was beautiful. He walked up to her, pulled her into his arm, and stepped into a slow waltz.

She laughed and clung to him as he whirled her in the middle of the street, while he softly hummed *The Blue Danube*—the only waltz tune he knew.

It was like a fairy tale, or a fantasy he never knew he had. Holding the woman he loved and dancing with her in the middle of a deserted street while Christmas lights twinkled from naked trees and shop windows. He pulled her close, still humming, and buried his face in her cool, snow-dampened hair. She had an underlying scent of her berry shampoo, but it was overpowered by roasted turkey and freshly baked bread.

He ended their dance by dipping her and kissing her throat that peeked above the open jacket collar.

She giggled and clung to his shoulders as he stood them upright.

"Thank you for the dance," he said, holding her hand and giving her a formal bow. Some things from forced ballroom dance classes stuck.

"You're very welcome, kind sir." She curtsied then laughed and wrapped her arms around him. "It's magical tonight."

He couldn't agree more. "There's one more thing I wanted to show you. I didn't bring you down here just to dance in the street."

She tilted her head back, her eyes sparkling in the streetlamps, her lips slightly parted in a small smile. "More?"

He nodded and kissed the tip of her nose. "Just one more thing." He eased her from his arms and took her hand in his. "Come here."

She followed him up onto the opposite sidewalk and stopped next to him in front of Pint's while he dug into his jacket pocket for the key.

"What're you doing?" she asked as he slipped the key into the lock.

"Shh. Just wait." He opened the door, let her in, then relocked it. "Stay here," he said before walking across the unlit room to the light switch on the far wall. "You have to promise to not say a word until I finish explaining everything to you."

"I don't understand."

"I know. Just say you promise, and I'll show you—tell you."

"Okay," she said, but he heard the reluctance in her voice. "I promise."

He flipped the switch and the artsy spotlights came on over the blackboard hanging on the wall behind the counter.

Sylvia gasped and covered her mouth with her hand.

He walked toward her, keeping to the side as she stared at the sign he'd had the daughter of his office manager doodle for him. She was an art major home on leave from college. He turned to admire the sign once again. *Sylvia's Main Street Café* was scrawled across the top in blue and pink chalk with an artistic flair. Then there were spaces titled *Coffees*, *Teas*, *Breakfast*, *Lunch Special*, and *Pastries*.

Finally, Sylvia turned toward him, her hand still over her mouth, her eyes wide. She slowly lowered her hand, swallowed so hard he heard it in the silent, empty space, and whispered, "Please explain."

He reached into his inside jacket pocket and withdrew the packet of papers he and Thomas had spent all day yesterday putting together—not an easy feat on Christmas Eve. He owed his cousin, big time.

"This isn't a gift, so don't freak out," he said softly.

She nodded. "Good."

He frowned. He didn't like that answer, but he pushed on. "This is me believing in you, in your ability, in your love of cooking and your dream to own your own café." He motioned toward the sign. "Of course, you don't have to use that name. I just needed something to put on the loan application."

"L-loan?"

He held the folded papers out to her. "A small business loan through Everland Mutual Credit Union, with me as your co-signer. A six-month deferment on the first payment so you can get set up, opened, and bringing in some money before the first one is due. And a one-year lease on the space, also with me as your co-signer."

She took the papers from him and unfolded them. Then she walked to the counter and laid them down, spread her hand over them to smooth the creases, and began reading.

Richard stood silently and waited. And waited. She went through the pile of papers twice.

When she finally turned toward him, he said, "Nothing's final. Not until you sign and file the papers with the bank and the real estate company."

She looked around the open space where he stood, then over the counter and up at the sign.

"I'm suddenly terrified of my own dream," she said softly.

He walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. "It's always scary at first. I was terrified to take over my father's company, but it all worked out." He kissed the top of her head. "I'll be here to help you any way I can, and my family knows everyone in this town...."

She turned in his arms. "It's a ten-year loan."

He nodded.

"You're my co-signer for ten years."

He nodded again. "I told you I'm not going anywhere."

"What if I fail?" she asked, her voice full of fear.

"Then I'll be here to help you get back on your feet."

She laid her head against his shoulder. "I have to think about all this."

"I know." He rubbed her back through her thick wool coat. "You have thirty days from yesterday to decide. Keep the key and come here and dream for the next month if that's what you need to boost your confidence, okay?"

She pulled back and frowned. "The real estate company let you keep the key for the month?"

He grinned. "Okay, okay. So being filthy rich and having my last name gets me a few perks. I've just never had any reason to use them."

She laughed and hugged him. "Thank you, Richard. No matter what I decide, I want you to know how much this means to me."

He held her a moment. "You're welcome, sweetheart. Now..." He released her and took her hand again. "Come look at this kitchen." He dragged her around the counter and through the door. He flipped on the light and pulled her into the stainless steel and white-tiled kitchen. "Tell me what you think."

When he looked at her, she had a wicked little smile on her full, red lips. "I think there's probably no whipped cream or chocolate syrup in here."

He narrowed his eyes. "You naughty, naughty girl."

Her smile turned into a grin as she pulled him toward her and reached for the button on his jeans. "But you said you like me that way."

He stood still, waiting to see what she'd do. When she unzipped his pants and reached inside to drag out his semi-erect cock, he had to stifle a groan. "Yes, I do like you that way."

"Well then..." She dropped to her knees and sucked all of his cock into her mouth.

He grew instantly hard and moaned as he speared his fingers through her hair. "Sylvia..."

She suckled, licked, cupped his balls, and within a moment, the climax neared. He didn't want to come in her mouth, so he pulled back, lifted her under the arms, and dropped her onto the stainless steel counter.

"I want—"

He kissed her hard as he shoved her jacket off her shoulders and tugged at the button and zipper on her jeans. "I know what you want."

She cried out when he shoved his hand into her underwear and flicked his fingers over her clit. Her pussy was already hot and slick. He kissed her again and pumped into her with two fingers.

She rode his hand and gripped his shoulders, making the sweetest sounds as she did so.

He pulled away just long enough to strip off her pants and underwear and don the condom from his wallet. She practically leaped into his arms when he was ready, and he lifted her with his hands under her ass, turned, and pressed her back against the massive refrigerator before he pressed himself into her.

She buried her face against his shoulder, panting hard, moaning. He heard her nails score his leather jacket as she clung to him.

Any thought of slow and gentle fled his mind—it always seemed to be that way with her—and he pumped into her hot, slick, tight core.

"More," she said on a harsh pant. "Please, Richard."

So he gave her all he had, trying to shield her from the unforgiving surface of the fridge as he pummeled into her. Her cunt tightened around him, and then she screamed his name. One more thrust, and he joined her in climax with a shout of his own, his head spinning, his vision blurring.

Still panting, she said, "You're squishing me."

A half gasp, half chuckle slipped out of him, and he eased back and slowly lowered her to the floor, her jeans, inside out, still hooked around one ankle, one shoe missing, her sock still on.

She looked down at herself and burst out laughing. He removed the condom, spotted an old napkin on the side of the sink and wrapped it inside, then tossed it into the garbage barrel at the end of the counter. Then he zipped his jeans while she tugged hers from her foot, turned them right side out, and then slipped her pink panties on. When she bent to pull her jeans on, he couldn't resist reaching out and caressing her silky smooth bottom.

She glanced up at him. "If you want more, I want a bed."

He laughed. "Yes, ma'am."

"I was only planning on giving you a blowjob; I didn't know you would attack me." She stood up and fastened her pants, not looking displeased by the assault.

"Come here, beautiful." He pulled her into his arms. "You know it turns me on just to hear you say the word blowjob?"

She laughed and shoved his shoulder. "Don't be silly."

"I'm not. I swear." He kissed her softly. "I can't get enough of you."

She sighed into his mouth and returned his gentle, seeking kiss. When he pulled back, their gazes locked. He wanted to tell her how he felt about her, wanted to say the words.

Something buzzed.

She pulled back and glanced around the room.

It buzzed again.

Richard reached for his cell phone, but it wasn't his. He'd shut it off when he arrived at Sylvia's house that night.

Another buzz.

He lifted her coat from the counter to his ear. "You still have your brother's cell phone?" he asked.

"Oh. Oh!" She grabbed the coat and searched her pockets until she found it. She flipped it open and held it to her ear. "Hello?"

It buzzed again, and Richard took it from her, pushed Talk, then handed it back.

"Hello? Yeah, I'm with Richard.... Everything's fine.... When do you want your phone back?"

Richard grinned and wrapped his arms around her.

