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Dare to Dream

a Dareville romance by

LEIGH ELLWOOD

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Author's Note

Dearest friends of Dareville,

I thank you for taking the time to read this latest adventure of the small town with big romance. Since publishing *Truth or Dare* in 2004 with Phaze, I hadn't expected to expand the series as far as I have, and I'm far from finished! I hope you'll stay a while and enjoy the scenery.

With regards to this book's place in the Dareville chronology, I will note that this novel works as a companion piece to the forthcoming *Daring Red* and *Dare Devils*, as all three stories will run in a concurrent timeline. Therefore, the chronological order of the series will eventually read thus:

Truth or Dare
Dare Me
Double Dare
Daring Young Man
Dare to Dream
Daringly Delicious
Dare Devils (not yet published)
Daring Red (not yet published)
Dare's Destiny (not yet published)
A Winter's Dare

But there's always room in town for more.

Stay daring,

Leigh

Chapter One

This is crazy, this is crazy, this crazy...

Claire Walker resisted the temptation to squeeze her hands against her ears. The voice inside her head was not her own, but that of Chevy Chase, bemoaning a classic predicament in *National Lampoon's Vacation*. That Claire's subconscious mind called up the memory should have brought some levity to her own situation, but she wasn't smiling.

She was nervous as well. And naked.

In another woman's bed.

Christie Brinkley wasn't waiting for her in the building's penthouse swimming pool, but Claire's potential first Sapphic encounter could certainly have rivaled the famous model in looks and charm. Like Chevy might have in the movie, Claire let her attention wander around Lupe's modest bedroom as go-time quickly approached. She felt relieved, at the very least, a hotel full of people couldn't come running from their rooms the second she screamed from the first contact of...

Of what? Claire wasn't about to skinny-dip, but she was nude and about to fulfill her fantasy of making love with another woman. Would it feel the same as plunging headfirst into a swimming pool? It had to have been freezing for Chevy back in the day. No way could he have faked such a shocked reaction in warmer water.

Ugh! Get out of my head, man! I don't even like your movies. If any thought could kill the mood...

Claire pulled the thin floral sheet over her bare breasts. Her nipples were colored deep rose, thick and puckered—a combination of a sudden draft and nerves. Lupe's prolonged primping in the adjoining bathroom wasn't helping matters, either. How long did it take to undress and get ready for sex? As modestly as the young Brazilian secretary attired herself at work,

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Claire couldn't imagine there was too much for Lupe to unhook, unsnap, and unclip. Perhaps she was jittery, too? But Lupe had said she'd been with women before, and had so eagerly volunteered to introduce Claire to the pleasures of trying on another woman's skin.

Beautiful skin, too. Claire let the sheet fall to expose her size B-cups and tried to envision how Lupe's caramel skin would look and feel pressed against her. Lupe's tongue, laving a nipple, dipping into her navel, swirling around her clit.

This is crazy, this is crazy, this is a...zit!

Shit.

Even given the distance, Claire detected something in the reflection in the mirror wall opposite the bed—a reddish dot between her blonde eyebrows. It didn't feel tight on her face, so perhaps it was the beginning of a nasty lesion.

A sign.

She was nervous, cold, and conjuring bad movie dialogue. This had to tell her something. Most women in this position would be licking their fingers and twiddling with their pussy lips in preparation. Now, all Claire wanted to do was lean forward a bit closer so she could better see her third eye, so she did just that.

“Nice. *Buena.*”

Claire startled. She didn't hear or see Lupe emerge from the bathroom, but now the Brazilian goddess stood at the side of the bed, dark and naked and curved in all the right places. Glorious brown-tipped breasts defied gravity over a taught abdomen and slender hips that tapered down to flawless, shapely legs.

Christie who?

And here was Claire on her hands and knees on the bed, her own skinny rump raised high, her tits too small to even sway in their down-turned position. Being next to Lupe brought back all the feelings of inadequacy she tried to leave behind in Dareville, her bucolic hometown. Coming to New York and winning a career as a respected entertainment lawyer was supposed to cure her dwindling self-worth.

Hardly. Yet, the look of desire on Lupe's face baffled her. While Claire certainly made more money than the secretary, she couldn't understand why Lupe seemed more enthusiastic about

this than she was. It should have been the other way around. Lupe could have any man or woman she wanted, and Claire had no control over raising Lupe's pay at work. The girl didn't need to suck-up.

Suck something else...another story.

Lupe gently stroked Claire's back, tracing one soft finger down the spine. The mere touch ignited a series of shockwaves across the vertebrae, and ended in a burning pool in her pussy.

"You like being in this position?" Lupe whispered as her hand drifted to Claire's ass. "I didn't know how you wanted to start. I thought we'd maybe lie down together and kiss, but this tells me you're ready for the advanced course."

Claire laughed nervously. "Yeah, right. Actually I was just.... Never mind." She wanted to move, but Lupe's gentle ministrations kept her still. *Holy Mother in Heaven, there's a woman touching my ass!* They were going to have sex and touch each other, and lick each other's...

Whoa! Now who's advanced!

The inner walls of Claire's pussy contracted the second Lupe's fingers swirled down her exposed nether lips. Claire kept her gaze forward, watching Lupe's mirrored actions take in the sensation. It felt different from a man's fingers. Lupe's was a soft, practiced caress, and effective, given how Claire could hear the wetness building inside her as the other woman slid two fingers deep into her slit.

"Ay, *sí*, you're ready now. Nice and wet," Lupe murmured, and Claire bit her lip as she watched Lupe's reflection bend low for a kiss to the spine. Though Lupe came from Brazil, she tended to speak Spanish more often, perhaps because the firm needed that skill more. The skills Lupe flaunted now, however, needed no translation.

"I think I'd like to lick this juicy pussy, *no*? What do you think? Would you like that?" Lupe asked.

"Well," Claire turned her head and found herself eye level with Lupe's bare quim. Smooth as silk it was, and not a follicle to be seen in that enticing delta. So that's how the wax job got its name, Brazilian. Maybe Lupe never had a hair down there to begin with? Despite this intimate moment, however, it didn't seem appropriate to ask.

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Besides, Lupe suddenly appeared to be distracted. Claire noticed her last question was directed at the mirror. Slowly, Claire eased away from Lupe's touch and rolled to one side. "Lupe."

"¿Sí?" Lupe glided easily beside Claire, her body a curving landscape of sweet *dulce de leche*. Claire's first instinct was to reach forward and run her hand over Lupe's hip just to see if her skin would ripple like cream. The look in the other woman's eyes, though, stopped Claire. The desire she thought was there actually looked, on closer inspection, more like vacancy.

"What is it, Claire? You don't have to be nervous. I'll take care of you, okay?" Lupe sounded hollow, like rehearsing a bad play, badly.

"Why do you keep doing that?" Claire asked.

"Doing what?"

Claire propped her upper body on an elbow. The draft was no longer felt, thanks to the heat of the rising frustration radiating from her body. "Looking at that damn mirrored wall. I'm over here. If you're into watching we could've just rented a movie." She had to stop herself from ranting further. Funny how a few moments ago her heart wasn't truly into this—though her pussy argued differently—yet now found Lupe's waning interest annoying. This had been her idea, after all.

"Claire, there's no reason to be upset. I'm paying attention, I want to be with you," Lupe said to Claire's face this time. "Don't you want that, too?" As an afterthought, Lupe eased backward and regained her feet. "We need to loosen you up. Maybe some wine?"

"I don't want—*Gesundheit*," Claire corrected.

"¿Que?" Lupe's perfect, heart-shaped bottom faced Claire. The secretary had paused in the doorway *en route*, presumably to the kitchen.

"Bless you. Er, whatever it is your people say when somebody sneezes. *Buenos Dios*."

"You just said 'good God' in Spanish, and the Spanish aren't my people. And I didn't sneeze."

"But I heard you." Claire blinked. She heard *somebody*, anyway. Loud and clear, like a ghost making his presence

known. But the TV and radio weren't on, and Lupe's bedroom didn't share a common wall with a neighbor.

Lupe now turned to her, in full glorious frontal, looking as though she'd been discovered hiding drugs within her person.

"Lupe," Claire began, suspicious. "*¿Que pasa, chica?*"

Lupe didn't answer. Didn't have to. Those vacant eyes shifted oh so quickly to the mirrored wall, and Claire felt the bile roil in her stomach. Lupe wasn't the only one watching, apparently.

A camera. She had been taken advantage of, unwittingly recruited into filming porn. Or maybe there was a live webcam buzzing behind one of those panels? How many techno geeks were surfing single-handedly, literally, through DumbHornyLawyers.com, enjoying the unfolding drama?

Claire ripped the top sheet from the bed and wrapped it furiously around her, toga style. "You bitch!" she seethed. "You better hope there isn't a hidden camera around here, because if there is you are so fucking fired—"

"Claire, please." Lupe's voice cracked. It sounded more genuine than her seduction act. *Good*, Clair thought. The cunt deserved to suffer for risking Claire's reputation like this. Never mind that she had no authority to fire Lupe, but she'd find a way.

"You can kiss your job goodbye, and kiss lady Liberty's ass *hasta luego*, too. I'll have your work visa revoked." She'd ask around about that tomorrow, her training wasn't in immigration law. Surely there was a loophole provision for this kind of thing. "You'll be back in Rio bouncing soccer players' balls off your tits before you can say *Ay, caramba.*"

She marched to one panel and knocked, drowning out Lupe's pleas as she listened for a hollow spot. "Sorry, boys," she called to the mirror. "You'll have to Google yourselves without any visual inspiration tonight—"

The fourth tap opened a knobless door built into the two-way mirror wall. The force with which it opened startled Claire. The depth of the hidden room behind it was equally shocking.

A shallow closet, a cubbyhole, filled with a tripod and running video was expected. A whole room with chairs, and men seated in those chairs, was just too surreal for Claire to fathom.

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Not just any men, either. Winston Gladstone himself, as in Gladstone and Wylie, as in Claire's boss, as in a sixty-year-old pantless man holding a cocktail in one hand and his deflating cock in the other, had prime viewing up front. Various junior partners and clients—clients!—comprised the remainder of the audience, all bearing expressions ranging from fear to shame to downright embarrassment.

This is crazy, this is crazy... Claire thought for a second to check for the esteemed Mr. Chase and was relieved to see he was absent.

"Claire," Gladstone's fatherly voice now filled her ears. "This isn't what it looks like."

Oh, come on! Clearly Gladstone didn't excel in improvisation as well as he did the law. Claire folded her arms and took on as defiant a stance as capable for a disgraced woman wrapped in a bed sheet.

"You know, Winston, most people I know who court clients usually take them to a Yankees game. They *are* in town this week."

A client in question—thin, Japanese, and staid—only bowed and seeped back into the shadows.

"Claire, sweetheart." Warmth melted into condescension. "If you would just let me explain..."

But Claire was on her way out. Locating her purse, she pushed past a weeping Lupe in her search for a quick exit. Never mind the clothes—why waste another second in this twisted place? "Explain to the Bar," she called behind her, then slammed the front door. Explain, indeed! No amount of backpedaling or promises of promotion would leave Gladstone with the upper hand. He'd humiliated her for his own personal amusement, made her the firm's whore!

Granted, Lupe shared some of that burden, and Claire felt somewhat sorry for her, but she wasn't about to go back to hear the secretary's excuses. She really didn't know how complicit Lupe was in the scheme, if at all. All the same, the woman could have said no to Gladstone and found a comparable job elsewhere.

Just like she was going to have to do. *Ugh!* Sure, this was New York—but open a sewer cap in Manhattan and twice as

many lawyers crawled out than rats, how she'd laughed at that joke when friends teased her. Claire knew she'd face stiff competition in the job market, and she doubted those vying for work didn't have the worry of their bare asses being uploaded to the Internet for global entertainment.

Not being able to use anyone at Gladstone and Wylie for references would hurt, too. Whom could she trust there now to help her?

Mercifully, the hallway was empty, and Claire's elevator ride to the ground went uninterrupted. Unfortunately, though, the long intervening silence set doubts in Claire, and hot tears stung her eyes. How could she approach the Bar Association with this? Gladstone was a legend. He dined with senators and movie moguls. He greased wheels and tripped on power daily. What man in that playroom would stand up for her when Gladstone offered so much more?

And Lupe...ol' Winston probably did have the power to ship her perfect, heart-shaped ass back to the jungles of South America. Or, Lupe would go into work tomorrow morning with a new fur coat, a few more bucks in the bank, and a conveniently lapsed memory.

No, Claire realized, best to just return to work tomorrow and quickly tender her resignation, then hope to God she could maintain her career. All because she wondered aloud to the wrong person what it would be like to lick another woman's clit.

I should just keep a journal like everybody else.

Whisking past the doorman into the street, she kept her head high and her attitude nonchalant. This was New York City, and a woman in a bed sheet, while not the norm, could certainly register as unremarkable if played correctly. Claire had only to hail a cab quickly and hope no tourists emerged from nearby Central Park to gawk at the adjacent Dakota building, John Lennon's last stand.

No such luck. Claire had just raised a bare arm to signal a passing checkered car when a squealing Minnesota accent exploded from behind her. "My lady," she scolded. "You need to leave whatever cult you're in and go back to Jesus."

She would have laughed any other day. Instead, Claire offered the befuddled older woman bearing a Bloomingdale's

Big Brown Bag her best smile. "Actually, I'm on a short filming break and have to remain in costume," she lied. "I'm Cameron Diaz's stand-in. We're doing street shots today."

Miss Minnesota was obviously from out of town. The cheap t-shirt, coupled with the black, pointed-toe flats—in a walking city, no less—gave her away. She bought the fib easily. "Ooh, how exciting," The woman's gaze darted all around in search of hidden cameras. "Am I in the way? Should I move?"

Another cab sailed uncaringly past. "You're fine, we took five," she said. The woman, starry-eyed and flushed from a presumably long walk through Manhattan in the wrong shoes, simply ate it up. "Yeah, it's another one of those screwball comedies with the ubiquitous girl in public in her underwear scene. Won't win an Oscar, but it'll pay the SAG dues." Did fake stand-ins have a union? Sure as hell wouldn't be SAG. Her captive audience didn't seem to know, either.

"And Cameron Diaz is the girl?"

"After editing." This was too easy. "I do all the grunt work while she relaxes in her trailer."

The old woman nodded sagely. "Well, if she's the star, she's entitled to star treatment."

Don't I know it. "Yep." Claire smacked her lips. "Her and Chevy Chase."

"Oh, he's in it, too?" The enthusiasm disappeared from the woman's voice. "Well, maybe I'll rent it." With that the older woman toddled away with her bag, leaving Claire to resume trying her luck with the taxis.

None passed for the next several seconds, only the never-ending line of dark stretch limos, reserved for more important, clothed passengers. Claire felt her insides wobble like gelatin as one suddenly paused next to her on the curb. Great. What if that *was* Chevy, on his way into the Dakota for high tea with Yoko?

Slowly the front passenger window buzzed downward to reveal a kindly, face leaning forward with a sad smile.

"Miss Walker," chided Dominic Petrocelli, Gladstone's driver. "What're you doing out here dressed like that? You'll catch your death."

Claire hugged the sheet firmly around her and contemplated draping one corner over her head. Maybe she'd pass for a

Missionaries of Charity nun, like Mother Teresa. Sister Claire, doomed to a life of poverty and chastity—how fitting. She hadn't even detected the weather, as concerned as she'd been about getting off the street.

Come to think of it, *it was* starting to feel cool. Autumn took its time coming to New York this year. Only days ago, she'd trekked the Garment District in shorts. Happier days.

"Just out for a stroll," Claire replied airily and looked for an escape hatch in the concrete. Dom, however, was already out of the cab and rounding the grill.

"If you'll excuse my Sicilian bluntness, Miss Walker, I call bullshit. Your face is redder than a beet and I'll bet you're as naked as the day God made you underneath that." He ripped open the back of his limo. "Get in."

It wasn't a request. And it beat standing out on the sidewalk pretending to be a movie prop. Only now did Clare realize what Dom had instantly seen—she was a mess. Sidewalk debris dug into the soles of her feet, and her cheeks felt sticky from small tears. No sooner than Dom hustled into the limo than did the torrential downpour follow.

Crazy, indeed.

* * * *

"Ah, Miss Walker, if I'd'a known that was you up there, I'd've come up and got you myself," Dom tsked and turned a corner.

His words, which came without pause after Claire's condensed version of her and Lupe's failed mutual seduction, shocked Claire. She watched the back of Dom's head, framed by his chauffeur's cap, bob sagely. Sympathetic brown eyes, mildly lined with age, peered at her from the rear view window.

"You know? You knew?" Claire thought a moment. It did make sense, she supposed. As often as Gladstone traveled the city, surely Dom would be privy to a few of the pervert's secrets. Being the help, Claire imagined the lower ranks of the company did a fair amount of gossiping to the unhearing ears of the higher-ups. People like Gladstone didn't view people like Dom as threats to their professional security. Who would believe an immigrant driver over a man with a law degree?

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Who's going to believe me? Tears stung Claire's eyes, heating her skin. These thoughts only served to further discourage Claire, discovering she'd been kept out of the loop on two levels. Senior attorneys knew the score, as did the "little people" like Lupe and Dom. Was there a vast network of sexual activity crackling behind the closed doors and shut curtains of every law firm in New York? How would she be able to work in this town again? She definitely couldn't go back to Gladstone and Wylie like nothing had happened.

Dom nodded his head back, in the direction from whence they'd come. "That right there, what you just came from, is a corporate apartment owned by the firm. Stoney's father kept it in the early days for visiting clientele, but when the firm got the suite at the Plaza, Stoney kept this one on for his reindeer games."

"Really?"

Dom made a sputtering noise as though to say, "Hell, yeah!"

"You name it, it probably happened there. Orgies, girl on girl shows, just like what you were there for. Oh, now, you didn't think *Lupe* could afford an apartment on Central Park West?" Those eyes in the mirror sharpened at her, regarding Claire with stern, yet gentle prodding.

"Well..." Claire recalled her surprise when Lupe gave her the address to "her" place, and she was Gladstone's international secretary. The girl spoke a number of languages and typed with the speed of a NASCAR driver. Claire didn't know Lupe's salary, but acknowledged a person with that talent was indeed valuable and worth every penny, if not more.

"Lupe lives off the Garment District with her sister. Poor kid. She had a pretty raunchy past in Brazil she's trying to keep buried there. That *cafone* Gladstone found out and holds it over her like a goddamned sword over her throat." Another turn and a long pause at a spotlight left Claire wanting for more.

Instead, Dom shook his head and said, "Just be thankful you're not her. You wouldn't believe the shit Stoney has her doing, and she obliges because she's scared to death."

Claire's heart thudded. "Is her life in danger?"

"I don't know, she's pretty tight-lipped about it. Near as I can tell, she doesn't want to go back to Brazil."

"Oh, God. I hadn't realized that about her." Claire fought the nausea bubbling in her stomach. "And I left her back there...I wasn't thinking."

"Now, don't you worry about Lupe. Here." Dom held up a cell phone, flipping it open with a thick thumb, and pressed three buttons. Seconds later he held a quick and terse conversation in Italian with the tinny voice on the other end. Claire couldn't discern any of it, sinister though it sounded.

What's Italian for concrete shoes, I wonder?

"Done." He rang off and Claire leaned forward, hugging the back of Dom's headrest. Closer to him, she detected his woodsy, fatherly cologne, and noticed the rest of the front bench seat was littered with crossword puzzle magazines and snack wrappers. A saint medal dangled from the rear view mirror. Claire's tensions dissolved in this presence, despite the niggling concerns over the phone call.

"Dom," she began, "if I ask you a question and you say *fuggedaboutit*, I'm escaping through the moon roof."

Dom let go with a hearty laugh and motioned her back to her seat. "Please, Miss Walker! I ain't no Tony Soprano. Hell, I ain't even a decent Mezzo, neither. You got nothing to worry about, you didn't hear anything incriminating."

"Please, I'm Claire. You've seen me in a bed sheet. We can afford to be informal now."

"Sure thing." The cell chirped and Dom held it up to inspect the number. "Bah. He can wait." He bounced the phone off the bench seat and Claire surmised Stoney was calling for his ride.

"Claire, nice Irish name," Dom added over the twittering peal of the phone. His voice was like a smile. "You know, I was married to a nice Irish Catholic girl for almost thirty years."

"What? When? At two years old?" Claire cried. "Did they betroth them that young in the old country?" No way a man of Dom's age—whatever it was, he certainly didn't look old—could have been married that long.

"Hey, you watch yourself, missy," Dom chided, not without some humor in his voice. "I may have been born in Sicily, but

the south Bronx is my old country. Moved there when I was two. How old do you think I am?"

Claire shrugged. Had she really been so focused on herself all this time she'd known Dom not to know his age? She knew nothing about any of the people who worked for Gladstone and Wylie, apparently. She took in what dark hair was visible under Dom's cap, and regarded his bulky yet strong build. Having seen him in action, shuffling clients in and out of his car, she did know he carried himself well and was quick on his feet. Great shape, clearly.

"Uh, I always figured you were close to my age. Mid-thirties."

"Lady, I love you. I was forty-seven last March."

"If you'll forgive my Irish-English bluntness, I call bullshit." Claire snorted back her surprise. Sure, his olive skin bore a few lines, but there was not a speck of gray on the man. "What's your secret?"

That smile filled the rear view mirror, blinding her with its sincerity. "No secrets. I was married to Ginny McLahren for about thirty years. We were happy every day of our lives together. Ziti every Saturday, Mass on Sunday, and potatoes whenever she felt like cooking them. We have a wonderful boy, too. Robbie, who's now on his way to Central Park West to retrieve our Lupe."

"Good." Claire thought a moment, and did recall a brief, company-wide e-mail noting the passing of Dom's wife. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be. I miss her, but she's not truly gone." Dom tapped his heart for emphasis. "When I'm down I think of her, and I look at our boy, and life is worth living again. When you find yourself that kind of love," he pointed at her truncated reflection in the mirror, "you'll see it, too."

"Not gonna happen." Claire slouched on the back bench. If anything could be more of a mess than this night, it was her whole damn love life, right from day one. She could count the number of failed romances she'd suffered on the fingers of half of Manhattan. There had been clandestine yet strained office flings, a near brush with death at the hands of an angry wife Claire didn't know existed, now this humiliation with Lupe...

“Hey, you like music? That’ll cheer you up.” Dom switched on the radio. The phone rang again but he swiftly clicked a button to silence it. “They got this new station I like, it bounces from song to song. You get Ozzy one minute and Celine Dion the next. It’s crazy.”

“Crazy.”

Crazy, crazy, crazy...

A familiar voice soon filled the back of the limo, further pushing Claire over the precipice of her dwindling sanity.

Ellie, when I look at you...

“Christ.” Not now. Of all the songs ever written and recorded...

“Dom, shut it off. Please? I have a headache.” She wasn’t lying...not right now. Claire needed only to hear that first lyric from Brady Garriston’s mouth to have a new flood of emotions unleashed. Memories of her failed, albeit brief, romance with the rock legend surfaced to her consciousness. That had been a mistake, breaking it off with the sexy older man. Brady had been nothing but a gentleman in public and a wild man in bed, though he could have been more attentive to her in the time they dated. That fault, however, she could have helped correct in time, but Claire hadn’t been willing to give him that. Sure, Brady up and left her on a spontaneous trip to Europe to clear his head. The move served to cure his writer’s block, and though Brady had tried to assure Claire he wasn’t running from her, she believed otherwise and left before her heartbreak could be rendered inoperable.

Only when she decided to give him the benefit of the doubt did she learn, in a humiliating manner, that she was too late to recapture their magic.

Now Brady was happily married to her look-alike cousin, the Ellie of Brady’s comeback hit song. The two women, best friends throughout their lives, hadn’t spoken in nearly a year as a result.

“Dom?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry.” Brady was duly silenced. “Sorry,” Dom added. “Forgot you and he had that thing.”

“How did you...?” Claire trailed off as she realized she knew the answer. The help knew everything.

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“Have you talked to your cousin lately?” he then asked.

No exaggeration there. Would Dom rattle off her Social Security number next? She confided to nobody at work, much less “the help.” Well, Lupe...but that slip taught her well.

“I haven’t,” she said finally.

“You should.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? You got her number, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Need a phone? I got one right here.”

“Dom.” She sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“Life doesn’t have to be complicated if you make it easier on yourself. Look around you.”

Claire did as told, watching Manhattan and her people slide past the limo. At this rate, the pedestrians would get to their destinations first.

“Think of all the people who can’t walk down the street anymore ‘cause of 9/11. How many unresolved issues remain because of that? Life isn’t complicated, sweetheart, but it’s damn short. I was married to Ginny McLahren for thirty years and that still wasn’t enough!” Dom’s voice cracked a little at this, along with Claire’s heart.

Quite suddenly the limo broke free of its crawling line of traffic and rocketed down a side street. The turn jostled Claire, who wasn’t buckled into her seat.

“What are you doing?” she cried.

Dom parked along the curb and killed the engine. “Wait here,” he said and dashed onto the sidewalk, into a nearby boutique.

Where was she going to go? She still had on the sheet and was miles from her building. Like hell was she going to dare the subway.

Dom returned several minutes later with a bulging plastic shopping bag, which he pitched into the back. It hit Claire’s lap and sagged, spilling clothes, socks, and a flimsy pair of thick-soled slippers.

“Get dressed.”

“What? Why did you buy this?” The bag crinkled as she shifted to better see its contents. “Can’t you just take me home? I

have clothes.” Claire pulled out the green sweatshirt bearing the I-heart-NY logo and matching sweatpants. Surprisingly, everything seemed to be her size.

“No time for detours if you want to get to JFK.” The limo resumed movement with a lurch and Dom steered precariously past parked cars and wobbling pedestrians.

“What? Who are we picking up?” Of course, Dom was still on the clock, reckless as he was now with the company time. “Stoney’s flying in more perverts for his playpen?”

Dom’s cell phone chirped once again, but this time he answered in a curt voice. Claire thought at first Robbie had confirmed claiming Lupe, but was shocked instead to hear from the driver an expletive-laden resignation.

Then the driver’s side window buzzed away, and the phone went flying into the street.

“Why did you do that?” Claire cried.

Dom shrugged. “Company phone, and I don’t work for the company no more. I’m not gonna stand by any longer while Stoney and his thugs take advantage of nice girls. You deserve better, Claire, and so does Lupe. My last official act with Gladstone and Wylie is to make sure both of you are okay.”

“I’m fine, Dom. Really. Just take me home.” Claire’s heart pounded. The limo seemed to close in on her. Was she being kidnapped? What was happening to Lupe now? To her?

“I *am* taking you home. What’s the name of that town you’re from? Doorville? What?”

“Dareville, and I don’t want to go there. I already feel bad, I don’t need any more crap.” Claire huffed. What good was this? The thought of Dareville only brought back painful memories. “I worked so hard to get away from there.” And from those who broke her heart, but Dom didn’t need to know that.

But they were away from the city now, *en route* to the airport. It would be a fairly expensive cab ride back to Manhattan from JFK, but Claire doubted she’d make it anyway. Knowing Dom, he’d buy two tickets to Norfolk just so he could get past security and see her on the plane. Maybe fly it himself.

“You listen to a guy who’s been there, sweetheart,” Dom scolded. Big brown eyes filled the rear view mirror, powerful and hypnotic. Compassion radiated from their reflection,

warming Claire's skin. "Where you are, I been there. A time like this, you need to be around people who love you. They'll ease your pain, even if you're on the outs with them. Besides, if you haven't spoken to anyone there lately, you don't know how they're missing you right now. Life's too short to carry grudges. You're going home and you're not coming back until you're better."

She couldn't resist smirking at him. "You gonna send Lupe back to Rio with the same Lifetime Television speech?"

"Never you mind about Lupe. Take care of yourself."

Claire leaned back, rustling the sheet around her. Outside, the skeletal monster globe of the World's Fair drifted past her window. She recalled when she first saw it, coming from Virginia fresh out of law school...ready to take on the world. Here, this world had presented itself as though daring her closer.

What remained?

A life of promise, damaged by pain and humiliation.

An aging globe, a relic of glory long gone.

Well, maybe a weekend away *would* help. She wouldn't necessarily have to see Ellie and Brady. She had other friends. Lauren McKenna and Kate Robeson, her best friends from high school, still lived in town and Claire maintained connections with them, if only through the occasional e-mail. Maybe they could use the time to reconnect, gorge on snack cakes and complain bitterly about men. *Heh*.

A pang in her heart chilled her. *He'd* be there, too. Her first love, her reason for leaving.

So what? her conscience chided. She didn't have to see him, either. She didn't last time she went home.

Nor did Dom need to see her dressing.

"Okay, pops," she drawled. "Up with the privacy shield. Enough men have seen me naked today. And while you're at it, take the second star to the right, and straight on 'til Virginia."

"Aye, aye." Dom mock saluted and hit the proper switch.

Chapter Two

Redding Marbury breezed through the small kitchen and squealed to a halt before the refrigerator. His gaze hadn't so much as darted in his older brother's direction, yet clearly the journalist's keen eye proved omnipresent.

"Jay, for Christ's sake," Red moaned. "It's not his funeral."

"It might as well be," Jake Marbury, Jr. groaned. He slumped at the small breakfast table, squirming in the discomfort of his best Sunday suit. Used to be he could find solace in a stolen moment in this kitchen. He and Redding had grown up in this house, shared countless meals and animated conversations with their parents and friends right here. Even after Cynthia Marbury's death, J.J.—as he'd always been known—could sit and savor the ghostly aroma of sugar cookies long ago eaten, comfort foods that nursed him through many difficult times.

This morning, however, there was no aromatherapy or welcoming sight to heal or even soothe his misgivings. Not the homely floral wallpaper, nor the ever percolating carafe of Jake, Sr.'s favorite dark roast provided enough balm to counter the bile rising in Junior's stomach. After today, all of this would belong to Lauren McKenna. Lauren McKenna-Marbury—because she seemed the hyphenating type...Mrs. Jake Marbury. A woman half Dad's age.

The freak. She was going to be the death of Dad one way or the other. A woman half his age, with a sexual reputation a porn star might envy, just screamed heart attack for Jake, Sr.

