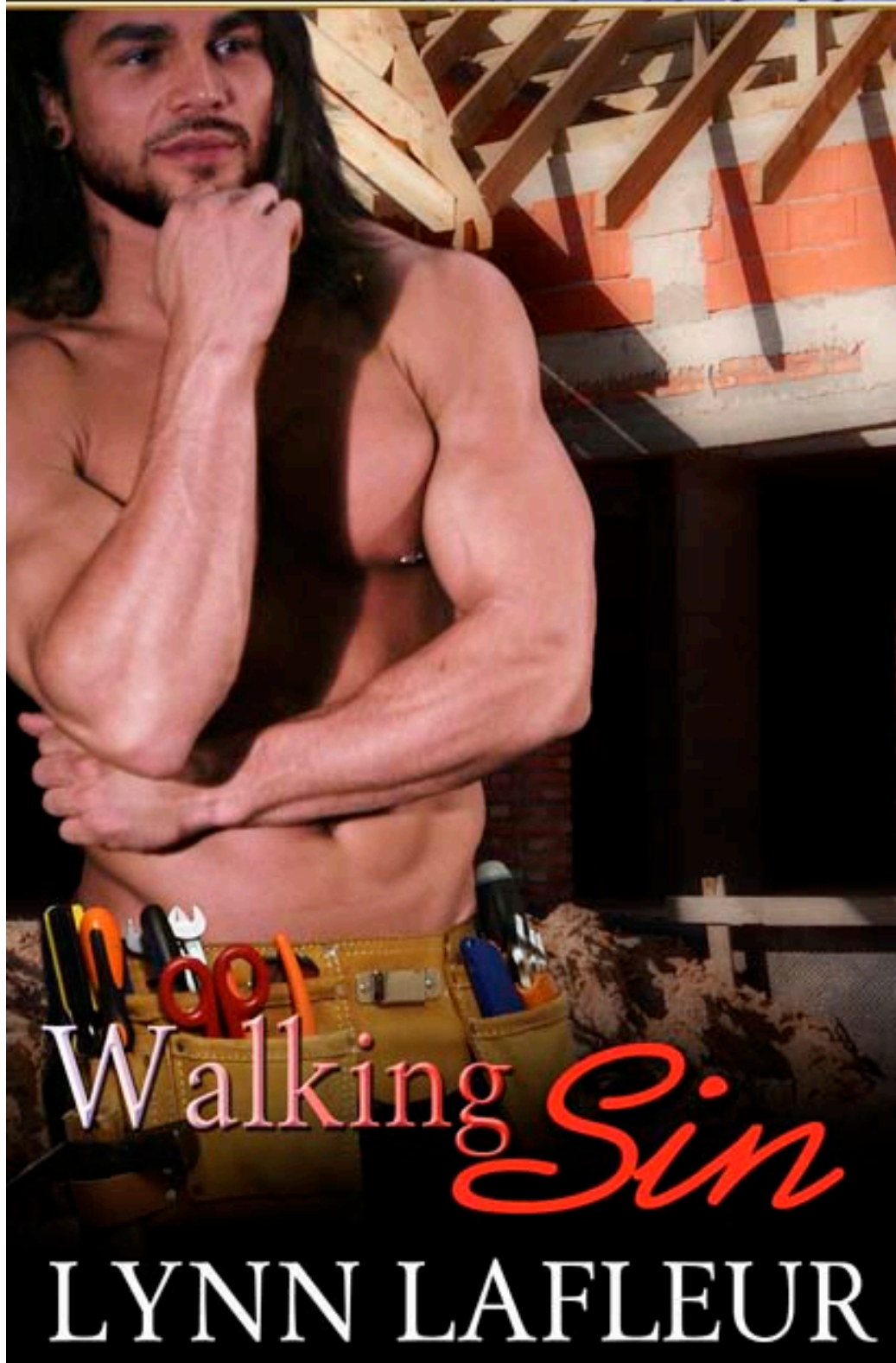


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Walking Sin

Lynn LaFleur

Third in the Men With Tools series.

Dax Coleman has it all—money in the bank, a job he loves, and an address book filled with the names of women who only want a good time. He's never had a problem charming a woman into his bed. He meets his match when Kelcey Ewing comes to Lanville. A former roommate of his brothers' girlfriends, Kelcey is as serious as Dax is carefree. He considers it his personal goal to loosen up Kelcey so she has fun, preferably in his bed.

An unforgettable incident in her life has left Kelcey wary and unable to have a normal relationship with a man. She decides she's destined to be alone, until Dax's lovemaking wakes up her senses.

Kelcey's unwilling to risk a broken heart with a man she considers walking sin. It's up to Dax to prove to Kelcey his love for her is real and will last the rest of his life.

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Walking Sin

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WALKING SIN

Lynn LaFleur

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Chapter One

Dax Coleman propped his cue stick on the floor and wrapped both hands around it. He watched while Kelcey Ewing studied the table, her eyebrows furrowed in concentration. Obviously new at playing pool, she was overlooking a shot he could have easily made. He almost pointed it out to her, but stopped before saying anything. Kelcey hadn't exactly been friendly toward him. She answered when he spoke to her, but didn't put out any effort to get closer to him. Alaina – his brother Rye's girlfriend – told him his reputation as a womanizer turned Kelcey off completely.

The reputation exaggerated the number of women he'd fucked. Yeah, he enjoyed sex. He went out with women who enjoyed sex too. His dates usually consisted of women who wanted nothing more than an orgasm, which had always worked for him. That didn't mean he didn't know how to romance a woman.

It wouldn't be a hardship for him to slowly wear down Kelcey's resistance. She wasn't as voluptuous as Alaina, or as make-your-tongue-hang-out sexy as Emma, his brother Griff's girlfriend. Still, at about five-eight and slim with shoulder-length ash blonde hair and huge blue eyes, Kelcey had been blessed with good looks. Small breasts and narrow hips gave her a gentle sex appeal. She made him think of moonlit nights, gentle kisses and soft caresses instead of fast fucking.

Maybe the moonlit nights and soft caresses would be nice for a change.

Kelcey took a different shot than the one he would've taken. Her ball hit the rim several inches from the pocket. Blowing out a heavy breath, she looked at him. "I missed."

"I noticed."

Her eyebrows drew together in a frown. "I suppose you'll run the table now."

"Maybe." Unless he was a gentleman and purposely missed a shot, which he should do so Kelcey wouldn't feel bad. She was still learning how to play pool, unlike Emma who beat him half the time they played.

Dax leaned over the table and lined up his shot. "Eleven in the corner." The cue ball tapped the eleven, sending it sailing toward the corner pocket. It slid in without even bumping the sides.

"Why can't I do that?" Kelcey asked.

"You will," Emma said. She sat in one of the oversized loungers next to Alaina in Rye's game room. "You just need more practice." She patted Griff's thigh. He sat on the chair's arm next to her. "This is the guy to give you lessons."

"Excuse me." Dax straightened before he took his next shot. "Griff isn't any better than I am."

"Griff never loses," Emma said with a smirk. "You can't say that."

"I don't believe this abuse," Dax muttered.

She grinned at him. Dax fought to keep from grinning back. He and Emma teased each other the way brothers and sisters would. She'd been involved with Griff less than six weeks and it already seemed as if she was one of the family. His parents adored her, partly because she was smart and clever and fun, but mostly because she had brought Griff back from the edge of darkness after he lost his wife. Jana's death eleven months ago had almost destroyed his brother. Now he laughed the way he used to. Emma's incredible cooking had helped put on a little of the weight he'd lost. Once again, he enjoyed life.

He was back to being a brother again.

Only two more striped balls plus the eight to sink and Dax would win. He lined up his shot. "Ten in the side." At the last moment, he pulled back so the cue barely bumped the ten. The ten ball stopped a few inches from the pocket.

He glanced at Emma. She winked at him. She knew he'd missed that shot on purpose.

Kelcey smiled. "Reprieve!" She leaned over the table to line up her shot. "Seven in the side."

She made it, but missed her next try. Dax had to admit Kelcey got better every time they played. He could easily make the rest of his shots, but decided to give her another chance. Besides, looking at her ass in those tight jeans when she bent over the table made his hormones very happy.

He sank the ten, but missed the thirteen. He stepped back while she lined up her next shot. The faded denim molded to her cheeks and thighs. He imagined tugging down that denim until he could nibble on her ass...

Oh yeah, *very* happy.

When she missed her next shot, Dax decided it was time to end the game. He sank the thirteen, then the eight.

"Well, piffle." Kelcey laid her stick on the table. "Losing makes me hungry. I need chocolate."

"I'll second that." Alaina rose from her chair, quickly followed by Emma. "We have tons of miniature Snickers since we didn't get any trick-or-treaters tonight."

"I told you I don't get any out here," Rye said. "Harvest Fest was on the square today. It's always held on the Saturday before Halloween. The kids go there and hit up the businesses for candy."

"I wanted to have some candy on hand just in case."

"You wanted an excuse to buy Snickers."

"You know me so well." She gave him a quick kiss. "We'll bring some back for y'all."

As soon as the women left the room, Dax faced Rye. "Did you get it yet?"

"Yeah. I picked it up this morning. Hardy called me as soon as he finished it."

"It's hard to believe Hardy is still making jewelry. What is he now, about seventy?"

"At least." Rye reached behind a section of books in the bookcase and removed a dark blue velvet box. "I told him I wanted it a little different, but similar to the ring he made for Mom when Dad proposed to her." He opened the box to reveal a two-carat round diamond on a gold band. A spray of smaller diamonds arced along one side of the center stone.

Griff released a long whistle. "Damn, bro, that's gorgeous. Mom will be jealous. Her diamond isn't that big."

"Do you think Alaina will like it?"

"Hell yes, she'll like it. She'll probably cry."

"Crying is okay, as long as they're happy tears."

"When are you gonna pop the question?" Dax asked.

"I don't know. It has to be the right time. Maybe I'll take her out to dinner at a really nice restaurant and ask her there."

Voices getting louder signaled the women's return to the game room. Rye quickly closed the ring box and replaced it in the bookcase.

"I don't know yet," Alaina said as she walked into the room.

"Don't you think you should decide soon?" Emma asked.

Alaina set the bowl of Snickers on the small table between two of the loungers. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Suggestions for what?" Griff asked.

"A name for the B-and-B. I can't call it Stevens House forever."

"She's rejected every name I've suggested," Rye told his brothers.

"That's because none of them worked." She returned to her lounge. Emma took the chair on her left, Kelcey on her right. "Give me a good name and I'll take it."

"What about May House?" Kelcey suggested.

Alaina wiggled her mouth back and forth. "I thought about that. Do you think it would be okay?"

"I don't," Rye said.

She turned her head toward him. "Why not? It is my last name."

Forget about the fancy restaurant. This was the perfect time for Rye to propose to Alaina. Dax looked at Rye and nodded. Rye glanced at Griff, who nodded too. A look of panic crossed Rye's face for a moment, but disappeared when he took a deep breath. Dax doubted if Rye had anything to worry about. Alaina adored his older brother. She wouldn't possibly say no.

Rye removed the ring box from its hiding place again. "I'm hoping May won't be your last name for long." Crossing to her chair, he dropped down to one knee and opened the box. "Will you marry me?"

Alaina's mouth fell open. She covered it with one hand while tears filled her eyes. An unfamiliar tightness gripped Dax's chest as his future sister-in-law smiled, touched Rye's cheek and whispered, "Yes."

Rye slipped the ring on Alaina's finger. With tears flowing down her cheeks, she cradled his face in her hands and kissed him tenderly.

Chaos reigned after that, so Dax didn't have the chance to examine that strange feeling. Emma and Kelcey were crying too when they grabbed Alaina for hugs, then Rye. Griff drew Alaina into his arms for a huge hug. When he released her, Alaina turned to Dax. Smiling, he hugged her tightly and kissed her cheek.

"Welcome to the family, Alaina."

"Thank you, Dax."

Emma clapped her hands once. "We need champagne."

"You'll have to settle for white wine," Rye said. "I don't have any champagne."

"You're as bad as Griff. He didn't have any either until I taught him how to stock his liquor."

"What else did you teach my brother?" Dax asked, grinning.

A devilish light shone in her eyes. "That's none of your business."

Dax laughed. Emma was as good for Griff as Alaina was for Rye. Even though Griff loved Emma, Dax knew it was too soon after Jana's death for him to think of marriage. Someday, though, Dax wouldn't be surprised to see a ring on Emma's finger.

"I'll get the wine and glasses," Kelcey said.

Dax fell into step behind her. "I'll help you."

She glanced at him over her shoulder, a look in her eyes that clearly said she didn't want or need his help. He simply winked and kept following her. She'd have to get used to having him around, now that she'd moved in with Alaina and Rye until she found her own place to live. In a small town like Lanville where rentals were scarce, that might take her a while.

"It's great about Rye and Alaina, isn't it?" he asked once they were in the kitchen.

"Very. I'm happy for them."

Dax removed a round tray from the pantry.

"He really loves her. She's so different from her sister."

Kelcey took six wineglasses from the cabinet and set them on the tray. "From what I've heard, I'd rather not ever meet her."

"You wouldn't miss anything. She really did a number on Rye. Her betrayal hurt him for a long time." Locating the corkscrew in a drawer, he accepted the bottle of chardonnay Kelcey had taken from the refrigerator and opened it. "Are you all settled here?"

"I've unpacked, if that's what you mean by settled."

"Are you going to sell your house in Dallas?"

"Someday. I'm not in a hurry. My neighbors on both sides of my house offered to watch it for me."

As Dax splashed the cold wine into the glasses, he realized this was the longest conversation he and Kelcey had had so far. He didn't know her well yet, but he enjoyed talking to her.

He'd enjoy her in his bed even more.

He hadn't asked her out yet, but he'd hinted about showing her around the area. Perhaps he should stop hinting and be more direct.

"Now that you're living in Lanville, I'll be happy to show you around. I'm a great tour guide."

That cute little nose of hers lifted an inch. "I'm sure Alaina and Emma can show me whatever I need to know."

She walked out of the kitchen, leaving him stinging from her rejection. He wasn't used to a woman rejecting him.

Eyes narrowed in determination, Dax picked up the tray of wineglasses. So she was going to play hard to get. No problem. He enjoyed a challenge.

* * * * *

Kelcey thought of Dax as walking sin. With that tall, buff body, sexy brown eyes and long brown hair, he reminded her of a pillager from many years ago. She imagined him riding into a village on a huge black horse, long hair flying behind him, leading a group of bandits to rob the men and rape the women.

No, that wasn't true. She couldn't picture Dax ever hurting a woman. Not like...

Kelcey shook her head to clear it of any bad thoughts. She wouldn't let anything—or anyone—intrude tonight. One of her best friends had just become engaged to the man she had loved for most of her life. That's the only thing Kelcey wanted to think about tonight.

She could feel Dax's presence right behind her as she stepped into the game room. His closeness rattled her. Being triplets only minutes apart in age, Rye and Griff were

just as handsome as Dax. *They* didn't rattle her. She didn't like that feeling. She liked being in control. Structure and routine made her happy.

There wasn't anything routine about Dax Coleman.

Everyone accepted a glass from the tray. Dax raised his wineglass toward Rye and Alaina. "To my brother, who was smart enough to fall in love with a very special lady. We all wish you many years of happiness."

Crystal clinked together. Kelcey watched the newly engaged couple as she sipped her wine. Rye dropped a tender kiss on Alaina's temple. She smiled up at him, her eyes shimmering with tears.

A lump formed in Kelcey's throat at the obvious love between Alaina and Rye. She glanced at Emma in time to see Griff kiss her lips softly. Both couples were so much in love. Kelcey was truly happy for her friends, yet couldn't help feeling like the ugly stepchild.

Warning – self-pity alert. Snap out of it!

Straightening her spine, Kelcey took another sip of the cold liquid. It didn't matter that she would never have a man look at her the way Rye and Griff looked at her friends. She'd accepted a long time ago that she would be alone the rest of her life. The few disastrous dates she'd tried had quickly taught her that.

Hate boiled up inside her, no matter how hard she tried to stop it. She'd always hate the men who had ruined her life...and the mother who hadn't protected her child.

Chapter Two

"When?" Emma asked. She held up her glass so Dax could pour more wine into it.

"When what?" Alaina asked.

"When are y'all getting married? You have to set a date. Not too soon. I want the reception to be in the restaurant."

"That won't be finished for months."

"It'll be worth the wait. You won't believe how gorgeous I'll make everything."

Dax didn't doubt that. Emma had offered some great suggestions for the old Victorian that Alaina had purchased to remodel into a bed-and-breakfast. Stevens House had been ready to collapse until Alaina hired Coleman Construction to refurbish it. In one more month, Alaina would have her grand opening. Then everyone in the area would see how the old, dilapidated house had been turned into a mansion.

The restaurant Alaina decided to build would be as beautiful as the B-and-B. She had moments of panic that she'd committed to a restaurant next door to Stevens House, but he had no doubt she'd be magnificent at running both. Especially since Emma would be the chef.

Alaina looked at Rye. "What do you think? Should we wait until spring? The restaurant is scheduled to be finished by March first."

"That's if we don't get any really bad weather to slow us down."

"Then maybe we should have the wedding in the early summer."

He shrugged. "It's up to you. Tell me when and where and I'll be there."

She frowned. "It doesn't work that way. I need a little more input from you."

"It's the bride's day." He leaned closer and spoke into her ear. "I'll be happy with the wedding night."

Dax chuckled as a lovely blush filled Alaina's cheeks. She'd lived with Rye since April, yet still blushed when he teased her about sex.

Emma rolled her eyes. "Men. They always think with their cocks."

"I don't hear any complaints about that when we're in bed," Griff said before nipping her neck.

Still chuckling, Dax glanced at Kelcey to see if she enjoyed the playful banter as much as he did. She held her glass with both hands, staring down into the last drops of wine. She seemed lost, alone, instead of part of the group. He wondered what was going through her mind right now.

Dax set his empty glass on the pool table behind him. "I have an idea."

"Uh oh," Emma said. "That means trouble."

"Actually, I'm going to be nice to my brother and his new fiancée and give them some alone time tonight. Kelcey, you should come home with me."

That comment brought her head up in a hurry. Her eyes widened. He thought he saw apprehension flash through them before they narrowed. That nose went back up in the air and she released a snort of laughter. "Yeah, right."

"I'm serious. I have two extra bedrooms. One of them has its own bath. You'll have it all to yourself. Rye and Alaina should have some private time to celebrate their engagement."

"You're very sweet to offer, Dax," Alaina said, "but it isn't necessary for Kelcey to leave. She just moved in here yesterday."

"I know that. I also know that y'all can be alone in your bedroom no matter who is in the house. But if you and Rye are *completely* alone, y'all can run around the house naked and you can scream as loud as you want to."

Alaina hit Rye's arm. "You told him I *scream*?"

"Ow." Rye rubbed the spot she'd hit. "I didn't have to tell him. He can probably hear you at his house."

She blushed again as everyone laughed – everyone but Kelcey. Her cheeks as red as Alaina's, she lowered her head and stared into her wineglass.

"It's only for one night. I'll bring Kelcey back tomorrow in plenty of time to watch the Cowboys' game."

Rye and Griff looked at each other. Dax knew what that look meant – they figured he'd make a move on Kelcey when he got her alone in his house. While the idea tempted him, he hadn't made the suggestion to get Kelcey alone. He honestly wanted to do something nice for Rye and Alaina.

He faced Kelcey. "The bedroom has a lock on the door. I won't bother you."

"I'm not worried about that."

"Is there something you *are* worried about?"

Her gaze touched everyone in the room before she looked at him again. "Of course not."

"Okay, so it's settled." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "It's almost eleven. If you'll get whatever you want to take with you, we'll head out."

"I'll help you, Kelc," Emma said, standing.

"Me too." Alaina also rose from her chair.

The three women left the room, Kelcey leading the way. Dax enjoyed the view of them walking out, then turned his head toward his brothers. Neither of them were smiling.

"What are you doing, Dax?" Griff asked.

"I'm doing something nice for Rye. Why is that a bad thing?"

"It isn't a bad thing, if that's really what you're doing and not trying to get in Kelcey's panties."

Dax grinned. "That wouldn't be a bad thing either."

His teasing didn't earn him the slightest chuckle from his brothers. "Hey, I'm joking. I'm not making a move on Kelcey."

"I hope not." Griff set his empty glass on the table beside his chair. "Kelcey isn't outgoing like Emma and Alaina. Emma told me Kelcey never dates, that she'd rather stay home and read than go out with a guy."

Rye leaned back in his chair. "Sounds like someone hurt her."

"I have no intention of hurting Kelcey. I'll admit I'm attracted to her. Those blue eyes could drive a man to his knees. If I can charm her into my bed, I won't complain."

"She isn't like the women you usually date, Dax," Griff said. "She won't fall into your arms the first time you snap your fingers."

"Then I'll have to work harder. I think she'll be worth it."

* * * * *

Kelcey laid her toothbrush and toothpaste in the tote on top of her pajamas. "Guess that's it."

"Are you sure you want to go with Dax?" Alaina sat on the bed next to Emma. "You don't have to leave. You won't disturb Rye and me if you stay."

"I agree with Dax." Kelcey zipped her tote shut. "You and Rye should have the house to yourselves tonight so you can celebrate your engagement."

"You can spend the night with Griff and me, if that would make you feel more comfortable."

Kelcey caught herself before her mouth dropped open. Emma's offer shocked her. Kelcey figured Emma would be the first one to tell her she should take advantage of being alone with Dax. Before she became involved with Griff, Emma had loved to party and went through a couple of different lovers a week. "You're telling me to give up the chance to jump Dax's bones?"

Emma shrugged. "You aren't the type to jump his bones. Me? In a heartbeat, if I wasn't so crazy about Griff."

"You're always nagging at me to date. Now I have a handsome hunk inviting me to spend the night at his house and you aren't telling me to go for it. What's wrong with this picture?"

"Maybe I decided it wasn't right of me to push you. When you're ready, you'll find a guy with the perfect bones to jump."

I wish. Kelcey picked up her tote. "Dax said we'd be back before the Cowboys' game. When is that?"

"Noon," Alaina said. "Since the guys' parents are out of town, we won't go to their house tomorrow for dinner. Emma's making pizza."

Emma stood up as Alaina did. "Perfect football food. We can talk about the wedding during commercials."

"The wedding." Alaina giggled like a girl half her age. "I'm getting married."

"You bet you are." Emma gave her a quick hug. "You're going to have the most beautiful wedding this town has ever seen."

A dull ache settled in the pit of Kelcey's stomach. She'd never have the man who loved her, the engagement ring, the beautiful wedding. She'd never know how it felt to walk down the aisle toward the man who would be her partner for the rest of her life.

It hurt. Sometimes it hurt so much, she could barely draw a breath.

Kelcey tugged the tote straps over her shoulder. Thinking about what she didn't have, instead of concentrating on all the good things she *did* have, would only make the pain worse. She walked out of the bedroom and met Dax in the hallway. He slipped the tote from her shoulder.

"I'll carry that. Ready to go?"

"As soon as I get my jacket."

She said her goodbyes to everyone and followed Dax outside. The air was crisp and cool with a strong feel of autumn in the air. Though the calendar said it would be Halloween tomorrow, it had been unseasonably warm until a couple days ago. The

high today was only seventy-three instead of in the high eighties. Now it truly felt like autumn. She sniffed deeply of the clean air.

"Yeah, the weather is finally nice." Dax opened the passenger door of his pickup for her. "I'm glad the heat is gone."

"So am I."

She slid onto the seat and watched him close the door, then circle around the hood. The truck smelled like Dax's profession with the touch of paint and paint thinner. For a reason she didn't understand, the scent tickled every feminine part of her each time she inhaled.

He was an incredibly attractive man, she couldn't deny that. Strong hands gripped the steering wheel. A light dusting of dark hair covered his fingers, the back of his hand and his forearm. Her gaze slowly traveled up his arm. The dark green T-shirt stretched across his broad shoulders and chest. She continued down his flat stomach to the impressive bulge behind his fly. Part of her had no desire to know what existed behind the denim. Another part of her longed to explore that fascinating male flesh.

Moments later, Dax drove the pickup into his garage and parked next to a vehicle covered by a gray tarp. Kelcey climbed out and grabbed her tote from the floorboard. He took it from her and closed the door.

"I can carry my tote. It isn't heavy."

"Let me be a gentleman, okay?"

She followed him to the door that led into the house. Just like Rye's house, they stepped into the mudroom. From there, she expected the similarities to end. She imagined Dax's house to be a bachelor pad done up in gaudy colors, maybe a combination of red and gold and black. She expected to see big screen TVs in every room and paintings of naked women on the walls.

Instead, she found a cheery kitchen painted in a soft butter yellow with white cabinets. Earth tones made the living room warm and inviting. Photographs of his family and the area around Lanville adorned the walls.

"Not what you expected?" he asked from behind her.

"No." Realizing that sounded rude, she quickly turned to face him. "I mean, you're single so I thought your house would be more..." She stopped, unsure which descriptive word to use.

"Decadent? Nasty?"

"Well...yeah."

Dax shrugged. "I like comfort. I wanted my house to feel like a home, not simply a place to shower and sleep."

"It's lovely, Dax."

"Mom helped pick out the furniture, just like she did for Rye. Jana picked out most of the furnishings for Griff's house." He chuckled. "Emma's taste is completely different than Jana's. She's already talked to me about paint colors. She's getting rid of every bit of pastel."

"Emma likes things bold."

"So does Griff, but he always let Jana do whatever she wanted."

Some people might consider Griff weak to cater to his wife the way he had. Kelcey thought him loving and romantic.

"This way to your room."

She followed him once again into the hall. Two steps through the doorway, she stopped. Framed photographs lined the walls on both sides of the hallway. More pictures of family, more of scenery. A large sepia photo in a gilded frame of a young, smiling couple caught her attention. Their clothing appeared to be from the early nineteen hundreds. The woman held a small baby in her arms.

"My great-grandparents," Dax said. "That's my grandfather—my dad's dad—in her arms."

"Is this the great-grandfather who was hanged for the murder of Alaina's ancestor?"

He nodded. "My grandfather had the original picture. I scanned it, played around with it and fixed the flaws. I had enlargements made and gave everybody one of the framed photos for Christmas last year."

