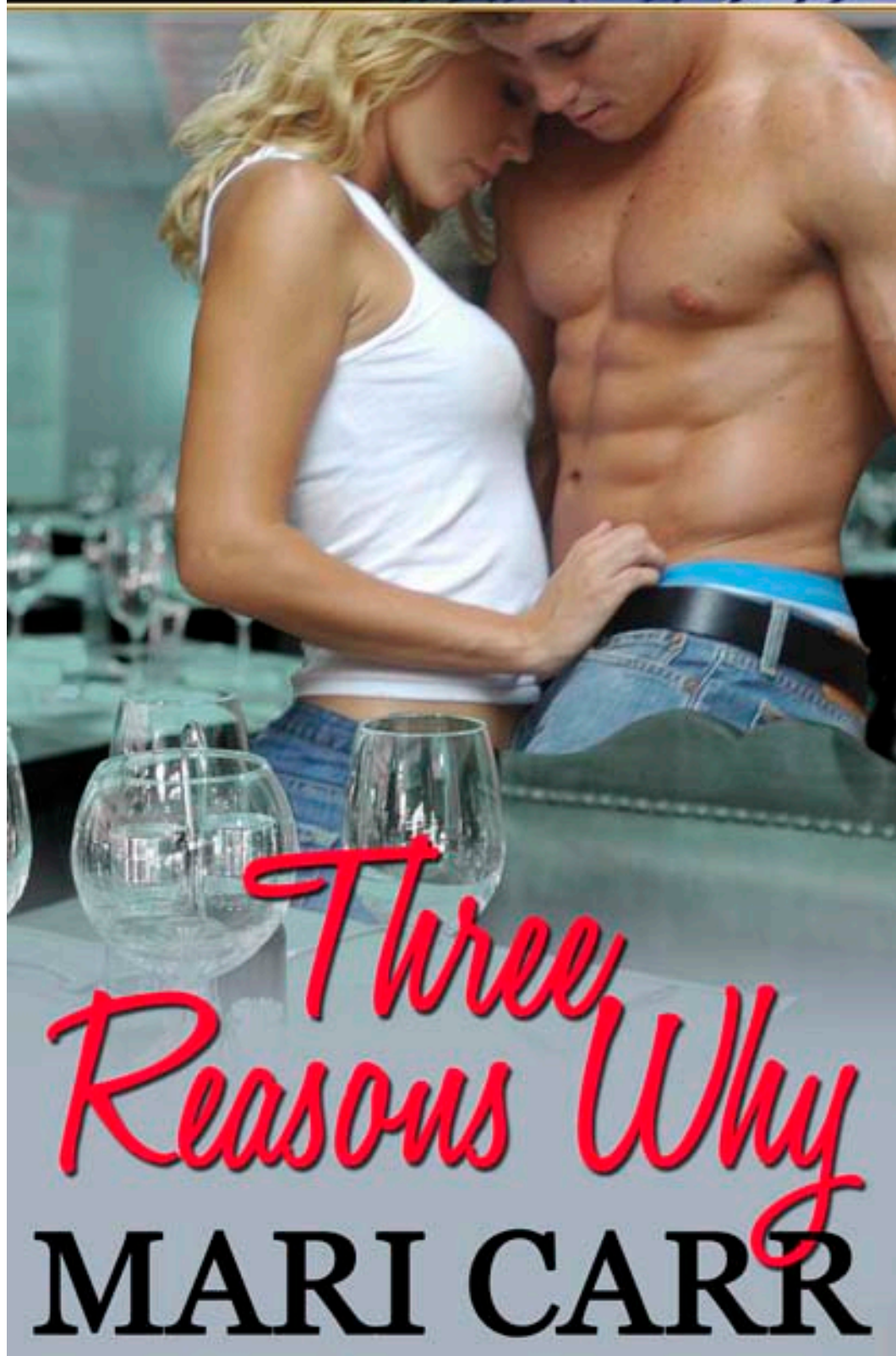


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



*Three
Reasons Why*
MARI CARR

Three Reasons Why

Mari Carr

Three Reasons Why is a sequel to Kiss Me, Kate.

Wes wants Jill Harper in every possible way a man can want a woman. But she's resisting. Hard. When he learns she needs a handyman for her diner, he decides fate is smiling upon him – until Jill offers three reasons why they can't be together. Always up for a challenge, Wes decides to prove her ridiculous reasons unsound, one by one.

Jill knows her reasons are total bull, but she's sticking by them, come hell or high water. Unfortunately, Wes Robson is extremely persuasive. Especially in bed. If the sex gets any hotter they'll likely burn down the town. Before long, Jill's reasons begin falling away as fast as her clothing whenever Wes is around.

But Jill knows exactly what Wes wants for his future, and she's just prolonging the inevitable heartbreak. The *real* reason she can't give herself to Wes, can't allow herself to love him, can only lead to pain – the kind from which neither may ever recover.

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Three Reasons Why

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THREE REASONS WHY

Mari Carr

Dedication

This story is dedicated to Susan, Valerie and Maria, who never stopped believing I could get this story right!

Trademarks Acknowledgements

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Prologue

Christmas

“Are you all right?” Jill Harper asked when Wes began fidgeting in his chair. No doubt he was uncomfortable due to the injuries he’d sustained in his last DEA mission. Simply thinking of how badly Wes had been hurt sent a cold chill through her. She could have lost him. Then she pushed the thought away. Hell, he wasn’t hers to lose.

“Yeah,” Wes answered. “Just bored.”

They were celebrating the holidays with Jill’s sister Kate and Wes’ best friend Rick. Unfortunately, the revelry had been curtailed for a little while—two hours’ worth of a little while—when Kate and Rick escaped upstairs to open their last gifts in private. Jill was finding it increasingly difficult to ignore the sexual sounds emanating from the upstairs bedroom. She’d like to say she was annoyed, but actually she was uncomfortably hot.

Fuck. She was horny as hell.

Wes’ fingers thumped against his cast absentmindedly. “How about you and me go rustle up some breakfast? I’m starving.”

Jill jumped out of her chair, grateful for Wes’ suggestion. She’d cook. That might help beat down her building arousal, even though, God knew, she should be used to the sizzling physical reaction she suffered whenever she was with Wes.

“Sounds good.” She crossed the room and offered Wes a hand to help him up. With his broken leg and ribs, rising was still difficult. He grimaced as she approached and she knew he was tired of being helpless. Wes was an active, strong man. Relying on her help—as well as Kate’s and Rick’s—was rubbing against the grain. Hopefully, the healing would happen fast and life could go back to normal.

They'd been together way more than usual lately and it was throwing Jill for a loop. She'd always recognized the slight tug of attraction when it came to Wes Robson, but lately it didn't feel like a tug as much as a hurricane-force wind blowing at her back, shoving her none too gently toward the man.

Wes reached for her outstretched hand. However, rather than allowing her to pull him up, he used their clasped palms against her. Pulling hard, Wes yanked her down and across his lap, quick as a flash.

"Wes!" she said, startled by his impulsive move.

"I want to give you your other gift," he said gruffly.

He'd already been far too generous, giving her a beautiful broach that had belonged to his mother before she passed away. She'd been equal parts touched and alarmed by the thoughtful gesture. He'd said it was to thank her for taking care of him while he was in the hospital, but a tiny part of her thought it was something more. That *something more* left her uneasy.

Before she could respond, Wes pulled her closer and kissed her. His lips grazed hers for just a moment. There was nothing tentative or apologetic in the touch. Wes wanted to kiss her and while he wouldn't ask or force, he was gonna get his wish. She liked that. She had a strong personality that tended to intimidate men. Sometimes she got tired of being the aggressor, the decision-maker.

Wes deepened the kiss and she let him lead the way. His lips were a mixture of strength and softness, a perfect reflection of the man. She'd learned so much about him in the hospital, watching him work through his physical therapy sessions with sheer determination and drive. Then he'd surprise her by stopping at the children's ward on the way back to his room to perform magic tricks for the kids.

She reached up to run her hands through his thick brown hair. She didn't want this moment to end. Not yet. It might not be the wisest decision of her life, but she liked the way Wes kissed. He held her like she was precious, important...special.

"Wes," she said after several minutes of the best kissing of her life.

“Shhh. Not yet. Let’s disappear for a little while, Jill. We can think about what this means tomorrow. Today, it’s Christmas and I want to kiss you.”

She smiled and pressed her cheek against his. “It’s Christmas.”

Wes cupped her face, pulling her lips back to his. She let herself get lost in the sensations, the beauty of the moment. He was right. They could pay the piper tomorrow.

For today, it was *ho ho ho*.

Chapter One

March

Wes stood outside the diner and watched his little pixie flit from customer to customer as if she didn't have a care in the world. Damn woman had been leading him on a merry chase these last few months and he'd had enough. It was high time he called a halt to her cat-and-mouse game once and for all. Since his last DEA mission in December, he'd been laid up with a bunch of injuries that left it too hard for him to pursue his quarry effectively.

He grinned as he glanced down at his cast-free left leg. The ungainly thing had been removed two weeks ago and his physical therapy was going great. For the first time in months, he felt like a whole man—a one hundred percent red-blooded man—and Jill Harper wasn't going to know what hit her. He spied the sign his best friend and former partner Rick had mentioned this morning at breakfast.

Part-Time Handyman Needed. Inquire Within.

He pulled the posting off the window, tucking it in his back pocket as he passed under the jangling bell hanging above the door and into the busy diner Jill owned and operated.

"Hey, Wes," Cheryl called out from behind the counter. Cheryl Pantino, a fifty-seven-year-old divorcee, was Jill's right hand at the diner. Between the two of them, they kept the fine folks of Madison well fed and happy at breakfast, lunch and dinner.

"Hi, Cheryl. How're you doin' today?"

"Busy, but the lunch rush is just about over. Going to finish cleaning things in here, then head up to my apartment to catch my soaps on TV before the dinner crowd rolls in."

Like Jill, Cheryl lived in one of the two apartments above the diner. They claimed living so close saved them the trouble of having to drive back and forth to work. Because of their long hours, they preferred to have as much time in the comfort of their homes as they could manage.

“Where’s the boss?” he asked casually.

Cheryl pointed behind her. “She just headed back to the storage room. We got a shipment today from the food distributor and she’s doing inventory.”

He grinned and nodded, then strolled toward the back room. This day was getting better and better. With Jill trapped in a confined space, there was no way she would escape until he laid down the law once and for all.

After returning from his ill-fated mission, he had been stuck in the hospital for a couple of weeks. Jill, always a good friend, had shown up and planted herself on the couch beside his hospital bed, nagging him to listen to the nurses and take his meds. While he’d grumbled about her meddling, he secretly loved having her all to himself. She was a spirited, vivacious woman. She was fun to be with, constantly keeping him on his toes.

As he reached the doorway to the storage room, he spied her unloading cans of vegetables from boxes and placing them on the shelves. Her back was to him and he took a moment to appreciate the view. She was no more than five foot four, with shoulder-length, wavy blonde hair. His fingers itched to touch the thick, silky mass. At the moment, she wore her lovely hair in what she referred to as one of her work ‘dos. It was pulled up on the back of her head, twisted into a loose bun and held in place by what looked like a pair of chopsticks.

Despite the fact that she was constantly surrounded by mouthwatering food, she was slim. He could see the muscles in her calves, left bare by her miniskirt. She was an avid runner and it showed in her fit body.

He could have continued to stare in silence at her pert little rear end all day, but she must have sensed his presence, and she turned toward the door.

For a split second, he recognized genuine happiness in her gaze when she spied him, only to see it quickly replaced by the damn indifference he'd come to hate these past couple of months.

"Wes," she said quietly. "You scared me. How long have you been standing there?"

"Just a few minutes." He grinned. "Enjoying the view."

In the past, his teasing would have provoked an equally witty rejoinder and the two of them would spar with words until one cried "uncle". This time, she merely shook her head in annoyance and turned back to her work. He swallowed his anger at her dismissal. If Jill Harper thought she could be rid of him that easily, then she didn't know him at all.

He stepped into the storeroom and shut the door. She spun around in time to see him turning the lock.

"What are you doing?"

"Well, pixie, the way I see it, you and I have some unfinished business to attend to and I aim to see that you stay in place while we do it."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." A blush covered her cheeks. She knew exactly what he was referring to. He hadn't been the only one *celebrating* under the mistletoe, and it was time Jill understood exactly what that kiss meant to him.

"Yes, you do." He inched closer as she tried to back away from him. He couldn't help but grin when she hit the shelf and realized she was truly trapped.

"I see you got your cast off." Obviously she was attempting to dissuade him from his pursuit.

"Yep. Two legs now. All the better to chase you with, my dear."

She rolled her eyes. "And your ribs? Your wrist?"

"All healed. Two hands." He raised his palms. "All the better to catch you with."

"Wes." Her breathing was labored, but he wasn't in the mood to be lenient. Ever since their first kiss on Christmas day, she had avoided him like the plague, and now he was going to finish what they'd started.

He continued forward until their bodies were only a few inches apart. He reached down and grasped her small waist, pulling her toward him until every part of them connected.

"You've been a very hard girl to capture." His lips descended toward her cherry-red ones.

"I have?"

He was finished talking. Claiming her mouth, he laid waste to her lips and tongue, drinking in every bit of her sweet breath. He was thrilled when she returned his heated kiss with an even hotter one of her own. She gripped his hair so tightly, he sucked in a breath at the pain she produced while pulling him closer. Sex with her would be an adventure. She was passionate and not shy about expressing it.

"Easy, pixie," he murmured. "We've got all the time in the world."

She shoved him away.

"Damn you, Wes Robson. How dare you come in here and attack me like this. I have work to do."

"Attack you?" He chuckled as she struggled to catch her breath. He reached up and ran his fingers through his hair. "Sweetheart, I'm surprised I'm not completely bald after that so-called attack of *mine*."

He took a step back to study her flushed, annoyed face. It was the same look she got every time he'd tried to get close to her since the holidays. She would offer her friendship freely but the second he tried to press for more, she pulled away, hissing and clawing at him like a cornered cat. He simply couldn't understand her continued refusal. "Why are you fighting this, Jill? Why can't you admit you feel this thing between us as much as I do?"

"What thing?" She tried to pass him to get to the doorway. When he refused to budge, she crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. "I'm not kidding, Wes. I have a shitload of work to do."

"I just saw Cheryl and she assured me the lunch hour was over. I have no doubt she's finished cleaning and has already locked up for the afternoon." He glanced at his watch. "That means we have two hours until you reopen. Plenty of time for what I have in mind."

"Two hours is plenty of time? Pity. I'd have thought you had more stamina."

He laughed, relieved to see her fighting with him again. "I was plotting a quickie since you're so busy. If you'd prefer something longer..." He wiggled his eyebrows and let her fill in the rest.

"God. Spare me. I'm busy," she insisted. "And I have no idea what's gotten into you, but we have nothing, no *thing* to discuss." As she said the word *thing*, she made quotation marks in the air with her fingers.

"Is that right? That's funny, because I think you know exactly what I'm referring to, pixie, because it's that *thing* that's making you run from me." He repeated her finger gesture.

"Stop calling me pixie. If you think you're so smart, say what you have to say and get the hell out."

He ran the back of his hand lightly down her cheek and tried not to grin at her slight shudder. "I'm talking about the *thing* that makes it impossible for us to keep our hands off each other. The *thing* that makes me think about you all hours of the day and night, desperate to strip those clothes off your body. The *thing* that makes me want to tie you to my bed and never let you loose." As he spoke, he watched the effect his words were having.

She wasn't as unaffected as she tried to pretend. The tight buds of her nipples poked through her T-shirt, and the breathing she had gotten under control after their kiss was suddenly labored again.

"Why can't you just admit that you want me too, Jilly?" He flashed her a charming grin, the one most women couldn't resist.

"Ha!" Her laugh was forced, and he was annoyed by the return of her inexplicable defensiveness. What the hell was going on with her? They were friends, and he knew without a doubt the woman wanted him just as much as he wanted her.

Her tone, when she spoke, was light and easy. Her words, however, were not. "Wes, your conceit is only surpassed by your arrogance. You think you can flash those dimples at any woman and she'll fall down drooling at your feet. Well, I have news for you. I'm immune to your charms. I'm not the slightest bit interested in anything you might have to offer, so if you will kindly step aside..."

"No." He crossed his arms. "Not this time. You and I are going to settle this once and for all. I would like to know why in the hell you run from me like I'm Satan incarnate every time I come around. I want to get closer to you, Jill, and I don't mean in this goddamn friendship trap you're hell-bent on maintaining. Damn it, woman, give me one good reason why you think we can't make a relationship work." He sucked in a breath, cursing his anger. He hadn't meant to lay it all on the line quite like this, but she had a habit of pushing all his buttons.

She gave him a grin. "Oh no, Wes, I won't give you just one reason. I'll give you three. Three reasons why this thing..." She paused as if unsure what to call their undeniable attraction. "Three reasons why you and I could never be more than friends."

Obviously, she'd given some serious thought to her denial of his suit and was now ready to lay all her cards on the table. Unwilling to let her get the upper hand, he took a couple steps back as a peace offering to encourage her. Then he raised his eyebrows and gestured for her to proceed.

"Number one, we are like oil and water. We fight all the time."

He waited for her to elaborate, but she simply looked at him as if her words were all the explanation needed. "That's number one?" His voice was laced with disbelief. "That's it?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Isn't that enough? Wes, you have to admit we get on each other's nerves more than the average couple."

"Jill, we don't fight. I don't think you and I have ever had one serious argument the entire time we've known each other. We bicker, we pick on each other, we spar, but all of that is in good fun. It's just the nature of our friendship. You've never done anything that's really angered me and I have a sense that, in truth, our arguments—should we pursue a relationship—would be few and far between."

"Oh." Her eyebrows creased as she considered his remarks.

"Besides, pixie, think how much fun we'd have making up after one of our little disagreements." Leaning forward, he captured her hand in his and brought it to his lips. She watched, her face flushed, as he placed a soft kiss on her knuckles before turning her hand over and running his tongue suggestively across her palm.

She pulled her hand back. "Stop distracting me."

He struggled to look chagrined. "Sorry to interrupt. You were about to give me two more reasons, I believe, as to why you and I shouldn't become lovers."

"That's right and that actually leads me to my next argument." Her face became more composed and he braced himself. "I'm not in the slightest bit attracted to you."

He laughed—loudly. Her words were such a blatant lie he didn't even pretend to fall for them. "Is that right?" He reached down and gripped her hips tightly. Pulling her closer, he let her feel the erection that was fighting to escape its denim cage.

Jill's eyes drifted shut and for just a moment, she pushed against him. Then her gaze lifted to his face. "All that proves is you're attracted to *me*. We already knew that." She gave him a cocky grin that made him smile.

He lifted his hand and tweaked her tight nipple. She gasped at his unexpected attack. "You go to hell for lying, Jill," he teased. "Should I dip my fingers into your panties to see just how big your lie is? How wet are you?"

Jill was nothing if not resilient. "I was fantasizing about Gerard Butler when you walked in. Needless to say, I'm soaked. But that doesn't mean I'm going to bend over for the first guy who walks by with a hard-on."

"So that kiss at Christmas meant nothing?" He refused to accept her second reason. He knew she was interested, knew she was as hot for him as he was for her. It simply made no sense for her to deny it.

"It meant we were under the mistletoe and you were laid up in a wheelchair over the holidays. Consider it a gift."

"You expect me to believe it was a sympathy kiss?"

"Well, it probably started out that way. I'm not going to lie to you, Wes. You're a pretty decent kisser. Let's just say it was a gift that kept giving...for a few minutes."

"Thirty," he amended. They'd made out like a couple of teenagers in the backseat of a car for half an hour before Rick and Kate returned to the living room.

"Wow. What'd you do? Put a stopwatch on us?"

"I'm observant. And I observed while we were kissing that you're totally hot for me."

"It was just a kiss."

He shook his head. "No. It wasn't. Do you want me to say it, Jill? I lust after you. And I'm not talking about some meek, mild lust, but a hot, heart-pounding, rock-hard-cock kind of lusting. I'm pretty sure if we explored that lust a bit we'd set the town on fire. And the attraction is definitely mutual."

She rolled her eyes and he struggled not to laugh. No other woman on earth kept his feet so firmly on the ground. "Fine, Wes. You're probably right. We'd burn down the house, but we're never going to let it go that far. It wouldn't be a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because it wouldn't lead to anything."

"I'm pretty fucking sure it would lead to a ton of orgasms for each of us."

"Yeah." She paused, and Wes suspected they were finally going to get down to the heart of the matter. Her first two reasons—weak excuses at best—had been a ruse. "Actually, that leads me to my final reason."

He crossed his arms and struggled not to gloat. If her last reason was as lame as the first two, he had nothing to worry about.

"I know what you're looking for, Wes, and I can't go there. I don't want a relationship. At all."

That caught him unaware. "I'm sorry?" he said, unsure he'd heard her correctly.

