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# SEND HER TO ME

Ronna  
Gage



## Send Her To Me

Kelli Godfrey believes in small town pride and holds onto the virtue that a person has but only one thing of value to give—trust. If you can't be a person of your word, then you aren't a person worthy of loyalty.

Carter Banks holds a tight rein on his personal life. Even the lawyers in his firm must sign a confidentiality clause before obtaining a position within his brokering firm. But when he finds the love of his life and loses her, how will he handle seeing her with another man? What will he do? He has two choices: fight for her like a Neanderthal, or let her go and be happy—and pray he doesn't die from the heartache.

**Genre:** Contemporary, Western/Cowboys

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**Ronna Gage**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



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**RONNA GAGE**

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## **Chapter One**

Carter stood in the shade of a crepe myrtle bush and mentally measured the distance between him and the pool area. Fifty yards, half the size of a football field, and the humidity surrounded him like a veil of sticky heat. Hands filled with a mini cooler, he psyched himself up for the challenge. “Okay, you got this dude,” he told himself, and then took a deep breath in. He clumsily darted on his heels toward the gate. In the heat of the late morning sun that short distance turned out to be a mission of beat-the-clock before the hot pavement scalded the bottoms of his bare feet. They received no mercy from the possibility of a burn on such a scorching day. He barely made it through the gate before the pain shot up to his knees, buckling his stride. He dropped the cooler by the only available chaise lounge closest to him, and then jumped on the cushion before blisters formed to scar his feet.

“Shit fire, that’s hot.”

His feet throbbed in tempo with his pulse and soon the ache dulled to a bearable degree.

“Hanging out by the pool sounded like a good idea earlier,” he said more under his breath instead of an internal thought. Judging by the crowd of people, the other residents of the Modern Palace complex shared his idea favorably. He looked around the perimeter of

the pool. People sat on submerged lounge chairs at the shallow end, drinking beer. A group of men and women played volleyball in waist-deep water, and some couples lay out in the sun with a thick coating of sunblock on their bodies—a minimal amount of protection against the sun’s harmful rays.

The smell of chlorine hung in the air. The pool sparkled with a silent invitation for Carter to join in the fun. He dashed to the pool and jumped in feet first—immediate relief numbed the tenderness to the soles of his feet.

Even before the noon hour, the sweltering heat hit the mid-nineties. A heat wave like this would give even a mild-mannered person a short fuse of patience and spark a quick temper to volatile actions. Thankfully, the cool water and the endlessly circulating ice-cold beer provided refreshment from the sun’s burning heat. And the scantily suited women playing water volleyball helped distract and ease the mental undermining of the scorcher.

*Pool parties! What a wonderful idea to civilize the masses.*

Carter pulled himself out of the cold water, sauntered to the lounge chair, and sat down in contentment. He opened the cooler and withdrew an ice-cold towel. The cool, wet material against his heated skin felt like a touch of heaven in the pits of hell. “Thank you, God!” Glad he took the initiative to stuff one inside.

He looked around at the status of various activities. Women jumped to spike the volleyball or serve it over the net in a competitive game. Flesh bounced in tiny tops, enthralling the male teammates.

*Any moment, one of these women will spike that ball just right and her boobs will bounce right out of her top.*

“I love luxury townhome living.”

The Modern Palace condominiums housed the Fort Worth Rebels basketball team. The complex favored the same liking of an adult fantasyland. Gadgets and buttons ensured a bachelor’s night of erotic fun while they entertained women. On opposite wings of the main complex, separate living quarters catered to the single team members



and cheerleaders. Twenty-four-hour guards secured the building from unwelcome guests and the after-curfew hookups. The married couples with families opted to house off the prestigious campus to raise their families, and looking around the noisy pool, Carter couldn't blame them. Cool amenities such as outdoor grills, sparkling pools, tennis and basketball courts, a weight room, sauna, and whirlpool added to the fun and spontaneous whims of one of the top-ranked basketball teams in the nation.

Carter enjoyed the close relationship he had with the team, but he wasn't one of the players or an associate on the staff. No one knew a whole lot about him. They considered him an outsider until his roommate and best friend, Dexter Reed, gave him an in to the wild lifestyle. Now, he socialized with all sorts of people, in various degrees of society. Every once in a while a resident would nod at him, wave, or give some other silent greeting. Carter enjoyed being in the background where he never worried about people knowing anymore than a "need to know" basis. The media never publicly announced an association with the team. They only referred to him as the best friend of the team's infamous point guard—which suited him to a T. He existed as "just one of the boys." Carter embraced the compliment wholeheartedly.

He looked in the direction of the condo block where he temporarily shared a two-room apartment on the top floor of the luxury condominiums with Dex. At least, until the construction of his house was complete in six weeks. Carter smiled. *It's just like Dex to offer his second room to me.* It made sense to think about it. Dex and he used to room together in college, so to stay with him for this short time seemed natural. Dex was one of the few people who knew about Carter's personal business, and it didn't seem to bother Dex or make him look at Carter any different. In fact, Dex said he trusted Carter's opinions and advice.

*Now, taking the advice is something different.*

Carter took an ice cube from the cooler and popped it into his

mouth. The cold touch eased the dry mouth affliction in his throat. Staring off into the distance, he saw a haze above the pavement. He inhaled a deep breath of humid air and almost choked. It was enough to suffocate the small amount of energy from every pore of his body. He dunked the cloth back into the icy water and wrung it out over his head, instantly relieving his renewed discomfort.

He looked at the man now sitting next to him. "Hey, Vance."

"Hey, Carter, how's it going?"

The two men bumped their knuckles together in lieu of a handshake for a greeting. Vance Parker settled in the lounge and lathered his body with sunblock. He, Carter, and Dex hung out together quite a bit these days. Carter and he sometimes shared a philosophy on life and money. They both loved its little surprises.

"The pool party is coming to life and in full swing." Carter commented on the thought in his mind.

Vance looked at his watch. "And all by noon."

Scanning the residents, he mentally made little comments about the supposed gossip millers. Men and women enjoyed watching and flirting with one another while they took pleasure in the sun and festivities. Rock music blared from a shaded corner in the gym. In the pool, several women screamed and giggled when the volleyball made a hard landing in the water and splashed their faces. Carter shook his head at their antics. "I guess someone should have told them to duck."

"But our fun would be limited."

Another woman screamed! "There goes Tiffany!" Vance commented and pointed in the direction of the noise.

Carter looked up and barely caught a glimpse of two basketball players dumping her into the pool. She came up in a fit of coughs and giggles.

"That's cold!" she complained and scrambled to cover her puckering nipples.

By her body's reaction, Carter could only surmise one thing. "I guess it really is cold in there."

“Judging by her titties, I’d agree.” Vance laughed in agreement.

Carter laughed and pulled the pair of Ray-Bans from the pocket of his swim trunks, laid back on the chaise lounge, and took in the boisterous laughter around him. “I love luxury living.”

“You got that right.” A few seconds later, Vance glanced around. “Where’s Dex?”

“He’ll be down soon. He slept in this morning.”

Vance looked at him and gave a knowing smile. “I bet.”

Carter shrugged, leaned over, and opened the cooler. His hand dug around the ice until he found a cold bottle. Lifting it up, he sighed. “Oh, good, water. You want one?”

Vance’s gratitude shimmered in his reply. “You bet your ass.”

He passed the bottle to Vance and then fished out another one for himself. After shaking the excess moisture that clung to the bottle’s exterior off, he placed it in an insulated wrapper and twisted the top.

Another woman’s screams gained his attention. He bolted up prepared to help a drowning victim. *What the hell am I going to do?* He scanned the pool and found the woman. Her arms were crossed over her chest. She dunked her head underwater.

*What was that about?*

“Look over there, Carter,” Vance said, pointing to the girl who found refuge under the surface.

Her swimsuit top floated by. Carter laughed softly at the poor woman’s predicament. “I hate to say this, but I can’t feel sorry for her.”

“Hell, me either, it’s too interesting to watch.”

“I knew it would happen sooner or later with the intensity they played that last round.”

The woman broke the water’s surface with her top secured. She turned to the man on her team and slapped him against the chest. “You’re an asshole.”

Carter turned his head to hide the smile tugging at his lips. His gaze turned to the gate in time to see Dex walk through and join the

party. Immediately, a passel of women rushed to his sides. Each one pushed on the other to be the first one to make him comfortable. With the grin of a tomcat, Dex set his sunglasses over his eyes and gave the women that fawned over him a small token of consideration. A small kiss to the lips.

He watched him cross the hot stone surface to the pool with the unofficial harem in tow. Watching his best friend with the women awed him. Hell, Dex's confidence impressed him. Everywhere he went, women flocked to him like pigeons in the park waiting for a morsel of his attention, but Dex didn't back away or flinch.

Carter shook his head in amazement. "How can Dex walk around and be comfortable with his celebrity status?"

"What do you mean?" Vance asked, a bit of intrigue in his voice.

"Women find him dazzling."

"Don't hate, Carter. There's plenty to go around."

*I guess Dex is a nice-looking man...If one man's opinion of another is appropriate.* "Oh, I'm nowhere near that handsome like my other brother over there," Carter confessed with ironic humor.

"What do you have to offer the women then if you don't think you're that handsome?"

Suddenly uncomfortable by Vance's query, Carter eyed him and found that Vance didn't look at him in adoration, just curiosity. "Nice biceps."

Vance laughed. "Is that all?"

"Well, I am over six and a half feet tall. Lots of women like tall men."

"So, you can say you have something positive. Carter, that is what confidence *really* is. Focus on something you like about yourself and use that to your advantage."

Carter nodded. He thought about the advice. Focus on something positive and work with that. "I'm a casual person by nature. Formality doesn't suit me at all. My casual dress style makes me more approachable than a business suit."

“That was the key factor in the team’s choice to use you for our investment strategies. And you are one hell of a stockbroker.”

“Thank you. And work couldn’t be better.”

Carter’s effort and laid-back nature paid off. His investment business saw profits, leaving the bulk of his wealth, his parents’ money, in a trust fund. When he moved to Texas, he made the conscious choice to leave that part of his personal history a secret—one he heavily guarded. He preferred people to like him for himself, not his money. He didn’t trust anyone enough or let anyone get close enough to know about his money. All the lawyers hired by his business conglomeration had to sign a confidentiality clause in their job contract.

These careful measures weren’t set into motion because Carter didn’t like his wealth, but he hated the influence money had over some people’s morals. People acted different the second they knew of its existence. In the past, he learned women usually overlooked a man’s appearance if they thought money played any part in the equation.

“Vance, I found another positive to work on.”

“What’s that, my friend?”

“Look at Dex and those three women. I like the fringe benefits of being Dex’s best friend.”

“I can relate to that point. I never have trouble getting laid with Dex around.”

“Don’t I know it. Whenever Dex and I go out together, in a matter of minutes women surround us.”

“No shit!”

“I know, it might sound pathetic or even wrong, but the women who don’t catch Dex’s attention turn to me.”

“No wonder you don’t have confidence,” Vance pointed out.

“No, I’m not complaining. For me, it simplifies the situation. No fuss, no muss.”

“Carter, you can have your pick of women. I bet with little effort

if you keep your eye on the ball.”

“Yeah, but the women I find are usually in the bars and clubs. I mostly gravitate to those women in the tightest blouses and the shortest skirts or second-skin pants.”

“My kind of women,” Vance teased. “What charming line do you give them to keep them coming?”

Carter shrugged his shoulders. “Most of them know the score; Carter is here for the sex, just like them.”

“So, what’s with all this confidence talk? And this bullshit about not having anything to offer women?”

“I don’t know. Something seems to be missing in my life.”

“Like what? It seems to me you have the perfect setup.”

Carter nodded. “I spend most nights with women open-minded enough to a variety of ways to pleasure me in their inebriated state. It actually becomes an enabler I use to my advantage.”

“Your complaint is...?”

“I’m not satisfied. I want more.” His sight took in the many beautiful women around the pool. Hot bodies covered in oils that smelled of coconuts. Glossed lips that sparkled in the sun and, of course, their high-dollar faces covered in full makeup. He didn’t find the sight appealing. In fact, he developed an aversity to the very thing he seemed to come by so easily, pussy galore on a smorgasbord.

“Don’t you want something more in a relationship?” he finally asked Vance.

“Like what?”

“For starters, how about some honesty? Or realistic values, and better yet, something solid enough to withstand the eccentricities of your personality?”

“I’m no freak, Carter,” Vance shot back with amusement lacing his voice.

“No.” He laughed at Vance’s semi-serious expression.

“I want a woman with morals, with depth...” Carter elaborated, listing his choices in what he wanted in the ideal woman.

“Carter, hold up. In order to find all that, where should you look?”

“I would start by giving up the easy women in the bars and clubs. The real and lasting relationship I’m seeking isn’t going to be in this place.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t see myself falling for a woman who would easily fuck another man after me for something as little as free drinks.”

“Sounds like you’ve thought about this long and hard.”

“Yes. And you know what pisses me off even more?” Vance shook his head. “The time and money I wasted on women with the morals of nothing more than a hooker.” Vance laughed a boisterous laugh. “It doesn’t sit well with me at all.”

“Carter, you are one unpredictable motherfucker. One minute you are looking for a good fuck, and then the next you are the conservative stockbroker again looking for true love. I get dizzy hanging out with you.” He laughed again. A second later he settled down again. A calm silence settled between them. “But I know what you mean about wasted money and energy.”

“At least someone does. Dex is too busy having fun.”

“That’s his choice. He can’t relate because he’s never really considered it.” Vance wiped the back of his arm onto his forehead. “Good lord, it’s hot. I’m going in for a dunk. I’ll be back soon.”

“Take your time. I’m not going anywhere.”

Carter looked away from the bikinis in the pool and glanced at the different groups of people. Most talked, others laughed and flirted shamelessly with one another. His eyesight strolled past, and then skittered to a stop and locked on a woman sitting directly across from him. She tossed back her hair, and his heart skipped a small beat. His cock twitched in his swim trunks. Her dark red hair fell down her shoulders to rest against her breast. She laughed at something her friend said. Carter could almost hear it, even over the blaring music. Her eyes sparkled while she engaged into a conversation with one of the players and his girlfriend.

*God, what were their names?* The names lay on the tip of his tongue, yet he didn't remember them to save his life. The more he watched her, the more he wanted to see. She gave off an air of confidence. She didn't flirt and act superficial like some of the women he knew. He longed for a woman with self-assurance, and it wasn't until this moment that he made the connection.

*How do I get her attention?* "I need a beer."

He reached into the cooler for something else to drink. His hands fished around for a bottle. He hoped to ease the loneliness that threatened to occupy his heart. The sting of ice-cold water attacked his hand. He looked down and moved around the chunks of ice until he found the beer on the opposite side of the cooler. He made a quick glance in the redhead's direction. To his disappointment, she was gone. His stomach quivered with discontent. *Where did she go?* He scanned several locations around the pool but didn't find her. For some reason, her absence saddened him. He pulled the beer from the cooler.

"Can I have one of those?"

He heard a soft-spoken woman's voice from behind him. Like a magnet to metal, it pulled him. Turning toward the voice, he came in eye-level with a woman's crotch and lost the reflex to breathe.

He swallowed hard.

The brown boy shorts of her suit were sexier than any string bikini around the pool. Slowly, his eyes followed a path up to her face. Her thin, tanned stomach enraptured him. He longed to touch her tight, flat abdomen. Traveling further up, they lingered at her full breasts barely hidden inside a halter swim top. Hungry eyes feasted on the milky mounds of her breasts until he felt his mouth water for a taste of her. Finally, the greenest eyes he had ever seen gazed back at him. *It's her!* The redhead from across the pool stood before him. The surprise almost knocked him for a loop. *She's a vision I'd happily go blind watching.* Her small, rounded face showed little blemish except for the little freckles that dotted her nose. The mere sight of her woke



up the beastly member in his shorts.

He pulled off his sunglasses to get a better view of her face. She gasped. *Am I not what she expected? Is that good or bad?* The shine in her eyes and the small smile on her lips said otherwise. He smirked inwardly. “Sure.” Without looking, he reached into the cooler and grabbed the first bottle he felt in his hands. So distracted by her appearance, he didn’t watch what he was doing and bumped the bottle against the metal frame of the chaise lounge, and it burst into two large pieces in his hand, piercing his palm.

He screamed out in pain, felt the stinging numbness in his fingers, and immediately dropped the bottleneck back into the cooler. “*Mother fu....Son of a bi...*” Carter lifted his hand. He carefully censored the string of curses in front of her. *You know better than to curse around a lady.*

“What happened? Did you cut yourself?” The woman reached out and took his fingers in her hands. “Are you all right?” he heard her ask. She turned his hand over in an obvious attempt to aid his injury.

He wanted to protest her examination, but one look into her concerned face and he became silent. Averting his eyes from her, he looked down at his injured hand. His left palm had a small gash that oozed blood.

“I don’t think you’ll need stitches,” her voice, soft and low, said to him, and his heart fluttered wildly. Carter almost didn’t hear her. She skimmed the top of the wound with her index finger.

Carter stood dumbstruck by her tenderness. He barely felt her touch on his hand.

She looked at him. “I hope you don’t have some wicked blood disease like AIDS or hepatitis.”

Silent for a second, he answered. “No, none I’m aware of.” He looked into her eyes, and for the moment nothing existed while his mind focused on her. Close up, he noticed the auburn color of her hair—his favorite color. Her hair was longer than he first suspected. It lay in a thick ponytail down her back to about the midpoint where the

strings of her top tied together.

“God, I would give my right nut to put my fingers in that hair,” he murmured to himself.

Her cheeks reddened. “I’m sorry, did you say something?”

Embarrassed that she heard him, he gently took his hand from hers. “It’s nothing worth repeating.” He reached into his cooler and picked up the hand towel he laid in there earlier. Tearing the towel, he wrapped his hand, and then used his teeth to tie off the two ends. It wasn’t the best bandage, but it would do. “Dry mouth! The unwanted effects to drinking beer in the hot sun.” He tried to convince himself, not daring to admit the slip-of-the-tongue comment he spoke in front of a complete stranger. He reached into the cooler again, this time with his right hand. “Here’s the beer you asked for. I hope you like Budweiser.”

She reached for the unopened container. “Thank you.” She snapped off the cap. Immediately, foam oozed from the top, and she hurried to lick the falling liquid dripping down the bottle’s longneck.

Carter watched her tongue and lips work the bottle, his lips parted slightly. The cool, calm, collected façade he adopted disappeared. She glided her tongue up the longneck to the bottle’s opening and licked the drop of fluid. He could imagine her doing the same thing to his cock. It twitched in response. He glanced up and realized that she watched him with as much intensity as he did. She tilted the bottle and took a long drink until half remained.

“That hit the spot.”

Her lips fit over the bottle’s top, and then tilted it back for another drink. When she removed the bottle from her lips, they were wet with the foam of the beer.

So focused on her movements, Carter barely swallowed the drink he poured down his throat. His senses took the day off, leaving him to his own vices. “No.” He leaned in and gently licked the beer from her lips. “Now, that hit the spot.” Her lips tasted sweet. A mixture of sweet cherries and cold beer stirred his taste buds. Desiring another

part of her, his eyes drifted down her body. *How would she taste in other places?* His gaze lighted on the juncture between her legs. Even in the relaxed environment of the pool party, he didn't dare push his luck and act on the impulse to find out. He much preferred to sample her in private. Taking a sip of beer in hopes to quench his thirst, he took a second and let the swallow linger in his cheeks. When he swallowed his drink, he extended his left hand to her, only to bring it back due to his bandage. Changing to his right hand, he replied, "I'm Carter Banks, by the way."

It took a few seconds for her to speak. The stunned expression on her face showed her surprise, and then it cleared. She tried to act unaffected by the brush of his tongue on her lips. She shot out her hand and grabbed his.

"Yes, I know."

The hoarseness in her voice confirmed his presumption was right. *The kiss did something for her.*

Suddenly, her words sunk into his mind. *Yes, I know!* "You know?"

"Yes, I heard of you before today."

"I hope it was good." No matter how hard he tried not to let it bother him, his apprehension mounted. Was she like the other women he'd met?

## Chapter Two

*Carter is, by far, the hottest man I've ever seen.* Kelli's eyes squinted to get a clear view of him. Tall in height, his dark brown sugar skin accentuated the color of his chestnut hair which lay on his shoulders. He looked at her with brown eyes that surely read her inner thoughts. A small gold hoop earring pierced his right ear. Kelli's gaze roamed over his body, taking in the corded muscles, narrowed waist, and muscled thighs. Upon further inspection, she saw no body art, nor gaudy body piercings. One word came to mind in her appraisal of his good looks. *Roguish.* He mesmerized her. Her insides trembled with eagerness to know him. What fascinated her more about him wasn't his looks but the fact that no other woman showed interest in him! *Are they blind or stupid? Can't they see his good looks?* On the other hand, she didn't care if they noticed him or not. *All the more for me!* At least with no competition, she didn't have to fight for his attention. *Unless he has a girlfriend. Stop it and focus, Kelli.*

The cut on his hand gave her the opportunity to examine it up close. Small calluses covered his fingertips. *What does he do for a living?*

*Guitar player?*

*Piano player?*

She blushed at the thoughts that filled her mind. She inhaled deeply and filled her lungs with the smell of his expensive, woodsy cologne and sunblock. She licked her lips, and tasted beer, lip balm, and the last remnants of the kiss.

"Yes, it was good." Kelli sensed Carter's famous suspicion. The telltale signs of his cocked head and narrowed eyes gave him away.

“I’m glad to hear that. How do you know me?”

“My cousin talks about Dex all the damn time.”

Kelli looked in the direction of the celebrated athlete with the four women that gathered around him. She shook her head slightly at the public display of affection. “I sometimes feel I know more than I want to know about him.”

“Your cousin?”

“Yeah, Tonya Lambert.” Kelli pointed in the direction of the lounge chairs where her cousin sat watching Dex and the group of women surrounding him. “Tonya actually seems peeved that he actively engages in a conversation with his little group of women.”

“Oh, well, Dex has so many women chasing him. I can’t keep the names straight,” Carter replied but continued to stare at her.

She felt awkward and shy with his close observation. Like being under a microscope. He undressed her with his eyes again, and his gaze rested on her breasts for the second time. Unsure of what to say, she watched the activities in the water. *What should I say next? Should I be coy? Be flirty? No, be yourself.* She turned back to him. “Do you sometimes feel like a fly on the wall around here?” Kelli wished she could take back the question. *Why would he wish or think such a thing?* He and his friend had a ton of women sitting around and waiting to go out with them. Carter associated with these players on a daily basis and seemed comfortable doing it. She wouldn’t be surprised if Carter gave the team members some competition. He had a body that would put some of them to shame. He had more muscles than Dex. However, his face looked like a rock star god. And his long fingers. Calloused, long fingers that would be masterful. Her nipples hardened just thinking of his long fingers stroking her like a taut string on a guitar.

His lips formed a smile. “Not really. I get a kick out of seeing Dex with his uh...fan club.”

Kelli tried to hold back a laugh at the innuendo, but it came out in a snort. Carter gave her a sidelong glance for the unladylike sound.

She couldn't have been anymore embarrassed if she passed gas in front of him. "Do you have a...fan club?"

"No, I don't play with the team. I'm a businessman."

Kelli thought she saw a moment of uneasiness in his posture.

"What business are you in?"

"What do you do for a living?" He countered the question with one of his own.

*Okay, he changed the subject. He doesn't want to talk about his job.* Instead of pushing for information, she let it go. "I'm a teacher."

"Really, what grade?"

"Junior high."

"Do you like being a teacher?"

"This is my first year. I'll let you know next summer."

Carter gave her a roguish grin. "I hope you will."

The conversation lulled again. Kelli looked around the pool area. "The quick organization of such an undertaking is completely amazing."

"What do you mean?"

"One minute I'm in bed, the next I'm at a poolside free-for-all party talking with you."

"I hope that is a good thing."

"Just a bit of a change for a girl from a small town in west Texas."

Carter lifted his bottle and tapped it to hers. "Welcome to Fort Worth."

"Thank you!"

"What brought you out here?"

"I came out here to attend the university. When Tonya found out I was here, she called and asked me to move in with her. She and I have always been close ever since we were kids."

"So, how do you like the condo?"

"I love it. It has all the amenities I hoped to have for my first apartment—security system, a doorman, manicured lawns, gym, and clubhouse. It's like living in a hotel suite without room service. But

there is no way I could afford it. Not at the price range they go for.”

“Yeah, why not?” Carter asked.

Kelli looked into his eyes and almost saw a softer gaze. She enjoyed the change—it made him look sexier. “I’m a teacher, remember?” She looked past his shoulder to see Tonya waving. *Time to end the conversation. For now.* “Well, thanks for the beer.” She took a step to leave.

“Wait! You’re going to take my beer and leave just like that?”

Kelli smiled. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I thought about doing.” She looked down at the bottle. “Why? You got something better to offer?”

Carter looked at her with a strange leer on his face but said nothing.

Although Kelli felt awkward again, she would be damned if she stayed around waiting for him to get rid of her. He obviously racked his brain coming up with an excuse to let her down easy. She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. Playmates surrounded him at any given time. She wouldn’t hang around and be today’s boy toy. She turned to leave again.

“Kelli!”

She stopped but didn’t turn around. Instead, she gave a quick look over her shoulder. “Yes?”

Carter stepped in front of her, blocking the path. “What are you doing this evening?”

Kelli saw his discomfort while he waited for her answer. He was definitely out of his element among these celebrities who had the world for the taking in the snap of their fingers. Kelli liked that he was unspoiled just like her.

“Whatever you would like to do...within reason,” she revised.

Carter chuckled. “Now, let’s not eliminate all of the possibilities.”

The burning heat of the sun dried her lips slightly. They cracked under the sun’s blistering effects. She pulled a lip balm out of the pocket of her shorts and smoothed the emollient over her lips.

Carter watched for a second, and then out of nowhere he stepped forward, closing the distance between them again. The touch of his lips on hers was gentle. He eased back, licking his lips. "Cherry, my favorite."

His teasing made her feel playful and giddy. She had to counter with a good comeback. *Think!* "Plenty more where that came from." She angled her head to the side.

His eyes blazed with mischief. "I look forward to the treat."

Kelli realized the double insinuation of the single phrase and knew he bested her with his husky reply. *Damn! I walked right into that one.* Figuring it best to leave the matter alone, she stood quiet. *Why can't people talk to one another without all the bullshit?* Games people play.

Carter licked his lips. "What time should I pick you up?"

"I'm staying with my cousin. How about we meet in the lobby? Say, around seven?"

Carter folded his arms over his chest. The bulged muscles strained against his muscular arms. "Make it five, and I'm there."

Suddenly, her suit got wet from the dewiness of her clit. She swallowed hard. "As you wish."

He shifted his position. "I wish a lot of things. Are you some kind of genie? I just rub your tummy, and my wishes come true?"

"No, I'm just a simple woman, not a genie. If you rub me the right way, I can make a few wishes come true."

Carter smiled and lowered his voice so only she heard him, and then he leaned in and whispered, "I'm counting on it."

Kelli stopped and gave him a sidelong glance but didn't comment on the innuendo. "I'll see you at five." She wasn't equipped for this game. No matter what she said, he would retort with something that implied sex.

"See you then."

She walked back to where her cousin sat waiting for her. The thrill of excitement bubbled under the surface of her skin.



“So, how did it go?” Tonya asked.

“We have a date this evening. He’s picking me up at five.”

Tonya looked down at her watch. “That’s doesn’t leave us much time.”

“Nope, not too long.”

“We’ll hang out here for another hour and then go up.”

Kelli nodded. She caught herself watching Carter across the pool. She smiled at the flirtatious, yet annoying, glances he sent her. He even vainly rubbed his stomach like a genie and smirked that wickedly charming grin. Kelli couldn’t wait to meet Carter at five o’clock. *What will our first date be like? Would he be gallant? Would he be more compulsive to make her comfortable and forget he was poor?*

“Let’s go on up now.”

Tonya and Kelli walked to the pool entrance. She looked at Carter and sent him a small wave. He gave her a nod. Excitement shot through her body. Inside the apartment, the clock on the mantle showed the time.

“Three o’clock. Just enough time to get ready.”

## Chapter Three

The clicking sound of a doorknob announced the arrival of an occupant in the building. Each passing moment spiked Carter's level of impatience. He paced the length of the lobby several times while he waited for Kelli to come down from the sixth floor. He froze in spot and waited. Every slight sound in the lobby added to the mounting tension.

To his disappointment, the female security guard strolled by while on her rounds. She smiled, and then exited through the door marked "private." Several minutes later, a door squeaked in the silent foyer. He stopped in his tracks and turned toward it just in case she arrived. The door marked "Fire Exit" opened. Carter's anxiety level hit an all-time high. His throat suddenly became too small for his neck; jitters filled his stomach, all anticipation worked overtime, and then two cheerleaders entered the room, possibly taking a shortcut to the main clubhouse.

"Hey, Carter!" one of them greeted.

The other winked.

Conditioned to be cool in any situation and out of courtesy, Carter nodded to them in a silent greeting as they walked past. He breathed a sigh of relief when the two women didn't stop to make small talk. The last thing he wanted was to have Kelli find him talking to other females. *How would she react?* The idea did make him wonder, but tonight wasn't the night he wanted to find out. Everything had to be perfect.

*Why am I so nervous?*

Nervous didn't cover the hell his stomach was going through. To

say why he felt edgy he didn't comprehend, still, every time he thought about Kelli, he wanted her. He'd desired other women, but in his gut, he knew she would be different.

Finally, a loud ding from the elevator echoed in the room and caught his attention. He stood still and watched the numbers creep down at a sloth's pace to the lobby. *Four...three...two...one...* at the bottom floor, the elevator doors opened. Carter held his breath, keenly aware of the anticipation building up within him. The second Kelli came off the elevator, he froze in place. Her feet padded softly on the marble floor. He chanced a step toward her, but his stiff cock made walking uncomfortable.

*I'm so glad I wore loose-fitting jeans.*

The peach lace tank dress scooped low enough to reveal her ample, golden, glitter-dusted cleavage. Her legs shone with moisturizer, and the firm, feminine shape of her body showed no flaws. His imagination went wild with visions of those silky legs wrapped around his waist, him rocking strong, steady thrusts into her, filling her with his cock.

She ambled toward him, and his breath caught in his chest for the second time that day. Her sun-kissed, bronzed cheeks glowed. *A woman after satisfied sex couldn't look any better.*

"Wow!" Carter whispered.

Kelli stopped. "What?" Her smile slipped to a partial frown.

"You look beautiful."

She blushed. Relief relaxed her features. His compliment meant something to her.

"Thank you. I hope I'm dressed appropriately. We are going somewhere casual, I hope."

He nodded. "Yes."

Carter hoped the façade of a cool and collected person remained intact, but deep down his reaction to her awed him and shook him to his core. His mind kept picturing all the ways he wanted to fuck her and leave her with that look of glowing satisfaction caused by him.