"Okay. Yes. Everything's fine. I'm fine. Okay. Go home. Good night, Damon." She closed the phone and frowned.

"What?"

With a sigh, she said, "He was worried you kidnapped me or something."

He laughed. "He was probably more worried about the 'or something,' which we just did."

She looked up at him. "Let's go sledding."

"Now?"

She nodded and grinned. "Let's go home and get whoever wants to go, and go."

"I...uh..." He hadn't been sledding since before he went to boarding school. He'd probably break something—like his neck.

"Come on. It'll be fun. I'm sure Steven has some snow gear that'll fit you." She took his hand and pulled him out of the kitchen, and he flipped off the lights as they went. She grabbed the papers from the counter as she marched to the front door. "Key, please?"

She turned the deadbolt so they could get out, then took the key from him and relocked it. Then she slipped the key into her jeans pocket, which he took as a good sign. At least she would think about the offer.

"Look how much it snowed just since we went in," she said with excitement in her voice as she skipped into the street. "We have the perfect sledding spot."

He followed her to the car and opened her door. "It's dark out."

"Yeah. That makes it even more fun," she said around a laugh. "Don't be such a chicken!"

He got in and started the car. "If you're sure...."

She folded the papers in her lap then clapped her hands. "We

haven't gone yet this year."

So, off to sledding in the dark they went, after a stop at her house to put on warm clothes, pick up Harland and Doyle, and grab the sleds. They wound up taking the Whites' old four-wheel-drive SUV because Sylvester didn't think Richard's car would handle the hills in the snow well.

The next morning Richard woke up so sore he could barely move, bruised in places he'd rather not think about, but the soft, warm body pressed against him, and the curtain of jet-black hair over his shoulder, made it not matter so much. Yesterday had been the best Christmas of his entire life.

* * * * *

Marie Laveau quickly set aside her favorite book of spells and headed through the beaded curtain when the bell over the door of her herbal shop chimed. Pasting on a friendly smile, she greeted her customer, finding herself a bit delighted at who it turned out to be.

At least one member of the hated Princeton family had become a profitable adversary over the decades. "How are you today, Deidre?"

"Hello, Marie. I have a dreadful headache, and I'm down to the last drop of that splendid herbal bath gel you recommended to help when my joints ache."

Marie gestured toward the aisle with the bath gels. "It's the best you'll ever find," she declared, unashamed. This particular Princeton liked the *best* and was willing to pay for it...unlike some in that family. She shook her head slightly to dispel the wayward memories, but that proved difficult as she watched Theodore's widow peruse the stocked shelves.

The Princeton family men had been nothing but thorns in Marie's side all her life. The pride of Everland, the Princetons were considered the royalty of the small, close-knit community, but Marie saw them for what they were. Arrogant, lucky bastards...the lot of them...beginning with that two-timing Drake Princeton.

"Is this one as strong as the other I bought last time?" Deidre asked without glancing back at Marie.

"Yes. The active ingredients are the same and all natural, too."

"I love the lavender scent."

"That expert golf swing of yours will come in handy."

Deidre glanced back. "How so?"

"One whiff of that and you'll need it to fight off all of the wealthy gents after you at the country club." Marie gave her a conspiratorial smile—camaraderie between two gray-haired matronly women of the town—making Deidre laugh.

"Oh, Marie, you are card. I'm long past my prime."

"Nonsense. You're still beautiful. A high quality lady, respected and admired." It never hurt to stoke Deidre's ego. Even the women who married into the Princeton family shared that fault.

"Thank you for that." Deidre's forehead wrinkled with tension, so Marie suggested she also look at the natural pain medications on the next aisle over.

As she did, Marie returned to the front counter to await her customer there...and to plot the demise of the Princetons. Someday she'd find a way to get her vengeance. Oh, handsome and vain Drake Princeton was still paying for his duplicity. Thoughts of him still hiding his face out in the swamps made her smile. She only wished her spell hadn't kept him young all these years, but how else would he pay forever unless he lived forever...or so long as her curse remained intact. She huffed and busied herself with wiping down the glass countertop. That swine deserved everything he got for breaking her heart all those years ago.

She frowned, remembering the newspaper announcement a few months back. Drake's cohort had been rescued from her lifetime sentence by none other than a Princeton. Well, an adopted one, but they were all the same.

Marie gritted her teeth. That made two curses broken by Princeton men. Two too many. She had to do something. She'd love nothing better than to cast a spell and send the whole lot of them straight to Hell, if such a spell existed, which it didn't, but a woman could dream.

However, there was that valid threat from the latest *ruler* of the Princeton clan. *Maxwell*. She had yet to determine how best to get around his dire warnings of turning her beloved home and shop, to which he held

the legal title, into a community garden should she be caught casting spells on a member of the Princeton family again.

Marie fumed as she remembered the letter he'd sent. Technically, Cindy—Maxwell's wife now—hadn't been a Princeton when Marie cast her spell on the hapless child to get back at the girl's father. And neither had Jacqueline, who foolishly tried to steal Marie's beau so many years ago. That beau was a Princeton, but Maxwell didn't know about that, or at least he hadn't known when he made his threat.

"You're a lifesaver, Marie," Deidre said, setting a few items on the counter.

She smiled at the patron. "How long have you suffered the headaches?" Perhaps she could coax the woman to purchase some additional herbal remedies whether she needed to or not. Business was business, after all.

"Since my son began a foolish tryst with—" Deidre shook her head. "I'm just under a lot of stress after my dear Teddy passed."

"And your son's not making it any easier, I see." She tried for a very sympathetic tone.

Deidre gave up her pretenses and confessed, albeit in a softer voice, "I warned him about her, the girl he's seeing, but he won't listen to me. Doesn't he realize I have only his best interest at heart?"

Marie leaned forward. "Youth, stubborn to a fault, especially boys. They don't think with the head that counts."

Deidre nodded.

"So who is she?"

"A nobody. Some miner's daughter. He's sleeping with the help and doesn't even realize that he's being used." Deidre looked up, the pain and fear for her son evident in her eyes. "I just wish she'd disappear, so he could get on with his life, be the man his father and I always wished for him to become."

"Well, I'm afraid I don't have any herbal potions to make a woman vanish—"

Deidre laughed. "Oh, Marie. I know it's wishful thinking, a pipe dream."

"Have you tried buying her off?"

Deidre shook her head. "Knowing her, she'd turn that on me, tell him, and then where would I be? I don't want to lose my son. I just want her gone. Out of the picture, so he could think straight again and realize I'm right. She's not the woman for him. He deserves someone more..."

"I understand. Perhaps..." Marie hesitated, thinking through her plan carefully. She had to do this so she couldn't be implicated. Perhaps, if she could pull this off, she'd be able to get back at the Princetons without having to attack them directly, so Maxwell would have no justification for ousting her from her own home. After all, she didn't know this miner's daughter, other than that the girl wasn't a member of the Princeton family, yet.

"Perhaps what?"

"Well, I probably shouldn't say. It's not as if you'd break the law to get rid of the problem...."

"No, certainly not."

"And it could be dangerous."

Deidre blinked. "Dangerous? What could be dangerous?"

"Well, it's just that people in this town talk—"

"Tell me about it," Deidre agreed with a look of disgust.

"And as a storekeeper, I hear things. I can't say whether it's true or not, but I heard there's a man who frequents the Snake Pit who, for the right price, can supply certain, shall we say, questionable potions with remarkable powers of persuasion."

"The bar down by the swamps?" The widow's shudder was visible.

Marie nodded. "Like I said, it would be way too dangerous, but he's there every Friday at midnight, or so I hear. Sits alone, dressed in black, except for white gloves. Seems like a fairy tale to me, or a mysterious way to draw in business to an otherwise unsavory bar, but that's the rumor. Anyway, can you imagine a potion that could make the girl lose all interest in your son, deaden her senses to the point she'd want nothing more to do with him? It could be the answer to your prayers." Marie began ringing up the items Deidre was there to purchase. "Of course, it's just gossip, and you and I both know how much stories can be exaggerated."

"Yes, yes, of course." Deidre shook her head and dug out her

wallet, but Marie could see the seed had been planted in fertile soil.

Chapter Nine

"Hey, guys," Sylvia said when dinner was finished and her brothers were ready to leave the table. "Can you wait a minute? There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

Every eye at the table turned toward her, and the room grew deathly quiet. She'd waited four days to bring it up, because she hadn't had the nerve. It was time.

Bartholomew asked, "What's on your mind, honey?"

She took a steadying breath and said, "An opportunity has been given to me, but it'll mean there will be some major changes in the house if I take it."