After an intense inspection of the refrigerator's contents, Red selected a bottled root beer and took the chair to J.J.'s left. The abrupt hiss of the cap's release took J.J. by surprise, and he awoke from his reverie to find his younger brother scowling at him.

“What?” J.J. protested. “You don’t like the idea of Dad marrying Lauren any more than I do. Why get on my case?”

Red took a quick but audible pull from the bottle before answering. “I know. I’ll admit I’m not too thrilled about Dad marrying somebody my age, but I never expected him to curl up and die alone, either,” he said. “I know I didn’t want *that* to happen, anyway. So, what choice do I have but to be happy that he’s finally happy again? Don’t you want that for him, too?”

“Yes, I do. We’ve been over this. I told myself a long time ago that if Dad wanted to get into another relationship, I wasn’t going to stop him. But,” he sighed, “I always figured he’d go for somebody closer to his age. Somebody with whom he’d have things in common.” Indeed, when he’d learned once that Jake had a date with Marlene Robeson, who used to do the books at Jake’s store, J.J. had been thrilled. The older divorcee seemed just the ticket to bring Jake out of his mourning. Apparently they didn’t mesh as well as J.J. had hoped.

“What commonalities? Medicare?” Red snorted. “He has plenty in common with Lauren.”

“The store. Big whoop. Her and half the town.”

That their father had made Lauren manager of his organic grocery shop still nettled under J.J.’s skin. The woman had been a teacher with no real business experience. She only ended up working for Jake, initially as an office manager, after a scandal involving racy pictures forced her resignation from Dareville Primary Academy. Falling in love might have been a happy accident according to Jake, Sr., but J.J. wasn’t fooled. He knew Lauren had orchestrated the whole plan—she weaseled into Jake’s life, his bed, and now his home and livelihood. J.J.’s home. It wouldn’t be his anymore—even though he hadn’t physically lived here in years, the place held his heart. Damned if Lauren didn’t have plans to renovate everything and remove any evidence of Cynthia’s existence.

“Why are you looking at the wallpaper like that?” Red asked.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re afraid it’s going to melt, or bleed. Will you just relax, Jay?”

“What if she changes it?” J.J. asked. “What if she redoes the whole damn house until we don’t recognize it anymore?”

Another long drink. The bottle hit the table as Red let out a mild belch. “Dude, it’s just wallpaper. Let it go.”

“It’s home. It’s Mom.” *It’s over.* Whoever said change was good was full of shit, J.J. decided. Sure, his father might think life was better for having Lauren, but where did that leave him? Red wasn’t wholly concerned, but Red had a home and family of his own, while J.J. had a condo in Virginia Beach and an equally nice place in Dareville. Neither, however, was really a home. Not like this place.

Home was where he found love. Lauren threatened that security. Her brand of love involved things that vibrated and moaned, and would certainly prove risky for his aging father, J.J. knew.

“You know about Lauren, don’t you?” J.J. felt the strain crease his forehead as his right eyebrow raised. “All the kinky shit she’s into.”

Red twisted his lips in an expression that rendered J.J.’s argument irrelevant to him. However, his brother wasn’t about to be silenced. “Remember those pictures that got her booted out of DPA?” J.J. prodded.

“No, because I never saw them, and it’s none of my business,” Red said. “Nor is it yours.”

“And she hangs out with Brady Garriston and his weirdo friend. Come on, you’ve heard the rumors about them, right?” Sex freaks, and God knew what else. Not that J.J. was a monk. He loved a nice, sweet piece of ass as much as the next red-blooded guy, but the stories of the rock star’s regular “house parties” were too bizarre for him to comprehend. To picture his sixty-year-old father humping around in a pile of naked flesh in Brady Garriston’s living room was just too much.

“She’s going to give Dad a heart attack,” J.J. warned. “We’re going to get a call and come here one night to find him dead with a ball gag in his mouth and a dildo up his ass.”

That did it. Root beer sprayed the expanse of the Formica tabletop and lightly misted J.J.’s suit. He scooted back.

“Watch it!”

DARE TO DREAM

Red's howling laughter lasted for several seconds. His own suit, unfortunately, was not spared the brunt of the spilled soda, and he frantically dabbed at his opened collar with a napkin. "Dude, don't ever do that," he gasped.

J.J. fumed. "Let's see you laugh when it really happens."

"Jay, come on." Now tidied, Red twined his fingers on the table. "Lauren hangs with those guys because they're married to her friends, who are also *our* friends. Second, it doesn't mean Dad and Lauren are rolling with that kind of crowd. I know for a fact they spend a lot of time at home."

No doubt looking for a place to hang the Pleasure Swing 3000. J.J. didn't share his thoughts on that.

"Third," Red continued, "I think it's great Dad has a sex life still, after all these years. Gives the rest of us hope when we're that age. And fourth," Red's smile slipped into a devilish grin, "I think you're jealous because you never get invited to those sex parties."

J.J. straightened and attempted a blasé attitude. "Who says I haven't? Have you and Charlene?"

The expected smart-aleck retort never came. Red rose and pitched his empty bottle in the trash can by the refrigerator. "Come on," he cajoled. "Let's go see what's keeping Dad. We need to get moving."

J.J. glumly followed his brother. With any luck, his dad had decided to play runaway groom.

Chapter Three

She felt as though her limbs nearly atrophied. Damn, but airplane seats were cramped! Claire fidgeted for comfort, balancing a dewy plastic cup of soda and relaxing only when her hips no longer hurt.

The next available flight to Norfolk, Virginia Claire was able to take had been scheduled for early the next morning. As she'd predicted, Dom bought two seats so he could sit with her at the gate. Claire felt strange checking in without luggage or something more presentable to wear, but she imagined those people with the airline remembered her from her last spur of the moment flight out of town. So she and Dom worked crossword puzzles and munched on Burger King combos, dozing intermittently until her flight boarded.

Dom kissed her goodbye. "Have a good life."

She looked at him, puzzled. "But I'm coming back. I may not be at the firm, but the city is my home."

Dom only winked at her and whistled away.

* * * *

Flying home at last, Claire's excitement over reconnecting with old friends grew as the distance between the plane and its destination shortened. Her best friend in high school, Kate Robeson, had sounded jubilant about the spontaneous visit, even through the staccato reception of Claire's cell phone before her departure. Of course, she'd be happy to get Claire from the airport, and guess what? Lauren was there, too. She'd tag along and they'd all catch up on the drive back to Dareville. Good times, good times.

After landing and wending her way down the corridor toward the main airport lobby, Claire soon discovered Kate had omitted a few details in their earlier conversation. She saw that clearly as the waiting crowd came into focus at the end of the

hallway. Flanked by curious onlookers searching for their own newly arrived loved ones, a radiant Lauren McKenna bounced on tiptoe, resplendent in a modest but beautiful wedding dress. Kate, in a stunning, floor-length maroon gown, waved wildly and called Claire's name.

"Holy Mother of God."

The shock of seeing them still numbed her, through the moving walkway toward the parking garage and into Kate's compact car, her friends babbling all the way. Claire could only repeat the same sentence over and again, and it wasn't until they crossed into Virginia Beach that they finally answered to her satisfaction.

"Please tell me this is a prank," Claire begged, feeling sorely out of place in her sweat suit, which surely stank of airport and old hamburgers. "You're late for a fashion show, dress rehearsal for *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. Something!"

Lauren bounced giddily in the back seat, crinoline and satin rustling a nice static white noise around them. "Nope! It's my wedding day, finally! I can't believe you made it down. When your RSVP didn't come back, I figured you'd be too busy. But, it *was* short notice, too."

"Uh, yeah. Surprise!" Claire couldn't recall receiving an invitation in the first place. Who was Lauren marrying? Last Claire knew, her friend was with the senior Jake Marbury. Claire shuddered to think about it, not because she disapproved of Lauren being with an older man, but because of said gent's connections to her own past.

She's marrying Jake? The name would come up eventually, so Claire elected to stay quiet about it. She looked enough like an idiot already. The wedding invite was probably buried in a pile of unread mail on her countertop back home, along with other letters she'd designated in the non-priority category. Had life and work in New York really distracted her to the point of neglecting her friends? And to arrive on a day celebrating love...what a kick in the teeth.

She deserved it, though. She'd been such a cad, yet her friends welcomed her back easily.

Claire had tried to sound and look convincing of her happiness for Lauren. It either worked or the woman was too

wound up to detect any discomfort from Claire. She reached over and grasped Claire in a tight, crinkling hug.

Kate snorted from the driver's seat. "Surprise, for real. What's surprising is that you didn't bring any luggage."

"Well," Claire wheedled, "it *was* a last minute decision..."

"Like your last trip here, and I didn't even get to see you then. Is this how the big city mind works?" Kate prodded. "Just hop on a plane whenever you feel like it?"

Hardly. The big city mind apparently needed surgery. "Okay, anyway, I must have gotten the dates mixed up," Claire lied, "and maybe the RSVP got lost in the mail. I would never have expected the bride to come all the way out here—"

Lauren patted her friend's shoulder. "Are you kidding? I had to do something. I'm so full of nervous energy. Besides, the wedding isn't for hours yet. We just thought us showing up in the dresses would be a hoot."

"Yes, that it was," Claire had to agree.

"And I'm sure I have something for you to wear," Kate added as she pulled onto the Dareville route exit. "We can stop at the drugstore for hose and makeup and whatever." She sniffed. "And feel free to use my shower. Please."

Gee, thanks. "That's fine. That and your pullout couch is all I need for the weekend." She would have to buy a ticket home, too, she realized.

"Really?" Claire saw Kate's brow arch in the rear view mirror. "I thought you'd be staying with Ellie," Kate said.

Claire cringed at that. Why would Kate think as much, since she called *her* and not Ellie to come to the airport? Surely Lauren knew better to have suggested it on the drive up to Norfolk. Kate's expression of surprise looked too transparent to warrant a comment, but Claire nonetheless indulged.

"I came here to see you," she told Lauren.

"Bullshit," Kate bellowed. "We all know what happened last time you came to town. No luggage, just the clothes on your back? You ran away again."

Lauren's own sympathetic expression clued in to Claire that another lie wasn't acceptable. So Claire slouched back in her seat and sighed, turning toward the window to watch picked-over cotton fields blur past in a band of grayish white haze.

"Yeah," Claire admitted. "But I don't want to talk about it right now. Today isn't about me. But I do hope your wedding is open bar, because I intend to close it."

Lauren laughed. "Well, it's a good thing Jake's has an organic wine section." She patted Claire's knee. "Don't worry, hon, we'll get you sufficiently sauced, but you do know Ellie and Brady are coming to this."

"Uh-huh." Talk about salt in the wounds. To come from a city of failed love to see her cousin and her ex-lover together...it would take more than organic wine to ease that ache. Did they make organic vodka?

"J.J. will be there, too, naturally." Kate sounded as though she were testing the waters. "He is a groomsman."

"I know. I can handle it." *Liar. Ugh!* Could this day get any worse? At least when she and Brady last parted company there was a degree of civility. She hadn't experienced that with J.J. when she left Dareville and they split for good, and she doubted fifteen years of non-communication had softened any grudges.

"Maybe I should head over to Kate's after the ceremony," Claire suggested, wary.

"Or, maybe we could put a nice dress on you, brush your teeth, and bring you to the reception to face the music," Lauren said firmly. "Honestly, we're not in high school anymore, and you two haven't seen each other in years. I'm sure you can be cordial for an afternoon. Besides, other people will want to see you, and Cal Briscoe's band is playing the reception. He's just incredible." Lauren swooned.

"I've heard." Cal was Brady's friend, Claire remembered. She'd met him a few times while she and Brady dated, and now the studio musician was married to her friend, Sue. At least she hadn't fucked *him*, too, Claire mused. Him she could live with, seeing again. But J.J....

He had talked of forever, made plans without consulting her. She wanted excitement and a metropolitan lifestyle, and he wanted matching Adirondack chairs overlooking the Chesapeake Bay. An explosive argument shortly after graduation had ended any hope of both of them sharing the same vision for their future.

"I don't know about digging up old wounds today," she added. "Ellie and I left so much unsaid..." She knew, of course,

eventually a family obligation would bring them together again. Claire anticipated such a reunion and possible reconciliation, but not now. She wasn't prepared for it, despite her assurances to Dom that she was, and didn't want it to happen while her life was in a rut. She had wanted to come back happy and successful, with a man who fulfilled her emotionally and sexually. Damn Dom for not allowing her at least that, or for not coming with her to pretend he was her rich boyfriend.

She wanted to be admired, not pitied.

And J.J. *Ugh*.

Claire felt more anxious about seeing him again after so long. Though she'd somewhat kept tabs on him over the years through hometown gossip—he'd never married, made a fine living as a real estate agent and got the condo with the deck chairs by the water—the notion of facing him unnerved her. How did he look now? Meticulous as he was about his appearance in high school, Claire imagined he was still gorgeous with his father's features, soft brown hair, and penetrating blue eyes.

And that cock, long and thick, though untrained at the time of their only coupling. How well since that night had J.J. mastered using it?

Familiar scenery closed in around them, and Claire shook away the thoughts of lust now warming her skin. Kate and Lauren continued to banter their battle plan for Claire between them, and she only half-listened until Lauren addressed her directly.

"So," she said, "you coming?"

Claire thought again of J.J., of Brady, of the string of faceless failed loves that covered the spectrum of her romantic life. How nice it would be to settle on one image and look upon it with happiness.

I wish. "Sure," she said. "I'll take a cigarette and blindfold while you're at it."

Chapter Four

Looking at Jake Marbury, Sr. was a hopeful glimpse into the future. Where brother Red had been blessed with the dark auburn hair and pointed features of the Redding side of the family, J.J. was clearly his father's son, resembling the older Marbury so well, few people could tell a younger picture of Jake from a current one of J.J. Only a head of silver hair separated the two now, that and a radiant joy evident in the groom's smile.

J.J. hoped one day to smile so broadly while escorting his own bride away from the altar and into eternity. Apprehensive as he remained about his father's new marriage, he couldn't deny that Lauren and his father looked good together, and were clearly in love. No doubt the fifty or so people crowding the small Episcopalian church where the Marbury boys had been baptized shared the same sentiment.

The brothers filed slowly behind the happy couple, each on the arm of a bridesmaid. He kept his head down, counting flower petals at his feet, annoyed by the restrained sputtering of the woman next to him.

He glanced sideways at Kate Robeson, who looked positively red with unreleased laughter. "What is so damn funny?" he hissed, just barely heard over the organ's *outro*.

Kate fanned away her merriment and shook her head. "You'll find out soon enough."

Great. She and Sue Briscoe, the other female attendant, had probably dotted his father's car with condoms. All the colors of the rainbow, ribbed for her pleasure.

Once out the church, Kate broke free of J.J.'s loose grip and snatched Sue to ride to the reception. Formal church pictures had been taken the day before, citing Lauren's disbelief in wedding curses concerning the groom seeing the bride in her dress before the ceremony. Suited him fine, it got them all to the bar quicker.

He passed a row of cars in the lot. Sue, Kate, and Sue's husband Cal had gathered together. "I'm looking forward to hearing the best man's speech," Sue called to him, her voice full of warning.

"So am I," J.J. shot back, grinning as he spun in a circle on his heels. The words unspoken between the two high school friends were palpable. *Don't spoil this*, Sue's face seemed to say.

He would do no such thing, he silently promised. He didn't have to like this new arrangement, but if anyone was going to ruin anything, J.J. decided to let that fall to his new stepmother. Surely, she would screw up sometime, and hopefully not at the expense of Jake's health.

Red came up from behind and nudged his shoulder. "Let's go," he said. "We need to get there quick for the introductions."

"Right." He couldn't wait to loosen his tie and quench his thirst. That the reception was to be held at the store amused J.J., but at least he could slip away toward the wine selection if it got to be too much for him.

"Wait a minute." J.J. stopped in his tracks. "You came with Charlene and the girls." They had driven separate cars to the church, with J.J. escorting Jake, who was now driving away in the wedding limo with his bride. "Where are they?"

"They went on without me." Red paused at the passenger side door of J.J.'s Mercedes.

"Really?" Odd, considering they hadn't lingered too long after the ceremony. "Are the girls okay?" he asked, referring to his nieces Charlie and Arlene.

"They're fine," Red snapped, taking J.J. aback. Then, more softly, "I think Charlene just wanted to get them something to eat right away."

"Okay, fine." Red didn't sound so convincing, but now was not the time to pry. J.J. had enough to occupy his mind as it was without getting in between yet another family squabble.

He had ten minutes to think of a wedding toast, and decided to concentrate his mental powers on praying for lengthy stoplights.

* * * *

In the end, Claire compromised with her friends and agreed to come only to the reception. A lively party provided a better

opportunity for social camouflage, whereas she was certain she'd stand out in the small church. Her nerves still had the best of her, and she wanted them entirely under control when she faced Ellie and J.J.

God, J.J. Her timing was uncanny. She arrived in Sue's car just as J.J.'s Mercedes turned into the Employee of the Month space at Jake's Organic. She had to laugh at his bravado—some things never changed, as she recalled how he'd pull into the same space when he worked for his dad in high school, regardless of whether or not he *was* the deserving employee.

When he emerged from the car, she noticed immediately something else hadn't changed—the man was still gorgeous. Dressed in a dark suit and tie, he exuded a sexy confidence that carried well with each stride across the gravel lot. So smooth he was, he didn't kick up any dust the way his loping ride partner—and that had to be Red, who else in town had hair that color—did.

Claire moved to kill the engine, but instead cranked up the A/C. The cab of Sue's compact seemed warmer. Understandable in a Virginia Indian Summer, but it didn't explain how Claire's nipples hardened underneath the silk of her borrowed green dress, or the raised flesh prickling her arms.

It was as though the years apart were voided. Never happened. Claire wanted to think it was her own lack of a sex life that aroused these feelings, that they could have been caused by any handsome man, but the memory of their time together was too intense to forget.

Trapped in the car, she could still smell his cologne on her skin, and hear the rustle of white hotel sheets tangling around their limbs as they relieved each other of their virginity. It was a scene that could have been immortalized in a John Mellancamp song—little ditty about Claire and J.J.—and it brought a smile to her face.

And the courage to get out of the car and join the party.

* * * *

Forks tapped glasses, chiming a melodic rhythm that Cal Briscoe caught easily with his bass guitar. He improvised into a fleet-fingered finish and soaked up the ensuing applause, much to J.J.'s annoyance. The musician played the role of emcee with

all the camp of a cartoon. Adam Sandler's wedding singer looked like Ferris Bueller's bland history teacher by comparison. How this man, a good fifteen years his senior, could get away with acting the buffoon was bewildering.

What's more, Cal didn't *look* like a buffoon doing it!

That Cal milked the introduction to J.J.'s toast with a morning DJ patter further irritated him. He just wanted to get the speech over with and return to his station at the bar before anyone realized he had ad-libbed the whole damn thing.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we'd like to remind you that we have a delicious buffet with a carving station on the other end of the store. And, to help you get there faster, the best man J.J. Marbury will now deliver the toast on *this* end."

By now Red joined them on stage. J.J. grimly took the microphone from Cal. "Thank you, Cal, for that delightful introduction," he sneered. "The joke was almost as funny as when Groucho Marx first told it seventy years ago."

This brought an even bigger laugh, which buoyed J.J.'s spirits somewhat. Cal simply blew J.J. a kiss and backed away with a flourish. Eventually the crowd quieted and J.J. toyed with his beer bottle. A tray of filled champagne glasses floated past and Red snatched two for both of them.

"I've heard tell that it isn't easy for the children of a surviving parent when he or she remarries," J.J. began. He searched out his father and Lauren in the throng of guests. They were seated at their table—both looked apprehensive, as though hanging on every word. J.J. felt their tension from across the room.

"I suppose it's because children want to think their parents will be together forever, and to see a widowed parent remarry somehow voids that destiny," J.J. continued. "When I see my father with Lauren McKenna, how happy he is with her, and how she makes him feel young..."

In the distance, Jake's features softened. J.J. could swear the older man blushed.

"...I think perhaps my mother would have approved of this union. Cynthia Marbury was a woman in love with life, and a woman who lived for her family. I don't doubt that she is looking down on us right now and smiling, knowing that we

continue to enjoy life and be happy. If Mom could approve of my father finding happiness with Lauren,” he looked at Red, who nodded, then turned back to the mic, “so can we. To Dad and Lauren.”

“Hear, hear.” Glasses clinked, champagne splashed, and cheers followed a drum roll that ended with the happy couple’s kiss.

The reception carried on happily and smoothly, with dancing in the aisles and socializing throughout the store. Jake enjoyed dances with his daughter-in-law and granddaughters, while Lauren tried her best not to joke with her new ‘stepsons’ as each asked for a turn about the floor.

J.J. held her close during one song, seething, “Let’s make a deal. I don’t call you ‘Ma,’ you don’t call me ‘son.’”

Lauren pouted. “Does this mean no Mother’s Day breakfast at the Knights of Columbus hall?”

“Long as you don’t try to fix me up with any of your friends’ virgin daughters. What?” he added as Lauren snorted.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, relieved when her maid of honor broke in to pull her away.

“Time to throw the bouquet,” Sue sang. “You better get ready, too, Jay. Your dad’s tossing the garter afterward.”

“I’m on pins and needles,” J.J. grunted, and stormed to the bar. Lauren was up to something. He had a feeling.

* * * *

“Ooookay, all you single ladies, it’s time to line up for the bouquet toss. Winner gets a stunning floral arrangement courtesy of Dareville Florist and Gifts and the honor of being the next single girl in town to be badgered with matrimonial-related questions. The losers, come talk to me after the reception’s over.”

Laughter filled the store, but J.J. thought Cal’s banter rankled. He would have liked nothing more than to toss a well-aimed champagne cork into the musician’s mouth.

Leaning against the store’s coffee bar, downing his fifth longneck, he watched as a flurry of Dareville’s most eligible ladies, and his young nieces, gathered around the bandstand. Lauren teased the crowd with a fake toss that revealed her hand still gripping the long sash that tied the bouquet, then turned

around again for take two. In the distance, Jake sat at a table with Red and Brady Garriston, watching on and laughing.

He wanted to be there, too, enjoying the day with his father, but his heart just wasn't it. It had nothing to do with Lauren, either, though J.J. wasn't completely okay with the marriage. It had taken some time for him to be convinced that Lauren had no ulterior motives, and he felt a bit better when she willingly conceded to a pre-nuptial agreement. She only wanted his father, and J.J. supposed he could be happy with that.

What made J.J. unhappy now was that fact that his father had managed to snare a *second* wife when J.J. couldn't even get a second date with a woman. His sixty-year-old father, married to a woman J.J.'s age! The idea irritated him to no end.

More laughter, more patter, more teasing and cymbals crashing. Lauren faked the toss a second time to the crowd's mixed delight and annoyance. A raucous sound erupted from Jake's table, and J.J. saw his brother rear his head back, his mouth open like a PEZ dispenser's.

J.J. fumed at Red, perfect Red. Track star, fraternity president, successful career, beautiful wife, great kids, big house on the beach. How was it that his younger brother got everything before he did? The second son was supposed to come in second!

True, real estate was good to J.J.—he had the flashy Mercedes and a nice condo on the beach in addition to property in Dareville, but he knew he could be doing better in the current market. He had his father's handsome looks as well, and the attention of many attractive, willing women. So where was his wedding? Why weren't these people celebrating him? Why wasn't it his wife taunting a crowd of wallflowers?

He slammed down the empty bottle and barked for another. He knew damn well why: no woman in Dareville, or for that matter Virginia, excited him enough for him to pursue a second date. Only one woman could do that, could stiffen his cock with just a simple smile, and she was the standard by which all the other women he dated were judged. All those women had failed.

That woman, that one woman. Jake watched the cold mist curl up from his bottle's neck before taking a long pull. That woman broke his heart so many years ago, so badly he doubted it could ever be repaired. That woman was—

“Claire!”

J.J. nearly dropped his bottle. Somewhere in the course of his bout of self-pity, the bouquet toss was finally executed. Ellie Garriston stood on the cusp of the circle of bouquet hopefuls, staring in shock as the young ladies parted to either side to reveal a tall, slim blonde in a dark green dress.

Claire.

Claire Walker stood quietly, clutching the bouquet to her chest. She looked uncertain, as if wondering how the bouquet fell into her hands, and what she should do with it. J.J. watched, along with everybody else, as she stepped carefully into space vacated for her. He twitched uncomfortably, and looked down at himself.

Damn. She could still do it. After all these years they hadn’t seen each other, and here he was with a hard-on at his father’s wedding.

Claire stopped in front of her cousin with a slight smile. It seemed the entire wedding party and guests were hanging on this very moment. Claire and Ellie looked at each other as if they were the only people in the room.

“I-I just wanted to say,” Claire said haltingly, and handed Ellie the bouquet, “that I’m happy for Jake and Lauren, and that I’m happy for you and Brady.”

Sympathetic clucking from the crowd filled the space. J.J. swallowed back a comment.

“And...” Claire visibly trembled now. Tears spilled, bangs moved out of place, and the woman practically fell into her cousin’s arms. “I’m here,” she said finally, “and I’m back.”

Another thunderous cheer heralded the reunion between the estranged cousins. J.J. glanced at the bandstand and saw that Lauren wasn’t put off by no longer being the center of attention at her own wedding. Hell, she probably arranged it to look even better in front of her father, who the hell knew?

“I’m back!” Claire cried to the crowd, practically dancing in her cousin’s arms. “I’m back, Dareville, and I’m never leaving again!”

The scene played like a movie ending. The band struck up a happy tune, and Lauren waved her new husband over to the

bandstand. Jake rose gladly and approached, twirling the garter as he went.

And J.J. set down his beer and straightened his tie. What a day for Dareville. The farmer takes a wife, and the prodigal daughter returns.

Claire Walker was back.

And, J.J. thought with a smile, so am I!

* * * *

“All right, let’s keep this party rolling. How about we get all our single vic—er, *fellas* up here for the garter toss?” Cal joked. “Honestly, I know you’re out there, come on. The gals don’t bite unless requested.”

“Or when provoked,” Sue offered from the dance floor.

Laughter and playfully suspenseful music filled the air, but much of it muffled in Claire’s ears because of the suffocating bear hug that trapped her. Ellie had her front, Brady her back, and neither seemed ready to let go. How had this happened? She wanted more preparation, a moment or two to absorb her surroundings and choose the words she really wanted to say. The bouquet toss had caught her off guard—she hadn’t expected to catch it.

Looking through her cousin’s embrace, her gaze level with a thinning tuft of Ellie’s blonde hair, she caught sight of Lauren staring at them and smiling. Then a clandestine wink, and she was off to cheer on her husband.

The sneak. Of course she and Kate would have orchestrated the toss to force Claire’s hand. Doing so, though, prevented the thought-out scenario Claire hoped for, and instead paved the way for a blubbing, emotional scene worthy of an Oxygen Network special. And she’d cried that she wasn’t leaving Dareville again, where the hell did that come from?

Ah, well. Claire quietly savored the hug, yet felt some relief when she was released. Ellie’s eyes were rimmed red and shining.

“I’m so glad you came home,” she said, her voice cracking. “We have so much to talk about, and the last time you were here—”

“I know. I didn’t give it a chance.” Claire nodded, then chanced a look at Brady—her ex-lover, now cousin. His smile

was genuine and warm, his touch brotherly. Claire felt no familiar shivers of lust from it, which suited her fine. This was how it should be.

“How long have you been in town?” he asked. “Did you rent a car, did you fly? Where are you staying?”

She held up a hand, laughing, to calm him down. “Oh, I literally just got in. Kate picked me up.” No sense mentioning Lauren’s role, or that Claire had spent the night at JFK with her former boss’ ex-limo driver while waiting for her flight. Everything would come out soon enough, but right now the anticipation of the garter toss was too distracting. In particular, one participant held Claire’s attention.

J.J. stood amid a group of five young men, rocking on his heels. Of the gathering he appeared to be the oldest and most confident, the others looking as though their mothers had goaded them forward.

Ellie had been carrying on through the whole thing. “Well, once this is over we’re going straight to Kate’s to get your luggage. You’re staying with us, no arguments. We just redid the guest room, and you’ll have your own bath. You’ll have the room next to Jared’s.”

“Jared?” She thought the tall, wiry young man next to J.J. looked familiar. She’d seen him in Brady’s building in Manhattan, minding the lobby. “What’s he doing here?”

“Publicity,” Brady said. “Among other things. He just got his degree and I hired him to handle my press and maintain my website. That kind of thing.”

“I see.” Claire didn’t bother asking how Jared qualified for the guy Friday job. From what gossip she’d heard about her cousin and her husband, Claire imagined “among other things” included duties one might not find on a resume.

How well she knew that.

“Looks like he’s about to take a dive,” Claire observed. The trio watched as Jake, prompted by a drum roll, turned his back to the crowd. Holding the blue silk garter over his heads with both hands, Jake released it slingshot-style above the group. The garter arced smoothly over the crowd and several hands reached for the prize, but once the initial jostling was over it was J.J. who held the trophy aloft.

Claire's heart caught in her throat. He was still so handsome when he smiled. When that Cheshire grin slowly drifted her way she sensed the energy pulsing between them. Her pussy twitched in reaction to his hungry gaze, yearning for the tongue that now circled his lips.

"The J-man scores!" Cal bellowed to his band's fanfare. "Okay, kids, you know what comes next. Let's get our lucky lady on the dance floor..."

Hands pressed against Claire's back, and she was moving, not of her own volition. Both Ellie and Brady nudged her into the spotlight, fueled by the crowd's encouragement.

Before she realized it, J.J. palmed the garter into her hands, then draped his arm about her waist. "So, you're next in line, eh?"

"What?" This, after nearly fifteen years apart? No "Hello?"

It wasn't until J.J. gently eased her down into a chair brought up front, however, that she remembered the wedding tradition. Before the dance of the "betrothed" couple, she had to try something on first.

Which meant J.J. would help, and have access to a place that, attention though it needed, was not where she wanted him right now.

Not yet.

So much for cool, calm, and collected.

Seated before the entire wedding closing around her, Claire's body responded to the growing encouragement. What she had hoped would be a dignified reunion had quickly spiraled into a reality-TV spectacle as J.J. kneeled before her, removed one high heel, and lifted the leg.

