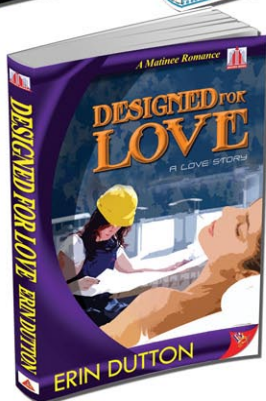
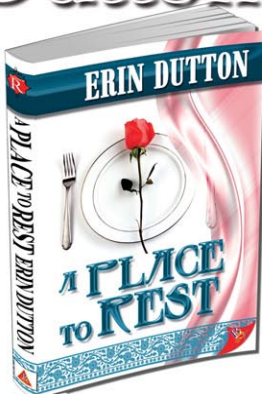
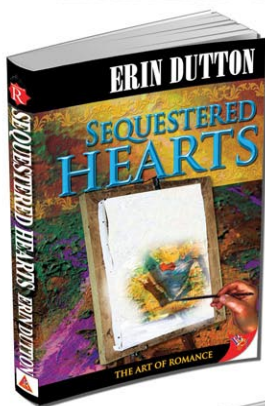


Erin Dutton



**ROMANCES
VOL. I**





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Sequestered Hearts

Fully Involved

A Place to Rest

Designed for Love

Point of Ignition

ROMANCES
VOLUME 1

SEQUESTERED HEARTS
A PLACE TO REST
DESIGNED FOR LOVE

ERIN DUTTON

SEQUESTERED HEARTS

by
Erin Dutton



2007

SEQUESTERED HEARTS

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Finally, Scott, through the years and through the miles, our friendship is ever present.

Dedication

In memory of Brandon Keith Davis.
I miss you every day.

CHAPTER ONE

Are you sure you're ready for this?" Cori Saxton sighed. Her agent and good friend Gretchen had asked the same question several times during today's conversation. Tucking the phone between her ear and her shoulder, she leaned back and balanced her chair precariously on two legs. She had been lounging on the deck at the rear of her house, trying to soak in a few hours of solitude before her tranquility was destroyed by a reporter from *Canvassed* magazine.

She didn't get outdoors often enough, Cori reflected, staring out across her sloping back lawn. A fieldstone path wound through expertly manicured grass the color of deep emeralds. Midway down the path she'd created a small sitting area with stone benches and shade trees.

She'd owned the fifty acres in upstate New York for almost five years, having fallen in love with both the property and the house the first time she'd seen it. She was visiting the previous owner, an architect friend who had designed and built the house for his wife. Sadly, they didn't get to enjoy their dream retreat for long. Carol had died of cancer only two years after its completion and Anthony decided he could no longer live in their home without her. When Cori heard he was looking to sell, she'd jumped at the chance.

The edge of her property ran to the riverbank, where a sizable dock housed her latest acquisition, a Chaparral Signature 276 she'd purchased earlier in the spring. She had only taken the sleek white craft out a few times. It had been an impulse purchase. She'd seen

a similar boat in the marina last year and simply had to have one. It wasn't hard to justify the extravagance; her last day sailer had been fine for the short visits that were all she'd ever managed to arrange, but things were different now.

She'd had big plans for the upstate hideaway, but it was hard to justify time out when her career had finally taken off. She was expected to maintain a certain degree of visibility and her plans had fallen by the wayside. In the past few years, she had rarely gotten the opportunity to spend more than a weekend at a time here. *Not anymore*, she thought wryly. For once her life was her own and she was going to stay out of town for as long as she wanted. Today's interview was the one concession she was willing to make right now, and only because she had her own ideas about how the interview was going to work.

Cori checked her wristwatch and glanced down at her tank top and nylon running shorts. Her unwelcome visitor was due in just a couple of hours. She supposed she should go indoors, take a shower, and change into clothing suitable for an heiress-turned-artist.

"Well," Gretchen demanded.

"They're just going to keep calling until I give them something," Cori finally answered. "Besides, the interview was your idea. Now you're trying to talk me out of it?"

"I know. I guess I was just worried that maybe I had pushed you into it. What are you going to say?"

"I'll think of something." In fact, she had already settled on the carefully constructed fiction she wanted this reporter to circulate. Apart from Gretchen, very few people knew the truth behind her self-imposed exile, and she intended to keep it that way.

"Well, be careful," Gretchen warned. "You know Mitchell Gardner. He's not going to send a junior out to interview you."

"I know, I know." Cori searched her memory for the name she'd seen in the e-mail confirming the date and time of arrival at the airport. "The guy is a freelancer. Bennett McClain. Henry is picking him up at the airport."

Henry and his wife Alma owned the property next to hers, and she'd hired them to look after her house and grounds during her long absences. Alma stocked the pantry when Cori was planning a visit,

and Henry helped her out with odd jobs and errands while she was there.

She'd felt a little guilty asking him to collect her visitor today, but she was aware that, being retired, he and Alma could use the income these small services provided. And besides, the last thing she wanted was to be stuck in a car with this reporter for a forty-minute drive.

"Don't worry about me," she told Gretchen. "I have everything under control."

"Don't forget who you're talking to. I know just how out of control you feel right now." Gretchen's voice softened. "Call me if you need anything. And make nice with him. Okay?"

"I'll work on it." Smiling, Cori hung up. She wasn't exactly known for her tact when dealing with the media, but this time she intended to try.

Weeks of continuous questioning about her supposed disappearance had grated on her nerves, and giving some kind of answer seemed like the best way to put an end to the speculation, once and for all. She really didn't understand what the big deal was anyway. She'd only been out of circulation for two months, yet everyone was acting like the art world had stopped because she was no longer a fixture at every gathering. Had she been so completely defined by her social activities that no one could understand her just needing a break?

Even as she asked herself the question she knew the answer. She had. And the truth was, it was more than just needing a break that had sent her running from her life.

Forcing herself out of her deck chair, she went into the kitchen and refilled her iced tea then wandered into her spacious living room. Large expanses of floor-to-ceiling glass along its northeastern wall let in natural light as well as affording a perfect view of the river. Cori had furnished the room in varying shades of olive and taupe, accented with deep purples. The hardwood floors had been stripped and refinished to a warm honeyed oak. She sank down into her favorite sofa, a surprisingly comfortable piece despite its minimalist lines, and gazed out at the river, taking stock of her life.

Normally, she tended to avoid idle reflection even when she

felt stressed. She preferred to distract herself from her problems and never had any trouble finding someone willing to party, especially if it was on her dime. She also had enough of a perspective on reality to know that most of the planet would be thrilled to have “problems” like hers. Cori had been born into privilege and was well aware of how easy that made her life in most of the ways that mattered. Her family’s money and stature was long established. As a child, she had heard the phrase “the Connecticut Saxtons” attached to her name so many times that she was nine years old before she realized that not everyone had their families referenced that way.

High school had taught her that her parents’ name afforded her the freedom to do exactly as she pleased with little consequence, and she had taken full advantage of that fact. Only recently had she begun to understand that never having to take responsibility for anything meant missing out on some key learning experiences, among them that money and good looks could only get you so far, and some things were completely out of your control.

Cori’s mind drifted to the reason for her seclusion, then just as quickly retreated as anger and helplessness flooded her. In hindsight, she could see that being an only child hadn’t taught her how to deal with pressure any more than it had taught her the give-and-take of intimacy with other people. She was far too used to having everything her way. Her every whim had been indulged by her parents, and she’d quickly learned that even if she couldn’t rely on her family name for a free pass, her looks carried a certain amount of weight.

Contemplating the past few years, she was suddenly painfully aware that she had wasted time she could have spent much more productively, time she would never get back. It had never crossed her mind that she would one day nurse regrets about the lifestyle she’d enjoyed since her teens.

The partying ways that had begun in high school had continued through college and over the years that followed graduation. She had spent a year in Paris, studying art at École des Beaux-Arts and having lovers in various European cities. Cori had never made any secret of her escapades, much to her mother’s consternation. Her

father, however, didn't seem bothered by the accounts of her success with women. That had never surprised her. Adam Saxton wasn't concerned with anyone's opinion about him. It was one of the few points they agreed on—that and their passion for their respective livelihoods. But her father's idea of success was measured in dollar signs, which made it difficult for him to understand Cori's artistic ambitions. Still, he tried. He'd even attended a few of her shows, and one of her more sedate pieces occupied a place of honor in his office.

Cori's mother had always been the one who worried about appearances. Catherine Saxton had been born into society life and had done her best to groom her daughter for the same. Cori's resistance to her efforts was a constant source of conflict between them, and her refusal to hide her sexuality stretched the limits of her mother's tolerance on a regular basis.

Catherine had even gone so far as to suggest Cori marry an acceptable young man and carry on her affairs with women discreetly on the side. At the time, Cori had laughed off the idea as absurd and made sure she was photographed the next night in an obvious clinch with the daughter of a prominent local politician. Flirting just on the safe side of her mother's disapproval was second nature. Catherine pushed and Cori pushed back, and in the end they would agree to disagree.

This delicate balance was upset when Cori sat her mother down just before the latest trip upstate and told her the truth about her present situation. It had been Gretchen's idea; she was always trying tactful interventions to bring them closer together. *You only have one mother. Unconditional love is a gift.* Cori could repeat the lectures in her sleep. She supposed the conversation had gone as well as could be expected. Her mother had cried and then railed against the medical profession. By the end of the conversation she'd decided that what was really lacking was adequate funding for research. Cori had spent the next thirty minutes talking her mother out of organizing a fund-raising dinner. She now treated Cori with kid gloves, acting as if she was fragile and avoiding confrontation at all cost. Cori was stunned. It seemed this one aspect of who she

was suddenly defined her completely; she couldn't even count on her own mother to treat her as if she was normal. Would she spend the rest of her life being viewed as damaged?

Cori set her iced tea on the nearest coffee table, swung her legs up onto the sofa, and settled back into the deep cushioning with her eyes closed. She kept expecting to wake up one morning and find her life was just the same as it had been for most of her twenty-nine years. Today was the first day she'd truly understood that wasn't going to happen and even if it did, something in her had changed. She would not be able to pick up exactly where she left off, even if she wanted to. And lately she wasn't so sure she did.



As the Beechcraft twin-engine turboprop lurched in the turbulent sky, Bennett McClain's stomach went with it. She'd looked up her destination, Ogdensburg, on the Internet the night before and was not surprised to find a small dot that was barely even on the map along the upper edge of New York state. *Christ, from the map I could barely tell if the place was still in New York or in Canada.* So she shouldn't have been surprised when she changed planes in Syracuse and found her next mode of transportation was propeller-driven.

Staring out the window, she wondered once again how she had let herself get talked into this assignment. She'd been dead set against it from the moment she'd heard the details from Mitchell Gardner, senior editor of *Canvassed*, an up-and-coming art magazine she'd written a couple of features for. The only reason she had even agreed to entertain the possibility was that Mitchell was a good friend. She still couldn't understand why he was so determined to run with a piece on Cori Saxton.

In the past five years, the woman had gained fame as a gifted artist. Ben had read various flattering reviews about her work and her talent, and had always wondered just how much the Saxton name contributed to the breathless awe of these pieces. Descriptions such as "edgy" and "brave" were routinely applied to her paintings, and the art establishment seemed to have reached the consensus that

she was “brilliant.” Of course her hard-living, reckless lifestyle had attracted almost as much publicity as her art, and it seemed Cori never shied from a camera, even when it caught her in a compromising position with one woman or another.

Ben wasn’t alone in wondering when the woman found time for painting, but Cori Saxton’s detractors were silenced when, with each successive show, her pieces seemed to surpass those of the last. Strangely, the self-promoting artist hadn’t been seen at any of her customary haunts in two months. Ben wasn’t losing any sleep over her disappearance. It made a pleasant change not to see the usual society pages shots of her at this party or that with a drink in her hand and a glassy look in her eyes.

“So what?” she’d told Mitchell when he dragged her into his office to pester her to do the story. “She’s probably in rehab or something, and I don’t write gossip column stuff.”

“As if I would ask.” Mitchell acted wounded. “There’s a story here, Ben. Everyone knows Cori Saxton wouldn’t just drop off the face of the earth for no good reason.”

“Maybe she wants some privacy for a change,” Ben suggested, doubting it. Publicity was oxygen for women like Cori. Without it they wilted. This had to be some kind of stunt. Maybe she’d decided to reinvent herself as reclusive and mysterious, only to find that got old after a few weeks and she now needed to be the center of attention again.

“If she wants privacy all she needs to do is say so,” Mitchell said snippily. “The fact that she won’t even make a statement through her publicist means everyone wants to break this one. And the good news is,” he smiled arrogantly, “we’re the people she’s going to talk to.”

“What makes you think that?” Ben asked.

“I have a friend who knows her agent. To make a long story short, Saxton agreed to an exclusive with *Canvassed*.” He rushed on before she could respond. “She wants final approval. She says it’s a deal breaker—”

“You have to be kidding me.” Ben was ready to walk out. She had not spent the past ten years building a reputation as a first-rate journalist to have her work rewritten until it read like a lame puff

piece. Mitchell knew that, and he should have thought about it before he called her.

He waved at her to sit down. "Ben, hear me out."

"I said no. I will not do a story contingent upon the subject's approval. I don't have to do that anymore, Mitch."

These days she didn't have to take assignments she didn't want and she didn't have to write to please someone else. She had no plans to be used as a mouthpiece by a spoiled socialite turned "artist." If that's what Cori Saxton was looking for, she was going to be disappointed.

Mitch wasn't about to let her out the door. "Ben, the magazine is not doing as well as projected. I really need this, and you're the only one I trust to get me a decent story even with her right of approval. I'm asking you for a favor."

His gently pleading tone kept Ben in her seat, against her better judgment, listening to him map out the details. Mitchell had sunk his life savings into this magazine. Ben couldn't let him lose it without trying to help. They'd known each other for thirteen years, and in that time he'd always helped her out as she built her career.

Knowing she would regret it, she had relented in the end, and now, less than a week later, she was on the smallest plane she had ever seen, headed for God knows where to attempt to interview a woman she gathered was suddenly allergic to publicity but still couldn't fade happily into anonymity. Mitchell had given her a file containing background on Cori, a plane ticket, and instructions to stay as long as she needed to in order to get the right stuff.

Cynically, she thought ten minutes would probably suffice for the life story of Cori Saxton. As for whatever spin the woman wanted to put on her exodus from the city, Ben could hardly wait to hear it. So far this week, she hadn't seen enough television to get her fill of banality. She was counting on her subject to remedy that.

CHAPTER TWO

Ben descended the few steps of the plane, happy to be on solid ground once again. She waited patiently planeside until her bag was handed to her. As she walked toward the terminal she surveyed the small airport. There was only one runway and the building she entered was little more than a large room with some airport equipment scattered about. An x-ray machine stood along one wall, separated from the rest of the room by a metal detector. A long counter stood between her and the lone reservation clerk. An older man had just approached the clerk, and Ben couldn't help but overhear his words.

"I'm looking for a Mr. Bennett McClain." He had glanced at her as she entered but dismissed her, obviously expecting a man. Quite used to this type of misunderstanding, Ben made her way across the room.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry to interrupt but, I'm Bennett McClain," she introduced herself politely, extending her hand.

"Oh, I'm sorry, miss. I don't know why, but I was expecting..." His voice trailed off in embarrassment as he grasped her hand warmly. "Henry Rollins. I'm here to pick you up."

Ben judged him to be in his early sixties. His hairline had receded, leaving a wispy gray fringe clinging to the back and sides. Despite the day's comfortable temperature, he wore a thick flannel shirt and navy Dickies. He reached for her bag, taking it from her before she could protest. Judging from the calloused hand that brushed hers, he didn't shy away from hard work. She did manage

to hold on to the laptop case, which she slung over her shoulder. She followed him outside to an older model Ford pick-up with blue paint that had begun to give way to a rusty hue. He lifted her bag easily over the tailgate, depositing it carefully in the bed of the truck next to some supplies.

"I was in town running errands, so Ms. Saxton asked me to come and fetch you," he explained as he opened the passenger door of the pick-up. He waited while she climbed inside.

"Are we far from her home?" Ben inquired casually as he slid behind the wheel.

"About forty-five minutes." He cranked the ignition and the old truck sputtered to life.

There didn't seem to be any air-conditioning in the rumbling vehicle. Henry left the windows down and the wind whipped in and tugged at Ben's loose, shoulder-length hair. Pulling her sunglasses down from the top of her head to cover her eyes, she stared out her window. They very quickly left the small town behind, the concrete and buildings giving way to open fields. Lush green grass rolled away from the side of the road, interrupted only by the occasional tree line.

There were no subdivisions here. Private homes sat on large plots of land; sometimes miles of road passed before Ben saw the next home. Compared with the city, she even noticed a subtle difference in the smell of the air that circulated through the cab of the truck, though she would have been hard pressed to find exactly the right word for it. "Fresher," maybe, but that didn't describe it fully.

Henry remained quiet, apparently feeling no need to fill the silence between them. Ben was thankful. She wasn't really in the mood for making idle conversation with a stranger. Her mind wandered back to her cousin Lucy's reaction to the news of this assignment. Insanely jealous was an understatement. As soon as Lucy had discovered the subject of Ben's latest article, she all but offered to pay Ben to bring her along as an assistant.

"Cori Saxton is just about the sexiest thing I've ever seen," she'd gushed as they polished off cartons of Chinese takeout a few days earlier.

Ben looked forward to their weekly lunches in Lucy's office, and she knew Lucy did too. Though technically they were cousins, they'd been raised virtually as sisters. Ben had spent much of her childhood under the care of her aunt Meg while her mother worked.

Lucy pulled a publicity photo out of the folder Ben had been leafing through and pushed it in front of Ben's face. "I mean, look at her."

Ben looked. Actually, she'd stared. The picture was a head shot, the type that was sent out in the press packets to advertise upcoming shows. Cori's short, dark blond hair was boyishly cut to frame an angular face that lent her features a sharpness softened only by luminous blue eyes and thick lashes resting against her cheek. It was a good photo, Ben had to admit. Her heart rate had quickened as she studied the smoldering look in Cori's eyes. Cynically, Ben decided that was precisely the effect the photographer had been going for.

"So she's attractive. So are a thousand other women." She'd handed the photo back to Lucy, ignoring her cousin's incredulous stare and trying to rationalize her own reaction to Cori's intense expression.

Now, on her way to Cori's home, she wondered if she would experience the same shock of awareness when she met the woman face-to-face. Highly unlikely. A posed photograph was simply the record of a face frozen in a single moment, everything predetermined. Cori had carefully created the image she wanted others to see, arranging her features as the photographer had instructed. In real life no one could manufacture a pose 24/7.

Ben's attention was wrenched back to the road ahead when Henry made a sharp turn off the main highway. She grabbed the door and held on as the truck lurched down what appeared to be a dirt road that wound its way among the thick stand of trees. *Is this even a road?* She tightened her fingers on the door frame as the old truck bumped along the ruts in the road.

The tree limbs on either side of the pick-up seemed frighteningly close to their windows, and the deep potholes made the vehicle sway even closer to an imminent collision. Despite the looming

hazards, Henry calmly negotiated his way between the larger holes and grooves in the road. Ben had the impression he could drive it in his sleep if he had to.

Several long minutes later, she sighed with relief as he maneuvered around a sharp bend, and through a clearing in the trees a sprawling house came into view. From the front, it appeared to comprise only one story; however, the land sloped sharply away from the front of the house and over a hill and Ben guessed there was a lower level on the back side. A circular drive passed by the front before looping back to connect to the road on which they had entered.

Henry pulled the truck to a stop in front of the house, and Ben looked up to find the silhouette of a woman standing in the open doorway. She pushed open the truck door and slid out. As she started for the rear of the pick-up and her suitcase, Henry said, "Leave it, I'll bring it in later."

Before she could utter a protest, he had her by the arm and was leading her toward the house. As they reached the front entrance, the woman waiting for them opened the screen door she'd been standing behind.

With an air of formality that seemed at odds with his attire and decrepit vehicle, Henry said, "Ms. Saxton, may I present Ms. Bennett McClain."

Surprise registered momentarily on Cori Saxton's face before it was quickly replaced by a polite mask. As she stepped into the sunlight and extended her hand, Ben barely stifled a gasp. *Intense? Yes, that's the proper word for this woman.*

Cori's photos failed to do her justice. In person, she was absolutely striking. Her sharp cheekbones and strong jawline lent her a slightly chiseled look. The only break in the clean lines of her face was the indent at the tip of her chin, a feature that merely added to the appeal of an already stunning visage. Her blond hair sported sun-bleached highlights, and her skin was evenly tanned, making her blue eyes seem to glow. Somehow Ben knew the rich color did not come from a tanning bed or a bottle. Cori's body was lean, perhaps a little on the thin side, and she had at least four inches on Ben's five foot five frame.

“Ms. Saxton.” Ben realized she was staring and quickly grasped Cori’s outstretched hand. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“I thought you were a man,” Cori stated bluntly, dropping her hand after the barest polite squeeze.

Ben smiled at her unapologetic tone. Flexing her tingling fingers, she said, “I get that a lot. But I assure you, I am not.”

No, she certainly is not. Cory allowed her eyes to rake quickly over Ben’s body. She had been expecting a male reporter and was searching her mind to recall where she’d gotten that impression. Obviously she’d been mistaken. The woman who stood before her now was not the least bit masculine. She wore a pale yellow blouse that molded nicely to her curves and was tucked into neatly pressed khaki pants. Long, thick brown hair fell in waves to her shoulders. High cheekbones and sharply arched brows lent a refined air to her soft features.

Cori let her eyes linger on Bennett McClain’s full lips. *Yes, very inviting.* All in all, Bennett was attractive in a wholesome way that Cori wasn’t accustomed to noticing. Before she gave herself away, she recovered her manners. “Please come in. Henry will bring your things after he unloads the truck.” She held the door open, waiting until Bennett preceded her into the house.

Ben stepped into an airy foyer that opened to a living room flooded with natural light. Drawn to the view, she quickly crossed the room and looked out the windows. A large cedar deck wrapped around the back of the house, accessible by sliding doors to the left of the living room. Stairs off the rear of the deck led to a stone patio around an in-ground swimming pool. Ben had been correct about the sharply sloping lawn. The trees had been cleared all the way to the bank of a river Ben hadn’t known was there. A stone path snaked its way through beautiful landscaping, back and forth across the lawn, easing the incline of land. The path ran all the way to the shore. A dock extended into the water with a white boat tied off next to it.

“What river is this?” Ben asked over her shoulder. She’d been so wrapped up in the view she was unaware of Cori following her across the room until she felt her presence close behind.

“The St. Lawrence River.” Cori supplied the name softly as if she didn’t want to break the spell that she knew had pulled Ben

in as she looked out the windows. “The bank on the other side is Canada.”

“You have a beautiful view.” Ben kept her voice hushed as well.

“I know. It’s partly what sold me on the house.”

“Partly?”

“Yes, that—and the fifty acres that ensures my privacy from encroaching neighbors.” She lightly touched Ben’s elbow. “Come on, I’ll show you the rest of the house.”

Ben followed her to an open kitchen and dining area that also sported a large wall of glass. The kitchen housed gleaming black appliances in sharp contrast to the white custom cabinetry. In the center of the room an island covered in slate gray marble had two bar stools tucked under its edge.

“Does your home have these windows all along the back walls?” Ben wandered idly around the room, returning once again to the glass expanse.

“Yes. I use the downstairs level as a studio when I’m here, it gets great natural light as well.” Cori’s answer was matter-of-fact, but Ben detected a note of sadness in her tone.

Before she could examine it further, Cori was leading her back through the living room toward the other end of the house. Down a short hallway, she gestured to a door on the right.

“This is the guest room. You can stay in here.”

“Oh, no. I don’t want to be any trouble,” Ben protested quickly. “I’ve already made reservations at the Riverview Inn.”

But she followed Cori through the doorway regardless and scanned her surroundings. A queen-sized bed occupied the center of the room. The taupe walls matched one of the stripes in the predominantly navy comforter. Somehow, despite fairly plain décor, the feel of this guest retreat was warm and welcoming. Disconcertingly, her suitcase was standing on a modern rug to one side of the bed. Henry, it seemed, had already decided she was staying over.

“Ms. McClain, the Riverview is nearly forty miles away.” Cori turned to face her, and suddenly Ben found the space entirely too small and her stunning interviewee entirely too close.

Intense. The word lingered in her head again. She'd never had such a visceral reaction to someone she'd just met. It was as if her mind instinctively drew in details about Cori that she didn't even realize she was noticing until she found herself wondering if Cori's skin was as soft as it looked. Or if the blond strands that brushed the back of her neck were as silky as they appeared. Irritated, she pushed the thought away, reminding herself that while Cori was physically attractive her personality probably left something to be desired.

"It's impractical to expect Henry to drive you back and forth," Cori continued in a businesslike manner that made Ben even more conscious of her own irrational response. "And it would be very costly for you to rent a vehicle that would be up to handling my drive, especially if we get that rain they've been promising. The road becomes impassable."

Cori's explanation was logical. However, Ben felt the need to argue because the slightly spicy scent that clung to the artist was making her stomach do strange things. She mumbled something vague about her schedule and the intrusion, but when Cori lifted her eyebrows quizzically she fell silent, realizing the absurdity of anything she could say.

"So, that's a yes, thank you," Cori concluded.

Ben managed a small nod. She was going to be staying in Cori Saxton's home. Lucy was going to strangle her with her bare hands for refusing the assistant offer. Bristling at being so efficiently "handled," but with no other polite alternative, Ben followed Cori back down the hall and they resumed the official tour of the house.

Cori pointed out an office with several bookcases that housed a large and obviously well-read selection of books. "Feel free to read anything you'd like," she offered with a wave of her hand toward the plush oversized chair that was tucked invitingly into the corner of the room. "My bedroom is at the other end of the hall, and, as I said before, the downstairs is mostly work space."

Making no offer to show Ben these more personal spaces, she offered, "Would you like to freshen up? Dinner will be in about an hour."



The guest bathroom was on the opposite side of the hallway, directly across from the bedroom. Ben was thankful for the chance to wash her face and shed her wrinkled travel clothes. Also, to slow her breathing down. Her reaction to Cori preyed on her mind. Anyone would think she hadn't seen an attractive woman in years.

She had.

Ben argued with a voice in her head that sounded suspiciously like Lucy's, and reminded her how long it had been since she'd had a second date. Was it her fault there hadn't been any chemistry with anyone lately? She'd had her share of first dates—why, just last week she had a perfectly nice dinner with a gorgeous elementary teacher. So what if she hadn't been able to summon the interest to call the woman for a second date? She had a career to worry about and, besides, when one traveled as much as she did there wasn't much time left for dating. Ben was usually just as happy to curl up at home with a book and a glass of wine. She barely thought about how nice it would be to have someone mirroring her pose at the other end of the sofa.

Twenty minutes later, after swapping her crumpled pants and top for more casual shorts and a polo shirt, she found Cori in the kitchen wrapping sliced new potatoes and onions in foil. Having decided while she was changing that she should at least make an effort at civility, she offered, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"You can open that wine." Cori gestured toward the bottle on the counter. She carried her foil bundles outside on the deck and placed them on the grill before returning to the kitchen. "I hope you like Cabernet Sauvignon," she said, taking a plate with two large steaks on it out of the refrigerator.

Ben nodded, glancing appreciatively at the quality vintage she'd just opened. Inhaling the rich aroma of the deep red liquid, she poured two glasses and handed one to Cori.

"Thank you." Cori registered the brush of warm fingers against hers as she accepted the glass.

The reporter was not what she had expected, even beyond the fact that she expected a man. Bennett McClain was attractive, but that alone was not reason enough to turn Cori's head. She had encountered her share of attractive women, most of them eager

to get to know her better. However, something about the reporter had immediately gotten her attention—something deeper than superficial appearances. The feeling puzzled Cori. She had often felt instant attraction to a woman. Plain, unmistakable lust. But this was different. She felt oddly drawn to Bennett and despite her reluctance to do this interview, simply being in the journalist's presence inspired a nervous energy in her that she couldn't explain.

Bennett had settled herself onto a stool at the counter across from her, and as she rubbed seasoning over the steaks Cori continued to sneak surreptitious glances at her guest. When Bennett finally met her gaze, Cori was surprised to find herself sinking into eyes the hue of warm honey. She hadn't noticed the color earlier, as Bennett had been wearing sunglasses.

Realizing she was staring, she cleared her throat and spoke quickly. "How do you like your steak, Ms. McClain?"

"Medium rare. And please, call me Ben."

Cori raised an eyebrow. "Okay, Ben. And you can call me Cori. I'll be right back." With that she headed back outside to put the steaks on and check the potatoes. She was about to lower the cover back over the grill when Ben joined her on the deck.

Leaning against the railing, Ben watched Cori rearrange the steaks needlessly. She seemed a little jumpy, Ben observed—no doubt the presence of a journalist was making her a bit self-conscious.

Searching for a way to test Cori's willingness to be forthcoming with information, Ben remarked, "I just can't get over this view. I can certainly see why you would want to spend as much time here as possible."

"Ah, are we leading into the interview already?" Cori paced over to lean on the railing right next to her, their elbows almost touching.

She'd known Ben would get around to questioning her eventually, yet she still found herself resenting the obvious probing. She'd spent most of her adult life under the scrutiny of the press, sometimes intentionally seeking publicity, but often trying to avoid it. Although she never let it show, she found the attention exhausting. Even in this case, when she'd quite literally invited that unwelcome scrutiny into her home, she was already wishing she hadn't.

“That *is* what I am here for, Ms. Saxton.” Ben didn’t want to sound defensive, but she could hear the slight edge to her own tone. Surprised by Cori’s ability to see through her, she glanced sharply at the woman standing beside her.

“It’s Cori,” the touchy artist said, assuming control of the conversation once more. “I thought we had already settled that. And I think the interview will keep until after dinner.”

Ben produced a casual shrug. “Fine.”

“I just realized I know absolutely nothing about you.”

“Really?” Ben would have thought someone like Cori would have found out everything about her before agreeing to the article.

“It’s very unlike me, I’ll admit, but I didn’t do my homework in this case. So, tell me something about yourself.” Cori turned, leaning her weight on one elbow.

Ben’s skin warmed under the intensity of her blue gaze. “What would you like to know?”

“The professional stuff, for starters. My agent talked me into the article and I assumed she’d checked out your previous work. But to be honest, I was so dead set against it in the beginning that—well, I was being a bit of a brat.”

Ben was slightly taken aback by the offhand admission. “What changed your mind? Obviously not my impeccable reputation.”

Cori let her gaze drift over the yard and across the river where she could barely make out the Canadian skyline. “I got tired of getting calls from reporters. I figured I may as well do it on my terms.”

“About those terms—”

“They are nonnegotiable.” Cori cut off the protest Ben had been about to offer regarding final approval of the article. “I told Gretchen—my agent, to make that clear. I’m sorry if she didn’t.”

“Well, that’s not exactly the way I work,” Ben said, unwilling to concede so early in the process.

“Then what are you doing here?”

“I had hoped to convince you to see the error of your ways.” Ben was unsuccessful at masking her annoyance.

“Then I’m sorry you’ve wasted your time coming up here.” Cori lifted her glass and carefully sipped her wine. Had she been

considering backing down, the slight tremor in the hand that held her glass was a poignant reminder of the reasons why she shouldn't.

Wondering if she was bluffing, Ben briefly debated calling her on it and then decided patience was the better route in this case. Shoving the interview to the back of her mind until after dinner, as Cori had requested, she forced a polite smile and said dryly, "Then I guess I should make the most of your company before I'm thrown out."

Reading Ben's expressive face, Cori wondered if she realized how much she telegraphed. Defensiveness had jumped quickly into her eyes at Cori's insistence on retaining approval of the article. However, just as quickly she seemed to assess Cori's willingness to bend, and the sudden smoothing of her expression suggested she was not going to push her luck. When she spoke again her voice was carefully guarded.

"Professionally, I've been freelance for about five years. Before that I wrote for *Grace*."

Raising an eyebrow at the mention of the popular women's magazine, Cori pushed off the railing and moved to check the steaks. As she lifted the lid, the gentle sizzle of the cooking beef and a mouth-watering aroma drifted out.

"Why did you leave *Grace*?" she asked over her shoulder as she went back into the kitchen, leaving the door open. She returned carrying plates stacked with napkins and utensils, and one piled high with thickly cut slices of French bread. Crossing to the small table tucked in the corner of the deck, she set them down. "I thought since it's a nice evening we could eat out here."

Nodding, Ben picked up their glasses from the railing and joined her at the table. "I got tired of writing what someone else wanted me to write," she said, answering the previous question. She grinned when Cori rolled her eyes over the pointed remark. "Seriously, think about it. What if you had to paint the way someone else told you to? Could you do commissioned portraits, for example?"

Cori regarded Ben, cocking her head to the side. *She has a point*. She turned back to the grill and pulled off the steaks and the foil packages, placing them on the plates. "Have you seen my work?"

“I’ve seen photographs of your work.”

Cori laughed. “Wow, you’ve really done your research for this article, haven’t you?”

Ben bristled at her sarcastic tone. “Actually, I have a fairly thick file of information on you already, and there were photos of some of your paintings in there. I had somewhat short notice for this assignment, so I’m still going through it all. I thought maybe you would show me some of your work when I got here, as I’m sure that photographs don’t do it justice.” She purposely injected a saccharine tone in her voice, certain that Cori would see right through the false sweetness.

Chuckling at her obvious ploy, Cori extended her hand, indicating one of the chairs and when Ben settled into it, she took the one opposite. “Well, then, once you have seen my work and gotten to know me a little better, you won’t have to ask if I could do commissioned work, and *portraits*, no less.” She wrinkled her nose distastefully and even the word twisted as it came out of her mouth.

Ben laughed out loud. Even having seen what little of Cori’s work that she had, she imagined that would be like asking Ansel Adams to photograph family portraits.

Cori lifted her glass and touched it to the rim of Ben’s, ignoring the way her stomach tightened at the sound of Ben’s laughter. There was something so genuine and unself-conscious in the response, it made Cori wonder where people like Ben hung out, she so seldom encountered any of them. Her pleasure was also infectious, lifting the pall that seemed to hang over her these days. Warmth spread within her as a smile transformed Ben’s face. Cori’s mind ran a slide show of the faces she’d used to try to chase away reality. She hadn’t enjoyed any of them longer than the time it took to satisfy her lust. Yet a simple exchange and a smile from Ben was able to bring her such pleasure.

Cori took a sip of wine and then, setting her glass back down, she picked up her knife and fork and cut into the tender steak. Control. That was really what her life was all about these days. Despite the forces that threatened to upset her life, she resolved to maintain control. She controlled the terms of this interview. And

she would control her reaction to Ben. She didn't need any extra reminders of just how much she had to lose by getting too close to the reporter.

They ate in companionable silence, enjoying the cool breeze that drifted up from the river. As night fell, a line of discreetly placed solar lights came on around the edge of the deck and the pool, progressing down the path to the water's edge. A nearly full moon reached across the water toward them in shimmering reflection.

Ben studied Cori as she ate. The moonlight slashed across her features, making them appear even sharper—more roguish. Ben had a sudden urge to reach across the table, to caress the shadowed indent of Cori's chin. Just as suddenly her mind clamped down around the image. *You are here to do a job. Mitch isn't paying you to fantasize about your subject.*

"So, after dinner...a tour of your studio?" Ben's words tumbled out haltingly.

Cori regarded her silently for a moment. "Okay, on one condition—tell me something else about yourself."

"Like what?"

"Well, we already covered professional. Tell me something personal." Setting down her utensils, Cori rested her elbows on the table and laced her fingers together lightly under her chin. Against her better judgment, she was curious about this reporter. Only moments ago she had vowed not to get close to Ben, but that wasn't enough to keep her from wondering about her. *On my terms. Keep it on my terms*, she reminded herself.

Ben chewed thoughtfully, considering how much she wanted to let Cori control the conversation. It was early in the process, and the illusion of control could be an effective interview tool. If Cori let down her guard, Ben's story would be that much better. And something told her that whatever was going on, she wasn't going to get to it without first gaining Cori's trust.

"Are you married? Kids?" Cori prompted when Ben remained silent. She'd noted the absence of rings on Ben's long, graceful fingers.

"No, I'm not married. And I don't have kids. I might like to someday."

“Have kids? Or get married?”

“Kids.”

“Well, you’re young. You’ve got plenty of time. How old are you, anyway?”

Ben smiled, uncertain how to take Cori’s unabashed curiosity. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s not polite to ask a woman her age?”

Cori just shrugged and lifted her glass, taking a long sip of the sweet red wine.

“I’m thirty-one.”

“Do you have any siblings?” Cori asked, surprised when Ben stiffened at her words.

“You said I only had to tell you one thing about myself.” Ben attempted to brush off the question but was not quite successful at blocking the image that surged into her head. Feeling the familiar ache sweeping through her body for a moment, she saw very clearly the heartbreakingly innocent face of her brother. As the ache intensified into a sharp edge of pain and loss that threatened to overwhelm her, Ben pushed it away. Settling her carefully crafted wall back into place, she cleared her throat around the lump that had formed there.

Unsure of what had caused the sudden chill, Cori filed away Ben’s reaction and let the moment pass. With social grace that came from years under her mother’s tutelage, she spoke quickly to cover the awkward moment.

“You’re right. Just one thing. I’d offer to share something about myself, but there’s probably little you don’t already know or have in that thick file you referred to.” Cori stood and began gathering the plates they had pushed away from them only minutes before.

“I’m sure there are a few things I don’t know about you,” Ben answered innocently.

She was thinking of the reason she was here, the whole purpose of the article she was supposed to be writing—Cori’s disappearance. However, she realized how her words might have sounded when Cori paused and bright blue eyes blazed into hers. Her mouth went dry and she felt a flush creeping up her neck. *Gosh, Lucy would certainly get a kick out of the way I seem to be reacting to this*

woman. Though she made light of her own reaction in her mind, Ben was unsettled by it and surged immediately to her feet, seeking a distraction.

“Let me help with this,” she said, grabbing a serving bowl as Cori gathered the remnants of their dinner.

She tried to move past Cori without touching her, but for a split second their flesh connected when her arm slid by Cori’s. Ben told herself she was imagining the electricity that seemed to arc from Cori’s body to her own. But her skin refused to comply, tingling in awareness as she headed for the kitchen.

Remembering that she was only there to do a job was becoming increasingly hard after just a few hours. *Well, it doesn’t help that my own body is betraying me.*

CHAPTER THREE

I guess I owe you a tour of the rest of the house, huh?" Cori took the last of the dishes from Ben and stacked them in the dishwasher, closed it, and started the cycle.

"Only if you want to. I'd love to see your work," Ben smirked, "in person. But I understand if you are private about your studio." Cori was hesitant, and Ben was still trying to gauge how much she could push and get away with.

"It's okay. Come on." Cori touched Ben's arm as she walked past her and through the living room.

"It's so peaceful. You must get a lot done when you're staying out here," Ben commented casually. She was perplexed when Cori stiffened as if the innocent comment had somehow caused offense.

"Yes, it's the ideal environment," Cori said. She usually did find herself incredibly inspired by the silence and solitude of her haven. However, this trip had been different. She hadn't actually touched a brush in almost two months. She still made a daily trek down to the studio in an attempt to ease the restlessness that came with not working. She did not feel as grounded unless she was painting. However, the panic that made her heart race, her palms sweat, and breathing erratic always chased her back up the stairs before she could lift a brush.

She knew it was a purely psychological reaction because the one time she had mentioned it to Dr. Franklin he had suggested someone she could "talk to." She had politely declined, being

a firm believer that she could control her emotional and mental reactions by sheer willpower. So what if she was still working on this particular reaction? She had made progress—why, just last week she had made it all the way across the room before her chest tightened.

In truth, she had been well out of her comfort zone since the day her doctor had delivered her diagnosis. *Multiple Sclerosis*. Even thinking the words inspired a sick feeling deep in her gut and no amount of “talking” was going to alleviate it. She would simply continue to hide out until she had figured out how to handle this unexpected upheaval in her life plan. Yes, she readily admitted to herself that she was hiding, but in the face of the fear she now battled on a daily basis she felt it an acceptable reaction.

“Come,” she said stiffly and led Ben to a door tucked into the corner of the foyer. She pulled it open, reaching automatically to flip the light switch just inside, and descended the stairs slowly.

As they reached the bottom, Ben was able to see a large, open room that extended almost the entire length of the house. There was a bathroom and a kitchenette at the far end, allowing the occupant the freedom to immerse herself in her workspace without having to break the spell by going back upstairs. Like the upper rooms, the northeast-facing walls were floor-to-ceiling glass; however, unlike upstairs these windows had heavy drapes that could be pulled across.

Seeing Ben pause to wait for an invitation, Cori waved toward the easel in the center of the room and the canvases leaning in rows against the walls and said, “Go ahead.” She hoped Ben wouldn’t notice that she didn’t venture beyond the bottom of the stairs.

Needing no further encouragement, Ben wandered into the room. She traveled slowly along one wall, her eyes drifting from painting to painting, taking in the bold use of colors and sharp contrast. She’d seen similar work in photos from Cori’s last show. However, she found the actual paintings much more dramatic in real life. Though she was by no means an expert, she could see why Cori had amassed such acclaim in the past few years. She was a talented artist. Her work was eye-catching and multidimensional.

As she circled toward the center of the room, Ben paused before the easel and could not prevent herself from gasping. She took a step back as a very physical reaction to the painting swept over her. *So different than the others. There is so much pain here.* The darkening shades of blue and black swirled together interrupted by violent slashes of red and white—so white it felt hot. Ben recoiled from the searing anger that swept out and over her. More curious than ever, she glanced at Cori and was surprised to find her nervously shifting from foot to foot.

Cori wanted to go back up the stairs. She felt too exposed down here and regretted allowing this stranger into her private world. *What made me want her to see this? Why do I feel like she would understand?* She'd watched Ben study the painting, golden eyes roaming over the canvas. The reactions that flew across her face were also telegraphed by her body and Cori could read every one. Shock. Puzzlement. Intrigue. It was the last piece she had touched. She'd started work on it shortly after she had arrived two months before, but had stopped suddenly in the middle of it, fighting the urge to throw it away. Since putting down her brush then, she had not returned to pick it up again.

Somehow she had known that if Ben saw it she would get a glimpse of what haunted her. Yet she'd allowed her inside the studio anyway, thinking maybe if she gave a small piece of her inner self away, the twisting pain would ease just a bit. Drawing in a shaky breath, she concentrated on being still and maintaining control, on keeping the whole story from pouring out. She willed herself not to flee into the waiting arms of this woman who stood in the center of her space. Reminding herself that Ben *was*, first and foremost, a reporter, she ruthlessly brought her emotions under control and renewed her resolve to keep her secret.

"This is...so different than the others." Ben turned to Cori, searching her face for the emotion that this canvas hinted at. She found Cori's expression closed and wondered if the shadow of pain in her eyes was mere imagination.

Cori shrugged. "I decided to go a different direction. Stretch myself a little."

“Stretch yourself?” Ben repeated skeptically. “There is obviously more to this painting than an artistic experiment.”

Steeling herself against the memory of the helplessness that had inspired this piece, Cori lied, “Not really. And I think I know my own motivations as an artist.”

“Come on, Cori. I only have to look at this painting to—”

“You know, for someone who has never even seen my work, you suddenly seem to be quite the expert.” Cori took several quick steps into the room before lurching to a halt. She was irrationally angry. Only moments before, she had admitted to herself that she knew Ben would see the turmoil beneath the paint of this canvas, and now she was denying it.

Surprised by Cori’s outburst, Ben said, “I don’t have to be an expert on your work, or even on art in general, to know your painting is telling me something, even if you don’t want to admit it.” When Cori remained stubbornly silent, she went on, “It’s striking. It makes me feel small, and...out of control.”

She supposed it wasn’t surprising that Cori’s expression closed and whatever door had opened during their exchange was once again slammed shut. But she wished it wasn’t the case. She wished she could establish enough trust that Cori would open up to her about something. Anything. Otherwise her interview was going to be sterile and superficial, like almost everything ever written about this woman.

Suddenly Ben understood that the media coverage Cori seemed to thrive on was nothing more than a coat of varnish intentionally applied to distract attention from the truths hidden beneath. Cori exposed only one dimension of herself, and she had no intention of changing that strategy for *Canvassed*. Well, she’s met her match this time. Ben’s articles weren’t fluff pieces. They had depth, and she had no intention of compromising that for anyone.

Ben met Cori’s uncertain gaze and could not resist challenging her. “Or have I got it all wrong, and you’re just painting something to match the office décor for a corporate client?”

“I don’t *do* décor.” Cori shot back, anger flashing in her eyes. Here was the *Cori Saxton* Ben expected.

Unsettled by Ben's accurate appraisal of the piece, and her attitude, Cori turned away, gritting her teeth against the dull ache that had begun behind her eyes. She knew what would come next if she didn't lie down soon.

"I'm going to turn in," she said and headed for the stairs. "Feel free to linger down here as long as you'd like. Please turn off the light when you come up."

"What about my interview?" Ben blurted, caught off guard by Cori's sudden exit. She had planned to interview her that night and catch a flight out the next day.

"Isn't that what we're doing?" Cori called over her shoulder as she ascended the steps. "We can continue tomorrow."



Ben leaned against the headboard of the bed with her cell phone in her hand. Flipping it open, she dialed the number from memory. Seconds later, before she could even say hello, her cousin's excited voice came over the line.

"Is she as unbelievably hot as she looks?"

Ben smiled at the envy. She could practically see Lucy's raised eyebrows and wide green eyes. "She is stunning," she admitted reluctantly, and heard an answering groan from the other end of the phone. "There's something about her that I don't think any photo could convey."

"You sound interested." Lucy could always be counted on to hear nuances that Ben wasn't even aware were in her voice.

"Of course I'm interested. It's my job to be interested," Ben said with forced casualness.

"How's the interview going?"

Here was another question that Ben was unprepared to answer. With a loud sigh, she pushed off the guest bed and paced to the window. Slipping her hand inside the seam where the curtains met, she moved one panel aside to look out. The night sky seemed clearer here than in the city, and Ben imagined that she could see every single star.

"I don't know, Luce. She doesn't even seem to want to do the interview. I'm not sure why she ever agreed. But there's definitely something she's not telling me."

"You mean like a secret?" Lucy leapt to the obvious conclusion. "Is she hiding a lover out there or something?"

"I can't quite get a read on her," Ben said, thinking out loud. She refused to examine the knot twisting in her stomach at the thought of Cori having a mysterious lover. "I expected this self-assured, womanizing—well, you know—everything you read about her in the papers. And she certainly is confident, but there's a vulnerability that I didn't expect."

Aware that she was failing to put into words the fleeting impressions she had gotten throughout the evening, Ben was at a loss for a better way to explain what she had seen. When she first noticed the faint trembling of Cori's hands as she prepared dinner, she had thought she was imagining it. But then later, as they'd argued over the terms of the article, Ben had seen something more than ego behind Cori's insistence on her approval. She'd thought for a moment it was fear, but was certain she must have been mistaken. Cori Saxton didn't come across as the type who was afraid of anything.

"Well, if anyone can get it out of her, it's you. You'll do great." Lucy could always be counted on to have complete faith in Ben.

Thanking her, Ben said good night before hanging up. Moments later, she slipped between the cool cotton sheets and closed her eyes, thoughts of Cori Saxton still drifting in her head.



The full moon cast a silvery light through the windows. Though it was the middle of night, Cori didn't need to turn on any lights as she padded across the living room toward the door to her studio. She'd been dreaming that she stood in front of the easel with a brush in her hand. But when she stroked it across the canvas the paint would not leave the brush. She jerked awake filled with dread that

she would never paint again. Every time she closed her eyes the dream would start all over. *It was just a dream.*

She'd climbed out of bed telling herself she just needed to get a glass of water. She just needed a minute to interrupt the loop so she could find a dreamless sleep. Drawn to the studio, she descended the stairs. Her feet stopped of their own accord as she reached the bottom. She forced herself to continue.

A palette and an assortment of brushes lay on a table next to the easel. She lifted a brush, testing its weight in her hand. Her heart raced and a fine sheen of sweat broke out on her forehead. She'd repeated this ritual before and lost her nerve every time.

This painting was more honest than anything she'd ever done. It was the turmoil, the rage, and the aching fear inside of her splashed across a canvas. She'd started it only hours after receiving the news that had turned her world upside down. Now it remained incomplete. And standing there washed in moonlight, she admitted to herself why. She was afraid if she finished it she might never find the strength to start another.

MS is progressive. I'll be able to watch my body slowly give up on me. There were too many unknowns. No one could tell her when or how the disease would move forward. But with no cure in sight, the only absolute was that it *would* move forward.

"Damn it! I just need one thing to work out right now," she muttered. Just a few months ago she had the golden touch. She couldn't have screwed things up if she'd tried. The irony of her situation wasn't lost on her.

Carbon Black. Cobalt Blue Cerulean. Titanium White. She hefted the palette in her left hand and loaded a brush with her right. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, she was back where she was when she started this piece; it was one of the tricks she'd always relied on, the ability to recall the inspiration almost instantaneously.

Just before the brush touched canvas she felt it. The tiniest of tremors rippled through her hand. Had she not been looking at the brush hairs she wouldn't have noticed them tremble. *Minute tasks.*

She'd been told that in the beginning she would have trouble with minute tasks. *Intention tremors*. It was a deceptive moniker. Intention, implying the tremors occurred on purpose, that she planned them. She hadn't planned a damn thing in weeks except her escape. And look how well that was working out.

Taking a deep breath, she tried one more time, fighting the quiver in her forearm until her fingers began to shake in earnest.

"Damn it!" She flung the palette against the wall. It split in two and crashed to the floor. Tears of frustration welled up in her eyes. She was losing it. And at the worst possible time.

She was still staring at the splashes of paint that were left on the stark white wall when she heard a sound behind her.

"Cori?" Ben's voice was tentative. "What's wrong?"

Cori spun around, the brush still dangling from her traitorous fingertips. Ben stood only a few feet away and she had the irrational urge to fling herself into the reporter's arms. *Reporter. She's a reporter that you've only known for a day. Get a grip, Saxton. This woman doesn't need to know that you're an emotional train wreck.*

"If there's something you need to tell me, off the record—"

"Ben, I've dealt with my fair share of reporters. If it's a good enough story, nothing is ever off the record."

Ben ignored her snide words. "Why is there paint all over your wall?"

"All right. I couldn't sleep so I thought I'd get some work done. I'm feeling a lot pressure to come up with some stuff for a new show, and I haven't been working much lately. It's making me a little nervous."

As Cori spoke, Ben bent to pick up the pieces of the palette. She crossed close enough to hand them over, and that was when she saw the moisture glistening against Cori's cheek.

"So it's work that's got you throwing things?"

Indecision flickered in Cori's eyes. For a second it seemed she would open up, then her expression hardened and Ben witnessed the lie before it reached fruition. There was more happening here than Cori was letting on. She seriously doubted that Cori usually splattered the walls with paint, and the tension in her body was evident. Ben had only known her a short time but she was certain

Cori wasn't crying over work. From the looks of things she hadn't made any progress on the painting.

"Let's just move on," Cori said dismissively. She avoided Ben's eyes, hers darting toward the stairs as if she were about to bolt.

Ben felt an unspoken pressure to move politely in that direction herself, but she resisted, asking gently, "What's the real story behind this painting?"

The compassion in Ben's eyes was nearly Cori's undoing. She wanted to tell her. It would be a relief.

"I can feel it," Ben whispered. "Fear and pain. I can feel it when I look at this painting."

She touched Cori's cheek, brushing away a tear. Cori leaned into her hand almost imperceptibly. It was enough. Ben slid her fingers into the hair that curled against the back of Cori's neck. When she drew Cori closer she was surprised to feel no resistance at all. As Cori's arms came around her waist, Ben smoothed her hands over Cori's back and shoulders. Their thighs brushed and firm breasts pressed into Ben's. She teased her fingertips down the side of Cori's neck and they drew back to stare at each other. *I could kiss her. I barely know her, but God help me, I want to.* There were mere inches between their mouths. Part of her brain insisted that she wasn't the first to fall under Cori's spell, but a growing part of her wondered what Cori's lifestyle cost her. How must it feel to exist in a world where someone always wanted something from you? How could she trust anyone?

Determined to give only what Cori needed, even if just for a moment, Ben just held her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ben stepped out of the bedroom the next morning and slowed to a stop as she walked through the living room. She stared through the expanse of glass as the sun lifted slowly behind the horizon, sending deep reds and oranges dancing across the water toward her. She remained still, entranced as fingers of iridescent color spread over the surface. Several long moments later, startled by a clatter and a growled curse, she headed for the kitchen to find its source.

Cori stood at the counter clad only in flannel boxer shorts and a white T-shirt. She was struggling with a bottle of aspirin; the tremors that shook her hands prevented her from getting the cap off. Swearing again under her breath, she was on the verge of flinging the bottle across the room when Ben crossed to her and held out a hand. “Let me help with that.”

Cori relinquished the bottle and shoved her hands behind her back, hoping Ben hadn’t seen them shaking. Frustrated, she went to the refrigerator and located some orange juice, giving herself time to breathe more evenly. When she felt she had control of herself again, she set the juice on the counter next to her glass and squeezed her eyes tightly shut against the throbbing headache that had ended her restless slumber that morning.

Seconds later, her eyes flew open as Ben touched her arm. She did not resist as Ben slowly cupped her open palm and shook two pills into her hand. As the warmth of Ben’s skin seeped into her own, Cori drew in a shaky breath. It wasn’t so unusual for a woman

to make an effort to get close to her, but what threw Cori off balance was that she wanted so much to let it happen. She stared down at the hand curled protectively around her own before returning her gaze to Ben's face. Warm amber eyes held hers for a moment, asking silently for an explanation. Cori was the first to turn away. Her skin still tingled, and she had practically melted into those eyes.

"Are you okay?" Ben sounded confused.

"I have a headache, that's all," Cori muttered, quickly pouring herself a glass of juice and downing the pills. She was still shaking, except now she was unsure how much could be attributed to the feel of Ben's palm against the back of her hand. "I'm fine."

Sensing she had somehow crossed a line, Ben changed the subject. "Did you see the sunrise? It was beautiful."

"No. I don't think a pretty sky would have helped my head," Cori replied shortly. Moving around the counter and sinking down on one of the bar stools, she rested her head in her hands, willing the pulsing pain to cease. Wanting to send a signal that they could end the small talk now, she added, "Beautiful sunrises are nothing unusual here, anyway."

Hearing the chill in Cori's voice, Ben moved away from the counter. "I'm going to shower and get dressed." *What do I care if she wants to open up to me or not. I've got a job to do. Let's not forget that.* "Is there anything else you need?" she asked from across the kitchen.

Cori spoke without lifting her head. "No. Once the aspirin kicks in, I'll be fine."

"Okay, I'll see you later, then."

"Ben." Cori's voice stopped her as she was stepping through the archway into the living room. She paused, waiting, but didn't turn around. "It's going to be a beautiful day. Come find me in a bit and we'll take a walk outside."

Nodding, Ben walked away. When she reached her bedroom, she closed the door a little too firmly and headed for the bathroom. She quickly stripped off her clothes and turned the shower on, stepping under the spray as soon as it was hot. She lingered for a moment, allowing the scalding water to ease the tightening muscles of her shoulders before reaching for the shampoo. Although she tried

to focus on the mechanical process of washing her hair and cleaning her body, her mind kept replaying the events of last night.

In that brief awkward moment in the studio, she'd sensed a lowering in Cori's guard, as if Cori were inviting her to connect on some level. Now, though, it felt as if the boundaries had shifted again; Cori was obviously trying to reestablish the distance between them. Ben knew it shouldn't matter to her, but it did and she was not sure why. She had reacted immediately and intensely to Cori from the moment she first saw her and the intensity of that response wasn't fading at all. In the kitchen, when she'd seen Cori's obvious distress, it had been all Ben could do to resist the urge to cradle Cori's head and stroke her until her pain went away.

This intense desire to comfort another was something Ben had not felt since she was a child. Back then, she had wanted so badly to erase her brother's pain, and hoped desperately that somehow, if she loved him enough, he would be spared. She had been too young to understand that nothing she could do would take away the cancer destroying his young body. When he died, something inside of her had died with him.

The memory brought tears to her eyes and she turned the shower off abruptly. Minutes later, toweling herself dry in the steam-filled bathroom, she paused to stare at her reflection in the mirror over the sink. Thinking of Randall still triggered that familiar emptiness in her heart, and she knew that the lasting effects of his death were still apparent in her life, especially in the distance that remained between her and her mother. And relationships—Ben considered herself a complete failure at maintaining relationships. She was always the more distant person, always controlled, never feeling the nurturing, loving urges that she thought should be present between two people. Her feelings, it seemed, were entirely internal. She kept all of her emotions carefully buried and could not bring herself to open up to another person.

Her last relationship had survived for six months. She had cared about Heather and enjoyed spending time with her. But she could not give what Heather felt she deserved, and her mistake had been in expecting Heather to understand why.

Heather was not the first woman who had been unable to accept

the emotional distance that Ben needed. Nor, Ben reasoned, would she be the last. Perhaps someday she would meet a woman who could deal with the fact that there would always be a part of herself that Ben withheld. If not, her life would simply remain as it was, which was just fine with her. She didn't need another person to feel complete. She was quite happy with her comfortably solitary life. Wasn't she?

Yet, having known Cori for only a day, Ben found she wanted to soothe the pain that she sensed within the artist. Of course, in that same amount of time, Cori had also frustrated and angered her plenty as well. In fact, she had inspired a wider range of emotions in a day than anyone had in months, and Ben found that disturbing.

Just write the article and get home. You don't need to spend any more time thinking about Cori Saxton or the way she makes you feel.



When her headache eased, Cori took a hot shower and pulled on a pair of baggy khaki cargo shorts and a tight-fitting green T-shirt. Despite the discouraging events of the night before, she wandered downstairs to her studio just as she did every morning, testing.

As she approached the easel, the familiar fear and panic seized her, only this time her mind flooded with the memory of Ben's arms around her. *She caught me in a moment of weakness.* Vulnerable in the aftermath of her attempt at painting, Cori had been unable to maintain her distance as she normally did. Her utter lack of emotional control was not surprising. There seemed to be so many more moments of weakness these days, lapses she would never have allowed in the past.