Kelcey thought that was a wonderful, thoughtful present. "You're lucky to have such an incredible picture of your ancestors."

"Do you have old pictures of your family?"

The mention of her family tightened every muscle in Kelcey's body. "No." She brushed by him, ignoring his confused look at her abrupt comment. "Which room is mine?"

He opened the door to a large bedroom, decorated in ivory and coffee. A large four-poster bed dominated one wall, a triple dresser the other. Framed photographs graced the walls here too.

"Who's the photographer?"

"I am."

Another surprise. Dax had sides to him Kelcey never expected. She stepped closer and peered at an eight-by-ten of three does standing in a grove of cedar trees, munching on tall grass. "You took this?"

"Yeah, at the back of my property."

"It's amazing."

"Thanks." He stepped up beside her. "I get a lot of deer through here. I have dozens of pictures on my computer."

"I'd love to see them."

"Sure."

They stood less than a foot apart. She continued to stare into his eyes. Awareness flickered in the brown depths. He glanced at her lips, then her breasts. That look made heat swirl low in her belly.

Knowing she had to ignore the heat, Kelcey took a step back. Something nudged between her thighs. With a yelp, she whirled around. The biggest German Shepherd she'd ever seen sat behind her, his pink tongue hanging out of his mouth.

"There you are." Dax squatted and rubbed the dog behind the ears. "It's not nice to give my guests a wedgie."

The dog had a beautiful, shiny coat. His tail went crazy as Dax petted and talked to him. Her heart melted. Dax obviously loved the dog very much.

Dax stood, his hand resting on top of the dog's head. "Kelcey, this is Walker. Walker, this is my guest. Be nice."

Walker lifted one paw toward Kelcey. Laughing in delight, she shook it. "Can I pet him?"

"Yeah, but once you start he doesn't want you to stop."

Kelcey dropped to her knees. Walker lowered his head and whined softly. He inched toward her until she buried her hands in the soft fur at his neck. Walker rewarded her with a lick on her cheek.

Dax smiled. "He likes you. He's usually stingy with his kisses."

"He's so beautiful." Walker tilted his head back when Kelcey scratched beneath his chin. "How old is he?"

"Four years. I got him when he was about two months old. There was a lot of frustration when he went through the chewing stage, but we made it past that. He's been a great dog. No one comes in the house if Walker doesn't want them to."

Kelcey continued to scratch Walker's chin and ear. She glanced up at Dax. He ran his hand down Walker's back, over and over, but his gaze focused on her.

"This is unusual, Kelcey. Walker doesn't normally take to a person this quickly. He was around Emma three or four times before he'd let her touch him."

"Does he like her now?"

"Yeah. But I think part of that is because she sneaks pieces of prime rib to him."

Kelcey laughed. It felt good to be here with Dax, which surprised her. She normally avoided being alone with a man. Having the huge dog between them gave her a sense of security, as if nothing bad could happen to her as long as she had Walker close.

"Well, fella," Dax said, ruffling the top of Walker's head, "shall we get out of here and let the lady get some sleep?"

The dog answered with a soft "Woof."

Dax offered his hand to help her stand. Once on her feet, she bent over to give Walker one last scratch behind his ears. "It was nice to meet you, Walker." Straightening again, she looked at Dax. "Good night."

He winked. "Good night."

Dax headed for the door. Instead of following his master, Walker moved closer to Kelcey until he leaned against her leg. Dax stopped in the doorway and glanced over his shoulder at the dog.

"Walker. C'mon."

Walker whined and rubbed his head against Kelcey's leg. Confusion passed over Dax's face. "He's never done that. It's like he's protecting you." Dax patted his thigh. "Walker. Let's go, fella."

The dog whined again and looked up at Kelcey. She smiled and scratched behind his ear. "You want to stay with me?"

He answered her question with a loud "Woof!"

"He sleeps at the foot of my bed," Dax said. "He'll want to sleep on yours too."

"That's okay. I don't mind."

Walker ran over to the bed and jumped up on the foot. He turned in a circle, then lay on his stomach with his head between his paws. He looked back and forth between Kelcey and Dax, as if making sure they wouldn't change their mind.

"That is the weirdest thing he's ever done. You really made an impression on him." Dax playfully scowled at his dog. "Traitor."

Walker responded to Dax by blowing out a breath through his nose and closing his eyes.

Dax shook his head while Kelcey laughed. "If he bothers you, tell him to leave."

"He won't bother me."

"Okay. Guess I'll see you in the morning."

Dax looked at her another moment, then backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Kelcey slipped into her jersey pajamas. After touching the light switch to turn off the lamps on either side of the bed, she slid between the crisp cotton sheets. Walker moved enough to rest his head on her feet. The weight comforted her. With a sigh of contentment, she closed her eyes.

Chapter Three

"Damn, she's a pretty little thing."

"We shouldn't be in here, Kirt."

"Who's gonna know? I won't tell anyone and neither will you."

The male voices seeped into Kelcey's consciousness. She frowned. She didn't want to wake up. She was dreaming of the new dollhouse her mom had promised to buy her for her birthday tomorrow. It would be even bigger and better than the one she had now, the biggest and bestest one ever made.

"You wanna do this as much as I do, Frank. Admit it."

"It isn't right."

"That boner in your pants says otherwise."

"Claudia will be really pissed if she finds out."

"Our sister won't find out. I'll make sure of that."

A cool draft passed over her legs. Kelcey frowned again and blindly reached for the covers. Instead, she felt a hand on her hip. Her eyes flew open. Her two uncles stood beside her bed. Still groggy from sleep, she blinked to bring them into focus. They shouldn't be here. It was dark outside and everyone should be in bed.

"Hi, baby," her Uncle Kirt said. He sat on the edge of her bed, his hand still on her hip. "Sleeping good?"

"I was until you woke me up."

"I'm sorry to wake you, but your Uncle Frank and I want to talk to you."

Kelcey rubbed her eyes. "Can't we talk in the morning? I'm sleepy."

"No, we need to talk to you now." He slid his hand over her hip and up her back. "Are you all ready for your birthday tomorrow?"

Kelcey nodded. *"I'm gonna have a party."*

"You sure are. You're all grown up, aren't you? Eight years old and such a pretty girl."

The cool air traveled farther up her legs. Kelcey looked down to see her uncle slowly pushing up her nightgown. A chill slithered up her spine. It felt different than one she had when she was cold. "Uncle Kirt, I want the covers back."

"Are you cold?"

"Yeah."

"You won't be for long, baby. I promise you."

This was wrong. Kelcey didn't know how she knew that, but she did. She grasped the hem of her nightgown and tried to tug it back down her legs.

She gasped when Uncle Kirt grabbed her face. "You're gonna lie still and be quiet, do you understand?" Tears filled her eyes when he squeezed her cheeks. "Do you understand, Kelcey?"

She nodded.

He smiled. "Now you be a good girl and let us do what we want. If you yell or try to get away, we'll have to hurt you. Okay?"

She nodded again. Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, she lay still and silently cried while Uncle Kirt stripped off her panties.

* * * * *

"NO!"

Kelcey came awake with the scream still ringing in her ears. Heart pounding, she sat up in bed and frantically looked around the dark room for evidence of her uncles. Her body wilted in relief when she realized they weren't there.

But they *were* there, in her mind. She would never be free of the memories.

Her chest ached, her throat burned. She covered her face as tears welled up in her eyes from pain and anger and the loss of a child's innocence.

The door flew open. Kelcey jumped and jerked up her head as Dax hit the light switch to turn on the lamps. He ran to the bed and grabbed her upper arms.

"Are you all right?"

He looked like a wild man. His eyes were wide and full of fear. His loose hair fell around his shoulders. His chest heaved as if he'd run five miles instead of only a few yards.

Her gaze dropped a little lower. She swallowed when she saw he was naked.

Sitting beside her, he squeezed her arms. "Kelcey, answer me. Are you all right?"

She had to swallow again before her voice returned. "Yes, I'm fine. I just..." She stopped when she realized she didn't know how he knew she was upset. "Why are you here?"

"Walker woke me. He was frantic that I follow him. Then I heard you scream."

His statement made Kelcey realize that the dog no longer lay on her bed, but sat at Dax's feet. "How did he get out of here?"

"He can push down on the lever and open the door." He ran his hands slowly up and down her arms. "Bad dream?"

Kelcey nodded.

"I'm sorry. Can I get you anything?"

"No." Her voice came out raspy from the lump of tears still in her throat...tears she didn't want to shed in front of Dax.

"Are you sure I can't get you a glass of water or something?"

His kindness and soft tone made the dam burst. Kelcey crossed her arms over her stomach and hung her head as her tears flowed.

"Hey." Dax pulled her into his arms. "It was just a dream. You're okay."

I'm not okay! I'll never be okay!

Now that the tears had started, Kelcey couldn't stop them. She clutched Dax's waist and laid her head on his shoulder. It felt so good to be held, to touch his warm skin with her palms. His hands slid over her back in a soothing caress.

"Shh. Don't cry. I won't let anyone hurt you."

His low voice seeped into her consciousness, easing her fear. Her tears slowed. She lifted her head and peered into his eyes. She saw kindness and concern.

"Better?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Dax smiled. "No problem."

He drew her back into his arms and held her close. Kelcey enjoyed his body pressed to hers, his hair tickling the back of her fingers. She couldn't resist rubbing a tendril between her thumb and forefinger. So soft and silky.

This time when he looked at her, the concern in his eyes had been replaced with desire. Her heart skittered in her chest, yet from a different emotion. Heat swirled low in her belly, the same way it had earlier when he'd stood so close to her while they'd admired his photographs on the walls. His hands still stroked her back, but slower now...exploring instead of comforting.

"Kelcey," he whispered.

His head dipped closer. Kelcey parted her lips in anticipation of his kiss. He didn't disappoint her. His lips touched hers in a fleeting caress, a gentle hello.

Kelcey dug her fingernails into his back. She thought she heard Dax groan, but she was too wrapped up in her feelings to be sure. She tilted her head when he deepened the kiss, parted her lips even more for the sweep of his tongue.

Other men had kissed her, touched her. Her fumbling attempts at sex had always ended with her in tears and the men getting away from her as quickly as possible.

Unfamiliar emotions swept through her body...feelings she had only imagined but never experienced. A liquid warmth seemed to flow through her veins. Her senses were heightened so she noticed everything more clearly. A hint of wine on Dax's breath. The fresh fragrance of shampoo in his hair. The silky slide of his beard against her cheek. His warm lips beneath her jaw.

His lips covered hers again, no longer fleeting or gentle. His tongue flicked the corners of her mouth, then ventured inside. He kissed her with passion, with hunger. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she returned each kiss with just as much passion, just as much hunger.

She wanted to lick and bite every part of him.

Kelcey moaned low in her throat when Dax cradled one jersey-covered breast. She hated the bit of fabric that kept his hand from her bare flesh. Pulling his hand away from her, she guided it beneath her top until his hand covered her bare breast.

"Oh yeah." His voice sounded guttural, almost feral. He squeezed her breast, ran his thumb over the hard nipple. "I've got to have more of you."

The covers disappeared from her legs. Dax gripped Kelcey's waist and tugged her to her back. Wedging his knees between her legs, he spread them wide and lay between them. The hard ridge of his cock pressed against her mound. She lifted her hips, wanting more of that enticing hardness.

Memories swamped her, mixing past with present.

"No! I don't want to!"

Uncle Kirt slapped her. Tears quickly welled in her eyes and ran down her temples into her ears. "I don't care what you don't want. We're gonna do what I want. Got that?"

Dax's hair fell on either side of her face, making Kelcey feel smothered. She tore her mouth away from his and shoved on his shoulders. "Get off me!"

When he didn't move as quickly as she thought he should, she screamed, "*GET OFF ME!*"

He lifted to his hands and knees, giving her enough room to scurry out from beneath him. She fell to the floor and scrambled to the corner. Pulling her knees to her chest, she wrapped her arms around them and buried her face against them.

She didn't know how much time passed while she cried before she heard Dax say her name softly. Now that her initial terror had subsided, embarrassment welled up

inside her. Dax would probably get away from her as quickly as all the other men she'd tried to sleep with.

"Kelcey," he said, his tone still gentle, "please look at me."

Several more seconds passed before she forced herself to lift her head. Dax squatted before her, a towel wrapped around his waist. Instead of seeing disgust in his eyes, she saw tenderness.

"Want to talk about it?"

His obvious concern brought more tears to her eyes. How she'd love to tell him the agony she'd gone through at the hands of two men who were supposed to love and protect her. She'd told therapists what happened, hoping for relief from the horrible dreams, but had never shared her experience with anyone close to her.

She shook her head. "It isn't important."

"I'd argue that point since you're so upset. Sometimes it helps to talk."

"I can't, Dax. Please don't ask me."

He looked like he might argue anyway, but then he nodded. "Okay. No talking. Would you like to go in the living room with me and watch some TV?"

She thought it sweet of him to offer when she had no doubt he'd rather get away from her. "No. I think I want to go back to bed."

"Okay."

He reached out as if to touch her face. Kelcey flinched, not yet ready for any physical contact. He dropped his hand back to his side.

"I'll see you in the morning."

She nodded. Dax rose and walked to the door. Once there, he looked at her again over his shoulder. The sympathy in his eyes made fresh tears pool in hers.

He closed the door behind him. Kelcey covered her face with her hands. She hated that the past still haunted her. She longed to share her life with someone, to find a man

who loved her as much as she loved him. She couldn't do that when even a hint of closeness made the disgusting memories flare up in her mind.

She heard a soft whine before a cold nose bumped her hands. Moving them away from her face, she saw Walker sitting next to her. He leaned against her leg and touched her arm with his paw. More tears fell as she hugged the dog's neck.

"Oh, Walker, what am I going to do?"

* * * * *

Dax had been angry many times in his life, but never enough to seriously think about hurting someone. That changed last night when he witnessed Kelcey's pain.

A woman didn't fall apart so completely because of a bad dream. She'd enjoyed his kisses and caresses. He didn't doubt that. Her response had been real and very hot. Yet she'd gone crazy as soon as he lay on top of her.

Some asshole had raped her.

He watched the slow drip of coffee into the glass carafe. He'd never understand why a man did that, why he would want to hurt a woman so much. Especially a woman as sweet as Kelcey.

Rage boiled up inside him again. Oh yeah, he could definitely hurt the man who had hurt Kelcey.

Movement in the doorway drew his attention. Kelcey stepped into the room, looking pale and uncertain. He decided he wouldn't mention last night since he didn't want to make her uncomfortable. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she said in barely above a whisper.

"Coffee's almost done. Are you hungry?"

"Not really." He saw her hands flex on the handles of her tote. He hadn't noticed it on her shoulder until now. "I think I'll walk back to Alaina's."

"You don't have to walk. I'll be happy to drive you."

"I know you will, but I'd rather walk."

"Sure. I have some to-go cups. I'll fill a couple with coffee and we'll walk."

He saw her chest rise and fall with a sigh. "Dax, I'd...rather be alone. Okay?"

No, it wasn't okay. He didn't like the idea of her being alone. The urge to protect her had him struggling not to take her in his arms and hold her.

Walker chose that moment to come in the kitchen. He stopped next to Kelcey and leaned against her leg. Even his dog wanted to protect her.

"It's cool this morning. I'll get one of my zippered sweatshirts for you."

"My jacket is enough. But thank you."

He had no other excuse to keep her here any longer. "You know the way? The trail is clear, but I don't want you to get lost."

"I won't have a problem."

"Then I guess I'll see you over there later."

She headed for the mud room, Walker right beside her. She gave him one last pat before she stepped through the back door. "No, Walker. You can't go with me."

Walker whined and pawed at the closed door. He ran to Dax, barked, then ran back to the door.

"Sorry, fella. I don't want her to go either, but we don't have a choice."

Chapter Four

Rye and Griff both groaned when the football sailed through the Cowboys wide receiver's fingers. "How could he miss that?" Griff asked. "It was right in his hands!"

"I think the Cowboys should concentrate on getting a new wide receiver at the next draft," Rye said. "What do you think, Dax?"

Normally as obsessed with football as his brothers, today Dax didn't care about the game. He couldn't get Kelcey out of his mind. She'd been in the kitchen with Alaina and Emma when he arrived. She gave him a fast glance, then quickly looked away, as if embarrassed for him to see her.

Rye nudged his arm. "Hey, Dax, where are you?"

"Sorry. Just thinking."

"You look pretty serious," Griff said. "What's up?"

Dax didn't know whether to confide in his brothers or not. He suspected Kelcey had been raped, yet couldn't say that for sure. "Nothing worth talking about."

Rye and Griff exchanged a look that clearly said they didn't believe him. Before they could probe further, Dax stood. "I'm gonna get some air."

He went out the front door to avoid running into Kelcey and wandered into the backyard. Clouds filled the sky, a preview of the rain expected tonight. The temperature had dropped twenty degrees from yesterday. While he liked the cooler weather, it made him feel restless, antsy to do something physical.

Sex would be his first choice. Since he didn't want to call any of the women who would be willing to spend an hour or two with him, he'd have to settle for a second option.

Strolling over to the storage shed, he twisted the combination lock that matched the one on his and Griff's sheds. He located the basketball and dribbled it over to the basketball hoop. He'd sunk two baskets when he saw his brothers walking toward him. It didn't surprise him a bit that they'd followed him.

"Game still lousy?" he asked as he took another shot at the basket.

"Halftime." Rye grabbed the ball when it bounced off the rim. He dribbled it in place while he looked at his brother. "You gonna tell us what's wrong?"

Dax looked from Rye to Griff and back again. He still wasn't sure if he had the right to tell them what happened with Kelcey last night.

"Did you make a pass at Kelcey and she turned you down?" Griff asked.

"Not exactly."

"Then what, exactly?"

Dax motioned to Rye to throw him the ball. His brother tossed it to him and Dax made a jump shot. The ball sailed through the hoop to land in Griff's hands.

Griff set the ball on the ground. "You're stalling."

"Big-time."

Rye motioned toward the picnic table beneath the huge oak tree. "How about if we sit down?"

He led the way, Dax and Griff following closely behind him. Rye and Griff sat on one side, Dax on the other. He looked at his brothers, down at his hands, then back at them, unsure how to start. "Kelcey had a bad dream last night. Only I'm not sure if it was a dream or a memory."

Neither brother spoke, but listened intently.

"Walker woke me. He was sleeping on the end of her bed."

Rye's eyebrows shot up. "Walker was on her bed?"

"Yeah. Crazy, huh? He took to Kelcey right away. He's never done that with anyone." He clasped his hands together on the table. "She was almost hysterical, she was crying so hard. I held her to comfort her and...it went a little beyond comforting."

Dax ran a hand over his face. "We kissed and things started getting hot. Everything was great until I tugged her down on the bed and lay on top of her. That's when she went crazy. She screamed at me to get off her. And I mean *screamed*. When I moved, she almost fell off the bed in her hurry to get away from me. She crawled to the corner, drew her knees up to her chest and curled herself into a ball."

The lump of emotion in Dax's throat made it hard to talk. There had been so much fear in Kelcey's eyes. "I've never seen anyone cry so hard. I think my lying on top of her brought back some horrible memories for her." Again, he looked from one brother to the other. "I think she was raped."

"Shit," Griff muttered.

"Have Alaina or Emma ever said anything about that?"

"Alaina hasn't," Rye said. "I don't think she knows."

"I don't think Emma knows either. She said she doesn't understand why Kelcey doesn't date. If she knew about a rape, then she'd understand Kelcey's reluctance to get involved with a man."

"Kelcey kissed me back. I could feel her heartbeat speed up and her breathing got heavier. Her nipples were hard. There's no doubt she was turned on. I just..." He stopped and took a heavy breath. "I wish I knew what to do."

"Do you care about Kelcey?"

Dax frowned at what he considered an inconsiderate question. "That's a shitty thing to ask. Of course I care about her."

"I mean *care* about her, Dax, the way I care about Alaina and Griff cares about Emma."

His brother couldn't possibly be asking if he loved Kelcey. He barely knew her. He thought her sweet and lovely and desirable, but love wasn't even feasible. "I like her. I'm sorry some asshole hurt her. But no, I don't love her. And I have no intention of falling in love with her or any other woman. I like my single life."

"Sounds like what Emma said before she became involved with Griff."

"Rye—"

"As a man who didn't want to become involved with Alaina just because she's Alesia's sister, I know exactly what you mean. I also know you can't fight love, no matter how hard you try. It knocks you over faster than a wrecking ball."

"Amen to that," Griff said.

"No," Dax said adamantly. "Absolutely not. If Kelcey and I have a physical relationship, that's cool. Anything other than that won't happen. I won't allow it to happen."

* * * * *

Kelcey looked out the kitchen window at the brothers. They all looked so serious. Dax must be telling them about what happened last night.

Her stomach churned at the thought of people she cared about knowing her secret. She'd never told anyone about her uncles, not even Alaina and Emma. The three of them had been best friends ever since they answered her ad for housemates almost four years ago. She thought of them as the sisters she'd never had. They shared everything about each other.

Everything except her uncles' abuse and a mother who didn't believe her own daughter.

She didn't want to tell them. Even though Kelcey knew what had happened to her was in no way her fault, it still shamed her.

Emma stepped up beside her. "I stare at them whenever possible too."

"You must be talking about the Coleman triplets." Drying her hands on a dishtowel, Alaina joined her friends at the window. She sighed. "What a nice view."

"I really like the view from behind," Emma said with a grin.

"Oh yeah." Alaina returned her grin. "They all fill out a pair of jeans *very* well."

"Especially in the crotch."

Alaina giggled along with Emma. As usual, Kelcey didn't make any comments about sex. She couldn't comment on something when she had no experience.

Emma turned and leaned against the cabinet. "Speaking of nice crotches, you haven't told us how things went with Dax last night."

Heat crept into Kelcey's cheeks. She'd almost discovered what Emma and Alaina considered so wonderful last night, until memories spoiled everything.

As usual.

"Fine." She finished rinsing the spinach and laid it on paper towels to drain.

"I need more details."

So much for Emma settling for a one-word answer. "I don't have any. We talked about his photographs. I met Walker. I went to bed. End of details."

Emma's eyes narrowed. "Why don't I believe that? There's something you aren't telling us."

Let it go, Emma, please. I don't want to fall apart in front of you and Alaina. "What else do you want in the salad?"

"Did Dax come on to you?"

Emma reminded her of a dog with a bone. This time, her friend's gnawing went over the top. All the frustration and pain of too much loneliness and pain boiled to the surface. Kelcey threw down the green pepper she'd just picked up from the counter. "Everything doesn't revolve around sex, Emma. Are you *ever* going to learn that?"

Unable to hold back the tears any longer, Kelcey ran from the kitchen. She hurried down the hall and into her room, closing the door behind her. She would've thrown the lock if there'd been one on the lever, for she expected Alaina and Emma to follow her.

Her friends didn't surprise her. The door opened without either of them knocking. "What the hell did Dax do to you?" Emma demanded.

"Nothing! I told you that."

"Then why are you so upset?"

The anger in Emma's eyes didn't cover the concern that was also there. Seeing that concern brought back Kelcey's tears. Crossing her arms over her stomach, she walked to the bed and sat on the side, her head lowered.

She heard someone close the door, then felt the mattress dip on each side of her as her friends sat next to her.

"Hey, you can talk to us, you know that."

Alaina's soft voice made the tears fall faster. She wished she could push the past completely from her memories. Since that wasn't possible, maybe it would help if she shared what had happened to her with her friends.

Her head still lowered, Kelcey clasped her hands together in her lap. "I had a bad dream last night, one that's recurred many times. Dax was so very sweet and tried to comfort me. We kissed and..." Kelcey stopped and swallowed to clear her throat of tears. "Everything went zinging and pinging inside me. My nipples got hard and my heart started pounding." She took a deep breath and lifted her head. "I've never felt like that with a man. I've tried to have sex, but it never...worked out."

"Why not?" Emma asked.

Kelcey looked at her friend. Anger no longer showed in Emma's eyes, only concern and caring. "Be-because I was raped."

The gasps from her friends didn't surprise Kelcey. She thought about covering her face with her hands, but decided she no longer wanted to hide from the past. Not with Alaina and Emma.

"I was eight when —"

"*Eight?*" Alaina said, the horror evident in her voice. "You were only *eight* when you were raped?"

Kelcey nodded.

"It was just once, right?"

"No. It happened several times over the next two years."

"My God, who did that to you?"

Here came the hard part, admitting the two men she'd loved so much had hurt her. "My mother's two brothers."

"Your *uncles* raped you?" Emma demanded.

"Yes," Kelcey said in barely a whisper.

Her friends were silent for several moments, as if they didn't know what to say after such a horrible revelation. Alaina finally spoke again. "Did your mother know?"

"I told her after it happened the third time. My uncles said they'd hurt me if I told anyone, but I didn't know how I could hurt any more than I already did. My mother didn't believe me. She said I shouldn't make up such horrible stories. She punished me by taking away the dollhouse I loved so much."

"That bitch," Emma muttered.

"I didn't know what that word meant at the time, but I definitely called her that when I got older." She pushed her hair back from her face. Now that she'd started, the words flowed out of her. "I told you two I grew up in San Francisco. When I was ten, my mother sent me to New England to boarding school. She had a new man in her life and thought a daughter would be in the way." Kelcey released a chuckle, but it held no humor. "She never knew how thankful I was that she wanted to be rid of me."

"Wait a minute," Emma said. "She sent you away instead of confronting her brothers?"

"She didn't believe me, remember? Her brothers could do no wrong. There was no way they'd ever do something so heinous."

"So you stayed in boarding school...how long?" Alaina asked.

"Until I was eighteen. I didn't bother to go home for visits and that was fine with my mother. She was too busy with her charity affairs and personal affairs to worry about her daughter."

"What about holidays and summer vacation? Where did you go?"

"I had a lot of wonderful friends. Someone always invited me to go with her for Thanksgiving or Christmas or spring break. I spent the summers with my friend Gail and her family. They had a beautiful place on Martha's Vineyard."

"I'm so glad you had such good friends."

"They were the best. Until you two, of course."

Emma squeezed her hand. "Did you move to Texas after boarding school?"

