Victim of Deception by Lynn Lafleur a novella from the collection,

If This Bed Could Talk
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Lynn LaFleur

VICTIM OF DECEPTION

A Novella from the Collection, if this bed could talk

HarperCollins e-books

A special thank-you to Cheryl Scheetz and Jeremy Norton for letting me use your poetry.

Contents

Prologue	
"Harder, Aaron. Harder!"	1
One A knock on her open office door made Karessa Austin	9
Two Karessa fell in love with the house at first sight.	15
Three	
Max tossed his garment bag on the bed. Unzipping the	25
Four	
Max parked beneath an oak tree seventy-five feet from the	33
Five	
Max laid down his hammer and leaned his head back	41
Six	
Aaron watched Karessa pace across the bedroom floor, then turn	51
Seven	
Karessa rubbed her forehead, but it did nothing to ease	61
Eight	-
Karessa slipped her hands in the pockets of her slacks	71

Nine	- 0
A soft knock on the door made Karessa look up	79
Ten	
Max dropped his hammer and whirled around. Karessa stood in	89
Eleven	
Guilt filled his eyes before he was able to mask	101
Twelve	
The heightened senses. The rush of blood to the brain.	111
Thirteen	
Mary sighed when Aaron's tongue slid over her clit. She'd	121
Sile u	121
About the Author	
Credits	
Cover	
Copyright	
About the Publisher	

Prologue

North Texas, May 20, 1910

Aaron slipped his hands beneath Mary's plump buttocks and pulled her tighter to him. He felt her fingernails scrape his back as he pounded his shaft into her. He didn't care if her nails scarred him for life. Nothing mattered except fucking her as hard and fast as he could. Nothing mattered except for the two of them to be together like this for as long as possible.

Her breath caught. Her back arched. Aaron knew those were signs she was close to her release. He called on all his inner strength to keep from reaching his climax before she did.

He bit lightly on her earlobe the way he knew made her crazy. "That's it, sweetheart. Let me feel that sweet pussy grab my cock when you come."

"Aaron!"

She shuddered beneath him. A moment later, Aaron followed her over the edge into bliss.

He lay on top of Mary, fighting for breath. They'd been

married for two years. Each time they made love was better than the last.

He'd never believed he could love a woman so much.

The gentle caress of Mary's hands on his back gave Aaron the strength to raise his head and look into her eyes. She smiled. "Hi."

He returned her smile. "Hi."

"That was wonderful."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "It certainly was."

"How can it be better every time we make love?"

"I was just wondering the same thing." He kissed her softly, sweetly. "I love you, Mary."

She smiled tenderly. "I love you, too."

Aaron started to kiss her again, but a mewling sound stopped him. Glancing over his shoulder, he looked at the small bed against the wall. The shuffling of covers indicated they'd woken their daughter.

"I don't think Katie likes all this ruckus."

"If we're quiet, maybe she'll go back to sleep."

Aaron chuckled. "You know better than that. If one of us doesn't hold her for a few minutes, she'll keep right on crying."

Mary bit her bottom lip. "Do you think we've spoiled her?" "Hopelessly."

Katie's mewling turned into a full cry. Aaron withdrew from the warmth of Mary's body and threw back the covers. "I'll get her."

He padded across the wooden floor to Katie's bed. "Hey there, baby," he crooned as he bent to pick up his daughter. "Did you have a bad dream?"

"Is she wet?"

Aaron checked her diaper. "Nope. You fed her before we made love, so she can't be hungry yet." Lifting her to his shoulder, he walked back toward the bed. "I think she just wants attention."

He laid her on the bed next to Mary, then lay beside her. Katie looked at him with her huge blue eyes . . . the only physical trait she'd inherited from him. She was her mother made over except for having his blue eyes instead of her green ones.

No longer crying, she thumped him on the chin with her small fist. "Hey!" Aaron playfully growled and tickled his daughter's tummy. Katie blessed him with her smile.

A knot of emotion lodged in his throat. He touched the soft blond fuzz on Katie's head as love swelled in his heart. He was so blessed to have these two beautiful ladies in his life.

"She's so pretty, Mary. She looks just like you."

Mary smiled. "I see a lot of her father in her, too." She pulled up the sheet and tucked it around Katie's body. "I cannot believe she'll be five months old in a few days."

"Me either." He picked up Mary's hand and kissed her palm. "Maybe it's time for Katie to have a brother or sister."

"I haven't lost all the weight I gained from having Katie."

"I like the way you look now. You were too skinny before you had Katie."

Mary's mouth dropped open. "Skinny!"

"Yeah, skinny." Aaron loved to tease her. His teasing usually turned into a playful wrestling match, which turned into lovemaking. "I like your body now."

To prove his words, he cradled one heavy breast in his hand and skated his thumb across the nipple. It peaked beneath his caress.

"You like my big breasts."

"I certainly do." He swiped his tongue across her nipple. She tasted of woman and milk. "What do you think about having another baby, Mary?"

A pink blush climbed into Mary's cheeks. "I'd like that very much," she whispered.

"Then maybe I should put Katie back in her own bed so we can start working on that brother or sister."

Once Aaron had Katie tucked into her bed, he turned to look at Mary. She lay with the rumpled sheet at her side, exposing her naked body to him. He gazed at her full breasts, rounded stomach, the blond curls between her thighs. As he watched, she spread her legs so he could see between them. Her lips were pink, swollen, and wet with the combination of her juices and his.

She held out her arms to him. "Give me a baby, Aaron."

He took two steps toward her.

"You cheating bastard!"

Aaron whipped around at the sound of the woman's shriek. Eva stood in the bedroom doorway, a shotgun pointed at his stomach.

"Eva?"

"How could you, Aaron? How could you cheat on me?"

Aaron had no idea what she was saying. Eva worked at the general store. He saw her every now and then when Mary would ask him to pick up supplies for her. Although he always tried to be polite to Eva, he'd never given her any special attention.

He held out one hand toward her. "Eva, put down the gun so we can talk."

She raised the shotgun another inch. "You should be with *me*, not this whore! I can love you so much more than she can."

Fear crawled up Aaron's spine. He'd heard stories of Eva's insanity, but had ignored them. With a shotgun pointed at his belly and the wild look in her eyes, he could no longer ignore the rumors.

"Eva, Mary is my wife. We have a daughter."

"I can give you all the children you want. You don't love *her*. You *can't* love her. You're always so nice to me at the store. You have to care about me. You wouldn't be so nice to me if you didn't care."

"I do care about you, Eva, but I love Mary."

"No! I won't listen to your lies!" She raised the shotgun to her shoulder. "If I can't have you, neither can she!"

Eva's screaming woke up Katie. Aaron heard her soft whimper. Sweat beaded his forehead and trickled down his temple. He had to get that gun away from Eva before she hurt Mary or Katie.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mary rise from the bed. "Mary, stay there!"

"I have to get to Katie!"

Eva swung the shotgun toward Mary. "You stay where you are, whore!"

Seeing the gun pointed at his love snapped Aaron's control. He lunged toward Eva, hands outstretched to snatch the gun away from her.

A loud blast made his ears ring. He stumbled backward when something burned his skin. Looking down, he saw blood running from the large wound in his stomach.

"Aaron!" Mary cried.

She'd shot him. Eva had shot him. Sinking to his knees, he stared at the woman with the crazed eyes. He never would have believed she could do such a thing.

Mary grabbed him and hugged his neck tightly. He could feel her warm tears fall on his shoulders. That's all he felt. It should hurt. He'd always thought a gunshot would hurt. He didn't understand why it didn't. His vision blurred. He wanted to return Mary's hug, but he couldn't get his arms to work. He blinked and watched Eva pop the two empty shells from the shotgun and reload it.

"N-no, Eva," he said, his voice slurred. "Don't."

"You didn't give me any choice, Aaron. You chose this slut over me. I can't allow that, don't you see?"

Through the buzzing in his ears, he heard Katie crying. His daughter needed him. He had to stop Eva before she hurt anyone else.

"That should be *my* baby, not this slut's! Katie will be mine from now on. I'll take her and raise her. I'll love her so much, she'll never miss either of you."

"No!" Mary screamed. "You can't have my baby!"

Mary rose and ran toward Eva. She made it no more than two steps when the shotgun blast sent her backward. Aaron watched his wife fall to the floor, blood pouring from the wound in her chest.

"Mary!"

She didn't move, she didn't blink. Aaron sensed Eva's movement, but his gaze focused on Mary. It was getting harder for him to breathe, yet he had to get to her. He had to help her. Sliding through a pool of blood, he made it to Mary's side. He gathered her up in his arms.

"Mary," he whispered. "Please don't die."

He looked up at Eva. She stood over them, the shotgun in one arm and a crying Katie in the other. Now he clearly saw the madness shining in her wide eyes.

"I curse you, Aaron, and your whore. I curse you to walk the floors of this house forever." She shifted Katie to her shoulder and rocked her gently. Leaning forward, she hissed in Aaron's face. "You'll be together, but will never be able to touch each other ever again. You'll suffer from your lust for all eternity!" Her maniacal laugh vibrated in Aaron's ears as she strode from the room.

With shaking fingers, Aaron closed Mary's unseeing eyes. Tears filled his eyes and clogged his throat as he inched closer to his love and tightened his arms around her. He kissed her lips once more before the darkness settled over him.

One

Fort Worth, Texas, May 2, present day

I fear she may be mad.

She is good to me and I believe she loves me. But I have heard tales of her treachery, her evil, her witchcraft. I have heard she is not my real mother.

I must find out. Somehow, I must find out the truth.

A knock on her open office door made Karessa Austin close the tattered diary and look up. She smiled at her assistant, Joy. "Is everything ready?"

"All unpacked and ready for you to inspect."

Excitement surged through Karessa's body. A new display for the museum always gave her goose bumps. It was better than sex.

Well, at least better than the sex she'd experienced lately.

She followed Joy from the executive offices of The Gage-Austin Museum. Walking down the lushly carpeted hallway made her feel closer to her parents. They'd died nine years ago when she was twenty-one, but not before establishing this beautiful museum close to Trinity Park.

"Did you have the chance to read your great-grandmother's diary?" Joy asked.

"Part of it. I'll read more after I've seen the display."

"Have you decided yet what you'll do with the house?"

Karessa shook her head. "No. That's something else I'll have to look at later. I have no idea why my Aunt Grace left me that old Victorian."

"You told me she never married, never had any children. You're the only family she had."

"I know, but I have no use for a house that's over a century old. I run a museum, but I like modern conveniences. My condo works perfectly for me."

Karessa pushed open the heavy metal door that led to the back room of the museum. Deliveries were made and any unpacking done here. This is where she looked at all the items that came into the museum and decided whether they go into an existing display or a new display be created.

She loved her job.

Her warehouse manager, Marco, smiled as she approached him. "You'll love all of these, Karessa."

Karessa returned his smile. Marco was thirty-five, dark from his Italian heritage, and built like Conan the Barbarian. If he didn't work for her, she'd jump his bones in a second.

I can fire him, at least for a weekend. We can have wild monkey sex, then I'll rehire him on Monday. With a body like that, he's got to be incredible in bed.

Karessa sighed as her hormones jumped for joy. They'd love it if she did exactly that. Unfortunately, her conscience would never allow her to take advantage of her employee.

Darn it.

Shifting her attention back to the large crates on the warehouse

floor, she watched as her men opened them and carefully removed the paintings by Thomas Abernathy. Her heartbeat sped up at the sight of the beautiful scenes of charming English cottages. The thatched roofs, white walls, cloudy skies, colorful flowers . . . they all combined to create the masterpieces for which he'd been famous.

There were seven in all, donated to the museum by Abernathy's granddaughter. She could've picked any museum in the world to display her grandfather's paintings. But she'd picked The Gage-Austin, a fact that made Karessa so proud of her parents and the museum's sterling reputation.

"I have the letter Ms. Abernathy sent with the paintings," Joy said. She opened the portfolio she always carried with her. "She said she would've donated all eight in the series, but one painting was bought by a private collector for, and I quote, 'an obscene amount of money.'"

"I can believe that." Karessa stood before the painting called *Twilight* and stared at it. How she'd love to have this hanging in her living room. Too bad she couldn't slip it into her purse and take it home with her. "Did she mention the collector's name? Maybe we could make arrangements for him or her to lend it to us for the showing."

"Yes, it's right here. His name is Maxwell Hennessey."

She shivered at the sound of his name, but not from pleasure. Maxwell Hennessey was the lowest form of scum on earth. She hoped she never saw him again for the rest of her life.

"Do you want me to contact him?" Joy asked.

"No," Karessa said quickly. Realizing her voice sounded sharp, she cleared her throat and smiled at Joy. "No, that's fine. We'll have a wonderful showing with the seven paintings."

"Are you sure? I can contact Ms. Abernathy and try to find—"

"That won't be necessary, Joy."

The puzzled look in Joy's eyes didn't surprise Karessa. Normally, she would jump at the chance to have a full collection on display. But she'd rather eat raw liver for a week than have anything to do with Maxwell Hennessey.

It wasn't exactly an uncommon name, yet Karessa had no doubt the Maxwell Hennessey who owned the eighth painting and the one she'd been involved with five years ago were the same man. Max collected things of value and beauty. He liked to possess things . . . including the heart of a naïve twenty-five-year-old who fell in love much too quickly.

"Of course. The Egyptian display is set to come down from the Red Room Friday. Do you want this collection set up there?"

"That'll be perfect. I'll want the flowers changed, too . . . something with an English garden theme."

"I'll take care of it."

Leaving the details in her capable assistant's hands, Karessa left the room and returned to her office. She began gathering up her things, intending to go home after she drove by her great-aunt's house. She'd have to talk to a real estate agent about selling the house and thirty acres as soon as possible.

She hadn't seen the house since she was a young teenager. Her great-aunt had been quite wealthy and loved to travel; rarely had she stayed at home for longer than a month at a time. When she did come home long enough for a visit, she was the one who always went to Karessa's condo with gifts, mementos, and pictures. There'd been no reason for Karessa to go back to Aunt Grace's house.

Her great-aunt's death from a stroke a month ago had been a shock. She'd always been so healthy, so vivacious—one could have assumed she'd live forever. Now, with Grace's death, Karessa no longer had any family. She was totally alone.

Where did this horrible case of self-pity come from? Straightening her shoulders, Karessa picked up her briefcase and purse from the bookshelf behind her desk. She glanced over her desk to make sure everything had been put in its place. The tattered diary on the corner drew her attention. She'd planned to leave it here, where it could be locked up in the safe. On impulse, she picked it up and placed it in her briefcase so she could finish reading it at home.

62

Max Hennessey closed his *Washington Post*, folded it neatly, and laid it next to his plate. The article he'd expected to find wasn't there. That meant his source hadn't lied and nothing had been leaked to the press.

At least, not yet.

Rumors of hidden treasure often brought out the ones looking to make a quick buck. But more often than not, rumors of hidden treasure were forgotten as soon as they were heard. Getting something for nothing would be too easy.

Max had become a multi-millionaire by following those rumors.

He had plenty of time. He'd finish up his business here in Washington, D.C., before heading for Houston. Once in the Lone Star State, he'd contact his source again for exact details on where the bearer bond was hidden.

As long as he stayed away from Fort Worth, he'd be fine. He didn't want there to be the slightest chance that he might run into Karessa.

Thinking of the beautiful blonde still caused a sharp pain in his chest. He'd deceived her and dumped her when the lure of fortune proved too much to resist.

Money in the bank hadn't made him less lonely.

He picked up his cup and sipped the cooling coffee. He'd wondered many times how his life would be now if he'd stayed with her, if he hadn't let greed color his judgment.

There'd been women since Karessa. He was a healthy fortyyear-old man who greatly enjoyed sex. He knew women found him attractive. Finding an available bed partner had never been a problem.

Finding someone to love was an entirely different matter.

"May I warm your coffee, Mr. Hennessey?"

Max looked up at the lovely brunette waitress. She'd been especially attentive to him for the three days he'd been at this hotel. He had the feeling it would take very little encouragement for her to warm his bed as well as his coffee.

Smiling, he held up his cup. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome. Is there anything else I can do for you?" *Time to move in for the kill.* "As a matter of fact, there is. I'll be leaving town in a few days and haven't had the chance to do much sight-seeing. Business hasn't let me play tourist."

"It would be a shame for you to leave Washington without seeing the sights."

"My thoughts exactly. So..." He glanced at her name tag. "Leslie, would you be interested in showing me around town, perhaps have dinner with me tonight?"

She smiled. "I'd love to."

Two

aressa fell in love with the house at first sight.

Surrounded by huge oak trees, the two-story house made her think of a time long past—a time when people weren't in such a hurry, when there wasn't as much stress in their lives, when every moment wasn't filled with something that had to be done immediately. It made her think of family, love, and romance.

She didn't remember the house ever having such a powerful effect on her.

It'd been at least fifteen years since she'd been inside, perhaps longer. She studied the thick columns supporting the second story, the wide veranda that completely circled the house, the large windows that let in the morning sunshine. Aunt Grace had generally kept up the house over the years, but had never personally taken care of it since she traveled so much. Karessa's trained eye could see bits of decay here, evidence of neglect there.

The house would be so beautiful with a complete refurbishment.

Thanks to a healthy inheritance from her parents, and now from her great-aunt, she had more than enough money to renovate the house. She could even live here during the remodeling. The house had four bedrooms, perhaps five. She'd have plenty of room to—

Karessa blew out a deep breath. What are you thinking? You can't live here!

The thought had no more than formed in her mind when she asked herself, why not. Her ancestors had lived here. The house had been passed down to the women of her family. She knew for a fact that her great-grandparents—Aunt Grace's parents—lived here. Perhaps the line went even further back than that.

She couldn't sell this piece of living history without a lot of thought.

Karessa climbed the steps to the veranda. Her hand shook slightly as she unlocked the front door and stepped into the cool interior.

69

"She's coming inside! Aaron, she's coming inside."

"I see that." Aaron leaned down next to Mary and looked out the window at the lovely blond woman climbing up the steps. "God, Mary, she looks just like you. Her hair is shorter, but she looks just like you."

"I've seen her. She was here several years ago to visit Grace."

"She's our descendant, Mary. She'd be our \ldots what? Great-great-granddaughter?"