“How’s your hand?” She looked down at the bandage. “I see you’re no longer using the hand towel.”

Carter looked down at his hand. He’d forgotten he wrapped it with gauze and tape. “Oh, it’s all right. It’s nothing serious. I got some wonderful emergency care on scene.” He smiled.

The rose tint on her already flushed cheeks spread to cover the rest of her face. She lowered her head a fraction before she spoke. “I’m glad to help, but to be honest, I didn’t do much.”

With gentle hands, he took Kelli’s and lifted it to his lips. “Your tender touch kept the pain away.” He saw the effect his second compliment had on her. It struck a pleasurable nerve. She looked at him with uncertainty. Yet, buried deep in her eyes, he saw lust.

Carter liked her shyness, loved the fact that she blushed at the mere mention of something sexually overt. He wondered a lot about her. *Maybe she’s a virgin or inexperienced at dating.* Her bashful demeanor didn’t reflect that of a woman who fucked around. The notion turned him on. He took Kelli’s elbow in his uninjured hand and guided her to the revolving door.

“Where are we going?” she asked when he opened the door.

Outside, a light haze settled in the air. Unlike the unbearable heat from the afternoon sun, the moon-brightened sky marked a considerable coolness in the atmosphere.

“We’re going gambling.”

Kelli stopped in her tracks and glanced at him. “There isn’t gambling in Texas unless you count...Bingo?”

He chuckled, placed an arm around her waist, and led her to the waiting Corvette. “No, not bingo.”

“But gambling is illegal in Texas,” she stated with conviction. “Isn’t it?”

“What do you think the lottery is?”

“The lottery is for non-cash prizes or private casino parties.”

Carter opened her door and then looked down at her. “You know, I think you’re right.” He waited for her to take her seat. “The lottery is

one big state fundraiser.”

Kelli cocked an eyebrow.

He stifled a laugh at her obvious skepticism.

She looked at the black sports car. “Whose car is this?”

“Dex let me borrow it for the night.” Glad he gave her an honest answer and not some put-on short lie.

Without looking, she stepped into the Corvette with her left foot, leaned into the car, and fell into the Corvette’s seat with a shriek.

Carter bit his tongue to keep from laughing at the blunder, but her wide eyes made it almost impossible.

“I’ve heard of falling out of a car, but never have I heard of falling into one,” Kelli murmured.

Carter couldn’t hold back the laughter anymore. It rumbled out before he gained control of it. “Nice trip?”

“You’re not helping!” She giggled a second later.

“How’s charm school, Grace?”

“I’ve heard that joke. Grace is supposed to be full of poise. Well, fall on your ass and see how graceful you are.”

Carter roared. By the way she looked at him, he didn’t figure her to have a mean bone in her body. It felt good to laugh. He hadn’t done that in awhile. To let his guard down and enjoy the company of someone that wanted nothing from him. The idea gave him hope. He found himself mesmerized by her green eyes. He inched his way closer until her hands moved and distracted his gaze. She hurried to push the hem of her dress into place but not before he glimpsed the peach-clothed thatch of heat he most wanted. Slowly, he leaned closer to her and took in her scent. The smell of fruit and flowers tantalized his senses. They screamed to breathe in more of her, but her unease was detectable. Her hands clutched the material of her dress close to her thighs. He found her reaction disconcerting. Especially when he looked into her eyes and saw a tiny flash of trepidation. *Does she think I would harm her?* He didn’t know how to react to her hold. The women he usually dated had no problem showing off their bodies to

him. They were amateur exhibitionists with enough liquor.

Carter couldn't stand to see her discomfort. The need to set her mind at ease overcame him. He set his right hand over hers and silently groaned at the heat radiating between her thighs.

"It's okay, sweetie. I'm not sure I want you showing off what I want to indulge in myself."

Kelli looked at him for long seconds, curiosity glistening in her eyes. At last, her lips broke into a shaky smile. The expression changed from curiousness to understanding, and then to bashful realization. The semi-silent rumbling in her throat turned into a bout of nervous giggles.

Carter took her seat belt and buckled her in with great care. He noticed how she watched him.

"I can buckle my own seat belt," she whispered in his ear.

When he looked up into her eyes, the desire reflecting in them was undeniable. Excitement coursed up his arms. "Yeah, but where's the fun for me?"

The silence between them filled with the sounds of music from one of the nearby apartments. The indefinable lyrics didn't deter his involuntary reaction to take her right hand and kiss her palm, and then down her wrist. Her breathing stilled for a fraction of a second, the pulse rate in her wrist jumped a notch and tapped his lips. Her attempts to swallow the lump in her throat echoed in the darkness. His gaze captured hers again. Her buckle fastened, he couldn't find one particular reason to leave her, not even the urge to take the few seconds to go around the car. "If we're going, we'd better leave," he stated a few seconds later when awareness refocused his mind on the evening plans.

She cleared her throat. "Is there anywhere special planned for tonight?"

"Heaven," he answered without missing a beat, and then shut the door.

\* \* \* \*

“Carter Banks is the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen,” Kelli whispered to herself in the quiet confines of the car. The second she saw him across the pool had piqued that interest. Now, watching him walk around the car, she admired the sight of round, taut ass cheeks in loose-fitted jeans. The mint green polo-style shirt enhanced his handsome features and highlighted his spectacular body for her hungry gaze. His soft brown eyes reminded her of chocolate, the same rich, decadent color of European chocolate. She longed to feel his strong, corded arms around her.

“Thank you, God, for creating such a fine specimen of a man,” she whispered a split second before he opened the door and got inside with her.

The enclosed space of the car filled with his tantalizing scent. Woods, clean soap, and spice aroused her senses. Her mouth watered with hunger. *Play it safe*, she told herself. Staring at her, he conveyed his desire for her. A blind person couldn’t have missed it. She wanted to lean forward and sample the taste of his lips.

“How is your butt?” Carter asked, breaking the erotic spell she was under.

She laughed. A floodgate of nerves released and flooded her with warm emotions. She didn’t know if it was the endorphins releasing their magical hormonal balance to the somewhat stressful situation or if it was Carter’s playful teasing. Either way, the ice was broken. In reality, there was nothing more embarrassing than falling into a car on her ass.

“I’m fine. Thanks for asking.”

Carter looked at her with a wicked wolfish smile. “Yes, you are.” He started the Corvette and pulled out of the parking lot.

Kelli sat in the quiet of the car. She and Carter passed the better part of an hour with small talk. Simple things—favorite colors, he liked blue. Their mothers’ maiden names, family goals, and of course

career goals they planned. He earned an MBA, and she had a Bachelor in Education.

She didn't mind the quiet background music on the stereo or the lulls in conversation. This was a first date and lulls in conversation were normal, but the long drive it took to get to their destination did have her at odds. Looking around, she asked the inevitable question.

*Where are we going?*

Kelli felt him take her hand and give it a little squeeze. She looked at him. "That's comforting." The heat of his hand felt good on hers, so good, in fact, that the comment slipped out of her mouth.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it.

Her stomach fluttered. She'd never had this kind of date before, and she adored him for being such a gentleman. The sight of him grazed over tight heartstrings and strummed a wonderful melody chord. She looked out the window to avoid any further music analogies and getting more tongue-tied. This night was the luckiest one of her life. Here she was on a date with this gorgeous man going God knows where. She wanted to pinch herself and make sure she wasn't dreaming. Out of the window, her eyes caught the words on the sign as the car passed it.

*You are now entering Oklahoma.*

Surprised, she looked at Carter. "Where are we going again?"

"To Heaven."

A nervous pang formed in Kelli's stomach again.

*This was no ordinary date.*



## Chapter Four

Kelli never suspected Carter would take her to Heaven, Oklahoma on their first date. Nevertheless, true to his word, they were going gambling.

The tiny casino town on the state line had nothing more than a large gaming hotel, a gas station, bank, and a small police station. Various cars, from small, compact Toyotas to a massive Hummer, crowded the casino parking lot. Carter pulled the Corvette into the spot between the Hummer and a Lexus. The second he turned off the engine, Kelli heard the dinging sounds of bells and the hoots of whistles in the distance.

“It sounds like someone is winning inside.”

“Yep.”

She doubted it was a good idea to waste money on a luxurious game of chance.

He wasn't a rich man. His investment business was just starting to make a profit, so he said on the drive up. She felt guilty that he considered spending money on her. However, to lose it to gambling bothered her even more. She looked at him. “Carter, can you afford this?” Kelli asked without thinking. She did that a lot lately, speaking without processing it in her mind first. It became a habit she knew she should break. The intention wasn't to make him angry about her concerns or to impugn his spending habits. She didn't want to be the blame for his bankruptcy.

“What?” Carter didn't seem upset. He seemed curious that she would inquire at all.

“Please forgive me, it's just...” She fiddled with the hem of her

dress and wished she could let the subject drop before it came up. She shouldn't have put him on the spot like that. "I know you're still trying to get your business off the ground. If this is too much of an expense for you, we don't have to gamble."

Carter smiled. "Don't worry about it." He raised his fingers to her cheek and stroked it. "Dex gave me a comp card. He said to enjoy and play as long as we want."

Kelli sighed with relief. "Let's not disappoint him then and enjoy his hospitality."

Carter got out of the car, walked around to her side, and then opened the door. He offered Kelli his hand, which she happily took.

He hoisted her out of the seat and into his hard chest. The feel of his heated breath on her ear and his strong arms around her waist drove the reckless urges of desire to race her heart. Unsure of herself, she slowly lifted her gaze to his. He looked at her with a pleasure that mirrored the need and desire her body vibrated with deep inside.

Her throat became thick. "I'm beginning to hate that seat," she murmured for lack of a better comment.

Carter laughed. "Yeah? I kind of like it myself." He lowered his head to hers.

She wanted to kiss him, or better yet, wanted him to want to kiss her. *Don't ask, just do it and be done with it.* To her disappointment, he didn't kiss her. He brushed his lips along her cheek to her ear.

The warmth of his body gave her a feeling of security and safety, cocooning her in more tingly feelings. She never felt that before. It both scared and delighted her.

"Why do you like the car?" she asked.

*Why did I ask such a question at a moment like this? So close. Damn.*

"So I can do this."

He lifted her off the ground. Kelli lightly punched him on the shoulder. His lips pressed on hers. Her fist hung in midair for a second before coming down to grab his shoulders where her other

hand already attached itself. He lowered her to the ground. Her fingers splayed, and then smoothed over his pecs. Under her examining palms, his muscles trembled. Slowly, he stopped the kiss.

Still enthralled by the moment, Kelli asked, "I...what...do you like about the seats again?" His hold tightened a bit around her waist.

"I like having you close to me." He loosened his arms and sniffed the air around them. "I like smelling your scent as it fills the car's interior. Hearing you breathe next to me." His tongue licked her earlobe. Her breath caught. "Yes, precisely like that."

Her body begged to give in to desire and brushed up against his. The reaction alarmed her. She wasn't ready for this step. This whirlwind of emotions in her head must stop before it got out of hand. "Carter." She knew her reply sounded desperate. "We..."

"Hey, the hotel has several vacancies, and the rooms are worth the price," a voice announced.

Kelli screamed at the intrusion. Out of habit, she usually looked around the immediate area. Being brought up by a law enforcement father and three older brothers taught her to be constantly aware of her surroundings.

Her father warned her of stranger danger and to always be prepared. Somewhere in his wisdom he forgot to mention the hell she would have as the only girl within a household of alpha men. The tricks and scare tactics never ceased while she grew up. Telling your dates you had family in law enforcement didn't guarantee many repeat outings.

In spite of all her dad's advice and her brother's hellish tricks, she missed the person that sneaked up on them. She let herself be distracted to the point that she didn't hear him coming. If this had been one of her brothers, they would be unmerciful in their attack.

She turned; the casino's pudgy security guard stood before them, leaned against a golf cart, and looked at them with kindness. Kelli suspected he meant what he said and stood by it firmly. He didn't want public displays of affection in the full view of the parking lot.

He stepped away from the vehicle and walked to them. His height matched Carter's and by the looks of him, just as dark. Kelli imagined he and Carter could have possible lineage to the Native American people.

"Yes sir. We may take you up on that." Carter pulled her close to him.

Kelli took the possessive gesture favorably. Carter claimed her as his in front of the other man. Her heart soared.

"Well, I'll let you two go on. But next time do me a favor."

"What's that?" Carter asked.

"Don't make out in my parking lot."

"Will do."

Carter took Kelli's hand. They walked toward the hotel's entrance. Kelli wasn't giving anyone another chance to sneak up on her. She looked over her shoulder several times on the way to the casino's entrance.

Carter looked around. "What are you looking for?"

"Nothing. Just making sure," Kelli replied.

"Of what?"

"That no one lurks in the shadows and tries to take advantage of us." He stopped. Kelli didn't make the connection that he stopped until she almost jerked her arm out of socket. "What?"

Carter pulled her to him, clutched her upper arms, and gave a wolfishly beautiful smile. "Kelli." His lips were mere inches from hers. "I'm the only thing you need to concern yourself with tonight."

Her eyes darted to his. There, that wicked, seductive look in his gaze glimmered again. Just like magic, the tensions of being in an unfamiliar place eased from her mind. Carter would protect her from anyone who tried to harm them, of that she had no doubt. *But who will save us from each other?* That thought rambled in her head when she stepped inside the casino.

Lights and sounds of various game machines excited Kelli when she and Carter entered the establishment. She watched people play

while Carter led her through the gaming area. Groups of people played slots, roulette, poker, and video poker. *Where to begin?* She'd never gambled before in her life. Chills of excitement brought goose bumps to break out over her skin. "Where do you want to go?"

Carter closed some distance between them. "I think we should take advantage of the buffet."

Kelli hadn't thought about food until Carter said something. Now, her stomach rumbled. Her eyes followed the direction to where he gestured. Banquet tables lined a wall in the area marked "Dining Room." The closer they got, the bigger the variety of foods offered. A two-tiered chocolate iced cake sat in the middle of one of the tables. Her mouth watered. "That sounds like a great idea." With *so* many foods to choose from, Kelli felt a little overwhelmed. She watched Carter pile chicken nuggets, meatballs, and pizza rolls onto his plate. Following his lead, she filled her plate with similar selections but in smaller portions.

"I think that will do for the first plate," Carter whispered in her ear.

Kelli looked at the food that overflowed his plate. "You're going to eat all that?"

Carter grinned. "And more." The impious man had that seductive grin on his face.

Kelli's stomach tumbled, heat filled her cheeks, and desire collected at the lips of her pussy. She got the idea food wasn't the only thing on his mind. Tonight, she feared, almost, that Carter would definitely be a big concern for her. She blew air onto her heated face.

Thirty minutes later, her meal eaten, she sat and waited for Carter to finish his second plate. The sounds of a dinging bell and loud whistle caught her attention. She watched a woman and two friends fill buckets with coins. Their excitement contagious, it blazed inside Kelli making her want to try her own luck.

"Why don't you go on and try it?" Carter asked, invading her thoughts.

“Try what?”

“Your luck at the slots.”

She looked back at him, feeling self-conscious to have her thoughts read so easily. She looked at the game and then back at Carter and waited. Why couldn't she find the courage to go and try it? The notion hit her. She didn't want to go alone.

“No, I'll wait for you.”

He smiled at her, and the nerves in her belly wavered.

“You're cute.”

She looked back at him. “Why do you say that?” That would have been the last compliment she thought she'd hear from him.

“You're like a little kid about to go on an adventure.”

“How?” She didn't understand the analogy. “Do you think I'm childlike?”

He shook his head. “Your eyes are shining, your skin is flushed, and you are breathless with anticipation.”

She smiled, but her gaze drifted to the machines, and then back at him.

Carter narrowed his eyes. “I take that back.”

Her attention refocused on him and not the games. His comment teased her curiosity. “What?”

He leaned into her ear, brought her hand to his lips, and lightly kissed her fingers one by one. “You look like a woman who has just been satisfied with the best sex of your life. And I'm hoping to be the man to put that expression on your face.”

Kelli fanned the flushed brightness in her cheeks with her free hand. She hoped they weren't as red as the heat hinted. Words escaped her. Inside, she quivered and shook with curiosity to know if he was that man. Outwardly, she didn't look at him for fear he would see right through her. She felt Carter give her hand a little squeeze and dared a glance. She prayed he wouldn't think less of her for the reaction.

His fingers combed a soft trail through her hair. The currents of

emotions stretched to a moment pregnant with unsatisfied gratification. He looked away for a second, and when he faced her again, his eyes lost the lust they displayed mere seconds ago. He cleared his throat. "When you play the slots, go to another machine."

His comment distracted her. His advice curbed her newly awakened emotions, ones best described as curiosity, lust, and most of all, fear. She was willing to give in and explore all these emotions with Carter because right now the pain of rejection wasn't on the emotional list.

"Why? That machine is paying off. You saw it," she argued.

"No, it paid off. It won't pay off again tonight."

"Oh, okay." Kelli walked to the end of the dining room. At the step, she turned to him. "Are you coming?"

Carter laughed. "Why? Do you need me for something special?"

The butterflies in her stomach raged with the triggered emotion with that thought. Keeping this relationship at a slow and steady pace became a goal she lost focus to obtain. "Yeah, I need you to show me the game."

He walked to her. The slow, sensual stride mesmerized her. When he reached the step where she waited, she looked into his brown eyes. Her breath caught.

"Is that all?"

*Lord, give me strength.* "No," she answered too quickly.

He came closer still, invading her personal space. "What else do you need from me?" he asked.

Kelli found herself turning into him. The seduction in his voice made her weaken a little more. His thumb stroked her palm. She jolted. Hungry, molten desire filled her body. She had to put a decent amount of distance between the two of them. But how? What could she say and not drive him away? She wanted him, but fear of getting hurt quelled her desires. She said the first thing that came to mind.

"I need you to collect and carry my winnings."

"So sure you are going to win."

“Yes.”

“You feel lucky?”

Kelli looked around the slot machines and the gaming area. “I’ve been lucky a lot lately.”

Carter laughed and pulled her into a hug. “Okay, but it’ll cost you.”

*Was that a dare?* She looked at him. “Not the shirt off my back, I hope.”

That wolfish smile crossed his lips. “What an interesting ante. One I look forward to collecting.” His words caused her heart rate to quicken. He led her to the first row of slot machines. Feeling his hand at the small of her back, she knew she had already won.

Kelli watched for the bar waitress to come back with her drink.

“Do you want to try this one?” Carter asked beside her.

“Okay.” After three bourbon and cokes, the effects of the alcohol had nowhere else to go but to her head. No longer feeling shy, she kissed Carter. “For luck.” She stuck a quarter into the machine, pulled the arm, and waited. Three seconds later, the beeping machine paid out five dollars in quarters. “Hot damn!” she said while she and Carter scooped up the coins.

“You were right about your lucky streak tonight.”

They stood up at the same time, each one staring at the other. Feeling the building intensions growing inside her, she kissed him deeply.

“Here’s your bourbon and coke,” the waitress said out of nowhere.

“Oh, okay,” Kelli answered with a slight buzz—a mixture of want and booze.

The waitress handed her the ordered drink.

“Thank you!” Kelli took a long drink. “Where to now?”

“We keep playing.”

An hour later, the slot machines paid off big. Kelli won a two hundred dollar jackpot that filled two buckets with coins. Spinning in



her chair while Carter fished out the remainder of the coins, she eyed a neon sign. Quite inebriated, Kelli had a hard time focusing on the illuminated words long enough to read it. Steady in her chair, she read the lines between flashes.

Flash.

*Black.*

Flash.

*Jack.*

*Blackjack!* “Carter!” She jerked on his shirt to gain his attention. “Blackjack. Let’s try our luck there.”

Her body bubbled with excitement. Impatient, she helped Carter gather the loot. She gave him a kiss, gulped down the rest of her drink, and kissed him again, longer, deeper, hungrier than the ones before it.

“What was that for?”

“For giving me such a good time.”

“Honey, it was my pleasure.” He kissed her with the same passion as she gave. “Come on, let’s go.” He led her to the gaming table. By the time they got to the blackjack station, her lips were puffed with the effects of the many kisses she shared with Carter. Considering the short walk, twenty kisses turned out to be a lot.

After three hands of blackjack, Kelli suddenly felt tired. She looked up at the clock. *Three o’clock in the morning.* The time whizzed by fast. She became limp with exhaustion and booze. Yawning, she shook her head, hoping to wake herself up. That trick didn’t work, so she inhaled deeply to fight the effects of alcohol.

The tall blackjack dealer looked at her inquisitively. He looked down at her hand, and then back at her. “Time to place your bet.”

She looked down at her cards. A nine of spades lay face down and a two of clubs lay face up. She looked at the dealer again. “Hit me.” He placed a card face up in front of her. A queen of hearts.

“Twelve, showing,” The dealer announced.

Kelli held her breath. “Stay.” If she compiled a list of the most

nerve-racking things she had done, gambling would top it. She felt a hand massage her neck. Roughened fingertips soothed tired muscles. *Carter*, she sighed.

“Player two,” The dealer announced.

“I’ll stay,” *Carter* said.

Kelli leaned into the soft feathery touch of *Carter*’s fingers. She sighed and turned over her card.

“Player one has twenty-one. Player wins,” The dealer announced to the table. *Carter* flipped his down card.

“Player two has twenty-one.”

The dealer dealt himself one card, a two. “Dealer busts with twenty-two.”

Kelli squealed with delight. Her eyes grew large when the dealer set five hundred dollars worth of chips in front of her. He set a stack in front of *Carter*, and pride swelled her heart.

She grabbed *Carter* by the neck and hugged him. “This is so awesome! I can’t believe we won.” The thundering applause filled her ears; she turned to face a gathered crowd behind them. Sometime during their winning streak, she and *Carter* became the focus of the spectators.

*Carter* handed the dealer a fifty-dollar chip.

“Congratulations, Mr. Banks,” the dealer complimented. *Carter* shook his hand. “I hope you and your lady had an excellent time.”

“Yes.” *Carter* turned to Kelli. “Thank you. We did.”

Kelli looped her hand into the curve of *Carter*’s arm; he led her through the maze of people. A slight misstep and she stumbled when *Carter* veered to the right.

“Are you all right?” he asked when she regained her footing.

Kelli nodded. “Yeah, I think...” In truth, she meant to say no. Maybe that last glass of bourbon and Coke wasn’t such a good idea. “I had too mush to dink.” She slurred her words.

“I had too *much* to drink.” he corrected.

“You, too?” Kelli giggled. Alcohol always made her dizzy and

horny.

“Come on, lightweight.” Carter led her into the direction of the cashier’s booth. “What do you want to do now?”

She leaned against his body, looked up at him, and replied with an honest answer. “Go to bed.”

“Sounds delightful.”

She felt the attraction draw her. Now, she understood what they meant by alcohol being an aphrodisiac. In her sober mind, she would never suggest they sleep together. She barely knew him, and she feared he would break her heart. Yet, being here with him now, she didn’t trust herself to be alone with him. There were too many temptations.

“Kelli. Don’t worry. We’re going to get a room and sleep, that’s all.” He looked at his watch. “It is way too late to drive back to Fort Worth tonight, and neither of us are sober enough to drive.”

Cold chills ran down her back. “How in the hell do you do that?”

“Do what?” His surprise and confusion went unnoted.

“Read my damn mind like that?”

Carter stepped back. “Where is this language coming from?”

“Don’t answer my question with a question,” she whined and stomped her foot in frustration. “Answer my question first.”

He sent her a knowing grin. “I am for you.”

Kelli’s eyes grew in size. She licked her lips and swallowed a hard lump that formed in her throat. *He was for her.* She leaned in for a kiss, but her body slumped against his in exhaustion. Immediately, his strong arms came around her and held her against his hard body. Her pussy creamed yet again. Her head turned slightly into his neck, the scent of his cologne teased her nose. “You smell good.”

“Thank you. So do you.”

*I want this man so much.* “I think I need sleep,” she whispered.

“We’ll get a room,” he soothed.

His voice calmed her anxiety while his fingers trailed a slow, seductive track up and down her back. “Can you hold on?”

"I didn't bring any clothes," she murmured, stating the obvious. Panic suddenly struck her. She would either have to sleep naked with Carter or in her dress.

"Don't worry. The hotel has a souvenir shop. We can buy T-shirts and shorts. The rooms have shampoo and other essentials. Plus, you have your purse with your girlie stuff."

Kelli giggled. "Girlie stuff," she repeated. She fumbled through her bag for her wallet. "Do we have enough money?"

"I got it covered."

Kelli looked up and saw the bucket he held in front of her. "The winnings, of course! Do you mind if we get a two-room suite?"

Carter shook the bucket of chips, squinted, and shook it again. "This should just about cover it."

Kelli couldn't cover her anxious laugh. She and Carter would be spending the night together after all. Was this a good idea?

## Chapter Five

“We need a suite with two beds please,” Carter requested of the young woman at the registration desk, and then handed her his Visa.

The clerk looked at the Visa card, and then looked up the accommodations list. “I’m sorry, Mr. Banks, but we only have one luxury suite available. It has a king sized bed and a sitting area. The sofa makes out into a full size bed,” the hotel clerk informed him.

*Was the stroke of luck a blessing to celebrate, or a pain in the ass?* Lucky for Carter the couch made out into a sofa bed big enough for him to sleep. “How much?”

“The room will be one-hundred fifty dollars.”

Carter looked down at Kelli. Her teeth gnawed on her bottom lip, worry flashed in her eyes. “We’ll take it.” He handed her the money from the winnings, which covered the cost of the room with a few dollars left over. *Good thing I didn’t have to use my credit card.* He dared to look at Kelli once again. Although she no longer chewed on her bottom lip, he suspected she felt some sense of relief. He knew in his heart that he’d forgo a suite and get two of the regular rooms if Kelli asked for it. He would do whatever he had to do to ensure her comfort and security for the night. He suspected that she did not have a lot of experience in dating, and more and more little things almost confirmed it. The thought of staying the night alone with a man quite possibly made her nervous. Kelli intrigued him. Nevertheless, to have her, he needed to play it delicately. If he took advantage of her drunken condition, she would never be able to trust him, thus losing his chance with her. He could be a good guy with little problem, but he never had to work so hard at being a gentleman.

\* \* \* \*

Kelli looked at the wide mirror in the bathroom and sighed with relief. The extra large T-shirt swallowed her up, hanging down to her knees, and covered the black souvenir shorts she wore underneath. No real need for the shorts, but decency and horniness called for them.

She knew if she went to Carter without shorts, her drunken state would allow her to throw caution to the wind and make love to him in a matter of minutes. *The decent thing to do is not tempt him or fate.*

Kelli took a deep breath to calm the buzzing in her head. She knew better than to drink two glasses of the champagne the hotel management sent up to them ten minutes after they arrived in the room. The so-called gift for winning at the blackjack table took its toll on her now. *I wished we hadn't won so much money.*

The first sip was to make her feel more at ease, but it didn't, so she had another and now she felt dizzy. She splashed cold water on her face, hopeful to calm the buzzing in her head. It helped a little, but the room still spun. Sitting on the tub, she looked around the bathroom, unable to focus on much. She cupped more water on her face.

"This is just typical of my luck," she whispered to the image in the mirror. "This one-room suite will force Carter and me to stay together....alone...all night." She worried over the choices she had to face when she left the restroom. "I can go with it and hope for the best, or I could under no circumstances give in to his charm." She sighed at the chosen word to describe Carter. *Charm!* He stepped up and took control of the situation in the most charming way. The tenderness in his voice eradicated some of the nerves. His reassuring touch of his strong hands when he stepped up behind her, slipped his arm around her waist and he being the gentleman suggested a perfect solution. "I'll take the couch. You take the bed."

*Why didn't I ask for two rooms? Then there would be no anxiety*

*on my part.* “Because you didn’t think of it,” she scolded herself for the question. Truth of the matter, loneliness kept her in this edgy mood. She hated the thought of being alone. She wanted to be with Carter and feel protected. Feeling a little less anxious by the recognition of her motives, the weight of the circumstances lifted from her shoulders. She pulled open the door and stood in the doorway frozen in place. Carter turned to her. Sexual masculinity surrounded him, everything she craved. She wanted to explore the possibilities his body stored. Forget fighting the urge of wanting him. All bets were off. It was every man and woman for him or herself.

\* \* \* \*

At the sound of the lock disengaging, Carter turned toward the bathroom. Kelli paused in the doorway, her face flushed.

He crossed the room to her. “Kelli, are you all right? Honey?”

She looked up into his eyes. “Yes.” She gave a small laugh.

“Come lie down.” He led her to the king-sized bed.

“No. You sleep on the bed. I’ll take the sofa,” she argued. Stumbling over her feet, she giggled and fell on the sofa. “See, I’m shorter.”

Carter picked her up. She was so light in his arms, and her tiny body fit perfectly in them, he carried her to the bed.

“Here, I already pulled down the covers for you.” He set her on the bed.

“That is so sweet.”

Sweetness had nothing to do with it really. He knew she would be too drunk to do it herself.

“It was nothing. Didn’t I warn you about mixing alcohol?”

“Yep.”

“Lie back,” he whispered. The second she settled into the pillows, she looked up at him with trusting eyes which clenched his heart.

“I’m so embarrassed,” she whispered.

Carter sat next to her. "Why?"

She sighed. "For getting drunk. I wanted this night to be speshel," she slurred.

"Oh." Carter smoothed the hair off her face. Her sparkling eyes, slightly parted lips, and flushed cheeks all beckoned for him to take her. His gaze scanned down to follow the flushed tones of her skin. Her nipples protruded from under the T-shirt. His cock stiffened in that instant. It was almost painful at how fast it happened. He looked away. *You have to do the right thing and be the stronger person right now.* He cleared his throat. "If I'd known you could not handle your liquor, I would have cut you off long ago, small fry." He mussed her hair.

Kelli giggled.

He looked down at her glowing face. The twitch in his shorts gained his attention. "What's so funny?"

"You can't cut me off. You like lik'er," she slurred. Her eyes closed.

Carter laughed. "Good one."

Unbeknownst to her, she pinpointed his exact problem. He wanted to lick her, to taste every inch of her body. Instead, he bent and gently kissed her forehead. *Walk away, now. She is in no condition to give herself to you.* If it were possible, this was a time he hated to have a conscience. He almost envisioned a good angel and a bad angel sitting on his shoulders, arguing who had more control. Finally, the good angel took over and gave him the strength he needed...determination. He refused to take advantage of her condition the way he'd done so many other women. "Good night, Kelli," he whispered.

She gave him a half smile. He started to get up, but she grabbed his hand and pulled it to her chest. His knuckles grazed her nipple; she cuddled his arm close to her heart. "No, don't leave me." She rolled over on her side, pulling him in the bed with her. He couldn't move. The tight grip she held on his arm made it impossible.

"Honey." He softly kissed her cheek. "If you don't let me go, I



will have to sleep with you,” he warned softly into her ear.

“Kay,” she murmured. She released a long sigh.