"I'm thirty-three years old and perfectly content with my life. I've just now gotten to a place where I'm genuinely happy. Upsetting that status quo isn't something I'm interested in attempting."

"You don't intend to date? Ever?" He thought back to what he knew about Jill. He and Rick had moved to Madison nearly five years ago and Jill had been the first friend they'd made. As he considered her words, he realized that while she went out occasionally with different guys and indulged in infrequent hook-ups with Seth Johnson, she'd never dated anyone seriously.

She narrowed her eyes, glaring. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"I tell people I don't want a boyfriend and suddenly they're eyeballing me like I'm a lesbian. Why is it so hard to believe that a woman might not want to tie herself to a man?"

"I don't think it's that hard to believe. I just don't understand why you're so opposed to a relationship."

"I'm not against dating in general," she corrected. "The problem is dating can lead to marriage and I'm definitely not putting my neck in that noose."

"I'm not asking to marry you, Jill. I'm just asking for a date."

She held her hands out. "Sorry. Not interested in dating you. I like my life the way it is. What can I say? I'm old and set in my ways."

Wes narrowed his eyes. "Thirty-three is hardly old."

"It's old enough for me to have gotten to a nice place in my life. I'm not looking for complications. If you were interested in dating casually, I'd be your girl, but I know you, Wes. You're a romantic at heart. You're looking for Miss Right, and I'm not her."

"I think you are." Wes appreciated her candor, even though he found it hard to accept. He knew Jill. He'd never met a woman who was more comfortable in her own skin. He also knew she was being completely sincere and honest, but there was a difference between contentment and genuine happiness. He intended to show it to her.

She reached up on tiptoe to place a quick, friendly kiss on his cheek. "I know all about that dominant streak you try to hide. You like to think you're an evolved man, and in some ways you are. But I've seen glimpses of your true spirit as well—the man compelled to protect, to shelter. You're used to calling the shots because you've spent a great deal of your adult life doing just that. I call my own shots. Surely you can understand that."

"I don't want to change you, Jill, and I don't want to take over your life. I just want to be included in your days. I want to be a part of your pleasures."

She looked at him and he thought he saw a spark of longing before she shut it down again. She'd definitely lied about not wanting him. Unfortunately, she was stubborn as shit when she set her mind to something. He'd have to work overtime to convince her to let him into her life.

"So you'd be happy with no-strings-attached dating?" she asked.

"No." He wasn't going to lie about his intentions.

She turned around, shifting items on the shelf. "I knew it. I also knew you wouldn't accept my words about what I want. It's why I've been avoiding this conversation. You just don't listen. Typical man." Her ranting turned to mumbling and he chuckled at her last line.

"You're fooling yourself if you think you have all you need in life."

She turned to face him, pressing her body against his. His chest constricted at her close proximity and it was all he could do not to pull her skirt up and show her exactly what she needed.

"I need easy. I need free. And occasionally, I need sex. You're welcome to help me with the third any time you want, so long as you understand nothing more will come of it." She ran her hand along his side, not stopping until she'd touched him from shoulder to upper thigh.

Narrowing his eyes, he studied her face. She was trying to call his bluff. Trying to distract him from his intentions with sex. Two could play that game.

He reached up, cupping the side of her face, pulling her close. "So now I know."

She frowned. "Know what?"

"What's been keeping you away from me these past two months. Fear."

She shook her head. "I am not, nor will I ever be, afraid of you."

Yep, she was stubborn. However, her last reason for refusing him—spoken with such assurance—left him at a loss for a rebuttal. She was hiding something. He knew it. He'd have to bide his time until he figured out why she was afraid of getting too close to someone. Time to fall back and punt.

He studied her flushed face and moved closer. He brushed his lips against hers softly, quickly. "Fine, Jill. You aren't afraid of me, and you've given me three reasons why you don't want to be with me. Now it's my turn."

"Your turn for what?"

"To give you the three reasons why I'm not giving up on us. Reason one, you're perfect for me. You—exactly as you are right now. Not later, after all these so-called changes you expect me to bring to your content lifestyle."

She refused to back away, even though he still held her close. He'd always admired her courage, her spunkiness. She never backed down from a fight, which was why her distance these past two months had driven him crazy.

"Second, our bodies were made for each other."

She huffed out an annoyed breath. "There's more to life than sex, Wes."

"I know that, which leads to my final reason. I want to date you."

"Date me?"

"Yep. Goin' steady. Boyfriend, girlfriend, an extra toothbrush for you in my bathroom, your side of the bed, my side of the bed. Dating."

She appeared dumbfounded by his words, her mind playing over his completely sincere declaration.

"I think those drugs they gave you in the hospital for pain must have affected your brain. Or at the very least, your hearing. I'm. Not. Dating. You." He grinned at the fervor behind her refusal. God, she was gorgeous. "Not now. Not ever."

He considered the heated passion behind her words and wondered if she was soured on the idea of commitment. No one in her life had ever made it very far with that concept. Her parents had divorced when she was young. Her sister's first marriage had gone to hell in a handbasket after six years. Rick was pushing hard to set a wedding date, but Kate was in no hurry – despite her obvious love for the man. It was inevitable that Jill would have reservations.

It was also inevitable that he would fight like hell to overcome them. His mind was made up in regards to his future...and Jill Harper's.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way, pixie."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He grasped her hips and pulled her against his erection once more. She held his gaze. "You can accept my invitation for a date now or you'll have to suffer my concentrated seduction until you say yes."

She grinned and for the first time since he'd entered the room, he saw the real Jill emerge. "Oh wow. It's gonna be tough watching you fall on your ass, Wes, but I'm willing to give it a go."

He laughed and released her. "Here." He pulled the *help wanted* sign out of his pocket and handed it to her.

She took it, looking down at the folded paper. "What's this?"

"You're looking at your new handyman."

She shook her head vehemently. "Oh no, I'm not. I—"

"Pixie, I think you underestimate me."

"What do you mean?"

"If this is a battle we're waging, you're going to face me on the field every day."

She swallowed heavily, but he could see her considering his comments. Jill never backed down from a dare. She was every bit as competitive as he was. She wouldn't run away any longer.

"I need a handyman, not a lover."

"You know I'm perfectly qualified to work here as your handyman and while I'm at it, I'm gonna show you how very wrong you are about everything you just said. I'm going to prove to you exactly how perfect we are for each other and I'm *definitely* going to change your mind about all three of those damn reasons why."

Chapter Two

Jill slammed her fist against the stuck drawer, cursing under her breath as Cheryl walked into the kitchen with a tray full of dirty dishes.

"Damn, girl. Is it your time of the month or did you just wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning? I've never seen you so pissed off."

"It's this stupid fucking drawer. It won't open."

Cheryl stopped and placed her tray on the counter. "You gotta hit it directly on the left corner," she said, banging the drawer. It popped open, and Jill fought the urge to smack the smug grin off her friend's face.

"Don't look at me like that," Cheryl chastised. "You're the one who taught me how to open it. Now why don't you tell me what's really bothering you."

"The men's room toilet is clogged, and I can't find one lousy plumber in this godforsaken town to come fix it."

"Um, Jill," Lottie said through the order window, "now the women's toilet is clogged too."

Jill turned and scowled at the young waitress, who hastily backed away to continue refilling the salt and pepper shakers.

Cheryl placed a comforting hand on Jill's shoulder. "Now, honey, before you get upset, you might want to reconsider Wes' offer to help."

"No," she replied sharply.

"Why not? Ever since Seth stopped working around here, we've been letting some things slide. It's time to start getting these repairs done or the place is gonna fall down on our heads."

"It's not that bad," Jill said, though she knew Cheryl's words were true. Every day, something else in the old building stopped functioning. If they didn't start taking control of the situation, they'd end up having to shut down for major renovations.

Cheryl raised her eyebrows. "What's your problem with Wes?"

"Who says I have a problem with him?"

"He's the answer to a prayer, and you know it," Cheryl replied. "We need help, Jill Harper, and Wes has offered it. I just don't get it. You've got yourself a six-foot Adonis practically begging to help and you're saying no."

"Adonis," Jill scoffed.

"With that light-brown hair and deep green eyes. Mmm. I'm old enough to be that boy's mother and he still melts my butter. What is it about him that bothers you so much?"

Jill crossed her arms and tapped her toe. "For your information, Wes Robson does *not* bother me."

"I certainly hope not," came Wes' deep voice from behind her. He'd come in the back entrance. "I mean, in my defense, I just got here. Unless, of course," he added, walking up so close behind her, Jill could feel his warm breath in her hair, "it's the 'hot and bothered' kind of bothering. Then I don't mind so much. Hell, I could even take care of that for you. I *am* a very handy man. Is your butter melting, Jill?"

"You knew he was behind me," Jill accused her friend, but Cheryl merely gave her a mischievous grin.

"Why are you here?" Jill muttered to Wes, refusing to turn around to look at the damn man who was melting a hell of a lot more than butter in her body.

"I'll just let you two sort this out," Cheryl said, waving and heading for the door. "Breakfast shift is over. I'm locking the front door and going up to my apartment. If you don't find somebody to fix those toilets pronto, we might as well dump the lunch

special in the garbage and leave the doors locked, because there's no way we can open. Lottie," she called out as she left, "wanna come upstairs and watch *The View* with me?"

Jill listened as her two waitresses tromped up the stairs, then she turned to watch Wes put a toolbox on the counter.

"Toilet problems?" he asked.

"Dammit, Wes, I mean it. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to work," he replied.

"That's funny. I don't recall hiring you," she answered.

She constantly struggled to recapture the wits he wiped away simply by being in the same room. She prided herself on being an independent, intelligent woman, but two minutes in his presence always reduced her to a quivering mass of goo. Damn if she didn't want him, and she was usually not the type of girl to deny herself her pleasures. However, in Wes' case, giving in would be the very worst thing she could do, and for reasons she hadn't shared with him yesterday.

Undeterred, Wes opened up his toolbox and started digging through his tools. "Cheryl mentioned a drawer that's sticking and a clogged drain here in the kitchen, but it sounds like I'd better tackle the restrooms first."

"Stop ignoring me as if I'm not speaking. I'm not hiring you."

"Why not?"

His question caught her off guard. She knew Wes was a jack-of-all-trades and that he was perfectly capable of doing most of the small jobs she needed taken care of. Since he'd resigned from the DEA, he was looking for work. Rick had been his partner on the force, and he'd managed to forge his new career by opening up a small bike shop.

"I don't have a lot of extra money to hire someone on." It was a lie, but she grasped it with both hands.

"You advertised for the position."

She blew out an exasperated breath. "Yeah, well, I mean it would only be part time."

"I didn't plan on setting up office hours or draining your accounts, pixie," he said.

Jill picked up the phonebook and glanced at the list of plumbers. She'd exhausted her options and she knew it. Madison had two full-time plumbers and at this moment, one of them was at a convention in Vegas and the other had pneumonia. It would cost a fortune to pay one to come out from Harrisburg for an emergency call. With the distance between Madison and its larger neighboring city, the plumber still wouldn't make it here in time for her to open for lunch.

"Fine. You can fix the toilets."

Wes laughed. "What an honor."

"But that's it. You're not going to be my handyman."

Wes shook his head and walked closer. She fought the urge to take a step back, refusing to let him intimidate her as he had yesterday. She'd had time to batten down her hatches and prepare herself for the onslaught.

"I'll fix your toilets, but only on two conditions."

"What conditions?"

"One, you hire me in this position for good, and two, you agree to my wages."

She was silent as she tried to find a way out of her predicament. Surely there was some way she could get the repairs done without selling her soul to the devil. She racked her brain but came up with nothing.

Her love for the diner won out. She needed help and, God help her, Wes Robson appeared to be the only man in town available to fulfill her needs. As soon as the word *needs* crossed her mind, a flush heated her cheeks. She had some definite needs she could envision Wes fulfilling. Of course, Wes noticed her blush immediately and grinned.

Before he could say anything, she asked, "How much do you want?"

"Are you hiring me?"

"Yes," she snapped. "I'm hiring you. How much do you charge an hour?"

"I don't come cheap," he teased her.

She closed her eyes and prayed for patience. "How much, Wes?"

"For every hour of work I do around the diner, you agree to spend one hour alone with me."

Her eyes snapped open. This was bad. Very, very bad. "I'd rather pay you money."

"No. I don't want money from you, pixie."

She placed her hands on her hips. "If you think I'm going to trade sexual favors for —"

"I didn't say sex. I said an hour alone with me."

"Doing what?"

"Dating, of course. Going out for drinks, dancing. Hell, we could rent a movie and watch it in your apartment for all I care. And if you feel so inclined as to have sex with me, that would be cool too." His eyes were dancing, and she knew he was enjoying that—in this instance—he definitely had the upper hand.

"Dating," she repeated, her body going a bit numb at the idea. She was fighting a losing battle and knew it. She closed her eyes, silently hoping that blocking out his gorgeous face would help her resist.

For weeks, she'd dreamed of Wes' kisses under the mistletoe. His lips should be registered as a lethal weapon. More than a few nights, she'd crawled from her bed into the shower, forcing herself to stand beneath the freezing water in an attempt to cool the burning desires he'd set aflame inside her. "I'm sorry. Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't I tell you just yesterday that I didn't want to date you?"

Wes shrugged. "You gave me some lame reasons."

"I don't consider them lame."

"I want some time to show you we're good together."

She closed her eyes, overwhelmed with frustration. Talking to Wes was like talking to a brick wall. She'd admit—only to herself—that her first couple of reasons for wanting to avoid Wes had been mere diversions, weak attempts at building a stronger case for the truth. She couldn't date him. She really couldn't. However, pride would never allow her to speak the real reason.

She looked at him once more. "Wes, we could date until the cows came home. Would we have fun? Yeah, more than likely we would. Would the sex be hot? Hell yeah. Would that change the fact that you and I are planning two very different futures? No. I don't see any way this could end in anything other than heartbreak."

"Why are you so opposed to a committed relationship?"

"I told you yesterday."

He shook his head. "No. I don't think you did. There's gotta be more to it than liking your solitude. It doesn't add up, Jill. You're one of the most social, most fun people in Madison."

"High praise," she joked. "Madison has a population of two hundred people and ninety percent of them are over seventy."

Wes laughed. "Very funny. Last count I heard, we had at least three hundred folks in town. Come on, Jill. What gives? What's got you so down on relationships? Is it because of your parents' divorce?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, puh-leaze. What do want me to say? I have daddy issues? My dad ran out on my mom and left her alone to raise two daughters. I don't think that wrecked my psyche. Truth is, my mother was better off without the guy. And yes, Zack the Rat dumped my sister and ran off with that slut to Vegas. Again, she was better off without him."

"So you don't trust men?"

She shook her head. "I'm not shallow or thick, Wes. I would never assume all guys are like Zack and my dad. Rick is a stand-up kind of guy and I know he'll make my sister happy until the day she dies. But Kate's different from me. She craves

companionship. She's loving, giving and totally into committed relationships. I like to fly – fancy and free."

"Speaking of flying free, I know you and Seth were seeing each other for a while, but Kate said that you aren't anymore," Wes said. "Is that true?"

"That was an odd segue. What does my relationship with Seth have to do with the price of tea in China?"

"Just answer the question."

She considered lying, telling him she was still involved with the other man. Truth was, she and Seth had never been in a real relationship. They went out occasionally and they slaked each other's needs. Seth knew she wasn't looking for more than sex. He didn't pressure her for more than she was willing to give in the emotions department.

"Seth and I aren't involved. Even when we were, he knew I wasn't looking for a relationship *and* he accepted that."

He ignored her pointed reference to the idea that he sucked in the listening department. "So you aren't still sleeping with each other?"

Her temper spiked. "And why the hell would that be any of your business?"

"Because I don't share."

She sucked in a breath, trying to still the racing of her heart. He was relentless. The worst part was, she knew that if any man on the planet had a chance of capturing her body and soul, it was Wes. Regardless of that, she couldn't give him what he wanted.

"Don't mean to shatter your overweening confidence or anything, but I'm not a one-man woman. I won't be tied down."

The damn man grinned, and she realized the gauntlet she'd just thrown down.

"Oh, I'm going to tie you down, Jill, don't you worry about that. And then I'm going to fuck you until you forget there are other men on the planet."

She fought to appear unconcerned, though her legs went weak at the thought. "Whatever. Listen, those toilets aren't going to fix themselves, you know, and the clock on these wages of yours doesn't start until you do."

She needed to get the hell out of this kitchen. The temperature had been rising steadily since Wes had shown up, and it was all she could do not to fan herself. She turned and walked toward her office. She needed to get away from him. Find a way out of the mess she'd landed herself in. She'd been smart to avoid him for so long.

She tried to shut the door, but a hand pushed against it. She turned and slowly backed toward her desk as he followed her in. The look in his eyes told her any attempt at escape would be futile. He continued to follow her step for step until the hard surface of the desk hit the back of her legs.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting an advance on my pay." Wes leaned toward her and didn't stop until his lips were a mere breath from hers.

Jill wanted to shove him back, tell him to get the hell away from her, but she'd dreamed of his lips since Christmas. Yesterday's kisses had only whetted her appetite for more. *Just one more taste*, she thought. One taste.

"Just one taste," he murmured against her mouth, and she realized she'd uttered her thoughts aloud. Slowly, seductively, he dragged his lips against hers, teasing her by withholding the true kiss she desired.

Her libido was in overdrive and crushing out all other emotions with its desire to pull Wes toward her and eat him alive. His bulging pecs were well defined through his tight T-shirt and, though she refused to glance down, his denim-clad erection pressed against her stomach.

"Kiss me or get out," she demanded when he continued his torturous teasing, his warm breath and soft lips barely brushing hers. She resisted the urge to move forward and capture his lips. Struggled against the desire to take what she wanted.

"You're going to fall in love with me," he said, and she tried to deny the truth of his words.

"Nope. Not interested."

Wes turned his face slightly and his grin tickled her skin. His next words brushed against her cheek. "You want me, Jill Harper."

"Shut up." Her words and her body were at war as she reached up to grip his hair tightly in her fists. "Shut up and kiss me."

His hot breath caressed her overheated skin as she pulled his lips to hers. She'd wanted his kisses for so long, and now that his lips were on hers once again, she wondered why she'd resisted. He allowed her to control the kiss for several minutes, but soon his alpha instincts reappeared and—as she'd experienced at the holiday—he took possession of her body. His tongue didn't merely explore her mouth, it laid a relentless siege, capturing everything it touched and burning a path wider than Sherman's March to the Sea.

When she feared she'd suffocate, she broke away with a cry, but he refused to be pushed away. He grasped her head firmly in his hands and pressed his forehead against hers. "Why are you fighting this? You must see how good we are together."

She wanted to shove him away, call him an arrogant, cocky man and laugh in his face, but her body was screaming for more. Her hands tangled in his shirt, stretching the soft cotton, and it took all her remaining strength not to rip it from his body.

"It's sex. Lust. That's all." She was annoyed at the breathless quality of her voice. God, please let that be all. Surely she could scratch the itch and send him packing.

Wes pulled farther away, and she wanted to cry out at the loss of his body next to hers. He grinned and she struggled to respond, to chastise him for the cocky grin, but words failed her.

"I'll take the lust...for now. I've waited years for you. I'm not waiting any longer. You and me and a bed, pixie. It's going to happen sooner than later, so you may as well get yourself ready for it."

Jill grasped his shirt, pulled him back against her and nipped his lower lip hard. He hissed, but she grinned seductively. Two could play the alpha game. Maybe it was time she gave Wes a taste of his own medicine. "You make that sound like a threat."

She wrapped her legs around his waist, grinding his hard cock more fully against her aching pussy. "Maybe you're the one who needs a warning. I'm very, *very* good at lust."

He gripped her hips with strong hands, pushing against her until she groaned. "We really are going to burn the town down." He took her lips in a passionate kiss that left her head whirling, but before she could resume control, he broke away, taking several steps back. Her gaze landed on his erection, and she could only imagine the strength it must take for him to walk away in such a condition.

"Let's make sure we've got this straight, Jill, because I'm not going to stand for any backtracking. I'm working here as your handyman. You match every hour I work, alone with me—in bed or out of it. Agreed?"

She nodded.

"One more thing." She tried listen, but the fog from his kisses clouded her mind. "From this moment on, there aren't any other men in your life. You want to limit this to something casual, to lust, to sex for now, you've got it, but I'm the only man who'll be warming your bed. Do you understand?"

She wanted to fight his demand, refuse him, tell him to take his condition and stick it up his ass. Instead, she let her body answer before her mind could formulate the words and nodded again.

"Good," he said with a pleased grin. "Start the timer, pixie. I'm officially on the clock."

* * * * *

Wes managed to get one bathroom functioning in time for the lunch shift, but he was going to have to convince Jill to let him do some major renovations. The pipes were

as old as the damn building and he was certain his quick repair was nothing more than slapping a Band-Aid on a cut that required stitches. Of course, it didn't help that someone had flushed some old rags. Probably some teenager's idea of a prank, though it was a damn stupid one.