Frustrated with herself, Cori turned away from the painting she suspected she would never complete and headed back up the stairs. She could regain the ground she'd lost. She just needed to reestablish her professional distance from Ben, and managing the interview as she planned would actually help with that.

Cori made her way outdoors and stretched out on a chaise on the deck, mentally rehearsing questions and answers. She was

making this ordeal worse than it needed to be. All she had to do was give this journalist a printable story and say good-bye to her.

A whiff of lemon verbena floated in the morning air, and she was reminded of a faint citrus scent she'd detected the previous night, standing close to Ben. Disconcerted, Cori glanced up as the subject of her thoughts stepped through the sliding glass door. Although she wanted their association to be more businesslike, she briefly allowed her eyes, which were hidden behind dark sunglasses in deference to the lingering ache in her head, to roam over Ben's body. The journalist had dressed in navy shorts and a white and navy striped polo. Her pale skin was dusted with freckles along her forearms and over the bridge of her nose. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, leaving just a few stray wisps to curl over her ear and touch the back of her neck. The overall effect made her appear much younger than her thirty-one years.

Cori stood as Ben approached. "How about a walk down to the river?" she offered, determined to put last night out of her mind.

"Lead the way," Ben answered agreeably.

They took the stairs off the back of the deck and followed the stone path past the pool. Cori moved to the side, allowing room for Ben to walk next to her. Despite continued predictions of bad weather, the morning sun was holding firmly amidst the scattered clouds.

Ben felt her pale skin tightening under the warmth of the sun and glanced over at Cori, envying her smooth, even tan. She was oddly reluctant to break their comfortable silence, but she also wanted to put Cori at ease if she could, by making some harmless conversation. "Do you spend a lot of time outdoors?"

"I have recently, since I've been here."

A light breeze swept across the lawn, lifting strands of Cori's sun-bleached hair. Ben's fingers itched once again to discover whether the golden strands were as soft as they looked. Aggravated by her heightened physical awareness of Cori, she curled her hands into fists at her sides and forced her eyes away from the artist. A butterfly fluttered in front of her before settling gracefully on one of the brightly colored flowers that lined the path. They were approaching the small area in the path that had been expanded to

create a small sitting area, with a stone bench surrounded by various shrubs and plants.

“Your landscaping is gorgeous,” she complimented Cori.

“Henry’s wife, Alma, has the green thumb. I’m not usually here enough to tend to plants.” Though she enjoyed the overall effect, Cori had little interest in the names or qualities of the various types of vegetation. Landscaping had never been important to her; even when she bought the place it had been low on her list of priorities. Alma had taken it upon herself to create the gardens as a gift to Cori for making Henry feel useful again. She’d told Cori in confidence that since he retired he’d been driving her nuts hanging around the house. The several hours a week that he spent working at Cori’s seemed to help.

For her part, Cori now appreciated the gardens beyond measure. Alma seemed to have sensed that she wouldn’t need over-the-top bursts of color. Instead, she designed the garden for its aromatic qualities, choosing soothing lavender and varieties of evergreens as well as other fragrant flowers. During her visits, those far too rare moments of tranquility she was able to steal were often spent in the garden with a sketch pad. The rough pencil drawings of whatever flower, butterfly, or bird caught her attention would most likely never see a canvas, but she enjoyed creating them all the same. They proved a good exercise for her skills as well as an enjoyable diversion.

As they approached the dock, Cori saw Henry and gave him a wave. As usual, he was taking his maintenance job very seriously. When Cori had asked him to keep everything in working order, she had not imagined he would ruthlessly investigate every rusty nail and every inch of timber on the property; however, she was thankful that he did. Alma was happy that he found so much work for himself, and Cori was relieved that she never had to find tradesmen for every tiny repair.

“Just replacing a few boards.” Henry pulled a loose plank from the steps leading to the dock and set it aside. Dropping a new one in its place, he secured it efficiently. “Alma’s going to town later for groceries, do you need anything?”

“I think we’re all set, Henry.” Cori turned to Ben, raising an eyebrow. “Is there anything you need?”

“Oh, no. I was actually planning on leaving sometime this afternoon, assuming I get what I need from you this morning.”

Cori was aware that her eyebrows had risen even farther at Ben’s choice of words, her mind filling with images of just what Ben might need. Before she could form a reply Henry spoke again.

“Actually, Miss McClain, there’s a storm coming this way. It looks to hit us soon. With the amount of rain they are forecasting, it wouldn’t be advisable to try and get down the drive.” He squinted up at Ben from where he knelt. “I don’t think you’ll be going anywhere until it lets up.”

Ben glanced at Cori in disbelief. “But I have to—”

“We’ll discuss it in a bit and decide what you should do,” Cori interjected, smoothly dismissing Ben’s objections. She turned her attention back to Henry. “I’ll call you and let you know when it’s time to pick her up.”

Irritated at being brushed off, Ben was about to protest when she saw the look that passed between Cori and Henry. The older man’s face was etched with concern. Cori’s expression was an odd mix of a warning stare and a plea.

When Henry spoke again, his voice was low and serious. “Call me if you need anything, Cori. I mean it. Alma and I can both come over if there’s a problem.”

“Henry.” Cori’s voice held a warning tone.

Puzzled by the standoff, Ben toyed with the idea of asking if she was missing something, but she was sure that even a flippant inquiry would aggravate Cori, and she didn’t need that before their interview. She decided she would interview Henry before she left, perhaps during their ride to the airport if not before. Obviously he knew something about Cori that he was not supposed to mention.

“I’ll be off now.” Henry stood and gave Cori another long look, absently brushing his hands against his denim-clad legs. “I’ll come back and finish up here this afternoon if the storm passes quickly enough.”

Cori smiled in response, making Ben far too aware of the cocky

way her lips lifted, slightly higher on one side. She moved toward the end of the dock, stepping around Henry, stretching her long legs to skip the step that he had just pulled up. At the top she glanced back and offered her hand to Ben, once again enjoying the warm skin against hers as Ben allowed herself to be helped up. Cori held her hand a moment longer than necessary and Ben's fingers tingled at the contact. The heat in Cori's eyes surprised her. Her thick lashes lowered slowly and then lifted again. Unable to tear her gaze away, Ben swallowed hard as Cori's eyes darkened to a deep indigo hue. Ben realized that the arousal spreading heavily through her limbs was mirrored in those eyes.

"Ben," Cori whispered, letting her eyes drop to caress Ben's full lips. *I have to kiss her.* When she would have lowered her head, the sound of Henry's cordless screwdriver was a timely reminder that they were not alone. Shaking her head quickly, she forced her attention elsewhere, released Ben's hand, and led the way up the dock.

Ben's low whistle drew her attention as they stopped beside the Chaparral Signature 276.

"Nice." Ben's eyes ran the length of the sleek white craft. "Twenty-six feet?"

"Twenty-eight." Cori glanced with pride at the cruiser. As was true with most things she set her mind to, she had paid exquisite attention to detail, ordering the boat to her exact specifications. She had been involved in every aspect of the customizing.

Ben read aloud the words written in a flowing script across the back: "*Saxton's Pleasure.*" She raised an eyebrow, and Cori simply grinned, making Ben's heartbeat accelerate as she glimpsed the woman who had stolen so many hearts. *And she certainly knows it,* she thought cynically.

Oddly, she found she much preferred the very human woman who had held her hand and looked at her with sudden, shy desire only moments before. "Do you mind?" she asked permission before she boarded the boat.

At Cori's sweeping gesture to proceed, she stepped carefully across the expanse between the dock and the boat. She moved through the cockpit with ease, ducking as she descended into the

cabin. Cori had obviously spared no expense in decorating her toy. The cabin had a double bed, a small dinette, and a well-laid-out galley and head. Tucked into one corner was a 15-inch LCD television and DVD player. When she stepped back outside, Cori was lounging in one of the seats.

"She's beautiful," Ben said. "Do we have time to take her out before the storm?"

Cori hesitated. Aware of the lingering effects of her earlier headache in the tenderness behind her eyes, she did not quite feel up to the concentration required to navigate the boat on the crowded river. She didn't want to explain why she shouldn't be driving her own boat.

Seeing her hesitation, Ben rushed to retract her words. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"No. It's not that—" Angry with her own inadequacies, Cori's words came out harsher than she intended and she bit them off when she realized how they sounded. Having the reporter here was proving more difficult than she had anticipated and it was making her decidedly short-tempered. She took a deep breath, deciding that maybe if she stalled, she would feel up to a short jaunt soon enough. "Actually, we probably don't have time," she lied smoothly, her mask firmly back in place. "But maybe we can squeeze something in when the rain clears up."

CHAPTER FIVE

Cori served Ben an early lunch on the deck. She'd thrown together thick ham sandwiches, wedges of cheese, and fresh fruit. As they finished eating, Ben leaned back in her chair and sighed contentedly. She glanced around, once again in awe of her surroundings. She had certainly been around wealthy people before and had seen larger, more impressive homes. But something about the secluded, comfortable retreat that Cori had created drew her in. And glancing at the woman beside her, she wondered if that wasn't the purpose of it all. By all accounts, Cori had no problem finding female companionship. Was this lovely home just part of the package? Suddenly, Ben's head was filled with images of unsuspecting female victims being lured to the beautiful estate by the charming artist.

"I bet this place really impresses the women." She voiced her thoughts before she realized she had spoken aloud.

The sarcastic words made it clear exactly who Ben thought Cori was—who everyone thought she was. *Have I really given anyone any reason to think otherwise?* For years she had lived up to her reputation, enjoying the reckless life she'd grown accustomed to. And, she admitted to herself, had things not played out the way they had, she might never have had a reason to change her life. She still found all types of women attractive, but she had begun to spend more time thinking about what she wanted from her life beyond the meaningless hookups and extravagant lifestyle. She had begun to realize that she could count on one hand the number of people with

whom she had ever really been genuine—to whom she had related on more than a superficial level.

For reasons she couldn't explain, Cori wanted to be truthful with Ben. She wanted to tell her that she had never brought a woman here, that it had always been her own private retreat. She wanted to tell her how her life had suddenly changed and what had made her reconsider how empty her own existence had become. By the time she had dragged herself to this upstate retreat, she could no longer remember how many women she had slept with. She had hazy memories of her most recent encounters, some involving more than one woman, but she had not been sufficiently lucid at the time to hold on to details. Looking back over the past year, Cori realized she had run the gamut from one type of woman to the next, rarely discriminating based on sexuality or marital status. She had learned early on that among the wealthy, sexuality was a flexible concept and marriage did not preclude affairs. *Straight* women often did not remain so for very long. However, they were never inclined to leave their wealthy husbands no matter how prosperous the other woman, because status was about more than just money.

Not that Cori had ever stayed with a sexual partner long enough, or been interested enough, to ask her to leave a husband or wife. She hadn't changed all that much now, she rationalized; she simply had less stamina.

A voice in her head reminded her that Ben was a journalist, and whatever direction their discussions took, the most salacious content would undoubtedly end up in print. Ben might seem to be a genuine person, but just like everyone else, she wanted something. Cori chose to give her the response she expected.

Flashing her most devastating smile, sure to make women melt, keeping her voice low and sexy, she responded to Ben's comment. "You tell me. Are you impressed?"

Ben frowned, confused by the mixed message she had detected. Cori's words and tone were seductive, but this seemed to be at odds with an underlying emotion Ben sensed beneath them. Disappointment? Cynicism? She wasn't sure.

"As a matter of fact, I am. And I become more impressed the more I learn about you." Ben answered honestly.

Everything she had discovered about this woman since she'd arrived had added unexpected facets to the enigma that was Cori Saxton. She had accepted this assignment thinking that it would be easy and that the only complication would be convincing Cori to bend her rule about approving the article. Having skimmed over the folder of information Mitchell had provided, she had thought Cori would be somewhat one-dimensional. However, there was more beneath the surface than Ben could have imagined, though she found it difficult to discern if any of it was real, or if she was merely falling for the "public persona."

Cori shifted uneasily in her chair. Most women would have responded to her flirtatious remark with something in kind, but she had a feeling she could take Ben's reply at face value. It wasn't easy to continue a seductive banter with a woman who seemed more interested in honest communication; Cori had to admit Ben had surprised her. Looking for a way out of their conversation, she glanced at the sky, which had become dark and heavy with clouds while they had their meal. The breeze was cooler now and carried on it the scent of impending rain. She was just thinking the storm was definitely coming their way when the first drop of rain hit her arm.

"It looks like we're about to be chased inside," she said, gesturing to several wet drops that now splattered the table. Standing, she began gathering up their empty plates. Ben followed her inside. "Make yourself comfortable in the living room. I'm going to straighten the kitchen and then I'll join you and we can talk about that article of yours."



Ben sat at one end of the sofa with her legs curled beneath her. The file Mitchell had given her was open in her lap, and she was busy making notes in a spiral notebook. She liked to make notes rather than using a tape recorder because it forced her to capture her impressions of her subject. With a tape, it was much easier to rely on the recording to recall her interviewee's words, and she could lose the small details, for example, the change in a person's expression as they answered a particular question. Taking notes allowed her to

focus on jotting down those impressions as they happened. Later, she would transfer her notes into her laptop.

She glanced up as lightning streaked across the turbulent sky. The rumble of thunder followed almost immediately. The wind whipped against the window, tearing at the trees outside, their leaves turning their backs in an effort to hold on against the onslaught. She was captivated by the power of the storm, the violence of nature—the same force that had astonished her with its beauty in the sunrise that morning.

Cori stood poised at the entrance to the living room watching as Ben seemed lost in the theatrics outside the window. Another flash of lightning flickered over Ben's face, casting her normally soft features into sharp contrast. Crossing to the sofa, Cori settled on the opposite end.

Reluctantly, Ben tore her eyes from the raging storm and turned toward her. "If this passes in a couple of hours, I can probably still get a flight today."

"I think you should wait until tomorrow and see if it lets up before you think about trying to get out of here," Cori said.

As if to punctuate her point, another bolt of lightning shot through the sky and seemed to strike the surface of the river. Ben jumped at the clap of thunder that followed. Just a couple of feet from her, the large windowpanes vibrated. Glancing nervously at the sheets of glass that were all that stood between them and the storm, Ben laughed. "How can I argue with that?"

"We're perfectly safe," Cori assured her, a little surprised by the genuine fear she glimpsed in Ben's body language. Ben closed the notebook in front of her, wondering just exactly how transparent she was. Cori seemed to know what she was thinking without very much effort.

"Is that my life story?" Cori teased, indicating the file in Ben's lap.

Ben glanced down. "I don't think it's quite that complete. It's just some background Mitchell gave me."

Cori startled her by lifting the file from her lap. Turning it around, she slowly flipped through the various candid photos, most of which were taken at this party or that bar. A large number showed

Cori with her arms around an array of beautiful women. Looking at the photos upside down, Ben was disconcerted to find she was silently comparing herself to the women in the pictures. Pushing her thoughts aside before she could examine the disappointment she felt, she lifted her gaze to Cori's face, trying to read her expression. Cori's eyebrows drew together as she studied the images. She looked detached, Ben thought, as if she were leafing through photos of some other woman, not herself.

Cori struggled to remember what she had found so appealing about those times. Certainly she'd never had a shortage of beautiful women around her, and as she looked at their faces now, flashes of encounters with them went through her mind like a slide show. But if she was being honest, she couldn't even remember most of their names; and if she was being brutally honest, she would admit most of her memories of those times were clouded in a drug-induced haze. When she was on a deadline for a show, she would stay up all night, playing hard, then use whatever chemical means necessary to stay up all day working. When the show was over and she could finally relax, she would crash, allowing herself as much rest as she could eke out before her friends started calling again to lure her to another party. There was always another party, and another girl, and looking at the pictures, she could not help but feel slightly bitter. They'd been more than willing to take everything she gave, but would any of them know how to give her what she needed most of all—someone to trust? She ached with emptiness at the thought.

"What is it?" Ben asked, struck by the sadness seeping into Cori's face. She knew she was pushing, and she told herself that it was for the sake of the article. Stifling the urge to reach out and touch the other woman, she watched with dismay as Cori shook off whatever reflection had hold of her and purposefully slid her walls back into place.

"It's nothing." She closed the file and handed it back to Ben. She'd already revealed too much of herself to this reporter, and here she was dangerously close again. She stared out the window watching the wind rip at the saplings Alma had planted that spring. She felt like one of those little trees; she stood as tall as she could, and life ripped at her and pushed against her. Sometimes it felt as if

there was only so much she could bend and sway before she would break.

Feeling that she had effectively been closed out, Ben changed the subject. "Henry seems like a very nice guy."

"Yes, he is. These past years he has really been as much a family to me as my—" Cori broke off as she realized what she was saying.

"Tell me about them," Ben requested gently, attempting to ease Cori into a deeper conversation. She needed to move the interview process along but she was curious. She wanted to know more of Cori. She wanted to know what had shaped her life and made her who she was, and she wanted to watch Cori's face as she told her.

"Don't you have all that in there?" Cori pointed to the file, torn between the comfortable feeling she seemed to have, inherently, with Ben, and the reminder that everything she said was destined for a magazine article. It couldn't really hurt to talk about her family. With the public exposure they'd had for as long as she could remember, there certainly wasn't much she could say now that Ben couldn't find out with a little research.

"I want to hear it from you. It's different than reading someone else's words." Ben hesitated, thinking about just how unusual this whole assignment was turning out to be. "You intrigue me," she admitted. "And I want to get to know you. Don't think about the article, let's just have a conversation."

Cori seemed to be considering this request. Slowly she nodded. "Well, as you already no doubt know, my parents come from money—I come from money. My father worked very hard to make sure our family's wealth was secure. He values what we have, in a way that I don't think I ever really have." The words were spoken as if she was just then realizing the truth in them. Shrugging off her own seriousness, she laughed softly as she continued, "I'm an only child, and I think he always wanted a son. I guess he was pleasantly surprised when I was more interested in cars than in dolls."

"What about your mother?"

Cori's dry laugh surprised Ben. "My mother—hmm, where to start. My mother is the quintessential society wife. She is very concerned with appearances." This time Cori's tone was self-

deprecating. “Needless to say, almost everything I do drives her absolutely crazy.

“When I told her I was going to be an artist, she didn’t speak to me for weeks.” Cori explained. “Every time a new tabloid comes out, she calls me and swears she is having a heart attack.”

Ben shifted her eyes to Cori’s face and found a faraway look. Cori’s words dripped with sarcasm, but Ben sensed an underlying affection as she talked about her parents. A small line marred her otherwise smooth forehead and Ben wanted to reach up and rub her fingers over it. Instead she busied herself making discreet notes.

“If she only knew,” Cori said softly, thinking about the secrets she had managed to keep from her mother. Changing the subject, she asked, “What about you? Are you close to your parents?”

“Not exactly,” Ben answered evasively, determined not to allow the focus of their discussion to be hijacked.

“Not exactly?” Cori raised an eyebrow. She knew very little about Ben personally and, oddly, she found she was genuinely interested.

Sighing, Ben decided she would have to give a little to get a little. She’d interviewed subjects who were so eager to talk that they practically spilled their life story before she could pose a question. Cori was not going to be one of those people.

“My father left when”—Ben stumbled over her words, swallowing the explanation of her father’s abandonment after her brother got sick—“when I was young. And my mother and I haven’t been close in a long time.” When Cori remained silent, Ben went on. “Since a very early age, I’ve always been very independent emotionally.” She omitted the fact that most of her independence had been out of necessity.

Cori nodded. “Well, that’s not necessarily a bad thing, is it? I mean being independent.”

“I don’t think so, but people don’t really seem to understand when I sometimes seem distant.”

“And by *people* you mean men.” It was an obvious ploy, but Cori realized that she didn’t know for sure if Ben was gay or straight. She had guessed gay, but now seemed like as good a time as any to bring it up.

Ben smiled, charmed by Cori's blatant curiosity. "Actually, by *people*, I mean women."

Meeting her eyes, Cori smiled back and as an understanding passed between them, she acknowledged it and filed it away for future consideration. She realized that as they had talked they had shifted closer to one another. Mere inches now separated them on the sofa and she had no inclination to move away.

They continued to talk while the storm raged on outside, rain pelting the windows in a steady rhythm. Ben jotted the occasional note. Mostly, though, she just listened, enjoying the soft, almost lazy cadence of Cori's voice and the casual way she gestured as she spoke. Most of what they were talking about was in the background information she already had, and therefore probably wasn't going to be in her article. She wanted a new angle, and sometime during their conversation she decided that she would stay as long as necessary in order to get it.

Eventually, she knew she was avoiding the question that would most likely interrupt the comfortable rapport they had developed. Despite their rough start, Ben sensed they had developed a tentative truce and she was reluctant to break it, but she had a job to do.

After taking a deep breath, she asked the question that would break the spell. "What are you running from?"

"I've been working nonstop for so many years. I have some big shows coming up next year. And I just needed a break," Cori answered coldly. The words sounded hollow even to her ears. Though she'd known she couldn't avoid the question indefinitely, Ben's intent gaze caught her off guard.

Ben could not believe what she was hearing. After dropping everything to come here, and breaking her own rule about approval, all because Mitchell believed there was a real story, this was what she got? *Burnout made me do it*? The excuse was so feeble, and so patently a half-truth, she asked incredulously, "I'm supposed to believe all this is nothing more than a case of burnout? You have creative exhaustion, so I have to drag myself out here and try to find something interesting to write about?" Cori bent her head to stare at her lap, avoiding eye contact. It had sounded like an okay excuse in her head, but Ben had seen right through it and she was angry,

really angry. Now that she thought about it, Cori supposed Ben must be insulted on some level. Gretchen had made a big deal about her wanting to go on the record with a personal revelation about her solitude, so a serious journalist had been sent out for the scoop. But the big announcement was: *I'm tired and taking a break.*

"Why all the mystery?" Ben made the argument Mitchell had presented only days before. "If you wanted a break, you only had to say so."

"Well, there is a bit more to it than that." Cori's mouth felt like it was full of dust.

"I'm listening." Ben regarded her with a stare that was far too penetrating.

Cori's mind raced. There had to be some way she could give Ben what she needed without having to bare her soul. "I...it's difficult. It's...something personal."

Surprised by the intensity of her anger, Ben held herself in check with difficulty. "If you don't want to tell me the real reason, I'll have to accept that. Although, if that's the case, I don't know what I am doing here, because I thought it was understood that the personal reason for your withdrawal from the party circuit was to be the focus of the article."

"Why don't you just make something up? Isn't that what you reporters do?" She knew it was unfair to lump Ben in with the tabloid hounds, but she said it anyway. Ben jerked as if she'd been slapped. But when she spoke her voice was carefully controlled and carried only a trace of the anger that leapt into her eyes.

"Please don't insult my intelligence. I won't write a weak article full of excuses just for the sake of putting something out there to make your privileged life easier." Ben paused, not wanting to examine her feelings at knowing Cori was intentionally deceiving her. After all, it wasn't the first time a subject had tried to be less than truthful; they all wanted to construct their own public image. But it was the first time she had taken it personally.

She searched Cori's eyes, seeing the fear that clouded them and wishing she could understand its origin. When she spoke again her words were hard and held an edge of warning. "Don't lie to me again, Cori. I can't respect that."

Before Cori could respond, Ben stood and stormed out of the room.

“Fuck,” Cori muttered under her breath, staring at Ben’s retreating back.



Ben’s anger cooled only slightly as she closed the door to her bedroom. She paced the room, wondering why she had gotten so keyed up over Cori’s evasiveness. After all, she’d certainly dealt with more difficult subjects without losing her cool. *So what is it about Cori Saxton that gets under my skin? Certainly she’s attractive*, Ben admitted. *Hell, she exudes sensuality. But that doesn’t mean I can’t be objective. Does it? She can’t be the most attractive woman I’ve ever been around.*

In truth, it was more than her physical appeal that drew Ben to her. It was those moments of vulnerability she sensed in Cori that fascinated her. There was something beneath the surface of Cori Saxton that had affected her profoundly. And despite her calmly delivered threat, Ben doubted she’d find the strength to walk away without knowing more.

Lifting her laptop from its case, she lowered herself onto the bed and sat cross-legged with the computer in her lap. For the next twenty minutes, she concentrated on transferring her notes to the file she had set up for the Saxton article and adding some spontaneous impressions. As she worked her mood calmed and she was able to detach from her emotions.

She was just finishing up when her cell phone interrupted. Glancing at the caller ID, she sighed heavily.

“Mitchell.” She managed to keep her voice even and controlled as she greeted him.

“Ben, how is everything going up there?”

“Things are going as expected,” she lied easily.

“Then I don’t have to explain to you what the word ‘deadline’ means?”

Ben bristled at his sarcasm. “Did you or did you not tell me to do what I have to do to get you this story?”

“I did, but—”

“Then trust me, Mitchell. And try to remember the reason you sent *me* up here instead of someone else was to get a feature that will boost your circulation.”

“Jesus,” Mitchell grumbled. “Sorry.”

“Just let me do my job,” Ben said curtly. She flipped her phone closed and tossed it on the bed. “Shit,” she hissed through her teeth.

CHAPTER SIX

Replaying Ben's parting words in her head, Cori wandered into the kitchen and reached for the cordless phone from the wall. When she heard the familiar voice on the other end of the line, she felt some of the tension release inside of her.

"I'm just checking in." She forced a casual tone.

"Hey, sweetie, how are you?" Gretchen's voice sounded as strained as hers.

"I'm good. How are you?"

"You know what I mean. How are you feeling?"

"A little better." Cori sighed, certain Gretchen would recognize the lie for what it was.

"It's already been over two months, Cori. Maybe you should call Dr. Franklin."

"The tremors aren't getting any worse right now." Cori could picture the frown on Gretchen's face. "I can't very well go down to see him while Ben is here, maybe after she leaves." On some level she knew that Gretchen's concern was not baseless. This particular relapse had lasted longer than the previous one.

"Ben?"

"I'm sorry, the reporter, Bennett McClain."

"You haven't told her the truth, have you?" Gretchen's concern was evident.

"Not yet."

"*Not yet?* Jesus, Cori, she's a reporter. Everything you say will go straight into Mitchell Gardner's damn magazine." Gretchen

raised her voice. “I thought the plan was to tell him—*her* the exhaustion story, drop a few hints about rehab, and get rid of her fast.”

“Do you think I need you to tell me that?” Cori shot back, matching her tone.

“I’m sorry, I’m just worried about you.”

“I know.”

“Are you taking your meds?”

“Yes, but you know how they make me feel.” More than once, Gretchen had held a wet cloth to her head while she lay shaking and sweating in bed. Gretchen had also witnessed the severe headaches that were a side effect of the drugs.

“I know. But Dr. Franklin said that should lessen. You’ve only been on the Betaseron for a couple of months.” Cori’s doctor had prescribed the medication—a drug in the family of interferons, which are intended to assist in the regulation of the immune system—in an effort to reduce the frequency and severity of her relapses. The side effects she had been experiencing were expected to lessen over time as her body acclimated to the drug.

“I know.”

Cori surged to her feet, turning as she did and stopping short when she came face-to-face with Ben hovering near the kitchen threshold. *Shit, how long has she been standing there?* Cori frantically searched her mind to recall her side of the conversation thus far, wondering if she’d given anything away.

“Cori?” Gretchen’s voice startled her. She hadn’t realized that she still held the phone to her ear. Unaware of what she was saying, she quickly mumbled an excuse and hung up, her eyes never leaving Ben’s face.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.” Ben had been about to back out of the room when Cori caught her standing there. She hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but when she heard Cori’s raised voice and obvious frustration, she had lingered for a moment.

Cori stared at her for a minute longer and then waved away the apology. “It’s okay. We were just having a professional difference of opinion.”

Cori moved to return the phone to the cradle at the same time as

Ben stepped into the room. They passed within inches of each other, and Cori's stomach tightened in reaction to the citrus scent drifting from Ben. *Shampoo*. Cori recognized the brand that she kept stocked in her guest bathroom. *Get a grip, Saxton, it's just shampoo*.

Still unsteady from her conversation with Gretchen, and unsure just how much Ben had overheard, Cori hastily excused herself and slipped from the kitchen. In the past, her studio had always felt like a refuge. Now, as she went down the stairs, apprehension coiled inside of her with every step. She'd decided to increase the frequency of her visits to the studio with the intention of at least dulling the sharp edges of her reaction.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she stared unseeingly across the room. Stalling, she let her mind wander back over her earlier conversation with Ben. She could no longer remember why she had agreed to the interview thinking that she could convince an astute journalist that something severe enough to send her fleeing her active social life was as simple as professional fatigue. But as she considered it, Cori realized that she hadn't really had the energy for that life for some time. She had been growing bored with the same faces and the constant stream of women who were only interested in her money and the attention they gained by being seen with her and had continued with her routine mostly out of habit.

Cori almost laughed at herself. Apparently a couple of days with a woman like Ben was enough to convince her that she had been seeking out the wrong women. *A woman like Ben?* Cori was not even sure she knew what that meant. There seemed to be so much about Ben she didn't know, such as what caused the sadness in her eyes when she talked about her family. They'd barely interacted on anything more than a professional level, but there were things about Ben that she just seemed to be able to sense, like her underlying strength, honesty, and straightforwardness.

Ben's warning as she'd left the living room earlier echoed in her mind. *Don't lie to me again, Cori. I can't respect that*. Why was gaining Ben's respect suddenly so important?

She took several hesitant steps toward the canvas in the center of the room. Her gaze traced the vibrant lines of the painting, and she recalled the numbing fear and hurt that tore at her every time she

put a brush to this canvas. *This is what Ben wants. She wants me to show her where this came from.*

Could she do it? Could she tell Ben the whole story? She found the idea decidedly less frightening than she might have thought. But Gretchen was right—if she did so, she did it with the knowledge that Ben would print it. If she told her, it wouldn't be fair to ask her not to.



Ben found Henry by the river again, working to repair portions of the dock. As her footsteps sounded on the wooden planks, he spared her only a glance before returning to work.

"That storm passed through quickly," she commented as she approached.

"It certainly did, Ms. McClain," he said between fastening boards. "It's going to be a nice afternoon."

"Will it disturb you if I sit for a while?" Ben waited until he gestured for her to go ahead, then sat down, dangling her legs over the edge of the dock. "How long have you known Cori?" she asked as Henry continued to work.

"About five years."

"Does she spend much time here?"

He paused in his work. Setting down his hammer, he regarded her silently for a moment before he answered. "Ms. McClain, with all due respect, aren't you here to interview Cori?"

"Yes, I am, Mr. Rollins. But it's not unusual for me to interview friends and family for a celebrity feature like this. Besides, she hasn't exactly been an open book." She didn't pretend innocence; he knew she was fishing for information.

"Well, then, I don't know what you hope I can tell you. But you should be asking her instead of me," he replied resolutely.

"If you are worried about your job, I can guarantee you complete anonymity with regard to anything you tell me," Ben offered confidently. She had experienced token resistance before. But she'd also found that the wealthier a subject was, the less loyal their employees turned out to be. The promise of confidentiality

often elicited the information she needed. However, there was a line between assuring a source remained anonymous and offering to pay for information. Regardless of what Cori seemed to think of her, Ben would never cross that line; despite the attractive rates, she did not work for tabloids.

Instead of being insulted by her assumption about his loyalty, Henry simply chuckled at her impertinence. “Ask Cori,” he repeated.

“Ask Cori what?”

Ben jumped at the words spoken so closely behind her. She hadn’t heard Cori approaching them and wondered how much she had heard. “Nothing,” she mumbled.

Henry stood and gathered his tools. “I’ve got to get home. The grandkids are due to visit this evening. I’ll see you later, Cori.”

“What did you get him so fired up about?” Cori joked after he left.

Ben tilted her head back to look up at Cori. “I have a feeling he doesn’t get fired up about anything.”

Feeling at a disadvantage, she scrambled to her feet, only to realize that she was face-to-face with Cori, entirely too close for comfort. She immediately stepped back and was startled when Cori firmly grasped her waist and pulled her closer. Ben gripped Cori’s shoulders automatically in an effort to steady herself.

“You don’t have much room back there.” Cori glanced down at their feet.

Ben followed her gaze to find that she stood only inches from the edge of the dock and would most likely have stepped backward right off it. Her words of gratitude died in her throat as Cori’s indigo eyes moved languorously over her face. She could practically feel their unhurried caress.

“Ben,” Cori whispered. Her skin burned through her shirt where Ben’s hands rested on her shoulders. A pulse point jumped rapidly at Ben’s throat, and for a moment, Cori allowed herself to wonder how that skin would feel beneath her lips. Would it be slightly salty and sun-warmed?

“Yes.” Ben’s eyes were riveted on Cori’s lips. She could lean just a few inches and touch them with her own.

Cori looked past Ben's shoulder toward the river. "We have company." Reluctantly dropping her hands, she stepped away. As soon as she had gained some distance, she mentally kicked herself. What happened to keeping things on a professional footing? Her resolve seemed to die as soon as they were within a few feet of each other.

Ben turned to see a flashy white and yellow boat approaching the dock. As it neared, the two occupants waved enthusiastically.

"Hey, Saxton." The shorter one greeted Cori with a wide grin as they pulled alongside the dock. Dark sunglasses screened her eyes, and her short blond hair stood on end.

"Hello, ladies," Cori returned the greeting.

"How about joining us for a little cruise?" the other woman called out. "Grab your swimsuits."

"We'll be right back," Cori replied, evidently taking Ben's agreement for granted.

"I didn't bring a swimsuit," Ben said quietly as Cori steered her toward the house.

Cori's eyes raked over Ben from head to toe. "I'm sure I have something that will fit you."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cori handed over the small cooler she had stuffed with drinks and snacks, then stepped onto the boat. Holding out her hand, she helped Ben on board, ignoring the swift stab of pleasure that she was coming to expect whenever they touched.

Ben settled into the bench seat on the side of the cockpit, and Cori dropped down beside her. The blonde slowly backed the boat away from the dock, turning it downriver.

"Guys, this is Ben, she's here to do a story on me for *Canvassed*. Ben, our driver over there is Janet, and," Cori gestured toward the petite redhead who sat to their left, "this is Karen."

Ben smiled at them both.

"Nice to meet you, Ben," Janet said with a friendly grin. "Hey, Saxton, how've you been?"

"I've been good," Cori lied.

"We haven't seen you on the water lately."

"I've been busy. Working." Another lie.

They anchored in a small inlet away from the swifter currents of the river and snacked on sandwiches, potato chips, and chocolate chip cookies. Cori passed out bottles of cold beer and soda. As they ate, Ben made mental notes while Cori and Janet took turns trading stories. They had known each other since Cori bought the house. Janet and Karen had been seeing each other for two years and were now living together.

"Janet has always been the more outgoing of the two of us," Cori explained, turning to Ben.

“Yeah, right. Remember that time we drove up to Montreal, and you—”

“Oh, no, no, you can’t tell that story,” Cori interrupted vehemently.

“What was that woman’s name? Kristen? Kaitlyn? Something like that.” Janet tilted her head back, fingertip to her chin, as if struggling to recall the details. She grinned as Cori shot across the small expanse of the boat and put a hand playfully over her mouth.

“Please, Janet, I’m begging. Don’t tell that story. Is that really the story you want my mother reading about in Ben’s article?”

Laughing, Janet pulled her head free from Cori’s grasp. “Come on, Saxton, I’m not buying that. Your mother has heard a lot worse about you.”

Giving up, Cori resumed her perch beside Ben and turned imploring eyes on her. “Don’t believe a word she says.” She lowered her voice, whispering loudly enough for Janet to hear. “She has a very rich fantasy life.” She ducked as a cookie flew at her head.

“Okay, you big baby,” Janet relented. “Come on, let’s go swimming.” She quickly stripped off her shorts and T-shirt and jumped in the cool water.

Standing, Cori pulled her tank top over her head, revealing a lean, tight torso clad only in a light blue bikini top. Ben stared as Cori dropped her shorts and approached the edge of the boat. Seemingly unaware of the effect she was having on Ben, Cori slipped over the edge, following her friend into the water.

Swallowing hard, Ben tore her eyes away from the spot where Cori had just been. In the space of a few moments, the image of Cori’s nearly perfect body was burned behind her eyes.

“Pretty impressive, huh?” Karen slid onto the seat beside her.

“Uh—” Ben flushed.

Karen laughed at Ben’s obvious discomfort at being caught ogling Cori. “She’s gotten thinner since the last time I saw her, though,” she remarked innocently.

Ben flashed on the image of Cori just before she slid into the water. Her abdomen was tight and flat, and her tanned skin stretched tautly over her ribs. Firm breasts and strong shoulders and arms were no doubt made so by hours spent standing behind an easel.

Suddenly Ben was struck with an overwhelming urge to watch Cori paint—to see whether her motions were smooth and measured or if they were frantic, as if she was trying desperately to capture an image before it fled her mind.

Hearing Karen clear her throat beside her, Ben flushed deeper. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

“Girl, please, if I wasn’t happily married, you’d have some competition,” Karen teased.

“Oh, no,” Ben rushed to correct her. “It’s not like that.”

“Uh-huh, sure.” Aware of Ben’s growing embarrassment, Karen relented. However, she didn’t buy the denials for a second. She had seen the way Ben looked at Cori. And from the glances she had seen her friend returning when she thought no one noticed, Karen was willing to bet that the feeling was mutual. Even if neither of them knew it yet, they definitely set sparks off each other.



“Are you enjoying yourself?” Cori turned her head lazily to the side to study Ben. The journalist’s cheeks and nose were tinged pink from exposure to the late morning sun. A strand of hair, still wet from their swim, clung to her cheek, and Cori’s fingers itched to brush it back but she was not sure that the caress would be welcome.

“I am. Very much.” Ben was ridiculously aware of Cori stretched out on the seat beside her.

“Good. I’m glad.” Cori’s voice was low, almost hypnotic. She lifted her legs one at a time and extended them, flexing each foot.

“Your friends are great,” Ben said distractedly. Her eyes refused to leave the firmly muscled limbs. She hoped her dark glasses hid her preoccupation.

Cori studied Ben out of the corner of her eye. The borrowed one-piece black swimsuit didn’t fit perfectly, but it still managed to show off her curves nicely. When Ben suddenly leaned forward to get another beer from the cooler, Cori caught sight of a tattoo peeking out from under the edge of the strap of the suit. Reaching out, she pushed the fabric aside. Several small black oriental symbols ran vertically down Ben’s shoulder blade.

"I hadn't figured you for the tattoo type," she remarked. "What does it mean?"

Ben froze as Cori's fingers brushed lightly over the symbols. When she spoke, she didn't look at Cori. "Pain. Courage. Love."

"That's beautiful." Cori was intrigued. No one chose a tattoo like that without a reason. *Pain. Courage. Love.* She wondered what lay behind the symbol.

"It's a reminder of something I lost," Ben said so quietly Cori almost didn't hear her.

When she didn't volunteer anything more, Cori didn't press, but she continued to stroke her shoulder.

Giving in to a moment of weakness, Ben leaned into the caress. Cori's fingers moved higher, tracing along the top of her shoulder and slipping beneath her hair to the back of her neck. Ben shivered. When Cori's fingers twined in her hair and tugged gently, Ben moved closer, leaning against her.

The hypnotic motion of the boat rocking gently in the water combined with the rhythmic feel of Cori's fingers sifting through her hair had Ben's eyes closing in lethargic surrender. As they had come out of the water earlier, Cori had pulled her shorts back on but had left her T-shirt off. Now the sun-warmed skin of Cori's long legs and upper body pressed against the length of Ben's. A contented sigh escaped her.

Cori too had fallen under the spell of their surroundings. Somewhere in the back of her mind she registered the quiet conversation and splashing of her friends outside the boat. But more present was the feel of silky strands of hair that slipped through her fingers, the comfort of Ben's weight against her, and Ben's soft, even breathing. She glanced at Ben's face, taking in her closed eyes and peaceful expression. Touching Ben felt so natural and right that the desire to kiss her stole into Cori's heart before she could stop it. *Don't! It wouldn't be fair to her.*

At the very moment that Cori was desperately trying to talk herself out of the kiss she ached for, Ben opened her eyes and Cori suddenly found herself lost in irises the color of fine aged whiskey.

Startled to find Cori watching her, Ben froze. She felt self-conscious but also intrigued. The expression in Cori's eyes was

unmistakable. Her body quickened at the lust burning there, and without thinking, Ben closed the distance between them. She felt Cori stiffen as their lips met. Within seconds, however, their bodies melted together. Ben lifted her hands to frame Cori's face, her thumbs stroking over her jaw. Cori's fingers tangled in the back of Ben's hair and her stomach tightened. Ben's kiss was tentative, but when Cori responded, she became bolder, running her tongue gently over Cori's lower lip. Her arms slipped around Cori's neck and as Cori's tongue slid against hers, Ben leaned back, drawing Cori with her. *Christ, this feels so perfect.* Cori's body half covered hers.

A clunking sound slid through the fog of arousal clouding Cori's brain, and she drew back just as Janet's head appeared over the side of the boat.

"I'm sorry—" Cori began automatically.

"Please, don't apologize. I'm the one who kissed you," Ben said.

"But—"

"Don't." Ben looked away, her face flushed.

Cori stifled a groan. *I shouldn't have let you kiss me. How will I ever stay away from you now?*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ben's steps slowed as she walked into the living room after having showered and changed. Cori was curled up at one end of the sofa, a bottle of beer cradled between her hands. When Ben entered, she glanced up, then shifted her eyes away. Uncomfortable, Ben considered retreat, but she decided they would have to deal with what had happened eventually. Settling carefully on the other end of the sofa, she took a deep breath.

"Listen, about what happened—earlier—um, on the boat."

"It's not necessary." Without looking up, Cori dismissed whatever Ben was about to say with a wave of her hand.

"I need to—"

"Ben, it's not necessary." Cori cut her off more sharply this time, finally looking at her. It was a mistake. Ben's damp hair and flushed skin from her recent shower lent her a vulnerability that rattled Cori.

"I haven't acted so unprofessionally—well, ever." Pushing off the sofa, Ben began pacing the length of the room. "I mean, to cross a line like that with an interviewee, it's—it's crazy."

"Do you always do that?" Cori leaned forward, bracing her elbows on her knees, and watched Ben thoughtfully. Why should she suddenly find it so incredibly cute that Ben paced when she was nervous?

Ben stopped, turning to look at her. "Do what?"

"That." Cori gestured with her hand. "The pacing."

“Um, yes. Yes, I guess I do.”

“Interesting.” And with that, Cori stood and moved to intercept her, forcing Ben to come to a halt in front of her. Her eyes lingered on Ben’s face, then swept down to the pulse at the side of her throat. Fighting the urge to touch that point and feel the blood race beneath her fingers, Cori curled her hands into fists at her sides. “Now, I *do* need to clear up one thing.”

“What?” Ben allowed herself to meet Cori’s eyes and was instantly lost in the varying shades of blue in their depths. She had given herself a firm lecture while showering and had come away with the resolve that she would apologize and set them back on a professional course. And yet for all of her good intentions, she had lost control of the situation as soon as Cori looked at her.

“You don’t have all the responsibility here,” Cori said firmly. “If you think about it, I’m sure you will recall that I participated as well.”

Ben did think about it. She had done nothing *but* think about the sensation of kissing Cori, of holding her. She thought about it now, standing so close that her body came to life. Stunned by the all too vivid memory of Cori’s tongue sliding against hers, Ben whispered, “I can still taste you.”

Cori gasped as a sharp stab of arousal shot through her. “Christ, Ben, you can’t say things like that.”

Between their close proximity and Ben’s softly rasped words, she was instantly wet and ready. Cori stepped back, putting distance between them. *How did she turn the tables on me so quickly? One minute I’m in control, and then with a few words I’m all fired up and melting inside.*

Ben too was grateful for the distance Cori reestablished. The words had escaped before she could stop them, and now there was no way to call them back. She had barely managed to avoid cringing as they echoed in her head. Ben retreated until her back came solidly into contact with the wall. “I’m sorry.”

“Please, stop apologizing to me.” Cori’s eyes were impossibly dark and her body visibly tense.

Ben kept her distance, struggling to clear her head. “We need some kind of truce here. I’ve got an article to write, and I need

to be as objective as I can. We have to get this interview done.” She refused to think about the feelings Cori stirred in her. They had absolutely nothing to do with her job. So what if she was having a physical reaction to the woman? She was a grown woman; surely she could control her urges. She had an obligation to Mitchell and she intended to fulfill it.

Lost in her own body’s surging desire, Cori missed the conflicting emotions that flickered across Ben’s face. When she’d read her so easily before, she now only heard the words. Ben had a job to do, and that was all that mattered to her. *She’s here to write an article, why should she care about you, Saxton? She doesn’t even know you.*

“Of course, your article.” Frustrated, Cori forced her thoughts back to their conversation. Floundering momentarily, she took a defensive tack. “You just do your job, and I’ll try not to resent it.”

“Damn it, Cori, why do we have to do this? You agreed to this article, and yet every time we start to make progress, you get evasive.” Her frustration rising to match Cori’s, Ben met Cori’s eyes.

Once again lost in Ben’s golden gaze, Cori blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “It’s just not that easy having your privacy invaded. I mean, I’ve put my whole life on hold to have you here.”

“Is that what this is about?” Ben paused, studying Cori, trying to assess the degree of truth in her words. “Is that really why I haven’t seen you working since I’ve been here? Am I disturbing your work?”

Cori debated her answer. Ben had a way of asking a question as if she really cared about the response. For reasons she could not explain, Cori wanted to answer—honestly. However, the fear that they were spiraling dangerously toward the truth had her censoring herself. She was not quite ready to change the way Ben looked at her.

“No. I haven’t worked in some time,” she admitted.

“Why?”

“Will you accept—I just haven’t been inspired?”

Ben regarded her suspiciously. “If it’s the truth.”

“It’s part of the truth.”

Cori had never realized how much a part of her identity her work was. The knowledge that she might someday be unable to continue was so painful that she had simply stopped. Yet doing so had left her so completely unsure of herself. Gone was the confident, almost arrogant, woman. In her place was a lost soul, who was now questioning what, if anything, she had to offer. Was she that afraid of losing her ability to paint? She had never realized before just how much being an artist had defined her. She knew where she stood in that world.

"I need to hear the rest of that truth," Ben said quietly.

Cori sighed. "Soon. Tonight, I promise."



Hearing a faint buzzing noise, Ben looked up from where she was slicing tomatoes. She had offered to make the salad for dinner as a peace offering and in an attempt to occupy her mind. She had been taken aback by the defeat in Cori's voice as she promised her the truth. *Soon. Tonight.* The buzzing noise persisted, Cori's cell phone vibrated against the counter.

"Cori," she called out.

Laying down the knife, she picked up a towel and wiped her hands as she took a few steps toward the living room where she had last seen her.

"Cori!" There was no reply and the room was empty.

Picking up the phone and glancing at the display, she headed through the living room and down the hallway toward Cori's bedroom. The door was slightly ajar and she peered hesitantly through the gap as she knocked.

"Cori, I—" Ben stopped short. Cori was sitting on the bed with a syringe in her hand.

Cori's hand froze in midair. She was perched on the edge of the bed with her shorts pushed up high on her leg, having just finished administering the injection in the middle of her thigh.

"What are you doing?" The phone call forgotten, Ben stared, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

Suppressing the urge to jump up, Cori said, "It's not what it looks like."

"It's not?" Ben's eyes remained glued to her hand. "'Cause it kind of looks like you're shooting up."

Cori carefully set the syringe on the nightstand. "This isn't how I wanted you to find out."

"Find out what?" Ben's voice rose, though Cori's was so quiet she had to strain to hear her. "Drugs? Is that what all this about?"

Ben retreated until her back was against the door frame. Her mind raced and her heart twisted. This was not at all what she had begun to expect. She didn't want to believe that Cori had a drug problem, but the evidence seemed to be staring her in the face. The exile must be a kind of rehab. Ben almost choked. Why would Cori try to hide that? These days rehab was virtually a badge of honor for most celebrities, almost a get-out-of-jail card.

Cori palmed one of two small bottles from the nightstand. Her eyes raced over Ben's face. Everything was about to change and she wanted to delay the inevitable as long as possible. She looked pointedly at the phone in Ben's hand.

"Uh—your phone was ringing." Ben glanced down at the now inactive device. "It was Gretchen and I thought it might be important, so I..." Her voice trailed off as she realized the ridiculousness of the explanation.

Neither woman moved for several long seconds. Then Cori got off the bed and crossed to the door. She slowly held out her hand, opening it to reveal the vial resting in her palm.

Ben took the bottle and read the label. "Betaseron. What is this?" She didn't recognize the name of the medication, but the pharmacy label bearing Cori's name indicated that illicit drugs were not the problem.

"It's supposed to decrease the frequency of my relapses." Ben looked up sharply. Cori's next words were delivered quickly as if she had to get them out before she changed her mind. "I have multiple sclerosis."

"Jesus, Cori," Ben whispered. She leaned weakly against the wall, searching Cori's face for some sign that she had misheard.

What she found instead was evidence of fatigue. Shadows darkened the tender skin under her eyes. Her face seemed to have become thinner, just in the short time Ben had known her. Ben suddenly had the urge to lay her palm against the hollow below Cori's cheekbones. Numbly, she handed the medication back to her. "I don't—I don't know what..."

Forcing herself to remain calm, Cori took Ben's hand, persisting when she felt slight resistance, and twined their fingers together. She drew her into the room, pulling her down to sit next to her on the edge of the bed. She had put off Ben's finding out about her illness for as long as she could. Telling Ben meant it would be in her article, but more than that it meant Ben would look at her and see weakness, and for reasons she did not wish to explore that bothered Cori more.

"I'm sorry, I don't know that much about multiple sclerosis," Ben said numbly, staring at Cori and trying to absorb what she had just heard. Her mind and body warred with opposing instincts, to flee or to draw Cori close and hold her.

Cori took a deep breath, but still her voice was shaky when she spoke, "It affects everyone differently. In my particular case, so far it seems to be primarily affecting my arms and hands." Saying the words made them feel so real. Cori's hand unconsciously tightened around Ben's, searching for an anchor as her world swam around her.

"How bad is it?" Ben squeezed back. Her voice was steadier than her feelings, her professional side taking over.

"It's not too bad yet. But—" Cori's throat closed over the remainder of her words.

"Tell me," Ben implored.

When Cori spoke, her voice was distant, her eyes unfocused as she recounted the story of her diagnosis. For over a year, she had chalked up the sporadic episodes of blurred vision and overall fatigue to too much work and not enough rest. She had even managed to convince herself that the loss of feeling and control in her hands was minor. After the third prolonged occurrence, when the numbness spread up her forearm, she had sought the advice of her physician,

who eventually referred her to a neurologist. Upon completing a battery of tests she was summoned to Dr. Franklin's office.

He didn't sugarcoat it, and for that Cori was grateful. After the first sharp punch of pain at his words, her distress had faded into numbness as she sank down on the edge of his sofa.

Her fingers still entwined with Cori's, Ben watched Cori's face. Her dark eyes were unreadable, her expression tight and the muscles of her jaw bunched. Still reeling from the revelation, she struggled to keep up as Cori continued talking.

Upon leaving Dr. Franklin's office, Cori had immediately gone home and set about researching her condition. With each word she read, her heart sank further. There was plenty of information to be found on the Internet regarding promising treatments and various medications. However, in Cori's state of mind, she had seen only the dim prognosis. *Progressive*. What had begun as an inconvenience would, with all certainty, someday become a serious disability.

"When I'm symptomatic, I have difficulty with tasks that require dexterity," she said suddenly. Pulling her hand free, she crossed the room to stare out the window.

"Like the aspirin bottle?" Ben asked, standing and joining her at the window.

Cori nodded. "They're called intention tremors. Simplified, it means that while at rest, my hands don't usually shake, but the more minute the task, and the harder I try, the worse the tremors become."

"Is—is there anything they can do?" Unable to keep from touching her, Ben brushed her hand down Cori's arm.

"There are drugs, like Betaseron, that can help with the relapses. There are also some steroids that will treat specific symptoms. But there's no cure. My symptoms are really not that bad right now. I've just got to be aware of a few limitations. Over the years, though, they will worsen." The words jerked to a halt as she said them aloud.

"How bad?" Ben asked.

Cori searched Ben's eyes for traces of pity but she found only concern and something deeper. "There's really no way to tell how fast it will progress or to what degree I'll be incapacitated." She

forced herself to state the facts as bluntly as she could, testing her own reaction to the words as well as Ben's.

Incapacitated. Ben cringed.



"Do you think you have enough for your article?" Cori propped her feet up on the coffee table in front of her. They had returned to the living room and settled on the sofa to talk. Cori had filled Ben in on the basics of MS, explaining that it was characterized by lesions that formed in the nerve fibers of the central nervous system. The varying possible locations for these lesions accounted for the wide variety of symptoms MS could present.

Forcing herself to appear calm, Cori talked more in depth about her own experiences. She described the tests she had endured and her feelings of uncertainty. While she talked, it was as if she was watching from outside herself—hearing someone else's voice. She just kept thinking that the deed was done. Soon, her own personal battle would be made very public, put on paper for anyone to read, and put there by Ben's hand.

"I think so. I'll probably do some basic research on MS—pull some statistics, that sort of thing." Ben's gaze lingered on Cori's hands, which she had been rhythmically clenching and unclenching in what Ben had figured out was a nervous gesture.

"Cori, I understand why this article is difficult for you, this is a very private thing," Ben began tentatively. "But I get the feeling there's more to it than that."

Cori stared at her for a moment, struggling to put her own thoughts in order. She'd known the MS was not something she would be able to hide forever without seriously altering her lifestyle. And the fact that she had done just that and had drawn more attention to herself did not escape her notice. So maybe she could regain a sense of control by managing the manner in which her diagnosis was disseminated. What was important now was that she find a way to make Ben understand what these past few months had been like for her.

"Come with me," Cori said, suddenly surging to her feet.

Without waiting to see if Ben was following, she strode through the living room and toward the door to her studio. She remained silent as they descended the stairs. Fighting the panic that rose in her throat, Cori moved directly to the center of the room to stand in front of the easel.

“See that slash of white?” With an angry flick of the wrist, Cori indicated a line in the lower left portion of the canvas. “That bend in the middle was unintentional.”

“I wouldn’t have known that if you didn’t tell me,” Ben replied without thinking. She knew it was wrong the moment she said it, but her first instinct had been to ease Cori’s worry. Instead, Cori stiffened and turned away. Too late, Ben understood. Painting was not an exact science and often a piece did not come out exactly as it had been conceived. But this error was symbolic of Cori’s loss of control.

“You don’t understand.” Every time she looked at this canvas it was as if she could actually feel the disease inside her, like a sinister shadow growing until someday it would be stronger than she was. And somehow the knowledge that Ben truly didn’t understand why that tiny imperfection of paint was a glaring reminder of her illness hurt more than she wanted to admit.

“I do. I do understand. But I don’t know why you think this has to be the end of your work. There is so much more you could do.”

“Like what?” It was a rhetorical question, really. As she stared at the vivid reminder of her impending failure on the canvas in front of her, Cori was past the point of listening seriously to Ben’s suggestion.

“You’re a gifted artist. You could teach.”

“Haven’t you ever heard the expression—‘those who can, do’...” She trailed off, leaving the rest unspoken. *Those who can’t, teach.*

“You don’t believe that.” Ben took a tentative step forward but Cori was already drawing away.

“I’ll make arrangements for Henry to drive you to the airport first thing in the morning,” Cori said quietly as she crossed the room and slid open the door to the patio.

“Where are you going?”

“For a walk.” And with that she disappeared through the door. Ben moved to the window and watched as Cori made her way down the path and out onto the dock. Her eyes remained on Cori until she boarded the boat and disappeared belowdecks.

CHAPTER NINE

Cori awoke to the insistent ring of the telephone. As she rolled over a little too quickly for the throbbing in her head, her arm shot out in a desperate effort to stop the noise. She finally managed to fumble the phone off the cradle and rasped a greeting into it.

“Are you still sleeping?” Gretchen’s chipper voice grated across her nerves.

“Not anymore,” Cori grumbled.

“Do you know what time it is?”

“Don’t start.” Cori glanced at the clock—nearly noon.

“The new issue of *Canvassed* came out today,” Gretchen went on, “I’m already getting calls from the press.”

“Vultures,” Cori muttered, rolling out of bed and stumbling toward the bathroom.

Hitting the button for speakerphone, she set the phone on the counter next to the sink and bent over to splash some water on her face. Dimly aware of Gretchen talking, she picked up the phone and made the appropriate sounds to let Gretchen know she was still listening. Barefoot and clad in boxer shorts and tank top, she padded to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of juice.

Glancing at the counter, she caught sight of the note Ben had left for her. It had been two weeks since Ben had left. Cori had spent that night on the boat, though the normally soothing sway of the waves didn’t calm her and she had slept fitfully. She had not returned to the house that next morning to see Ben off, trusting Henry to pick

her up on time. Instead, she waited until she was sure Ben was gone before slipping through the back door into the kitchen. That was when she found the note. The folded piece of paper read, *Thanks for your hospitality. Best wishes, Ben.* And with it, Ben had left one of her business cards. Every time Cori passed through the kitchen, she paused to read it.

"Cori, are you listening to me?" Gretchen's raised voice startled her.

"What? Uh, yeah," she answered distractedly.

"What did I say?" Gretchen challenged.

"Okay, you got me. I'm sorry. But I have a lot on my mind right now." Cori picked up the business card. The linen textured card felt thick between her fingers. Ben's face floated into her head as she rubbed her fingertips over the slightly raised script. Hard as she tried she could not keep from remembering the heavy-lidded expression on Ben's face as she had whispered, *I can still taste you.*

"That's what I'm talking about." Gretchen's voice in her ear snapped her back to the present. "You need to think about coming back to the city. With the article out, there's no reason for you to stay away."

"I'll think about it," Cori promised before hanging up.

Maybe Gretchen was right. The article was out. People had already read it. It was a good article, she admitted. Two days after her departure, Ben had sent the draft in for Cori's approval. Cori had been pleased with Ben's work, finding the article to be accurate, detailed, and still respectful of her privacy. She had asked for only a couple of minor changes, and surprisingly, Ben made them with no argument.