"She's Elizabeth's daughter, Karessa. I remember her coming here for holidays." Mary shivered. "It's so hard to believe, Aaron. Our beautiful Katie grew up, married, and had two daughters. We watched her children grow up right here in this house." She straightened and faced Aaron. "Despite Eva's curse, our family continued." Tears filled Mary's eyes. Aaron reached out to touch her face. His hand met an invisible barrier two inches from her . . . just like it had for almost one hundred years.

"Damnit! I wish I could touch you."

"I wish you could, too," Mary whispered.

Aaron began to pace the floor. Years of frustration tore at him. He wanted to hit something, to ram his fist into the wall. He'd tried, several times, but his fist simply passed right through the wood. "There has to be a way to break the curse, a way for us to be together again."

"How? We've tried everything we can think of."

"God damn Eva! I hope she's rotting in hell where she belongs."

Mary stepped closer to him. "Aaron, don't say that. Don't think or say anything bad."

"Why not? It's how I feel."

"I know, but I can't help feeling we need to do something . . . good for someone." $% \label{eq:condition}%$

Aaron held out his arms. "How can we do something good for someone when no one can see or hear us? We've stood directly in front of people in this house. They didn't even blink."

"I don't know! I just know we can't give up. We have to keep trying until we can be together again . . . in every way." $\,$

Aaron gazed at Mary's long blond hair, huge green eyes, and full figure covered but not hidden by her floor-length white dress. She chose for them to wear clothing while he'd prefer to see her nude at all times. He respected her wishes, knowing she wore the dress to keep his mind off her body.

As if that could ever happen.

"Ah, Mary. How I wish I could make love to you again."

"I wish you could, too," she whispered.

"I don't understand this whole thing. We're dead. I know

we're dead. Eva shot both of us. But we don't feel dead. We breathe, we sleep, we feel emotions. We can pick up and move things, even though we can walk right through a wall." He turned in a circle, his arms outstretched. "We can go anywhere in this house, but we can't take one step off the veranda. We've been trapped here for almost a century! I'm tired of being in limbo."

Mary's tears overflowed and ran down her cheeks. "I know. I'm tired, too, but I don't know what we can do."

He stared at his wife, the woman he loved. He could see her sweet smile and voluptuous body. He could smell her floral scent. He couldn't touch her, but she could touch herself. "I know one thing you can do for me."

"What?"

"Make yourself come."

She bit her bottom lip. "Aaron—"

"Please, Mary. You know how much I love to watch you touch your pussy. I can't touch you, so do it for me." He stepped as close to her as he could until the barrier stopped him. "Think about my lips on yours. Think about my hands touching your back, your bottom, your breasts. Think about my tongue between your legs, lapping up your juices. Think about my cock buried deep inside your sweet pussy."

Her eyes glazed with passion. Her chest rose and fell with her shallow breaths. Her nipples beaded beneath her thin cotton dress. Aaron longed to suck them.

She took two steps back. Aaron's own breathing became unsteady as he watched her gather up the hem of her dress and pull it over her head. She stood before him naked, her ivory skin flushed with desire.

Silently, she walked across the room to the rocking chair. Sitting on the cushioned seat, she draped her legs over the arms. Aaron had a clear view of her wet pussy. He moved closer and dropped to his knees between her legs. The aroma of her arousal drifted to his nostrils.

"God, Mary, you smell so good. I wish I could taste you again."

Mary slid one hand over her full breast and down her rounded stomach. "So do I."

She touched her labia. Aaron swallowed hard as she picked up the cream from her slit and spread it over the swollen lips. "That's the way. Rub your clit for me. Make yourself come."

She stared into his eyes while caressing herself. Aaron alternated between looking into her eyes and looking at her pussy. The feminine lips turned darker, wetter, with her caressing. How he longed to touch her, taste her!

He damned Eva all over again.

Mary's fingers moved faster over her clit. Aaron unfastened his pants and withdrew his hard cock. He stroked it in time with her fingers, wanting to come at the same time as she.

Her lids slid closed.

"Don't close your eyes, baby," Aaron rasped. "Watch what I'm doing."

Mary looked at his shaft. Aaron tightened his grip and pumped quicker. "Do you want me to come first?"

"Yes," she whispered.

The orgasm built in the base of his spine and tightened his balls. Aaron groaned. He continued to pump his cock as semen shot out the head and ran over his hand. Gazing at her face, he wilted to the floor, totally spent.

His strength quickly returned when he focused his attention on Mary's hand. He loved when she pleasured herself. It was one of the most erotic things he'd ever seen. "Aaron!"

Her hips bucked, her back arched, her nipples beaded. She moaned loudly. He stared at her pussy, watching the inner lips pulsate with her orgasm. His mouth watered with the desire to drive his tongue deep inside her.

"Ah, Mary," he whispered. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too." Her voice broke on the last word. Tears cascaded down her face again. "It feels good when I do that, but I wish it could be you touching me."

"Soon, Mary. I'll hold you in my arms and make love to you again, soon."

"H-how?"

"I don't know yet, but it will happen. I promise you."

62

She heard the soft moan the moment she stepped inside the house.

Karessa froze, her hand still on the doorknob. She waited several moments, but didn't hear the sound again. Certain her ears had been playing tricks on her, she closed the door. That's when she heard a woman weeping.

Okay, this is really weird.

Goose bumps skittered across her skin. She didn't know whether to leave or stay. All her protective instincts screamed at her to get out of the house as quickly as possible.

Karessa pulled the strap of her purse higher on her shoulder. This was *her* house. She wouldn't let some strange noise scare her away.

Even though it gave her the creeps.

The house was stuffy from being closed up for over a month. Karessa walked through the downstairs rooms, opening a window in each one to let in the pleasant seventy-five-degree air. Due to the hot North Texas summers, air conditioning would soon be a necessity. For now, she wanted the gentle breeze to clear out the stale smell.

She laid her purse and briefcase on the dining room table. The large mahogany table would seat eight comfortably. Karessa remembered coming here as a child with her parents and grand-parents for holidays. She smiled. Such pleasant memories of family and laughter.

Thinking of her family made her remember the diary in her briefcase. It seemed right to read her great-grandmother's words while here in the house where Katie had lived so long ago.

Karessa prepared herself a glass of iced water, then sat at the table. She carefully pulled the antique diary from her briefcase and opened it to the page she was reading at the museum.

I must find out. Somehow, I must find out the truth.

I wish I could ask someone for help, but there is no one I can trust. It is as if she has everyone around us under a spell. No one comes to the house. No one speaks to us when we walk on the street.

She works to support us, but does not let me out of her sight. I must go to school, then directly to the store until she is finished for the day. We come home, have supper, then I do my homework while she sews or reads in the big book she will not let me see.

I have looked for the book, but have only minutes to myself to hunt for it. I long for friends, for someone to share secrets and desires. She will not allow it.

The loneliness is crushing at times. I fear I will never meet a boy to love and who will love me. I fear I will remain in this house forever. Karessa wiped a tear from her cheek. Her great-grandmother had been so young when she'd written these words, barely a teenager. How sad to be full of so much despair at such a young age.

She turned the page and continued to read.

May 29, 1925—I saw him today. He came in the store shortly before my mother and I left. Tall, dark-haired, handsome. My heart started beating funny as soon as I looked up and saw him.

Karessa smiled. She remembered her own first "love" when she was fifteen. Seeing him had made her heart beat funny, too.

I did not find out his name. I tried to wait on him, but my mother pushed me back with a stern look and told me to help Mrs. Chatham. Perhaps he will come back in the store tomorrow and I will see him then.

Whatever I do, I must not let my mother know that I wish to see him. She would forbid me to stay in the store with her, even though Mr. Lewis likes me to be there. He says I am like a ray of sunshine. It is his store and he should make up the rules, yet I fear my mother could convince him I should not be there.

He sometimes gives me money when she is not looking. He says it is payment for working there. Taking money from him does not seem right, but it is nice to have a little money of my own. I have to hide it from my mother, just like I have to hide this diary and anything else I do not wish her to find.

I love her, but she frightens me.

Karessa drained her glass of water and rose to refill it. She stopped halfway to the kitchen when cold air flowed over her. It felt as if she'd stepped beneath an air conditioning vent, yet she hadn't turned on the air conditioning.

Slowly, she turned in a circle. A movement in the air ten feet in front of her made the goose bumps erupt on her skin again. It looked like a heat mirage, one a person sees over a highway on a very hot day.

She hadn't thought it was possible to see something like that inside a house.

The air shifted, became wavy and distorted. Karessa's heartbeat sped up. Her palms grew damp. She blinked, certain she had to be seeing things.

The movement stopped.

Karessa stared at the spot for several moments. When nothing else happened, she blew out a deep breath.

You're letting the house get to you. There's no one here but you.

Feeling calmer once again, she turned and headed for the kitchen to refill her glass.

69

"Aaron, she saw me!"

"She can't see you, Mary."

"She looked right at me! She knows I'm here!" A huge smile spread over her face. "She's the key, Aaron. Our great-greatgranddaughter is going to help us break the curse."

Three

ax tossed his garment bag on the bed. Unzipping the side pocket, he withdrew a white clasp envelope. Frankie had met him at the airport and handed the envelope to him. He'd offered the guest room in his house for a couple of days, but Max had declined and rented a hotel room instead. He wanted to be alone when he looked at the contents.

His friend was a strange guy. Frankie liked the hunt, liked to dig up information about hidden treasure. He searched the Internet, old newspapers, courthouse records. The research turned him on, not the physical search for the pot of gold. He didn't care about actually finding the treasure. Max had never been able to understand that. Frankie had a lot of money, but he could have so much more if he found the riches he helped others to find. Yet he was perfectly happy earning his finder's fee from people like Max before he started the next research project.

Max would be all too happy to give Frankie the twenty percent finder's fee he demanded if the contents of this envelope led to the bearer bond worth millions.

He unfastened the clasp, but hesitated before opening the

envelope. Before he looked inside, Max decided to shower and have a drink.

Anticipation always made the prize sweeter.

The flight from D.C. had been rough thanks to strong thunderstorms. Even a seasoned flyer would feel queasy after the bumpy ride. Max stood beneath the warm spray, letting the water revive him. Only a full body massage would feel better right now . . . followed by a naked, willing woman.

He lowered his head so the water could beat on the back of his neck. Leslie had certainly been willing. She'd been a pleasant diversion for a few hours, even though neither his heart nor his mind had been with her. His mind had been too focused on getting to Texas and looking inside that envelope. His heart . . .

His heart still belonged to Karessa.

Women had come and gone in his life in the five years since he'd fallen so hard for the beautiful blonde. None of them came close to making him forget about Karessa. So many times, he'd thought about calling her, seeing if she'd give him another chance. He'd always hung up before the call had gone through. The way he'd hurt her, she'd never forgive him. And he couldn't blame her for that.

So he remained alone, taking pleasure from women whenever his body's urges became too strong to ignore. The women paraded in and out of his life through a revolving door. With each new one, he hoped for that spark, that connection that might lead to love.

It never happened.

Max turned off the faucets and opened the glass door. After swiping most of the water from his body, he wrapped the oversized towel around his waist and padded back into the bedroom. An investigation of the small refrigerator and bar produced a miniature bottle of bourbon and can of Coke. He'd rather have Scotch, but right now he wouldn't be picky. He mixed the drink and propped himself up on the bed with the pillows behind his back. Once he'd emptied half the glass, he reached for the envelope.

His instant erection made him shift on the bed. Uncovering a new treasure always gave him a hard-on.

Ignoring the randy part of his body, he bent open the clasp and dumped the contents on the bed. One thing about Frankie—he was thorough. He always included the notes he took during his research so Max could be sure of every step Frankie took. After years of working with him, Max trusted Frankie enough to ignore the handwritten notes and scribbles. All he cared about was the bottom line.

He searched through the paperwork until he found the single sheet of neatly typed blue paper, Frankie's trademark.

Fingering his thick mustache, he read from the beginning. Charles and Belinda Blackburn had moved to America from England in 1898. Already a man of means, he'd made a fortune with wise investments. Part of those investments included buying a bearer bond from a small railroad. Over the years, that railroad had been absorbed into a larger one, which was bought out by a national transportation company.

That company had been bought by Tharwood Energy.

"Holy shit," Max muttered. Tharwood Energy was the largest producer of electricity in the United States. If one of those bonds still existed, it could easily be worth millions, Frankie claimed.

Max's erection throbbed.

Scanning farther down the sheet, Max searched for where the Blackburns had lived. They'd settled in a small town outside the city limits of \dots

Fort Worth.

"Hell."

Of all the hundreds of cities in Texas, it had to be the one where Karessa lived.

Max pushed his damp hair off his forehead. It didn't matter. He could get in and out of the area within a few days. He'd find the bond and leave before there was even the slightest chance of running into Karessa.

He continued to read. The house the Blackburns had built the house where Frankie believed the bond was hidden—still stood. The owner recently passed away and had left it to her grand-niece.

Karessa Austin.

"Aw, fuck!"

Max wadded up the paper and threw it across the room. He watched it bounce off the wall and fall silently to the thick carpet. Karessa's house. He couldn't even contemplate the odds of the one thing he wanted being inside her house. There was no way he could get it now.

Max stared at the crumpled piece of paper for several moments before he rose and picked it up from the floor. Smoothing it out, he quickly scanned the words again. The bottom line on the blue sheet drew his attention: the bond's estimated value—\$176 million.

Max groaned.

He couldn't possibly give up on such a huge prize. Surely he could find a way to get inside the house, find the bond, and get out before Karessa discovered his presence.

Yeah, and the sun would start coming up in the north tomorrow.

He needed a fool-proof plan. Max began to pace as he thought of his options. The first step would be to catch the next plane to DFW Airport. Once he arrived in the Metroplex, he'd rent a car and . . .

He didn't know yet what he'd do after he rented the car, but the plane ride and drive to Fort Worth would give him time to come up with something.

Flopping back on the bed, Max slipped his hands beneath his head and stared at the ceiling. He'd see Karessa. He knew of no way to get around that. His heartbeat increased at the thought of seeing her again. Gorgeous curly blond hair. Huge green eyes. A luscious figure with full, round breasts. A perfect ass. Long, shapely legs. A sweet, tight pussy.

Max groaned softly. His erection flared back to life, and it had nothing to do with finding the bond.

Her last words to him were, "I hope you rot in hell." Hell couldn't be any worse than the pain he'd felt because he'd hurt her.

He wished he could make it up to her. Knowing that wouldn't be possible, the smartest thing he could do would be to find the bond and get the hell out of her life . . . permanently.

62

"You're looking at a lot of money, Ms. Austin."

"Karessa, please. And I don't care. I'm not going to say money is no object, but I 'm not opposed to spending it. I want the house to be perfect when it's done."

She studied the handsome contractor as he totaled figures on his calculator. Marco had recommended Grayson Construction, saying Kevin Grayson would do a good job for her and wouldn't screw her over financially. Marco's recommendation was enough for her.

Besides, Kevin was really nice to look at.

Inwardly, Karessa sighed. She couldn't help the way she felt. It'd been a while since a man had held her, touched her, made love to her. Maxwell Hennessey had completely spoiled her. He'd been an incredible lover, taking her to heights she'd never been,

and likely would never be again. She'd dated since Max and she'd had lovers. No other man had made her body sing.

Kevin appeared to be in his late thirties. Perfect. Maybe she should find another contractor and concentrate on something more personal with Kevin.

A glance at his left hand and the gold wedding band on his fourth finger quickly shot down that notion.

Oh, well, it was a nice dream.

Kevin made a couple of notations and removed a piece of paper from his clipboard. "Here's my estimate. I suggest you get at least two other contractors to give you estimates also."

Handsome and scruples, too. Life simply wasn't fair.

Karessa accepted the piece of paper from him. "Marco recommended you. That's good enough for me. When can you start?"

"My crew is finishing up a job this week. We can start first thing Monday morning."

"That would be perfect."

69

"What are they going to do?" Mary asked.

"She's going to renovate the house, make it more modern."

"What will that mean for us?"

"Nothing. No one can see us, so we won't be in the way."

Mary rose from the living room loveseat and walked to the window. Crossing her arms over her stomach, she looked outside at the beautiful spring day. The sun shone, a gentle breeze rustled through the oak trees. She could step out on the veranda and feel the breeze. It wouldn't be enough. How she'd love to walk beneath those trees while the wind caressed her face.

She sensed Aaron come up behind her. "What's wrong, Mary?"

She shrugged. "Restless, I guess. I've done the same thing over and over for a century. I'd like to change something. I'd like to take a walk outside."

"I know," he said softly.

"I don't like strangers in our house." Turning to face him, she bit her bottom lip. "Do you think she'll change our bedroom?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I don't want our room changed, Aaron."

"There's no way we can stop it, baby."

"People have made changes to the house over the years. No one has ever touched our bedroom. It's almost as if . . . as if Eva put a spell on it so no one would go in there."

"I think she did. Remember the two guys who came and took our bodies away? I don't know how she could've gotten anyone to do that without them telling the sheriff."

"She was a witch, Aaron. We know that now."

"Yeah, we do."

"At least she was good to Katie. I'm grateful for that."

"She smothered her, Mary. Katie barely got the chance to breathe without Eva's permission."

"But she loved her. That's the important thing. She loved her and took care of her."

Aaron smiled tenderly. "You always try to see the good in people."

"I'd rather see the good than the bad." She wandered away from the window toward the television. "Watching this has shown us how the world has changed, even if we haven't been able to see it ourselves. We've seen a lot of good and bad over the years."

"Grace's computer has helped us see the world, too."

Mary smiled. "You do love playing with that thing."

Aaron grinned. "Yeah, and I'm getting good at it."

"You're good at everything you do."

His grin faded. "There's one thing I'm not good at—getting us out of here."

"You don't have to be good at that. She'll get us out of here," Mary said, nodding toward Karessa.

"You can't be sure of that, Mary."

"Yes, I can. I feel it here." She touched her chest, over her heart. "Our great-great-granddaughter will help us. I promise you that."

Four

Max parked beneath an oak tree seventy-five feet from the house. Several vehicles were parked at odd angles on the property, so he doubted if one more would raise any suspicion. He saw a van from a satellite company and one from a plumber. A blue truck held various sizes of glass and windows in its A-frames. Apparently, Karessa had decided to do some remodeling of the old house.

Great. With people coming and going all the time, he'd never get any alone time to search for the bond.