He'd taken a break for lunch, and Jill had given him permission to use her apartment to wash up before eating. He had a fit when he found out she left her home unlocked while downstairs working. She had no sense when it came to security, and while Madison wasn't a hotbed of crime, it was simple enough to lock a door. He'd have to have a talk with her about it.

As he came down the stairs, he heard the muffled conversations of the patrons at the diner. Jill had built up one hell of a business. She had a large group of loyal regulars who found it hard to resist her mouthwatering specials.

The scent of the beef stew she was serving drifted toward him, and his stomach growled. During his midmorning break, he'd flirted with her in the kitchen while she put together five homemade apple pies. He'd have to watch himself while working here because he was certain he could gain twenty pounds in a week with Jill cooking for him. Perhaps he should use a couple hours' pay running with her. He grinned as he considered all the ways he'd like to be with her alone, surprised to realize a lot of his plans for their time together didn't involve sex at all. He genuinely liked being with her. She was fun and funny and as sweet as the pies she baked.

As he stepped into the diner, his gaze immediately landed on her, and his grin faded when he realized she was talking to Seth. Kate had assured him Jill wasn't still seeing the man, and Jill had confirmed that this morning. As he walked across the diner, he fought the urge to punch the bastard in the face when the other man reached out and took Jill's hand in his. Jealousy was a new emotion for him but he found where Jill was concerned, he had it in spades.

"Hey, pixie. I'm ready for whatever scraps you're willing to feed to the hired help." He wrapped his arms around her waist from behind. She stiffened at his touch. He

knew it was a petty move, but he wanted Seth and every other man in this place to understand the stake he was claiming. The stupidity of the action wasn't a strong enough factor to stop him. No doubt she'd try to emasculate him for the macho power play.

"What are you doing?" She glanced over her shoulder at him and flames were shooting from her eyes. His brain refused to kick as he continued digging his own grave.

"Mooching for an appetizer." He placed a soft kiss at the nape of her neck, just below her ear.

"Wes." While her tone dripped pure venom, her body responded to his nuzzle. Her breathing accelerated and her tight nipples began to bud. The woman was one giant contradiction. She wanted him, but she refused him. She was pissed off, but her body was heating up to his affection.

"Delicious." He tightened his arms around her waist, sucking in his own pained breath when her bottom brushed against his cock. An accident? She turned to look at him through seductively narrowed eyes, and he realized she purposely made the contact. He loved the way she got even.

"Jill?" Seth asked. Wes lightened his grip. They were putting on quite a show for the lunchtime crowd. "I didn't realize you and Robson were an item."

"We're n—"

"What can I say, Seth? The woman can't keep her hands off me."

"You always were a dreamer, Wes." Jill leaned away from him, bending over the counter and closer to Seth. Wes fought to beat back the green-eyed monster clawing for release. She ignored him, turning all her attention toward the other man.

"So what have you been up to, Seth? Long time, no see."

Wes scowled when Seth's gaze dropped to the cleavage Jill was flashing in his direction. Wes crossed his arms angrily when Seth glanced up and gave him a cocky smile.

"I've been around. Busy at work. Sure have missed your cooking, Jilly." Seth rested his forearms on the counter, the action moving him even closer to Wes' girl.

Wes cleared his throat but Jill ignored him.

"I heard you were seeing someone."

Her words only cooled Wes' overheated nerves until Seth's response. "We split up. Didn't work out."

"Oh." Jill stood up, her face one of concerned friendship. "I'm sorry to hear that. What happened?"

Seth leaned back, his shoulders slumped. "I don't know. Nothing was ever easy with her. She was wicked jealous. You know I can't stand that shit."

"Me neither." She flashed Wes a smirk over her shoulder. Jill topped up Seth's water glass. "I can still set you up if you're interested. I have a couple friends I think you'd like."

Seth shook his head. "Naw. I hate blind dates. Prefer to meet women in a more natural environment."

"Natural environment? I'm afraid to ask."

Seth nodded. "You know, like a bar or the race track or a strip club."

Jill laughed. "God, Seth. You never change. Of course, if you're going to find your Miss Right, it's definitely going to have to be in one of those places."

It was becoming clear from their joking conversation that Jill and Seth were nothing more than friends. Wes suddenly felt like a fool. He reached up and lightly brushed her cheek with his fingers.

She turned and looked at him.

Wes gave her a rueful grin. "Sorry."

"You want something to eat?" she asked.

He nodded and walked around the counter as Seth stood to leave.

"Thanks for lunch, Jill. It was good to see you again."

"You too, Seth," she replied.

"Wes." Seth stuck out his hand.

Wes accepted the proffered handshake and the truce it implied. "Take it easy, man." He watched Seth leave, saw the brief, pained glance he flashed toward Jill as she headed for the kitchen. While Jill's feelings didn't extend past friendship, Wes wasn't sure the same could be said for Seth.

Jill returned with a huge bowl of beef stew and a large slice of homemade bread and butter. All thoughts of Seth flew from his mind the second she put the food in front of him.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes appreciatively. "Damn, that smells good."

She poured him a glass of lemonade. "You earned that. Thanks for everything you've done today, Wes. We wouldn't have been able to open if you hadn't gotten the bathroom functioning."

"Yeah, well. You might want to put up a sign that mentions flushing only toilet paper."

Jill looked annoyed. "Wish I could get my hands on the asshole who thought it would be fun to flush a bunch of rags."

Wes took a sip of his lemonade. "You and me both. Can't say that was the most pleasant job I've ever done. Smell was terrible."

She leaned over the counter and blessed him with the same view she'd given Seth. Unlike Seth, Wes didn't find it as easy to look away. The tops of her creamy white breasts peeked through the buttons of her blouse and suddenly his mouth wasn't watering for beef stew anymore.

“Do you need anything else?” Her voice was low, seductive.

Wes’ gaze rose to her face. He had an entire list of things he needed from her, but now wasn’t the time or the place. He shook his head and she smiled as she walked away.

As he ate, he conversed with a few of the diners, his gaze never traveling far from Jill as she moved around the room, comfortable in her domain. She gossiped with a few elderly ladies as she topped up their coffee cups. She wiped tables and showed a couple to a corner booth. She sliced pie, mopped up spilled tea, and managed to do it all with a friendly smile and a kind word to everyone in the place.

Once he finished his meal, he rose, ready to tackle the problems in the kitchen. When Jill walked by, he reached out and grabbed her. His impetuous movement surprised her, and her eyes widened when he wrapped his arms securely around her waist and pulled her close. When she opened her mouth to lambaste him, he swooped down and kissed her, long and hard.

He’d intended a quick brush of the lips. He couldn’t resist her for one more moment. Watching her, being so close to her all day, was wreaking havoc on his libido. At this point, he wasn’t above begging.

Jill fought him for only a moment before her body went soft against his, and her tongue swiped across his lips.

So she wasn’t immune to a little public display of affection herself. He groaned softly, and the sound brought them both to their senses as they broke away.

They stared at each other, and he wondered what in the hell had possessed him to come on so strongly. The patrons in the diner erupted into applause, several of the men hooting, the elderly ladies giggling.

He grinned, offering her an apology. “Sorry, pixie. Lost my head.”

She returned his smile with one of her own. “Little late for that now, isn’t it? I’ll never live this down.”

He shrugged. "Hey, I live in this town too."

"You're impossible."

"I'm wearing you down, aren't I?"

She shook her head slowly, averting her eyes, and he glimpsed true sadness in her gaze. He started to question her but she wiggled out of his grip, shook off his hold. Within seconds, the indomitable Jill reappeared. "No. You're aren't. You can't."

She walked away, leaving him in the wake of her last words.

You can't.

Chapter Three

Jill wiped the kitchen counter after lunch rush the next day, keeping one eye on the back door. Wes hadn't shown up this morning to work. They hadn't discussed work hours for him and she wasn't sure why his absence annoyed her so much. Seth had never put in more than a couple of hours a week and even that was whenever he wanted.

So why was she pissed as hell that Wes wasn't here? She tried to fight back her frustration. She was actually missing him. Missing him! Damn it, the infuriating man left her so confused, she didn't know if she was coming or going. He'd worked most of the day yesterday, finally getting her second bathroom functioning. After his very public proclamation at lunch, he'd kept his hands to himself, much to her relief...and chagrin.

Regardless of her opinion that the two of them would be better off in different states—hell, on different continents—she couldn't deny the desires that sizzled throughout her body whenever he was nearby. She was irresistibly drawn to him and it scared the hell out of her. She'd known long before Christmas that she was fighting a losing battle where Wes Robson was concerned, but she couldn't give in. There was too much at stake. Too much she couldn't tell him. She had to figure out a way to keep her hands to herself. She'd fight her need for the man with every breath in her body, which sadly wasn't saying much, considering her new handyman left her absolutely breathless.

"Morning, pixie." His voice rang out from the back door.

She turned slowly, scowling. "You're late."

He grinned and produced a beautiful bouquet of wildflowers from behind his back. "I didn't know I had strict work hours. That may cause a bit of a problem for me."

She took the flowers, fighting to hide her delight at his thoughtful gesture. Her mind raced as she tried to remember whether any man had ever given her flowers before. She couldn't recall a single instance in her life.

"Thanks."

His eyebrows rose. "Thanks? That's it?"

She narrowed her eyes. "What were you expecting? That I would fall down on my knees and kiss your feet? Whose yard did you steal these from anyway?"

He laughed, and she struggled not to grin.

"There it is," he said. "I knew there had to be some sort of smartass remark buried somewhere in that *thank you*. Damn, for a minute there I thought you were losing your touch."

She rolled her eyes as she turned and bent down to rummage in the cabinet for a vase. "So about your work hours, I think —"

"I've applied for another job, so my work hours here are going to have to be scheduled around that."

"What other job?" She was surprised by his comment. He had been recuperating from the injuries he'd sustained in his last DEA mission, and while Rick had made inroads toward starting his new business, Wes hadn't mentioned his plans for the future.

"I don't want to say anything until I know for sure I've got it. Might jinx myself."

"Since when did you become superstitious?"

He wrapped his arm around her waist from behind as she turned to fill the vase with water. He pulled her braid aside with one hand, planting soft kisses on the back of her neck. Shit, how could he turn her to mush with just a few light touches?

"Wes." Her voice betrayed her, sounding more like an invitation than a chastisement.

"Hmm," he murmured as his hands drifted beneath her blouse to cup her breasts. His fingers toyed with her nipples as he pressed his firm erection into her ass.

"Damn it," she murmured.

"What happened to your car?" he asked, shocking her with his abrupt change of subject.

"My car?"

"I noticed on the way in that there were some scratches in the door."

She nodded. "Oh yeah. Happened a few days ago. Looks like some shithead keyed the driver's side door when I was at the grocery store."

Wes frowned, but she dismissed it. "It's an old car, Wes. I'm not too worried about it." She put the flowers in the vase and started to arrange them.

"So how about I take you out to dinner tonight?" He leaned against the counter and snatched a handful of pretzels from a bowl.

"I have to work tonight."

"You work every night," he said. "You're the boss. Give yourself tonight off."

"I can't leave Cheryl shorthanded on such late notice. Besides, Tuesdays are Lottie's night off, so I'm cooking while Cheryl serves."

He frowned. "You need to hire more help. You work too hard."

She recognized the truth behind his words. Lately, she was tired, overworked, and she longed for some real time away. Taking a shift off here and there simply wasn't cutting it anymore. She wanted a break from the place, a real vacation.

"Hiring more people costs money." The excuse was a weak one. The diner did well enough that she could hire on at least two more full-time people without any problem.

"Sell that to someone who's buying it, Jill. I've seen the business you do around here and I know this building is bought and paid for. Money isn't the issue and you know it."

"Maybe not, but you said yourself the place needs some major repairs. That's going to cost me plenty of money and maybe even some downtime, while the repairs are being made. Now's not a good time to consider increasing staff."

He fell silent and she knew she'd convinced him with her argument. Now if only she could convince herself. She'd love to be able to go out on a moment's notice for a night of fun.

"You know what they say?"

"What's that?" she prompted.

"All work and no fun..."

"Makes Jill a dull girl."

He gave her a sexy grin. "You couldn't be boring if you tried. So save a night this weekend for me."

She started to protest but he placed his fingers against her lips. "I'm giving you plenty of advance warning. Besides, there's the issue of my payment. I did work quite a few hours yesterday."

She grimaced as his statement hit home. He'd worked close to an eight-hour day, and she wondered how in the hell she'd manage that many hours alone with him without falling into his arms or better yet, his bed.

Aw shit. Better yet?

Yep, she was screwed. Hopefully, literally as well as figuratively. She groaned at the waywardness of her cursed thoughts.

Wes tugged at her braid. "Don't look so worried. I aim to make sure you enjoy paying up. Every single second of it."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

He glanced at his watch and shook his head. "Listen, pixie, as much as I'd love to spend the day with you, I've got a job interview. I'll catch up with you later."

He gave her a quick, friendly kiss on the lips before vanishing out the back door again.

She sighed. Even his platonic kisses managed to fire up her libido. She looked at the clock on the wall and wondered if she had time to visit her vibrator before getting ready for the supper crowd.

Nope, of course she didn't. Damn, it was going to be a long night.

* * * * *

Jill bade the last of the diners goodnight and locked the front door. She turned the sign that hung there to the *closed* side and pulled the blinds down.

"Dishes are done, Jill," Cheryl called from the kitchen. "You need help with anything else?"

"No." Jill blew out a tired breath.

It had been a long day, physically and emotionally. The diner had been quite busy for a weeknight. Unfortunately, she had Wes on the brain and it had made it hard for her to concentrate. She'd screwed up more orders than she'd gotten right.

Cheryl walked into the dining room. "So let's have it," she said as she sat on a stool at the bar, her body language indicating she wasn't budging until Jill gave her the answer she was looking for.

"Have what?"

"Where's your head been tonight? It's not like you to foul up so many things."

Jill rubbed her eyes wearily and claimed the stool next to her friend. "Three guesses, and the first two don't count."

"Wes."

Jill put her head down on her arms on the counter, the action reminding her of a naughty school girl being punished. "I'm so fucked up."

"No, you're not. You're falling in love. And if I'm not mistaken, it's the first time in a long time you've let yourself do that."

Jill didn't raise her head. "I can't fall in love with him."

"Why not?"

Jill kept her eyes closed. Avoided direct eye contact with her best friend. Not even Cheryl knew the secret she was carrying. She wasn't sure why she hadn't told Cheryl or why she hadn't confided in her sister Kate. At first, she'd hoped the doctor was wrong. Now it was simply too painful to think about. As long as she was single, unattached, she could pretend it didn't exist. Being with Wes, wanting more with him, had driven it right back to the forefront, and she needed help.

Raising her head, she started to say the words but they lodged in her throat. She shrugged instead. "Because he's a pain in the ass."

Cheryl smiled but Jill could see she hadn't fooled her friend. "No, he's not."

They fell silent, and Jill knew Cheryl was giving her a chance to come clean.

When she didn't speak, Cheryl rose. "I'm headed for bed unless you need help cleaning up out here."

"No," Jill said. "I only have to finish sweeping. Go on to bed. I won't be too far behind you."

"If you ever want to talk, you know where to find me."

Jill nodded.

"Night, then."

Jill listened as her friend climbed the stairs to her apartment, but she didn't stand. Swallowing hard, she tried to fight back tears. She was being stupid and emotional. Her resolve to hold Wes at arm's length was definitely wavering. He made her want far too much. Too much that she could never have. That she could never give him. She took a deep breath and whispered the words. Uttered them aloud in the quiet room.

"I can't have children."

Hearing them, she realized she'd never spoken them out loud. She said it again. "I can't have children."

The acknowledgement sent tears to her eyes, but she batted them away. She'd never cried over that loss and she sure as hell wasn't going to start now.

Her mind drifted back to Christmas morning.

Kate and Rick had gone upstairs, leaving her and Wes alone for far too long. Shortly after their incredible make-out session under the mistletoe, they'd joined Kate and Rick in the kitchen for breakfast...

"Oh damn, Jill," Wes said, leaning back in his chair and rubbing his stomach. "That was delicious."

Rick assumed a similar pose while she and Kate giggled.

"Twenty dollars says they're both asleep on the couch in front of the TV in an hour," her sister teased.

"You're on," Jill said. "I say they'll be dozing in thirty minutes."

Wes topped up her mimosa, then lifted his own. They clinked the glasses together as Wes said, "To the chef. Long may she reign."

Jill grinned. "Men are so easy to please it's frightening."

Wes nodded. "I'd like to protest that sentiment, but I'm afraid it's true. Give me a full stomach and a hot woman in my bed and I feel like the richest man on earth."

Rick placed his arm around the back of Kate's chair, pulling it closer. "I don't know about that, Wes. I may have Kate in my bed, but I don't think I'll really be happy until I have my ring on her finger."

Kate blushed. "Rick. We've talked about that. We haven't even known each other a full year. It's too soon to talk marriage."

"I'm thirty-five, Kate. We can wait years and it still won't change how much I want you to be my wife."

Wes leaned forward. Jill knew he was talking about Kate and Rick, but he looked at her as he spoke. "And babies. You want to start having kids before you're too old to pick them up."

Rick rolled his eyes. "Again with the kid talk. Wes, I swear to God, you aren't going to be satisfied until you have a brood as big as The Brady Bunch."

Wes didn't disagree as his smile grew larger. "Six kids wouldn't be such a bad thing. Especially if I had the perfect woman to raise them with."

"Florence Henderson's a bit old for you, wouldn't you say?" Jill joked, surprised she could speak so naturally when every drop of moisture had evaporated in her mouth.

Wes acknowledged her jest with a quick nod, but the look in his eyes told her everything she needed to know. Wes Robson thought he was looking at his perfect woman. God help him.

Jill had spent the remainder of the holiday trudging through as if she were waist deep in mud. It had taken all the strength in her body to remain at the old farmhouse Rick and Wes shared without running away like a coward. From that point on, she'd avoided Wes. Though it hadn't been easy to maintain her distance these past couple of months, it was certainly preferable to the hell she resided in now that Wes was hanging around every day.

She wanted him. Wanted him more than she'd ever wanted anyone or anything. However, she couldn't be what he wanted and she would never ask him to sacrifice something that meant so much to him. Wes wanted to be a father. She smiled sadly. He'd be an amazing dad. So much better than the guy who'd donated the sperm to create Jill and Kate.

She'd decided years ago that marriage wasn't in the cards for her. She'd taken that dream out of her future equation and she'd stuck to her guns, eschewing relationships in favor of casual dating.

"It's not going to happen," she muttered to herself. "No use crying over spilled milk. You want Wes. He wants kids. The pieces don't fit. They'll never fit. Time to move on."

She rose and finished tidying, using the hard work to ease the ache in her chest. She was just about to turn off the lights when she heard a soft knock on the front door. She considered ignoring it but when the sound came again, she walked over and raised the blind.

"We're closed," she said before she realized it was Wes on the other side.

He smiled and held up a picnic basket.

She turned the lock, trying not to be so pleased by his unexpected appearance.

"What are you doing here?" she asked as he walked in and placed his basket on the nearest booth. She locked the door behind him.

"Since you couldn't go out for dinner, I thought maybe I could entice you into joining me for dessert." He opened the basket, pulling out large, fresh strawberries and a container of melted chocolate sauce.

"Strawberries and chocolate, my favorite."

"I know," he said.

She was taken aback by his admission. Wes had been paying closer attention to her over the years than she'd realized. The wildflowers and dessert all proved he had indeed done his homework. The idea put the lump back in her throat. He wasn't making this easy.

"Here." He pulled out several more items from the basket. "Why don't you pop this CD in the stereo and I'll light a candle and open the wine?"

She grinned. Candlelight, music, wine. He was certainly pulling out all the stops, and her traitorous heart was falling for every delectable bit of it.

"Wes." She needed to find a way to get him out of here. She'd always thought herself too practical, too cynical to fall for such romantic trappings. "I'm sort of tired."

He turned and softly ran his finger along her cheek, studying her face. She tried to hide the traces of her earlier anguish, tried to erase all evidence of how depressed she

truly was. "You work too hard. I just want to take care of you, Jill. Give you a few minutes to relax, to throw off the stress."

His words soothed her soul, cooled the red-hot pain like aloe on a sunburn. She nodded, unable to speak. Turning away, she walked to the CD player.

She returned to the corner booth he'd set up for them. Just a few minutes. She wanted just a few minutes with him. Tomorrow she'd be strong. Tomorrow she'd tell him the real reason she couldn't be with him and he'd leave. Leave her alone forever.

The soft sounds of George Strait singing a slow song filled the air. Damn, how did he know she was a sucker for a country love song?

"So how was your job interview?" she asked, desperate to find something innocuous to lighten the spell he was slowly putting her under.