Fingering the business card she still held in her hand, Cori wished she could call Ben and ask her why she hadn't fought the changes. She wished she could call her and...just talk. If only things were that simple. Shaking her head, she consciously changed her line of thinking. Things weren't simple. For a start, she had no right even thinking about inviting someone into her life, such as it was.

She wandered out onto the deck and leaned against the railing, staring off into the distance. Pushing a hand through her hair, she decided she'd been doing entirely too much of this lately. She'd

never spent so much time staring into space. Usually a woman of action, she suddenly found herself completely unable to make the simplest of decisions without overanalyzing things.

She thought again about Gretchen's parting request. She could go back. She'd have to face everyone eventually and it was probably time. Maybe returning to her old life would be just what she needed. Yes, going back and resuming her social activities would certainly leave no room for all this introspection she seemed prone to recently.



After quickly draining the glass in her hand, Cori set it on the tray of a passing waiter and grabbed a full one. She smoothed her hand over the front of her silk blouse and turned to survey the room. As the rush of alcohol hit her system, she began to relax. This was where she belonged. The events of the past few months had thrown her off balance, but now she was back in her element.

"Hey, kiddo, you might want to slow down on those," Gretchen said in her ear as she stepped close behind her.

To prove a point, Cori tossed back the rest of her drink and turned to face her friend. Rediscovered confidence rushing through her system, she gave her a slow, sexy smile. Gretchen looked stunning as usual in a simple black cocktail dress that complemented her petite frame, her dark hair swept back from her face.

She, like Cori, had been born and bred for a life of leisure. Their mothers had never been interested in careers, instead spending their days shopping or at the club playing tennis. Gretchen and Cori were raised to follow the same path, but neither had. If asked why, Gretchen would say that she hated tennis. Cori had never been able to be as flippant about her reasons. She knew only that since she was a child, the urge to express herself had been a strong force within her. Both women worked hard, but they played hard as well, thoroughly enjoying the privileges life afforded them.

"I'm serious, Cori. I'm glad you're back, but you need to take it easy." Her tone was light and free of judgment, but Cori detected a note of concern.

"Now, Gretchen, when have you ever known me to take it easy at one of these things?" Cori gestured broadly around the room. The impromptu cocktail parties were common among their circle of friends. Their hostess had opened her opulently decorated home to fifty of her closest friends and their dates. The large open area boasted an ornately carved bar along one side of the room and a huge ebony grand piano tucked in a corner. Textured wallpaper and red velvet drapes made the air in the room feel thick—stuffy. Garish gold candlesticks held heavily scented candles. A collection of nineteenth-century sculptures was a testament to the owner's affluence. Cori's practiced eye picked out a particularly impressive Rodin displayed on a pedestal nearby.

"God, look at this place," she muttered to herself.

"That's my point, sweetie." Gretchen ignored her look of disgust. "Things aren't the same as they used to be. You aren't the same."

"I'm exactly the same," Cori argued, though she knew it was a lie. She wasn't. The *old Cori* walked into a room and commanded it, earning admiring and envious looks. *This Cori* got looks of pity, and that was just from the people who didn't avoid eye contact. That knowledge seared into her, cementing her resolve to prove she was just as strong as she had once been. She caught herself stiffening her spine, and in an attempt to ease the rigidity of her posture, she rolled her shoulders and slipped her hand into the pocket of her slacks.

"I know that look." Gretchen tucked her hand in the crook of Cori's elbow. "Please, take it easy."

"Just last week you were telling me I needed to get back to the city. Now I'm here and you're trying to rein me in. Make up your mind."

Relenting, Gretchen slid her hand up to squeeze Cori's bicep. "Enjoy yourself. You deserve it."

"I think I will." Cori handed her empty glass to Gretchen. "And I'm going to start over there." She nodded toward a corner of the room occupied by several attractive women.

Flashing Gretchen one of her trademark grins, Cori pushed back her shoulders and strode into the crowd. The swagger that had

once been second nature now required conscious thought, but she was certain she was pulling it off.

Halfway across the room, Cori lifted another glass from the tray of a passing waiter. Too late she caught sight of Alyson Haines approaching her. Alyson was the wife of Edward Haines, head of Dexcon, a Fortune 500 textiles company. Pasting a polite smile on her face, Cori gulped down a good amount of the champagne.

"Cori, darling. I was saddened to hear of your dreadful affliction," Alyson cooed as she halted just outside of touching range. Her formal speech and exaggeratedly Waspish accent always made Cori wonder if anyone *really* talked like that.

"It's not contagious, Alyson," she said wryly. At any other time Alyson would have swept her up in an embrace. In fact, the lithe brunette had no aversion to close physical contact on several occasions Cori could recall.

"Of course not." Alyson backpedaled. "I'm merely trying to express my concern."

"Sure you were," Cori bit back sarcastically.

"You know, I don't think your illness is an excuse for rudeness." Alyson's defensive tone was no doubt intended to chastise. However, it only made Cori more aware of just how superficial her world really was. She was not in the mood for these social games.

For the next couple of hours, she drifted around the room draining glass after glass of champagne. She flirted endlessly, attempting to convince herself that she didn't feel the helplessness growing inside of her. But she did. She felt it every time someone made even the most casual reference in conversation to Ben's article. She felt it in the pitying gazes of the other guests when they thought she wasn't looking. She thought she had taken back some of the control she'd lost when she was diagnosed. However, as she was finding out, nothing she did could ease the aching knot that grew tighter every day.

She was on the verge of a serious case of self-pity when she felt a hand curl teasingly around her arm. As she turned, her eyes drifted lazily over a compact but curvaceous figure. The woman's body was practically poured into an electric blue sleeveless number. The top

was cut low enough to reveal a good amount of cleavage, and the hem rode high on her shapely thighs.

"I'm Veronica," the blonde purred, running a manicured fingernail over Cori's collar.

"Cori."

"Oh, I know who you are." Trailing her fingers over Cori's forearm, she lifted the empty glass from Cori's hand and smoothly replaced it with a full one.

Cori raised blurry eyes to meet Veronica's green ones and saw the familiar glint of lust in them. Too much champagne had dulled her senses, but she was still lucid enough to recognize the invitation in Veronica's eyes. *She's not what you're looking for*, her conscience whispered. However, it was quickly stifled by the memory of her recently developed penchant for self-doubt. She had something to prove to herself, and this attractive woman was presenting an opportunity to do just that. Cori didn't stop to feel guilty because she was certain Veronica's expectations didn't extend much past this one night and her interest didn't go deeper than Cori's celebrity status.



Cori barely had time to close the door to Veronica's apartment when the shorter woman was on her, pushing her back against the wall. She leaned into Cori, fastening her mouth on the side of her neck. Cori intercepted the hands that reached for her blouse. She shook her head at Veronica's questioning look and said roughly, "That's not how I want it."

"What do you want, baby?" Veronica allowed Cori to steer her toward the bedroom.

"I want you to do as I say." Cori had spent the entire cab ride home trying to keep Veronica's wandering hands under control. Now she was desperately trying to get her to the bed before she lost the battle and Veronica took her against the wall of her apartment. Veronica was obviously an extremely practiced seductress, but Cori was fast discovering it wasn't Veronica's hands she wanted on her. In fact, she was not enjoying her touch at all, and just wanted this to be over.

Pushing her back until her knees hit the edge of the bed, Cori pulled down the zipper at the back of Veronica's dress. After the garment fell around Veronica's ankles, Cori pushed her back onto the bed. When Veronica reached for her, Cori caught her wrists and pinned them over her head.

"Don't touch me," Cori ordered, pleased to see obedience shining in Veronica's eyes. She had played this game before, and she wouldn't touch until she was allowed. Cori released her wrists, confident that they would remain in place.

Champagne still racing through her blood, she pulled her unfocused gaze from Veronica's face. Normally she would revel in the reactions of her partner. She was aware of each twitch and sigh and very much enjoyed giving that pleasure. Tonight, though, she wouldn't watch Veronica's face as she touched her. She didn't need to see Veronica's eyes change and go hazy with passion; the face that danced at the edges of her consciousness wasn't Veronica's. Cori squeezed her eyes shut and edged out that image before it could fully develop.

Shaking her head, she bent over and abruptly pulled one of Veronica's nipples between her lips, sucking harshly. The other woman gasped at the sudden and unexpected contact, but Cori did not waver. She alternately teased and pulled relentlessly. It wasn't until Veronica's back arched and a litany of incoherent pleading fell from her lips that Cori pushed her palm flat against Veronica's stomach, holding her in place while she slid her mouth lower.

When Cori reached the sensitive flesh along the insides of her thighs, Veronica's hips came off the bed. Still anchored by Cori's spread fingers in the center of her abdomen, she struggled to push herself closer to Cori's teasing lips and tongue, a low moan escaping as teeth scraped against tender skin.

"Oh, not so fast, I'm going to come," Veronica pled.

Cori slowed only for a second, drawing Veronica to the edge, but she would not linger long. Wedging her shoulders between Veronica's thighs, Cori spread them apart. She did not go gently, curling her lips firmly around Veronica's clitoris and sucking. Veronica's hips bucked beneath her, but Cori simply held her pinned there and marveled at the fact that Veronica's hands remained above

her head. Cori was certain that if Veronica were not so practiced in submission, her hands would be buried in the back of Cori's hair.

Sensing that the eager blonde was on the edge, Cori quickly shoved three fingers deep inside her and raked her teeth over the pulsing flesh in her mouth. Veronica's thighs surged against Cori's shoulders and her back curved violently as she shuddered and cried out.

As her cries subsided into soft sounds of lingering pleasure, Cori withdrew her fingers, lifted herself on her arms, and crawled up Veronica's supine body. She leaned down and swiped her tongue firmly over the sweat-dampened skin between Veronica's breasts. When Veronica lifted her head for a kiss, Cori moved away. Still fully clothed, she left the room without a backward glance at the woman sprawled on the bed behind her.

Outside Veronica's apartment building, Cori opted to walk the ten blocks to her place, hoping the cool night air would help clear her head. The encounter with Veronica had been similar to dozens of others she'd had. It should have been equally satisfying. *So why do I feel so mixed up? This doesn't make any sense. I'm not symptomatic, and it's not like Veronica would have noticed if I was.* Could that be it? The thought stopped her short in the middle of the street. What difference should it make to her that Veronica wasn't more considerate of her? It didn't make any difference. They both knew what they wanted when they left that party together. And as always, Cori had delivered exactly what her reputation promised. So why wasn't that enough? It always had been before.

By the time she pushed open the door to her own apartment, Cori's buzz had worn off. In the kitchen she found a half-full bottle of tequila and knocked back a healthy shot. She welcomed the fiery path as it burned down her throat.

A couple of drinks later she was sprawled on the living-room floor, her back against the couch. The face that had threatened to intrude earlier now drifted through her mind and she let herself dwell on the myriad of Ben's expressions, from the cool professionalism tinged with skepticism of their first meeting to the heavy-lidded arousal following their kiss on the boat.

She felt guilty about Veronica, which was ridiculous. She and Ben didn't have any claim on each other. So why did she feel unfaithful? *Hell, for all I know, she's out there doing the same thing right now.* What did she *really* know about Bennett McClain? She knew nothing of her personal life or reputation. Ben could be as much of a player as Cori was, she just wasn't as high profile.

Another shot of tequila did little to soothe the jealousy that rose up at the thought of Ben having sex with someone else. *This is crazy,* she thought as she dragged herself to the bedroom. *So what if I think she's attractive? I can even admit I want to sleep with her. That doesn't make her any different than a dozen other women.*

CHAPTER TEN

Have you seen the tabloids lately?" Lucy asked hesitantly as Ben reached for the carton of fried rice.

They were back to their routine of Wednesday lunches in Lucy's office. Ben had stopped for Chinese takeout on her way over. Several opened cartons littered the glass coffee table in front of them.

Ben glanced around, realizing how much she missed the comfort of this routine whenever it was interrupted. Lucy had moved into the large office a year before when she made partner at the law firm. The décor was similar to Lucy's apartment. She favored a lot of blacks and whites with carefully chosen splashes of color. The walls were painted white and the furniture was black. The only spot of color in the room was a large, deep red vase that stood next to the black lacquer bookcase. A leather sofa and chair and coffee table created an inviting sitting area in one corner. Lucy's glass-topped desk sat in front of the large windows. Ben knew that when she was puzzling over something, Lucy liked to twirl around in her chair, alternately studying the city outside and whatever perplexing case lay on her desk.

"Just the covers as I went past the newsstand," Ben replied dryly.

She knew what Lucy was getting at. Just that morning, she had stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk as she stared at the cover of *Exposure*. Ignoring the irritated mutters of people forced to change course quickly to get around her, she had been unable to

move or think for several seconds. If it weren't for the two other women in the photo flanking Cori, Ben might have said it wasn't a bad picture. But the photographer had either failed to capture the intensity that burned in Cori's eyes, or it had been lacking when this photo was taken.

"Cori Saxton is back in town."

"I know."

"And it looks like she is back to her old self again." Lucy glanced at Ben.

"I know," Ben said tightly.

Setting down the carton, the contents of which she had been poking listlessly with her chopsticks, she sighed and let her shoulders droop. She didn't worry about trying to hide her emotions from Lucy. Her cousin had drilled her endlessly during her first few days back from upstate and Ben had given up most of the details of her time with Cori.

"I guess it was inevitable," Lucy said.

"Do you think it's true?"

Lucy's sympathetic expression was answer enough. Disheartened, Ben slid deeper into the oversized leather couch. Lucy pushed back next to her and covered Ben's hand with hers.

"I just hate to see her selling herself short," Ben remarked, attempting to downplay her disappointment. This should make things easier. Knowing that in all likelihood the vulnerability she thought she had glimpsed that last night had probably been an act should make it easier for her to move on. So why did she still find herself thinking entirely too much about the artist? Why did it seem she was unable to keep her mind from replaying their shared kiss? Why did she continue to think about the fear that shone in Cori's eyes as she had revealed the nature of her illness?

"You care for her?"

"Yes," Ben answered without hesitation. "As irrational as it seems, I do care for her."

"Can you deal with her being ill?" Lucy asked the question that had been lingering in the back of Ben's mind.

"I don't know."

Both women were silent. Ben suspected they were both thinking

of the same thing—Randall. Lucy had been there and had seen the devastation Ben had felt as a child going through her brother's illness.

"What are you working on now?"

Ben smiled, aware that Lucy was changing the subject.

"I'm doing a story on Brian Cobb." The politician was a favored candidate for an open senate seat in the upcoming election.

"He's a *Republican*," Lucy spat the word out as if its very pronunciation repulsed her.

"I didn't say I was voting for him, I'm just writing about him," Ben defended. "Besides, I find his ideas on immigration interesting."

"Yeah, well, I find his ideas on gay marriage much more interesting," Lucy argued.

"There is that."

"Yes, there is." Lucy's eyes narrowed and she was obviously awaiting an explanation.

"Ah, the truth is," Ben began hesitantly, "I got offered the article and I needed something to occupy my mind, so I took it. Besides, I'm not writing in support of him. It's merely a very short informative piece."

"Hmph." A grunt was Lucy's only response. But Ben took her lack of further argument as understanding, if not acceptance.

Their conversation about Cori was on Ben's mind for the rest of the day. During her interview with Cobb and his wife, she constantly had to jerk her attention back to the couple in front of her. Just when she was able to get her concentration back on track, something would trigger thoughts of Cori again.

She needed to stop at the market on the way home, and her detour took her past the newsstand down the street again. Cori's face jumped out from the cover of the tabloid. It was clear the photo was taken at a lavish party. Cori's vacant expression was likely due to whatever was in the glass she raised. *DROWNING HER TROUBLES?* Ben cringed at the headline, wondering how much her article had contributed to the renewed interest in Cori's "troubles." She didn't question her motives as she handed a couple of bills to the newsagent.

Ben pushed open the door to her apartment and headed for the kitchen. She deposited the bags of groceries on the counter and dropped the tabloid next to them. While unpacking the groceries, she ignored the picture staring back at her. Still unsure why she'd even bought the rag, she hadn't been able to bring herself to actually read the article.

She spent the next hour roaming around the apartment restlessly pretending to straighten the already spotless living room. The constant travel that her work required left her with little time to spend at home. Perhaps because of that, she appreciated even more the time she did get. By her friends' standards her apartment was small, but Ben had fallen in love with it the moment she had seen it. She'd had no qualms about spending a large chunk of her savings on a down payment. The renovated apartment in a prewar building on the Upper East Side boasted high ceilings, hardwood floors, and an oversized bathtub. The galley-style kitchen was on the small side but, if she was being honest, Ben didn't spend too much time in the kitchen anyway. Over the years, she had lovingly decorated with a collection of mismatched antiques that she'd found on her travels.

Her eyes kept straying back to the newsprint image as she worked. "This is ridiculous," she muttered, finally deciding a bath might take her mind off Cori. It usually helped her to unwind after a long day.

She drew a bath, adding some scented bath salts, and poured herself a glass of wine. Before long, fragrant steam drifted throughout the room. She lit some candles, stripped off her clothes, and slid into the tub. The soothing water immediately began to melt the knots of tension from her muscles. She tilted her head back to rest on the edge and closed her eyes. As her frustration slipped away, Ben sighed and sank deeper until the water touched the tips of her earlobes. The tightness in her neck eased and the edges of her mind blurred, unfocused in her relaxation.

When Cori's face swam unbidden behind her closed eyes, Ben did not force the image away. She did not see the face from the cover of the tabloid. She saw Cori as she was on Janet's boat, pulling herself out of the water after their swim, all bronzed lean

limbs, muscles flexed, beads of water dancing across the surface of her skin as she hefted herself up the ladder and into the boat.

Under the pleasant heat of the afternoon sun, Ben had been hypnotized when Cori had stroked her fingers over her shoulder and then into her hair. She hadn't had any defenses against the weight of Cori's body against her, both comforting and arousing. Now, weeks later, she slid upward again on a slowly cresting wave of arousal, as gentle as those rocking the boat. She was just as helpless now to deny her need as she had been then. She relived that urge to close the distance between them without a thought for consequence. She had needed Cori's lips against hers and Cori's skin beneath her fingertips. She still did.

As the memory of Cori's mouth opening for her flooded back, Ben slipped her hand beneath the water. As her mind conjured up the images of what might have happened had Janet not interrupted them, she rubbed her fingers over her nipple. She imagined Cori's hands on her shoulders, pushing her back against the seat of the boat. Ben brushed her hand over her abdomen, envisioning the sleek warmth of Cori's back. And when she pushed her hand between her thighs she imagined that Cori's fingers stroked over her clitoris, somehow knowing just how much pressure would bring Ben right to the edge without putting her over.

She jerked her hand away and sat up straight, startled by the ringing of her cell phone from the next room. Deciding that by the time she got out of the tub and retrieved the phone she would have missed the call anyway, she let it go to voicemail. The interruption had effectively broken the spell cast by the wine and warm water. She stared at her hand accusingly, as if it had acted entirely on its own. However, she couldn't forget the images that had played in her head. *Oh hell, what was I doing? Fantasizing about a woman I can't even stand?*

That was not entirely true, Ben admitted as she stood and reached for a towel. There were many things about the public Cori Saxton that Ben didn't like. But she couldn't ignore the fact that she had seen another side of her, and she didn't think that private self was an act. She had seen a strong woman covering up a core of

vulnerability. She had seen a kind, thoughtful woman. She had seen a passionate, intense woman. Cori had dimensions that the press had never seen, or if they had, had chosen not to write about. Ben had glimpsed them and she had been taken in from that moment on.

She pulled on a thick robe and reminded herself that she would never see Cori Saxton again. She carried her half-finished glass of wine out to the kitchen, picking her cell phone up on the way. Mitchell had left a message. He wanted her to accompany him to a party the next weekend, as a thank-you for a job well done with the article. She decided she would call him back later.

A glance at the clock told her the night was still young. *And here I am, ready to turn in for the evening. No wonder I'm obsessing about someone I can't be with. It's Friday night and I have absolutely no plans.* Recently, she'd fallen into a routine and was spending more and more time alone. *Maybe that's what I need, a night out.* Her mind made up, she stripped off her robe and began sorting through her closet.



The music that pounded out into the street when the door to the club was opened was nearly enough to make Ben change her mind. Maybe she should have picked one of the more laid-back bars. *No, I can do this.* The repetitive thump of the bass seemed to vibrate the very air around her. The room was filled with mostly twentysomething women, most of whom were grinding against each other on the dance floor. Ben knew she was going to need more than a glass of wine if she was going to stay here for long. Winding her way through a throng of bodies, she headed straight for the bar.

As she slid into an empty space and waved to the bartender, a woman a few stools down caught her eye. Black over-gelled hair stood up in spikes and dark eyes were ringed by too much eyeliner. But there was something about the indolent way she slouched against the bar that drew Ben's eyes to her body. Her hips were cocked to one side and her thumb hooked on the pocket of frayed blue jeans.

Ben had never seen the woman before, but there was something familiar about her.

The harried bartender leaned in her direction, and on a whim, Ben called out her order as well as instructions to replenish the slouching woman's drink. She watched as the drink was served and the bartender hitched a thumb in her direction. An indifferent gaze lifted to meet hers and Ben forced a smile. The woman lifted her chin ever so slightly. Ben wasn't certain it was an invitation but she took it as one anyway. A diversion. This was what she needed. She moved down the bar.

"Thanks," the woman said as Ben drew close. "What's your name?"

"Ben."

"Really?" There was a flicker of interest in the nearly ebony eyes.

"Yeah."

"I'm Rachel. How come I've never seen you here before?"

"It's my first time." Ben was barely able to contain a grin at the obvious line. The measured smile on Rachel's lips said she thought she was smooth. Ironically, Ben had come to the club to get Cori Saxton off her mind and ended up chatting up a woman who fancied herself a player. Only she wasn't, not really. Whereas Cori's charisma was natural, an innate part of her, Rachel's seemed contrived. She was a young buck playing a part.

"Are you new in town?"

"No. But I travel a lot for work, so I'm not around much."

"Really, what do you do?"

"I'm a journalist."

"That must be an interesting job." Rachel smiled.

"Sometimes. What about you?"

"Oh, nothing exciting. I'm a paralegal." She gestured at Ben's empty glass. "Can I get you a refill?"

"Um, sure." This wasn't going quite how Ben had planned. She had expected a more aggressive come-on—something anonymous. Sure, there was an underlying flirtation to the woman's words and the none-too-subtle way she slid closer when she called out their

drink order to the bartender. But she also seemed interested in their conversation.

When their drinks were delivered, Rachel took a sip before turning to Ben with a raised eyebrow. "Would you like to dance?"

Ben smiled. Rachel's cocky expression made it clear that she didn't expect to be refused. She nodded and allowed Rachel to take her hand and lead her to the dance floor. Taking the opportunity, she slid her eyes down Rachel's narrow back. The baggy jeans hanging just under the waistband of a pair of boxers did nothing for her figure. Ben couldn't help but make a comparison to the way Cori wore her jeans, as if they were made for her lean hips. Cori's swagger fit her in a way that Rachel's contrived gait never would. *I cannot be so obsessed with Cori that I can't even get her out of my head long enough to get interested in someone else.* By any standards, Rachel was an attractive woman. It was only when compared to the mysterious artist who oozed sex appeal that she could be found lacking. *So stop comparing them, damn it. And just enjoy the attentions of a sexy younger woman.*

As one song faded into another one, Rachel pulled her close, and Ben automatically matched the movement of her hips to the other woman's. She slid her hands around Rachel's waist and tried to keep her mind on the woman in front of her. Soon she was able to let herself go, feeling only the pulsing music and the slender body pressed against hers.

"You're a good dancer." The whisper of breath as Rachel spoke close to Ben's ear sent a shiver down her spine. It was a purely physical reaction, but it was enough for her.

They danced through three more songs, each pushing the flirtation a little bit further. When Rachel's hands wandered down past her lower back, Ben slid her hand to the back of Rachel's neck, teasing the fine hair in encouragement. Rachel's lips brushed her neck and Ben pressed closer until she knew the other woman could feel her breasts against her chest. Rachel's mouth covered Ben's, her tongue pushing past her lips. Here was the aggression she'd been seeking. The jolt of pleasure, the sudden throbbing between her thighs could prove to be just the distraction she needed. Ben's

fingers dug into the back of Rachel's neck as she met the bruising kiss.

Rachel backed off long enough to speak. "Unless you're into public displays, we should take this someplace more private."

"What did you have in mind?" Ben teased. She slid her thigh between Rachel's and was rewarded with a low moan.

"My place is just around the corner."

"Lead the way."

Rachel snaked her arm around Ben's waist and kept it there as she guided her out of the club and down the street. She released Ben long enough to fish a set of keys out of her pocket and let them in.

The door opened into the kitchen and Ben wandered in ahead. The sudden break from Rachel's warm proximity threatened to bring reality rushing back. Immediately Ben moved closer again, trapping Rachel against the counter. She didn't stop to wonder if the groan that issued forth was caused by the thrust of her hips against Rachel's or the pressure from the edge of the counter in the small of the other woman's back. She crushed her mouth against Rachel's, biting at her lower lip.

"If we don't slow down, I'm going to have you right here in my kitchen." Rachel sucked in a ragged breath when Ben's hands pushed beneath her T-shirt. She reversed their position and urged Ben up to sit on the counter.

"And that would be bad because..."

Rachel moved between Ben's thighs and tugged her closer until Ben's crotch was snug against her midsection.

"Not bad—definitely not bad," Rachel managed between nipping at Ben's neck.

Ben's head fell back. But when she closed her eyes, Cori's face swam behind them. Her expression was arrogant, as if she knew Ben was trying, unsuccessfully, to drive her out of her head. *It won't work.* In Ben's mind, Cori glanced dismissively at Rachel. *Is this really what you want?* Her expression said she knew it wasn't.

When Ben snapped her eyes open, the accusing stare lingered. "Damn it." She pushed Rachel back and slid off the counter.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She drew Rachel toward her again and fused her mouth to Rachel’s neck.

“Mmm, baby,” Rachel moaned, but it was Cori’s voice that she heard, low and husky.

“Fuck.” She jerked out of Rachel’s arms.

Rachel stepped back and waited. “What’s happening?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t do this.”

“Did I do something wrong?” The wounded look on the young woman’s face made Ben feel guilty.

“Not at all. Jesus, I can’t believe I’m saying this but, it’s not you, it’s me.”

“Sure, right.” Disbelief shone in Rachel’s eyes. Despite her cocky exterior, she’d obviously been hurt before and Ben had just repeated someone else’s mistake. Her guilt increased exponentially as she realized that her misguided attempt at beating Cori at her own game had caused pain to this sweet woman.

“I’m really sorry. I thought this was about you and me, but—I just wasn’t ready for this. And that’s not fair to you. You deserve more than that.” Ben laid her palm lightly against Rachel’s cheek, trying to take the sting out of the situation.

“Yeah, okay.” Rachel moved away. “I think you should go now.”

In the end, the solitary cab ride home was sobering. Swamped with regret for what she’d done and what she’d *almost* done, Ben resolved to do whatever it took to get Cori out of her head. She would focus on her career. And she would start by going to that party with Mitchell. Maybe she could cultivate some new contacts and generate some more work in the art scene.



The click of the lock disengaging echoed through Cori’s head, yanking her out of a near-sound sleep. Seconds later she heard the door to her apartment open and then close much too loudly. Groaning, she rolled over and pulled a pillow over her head.

“Cori,” Gretchen sang out from the other room.

“Ugh, kill me now,” Cori muttered through layers of cotton and feathers.

“Oh, here you are.” Gretchen sank down on the bed beside her. “You missed breakfast with Barbara,” she scolded. “She was asking about you.”

“Tell her I died.”

“You don’t think this grumpy bit is cute, do you?”

“Remind me again, why did I give you a key to my place?”

“Because you don’t want your plants to die,” Gretchen supplied helpfully.

Spending so much time away from the apartment that she kept in the city necessitated handing over a key to someone. And in an apparent moment of insanity Cori had thought Gretchen a good candidate.

Gretchen unrolled the top of the paper bag she was holding.

“Please, stop,” Cori begged, flailing blindly with her hand in an effort to stop the offending noise.

“Come out from under there. I brought muffins and coffee, though it’s really past lunchtime now.”

“Coffee?” Cori stuck her head out from under the pillow, sniffing the air appreciatively.

“How are we feeling today?” Gretchen asked in mock sympathy, holding a Styrofoam cup just out of Cori’s reach.

“Don’t be a tease.” Cori lunged for the cup in vain. Gretchen grinned and held it away from her. Cori pulled herself gingerly into a sitting position.

“Oh, all right.” Gretchen handed over the cup and waited while Cori pried off the lid and inhaled deeply.

“Perfect.” The aroma of rich coffee and hazelnut seduced her, almost managing to take her mind off the pounding in her head. She took a sip and sighed as the warm liquid eased her dry mouth and throat. “Did you say you had muffins?”

Gretchen handed over the bag and slid to the empty side of the bed to settle next to her. “Where did you run off to last night?”

Cori looked up from the blueberry muffin she was pulling apart. “I, uh, had to escort Veronica home.” She shoved a piece of muffin into her mouth.

“Hmm. Okay. Give,” Gretchen demanded.

“Oh, hell.” Cori pushed a hand through her hair. When Gretchen remained silent, she went on. “I thought...” Her voice trailed off.

“What were you trying to accomplish?”

“I was just trying to make things normal again.” Cori set her coffee cup on the nightstand.

“Oh, sweetie.” Gretchen didn’t offer platitudes or false assurances. She opened her arms and waited while Cori settled against her. “Did it work?”

“No,” Cori admitted, her face pressed into Gretchen’s neck.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cori steered her black Jaguar XK convertible into the U-shaped drive in front of Gretchen's house. Choosing to park the car near the garage rather than trust it to the valets Gretchen had hired for the party, she eased into the space next to Gretchen's Mercedes. She got out and glanced back as she engaged the alarm.

The car had been a gift to herself last year in celebration of her first show to gross six figures. She had enjoyed leafing through the brochures for hours, picking out just the right features, finally deciding on the sleek ebony exterior, charcoal leather interior with aluminum trim, 20" Senta wheels, and a 525-watt, eight-speaker Alpine sound system. She'd had a state-of-the-art navigation system installed aftermarket and took perhaps too much pleasure in the woman with the English accent telling her when to turn right. Grinning to herself as she thought of the sexily accented voice, Cori strode toward the house.

After the fiasco with Veronica, she had been hesitant to attend another party. It would be the same social circle that she was tired of. She'd given up on thinking she could make herself feel normal by going through the same old routines.

But Gretchen was hosting the party and had been planning it for weeks. Cori was well aware that everyone would expect her to be there, and they would all have plenty of questions for her. Not about her work, however. That topic suddenly seemed to be out of bounds. Gretchen had reeled off the names of some powerful people in the art world who were on the guest list. Normally Cori would have

been excited about being in their company, but what was she going to say? She couldn't talk about her next show, or a new technique she was experimenting with.

She was here only because she didn't want to let Gretchen down. But tonight she didn't want to be Cori Saxton. She would play the role for as long as she could, but her plan was to slip away as soon as possible.



Ben wandered away from Mitchell, lifting her glass at his questioning look to indicate she needed a refill. As she moved among the crowd, she smoothed her hand self-consciously across the back of her neck and down her side. She had swept her hair up and pinned it up in a simple yet elegant style. Though she knew that the rich chocolate color of her dress complimented her complexion and its simple lines flattered her figure, she still felt completely out of place. She recognized the work of several top-name designers hugging bodies no doubt surgically sculpted. The teardrop-shaped diamond that hung on a silver chain around her neck felt plain in a room full of expensively jeweled guests.

She stood at the bar along the far wall, awaiting her drink, when a shiver of awareness danced along her spine. Turning, she scanned the crowd and focused on the front door just as Cori walked through it. Confident that Cori was unaware of her gaze, Ben allowed her eyes to roam hungrily over her. Cori wore a black tuxedo-cut pantsuit, perfectly pressed with sharp creases. Her white shirt was a stark contrast to her tanned skin and her blond hair was slightly shaggy, obviously not having been cut since Ben had last seen her. The sexily mussed style still appeared to be deliberate and definitely didn't detract from her allure.

Standing unobserved across the room, Ben was still deciding whether she should approach or avoid Cori when a dark-haired woman stepped up next to Cori. The woman looked incredible in a knee-length red dress. The halter style top showed off strong shoulders, and the flared skirt swirled around her legs. She touched

Cori's arm and there was affection in her eyes as she tilted her head back to look at her.

The easy intimacy between the two women had Ben's insides twisting in jealousy. When Cori walked away, her companion looked up and caught Ben staring. She looked away quickly.

Smiling, the woman closed the distance between them.

"I don't think we've been properly introduced. I'm Gretchen Mills." A slim, fine-boned hand slid gracefully into Ben's.

Though she suspected that Gretchen knew exactly who she was, Ben said, "Bennett McClain."

She recognized the woman as Cori's agent and their hostess for the evening. She smiled politely in response to Gretchen's obvious social ease. Remembering the familiar way she touched Cori's arm, Ben thought that Gretchen was probably the type of woman Cori would go for—socially adept and polished. She refused to examine her disappointment as she realized she was neither of those things and probably never would be.

Her eyes darted back to Gretchen's face when she heard the other woman chuckle softly. Gretchen cocked her head to the side in a gesture that reminded Ben of Cori. "You're trying to decide if Cori and I have ever been romantically involved." It was not a question but a statement, and was said without rancor and with a touch of amusement. Ben did not respond. "We haven't."

"It's none of my business," Ben said despite the relief that washed over her.

"Yeah, sure," Gretchen murmured without an ounce of sincerity before excusing herself and moving away to greet another guest.

Ben's eyes drifted back across the room. She allowed herself to admire for a moment the way Cori moved about the room, flowing sinuously between small groups of people. She seemed inordinately aware of her body and moved as if every motion was deliberate and effortless. This was the Cori Saxton she'd expected to find when she stepped out of Henry Rollins's truck weeks ago. Confident, her presence seeming to fill the room. Here was the artist envied by her peers and lusted after by men and women alike. Seeing Cori in her element, larger than life, Ben could see why. Her smooth, subtly

sexy walk brought to mind images of that body sliding against Ben's own. The room seemed to grow warmer as her pulse accelerated.

Ben watched heads turn as Cori passed and was certain she was not the only person suddenly finding all of her blood rushing south to pulse between her thighs. But she was probably the only one to recognize the vulnerability Cori worked so hard to hide. She had witnessed the fine tremors in Cori's hand and the dark circles of exhaustion and pain beneath her eyes. She had seen agonizing fear swim in her eyes when Cori first talked about her illness. And not one of those things made Ben want her less. They merely added a protective instinct beneath the desire churning within her.



Justin Whitfield had purchased a number of Cori's paintings. They hung in both of his homes as well as several of his offices around the country. This was a compliment. He was a collector whose opinion mattered. Other collectors took notice when he picked up an artist and even now, standing at his side, Cori could feel speculative eyes on her. She felt like making an announcement: *Yes, my paintings will increase in value because that's what happens when there aren't any more.*

Normally an artist had to die to see their works suddenly double in value. Lucky her; she didn't have to wait that long. Justin had just picked one up at auction and was acting like he'd made a killing because anytime soon the Getty people would come knocking at his door. When he was done congratulating himself over that, he moved on to foreign affairs, a topic he said was close to his heart because his father had been a diplomat. Now she was stuck smiling and nodding politely as he spouted his inane ideas about the state of affairs in North Korea.

"Your reporter is here," Gretchen hissed in her ear, barely pausing as she passed by.

Cori jerked her head up, which Justin took to be an awestruck response to his vision of twenty-first-century diplomacy.

"So, as you can imagine I accepted Kim Jong-il's invitation

with an open mind,” he waxed on. “His mistress defected to South Korea, you know.”

“I didn’t realize.” Cori scanned the crowd discreetly.

“The Koreans are a fine people,” Justin said. “Proud. Disciplined. I brought back some extraordinary ceramic pieces for my Goryeo dynasty collection.”

Cori’s breath caught in her chest. *She’s gorgeous.*

Ben wore a rich brown sheath that hugged her body, cinching slightly at the waist before following her hips and dropping midway down her calves. Her hair was pinned back in a simple style that accentuated the graceful line of her neck. Cori wished she could touch her fingers to that area of skin where the tendrils of hair met the back of Ben’s neck.

Cori recognized Mitchell, clad in an expensively cut dark suit, at Ben’s side. He glanced at her every few minutes, as if gauging her attention to whatever he was going on about. Several other people gathered around, possibly entranced by his story or by the woman standing next to him. Ben exuded an earthy beauty that contrasted sharply with the superficial glitz around her. She looked warm and real and so desirable, Cori sighed aloud and wondered why she had spent that last night on her boat. It would not have been that hard to seduce her; why had she let the opportunity slip by?

When she intercepted an appreciative stare from an artist she knew vaguely, she excused herself with a quick half-truth about needing some air.

Justin was immediately apologetic. “Is there anything I can do?”

Cori gave him a wistful smile and placed her hand on his arm. “Your support means so much to me. I’ll speak to Gretchen. Anything I complete this year...you’ll see it first.”

Pigs would fly, but her promise had the desired effect. He kissed her hand as if this were a ballroom in Europe and cast a gloating look around the guests milling nearby. A little too loudly, he said, “Consider it sold. I don’t have to see a Cori Saxton to know I want it.”

Cori scored an approving nod from Gretchen and made her

escape. Ben was still at the center of Mitchell Gardner's clique, and judging by Mitchell's sweeping gestures, he thought he was the life of the party. Ben was doing a good job of concealing her boredom, but Cori could sense a restlessness about her, from the fingers tapping almost imperceptibly against her thigh to the small darting glances around the room. *Is she looking for me?*

When Ben left Mitchell's side, apparently headed for the bar, Cori seized her opening and moved quickly around the perimeter of the room, avoiding eye contact with anyone who made a move toward her. She reached the bar just after Ben and waited among the guests behind her. A tall man greeted a long-lost friend, and Ben hastily took a step back to avoid their reunion. Strong, warm hands gripped her shoulders and her body collided fully with another. "Oh! I'm sorry," Ben began automatically.

"My pleasure," a familiar voice purred in her ear.

Startled, Ben jerked sideways, bumping into a woman with a cocktail in each hand. An embarrassed flush crept up Ben's neck as she mumbled an apology to her as well. She hadn't yet found the strength to raise her eyes.

Cori's heart quickened, keeping pace with her libido. The fleeting sensation of Ben's back pressed to her breasts had ignited every sense in her body. She felt alive, hot, and thrilled.

Flustered, Ben took a few paces toward the wall to escape the jostling. "I didn't know you were here."

"Perhaps that's a good thing," Cori teased gently. "You might not have bothered to come."

If she'd had any doubt about whether Ben wore a bra underneath that dress, she didn't have any now. Ben's nipples altered the silky drape of her cocktail gown and she seemed to be aware of them herself.

Stealing a glance down, Ben said stiffly, "We should move away from these French doors. You must be cold."

"Actually, I'm feeling pretty warm." Cori let her eyes rest on the prominent bumps. She was unable to contain the low moan that vibrated from her throat.

Ben reacted with a sharp intake of breath. "How are you?"

“That question is never just small talk anymore,” Cori noted dryly.

Ben lifted her eyes. “No, I guess not.” Her gaze raced over that face that had haunted her for weeks. *She looks tired.* Dark circles drew the brilliance from her normally luminous eyes. If possible, she looked even thinner than the last time Ben had seen her, the suit hanging loosely on her shoulders. Ben stepped closer. “Are you ill?”

She had to know. Unable to keep from touching her, Ben brushed her fingers down the outside of Cori’s arm, circling her wrist discreetly.

“I’m in remission at the moment.” Ironically, she was healthier than she had been since her diagnosis. She was virtually symptom free, and her body had finally seemed to adjust to her medication.

“But you’re not sleeping,” Ben guessed aloud. It wasn’t a question. Cori’s drawn look and the hint of fatigue in her posture had given her away.

Cori shrugged. “Not much.”

It was a cruel twist that although she was fairly healthy, she had rarely had a full night’s sleep since she last saw Ben. She was constantly awakened by dreams that a psychologist would no doubt have a field day with, dreams whose underlying meaning reflected her feelings of inadequacy and fear.

She watched as concern intruded on Ben’s cool façade, and for one brief moment she longed to melt into her—to hand herself over to the caring arms of this woman. The warmth of Ben’s fingers seeped into her skin and began to unfurl the icy fist that had gripped her insides for months. Cori wanted so much to give in to it, but she could not block out the polite pity she kept seeing on the faces around her. The last thing she wanted was for Ben to look past her as a woman and see only her illness.

She forced herself to meet Ben’s eyes, fearing she would find pity there, but Ben was regarding her with a mix of tenderness and dismay that came close to her own. Unusually for her, Cori gave voice to her first thought. “I’ve missed you.”

Ben’s throat closed over a rush of emotion and for a moment

she felt like she was drowning. Her voice sounded scratchy as she started to speak. “Cori, I—”

“Cori, darling,” a shrill voice cut across Ben as if she were invisible. “I thought you would at least call me after last weekend.”

The woman approaching them was walking quickly, considering her three-inch heels and the tight skirt restraining her thighs. Her obviously dyed blond hair was pinned up, leaving several loose tendrils to brush against her exposed neck. Glancing down, Ben realized her neck wasn’t the only thing exposed. The top three buttons of her dark green blouse were open, revealing a generous amount of cleavage. She stepped entirely too close to Cori for Ben’s liking and draped her arms around Cori’s neck as if they always greeted each other like lovers the morning after. Cori turned her head away, and a kiss intended for her mouth landed on her cheek instead.

“How are you, Veronica?” With a quick, embarrassed look at Ben, Cori detached the clinging arms and firmly put some distance between them.

It was naïve to hope that Ben might have missed the innuendo and the possessive way Veronica had just laid claim. Her cold stare made her feelings so plain, Cori was momentarily tongue-tied.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Am I interrupting something?” Veronica acted as if she had just noticed Ben standing there. She gave her a cursory look, clearly dismissing her, and went on before either of them could speak, “I saw you from across the room, Cori darling, and I just had to come over.” Undeterred by the previous rebuff, she moved to Cori’s side and linked arms with her.

Ben’s stomach churned. She desperately needed to escape the situation before she embarrassed herself. *Possibly by throttling the woman right here.* She allowed herself the pleasure of a vivid fantasy, imagining her hands around the busty blonde’s throat. But as the woman’s face began to turn a lovely shade of blue, she terminated the train of thought. If “Veronica” was Cori’s idea of a desirable woman, they deserved each other.

“Well, I will leave you to your... whatever.” Lacking the energy to bother with a precise definition, Ben turned to go.

“Ben, wait.” Cori extricated herself from Veronica’s grasp and took Ben’s arm.

“I must be going, anyway.” Veronica brushed her lips past Cori’s cheek. “Do call me. We have unfinished business.”

Ben’s icy expression flashed hot as she watched Veronica walk away.

“It’s not what you think.” Cori stepped closer.

“Well, that *is* a relief. Because I was thinking that you fucked that woman.”

“Christ, Ben.” Surprised by Ben’s bluntness, Cori lowered her eyes. She couldn’t lie to her, but still she couldn’t quite bring herself to verbally confirm Veronica’s insinuations either.

“So, it is, in fact, *exactly* what I think.”

Ben didn’t need to hear the words; the guilt she’d seen in Cori’s eyes before she looked away was sufficient. Her insides shook, but somehow she managed to keep from embarrassing herself with tears. She wasn’t certain if she was angrier with Cori or herself. The thought of any woman touching Cori sent a rush of anger and jealousy through her, but realizing that Veronica had been touching Cori just days ago made her absolutely livid. Trying desperately to hold back the flooding rage, Ben once again turned to walk away, and was once again stopped when Cori’s hand shot out to roughly grab her wrist.

“Wait, damn it!” Realizing her raised voice had drawn the attention of several people nearby, Cori quickly lowered it again, groping desperately for the words to explain that night. “It was just...sex.”

Ben had thought she couldn’t be hurt. Anger she could handle, she was familiar with it. But Cori’s flippant justification cut deeply. The fact that sex meant so little to her told Ben everything she needed to know about the difference between them. Seething with barely controlled fury, she wrenched her hand away and stepped back. “*Just sex?* Oh, well, that makes it better, doesn’t it?”

“I made a mistake.” Cori had regretted the encounter with Veronica almost immediately, but this was not the time or place to try to explain that. She needed to talk to Ben in private.

“No, I believe I am the one who made the mistake,” Ben shot

back bitterly. “I made the mistake of believing you were different than the shallow, superficial ass I saw in all of those tabloids. But I was wrong. That is exactly who you are.”

Cori flinched as if she had been physically struck. Not waiting for a response, Ben turned and stalked away. She almost made it to the door when Mitchell caught her arm, thwarting her dramatic exit. Irritated, she searched his face for any indication that he had seen her exchange with Cori. Excitement gleamed in his features, but she suspected there was another reason for it.

“Where are you going?” he asked, steering her back toward the room.

Sighing, she allowed herself to be led. “I was just going to get some air.”

“Well, stick close to me because we’re going to line up your next assignment tonight.”

“No, I don’t think—”

“You’re not going to be able to turn this down, Ben, trust me.” He negotiated a path to the bar. “I don’t know about you, but I need a drink.”

Ben accepted the Scotch pressed into her hand a few minutes later and downed it in two swallows. She smacked the glass down soundly on the bar and met the bartender’s eyes. “Another. Make it a double.”

Mitchell finally seemed to detect that something was wrong. “Listen, if you’re worried about that cretin Evander Wynton, don’t be. He’s the worst kind of poseur. Who cares if he wants to publish a reply to your piece on suburban meth labs. No one’s going to read it.”

Ben stared at him blankly. “Mitch, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”



A full, clear moon lit the patio and Cori retreated to a corner shadowed by an ivy-covered trellis. Leaning against the stone wall, she took several deep gulps of the cool evening air.

Ben’s parting words echoed in her mind. She knew it made

no sense for her to be upset. She had intentionally set out to prove she was the same as she had ever been, and her illness made no difference. Shouldn't she be thrilled that she had pulled it off? Why should she be huddled out here in a corner, unable to move past the pain she had seen in Ben's eyes?

Why should it sting that Ben walked away from her looking so disillusioned? Who was Ben to her, anyway? Nobody. A journalist who'd written a story about her, that's all. They'd both gone back to their lives. What made Ben think she could judge her for picking up where she left off?

Lost in thought, she only noticed Gretchen standing in front of her when she heard a loud sigh.

"What are you doing, hiding out here? I've been looking all over for you."

"I needed a break. I think I'll go home soon."

"No, you won't...not yet, anyway. Mitchell Gardner wants to meet with us."

"Set something up for next week," Cori said impatiently. She was not in the mood to be nice to anyone else tonight.

Gretchen grasped her hand. "He says it's important, and since he's here and we're here, it may as well be tonight. I told him to meet us in the library in a half hour."

"Gretchen, I know we need to do business, but right now I am just not—"

"This is your career, and let's face it, we're in damage control mode. Mitchell's magazine could do a lot for us."

"In case you haven't noticed, we're doing fine." Cori frowned. "Damage control...what do you mean?"

Gretchen drew her out of the shadows. Her expression was serious. "You're not painting. You know it and I know it, but the rest of the world is expecting another show to be announced sometime soon."

"Well, they can wait. Justin Whitfield says prices are going to go through the roof."

"Which means that people will hold your works. They'll vanish into private collections and you'll become an entry in auction catalogs once or twice a year. Is that what you want?"

Cori knew what Gretchen hadn't said, that for all intents and purposes she was going to be treated like a dead artist in her own lifetime. "No, I don't want that," she said. "But I *can't* paint, so I'm not sure if there's even a choice."

"That's what damage control is about," Gretchen said. "We have to buy time. You *are* going to paint again."

"How can you be so sure?" *I'm not.*

Gretchen gave her a gentle shake. "Because you're an artist and that's what artists do. It's your nature. You might be able to fight it for a while, but you'll never win. None of us do when we're fighting our true natures."

Cori smiled at her friend's sudden fierceness. "I'm not sure if I really know my true nature, but I guess we'll find out. What do you want me to do?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sit down, Mitch, you're making me dizzy." Ben could hear herself slurring, but she seemed to have no control over her tongue. The four glasses of Scotch she had consumed in the past twenty minutes had also loosened her thoughts far too much. And that was nothing compared to the state of her legs.

Unable to stay on her feet for another minute, she dropped down onto the nearest sofa, attempting to appear casual rather than inebriated. This meeting in the library seemed like a crazy idea, and now that the other participants had joined them, the situation had gone from bad to worse. Cori was standing by the windows, as if she wanted to be as far away as possible. Ben could feel her eyes, but she avoided them. This would be over soon. Maybe she could even sleep through it.

"I am sure we can all agree the last article did well. I really think we managed both to expand my readership and ignite Cori's fan base." Mitchell paced the room, obviously pleased with himself and happy to take all the credit. "So, to make a long story short, I think we should do a series of follow-up articles, a sort of a 'week in the life.' Ben would accompany Cori and write several features chronicling events. Readers will eat it up."

"You can't be serious," Ben mumbled. She wasn't sure if anyone heard her.

Mitchell crossed to the chair opposite her and sat down. He gave Ben what he must have thought was a stern look and said,

“There’s a lot of buzz. People want to know how Cori is going to manage her illness as she works. This can only be a win/win for all of us.”

Ben waved him off. “You mean for your magazine.”

Cori barely suppressed a smile. Ben was cute when she was drunk. She was somewhat ambivalent about the “week in the life” idea, but Gretchen looked thrilled. If she tried, she could look like she was working, Cori supposed; she had a few half-finished canvases she could erect around her studio. In still photographs, no one could tell if the paint was fresh. But everything was premised on Ben agreeing to spend the time with her, and Cori couldn’t see that happening.

“I want approval,” Ben blurted out.

Cori wasn’t the only one startled by this demand.

“So you’ll do it?” Mitchell sounded astonished.

“I said,” Ben repeated very slowly, as if speaking to the developmentally challenged, “I want approval. Period.”

Gretchen said, “I don’t think that’s negotiable. Mitchell, if we agree—”

Panic stole over Mitchell’s face. “Ben, be reasonable. Cori only requested the most minor changes to the last piece. You can live with this.”

“You’re not listening.” Ben slid a little farther down the sofa. “What I say goes this time. I get approval or I don’t pick up my pen.”

She hid a grin with her hand. Cori was never going to buy it. She had lost control over too much to relinquish it for the small stuff. Ben could look good by agreeing to do what Mitchell wanted, and it would be Cori who sabotaged the deal. That was fine with Ben. She had no plans to write a series of articles pretending Cori was a working artist just to make her look good. After tonight, she never wanted to see Cori again.

“Give it to her,” Cori said calmly. Ben’s eyes flew to hers and held. Cori knew Ben wouldn’t be able to read her expression from across the room, but she could feel the questions in that honeyed gaze.

Ben looked dazed. "What?"

"Excellent." Mitchell beamed. "We'll need to start soon or we won't have anything ready for the next issue, of course."

Gretchen was obviously uneasy. "Cori, what we were talking about earlier...I don't want you feeling pressured. This can wait."

Cori understood the last-minute reservations. Gretchen didn't want her to be exposed as not working at all, and if they didn't retain approval they had no control over that. Cori wasn't altogether sure why she was taking such a risk, but she knew one thing: she could not turn down an opportunity to spend more time with Ben. Although Ben's recent words still stung, Cori was sure Ben saw her as more than a selfish socialite, no matter what she wanted to pretend. There was another reason for her outburst, and Cori wanted to hear what it was. She wanted that private conversation.

In a low voice intended only for her, Gretchen asked, "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean? I'm doing exactly what you want me to do. Damage control."

"Explain something to me." Gretchen glanced across the room at Ben, who was in danger of falling off the sofa if she sprawled out any further. "You're over here, sulking and making irrational decisions. She's over there wasted and acting like you're not in the room. Is there something I should know?"

"Mind your own business," Cori snapped.

"You *are* my business." When Cori remained silent, she continued, "Do you think this article is a good idea?"

"Hell, I don't know." It was probably insane to think Ben would change her mind. Maybe she would write a character assassination.

"I can get you out of it," Gretchen said. "It's not like we've signed anything. There's no need for you to make this compromise."

"I think there is."

"I hope you know what you're doing."

"Me too. It's okay, Gretchen." Cori kept her eyes on Ben's face, trying to read beneath her distant expression. "Just make the deal. I'll take care of the rest." With that, she left the library.

Ben stared after her in foggy dismay, barely able to absorb what had just occurred. *I'm going to spend a whole week with Cori Saxton. This can't be happening.*



Another article, what the hell was she thinking? She wanted Ben—that she knew. But the problem was, she wanted her for more than one night, and that was...a relationship. Cori didn't do those, and even if she did, it would be selfish and irresponsible for her to begin one now. She would not subject anyone to a lifetime with an invalid. So why had she just agreed to spend more time with Ben?

Cori watched Ben consume another drink. Ever since she and the others had returned to the party, she'd been a fixture at the bar. Cori had no idea what kind of tolerance Ben had, but she had long ago exceeded it. She scanned the room for Mitchell, wondering when he planned to take Ben home. He was still deep in conversation and didn't appear concerned about Ben's state.

Ben was about to order another drink when she felt someone move behind her. The bartender's gaze slid over her shoulder as if his attention were elsewhere.

"Hey," Ben complained, but he ignored her and set about straightening the bottles. "What the hell—hey, I said I want another drink."

"I think you've had enough." Ben jumped at the words spoken softly in her ear. She spun around and to her dismay stumbled forward directly into Cori's arms. "Damn it," she muttered and struggled to pull back, but Cori didn't let go.

"Whoa. Hold on, let me help you."

"I don't need help." Ben felt a surge of anger, both at Cori for presuming to know how much she should drink and herself for getting into this condition. A bolt of heat shot through her stomach as Cori's warm breath brushed against her ear.

"Do you have a coat?" Cori asked.

"What?"

"When you came in, did you check a coat?"

"No."

Cori glanced in Mitchell's direction once again. He was still oblivious. She tucked Ben against her side and began to steer her toward the door.

"What are you doing?" Ben struggled a bit, but Cori was stronger and kept them on course.

"Taking you home."

"I can get myself home."

"How? It doesn't look like Mitchell is going to be ready to go anytime soon." Cori nodded to Gretchen as they drew close to her. "Tell Mitchell I took her home."

"I'll call a cab," Ben offered uncertainly.

"Why bother? My car is right here." Cori kept a firm grip on Ben's hand and led her down the walk, directing her carefully around the uneven spots. She released Ben long enough to open the car door.

Too drunk to argue, Ben allowed Cori to guide her into the car and close the door. "Don't you have to take Veronica home?" she asked snidely as Cori slid behind the wheel.

"I told you, that didn't mean anything," Cori said wearily.

"And all those women on the magazine covers?"

"Come on, Ben. I'm at a party, some reporter has a camera, and as soon as they start taking pictures everyone is trying to get in them."

"And you're completely innocent, right?" Ben mumbled sarcastically.

Cori didn't respond. She sped out of Gretchen's drive, taking comfort in the aggressive growl of the engine.

"Nice car," Ben slurred after a few beats. "It suits you."

"How's that?"

"Pretentious and flashy." Ben wished she hadn't said that, but she seemed to have lost control of her tongue. She couldn't stop from baiting her.

Cori wasn't biting. She'd been beating herself up over Veronica for the past few days, but she would only make things worse if she tried to explain herself now. Ben was too drunk to listen with her brain turned on, and besides, they would have plenty of time to talk while working together.

They remained silent for the rest of the ten-minute drive, except for Ben muttering the occasional direction. Her apartment was on the Upper East Side, five blocks from Central Park. Cori pulled up to the curb in front of Ben's building. The renovated prewar building boasted a brick and stone façade, partially obscured by the ivy climbing the corner and spreading across the front.

Ben had the door open and was still struggling to climb out of the low car when Cori came around and held out her hand. Though she briefly considered ignoring her, Ben wasn't having much luck extricating herself from the vehicle. She grasped Cori's hand for as long as it took to get out of the car and get her balance, then released it quickly.

"You don't have to walk me up," she said when Cori followed her to the front door.

Her feet betrayed her just as she got the words out and she stumbled on the front steps. Her hand shot out to break her fall, and an arm snaked around her waist, hauling her back. The warm press of Cori's thighs against the back of hers inspired a rush of moisture between her legs. Ben tried to move away, but Cori held her fast.

In her ear, she said, "Let me help you."

Cori hadn't meant to pull Ben quite so tightly against her, but she wasn't quite ready to let her go, either. She'd been caught off guard by the jolt of arousal she felt when Ben's ass came into solid contact with her crotch. Now, holding her close, she felt the curves of Ben's body molding to hers. Her arm was around Ben's waist, just inches from her breasts, supporting her weight. She would only need to slide her hand up slightly to cup one of those breasts. Ben pushed back against her, and Cori cleared her throat in a failed attempt to cover a low groan.

The hum of that groan whispered past Ben's ear and her stomach tightened. Suddenly the buzzing in her head couldn't be blamed completely on the alcohol. She jerked out of Cori's grasp, almost toppling forward before she regained her balance. Grabbing the railing, she fumbled her way up the stairs and unlocked the door without dropping her keys. She hovered in the doorway and turned toward Cori, aware that she should thank her and that she had been

unpleasant for the entire ride home. After an awkward silence, they both started to speak at the same time, then fell silent again.

Cori gestured for Ben to go ahead. "You first."

"Okay. I will call you about the article. It's not too late to change your mind, you know." Ben decided she must be sobering up since she had almost managed to inject a professional tone into her voice. She certainly felt anything but professional. Her heart still hammered in her chest and her legs barely supported her. She lacked the concentration to think about something as inane as work when she looked at Cori. There was a flicker of promise in Cori's eyes, a promise that nothing else would matter if only they touched each other again.

"That's fine. Just call my cell and we'll work out a schedule."