A gray pickup with Grayson Construction stenciled on the side was parked closest to the house. A memory tickled the back of Max's mind. He'd gone to college with a guy named Grayson. They'd played football together. What was the guy's first name? Keith? Kelvin? No, Kevin. Kevin Grayson. He watched the man talking to Karessa on the steps. Right height, right build, if Kevin had kept himself in shape over the years.

Max chuckled. Grayson wasn't exactly an odd name. Besides, he'd gone to college with Kevin in Florida. Running into an old college chum in Texas would be highly unlikely.

The man stood to one side, his back to Max. His position gave

Max an unimpeded view of Karessa's body. She wore faded jeans and a pale green T-shirt. He narrowed his eyes, studying her. She'd put on a few pounds in the last five years.

The extra weight only made her sexier. Her breasts looked fuller, her hips more rounded. He wished she'd turn around so he could see her ass. With her weight gain, he'd bet it was larger, too.

He groaned as blood surged into his cock. He'd love to drive his shaft deep inside Karessa's wet pussy. Or into that sweet ass.

Karessa smiled at the man. A surge of jealousy tore through Max. Those beautiful smiles should be reserved for *him*.

Forget it, man. She'll never have anything to do with you. Get in the house, find the bond, and get on with your life.

Max rubbed his mustache. Guilt gnawed at him. The bond wasn't left to Karessa, but it might be in her house. He didn't like taking something away from her.

He couldn't think of the bond belonging to Karessa. This was a job, just like every other job he'd ever done. As long as he remembered that, as long as he didn't let any leftover feelings for her confuse him, he could pull this off. He *would* pull this off.

The man turned and headed for the gray pickup. Max watched him. It was Kevin. Older, yes, but he still looked the same as he had in college. He wondered if Karessa had awarded the remodeling job to Kevin. If so, that would be the perfect way for Max to get inside the house without anyone questioning his presence.

Max smiled. This would be so easy.

62

A shiver danced up Karessa's spine. She had the spooky feeling someone was watching her. She looked out across the yard. A midsize car pulled out onto the lane, followed by Kevin's pickup. She couldn't see anyone standing around.

Still, the feeling persisted.

Karessa descended the steps and looked up at the house. She could swear the curtain moved at the window to the locked room.

Bypassing workers who were still taking measurements and computing estimates, she took the stairs to the second floor. She strode to the end of the hall. Stopping at the door, she studied the heavy padlock that kept her from entering the room. She'd searched for the key for three days, but with no luck. Whatever Aunt Grace had stored inside that room, she obviously wanted to keep secret.

Karessa straightened her shoulders. This was *her* house now. She wanted to know what was inside that room.

"Excuse me, Ms. Austin."

Karessa turned to see the plumber Eddy standing before her. She automatically smiled. "Yes?"

"I'm through downstairs. Would you like me to start up here?" $\,$

His question temporarily took her mind off the locked room. "Yes, please. The main bathroom is two doors down on the left. I'll be adding another small bathroom that connects to my bedroom. I'll have my contractor contact you so you two can work out the details."

"Sounds good."

He turned to walk away. The toolbox in his hand drew her attention. "Uh, wait please."

Eddy faced her again. "Ma'am?"

"Can you take off a lock?" She gestured at the padlock. "I can't find the key. It wasn't with the rest of my aunt's keys."

He stepped closer and examined the lock. "I can unscrew the hinges."

"Wonderful. Thank you."

A few minutes later, Eddy removed the hinges and pushed open the door. Karessa stepped into the bedroom... and stepped back in time to the early 1900s. Her extensive study of history helped her recognize the time period immediately. Chinese rugs were scattered across the wooden floor. A chenille bedspread covered the four-poster bed. A large chest of drawers sat against one wall, next to a small writing desk. The opposite wall held a dresser with a large oval mirror. Lacy white curtains covered the windows. A wooden rocker with a faded seat cushion sat near the windows.

The room was charming.

"Uh, Ms. Austin?" Eddy said. "You through with me?"

She turned and smiled at him. "Yes, thank you." Her smile faded when she noticed his wide eyes. "Is something wrong?"

"Are you okay in there?"

"Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be?"

"It feels . . . funny."

Karessa noticed that Eddy stood outside the doorway. She didn't need a plumber in this bedroom, but he had no reason to think anything was wrong. "Come in, Eddy. You can see for yourself that everything is fine in here."

"No, thanks, Ms. Austin." He thumbed over his shoulder. "I'll, uh, check out that bathroom."

He skittered away much quicker than what she thought a man as large as that would be able to. How odd that he wouldn't come into the room.

Karessa shrugged and walked over to the east windows. Aunt Grace's windows gave her a view of the backyard. These windows let her look out over the front yard and would give her the morning sunlight. Karessa would much rather wake up with the sun than an alarm clock. She'd planned to turn the large storage closet next to Aunt Grace's bedroom into her private bath since it butted up against the current bathroom. Now she wasn't sure. She wouldn't have a private bath if she moved into this bedroom, but she liked it so much better than Aunt Grace's room. This room had . . . character.

She didn't understand why it had been padlocked, or why there wasn't a thick layer of dust over everything.

Karessa threw open the windows and sniffed deeply of the rain-cooled air. A light shower an hour earlier had lowered the temperature and made the air smell fresh. She walked over to the south wall and opened those windows also. A refreshing cross-breeze made her smile. Oh, yes, she liked this room very much.

Realizing she still had several workers in her house who probably needed to talk to her, she turned to go back downstairs. She froze in place when a blur of white flashed before her eyes. It happened so quickly, she wasn't sure if she'd really seen anything.

She stood still, staring at the spot where she thought she'd seen the white blur. Nothing else appeared after several seconds. Karessa swallowed. She didn't know whether to be frightened, or ashamed of herself for letting her imagination get away from her.

Shaking her head at her own foolishness, Karessa started toward the stairs. First thing Monday morning, she'd show this room to Kevin Grayson and get his opinion on renovating it.

60

"It didn't work!" Mary paced back and forth in front of the east windows. "We've always been able to get anyone in this house to do what we want, as long as we concentrated together. It worked with Grace. Why didn't it work with Karessa?" She stopped pacing and faced Aaron. "She's going to move into our room! I don't want that."

"You can't stop it, baby. We tried to stop her from taking the lock off the door. It didn't work." He chuckled. "That plumber certainly didn't want to come in here."

Mary scowled. "This isn't funny, Aaron. She's going to move into *our room*."

"Not if we can keep all those workers out of here. If she can't get anyone to change this room the way she wants it changed, she can't move in here."

She hadn't thought of that. Perhaps she and Aaron couldn't influence Karessa, but they could easily take care of a few men. Mary smiled. "I like the way you think."

62

Max waited until shortly after five o'clock before he wandered into Grayson Construction. He'd seen Kevin's pickup out front when he'd parked, along with a few other vehicles. The parking lot was now empty except for Kevin's truck. Perfect. Max wanted to be alone with Kevin while they talked.

He heard Kevin's voice on the telephone when he walked through the front door. Following the sound of the voice, he found his old friend in a small office at the back of the building. He leaned on the doorway and blatantly listened to Kevin's conversation. From the exasperated look on his college chum's face, he guessed that Kevin wasn't happy.

"So go without me. Your mother will be happier if I'm not there anyway."

Ah. Must be talking to the little woman.

"I don't know when I'll be home. It should be soon. I just have a couple more things to finish up here...Okay, okay. I will...Yeah, me too."

Kevin jabbed his fingers through his hair. "Stupid mother-inlaw," he muttered as he hung up the phone. "Problems?" Max asked.

Kevin jerked his head in Max's direction. His eyes widened before a huge grin spread over his face. "Maxwell Hennessey. What the hell are you doing here?"

Max shrugged. "Thought I'd pop in and see an old friend."

Kevin rounded the desk and pulled Max into a bear hug. "It's great to see you, man." He gestured toward the chair in front of the desk. "Sit down, sit down. You want a Coke or something?"

"Thanks, I'm fine. But it didn't sound like you are. Trouble at home?"

"Nah. I'm not exactly best friends with my mother-in-law, that's all. My wife's wonderful. I don't know how she came from such a bitchy woman." Kevin leaned back in his chair. "You married, Max?"

"Nope. Never made it down the aisle."

"I've been married for twelve years. Got three kids." He grinned devilishly. "Had a hell of a lot of fun making them, too."

Max laughed along with his old friend. He'd forgotten how easily Kevin always made him laugh.

"Seriously, what are you doing in Fort Worth?"

"Looking for work. I've had some \dots bad luck with some of my investments."

Kevin clasped his hands behind his head. "How are you with a hammer and nails?"

"Great. I did a lot of carpentry work when I got out of college."

"I just got a remodeling job today. Big Victorian. The owner wants it completely renovated. If you want work, I got it."

"Hey, man, I didn't come here begging for a job from you. I just wanted to say hi to an old friend."

"You didn't beg, I offered. You want it or not?"

"Yeah, I want it. I'm not too proud to accept a job from a friend."

"Be here Monday morning at seven."

"I will." Max stood and offered his hand to Kevin. "Thanks, man." $\,$

Kevin also stood and accepted Max's handshake. "No problem. I wish I could talk longer with you, but I gotta get home. How about if I buy you a beer after work Monday?"

"Deal."

Max kept his face composed until he slid inside his rental car. Once safely hidden by the tinted glass, he smiled.

Damn, I'm good.

Five

M ax laid down his hammer and leaned his head back to try and relax the stiff muscles in his neck. He'd forgotten how hard construction work could be on the body. Max worked out regularly and figured he was in pretty good shape for forty. A weight machine couldn't compare to three straight days of manual labor.

He had to admit he liked the physical workout, and he liked the room's results because of that workout. Kevin had put him in the kitchen. He said the owner wanted this room completely gutted and modernized. That didn't surprise Max. Karessa had always loved to cook and liked all the newest gadgets. She wanted convenience, but still wanted the kitchen to have an early 1900s appearance. Thanks to the pictures and drawings supplied by her, she'd get exactly what she wanted.

He hadn't seen her. He'd been working in her home for three days, but he always left before she showed up. She hadn't officially moved into the house yet, but she did spend the nights in her great-aunt's bedroom. He'd learned that from talking with Kevin.

Between Karessa here at night, and workers in practically every room during the day, Max hadn't had the chance to search for the bond. He would. He was determined to find the bond and get out of here before he ever saw Karessa.

He didn't think his heart could stand seeing her again.

A final tug with the claw of his hammer and the last cabinet came loose from the wall. Max stood back and smiled. He pictured Karessa's drawing in his mind, the way she wanted this room to look when completed. She'd always had excellent taste. The room would be beautiful, as would the entire house.

"How's it going?" Kevin asked from behind him.

Max turned and faced his boss. "Great. I just pulled down the last cabinet. Now I can start tearing down the walls."

"You can start on the walls tomorrow. It's ten after five."

"It is?" Max glanced at his watch. He'd been so absorbed in his work, he hadn't noticed the time.

"I wish all my men worked as hard as you do."

"I like the physical work."

"Yeah, me too." He clapped Max on the shoulder. "Karessa called me about half an hour ago. She's run into some problems at her museum, so she won't be here tonight."

Max kept his face impassive so Kevin wouldn't know how his heart had kicked into high gear. "Oh?"

"Everyone else has left. As soon as you gather up your stuff, I'll lock up after you."

This was his chance . . . the chance to search the house without anyone bothering him. "Hey, man, I'd like to work a little longer. How about if I lock up for you?"

Kevin frowned slightly. "I don't think that's a good idea—"

"You can trust me, Kevin, you know that."

"It isn't you, Max. I'm responsible for this house. I think I should be the one to lock up."

Time for Plan B. "Okay, I understand that. How about if you

come back in a couple of hours to lock up? I'd like to start on these walls."

Kevin rubbed his upper lip. "No, that'd be silly. I don't want to turn around and come back here once I'm home." Reaching into his jeans pocket, he pulled out a gold key on a red keychain. "Here. Stay as long as you want to. Just don't wear yourself out so you can't work tomorrow."

"No problem." Max took the key and squeezed it in his fist. "Thanks."

"Surely you have something better to do than hang around this house and work all night."

"Nope. I don't have anyone to go home to like you do."

"My wife knows a lot of single women—"

Max held up one hand to stop Kevin from saying anything else. "I appreciate the offer, but I'm not into blind dates."

"If you change your mind, let me know."

"I will. Thanks."

Max continued to clutch the key until he heard Kevin's pickup start. Moving to the window, he watched his friend drive down the lane until he could no longer see the truck.

"Yes!" he whispered.

Slipping the key into his pocket, Max picked up his hammer and left the kitchen. Even though he hadn't been able to search the house the way he wanted to, he had checked out the downstairs. The bond wouldn't be in plain sight. It had to be hidden somewhere . . . probably in some kind of secret compartment in one of the walls or within the woodwork.

He started in the living room. Standing in the middle of the room, he turned a circle, searching for anything that might be obvious. The walls were covered with a hideous pink flowered wallpaper. Karessa's great-aunt obviously had no taste when it came to decorating. Two of the walls had already been torn down, exposing the wooden studs. Nothing hidden there. Even though Max had been assigned to the kitchen, he'd wandered through the house at various times to check out what the other guys were doing. So far, no one had discovered anything hidden in the walls.

He had to find the bond before someone else did.

62

Juggling her briefcase, purse, and the bag holding her supper, Karessa turned the knob to the back door. She stepped into a war zone. Her kitchen had been completely destroyed. She knew it had to be torn apart to be remodeled. Still, the missing cabinets and appliances made her blink. The room looked so empty.

She had no place to set the items about to fall out of her arms. Making her way to the dining room, she placed everything on the table and sighed from relief.

The sound of a hammer pounding made her frown. She'd seen the pickup parked outside, but assumed it belonged to Kevin. Obviously, one of his workers decided to stay late tonight.

She followed the sound to the living room. Standing in the doorway, she watched the man currently knocking a hole in the wall. He stood with his back to her, giving her the opportunity to study him without his knowledge. Wavy, dark brown hair that covered his nape. Tall, at least six feet. Broad shoulders. Trim waist. Long legs encased in tight jeans . . . jeans that showed off a very nice butt.

Karessa sighed. It'd been much too long since she'd touched a man's butt.

"Hello"

He whirled around, the hammer clutched tightly in his fist. Karessa noticed that first before her gaze shifted to his face. Her mouth dropped open. All the blood drained from her head, leaving her dizzy. She grabbed the door facing to keep from sinking to the floor. "Max?" she whispered.

"Hey, Karessa."

She stared at him, not believing her eyes. Maxwell Hennessey was in her house? *Maxwell Hennessey* was in her house!

Karessa released the facing and clenched her hands into fists. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He lowered the hammer to his side. "Working."

"Working? For whom?"

"Kevin. He gave me a job."

Nothing he said made any sense. Max was a multi-millionaire. He didn't need to work at manual labor. "What do you mean, he gave you a job? You don't need the money."

"Yeah, I do. I made some bad investments, Karessa. Things have been \dots tight for me."

"They haven't been too 'tight' for you to buy a Thomas Abernathy painting."

"I bought that before . . . things went bad."

She couldn't believe she was standing here, having a calm conversation with this man. He had lied to her, betrayed her. She should be throwing heavy objects at his head, not treating him as a guest.

"I don't care about your money situation. I want you out of my house. Now."

He took two steps toward her. She took two steps back. Dropping the hammer to the floor, he ran one hand through his hair. "Karessa, I need this job."

"Oh, puh-lease. You can sell the Abernathy painting and live comfortably for the next five years. A piddly construction job can't pay you anywhere near what you're used to earning." "It's a start. That's all I need."

She would not feel sorry for him. She'd been a victim of his deception once. That would never happen again. "You can find your start somewhere else. I don't want you here."

"You'll never see me. You're at the museum all day while I'm here. You wouldn't have known I was working here if I hadn't decided to stay late. I only decided to work late when Kevin told me you wouldn't be home tonight."

"But I do know you're here and I won't allow it. I'll call Kevin and tell him you aren't allowed on my property."

She turned to leave the room. She'd taken no more than a step when Max grabbed her arm. "Karessa, please don't. I really do need this job."

He turned those pleading gray eyes on her and she began to melt. He'd always had that effect on her. Knowing she couldn't let him get to her, she narrowed her eyes and lifted her chin. "Take your hand off me."

He gave her arm a gentle squeeze before releasing it. "Look, I promise you won't see me again. I'll make sure I leave before you get here at night. I won't arrive until after you leave in the morning. You'll never know I'm here."

My heart will know. She straightened her spine, ready to tell him again to get out of her house. He continued speaking before she could say a word.

"I know you're angry at me. I know I hurt you. I regret that more than I can ever tell you. But that was five years ago, Karessa. I'm a different man now. I want the chance to prove that to you."

"I have no interest in you proving anything to me."

"Okay, fine. But let me keep working here. After your house is finished, I'll leave Fort Worth and be out of your life forever. Deal?"

Karessa wanted to say no. She wanted to demand again that he leave her house. But if he were really hurting financially and needed this job to survive, she couldn't turn him away. "I won't see you at all? You'll come in the morning after I've left and leave before I get home?"

"I promise."

She stared into his eyes, trying to determine whether or not he told her the truth. His eyes looked sincere. However, they'd looked sincere in the past when he'd been lying to her.

She'd have to watch him very closely.

"All right. You can keep on working here. But I want you to leave now."

"Sure. Whatever you want." He ran one fingertip over her cheek. "Thank you, Karessa."

She stood in place, her hand pressed to her cheek, and watched him walk out the front door. That simple, unexpected touch had been enough to bring back all the yearnings he'd been able to stir in her so easily.

Tears filled her eyes. Damn you, Max. Damn you for hurting me. Damn you for coming back into my life and making me hurt all over again.

62

Max tossed back a shot of Chivas and poured another one. He downed the second shot as quickly as the first and poured a third. Crossing the room, he sat on the edge of the bed and stared into the glass. Instead of seeing the amber liquid, he saw Karessa.

God, she was stunning.

Her hair had fallen almost to the middle of her back five years ago. Now, it fell to her shoulders in soft waves. It had looked tousled, as if she'd just risen from bed after a long, intense session of sex.

Max groaned as blood rushed to his cock. He set the glass of Scotch on the nightstand with a loud *thump*. Don't think about sex, man!

But the seed had been planted. Memories of making love with Karessa swam through his mind. Her ivory skin shiny with sweat. Full, round breasts with big pink nipples. Long torso. Legs that went on forever. A tight, wet pussy . . .