"Here's how this works," Cal egged on from the stage, "every inch up her leg equals one year of wedded bliss. What do you say, J? Go for the golden anniversary?"

J.J. smirked. "What do you get for a hundred years?" he said, more to Claire than anyone else.

"A hundred? Some kind of metal out of *Star Trek* that built the ship, I bet," Cal quipped. "Aaand, we're off!"

Claire felt a chilling spark as the garter slipped from her hands into J.J.'s and looped around her bare foot. Because the

dress dusted her at mid-calf, and because the day was rather warm, she had opted not to wear stockings.

Due to her limited wardrobe, she'd forgone a more essential item of clothing as well. Claire cursed her thrifty nature. If only she'd checked one more aisle at the drugstore...

Bass strings vibrated and strained the ominous theme from *Jaws* as the garter snaked up her leg and over her knee, J.J.'s soft fingerpads leaving behind a trail of shivers. She tried not to let her free leg bounce with her anxiety, but involuntary nerves got the best of her, and that foot raised on the ball and began a lively springing. Thankfully J.J. edged closer to stop it, but that maneuver did little help for her senses.

She felt wetter underneath the dress, the delta between her thighs slick. A slight brush of skin and silk hitting a dangerous zone alerted her to J.J.'s discovery of the same thing, and the bouquet fell from her hands to the floor so she could grasp the sides of the chair for support.

Claire looked around her, at men and women dressed in fine clothes, all clapping and cheering and laughing along to a times-old wedding game. Cal's teasing bass increased its urgent rhythm and shook the floor. Each vibration was torture, licking up her labia with flames. She'd read somewhere once about a woman who achieved orgasm by doing nothing but sitting near a bassist's speakers at a concert. Claire had to commend Cal for his ability to please a woman without touching her, excruciating though it was.

A finger scraped her pussy and she looked down at J.J.'s bewitching smile. No sense trying to deny it now—he knew she wasn't wearing underwear, and he had her in a position where he could take free advantage. How graceful could a bouquet catcher look leaping from her throne with a man's hand up her crotch? It couldn't be done.

So she closed her eyes and braced for the inevitable probing of her wet slit. To be honest, it would feel good to be touched, to have months of pent-up sexual frustration released. Given the way J.J.'s fingers expertly secured the garter around her thigh, he seemed a good candidate to assist.

But his hands retreated and he rocked away, sitting back on his haunches. He waggled his fingers in the air to indicate his

mission was a success, and Claire's head filled to capacity with the roar of an approving crowd.

"Hey, Jay, where's your watch?" a slurred male voice shouted from the back. There was laughter, even a few gasps of dismay for the minors within earshot. Claire tried to zero in on that heckler but was distracted when J.J. jerked her upright and scooped her into his arms.

"What are you doing?" she cried, and kicked her feet skyward. Then she realized her nether regions might be made visible by the action. So she crossed her ankles and squeezed her thighs, but that seemed only to put more pressure on her throbbing clit and to heighten her enraged lust.

"Hey, Marbury, you're supposed to marry her before you carry her over the threshold," Cal called over to them. "Or at least over to the pet supplies aisle. Where you going, man?"

J.J. filed past wedding guests and wove around tables, into the aforementioned sales aisle. Claire watched over his shoulder as the wedding shrank with increased distance. A mixture of reactions were left in the wake—Ellie beamed proudly, Lauren cackled into Jake's shoulder and toasted their departure with her champagne flute. Cal shrugged and motioned to his band to play. Over J.J.'s labored breathing she heard the bassist quip about J.J.'s giving the wedding a miss and going straight for the honeymoon.

Technically, he was taking them to the back of the store, down the hall and into a restricted area. When the world slowed to normal, and J.J. returned her to a standing position, she realized they were in the employee lounge. Standard minimum wage and safety posters Claire remembered from teenaged summer jobs lined the beige walls. A small table with mismatched chairs took up one corner, a refrigerator the other.

And J.J. locked the door behind them. He turned toward her, shedding his jacket. His darkened eyes reflected his passion.

"You know what, I changed my mind," he said. "I want the garter back."

Chapter Five

He advanced on her slowly, undoing the buttons of his shirt with practiced ease. Claire's heart beat a rapidly growing tattoo, and her breath hitched on seeing his bare chest unveiled. Damn, he looked as good—no, way better—then the groping, thin teenager who'd rolled around a Virginia Beach hotel room with her after the prom. Time had been good to J.J., though it hadn't necessarily healed the pains that drove them apart.

If only she could see that for the desire clouding her vision and judgment. What good sense remaining implored her to keep her cool and try to get back to the reception. Her body, however, wanted to spread-eagle on the table and welcome J.J. back to familiar territory.

She wanted to stay here, too, and know again the pleasure of a man's tongue swirling around her clit, fingers exploring her pussy lips, and a nice thick cock to take away the ache in her core.

So it was no surprise to her that an exhaustive disappointment overtook her when she opened her mouth. "I think we should get back to the party instead." It didn't sound like her voice, more like a disapproving dowager. Was this the image she'd projected all these years? No wonder her sex life was shit.

J.J. had backed her into the table. Metal chair legs squealed in protest against the tile floor. "I thought this is where the party is," he said.

"Everybody's going to wonder where we are and what we're doing."

"Everybody knows where we are. They saw us come in here. And we aren't doing anything right now." The implied *yet* hung heavily between them. "Besides, nobody is going to care

what goes on in here. Dad and Lauren are probably dirty dancing in the deli area with a crowd around them.”

He encircled her waist and pulled her close. J.J.’s hardened cock brushed against her high and set her desires skyrocketing. Why would she resist something she craved so much? Here she was, actually trying to pull away!

She knew why. This was a man with whom things ended badly, and she hadn’t seen him in years. Lord knew where he’d been all that time. And yet, he was J.J., her first love. Perhaps her best love...

He leaned forward, his lips dusting over her bare neck. The dress was slit at the sides, yet exposed enough bare skin to ripple into goose flesh. In seconds she’d be a puddle, with her resolve weakened.

“I’ve missed you,” J.J. whispered, and peppered kisses against her collarbone. “Damn it, girl. Why did you stay away for so long?”

Why do you think? “I was here earlier in the year for Brady’s concert,” she said, a bit too defensively for her taste. *Please, right there under my ear. Yessss.*

“Yeah, for like a day. I didn’t find out until after you’d gone. Was I so bad you couldn’t face me? Come on. Kiss me.”

Her lips parted to receive his kiss, which was thankfully less forceful than the tone that demanded it. J.J. was gentle, and traced her lip as he groaned his appreciation. Her entire body vibrated in the wake.

He dared a touch to the small of her back, fingers probing and following upward the path of the dress’ zipper. Once at the base of her nape, he found the tab, which soon began a slow, painstaking descent. This time she did not protest.

“You look great,” he murmured. His hands touched down on her shoulders and slid away the straps. “Always did.”

The dress dribbled easily from her, more so than when she’d put it on. It was as though everything around her responded to J.J.’s desire...all but her own will, which continued to fight uphill.

She was naked now but for her heels and the garter, having forgone a bra as well since her breasts were still buoyant enough to pull off going *au naturel* in the dress. Vanity encouraged her

to roll back her shoulders and suck in that small abdominal bulge that regular workouts hadn't erased—the result of time and a diet of junk food brought on by long office hours—that J.J. couldn't seem to stop stroking. Until his hand slid back to her pussy.

The way he inspected her, his gaze caressing her stiffened nipples, make her queasy. She felt on display, no different than when her law firm watched from a two-way mirror.

It was then she realized the break room also had a mirror panel opposite them. She watched the muscles in J.J.'s back flex and ripple as he gyrated into her. His dark slacks molded nicely against his ass, the sway of his hips was hypnotic.

"Who's watching?" she asked suddenly.

J.J. was working the other side of her neck, nibbling a trail toward her throat. "Hm?"

"The mirror," she said. "What if somebody's watching from the other side?" She knocked on the mirror, feeling solid wall behind it.

J.J. didn't even look up. His open mouth slid down to the valley between her breasts and closed in a heated kiss. "Nobody's watching but you," he whispered on her skin.

"But the mirror..."

"Is on a common wall with the storage room, which has no windows. Just relax." He pulled the words into several syllables and lowered to capture her nipple.

"Oh." What a nice feeling that was, one she hadn't experienced in so long. Not even Lupe had managed that in their brief attempt at foreplay. On the opposite wall J.J.'s reflection rocked to the sensuous rhythm set by her pounding heart.

He pulled the distended knob of flesh and released it with a pop before working the other nipple between his teeth. Claire twitched and wobbled, fighting for balance in J.J.'s loose embrace. Finally she let him guide her to a precarious seat on the table's edge and did not protest as he shouldered her knees apart.

"Let's get a good look at you," he said, easing to a kneeling position. "See what I've missed."

Claire's head rolled back, anticipating what was to come, anticipating when to come.

* * * *

Mama, what *have* I missed?

Nearly two decades of time had done nothing—Claire remained as supple and taut as the night they'd first made love. *Only* time, he then corrected his thought. Claire hadn't allowed a repeat performance, but simply left town for a last summer trip before college and didn't look back. But, picking at old wounds could wait.

Claire didn't look old at all. Firm thigh muscles clued him to a regular exercise routine, perhaps at some exclusive New York fitness club, and a silken bare pussy, quite the contrast from the feathery bush that waited for him once before, revealed the mature, sensual woman before him. No longer the shy virgin, this was a woman ready to be pleased.

Luckily he'd used his time well, researching how to do just that.

"You're beautiful," he said, and parted her pussy lips to better appreciate the glistening pink clit aching to be touched. First, though, a bit of punishment.

Slowly he exhaled through his nose, reveling in how she squirmed in the heat. Her pussy lips twitched and she moaned her frustration. *That's for leaving without saying goodbye.*

Next, with his free hand, he traced her wet core and then eased his fingertip up her slit so it just rested beneath her clit. The pleased pain no doubt swirled within her. *This is for not calling for fifteen years.*

He inhaled her musk—sweet and salty, and oh so addictive. The tortured feeling transferred, evident in the way his hardened cock strained in his pants.

This, he told her silently, *is for coming back.* And they reconnected with one bold upward stroke of his tongue.

"Yes," he heard her hiss, her approval further confirmed with her firm grip in his short locks. Well, he certainly was not going to argue. She was delicious, and he starving. Before the shock of initial contact faded he resumed his ministrations. After a few broad licks he drew one of her folds between his lips, worrying her with gentle nibbling and sucking. He wanted to savor her, and save her clit and the inevitable rush of her juices for last. The way Claire gyrated made it clear she was more than ready to come. As was he, but the saner part of his mind

prevailed in the thought that he didn't want to wait another fifteen years to be with Claire Walker again.

"Jay," she whined, her stomach tightening. She pushed her hips forward, forcing herself closer. She lifted in mid-lick and J.J. inadvertently tapped her clit. Claire couldn't have squealed any louder if somebody had touched an ice cube to the sensitive bud. The sound put J.J. on the edge as well. He imagined his cock was a deeper shade of purple than was natural for skin.

Ah, hell. He began a full assault on her pussy, lapping and stroking and nibbling where effective. With his lips pursed over her clit, he pulled lightly while plunging two fingers in and out of her juicy core. Her walls were tight and slick, eagerly drawing him deeper as they contracted. Man, if it felt this constricting with just fingers, he could only imagine how sweet it would be to snug his hard shaft inside her.

The sooner the better, too. Claire's orgasm began as a fluttering in her thighs, then her hips bucked and rode J.J.'s probing tongue as he tried to drink in her sweetness. He followed her every movement as her climax hit, milking every last nerve until he thought she'd shatter the mirror behind them with just her voice. The wedding reception only just surfaced to his consciousness. Was anybody listening in? Were they loud enough to halt the music and heighten curiosity?

Then he asked himself why he cared.

"Oh, my." Claire's orgasm was tapering into silence. Time to rev up the engine again. How he managed to get his pants down was a mystery given how difficult it was to maneuver the jutting rod tenting the crotch. Once freed, however, J.J. wasted no time sliding into that waiting pussy. Claire responded loudly, tightening her core and her legs around his waist at the same time.

"So good. Tight." The words were ground through his teeth. He pumped hard into Claire, disrupting the table and various flatware and condiments left behind by past shifts. He saw none of that for the passion on Claire's face as he filled her.

Slow and soft, slow and soft, then hard and fast. Then he reversed, staying in the same pattern until the buildup in his balls became too much to bear.

Her nipples rubbed him raw from the tension. Sweat cooled on his back. He saw only Claire's silent cry, her beautiful face and fluttering eyes. He lodged his cock as far as it would go and came in a long, gloriously painful release. Several seconds elapsed before he ran out of air, but the tingling remained.

He kissed her shoulder, tasting salt, then nuzzled her neck. "Welcome back," he said.

"Thanks," she replied, as he left her body.

Chapter Six

She woke in the direct line of sunlight spraying her from a small window opposite the bed. Claire blinked slowly and paused to let her eyes adjust to the unknown surroundings—tall, cherry bedposts and a plush recliner, dark red curtains, taupe walls with white crown molding. A long bureau to one side bore antique framed photographs of people she knew. Family.

Kate had no such things in her home, she'd discovered that yesterday. Nor, she imagined, would J.J. have pictures of her aunt and uncle, or a stuffed white teddy bear resting at the foot of the bed.

God.

She'd screwed J.J. Marbury in the back of his father's store, like any common nymphomaniac might do. Clearly having a law degree and the highest score on the New York Bar exam among her graduating class could do nothing to combat the disintegration of common sense, or quell the rage of lust suffered last night.

She tried to sit up and an ache seized her, starting behind the eyes and shooting down her limbs. Somewhere in the course of leaving J.J. in the employee lounge and coming to this place her body and mind had petrified. How did she get here anyway, she wondered, and who had changed her into a flimsy satin baby doll nightie?

Correction, she realized. She'd had no champagne *before* fucking J.J. That much she could remember as she ran her tongue over her teeth to get rid of the fuzzy hangover sensation. Lying in a goose down bed, flanked by memories of youth could mean only one thing, too.

That suspicion was confirmed when something landed on her bed and brushed a fat stream of fur against one bare, exposed

foot. The teddy bear rocked and fell to the throw rug beneath the bed.

“Typhoid,” Claire chastised her cousin’s cat. “Off. Let’s move it.”

Typhoid, acting the typical cat, padded across the comforter to a sunny spot and curled into a ball, purring contentedly.

Claire huffed and not so gently pulled herself from underneath the comforter. She had just touched the ball of her foot to the cool hardwood floor bordered by the rug when Ellie entered the room, fully dressed and carrying a steaming coffee mug.

“Morning.” Her voice had a sing-song quality to it, not unlike the tone of a happy wife might express after a night of marital bliss. It wouldn’t have surprised Claire to learn Ellie and Brady had celebrated her return to Dareville with a tumble between the sheets, or suspended from the ceiling. The way she had been blacked out, they could have made love using sex toys at chainsaw decibel levels without disturbing her.

“There’s a robe and some matching slippers in the closet,” Ellie was saying as Claire sought to alleviate the throbbing in her temples. She pressed fingers to both sides of her head and rubbed them in circular motion. Shifting her glance to the side table, she saw Ellie had set down some white capsules next to the coffee.

“Fresh towels are folded in the guest bathroom. Lots of soaps, toothpaste, a spare toothbrush, and...” Ellie plunged her hand into a front jeans pocket and produced a key. “Opens the front and back doors,” she added, handing it to Claire. “What else?”

Perched on the mattress edge, Claire quickly downed the hangover relief and washed it down with the rich, French roast. With her free hand she daintily lifted the hem of the nightie, cringing at the whitened stretch marks across her hip. “Underwear?” she asked.

“Cal called early this morning. He’s going to bring your things back from Kate’s,” Ellie said. “He and Sue were stopping by there anyway.”

“Kate’ll be at the museum today.”

“No, it’s closed on Sundays after summer.”

“Oh, right.” She sipped more coffee. No sugar, light cream, just as she liked it. She couldn’t believe Ellie remembered such a detail. Given the opportunity, Claire doubted she’d be able to reciprocate the gesture.

Well, this meant Claire could be certain of two things: she hadn’t lingered in a drunken coma for days, and Ellie still cared enough to prepare her coffee to her liking. Of course, Ellie wasn’t the one who enforced their estrangement.

She watched her cousin idle around the room and pick through a dresser drawer. Blouses, slacks, and socks piled on the bureau as Ellie sorted color combinations.

“For now, I have some stuff you can wear,” Ellie said. “I don’t know when they’ll be over here from Kate’s.”

“Fine.” What business Cal and Sue Briscoe had at Kate’s, she didn’t want to know. What she knew of the amorous bass player didn’t include any skills of the handyman variety. Ellie’s fluttering around the room distracted her from thinking further about it.

“Ellie.” The coffee and pills were doing their magic, her voice and energy levels boosted significantly. “I crashed a wedding and your home and ended up half-naked in your guestroom. I think we’re long past the awkward feeling stage, if half the shit I’ve heard about your life is true.”

Ellie fidgeted with a pair of socks. “You didn’t crash the wedding. You were invited.”

“Ellie.”

Her cousin turned around completely, misty-eyed and smiling, resting her elbows back on the bureau. “I missed you, girl.”

“Me, too.” Claire’s own smile felt barely there on her face, but it was enough to draw her cousin to the bed for a hug. They remained clasped together and near sobbing for several seconds before Claire finally pulled away, fearing another headache.

She headed to the bureau and unfolded a pair of jeans, which she slid over her hips with little effort. She’d worry about undergarments later. “Cal doesn’t need to worry about my things, I’ll get them myself,” she said, all the while worried that Cal was already at Kate’s and knew the truth. “In fact, I should head over there now while I’m thinking of it.” If Ellie lent her a

car, maybe she could beat Cal there. Surely she didn't take Sue's car here.

She looked up and saw the hesitation on her cousin's face. Interesting. At least Ellie had made no move to lock her in the room, but Claire was intrigued. Had she let something slip last night, while she was drinking away J.J.'s touch? Maybe Ellie already knew that Claire had no luggage to retrieve, and Cal was just a ruse to flush out the truth.

The nightie flew away and landed in a silken puddle by the snoozing cat. Typhoid's tail flinched, then stilled. Selecting a blue long-sleeved shirt, Claire pulled it over her head and pushed the sleeves to mid-arm. "Ellie, I don't want to pretend anymore," she sighed. "We shouldn't reconcile our relationship over deceit..."

"I know, sweetie," Ellie broke in, "but after all that happened last night, we didn't want to overwhelm you. And this isn't something Kate wanted broadcast, not that we'd think you'd gossip or anything."

"Gossip about what?" This conversation had taken an odd turn. Why would Kate be so concerned about how Claire came back to Dareville?

"Nothing," Ellie said quickly, head down. "Just the usual gab."

Hands on hips, Claire studied her now skittish cousin. "It's either nothing or 'the usual,' which must be something if it's become a regular topic of conversation around town," she said. "Then again, no gossip is good. I don't need everybody to know I ran away from New York again without packing..."

"You don't have any luggage?" Ellie said, sounding genuinely surprised. "Where did you get the dress?"

Shit. Ellie hadn't known, nor had she realized the circumstances that led to Claire's visit, she was willing to bet. "It was Kate's dress," Claire said after an awkward pause. "That's the gossip Kate didn't want broadcast, right? What else could it be?"

Claire was silent for a long moment, watching her cousin. Did she even want to know what a horndog like Cal Briscoe was doing at Kate's house on a Sunday morning? It couldn't be for brunch. At least, not the kind that involved food.

Ellie said nothing, just shifted her gaze around the room as though looking for another topic of conversation. The pictures, the lamp, the bed sheets...nothing proved able to hold enough interest for discussion.

"Look," Ellie said finally, patting the space next to her in invitation. "Maybe it's just me acting strange. I honestly never expected to see you again, given all that happened with you and me and Brady. I know I don't want to lose you for good, especially now that you're back. Know what I mean?"

Claire took the seat next to her cousin, shoulders sagging as she plunged her folded hands between her knees.

"I know you still talk to people here," Ellie continued, "so you probably know about what goes on here..."

"I'm not going to walk into the middle of it when I come downstairs for breakfast, am I?" It was said as a joke, yet the thought of an orgy in progress in the Garriston kitchen didn't sit well with Claire right now. Her stomach growled, craving sustenance.

Ellie shook her head. "You'd be surprised. It's more normal here than people would care to believe. And as long as you're staying here we aren't going to plan any...ah, get togethers."

"Really?" Claire arched an eyebrow. "Should I be flattered or insulted by that? Do you even care what other people think? Why should you feel the same way about my opinion?"

"Oh, damn, Claire." Ellie moaned and covered her face with her hands. "I just keep digging the hole deeper. I'm sorry, we just didn't want to make you uncomfortable while you're here. I didn't mean to imply—"

"Ellie," Claire sighed, then offered her a smile. "I know what you meant, and there's no need for you and Brady to change your lifestyle because of me." She removed Ellie's hands to her lap and was relieved to see no tears. "In fact, I never planned to stay here. I called Kate when I flew in, and I really think I should be there."

"Claire, you're family," Ellie protested. "There's plenty of room, and..." She paused. "If it's about Brady..."

"It's not about Brady. The two of you are married, and I meant what I said yesterday. I'm happy for you, and I'm over it." As the words came out, Claire indeed realized just that. The

heart flutters, the rush of blood to her sensitive areas, that tightening sensation in her nipples she attributed to hard lust...Brady's name invoked didn't cause those things to happen anymore. In fact, they hadn't happened in a while, not with any man she'd dated since Brady. Lupe, Claire now chalked to nervous excitement.

No reactions had caused her to melt into her panties, until J.J. took her last night...

Ellie seemed to sense that from her. "I don't think you're over *everything*."

"Probably not."

They sat there together for a moment, savoring the silence, arms about each other's shoulders. Finally Claire turned to the woman who'd been more of a sister to her than a cousin.

"Cal and Sue went over to Kate's to have a three-way, right?"

"Yeah," said Ellie, as though resigned. "Actually, they went over after the wedding reception when Brady and I brought you here. They stayed overnight. We didn't tell you because we didn't want you thinking it's a regular thing."

"That's okay. I don't need details." Claire shook her head. At least she could end that curiosity. *What is it about this town?*

"Do you want to talk about why you came home from New York for the second time this year without thinking to pack?" Ellie changed the subject.

Claire shook her head. "It's too embarrassing," she began, yet it took only one comforting rub across the shoulders to encourage the sordid details. Lupe, the two-way mirror, Claire in a bed sheet on the streets of New York and her savior Dominic—characters in a hastily rehearsed pilot episode of her sitcom existence tumbled to the forefront of the conversation. When the story was over, Ellie offered only a shocked, gaping ovation before words finally found her.

"Well, you're not going *back* there, are you?" she asked.

"No, I'll formally resign from the firm," Claire said. "Though I should see if Lupe needs a lawyer, just in case Gladstone tries to ship her back to Brazil." As for going home to stay, Claire didn't want to think about that.

“Well, if I were you, I’d wait until you were offered a decent—no, a *hefty* severance package for your humiliation.”

“Hush money?” Claire asked, incredulous. “You’d approve of me taking what is essentially a bribe?”

Ellie sighed. “You deserve some kind of restitution. If you don’t get it, Brady’s lawyer will help you.” Ellie leaped from the bed, fuming. “I can’t believe shit like that goes on. I mean, I’ve seen some freaky stuff in the last few months...”

Done some, too, I bet, Claire thought, but wisely kept silent as Ellie ranted.

“...but what those men did to you and that poor girl, that’s just low. Using your own employees, treating them like hookers to entertain clients. God, that makes me mad!” Ellie paced the length of the bed before Claire, fists bouncing off her hips.

“So, for all your exploits, you never watched? How is what happened to me any different from one of your ‘get togethers’?” Claire then bit her lip. She didn’t mean for it to sound so snide, but Ellie’s fury seemed a bit misguided. Since marrying Brady, it was no secret that her cousin’s sexuality took on new dimensions of expression and exploration. Celebrity magazines covered the Garristons frequently due to his resurgence in fame. There were plenty of pictures circulating of barely there dresses at ritzy galas, with Ellie sandwiched in between her husband and some matinee idol...or slinky ingénue. Living in the City as an entertainment lawyer provided Claire with an endless font of gossip. She always knew, whether she wanted to or not, who was fucking whom. Sometimes in the case of the Garristons, it was how many. Plus, there were the occasional e-mails from Dareville friends that began with *You won’t believe what Ellie did this weekend!*

Thankfully, Ellie must have taken Claire’s recent history into consideration before responding. “Claire, I do love sex, very much. I love it best with my husband, and I enjoy it when we share ourselves with others who feel the same way. When we attend or host these ‘get togethers’,” hooked fingers emphasized the sudden change in tone, “we do so with the knowledge that everyone *wants* to be there. We don’t extort people for our own gain.”

"I wanted to be there, with Lupe," Claire said quietly, eyes downcast. "I wouldn't have showed up otherwise."

"Yes, you were looking to *privately* fulfill a fantasy. You were curious. That's okay. But did you expect to be exploited? Spied on by the same people who are supposed to be your peers? Do you think your boss makes similar arrangements for junior *males* in your firm?"

Claire doubted as much. She's spotted two juniors in the audience that night. Probably an initiation rite to the secret boys' club to which she'd never be asked to join.

"So, you'll take these sexist pig assholes for a nice lump sum, and if your friends need help we'll give it to them. Oh, Brady is going to shit when he hears this."

"Could he not hear about it for a while? Like, until after lunch?" Claire asked. She wanted to rest a bit before the cavalry attacked. "And J.J.?" God, what if this got back to him? Rebounded over a failed lesbian encounter? What would he say to that?

Claire thought about it. Why did she care what J.J. thought?

"Don't worry, we'll keep it quiet for now. But you should talk to Brady. He cares about you, too." Ellie stopped pacing, sagging with a pout as she rejoined Claire on the bed. "Oh, sweetie. Why didn't you just talk to me? We used to talk about this stuff all the time. If you wanted to experience a woman..."

Claire edged away from her cousin's touch. Ellie just laughed.

"I would have *found* you one, a nice one," Ellie added.

"Lupe was nice. Is," Claire said. "I just didn't expect our date might one day be considered performance art by some of my co-workers."

"Former co-workers," Ellie stressed, then said, "What are you going to do now? Find another job in the City?"

"I don't know." Job hunting was the furthest thing from her mind. As connected as Gladstone was to the city's movers and shakers, Claire imagined he could turn her name to mud with just one word. Gray's Papaya Hot Dogs wouldn't hire her to sweep floors.

Ellie's offer kept coming back to the forefront of her mind. *I would have found you one...* how does one ask a relative—an

almost sister—to hook them up with a hot-looking woman to fuck? An embarrassing thought, to say the least, and yet...

“Honey?” Ellie prodded. “Did you say something?”

“And yet,” only now did Claire realize she was talking out loud, “I had the chance before and turned it down.” She looked straight into her bewildered cousin’s eyes. “Brady offered to set something up once, back when we were dating. I was interested then, a bit, but I thought he was joking, so nothing came of it. The more I think about it, though, I was probably too scared to go through with it. When Brady left for Europe without me, I made that the excuse to leave him so the opportunity couldn’t happen again.”

Claire straightened, heaving a slow, silent sigh. “But all that time, I still wanted it, I guess.”

“What stopped you back then?” Ellie asked.

“I told you, I was scared.”

“Scared of what? Vaginas don’t have teeth,” Ellie teased, then, “Were you afraid you’d like it too much? Or that you might be gay? Does that worry you?”

Claire shook her head. “No, I definitely like men, and I wouldn’t call myself bi, either. It was just something I wanted to try just once, to say I did. There are a lot of things I’d like to do, not all of them sexual.” She gave a stuttering laugh. “Back in high school, J.J. and used to talk about all this shit we were going to do together...and I think that was the first time I got those feelings.”

“What feelings?”

“Being scared,” Claire asked. “The notion that we might have gotten to do those things made me scared, so I ran.”

She looked at Ellie, who nodded on every word. Her cousin didn’t need to hear the story again—how she and J.J. fought during the big graduation party—because she’d been there to see it, along with their friends. How on the morning after Claire packed a bag, hopped into her car, and spent the summer with relatives out of town until her first semester at college began. Rumors had abounded, she later learned, that she either left to wait out a pregnancy or terminate one, but in truth she wanted to end all talk of the future...one with J.J.

He wanted to get married, and live in a big beach house of his design while she tended to the legal needs of Southeast Virginia. At eighteen, Claire couldn't decide what frightened her more—that deep down she might have wanted the same dream more than her own big city aspirations, or that she couldn't know if the outcome of J.J.'s dream would be better than hers. She couldn't understand, either, why J.J. wouldn't consider going with her to New York. So, instead of staying to find out if they could reach a compromise, she escaped to forge her own way in life.

What a life. *Blech!*

"Tell me something," Claire stood and followed Ellie down the hall. "Do you think I'd have been better off if I stayed in Virginia? Came home after college graduation?"

"I don't know," Ellie said. "You might have had the same opportunities here or at the beach, but if you're asking if you'd have been happier being married to J.J. right out of college, I can't say."

Claire watched her cousin's blonde hair bounce with each light step down the stairs. In the spacious eat-in kitchen, a basket of fresh fruit muffins and hot coffee awaited. Claire's stomach gurgled—she was eager to sate the queasiness that resulted from last night's binge.

"I will say that," Ellie added, foraging for plates, "if you hadn't gone to New York, you wouldn't have met Brady."

Claire slumped into the window seat abutting the kitchen table. The cushions were firm and she shifted for comfort. "Yeah, I'm glad the path I took led to somebody's happiness."

"Actually," Ellie winked at her, "Sue was the one who gave Brady the idea to come to Dareville and hide out. Remember, he and Cal ran into her at that restaurant. I told you that story."

"You did." Of course, Brady and Cal ended up there because Brady was unable to contact her! So she had some indirect role in uniting Brady and Ellie. "Anyway, I'm not trying to be mean," she added on seeing Ellie's face had suddenly fallen. "I just want everything to go right for me, for once. Good job, nice home, a loving relationship, great sex...all in one day would be nice."