"What opportunity?" Stevie asked.

"What changes?" Greg demanded with a deep scowl.

"Well," she hedged. This was even harder than she'd thought it would be. "The changes will involve you fending for yourselves more. Making and taking your own lunches, maybe making your own dinners a few times a week." She reached for her water glass, but nearly dropped it when Greg surged out of his chair.

"That bastard asked you to move in with him, didn't he? I won't allow it!" He slammed his fist onto the table, rattling the china. "You might be sleeping with him—you've barely been home all week—but I'll be damned if you go live with him without so much as a ring on your finger!"

"Greg—"

"I mean it, Sylvia. No way in hell—"

"Gregory Joseph White!" She stood up fast and planted her hands on the table beside her plate. "Sit down and shut up and hear me out!"

Gregory dropped into his chair, his eyes narrowed on her. "Ought to turn you over my knee."

"I'd like to see you try," she shot back.

Then she took a couple more deep breaths and sat back down. "Richard has not asked me to move in with him..." Though at this particular moment, the idea had merit. "...he's helped me get a small business loan."

"You own a business?" Harland asked.

"What's he want in payment for that?" Greg practically growled.

She addressed Greg first. "He doesn't want anything in payment. He's just the co-signer so I, someone with no work history and no credit history, can get a loan." Then she turned toward Harland. "I want to open a café on Main Street."

"Why?" Stevie asked.

"Because it's been my dream for years, and now I have my chance."

"I think we should call Damon," Doyle said from beside her. "He's the oldest. He'll know what to do."

She rolled her eyes. "This has nothing to do with Damon, and there's nothing to be done. This is between us, who still live in this house, because I'm telling you, things are going to change around here."

"We don't know how to cook. You won't make our dinners anymore?" Doyle said, a little fear showing in his eyes.

She sighed. "You're not going to starve because you have to fend for yourselves. I know some of you..." She made eye contact with Sylvester and Bartholomew. "...cooked after Mom died before I was old enough. You will all have to pitch in to do the cooking, the cleaning—I'm not going to be doing your dishes if you make dinner—and your laundry. And I'll still do some of the dinners. I'm not jumping ship; I'm just going to be as busy and probably as tired as the rest of you at the end of each day."

"You've already made up your mind, then?" Bartholomew asked softly.

As she stared at her brother, a small smile flitted over her lips. Until

now, she hadn't made up her mind, but yes. *Yes!* She was going to do this. "It's a once in a lifetime opportunity for me. Of course I'm going to do it."

"How come you never told us that's what you wanted?" Sylvester asked.

Greg saved her from answering that question with, "I still say he wants something from you."

She might as well clear the air now, while they were all here. "He may be my lover, but he's also my friend who wants me to be successful and live out my dreams. When was the last time any of you asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up?" She swallowed hard. She hated talking to her brothers this way, because she knew they loved her. But they'd come to rely on her too much, to expect certain things. "How long am I supposed to just be Sylvia, the little sister? The one who takes care of everything in this house? I need more in my life than making sure all of you have clean socks and underwear to put on every morning. I'm a twenty-four-year-old woman. I can't be your housekeeper and cook forever. I've got to live my own life."

The table was silent for long minutes, and Sylvia sat tense in her chair, waiting for some kind of explosion. As the seconds ticked by, her nerves wound tighter. And when a chair scraped over the floor, she jumped.

Bartholomew pushed his chair back, came to her and hugged her, kissed the top of her head. "Good for you, honey. Let us know if you need any help."

Tears burned her eyes.

"Maybe you can hire my band to play a night a week, or something," Harland said.

She hid her cringe. His music wasn't exactly what she envisioned playing softly over the speakers in her café. "Maybe you can bring your acoustic guitar and play some of the old standards during lunch hour?"

He laughed. "Okay."

"Can I work for you after school? Until they need me at the farm?" Doyle asked.

"I don't see why not," she said, grinning. "As long as your grades stay up."

"Does family get free coffee?" Stevie asked.

"Regular coffee. You have to pay for any specialties."

"What kind of stuff will you sell besides coffee?" Sylvester asked.

As she started listing off items she'd considered offering, Gregory got up from the table and stomped off into the living room and turned on the television at a loud volume.

When Sylvia paused in what she was saying and glanced toward the living room, Harland said, "He'll come around. He just doesn't like change. You know that."

She nodded. "Thanks, guys. For understanding. This means...everything to me."

"Will I get to learn how to make mochas?" Doyle asked. "And if I work there, are my specialty coffees free?"

Sylvia laughed and hugged her little brother. "We'll talk about the details when it's time. First I have to get the place ready to open, and that's going to take some work."

"I'll help," Doyle said.

"Me, too," Harland chipped in.

"We all will," Bartholomew said. "Whatever you need."

Sylvia looked around the table. The end result was better than she'd expected. She should have tried being honest with them years ago.

* * * * *

Her no-account nephew best not screw this up, Marie thought as she settled into a dark corner of the bar and maintained a direct line of sight to Rupert, who sat alone at a table closer to the front door.

She didn't want Deidre to have to be braver than absolutely necessary, and it took quite a bit of courage to enter such a place as the Snake Pit. Marie didn't want her chickening out if she made it as far as the front door. Of course, there was still a chance the wealthy widow wouldn't show tonight, but Marie would make certain Rupert was here and in character every Friday night for however long it took.

She'd already briefed the man on his role. Get the money, hand over the vile, and wait for the widow to leave. Once Marie made sure the

coast was clear, she'd give the signal, and he could meet her behind the tavern to hand over the money.

Her nephew was a virtual unknown in the town. Orphaned at an early age, he'd been raised by a system that cared little and provided even less. Though he was now a full-grown middle-aged man, Rupert had never amounted to much. Addicted to role-playing video games, he'd worked menial jobs for little pay until Marie found him and coaxed him to Everland with the promise of teaching him how to become a powerful wizard in the mystical arts of black magic.

"Keep your hood down," she whispered, watching the obviously bored man glance around.

But then the door opened. Rupert tipped his head forward and ran a fingertip around the rim of his glass.

Deidre was covered from head to toe in black, but her shoes gave her away. Marie smiled as the widow made her way over to Rupert's table.

Although she was too far away to hear the conversation over the hubbub of regular bar activity, Marie saw the moment money and product exchanged hands.

Won't be long now. She'd found a way to destroy the oh-so-perfect reputation of the Princetons, and she'd barely lifted a finger to do so.

"What are you doing here, witch?" A tall, cloaked figure moved between her and Rupert. Marie looked up, recognized the mask, and smiled. She couldn't risk making a scene with Deidre still in the bar, but this was a pleasant turn of events. It had been decades since she'd last seen the man who'd broken her heart, years since she'd been able to needle him so that he shared her pain.

"Drake..."

He hissed at her use of that name and leaned over the table toward her. "I should kill you for what you did to me."

"Do, and you'll be cursed to live like the toad that you are forever. You'll never be able to show your face in public again."

"I can't now," he gritted out. His hand inched toward a knife sheathed at his waist. "I'm as good as dead to everyone I cared for anyway. To society, I'm already dead, so why not rid this world of your

treachery?"

She lifted her own coat to reveal an ever-present pouch of potent protection. "Do it, and you'll suffer a fate worse than the one you deserve."

"I didn't deserve this. And Jacqueline was innocent."

"That's a matter of opinion." He'd cheated on her with that harlot, and they both had gotten what they deserved. Marie's only regret was that the curses she'd used on them had locked them in an ageless cycle of youth, while she'd grown old naturally. But looking at him now, alone and helplessly irate—a bitter shadow of his formerly strong, handsome self—made it all worthwhile.

"She found a way to be free of you."

So he kept track of his family, too, did he?

"I will, too. And when that day comes, I'll find a way to make you pay."

"Perhaps, but then again, who says that she-wolf is out of the woods?"

"You won't harm her again." His words were both arrogant warning and vile threat, punctuated by the knife he suddenly held to her throat.

Nearby customers eyed them but didn't so much as budge—proof that only the lowest forms of life patronized this establishment. She experienced a sense of dread for the first time, but she refused to show it to him. He wouldn't commit murder in front of so many witnesses, even if they were most likely the worst sort of criminals themselves.

Through gritted teeth she murmured, "Not if you behave yourself."

He managed to scowl at her despite the mask that covered most of his face, but after a brief pause, he lowered the knife and straightened to his full height.

"Get out of here, Marie, before I change my mind and decide your death is worth the cost of my soul after all."