He loosened the thin towel around his waist and palmed his hardening cock. Closing his eyes, he remembered burying his shaft inside her, thrusting over and over. He remembered how she'd arch her neck and moan softly before she came. She'd wrap her legs around his waist and pull him even tighter to her. Or she'd push him down and impale herself on his cock. She'd liked the power of being in control of him—of moving the way she wanted, the way she needed, to climax.

He pumped his cock, his strokes slowly gaining speed as the memories continued. They'd made love after their first date. They'd made love *during* their first date, unable to keep their hands off each other. He'd kissed her for the first time in the restaurant over dinner. Luckily, they'd been in a dark corner behind a large potted plant. If the maitre d'had seen Max's hand on Karessa's breast, he would've thrown them out of the restaurant.

It would've been worth it.

She hadn't pulled away from him when he'd cradled her breast in his hand and thumbed her nipple. Instead, she'd parted her lips and touched his lips with her tongue. He'd loved her taking the aggressive role. He'd deepened the kiss as she slid one hand over his thigh to tickle his shaft with her fingertips.

He'd almost taken her right then.

They'd hurried through the rest of dinner and refused dessert. In his car, one more deep kiss, one more squeeze of her breast, had to satisfy Max until he could drive to Karessa's condo. He'd damned his bucket seats all the way to her home.

But once inside her condo, the dam had burst. He'd taken her against her front door with her legs wrapped tightly around his waist while he'd pounded his cock into her creamy pussy.

The first time had been quick, rough sex. The next time, he'd made love to her in her bed, urging her toward her climax with soft touches and gentle licks of his tongue before he ever entered her.

Max's breathing deepened. His strokes quickened. The orgasm snaked down his spine and grabbed his balls. He moaned deeply and closed his eyes as pleasure flowed through his body.

It took him a moment to remember how to breathe. Opening his eyes, he noticed the drops of cum on the faded carpet. He stared at the spots, wondering if the housekeeper would even notice them in this dump. He normally stayed in five-star hotels, but couldn't do that and pretend to be poor. This shabby motel had been the perfect solution.

He hated it.

Sighing deeply, Max cleaned himself with the towel, then bent over and dabbed up the evidence of his orgasm. He was beginning to hate everything about this job.

Mostly he hated himself.

Six

A aron watched Karessa pace across the bedroom floor, then turn and pace back again. "She isn't a happy camper, Mary."

"No, she isn't." Mary chewed on her thumbnail. "She's been upset for two nights, ever since she argued with that man."

"She obviously knows him. Who do you think he is?"

"I don't know, but he's here every day, working on the house."

Karessa walked to the bed and sat on the side. Aaron sat beside her. His great-great-granddaughter seemed to sense him and Mary, to know when they were close. She didn't sense his presence now. That told him she was truly upset. "What's his name?"

"She called him Max." Mary stepped in front of Karessa. "Whatever happened between them had a profound effect on her. They must have been in love." She tilted her head to the side. "And I think she still loves him."

Aaron frowned. Rarely did he disagree with his wife, but this time he did. "She hates him."

"There's a fine line between love and hate, darling. A woman wouldn't react so strongly to a man if the feelings didn't run deep." She knelt before Karessa. "We have to help her."

"How?"

"She needs to remember how much they loved each other."

"Mary, you don't know for sure she loved him."

"Trust me, Aaron, I know. I'm a woman. I understand how she feels."

"So you're going to interfere."

"I'm going to help. There's a difference."

Aaron watched his wife lay her hands on top of their great-great-granddaughter's. Karessa jumped as if startled. Her gaze darted to Mary's face. "She sees you."

"She can't see me, but she senses me."

"Maybe we should leave her alone."

"In a minute."

Mary closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and slowly released it. Aaron had seen his wife do a similar thing many times over the last century. She touched someone when she wanted them to do her bidding. But it hadn't worked on Karessa earlier in the week when they'd tried to keep her out of their room. "Mary—"

"Shhh."

His wife left her hands on top of Karessa's for almost a full minute. Karessa didn't move the entire time. Aaron looked back and forth from Mary to Karessa. He'd never felt such strong energy in the air. The two women were truly connecting.

When Mary opened her eyes, they were glowing.

Chills slithered down Aaron's spine. He'd never seen Mary's eyes glow. "Are you okay, baby?" he asked softly.

Shaking her head, Mary lifted her hands from Karessa's. She cleared her throat. "Yes, yes, I'm fine."

Her voice sounded husky, as if she'd just awoken. "Are you sure?"

Slowly, Mary got to her feet. "We need to leave her alone now." "What did you do?"

"She'll dream of him."

She looked at Aaron, and her eyes appeared normal once again. Aaron wished he could take her in his arms, hold her, to be sure she was truly all right. Instead, he rose from the bed and followed Mary out of the room.

60

Karessa no longer felt the cool air surrounding her. The sensation had been similar to the one she'd experienced the first day she walked into this house, as if she were standing directly beneath an air conditioning vent. She looked up at the ceiling. There were two vents in the room, but neither of them blew directly onto the bed. Besides, she hadn't turned on the air conditioning yet because of the construction work.

Something—or someone—had touched her.

Her mind was too fuzzy to concentrate now on who that someone could be. A sudden yawn made her jaw pop. She'd been reading a bit of her great-grandmother's diary every evening in bed. Tonight, she could barely keep her eyes open. All she wanted to do was sleep.

Karessa turned off the lamp and crawled between the cool sheets. An image of Max's face flashed through her mind, as it had each evening since she'd seen him in her living room. Memories swam through her head . . . memories of a time when she'd been so desperately in love . . .

69

Karessa closed her eyes and tilted back her head. The warm wind ruffled her hair, making her smile. What a perfect day. Comfortable temperature, gentle breeze, and the man she loved. A woman couldn't ask for much more.

She opened her eyes and gazed at Max on the blanket. He lay propped up on one elbow, chewing on a toothpick, looking at her. A crooked grin touched his lips. "Did you like the picnic?"

"Very much. It was a nice surprise." She touched her stomach. "I ate way too much."

"You're supposed to eat too much on a picnic. It's a rule."

"A rule?"

"Yeah. Just like it's a rule for the picnickee to pay the picnicker with a kiss."

Karessa struggled not to laugh. "'Picnickee'?"

He shrugged and grinned. "You get the idea."

"Yes, I do." Karessa moved toward him on her knees. "I think it's an *excellent* idea." She took the toothpick from his mouth and tossed it to the ground. "You do realize that I probably won't stop with only one kiss."

His grin widened. "I certainly hope not."

Leaning forward, she softly kissed him. He tasted of the wine they'd drunk with their meal. Tilting her head, she slowly moved her lips over his. He cradled the back of her head in his hand and returned her kiss. The tip of his tongue touched her lips, seeking entrance into her mouth. Karessa parted her lips ever so slightly, giving him only a tiny sample of her.

Max growled deep in his throat. "Open your mouth, Karessa."

"You can be such an impatient man."

"I am when it comes to you. Let me taste you."

Their mouths were but an inch apart. Each word he spoke puffed air across her skin. The sensation made her nipples pucker. With a soft moan, she parted her lips for his tongue.

Karessa could count the number of her lovers on one hand. She'd had one guy who barely knew what he was doing, and two guys who were very good lovers. Not even the very good ones could compare to Max. He made her body sing every time they made love.

He slid his hand down her back to her buttock and squeezed it. His tongue stroked over her lips and teeth before beginning a dual with hers. She whimpered. His kisses touched not only her mouth, but every part of her body. She'd always scoffed at the term "his kisses made her melt." She no longer scoffed. Max's kisses did, indeed, make her melt.

Karessa knew in another moment, he would push her to her back so he could caress her entire body. While she loved his touch, she planned to be in control today.

When he shifted position and gently pushed on her shoulder, Karessa pulled away. "Nuh-uh."

Max's eyebrows drew together in confusion. "What do you mean, 'nuh-uh'?"

"Today we play by my rules."

"Oh, we do?" One of his dark eyebrows arched and his eyes twinkled with devilment. "What if I don't want to play by your rules?"

"You don't have a choice."

Karessa tugged up his navy T-shirt until it bunched under his arms. For a moment, she simply looked at his chest. Broad, tan, lightly dusted with dark brown hair. The hair formed a line down his flat stomach. She touched the center of his chest with one fingertip. She followed the line of hair until it disappeared into his denim shorts, then traced the line back up to his chest. Once she'd reached her starting point, she repeated the journey with her lips, dropping soft kisses on his skin.

The sudden tightening of Max's stomach muscles made her

look at him. He rose to his elbows and watched her. Deciding to give him a show, she circled his navel with the tip of her tongue while she looked into his eyes.

"Do you like that?" she asked.

"Yeah." His voice sounded rusty, as if something clogged his throat. "I like everything you do to me."

She dragged her tongue up the center of his stomach. Each of his nipples received a long lick and gentle tug with her teeth. Max's breathing became deeper, slower. His eyelids shuttered. She could no longer see the heat in those incredible gray eyes, but she knew it was there.

She traveled back down his stomach, alternating between kisses and soft licks. She stopped when she reached his navel again. Peering into his eyes, she released the snap on his shorts. She ruffled the hair beneath his navel with her finger.

"You like my happy trail?"

"Mmm, yes. Very much. I think," she said while leisurely lowering his zipper, "I'll follow it all the way to your campground."

Max chuckled. "I've never heard it called that."

"I thought I'd camp out for a while, see if anything comes up."
"It's already up."

She could see the outline of his hard cock through the denim. "I noticed."

Rising to her knees, Karessa gripped the waistband of Max's shorts and tugged them past his hips. Surprised at her discovery, her gaze snapped back to his face. "No briefs?"

A grin tweaked the corners of his mouth. "I figured they'd just be in the way."

She smiled. "You're so clever."

Karessa pulled his shorts down his legs and tossed them aside. His shaft lay against his stomach, fully erect. Her mouth watered with the desire to taste him.

"Take off your blouse and bra, sweetheart. Let me see those pretty tits."

She granted his request without hesitation. She'd no sooner tossed the bra to land on top of Max's shorts than he sat up and opened his mouth over one nipple.

Karessa moaned. Tunneling her fingers into his thick hair, she pulled him closer to her breast. He kneaded her other breast while he suckled her nipple. His tongue circled the hard nub, his teeth scraped across it. He took his time, switching from one nipple to the other . . . back and forth, back and forth, sucking, nipping, licking. Karessa threw back her head and arched her back, trying to get even more of her breast into his mouth. Obeying her silent cue, he suckled harder.

The orgasm shimmied down her spine and zinged through her clit. She gasped as her pussy clenched and moisture dampened her panties. Experiencing a climax but not quite sure *how*, she clasped Max's head to her breast while she tried to remember how to think.

He lifted his head, a smile on his lips. "Did you come?"

Unable to speak yet with her heart beating so hard, she nodded.

His smile widened into a cocky male grin. "Yeah?"

The obvious pride in his voice made her laugh. "You didn't just invent the cure for cancer, you know."

"You've never come from me sucking your nipples." He caressed her back and buttocks. "I wonder how many other ways I can make you come."

"Oh, so now you want to show off?"

"Yeah."

That overconfident grin of his made her laugh. "All the ways I come now are fine, thank you."

"But we just discovered something new. I think we need to experiment some more."

She reached down and clasped his hard cock. "I think we need to concentrate on a climax for *you* right now."

Max hitched in a breath when she began fondling his shaft. "Well, if you insist . . ."

62

Karessa awoke with her heart pounding and her lungs struggling for air. Desire flowed through her veins like fire, making her skin damp with sweat. She'd often had dreams of Max and her making love in the past, but hadn't had one in a long time.

This hadn't been a product of her subconscious. Everything in her dream had actually happened, right down to her having a climax from him sucking her nipples.

Her clit throbbed in memory.

Rolling to her back, Karessa lifted her large T-shirt to her waist and slid her hand between her thighs. She wasn't surprised to find her labia creamy and swollen. She bit her bottom lip and moaned when she touched her clit. It had been months since she'd been with a man. Her body decided to remind her of that fact this morning.

She rubbed her clit while she raised her shirt over her breasts. A few tugs on her nipple and her toes began to curl. Her body was so hot, it wouldn't take long for her to come. One, two, three more swipes across her clit and the pleasure flowed through her body.

After the pleasure, the tears came.

Karessa pushed down her shirt and pulled the sheet over her body. An orgasm was a powerful release. So were tears. She often cried after a climax, simply because the feelings were so intense.

These tears had nothing to do with her orgasm.

She damned Max again for coming back into her life and making her want what she didn't have.

Wiping the tears from her cheeks, Karessa threw back the sheet and sat up. Enough of self-pity. It was a totally useless emotion and accomplished nothing. She was a strong, independent woman. She had money in the bank and a house that would be gorgeous after the renovation. She ran the largest museum in the Metroplex, and ran it successfully. Her body had needs, as it had demonstrated to her this morning, but she could take care of that, too. She didn't need a man to make her life complete. She certainly didn't need love. That only led to a broken heart.

With that thought, Karessa rose and headed for the bathroom. A shopping trip to one of the malls would be the perfect way to spend her Saturday.

Seven

aressa rubbed her forehead, but it did nothing to ease her pain. She hated headaches. No amount of medicine could make this one go away. She knew that the only thing that would help was lying down in a dark room—or a bout of wild, sweaty sex. Since she didn't have a place to lie down here in the museum and sex wasn't an option, she'd been suffering for most of the morning.

Combine her pain with lack of sleep due to her erotic dreams of Max, and she was ready to snap at anyone who talked to her. Unfortunately, Joy had several things on her agenda today that needed discussing.

She jerked at the sudden snap when Joy closed her portfolio. "Okay, that's it. Go home, Karessa."

"What?"

"I see you rubbing your head. I know you're hurting. We aren't getting any work done. Go home."

"I can't. The workers are there."

"So go to your condo."

She could do that, but she didn't want to. Her condo was so . . . sterile. It had only taken a short two weeks for her to

think of the Victorian as her home. "I don't want to go to my condo."

Joy frowned. "Now you're sounding childish." Rising from her chair, she rounded the desk. She picked up Karessa's purse and briefcase from the bookcase and shoved them into her boss's arms. "Go *somewhere* and lie down."

"You know, I could fire you for this abuse."

"No, you couldn't." Joy grinned. "I'm indispensable."

"That's true." Lying down sounded like a wonderful idea. They weren't getting any work done with her in pain. Shifting her purse and briefcase so she could carry them, she stood. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Only if you're better."

"Yes, Mother," Karessa said dryly.

Once in her car, she thumped her fingers against the steering wheel while deciding where to go. Her condo would be the logical choice. No dust, no noise, no interruptions. If she went to the house, the buzz of electric saws and the pounding of hammers wouldn't let her get any rest.

Besides, she'd see Max.

He'd kept his word. She knew he was still working because she'd casually asked Kevin about him, but she never saw him. Going to the house in the middle of the day meant she would surely see him.

That would be incredibly stupid.

62

"I like him."

"How can you like him?" Aaron asked. "You know Karessa doesn't."

Mary moved to Max's right side and watched him swing his

hammer. "There's something...good about him. And Karessa may not like him, but she loves him."

"So you think."

"So I know."

Mary had no doubt of Karessa's feelings for Max. The problem lay in getting Karessa and Max back together. She didn't know what had happened between them in the past. Until they got beyond that, they couldn't have a future together.

She wanted her great-great-granddaughter to be happy.

The erotic dreams seemed to be working for Karessa to help her remember Max. Maybe a few erotic memories would work for him, too.

Mary touched his shoulder. Max jerked and stopped hammering. He whipped his head in her direction, his eyes wide.

Aaron moved closer to her. "Mary, what are you doing?"

"Helping him to remember Karessa."

"He's reacting to you. That's never happened except with a member of our family."

"He'll be a member of our family, Aaron . . . in time."

She closed her eyes and concentrated, letting her energy flow into Max. She could feel him trying to fight it. Refusing to give up, she continued to touch him, telling him with her mind to remember how much he'd loved Karessa.

How much he still loved Karessa.

Mary opened her eyes when she felt him lower his arm. His chest rose and fell with a deep breath. She smiled to herself.

Gotcha.

62

Max stopped hammering when Kevin walked up to him. "It's almost noon. You wanna go with C. J. and me to grab a burger?"

Food held no appeal at all to Max right now. He didn't understand that for he rarely missed a meal. "Thanks, but I'm not hungry. I think I'll keep on working awhile."

"Suit yourself. See you later."

Max continued nailing two-by-fours into place until he noticed all was quiet in the house. The guys had left for lunch, or were eating outside beneath the huge oak tree in the backyard. That gave him time alone with his thoughts.

He couldn't help but think of Karessa since he was in her house. Usually he could push the thoughts away and focus on finding the bond. Not now. Memories filled his head and stayed there, no matter how much he tried to push them aside.

When he hit his thumb instead of a nail, Max knew it was time to take a break.

Grabbing a Pepsi from his cooler, he held it against his throbbing thumb as he walked outside to the veranda. A gentle breeze blew from the south, bringing the smell of rain. Thunderstorms were predicted for later today and the rest of the week. He hoped it poured. The rain and gray skies would remind him of his home on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State.

He'd never planned to settle in the Pacific Northwest. In his line of business, he traveled more than he stayed home. He'd bought a condo in Florida and lived there between jobs. It had served his purpose, even though he'd always thought of Florida as one big tourist state.

When a job had taken him to Seattle, Max had immediately fallen in love with the area. The cool weather, huge trees, beautiful mountains . . . they'd all grabbed him and refused to let go.

He wondered if Karessa would like Washington.

Well, I made it for about three minutes without thinking of her. Max popped the top of his Pepsi and took a long drink. Karessa had always liked the outdoors. He remembered one time in particular when he'd surprised her with a picnic . . .

62

Max closed his eyes as Karessa fondled his cock. He'd just made her come from sucking her nipples, and that had never happened. He wanted to explore other ways he could bring her to orgasm.

His vixen apparently had other ideas. She tugged his T-shirt over his head. "Lie back, Max," she whispered.

Leaving his eyes closed, he did as she commanded. He lay still, waiting for what she would do next. First, he felt the soft brush of her hair across his thighs. Next, he felt her warm breath on his balls. The tip of her tongue teased the base of his cock.

Max groaned.

That wicked tongue ran up the length of his shaft and circled the head. He opened his eyes and rose to his elbows so he could watch her. Her own eyes were closed as she continued to lick the head. She'd told him she loved performing oral sex on him, and would gladly do it every day.