Ellie set a plate with a muffin at Claire's folded hands. Seeing that Claire had left her mug upstairs, she fetched another cup for coffee. "Claire, you need to stop sounding so defeated. You are a smart, *smart* woman. You have a law degree, you're beautiful...you should be kicking ass, not bending over to be kicked like some simpering, too-stupid-to-live ditz in a bad romance novel."

"Can I at least simmer while I have my coffee?" Claire reached for her lemon muffin and pointed to Ellie with it. "Let me eat, too, before I kick this ass of which you speak. Wherever it is."

"The way I see it, you're halfway there."

"Huh?" garbled Claire around a bite of cakey muffin. Poppy seeds crackled between her teeth and she dug her tongue around her gums so none would get caught. "What are you looking for?"

Ellie closed the drawer nearest the refrigerator and sat beside Claire. She flopped the pen and pad she held on the table. "You want to be happy, then you should do what you've wanted all these years, everything your fears prevented. If it turns out you don't like everything you have done, at least your curiosity is satisfied and you can move on. I know you have it in you, too. You wouldn't have ended up at that apartment if you were still a fraidy cat. And you definitely wouldn't have been so bold as to have sex with J.J. in the back of Jake's store, during his father's wedding!"

"How did you—?" Claire's voice died. Of course, how could anyone have *not* known what was going on in the employee lounge? For all the wonderful memories the sex brought to mind, Claire felt strangely small right then. She'd balked on discovering spies at her failed lesbian tryst, and by that logic she should have rebuffed J.J., knowing another audience awaited.

What is wrong with me? Had she always been this mixed up a person? She considered both situations: she wanted the Sapphic experience, but take away Lupe and a different woman would have sufficed. She wanted J.J. She could think of no other substitute right now.

Ellie offered her a wicked smile, and tapped her nose. "There are ways of knowing, dear." That same finger came to

rest on the pad. “All your fantasies, your dreams. Write them down. We’ll start with number one and work your way through the list. I’m going to wake up Brady.”

Claire took the pen in hand and twiddled it in her fingers, a habit when nervous. “You sure about this?” she called to her retreating cousin.

“Nothing you write will shock me, darling.” The sentence faded as Ellie ascended the stairs.

Claire bowed her head over the blank pad. Perhaps that should be her first goal, she pondered, then dismissed the idea. Her decisions in life led to Ellie’s ultimate happiness, and her cousin was right—she could achieve her own. If that meant fulfilling her every fantasy...who was she to say no?

And what was fear, but a force that lost quite a bit of ground these last few days. She had sex with J.J. after not seeing him in years. Maybe not totally a fearless act, but very unlike her.

Claire numbered the top sheet of the pad vertically, and soon the words followed. Bold self promises, outrageous fantasies, the life she wanted scratched out in ink. How Ellie intended to help made her curious, but Claire kept writing.

At least, the thought that J.J. may be involved didn’t scare her.

Chapter Seven

J.J. groaned, tasting a combination of soy sauce and something he hoped wasn't vomit. He pressed the cold rag given to him deeper into his closed eyes. "How long was I out?"

"'Bout twelve hours." Red's deep, alert voice sounded fuzzy and distant in the foreground of throbbing pain.

"And you're sure I didn't make a complete ass of myself last night?"

"You mean aside from whatever you and Claire Walker did in the back of the store, then you sitting at our table and drinking yourself into a coma? I'd say not."

"Claire?" J.J. asked. Her soft visage came into focus under his eyelids, supplanting the pain. Luscious curves and breasts, the pout of her lips as she came, flooded his memory. Damn, close to death and he was getting hard...on this cold floor.

"She is fine, I guess. She got drunker than you last night, but she'll live. What did you do to her?" Red demanded.

J.J. ignored the question. Instead he pinched the bridge of his nose to quell an oncoming ache, then tossed away the wet rag to reveal a blurred view of a pockmarked ceiling. "And why," he asked, "am I lying on the floor of Dad's office?"

"'Cause this is where I put you after you passed out. Took three of us to carry you. You need to go back to the gym."

"For all the good it would have done. Muscle weighs more than fat, jackass." J.J. moved his head. The suit coat under his head, now unraveled from what had likely been a hasty folding job, shifted and absorbed the floor's coolness. He felt something sharp under his ear, probably his keys.

"Why didn't you just take me home?" he demanded.

"I couldn't do that," Red said. "Dad and Lauren were heading back there for the night before leaving on the cruise." Red sat down on Jake's desk, hunching forward. His legs swung

out and back, scraping the clapboard panel. The sound irritated J.J. to distraction.

“Didn’t think you wanted to be in the house with all that racket going on,” Red added with a drawling laugh.

“I meant *my* home, stupid! Shit!” The curse echoed in his temples, searing behind his eyes and throwing sparks. In a more restrained, safer tone, he continued, “I can’t believe you left me here alone all night. Some brother you are.”

“You weren’t alone. Somebody had to be here to keep you turned on your side so you wouldn’t choke on your own vomit,” Red said. He hopped off the desk and went to make coffee. “Besides, I don’t know your security code, and I didn’t think you’d remember it in your state.”

J.J. had managed an upright position now, only starting at the first hiss of Jake’s coffee maker. His stomach roiled at the thought of eating or drinking anything. At least, contrary to Red’s suppositions, there was no indication that he had thrown up. But, the day was presumably young.

“You couldn’t set up this vigil at your place then?”

“And have my girls see their uncle stumbling around like an idiot? No thanks.” Red made a pinching face, like he’d just bitten into a lemon.

“Come on, Red. I was at least cognizant to know Charlene and the girls left early. You could have stashed me upstairs until the girls left for Mass, then I’d have left with nobody knowing.”

“How would you get home? In my car?”

“If you drove me, yes.” J.J. got himself into the chair before Jake’s desk, and studied his brother’s profile as Red watched the coffee drip. Red’s excuses were lame at best, for they could easily have handled getting into J.J.’s house. Hell, he was a real estate agent with the key to every lockbox attached to a Marbury Realty sign. They could have stayed anywhere but here.

Yeah, he’d imbibed plenty after his tryst with Claire, but all the booze in Dareville couldn’t wash away the memory of his sister-in-law offering Red a restrained kiss on the cheek before escorting their daughters away. Something was up in his brother’s perfect life.

J.J. smiled.

DARE TO DREAM

“What are you grinning about?” Red handed him a filled Styrofoam cup and took his behind the desk to Jake’s chair. “And what did you do to Claire Walker?”

“I rocked her world, Bubba.” The attempt to appear suave failed when J.J. burned his upper lip on the coffee mug. He jerked the cup back with a yelp, scattering molten rain on the desk blotter.

Red remained stoic, but a frustrated J.J. could see the howl straining to escape. “Yeah that would explain her need to drink herself into oblivion,” he said and let go.

“I doubt that had anything to do with me,” J.J. snapped. “She’s had a lot going on, seeing her ex-boyfriend and Ellie together...” He stopped there. Only now did he realize he wasn’t the only man in town who’d been with Claire. Brady Garriston had been her lover once. She’d come home before to reclaim him...surely this visit wasn’t a second attempt? She hadn’t exactly gone willingly with him to the employee lounge.

But when they got there...mama!

“What are you going to do about it?” Red was calm and serious now. “Are you going to see her again?”

“Yes. I mean, I want to. I always had,” J.J. said and blew on the coffee this time before tasting.

“You never stopped loving her,” Red said. It wasn’t a question.

“I guess not.” *Damn*. Just the mere thought of her made him hard. Much as the idea of stroking off to memories of a naked Claire tempted him, he wanted to clean up and get into some fresh clothes. Maybe in the shower he could kill two birds.

If only this hangover didn’t kill him first.

He fought the dizziness as he stood, gripping the desk for support. “Can you at least drive me home now?” he asked. “I’d try myself, but this marching band is still parading around my head.”

“Sure. I was hoping you’d be clear enough to talk with me about something.” But Red said nothing more until they were out of the store. J.J. tried to ignore the knowing smirks of the cashiers and stock people they passed. What had they seen last night?

Who cares? More importantly, what was Claire doing now? Recovering, or packing? He'd ditch Red as soon as possible and find out.

He got into Red's car. "Where did you say Claire was?" he asked his brother.

"I didn't. I don't know, anyway. Last I saw, Ellie Garriston and Kate Robeson were helping her out of the store. Can I talk to you about something else?"

"Sure." A sharp ping tone echoed through the front cab. Each note was a nail hammered through J.J.'s skull. "Uh, Red?"

"Sorry." Red fastened his belt and the alarm stopped. They backed slowly out of Jake's gravel lot and onto the main road. "I want to buy a house in Dareville," Red said.

"Anywhere in particular?"

Red shook his head. "I really haven't looked yet. Something close to Dad would be okay, or in that new neighborhood where the Briscoes are. Thought you might have a suitable place in your listings."

"Yeah, sure. If not I'll negotiate for you. Happy to help." J.J. ran the available homes he knew of in his head. There was plenty to be had with Red and Charlene's income. "I'll assume you want me to sell your house, though why you guys would want to leave the beach is beyond me." Indeed, though Red wouldn't have to commute far to work at the *Dareville Shopper*, Charlene would have a considerable drive to Norfolk. The girls, however, were near the age where Dareville Primary Academy would no longer be an option.

Well, here's the thing." Red paused at a stop sign before cautiously turning right. "I'm not selling the beach house."

"Oh." Surprising, but not so much. Virginia Beach real estate came at a premium. A house like Red's on the Chesapeake Bay would be appraised for a fair penny based solely on location. It would rent in a snap and remain a good investment.

"Not a problem," J.J. said. "I take it you have enough saved for a down payment?"

Red nodded. "For that, and other things like child support."

J.J. felt his heart numb. He studied his brother's poker face and detected a hint of worried smile twitching one corner of his mouth. Well, this certainly explained Red's recent behavior, yet

J.J. had to admit the roundabout news was still shocking. Red and Charlene had been inseparable since high school—till death seemed a given for them.

“How...?” J.J. realized he couldn’t bring himself to ask, as though voicing it would confirm the truth.

“It’s not something we just decided to do one day, believe me. This has been a long time coming,” Red answered. “I mean, yeah, there’s a lot to consider—the girls for one—but we’ve talked for weeks and it wouldn’t seem fair for them to grow up in an unhappy home.”

“Seems unfair to the girls now, your choosing to live apart because you think that will make you happier,” J.J. muttered. “Will they be happier not having their dad at home?”

“Wise words from somebody who’s never married or had kids,” Red snapped and there followed an uncomfortable silence that carried the brothers to J.J.’s street. J.J. broke first as the car dipped into the turn.

“Sorry,” he murmured. The single life wasn’t always a picnic, but he saw no reason to reveal that now. Let Red and Charlene discover that for themselves and allow absence to increase their mutual fondness.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s going to take some getting used to for everybody,” Red said. He looked hopefully at J.J. “Can you help?”

“Sure, no problem. But maybe you want to rent something for awhile first, in the event—”

“There won’t be any events outside our divorce.” Red’s voice was firm. “Unless Charlene decides to remarry.”

“Huh?” J.J. detected no forlorn tone as Red spoke. It sounded as though Red was hoping his wife—estranged wife, soon to be ex, it sounded so foreign—would move on with another man. Yeah, it would put an end to alimony, but this was a woman who shared half of her life with Red. Bore his children. Could it be that easy to walk away, never mind Red’s bellyaching.

Now, take Claire, J.J. mused to himself. They were young with little more than a few moonlit drives and a sweaty night in a cheap hotel between them. Somewhere an escape presented itself, and she dove headfirst down the hatch. What if she’d

stayed, he wondered. Would he eventually have a similar conversation with his brother?

“And another thing, Dad doesn’t know yet,” Red was saying as the car slowed. “No sense giving him news like this on his honeymoon, so let me break it to him when they get back, all right? Jay?”

But J.J.’s eyes and attention were fixed on the cherry red 911 Porsche parked in his drive, and the luscious blonde in sunglasses leaning on the passenger side door.

Red brought the car to a jolting stop at the curb. “I suppose you’ll fax me what I need at the paper?”

J.J. smiled, his gaze taking in Claire’s long legs and inviting curves. “You suppose correctly. Now, get lost.”

Chapter Eight

Claire had to bite her lip as J.J.'s body unfolded from his brother's car. Damn! Even disheveled in yesterday's suit, his hair askew and a veneer of overindulgence and fatigue sticking to his skin, he looked good enough to eat. His drooping tie hung loose around his neck, and an involuntary flex of his arms pulled back enough of his half-buttoned shirt to reveal a solid expanse of lickable chest. Never mind that his breath probably smelled like a bar mat at last call, Claire knew she wouldn't mind easing against him to press out the wrinkles.

She watched as he mimicked a quick word to Red, holding his hand to his ear in the international "I'll call you" sign. Red wagged a few fingers in her direction and resumed driving.

"He's not staying?" she asked. Not that she wanted Red around for this, but of course she was not the invited guest. How long she would stay depended on J.J., and thankfully he appeared accommodating despite looking as though a frat party landed on him.

"He's a busy man," J.J. said and gestured Claire up the walk toward the house. Glad to see you stuck around for lunch at least."

Claire huffed, but sucked it back quickly. She deserved that, she supposed. "Glad to know I arrived in time," she offered in place of a more defensive retort. "What's to eat?"

"What, who...so much to choose from." He placed a hand at the small of her back to guide her through the door. An innocent gesture, but one that tingled her skin and ignited nerves. Claire felt her pussy twitch, and remembered how J.J.'s thick cock had easily stretched her to the edge of ecstasy. Standing so close to him now, she sensed he likely would not fight were she to tackle him back to the lawn. But, she chose instead to pace herself. It would be a challenge to walk with her thighs pressed

together, but one that might yield a nice reward if she hit her clit right.

In his kitchen, Claire settled into a padded retro diner chair and spread her arms on the matching table. J.J. flopped the morning paper by a pile of unopened mail and turned to inspect one cabinet.

“Normally I’d freshen up,” he said, “but I’d really like to be awake when I do that. Don’t want to brush my teeth with my razor, I’m that tired.”

“Huh,” Claire said. She couldn’t help but wonder where J.J. had spent last night that his brother had to drop him off while still in his suit. Best, perhaps, to ease that into conversation at the time she could tell he would be more conciliatory.

“I slept fairly well, actually.” Amazing how reconciling with her family had eased much of her anxieties. That, and the sex hadn’t hurt.

“I know. You did quite a bit of it at the wedding.” His tone was light, teasing. Despite her initial bristling at the remark, she had to admit to herself that he was right. She did recall now, to think of it, how she’d closed her eyes for a second just as the cake was being cut, before everything went dark. She could only hope she didn’t slump face first into a nice white frosted slice.

On camera, anyway.

Claire leaned back in her seat, grateful for the aroma of coffee wafting slowly across her senses. “Yeah, I suppose I was a bit out of sorts,” she conceded with a laugh, “but, you know, it was a long time coming. What with the job and...” Here she stopped, realizing J.J. knew nothing about the Lupe incident.

J.J. set an empty mug before her. “Yes?”

She offered him a genuine smile. Best to change the course of the conversation. “What happened yesterday, I don’t regret it.”

The coffee brewed, J.J. poured each of them a full serving. “Good to know. Well, feel free to let me know whenever you want to relive those good old days. I was going to put in some office time this afternoon, but I can be late if persuaded to do something else.” He wiggled his eyebrows, eliciting a laugh from Claire. She’d loved how playful J.J. could be, especially considering his wild sense of humor had attracted her all those

years ago. J.J. had been voted Senior Class Clown, a title which clearly hadn't impeded his success in real estate.

"Actually, that's another reason I came to see you." The ceramic mug was warm and heated her palms quickly. The sensation spread quickly throughout her body—it was a welcome diversion from her rising lust, which J.J. inflamed further as he mussed his collar and took the opposite chair. Rugged, sexy, good enough to eat. *Dunk some of that in my coffee. Yum.*

"I can't remember if I told you yesterday...probably not since I wasn't so sure about it until recently. I'm going to be staying in Dareville indefinitely," she added, looking at J.J. Was that a smile hiding behind his red rimmed mug? When J.J. licked his upper lip she felt her heart pound, and longed to experience that touch somewhere else.

"Are you now?" J.J. sounded amused, as though trying to mask a greater excitement. To be honest, Claire felt ready to burst herself. How she would bomb at Texas Hold'em. "Had enough of the bright lights and big city?" he asked.

"I've had enough of my job and the chauvinist pigs running the firm. It's time to try something new in a new place."

"I sense a 'but' coming."

"Then you better duck, here it comes." Claire laughed. "I won't be leaving entirely. I'd be a fool to give up my nice rent-controlled department on the Westside. Luckily I bickered with the landlord enough when I got it to have the contract allow me to sublet should the need arise. I never thought the time would come, but I wanted to be prepared."

"Smart lady." J.J. nodded. "You'll be able to go back anytime you wish, but where do I figure into this?"

"You're the Realtor, of course."

"Of course. You want me to find you a place to live."

"I have a place to live, for now. I need a job."

* * * *

Was she kidding? He paused from his coffee long enough to gaze back into those sparkling blue eyes. What light there was didn't appear to allude to mischief. Her jaw was set, yet her smile was soft and earnest.

She wasn't kidding.

"You want to work for me?" he asked, still unsure.

"I want to work with you."

"Ooo-kay. Well, selling houses is pretty cut and dry. Don't think I've had to call in a lawyer to negotiate new contracts—"

"Actually, I was thinking I'd take the real estate exam," Claire said, studying him. "Why do you look so surprised?"

"What?" And he dipped his gaze down to discover how close his coffee came to spilling. He set down his mug and pushed away from the table. Maybe he did look surprised to her. But of course, this news was coming from someone who couldn't wait to get out of Dareville, and now she wanted to help other people settle here? Quite a change of heart from the girl who'd once christened her hometown *Boreville*.

"You heard me." She sounded defensive now, and the edge to her voice immediately aroused him. You don't think I'd be good at selling houses?"

"I never said that," he said quickly.

A deliciously wicked grin split her face, showing white teeth he'd rather see grazing his stiffened shaft. "You're threatened, then?" she asked. "You don't want somebody on your turf, somebody who might just sell more than you."

J.J. chuckled. "Babe, nobody sells Dareville better than I do. I know this place like the back of my hand. I've learned every gravel road and reservoir while you were munching on giant pretzels and falafel wraps by a pushcart in front of some gigantic steel building." He delighted a bit as Claire wilted. "But, in truth, while I wouldn't mind having you work *under* me, I'm curious to know why. All you ever talked about in high school was being a high powered lawyer. Now you want to sell houses to commuters?"

"Claire's face remained wistful. "We're not in high school anymore, Jay. I'm sure you noticed more than a few wrinkles and rolls since you...*saw* me last."

"I don't know about you, but I saw a gorgeous woman with soft skin and a delicious—" Claire's sudden embarrassment halted him, so he finished with a grin that spoke more than mere words could.

"I'm ready to try something new," Claire said. "Many new things, in fact. We'll talk about my career change later. I have something else along this vein to discuss." Reaching into a

pocket, she unfolded a sheet of paper and smoothed it flat against the table.

“While Ellie and I were talking about my future this morning, she encouraged me to make a list of my goals,” she said. “I hadn’t realized while I wrote it how little I’ve done with my life.”

“What do you mean?” J.J. asked as she slid the paper toward him. “You built a successful career in New York City. Ellie talked all the time about the famous people you got to hang out with.”

“Yes, she used to say she lived vicariously through me. Now she has a glamorous life and I have nothing really, except memories of countless billable hours worked, and I still didn’t get partner!”

Her fist banged the table for emphasis. Coffee sloshed over the side of J.J.’s mug, streaking down to puddle on the Formica. He could sympathize somewhat when he thought of his own life and what little reward awaited him. Yes, he had money and a nice car, but what had he done with his life, really? The happiness went to people who were finally able to clutch house keys in hand. J.J.’s own pride in assisting those little miracles was often fleeting.

He glanced down at the list, which nearly ran the length of the page. There were few pat goals—visit London, go waterskiing, run a 5K. There were some things J.J. wouldn’t have minded trying himself.

“Never took a sick day, never took a vacation,” Claire muttered. “At least, when you sell your soul to the devil he actually gives you what you want, if even for a short time. Right?”

J.J. had stopped listening. His eyes scanned the rest of the paper, his cock hardening with each entry. Exactly how much of this list had Ellie helped Claire write, he had to wonder. The goals turned more adventurous, more sexual the further down it went. The ink in Claire’s pen must have boiled in its cartridge.

Have sex with a woman.

Have a threesome.

Have sex in a public place and not get caught.

Dinner with a “human” dining table.

Try bondage.

Participate in an orgy.

On and on it went. Such a list would have given Santa a heart attack, but indubitably the jolly old elf would’ve gone with a smile.

Hands reached across the table to grasp his. The years between them seemed to melt. Claire never felt like a stranger to him, but looking at those unfulfilled wishes made him realize that there was so much more to learn about her. Here with him was not the work-weary, mid-thirties Claire Walker looking for another escape hatch. But, the lively teenaged Claire who gobbled down his mother’s sugar cookies without a care for calories.

“Jay,” she said. “I want you to help me with this list.”

He shifted in his seat, his cock straining to be free. “Please don’t say just with the water skiing.”

She laughed out loud, close to tears. “Don’t worry, that one’s covered.” She tilted her head and pushed out her lower lip in a sexy pout. “What do you think?”

“I think,” splayed fingers turned the list back toward Claire, “you need to add one more thing to this paper.” And he reached to the far side of the table for a blue-ink pen, which he handed to her. “‘Take a shower.’ I can definitely help you there.”

* * * *

A big help J.J. was.

Claire hugged her arms around her breasts and tilted her head back to let the spray stab hot water needles at her chin and throat. Behind her two strong hands massaged her buttocks, spreading a cool, musk scented gel over each cheek and up her spine. J.J.’s presence loomed large over her, and she gasped on feeling the head of his cock tapping the small of her back. She chanced a look over her shoulder, water droplets flying from her hair, to the expanse of muscle shielding her from the opposite nozzle of the Swedish shower.

Yes, a big help indeed. Thick and erect, jutting up from a nest of matted dark hair. She nearly lost her balance when J.J.

undulated into her and closed the gap, nestling his cock between her buttocks.

“How’s that?” His voice was raw silk tickling her left ear. His hands now worked her shoulders, then slid down to her elbows to relax her arms. Her breasts now visible, J.J. cupped one in each hand as though testing their heft, rolling and pinching her nipples as he went.

“S’good,” Claire breathed. For the first time in a long while, she felt spoiled. The dual nozzle Swedish shower was something she’d not experienced before. To have a gorgeous man with her was certainly a perk. It shouldn’t have surprised her that J.J. equipped his home with high-end luxuries. His home was his castle, and judging by all the *SOLD* banners plastered on the Marbury Realty signs she’d seen around town, she knew he had what it took to broker similar “kingdoms.”

She could do that, too. She had the experience in law, had negotiated contracts with record companies and movie studios, so how far removed could real estate contracts be?

She would read up, take the exams, and build a new life. *Be happy* had been the last item on her goal list, and she believed a large factor in achieving that would come once she could not only conquer her fears, but discard the negative energy associated with her past.

Fulfilling the other goals preceding that climax would certainly help. There would be plenty of climaxing if all went according to plan.

Now...she was close. J.J.’s cock had dislodged from her buttocks and he released one breast long enough to position the head at her anus. He rubbed the sensitive area, igniting the nerve endings to the point where Claire thought the water might evaporate on her skin. The heat seared her. Could she possibly come without having her clit touched?

Was it too late to amend her list so she could find out?

J.J.’s other hand trailed between her breasts, down her belly before resting on her mons. He burrowed a finger deep into her slick folds and pressed closer as she jumped. “Yeah, there it is,” he moaned, and moved with her, disrupting her train of thought. Stroking her clit in a circular motion, he steered his cock back and forth around her pussy and ass, teasing each hole so that her

balance faltered. “Baby, if I’m not inside you soon I’m going to explode.”

The twinge started low in her pussy and spread to her hips and belly. She couldn’t feel the water anymore, only sensed the coming orgasm as her groans masked the whoosh of water overhead. She wanted to tell him to do it now, to come inside her, make her come, come, come...

He pulled away suddenly, and a shock of cold air attacked her, increasing her sense of loss. She twisted her torso to see J.J. had opened the sliding shower door and now leaned outward. He returned quickly with a condom clamped between his teeth. With one wink and a yank he ripped the package open and rolled the rubber down his shaft, all the while still tapping at her clit.

He arranged the doors so that the frosted glass nearest her closed from the farthest track on the shower’s edge. “C’mere,” he said and kicked her feet gently so that she was more spread apart. He nudged her right foot over the ledge. Claire winced as her toes curled over the cool, metal track, but she quickly adapted to J.J.’s grunting directions, for her comfort and pleasure.

Now, feet apart, hips and ass thrust out for J.J. to admire, Claire braced the wall before her, wrinkling fingerpads pressing against wet ceramic for the hope of support while J.J. slammed into her pussy.

“Yes.” The word was a slow, lasting hiss. Claire closed her eyes to take in every second, every sensation. J.J. filled her completely, the ridged and raised velvet skin—enhanced by the ribbing on the condom—hitting every sensitive spot inside her, places she hadn’t before known existed. “Harder,” she demurred, echoing her pleasure in the small confines of the shower. Her voice no longer sounded like Claire, but that suited her fine. She preferred the new throaty, smoke-voiced vixen. New feeling, new woman, and a new adventure.

Fingers dug into her hipbones. J.J. pounded her roughly. Her orgasm was building and she struggled for a tensing grip on the tile. Shiny streaks left by her failing fingers disappeared in the steam.

DARE TO DREAM

“Baby, I’m gonna come.” J.J.’s warning was almost late. With one final stab he cried out his release, grinding his crotch into Claire just as she barreled over the edge.

When she was able to catch her breath, she waited for J.J. to slide from her, then turned to envelop herself in his arms.

“So,” he kissed the top of her head, letting his hands slide aimlessly up and down her slick skin, “can we strike that off your list?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Claire smiled, thinking it wouldn’t be a bad idea to pencil in another shower date soon.

Chapter Nine

“Hey, sexy.”

J.J. was unlocking his office door when the silky voice purred in his direction. He turned away from his lock to see his work neighbor, Sue Briscoe, setting up a small sandwich board advertising her studio. It was early, not yet eight o’clock, and all around them the historic downtown area of Dareville was coming to life. Soon visitors and residents alike would weave in and out of the many antique shops, boutiques, and cafes lining Main Street.

Looking at the attractive photographer, J.J. guessed Sue was always alive and bubbling over, unchanged since high school. He had barely dragged himself out of bed that morning, whereas she displayed a buoyant step that highlighted a full bosom encased in a powder blue, scooped neck blouse.

“You’re certainly looking perky,” he stated the obvious. He glanced at the coffee takeout cup burning in his other hand. It hadn’t done the trick for him—maybe if he were lucky enough to brush up against Sue he would catch her *joie de vive*.

Of course, Sue would love that.

“Big day ahead. Two bridal sittings and an entire afternoon of senior portraits.” Sue dusted her hands off the backside of her jeans and followed J.J. into his office. “I’m going to be busier than a one-armed man at the batting cage.”

J.J. chuckled at the analogy. He wished he could say the same. Aside from helping his brother find a place, his workload was actually light. The two agents working under him would likely not make appearances unless office time was necessary. Since J.J. didn’t see the need to keep an office manager for such a small place, the staff agreed to switch off days to sit and answer phones. Today, his number was up.

DARE TO DREAM

Sue sauntered past J.J. into the galley kitchen behind the reception area. As was custom on J.J.'s office days, since Marbury Realty moved to the historic district, Sue got the first pot of coffee started. J.J. set his laptop case on his desk and met her by the coffee maker. "Well," he said, "if you get bored or hit a lull, you can help me answer e-mail."

"That's not so much fun anymore since you set up that new junk filter," Sue teased. She bent low into the mini-fridge, briefly presenting J.J. with a nice view of a thong riding up her jeans, before she rose with a package of precut cookie dough discs. "Chocolate chip or sugar today?"

"Oh, let's be wild today. Half and half," he said. The cookies and coffee were left as a courtesy for prospective clients, but J.J. had a feeling he and Sue would end up polishing off the plate by lunch, as was their other custom on slow business days. "And I do apologize for limiting your opportunities for signing me up for penis enlargement products and bulk toner cartridges."

"Yeah, like you need toner." Sue popped a tray of cookies in the toaster oven. Turning to him, she winked. "I kid, darling. Some days it's easy to see you don't require the help in that department."

"Thanks." Any other man might immediately have sported a hard-on at Sue's lascivious smile and the suggestive words unsaid yet clearly reflected in her eyes. Yes, Sue was attractive, though J.J. took the flirtatious banter at face value. Besides, he could only think of Claire now and that damned list of hers. The things she wanted to do, he couldn't fathom the Claire he'd known in high school wanting to try any of those things.

Standing before Sue, he had to wonder what on Claire's list had Sue done, and how many times over.

Be nice.

He held his thoughts in check, though he did surprisingly feel the stirrings of an erection as Sue leaned back, elbows on the counter. Her blouse pulled tight against her chest, accentuating the twin dents made by her nipples. She regarded him with a smile that could have baked the cookies without the oven.

"Well, if you are bored today, you should stop by around lunchtime," she said. "I'm doing a shoot that, if I may be blunt..."

J.J. stifled a laugh. Sue was nothing if not direct. He'd been on the receiving end of numerous propositions by either one or both of the Briscoes.

"...will make you want to shoot your load," Sue finished and started at a loud click from the coffee maker.

"You don't say?" J.J. moved closer and, reaching over her head for the top open shelf, grabbed an opened sleeve of paper coffee cups. Coming down, he did brush against Sue's shoulder but felt nothing except an increasing curiosity.

"Am I to assume I'll get to see everywhere the bride blushes if I drop by later to borrow toner?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

"She might blush, but she's no bride. Unless," Sue cast him a knowing glance, "you amend that in the near future."

"I see." So much for bluntness. J.J. took a deep breath, savoring the rich aroma of vanilla and hazelnut. It was an okay substitute for aromatherapy, but J.J. doubted even that could calm his nerves. What business did Claire have at Sue's studio today? He couldn't recall seeing "Pose for Penthouse style pictures" on her list.