* * * * *

Richard peered through the window of Pint's Pantry to see Sylvia

standing in the middle of the open space, yellow legal pad in one hand, pen in another, and her hair pulled back and covered by a pink bandana. Wearing tight, faded blue jeans with blown-out knees and an enticing rip near the right back pocket, and a gray sweatshirt three sizes too big, she was as cute as a bug.

When he lightly tapped on the window, she turned toward him then smiled as she rushed to unlock the door to let him in.

"Hey," she said, her gorgeous eyes sparkling with pleasure. "What are you doing here?"

He swept her into his arms and kissed her, reveling in delight as she melted against him and returned his kiss with passion. "The kitchen empty?" he asked when he lifted his head.

She laughed and pushed out of his arms. "Not now, Mr. Princeton. I have work to do."

"Yeah, I got a call from the bank. When no one answered the phone at your house, I thought I'd see if you were here. I'm so proud of you."

Her happy grin meant everything to him, and he kissed her again.

"Did you talk to your brothers yet?" he asked.

She nodded and moved across the room to lay the legal pad on the countertop. "Yeah, I did."

"And?"

She turned, and he saw the calm pleasure in her features. "And, it went rather well. Doyle wants to work here until he's needed at the Colbert farm. Harland wants me to hire him to play here. Everyone's really supportive except..." Her smile slipped.

"Let me guess. Gregory."

She nodded.

He moved toward her and put his arms around her waist. "He'll come around."

"I don't know." She sighed, but then she gave a little laugh and looked up at him. "When I started off telling them things were going to change around the house, he jumped to the conclusion I was moving in with you. Jeez, did he freak out."

Richard raised an eyebrow. The idea had merit, for sure, but he feared for his life if he even suggested such a thing to her...yet.

"Started pounding his fist on the table and—well, you get the picture."

"Yeah, I can imagine." He kissed the tip of her nose. "But six out of seven is pretty good odds."

"Damon wasn't there."

"Why not?"

"Because it doesn't involve him. Just like I told them. The only people this affects are the ones I live with. I had to make it clear I'm not cooking all their meals anymore, not bringing them lunch every day, and definitely not spending hours doing laundry every day anymore."

Richard grimaced. "You just took away —"

"Their mother," she said with disgust. "Or girlfriend, or wife, or any other female who would do those things for them. It's time they grew up."

"And you're okay with all of this? You do realize that what you're walking away from is also everything you've known for most of your life."

"I'm still their sister, and I'll still make Sunday dinners, and I might even feel sorry for them and make a few more meals during the week. I'm not walking away from *them*. I'm just changing my workload. I'm going to put everything I have into making Sylvia's Main Street Café a success. And if they love me and support me as much as they say they do, then they'll understand and pick up the slack." She narrowed her eyes, and her smile turned wicked. "They have to, or they'll be wearing dirty underwear."

Richard laughed and hugged her tight. "Good for you, sweetheart." He kissed her again, because he could, and because he couldn't get enough of the taste of her. "I missed you the last couple of days."

"Missed you too," she said, laying her head against his shoulder and sighing softly. "How are things with your mother?"

"Same ol', same ol'. I don't think she was too happy with the fact I decided to keep up Dad's tradition of throwing the annual New Year's Eve party."

"I saw the announcement that came with the boys' pay stubs," she said, looking up at him. "They all plan to attend. Why is your mother not

happy with it? I thought she was the one who planned the whole thing.”

He cleared his throat, not sure how or if he should answer.

“From the look on your face,” Sylvia said, “I get the impression she went along with it because of your father.”

He gave a nod.

“And you aren’t your father.”

He nodded again.

“And she doesn’t like all those lowly miners in her home.”

Pressing his lips tight, he gave a final nod.

“So, are you going to move it out of her house?”

“No.” He sighed. “I told her that tradition needed to stand. Of course, there wasn’t a party last year because of...well, you know. But for the last fifty years, there has been a party for the workers. It’s the one time of the year that the owner shows a little appreciation for all their hard work.”

“The bonuses were very nice this year.”

“As I said, things got pushed to the side last year, and I feel responsible for that.”

She frowned up at him. “Why? You were grieving just like the rest of us. No one wanted to party.”

“I thought I was coming home for the funeral, Sylvia. I had no idea he was turning the company over to me until his will was read. I was reeling. My first inclination was to sell it, get rid of it, get the hell out of Everland. But Mother was destroyed by his death, and then...” He rubbed his hand up and down Sylvia’s back. “And then I was given a journal Dad had written—letters to me over the years. Even after I came back and avoided going home—hell, I didn’t even know that he knew where I was—he loved me, watched over me, and built the mine into what it is for me. It was months before I got into the groove of things.”

“I still don’t think you should blame yourself for missing a year of bonuses when there was so much going on in your family.”

“On top of everything else, I worried about a lawsuit. Or rather, Mother worried about it, laying it on my shoulders every time I saw her for months. It was all she talked about.”

“A lawsuit? From my family?”

He nodded, figuring it was time to air all the dirty laundry. Get it all out in the open.

"My brothers were there when it happened. They all said that it was a fluke. A weakened support beam, but no way to see that it was damaged. The inspectors had just been through there the week before." She touched his cheek. "Our dads were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, that's all."

"I wish..." He closed his eyes and let her soft touch soothe him.

"I understand," she whispered. "But knowing he loved you is going to have to keep you strong."

Richard looked down into her beautiful eyes. "You're a pretty smart woman. You know that?"

She smiled. "Yeah, I know."

He hugged her tight, then slapped her bottom, lightening the mood.

She giggled and pushed away. "Hands to yourself, buster. I told you I have work to do."

"I've got to get back to the mine, but I wanted to ask you something."

"What's that?"

"Will you be my date for the party?"

"Sure. I'd be going with the boys anyway." She went up on tiptoe and kissed him. "Now go away before I haul you into the kitchen and have my way with you."

He laughed. "What are you doing today, anyway?"

She picked up the legal pad. "Listing all the necessities I'm going to need. Then I'll go home and get online and see where I can get it the cheapest. And I need to find someone who can look over the appliances in the kitchen and make sure they're not a fire hazard or anything." She tapped the paper with her pen she still had in her hand. "I think I'm going to start off small. A good industrial cappuccino machine, a couple basic coffee makers, and a couple more just for hot water for brewing tea. If the oven in the kitchen works, I'll start with breads and a few pastries. Soups and sandwiches." She wrinkled her brow. "I think I can use this display case, if I can get someone to modify it a bit and if the cooling system still

works."

He kissed her again, very quickly, and kept his hands to himself. "Let me know if you need anything. You know where to find me." He winked. "I'll miss you."

"It's only a day and a half 'til the party."

"I know. A lifetime."

She laughed and gave him a shove toward the door. "Go. Or this place will never get off the ground."

Richard let her open the door for him, then turned and winked. "I'll still miss you."

Still grinning, she shut the glass door and turned the deadbolt. When he didn't walk away, she waved at him then turned her back.

Walking across the street to his car, he wondered how soon was too soon to ask her to marry him. Another day and half until he saw her again just might kill him. He wanted her next to him every morning when he woke up, and every night when he crawled into bed.

But damn, what would her brothers say to that?

Chapter Ten

Sylvia could hear the party was well underway when she and her brothers, minus Damon who was working tonight, walked up the steps to Richard's house. Sylvester pushed the doorbell, the door immediately opened, and there stood Richard looking ruffled and sexy in blue jeans and a faded blue T-shirt.

Richard greeted Sylvester, Gregory and Steven, who were ahead of her, but when it was her turn to enter the house, Richard swept her into his arms and laid a hard kiss on her lips, which made her giggle.

"God, I missed you," he murmured in her ear, making her tingle.

They'd talked last night on the phone, discussing plans for the café. When Richard had offered to come pick her up for the party, she'd declined and said she'd come with her brothers. He hadn't been happy with the decision, but he hadn't argued...much.

Something Greg had said kept niggling at the back of her mind. Greg said a lot of things, but this one seemed to stick, and she wasn't sure what to do about it. She'd slept with Richard on their first date. Every time they saw each other, until the other day, they wound up in bed, or on a kitchen counter, or in a shower, having sex. She'd asked Richard that first night if he'd still want to see her after they had sex, and he'd said now that he'd had her, she'd have a hard time getting rid of him—or something like that. But he hadn't professed any feelings stronger than a sexual attraction.

Now, the question plaguing her was, what if sex was all he wanted? Sure, the sex was amazing, but she was head over heels in love

with a man who might just be horny.

He finally set her down, but wrapped an arm around her and pulled her against his side as he shook hands with Harland, Bartholomew, and Doyle.