That worked for him.

She lowered her head until his shaft disappeared inside her mouth. When her lips touched the base, she slid them back up to the head. She slowly repeated the journey over and over. He wanted to pump. He *needed* to pump. But the rapturous look on her face made him lie still and wait for whatever she would do next.

Torture had never felt so good.

She opened her eyes as her tongue circled the head again. "Do you want to come in my mouth?"

Max swallowed hard. "Yeah."

The tip of her tongue darted into the slit. "We're playing by my rules, remember?"

Unable to resist touching her any longer, he tunneled one hand beneath her hair and cradled the back of her head. "Your rules are to torture me?"

A mischievous twinkle lit up her eyes. "No. My rules are to make you feel *really* good."

"Coming in your mouth would make me feel really good."

"How about coming in my pussy?"

"Oh, yeah. I'd like that, too."

Releasing his cock, she rose to her knees and leaned forward. Her breasts barely brushed his chest. With her lips a breath away from his, she whispered, "How about licking my pussy?"

"I would love that."

"We could do all of the above."

"I'm in no hurry to leave."

She smiled her vixen's smile, the one that always made him hard. Since he was already hard, this time he growled. Pulling her head closer, he gave her an open-mouth, tongue-dueling kiss.

The whimper in her throat caused the blood to surge in his cock.

"Take off the rest of your clothes. I want you naked."

She stood up and unfastened her khaki shorts. They fell in a puddle at her feet, leaving her in nothing but a pair of tiny blue panties. He palmed his cock and leisurely stroked it while she hooked her fingers in the waistband of her panties.

Instead of pulling them off, she gave him that vixen smile again. "I have a surprise for you."

He waited, but she didn't say anything else. She pulled her panties down an inch. His gaze snapped to that enticing strip of skin between her navel and the top of her panties. She pulled them down another inch. "Are you ready for your surprise?"

"Yeah," he rasped.

Her panties joined her shorts on the blanket. Max's mouth dropped open. If possible, his cock became even harder. "You shaved your pussy?"

She nodded.

Max rose to his knees before her. Slipping his hands between her thighs, he pushed gently until she opened her legs. He slid his thumbs over the smooth, silky skin. "When did you do this?"

"I shaved a couple of days ago, then again this morning. I thought you might \dots like it."

"I do." He pulled apart her feminine lips with his thumbs. She was already creamy and swollen, proof of her arousal. "My God, this is sexy." Leaning forward, he swiped his tongue across her clit. He enjoyed it so much, he did it again. "I love the way you taste."

Karessa tilted her hips toward him. "Max."

He looked up at her face when he heard her breathless voice. The desire in her eyes made him want to devour her. "Lie down, sweetheart. Let me lick on this pretty pussy."

She stretched out before him, a blond goddess. Max spread her legs wide. For a moment, he simply looked at her . . . from her tousled hair, down her long torso, past her bare mound, all the way down to her toenails painted a pale pink. He made the return journey as leisurely as the first trip, until he looked into her eyes again. His heart clutched in his chest. "You're beautiful, Karessa."

He kissed her, long and deeply, before he stretched out on his stomach between her thighs. Closing his eyes, he inhaled her unique, musky fragrance. Nothing smelled better than an aroused woman.

Or tasted better.

Max liked to take his time when giving oral sex for he enjoyed it as much as Karessa. He gave her one long swipe with his tongue from her anus to her clit. She moaned and spread her thighs another inch. Slowly, he licked the length of her slit again.

"More," she breathed.

Only too happy to oblige, he suckled her clit, darted his tongue into her vagina, licked her anus. Concentrating on that sensitive bit of flesh, he pulled her buttocks apart with his thumbs and pushed his tongue deep inside her ass.

"Oh, God!"

Her cry made him smile to himself. She loved it when he tongue-fucked her ass. "You like that, sweetheart?"

"Yesssss."

Max had never made a woman come from licking her anus, but he wouldn't be surprised if Karessa could climax that way. She was a very passionate woman who loved sex. She'd already come from having her nipples sucked. Rarely did they make love without her having at least two orgasms.

Even if she didn't come, experimenting would be fun.

Max pushed her legs forward until her knees almost touched her breasts. "Hold your legs for me."

She hooked her hands behind her knees. The position left her pussy completely open for him.

Beautiful.

Slipping his hands beneath her buttocks, he began the gentle assault on her anus. He drove his tongue deep inside her, then pressed it flat against her. He licked back and forth, up and down, in a circle, before driving back inside her again. Each new movement made Karessa moan a bit louder. Each new movement made his cock a bit harder. He'd fantasized about sliding his shaft inside her ass for weeks.

It was time he made the fantasy a reality.

She arched her back and keened deeply. Max leaned back and watched her anus contract with her orgasm. The urge to mate pushed him past his limit. Rising to his knees, he rolled Karessa to her stomach. Her body was limp as a damp dish cloth. Good. He wanted her perfectly relaxed when he thrust inside that gorgeous ass.

Max reached for the bottle of coconut-scented massage oil he'd included in the picnic basket. Flipping up the top, he poured a generous amount over his fingertips. He parted Karessa's buttocks with one hand and slathered the oil over her anus.

She moaned softly.

"Get on your knees, Karessa."

She did as he said. Max slid his cock inside her pussy. The tight, wet warmth made him groan. He thrust slowly while he pushed his thumb into her ass. She moaned again and arched her back.

"Okay if I play a little, babe?"

"Yessss."

He grinned. He loved when she stretched out her "yes." That meant she was totally into whatever he did to her.

He continued to thrust slowly. Removing his thumb from her ass, he replaced it with two fingers. He pumped them in and out, in and out, getting her ready to accept his cock.

Several moments passed before he couldn't wait any longer. Max withdrew his fingers from her ass, his cock from her pussy. Adding more oil to the head of his shaft, he pressed it against her anus. Instead of tightening, as he'd expected, Karessa pushed her buttocks back at him.

His little vixen wanted this as much as he.

"You want me to fuck your ass, don't you?"

"Yessss."

"Hard or easy?"

"Hard. Fuck me hard, Max."

He pushed his cock all the way inside her ass. Karessa arched her back even more and tossed back her head. "Oh, *God*!"

"Am I hurting you?"

"No, no. It feels incredible."

Slipping one hand beneath her stomach, he held her tighter against him. His thrusts picked up speed until he was hammering into her. Leaning over her body, he drove his tongue into her ear. She shivered.

"This feels . . . God . . . so good. I love having my cock in your ass."

"Harder, Max. Harder!"

Karessa's breaths became choppy and uneven . . . the sign of an impending orgasm. Sliding his hand farther down her stomach, he caressed her clit. "That's it, babe. Come for me while I'm fucking your ass."

Her body bucked beneath his. The contractions of her orgasm grabbed his cock. His balls tightened. Max thrust as deeply inside her as he could and came.

Remembering how to breathe took too much concentration. Instead, he followed Karessa as she stretched out on the blanket. He lay still, his shaft still inside her, while the aftereffects of his orgasm flashed through his body. Making love with Karessa was always special. This had been . . . overwhelming.

His heart clutched in his chest again. He'd never told a woman he loved her. Feelings so strong, so powerful, had to be expressed out loud. He kissed the curve of her ear. "I love you, Karessa," he whispered.

She lifted her head and gave him a gentle smile. "I love you, too."

Eight

aressa slipped her hands in the pockets of her slacks and stared at Max. He sat in the porch swing, his head resting on the back, his eyes closed. She took the time to study him. A few strands of gray were now mixed in his dark hair. The laugh lines at the corners of his eyes were more pronounced. Other than those two things, she saw no evidence of his aging. His stomach was still as flat as it had been five years ago, his chest and shoulders as broad. He'd always had a killer body.

The mustache was new. Full and thick, it almost covered his upper lip. Karessa had never kissed a man with a mustache. She couldn't help wondering how it would feel against her lips . . . and other, more intimate, parts of her body.

His chest rose and fell steadily as if he were asleep. He must be having a very sexy dream. His erection filled the crotch of his faded jeans.

Her mouth watered at the sight.

She cleared her throat. "Max."

Nothing. "Max," she said a bit louder.

Still nothing. Karessa wiped her palm on her slacks and touched his shoulder. His body jerked. He opened his eyes and whipped his head toward her. That laserlike silver gaze pierced her, making her catch her breath.

It should be against the law for a man to ooze so much sex appeal.

"Karessa." He frowned slightly. "What are you doing here?" "It's my house."

"It's the middle of the day. You're usually at work."

He sat up straighter, and winced. She had no doubt his jeans had cut into his erect penis. She turned her head for a moment to give him the privacy to adjust himself. Not wanting to tell him about her headache, she gave him another reason she'd come home in the middle of the day. "I wanted to talk to Kevin about one of the upstairs rooms. I've been leaving early and getting home late, so haven't had the chance to say more than a few words to him in passing."

She saw him stand out of the corner of her eye. Deciding it must be safe to look at him again, she once more faced him.

"Kevin went out to lunch. Can I help you with something?"

She wanted to get Kevin's opinion about renovating the bedroom she liked so much. Getting Max to look at it first only made sense. Friend or not, she doubted if Kevin would have Max working for him if Max wasn't good at his job. "Come with me please."

She led the way upstairs and down the hall. Outside the door to the bedroom, that strange chill flowed over her again. She paused and looked over her shoulder at Max. He was looking up at the ceiling, a slight frown on his lips. "What's wrong?"

"I feel cold air." His gaze met hers. "You didn't turn on the A/C, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"Weird."

With a shrug, Max reached past her to turn the doorknob. He pushed open the door and Karessa stepped across the threshold. He followed her into the room. Turning in a circle, he took in everything from the ceiling to the floor, including the furnishings. When he faced her again, a sensual light filled his eyes.

"It's sexy and feminine, just like you."

She slipped her hands in her slacks pockets, unsure how to respond to his observation. Deciding it was best to ignore it, she returned to the subject of the house. "I've thought about making it my bedroom. Aunt Grace's room is nice, but this room is . . ." She stopped, not knowing what words to use to describe how she felt about this room.

Max nodded. "I understand." He took one step closer to her. "What do you want me to tell Kevin?"

"There's a small sitting room next to this one. I'm wondering if it can be turned into a bathroom. I'd like to make a door in the wall there . . ." She pointed to the wall on her left. "So it could be my private bath."

"I doubt that would be a problem, but it depends on the plumbing. Eddy can tell you better than I can." He slipped his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. "This is the first time I've been upstairs. Kevin assigned me to the kitchen." He gazed at her again. "It doesn't look like it needs much work. It's almost as if . . . "He stopped.

Karessa knew what he'd been about to say. "It's almost as if someone lives here."

"Yeah." Walking over to the dresser, he ran his fingers along the polished wood. "No sawdust. Have you cleaned in here today?"

She shook her head. "The door was padlocked. I couldn't find the key, so the plumber unscrewed the hinges for me over a week ago, but I haven't cleaned anything. I don't know how long it had been locked up."

"Even with the door shut, dust would seep in over time."

Cool air flowed over Karessa, making her shiver. She wrapped her arms across her breasts.

"You okay?" Max asked.

She nodded. "I just had a chill."

Eyes narrowed, he walked up to her. "Are you sure that's all?"

"Of course I'm sure. I \dots " She stopped when a sharp pain passed through her forehead. She winced and pressed her hand against her temple.

"You have a headache, don't you?" Max asked.

"It isn't bad."

"Yeah, right." He stepped behind her and laid his hands on her shoulders. "Let me help—"

She jerked away from him. "I told you not to touch me."

She heard him release a heavy sigh as she faced him again. "I wasn't making a pass, Karessa. I only want to help."

"I don't need your help."

"Max?" Kevin called out. "You upstairs?"

"Yeah," Max said, his gaze still on Karessa's face.

She turned to the door. Kevin walked down the hall toward them. When he reached the doorway, he stopped in his tracks. His eyes widened and his eyebrows disappeared into his hair.

"Whoa!"

"What's wrong?" Karessa asked.

"I can't . . . go in there."

"What do you mean, you can't come in here?" Max asked. "We're in here."

"Yeah, but . . ." Eyes still wide, he quickly scanned every corner of the room. "I can't do it, man."

"I want this room renovated, Kevin."

He held up both hands, palms toward her. "Sorry, Karessa. I'll do the rest of the house, but I won't do that room."

She frowned. "But that doesn't make sense."

"I know it doesn't, but . . ." He stopped again. "Sorry."

He turned and quickly walked back down the hall toward the stairs.

Max looked at Karessa. "What the hell was that about?"

"I don't know. Eddy wouldn't come in here either. He took the hinges off so I could open the door, but wouldn't come in here with me."

She didn't understand why Max would enter this room when no one else would. Something was stopping everyone else from crossing the threshold.

"If you really want this room renovated, I'll do it."

Karessa bit her bottom lip. She hated to ask Max for anything. Perhaps some of Kevin's other employees would do the work for her. "You can't do it by yourself."

"Sure I can." He flashed her a crooked grin. "I'm good."

His teasing made her chuckle. She'd always loved his quick wit and sense of humor.

She'd loved so many things about him... until he'd betrayed her.

"I'll think about it. The downstairs is the most important. This can wait."

Max nodded. "Let me know when you decide."

"So you plan to be in Fort Worth awhile?"

"At least until your house is done."

She stared at him, unable to drag her gaze away. He was just so . . . male. He filled the room with his presence, his very essence. His height, the breadth of his shoulders, his husky

body, that sexy mustache . . . everything about him oozed testosterone.

Damn hormones.

Another jab of pain in her head made her wince. Max took a step closer to her. "Karessa, let me help you. I remember when you had those headaches. A massage always helped you feel better."

Yes, it had, because a massage had always led to sex. An orgasm had been the best pain fighter she'd ever discovered. "I just need to lie down."

"The guys will start working again soon. You won't get much rest with all the noise."

"I'll be fine."

Max frowned. "You always were stubborn."

The pain kept her from responding to him. Instead, she turned toward the door. "I have to lie down."

Two feet from the doorway, a cold gust of air washed over her...colder than anything she'd felt so far in the house. Karessa gasped and stopped in her tracks. She didn't realize that Max was right behind her. He bumped into her back and grabbed her upper arms.

"What's wrong, Karessa?"

She drew in a sharp breath, but not from the cold. Max's hands on her quickly brought forth yearnings she'd tried to forget. How she'd love to lean back against him, have his arms slide around her waist, his hands glide up to cradle her breasts. She'd gained weight in the last five years. She wondered if Max would like her fuller breasts.

His warm breath ruffled the hair over her ear. "Karessa," he whispered as he squeezed her arms.

The feel of his cock brushing her buttocks gave her the strength to pull away from him. "Excuse me."

She hurried down the hall to her bedroom, eager to be away from Max as quickly as possible.

62

Mary crossed her arms beneath her breasts. "I *told* you she still loves him."

"Yeah, you did." The satisfaction in her eyes made Aaron frown. "You don't have to be so smug about it."

"After a century, you should know when I'm right." She flopped down on the bed, resting on one elbow. "Unfortunately, being right isn't getting them back together."

"Don't you think Karessa's dreams are helping?" Aaron asked. He sat on the bed next to his wife, as close as he could get.

"They're helping her to remember, but they aren't helping her to forgive him."

"Maybe whatever he did to her is too much to forgive."

Mary tapped one fingernail against her teeth. "There has to be a way to find out why she's so angry at him. I'd have a better chance of helping her get over it if I knew exactly what he did. I tried to get them to stay in here so they'd talk longer, but they ignored me."

"Too bad we can't just ask them what happened between them."

"That's true."

She lay back on the bed and linked her fingers together on her stomach. Her position let Aaron clearly see the soft swell of her breasts inside her neckline. His mouth watered with the desire to run his tongue over her creamy flesh.

"Aaron, stop," Mary said softly.

He raised his gaze back to her face. Sadness filled her eyes. "Stop what?"

"We can't be together. Stop looking at me like you want to make love to me."

"I do want to make love to you. I want to kiss you, touch you, lick every inch of your skin . . ."

Mary abruptly sat up, her back to him and her head lowered. Aaron bent down so he could see into her face. "Mary, we can still pleasure each other."

"I know that. We've been masturbating for almost one hundred years."

"Do you think that's wrong?"

She pushed her hair back from her face and turned to look at him. "No, I don't think it's wrong. I know it pleases you when I touch myself. I enjoy looking at you, too, when you touch yourself." Tears flooded her eyes. "I'm just tired, Aaron. I want to be with you. I don't want to rely on my own hand for an orgasm."

Her tears made him feel helpless. "Mary—"

"They're the key, Aaron. Karessa and Max are the key to breaking the spell. I know that. That's why we have to get them back together."

If she felt so strongly about it, then he'd do everything he could to help. "What do you want me to do?"

Nine

June 27, 1925—He kissed me today. It was the first kiss I have ever received from a boy. I was so nervous, I did not know what to do. I was afraid he would think me foolish. He only smiled and kissed me again.

It was wonderful.

Mrs. Lewis knows how I feel about him. She helped me set up a meeting with him by telling my mother she needed my help with a project at her home. My mother gave Mrs. Lewis what I call "the look," but Mrs. Lewis did not back down like most people do. She said it would be good for me to get out of the store for a while and earn a little spending money. With so many people in the store, my mother could not refuse.

I did go to Mrs. Lewis' house and help her finish sewing her new curtains, but left long before my mother expected me back at the store. That is when I met him by the creek. We were totally alone and talked for almost an hour. He said he would meet me again the first chance he could. Then he kissed me. I thought I might faint, the feelings inside me were so strong. They became even stronger when he touched my breast.

My mother has taught me it is wrong to let a boy touch me before marriage. This did not feel wrong. I wanted him to touch me, and I would have let him touch me any way he wanted to. Being a perfect gentleman, he pulled back with a smile and said we needed to leave before my mother came looking for me.

I know she suspected something. She did not ask any questions, but I could tell by the anger in her eyes. I refuse to let her destroy my happiness. I have found the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. I will not let my mother or anyone else stop me from being with him.

I hid the money Mrs. Lewis gave me in my secret place. I know my mother searches my room. She tries to be careful, but I can tell that items have been moved. She does not like me having money of my own and has often asked how much I have. I will not tell her. I will not tell her about any of the things I have found hidden in the house.

Some of those things make me wonder all over again if she is truly my mother.

A soft knock on the door made Karessa look up from her greatgrandmother's diary. "Yes?"

Max opened the door and peered inside. "Feeling better?" "Yes, thank you."