Nor did he remember, as Claire left his house after a lengthy lovemaking session that morning, her inviting him to a naughty portrait sitting.

He didn't notice Sue's face twisting with unreleased laughter until she finally exploded. Sue reared back and lightly shoved J.J. "Jesus, you are so easy. What did you think I was talking about?"

"Well..." He felt more bewildered than embarrassed. "You did mention my shooting my load."

Sue rolled her eyes. "You do love Claire, right?"

"I do," J.J. said. "I always have."

"I'd think just the sight of her would arouse you, correct?"

"True. I don't think I could put it quite so eloquently as you did."

"Claire wants some business portraits taken," Sue said, calmer now. "Said something about needing them for her new career in real estate. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

By now the coffee finished brewing. J.J. grasped the pot handle and, with a decided swagger, took it out front to a service tray where a pot warmer waited. He poured Sue a cup. "Probably just as much as you right now," he said, handing Sue her requisite two sweetener packets. "I imagine she'll let me know more when she wants to. Just as you'll let me know when you're interested in fucking me. Again."

Sue gaped in mock consternation. "Give me some credit. At least this time I was going to wait until after I had coffee." She took the tiny pink envelopes and slapped them against her thigh to clump the sweetener at one end. "But since you brought it up—"

J.J. held up his hand. He'd heard enough "up" innuendos for the day, which had just started. "Sue, have a good day at work. I'm going to sell some houses, God willing. If any of your brides want a new place in which to hang their nice wedding pictures, send them over."

Sue nodded. Bless her, she could take a hint with good humor. She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "I'll tell them you have free cookies."

"And if anyone comes in here, I'll say the same of you."

Sue cackled and toasted J.J. with her coffee cup as she left.

* * * *

By noon, J.J. had not only found three potential residences fitting Red's needs and budget, but he had placed a contract bid on one condo on his brother's behalf. J.J. knew the complex, which was situated in a growing area on the south end of town, very well. He was good friends with the contractor and trusted the quality of the construction, and he'd helped negotiate the sale of a number of units there. As Red was unable to break away from the paper to walk through a model, a phoned-in confirmation got the process off the ground.

"You know what I like, and you know what the place is like," Red had told him. "If there's room for the girls to visit and a place for my mountain bikes, go for it."

So J.J. went. The complex had detached storage and a pool—his nieces would love that—and a fitness center. A two-bedroom, two-bath condo would work well for his brother.

Excited as he was about the prospect of a sales commission, however, J.J. couldn't quell that twinge of melancholy as he faxed Red's information to the condo's sales office. He'd sold many a home since hanging his shingle, yet the majority of them had gone to families and newly married couples. Often he'd associated his work with the beginning of new lives and new dreams, the happily ever after enveloped in a picket fence embrace. To assist his brother in dividing his own family numbed him. Red's complacency over the whole situation disturbed him all the more. What was so wrong with his brother's marriage that required no other solution than separation? As long as J.J. could remember, he never heard of Red and Charlene having a fight, nor had his brother indicated a wandering eye for the ladies.

J.J. sighed and straightened his work area, discarding snack wrappers and outdated Post-It notes. He wasn't hungry enough for lunch, and he hadn't made any more coffee and cookies since a few walk-ins that morning depleted his supply. He had just decided on making a fresh pot when he heard the bell on the outside door trigger.

"Jay, you around?" Cal's booming, deep voice filled the small office.

"In here." Seconds later, a blond head poked through the open doorway into J.J.'s private area. Cal leaned on the jamb, crossing his ankles. He looked casually cool in snug denims and a loose black t-shirt.

"I'm placing an order at the deli up the street. Want anything? Be about twenty minutes."

"Sure, I'll be ready to eat by then. Turkey sub all the way, light mayo. Sour cream chips if they have them." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled ten. "Keep the change. Sue got me last time."

"No problem." Cal hesitated in taking the money, and as J.J. watched the musician carefully smooth out, then fold, the bill, there was no denying Cal had more to say. The knowing smirk on the older man's face sang endless verses.

"Out with it, Briscoe." J.J. leaned back in his chair and propped his feet on his desk.

Cal tucked the money in his back pocket and rocked on the balls of his feet. "Well, you're the one who mentioned Sue 'getting you.'"

"She paid for my lunch, she didn't suck my cock." J.J. was blunt, and not surprised that Cal didn't so much as blink. "Though I've politely declined those offers, it doesn't deter your wife from still asking."

"Doesn't deter me, either, you may recall." Cal wiggled his eyebrows.

J.J. had to laugh at that. How naive of him to think Cal's coming over to put in a lunch order wouldn't have a string of anal beads attached. "Tell me, Cal," he sat up now, leaning forward with his elbows on the desk, "your visit wouldn't happen to have more to do with Claire being at the studio today than a friendly gesture to pick up lunch?"

Cal took the chair opposite J.J.'s desk. Elbows on his spread knees, he bowed his head as if in deep thought then raised to meet J.J.'s gaze.

"I should know better to try to outsmart a guy with so much fancy book learning as yourself," he joked.

J.J. had been a marginal student in college at best, but Cal didn't need to know that. "What do you know?" he asked instead, suspicious.

"I know there's a very lovely lawyer lady next door who wants a happier life than the one she's living," Cal said with earnest. "I know many years ago she was rather sweet on a certain grocer's son, and from what I saw at the wedding I think she still is."

"Those feelings are definitely mutual." J.J. nodded.

"I also know she wants to do everything she can to achieve that happiness for herself, and that there are many people here who want to help," Cal added. J.J. didn't like the predatory gleam and the other man's eye. To him, it implied he, or perhaps both of the Briscoes, intended to have more than a hand in Claire's extreme life makeover. A cock, a pair of tongues, and God knows what else. Were they aware of Claire's to-do list?

"Why are you talking to me like I'm three years old?" J.J. asked, annoyed. "You sound as though I'm the lone holdout in

the Claire Walker rescue squad when I can assure you nothing could be further from the truth.”

Cal chuckled and leaned back in the chair. He appeared to want to prop up his feet on the desk, but J.J. made sure his expression denied that luxury. Instead Cal shifted in his seat for comfort. “I’m not implying that you don’t want to help Claire. Hell, you’ve known her longer than I have, and I certainly can’t speak for what she wants.”

“Damn straight,” J.J. said.

“Then again, neither can you.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” J.J. gripped the armrests of his chair, feeling the tingling sensation of blood draining from his knuckles. Like hell he couldn’t say anything. Claire wanted him. She made love with him in his shower and his bed. He’d seen the fluttering bliss that colored her cheeks, and he tasted her sweetness as she came for him. Emotions displayed thusly couldn’t be faked so easily...and why come to his house if she didn’t want him?

J.J. sulked. This guy didn’t know anything.

“Claire wrote up a list,” Cal said. “I don’t know if you know—”

“I do. I helped her with one item on it already.” J.J.’s face split with a wide grin. “Perhaps two, if you count our detour during the wedding reception.”

Cal remained unaffected. “Then you realize what’s involved there, and I don’t mean the waterskiing and the bungee jumping.”

“Claire wants to bungee jump?” J.J. frowned. “That wasn’t on the list yesterday. Is she writing this out as she goes along?”

Cal slapped his hands on his thighs. “That’s just it, Jay. When I said we couldn’t speak for what she wants, I meant it’s because I doubt *Claire* knows for certain. Like I mentioned before, I’m the new guy in all of this. You, Sue, and Ellie have known her forever, but *I* know a fair amount about some of the territory she wants to explore, and I want to be sure for her sake and yours that you’re ready to deal with it.”

They weren’t talking about bungee jumping anymore, that much J.J. realized. Unless, somewhere along that growing list

Claire had penciled in bungee fucking. Lord bless the physics professor who you could successfully plot that diagram.

“What makes you think I can’t?” J.J. challenged. He struggled to sound nonchalant, arrogant even, but inside his stomach roiled. Cal could see through the veneer of his confidence, he was afraid. At least, to his credit, the musician wasn’t acting smug about it.

“Jay.” Cal stood and edged closer to the desk. He towered over the seated J.J., casting an imposing stance that led J.J. to inch back a bit, if only to move out of Cal’s shadow. He felt silly for acting so—he was a grown man. Why was he feeling like a coquettish teenager?

“More than once,” Cal continued, “we’ve invited you over to the house for one of our parties. Every time you’ve turned us down. Politely, but declined nonetheless.” He rested a hip on the desk corner. “Why?”

J.J. considered his answer. His refusal to participate in the Briscoes’ sexual play had nothing to do with being a prude. Quite the contrary, he liked to think his sexual appetite held best among men his age. However, given the choice between a quiet romantic dinner for two and all you can come buffet...

“I didn’t think you guys were ever serious,” he said. “I figured it was just joking courtesy on your part.”

Cal grinned. “I may have a great sense of humor, but we don’t kid about sex. Some people who’ve turned us down, we never asked again. Harassment isn’t my thing, but you...” Cal twitched his lip. “I don’t know, man. You give off this vibe, like you want to be pursued.”

“You do flatter me, but I suppose the whole piling on of bodies just isn’t for me,” J.J. offered finally. “Don’t get me wrong, Sue is incredible, and in another alternate universe, well...”

He had to smile when Cal puffed his chest at the compliment.

“...but at the end of the night after we’re all gasping for air and sorting through heaps of underwear, I’ll realize I will have to go home alone.”

“You don’t have to,” Cal said.

“Your wife doesn’t belong to me,” J.J. countered. “You’re willing to share to that extent?”

“No, I guess not.” Cal laughed. “But I was talking about Claire.” He turned serious. “If you’re not willing to share yourself sexually with others, how are you going to accept Claire’s wishes?”

That was the question he dreaded. He loved Claire, and believed deep down she still had feelings for him, enough to want to rekindle what they had once shared. Why Claire saw the need to sow these particular oats baffled him. Could he accept Claire being fucked by another man, or woman? His blood thickened in his veins at the mere thought.

And yet, Cal had a point. He couldn’t speak for Claire, and she didn’t belong to him, either. Maybe when he saw her next there should be more talking and less fucking, and maybe he could get her to compromise on a few of her sexual wants. She could do the same with him. Let them be a team.

“I think,” J.J. said, rising, “that answer should be given by Claire. So why don’t we head over to Sue’s and we’ll all enjoy a nice lunch?”

“Sure thing, but let’s wait a few minutes,” Cal said, checking his watch. “The girls will need a few minutes to get dressed.”

Chapter Ten

She could hear the shouting from the sidewalk. Hell, probably all of Dareville could hear the colorful language angrily permeating the atmosphere. Global warming had nothing on that kind of pollution.

Claire had remained on the swiveling stool in front of the ubiquitous business blue backdrop, twisting her torso in an impromptu stretch while Sue disengaged her camera from its tripod. The photo session was over, Claire confident that she would have an attractive portfolio for her new career. The next step was a trip to the Dareville campus of Tidewater Community College to enroll in the coursework she needed, but she had a difficult time contemplating that now for all the ruckus.

“Jay, I was just yanking your chain.” Cal’s placating voice, however, was quickly overrun by J.J.’s snarling fury.

“Let go! I’m surprised you weren’t here helping your nympho wife film it.”

Both men emerged forcefully from the dim of the entranceway to stand under the harsh overhead lamps. Sue had removed the softening gels, leaving Claire to bask in a brightness that rivaled a tanning bed. Neither Cal nor J.J. were accustomed to the light as she was, and she had to laugh when they shielded their eyes with their forearms, like vampires forgetting Daylight Savings Time.

“Let me guess.” Sue strode over to one lamp and flicked it off. “Cal told you we were naked and having sex.”

Mildly shocked, Claire turned to her friend’s husband, whose only defense was a playful wink. She warmed to the prank, somewhat pleased by J.J.’s reaction. It was genuinely upsetting to him to think of her with another person.

She thought back to the list she’d shown him, noting how it had changed in the brief time since leaving him. Of course, it

was her hope now to have J.J. with her all the way. The more she was with him, the more that intention strengthened. He stood to play a large role in her happiness, but seeing him now made her realize perhaps she hadn't taken his feelings into consideration with some of her to-do items. Making love with another woman, probably the only thing J.J. couldn't directly help her with, might have to wait.

"Yes."

"No," Cal said in his defense. "I said let them get dressed first. I didn't say why they would be undressed."

J.J.'s contrite admission snapped Claire out of her reverie. She smiled as he drew closer—he was still blinking from the light adjustment. "Sorry about the nympho crack," he added.

"Why be sorry for stating a fact?" Sue said with a relaxing air. She switched off the remaining lamp, leaving a small track light above as the room's only illumination, then tiptoed over to J.J. and planted a kiss on his cheek. "You know where to find me if you *really* want to apologize."

J.J. shot Claire an embarrassed look, which only made her laugh. How was it that this man could exhibit such unbridled want in the bedroom with her, yet freeze at the simplest of flirtations? Had he not seen the list of things she wanted to do? J.J. really needed to loosen up.

She could think of a few ways to do that, maybe after lunch or sooner.

Camera now in hand, Sue offered her husband a longer more exploratory kiss, breaking off with a loud smack. "I'll have these on a CD for you in a jiffy. You can pick it up in my office later," she told Claire. Taking a wad of cash from Cal, she added, "I'll leave your sandwiches in there, too. Bye."

J.J. watched her retreat. "You're not staying?"

"Can't," Sue called from the door, "but stick around and help Claire with the next item on her list." Then the ringing of the front door's bell sounded her departure.

"Sue's working with the yearbook class at DPA now," Cal explained, taking a chair. "Just a part-time thing. She closes the studio for an hour or so and helps them with their photography and layout."

"That's right," J.J. said. "I should know that. I'm on the board of directors. When Lauren left we decided Yearbook didn't have to be a whole class, but a club. Hiring a resource teacher part-time let us add a Humanities elective to the curriculum."

"I thought your stepmother got fired," Cal said dryly, prompting a cringe from the stepson.

Yeah, due to pictures your wife took, he thought. Rather than retort, J.J. turned his attention back to Claire. The bemused look in his eyes initially unsettled her, but his smile dissolved any worries. "What was this about helping you with the list today? Here?"

"Well...I did have something planned for today." Claire's heavy purse sat on the floor next to her. She reached down for the folded sheet of loose leaf paper tucked in the outer pocket while J.J. came to stand behind her.

"That's not the same list I saw," he accused.

Claire shrugged. "The other one tore while I was scratching out something, so I started a new one. Basically the same stuff with a few things added that I remembered," she said.

"From this morning?"

"Actually, from a few minutes ago." Claire laughed and held up the paper so J.J. could see the different colors of ink used.

J.J. shook his head, smiling. She felt his heated breath against the back of her neck as he bent to read the paper over her shoulder. Cal's presence proved equally distracting and powerful, as though Claire sensed his sexuality radiating outward. It made sitting on the low stool a challenge, as she was becoming so wet she thought she might slip and fall.

Together, the three browsed the revised list:

Pass Real Estate Exam, get job

Bungee jump

Visit London, get picture taken crossing Abbey Road

Smoke pot

Have sex with a woman

Have a threesome with two men

~~*Have sex in a public place and not get caught*~~

Dinner with a "human" dining table
Try bondage
Participate in an orgy
Get back at my old firm

Claire looked at J.J., tapping the crossed-out item. "I was thinking about it, and figured the wedding reception..."

J.J. nodded. "Great minds."

Cal conspicuously cleared his throat. "Did that, did that, did that twice..." he muttered. "I don't see 'Buy the Knicks' on here."

"And what's with the bungee jumping?" demanded J.J.. "Are you going to do that after you've smoked the pot? Because you'd have to be high to want to do that."

"I want at least one adventure rush, and I'm scared of heights," Claire defended. "That should cure it, and I hate basketball."

"Start small on that one first," J.J. said. "We'll go to Busch Gardens and ride some coasters. At least you'll be strapped inside a car."

"Which could crash to the ground at a hundred miles an hour if a bolt comes loose at the wrong time," Cal finished. After a beat, "What's wrong with basketball?"

"Nothing." Claire rolled her eyes. "I'm just not into it. My firm had a skybox for Knicks games, and I'd only go to appease clients. The game never interested me."

"Well, we can start small there, too. Buy the Liberty first and see how that goes," Cal said with a smirk. "You might find a woman on the team who can help you with another item on your list."

"Cute." A quick glance over her shoulder revealed J.J. was not wincing in discomfort as she had expected. A coy smile played on his lips instead.

"Gives a whole new meaning to full court press, I'm sure," he quipped, but his tone took on a darker note when he next asked, "What is on the agenda for today?"

"This." Cal stepped away and plunged a hand deep into his front jeans pocket. Producing a black film canister, he grabbed a stool for himself and flicked the sealed cylinder at J.J.

DARE TO DREAM

"I thought Sue did everything digitally now," J.J. murmured, twiddling with the canister.

"Not for everything, but you won't find film in there," Cal said.

"Indeed you won't." J.J. uncapped the canister and whipped his head back slightly as the unmistakable, pungent stench of marijuana filled the space between them. Claire wrinkled her nose. Never in her years had she smoked the stuff, much less come into contact with it outside of the occasional diluted puff hanging over a concert crowd. Nevertheless, it was the vice of choice among a number of junior partners in her firm, people promoted ahead of her. Perhaps there was something in the wacky weed that enhanced work performance, or even ass-kissing, that she didn't know about. Unlikely, but at any rate she decided she wanted to know what the fuss was, and she'd been relived when Cal readily agreed to supply some for her.

J.J. extracted a wrinkled baggie from the canister and unraveled it to reveal a thumb-sized lump stuck in one end. He sniffed the contents in earnest this time. "I thought you gave up this stuff," he told Cal.

Cal chuckled. From his back pocket he produced a lighter and a packet of rolling papers. "You know what they say about old habits," was his initial defense. "Actually, it's been a long damn time since I last blazed, since before Sue and I got married. I'll be lucky if I can remember to inhale."

"What?" J.J. scoffed. "You haven't been married a year yet."

"The more you smoke, the slower time passes," Cal said. "I once stood in front of a microwave for an hour waiting for it to heat White Castles, and I set the thing for a minute. Hand me that board, would you?"

Clearly, as he deftly proved with the wooden board on his lap, his skills at rolling a joint hadn't rusted due to lack of use. Claire watched thick, guitar worn fingers tear apart the plant bud and sprinkle the bits liberally in the crease of a white paper square. "Where are the leaves?" she asked, seeing no sign of the familiar three-pronged green.

"You don't smoke the leaves," J.J. said, as Cal was too occupied licking the moistened flap of the rolling paper to

comment. "Well, you could, but the THC is concentrated in the bud of the plant. That's what gets you high."

"Yeah, leaves might give you a mild buzz, but not like that bud," Cal added, joint now hanging from his lip.

Claire arched a brow at her lover. How was it that J.J. knew so much about smoking pot? She'd never seen him with it, nor smelled anything peculiar on him in the time they dated.

She reminded herself that fifteen years had passed since those days. While their passion felt ageless, J.J. had changed in many ways, as had she. An uneasy worry pitted in her stomach just then as she wondered how well they would mesh once every line in her list was crossed off.

So far, they seemed to be doing fine.

"Okay." Cal's booming voice startled her. "Let's get this party started. Jay, you in?"

"Sure," J.J. said. "Been a while, but I could use some mellowing out."

Cal lit the far end of the joint. The scent grew more noxious, like burning aloe, yet Claire was no longer repulsed by it. She watched as Cal took a quick drag, then lifted the joint away from his lips for a deep intake of breath.

J.J. must have seen the confusion in her expression. "It's not like smoking a regular cigarette," he explained to her. "What he does is takes a drag, then sucks in as much air as he can to get the smoke into the lungs. Then he'll hold it a bit to let the weed do its work."

At this Cal let out a sputtering exhale, looking as though he'd sucked on a lime. Wordlessly he handed the joint to J.J., who took a quick toke.

"I get it," said Claire. "So just do what Bill Clinton said he didn't do."

"He didn't have me to show him how." Cal winked. Taking the dwindling joint from J.J., he guided it close to Claire's lips. "Don't be fooled by the size of it," he said. "It doesn't take much for some people to get high, and it might not happen the first time off."

"Bout the only small thing you'll get that packs a wallop," J.J. snickered. By the mellow smile on his face, Claire could tell he was feeling no pain. In truth, the second-hand smoke

generated from the small cigarette had her mildly buzzed already.

The once glowing ember on the burning end had gone black, and Cal held his lighter to it. "Go," he said, and Claire sucked in the smoke.

"Now inhale, as much as you can." Cal held the tip away, and Claire felt her chest expand with the intake. Soon an internal burning sensation spread down her throat to her lungs, and she instinctively knew this to be the moment of truth. Sealing off further air, she held in the smoke until the need to breathe prevailed and she blew out a faint gray cloud.

"Well," Cal said, grinning, "welcome to your mid-life crisis."

* * * *

Another joint later, J.J. finished the last of the tortilla nacho chips left behind for lunch. Deli sandwich wrappers, tightened into tiny balls, littered the hard floor of Sue's studio. J.J. sat in the midst of it, bobbing to the music on the radio and delighting in Cal and Claire's game of wrapper "marbles."

Somewhere, sometime between tokes, Sue had slipped into the studio and left their lunches without his knowing. She was off on presumably another job, missing out on all the fun.

Or is she? J.J. watched how well Cal and Claire interacted together, wondering if this whole thing was a setup, an easing of Claire into her debauchery spree.

Of course it is, you melon head, his saner conscience chided. *Smoke now, pay later.*

"Touchdown!" Claire squealed, arms raised in victory as she sat with her legs tucked underneath her. For a first-timer she'd taken to the drug rather well. J.J. watched her giggle and list to one side as Cal silently arranged the wadded-up wrappers in a circular pattern.

"Girl," he grunted, "you are so baked."

"Oh, and you're not?" Claire posed. "You smoked as much as I did."

"Yeah, but as much as I've toked, sometimes it takes a bit more to get where you are now." Cal attempted to disentangle himself from his cross-legged sitting position, but ended up

tumbling backwards, legs akimbo and kicking like an upturned turtle. J.J. couldn't resist the belly laugh that escaped him.

"Little help?" Cal gargled, and J.J. carefully complied. He walked on his knees toward the awkward musician, but unfortunately didn't feel the floor give way when it did. He ended up layered over Cal's abdomen.

"Sorry, dude," he muttered, noting the sensation of his body breathing against Cal's. They rose and rested in unison with the heat from Cal transferring easily through his body. The laughter around him faded into a dull echo as his senses came to focus only on his body, his touch, and his growing reaction to it.

J.J. was hard now. Yes, he was baked, but there was a bit of lucidity flowing through his system, aiding him to hope that Claire—only Claire—played a role in that. Pot never made him horny, and he surmised watching Claire lose her inhibitions contributed to his own growing desires.

It wasn't his hand cuffing Cal's lean jean-clad thigh, or the impressive bulge next to that which did merit some admiration, gay or not.

"No need to be sorry," Cal said, his voice teasing. A slow, strong hand came to rest on J.J.'s backside, kneading the buttock with expert gentility. J.J.'s balls tightened at the touch, and while normally he'd tear away from such a bold move he wasn't repulsed by Cal. The man was older by almost twenty years, but one would never know to look at the handsome blond with the piercing eyes and youthful smile. He didn't have the timeworn look of other musicians of his generation, some of whom probably rolled IV poles on stage with them.

"You two gonna get up, or are you deciding to cross something off *your* to do lists?"

Shit. J.J. had forgotten about Claire. Quickly he rose back on his haunches and turned toward her. The scene had clearly excited her somewhat—thick nipples dented her thin blouse, and her now spread-eagle position on the floor teased a bit of inner thigh.

He wanted to kiss her between those thighs, and lap up her pussy juices and erase the smoke lingering thick inside his mouth.

“What are you talking about?” He didn’t want it to come out as a laugh, damn the weed.

Claire shrugged. “Well, I’m sure everybody has a bisexual itch. Not everybody gets to scratch it, so I thought you were looking for an opportunity.”

“Is that so?” He glanced quickly at Cal, who turned away to reach for the remains of the joint lying in an open wrapper. “What makes you think I have an itch at all, or that I haven’t doused it with calamine lotion?”

“Arnie Logan had the cure, I’m told.” Claire pouted. “And Cal gets the itch, too, right?”

“I might as well have poison ivy,” Cal said, beckoning Claire closer. “C’mere, I wanna show you a trick.”

“Arnie Logan?” As if that wasn’t a mood killer. What did their old friend from high school have to do with any of this? If only he weren’t so wasted and distracted by what Cal was doing he’d ask. Yet, it appeared as though Claire had forgotten the conversation entirely.

Cal pinched the joint in a roach clip taken from his pocket and held it to his mouth. “Here’s something you can do that won’t feel like your lungs are on fire,” he said. “I’ll take a puff and blow the smoke into your mouth, and you inhale and hold like you’ve been doing. It’s called shot-gunning.”

“Like using a human bong,” J.J. supplied coming closer instinctively for a whiff of residual smoke.

Ever the eager student, Claire leaned forward with her lips parted, taking in the pungent smoke Cal offered by way of his own mouth. But just when it appeared Cal might complete the kiss, he rolled back. “Pretty good,” he complimented, “we’ll make a stoner of you yet. All we need now are a few blacklight posters and a case of White Castles.”

“Where’s the nearest White Castle?” J.J. asked.

“Yonkers.” Claire coughed, prompting laughter all around. When Cal offered her a bless you, J.J. lost himself in a fit of maniacal giggles.

“Come on, Jay, one more for the road.” Cal beckoned J.J. closer to finish the roach, but as J.J. reached for the clip Cal swatted his hand away. “Uh-uh.” Cal sucked the roach into a bright red ember and held the smoke, waiting for J.J. to accept it.

He was still for a moment. This was a trap, he knew somewhere in his addled brain that the musician meant to seduce him. He had done shotguns before... with women, and those moments were strictly platonic. This would be, too, he would see to that.

His heart pounding in his ears, he closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath, relishing the singing sensation trailing down his throat until he sealed off the air.

"Aagh." He heard Cal curse, presumably as though the weed burned off and faded into a wispy gray ash. In his own little world, J.J. floated within his numbed skin. He felt content and aroused, and suddenly curious as to why he was disappointed that Cal hadn't tried anything.

He exhaled in time to his opening eyes. Cal looked dreamy, heavy-lidded, with his lower lip pushed forward. With Claire's head drooping over his shoulder, he looked especially cute. They looked good together, and that strengthened his desire to come, literally, between them.

His body moved before his mind. Taking Claire by the back of her neck, he drew her closer for a deep, exploring kiss, one that Claire enthusiastically returned, and raised him a quick thigh squeeze. His hand found her right breast and rolled the nipple gently in his fingers. Claire's moaned approval vibrated in her throat even after he broke off the kiss.

When he looked down at her, he saw buttons undone and a flash of a lacy bra, covered by Cal's fingers on her left side. Cal nestled into one side of her neck, his eye on J.J. as an invitation to join them.

But where? It surprised him that he couldn't decide where to jump in.

Sometime in that interlude, Cal's hands found their way in the crease of J.J.'s pants and rubbed up and down. "Not bad," Cal said. "I can see why my wife persists in asking you over."

"What do you mean, not bad?" J.J. challenged. "I'll have you know I'm damned impressive." With a nod toward Claire, "And I have witnesses."

"Mm." Claire nodded. "Looks good, tastes good to the last drop."

“Yeah?” Cal’s bleary, stoned gaze lit with anticipation. “Proof or it never happened.”

J.J. laughed. “Never happ—? The fuck are you talking about? Aw, hell, come here.” Maybe it was the weed, maybe it was Cal’s bumbling yet effective seduction technique, J.J. didn’t want to question it. He couldn’t, anyway, in a coherent manner, he was that far gone. All he could discern was that neither party protested when he brought both of his hands to cup Cal’s face and draw him closer for a deep, wet kiss.

He’d not kissed a man before like this, nor had he ever been offered the opportunity before Cal and Brady moved to Dareville. J.J. supposed a small part of him should be flattered for the attention, and as his lips moved against Cal’s, he felt surprised by how practiced his cadence felt. Their tongues mated and twirled together in a familiar dance, lips slid and pursed at the right moments to increase want, and breathing synchronized to a comfort level that precluded the kiss didn’t need to end.

Even the occasional twinge of Cal’s stubbly skin rubbing against his gave him pleasure. He never believed to have a gay bone in his body, but this...this was nice.

Wait ‘til you’re sober, his intoxicated consciousness taunted him.

Shaddap.

It might have gone on forever, too, had not a sighing feminine voice awakened him. Reluctantly, he broke away from Cal to see Claire had removed her blouse and bra, and now played with her nipples as she watched them.

“That was so hot,” she said, her voice just below a whisper. “Do it again.”

J.J. looked at Cal, whose devilish grin suggested an enjoyable detour. He winked bank.

“I got a better idea,” he said as he and Cal inched ever closer toward their prey.

* * * *

Jesus Christ in blue jeans.

Claire looked down at herself, at each breast covered by a hungry mouth nibbling and sucking and igniting fires within her that she realized had been banked. Hands caressed her back and seated buttocks—she felt too intoxicated by too many substances

to know or care who was fondling what. All she wanted right now was for the pleasure to travel downward and release the building ache in her pussy. Fingers, mouths, cocks...the method was unimportant, so long as it happened very, very soon.

Weed must promote extra sensory communication, she decided. It seemed as though both men read her mind and replied. One hand fumbled with the back zipper on her skirt while another slid under the material to determine what other barriers existed. Claire thanked Providence for guiding her to buy a pack of thongs as part of her replacement wardrobe, more so when that exploring hand plucked at the back string to play a divine melody over her throbbing clit. The jolt nearly sent her to the ceiling.

J.J. removed his mouth and grinned up at her. "Can you stand?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Trust me. It'll be worth the hospital stay later."

She allowed both men to straighten her and position her feet to a more grounding position. Skirt and undergarments fell away to their audible approval, and two tongues immediately set to work.

Fuck!

They started first at either leg, lapping at the crease in that sensitive area near her outer labia. The act alone should have sent Claire crumpling in a mass of quivering goo, but she kept a splayed hand on each bobbing head for balance. The main act was certain to exceed this prelude.