"There's a game on the big screen through there," he said, pointing toward the TV room she'd glimpsed on one of her visits. "We have a few poker and pool tables set up in the library, and of course the buffet and bar are in the dining room."

"Little more casual this year," Bartholomew commented.

"I thought it would be more fun," Richard said with a grin.

Sylvia pointed her finger at Doyle. "Stay away from the alcohol."

"Yes, ma'am," he said solemnly then followed his brothers out of the foyer.

"He get into trouble with some booze?" Richard asked, guiding her toward the dining room, which was big enough to seat a small army. The monstrous dining table that usually stood center stage had been removed, replaced by cozy little round tables covered in blue linens with silver party hats and confetti as centerpieces. Men and women sat at the tables, or stood mingling near the bar or buffet table. The men she'd known most of her life. The women changed often, though she spotted a few wives and daughters she recognized.

"Hm? Oh, yes, he did. Decided to get into the beer one night."

"Did he drink enough to learn a lesson?"

She shrugged. "I don't think so. He only had two, and I wouldn't have known if I hadn't cleaned his room and found the cans on his desk. He swears it was the only time, but I'm a little worried."

Richard gave her a squeeze. "Kids do that kind of stuff. I sure did." He walked her up to the bar and ordered her a blended fuzzy navel, easy on the schnapps. "Maybe we can sneak away a little later and have our own party," he murmured as he handed her the orange-colored drink.

She took a sip but couldn't bring herself to look at him. Those kinds of comments kind of proved Gregory's point.

"Sylvia?" he said, lifting her chin. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head and glanced around the room. "I'm going to go visit with some old friends."

His brow furrowed into a frown, but then he kissed her cheek and said, "Okay. I'll be around."

She took her drink and approached a table with women quite a bit older than she was, wives of men her father had worked with. "Hi, mind if I join you?"

"Sylvia!" Marilyn Richards said as she stood up and embraced her. "It's so good to see you. How are you?"

"I'm doing good. You?"

Two more women hugged her, and then she took the only vacant seat.

"My boy Tommy said he heard you took out a loan at Everland Mutual," Marilyn said.

Sylvia nodded. "I did."

"A business loan?" Cathy Baker asked. "My Beth works in that department, and she told me the same thing."

God love little towns, Sylvia thought. "Yes, ma'am. I'm opening a café."

"You are?"

Sylvia turned to see who asked the question. Barbara Cartwright, a woman about Sylvia's age who'd married Sam Cartwright about a month before Sylvia's dad died, stood behind her. "Are you going to sell those little Bavarian cream-filled pastries like the ones you brought to my wedding?"

Sylvia smiled. "I might. I haven't started planning the menu yet. I'm just now getting the space set up."

"Where will it be?" Barbara pulled an empty chair from a nearby table and sat down next to her.

"The old Pint's Pantry space."

Susan O'Macky gasped. "That's the perfect spot for a café. This town surely needs one. I have to drive all the way to Westminster just for a good cup of coffee." She patted Sylvia's hand. "You'll have good coffee, won't you, dear?"

"Only the best," Sylvia said proudly. "And teas."

"What about Italian sodas?" Barbara asked. "I had some of those on our honeymoon, and they are to die for."

Sylvia's heart soared at the show of support. "I hadn't thought about those, but I suppose I could offer them. They use the same syrups as the flavored coffees."

For the next half hour the conversation swirled around the café, what her menu would consist of, and suggestions of many items she'd never thought of. Women joined their table until there were nearly a dozen surrounding her. Though she'd hoped and prayed, she realized she hadn't expected this kind of gusto from the average citizens of Everland. A couple of women even offered to come down and help with manual labor if needed to get the café opened sooner.

With her drink finished, she had to use the bathroom, so she excused herself after taking the offered napkins with phone numbers scribbled on them and put them in her pocket. "I'll call. I promise." She smiled at the group. "I can use all the help I can get."

She hurried to use the bathroom. The first one in the hallway near the dining room was occupied, so she went across the foyer to that one. When she went back to the bar, Richard's mother was standing near it nursing a drink.

Sylvia wiped her palms on her jeans, since they were still slightly damp from washing, and approached the party's hostess. "Mrs. Princeton."

The woman startled a bit, but turned toward her and gave her a glacial glance up and down. "Sylvia. I see you're more appropriately attired."

"Yes ma'am. I'd like to apologize for the other morning. I'm sorry for making you uncomfortable."

The woman gave a sniff nod and small smile. "Well, it didn't stop you from returning night after night to my home, did it?"

"No, ma'am. I care deeply for your son." She'd had no idea his mother ever knew she was in the house those other nights. She hadn't seen the woman since the breakfast fiasco.

"I'm sure you do. My son is quite the eligible bachelor, isn't he?"

Sylvia frowned. "I'm not after your son's fortune, Mrs. Princeton."

"No, of course not. Just his body?"

"Ma'am, I—"

She raised a finger and wagged it back and forth in front of Sylvia's nose. "Save your protestations, please. I've heard how he co-signed a loan for you. That makes *him* financially responsible should you fail to repay."

"I know how this looks...."

"And I know women like you. You're a miner's daughter, single, young, and pretty. My Richard is a Princeton, educated at the finest schools...also single, wealthy, and handsome, too. Caring to a fault. Perfectly understandable, your attraction to him. I get that."

She lifted her glass, swirled the drink around in the glass, and shook her head. "You know, I'm not thirsty after all. You want it?" She slid the wine glass toward Sylvia.

"Mrs. Princeton—"

"My son is a grown man and can take care of himself. I trust that he can make tough decisions and do what's best in the long run. So, if you two want to date, far be it for me to stand in your way. Just let me give you a little advice," Richard's mother continued. "Don't get your hopes up that this little affair will end in wedding bells. Richard is young, too. He'll tire of you soon enough; you wait and see." With that, Mrs. Princeton moved away and left the dining room.

Sylvia sank down on a stool in front of the bar and stared at the glass. His mother's remarks intensified her fears, made her dwell on the questions Gregory had raised. After a moment, disgusted with her doubt, she lifted the drink, downing half of it before stopping.

"Are you really seeing Richard Princeton?"

Sylvia raised her head to see Barbara scooting onto the stool next to her. "Uh huh." She sipped more of the fruity red wine.

"Sorry if I'm bugging you, but you're the only one here near my age. They're either old as the hills or children."

Sylvia shook her head and tried to smile. "You're not bugging me."

Barbara ordered a margarita then turned on her stool to face Sylvia. "So, tell me. What's it like to date a rich guy?"

Sylvia's stomach turned over and clenched. She gasped at the sudden pain and wondered when she'd come down with ulcers.

"You okay?"

The pain passed as quickly as it came. "Yeah. I'm fine."

"So, what's it like? Must be great. Does he take you out for expensive meals? Do you go to Westminster for theater?"

"Uh..." Her head felt a little fuzzy. She wasn't used to having more than one drink a night, and she'd just chugged her second. "No. We do normal things. But we just started seeing each other—met at the...ball." The headache seemed to be growing, and her right foot tingled. She stood up and lightly stamped her foot on the floor, wondering how it'd fallen asleep.

"Like what? What do you do? I mean, you know what it's like to live on a miner's salary."

Two people living on a miner's salary couldn't be that bad. Sylvia's father had supported eight kids on his. "We went sledding, and he took me to the pub the other night." Her left foot and right hand started tingling. "Excuse me. I'm not feeling so well."

"Sure..."

She headed for the entry hall, hoping to find one of her brothers to take her home. She'd never been drunk in her life, and if this is what it did, she prayed she never made the mistake again. None of her brothers were there, so she moved in what felt like a fog of cotton toward the library. They were probably involved in a game of pool or poker.

The tingling sensation moved up her legs, down her arms, until it felt as if her whole body was invaded by a swarm of ants. Tears sprang to her eyes from the intense headache pounding at the back of her skull. The library was at the end of the hall, and it seemed so far away, so many people in the way.

She bumped into someone, tried to say, "Excuse me," but her tongue felt too heavy to move. Finally, the door to the library was within reach. She fell against the doorframe and frantically searched the room for her brothers. Her chest felt so tight, as if she were smothering.

"Sylvia?"

Richard. She couldn't say his name. Her mouth wouldn't work, her jaw felt frozen in place. His name came out as nothing more than a choked gurgle.

"Sylvia! What's wrong?"

She saw the panic in his eyes, in the way he grabbed her arms. But she couldn't feel his hands on her. She couldn't take a breath. She gasped, but no air filled her lungs.

Richard! Help me!