"May I come in?" He held up two plastic bags. "I thought you might be hungry."

The scent of lemon chicken and pork chow mein drifted to her nose. Her mouth watered and her stomach growled. Her pounding head had kept her from eating any lunch.

She didn't want to accept anything from him, but her taste buds had other ideas. "What did you buy?"

He grinned. "A little of almost everything. I didn't have any lunch."

"Me either."

"So, may I come in? There isn't much of a place to eat downstairs."

That was true. The downstairs and most of the upstairs were demolished. Her room and the bedroom at the end of the hall remained the exceptions. If Max had been good enough to go out and get their supper, she could at least provide a clean place to eat it. "Come in."

He entered the room and closed the door behind him. Although spacious, Aunt Grace's bedroom seemed so much smaller with Max in it. Karessa moved over to make room for him on the bed. He sat down, one bent leg resting on the bed, and began unloading white cardboard containers from the sacks.

It seemed so right to have him in her bedroom.

She looked down at the diary still open on her lap. Thinking about her few months with Max hurt because of the way their relationship had ended, but she also had many fond memories from their time together. She'd loved him desperately, and had no doubt that he'd loved her, too . . . at least, in his own way.

What happened between them had taught her a lot about men and love. She didn't trust as quickly now. It made it easier for her to determine whether or not to give a man more than one date.

It also made life lonely.

Max held out a bottle of water to her and a long, wrapped straw. "Here you go. I stopped at the convenience store a couple of miles from here so I could get a straw that would fit in your bottle."

He remembered she liked to drink from a straw. The knowledge made her swallow hard. It was a simple thing, but something that had been important to her and he remembered. "Thank you."

His smile made her breath catch. Dropping her gaze from his handsome face, she reached for one of the white containers. She opened it to find her favorite—lemon chicken.

Max handed her a plastic fork as he peered into her container. "Figures you'd find the lemon chicken right off the bat."

"I have a good nose."

"At least save me a bite."

"Maybe," she said with a grin.

He opened another container and scooped up a forkful of broccoli and beef. "I guess I should've picked up some paper plates."

"This is fine. It's like a picnic."

She looked at him when she realized what she'd said. His eyes narrowed and turned sultry. "Picnics can be a lot of fun."

Karessa cleared her throat and took another bite of lemon chicken, deciding it would be better to say nothing to that comment.

Max ate silently for a few moments before he gestured to the diary. "Whatcha reading?"

"My great-grandmother's diary."

Karessa nodded. "It was among the papers from Aunt Grace. I remember her mentioning it several years ago. She never read it. I can't imagine why not. It's part of our family's history."

"Your Aunt Grace was a bit of a rebel."

"You're telling me?"

Max chuckled. "I liked her. She was wild and fun and didn't worry about what anyone thought of her. She followed her desires, no matter where they took her."

"Yes, she did."

She couldn't help the sad note that crept into her voice. Max must have noticed it. He lightly touched her knee. "You miss her, don't you?"

"Very much."

"Look at it this way—she's driving everyone crazy in heaven."

The mental picture of Aunt Grace telling God exactly what to do made her laugh. "I have no doubt of that."

She took another bite of her chicken. Max nudged her container with his fork. "You really aren't going to share that, are you?"

"Only if you'll share your pork chow mein."

"Deal."

She switched containers with him and dug into the noodles and meat dish. She'd taken two bites before she realized how intimate it was to share food with him.

The rumble of thunder startled her. "Is it raining?"

"It wasn't when I came in, but there were a lot of dark clouds in the sky."

"I haven't turned on a TV in days, so I haven't watched the weather or the news. I've no idea what's happening in the world."

"Same old stuff. You haven't missed much by not watching the news. I'd imagine your great-grandmother's diary is a lot more interesting than anything on TV."

"I'm enjoying it very much." Karessa set her container on the nightstand and turned the diary toward Max. "Here. Read this sentence."

Max wiped his hands with a napkin before taking the book from her. "'Some of those things make me wonder all over again if she is truly my mother.'" Frowning, he looked back at Karessa. "She doesn't think her mother is really her mother?"

"She's written that several times in the diary, at least in what I've read so far. I'm eager to find out if that's actually true."

He laid the book on the bed. "If it is true, then your ancestors are completely different than you've believed your entire life."

"I hadn't thought about that."

"Does that bother you?"

Karessa considered his question for a moment. "No. I didn't personally know any of my ancestors earlier than my grandparents anyway. I've always been interested in my family history, but if I find out my great-great-grandparents were other than who I thought they were, it won't make any difference to me now."

A frigid gust blew over Karessa and she shivered. "Did you feel that cold air?"

"Yeah." Max frowned again as he looked around the room. "I've got to find that draft. I can't figure out why there would be cold air in this house when it was eighty degrees today."

Thunder rumbled again, closer this time. Max closed his empty container. "Sounds like that's my cue to get out of here. If it starts raining, my truck will get stuck in the mud."

"Thank you for bringing supper."

He smiled. "My pleasure. I'll put the rest of it in your refrigerator. The egg rolls are still in the sack. I figure you'll have one about . . . nine o'clock, right?"

"You remember a lot about my habits."

His smile faded. "Yes, I do," he said softly. "You might be surprised at all the things I remember about you, Karessa."

The tenderness in his voice made her want to reach out to him. Instead, she handed him her empty container and water bottle. "Good night."

He stared at her for a long moment before standing. "Good night."

At the door, he turned to face her. "This was nice. Thank you for having dinner with me." He opened the door, but didn't step

across the threshold. "I want you to know I regret hurting you. If I could go back, I'd do everything differently."

"But we can't go back, can we?" Karessa whispered.

"No, we can't. I'm sorry about that. I'm sorrier than I can ever tell you."

She watched him go through a blur of tears. She was sorry, too . . . sorry that the lure of riches had meant more to Max than her love.

62

A flash of lightning lit up the dark sky outside the dining room. Max glanced out the window at the churning clouds. If they ever opened up, it would rain buckets.

"Hey, Max."

He turned at the sound of Kevin's voice. "Yeah?"

"All of Tarrant County is under a tornado watch. I don't want to take any chances with my guys' safety, so I'm letting everyone go early."

"Sounds like a good idea."

"You wanna lock up for me?"

"Sure."

"Thanks. My wife freaks at thunderstorms. I gotta get home and protect her." He bobbled his eyebrows and grinned devilishly. "She's always *really* appreciative of my protection." He clapped Max on the shoulder. "Finish up and get out of here. I'll see you Monday."

"Okay."

Max thought about Kevin's words as he began gathering up his tools. Kevin's wife was afraid of thunderstorms. Karessa loved them. She wasn't crazy about lightning, but the more thunder and rain, the better. He could remember a couple of times when they'd lain together in bed after making love and listened to the storm raging around them.

He missed that closeness, that intimacy, with a woman. He could get sex anywhere. Making love to a woman was totally different than having sex. He didn't think he'd ever "made love" to any woman but Karessa.

It would be so easy to fall in love with her again. Knowing that she wouldn't return his feelings hurt all the way to his soul.

Sticking to their agreement hadn't been easy. He couldn't help being around her when she came home early. He also couldn't help worrying about her, like on Tuesday afternoon when she had a headache. All he'd wanted to do was take care of her. Chinese food had always made her feel better.

In the past, Chinese food had always been followed by love-making. Hell, *everything* had been followed by lovemaking. Karessa was an incredibly passionate woman.

Max sighed heavily as he dropped the hammer in his toolbox. He needed to get out of here. Being around Karessa and not having her was slowly eating away at him. He had to find that bond and get out of Fort Worth . . . and out of her life for good.

He had the perfect opportunity now to search. No one else was in the house. Karessa wouldn't be home for hours. Some rumbles of thunder and flashes of lightning wouldn't frighten him away.

Grabbing his hammer again, Max headed for the stairs and the bedroom at the end of the hall.

He stopped two feet past the doorway and looked at every corner, every wall. The bond had to be hidden in this room. It's the only room in the house that had been padlocked, meaning *something* of value was in here.

Starting at the wall to his left, Max began tapping the wooden

boards, searching for a hollow sound. There could be a false wall, or even a secret hiding place behind one of the boards.

He jumped at a crack of thunder. A moment later, the skies finally opened up. It sounded like large hail hitting the roof instead of raindrops. At least with the horrible weather, he could be assured that Karessa wouldn't be home early.

There. Max couldn't be sure over the sound of the pouring rain, but that tap sounded different from the others. This could be it, the break he'd been wanting for two weeks. He tapped again, a bit harder.

"What are you doing, Max?"

Ten

ax dropped his hammer and whirled around. Karessa stood in the doorway, water dripping from her hair and clothes. She'd obviously gotten caught in the rain.

Heart pounding at being caught, he bent over to retrieve his hammer. "Hey, Karessa."

"I asked you what you're doing."

He took his time standing so he could think of a good reason for him to be in this room. "Checking out the wall. You said you wanted a door here."

"I thought you were working in the dining room."

"I am." He shrugged. "I just thought I'd take a look in here." Before she could question him further, he quickly continued. "Looks like you could use some dry clothes."

She pushed her wet bangs back from her forehead. "It's pouring. I'm really sorry I didn't have Kevin renovate the garage first."

Lightning flashed outside the window, followed by a loud clap of thunder. He could see Karessa shiver. Despite the warm house, she had to be cold in her damp clothes. "Go ahead and change your clothes, Karessa. I'll get out of here." More lightning flashed. Karessa bit her bottom lip as she gazed at the window. "I think the storm is getting worse."

"Kevin said there's a tornado watch for Tarrant County."

She looked back at him. "You can't go out in this, Max. You'll be soaked before you get three steps away from the house. You'd better wait until the rain dies down."

He'd never refuse an opportunity to be alone with her. "All right." He gripped the handle of his hammer. "I can start on the door for you, if you want."

"No, not now."

She rubbed her forehead. Her action made Max notice the pinched look around her mouth, the darkness beneath her eyes. He hadn't noticed those signs earlier with his heart beating so hard. "Does your head hurt again?"

"A little."

"I'd say more than a little."

"I'm fine," she said, her tone sharp.

Max knew better than to push. He remained silent while she rotated her head on her neck and released a heavy breath. "I'm sorry, Max. I didn't mean to snap at you. It's been a hell of a week."

"No problem."

"I'm gonna change and lie down. Don't work in here right now, okay?"

"Sure. I'll go back to the dining room."

He watched her walk down the hall and into her bedroom, closing the door behind her. With a glance at the wall, he left the room. There would be time later to investigate what might be behind that wall.

"What are you doing, Mary?"

His wife leaned over the railing as she watched Max descend the steps. "Nothing, darling."

"Don't give me that innocent act. I've known you for over one hundred years."

She faced him. A mischievous smile lit up her face. "They're getting closer."

"Thanks to you. The storm is a lot more intense in here than it is outside."

"I only made it seem more intense for Karessa and Max. If they walk out to the veranda, they'll discover it isn't raining as hard as they think it is."

"But they won't walk out onto the veranda because they do believe the storm is worse than it actually is."

Mary grinned. "I know."

Aaron couldn't help chuckling. When his wife put her mind to something, there was no stopping her. "So, what's next? A tornado?"

"I can't change the weather, Aaron."

"But you can make them think there's a tornado."

"If I have to."

"I'm glad you're on my side, sweetheart."

62

Karessa had been in her bedroom for over an hour. Max figured she was probably taking a nap to try and get rid of her headache.

Wanting to be quiet so as not to disturb her, he had returned to painting the kitchen instead of working in the dining room. The lack of any noise from upstairs bothered him. The storm still raged outside, but he couldn't hear anything inside the house.

He needed to know for sure that she was all right.

He stood outside her bedroom and pressed his ear to the

door. Nothing. Max debated with himself for a moment about invading her privacy. Worry overruled etiquette. Turning the doorknob, he slowly pushed open the door.

Karessa lay on her back, one arm covering her eyes. He thought she was asleep, until she moved her arm and wiped her eyes with her hands.

Seeing her tears made his heart clutch in his chest.

"Hey," he said softly.

She turned her head his direction. "Hey."

"Still hurting?"

"Yeah."

Sympathy welled up inside him. He had to help her. She might try to push him away, but he was determined to do whatever he could to help her.

Max stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. She watched him with suspicion in her eyes as he walked toward her. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm gonna help you get rid of your headache. Turn over."

"You don't have to—"

"Don't argue with me, Karessa. A massage always helped you. Now turn over on your stomach."

A frown formed between her eyebrows, but she didn't argue. She rolled to her stomach, her face turned away from him.

Max sat on the side of the bed and laid his hands on Karessa's shoulder blades. One touch and he had no doubt why her head hurt.

"You're so tight." He pressed into the blades with his thumbs. She groaned. "Too much stress lately?"

"New exhibits."

He knew Karessa always worried about how the public would react to a new exhibit. Max thought she worried over nothing. All the museum's exhibits were well received and very popular. Her worrying was probably what made The Gage-Austin so popular and successful.

Success shouldn't make her suffer.

He slid his hands up to her shoulders. They felt like bricks instead of flesh. "Jesus, Karessa, don't you ever relax?"

"Rarely."

"That's apparent. I think you need some time on a tropical island somewhere with no phones and no obligations."

"Mmm, sounds good. When can I leave?"

Max chuckled. "As soon as I turn your body into a pile of mush."

Her cell phone chirped from the nightstand. Max felt her tense as if she were going to raise up to answer it. He pressed harder on her shoulders. "Uh-uh. Ignore it."

"But it might be—"

"I'm not letting you up. You can check the voicemail later."

"Don't pull your macho shit on me, Max."

He chuckled again. "Such language."

"Max—"

"Straighten your neck so I can get to it."

He grinned at her huff of breath. She'd never liked it when his opinion differed from hers. Tough. This was for her own good. If he had to pull his macho shit on her, he would.

She straightened her neck and propped her forehead on the pillow. "There. Are you happy?"

"Ecstatic, except your hair's in the way. You have one of those hair clip things?"

"In the bathroom, second drawer on the right."

"Lotion?"

"On the dress— Why do you want lotion?"

"Be right back," he said, ignoring her question.

When Max returned to the bedroom, he removed his work boots and left them by the door. The best way to work on Karessa would be to straddle her, and he didn't want to get her bedspread dirty.

Climbing back on the bed, Max gathered up Karessa's hair and clipped it high on her head. She wore a floppy T-shirt with a loose neck. He tugged it away from her neck before reaching for the bottle of lotion. Pouring a liberal amount in his palm, he rubbed his hands together to distribute the rose-scented liquid. He pressed his thumbs into her muscles as he spread the lotion over her shoulders and neck.

Her back rose and fell with a deep breath. "That's nice."

"I'm glad you approve."

"I shouldn't let you do this."

"Why not? I've given you lots of massages."

"I'm still angry at you."

"I know," he said softly.

"So why are you doing this?"

"Because I care."

She gave no response to his comment. That didn't surprise him. He doubted if Karessa would ever believe he cared for her, especially how deeply he cared.

He wanted to work on her back as well as her neck and shoulders, but the neckline of her shirt wouldn't stretch enough to let him do that. He poured more lotion in his hands, then ran them up under her shirt.

"Max!"

She started to raise her torso off the bed. One firm hand in the middle of her back stopped her. "Calm down. I'm not making a move on you." Deep pressure with his thumbs made her moan. "Your whole body is one big knot. You need to soak in a hot tub."

"The best I can do now is a bathtub."

"That's probably a good idea, after I work on you some more." He slid his hands all the way up her back, stopping only long enough to unhook her bra. Her body tightened when he unfastened it, but he disregarded her reaction and continued the massage. Up and down, side to side, he kneaded her flesh until the stiffness began to melt away.

Touching her was causing a completely different stiffness in his body.

Ignoring his growing erection, Max pushed her shirt up to her shoulder blades. A gentle downward tug on her jersey pants gave him access to her lower back. Her skin was already smooth; the lotion made it even softer. He hadn't touched her in five years, and planned to savor the feel of her flesh beneath his hands as long as he could.

Her breathing grew deeper...the sign of her beginning arousal. His massage was apparently affecting her as much as him. Max ran his hands all the way up to her neck, then made the return journey to her low back. He repeated the process over and over, dipping a bit farther inside her pants each time.

On the last pass, he palmed her buttocks. Karessa shifted on the bed, spreading her legs another inch. Taking that as a sign that she wanted more of his touch, he slid one thumb between her buttocks. She clutched the pillow and lifted her ass a few inches off the bed.

"You want this, don't you?" he asked as he circled her anus with his thumb.

She didn't answer with words, but her breathing increased. Max tugged her pants and panties down her legs to her knees. The sight of her ass made him groan. It was larger, fuller, than the last time he'd been with her. He could tell she'd gained weight. It seemed to be focused mainly in her breasts and ass.

Perfect.

His own breathing now as erratic as hers, Max pressed one hand against his bulging zipper while he caressed her anus. Dipping his thumb down to her pussy, he collected her cream and spread it over the puckered hole. Karessa whimpered. She began to pump her hips in time with his movements. Each time she raised her hips, his thumb slipped a bit farther inside her ass.

Touching her like this made his head swim, but it wasn't enough. Stretching out on his stomach, Max spread her buttocks wide and licked her anus.

"Yes," Karessa moaned. "Like that."

Her musky, womanly scent drifted to his nose as he moved his tongue around the small hole. He'd never been with a woman who smelled as sexy as Karessa. Or tasted as good. He made one pass over her labia with his tongue before darting it inside her ass.

"Mmm. That feels good."

To him, too. He'd be happy to tongue-fuck her ass all night long. He wanted to make her come over and over and over . . .

Karessa lifted her hips another few inches. "More. Oh, more, please!"

All too happy to comply with her wish, Max thrust his tongue harder, faster, into her ass as he pushed two fingers into her creamy pussy. Karessa froze for a moment, then moaned loudly and trembled. The walls of her pussy clamped onto his fingers, expanding and contracting through her orgasm.

Max gave her anus one last lick before he rose to his knees and flipped Karessa to her back. Her eyelids drooped. A satisfied smile touched her lips. She might be satisfied, but his cock was as hard as the handle of his hammer.

His gaze passed over her bare skin. With one finger, he touched the smooth flesh of her mound. "You still shave your pussy."

She nodded. "I like it this way."

Cradling her mound, he slid his fingers over her wet labia. "So do I." He watched her eyes drift closed while he touched her. "It's very sexy."