Still standing at the bottom of the steps, Cori tilted her head to meet Ben's eyes. Ben's face was flushed and her eyes glassy and Cori hoped it was due, at least in part, to their proximity a moment ago. She could insist on walking Ben up. Ben would invite her in. And then... *Christ, Saxton, she's drunk. That's low, even for you.* Ben had made it quite clear earlier in the evening that she wanted nothing to do with her. *I believe her exact words were "shallow, superficial ass."*



"I don't understand what the problem is."

"You don't understand what the problem is?" Cori followed Gretchen through the seemingly endless booths at the Union Square Farmer's Market a few days after the party.

"Well, you like her, don't you?"

"Do I like her?"

"Okay, you do realize you're just repeating what I'm saying," Gretchen quipped.

"Shut up." Cori paused at a table loaded with various cheeses and picked up a wedge of parmesan. She debated for a moment and then set it down when she found herself wondering if Ben liked fettuccini Alfredo. "Tell me again what we're doing here."

"I told Marianne I could cook, and now she expects me to make dinner for her tonight."

"Wonderful," Cori said. Gretchen had met this woman at the party the previous weekend. She'd been instantly attracted to her and had called Cori the next day to gloat about having a date with the gorgeous redhead. Cori couldn't remember Marianne at all, which astonished her because she would normally have got the number of any sexy woman she ran into, even one Gretchen might be planning to date.

Gretchen wandered to a bin piled high with vine-ripened tomatoes. "I forget, do you squeeze tomatoes and smell melons or is it the other way around?"

"I don't think you're supposed to squeeze or smell tomatoes. Just look for the red ones." Cori picked up two large, red tomatoes and handed them to her. "There's one flaw in your plan. You can't cook."

"I know that and you know that, but she doesn't." Gretchen handed over several bills and took the bag from the vendor. "I talked Louisa into making dinner, but I have to get the ingredients." She consulted the crumpled list in her hand.

"Your housekeeper is cooking dinner for Marianne?"

"Yeah, so?" Gretchen glanced at her before heading off in another direction. "Where do you think they keep the herbs?"

"Well, it's good to know you're basing your relationship on honesty."

Gretchen stopped in the middle of the aisle and Cori stumbled into her. "I'm sorry, are *you* lecturing *me* on honesty?"

"I don't know what you mean. I am absolutely above reproach," Cori shot back.

"Besides, who said I was having a relationship with her?"

"You're a dog."

"My point was, you'll let Ben follow you around for a week. And then it will be over and you can get back to your life." Gretchen paused in front of a table full of fresh herbs.

"I don't know if I even know what that is anymore."

"Sure you do. You've just been distracted." Gretchen bought some herbs and they walked out to her Mercedes.

"I sure have," Cori mumbled.

"So you just spend some time in the city. Stop running off to be a hermit upstate. You'll be back to your old self in no time." Gretchen keyed the remote and popped the trunk.

Cori stood next to the car wondering if her old self was something she wanted to be, even if she had a choice about that. She handed over the packages she'd been carrying and waited while Gretchen stowed them.

"I'm telling you, Cori." Gretchen slammed the trunk and they climbed in. "Just get these new articles over with and we'll deal with the rest. Have you called her yet?"

"Yeah, she's coming over later today so we can make plans." When they'd talked on the phone earlier, Ben had apologized for the way she'd acted during the drive home. They had agreed to make the best of the situation, and Cori was hoping they could have a fresh start.

Gretchen wheeled aggressively into the flow of traffic and Cori cringed as she changed lanes quickly, cutting across within inches of the front bumper of another car.

"God, you're a worse driver than I am," she groaned.

"That's not possible." Gretchen waved away her concern and sped through a yellow light.



Ben stood outside a prewar building on Park Avenue that looked somewhat like her own from the outside, but she knew the inside would be drastically different. Studying its architecture seemed a good stall to keep from going inside. She was second-guessing the drunken bravado that had made her think she could handle this assignment, revisiting her distorted thinking that evening in the library. She had gambled on Cori's refusal and her bluff had blown up in her face. Yet on some level, the gamble was more complicated; she could see that now. She had offered Cori a chance, as if daring her to prove something. She was still shocked that Cori had chosen to take it, to trust her.

Wondering what it meant and why Cori had made that choice,

she took a fortifying breath and entered the building. She gave her name to the doorman. He directed her to the elevator and told her that Ms. Saxton was expecting her. As Ben waited for the doors to close, then listened to the muted whir of the elevator, she felt a heady thrill of anticipation, and it had nothing to do with writing an article. The thought of seeing Cori made her breathless, and when the doors opened on the top floor, she stepped out with a strange sense that nothing in her life was going to be the same again.

Cori's apartment door was directly in front of her, in a tastefully decorated, olive-toned hallway. Ben clutched her planner tightly to her chest and rang the bell. Her heart almost deafened her as the door opened and Cori stood in front of her in shorts and a casual shirt, a cell phone pressed to her ear. She motioned Ben inside.

"I'll just be a minute," she said, covering the phone with her hand. "Feel free to give yourself a tour of the place."

Ben nodded and followed her to the living room. The apartment exceeded her expectations. Light oak hardwood floors were accented with a cherry inlay around the edges. Three large windows afforded a view of Central Park. The room she stood in was furnished in rich brown leather furniture and dark woods, and a massive armoire stood against one wall.

Cori appeared to be doing much more listening than talking to whoever was on the phone, only muttering the occasional sound of agreement. Taking her invitation to look around at face value, Ben wandered back through the foyer and down a hallway. Doors opened on either side and, from a glimpse of tiling at floor level, it looked like a bathroom was straight ahead. She peeked into the bedroom on the left and guessed it to be the master. The décor was simple and more contemporary than the living room. The clean lines of the large bed in the center of the room were accented with a spread of bright blues, white, and muted gray. A matching cherry nightstand and bureau were the only other furnishings in the room.

In the room to the right Cori had set up an easel. Here the floors were covered with drop cloths to protect the wood finish from stray drops of paint. The same view of the park could be seen from the window. Ben wandered around the airy studio, enjoying the atmosphere. She was drawn to the most shadowed wall, where

several large canvases stood, protected by drapes. She glanced over her shoulder before lifting a corner exposing a hint of color. Not satisfied, she pulled the cloth back farther. She recognized several of the paintings, but there were several that appeared unfinished. Remembering the canvas in Cori's studio upstate, Ben wondered if these works carried as much pain for her. She made a mental note to ask her about them later in the week.

After carefully covering them once more, Ben made her way back to the living room. She hesitated on the threshold, not wanting Cori to feel she was eavesdropping on her call. Cori lounged on the couch with her feet up on the coffee table. Her white cotton shorts set off long, tan legs. Two buttons of her light blue shirt were open, leaving a vee of smooth skin. Ben suddenly had the urge to press her lips there. *Jesus, I spend entirely too much time thinking about how this woman tastes.*

She must have made a small noise because Cori saw her then and waved her in, gesturing for her to sit in the chair closest to her.

"Yes, Mom, I read the article before it came out." Cori tucked one hand behind her head and looked at Ben pointedly. "I know exactly how persistent the press can be." She grinned when Ben rolled her eyes. "Okay, I'll call you later." She flipped the phone closed and explained, "My mother."

"I gathered."

"She tends to worry too much."

"That's better than not at all."

"I suppose." Cori was confused by the shadow that passed over Ben's expression. "Do you think your mother doesn't worry about you?"

Ben considered her answer. She honestly doubted if her mother gave her any thought. It was not uncommon for several months to pass between their conversations, and even then, it was usually Ben who initiated contact. "I don't know."

"She's your mother. She must."

Ben's dry laugh was humorless. "Not everyone grew up in a fairy tale, Saxton."

Cori was stunned by the rancor in Ben's voice. Certainly, she had not lacked for much when she was growing up, and she hadn't

always appreciated what she had. She took for granted that those things would always be there, just as she did her parents' love. They hadn't agreed with her every endeavor, but they had always given her the freedom to go forward and their support whether she succeeded or failed. She could not conceive of a parent not being concerned about their child.

Cori pushed away her musings about her own childhood and focused on the pain that lingered in Ben's eyes. "Tell me," she invited softly.

"We're not here to talk about me," Ben said, but her voice didn't hold much conviction.

Exploiting the hint of uncertainty, Cori reached across the space between them and covered Ben's hand with her own. "Please. You can't make a remark like that about fairy tales and act like it's nothing. If we are going to do this week, it can't be totally one-sided. I want to know something about you too."

She was pleasantly surprised when Ben turned her hand over and laced their fingers. "I guess there were times when we were happy, but except for the early years I can't recall many. I was eight when my brother was diagnosed with leukemia. He was ten. My dad couldn't handle it—his only son with a terminal illness. After a while, when Randy started getting really sick, Dad left."

Ben's mind flashed back to the day she watched her father leave. The image was sharp in her mind, painfully so. He wore a blue striped shirt, the knot of his burgundy tie haphazardly pulled loose. And though she had never been able to put a brand name to his aftershave, she could still recall its musky scent. Randy had been too sick to get out of bed that day; he was already losing his hair from the chemotherapy. Their father had briefly bent over his inert form, pressing his lips to Randy's pale forehead before he headed for the door. He'd brushed a hand lightly over the top of Ben's head as he walked past her. She never saw him again.

"I'm not sure if he was tall."

"What?" Cori asked gently.

Ben's expression was distant and Cori wasn't even sure if she had heard the question. Ben's eyes darted back and forth but her gaze was inward, searching not her line of sight, but her memory of the

distant past. “I’m not sure if my father was tall or if I just remember him that way because I was small. After he left, my mother had to work a lot to pay for Randy’s hospital bills. Randy and I stayed with our aunt Meg.

“When he—” Her voice cracked and the fingers around Cori’s tightened. “His doctors tried everything, but nothing worked. When he died, my mother started working even more. She said it was to pay for his funeral. But I think...”

“What?”

“Well, my brother and I looked a lot alike, and we were both the spitting image of our father—our hair, our coloring. We even have his eyes. After Dad left, then Randy was gone, I think I was just a constant reminder of the two of them. Sometimes I swear she could barely stand to look at me. So she was hardly ever around.”

“Oh, sweetie, I’m so sorry.” Cori moved to kneel before her, enfolding both of Ben’s hands in hers.

Ben shook her head, chasing away the emotions and blinking back tears. “It’s okay. I stayed with Aunt Meg a lot. And my cousin Lucy was around the same age, so we sort of grew up together. I had family around me, but—do I think my mother worries about me? I honestly don’t know. We rarely speak, and certainly not about anything of substance.”

“I always wondered what it would be like to have a brother or a sister,” Cori mused.

“It was great. For me at least... poor Randy, he must have hated having his little sister always wanting to tag along, but he never let it show. He was very patient with me.”

“You guys didn’t argue?”

“Oh, sure we did. But he wouldn’t let anyone else give me a hard time.” A small smile played at the edge of Ben’s lips. “Once, when he and a bunch of his friends were hanging out on the front porch, one of his buddies called me a name. Randy leapt to my defense, and they started yelling at each other. Randy ended up slugging the kid and giving him a black eye.”

Cori laughed and shifted to perch back on the edge of the sofa. She kept one of Ben’s hands firmly within hers. “Did he get in trouble?”

“My dad pretended to read him the riot act, but I think he was secretly proud of him. The other kid’s mother went ballistic and he wasn’t allowed to play at our house anymore. I felt so bad that I’d cost Randy a friend that I went to him, crying, and apologized. You know what he said?”

“Hmm?”

“He said, ‘That’s okay, I didn’t like him that much anyway.’” Grinning, Ben glanced up.

Returning her smile, Cori met her eyes for a long moment, then dropped her gaze to their joined hands. She idly stroked her thumb over the top of Ben’s.

“It must have been hard for you when he got sick.” She pictured an eight-year-old Ben desperately trying to grasp the concept of cancer. She could only imagine what Ben and her family had gone through.

Ben recalled vividly the first time she knew her brother was sick. She knew now that her parents had kept it from her for several weeks. Randy had just begun the treatments and his small body was not dealing well with the radiation and chemotherapy. Ben had been bored one day and had gone in search of her favorite playmate. She found him in the bathroom, pale and shaking, sitting on the floor.

Surprisingly wise for his years, he had immediately seen the fear in her eyes and got to his feet. Taking her hand, he led her into his room. Ben could still feel the cold, sweaty sensation of his flesh against hers. When they were both settled on his bed, he had explained to her straightforwardly what his parents had been unable to bring themselves to tell her. And when she cried, he had simply wrapped his thin arm around her shoulders and waited until her tears had run dry.

“It was the most difficult thing I’ve ever been through,” Ben finally answered.

The knot that had begun forming in Cori’s stomach twisted at the agony in her voice. Tears filled Ben’s golden eyes, yet she stubbornly refused to let them spill.



For the next thirty minutes, they went over Cori's schedule for the week to follow and compared it to Ben's, deciding when they would get together. Ben was pleased with the outcome. They had a good mix of work and social activities that would give her a well-rounded view of Cori's life for the article. And, she admitted, she was also looking forward to spending time with Cori.

Work out of the way, Cori offered to order a pizza and open a bottle of wine. While waiting for the delivery, they talked casually, meandering from light topics to more serious ones. Their easy conversation seemed in direct contradiction to the sensual energy that seemed to hum between them whenever they were in proximity to each other. Ben had never met anyone who could make her so completely relaxed and yet so instantly turned inside out with barely a word.

When Cori started talking about her high school years, it took some effort for Ben to stay focused on the stories she related in that low, sexy, languid way of hers. Though entertaining, Cori's private school escapades only confirmed that she and Ben could not be more different. Cori had lived a privileged life, and Ben wondered if she had ever realized, or cared, during her teenage years that not everyone had so carefree an existence.

"So this one time when we ditched school, the four of us piled into my car and we headed for the beach." Cori continued her recollections, apparently at ease revealing more about herself than Ben had expected.

"How old were you?" Ben asked.

"A little older than sixteen, I guess, because I hadn't had the car for long."

"Birthday present from Daddy?" Ben asked sarcastically.

"Yeah, actually, it was."

"What kind?"

Cori paused, realizing how telling her answer would be. "It was a Mercedes 500SL."

"Convertible?"

Cori nodded.

"Mmm-hmm...typical."

Cori bristled at the disdain that suffused Ben's words. She'd

been judged by strangers all of her life, even more so since her illness became public knowledge, and she was tired of it. “So now you’ve got me all figured out? You think you know all about me?”

“I didn’t mean anything by it.” Ben realized that she had reacted to Cori the spoiled rich girl, not Cori the woman she saw now. It wasn’t fair to categorize Cori this way, and if she wanted to get to know her better, she needed to guard her reactions a little more. “I’m sorry.”

“I know you didn’t,” Cori said with a sigh. *Shallow, superficial ass.* She wondered if it was foolish to hope Ben would ever see more than that. She settled back into the sofa and changed the subject, launching into another story, this one set in Paris during her art school years.

Ben listened with interest, noting that none of the players in Cori’s stories were the same. It seemed that she didn’t have many close friends until she returned to the States, and then Gretchen’s name was interspersed quite regularly.

When the doorbell rang, Cori got up to answer it. When she disappeared into the foyer, the muted sound of her voice could be heard as she spoke to the delivery person. Ben was glad to have a moment alone to collect her thoughts. It had been almost too easy to lose herself, talking on such a personal level. She never spoke about Randy with anyone except Lucy, yet Cori had tenderly drawn her feelings from her and seemed to have absorbed her pain. Something odd happened to Ben’s reserve when she was close to Cori—something that made her want to share things she never had.

Cori returned with a pizza box and two plates. While she served the pizza, Ben refilled their glasses and watched, in amusement, as Cori picked up a slice, folded it in half, and shoved it in her mouth.

“What?” Cori asked before taking another bite.

“There are so many sides to you.” Ben laughed.

Cori raised an eyebrow.

“At Gretchen’s you were so at ease and socially adept in that crowd. Smooth, I guess. But at your place upstate, and here now... you’re just not at all what I expected.”

“Mmm... what did you expect?” Cori asked indolently, glancing at her.

“I expected more”—she searched for the proper word—“swagger.”

“I can swagger when I need to.” Cori chuckled and a small smile graced her lips. “You’re not exactly what I expected, either.”

“I know. You expected a man,” Ben quipped.

“Yeah, sorry about that.” But she didn’t sound sorry in the least as she raked her eyes purposefully over Ben’s body. “There is definitely nothing masculine about you,” she teased with a wide grin as her gaze returned to Ben’s face.

For a moment Ben basked in the warmth of their shared smile, her body growing increasingly hot under Cori’s frank scrutiny. But just as she started thinking about how little effort it would take to close the distance and kiss Cori, Veronica’s face flashed in her head.

A heaviness settled around Cori’s heart as the smile faded from Ben’s face and the intimate moment between them slipped away. “Where did you go?”

“It’s late,” Ben muttered. She stood and shoved her notebook in her purse. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Seven?”

“Yeah.” Cori had an appointment the next day with Dr. Franklin. Ben would accompany her to University Hospital in Syracuse. Cori had argued that it wasn’t necessary, that certainly *a week in the life* didn’t literally mean 24/7. Ben had none too gently reminded her that *she* was calling the shots this time around. Knowing she was arguing in vain, Cori relented, telling Ben they would have to leave early to make the just over four-hour drive.

Cori stood to walk Ben out, but she was barely across the room when the door closed firmly and she heard the ding of the elevator in the hallway. Sighing, she flipped the deadbolt in place and wandered back to the living room. She replayed the evening, dwelling on the pain so vividly reflected in Ben’s eyes as she talked about her father’s abandonment and her brother’s death. Cori had no difficulty picturing a young Ben feeling very much alone as her mother let her down emotionally. Her heart ached for Ben’s childhood loss. She was thankful that Ben’s aunt and cousin had been there for her.

As she moved around the living room cleaning up the remnants of their dinner, she kept hearing the anguish in Ben’s voice as she

spoke of her brother. She hadn't said how long Randy was sick before he died, but Cori had gotten the sense that it was a long illness. Ben had probably watched for many months as he got sicker and sicker. Cori had wanted more than anything to take Ben into her arms and comfort her. She wanted Ben to feel safe enough with her to have shed the tears that she had stubbornly held back. *You would damn her to a lifetime of helplessness watching your health deteriorate?*

Cori wasn't sure where that voice came from, but she recognized the wisdom in those words. She was drawn to Ben, of that she had no doubt, but she would keep a professional distance between them in the coming week. She hadn't done too many unselfish things in her life, but this she would do.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dr. Franklin's office was not the luxury suite Ben had expected for a leading neurologist, but a functional set of rooms at University Hospital in Syracuse. Upon arrival they were instructed to have a seat in the small, tastefully decorated waiting room. Cori seemed completely at ease, so Ben wasn't sure why she felt so uncomfortable herself. This was part of their deal. If they didn't explore how Cori was handling her illness in her daily life, there was no point to the follow-up articles. Certainly she shouldn't feel as if she was intruding when Cori had agreed to the arrangement. She knew it was a lie, even as she reduced it in her mind to a business arrangement.

Ben glanced up when a door opened and a nurse instructed, "Ms. Saxton, please come with me."

"You can wait out here," Cori told Ben firmly.

"What?" Annoyed to think she'd driven all this way to sit and read crappy magazines, Ben reminded her, "I'm supposed to be doing a chronicle of your daily life, not just excerpts you choose to share." As soon as she'd spoken, she felt bad. She had always prided herself in knowing the difference between fair investigation and outright invasion of privacy. "I'm sorry," she began, but Cori was already stalking away after the nurse.

Looking back over her shoulder, Cori said, "Come on, if you must."

The nurse showed them to a dressing cubicle and handed over a gown. As she left, Ben started for the gap in the curtains.

"Where are you going?" Cori demanded.

"I'll wait outside to give you some privacy to change."

"That's not necessary. You wanted complete access and that's what you'll get."

Before Ben could respond, Cori tugged her T-shirt over her head, revealing a lean torso and small, firm breasts. Ben could only stare as she proceeded to strip down to her panties and pull on the gown. With an impertinent grin, she turned her back. "A little help?" she prompted, waiting for Ben to tie up her gown.

After Cori had changed, the nurse led them to an examination room. Cori got on the examining table and Ben settled unobtrusively in the chair in one corner and wished she had stayed out front with the potted plants.

Cori shifted uncomfortably on the high bed, tugging the gown that was failing to sufficiently cover her backside.

"Sudden attack of modesty?" Ben asked sarcastically, pretending to flip through the magazine she'd brought with her from the other room.

"I don't think this gown is necessary. It's just a checkup. Plus, this vinyl is cold." Cori winced as her skin came in contact with the offending surface of the exam table once again. "Smart-ass," she added after a beat.

"Tell me again why your doctor is so far away," Ben grumbled, shifting in her seat. They'd just spent the past three hours on I-81. It felt like the longest road ever.

"He comes highly recommended. Besides, I plan on spending a lot more time upstate, so I thought I'd find a neurologist up here in Syracuse."

"Do you think you're actually going to live upstate instead of the city, eventually?" Ben asked, trying to make everyday conversation. She wasn't even sure if Cori answered, she was so distracted by a glimpse of naked breast through the gaping arm of the hospital gown. By all rights, Cori should have looked unappealing in the shapeless blue sack, but the sight of Cori's body as she had unabashedly disrobed was burned in Ben's memory.

Ben shook away her inappropriate thoughts as Dr. Franklin entered the room. He was a thin man with just a fringe of hair ringing

his otherwise bald head. A lab coat covered a white shirt and solid navy tie.

Cori made a quick introduction, giving only Ben's name and no explanation as to the reason for her presence. He greeted Ben politely, and if he drew any conclusions about her they did not show on his face.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, shuffling through some papers in the file he was carrying. He pulled a pair of wire-rimmed glasses from his front pocket. His movements seemed careful and deliberate, long fingers carefully settling the glasses on his nose.

"I feel fine." Though Ben was obviously trying to be invisible, keeping her eyes lowered and her hands clasped around a small notepad in her lap, Cori was still aware of her presence, sensing her almost palpably on her skin.

"Your tests look good. You're not experiencing any symptoms?"

Cori shook her head, deciding that the occasional bout of fatigue shouldn't be considered a symptom. "Nothing I can complain about."

"No tremors since the last time we spoke?"

Again she answered in the negative, glancing nervously at Ben. She didn't know why, but she sensed a distance growing between them with each of Dr. Franklin's questions.

"How are you adjusting to the meds? Are the side effects decreasing?"

"Yes. The headaches are fewer and the nausea and chills are pretty much over."

"Have you had any reactions at your injection sites?"

"No. I've been keeping up with the rotation pretty well."

Ben sat silently, trying to absorb the medical terms and specifics of Cori's condition as the two continued to talk about her treatment. She paid particular attention to the things that Cori had not previously explained to her. Every time she heard a word she didn't recognize, she made a note to look it up later.

When Cori had first revealed the nature of her illness, Ben had researched MS extensively on the Internet and had thought she was well versed in the disease, but something about hearing it discussed

in the small sterile room made it impossible to feel detached. This was Cori's reality, and no amount of education about the possible progressions of the disease could help anyone predict how or why it would run its course in her body. Ben knew the strange queasiness she felt about that was fear.

"Do you have any questions?" Ben was startled to find Dr. Franklin addressing her.

"No." That was a long way from the truth. She had many questions, but she was no longer able to discern which of them were relevant to her work. She had very personal feelings for Cori, and that could certainly be a problem if she wished to write an objective story.



Some time later, they were seated across from each other at Edy's Place, a little diner just off the interstate that Cori favored when she traveled this route. It was exactly the type of place one expected to find at an interstate exit. A long countertop ran along the back and the stools that were pushed up to it were upholstered in red vinyl, as were the booths that lined the walls. Several tables dotted the open area in the center of the diner, and Ben suspected that if she checked, every one of them would wobble until someone shoved several sugar packets or a strategically folded napkin under them. As soon as they'd walked in they were assailed with the smell of fried food.

Ben had been quiet since they left the hospital, and she now sat silently in her side of the booth, staring at the cracked Formica tabletop.

"What's wrong?" Cori asked casually.

Ben looked up. "Sorry...just lost in thought."

She would have explained herself a little more but they were interrupted by the waitress who sauntered over. After they'd placed their orders and were once again alone, Cori prompted, "So?"

"I guess listening to Dr. Franklin really made things more real," Ben admitted. "I mean, I did the research. I know what MS is. But it was still kind of abstract."

“And now it’s real.”

“There’s a lot to consider, isn’t there? And a lot of unknowns.”

“Yes, there are. But it’s not as bad as it could be. I’m finally getting to a place where I can accept it.” *Being around you is helping me with that.* Cori wasn’t willing to put voice to this thought but she realized it was true. When she was with Ben, it was easier to remain in the present rather than dwell on what the future might entail.

“Dr. Franklin asked you a lot of questions about the medication you are on now. Is he considering other options for you?”

Cori nodded and waited as their meals were placed in front of them. “I think that’s one of the reasons I chose him as my neurologist. He’s always aware of the latest research. If the Betaseron isn’t working as well as he’d like, there are other drugs we could try to help alleviate the symptoms and reduce the relapses. And he doesn’t discount alternative therapies without examining them. For example, he says there has been limited success with hyperbaric oxygen therapy for some symptoms.”

Finding her sandwich tastier than she had expected, Ben chewed thoughtfully. “Is there hope for a cure?”

“I guess there’s always hope,” Cori answered evasively.

Ben wasn’t letting her off the hook. If it was only for her article, she could do the research herself. This meant something more. “Knowing you, I’m sure you’ve looked into this enough to answer more specifically.”

“I have.” Cori paused to take a sip of her lemonade. “There’s extensive research going on, but some of the more promising studies are still in the early stages. I don’t know if you’ve heard about Antigen-specific immunotherapy and stem cell replacement. And there’s a lot of buzz about a new drug that could be taken orally instead of by injection.”

“Yes, I think I read about that,” Ben said, recalling one of the many resources she’d been skimming through online. “It’s still in trials, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s several years away from FDA approval.”

Trying to sound optimistic, Ben said, “There’s really no way to know when a breakthrough might happen.”

“By the time it does, it could be too late to do me much good.”

Cori didn't seem bitter, only resigned. "I have to be realistic, and plan accordingly."

"So when you said you plan on spending a lot more time upstate, how much time exactly do you mean?" Ben returned to the question she'd asked in Dr. Franklin's office earlier. She felt barren at the thought that they could live miles apart in the near future.

"I need to make some changes in my life," Cori said. "There's really no reason for me to stay in the city. My place in Ogdensburg has everything I could want."

"Well, it is beautiful up there," Ben agreed, her heart sinking.

Cori picked up the check their waitress had laid on the table and pulled her wallet out of her back pocket.

"Hey, give me that." Ben protested. "It's a business lunch. We'll make Mitch pay for it." She took the check and placed her credit card in the folder. "Don't you think you'll miss your lifestyle?"

"What do you mean?"

Ben searched for the words to be tactful and then decided it was futile. "The pool of available lesbians is much smaller upstate."

"Who are we kidding, Ben? I've never limited myself to the *available* ones." Cori gave a self-deprecating chuckle. "I guess that's one of things that will have to change. I think I can live without sex."

Ben couldn't stop the disbelieving look before it flew across her face.

"I can!" Cori insisted.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I can't believe I let you talk me into this," Lucy grumbled, bending over to tie her shoe.

They stood together just inside Central Park. The early morning sun was beginning to burn off the previous night's dew. The peaceful chirping of the birds competed with the ever-present sounds of the city.

"It'll be good for us. I should get in shape." Needing to work off some energy, Ben had called Lucy and convinced her that a walk would be nice. When Lucy hesitated, Ben insisted, saying that they hadn't had much time to spend together lately and she missed her. Lucy couldn't argue with that but she made her feelings about exercise very clear.

"Just because you want to look good so you can get in Cori's pants doesn't mean my fat ass has to sweat."

Ben snorted. Lucy was naturally shapely in all the right places, but she would never be called fat. "I am not trying to get in Cori's pants," she protested.

"Then you're crazy." Lucy gave her a salacious grin. "Mind if I have a go at her?"

When Ben's only response was a dark glare, Lucy laughed.

"Come on." Ben pulled Lucy along the path. "I only have an hour before I have to meet her."

As they passed through a treed area, the sunlight poked through in a random dappled pattern and reached down to touch the ground. They walked in silence for a while, settling into a brisk pace.

"Are you still upset about the blonde?" Lucy broke the silence tentatively.

"No," Ben answered too quickly. "Maybe. Yes. But I don't have any right to be. She can sleep with whomever she chooses."

"But it bothers you," Lucy gently pointed out that Ben was not nearly as neutral as she wanted to be.

"Yeah," Ben admitted with a sigh.

"But you can see why she had another fling, can't you?"

"Because she's a player and she'll never change." Ben fell in behind Lucy, walking briefly in single file as they met a woman pushing a stroller.

"Come on, Ben. MS is a big deal. Her life is changing beyond her control, and your article just basically outed her to the whole world. Maybe she had something to prove."

"Please tell me you're not going to take her side." Ben caught up with her again. "She agreed to the article."

"I'm taking whatever side will result in you being happy. All I'm saying is, think carefully before you let anything happen with her. Cori is the one-night stand type, but you're not."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You get emotionally involved. From all accounts, she doesn't. She has no depth. I don't think you need someone like that messing with your head."

Ben walked on in silence, pondering Lucy's observation. Once again she was struck by the discrepancies between the woman people thought Cori was and the one Ben was getting to know. Cori might not have been emotionally involved with her previous sexual partners, but Ben didn't think she lacked the ability.

No depth. She recalled the warmth between Cori and Henry as well as the closeness she had witnessed with Gretchen. Cori was capable of depth, of that Ben was certain.

"You don't have to have sex with someone to be emotionally involved." The words were out before Ben realized just how much they revealed. Though she was resolutely staring straight ahead she could feel Lucy's eyes on her.

"Oh, no, Ben. No."

"What?"

“You’re falling for her,” Lucy accused.

Ben considered denying it, but Lucy would see right through her anyway. When Ben walked on silently, Lucy grabbed her arm, forcing them both to a stop.

“Ben? What are you doing?”

“I can’t help it, Luce. She’s not like the person you see in the tabloids.”

“That’s what they all say.”

“She’s not,” Ben insisted quietly. “She *is* exciting and sexy. But she’s also sweet and kind. And, I don’t know, sometimes when she looks at me it’s as if there is no one else in the world.”

“And you’re sure it’s not just an act?”

They were in the middle of the path and the foot traffic was picking up. Several people gave them annoyed looks as they were forced to go around them. Ben tugged Lucy to a nearby bench off the path.

“She’s vulnerable in ways that I’m not even sure that she is aware of, otherwise I’m sure she would hide it.”

“Why her? I mean, you’re a good-looking woman and there are plenty of attractive, available, *healthy* women out there.”

“Lucy.”

Concern clouded her cousin’s eyes. “You know what I mean, don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it.”

“Okay. I know she has—health concerns. But I’ve dealt with that before.”

“My point exactly.” Lucy slid closer and took Ben’s hand in hers. Ben recognized the attempt to soften the impact of her words. “Don’t you remember how hard that was?”

“Of course I do. Do you think I could forget?” Ben’s heart ached as Randy’s face swam into focus. Against her will, hot tears sprang into her eyes.

“I’m sorry. I’m not trying to upset you.” Lucy squeezed her hand.

Ben swiped the back of her hand across her eyes. “It’s okay. But enough time has passed that I also remember the good times. I wouldn’t wish those times away just to have missed the pain.”

“I know.”

“And if it was in the cards for me to be involved with Cori, I wouldn’t avoid it just because there may be hard times.” Ben fell silent immediately, shocked by her own admission.

But she’d spoken the truth. Cori’s uncertain future scared her, but not enough to drive her away. The very thought of being with her sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine. A blush crept up her neck, warming her skin. She thought about the kiss they had shared and the feeling of being curled up on the sofa talking with Cori while a storm raged just outside. She wanted more than that. It was probably impossible, but if the opportunity arose Ben was no longer sure she would be able to resist.

“I love you, Ben, and I just want you to think about what you would be getting into,” Lucy said. “You would be signing up for a lifetime of—”

Ben cut her off quickly. “Whoa, slow down there. I didn’t say I was signing up for a lifetime of anything. Besides, we’ve spent a lot of time together in the past few days, and I don’t have the impression that Cori’s interested in getting involved with me.”

Lucy regarded her skeptically. “Whatever you say.”



An hour later, her conversation with Lucy still running through her head, Ben leaned against the wall of the elevator in Cori’s building. She was still evaluating her feelings. There really was no denying that she was attracted to Cori, and she was fairly certain it was mutual. But she didn’t know if Cori wanted a relationship, and Ben didn’t think she could accept anything less.

As the elevator doors opened on Cori’s floor, Ben pushed aside her thoughts. There would be time for introspection later. She crossed the hall and pressed the doorbell, willing her heartbeat to remain steady. By now, she should be used to seeing Cori. It was silly to overreact the way she did.

Cori opened the door in the midst of buttoning her shirt. Her slightly damp hair stood on end where she had apparently been running her fingers through it. The lavender button-down shirt was

crisply starched and showed a tantalizing strip of skin just before she drew it closed.

"I'll be ready in a minute." She turned away, shoving her shirttails into the waistband of her jeans and leaving Ben to follow her.

"So what's on the agenda for today?" Ben settled on the sofa as Cori wandered down the hall.

"Lunch with Gretchen," Cori called through the open door of her bedroom. "Then shopping."

When she returned to the living room she had added a brown leather belt with an oversized buckle and was clipping her cell phone onto it. She glanced up at Ben, one eyebrow cocked enticingly. "Ready?"

"Yes." Ben jumped up and moved past her, careful to avoid contact. She pushed the elevator button and forced herself not to turn around and stare as Cori locked up.



They stepped inside the trendy restaurant. The décor was dominated by dark wood and subdued burgundy wallpaper that would have substantially darkened the interior had it not been for the large windows that lined the front of the space, letting in sufficient natural light.

A wiry man rushed over to greet them. "Ms. Saxton, Ms. Mills has already been seated. Please, this way."

Cori waited for Ben to precede her and then stepped close behind, laying a hand lightly against the small of her back. Realizing it was probably an automatic gesture didn't keep Ben's heartbeat from accelerating.

When they reached the table tucked discreetly in a rear corner of the room, the maître d' seated them both.

"Ben, it's good to see you again." Gretchen smiled in greeting.

"Yes, you too."

Once again Ben was struck by how polished and together

Gretchen looked. Today she wore a striped silk blouse open at the neck to reveal a strand of pearls. Her dark hair was twisted back and pinned behind her head. How did the woman look utterly gorgeous and make it appear effortless? Ben had changed her own clothes three times and still felt dowdy next to her.

The waiter approached and they each ordered the house special, a lightly glazed chicken breast and a watercress salad. Ben sipped her iced tea and listened quietly as Cori and Gretchen talked business. She was impressed with Gretchen's thoroughness and her ability to keep Cori on track. She had no doubt that Cori could handle the business end of her career if she needed to. However, having Gretchen there to do it gave her a degree of freedom that surely helped her creativity. There was obviously an enormous amount of trust between the two women as well as an easy friendship.

"How rude of us to exclude you, Ben. I'm sorry," Gretchen said smoothly as their meals arrived.

"It's quite all right, thank you. Cori is supposed to be carrying on with daily life as if I'm not here," Ben replied politely.

"Well, we can hardly ignore the fact that you're here." Gretchen smiled.

Cori's eyes narrowed. Gretchen's smile was just a tad too friendly for her liking.

"Is Mitchell driving you crazy about this article?" Gretchen asked, lifting the linen napkin from her lap and dabbing the corners of her mouth carefully.

"He's—ah—" Ben searched for a way to politely express Mitchell's involvement.

Gretchen laughed. "It's okay. Mitchell and I have traveled in the same circles professionally for years, I know how he can be."

"He likes to see how far he can push me before I push back. It's a game we play," Ben explained.

"Yes, well, from what I understand there aren't too many people working at that magazine of his who will push back. You're certainly in the minority. But I too have found Mitchell responds well to a firm hand." She paused to sip her Chardonnay, then asked, "Are you seeing anyone, Ben?"

Cori's head snapped around in Gretchen's direction.

"Um." Ben dropped her fork onto her plate. "No, I'm not."

"Really? Because I have a friend, she owns a gallery downtown, and you two might hit it off."

"Gretchen," Cori said sharply.

"What? I'm just saying if she's not seeing anyone they might get along."

"Actually, thank you, but I'm working a lot right now and I don't have much time for dating." Between Cori's murderous gaze and Gretchen's guileless expression, Ben did not know which way to look, so she stared down at her plate. Her cheeks were hot.

"Well, if you change your mind," Gretchen offered with a shrug.

"I'll let you know," Ben said.

Cori watched the exchange in disbelief, irritated by the stab of jealousy she felt. The thought of Ben going out with someone else affected her far more than it should. So did Gretchen's interference. Unsettled, she turned her attention back to her salad and quietly picked through her meal while Gretchen and Ben carried on casual conversation. They seemed to be getting along as if they'd known each other for years.

When Ben excused herself to go to the restroom, Cori rounded on her friend. "What are you doing?"

"What?" Gretchen feigned innocence.

"Trying to fix her up. Was that necessary? And were you flirting with her?"

"What if I were? You don't want her."

"When did I say that?"

"Oh, please. If you really wanted her it would already have happened and she would be old news by now." The challenging spark in Gretchen's eyes drew exactly the response it always did.

Cori's temper flared. "Are you telling me that if I don't act soon, you are going to fix her up with someone else? Or," she could hardly keep her voice even, "nail her yourself?"

"Cori," Gretchen gave her a long-suffering smile, "what I'm telling you is very simple. If you two aren't going to get over

yourselves and realize you want each other so much that anyone within twenty feet can see it, then eventually she's going to have to date someone else. Why shouldn't I...er...lubricate that process?"

"So that means you have to help her along, right in front of me?" Cori hissed softly. "Damn it, Gretchen."

"I was just trying to—"

"*Jesus Christ*, is the whole world conspiring against me right now?"

"Cori—"

"Just forget it." Cori pushed her hand through her hair, struggling to tamp down her anger. She knew her feelings were irrational—after all, she had already decided that she was not going to act on her desires. Gretchen had every right to treat Ben as an attractive, available single, and there was nothing Cori could do about it. In fact, she should be thanking her. Ben deserved to find happiness with someone. Preferably a very plain woman with no personality who would bore her to tears. She glared at Gretchen, then recalled part of her little speech. *If you two aren't going to get over yourselves and realize you want each other...*

"Do you really think Ben wants me?"

Gretchen groaned. In a sarcastic tone, she said, "No, I think she's really after your car and your money."

"Very funny." And it was. For once in her life, Cori knew for a fact that her background would buy her nothing. If Ben wanted her, it would not be because she drove a Jag and was heiress to a mountain of money.

"I thought so too." Gretchen smiled.

Cori gave her a small shove. "Why are you always a jump ahead of me?"

"Because it's my job to be."

When Ben returned, Cori immediately snatched up the check and deposited several bills on the table. "Are you ready?" she asked, standing.

"Sure." Ben only had a chance to exchange a polite farewell with Gretchen before Cori clamped a hand on her arm and steered her away. "Where are we going?" she asked as they left the restaurant.

“A little shopping,” Cori replied in an odd tone. “That’s what shallow, superficial asses like me do when we want something we can’t have.”



“See anything you like?” Cori asked, too close for comfort.

Ben jumped. “Not really.” She’d never been in a boutique where one outfit cost more than she made in a month.

Cori lifted an exquisitely cut pantsuit in a soft gray pinstripe. “This would look good on you.”

Ben gave a noncommittal shrug. “It’s not something I would buy.”

She wished they could leave. Cori’s barb as they left the restaurant had found its mark, and she felt hurt to be reminded of her own rush to judgment. She’d thought they had let go of their preconceptions enough to move forward. Apparently not. She moved away from Cori, wandering among the stylishly displayed racks of clothing. Everything she looked at was wildly out of her price range.

Cori watched as Ben moved through the store, absently fingering the sleeves of several garments. She had seen the naked appreciation in her eyes as she studied the gray suit. Ben had good taste, and it would fit her beautifully. She glanced at the suit again and speculated on Ben’s size. Probably a ten. She could see Ben was restless, obviously bored with fashion shopping.

“Something wrong?” Cori asked, following her around a stand of cashmere sweaters.

“No. I’m just realizing how different our lives really are.” Ben glanced pointedly at the pile of garments draped over Cori’s arm.

“Well, I’ll agree that we grew up under different circumstances, but I think now—”

“Need I remind you that your car costs more than I make in a year?” Ben interrupted. “Hell, I wouldn’t even be able to guess how many weeks’ salary it would cost me to buy one of your paintings.”

“Don’t buy one. I’ll give you one.”

Ben gave Cori a withering look before turning to pretend disinterest in another rack of temptingly lovely clothing she couldn't afford. She could feel an underlying tension in Cori, and every comment she made seemed to have an edge to it. Ben stole a quick glance at her and was relieved to see that she was at the counter, speaking to the clerk.

Ben gave her time to finish paying for her purchases before joining her.

"We'll have your packages delivered, Ms. Saxton," the clerk assured her.

The pleasant veneer Cori had affected when dealing with the clerk dissolved as they stepped onto the street. To Ben's dismay, Cori was back to her sullen self.



If Cori had hoped to see Ben show up for dinner the next evening in the pinstripe suit, she was disappointed.

"I can't accept it," Ben insisted as soon as she walked into the apartment. She was wearing a light blue silk blouse and black slacks. Nice, but a snub.

"Well, I'm not taking it back." Cori calmly poured wine and wondered how she was supposed to have handled this. What was wrong with her wanting to give Ben a gift? It wasn't jewelry.

"It's too much," Ben said.

"It's not like I don't have the money." Cori had never met a woman who had refused to have money spent on her. Trying to explain that the gesture was no big deal, she said, "It's nothing to me. I spend more on getting my house cleaned."

Ben stared at her. There was an edge to Cori's tone that she didn't much care for. "That's not really the point. I don't make a habit of accepting expensive gifts from my interview subjects."

Ben actually seemed insulted. Cori supposed it was some silly issue of hurt pride and she felt patronized, or whatever. "It wasn't expensive," she reiterated.

"Not for you, perhaps. But I don't spend thousands on my wardrobe."

“Keep the damn suit, return it and keep the money, give it to a fucking homeless person, I don’t care. I’m not taking it back,” Cori snapped.

Ben didn’t bring it up again, and they had both acted as if it had never happened as they dined together. Their week was fast coming to an end and Cori didn’t want to conclude it on a sour note. She had grown used to Ben’s presence, far too used to it. Ben had spent several hours each day with her, rotating between mornings, afternoons, and evenings so she would get a well-rounded idea of Cori’s daily life.

However, at some point, at least for Cori, the week had become less about how she spent her days and more about enjoying the time shared with Ben. In another day’s time, Ben would be going back to her life and Cori would be faced with the void left by her departure. She already knew she was going to miss Ben, but in her usual fashion she decided to focus only on the present. The future could take care of itself.

So she’d planned a quiet evening in. It turned out that Ben did like fettuccini Alfredo, and Cori had tossed in some grilled chicken as well. She served it with fresh grated parmesan and a nice Merlot.

After arranging plates on the dining-room table and lighting candles, Cori declared dinner ready. She pulled out Ben’s chair and waited for her to be seated. She sat across from her and waited while Ben took a bite.

“Once again, you’ve surprised me,” Ben commented. She savored a bite of the tender chicken and rich sauce.

“How’s that?”

“I didn’t expect you to be such a good cook. The steaks on the grill were one thing, but this is quite another. I figured expensive restaurants were more your style.”

“While I will concede a reservation at an exclusive place seems to impress,” Cori sipped her wine, “there’s something to be said for an intimate dinner in private.”

Ben smiled. “Yes, there is. Do you do this often?”

“Not really.” *You’re the first.* “I don’t bring many women here.”

“Ah, yes, easier to leave if you’re at their place.” It was said without a trace of bitterness.

And instead of reacting defensively, Cori simply acknowledged the truth of her statement with a shrug. “More wine?” she asked as they finished their meal.

When Ben lifted her glass, Cori refilled it. The candlelight and wine were doing the trick, and when Cori gave her that familiar smoldering look, Ben wanted to believe it was only for her. “You’re certainly very good at this.”

“I’m better than you think,” Cori drawled. Her eyes lingered on Ben’s mouth.

“Well, that remains to be seen.” The warmth of Cori’s gaze was intoxicating and Ben found herself wanting to give in to it. Sitting there in Cori’s dining room, just a few feet from her bedroom, she allowed herself to wonder just what Cori had in mind. She’d been sweetly sexy and attentive all evening, and Ben had the impression it was not their meal that brought the fire into her eyes.

“Would you care for some dessert?” Cori asked.

“I really shouldn’t.” *But, oh God, do I want to.* Ben was overwhelmed by the feeling that they were building toward something she was not ready for. She did not want to be simply another woman seduced by Cori Saxton. She wanted more. *Too much more.* “In fact, it’s late. I’d better be going.”

“It’s early,” Cori argued as Ben rose from the table.

“Really, I should go. Dinner was delicious.” Ben headed for the door and Cori followed. “Are you still planning to go to the gym tomorrow morning?”

“Yes.” Cori drew close as they paused in the foyer. She touched Ben’s arm lightly. “I enjoyed having dinner with you.”

Ben swayed toward her, the gentle touch and sincere words were even more charming than the arrogant sexuality Cori usually displayed. And once again she found herself fighting the urge to kiss her. The need to touch her was too strong, though. Ben stepped closer and embraced her, her face against Cori’s neck.

“Thank you for dinner,” she murmured.

For a split second, it seemed that Cori would not let her leave, but she fell back a pace as Ben opened the door.

Much later that night, as she lay in bed staring at the closet where the suit hung, Ben thought about something her mother occasionally said. *Nothing like sleeping in your own bed.* Unless that bed was suddenly terribly lonely. She rolled over and closed her eyes. Cori's seductive gaze played across her closed eyelids as she drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ben signed her name in the next available line on the clipboard and handed it back to the impressively muscled man on the other side of the counter. She could count on one hand the number of times she had been in a gym in the past year. Luckily, she was blessed with a slightly better than average metabolism that kept her at an even weight as long as she watched what she ate most of the time.

Cori routinely worked out at George's Gym not far from her apartment and had arranged for Ben to be admitted with her as a guest. This was not one of those chain establishments with their expensive cardio equipment that required nothing more of a person than to perch upon it. The only treadmill in the place was tucked in one corner. The rest of the room was divided in half, one side devoted to free weights and the other to machines. At midday, the room was nearly empty.

Ben found Cori amidst the free weights. She stumbled to a stop a few feet from her. Cori bent over, her back to Ben, and smoothly touched her palms to the floor, stretching. *My, but she's flexible.* Cori's nylon shorts rode up slightly, revealing a length of thigh. Smooth, tan muscles elongated and then contracted as Cori straightened. Ben's mouth went dry. Their eyes met in the mirror that covered one wall and Ben was certain Cori could read the lust in hers. Time stopped as their gazes locked. Ben was the first to break eye contact.

"So, what's first?" she asked with false enthusiasm and rubbed her hands together.

"You should stretch so you don't pull anything." Cori raised her arms over her head and leaned to the side.

"Right, always a good idea to stretch," Ben mumbled to herself. "Wouldn't want to hurt myself." Cori's limber body sapped her strength. She could imagine what would happen if she tried to lift anything over a pound; she would probably drop it on her foot.

"Are you talking to yourself?" Cori grinned, enjoying Ben's distracted state a bit too much. She had purposely lingered longer than necessary when she bent over to stretch and she'd been rewarded by a flash of need in Ben's eyes. Her body reacted immediately. Heat, liquid and molten, suffused her limbs and pooled between her thighs.

"Yep. So," Ben began while halfheartedly lunging forward to stretch her legs, "do you come here often?"

Cori raised an eyebrow. "Why, Ben, is that a line? Are you trying to pick me up?"

"I—uh." Normally she would be more composed, but considering the path her thoughts had been taking she had to fight to keep from blurting out, *Yes, yes I am. I want to take you home and do unspeakable things to your body.* Jesus, where did that come from?

Cori watched in amusement as arousal and then shock slid across Ben's face. She liked being able to read her expressions so easily and wondered if Ben knew how much her face gave her away.

"Actually, I go through cycles when I slack off on working out. But I always feel better when I'm more disciplined and get here regularly," Cori explained, letting Ben off the hook. "I want to bench-press first. Will you spot me?"

When Ben nodded, Cori led her over to the bench and began sliding weights onto one end of the bar.

"This won't be too much?" Ben asked as she slid enough weight on the bar to balance out the side Cori was loading up. In total, it was far more than Ben could've handled.

"I'm not an invalid yet," Cori retorted sharply as she dropped down onto the bench and slid under the bar.

"I didn't—I didn't think you were." Ben moved to stand behind

the bar, spotting Cori as she lifted and then lowered the weight carefully to her chest. Her biceps were tight with the controlled effort, and cords of muscle stood out on her forearms. As she finished a set of reps, a fine sheen of sweat broke out on her brow.

Exhaling, she pushed the weight back up and paused. “Damn it,” she muttered under her breath. She was snapping at everyone lately and she didn’t know what was wrong with her. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m so on edge lately. It’s not your fault.”

Avoiding eye contact, Ben nodded silently, her hands hovering close enough to the bar to catch it if needed. Cori had been noticeably on edge. Though overall they were having a pleasant week, Ben had witnessed several bouts of short temper on Cori’s part that she had tried unsuccessfully to hide.

“Anyway,” Cori said. “I’ve done something about it. Straight after this we are going to the day spa for a massage. I booked a full-body session for both of us. My treat.”



Ben stepped into the sauna behind Cori with a towel clutched tightly around her. She’d left her robe on the hook outside the door. Though she and Cori were the only two occupants, she couldn’t bring herself to drop the towel. When Cori settled on a bench, Ben chose the one perpendicular to her. The warm mist enveloped her, bringing a flush to her skin.

“God, I needed this,” Cori moaned, tilting her head back against the wall and closing her eyes. When she planted one foot on the bench and raised her knee, her towel dropped aside, baring a length of thigh. “You know what I mean?”

“Ah—yes. Yes, I do.” Ben cleared her throat in an attempt to cover the roughness of her voice. Through the steam she watched a bead of sweat trace over Cori’s cheek, disappearing for a moment only to reappear on her neck. It pooled in the hollow where her collarbones met. “Cori?”

“Yeah.”

“The woman at the desk said a spa treatment *for two*...”

“Oh, yeah. They have this package where you go through

the whole thing together. You know, massages in the same room.” Cori opened her eyes to challenge Ben with a frank stare. “Is that a problem?”

“No. No problem.” Closing her own eyes seemed to be the only way Ben could relax. Her body was reacting to the sight of Cori and coiling more tightly. Even when she couldn’t see her, she could sense her nearness.

“I really am sorry I snapped at you earlier. I’m just a little touchy about my health right now,” Cori said suddenly a few moments later.

“It’s okay. I understand.”

“I just didn’t want you to think it was personal. Since today was our last day together. I wanted you to be able to enjoy being pampered, with no hard feelings between us.”

The realization that the spa day had been planned as much for her benefit as for Cori’s sparked a warmth within her.

“Are you?” Cori prompted. “Enjoying this?”

Ben traced her eyes over Cori’s body covered only in a towel, the swell of her breasts evident beneath it. When her gaze returned to Cori’s face, she found awareness burning just as brightly there.

“Yes.” Ben was saved from commenting further when an attendant came to retrieve them for their massage.

They were led into a room large enough to accommodate two massage tables draped with sheets. Aromatherapy candles dispersed the relaxing scent of lavender and sage, and a sideboard along one wall held an array of lotions and oils.

“Get comfortable, ladies. Your masseuses will be with you shortly,” the woman instructed before leaving them alone.

Cori immediately took off her robe and slipped beneath the sheet, but not before Ben got a glimpse of her strong back and firm buttocks. While Cori was still getting settled, Ben hurriedly did the same, dragging the sheet over her body as she stretched out on her stomach.

A moment later the door opened and two women entered. They introduced themselves and confirmed Cori’s arrangements for a relaxing full-body massage.

Warm hands pulled the sheet from Cori's back and folded it low over her hips. She sighed as lightly scented oil was rubbed into her back. She really had needed this; it had been far too long since she treated herself. And having Ben close by made it even better. The hum of arousal between them seemed to shimmer in the air, and Cori wouldn't have been surprised if the other two women in the room could feel it. She groaned when her masseuse hit a particularly tight spot in her shoulder.

"You're all knotted up here," the woman murmured, applying firmer pressure and working the muscles.

"That's so good," Cori sighed as she felt the knot loosen.

She looked over at Ben. Her face was pressed into the opening in the table. Cori bit back a moan when her masseuse folded back the sheet to bare Ben's legs. The curve of her ass was just visible where it met her thighs.

Ben turned her head sideways on her folded arm and glanced across the few feet that separated them to find Cori staring at her. Her mind as languid as her muscles, Ben could only gaze back. She had no defenses for the clear intentions burning in Cori's eyes. And in that moment it was Cori's hand that moved over her, Cori's fingers that kneaded the backs of her thighs. Cori's mouth that she wanted—*Jesus*. She jerked her eyes away and buried her face back in the cushioned head support. She was fully aroused and wet, and a stranger's fingers were far too close to discovering it.

For the rest of the massage, she kept her eyes averted, but there was no way she could shut out the soft sighs that drifted from the other table. When they were finished the masseuses left the room, instructing them to take the time they needed before leaving. They lay there in silence for a few minutes until Ben shifted off her table and reached quickly for her robe. She didn't look at Cori as they made their way back to the dressing room.

When Cori reached into the attached cubicle and turned a faucet, Ben said, "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to shower before I get dressed. There's plenty of room in here for you to join me."

Ben stared at her as she loosened the belt of her robe and

prepared to step inside. A shower. With Cori. There was no way she could go in there and pretend that the entire massage had not just been foreplay. “You know—I’m not feeling so well. I think I’ll just shower at home.”

“Are you okay?” Cori stepped closer, concern in her voice.

“Yeah. Yes, I’m fine. The massage was wonderful. I’m just a little light-headed.”

“Okay, let’s get you home, then.” Cori turned off the shower and began pulling on her clothes.

As far as Ben was concerned, she could not dress fast enough. Ben just wanted to get out of there. Cori’s thoughtful gift had been supposed to relax her, but all it had done was inflame her already overactive libido.



“Stay for a glass of wine,” Cori urged as she unlocked the door to her apartment and stepped inside.

“I really need to go home and take a shower,” Ben said. *A cold shower.*

She could not even look at Cori; she was afraid that if she did, she would not be able to resist her. She wanted to believe the desire she had seen during their massage was for her, personally, but common sense told her otherwise. Cori was a sexual being and Ben could be any desirable woman. For Cori, sex was just sex; she’d made that very clear.

“Please, don’t rush away,” Cori begged softly. “I would really like your company.”

Fool, Ben thought, but relented anyway. “One glass, then I have to go.”

She followed Cori into the living room and settled uneasily on the couch while Cori headed for the kitchen.

Cori returned carrying two glasses of a deep red wine. She handed one to Ben before sitting at the other end of the sofa. She raised her glass in a toast. “To us. We got through a whole week together and we’re still talking.”

Ben tried to seem enthusiastic and impersonal in her agreement. "Yes, to a job well done. I hope you'll like my articles."

"I'll be very interested to see how you describe today," Cori said blandly.

Ben gulped down most of her wine as she tried to think of a reply. "Let's stop doing this."

"Why?" Cori leaned her head against the back of the couch, revealing an expanse of throat that drew Ben's eyes. "I'm having fun. I like flirting with you."

"You like flirting with any attractive woman?"

"That's true," Cori conceded with a self-effacing sigh. "Are you saying you don't want to be one of many?"

"I suppose I am," Ben replied.

"Then don't be." Cori took Ben's glass from her unresisting fingers and placed it on the low coffee table in front of the couch. Taking this as an invitation to leave, Ben tried to stand, but Cori's hand prevented her. "Where are you going?"

"Home. This past week has been great, spending time with you—but it has also been agonizingly frustrating." The words were out before Ben could stop them. She hadn't realized how much the wine had dulled her inhibitions. She sank back against the soft cushions and mumbled, "Ah—never mind."

"You can't leave it there." Cori withdrew her hand leaving Ben's arm tingling. "Why has it been frustrating?"

Ben's mind raced for a suitable alternative to the truth. Finally she realized she would just have to take a leap. "I can't stop thinking about *you*, even when I don't want to. That kiss. I—" She broke off, realizing she was dangerously close to admitting she fantasized about Cori.

"I think about that kiss too," Cori said. "It's a pity we stopped there."

"I'm thankful we did," Ben said honestly. "Like I said, I don't do one-night stands."

"What do you do?" Cori asked and, again, her tone had an edge. "Fall in love and get married? You seem very single for someone who has *real* relationships."

Ben had the impression she was being provoked deliberately. "I'm single because I don't have relationships unless I really care about someone. The right kind of woman isn't that easy to find."

"Really?" Cori's eyes drew Ben's. Very softly, she said, "It's funny...I feel exactly the same way. I just console myself differently." Before Ben could speak again, she said, "I have something to tell you."

Ben wasn't sure that she wanted to hear it. With every word, with every glance, Cori was undoing her, and she knew if she didn't leave soon she would do or say something she would regret. Cautiously, she prompted, "I'm listening."

"You are the only woman I have ever invited to stay upstate... the only person who has ever been inside that studio. You're not one of many. I just want you to know that."

The eyes Ben met were bright with tears, and something else. Ben didn't think she was imagining the yearning in their depths. Confused, she scooted along the sofa until their thighs were almost touching. "Cori, what are you saying?"

When Cori remained silent, Ben reached up and traced a fingertip down the side of her neck. Cori sucked in her breath and held perfectly still. Ben framed her face gently, laying her palms alongside Cori's cheeks. She lightly traced the indent in Cori's chin and brushed her fingers over the angles of Cori's face—brows—cheekbones—jawline. *Slowly*. It was an attempt to memorize Cori's face.

Cori couldn't tear her eyes from Ben's. *Jesus, it's too much*. The tenderness she found there was almost unbearable. "I can't get you out of my head," she confessed hoarsely, seconds before Ben's mouth covered hers. It threatened to be the last coherent thought she ever had. The feel of Ben's lips yielding to hers consumed her. The taste and texture of Ben's tongue ingrained itself in her senses.