J.J. nudged Cal away long enough to dip in between Claire thighs and maneuver into a sitting position. Legs extended and the heels of his hands braced on the ground, J.J. stretched so his face could bury into Claire's wet pussy. Back and forth he swabbed her pussy lips, pausing occasionally to suck in her juices or stab her core with his tongue. Cal, meanwhile, assisted by straddling J.J.'s hips from behind and pushing him forward so that J.J. could concentrate on her hole. This left Cal with enough room for a gentle yet effective assault on her clit. Slowly, circuitously, he licked at the bud, each touch sending a delighted whimper into the air.

“Just like that, God, yes.” She kept Cal’s head in place and wobbled as J.J. moved farther between her legs. “I’m gonna come all over you if you keep this up. I swear.”

One of them elicited a muffled response. He might have said, “Good,” whoever it was. Claire sensed the orgasm growing and knew it wouldn’t last long. She hoped for release before her knees buckled.

Instead it—she—came with the simultaneous action. Wave after wave rolled up her body, forcing her to the ground and folding over the length of J.J.’s now elongated body. Cal managed to get away just as she fell, but J.J. didn’t once let up on his oral attentions. He continued to drink deeply and lave her pussy lips, even taking over the ministrations to Claire’s clit that Cal had abandoned.

Claire gasped for air, propped on trembling hands. She tried to undo J.J.’s belt and free his cock, but found trouble with all motor skills for her wanting to concentrate on J.J. loving her. She’s never had it like this. She could die a happy woman tomorrow, list be damned.

Good thing, though, she had this gorgeous man to resuscitate her.

Cal crawled up J.J.’s legs and pecked her on her parted lips. “Need some help?” he asked, and deftly unbuckled and unzipped her lover. Sensing the inevitable, J.J. arched his hips upward. Claire’s body rocked with his, further stimulating her.

Pants and briefs came down together to J.J.’s ankles. Cal stood momentarily to shed his own clothing, and soon he stood gloriously naked before Claire, his nice, thick cock erect in a feathery nest of dark blond hair.

“Whoa,” was her only compliment. Cal’s response was a teetering smile as he slid down beside her, stretching his legs toward J.J.’s head. Taking J.J.’s impressive organ by its base, Cal tilted it toward him and took the bulging head into his mouth. Claire couldn’t help but giggle at his dreamy look, eyes closed and smiling around the girth as though savoring a first bite of favorite ice cream.

“Good?” she prompted.

J.J.’s cock popped out of Cal’s mouth, and Cal steered it toward her. “Try it yourself.”

“Already have, but I don’t mind another taste.” She bent over and licked the pre-come bubbling from the slit, then traced the ridges around the circumcised head. Cal lowered his head and made good use of his time nibbling J.J.’s scrotum.

After several minutes of mutual oral pleasure, she sensed a second orgasm building. No way would this one pass without at least one cock inside her. Lucidity appeared to overpower the weed now, but not so much over her lust. It was enough to get her to crawl away to the pile of discarded pants. Surely to God somebody had the forethought...

Yes! There was a three-pack of condoms in Cal’s back pocket. She unfurled the short strip and looked back at her lovers. Cal had J.J. in a deep throated lock while J.J. cuffed Cal’s shaft, stroking roughly. He craned his head at her.

“Damn,” he exhaled. “Who goes around with rubbers in his pocket?”

Cal rose. “An optimist,” he said, smiling. He took one foil packet and rolled it down his cock. “A full pocket signals the promise of a good day.”

“And an empty pocket is a great day?” J.J. asked.

“If it’s empty in the next hour, hell yeah.”

“Speaking of empty, I don’t want to be anymore.” Claire sealed a second condom over J.J.’s shaft and, facing him, straddled and lowered herself.

“Oh, that’s good,” she groaned, relishing each pulse, each ridge sliding across her inner walls. She settled herself comfortably, intending to ride hard.

“Where do you want me?” Cal asked from behind her.

“In the ass.”

Cal knelt between J.J.’s parted legs. “Yours or his?”

Claire paused. She hadn’t considered that. But, J.J. broke into the silent deliberation.

“I’ll pass, thanks,” he said. “This is your party, darlin’.”

“How gracious,” Claire said, and leaned forward with her ass raised slightly. Still clenching J.J. in her pussy, she tried to relax her ass muscles to accept Cal. Anal sex was like an obscure holiday for her, enjoyed once in a rare while. Double penetration...Christmas and Fourth of July with the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade marching through an ice cream

snowstorm. All that felt from the first touch of Cal's cock to her backside.

When he breached the outer ring and slid further up her ass, the first set of fireworks erupted. "Merry Christmas to you," she said huskily over her shoulder.

"I'm Jewish, but thanks anyway," Cal said.

Once both were seated to the hilt, the trio commenced a slow rhythm that hit her every spot. Claire was a gelatin filling, her breasts just brushing J.J.'s chest as she rocked over him. How she wished she could have seen herself being fucked like this, an interesting thought in a studio full of camera equipment.

Nah, she decided grinding into J.J.'s pelvis. Best to commit the feelings to memory. But, oh, if only Stoney and his entourage of ass-kissers could see her now...on her terms.

No. She smiled wickedly to herself. Better they couldn't see. Let them suffer. This pleasure was hers, J.J.'s, and Cal's.

"Shit." J.J. grit between his teeth. "Can't hold it..." and with one last upward thrust he shot his orgasm into her. Cal followed soon afterward, leaning heavily into her so that her clit rubbed into J.J. The ensuing orgasm took the last of Claire's strength, and when her cries faded she collapsed on J.J.'s chest, hearing the rapid pulse of his heartbeat in her head.

"This," she said, "is a very great day."

"Yeah," Cal concurred, his breath labored. "And it's only half over."

Claire's eyes rolled into her head.

Chapter Eleven

“You okay?”

J.J. looked up from the television. Claire curled her body on the opposite end of his couch, her pen tapping on an open textbook, her expression bland yet curious. For odd seconds it appeared as though she looked past him, speaking to a ghost in the room. Or, perhaps, she was asking herself of her own condition.

She seemed okay. J.J. detected still the glow of being fucked and sucked double time in the corner of her smile. Through the remainder of the day, from leaving Sue’s studio to coming to his house for takeout pizza and rental movies, he half-expected those lips to say, “Let’s do that again.”

“I’m good,” he said. “You get enough to eat?”

“Full,” she groaned.

“Kay.” He reached for the wider of the two remaining slices in the box on the coffee table. “You need me to quiz on you on any of those questions? Mom did that with me, and it helped a lot.”

As he said it, a pang of sorrow slowly veiled his heart, softening him from the inside. He studied the oily pepperoni atop the triangle of browned cheese in his hands. It really hadn’t been that long ago since Cindy Redding died, not even two years, and yet those memories of her helping him with the exam weren’t so distant. He could hear his mother’s voice even now, admonishing his poor choice in diet and urging him across the sofa to snuggle with the gorgeous blonde making notes in the book margins. Cindy had loved Claire, too, and J.J. knew his mother hoped the two would eventually reunite for keeps.

He smiled, buoyed by the warming presence of his mother’s spirit. *I’m trying, Mom. She has to meet me halfway.*

“She is,” a voice seemed to tell him.

“What was that?” he asked abruptly of Claire.

Claire’s pen fell to her lap. “I was saying how sorry I was to have missed her funeral,” she said, hinting of melancholy. “That she is...was...a wonderful woman.” She teared up and sniffled. “She once told me I could do anything I wanted, and that inspired me to go into law. And I couldn’t take one lousy day off to pay my respects—”

“Hey, stop it. Come here.” Books and papers fell to the floor as Claire unfolded and stretched toward him. Head against his chest, Claire snuffled, what J.J. presumed to be years of repressed guilt, into his favorite t-shirt. He stroked her hair and cooed. “It’s okay. She knew you were a busy lady, a successful one. She understood. And, we got the card and flowers. Don’t think we didn’t appreciate that.”

Claire snorted. “Well, maybe you could tell me what they were and what the card said. Because I didn’t write it,” she confessed. “I had a secretary take care of that. Lupe.”

“Well,” J.J. conceded, “Lupe had refined taste. It was a lovely arrangement of lilies, and the card held a nice Psalm verse. Mom would have liked it.”

Claire lifted up momentarily and looked at J.J. with smeared, pleading eyes. “I was so self absorbed. There wasn’t anything at work that could have waited twelve hours, or anything that I couldn’t have brought with me.”

“Claire.” J.J. brushed away a tear with his thumb. Her skin was hot yet silken. He wanted to kiss away all the bitterness and pain and just hold her until morning. Sex wouldn’t be necessary, as they’d certainly had their fill today. “It’s the past, and we aren’t offended, so don’t worry about it anymore. If you want to, this Sunday we can pay a visit. I go every once in awhile as it is. I’m sure Mom would like that.”

Claire nodded. “I would, too.”

“And,” he continued, “if you really want to make up for it, you can be my date for my stepmother’s funeral. Assuming I’m not in prison for having expedited it.”

If any words could bring Claire out of this sudden funk, those did the trick. J.J.’s reward was a strong slap to the shoulder.

“Hey!” His reaction caused an involuntary kick to the coffee table, which sent the pizza box avalanching to the carpet.

“I can’t believe you said that,” Claire chided, helping him pick up the mess.

“What? It was a joke,” J.J. said with mock innocence. “I’ll have you know I wish Dad and Lauren a loving, happy life together.”

“But in separate houses, right?”

“Separate towns would suffice as well,” he grumbled and carried the pizza box and empty cola cans to the kitchen. Claire followed, bearing sauce-stained paper plates and napkins, which she deposited in the trash.

“I don’t see why you are so threatened by your father’s marriage,” she said. “An age difference like theirs isn’t necessarily a foreboding factor in a divorce. Besides, you said she signed a pre-nup.”

“Yeah, but who knows how much weight those things carry,” J.J. said. “People contest them, claim they were coerced into signing.”

Claire leaned against the counter, arching backward so that her breasts lifted and exposed tightened peaks against her t-shirt. The sight surely made arguing a challenge when all he could think of now was lifting that shirt and taking those succulent buds into his mouth.

“That’s true,” Claire said soberly, and J.J. was drawn back to Earth. “Still, I know more couples closer in age who have divorced than people like Jake and Lauren. They were meant to be together.”

“You think?” J.J. eyed her suspiciously now. “So if Lauren were to one day decide to dump him, how do I know you wouldn’t represent her in the divorce and try to invalidate that pre-nup?”

“For one, Lauren would never dump your dad. For two, I never took the Virginia Bar, so I can’t practice here anyway. For three,” she cringed when the doorbell chimed through her words, “answer your door.”

“Fine.” Not one to end a conversation on sour feelings, J.J. allowed himself a quick kiss and a feel before heading to the

foyer. He welcomed his brother and gladly accepted the six-pack offering of his favorite lager.

"You have something for me, I hope?" Red asked.

"Came through my e-mail fax this afternoon. They accepted our bid." J.J. motioned his brother deeper into the house. "It's all over but the signing. Have a seat."

Claire met them in the living room and gave Red a warm hug. "I'm sorry I didn't get to talk to you much at the wedding," she told him. "How've you been?"

"Fair, considering." Seeing Claire's confused reaction, Red turned to J.J. and realization dawned on his own features. "Oh, I'm guessing J.J. didn't tell you that Char and I are separating."

"Oh, Red. No!" Claire looked crestfallen for a moment, and J.J. guessed Red hadn't noticed the almost immediate shift of her lips. They twisted in a quirky smile as she dared a glance at J.J., as though to say, *See? Same-age couple splitting up.*

I get it, he sent telepathically back. Claire must have read his face correctly, because she then changed the subject.

"How's the paper?" she asked.

"Good, doing good." Red rocked back on his heels, hands in pants pockets jangling change or keys. "Circulation's up, subscriptions are up. Just hired on more help today. Friend of Brady Garriston's, name's Jared Wilton. He's going to rebuild our Web site."

"I know Jared. He's staying at the house, too, though I don't see him much," Claire said. "That's good."

"Yeah."

Watching the slightly uncomfortable exchange from the sidelines, J.J. cleared his throat to bring attention. "Here's the contract," he told Red, handing over the papers he'd taken from his printer tray. "Your bid's been accepted, and all you have to do sign where needed and we can call the bank tomorrow." He paused. "Unless...you want some time to think it through." It bothered him to give Red such good news. He stood to get a spanking new condo at a great price, with the seller handling the closing costs. Were this deal for a newlywed couple, J.J. would offer to buy the champagne.

But, this was his brother, about to leave a more than a decade old marriage for reasons J.J. still didn't understand. What

could have happened between Red and Charlene to necessitate a split? They grew apart...a lame excuse in J.J. opinion, but it didn't mean there wasn't hope for the two to drift back together at some point. He and Claire surely seemed on that path.

Red rolled the papers in his hand. "Thanks," he said. "I know the process, we don't have to go over it now since you and Claire have plans—"

"Which can wait for family," Claire finished, and reached for her purse. "I need to call my cousin anyway, and check my voice mail. I'm waiting to hear back from Arnie Logan about a car so I don't have to borrow Ellie's anymore."

She had her phone out and flipped it open with one hand. "You seen him lately, Red?" she asked, somewhat pointedly. J.J. couldn't miss the unspoken words volleying between the two. If only he knew what they were and why they caused his brother to suddenly flinch.

"Not in a while," Red answered, and Claire simply nodded and darted down the hall.

"You know, I'm just going to sign these now," Red muttered and headed toward J.J.'s desk. "No point in trying to fix what can't be fixed."

"Well, maybe if you and Char tried counseling or some—" J.J.'s voice fell silent with the audibly rapid zip of a pen against paper. Seconds later Red returned the condo contract with a flourish. He looked clearly agitated.

"Can't be fixed, big brother," he said simply. "I need to go. Tell Claire I said goodnight, would you?"

"Sure." Red was at the door when J.J. managed to choke out, "I love you, Red."

Red's hand paused on the knob and he slowly turned back. J.J. could easily read the surprise on his brother's face. As affectionate as their parents had been toward them, love was something the brothers rarely discussed.

"I've always envied your life," J.J. continued. "Beautiful wife, great kids, a successful career. You have it all. I just don't see how you can walk away."

"You seem to be heading that way, too, to having it all." Red looked past J.J. now, and J.J. sensed Claire was probably listening from the hallway.

"I hope so," J.J. said, loud enough for her to hear if she was. "It doesn't mean I want to step over you on the way to the top."

"You're not," Red said. "The job's still great, and so are Char and the girls. I love them...and you. It's just going to be different." With a grim smile, Red slipped quietly away before J.J. could stop him.

"Coast is clear," he called, still looking at the front door. Hesitant footsteps approached and soon J.J. could smell Claire's perfume.

"Should I leave so you can be alone?" she asked.

J.J. turned around and took her into a tight embrace. He kissed her passionately, his heart lifting as she responded with equal zeal. He didn't want to be alone ever again. He'd been alone for too many years while Red enjoyed his family. Now the tables were reversed, and despite Red's insistence that everything would be fine, J.J. knew differently. He saw the sadness in Red's smile. Too much pain would have to elapse before happiness returned.

J.J. knew that all too well.

"You should go back to the bedroom so we can make love until dawn comes," he whispered in her ear. He tugged at the hem of her shirt and caressed her lower back, his cock hardening with her gentle sway into his hips.

She let out a throaty laugh. "Who's Dawn, and when's she coming?"

"Not before you, that's for certain." J.J. walked her backward down the hall to his bedroom, letting her fall back against the mattress with an ungraceful bounce. "Any good messages?"

"I'm meeting Arnie tomorrow, we're about all set." Claire made a face. "And Sue invited us to dinner tomorrow night."

"Clothing optional?" J.J. toyed with the elastic band of her slip-on jeans and kissed the reddened indentations on her skin.

"She didn't say outright, but she did say you weren't obliged to return any favors to her that Cal, ah, gave me."

Riiight. "Maybe the real message was diluted by cell phone static," J.J. murmured against her bellybutton.

"Could be fun," Claire teased. "Wanna come?"

"You first."

Yet through the night, as J.J. sucked Claire's sweet pussy into orgasm, then lay back to watch her ride his hard cock in an achingly slow rhythm, he found it difficult to enjoy the ecstasy fluttering on her lips, and the seductive swing of her breasts. Words from earlier in the evening distracted him, looping in his mind like a broken record.

Claire had asked Red about Arnie Logan, their old high school friend. Arnie had been in their class, but was Red's closest friend at the time, and for years afterward until college interests led them to drift apart. But once upon a time he, Red, and Char had been inseparable, always getting into trouble and enjoying each other's company. It had been Arnie who secured post-prom liquor for J.J. and Claire, and got them the room that magical night.

Inevitably, like the rest of them, wild Arnie matured and settled into middle class life. He now ran his father's luxury car dealership, and from time to time kept tabs on the old gang.

Red had been agitated at the mention of Arnie, and as much as he didn't want to believe it, J.J. wondered if Claire tested his brother.

Was Arnie somehow involved in the breakup? Having an affair with Charlene?

The thought disturbed J.J., so much that when his attention returned to Claire he realized he was going soft inside her. It didn't take long for her to notice, too.

"You alright, baby?" She stopped rocking and he felt her pussy clamp tightly around him.

J.J. grabbed his pillow and arched his back, willing himself back to stone. "Almost there, sweetheart. Suck me off, please? I want to see those sweet lips around my cock."

With a smile, Claire rolled off of him and knelt by his semi-hard shaft. She removed the condom and stroked some life back into him before taking the head into her mouth. In seconds he was at full attention, and came hard, with Claire grasping his thighs for support as she sucked him dry.

His orgasm faded quickly and he gathered Claire in his arms, pulling the sheets over them as they lay back. She snuggled into his side and he kissed her temple. "I love you."

"I love you," Claire echoed.

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“We’ll study for the test at breakfast. That alright?”

“Hmm.”

“And, if it’s okay with you, I want to go down to Logan’s with you when you get your car.”

Claire looked up at him, bemused. “Jay, I may be a girl from a walking city, but I know about buying a car.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” J.J. placated. “You’re my girl, and I want to be more a part of your life. Besides, if you’re going to be a Realtor, you’re going to spend a lot of time in that car. You’ll need my input.”

“You’re right. I didn’t think of that,” Claire said. She kissed his nose. “Okay, we need to be there tomorrow at four.”

Claire fell easily into sleep, but J.J. lay awake a while longer. Yes, he was looking forward to seeing Arnie again.

Chapter Twelve

Not so true to his word, J.J. didn't encourage further study the next morning...at least, not of any real estate terminology. The early hours were spent in bed, lazily making love and forgetting the mundane aspects of life—food, bills, and the outside world.

Finally, around ten, Claire managed to extract J.J.'s mouth from her nipple and get out of bed. "Come on," she urged. "I actually have stuff to do today. Don't you have work, too?"

"That's the joy of being able to set your own hours." J.J. stretched, resting his head on his hands. Claire couldn't help but laugh at his bravado. And, damn, but he looked sexy all tangled up in the sheets.

"Well, I intend to set aside a few hours for work, once I pass this exam. Then we can schedule, ah, other activities as we go along," she said.

"Don't forget to space out rest periods. You'll need them."

Without another word, Claire slipped on her clothes, leaned down for a scorching goodbye kiss, and made for the door.

"I'll come by Ellie's at three," J.J. called behind her. Claire's answer was an absent wave. She didn't look back. She knew if she did, she'd turn right back around and nothing would get done.

* * * *

She bit her lip for most of the drive back to Ellie and Brady's. She felt bad for tying up Ellie's car as much as she had over the past few days, though Ellie had insisted Claire consider it hers until she settled in. Of course, Ellie would have called had she really needed it, and Claire intended to make it up to her cousin by having the oil changed and tires balanced when she finished using it.

Claire's heart sank as she pulled onto the property and saw the strange SUV parked in the drive. Neither Cal nor Sue drove one, nor did Jared, who usually parked on the street anyway. She hoped she hadn't put Ellie out by forcing her to rent something so expensive.

She came through the front door to another surprise—three large, bulging duffel bags lined the tiled far edge of the foyer alongside an upright pink suitcase with rollers. Her bag, which she'd left behind in her apartment. She immediately recognized the daisy-shaped luggage tag dangling from the elongated handle, no need to check the address on it.

"Morning, babe." In sauntered Brady from the kitchen, casually cool in black jeans, dark red turtleneck, and no shoes. He cupped a large yellow mug in both hands—steam curled under his chin. "You eat yet?"

"Uh, no. What is all this?" Claire went to one of the strange bags and unzipped it. Lingerie and sleepwear popped forth like stuffing from a dissected toy animal. These were her clothes.

"I'm making pancakes still," Brady was saying. "If you're hungry, I'll make some for you."

"Sure. Whatever." Her stomach felt suddenly queasy. Somebody had been in her apartment without her knowledge, or permission. She felt immediately violated, and confused. Yes, she hoped to go back to get her stuff, but knowing somebody had taken that liberty unsettled her.

She rose from her kneeling position and turned on Brady. "Did you do this? I know you'd said you'd help, but breaking into my home—"

Brady quickly held up a hand and whistled her silent. "No, no. This wasn't me. But, I think while I make your breakfast you should go out into the sun porch. You'll find your answers there."

"I'll do just that." With one last suspicious glare at her cousin's husband, Claire skulked past him to the back of the house. Her peripheral vision caught a figure in the kitchen, a young man hunched over the butcher's block island. She did a double-take and realized it wasn't Jared wolfing down pancakes, but a darker, reedier person. Handsome, with a chiseled face, and brooding eyes.

Another pet for her cousins' playpen? Claire was too agitated to ask. When she slid open the glass door to greet Ellie on the sunny, glass-enclosed porch, she saw Ellie appeared equally worried.

Ellie sat in the far corner, pretty in a pastel green track suit with white t-shirt. She, too, had a yellow mug, which was set on the table beside her as she acknowledged Claire.

Facing away from Claire, in a matching white wicker chair, sat a body of which Claire could only see a dark, full head of hair.

"Claire," Ellie said hesitatingly. "I believe you know Mr. Petrocelli from New York."

"Petro—" Claire's heart imploded. Why did she know that name? *My God*. Had Gladstone sent a heavy to track her down? She couldn't believe Ellie and Brady would invite somebody like that into their home.

"Hey, I hope you're decent this time," came a familiar Sicilian snap, and Claire exhaled. Cap in hand, Dominic rose from the chair and widened his arms for a hug, which Claire readily offered.

"How's my girl?" he soothed, smelling of coffee and Paco Rabanne.

"Much, much better," Claire said.

* * * *

"Turns out Robbie here knows the brother of your super's girlfriend. Thanks, honey, no more for me," Dom said as an aside to Ellie, who tried to refill his coffee. After a generous bite of pancake, Dom swallowed and continued his tale. "So we explained the situation, well, most of it," he grinned, "and we got in just to pick up a few things we thought you might want. Don't need you maxing out any credit cards while you're trying to start over, you know."

They had moved to the breakfast nook in the Garristons' kitchen, where Brady made the rounds with piping hot pancakes. He eased three more on Robbie's empty plate, sticky with maple syrup. Claire had to bite her lip on seeing the young man's silent, appreciative response. How often did a guy like him get served breakfast by a rock legend?

Clearly Brady had noticed her failing attempt to stifle her amusement. He gave her a look that said, "What have you wrought?" and held the serving plate out to her.

"No, thanks." She waved it away, then turned to Dom. "That was sweet of you, really. But it wasn't necessary for you guys to come all the way down here to bring me clothes—"

"Your laptop, too," Robbie interjected, spearing a bite. "We figured you'd need it."

"Right." Holy cow, her e-mail inbox must be ready to explode, she realized. She never went more than a few hours without checking messages...and hopefully nobody at the firm tried to hack into her account. "Still, you could have shipped everything. In fact, I was going to arrange for that this week, and eventually go back to see about subletting."

"Ah, but then Robbie and I would have missed out on a nice drive down the Eastern Shore, and all those delicious blue crabs. I think between the two of us we depleted the ocean, eh, Robbie?" Dom nudged his son, who offered a tight-lipped smile as he chewed. "Besides, we hadn't heard from you in a few days, and had to see you were okay and all."

"I'm sorry, Dom. I should have at least called since—"

"...plus we gotta check out our new digs, too."

Claire's next thought flew away. "New digs?" she asked.

Dom leaned back in his chair, his chest puffed with pride. "The day you left was the day I quit Gladstone. You're looking at the new owner of the Big Apple Limos, formerly Smith and Son Limos of Virginia Beach."

Brady had just sat down to his own breakfast when he looked up with mild surprise. "Really? Cal hires Smith out a lot. You bought their business?"

"That quickly?" Claire asked.

"That's right, but we're still in the negotiating stage right now. Robbie's gonna be my partner," Dom said. "Between us and the other drivers we're retaining, plus Smith's current client list, I think we're gonna do okay. It was like serendipity, me needing a job and this coming up when Murray Smith decided to retire."

"Voluntarily? Ow!" Brady glared at his wife and rubbed the shoulder she hit.

“Well, I think it’s great you’ve decided to open your own business,” Ellie said. “And I know Cal will be happy to hire your services, as will we.” She eyed Brady sternly with those last words.

“We do appreciate it, thanks. And what’s more, you can count on top notch service,” Dom said. “We got the best people around to run the office. Great couple of girls, multi-lingual, too.”

Claire thought a moment, then her jaw dropped. “Lupe is coming, here?”

“Lupe *is* here,” Robbie said, looking suddenly on edge.

“And her sister,” Dom added. “Come on, you didn’t think I was gonna leave those poor girls to Stoney, did you? When Robbie got her out of the apartment, we took her home and helped them pack. We’re gonna take good care of them, get them out of the city and into the sunshine.”

“Just like me,” Claire whispered. Already she was better off for that swift kick in the pants Dom had administered. She wanted to lean across the table and hug him.

“We shouldn’t have left them at the hotel,” Robbie said. “We should prob’ly go and check on them.”

“They’re fine,” Dom said. “They wanted to go shopping, let them do what they want. They’re not prisoners.” He shook his head, chuckling. “My boy can be a bit overprotective.”

“Yeah, well, you weren’t there.” Robbie’s voice rose. The young man clenched his fork in a whitening fist. “You didn’t see what they were doing to her.”

Claire felt suddenly nauseous and guilty. Had Gladstone taken out her escape on poor Lupe? The anger in Robbie’s glare, aimed beyond them toward the front entrance, was certainly palpable, and she was glad for Lupe to have found a savior. It wasn’t difficult to see that Robbie had strong feelings for Lupe as well, and she wondered if the secretary returned them.

“Okay, okay,” Dom relented. By now the plates were empty and Dom helped Ellie stack them. “We’ve taken up enough the morning anyway. Plenty of time to catch up later.”

“How about Friday?” Ellie suggested. “One of my friends is coming back from her honeymoon, and we’re having a shower for them since we didn’t have one before.”

"It was a rather spontaneous wedding," Brady supplied.

"Oh," said. Dom. "You mean—" He made his finger into a gun.

"Hardly," Brady snickered and managed to get away before Ellie landed another blow.

"And bring Lupe and her sister. More the merrier," Ellie added as their guests stood to leave.

"We'll do that. Thanks much. Now," Dom looked pointedly at Claire, smiling. "What more can I do for you?"

Claire took his arm and guided him toward the front door. "Well, when I pass my real estate exam, you can let me help you buy your new home."

"Serious? Why stop there? I think we're going to need some office space in town, too." He glanced slyly at Brady behind them. "Never know who might need a limo for a special occasion."

Brady looked behind him into the empty hallway as Ellie cackled.

Goodbyes said, Claire closed the front door, then whirled to confront her cousins.

Brady got in the first word, however. "Are they in the Mob?"

"No," Claire scowled. "Not everyone who's Italian is connected. Did you just invite them to an orgy on Friday night?"

"No!" Ellie aped her cousin, rolling her eyes. "Not all of our parties end up in a massive, naked pile. Come on, it's Lauren's party."

"Sorry," Claire said, chagrined. "It's just, I didn't expect any of this today." That anybody would think to track her down to Dareville was a shock. Small as the town was, she imagined Dom didn't have much trouble finding it.

She shuddered to think what Gladstone and his cronies might do if they knew where she was. Would there be repercussions for him losing his driver and personal secretary in one night? Would she be expected to pay?

As though reading her mind, Brady laid a hand on her shoulder. "Have you tried to get in touch with work since you got here?"

Claire followed them back into the kitchen, shaking her head. "I don't keep my cell phone on, and every voice mail that starts with a work voice I erase," she said. "To tell you the truth, I'm scared to do anything. Like if I ignore it, it'll go away, you know?"

Ellie finished clearing the table. "You can't avoid them forever, Claire. Even if you don't go back to New York, or practice law, you can't let those ties hang loose."

"Surely, there were people at the firm you called friends?" Brady cleaned off the griddle. "They're going to want to know what happened to you. Whose story do you think they'll hear?"

"I know." Claire took the creamer and returned it to the refrigerator. "I just want to put that life behind and look ahead. I don't care what happens at work. I imagine what workload I left behind will get parsed to other juniors. I don't care if I don't get any severance. I'll keep quiet about Stoney's kinks if he'll just leave me alone." She wanted it to just die. Gladstone had no idea where she was, God hoped, and she knew Dom wouldn't have betrayed her to anybody. Maybe she could just disappear.

"Fine and good for you, but what about the next unsuspecting junior looking to make partner?" Ellie asked. "Don't you think you owe it to them to make sure this doesn't keep happening?"

Claire sighed. "First off, who is *them*? Am I supposed to go around the office and kick down doors like I'm Wonder Woman? Besides, who is going to believe me over Gladstone and a roomful of the most powerful lawyers in Japan?"

Ellie shrugged. "Dom believed you. So did his son."

"I can take care of myself," Claire said, "as can anybody else in that firm."

"I know you can. You seem to be doing quite a job of it," Ellie muttered, turning through the kitchen. "I need to freshen up."

Claire watched her leave, then turned back to Brady. "I don't think that was meant as a compliment."

"Claire." Brady waved her to a seat, towel in hand. He took the chair opposite her and twined his fingers on the table. "Ellie's just worried about you, that you're using this time as an excuse to hide from your problems."