She opened her eyes again when he tugged her pants and panties off her legs. One jerk and his T-shirt joined her clothes on the floor. Looking into her eyes, he unbuckled his belt and unfastened his jeans. Her gaze dropped to his pelvis when he pushed his jeans and briefs past his hips.

His cock jerked when she licked her lips.

He'd love to feel that warm mouth wrapped around his shaft. Not now. Now, he needed to fuck her. Not able to wait one more second, he stretched out on top of Karessa and entered her with one stroke.

It was like coming home. He'd been with women—a lot of women. No other woman had ever fit so right in his arms. No other woman had ever made him feel whole, as if they were truly part of each other.

No other woman had ever made him feel love so deeply.

He kissed her. Her lips softened beneath his and parted ever so slightly. Slipping one hand behind her neck, he tilted his head to deepen the kiss. His tongue stroked her lips, her teeth, her tongue. He began to move his hips, driving his shaft into her creamy pussy. She responded eagerly, her arms wrapping around his neck while her hips rose to meet his hard thrusts.

Max knew he'd come much too soon if he kept up the frantic

pace. Holding Karessa tightly, he rolled to his back. "Ride me, sweetheart."

She pushed herself into a sitting position. Max inhaled sharply. Her new position buried his cock inside her, all the way to his balls. It wouldn't take more than a few thrusts for him to come.

Karessa pulled off her shirt and tossed it to the floor. Her bra followed. Max stared at full, creamy breasts with big pink nipples. Cradling the globes in his hands, he ran his thumbs over the hard nubs. "You're bigger."

"Mmm-hmm."

He pushed her breasts together and squeezed them. "They're beautiful." He looked up into her eyes. "You're beautiful."

She lifted her hips until only his head remained inside, then lowered herself to take all of him again. Max continued to knead her breasts as she rode him. Her movements were easy at first, but soon gained in speed. He wanted to let her control their lovemaking. The need to pump overruled his good intentions. Holding her waist, he lifted his hips to meet each of her movements. Pleasure shimmied down his spine, straight into his balls.

Before it could peak, Karessa threw back her head and arched her back. Her pussy grabbed his cock, milking it as she came.

Her orgasm brought on his own climax. Max shoved his cock as far inside her as he could and let the pleasure engulf him.

Seconds might have passed, or maybe minutes, while Max tried to breathe normally again. He watched Karessa's body, knowing the aftershocks of her orgasm still gripped her. She ran her hands up her thighs, over her stomach and breasts, and up into her hair. The clip fell silently to the bed. She shifted her body, drawing a soft groan from him.

The sound must have penetrated her senses, bringing her back to him. Lowering her head, she gave him her vixen's smile.

"Very nice."

Max squeezed her thighs. "Very."

Leaning forward, she braced her hands on his chest. "Now that the pressure is off, so to speak, don't you think it's time you told me the real reason you're here?"

Eleven

Guilt filled his eyes before he was able to mask it. Karessa waited for the excuse she knew he would give her.

"What do you mean, the real reason I'm here? I'm working for Kevin."

"Why?"

"I've developed a fondness for food. I like to eat."

"And that's the only reason?"

"What other reason could there be?"

Smiling without a trace of humor, Karessa shook her head. "Ah, Max. You were always so good at answering a question with a question." Her smile quickly vanished. "I don't like it. And I don't believe you lost all your money in bad investments. You're too smart to put all your eggs in one basket. You may have made some bad investments, but there's no way you're so poor you need to be working at a construction job to eat. There's something here, in this house, you want."

He lifted his hips. "Yeah. I want you."

"You can't distract me with sex, Max. I want the truth now."

She stared into his eyes, watching the different emotions flash through them. She saw guilt again, then concentration as if he were trying to think up another excuse. Then she saw acceptance. That's when she knew he would tell her the truth.

He rubbed one hand over his face. "I think there's a bond hidden in your house."

"A bond."

"Yeah. A bearer bond, worth about one hundred seventy-six million."

The amount staggered her. Her mouth dropped open. "One hundred seven— Are you sure?"

"Of the worth? Not exactly, but that's close. Am I sure it's here? All the research points to this house."

She should have known he was searching for treasure again. He hadn't come back to Fort Worth, to *her*. He'd come back for more riches.

It shouldn't hurt so much. Her heart should have hardened after the last time he'd trampled on it. But the heart could be incredibly stupid. She'd never gotten over Max, not completely. A part of her still loved him.

A bigger part of her wished he loved her, too.

"Well, I can certainly understand why you would pretend to be poor so you could work in this house. That's quite a prize."

He ran his hands over her thighs. "After what we just shared, the prize doesn't seem as important."

Karessa lifted her hips so his cock could slip out of her. "What did we share?" she asked as she climbed off the bed.

"We made love."

She laughed while slipping on her pants. "We didn't make love. We fucked."

Scowling, Max propped up on one elbow. "Don't degrade what we did, Karessa."

"I'm not degrading it. I'm simply stating a fact." Not bothering with a bra, she pulled her T-shirt over her head. "You're very

good in bed, Max. I needed a man and I used you." She glanced at him in time to see him wince. "Does that make you feel like a whore? Well, now you know how I felt when you fucked me to steal the map from the museum."

He scrambled off the bed, tugging up his briefs and jeans as he stood. "I didn't steal that map."

Karessa rolled her eyes. "Oh, excuse me. That's right. You didn't really 'steal' it. You only 'borrowed' it long enough to make a copy."

He huffed out a breath and ran his fingers through his hair, but said nothing.

"What, no comeback? No justification for being a thief? At least tell me it was worth it. Tell me that map led to the treasure you just *had* to have."

"No, it didn't lead to any treasure."

"So those months of taking advantage of me were for nothing."

"I didn't take advantage of you. Karessa, I loved you. I *still* love you."

She threw up one hand toward him, palm forward. "Don't you *dare* tell me you love me. You have no idea what it means to love someone."

"I know I love you, and always will."

Instead of his words bringing joy, they drove the knife a bit farther into her heart. "Forgive me if I don't believe you."

He took a step closer to her. "Karessa—"

"I want you to go now, but come back tomorrow morning. Taking that bond off my property would be grand theft, Max. Do you realize that? But I don't care. I'll help you find it and hand it to you in order to get you out of my life."

62

"You might as well stop the storm, Mary. It isn't working anymore."

"I know."

The sadness in her voice tore at Aaron's heart. The tears shimmering in her eyes made him long to draw her into his arms and comfort her.

The sound of a raging storm disappeared, to be replaced with the gentle patter of raindrops. Aaron stood next to his wife and watched Max walk out of the house. Her plan hadn't worked. He didn't doubt that Karessa and Max had made love in her bedroom, although he and Mary made sure they were as far away as they could get in order to give the couple privacy. Yet they had still argued. Whatever had happened between them in the past must be too much for Karessa to forgive.

"What now?" Mary asked in a soft voice.

"I don't know, sweetheart."

She turned to face him. Tears still glimmered in her eyes, but he also saw determination. "I won't give up, Aaron. They're the key to us being together."

"There's nothing else you can do, Mary."

"There's something. I just haven't figured it out yet. But I will. I promise you I will."

69

The air smelled fresh from last night's rain. Karessa inhaled deeply before taking a sip of her coffee. She'd come out to the veranda to enjoy the morning. Now sitting in the porch swing, she let her gaze sweep the acres of oak and pecan trees that she owned. The view was peaceful, comforting.

Unlike her emotions.

Her eyes still burned from crying and lack of sleep. She was angry at herself for letting Max get to her. She should have thrown him out of her house the very first day. But no, she had to fall for his sob story.

What a wimp.

She'd learned her lesson. Deep inside, she'd always hoped that Max would come back to her. She'd loved him enough to forgive him, to give him another chance. No more. She'd help him find his precious bond. She didn't care about the money. She didn't *need* the money. She just wanted him gone.

The sound of his pickup made her heart lurch. She hated that the knowledge she would see him soon made her body heat with desire.

Damn the man for being such an incredible lover.

She took another sip of coffee while he parked his truck. She watched him climb out of the black vehicle and saunter toward her. Her gaze fell to the impressive bulge behind his fly. Those tight, faded jeans left nothing to the imagination. Of course, she didn't need her imagination. She knew exactly how his cock looked, felt, tasted . . .

"Good morning," he said once he stood at the bottom of the steps.

Karessa cleared her throat. Damn hormones. "Good morning. There's coffee inside, if you want some."

"I'm fine." He climbed up one step, then stopped. "May I join you?"

Karessa nodded. Max sat beside her and stretched his legs out in front of him. She took another sip of her coffee before setting the mug on the arm of the swing. It was time to give up on silly fantasies and get down to business. She wanted to get back to her life . . . a life without Max.

"I spent a lot of time last night reading my great-grandmother's diary. I think we'll find the location of the bond in it."

"Karessa, you don't have to do this. I'll leave and—"

"No, we're going to do this. It would be a shame for you to have come all this way and not find your treasure."

"Damn it, you mean more to me than any treasure."

Ignoring his declaration, Karessa opened the diary. "Let me read part of this to you. It's dated August 2, 1925. 'I know my mother has been searching my room again. So far, she has not found this book, or the other treasures I've hidden. I must make sure she does not. I want to keep writing down my thoughts, my feelings, but I must be more careful.'" She looked up at Max. "This is where she starts writing poems."

"Poems?"

She nodded. "I assume she did that in order to hide things from her mother. This is the first one:

A bond broken, victim of deception,
The lead to a brand-new start.
Casual search, an image perfection,
A heinous conceited art.
Documented silver in the reflection,
Eternal never-ending see.
Faithful perform careful introspection,
A turn around is the key."

Max frowned slightly. "Do you understand what that means?" "No, but it's important. She wrote that she had hidden treasures. Perhaps the bond is one of those treasures."

"And perhaps the treasure is a fancy comb. She was a teenager when she wrote that."

"It's pretty profound for a teenager." She closed the diary. "I assume you've searched for the bond."

"A little. There are usually too many people around for me to search very much." $\,$

"Do you have an idea where it might be?"

"It could be in the bedroom that was locked. There had to

be something important in there or it wouldn't have been locked."

"True. So, let's go look."

She stood and headed for the front door, not bothering to see if he followed her. She had no doubt he would.

"Let me grab my toolbox, Karessa."

She waited for him at the foot of the stairs while he went into the dining room. Toolbox in hand, he followed her up the stairs to the bedroom at the end of the hall.

62

Aaron watched Karessa and Max approach the bedroom. "We know where that bond is."

"But there's no way to tell them." Mary turned to him, her eyes wide and shining with excitement. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if they found the bond *today*? You do realize what today is, don't you?"

"Of course I do. But I don't think finding the bond will bring them back together, Mary. She's too angry at him."

She stepped to the side when Karessa and Max entered the bedroom. "Eva killed us on this day. They'll find the bond and it'll bring them back together, which will let us finally be together."

"I wouldn't disappoint you for anything, you know that, but I'm not as sure as you."

"Trust me, Aaron. I know I'm right."

62

Karessa knelt on the floor and sat back on her heels. She didn't want to be in Max's way, but she intended to study everything he did. Hammer in hand, he stepped up to the wall next to the dresser. "You think it's in the wall?"

"It could be. I thought I heard a hollow sound yesterday when I tapped on this board."

"You mean, like a secret compartment?"

"Yeah."

Slowly, he moved down the board, gently tapping it with his hammer. Six inches from the floor, Karessa heard a distinct difference in the sound. She looked up as Max gazed at her. Silently, she nodded.

He maneuvered the claw into the edge of the board. The wood began to splinter as he tugged on it. He stopped and gazed at Karessa again.

"Go ahead. The board can be replaced."

Another tug with the claw and the board broke. Max tugged on the pieces until they fell to the floor. Karessa leaned forward and looked inside the wall at the same time as he.

Nothing. The wall was empty.

Max sat down, one foot resting on the floor. Karessa could clearly see the frustration in his eyes. "It's like a sickness with you, isn't it?"

He looked at her, his eyebrows drawn together in a frown. "What?"

"Treasure hunting. You're addicted to it, just like someone who smokes or drinks or gambles. The adrenaline rush gets you high."

He huffed out a breath and rubbed his mustache, yet didn't respond to her comment.

"What now?" she asked.

"I don't know." Rising to his feet, he offered her his hand to help her stand. She accepted it and let him tug her to her feet. "I have this gut feeling the bond is in this room."

"Then we'll keep looking."

Karessa walked over to the bed and sat down. Picking up the diary that she'd laid there earlier, she opened it to the next passage.

"My great-grandmother didn't write any more poems for several pages." She glanced at Max when he sat beside her, then returned her attention to the diary. "This is the next one:

Reach for one who reaches for you,
Gently touching, one becomes two.
Seeking that which seems invisible,
Breaking could be apprehensible.
Search with your heart and all will be clear,
The dark-haired hero saves the brilliant fair hair."

"May I see that?" Max asked.

Karessa handed the book to him. She waited while he reread the poem. "What do you think?"

"Hell, I don't know. I was never good at riddles."

"Me either. I guess we need to . . ."

Karessa stopped when a bright light hit her eyes. The sun shone through the window and reflected off the dresser's mirror. Blinking quickly, she moved her head a few inches to the side. "Wow, the sun is bright this morning."

Max looked up from the diary. His gaze traveled from her face to the mirror and back again. "The sun?"

"Yeah. The light reflected off the mirror and hit me right in the eyes."

"The light reflected . . ." He stopped. His eyes widened slightly, then he looked back at the diary. "'Seeking that which seems invisible, breaking could be apprehensible.'" He flipped back through the pages. "Where's that poem you read me this morning?"

"Here." She found the spot in the diary for him. "What is it?"

"'Documented silver in the reflection.' She's written about a reflection. A mirror has a reflection. And it's supposed to be bad luck, or 'apprehensible' to break a mirror."

Karessa inhaled sharply. "It's in the dresser."

"It's in the mirror." He continued to read the first passage. "'A turn around is the key.'" He raised his gaze back to Karessa's face. "It's *behind* the mirror."

Twelve

The heightened senses. The rush of blood to the brain. The instant erection. The sweaty palms. All the emotions that hit Max at once when he was about to find his treasure didn't happen. He didn't understand that. He always felt as if he'd soared to the highest peak of a mountain when he held the treasure in his hand.

Perhaps the high would hit him once he actually held the bond.

He pulled the dresser away from the wall, far enough so he and Karessa could step behind it. A weathered, warped piece of wood covered the back of the mirror. There was no telling how long that piece of wood had been in place.

"Do you need the hammer?" Karessa asked.

"Yeah."

Working carefully, Max pried the wood away from the dresser until he could slip the claw behind the nail heads. Karessa stood close to him, accepting the nails in her outstretched hand as he removed them.

He dropped the last nail into Karessa's palm. Gently, he pulled the wood away from the mirror.

A yellowed envelope fell to the floor.

He stared at it, unable to comprehend yet that he'd actually found the bond. Setting the piece of wood against the wall, he knelt and reached for the envelope. He stopped four inches from it and looked up at Karessa. She stood with her arms crossed over her stomach, staring at his face.

Tears glistened in her eyes.

"Looks like you found it," she said, her voice raspy.

"Yeah."

He continued to look at her, making no move to pick up the envelope. She frowned slightly. "Why are you waiting? Pick it up. It's what you want."

Releasing a sigh, Max picked up the envelope and stood. He held it in his right hand and tapped it against the palm of his left. He felt nothing. There was still no excitement, no blood rush, no pounding heart, no erection. He held a fortune in his hand, yet felt only disgust at himself.

Karessa was right. Hunting for treasure was an addiction. Or it had been . . . until now.

This was crazy. He should be salivating with the knowledge that he held a fortune. But he didn't want the bond. He only wanted Karessa.

"Here." He held the envelope out to her.

Her frown deepened. "What?"

"I don't want it. It belongs to you."

Her mouth slackened, then her eyes narrowed. "What are you doing, Max?

"The bond belonged to your great-grandmother. We found it in your house. It's legally yours."

She hesitated before taking the envelope from him. "I don't understand."

"I'm doing the right thing. Possibly for the first time in my life." Max hooked his thumbs into the front pockets of his jeans. "You're right, Karessa. I did have an addiction. I fucked up five years ago when I followed that addiction instead of my heart.

I never should have hurt you. I've regretted that every day since I left you." He let his gaze travel over her face . . . the face he'd seen every night in his dreams for five years. "God, I love you."

"Max—"

"I know you don't believe me. I understand that. And this . . ." He motioned toward the envelope. "isn't a con. I'm not trying to get you to feel sorry for me. I'm simply being honest." Hoping she would accept his touch, he reached out and slid one hand beneath her hair. "I don't need any more money. I could blow money like crazy and not spend what I've already made. Take the bond and cash it. Use it to add to your museum, or pay for the renovations to this house. Build five more houses just like it in different cities. Go on an around-the-world cruise. Whatever you want to do."

She remained silent for several moments. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I love you," he said without a hint of hesitation.

She stared into his eyes, clearly not sure whether or not to believe him. Words were easy. Perhaps she needed a different way to convince her of his feelings.

Max lowered his head until his lips touched hers. He kissed her softly, tenderly, trying to show her how very much he cared. When she didn't pull away from him, he slipped his other arm around her waist and pulled her against him. He deepened the kiss, using his tongue to circle the outline of her lips before dipping it inside her mouth.

A soft moan from her throat sent blood rushing to his cock.

Max stopped the kiss and rested his forehead against hers. "Now *that's* an addiction I'd gladly live with for the rest of my life."

She pulled back and looked into his eyes. "Just like that? No more hunger for the treasure hunt?"

"The only hunger I have is for you."

Karessa wanted to believe him. She desperately wanted to believe him. Sharing her life with Max had been her dream five years ago. That dream had never completely died. But she had a hard time believing he could be "cured" of his addiction so quickly.

Stepping out of his arms, she held up the envelope so he could clearly see it. "We haven't opened the envelope yet. The bond might not be in here."

"That's true."

She raised the envelope a bit higher and gripped it with both hands. "So I could tear it in two, right now."

"You could. It's yours. You can do whatever you want."

No fear flashed through his eyes, no sign of anxiety. He truly didn't care if she tore the envelope in two.

"Max, are you serious? You'd let me tear this envelope, knowing there might be a bond in it worth millions?"

"There is no 'letting' you do anything, Karessa. I said the bond is yours and I meant that. I only want *you*, nothing else."