Kelcey nodded again. "I came into the inheritance from my father when I turned eighteen. I moved to Dallas after I graduated and started a new life. I started an internship at Tharwood Energy after my sophomore year in college. I started working there full-time after graduation." She pushed her hair behind her ears. "I met some really nice men and tried dating, but..." Tears filled her eyes again. "The memories would always take over and I...couldn't do anything."

Alaina draped one arm over Kelcey's shoulders. "Is that what happened with Dax?"

"Yes. One minute we were kissing, and the next I was screaming at him to get off me."

"Please don't take this the wrong way, Kelc," Emma said, "but have you thought about seeing a therapist?"

"Don't you think I did? I talked to two different therapists. I even saw a psychiatrist for a while. I know I should be able to get past what happened, but I just...can't."

Emma rubbed her hand over Kelcey's back in small circles. "Okay, let's think about this. You said you and Dax were kissing and then you screamed at him to get off you. I assume that means he was on top of you?"

Kelcey wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Yes."

"Is that the way it was with all the men you tried to sleep with?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

Emma wiggled her mouth back and forth. "It sounds like the man on top of you is what triggers the memories. You're no longer in control. What if *you* were on top and in control of sex?"

Kelcey had never considered that. Since she knew absolutely nothing about sex—other than from books and movies—she'd always assumed the man would do most of the work. "Are you on top when you have sex?"

"Sometimes I am, sometimes Griff is. Sometimes he's behind me, or we're standing, or I'm bent over a table. There are a lot of positions for sex, Kelc. You just have to find what works for you."

She looked at Alaina, who nodded. "Emma is right. When you find a man who truly cares about you, he'll do everything he can to please you."

"I don't know if I have the courage to look for that man."

"Maybe you don't have to look for him," Emma said. "What about Dax?"

Heat flooded Kelcey's cheeks at the thought of being alone with Dax again. "I could never have sex with Dax, not after the way I acted last night. I don't want him to know about what happened to me."

"I'm pretty sure he already does."

Kelcey figured Emma was right. Dax didn't know exactly what she went through, but he had to suspect she'd had a very bad sexual experience with a man. Or men. And

as serious as the brothers had looked outside a few minutes ago, he must have told them about last night.

"Rye and Griff know too, don't they?" she asked Alaina.

"Probably. The guys don't keep secrets from each other."

She twisted her fingers together. The heat of embarrassment swept through her at the thought of her friends now knowing what she'd gone through. "I didn't want them to know. I didn't want *anyone* to know. God, I'm so ashamed."

Emma squeezed the back of Kelcey's neck. "You have no reason to be ashamed. Those bastards took advantage of a little girl. You did nothing wrong. Don't ever forget that."

"Emma's right. Nothing that happened was your fault." Alaina hugged her again. "Feel better?"

It surprised Kelcey to realize she *did* feel better. "Yes." She looked back and forth between her friends. "You gals are the best."

"Of course we are," Emma said with a grin.

The teasing made Kelcey laugh. She didn't know what she would do without Alaina and Emma in her life. She wiped the last of the tears from her cheeks. "Let's get that pizza in the oven. I'm hungry."

Chapter Five

Once outside the fast food place, he lit a cigarette and blew out a stream of gray smoke. Taking his time, he enjoyed his cigarette as he strolled to his car in the parking lot. It felt good to stretch his legs. He'd been behind the wheel for hours and still had hours to drive before he reached his destination.

Dallas, Texas. That's where Kelcey lived and worked. He'd made this long trip to find her.

He wouldn't rest until he did.

* * * * *

Kelcey pressed the last label to the tab of a green folder and smiled. All done. She'd spent the morning sorting papers and creating file folders in Alaina's office. She'd used green folders for income and red for expenses. She had yellow, blue, white and purple folders on hand to create other categories after she found out exactly what Alaina needed.

She looked around the small office. Alaina had piled books and catalogs of supplies haphazardly on the bookshelves, intending to sort them later. Thanks to Kelcey's work, they now stood up nice and neat, arranged alphabetically by category. The desk held a brand new iMac, ready to be uploaded with bookkeeping software Alaina had ordered and expected to receive today or tomorrow.

Kelcey smiled. She'd accomplished a lot on her first official day of working for Alaina.

Alaina rushed into the office, almost skidding to a stop next to Kelcey. Her eyes were wide, her breathing labored. "Where's the invitation list to the grand opening?"

"Here." Kelcey took a purple folder from a cubbyhole above the desk and handed it to Alaina. She silently waited while her friend scanned the list.

Alaina's shoulders slumped in obvious relief. "Bella is on here. I thought I'd forgotten her."

Kelcey remembered Alaina telling her about the former owner of Stevens House and how she figured so prominently in the histories of both Alaina's family and the Colemans. "Aren't you having the grand opening for everyone?"

"Yes. I'm placing a full-page ad in the *Lanville Journal*, but I want to send out invitations to special people too."

"Invitations should go out three weeks before the event, Alaina."

"I know! I need to order them, but I can't order them until I come up with a name for this place. Arrrggghhh!" She flopped down in the padded chair by the desk. "Why is it so hard for me to think of a *name*?"

"You're trying too hard. You need to relax and clear your mind."

Alaina released a snort of laughter. "Relax. Right. I have to shove six weeks of work into four weeks and two days."

"Everything is on schedule. Rye promised the house will be finished by the thirteenth. The furniture will be delivered the next week. We'll have almost two weeks to put up the Christmas decorations before your grand opening."

Alaina's eyes widened again. "Christmas decorations! Ohmigod, they should've been here by now! We have to call that company."

Kelcey would've laughed if her friend hadn't been so frazzled. "Calm down. They'll be delivered next week." She reached over and squeezed Alaina's hand. "Everything will be fine. I promise."

Alaina blew out a huge breath, then took Kelcey's hand between hers. "I love how organized you are. I'm so glad you're here. I couldn't get through this without you and Emma."

Kelcey thumbed the diamond ring on her friend's left ring finger. "Your hunky guy can help you get through anything."

A soft smile touched Alaina's lips. Holding up her hand, she looked at her ring and sighed. "He is a hunk, isn't he?"

"And absolutely crazy about you."

"The feeling is mutual." Her smile lit up her entire face. "Oh Kelc, I never *dreamed* I could love a man as much as I love Rye. Yes, I had a crush on him when I was young, but it blossomed into so much more. He's just so perfect."

Jealousy churned in Kelcey's stomach. She ignored it. Just because she would never know the joy of a diamond ring on her finger didn't mean she couldn't be thrilled for her friend. "I'm really happy for you, Alaina."

"I'm happy for me too." Her smile abruptly faded. "How are you doing today?"

Pulling back from Alaina, Kelcey reached for a stack of file folders to give her hands something to do. "I'm fine."

"Are you? After what you told Emma and me —"

"It happened a lot time ago, Alaina. I just want to forget it."

Sympathy filled her friend's eyes. "But that's the problem, isn't it? You *can't* forget it."

Kelcey would not cry. She refused to. She had tons of things to be thankful for in her life. What happened in the past stayed in the past. "No, I can't forget it, but I can stop letting it run my life. I have a brand new job and will soon have a brand new place to live. I want to concentrate on the positives."

Alaina smiled. "Good for you! That's what I want to hear." She glanced at the clock on the wall above the desk. "Bob Lowe should be here any minute. We're doing a final walk-through outside to talk about autumn flowers. I think bluebonnet seeds are supposed to be spread in November."

"Why not wait until spring and buy bluebonnet plants?"

"I will, but I want to spread seeds too. I want wildflowers all over the place, all the way to the creek."

Kelcey didn't remember Alaina mentioning any kind of water on her property. "Creek?"

"Yeah. It divides my property from the Pearsons' to the north. It isn't very big, but I think wildflowers along the bank will be pretty. Very romantic for a picnic." A calculating look suddenly appeared in Alaina's eyes. "Bob is single. I'll introduce you to him when he gets here."

Kelcey expected matchmaking from Emma. She didn't expect it from Alaina. "Are you trying to set me up?"

Alaina gave a shrug that Kelcey assumed was supposed to be innocent. "You need to start meeting people in Lanville. A single man is a good place to start. Bob's probably in his mid-thirties. He isn't drop-dead gorgeous, but he's good-looking and very nice."

"It doesn't matter what he looks like, Alaina. I'm not interested."

Alaina scooted her chair closer to Kelcey's. "You can't just give up, Kelc. You're a warm, caring person. You have so much love inside you that you could give a guy."

A lump formed in Kelcey's throat at her friend's sweet words. "There's a physical side to that love, Lainy. A guy would expect sex from me. I can't give it."

"With the right guy –"

"I *can't*. I've tried so many times and it always failed. I simply can't try again."

Alaina took Kelcey's hand in hers and squeezed it. "I hate for you to give up. Sex with the right man is beyond incredible. I can't even describe how wonderful it is between Rye and me. It's so much more than just two naked bodies touching. It's almost...spiritual." She rolled her eyes. "I guess that sounds stupid, huh?"

"No," Kelcey said softly. "It doesn't sound stupid at all." And it made her hate her uncles even more for what they stole from her.

"Alaina!" Rye called from somewhere in the house.

"I recognize that bellow." She squeezed Kelcey's hand one more time. "Dating doesn't automatically mean sex. You can still enjoy a man's company without anything physical happening."

"Right. And how long would that last if we start caring about each other?" She splayed her hand over her chest. "Don't you think I *want* that closeness with a man? I'm human, Lainy. I think about sex a lot."

Tired of the sympathy in Alaina's eyes, Kelcey waved her hand as if to erase their conversation. "You'd better go see what Rye needs."

"Okay. Call my cell if you see Bob before I do."

Once Alaina left, Kelcey straightened the desk again until it was organized the way she wanted it. Finished with her duties for now, she decided it was time for a short break. Even though as Alaina's assistant she should greet everyone who came in the B-and-B, she had no desire to meet Bob. Or any other man.

Slipping on her long cardigan, Kelcey walked out the back door of Stevens House. The cool morning would turn into a pleasant afternoon, at least until showers moved in later tonight. They would be welcome after a month of above-average temperatures and less than an inch of rain.

Thoughts of rain brought back her conversation with Alaina about the creek on her property. Kelcey turned north in search of the small waterway.

The sound drew her before she saw it. No more than five feet wide, the creek bubbled over rocks on its journey. Shaded by oak and cedar trees, it would be the perfect place to picnic.

Kelcey tapped one finger against her lips. Maybe Alaina should think about putting some picnic tables here. Not everyone wanted to sit on the ground, even on a blanket. Alaina planned to leave a lot of the twenty-two acres she owned natural, but also planned landscaping for part of it, including walking trails for her guests. How lovely to stroll here on a path edged with wildflowers to have a picnic with your lover.

Kelcey sighed. It would be so romantic.

The click of a camera had her quickly glancing over her shoulder. She'd been so lost in thought, she hadn't heard Dax approach. He stood six feet away, a camera raised to his eye. She heard a click again before he lowered the camera and grinned.

"Gotcha."

She'd managed to avoid him all morning, worried that he'd want to talk about what happened between them Saturday night. Out here in the open, with just the two of them together, she couldn't avoid him any longer. "What are you doing?"

"Taking pictures."

Self-conscious, she hooked her hair behind her ears. "Surely you can find something better to take pictures of than me."

"I don't think so."

The intense look he gave her out of those dark brown eyes curled her toes. Literally. She had to order them to relax before she could turn and face him. "You're just out taking pictures?"

"For my mom. She's making a scrapbook for Alaina to give her for her grand opening."

Kelcey relaxed at the word "scrapbook". It was one of her favorite pastimes. "Your mom is a scrapbooker?"

Dax nodded. "She's been doing it for years. Even has her own craft room in her and Dad's house. She started making the book for Alaina right after the remodeling started. I've been taking pictures every week and downloading them to her computer. It's up to her which ones she has printed."

"I'd love to see some of her scrapbooks."

"Are you into that too?"

"Yes. I have wonderful scrapbooks from high school on."

"Nothing before that?"

"No." Her life had been a huge mess before the age of ten when she went to boarding school. There hadn't been anything she'd wanted to remember enough to put in a scrapbook.

"Well, if you ever want anyone to work with, my mom would love the company."

She hadn't met Beverly Coleman yet, but Alaina and Emma adored her. "I'm sure I'd enjoy that." A sudden breeze blew a tendril of hair on her cheek. She pushed it behind her ear. "She and your father must be so excited about Alaina's and Rye's engagement."

"They don't know yet. They've been out of town."

Kelcey remembered Alaina and Emma talking about Beverly and Kenneth going to the coast over the weekend. "They picked up your grandfather from his cruise, right?"

"Yeah." Dax chuckled. "Pops is amazing. He'll be seventy-four next month, but I think he has more energy than I do."

"I'm eager to meet him."

"You will, Sunday at dinner."

Kelcey cringed at the mention of dinner at the Colemans. She didn't feel she had any right to be a part of family traditions. "I won't be going to your parents' house Sunday."

A frown furrowed Dax's brows. "Why not?"

"Because it's a *family* dinner, Dax. I'm not part of your family."

"You're Alaina's and Emma's best friend. That makes you family."

"Dax—"

"I promise you, if you don't show up Sunday, my mom will hunt you down and drag you there."

She wouldn't argue with him. She simply wouldn't go on Sunday. That would solve everything.

Another breeze ruffled her hair and she could smell a hint of rain on the air. She looked up to see puffy clouds quickly building up in the sky. "The rain must be coming earlier than the weatherman predicted."

"Yeah."

She heard his camera snap. Kelcey returned her gaze to Dax just as he snapped again. "Why are you taking pictures of me?"

"Because you're lovely."

Warmth traveled up her neck and into her cheeks. She wasn't used to receiving compliments, especially from men. "Maybe it's time for you to have your eyes checked."

"Did that last month. I have perfect vision." The camera snapped again. "C'mon, give me a smile."

Kelcey couldn't help it. She laughed. "Dax, stop it."

The rapid *click-click-click* of his camera proved he held down the shutter button, taking many pictures only seconds apart. "Pose for me."

"I don't know what to do. Besides, you're supposed to be taking pictures for your mother."

"I can do both." He turned the camera at a ninety-degree angle and snapped again. "I'm sure Alaina would love some pictures of you and Emma." *Click-click-click*. "I should get the three of you down here. The creek makes a great background for pictures."

A sudden gust of wind molded Dax's T-shirt to his chest and stomach. He always wore his long hair back in a ponytail. Kelcey had a vision of his unbound hair blowing in the breeze. She knew it was soft from touching it Saturday night.

Other parts of him hadn't been soft Saturday. She'd felt his hard cock pressed against her tummy. It hadn't been the first time an aroused man had pressed up against her, yet she'd never regretted pushing him away. She regretted that with Dax.

He let his camera drop to the end of its leather strap and rest on his chest. "There's a great spot about fifty yards up the creek where it widens and the water creates a deep pool. It's shaded and very peaceful. Want to see it?"

Kelcey hesitated. Although she enjoyed his company, she knew spending time with him would only cause her more frustration. "I'd better get back to work."

She thought she saw disappointment in his eyes before he glanced away. That emotion was gone when he looked back at her. "Alaina's a slave driver, huh?" he asked with a grin.

"She hides her whip in the desk drawer."

"Hmmm." He rubbed his finger across his mustache. "Wonder if she takes it home to play with Rye?"

Kelcey's mouth dropped open in surprise. She couldn't believe he said that. "Dax!"

"What?" he asked, his tone completely innocent although his eyes twinkled with laughter.

"I don't think Alaina is into...that kind of thing."

"I have no idea if Rye is either, but I've always believed what two people want to do together is cool, no matter what it is."

So many images popped into her head at that statement...images that came from her imagination since she hadn't experienced anything like that in real life.

Dax lifted his camera and snapped a shot of the creek. "The bank by that pool would've been a great spot for Alaina to build her B-and-B if she hadn't been so determined to refurbish Stevens House."

"Yes, it would've been nice for her place to be on the water, but..."

Kelcey stopped. She couldn't believe the perfect name for Alaina's place had been under everyone's noses all along. "Dax, does this creek have a name?"

"Yeah. Crystal Creek. Why?"

My gosh, that's perfect. A huge smile turned up her lips. "Dax, you just solved the biggest problem Alaina has."

"Great." He frowned, obviously confused. "What did I do?"

"You came up with the perfect name for Stevens House."

Eager to tell Alaina her idea, Kelcey took off at a jog for the mansion. "What did I come up with?" Dax called out.

Without turning around or slowing her pace, Kelcey shouted, "The Inn on Crystal Creek!"

Chapter Six

Alaina squealed when Kelcey told her the name she'd come up with for the B-and-B, which made Emma come running to make sure everyone was all right. Emma joined in the squealing after Alaina told her what Kelcey had said. Holding on to each other, they jumped up and down while turning in a circle.

Emma pulled out of the circle first. "Now I know the name of the restaurant too."

"What?" Kelcey and Alaina asked at the same time.

"Café Crystal."

Alaina beamed. "It's perfect! I can't believe I didn't think of such a perfect name."

"You were trying too hard," Kelcey said. "I wasn't trying at all, so it came to me when I was talking to Dax."

"However it came to you, I'm so happy with it. Okay, now that we have a name, we have a lot to do, like order the invitations."

"I'll do that today."

"I'm going back to the restaurant," Emma said. "I'm getting really good with the nail gun."

Once she left, Alaina looked at Kelcey again. "Does that scare you as much as it does me?"

"Definitely."

Kelcey giggled with her friend until Alaina turned serious again. "Several things before I forget. Bob got tied up at his other job, so we rescheduled for Wednesday. I spoke with Ally Briscoe at the *Lanville Journal* about my website and brochures. She's the newspaper's bookkeeper, but she's also an amazing graphic artist. She's coming Wednesday too. Michaela and Jax Greene are coming Thursday to interview me and

take pictures for the article and ad in the paper. UPS delivered the accounting software I ordered, so it can be installed whenever you're ready."

"I'm ready now."

"Great! I'll let you play while I go back upstairs before Rye yells for me again."

Alone in the office, Kelcey unwrapped the accounting software and slid the DVD into the disc drive. While the software installed, she went to the kitchen for a Coke and a couple of Emma's peanut butter cookies. With her sugar fix close by, Kelcey opened the program, prepared to work.

The sound of rain pattering on the window glass captured Kelcey's attention. It surprised her to see how dark it had become outside. Sunset wouldn't occur for another hour, yet the thick, gray clouds made it appear much later.

Everyone had left half an hour ago. Alaina told her she and Rye were headed to Rye's parents' house after they cleaned up to tell them about the engagement. Since Kelcey would be responsible for her own supper tonight, she saw no reason why she shouldn't stay and finish up the work she'd started. Another thirty to forty-five minutes and she'd have all the accounts set up and the files the way she wanted them.

A rumble of thunder sent a chill up Kelcey's spine. She'd never been crazy about thunderstorms. Emma loved them while Kelcey would be happy if she never experienced another one.

When a flash of lightning lit up the room, Kelcey knew it was time to go home.

She shut down the computer and straightened the folders on the desk. After making sure everything was secure in the office, she locked the door and headed toward the parking lot.

The clouds opened up as she made a fast dash for her car. The downpour quickly soaked her clothes and made her hair stick to her head and neck. Shivering, Kelcey

started the motor and turned the heater on high. Blessed heat poured from the vents in only moments.

Once she'd stopped shivering so badly, she put the car in gear and backed out of her parking place. Rain fell so hard, she could barely see out of the windshield, even with the wipers on the highest speed. Logically she knew she should wait until the rain let up before she tried to drive, yet she had no idea when that might be.

Alaina's house was only a few miles away. Deciding she could make it if she took it slow, Kelcey pulled away from the mansion. Thunder rumbled in the distance, lightning flashed and lit up the entire sky. Ten minutes later, Kelcey wondered if she'd made a mistake in attempting this trip. The drive to Alaina's house normally took about twelve minutes and she guessed she was only about halfway there. Turning around would be silly, so she continued on, gripping the wheel and leaning forward in her seat to better see out of the windshield.

Through the driving rain, she saw Dax's house about one hundred feet ahead. That meant Alaina's house was only another mile away. She could do this. She'd be one big knot of tension when she pulled into Alaina's driveway, but she could do this.

A bright flash of lightning quickly followed by a booming crack of thunder caused Kelcey to jerk the wheel. Her tires hit a deep puddle on the side of the road. She screamed as she lost control and headed straight for a tree.

* * * * *

Dax looked up from his laptop when Walker lifted his head, ears cocked. "What did you hear, boy?"

The dog growled low in his throat. Dax didn't know how Walker could hear anything over the rain pounding on the roof. He leaned over and rubbed the top of Walker's head. "It's okay. No one would be out in this storm."

He no sooner said the words than Walker jumped up and ran to the front door, barking nonstop. Walker didn't act that way for nothing. That meant he'd heard something — or someone — outside.

Laying his laptop on the coffee table, Dax hurried to the door and pushed Walker aside. A blast of cold rain immediately hit him in the face and chest when he opened the door. Blinking against the rain that flew into his eyes, he looked up and down his road for a sign of whatever Walker heard.

The German Shepherd raced past him and leaped off the porch. Dax almost yelled for Walker to come back when a flash of lightning lit up the area. He saw the small car plowed into a tree less than seventy-five feet from his house.

"Holy shit," he muttered.

Dax took off running toward the car. His heart began to pound the closer he got. It looked like Kelcey's car.

Walker had his front paws on the driver's door, scratching as if trying to get in. Dax grabbed his collar and pulled him back. Jerking open the door, he saw that the airbag had deployed. Kelcey sat with her head back and eyes closed.

His heart dropped down into his stomach.

"Kelcey! Can you hear me?"

She rolled her head toward him and opened her eyes. "Dax."

She knew him. That had to be a good sign. "Can you move?"

"I think so." She straightened in her seat. "So far, so good."

He didn't give her a chance to do anything else before he unhooked her seat belt and slowly slid his arms beneath her.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting you out of the car."

Scooping her up in his arms, he pushed the door closed with his hip and headed for the house. Walker ran ahead a few feet, stopped and looked back at him, then ran ahead again.

"I can walk, Dax."

He ignored her protest and kept walking. By the time he made it the short distance to his house, they were both soaked. He walked through the front door, kicked it shut, and headed straight for the couch in the living room.

"Don't you *dare* put me down on that beautiful couch. I'm soaked."

She was also shivering. First order would be to get her dry and warm. Dax continued on through his bedroom and into the master bath. He let her slide down his body, holding her close to be sure she didn't fall.

"I'll call for the ambulance while you get dry."

"No. I don't need an ambulance. I'm *fine*. The airbag and seat belt kept me from hitting anything."

He frowned. "You should be checked out. I can take you to the ER—"

"NO. I don't need to go to the hospital."

"You're shivering."

"I'm wet. So are you." The dog let loose a loud bark, then shook the water from his fur. "So is Walker."

Once he was certain she wouldn't fall, Dax released Kelcey and crossed to the towel cabinet. He removed two thick, fluffy towels and handed one to her. "I'll give you some privacy so you can dry off. Or take a shower if you want to. I'll leave some sweats for you on the bed, okay? Then I'll throw your clothes in the dryer."

"Okay. Thanks."

He peered closely into her eyes. They looked clear and as blue as usual, her pupils reactive the way they should be. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Kelcey smiled. "I promise I'm okay. I just need to dry off and drink something warm."

"Coffee or hot chocolate?"

Her eyes widened a bit. "Oooh, hot chocolate please."

If she could get so excited about chocolate, she must be okay. "Hot chocolate coming up. Let's go, Walker."

He closed the bathroom door behind him. Quickly searching through a dresser drawer, he located a gray sweatshirt and matching pants and laid them, along with a pair of socks, on his bed. Grabbing more socks and a pair of navy sweatpants for himself, he headed for the laundry room with Walker by his side.

After stripping off his wet clothes, he swiped the towel over his body and donned the sweatpants and socks. He took a beach towel from the cabinet above the dryer and dropped to his knees before Walker.

"Let's get you a little drier, okay?" The dog answered his question with a lick to Dax's cheek. Dax chuckled as he rubbed the towel over Walker's back. "Yeah, I thought you'd like this. You probably want to be brushed too."

Walker barked, which made Dax laugh. "I know you well, don't I, boy?"

Movement to his left caught Dax's attention. He saw his socks encasing a pair of small feet and curvy calves. The socks stopped just below Kelcey's knees...her bare knees. His gaze slid up smooth thighs to the hem of his sweatshirt, which hit her a couple of inches below her crotch.

"The pants wouldn't stay up," she said softly.

Dax had no complaints about that. If he leaned forward a few inches, he could nuzzle Kelcey in that warm place between her thighs.

His gaze lifted, pausing long enough to notice her hard nipples pressing against the fleece before he continued on to her face. Pink bloomed in her cheeks. She was

obviously embarrassed to stand before him in next to nothing. Ordering his randy hormones to behave, he stood. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay. You're a lot more..." She stopped and her gaze passed over his chest and stomach. "Husky than I am."

He wanted to touch her. He wanted to touch her more than he wanted to draw his next breath. Worried about scaring her away, he pushed aside his desire and reached for her wet clothes. "I'll put these in the dryer for you."

"Thank you. Could I maybe borrow a blanket or something to wrap around my legs?"

He thought it a shame to cover up those pretty legs, but he didn't want her to be cold. "There's an afghan on the back of the couch. Why don't you grab it and I'll meet you in the kitchen?"

She gave him a small smile. "Sounds good."

Concentrating on taking care of her clothes gave him the chance to get his body back under control. He added his wet clothes to hers and started the dryer. After tossing the wet towel he'd used on Walker on top of the dryer, he headed for the kitchen.

She came into the kitchen as he removed the milk from the refrigerator. She'd wrapped the afghan his grandmother made ten years ago around her and tucked in one end at her waist to make it look like a sarong. A sheepish expression brought the pink back to her cheeks.

"Not exactly a fashion statement, am I?"

"Considering you plowed your car into a tree a short time ago, I think you look damned good." Dax took cocoa, sugar and salt from the cabinet. "I wasn't sure if your accident should be reported or not, but I called our sheriff to make sure. Brad will check out your car tomorrow morning."

Kelcey bit her bottom lip. "I need to call my insurance agent too."

"Use my phone."

"Her number is in my cell phone, which is in my purse in my car. I really don't want to get wet again to get my cell."

"So you'll call her in the morning. There's nothing she can do tonight anyway."