"Pretty good. I'm not sure it was an 'are we going to hire you' interview as much as a 'get to know you before you start' interview."

"So you got the job?" She reached for a strawberry only to have him swat her hand away.

"Let me." He picked up a strawberry and dipped it into the chocolate before raising the fruit to her lips. She leaned forward, biting the entire berry, her lips brushing his fingertips where he held the stem. His eyes darkened at her movement, and he stared at her mouth without moving.

"You have a bit of chocolate on your lips." He bent to swipe the sweet sauce from the corner of her mouth with his tongue. His lips lingered on hers and she closed her eyes, lost to the soft touch.

She was disappointed when he sat down and pointed to the seat across from him. She struggled to gather her composure.

"I got the job."

"So tonight is a celebration?" She gestured at the wine.

"Every night I'm with you is a celebration."

She expected him to follow his compliment with some sort of joke. When he merely smiled at her as if she were Cleopatra, Helen of Troy and Aphrodite all rolled into one, her face flushed. Shit, he meant what he was saying. This wasn't good.

She cleared her throat. "So what's the job?"

He shook his head. "It's a surprise."

"A surprise?"

"Yep. I'll tell you tomorrow. Tonight I just want to be with you." He fed her two more strawberries before he rose from the booth. Holding out his hand as another slow song came on, he reached for her. "Dance with me."

She started to refuse but the idea of being held in his arms was too great a temptation. She took his hand as he led her to the large aisle next to the table. They swayed slowly in time with the music, and Jill closed her eyes, reveling in the moment. He was a wonderful dancer, and as the Dixie Chicks sang about a cowboy taking them away, Jill marveled at the sensation that she truly was flying away with him, free at last from her fears, her responsibilities, her loneliness.

She rested her cheek against his chest and listened to the sure, strong sound of his heartbeat. His hand drifted along her back, up and down in time with the music, and she savored the sensations his gentle touch created. She was relaxed, comfortable, at peace. All those concepts that were always just out of her reach permeated every part of her being, and she was hard-pressed to resist the magic of it.

As the song ended, Wes loosened his grip, reaching up to cup the back of her head. She raised her face to his as he kissed her. The kiss was warm and slow, the sort of kiss every girl dreams of receiving just once in her life.

It was perfect.

He was perfect.

And she was in big, big trouble. She backed away from him.

"I have to go."

He frowned, confused. "Jill —"

"I can't do this. I wish you would try to understand." She continued moving away.

He took a step toward her, raised his hand as if to touch her.

"Please." The broken plea gave her away, and he froze.

She remained still, forcing herself to look at his sad face. She chiseled the image on her heart so she wouldn't forget. She couldn't forget. This was the only future they could have. One of sadness, regret, loss. Better to suffer it now than later.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. And she did the one thing she'd wanted to do at Christmas. She ran.

Chapter Four

Jill wasn't surprised to find Kate at the end of her diner counter bright and early the next morning.

"I suppose Wes sent you."

Kate pretended to be hurt. "What? Can't a sister come for a visit without an ulterior motive?"

Jill glanced at the clock. "It's seven o'clock in the morning, Kate. Bit early for a social call, wouldn't you say?"

"I don't get it."

Jill didn't pretend to misunderstand. She and Kate weren't just sisters, they were friends. After a lifetime together, they could move between conversations and never miss a beat. "There's a lot of that going around. I don't know why you and Wes can't accept that I'm not interested in a relationship. Not with him. Not with anybody."

Jill turned to pick up the coffeepot and filled her sister's mug. There were only a few diners around, none within earshot. Kate had chosen her seat and her time wisely. The diner wouldn't fill up for another hour.

"Sell that bullshit to someone else, Jill. You and Wes are perfect for each other. And you are most definitely interested. More than interested. I'd say you were downright hot for the man."

Jill leaned her arms on the counter, moving closer to her sister. "Please just trust me when I say I know what Wes wants in a woman, and I can't give it to him."

Kate frowned. "What's your hang-up about commitment? You know, you never used to be like this. You had steady boyfriends in high school and after graduation. What changed?"

Jill sucked in a deep breath. She'd practiced saying the words last night, knowing things with Wes would never be resolved until she confessed her secret. Having a conversation like this in the diner probably wasn't wise. It was bound to become too emotional. Then Jill decided it was the perfect place. Things wouldn't get too heavy. If they did, there was a good chance she'd be interrupted and could escape for a few minutes to get her shit back together. Plus, Kate wouldn't try to console her in public. Jill knew that was the one thing that couldn't happen. If Kate tried to hug her, she'd fall apart and she refused to do that.

"You know I've always had bad periods."

Kate nodded.

"I was diagnosed with endometriosis a few years ago. It's bad. Really bad."

"How bad is really bad?"

"I can't have children."

Jill had to hand it to her sister. Kate managed to maintain a stone face, though her eyes spoke volumes. No one in the diner would think they were talking about anything more serious than the weather.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Jill struggled to answer. Her mother had always accused her of having more pride than sense. Obviously that was true. She'd just felt so inadequate. So broken. It had taken her weeks to accept the diagnosis, and saying the words to another person had gotten harder with each passing day until she'd given up trying. "I don't know why. I couldn't."

Kate nodded, took her answer at face value. Jill was grateful for that easy acceptance. She knew the rest of the conversation was going to be hard enough without Kate expecting her to dive too deeply into her fucked-up psyche.

"You haven't told Wes about this?"

Jill shook her head.

Kate leaned back. "Don't you think you should?"

"Why? Wes just wants to go out on a few dates. It's not like he's asking me to marry him."

Kate scowled. "Don't play stupid, Jill. It doesn't suit you. You know as well as I do Wes is looking at a long-term, possibly forever, kind of commitment."

Jill sighed. "I know. Why do you think I've been trying to discourage his advances?"

"I have no idea why."

Kate's response took her aback.

"You heard Wes at Christmas, Kate. He wants a big brood of kids. Hell, he deserves them. God knows he'll be a better father than our dear old dad. How could I ask him to give up that dream?"

"There's more than one way to make a family, Jill. Jesus. Adopt."

Jill shook her head. She'd thought of that. She wanted children desperately and it wouldn't bother her one bit if they didn't have her genes, but she couldn't ask the same of Wes. She wouldn't. "It's not the same thing. I would never ask Wes to give up the opportunity to make a son or daughter in his own image. Imagine a little boy with Wes' eyes and strong jawline." She smiled at the thought of a miniature Wes, before the crushing weight that she couldn't give that to him threatened to suffocate her.

"Fine. Hire a surrogate."

Jill closed her eyes and released a long breath. "You're relentless."

"And you're a coward."

Jill reared back as if her sister had struck her. "What?"

"You aren't giving Wes the credit he deserves because you're too wrapped up in your own self-pity."

"Jesus, Kate. Don't hold back. Tell me what you really think." Her words were a weak, sarcastic attempt at avoiding the truth. Kate was right. Unfortunately, the rightness of her sister's words weren't enough.

"God. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. You know I love you more than my luggage." They smiled at the *Steel Magnolias* quote. She and her sister had watched it a thousand times in their lives, often pulling out lines from the movie at appropriate times. "I hate to see you deprive yourself of true happiness because you're afraid." Kate reached out and grasped her hands. "Wes is crazy about you."

Jill bit her lower lip and spoke her true fear. "What if I tell him and it *does* matter? What if it changes the way he sees me?"

"It won't." Kate's words were sure and strong, but they didn't help.

"What if it *does*?"

Kate squeezed her hands. "You're in love with him."

Jill only shook her head once, not bothering to lie. Her sister would see through it anyway. "When he's with me, it's like I'm a different person. When he looks at me, I feel like a whole woman, perfect in his eyes. I can't give that up. Not yet."

"Jill—"

"I'll tell him. I will. Just give me a little time to figure out how."

Kate smiled sadly. "You know how to tell him. That's not why you want more time. If you can't be honest with Wes, at least be honest with yourself."

Kate was right. She wanted to be with Wes. Just once, she wanted to lie in his arms and pretend she could be everything he needed. There would be plenty of time for heartbreak later. Time for regret and resentment.

For now, she'd take the make-believe and hope it would be enough.

* * * * *

The sound of wolf whistles and catcalls dragged Jill out of the kitchen in the midst of the lunch rush hour. As she turned the corner, she caught sight of Wes in a Madison police uniform. She was so taken aback by the change in his appearance, she giggled.

"What the hell are you supposed to be?"

Wes' eyes narrowed and she silently taunted him with her gaze. Daring him to utter a comeback.

"I think he looks handsome," Lottie said. Her words were accompanied by more than a few head nods amongst the female diners.

"Handsome, nothing," Cheryl said from behind the counter. "That boy looks sexy as sin."

A couple of women cheered, and the mayor's eighty-year-old mother asked if Wes would arrest her. Through it all, Wes grinned and accepted their teasing with good grace, but he never took his gaze off her.

"Bit early for Halloween, isn't it, Wes?" she added, and several of the men clapped at her cut down, while the women remained firmly in Officer Robson's camp.

"Come on now, sweetie," Cheryl persuaded. "You gotta admit Wes looks good enough to eat."

"So does my cherry pie, but I wouldn't strap a gun on it."

Wes' eyes twinkled at her joke. Something about the man's presence brought out a lightheartedness that she enjoyed. After her talk with Kate earlier, she'd decided she was going to let the cards fall where they may for a while. She'd wanted Wes Robson since the first day he'd walked into her diner nearly six years ago. She was finished denying that. The truth would come out...eventually. For now, she was going to take exactly what she wanted and she'd gladly pay the piper later.

"Seems to me," he said when the catcalls and hooting died down, "that there's someone in here who's lacking the proper respect owed to an officer of the law."

The women in the diner giggled, offering all sorts of advice in terms of how she should be dealt with.

“Arrest her,” one woman yelled.

The fire chief suggested he strip search her, and Jill’s eyes widened at the risqué remark from the older gentleman.

“Jonesy,” she chastised. “Shame on you. I’m going to tell your wife you said that.”

The man had the good grace to look abashed while the other customers roared with laughter.

“Now, now,” Wes said, walking toward her. She fought desperately against the impulse to back away. She refused to lose face in front of the crowd. “I think Jonesy’s suggestion has some merit.”

She raised her eyebrows, ready to berate him, when he startled her by placing his hands on her shoulders and spinning her away from him.

“What the hell —” she started when he gripped her wrists and placed his handcuffs on her.

“You have the right to remain silent,” he said loudly, for the amusement of all the patrons.

“Wes Robson, you better take these off me right now.”

“Are you resisting arrest?”

“You’re damn right I’m resisting, you dumbass. Take off these handcuffs before I make you sorry you were ever born.”

“You heard it, folks. You’re my witnesses. She resisted arrest and threatened the well-being of an officer of the law. I think I’m going to have to place her under house arrest until, oh say...?”

From over her shoulder, Jill watched as Wes looked toward Cheryl for an answer.

"I think you should keep her under lock and key until at least tomorrow morning. Lottie and I can handle things here tonight, but I've got a dentist appointment in the morning."

Wes grinned. "Very well. You're under arrest until breakfast." He used his grip on her wrists to push her toward the stairs to her apartment.

"I am so kicking your ass when you take these off me," she said through gritted teeth.

Wes ignored her comment as well as those of the diners as they yelled out their suggestions of how he should punish the hardened criminal.

When they reached her apartment, Wes reached around her and opened the door. "How many times do I have to tell you to lock this damn thing when you're down in the diner?" he asked, repeating the now-familiar argument.

"My unlocked door is the least of your worries. Take off these cuffs. You've taken this joke way too far."

Rather than release her, he shut the door before turning her and pushing her chest lightly against it.

"Who said I was joking?" He caged her against the hard surface as his hands began the sexiest frisking in the history of law enforcement. He left no part of her body unexplored, taking his time to become familiar with the more sensitive areas. Her breasts throbbed from his intense investigation, her nipples hard and aching against his rough palms. He pulled her short skirt above her waist, his hand lingering over her pussy, rubbing her clit through the material of her silk panties. She thrust against his firm touch, anxious for more. She was on the verge of begging when his fingers moved around her hips, gripping her ass in his hands. His fingertips drifted into the crack between the globes, only minimally hampered by the thin material.

"God," she breathed out.

He continued his exploration, dragging his hands down her legs to her feet. He wrapped his hand around her ankles, one at a time, lifting them to remove her shoes

and socks. When he finished, he ran his hands back up along the inside of her thighs and she shuddered at the intensity of his touch.

His hands left her completely and she heard jingling behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, she watched him retrieve the keys to the cuffs before removing his gun belt.

He released the handcuffs and dropped them to the floor. She tried to summon the energy needed to punish him for his joke, but her body was too busy clamoring for more. Turning, she attempted to pummel him but he stopped her before she landed a single blow, catching her fists in his hands and pressing them against the door by her head.

His lips descended, kissing her until she was certain she'd sell her soul to the devil to keep this man's lips on hers for the rest of eternity. She shoved off his hands at her wrists, reaching out to touch his hair, his face, his neck, his shoulders. She wanted to touch him as he touched her. Wanted the opportunity to look *and* feel. Dragging her hands along his tight abs, she released his shirt from where it tucked into his pants, desperate to caress his bare flesh. He pushed her skirt off with her panties.

"I want you naked," he muttered against her lips. He pulled her shirt over her head before unhooking her bra and adding it to the pile of clothing at their feet. He pushed her shoulders against the door, leaning back to look at her with hungry eyes.

Dammit, this was wrong. This was the beginning of the end and she knew it, but she couldn't resist the idea of being with him. The fantasies of him inside her had haunted her for weeks, months, years. She pulled him toward her, gripping his shoulders for support while wrapping her legs around his waist and grinding her aching pussy against his clad cock.

"Think you can keep up with me?" she taunted, rubbing harder, trying to find relief and fanning the fire he'd started.

"I'm going to fuck you long and hard, pixie," he said. "But first, I want you to repeat your promise."

His hands slid down her shoulders and cupped her breasts. He gripped them firmly as his fingers pinched her taut nipples tightly. She fought against the scream building in her chest. He hadn't removed a single piece of his own clothing and already she was fighting off her orgasm, unwilling to give in to the gloriousness just yet.

"What?" she gasped. "What promise?"

Her mind wanted to protest whatever he requested, wanted to resist whatever it was he planned to say. She hadn't made him any promises, had she?

"Just me," he repeated. "I'm your only lover from now on."

"Wes, please." Her pride was tattered and tossed to the wind.

"Say the words, Jill. Promise me."

"Only you," she whispered when he followed up his demand with another strong tug on her nipples. "Oh God, only you, I promise."

Her mind fought to comprehend her promise. Before she could think about her agreement further, Wes pushed his hips closer and rubbed his hard-on against her clit. Why wasn't he naked? When would he come inside her?

Gently, he pushed her legs down. His hands moved at lightning speed, quickly divesting himself of his pants and boxers. She reached out to unbutton his shirt, pulling it over his strong shoulders.

She didn't have a moment to regret the step she was about to take as Wes bent over and picked her up. "Not here. Not for our first time."

He carried her to her bedroom and she prayed this first time wasn't the only time. God willing there would be more. Lots more before —

She shut the thought down. She was going to live in the moment, revel in the joy of being here with the man she loved.

He gently placed her on the bed. She watched him don a condom and briefly, she realized the mistake she was about to make. Unfortunately, Wes was too fast.

He leaned over her, pushing her legs apart. "Put your legs around my waist," he commanded, his husky voice letting her know in no uncertain terms he wouldn't be denied. This moment was long overdue. They both knew it.

She did as he said, grateful for the soft mattress at her back as Wes covered her with his rock-hard flesh.

"I want to go slow, Jill, but—"

"I don't need slow. Just you. Please. Just you. Now."

She fought back a gasp as his cock slowly entered her tight sheath, and any chance she had at resisting fell away.

Once he was seated to the hilt, he stilled. "Okay?"

She smiled and tried to hold back the tears gathering in her eyes. "Perfect."

"Been a long time coming."

She laughed lightly at his joke. "Shut up, Wes. Shut up and fuck me."

He gave her a quick kiss as his cock retreated from her body. Her pussy clenched in response.

He groaned. "Christ. Perfect is right."

She silently rejoiced when his body shuddered slightly. She'd never felt so overwhelmed by joy. To know she instilled the same response in him thrilled her.

As he pushed back in, it was her turn to moan. He captured the sound with his lips, kissing her. She savored the taste of the peppermint gum he chewed on his breath. His tongue tangled with hers as she clung to him, digging her fingers into his muscular shoulders.

He was rock hard—the living, breathing embodiment of a Greek god. What had Cheryl called him? Adonis? Her friend was right. Wes was simply too handsome, too perfectly put together to be a part of this modern-day world.

He cupped her face in his hands as he deepened the kiss they shared. His air became hers. His hips mimicked the driving thrusts of his tongue in her mouth, each motion driving him deeper into her body.

She fought for air, fought for purchase, fought for more. He was taking over every part of her and she was surrendering willingly.

"Faster," she murmured when he released her lips. "God, move faster. I need you so badly."

Wes ran his lips over her cheek, the gesture so sweet, so loving, her heart beat harder. She'd had sex far too many times in her life. She'd never once made love.

Her traitorous heart tried to deny the truth of that thought.

No, she thought. It's sex. Only sex.

Wes wiped away all her anxieties when he lifted her legs above her head. The new position allowed him to thrust deeper. She gasped as his cock touched parts of her that were previously uncharted. No lover had ever taken her so completely.

Thrashing her head against the pillow, she fought against coming too soon. She was in no hurry to give up Eden after only walking through the gate.

"God," she cried when he pushed in even stronger. His hips slapped against her thighs powerfully. He was staking a claim that could never be questioned or refuted.

"Fuck, Jill. So fucking good."

Her mind could only conjure up the words, *No shit.*

Instead, she merely hissed, "Yes."

Over and over, he moved inside her, deeper and harder. His cock pounding into her body in a marvelously steady rhythm. She thrust her hips against him as much as her position would allow, anxious – greedy – for more.

At last, she admitted defeat. She had to give in to her orgasm or die. She screamed as his cock throbbed with its release.

Wes held her tightly for several long moments as her body trembled with the aftermath of their combined climax.

When her strength returned, she lowered her legs, leaving them dangling from the edge of the bed.

Wes rolled off her, pulling her into his tight embrace, and Jill's wits returned, resounding in her brain like the pealing of a bell. Her reasons for running, for hiding, for resisting Wes crashed in on her, and panic gripped her chest.

The damage was done. Wes had overpowered her better judgment and claimed the one thing she'd never, ever given to anyone—her heart.

Problem was, she couldn't accept his in return. Not without destroying him.

* * * * *

Wes opened his eyes in the dark room and grinned. He and Jill had dozed and made love off and on all afternoon. A quick glance at the clock showed it was nearly nine. They'd skipped dinner, neither of them hungry for anything outside the walls of her bedroom. He'd taken her three times and already his body was hardening, readying itself for more.

Jill curled against his chest like a kitten searching for warmth. He pulled the covers over her shoulders and tightened his grip. He knew without a shadow of a doubt Jill was his destiny. The way her body responded to his had only solidified the truth he'd known since walking into her diner all those years earlier. He'd taken one look at this little blonde pixie, and the blinders he'd worn for years fell away.

Like a fool, he'd thought his future was set, his life determined. He had his dream job in the DEA, a roof over his head, money in the bank and the occasional hook-up in his bed.

Meeting Jill proved all those things were insignificant distractions. She was the real deal, the only thing that mattered.

Unfortunately, for some reason she still hadn't told him, Jill was working overtime to deny the truth. He'd hoped getting her into bed, making love to her would penetrate the damn defenses she'd erected between them. Sadly, that didn't appear to be the case. Though her body responded to his, her heart was closed against him. He could sense her holding back, restraining from giving herself to him fully.

Why?

Her hand drifted along his chest and he listened to the subtle change in her breathing that told him she was awake.

"Hungry?" he asked.

She shook her head. She lay quietly, and he wondered what she was thinking about. When the silence lingered for longer than was comfortable, he rolled to face her.

"You okay?"

She nodded and gave him a smile tinged with sadness.

He narrowed his eyes. He wasn't used to this quiet Jill. He preferred the woman who always had an answer—smartass or otherwise. He touched her face, stroking the soft skin of her cheek. "Talk to me. Was it awful? Did you hate it?"

She shook her head, confirming he hadn't misread his earlier assumptions that the sex between them was off-the-charts hot. "Hardly. God, can you die from too many amazing orgasms?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm willing to give it a try if you are."

She leaned forward and placed a quick kiss against his lips. He loved when she initiated the kiss. "Are you spending the night?"

He nodded. "I was planning on it. Is that okay with you?"

She didn't answer right away, and again he sensed she was trying to keep that cursed distance between them. It pissed him off.

"Goddamn it." He pushed her to her back, rolling on top of her. "Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Pushing me away." Before she could reply, he pushed his cock inside her body. As always, she was wet and ready to accept him. "Feel this?" He pushed deeper as he spoke.

She lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist. The movement allowed him to thrust deeper.

"I want to be inside you, Jill."

"You are." She gasped when he pulled back, her pussy clenching around his hard flesh. It was a heady sensation, and he returned quickly with a strong shove.

"Not just your body." He moved again, shallow, light movements meant to stoke the flames.

"God, Wes," she cried out, trying to direct his motions with her legs. "More."

He answered her request, thrust deeper, harder. "Like this?"

He stopped again and she squeezed his upper arms tightly. "Please." Her hips wriggled, trying to instigate movement. "Give me more."

He responded, thrusting inside her body in the way he'd learned that she liked. When he reached the tipping point, he froze. "Let me in," he repeated.

She gave him a puzzled look. "You are."

He shook his head. "Not like this." He bent down, gave her a long, hard kiss, relishing her hungry response. They were well-matched in passion. "Let me in," he repeated, moving slowly, deeply.

Her orgasm built quickly and he knew he'd rather cut off his left arm than stop now. He pushed her – and himself – higher, both of them giving in to the heat together.

He shuddered as his climax took him, her pussy gripping him tightly. Jill was a vocal lover. Her soft, panting cries sounded like music, driving him higher, dragging out his orgasm until he became lightheaded.

As he filled her with his come, he realized he'd forgotten to put on a condom. Jill trembled slightly beneath him but he could see by the look of bliss on her face she hadn't realized his fuckup yet.

Resting on his elbows, he kissed her softly. "Let me in," he whispered once more.

Jill looked at him with unshed tears. "I can't."

He wanted to argue, wanted to rage against her continued protest, but something in her face stopped him. It was giving her no joy to refuse him. Her face was etched with pain. Something was seriously wrong but until she opened up to him, Wes knew he didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of claiming her heart.

He kissed her lightly before moving to the side of the bed and rising.

If he'd expected her to protest his leaving, he would have been disappointed. But he knew she'd offer no complaint. Leaving was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do, but he knew that *this* battle was lost. Better to regroup. The war was far from over.

"Good night, Jill."

Chapter Five

Two days later, Jill was home pouring her second cup of coffee when a loud crash came from downstairs in the diner. "What the hell?"

She was barefoot and dressed in just her robe as she threw open her door and nearly collided with Cheryl in the hallway.

"What the hell was that?" Cheryl asked.

"No idea. Come on." Jill led the way down the staircase. A chilly breeze caught her at the bottom, causing her to shiver. As she entered the diner, she saw that the plate-glass window at the front of the dining area had been shattered. Glass covered nearly every inch of the floor.

Jill stepped into the room, instantly treading on a sharp piece of glass. "Dammit!"

"Well, hell," muttered Cheryl from behind her. "Somebody broke the glass."

"No shit." Jill hopped back out of the dining room with Cheryl's assistance and sat on a chair in the hallway.

"Lemme see." Her friend leaned down. "Yep, the glass is still in there. Hold still a second." Cheryl pushed on the sole of her foot.

"Dammit, Cheryl, what are you doing? That hurts."

"I'm trying to dig it out. Stop squirming."

Jill closed her eyes to block out Cheryl's poking and prodding, the sight of the blood making her queasy. She'd never been able to stomach blood—hers or anybody else's.

She hadn't slept a wink since Wes left her bed two nights earlier. The defeated look on his face as he'd walked away had eaten at her soul until she thought she'd go mad.

She'd picked up the phone a thousand times to call him, but she never got beyond the fourth digit before she hung up. What could she say?

I'm sorry I hurt you, but this is for the best?

While her head knew that, her heart didn't concur. Her main fear was that he'd answer the phone and she'd beg him to come back. What good would that do? Better to make the break now.

"Ouch."

"There. I think I got it out. Let me grab a towel and Band-Aid from the kitchen."

"Call Drake while you're in there," Jill shouted. She was careful to specify which member of Madison's police force she wanted to answer this call.

"Okay," Cheryl called out in response.

"Asshole vandals, throwing damn rocks at my windows, clogging my toilets, keying my car," she muttered. "Damn it, I do not need this aggravation right now."

"Talking to yourself isn't going to help." Cheryl bustled out of the kitchen with a wet towel and bandages.

"Maybe not, but seeing as how I can't yell and scream at the idiot who broke my fucking window, I don't have anyone else to berate. Ouch, Jesus, Cheryl! Stick with waitressing. It's clear you'll never be a nurse."

"Oh hush up. You're acting like a big baby. It's just a little cut. I want to get the blood cleaned up so the Band-Aid will stick. Now then, that's good. I've got some Neosporin here too. Want me to kiss and make it better?"

Her friend finished patching her up as Jill smiled. Cheryl was truly her best friend. She figured no one else but the straight-shooting, chain-smoking waitress could put up with her and her cutting way of communicating on a daily basis.

"Sorry. Didn't get my second cup of coffee yet."

Cheryl grinned. "Well, that explains it then. Even I know better than to break one of your windows before you've had your daily fix of caffeine."

The sound of a siren broke through the quiet morning air.

"Damn Drake," Cheryl said. "Why in the hell does he think he needs to blast that siren? He'll wake up the whole damn town and have them over here poking their noses in our business."

"Gotta love Madison. Drake's probably been looking for a reason to turn on those flashing lights for weeks," Jill replied. "Let's face it. We're gonna be the big news today with that broken window."

"Hell, we're probably gonna be on the front page of the paper for the next week and a half."

They were laughing when Drake and Wes came through the kitchen door. Cheryl had unlocked the back door for them so they wouldn't have to tramp through the sea of glass out front. Jill tried not to let her eyes eat up how gorgeous Wes looked in his police uniform.

"Glad to see you're finding some humor in this situation," Drake said.

"What did you do to your foot?" Wes asked, and Jill was amazed by how quickly he'd noticed her tiny Band-Aid.

"Stepped on a piece of glass. It's okay now."

"Why the hell are you running around barefoot?" His hands were braced on his hips, and Jill saw Cheryl's eyebrows rise at his tone.

"Oh, I don't know, Wes. Maybe because it's six o'clock in the fucking morning and I don't sleep in shoes!"

"Uh, Drake, why don't you come on in the kitchen with me? I'll get the coffeepot going." Cheryl opened the kitchen door, making a hasty escape with the sheriff. It was on the tip of Jill's tongue to beg her friend to stay, but there was no use in putting off the inevitable. Madison was a small town and there was no way she could avoid Wes forever.

"Somebody threw something through my window. Cheryl and I heard a loud crash and ran down to check it out. Shoes probably would have been smart, but I'm functioning at half-mast without coffee." She hoped her friendly tone would make amends for her hostile response. Hell, for everything.

He grinned, bending down to look at her foot. She was surprised when he lifted it and kissed it as Cheryl had offered to do. "There," he said. "All better. Why don't you go throw on some clothes and shoes and I'll take a look around in there? See if I can't figure out who broke the window and with what."

"May as well. Doesn't look like I'll be opening today. It's going to take some time to clean up all that glass, and then I've got to find someone to replace the window. So thoughtful of the idiot to do this when it's cold as shit outside," she muttered, her anger and frustration mounting again.

"I'm your handyman. I'll fix the window," he said.

"But you're working," she said, gesturing at his uniform.

"Jill, how busy do you think the cops in Madison are? I'm sure Drake can manage on his own today."

She giggled at the thought of a former DEA agent from the big city following around a sheriff who made Barney Fife look like a brain trust as far as law enforcement was concerned.

"Does Drake let you put a bullet in your gun?" she teased.

"Very funny, Jilly. Go get dressed. I'll start cleaning up the mess."

* * * * *

When Jill came back downstairs, she paused at the door, soaking up the sight of Wes standing next to Drake. His light-brown hair was slightly mussed from the wind blowing through the big-ass hole in the front of her diner. Drake nodded at something Wes said before walking out.

"Drake leaving?" she asked.

Wes glanced at her. He looked troubled about something, his face far too serious for her fun-loving friend. "Yeah."

She noticed he had a brick in his hand and pointed to it. "Is that what broke my window?"

He placed the brick on the counter. "Yep." There was a piece of paper in his hands. "Had a note attached to it."

"You're kidding. What does it say?"

"Slut."

Jill frowned. "That's all."

"You don't think that's enough?"

"Sounds like I pissed someone off."

"Gee. Ya think? Christ, Jill. The question is who?"

She shook her head. She honestly couldn't think of a single person. "I have no idea."

"Me neither. Fuck. Think it could have been directed at Cheryl?"

"No. Not at all."

Her response didn't make him any happier. "Yeah, me neither."

"Don't worry, Wes. It's just a window. Maybe whoever I made mad got it out of their system with the brick."

Wes shook his head. "If you think I'm going to let this rest with a light shrug and an 'oh well', you don't know me very well. If this were the first attack, maybe I wouldn't be so concerned."

"No one's attacked me before this."

Wes leaned against the counter. "Someone keyed your car and flushed a bunch of rags down your toilets. Now this. You are most definitely on someone's shit list."

Jill tried to hide how much Wes' words bothered her. She wasn't used to being a victim.

"What about Seth?" Wes asked.

Jill's anger piqued at his suggestion. "What about him?"

"You said you two weren't seeing each other anymore. Was the breakup mutual or one-sided?"

"There wasn't a relationship to end. We had some fun together. It ended on a friendly note. Seth wouldn't do something like this."

Wes didn't look too convinced. "Maybe not, but I think I may pay him a little visit today."

She shook her head. "Oh no, you're not. I told you, Seth wouldn't do this. That should be good enough. You don't need to talk to him."

"Jill, we're light on suspects. I'm going to tug every thread we have, and right now Seth's the only one dangling in the wind."

She narrowed her eyes. "I don't want you harassing him."

"I'm just going to ask him a few questions. I hardly call that harassment."

She crossed her arms. She was tired and short-tempered, but she couldn't shake the idea that Wes was pointing the finger at Seth based on jealousy, not the facts. "Don't talk to Seth."

Wes took her arm and gently pushed her against the counter. Her traitorous body instantly reacted to his touch. He bent until his face was only inches from hers. "Pixie, I don't tell you how to cook your lunch specials and you sure as hell aren't going to tell me how to do my job."

She started to lambaste him, but he reached up and gently ran a finger under her eye. "Dark circles. You're tired."

She shrugged.

"You aren't sleeping any better than me."

She wanted to deny his statement, but it wouldn't come.

"Why are you doing this to us?"

His words flipped the trigger, broke the last straw of resistance inside her. "Us? There's no *us*, Wes. The sooner you figure that out, the better off you'll be."

He nodded, his jaw set in stone. "I know you believe that's true."

She scowled at his condescending tone.

"But I know different," he said.

She closed her eyes, feeling like the biggest bitch on earth.

"I'll call Jack at the home improvement store and get him to come out and replace the window. See you later, pixie." He bent down to kiss her, but she turned her head at the last minute so he was only able to land a glancing buss on her cheek.

"I *will* be back, Jill. I'll always come back."

She watched him walk away, her heart breaking at his confession. Somewhere deep inside, she hoped his last words were true.

* * * * *

Jill was refilling salt shakers when Wes pulled up outside the diner shortly before dusk. He parallel-parked his pickup truck in the space out front. His uniform had been replaced by jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and leather jacket. She watched as he reached into the back of the cab and pulled out a duffel bag.

Jack had shown up and fixed her plate-glass window earlier that morning at Wes' request. Kate had also shown up midmorning and helped her and Cheryl clear away all the glass, as well as a steady stream of Madisonites who'd made their way through to offer opinions on the broken window.

Jill was grateful the brick incident had only closed the diner down for one day. She fully intended to open for breakfast in the morning. She'd had too much time to think today. Too much time to worry and fret over Wes.

The bell jingled when he walked in.

"Hey, pixie," he said, his voice rather tentative as he put his bag down. "Looks like you got everything back in order."

"I did. What's the bag for?"

He took a deep breath and she knew she wasn't going to like his answer. He stood stiffly, his jaw set. He fully intended to win whatever argument he was about to begin. "I'm staying with you. Just until we find out who's been harassing you."

"Did you eat yet?"

He frowned before shaking his head.

"I was just about to dip up a plate of leftovers. There's plenty if you want some."

He nodded and smiled. He'd expected her to balk at his announcement. She knew she should, but she was glad to see him. She'd missed him. He'd been nothing but sweet to her. They were friends and he didn't deserve her continual Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde routine.

"Leftovers sound great."

She smiled and walked to the kitchen. He grabbed a stool at the counter and talked to her through the serving window as she placed food on the plates and zapped them in the microwave.

"You planning to reopen tomorrow?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yep. No reason not to. The window's fixed. Thank you for that, by the way."

He dismissed her thanks with a wave. "I didn't do the work. Just sent Jack over."

"Did you talk to Seth today?"

His spine stiffened, and again she knew he was waiting for her attack. Yep, she'd been a total bitch lately.

"Yeah. I did."

"And?"

"And I'm still not convinced he didn't do it."

"Wes—"

"Hear me out. He was allegedly at a construction site at six this morning. However, none of the twenty other men working there with him could recall seeing him at that time. As far as alibis go, his is flimsy."

She laughed and shrugged off his suspicions. It was clear they were just going to have to agree to disagree. "Oooh, cop talk. So sexy." She returned to the dining room and placed a plate in front of him before taking her own seat.

He smiled widely. "Didn't know you had a kink for that. Maybe I should tell you about the APB I'm about to put out."

"All points bulletin?"

Wes nodded. "Yep, I'm planning to do a little 'B and E' tonight in your bedroom."

She leaned closer. "Is it breaking and entering if you're invited?"

Wes' gaze lowered to her lips and she accepted the invitation in his look. Against her better judgment, she kissed him. Let her lips show him all the things she struggled to say aloud. Words like *I'm sorry*. His mouth opened and she took advantage, dipping her tongue inside to taste. For several moments, they kissed.

When they parted, he rested his forehead against hers. "We need to talk."

He was right. They did. It was time for her to come clean. She was so tired of the roller coaster. Time to let Wes off the ride.

"Okay," she said.

"Are you on birth control?"

Her stomach lurched at his question. Did he know? Had Kate told him?

She shook her head, trying to find her words.

"The other night, when we were together, I forgot to use a condom."

"Oh." She licked her lips nervously. He thought they'd had unprotected sex. Well, they had, but not in the way he thought. "It's okay."

"No, it's not. It was stupid of me, Jill. Stupid and careless. I don't want you to worry about anything. I'll always take care of you. You know that, right?"

She nodded numbly.

“So.” He paused and gave her a crooked grin. “If you *are* pregnant, I want you to tell me.”

She cleared her throat, ready to assure him he didn’t need to worry.

Moment of truth.

He spoke before she could. “Although I’d be lying if I didn’t say making a baby with you would be incredible. I know it’s too early in our relationship to even think of children, but when I look at you, Jill, when I imagine you pregnant with my baby, I feel like the happiest guy on the planet.”

She sucked in a hard breath, her words failing her.

He watched her expectantly, but she didn’t have a response. Instead, she let the mask fall back into place and pasted on a fake smile.

“So,” he said, turning back to his dinner plate, “now that we’ve got that out in the open, what do you say we eat? This sure does look good. I’m starving.”

She wasn’t sure how she made it through the meal. Somehow she managed—barely—to carry on a conversation while concentrating on keeping her hands steady. One bite after another, she pushed away the panic attack threatening to emerge.

Finally, she rose and carried the dirty dishes to the kitchen to wash. Wes followed.

“You okay?” Wes asked. “You were quiet during dinner.”

“Just tired,” she answered. It was the truth. She’d never felt so emotionally drained in her life.

Wes walked up behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. “Maybe I can help with that.” Slowly, he massaged the tightness away. Neither of them spoke as his hands worked their magic, rubbing out all the kinks.

Finally, he used those same hands to turn her around. Grasping her waist, he pulled her closer, bending down to kiss her. His erection pushed against the denim of his jeans.

He’d brought a bag.

He intended to stay.

He wouldn't care if they'd made a baby.

She pulled away. "How about dessert?"

He grinned. "What have you got?"

Jill's gaze traveled to the window between the lunch counter and the kitchen. Wes followed her line of vision, spotting the large chocolate cake.

"Oh yeah. I'll definitely have some of that."

She grabbed a cake knife while Wes picked up a couple of plates and forks. He placed them on the counter and she grinned when Wes rubbed his hands, anticipating the sweet treat. Food was the one thing she could give him. It was silly to let that thought comfort her, but it did. She had something—no matter how insubstantial—to offer.

She dipped out large slices for both of them and they carried them back to the dining room lunch counter.

Jill walked to the coffeepot, looking over her shoulder. "Coffee?"

Wes shook his head. "Not down here. Maybe later. Upstairs."

"About that. Wes—"

"Here we go. I was wondering when you were going to start that fight."

She narrowed her eyes. "I'm not picking a fight. I just don't think anything that's happened has been bad enough to warrant a bodyguard."

"Maybe, maybe not. I know they've been relatively harmless pranks, but I still plan to stick close to you for a while. Humor me?"

She grimaced. "Even if I say no, you're still going to stay, aren't you?"

He grinned. "I don't like the idea of sleeping in one of those booths, but I will if I have to."

She tried to imagine Wes squeezing his six-foot frame onto one of the four-foot-long bench seats of her booths. "I suppose I could be generous and offer you the couch in my apartment," she teased.

"Just the couch?"

"You were expecting something else?"

Wes didn't answer. Instead, he dipped his finger in the icing on her cake, smearing it along her left cheek. "Oops. I missed."

Jill started to wipe it off while plotting her revenge, but Wes grasped her wrist. "Let me."

He bent forward, using his tongue and lips to slowly, sensuously clean up his mess.

"Are you seducing me?" she asked.

Wes' hot breath tickled her. "Mmm hmm. Is it working?"

"I'm not sure." Before he could react, she shoved a fistful of chocolate cake into his face, laughing as he reached up to clean the gooey icing away from his eyes. "Nope. Not working."

"Now you're in trouble," he said, his voice a low, sexy growl.

She tried to run but he grabbed her around the waist before she made it two steps. He seized the advantage, taking her down to the floor behind the lunch counter and straddling her waist. Jill squealed and tried to escape, but he managed to subdue her with his knees and hands.

"Unbutton your blouse," he demanded when she was truly trapped.

"Why?" she asked breathlessly.

"Because I'm not going to let you up until you do. I plan to eat my dessert and further my seduction. Open your shirt. I want to see you."

She fought to catch her breath at his demand. Before she could think about what she was doing, she unbuttoned her shirt.

His eyes followed the motions of her hands. "Pull the material apart. I want to see your breasts. I want to eat my cake off your stomach."

Reaching above his head, he pulled down the plate with the rest of her chocolate cake.

When she bared herself to him, he placed a large piece of cake on the sensitive skin of her stomach. The dessert slipped a bit as her breathing accelerated and her chest rose and fell rapidly.

With sticky fingers, he reached into her bra, pulling her breasts out of the lacy material. She sucked in an excited breath as he dabbed some chocolate icing on the tip of each taut nipple.

"Wes," she whispered as he reached back up to the counter and pulled down a can of whipped cream.

"Almost ready," he murmured as he shook the can. He sprayed a large dollop of cream atop the icing on her nipples. "Mmm. I've always said you look good enough to eat. Guess that wasn't too far from the truth."

She fought against the impulse to pull his lips down to her aching breasts. She wanted his mouth on her, wanted him to take his fill. She didn't have to wait long as he answered her body's call, bending forward to suck one sweet, covered nipple into his mouth.

He took his time as he licked off every smear of chocolate and cream before turning his attention to her other breast. When he'd cleaned them completely, he moved farther down her body, leaning forward to take his first bite of the rich dessert he'd placed on her stomach.

Hungry for a taste, she reached down. Dipping her hand into the cake, she pulled it to her mouth, seductively licking and sucking the chocolate off each individual finger.

"Jesus," he muttered. "Jill, we better get upstairs or I'm going to take you right here in the middle of this diner."

She glanced to her right, relieved to realize they were hidden from the street by the counter. Christ. He had her so turned on, she'd forgotten where they were. She was lying on the floor of her diner with her shirt unbuttoned and her breasts hanging out.

He pulled her up, helping her set her shirt to rights, although they were both a sticky mess.

"I know you don't want me to stay," he said, more seriously than she'd expected. "I don't know how else to say it, Jill, but you've become the most precious person in my life. I'll do anything to make sure you're safe."

The seed he'd planted in her heart at Christmas blossomed into a full-grown rose, despite her wish that she could pluck the damn thing out. He'd gotten in under her defenses and she was lost.

"Damn you." She reached up to drag his face to hers. She offered him a kiss, closing the distance and praying he wouldn't see the truth in her eyes, hoping she could distract herself so the words she'd fought so long to deny wouldn't fall from her lips.

Because if there was one thing she couldn't do, it was confess to Wes that she loved him.