"What have you been thinking about?" Ben pulled back only far enough to get the words out, her lips still lightly rubbing against Cori's as she spoke.

"This. I think about this." *And so much more*.

"What else?" Ben encouraged. She moved her mouth to Cori's neck tasting the slight saltiness of her skin.

I could lose myself in her. Everything else would disappear. Cori froze. “I—uh—I need a shower. Excuse me.”

Ben drew a sharp, uneven breath as Cori sprang from the couch and practically ran from the room.

Somehow Cori made it into her bathroom and leaned against the closed door, breathing hard. She stripped off her clothes and dropped them on the floor. Stepping into the stall, she twisted the knob all the way to cold and gasped as the icy spray hit her. Within seconds, her racing blood had cooled.

She leaned against the shower wall, panting. *Everything else would disappear.* She had been seconds away from forgetting everything except the way Ben felt against her. She hadn’t wanted to think about what she would be taking from Ben, but it had shoved its way into her mind. Since she’d already decided that subjecting Ben to a relationship with her would be unfair, this encounter would be reduced to one night. She had nothing more than that to offer Ben.

Ben paced outside the bathroom door. *I should leave, just go home.* But she had seen the heat in Cori’s eyes. She had felt the energy arcing between them. Then Cori had fled. *I didn’t imagine it. She wants me as much as I want her.* Cori was letting her head get in the way. *You’re not one of many.* Her decision made, Ben tried the knob and found the door unlocked. She slipped quietly inside the bathroom.

When the stall door opened behind her, Cori turned. She stared as Ben paused before stepping inside. *God, she’s beautiful.* She couldn’t keep her gaze from straying over Ben’s body. She was all luscious curves, from her rose-tipped breasts to her gently flaring hips. She had just spent several minutes talking herself out of her lust for Ben. In seconds her efforts were undone. Her heart pounded in her ears and her skin flushed hot despite the cold water.

Cori couldn’t tear her eyes away from Ben’s body. It couldn’t be considered rude to stare at a woman after she had walked nude into the shower with her, could it? Ben advanced, stopping just inches from her.

“I think we need some hot water here.” She reached around Cori and turned the faucet. “I’m not really in the mood for a cold shower.”

Ben enjoyed seeing Cori flustered. Smiling, she pressed closer until they both stood under the spray. Her breasts brushed Cori's. Though she was fairly certain this little scene would not make it into her articles, she mentally recorded it all the same. No matter what happened, she would have this, she thought. It was better than nothing at all.

"Turn around." Without waiting for Cori to move, Ben took her by the shoulders and turned her firmly. She squeezed some shampoo into her hand and buried her fingers in Cori's hair. Cori moaned just loudly enough to be heard over the pounding spray as Ben's fingers massaged her scalp. When she was finished lathering, Ben twisted her fingers into Cori's hair and pulled her head back. "Rinse," she ordered.

"Hey."

"What? You want gentle?" Ben teased. She lightened her touch, stroking Cori's hair until all the shampoo was out. She grazed her fingertips lightly over Cori's shoulders. "I can do gentle."

"Ben." Cori grasped Ben's waist. "I can't think with you doing that."

"I can do whatever you want, baby," Ben purred with a sudden burst of bravado. She wrapped her arms around Cori, pressing closer, and rubbed soapy hands over Cori's back.

"God, Ben."

"Hmm?" Ben grasped Cori's ass in her slippery hands.

"Don't stop." Any protest melted away when Ben tilted her hips and moved against her.

"Oh, I have no intention of stopping." Applying a little more pressure, Ben ran her fingernails up Cori's back and over her shoulder blades.

Cori shivered. She could absolutely melt under those fingers. When Ben's nails raked once more along the length of her back, her senses skyrocketed and her body vibrated with the need to have Ben beneath her. She desperately struggled to regain her composure before she embarrassed herself.

"Mmm, hold that thought." Ben reached for some more soap.

Grasping her hips, Cori pulled her back firmly. Ben looked over her shoulder and Cori captured her mouth in a kiss that was not at

all gentle. She devoured her, alternately taking possession with her tongue and withdrawing to allow Ben to follow.

Ben moaned into Cori's mouth as she felt teeth close over her lower lip and when Cori sucked aggressively, Ben felt an answering tug low in her belly.

Cori rubbed her hands over the slick skin of Ben's stomach, slipping lower. When her fingers slid through wetness that had nothing to do with the water coursing over them, she thought she might lose the thin thread of control she still held. She forced herself to go slowly, only stroking broadly through the swollen folds when what she really wanted was to bury her fingers inside Ben's willing body.

Ben too was in danger of losing her mind. The solid feel of Cori pressed against the length of her back, the arms encircling her, and the fingers playing purposefully between her legs had her blood racing with need so strong it threatened to consume her. She rolled her hips back, pushing against Cori's thighs.

Ben's ass moving against her crotch spiked Cori's arousal. She sucked in a breath and fought the rising urge to take Ben savagely. She slid one hand up to cup Ben's breast. Her mouth closed over Ben's earlobe at the precise moment that her fingers reached Ben's nipple.

"Oh, God, Cori—please," Ben moaned, arching her back, seeking more contact. She could feel the effort of Cori's restraint. She understood Cori's need to be in control, yet she also understood the power she had in submitting. Somehow, she knew Cori would not take anything more than she was willing to give.

Cori raked her teeth down the side of Ben's neck, biting and sucking a path to her shoulder, where she closed them in earnest and marked Ben's skin.

"Cori, inside," Ben demanded, and when Cori complied, her knees threatened to buckle. She pressed her hands against the glass wall of the shower stall and braced herself to keep from sliding to the floor. As Cori thrust two and then three fingers inside Ben, she rocked her hips against Ben's backside.

"Let go," she urged, her mouth close to Ben's ear.

"So close," Ben ground out between clenched teeth. Her nearly

shattering mind searched blindly for the words to tell Cori what would put her over the edge. "I need—"

She didn't get another word out before Cori's other hand pushed between her thighs and Ben felt the fingers she craved stroking firmly along her clit.

"Oh, that's it..." She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her forehead against the glass as her body started to uncoil.

Ben's orgasm overtook her quickly. Her thrusting hips moved erratically and she shuddered with each stroke of Cori's fingers. Cori's name fell from her lips, melded with a string of unintelligible words.

Cori waited until Ben's body stopped pulsing around her fingers before she slowly withdrew them. Pressing one hand against the glass next to Ben's, she wrapped her free arm around Ben's waist.

"Cori?"

"Yes."

"I don't know if I can stand up much longer."

With a soft chuckle, Cori opened the shower door. Grabbing a large, fluffy towel, she wrapped it around Ben and kissed her.

"Thank you," Ben said, taking her hand and leading her toward the bedroom. "Now, come on. As soon as I regain my strength I have plans for you."



Ben woke slowly, pleasantly aware of the warmth of Cori's body half covering her own. Her head rested on Ben's chest and one arm curled possessively around her ribs. A wonderful tightness in her stomach reminded Ben that several times during the night she had been coaxed into consciousness by Cori's lightly stroking fingers.

She sensed Cori's awakening in the almost imperceptible tensing of her muscles and the slight change in her breathing. As Cori surfaced, Ben remained still, wondering if Cori had any idea how cute and vulnerable she looked, rubbing her fist sleepily against her eyes.

"Good morning," she greeted softly when Cori turned her face

upward. *Adorable.* Her sun-streaked hair stood up in spikes and her cobalt eyes were still hazy with sleep.

Cori tightened her arm around Ben, reluctant to move. Ben's skin was warm and her heart beat against Cori's cheek. She could get used to waking up like this. *Damn, what am I thinking?* She drew slowly away, shifting to pull the sheet more tightly around her.

"Do you want some coffee?" Ben sat up and slid toward the edge of the bed.

"I can't do this," Cori said quietly from behind her.

"What?" Ben turned.

"This isn't a good idea."

Ben reached for her and Cori slid out of her grasp. She didn't seem to think rationally when Ben was touching her. Instead she became a mass of emotion and sensation, losing herself in the possibilities that Ben's nearness promised. Her stomach churned as she stood and put some distance between herself and the woman still reclining in her bed.

This woman's talented hands and insistent mouth had completely shattered her the night before. She had, in the middle of the night, evoked a tenderness that Cori hadn't even known she was capable of. She had awakened once to find Ben curled against her side. Just lying there with her, warm and safe in the haven of their intimacy, affected Cori in ways she had never expected. All the times she had crawled away from some meaningless encounter were chased from her mind. True to the clichés, she had rarely stuck around for breakfast. This time, everything was different. Yet she needed to pretend it wasn't, so she could somehow do what she needed to do. *This can't happen. I can't allow it.*

"What are you talking about?" Ben demanded.

The panic and regret streaking across Cori's face nearly broke Ben's heart. *After all she said, was I just another in a long string of women? Could I really have been alone in what I felt...that there was something between us last night...something more than sex?*

Cori embarked on a line that was as familiar as breathing. It felt all wrong, but she had used it so often, the tone came automatically. "Look, last night was fun and all, but—"

"Fun?" Ben repeated in disbelief.

“Ben, be reasonable. We both know this can’t go anywhere, so we should just quit while we’re ahead.” Cori slipped out of bed and pulled a T-shirt over her head.

“Actually, I didn’t know it wasn’t going anywhere,” Ben said coolly. She stood and faced Cori across the bed. Her heart threatened to choke her.

“It’s not like I made you any promises last night.” Cori flung the words, her tone intentionally harsh. She *had* made a promise, in fact—to herself. And even if Ben couldn’t see it now, she would be better off in the future, unburdened. Guilt flooded her as she watched hurt fill Ben’s eyes. *Aw, hell.*

“Why are you angry with me?”

“I’m not angry! I’m—”

“What?” Ben demanded. Cori remained silent. “What, Cori? Just talk to me, damn it!”

I’m scared. “I really can’t talk about it,” Cori finally ground out, her voice rough with emotion.

Ben used all of her willpower to maintain the several feet that separated them. She wanted nothing more than to close the distance and take Cori in her arms, but they needed to have this conversation and it would not happen if she got close enough to touch her. She held tightly to the cold fist that had begun growing inside of her. She told herself that she should be angry—angry that Cori’s regret threatened to tarnish the previous night.

“Don’t do this,” she said, realizing that Cori was working incredibly hard to push her away. *Why?*

“I have to,” Cori said with terrible sadness.

“Why?” Ben tried to keep her panic in check. “Please, just tell me what’s wrong and we can work it out together. I’m not afraid.”

“But I am,” Cori whispered. “You make me feel like I can do *anything*.”

With those words, Ben melted. “And that’s bad?”

“There will come a day when I can’t.” Frustrated, Cori pushed her hand through her hair. “There are already days when I can’t. And it’s probably better if I just accept it now.”

“Why? Why should you accept it? Cori, you *can* do anything. Certainly there will be times when things will be harder. But

you have means and opportunities that a lot of people will never have—”

“Money doesn’t solve *this*,” Cori said, but Ben rushed on.

“I’m not saying that it does. I *am* saying that life is what you make of it. And this disease—anything in life, really—can only define you if you allow it to.” Now Ben did move toward her, desperate to stop what she feared what was about to happen. The wall Cori was erecting between them was practically tangible. “Cori. I...care about you.”

As Ben moved, Cori jerked back. She was so intent on staying out of Ben’s reach that she staggered back two steps and promptly fell over the chair by the door. Ben leapt forward to help her up, but Cori was already stumbling to her feet.

“Ben, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you, but I just can’t...” Cori’s voice trailed off as her eyes met Ben’s and found tears welling there. *Oh, God, don’t look at me like that.* She couldn’t find the words. “I—I’m sorry,” she whispered and fled to the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind her.

Cori leaned against the inside of the door. For several long minutes she heard shuffling noises that she soon placed as the rustling of clothing being hastily pulled on. She expected anger, she was used to anger. After all, this wasn’t the first time she’d had to let down a woman who expected more than just one night. It was the first time that it tore her apart. Remnants of their night together lingered on Cori’s skin. But she kept seeing the misery in Ben’s eyes as she tried to convince her to trust, and a sharp stab of pain accompanied the soft click of the bedroom door closing. She slid down to sit on the floor and wrapped her arms around her knees in an attempt to ease the ache in her stomach.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The morning sun burned brightly, showing no mercy for Cori's aching eyes. She scowled and pulled her sunglasses from her head and slipped them on. It did not seem quite fair that the sky should be so blue and the temperature a perfect seventy-three degrees. Nor did she appreciate the gentle breeze that ruffled her hair as she sat at one of the quaint little wrought-iron tables outside a coffee shop with a view of the park. She grumbled to herself and absently stirred the cappuccino that tasted entirely too decadent for her mood.

"Hungover again?" Gretchen approached, carrying her usual cup of black coffee and a blueberry muffin.

"Bite me," Cori growled.

"That's pleasant." Sitting opposite Cori, she pulled a folded magazine from under her arm and slapped it down on the table.

Cori glanced at it, recognizing the cover of *Canvassed*. She forced herself to look away casually.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on or should I guess?" Gretchen asked dryly. Cori didn't respond. "I read the article, so I know something is up."

"There's nothing out of sorts in that article." Cori had read it too. Once again she had found Ben's work to be fair and respectful, while also being honest and easy to read. She had scoured the page for a hint that Ben was at least one fraction as miserable as she was and had found nothing.

"Sure, not in the article alone," Gretchen conceded. "I'm talking about you walking around like someone stole your puppy."

"I am not."

"And the way you bristle like a porcupine every time someone even mentions Ben's name."

"Oh, fuck off," Cori exclaimed in exasperation.

"See."

It was futile to argue. No matter what she said, Gretchen would turn it around on her.

"Spill," Gretchen demanded, setting down her muffin and giving Cori her most intimidating stare.

"I slept with her," Cori blurted out.

"You what?"

"You heard me."

"When?"

"A couple of weeks ago, on our last day together."

"Okay," Gretchen drew the word out as she considered Cori's words. "So what's the problem? She's certainly not the first. I mean, it's not like you spent the night..." Gretchen trailed off at Cori's guilty expression. "*You spent the night?*"

Cori pushed her fingers through her hair. "I don't know what the hell I was thinking."

"Are you going to see her again?"

"No." She broke a piece off Gretchen's muffin and popped it into her mouth.

"Do you want to?" Gretchen asked cautiously.

Cori paused. She didn't have to think about her answer, but that was part of the problem. She had no doubt. She wanted to, again and again. Unfortunately her life was no longer just about what *she* wanted.

"Oh, boy," Gretchen heard the answer in Cori's silence.

"Yeah," Cori breathed.

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing." Cori feigned indifference, sipping her cappuccino.

"Nothing?"

"There's nothing I can do, Gretchen. It's not an option."

"But—"

“It’s not open for discussion.”

“I could talk to her. She’s a real person. She’ll understand.”

“It’s too late for that,” Cori said. “Trust me. I hurt her.”



Ben breezed through the crowded baggage claim area of McCarran International Airport. She had packed light for the two-day trip, fitting everything into a carry-on so she wouldn’t have to wait for her bags. She stepped outside and was immediately assailed by the hot, dry Nevada air. She suddenly remembered why she hated the desert, but she forged on, climbing into the back of a waiting cab and directing the driver to take her to the Mirage. He flipped the meter on and headed for the strip.

Less than an hour later, having checked in and dropped her bag at her room, Ben was on her way back down to the main level. She had glanced at the map in her room, and when she exited the elevator, she made her way through the casino, following the various signs to the Danny Gans Theatre. But she got turned around and ended up asking a bellman for directions.

She wondered for perhaps the tenth time if it had been such a good idea to take this assignment. She had been failing miserably at distracting herself from thoughts of Cori. After leaving the apartment that night, she had gone home and shut herself away for the next few days, only dragging herself out of bed to write the articles Mitchell was hounding her for. They would be in three separate monthly issues, and only the first was due right away. However, she did them all at once, quickly, like ripping off a Band-aid. It was excruciating.

When she was done she rewarded herself with one more evening spent moping in bed. The next morning she decided she would not allow her foolish feelings for Cori Saxton to rule her life. It wasn’t as though she had ever expected Cori to care; they were completely unlike and she had known that from day one. It certainly wasn’t the end of the world.

When the offer to interview Robin Sparks came along, Ben decided it must be a sign. The rising young comedienne was doing

a series of shows in Las Vegas, and the fact that the job would take her practically to the other side of the country, even for just a couple of days, made it even more appealing.

Ben followed the directions given to her by the woman at the box office, weaving a convoluted path through the backstage area. As she approached her destination, a lime green dressing-room door, Ben ran through in her mind the facts she already knew about her subject. Robin Sparks had gotten her start in San Antonio after winning a local talent contest. She had spent the ensuing three years touring the country with two other comics. She did live stand-up but was also making occasional appearances on the Comedy Channel.

Ben's knock was answered by a voice telling her to enter. She opened the door to find a tiny room barely large enough to accommodate two chairs and a clothing rack. Robin occupied the one in front of the mirror, patiently having her make-up applied.

They exchanged introductions as Ben settled into the other chair. She held up a tape recorder in silent question and Robin nodded.

"You've been touring for a few years now, haven't you?" Ben asked after clicking on the recorder.

"Paying my dues," Robin said. "College bars, seedy comedy clubs, a few reputable ones, we went wherever we could make a buck. But, hey, I can't complain, can I? It got me here. Vegas is the big time, you know what I mean?"

Ben nodded, enjoying Robin's Texas drawl. Barely twenty-three years old, Robin didn't look a day over legal. So when Ben found her attention drawn to long legs enticingly displayed in the shortest of skirts, she jerked back up. A slow grin spread across Robin's face and Ben realized she'd been caught.

"A little trick I learned in Texas. Good ol' boys, you know. Just show enough leg and they'll applaud all night. Get a few ladies who appreciate it too," she finished with a wink.

Oh hell, straight girls are trouble. Ben forced her thoughts back to the interview. She managed to get through the rest of her questions without incident. They finished up only minutes before Robin was due to go on.

"You should stick around after the show. We'll have a drink,"

Robin suggested as she headed for the stage. She didn't wait for Ben's response, seeming to take for granted that the answer would be yes.

"She don't mean just a drink."

Ben turned at the voice from behind her. The make-up artist she hadn't bothered to notice was standing there.

"What do you mean?"

"I usually don't say anything, but—you seemed real nice during your interview and all. And I just didn't want my sister to treat you like all the others."

This is Robin's sister? They couldn't be more different. Robin's hair had the varying shades of a field of wheat and fell in loose curls to brush her shoulders. This woman's long, black hair was cut in a simple, straight style and tucked behind her ears. Ben would bet a month's salary that the aqua color of Robin's eyes was the result of contact lenses, unlike her sister's dark eyes, which looked back at Ben from behind wire-rimmed glasses that she pushed nervously up her nose with one finger.

"It's very nice to meet you—uh—"

"Patti."

"Patti, I'm sorry, Robin didn't tell me you two were related." Ben realized that as they had talked, Robin hadn't bothered to introduce her make-up artist at all. "How long have you been working for Robin?"

"I don't. Not really. I mean, she don't actually pay me," Patti explained.

Ben glanced at her watch. "Well, Patti, it was nice to meet you. I'm going to go out front and catch some of Robin's show before I take off." She started for the door that led to the audience. "Oh, and I have no intention of taking your sister up on her offer," she added as an afterthought.

Patti smiled before turning back to packing up her cosmetics.

After the show, Ben headed back to her room, all too aware that the next day she would return to New York and be faced with finding another distraction. She settled on the bed with her laptop, transferring her notes. A king-sized bed. If she had thought her bed at home felt lonely, this one felt positively solitary. She forced her

attention to the notes in front of her. As she read over them she realized it wouldn't take her long at all to write this article.

Ironically, Robin actually *was* as one-dimensional as Ben had once thought Cori would be.



Cori sat alone at the end of her dock swinging her feet gently. For the fourth night in a row she stared at the setting sun, trying to summon the energy to return to the house and cook another solitary dinner. As the last sliver of nearly crimson light slipped below the horizon, Cori stood.

She wandered restlessly through the house, frustrated with her inability to relax in what was supposed to be her safe haven. *Damn it, this is why I never brought women here. Now this place is tainted.* After only a couple of days, Ben's memory was all over the house. It wasn't just the house, she admitted. Ben was everywhere she looked these days. She kept waiting for it to get better. Surely eventually she would begin to forget how it felt to hold Ben, to kiss her or just to sit with her curled up at opposite ends of the sofa. At least, that had been the plan when she had once again fled upstate early that week. She had been prowling her house ever since to no avail.

When she walked back out onto the deck, fighting off a vision of Ben leaning against the railing holding a glass of wine, Cori thought absurdly that she was probably going to have to sell the place. *Sure, sell it. Start fresh someplace else.* She'd passed a cute little cabin farther downriver on the drive up. *What the hell am I thinking? I'm not selling my house over some woman.* But the fact that Ben was not just any woman was becoming far too evident as the days passed.

Shoving her hands into her hair, she headed for the only part of the house that she had yet to pace in. As she descended the stairs to her studio, an idea started forming in her mind. She needed to exorcise some demons, and damn it, it had been long enough. She barely paused at the bottom of the staircase before she plunged into the room.

Crossing to the center of the studio, she set about preparing her

workspace. She put a fresh canvas on an easel and set up a palette of the colors needed to create the vision swimming behind her eyes.

Taking a deep breath, Cori closed her eyes and freely allowed the image to drift into her mind. She could sometimes see a completed painting in her head even before she touched brush to canvas. As the colors coalesced behind her eyelids, Cori had a brief glimpse of what she wanted to capture, and it imprinted in her mind before she opened her eyes once more.

Pushing her brush into several paints, she expertly mixed the hue she needed. She glanced only for a second at the pure, blank expanse before lifting her hand and swiping her brush against the canvas.

Cori worked feverishly for several hours, desperate to capture as much as she could as quickly as possible. The night faded into the wee hours of the morning, but she barely noticed. As she worked, another idea germinated. It lingered in the back of her mind. When she finally set her brush down, she stepped back and considered her progress, tilting her head from side to side. Now that her mind was not as occupied with painting, her new plan pushed its way forward insistently. She spent the next hour working out the details in her head as she touched up the painting.

Inhaling the familiar smell of paint and linseed oil, she finally studied her work. Warm pleasure hummed beneath the relief that flooded her. She had captured exactly the image in her mind. Whatever else happened, she would have this canvas and would remember the flash of moments that had inspired it. Motivated by both the painting and the ideas that had been building while she worked, Cori dug her cell phone out of her pocket and flipped it open.

"I painted," she said as soon as Gretchen picked up.

"What?"

"I painted," Cori repeated. "Last night. And it felt good. So, I was thinking. I need to have a show sometime soon."

"I have a list of gallery owners who have been waiting for the call." Gretchen paused. An uncertain note entered her voice. "It's early days. Are you sure you'll be able to sustain this?"

"Yes. Everything has changed. I can work again."

“That’s wonderful. I was worried after the articles when you ran away upstate again.”

“Well, I’m back now. Oh, and Gretchen...not a gallery. Something bigger. And there’s more.” Cori explained her plans for a joint show with several of her peers. It would really be a fund-raiser of sorts.

“We’ll need some press, television probably. But Mitch will probably want Ben—”

“No,” Cori interrupted.

“Why?”

“Don’t call Mitch. In fact, I don’t want any press releases. This is by invitation only.” She’d already decided that the show would be exclusive, and any necessary press releases could be made afterward. The selective guest list she was putting together would fuel talk among all the right people, anyway.

“Cori, something like this needs media coverage. Whatever is going on between you and Ben—”

“There’s nothing going on between me and Ben,” Cori said and then acquiesced on one point. “I’ll put some of the media on the guest list, but I’ll pick which ones.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Why is your mailman downstairs cursing you?" Lucy asked as Ben opened the door. Without waiting for a reply, she headed for the kitchen to deposit the grocery bags she carried.

"Shit. I haven't checked my mail all week. Be right back." Ben rushed out.

When she returned, Lucy was in the kitchen unpacking ice cream, hot fudge, and cookies. Ben glanced at the spread and then at her cousin with a raised eyebrow.

"What? It's movie night, I'm allowed." Lucy had declared it a girls' night in. They planned to spend the evening lounging in Ben's apartment in sweats, watching movies.

Ben shrugged and set about sorting through the stack of envelopes she'd had to pry out of her small mailbox. Junk mail went directly into the trash and bills in a stack to be opened later. She was left with a small square envelope in her hand. She slid the thick card out and read the words twice before they sank in.

"So which movie do you want to watch first?" Lucy asked, turning away from the freezer. "What is it?"

She saw the blank look on Ben's face and the card still loosely clasped in Ben's hand. Numbly, Ben handed it over.

"You and a guest are cordially invited..." Lucy's voice trailed off as she finished reading to herself. She looked up at Ben. "This is an invitation to a reception and art show for the Saxton Foundation."

Ben nodded.

"What's the Saxton Foundation?"

"Never heard of it." Ben's indifference was forced. "Let's watch the comedy first."

"Ben, this thing is tonight. When was the last time you checked your mail?"

Ben had to think about that one. "Last week. I think."

"Okay. Come on." Lucy pulled Ben toward the bedroom.

"What are you doing?" Ben resisted, but Lucy continued to yank on her arm.

"We still have time. You're getting dressed and going down there."

"There's no point."

Ben dug in her feet. Lucy stopped and stared at her.

"You've been moping over her for weeks."

"Yeah, but she turned me away. Or have you forgotten that?"

Lucy moved behind her and started pushing her forward. "Then why did she send you this invitation? You have to go and see what this is about. Now get in there and put on your sexiest little black dress."

Ben relented, reluctant to admit that she too was curious about what had prompted the invitation. "Okay, but you're going with me."

"I'll go home and get dressed and pick you up in an hour."



The next time Ben opened her door to Lucy they were both a good deal more presentable. Lucy had left her hair down. Her dark green dress hugged her curves as if it were made for her. Lucy stepped inside and circled Ben with a low whistle.

"Nice," she murmured.

Ben smiled. She'd considered a cocktail dress but, on a whim, had put on the gray pinstripe suit over a rose-colored silk shell. She worried that the suit was not formal enough for the affair, but after checking her reflection in the mirror she changed her mind. Cori had exquisite taste. And though bought off the rack, the suit was cut perfectly for her. Ben added a simple pair of large gold hoop earrings and left her neckline bare. She was glad she'd opted for an easy up-

do; the simple hairstyle drew attention to her high cheekbones and slender neck.

"It's perfect," Lucy said. "She'll wonder what the hell she was thinking."

"Let's hope so." Ben began to allow a sliver of hope. By now, maybe Cori regretted pushing her away.

"I have a cab waiting downstairs," Lucy said, following Ben out and waiting while she locked up.

Several blocks later they climbed out of the cab and walked into the spacious lobby of the Carlyle Hotel.

"Damn," Lucy hissed.

If Ben needed a reminder that they were grossly outclassed by Cori's circle, her cousin's awestruck expression would do the trick. Ben tried not to gape at the highly polished floor, chandelier, and impressive molding. Several couples walked past them, their confident gaits screamed entitlement.

"Listen, you may be getting used to these highbrow parties, but this is all new to me," Lucy said.

"Please, behave," Ben urged as they fell in with a group of people making their way toward the reception room reserved for the Saxton Foundation.

"I can't make any promises." Lucy stopped short as she and Ben stepped through the wide doorway. Her eyes locked on a figure across the room. "Good Lord, the woman is positively edible."

Ben followed her gaze and drew a sharp breath. Cori stood among a small group of people. Ben had the impression of several blurry faces, but all she could see was Cori, both elegant and powerful in a black tuxedo-cut suit. Instead of the traditional white shirt, she wore an ash gray one left open at the collar. Her hair looked like someone had had their hands buried in it only minutes before. Ben suspected this was deliberate. Her palms itched and she was overwhelmed with the urge to push her own hands through the fair tresses, staking a claim. *She looks good. Who am I kidding? Lucy is right, positively edible.* Unbidden, Ben's mind filled with the memory of running her tongue over Cori's skin.

"Are you going to go talk to her?"

"No," Ben answered quickly.

“Um, then what are we doing here?”

“Oh, God. I don’t know.”

“Okay, just calm down.” Lucy drew her farther into the room, grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, and pressed one into Ben’s hand.

At the ringing of silverware against crystal they turned. Cori tapped a fork against her glass and stepped up to a podium at the far end of the room.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to thank you all for joining me here tonight.” Cori scanned the room, making eye contact with many familiar faces. “We are here to announce the formation of the Saxton Foundation.” Her voice nearly faltered as her eyes came to rest on Ben’s face. Then she sought Gretchen’s, casting an accusatory look before returning to Ben. She swallowed the lump forming in the back of her throat and forced herself to go on. “A wise person once reminded me that I am fortunate enough to have means and opportunity that many will never have. Growing up, I was lucky enough to go to a well-funded private school where my artistic pursuits were nurtured and given the chance to flourish. When I began thinking about what I might be able to give back to the community, it was only natural that I look to the arts.”

She explained that the Saxton Foundation would contribute to the art programs of local public schools in an effort to enhance the opportunities for less privileged students. It would also establish several scholarships to be granted each year to deserving students wishing to further their education in the arts.

“So, in closing, with a few exceptions, the paintings you see displayed here tonight are available for purchase. All proceeds will, of course, go to the foundation. In addition to myself, several other area artists have generously donated their work to this show. Please, enjoy yourselves.”

Amidst a polite smattering of applause, Lucy leaned close to Ben and whispered, “She looked right at you.”

“I know.”



Cori wandered smoothly through the crowd, accepting congratulations. Occasionally, she paused long enough to grasp a hand and engage in polite conversation. She sipped from a flute of champagne and nodded her head appropriately until such time as she sensed an opening in the conversation. Apologetically mumbling something about her duties as hostess, she shrugged her shoulders in a way she knew would be seen as charming and moved on to the next person. She worked her way across the room in this manner, effortlessly, the ever-attentive hostess. *Mother would be proud*, she thought cynically. After all, this *was* what Saxton women were born and bred to do.

Gretchen caught up with her just as she had finally managed to tuck herself into a shadowy corner of the room. Cori leaned casually against the wall, her relaxed posture belying her nervousness.

“What’s wrong?”

Hearing the edge in Gretchen’s voice, Cori remained silent.

Gretchen moved closer and lowered her voice. “I know you, Cori. What’s going on?”

“Is everyone enjoying the show?” Cori ignored Gretchen’s question.

“Are you asking about anyone in particular?”

“Leave it alone, Gretchen.” Cori tossed back her champagne in one gulp. “Please.” she asked, softly, letting her eyes travel to the one person she needed to see but knew she should avoid.

Gretchen followed Cori’s gaze. Ben was carefully making her way around the outside edge of the room, pausing in front of each painting. A striking redhead at her side grabbed her arm and leaned close.

“I wasn’t sure if she would come.” Gretchen watched Cori’s eyes narrow as she took in the familiar way the redhead touched Ben.

“So you *did* do this,” Cori accused, her suspicions confirmed.

“I just sent her an invitation. What happens next is up to the two of you.”

Cori’s eyes tracked Ben as she moved from canvas to canvas. Her heart pounded hard in her chest as each step brought her unknowingly closer to the canvas that would unveil Cori’s emotions.

The fact that Ben would first see it with another woman on her arm tore at Cori's heart. Apparently, some things had changed in the weeks since they'd seen each other.



"She really is very talented," Lucy commented as they stood before the darkly intense painting Ben had seen on the easel in Cori's studio. "What? She is," Lucy said when Ben only glared at her. "This one is so different, though."

"That's what I said when I first saw it." Ben hadn't understood why at the time, but now, something inside of her twisted as she lost herself in the painting. *Oh, Cori, what you must have been going through.* It was a powerful piece in its own right. But it was made more so when viewed with a full understanding of the artist. Emotion washed over her as she stared at the melding colors—alternately fiery and cold at the same time. She ached for Cori, for the uncertainty in her future, and that Cori felt she must sentence herself to facing it all alone.

Lucy's sharp gasp drew Ben's attention. She stood several feet away, wide-eyed in front of another painting.

Ben's breath caught in her throat as she moved to Lucy's side to see what was so earth-shattering. Her own larger-than-life image stared back at her. *This is how she sees me?* Cori had painted her with a radiant smile that lit her expression as if from the inside. She had perfectly captured the amber shade of her eyes and the slight wrinkle at their corners when she smiled. Ben's tousled hair fell in soft waves to frame her high cheekbones and the sleek line of her jaw. She'd never imagined that anyone could look at her and see such beauty. Seeing herself through Cori's eyes shook her.

"Jesus, Ben, you're beautiful," Lucy whispered reverently, still staring at the painting.

"Yes, she is." Cori's slight rasp scraped against her raw emotions.

Ben stiffened. She'd come to the show because she couldn't have stayed away. But she knew now that she hadn't really been prepared—already, being this close was rending the place in her

soul that existed only for Cori, and she hadn't even turned to face her yet.

She finally did, her stomach clenching involuntarily when a familiar spicy scent teased her consciousness. With some effort, Ben was able to bring her reaction under control, and when her eyes met Cori's resolutely, she knew they were devoid of emotion.

"It seems that you do portraits quite well after all," Ben remarked flatly.

"Actually I think this was a—um, special project." Cori struggled to keep her voice even. "And I was right about the suit. It looks great on you." Her heart twisted at the distance she saw in Ben's eyes, but she worked to keep her feelings hidden. She had watched from the corner of the room, her insides coiling tightly in anticipation, while Ben approached the painting. Unable to resist, she crossed the room because she wanted to see Ben's reaction to this piece. She searched Ben's face, looking for any sign that the painting had touched something in her. What she found was a carefully guarded expression.

Her attention shifted to the redhead at Ben's side, and she was suddenly filled with doubt. There wasn't a day that had gone by since they met that Cori hadn't thought about Ben. From very early on, the connection she felt to her ran deeper than with any woman before. And despite everything that had happened between them, she had thought the feeling was mutual. However, it seemed Ben had moved on.

The woman who stood so comfortably next to her was attractive. Her copper curls fell to her shoulders, just barely touching the pale skin left bare there. She was fashionably clad in a green silk dress that perfectly matched her sparkling eyes. Eyes that now regarded Cori warily.

Ben watched the two women size each other up. She would have expected Lucy's protective glare; however, her heart lifted when she saw the blatant jealousy in Cori's expression. Grasping Lucy's arm just above her elbow, Ben pulled her closer. Cori's eyes darkened considerably.

"Cori Saxton, this is Lucy Andrews." She waited a beat before adding, "My cousin."

"It's nice to meet you." Cori couldn't hide her rush of relief.

"I've heard a lot about you," Lucy said.

Taking advantage of Cori's diverted attention while she exchanged pleasantries with Lucy, Ben feasted her eyes. It seemed like forever since she had seen Cori, but her image was indelible. Ben hadn't realized it was possible to feel so incomplete without another person. Or that totality could come simply from being near Cori. But it did. A place that had been hollow was suddenly filled as she was unable to pull her eyes from the face of the woman she loved. *I love her?*

Struggling with a mini-panic attack over that thought, she was vaguely aware of Lucy complimenting Cori.

"I think it's great what you're doing with this charity. And the work you're displaying here today is amazing." She gestured toward the portrait of Ben. "It's exceptional."

"Thanks. I was—inspired." Cori was losing the fight to avoid looking at Ben. The compulsion was too much and she surrendered to it with a fatalistic sigh. It was too late to pretend she could control herself completely around this woman.

"Ah—well, I guess." Lucy seemed to be searching for a polite way to excuse herself. "Yeah," she said, finally giving up on tact and slipping away.

Neither Ben nor Cori noticed her departure.

"It—it really is an amazing painting. You made me look so much—better," Ben said after several long moments.

"You're gorgeous." Cori gazed at Ben standing there beside her portrait, and she thought she had failed. *You are so much more than I could ever capture in mere paint.* "It's so good to see you. I've missed your face." It was an odd thing to say considering she had spent countless hours envisioning Ben's face as she worked on the portrait. But it made perfect sense to her.

"I've missed you too," Ben whispered.

"I've got to hang around here for a while, but—will you stay? Can we get a cup of coffee or something afterward?"

There was something endearing about the tentativeness of Cori's invitation. "Yes. I'll wait."

Ben kept her word, watching Cori from across the room as

she moved among the crowd talking to guests. Lucy returned with champagne, and Ben tried unsuccessfully to draw her attention from Cori, who also cast periodic glances her way. But after a while there seemed no point in fighting it.

“So, what’s going on?” Lucy asked.

“She wants to talk after the party.”

“Is that good?”

“I think so.” Ben forced her gaze back to Lucy. “She didn’t really say, but there was something...”

“Ben, it’s nice to see you again.” Gretchen approached them. She clasped Ben’s hand tightly. “I’m *so* glad you could make it.” Her tone of voice conveyed more than a polite greeting. “And I know Cori must be very happy to see you.”

Ben smiled and introduced Lucy.

“Cori’s work is amazing, especially that one of Ben,” Lucy gushed.

“I know. It was right after I saw it for the first time that I sent your invitation.”

“I didn’t pose for it.” Ben was not quite sure why she said that. She was trying to explain the painting to herself, and nothing she came up with made any sense.

Gretchen seemed to understand her confusion. “She just told me one day that she had started painting again. And then she spilled all of her plans about starting the foundation and what she hoped it would accomplish in the future. But as soon as I saw this painting I figured you must have had something to do with the change in her.”

“I—no, I haven’t even seen her in weeks,” Ben protested.

“Well, maybe not directly, then.”

Ben stared at the painting, trying to make sense of Gretchen’s words. *It really is an incredible likeness, so detailed.* Surely the fact that Cori put the time and effort into this meant something. Ben’s heart flooded with optimism. Maybe there was a chance.

“What an amazing piece.”

Ben cringed at the sound of a voice behind her. She had only heard it once before but she would never forget it. She caught a look of apprehension on Gretchen’s face and turned to find Veronica

studying the painting next to Ben's portrait, the one that Cori had kept on her easel as a reminder every day while she couldn't work.

"Oh, hello." Veronica noticed them standing there. She pointedly ignored Ben and addressed Gretchen. "I'll take it."

"It's not for sale," Cori said from behind Ben. She stepped into their circle. Veronica immediately crossed to her.

Ben tensed and felt Lucy's hand on her arm.

"Why, Cori, I think we could work out some kind of arrangement, don't you?" Veronica purred, sliding closer.

Ben fought the urge to step between them and claw the woman's eyes out. She didn't consider herself a violent person, but she had never felt such strong dislike for someone in her life. It was only Lucy's restraining hand that kept her from leaping across the space that separated them.

Cori purposefully uncurled Veronica's fingers from around her arm and moved out of reach. "It's not for sale."

"Well, why not? It's just a painting." Veronica's tone of voice indicated that she clearly thought that everything had its price.

"Actually, it's more than just a painting," Cori corrected her. "It's a reminder." She looked at Ben for several long seconds and then glanced at the portrait behind her. "They both are. Now if you'll excuse me, the guests are starting to leave and I really must thank them for attending."

As she passed, she touched the small of Ben's back so fleetingly that if it weren't for the tingling sensation left behind Ben might have thought she imagined it.

Casting a look of disbelief at Cori's retreating back, Veronica stalked away.

"Who invited her?" Lucy grumbled, obviously having figured out who Veronica was.

"No one," Gretchen said sharply. "She must have managed to talk someone into bringing her as their guest, because she sure wasn't on the list."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

So they really aren't for sale." Ben stood shoulder to shoulder with Cori, both of them staring at the paintings. True to her word, Ben had waited until the room cleared, and now they were the only remaining occupants.

She had been elated when Cori refused to sell the painting to Veronica, but she hadn't thought Cori would seriously hold on to them. Especially when a silver-haired dapperly dressed gentleman had murmured a figure that had nearly caused Ben to choke on a mouthful of champagne. Without blinking, Cori had politely declined. The man saluted her resolve and then generously offered the same sum for a different painting. All of the others had eventually been sold at a great profit for the Saxton Foundation.

"No. They're not."

"It was an amazing night, Cori. You should be proud of yourself."

"I should?" Cori didn't look at her.

"Yes. You figured out how to use your gifts to do something that will matter to a lot of kids. Who knows how many will have a future they might not have had if it weren't for you." Ben made a conscious effort to keep her voice even despite her racing heart.

"I'm glad you came, Ben."

"You are?"

Cori was quiet for a moment. There were so many things to say and so many she wondered if she would ever be able to say. "Would

you like to go get some coffee? Or, well, don't take this the wrong way, but my place is just a couple of blocks away." She rushed on nervously before Ben could respond. "It's just that I'd like to be able to talk to you privately. It seems like I haven't gotten more than a moment with you all night, and—"

Without thinking, Ben pressed two fingers to Cori's lips to silence her. There was that damn tingling sensation again. She jerked her hand back. "Your place is fine."



Ben followed Cori inside her apartment and laid her purse on the hall table. She longed to blurt out her feelings. Remaining silent during the walk from the hotel had been excruciating, but Cori seemed disinclined to speak, so Ben had not pressed the point.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Cori asked.

"No, thank you." Ben perched on the edge of the sofa.

Cori remained standing. She slipped out of her jacket and draped it over the back of a nearby chair. Ben watched as she took off her cuff links and tucked them in the pocket of her jacket. She shook her sleeves loose and pushed them up her forearms. For a moment, Ben allowed herself to imagine how nice it would be to come home with Cori after an evening out and undress her. They would plop down on the sofa next to each other, prop their feet up on the coffee table, and talk about who wore what to the party.

"Ben, this isn't going to work." Cori was pacing a few feet away.

"Yeah. You said that before. So you brought me back here to tell me that again?" Ben felt her moment slipping away, but there remained a glimmer of hope when she recalled the way Cori had looked at her less than an hour earlier.

She moved to stand in front of Cori, stopping her progress. Ben realized she felt not a second's hesitation about Cori's uncertain future, only an overwhelming need to touch her. Setting caution aside, she pulled Cori into her arms. She could feel Cori's heart beating against her own as their chests pressed closely together.

“Don’t you understand? My life has changed irrevocably.” Cori tried to pull back but Ben held on.

“Yes, I know, darling. Mine did too—the day I got out of Henry’s truck and saw you standing there on your porch.” Ben cupped Cori’s jaw, realizing the truth of her words. She couldn’t have known it at the time, but she hadn’t been the same since she’d squinted up at Cori’s silhouetted figure.

“Damn it, Ben!” Cori jerked out of her embrace. She needed the distance between them to keep her resolve intact. “You’re being purposely obtuse. I’m trying to tell you that I’m not going to get better. There’s no cure. I’ll only get progressively worse.”

“I know, you’ve said that too,” Ben said quietly.

“The only thing that remains to be seen is how much worse and how fast.” Saying the words aloud brought a flood of panic into Cori’s heart, but she needed Ben to understand what was at stake. She needed Ben to walk away now, because if she didn’t, Cori would give in to the crazy urge to submit to her.

“I know.” Ben’s voice remained steady. “I know all of that.”

“I have nothing to give you. What if I can’t paint? I’m nothing without my work.”

The anguish in Cori’s voice was so palpable that it made Ben’s chest ache, and she was unsure if she would ever be able to convince Cori to look beyond her fears—to see the heart Ben was offering now in her outstretched hands.

“Sweetheart, you can’t believe that. You proved tonight that you have something else to offer. You are an amazing artist. But your art is simply a reflection of your soul, not a testament of your worth. You have more value than just the price tag on your paintings.”

Cori shook her head as if she could deny Ben’s words. “A year ago I would have jumped at the chance to be involved with a smart, sexy—”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” Ben interrupted.

“I wouldn’t have?”

“No, you were still dating bimbos,” Ben explained bluntly. “You wouldn’t have looked twice at me.”

"Yes, I would have," Cori argued, though she knew Ben was probably right.

"No. You needed the events of the past year to let you know what is important. You needed to take a good look at what you want from life."

"Ben..." Cori's intention was to stop her before she no longer had any defenses against the words.

Ben moved to close the distance between them, feeling as if her whole future depended upon that moment, on her ability to make Cori see what was in her soul. She laid her hand gently against the middle of Cori's chest and drew strength from the steady beat beneath her palm. "So, Cori Saxton, what is it that you want from life?"

"Ben, I can't." Cori couldn't bear to see the naked emotion in Ben's eyes. She could feel the warmth of Ben's hand through the thin layer of her shirt. Her mind screamed to step away, but she couldn't make herself move. Her body was acting on its own and was reluctant to lose that tiny physical connection between them.

Ben took a deep breath. "I need you to tell me. What do you want? Because I want *you*, whatever time brings, I want to be there beside you—to face it with you." She had done it. She had stepped off the edge of a cliff, and there was no going back.

"It could hurt," Cori said cautiously.

"Yes. And when it does, we'll hold each other."

"And when I can't hold you?"

"If you can't hold me, then I will hold you."

"Ben, it's really not that simple. Someday—"

"It is that simple. You're strong now. I'll deal with someday when it happens."

"You can't just push reality aside and say you'll deal with it later."

"I also can't ignore the way I feel about you now because I'm afraid of what the future may bring. I want *you*, Cori. Whatever that entails, I'll take it. I'll risk the future in exchange for the way you make me feel right now."

She was running out of excuses, and Ben's hand still resting

against her chest was making it more and more difficult to think. "How do I make you feel?" She was stalling.

"I asked you first. What do you want?"

Cori covered Ben's hand, pressing it more tightly against her chest. *You're so good for me.*

"You don't let me get away with anything. I've never had that. Even before—" She choked on the words. "Before I got sick. All of my life people have catered to me because of who I am or who my parents are. You don't do that. In fact, I've sometimes wondered if you're impressed by anything at all about me. But when you speak, when you look at me, I never have to wonder if you're sincere. I want you, of course. Do you really not know that?" Cori drew her close and kissed her tenderly, fearing she could break the tenuous thread that was forming between them.

Ben pressed her face into Cori's neck and wrapped her arms tightly around her waist. "You make *me* feel as if I can do anything," she said, borrowing Cori's words. "And I've never had that before."

"Ben, I don't know how to do this." Cori's fingers danced faintly along her spine. "Hell, I've never really done the relationship thing."

Ben laughed softly. "I'll try to be gentle." She kissed up the side of Cori's neck and drew her earlobe into her mouth.

"If you keep that up..." Cori gasped at the scrape of Ben's teeth.

"What are you going to do about it?" Ben pulled the back of Cori's shirt free and slid her hands over warm skin as soft as silk.

"I'll show you," Cori replied, backing her into the bedroom.

"Hmm..." Ben pressed a hand to the center of Cori's chest, stopping her. She continued backward, putting some space between them. A teasing light sparked in her eyes. "I don't know. Are you well? I mean, I wouldn't want to tax your system."

Cori raised an eyebrow. "Not well?" Ben remained silent but a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Tax my system, eh?" Cori advanced on her. "Maybe I need to show you just how capable I am."

Ben's stomach tightened pleasantly as a feral grin intensified Cori's gaze. "How exactly do you plan to do that?" she teased.

Cori stopped before her, mere inches between them. "Take this off," she demanded, tugging at Ben's lapel.

Ben complied without question, stripping off both the jacket and the silk beneath. Cori's confidence was sexy as hell, and Ben had no problem letting her take control.

"This too." Cori brushed her fingers lightly over the lacy cup of Ben's bra. She reveled in the reaction of Ben's flesh through the fabric.

After dropping her bra to the floor, Ben reached automatically for the waistband of her slacks, but Cori stopped her.

"Not yet." Power surged through Cori and she struggled to control her fervor. She had never felt stronger than she did standing there gazing at Ben. Her arousal climbed rapidly and she was once again overwhelmed with the desire to take Ben quickly and passionately. Yet a bigger part of her needed to exercise control—over herself as much as over Ben. Her desire for restraint came not from a need to prove something, but from the desire to bring Ben as much pleasure as she could. She silently acknowledged the fact that she had selfish intentions as well. She wanted to memorize every moment she spent touching Ben.

Ben obediently dropped her hands to her side. Cori slowly lifted her hand and brushed her fingers feather-light over one nipple, Ben's breath hissing through her teeth as her nipple tightened. Cori drew two fingers down the center of Ben's chest, between her breasts and moving lower. The sensitive skin of her abdomen jumped as Cori's fingers trailed over it.

Ben fought to stand still, but her body strained toward Cori's fingers, seeking to increase their pressure. She didn't quite manage to stifle a moan, but she did bite back the plea that rose up in her throat.

Heart racing, Cori attempted to draw a calming breath. She traced her hand back up to cup Ben's jaw firmly, her thumb under Ben's jawbone and her fingers splayed over the other side. Pressing with her thumb, she turned Ben's head to the side, exposing the

tempting expanse of her neck. She leaned forward and trailed her tongue along the pulse that beat heavily there.

Ben cradled Cori's head in her hands, her fingers tangling in her hair. She exerted enough pressure to tug Cori's head up sharply, but not enough to hurt. Sinking into the swirling depths of azure eyes hazy with passion, she somehow refrained from crushing her mouth against Cori's.

"How long do you intend to torture me?" Ben's mouth was inches from Cori's.

"Just long enough." Cori grinned before pressing her lips to Ben's.

The tentatively contained flame between them ignited with the first brush of their mouths. Ben sighed against Cori's lips as the thirst that had consumed her for weeks finally promised to be quenched. Wrapping her arms about Cori's neck, she pulled the taller woman against her, deepening the kiss. She tugged ineptly at the tuxedo shirt that was still between her own bare chest and Cori's skin.

Cori yanked the shirt open and shucked it off her shoulders. Ben's hands were back in her hair, pulling her mouth down. With Ben's tongue stroking inside her lips, it took all of Cori's waning concentration to fumble her own bra off. Dropping it behind her, she grasped Ben's hips and pulled their bodies flush, unsure which of them sighed as their skin met. Ben's thigh slid between hers, and the throbbing that had begun between her thighs became nearly intolerable.

Barely resisting the urge to thrust her hips against Ben's thigh, Cori propelled them toward the bed. Her plan to go slowly was virtually forgotten, but she managed to regain enough of her senses to grab Ben's hands just as they undid the fly on her pants.

"Let me." Ben's gently pleading tone was almost her undoing.

"Wait. If you touch me, I'll lose it."

"I know. I can feel how close you are. Let me."

Without waiting for a response, Ben pressed her hand flat against Cori's abdomen. She felt the muscles twitch. Her body surging with the power of Cori's reaction, she slipped her fingers lightly under the edge of Cori's waistband.

“Ben,” Cori growled. When Ben’s hand slid inside her panties, Cori’s head dropped back. Her heart pounded and there was a rushing sound in her ears warning her that she was far too close to the edge. “Oh God, you’re going to make me embarrass myself here.”

“Shh, please,” Ben hummed against her lips between kisses. “You’re so amazing. Let me make you feel good.” The last word came out on a half-moan as her fingers moved into warm wetness.

“Ah, baby—everything you do—makes me feel—ah—good.” Cori struggled to form a coherent sentence. Her entire body spiraled inward, focused on Ben’s fingers sliding against her.

Releasing her momentarily, Ben tugged Cori’s pants and panties over her hips. She pushed them down around her ankles and urged her back to lie on the bed. Kneeling, she pulled off Cori’s shoes and freed one leg, but she lost patience before she got to the other one.

She knew Cori was close, so when she lowered her mouth to the inside of her thighs she didn’t linger before sliding upward. Pressing her tongue firmly against Cori’s clitoris, she flattened her hand against Cori’s stomach as her hips wrenched off the bed.

“Ben, I can’t wait.” Cori gasped out the warning through her teeth.

“I won’t make you wait.” Ben lifted her head only briefly as she slipped two fingers inside.

Matching the timing of her stroking tongue with the thrust of her fingers, she brought Cori quickly up, the pulsing muscles drawing her deeper. When each of Cori’s moans became indistinguishable from the next and she panted with the effort of holding off her orgasm, Ben carried her over. She applied the slightest pressure against Cori’s lower abdomen with one hand while curling the fingers inside. Cori’s back bowed and she called out. Then she went limp, panting and whispering Ben’s name.

As her breathing began to slow and her body gradually relaxed, Ben crawled up onto the bed next to Cori, still stroking her fingers lightly over her stomach, content simply to be touching her.

Cori rolled Ben onto her back and rose up over her. She reverently touched Ben’s cheek. She had been fighting for control for so long that she had forgotten how amazingly sweet it could be

to relinquish it. She stared in awe at the woman who had changed her life so completely and was suddenly compelled to tell her.

“Ben, I...” she began.

“Shh...”

Ben didn’t need to hear it. She felt it in the protective way Cori’s body curved over hers as she moved to cover her. She saw it in Cori’s eyes, gazing at her—unshuttered. She didn’t need Cori to put her feelings into words. When Cori relented and silently lowered her body onto Ben’s, her gentle hands and insistently seeking lips conveyed her emotions.



When Cori’s fingertips trailed slowly over her buttocks, Ben moaned and rolled over. “You’re going to kill me,” she murmured groggily.

They had barely slept, instead spending most of the night learning every inch of each other’s bodies. Ben was loath to waste a single moment of the time they were stealing together in an unconscious state, and she sensed that Cori felt the same. She didn’t open her eyes for fear she would find herself alone and realize it had all been a dream.

When the aroma of coffee pervaded her senses, she couldn’t hold out any longer. She pried open her eyes and blinked until she could focus. She was far too comfortable to move, lying stretched out on her stomach across the entire bed. Reluctantly she shifted onto her side. Cori sat perched on the edge of the bed.

“Good morning,” she said smiling.

“Good morning.” Ben sat up and reached for her hand. “I tend to be a bit of a bed hog,” she confessed.

“I remembered.” Cori was pleasantly surprised to realize that she had just spent a second full night with the same woman.

Ben’s memory of their first night together rushed back as well. It was closely followed by that of Cori shutting herself in the bathroom and effectively shutting Ben out of her life. She wondered, now, if she would have to face that again. And she didn’t know how she would survive it.

“Coffee?” Cori picked up two mugs from the nightstand and handed her one. “I would have made you breakfast but I don’t know how you like your eggs.”

Ben accepted the mug without a word.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Cori said, reading the apprehension in her eyes.

“I—uh—”

“It’s okay. I deserve your skepticism. Ben, you didn’t want me to say this last night, but I love you.”

“You don’t have to—”

“But I do.” Cori set aside their mugs and took Ben’s hands in hers. “I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you. I was trying so hard to be unselfish, for probably the first time in my life.” She scoffed. “What you went through with your brother, I didn’t want to be the one to put you through a moment’s heartache.”

“I wouldn’t trade away the pain. It was something I was meant to go through. I was by his side when he needed me most, and that’s what mattered.” Ben pulled Cori closer, wrapping her arm around her, and waited while she settled against her side. “I love you. And I will be by your side for whatever you and I are meant to go through. If you’ll let me.”

“I will,” Cori answered, her arm tightening around Ben’s waist. She wasn’t sure how she had gotten lucky enough to have a woman like Ben fall for her, but God help her, she was going to hold on to her for as long as she could.

EPILOGUE

Cori opened the door to find Ben leaning against the doorjamb. She yanked her inside and kissed her thoroughly before even allowing her to put down her overnight bag. When they moved apart, they were both breathing heavily.

“Did you miss me?”

“Welcome back.” They spoke at the same time.

“Darling, I was only gone for two days.” Ben grabbed Cori’s hand and pulled her toward the living room. Dropping her bag by the couch, she sat down and Cori settled beside her.

“How was your trip?” Cori asked.

“Uneventful. How was your meeting with Gretchen?”

“Very good. We’re putting together a reception in a few weeks to award the scholarships for next fall.”

“She’s really enjoying being involved with the foundation, isn’t she?”

“I think she likes it better than being my agent,” Cori observed. “She’s already talking about hiring an assistant to take care of the grunt work, you know, like managing my career, so she’ll have more time for the foundation.”

“Aw, you’re not grunt work,” Ben soothed. She pulled Cori’s head to her shoulder and patted it patronizingly.

“I have a surprise for you.” Cori beamed, unable to hold it in any longer.

Ben sighed. In the three months that they had been dating, she had been unable to convince Cori that it was not necessary to

present her with a gift on a weekly basis. And as with everything she did, Cori certainly did not go halfway with her gifts. Ben absently fingered the diamond solitaire pendant at her neck, another of Cori's tokens.

Excitedly Cori reached into her pocket and pulled out a key, presenting it to Ben as if it was a precious bauble.

"A key? Sweetie, I've had a key to your apartment for weeks now." They'd had one made after Cori had gotten unexpectedly detained at a charity function. Ben had returned from out of town to find that Cori wasn't home yet and she had gone back to her apartment and crashed. Cori had insisted on the key, saying she wanted Ben to be there even if she was late.

"This is a key to the house upstate. I've been planning to spend more time up there, and now that things are settling down with the foundation, I want to move up there. Uh—I want us to move up there." She pushed her hand through her hair. "I'm messing this up. I'm asking you to move in with me—up there."

Ben smiled. This side of Cori that no one else saw never failed to charm her. In public Cori was smooth and polished and perfectly poised. Only Ben got to see the shy side.

"I would love to move up there with you."

Cori breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief. "I'm so glad you said yes."

"What did you do?" Ben's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"I have another surprise." Cori stood and led Ben to the window. She pointed to the street.

"You didn't." Ben stared at the enormous SUV pulled up next to the curb. She remembered walking past it on the way in and wondering what idiot needed a vehicle that big in the city. *Turns out, I'm in love with the idiot.*

"Well, the Jag won't be practical if we're going to be spending most of our time upstate," Cori said.

"You traded the Jag for that blue monstrosity?"

"It's slate blue metallic, and it's not a monstrosity, it's a Hummer H2. *And* I didn't trade the Jag. I'm keeping my apartment in the city for when we need to be here, and it will stay garaged here."

Ben laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Cori demanded.

“You are so adorable.” Ben wrapped her arm around Cori’s waist and hugged her.

“It has an air suspension package and off-road roof lamps,” Cori mumbled defensively against Ben’s neck, making her laugh harder.

About the Author

Born and raised in upstate New York, Erin Dutton now resides in Nashville, Tennessee. No longer a Yankee, and yet not a true Southerner, she remains somewhere between the two and is happy to claim both places as home. In her spare time she enjoys reading, golf, and riding her motorcycle.