Blackness moved in from her peripheral vision, and her legs collapsed from beneath her. She couldn't feel them. Couldn't feel anything. Couldn't see anything but Richard's panicked eyes as he grasped her to him and lowered her to the floor while he repeated her name over and over.

And then darkness. Nothingness. Emptiness.

Richard eased Sylvia to the carpeted floor as he said her name repeatedly. Her skin was pale—paler than normal—and her eyes were glassy. "Call an ambulance!" he shouted when he realized her breaths had stopped.

He tilted her head back and started CPR on her, his heart pounding hard enough for the both of them.

"The ambulance is on the way, Mr. Princeton." His administrative assistant, Ellen, the woman who'd worked for his father for over two decades, fell to her knees on the other side of Sylvia and did chest compressions while he blew into her mouth.

"Come on, sweetheart. Come on!"

"What the—Sylvia?" Steven was the first brother there, on his knees at Sylvia's head. Soon the others gathered around, not saying a word.

Richard and Ellen continued CPR, and every time Richard lifted his mouth from Sylvia's, he said a prayer and begged her to wake up. At one point he looked up and realized the brothers had joined hands, forming a circle around them, their heads bowed.

"Oh, God, no!" Richard shouted at seeing the brothers praying silently. "Sylvia, wake up!" He blew into her lungs. "Please, wake up."

Sirens sounded, and men in blue uniforms rushed into the room, pushing him out of the way.

"Sylvia, honey." One of the EMTs was Damon, and through his own terror, Richard heard the agony in her brother's tone as he placed a mask over her face. "Clear the room!" he shouted.

Richard stumbled to his feet to shoo people from the room, but it hadn't been needed. Guests poured out through the door. Only he, the brothers, and the three EMTs were left, and then Damon ripped open Sylvia's blouse and applied the defibrillator to her chest to shock her heart. Each time Sylvia's body jerked from the jolt of electricity, Richard felt it, nearly crying out with it.

"I got a pulse!" The female EMT shouted.

"Get her loaded," Damon said, "on three."

They lifted Sylvia onto the gurney and then raced from the room, down the long hallway to the foyer, with all of the brothers and Richard following.

"Come on," Bartholomew said to Richard. "I'll drive you."

Numbly, Richard followed everyone out of the house, watched them load Sylvia into the back of the ambulance, and then followed Bartholomew to one of the Whites' old pickup trucks.

Three vehicles followed the ambulance that carried the woman he loved. What the hell had happened? A seizure? An allergic reaction? To what? He turned and looked through the darkened truck at Bartholomew. Tears streamed down Sylvia's brother's face.

* * * * *

Time crawled by as Richard and Sylvia's seven brothers sat in the emergency waiting room of Everland General Hospital. Even Damon, the EMT, wasn't allowed beyond the gray doors marked Authorized Personnel Only. They'd been there for almost three hours while the medical team worked to save Sylvia's life.

Richard paced down the hallway to the forbidden zone, then back to the waiting area. He couldn't understand how her own flesh and blood could all sit so calmly while she could be dying just beyond those fucking doors.

Jane, Damon's wife, was on duty tonight, and she'd come out with a couple of updates, mostly saying they were doing all they could to stabilize Sylvia. Her heartbeat was irregular, would stop, and they'd have to shock her back to life. Her body temperature kept falling for no reason

whatsoever. There was no nerve response. They worried about brain damage. The cause was still unknown.

Richard glanced at Doyle just as the boy wiped the back of his hand over his eyes. He desperately wanted to give some word of reassurance to the kid, but he had none. Richard had never been so fucking scared in his life.

The ER doors swung open, and Jane came through.

The seven brothers stood as one, right behind Richard.

"Sylvia's stable, for the time being," Jane said. She looked exhausted, and Richard realized how hard it must be for her, too. "We believe we've pinpointed the cause of the reaction she's having." She turned all of her attention on Richard. "Was there any exotic seafood served at your party tonight?"

He shook his head. "Cold cooked shrimp, and some caviar. That's it. Mother wanted to serve sushi, but I told her that wouldn't fly with—" He realized he was rambling and stopped himself. "Shrimp and caviar were the only seafood."

"We ran every blood panel we could think of on her, looking for every typical toxin," Jane said.

"Toxin?" Shock choked the word from Richard in mid breath.

"Yes, but what we discovered is not typical. We found fairly high levels of tetrodotoxin in her blood."

"What's that?" Damon asked. "I've never heard of it."

"It comes from puffer fish and a few other seafoods, but the most common is puffer fish prepared the wrong way."

"Where the hell did she eat puffer fish in Everland?" Richard asked.

Jane looked back at him. "The reaction is almost immediate. It had to be ingested at your party."

What if his mother had served something he hadn't approved? He turned toward Damon, not knowing where else to go, but Damon shook his head.

"We'd have gotten a call by now if there were any others." He looked at his wife. "Right?"

Jane nodded. "Yes. As you can see, Sylvia's our only patient

tonight. This particular toxin..." She paused for a moment, her brow forming a furrow. "It can be bought on the black market. The police have been notified. It's hospital policy."

"Who—?" Richard couldn't fathom anyone wanting to hurt Sylvia. She was the sweetest, most loving person in the world. If someone tried to hurt her on purpose, he wanted them found. Strung up by their balls.

"Is there an antidote?" Damon asked.

"There is no antidote to the toxin. It must work its way out of her body. Chances are very good that if she makes it through the first twenty-four hours, she'll survive, but she may be in a coma for a few days. We have her stabilized on a ventilator, and we put in a temporary pacemaker to shock her heart if it should stop again."

Richard clenched his teeth, fighting the pain in his heart, all the way down in his soul.

"She's been taken up to ICU. All we can do now is wait."

"Can we see her?" Gregory asked.

Jane nodded. "You can head up there now. I have to finish some paperwork down here before I go."

As one, the eight of them turned toward the elevator, but Jane touched Richard's arm.

"I'm sorry, Richard," she said. "The hospital is very strict on family only in the ICU."

She might as well have slugged him in his gut. The air whooshed out of his lungs. "But—"

"He *is* family," Bartholomew said in a firm tone.

Jane glanced at Bartholomew, her husband, then back at Richard. She gave a quick nod. "Okay."

As one, the seven brothers moved into Sylvia's room across the hall from the ICU nurses' station. Richard stopped in the doorway, needing to lean against the doorframe for support. Dear God, she looked so small. A breathing tube came out of her mouth. Wires ran into the top of her hospital gown. She had IV needles in the back of both hands.

Slowly, he walked across the floor, the soles of his shoes making a soft squeak with each step. He thought he could hold it together, keep from falling apart in front of all these men, but when he got to the edge of

her bed, the burning in the back of his eyes became unbearable.

"Sylvia," he tried saying, but his throat was so tight it came out as a ragged whisper. "Sweetheart, open your eyes." He brushed the hair back from her forehead and leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Wake up, please. Let me see those pretty eyes. Please, Sylvia. I need you to smile at me."

He fell to his knees, buried his face in the crook of her neck, and breathed in her scent, now tainted by astringent and the smell of latex. "I need you. Your brothers need you. Who's going to carve their turkeys for them so they don't get upset? Who's—" A sob slipped from deep in his chest, and the tears came then. "Come back to us, sweetheart. We need you."

A big, beefy hand closed over his shoulder, and Richard lifted his head. Gregory stood beside him, tears magnifying the burly man's eyes. "She'll come back to us. She knows we can't make it without her." He patted Richard on the shoulder and gave a nod. "She'll be fine."

Richard bowed his head and slipped his hand under Sylvia's, afraid to move her hand because of the IV needle. *Wake up. Wake up. Wake up...*

Chapter Eleven

Three days. Richard hadn't left the hospital since they'd rolled Sylvia into the ER three days ago. She'd made it through the first twenty-four hours—thank God!—and her diagnosis had improved enough now that the doctors had finally taken her out of ICU and placed her in a private room for continued observation and hospital care.

Although she was now breathing on her own, and her heartbeat had grown stronger with each passing hour, the IVs remained. She'd yet to open her eyes.

Her brothers came every single day to check on her, sometimes multiple times per day, but each time the news remained the same. No change. Although several had tried to take his place, he politely refused to leave. Even his mother had stopped in to check on Sylvia and see how he was doing. She, too, had tried to convince him to go home, get some sleep; he could come back in the morning, but again he refused. They were all welcome to stay, but he wasn't going anywhere. Not as long as she lay in that hospital bed, unresponsive and helpless.