Chapter Six

Wes dropped his duffel bag by the door just inside Jill's apartment. She walked ahead of him toward her bedroom, turning at the doorway. "You can shower first," she said. He suspected he'd frightened her with his admission down in the diner and now she was hoping to reestablish the same cursed distance she'd kept between them for months. She was weakening though, and he knew it.

"Or we could shower together?" He pulled off his T-shirt as he walked down the hall toward her.

She welcomed him back into her arms and he rejoiced at her quick acquiescence. Used to having to cajole her into accepting him, he was thrilled by her enthusiastic response.

As he kissed her, he pushed her backward into the bathroom. Their lips connected and their tongues tangled as they fought for control of the kiss.

"Shower." She leaned over to turn on the water before resuming their broken kiss. Soon, steam filled the room and they pulled apart to hastily shed their clothing.

Jill climbed in first, turning to crook her finger in invitation. As he stepped in, she reclaimed his mouth, and he fought to control the demon inside prodding him to take her against the shower wall.

Wes grabbed the soap and worked up a lather. He washed the remnants of chocolate from her breasts and her stomach as Jill reached down and cupped his balls.

"Jesus," he muttered as she firmly rubbed his erection, bringing him far too quickly to the danger zone. "Slow down, pixie, or this will be over before it starts."

She gave him a wicked grin as she loosened her grip. "We have all night." She dropped to her knees and took him to the back of her throat in one hard, fast move.

Wes' hands slammed against the tiles. He needed something to hold him upright as she sucked him deeply, strongly.

"Mother of God," he growled, wanting to prolong her beautiful torment but knowing he couldn't. She held him in the palm of her hand—literally—as she gripped his balls, squeezing them with just enough pressure that his eyes rolled back in his head.

He reached down to grip her head, his fingers tangling in her hair. She groaned as he pulled it. "Fuck," he muttered. He couldn't hold back, using his hands to push her faster, harder.

"Please," he said through gritted teeth. He should be apologizing as he roughly thrust inside her mouth. Her hands moved to his thighs, her fingernails digging in as she swallowed his head.

She was sexy as hell, and he was a goner. Two more thrusts and he erupted. Holding her head, he came in her mouth, crying out in pleasurable anguish. She swallowed his come, caressed his softening flesh with light brushes of her tongue.

He pulled out of her mouth and fell to his knees. "God, pixie. I—"

She didn't let him finish, didn't let him make amends for using her so roughly. She simply leaned forward and kissed him—hard.

They broke apart, both gasping for air. "Hot," she whispered.

He narrowed his eyes, taking in her flushed face, her sparkling blue eyes. He was never letting her go.

When they finished showering, he dried her and wrapped a towel around her before throwing one around his hips.

They walked back to her bedroom in silence and he watched as she rummaged through her drawers for a T-shirt and pair of panties. He let her get dressed before speaking. "I'm going to take those off you before you fall asleep."

She snorted. "Maybe. Maybe not."

He grinned and pretended to fumble with his towel, pleased when her eyes followed the movement as if hoping for a small peek.

"See anything you like?" he asked when her eyes lingered on his reemerging erection.

She huffed. "Not particularly. Been there, done that." Her smartass reply surprised a quick bark of laughter out of him.

"You're going to be the death of me, Jill Harper."

He walked to the living room to grab his duffel bag. When he returned to her bedroom, he pulled out a comfortable pair of lounge pants, eschewing the need for a shirt. As she watched, he sprawled out on her queen-sized bed and started flipping through the channels of the TV.

"Making yourself at home?" she asked, her arms crossed.

He grinned. "I hope so."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I can see us doing this every night for the rest of our lives."

As always, his words pushed her back behind a defensive wall. Her face went blank as he silently cursed. Every step forward with her was followed by twenty paces back.

He patted the bed. "Come lie down beside me."

She stood stiffly.

"I won't bite," he teased. "Much."

She rolled her eyes and crawled into the bed, careful to keep two feet between them. He chuckled at the image of her clinging to the edge of the mattress.

"We both know you're going to end up in these arms before the night is over. Why fight it?"

Jill gave him a dirty look that was ineffectual against the happiness pervading his soul. He was in bed with her, and he'd move heaven and earth to stay there.

"I'm not interested in anything more than sleeping."

"Mmm hmm." His tone proved he knew her words to be a lie.

"I mean it, Wes. You've had your fun. Now I'm tired and I'm going to sleep."

He moved so quickly she couldn't fend him off as he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close.

"Are you listening to me?" she asked.

"Of course I am. I just happen to prefer what your body is saying over what your voice is."

"My body?"

He pulled her T-shirt and panties off just as he'd promised. She didn't fight him. Didn't try to shield her naked body from him. God, he loved her confidence, her poise. She was sexy as hell.

"Your nipples are taut, drawn up so tight and firm, they look like little cherries, just begging to be tasted." He engulfed one within his mouth and she gasped, her fingers twisting in his hair.

Once he'd taken his fill, he pulled away and rested his cheek against her chest. "Your heart is racing, pounding hard and fast, begging me with its rhythm to take you the same way."

His hands drifted to her pussy and, turning her to her back, he pushed her legs apart, leaving her open to his hands and mouth.

"You smell so sweet," he murmured, sitting up and leaning closer. "Your body's begging me to take one little lick." He dragged his finger along her slit before slipping it into his mouth. He was assaulted by the flavor of her tangy juices. The single taste left him hungry for more.

He lifted her legs until they rested on his shoulders, then he bent forward, dragging his tongue along her slick flesh, and left no part of her pussy untried. He teased her clit with the tip of his tongue for several minutes, relishing the sounds escaping from her lips, her quiet cries for more. His fingers drifted down to her opening and he slowly slid

two in and out of the tight passage, soaking in the way her body continued to beg for more. Her inner muscles clenched and quivered against his fingers.

He pulled away when she reached the peak, selfishly wanting to experience her climax against his cock.

"Tell me what your body wants, Jill. Tell me the truth."

"You. It wants you."

He smiled at her admission. For once, the stars had aligned and he was following the right path, the path meant only for him.

Rising, he knelt before her and took off his lounge pants. "Get on your hands and knees. I want to take you from behind."

"Yes," she hissed, quickly assuming the position.

"I want to push into you hard and strong. I want to be inside you as deep as I can go."

"God, yes," she cried, her body thrusting toward him. "Do it. Do it just like that."

He pushed into her wet passage with one powerful thrust. She began to climax immediately, and he bit his lip to keep himself from following her into the void.

Damn, she tested his will. As she began to come down from her orgasm, he started to move. His solid, rapid motions betrayed his undeniable need for her. As he fucked her, his words, his emotions flowed, filling the silence in the room.

"Oh baby, you feel good. So good. God. I can't live without you, Jill. Can't live without you."

She met him, thrust for thrust, as she came twice more. He joined her the last time, filling her with his seed.

He'd done it again. Taken her without a condom.

He was tempting fate and it was a stupid thing to do. He never forgot to use protection. Now, he'd failed Jill twice. A slight unease niggled at the back of his mind. Had he subconsciously forgotten in hopes that she would get pregnant? Even as the

thought crossed his mind, he dismissed it. What kind of bastard would that make him? He closed his eyes. The biggest kind. Despite his desire to make a baby with Jill, he couldn't hurt her like that. She was fighting this relationship and he refused to play dirty. When she came to him—God, please let her come to him—it would be of her own free will, not because of a mistake, not because he failed to be careful.

He fell to the side, taking her with him, not wanting to crush her but reluctant to leave the warmth of her body. They lay silent, both of them breathless and overwhelmed by the intensity of their lovemaking.

"So my body was asking for all of that?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yep."

"Smart body."

They laughed as they drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

Jill woke in the middle of the night to soft hands caressing her back. "Mmm," she said. "Was my body talking in its sleep?"

Wes chuckled, his hands scorching a path of glorious sensation along her hips and over her ass. "Talking so loud it woke me up out of a sound sleep."

"Hate when that happens," she said, her voice leaving it perfectly apparent she didn't regret it a bit.

"I did a little B and E while you were asleep," he murmured, his lips following the trail of his hands, his tongue darting out to tease the skin along her back.

"You did?"

"Yep, I broke into your toy drawer."

Jill stiffened at the thought of Wes seeing her sex toys, worried about what he might think of her idea of fun. "Not very upstanding behavior for a cop," she said sharply, hoping he'd let the subject drop.

"I want to use your toys with you."

Nope, he definitely wasn't dropping the subject.

"You do?"

"Oh yeah, you've got some pretty hot stuff in that drawer, pixie."

Her mind went wild with the possibilities. Maybe she didn't mind sharing her bed with a criminal after all.

"I do, do I?" she purred.

He crawled on top of her, caging her in with his chest pressed against her back. She was completely trapped yet marvelously free at the same time. He had a way of raising annoyingly contradictory sensations inside her.

"How often do you use that butt plug?"

Flames erupted in her face at the idea of him discovering one of her most intimate, most guarded secret desires. "I—" She stumbled for words as Wes' soft laugh shook the bed.

"Never thought I'd see the day when I left Jill Harper speechless. Come on, pixie, tell me."

"I've only tried it a couple of times."

"Did you like it?" he asked.

She sucked in a deep breath and decided, in for a penny, in for a pound. "I loved it."

"I want to fuck your ass," he murmured into her ear.

"God, yes," she breathed, trying to decide whether or not to be pissed off when he chuckled. Until his next words.

"You are a dream come true. Here, lift up your hips." As she did so, he put a couple pillows underneath her. "Get on your knees," he directed. "But leave your head down."

She followed his command, the first stirrings of an unfamiliar but powerful need growing in her body. She'd never allowed a man to take the lead in the bedroom. She

was used to being in control of every aspect of her life—her career and her relationships. Her mother had often referred to her as a force to be reckoned with. She'd always taken that as a compliment, even though she knew there were more than a few times when her mother hadn't meant it as such. She was a no-nonsense, grab-the-bull-by-the-horns kind of girl and she preferred it that way. She directed her own course and determined her own destiny, whether in life or in the bedroom. She took what she wanted. Always had, always would.

As Wes ran his hands along her spine, she shivered with the realization that tonight, with this man, she wanted someone else to take the wheel. She wanted him to control their destiny, even if it was only for a little while. She trusted him. Knew he would give her everything she wanted without holding back.

When his hands reached her ass, she couldn't conceal her groan of delight.

She trusted Wes. Implicitly. She knew with every fiber of her being that he would never hurt her, never betray her. Had she ever trusted a man before? Her mind raced over the question and answered with a resounding *no*.

He picked something up from the bed, and she realized he'd already helped himself to several items in her fun drawer.

Cool, slippery gel landed on her ass, surprising her, and she jumped a bit.

"Shh," Wes soothed as he slowly worked the slick lubrication into her with one finger. She'd bought the butt plug out of curiosity several years earlier, and she'd been shocked to discover how much she enjoyed the sensations it evoked in her body. Before Wes, she'd never trusted any of her lovers enough to try the dark, sensual act. It was too personal, too private...too special.

As soon as she thought the words, an uneasy twinge nagged at the edge of her conscience. What the hell was she doing? She'd said she would keep him at a distance. Was this her idea of distance?

For a moment, she stiffened, determined to pull away, but when Wes added more lubrication and another finger to his delicious torment, she knew she was lost.

Over and over, Wes worked his fingers in her ass, and she was touched by the care, the time he was taking to make sure she was ready for him. Unfortunately, he was too cautious, too slow, and despite her thrusts against his fingers and her demands that he take her, he refused to be rushed.

"Not yet," he murmured as he pushed in a third finger. She gasped at the fullness, the glorious vibrations rippling through her.

"Now," she repeated. She wanted him, and damn it, she wasn't going to be denied. "Now, Wes."

He pulled his fingers out and slowly replaced them with his hard cock. She breathed a sigh of relief as he moved into her with delicate care. He was answering her need, fulfilling her body's desire for something she'd long ago resigned herself to never having. Was there anything he wouldn't give her, do for her?

Inch by thick inch, he worked his way inside, his firm grip on her hips proving once again that he was in charge. He would give her what she wanted, but it would be on his terms. When at last he was seated to the hilt, he paused, leaning forward, draping himself over her so he could place his lips at her ear.

"Do you like this?"

"Do you have to ask?" she answered, trying unsuccessfully to push back against him, trying to grasp one more millimeter of his beautiful cock.

"I'm going to fuck you hard, pixie," he said, the hands on her hips tightening slightly, betraying his own overwhelming need. "Tell me if you don't want that."

"Don't hold back," she said. "I'll know if you do and I'll make you sorry."

He chuckled lightly at her breathless threat before pushing himself upright on his knees. He was true to his word. He took her with all the desire she felt. With all the unrequited needs she had allowed to build up during a lifetime of loveless affairs. In her quest to keep her lovers at arm's length, she'd failed to understand the true meaning of passion, of craving, of love.

"I love you," he said as he came.

Oh God. The words crashed in on her heart as her orgasm tore through her body. Hot streams of come filled her and she screamed with the overpowering impulse as the brutal truth revealed itself. She'd let things go way too far.

Fuck. Now what was she supposed to do?

Chapter Seven

"You want this last cup of coffee?" Wes yelled down the hallway from the kitchen.

Jill appeared from the bathroom and pulled her toothbrush out of her mouth. "No, you can have it. I'll be drinking the stuff all day down in the diner." She returned to finish her morning toiletries and he emptied the pot into his travel mug with a grin.

He couldn't wipe the smile off his face. For five mornings in a row, he'd woken up next to the woman he loved. Life didn't get any better than this. For all their bickering, they actually coexisted rather peacefully. They enjoyed the same television shows and kept the same hours. He was an early-to-bed, early-to-rise kind of guy and Jill followed suit on days when she had to work. He suspected that was just because she worked herself into exhaustion. She made up for it on her days off, often sleeping until early afternoon without even rolling over. Problem was, her days off were few and far between.

He planned to talk to her about her hours at the diner soon. She simply couldn't keep working every shift, every day of the week. She made more than enough money to hire a couple extra people and he hoped to convince her to do so. Several times over the past few days, he'd gotten a sense that he was making progress in his campaign to claim the woman's heart, only to have her stubbornness kick back in.

It hadn't even been a week. Rome wasn't built in a day, and he knew it would take a hell of a lot longer than a few days to defeat the stubborn will of Jill Harper.

Despite his impatience in claiming his pixie once and for all, everything else was falling into place. For the first time since he'd graduated from college, he felt complete and utter contentment. His days had fallen into a routine he would never have imagined for himself a year ago. For years, he'd enjoyed a life lived on the road and on the edge. He and Rick had often been assigned dangerous cases with the DEA that

required they live undercover and away from home for several months out of the year. Wes had loved that fast-paced, erratic lifestyle for nearly a decade before reality struck.

During their last case, he realized he was sick of playing roles that left him in the company of the dregs of society. He was tired of constantly seeing the dark, depressing world of the mob, prostitutes and junkies, and he hoped to hell he never saw another seedy hotel or fleabag apartment building. Every time he came home to Madison after months away and saw Jill, she refreshed and rejuvenated his soul. She took away some of the pervasive loneliness that continually hung over him. In the past year, he'd come to understand that he wasn't merely living for himself anymore, he was living for her.

A light knock on the door pulled him out of his thoughts.

"Hey, Wes, will you get that? It's probably Kate."

He unlocked and opened the door to see Jill's baby sister standing there smiling.

"Good morning," he said as she stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

He wasn't sure how much Jill had told her younger sister about their living arrangements, but if he knew his pixie, he was sure she'd skirted around the truth rather than admit what was really going on. For all intents and purposes, they were living together, yet Jill insisted on saying their cohabitation was merely temporary.

Kate narrowed her eyes and studied his face. "Cocky, self-satisfied smirk, light scent of sex. I guess it *is* a good morning."

Kate had served as house sitter for him and Rick when they were away on their last case. When they returned, she and Rick hooked up and she never moved out.

"Yeah," he said, stretching. "I just made the bed, Kate, and I can assure you it was no small feat. Your sister sure knows how to tangle the sheets."

Kate laughed and lightly punched him on the arm. "You better be glad she didn't hear you say that. She'd kick your ass."

"She probably would. What brings you to town so early?"

"I'm working the breakfast and lunch shift with Jill. Cheryl drove Lottie into Harrisburg last night for a girls' night out. They aren't due back until this afternoon."

"That's right," he said, "I forgot that was today. Jill must have been desperate for help."

"Ha ha," Kate said. He and Rick often teased her about her inability to boil water. She was a disaster in the kitchen, a detail he and his partner had learned early on. Rick had taken on the duty of keeping them all fed. Until he'd moved in with Jill, Wes struggled with the realization that he was becoming a third wheel in their household, and he was grateful to be able to give the new couple some time alone.

"Stop harassing the hired help. Besides, I'm doing the cooking. She's going to be my waitress." Jill walked down the hallway.

He turned to look at her. Regardless of what she wore, she took his breath away. Today she was sporting a short jeans skirt with tight black leggings beneath, a red cotton blouse and her black Converse tennis shoes. He'd laughed the first time he looked into her closet and discovered she owned the high-top sneakers in nearly every color. She claimed they were the most comfortable shoes around and considering she was on her feet all day, that made the indulgence of owning so many pairs worth it.

"Hey, Jill, I gotta tell you, you may have to pay me overtime for dragging me out of bed so early on a Saturday," Kate said.

"Shit," Jill deadpanned. "I'm paying you?"

"Very funny."

Jill put her hands on her hips. "Besides, you aren't fooling anyone, Miss Mary Sunshine. You live for dawn. Only reason you're pissed off is because I dragged you away from Rick."

Kate gave her a wicked grin. "It's his day off. We usually put Saturday mornings to very good use."

"Ick. I'll give you a thousand bucks not to give me any of those details."

Wes smiled at the two sisters. "I'll leave you two to fight out the issue of compensation. I've got to go out and keep these mean streets of Madison safe for you law-abiding folk," he said in a perfect imitation of John Wayne. He bent down to brush a light kiss against Jill's lips in farewell and was surprised when she reached up and deepened the gesture. When he pulled back, she smiled at him.

"Be careful, hotshot."

She said the exact same thing to him every morning.

"I'm always careful. Besides, pixie, with Drake at my back, what could go wrong?"

Jill rolled her eyes. "Drake can't distinguish between his ass and a hole in the ground. You might not want to lose sight of that."

"Sad, but true. I'm starting to suspect the mayor hired me to protect Drake while he attempts to protect Madison. I'll check in during the day. You girls behave."

As Jill watched her handsome policeman close the door behind him, she felt her sister's accusatory glare land on her.

"You haven't told him, have you?" Kate asked.

"No. The opportunity hasn't presented itself yet. We'd better get downstairs and start firing things up."

Never one to let things lie, Kate didn't budge. "Jill, you need to tell him. Now."

"I know, Kate. Jesus. Do you think you're telling me something I don't know?"

"It's not going to get easier with time."

Jill turned her back on her sister, fighting down the combination of fear and fury Kate's words provoked. "I don't need this right now."

Kate put her hand on her shoulder, and Jill fought the urge to shrug it off. It wasn't Kate's fault she was fucking up her life.

"I'm sorry," Kate said. "I'm nagging. Starting to sound like Mom."

Jill laughed, though there was no joy in it. Turning, she faced Kate once more. "I know I have to tell him. It's just not that easy."

"I wish—" Kate closed her eyes and sighed. "Shit. I wish so many things. I wish I could make this easier for you. I wish I could take some of your pain away. Hell, I wish I could change it so that you could have a baby. You're my big sister and you've always helped me make things right in my life. I wish I could do the same for you."

Jill reached out and hugged her. "Oh hell, Angel May. You *do* make things better. You listen. You care. Shit, you even wait tables when I need you. I'll work this out. I promise. I just need more time."

"He won't let you down."

There was so much assuredness in Kate's declaration, Jill wasn't sure how to respond. "I hope you're right."

"I am."

Jill held her sister's gaze and smiled. "We really do need to go downstairs and get things going."

Kate nodded and led the way as they walked down to the diner together. "So how's the whole shacking-up-together thing going?"

Living with Wes was pretty damn terrific. He was a hell of a lot of fun, in and out of the sack, and she desperately wanted to hang on to him for a little while longer before she faced reality.

"Awesome," she confessed.

As they entered the kitchen, Kate banged on a drawer to pull out an apron, and Jill grinned.

"Wes fixed that drawer weeks ago. We don't have to hit it anymore to get it to open."

"Ah, Mr. Handyman strikes again."

Wes *had* been an extremely handy man to have around these past few days. He kept the bathrooms functioning, unclogged her kitchen sink, fixed three drawers and a slew of other silly things that had been annoying her for months. The place was running like a well-oiled machine thanks to him.

Her initial concerns about his payment demands had all been for naught. With him living in her apartment, neither of them had bothered to keep track of his hours, instead enjoying each other's company. He'd started running with her and they'd begun to eat a late dinner together every night in the diner after the initial dinner rush passed. His dirty clothing and hers mixed together in the laundry basket, his socks and T-shirts were in her dresser, and his shoes were in her closet. She couldn't begin to explain to herself why those things pleased her so.