Carter heard her soft snores and knew she slept. Gently, he tried to pry his arm out of her grasp, but the slightest movements made her clutch it harder. He looked around for something to replace his arm with but found nothing. With no other options, he did the only thing he could under such circumstances—he got in bed with her. He settled in behind her and pulled her closer to his body. He sighed with dissatisfaction. Lady Luck showed she could be a bitch tonight. Here he lay with the soft, warm, delicate figure of this desirable woman and couldn’t have her. Her snores made him laugh.

“Just my damned luck.”

## Chapter Six

Kelly woke up after a restful sleep, refreshed with no aftereffects of a hangover. She yawned, stretched, and rolled over onto her side...and almost jumped out of her skin at the sight of Carter lying next to her. "Carter!" she shrieked.

He opened his eyes and smiled. "Good morning, did you sleep well?"

Confused, she glanced away but caught a glimpse of his sinful grin before she did. "Yes, thank you for asking." *Oh God, what have I done? Did I make the worst mistake of my life and have sex with him? In my drunken state?* She closed her eyes in hopes to recall the previous night. *Think, Kelli!* Dread filled her, but she had to know for certain. She took a deep breath and asked one of the hardest questions of her life. "Carter?"

"I love to hear you call my name first thing in the morning." He rolled over onto his side to face her.

Her stomach went on alert, and her heart skipped a beat. *No, this can't be happening.* "What happened between us last night? I mean, did we...?"

Carter placed a hand over his heart. "You don't remember?" His voice sounded...wounded.

Kelli glimpsed at him, and then laughed at the wounded expression in spite of herself. It was too comical not to be serious...wasn't it? The laughter eased her tension. However, the question remained—did she or didn't she sleep with him? And it bothered her that she didn't remember. The possibility of their sleeping together conjured all kinds of salacious images—a hot,

heavy breathing, naked limbs, and skin-to-skin contact. The wait was almost unbearable.

After a long, quiet pause, Carter cupped his palm over her cheek. “No, we didn’t do anything last night but sleep. I stayed on my side of the bed and you on yours...sorta.”

Relief flooded through her body. To have a relationship based on something real was important to her. A one-night stand would jeopardize the plans she had for her and Carter. “What do you mean, sorta? And by the way, how did you wind up in bed with me?”

Carter sat up, leaned against the headboard, and affixed his gaze on the ceiling fan. “You grabbed hold of my arm, pulled it close to your chest, and then rolled over, dragging me into bed with you...literally.” He told her, mocking her gestures perfectly.

“No I did not!” she defended, her cheeks heating in an instant.

“Yes, you did. You grabbed my arm so hard I feared I’d lose it if I moved.”

Kelli concentrated on the last thing she remembered. “Last night you carried me to the bed.”

“Yes.”

“You played with my hair, and then told me to sleep. Not to worry that you’d sleep on the sofa.”

“Yes. Somewhere between that comment and sleep, you decided to use my arm as a teddy bear.”

Kelli smiled. “At least my virtue is intact,” she stated with a sigh of relief.

“As long as I’m around, and you don’t give in to me, it will remain in that condition.”

Kelli’s eyes watered with the overload of emotions in her heart. By no means was she a virgin, hadn’t been since her high school sweetheart took it on prom night, but while she watched Carter’s reactions for signs of doubt, she saw something worthwhile. His expressive eyes showed honor to his promise. She smiled. “You are the sweetest man, Carter Banks.”

He groaned and placed his finger to his lips for a quick second. “Shh, don’t say that too loud. I have a reputation to protect.” Softly, he kissed her. She tasted only sweetness in the man and for that, she soared with delight.

## Chapter Seven

Kelli looked at the mini Victorian clock on her dresser. “Six thirty! I only have thirty more minutes to get ready.” She placed her hand over her stomach. Nervousness grew steady by the second. Carter would be by to pick her up for their date at seven o’clock, and her body reacted with charged energy. Although she talked to him on the phone and through text messages on a daily basis, tonight would be the first time she actually saw him since she woke up in his arms two days ago. Her heart raced with anticipation to see him. The idea sent warm feelings all through her body.

*Take it easy!* her heart warned.

“He’s not like Larry, who used me for his own mind-fuck games and sex.” At the time of her and Larry’s relationship, she thought he’d be the man she’d marry and spend the rest of her life with....happily ever after! But it was a dream, like all high school girls think of their boyfriends. Little did she know Larry had other plans; he wanted her best friend instead. Three months into her first college semester, he sent her a woman’s version of that proverbial Dear John letter. Anger and hurt consumed her for a long time. Still, to this day, she didn’t know if she was over him or not. His betrayal hurt her that deep. Fear of getting hurt again kept her from involvements with anyone else.

Today, for the first time since that heartache, Kelli had an urge to take a risk with Carter. The magnitude of her attraction for him both terrified and thrilled her. Every time she heard from him, her body tingled with awareness, and at the same time, she waited for the inevitable end. This fear terrified her into sending little messages to her heart to slow down. Exploring the promise of a relationship with

Carter was a big step for her to take, one that might lead to heartache.

“Mine!” She looked to the sky. “God, should I chance it and trust him? In Oklahoma, he’d proved himself a gentleman when he insisted she sleep on the bed, and he would sleep on the small sofa in the suite.” Kelli smiled at the chivalrous gesture. Suddenly, she imagined his long legs hanging over the side of the armrest while his frame tried to fit on the small cushions of the sofa. Kelli giggled. “Carter always makes me laugh. Even when he isn’t around, I laugh out loud like a crazy loon.” *It would be easy to fall for someone like...*

“What am I doing?”

A part of her didn’t want to get into a position where she could get hurt. Her attraction for him was too strong to forget. She needed a distraction. She looked at the clock. “Twenty-five minutes left and I have no idea what to wear.”

The clothes in her closet hadn’t changed the last nine times she looked inside. “Where does Cather plan to take me?” She’d asked him earlier about the dinner plans, but he’d replied with an evasive answer. *It’s better than the buffet two nights ago.* Carter’s surprise with dinner plans accounted for his sense of humor. “That doesn’t help me choose the right outfit, Carter,” she said in frustration. She ran her fingers through the rows of clothes. Unable to make a decision, she placed a hand over her eyes and pulled out the first thing she grabbed. A black and maroon sleeveless tank dress. She stepped into the dress. The black empire skirt hugged her waist, and the dark color slimmed the curves of her hips. The maroon V-neck plunged low between her breasts. Satisfied with her choice, she straightened her posture and continued to look at her reflection. The peal of the doorbell sounded throughout the apartment. Her stomach flip-flopped with excitement. She rubbed the sweat from her damp palms and inhaled deeply to clear her nerves. “He’s here!”

“Hi, Carter!” She heard Tonya greet him. Kelli’s insides jumbled into tight knots.

“Welcome, come on in. Would you like something to drink?”

*Good one, give me a few more seconds to breathe.*

“No, but thank you,” he replied, his voice rich.

*He has such impeccable manners.*

“Kelli’s almost ready,” Tonya informed him. “I’ll go and get her.” A couple of seconds later, a soft tap vibrated on the bedroom door. Tonya peeked her head in. “Kelli? Carter’s here.”

Kelli looked at her cousin. By the look in her eyes, Tonya was pleased with her choice of dress. “I take it you like?”

Tonya nodded and stepped inside. “You look great.”

Kelli smiled. “Thanks. Let’s hope he likes it.” She took one last look at her image and grabbed her small evening bag off the bed.

“I’m sure he will,” Tonya encouraged a second before they rounded the corner to the living room.

The second Kelli saw Carter, she had no doubt he liked the dress, too.

\* \* \* \*

Carter’s leg jerked nervously while he waited for Kelli and Tonya to re-enter the living room. All day long he focused on one thing. *If I don’t see her soon, I’ll go crazy.* That statement became his silent tune for the past twenty-four hours. Work kept him busy to the point that he couldn’t see her for a leisurely lunch, and previous plans with Dex committed him with some gala function for the team last night. For two days, he’d recollected their last time together. The images of her dressed in the long souvenir T-shirt swelled his cock every time it crossed his mind. He would swear on his life that the erection that afflicted him two nights ago may have softened but still stood firm. Sleeping with her in the hotel had been torture. He’d never slept that badly in his life. Her warm, soft body lay next to him untouched. While he struggled to fall asleep, she cradled his arm in her bosom, her heartbeat tapped strong against his wrist, and her soft snores echoed in his head. He wanted to touch her in the places that he

longed to explore, but to take advantage of her would have made her skittish to trust him. Whether it was the actions of a fool or those of a gentleman he let her sleep. And right now he couldn't make the distinction.

Fidgeting in unbridled anticipation, he shuffled his feet to change his one-ankle-over-the-knee position for another. He stood up when he heard the women's footsteps in the hall and found a deep gratitude that his legs held him up. The second he saw Kelli rendered him speechless. If it were possible, she looked more beautiful than the first night they went out. Her dress emphasized the shape of her slim calves. The long skirt hit past her knees. The V-neck top of the dress plunged deep between her breasts, enhancing the rounded flesh. Her hair was pulled back and secured with a simple black band. Little tendrils curled around her face.

His crotch spasms grew intense.

"You look beautiful," he barely got out. Looking at her tonight, he saw something different that he didn't see the other night. Maybe, the look of submission in her eyes. He didn't know for sure, but his body responded to it. His groin tightened. Not only was his desire engaged in pursuing her, but also, something in his heart caught when he gazed at her.

"Okay, Carter, I've been a good girl and haven't pestered you into telling me where we're going. But now, I want to know. Where are we going for dinner?"

Carter chuckled. The sudden image of her wasn't that of a good girl, but as the object of his desires. He envisioned them in bed together, touching, loving, and squeezing. "I want it to be a surprise."

Kelli seemed to ponder his answer for a second. "Will this dress do at least?" She turned slowly giving him a full view.

Carter took her hand in his. "You look radiant and beautiful." He kissed the hand he held.

Kelli grinned. "I just love chivalry. Kissing my hand, opening doors...."



“Saving your virtue,” he added.

Kelli blushed. Her earlier body language told him she would welcome him if he made love to her. Bending to kiss her cheek, Carter caught view of her cleavage and felt his cock ache.

He suffered a little more.

## Chapter Eight

Kelli looked around the restaurant. Elegant paintings of high-dollar art covered the walls. Instrumental music played through hidden speakers. A short line of attentive waiters hovered close by, ready to service the needs of the patrons. Overall, the ambiance was, for lack of a word, expensive.

Kelli's gaze returned to Carter. "Nice place."

"Glad you like it."

Their waiter came by with two wine glasses and a bottle of red wine. He held the bottle out for Carter's inspection. He glanced at it, and then nodded his approval. The waiter poured them each half a glass of wine and left.

Carter picked up his glass. "I propose a toast."

Kelli lifted hers. The sparkle in his eyes told her to be wary. "What are we toasting?"

"That dress."

She looked down at the dress. "What about it?"

"I really like that dress!"

Kelli saw a mischief gleaming in his eyes. The last time she saw that look was at the pool two days ago. He'd caused her to have a short-term loss of speech. Knowing better than to mince words with him didn't factor into what she said next. Curiosity got the better of her. "What do you like about my dress?"

His gaze turned serious. He leaned forward and raised his glass to her. "Taking it off of you later." He gave her a wink and clanked his glass to hers.

Her mouth parted in surprise. Not a sound came out, but the image

his words implied played out in her head.

The chatter of conversations from the other diners surrounded them, but they didn't notice. They sat and looked deeply at one another.

Kelli barely tasted the grilled chicken entrée or the fine wine that never ended. She couldn't keep her thoughts focused for more than five minutes on anything but Carter and his earlier toast. Embarrassed, Kelli diverted her eyes from him when he looked at her and took the liberty of stealing glances at him when she thought he wasn't looking. Rich colors of brown and khaki made him as sinfully decadent to look at as the rich chocolate cake that they shared for dessert tasted. Tonight, his hair fell loose around his shoulders. She wanted to run her fingers through it.

During the dessert course, images of Carter licking crème off her body flashed in her mind. *No doubt about it, I want him, pure and simple.* She tried to speak the words to make known her longing, but she couldn't get them out. She took a sip of the Irish coffee she drank, hoping the extra alcohol inside would give her courage.

When they left the restaurant, neither of them said a word as they walked to the Corvette. His hand heated the spot on her back that he touched, sending a spark of anticipation to ignite inside her. He held the door open for her. She turned to him. "There's something I've wanted to say."

"Okay, what?"

She gazed into his eyes and got lost in the depths of the windows to his soul. The moment lasted longer than necessary. *Now what?* What small bits of wisdom would she say to tell him that she wanted him? Would she look like a woman who didn't know what she was doing? She leaned against the door. He stepped forward in close proximity of her personal space.

"Carter, I..."

He leaned in and kissed her, stopping the momentum of her comment. He tasted of Irish coffee. He stepped back. "Get in," he

instructed.

She didn't bother to retry her statement. Her mind mellowed with his kiss. Once she got in, he shut the door to join her. As the car drove away from the restaurant, her courage to tell him she wanted him stayed in the parking lot along with the dissipating need for him.

During the ride home, concentrating on one particular thing proved a difficult task. Kelli focused her attention on the sound of the Corvette's motor. The vibrations of it hummed through her seat and tickled the spot that desired Carter's touch. She shifted in her seat to take advantage of the vibrations droning underneath her. The intensity of the sensations touched her clit in a way that made her want to jump in the driver's seat and beg Carter to touch her. An agonizing inner battle ensued as she fought the urges between behaving like a proper lady and acting similar to a ravenous tigress that wanted his flesh on hers.

Carter inhaled deeply, and then reached over and placed his hand on her leg. His fingers skirted softly on the hem of her dress before they vanished under the material.

Kelli froze. As much as she wanted him to touch her, to take her and do all the things her body begged for and her mind fantasized, she couldn't find the words to convey her thoughts to him.

The moment of silence didn't matter. Carter somehow knew. He pulled the Corvette into a darkened park, pushed the gearshift into place, and turned off the motor. He adjusted in his seat, unbuckled his seat belt, and then hers. He skimmed his thumb over her bottom lip.

"I know what you want, Kelli."

"How can you possibly know what I want?" she asked, closing her eyes to the delicate touch of his thumb on her lip.

"Because I want it, too."

If his comment shocked her, he didn't give her a chance to say anything. His lips replaced his thumb and gave the most tender kiss she'd received to date. She melted with desire and opened her mouth for him, tasting the breath mint he popped after the first kiss in the

parking lot. His fingertips burned a trail of heated desire from her throat to her breasts. He slipped his hand under the skirt of her dress, and then under her panties. *Does he read my mind and know my lust-filled thoughts?* Once he started cupping her, she didn't care. She lost all focus of the ensuing battle inside her.

The tigress won.

His long, firm fingers opened the folds of her soaking pussy. At his touch, she moaned with pleasure. *His fingers do magical things to me.* His touch set her afire with a blaze so hot she felt it deep in her body, but it didn't burn. It excited her. He slipped the crotch of her panties to one side and her legs opened on their own accord, giving him better access. Her hands covered his to push it away, but instead, she realized she helped him reach the place she wanted him to go. The building of suppressed tension started to ease its way to the top. Her womb contracted with such a force she soaked herself. Something was happening to her and she doubted her every move. "Carter?" She breathed his name and pushed his hand away. She could only imagine the color of her heated cheeks. Automatically, her hands patted her cheeks. They blazed at her touch. She envisioned a beet-red tint, a color derived by her arousal for him, mixed with her embarrassment for the way she reacted to it. In the shadow of the Corvette, his heavy breathing sounded rushed and loud.

"What is it, Kelli?" Confusion laced his voice.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let it go that far." She pulled her panties back into place and adjusted her dress back over her lap. The dark interior became a natural confidante to her. In it, she was blind to his anger and confusion and he to her embarrassment.

"Please don't hate me," she begged. "It's just that you smelled so good and looked so...and I..."

"Kelli." He took her hand into his. "First off, I could never hate you. I, or we, went too fast. We don't have to rush anything. It's up to you."

His words of endearment elated her. She didn't want to rush into

anything. Knowing he didn't hate her made the moment more special. "Carter, that means so much to me. The fact that you are willing to take it slow."

She leaned forward to give him a small peck on the lips, just a brush of hers on his. Except, the tigress inside wanted to feel the heat of his skin on hers, to taste its salty pleasures. The second their lips touched, she lost sight of the goal to slow things down. She nibbled his lips as if tonight she tasted them for the first time. She deepened the kiss. Her hands roamed his body from his waist to his chest. His hard muscles enticed her to feel more and enjoy the exploration. His desires ignited and radiated heat from his pores. She smoothed her hand over his rock-hard shoulders and up his neck until her fingers threaded through his hair. Her hunger intensified. It wanted more. His hand eased up her leg and sent a powerful electric sensation through her. Soft fingertips found the folds of her clit again. She wanted to feel him inside her. Her legs opened to allow his finger to penetrate her swollen flesh. It wasn't enough. Breaking the kiss, she shifted in her seat to better accommodate his probing finger. She faced him now. She thrust her hips up to meet his finger, but he didn't begin to touch the deepest recesses of her desire. He wasn't satisfying the tigress in her. She cupped his hand and opened her legs even more.

His finger stopped moving. "What do you want, Kelli?" he whispered.

She stopped her gentle thrusts. This was the question she both longed to hear and dreaded. Delirious with desire, she chose her next words carefully. Once said, there would be no turning back. She looked deeply in his eyes. "Take me home and make love to me." Her voice came out in gasps.

Suddenly, stillness filled the car. *What did I just say?* The moment stood charged with words that should have told them to stop what they were about to do and take it slowly. Instead, she heard him say exactly what her heart wanted to hear.

"As you wish." He started the car, drove out of the park, and sped

down the road. Driving through the next exit, neither of them voiced a change of heart.

Kelli realized he drove in the opposite direction of the apartments.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll have to wait and see.”

“What?” She sounded desperate.

“It’s a surprise.”

Goose bumps broke out on her skin. Kelli liked Carter’s surprises.

## Chapter Nine

Carter pulled into the parking lot of a luxurious hotel in downtown Fort Worth. The tall building rose farther into the sky than the others on the street and took up a city block. A young valet opened her door while Carter tended to the parking attendant. Kelli waited as Carter handed the keys over to them and then came to her at the curbside. She looked up at the towering building and wondered if her gaze would ever stop at the top floor.

In a matter of seconds, the valet drove the Corvette to the parking area. She looked at a smiling Carter. "This is the Lux Hotel."

"Yep, it sure is." He took her arm and guided her to the hotel's revolving door. "Have you been here before?"

"Yes, but not in the manner you think. A friend of mine had her wedding reception here."

Kelli watched while Carter signed in at the reception desk. His assurance amazed her. He was confident in his surroundings, and knowing what she knew they planned upstairs, he didn't seem ruffled at all. *Must be part of his job as an investment broker.* He handed his charge card to the clerk, and then turned back to her. Their gazes met, and within seconds, desire rushed through her. He stared at her as if he couldn't wait to get her alone, and she creamed in her panties.

"Mr. Banks." Carter glanced away. The concierge smiled. "It will take a few minutes to prepare your room. May I suggest a cocktail for the evening, or you may sit in the lounge if you like."

"Thank you." Carter led Kelli in the direction of the lounge area.

Thankful for the distraction, Kelli didn't dare look around the lobby. She knew with little doubt the people milling around would



know their plans and voice their opinions. *No, do not worry about what other people think. It will only cheapen this special night.* Carter sat next to her on the sofa and casually rested his arms on his legs. Kelli picked up a *Texas Monthly* magazine from the stack on the coffee table. After thumbing through it, she sighed and tossed it back on the pile. Nothing in it held her interest. Still restless, she fidgeted in her seat. Unexpectedly, Carter's fingers entwined with hers, and then closed over her small knuckles. Looking at his large hand, she couldn't wait to feel it on her, stroking her naked skin inch by inch. But most of all, she wanted to feel his long fingers gliding inside her, and then his impassioned body covering hers, filling her to completion with his cock. Her nipples tightened, an unbearable ache formed in her chest.

"Mr. Banks?" A young man called for him from the front desk. Kelli and Carter stood up. "This way, please." The bellhop led them to the elevators and pressed the button for the fifth floor. At the door, he used the card key to open it and let them into the luxury room. The small sitting area, intimately lit with soft lighting, captured Kelli's attention. A small sofa, two chairs, and an end table decorated the area closest to the balcony door. A queen-sized bed dominated the room, further capturing Kelli's focus. Her eyes fixed on the spot that she and Carter would share in a matter of minutes. Goose bumps broke out on her skin again thinking of it.

Carter tended to the bellhop. "Please place the do not disturb sign on your way out."

The young man looked from Carter to Kelli. She blushed. He smiled. "Yes, sir."

The second the bellhop left them alone, Kelli turned to Carter and waited for him to make the first move. Casually, he placed the card key on the counter. He stood gazing at her, saying nothing, but the glare of a controlled man followed her every move. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, his eyes wandered over her body. Yet, he remained composed and still.

“How can you be so calm at a time like this?” Kelli forced herself to stand in one spot and not run to him.

He took a step toward her. “I am waiting for you to give me the go-ahead.”

Her heart raced with joy. She quickened her steps, rapidly closing the distance between them. And then, she threw herself into his arms, surrendering to the restive energy that inflicted her. The kiss summoned a hunger so deep, her knees weakened.

Carter stopped the sensual kiss and slowly kissed his way to her neck. He quietly whispered her name, almost like a prayer. “Baby...Kelli.” He detached her arms from around his neck, which separated the warm heat of his body from hers. She looked into his eyes. Arousal lowered them to half slits. If she had any doubts about what he wanted, this one look told her that he sought her—probably with the same intensely burning desire. She watched him take a step back. His arms extended at his sides.

“Go ahead, make your move,” he whispered. She took a step toward him. “Only, be gentle.”

To her relief, he surrendered all control to her. They would go at her pace, not his. With trembling hands, she pulled his polo shirt out of the waistband of his jeans. She slowly removed his shirt, dragging out the moment as long as time allowed. She savored the touch of his skin with her tongue as her fingertips drew out the removal of his shirt. His cologne filled her nostrils, and the salty sweetness of his flesh filled her mouth with each inch of skin she exposed. She glided the material over his chest. Carter bent at his knees allowing her to pull it over his head.

When he stood straight, she took in the sparse growth of hair on his chest. *Funny, I didn't notice it when we met at the pool.* With light kisses, she touched the delicate joint between his left shoulder and arm. The salt of his body mixed with his after-shave became a delicacy she would hunger after for the rest of her life if she were to never have it again. Her tongue swirled around his collarbone. She

wanted to savor each contour, slope, and flat plane. Nibbling on the soft part of his neck, she felt the light, airy touch of his fingers moving her hair aside. He rained kisses along the uncovered skin.

Small shivers of ecstasy traveled across her aroused body. He pulled her closer, and the quivers ceased to ravage her body. *Please don't stop. Keep the shivers rolling through me!*

"You said earlier." He kissed the soft spot between her neck and ear. "You wanted me to fuck you." His teeth nipped her tender flesh. "Is that still a part of your plan?" His voice was husky with his desire.

"I don't think I said that. I remember saying that I wanted you to make love to me." She rephrased the statement.

Carter's hand reached up and cupped her breast through the top of her dress. She gasped with shocks of pleasure. His hands stroked her nipple, and she moaned. "Like this?"

"More!" Her urgent demand came out in gritted retort.

"How?"

"I hope you can make love better than the meal you paid for earlier." All of a sudden, his hands stopped caressing her. Her body begged for him to come back and continue the magic he created in her.

His brows lowered to form a deep frown. "Uh, you didn't like the meal? It's one of the best restaurants in town..."

Kelli smiled at his defense. His voice trailed off. Then, in a slow, calculated move, she stood on tiptoes and brushed her lips on the pulse point of his throat, flicking her tongue on his skin.

"I thought." He stopped talking.

She planted little kisses down his chest. "Do we have to discuss this now?" she whispered.

"You brought it up."

"I don't care for fancy restaurants."

Carter grabbed her shoulders and widened the distance between them. "That still doesn't answer my question, Kelli."

Feeling frisky and coy, she narrowed her eyes. "What was your

question? I got a little distracted by the topic of our dinner.”

His finger journeyed to the delicate curve of her collarbone, and then slid to her breastbone. Another layer of goose bumps covered the earlier ones. His hand glided a path down to her tingling breasts along the border of the V-neckline. His knuckles brushed her right breast. “What do you want me to do?”

Kelli swallowed the urge to scream for him to take her.

“Say it, Kelli,” he murmured. “Tell me what you want.” He bent and kissed the exposed flesh between her breasts. Now, both his hands traced the plunging neckline.

His whispered encouragement was like a beacon to her desire. Their gaze collided. She conveyed what burned inside her. “Make love to me, Carter. Make me want only you.”

Carter slipped the material off her shoulders and down her arms. He let her dress fall to the floor and pool around her feet. She stood before him in a thong and bra. His strong, steady fingers skimmed over the skin down her arms. In no time at all, he unfastened the hooks on her bra, exposing her breasts to his waiting eyes, which feasted on her flesh, but Kelli didn’t flinch. His fingernails slightly scored her thighs. Her arousal burned just under the surface of her skin. Seconds passed before he removed her panties.

A sudden heat of embarrassment burned her from her neck to her cheeks. Most likely, her skin was a deep crimson color. Carter stepped back and examined her body. She yearned to fold her arms over her naked flesh to hide herself from his penetrating gaze. “Okay, that’s enough.” She looked around for something to cover her body. The awkward moment changed the charged, tingling arousal to a cool chill.

“No.” His hands gripped her shoulders and held her in place. “You have a beautiful body,” he whispered, and then took a step toward her, closing the short gap between them.

“It’s not fair that you still have on your jeans, and I’m totally naked.” She hoped her words sounded light and playful. He smiled

and wrapped his arms around her. The heat of his skin next to hers warmed the chill. She rested her head on his hard chest and began rubbing her cheeks against the sparse growth of hair that tickled her nose.

“Is that better?”

“Mmmm,” she purred. Carter’s roughened fingertips passed over her back to her hips. “...a little.”

“What would make it better?” he asked softly. His fingertips ventured down over her hips to the rounded flesh of her ass. “Maybe this?”

He grabbed her right knee and placed it on the curve of his hip. She looked at him with curiosity. Before she had a chance to ask him what he planned to do, he slipped his finger inside her. Gasping with pleasure, she grabbed his shoulders and her hips pushed up to meet the demands of his invasion. When he used two fingers to open the lips of her wet pussy, she stifled a moan against his chest. He pumped his fingers into her, filling her, wetting her more. She tried hard to hold back, to fight her loss of control, but she failed. Through her lashes, she saw that Carter also battled to keep control of his own reactions. Still, he was relentless.

“Give it all to me, Kelli.” He demanded. His fingers entered her and withdrew, repeating the movement over and over until she thought she would pass out from the pleasure. Dizzy, she hung to reality by a thread. She was so wet with her need for him, soaked actually, that she heard the suction sounds as he penetrated her. A heat wave of indescribable proportions ran through her body. The room spun, and her nipples puckered until they ached.

“I need to come.” She cupped her breasts. Carter gripped her right leg, and then the orgasm came on her fast and hard. Her left leg buckled. She softly whimpered. Then, to her relief, she shattered. Somewhere in her euphoria, she heard herself scream in unbridled ecstasy. Carter continued to finger-fuck her until the first orgasm of the evening dissipated. She fell forward onto his chest. His scent

enveloped her. Sweat, sex, and cologne mingled in a strange, vaporous brew that stimulated her pussy and mind. She became dizzy and wet. She breathed in the smells of his heated body and her orgasm. Lifting her head, she found him leaning against the wall, balancing their weight easily. His breathing came out as erratic as hers. In addition, his heart thumped against her cheek. She gently tugged at her right leg. He pulled his fingers from the lips of her pussy, which got wetter while she continued to ooze. To her surprise and excitement, he tasted the juice on his fingers.

“God, you’re sweet.” He continued to lick.

Watching his tongue aroused her all over again. Curiosity played its part and got the better of her. “What does it taste like?”

“I told you already, sweet,” Carter answered.

She took his wrist and pulled his hand toward her mouth. “Let me try some.” Before she had a chance to lick his finger, he pulled it away from her.

“No, it’s mine.” He sucked his fingers clean.

“It was mine first,” she reminded him.

“I tapped only enough for me. I didn’t get enough to share.”

Kelli didn’t know what to say. She envisioned herself with Carter in a forest next to a grove of maple trees. He tapped her juices to his delight. She shook her head in disbelief at the images.

“What happened? Pussy get your tongue?” A teasing light appeared in his eyes.

“Clearly not as much as yours,” she quipped back, staring at him, her chin notched and her shoulders squared back.

Carter laughed and pulled her into his arms for a long kiss. She tasted her cum on his tongue. The flavors of him and her mixing together into one intoxicated her.

“Did you like the taste of your juices?”

She said nothing. The conversation made her uncomfortable. She wanted to say something witty, but nothing came to mind.

He gazed down at her and smiled. “Maybe eating pussy is an

acquired taste, just for men.”

Kelli was speechless. She didn't have a comment for that remark, either. She turned away from him, but Carter turned her back around. Bending, he licked the space between her breasts up to the base of her throat.

A series of tremors raced across her body and she submitted to their unyielding desire.

He placed his hands on her ass and lifted her, angling her pelvis over his. She wrapped her legs around his waist, straddling him for security. His chest pushed against her breasts as he inhaled deeply. Carter gazed into her eyes. His need reflected clearly. “I can smell your cum.”

She smelled it, too, and wanted another experience with him. He smiled the same wicked, knowing smile, which caught in her chest. “What do you intend to do about it?” she whispered.

“I plan to make you come again—to make you want no other...to make you mine,” he answered. He carried her to the bed, lowered her onto the mattress, and then placed his knee between hers, opening her more. He stroked her cheek with his thumb. “Kelli, I have wanted you all night.” He set his foot on the floor, lifted his arms, and extended them on either side of him.

“What?”

“Touch me again,” he encouraged.

Trembling hands reached for his belt. She unfastened it and pulled it out of the belt loops. She looked at him with questioning eyes.

“Don't stop now! Go on,” he encouraged further.

Her tongue softly skimmed her bottom lip. Lifting her unsteady hands to the button of his jeans, she hesitated. She inhaled deeply and closed her eyes, hoping to calm her tattered nerves. As she released a breath, she opened her eyes slowly and pulled at the button. The waistband of his jeans loosened. She cupped his crotch, hoping it gave an indication to the size of his cock, but it didn't. Her hand moved over to his zipper. She pulled the metal tab exposing him to her eager

gaze. Out of the waistband of his shorts, his cock peeked out at her. Impatient, she removed his pants and boxer shorts. Instantly, his cock sprang out at her. Shocked by his size, she gasped. She reached out and touched it. The velvet softness of the thick shaft fit over the length of her hand. The soft bulbous head was huge.

“Don’t worry, baby, it won’t hurt you.”

“I know,” she started to agree, but doubt filled her. “How do you know?”

“I’m assuming you’re not a virgin.”