"That's probably true." She stepped closer and peered into the saucepan. "You make hot chocolate from *scratch*?"

"Sure. It's better that way." He gave the concoction a quick stir. "Doesn't Emma make hers from scratch?"

"Yes, but you're a guy."

"Yep, I'm definitely a guy." One who could smell the rain in her hair, see the way the light over the stove illuminated her eyes...those incredible, sexy, blue eyes.

Dax had to look away from her to get his hormones back under control again. "What happened? Why did you hit the tree?"

"The lightning scared me and I jerked the wheel. Then I hit a huge puddle on the side of the road. I lost control of my car."

"You're lucky you aren't seriously hurt."

She held up one hand, palm toward him. "I can swear that airbags do work and seat belts hold you in place."

"Think you'll be bruised tomorrow?"

Kelcey shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe."

He took two thick mugs from the cabinet. "Will you do something for me?"

"What?"

"If you're sore tomorrow, see a doctor. It won't hurt you to get checked out."

She smiled, accepted the mug of cocoa from him. "Okay."

Dax picked up his mug from the countertop. "Let's go in the living room."

Walker lifted his head and thumped his tail when they walked into the room. After Kelcey sat on one end of the couch, he shifted so he lay at her feet.

"I swear you hypnotized my dog."

He enjoyed the contented expression on Kelcey's face while she rubbed Walker behind his ears. "He's so beautiful. Aren't you, Walker?"

He licked her hand and whined softly.

"That's it. He officially loves you."

Still petting the dog, Kelcey turned her head toward Dax. "How do you know?"

"He kissed your hand. I told you Walker is very stingy with his kisses."

"Then I'm honored."

Holding her mug with both hands, she curled her legs beneath her in the corner of the couch. She should've looked silly in his too-big sweatshirt with the afghan wrapped around her legs. Instead, she looked soft. Comfortable. Lovely.

Desirable.

Dax stretched his arm along the back of the couch. Another few inches and he could touch her hair. He wondered what she'd do if he moved closer to her.

Before he did that and sent her running away, he drained his cup of cocoa. "That was good, but I need food. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Mom keeps my freezer stocked with casseroles and stuff I just have to stick in the microwave. And I'm pretty sure I still have some steaks in there. Be right back."

Kelcey turned and watched Dax walk out of the living room. She'd never thought sweatpants were sexy. On Dax, they were definitely sexy. They molded to his butt and hips, letting her see every curve, every dip, every bulge. Especially that enticing bulge at his groin.

She'd never thought underarm hair sexy either, but she'd been fascinated by the tuft of dark hair when he stretched his arm along the back of the couch. She'd wanted so badly to touch it and see if it was as soft as it looked.

He'd taken the band out of his hair. The long tresses fell around his shoulders and down to his chest. She didn't know how any woman could resist burying her hands in it while she devoured his mouth.

She couldn't think about that glorious wide, hair-dusted chest or flat stomach without her heart beating funny.

Her cheeks flooded with warmth. Being around Dax still rattled her. She shouldn't be here, but she didn't have a choice. She either had to wait for him to take her home or call Alaina or Emma to come get her. She didn't want either of her friends to have to drive in this horrible storm.

As if to emphasize Mother Nature's wrath, a crack of thunder shook the windows. Kelcey gripped her mug tighter. She had no idea how long the storm would last, but she couldn't leave until it stopped. That meant more time with Dax. Perhaps the rest of the evening.

Perhaps the rest of the night.

Chapter Seven

"You have several choices," Dax said, stopping next to her on the couch. "From Mom I have lasagna, chicken casserole or stew. I also have sirloin steaks and chicken tenders. I can do baked potatoes or French fries or a salad, whatever you want."

Kelcey didn't want him going to a lot of trouble for her. "The stew sounds good."

He smiled. "Excellent choice. Mom's stew is the best. Biscuits or cornbread?"

"Surprise me."

"A woman of adventure. I like that."

He winked at her before heading back to the kitchen. How silly for a wink to quicken her breathing and make her imagine all kinds of naughty things...things that she had no idea how to do, or anyone to do them with. After the disastrous event with Dax Saturday night, he would never want to be with her. Besides, he dated half the single women in Lanville. A man with so many choices wouldn't want a woman so scarred that she couldn't even kiss him without freaking.

The aroma of stew and baking biscuits made her stomach gurgle. Pushing aside her self-pity, Kelcey rose from the couch and walked to the kitchen. Dax stood at the counter, pouring red wine into two glasses. Disappointment curled in her stomach to see he'd pulled on a navy T-shirt. She would've enjoyed looking at his chest while they ate.

"How about a little wine with the stew?"

"That sounds nice."

"Would you like to eat in here or in the living room?"

"In here is fine." She accepted one wineglass from him. "Can I help with anything?"

"You can be the official biscuit butterer as soon as they're done."

Taking a sip of wine, Kelcey leaned against the cabinet and watched Dax open the microwave to stir the dish of stew. He seemed so confident in every move he made, even something as simple as opening the oven to check the biscuits.

He also possessed so much talent. Kelcey knew he'd painted the beautiful grapes and vines in the B-and-B's dining room, but assumed he'd used some kind of stencil or pattern. Alaina told her this morning that he'd done everything freehand. Then Emma showed her the sketches Dax had made of the artwork he planned to do on the restaurant walls of different fruits and vegetables. It would be absolutely incredible.

A pinging noise drew her attention to the window over the sink. "Is that hail?"

"Sounds like it."

The pinging turned into a deafening roar as hail pounded the house. Dax motioned with his finger for Kelcey to follow him. He led her to the patio door in the dining room that opened to the backyard. Light flooded the area when he flipped a switch.

"Wow." Kelcey couldn't believe how quickly the ground turned white with pea-sized hail. "It's really coming down."

She couldn't ask Dax to take her home now. Even though Alaina and Rye lived only a mile away, the hail would cause all kinds of damage to Dax's pickup. The same with Alaina's and Emma's vehicles. She didn't want anything to happen to her friends' cars. She had no choice but to stay here with Dax.

The buzzer on the stove went off at the same time the phone rang. "I'll get the biscuits," Kelcey said, "while you answer the phone."

"Good plan."

She removed the pan from the oven as Dax picked up the receiver from the wall phone. "Hello?" He looked at Kelcey. "Yeah, she's right here." He held out the receiver to her. "Change of jobs. It's Alaina."

Kelcey traded places with Dax so he could butter the biscuits. "Hi."

"Are you okay? I was so worried when Rye and I got home and you weren't here."

"Yes, I'm okay. I had a little accident in my car and —"

"You had an *accident*?" Alaina's voice rose in pitch with each word. "Where? When?"

"Luckily right in front of Dax's house. I hit a puddle and ran into a tree."

Alaina gasped. "Ohmigod, are you *okay*? I'll be right there."

"I told you I'm okay and no, you won't be right here. It's horrible outside. There's no reason for you to get out in this weather."

"Didn't Dax take you to the hospital?"

"He tried to, but I wouldn't let him. Lainy, I'm *fine*, I promise. Dax has taken excellent care of me. In fact, we're about to eat supper."

"Are you *sure*? Are you *really* sure you're okay?"

"I'm really sure I'm okay."

"Let me talk to Dax."

Shaking her head, Kelcey held the phone out to Dax. "She wants to talk to you. She doesn't believe I'm not hurt."

She couldn't help hearing his end of the conversation while she searched through cabinets and drawers for bowls, plates and utensils so she could set the table.

"Hey, Alaina... She refused to let me call an ambulance or take her to the ER... She seems to be fine. She says she is." Kelcey glanced at Dax to find him watching her. "I think that would be best. There's no reason for anyone to get out in this weather... Sounds good. See y'all in the morning."

He replaced the receiver in its cradle. "Rye said he'd let Griff and Emma know what happened. They'll all be here in the morning."

In the morning. That meant Dax intended for her to spend the night. "I'm sorry. I know you didn't expect to have a houseguest tonight."

"It isn't a problem. You know I have plenty of room."

Including a bedroom where she'd slept alone Saturday night after she'd almost made love with Dax.

He gestured toward the table. "Sit down. Your clothes will probably be dry by the time we finish supper."

Conversation with Dax had been easy so far. But now, realizing she would spend the night in his house, she didn't know what to say. She took a bite of stew and washed it down with wine while trying to think of something that didn't sound lame or boring.

"You got quiet," Dax said.

"I'm eating."

"If you're uncomfortable spending the night here, I'll take you back to Rye's house."

"The hail will destroy your pickup."

"The hail won't last much longer. Besides, that pickup is a work truck. It already has lots of pings and dings in it. A few more won't hurt it." The corners of his lips lifted in a grin. "Just don't ask me to take you in my car. My baby doesn't go out in bad weather."

Kelcey chuckled. She liked this humorous side of Dax. "Is that what's under the tarp in the garage? One of those bachelormobiles?"

His grin widened, his eyes sparkled like a kid's with a shiny new toy. "Oh yeah. Solid black, lots of leather and chrome, zero to seventy in about half a second."

"Which is so handy on these country roads."

"Hey, they're paved. With lots of curves where the tires squeal when you take 'em."

"What are you, ten?"

Dax ran his fingertips over his beard. "Maybe sixteen when I'm behind the wheel."

His teasing helped her to relax. Kelcey returned his grin. "Now I have to see it."

"If you're really nice, I'll take you for a ride."

"I accept."

The dryer buzzed, signaling that her clothes should be dry. Kelcey took one more bite of the scrumptious stew before she stood. "Do you mind if I keep wearing your sweatshirt? I hung up my cardigan in your bathroom, but I'm sure it's still wet."

"Are you cold? I can turn on the heat or build a fire in the fireplace."

Although a fire would feel good, it would be much too romantic. "I'm okay as long as I can wear your sweatshirt."

"You can keep it as long as you need it."

"Thanks."

Kelcey didn't know Dax had thrown his wet clothes in the dryer with hers until she opened the door and saw them. First she slipped on her panties and jeans, sighing happily at the warmth on her legs. Next she took out her bra and T-shirt. The thought of putting her bra back on didn't appeal to her at all. With Dax's huge sweatshirt covering her, he'd never be able to tell whether she wore a bra or not. She folded it up inside her shirt.

Finally she removed Dax's clothes. She folded his jeans and T-shirt, laid his socks on top of them. The only thing left in the dryer was a pair of tiny black briefs.

Warmth crept back into her cheeks and traveled down her body. Holding up the briefs, she imagined how Dax would look in them...and nothing else. She already knew dark hair spread over his chest and down his stomach. She wondered if the same dark hair covered his legs too. The hair would tickle her as he rubbed his legs against hers.

Goose bumps covered her skin when she felt a presence behind her. Slowly she turned her head to see Dax leaning against the doorjamb.

Mortified to be caught staring at his underwear, Kelcey quickly laid them on top of his socks, closed the dryer door and leaned against the warm appliance.

"Are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?" Dax asked.

She knew exactly what he meant, but pretended she didn't. "I don't know what you mean."

He gave her a look that said, “sure you don’t”, even though he didn’t say the words. “We’ve talked about several things tonight, but not the one thing we should talk about. We almost made love Saturday night, Kelcey. I know you wanted me. Your body told me so. Yet you stopped. Why?”

Dax hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his sweats. Kelcey couldn’t think straight with that strip of skin below his navel exposed. Unsure what to say, she lowered her head and pushed her hair behind her ears.

“Did I do something wrong? Is that why you pushed me away?”

“No,” she whispered.

Several seconds passed before he spoke again. “Were you raped?” he asked in a soft voice.

Denying it would be useless since he already suspected the truth. She nodded.

“Shit,” he muttered. “God, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

The anguish and sympathy in his voice tightened her throat. Tears flooded her eyes. She didn’t want Dax to see her cry. “Excuse me,” she whispered.

She made it no more than two steps when Dax held her arm to stop her. “Hey,” he said, his voice low, soothing. “You don’t have to hide your tears from me.”

His understanding released the floodgates. A choked sound came from her lips before she could stop it.

“C’mere.” He tugged her into his arms, gently coaxed her cheek to his shoulder. Kelcey wrapped her arms around his waist, accepting the comfort he freely offered. He rubbed soothing circles on her back, the way he had Saturday night after her nightmare.

She didn’t know how long they stood there before her tears finally stopped. The desperate need for a tissue made her leave his arms long before she wanted to. “My nose is running.”

“Kleenex in the living room by my recliner.”

Walker looked up and thumped his tail when she walked into the living room. She took long enough to rub his ears before she popped two tissues from the box and blew her nose. Those goose bumps that seemed to pop up whenever Dax came near covered her skin again. She turned to find him standing behind her, close but not close enough to touch.

"You okay?" he asked.

Kelcey nodded.

"I have an idea."

If it had to do with her telling him about her past, she didn't like that idea at all. "What?"

"I think we should get drunk."

His suggestion didn't sink into her brain at first. When it did, she burst out laughing.

Dax grinned. "Hell of an idea, don't you think?"

"We can't get drunk. We have to work tomorrow."

He shrugged. "So we'll get highly plastered instead. How's that?"

"You're insane."

"What fun is life if you don't act a little insane every once in a while?"

Dax's philosophy sounded like Emma's. If she was here right now, she wouldn't hesitate to go along with his idea.

Maybe it's time I let loose and do something a little insane too.

"Okay. Let's get crazy."

* * * * *

Kelcey held up her glass so Dax could pour more wine into it. She had no idea how much wine she'd drunk, but she knew he'd opened a second bottle a short time ago. Her brain felt deliciously fuzzy.

She sat in his office with him, looking at photographs on his computer. He'd shown her pictures he'd taken of the deer on his property, all the ones for the scrapbook his mom was making for Alaina, people around Lanville. He had wonderful shots of kids playing basketball, fishing, running in the schoolyard. The scenery pictures were beyond amazing.

A folder with the name "Trash and Erase" caught her attention. She pointed to it. "What's in there?"

"Nothing." Dax quickly closed several folders he had open, taking him back to the main pictures folder.

"Wait a minute. What are you hiding?"

"I'm not hiding anything."

The wicked gleam in his eyes proved otherwise. Heat whooshed through her body when she realized exactly what he had in that folder. "You have pictures of naked women."

Dax leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest. "Do I?"

The wine swimming through her system gave her courage. Kelcey laid her hand on the mouse, determined to find that folder and open it.

"Oh no." Dax quickly took the mouse away from her and laid it on the other side of the keyboard.

"Hey! I want to see."

"You like looking at pictures of naked women?"

"Ah ha! So you admit that's what's in that folder."

His lips twitched as if he was trying to keep from laughing. "I'll admit I'm a man who appreciates the female body."

Kelcey didn't understand why the image of Dax looking at nude pictures of women seemed so hot. "What's with that 'trash and erase' name?"

"I have a deal with my brothers. If something happens to me, they have to delete that folder and securely empty the trash so there's no trace of it before anyone starts checking out my computer."

"You mean like your parents?"

Dax chuckled. "No. They wouldn't have a problem with those pictures. My parents are cool. My mom would probably critique the pictures. 'You can tell that one was airbrushed'," he said in a higher voice, mimicking his mother. "'Those breasts can't be real. Her butt is way too big. What man would want legs that skinny?'"

By the time he finished, Kelcey was laughing so hard, her sides hurt. She could hardly wait to meet Beverly and the triplets' father, Kenneth. How lucky the Colemans were to have such supportive and understanding parents.

Refusing to go down the self-pity road tonight, Kelcey held out her glass for more wine. Dax splashed some into both their glasses. "Do Griff and Rye have those folders too?"

"Griff erased his when he and Jana got married. I don't know if Rye still has his. He may have erased it when Alaina moved in with him."

"I can tell you Emma still has her folder of naked men pictures on her laptop."

Dax leaned back in his chair again, swirled the wine in his glass. "And you know this...how?"

"I saw it last week. The folder, not what's in it."

"Have you ever looked at what's in it?"

"Maybe once. Or twice."

Dax grinned. "I'm learning a new side of you."

She lifted her glass. "It's the wine talking."

Setting his glass on the desk, he leaned forward in his chair until their faces were only a few inches apart. "Or maybe the real Kelcey is trying to come out...the Kelcey who wants to be a little bolder, a little more daring."

The heat in his eyes warmed every part of her. Her gaze passed from his eyes to his lips and back. She wanted to touch his beard, grab handfuls of that glorious hair. She wanted to press her lips to his and kiss him with all the passion she'd kept bottled up inside her for so long.

Except she didn't know how.

Kelcey set her glass on the desk and stood. "The wine has made me sleepy. I think I'll go to bed."

He looked up at her face several seconds before he also stood. "Would you like a T-shirt to sleep in?"

"Please."

She followed Dax to his bedroom. He pulled a dark green T-shirt from a dresser drawer. "This okay?"

The shirt looked faded and soft and comfortable...perfect to sleep in. "Yes. Thank you."

Moments passed while she looked into Dax's eyes. She sensed he wanted to say more, but he remained silent.

"Thank you for everything, Dax. Good night."

"See you in the morning."

Kelcey strolled down the hallway to the guest room. She laughed when she stepped through the doorway. Walker lay on the end of the bed.

His tail wagged while she walked up to him. "You don't want me to sleep alone, huh?" She rubbed the thick fur on his neck, kissed the top of his head. He licked her hand and released a soft whine. "Yeah, I agree with you. I'm tired of sleeping alone. I wish I had the nerve to walk back to your master's bedroom and just...attack him."

It was a nice fantasy, but one that couldn't come true. After giving Walker one more scratch beneath his chin, Kelcey tugged off the sweatshirt and replaced it with the T-shirt. She removed her jeans, panties and socks, laid them on top of the dresser. After a

quick trip to the bathroom, she turned off the lights and crawled between the soft sheets.

Emma's words popped into her head, the words she'd spoken after Kelcey told her and Alaina about the rapes.

It sounds like the man on top of you is what triggers the memories. You're no longer in control. What if you were on top and in control of sex?

She rolled to her back and stared at the ceiling. Dax was sexy and gorgeous and experienced. He'd be a great teacher. Kelcey didn't want to make a fool of herself, but she didn't want to be afraid any longer either.

Kelcey sat up in bed. Walker lifted his head and looked at her.

"I'm not going to sleep alone tonight, Walker, but I won't be sleeping with you."

Chapter Eight

Dax stuffed two pillows behind his back, stretched out his legs on the bed. It was after eleven and he knew he should be sleepy, yet his mind whirled too much for him to sleep. He'd had fun tonight with Kelcey. That surprised him. She wasn't his type at all. Or she wasn't the type of woman he usually dated. His dates wanted a good time—dinner, maybe a movie or pool at Boot Scootin', and sex. They never spoke about the future, not even another date. Good times. Nothing more.

Funny how thinking about his usual date left a bad taste in his mouth.

Since sleep wouldn't be possible yet, he decided to finish the book he'd started over the weekend. Dax took a sip of wine and turned on his e-reader. He'd read a couple of paragraphs when he heard the door close. He looked up to see Kelcey leaning against it.

She wore his T-shirt. The hem hit her at upper thigh, letting him see all of her pretty legs. He didn't know if she wore anything beneath it, but he suspected not.

He hoped not.

Pushing herself away from the door, she slowly walked toward him. Her hard nipples pressed against the soft cotton, proving that she didn't wear a bra. When she reached his side, she took the e-reader from his limp fingers and laid it on the nightstand.

"You won't need that for a while."

He'd lost his ability to think, much less speak. He'd never expected this from Kelcey. Dreamed of it, yes. Wished for it, yes. Assumed it would happen, no.

Kelcey climbed on the bed and straddled his thighs, her pussy no more than three inches from his cock. "I need you to do something for me."

Dax swallowed, willed his tongue to work again. "What?"

"Don't touch me. Let me touch you."

Since all the blood in his body had rushed to his dick, Dax couldn't move anyway except to nod.

She touched his beard with her fingertips. Dax watched her eyes as she touched him. Her gaze followed her hands. She stroked his jawline, caressed his mustache. She ran her fingers beneath his chin to the smooth skin of his neck where he shaved.

"It's so soft." Her gaze traveled up to meet his. "I expected a beard to be coarse."

"Whiskers are coarse. A beard is longer than just whiskers."

"I don't like stubble, but this is nice." She continued to look into his eyes as her fingertips caressed his jawline again. "How long have you had a beard?"

"Ten years."

She leaned closer, rubbed her cheek against his. Dax squeezed his hands into fists on the bed. He understood why she asked him not to touch her, yet he yearned to do exactly that. He wanted to feel her skin beneath his fingers, cradle her breasts in his palms, slide his hand between her thighs and find out if she wore panties or not. He wanted to tunnel his hands into her soft blonde hair and kiss her until neither of them could breathe.

She slid her lips over his jaw and to his mouth. He didn't return the kiss, but let her explore his mouth at her leisure. Her lips pressed so tenderly against his. She moved her mouth one way, then the other, over and over again. She nipped gently at his lower lip with her teeth, flicked the tip of her tongue over the bite. Those soft, sweet kisses caressed his lips again.

After a few moments of torture on his part, she moved back enough so he could see into her eyes. "Why aren't you kissing me?"

"You told me not to touch you."

"I want you to kiss me. Please."

This time when she pressed her lips to his, Dax responded. He kept the kisses soft and sweet, the way she seemed to want them. Tilting his head slightly to the side, he parted his lips and swiped his tongue over the inside of her bottom lip.

She moaned.

Keeping the kisses gentle became more difficult. Dax wanted to hold her, to ravish her mouth, her body. He twisted his hands into the bedspread beneath him to keep from reaching for her.

When the kisses ended this time, Dax didn't know which of them breathed heavier. She rested her forehead against his. Each puff of air from her mouth flowed over his lips. It made him long for more of her taste.

"I've never..." She lifted her forehead from his. "I've never felt like this."

Neither had he. He'd kissed dozens of women. Kisses had always been a prelude to sex. Kisses with Kelcey seemed to be filled with more feeling, more meaning.

Dax cleared his throat. "How do you feel?"

"I ache, low in my belly."

That meant her pussy was probably open and creamy. He tightened his hold on the bedspread to keep from finding out for sure.

She shifted forward on his legs. Dax inhaled sharply when her mound bumped his tight balls. A man could be sexually frustrated but it wouldn't kill him. At least, Dax had never thought so until now.

"Kelcey, may I touch you?"

She bit her bottom lip, obviously torn. He understood the desire flooding her body battled with her fear. He wanted to do whatever he could to help her.

"I won't touch you if you aren't ready."

She rested her hands on his shoulders. "I'd like to kiss you again."

"I have no problem with that."

Dax gave her everything he could with the next kiss, from slow and tender to hot and passionate. She slid her hands into his hair, held the back of his head while she devoured his mouth. Her lips caressed, her tongue stroked. She tugged his lower lip between her teeth, licked the inside of his lip the way he had hers a few moments ago. She stopped kissing him long enough to take a breath before taking his mouth again.

For a woman who hadn't kissed many men, she learned damned quick.

His cock felt as if it would explode any second. It had been a long time since he'd come in his pants. There was a very good chance of that happening, especially with Kelcey rocking her hips so her mound rubbed against his shaft and balls.

God, he wanted to touch her!

Kelcey leaned back and stared into his eyes. Dax waited, not knowing what she planned to do next. She surprised him by taking the hem of his T-shirt in her hands.

"Raise your arms."

He did as she said. She tugged off his shirt and tossed it to the floor. Dax closed his eyes when she placed those soft hands on his chest. She glided them back and forth over his skin, slid them down the center of his stomach. She stopped at the waistband of his pants.

He opened his eyes again to see her staring at the large bulge an inch from her palm. Indecision mixed with the heat in her eyes.

"I won't hurt you, Kelcey. I swear that on my life."

Her eyes softened with gratitude. Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to his again. He almost swallowed his tongue when he felt her hand slip inside his pants and wrap around his cock.

She laid her face against the side of his neck. "It's so hot."

He caught himself before he arched into her hand. He changed his mind. A man *could* die of sexual frustration. That would happen to him any moment now.

"Dax?" she whispered directly into his ear.

"Yeah," he managed to choke out.

"I want you to touch me."

His cock gave a happy twitch. Before he did anything, he had to know exactly what she wanted. "Where?"

"Wherever you want to."

His first impulse was to cradle a breast and slide a hand between her thighs. He suspected that would frighten Kelcey until she'd gotten used to his touch. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and simply held her close to him.

The gentle nip on his earlobe prompted him to slowly move his hands over her back. Her grip on his cock tightened when he slipped his hands beneath her T-shirt. Still moving slowly, he glided his hands across her back, up and down her spine. Venturing lower, he discovered nothing covering her ass.

Sweat broke out on his forehead when he realized only his pants separated her pussy from his cock. He could push them down, lift her over his dick and sink into her creamy heat in a manner of seconds.

His hormones liked that idea a lot.

Her thumb brushed over the head of his shaft. Her curiosity would make him lose it long before he wanted this to be over. Dax gritted his teeth to get his hormones back under control. He couldn't come until he made sure he satisfied Kelcey.

Looking into Kelcey's eyes, Dax ran his hands up and down her sides beneath her shirt. After the third pass, he covered her breasts with his palms. She gasped softly.

"Is this okay?" he asked, gently squeezing her breasts.

Kelcey nodded.

Neither too big nor too small, her breasts fit perfectly in his palms. He caressed the hard nipples with his thumbs, loving the little sounds of pleasure that came from her throat. She released his cock – much to his disappointment – and gripped his shoulders.

"That feels so good, Dax."

"I can make you feel better. Will you let me?"

She nodded. Dax continued the sweet torment on her breasts with one hand while he slid his other hand between her thighs. It surprised him to find hair covered her mound. Dax couldn't remember the last time he'd been with a woman who didn't wax or shave or at least trim her pussy. He liked the feel of the soft curls beneath his fingers.

Continuing his exploration, Dax touched her labia with his fingertips. She gasped again, louder this time, then moaned when he stroked her clit. He swallowed hard when he discovered the cream covering her intimate flesh. His mouth watered with the desire to taste her. Unable to resist, he gathered her cream on his fingers, brought them to his mouth and licked them clean.

"You're delicious," he said, his voice gruff.

Kelcey whimpered.

She kissed him, lips parted, tongue dueling with his. Dax touched her pussy again, his fingers gliding easily over her wet folds. He rubbed her clit with his thumb while continuing to caress her breasts beneath her shirt. He wanted the shirt gone, but had to leave it up to her whether or not she removed it.