"Oh God. Goofy, too-pleased grin. You are *way* smitten," Kate teased.

Jill decided to toss the ball back into her sister's court. "Gee. Look in a mirror much?"

Kate smiled. "You're right. Rick loves me to distraction. He puts me on a pedestal and treats me like a queen. He's made me so happy that most days I wake up and pinch myself just to make sure it's all real."

Jill took her sister's hand and squeezed it. "I know he does. And I'm glad. No one deserves that happiness as much as you."

"Wes feels the same way about you," Kate said.

Jill knew Wes loved her. Knew it with all her heart. She also knew she couldn't accept those emotions. Her secret would destroy what was growing between them and then she'd have the rest of her life to nurse the broken heart he was going to leave in his wake.

* * * * *

"I'm gonna dump this garbage," Jill called over her shoulder to no one in particular. Cheryl and Lottie had returned in time for the dinner shift, and Kate had returned

home to Rick. Wes had gotten home a few minutes earlier and gone upstairs to change out of his uniform before coming down to join her for a late dinner.

The second she opened the door, she cursed her stupidity in failing to grab her jacket. A bitter cold front had moved in. Not unusual for late March, but definitely not her favorite kind of weather.

"Bring on the summer," she muttered as she stepped on to the landing. Her feet immediately flew out from under her as she slipped on a large patch of ice. She banged her arm on the stairs as she fell, bumping down three steps roughly on her ass.

"Aaaah!" she yelled.

"Jill?" Wes called out from the kitchen.

"Fuck." She rubbed her sore arm. "Out here."

He opened the back door. "What the hell?" he asked, bolting down the steps, nearly slipping on the ice himself.

"I fell," she said, feeling like an idiot for stating the obvious. "Here, help me up."

He bent down and gently lifted her to her feet, concern written on his face. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. Nothing but a bruised arm, ass and pride." She held on to his arm as he helped her back into the kitchen. "Guess I'll go upstairs and change out of these wet clothes."

"I'll be there in a minute to make sure you're all right. I want to check something first."

She nodded and headed upstairs to her apartment. She rubbed her arm and shook her head. If it wasn't for bad luck, she wouldn't have any luck at all lately. She heard Wes' footsteps and turned as he walked in.

She was about to walk back to the bedroom when Wes halted her with a firm hand on her upper arm. His dark face told her he was upset.

"Wait a minute," he said.

She faced him, confused. "What's wrong?"

"Those stairs were a solid sheet of ice."

"No shit, Sherlock. I fell on them. Remember?"

Wes scowled and she wondered at his sudden fury. "There hasn't been any precipitation, Jill. Cold air alone can't produce ice."

She paused, considering his words. "You're right."

"Someone put water on those stairs knowing it would freeze."

She tried to process his words. For nearly a week, there'd been no more pranks, no more juvenile attacks against her or her diner. "I thought whoever was mad at me had given up."

"Obviously they haven't. Take off your shirt."

"What?"

"You winced when I touched your arm, so you're hurt worse than you're letting on. Take off the shirt or I'll take it off for you."

Her temper snapped at his angry tone, her nerves rubbed raw by the combination of his overbearing nature and her frustration at being attacked again. "I'm fine."

Wes reached over and ripped her blouse open in one hard pull. Buttons flew in every direction as the material tore. She was equal parts shocked and aroused by his domineering move.

"Wanna play rough, huh?" she asked, fury evident in every word. "Fine." Reaching over, she mimicked his actions, tearing his button-down shirt open.

Wes glanced at his destroyed shirt for only a second before rushing to unbuckle and remove his belt. He bent the leather in half and slapped it over his palm.

"I should take you over my knee for that," he said, swinging the belt in front of her menacingly.

She laughed at his threat. "I'd love to see you try. Careful, cop. I think you may have met your match."

He dropped the belt and reached over to pull her blouse off completely. He looked at the darkening bruise on her arm. "You must have knocked it pretty hard."

"It's just a bruise," she muttered. "I'm probably gonna have one on my ass too. Wanna kiss it?" She added the last in such a way that left no doubt exactly how she intended for him to kiss her ass.

A grin crossed his face as he placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her away from him. He bent down to grasp the hem of her denim skirt, hiking it over her hips. He slowly peeled her leggings and panties down before kneeling behind her. His hot breath and calloused hands warmed her cool flesh. She sucked in a sharp, excited gasp as his lips and tongue traveled along the smooth skin of her ass.

Her anger fled as overwhelming desire filled every spare inch of her body. "Damn it," she said. "I'm trying to be pissed off at you and you're distracting me."

He chuckled but didn't answer as he continued caressing her ass with his lips, his hands, his tongue. The now-familiar sensations he evoked in her body emerged fully. He gently pushed her legs apart and she struggled to remain standing when his fingers made their way to the hot opening of her body. Finding her wet and ready, he shoved in three, catapulting her to near-orgasm in just one thrust.

"Oh my God," she gasped, loving his rough touch, his demanding pushes. Over and over, he worked her needy flesh until she was crying out with her climax, her inner muscles clenching against his fingers. She staggered as he pulled his hand away and stood quickly to support her. He remained behind her and held her gently before reaching around to unzip her skirt and slide it down. His lips nibbled at the nape of her neck.

Suddenly it wasn't enough that his hands and lips were on her. She wanted to touch and taste him. She wasn't about to play the passive lover. Turning, she dropped to her knees, and before he could react had his jeans unhooked and his rock-hard erection in her hand. She stroked the velvet skin, drawing his cock to her mouth. He'd

driven her crazy with his touches, his kisses, and now she intended to give him a taste of his own medicine. She wanted him at her mercy, desperate and begging for more.

She played with the head of his cock for several minutes, teasing the sensitive spot underneath with the tip of her tongue as his hands roughly gripped her hair. She hissed as he pulled her long tresses, the powerful tugs making her wild and uninhibited.

"Suck me," he said through gritted teeth when she continued to torment him, refusing to engulf his flesh the way she knew he desired.

"Beg me," she taunted as she glanced up at his face. His eyes narrowed, his cheeks flushed.

"I really am going to beat your ass," he said. "As soon as those bruises fade, I'm going to mark you with a few of my own. Please, Jill."

She smiled seductively before opening her mouth and taking him to the back of her throat. She swallowed his head, sucking strongly. She reached around his hips and gripped his ass with her hands as he began thrusting into her mouth, his dirty, sexy words driving her on.

"God," he muttered. "You are so fucking sweet. Your mouth was made for this. Jesus, pixie. Take it deeper. Deeper. That's it. Oh shit. I'm coming."

His cock erupted, sending hot pulses of come into her mouth and down her throat. When she released him, he dropped to his knees in front of her. She grinned as she recognized her earlier affliction had taken him down as well. His legs wouldn't support him anymore.

He swooped down to kiss her, and his hands gripped her face gently as he worshipped her with his lips. When at last he broke the embrace, he rested his forehead against hers.

"I'm sorry. I think I fucking lost it for a little while there."

"Why were you so mad?"

He frowned. "I'm supposed to be protecting you, Jill. When I saw you lying at the bottom of those stairs, when I knew you'd hurt yourself and I hadn't been able to keep you safe..."

She stroked his cheek, kissing him softly. "You aren't my keeper, Wes. You can't swaddle me in bubble wrap."

He wiggled his eyebrows. "Are you sure? That sounds sort of hot."

"I'm fine. Honest."

"Lie down," he said, pushing her to her back on the carpeted floor.

"Why?"

"I want my cock inside you. Now."

She opened her legs, thrilled when his rejuvenating cock entered her bit by bit. He propped himself above her on his elbows, bending close to kiss her.

He offered her a crooked grin and she wondered why he wasn't moving. He seemed content to simply hold himself within her.

"Tired?" she asked.

He shook his head. "We always come together in a heated moment that's over in a flash. I want to savor this. Do you have any idea how good this feels? Your soft body wrapped around mine, your pussy holding my cock so tightly. You're always wet, always warm, always perfect."

"Wes." She reached up to draw his head down to hers. "Kiss me."

He leaned down and kissed her, his lips proving the truth behind his words. She closed her eyes and gave herself up to the moment, to the magic...to him.

Chapter Eight

Jill topped up his glass of iced tea as Wes finished his lunch at the counter. After their slow lovemaking on the floor, they'd spent the remainder of the evening in bed, simply holding each other and talking all night.

She was amazed by how awake she was. She should be dead tired after no sleep.

He winked at her and she blushed to realize she'd been staring at him.

"Hey, Jill. How about a piece of that Dutch apple pie?" Jonesy called out from the other end of the lunch counter.

"I thought your wife put you on a diet because of your high cholesterol?" Jill answered.

"That piece of pie won't hurt anything. I mean, I didn't ask for a scoop of ice cream on it, and it's fruit," the fire chief replied.

Several people sitting at the counter laughed as she shook her head and gave him a stern look. "I'm telling you right now, Jonesy, if I catch hell from your wife for feeding you pie, you're going to be banned from this diner for a month."

The man considered her threat, and Jill was afraid he was going to call her bluff. Truth was, she'd never ban the dear man—she enjoyed his company far too much.

Mercifully, Wes decided to lend a hand. "A whole month? Damn, Jonesy. That's a long time. Don't know if I'd push my luck on that."

"All right, fine," Jonesy replied with a scowl. "Skip the pie. Damn doctors. Damn wife."

She fought back a grin when the older man looked positively childlike, sulking over his lost dessert and cursing everyone who was keeping him from his favorite treat.

"I have some fresh berries in the back. Blueberries and strawberries. I could even throw a tiny scoop of fat-free whipped cream on there for you," she said as a peace offering, hoping to keep him from becoming too discouraged by his diet. The man had a sweet tooth the size of an elephant.

"Hey, that sounds good," Wes said. "I think I'll have that too."

Jonesy nodded, pleased by Wes' support. "Berries would be great, Jilly. Thanks."

She smiled her thanks at Wes. He leaned forward, chuckling, and spoke low so only she could hear. "You're gonna make a hell of a mother one day, Jill. You've got that powerhouse *don't mess with me* tone down to a tee."

Her smile froze at his words.

What the hell was she doing?

She looked at Wes' face and knew she'd been wrong. Terribly wrong to hide something so important from him. With his words and actions, he'd made it clear what his plans for the future were. She was only prolonging the agony by lying to him, lying to herself. The reality of her deception crashed down on her and she knew she'd let things go too far.

Walking to the kitchen, she began to scoop out the desserts. Her body was numb, her heart beating unnaturally fast and hard. She'd made some mistakes in her life but this one was huge and the fallout would take her a lifetime to recover from.

The bell above the diner door rang and Seth walked in. She was surprised to see him take the seat next to Wes.

"Jeez, Jill. Want some fruit with that whipped cream?" Cheryl asked from behind her.

She glanced down to discover she'd buried the berries in whipped cream, the fluffy white stuff overflowing the plates and covering the counter.

"Shit," she mumbled.

"You okay, honey?"

Jill looked at Cheryl and nodded. She was having trouble speaking through the lump in her throat.

"Are you sick? You look sort of pale."

She was lightheaded, nauseous and the definite beginning of a headache was emerging, but she didn't tell Cheryl any of that. "I'm fine," she said, her voice sounding tense.

She walked back to the dining room before Cheryl could question her further. She placed Wes' dessert in front of him as he and Seth conversed about last night's basketball game. She delivered Jonesy's dessert as well.

As she turned, she hit her injured arm against the corner of the coffee machine.

"Damn," she said, rubbing the flesh. Wes and Seth looked up, concerned.

"You okay, Jill?" Seth asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Just banged my damn arm. Not paying attention."

Wes frowned. "Isn't that the arm you hurt last night?"

She nodded. Her brain was fried and she wished she could just go upstairs, curl into a ball and cry her eyes out. She was too tired for this shit.

Seth looked from her to Wes. "What happened last night?"

Jill rubbed her forehead and considered taking a couple aspirin. There was no way she was going to be able to avoid the coming migraine.

Wes explained to Seth about the ice on the stairs and then, to her surprise, he filled the man in on all the other odd pranks that had been happening over the past couple of weeks, watching Seth closely for a reaction. She'd told Wes that Seth was innocent, but obviously her word wasn't good enough. She'd lost total control of her life and here was Wes, questioning her friend despite her assurances Seth would never hurt her.

Her temper snapped. She walked over to them and leaned forward.

"Jealous much, Wes?" she asked, her voice lined with fury.

"What?" he asked, his face betraying his confusion. He was surprised by her sudden anger.

"I don't appreciate you accusing Seth in front of me."

Wes frowned. "I wasn't accusing Seth of anything. I was —"

"I know what you're doing," she said, her voice rising as she cut him off. The conversation in the diner started to die down, but she couldn't make herself care. She needed to get Wes out of here, out of her life. Everything had been fine until he'd come along and fucked it up. Made her want things she couldn't have. Made her feel things she shouldn't.

She'd been content, in control. Now she was living in the eye of a tornado, watching and waiting for the shit to hit the fan. It was unnerving and frightening as hell. "What goes on in my life is none of your business, so I'll thank you to keep your nose out of it."

Wes stood slowly, his face clouded with uncertainty. They were attracting an audience and he knew it. "Jill, why don't we go upstairs and —"

"No!" she yelled. "No. I don't want to talk. God, is it so hard for you to understand that maybe there are things I just don't want to fucking talk about? Not now. Not ever!"

He nodded slowly. His jaw was set, his body tense. One glimpse at his eyes and she knew. Knew he understood this argument had nothing to do with her falling on ice. "I see."

The simplicity, the coldness of his response spoke volumes. "Good," she said quietly.

Wes turned and left the diner without another word. Jill sucked in a painful breath. Every eye in the diner was on her and she fought against the urge to crumble to the floor in tears.

She turned stiffly toward Cheryl. "I have a headache. I'm going upstairs."

Cheryl nodded, her face showing dismay and disappointment.

Unable to face hurting yet another person she loved, Jill closed her eyes and walked away.

* * * * *

Jill remained in her apartment all afternoon. She walked in, dropped down on the couch and stared at the wall for hours. Dusk had set an hour ago but she couldn't summon the energy to turn on a light, so she sat in the dark and listened to the silence. Wes hadn't returned after her asinine attack at lunch. Cheryl had knocked on the door earlier, but Jill didn't answer. Kate had been ringing her phone off the hook, but she'd let every call go to voicemail.

She'd expected to cry, thought the tears would burn away some of the pain, but they wouldn't come. Obviously she'd held them at bay too long. Instead, she was empty, numb.

Wes hadn't come back. He had lots of personal items in her apartment and she'd thought maybe he'd stop by to pick them up if nothing else.

A light knock on the door roused her. Her heart raced. Had Wes had finally returned?

"Jill?" Seth's voice called.

Just her luck, the wrong man at her door. Seth hadn't come to her apartment for months, not since she'd broken off their relationship. Curiosity prompted her to rise and open the door. He'd witnessed her insanity earlier with Wes. He was probably thanking his lucky stars he'd never gotten too involved with her.

"Hey, Seth. What are you doing here?"

He looked uncomfortable. "Can I come in for a few minutes?"

She took a step back and gestured for him to enter. He looked around, searching the room.

"Wes isn't here," she said.

He grinned good-naturedly and she thought she could sense his relief.

"What's up?" she asked, suddenly sorry she'd opened the door. She was dog-tired and depressed as hell. Having a conversation with anyone right now seemed like too much work.

Seth walked over to her couch and dropped down. She moved to take the chair. They'd spent lots of time together in her apartment but very little of it in the living room. Seth had been an easy lover, both of them seeking each other out when the need for companionship became too great. Neither of them expected or needed conversation. They were friends who'd built a solid foundation of trust between them over the years. However, they'd created nothing beyond that—no emotions, no demands, no shattered dreams.

Jill wished she'd managed the same feat with Wes.

"I've missed you," he said.

She looked at him, confused. "Missed me? I've been right here. Besides, I've seen you loads lately."

"That's not what I mean. I miss being with you."

"Oh." His confession caught her unaware. He'd never given her any indication that their decision to stop sleeping together bothered him.

He looked at her with apologetic eyes tinged with longing and she suddenly understood. God, she'd been blind. "Seth—"

"Forget it. I shouldn't have said anything. You were never anything but honest about what you wanted from our relationship. I was the one who was hiding the truth, lying about my hopes."

She struggled to respond but his words struck a chord. She'd been doing the same thing with Wes. Carrying him along on her roller coaster of emotions, sending him so many damn mixed signals it was a wonder he'd stuck around as long as he had.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know."

He grinned ruefully. "I sort of consoled myself by thinking that you didn't want anybody. Didn't take the brush-off too personally. Then you started seeing Wes."

"I've been a heartless bitch."

"God, no. You haven't. You're in love with the guy. It's fucking with your head. Anybody can see that."

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the chair. "Great. I like looking like an idiot in front of the whole town."

He chuckled. "The idiot part wasn't really apparent until today."

She opened her eyes and smiled. Seth was a good friend and she appreciated his humor. "Gee, thanks."

Seth shrugged. "That's what friends are for."

They sat in silence, though she knew there was more he wanted to say. "So why are you really here?"

"I know who threw the brick through your window, who's been messing with your car and your toilets."

She feared he was here to confess, but she couldn't accept that Seth would ever stoop to such juvenile pranks. Not even after she'd unwittingly trampled on his heart. "Who?"

"You remember that woman I was dating for a while?"

She nodded. "The one you met at the bar in Harrisburg? The one who was..." She paused, the answer becoming clear.

"Jealous," Seth supplied. "Apparently, she didn't like getting dumped."

"I don't understand what that has to do with me. We were finished before you started dating her."

Seth leaned forward and rested his elbows on his thighs. "That's my fault. When I told her I didn't want to see her anymore, she kept pushing for a reason why. It sort of escalated into a nasty fight and I blurted out that I was still in love with you."

Jill winced.

"I shouldn't have dragged your name into it. I knew she had a jealous streak, but I didn't have a clue she'd retaliate against you. I figured she'd harass *me*. You know, a lot of crying phone calls, showing up at my work to cuss me out. *That* kind of shit I expected. I had no idea she'd go after you."

"How do you know it was her?"

"I sort of had a bad feeling after Wes came by my work to question me about someone breaking your window, but I brushed it off as teenagers being stupid. Today at lunch, when he told me about the ice on your stairs and your car, well, I just put two and two together. I drove up to Harrisburg to see her today. Asked her straight out."

"Asked or accused?"

Seth smiled sadly. "I knew it was her and I was pissed off. It may have come across as an accusation."

"And she confessed?"

He nodded. "Yeah. She actually twisted it around, tried to make her actions look like true love. She thought I'd be impressed she would go to such lengths for me. Thought it should prove what a fool I was for breaking up with her."

"Wow. Girls like that only come along once in a lifetime, Seth. You might want to reconsider—"

"Don't even finish that sentence," he said. His tone was light, playful. This conversation was going a long ways toward mending the rift she hadn't even noticed between them. She'd been so wrapped up in her own self-pity lately, she'd failed to see the pain she'd caused a friend.

"Anyway," Seth continued. "She's offered to pay for all the damages and to drive down here to apologize. She's also promised to steer clear of you from now on. Of course, it's up to you if you want to press charges. She would deserve it if you did and I wouldn't blame you. It's just..."

His words drifted away but she could fill in the blanks. He felt guilty for what had happened. "I'm not going to press charges," she said. "And I don't want you to think you're responsible for this."

He started to argue but she cut him off. "No, I mean it, Seth. I was heartless and cruel."

"Damn it, Jill, you weren't—"

"Please let me finish. I thought you understood. I thought you knew I wasn't looking for a long-term relationship. I suppose I'd closed myself off enough from that concept that I didn't notice when your emotions became engaged."

"I knew we were just hanging out. I mean, you said right at the beginning you weren't in it for love. Somewhere along the line I guess I just forgot."

"You could've told me."

He smiled sadly and shook his head. "No. That only would've ended things earlier. You love Robson, don't you?"

She considered lying in order to protect him. She'd done more than her fair share of tramping on his heart. Then she decided he deserved the truth.

"Yes."

"I'm glad," he said easily.

"You are?"

"I was kind of afraid you'd never let yourself experience that. You deserve to be happy and in love."

She blinked quickly, trying to hold back the tears at his kind words. "You are a wonderfully sweet man, Seth."

He shrugged and she could tell she'd embarrassed him. He stood up and she followed suit. She opened the door and he stepped out onto the landing.

"Good luck, Jilly. I hope Robson realizes what he's got with you."

She sucked back her breath, holding in the sob that almost escaped. She nodded so she wouldn't have to answer, wouldn't have to admit that it was *she* who had screwed everything up this time by keeping her own secrets.

He hugged her and she returned the embrace.

"See you around," he said, kissing her lightly on the cheek.