“How do you know that?” He knelt down before her and took her hands in his. “God, your hands feel warm. I know mine may feel like blocks of ice.”

“Shh. I know because I made sure of it earlier. What do you think that was over there?” He nodded toward the wall.

Her response was immediate. “Wonderful.”

He chuckled. “Yes, but it also made you wet. When I enter you, I’ll make you wetter still. Trust me, you will be able to take me, and in doing so, the penetration will not hurt you.”

She nodded, knowing he wouldn’t intend to hurt her. Her body screamed for more release. Leaning forward, Carter met her halfway. Their lips infused with another hunger-invoking kiss. She became lost in his passion.

He moved to stand but didn’t break the kiss. His body pushed on hers, nudging her to lie on her back. Logic went out of her mind the second the soft mattress met her back. As his hard, hot body touched hers, nothing else mattered but holding him. His fingers penetrated her, teasing her already stimulated nerves. Her breathing quickened. “Carter!” She called his name. Seconds later, the rapture of her emotions burst forth in shades of passionate purple.

“Good, baby,” Carter whispered in her ear. He placed his large hands on her thighs and pulled her left leg over his right hip. His thick cock entered her, stretching the delicate inner channel at the entrance. The pain caused her a little alarm. Suddenly, he stopped.



“What is it?” she asked. He said nothing. She looked down where he joined their bodies, his shaft still exposed to her eyes. She glanced up to see into his. The anguish on his face almost frightened her. “Are you in pain?”

“God no! This is the look of satisfaction....pleasure.”

“If pleasure looks like that, why are you not moving?”

The muscles in his left bicep bulged as he shifted his weight. Using his right hand, he grabbed her under her right knee and pushed out, opening her wider to accommodate him more. He thrust his hips forward, burying his cock inside her.

Kelli almost screamed out with the sharp pain of her expanded skin, but instead, she gripped the mattress. The pain was quick, over in a matter of seconds after his penetration. She took deep breaths and counted to ten. “I didn’t consider there to be pain since I’m not a virgin.”

Carter lay completely still. “How many lovers have you had?”

“Not counting you?”

“Yes.”

“One.” Realization overcame her. Since Carter became her second lover, her vaginal canal wasn’t open enough to take him. His thrust stretched her open, making the fit complete.

“Are you all right?” he asked softly while he kissed her forehead.

“Yes.”

“Is it still hurting?” He readjusted her legs, pulling them higher above his hips.

“No, just don’t move for a second.” He moved. She inhaled deeply to combat the shock of the anticipated pain. Gently, he retreated, but the head of his cock remained inside her. She felt every inch of him pull through her canal, and as quickly, she felt the long shaft push into her. He rocked into her setting a steady motion. She gasped at the pressure that built up inside her. Her rapid breathing became erratic, the onslaught of her orgasm increased quickly, her core muscles tightened, and her body shivered. She looked up and

saw sweat beading off Carter's brow.

"Don't hold back on me, Kelli. Let it go, babe."

"I want to come with you," she cried, fearing that little bit of conversation would send her over the edge.

"Yours will set mine off. Don't wait." He moaned suddenly.

"I think we should..." Her body tightened. She tried to regain control and slow the impending eruption. Out of nowhere, she buckled. The fragile control she fought for spilled out of her in a flow of liquid evidence, along with his.

\* \* \* \*

Breathless from his orgasm, Carter watched as hers tolled through her body. He liked her expressive eyes, most especially in her aroused state. They made her feelings easy to read. In her eyes, he saw the moment she lost power to hold it back. They brightened with her passionate release. The fire of her discharge on his sensitive head fueled his. Carter rolled over and pulled her into his embrace, thankful that she wasn't a virgin. He didn't want her to wake up in the morning with any regrets. However, the length and thickness of his cock made it difficult for her to take him. He had second thoughts about her virginity until he opened her. Stretching her was like breaking a membrane that waited for only him. He knew that wasn't the case, but he also knew that in the morning she would be sore.

Nevertheless, their relationship was now forever changed. Being inside her, opening her as he did, made her his.

## Chapter Ten

The aroma of fresh brewed coffee hung in the air and tingled her senses, beckoning her with a silent chant. “I need caffeine!”

Tonya dragged herself out of bed and stumbled toward the dining room, her eyes felt heavy and gritty from lack of sleep. She had been up most of the night writing a brief for a client and barely got an hour of sleep when she heard Kelli returning from her date. A subtle movement caught her attention. She turned to see Kelli sitting at the table. The sunlight beaming from the window illuminated her cousin’s dark red hair. A touch of fiery flames formed on the tips of her locks. She looked positively radiant. That and the added lack of sleep, plus getting up at the crack of dawn to see her cousin’s satisfied expression only darkened Tonya’s mood.

“You look happy,” she said with a mild sneer. Kelli’s nonverbal response set her mood on edge. She turned to face her head-on, and by her cousin’s dreamy eyed expression and smile, Tonya could only ascertain one thing. *She had a good night!* Tonya rolled her eyes and feigned disgust. “You look like you got laid.” She commented on her way to the slow drip of the brewing coffee. Kelli snorted. Tonya grinned in spite of her irritation. She reached above the coffeemaker and opened the cabinet door, took out a yellow mug, the biggest one she could find, and poured herself a cup of coffee. After a sip, she breathed deep appreciation to the miracle of coffee. Turning to the table, she almost laughed at her cousin’s lost-in-thought expression. “It must have been some night.”

“It was incredible!” Kelli’s eyes were bright.

Last night must have brought her great pleasure, and she beamed

because of it. Out of nowhere, her mood changed. The bright-eyed girl vanished, and a regretful woman replaced her. "And now that it's over, I can't see him anymore."

Tonya coughed and sputtered on the sip of coffee in her mouth. She spit it back into the cup. *Did I hear that right?* To stop a relationship with a man she was obviously wild over was out of character for her. Not that staying out all night was in character for her cousin.

"Why? What happened?"

"Nothing." The look on her cousin's face revealed disappointment. "Everything." Kelli bowed her head.

"Don't hide from me, Kelli. I'm not here to judge. What happened?"

"I only slept with him, that's all." Kelli placed her hands on her face.

"That's a bad thing, how?"

Kelli burst into a fit of sobs. "I feel so stupid and cheap," she cried. "It's not like me to unceremoniously jump into bed with a man." She sniffed and wiped her tears.

"I agree with that. It isn't like you."

"I wanted to take it slow on the first date, but we stayed at a casino in Oklahoma. Last night, I don't know what came over me. I was like a woman willing to give him a blow job for a Big Mac."

"I wonder why you gave in to Carter so easily, especially after what you went through with Larry."

"Tell me when you find the answer," Kelli whimpered.

"I think it's intrigue. You were so intrigued by Carter's good looks, caring nature, and of course, your immediate sexual attraction to him that you acted on those feelings last night."

"Oh, God! I was a brazen hussy!"

Tonya grabbed Kelli's hand. "First off, no one says hussy anymore."

"I was being nice!"

“Regardless, and may I add you weren’t alone in that bed. Now, without giving me a blow-by-blow, no pun intended, tell me what happened to make you think this is over.”

“He won’t want to see me again,” she moaned and laid her head in her opened hand.

“You don’t know that for certain.”

“Why would he want to see me after I gave him what other women are willing to give him?”

“What exactly? A night of passion?”

“No, sex on our first, n–no, second date. It doesn’t matter if it’s the first or second. It was too soon, and I didn’t even show any resistance. In fact, you might even say I instigated the whole affair.” Kelli looked at Tonya with earnest eyes. “But Tonya, I couldn’t help myself. He looked so damn good, and he smelled even better, like a clean spring with an outdoorsy smell, and when he kissed me—” Kelli stopped talking.

“Kelli, don’t leave me hanging at the good part. Geez!” she sipped her coffee, and then looked at her. “What can I say to you to make you feel better? I get the feeling you want assurance, but what are you wanting it for?”

“I don’t know!” Kelli cried.

“What did you feel last night?”

Her eyes glazed over again. “I felt the earth move. I felt the awakenings of something deep inside me,” Kelli declared.

Tonya’s heart squeezed a little. She knew exactly how her cousin felt.

“I was way out of my league to think I had a chance at a relationship with someone as wonderful as Carter.”

“Oh Kelli, don’t worry about last night. It will work itself out.” She gave her cousin a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Did you take extra precautions?” Kelli nodded. “Good. I’m so glad that Carter is levelheaded enough to take care of the two of you,” Tonya complimented off-handedly.

"I just hope that his hanging around celebrities hasn't made him as jaded as they are about women." Kelli sniffled.

Tonya thought about it for a second. "He doesn't strike me as the love-them-and-leave-them type. But he does hang around with celebrated sports figures." *How much did you tell Kelli about yourself last night?* "No, he's just as cautious as you are in the relationship department."

Kelli stared at her in disbelief. "Why? He is so perfect. What would he have to be cautious about?"

Tonya looked for the best way to explain the life of Carter Banks. "Let's simply say, he is afraid of getting his heart broken."

Kelli looked at Tonya in skepticism. "That Carter worried about getting his own heart broken never crossed my mind."

"Although you make him out to be your hero, he is human, Kelli."

"I know that! But I can't believe that someone as devilishly handsome as Carter. And as virile...and sweet." Kelli swallowed. "And...sexy."

Kelli's eyes became dreamy again. "Well, he has to be."

"Why?" Kelli snapped out of dreamy state and focused her gaze on Tonya.

"Well, because of whom he is." Tonya hated being in this predicament. She treaded lightly, wanting to give Kelli some insight on Carter but not betray his and Dex's confidence.

"He is the one that women use to get closer to Dex."

Kelli seemed to mull over that idea. "I guess that makes sense," Kelli conceded.

"Good. Honey, I have to go now. I want to get some sleep before the pool party later on this afternoon." Tonya stood up from the table and took her empty cup to the kitchen sink. "Good night! Or should I say, good morning." On her way through the dining room, she turned to Kelli. "Look Kelli, there's more to Carter than a superficial facade. What you think he takes for granted is what he finds endearing the most."

\* \* \* \*

Kelli sat in the dining room thinking about Carter. So many emotions filled her. Shame and mortification for her slutty behavior filled her with regret. Sleeping with a man on the second date and the guilt of wanting to have him inside her again battled for top priority of her promiscuous actions. *Last night was the best sex I'd ever had.* Carter made her come more than once, and each time built to something special. Being with him changed her. She was now, officially, a multi-orgasmic woman, and surprisingly, she reveled in the status. Phantom finger touches lingered on her body, and the taste of his lips still remained on hers. She inhaled the scent of his cologne. Lifting her blouse, she smelled where it clung to her clothes. If she didn't stop thinking about Carter, she would have an orgasm in the dining room.

"Thank God we used protection along with the pill." It was not only smart to take the necessary precautions but necessary. The idea of dealing with an unplanned pregnancy on top of a new job would've stressed her out. Not only that, but there were STDs she didn't want to have to worry about.

*I'm so glad that Carter is levelheaded enough to take care of the two of you.*

*What had she meant by that? How well did Tonya know Carter in the first place?* Kelli noticed him sitting alone at the pool that day, and it didn't seem odd to her at all. Tonya encouraged her to approach him. *Why did the crowd he hung around with keep him at a distance? What was it about him that appeals to me but not to them?* To imagine Carter hanging around the celebrity lifestyle was out of the ordinary scheme of things. He seemed perfectly comfortable in the midst. "Maybe that's the connection. He's like me."

The fact that she fucked him so early into their relationship didn't bother her as much as the feelings she developed the morning after.

She felt like a fool. Something alerted her to take this relationship slowly, but last night she didn't listen to that inner voice, and now she may have lost her only chance to do something right. "He won't want to see me anymore." Kelli prepared herself for the broken heart she would have to deal with in the near future—again. She didn't want to face another broken heart. This one might break her spirit.

\* \* \* \*

Carter walked into his office all smiles. He had woken up in the hotel suite holding Kelli. *She looked so adorable.* Her body still smelled of her sweet orgasms. Her tousled hair fell over her face. Carter eased it back to watch her sleeping. Her lips beckoned him to kiss her. He leaned in and brushed his lips against hers. Immediately, she woke up and smiled at him.

He set the leather briefcase he carried on his desk. He switched on the computer and took a quick peek at the stocks on the NASDAQ. He grinned at the open points of the day and closing points of the stock prices from the day before—*steady increase*. He checked the messages for the day and made a mental prioritized list when Dex's long frame filled his doorway, interrupting him. The grim face staring at Carter wasn't the happy-go-lucky Dex he saw last night before he left for his date. He wondered if Dex's night was as good as his.

"Can I help you?" Carter asked with the steady tone he used to de-escalate temperamental clients.

"That fucking stock I invested in a year ago is taking a big shit."

Telling by Dex's tone of voice, Carter knew he expected an explanation from him about the declining stock. "And you are yelling at me because I'm a good sounding board, right?" Carter went back to his notepad and made a few more notes on some stocks he was looking at for his own portfolio.

"You told me that investing my money would be lucrative," Dex challenged.



“Yeah, but I didn’t tell you to blindfold your eyes and shoot darts at the stock page to pick the companies you want to invest in.”

Dex shrugged off the comment. “I was bored,” he defended in a petulant tone. He walked into the office and plopped down in the chair in front of the desk. “So, how do I get out of it?”

Carter looked back at the computer. The stock that Dex referred to had been under scrutiny by the government due to suspicious irregularity with the company’s financial report. The small airline company was susceptible to a hostile takeover. He turned to his friend. “I think you should count it as a loss and pull out while you can.”

Dex nodded in agreement. “Is that what you did for Tonya’s cousin? Pull out while you could?”

Carter calmly put down his pen and gave Dex a hard look. He didn’t mind sharing the conquests of a good fuck with his friend, who was usually right there with him, but Kelli was off-limits, and he wasn’t about to share the intimate details, not on this one. He needed to set the boundaries now.

“I think that would best be left unsaid.”

“Well, she’s kinda freaked out about it,” Dex informed him.

“What do you mean?” *Last night was one of the most remarkable nights I’ve had in a long time. It was wonderful, in fact. Where is her sudden regret coming from?* She hadn’t said anything to him when he left her at the lobby of her apartment building earlier this morning.

“She thinks she’s moved too fast, and you would rather date someone who isn’t so, let’s say, quick to ball you.”

“I’m not sure I like being the gossip mill’s topic of discussion for the day.” He knew he didn’t like his best friend telling him how to date women when he was the stud of the hour for the male population of Fort Worth, Texas.

“You’re not. Just cluing you in.”

“How in the hell do you know all this stuff?”

“Tonya called you this morning. When I told her you weren’t

there, we talked, which led us to speculate about her cousin's relationship."

Carter fell back into his chair. He gave Dex a long stare. "You do realize that her relationship is also mine."

"Yep." Dex sent Carter a sheepish grin.

Carter thought about what his friend said. "How in the world would Kelli or Tonya think that of me? I never treated her with anything but respect." *Well, maybe toasting to taking her dress off was a bit much. That would be treating her like a...* Suddenly, he knew how Kelli came up with that thought. She didn't exactly fit the groupie profile. She was a teacher and unused to the world of athletes and super-egos. *Of course, she would have regrets this morning. She woke up thinking she was no more than another piece of ass. Of all the stupid, idiotic, non-thinking...*

"Carter? Carter?"

Carter looked up at his friend. "What?"

"What are you going to do about her?" Dex repeated.

"Nothing but see her again." Carter became uncomfortable having his friend dissect his romantic relationship.

A look of concern crossed Dex's face. "Well, take it easy. She doesn't sound like a woman that is willing to be in the fuck 'em and leave 'em category."

Carter smiled. "Yeah, and that makes it all the better for me." Suddenly, he had a plan. He was going to surround Kelli with love.

Dex smiled. "What should I do about this stock?" He handed a copy of his stock portfolio to Carter.

Although Carter was attentive to the business at hand, his mind wasn't far from Kelli and his longing to make love to her all over again.

## Chapter Eleven

The quiet apartment echoed with a deafening sound. Her heart floated with happiness, and then plummeted with despair. “God, have I truly ruined everything?” She hit her bowed head. “I’m so stupid!” The vibration of her cell phone broke through the sounds of silence and resonated like a jackhammer on the coffee table. She picked it up, looked at the LED screen, and wondered about the unfamiliar number.

“Hello, this is Kelli,” she answered.

“What are you doing later this evening?” Carter asked.

Her heart raced a notch. Her hands fidgeted with the hem of her shorts. Kelli never expected to see or hear from Carter again. Especially this soon after their last night. “Nothing. Why?” She didn’t think twice to spend more time with him. Her insides quivered with hope. *Does he want to see more of me?*

“I thought we could have dinner together.”

“I’d love to,” she answered a little too quickly. *Don’t blow it, Kelli.*

“Great. I will see you at, say, six thirty?”

“Sounds great. I’ll see you then.”

“I look forward to it.”

She heard the soft click of the cell phone’s disengagement of the call. Her excitement built up and then exploded in a wild whoop of cheers and hurrahs. “Yes, Yes! Thank you, God, yes.” Kelli danced around the living room. “I’m gonna see Carter tonight!” she sang. Her heart fluttered with the euphoria of walking on air. “I can’t wait!”

\* \* \* \*

The ping of the doorbell echoed in the apartment, and Kelli scrambled on the slick tiled entryway to answer the door. Giddy with excitement, she couldn't get there fast enough. Her feet slipped, and she almost crashed into the wall. Steadying her footsteps, she tiptoed to the door, and then looked through the peephole. Butterflies filled her stomach while she eyed Carter standing on the other side. Her heart soared with the reality that he was actually at her door. She paused a moment, taking the time to admire him through the vantage point. Smiling, she watched him fidget until he finally leaned against the doorframe and waited for her. Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, she opened the door with a smile. "Hi."

Carter stared at her with a longing that matched hers. His intent gaze caused a jittery, tingly, drop-your-gut-to-your-knees feeling to run through her body. Suddenly, her palms turned sweaty.

"Where are my manners? Come in." Kelli felt like a dunce for leaving him standing in the hallway. He smiled, kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Hello." He entered the small area inside the doorway. The heat that radiated from him surrounded and warmed her with desire. His scent filled her nostrils. The intoxicating smell reminded her of fresh air, clean, lush fields, and man. Longing engulfed her. *I'd like to jump his bones right here on the ceramic floor.*

He continued to the living room. She shut the door, watching the way his jeans molded the shape of his ass.

He turned to her. "How was your day?"

She walked to where he stood. "Good. I didn't do a whole lot. I'm taking it easy and hanging out before I start interviewing for different schools in a few weeks." She gazed into his handsome face. Their sexual energies wrapped around her, mesmerized her in a strange, euphoric atmosphere.

"You look beautiful."

His soft words broke the spell she was under and brought her

around to reality. She looked down at the simple black tank dress. *Every time we go out, I manage to wear a dress. Does that mean something?* Maybe, it was a subconscious decision, a sexual, sensual, bold way to communicate that she wanted him. Kelli smiled at the significance of such a gesture.

“Thank you.” She continued to stare at him, unmoving, feeling the atmosphere come alive with unseen forces that guided her hand to rest on his arm. The solid mass under her fingers warmed her cool hands. She cleared her throat. “Would you like something to drink?”

His gaze responded to her touch and then her question. His eyes grew turbulent with changing emotions. “Yeah, whatever you have,” he answered at last.

Kelli didn’t attempt to move to get their drinks. Her contentment easily fulfilled to stand in the living room with Carter and continue looking at him. *What would happen if I turned away right now? Would I get these feelings again, or would he disappear, never to be seen again, like a dream my mind made up to entertain my erotic fantasies?*

In her mind’s eye, Kelli could see his naked body coming to her, feel his lips on hers, and then on her skin. Her mind recognized the scent of their arousal, blending in with the images of her mental dream. His tongue licking and bathing her clit. An immediate heat collected between her legs, triggering a sharp pang deep in her womb. The crotch of her panties became saturated, and a faint musk of her feminine arousal wafted in the air filling her nostrils. Kelli hoped that Carter was close enough to know what her body wanted but dreaded it at the same time. By the sudden awareness that appeared in his eyes, she found her answer. *He knows!* Neither spoke—silence filled the room as each one looked at the other, yet both of them could feel the spark of electricity sizzling in the air between them. She felt a slight burning in her cheeks. *Why is it that he makes me feel like a little schoolgirl?*

He squeezed her hand, gaining her attention.

“Go ahead and make yourself at home while I get our drinks.” He let her hand slip out of his. She walked around the counter into the kitchen, feeling Carter’s presence close behind her. He stopped at the bar, pulled out one of the barstools, and sat down.

Kelli felt the change in atmosphere on her skin. His body’s close proximity no longer warmed her and the giddy feelings when he was close no longer bubbled inside her, all because a breakfast bar separated them. She turned to him and found him watching her. It felt oddly familiar to have him near. “I missed you,” she said in response to the realization. She’d missed him all day.

“I missed you, too. I thought about you all day.”

She smiled but still felt shaky inside. She gazed at him a moment longer. *What’s happening to me? More importantly, how long will it last?* Kelli pushed the latter thought out of her mind. She wouldn’t dwell on the negative energy that tried to seep into her happiness. She grabbed a beer for him and a wine cooler for herself. “How was your day?” Making idle chitchat would help to calm her nerves.

“It was all right. Win some, lose some.”

When she returned to him, she stood on the opposite side of the breakfast bar and placed the beer in front of him. She reached up to open the bottle with trembling hands and prayed it wouldn’t become a big mess to clean. Carter took a drink of the beer. New tingles of want ran through her body so fast it overwhelmed her with the need to kiss his lips. Instead of reacting to the urges inside, she turned away from them. “Let’s have a quick snack,” she stated and walked back to the fridge. She opened the door and searched on each shelf for something—anything to keep her mind off him and the impure thoughts running through her head. The chill of the fridge minimized her lust, but it still lingered, smoldering beneath the surface, ready to ignite with a spark.

\* \* \* \*

Carter saw the slight tint of blush that colored her cheeks. Too engrossed with the sparkle from her eyes, he didn't say anything about the cause for her coloring. Kelli bent over in front of the opened refrigerator, and he lost all train of thought. The hem of her dress didn't hit much past the cheeks of her ass. Her smooth, shiny thighs tempted him to reach out and touch them. Carter took advantage of the bird's-eye view on his perch, filling his head with all sorts of fantasies.

He imagined her bent over the island, her dress hiked above her waist, her panties down around her ankles, and he inside her, rocking into the deep recesses of her heated core. His balls tingled.

She pulled a small tray of meats and cheeses from the bottom shelf and set it on the island.

"Do you..." Suddenly, the ability to speak left him. He cleared his throat before he tried to speak again. "Do you need help?"

Kelli looked up at him and smiled. Her green eyes showed an innocent and seductive woman as they gazed at him. He knew how seductive she could be and how sweet she tasted. And he craved her more than food.

"No, I got it." She put the tray together, unaware of his watchful eyes upon her. She bent again to retrieve a bottle of white cream dip. The material of her black dress clung to her ass. He didn't see a panty line through the fabric. Taking a closer look, to make sure he wasn't seeing things. His mind went wild thinking of the possibilities under the dress.

*A G-string?*

*No, a thong!*

*Oh shit, no panties at all.* He could feel his cock straining against the fabric of his jeans. Damned thing didn't believe what his eyes saw and his brain registered it wanted to look for itself. The room suddenly got hot. Carter started sweating profusely under his collar. The idea to strip out of his shirt and feel the cool breeze of the air-conditioning on his heated body sounded better and better with each

passing thought. “Did you leave the stove or oven on?” He had to find another source for the sudden heat wave. Carter flapped his shirt collar in a repeated motion. *Man, that air-conditioner better kick on soon.*

“No, I didn’t cook today. It’s too hot,” Kelli answered. She opened the last package of meat.

“You got that right,” Carter murmured to himself. He took a sip of beer and watched her hands open the package with care. Suddenly, he pictured her small hands on him, roaming softly against his body, heating it to the bone. He could almost feel her hands on his bared flesh. He inhaled deeply and released it slowly to calm the urge. He distracted himself with sports statistics and the titles to this week’s top twenty songs. He even thought of huge, indestructible icebergs in Alaska. Large masses of floating ice that could sink a ship if it were to get too close, but also large enough to cool his heated loins. His eyes traveled up her body, and then connected with hers. She looked at him smiling.

“I hope you’re hungry.” She walked around the bar carrying the tray of snacks, basket of crackers, and her drink.

*When did she finish? When did she fill the basket?* He couldn’t remember. He was too enthralled with her ass...and icebergs.

“You have no idea.” He took her drink from her hand and looked at the blush colored liquid. He considered downing the contents but thought better of it. Mixing alcohol wasn’t such a good idea.

He followed her into the living room, silently moaning inside as he gazed at her heart-shaped ass clad in the black, shiny material. He sat their drinks onto the coasters he found placed around the glass-top coffee table, sat on the couch, turned his head to offer help, and literally came eye-level with the right cheek of her ass. He moaned inwardly with the battle of urges building inside him. One part wanted to be a gentleman, the other insisted he take a touch and caress her ass. He cupped the air around it—what could he do to restrain himself from biting her cheek? Closing his fingers into fists, he considered



putting them under his legs. Instead, he grabbed the beer in front of him and took a long drink. He almost drank the contents of the beer at one time, but he kept his hands busy and to himself.

Stimulated nerve endings tingled under the surface of his skin. Kelli placed a hand on his shoulder, and his insides unraveled like a tight spring. She gracefully kicked her shoes off and set them beside the sofa. He looked down at her feet. Her tiny toes and small feet were dainty. *As a woman's feet should be.* She rested her hand on his knee and eased down to sit on the floor in front of him. She reached over his leg and picked around the tray of snacks.

"Since you're in a dress, wouldn't you rather be on the sofa? I'll sit on the floor."

"What, and have you look up my dress? Perish the thought."

Carter laughed at her upturned nose. *She has such a cute little nose.* He covered his heart with his hand, pretending to be chivalrous and hurt. "You know me so well." He took a piece of sausage from the tray and popped it in the creamy dip. He looked at the nice arrangement of pepperoni, smoked sausage, and yellow and white cheeses. *This isn't enough for me. Even with the crackers, I won't be satisfied. What a statement of words and facts.* He wondered if she made alternate plans. "Are we still going out?"

"If you want to."

"Good. This chick food isn't going to fill me up."

Kelli reached for a small piece of cheese and stopped. "Chick food?"

There was something about her response that alerted him. She acted as if he insulted her. He had to do some quick talking to get him out of trouble. But words failed him. No matter what he said, he would find himself deeper in a hole he would dig himself into. "You know what I mean."

She laughed, and then licked some dip off the small disc of sausage. "I thought we could get to know one another better. If that's all right."

“Sure.” He took a sip of beer. His eyes rested on hers for a quick minute, and then turned away.

“So, how is the world of business?”

Carter smiled, happy that she remembered he was involved in the business world. “Still no recession to report.”

“Good.”

A few minutes later, the idle chitchat turned empty—so had the snack tray before them. The issues at hand were still unsettled. Carter silently watched her as she stacked their used napkins and empty bottles on the disposable tray. She straightened from the task, and he stood up with her. She took a step toward the kitchen, but he caught her arm and brought her around to him.

“Kelli, I think we need to talk.” She looked deeply into his eyes. He noted how her they shifted side to side. She only did that when she looked at him with purpose. He smiled as he felt his heart swell against his ribcage with her irresistible charms. There was nothing about her that he didn’t like.

“Okay.” She set the trash back on the table and stood before him. The lustful spark in her eyes earlier was gone, replaced by a guarded look. Her arms crossed over her chest proved it.

It bothered him to see this side of her. Maybe Dex was right. She thought the worst of his intentions. She took a step away from him, but he wasn’t going to let her think that of him. He pulled her into his arms. “Kelli?” He kissed her softly, and then his passion ruled his actions. He kissed her with a hunger so strong he tasted the passion on her tongue. It tasted like a mixture of hot desire mixed with a decadent sweetness.

Kelli’s hands grasped his shoulders, taking fistfuls of his shirt. She pulled away and looked into his eyes. “What was that for?” She took a step back and tenderly touched her lips.

“I wanted you to know that I was thinking of you even after the intense romp last night.”

Kelli blushed at his comment. “I hope you mean that.”

He softly touched her cheek with the back of his fingers. "I do. I don't want you to regret or freak out about anything that went on or goes on between us," he said gently.

Kelli gnawed on her bottom lip, her eyes narrowed, and looked at him, mulling something over in her head. *Maybe something I said.* He held his breath.

"Who have you been talking to?"

*I knew I fucked up before I finished the sentence.* He couldn't stop the comment once he voiced it. He'd hoped she wouldn't catch on to what he'd said, but she was quick. He rubbed the back of his neck. What was he to do? Reveal that Dex was his source? "Does it matter?"

"Who, Carter?"

Kelli's hard stare leveled him. He said nothing, afraid of her reaction. "Some teacher. Don't you mean whom?" His calm demeanor seemed to agitate her further. He saw her face getting red, and her eyes narrowed sharply.

"Don't correct me," she shouted.

Carter took a deep breath. When he let it out, the silence in the room was almost deafening. Suddenly, his best friend's name tumbled out of his mouth. "Dex."

"Dex?" Kelli stood back and searched his eyes. "This isn't happening. How would he know? Only Ton..." Then her expression changed, turning into one of dawning realization. "Tonya!" Her actions and ranting mixed to create a hostile creature which fascinated Carter. "I'm going to beat her until she's a bloody pulp. I'll kill her in her sleep, drag her body out under the cover of night, and bury her in her mother's backyard. Under the peach tree," she continued, unaware Carter stood dazed behind her. Kelli seemed sure she could get away with killing Tonya. Carter worried she may actually do something drastic to her cousin. He had to say something.

"Kelli, don't be mad at Tonya." Carter came up behind her and pulled her against his chest. She stiffened under his hold. "She wasn't

thinking when she told Dex. I'm figuring she thought I would have told him about last night." Kelli struggled to pull away, which annoyed him. "Stop struggling. You aren't going to walk away from me, not when you are this upset."

"Let me go, Carter!"

"No, I won't let you go, so calm down."

Saying that to her was the worst thing he could have said to her. She spun around on him so fast, his grip loosened on her body, and his hand grabbed the tender part of her right breast. Her eyes blazed with so much animosity he had no choice but to let her go.

Carter couldn't blame her for her ill feelings. Her trusted friend and family member betrayed her. Gossiping to God knows whom about their relationship. Now, anger added itself to the list of emotions that ran through her body and collected with the heat of his words. Unfortunately, anger won out.

"You won't let me?" Her voice hissed. "Who do you think you are?" She jabbed a finger into his chest. Before he had a chance to answer, she raved on. She turned red. The ranting grew faster, to the point that Carter couldn't get a word in edge-wise, much less understand a damn thing she said. He did try to calm her down verbally, but her anger increased.

"You will not dictate to me what I will or won't do. I am much stronger than you think. For your information, I have no problem facing sh...stuff on my own. I always have, always will." Her head notched up so high her nose turned red.