Her story “Two Under Par” is included in the anthology *Erotic Interludes 5: Road Games*, and her second novel *Fully Involved* will be released by Bold Strokes Books in December 2007. For more information visit www.erindutton.com or e-mail erin@erindutton.com.

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A PLACE TO REST

by
Erin Dutton



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There are so many people behind the scenes adding to the amazing environment of Bold Strokes Books. I'm privileged to be connected to such a talented group.

Dedication

Family is a big part of this story. So it seems only right
that I dedicate it to mine.
For always giving me a place to belong.

CHAPTER ONE

Sawyer Drake rolled over and squinted at the bedside clock through eyes that weren't quite sharp enough without the correction of her black square-framed glasses. *Seven a.m.*? Who the hell was calling her at seven a.m.? She snatched up the receiver, pressed the button to end the offending noise, and growled into the phone.

"What?"

The voice that greeted her was far too cheery for the time of day. "Is that how you answer your phone? Really, Sawyer, I raised you to be more personable than that."

"Morning, Mom. I'm not usually personable until at least nine."

"I know, dear. That's why I called at seven. I was hoping to catch you off guard."

Sawyer laughed at her mother's candor. Tia Drake was nothing if not honest, and when she wanted something she made it clear. "What do you want, Mom?"

"I need a favor, Sawyer."

Sawyer pushed aside the covers and crawled out of bed, then padded down the short hallway of the two-bedroom apartment she shared with her best friend. In the kitchen, she moved from carpet to cool tile and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

“Of course you do.” Sawyer sipped from the bottle, letting the cold water soothe her dry throat. “Ever since you and Dad moved to Florida, you only call when you want something.”

“Yes, I know,” Tia said sarcastically. “Next you’ll tell me I call your brother and sister more than I call you.”

Sawyer cringed. Though she’d been teasing and knew her mother was doing the same, Tia had touched a nerve in talking about Sawyer’s siblings. At thirty-two, Sawyer was four years older than her brother and sister, fraternal twins. She supposed it was normal for one child to think another got preferential treatment. And over the years she probably should have gotten used to her siblings getting more attention, especially when they were younger. People tended to coo over twin babies.

Tia interrupted her musings about her family dynamics. “Sawyer, I need you to do something for me. Have you found a new job yet?”

“Not yet.” She’d been unemployed for two weeks since she left her job at the zoo. Although, in her defense, how long could they expect her to sit in a bamboo shack and sell tickets before she got bored?

“I want you to consider going to work with your sister.” When a health scare had encouraged their father to consider early retirement, her parents had finally decided to leave Nashville and make that move south they had been talking about for years. Sawyer’s sister, Erica, had reluctantly taken the reins of the family restaurant, Drake’s.

“Mom—”

“Hear me out, Sawyer,” Tia said in a tone she knew better than to interrupt. “I know you’ve never been interested in working at the restaurant. But Erica needs your help.”

“She didn’t say—”

“When was the last time you talked to her?”

Sawyer took a deep breath and mentally counted to ten. Her mother had a habit of not letting her finish a sentence. “I don’t know. A few weeks ago, I guess.”

“She says you haven’t been by Drake’s in months.”

“I haven’t had time.” Sawyer regretted the white lie the moment it passed her lips. She wandered into the sparsely decorated living room and settled on one end of the sofa. Beige sofa, neutral carpet, and white walls. She kept promising herself that she would decorate the apartment, but it just never seemed to take priority. Her friend and roommate, Matthew, had added the few personal touches, such as the large burgundy vase and the colorful abstract painting.

“So then, daughter of mine, how have you been whiling away your hours of unemployment?”

“Ah—well—I—”

“Exactly as I thought. Erica’s pregnant, Sawyer. You could at least go by there and check on her once in a while.”

Her sister was nearly seven months along and planning to have the baby on her own. Every time Sawyer talked to her mother she had to listen to a monologue about how it must be so hard for Erica to be going through this all alone and how Sawyer should check on her more often. She would endure as long as she could before making an excuse to get off the phone.

“Mom, she works with Brady every day. It’s not like she’s by herself,” she argued in vain, knowing her mother wouldn’t see her brother’s presence as a fitting substitute. From the time Sawyer was old enough, Tia had often left her in charge of her younger siblings while she and their father spent long hours at the restaurant.

“That’s no excuse for you to not care about her.”

“It’s not that I don’t care about her, you know that.” It took some effort for her to keep from raising her voice. Her mother could be exasperating when she wanted to. It was how she wore a person down, and no doubt she knew Sawyer would give in. “Jesus, Mom. Okay. I’ll go over there.”

“And you’ll work with her?”

“Now you’re pushing your luck,” she muttered, resting her feet on the oak coffee table in front of her.

“Try it for a few weeks. If you give it a fair shot, I won’t bother you about it anymore.”

Sawyer sighed. Well, what else was she going to do for the next few weeks? She hadn’t found anything else yet, and a cushy job at her family’s restaurant would be as good as any. She could just go in a few days a week and hang out with her brother and sister, and as an added bonus, her mother would think she was making an effort. This was a good opportunity to eliminate one of their arguing points. “If I do this and it doesn’t work out, I’ll never hear another word about working at the restaurant. Right?”

“Right,” Tia agreed after a moment of silence.

“Okay, Mom. I’ll try.”

Minutes later she hung up and went back into the bathroom. She brushed her teeth and wondered, as she did every morning, if she should consider tinted contact lenses. Her brown eyes were very ordinary, so she thought about trying something in green or hazel. She’d considered contacts several times, mostly out of vanity, thinking her glasses made her look like a nerd. But as the years went by, she’d grown accustomed to them, even hiding behind them at times.

After a quick shower she ran a brush through her chin-length light brown hair and decided to let it air dry. She pulled a pair of khakis and a button-down blue striped shirt from the closet. *I should iron this shirt. But why bother?* Who did she need to impress? Erica? This would be the easiest job interview she’d ever had.



“It’s not too late to leave,” Sawyer muttered to herself that afternoon as she shifted in a chair in her sister’s office. “Erica hasn’t even seen me yet.”

She’d left word with the hostess on the way in that she would be waiting for Erica. So she tried to get comfortable in one of the expensive-looking chairs decorating the small office. Sawyer

remembered many afternoons spent curled up in her father's old, comfortable furniture after school doing homework while he worked at the desk. Erica had redecorated earlier in the year after she had taken over and had obviously chosen the muted olive green-and-beige-patterned chairs for aesthetics rather than comfort. She seemingly hadn't wanted anything to compete with the bold artistic photos featuring some of their specialties that she'd had blown up and displayed on the walls. And she had replaced the scarred wooden desk that once held her father's old adding machine with a more modern-looking glass-and-chrome desk that now boasted a sleek desktop computer.

Sawyer was still considering her chances of escaping unnoticed when the office door opened and Erica hurried inside. She spared Sawyer only a quick glance as she moved behind the desk. Sawyer appraised her, thinking she looked tired. Her normally bright blue eyes had lost some of their sparkle, and her blond hair was pulled into a sloppy updo. Her stomach had rounded considerably since the last time Sawyer had seen her. Erica sighed as she lowered herself into her chair.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm very busy today. What do you need, Sawyer?" she asked shortly.

"Well, I might be able to help you out." She leaned back and folded her arms over her chest. "I'm here for a job."

Erica stared at her. She'd been having a bad day already. Her vegetable delivery was late, one of her servers had quit, and her feet were swollen. Perhaps it wasn't fair, but right now she just wanted to slap that condescending smile right off Sawyer's face. She was quite used to that expression, having seen it when they were growing up every time Sawyer excelled where she faltered. School had been easy for Sawyer; she seemed to get good grades without putting in the hours of studying that Erica required. And she never seemed to tire of basking in their father's praise at report-card time.

Erica wondered what had motivated Sawyer to come in

today. She'd never had trouble finding a job before, but perhaps this time was different. It was just like Sawyer to sweep in and act like she was doing her a favor. She probably expected to be thanked effusively for bailing her out. She was tempted to refuse the offer, out of pride. Then she smiled as an idea began to form that would solve one problem and also put Sawyer in her place.

"Okay."

"Okay?" It was clear from Sawyer's expression that she'd been expecting an argument. "Great. When do you want me to start?"

"Tonight. Follow me." Without waiting to see if Sawyer was behind her, Erica stood and walked out of the office. She stopped at a linen closet in the hallway outside of the kitchen. "The entire dining room has been booked tonight for a fund-raiser for the mayor, and I'm down a server."

"Okay, cool. So—what? You want me to help out, hang around the dining room and make sure everyone's happy?" Though she wasn't really into politics, she thought she could handle an evening of socializing. She could throw on her best suit and glad-hand the guests, putting up a good front for Drake's.

"No." Erica held out a uniform. "I need another server."

"Are you forgetting I've been a waitress?" she said, remembering the summer she'd spent on the Cape waiting tables. "I didn't like it."

"If you want to come to work at Drake's, you have to start at the bottom. Learn the business from the ground up. Brady and I both did."

"You were sixteen when you were a server. I'm thirty-two years old and I have a business degree."

"Which you haven't used in ten years," Erica added, still holding out the black vest, tie, and apron.

Sawyer debated refusing but remembered her conversation with her mother. If she thought she'd gotten a guilt trip that morning, it would be nothing compared to their next phone

conversation. She snatched the uniform from Erica. “I hope you’re enjoying this little power trip.”

“Wear black slacks and a white shirt with that, please,” Erica responded, ignoring Sawyer’s snide comment. “And be here at five,” she called as Sawyer stalked away.



“I should have figured she’d be late. She acted like she wanted to help, but that doesn’t mean she’s changed,” Erica muttered as she walked through the kitchen.

“Erica, are you talking to yourself?” her twin brother, Brady, asked from across the room. She glanced at features so like her own and felt some of her irritation ease. Brady calmed her; she could rely on him in ways she’d never relied on Sawyer.

“Your sister came by this morning asking for a job, and she’s twenty minutes late for her first shift.”

Brady smiled. “She’s always *my* sister when you’re mad at her.”

Erica crossed to the counter where her pastry chef was prepping. Jori Diamantina had been at Drake’s for only six months, but she’d proved to be hardworking and creative. In just a few short weeks her dessert menu had begun to receive rave reviews. Erica had never regretted hiring her.

“Jori, have I ever told you about *Brady’s* sister?” She heard Brady laugh as she turned her back on him.

“I think I’ve heard a thing or two.” Jori regarded her with eyes that sometimes resonated with sadness, but today sparkled. Many times she had seen how Jori transformed when she stepped in the kitchen. Normally reserved in both public and private, she worked with sharp confidence.

“I’m sure you have. Don’t get me wrong, I love Sawyer. But she’s a bit flighty. She hops from job to job and never settles down. And don’t get me started on her relationships. I mean, I

don't think she's stayed with the same woman for more than a week since she was in the tenth grade."

"Maybe she simply hasn't found what she's looking for."

Erica appreciated Jori's attempt at diplomacy. "Well, that may be. But while she's out there searching, the rest of us are left to be the responsible ones and handle things around here."

"Geez, Erica, Sawyer has some good qualities, too. Don't just list her bad ones," Brady called.

"Oh, yeah," Erica continued. "Sawyer can be very charming when she wants to be. Believe me, Jori, within a few minutes she'll have you wondering why I'm complaining."

Jori nodded, uncertain how to respond to the obvious bitterness in Erica's voice. This was exactly the type of situation that made her uncomfortable. She enjoyed her job, and usually there was an easy dynamic between Erica and Brady. But tension surrounded any conversation about Sawyer. From what she'd heard, she didn't know why Erica wasted her time worrying about her sister when it seemed clear that the woman thought of no one but herself.

"I swear, if she doesn't get here soon she's going to make me regret hiring her."

"And that would ruin your perfect record, wouldn't it?" Brady grinned at Jori. "Erica takes all the credit for hiring you, even though I was the one who found you working at that dive on Fourth Avenue."

Jori laughed. "Granted, it was no Drake's, but that place wasn't a dive."

"Of course not." Erica lifted a freshly washed strawberry from the bowl in front of Jori. "But it was merely a stepping stone to this point in your career."

Erica remembered the day Brady had come to her raving about an assistant pastry chef he'd met. They'd just lost their own head pastry chef and invited Jori to interview. She won Erica over with the box of Key lime tarts she'd brought along. Erica went

through with the interview mostly for show, already knowing she would offer Jori the job.

“You’re a good fit for Drake’s, Jori. And I hope we can convince you to stay with us for a very long time.”



Sawyer drove down West End Avenue in her white Toyota Solara convertible with the top down. A warm spring breeze feathered strands of hair across her face. She shoved them behind her ears and smothered a curse as the driver in front of her stopped quickly when the light turned yellow. She could already tell she wouldn’t like working downtown. Traffic tested her notoriously short patience, and it would only get worse as summer progressed and country-music fans flocked to Nashville. Seeing a break in the lane to her left, she sped around the delivery van she’d nearly rear-ended twice already. During the summer Tia had taught her to drive, she’d also passed on her aggressive maneuvers and her irritation with traffic.

Since her meeting with Erica, she’d had time to think about the way Erica was flaunting her power, and it made her angry. As Sawyer’s little sister, Erica had never been in a position of authority over her. Trying to please her mother was upsetting the balance of their relationship, and it wasn’t in Sawyer’s favor. She was convinced Erica’s power play was unreasonable. After all, Sawyer was a Drake. How would it look for her to be toting trays?

West End turned into Broadway as she entered downtown. Crowds of people carrying cameras wandered along the sidewalks and paused at the open doors to several bars, no doubt hoping to glimpse the next big star. As she reached Fourth Avenue, the sounds of live music spilled out of a bar famous for its lavender exterior and for discovering new talent. Three blocks later, she took a left on First Avenue and slammed on her brakes, growling

when a group of people decided to cross despite the Don't Walk signal. One of the men had the nerve to shoot her an offended look as he passed in front of her car. *Of course, that's nothing compared to the nerve he has wearing that shirt.* Sawyer didn't follow fashion too closely, but surely the old-fashioned cowboy-cut shirt with the pearl snaps and three-inch fringe running the length of the arms wasn't back in style.

When she was able to move again, she quickly covered the two blocks to the back of Drake's. She pulled up to the loading dock next to Erica's Land Rover and put the top up. Before getting out of the car, she grabbed the tie from the passenger seat and looped it around her neck.

As she walked through the back door into the kitchen, she paused. Brady, the executive chef, moved between the counters calling out instructions. The rest of the room's occupants, a sous chef and three line cooks, responded in kind. Erica had once told Sawyer that she loved the energy of a well-run kitchen, the sights and sounds mingling with quick, efficient movement. She said there was a choreography involved, each player gracefully playing their part. Sawyer knew she missed being the orchestrator in the kitchen now that she'd taken on a more administrative role.

Brady looked up from the lamb he was seasoning. A shock of blond hair just a shade darker than Erica's fell across his forehead. Though they were fraternal twins they shared the same soft features, and while they lent Erica a feminine beauty, they made Brady appear younger than his twenty-eight years. The baby face he had complained about as a teenager didn't offend him quite so much anymore. They were carbon copies of their mother, and Sawyer resembled their father with looks that she considered mousy.

"Erica's looking for you," Brady said.

Sawyer glanced at her watch. "No doubt. Is she mad?"

"She's always cranky these days," he joked.

"You wouldn't say that if she was standing here." Sawyer figured he knew as well as she did that Erica wouldn't like the reference to her pregnancy hormones.

Brady laughed. "Probably not. Paige said to invite you over this weekend. We're barbequing."

"Cool. Remind me later this week."

Brady's wife was quite possibly the sweetest woman Sawyer had ever met. Fortunately for them, both of their sons apparently took after her. During Paige's pregnancies Sawyer had tormented her with talk about them inheriting Brady's temper, another trait he'd inherited from their mother. "I guess I better get this over with. Where's Erica?"

"In the dining room," he answered, lifting his chin in that direction.

With a sigh, Sawyer headed that way. As she stepped into the dining room a feeling of warm familiarity engulfed her. The decor remained as it had been for many years. Subdued lighting cast pale circles of light on the tables peppered around the room. The far wall boasted a huge stone fireplace, and the large windows along the opposite side faced Second Avenue, bathing the room in natural light. The remaining wall space was covered with textured ivory wallpaper.

Erica intercepted her as she was passing the mahogany bar.

"It's five thirty." She flipped up Sawyer's collar, grabbed the ends of the tie slung around her neck, and deftly tied it. "I said five o'clock."

"Sorry."

"No, you're not. But you would be if I docked your paycheck."

"Slave driver," Sawyer muttered, pushing Erica's hands away and folding her collar back down. Between her mother and Erica, Sawyer was already thinking this was a bad idea. "I really don't need this aggravation. I can get a stress-free job tomorrow."

"Tonight is a big deal, Sawyer. A lot of important people will

be here. Please don't let me down." Erica made the request softly as she drew the front of Sawyer's vest closed and buttoned it.

"I can dress myself." Sawyer stepped out of reach. "I'm already here, I may as well work. But after tonight I'm done."

CHAPTER TWO

What's on the menu for tonight?" Sawyer asked as she entered the kitchen. The guests had started arriving, and many were sipping cocktails and milling about the dining room. Soon the hors d'oeuvres would be served, then everyone would be seated for dinner. After that Sawyer would be too busy to do more than pass through the kitchen. She touched her brother's arm affectionately as she peered over his shoulder.

"Chuck is working on an assortment of appetizers over there." He waved a hand toward his sous chef. The dark-haired man looked up at Brady and an indulgent grin drew the corners of his mustache upward. "For dinner, garlic roasted lamb with oregano pesto and steamed asparagus."

"Sounds good." Sawyer smiled at Chuck and smoothed her hand over the shoulder of Brady's pristine white jacket.

"It will be exquisite," Brady assured her, swiping the back of his hand across his forehead just below the band of his toque, the traditional pleated chef's hat. "But the real treat is dessert. Right, Jori?" He glanced over his shoulder.

Sawyer followed his gaze across the room to the woman standing behind a long stainless-steel table plating triangles of some sort of chocolate creation with pink stripes in the center. The woman's jacket appeared as clean and starched as Brady's. Instead of the toque she wore a navy blue bandana. Tendrils of shiny black hair curled out and clung to the edge of the fabric.

When she glanced up, Sawyer found herself staring into slightly almond-shaped eyes so dark that from across the room they appeared black. *Stunning*. This woman possessed a smoldering beauty that brought to mind sultry summer nights spent making love beneath a starry sky. *And she probably knows it, too*. In Sawyer's experience, women as attractive as this one were often very aware of what a pair of carefully batted eyelashes could garner.

"I guess you two haven't been introduced. Sawyer, Jori Diamantina is our pastry chef. Jori, this is my sister Sawyer."

"It's nice to meet you." Sawyer stepped forward and extended her hand.

"Yes, you, too," Jori said, taking Sawyer's hand.

The flush that spread up Jori's neck was unexpected, and her shy smile charmed Sawyer even more than the dimple that appeared in her right cheek. The hand within hers was soft and warm, and Sawyer's heart raced as she held it for a moment longer than was necessary. "Have you been working here long?"

"A few months."

"It's been a while since I've stopped by," Sawyer said. She couldn't even recall the previous pastry chef's face, but she was certain she would remember this one.

"I guess you need to come around more often," Brady said.

"I think I will." Sawyer's eyes didn't leave Jori's face. When Jori's blush deepened, Sawyer knew she'd sensed the innuendo behind her words.

"Really? Erica was just in here and said you'd only signed on for tonight."

"No. I'll be helping out for a bit," Sawyer told him. Despite her conversation with Erica, she thought she might have found something worth sticking around for, at least for a little while.

"Good." Brady opened the oven and pulled out a large pan bearing several lamb roasts.

"So what are you working on here?" Sawyer asked Jori,

stepping closer to study the dessert. The rich aroma of chocolate teased her senses, making her mouth water.

“Princess cake,” Jori said. Sawyer raised an eyebrow and she continued. “Chocolate sponge cake with layers of triple-sec syrup and buttercream and a ganache icing.” Jori’s features lit up as she talked about her creation. Her eyes danced and her face was animated, and Sawyer glimpsed a passion that she envied.

“Sounds absolutely sinful,” she purred, purposely lowering her voice.

“It is.” The flirtation in Jori’s tone surprised Sawyer. Already she thought of Jori as timid and hadn’t expected this response to her teasing.

“My sisters both have a weakness for sweets,” Brady said from behind her, effectively breaking the spell between them. Jori looked away and immediately her gaze was once again impersonal. “It’s one of the few things they agree on.”

“It’s true,” Sawyer said, missing the spark in Jori’s eyes already. She kept her gaze on Jori’s face, hoping she might see it again. “Chocolate in particular. I can’t turn it down.”

“There you are.” Erica burst through the swinging door into the kitchen. “I need you out there with the other servers. Take these.” She grabbed a tray of canapés and passed it to Sawyer.

“Yes, ma’am.” Sawyer smiled once more in Jori’s direction, then headed for the dining room.

After Sawyer was out of sight, Jori steadied herself with a few short breaths.

“Something wrong?” Brady asked without turning around.

“Um, no. No, everything’s fine.” Jori felt like her insides were shaking and wondered if her inner state was visible to her co-worker. Trying to distract herself, she went back to arranging slices of cake on gold-rimmed dessert plates.

Even after her earlier conversation with Erica, she hadn’t given Sawyer much thought. Now she was certain she would be thinking about her for the rest of the night. Behind a pair of small

rectangular glasses, the longest eyelashes Jori had ever seen framed rich brown eyes. Otherwise her features were unremarkable, pleasant and symmetrical, except when she was teasing her, one eyebrow arched more than the other. Her skin was smooth over prominent cheekbones and a strong jaw. Sawyer's smile as they had been introduced was wide and infectious and warmed her eyes. Jori couldn't help smiling back, albeit somewhat self-consciously. Sawyer's gaze had been focused when she looked at Jori, and it seemed as if Sawyer saw nothing but her—well, her and the chocolate cake between them.

This is ridiculous. You should be concentrating on work, not your boss's sister. You've been through this before. Do you want to lose the best job you've ever had? The admonishment worked, at least for a little while. Her concentration only flagged when Sawyer passed through the kitchen to pick up another tray of food.

Jori tracked the progress of dinner by the courses of food the servers came in for, and as they retrieved the main course she began to garnish the dessert. Each plate got a fan of strawberry slices and a drizzle of chocolate syrup, and then they were loaded onto trays for distribution. She was putting the finishing touches on a serving when she looked up and saw Sawyer standing there staring at the plate with an expression of absolute hunger on her face.

Sawyer watched Jori trail a curving line of chocolate across the china and felt her insides tighten unexpectedly. She was suddenly imagining herself dripping chocolate over Jori's skin. She swore her taste buds twitched at the thought of licking the sweet syrup from her bare stomach. *Man, do I need to get laid. I'm standing here fantasizing about a woman I've just met.* Sawyer had seen plenty of attractive women, some of whom had inspired lustful thoughts. But she couldn't remember the last time she'd reacted to someone this powerfully and quickly.

"Something wrong?" Jori asked.

“Nope,” Sawyer answered. She scooped up the tray and dashed out of the kitchen, running from the warm concern in Jori’s voice as well as the still-vivid visions of chocolate-covered sex.



Sawyer’s wrist cramped as she swung the tray up to hover over her right shoulder. The tightness in her arms and shoulders would no doubt manifest itself as a persistent ache in the morning. But she would not admit defeat. She had done much more physically demanding jobs before. She had spent the better part of one summer loading mulch at a landscape-supply company. So she carefully schooled her features into a pleasant smile as she drew close to the table nearest the kitchen and distributed desserts.

When her tray was empty, she hurried back to the kitchen, almost colliding with another server at the swinging door. She spun into the kitchen and slid her tray onto the counter in front of Jori, hoping she looked much smoother than she felt.

She leaned against the counter and waited while Jori garnished another half dozen plates and transferred them to the tray. Watching her brother and sister expertly wield a knife had always impressed her. Their motions were deft and quick. But somehow watching Jori’s slender hands move quickly and confidently over the plates was different. As fingers tipped with nails kept short and neat manipulated the tender flesh of strawberry slices, she imagined them against her own skin.

When Jori reached for the melted chocolate, Sawyer turned away, unable to watch anymore. *Jesus, who knew food could be so dangerous?*

“All set,” Jori said from behind her. Sawyer grabbed the tray without looking at her and headed back to the dining room. By the time she’d once again passed out the desserts, she had calmed

her racing heart, but it had taken more than a few minutes out of Jori's presence to regain her senses.

"Ready for more?" Jori asked without looking up when Sawyer returned to the kitchen once more.

"Am I ever," she mumbled, her gaze once again drawn to Jori's hands. She wondered when she had developed an unnatural obsession with hands. Her imagination was working overtime and her libido was having no trouble keeping pace.

"What?" Jori glanced up.

"Um, yeah. I've got one table left." She averted her eyes, hoping the lust churning in her stomach wasn't evident there.



"Jesus, what a night. I forgot how much work waiting tables was." Sawyer perched on a stool at the bar, her elbows resting on the polished surface. The last guests had left over an hour ago, and she had helped Erica get the dining room back in order. She reached back and rubbed at a knot in the muscle where her neck and shoulders met. It had been several years and twice as many careers since she'd had a job that required so much physical strain.

"Are you still sure you want to come back tomorrow night?" Erica asked, moving behind the bar and getting a bottle of water from the cooler. She took a bit of pleasure in her sister's discomfort, knowing she had expected to breeze right through the evening and obviously failed to do so. She didn't want Sawyer to struggle, but she was tired of seeing her always land on her feet. She had been surprised when Sawyer sought her out during the salad course to tell her she had reconsidered and now wanted to continue working at Drake's.

Before Sawyer could answer, the door from the kitchen swung open and Brady walked through, leading Jori toward

them. Erica watched as Sawyer's eyes immediately tracked to the pastry chef.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Sawyer murmured.

"How about a beer, sis?" Brady called as he slid onto the stool next to Sawyer. "And get the lady whatever she wants." He hooked a thumb in Jori's direction.

"I really should get going," Jori said.

"The fund-raiser was a big success. It should be good for business. Relax and celebrate with us," Erica suggested, sliding a local microbrew across the bar to her brother. "What can I get you?"

"Just water, please." Jori sat next to Brady.

Erica shifted her gaze between Jori and Sawyer, wondering what was going on in her sister's head. She certainly didn't want her pastry chef getting involved with Sawyer. Jori was sweet and a great addition to Drake's, and Erica didn't want to see her get hurt. Maybe she was being selfish, but she also didn't want to risk losing an employee when it ended. It *would* end, Erica was certain. Sawyer had a bad track record with women. It wasn't that she was a player. She apparently made honest attempts at relationships, but her short attention span prevented her from sticking around when the initial glow wore off. And Erica had watched one too many women, namely a good friend of hers, fall victim to Sawyer's fickleness.

Brady draped his arm over Sawyer's shoulders and beamed across the bar at her. "It's so great that we're all working together. It took you long enough to come around," he said, squeezing Sawyer.

"I don't think this is a permanent move, Brady," Erica interjected. Despite Sawyer's assertion that she planned to stick around, Erica still had her doubts. She would lose interest in Jori or the job, either of which would end her commitment to Drake's.

He looked expectantly at Sawyer, who just shrugged. “Oh, come on. This place is in your blood. I don’t know why you keep trying to fight it,” he said, dismissing her indecision.

“Are you kidding me? In my blood? This place has never meant to me what it means to you guys,” Sawyer argued.

“Then why haven’t you stayed at any other job?” Brady wasn’t letting her off the hook.

“Jesus, Brady, get off my back. What is it with this family? Does everyone think they can just nag me until I give in?” Still sensitive from having her mother manipulate her so easily, Sawyer fought to keep her voice from rising. So what if she’d had a few jobs in the past several years. Why did they all think that gave them the right to dictate how she should live her life?

She glanced at Jori and bit back a retort. Her siblings sure knew how to make her seem irresponsible, and though she wanted to defend herself she decided that now wasn’t the time. Jori was staring at her water as if she wished the floor would open up and swallow her. She hadn’t spent any time around the three of them, so she couldn’t know that the sniping was typical behavior for the Drake siblings.

“Well, I’m beat, and if you expect me to do this again tomorrow, I need some sleep.” Sawyer stood.

“Be here by four.”

“Okay.”

“I should go, too.” Jori rose.

Brady followed. “I’ll walk you ladies out. Don’t forget to lock up before you go upstairs, Erica.”

The top floor of the building had been converted into a loft-style apartment that their parents had moved into after their children were all grown and had occupied until they retired. Tia had liked being close to the restaurant, and when Erica took over as manager, she’d moved in upstairs.

“Hey, Sawyer, how about a ride home? I was supposed to call Paige to pick me up when we got done. But she’d have to

wake the boys and get them out,” Brady said as they walked out the back door.

“Sure.” Sawyer fished her keys from the pocket of her worn leather jacket and disengaged the automatic locks. “What’s wrong with your truck?”

“I think it’s the transmission. I dropped it off at the garage yesterday.”

“When are you going to trade that thing in?” She didn’t expect a response. Brady loved the old Ford, and she knew he’d keep patching it until his mechanic told him there was no hope. “What about you, Jori? Do you need a ride?”

“I’ll grab a cab.”

“Nonsense,” Brady said, pulling open the passenger door. “Sawyer will drive you home. You’re in Green Hills, right? You two are practically neighbors.”

Sawyer slid behind the wheel and put the top down. “I hope you don’t mind. It’s a beautiful night and I thought we could enjoy it.”

Jori nearly stumbled as she climbed into the low-slung car. Sawyer was watching her and the softly spoken comment felt intimate, as if they could forget Brady was trying to settle his long body into the small backseat. Sawyer slipped off her tie and tossed it on the center console between them.

“Brady, I’d probably fit back there better than you,” she said. She estimated that Brady was six to eight inches taller than her own five foot five.

“He’s fine.” Sawyer waited until Jori closed the door, then put the car in gear and backed onto the street.

Brady leaned forward and rested his forearms along the top of their seats. “The boys are excited to see you this weekend,” he said, clapping his hand on Sawyer’s shoulder. “Daniel wants you to teach him to throw a football. I offered to show him but he won’t hear of it.”

“That’s because he knows you throw like a girl.” Sawyer

smiled. She loved spending time with her two nephews. At four and six years old they were at a great age. They were up for anything and still thought Aunt Sawyer was the coolest person on earth.

“Oh, yeah? Who taught you how to throw?”

“Mom did,” Sawyer shot back with a wink in Jori’s direction.

“Mom does have a pretty tight spiral,” Brady conceded.

Sawyer laughed, but it wasn’t far from the truth. Their mother had taken a very hands-on approach to parenting. Whenever she could, she was there cheering them on at baseball games and school plays. In fact, everything Tia did, she did it full throttle. After finishing her training as a chef, she started working at Drake’s where she met and soon married their father, Tom Drake. Tom had grown up in the restaurant that his parents had founded, in much the same way Sawyer herself had. If he was the head of Drake’s, Tia was the heart. The Drake family and the restaurant were hers from the moment they met.

“Jori, do you have any plans for this weekend? My wife and I are having some people over for a barbeque Sunday afternoon and you’re welcome,” Brady offered as Sawyer pulled up next to the curb at his house. He vaulted over the side of the car before Jori could open the door.

She hesitated.

“It’s an open invitation, just let me know. See you ladies tomorrow.” Brady didn’t wait for a reply before he turned and strode up the walk.

“You should come,” Sawyer said as she steered back into the street.

“I don’t want to intrude.” Jori studied Sawyer’s profile and felt the same flutter she’d experienced throughout the night. She remembered how a wide grin had transformed Sawyer’s face. Her brown eyes sparkled and the easy smile made Jori feel inexplicably warm. Something about Sawyer definitely brought

butterflies to Jori's stomach, but Erica's warning about her charm lingered in her head.

"It's not an intrusion. There's always room for one more."

Realizing she'd been staring, Jori looked away as Sawyer glanced at her. She was certain this initial awareness would fade. Since they would be working together almost daily, Jori figured she would become accustomed to Sawyer's energy. *Charisma*. Jori had heard the word applied to others and it definitely fit Sawyer Drake. In just one evening, she had seen how people seemed to be drawn to Sawyer. They would stop midtask to talk to her, and when they turned away they did so with a smile on their face. Sawyer noticed things that others wouldn't. Jori had heard her compliment one of the cooks on his weight loss, and Jori, who worked with him every day, hadn't even known he was dieting.

When Sawyer looked at her, she felt as if Sawyer saw nothing else but her, even if just for that moment. And somehow the glow that spread inside her radiated from Sawyer, not from within.

"So you'll come, then." Sawyer had taken her silence as agreement.

"If I don't say yes, will the three of you be ganging up on me for the next three days?"

Sawyer laughed. "Most likely. We're definitely a force to be reckoned with when we have a shared goal. It's a good thing that doesn't happen very often."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said quietly. "Turn left on Woodmont."

"Nice neighborhood."

"Brady said you're around here, too, didn't he?" She pointed to a house on the left. "You can pull in the driveway. I'm around back in the garage apartment."

"I share an apartment in a complex farther down Hillsboro Road."

Sawyer steered carefully up the drive. The Bradford pears,

slim trees topped with shadowed puffs of foliage, guarded either side. About a hundred yards off the road, a Tudorbethan-style home was surrounded by immaculate landscaping. The white stucco and the gray half-timbers were accented with light stone. Sawyer guessed the house dated back to the early 1930s.

As they rounded the house, she saw a large three-stall garage painted to match the gray trim on the house. A wooden staircase with a moderately sized landing led to an exterior door on the second floor.

“Thanks for the ride. I’ve finally saved enough to buy a car, but I haven’t had time to shop around.”

“What are you looking for?” After putting the car in Park, Sawyer turned to her.

“Something inexpensive and reliable. I don’t need much, just a good used sedan.”

Sawyer smothered an offer to go shopping with her. Her roommate Matt was a salesman at Aces Toyota and had gotten her a great deal on the Solara. But she’d just met Jori and already had threatened to browbeat her into going to Brady’s that weekend. She didn’t want to scare Jori away. And though she barely knew her, something told her there was a good chance that could happen if she came on too strong.

CHAPTER THREE

Jori stepped out of the shower and rubbed a towel over her hair. It was almost time for a haircut. When she let her thick curls get too long they became frizzy and unruly, especially during the humid summer months. Since she wore a bandana while at work, she chose a short, low-maintenance style.

She pulled on a pair of black chalkstripe pants, tied the drawstring, and tugged a white T-shirt over her head, bumping her elbow against the wall in the process. She bit back a curse as the nerves in her arm tingled. The tiny bathroom was her least favorite part of her apartment. It was barely large enough to house the shower stall, a pedestal sink, and the small towel cabinet in the corner.

Her frustration with the size of the bathroom was worth the trade-off for the rest of the apartment. The remainder of her loft-style living area was open and boasted plenty of natural light. The apartment was tucked beneath the gable roof of the garage but had large windows at either end of the room. In the summer she opened them both and enjoyed a cross-breeze that nearly eliminated the need for air-conditioning.

Since she'd been saving every penny for a car, she had only furnished with the bare necessities. A futon and secondhand coffee table faced one of the windows, and an Asian-inspired screen she'd picked up at a yard sale divided the room from the

platform bed on the far side. The corner opposite the bathroom housed what was really nothing more than a kitchenette. She didn't bemoan her lack of a full kitchen since she rarely put together anything more complicated than a salad at home.

Having been on her own since she was eighteen, she had sacrificed comfort at home to pay for her education. But after she'd graduated and got her first job as an assistant pastry chef, she began saving for the day she could find a new place. Then about a year and a half ago she happened to see the listing for this apartment in the newspaper and had quickly called the landlords, praying no one had already snapped it up.

It was much nicer than the last apartment she'd lived in, which was little more than a roof over her head in an undesirable neighborhood. The incredibly reasonable rent she paid made the apartment even more attractive. Her landlords were generous and had told her to do anything she liked to fix it up.

She descended the steps outside and crossed the aggregate drive toward the main house. She actually enjoyed the fifteen-minute walk to the bus stop on beautiful afternoons like this one, and as she strolled down the tree-lined drive she realized she was unusually excited about going to work. Since she'd started at Drake's, she'd always enjoyed her job, but today she buzzed with uncharacteristic anticipation. She recalled the flutter in her stomach while she had studied Sawyer's profile against the backdrop of the city speeding by. She still didn't know much about Sawyer, but somehow she knew if they worked together for any period of time she would.



"Good afternoon," Sawyer called as she strolled into the kitchen.

The kitchen was empty except for Erica, who carried a clipboard and was checking off items in the large stainless-steel refrigerators along the far wall.

“You’re early,” she said with a note of surprise in her voice.

Sawyer shrugged. She knew she had arrived an hour before Erica expected her. She had awakened early, and even after showering, lingering over breakfast, and running some errands, she had plenty of time before dinner.

“Don’t you have someone who can do that for you?” she asked, nodding at the clipboard in Erica’s hand.

“Are you volunteering?” She turned toward Sawyer with a sigh and set the board down on the nearest counter. “Until you signed on, I was short a server. Brady and Chuck are handling dinner six days a week with their assistants filling the gaps. Jori has been a godsend because my assistant pastry chef was definitely not ready to step up. So to answer your question, no, I don’t have anyone else to do this stuff. I’m the manager. It’s my job.”

“Well, maybe you should hire someone to help out, at least until after the baby’s born.” The fatigue in Erica’s voice had immediately made Sawyer feel guilty, and she could practically hear her mother chastising her for baiting her sister. She knew Erica was a chef at heart, yet she’d stepped in when neither Sawyer nor Brady had volunteered to take over their father’s managerial duties, making her a heck of a lot less selfish than them.

“I can’t hire someone just because I don’t want to do this stuff. I have to consider a little thing called profit.”

“Geez, Erica, you don’t have to talk to me like I’m a child.”

“Well, stop acting like one,” she snapped.

Sawyer bit back a sharp reply. A crack about hormones would only earn her a dose of Erica’s temper.

“What the hell are you so mad about?” Sawyer asked.

“I didn’t plan for any of this. I’m supposed to be cooking, not running the place. I never thought I would be pregnant and facing raising a child alone. I always thought the father would be in the picture. And he’s not.”

“He’s an asshole. You’re better off without him. And no one could’ve predicted Dad would get sick.” Erica’s outburst startled

Sawyer. She seemed to have everything together, so much so that she had time to critique Sawyer's life. It had never occurred to her that it might be a façade.

"But he did. And here I am, ignoring everything else for Drake's. Just like he did."

"That's not fair. You know he wasn't ignoring us."

Sawyer didn't have many childhood memories of her father that didn't involve being at the restaurant. When she was old enough, she had come to understand that he didn't spend so much time away from his family because he wanted to, but rather because he felt he should. Examining her grandparents' relationship, Sawyer had finally realized that Tom was raised to believe that working hard and making sure they didn't want for anything was his way of providing for his family. And he relied on Tia to fulfill their emotional needs.

Erica snapped up her clipboard from the counter and returned to the inventory. "Just forget it, Sawyer."

A strained silence still hung between them when Jori walked in.

Jori was several paces into the room before she noticed the tension that hung between its occupants. She hesitated, but it was too late to retreat so she continued silently to the pantry and pulled out the supplies she would need for that day's dinner. From the corner of her eye she saw Sawyer leave the room without a word.

Drake's was famous for varying their desserts. Instead of a printed menu they had several different daily selections. The servers were briefed before each shift and were responsible for letting the patrons know what the menu was. Usually Jori arrived in the early afternoon to begin preparing the evening's dishes.

She had picked up some fresh peaches from the farmers' market the day before, so one of tonight's desserts was a cobbler. She set a large pot of water on the stove, then measured ingredients.

"Everything okay?" she asked when Erica came over, picked

up one of the peaches, and smelled it, then absently passed it back and forth between her hands.

“Yeah, just family stuff,” she said dismissively as she slid onto a nearby stool.

“How are you feeling?” Jori sensed that Erica wanted to change the subject. She loaded the peaches in a steamer basket and lowered it into the boiling water.

“Well, other than the fact that by the end of the night my shoe size goes up two sizes, I feel good.”

“It’s no wonder. I rarely see you sit down until well after the dinner rush.” She leaned around Erica and grabbed another large pot, which she filled with ice and water.

“I don’t have time to sit down. What are you doing with these peaches?”

“Peach cobbler.” She pulled the basket from the hot water and submerged it in the cold water. “This will make the skin come off easily.”

“Cobbler? You’re going to make me gain a hundred pounds before the end of this pregnancy.”

“It’s quality control. You have to taste the dish before we serve it, don’t you?” Jori joked.

“Of course.”

In the weeks after she’d hired Jori, Erica had worried that her new pastry chef wasn’t fitting in. After closing, when they would all gather around to talk, Jori busied herself cleaning up her area and rarely joined their conversation. But slowly she had begun to come out of her shell. And Erica soon figured out that she was just uncomfortable in a group.

She had soon seen Jori occasionally joke around with Brady and Chuck throughout the night and made an extra effort to converse with her when a lot of people weren’t around. But Jori still seemed reluctant to talk about her personal life. She had responded to all of Erica’s inquiries about her family with unspecific answers and a quick subject change.

Jori seemed uncomfortable talking about herself and

obviously struggled with the social ease that came so easily to Sawyer, which was one reason they seemed an odd match. But clearly there was a glimmer of interest, at least on Sawyer's part. Erica only hoped it didn't blossom into anything; maybe Jori's shyness would hinder Sawyer's efforts.

She felt a little guilty for rooting against Sawyer's success. But she was still irritated with her assumption that she could solve all of her problems by simply hiring someone. She didn't expect Sawyer to understand what it meant to sacrifice her desires for the good of the business. After all, she was free to flit from one job to the next and one relationship to the next, never caring about the state of the one she left behind.

Five years earlier one of Erica's closest friends had confided that she'd started seeing Sawyer. Erica had tried to stay neutral and wished them the best. But when Sawyer broke her heart, Erica lost a friend as well. Sawyer, however, went on about her life unaffected, as always.

Now that Erica had to make decisions for the good of Drake's instead of herself, her resentment of Sawyer was twisted up with jealousy of Sawyer's apparently carefree life.



Sawyer shoved through the swinging kitchen door and yanked off her apron. She resisted the urge to sling it onto the nearest surface and instead draped it over her arm. The aromas of that night's menu mingled in the air, each competing for her attention. She drank them in and they separated inside her senses—something fried, roasting meat, and a dish with a touch of jalapeño. She'd grown up in this kitchen; sorting the flavors was automatic and something she'd done since she was a child.

Brady moved efficiently between two saucepans, a frying pan on the range, and the large oven nearby. Sawyer passed him up in favor of the counter where Jori worked. As she approached, Jori swiped her forearm across her temple, then picked up a

lemon and rolled it between her palm and the metal surface. She pulled a knife from the magnetic bar attached to the wall. The sharp scent of citrus accompanied the smooth glide of the blade through the fruit.

“Hi.” Sawyer leaned against the counter, one palm pressed to the cool surface.

“Hey,” Jori said, barely glancing up.

“Sawyer.” Erica crossed the kitchen, and when she got close enough to keep her voice down, she said, “I need you out front. Not back here hanging out.”

“I’ve been running my ass off out there, Erica. My tables are covered, I’m taking a break.” When Sawyer ignored the frustrated look Erica cast her, she rolled her eyes and walked away. “How do you work for her?” she asked Jori.

“She’s a great boss.”

“Yeah. Try being related to her. I think personal relationships interfere with supervisory ones.”

“You’re right about that.”

Jori’s tone piqued Sawyer’s interest. “Are you speaking from experience?”

“It’s a long story. Would you like to sample my lemon meringue torte?” She held up a plate she’d just finished garnishing. A square of lemon cake was topped with fluffy white meringue, the tips of the peaks tinged golden. A sprig of mint and a fan of thinly sliced lemon added to the visual effect.

“Ah, you’re a quick study. You already know how to distract me.” Sawyer took the plate, forked a bite into her mouth, and groaned. The tart lemon flavor that practically burst on her tongue was tempered by the lightest meringue she had ever tasted. “This is amazing.”

“Thanks.” Jori smiled and again rubbed her arm against her forehead. “I have a piece of hair that keeps getting in my eye. Could you push it back for me?”

“Sure.” After setting down her plate, she studied Jori’s face. A lock of dark hair rested close to the corner of her eye. Sawyer

brushed it back and tucked it under the edge of her bandana, resisting the urge to rub the silky strand between her fingertips to determine if it was as soft as it appeared.

“Thank you,” Jori said quietly.

Sawyer searched her eyes and noticed for the first time that her pupils were ringed with a halo of silver and the darkest gray irises she’d ever seen.

“Sawyer?” The question in Jori’s voice made her realize she was still lightly touching Jori’s temple.

She jerked her hand back and shoved it awkwardly in the pocket of her black slacks. “Sorry. I guess I zoned out for a minute there.”

“I should get these orders done.” Jori appeared as flustered as Sawyer felt.

“Yeah.” She backed away from Jori. “I need to get out there before Erica comes looking for me again.”



Sawyer walked through the front door to her apartment and dropped her keys on the table by the door. After only two days at the restaurant she was exhausted, her feet ached, and her back felt tight. Her only thought was of sinking into a steaming bath.

“Honey, I’m home,” she called as she walked into the living room. Her roommate, Matt, sat at one end of the sofa with a book open in his lap.

He glanced up from his book. “How was your day?”

“Very long.” She dropped down on the sofa opposite him. His faded T-shirt and disheveled brown hair belied the smooth car salesman he portrayed during the day. She was always a bit taken aback to see the disorganized boy she’d met in college put on a shirt and tie, slick back his hair, and run his game. But he was actually very good, having garnered multiple awards for top sales. “Did you sell any cars today?”

“Two. My streak continues. How do you like working for your sister?”

“I don’t know how long I can do this. Erica seems determined to treat me like hired help.” She rested her feet on the oak coffee table in front of her.

“Well, she’s probably under a lot of pres—”

“Don’t you dare take her side, Matt. Erica has never been helpless a day in her life. Why, all of a sudden, does everyone want me to feel sorry for her because she’s pregnant?” Erica was one of the strongest women Sawyer knew. Outside of their conversation earlier that day, Sawyer had never seen even the tiniest crack in her composure.

“I’m not taking sides, but you have to admit Erica is dealing with a lot right now. After your dad’s heart attack and their retirement, then she found out she was pregnant and that deadbeat she was dating took off—”

“And I’m a heartless bitch because I don’t want to run the damn restaurant,” Sawyer finished for him.

“Come on, Sawyer, this isn’t you versus the world. Besides, martyrdom doesn’t suit you.”

She didn’t respond. It wouldn’t do any good to argue with him now, even though she felt like he should have her back instead of being so rational. After all, he was her best friend and he’d been supporting her since that time, freshman year, when Misty Simmons had accused Sawyer of cheating on her, when really she’d been in a gay bar with Matt all night. As it turned out, Misty was much less interesting than Sawyer had originally thought anyway.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sunday morning, Sawyer pulled into Jori's driveway just as she was descending the steps of her apartment and allowed herself a moment to drink in the sight. Seeing her for the first time in something other than the boxy chef jacket and loose pants, she felt a flash of arousal. Jori's red polo shirt was tucked into khaki shorts riding low on narrow hips. Short, shiny curls were free of their usual bandana, and dark sunglasses obscured eyes Sawyer already knew she could get lost in.

"Good morning." Jori bent to smile at her through the car window, and when Sawyer saw a small gold four-leaf clover resting in the hollow between her collarbones, she fought the urge to reach out and touch it.

She stretched across and pushed the door open, took the foil-covered plate Jori carried, and held it until she got settled.

Jori glanced at Sawyer as she turned the car around and headed down the drive. She looked comfortable, steering with one hand draped over the top of the wheel. She wore baggy camouflage cargo shorts and an olive green T-shirt, and the baseball cap pulled low over her eyes shaded her face.

Sawyer glanced pointedly at the plate on Jori's lap.

"Double-fudge brownies." Jori laughed as she guessed the sudden look of desire on Sawyer's face was for the brownies, not her. "I know Brady said not to bring anything, but I figured everyone likes dessert, right?"

“Tell me they’re frosted and you’ll own me.”

Jori was surprised by a surge of pleasure in reaction to Sawyer’s words. An unsolicited vision of herself *claiming* Sawyer flew through her mind. “I’m sorry, no. They’re not frosted.”

“Well, I’m sure they’re good, just the same.”

Sawyer turned her attention back to the road, and Jori mentally jerked her mind back on track. She had no business thinking about Sawyer sexually; that would only lead to trouble.



When Sawyer pulled the car up to the curb in front of a ranch-style home, Jori felt the familiar racing of her heart and questioned why she had agreed to this outing.

She’d been described as *shy*, but Jori thought the description a bit simple for the panic that bordered on debilitating. Her chest tightened and she struggled to keep her breathing even. After a lifetime of feeling this way, she should be used to the weakness in her limbs and her sweating palms, and she tried to talk herself out of her nervousness. It wasn’t like she was a complete stranger, thank God, or she would be shaking and nauseated. “I know Brady, Erica, and Sawyer,” she mentally chanted while she willed her heart to slow.

As she followed Sawyer to the backyard, she tried not to think about the other fifteen to twenty people Sawyer had said would be there. She forced herself to focus on the expanse of Sawyer’s back and the set of her broad shoulders rather than the ball of fear forming in her stomach. Sawyer’s T-shirt was tucked in, her shorts rode low, and a wide brown leather belt circled her hips. Watching Sawyer’s arms swing slightly at her sides, Jori had the sudden urge to capture one of her hands and try to draw strength from her obvious social ease. Instead, she followed in Sawyer’s wake as if she could blend into the aura of confidence that surrounded her.

At least a dozen adults stood in groups around the large

backyard talking and laughing, and nearly as many children zoomed around.

“Would you like a beer or some lemonade?” Sawyer asked as she led her toward a picnic table laden with food.

“Lemonade sounds great, thank you.”

“Hey, Jori,” Brady called from where he stood nearby expertly flipping a row of hamburgers. The smoky scent rising from the grill made her stomach growl.

“Hello, Brady. Something smells delicious.”

“Yeah, Brady’s the man on the grill,” Sawyer said as she handed her a plastic cup. “But he sticks to that because he knows he can’t compete with Erica’s potato salad.”

“Yes. It’s true. I bow to my sister’s culinary mastery.” Brady laughed.

“See that you remember that. Hi, Jori,” Erica said as she walked by carrying a plate of hamburger buns.

“Don’t worry, I have him well trained.” A tall strawberry blonde winked at Brady. She shifted the bags of potato chips she carried into one arm and with the other drew Sawyer into a hug. “You don’t come around often enough,” she murmured, then released her and smiled at Jori. “I’m Brady’s wife, Paige.”

“Jori.” She had seen Paige at the restaurant a few times when she first started working there, but they’d never actually met. She did remember, though, being impressed by the level of respect Brady seemed to have for his wife, evident in the way he had talked about her and now in the way he looked at her.

“Ah, the pastry chef. I’ve heard good things about you. Welcome to our home.”

“Thank you.” She couldn’t help but be taken in by Paige’s friendly smile. Her green eyes were bright, and the dash of freckles across the bridge of her nose was the only hint of color on otherwise porcelain skin.

“You two go get some food. I’ll bring these over in a minute.” Brady began stacking the burgers and hot dogs on a platter.

Jori followed Sawyer to the picnic table, then—after they

filled their plates with potato salad, baked beans, corn on the cob, and hamburgers—to a couple of lawn chairs under a tree.

She took a bite of the potato salad and said, “You’re right. The salad’s great. I know Erica and Brady are chefs. What happened to you?”

“I’m the black sheep,” Sawyer said lightly, and Jori wondered if she was being blown off. But then she continued. “Erica wants to be in the kitchen, not the office. That was always supposed to be my place.”

“But you don’t want it. Why did your parents choose to retire when they knew Erica didn’t really want to take over?”

“They didn’t exactly choose. My dad had a heart attack.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“He’s fine. It was a mild one. But his doctor told him he was on his way to another if he didn’t slow down. So they decided it was time to do what they always talked about doing and they retired.”

“And Erica took over.”

“Yes.” Sawyer paused and bit into her hamburger, hesitant to reveal what she knew everyone else saw as selfishness on her part. “By the time they were in junior high, Erica and Brady knew they wanted to cook. They both waited tables at Drake’s during high school. So everyone assumed I’d take Dad’s place. And when it came time to go to college, I didn’t feel passionate about any other subject, so I majored in business as expected. But when it came time to work at the restaurant I started feeling like I might suffocate.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s like I was supposed to fit into a mold that just wasn’t right for me.” She hadn’t wanted to step into the role her father had prepared. She wanted to find her own way, but, looking back, she hadn’t been very successful at that either. “I had to try something else.”

“What did you do?”

“What didn’t I do? You name it and I think I’ve done it. Waited tables, worked at a law office and at the zoo.” Sawyer ticked them off on her fingers.

“But you didn’t stay at any of those places?”

Sawyer shrugged, unable to explain why she’d never felt settled. There was no great drama or deciding factor, but with each of those jobs she had suddenly become restless and had to get out. She’d hoped that if she found a career that fit, she might begin to feel more comfortable in her own skin. “So what about you, did you always want to be a chef?”

Jori considered the question, trying to decide how much to reveal. “Yeah, I used to cook a lot when I was younger. After high school I went to culinary school during the day and waited tables at night and on weekends.”

As a child she’d begun planning early to be on her own. She had known since she was old enough to understand what it meant to be in foster care that she would someday have to survive alone. In the last of a string of foster homes she had been charged with caring for the younger children while both parents worked late every night. She quickly learned how to cook for them, and since the pantry was rarely well stocked, she also figured out how to be creative with few ingredients. So when it came time to choose a career, she’d gravitated toward food. It had taken some time and a lot of work for her to get there, but all the work had been worth it. She loved her job, especially since she had come to Drake’s, and she constantly challenged herself to create new recipes.

“You worked full-time while you were in school?”

“Sure. I had to pay the rent somehow.” When, the day after her eighteenth birthday, her foster parents told her she needed to find someplace else to live, she was prepared. She packed her few belongings, retrieved the money she’d hidden in a coffee can in the back of her closet, and found a tiny apartment in the warehouse district.

“My parents paid for our education, because they assumed

we would work at Drake's, and I guess they considered it an investment in the restaurant." Sawyer gave a self-effacing grin. "Two out of three ain't bad, huh?"

"You're there now."

"Yeah, but that's temporary. And don't think my mother didn't ask for a refund when she found out I got a job as a tour guide on a trolley after college."

Jori wasn't successful in smothering a laugh. "You were a tour guide? Did you have a uniform?"

"Yes, I did." Mischief flashed in Sawyer's eyes. She leaned close and lowered her voice. "And I looked damn cute in it."

"I'll just bet you did." Jori pictured her in a sharply pressed khaki uniform pointing out tourist attractions and thought her square-framed glasses would make her seem even more knowledgeable. She was probably popular among the guests, friendly and engaging.

Sawyer laughed and, taking Jori's empty plate, she stood. "Can I get you anything else? Another drink?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Okay, I'll be right back."

Jori watched as Sawyer disposed of their plates and strode confidently through the crowd, occasionally pausing to return a greeting. She was surprised at the slight clench of jealousy when Sawyer leaned close to a pretty young woman and smiled as they spoke. Sawyer laughed at something the woman said, then moved on.

She looked comfortable and relaxed, and Jori was envious. She'd never had that level of ease. Merely being there—sitting apart from the group—had her stomach in knots. She'd been fine while they were talking, but without Sawyer at her side she again felt nervousness build inside her.

"Miss me?" Sawyer asked with a grin when she returned.

"Oh, yes, terribly." Jori purposely injected false enthusiasm into her voice.

"Okay. You don't need to patronize me."

Jori held back her response as a blond boy, a miniature Brady, ran over.

“Aunt Sawyer, we’re gonna play T-ball and we need an umpire.” Sawyer barely kept from falling out of her chair when he yanked her hand. She glanced at Jori.

“Go ahead,” Jori said as he continued to tug.

“Come on,” he grumbled.

“Come with me. The boys could use a cheerleader.”

“Maybe later,” Jori hedged. She wasn’t the cheerleader type.



“They could be at it for a while. My kids have endless energy,” Paige said as she approached Jori’s spot under the tree. “Mind if I join you?”

“Please.” Jori gestured to the chair Sawyer had vacated. “Which are yours?”

“That’s my oldest, Daniel, playing first base.” She pointed to the blond who had come to persuade Sawyer to join them. Paige searched the group of children before indicating a smaller boy wandering around in the outfield. “And there’s Quintin.”

Instead of paying attention to the action at home plate, he bent down to study something in the grass at his feet.

“He looks just like you.” His hair was a halo of shiny strawberry curls, and Jori guessed if she were close enough she would see freckles dotting his pale skin.

“Yeah, poor kid.”

“What are you talking about? You’re beautiful.” Jori had spoken without thinking, and as soon as she realized what she’d said, she felt her face flush. “I mean—I—”

“Thank you.” Paige touched her arm fleetingly. But her easy acceptance did little to cool the heat in Jori’s cheeks.

“Um, so, Erica said you’re a stay-at-home mom,” Jori said in an effort to draw attention from her embarrassment.

“Before the kids, I worked in an office downtown, but with

the hours Brady keeps it was sometimes hard to plan for child care. Eventually we realized it made more sense for me to stay home.” Her eyes followed the action on the makeshift diamond. “It was the best decision I ever made.”

They watched for a moment longer in silence. The teams had changed sides and Paige’s face lit up as her younger son took a mighty swing with a bat almost as tall as he was. When the ball sailed past the pitcher, Paige cheered him on as he ran toward first base. Jori finally felt the warmth begin to drain from her face.

“So, how are you settling in at Drake’s?”

“Very well.”

“Erica and Brady don’t drive you nuts with their bickering? And I imagine it’s worse now with Sawyer there, too.”

Jori shrugged. “I kind of like it.” She wondered if Paige would understand the comfort of being around such a close family connection. Even when the Drakes didn’t agree, the affection between them was still obvious.

“You an only child?”

“Yeah.” Jori gave the simplest answer.