Kelcey rocked her hips in time with his strokes. Her pants grew deeper, faster. "Dax, I need..." She stopped.

"What do you need? Tell me and I'll do it."

She jerked off her T-shirt and tossed it to the floor. "I'm so hot."

That was an understatement if he'd ever heard one. Her long, lean torso flared into shapely hips. Her breasts were round with pale pink areolas the size of half dollars surrounding her nipples. The blonde hair covering her mound matched the hair on her head.

Exquisite didn't begin to do her justice.

She grabbed handfuls of his hair and bucked against his hand. Dax pushed one finger inside her tight channel as he kept up the stimulation to her clit with his thumb.

Kelcey closed her eyes and threw her head back. Her body stilled, her breathing stopped, then she shuddered. A long mewling cry came from her throat.

The walls of her pussy milked Dax's finger. Leaving his hand between her legs, he wrapped his other arm around her and pulled her to his chest. Her heart pounded against him, her hot breath blew across his neck. He kept up the gentle massage of her labia, wanting to give her pleasure as long as possible.

"Your touch feels so good."

"To me too."

She lifted her head and looked in his eyes. "I want more."

"What do you want?"

Still gazing into his eyes, she laid her hand over his cock. "This inside me."

"Like this? With you on my lap?"

She nodded.

He understood and accepted that she had to remain in control. "Take off my pants."

Kelcey's hands shook as she hooked her fingers in the waistband of Dax's pants. Part of her worried she wouldn't be able to actually take him inside her, that she'd freak out again. The biggest part of her wanted him so much, she would be willing to try anything to make love with him.

Dax lifted his butt from the bed and she pulled his pants past his hips. She froze, her gaze riveted to his hard cock. Emotions battled inside her—fear, desire, need, anxiety.

Desire won.

The pants came off, along with his socks. He sat before her nude, aroused and incredibly gorgeous.

He opened the second drawer in his nightstand, withdrew a foil packet. She watched, transfixed, as he opened the packet and rolled the condom over his shaft. Then he held out one hand to her.

"Come here, Kelcey."

She obeyed, taking his hand and letting him guide her over his lap again. She expected him to thrust inside her right away. He surprised her by wrapping his arms around her and holding her close to him.

"Nothing will happen until you're ready," he said next to her ear.

Any lingering fear or anxiety vanished. Kelcey kissed him, gently, tenderly. Her kisses became more passionate as her desire climbed once more. She loved the feel of Dax's hands moving over her body, worshipping every curve, every dip. Squeezing her ass, he pulled her tighter against him. He lifted her up and down so his shaft rubbed her clit.

Heat quickly spread through her body again. Her climax had been so powerful, she'd thought she wouldn't be able to have another one for days. It seemed as if Dax wanted to blow that belief into a thousand pieces. He kept moving her up and down, kept rubbing her clit against his cock. Kelcey spread her legs as wide as she could, buried her face against his neck. The tingling started in her womb, rushed down to her toes and back up her body. She dug her fingernails into Dax's shoulders, bit his neck.

He grunted and jerked beneath her. She could feel his cock pulsing against her belly. Pulling back, she looked down and saw his cum in the condom's reservoir.

"I didn't mean for that to happen," he said.

She heard the chagrin in his voice. "You weren't supposed to have pleasure too?"

"I wasn't supposed to have it without you."

"But you didn't." She touched his lips with her fingertips. "I was right there with you."

Holding her hand against his mouth, he kissed each pad of her fingers. "Let me up and I'll get rid of this condom. Then we'll start the next round."

She didn't understand what he meant. "Next round?"

"Yeah. You don't think we're through, do you?"

Chapter Nine

Kelcey had no idea how to answer Dax's question. Yes, she thought they were through. She assumed once a man had a climax, he rolled over and went to sleep. Since she had no experience with sex, no man had ever proven that theory wrong. Yet Dax didn't seem the least bit sleepy.

He kissed her fingertips again. "Will you let me get up?"

"Oh. Sure."

She had to move slowly because her legs were so weak. Once she shifted to his side, he rose from the bed and headed for his bathroom. A sigh escaped Kelcey's lips as she admired his broad shoulders and tight butt. He had an incredible body, not from working out in a gym but from the physical labor of his job. All those muscles came from lifting tools, not weights.

Unsure whether or not to put her T-shirt back on, she drew a pillow to her chest to hide her body. Dax had seen her, touched her, yet she didn't think she should just sit here naked until he came back.

The view of him from the front stole her breath. Even flaccid, his cock looked thick and long and impressive. She liked the way it jiggled as he walked toward her.

Placing one knee on the bed, he cradled her face in his hands and kissed her. "You're staring."

"There's a lot to stare at."

Dax chuckled. "I'd stare too if you weren't hiding." He gently took the pillow from her arms and tossed it on top of the others. His gaze swept down her body. "That's better."

Warmth climbed up her chest and into her cheeks, partly from embarrassment and partly from the desire in his eyes. He palmed her breasts as he kissed her again, his thumbs and forefingers rolling her nipples. A gentle throb in her clit answered each tug of his fingers.

The mattress dipped with Dax's weight. He pulled her up to her knees so their bodies touched. Her breasts flattened against his chest, his hardening cock pressed into her belly. Kelcey wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingers burrowing into his hair. She couldn't get enough of touching the long tresses. She now understood why men liked long hair on women. The sensual feel of it sliding between her fingers made goose bumps pop up on her skin.

Kelcey went willingly when Dax drew her down to the bed. He kissed her again and again while his hands swept over her back and butt. She squirmed on top of him, searching for more stimulation to her clit.

He dropped kisses across her cheek, her jaw, beneath her ear. "What do you need?"

She didn't know how to tell him. It seemed so forward of her to tell him to touch her clit again. "I...don't know."

"I think I do. Let me taste you."

Kelcey lifted her head and focused on his mouth. Her pussy clenched at the sight of his tongue running over his lower lip. "You mean..."

Dax nodded. "That's exactly what I mean. Climb up over my face."

With his help, Kelcey did as he said. Gripping the headboard, she straddled his mouth and slowly lowered her hips until Dax's tongue swiped across her feminine lips.

"That's the way." He licked her again, all the way up her slit. "Oh yeah. Perfect."

Kelcey gripped the headboard tighter and closed her eyes. Dax continued the teasing torment on her labia. He licked her gently, slowly, as if he wanted to raise her desire bit by bit. Either that or drive her crazy.

Rocking her hips back and forth, she moved her pussy over his tongue so it stroked her where she needed it the most. She stopped when he flicked her clit with the tip of his tongue. Oh yeah, most definitely perfect.

She almost cried in disappointment when he lifted her away from his mouth.

"I want more room. Let's change positions, okay?"

No longer anxious about what he would do, Kelcey followed his guidance to lie on her back. Standing by the side of the bed, Dax grasped her behind her knees and pulled her butt right to the edge. He dropped to his knees, pushed her thighs far apart. He looked into her eyes as he lowered his mouth to her pussy.

And feasted.

Kelcey did cry out this time, but not from disappointment. Dax's tongue flashed over every bit of her intimate flesh. It surprised her to feel him lick her anus. She tensed for a few seconds, unsure how to feel about that, until he licked her there again and she realized she liked it. She relaxed, let her legs fall a little farther apart.

Dax growled.

He pushed his tongue inside her channel, licked up one side of her folds and down the other. Kelcey clutched handfuls of Dax's hair, then realized she'd probably pulled it and quickly released it.

He kissed the inside of each of her thighs. "It's okay. Pull my hair. Dig your fingernails into my shoulders. Scream. Do whatever you need to do to come again."

She'd never imagined she'd ever be in this position with a man, and especially not a man who cared so much about her pleasure. His lips looked wet and shiny from her juices. She reached down to touch them. They felt like silk.

Dax captured two fingers in his mouth and sucked on them. It amazed her to feel her womb clench with each pull of his lips.

Grabbing a pillow, she tucked it beneath her head so she could see Dax better. He held her gaze while he rubbed her clit with his thumb, drove his tongue into her pussy

over and over. Kelcey twisted the bedspread in her fists to keep from pulling Dax's hair again. Another orgasm loomed, yet she needed more to get over that last hurdle and tumble into bliss.

She got it when Dax pushed a finger inside her as he suckled her clit. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she trembled from the powerful sensation galloping through her body. Dax rubbed a spot in her passage that made her gasp from pleasure.

"Like this?" he asked, rubbing that spot again.

"Oh yes."

Leaving that finger inside her, Dax stood and leaned over her, propping himself up on his other hand. His hair fell forward to tickle her breasts. "You haven't been with a man since...the incident?"

"No," she whispered.

"You're tight. I don't want to hurt you."

"Won't I...adjust to you?"

"Yeah, but it might be uncomfortable for you at first."

"I don't care." She ran her hand up his arm to cradle his cheek. "Please. I want to feel all of you."

He dropped a kiss on each nipple, her tummy, her mound. Retrieving another condom from the drawer, he quickly sheathed his hard cock. He grasped the base of his shaft, slid the head up and down her folds several times before he positioned it at the entrance to her channel. He pushed—slowly, so slowly—until the head of his cock slipped inside.

The stretching gave her a little discomfort, but the pleasure far outweighed any pain. Dax withdrew, pushed back in again. He repeated the action, going a little deeper each time, until he filled her completely.

He leaned over her again, resting both hands on the bed next to her shoulders. "Is this okay?"

Kelcey nodded. She wrapped her hands around his upper arms. "You feel good inside me."

He pulled back, pushed forward. She closed her eyes to better savor the feeling of his cock sliding through her creamy flesh. Dax kept up the slow pace, as if he wanted to be sure she enjoyed everything happening to her body before he moved any faster.

She couldn't help but enjoy something that seemed so right.

Opening her eyes again, she looked into his, squeezed his arms. "More."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

His movements quickened. Kelcey kept staring into his eyes, the connection between them growing stronger with each sharp thrust into her body. She didn't feel the strong buildup of pleasure, the prelude to an orgasm this time. It didn't matter to her. She only cared about Dax's satisfaction.

The pulsing of his cock deep inside her channel signaled his climax. Dax threw back his head. His body jerked. The tendons stood out in his neck, the muscles tightened in his arms. He released a sexy sound of part groan, part growl, before he hung his head, breathing heavily.

It had been a long, long time since such a powerful orgasm had gripped him. Dax struggled to get enough oxygen into his lungs. Sweat covered his entire body. His hair stuck to the back of his neck. His legs felt so weak, if he didn't lean against the bed for support, he wouldn't be able to stand.

Kelcey's soft stroking on his arms made him raise his head. She lay on his bed, looking sexy and lazy and very well satisfied. He wanted nothing more than to hold her in his arms all night. Since he rarely spent the entire night with a woman, the strong desire surprised him.

"Hey," he said softly.

She gave him a sweet smile. "Hey."

"You okay?"

"I'm a lot better than okay."

He couldn't resist grinning at her choice of words. "I'll second that." Holding on to the base of the condom, he slowly withdrew from her body. "Be right back."

Dax thought about jumping in the shower, but didn't want to do that without telling Kelcey. He could invite her into the shower with him. Soap sliding down her body would be sexy as hell.

Everything tonight had been new for Kelcey. He didn't want to overwhelm her with too much too soon. He quickly took care of the condom and returned to the bedroom to find Kelcey curled up in a ball in the middle of the bed.

He ran his hand over her hip. "Hey, you okay?"

"I'm a little cold."

"Why didn't you crawl under the covers?"

"I didn't know if I should stay or go back to my room."

Dax leaned over and kissed her softly. "I'd like you to stay."

The worry that had been in her eyes changed to happiness. "I'd like that too."

He tugged back the covers so she could slide between the sheets. After turning off the lamp, he lay next to her. Wrapping one arm across her breasts, the other around her waist, he tugged her back against his chest. He heard her sigh.

"This all right with you?"

She entwined her fingers with his at her waist, placed her other hand on the arm across her chest. "It's nice."

Now would be a good time for them to talk, yet Dax could barely keep his eyes open. The combination of really good sex and feeling comfortable with Kelcey in his arms thoroughly relaxed him. Before sleep could claim him, he pressed a gentle kiss to Kelcey's shoulder. "Good night."

She squeezed his fingers. "Good night."

* * * * *

In that world halfway between sleep and consciousness, Dax thought he heard a car door slam. Then another. He frowned when he heard voices outside his house. No one should be here. He'd barely fallen asleep. It couldn't be morning yet.

His eyes popped open and he jerked fully awake when someone banged on the window by his bed. "Hey, sleepyhead," Rye said. "You gonna stay in bed all day?"

"Shit!"

Throwing back the covers, Dax jumped up from bed and grabbed his sweatpants from the floor. A quick glance at the digital clock on his nightstand showed twelve minutes past eight. He hadn't slept later than six-thirty in years.

"Dax?" Kelcey said, her voice husky from sleep.

"Rye's here. Probably Griff, Alaina and Emma too." Hurrying to his closet, he shoved his feet into a pair of running shoes. He scooped up his T-shirt and tugged it over his head as he headed for the door. "I'll stall them outside while you get dressed."

Walker was already at the back door, waiting to be let out. Dax stopped long enough to snag a jacket from a hook before he opened the door. Walker bounded out, almost knocking Rye down in his haste.

"Hey, fella." Rye knelt to give the dog a hard rub on his neck. "How come your master is still in bed after eight o'clock?"

"Is it a crime to sleep in every once in a while?"

Rye looked up at him. "Nope. It's just unusual for you. Unless you were...busy last night."

Dax refused to respond to Rye's teasing. He wouldn't tell anyone that Kelcey spent the night in his bed. It had to be up to her if she wanted anyone to know they'd made love.

He'd always thought of it as having sex, yet with Kelcey he thought of being with her as making love. He didn't understand why everything with her seemed so different.

He looked over toward Kelcey's car. Alaina and Emma stood with Griff, examining the car. Dax winced. It was a total loss. Kelcey had been extremely lucky to walk away from that wreck without serious injury.

Alaina walked toward him and Rye, Kelcey's purse clutched in her hand. "Where's Kelcey?"

"Still asleep, I guess."

Emma and Griff also came toward them, his brother carrying a large white box Dax recognized as coming from the donut shop. Emma's gaze swept over Dax. "You look all...rumpled."

"I'll bet you look rumpled too when you first get out of bed."

"Nah." She grinned wickedly. "I look sexy."

"I'll agree with that." Griff wrapped an arm around Emma's neck and kissed her temple. "We brought apple fritters. You got coffee?"

"I can have it in a few minutes."

Dax led the way into his kitchen. He stumbled a step when he saw Kelcey standing at the counter, measuring coffee into the filter. She wore her own clothes, her hair brushed and shiny. Her eyes glowed the way a person's did who had been thoroughly loved.

The thoroughly loved part sounded really good. He wondered if it would be rude to chase everyone off and carry her back to his bed. "Mornin'."

She smiled. "Good morning." Her eyes and smile widened when she saw the box in Griff's hand. "Donuts?"

"Apple fritters."

"Even better."

Since taking Kelcey back to bed wouldn't happen, now would be a good chance for him to change into regular clothes before the coffee finished brewing. He clapped each of his brothers on the shoulder. "Guys, play host while I get dressed." After one more glance at Kelcey, he headed toward his bedroom.

Kelcey pushed the start button on the coffeemaker to keep from staring at Dax's butt as he walked away. She'd hoped for another lovemaking session this morning. The arrival of his brothers and her friends destroyed that idea.

She sighed to herself. It was probably for the best anyway. More time with Dax would lead to her wanting even more time, and that couldn't happen. She had given herself to him last night, hoping he could help her get past the awful roadblock that kept her from being intimate with a man. He'd done that with consideration and kindness. She would always love him a little bit for that. Anything more than that little bit of love wouldn't be possible. She'd heard over and over from her friends that Dax didn't want to be tied down to one woman.

"I brought your purse in from your car," Alaina said.

"Thank you. I need to call my insurance agent."

"We ran into the sheriff at the donut shop," Griff said. "He'll be by with one of his deputies in about an hour."

She looked from one brother to the other. "Do you think my car is totaled?"

"I think there's a good chance of that," Rye said. "It looks pretty bad."

"It's only four years old."

Emma gave her a quick hug. "Lainy and I will go with you to shop for a new one."

"Thanks, Emma." She spotted her purse on the end of the counter. "I'd better call my agent. Be right back."

She'd just finished leaving a message on her agent's voice mail when Alaina and Emma walked into the guest room. Emma shut the door behind them. That alerted Kelcey that her friends planned to have a serious talk with her.

"What is it?"

Instead of answering her question, Alaina and Emma gave her a fierce hug. "We were so worried about you," Alaina said. "Don't *ever* get in another car accident."

A lump formed in Kelcey's throat at the obvious love of her friends. She'd had a few close friends in her life, but none of them as special as these two ladies. She was so lucky to have them in her life. "I'll do my best."

Emma released her, wiped a tear from her cheek. "Okay, end of serious stuff. What happened with Dax?"

"What makes you think anything happened with him?"

"He had that rumpled, just-had-a-great-night-of-sex look. And so do you, even though you took the time to get dressed and start coffee so none of us would suspect you came from his bed."

Kelcey started to automatically deny anything happened between her and Dax. What they'd shared should be between them. Then she realized she didn't want to lie to her friends. The memory of the previous night caused her lips to tilt up in a pleased smile. "It was amazing."

Emma flashed a grin at Alaina and punched her upper arm. "I told you so! I *knew* they'd have sex."

"You were okay?" Alaina asked. "No freaking out or nightmares?"

Kelcey shook her head. "I thought about what you said, Emma, about me being in control. Dax let me do that. He didn't even touch me until I told him he could. After that..." She fanned her face. "Wow."

Emma grinned again. "Sounds like all the Coleman triplets have impressive tools."

"I don't know about Rye and Griff—nor do I want to—but Dax certainly isn't lacking in the tool department."

Alaina giggled along with Kelcey. "You realize they'd shoot us if they knew we were comparing notes about their...assets."

"Men have talked about our tits and asses for years," Emma said. "It's our turn to have fun."

The teasing look disappeared from Emma's eyes as she touched Kelcey's face. "I'm happy you were with Dax last night. What your uncles did to you was beyond horrible. I would gladly cut off their dicks if I could."

"Don't think I haven't thought about that too."

Alaina gave Kelcey a one-armed hug. "You're safe now and no one will ever hurt you again. We'll all make sure of that."

Chapter Ten

Thanks to the flat land of North Texas, he could see the sprawling Metroplex long before he got close to it. He rarely left California so he'd never been here, yet he couldn't take the time for any sightseeing. He had to find Kelcey before he did anything else.

Then he would settle up with her once and for all.

* * * * *

Kelcey rotated her neck and winced. It had become tighter as the day progressed. She blamed the achy shoulders and stiff neck on too much time on the computer, yet she suspected she hurt because of another reason—a touch of whiplash from her accident.

She'd promised Dax she'd see a doctor if she started hurting. He'd probably write a prescription for pain pills or muscle relaxers and send her on her way. She didn't want to pop a bunch of pills that would make her sleepy. She had way too much work to do to have pain medication hamper her ability to think.

Hooking her hands behind her neck, Kelcey leaned her head back to try to loosen the stiff muscles. A massage would be so welcome now. Perhaps Alaina and Emma had found a massage therapist here in Lanville who would be willing to see her on short notice.

"You okay?" Dax asked from behind her.

Kelcey started to turn her head toward his voice, but quickly changed her mind when pain shot down into her mid back. She couldn't help the gasp that escaped her lips.

Dax moved into her line of vision, a scowl on his face. "Your neck is hurting, isn't it?"

"A little."

He gently pulled her hands away and ran his fingers up and down her neck. "From as tight as these muscles are, I'd say you're hurting more than just a little."

Alaina came into the office, carrying today's mail. One look at Dax's hand on Kelcey's neck and she frowned. "What's up?"

"Kelcey's neck is hurting."

Kelcey didn't want anyone making a fuss over her. "It's not that bad. I think a massage is all I need. Do you know a massage therapist, Lainy?"

"Yeah." Alaina laid the mail on Kelcey's desk. "He has his hand on your neck right now."

If Alaina had said a truck full of gold pulled up outside, Kelcey wouldn't have been more surprised. She swiveled her chair so she could see Dax's face. "You're a massage therapist?"

"Not officially. I took the classes and I do have a license, but I don't see clients. I only work on family and friends."

"He told me he works for sex or food," Alaina said.

Dax shrugged. "I had to pick something else besides sex. Can't ask for that from my future sister-in-law."

"You can *ask*, but you ain't getting any."

"Man, I'm so abused." He pressed a spot in Kelcey's shoulder with his thumb. She snagged her bottom lip with her teeth to keep from gasping. "I'd like to help you."

"Kelcey, go. Right now. I don't want you here if you're hurting. I promise Dax will make every ache and pain disappear." She reached into the top desk drawer and drew out a ring of keys. "Take my car. Then go home and rest. I'll get a ride with Rye."

She'd ridden to work with Alaina, so had no way to leave unless she took her friend's car. "I still have accounts to set up—"

"It's already after three. There's nothing you have to do that can't wait a day. Go!"

Dax gently squeezed her neck. "I'll follow you."

With two people working on her, she didn't have a choice. Kelcey gathered up her purse and sweater and walked out to Alaina's car, Dax right behind her.

The drive to Dax's house gave Kelcey the chance to think. His hands on her during a massage would be completely different than when he touched her while making love. There wouldn't be anything intimate about it. Dax hadn't given her any indication that he wanted a repeat of what happened between them last night. While it had been life-changing for her, it had probably been just another evening of sex with a willing female for him.

She wouldn't mention last night, wouldn't ask him for a repeat. She refused to be a needy, clingy female when she knew Dax didn't want that.

She parked in front of his house. He pulled onto the pad in front of his garage. By the time she climbed from the car, she could barely move her neck. The pain must have been evident on her face for concern filled his eyes as he held out his hand to her. Taking it, she let him lead her to the back room of his house. He took a key off a hook on the wall and unlocked the door.

"I have to keep the door locked or Walker will go in and sleep on the table."

He pushed down on the door lever and stood aside so she could enter the room. A massage table sat in the middle of the room, already made up with fresh sheets. Dark curtains covered the windows to keep out sunlight. Several candleholders sat on the chest of drawers against the wall and on small accent tables.

"I keep the room ready in case someone comes over." Walking to one of the tables, he picked up a lighter and touched the wicks of three tall pillar candles. "Emma picked out these candles for me. They're a mix of lavender, jasmine and vanilla."

"Do you burn candles when you work on men too?"

"Men enjoy fragrances just like women do." A press of a button on a stereo in the corner and New Age instrumental music filled the room. "I'll give you time to get undressed and between the sheets."

Undressed? Kelcey hadn't realized taking off her clothes would be part of the deal. "Why do I have to get undressed if you're working on my neck?"

"Because I won't be working only on your neck. This will be a full-body massage, Kelcey...about two hours worth, if you're as tight as I suspect you are."

Two hours of muted light, soft music, and Dax's hands on her skin. That could be a potent combination.

"I'll be back in a few minutes. Lie on your stomach." He opened the door, pushed Walker back before the dog could go in the room, and closed the door behind him.

This is medical, Kelcey. As long as you remember that, you'll be fine.

With that thought, she looked around the room again and noticed the hooks on the wall over a padded chair. That must be the place for her clothes. She'd had a full-body massage several times and knew that meant everything off, including underwear. That had never bothered her since she'd always had a female massage therapist and a female doctor. A man had never touched her nude body since she became an adult, until last night.

The pain shooting through her neck and shoulders stopped her hesitation. Kelcey quickly removed all her clothes and slipped between the sheets.

A soft knock on the door announced Dax had returned. Kelcey lifted her face from the headrest and called out, "Come in."

She noticed he'd changed clothes while out of the room. No longer wearing his paint-spattered jeans and shirt, he now wore dark green sweatpants and a loose camouflage T-shirt. He'd also removed his shoes and now wore only socks on his feet.

She didn't understand why that seemed so sexy.

Dax opened a two-door cabinet close to her head. "I have several different scents of massage oil. Do you have a preference?"

"Something flowery."

He looked at her over his shoulder and grinned. "I figured that since you're a girl." He chose a bottle and closed the cabinet. "I think you'll like this one."

She watched him slip on a loose canvas belt and slide the pump-top bottle into a loop on the side. Expecting him to start on her neck, Kelcey lowered her face to the headrest. He surprised her yet again by uncovering her left foot and taking it in his oil-slick hands.

"You aren't working on my neck?"

"I'll get there. Eventually."

Kelcey had tensed when Dax first touched her foot. The smooth glide of his fingers across her skin soon helped her relax. He caressed every part of her foot, including each toe. He found sore spots on the bottom of her foot she didn't realize she had.

"Have you ever had a massage?" he asked.

"Yes, but it's been a while."

"Everyone has a different level of pressure they can take. Let me know if I go too deep. I want to go as deep as I can, but don't want to hurt you."

"Okay."

A whiff of flowers from the massage oil reached her nose. Kelcey closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. The scent made her think of the first flowers of spring. The soothing fragrance mixed with the soft music had her contemplating a nap.

The thought of a nap flew out of her head when Dax uncovered her left leg and buttock. She barely caught the groan before it escaped when his hands slid all the way up her leg and cheek. There was nothing sexual about his touch, nothing to compare it to the way he'd touched her last night. Yet memories flooded her mind of his kisses, his

caresses, his cock moving in and out of her channel. Her clit throbbed when she thought of his tongue on her intimate flesh.

Talking would help get her mind off sex and back to medical stuff. "You, uh, do this a lot?"

"Depends on what you mean by a lot. I give at least one massage a week. There have been weeks when I've done one every night."

"You don't charge for them?"

"No."

"That's very generous."

"I believe in karma. Be good to people and they'll be good to you. I would never charge my family, of course, or Alaina and Emma. Other people give me things to thank me, even though I don't ask for anything. Brad gave me Mavericks tickets after I worked on him a couple of times. My last two oil changes have been free 'cause I worked on my mechanic's back. I get lots of food, which I appreciate since I'm not the best cook."

Kelcey chuckled.

"It isn't funny. I'd starve if my mom didn't send over care packages."

"Emma would never let you starve."