"Don't be a ball breaker. I'm only saying you don't have to face anything alone anymore," he yelled back. "Stop fighting me." He took a step, closing in on her personal space. She took a step back. He took a step forward.

"I don't need anyone to help me get through shit." She calmed down for no longer than a second. "Won't let me." She glared at him. "I don't need a buffer!" she yelled back

"Don't you see I care about you and what happens to you?" If he

were honest with both of them, he would admit that he was more than a little in love with her.

She pushed against his chest. He braced his stance. The small push bounced her off his massive body. Unsteady, she stumbled in the direction of the wall. Carter reached for her. She jerked out of his grasp and bumped against the wall. He closed in on her. “You are so stubborn.”

Two seconds later, mere inches separated them. They heaved with heavy breath, staring at one other with anger simmering under the heat of passion. A heartbeat later, she threw herself into his arms. Kissing him with a craze that only love or anger could withstand.

## Chapter Twelve

The heat of his body ran through hers like a wildfire in August. She could feel his hands caress her body. He filled them with her breasts, and then his fingers moved down to her ass, caressing and rubbing his hands over each cheek. *No, you can't jump into bed with him again, she told herself. What about control?*

"Carter." He looked deeply into her eyes. She saw his unquestionable desire. *God, he has beautiful brown eyes.* "I..." She couldn't get the words out. Softly, her right hand brushed his cheek.

"What, Kelli?"

She shook her head.

Carter didn't move. He kept his eyes on hers. "Tell me," he whispered through gritted teeth.

"Would you mind if we started this thing between us again? Take it slow?"

Carter dropped his hands at his side, and then put them behind his back. "Not at all."

Kelli watched him. His struggle to maintain control reinforced her strong desire for him. She asked so much of him, to start all over at square one. Nevertheless, he said he would and for him to back off that simply meant the world to her.

He took a step back, and his body heat no longer warmed her. She felt the chill of loneliness. His hard, buffed body wasn't there to comfort her. *Fuck that!* She needed him and refused to do without so she could save face. Taking his hand, she led him toward the hall. "So much for slowing things down." She guided him to her bedroom and closed the door behind them.

“Kelli, are you sure?”

“I have never been surer in my whole life.”

Some small portion of the earlier hostility still lingered. “Then, what was that question about? Are you trying to make me crazy?”

Kelli took a step toward him. “No, I just changed my mind.”

“Women!”

Carter took her into his arms. She felt his strength and the reason behind his firm grip on her. He was paying her back for the frustration and confusion she caused them. His aggressive behavior normally would’ve offended her, but not now. It proved he cared. She luxuriated in it.

He bore down on her. His lips moved against hers like a crazed and starving man. His kiss excited her. She felt his hands roam her body. His fingers lifted the hem of her skirt. She didn’t hesitate or let her prudish side get the better of her. She willingly gave Carter the lead and followed his silent commands. She turned around, putting her back to his chest. With calm hands, he stroked her arms, gliding up and down until they rested on her shoulders. He gathered her hair and placed it over her left shoulder. His thumbs softly grazed the skin of her spine as he took hold of the zipper’s pull-tab and zipped it down her back, kissing and nipping every exposed vertebra he came across. Goose bumps broke out on her skin, and then more goose bumps piled on them until she shivered in his arms. Carter eased the straps of her dress off her shoulders and guided the dress down her body, letting it fall around her ankles.

The intensity of his need, conveyed in his touch, aroused her. Kelli glanced at him over her shoulder. His eyes half closed with wanting, but she saw the depths of his desire in his eyes. He wanted her as much as she wanted him. “Carter,” she whispered, not bothering to hide her desperate need for him in her trembling voice.

“Shhh,” he growled in her ear. “I will take my time, and you will enjoy it.” He nipped her ear. His hands skimmed her sides and tickled her ribs. Her body jerked. His strong arms wrapped around her waist

holding her still, while his warm, long fingers teased her nipples. His palms shifted upward, causing her breasts to lift. She held her breath while he played with the front clasp of her bra, and then bared her breasts. She grasped the denim material around his thighs. Her head fell back just under his shoulder and her hairline rested against his lips.

He kissed the skin laid bare before him and then gently nipped her shoulder up to her neck. She moaned and almost flooded her panties.

“Are you wet?” His voice penetrated the allure of his touch.

Kelli felt small as his large hand skimmed over her stomach to the waistband of her thong. Under the bands of her panties, he smoothed his palms over her bare ass, pulling her panties down to the middle of her thighs, giving his hand enough room to brush the inside of her thighs.

“It amazes me that you know what places to touch and when.” His thumb grazed the lips of her pussy. It felt like a white-hot charge enveloping her whole being. She wanted him to get inside her. His finger penetrated her. She arched into his hand. She needed his finger deeper. His touch was just out of reach of that one spot. She moved in closer to his body, giving him better access to pleasure her however he wanted. The heat and muscles of his chest against her back was pure bliss, another indulgence she didn’t want to miss.

“Oh, yes. You’re so wet.”

The husky tone of his voice made her aware of his own need. Kelli started to turn and face him.

“No, don’t move.”

His gruff order only stoked the passion in her. “Carter, I want you in me.”

“Don’t worry. I plan to be inside you, but first...”

Carter’s hand skimmed down her body. Taking her panties in his hand, he pulled them down to her ankles. Once he got on his knees, Kelli felt his tongue on her skin. He tasted the back of her knee and licked up her thigh to the right ass cheek. Fingertips skimmed over the



moist collection on her pussy. His full attention to her left cheek, his tongue continued to savor her body. He inserted his finger inside her and then out again. She moaned her pleasure. Abruptly, he stopped. She felt him lift her leg and help her step over the pile of material at her feet. He stood up, placed her right leg over his right knee, and shifted his position enough to open her wider. He inserted his finger inside her pussy and withdrew the slick coating of her heated need. He cupped her left breast while his finger stimulated her clit. She fell back against him in surrender.

“I want to bend you over and make love to you until you scream my name,” he growled.

She hissed at the gentle tug of her nipple.

He lifted and carried her to the bed. When he set her down, his hand started to cup her pussy. But Kelli reached out and pulled his shirt over his head. She gazed at his firm jaw, then his large neck. His chest rose and fell with each breath. She bent and took one of his small nipples into her mouth and scraped it between her teeth. His body jolted, and he pulled her from the bed and hard against him.

“You’re killing me,” his gruff voice whispered in her ear before he devoured her lips in a hot, lusty kiss. Her moans of need beckoned him to take her. He placed her back on the bed, kept his gaze on her as he unfastened the button of his jeans. Slowly, he pulled the zipper down over his engorged erection. He stepped out of the jeans and gave her a moment to look before he joined her on the bed.

Kelli’s gaze followed the thinned-out trail of chest hair to the narrow line between his legs—like an arrow pointing the shortest route to his pleasure. “I love this buffed body.” Her fingers shook with exploring touches down the hair-lined path over his abdomen to his balls. His enlarged cock looked magnificent. The long, massive shaft awed her. She couldn’t believe that the huge, bulbous head actually fit inside her. She smiled as she cupped his cock into her hand.

“Hello,” she whispered to it, and then softly stroked the head with

her thumb.

Carter said nothing. His cock flexed in some mock understanding of what she said.

“It’s been waiting for you all day long,” he whispered.

“Ah! What’s been on your mind?” she asked it innocently.

Carter folded his arms over his chest. Patiently, he stood waiting for her to stop making conversation with his cock. “This is awkward but interesting.”

She glanced at him. “What’s his name?”

“Whatever you want to name him.”

“How about *Cocky*?”

His eyes narrowed. “Why *Cocky*?”

She looked at the member in question. “Because he has some set of balls.” She bent over and kissed *Cocky*’s head.

Carter laughed, and then bent to kiss her lips. She kissed him back with all the passion she felt in her heart. When she pulled back, she saw in his eyes the same wanting. His cock twitched in her hand. He crawled on the bed between her legs and softly nudged her with his shoulder until she lay on her back. “What new things do you want to show *Cocky*?”

“Maybe I can show him this.” She rolled over, pushed him onto his back, and then turned to kiss *Cocky*’s head. When she pulled it into her mouth, her main goal was to show *Cocky* something new.

\* \* \* \*

Carter’s senses reeled as she took his cock into her mouth. She licked, sucked, and used her teeth to gently nip him, sending his mind whirling in a fog of white swirling light. He couldn’t breathe. He twisted thick strands of her hair into his fists. “Sweetheart, if you don’t stop, I’ll come in your mouth,” he warned, but she didn’t stop. In fact, she sucked harder. Suddenly, it was too much and already too late for him to hold back. He’d given her fair warning, but she ignored

him. His massive release left him little energy to fight. He felt the firm suction of her mouth wring out every drop of his cum inside her heated mouth. She swallowed until he had nothing more to give.

When he recovered from his spectacular orgasm, he saw a dazed look on Kelli's face.

"I have never done that before!" she exclaimed.

"I warned you." Although he warned her, he was ecstatic that she gave him the best head he'd ever had. Having a woman—his woman—swallow him was the biggest thrill a man wanted to experience.

"I know." She rolled onto her back.

He pulled her into his arms. "Why haven't you ever done that before?"

"I never trusted anyone enough to even try."

On the inside, Carter flinched. He caressed her cheek with the soft pads of his thumb. Gazing into her eyes, he slowly bent to her lips, all the while wondering if he should tell her the truth about his past and his intentions. Looking into her eyes, he decided to wait.

"What should we do now?"

She took his hand and guided it to her pussy. His gaze captured her shyness. "It's your turn."

Carter pulled up onto his knees and positioned himself between her thighs. His hands grasped her legs under the knees and bent them high up to her hips. In this position, she lay open, showing every beautiful fold to his eyes. Gazing at her naked body, "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." Inside the triangular thatch of hair, he saw the dewy nectar of woman waiting for him to sample. "I want you to..."

"Come on your face?" She finished for him.

"Exactly." He inserted a finger deep inside her pussy. She bucked up.

"Then do it right," she managed between gentle pants of breath.

"I don't do anything half-assed."

She raised herself up on elbows and watched his finger enter her, and then glide out again. When he added a second finger, Carter heard her moan of approval. She glistened with a slight sheen of sweat. He lowered his head. She opened her legs wider for him. The moment his tongue touched her, she bore down on it. He had no doubt in his mind she was his. He sucked on the swollen nub of her clit and watched her. Her head fell back. His teeth teased her bud, skimming over her with gentle pressure. His tongue went inside her, and she rose up on her hands to get a better view. Her eyes locked with his. He reached out and took her right breast in his left hand. His thumb pulled at her nipple, arousing her further while she still looked on with growing tension and less curiosity. He continued to eat her until the tremors in her body built to an all-time high. The power of it made him aware she was on the downhill battle to erupt. "Let it go, baby." She fell back on the bed, panting. He pinched her nipple and scraped her clit with his teeth at the same time. Suddenly, without warning, she screamed and released a shattering orgasm, coating his face with her cum.

He watched her regain control—first of her breathing and then of her shuddering body. He wiped the last bit of cum off his face. She opened her eyes and blushed.

"What is it?" he asked of her new bashful coloring.

"I've never done that before," she said shyly. She grabbed a pillow from the bed.

Carter took it away from her. "No, don't hide from me." He liked to see her blush and her eyes after she came. "What have you never done?" He placed the pillow under her head.

"Come like an erupting volcano that had laid dormant for most of its life. Was that too much?"

He lay above her. "I can't get enough of you, baby. No matter how much I get, it is never enough." He eased the head of his cock into her.

"Hello, Cocky." She breathed a sigh of complete satisfaction and surrender to Carter.

\* \* \* \*

Carter made love to her two more times before he finally let them get some sleep. "I think I could fall for you."

At his admission, a thrill of her emotions ran through her. She didn't have any doubt he knew she loved him. *He is so different from Larry.* But fear of another heartbreak kept her from giving him more. The idea of his using her for a little while until something better came along scared her. She once believed relationships lasted forever--that's all she wanted. Not too long ago, she learned the hard way that they didn't. "I think we should let it happen, not rush it."

He cupped her cheek in his palm. "I think that is an incredibly wise decision." He pulled her close and kissed her soundly.

Kelli rolled and cuddled against his chest. Feeling his strong heartbeat and muscled heat lulled her to relax and linger on the threshold of sleep. Next to her, his body relaxed.

"Good night, Carter."

"Good night, Kelli," he mumbled in her ear and hugged her one more time. Seconds before she fell asleep, she thought she heard him say, "I love you."

In a natural response, she said the first thing to come to her head, a message from her heart. "I love you, too." She laced her fingers through his.

*Do I dare hope that maybe me and Carter will work out? Time will tell.*

## Chapter Thirteen

Kelli looked at the clock and counted the minutes until she saw Carter again. *Thirteen minutes*. Her heartbeat sped up. She looked forward to the time she'd come to expect him to knock on her door. If there was a time when she had been happier, it was in her distant memory. In the three weeks since she and Carter became lovers, she found herself falling in love with him more and more each day. She did fight it at first. She kept telling herself to take it slow, but her attraction for him won out, along with their common attachment to the team from the sidelines. He loved her. He said so. In her heart, she knew it to be true. His loving words were so endearing she welled up with tears when she thought about it. Believing in love again, Kelli sighed with anxiety. First, before she could find complete happiness, she had to tell him a secret.

The doorbell rang. She took one final calming breath and braced herself for the challenge that awaited her on the other side of the door. The dreams of a future come true.

"Hi!" she greeted with a sigh of happiness. His handsome face smiled in satisfaction of seeing her. His dark chocolate eyes registered appreciation to see her. He came forward, and immediately, his firm, desire-invoking arms wrapped around her and she felt safe within them. She held on one more second longer than usual, enjoying the feel of his body next to hers.

"What is it, Kelli?" He pulled her back. "Is everything all right?"

Her heart fluttered with growing love. She pulled him close again. "Yes, I'm all right. It's just that I have to tell you something. I think you have a right to know. A secret I've been keeping."

He pulled her back. His eyes showed no signs of fear or disappointment. Only strength. "So, tell me this big secret," Carter encouraged.

Kelli swallowed a large lump that formed in her throat. "Carter, come on in and we'll talk." He was all she looked for in a man. He was gorgeous without question, honest to a fault, a gentleman with her in public, and a hot, confident, giving lover in private. Even with all that, what she loved most about him was he didn't play games with her mind.

*What you see is what you get.*

"Carter, you know I wasn't a virgin when we met." Kelli lowered her eyes, avoiding any lingering disappointments she might see in his eyes.

"Okay, so you dated other men."

"No, Carter, I only dated one other man before you. I thought he and I would be married."

Carter took her hand. "Kelli, you don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do, Carter. I love you." She looked at him. "In fact, I love you more than I ever loved him." She saw the cocky smile part his lips. *Only Carter would smile at a serious moment like this.* It was sort of a male-satisfied grin. "He and I had our first sexual encounter on my prom night. We stayed together believing we would get married in the future."

"But?"

"Well, about December, Larry, my ex, broke up with me. I was devastated. I kept wondering what had I done that was so wrong? One night I got up the courage to ask him. He told me that he had been sleeping with my best friend, and she was pregnant."

"Oh, Kelli." Carter pulled her into a loving embrace. Peace and love surrounded her. "How lucky for me! Besides, he didn't deserve you."

Kelli smiled, and then looked up into his eyes. "Carter, you are so sweet."

“No, only a man in love. And Kelli, I love you, too.” He leaned into her and settled a kiss softly on her lips.

Kelli would believe he put every ounce of love he felt, into that one kiss which bonded her feelings of security for a future. “I think I’m ready for you to meet my parents.”

Carter took out his cell phone and handed it to her. “Call them now.”

She looked down at the proffered phone. Her eyes lifted to his, with a shaky smile, she hesitated for a second longer. “I hope you’re ready.”

Ten minutes later, she hung up the phone with a renewed excitement. “They’re excited to meet you.”

He took her hand in his, kissed it softly. “I am, too.”

\* \* \* \*

Kelli woke to the familiar ringtone on her cell phone. She reached over to the nightstand, but the phone wasn’t there. Rising upon her elbows, she looked over the side of the bed.

Nothing.

Frantically, she looked for the ringing phone. “Don’t shut off yet.” She stopped rustling the bed covers and listened for the next ring. She turned her head to the muffled sounds under Carter’s pillow. Lifting it, she found her phone. *How did you get over there?* She questioned a nanosecond before she answered the phone on the last ring. A quick glance at the empty place next to her reminded her that Carter had left early. The past two and a half weeks, Carter had slept at her apartment while Tonya stayed with Dex. Those nights were the best sex she had ever had. And the time needed to know Carter better.

“Hello?” She expected Carter’s voice to greet her but was pleasantly surprised to hear her brother’s voice instead.

“Hello, kiddo, did I wake you?”

“Hey, Joshua! No, you didn’t wake me. How are you?”



Kelli lay back on her pillow and pulled Carter's over her. The scent of his cologne clung to the pillowcase. The shampoo he used and their orgasms lingered on the material of the sheets. She closed her eyes, longing for his touch.

"Kelli? Kelli?"

Her brother's voice zapped her back to the phone call. She felt embarrassment burn her cheeks. *Does he know what I'm thinking?*

"Kelli? Are you there, honey?"

"What? I'm sorry. I must have dozed off."

Kelli couldn't believe her behavior! She had to focus on her brother, not on Carter and her insatiate sexual appetite for him. She hadn't talked to Joshua in weeks. "Josh, the last time I spoke to you was three weeks ago. The afternoon we met for lunch and I told you about Carter." Joshua had said he was happy for her and Carter, but being the overprotective older brother he was, Kelli knew he wouldn't be happy until he met Carter face to face and got to know him better. "God, has it been that long since we last saw each other?"

"Yep," Joshua answered. "About that."

There was a lull in the conversation.

"Kelli, we need to talk."

"Okay, but I have a job interview in an hour. Can we talk after?"

"Yes, that will be fine."

Kelli suddenly got a bad vibe from Josh's silence. An awkward foreboding settled in the pit of her stomach. "Josh, what is this about?"

"It's about Carter. There's something I think you should know."

"What...what is it?" The shattering feeling of alarm suddenly crept over her.

"I'll tell you when I get there."

Josh hung up the phone before she was able to question him further. She felt bile burning in her throat, and dread filled her. Her brother's words echoed in her mind.

"Josh's meddling. This isn't happening," she whispered.

Kelli jumped out of bed and showered. Josh wasn't going to spoil her day. Once he arrived this afternoon, she would deal with him once and for all.

\* \* \* \*

Kelli's image popped into Carter's mind for the millionth time today. He couldn't stop thinking of her, and the more he tried to concentrate on something else, the quicker the images came. His anxiety to see her later increased. He tried to blame it on the secret he planned to tell her. "Today, everything will be on the right track. I'll tell her the truth about my money, and we'll have nothing more to stand in our way." He didn't want to leave anything to chance. *This is the time to make a clean start with her before meeting her parents.* Thinking of the future and all its wonderful possibilities, he couldn't wait to see her tonight and make plans.

He reached for the phone but set it back on the desk charger without dialing. He'd done that several times today. Every time he thought to call her and tell her he loved her, something came up or he decided against it. Whether it was to keep her interview uneventful or anticipation of telling her his feelings in person, he'd changed his mind. "Why didn't I call to wish her luck this morning? Or leave a note? Because I lost track of time, and it got away from me."

A strange feeling filled his gut. One he never experienced before, at least not in his recent recollections. *Something's wrong.* He felt like his whole world was about to end. The more he sat around waiting to leave work, the higher his dread. He looked at his watch—four o'clock. He'd expected her to call and tell him how her interview went. *Something isn't right.* "I have to get to her." He switched off his computer. "Why couldn't she stay home and chill out? Why did she have to interview for a job today?" Looking to the heavens, he implored the only one that could help her. "God, don't let anything happen to her."

The moment he left work, Carter jumped into his truck and then raced through town to Kelli and Tonya's apartment. He felt the nervous vibrations building up in his gut the closer he got, and then the traffic stopped to a standstill—the interstate a virtual parking lot. Carter swallowed down his panic. Slowly, he made his way to the scene of the accident that had blocked the road. The small compact car looked nothing like Kelli's. "Thank you, God, for not letting her be in the accident." The panic he felt earlier subsided. However, he still had to see her. Carter whipped in and out of the rush hour traffic in an effort to get to her.

The second he pulled into the apartment complex, he ran through the courtyards. He pulled open the entry door to the dormitory and trotted through the lobby to the elevator.

"Slow down!" the security guard yelled, but he ignored him. He wanted Kelli, and nothing, or no one, would stop him.

In his eagerness to see her, Carter banged on her door. The sound of the disengaged deadbolt caught his attention. This was it.

Kelli opened the door, but instead of a smiling face, his heart sank when he saw her eyes glistening with tears. When she looked at him, her face was hard and impassive. Her body shook with the rage that quickly filled her gaze.

He stepped into the doorway "Kelli, are you all right?" She wouldn't look at him in such a harsh way if everything were good. "What's happened?" He tried to wrap her in his arms, but she pushed him away. "What?"

Kelli stepped out of his reach. "You own the Fort Worth Rebels?" She shouted.

"What?" Carter couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Who told you I own the team?" *No doubt about it, fate is screwing with me. How did she find out?*

He looked around the room. For the first time, he noticed they weren't alone. Behind Kelli stood Tonya and some man he had never seen before. He didn't know what emotion to act on first, her anger at

his mistakes or his jealousy for this man in her apartment.

He reacted to the immediate potential fallout of his secret coming to light. He looked at Kelli. "I can explain everything."

He turned to Tonya. "As my legal representative..."

"Save it, you fucking coward," Kelli roared. "I know everything, even that my cousin is your lawyer."

Carter looked back at Tonya. She nodded but said nothing. If Kelli learned the truth from someone other than him or Tonya, it would be a matter of time before the public would hear of it through the media. Then, the team would know he was the owner. Everyone would view him differently.

He turned to Kelli. "Who told you I owned the team?"

"Fuck you," she hissed.

Carter didn't expect her to use language like that in front of other people. She'd always acted like a lady, not some brazen redneck with a temper from hell.

"That's what I like about you, Kelli. Your ladylike manners."

"Go to hell!" Kelli stomped to the door and opened it. "Get out! I don't ever want to see your lying face again. Fucker."

Too stunned to react, Carter stood in the living room of the apartment and gaped at her. He couldn't believe what was happening. She broke up with him and ordered him out of his own building, not giving him a chance to make it right. The earlier happiness he felt and the plans he wanted to make were slipping through his fingers.

"Kelli, we are going to have this out. I will not let you turn away from me without giving me the chance to explain."

"Okay." She walked back to him. "What was the trip to Oklahoma?"

Carter had to mentally take a step back. What was she talking about? "I would call that a good time," Carter defended.

"Did Dex actually give you a comp card, or did you pay for the whole thing?"

"Yes. Dex gave me the card." He hadn't lied about anything. He

just avoided telling her the whole truth.

“And the Corvette? The night at the Lux Hotel where did that come from?”

“The car belongs to Dex. Kelli, I’ve never lied to you.” He took a step closer. “I kept...” She rolled her eyes and turned away. “Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving,” she answered.

He grabbed her by the arm and spun her round to meet him. “You will not go anywhere until we have this out.”

“Excuse me. You need to get your hands off her.” The other man, who remained quiet all this time, finally spoke. “You don’t have a say in the matter. If she wants to leave, she can.”

Carter glanced at the man. “Who are you?”

“I’m Joshua Godfrey. Sergeant Godfrey of the Arlington Police Department.”

“What right do you have to butt into this personal conversation? My personal conversation?”

Joshua crossed the tile floor at a slow pace, his movement filled with restrained anger. “I’m Kelli’s brother.” The tall, muscular man with reddish blond hair, blue-green eyes, and rounded face favored Kelli but not that closely. “I’m the one who told her about your secret.”

*So, that was how she found out about the money.* Of all the rotten fucking luck, she had to have a cop for a brother. “So, Officer Brother.” His sarcasm took over. “Do you run background checks on all your sister’s boyfriends, or am I just the lucky one?” Carter sensed his anger coming to the surface. He had to control it if he didn’t want to antagonize Kelli further. Couldn’t she have asked him anything? The mistrust she harbored for men was deep, but to have her brother look into his past was worse.

He turned back to Kelli. “Did you have me investigated?” Carter saw the hurtful look in her eyes at the accusation.

“I didn’t tell my brother to investigate you. If you must know, I

thought I could trust you.”

Carter wanted to take back the remark and tell her the whole truth. She would understand why he did it. Except pride wasn't going to let him air out their issues in front of the others. He was a private person, after all. The fact they were family didn't matter.

“Let's go into your bedroom, so we can talk there.” Carter took a step toward her.

“No. I won't go anywhere with you. You don't have to worry about keeping secrets from me any longer. You and I won't be seeing each other anymore to have secrets.”

Carter felt his stomach fall to his knees with the blow of her comment. Heartache crept in to claim a huge spot in his heart. The bottomless pits of anguish replaced the fear and dread he felt earlier. Realizing his mistakes too late added to his emotional stress. He should have trusted her enough to tell her he was rich in the beginning. On the other hand, how could he? She liked him, no, loved him, when she thought he was more like her. A blue-collar worker, out of place at the team's living quarters. Now, she knew the truth about him, and she misinterpreted his actions.

“I tried to tell you but—”

Her eyes brightened with unshed tears. “It's too late.” She went to the foyer, picked up the bag in the hall.

“Where are you going?” His world crashed around him.

“Since you won't leave, I am.” She looked at Tonya. “I can't believe in anyone here.”

“Kelli.” Tonya choked on her name.

Carter took a step forward, but Kelli raised her hand. “Don't come near me. I will not be responsible for my actions.”

“Kelli, you can't run from this and put it off. We will have to talk about it eventually. Don't punish me for mistakes others have made.”

Her eyes narrowed at him, regret showed on her face. Carter hated that look. “How could you use something so private against me? Larry was a bastard who used me and dumped me without a backward

glance.” Her hurt changed. She seethed with unspent anger. “My one mistake, besides you.” She pointed at him. “Like a trooper, you showed your true colors. Carter, I never thought you would be so cruel. But there’s a lot about you I didn’t know.”

“I don’t want to talk about your past Kelli, but how can I let you walk away from me?”

Kelli didn’t respond to the comment. She looked at Joshua. “Come on, let’s go.” Kelli led her brother out the door, and with a click of a knob and a simple turn of a key, she was out of his life.

Carter hurried to the door. “I’ve got to stop her.”

Tonya thrust her hand to his chest. “Carter, that isn’t the way to get her back.” Sadness covered her face.

Out of desperation came a small glimmer of hope. “What is the way to get her back?”

“Be there for her. Don’t crowd her. Give her room. When she’s ready, she’ll come to you.”

“It doesn’t make any sense that she’d leave the apartment. Why?”

Tonya sobbed. “She found out that I work for you. And now, she thinks I kept the truth from her.”

Well, in a way, she had kept the truth from Kelli. Carter had to agree with her on that one. “Oh shit! This is all my fault.” If it was possible, he felt worse now than he did before. “But you had no choice. You signed a confidentiality clause.”

“She thinks I should have told her because—” Tonya hiccupped on her tears.

“You’re family.”

Tonya nodded. “And you were lovers.”

Carter pulled her into his arms. *If only I told her the truth last night like I had planned. Then she and Tonya wouldn’t be fighting now.*

“Sometimes, family is overrated.” He surmised out loud.

## Chapter Fourteen

Josh drove his car further away from Carter, and Kelli sat in silence. She felt so many emotions run through her at once: hurt, anger, and unworthiness. She had tried in all possible ways to be everything to Carter—a friend who didn’t judge him for his lack of money but embraced him for his efforts. She told him she would love him no matter how little he had.

*Little? He’s one of the richest men in the city. He duped me into believing otherwise. I gave him all I had, for what?*

“You okay, kiddo?” Josh squeezed her shoulder.

“Josh, stop calling me that. I’m not a little kid.” Josh rested his hand on her shoulder. The closeness of strength got the better of her and held back the tears. “I need a drink.”

“I can hook you up.” Josh took the next exit off the highway and pulled into a convenience store past the exit. He pulled the car in gear and left it running while he went inside. “I’ll be right back.”

The windows behind the burglar bars bore civic advertisements of garage sales and lost pets. Neon signs advertised the names of beers available for purchase. Kelli watched as Josh grabbed a twelve pack of beer and carried it to the counter.

She recalled the day she met Carter by the pool. He had offered her a Budweiser and cut his hand on the broken bottle getting it for her. She smiled, and then her tears fell anew, breaking her heart. So much had happened since then. The latest development was most overwhelming. He turned out to be a rich man. “What hurts me more? The money? No. The money isn’t the real issue.” In her calmer state, she realized what bothered her. His lack of trust and understanding in



her.

“Damn it, Carter. Why couldn’t you just trust me?” She cried. “I feel like a part of me has died tonight.” In her pain and anger, she lashed out and hit the dashboard with her fist. “Ow!” She screamed and grabbed her hand. Her knuckles swelled almost immediately, and she held it to her chest and rocked.

Josh opened the back door, set the bag behind his seat, and grabbed one of the beers before he closed it. Josh got behind the wheel. “So, you still need that drink?”

“Nope.” Her pain tightened her words.

Josh glanced at Kelli. “What is it, honey?”

“I think I broke my knuckles.” She held up her hand to show him. “See?”

“What? How?” The knuckle of her middle finger swelled to unimaginable size. Small drops of blood trickled down the back of her hand. “Kelli!” he moaned. He threw the car in reverse and peeled out of the parking lot, and then turned the corner almost on two wheels, racing in the direction of the hospital district. “Damn redneck woman.”

“Fuck you,” Kelli shot back, holding her injured hand next to her broken heart. “I feel defective as it is.”

\* \* \* \*

The emergency room buzzed in chaos. Josh had never paid much attention to the ER while on duty. He usually came when the staff called him to take domestic violence or sex offense statements. The doctors on call had the patients in another room while they waited for him.

Tonight, being on the other side of the counter didn’t please him at all. His patience grew thin waiting in line to be seen by the admitting clerks. His little sister’s hand swelled two times its original size, and to further complicate matters, she was crying. He couldn’t

differentiate between the sources of her tears. *Was it the pain of her injury or her broken heart?* All he could do was hold her while she cried and wet his T-shirt with her tears.

He saw a face he recognized. The kindly, grandmotherly type that catered to him every time he visited the hospital. "Come with me honey." He led Kelli to the registering clerk. "Gladys, can you get me through?" he asked.

"Officer Godfrey, what brings you by tonight?" she asked when he and Kelli sat down at her station.

"I brought my little sister in. She hit the dashboard of the car and broke her finger."

The woman, G. Middleton, gave Kelli a quick glance. "I'll see that she gets in right away. Let me get some information." After the admitting questions, the medical assistant met them at the entrance. Mrs. Middleton buzzed them in without delay.

"Thanks, Gladys!" Josh said to her before he let the door shut. He saw her wink, and then heard her call her next patient over.

Josh and Kelli followed the medical assistant back to a hallway of rooms.

"Officer Godfrey!"