Someone had poisoned her, and guilt weighed on him for having failed to protect her. Everyone reassured him, the doctors and the police, that they'd catch whoever did this to her, but Sylvia had no enemies. The authorities had very little to go on. They'd searched the estate for any sign of poison and come up empty. They'd questioned everyone who'd attended the party. Still, Richard tried hard to believe them, to believe that the one responsible would be caught, but the longer she remained unconscious, the more his fears got the better of him.

Even if she couldn't identify her attacker, she had to wake up. She must live, really live, with her bright eyes open and that sweet smile on her face, the one that warmed his heart and made his life worthwhile.

He closed the book in his lap and glanced at her, hoping for any change. She hadn't moved. He'd spent most of his time reading to her from his father's journal, which he'd asked his secretary to bring to him along with a small duffle bag of clothes and toiletry items.

He caught his whiskered reflection in a mirror on the wall over a small sink in the corner and decided he had let himself go the past few days, despite the items in his duffle. Tonight, when one of the brothers was here to look after her, he'd find a shower somewhere in this hospital and make himself more presentable.

A nurse came in to check her vitals, and he stood up and stretched. She smiled at him and raised her arm to stare at a wristwatch while she took Sylvia's blood pressure.

"I'm going to grab a cup of coffee," he said to the nurse. He couldn't bear Sylvia being left alone for even a moment. He couldn't stand the thought of her waking up alone. He hesitated a moment but figured he'd be back quickly enough, so he gave her his thanks and headed down the hall.

When he returned, though, he heard a soft, feminine voice that didn't belong to the nurse.

Mother?

"I'm so sorry."

He stopped just outside of the room and listened. Why was she apologizing?

"I didn't mean for this to happen. It was supposed to just make you go away, not—"

"*You* did this to her?" He couldn't believe what he'd heard.

"Richard." She startled. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you there."

He narrowed his eyes at her and let his rage show. "Obviously. You want to tell me why you poisoned the woman I love?"

"I didn't—" Her eyes were wide as she shook her head and tears welled.

"I didn't mean for this to happen," he quoted. "You want to

explain what you *did* intend to happen? Don't mess with me, Mother. I know what I heard. How could you do it?"

"It was just supposed to make her lose interest and go away. You deserve so much better than her. Richard, I was trying to protect you."

"Protect me? From what?"

"From yourself! You deserve so much more than some miner's daughter eager to land the wealthy CEO. She's not good enough for you."

"She's everything to me. I love her, Mother."

His mother cringed, fist at her temples, and then she pleaded with him. "I didn't want this. It wasn't supposed to almost kill her. Please, you have to understand. I just wanted what's best for you."

"No. If you did want that, you never would've harmed her. *She* is what's best for me, Mother. *She is.*" He pulled out his cell phone and dialed the police.

"What are you doing?"

"Yes, this is Richard Princeton...at the hospital. Someone here just confessed to the crime of poisoning Sylvia White."

His mother reached for the phone, but he grabbed her wrist and gave her a hard look. "Yes, my mother will turn herself in. She'll be here when you get here. I'll make sure of it."

"How could you?" she whispered heatedly. "I'm your mother."

"Yes, you are. And I've never been so ashamed of that fact in my life."

She gasped and then crumbled into ragged sobs.

He hung up the phone and then dialed their family attorney, but through it all he kept a firm grip on his mother's wrist.

* * * * *

The police came and went, taking his mother and attorney with them, leaving him alone to explain to Sylvia's brothers how she'd come to be hospitalized because of his own mother's misguided actions. To their credit, they'd taken it in stride and hadn't blamed him personally, although he still carried a silent weight of guilt for not having thwarted his mother's plans before they harmed the woman he loved.

The room was once more silent except for the mechanical devices that monitored Sylvia's vital signs. He sat beside the bed gently holding her hand, his father's journal now lying unopened in his lap. He'd passed some of the time by reading it to her, but that only made him realize what he'd lost when his father died. He didn't know what he'd do if he lost Sylvia, too.

"I'm so sorry, Sylvia. God, if I could turn back time, I swear none of this would've happened. I didn't know..." He dropped his forehead to their joined hands, kissing her delicate skin and fighting back tears. "Please come back to me. I can't live without you. I don't want to—"

"Richard..."

His head shot up, gaze locked on her face, and relieved joy swelled his heart at the sight of her beautiful eyes, open and looking back at him.

"Thank God, Sylvia!" He leaned over her, his father's journal dropping to the floor, and kissed her. "You're awake." He pressed the call button for the nurse and as soon as the speaker crackled he all but shouted, "She's awake. Sylvia's awake."

"Water..."

"Someone will be right there, Mr. Princeton," the nurse's voice sounded over the speaker.

"And she wants water. Bring her some water."

"Yes, sir."

Seconds later, a nurse came in with ice water and a straw, warning her to not drink too much too soon. The uniformed woman took Sylvia's vital signs, scribbled on a clipboard, and said the doctor had been contacted and would be there soon.

While the medical staff did their thing, Richard got on the phone and notified her brothers of the good news. They all came to the hospital but kept their visits brief because she remained weak and tired, and her sister-in-law, the doctor, warned them to not overwhelm the patient. None mentioned Richard's mother or questioned Sylvia about what she remembered of that tragic night at the party-turned-nightmare. It seemed all of the men had decided that unfortunate news could wait or that it would be better coming from Richard.

The prognosis, now that she'd awakened, was very promising, but

Richard struggled with how to tell her, when to tell her.

When the room was silent once more, and they were again alone, Sylvia took the decision from him.

"Your mother's in jail?"

His gaze collided with hers. She appeared serene, not the least bit angered, though he wouldn't fault her if she were. His nerves were tearing him up inside. He nodded, trying to find the words that could explain something he couldn't accept himself.

"Are you going to post bail?"

He hadn't thought of that—hadn't let himself think of it. His mother, his own flesh and blood, had tried to murder the woman he loved. "I don't know."

"You should."

"How do you—" He stared at her. She was serious. "Do you remember what happened?"

She nodded. "But I also heard her...and you."

"When? In here?" he asked in astonishment.

She held out her hand to him, and he took it between his as he sat on the side of the bed next to her.

"It was like a dream at times. I could hear you talking, reading to me, and my brothers.... I just couldn't open my eyes or speak. I wanted to tell you not to worry."

He brought her hand to his lips. "The idea of losing you scared the hell out of me."

Her smile was stronger than he expected. "Then I heard your mother. She sounded so distraught over what happened. I believe her. I don't think she realized what the poison would do."

"That doesn't justify what she did."

"No, I know that, but don't let it destroy your love for her. Life's too short as it is, and too lonely without forgiveness."

He caressed her skin with his thumb, happy to feel her warmth. "She's wrong, you know?"

"About what?"

"She had it backwards. I'm the one who doesn't deserve you."

Sylvia closed her eyes, her smile subtle, her expression

unfathomable. When she opened her eyes again, she stared into his. "Say it again...."

He knew her whispered command had nothing to do with what he'd just said, but rather an admission he'd made earlier. He held her gaze and confessed, "I love you, Sylvia. I love you more than anything or anyone in this world. And as soon as we can get you out of this hospital bed, I swear I'm going to spend the rest of my life proving it to you."

* * * * *

The Everland Gazette

Sylvia's Main Street Café

Grand opening Valentine's Day.

Free pastry with every specialty coffee purchase.

"Doyle!" Sylvia shouted from the kitchen.

The door swung open, and her brother came through wearing crisp black jeans, the forest green polo she'd had made for him with her logo in salmon pink embroidered on the chest, and a maroon waiter's apron around his waist. He looked very handsome. "What? I'm trying to get all the coffee brewed." He glanced at his watch. "T minus fifteen minutes. There's already people out front."

"Take these out and put them in the display case. I hope I made enough." She lifted a tray of heart-shaped raspberry-filled pastries.

"You've been baking for the last thirty-six hours," Doyle said with a huff. "If it's not enough, they're out of luck." He took the tray from her and pushed through the swinging door.

Fifteen minutes. Her heart thudded against her breastbone. Fifteen minutes until she opened her doors for the first time, let people in, took money from strangers. She leaned against the counter and breathed deep and slow. This was not the time to start having panic attacks.

Big, familiar hands slid around her waist a moment before a solid body pressed against her back. "Happy Valentine's Day, sweetheart."

Sylvia melted back against Richard and closed her eyes. His touch seemed to drain all the anxiety from her. "You too."

He nibbled her neck and slid his hands up her front until he cupped her breasts. "Mmm. I missed you last night."

She moaned and tipped her head to the side. It didn't matter how often they made love, she craved more. She'd run home for only a few hours last night to catch a nap then come right back here to finish the baking. Richard hated it when she didn't make it to his house for a sleepover, something that was happening more and more lately.