“Me, too. It took me a while to get used to them.” Paige glanced around the yard, her gaze touching on each of the siblings. “But it’s hard not to spend any amount of time around them and not fall in love with the whole family. They’re so much fun to be around and, despite their differences, deep down they’re very loyal to each other.”

Jori only smiled in response. She’d certainly developed a fondness for Erica and Brady in the time they’d worked together. But as she looked at Sawyer, taking in her easy smile as she ran alongside one of the boys, she realized there was one member of the Drake family with whom she didn’t want to fall in love.



Erica paused on her way into the house when she noticed Jori and Paige watching the kids play. One of the boys ran across

home plate just ahead of a throw by the first baseman, and Sawyer called him safe with an exaggerated sweep of her arms. Immediately three boys ran up to her and argued the call, but she didn't back down.

Jori's eyes followed Sawyer, and Erica wondered if she was aware of the smile that brought out her dimple. She'd seen the way Sawyer looked at Jori and now it seemed the attraction might be mutual, which concerned Erica. If Sawyer got involved with Jori, things would be uncomfortable around the restaurant.

She debated talking to Jori, but when she saw Sawyer glance up and wave at Jori, she reconsidered. Jori had never talked about her relationships. In fact, Erica wasn't certain Jori was a lesbian, though the blush spreading over her cheeks in response to Sawyer's attention was definitely a strong hint. Jori was an employee, and she needed to be careful when broaching such a personal subject. Jori could misunderstand a request from her employer not to get involved with Sawyer. No, she decided, talking to Sawyer was a much better route.

When the game broke up, Erica crossed the lawn to intercept Sawyer before she could join the rest of the guests.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"What's up?"

Erica waited until she was certain the children were out of earshot, then said, "*Please* don't make a move on my pastry chef."

Sawyer laughed, but Erica's expression remained serious.

"I'm serious. I don't want Jori—"

"Erica, you can't tell Jori what she can do in her personal time."

"I'm not telling her. I'm telling you."

Sawyer smothered her instinct to inform Erica she had no right to tell her what to do either. But she didn't try to deny her attraction to Jori; instead she tried to reason with Erica. "What's the big deal? If Jori and I want to hang out, who does it hurt?"

"Why her? Can't you find someone who doesn't work for

me? I just don't want things to be difficult when you get tired of her."

Sawyer flinched, but her sister's bluntness didn't surprise her. "Who says I'll get tired of her?"

"You always do. I don't want to watch you hurt Jori like that."

"I didn't intend to hurt anyone." Stubbornly, she didn't correct Erica's assessment of her personal life. She never did because Erica was going to believe whatever she wanted to despite any explanation on her part. Ever since Sawyer's failed relationship with Erica's friend, she hadn't wanted to hear her side of the story.

"I know you didn't mean to. But you did."

Sawyer looked across the lawn where Jori sat next to Paige. She was smiling politely, but to Sawyer she appeared a bit uncomfortable. Erica was right about one thing; she could get involved with plenty of other women. But though it seemed crazy, considering she barely knew Jori, something about her attracted Sawyer, something more than just her dark good looks and adorable smile. She recalled the one break in Jori's perpetually guarded expression, when they'd first met and Jori was describing the chocolate cake. She wanted to see that flash of confidence and bit of teasing again.

Erica interrupted her thoughts. "I'm serious. Promise me you won't hit on her."

If she didn't agree Erica would only continue to harp on the idea, and she'd be watching them both closely. Maybe she could satisfy Erica and still have a chance with Jori if *Jori* came on to *her*. "Okay. I promise."

CHAPTER FIVE

Late Monday morning Sawyer awoke with a new purpose. She rolled onto her back and stretched, enjoying the lingering arousal from the dream she'd been having when the alarm went off, one in which Jori had starred. Her stomach was pleasantly tight and the expensive sheets, a favorite indulgence, slid against skin left bare by a tank top and soft flannel boxers.

She showered and dressed quickly in black pants and a white button-down shirt. While pinning her hair back, she glanced in the mirror only long enough to scowl at her plain features. She looped her tie around her neck and shoved her wallet in her back pocket, suddenly in a hurry to get to the restaurant. She wanted to see Jori and she hoped the added challenge of getting Jori to fall for her would provide a nice distraction, because in only a week she was already tiring of waiting tables. If not for Jori, she would be ready to move on soon. Oddly enough, this restlessness was comfortable. She'd grown to expect it, so much so that she didn't know what she would do if she ever found someplace that held her interest, that challenged her.

Following the smell of fresh-brewed coffee, she headed for the kitchen. As she passed the hall bathroom she heard the shower running. She hadn't expected to see Matt before noon, considering she hadn't even heard him come in the night before.

She stepped into the kitchen and paused. Matt stood at the

counter wearing only boxers and a wrinkled white T-shirt and pouring himself a cup of coffee. With his hair sticking up and his features softened by sleep, he looked more like the boy she'd known than the man he'd become. He'd been so cocky and sure of what he wanted back then that Sawyer had envied him. He seemed to have no fear when he told his father he wanted to sell cars.

She crossed the room and lifted her own mug off a rack.

"Good morning." He moved aside so she could reach the coffeemaker.

"Who's in the shower?"

"I went to that new club on Church Street with some friends." He leaned against the counter and sipped from his mug. "I met someone."

"Details?"

"His name is Davis and he's really cute. Gorgeous blue eyes. He works out, has pecs I'd kill for."

Sawyer laughed. Matt had gone through a phase during which he lifted weights obsessively, but he couldn't build any bulk. His high metabolism burned all the extra protein he consumed, and he remained lean and lanky.

Matt was spared further interrogation when a soft voice called from the next room, "Matty, do I smell coffee? I don't think I need to tell you what I would do for a cup right—"

Davis bit off his words as he walked into the kitchen and saw her standing there. Dark wet hair fell across his brow. He wore a pair of old sweatpants Sawyer recognized as Matt's, and his broad chest was bare. The rapid blush that crept up his face left little doubt about what he'd been about to suggest in trade for caffeine.

"Hi," he said, clearing his throat. "You must be Sawyer."

"Yes. And you're Davis."

When he turned to take the mug Matt offered, Sawyer grinned at Matt behind his back and mouthed, "*Matty?*" He

glared at her and wrapped an arm around Davis's waist to pull him close.

"Well, I'm off to work." She grabbed her keys from the counter and called over her shoulder, "You were right about the pecs, Matty."



Sawyer strolled through the back door of the restaurant. Brady had a row of knives laid out and rasped the one in his hand over the diamond-stone sharpener. He was particular about his knives and insisted on sharpening them despite Chuck's repeated offers to do it for him.

"You better check on your sister. She didn't look too well," Brady said without slowing the rhythmic swipe of the chef's knife against the sharpener.

"Sure, all of a sudden she's *my* sister," Sawyer shot back sarcastically.

"You know I can't handle the pregnancy stuff."

"You're such a wimp, Brady. You have two kids."

"I know. And Paige will tell you, I was no help at all."

Sawyer rolled her eyes at him as she left the kitchen.

She found Erica in her office, sitting with her elbows propped on her desk and her head in her hands.

"Erica, what's wrong?"

She snapped her head up and, though it was too late for pretense, she shuffled the papers in front of her as if she'd been working. But her eyes were glassy and she looked as if she might drop out of her chair at any moment.

"Nothing. I'm fine. I was just going over some orders."

"Uh-huh." As Sawyer sat in the chair opposite her, she let her sister know she wasn't deceived. "You look beat. You should go upstairs and get some rest."

Erica shook her head, denial coming automatically. "I'm

fine.” She was exhausted, but she refused to let that keep her from doing her job. She knew her complexion was pale and hoped Sawyer didn’t notice the film of sweat on her face.

“Go. Brady and I can handle things here.”

“I can’t. We’re already shorthanded.”

“You’ll just be upstairs. We’ll call you if we need anything.”

Erica knew once she left they wouldn’t call and disturb her, and she wanted to protest further, but she felt weak and nauseated. Crawling into bed sounded good. “Maybe I’ll just take a short nap and come back down in time for the dinner rush.”

“The place won’t fall apart without you for one night. You’ll probably have to take at least one night off to have that baby, you know.”

“You think?”

“So consider today practice. Go upstairs.”

Aware that Sawyer wouldn’t give up, Erica finally nodded and stood carefully to avoid the dizziness that came when she moved too quickly. She’d lost her share of sleep wondering how she would manage as a single mother and restaurant manager, afraid she wouldn’t be able to balance the two roles as well as she should. She’d begun looking into child-care centers, but with her long hours at Drake’s, her child would essentially be raised by a stranger. This type of thinking had led to the exhaustion she now battled. After making Sawyer promise to let her know if things got too crazy, she headed for the back stairs leading to her second-floor apartment.

Sawyer returned to the kitchen to find Brady seasoning a tray of thick steaks and Chuck peeling potatoes for dinner.

“Hey, guys, Erica’s resting and we’re down a busboy. We’re working short tonight. I’ll take fewer tables so I can keep an eye on the dining room. I’ll pretty much stay out front. You can handle things back here, right?”

“Sure, we got it. Right, Chuck?” Brady nudged the sous chef.

“Yes, Chef. And if you get behind clearing tables, let me know and I’ll come help.”

“Thanks, Chuck.” Sawyer was grateful for the offer. She would never have asked him to bus tables, though she might have bullied Brady into it.

Sawyer left them in the kitchen, confident that her brother had everything under control. Of course he did; they’d been getting along fine without her for years.



An hour later, in the dining room, Sawyer wound among the rapidly filling tables. Apparently she wouldn’t get her wish for a slow night after all. At the front of the restaurant she paused next to the hostess stand and waited while the young woman finished taking a phone reservation.

As the hostess hung up the phone, she turned to Sawyer with a friendly smile that was undoubtedly one of the reasons Erica had hired her. She had seemingly endless patience no matter how full the lobby got, and on more than one occasion, Sawyer had seen her talk a patron out of his irritation at having to wait for a table.

Sawyer reviewed the section assignments for the night’s servers, including the cluster of tables she would be handling. Then she walked around the dining room, stopping to check on each table.

Her final stop was a full circular booth in the corner. A man with thick salt-and-pepper hair that feathered back from his forehead sat in the center, flanked by several young men in dark suits.

“How is everything this evening, gentlemen?” she asked. The men didn’t look up from their plates, clearly deferring to the older man.

“Everything is wonderful as usual, miss. My compliments to the chef. If I may ask, where is Miss Drake this evening? We’re

here every Monday and I don't recall a single night she wasn't working." He waved his hands as he spoke and Sawyer noticed several gold rings pushed over thick knuckles.

"My sister is not here this evening," she answered politely, keeping her answer general in deference to Erica's privacy. The young man closest to her shifted slightly, and through the gap in his jacket she caught sight of a compact handgun tucked into a shoulder holster. Instinctively, she took a step back, and when she jerked her eyes back to the ringleader she saw that he'd noticed her reaction.

"Sister? Then you must be Sawyer," he said with a friendly smile. When she gave him a curious look, he said, "Erica talks about you. Please, tell her that Lieutenant Ames said hello." He casually eased his jacket back so she could see the flash of his gold shield.

She wondered if he could hear her sigh of relief. "I certainly will, Lieutenant. Well, I'll leave you to your meal. Let me know if I can get you anything."

"Certainly. And you can call me Derrick."

Laughing at her overactive imagination, Sawyer headed for the kitchen. She always loved that first moment when she entered the room. There was something nostalgic in the bustling energy of the various chefs rushing to plate appetizers and meals. Her mother said the kitchen was the one place that stimulated all the senses. Sawyer paused to enjoy the sizzle from the sauté pan and the cloud of steam roiling from a large pot on the range. She inhaled and envisioned Tia standing at the kitchen door and identifying the exact foods and spices that composed the mingled aroma.



"Damn, no wonder Erica's exhausted," Sawyer said as she pushed through the kitchen door after closing. She'd just finished

a final check of the dining room and bar area. She crossed to the table where Jori still worked. "What are you making?"

"Frosting for tomorrow's cake."

"Jori, I just closed everything up. It's late. Why don't you go home and do that tomorrow?" Secretly she was happy to find Jori here alone. There was something intimate about the nearly tangible stillness of the partially darkened kitchen. Jori had left on the row of lights closest to her, but the ones at the far end of the spacious room were unnecessary for her workstation. Her dark eyes appeared even more mysterious and the low light softened her features. It had been a busy day and she looked tired, but her beauty still made Sawyer's chest ache.

"I'm almost done. I'm making three other desserts tomorrow, and the cake is the only one that will keep until then. Besides, I love the peace of the restaurant when no one else is here. But I can go if I'm holding you up."

"You're not keeping me from anything." Sawyer pulled a stool close to Jori and sat. "I hope you don't mind the company."

"Of course not." Jori slid a stainless steel bowl of melted chocolate under the mixer, added sour cream, and turned it on.

"I thought you were making frosting," Sawyer said when Jori turned the mixer off and extracted the bowl.

"I am." Jori felt Sawyer's breath sweep across her forearm as she leaned closer to peer over her shoulder. She dipped a spoon into the thick frosting, testing the consistency.

"With sour cream?"

When Sawyer wrinkled her nose, she smiled. "A skeptic, eh?" She held up the spoon. "Taste."

Sawyer took the spoon, but her expression said she was still unsure. "You first."

The challenge in Sawyer's voice struck a competitive vein in Jori. This was her domain and if Sawyer wanted to test her, then she had to answer. When Sawyer would have handed the utensil back to her, Jori simply dragged one finger through the

sweet concoction. She met Sawyer's gaze and sucked her finger into her mouth seductively, letting the rich icing melt on her tongue. Sawyer's eyebrows lifted and she gasped softly, which surprisingly made Jori's stomach tighten.

"Perfect," she rasped, unable to keep the trickle of excitement out of her voice.

"I think"—Sawyer paused and slowly ran her tongue over the back of the spoon—"you're right. It's heavenly. *And* I think *you* are secretly a tease."

"No."

"Not even if I want you to be?"

Jori smiled. "No." She wasn't a tease. At least, she never had been. But she hadn't been able to resist the attempt to fluster the normally confident Sawyer. What she hadn't intended was her own body's reaction or the fact that she could so easily shed her usual self-consciousness. The protracted drag of Sawyer's tongue over the spoon gave her time to imagine that tongue against her own skin, and the vividness of the vision shocked her. Their flirting, which had begun with a buzz of arousal, had ratcheted into full-blown lust in a matter of seconds.

"Hmm. Pity," Sawyer murmured.

Jori watched Sawyer deliberately place the spoon on the counter in front of them. Her slender fingers seemed to caress the arch of the utensil as she released it, and suddenly Jori wished she were braver, but her shyness reappeared. She could easily close the small space between them and— *What? Idiot*. What would she do with her boss's sister, who, from everything she'd heard, had the shortest attention span in the world?

CHAPTER SIX

I'm ready," Jori called as she finished wiping down her work surface.

"Just let me set the alarm, then I'll walk you out." Sawyer waited for the series of beeps that signaled she could leave. "Are you in a hurry to get home?"

"Not really."

"Then how about a walk by the river?" The Cumberland River wound through the city like the curled end of ribbon on gift wrap, coiling around downtown and then doubling back to flow past the Opryland Hotel and into Old Hickory Lake.

"Sure." Jori waited while Sawyer whipped the tie from her collar and tossed it in the open window of her car. At some point during the evening, she had rolled up her sleeves. Now she freed the button-down shirt from her waistband, then took off her glasses and tucked them in her breast pocket. A strand of hair the color of dark honey fell across her cheek, and when Sawyer reached up and slipped it behind her ear the gesture seemed familiar. Jori realized she'd seen Sawyer do it often throughout the evening as she passed through the kitchen, and it was unsettling to discover how much she'd been watching her.

"By the end of the night I can't wait to get out of that tie." Sawyer led her across the street toward the park. The night air

was warm and heavy and carried the scents of the city—exhaust mingled with the smell of fried foods wafting out from the bars that lined the street. The glow of neon beckoned patrons to the various establishments, and blues and reds bled into the orange halos of the streetlights.

Riverfront Park was comprised of a large swath of land between the river and First Avenue. At one end was a scaled-down replica of Fort Nashborough and, at the other, a large commercial dock where the General Jackson riverboat stopped during the dinner cruise.

Oversized concrete steps were etched into the grassy bank providing a place for people to sit during outdoor events. In the summer, a collection of the downtown businesses sponsored a free weekly concert series intended to draw people into the area.

As they approached the steps, Sawyer took her hand and said, “Be careful.”

Jori tried not to flinch as Sawyer’s warm fingers closed around hers. She knew Sawyer only meant to steady her on the steps, but it had been a long time since anyone had touched her, at least anything more than a handshake. An ache formed in the back of her throat. Essentially, she’d been alone for most of her life, so long that she rarely noticed the solitude. But every so often the bone-deep loneliness crept through. Still, it irritated her that she could get choked up from such simple contact with Sawyer.

“Everything okay?” Sawyer asked, and Jori guessed she’d felt her tremble.

“Yeah. Fine. Want to sit for a minute?”

“Sure.” After Jori was settled, Sawyer sat beside her.

Sawyer glanced down at Jori’s hand resting nearby. She hadn’t wanted to release it when they sat, and now she fought the urge to reclaim it, feeling rough concrete beneath her palm as she curled her fingers around the edge of the step. Her new plan might be harder than she thought.

“It’s a beautiful night,” Jori said, gazing at the sky.

Sawyer stared at her and murmured, “Mmm, beautiful.”

The hollows beneath Jori’s high cheekbones were shadowed in the half-lit park. In profile, Sawyer could see a tiny bump in the middle of her nose and decided the flaw in otherwise stunning features only added to her attractiveness. Jori had the kind of natural beauty Sawyer had always wished she had. The desire to trace the line of her neck, to press her mouth against the softness just beneath Jori’s ear overwhelmed her. Lord, how long had it been since she reacted this way to a woman? Had she ever? Certainly she’d seen gorgeous women before—she’d dated more than her share—but something else drew her to Jori. She possessed a sensitivity that she covered well with self-sufficiency, and Sawyer wanted to know the root of it. Even more, she wanted to soothe it. She stood and began to pace two steps below the one Jori sat on.

Her mind still on Jori’s exotic features, she said, “Diamantina—is that Greek?”

“I have no idea.” Not for the first time Sawyer saw a hint of sadness in Jori’s eyes that made her want to protect her, though she didn’t know from what. Just as their gazes touched, Jori glanced away. “I’m not close to my father’s side of the family.”

“Are you from a big family?”

“Nope. Just me.”

“Lucky.” Growing up, sometimes Sawyer had wished she was an only child. For instance, on her fifth birthday, when Brady took his first steps and her family spent her entire party fawning over the twins.

“Are you kidding? You’re the lucky one.”

“Ha. I bet nobody tells you what you *should* be doing.”

“No one cares what I do.”

“Come on, everyone has *someone* who cares.” Despite the resignation in Jori’s tone, Sawyer was certain she was exaggerating.

“There’s no one.” Now her voice was hard, making it evident she didn’t expect Sawyer to press the issue.

But Sawyer wasn't willing to let it go. "What about your parents?"

Ignoring the question, Jori changed the subject. "I've never been down here after dark."

"Well, I wouldn't recommend you come here by yourself." Though the police chief bragged crime was down, like many other cities its size, Nashville still had its share. And despite the recent marked increase in police presence in the downtown area, Sawyer still wasn't comfortable with the thought of Jori on the street alone at night.

"I can take care of myself," Jori said, aware of the trace of defensiveness that crept into her tone. Her anxiety had increased as they talked about family, and she had tried not to reveal too much about her past.

"I wasn't implying you couldn't. But I'd hate to see you test your self-defense skills against a mugger with a gun." Sawyer continued to wander from one end of the step to the other. "Just promise me you'll be careful."

"I will," Jori said, telling herself it was ridiculous to think Sawyer might care about her. She was probably just being nice. "It's late. I should go."

"How are you getting home?" Sawyer asked as they walked back toward Drake's.

"By cab."

"Doesn't that get expensive?"

"Sure. But the bus doesn't run this late, and I keep putting off car shopping. I always feel like the salesmen are trying to rip me off."

"Well, come on. I'll take you home."

"You don't have to."

"I want to. So there's no use arguing," Sawyer said, pausing beside her car.

Jori relented. "Should you check on Erica before we leave?"

Sawyer craned her neck and looked at the row of windows

on the second floor. “There aren’t any lights on up there. She needs her rest, and if she’s sleeping I don’t want to wake her. I’ll look in on her tomorrow when I get here.” She slid into the driver’s seat of the Solara and looked at Jori expectantly through the open passenger window. “Get in.”



Sawyer climbed the steps to her apartment, feeling energized despite the late hour and a long day. She dropped her keys on the table by the door as she entered. From the muted glow and the murmured voices coming from the living room, she guessed Matt was still awake.

Hoping she wasn’t interrupting anything, she headed that way. Matt and Davis were entwined on the couch watching television.

“Hey, guys.” Sawyer dropped into the chair nearby. “What’re you watching?”

“Nothing, really. We were just lying here talking about going to bed,” Matt said.

Davis sat up and Matt seemed reluctant to let go of him. “I’m off. See you in a few.” He gave Matt a quick kiss on the mouth before he left. They seemed very comfortable together despite the short amount of time they’d known each other. Matt fell in love easily, then seemed so content that she wondered if she was missing out on some secret. Her own relationships always seemed complicated in comparison.

“How’s your used-car inventory right now?” she asked.

“We’ve got a bunch of stuff—a Camry with low miles and a couple of SUVs. Why? Do you want to trade the Solara?”

“No. It’s not for me. I might bring someone by later this week.”

“Okay.” Matt’s tone was saturated with curiosity.

“Jori’s been taking the bus to work. I just thought you might be able to help her out.”

“Jori’s the pastry chef, right?” he asked as he stood to gather the empty beer bottles from the coffee table.

“Yeah.” Sawyer grabbed the nearly empty bowl of popcorn and followed him into the kitchen.

“Is she hot?” He disposed of the bottles and took the bowl from her.

“Matt!”

He nodded. “She is.”

Sawyer pretended to glare at him. “Yeah, she’s hot. But that’s not why I’m doing this.”

“Uh-huh.” She could tell he didn’t believe her. “I’ll be there Thursday morning. Why don’t you bring her by before work and I’ll show her what we have.”

“I’ll check with her and see if she’s free.” Sawyer told herself she was just trying to be friendly and help Jori out. After all, why should she have to deal with an untrustworthy salesman when Sawyer knew someone who would make her a good deal? Her generosity had nothing to do with her desire to see more of Jori.



Sawyer turned onto Jori’s street, admiring as always the sprawling lawns in front of each large home. The neighborhood contained mostly older houses, and the residents here had enough money to stave off the growth and overcrowding that had spread through much of the city. She pulled into Jori’s driveway and circled the main house a few minutes early. She had told Matt to expect them around eleven, and then she planned to take Jori to a late lunch before they went to work.

She was debating where to go for lunch when Jori, her hair still wet, stuck her head out the door at the top of the stairs.

“I’m almost ready. Do you want to wait up here?”

Sawyer told herself it was her desire to get out of the beaming sun and not her curiosity about Jori’s place that propelled her out

of the car. She paused at the top of the stairs and called through the door Jori had left open.

"I'll be out in a minute," Jori answered from what Sawyer assumed was the bathroom.

She wandered around the apartment. It wasn't large, but with the natural light and the minimalist furnishings, it didn't feel cramped either. She thought about her own place. No one would walk in and say it looked like her. But even after the short time she'd known Jori, this space, with its rich colors and unassuming décor, felt like it fit. She could imagine Jori taking comfort in the warm stillness here after a long day.

Though the screen at the far end of the room only partially obscured the bed with its Asian-inspired duvet, Sawyer avoided circling it, fearing she would be intruding on Jori's privacy. Instead she moved around the room and touched the back of the futon and the maple end table. Candles sat on nearly every surface, as did several decorative vases, but something was missing. She carefully lifted one of the vases, a beautiful glass piece with a swirl of dark red around the neck that looked like a ribbon embedded inside. It was heavier than she expected, given its delicate appearance.

The bathroom door opened and Jori headed for the kitchen, carrying her uniform on a hanger. When she turned to open the refrigerator door, Sawyer noticed the navy bandana that would cover her hair when she got to work, but for now it looked sexy hanging out of the back pocket of her faded blue jeans.

"You don't have any pictures of your family around," she said, jerking her eyes away from Jori's ass before she could be caught.

"What?" Jori asked from behind the refrigerator door.

"Well, most people put family photos out."

Jori fought a streak of panic and forced a casual tone. "My place is small and I don't like clutter." Before Sawyer could press her, she rushed on. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thank you."

She grabbed a bottle of water. “Ready?” She crossed to the door and held it open for Sawyer.

After she followed Sawyer to the car, she was surprised when Sawyer held the door for her, and her arm tingled when it brushed Sawyer’s as she got in. She leaned across to unlock Sawyer’s door and saw her eyes dip. Confused, she looked down and realized that as she’d reached for the door, the V-neck of her shirt had gaped, giving Sawyer a view of her small breasts. She felt uncomfortable and knew she was blushing. She wished she’d put on a bra that morning, but once she got into the chef’s jacket no one could tell if she was wearing one or not, so she often didn’t bother. She realized Sawyer was still staring and cleared her throat. Sawyer jerked her eyes away and hurriedly climbed in, started the engine, and backed out without looking at her again.

Sawyer’s observant inquiry about her lack of family photos had thrown her. She had dodged the question, reluctant to explain her lack of sentimentality about her family because she was afraid of Sawyer’s reaction. As a young girl she’d seen pitying looks on the face of more than one social worker, and that wasn’t what she wanted to see when Sawyer looked at her.

She much preferred the expression on Sawyer’s face as she’d leaned across the interior of the car. The flash of heat as Sawyer’s gaze caressed her made her wonder how she would feel if Sawyer were actually to touch her, made her long for the certain intensity. Her face flushed anew as she realized the direction of her thoughts, and she looked out the window so Sawyer wouldn’t notice.

Sawyer steered into the dealership and parked in front. Waving at the man who strode through the front door, she got out and met him at the front of the car.

“Jori, this is my roommate, Matt.”

“Hey, how are you?” Matt held out his hand.

Jori took it and was surprised to find his grip warm and enveloping. His smile was friendly, and when he released her

hand he stepped back, leaving her a comfortable cushion of personal space. "It's nice to meet you."

She'd expected something a bit more aggressive from a car dealer. Of course, she didn't trust them as a breed, so she readily admitted she was already biased against him in spite of her initial reaction. He certainly looked the part, with his slicked-back hair, dark navy suit, and bright yellow tie. But the welcome in his eyes contradicted the glossy appearance.

"What can I help you find today?"

"I'm looking for a used sedan, nothing too expensive or flashy."

Sawyer smiled in encouragement when Jori glanced nervously at her. She'd already talked to Matt a bit about what Jori was hunting for, but she'd let them work it out from here. She trusted Matt not to screw Jori. So while he led her from car to car and pointed out the features as well as the flaws of each one, Sawyer wandered among the new vehicles nearby.

When she noticed Matt leave Jori standing next to a green Toyota Camry and head for the building, she strolled back to Jori.

"Did you find something you like?"

"I'm going to test-drive this Camry." Jori touched Sawyer's arm. "By the way, thank you. Matt is a good guy."

"Yeah, he'll take care of you." Sawyer smiled, enjoying the warmth of Jori's hand against her skin and the feeling of helping her.

"Did you find something?" Jori asked, nodding toward the row of shiny new SUVs Sawyer had been looking at.

Sawyer shrugged. "Nothing I'd consider trading the Solara for. Don't feel obligated to make a deal you're not comfortable with. Matt sells a lot, he doesn't need the commission. I only brought you here because I know you can trust him to shoot straight."

Jori nodded and before she could respond, Matt returned, jangling the keys to the Camry.

“Ready for that test-drive?”



“Thanks again for hooking me up with Matt, and for going with me. I know you must have been bored,” Jori said, picking up a slice of pizza.

“Nah, I like car shopping, even when I’m not buying.”

“But even with Matt fast-tracking the paperwork, it still took an hour and a half to finish it. *I* got bored, and I’m the one buying the car.”

Sawyer waved off Jori’s concern before she bit into her pizza. The pizzeria was a popular lunch spot and the booths around them were quickly filling up. “I’m glad I could help. So, you pick up the car tomorrow?”

“Yes, it’ll be nice not to plan my day around the bus schedule. I haven’t been here in years. But the food is still as good as I remember.”

“Did you grow up around here?”

“Mostly. In the area, at least. I moved around a lot when I was younger.”

Sawyer waited but Jori didn’t volunteer any more. *I moved around, not we, not my family.*

“So you must have changed schools a lot.” From the little she knew about Jori’s past, she guessed Jori hadn’t gone to private school.

“Yeah.”

“I bet it was tough to keep friends.” Sawyer thought about her own circle of school friends. She’d been popular, with a number of loyal friends, and she’d never had a problem getting to know new people. In high school she hadn’t dated much, because by that time she knew she was interested in girls but was far too intimidated by the ones she found attractive. It wasn’t until college that she’d ventured into that arena, and by then she’d learned to rely on her outgoing nature rather than her looks.

Jori shrugged.

“Did your dad have to move for work or something?”

“No.”

Jori set down the glass she’d been sipping from and shifted uncomfortably in her side of the booth. Sawyer could tell she should just change the subject, but she was curious about why the light went out of Jori’s eyes when the conversation turned to her past.

“Every time I ask about your family, you avoid answering.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. So I’m going to stop asking.”

“There isn’t much to tell, really. My father wasn’t a very nice guy.” When Jori stroked her knuckles over her own cheekbone, Sawyer didn’t think she realized she was doing it.

Her father hit her. She fought back a swell of anger and remained silent, sensing Jori would speak again when she was ready.

“My mother was too busy trying to remember where she left her bottle to pay attention to what he was doing. I was eight when I was put in foster care.”

“If you don’t want to talk about this, we don’t have to.” Sawyer touched her forearm. She’d had no idea and realized she shouldn’t have pushed Jori to talk.

“It’s history.” Jori’s voice was distant—cold, now. “One day, she was passed out on the couch when he came home from work. I was in the kitchen trying to make dinner because I knew he would be mad if it wasn’t ready and I couldn’t wake her up.” As Jori spoke, she stared at the white-and-black speckled Formica tabletop, but Sawyer could tell she was seeing the events of that day. Not wanting her to relive it alone, Sawyer covered her hand. Jori turned it over and slipped her fingers between Sawyer’s. “I burned his dinner and he beat me unconscious.”

The ease with which Jori uttered the statement made rage surge within Sawyer. “Oh, Jori.”

“I woke up in the hospital with ten stitches in my head, a

broken arm, and three cracked ribs. The social worker came and told me I couldn't go home. I never saw either one of them again." She looked at Sawyer with tears shining in her eyes. "But when I was about thirteen, I overheard my case worker say that my mother finally got sober and left him."

"Did you ever try to find her?"

Jori shook her head. "When I turned eighteen the folks I was staying with told me I had to go. The state wasn't paying for me anymore. I had to work my ass off to get by, and I was angry at her because I blamed her for not protecting me from him. So, no, I've never looked for them."

"Maybe they—"

Jori shook her head. "I've heard it all before, Sawyer. She was my mother and that whole time I was in foster care she could have found me with one phone call, but she didn't. She never came to get me back."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's in the past. That's why I don't talk about it much. I can't do anything about the way they lived their lives. The only thing I can control is mine."

"Everything you've accomplished is all yours, Jori. They can't claim any of that and they can't take it away from you." Suddenly, Jori's withdrawal from those around her made sense. Sawyer complained plenty about her family, but she'd never faced any of life's trials alone. Thinking about all that Jori had accomplished entirely by herself made Sawyer respect her even more.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Good afternoon, Jori,” Sawyer called as she strolled through the kitchen door.

“Hi there,” Jori said, not looking up from the Bartlett-pear torte she was making.

As the weeks passed, Sawyer had started hanging out in the kitchen on her breaks. She would drink a cup of coffee and drool over that day’s dessert. Sawyer talked while she worked, and she rather liked the running commentary on whatever had Sawyer’s attention that day.

Jori watched her pass through the kitchen picking up orders, often scowling or looking irritated. But by the time she pulled a stool close to Jori, she was smiling, relaxed, and chatting away. At first Jori had tried to keep up her end of the conversation and ended up distracted from her work. But she soon figured out that Sawyer liked to talk and didn’t require more than the occasional remark to let her know Jori was still listening. Jori fell easily into the rhythm of her speech and responded when she sensed the expectant lull.

She smiled to herself as Sawyer talked about a movie that she, Matt, and Davis had rented the night before. Behind Sawyer, servers passed through the kitchen and called out orders. Brady and Chuck spoke to each other in the shorthand they’d developed

over the years, plating food and setting it on the counter to be picked up.

“Have you seen it?”

She quickly recalled the name of the movie Sawyer had been talking about. “Yeah.” Surprisingly, she’d enjoyed Johnny Depp as an eccentric pirate.

“Well, the sequel just came out on DVD. Davis rented it, if you’d like to come over tonight and watch with us.”

“That sounds fun. I’d like to run home and change first.”

“Great. I’ll give you directions before we leave.”

“Okay.”

“Good. Well, I have to get back to my tables.”

“Sawyer, service,” Brady said as he slid three entrées onto the counter.

“Duty calls,” she said with a sigh. She loaded the plates on a tray, then shoved open the swinging door.



Jori worked steadily through the dinner rush, barely taking time to look up when another server came to pick up desserts or shouted a new order. But every time she glanced up to find Sawyer standing in front of her, she felt a thrill at the thought of spending time with her after they closed. She hadn’t known she would agree to the invitation until she was already saying the words. But now she looked forward to the end of her shift.

She had just passed a large order to one of the new waitresses and returned her attention to the orders still pending. When she heard a loud crash, she jerked her head up to see a waitress standing amid a scattering of broken plates and ruined desserts. The slender redhead had been working at Drake’s for only a week and evidently had little or no prior experience.

Erica and Sawyer burst through the kitchen door at the same time. Sawyer rushed over and stooped to help the woman clean

up the mess. While she brushed broken bits into a dustpan, she smiled and talked with the waitress. Warmth infused Sawyer's murmuring voice and the waitress's eyes barely left her face. Her trilling laughter in response to something Sawyer said grated on Jori's nerves.

Erica crossed to Jori's counter. "Jori, I need—"

"Yeah, I've got it." Irritated, she began to fill the lost orders again.

"You okay?" Erica asked quietly.

"Has she ever waited tables before?" When Jori jerked a plate from under the counter and set it down with such force that she nearly broke it, she took a deep breath and forced herself to be gentler with the next one.

"I don't think so. She's trying to work her way through college, and I wanted to give her a break." Erica clearly hadn't expected Jori's burst of temper. "She dropped a tray, Jori. It happens. With or without experience."

"I know." With some effort, she reined in her frustration, only to have it flare up again when she heard the waitress giggle at something Sawyer said.

"Is anything wrong?"

"I admit the girl is cute. But she's barely legal. Does Sawyer have to flirt with every female in range?"

Erica laughed. "That? That isn't Sawyer flirting. She's just being *Sawyer*. Our father says Sawyer has never met anyone who after ten minutes is still a stranger."

"So, what? She's just being friendly?"

"Yes." Erica glanced at her, looking oddly disappointed. "Now, the way she looks at you—that's flirting."

"What makes you think so?"

"There's something in her eyes, and in her voice, when she talks to you."

As Jori pushed the new desserts across the counter, Sawyer came over to load up the tray. "Thanks," she said with a wink.

Jori watched as she handed the tray to the smiling waitress, then picked up her own entrées and followed her to the dining room. *There's something in her eyes.* The warmth Jori had felt when Sawyer winked at her supplanted the tension in Erica's voice. Sawyer naturally hummed with energy, and being the singular focus of that energy was a powerful feeling.



Sawyer stood inside her apartment door and smoothed her hands over the front of her T-shirt. The doorbell rang for the second time, and she realized Jori was waiting in the hallway while she was worried about looking good in a T-shirt and track pants. It was just a casual night with friends. She had absolutely no reason to be this nervous. Jori was definitely not thinking of this as a date. Besides, she hadn't been this nervous about a woman since high school.

She took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Hi," she said, wondering if she imagined the tremor in her voice.

Jori smiled. "I picked up some wine. You don't have to open it tonight, but I didn't want to show up empty-handed."

"Thank you." Sawyer took the bottle and read the label.

"It's Shiraz. I thought you'd like it because it's fruity and spicy with a hint of mocha."

"Fruity and spicy? You're right. That does sound like me."

Jori had changed into blue jeans and a light pink polo that clung to her. The gold clover was once again nestled against the base of her throat, and Sawyer wanted to press her mouth to the skin there. When she realized she was staring and rudely leaving Jori standing in the breezeway, she flushed and moved aside. "Come in. The guys are in here."

She led Jori to the living room. Matt sat at one end of the sofa and Davis half-reclined against him.

“Jori, you remember Matt. And this is Davis. Guys, what would you like to drink? I’m having wine.” She held up the bottle.

“Beer,” Matt and Davis answered in unison.

“Jori?”

“I’ll have a glass of wine with you.”

As she went to the kitchen to open the wine, she heard Jori exchange pleasantries with Davis.

“Jori, how’s the car?” Matt asked.

“It’s great. Thank you again.”

Sawyer returned and passed around their drinks, then moved to sit on the floor at the corner of Jori’s chair, which was perpendicular to the sofa.

“Are we ready to start the movie?” Matt picked up the remote.

Two and a half hours later, as the credits rolled, Jori turned her attention to the woman whose shoulder pressed against the outside of her leg. Sawyer had settled back and her outstretched legs were crossed at the ankle. Her proximity had been distracting during the movie; she was so close Jori caught hints of her fresh citrus scent. She noticed the curve of Sawyer’s neck where it met the worn cotton of her T-shirt and wondered if her skin was as soft as it looked. But she would never know since, other than some flirting and heated glances, Sawyer hadn’t made any moves toward her, and Jori certainly didn’t plan to pursue her. She wouldn’t even know where to start. In the few relationships she’d had, she’d never been an aggressor and had always taken a long time to feel comfortable with a woman’s advances.

Davis and Matt leaned close together in the darkened room. As they whispered, Jori noticed Sawyer watching them. Her shoulders sagged and Jori wished she could see her expression. In spite of the fear in the back of her throat, she casually dropped her hand on Sawyer’s shoulder, intending only a comforting touch. But when she should have removed it she squeezed instead, then

smoothed it over the back of her neck because the skin there was even softer than she'd imagined. What in the world did she think she was doing? She braced herself for the expected panic, but it didn't come. Instead of scaring her, touching Sawyer excited her.

Davis stood and gathered their empty glasses and bottles.

"Leave that, sweetie. I'll get it," Matt said, trying to pull him back down on the sofa.

"It'll just take me a minute." Davis dropped a kiss on Matt's head. "Be right back."

"So, Matt, how long have you two been seeing each other?" Jori asked.

"About a month."

"You guys are cute together." Her fingers slipped of their own accord into Sawyer's hairline and massaged the base of her skull.

"We clicked from the moment we met."

"I sure hope so, since you brought him home that first night," Sawyer teased.

"Well, what can I say? I'm irresistible," Davis said as he came back into the room. "From what I hear, Sawyer, we have that in common."

"Hmm, you're right about that," Sawyer said, trying not to moan under Jori's ministrations. Her touch was at once relaxing and arousing. Her fingers soothed away her tension, but when she raked her nails against Sawyer's scalp, neurons fired all the way down Sawyer's spine.

"And you're both so modest, too." Jori tugged on a lock of Sawyer's hair and Sawyer grinned at her.

"Ladies, thank you very much for joining us." Matt stood and pulled Davis toward the bedroom. "But this one has to get up early in the morning, so I need to put him to bed."

"Good night, boys," Sawyer called as they disappeared.

Jori and Sawyer sat in silence in the room lit only by the glow from the television. Sawyer didn't move to the now-vacated sofa.

Jori's fingers still played in her hair, almost absently, and she marveled that such a simple touch could turn her on so much.

She let her head fall forward as Jori traced down her neck. She remembered watching Jori slice strawberries and wondering what it would feel like to have her agile fingers on her.

"You have amazing hands," she murmured, caught up in her memory. "I love watching you work."

"Why?"

"Your fingers are quick yet somehow still graceful. I don't know how else to explain it. Not to mention you do sinful things with chocolate."

"Well, you did let me know your weakness the first day we met. So now I could have you just where I want you with little effort."

"You think so?" *You have no idea how easily you could have me—any way you want me.* Sawyer's stomach fluttered at the thought.

"Sure." Jori twined her fingers in Sawyer's hair and pulled her head back. "I could just melt some chocolate and pour it..." She leaned close until mere inches separated their mouths. Sawyer's brain finished that sentence in a dozen different ways, and they all made her weak. Her heart pounded so loudly she swore Jori must be able to hear it. "...over some fresh fruit."

Jori released her and sat back. She wondered if Jori was simply a tease, but she saw the heat leak from Jori's eyes and decided that something had caused her withdrawal.

"I suspect you could do just about anything with melted chocolate and I'd enjoy it," Sawyer said, watching her face to gauge her reaction to the suggestive comment.

One corner of Jori's mouth lifted slightly, and her eyebrow arched. But her verbal response was at odds with the physical one. "It's getting late."

When she stood, Sawyer followed.

"I should go." Jori headed for the door, but Sawyer grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the kitchen.

“Come with me.”

As they stepped inside the kitchen, Jori said, “What are we doing in here?”

Sawyer moved closer and Jori retreated a step. “I was thinking, nearly every other time you’ve flirted with me, we’ve been in the kitchen. It’s where you’re most comfortable—most confident.” She closed the distance between them, backing Jori up. She rested a hand on the counter on each side of Jori’s hips, lightly, not quite embracing her. She leaned close, her body nearly trembling with the effort of holding back.

“Sawyer, I really didn’t mean to flirt with you.” Jori’s hands loosely clasped Sawyer’s forearms.

When she lifted her eyes, Jori avoided them. “What did you mean to do?”

“I just couldn’t help myself those times.”

“Because I’m irresistible?”

Jori smiled. “Perhaps it’s as you said, I’m comfortable in the kitchen—”

“You let your guard down.”

“Yes,” Jori whispered. She lightly caressed Sawyer’s arms.

“So here we are.” She leaned close until her lips were inches from Jori’s ear. “In the kitchen. Where you’re comfortable.” She saw the sharp intake of Jori’s breath in the quick rise of her shoulders and knew she was bending her promise to Erica, but since she hadn’t touched Jori yet, she still considered her word kept. “Let your guard down, Jori.”

Jori felt the feathered breath against her ear and realized she only needed to turn her head slightly to capture Sawyer’s lips. She wanted to, but did she dare?

“I can’t,” she whispered. Since Sawyer’s arms still trapped her, she rested her forehead against Sawyer’s shoulder.

“Why?” Sawyer palmed her cheek.

“I can’t get involved with someone I work for.” Jori stopped herself before adding *again*. She’d been burned by mixing her professional and personal relationships, and she wouldn’t allow

it to happen again. She loved working at Drake's and she didn't want to do anything that could potentially jeopardize that.

"Well, luckily, you work for my sister." Sawyer trailed her fingers down Jori's neck and into the vee of her polo, toying with the gold clover.

"You know it's the same thing."

"I'll quit."

Jori straightened. "You'd quit your job so you could seduce me?"

"I'd quit my job so *you* could seduce *me*," Sawyer drawled.

"From what I hear, your interest in me wouldn't last much longer than your tenure at Drake's." She hadn't meant to state it so bluntly, but she was irritated that Sawyer didn't seem to take anything seriously and that she would have the gall to maneuver her into a situation like this, then try to blame it on her. On second thought, if she was blunt enough, she could keep Sawyer at a safe distance and not have to be brave enough to do what she'd really like to.

Sawyer jerked back and dropped her arms. Hurt flickered across her face before she brought it under control, and her short bark of laughter seemed forced. "Do you believe everything you hear?"

"Sawyer—"

"What else have you heard?"

"I—"

"Because whatever it is, I can assure you, at one time or another it was probably true."

Whatever Sawyer was really feeling was hidden behind a mask of indifference, and Jori was too unsure of her own emotions to attempt to sort through Sawyer's.

"I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong idea. I like you, Sawyer. But I can't get involved with you."

When Sawyer nodded and moved aside, Jori left before she could change her mind. She spent the entire drive home trying to convince herself that leaving had been the right thing to do. Her

skin still burned where Sawyer had touched her, and she could still see Sawyer's wounded expression at her rebuff. But she did have some nerve to orchestrate that little seduction scene in the kitchen.



Sawyer leaned on the balcony rail outside her apartment staring at the city lights in the distance, the empty wine bottle next to her elbow. She rolled a wineglass between her hands, occasionally sipping from the last of the Shiraz.

She mentally reviewed the scene with Jori, feeling an echo of pleasure when she remembered standing close to her, almost kissing her. Jori's arousal had been evident in her widened pupils and the cadence of her breathing, but something had held Jori back, and though she'd been quick to throw up Sawyer's reputation, she suspected there was more to her resistance.

She figured Erica had warned Jori against getting involved with her. Despite Erica's opinion, she'd never considered her lack of a long-term relationship to be a big deal. She had a nice-enough time with the women she dated. But when it became apparent something was lacking, wasn't it best for all involved to end it so they could move on? Was it her fault she often came to this realization more quickly than the women she was involved with? Early attempts at a relationship had taught her how easy it was to get hurt. She had learned to read the lasting potential of a relationship as quickly as possible to minimize the risk.

But that didn't mean she wasn't willing to give it a shot with Jori. She'd only just begun to get Jori to open up, to know her. But from the first day they met, something about Jori had attracted her. She would have been willing to go up against Erica, to stand up for her right to date Jori. But it seemed Jori didn't want that. Was she teasing her, was she shy, or did she have an altogether different reason for keeping her distance?

So where did that leave her? She didn't want to wait tables. Erica's constant need to control her decisions got on her nerves. Her younger sister had rarely had the chance to do that while they were growing up, so she was taking full advantage of her opportunity now. And now she'd have to face the inevitable awkwardness with Jori, not to mention the raging arousal she inspired.

Yeah, I'm in great shape, she thought, feeling the urge to flee beginning to claw at her as she quickly drained her glass. It always started like that, a subtle itch to move, soon followed by restlessness that made her feel as if she couldn't sit still, like marbles rolling beneath her skin. And she would find no relief until she made a change.

CHAPTER EIGHT

For the second time in a month, Sawyer found herself sitting in Erica's office wondering if she was about to make a big mistake. She wasn't a waitress, of that she had no doubt. So if this wasn't the job for her and Jori seemed intent on rejecting her, why should she stick around? She'd never had a problem walking away before.

Erica came in and, barely glancing at her, circled the desk. "Sawyer, you're not scheduled to work today."

"I know. How are you feeling?"

Erica seemed tired, but aside from that one afternoon, she hadn't missed a day at the restaurant.

"I feel fine." She twirled a pencil between her fingers and flipped through several sheets of paper. "What's up? I've got to finish the payroll."

"Do you need help with that?" Sawyer was stalling and she didn't know why.

"What I need is—" Erica glanced up and paused, then studied her more closely. "What are you doing here, Sawyer?"

"I wanted to talk to you about something."

She watched comprehension sweep across Erica's face. "No."

"I'm sorry."

"Damn it." Erica slammed her hand down on the desk.

“This just isn’t what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“I really needed you to be reliable for once in your life, Sawyer. What are you expecting me to offer you to get you to stay?”

“Nothing. It’s not about you.”

“No, of course not. Because it’s always about you, isn’t it? Because *you* always come first, no matter what else is going on. It’s been that way as long as I can remember.”

Erica stood and left the office.

“Shit,” Sawyer muttered as she rose slowly. She stepped into the hallway and stopped short. Jori leaned against the wall just outside the door.

“I—uh, I didn’t mean to overhear. I was coming to talk to Erica.”

Sawyer didn’t bother trying to excuse her behavior. She headed for the back door, passing Jori in the narrow hall.

“You’re leaving?” Jori asked when she was just a few steps away.

She stopped, but she didn’t turn to look at Jori. She didn’t want to have this conversation, she just wanted to go. “It was always supposed to be temporary.”

“Does this have anything to do with—what happened in your kitchen?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? Because if it does, there’s no reason we can’t keep working together. I just won’t let you put me in that position again.”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with you,” Sawyer repeated, facing her.

“What are you going to do?”

She shrugged. “I’ll find something. I know a guy who owns a limo service. He’d probably let me drive for him.”

“You hate it here that much?” Though she knew it wasn’t logical, Jori was hurt. She’d been fighting her attraction to Sawyer

from the day they met, but more than that, she'd enjoyed getting to know her and had thought the feeling was mutual. And though she had put the brakes on Sawyer's advance the night before, it still stung that Sawyer could simply walk away.

"Jori, I'm not a waitress."

"But you're a chauffeur?"

"I don't know."

She looked so confused Jori almost felt sorry for her. But she didn't understand how someone who had such a supportive family could just abandon them. Sawyer had the one thing she had always wished for, and she thought nothing of tossing it aside on a whim. Sawyer was pouting, Jori realized, and she couldn't respect that behavior.

"You need to find yourself, so you just say 'screw you' to everyone who needs you?" Though not normally confrontational, she didn't give a second thought to calling Sawyer on her egocentricity.

"Jori." Sawyer reached for her hand, but she jerked it away.

"Erica is working herself sick."

"She's fine. She doesn't want my help. Brady will—"

"Why should it always be up to Brady to pick up your slack?"

"My slack?" Anger flashed in Sawyer's eyes.

"They're your family. It's not like you have something else pressing to do. You're *bored*, so instead of at least sticking it out until she has the baby, you're taking off. You're just being selfish."

Sawyer's expression hardened. "This is *family* business. I don't expect you to understand what that's like."

Stunned, Jori nodded slowly. "You're right. I don't understand. Because I've never had a real family."

"Jori, that's not how I meant it."

"Maybe not, but you're absolutely right. In fact, no one's ever given a damn where I was or what I was doing. So if I were

in your place, I wouldn't be so quick to take what you have for granted."

Seething, and not interested in Sawyer's response, Jori walked away. She was hurt that Sawyer would use something so personal against her, something she hadn't shared with anyone else, and went directly to the kitchen, refusing to look back. If Sawyer wanted to take off, it shouldn't bother her. After all, Sawyer had just proved how little she thought of her.



"Come on, damn it," Sawyer muttered as she inched through traffic. She slammed her palm against the horn as an oversized SUV cut her off, barely missing her front bumper.

As she drove, Sawyer reviewed her conversations with both Erica and Jori and wondered why she'd made such a mess of things. She was convinced she didn't want to be a waitress, even if it meant seeing Jori every day, but Jori's remark about her being selfish stung and she'd lashed out, using Jori's past to hurt her. Was it selfish to want to be in a job that made her happy? Was she always supposed to put everyone else first?

Jori seemed to think if she just stayed on until Erica had the baby, everything would be back to normal. But the truth, as Sawyer saw it, was that things would never be the same for Erica. Running Drake's was more than a full-time job; it was seventy-plus hours a week. Add a newborn to that and Erica was facing some major changes. Sawyer couldn't be expected to set aside her life indefinitely to help Erica manage hers. Could she?

She was so engrossed in her thoughts that she almost missed the turn into Aces Toyota. Though it probably pissed off the guy in the car behind her, she executed a sharp turn into the parking lot and whipped into a spot in front of the dealership.

Matt was rushing through the showroom as she stepped inside and pulled off her sunglasses. When he saw her, he detoured in her direction, skirting a family of four admiring a minivan.

“Lunch. Oh, man, Sawyer, I completely forgot we were having lunch today.” He tapped two fingers against his temple.

“It was your idea. You said you wanted to talk to me about something.” That morning before she’d left to see Erica, he had asked her to meet him later.

“I know, I know. But we’re so busy right now.”

Sawyer glanced at several small clusters of people, some of whom it appeared were being helped already, but others looked around expectantly. “Forget it. I’ll catch up with you at home.”

“Wait, I’ve got time for a cup of coffee. Come back to the lounge.” Without waiting to see if she would follow, Matt headed down a long hallway to the left. They entered a room large enough for a kitchenette and two circular tables. “Sit,” he said, indicating one of the tables.

He filled two Styrofoam cups, adding cream and sugar to both, and set one in front of her.

“I did want to talk to you about something.” He seemed hesitant.

“I’ll see you at home later, if you’re busy.”

“Davis is coming over, and I wanted to speak to you privately.” He paused as one of his coworkers came in and got a soda from the vending machine. He waited until the man left before he spoke again. “You know that Davis and I are getting serious and—”

He stopped again as a woman entered, went to the coffeemaker, and filled a mug. He tapped his fingers impatiently on the table as the woman stood with her back to them adding condiments to her drink. Between his tapping and the woman’s spoon clinking against the side of the ceramic mug, Sawyer was losing her patience.

“Whatever it is, Matt, just say it.”

“I’m moving out,” he blurted.

“Why?” Sawyer sighed, and when she caught the woman at the counter trying to look discreetly over her shoulder at them, she glared at her. She knew Matt wasn’t out at work and imagined

that the woman thought she was witnessing a lovers' quarrel. Caught looking, the woman blushed and rushed out of the room, no doubt to go spread the juicy gossip.

Sawyer returned her attention to a contrite-looking Matt. She'd argued with Erica, then with Jori. She needed her relationship with Matt to stay level, because she was running out of places to turn.

"Davis and I are getting an apartment together."

"You've barely been together a month."

He shrugged. "When it's right, you just know it."

Sawyer had heard him say he'd met the right one before and it never seemed to last. But that didn't keep him from trying again. He approached relationships with an optimism that Sawyer envied. So, though she didn't really believe this guy would be any different, she wasn't in the mood to argue. "No, you should stay there. That place is more yours than mine. I'll move out."

She wanted to be happy for Matt and Davis. But she'd been living with Matt for years and would miss him terribly. They'd moved in together fresh out of college, and she'd backed him up when he told his father about his career change. He'd been the friend who listened when she lamented her failures and stayed up late talking until she felt better. She knew they'd always be friends, but she couldn't help worrying that their not living together would change things.

"You were there first and I moved in. Davis and I made this decision, so it's not fair to expect you to leave."

Sawyer sighed. "Can we talk about this later? It's been kind of a long day."

"What's wrong?"

"What isn't wrong?" Sawyer replied sarcastically. "I quit my job. Erica's pissed at me, and Jori and I argued."

"Wow. You have had a big day. I can guess why you quit your job—"

"Why?"

"How long have you been there?" He stood. "Refill?"

She shook her head as he stood and filled his own cup. “It’s been almost a month. What’s your point?”

“Well, it’s about time for you to move on, isn’t it?”

Sawyer remained silent. She supposed she hadn’t given anyone any reason to expect any more from her, but she wished just one person had faith in her.

Matt regarded her thoughtfully as he leaned against the counter and stirred his coffee. “So Erica’s pissed because you’re leaving her short a server again. But what did you and Jori argue about?”

Sawyer shrugged. “She seemed mad that I was leaving, too. Erica had just basically accused me of being selfish, and I wasn’t in the mood to hear the same thing from her.”

“So you flew off the handle and now you owe her an apology.”

“Close enough.”

He glanced at his watch. “Listen, I hate to do this to you, but I really have to get back to work before my sales manager comes looking for me. Can we talk more when I get home?”

“Sure.” Sawyer followed him back to the showroom. He waved, then approached the nearest customer as she walked numbly toward the front door.

She’d been spoiled, Sawyer decided as she got into her car. While she’d been cruising through life, not looking for a bump in the road, the universe had been conspiring to blindside her. In one day, she’d thrown away her job, admittedly one she didn’t like, but along with it, the chance to see Jori every day. And now her home was facing upheaval as well. *Jesus, give me a break. I’ve never been this dramatic.* Immediately she shoved her self-pitying thoughts from her head. She certainly didn’t have things any worse than anyone else.

She started the car and steered out into the street, accelerating quickly as if she could outrun her circuitous thoughts.



“That looks good, Jori.” The words came from behind her, spoken softly so they wouldn’t startle her.

“Thank you.” She rolled the pipe in her left hand slowly and evenly against the large wooden arm of her bench. With her other hand, she maneuvered the jacks, a tool that resembled cooking tongs, to shape the bulb of glass clinging to the end of the pipe.

Though the molten glass had the consistency of stiff taffy, too much pressure could throw off the symmetry. Instead of the traditional vase shape, Jori’s design for this piece resembled an hourglass. She pressed the jacks against the bulb, gradually narrowing the center.

She was one of four students in the studio, all of whom worked intently on their own piece while their instructor, a willowy blonde, walked among them offering encouragement and advice. Each of the three furnaces in the room served a different function in the glassblowing process, and even with the protective outer shells, their combined heat pushed the temperature in the room over one hundred degrees. Sweat trickled down the back of her neck and under her collar, and she knew her bandana would be damp at her forehead.

Jori put the end of the rod through a small hole in one of the furnaces to soften the glass, heating it to over two thousand degrees. Then she blew into the mouthpiece in the other end of the pipe, watching the bubble of glass slowly expand. After returning to her bench she picked up the jacks again.

The meticulous work was a good distraction for her, and she’d been lucky to find a class at the Gaines Art Center offered on her day off. Here she had to use an entirely different type of sensory energy than she used in cooking. Glassblowing required visual and tactile skills.

Despite the concentration required, she still found her mind wandering to Sawyer and the changes at Drake’s. She’d expected the ease between Erica and Brady to return after Sawyer left, but her presence and the tension she had brought along with it

lingered. Sawyer's indifference regarding her family still baffled her. She seemed to expect everyone to fall in line with her plans, including Jori and her plan to seduce her in the kitchen. Or rather for Jori to seduce her. She recalled the arrogance with which Sawyer had made that statement. She had seen the expectation of compliance in Sawyer's eyes, then the jolt of rejection when she'd refused.

"Was this the color you wanted?" The instructor's voice momentarily silenced her thoughts. She'd filled a trough with powdered glass in preparation for adding color to Jori's piece. The fine powder was tinted in varying shades of green, and Jori was hoping to achieve a variegated effect.

"That looks perfect. Thank you."

She rolled the vase in the trough until it was evenly coated, then returned it to the furnace. When she removed it, a verdant monochrome shaded the outside.