"Yeah, that's true." He covered her left leg, moved around the table and uncovered her right. "She and Alaina have become like sisters to me."

Kelcey noticed he didn't include her in that sister category. She couldn't expect him to. Despite their sleeping together last night, they didn't know each other very well. Although the more she learned about Dax, the more she liked him. The fact that he wanted to help his friends and did not expect anything in return said a lot for his character.

He was so much more than the womanizer she'd believed him to be.

She jerked when he pressed a sore spot in her cheek. He immediately let up on the pressure. "You have a bad hip?"

"It hurts sometimes when I stand too long."

"I can show you some stretches that will help it." He covered her leg with the sheet. "Tell me if you get cold and I'll add a blanket with the sheet."

She didn't see how she could possibly get cold, not with Dax touching her.

He drew the sheet down her back and folded it across the top of her thighs. His oil-slick hands glided across her shoulders and down her back to just above her buttocks. He pressed a bit firmer on his return journey to her shoulders. "I should have asked if you want a towel for between your breasts."

"Why would I want a towel?"

"Some women need a towel to keep from smashing their breasts against the table."

"I'm not Alaina. Mine aren't big enough to worry about that."

His touch paused in the middle of her back. "Your breasts are beautiful, Kelcey."

The husky tone of his voice sent warmth skittering through her body. She considered rolling over, drawing him down to the table with her. The press of his thumbs on either side of her spine stopped that thought. She had to remind herself again that this was medical, not personal.

She couldn't help wondering if any of his massages on women turned personal. All that skin, shiny and slippery from the oil, would be difficult for a man to resist, especially a man who'd had his hands all over her body.

Too embarrassed to ask such a personal question, Kelcey took a breath and blew it out slowly, ordering her body to relax.

"That's good," he said. "Breathe nice and even."

The soothing glide of Dax's hands helped her relax. Sometimes he touched a sore spot, but he worked on it until it no longer hurt. She'd had massages in the past, yet no

one had taken as much care as Dax to make sure he'd completely relaxed a muscle before he moved to the next one.

Professional. That's how she had to describe him.

She had no idea how much time had passed when he lifted the sheet off her body. "Roll over to your back."

Kelcey looked at Dax, but he held the sheet in front of his face so she couldn't see him...or he see her. Following his instruction, she carefully rolled to her back. "Okay."

He let the sheet drift back over her body, covering her from neck to feet. "Do you need a tissue or drink of water?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Blanket?"

Now that he asked, she realized she'd grown cool during the massage. "Yes, please."

He returned to the cabinet by her head and removed a thermal blanket. After draping it over her, he knelt by the side of the table. Kelcey heard a soft click.

"I'm turning on a heating pad. You should feel it on your back in just a bit."

"You turn on a heating pad, you'll put me to sleep."

Dax stood and smiled at her. "If I put you to sleep, that's the best compliment you can give me."

The warmth from the pad began to seep into her back. Kelcey closed her eyes and sighed. She could get used to this kind of treatment.

"I assume that pleased little smile means you're comfortable."

She heard the teasing in his voice, but decided she didn't want to go to the effort of opening her eyes. "Very."

He uncovered her left foot and leg, all the way to her groin. She moaned when he began to massage her foot. "Can you do that for about three hours?"

His chuckle sounded deep and a little bit wicked. "Like the foot massage, huh?"

"It's very nice."

"If *this* relaxes you, you *will* go to sleep when I massage your scalp."

"You do that too?"

"Full-body, remember? Well, except for the good parts."

Kelcey opened her eyes, lifted her head. The silly grin on Dax's lips made her laugh. She decided to play along with him. "No touching the good parts?"

"Not unless I want to get hit."

"Rye and Griff probably wouldn't appreciate your hands on any part of Alaina and Emma that isn't neutral territory."

"That's for sure." He bent her knee, pushed it toward the center of her body. "I wouldn't want to touch them anyway. I mean, they're both gorgeous and sexy, but I don't feel any lust for them."

"You did for Emma before she got involved with Griff."

"I flirted with her a little and she flirted back, but it didn't last long. She fell for Griff pretty fast."

"That didn't bother you?"

"Nah." He covered her leg, moved to the other side of the table and uncovered her right one. "I'm happy Emma and Griff found each other. Griff really needed someone in his life after Jana died. Emma makes him a better person. I think they were made for each other."

"That sounds pretty romantic coming from a guy who plans to be an eternal bachelor. That's what Alaina told me."

Dax shrugged. "Just because I don't believe in one woman for me doesn't mean I can't be happy for other couples."

"Emma never believed in one man for her until she met Griff."

He looked at her, a frown wrinkling his eyebrows. "Kelcey —"

"I'm not pushing you, Dax. I don't expect more from you than what we had last night. It was amazing and I loved it, but I'm not holding my breath for it to happen again."

His frown disappeared. A wicked grin turned up one corner of his mouth and he bobbled his eyebrows. "It could happen again. I wouldn't mind."

Kelcey struggled not to laugh. "You want to be used like some sex toy?"

"I could live with that."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but no."

"Damn it."

He recovered her leg, walked to the head of the table. A chair's wheels squeaked as he rolled it into position behind her head. Slipping his hands beneath her neck, he rubbed it gently with his fingers. "Here comes the part where you can go to sleep. Close your eyes and relax."

She closed her eyes, breathed in and blew out a deep breath. Even though the massage on her neck felt incredible, she wouldn't possibly fall asleep...

Chapter Eleven

Kelcey's parted lips and even breaths proved to Dax that she'd fallen asleep. He kept up the gentle massage on her scalp for a few more moments to be sure she wouldn't wake, then left the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

Walker jumped up from the floor. Dax shushed him before the dog could bark. "She's asleep, Walker. Leave her alone."

He whined, dropped back down on the floor and stared at the door. Chuckling, Dax shook his head. His dog had definitely fallen in love with Kelcey. Not that he could blame Walker. It wouldn't be hard for anyone to fall for Kelcey.

Dax wandered to the kitchen, thinking he should find something to fix for supper. The thought of taking something out of the freezer didn't appeal to him, even though he loved his mother's cooking. He knew how to cook, but wished he could be better at it. He'd like to prepare something special for Kelcey.

Maybe she wouldn't want to stay for supper. Maybe she'd want to leave as soon as she woke up. He hoped not. He wanted more time with her.

That shocked him. He'd never cared about spending time with a woman outside of a bedroom. While he'd teased with her about him being a sex toy, last night hadn't been all about sex. He'd truly enjoyed their evening together. It had been fun to sit at his computer and listen to Kelcey's comments about his photographs. She'd been honest with him about ones she liked and ones she didn't. She had a great eye for color and offered suggestions on how he might set up a shot differently should he take a similar picture in the future. Every suggestion had been perfect.

So had the lovemaking.

She'd surprised him when she came into his bedroom. Although he didn't doubt for a moment that she wanted him, he could feel the fine trembling of her body, see the

trepidation in her eyes. She hadn't been intimate with a man since the asshole raped her, however long that had been. He'd wanted so much to please her, to make her first time with a man erase the memory of the pain she'd suffered. He hoped he'd done that.

His growling stomach turned his attention back to supper. His cell phone rang as he crossed the floor to the refrigerator. Slipping the phone out of his pants pocket, he saw Griff's picture on the display.

"Hey, bro."

"Hey. You still working on Kelcey?"

"I finished a few minutes ago. She's asleep."

"No, I'm not," she said from behind him.

Dax turned to see Kelcey standing two feet away, Walker by her side. Her hair was mussed, her skin flushed, her eyelids slumbrous. She looked like a woman who had crawled from bed after hours of hot sex.

His cock immediately responded to that thought, quickly growing thicker and longer. Thankful he wore loose sweatpants that would hide his condition, he smiled at her. "I thought you were asleep."

"I was for a little bit. I woke up when you shut the door." She gestured toward his phone. "Go ahead and finish your conversation."

He opened the refrigerator and peered inside for something to cook. "I lied. She isn't asleep."

"Good. Emma left work a little early today so she could roast a pork loin. She wants to give some to you to thank you for helping Kelcey."

Since he now knew what to do for supper, Dax shut the refrigerator. "I won't ever turn down Emma's cooking."

"You'll have to do your own vegetables," he heard Emma say in the background.

Dax chuckled. "Tell her I can do that."

"Okay. We'll be over in a few minutes."

Dax slipped the phone back in his pocket and faced Kelcey again. "Emma and Griff are bringing over roast pork loin."

Her eyes widened and a smile lit up her face. "Oh wow. Emma makes the *best* pork loin you'll ever eat."

"Does that mean you'll stay for supper?"

"Well, yeah. I'm not giving up the chance to eat Emma's cooking."

"Great." He clapped his hands together. "Now what to go with it? Baked potato?"

"Definitely."

"I think I'm out of salad stuff, but I have canned and frozen vegetables."

"You pick out the vegetable and I'll get the potatoes ready for the microwave."

Dax smiled. "Deal."

* * * * *

Dax loved food. He never had any trouble packing it away and enjoyed every bite. Eating with Kelcey made everything taste better than usual. Even a baked potato seemed more fluffy with Kelcey sitting across the kitchen table from him.

Emma and Griff had stayed only long enough to drop off the food before they left. Dax invited them to stay for a glass of tea or wine, but they'd refused his offer. Emma claimed she wanted to restock the cookies at the B-and-B, so had a lot of baking to do tonight. They left after being there barely ten minutes.

Dax couldn't say he minded. It gave him more alone time with Kelcey.

He pretended he didn't see her sneak bites of the meat to Walker, who hadn't left her side since she came out of the massage room. Walker rarely took to a person as quickly as he had Kelcey. Dax still couldn't understand why his dog seemed so protective of her. He didn't normally take to strangers, but he'd loved Kelcey right away.

Kelcey laid her fork on her empty plate. "I am stuffed."

"So is my dog."

Dax chuckled as a guilty blush turned her cheeks pink. "I only gave him a few bites."

"You gave him half the meat on your plate."

"He was hungry."

"Did he tell you that?"

That cute little nose of hers went up an inch. "I could tell."

It took all his willpower not to laugh. "You're a dog psychic?"

"Oh hush."

She stood and gathered up her dirty dishes. Grinning, Dax gathered up his too and followed her. "I just want to make sure I understand what you're telling me."

After setting her dishes in the sink, she turned to him, one hand on her hip. "Are you purposely being a jerk?"

Setting his dishes on the countertop, he gave her his best little-boy grin. "Yeah."

She laughed, which Dax wanted her to do. "I'm really good at being a jerk. Ask anyone in town."

"I'll take your word for it." She turned on the water and rinsed her plate. "Bring me the rest of the stuff from the table and I'll load the dishwasher."

"You don't have to do that." He turned off the water and took her hand. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

"Wait! My hands are wet."

He waited long enough for her to grab a paper towel before he led her from the kitchen to his office. After she'd settled in the chair where she'd sat last night, he pressed the keyboard's spacebar to wake up his computer.

"I took more pictures for Mom this morning, so came home at lunch and downloaded all the pictures I've taken the last couple of days. I have some great ones of Alaina and Emma that should make you smile." He opened his photo program. "These

are the raw pictures without any kind of adjusting. I usually tweak them a little before I send them to Mom."

He highlighted a picture of Emma and pressed the spacebar to enlarge it. She looked up at something above her head, intense concentration spread over her face. Kelcey leaned closer to the monitor. "What's she looking at?"

"She was watching Jerry and Dusty working like hell to get the roof finished before the rain started."

"Did they?"

"Yeah, but barely, since the rain got here quicker than we expected." He brought up another picture of Alaina and Emma laughing. "I took this after Alaina fired a nail gun for the first time. I wish I'd caught Alaina's expression when she pressed the trigger, but I walked in after she'd already done it."

Kelcey giggled. "I'm surprised Alaina hadn't already used one in the B-and-B."

"She refused to. Said it scared her. I guess she figured if Emma could do it, so could she."

"I'll let them play with tools. I'll stick to the office stuff."

Dax chuckled. "You're probably wise." He scrolled down the page to the next picture he wanted to show her. "Now this picture I like a lot."

He pressed the spacebar. Kelcey's smiling face filled the screen. He watched her as she studied her image. Surprise filled her eyes, her lips parted. Her expression clearly said she didn't believe she could be the lovely lady on the screen.

"This is the one I took when I told you to smile for me."

"You did something to it," she said, still staring at herself. "I'm not that pretty."

"I did nothing to it, and you're definitely that pretty. Why would you think you aren't?"

She switched her gaze to him. "Look who I've lived with the last four years. Emma is stunning and oozes sex appeal. And Alaina is so gorgeous with that voluptuous body and long auburn hair."

"Emma and Alaina are both beautiful ladies." He reached over and ran one fingertip down her cheek. "That doesn't mean you aren't too."

She snorted out a laugh, which he thought very cute. "I'm not beautiful, Dax. I know that."

"There are all levels of beauty, Kelcey. Maybe your looks don't kick a guy in the gut like Emma, or you don't have all the curves Alaina has. That doesn't mean you aren't lovely." He tilted up her face, his thumb slowly rubbing her chin. "You have the most incredible blue eyes. They make a guy feel as if you can look all the way into his soul."

He saw her throat work as she swallowed.

"You have beautiful blonde hair and a creamy complexion. You're tall and slim with gentle curves. So your breasts aren't as big as Alaina's. Not every guy wants a gal with double Ds."

"Do you?"

Dax shook his head. "Breast size doesn't matter to me. I love them, I'll admit that. I love touching them, squeezing them." His gaze dropped to her chest. "Licking and sucking the nipples."

He looked back into her eyes, which now almost glowed with heat. "I didn't pay nearly enough attention to your breasts last night."

"You didn't?" Her voice came out in a husky whisper.

"No." Still staring into her eyes, he let his fingers drift down her neck to the top button of her blouse. "There are a lot of things I didn't do last night that I want to do."

"Like what?"

He released the top button. "Sucking your nipples."

"What else?"

He liked the breathless tone in her voice. Another button slipped from the buttonhole. "Trying some different positions."

"Wh-what kind of positions?"

"I have a fantasy about you in the shower." Leaning forward, he dropped a kiss between her breasts. Her little gasp traveled straight to his cock. Dax rolled his chair closer to hers, slipped one arm around her waist while he released another button. "I think about soap suds sliding down your wet skin." The last button slipped through its hole. He spread her blouse open as he kissed the sensitive spot below her ear. "I think about pressing you up against the shower wall and hooking your legs over my arms." Pulling back a few inches, he looked into her eyes. "Can you imagine what happens next?"

"I think so."

"Would you like to see if your imagination matches mine?"

She nodded.

Dax covered her lips with his, pouring all the desire he felt into the kiss. Holding her neck, he tilted his head and deepened the kiss, sweeping his tongue across her lips. Her lips softened beneath his, parted to allow him entrance. Dax accepted her offer, his tongue darting into her mouth to glide against hers.

She melted against him. Lips parting wider, she clutched his T-shirt in her fists and returned his kiss as if she wanted to absorb him right into her body.

That worked for him.

He needed more...more kisses, more caresses, more of her body against his. He needed to be buried so deep inside her, he wouldn't be able to tell they were two separate people.

"I want you," he whispered in her ear.

She pulled back and looked into his face. Her hand trembled as she touched his lips. "I want you too."

Taking her hand away from his mouth, he pressed a kiss in her palm. "Shower with me?"

She nodded.

Kelcey had a moment of disbelief when Dax took her hand and tugged her from the chair. Although she would've been happy to make love with him again, she'd accepted that last night had been the only time she'd ever be intimate with Dax.

Everything had changed with his three little words—"I want you."

He led her through his bedroom to the master bath. She stood next to the sink while he started the shower running, unsure whether to take off her clothes or wait for him to make the first move. Since she'd never been in this situation where she showered with a man, she didn't know the rules.

Turning to face her again, he pulled his T-shirt over his head, dropped it on the floor. She waited for him to remove the rest of his clothes, but he stood still, watching her. Heat rushed to her cheeks when she realized he wanted her to remove some of her clothes. Hands trembling once more from desire and a touch of nervousness, she let her blouse slip down her arms. She reached behind her and unhooked her bra. It joined her blouse on the floor.

She stood before him, naked from the waist up, deciding she'd removed enough until he took off something else.

His gaze swept over her breasts, down to her low-riding jeans, back to her breasts. She clearly saw the outline of his erection through his sweatpants. It made her wonder if he wore a pair of those tiny briefs.

He answered her silent question when he pushed his pants down his legs. She saw no briefs...just an amazing, hard cock.

After removing his pants and socks, Dax stepped closer to her. "Want some help?"

Kelcey nodded. Help would be appreciated since she didn't know if her fingers would work to unfasten her jeans. Dax unsnapped them and slowly lowered the zipper. Hooking his thumbs in the waistband, he pushed them past her hips. Pausing long enough to hook her panties too, he slid them down her legs. She held his shoulders as he knelt before her and removed her clothing.

He slid his hands up her legs as he stood again. His touch released the scent of the massage oil.

"Your skin is so soft."

"It's the oil."

Dax shook his head. "It was soft before your massage. You're soft everywhere." He cradled her breasts, whisked his thumbs across her nipples. They immediately peaked. "Well, except here."

His playful teasing eased her nervousness. She pointedly looked at his cock. "You aren't exactly soft in places either."

"I'm thankful for that."

Reluctantly, she dragged her gaze away from his enticing flesh. "So am I."

He drew her into his arms and kissed her. Kelcey wrapped her arms around him, splayed her hands over his back. This time she took control of the kiss, licking across his lips before she thrust her tongue into his mouth. Dax groaned, dropped his hands to her ass and pulled her tighter against him. His cock felt like a hot brand against her mound.

Kelcey willingly followed him to the shower's entrance. So many emotions pinged around inside her, the strongest one desire. But beneath that desire lay common sense. She stopped before stepping into the shower with him.

He looked at her over his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

She gestured toward his shaft with her free hand. "Can you wear a condom in the shower?"

He cradled her cheek in his palm. "Remember when I told you I had my eyes checked last month?"

She didn't understand what that had to do with her question, but answered honestly. "Yes."

"I had a full physical too. I'm clean, Kelcey." He caressed her cheek with his thumb. "Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"I hear a 'but' in there."

"Dax, I'm not... What happened to me..." She didn't quite know how to talk about this, or the right words to say. "I haven't been with anyone besides you in a long time, so I'm not...protected."

She could tell by the comprehension in his eyes that he knew what she meant. "You don't use birth control."

Kelcey shook her head. "I'm sorry. It's probably a safe time, but —"

He gave her a gentle kiss. "It isn't a problem. We'll take a shower now and make love later."

"But you said you have a fantasy —"

"I have a *lot* of fantasies about you, Kelcey." He kissed her again, then grinned. "Some of them might curl your toes."

His teasing made her chuckle. When he gently tugged on her hand, she didn't hesitate to follow him beneath the warm water.

Pouring a generous amount of liquid soap into his palm, Dax rubbed his hands together to make a thick lather. He wrapped his arms around her from behind and began to spread it over her body. Kelcey closed her eyes and rested her head on his shoulder, content to let him touch her however he wanted.

He concentrated on her breasts first, kneading them, plucking at her nipples. A pleasant little zing traveled to her clit with each tweak of his fingers. That zing

intensified as his hands traveled lower. He spread the lather over her stomach, her hips, her thighs, the valley between them. She gasped when his fingertips passed over her clit.

"Mmm, you're swollen." One finger pushed into her channel. "And wet." He nipped her earlobe. "I like that."

Kelcey swallowed. He slid his cock up and down the cleft between her buttocks. She wondered what it would feel like to lean forward and brace her hands against the wall so he could slip inside her.

Before she had the chance to give in to temptation and do that, Dax took a step back so his body no longer touched hers. She swallowed her moan of disappointment when she felt his soapy hands on her back. He slowly slid them down her spine, over her butt, and down her legs. On the return journey, he cupped her cheeks in his hands, pulled them apart and settled his shaft between them.

"Oh yeah," he said, his voice rough, "some of my fantasies would definitely curl your toes."

Her curiosity won out over her apprehension of the unknown. "Tell me."

"I'd rather show you."

He tugged her backward a few steps so water from one of the showerheads hit her chest. It ran down her body, chasing away the soap suds. He turned her so the water could rinse her back too.

"Had enough of the shower?" he asked.

"Yes."

Dax rinsed himself and turned off the water. He helped her from the stall, handed her a fluffy towel. Kelcey quickly swiped the drops from her skin, eager to be back in Dax's arms again as soon as possible. She tossed her towel on top of his on the counter and took his hand. He led her straight to his bed, where he lay on his back and pulled her on top of him. His lips covered hers in a long, deep kiss.

Kelcey had fantasies of things she wanted to do to Dax, just like he had about her. Right now, all those fantasies vanished in her desire to be one with him. She ended the kiss, despite Dax's mumbled protest, and moved away from him.

"Wait. Where are you going?"

"To get this." She reached into the nightstand drawer and removed a condom. She waited only long enough for Dax to roll it over his cock before she straddled his hips. Grasping the base of his shaft, she impaled herself.

Dax hissed. She moaned. She gave herself a few moments for her body to adjust to him, then began to move. Dax touched her the entire time she moved, running his hands over her breasts, her hips, her butt. He dipped his thumb between her thighs to caress her clit...tiny little circles that urged her to move faster, take him deeper.

"Oh yeah. Move on me, Kelcey. I want to feel you come."

Those husky words, combined with the fullness inside her, sent her over the edge. Tongues of pleasure licked up and down her spine. Kelcey tried to keep her eyes open, to look into Dax's eyes, but the sensations were too intense. Throwing back her head, she arched her back and rode out the wave.

Dax tensed beneath her. She felt his cock pulsate inside her, heard his low growl when he came. She watched the evidence of pleasure wash over his face.

The sight of Dax in the throes of orgasm took away her breath.

She caressed his chest and shoulders while waiting for him to open his eyes. She didn't think she'd ever tire of touching him.

He took both her hands in his and gently tugged until she lay stretched out on top of him. His softening cock remained nestled inside her. She wanted to leave it there as long as possible.

A gentle kiss touched her temple. "That was amazing."

"Even if it didn't fulfill any of your fantasies?"

"Who says it didn't?"

Kelcey lifted her head. His eyelids were half closed, a satisfied smile turned up his lips. "What fantasy did it fulfill?"

"You in my bed."

"I think technically I'm *on* your bed."

He shrugged one shoulder. "In, on, doesn't matter, as long as you're in my arms."

Everything inside her went all gooey, like melted caramel. She didn't know what it felt like to fall in love, but she wondered if all the tender feelings welling up inside her for Dax could be the beginning of love.

That would be incredibly stupid.

"I'd better go."

His arms tightened around her. "You don't have to go. Spend the night with me."

"Dax, I don't have any clean clothes."

"You didn't have any last night either and you stayed."

She couldn't argue with that statement. "I have things I need to do tonight."

He pushed her hair behind her ear, ran his fingertip down her cheek. "Is there anything you have to do tonight that's more important than fulfilling some fantasies?"

She couldn't argue with that question either. "No."

"Well, then." He slid his hands down her back to her butt. "What do you say to eating that hunk of chocolate cake Emma brought over and then we'll work on some of those fantasies?"

Kelcey smiled. "I say that sounds good."

Chapter Twelve

Dax eased off the bed so as not to wake Kelcey. He moved slowly because he wasn't sure if his legs would work yet. He'd just experienced some of the most intense orgasms of his life and his entire body felt weak.

Gathering up his clothes from the floor, he tiptoed from his bedroom. Once in the hall, he pulled on his T-shirt and sweatpants before making his way to the kitchen. A drink would be really good right now. Then food.

He guzzled down half a can of Coke while thinking about the lovely woman in his bed. He didn't think their lovemaking could be any hotter than it had been last night. Playing around with their fantasies had been fun. He hadn't taken her against the shower wall, but the wall in his bedroom had worked just as well.

Tonight had been even hotter.

He'd worked in the office today, painting colorful flowers on the white walls in the office. The additional artwork hadn't been in Alaina's original plan for the B-and-B, but she'd quickly agreed when Dax suggested it. Kelcey would spend most of her time in the small room. While she had a large window for natural light, he wanted her to have other beauty surround her.

Working in the office gave him the chance to sneak in a kiss every few minutes.

It also gave him the chance to observe the way she'd rub her neck when she didn't think he saw her. The massage on Tuesday helped her, but more than one would be better. He'd suggested she come by his house after work for another. Not wanting her to get the wrong idea, he'd sworn he wasn't simply trying to get her in his bed. She'd actually looked disappointed at his declaration.

Dax chuckled. Kelcey continued to surprise and delight him.

He'd been a good boy until the end when she lay on her back while he massaged her neck. He may have let his hands slide a little farther down her chest than he did with most clients. And maybe he enjoyed it so much, he let them slide even farther until he touched her breasts. The little gasp of pleasure she'd uttered encouraged him to continue. Her nipples had hardened beneath the brush of his thumbs. When she began to shift her hips, he knew she needed more than stimulation to her nipples.

Dax stood by the side of the table and pulled back the sheet and blanket. He'd slipped one hand between her thighs while he continued caressing her breasts with the other. Kelcey had raised her knees and let them fall open, giving him plenty of room to touch her. The oil on his hand let his fingers easily glide over her creamy folds.

It had taken less than a minute for her body to tremble from her climax.

Not giving her any time to come down from the high, Dax had helped her stand, then bent her over the table. He'd sheathed his cock with the condom he'd stashed in his pants pocket—just in case—and entered her with one long thrust. The walls of her pussy had clamped onto his cock, milking it from her second climax as he fucked her.

The memories had his shaft half hard, despite all the sex he and Kelcey had shared over the last two hours. Pushing aside his growing desire—for now—he opened the refrigerator to try to find something to prepare for supper.

A sharp knock before the back door opened followed by a "Yoohoo!" announced his mother's arrival. She came in carrying a plastic grocery bag. "Hi," she said with a smile.

"Hi. Whatcha got?"

"A present from Walt Kinney. His grandson went to the Gulf coast this weekend and came back with fifty pounds of jumbo shrimp."

"Whoa!" Dax took the sack from her. "Fifty pounds?"

"Walt brought us twenty-five. I kept ten pounds for your father, grandfather and me and split up the rest between you, Rye and Griff. They're cleaned, but aren't cooked. You'll have to do that."