Josh turned his head to the direction of the voice that called his name. "Hey, Glenna."

"I was told you came in and thought I'd come check out the situation."

"You are an angel in disguise. I was tempted to pull out my weapon and start shooting," he warned of his impatience.

"You don't have your weapon on you," Kelli reminded him. "Idiot," she called him under her breath.

"Doctor Glenna Roberson, meet my sister, Kelli Godfrey. My little sister." Josh knew that would rile Kelli up more. Her sarcastic tone needed to be squelched. "She is going through some..."

"Josh!" Kelli warned with a glare.

"Personal problems."

Glenna looked from brother to sister and then smiled. "Come on, let's take two."

Josh was acutely aware of treatment room two. "Funny, that even in my personal life, I seem to find my way to this room."

"I figured it to be the most private for this situation as well. Plus, I had no idea what you'd bring in for us."

He looked at Kelli to explain. "More times than I want to admit, the staff escorted me here, it being nearer to the back of the ER department. I tell you, the things people do to one another always amaze me."

Kelli nodded in a robotic response of understanding.

"I see that you have an injured hand." Glenna read from the chart.

Kelli turned her head and let Josh handle the details of explanation.

"I went ahead and ordered an X-ray for her. Sit tight until they come for her and read them."

"Will do."

In less than three minutes, the technician came in and took Kelli for X-rays of her right hand. One and a half hours later, she returned, depression settled on her face, but at least she wasn't crying.

"You doing okay, kiddo?"

"Josh, stop calling me that." Kelli got out of the wheelchair and sat on the bed. She lay back, bracing her hand against her chest.

Josh picked up the thin sheet and covered her with it. "You like this guy a lot, don't you?" He knew he treaded on uncharted waters. Kelli's emotional breakdown wasn't something he saw on her most of the time, and he didn't like it.

Kelli sat silent for a moment. "No, I don't like him a lot, Josh. I love him."

"But?" Josh coaxed her to continue.

"He lied to me."

"How?"

"He made me believe in...that he was something he wasn't. "

“What was that?”

“...an outsider in that world he lives in. Like me with Tonya. I wanted to believe *we* had something special.”

“You didn’t have something special?”

“Joshua, I started to believe in love.”

“Oh Kelli.” Josh sat on the edge of the bed, pulled her left hand into his. “You have to let Larry, and what he did to you, go. He was an asshole. Carter is a private person, but his keeping his financial status from you is no cause for corporal punishment.”

“Larry hurt me bad when he slept with Leslie.”

“I remember that day all too well.” He thought that was the worst day of his and Kelli’s lives. To come home and find her in tears that night made him angry. He had always been protective of his little sister and of her best friend. To know then that Leslie would be the one to hurt her the way she did, he would have sent her away himself. “Yes, some best friend. I agree he hurt you, but Kelli, you never reacted to yours and Larry’s breakup in the manner you are dealing with you and Carter breaking up. You got pissed, yeah. You got even by surviving without him and Leslie for that matter. Yet, with Carter, you are crying, emotionally distraught, and worst of all, you are in the ER. There are worse men than Carter Banks. His secret was about his money, not in the way he felt about you. Trust me!”

“What is it he feels for me?”

Kelli’s sarcastic answer did not deter her brother’s honest opinion.

“He loves you.”

A soft knock sounded on the door. Josh turned in time to see Glenna enter the room. He saw her eyes light up, and it stirred him. Her blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail and soft brown eyes were kind and approachable. She looked at Kelli and then at Josh. “I have some good news.” She flipped the chart open and scanned her notes. “The X-rays of your right hand indicate a fracture but no break.”

Josh felt relief flood over him. “So, what are you going to do for her?”

“The required treatment is a shot of Demerol for her pain and a soft cast to keep the knuckle immobile.”

“That’s it?” Josh had a sudden burst of angry emotion. It wasn’t unusual for his outbursts. He had them when he left the ER. There were usually no witnesses to his tirade. “All that waiting for a soft cast? Are you fucking kidding me?”

Glenna let him rant for a second longer. “Josh, suppose I give you a shot?” she suggested in a calm voice to his ranting.

“I don’t need drugs, lady.”

“No, I was thinking tequila. About ten o’clock tomorrow night?”

Josh was quiet for a second. He narrowed his eyes, taking note of her shy gaze. “Doctor Roberson, are you asking me out on a date?”

“Are you fucking deaf or stupid?” Kelli quipped. “Of course she is. Dr. Roberson, when and where?”

“Kelli!” Josh scolded her.

“Well, while you two pussyfoot around your dating issue, I’m in pain. So, accept already, get her number, and the time to meet her.”

“Tomorrow night...meet me here in the ER,” Glenna stumbled out.

Kelli pointed to Glenna. “Now, get my shot order.”

At Kelli’s forceful suggestion, Josh had a date for tomorrow evening, and she soon felt the wonderful effects of Demerol.

Suddenly, the world wasn’t so painful and lonely after all.

\* \* \* \*

Josh pulled into the garage of his townhome. He softly nudged Kelli’s sleeping body. “Kelli, we’re here, sweetie.” Unable to wake her, he raced around to her side of the car and then lifted her out. He carried her up to the door, and then brought her into the house. She didn’t wake for one second. He gently laid her on the spare bed and covered her with the blanket. He placed a gentle kiss on her cheek. “Good night, little sister,” he whispered.

“Good night. I love you, Carter.”

Josh looked down at her. His heart broke for his meddlesome nature. He was a great detective and a great brother. Tonight, he hated that the two things he did best caused his little sister so much pain. “Honey, I’m so sorry to have brought this sorrow onto you.” Josh gave her cheek a gentle, brotherly touch. “If there is anything I can do to make it better,” he whispered.

He hadn’t intended her to reply. But, softly, she touched his arm.

“I need to leave for awhile,” she whispered.

Her voice sounded drowsy. He detected her pain. Her intent green eyes stared at him with fixed determination.

“I’ll make the arrangements.” He squeezed her hand.

She gave him a little smile, closed her eyes, and was asleep again in seconds.

Josh watched her for a moment. His little sister was a good person who deserved the better things in life. Not the hurt and despair of what he had seen in his. There were worse things she could do than Carter Banks.

“Sorry, buddy, but her well-being comes first.” Josh stood up, left the room, and let her sleep.

## Chapter Fifteen

Carter paced the spacious floor of his high-rise office on the twentieth floor of his business complex. He felt a swelling emptiness run through his heart and knew all too well the emotion since that afternoon Kelli broke up with him. Nothing could touch the barren plains she left behind. He remembered her infectious laugh, her gentle smile, and the glint of passion in her eyes when she looked up at him. His gut clenched with every dawning in his mind. *She's out of my life.*

Memories of them had driven his existence into a mundane world of work and grief for the last three weeks. Memories of her...of him...of them laughing together, making love, and afterward, sleeping peacefully with her by his side. He had trouble sleeping these days. Adding the unwanted loss of appetite syndrome, the grief still weighed heavy. Other than work, his only other productive activity was the grueling workouts at the team playhouse with Dex. He exercised until his muscles ached, his mind cleared of all thoughts and memories, and his breathing labored too much to speak.

He inhaled deeply, the burning ache in his stomach reached up to his throat and kicked in the repetitive swallowing reflexes. Pain constricted his heart. *Why not give me the chance to explain—to make it right?* He looked out across the skyline at nothing and wondered for the millionth time of her whereabouts and how she was today. *Where are you now?*

*Running.*

“Don’t run away from your feelings or from me,” he demanded to the silence of his building rage. He laid his forehead against the cool pane of glass and calmed his anger. “Wait her out. She’ll come back.”

He knew deep down in the depths of his being that their breakup was only temporary. She needed time to get over her fear of this relationship and its future. Giving her space to realize what he already knew annoyed him. But in order for her to come around to her senses, he had to take necessary actions. He purposely didn't call her cell phone, not that it would do any good. He knew she would hang up or ignore his call anyway. He considered going to Tonya's apartment to coax her into seeing him but decided against it. Kelli and she needed the chance to make amends before he became a part of the picture.

Hope and anger toiled with one another through the emptiness of his heart. "I can't do this anymore. Five days of pacing and waiting with no word is driving me crazy. Someone, somewhere, has to talk to me, dammit." He reached for his cell phone and called the one other person Kelli was sure she could trust—her brother. *The great Officer Joshua Godfrey.*

On the first ring, a male voice answered the call. "Godfrey!"

Carter's stomach rolled, dread and curiosity flooded his inner peace. What if he didn't give him any help? "Officer Godfrey? This is Carter Banks."

A small chuckle sounded from the man on the phone. "I wondered when you'd call." His voice didn't sound the least bit surprised.

"I know I'm the last person you want to speak with, but I need to know. Is Kelli all right?" Silence, except for the steady breathing over the phone line.

"Yes. She's fine as far as I know. Which right now isn't much, considering she's out of town."

Panic replaced the earlier confusion. *She's out of town. Who's taking care of her?* "When did she leave?" Carter had to take a deep breath to control the shrill from escaping from inside to interfere with his voice.

"The day after you broke up."

The hurt in his heart almost doubled him over. He sat on the windowsill, gained composure to get more details. "When do you



expect her to come home?”

“Well, Carter, that’s the thing. Now, this is her own words, mind you. She won’t be home until she’s ready to come back. Until then, we all sit and wait.”

Despair assaulted him. His fear almost choked him. “She actually left without saying a word,” he murmured softly.

“Well, you know she doesn’t...”

“—have any obligation to tell me of her whereabouts,” Carter finished for him. He tried to reconcile that very fact, but it offered little solace. “Thank you, Josh. If you hear from her, will you tell her I asked about her?”

“I will. Carter, sometimes it’s best to let her come to her senses.”

“Yeah, I’m learning that the hard way.”

He took a proactive approach to the situation. He called her cell phone, only to hear that at the customer’s request, the number was changed and unlisted. Agitated, he set out in a random direction, searching for her in all the places she’d normally hang out. Six days of waiting around, his patience grew thin. Having no results forced him to make a decision he hoped wouldn’t come.

“It’s time to call in the professionals.”

## Chapter Sixteen

The one o'clock meeting scheduled with the private investigator wracked his nerves almost as much as having Kelli missing. Carter handed the information he had about her and half of the agreed upon fee to the detective. A few days later, when his anxiety level peaked beyond his realm of survival, the PI called.

"Mr. Banks, I have an update for you. When is the best time to deliver the information?"

His enthusiasm soared quietly in response to the news. He didn't want to get his hopes up too high and face disappointment. "I'm available in one hour."

"I will see you then."

The phone line went silent. Carter had no idea if it was good news or bad. The detective gave no indication one way or the other. "Great, more drama."

An hour later, Detective Walker walked through the door. Carter met him at the room's middle and extended his hand. "So, what do you have for me?"

Detective Walker handed him a single file folder. "I believe this is what you are looking for."

Carter opened the file folder and looked down at a piece of folded white paper. "What is it?"

"Miss Godfrey's new phone number."

Carter opened it. Ten digits splayed across the middle in a single row. *Her supposed new number*. He shoved it into his pocket. Having the information should have made him overjoyed, but he wasn't. Things between him and Kelli were still unsettled. "Anything else?"

he asked, almost choked up on the new sense of emotions.

“She’s back in town.” Carter almost did air flips in the middle of his office. “She is about to start a new job at the middle school on the west side of town in the Westgate housing development.”

“The what? The Westgate? That middle school is a few blocks down the street from my house.”

“I believe I have obtained all the goals of this case.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

The investigator stood up. “If that is all, Mr. Banks.”

“Yes, hold on. I have the last half of the fee.” Carter gave him an envelope from his desk. “You did an outstanding job and kept it discreet.” He shook the man’s hand and watched him leave the office area. He then fell back into the chair, wondering what steps to take next to win at this seemingly hopeless circumstance. He stood up from the seat, and then walked to the bank of windows that overlooked the city. The rush of people below looked small, almost unbelievable. They were the everyday people coming and going about their lives while everything stood still within his. He wondered if Kelli was down below in the throng of people. Even knowing Kelli was back in town, he couldn’t contact her, not yet. He had to fix the problem he’d caused and mend the path between them first. *How?* He couldn’t change the fact that he lied to her. Actually, he kept the truth about his wealth from her. Still, in her eyes, he’d lied by omission. Every reason she had to be angry with him, he earned. Had he known she had other resources other than Tonya to investigate his background, he’d have made every effort to bring out the truth earlier. In addition to her brother, Josh, she had a father, an uncle, and two more brothers in law enforcement. She was bound to find out about him eventually.

He heard a sound behind him and assumed his assistant came in to leave some papers for him to sign. “Leave the papers on my desk, Kathy.” He felt her presence within the room, but she didn’t say anything to him. He looked over his shoulder. Shock coursed through

his body. He turned fully around to see Kelli standing in the doorway. “Are you really here?” he softly mumbled. She didn’t say a word, but it didn’t matter. His soul rejoiced. *She’s here...in my office...my beautiful Kelli.* He stared at her, prayed she wasn’t a mirage, and filled his gaze with her existence. She looked thin, tanned, and tired. His heart jumped for joy.

\* \* \* \*

Kelli’s heart raced at the sight of Carter’s handsome face. She didn’t know what to say to him, but seeing him triggered emotions she didn’t want to feel. Her palms sweated, and she became lightheaded. Memories of his touch flooded her mind, her body almost begged for his tenderness on every inch. Straightening her shoulders, she pushed them away. She was on a mission. A clearing of the air, and by God, she would say what was on her mind.

“Is this a bad time?” The nervous pitch of her voice caught in her throat.

Carter shook his head and stepped around the desk. “N–no, come on in,” he stuttered. “How have you been?” he asked. With no time given for an answer, he escorted her into the small receiving area. “It’s great to see you.”

He pulled her close for a quick hug and let her go before she had a chance to object. His arms wrapped around her were like a balm to an open wound. “I’m doing well.” She braced her hands against his chest to keep him at arm’s length.

Carter stepped back and looked around the small setting of chairs and sofa. He moved aside some old, discarded newspapers on the sofa. “Please sit down.”

Once she sat on the offered seat, he cleared the take-out trays on the table. “I’m sorry about the mess, but I’ve been busy.” He took the Styrofoam trays to the trash bin. “Is there anything I can get you? Soda, coffee, tea?”

She smiled. It appeared that she wasn't the only one nervous. "Thanks, soda is good." She watched him round the corner of a small wet bar between the office receiving area and his desk. While he got her the drink, she looked around.

Touches of Milan came to mind when she saw the gold-trimmed mirrors, red drapes over a wooden table, and the Italian leather sofa with matching chairs. Sounds of ice clanging into a glass brought her attention back to Carter. Seconds later, he came back with an iced soda. He set the glass on the table in front of her. She picked it up, took a sip, and sighed with satisfaction at the refreshing taste. Carter sat across from her on the wingback chair. She didn't dare look at him or say a word. She concentrated on her soda glass, trying to find the words.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly, breaking into her resolve.

Kelli's eyes connected with his. She nodded slowly. "Yes. I was on vacation. I had to get away for a while and think."

"Really? I stayed away, giving you and Tonya some space. She told me you hadn't talked to her since you moved out. So, in an effort to keep peace, I transferred her to the downtown office."

"Yeah, she told me yesterday." She looked back at her soda glass. The change in conversation eased her mind a little, but so much still needed settling. "She and I can't stay mad at each other for long. She is..."

"Family," Carter finished for her.

Kelli's eyes locked with his in a silent embrace. In that moment, they conveyed so much without speaking one word.

*Carter, why didn't you trust me? Or believe in us?* She willed him to read the silent question in her eyes.

"Kelli?" He leaned forward. "Why did you leave? Why didn't you lean on me? I will always be here to face things with you. What makes me so like Larry to make you run?"

"Carter." Kelli set the glass on the end table next to her. "I wanted you to know that I'm not mad anymore."

He stood up from the chair, walked to the sofa, knelt on the floor before her. "I only wanted you to like me for me, not for my money." He cradled Kelli's hand in his.

Lightly, she squeezed it.

"I do like you for you, Carter." Kelli stumbled to tell him she loved him. It was too painful to say the word out loud. "To be honest, I don't give a damn about your wealth. What I care about is that you kept the truth from me even after you knew how I felt about you. How can I trust you?" Carter rolled his eyes. The gesture set off the spark Kelli had tried to keep extinguished. She stood up. Frustration vibrated through her whole body. "Don't you get it? So what if you have money? Having honesty between us is all that matters to me."

Carter stood up with her. "I can fix this, Kelli. Tell me how. I will do anything."

Looking into his face, the tears in his eyes, along with the pain in his gaze melted the last bit of resolve to hold her anger. Suddenly, forgiveness replaced her frustration. "Be my friend. I would hate to lose your friendship."

His anger and pain changed. His voice softened. "That's a good place to start. I'm willing to try there. At least it's something we can build on."

Kelli let out a soft sigh of relief. "I think we blew it in our relationship when we became lovers before we became friends."

Disappointment etched on his features. He took a step toward her. Her nipples puckered to his closeness. *Tattlers*.

"How can you say that?" Carter whispered. "Making love wasn't a mistake. It was an expression of something real in our hearts." He took another step closer, and she almost lost her nerve to stand strong.

"Can we trust one another? Be open with one another? Can you live without shrouding yourself in secrecy?"

"Don't you understand why I kept this secret?" Carter's heated expression caught her off guard.

Kelli nodded slowly. "Yes. Joshua told me about Deborah, the

little socialite that wanted to marry you for your money and family social circles. I'm sorry you didn't feel you could trust me to be different."

Carter narrowed his eyes in anger. "I could say the same to you. Couldn't you have given me what you ask?"

The festering wound of Kelli's broken heart bled. She and Carter would never find a way back. From the beginning, they held so much back. *Is the damage too immense to mend?* Tears blurred her vision. She already knew the answer to the question. Finally, she replied, defeated. "Touché." She picked up her bag, and then walked out of the office, taking her broken heart with her.

## Chapter Seventeen

Carter rounded the corner of his private office suite and almost ran into Tonya. “Hey, Tonya! How are you doing these days?” he asked.

She stopped and actually smiled at him with the same deer-in-the-headlights look she gave him when they happen to see one another. This time she did not try to tiptoe around the hallway to avoid him. “I’m good. Thank you for asking.”

Her relaxed posture increased his assurance that moving her here to the downtown office was a great choice. He nodded. One aching question befell him. “How’s Kelli?”

Tonya gave him an expression of pity. He hated that look, but she did offer a good piece of advice. “Carter, let Kelli come to you.”

“I’m trying, but I can’t get her to talk to me, to see me, nothing.” He sighed in frustration. “So much for starting a friendship.”

“Try this. I’ll call her tonight and invite her to accompany me to the awards banquet for the team.” He started to hesitate, but Tonya raised a hand to stop his protests. “I will call her brother, Josh, to come along. In a crowd, with her family, she won’t feel pressured.”

“Pressured for what? I’m not going to get corporate secrets from her.”

“Men!” Tonya rolled her eyes. “Pressured to be alone with you. Keep her off the defensive. A date setup would further add tension to the betrayal.”

“She will immediately decline because I’ll be there. I own the team, remember?”

“Yeah, I thought of that, too, but what if she thinks you are too busy to mingle with the guests? You know, Public Relations agenda



interviews, press conferences, team announcements.”

Carter let the idea roam in his mind. If he could have the chance to see her, surely she’d want to spend more time with him. “I’ll give it a shot.” He gave in to the idea.

“I will make the call right now.”

Tonya’s eyes brightened. Her stance looked ecstatic. “How long have you been planning this?”

The wicked smile on her face floored him. What was she planning?

“For a little while. I had to work out all the details before I could put this into motion.”

Carter watched her saunter down the hall. She turned to look back at him.

“You coming?”

His heart soared higher than before. A large smile formed on his lips. He took long strides to catch up with her. “This better work,” he warned.

She giggled but revealed nothing.

\* \* \* \*

“Kelli? Is this a bad time?”

“Hey, Tonya. No, it’s not a bad time.” Kelli looked through a stack of papers on her desk. “Just organizing the stack of papers I have to grade tonight.”

“That’s right, you started teaching today. Yes, so how is it?” Tonya’s voice coaxed gently to give details.

“More work than I thought, but I love it. Enough about me. What’s up with you?”

“I’m inviting you and Josh to a dinner banquet this Friday night. Now, before you say no, I think you should consider it. A lot of the players and the cheerleaders have been asking about you. This is a great way to let them know you are all right.”

The knot in Kelli's stomach grew to unimaginable lengths. Well, at least it felt that way. "How? What are they asking?"

"Nothing bad. Everyone knows that Carter owns the team and that you and he have stopped dating."

Kelli bowed her head in disbelief. "Is this a joke? I am still the gossip topic?"

"No. Besides, you should come out for your brother, too. He's all excited about it."

Kelli looked up at the ceiling. How could she say no to family? "You talked to Josh?"

"Yes."

"You know I'm not happy about this. You going behind my back to secure Josh first."

"Kelli, I have an allowance to invite some people to dinner. I thought of you and Josh because I'm close to you guys."

"Okay! Sorry!" Kelli felt like she put Tonya on the defensive and for what? *Carter!* "Is Carter going to be there?"

"Yes, he is the owner. But, don't worry. Public Relations have him jumping through hoops these days. He'll be too busy to speak with guests."

"Why?"

"Well, since it broke that he signs the Rebels' paychecks, he's been bogged down with interviews, press conferences, parties of the social elite, and of course, every wannabe socialite hooker in the room."

Kelli's gut twisted with anger. She imagined rich, beautiful women pawing him like a piece of merchandise. They didn't know how shy he could be or how loving. His last relationship proved how horrendous it was to date within his circle of friends. She imagined the sickly sweet comments they'd give to him to gain his favor, and then turn on him when the man-eating whore got her hands on him.

"Kelli? Kelli?"

"What?" she asked when Tonya's voice registered in her thoughts.

“Can I put you down at mine and Dex’s table?”

She sighed, “God help me, but go ahead.”

“Great! I will see you and Josh Friday night.”

Kelli ended the line. She thought of Carter and the night to come. He would be in his world with people like him and women more of his caliber. Her eyes misted with tears. “Carter! I can’t see you with another woman.”

Her heart broke thinking of it.

## Chapter Eighteen

“Are you sure she’s coming?” Carter asked Tonya for the eleventh time in the space of one hour.

“Carter, if you ask that of me again, I will slap you myself,” Tonya threatened.

“Sorry! I’m nervous, all right. What if none of this works?”

“It will. Remember, Josh is on our side. He is picking her up now. He called a few minutes ago and said they were on the way. But Carter, stick to the plan. And for God’s sake, relax.”

Carter nodded, put on his best smile, and turned to greet one of the representatives from the Public Relations Department. He wouldn’t draw a relaxed breath until he saw her. This evening he planned to be her friend. Nothing more, as per her request.

\* \* \* \*

Josh drove into the circular driveway of the reception building and waited in line for five minutes for the driver ahead of them to get a ticket from the valet. He pulled up for his turn, stepped out of the Nissan, and gave the key and a pre-sent voucher to the valet. “We’re guests of Miss Lambert’s and Mr. Reed’s.”

“Yes, sir. They’re waiting for you inside,” the valet driver told him. “Have a good evening.”

“Thank you!” Kelli said on her way past. She took hold of the elbow Josh offered. He led her to the doorway; attendants opened the doors and granted them entrance with a curt nod. They proceeded inside. A waiter strolling by with a tray of champagne stopped and

welcomed them. “Hello! Welcome the Rebels’ Awards Banquet. May I offer you a glass of champagne?”

Kelli took one off the tray. “Don’t mind if I do.” She took a sip and giggled at the tickling sensation on her nose. “If it makes your nose tickle, it’s the good stuff!”

“Really? Let’s see.” Josh took a sip but didn’t swallow it. He looked down at her. The expression on his face was classic. His upturned nose and pinched lips gave a comical flare to the taste. He spit it out into the glass. “This is foul! Where the hell is the beer?”

“You call me redneck!” Kelli exclaimed in laughter.

“Hey guys! Glad you could make it!” Tonya greeted. “I wondered what kept you.”

Josh looked at Dex and then down at Kelli. “She couldn’t find the right shoes. Imagine that!”

Dex laughed. “I can relate.”

Tonya gave him a warning look. “Do you want to share your experiences?”

Dex adjusted the bow tie at his neck. “No, not if I can help it.”

Kelli laughed at their minor tiff. She also admired the closeness they shared. Since she’d last seen them together, the relationship turned rocky at best. He still flirted like a single man, and if not for Carter’s insistence to be alone with Kelli, Tonya wouldn’t have an excuse to be around him all that time. In a way, she suspected her bond helped build this one. *At least someone is happy.* She looked away at the blooming love in her cousin’s eyes and realized that she, too, missed that feeling.

“Come on, our table is over there.”

Tonya and Dex escorted them to the table they’d share. Music played in the room. Camera crews set up their equipment everywhere Kelli could see. The stage, swathed in blue and gold, downplayed the podium with the Rebels’ logo. In a quick scan of the area, her gaze froze on familiar, soft eyes. Her heart raced with glee. She tried to look away but couldn’t. Carter gave a small wave of his hand, and

then returned to his conversation with the blonde woman by his side. A part of her wanted to cry and another part gladdened that he acknowledged her. Most of her wanted to be at his side in place of the woman. She turned back to Josh, Tonya, and Dex. This was their night. She planted the perfect smile on her face and did her best to have fun.

“Good evening, everyone,” Carter greeted the table, startling Kelli. She had her back turned away from his direction at the main table. “Welcome. I hope you have a wonderful evening.”

Josh stood up from his seat, extended his hand, and gave him a healthy handshake. “Thank you for having us,” he returned.

“It’s no problem. Hey, I have tickets to the race event coming to the Texas Speedway. Do you want to come?”

“That would be great!” Josh gushed with enthusiasm.

Kelli rolled her eyes.

“I have to go, but I’ll come back by after the dinner, and we can talk sports some more.”

“You bet.”

“If you need anything, let Tonya or Dex know.” He took one look at Kelli but didn’t say anything more to her and walked away, straight to the side of the same woman he stood next to at the main table. His actions miffed her in a way. What bothered her she couldn’t pinpoint. but her irritation struggled to come forth. “I can’t believe it!”

“What?” Tonya asked.

“He...him...Carter.” Kelli seethed.

“What about him?”

Kelli looked at the blonde next to him. She opened her mouth to say what bothered her, but nothing would come out. “Never mind.”

Josh looked over his shoulder. “Are you upset that he didn’t pine away for you like you feared he would?” Josh’s ever-subtle ways of getting under her skin and targeting in on her feelings annoyed her.

“You know, for someone who hurt your little sister, you didn’t have a problem being his grateful new friend,” she shot back.

“I don’t have a problem with Carter.”

“Not anymore, right?”

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Carter started the festivities, leaving the sibling quarrel to simmer in quiet.

An hour later, the banquet dinner served, coffee and dessert upcoming, Carter made his way back to the table. “Did you enjoy the meal?” he asked everyone. Everyone nodded and complimented the food choices.

He looked down at Kelli. “Can I ask a huge favor of you?”

Her irritation subsided when he squatted down beside her and leaned close to her ear. “I guess.” She smiled at his.

“See that blonde behind my chair?” He used his head to point the same woman out as before.

Kelli’s tension recoiled. “Yes,” she said coolly.

“I can’t seem to shake her off my tail. Will you sit beside me for the awards ceremony?”

“Isn’t she your date?”

“Nope, she’s just a woman who found out that I’m an eligible bachelor,” he commented softly.

She looked at Tonya and Dex. Dex closed his eyes and shook his head. Tonya rolled her eyes in frustration. “What?”

“Women from all walks of life have been calling him all week,” Tonya announced. “They’ve been keeping the answer service busy after hours as well.”

Kelli gazed at the woman standing next to Carter’s chair. She flipped her hair back in some grand demonstration to gain attention. Possessiveness overcame her. *No one would be messing with Carter, not if...* She collected her thoughts. “I don’t know. I came here with Josh and...”

“Ah, dammit!” Josh said next to her. He fished out the phone from his belt, looked at it, and shook his head. “Duty calls.” He looked around the table. “Can one of you take Kelli home?”

Carter stood up. “I will.” He looked down at Kelli. “In return for

doing this favor for me. I promise it's just as friends, and you'd be saving me from hassles."

"Go ahead, sis! I've got to run anyway."

Kelli hesitated for one more second before giving in. If her presence warned other women off, she'd be glad to help. It was her idea to be friends, but at the same time, she didn't want anyone else to take him.

"Carter! There you are!" the blonde woman called to him. Kelli came around from behind him to stand at his side. The woman's high-dollar smile fell. Her eyes narrowed on Kelli. "Who's your friend?" The woman's question sounded on a soft whisper, shock and jealousy resounding in the simple query.

Carter took hold of Kelli's hand. "This is a good friend of mine. I'd like you to meet..."

Kelli squared her body in front of the imposing threat. "Kelli Godfrey!"

The woman looked down her perfectly enhanced nose at Kelli. Her eyes glittered with anger and determination. "It's nice to meet you. My name is Denise Koneke, I'm Carter's...." The woman looked to Carter for some kind of clarification for her status.

"Annoyance?" Kelli finished for her.

The woman huffed. Her cheeks blushed in embarrassment. She looked around the immediate area and straightened her back. "I don't see how you were invited to the party. He usually doesn't invite, uh, po'folk."

"No?" She gave Carter a sidelong glance. "I didn't think a pretty package of shit wrapped in a pretty bow was his style either."

"Carter, be a dear and excuse me, but I won't stand around and take this for no one."

"Go ahead, it's a free country." Kelli answered for him. She waited until Denise left his table and headed in the direction of the coat check. She relaxed her stance, turned to Carter, and smiled. "I hope that helped."



“That was amazing. I’d never been fought over before.” He pulled out the chair beside him and waited for her to sit down.

Kelli’s stomach flip-flopped with pride. Her heart thumped hard and loud in her ears. She grinned, in spite of her defenses, toward him. She shrugged her shoulders. “That’s what friends are for.”

\* \* \* \*

On the drive to Kelli’s new apartment, she and Carter made idle chitchat about her work, his work, and the adventure she faced as a first-year teacher. They shared little more than typical first date stuff. He pulled into the drive and didn’t bother to shut off the motor. He walked her to the front door in a gallant gesture of any gentleman returning home from a first date. He leaned against the door frame. “Would it be all right if I call you sometime?”

Kelli smiled, and his heart fluttered. She reached into her purse and pulled out her cell phone. “Do you still have the same number?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She punched two keys, and immediately, his phone rang. “Here’s my number. Call me sometime.”

Gaining the number from her directly, his body hummed with victory, but he covered it with a cool play of friendly departure. “I better go while it’s still early.” The disappointment in her eyes caught in his chest, and he almost gave up the plan. In a valiant move, one befitting of social grace of a long-ago era, he took hold of her hand and softly brushed his lips across her knuckles. “I will call you tomorrow.”

“I—I look forward to it.” Came her breathy reply.

*Score!* He still got to her.