"I'll be here," she whispered as he walked downstairs. She went back inside. Back into the dark. Alone...again.

* * * * *

Wes walked into the diner and claimed a seat at the counter. He stared at the hallway that led to Jill's apartment, trying to figure out his next move. She'd thrown him for a loop earlier. He'd spent the past couple of weeks certain he could overcome whatever issues Jill had with long-term relationships. The utter desolation in her eyes this morning as she picked her silly fight made him think he was wrong.

"That's a serious look."

Wes glanced over and saw his best friend standing beside him. "Rick, I didn't see you."

"I noticed."

"What are you doing here?"

Rick pointed to the Styrofoam carry-out box. "Kate's working late tonight. Parent-teacher conferences. So, I'm fending for myself for dinner. Had to run into Harrisburg for some motorcycle parts and I'm late getting back. Thought I'd let Jill fix my dinner for me."

Wes nodded. The mention of Jill's name sent his gaze back to the hallway, to the staircase that would lead him to her.

"She hasn't been down all day."

Wes looked at Rick, confused. "What?"

"Cheryl told me you and Jill had a bit of a fight. She said Jill went up to her apartment after you left and hasn't come down all day."

"Shit," he muttered. He'd noticed she wasn't in the diner the minute he walked in.

"What was the fight about?"

Wes shook his head. "Fuck if I know."

Rick put his food on the counter and claimed the seat next to him. "You don't know what you're fighting about?"

"No. Not a clue."

"Damn, man. That's not good."

"I know."

Rick studied his face, his brows lowered. "Never known you to shy away from a fight, Wes. It's obvious you're in love with her. Go up there and make things right. Grovel if you need to."

Wes ran a hand through his hair, frustration permeating his body. "It's not that easy. I'm not the one fighting the relationship. Jill is. She's hiding something, but she won't tell me what it is. Kate hasn't said anything to you, has she?"

Rick frowned and shook his head. "No. I know she's been worried about Jill lately, but she's never given me any indication about what's wrong."

"Fuck it!" He slammed his hand on the counter "I can't keep doing this. I'm going upstairs and I'm demanding that she tell me what's going on. I don't care if I have to tie her up and beat her ass until she does." Wes stood and walked toward the stairs before stopping. He fought to take a deep breath and calm down. Anger wasn't going to help this situation.

Rick caught up to him at the bottom of the stairs. "Thank God you stopped on your own. Didn't relish the idea of having to tackle you until you came to your senses."

Wes laughed lightly until Jill's apartment door opened. He stepped back into the shadows, pulling Rick with him.

He glanced up and his breath caught in his throat. Seth walked out, followed by Jill. The man said something to her and Jill smiled when the man hugged her. Wes fought the desire to take the steps two at a time and beat the shit out of Seth.

He pushed Rick back into a dark corner as Seth came downstairs and left.

"Now, don't go jumping to conclusions, Wes," Rick said, turning to face him.

Wes leaned against the wall, and his temper snapped. "Too late."

"Goddamn it, Wes, that girl would never cheat on you with Seth. You know that."

Wes knew his friend was right, but that didn't erase the image of Jill smiling at Seth, hugging him. Had she told him her secret? Had she confided to Seth all the things she wouldn't tell Wes?

"I think maybe it's time I just accept the truth. She doesn't love me," he said, his heart heavy.

Rick looked surprised. "Bullshit."

Wes shook his head angrily. "No. It's not. I've been beating my head against the wall for weeks, fuck, for months, trying to get her to accept me in her life. I'm done, Rick."

"I think you owe it to both of you to go up there and get some answers. Give it one more try."

Wes shook his head. "No. I'm fresh outta tries. Let's get the fuck out of here."

Rick stood quietly for several moments before nodding. "Where to?"

"Where else? O'Malley's."

"You sure getting drunk is such a good idea?" Rick asked.

Wes stared hard at the stairs in front of them.

"Drunk is the best idea right now."

Chapter Nine

Wes stood outside the diner and watched Jill wipe up the counter before pulling off her apron and heading into the back. It was late, though nowhere near closing time yet. He'd stayed out far too late last night with Rick. He'd attempted to drown sorrows that simply wouldn't die, no matter how many shots of whiskey he threw at them. After staying in bed and nursing a hangover all morning, he'd spent the rest of the afternoon tinkering around Rick's garage, helping him fix a motorcycle. It had felt good to work with his hands, to lose himself in a project for a few hours.

Unfortunately, the real world beckoned. He'd run last night, nursed a wound and played the pity party card. Tonight, all bets were off. He was tired of playing Jill's game, never knowing what the rules were.

He walked in and caught Cheryl's eye. She gave him a leery look.

"Where's the boss?" he asked.

"I just sent her ass upstairs. She was starting to bring the customers down with her depressed mood."

"Depressed, eh?"

"Yeah. Kinda starting to miss her smart mouth."

"Me too."

"You planning on fixing whatever's wrong with her?"

Wes smiled at Cheryl and nodded. "I aim to try."

Cheryl took his hand and gave it a squeeze. "You're good for her. If you hang in there and manage to break through that stubborn will of hers, I promise you'll find a wife who's worth her weight in gold."

"I'm not gonna give up, Cheryl."

She nodded as she released his hand. "Good."

He walked toward the stairs that led to Jill's apartment. As he reached the top, he started to knock then thought better of it. He didn't want to take the chance she'd tell him to go away before he spoke his peace.

Reaching out, he turned the knob. It was unlocked.

As he pushed the door open, the light from the hallway shone on Jill as she sat on the couch in the dark.

"Why is this door unlocked?" Not the opening he'd planned, but it sparked a reaction.

She reached over and turned on the light on the end table. "I don't know. Maybe because I'm home and not down at the diner."

"Damn it, Jill. It doesn't matter if you're home or not. You're here alone and there's someone out there with a grudge. Seems to me —"

"Not anymore," she said.

"What?"

She leaned forward. "I know who's been pulling the pranks, so the party's over. You don't need to stay here to protect me anymore."

"Who did it?"

"It doesn't matter. I got an apology today over the phone and there's a check in the mail to cover the cost of the new window and to fix my car. Even charged a bit extra to pay you for all the hours you spent unclogging the toilets."

Wes crossed his arms and swallowed down the angry retort he wanted to fling at her. She was kicking him out *and* keeping him in the dark. Neither sat well with him. "Who was messing with you, Jill?"

"Seth's ex-girlfriend."

He frowned. "Why?"

"Because when he dumped her, he told her he was still in love with me."

He remembered Seth and Jill's embrace the previous night. Had Seth come here to try to win her back? Had he succeeded? "I thought you said your relationship with Seth was casual. No strings attached."

Her face was the perfect picture of regret and sadness. "Apparently I was the only one without strings. I hurt him."

He nodded. He'd known Seth was pining for her weeks ago. Evidently Jill really hadn't known about the man's feelings. "I see."

She looked up. "I'm hurting *you*."

He wanted to deny it, wanted to say anything to erase the look of pure despair in her gaze. "I'm okay, Jill."

She bit her lip then stood to face him.

"I can't have children," she said.

He stared at her, trying to process her words. "What?"

She attempted to take in a deep breath, but it was broken, choppy, and she looked like she was desperately fighting not to cry. When she replied, her words were spoken so softly, he barely heard them. "I can't have children."

"I don't understand."

She swallowed hard. "I have a medical condition. Endometriosis. In my case, it's bad."

He nodded slowly. It sounded like her words were coming to him from some great distance, and he was struggling to take them in. "You can't have babies?"

She flinched at his question. Then she clenched her jaw and shook her head. "I can't."

It was his turn to speak. He knew that. She was watching him, waiting for him to say something, anything. His mind was blank. The future he'd created for them blew away like the seeds of a dandelion, and he couldn't find a single word to say. He was

being pummeled by a million different emotions, all of them beating the shit out of him, leaving him raw, damaged, destroyed.

A brief, anguished laugh escaped her lips. The silence had been too much. He'd waited too long.

"Yeah. That's what I thought." She crossed her arms, her face etched with betrayal.

He frowned. "Jill. Wait."

She shook her head. Her temper snapped. "No. Obviously, there's nothing to wait for. Get out."

"No."

His response enraged her, triggering an anger he'd never seen in her before. She was pale – too pale – and her hands were shaking. "I said *get out*."

He took a step toward her, said her name.

She lunged for him, beating his chest with hard, furious fists. "Get out! Get out! Get out! Get out!" She was screaming, her words pelting him harder than her blows.

"Goddamn it, Jill." He raised his hands in self-defense, but she wouldn't stop hitting him. Wouldn't stop yelling.

He did the only thing he could think to do. He turned and left.

Wes made it as far as the last step outside Jill's apartment before he stopped. Stopped dead in his tracks. His legs couldn't support him anymore so he sat. Sat on the bottom step and tried to make sense of the tornado of feelings whirling inside his brain, inside his heart.

Jill couldn't have children. Her confession had caught him unaware, but now it made sense. Her reasons for running, for holding him at arm's length, all the pieces fell into place.

Now, away from her, alone, he let himself think about those words. Understand them.

She couldn't have children.

He rubbed his face, surprised to discover a trace of wetness on his cheeks. Fuck. He was crying? He never cried. He put his head in his hands as the picture of a little girl with Jill's wavy blonde hair and sassy smile faded from his mind. Another tear escaped as he mourned the loss of a daughter he'd never have.

For several minutes, he sat on the stairs and said goodbye to the dream.

Jill watched the door close behind Wes, and for a frozen moment she simply stared at it. Then the dam broke and she collapsed to the floor. She fell in a heap and gave in to the one thing she'd never allowed herself to do.

She cried.

Cried for Wes. For her. For the children they'd never have. She cried for her broken heart and her loneliness. Years of anguish, agony and longing found an escape as she sobbed. Broken. Devastated. Alone.

She wasn't sure how long she lay on the floor, how long she cried. Sitting up, she tried to get herself together. Tried to pull in the scattered pieces of her soul. She couldn't. Her mind drifted back to Wes' blank expression when she'd told him. She'd watched him mentally and emotionally check out, leave her. Everything she'd feared had happened. All her reasons for avoiding love, avoiding relationships, crashed in on her and she cursed herself for being a fool.

Cursed herself for allowing a tiny piece of her heart to believe that Wes wouldn't care. That he'd want her despite everything. That he'd love her regardless.

Her lower lip quivered. He was gone. The realization ripped her to shreds, and a fresh round of tears started to fall.

Wes wiped his eyes and took a deep breath. He stared at the blank walls of the hallway that would lead him to the diner. Lead him away from Jill.

She couldn't have kids.

So what?

The two words popped into his mind on a flash of lightning.

“So what?” he said aloud, tasting the words, testing their strength. They were right. They were true. He wanted Jill. He loved her. That love wasn’t conditional, wasn’t based on her ability to have his baby. He loved her. Loved her laughter, her wicked sense of humor and her love of short skirts. He loved her intelligence, her sparkling blue eyes and her cherry pie.

He loved *her*. The whole package. Exactly as she was.

There was more than one way to catch a fish and there were a hell of a lot of ways to make a family.

He rose and turned, ashamed of himself for walking out. For leaving her when she needed him the most.

When he got to the top of the stairs, he twisted the knob and walked in.

He spotted her instantly, found her lying on the floor, and his heart broke. He’d never seen her cry, never seen her shed a tear. It looked like she was making up for a lifetime of pain as she sobbed inconsolably.

He walked over to her and dropped to his knees.

She startled at his touch on her shoulder. She sat up quickly, trying to dash away the tears as she sucked in great gasps of air in an attempt to stem them.

“Don’t do that,” he said. He was angry. She’d hidden too much from him for too long. As of right now, that was over.

“What?” she asked quietly.

“Don’t stop crying. Don’t.”

She started to refuse him. She opened her mouth to tell him off. No doubt she planned to tell him to get out again. He wasn’t going.

Bending forward, he captured her lips with his, shocked her into silence. The kiss was quick, brief, a means to an end. When he pulled away, he fought to hold her gaze, forced himself to see the sorrow reflected in her eyes. He'd walked away from her.

"You've held those tears in for too long, Jill. Don't you think it's time you let them out?"

Her face crumpled and she fell into his arms. He pulled her close, held her tightly, whispering words of comfort as she cried and cried and cried.

"Shhh," he said, pressing his lips against her forehead. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

Eventually her cries became quieter, accompanied by the same words, spoken over and over. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

He moved away, gripped her upper arms tightly while he waited for her to look at him. "Don't ever apologize to me again. Not for this."

"But —"

"But nothing. You've done nothing wrong."

"I know what you want, what you've always wanted. A family. I can't give that to you."

He smiled sadly. "Of course you can. There are a million kids in this world who need parents. We'll adopt all of them."

She laughed, the sound broken by a brief cry. Her emotions were so raw, so fresh. He knew it would take her a long time to pull herself back together. "It's not the same."

"It is to me."

"Wes —"

"I want you to be the mother of my children. Where the babies come from doesn't matter to me. Hell, we can give Brad and Angelina a run for their money. Adopt a baby from every country in the world. Set up our own little United Nations."

Her laughter this time was real. "I couldn't ask you to give up so much."

"You aren't asking me to give up anything, Jill. You're offering me a lifetime of happiness and love. I love you. I wanna marry you and spend the rest of my life with you. We have lots of options, lots of ways to figure out the baby part."

She stared at him for a long time, studying his face, searching for a trace of insincerity, a chink in his armor.

He grinned when her face cleared. "Satisfied?"

She blinked quickly, dashing away a few stray tears. "You aren't lying."

He was happy her words weren't a question. "No. I'll never lie to you."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you right away."

He shrugged. He knew her. They'd been friends for years. Jill was fiercely independent and proud. She was a woman who took charge, and he could only imagine how difficult it was for her to know that in this one instance, she couldn't control her destiny. Admitting to something she viewed as a flaw—regardless that it wasn't her fault—would be extremely hard for her. "You told me. That's all that matters."

"It is?"

He smiled and nodded. "However, you still owe me a few hours' pay."

She narrowed her eyes and he savored the return of her true spirit. "No way. We've spent hours and hours together these past few days. I figure I've got myself quite a bit of credit built up. You know, speaking of which, there's a leaky faucet down in the kitchen—"

"Pixie."

"Yeah?"

"Get undressed."

Wes' smoldering gaze nearly turned her to ashes, and she was torn between crying again and laughing until her sides burst with the sheer joy of this moment.

He knew the truth. He still wanted her.

"Wes," she started. She didn't have time to say more when he took her in his arms. His lips landed on hers and he kissed her as if they'd been apart for years rather than a day.

When he finally released her, she found the words she'd been desperate to say.

"I love you," she said, savoring the taste, the power, the veracity of them.

He pulled her toward him and kissed her softly. "Tell me again why we can't be together."

"What?" she asked.

"Your three reasons, Jill."

She considered her foolish words to him the day he'd cornered her in the diner storeroom. "Wes —"

"Tell me," he insisted.

"We fight too much."

He nodded. "I'll admit that neither one of us is lacking in the temper department."

"Or the stubborn department," she added.

"I can't promise we won't ever fight, but I can assure you that I'll always want to make up."

She grinned. "I like the way you make up." She wrapped her arms around his neck as he engulfed her in a big bear hug. She'd never felt more cherished.

He placed a light kiss on the top of her head, his words muffled by her hair. "Tell me the second reason."

"I'm not sure I can say it again with a straight face," she teased as she turned her face toward his neck, planting soft kisses on his chin.

"Ah, yes, the great *I'm not attracted to you* lie."

She bit his shoulder lightly. "Guess you set me straight on that."

"And the third reason why we shouldn't be together," he started, but before he could say the words, she pulled away from him.

"It doesn't exist anymore. There's no reason why we shouldn't be together. I want to marry you, Wes. I want it more than I've ever wanted anything in my life."

He grasped her hands in his. "I love you."

She sniffled as tears battled with the laughter bubbling inside her. "Why do you have so many clothes on?"

"I was going to ask you the same question," he said, reaching for the hem of her skirt. "A skirt. Thank God for your love of skirts. Easy access." He pulled the flimsy material above her waist, and Jill giggled.

"Lie down," he said, gently pushing her to her back. She grinned at the familiar sensation of the carpet against her skin as he hastily pulled her panties off. He unzipped his pants and shoved them to his knees before moving above her.

"So impatient," she teased as he pushed his cock inside her. He didn't respond until he was fully seated and she heard him sigh, a sound of complete and utter relief.

"Better?" she asked with a giggle.

He closed his eyes as he bent down to nuzzle her neck with his lips.

She ran her hands along his back, wishing he'd taken the time to remove his shirt. She wanted to touch his skin.

"I don't want a long engagement, Jill. I want my ring on your finger as soon as possible." He pulled out as he spoke and pushed back in slowly, teasing her with his too-soft motions

She nodded, breathless. "That sounds doable."

"And you're going to have to take some time off from the diner. I'm planning on a long honeymoon."

Her laughter ended on a groan, and he moved inside her harder, quicker. "I can do a long honeymoon."

"Good. We're gonna have to live in this apartment for a while, just until we find a place of our own."

She fought to catch her breath as he pounded inside her once more, and she decided to give him a bit of his own medicine. He was seducing her with his words, his future plans, as much as his actions.

"We'll grow old together." She locked her legs tightly around his waist, holding him in place until he raised his gaze to her face.

"But never too old for this." He leaned up on his forearms, kissing her deeply. His lips expressed the emotions she'd spent a lifetime longing for.

"I love you, pixie. Now what do you say I give you one good reason why we *should* be together?"

He pushed to his hands, and with his kiss, his body, his softly whispered words, he drove his point home...gloriously.

Epilogue

Jill adjusted her white veil and tried to decide if she felt silly or beautiful. She'd never pictured herself as a white-wedding kind of girl. Hell, she'd never pictured herself getting married period. She let her fingers run over her silk dress and studied her image in the mirror once more. She imagined Wes' face when he saw her at the end of the aisle, and smiled.

"Hubba-hubba," Kate said, stepping behind her, her sister's bridal image reflected as well.

"Ha ha. I feel like a fool. White suits you better than me with that mass of reddish hair. This damn blonde mop on my head just makes me look washed out."

"You're fishing for compliments and I'm not biting."

Jill rolled her eyes. "You know, it's not too late to run," she joked.

Kate grinned while shaking her finger at her older sister. "You wouldn't make it twenty feet down that driveway before Wes caught up to you and dragged you back."

"I wasn't proposing we flee on foot. That revved-up Harley Rick has been working on looks pretty damn fast. I bet we could make it to the garage easily enough."

Kate shook her head. "Oh no. You were the one who suggested the double wedding at the farmhouse, Jilly. If I'd known you were plotting an escape, I'd have made sure Rick locked the garage. If I'm going through with this, you are too. You aren't leaving me alone to take the plunge."

"Well, since you put it that way. I'd hate for you to think I ditched you at the altar. I'll go through with this for you."

Kate wrapped her arm around Jill's shoulder, turning her so they could look at themselves in the mirror. "You're doing this for you, for Wes. You're doing this because

he makes you happy and because the two of you were made for each other. Besides, it would be a terrible shame to waste this." Kate gestured at their reflection. "You're beautiful."

Jill's breath caught. Her sister's words were true. She smiled at the image of the two of them in their wedding dresses. "Shit, beautiful nothing. We both look hot."

A soft knock at the door followed by Cheryl's voice interrupted them. "It's time, girls. Get your butts downstairs. Two more minutes and I won't be able to hold those boys back."

Jill took a deep breath. "Well, ready or not. The firing squad awaits."

"Hush," Kate said. "Stop joking around and let me be serious for a minute."

"Okay."

"I love you, Jilly. I can't imagine what my life would have been like without you. If it weren't for you, I never would have met Rick. I owe you so much."

"Stop, Angel May, or you're gonna have me crying before I get downstairs. Cheryl will kick my ass if I mess up the makeup she put on me." She hugged her baby sister, thrilled to be sharing the most special day of her life with her best friend. "I love you too, Katie. More than I can ever say."

"Ready?" Kate asked, opening the door that led to the hallway and to their bright futures.

"I am *so* ready," Jill said, grabbing her sister's hand and rushing her to the altar, the two of them laughing the whole way.

The End

About the Author

Some people fall apart on their 30th birthday, others on their 40th. For Mari Carr, 34 was the year that took her down. After she spent the day crying and saying, “I haven’t done anything I thought I would,” her husband finally asked what was left undone. Her answer was simple—she hadn’t written a book or decorated her house. “So do it,” he said.

Five years later, the house is sparkling with fresh paint and new furniture and her computer is jammed full of stories—novels, novellas, short stories and dead-ends. The lesson: It’s never too late to achieve a goal or two!

High school librarian and English teacher by day and mother of two busy teenagers, Mari Carr finds time for writing by squeezing it into the hours between 3 a.m. and daybreak when her family is asleep and the house is quiet.

With the publication of her first book, her latest goal—publishing before 40—has been achieved with a couple of years to spare. Phew!

Mari 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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