"No problem." Beverly had just solved Dax's problem of what to prepare for supper. Shrimp he could handle.

His mother looked toward the door that led into the dining room. "Is Alaina here? Isn't that her car out front?"

Dax set the sack on the countertop. "Kelcey's here. She borrowed Alaina's car. Her neck was still hurting from the accident, so I offered to work on her again tonight."

"I heard about her accident. Is she all right?"

"Other than a stiff neck, she seems to be fine. She was very lucky."

"I saw her car at Walt's. Did you have it towed there?"

"Yeah. The insurance adjustor will be here tomorrow to check it out. I'm pretty sure it'll be totaled."

Beverly sat at the kitchen table. "That's too bad. It isn't that old, is it?"

"Kelcey said four years."

She gestured toward the sack of shrimp. "Put those in the refrigerator."

Dax grinned at her bossy tone. "Yes, ma'am."

"And get me a glass of tea while you're there."

"Anything else, Mother?"

She looked up toward the ceiling, as if pondering his question. "Not right now. I'll let you know."

He chuckled at her impish grin. After putting away the shrimp and washing his hands, he prepared two glasses of iced tea and joined her at the table. He'd taken a healthy sip when Kelcey walked into the kitchen, Walker by her side.

"Hey." He quickly stood and crossed to her. With his mother in the room, he fell into professional massage therapist mode. "You didn't sleep very long. How do you feel?"

"Like an overcooked noodle." Pushing her hair behind her ears, she switched her gaze to Beverly. "Hello."

Beverly stood and drew Kelcey into a hug. Kelcey's eyes widened, her gaze darted to Dax. She obviously hadn't expected a hug from a woman she didn't know.

"Kelcey, this is my mother, Beverly. She's a hugger."

"He says that like it's a bad thing." Beverly released her, but still held her hands. "I'm so happy to meet you, Kelcey. Alaina and Emma have told me all about you. I'm sorry about your accident. How do you feel?"

"Mom, give her a chance to breathe." He lightly touched Kelcey's shoulder. "Would you like something to drink?"

She looked at him with a grateful smile. "Yes, please."

"Iced tea or something stronger?"

Her smile bloomed, lighting up her eyes. "Tea is good."

Completely mesmerized, he stared into her beautiful blue eyes. Something tightened his chest, an unknown emotion that made him feel as if his heart was swelling. He'd experienced the same kind of emotion when he'd watched Rye propose to Alaina.

Scared of the strong emotion, Dax took a step back, breaking the spell. Kelcey's smile faded. He thought he saw pain flash through her eyes before she lowered her head.

"Uh, why don't you sit down with Mom and I'll fix your tea?"

"Actually," Beverly said, "I need to go. I left your father and grandfather cleaning up the kitchen. I have to supervise or they'll make an even bigger mess." She gave Kelcey another quick hug. "I'll see you Sunday at dinner."

"Mrs. Coleman, I hadn't planned —"

"It's Beverly, and I don't accept any excuses. We eat at three, but you're welcome at any time." She switched her gaze to Dax. One eyebrow arched. "Walk me out, Dax?"

Oh shit. He knew what that eyebrow meant. His mother had something to say to him and wouldn't say it in front of Kelcey. "Sure. Kelcey, help yourself to whatever you want."

He stepped out the back door with his mother. As soon as he closed the door behind them, she turned on him.

"Don't you *dare* hurt that sweet girl."

He couldn't believe his mother would automatically think the worst of him. "I have no intention of hurting Kelcey."

"You may not intend to, but you will if you string her along like she's one of the trollops you date."

Whoa. He'd never heard his mother talk about his dates this way. "Mom—"

"You date women only interested in sex because that's all you want from them."

Heat crept into his cheeks. Only his mother could make him feel as if he was ten again and being punished for doing something stupid. "I'm single. There's nothing wrong with that."

"I didn't say there is. Sex between two consenting adults is fine if that's all they want." She pointed toward the kitchen. "Kelcey isn't like that."

"How do you know? You just met her!"

"I know a lot more than you think I do."

She couldn't know about the rape. Surely Alaina and Emma hadn't talked to his mother about that. Dax's eyes narrowed. "Exactly how much do you know about Kelcey?"

"I know she isn't a plaything you can use and push aside when you decide you're through with her."

It hurt to realize his mother thought so little of him. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants. "Thanks for your vote of confidence, Mom."

His mother's eyes softened with love. She tenderly touched his cheek. "I'm not saying your lifestyle is wrong, Dax. I know you've never been interested in anything long-term with a woman, although I don't understand that. You were brought up in a caring atmosphere with parents who adore you and each other. I don't know why you don't want that kind of close relationship yourself. You're just as warm and loving as your brothers. They've both found women to love and who love them. I want that for you too."

Dax shrugged, unsure how to respond to his mother when he didn't know how he felt. He knew he enjoyed being with Kelcey, enjoyed their lovemaking. Other than that, his feelings and emotions had become all jumbled since he met her. "I like my single life, Mom."

"If it makes you happy, I'm happy too." Tears shimmered in her eyes. "I love you and only want what's best for you. Please believe that."

He took her hand from his cheek and squeezed it. "I do believe that. And I love you too."

She gave him a fierce hug and kissed his cheek. "Enjoy the shrimp."

He watched his mother walk to her car and drive off before he entered the house again. He expected to see Kelcey sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a glass of tea. It surprised him to see her standing by the table, withdrawing a key ring from her purse. "Are you leaving?"

"Yes." She clasped the keys in her hand. "Thank you for the massage. It really helped."

Just like that, she decided to leave. No, she couldn't go yet. He wanted more time with her. "I thought you'd stay for supper. Mom brought over some fresh Gulf shrimp. Or I can fix something else if you don't like shrimp."

"I love shrimp, but I can't stay. I want to shower off the massage oil."

Instant image of Kelcey in the shower last night, water beading up on her oiled skin. He'd work up a thick lather in his palms again and wash away the oil from her

flesh, paying extra attention to her pretty nipples and pussy. Then he'd make her come with his tongue.

"You can shower here."

"Thanks, but then I'd have to put these clothes back on. That would defeat the purpose of the shower."

He took two steps closer to her. "You wouldn't have to put your clothes back on. You know that."

He watched her gaze pass over every part of his face. "May I be honest with you?"

"Always."

"I used you, Dax. I didn't want to be afraid of a man anymore. Emma told me if I was the one in control, maybe I could be intimate with a man and not fear sex any longer."

"That's why you didn't want me to touch you Monday night."

Kelcey nodded. "I thought, with your experience with women, you would be the perfect man to...experiment with."

First his mother and now Kelcey. His reputation had gotten way out of hand. A touch of anger laced his words. "Kelcey, I don't fuck every woman I know."

"I didn't say you do. But you have a lot of experience with women, right?"

He couldn't deny that. He had no idea how many women he'd fucked, but it had to be dozens. "Yeah, I do."

"You made everything wonderful for me, Dax," she said, her voice soft. "I don't know if another man would have been so patient with me." She picked up her purse and slung the strap over her shoulder. "This time with you has been wonderful. But it can't happen again."

He couldn't believe she planned to walk out, not after the last three evenings they'd shared. Everything had been perfect between them. "Why not?"

"I'm not strong enough, Dax. I can't have sex with a man and walk away like Emma did for years." Her eyes filled with tears. "I didn't plan for us to be together again tonight. I honestly came over for only a massage. Yes, I wanted you. I can't help wanting you. But I can't be the next in line of your bed partners. I want to share my life with someone, Dax. You don't. There's no reason for me to ever be with you again."

That tightness gripped his chest once more. He didn't understand it, he didn't like it, but he couldn't ignore it. He needed to touch her, to verify she was right here, close to him. He reached out to cradle her cheek in his palm. Kelcey stepped back so he couldn't touch her.

"Goodbye, Dax."

* * * * *

Kelcey managed to hold back the tears until she made it to Alaina's car. Falling for Dax had to be the stupidest thing she'd ever done. She never would have believed she could care so much for a man in such a short amount of time. Love took time to nurture and grow. Two people needed a lot of time together before they fell in love. That's what she'd always believed. However, she had no doubt that love blossomed in her heart right now.

All the time she'd talked to Dax in the kitchen, she'd wanted to take his hand and lead him back to his bed. She'd longed to make love with him again, feel every bit of his skin against hers. After they were sated and couldn't move, they'd talk about all the silly, mean-nothing things that couples talked about while getting to know each other better. Then they'd make love again before falling asleep in each other's arms.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Kelcey started the car and headed for Alaina's and Rye's house. She'd get over Dax, in time. She had to. They didn't want the same things in life. He wanted to continue flitting from woman to woman while she wanted to settle down with one man. She wanted children. The thought of becoming a father probably made Dax run and hide.

She pressed the button on the remote attached to the sun visor to open the garage door and pulled into Alaina's spot next to Rye's pickup. After checking her reflection in the rearview mirror to be sure she'd wiped away any evidence of tears, she got out of the car and went into the house.

The kitchen was empty, the light over the stove the only illumination. Kelcey took the back hallway to her room. She collected her robe and headed to the bathroom. She started the shower to let the water warm while she removed her clothes. Stepping beneath the spray, she closed her eyes and tilted her face up so the water would run over it.

Tears came again, but Kelcey didn't fight them. She let them fall to mix with the water running down her body.

She wasn't the first woman to fall for the wrong man, and certainly wouldn't be the last. As long as she remembered that, she could go on with her life and hopefully find a man who would love her as much as she loved him.

Chapter Thirteen

He made it back to his car before he cursed fluently. Kelcey no longer worked at the utility company where she'd worked for the last eight years. No one at her job knew where she'd gone...or wouldn't tell him, despite him playing the relative card.

He'd done no better at her house. He discovered it locked up tight and looking deserted. A check of the mailbox on the porch didn't help either since he found it empty. Kelcey had disappeared without a trace.

"Damn it," he muttered, hitting the steering wheel with the side of his fist. He'd already checked her credit card records and hadn't found any usage in the last month, so no clue there. Her cell phone records didn't help him either. He'd never known a woman who didn't use a credit card or cell phone on a regular basis.

He had no choice but to go back to his hotel room and start a brand new search.

* * * * *

Dax slowly moved his brush along the outside of the leaf, adding more color. He wanted the leaf a little wider with a little more shadow. Just a bit more on the edge...

His hand slipped, his brush leaving a blob of green on the wall.

"Fuck!"

He heard a "tsking" sound behind him. Dax looked down from his perch on the ladder to see Griff standing below him.

"Did you make a boo-boo?"

"Yes, goddamn it."

"You're in a shitty mood." Griff held up two bottles of Coke. "Time for a break."

He'd rather have a beer than a Coke, but had never drunk during working hours and wouldn't start today, no matter how crummy he felt. "Sure."

He joined Griff at one of the folding tables that were set up in the dining room so their crew could take breaks and eat lunch. He stared at his blob on the wall as he unscrewed the lid of the soft drink.

"Don't look so upset," Griff said. "I've seen you fix bigger mistakes than that."

"I guess I can blend in another couple of leaves. Things should be done in odd-numbered groups. Since I already have three leaves there, I'll have to add two more."

"I don't see anything wrong with an even number in a group, but that's why you're the artist and I'm the electrician."

"It has to do with pleasing the eye, bro."

Griff took a long drink of his Coke. "Speaking of pleasing the eye, I want to talk to you about my house."

"What about it?"

"I know Emma has mentioned to you about painting some of the walls with more vibrant colors. Think you can fit that in your schedule?"

"Sure. I need to finish the vines I'm painting in here first. Then I'm all yours until I start working in the restaurant." He leaned back in his chair. "Does she have her colors picked out?"

"You'll have to ask her that. She changes her mind every other day."

"Sounds like a typical woman to me."

"Yeah. What is it about women? We love them at the same time we want to strangle them."

"They probably say the same thing about men."

"I guess."

Sipping his drink, Dax studied his brother. Griff had fallen apart when his wife died. He'd lost a lot of weight and practically hid in his house except during work.

Emma had put the sparkle back in his eyes, the smile back on his face. He'd regained some of the weight he'd lost and seemed so much happier. "You really love Emma, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do," Griff said with a soft smile. "I never thought I'd love again after I lost Jana and our baby. Emma is... She's amazing."

One look in Griff's eyes proved to Dax how much his brother loved Emma. "Will I hear wedding bells soon?"

Griff choked on his swallow of Coke. "Hey, no rushing. We're still getting to know each other."

"You said you love her. What else do you need to know?"

"Neither one of us is ready to get married. We're happy living together for now. Besides, Emma is wrapped up in building the restaurant and helping with Alaina's and Rye's wedding."

"Did they set a date and no one told me?"

"Not an official date, but Emma told me last night Alaina is leaning toward April."

"I thought women liked June weddings."

Griff shrugged. "She wants bluebonnets in bloom for the wedding."

"She may have rain along with those bluebonnets."

"I have no doubt the ladies will consider every little thing that could go wrong when they plan the wedding." Griff emptied his bottle. "Well, that was a nice break. I'd better get back to work before Emma hunts me down and hurts me." He bobbled his eyebrows and grinned. "Although her hurting can feel mighty fine."

Dax laughed as he watched his brother leave the room. It made him feel good to see Griff happy, yet jealousy also tugged at him. Both of his brothers had fallen in love and wanted to share their lives with one woman, and only one woman. Dax had always believed it would be boring to wake up with the same woman morning after morning.

Maybe it wouldn't be boring. Maybe it would be...nice.

The Coke satisfied his thirst, but Dax still wanted some kind of snack before he tackled the grapevines and leaves on the wall again. Luckily, Alaina and Emma kept the pantry well stocked with goodies. He wandered into the kitchen, in search of some of Emma's homemade cookies. Since the office was located right off the kitchen, he could hear Kelcey talking on the telephone.

"Are you sure it can't be repaired? It's only four years old... Yes, I understand."

She must be talking to her insurance agent. Dax grabbed three oatmeal raisin cookies from one of the Rubbermaid containers and strolled toward the office.

"That quickly? That'll be wonderful." She laughed. "I guess that should be fun, but I'm not looking forward to car shopping. It always makes me dizzy... Thanks, Crystal. I appreciate all your help. Bye."

He leaned against the doorframe, munching on his cookies, as Kelcey hung up the phone. "Totaled your car, huh?"

"Yes." She swiveled her chair toward him. "I was hoping it could be repaired, but that wasn't an option." She sighed heavily. "I loved that car."

"So buy the same one in a newer model."

"I guess I can."

She reached back and rubbed her neck. Dax figured she didn't even realize she'd done it. "Neck hurting?"

Kelcey quickly lowered her hand. "It's okay."

"Don't lie to me, Kelcey. It isn't unusual for a person to hurt for a long time after a car accident."

"Define 'long'."

"Days. Weeks."

She scrunched up her nose, as if smelling something bad. "I can't hurt for weeks. I have too much to do."

Dax popped the last bite of cookie into his mouth and dusted the crumbs from his hands. "Come over after work for another massage." He stopped her objection before she could voice it. "No strings attached, nothing else expected. The massage will help you. That's all I want to do."

He meant that. Kelcey had made it very clear she wanted nothing more to do with him. He would accept that, even though he didn't like it. She'd rejected him. No woman had ever done that. He had to be honest with himself and admit it stung his ego. A woman he wanted didn't want him.

So much for being completely irresistible to women.

"Tell you what," he said, trying to sweeten the deal, "after the massage, I'll cook some shrimp for you."

A hint of a smile touched her lips. "Are you trying to bribe me, Dax?"

He shrugged. "Whatever works."

"You told me you aren't a good cook."

"I'm not, but I do know how to make some dishes. I can prepare shrimp that'll make you weep from pleasure."

The smile spread over her face and lit up her eyes. "I don't know how I could turn down the chance to weep from pleasure."

"So you'll come over? I'd really like to work on you again."

"I'd appreciate it. I need to check with Alaina first and see if I can use her car again."

"You don't have to do that. You can ride home with me and I'll take you back to Rye's and Alaina's after supper."

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Of course not. You can even walk home if you want since it's less than a mile."

"That's true." She smiled again. "Okay. My agent said I'll have my check in a few days so I can shop for a new car. It'll be nice not to have to depend on people to cart me

around. I probably should've gotten a rental car, but Alaina and Emma insisted they could take me wherever I wanted to go."

"I doubt if they mind being your chauffeurs."

"I mind. I don't want to be any trouble to anyone."

Emma walked into the office. "That won't be a problem anymore, Kelc. Follow me."

"What is it?" Kelcey asked.

"Just do what I tell you. C'mon."

Kelcey looked at Dax, who shrugged. "Can't help you. I guess you'd better follow her."

Curious, Dax tagged along behind the ladies through the back door. He stopped suddenly when he saw Griff leaning against Jana's car. Griff had stored the car at their parents' house, so Dax had no idea why it was here.

"Whose Camry?" Kelcey asked, puzzlement evident in her voice.

"It was Jana's," Griff said. "I bought it for her about two months before she died. I had it in the garage, then moved it over to my parents' place to make room for Emma's car. It's been covered and protected the whole time." Walking closer to Kelcey, he held up a key fob. "If you want it, it's yours."

Kelcey blinked. "What?"

Griff shrugged. "You need a car and I don't need this one. I've been thinking about putting it up for sale. You saved me that hassle."

Kelcey looked from Griff to the car and back to Griff. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll take it, Kelc," Emma said. "It drives wonderfully and it has less than a thousand miles on it. You had a Corolla, so it's the same brand you're used to driving." She smiled. "It'll save you from having to car shop, which I know you hate."

"Did you make Griff do this?"

Emma shook her head. "Totally his idea, I swear."

Tears filled Kelcey's eyes as she accepted the key fob from Griff. "I can't just *take* it. I want to pay you for it."

"We can work out details later," Griff said. "I have the title. We can have the car transferred to you right now."

"Really?"

Kelcey's smile touched Dax's heart. He liked seeing her so happy.

"Go to the county annex building on the square," Emma said. "Griff and I will follow you."

"Griff, I..." Kelcey stopped. She looked at the key fob in her hand, then threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. "Thank you."

Griff returned her hug. "You're very welcome. I hope you enjoy it."

"I'd better grab my purse. Be right back." She took two steps toward the building, then turned back to face them. "Don't I need proof of insurance to license it in my name?"

"Call your agent," Emma said. "She can fax a rider to you."

"Good idea. You're so smart."

Emma grinned. "I know."

"Here's the title." Griff withdrew a piece of paper from his shirt pocket, held it out to Kelcey. "It'll have all the information your agent needs."

Dax watched Kelcey practically skip back inside the B-and-B before he looked at his brother. "You sure you're okay with this?"

"Yeah. It's silly to keep the car when it's never driven. I really have been thinking about putting it up for sale. This solves my problem and Kelcey's too."

Emma slipped her arm through the bend of Griff's elbow. "And makes me love him even more for taking care of my friend."

"Will I get a reward tonight for being a good boy?"

Her eyes narrowed and turned sultry. "Oh, you're gonna get *such* a reward."

Griff grinned. "Goody."

"On that note," Dax said, "I'll go back to work."

He detoured by the office first. Kelcey hung up the phone as he stepped up to the door.

"Did you talk to your agent?"

Kelcey nodded. "She'll fax a rider to me in a few minutes." She clasped her hands together beneath her chin and smiled. "Your brother is wonderful to do this for me."

"He has a big heart. Plus Emma promised him hot sex later."

A blush bloomed in her cheeks. "I guess that'll get a guy's attention every time."

"Pretty much."

He stared into her eyes, unable to look away. He wanted so badly to take her in his arms. He wanted to feel her naked body next to him in his bed, and not just for sex. He simply wanted to hold her.

The fax machine started and printed out a piece of paper. Kelcey withdrew it from the machine's tray. "It's my rider. So I guess I'd better get to the annex before it closes."

"Come by the house whenever you're through taking care of your car."

The apologetic expression on her face showed him that she'd changed her mind about the massage. She picked up her purse from the desk. "I don't think I need the massage tonight, Dax."

"Did your neck suddenly stop hurting?"

"Not totally, but it's better than it was earlier. I guess having my car problem solved helped the tension."

He had no doubt getting her own car made her feel better, but he did doubt if that was the real reason she'd changed her mind. "I told you I don't expect anything from you, Kelcey."

"I know you did and I believe you, but I..." She folded the rider and slipped it into her purse. "I told you I'm not strong. I can't handle your hands on me. It'll make me want...more."

He suspected she was a lot stronger than she thought. He took a step forward. She took a step back. He sighed. "Kelcey, I want to help you."

"Not like that. Not with touching. Just...be my friend, okay?"

If that's all he could be to her, he'd take it, although he wanted more. "Okay."

"Good." A relieved smile spread over her lips. "Well, I guess I'll go get the license for my car. I need to change the address on my driver's license. Can I do that too?"

"I'm not sure, but someone there can tell you what to do."

"Okay. Well. I'll see you...sometime."

"Yeah."

Dax followed a few steps behind as she left the building. He leaned against the doorframe and watched her climb into her new car. Once behind the wheel, she looked at him again. He dipped his head to acknowledge her. She gave him a small wave, then pulled away from the B-and-B.

The tightness returned to his chest. He had a sinking feeling down deep in his stomach that he'd made a huge mistake in letting Kelcey go.

Chapter Fourteen

"That's the third time you've rubbed your neck in the last fifteen minutes," Emma said with a frown.

Kelcey jerked her hand away from her neck. She'd tried to be casual so Emma and Alaina wouldn't notice how much she hurt. Apparently she hadn't done a very good job.

Alaina touched her arm. "Are you still hurting?"

"A little."

"Why didn't you tell us? We would've postponed our girls' day out."

"Because I didn't want to postpone it." The girls' day out had been her idea to celebrate getting her new car. Plus, with less than four weeks away from The Inn's official grand opening, Kelcey figured Alaina needed a day of shopping and eating with her and Emma. They'd decided to walk the Lanville square and hit all the little curio and souvenir shops, then have lunch in Alaina's favorite restaurant. "I won't feel any better at home, so I might as well be out with my best friends and enjoying our time together."

"Dax could work on you if we were home," Emma said.

Kelcey swirled a French fry through the ketchup on her plate. "I don't want Dax to work on me again."

"Why not?"

"I just don't."

"Well, you know that answer isn't going to satisfy me."

"Or me," Alaina said.

Yes, Kelcey knew all too well that she couldn't be evasive with her two friends. She laid the fry back on her plate. "Because I did the incredibly stupid thing of falling in love with Dax and I don't want him touching me when I know I'm nothing to him but a sex partner."

It wasn't often Kelcey could render her friends speechless, but her statement did it. Instead of waiting for the barrage of questions they would ask, she decided to tell them everything.

"I didn't mean for it to happen." She released a humorless laugh. "I didn't even *like* Dax at first. I thought he was nothing but a conceited, selfish womanizer. He proved me wrong with the way he loves Walker, and how much he cares for his friends and family. It blew me away when I learned he gives massages for free, just because he wants to help his friends. That's so generous. And completely out of character for a supposed selfish person."

"I could've told you Dax isn't selfish," Alaina said. "Just because he's slept with a lot of women doesn't make him a bad person."

"Yeah," Emma said. "I've been with a lot of guys. You don't think I'm a bad person, do you?"

"Of course not. Sleeping with several partners doesn't make anyone *bad*. And that's beside the point. I was wrong about Dax. Once I got to know him, I realized what a caring person he is. That's the man I fell in love with. How could you *not* love a man who's so wonderful with his dog?"

"Did you tell him how you feel?" Alaina asked.

Kelcey shook her head. "There would've been no point in doing that. He isn't interested in anything serious with one woman."

"I wasn't interested in one guy either until I met Griff." Emma swished her straw through her Coke. "I never planned to fall in love, wasn't the least bit tempted to fall in love. One look at Griff and I lost my heart. There's no reason why Dax can't feel the same way about you."

It was a lovely thought, but Kelcey doubted it would happen. Dax had spent thirty-two years as a happy bachelor. She didn't believe he would ever want to be involved with only one woman.

"I agree with you, Emma, that it can happen. But I feel here," she said, touching her stomach, "deep down inside that Dax isn't like that. Will he fall in love someday? Maybe. But I can't keep seeing him, hoping for that, and end up with my heart broken." She blinked several times to keep tears from forming in her eyes. "Dax helped me get past what my uncles did to me. It's a fresh start for me, a new beginning. Maybe I'll meet the man of my dreams here in Lanville."

"You already did," Alaina said softly.

If her friends kept up this conversation, Kelcey would burst into tears at any moment. "Okay, that's enough of that topic. We have shopping to do."

"You're absolutely right." Emma reached for the check next to Kelcey's elbow, but Kelcey snatched it away from her. "Hey!" Emma said, frowning. "I offered to buy lunch."

Kelcey shook her head. "Nope. My treat. I'm celebrating, remember? Besides, I haven't used my credit card in weeks. My bank will think I don't love them anymore."

"Well, I wouldn't want your bank to be mad at you." Emma reached for her purse hooked over the back of her chair. "Let's walk down to the bookstore. I finished my book last night, so need something new to read. Preferably something hot and sexy."

"You *always* read something hot and sexy," Alaina said as she stood.

"Erotic books are more fun."

Chuckling, Kelcey followed her friends to the cash register. As long as she had Alaina and Emma in her life, she could handle anything. Even unrequited love.

* * * * *

Dax leaned over the pot of chili and took a deep sniff. His stomach rumbled loudly. "Man, that smells good. Isn't it done yet?"

Griff chuckled. "Soon. You have no patience, Dax."

"Not when it comes to food and my empty stomach."

"Why don't you finish looking at those paint samples Emma picked out while I finish lunch?"

"You're making cornbread too, right?"

Griff pointed toward the door that led out of the kitchen and into the family room. "Out of my kitchen, Dax!"

"Sheesh. A guy can't even make a request around here."

Stepping into the family room, Dax found Rye sprawled in the recliner, studying a spreadsheet on his open laptop. "Problem, bro?"

"No. Just doing some figures on the work at Alaina's place. I promised her a final bill by next Saturday."

Dax flopped down on the couch across from Rye. "I can't believe you're charging her for our work. She's gonna be your wife, man. Charge her what's necessary to pay our guys and cover supplies, but not for what you, me and Griff did."