Two days later, he called her to catch up. A week later, she called him and shared information on a new project assigned to her. During this time, Carter came to one understanding. Their friendship had

grown since their breakup. He held onto the hope a relationship would build from it.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

Dex entered the room, bouncy stepped as ever. “So, how goes Operation: Win Kelli Back?” he asked in lieu of a greeting.

Carter’s eyelids narrowed. “Don’t know how to gauge this one. Some days we talk for hours on end, other times she’s telling me to slow down, that anything other than friendship will not work.”

Dex shrugged. In earnest thought of a fleeting idea, he blurted out a simple and logical step. “Ask her to dinner sometime.”

“I did, but she refused.”

“What reason did she give?”

“She had to grade papers or work on a project at school or something else comes up. Sometimes I think she makes this stuff up to avoid me. She’s so stubborn. I can’t get past it.”

“Aren’t you being a little hasty?”

“No, I don’t think so. The one time we did do something together besides the awards banquet was a dinner with her brother, Josh, and his doctor friend, Glenna.”

Dex perked up. “How did that go?”

“She arrived in her own car and left alone.”

“Sorry, dude. Is Josh at least on your side?”

“I think so. Glenna had an emergency, and they left us alone. We ate and had a great time talking.”

“That’s good! She didn’t just jump up and run out when her brother wasn’t there to protect her?”

“Yes and no.”

Dex looked at him. Confusion settled on his face. “How is that?”

“The second they left us, she guarded her emotions closely and

refused to talk about anything remotely close to feelings, relationships and starting over.”

Dex clucked his cheek in a loud fashion of defeat. “Sounds like she still loves you, but is afraid.”

Carter placed his elbows on the desk, leaned forward, and gaped at Dex. “Now, I ask you, how can we build a bond of love if she puts an emotional distance between us?”

Dex threw his hands up in the air. “You got me.”

\* \* \* \*

Carter stood at the window of his sitting room hidden by shadows of the darkened room. He stared at the house across the street. The second floor room gave him an advantage to look without being seen. *So, after six months this is what it's come to, huh! Spying. I wonder if it is against the law.*

In the driveway below was the very existence of his universe, Kelli. The most irritating redheaded woman he had ever met in his life and the very one who drove him to distraction with her mere presence. *She's the one woman I'd give my very life for and spend the rest of my days loving.* She stood next to the moving van, watching movers unload boxes one by one from the truck and carry them inside her new duplex. She lifted her face to the sun's rays and smiled.

Carter's heart skipped a beat. All Kelli had to do was smile, and he'd be at her beck and call.

She wiped her bare arm across her brow. The small gesture in itself provoked images of her sweat-glistened body arching into his. His mind's eye saw a bead of sweat fall from her forehead, past her eyes to her cheek. His tongue licked at the spot where the perspiration filled the crease of her lips. He licked at the wetness and tasted salt and coffee?

Blinking, he realized he actually wet his own lips.

*Unbelievable!*

Irony, that one word could describe his relationship with her. *Doormat!* If he sat and thought about it long enough, the things he was willing to do and go through for her baffled him. One by one he named them as they came to his mind. "I've become a hermit in my own home. I no longer socialize with my friends and acquaintances. Instead, I sit by the phone waiting for her to call." The reason for it doesn't matter. It could be something as small as to ask his opinion in something or for his help. He spent many a lonely night waiting for the call that rarely came anymore.

Behind him in the hall, he heard footsteps. He didn't have to turn around to know it was Dex. Lately, he was the only visitor who tolerated Carter's company. *Not today, go away and leave me alone. I don't want visitors.*

"What are you looking at?" Dex asked when he entered the room.

Dex's jolly attitude grated on Carter's nerves. He bit back the nasty retort that popped in his head. *None of your damn business! Go away!* Thinking it best to keep his mouth shut and not hurt Dex's feelings, he remained quiet and continued to stare at Kelli. *If I don't answer his question, he will keep pestering me until I do.*

He inhaled sharply. "The existence of all the world holds dear."

"Oh. Kelli."

Carter felt Dex's proximity closing in behind him. He turned and glared at his friend, hoping the angry face would warn Dex to keep his distance, but it didn't. Unaffected by the hostile glare, he looked down at him.

"Wearing your game face?" Dex asked, looking past his shoulder to the view below.

Carter tried to suppress the smile, but before he knew it, he was laughing at Dex's off-the-wall comment.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't know if I should be upset that my warning glare was unsuccessful in thwarting your curiosity or thankful you always make me smile on these bad days."

Once the laughter died down, he gave Dex a sideways glance. “I sometimes wish I could be more like you.”

“How’s that?”

“Have sex with a woman on different nights of the week and not be bothered with attachments.”

“It’s not hard really. Besides, I can’t have sex with other women anymore. It would piss Tonya off.”

“Congratulations.”

“I’m already bored, but there is something about her keeps me hanging on.”

Carter gave a silent chuckle. “For me, it is difficult. Each time I consider going out with someone else, Kelli’s face flashes in my mind. The next thing I know my heart breaks.”

“Pussy!”

Carter snorted on laughter. “Shut the fuck up!” The two stared in silence at the house across the massive yard. “I thought of something yesterday, hadn’t thought of it in so long it’s like a lifetime ago.”

“Don’t keep me in the dark.” Dex half-assed encouraged.

“Women play games when they think the payoff is worthwhile. Take Denise Koneke for example. They designed their world to fit mine, ate the same things I liked, gave no opinions for themselves, in the end, we were miserable. But not Kelly. She took me for what I am—a jackass, an unthinking mass of crap. I was wrong in keeping her in the dark for so long.”

Sounds like your insecurity toward women cost you the love of your life.”

“It’s okay, as long as she’s still a part of it. I will learn to live with the cursed word.... friends.”

Dex turned away from the window. “This is so boring. Man up already.”

Carter’s attention returned to the townhouse. “No more boxes in the truck,” he murmured aloud what his mind registered. Kelli would be going in, soon. He watched her turn to the driver and sign a piece

of paper on his clipboard. Smiling, she waved good-bye as they backed out of her driveway. When the moving van drove away, she checked out the neighborhood, scanning the little street which dead-ended at her new home. To his surprise, she looked across the street in the direction of his bedroom.

He backed away from the window. "Don't let her see me staring at her," he prayed.

"Afraid she'll recognize you?"

"No, at this distance, I'm not worried she will recognize me, but I don't want to scare her into thinking someone is watching her."

"Good point." Dex nodded in animated agreement.

Carter waited a few seconds and eased his way back to the window. He looked out across the yard in time to see her turn and go back inside the house. She closed the door behind her, closing out the world and him when she did. Emptiness built in his world.

"Does she have a clue you live across the street?" Dex asked from behind.

"I don't think so."

"Does she know you're stalking her?" He laughed.

"I'm not stalking her!" Carter defended quickly. "I'm only...keeping an eye out for her."

Dex laughed harder. "Yes you are. By the way, I wouldn't use that excuse when she finds out," he challenged softly.

"She won't find out. Until I tell her."

"You have to leave the house sometime."

Carter knew he would be found out. "If Kelli knew I had anything to do with helping her acquire her house, she'll leave so fast it would make my head spin."

"I think it was a stroke of fate that Kelli mentioned to you that she was waiting to hear if she'd received an approval of her home loan application. Good God, listen to me! I sound like a sap, too."

"Go to hell," Carter shot back, not really meaning it. "Lucky for me, the bank was one I used on a regular basis."

“And you knowing the bank manager, you set up a private meeting and successfully slowed the process of her loan approval to get the details of this plan together.”

“I don’t regret it for one minute. I would fund the loan again if I had to.”

“I hope even at your fiftieth anniversary she won’t find out.”

“No way will she find out. There’s no paper trail.”

“I’ve always been curious. How did she get the dead-end lot?”

“I gave the home builder’s sales manager a bonus if Kelli bought that lot.”

“You sneaky little shit. That particular piece of land has benefits—seclusion, low city noise, and...”

“The deciding factor was the access to security personnel to her. Fortunately, she jumped at the offer with that to sweeten the deal.”

“So, she’s all moved in now?”

Carter glanced over his shoulder at his friend who sat on one of the wingback chairs. He only nodded his answer.

Dex looked at him with genuine concern.

“I’ll be all right. I have to make it right between us somehow. Then...” He looked back down into the street. He trailed off, not completing the thought. Suddenly it dawned on him. “How in the hell did you get in anyway?”

With a boyish grin, Dex answered, “Maria let me in.”

Carter rolled his eyes. “Some housekeeper. I’m going to fire that woman.” The older woman babied Dex. She gave him the run of the house as if he was the one paying her salary.

“I don’t think you’ll fire Maria for making a guest feel welcomed.”

Carter chuckled and realized that Dex tried to keep Maria out of trouble. “Don’t count on it.”

“Besides, if you fire her, no one else will put up with your bullshit.”

The comment mentally took Carter back. “This remark, coming



from the stud of Fort Worth, and you call my goals bullshit? What about your bullshit, Mr. Love'm and Leave'm? ”

Dex grinned as he walked back to the window. “Well, at least Kelli’s forgiven you for not being up-front with her. And you are the first one she calls when she needs to talk,” Dex pointed out. “Did she go inside?”

Carter turned toward Dex. “It’s real slick how you worm your way back into my good graces with a comment about Kelli.”

“What are you saying?” Dex’s crestfallen face looked upon him.

“Stop changing the subject. Besides, she doesn’t always call me when she needs something. She wants to be friends, but for me that isn’t enough! I still love her.”

Dex patted him on the back. “Good luck! I think groveling will be very helpful at this point. I’m hungry.”

Leave it to Dex to think of his stomach at a time like this. Carter smiled as he watched Dex retreat out the door.

He turned back toward the townhouse across the street and sighed. She wasn’t going to come out again today. Deep in his gut, he knew it. Maybe Dex was onto something. Groveling would be a good start.

Yet, he still couldn’t move from the window. He waited and hoped she would at least come out with some empty boxes and set them by the curb. “I don’t know how I let her go.” Carter sighed. The sound of defeat rang in his ears. He looked at his watch. It was five o’clock. If he had to make a guess of what she would be doing right now. *She is settling into her new home—unpacking boxes, putting things where they belong, and maybe she will eat a sandwich so she doesn’t have to clean dishes and stop working.*

“I’ve got to stop obsessing over her. It isn’t healthy to pine away for her like I am. Plus, if she finds out that I’ve spied on her, she’d freak out.”

A large cloud covered the sun’s rays. The dreary afternoon reminded him of a cold winter day. At one time, he couldn’t wait for fall and winter. He imagined him and Kelli spending the holidays

together. On those cold days, he predicted them laying in bed making love....but reality bit him in the heart, and darkness fell over his soul. That wasn't their current relationship status. Not anymore. "How do I win you back? Do you still hold back out of fear or is something else keeping away from me?"

"I think you should go over there and make an amends." Dex answered.

Carter jumped. He turned and glared at Dex who stood in the doorway. *Wasn't he downstairs bothering Maria for a snack?*

"What if she won't see me? Any ideas, cupid?"

"Don't take no for an answer." He smiled the candid grin of a playboy. "You're Carter Banks. Stop moping around this damn huge-ass house feeling sorry for yourself. Get out there and find your spirit. Only you can get her back."

Carter figured he was grabbing at straws, but at least Dex had some ideas that might help him. Standing back and waiting wasn't getting him anywhere. "How do I get in to see her?"

"You want to help lift the heavy stuff." Dex offered offhandedly. "She always did like your, uh, muscles."

Carter grinned at Dex's innuendo. He envisioned Kelli stroking "Cocky." "Maybe, I can give it a shot. She is constantly telling me she's happy we were able to continue our friendship." Carter felt a renewed sense of encouragement. He didn't waste one second guessing his next move. Stripping out of the T-shirt, he headed for the closet. "No time like the present," he mused as he pulled on a sweater and slipped on sneakers.

Dex, ever the encourager, said, "Now you're talking," bolstering Carter's decision to action.

"I have nothing else to lose."

"You've got this!"

"Maybe, if I make the effort, she will see me as I was before. Someone who really cares for her."

"That's the way to think outside the normal broken heart."

“Thanks, Dex. I can count on you to lift my spirits.”

Dex shrugged. “What are friends for?”

Those were the same words Kelli spoke to him often. It wasn’t until this very second that he knew he hated that phrase. “Don’t fucking ask!”

## Chapter Twenty

“Ah, dammit!” Kellie massaged the cramp that moved up her shins at a slow, torturous pace. They ached and burned from her prolonged position on the floor. The task of sorting out tangled wires of her electronic equipment became a job, and by the second, her aggravation mounted. Nothing she picked up seemed to work. The power cord for the printer didn’t make a connection on it or to anything she worked on currently. Looking around at the assorted wires, she almost threw the whole mess down in defeat. “Where do you go?” she asked the inanimate object in her hands. She fisted it in her palms. “This is such a waste of time.” On top of the disappointment, she now had a headache forming at rapid speed. “Why didn’t I keep the wires with their components?” she whined and rubbed her temples.

The doorbell rang, adding more frustration to the task at hand. “Who could that be?” She shook her head and blew out a strong breath, rustling her bangs in the process. “I can’t decide if this is a blessing in disguise or a pain in the ass interruption.” *This is moving day! Don’t people know you don’t visit on such a day?* She looked around at the stacked boxes and groaned. *The house isn’t set up for visitors.*

She stood up from the tangled web of cords around her feet. The sharp sensation of pins and needles shot down her legs, reacting to the rush of blood back into her shins. “I’ll get back to you in a moment,” she promised the wires and extensions which lay in jangled arrays of loops.

At the door, she peeked through the peephole but didn’t recognize

the visitor's profile. All she could make out was a man who bent his head down, and his coat covered his face. *So much for the security personnel.* Without thinking, she opened the door and froze in surprise.

Carter! "What are you doing here?"

"You shouldn't open the door unless you know who it is," Carter reprimanded.

Kelli upgraded her previous thought. *The small interruption is now a major pain in the ass.* She was too busy unpacking and fighting cords to listen to lectures on safety from yet another man in her life. She heard enough from her father and brothers on the subject to last a lifetime. Irritation oozed in her voice. "Save it!"

Carter smiled.

Kelli would have sworn it was a smile of victory, but for what? *That he'd gotten to me? Doubtful.* She wouldn't put it past him to have planned this interlude all along.

"I ask again. What are you doing here?"

Carter walked past her and entered the house without welcome. "I remembered you saying last week it was moving day, so I thought I would help you set up the heavy stuff."

Her suspicions settled to a lower level, but the annoyance still remained. "Thanks, but I can handle it."

"I'm good at heavy lifting." Carter flexed his right bicep. "I'm at your disposal."

Kelli lifted an eyebrow. "What a fascinating choice of words." She eyed him carefully and then moved past him, leading him into the house. Her stomach did that familiar flip-flop motion. She inhaled, caught a whiff of his cologne, and creamed in her panties. Mentally, she shook. *It will be a major mistake, a setback, if you don't get control of yourself.* Months of strategy to keep him at arm's length would be undone in seconds if she didn't.

Carter took off his coat and looked around the small living area. "Nice place."

At his approval, Kelli's heart quickened. She didn't need his endorsement, but his giving it, unsolicited, set free her doubts about the move. "Thanks, I like it so far."

She walked past him to the kitchen, opened the fridge, and pulled out a pitcher of tea. *Carter likes iced tea. Oh! Why do these little facts keep hounding me?* She turned and found him leaning against the bar. Her heart almost stopped beating, her mouth went dry, and if it were possible, Carter looked better today than the last time she saw him two weeks ago. His black sweater and jeans accentuated his body. His hair, loose and silky, looked fuller and yes, definitely longer than it was in the summer. *I've always loved his hair loose, to run my fingers through the strands, feel the soft texture.* Kelli gasped and shook with the thoughts of his naked body in bed. His head tilted at a slight angle. The silent plea in his eyes invited her to take the hand he offered and come join him. His long hair fell off his shoulder and the provocative way the sheet draped over his hip barely hid his stiff cock. Snapping out of her reverie, she looked up into his brown eyes and saw the raw desire that expressed his feelings. The tension between them sizzled with the sexual attraction. She closed her eyes, only to open them and see a knowing look in his gaze. *Is he reading my thoughts? Do I convey my desire that easily without words?* She felt her panties get wetter. The subtle odor gained her attention. *This must be how he knew what I was thinking. This isn't fair. To see him face-to-face always makes my heart flutter.*

The phone conversations they shared were definitely safer. He was a voice on the other end. Someone to talk to and pass the time when she was alone, feeling lonely. She didn't have to see him or look into his eyes and read his feelings, especially his desires.

"Would you like a glass of tea?" Before he answered, she handed him the glass already made for him. She took a sip of the cold drink in her glass. *I need something stronger.* She watched his long fingers curl around the glass. Her insides became weak, which spiced up her exasperation of weakness. "What are you really doing here?"

Carter shrugged. "Like I said, I'm here to move the heavy stuff if you can use me." Carter took another sip of tea. His gaze locked with hers over the glass. They displayed a glimmer of mischief.

*Is he flirting with me?* "Uh-huh," she replied sarcastically to his excuse for being at her house. She looked around the living room. "As you can see, I'm in the middle of unpacking. I wasn't expecting company." She hoped the comment would hint to his leaving, but he ignored it. Instead, he laid his jacket on the barstool and turned to her.

"Where shall I begin?"

It had been awhile since Kelli took close notice of his body. His arms were bigger. She remembered those arms favorably. The temperature in the room increased, flooding self-doubt to her mind. *I'm not sure I can handle myself under this kind of pressure.* She feared she would give in to him. Her defenses were definitely weakening.

The doorbell rang again, giving Kelli another welcomed distraction. She rolled her eyes at the second interruption. *Now what?* Inside, she breathed a sigh of relief. Any interruption right now would save her from herself. She heaved a heavy sigh of feigned disgust, and then looked at Carter. "Excuse me."

"Not a problem," he whispered quietly. He cleared his throat. "I'll be right here waiting for you."

Kelli understood with certainty whether she had company or not, Carter was not leaving until he was ready or she kicked him out.

A dimple appeared on his left cheek. Butterflies toiled and fought inside her stomach. Her defenses were definitely eroding. Before they diminished further, she hurried to answer the door.

Kelli opened the door and almost yelled for glee. "Paul Hoffman! What brings you by?" Paul stepped inside the doorway and then gave her a small peck on the cheek. "I was in the neighborhood and thought I would drop in."

\* \* \* \*

A pang of jealousy hit Carter in the gut with the greeting Kelli gave the arriving guest, a man. The welcome came off warmer than the one he received. He tamped down the emotion. *Carter, let it slide. This is Kelli's night, not mine or the other man coming in.* He bent and picked up one end of the sofa and placed it along the wall.

"Come on in. Let me take your coat," Kelli offered.

When she entered the living room, she came up short. Her surprise reflected in her stumbled comment. "Carter, thank you for moving the sofa. That is exactly where I wanted it. I haven't had the room to move around."

"Or the muscles he seems to have," the man said from behind her.

"Paul! Oh, where are my manners? Paul Hoffman, Carter Banks. Carter, Paul."

The two men shook hands. A heavy awkward silence filled the room.

Paul took a quick look around the living area. "Nice place. Maybe I can give you a hand with the electronic stuff. And it won't cost you anything but pizza."

*Yeah right.* Carter almost bit out the words but caught himself in time. He turned and set the bulky coffee table in place, and then focused his attention to the heavy wall unit.

Taking a step back to admire his own handiwork, he noticed Paul watching him. "So, Paul, what do you do for a living?"

"I teach at the same school as Kelli."

"Paul is the media technology teacher," she finished for him.

"I see." Carter turned his back and set a matching chair by the sofa. He didn't like the other man being here. His possessive nature struggled to come through.

"Paul, I'm so glad you stopped by. I could use some help sorting out the mess of tangled cords on the floor and connect them to the right electronic equipment."

Another wave of jealousy hit Carter. She didn't make him feel as



needed when he offered her his help.

“I’ll get right on it.” Paul went to the pile of cords.

“I’ll order the pizza. I have to call it in from the bedroom. I have my cell phone charging there.” Kelli left the two men alone while she went to call in the pizza order.

Silence settled in a heavy wave between them again. “So, how do you know Kelli?” Paul asked.

Carter didn’t see any reason to lie. “I used to date her, but we stayed friends. I’m trying to win her back.” He didn’t feel it necessary to hide his intentions, and he wasn’t stupid enough to believe Paul was in the neighborhood with no ulterior motives to stop by. “How well do you know her?”

“My class is across the hall from hers. She and I chat all the time.” Paul coiled a wire and set it with the others.

Carter sorted through the mass of multi-colored cords Paul coiled and found the one to the computer’s printer.

“I may be spending more time with her since she has her own place.”

At the same time, both men glared at one another, each one more or less squared off, sizing one another up.

Carter reached for one of the cords. “I wish nothing but the best for Kelli.”

“Why did you let her go if you obviously care for her?” Paul picked up a few more loose wires and rolled them up in a circle.

“I was stupid and let my selfish pride get in the way. I thought love was enough, but I was wrong.”

Carter uncoiled the blue cord for the computer and plugged it into the terminal.

“I’m not looking for a serious relationship. I’m separated at the moment, and I don’t plan to get involved.” Paul faced Carter. “I don’t think she’s looking for a serious thing either, but I’ll take your advice into consideration.”

Carter knew Paul antagonized him with jabbing remarks to make

a scene. *Don't fall for this asshole's bull. Leave now before furniture breaks or a night in jail enters in your near future.*

"Tell Kelli,"

"Tell me what?" Kelli asked, joining them at that moment.

Carter pulled on his jacket and walked to the door, Kelli close behind. "I'll be around if you need me." Before he left, he gently stroked her cheek with his thumb. The urge to kiss her was so strong that he had to bite his tongue to keep from it. He buried his fingers deep in her hair. "Kelli, if you ever..." He bent and kissed her forehead. "I'm a phone call away." He opened the door, and then walked out into the cool night air, leaving her in the company of an asshole.

\* \* \* \*

*Carter, don't leave.* She watched him walk out the door. Her heart screamed for him to come back. Somehow, she held firm. He had to work for not only the privilege of an invite but for her trust. She thought about his stupid distrust of women, and it made her angry again. They had to get past this blemish in their relationship.

The power of his confessed feelings knocked the wind out of her. She felt something flicker while she stood in her bedroom and listened to his and Paul's conversation.

*Is he giving up on pursuing me? Did he only want to be friends?*

She walked back into the living room thinking about those questions. How would she feel if he did give up on her? She didn't want to think about it. She wanted them to find a bond to make their previous relationship better. Nothing can be the same. It had to be better or nothing. Her heart grew heavy.

She entered the room to find Paul busy working with the cords. He didn't see her watching him. Paul reminded her of her brother, Josh, only with a smaller build. His blond hair was well kept, those playful blue eyes gave her a warm sensation, and he had a tall body.

At her approach, he turned his head and smiled.

"I guess you know how he feels," Paul stated matter-of-factly.

"Yeah." The ringing doorbell caused her stomach to flutter wildly. She looked back at Paul. "Do you think it's him?"

He shook his head and gave her a small, almost sympathetic, smile. "Too soon."

"I hope you're wrong." Kelli went to the door. When she pulled the door open, it wasn't Carter.

"Is my husband here?" Jennifer Hoffman asked in her playful singsong voice.

"Yes, he is. Come on in."

Jennifer stepped inside. Her stomach protruded enough to make hiding her delicate condition difficult. Her blonde hair and brown, doe eyes made her glowing pregnancy much more motherly.

Kelli envied her. She wanted motherhood and love for herself. No one but the jackass who left her doorstep not more than five minutes ago would do.

"I'm in here," Paul hollered.

Jennifer and Kelli went into the living room. Paul plugged in the last cord and turned on the computer. "Eureka!"

"It works," Kelli cheered.

"As if you had any doubt," Paul admonished playfully.

Jennifer clapped. "Good, let's eat."

He smiled and wrapped his arms around his wife. "Ah, are you guys hungry?" he cooed as he softly rubbed her tummy.

"Yep, all three of us," Jennifer stated.

In classic reaction, Paul gaped at Jennifer. "Did I hear you right?" He looked down at her protruding belly. "Twins! We're having twins?"

Jennifer handed him the sonogram picture. "Baby A is a boy and baby B is a girl."

"And you told Carter you were separated? Shame on you." Kelli grinned and stepped closer to see the sonogram pictures.

“Who’s Carter?” Jennifer asked.

“The man Kelli’s in love with,” Paul answered. “But she’s playing hard to get.”

Jennifer thought for a second. “Then why did you tell him we were separated?”

“To bother him, get under his skin. Besides, we were separated,” Paul defended as he snuggled Jennifer closer. “You were in Tennessee until this morning. I missed the hell out of you.” He turned to his beautiful, glowing wife and kissed her. “I want to make love to you.”

“Now?” Jennifer gave him a doe-eyed look. He smiled. “Can’t we eat first?”

The three laughed. Kelli looked at the couple. “I hope Carter and I have this close of a relationship. One that will last forever.”

Paul looked down at her. “You will. But only when you find the peace you need to go on.”

“I know.”

“What do you want to find out?” Jennifer asked.

“Carter has to trust me to love him for him, not his money. I have to stop paying for everyone else’s mistakes. Just as he has to stop paying for others in my past.”

“Good luck with that one. Everyone pays for something somehow,” Jennifer acknowledged. “It is the couple who survives this life lesson that goes on to be stronger. And at one time or another, we have all had to come to terms with a past relationship.

The doorbell rang, and everyone stopped and looked toward the door.

“Pizza’s here!” Kelli announced.

“About time. I’m starved,” Jennifer stated, waddling behind Kelli to answer the door.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“It’s Friday night, and I’m alone.” Carter looked around the spacious house thinking about Kelli and how she would fit into his world right now. Most of the day he’d spent watching her house, waiting for her to come home, but she hadn’t arrived yet. Suddenly, the claustrophobic effects of the walls closing in got to him. Bored and restless, he came to the conclusion that the best remedy for the ailing heart and sick soul was socialization. *But where can I go?* “What would Kelli and I be doing tonight if we were still together?” he asked the silence. *If Kelli and I were still together, we’d be at Riker’s Pub sharing a pitcher of beer. Maybe if I call her she’d meet me there...just as friends.*

He pulled out his cell phone, scrolled down the address list until he got to her number, and then highlighted it. Taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, he pushed the send button and waited for her to answer. With each ring that passed, his disappointment escalated. After four rings, the voicemail feature activated, and Carter’s heart dropped. He snapped the flip phone closed. *Is she out with Paul?* The one thought which hounded his mind on many days caused a new wave of sadness to dig in deeper and bring out the anger brewing below. “Maybe I should stay in and forget the whole thing.” But then, the more he reconsidered that option, the more agitated he grew.

“As difficult as it may sound, you’ll have to go on without her.” The little self-pep talk worked to some degree. “At least I know she won’t be there.” No sooner had he said the words, he wondered. *What would happen if I saw her and Paul out somewhere? Would I go crazy and kick Paul’s ass? What would I do to Kelli?* Shrugging into his

jacket, Carter took the first steps of regaining his life back as a single man. He would go to Riker's Pub and get drunk...alone.

\* \* \* \*

Inside Riker's Pub, the jukebox blared with Faith Hill singing about the magic of a kiss. The upbeat tempo put his mood into better spirits. The usual Friday night crowd hadn't arrived yet, most likely watching the high school football game down the street. Carter favored the small neighborhood pub. People came in for a quick drink after work, talked about high school sports, religion, and politics. *A friendly place really to be yourself.* Carter liked it.

Carter stepped up to the bar and noticed his favorite bartender, Jenna, working this shift. She didn't notice his entrance. He smiled while he watched her work her customer.

"It won't be a close game, Earl. This year's team is awesome," she commented, serving draft beer. She picked up the money from the man's designated pile and turned. The second her eyes connected with Carter, they grew big with surprise.

"Well, I wondered if you were going to show tonight."

"Yeah, I needed a break."

Jenna walked around the bar and raised her arms in signal for a hug. "Good to see you," she said, giving him a hug.

The way she hugged him made him uncomfortable. He couldn't pinpoint what exactly bothered him. Maybe it was the soft, lingering touch of her hands on his waist. Or it could have been the way her eyes softened when she looked at him up close. *Maybe it was nothing. You're reading way too much into a simple hug is all.* Still, he put some distance between them to ease the underlying tension of discomfort. "Hey, aren't you supposed to be behind the bar?"

Jenna winked. She leaned forward as if sharing a huge secret. "I won't tell if you don't."

Carter laughed. "What are you going to do for me if I keep your

secret?”

The wicked grin she returned hinted at a time with no disappointment. “Whatever you want.”

*Time to back off this thing off real quick.* “How about a beer?”

She rested her hands at her sides. “Okay.” She walked back around the bar. “Longneck or can?”

“Now, how long have you known me?”

“Not long enough or as much as I would like but well enough to know longneck.” Jenna opened his beer and set it down in front of him.

“I’d also like a shot of tequila.”

She tilted her head, curiosity etched on her face. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m a big boy and know what I can handle.”

“All right, big boy! Let’s see you handle some José.”

After Jenna poured him a shot, she sat it down in front of him and then placed two limes with it. “Drink up!”

Carter picked up the shot of José Cuervo, bit into one of the limes, gulped down the amber liquid, and then chased it with the beer. The burning hot liquid hit his stomach, and he almost choked. In a matter of seconds, the beer cooled the burning tequila.

Jenna clapped her hands. “All right! What a man,” she teased.

“Now, that hit the spot,” Carter replied once the ability to breathe returned. Instantly, the shot relaxed his body. He reached down for the empty shot glass at the same time Jenna reached for it. Their hands touched and he felt the slight tingle on his skin. *I’m horny as hell.*

She took a step back and raised her hands in the air. “It’s all yours.”

They looked at one another and laughed. Carter passed the glass to her. “Give me another one.”

Jenna nodded. “Okay!” She took the glass, leaned over, grabbed the tequila bottle, and then poured him another one. “Don’t get too messed up. I don’t want to have to call a cab.”

“Yes, mother!” His sarcastic reply got him a snicker.

A new song blared from the jukebox. Something about a man taking all he was going to take. Carter raised his beer bottle to the jukebox. “I hear ya.” He wasn’t going to mope around anymore today. Tonight, he planned to drink her memory off his mind and enjoy it for once. *I’ll mope about her tomorrow.* He took a drink from the beer bottle and sighed with the effects of the mixed alcohol. From the back of the pub, he heard a familiar sound. *I know that laugh.* It was deep in his mind. His memory ingrained it there.

*Kelli.*

His body came alive at the mere thought of her name. His heart raced, he could hear his pulse beating in his head, and his palms became sweaty. The laughter settled to a hushed whisper, and he turned to it. Across the darkened bar, he spotted her, and next to her sat Paul. They were sharing a pitcher of draft beer at the back table. Immediately, a bitter taste stung his throat. The intimate setting was the perfect place for Kelli and her fuck buddy to gain a moment of privacy away from prying eyes. Carter wouldn’t have known she was in the bar if he hadn’t recognized her laugh.