“Ridiculous,” Claire spat. “I’m taking charge of my life. I mean, look.” She pulled her crumpled list from her jeans pocket. “I made the list like she suggested. See what I’ve done already?”

She spun the paper on the table and pushed it toward Brady, who ticked off each item with his finger.

“Did that, did that, did that twice...”

“That’s what Cal said.”

“As well he should. He was there.”

“While blindfolded with both hands tied around your backs. Yeah, yeah,” Claire scoffed.

Brady tapped the list. “I’m glad you got high and had your three-way. The rest of the list is pretty ambitious, too. Of course, there appears to be something missing.”

Before Claire could ask, Brady reached back on the counter for a pen. He scribbled a quick sentence and returned the sheet:

She eyed the addition: *Confront boss*. Then she gave him a sly grin.

“I have a firm related item here already.”

“You don’t have one for your boss,” Brady said.

“I don’t have a boss anymore.”

“You know what I mean,” Brady chided. “You also remember when we were dating and I took off for Europe?”

“Ugh.” Claire had hoped they could make it the rest of her stay here without dredging up their romantic history.

“I ran away from my problems,” Brady continued. “I didn’t have the courage to face my demons then, either.”

“So you ran away to Dareville and what happened? You met the love of your life and your career hit an all-time high.” Claire arched an eyebrow. “Yeah, poor you.”

Brady traced circles on the tabletop. “Okay, maybe I’m the exception, but before all that I wanted you back, and you wouldn’t have me,” he said. “You were a real hardass, didn’t take any crap. You were the same way at work, too. You got things done.”

“I’m getting things done now!”

Brady pointed to the list. “Get *all* of those things taken care of, Claire. We want you happy and fulfilled, and all the sex and real estate in Dareville won’t mean much until you’ve closed this

one door. I managed it when we sorted things out at the benefit concert, and I know you will, too.”

Carefully she folded the paper. “Why are you doing this?”
Let me do it my way.

“When I came back to New York, you gave much such a kick in the ass. I’m just returning the favor.” His chair scraped the tile as he stepped back. Rising, he leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “You going shopping with us?”

“Jay’s taking me to get my car later.”

Brady nodded and left. Claire moved to stuff the list back in her pocket, but stopped and studied it again.

Pass Real Estate Exam

Bungee jump

Go waterskiing

Visit London, get picture taken crossing Abbey Road

~~*Smoke pot*~~

Have sex with a woman

~~*Have a threesome with two men*~~

~~*Have sex in a public place and not get caught*~~

Dinner with a “human” dining table

Try bondage

Participate in an orgy

Get back at my old firm

Confront boss

Amid the various scratchings and erasures, she decided it was a good list, Brady’s addition notwithstanding.

For a start, anyway. She slid a corner under her fingernail and flicked the paper back and forth. Assuming she completed this list, what then? Would she truly find fulfillment? Or, like Brady did, would she continue to amend her goals to suit her changing mind?

Her little weed and sex party with J.J. and Cal had been fun, yes, but she knew that pace of lifestyle could not define her future. Thinking back to yesterday did make her smile, but thinking of J.J. alone and the way his cock filled her slick pussy made her moan and hunger for more.

She took the pen Brady left behind and made one final adjustment to her list. If nothing else was realized, she told

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herself, she wouldn't be bothered. So long as she could cross off this last item.

Chapter Thirteen

“You okay?” Red asked him.

“Fine,” J.J. snapped, then added more softly, “What makes you think differently?”

Red shrugged. “You just look agitated, is all. If you have something to do at work I could have done this on my own.”

“I wanted to come, I’m fine.” J.J. steered the car toward the Norfolk Waterside exit. “There’s nothing pressing at work that another agent can’t handle, and the deal on your new place seems to be going well.” He cringed on saying that, as it only reminded him of Arnie Logan, who just might be the reason for Red buying the condo when the money should be going to pay for the girls’ college. Man, was he looking forward to visiting Logan’s car lot.

“Well,” Red wheedled, “with you going to the beach later with Claire, I just thought it was odd you’d make two trips out here—”

“Who told you that?” J.J. broke in. The cars’ tires squealed to a stop before a fast-changing light. Business suits, cell phones pressed to ears, floated in procession across the street while the car idled.

“Did I tell you Claire and I were going to Arnie’s?”

“No. Arnie did. He told me last night at Mick’s.”

J.J. frowned. *God, no. Please don’t tell me you’re hanging out with the guy who’s screwing your wife.* “I thought you hadn’t talked to him lately. That’s what you told Claire.”

“Well...” Red shifted nervously, folding his arms tightly over his chest, as though for protection. “We had a lot of catching up to do.”

I’ll bet. J.J. hoped, for Red’s sake, the evening spiraled into a drunken brawl that left his younger brother the victor. “If you want to talk about something, I’m listening.”

“Just anxious,” Red mumbled. He leaned forward to watch the modest Norfolk skyline pass before them. “I didn’t expect to pick up Dad from his honeymoon with the news that I’m getting divorced.”

“Don’t say anything then, wait ‘til we get home,” J.J. said. “We’ll just trade hugs, let Dad and Lauren give us whatever tacky straw market gifts they got for us, then spend the drive home with them gabbing about midnight buffets and the Elvis impersonator show on the boat.”

Red’s snuffled laughter buoyed him somewhat. “Fine, bro,” he said, clasping J.J.’s knee. “I figure Dad will want to have a family dinner soon, but I’ll think of something, if he mentions it.”

They arrived at Nauticus, the marine center where the cruise ship had already docked. The luxury liner was huge and nearly blocked their view of Portsmouth on the other side of the Elizabeth River. J.J. managed a parking space in the garage across the street, and within minutes both Marbury boys were reunited with their father and stepmother.

Wow. Were it masculine enough to say, J.J. would have remarked how his father “glowed.” He almost didn’t recognize the older man—despite the silver hair, Jake Marbury appeared to have gained back ten years, he looked that much better. Khaki pants and a green Polo nicely set off his tanned skin and bright smile, one J.J. hadn’t seen in a long time.

Or, he realized, maybe he hadn’t noticed lately how positive an affect Lauren had on him.

He embraced them both. Lauren looked quite fetching in a green floral sundress and white sweater—a bit light for the cooling autumn weather, but she didn’t appear bothered by the wind.

“You guys look great,” he told them, and meant it. Wow. To think only weeks ago he’d fantasized of Lauren tipping too far over the ship’s railing.

Lauren’s dark red hair was gathered in a high ponytail with colorful, beaded ties. It bounced as she milled about the small circle of men. “I feel great,” she said. “I just wish Jake hadn’t been so worried about the stores the whole time.” Her lips twisted into a mock frown.

“Now, it wasn’t that much,” Jake chided, nuzzling her ear. “I had plenty to distract me.”

Oy. Okay, so he wasn’t ready to wholly accept this yet. “The stores are fine,” he assured his father. “Just ask Trader Joe’s. We sold both to them while you were gone.”

“Har, har,” Jake said. Lauren’s laughter bounced off the walls.

“Wait here with Red. I’ll bring the car around—”

Lauren stilled him with a hand on his arm. “Oh, could we get something to eat, maybe at the mall? We, ah, skipped breakfast this morning.” She winked.

J.J. felt ready to lose his. “Sure,” he forced out. “I don’t have to be anywhere ‘til this afternoon. Red?”

Red looked suddenly pale. “S’fine, I took a personal day.” He grabbed the elongated handle of Lauren’s rolling suitcase and charged toward the street.

“Is Red okay?” Jake whispered to J.J. as they followed. “He doesn’t look so good now.”

J.J. shrugged. As much as the drive home worried Red, J.J. imagined having to sit through lunch without letting news of his pending divorce slip must be torture.

Well, he’d have to dominate lunch conversation for him. What were big brothers for?

* * * *

Ensnared in a booth in Nordstrom’s restaurant at MacArthur Center, J.J. did his best to keep the chatter light and focused away from Red. Thankfully, he could talk freely and easily about Claire and their plans, much to Jake and Lauren’s delight.

“I’m happy for you, son, really,” Jake said warmly, sipping coffee. “I’d always known Claire could be a success at anything, anywhere, but there’s something to be said for the small town life. She’ll be happy here, and she doesn’t need anymore big city stress.”

Lauren leaned forward on her elbows, chin resting in upturned palms. “Is there going to be another wedding?” she sang.

J.J. laughed. "I don't know. We haven't talked that far ahead. I think she just wants to pass the real estate license exam first, then we'll worry about a marriage license."

Just promise me a wedding at home." Lauren stirred her tea. "Ellie and Sue cheated me by running off to Vegas. I want to help plan a real wedding this time—with a dress and flowers and catering...everything!"

"You just did," J.J. protested, and spied a glance at his brother sitting stiffly next to him. Damn. All this talk of love probably wasn't helping his inner turmoil.

Jake draped an arm around his wife. "I guess I should mention that Lauren is going to set up a bridal registry program through Jake's Organic," he said. "How it works is we'll partner with a few local businesses, like Sue Briscoe for photography, so people can plan everything from one place."

"All I need is a bride, so give me one," Lauren demanded, then smiled at Red. "How about you, Red? Don't you and Char have an anniversary coming up? You could renew your vows..."

That was enough to send Red into an awkward sputtering fit. "Uh, I don't know..." The uncertainty dissolved into nervous chuckling which ended when J.J. pulled him from the booth.

"We're going to get some dessert," he said with decision. "C'mon, Red, they have those cookies the girls like. My treat." They left the honeymooners to prattle amongst themselves, and sauntered to the dessert case where J.J. pretended to study cheesecake slices.

Red leaned into him. "Well, that was smooth of me, wasn't it?"

"You're fine," J.J. murmured back. "Their minds are all over the map. Let's just get something to go and get out of here."

"No, I'm going to tell them now," Red said. "No point in delaying it. They'll learn it soon enough."

But J.J. wasn't listening. Looking beyond the restaurant entrance into Nordstrom's lingerie department, he spotted a familiar figure running her hands over a long, satin gown. When his view was completely unobstructed he saw it was indeed Charlene fondling the nightwear.

Coincidence, and an awkward one. Charlene worked downtown, so it did make sense that she could take a shopping break.

The tall, dark-haired man coming from behind to fondle *her*, however...

J.J. watched the man nibbling Char's neck to her visible delight, and his stomach rolled. It wasn't Arnie who was involved in the break up. To think he had planned to throttle his old friend at his own place of work.

Well, he had a new target now. Red and Char might be separated, but they were still married. That kind of public display was not proper, especially with their father not a few hundred feet away.

"Jay?"

Red's voice was distant and weak. J.J. was surprised by how much space he covered in the few seconds it took to approach the couple. Charlene's face drained of color on seeing him, and the gown fell slack between her stilled fingers. The man regarded J.J. with a cool frown.

"Got a problem, buddy?" he shot at J.J.

"I'm not your buddy, and you're not my brother, who should be the only man kissing my sister-in-law like that." Fists clenched at his sides. He spotted a guard in his peripheral vision, strolling the aisles. It took every bit of willpower not to cold cock this clown into a bank of hanging bras.

The man's face softened, and he nodded. "I see," he said. "Look, I can assure you this—"

"—isn't what it looks like?" J.J. finished. "Enlighten me, then. It looked like you were about to pounce on a married woman." His voice cold and no longer restrained. Several heads within earshot turned.

"J.J., please," Charlene begged. "We were going to let this out in the open." She sighed and looked past him. J.J. turned around to see Red, Jake, and Lauren had gathered there.

"Red, I'm sorry," the man—Charlene's man—said. "I didn't know you all would be here today."

"It's cool, George," Red said, eyes downcast.

"You know this man?" J.J. asked.

DARE TO DREAM

“You knew this was going on?” Jake then asked, bewildered.

“I knew, because I arranged it,” Red said. He looked from face to face, some confused, others serenely guilty. “I wanted Char to find love with a man who could give her what she needed, what I can’t give her anymore.”

“Dad, Jay,” Red swallowed and took a deep breath. “I’m gay.”

Chapter Fourteen

When two o'clock rolled around and J.J. didn't call, Claire tried his home, cell, and work numbers to no avail. Nobody knew where to find him, and quick trips to Jake's Organic and other local hideouts yielded fruitless results. Close to three, she was about to ask Ellie for a ride to Virginia Beach when she found her cousin sitting on the patio, absolutely motionless.

Ellie stretched out on the wicker lounge, one ankle crossed over the other and pressing the portable phone receiver against her hip. She stared down at the floor as though the tiles might bubble and shoot to the ceiling.

Claire choked on her heart. *Oh, God, what happened?* She didn't like that look, and holding a phone only seemed to confirm bad news.

"That was Lauren," Ellie finally said, her words careful. "Jake's in the hospital."

* * * *

They made it to Norfolk in record time, Claire silently thanking all beings divine that the cops were largely absent on the main road from Dareville. Lauren's call had been vague, as Ellie recounted the few details she could glean from their friend's hysterical voice.

"They were having an early lunch and he just collapsed. An ambulance took him to Norfolk General. That's all I know."

Claire disconnected her cell, having finished a quick call to Arnie. "Arnie said he'd stay late, and that he's praying for Jake. I don't know, we'll see about the car, it's not important. I just hope Jake's okay." How terrible for this to happen, right after his honeymoon! She could imagine the pain Lauren endured now, and Red and J.J....

J.J. She could certainly forgive his neglect of her in light of this event. He needed to be with family, but she wanted to be

with him. She wanted to believe J.J. thought of her as family, too. She had plenty of love and moral support to give, and hoped it would be enough to see everybody though whatever news came.

They found a decent parking spot near the emergency room, where Claire discovered the Marburys huddled in one corner. Charlene was there, too, along with a man she didn't recognize. Claire guessed their relationship was more than friendly, considering the man had his hand on Charlene's knee, squeezing gently.

The reason for the breakup of Red's marriage, or the result of it? She would ask later. This time was about Jake.

J.J. looked up and dashed over to her. Relief washed over Claire as he drew her into a tight embrace. She was welcome, a good sign.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"No, I am." J.J.'s voice was raspy. "I should have called you..."

Claire shushed him. "It doesn't matter. I'm here now." She reluctantly pulled away. J.J.'s eyes were raw from crying and her heart melted to see him. She was reminded of the last time she'd seen him like this—just before she left Dareville...and him, behind.

She promised she wouldn't make him cry like that again.

"How is he?"

J.J. was grim. "We don't know yet. They carted him off somewhere on a stretcher and we can't get anybody to talk to us. Damn it all!" He seethed. "He's not an old man, Claire. He takes unbelievably good care of himself. How could he have a heart attack?"

"Is that what it was?" Claire asked.

"It's my fault," came a muffled, mournful wail. Red sat in between Lauren and Ellie, his face buried in his hands, shoulders heaving with heavy sobs as both woman tried to calm him. "I killed him. Told him I was gay, and he clutched his heart and fell to the ground."

"Red, you know it didn't happen as dramatically as that," Lauren said over her own tears. "And we don't even know it was a heart attack, but if we can agree on anything it's that you did

nothing to cause this.” She rubbed him from shoulder to shoulder and down his back. “Nobody is to blame here.”

J.J. strolled slowly away and Claire followed. She didn’t like the suspicion clouding his features. “What are you thinking?” she whispered. Surely he couldn’t be considering that Red bore some responsibility for this.

“That maybe it was all too much for him?” J.J. posed, his voice very low. “With Lauren, I was concerned before that Dad might not be able to keep up with her in bed. He comes back from a week of non-stop sex and fattening cruise food to find his daughter-in-law fooling around and his son is gay. Hell, *I* almost passed out when Red admitted it.”

“You shouldn’t think like this,” Claire admonished. “Like you said, Jake is healthy, and you don’t really know what’s wrong here. A fit man at the top of his game can still get sick and it will have nothing to do with sex or shock. Sometimes things just happen.” She hated to sound brusque, but she didn’t want grief to color J.J.’s perception of his family. Worst case scenario, she didn’t want to see family discord crowded around Jake’s grave.

She shuddered to think about it.

“Did you know?” he asked suddenly.

“Know what?”

“About Red?” His eyes turned cold. “The way you questioned him at the house the other day...I thought it odd.”

“I didn’t know Red was gay, really. It’s been fifteen years since I’ve seen him, too.” In a way, this was the truth, for she had only her memories and experiences to rely on now. “But, I did know about Arnie.”

“Arnie is gay?” J.J. shook his head and looked back at his family. The women had managed to calm Red, whose head was now buried in Ellie’s neck. “Impossible,” he said. “Arnie dated your cousin for nearly two years after college. They even talked about marriage.”

“Now you know why it didn’t happen,” Claire said with a mild chuckle. A poor attempt at levity, so she added quickly, “Actually, I’m not sure what Arnie is, or if he’s assigned a label to himself. Seems, though, he prefers men to women, but it just

wasn't something he chose to advertise. I guess he didn't want to put Ellie through the pain of his identity crisis."

"And yet she married Brady Garriston," J.J. muttered. "Who knows where he's been?"

Claire snickered. She could name one place with certainty. "She wasn't that person two years ago. Just like we aren't the fumbling teenagers from prom night." She dared a hand cuffed around his bicep and was glad when he didn't flinch. "Are you mad at me?" she asked softly.

He shook his head again. "Why didn't you tell me, though?"

"Was it my place to?"

J.J. thought a moment. "I suppose not. Man, just when you think you know everything...I don't even know my own brother. I spent more time being jealous of him that I forgot to talk to him."

"There's time now."

J.J. squeezed her hand and her heart lifted. Fingers now entwined, they walked back to the waiting area and took chairs opposite everybody.

"Red, you okay?" J.J. asked, and added after his brother silently nodded, "Dad's going to be okay. Just keep believing that in your heart, and know that nothing you did or said caused this."

Red sniffled. "Trying."

"Good." J.J. looked around. "We can discuss the hows and whys of all this later. First we need to find a doctor and see what's going on."

Nobody argued with that. J.J. excused himself from the group, leaving Claire to take Red's sticky hand. She glanced nervously at Charlene and her gentleman friend, who shuffled in his seat, looking very much the outsider.

"H-How long...?" Claire began.

Charlene swallowed. "George and I have been...together about six months now. With Red and me, we've talked and agreed it's always been an issue, it just hadn't manifested itself until recently," she said.

"It's all pretty much amicable," Red added. "We're still friends, always will be. We have children, and that doesn't change."

“Oh, God. The girls!” Lauren cried. “Did anybody think to—?”

Charlene raised a hand. “I called my mother on the drive here, and she has them now.” A collective sense of relief followed.

“Do the girls know, about all this?” Claire asked. “I mean, not about Jake—”

Red sighed. “Not yet. There never seems to be a good time to say anything to anybody. It’s not the kind of news you give to your father while he’s planning his wedding.”

“They should know, Red, and soon.”

Claire jumped at the sound of J.J.’s voice. How long had he been listening? She didn’t turn around, but sensed his presence hovering over her. She felt comforted by his closeness, warmed by his gentle touch to her shoulder.

“I finally found a doctor,” he continued. “Dad’s fine. It wasn’t a heart attack, just angina. I guess he was a bit overtired, and maybe overfed. Bad timing, is all.”

Lauren smiled through her tears. “To be honest, not all the buffets agreed with me, either.” She leaned into Claire’s supportive shoulder. “Can I see him?”

“Sure. We all can.” J.J. crooked his head toward the exam rooms. “He’s just getting some prescriptions.”

As one, the group stood and made their way to see Jake. Claire brought up the rear but was stopped by J.J. He took her into his arms and squeezed tight.

“I’m so happy he’s going to be okay,” Claire said, resting her chin against him.

“I’m happy you came,” he whispered back. “That means a lot to me.”

“Anything for you, and all the Marbury men. I love you, Jay,” Claire said. She slid her hands down his arms and gently pushed away. “I don’t think I’ve said it much since I’ve been back, but the feeling never left my heart. I did so much to repress it, now I see I can’t do it anymore.”

“I love you, too, Claire. Always have.” His eyes misted with unshed tears. “You know, I saw Lauren sitting there, devastated to think she might lose Dad.”

Claire sniffled. She never wanted to feel that way about J.J.

"She loves him," J.J. said, resolute. He sounded happy to say it.

"She does."

He nodded. "Good. He deserves that kind of love, and so do you. I intend to give it to you."

"Yes." Joy radiated from her.

"And I want us to be open with each other, too. No secrets like Red kept from Char all these years. I know he loves her, but he lost ten, fifteen years of his life because he couldn't be honest with himself. I lost more than that when you left the first time." His voice broke and he sighed. "No more."

"No more pain," she affirmed. "We have a lot of catching up to do." *And healing.*

"Okay." J.J. wrapped his arm around her waist and steered her toward the nurses' station. Jake stood among his family, preparing to leave.

"I'll take Red, Jake, and Lauren home. I think we can all squeeze in," Ellie offered. "Jay, Claire still needs to pick up her car, if that's okay."

"No prob. I'll hang onto the luggage. See y'all back at the house. I'll call when we leave Arnie's lot."

After a strong hug from his father, J.J. set off with Claire. "On the way, while we're being honest," J.J. looked over at her with concern, "I want to talk about that list of yours." He paused, and Claire could sense what was coming next.

"You don't feel comfortable with some of the items on the list," she concluded, not as a question.

"Bungee jumping isn't my style, sorry."

"But that's not what you meant."

"Right." J.J. pulled out of the parking lot, pausing at the edge of the main road. He looked at Claire. "I hope you're not mad. I don't want you to feel like you have no freedom. It's just that...the thought of...sharing you..."

Claire watched him struggle to find the right words, and decided he'd suffered enough. "Before you comment any further, maybe you should see the latest draft." She pulled the paper from her pocket and handed it to him. "I think you may be relieved to read it."

LEIGH ELLWOOD

J.J. unfolded the note paper, read the contents, and offered a half-smile. “I am,” he said, “though I notice the bungee jumping is still here.”

Chapter Fifteen

J.J. had to admit, the prospect of attending one of the Garristons' parties unnerved him a bit. In light of recent conversations with Claire, accepting an invitation seemed akin to jumping from the frying pan into a nearby bubbly fry vat full of naked people. Of course, she did her best to remain enigmatic about this particular shindig.

The purpose of this gathering hadn't been made clear to him, and as he knocked on the door he wondered if his simple black slacks and white turtleneck bordered on too dressy.

He stepped into the foyer, guided by Ellie, and relaxed. The spacious room before him was thick with people, all clothed. Not a dog collar or chicken feather in sight, but the night was young. He promised himself if things got too weird he'd have Claire by the hand and out of the house in a heartbeat.

He spotted his father and Lauren by the buffet, chatting with Brady's young friend. What was his name again? *Jared*, right. The Web guy.

"Jay, over here." Jake waved him over. He looked so much better now. Taking it easy and keeping up with his medicine really improved Jake's appearance. J.J. was glad, too, that Lauren had insisted on taking the bulk of the store's work for the next week.

He embraced them both as though he hadn't seen them in a month, despite it having only been a day. He felt more comfortable with Lauren's role in his father's life, and was happy for his father's sake. Lauren no longer needed to prove herself to him—she loved his father.

"I can't believe nobody told me they were having a post-nup shower for you guys," he grouched.

"Probably didn't want you planning it." Lauren winked.

"Ho, ho."

“Have you met Jared Wilton?” Jake asked.

J.J. nodded and took Jared’s hand. “We met at the wedding, yes. You’re doing Brady’s PR and Web site.”

Jared flashed a brilliant, shy smile. “Mainly just the site. Keeping it updated, helping out with the blog and monitoring the message board. That kind of thing.”

“Nice. Hadn’t realized that could be a full-time job.”

“It keeps me busy,” Jared said, “but I do some freelance writing, too.”

“He’s been working for Red at the paper,” Jake supplied.

Here Jared shuffled his feet, his smile fading into an embarrassed grin. “Yeah, a bit,” he finally confirmed, and J.J. watched for reactions. Lauren bit her lip and raised her eyebrows, while Jake didn’t appear to notice anything. J.J. could easily read his father’s wife’s mind and agreed with her silent assessment: maybe Jared was doing more than writing for his brother, or at least wished to be.

An unbidden image flashed in his mind, and J.J. sought to expel it by squeezing his eyes shut. No dice, on to Plan B. “Well, best of luck in your endeavors,” he told Jared, shaking the young man’s hand again. “I’m going to find Claire. Know where I should look first?”

Lauren pointed toward the kitchen. “The bar’s set up over there,” she said. “She was helping Ellie earlier.”

“Good enough, that was going to be my second stop anyway.” He needed to hurry, too. The ghostly visage of Red engaged in powerful liplock with this wiry, black-haired youth gained a strength only alcohol and an ass grab could repel. Sure, he’d done the same himself, but envisioning family in action was too much.

He got the second of his goals almost immediately. He found her leaning over the kitchen counter, rinsing a martini glass, her shapely ass raised and looking luscious in a short black dress that ended high above her thighs. Cupping her cheeks in both hands, he caressed her skin and lowered his body over her curved back. He planted a kiss on the fine black netting covering her spine.

“Hello, sailor,” he murmured. “Buy me a drink?”

“Oh, I can do much more than that. ‘Bout damn time you asked.” Bubbly laughter floated over him, and J.J. reeled back on seeing he had accosted Sue Briscoe by mistake.

Sue turned fully around and braced the heels of her hands against the granite counter top. Her lower lip pushed out in a playful pout. “Aw, come on,” she wheedled. “I won’t bite, only on request.”

“Yeah, come on, Jay.” Claire sidled up to him, brushing her thighs over his hip until she stood behind him. She bumped against his ass and nudged him forward, causing him to land on a stretched out Sue right as she flipped back over.

Claire nuzzled her chin into his shoulder blade. J.J. sensed by the sharp tang of vodka stinging his nose that Claire’s party began a bit early. “Mmm, this is nice,” she purred, grinding into his backside. Each thrust sent a pulsing sensation through his sac and into his cock, which hardened against Sue’s ass. Sue took advantage of his gentle captivity by wriggling her behind, rubbing him to a severely wanting ache.

“You know...” Claire’s hands linked around his waist and slid down to his bulge. She then gripped Sue on either side and steered them into a sensuous, synchronized rhythm. “That one item I added to my list, that you cringed at?”

“The one I’m still cringing at? Ooh.” He winced at Claire’s next thrust, still skittish at the prospect of being fucked in the ass with a strap-on toy. No matter that he enjoyed their light ass play and the rimming Claire expertly administered, sticking phallic objects thicker than a finger into his rectum lacked a certain sex appeal in his mind.

“What?” Claire continued to hump him. “You don’t mind doing me that way.”

“Neither do you. That’s what makes the arrangement so agreeable,” J.J. said, then paused with a crook of his neck toward Sue. “Do I get to do her while you’re doing me?”

People continued to mill around the kitchen, chatting and laughing. J.J.’s question went largely unnoticed, prompting only a mild snicker from a lovely black woman who patted Claire’s ass on the way out and advised her to “ride him hard, cowgirl.”

“Maybe.” Claire hedged, grasping his hard-on and easing him away, much to Sue’s audible disappointment. “Depends on whether we could find some privacy.”

“I have no objections.” Sue performed a full frontal assault now and crushed her breasts against his now pounding heart. She was close enough to kiss and brushed her lips against his collarbone to that effect.

This was getting to be too much for J.J., whose cock was to the point of stone. There would be a new number to record on Moh’s Hardness Scale soon. His arousal hadn’t gone unnoticed, either, particularly by Sue, who seemed to take great pleasure in her deliciously slow torture of him. So close she could be in his pants, she rocked her hips against his erection, making him ache to be inside...her?

J.J. smiled. Sue was undeniably sexy, but he wanted only to slide into another beautiful, warm body for the evening. Just as he didn’t want to share Claire with other women, so he had no desire to share himself.

He kissed Sue’s proffered cheek. “Certainly you have better offers. Where’s your lesser half?” He enjoyed hearing Sue’s cackle at that.

“Upstairs, enjoying the alternate hors d’oeuvres.” She crooked her head upward, presumably the very room above them was where Cal enjoyed his smoke.

He turned to Claire. “You up for a little alternative activity?”

Claire made a face. “Not that kind, no. I’ve had enough of that to last a lifetime.”

A waiter rounded the kitchen bearing a tray of filled champagne flutes. J.J. took two and motioned Claire toward the door. “Let’s go think of a Plan B.”

“Good enough.”

Paper lanterns glowing different colors lined the screened-in patio, where Ellie held court among a small throng of partygoers. J.J. and Claire approached slowly, sipping from their glasses, when J.J. felt himself tugged deeper into the circle.

“I want you to meet somebody,” Claire said, and soon J.J. was face to throat with a tall, swarthy *paisan* in a shiny black jacket. His bright blue shirt was unbuttoned at the top, revealing

a silver religious medal nested in a thick tuft of black chest hair. He smelled of a cologne so strong J.J. swore he could see the vapors haloing the stranger like an Old Spice aura.

“Dom’s the one who saved my bare ass in New York, literally, and took me to the airport,” Claire had been saying while J.J. pumped the man’s meaty hand. “And that’s his son, Robbie...and this is Lupe.”

Her voice dwindled at that last introduction, and J.J. turned to fully appreciate the Latin beauty standing shyly to one side. She wore a body hugging red cocktail dress, and her long, black hair flowed over her shoulders and down her face, leaving her to constantly brush it away. She offered a small smile and gestured to the more animated young woman—nearly her twin—beside her.

“And this is—” Lupe began, her voice small.

“Lola Santiago y DeJesus,” finished the flirty girl with the flashing brown eyes. She took J.J.’s hand and held it aloft, as though inspecting it for telltale signs of marital commitment. She seemed to like that she saw no obstacles in her way. “Forgive me, I dabble in palmistry and can’t help but look,” she added. “I can tell by the lines in your hand that you are quite successful. What is it you do, *Señor*...?”

Claire linked her arm in his. “He dates me, and yes, he’s very successful at it,” she said with confidence, and J.J. felt his heart lift. It was nice to hear Claire acknowledge them as a couple, though they had clearly left dating in high school and moved on to better things.

Lola only quirked an eyebrow and stared at Claire. “You are the one who worked at the firm, right? With Lupe—”

A quick smack to the shoulder, followed by a terse exchange in what sounded like Portuguese, and the sentence went unfinished. “Robbie, I think Lola can have another soda,” Lupe said coldly, glaring at her sister. Wordlessly, Robbie emerged from behind them and escorted Lola gently but forcibly to the bar.