"She insisted I charge her what I would charge any other customer." He looked over the laptop and grinned at Dax. "She doesn't know about the fiancée discount."

Dax returned his brother's grin. "You sneaky devil."

"Gotta take care of my lady wherever I can."

Rye's words had an image of Kelcey flashing through Dax's mind. He remembered her lying on his massage table as he'd worked on her. He enjoyed giving massages, knowing they helped his friends feel better. With Kelcey, it had been more. He'd *needed* to help her, to ease her pain any way he could. Whenever he saw her wince in pain, a little part of him died inside. He wanted to hold her until she didn't hurt any longer.

"Where are you, Dax?" Rye asked.

Dax looked at his brother. "What?"

"I asked where you are. I lost you."

Dax spread his arms wide. "I'm right here."

"Maybe in body, but not in mind. What's up?"

"Cornbread's in the oven." Griff stepped into the room, wiping his hands on a dishcloth. "We'll eat in about twenty minutes." He looked from Dax to Rye. "What's going on?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out from Dax."

"Nothing's going on! I was thinking. A guy isn't allowed to *think*?"

"What are you thinking about?" Rye asked.

"Or maybe we should ask *who*." Griff sat on the other end of the couch from Dax. "I'm guessing Kelcey."

"No." The lie tasted sour on his tongue. Better that than catching grief from his brothers. "Why would I be thinking about Kelcey?"

"Oh, I don't know," Rye said. "Maybe because you love her."

The automatic denial almost came out of Dax's mouth. He stopped before he uttered it. He honestly didn't know how he felt about Kelcey. He wanted to be with her, he knew that. Their lovemaking was incredible, yet he didn't need sex to be happy to be with her. He enjoyed her company more than any woman he'd ever been with.

"No arguments?" Griff asked. "No telling us we don't know what we're talking about?"

"Not this time."

"What's going on between y'all?" Rye asked.

"Nothing. Unfortunately."

"She spent Monday and Tuesday nights with you."

"Yeah, but she had that car accident Monday. That's why she was at my house. And then I asked her over for a massage Tuesday. I swear I didn't plan to seduce her."

"Alaina told me *Kelcey* seduced *you*."

Of course Rye would know that because Alaina would've told him. And Griff probably knew too, since Alaina would've told Emma and Emma would've told Griff. Dax wondered if there was anything those three friends didn't discuss. "Well, yeah, she did, Monday. I started things on Tuesday."

Griff stretched one arm along the back of the couch. "But she didn't fight you."

"No. It was consensual." Dax leaned forward, clasped his hands together between his knees. "It was consensual Wednesday too, but then she told me she doesn't want to see me anymore, that she doesn't want to be just another sex partner."

"How do you feel about that?" Rye asked.

"Hell, I don't know." Dax ran one hand over his face. "And the fact that I'm talking to y'all about *feelings* is completely wrong."

Griff tossed the dishtowel at Dax. "Afraid you'll lose your membership in the Macho Club?"

Dax chuckled. "Something like that."

"There's a simple way to figure out how you feel about Kelcey," Rye said. "Think about the women you usually date. Do you give any of them another thought once you're away from them?"

Easy question to answer. "No."

"Do you think about Kelcey when you're away from her?"

Dax nodded. "Yeah."

"Do you want to be with her all the time?"

"Yeah to that one too."

"Can you imagine your life without her?"

It hurt deep in his gut at the possibility of not having her in his life. "No."

"Sounds like love to me," Griff said.

Dax blew out a breath. "So what the hell am I supposed to do about it?"

"Tell her how you feel." Griff punched him on the arm. "You'll only choke up a couple of times before you get the words out."

"Gee thanks, bro." Dax scowled at his brothers when they laughed. "I fail to see the humor in this. How does a guy grovel and keep his balls at the same time?"

"It ain't easy," Rye admitted.

"But worth it," Griff said. "Every minute with the woman you love is precious. Don't waste too much time before you talk to Kelcey."

Dax rubbed his hands together. "Shit, my palms are sweaty."

His brothers laughed again. This time, Dax joined them.

The timer on the oven rang. Dax jumped up. "Hot damn! Food's done."

Rye set his laptop on the small table beside his chair. "I guess that means serious talk is over."

"Damn straight." Dax headed for the doorway into the kitchen. "Let's eat."

* * * * *

He sipped his coffee as he scrolled through the information on his laptop, searching for any new evidence of where Kelcey might be. At least the sun shone through the window of his hotel room, unlike the clouds that had filled the sky the last few days. It would be much more pleasant to be outside in the sunshine, should something appear to give him a clue where she might be.

Two credit card transactions caused him to stop scrolling. Kelcey had done some shopping and eating out yesterday. Jotting down the names of the businesses where she'd used her card, he opened another window on his browser. A quick search showed him both businesses were located in a town called Lanville. Another search and he discovered Lanville had a population of around 3,000 and was about an hour's drive away.

He smiled. It was a perfect day for a drive.

* * * * *

Trying to decide how to talk to Kelcey kept Dax awake most of the night. He considered calling her at least a dozen times. He even considered walking over to Rye's place to see her. The uncertainty of what to say to her kept him in his house.

The first football game would start in fifteen minutes. His dad or one of his brothers would call if he wasn't at his parents' house by noon to watch the game with them. Kelcey would arrive with Alaina and Emma shortly to help prepare the big Sunday family dinner. If he didn't show up for that, his mother would demand to know why he wasn't there. He couldn't claim sickness or she'd show up at his house with soup and a thermometer.

Being a coward sucked big-time.

Walker looked up at him with an it's-time-to-go look. Even his dog wouldn't let him put off going to his parents' house. "You're supposed to be on *my* side."

Tilting his head, Walker let out a soft, "Woof."

"Yeah, yeah, you just want to see Kelcey."

The mention of Kelcey's name had Walker running to the back door and releasing a more forceful bark. Knowing he couldn't put off the inevitable any longer, he walked to the back door and let Walker out in the sunshine. The dog ran off into the trees, probably to chase a small animal. By the time Dax made it to his pickup, he knew Walker would be there to jump up in the back for the two-mile ride to Dax's parents' house.

All the vehicles parked in front of his parents' house proved to Dax that he was the last to arrive. He didn't see Kelcey's car, but assumed she'd ridden over with Rye and Alaina. Taking a breath for courage, he climbed out of the pickup. Whistling for Walker, who had already taken off to explore, he headed for the back door.

The kitchen was chaos, as usual. The four women scurried around the room, preparing the feast that would be served in three hours. The scent of roasting beef already filled the air. Dax's gaze snapped to Kelcey and his heart seemed to swell in his

chest. She stood at the counter, peeling potatoes. She looked beautiful with her hair pulled up on top of her head. Faded jeans covered her legs, a short-sleeved blue T-shirt that matched her eyes flowed over her breasts.

Walker passed him and went directly to Kelcey. Smiling brightly, she dried her hands, dropped to her knees and buried her fingers in his fur.

"Hey, Walker." She laughed when he swiped his tongue over her cheek. "Emma's cooking her famous prime rib. I'll make sure you get a nice big piece."

Still petting the dog, she looked up at Dax. He frowned. She moved her neck much too slowly.

"Dax, you're here. It's about time." Emma grabbed Kelcey's arm and tugged her back to her feet. "You have to work on Kelcey's neck. She can barely move it."

"Emma, I'm fi—"

"Don't you dare tell me you're fine when I know better." Grabbing Dax's arm with her free hand, Emma tugged them both down the hallway to his parents' bedroom. "Your dad set up your mom's massage chair in here. The massage oil is on the nightstand." She pointed a finger at each of them. "I don't want to see either of you out of this room until Kelcey is better. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," Dax said.

Emma left, closing the door behind her.

Dax blew out a breath. "She's like a tornado, isn't she?"

"Definitely." Kelcey stared at the purple contraption in the middle of his parents' bedroom. "What is that?"

"It's a massage chair. You sit down, kneel on the leg rests, lay your hands on the arm rests and place your face in the hole. My mom bought it and usually keeps it in her craft room. After scrapbooking for a while, her neck gets really stiff. I come over once a week or so and work on her."

"It's better than your table?"

"It's different than my table. Sometimes Mom gets a full-body massage, but I usually just work on her neck here."

"Oh."

She looked very uncomfortable, and Dax suspected her discomfort wasn't completely due to her neck hurting. She obviously didn't want him touching her again. "I just want to help you, Kelcey."

She looked into his eyes. "I know that."

"You'll need to take off your shirt, but that's all."

Despite the intimacy they'd shared, a blush crept into her cheeks. Wanting to give her a little privacy, Dax jerked his thumb toward his parents' private bathroom. "I'll wash my hands while you get ready."

He came back into the bedroom to find Kelcey on the chair as he'd instructed. She'd removed her blouse, but left on her pale blue bra. It looked feminine and sexy against her ivory skin. A flick of his thumb and he could have it unsnapped in a few seconds...

You're here to help her, not try to seduce her.

Dax squirted a generous amount of oil into his palms and laid them on Kelcey's shoulders. She tensed beneath his touch.

"Take a deep breath and relax. Trust me."

"I do trust you."

"I hope so, because I would never hurt you." He ran his thumbs up and down the back of her neck. "How long has your neck been hurting?"

"Off and on since Friday."

"This should help you for now, but I'd like to get you back on my table again."

She remained silent for several moments. "That isn't a good idea, Dax."

"Why not?"

"You know why not."

"Tell me anyway. Refresh my memory."

Her shoulders tightened, as if she was about to lift up. Dax gently pressed down on them so she couldn't move. "Sometimes talking is easier if you don't look the other person in the eyes."

Silence again. When she didn't speak for almost a minute, Dax decided it was up to him to break the silence...to tell her everything he felt.

"Okay, if you don't want to talk, I will. I've missed you, Kelcey. I've never missed a woman once the sex was over. I never gave her another thought. It's been different with you. I enjoy being with you both in and out of bed. I like the way your nose wrinkles when you laugh. I like the way your eyes sparkle when you're happy. I like how you don't hold back your opinion on my photographs, but always tell me the truth. I like how much Walker loves you. I like how much you care about Alaina and Emma."

He stopped to give her a chance to comment, if she wanted to. He waited almost a minute again.

"What are you saying, Dax?"

He leaned over so he could speak directly into her ear. "I'm saying, I love you."

She lifted her head very slowly. Eyes wide, lips parted, she stared at him. "What?"

"I'm pretty sure you heard me."

"You love me?"

He nodded. "So much, I don't know how to put it into words."

Tears filling her eyes, she raised one trembling hand and touched his lips. "I love you too."

Later there would be time for desire, for passion. Now he kissed her softly, gently, a bare meeting of their lips...telling her without words how much he cared for her.

Dax continued the gentle massage. "How's your neck?"

Her eyes glowed with happiness. "Much better."

"Come home with me after dinner and I'll give you a full-body massage."

"On one condition."

"What?"

"Since I'm naked during a massage, you have to be naked too."

Oh, he loved that impish grin that turned up her lips. "But you're covered, so I don't really see any of your body except what I'm working on."

"I don't *have* to be covered."

This situation sounded better and better. "I think you just want to be bent over my massage table again."

"Works for me."

Dax burst out laughing. He had the feeling life with Kelcey would never be boring. "You have a deal."

The phone rang as Kelcey rose from the chair, reached for her shirt on the bed and tugged it over her head. Once her clothes were straightened, Dax took her hand and led her from the room.

A roar greeted them as they stepped into the living room. Dax looked at the TV screen to see one of the Cowboys doing a celebratory dance in the end zone. "Who's ahead?"

"We are, now." Rye looked over at them. His gaze drifted down to Dax's hand wrapped around Kelcey's. He winked at his brother and gave Dax a subtle thumbs-up.

Beverly walked into the living room, stopping short when she saw Dax and Kelcey. "Good, you're through. I was about to come see you, Kelcey."

"Oh?"

"You have a visitor in town. He stopped at Walt Kinney's station and Walt called me to see if it was all right that he give the gentleman instructions to our house. I told Walt that would be fine."

Kelcey glanced at Dax, confusion in her eyes, then looked back at Beverly. "A gentleman? Who is it?"

"Your uncle."

Chapter Fifteen

The room spun around her. Kelcey had never fainted in her life, but had a strong suspicion she was about to if she didn't sit down.

Dax must have read her mind. He urged her down onto the arm of the couch. "What's wrong? Don't you want to see your uncle?"

Her uncle was *here*. In Lanville. *Which uncle?* she wondered. It didn't matter. She couldn't see either of them. "I have to get out of here. I can't be here when he arrives."

Jumping up from the couch, she made it no more than a step when Dax wrapped his arms around her from behind and stopped her. "Hold it! What's going on, Kelcey?"

Dax told her he loved her just a few minutes ago. She'd never been so happy in her life. Now her past was on the way to destroy everything. She twisted, trying to get Dax to release her. "Let go of me! *I have to get out of here!*"

"Did I do something wrong?" Beverly asked in a small voice.

Kelcey stopped struggling long enough to glance at Dax's mother. Beverly's eyes filled with tears and she looked mortified. It wasn't her fault that Kelcey had two rotten bastards for uncles.

"Mom, I'm sure you did nothing wrong." Dax whirled Kelcey around to face him. "Talk to me, *right now*."

Out of the corner of her eye, Kelcey saw Alaina and Emma rush into the living room. Concern and fear covered both their faces. Dax looked at them, then back at Kelcey. "Are you going to tell me what's going on, or do I have to get Alaina and Emma to tell me?"

Kelcey looked at Alaina, who gave her a nod. "It's okay, Kelcey. Tell him the truth."

She frantically looked around the room. She couldn't blurt out the truth in front of these wonderful people who had been nothing but kind to her, had been more of a family than her blood relatives.

"Kelcey, what's going on?" Dax squeezed her upper arms. "You can talk in front of my family. Whatever is wrong, no one here will judge you."

She looked into Dax's eyes and saw nothing but love and caring. His support gave her the courage to admit the truth. "It-it was my uncles wh-who raped me."

Silence filled the room until Beverly whispered, "Oh my God."

Dax seemed stunned. Kelcey couldn't blame him. He probably never expected her to say something so awful.

"Your *uncles* raped you?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

Kelcey nodded.

"When?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters to *me*. When did this happen?"

"A long time ago."

Dax's eyes narrowed and he squeezed her upper arms again. "Define 'a long time ago'."

"I-I was eight the first time."

"Fuck," Rye muttered.

"I'll second that," Griff said.

"The *first* time?" Dax demanded. "How many times did it happen?"

"Se-several over two years' time."

"Where the hell were your parents when this happened?"

"My dad died when I was six. My mother..." Her voice broke. It still hurt all the way to her soul to know her mother hadn't believed her. "She took her brothers' side."

Dax hung his head. Unsure how he felt about what she'd told him, Kelcey looked at her friends. They were both crying. Tears tightened Kelcey's throat, yet her eyes remained dry. Her heart ached too much to cry.

The doorbell rang. Kelcey jumped. Dax lifted his head. She'd never seen murder in a person's eyes. She saw it in Dax's. "Wh-what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to kill him."

He headed for the front door. Before he was halfway there, Beverly stepped in front of him.

"Get out of my way, Mom."

"No. You aren't going to do something stupid."

"It won't be stupid. I'm going to pound his head against the side of the house."

"With our help," Rye said as he and Griff stepped to either side of Dax.

"No. My sons are not going to end up in jail. Kenneth, answer the door."

Growling softly, Walker moved in front of Kelcey. She reached down and grasped the scruff of his neck to keep him from charging at her uncle. She braced herself to face the man who had hurt her so much. Kenneth opened the door. A handsome man in his late forties stood on the porch.

Kelcey had never seen him in her life.

The man smiled. "Hello. I'm here to see Kelcey Ewing." He held up a business card for Kenneth to see. "I'm Bruce Jensen."

Kenneth took the card, studied it, then faced Kelcey. "Do you know this man?"

"No."

Dax looked at her too. "He isn't your uncle?"

Kelcey shook her head. "I don't know who he is."

Kenneth held up the business card. "His card says he's an attorney."

Bruce Jensen smiled again. "If I could be permitted to come in, I can explain my presence here."

"It's up to you, Kelcey," Kenneth said.

Surrounded by the Colemans, her friends and Walker, Kelcey felt completely safe. She nodded.

Bruce stepped over the threshold. He stopped short, a worried expression on his face, when he saw the Coleman triplets standing together. "Uh, perhaps I could speak to Ms. Ewing alone?"

Dax crossed his arms over his chest. "Ain't gonna happen, fella. Whatever you have to say, you say in front of all of us."

He looked over at Kelcey. "Ms. Ewing? Is that all right with you?"

Kelcey gazed at everyone in the room. They'd formed a semi-circle around her, protecting her. She barely knew Beverly and Kenneth, yet they already treated her as if she belonged in their family. Her chest tightened with emotion. She lifted her chin. "You can talk to me in front of my family."

Dax winked at her. That simple gesture eased the fear from her heart. She gave him a small smile.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Jensen?" Beverly asked.

"Thank you. And it's Bruce, please."

Kelcey sat on the couch, Dax right next to her. Walker lay at her feet, staring at the stranger in the room. She thought she saw Bruce swallow as he sat in the chair closest to Kelcey.

"He, uh, won't attack, will he?"

"Not unless I tell him to," Dax said.

That didn't seem to make Bruce feel any better. Kelcey waited until everyone had settled in a chair or on the floor before she turned back to Bruce. "Why did you pretend to be my uncle?"

"Because I doubted if anyone would help me find you unless I pretended to be a relative."

"Why did you want to find me? I don't know you."

"I was your mother's attorney, Kelcey. May I call you Kelcey?"

She nodded. Bruce reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a thick, legal-sized envelope. "I believe this will explain everything."

He held out the envelope to her. Kelcey clasped her hands together, not knowing for sure if she wanted to see what the envelope contained.

"Do you want me to look at it?" Dax asked, his voice gentle. "Or Alaina or Emma?"

"I can tell you what's in it," Bruce said. "It's a copy of your mother's will and a personal letter to you."

Kelcey blinked. "Her will?"

Bruce nodded. "She passed away two weeks ago from lung cancer."

Kelcey remembered her mother smoking almost nonstop. She had no idea if her mother continued to smoke after Kelcey went to boarding school since she never went home for visits. The last time she saw Claudia Ewing, Kelcey had been ten years old. She didn't know if her mother had ever remarried, had moved somewhere else, had any more children. When she left San Francisco, she never looked back.

She should feel something. Kelcey thought she should feel some kind of remorse or sadness at the passing of the woman who had given her life.

Nothing.

"I don't know what the letter says," Bruce said, "but your mother asked me to have you read it. In fact, she told me to beg you to read it, if that was necessary."

Kelcey reached out and took the envelope from Bruce. She saw her name written in her mother's perfect penmanship. She stared at her name while she asked her next question. "Do you know if my mother's two brothers are still alive?"

"Kirt is in prison, serving a long sentence for a variety of white collar crimes. Frank was killed in a car accident several years ago."

That meant neither uncle could ever hurt her again. The tightness in Kelcey's chest eased a bit. It eased even more when Dax slipped his arm around her shoulders and kissed her temple. She gave him a grateful smile, then slid her finger beneath the envelope's seal. She withdrew a single piece of her mother's custom stationery. After clearing her throat, she began to read aloud.

Kelcey,

There are no words I can write to make amends for how badly I hurt you. I couldn't believe Kirt and Frank would ever do something so horrible, especially to my baby. It was completely unthinkable.

Frank admitted the truth to me while he was in the hospital after a major car accident. The injuries he suffered eventually took his life. Before he died, he told me how much he hated what he'd done to you. It had been Kirt's idea, but he'd gone along with it. He'd hated himself his entire life because of it.

Perhaps deep inside I knew the truth all along. I was too selfish and wrapped up in my own life to get to the truth. It was easier to ship you off to boarding school than to confront my brothers.

How I've regretted what I did! I missed the most important years of my baby's life. I missed watching you grow up, seeing you wear makeup the first time, go on that first date, graduate from school and college. I've kept track of you, my darling. I know you graduated from college with honors and made a good living for yourself in Dallas. I'm very happy about that.

After you returned the letters I worked up the courage to write to you and refused my phone calls, I decided the best thing I could do for you was stay out of your life. I had to give you the chance to find your way, to be your own person. Losing your father made me bitter and cold. You were always such a sweet little girl. If I hadn't sent you away, you probably would've grown up as bitter and cold as I.

I hope somewhere along the way you find a special man who loves you the way you deserve to be loved. I hope you have a wonderful, long life. I'm sorry I won't be part of it. I'm sorry I can

never again hug you and tell you I love you. I'm sorry I won't see you get married, or hold my grandchild in my arms. I'm so very, very sorry for everything.

Mother

Kelcey's hands trembled as she folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. Her throat burned with the need to cry. She was afraid if she started, she would never stop.

Bruce cleared his throat, as if Claudia's letter had affected him too. "I can give you the short version of what your mother's will says. Claudia was a very smart businesswoman. She took what your father left her and invested wisely. You've inherited her entire estate, which is valued at about twenty million."

"Holy shit," Emma whispered.

It was too much for Kelcey to comprehend. She rubbed her forehead to help Bruce's words sink into her brain. "I can't... I can't accept that. I haven't had anything to do with my mother in years."

"Which she regretted. She couldn't make amends with you in life, so tried to do it after she died." Bruce crossed one leg over the other. "Part of that estate is a beautiful mansion overlooking the San Francisco Bay worth about twelve million. The rest is in cash, bonds and stocks. She had several offers over the years from people wanting to buy the mansion. I don't think you'd have any problem selling it if you don't want to keep it. I'll be happy to take care of that for you." He smiled at her. "After you research me to make sure I'm legit, of course."

The humor brought a smile to Kelcey's lips. "The fact that you have this letter from my mother proves you're legit. I haven't seen her handwriting in a long time, but I recognize it, and her stationery."

Bruce uncrossed his legs, leaned forward in his chair. "I know this is a lot for you to take in right now. Think about it for a few days and then call me. I'll be happy to help

any way I can. I can make arrangements for your mother's assets to be transferred to you, or I'll work with your own attorney. Whichever way you wish to go."

Kelcey nodded. "Okay. I'll think about it."

Bruce stood and headed for the front door, Kelcey by his side. Once he'd opened the door, he faced her. "I rented a car and drove here, just to take a little break. I think I'll turn in the car and fly back to San Francisco tomorrow. I'll be in my office Tuesday should you need to speak to me."

"Thank you again, for everything."

Kelcey closed the door behind the attorney and rested her forehead against it. Her mind whirled, her legs felt like gelatin. She worried she might fall until strong arms slipped around her waist.

"You okay?" Dax asked.

She turned, wrapped her arms around his waist, laid her cheek on his chest. His strength seeped into her. With Dax by her side, she could handle anything that came her way.

"Hey, Kelc," Emma said from her perch on the floor. "Wanna invest in a restaurant?"

Emma's joke helped ease the tension in the room. Kelcey could always depend on her friend to make her feel better. "I'll think about that too."

"Right now, we need to think about dinner." Beverly motioned for Alaina, Emma and Kelcey to follow her. "C'mon, girls, let's finish up in the kitchen."

Just like that, everything was back to normal. Kelcey accepted the soft kiss from Dax and followed the ladies out of the room.

* * * * *

Dax handed a glass of wine to Kelcey, then sat beside her on the couch. She leaned back against his chest and took a sip. "Mmm, good."

"I'm glad you approve." He wrapped his arm across her chest, nuzzled behind her ear. She felt so good in his arms, he didn't want to ever let her go. "I'm also glad we decided not to stick around my folks' place after dinner."

"I wanted to be alone with you." She laid her hand on his arm, slid her fingers back and forth. "My whole life changed today. I'm still trying to get used to it."

"Finding out you're an heiress was a big shock."

"A *huge* shock. And that was on top of you telling me you love me."

"I don't think my confession measures up to an estate worth twenty million."

She tilted her head on his shoulder and looked into his eyes. "It's worth more than twenty million to me."

A comment like that deserved a kiss. His hand dipped down to cradle one soft breast as his lips covered hers. He loved touching her, loved how responsive she was to his caresses. They'd make love later...long, delicious, unhurried lovemaking that would last far into the night. Now, they needed to talk.

"You never had sex after what your uncles did to you?"

"No." She took a sip of wine before continuing. "I tried, once I moved to Dallas. I thought new city, fresh start. I decided not to let what happened to me keep me from finding someone to love. But nothing ever...worked. The memories would swamp me and I panicked."

"Like you did that first night at my house."

She nodded. "I never gave a guy a second chance. Not that he'd want one, after I screamed at him."

He nipped her earlobe. "I happen to like screaming."

Chuckling, she accepted his kiss. "I don't recall doing any screaming except for that first night."

"Then I'll have to work a little harder in bed."

She relaxed against him once more. He couldn't resist kissing that spot beneath her ear that always made her moan. "I'm glad I told you my feelings before Jensen showed up."

"Why?"

"So you don't think I want you for your money."

"I would never think that."

"I hope not. I'm not rich—not like you are now—but I make a good living. I still owe on my house, but otherwise I'm debt free." Wanting to lighten the mood a bit, he grinned. "I'm a great catch."

Kelcey laughed. "Yes, you are."

"I'm new at this love thing, Kelcey. You have to be patient with me if I screw up sometimes."

"I'm new at it too, Dax."

He kissed that spot beneath her ear again, smiling when he heard her moan. "How's your neck?"

"A little stiff. So are my shoulders."

"Think a full-body massage would help?"

"I think it would help a lot, as long as you're naked."

"Are you going to insist on me being naked every time I give you a massage?" he asked with a playful sigh.

"Absolutely."

He gently squeezed her breast while he kissed her temple. "Whatever the lady wants..."

The End

About the Author

Lynn LaFleur was born and raised in a small town in Texas close to the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Writing has been in her blood since she was eight years old and wrote her first “story” for an English assignment.

As well as writing at every possible moment, Lynn enjoys reading, scrapbooking, photography and learning new things on the computer. She’s a software junky and loves to try out new programs, especially anything to do with graphics.

After living on the West Coast for 21 years, Lynn now lives 17 miles from her hometown in Texas. She’s a romantic at heart and can’t imagine ever writing anything but romances. A full-time writer, she spends her days creating stories of people who find their happily ever after, sometimes with the help of an alien or psychic or vampire.

Lynn welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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