Grabbing the beer in front of him, he took a long drink, hoping the cool liquid would neutralize the acid in his throat. It didn’t help. He picked up the shot of tequila and tossed it back. Immediately, the tequila numbed his esophagus, but he needed something more for the pain in his chest. He wondered about seeing her but hadn’t expected to see Kelli tonight. Especially with the new man in her life at the bar they found together. *There is nowhere I can go to escape the two of them.* He wanted to turn away from them, but he couldn’t—the sight of her mesmerized him. Watching them, his heart broke more. *I don’t want to see how she responds to him. Does she respond to him the way she did with me?* He closed his eyelids to block out the painful scene. He’d spent many nights fighting the painful memories toiling in his head and resigned to the fact they were only that memories.

A glutton for punishment, he dared to gaze at Kelli. She said



something to Paul that made him smile. *God, she looks beautiful.* Her eyes lit up. There was a time when she'd given him the same beam of light in his world. Kelli leaned over and whispered something into his ear. The flush on her cheeks enraptured Carter. She sparkled, glowed, and looked good. *That's how she would look after we made love.* He continued to watch them from afar. *What is it that Paul does for her that I couldn't? Kelli, why can't you still want to be with me?*

Carter took a deep breath to ward off the hurt. It rankled him that he wasn't next to her, receiving her attention. She sipped her beer. Her lips parted just enough to take in the swallow when her mouth touched the glass. It was too sensual, too sexy, the reflexes of her throat to get the drink down. She pulled the glass away, leaving a single drop of liquid on her lips. He longed to use his tongue to lick the small drop off her lips. *Like I did the first day we met.*

What does Paul think of when he sees her? *That the single drop of beer on her lips is the most enticing thing he's ever seen? Does he want to reach over and kiss that drink off her lips? God, what will I do if he does?* Luckily for him, there was a merciful God.

Kelli licked the wet spot off her lips.

Carter's fingers tightened on the bottle. *How is it possible that another man benefits from what should be mine?* He didn't want to witness the development of her love for Paul. He turned away from the couple. Yet, when he glanced away, he caught sight of them in the mirror over the bar. Mirrors on all the walls, everywhere he looked she and Paul's image met his gaze. *I can't win! You'll have to leave the bar to ignore them. It wasn't a good idea to come here tonight after all.*

Almost out of pure desperation, Carter closed his eyes again, brushed his hair away from his face, and took a long, deep breath. Kelli was everything he wanted in a woman, and everything in his world was slipping away. They had something worthwhile once. He thought they had something special and belonged together. *It seems I was wrong. Unlike me, she's found a way to move on. She really did*

*just want to be friends.*

It wasn't so easy for him to go on and leave her behind. Without her in his life, he found it difficult to function. Deep in his heart, he knew Kelli was the woman for him. Convincing her of the fact was moot. It was ironic in a way how he thought their relationship would grow beyond the friendship she insisted they maintain. However, when he pushed for more, she kept him at a distance. *Does she keep Paul at a distance?*

She tossed her head back, and her long auburn hair flipped suggestively down her back. When his cock grew harder, he glanced away again.

*Why did you let her go, you stupid son of a bitch?* Carter berated himself.

*She wasn't like the other women. She was the real deal.* His heart broke and shattered to hundreds of pieces.

"Enough!" he hissed. He wished his heart and mind would find another time to start this emotional tug of war. The headache grew with a vengeance.

"Hey, Carter!"

He heard a soft female voice call his name. With a gleeful, hopeful heart, he looked up.

"Need another one?" Jenna asked.

His sudden anticipation disappeared. He felt the anger surfacing. "You knew!"

Jenna stepped back, her eyes widened with shock. "Excuse me?"

"That Kelli and Paul were here."

"I—"

"They hadn't come in while I stood at the bar. When they came in, you'd be the first one to see them. Therefore, it stands to reason they were here before me." *Why didn't she say something to warn me?* Then he thought about the way she acted when he came in a little while ago. *That explains the flirtatious behavior.* She knew Kelli was with another man. *Is Jenna working her way to be Kelli's*

*replacement?*

Jenna looked at him and said nothing but picked up the tequila bottle and shook it.

“Yeah, get me another one and a beer,” he said.

She set another shot in front of him.

In two gulps, Carter set the empty beer down on the counter. She placed the new bottle of beer down. “Good timing.” He winked and then took a long drink of the beer.

“I try to please. I’ll do anything to keep you satisfied,” she teased and then walked to the other customers at the other end of the bar.

Carter watched Jenna work. He took notice of her in a different way this time. He didn’t find her terribly attractive, but she wasn’t the least bit ugly. White blonde hair hung back in a neat ponytail. When she looked at him, big blue eyes danced with delight. And her chest, he compared it to be as big as her heart. *Judging by the recent addition to her blouse, she’s high maintenance.*

Every once in a while she looked at Carter and smiled.

He noted the meaning of her expression immediately. He had seen that same *fuck me* look on a hundred women willing to fuck him and have no ties. If this were another time, he would have her in his bed so fast she wouldn’t know what hit her until she felt his cock inside her. But that was a long time ago. *Where have those carefree days gone?* Carter knew where they went. They ended when he met Kelli. *Now, the idea of fucking someone for the night holds no enticement for me anymore.* He was empty inside. *There is no more room for another woman.* He wasn’t looking for the right one anymore. From now on, he was just killing time.

“You going to drink that shot?” Jenna asked, stepping in front of him. She leaned against the bar, her hand mere inches from his. Feeling the effects of tequila, Carter grabbed the tequila shot then raised it to her. “Here’s to fate. Isn’t she a bitch?” In a gulp, he swallowed the tequila.

“Fate can be a blessing in disguise you don’t foresee,” Jenna

countered with a sweet charm of a wise woman.

Carter would have laughed, but he heard Kelli again. This time, he closed his eyes as he took another swig of his beer. When he opened them again, he saw Jenna peeking over his shoulder.

“Someone you know?” she asked.

“You know damn good and well I know her,” he growled.

She rolled her eyeballs. “Not her, you boob. The guy she’s with.”

Carter didn’t answer. The renewed desire to beat Paul to a bloody mess kept him from speaking. He no longer felt like getting drunk. *I want to fight.*

*I want her to hurt as much as I do, to feel the sadness so deep that breathing becomes difficult.* If he couldn’t be happy with her, he didn’t want her to be happy without him. He knew he was being petty, but it didn’t make him hurt any less. Carter despised this sinister part of his mood. No matter what he did, he wasn’t going to win her back. He had to face the fact.

“Why don’t you just go over there and beat his ass?” Jenna asked pointedly, voicing his thoughts.

“I actually considered it, but what good would it do?”

“It might make you feel better, and she would know how you feel.”

“Good point.” Without getting up, Carter continued to drink his beer. “If I go over there, I may get my ass kicked or arrested in a bar fight.” Carter rolled his eyes. “I don’t need that shit.”

The effects of the tequila and beer mixed together made him feel invincible. Suddenly he was ten feet tall and weighed an extra fifty pounds.

*Maybe I can whip Paul’s ass after all.*

He lifted the bottle. “Liquid encouragement in a can, uh, bottle.”

Jenna laughed. “Liquor enables lovers to voice their opinions.”

“I thought that was alcohol,” Carter retorted playfully. He stood up.

“Oh yeah...right. Good luck.” Jenna stepped back. He knew she

watched him as he advanced to the unsuspecting couple. “You’re gonna need it,” she said to his parting back.

“I heard that.”

As soon as he was several feet away from Kelli’s table, he called out, “Kelli, is that you?” Carter did his best to feign a surprised expression. “I didn’t know you came here anymore.” He looked at Paul. “Hey, Paul.” He plopped down on a chair between the couple.

*Alcohol is a great relaxant.* He never realized how good it was until this precise second. Now that he was down in the chair, how the hell was he going to get back up?

Paul stuck out his hand. “Hello, Carter. What’s been going on?”

Carter didn’t take the hand proffered him. Instead, he looked back to Kelli. “Just keeping up a routine.”

A look of concern crossed Kelli’s face. It surprised him. *I didn’t think she cared.*

“Are you all right?” she asked.

He gazed into her green eyes and became mesmerized. When he first came over to the table he wanted to beat the shit out of Paul. Now, he only wanted to reach for her hand. Maybe he could do both. He shook his head.

“No?” Kelli looked at him, her eyes filled with hurt.

Carter had wanted to hurt her, but now that he saw the slightest glimmer of pain, it made his heart bleed.

“No, I’m not all right.”

Her brows crinkled. “Okay, why?”

“Because you are with Paul now.” He turned to Paul. “I have to tell you.” Carter wanted to tell Paul to fuck someone else. Kelli was too important to him.

“What would you like to tell me?” Paul asked.

Carter thought Paul was too calm. He shouldn’t be. In a minute, he was about to knock him out.

“I face each day now with an emptiness I can’t fill. I think of the things I should have told her, but I was too proud and scared to say

anything.”

“Like what?” Paul seemed interested in learning about Carter’s mistakes. Maybe he intended to use them to get closer to Kelli. *God help Paul if he hurts her.*

Carter looked at Kelli. “I should have told her everything from the beginning.” He took her hand. It surprised Carter that she didn’t pull it away from him. “I wish there was a way to take it back and start over again. But I can’t blame her for walking away. I took something that she took great stock in and stepped on it.”

Kelli’s lip trembled, and her eyes filled with tears.

“What was that?” Paul asked.

“My word. To her, my word should have been my most valuable asset. No amount of money in any of the banks I use is more valuable to her. So, if you truly want to make her happy, don’t lie and don’t break your promise because these liabilities will devalue your worth.”

A ripping pain tore through Carter’s heart as he realized he was letting Kelli go. “I’m going to let her go because her happiness is all that matters to me. I love her that much.”

“Why let go of something you worked so hard to obtain?”

“She has to find out what she needs in her life.” He turned back to Paul. “Even knowing in my gut that you, Paul, will hurt her, I won’t stand in her way. But I do have one request to ask of you.”

“What do you request of me?”

“After you are through doing what you’re gonna do and you break her heart, do me one favor?”

“Okay!” Paul adjusted in his chair.

“Send her to me.”

“Why would you want a woman so broken?”

Carter looked back at Kelli then back to Paul. “Because I’m the one who truly loves and needs her. You’re just playing with her to satisfy an urge. ”

“Paul?”

All three of them turned to look at the new voice that entered the

conversation. There, just beyond the table, was a woman who stood wide-eyed and curious.

Carter looked at Paul who closed his eyes and actually shook his head in disbelief.

Paul stood up. "Yes, my love?"

"What is this man talking about?" she demanded.

"He is confused right now, darling. Don't worry about it. Oh, by the way, this is Carter Banks. Carter Banks, this is Jennifer, my wife."

"Oh." Jennifer looked at Carter. "It's nice to finally meet you," she said as she shrugged out of her coat, revealing a protruding belly.

Her pregnancy couldn't have surprised Carter any more than if Jennifer had slapped him with a frying pan. In that moment, he snapped. He turned to Paul and jumped out of his chair. "You motherfucker!" The room spun around, and Carter fell sideways and bumped into a solid frame. He looked up into Dex's amused eyes.

Carter laughed. "Hey, Dex, how did you get here?"

"I was in the neighborhood, and I thought I would stop by for a beer." He steadied Carter on his feet. "I see you're with friends."

Carter harrumphed the comment.

"Okay, maybe not. I think you've had enough to drink, though." Dex put Carter's arm around his neck and looked down at the table. "You guys have a good night." Okay, buddy, let's go." Dex steered Carter around the furniture on the way to the door.

"Do you know what I did tonight?" Carter asked as he leaned against Dex.

"No, what did you do tonight, besides get drunk off your ass?"

"I let Kelli go. She is free to date the son of a bitch if she wants to."

"Good for you, buddy."

"It hurt like hell, but I did it." Carter's enthusiasm for the selfless act grew with each word.

"Let's go pour you into bed."

"Okay!"

\* \* \* \*

Kelli looked at the couple at the table. "I'm so sorry about this scene. I gotta go. You guys going to be all right?"

Paul looked away from Jennifer long enough to answer Kelli's question. "Yeah, we'll be fine."

Kelli looked at a very confused Jennifer. "I wish I had time to explain."

"Don't worry about that. I will explain everything to her. I think you need to make amends now. You have all the information you wanted to know. It's time to tell him how you really feel."

Kelli smiled. "Thanks for helping out." She bent and kissed Paul's cheek and then Jennifer's.

"Good luck," Jennifer said.

"Thanks. I may need it."

Kelli gathered her purse and followed Carter and Dex out the door. On her way out, she gave a quick nod behind the bar at Jenna who returned with a wink.

"Good luck!" the bartender shouted.

Kelli stopped just inside the doorway. For a second, she didn't move, and then she walked back to the bar. She looked at Jenna and saw something that looked like disappointment, maybe even sorrow and regret in the bartender's eyes.

"I keep asking myself one thing. Maybe you can help me with the answer."

Jenna gave her a shaky smile. "I'll try?"

"How did Dex know to come here, at this moment, in this bar?"

Jenna tilted her head as if pondering the questions that plagued Kelli's mind. "Intriguing, isn't it? Maybe a little birdie told him. Or better yet"—Jenna's laid-back humor became serious—"maybe someone knows when to bow out gracefully."

The bartender's comment was all the answer Kelli needed to



know. She had suspected all along that Jenna had a crush on Carter.

Tonight, for the first time that Kelli could recall, Jenna personally greeted customers with a hug. In doing so, Jenna confirmed Kelli's suspicions. Her usual greeting habit was a handshake at best. Usually, Jenna kept to herself. She would stare at the two of them when she thought they weren't looking. The subtle flirting between Carter and Jenna was new. Jenna hovered closer to him and whenever possible, she took the opportunity to touch him. She grabbed his hand when he made a funny comment. She patted his arm when she set his beer down or placed his change in his opened palm.

Kelli had seen it all play out in front of her, and she became jealous. So jealous in fact, she wanted to go to the bar and set her straight on the boundaries of touching him. Furthermore, she viewed Jenna as a threat to Carter's happiness. She didn't fit the bill of women Carter liked.

No doubt about it, by the way she acted tonight, Jenna would have tried to make her move on Carter. *Why did she back off if she had the chance? Did she know Carter still had feelings for her? Surely, she knew whatever they would've shared wasn't destined to last. It was a rebounding relationship.*

For whatever reason, Jenna had made a personal sacrifice in Kelli's favor.

Kelli looked at the other woman. Her would-be competition if she hadn't bowed out gracefully.

"Thanks."

Jenna smiled. "Don't mention it. Really, don't mention it...ever."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Kelli stood on the driver's side door and watched Dex help Carter into the passenger seat. She waited for Dex to come around, gnawing on her lip.

He came to her. "Is he all right?" she asked. By the way Dex looked at her, she knew he had some doubt about her concern.

"Go home, Kelli. He will be fine without you."

She leaned on the driver's door, blocking his attempt to open it. "I love him."

He shot his hand back and placed both hands on his hips. "Really? You have such a weird-ass way of showing it." He looked inside the truck, turned to her, grabbed her by the arm, and led her to the back bumper. "Do you have any idea what this man has gone through for the last six months?"

Dex was angry—enough so to give her his opinion—whether she wanted it or not. She said nothing in her defense.

"Carter has lived with the hope you will want to make more of your friendship. He's waited patiently in the background, giving you room to decide what you want." Dex stepped closer to her, invading her space with his anger. She didn't move. "Well, Kelli, have you decided what you want?" He pointed toward the bar. "Is that guy in there the one you want?"

She said nothing.

He grabbed her by the shoulders. "Answer me, god damn it."

Kelli was stunned that Dex actually put his hands on her. With as calm a voice as she could possess, she said, "You have no idea what is going on with me and that guy, as you call him." His grip tightened.

“Take your hands off me,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Or what? You’ll call your badass law enforcement family? Go ahead, but you will answer my question before you dial the first number of 9-1-1.”

“I don’t need my family to whip your ass.” She turned just right and loosened the grip he had on her shoulders. A second spin had him pinned against the tailgate of the truck and her knee in his back. She bent his thumb back enough so he could feel the pressure she applied to it.

“I told you before, I love Carter. I have never stopped loving him. If you must know, that man in there is a co-worker. He and his wife are happily married and expecting twins. Paul helped me to get out of Carter his true feelings. When he sobers up, he’ll realize that firsthand. Now, is there anything else?”

“Yes,” he answered.

“What’s that?”

“Let me go!” He shrugged his shoulders.

Embarrassed to the bone, Kelli released him and straightened his clothes. “I’m sorry I held you longer than necessary.”

He sat on the bumper of the truck. “Carter is my best friend. He has been hurting so much these last few months. I don’t think you know how much.”

“Do you think it has been easy for me? I’ve watched him go out with another woman at the awards banquet. I had to keep myself from him, so I wouldn’t have to witness any more.”

“That blonde with him at the banquet was a plant. I put her onto Carter to flush you out.”

She stepped back, shocked to hear Dex’s involvement. He did to her what she did to Carter. “Why would you do that?”

“So you would come to your sense about your feelings.”

“I’ve known all along that I love him.”

“If you loved him, why did you put him through this?”

“He had to prove his love and understand to trust me, good or

bad.”

He looked at her in surprise. “I think there is something you should see.”

“Okay.”

He stood up. “Follow me.”

\* \* \* \*

Kelli followed Carter’s truck out of the parking lot and then headed in the direction of her house. She became increasingly worried about Carter.

*Do you really want to give me up? Do you still want me?* “Carter, we’re so close to being together.”

When they turned on the main thoroughfare to her street, her curiosity mounted. “Why is he taking Carter to my house? How does he even know where I live?” Then, they passed it. She looked back but kept following them, becoming more suspicious than ever to where Dex led her. Subconsciously, she looked at the elusive neighbor’s house as it came into view. Most of the downstairs lights were on.

*He must be in town.*

When Dex pulled into her neighbor’s long driveway, she couldn’t grasp the comprehension of his actions. She followed him inside the security gates, and then to the back of the large house. In the driveway was Dex’s Corvette.

“What the hell?”

As the garage door opened, Dex pulled the truck into the open spot.

A hundred and one questions ran through Kelli’s mind as she watched the garage door go down. Too stunned to move, she stayed in her car. *How do Dex and Carter know my neighbor? If Dex’s car is here, how did he get to the bar? Taxi probably.*

Dex tapped on the window some minutes later. Kelli jumped at

the loud tap. She shook her head, clearing it of the stupor of questions in her mind. Turning the key, she let the motor die.

She opened the door. "You scared me!"

Dex laughed. "Are you coming in?"

He had a big, goofy grin on his face that only irritated her.

"Whose house is this?" She stepped out of the car.

"Carter's."

"Carter? I don't understand." She looked across the vast yard and saw her own tiny home. Anger poured out of her so fast she couldn't stop it. "Was he spying on me?"

"No, dumbass. He was looking out for you. He has had your best interest at heart since the day he met you. All this," he spanned his arms, "is to prove his love for you."

"You can't buy love. It's stupid to try it!" she shouted. Her heart became heavy with despair. "Why can't he get that?"

"Why can't you understand?" he exploded back. "It wasn't until he knew you would be all right that he let you go."

She shook her head in defeat. She lost him. It wasn't until that moment she grasped the depth of his love. Now, it was too late. She leaned against the hood of her car and sobbed her misery. "I pushed him away."

Dex pulled her into a hug. "No, he's tired of fighting what he thought was a losing battle. No matter what he did, he couldn't win."

She pulled away from Dex's hug. "Don't you see? He could have won all along."

"What did you want him to prove?"

"That I'm not like the other women in his past. In addition, I had to make sure he wouldn't hurt me and go on to the next piece of ass."

"So, has he proven his love yet?"

"Yes, when he sacrificed his happiness for mine. It was the ultimate sacrifice."

"When did he do that?" Dex was obviously lost.

"In the bar."

“You are playing with some serious fire.”

Kelli couldn't think about the consequences now. She had to make sure Carter was all right and put an end to this madness. “Where is he now?”

“I had the guards try to give him something to eat. He will wake up with a doozy of a headache tomorrow.”

“I have to see him.” Her lips trembled. “Don't say no.”

“I don't intend to stop you,” he whispered softly. “You may manhandle me again. And that's no fun when I don't get the pleasure of being bound.”

Kelli laughed through her tears. “Dex, you're a good friend for Carter, thank you.”

He grabbed her purse off the hood of the car and dug around in it. “Get out of my bag.”

“Wait a minute. I'm looking for a handkerchief.” He pulled it out of her bag and used it to dab the tears away from her face.

“We don't want to upset him with your tears.”

She grabbed her purse and took a step toward the door. Before she had a chance to enter the house, his hand stopped her.

“I know I don't have to say this, but I will anyway.”

Kelli braced herself. “What?” She saw a serious glint in Dex's eyes then in a snap, it was gone.

“Don't make any specific plans during basketball season.”

Kelli laughed. “Dex, are you making plans for mine and Carter's future?”

“Someone has to.” He walked away, griping about the ordeal he'd witnessed. “With the way you two play games and shit, it's a wonder anything gets done. Hell's fire! Drama, fights, tears!”

*I hope you're right about your insinuation about our future plans.*

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Carter blinked his eyes open. A splitting headache forced them to close immediately. His mouth felt dry. *I feel like shit!* He sat up, and the room spun. Placing his feet on the side of the bed, he waited to gather his strength. He rubbed his hands down his face. “How in the hell did I get home last night?” *Furthermore, how did I get up into my room...and into bed?*

A sudden shift of his mattress caught his attention. His mind searched the broken memories of the previous night. *Who did I come home with last night?* Confused and a little worried, he looked over his shoulder at the sleeping body. Kelli lay next to him. His gaze took her in. She’d slept wearing his old gray dress shirt. Just looking at her now reminded him of how much he loved her. Immediately the realization of her absence returned. *What I wouldn’t give to get you back into my life.* But he let her go last night. *Then why is she here in my bed? It doesn’t matter. I will make everything all right. What about Paul? But Paul has a wife who’s pregnant.*

Carter straightened. “Paul is a fucking philanderer.” *Screwing his wife over and knocking her up was one thing, but to drag Kelli into it is another matter. I won’t stand idly by and let Kelli ruin her life for that jerk.* In his torment, the pessimistic side of his nature made its view. *What’s the use, Carter? Maybe she wants to be there. Could she be trapped in a relationship she didn’t want?* Theorizing what Kelli had or hadn’t done with Paul literally made him sick. His stomach rolled, and he belched and tasted the remnants of last night’s tequila shots and beer. The pounding headache worsened. With extra slow efforts, he placed his weight onto his feet and stood up. The room

spun faster this time. He sat down and set his aching head in his hands.

“I will never drink again.”

Kelli sighed.

He turned and looked at her. “God, Kelli. What have you gotten yourself into?” he whispered in anguish.

“I wonder that a hundred times a day,” her sleep-husky voice answered him.

Carter couldn’t take his eyes off her. “I didn’t mean to wake you.” Even knowing she saw a married man, he still wanted her.

“You didn’t. I’ve been napping off and on all night.” She pulled herself up in a sitting position. “I wanted to stay with you and make sure you were all right. I hope you don’t mind.”

At her words, he smiled. “No, I don’t mind.” *She does care.* He eased himself closer to her, laid across the bed, and rested his head on her folded legs. Reaching for her, he softly stroked her cheek.

Her gaze panned his bedroom. “When did you move in here?”

He picked a strand of her hair and played with it. “I moved in a week after you and I broke up.” Watching for a sign of turbulent emotions, he lay still and braced himself for another argument. When nothing happened, Carter inwardly admitted surprise. She didn’t make a big case out of the suspicion that he kept this from her as well.

“I didn’t know you could have a house built this quick.”

“I told you I was having my house built while we were dating. I liked the location, so I settled here.”

Kelli eyed him for a moment. She laid her hand on his chest. “Carter, did you mean what you said to Paul last night?”

*What did I say to Paul last night? Hopefully, I professed my love for her.* He had to be very careful with what he said. “Every word. Kelli, I haven’t stopped loving you. Just because...”

She placed a finger over his lips. “Carter, ever since Larry hurt me, I became distrustful of men and used that as an armor to keep you at arm’s length. I told myself that I wouldn’t get hurt if I didn’t allow



another man to get too close.”

Carter thought about it and took a deep breath. He kissed her finger and removed it from his lips. “Yeah, I guess you can say I did the same.”

“It wasn’t until I let my guard down that I met you. Out of nowhere, you came into my life and resided in my heart. Taking a chance and being hurt was worth it for you.”

“What did we learn? How can we go from here?”

He took her hand and held it. “Kelli, I’ve never had a relationship that I would say was honest. Unless, you count the one woman who told me she was interested in me only because I was capable of providing her with a life of leisure and comfort.” Carter smiled at the memory. It hadn’t been funny back then. *The woman had balls*. “That was the last time I recall any woman being straight up with me.”

Kelli laughed. “In other words, she wanted a hefty sum for a divorce settlement.”

Carter nodded. He didn’t like going into details about his failed relationships. He was more interested in his current one. “Kelli, what is Paul to you, and how does his wife fit into this affair you’re having with him?”

\* \* \* \*

“Paul and Jennifer are friends of mine.” Softly, she fingered his hair. “I work with Paul. Jennifer and I get along really well. They invited me out to dinner with them last night knowing I would be alone this weekend.” She smiled. “Since Jennifer became pregnant, Paul said she’s been mothering everyone. He and I were meeting Jennifer at the bar. They also helped me to find out what was most important. You loved me for real, and you were trustworthy.”

Carter looked confused. “Paul told me he and his wife were separated. Are he and Jennifer not separated?”

“No, they’re not,” Kelli admitted with a grin. “Jennifer was in

Tennessee that day you met Paul. He used a technicality to get to you. He implied a separation, which you assumed meant his marriage was falling apart, when, in fact they are very much in love. Jennifer is carrying twins. If you had stayed around for five minutes that night, you would have met her.” She emphasized the last part with a soft poke to his chest.

He hesitated. “So, there is nothing going on with you two?”

She laid her hand on his chest again. “No. We just happen to work in the same place.” His heart beat a slow, steady tempo under her hand. Her steady gaze raised the tempo another notch and then another. “Besides, I can’t see another man right now.”

“Why?”

Kelli smoothed her thumb over Carter’s bottom lip. “I’m still in love with you.”

Neither one glanced away from the other. His quick heartbeat was the only indication that her statement fazed him.

“Why did we have to go through six months of hell?”

Kelli sensed anger mixed with his confusion. “Because you had to prove you loved me. Not buying my love but proving yours was real. And I was scared.”

“You don’t ever have to be afraid.”

“I needed to know that you could be trusted. And you needed to sacrifice your happiness to prove it to yourself.”

“How did I prove that?”

“You let me go to find my happiness, even if it meant losing me to another man. My happiness was all that mattered to you.”

“If you love someone, set them free,” he whispered.

Silence filled the air.

“What do we do now?” Kelli wondered aloud.

“I think we should never let the other go.” He dipped his head and lightly kissed her lips. “I also think we should just love one another.”

“I like it so far.” Kelli liked it when he took control. He was such a giving and caring person and lover. “What else?”

Carter pulled the covers back. He settled himself between her legs. Slowly, he pulled at the three remaining buttons of the gray shirt. Once he had the last one undone, the shirt parted to reveal her breasts. The pink tips perked to buds. His cock sprang to life. Putting one arm under each knee, he scooted her down to a lying position. His eyes roamed over her body. "I have craved this body for months." His thumbs hitched under the strings of her bikini panties. He smoothed his hands down her legs, pulled the panties past her feet, and tossed them on the other side of the room. "I also think that we should make love to one another often."

"I agree to all that you have suggested."

"I can't believe you're here," Carter said, "in my bed, naked. And do you know what the thrilling part is?"

Carter smoothed his tongue over her right nipple. "N-no, what?" Her voice hitched.

"We can be more than friends."

Kelli smiled and watched him take his pajama bottoms off. "So much more." She reached out to him.

With slow, careful, caressing kisses, he edged his way up every inch of her body until his lips were a breath's beat from hers. "I have another secret."

"Yeah, what's that?" She panted to control the spasms that had already built up inside.

"I'm rich, and I think you should start getting used to having money."

Kelli laughed aloud. Joy filled her heart. Carter was trying to start over. "Deal, only if you get used to having someone who loves you for you."

He bent his head and kissed her hungry lips.

She moaned. The pleasure Carter invoked became evident by the heated, slick desire from her pussy that ran down to the sheets.

Carter eased himself from the kiss and looked into her eyes. "Will you marry me?"

The atmosphere suddenly changed from hot passion to pure love. "I thought you would never ask. By the way, we can't make definite plans during basketball season."

"Who said?"

"Dex told me that last night." She giggled when Carter nipped her neck.

"I have one more question."

"Aren't you a nosey one today." She laughed, and then cupped his cock.

He looked around the room. "How the fuck did I get into bed last night?"

Kelli laughed. "I fucking put you in bed."

"That's what I love about you, Kelli. Your mouth is so ladylike."

"You don't like my mouth? I didn't hear you complaining about the unladylike mannerisms any other time." Kelli licked her top lip seductively. "In fact, as I recall you said it was thrilling."

"Thrill me," he challenged with a smirk of confidence.

Kelli eased her way down to Carter's engorged cock. Her fingertips fanned the head. A small drop of fluid oozed. She viewed it as a tear of joy.

"Hello, Cocky. Do you remember me?" Kelli soothed.

Carter laughed. "Cocky is painfully aware of who you are."

She looked up into his eyes. Her heart beat wildly against her ribs. "Who am I?" she asked, her throat husky with passion.

"You are the reason for his very existence." His finger traced a heart over her left breast. "The woman I love. The one who loved me for me all along." He lifted up her left hand and kissed it. "And the one I intend to marry very soon. But, first things first."

He rolled her over and eased himself between her legs. "I'm staking my claim."

"Your claim?"

He smiled. "Now that I know Paul didn't have a chance with you, you're mine."

“Even if he was free, he would never have a chance with me. I have always been yours.”

He entered her slowly, and the broad tip of his cock stretched the tender membranes of her canal. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she hissed.

He eased in further. She hiccupped on a gasp and inhale of pain. The lack of intimate contact between them had been so long the adjustment burned, but she held on to his hips, digging her fingers into his flesh. He stopped. “Kelli, I can...”

“No!” came the throaty growl of the inner tigress. “Don’t stop.” As he pushed deeper inside her, Kelli’s heart almost burst with pent-up emotions that she thought she buried deep inside. Trust, love, pride, and a small dot of pain soon surfaced and then disappeared within seconds. Tears welled up in her eyes and fell. Carter licked the tear away.

“The way your pussy surrounds me is like a reassurance of something stronger to come.” He whispered in her ear.

“What’s that? Children?”

“Well, that too, but more like I know that there will never be anything to come between us ever!”

# THE END

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ronna Gage lives in Texas with her husband, son, dog and cat. When she is not writing romance novels she teaches at the local school district or watches her son and husband race motorcross.

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