“I want a real drink,” J.J. heard her complain. “I’m not a child.”

That you are not, thought J.J. It was difficult not to watch the sway of Lola’s rounded ass in her tight minidress as she

walked away. He turned back to his group to see others watched with varying degrees of longing.

"I am sorry about my sister," Lupe said, eyes cast down. "She is a bit...untamed. But she's not yet twenty-one. I've been looking out for her since we were younger."

"Hey, no biggie," Dom offered heartily, and his deep chuckle brought some levity. "I mean, you live in Rio and New York, the two wildest cities on the planet, and you have to expect an exciting personality's gonna shine through, eh?"

J.J. looked at Lupe, wilting under the stench of Dom's cologne. She'd come from the same environs, but definitely she was nothing like her sister.

"Anyway," Dom continued, "don't you worry about Lola. I'm sure living in Dareville will calm her down."

"It hasn't me," Ellie joked.

"Oh, really?" Dom offered a crooked elbow to her and Lupe. "Well, how about we get your drinks refilled and you can tell me more? Claire, great to see you. Mr. Marbury, take care of this girl, a'right?"

"You got it." He gave the trio a wide enough berth to leave, and realization dawned when Lupe glanced back in their direction. The hint of sadness in her smile was almost apologetic toward Claire.

Lupe.

Right.

This was the girl from the playpen apartment, the girl used to lure Claire into that clandestine peepshow.

"Are you okay?" he asked Claire. She was clingier now, grasping his waist.

"Fine," she answered quickly.

"You want to talk about it?"

She shook her head and pulled away. "No, I'm good. It was weird seeing Lupe again, but I'm okay with it. It wasn't her fault. I just hope I don't make her uncomfortable, since we're going to be living in the same town. I mean, it's not like New York where you can live a lifetime and never see each other."

"Well, if you do make her edgy, I'm sure your friend's son would gladly ease any worries." J.J. nudged Claire to look to one side, where Robbie had a protective arm around the young

Brazilian girl. Lupe seemed to fidget in his proximity, as though feeling ambivalent of Robbie's protective nature.

The look on Robbie's face, however, was simpler to interpret. Smitten with a capital S.

"C'mon." Claire tugged his attention back to her. "Let's go back up to my room. You can help me sort my holy cards."

J.J. laughed. "Sort your what?"

"Come on, you've seen *Caddyshack*, haven't you. It's the line the Irish girl used to lure Danny to her room for sex."

"Ah, right. You're in a mood, aren't you?" Good thing said mood was frisky. J.J. felt evidence of it as Claire goosed his rear.

"I've been on a Chevy Chase kick lately, don't ask why." Claire shrugged and offered an impish grin.

"Well, if Cal's still upstairs, maybe we can get some Cheech and Chong action, too." J.J. winked. "Just don't let Dad see us, alright?"

As it turned out, Jake and Lauren were too engrossed in conversation with Charlene and her new squeeze to notice J.J. and Claire crossing the living room.

"She brought *him* to my dad's party?" he hissed in Claire's ear.

Claire shrugged. "Ellie told me Red wanted them here. Figured since everything's out in the open now, we should all get used to it.

J.J. felt his stomach flutter—in theory that sounded fine, but maybe Red should have let everybody have a few days to digest. Char did look amazing, though, in a short green dress that accentuated her form. Her laughter carried easily over the crowd, and J.J. realized it had been a while since he recalled seeing her so happy.

Like a weight's been taken off her chest, he thought. A two-hundred something pound gay weight with red hair. J.J. could imagine his brother felt equally relieved about his secret being revealed, too. Still, J.J. wasn't sure how long it would take to become accustomed to seeing Char with another man.

Or Red, for that matter. He and Claire had just ascended the stairs when the thought touched his mind at the same time his brother crossed his line of vision. Red staggered out of one room, clearly having sampled the alternate *hors d'œuvres*, and

pitched forward through another open door, Jared Wilton on his heels.

Claire seemed to read his mind and grasped his arm. "Only at one of Brady's parties," she said, rolling her eyes.

"It's like an HBO movie in here," J.J. said. "My sister in law is downstairs with her boyfriend, and my brother is upstairs with his...can this get any more bizarre?"

"Hey," Claire laughed. "You weren't here when they were all downstairs, carrying on like old friends. Jake and Lauren looked a bit taken aback at first, but I think the over feeling of relief got to them. It's cool."

"It's weird."

"Yeah, buddy." Claire sighed. "This is crazy, this is crazy, this is—"

J.J. broke in, "Now that's not from *Caddyshack*. I know that much."

"Close enough."

The walk to Claire's room passed in slow motion. Twined couples lined one side of the hallway—some talking, others kissing—while each open room offered a preview of more explicit activity. What J.J. presumed to be Brady's office reeked of marijuana smoke. A small knot of people to one side passed around a bong while Cal lounged on a far sofa. Sue, her blouse unbuttoned, worked on Cal's shirt with nimble fingers as another woman—African-American, slender with long braids, face obscured in Cal's crotch, fumbled with his belt. Though J.J. couldn't see the woman, he could tell by the hair and style of dress that she was Cal's new lead singer.

Mixing work and pleasure. J.J. doubted, however, Cal would call his band work. He appeared to enjoy it too much.

"I thought this wasn't that kind of party," J.J. murmured.

"It's not," Claire said. "But these are those kind of partygoers. The naughty bits stay upstairs."

Cal spotted them and beckoned, but J.J. pushed forward. He didn't want to look in the room opposite, but morbid curiosity got the better of him. To J.J.'s relief, Red was clothed, yet lying on a full-sized bed with his long legs draped over one end. Jared straddled him at the hips, grinding down and jouncing the mattress. From his vantage point, J.J. could see his brother

staring at the ceiling with true bliss and a smile as wide as he was tall.

Oo-kay, too much information here. Moving right along...

Claire's room, thank the angels, was empty. J.J. locked the door behind them—there would be no sharing or audience members tonight—and fell back against the mattress, gathering Claire in his arms.

"You okay?" she asked, and he knew what she meant.

"I will be," he said. "It'll take some adjustment, but I want Red to be happy. He seemed that way a minute ago, but just because I want him happy doesn't mean I have to witness every little detail."

They laughed together and J.J. took the advantage, claiming her mouth in a gentle yet searing kiss.

"C'mon." He lay flat and beckoned Claire to sit astride him. "Let's forget about Lupe and Red for a while. It's just us now, and all I want to do is feel myself inside you."

Claire looked down at him longingly, her eyes on his as she rocked over his growing erection. "I would love that," she breathed, "and more than anything I'd love to feel just you."

J.J. raised an eyebrow. "No barriers?" When she nodded, he asked, "You sure about this?" He had seen Claire take pills during their recent courtship, though he was well aware such birth control methods were not one hundred percent effective. To suggest doing away with extra insurance implied a whole new level of commitment.

He was willing to take it. The idea, too, of a beautiful hybrid of Walker and Marbury genes growing in Claire's belly warmed his heart.

"Is a baby on your list?" he asked.

Claire smiled and shrugged. "Not immediately, but I won't turn one away," she said. "I don't mind trying, either."

The clothes couldn't have come off any quicker following that assertion. Shirts, pants, socks, and underthings puddle the far corner of Claire's room. Claire, now completely naked, stretched languorously atop the bed's comforter as J.J. hovered close. Starting just under her chin, he kissed a trail down her neck, then detoured across her collarbone and down to capture a

hardened nipple. J.J. delighted in Claire's hissing reaction as he nibbled and tugged the bud to its full thickness.

Around the areola and under the swell of her breast he kissed, wavering his head from side to side to adjust to Claire shifting on the bed. He tongued her navel, rimming the edge then delving low for a playful tease. Three more kisses south brought him to the trimmed border of her cleft.

Claire eased her thighs apart from under him, and J.J. settled into a nice cradle before her pussy, his feet dangling off the edge of the bed. "Please," he heard Claire beg, "I'm dying here."

J.J. smiled into her glistening, puffy labia. Passion swelled her and released her irresistible musk. He let out a slow, heated breath over her pussy lips and enjoyed the resulting twitch. Claire's ass arched off the bed slightly in an offering to him.

"Okay, no more teasing," he said. Claire needed to release and he wanted to taste her badly. One broad stroke up her slit jolted Claire's body, and J.J. continued gently, gazing up her curvy landscape to discern her response to every lick and nibble.

Soon he became lost in his own desires and he devoured her, sucking in each of her soft pussy lips, then pulling her swollen clit carefully between his own pursed lips. His tongue lovingly swathed the bud as J.J. explored her slick channel with crooked fingers. When he found the right spot he massaged the inner wall in the same side to side motion his body rocked to relieve his aching erection.

Claire thrashed, calling his name and crying other unintelligible curses. Release seemed imminent.

Still pumping his fingers, J.J. lifted his head and licked her from his lips. "You taste so good, babe. I could do this all night."

"Yes," Claire groaned.

"What do you say? All night?"

"Oh, God." She laughed. "Yes."

"Every night?"

"Uh-huh."

"Marry me."

"Yes! God, yes!" Claire's orgasm shook the bed. J.J. bowed back to her pussy and tongued her clit in circular motion, pushing her further into her ecstasy. When she waved finally

crested and died he carefully raised her hips to swath her soaked pussy lips and poke lower to rim her anus. The move brought a surprised twitch from Claire, but J.J. wasn't about to explore that territory until his own satisfaction was met.

In a single bound his palm braced the mattress by Claire's shoulders, and he lifted himself over her. His cock was so hard it didn't require further guidance beyond rotating his hips down into her. The bulging rod quickly connected with Claire and pushed easily into her tight, wet warmth.

"Ohh." Every time felt like the first with Claire. How could he have been so foolish to let her go away all those years ago? Since seeing her at the wedding, he had come to understand the importance of happiness, and why he hadn't any in her absence. He could see why loved ones lived the way they did now—his father with Lauren, his brother with his freedom to explore his true sexual feelings.

He and Claire. This made him happy and it wasn't difficult to see that Claire shared the sentiment. Sheer bliss flickered in her smile, and she gazed adoringly at him.

"I love you," she whispered without hesitation.

"I love you."

"Harder."

J.J. complied, thrusting faster until sweat beaded his back and his arm muscles spasmed. He could feel his balls slapping her with greater force, the orgasm building with each hit.

His release was explosive—pure liquid fire screaming through every artery, and his cock as he filled her. This had to be the most incredible orgasm he'd ever experienced. Maybe Claire's acceptance of his proposal stimulated him, or perhaps the illicitness of making love in a house full of mostly unsuspecting people added to the thrill. Whatever the reason, J.J. saw it merely as the beginning of a life of amazing love, and sex.

He collapsed against her, panting and sticky, his cock still twittering for life in her pussy. "That...was the best."

Claire kissed him and stroked his shoulders. "You do know I was saying yes to marrying you, right? That wasn't a standard, oh God yes sexual thing."

“It wasn’t?” J.J. turned playful. “Well, I guess I’m not trying hard enough.” Encouraged by her giggling, he ducked lower and prepared for seconds.

He was stroking her pussy gently when an anguished cry sounded from the other side of the door. The voice was muffled, but loud enough to be discerned as female and not happy at all.

Claire bolted upright. “What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know.” Fear gripped J.J.’s throat then and strangled the wind away. Could that have been Lauren? *No, not Dad again...*

A sharp rap at the door startled them both. “Hey, Claire,” Cal called. “You need to get downstairs real quick.”

Chapter Sixteen

Had she known what, rather who, awaited her at the party, Claire might have spared a few seconds to conceal the evidence of having just been fucked. A quick finger comb, spritzing on some cologne to mask the scent of sex lingering on her skin...could have and should have usurped by one fretful word from her lover's lips.

"Dad."

If that scream was related to Jake's recent medical concerns, then to hell with appearances. Odd, though, that Cal called for her and not J.J. Surely he saw the both of them pass the hall to her room.

She touched the bottom of the stairs and spied the outer fringes of the party. Surprise, but not horror, appeared to be the consensual emotion. Good news, perhaps, or not so bad news depending on the perception. Maybe Jake wasn't the reason for this sudden downturn of the party atmosphere.

Turning the corner, Claire nearly lost her balance and fell back against Cal and J.J., who'd been on her heels. "What is it? What's wrong?" J.J.'s voice held a controlled panic that quickly spiked when he looked at her.

She turned back toward the living room. On the far end, Lupe cowered in a defiant-looking Robbie's embrace, her sister behind him. In the eye of the storm, at least an arm's length of everyone in the room, stood Gladstone.

Stoney. Well, that explained the chill in an otherwise warm place.

Gladstone caught sight of Claire and smiled phony camaraderie. "Claire, there you are," he said. "I was just telling your cousin-in-law how much we've missed representing his needs."

Brady folded his arms and nodded forward, but stalled after a gentle touch to the shoulder from Ellie. “And I was about to inform Mr. Gladstone that I’m perfectly happy with my new firm,” he retorted evenly. Claire sensed the smoke within him, and his frustration over restraining his displeasure. It was time to intervene, as she could see Dom looming in the distance, ready to pounce.

“Mr. Gladstone,” she stepped forward and gestured to the now empty sunroom, “I helped plan this party and I know you weren’t on the guest list—”

“My apologies.” Gladstone’s voice was so well-oiled Claire could hear the hiss in the last syllable. “This was sort of a last minute trip. I had a few days of vacation time and thought to myself how nice it would be to tour Virginia’s wine country.”

“Dare’s Destiny Vineyards is about twenty minutes north of here. I’ll be glad to draw you a map.”

Gladstone carried on as though she hadn’t spoken. “And I realized, too, that my good friend Armand has never been this way, either. Right, Armand?”

At this, a tall, pockmarked man with receding dark hair turned from inspecting a shelf of Brady’s music awards. He smiled, showing no teeth.

“Armand is with the INS,” Gladstone offered wickedly, “and he loves his work. You can imagine how challenging it is to pull somebody like that from his desk for a few days. But, I promised to make it worth his time.”

“Indeed.” Claire’s stomach rolled. She didn’t have to check Lupe to know her reaction. Gladstone was a disgrace to his profession, yes, but prestige and money allow his words more weight than poor Lupe’s. Never mind that her affairs might be in order.

The crowd seemed to hang on every word of this drama. “Let’s talk in here, *alone*,” she added after sensing the rest of the party wanted to follow. Claire knew she’d put off the inevitable long enough, but never dreamed her former boss would dare to make a personal, threatening appearance.

To J.J. she said, “Look after Lupe and Lola, and keep an eye on that INS guy, if that’s who Stoney really says he is.”

"I'm coming with you," J.J. insisted. Behind him, Cal nodded as though to imply the same.

"I'll be fine. I need to do this. Right now Lupe needs the support." Mentally she prepared to tick one more item off her list, *Confront boss*.

Reluctantly, J.J. conceded, and Claire slid the glass door shut behind her. She smiled as Ellie drew the curtains closed from the other side to give them privacy. Seconds later, the party could be heard resurrecting to an excited murmur.

Claire whirled back to Gladstone, who'd made himself comfortable on a lounge chair. "I can see why Garriston makes a second home here," he said, gazing through the glass walls at the night sky. "Country living does have its appeal."

"It's peaceful, and friendly," Claire agreed, "and free of city vermin."

Gladstone's features sharpened. "Had you bothered to respond to any of the firm's messages, Ms. Walker, I can assure you that it wouldn't have been necessary for me to come all the way down here. Do you have any idea of the mess you've put us in, the clients left unsatisfied and ready to mutiny? Your disappearance cost us a \$25 million dollar contract!"

"Had you decided not to treat me like a high class call girl, I can assure you that wouldn't have happened, because I'd still be in New York," she shot back.

"A devoted player doesn't walk away from the team in the ninth inning, Claire," Gladstone said. "What you did was unprofessional."

"What!" *Are you that delusional, man?* "You all but prostituted me and Lupe to entertain clients!" she cried. "I would think you were smart enough to know my leaving your playpen was an indication of my resignation from the firm."

"Your unofficial resignation cost me my foreign corresponding secretary and my personal driver, and it's left us having to explain your absence to some very powerful people." Gladstone rose slowly, deliberately and reminiscent of a movie villain about to convey some dramatic revelation.

"Well, let me make it official, then. I quit. If anyone asks why, tell them I wanted a change of scenery."

“Enjoy it, sweetheart. I’ll see that you never work for another law firm in New York. You’ll be lucky to defend hicks who can’t curb their dogs on public streets.”

“I don’t intend to come back. I have plans that don’t include you or any of your pals. I’m not afraid of you, either. Now get out of this house,” Claire snapped. “I don’t care if I get severance or not. I’ll gladly forfeit it if I never have to see your face again.”

Gladstone shrugged, slightly amused. “Very well. Maybe you aren’t scared, but I dare say Lupe looked more than a bit anxious on meeting Armand.”

A wave of nausea crested in Claire’s gut. To think the man would stoop so low to keep his perverted secrets. “I don’t think she’d say anything to incriminate you, Gladstone,” Claire said evenly. “She just wants a good life for herself and her sister. And as you seem to have assured us all, who would believe anything she has to say over your word?”

“You did. Dominic did. His nitwit son, your ditzzy cousin, and her has-been rock star husband.” Gladstone paused slightly, but picked up again before Claire could protest. “You can imagine the consequences should anybody credible happen to catch on. That’s why Armand and I are here to offer Lupe and her sister first class tickets back to Rio.”

“You can’t do that,” Claire whispered hoarsely. “They’re in the country legally, and I can still practice law in New York. I’ll fight you—”

“Claire?”

Claire startled at Ellie’s gentle voice. Her cousin had poked through the curtain and a narrow slit in the sliding door. “Claire?” she repeated. “The ceremony’s about to begin. We need you up front.”

“Ceremony?” Gladstone asked, reading Claire’s mind. What had her cousin planned?

“The wedding ceremony,” Ellie corrected. “This wasn’t just a party you crashed.” With that, Ellie opened the curtains to reveal a more organized gathering.

Guests lined the walls, filled champagne glasses in hand. In the center of the living room stood Dom with either arm linked

around Lupe's and Lola's. Next to each girl stood a man—Robbie to Lupe's left, and J.J. to Lola's right.

Claire wanted to cringe. She didn't like how Lola eyed J.J., like a starving cat ready to pounce on a box of kibble. What calmed her quickly was the sight of Red standing opposite the group, staid in a black jacket and holding a Bible.

They've got to be kidding! Would Gladstone buy this?

She caught Ellie's eye and bit her lip, hoping Gladstone didn't see her. Ellie maintained her poker face and ushered them inside.

"You're more than welcome to stick around," she offered Gladstone. "You and your friend. I'll admit, it's a rather informal gathering, but the brides insisted on simplicity."

Claire clearly heard Lola snort at that.

"You cannot be serious." Gladstone stormed past them into the living room, taking in the scene with obvious disgust. "You expect us to believe this farce?"

"Believe what you wish," Red said and pulled a folded paper from his Bible. "I have a set of licenses right here for these two happy couples. Sir?" He tried to hand them to Armand, but the older man waved them away.

"Stoney." He set down his untouched champagne flute, "there is nothing we can do here. We should go." Eyes shifting from side to side, he backed to the foyer.

"What? Armand, it's a bluff. Seriously." Gladstone cracked with panic, but Armand would hear no more. He was out the door, leaving Gladstone to sneer back at the gathered crowd.

"I don't want to see any of you in my town again," he spat.

"Yes, we know." Claire rolled her eyes. "You'll see us in Hell first. Save us some seats."

"And maybe Armand will have the lead in *The Producers* there, too," Cal called after him.

Gladstone's eyes widened at that. In a huff he barreled out of the house, which remained still until the distant slam of a car door sent the crowd to jubilant laughter.

Claire hugged J.J., easing him away from Lola. "I'll take it from here," she told the Brazilian beauty.

"Sorry about that," J.J. said. "Jared was going to stand here, but she grabbed me."

Lola harrumphed, unapologetic. "Well, you're cuter. And straighter."

"And mine." Claire then turned to Cal, who was fighting off Sue and Ellie. "*The Producers*? What's that about?"

"It's about these two scam artists who decide to produce a musical about Hitler—"

"Cal!"

Cal laughed. "Your boss was bluffing us," he said. "Armand is an actor. We wouldn't have known for sure had Sue not recognized him from the play when she saw it in New York, just after she met Brady that night."

"Swear to God. He was the third Nazi from the right." Sue held up a hand in mock salute. "And when Cal started asking questions about immigration, we knew the guy was a fake."

"Nice." For a city-slick lawyer, Stoney had a lot to learn. Claire had to wonder what the firm had on Armand to rope him into this charade.

"Even if he was the real deal," Dom put in, "we came prepared." He took the blank marriage licenses from Red. "Like my Miss Ginny always said, take a sweater when you go out, because it can get cold fast. Always good to keep a few things in the pockets for emergencies."

"Marriage license applications, Dom?" Claire challenged.

Dom shrugged and grinned. That was as good as it would get, Claire supposed.

"Well, I'm so happy everything is going to be okay," Claire said. A quick glance at Robbie, however, told her that he seemed disappointed in the turn of events. He truly wanted a wedding to happen, even a fake one to appease Gladstone.

Lupe back shyly toward the foyer. "I think I have had enough excitement," she said. "This was a wonderful party, Brady. Ellie. Thank you for having us."

"You are all welcome anytime." Ellie gave the girl a hug, as did Claire. She was pleased neither of them flinched. They were comfortable as friends now.

As Dom, Robbie, and the sisters made their individual farewells, Claire saw J.J. take the older man aside. When they left, she asked, "What did you say?"

DARE TO DREAM

J.J. smiled. "I asked to borrow something." He lifted one of the applications. "Wanna help fill it out?"

"Certainly. Remind me again. Brad Pitt has two T's, right?"

He chuckled. "Too bad Red's not a real preacher. I'd say we'd do it now."

"Actually," Red spoke up. "I am a notary..."

"No!" bellowed Lauren from the far end of the room. "No more quickie weddings." In seconds she was in her stepson's face. "Dress, church, flowers, catering, and I'm planning everything!"

"Yes, Ma," J.J. sighed, and was rewarded with a slap to the shoulder to the crowd's amusement.

"Oh," Claire said, taking Lauren's hand, "I think we can arrange for three out of four."

And she pulled her own folded paper from her pocket.

Chapter Seventeen

Six months later

They couldn't have asked for better outdoor wedding weather, J.J. decided. The sun reigned over Virginia Beach in a cloudless sky—not too cold, not too warm. Claire was absolutely gorgeous in her simple, knee-length white dress, twigs of baby's breath braided into her upswept blonde hair. She contrasted perfectly with his gray tuxedo with tails.

They were an ideal fit, made all the more obvious by the white-ribboned bungee cord securing them together at the waist.

"This is crazy," he whispered into his new bride's kiss as the minister proclaimed them man and wife.

Claire only laughed, tightening the grip on her bouquet, her arms around his middle. Momentarily he followed her gaze over the platform's edge to the waving patch of blue below them. The miniature fun park on Virginia Beach's Oceanfront had a bungee jump overlooking the Atlantic. To J.J.'s disbelief and progressive anxiety, they offered a wedding package. On the first available date of the new year, they booked a ceremony at three hundred feet while guests and loved ones awaited the literal and figurative plunge from the reception area, amid the kiddie rides and buffet.

Maid of honor Ellie grasped the railing, keeping her focus on faces rather than the ground. Nobody else in the wedding party would jump, which suited J.J. fine. Ellie no doubt would spew over the wedding.

Red, his best man, appeared much calmer, happy even. He had grown into his new life easily and appeared all the better for it. New home, new love, and a stronger relationship with his family...yes, happy endings seemed to be the norm. And for

once J.J. couldn't have been happier for the brother who once roused his envy.

"You may now kiss the bride...again," intoned the minister, smiling.

"And hang on for the ride of your life," Claire said, winking.

He clung instead to Claire's backside, leaning forward as their jump guide instructed and, when the guide gave the signal, they pitched themselves off the platform, into the air and their new life together.

* * * *

"There they go! They did it!" cried a female guest, and heads craned upward toward the bungee platform. The drop was to be the signal that vows were exchanged, and the crowd cheered on Mr. and Mrs. Jake Marbury, Jr. as the bungee cord tightened and brought the couple skyward.

Lupe couldn't watch, electing to bury her face in Robbie's shoulder. Heights terrified her, and she couldn't fathom why anyone would choose to marry in such a manner. She could barely stand to look out the firm's windows at the New York skyline when she worked there. Thank goodness Dom gave her a job that kept her feet on the ground.

Robbie's cologne intoxicated her, and his heartbeat sounded throughout her body. She should have just swallowed her phobia and watched the jump, she realized. Robbie didn't need further encouragement, and though she liked him, she knew she couldn't give him what he wanted. He was such a wonderful man, and deserved better.

Hesitantly she glanced at the hand clutching his chest, and at the simple band around her ring finger. How she had let him talk her into a quickie civil ceremony still baffled her. She should never have opened up to him about fears of being deported. There were other ways to extend her stay in America without involving Robbie at this level, but he insisted on this "insurance."

"You can look now, but if you'd rather not..." Robbie pulled her tighter. "I don't mind."

She wanted to distance herself, but the warmth of his voice spread through her. Her nipples puckered and her pussy throbbed

with want. Soon she'd have to stay against Robbie for support, her knees were that weak.

"Okay, now you can really look. They're off the cord now." Robbie drew away from her and pointed to the platform. The happy couple approached the reception area—windblown and exhilarated—and Cal Briscoe's band struck an introductory melody. Lupe followed Robbie deeper into the crowd, marveling at the color and friendly faces. Some she knew, others seemed genial all the same. Perhaps Robbie would meet someone here, and that would make an annulment that much easier to do.

Divorce, she reminded herself. An annulment might have been possible had the marriage not been consummated. Oh, why did she let Rob talk her into *that* as well? The more time passed, the harder it would be to walk away.

"Want something to eat?" Robbie asked.

"Yes, please." She moved with him but he edged her toward a table.

"Get some seats, for Pop and Marlene and Lola, too. I'll get us some plates." With a quick kiss on her cheek, he turned and strode to the tented buffet. Lupe couldn't help but watch the way his ass moved in those form-fitting slacks.

Dios mio. Did it get even hotter?

She spied Dom at a round table sitting with his date. Marlene Robeson—a nice woman, she seemed. Dom had hired her to do the books and payroll for the limo company, which suited Lupe fine. She preferred to stick with other secretarial duties, and dispatch. Marlene was a bit older than Dom, but it didn't matter to Lupe, and hopefully not to anybody else.

Lola's shawl draped over another chair, but the young woman couldn't be seen. Probably flirting with a waiter or five, Lupe guessed. Lola's libido knew no bounds. Robbie was probably the only driver in the Dareville and Virginia Beach offices that Lola hadn't yet screwed.

Yet.

Lupe squeezed her eyes shut to expel the thought. Robbie deserved better than her, and most definitely Lola. She loved her sister, but still...

Marlene rose, patting Dom's shoulder, and pointed toward the bar setup. "They're getting the champagne out. I'll get us

some glasses,” Lupe heard her say. Dom offered to fetch them himself, but Marlene insisted on saying hello to a friend along the way. Conceding, Dom offered her smile, then beckoned Lupe to the vacant chair next to his.

“I’m sorry your wedding didn’t have this level of pizzazz,” he joked. Lupe didn’t feel like laughing.

“I wish you wouldn’t say such things,” she scolded, “and you shouldn’t encourage Robbie. You and I both know this is only temporary, until I pass the citizenship test myself.” *Right.*

“Lupe,” Dom gently warned. “Come now. Why do you keep denying your feelings? I see it everyday at work when you look at Robbie. Yes, the situation is a bit extreme, but the emotions are genuine. He loves you, and I know you can love him back.”

Lupe kept her face turned away from him. As long as she’d known Dom, his ability to read her rivaled the canniest of psychics. Of course, Dom was right. The spark glowed, but she couldn’t let it spread.

“You know about me,” she whispered. “About my past...”

Dom placed a comforting arm around her shoulder and squeezed. “And I know the past doesn’t mean a damn in the present. Look at those two.” Dom nodded toward the bride and her cousin. “Seven, eight months ago, they weren’t speaking. Things can change for the better, and you’re due yours.”

She couldn’t restrain a smile there. “Thank you, Dom,” she said, and leaned into his half-hug. “You deserve the best, too. I think Mrs. Robeson might be a good start, yes?”

Dom chuckled. “Marlene’s a great lady,” he said, tapping his temple, “but I see it in her eyes...she still loves her ex-husband. It’s only fair she has that opportunity to get him back. I intend to help.”

Lupe straightened and looked at her boss and confidante. “How gallant,” she exclaimed. “How do you intend to do that?”

“We’re a limo company, *bella*. Aren’t we all about romance?”

Lupe couldn’t argue there. She said nothing further so as not to encourage Dom offering to spread the romance her way. Instead she rose when she saw Robbie juggling three rounded plates of food.

LEIGH ELLWOOD

“Robbie’s hands are full. I’ll get his and my champagnes.”

She milled through the crowd, weaving around tables and nodding to familiar faces, just as a piece of paper fluttering to the ground caught her eye. It landed at her feet and she scooped it up in her hands, seeing it was a folded note of some sort. It looked important, perhaps something blown from a pocket or purse. She knew she shouldn’t look, but otherwise she wouldn’t know to whom it belonged.

Carefully, she unfolded the paper. It was a list, with all of the items crossed out. Some were intelligible, but the last line, with only one mark scratched through it as accomplished, stood out.

~~*Live happily ever after.*~~

Lupe smiled and balled the list in her hand. The owner obviously no longer needed it. Nice that somebody managed to achieve that last goal.

When was her turn?

THE END

Watch for Lupe and Lola’s stories in *Dare Devils*, coming soon from Phaze Books!

About the Author

Leigh Ellwood writes spicy romances and sassy mysteries. She is the creator of the award-winning Dareville series for Phaze Books, as well as numerous shorts for Phaze and other small publishers. Readers are invited to visit LeighEllwood.com for more information on Leigh's books, and to follow Leigh's writing adventures via her blog at leighwantsfood.blogspot.com or through her Twitter at [Twitter.com/LeighEllwood](https://twitter.com/LeighEllwood).