The love and sincerity in his eyes convinced her he was telling the truth. Tears sprang to her eyes again. This time, they were tears of happiness. "You really do love me?"

He smiled. "With all my heart."

Karessa wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. "I love you, too," she whispered.

62

"Aaron, I feel funny."

"Yeah, me, too."

"What's happening to us?"

"I don't know."

"Aaron!"

Max saw the two people materialize behind Karessa. "Jesus!" He immediately tugged Karessa behind him to protect her. "Who the hell are you?"

"You can see us?" the man asked.

"Yeah, I can see you." He gazed at the two people, noting their old-fashioned clothing. They looked like they'd stepped out of the early 1900s. "Who are you?"

The couple looked at each other. Max saw the woman's eyes fill with tears before she smiled at the man. "Aaron, it worked! I told you it would."

He held out a hand to her. She moved her hand slowly toward it, almost as if she were afraid to touch him. When she laid her hand in his, she audibly gasped.

"I can touch you," she whispered.

The man drew her into his arms. Max looked at Karessa. The confusion on her face told him she had no idea what was happening, either. "Who are these people?"

"I don't know. She called him 'Aaron.'"

"Yeah, well, that doesn't tell me anything." He looked back at the couple. "Excuse me for bothering you two, but who are you?"

Aaron released the woman after kissing her softly. "I know you have a lot of questions, Max."

"To put it mildly. And how do you know my name?"

He looked at Karessa. "We're your great-great-grandparents, Karessa."

Her mouth dropped open. "My . . . What?"

"We'll explain everything to you, I promise. But first \dots " He lifted the woman's hand to his mouth and kissed the back. "Mary and I need to \dots talk."

With that comment, they disappeared.

Max blinked. "Well, that was . . . interesting."

"Did we just see two people who claimed to be my great-great-grandparents?"

"Yeah, we did."

Karessa crossed her arms over her breasts. "Okay, I am officially freaked now."

"Don't be freaked."

"Max, they're ghosts! I have ghosts in my house."

"Hey." He took her in his arms and held her tightly to him. "It's okay, Karessa. They won't hurt you."

She wrapped her arms around his waist. "You probably think I'm silly."

"No, I don't think you're silly."

"Aren't you afraid at all?"

"Not really. Maybe I should be freaked, like you said, but it makes sense for ghosts to be here."

She raised her head from his chest and looked at him. "Why?"

"Haven't you sensed their presence?"

"I've sensed . . . something."

"So have I. I think they wanted us back together."

"What difference would it make to them?"

"I don't know. I guess we'll have to ask them."

A sexy moan filled the air. Karessa's eyes widened. "What was that?"

Max grinned. "I didn't think that guy had a 'talk' look in his eyes. He had more of an 'I-gotta-jump-her-bones' look."

"Do you think they're making love?"

"Absolutely."

"But ghosts can't make love."

"Who says?"

Another, louder, moan filled the air. Max released Karessa and took her hand. "Let's leave them alone."

He led her to her bedroom. After shutting the door, he tugged her to the bed. Lying on his back, he drew her into his arms. She snuggled up to his side, one leg between his.

"Feel better now?" he asked.

"Mmm-hmm."

"Still scared?"

"No. I think you're right, that they're . . . friendly. I mean, they could've hurt me a long time ago if they'd wanted to, right?"

"Right." He kissed the top of her head. "They'll talk to us later, I'm sure of it."

Her hand lazily caressed his chest. Content, he simply held her for several moments before speaking again.

"Marry me, Karessa."

Her hand stilled. Max continued before she could say anything. "Don't say yes or no until you talk to your lawyer about a prenup. I have no intention of us ever divorcing, but your assets need to be protected. I don't want you believing that I want to marry you simply to get that bond, or the museum, or anything else of value you own."

She tilted her head on his shoulder. "And to protect your assets, too?"

"No. Anything I own is yours. That's the way I want it."

"Maybe that's what I want, too."

Tilting up her chin, he kissed her softly. "Please, sweetheart. Talk to your lawyer. You're a wealthy woman. It's the smart thing to do."

He enjoyed the kiss so much, he kissed her again. And again. On the third kiss, he rolled her to her back. He deepened the kiss as he cradled one breast in his hand. A brush of his thumb made her nipple stand up as if begging for more.

Max was only too happy to give her more.

"I want to be inside you," he whispered against her ear.

Karessa rose from the bed. Max propped up on one elbow and watched her undress. With each article of clothing that fell to the floor, his cock got a bit harder.

She stood nude before him . . . legs parted, breasts thrust forward, hands lifting her hair from her neck. A Roman goddess couldn't be as beautiful as Karessa looked right now.

"You take my breath away," he said, his voice husky.

That vixen smile he loved tilted up the corners of her mouth. "You're wearing way too many clothes."

"I can fix that."

Max scrambled off the bed while Karessa climbed up to the middle on her knees. Mere seconds later, he was as nude as she.

A devilish light twinkled in her eyes. "That's quite a boner you have there."

He stroked his hard cock. "The better to fuck you with, my dear," he growled.

Karessa laughed at his Big Bad Wolf imitation, but the laughter quickly faded from her voice. "Make love to me, Max."

He returned to the bed, moving on his knees to within a few inches of her. Taking her hands in his, he linked their fingers together. He held their hands out from their bodies as he leaned closer and kissed her.

The barest mingling of breaths. A brush of tongue. A gentle nibble on her bottom lip. Max didn't simply kiss her; he worshipped her mouth. He moved his mouth one way, then the other. Seconds passed, perhaps minutes, as he continued to kiss her every way he possibly could.

She tightened her fingers on his when the kiss ended. "Wow," she breathed.

Max nipped the skin beneath her ear. "I love kissing you."

"And you do it so well."

"Then I'll do it some more."

He covered her lips with his again. Releasing her hands, he wrapped his arms around her and slowly lowered her to the bed. She clasped his back as he stretched out on top of her. He slid his cock inside her pussy with one long stroke.

The silken glide. The snug clasp of her flesh around his shaft. The soft sucking sound her pussy made when he withdrew his cock. Max pumped into her slowly, building their pleasure a little at a time. She'd asked him to make love to her, and that's exactly what he planned to do. He didn't increase the speed of his thrusts, not even when Karessa's fingernails dug into his butt.

"Harder, Max."

He darted his tongue into her ear, and smiled when he felt her shiver. "No. Nice and easy, Karessa." He cradled her cheek and kissed her. "Let me love you nice and easy."

He watched her as he continued moving inside her. Her eyes drifted closed. Her mouth slackened. Her neck arched. Seeing that long column of ivory skin made Max long to bite, to suck. Wrapping his hand in her hair, he tilted her head farther back and bit her neck. He soothed the bite with his tongue, then nipped her again.

"*Max*! Oh, *yes*!"

The walls of her pussy clamped around his cock. Her climax sent him over the edge with her. Slipping one hand beneath her buttocks, he held her tightly to him while the pleasure slithered down his spine and into his balls.

Karessa slid her hands up and down Max's spine. A fine sheen of perspiration coated his skin. She could feel his heart pounding against her breasts, his warm breath on her neck. The closeness, the sharing of their bodies, their hearts . . . she'd missed it so much.

He raised his head and smiled at her. "Hi."

She returned his smile. "Hi."

"Do you have any idea how much I love sex?"

His goofy grin made her laugh. "Probably as much as I do."

"Then I think we'll have a long and happy life together."

She lightly ran her fingernails down his back. "I have no doubt of that."

Karessa sighed when he kissed her. The man certainly knew how to use his tongue to its best advantage...in more ways than one.

He dropped a peck on the tip of her nose. "Do you think we should get dressed and look for the ghosts?"

"I guess we should. Darn it."

Max chuckled. "I promise we'll make love again today. Probably more than once."

Karessa grinned. "Goody."

He swiped his tongue across both her nipples before he rose from the bed. Rolling to her side, she watched him pull on his clothes. After he fastened his jeans, he kissed her once more. "I'll be right back."

Once he'd left the room, Karessa's gaze fell to the yellowed envelope she'd laid on the nightstand. Curiosity made her reach for it. Sitting up, she slid her thumb beneath the flap and withdrew the contents.

Thirteen

Mary sighed when Aaron's tongue slid over her clit. She'd love to lie here all day and make love, but knew they had to talk to Karessa and Max. Tunneling her fingers into his hair, she tugged gently. "Aaron, stop."

"Uh-uh. Not until you come again."

"I've already come three times." She tugged a bit harder, until he raised his head. "We've been making love for almost two hours."

He grinned devilishly. "Damn, I'm good."

Mary laughed. "Yes, you definitely are. But we have to talk to Karessa and Max. They have to be wondering where we are."

"I hate it when you spoil my fun."

He rose from the bed and helped Mary to stand. Her legs felt like limp noodles. She grabbed his arms to keep from falling.

"You okay, sweetheart?" Aaron asked, concern in his voice.

"I'm fine. Just weak. I'm not used to having so many orgasms in such a short time."

"We have a lot of time to make up for."

"Not all in one day, Aaron."

"You're determined to spoil my fun, aren't you?"

She pulled his head down so she could kiss him. "We'll have more fun later, all right? Let's get dressed and talk to Karessa and Max."

62

Hand in hand, Mary and Aaron walked down the stairs. A knock on Karessa's bedroom door had produced no response, so Mary suggested they check downstairs. They followed the sound of conversation to the veranda. She spotted them first, sitting on the swing.

Max stood. "Hello again."

"Hello." Mary smiled to herself. She liked Max's manners. He would be so good to Karessa.

Her gaze slid to Karessa's face. It was almost like looking into a mirror. There were subtle differences in their looks, but even if Mary hadn't been sure of Karessa's identity, she'd know they were related.

Mary tugged Aaron closer to the swing. "We have so much to tell you, it's hard to know where to start."

"Mary, here, sit next to Karessa. I'll get a couple of folding chairs for Aaron and me."

"I'll help you," Aaron said.

Once the men left, Mary sat on the swing next to her great-great-granddaughter. "I can feel your tension. Are you afraid of me?"

"I'm . . . cautious."

"I understand that. Finding two ghosts in your house must be mind-boggling."

"It was, but Max told me I shouldn't be afraid."

"Max is a wonderful man, Karessa. He loves you deeply. Don't ever doubt that." "How do you know?"

"I just do. Trust me, please." She straightened her skirt over her legs. "I'm sure you're confused about a lot of things."

Karessa chuckled. "Yeah, you could say that. You two look \dots human."

"I can't explain that part. I assume it's so we can communicate with you."

Max and Aaron stepped back outside, each carrying a folding chair. Mary remained silent until the men had set up their chairs and sat down, then she looked back at Karessa. "Would you like to ask questions, or should I simply start talking?"

"I do have a question. You said your name is Mary and you're my great-great-grandmother. But her name was Eva."

"I *am* your great-great-grandmother." She glanced at Aaron, unsure whether or not to be brutally honest with Karessa. His nod gave her the encouragement to continue. "Eva shot Aaron and me on this day in 1910."

Karessa gasped. "She shot . . . Why?"

"Because she was obsessed with Aaron and wanted him for herself. She shot us and took our baby to raise as her own."

"Katie?"

Mary nodded. "You've been reading her diary. Have you finished it?"

"Not yet."

"Katie always suspected Eva wasn't her birth mother, but could never prove it. Eva had bewitched practically everyone in the whole town. No one ever looked for us after we died. Aaron and I couldn't figure out why, until we found Eva's book of spells."

"Book of spells?" Max asked.

"She was a witch. Katie looked for the book, but could never find it. Eva kept it well hidden." She turned back to Karessa. "She had the book with her in the carriage house the night she died. Aaron and I don't know exactly what happened since we could never leave the house, but a fire started in the carriage house in 1928. That's how Eva was killed, in the fire. It was a horrible way to die."

"After what she did to us, she deserved to die a horrible death," Aaron said bitterly.

"No one deserves to die so painfully, darling."

Aaron looked at Max. "Mary always sees the good in people."

Max shifted his gaze from Aaron to Karessa. "Sounds like her great-great-granddaughter inherited that trait."

Karessa smiled at Max, then turned back to Mary. "You mentioned a carriage house?"

"Yes. This house became Katie's after Eva's death, but she decided not to rebuild the carriage house after the fire. Of course, by that time, automobiles were used for travel more than horses and a carriage house wasn't necessary."

Karessa rubbed her forehead. "This is all . . . It's a lot to try and absorb."

"I know, but Aaron and I want you to know everything."

"And you've been here all this time? Ever since you \dots died?"

"Yes. She put a curse on us that we'd be bound to this house forever, unable to touch each other. We don't know how, but the curse was broken when you and Max declared your love."

Karessa and Max looked at each other. Mary smiled at the obvious love—and lust—in their eyes. They were made for each other, just like Aaron and her.

"So, what happens to you now?" Max asked.

"We don't know for sure," Aaron said. "We're . . . in limbo, I guess you'd call it."

"We do know that we won't stay here," Mary continued. "This is your house, Karessa. Aaron and I don't belong here anymore."

"But you won't go yet, will you? I still have so many questions. How many people get to actually talk to their great-grandparents?"

"I'm sure we can stay awhile longer." Mary smiled. "What else would you like to know?"

62

Karessa jotted down the last thing Mary told her. She'd been writing for well over an hour. Her hand throbbed from writer's cramp, but she wasn't about to stop. She wanted every bit of information she could get about her ancestors before Mary and Aaron left.

Shortly before eleven o'clock, her stomach reminded her quite loudly that she hadn't eaten anything today. Embarrassed by her rumbling tummy, she glanced up at Mary.

Her great-great-grandmother smiled. "You are hungry."

"Starved." She bit her bottom lip. "Can you . . . eat?"

Mary shook her head. "No. But Aaron and I can take a walk among the trees while you and Max have lunch. We haven't been able to step off the veranda for many years."

"Actually, Mary," Aaron said, "it's time for us to go."

"Oh, no, not yet." Karessa clutched her notebook. "I still have questions."

"I'm afraid we don't have a choice, Karessa. Mary and I are being . . . called." He stood and held out a hand to his wife. "We have to go, sweetheart. Are you ready?"

She placed her hand in his. "As long as I'm with you, I'm ready for anything."

Tears sprang to Karessa's eyes. She could almost feel the love

these two people shared. She stood as Mary did, and so did Max. "May I hug you?"

Mary smiled tenderly. "I insist on it."

Karessa hugged her fiercely, then faced Aaron. He gave her a loving smile before hugging her, too. Turning to Max, he held out his hand. "Take care of her."

"I plan to," Max said, shaking Aaron's hand.

Karessa leaned back against Max's chest when he slipped his arms around her waist. She watched Mary and Aaron climb down the steps and walk toward the grove of trees. Tiny stars glittered around them. Slowly, her great-great-grandparents faded from view until they disappeared. The stars floated in the air a few seconds, then whooshed up toward the sky.

Max kissed her temple. "I wish they could've stayed longer." "So do I."

"They didn't have a choice, babe. They had to go when they were called. But they're together. That's what counts."

Her tummy rumbled again. Max chuckled in her ear. "I think I'd better feed you before your stomach starts registering on the Richter scale."

62

Karessa spread lotion over her hands as she watched Max undress for bed. She couldn't help the sigh that escaped her lips when he pushed his briefs past his hips. The man was so gorgeous.

He slid between the sheets, facing her, and bunched up his pillow under his head. Amusement twinkled in his eyes. "I heard that sigh. Were you ogling my body?"

"Yes."

"Good." Hooking the top sheet with one finger, he pulled it down to her waist. "That means I can ogle yours, too."

"Before we get past the ogling stage, I need to talk to you." He cradled one bare breast. "Can I suck on your nipples first?"
"No."

She picked up the envelope containing the bond from the nightstand and held it out to him. "Open it."

Max frowned. "I don't need to open it. The bond is yours."

"Please. I want you to see what's inside."

He hesitated several moments before sitting up and taking the envelope from her. Karessa watched him withdraw the antique bond and unfold it. He read over it, then refolded it and put it back inside the envelope.

"Okay, I saw what's inside. I don't care."

"Did you notice the name of the railroad?"

"Yeah. Tanner and Watson. Why?"

"Tanner and Watson was a small railroad that was bought out by another railroad."

"And that one was bought out by a major transportation company, which was eventually acquired by Tharwood Energy."

"Right. If this bond had been issued by Tanner and Watson, it probably would be worth close to \$176 million. But the name of the railroad on my bond is *Tonner* and Watson."

"Tonner and Watson?" Max asked, confusion in his voice.

"A smaller railroad that went out of business in 1904. The owner disappeared with all the investors' money."

"Which means . . ."

"That bond is worthless."

Max tapped the envelope against his palm. "Worthless."

Karessa nodded. "Worthless as far as money. It's important to me because I'll put it on display at the museum." "And you know all this . . . how?"

"I run a museum, Max. I've studied history extensively, especially Texas history."

Max sat up straighter on the bed. "So this bond will make a great exhibit in your museum, but nothing else."

"Right."

He handed the envelope back to her. "I'm glad."

That wasn't exactly what she expected him to say. "You're *glad* the bond is worthless?"

"Yeah. Now you know for sure I want to marry you because I love you, not because of your money."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he continued before she had the chance to say anything. "I know you had doubts about me. Maybe you still do. But I'll spend the rest of my life proving how very much I love you. I promise you that."

Karessa believed him. The love shining in his eyes was all the proof she needed of his feelings. "I love you, Max," she whispered.

He smiled. "I like the way that sounds." Leaning forward, he kissed her softly. "I also like the way Karessa Hennessey sounds. Any chance we can make this a short engagement?"

"I have a couple of conditions about this engagement."

One eyebrow arched. "Conditions?"

"I want to borrow your Thomas Abernathy painting to display with his other paintings at the museum."

"Deal."

"And . . . "

Max frowned. "There's more?"

Karessa nodded. "When you gave me a massage last night, you mentioned me needing time on a tropical island. I want to go to some fabulous resort and be totally pampered on our honeymoon."

He smiled. "Deal on that one, too."

"In that case . . ." Wrapping her arms around his neck, Karessa tugged him closer to her. "I think a short engagement is an excellent idea."

About the Author

Lynn LaFleur was born and raised in a small town in Texas close to the Dallas/Fort Worth area. After living in various places on the West Coast for twenty-one years, she is back in Texas, seventeen miles from her hometown. Lynn also publishes with Ellora's Cave and when not writing at every possible moment, she loves reading, sewing, gardening, and learning new things on the computer.

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