He turned her and pressed her back against the counter, grinding against her, letting her know what he wanted.

Sylvia tipped her head back and gazed into his gorgeous blue eyes. "I really like kitchens, you know? But I think you've got a fetish for them."

He laughed and kissed her hard, grabbing her butt and lifting her slightly so she could feel his solid cock at her apex. "Only the ones you're in," he murmured against her mouth. "How about a quickie for good luck?"

"Richard!" she tried to admonish, but it turned into a laugh when he swung her into his arms and rushed to the back of the kitchen and into the storeroom.

He kicked the door closed behind him and set her down next to a pallet piled high with flour sacks. "Turn around."

"I don't think—"

"Good, don't think." He turned her by her shoulders and suckled her neck. "Don't think. Just feel me. Relax. You've been so tense the last few days."

"I'm opening in ten minutes. I can't—" But there was no use trying to convince him she didn't want him, because she did. Desperately.

He unbuttoned her jeans and shoved them and her panties down her legs. His fingers delved into her, and she fell forward against the flour sacks, propping herself on her hands.

"So wet so fast," he rumbled in her ear.

"Fuck me, Richard," she begged. They didn't have much time, but she needed the relief and serenity an orgasm would bring her.

He unzipped his own pants, never taking his other hand from her pussy, his fingers delving deep, his thumb flicking her clit in that way that drove her nearly insane with need.

And then he was inside her. His thick length slamming deep into her and pushing her forward onto her elbows. He gripped her hips and fucked her hard as she closed her eyes and tried to stifle her noises. Skin slapped skin. His balls lightly bounced against her clit. She pressed her breasts against the hard sacks of flour and rocked in opposition to every deep thrust he gave her.

The orgasm built, and she buried her face in the crook of her arm to keep from screaming. Yet, when he reached beneath her, pinched her clit, and pressed his thumb into her anus, she cried out as the climax burst and spread to her limbs from her core. She shoved against him again and again, prolonging the pulsing pleasure, until Richard gripped her hard and slammed into her one last time. His deep groan of release echoed off the storeroom walls.

"You okay?" Richard asked as he slowly withdrew from her body.

"Mmm hmm." Sylvia laid her hot face against the cool bag of flour and sighed. She felt much better now.

Richard laughed and helped her stand up straight then pulled her pants up her legs before he kissed her ear. "You're going to knock them dead today, Sylvia. It's your day to shine."

Tears rushed to her eyes, and she turned in his arms to hug him close. "I couldn't have done this without you. I love you so much."

Richard squeezed her tight. "I've been waiting forever to hear you say those words."

She smiled into his shoulder. "I know you have, and I thank you for your patience."

Richard pulled back, then put his hands on her shoulders and looked her up and down. "You're gorgeous. But you should probably zip up your jeans, even if you are wearing that sexy little apron."

With a laugh, Sylvia did up her pants, tucked in her polo shirt, and touched her hair to make sure it was still up and her ponytail was straight. "I'm ready."

"Damn straight you are. Your brothers are out front waiting to be your first customers." He winked. "That's why I had to take the first nibble." He leaned down and nipped her neck lightly. "No one knows I still have a key to the back door."

She laughed. "I'd kind of wondered how you got in undetected."

"Go to work, woman. You've got thirsty people out there."

A face-splitting grin spread over her face, and she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him hard one more time before she threw open the storeroom door and practically skipped to the front of the store.

"Ready, Doyle?" she asked as she passed the counter, heading for the front door. Sure enough, there was a line of people out there waiting. Her heart soared.

"Yep. Ready. Let's do it, sis!"

She turned the deadbolt and threw the door open.

"Bout damn time you opened the door," Gregory blustered as he came in, carried on a frigid breeze. "All your customers damn near froze to death out there."

Within moments the shop was packed, and within minutes her brothers had their coffees and moved to one side of the shop while she served what felt like the rest of the town. The small tables were soon packed, and patrons perused her shelves of pre-packaged ground coffees or the walls covered with art by local artists—all for sale, of course.

Sylvia and Doyle made coffees and served pastries and sweet breads. Harland brought in a stool, placed himself in the corner with his acoustic guitar, and played soft, upbeat music. Even Richard pitched in, restocking the display when the pastries ran low or getting ice water for those who requested it.

Hours ticked by in a flurry of plain coffee, lattes, mochas, and her raspberry delight—the holiday special to go with the pastries. She'd kept her menu short, though she knew when she found the right person to be her assistant, she'd start expanding it. Doyle, though a great help, was no chef.

"Excuse me! May I have your attention please?"

Sylvia handed a woman her raspberry delight just as Richard loudly called everyone to order. She frowned at him standing near the end of the counter, because she still had four people in line to serve.

But the room grew quiet, and the woman she'd served moved toward the side.

"Thank you all for coming today," Richard said. "This is a big day

for our Sylvia, here, and your support means the world to her."

Sylvia's face grew warm, and she glanced down at the countertop, grabbed the rag hanging from her apron, and wiped up a bit of spilled cream.

"Best damn coffee I've ever had," a man said from the front of the store.

There were quite a few mumbles of agreement, and a woman said, "These pastries are to die for."

Sylvia smiled. Doyle bumped her with his shoulder and gave her an, *I told you so*, roll of the eyes.

"I agree she's the best at what she does," Richard said, "but I'm here today for a different reason."

Sylvia's smile slipped a notch. He suddenly looked so serious.

Gregory pushed away from the wall where he'd been leaning and sipping his fourth or fifth cup of brew. "Yeah, so why you here?"

Oh no. Now what? Not in my new store, please! If you love me, don't do this!

Richard held up his hand toward Gregory. "It's Valentine's Day."

"So?" Gregory asked, looking grumpy as usual.

"So, since she's going to be here all day, and I don't get to take the woman I love out to dinner to do this any other way..." Richard stepped into the middle of the café. Men and women alike moved out of his way, clearing a spot for him in the packed room. And then he went down on one knee, reached inside the pocket of his suit jacket, and pulled out a little velvet box.

Sylvia's knees started to tremble.

"Sylvia White, I love you with all my heart and soul, and finally you admit you love me too." He smiled at her.

A few awws and ohhs sounded from the women in the room.

"Now, I know I didn't exactly ask their permission..." He looked toward the row of her brothers against the wall. "...but I think we've reached an understanding." He raised his eyebrows at the men and waited until they each nodded. All except Gregory.

"Greg," Sylvia said in a harsh whisper.

A slow smile slid over her brother's face. "Yeah, what the hell. Go

ahead."

Richard turned back to Sylvia, this time with a shit-eating grin on his face. "So, it's up to you, sweetheart. I love you. I need you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you by my side. Will you make me the happiest man on earth and marry me?"

Sylvia glanced around the café, and a few dozen eyes stared back at her. She bit her bottom lip and knew her cheeks were as red as the raspberry filling in the pastries. But she said, "I don't know... This place is going to take a lot of my time. I have a loan to repay, and my co-signer wouldn't be happy if I lapsed on the very first payment. I'm not sure I would be able to give a new husband all the attention he needs to be happy."

"You are a wicked woman, Sylvia," Richard said, placing his hand over his heart as if she'd shot him with an arrow, but his eyes sparkled with humor.

"Come on, girl," a woman in the crowd said. "He's a Princeton."

"On his *knee*," another threw in.

"Begging for ya," said another.

"I'll take him if you don't want him!"

"He's too old for you, but not for me."

Sylvia burst out laughing. "Yes!" she shouted. "Yes!" She ran around the counter and into his arms as he stood up. "Yes," she murmured in his ear. "I love you."

Richard lifted her off the floor and swung her in a circle. Setting her back on her feet, he pulled the diamond and emerald engagement ring from the box and, placing it on her finger, met her gaze. Cupping her cheek, he said, "I love you, too."

She grinned. "Promise to keep telling me that even when I'm old and gray?"

He leaned forward and kissed her lips, murmuring, "Every morning...after breakfast in bed."

"It's a deal."

The End

Author Bio

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romances for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle, and romance can be erotic even in her own home.

Madison Layle avoided her childhood chores on the family farm by curling up with books and disappearing into other worlds of fantasy, adventure, and romance. With maturity came the love of her own real-life hero (a.k.a. my darling hubby), and a real understanding of why her parents locked their bedroom door.

Madison and Anna Leigh first met online through a critique group, a meeting which sparked a strong friendship and a fun partnership. Together, their writing has taken on a spicier flavor, so while their hubbies are off at work, they let their imaginations soar....

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