"That's lovely. Your best piece yet."

Jori smiled, then resumed expanding the size and shape of her vase. The instructor moved on to check in with another student.

The striations of green stretched as she blew the vase out, and the shades reminded her of the color of Paige's eyes. Though it was months yet until Christmas, she decided this piece would make the perfect gift for Paige. She thought again about the situation with Sawyer and hoped she would still be working at Drake's by the time the holidays rolled around. Despite the fact that Sawyer had left the restaurant, she had the uneasy feeling that things weren't over between them.



Sawyer drove through downtown and dreaded going to Drake's to return her uniform. In the week since she'd left, she'd put off going back. In fact, she'd put off everything. She still insisted that she would be the one to move out, but after a few

halfhearted attempts to find a new place, she hadn't gotten any closer to leaving.

The freshly laundered vest and tie had lain folded on top of her bureau for several days. This afternoon she was going job hunting and had decided to stop by the restaurant while she was out. She hoped she could see Erica without running into anyone, namely Jori. She hadn't seen her since they'd argued but had thought about her often.

She parked near the loading dock and slipped through the back door. Immediately turning right, she avoided the kitchen and headed for Erica's office. But when she got there, it was empty.

"Damn it," she mumbled. So much for getting out quick. In the hallway she stopped a passing busboy. "Do you know where Erica is?"

"She was in the dining room last time I saw her."

Thanking him, Sawyer turned back toward Erica's office. She'd just leave the uniform on her desk and call her later. Then she heard a commotion from the kitchen.

"Miss Drake just passed out."

Sawyer rushed to the dining room and shoved through the crowd gathered near the corner booth, where she saw Erica lying on the floor, Lieutenant Ames crouching nervously next to her. Brady and Jori had already reached her, but she pushed past them.

"Erica," she said, gently nudging her shoulder. "Erica, wake up, sweetie." The lieutenant radioed a request for an ambulance.

"What happened?" she asked.

"She was standing here talking to us and just collapsed," Ames answered.

The moments until Erica's eyes fluttered open were the longest of Sawyer's life, but soon she began to come around. She moaned and reached for her temple, but Sawyer grabbed her hand.

"I think you hit your head when you fell." She brushed Erica's hair back from the lump forming at her temple.

“Help me up, Sawyer,” she said groggily.

Sawyer glanced at the nearby crowd of patrons and guessed her sister was embarrassed to be there. But she hesitated to move her until help arrived.

“Be still for a minute. The paramedics are on the way.”

“I don’t need paramedics, just help to my office.”

“Erica, you just passed out in the middle of the dining room. You need to go to the hospital.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Damn it, Erica,” Sawyer burst out.

Brady knelt next to Erica, then met her eyes and touched her stomach. Sawyer watched, astonished, as the look in Erica’s eyes changed and the rest of the room seemed to fade away, herself included. “You need to go to the hospital,” he said calmly. The bond they’d shared since birth tethered them. His words inspired a trust that Sawyer’s never would. She was quite used to feeling excluded, having been in this position her entire life, but she still felt the sting.

Erica nodded, and then the paramedics carted in equipment and began to push their way in. Sawyer and Brady stepped aside. “Go to the hospital, I’ll handle things here,” she said without looking at him.

“You can go.”

“She needs you more than she needs me.”

He took her elbow. “She doesn’t—”

“Brady, just go.” She jerked her arm away. “Chuck can handle the rest of dinner.”

“Okay.” He relented. “Come to the hospital when you’re done. She’ll want to see you.”

“Yeah,” she murmured as she headed for the kitchen with Jori behind her. Chuck was keeping an eye on a béarnaise that Brady had abandoned, and the other cooks continued to fill orders.

“How’s she doing?”

“The paramedics are with her now.” Jori was standing just inside the door, the rest of the staff trickling in as well.

“Okay, guys, here’s how we’ll handle this. Wendy,” she addressed the shift manager, “you and the servers keep doing what you do. If you need anything, let me know.” She felt a pang in her chest at the concern in Jori’s eyes but ignored it, needing to stick to business. “Jori, how are you set for dessert?”

“I’m in good shape. I just have to plate as the orders come in.”

“Good. Help Chuck with dinner. And if I can do anything at all for the two of you, yell. I’m not up to your standards but I take direction well, so just make sure it’s a simple task.”

As the staff dispersed, Sawyer paused to whisper a prayer for Erica and the baby, then got to work.

CHAPTER NINE

Sawyer headed for the nurses' station, but before she could ask for Erica's room number, she spotted Paige.

"Sawyer, I'm so glad you're here. You need to go talk some sense into your sister."

"Me? She doesn't listen to me." Her pride still stung from the moment at the restaurant. Paige drew her to the side of the hallway. "What's going on?"

"Her doctor says she needs complete bed rest. But she says she won't leave Brady with all the work for the next month."

"We can't make her—"

"Sawyer Drake," Paige said, her green eyes flashing. She was using her mommy voice, and Sawyer was surprised she didn't throw in her middle name. Then Paige's expression softened. "She could lose the baby."

Sawyer remembered the day Erica had told her she was pregnant. She'd been scared and wasn't even sure she wanted to keep it. They'd talked extensively about her options, and for a time she thought Erica would decide on adoption. But over the months something had changed. Erica had blossomed in her pregnancy and glowed with love for her unborn child. Sawyer couldn't let anything happen to her first niece.

"What do we need to do?"

“She can’t go back to work until after she has the baby.”

Which means I’ll be back at Drake’s. “Should someone stay with her?”

“It might be better if she spent the month in our guest room. She’d have to deal with the stairs at her place. And I’m home all day with the boys, so if she needs something I’ll be there.”

“Okay. I’ll take care of it,” she assured Paige. “Did Brady call Mom and Dad?”

“Yes. Erica insisted he tell them they didn’t need to come right now.”

“I agree. It sounds like she’ll be okay, if she’ll follow instructions.”

“Knowing Erica, that’s a big if.”

Sawyer had to agree. “Where’s her room?”

Erica had been admitted and was staying overnight so they could monitor the baby. She lay in bed partially reclined, fatigue etched on her pale face. Lines snaked from beneath the sheet and ran to a machine that Sawyer guessed monitored the baby’s heartbeat. Brady sat in a chair next to her bed.

“Hey, sis.” He stood and offered her the chair.

When he started to drag another chair over, Paige said, “Brady, I’m going to the cafeteria for some coffee. Would you come with me?”

“Sure.” He touched Erica’s hand and met Sawyer’s eyes. “We’ll be back in a bit.”

“How are you feeling?” Sawyer asked after they were alone.

“I’ll be better when I can get out of here and back home.”

“Yeah, about that—”

“The doctor said I could leave tomorrow.”

Sawyer hesitated, knowing Erica wouldn’t like her suggestion. “He also said you needed bed rest.”

Erica dismissed her words with a wave. “Sure, I’ll take it easy. But I’ve got a business to run.”

“I’ll take care of things at the restaurant. You just do as the doctor ordered.”

“But you don’t know the first thing about—”

“I’ve worked there for a month. Brady and I’ll manage. If we need help, you can advise us from your bed. Also, Paige and I discussed it and decided you should stay with them.”

“I haven’t lost the ability to make my own decisions, you know.”

Sawyer went on as if she hadn’t heard Erica. “Paige and the boys will be home all summer so you won’t be alone.”

“But—”

“No arguments, Erica.” She was beginning to see why her mother favored not letting her children finish a sentence. It was quite effective. And an idea occurred to her that might solve more than one problem. “The traffic has been making me crazy, so I’ll stay at your place. I’ll be close to the restaurant and won’t have to drive to work.”



In the waiting room, Jori watched Daniel and Quintin flip through a children’s book. She’d told Paige she would wait with the boys while she and Brady went downstairs.

She had overheard Paige tell Brady that Sawyer was coming back to Drake’s. Though she knew it probably wasn’t what Sawyer wanted, she was glad. If Sawyer had refused to help her family under these circumstances, Jori would have considered her actions unredeemable.

After Brady had left to follow the ambulance to the hospital, Sawyer had automatically taken charge. She had directed the staff and pitched in wherever needed to keep things running smoothly. Jori had been helping Chuck get the last of the entrées ready when several dessert orders had come in. Sawyer had covered her slacks and button-down shirt with an apron and, while Jori

directed her from nearby, had plated and garnished servings of caramel pie and double-fudge cake.

"Aunt Sawyer," Daniel called as Sawyer entered the waiting room. He rushed over to her and Quintin followed.

Sawyer knelt and draped an arm around each of their necks. "Hey, boys."

"Is Aunt Erica sick?" Quintin asked.

"A little bit, pal. But she's going to be just fine. In fact, she'll be staying with you guys for a while." Sawyer glanced at Jori, but her expression was unreadable. "Thanks for watching them. Guys, you remember Jori, don't you? She works with your dad and Aunt Erica." She ruffled Quintin's red curls.

"Do you make supper, too?" Quintin asked, clearly not satisfied with her explanation.

"Better." Jori leaned closer as if she was about to tell him a secret. "I make the dessert."

"Cool."

"Do you make hot-fudge sundaes? They're my favorite." Daniel bounced on the balls of his feet.

"I don't make them in the restaurant. But I do make them every once in a while for very special kids."

"We're special."

"Yeah, we are."

Jori smiled at them. "So I've heard."

Paige and Brady returned minutes later, carrying cups of coffee.

"Did you get her to agree?" Paige asked.

"After some discussion, yes."

"Good. Tomorrow after we pick her up here, Brady and I'll help her get some things from her apartment."

"I'm going to stay at her place while she's with you."

"Why?"

"Matt and Davis need some space. This way they can have it, and I can be closer to work."

“Admit it, sis,” Brady teased. “You’ve always been jealous that she got the loft.”

“I have not.”

“Don’t pay any attention to him, Sawyer. He’s just trying to rile you.” Paige took the role of peacekeeper.

“Come on, boys, it’s past your bedtime.” Brady corralled them toward the door. To Sawyer he said, “I’ll see you tomorrow at work.”

Sawyer nodded and accepted Paige’s hug and her whispered “Thank you.”

When they’d gone, Jori and Sawyer stood in awkward silence. Jori shifted from foot to foot and wondered how best to excuse herself from the room.

“Jori, I—”

“Sawyer—” They spoke at the same time.

“I guess I’ll be seeing you at work.” Sawyer’s voice was hesitant.

Jori took her words as an offer of truce. She knew Sawyer was trying to avoid apologizing, but knowing Erica’s health was Sawyer’s foremost concern, she decided to let it slide.

“I want to say hello to Erica before I go,” Jori said, avoiding her eyes and carefully keeping her tone neutral. She could be professional despite the tension that still wound tight between them.



Early the next morning, Sawyer climbed the flight of stairs at Drake’s, the thick soles of her boots echoing on the steps. At the top, she dropped the suitcase she carried long enough to dig Erica’s key out of her pocket. She shoved open the heavy metal door and pushed the bag inside with her foot, leaving it just inside to deal with later.

Erica hadn’t changed much in the apartment since Sawyer

was there last. Gleaming honeyed hardwood floors stretched from the front door to the far wall, where a large window looked out over Riverfront Park and the Cumberland River. Considering the downtown locale and the view, if they ever decided to lease out the apartment they could ask a fortune.

Erica, favoring a modern touch, had chosen bright colors throughout the open space. As in the office, she had apparently chosen the red sofa facing the window for its dramatic lines rather than for comfort. The boldly patterned accent chair sitting perpendicular to the sofa was the one piece of furniture Sawyer could actually get comfortable in. She wasn't entirely sure she could live there for even a month. But she had decided by the time Erica had the baby and was ready to move home, she would know what she wanted to do. If everything worked out between Matt and Davis, and she hoped for Matt's sake it did, she would be looking for a new apartment.

As she circled the counter that divided the kitchen from the main living area, she remembered how she'd teased Erica the first time she'd seen the renovation. Despite the full professional kitchen just a floor below, Erica had kept things top-of-the-line in her personal space as well. The kitchen was laid out in an efficient manner, with stainless-steel Pro-Series appliances and a wooden block housing her favorite set of knives.

The dark granite countertop accented the light maple cabinets with frosted-glass door inserts, but Sawyer grimaced at the kiwi-colored walls. She and her sister had completely different taste. *Well, I can't criticize her for at least making an effort to decorate. My beige apartment doesn't exactly scream "me."*

Now that she thought about it, she hadn't lived anywhere that felt like home to her in years. The last place that inspired any nostalgia in her was the house in the suburbs she'd grown up in. When she sought the comfort of sepia-toned memories, she recalled the home her parents had provided. While she would admit her childhood hadn't always been idyllic, it had been good. She suddenly remembered how Jori had trusted her with the story

of her own less-than-perfect upbringing and was ashamed of how she'd flung it in her face the first time Jori challenged her.

Since she'd moved out of her parents' house, she had floated from one apartment to another, rarely staying longer than the length of her lease. And with the exception of a fireplace or washer and dryer here or there, they were all pretty much the same. She'd spent all of that time transferring her belongings from one cookie-cutter box to another.



"Did you get Erica settled?" Sawyer asked Brady as she walked into the restaurant kitchen. She'd spent some time getting settled upstairs, then worked in Erica's office for a while. When she'd heard the sound of rattling pots and pans that signified life in the kitchen, she had come out.

"Yeah. She wants you to drop by tomorrow so she can go over things with you," Brady said, smiling.

"She's miserable already, isn't she?" She smiled at Jori over Brady's shoulder, but the pastry chef was either too engrossed in the chocolate she was shaving or purposely avoiding Sawyer's eyes.

"You know she hates not being in control." Brady dipped a spoon in one of the pans on the stovetop and handed it to her.

She tasted the savory reduction. "Red wine, shallots, and garlic," she guessed, falling easily into a game their mother had played while they were growing up. Though only Brady and Erica worked in the business, all three of them owed their practiced palates to Tia Drake.

"And chicken stock." Brady tested the sauce and added more wine. "She's already made a list of things she wants to tell you about running the place. Just go over there and humor her."

"I'd planned to stop by tomorrow anyway. I have a few questions myself."

"Please, don't give her a hard time."

“Why would you assume I’d give her a hard time?”

“Because you’re the two most stubborn women I know.” He handed the saucepan to Chuck.

“You mean besides Mom, right?”

“Well, I guess we know where you both get it from. It’s a damn good thing I inherited Dad’s tolerance.”

Sawyer glanced at Chuck in time to see him smother a smile. She narrowed her eyes and he pretended to look chagrined, but she knew Chuck saw right through her mock sternness.

“Don’t worry, little brother, I’ll play nice tomorrow.” She watched Chuck pull one of the perfectly seared steaks from the grill and place it on a plate, then spoon some of Brady’s reduction over it. She separated a sprig of parsley and garnished each plate as Chuck slid it in front of her.

“See that you do.”

Brady’s attempt at peacekeeping annoyed her. As usual he focused on keeping Erica satisfied, which always made Sawyer feel like an outsider in her own family. “Your wife is rubbing off on you, Brady.”

“I’m going to take that as a compliment, even though I know you didn’t mean it that way.”

When Sawyer stalked back to the dining room without responding, Jori watched her go. She’d carefully avoided looking at her while she was talking to Brady, though several times she thought she’d felt Sawyer’s eyes on her. She probably shouldn’t hold on to her anger about the way Sawyer had handled things when she’d left. That had been over a week ago, and so much had happened since then it seemed silly to cling to those hurt feelings.

She wondered if she’d read too much into the situation. She had taken Sawyer’s leaving personally when, as Sawyer had so cavalierly told her, it had nothing to do with her. Why should Sawyer consider Jori’s feelings when deciding whether to quit her job? Aside from an incredible attraction, what was really

between them? The beginnings of a friendship...maybe. But that wasn't reason enough to keep Sawyer at Drake's.

Whatever her personal issues, Jori knew she would set them aside in deference to Erica's condition. The Drake family needed to focus on her health and the safe delivery of the baby. So she and Sawyer would have a truce by way of avoidance, even if that was all they could manage.

CHAPTER TEN

One of the servers caught up with Sawyer as she circled the dining room. “The guy at table twenty-three wants to speak to the manager.”

She sighed. “I’ll be right there.”

They were halfway through the evening and she hadn’t had even a few minutes of downtime. She had developed a circuit of sorts between checking in at the hostess stand, making the rounds of the dining room, and sticking her head in the kitchen. But she didn’t have time for more than a quick exchange with Brady and a glance in Jori’s direction. Often Jori continued to work, her head bent over the plate in front of her. But when she did look up and their eyes met, Sawyer immediately lost her concentration. Once she stopped right in front of the door and one of the waitresses hurrying to pick up an order nearly ran over her.

She smoothed her hand over her hips and focused on adopting a professional air as she wove through the tables. As she reached number twenty-three she pasted on a polite smile. “I’m the manager, sir. Can I help you with something?”

“You certainly can.” The rotund man puffed out his chest and glared at her from under heavy gray brows. “This is overcooked.” He handed her his plate. The goat cheese and arugula ravioli was one of Brady’s most popular pasta dishes.

“I’ll bring another right out for you.”

She crossed the dining room, pushed through the swinging door, and slid the plate in front of Brady. "I need another ravioli. The customer says this one is overcooked."

Brady glanced at the plate in disgust. "It was perfectly cooked."

"I'll take care of it, Chef," Chuck jumped in, obviously knowing that Brady hated complaints.

Sawyer had learned that he refused to believe that either he or his staff could make a subpar entrée. Before coming to work at Drake's, she hadn't known her brother was such a temperamental chef. Erica was the same way, and Sawyer understood that, considering her sister's need for control. But she'd always thought of Brady as easygoing in the kitchen, so she was surprised to find him so stubborn when it came to critiques of his food. She was getting to know her family members better than she wanted to.

"Better make it al dente, Chuck," she suggested, glancing at Brady to see if he would protest. He ignored them both.

Her phone vibrated against her hip and she glanced at the display. Grimacing, she took several steps away from the chefs before she answered. "Erica, what a surprise. It's been more than an hour since the last time you checked up on me."

"Paige yells at me every time I get off the couch. What else am I supposed to do?"

"Make a list of books you want to read and I'll go to the library for you."

"I wouldn't know where to begin. Do you know how long it's been since I had time to read?"

"Come on, Erica. You can find something to do besides bugging me when I'm trying to work." She paced the far end of the kitchen, stepping quickly out of the way when Jori walked into the cooler.

"Sawyer, that place is my life. I rarely have time for anything else."

"Well, now this baby is going to be your life, too. So you may as well learn now how to give up some of the control here."

“What’s the big deal? I just want to make sure things are running smoothly.”

“And you don’t trust me to do the job.” She paused as she heard Chuck call out from behind her that the ravioli was ready. “I don’t have time for this now. Everything’s fine here. I’ll stop by in the morning. Don’t call again tonight.”

Irritated, Sawyer flipped her phone closed and stowed it. As she spun around she nearly ran into Jori, who was emerging from the cooler carrying a carton of cream. She caught Jori’s upper arms and held her just inches shy of crushing the carton between their bodies.

“Sorry,” Jori murmured.

“No. I’m—sorry.” Sawyer was sorry for more than just the near collision. She fought the urge to slide her hands across Jori’s shoulders and up the sides of her neck. She could cradle Jori’s jaw and kiss her before she even had time to react. Jori made no attempt to move away, so Sawyer held her there for a moment. Judging by Jori’s sharply indrawn breath, Sawyer wasn’t the only one affected by their nearness. Even though they weren’t alone, she was confident if she leaned forward, Jori wouldn’t resist.

“Ravioli’s up,” Chuck repeated from behind her, fracturing the connection. Sawyer dropped her hands, stepped backward, and waited for Jori to pass.

She returned the new entrée to the dissatisfied customer and waited patiently while he sampled it. When he nodded his head in approval, she smiled politely, then stopped his waitress and told her to comp the entire table. The young woman looked surprised but didn’t argue.

As Sawyer turned away, she noticed a group of men clustered around the hostess stand. She quickly placed the tall man in the charcoal suit and, pleased to see him, crossed the dining room in time to hear him give his name to the hostess.

“Well, hello, Lieutenant. Is it Monday already?”

“Miss Drake.” He took her outstretched hand, turned it over, and touched his lips to the back of it. Gesturing to the nearly full

dining room, he said, “It looks you have things under control in your sister’s absence.”

“Yes. I hear you’ve visited her.”

“I checked on her when she was in the hospital and she invited me to stop by your brother’s place.” He looked hesitant.

Sawyer studied him, finding sincerity in his kind eyes. “Good. She’s getting bored over there. She must enjoy the company.” She narrowed her eyes as guilt slid across his expression. “She asked you to report back after dinner tonight, didn’t she?”

“As a matter of fact, she did.” When he smiled, the warmth lit up his eyes and Sawyer could see why Erica liked him. “And I plan to tell her that while her presence is surely missed, you have everything well in hand.”

“Very diplomatic.”

He nodded in return before following the hostess to his table. Sawyer watched him go, contemplating her sister’s interest in the lieutenant. Paige had reported the visit to her house and, she’d added with a grin, he seemed to be quite taken with Erica. Certainly he was charming, but he exuded a solid confidence that Sawyer guessed made Erica feel safe, especially after her last boyfriend had proved so unreliable.



“Are you coming, Jori?” Brady asked after he finished cleaning up for the night. He paused on his way to the back door.

She closed the lid on the bakery box she had carefully filled with tarts. “I’ll be a bit longer.”

“See you tomorrow, then.”

Jori stowed the box in the cooler and went into the employee locker room, stripping off her chef’s jacket as she crossed to her locker and retrieved her keys. As she stepped back into the hallway, she noticed a light glowing at the far end.

She hesitated, clinging to hurt feelings over her confrontation with Sawyer. But she'd seen the apology in Sawyer's eyes when they'd nearly collided earlier. So, deciding to extend an olive branch, she returned to the kitchen and pulled down two ceramic mugs.

Ten minutes later, she headed down the hallway again. She braced her shoulder against the office doorjamb and, unnoticed, watched Sawyer as she leafed through a pile of papers. Every few moments she sighed and shoved a hand through her hair. The quiet concentration with which she worked was incongruent with the energy that usually emanated from her.

"Staying late?" Reluctant to disturb her, Jori kept her voice just above a whisper.

Sawyer glanced up. "For a bit. I'm trying to streamline Erica's system."

"How about a cocoa break?"

"That sounds great. Come in. Sit." Sawyer waved toward one of the chairs opposite her desk. She took off her glasses and dropped them on the desk, then rubbed her eyes.

Jori handed her one of the mugs of cocoa topped with miniature chocolate chips clinging to a cap of whipped cream. "It's hot."

"Thanks." Sawyer sipped carefully and Jori couldn't tear her eyes from Sawyer's lips as she ran her tongue along them to catch an errant bit of cream. "Mmm, that's good."

"Is something wrong with Erica's bookkeeping?"

Sawyer pushed aside a stack of invoices and bit the end of her pen. "She put a brand-new computer in here last year, yet she uses the same accounting system my dad used for years. It's all on paper when it would be much more efficient to go electronic."

"It must work for her. She keeps up with everything so well."

"She'd have a lot more hours in her day if she did things my way."

“Can you fix it?”

“Sure. I could have everything computerized within a week.”

“So, why don’t you do it? When Erica comes back you can show her what to do. There’s no reason not to make both of your lives easier. Is there?”

“I guess not.” Sawyer set her mug on a coaster and pulled the paperwork back in front of her. “Listen, the other day, I was frustrated with Erica. But that’s no excuse for taking it out on you. So—I’m sorry.”

Jori guessed from Sawyer’s expression that she expected to be forgiven quickly. And perhaps that would have been easier, but she had opened herself up to Sawyer, which she didn’t usually do, so to have Sawyer twist her words and stab her with them had hurt, and she wanted Sawyer to fully realize what she’d done. “I don’t share my past with just anyone.”

“I figured.”

“So when you used what I told you to hurt me—”

“I didn’t mean to.” Sawyer reached across the desk and covered her hand. “It won’t happen again.”

Jori nodded. “It’s late. You should start fresh tomorrow.”

For three nights in a row, Sawyer had still been at work in the office when Jori left and was there before anyone else the next day. It had never bothered Jori to know that Erica kept nearly the same hours.

Sawyer glanced down at their hands. The jolt she’d felt when she first touched Jori had settled into a pleasant hum as she stroked her thumb over the back of Jori’s hand. Jori turned it over and laced her fingers with Sawyer’s.

Then Jori rose, not releasing her hand. “Come on. Walk me out.”

Sawyer allowed Jori to draw her around the desk. They stood close, hands still clasped, and she stared at the hair curling over Jori’s right ear, because she was afraid if she looked in her

eyes she wouldn't be able to keep from kissing her. In Sawyer's kitchen when she had asked Jori to give in to the attraction between them, she'd said she couldn't get involved, and so soon after their renewed truce, Sawyer knew she should try to respect that. But while her apology was sincere, part of her wanted to push Jori's boundaries, if for nothing else than the pleasure she knew they could give each other.

"I need to grab my things from the kitchen." Jori's voice was low and a little rough.

"Okay." Sawyer didn't move and for a moment she wondered if Jori was going to.

Finally, Jori turned away, breaking the spell, and headed down the hallway. She went to the cooler and came out carrying a white box.

"Are you going to see Erica?"

"In the morning."

"Take these." Jori gave her the box. "Key lime tarts," she explained when Sawyer gave her a questioning look.

Jori gathered her jacket and keys from the counter, her fingers still tingling from holding Sawyer's. When Sawyer had touched her hand, Jori's mind had told her to pull away, but her body had been in charge when she'd laced their fingers together. She forgave herself the moment of weakness while steadying her resolve to avoid involvement.

"Trust me. She craves them. And if she's feeling generous, there are enough for Brady, Paige, and the boys."

"What's the deal, everyone gets a treat but me?"

Jori immediately conjured up a treat for Sawyer but stopped short of verbalizing it. *Damn, can I possibly be around her and not want to flirt with her?* "Be nice to your sister and maybe she'll share."

"Oh, that's too cruel," Sawyer said with a chuckle as she followed Jori to the back door. Jori glanced up as she got in her car and saw Sawyer closing the door. She hoped Sawyer would

lock up and go upstairs to Erica's apartment instead of going back to work in the office. And she hoped she could figure out a way to stop thinking about how Sawyer was spending her time.



"Here's the delivery schedule and some notes on payroll and suggestions for staffing," Erica instructed from Brady's sofa. She tore the top sheet from the legal pad in her lap and handed it to Sawyer.

"Who gave you paper and a pen, anyway?" Sawyer grumbled. "Aren't you supposed to be resting?" While running some errands, she had stopped by Brady and Paige's house to check on Erica.

"I'm delegating," Erica shot back.

Sawyer shifted in the arm chair and scanned the paper. "Erica, some of these deliveries are at seven a.m. Do you really get up that early after staying to close the night before?"

"You only have to go upstairs after you close. It's not like you have an hour commute."

"Seven in the morning?" Sawyer couldn't remember the last time she was awake and presentable at seven a.m. She calculated and decided that if she threw on some sweats and went downstairs she could sleep until a quarter till.

Sawyer's continued refusal to take her job seriously irritated Erica. But though she knew Sawyer was definitely not a morning person, she didn't feel guilty. Maybe now she'd learn to appreciate how hard Erica really worked. "It's important that you check the order against the invoice. Once you accept the delivery we have to pay for the full order whether it's correct or not."

"Okay."

"I mean it. Don't sign off if it's not right."

"I got it, Erica. I'm not an idiot."

"I didn't say you were."

“You’re talking to me like I can’t handle the simplest task.” Sawyer’s voice rose.

Erica matched it. When it came to Drake’s, she wouldn’t back down. “I’m handing my restaurant over to you. I think it’s understandable that—”

“*Your* restaurant? Yours? I wonder what Brady would think about that.” Sawyer stood and backed away from her.

“Brady doesn’t have anything to do with this.”

“No? Because the last time I checked, this was still a family business.”

“It is. But you’re so damn selective about when you want to be a member of this family, it’s hard to keep up.”

“I don’t have time to argue with you.” Sawyer folded Erica’s list and stuffed it in her pocket. “I have to go run *your* restaurant.”



“What’ll it be?” Sawyer asked from behind the mahogany bar she’d just finished wiping down. Their bartender had gotten a call about a family emergency, and since it was only an hour until closing time, Sawyer had told him to go and had finished his shift. By the time Brady, Chuck, and Jori finished in the kitchen and found her, she’d closed out the register and cleaned up.

“Give me a beer,” Brady said, sliding onto a stool at the bar while Jori took the one next to him.

“Coming up.” Sawyer slipped the beer into the opener under the bar and smoothly uncapped it. She passed it to him, then opened one for herself and held up a bottle to Jori, questioning.

“Just water, please. Let me guess, you used to be a bartender, too,” Jori said sarcastically as Sawyer handed her a bottled water. She followed the quick, competent motion of Sawyer’s hands.

“Just one of my many talents,” Sawyer quipped with a wink

and a teasing grin. Jori looked away, fighting curiosity about the nature of Sawyer's other talents. "Chuck?"

"Nothing, thanks."

Sawyer took a long swallow, then pressed her palms to the bar and leaned forward, her forearms flexing as they took her weight. "Countryfest starts this week. I expect business will pick up a bit with the swell of tourists in town."

"We usually don't get the crowds that the bars down on Broadway do," Brady said.

"I talked to a friend on the fund-raising committee and have arranged for us to be one of the sponsors for the main stage," Sawyer said. "We're having a banner made."

"And you think that's going to bring the crowds in?"

She shrugged. "Couldn't hurt to get our name out there. After all, maybe they'll get sick of beer and bar food and want a real meal."

"Sick of beer?" Brady punctuated his question with a swig from his own bottle.

"Maybe not," Sawyer admitted. "But we need to be more active with advertising and promotion. They gave me tickets to Friday's concert. Who wants them?"

Chuck shook his head. "I'll pass. I'm not a big country fan."

"Brady?"

"Yeah, give me a pair. I bet Paige would like to go."

Sawyer slid the tickets out of the envelope and handed over two. She fanned out the remaining pair and looked at Jori. "I've got two left. Want to join me?"

"Sure." Though Jori was uncertain if she should go with Sawyer, she told herself it wasn't really a date since Brady and Paige would be sitting next to them. In fact, it was really more of a work function. She wondered if the lie became less potent if she was aware of it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Friday morning, Jori parked in front of Brady's house and saw Paige kneeling next to the porch weeding a bed of daylilies. Her red-gold ponytail was pulled through the back of a baseball cap that shaded her eyes from the bright sun. The tops of her shoulders, left bare by a navy tank top, were turning pink. As Jori got out of the car, Paige looked up and waved.

"Good morning," Jori called as she walked over. "I just stopped by to check on Erica." She hadn't had time to visit since Erica had come home from the hospital.

Paige pulled off her gardening gloves and sat back on her heels. "She's inside. She's supposed to be resting, but I'd bet money she got off the couch the minute I came out here."

"She's not used to inactivity," Jori said diplomatically. "I need to go to work in an hour, so I'll run in and say hi."

"She's in the family room." Paige turned back to the flower bed. "Hey, will you tell her I'm leaving in fifteen minutes to pick the boys up from their friend's house?"

"Sure." Jori entered the house and passed through the living room to the family room. While Paige kept the rest of her home meticulously clean and organized, she seemed to have given up the cause in here. An assortment of toy guns, blocks, and cars and trucks of all sizes spilled out of a camouflage toy box and across the floor. Under the plasma television mounted on the far wall, a

low table held a video-game console. This was clearly the room where the family played.

Erica reclined on a large dark green sofa leafing listlessly through a *Gourmet* magazine. A stack of crossword-puzzle books and other publications sat on one corner of the coffee table in front of her.

“Hey,” Jori said from the doorway.

Erica laid the magazine down in her lap. “Hi. Thank you for the tarts.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed them.” Jori settled into the nearby chair.

“Very much.” Erica barely paused before changing gears. “So, how’s Sawyer really doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“At the restaurant. She tells me everything’s under control. And here I sit, not allowed to do anything but ring this damn thing when I want something.” Erica pointed at a small bell sitting nearby.

“She comes in early and she’s still there when we close. She does the paperwork and works the dining room all night. She’s amazing.”

“Yes. She can be quite impressive.”

Jori felt her face flush. She’d been raving about Sawyer and Erica seemed amused. She knew Sawyer was only doing what Erica had been doing for years. “I didn’t mean—well, of course we miss you. I only meant she’s really stepping up.”

“I’m not offended, Jori. I just hope she sticks with it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Time has always been Sawyer’s enemy.” Erica shifted and adjusted the mound of pillows behind her back.

“Maybe this time is different.”

Erica smiled. “I’ll bet Sawyer would appreciate your optimism, but I’ve known her longer than you have. Trust me, she’ll leave. It’s just a question of when. She’s been doing it since

she got out of college. She hops from one job to the next as soon as she gets bored.”

“I hope you’re wrong.” After Jori spoke, she realized how telling her words must be.

“Jori, I know you work for me, but I’d like to think we’re friends, too.”

“We are.”

“Ah—this is awkward. I don’t know that much about your lifestyle, but I get the feeling I should warn you. Sawyer isn’t known for her longevity.” Erica watched Jori’s earlier blush deepen.

“If you’re trying not to ask if I’m a lesbian, the answer is yes. I am.”

“I know you’re a private person, Jori. And I’m not trying to pry into your life. But I don’t want to see you get hurt.” Erica wasn’t certain if Jori would think she was butting in, but she was genuinely concerned. Sawyer was her sister and she loved her, but more than once, she’d seen Sawyer run away without worrying about what kind of mess she left behind. In fact, it was her signature move—rather similar to that of the men Erica usually dated, come to think of it.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ve already turned her down.”

“Oh.” Erica would have been impressed if Sawyer had stood firm when Jori rejected her. But she now understood that Jori’s refusal had likely been part of the reason she’d quit her job. *Typical.*

“What about you? How are you doing? Going stir-crazy?”

Erica easily accepted the subject change. “Absolutely. I’m not used to this much inactivity. Watching so much daytime television makes my brain feel like mush. Do you have any idea how many semicelebrities have their own talk shows now?”

Jori laughed. “I have no idea.”

“I really don’t know how I’ll stand it.” She couldn’t keep the

crankiness out of her voice. She hated to unload her frustration on everyone she talked to, but they all kept asking how she was doing, and sometimes she was too exhausted to pretend.

"It'll all be worth it when you're holding your child. Don't you think?"

"That's what everyone keeps telling me."

"Is something wrong?"

"Sometimes I wonder if keeping this baby is the right thing. Maybe I should have thought more about adoption."

Erica couldn't have known the emotions her words brought up for Jori. She was relieved that at least Erica hadn't been contemplating abortion. Jori's stance on that particular subject was solid and not the least bit politically based. Her most vivid memories included her mother screaming at her more than once that she wished Jori had never been born. She shivered and shoved the image aside. "Is that still an option?"

"I guess it is. But I'm past that point." Erica rested her hand gently on her rounded belly. "I just don't know if I'll be a good mother. I want her to have the best."

"She will."

"But am I being selfish to try to raise her alone? Doesn't she deserve a mother *and* a father?"

Jori could hear the indecision tearing at Erica. She slid to the edge of the chair and covered Erica's hand with hers. "Do you love this baby?"

Erica slipped her hand from beneath Jori's and caressed her stomach. "I really do. It's amazing how much."

"That's all she needs. Besides, you're not alone. She'll have lots of family around her—Sawyer, Brady, Paige, and the boys." The jolt against her palm surprised her and she quickly sought Erica's eyes.

Erica smiled. "Did you feel it?"

"Was that a kick?"

"Yeah. She's an active girl."

“That’s amazing.” Until then Jori hadn’t considered what it might feel like for a child to grow inside her. She’d always known she wanted a large family, but she didn’t feel ready for children yet. Because of her own screwed-up childhood she’d often thought she shouldn’t have kids. But the movement beneath her hand happened again and she suddenly imagined the tiny foot that caused it.



“Come on, Sawyer. We’re going to be late,” Brady said for the third time in fifteen minutes.

Drake’s was packed with patrons, every table in the dimly lit dining room filled to capacity, and several small clusters of people waited near the front door. Sawyer strode through the dining room to the bar and picked up a tray full of drinks. Brady trailed her, stepping quickly out of her way as she spun and headed for a nearby table. He took the tray from her and held it while she served the drinks. “Maybe you guys should go on without me,” she said and nodded politely in response to each murmured “thank you” as she placed the glasses in front of the diners.

“No way. Paige is waiting in the kitchen and Jori is getting ready. You’re going with us.” He slid the empty tray onto the bar, then, taking her shoulders, directed her toward the kitchen.

“We’re slammed, Brady. I can’t leave them like this.” Sawyer was pleased that they’d been getting a lot of traffic the past two nights, which she attributed to their advertisement at the music festival.

“Wendy has handled worse.”

“I know.” Their shift manager was competent and smart. She didn’t often get as much responsibility as she’d earned because Erica wouldn’t relinquish much control.

“Besides, the rush has already started to ease. They’re

catching up. And in an hour when the concert starts, it'll be even slower." He pushed her through the swinging door. "Now go get dressed."

"All right, all right. Give me ten minutes."

"You have five," he called as she headed for the small locker room.

"Geez. Impatient," she grumbled as she rounded the corner of a row of rusty gray lockers, already unbuttoning her shirt. She jerked to a stop as she saw Jori, bare from the waist up, standing near her locker. "Uh—sorry, I—" *Jesus, I should have gone to the office to change.* Sawyer had only that one rational thought before her brain slid out of focus. She knew she was staring but couldn't drag her eyes from smooth shoulders and ridges of collarbones that met in a hollow at the base of Jori's neck. She thought she might lose her mind as she roamed lower to Jori's breasts and the rose tips that tightened beneath her gaze.

"Sawyer, you have to stop looking at me like that." Jori's voice was gravelly and, Sawyer thought, a bit beseeching.

Jori clutched her T-shirt to her chest, and the dark blue cotton obscuring Sawyer's view was enough to break the thread that held her attention. But when she raised her eyes guiltily to Jori's face, she discovered flushed skin and eyes round and liquid with...was that desire?

"Why?" Sawyer stepped closer. Another two seconds and she would have to touch her.

"Because Brady and Paige are waiting for us." Jori blinked once, then again, and the heat faded slowly from her eyes.

Brady and Paige are waiting. She didn't say because she didn't want me to.

"Of course."

With some effort, Sawyer turned away, opened her locker, and pulled out a pair of jeans and a plaid camp shirt. Keeping her back to Jori, she quickly stripped off her slacks and blouse and dressed in the more casual clothes. She swung her locker closed,

turned around, and saw Jori now completely covered, leaning against the door watching her with unguarded lust. Arousal slammed into Sawyer's stomach, and the air in the small room grew heavy and so hot it seemed to sear her lungs as she dragged it in.

Jori quickly straightened. "Sorry," she mumbled, averting her eyes, and pulled her lower lip between her teeth.

"Don't be." Unable to ignore her thudding heart, Sawyer crossed the room in three quick strides. Before Jori had time to react, she pinned her against the door and shoved one hand into her hair, holding her captive. She allowed her mouth to hover a whisper from Jori's for several seconds, enjoying the anticipation of the kiss, the reflexive grasp of Jori's hand on her forearm, and her unsteadily indrawn breath.

When she couldn't stand it anymore, she closed the distance between them and met Jori's unexpectedly hungry mouth. Jori matched each stroke of her tongue and nip of teeth against her lip. Sawyer drank her in, infused with thrumming pleasure and the sweet exhilaration of a first kiss.

When she finally registered Jori's hands pushing against her shoulders, she drew back.

"Something wrong?" she asked softly. *It certainly felt right to me.*

"We should go." Jori stared at the floor between them.

Sawyer touched Jori's chin, drawing her head up so she could see her face. Her eyes were soft and hazy, her lips dark pink. Sawyer longed to kiss them again, and having felt the abandon in Jori's response, she knew she could. But she wouldn't want to stop, and Brady was waiting. So instead, she said, "We have a minute. Did I upset you?"

"No. I—um, it was nice."

"Nice?" Sawyer chuckled. Such an inane word to describe the exchange that had left her breathless and nearly shaking.

"Very nice."

“Okay.” Sawyer smiled to herself and took another step away from her. She picked up her light jacket from the nearby bench. “Let’s go.”

As they came down the hallway Sawyer heard Paige say, “Sweetheart, we have plenty of time. The concert doesn’t start for another hour.”

Brady was unconvinced. “Well, how long does it take to change clothes?”

“Hey, it takes time to look this good,” Sawyer called out as she strutted into the kitchen, purposely calling attention to herself and away from Jori’s flushed face and freshly kissed appearance.

“About time,” Brady grumbled. He hated to be late for anything, so much so that it actually stressed him out if he wasn’t early. He hadn’t inherited the trait. Unless it pertained to Drake’s, both their parents were more likely to be tardy. Sawyer wondered if Brady’s obsession with being on time stemmed from growing up with their lax idea of schedules.

As Brady headed for the back door, Sawyer let Jori precede her. She touched her lower back lightly as they stepped outside, but Jori’s continued avoidance of eye contact worried her.

“It’s a nice night. Would you like to walk?” Brady asked. Sawyer knew he would relax now they were on the way. She briefly wondered if twins were more complex than singles like her.

The sidewalk was still damp from a brief shower earlier, but the clouds had passed quickly and the clear, orange-tinged sky was streaked with red as the sun set behind the skyline.

Countryfest drew over a hundred thousand fans to Nashville each year, so the sidewalks were more crowded than usual and they were swept along in the rhythm of the throng. As dusk approached, neon glowed in the windows of the bars lining Broadway. Live music and the smell of fried food emanated from open doors, but nothing could entice the flock. Aside from the occasional stragglers who ventured inside, most of them

continued to flow toward the Sommet Center seeking big-name country stars.

Sawyer smothered a curse as a particularly zealous fan rushed past, slamming his shoulder into hers. “When you live here, it’s easy to forget people actually come here on vacation, isn’t it?”

“This is the first thing I’ve done that is remotely touristy,” Jori said.

“Really? But didn’t you grow up here?” Paige asked.

Jori shrugged. “I guess I’ve never had the time.”

Her slightly sad tone tugged at Sawyer’s heart, and she sensed that Jori’s neutral expression took some effort. She could imagine that such luxuries had never been a priority or even a possibility for Jori. Though Sawyer sometimes resented her family’s intrusion into her life, she couldn’t imagine being completely alone in the world.

Swamped by a wave of empathetic loneliness, she tucked her hand in the crook of Jori’s elbow and drew her nearer.

“Stick with me. I’ll show you all kinds of new things,” she murmured, leaning close as they walked.

Jori couldn’t help but smile at Sawyer’s mildly flirtatious tone. She had to admit she liked the warm feeling of Sawyer’s fingers wrapped around her arm. It amazed her that the same woman who could make her senses go haywire with a kiss could also so totally anchor her with a touch. *And what a kiss.* It had taken a good part of Jori’s willpower to draw back from Sawyer’s embrace. She could easily have lost herself in the softness of Sawyer’s breasts pressed against hers and Sawyer’s hips pushing her insistently against the locker-room door.

She hadn’t reacted this way to anyone before. Her few relationships, though pleasant, had been tame. Never before had she been unable to resist the magnetic pull of another person. And it had been years since she’d believed someone could fill the hollowness in her heart, but she closed out those sensations in favor of the alarms ringing in her head. The last thing she needed

was to start thinking Sawyer Drake would be the one to occupy real estate in her heart. She was either too self-centered to care about those around her or too lazy to put forth the effort. Either way, Jori didn't need to waste her time. Besides, Sawyer had proven how little respect she had for her when she'd kissed her just now, even after she'd made it clear that night in Sawyer's kitchen that wasn't what she wanted.

When they reached the Sommet Center, Sawyer dropped her hand long enough to open the door for them. As Jori followed Brady and Paige inside, she felt the brush of Sawyer's hand on her back and wondered if, in time, she would become less aware of her. She read too much into every touch, every look, but she couldn't deny the tingle along her spine when Sawyer's fingers brushed the bare skin of her arm. Surely if she felt it, Sawyer did, too, though nothing could come of it. She refused to let it.



A slender blonde dressed in tight black jeans and a black tank top strode across the stage. Her unrestrained long hair feathered wildly around her face and over her shoulders. She strapped on a bright pink guitar, cradling its body against her hip, and a collection of silver bangles at her wrist failed to hide the tattoo that crept up the inside of her forearm.

The band behind her immediately launched into a rocking country tune, and she stepped up to the microphone. As the volume increased, she tapped a steady rhythm on the stage floor and her fingers flew over the strings, driving the music up until everything exploded in a burst of drums and guitar.

"Country music ain't what it used to be," Brady said between songs. The appreciation in his eyes earned him an elbow in the ribs from Paige. His grin in response didn't show a trace of remorse. "How come you didn't elbow Sawyer? She was looking, too."

"She's not my responsibility," Paige countered, slanting Sawyer a look anyway.

“Who are you kidding, Paige? I saw you checking her out, too,” Sawyer teased.

“I was not,” she protested, but Sawyer thought she saw her color slightly.

“Even if you were, it doesn’t mean you’re gay,” Sawyer deadpanned.

Paige laughed and gave her a shove. “Thanks.”

Sawyer glanced at Jori, who was smiling wide enough to display the dimple in her right cheek. Sawyer *had* been checking out the blonde. A study in sensual energy and confidence, the singer had captivated every person in the audience. But looking at Jori now, her eyes sparkling and sheer enjoyment lighting up her face, Sawyer thought, *What blonde?* In that moment, she couldn’t think of anyone she’d rather be looking at, couldn’t imagine anyone more breathtaking. When Jori gave her a questioning look, she forced herself to smile, then look away.

“Come on, Jori, back me up here,” Brady said, leaning to look past Sawyer and Paige. “Shouldn’t Sawyer get in trouble, too?”

“I’m not married,” Sawyer declared.

When Brady looked at Jori expectantly, she merely shrugged. “She has a point. There’s no one to stop her.”

Sawyer gave Brady a smug smile, then turned to blatantly leer at the woman on stage. Though Jori knew Sawyer was trying to annoy her brother, she was surprised by a stab of jealousy. She didn’t have any claim on Sawyer just because an hour ago in the locker room Sawyer had acted like she wanted to rip her clothes off. *Now there’s a bad idea.* In fact, she’d just finished reminding herself why she wasn’t worth her time.

When the music began again, Brady and Paige concentrated on the stage again. “So, is she your type?” Jori asked close to Sawyer’s ear in order to be heard.

“What?” Sawyer turned and suddenly their faces were inches apart. Sawyer arched a brow and the depths of her eyes, enhanced by the sable flare in her warm mocha irises, distracted Jori.

“That singer. Blonde, tight body. Is that your type?” She shouldn’t care.

“There’s really no right answer to that question, now, is there?” Sawyer smiled, a lazy lifting of the corners of her beautiful mouth that Jori wished she didn’t find so damn attractive.

“Chicken?” Jori challenged.

“Oh, you want to go there? You really want to know?”

Jori nodded.

“Right now, my type is an exotically beautiful brunette with dark eyes and a dimple,” Sawyer said boldly as she touched the dimple in question, then brushed Jori’s chin.

“Smooth.” Jori didn’t expect anything less from Sawyer. Still, mesmerized by the sensation of Sawyer’s fingertips on her skin, she swayed closer, not caring if anyone noticed. For once she didn’t mind the crowd pressing in around them and felt oddly cloaked instead of smothered.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sawyer rushed through the hallways of Baptist Hospital, trying to follow the signs to the maternity ward. She cursed under her breath. Erica would kill her if she missed the birth. *Every freaking hallway looks the same.* Finally she turned a corner and rushed into the waiting room.

Grabbing her upper arms, Brady halted the forward progress that would have otherwise flattened him. “It’s about time.”

“She just had to go into labor a week and a half early and at one in the morning,” Sawyer grumbled. She’d been asleep for only an hour when the phone rang. Thirty minutes later, after slipping on a pair of jeans and a rumpled T-shirt, she’d been in the car on her way to the hospital. “How’s she doing?”

“Paige is with her now. The doctor says she’s progressing quickly.”

Sawyer slouched in a nearby chair and tried to get comfortable. She knew *quickly* didn’t mean anything when referring to childbirth. Her new niece probably wouldn’t show herself for hours.

“Mom and Dad are driving up.” Brady sat next to her. “I called Wendy, too. She’ll take care of the morning delivery. I told her one of us would get there when we could.”

“Good. Thank you.” Sawyer had planned to run back downtown to meet the truck.

They sat together quietly in the sterile-looking room, hearing only the distant beep of some piece of machinery and the occasional squeak of rubber-soled shoes on the polished hallway floor.

“Do you think you guys will ever do this again?” Sawyer asked, elbowing Brady.

“Probably not. Paige wants a girl, but neither of us can handle her being pregnant again. What about you? Do you think you’ll have kids?”

She shrugged and remained silent.

“You don’t know?”

She considered and discarded several white lies. “What if Erica is right about me? What if I really can’t commit to anyone? I don’t know if it’s fair to bring a child into a relationship that may not last.”

“There’s no guarantee any relationship will last, no matter who’s involved.”

“Give me a break, Brady. You and Paige are perfect.”

“We’re really not. We have problems just like anyone else. Relationships are work. There’s no magic formula.”

“I know. But if you believe Erica, I have even less chance.”

“Do you believe her?”

“She knows me pretty well.”

Brady laughed. “That’s ridiculous.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry about what Erica thinks. Do you want to love someone completely and be committed?”

Sawyer hesitated. “I want to.”

“Okay. Then why worry about what anyone else thinks?” He yawned and stretched his arm along the chair behind her. “What’s stopping you?”

“The only times I’ve really tried, I failed.” Sawyer recalled her early naïveté in love. She’d been a freshman in college the first time someone broke her heart—crushed was probably a more accurate description. In hindsight, she blamed herself for falling

for her roommate, though certainly the woman should have told her she was straight from the beginning. She was completely in love by the time her roommate told her it was just a fling. Sawyer even remembered her exact words. “You didn’t really think this was serious, did you? It was just a bit of fun, before I settle down and get married.” Sawyer had moved to another dorm and a few months later heard that her former lover was engaged to a football player.

She could probably have gotten over that incident if it had been the only one. But each of her subsequent attempts ended similarly until she finally decided she was just the type that other women stayed with until something better came along.

“You’re not still hung up on that, are you?” Brady’s voice tugged her back to the present before she could dissect her other failed relationships. After Sawyer had ended things with Erica’s friend and Erica wasn’t speaking to her, she had confided in Brady about her insecurities.

“Maybe I’m just not meant for love. The truth is, most of the time I bail before I start to care because I expect them to eventually move on. So I do it first.”

“You just need to find the right person.” Brady dismissed her concerns with the same phrase her mother often used. In fact, they were the exact words her mother had used when Sawyer came out to her, only then she hadn’t met the right man. Since that day, Tia had accepted that Sawyer was a lesbian and had amended the phrase. “Just think, someday you’ll have someone to nag you about picking your towel up off the bathroom floor, and a couple of kids leaving Matchbox cars on the floor for you to step on.” He rubbed a hand over the stubble on his jaw. “Man, those things really hurt.”

Sawyer laughed. “You make it sound so appealing.”

“It is. I mean, sure, there are days—but most of the time it’s good. Knowing she’ll be there when you wake up. Having someone to talk to over the dinner table.”

“I’ve had that.” *Albeit briefly.* She and Deborah had

practically lived together for one intense week. Of course, it hadn't lasted past the following weekend.

"I'm not talking about Matt."

"Very funny." She tried to shove him away, but he squeezed her shoulder.

"Seriously—"

"You're never serious."

"As I was saying, seriously, it's different when you're married."

"Yeah, well, until the laws change, I'll have to take your word on that one."

"You know what I mean. It's different when you know that person will be there no matter what stupid thing you might do or say. Why do you have such a hard time envisioning this? Our parents are still together, Paige and I are going strong. Can't we be your role models?"

"I'll work on it," Sawyer said, more to stop this conversation than to admit her desire to pattern her life after his. She didn't really believe she'd have anyone who would stick around no matter what she said or did. Others might have that kind of life, but she had finally accepted that she might never achieve her version of the fairytale. Still, she secretly envied her friends who had been coupled for more than a decade.



Sawyer eased the door open and peeked inside the darkened room. The amber glow of the streetlight outside the window slashed through the space between the vertical blinds and fell across the sleeping form in the bed.

But when she started to close the door she heard Erica whisper, "I'm awake."

She tiptoed halfway in before she realized the other bed was

vacant. “How are you feeling?” she asked as she sat in the chair next to Erica.

“I’m still pretty tired.” Using the nearby control, she raised the back of her bed a bit. “I bet you’re getting sick of visiting me in the hospital.”

“Well, hopefully this will be the last time for a while.”

“Did you see her?”

“She’s beautiful.” Through the nursery window, Sawyer, Paige, and Brady had watched the pink-skinned baby cry and wave her fists. The tiny knit cap covered her head, but Paige said she had a thick head of white-blond hair. Taylor Ashley Drake. Sawyer remembered how fragile her nephews had looked when they were born, but somehow her first niece seemed even more delicate.

Erica grinned. “I might be biased, but I think she’s gorgeous.”

“Yeah, well, luckily she looks like her mother.”

Erica’s smile faded a bit. “She has his chin.”

“Have you called him?” Sawyer regretted reminding her of Taylor’s loser father.

“No.”

“Do you—want me to?”

“No. He knew I was pregnant and never bothered to get in touch. There’s no point now. I don’t need him. I’ve got you guys.”

“That’s right.” Sawyer squeezed Erica’s hand. She hadn’t always had such a positive attitude. The first four months Erica was pregnant, her anger had been palpable. Sawyer had been worried until the first time Erica felt the baby kick; then love pushed out her rage. Now Erica seemed to experience only brief glimmers of hurt, which she clearly tried hard to hide.

“I’m going to stay at Paige and Brady’s for a couple more weeks, and then Taylor and I are going home. But you’re welcome

to stay as long as you want, provided you don't mind a newborn crying in the middle of the night."

"We'll work that out when the time comes." Sawyer hadn't expected to miss Matt so much. Every day after work, she went upstairs and flopped down in the chair and stared at the empty sofa. She was still adjusting to living alone and hadn't yet considered what she would do when Erica returned.

"Mom called this morning. She and Dad are on the way up and should be here this afternoon. Are you going to Drake's?"

Sawyer laughed. "Can you ever stop thinking about work?"

Erica's expectant silence was answer enough.

"Yes, I'll be at the restaurant, but first I'm going home and try to grab a power nap, since I was up all night waiting for Miss Taylor to appear."

"Up all night, my ass. Paige said she saw you and Brady sleeping in the waiting room."

"We were resting our eyes," Sawyer shot back.

"Brady was drooling."

Sawyer smiled. "He's been taking pictures of Taylor through the nursery window to show everyone at the restaurant."

"Will you tell Jori and Chuck I expect them to come by Brady's and visit?"

"Sure."

"And if you see Derrick Ames, please tell him—well, never mind."

"So, you and the lieutenant, huh?"

"I don't know what I'm thinking. I mean, look at me." Erica fluttered the edge of the sheet covering her.

"What are you talking about? You just had a baby. No one expects you to be a beauty queen."

"Gee, thanks, Sawyer."

"Oh, you know what I mean."

"That's my point. Even if I'd let myself believe he could be

interested in a pregnant woman, now I'm the mother of an infant. How sexy is that?"

"He asks about you every Monday. And I got the impression you two had been in touch."

"We have."

"Obviously he was into you before, and so far the idea of a baby hasn't scared him off. So why not give him a chance?"

"You're probably right."

Sawyer feigned shock. "Could you say that again?"

"Okay, I said you're probably right. Enjoy it, because who knows when it'll happen again. Why are you so smart about my life, but when it comes to your own—"

"And that's my cue to leave." They'd been getting along and Sawyer didn't want to ruin that. "I'm heading home for that nap."



Jori pressed a ball of dough against the floured metal counter in front of her, then picked up a solid maple rolling pin and began to flatten the ball. She had already prepared the filling for the blackberry cobbler.

"Hi, Jori," Chuck called as he entered the kitchen. He pulled an armload of vegetables from the subzero and carried them to his station, whistling as he began to prepare them for the day's menu. "You hear about the baby?"

"Yeah, Paige left me a message this morning. Do you have any kids, Chuck?" Jori realized that in the months she'd worked at Drake's, she hadn't learned much about her coworkers. Brady and Erica were easy to know, because they shared a bit of the same outgoing nature that Sawyer had in abundance. They brought their family life into the kitchen and Jori couldn't help but learn about them. But Chuck was more reserved.

“One daughter. She’s fourteen. She lives with her mom.”

“Do you see her much?”

“Every other weekend, although lately she’s more interested in going to parties with her friends than hanging out with her dad.”

Having never done much of either, Jori didn’t know how to respond.

“Ah, I guess that’s just part of growing up.” He shrugged and started whistling again. “I’m going out back for a cigarette before Brady gets here.” Brady had been after him to quit, and while he showed no signs of doing so, he had cut back and tried to get them in when Brady wasn’t around.

Jori smiled and continued to work the dough. She loved the bustle and din of the kitchen during service, but she also savored these quiet times before the rest of the staff and the customers arrived. She did some of her best thinking during the peaceful pre-open period. And today her thoughts were firmly on Sawyer Drake. If she was being honest, Sawyer had been logging a lot of hours in her mind lately.

During the concert and later that night at home alone, she had rehearsed how she would let Sawyer down easily. She simply couldn’t get involved with someone she worked with. But Sawyer wouldn’t hear it; every time she tried to bring it up, Sawyer suddenly got busy or just flat-out left the room.

The memory of past mistakes still stung. Once before, she had ignored the voice that told her a relationship with her boss was a bad idea. She’d vowed not to put herself in that situation again. And until she’d met Sawyer, she’d had no problem keeping that promise. But the constant arc of energy that surrounded Sawyer drew her in. Being in the spotlight of that energy was exhilarating, electrifying, and dangerous. Sawyer could almost make her forget her resolve, and losing Drake’s would be even more painful than losing the last job. Jori had to admit, though, if she hadn’t already been burned once, she probably wouldn’t be trying so hard to avoid her growing feelings for Sawyer.

In addition to their attraction, she was beginning to respect Sawyer's burgeoning work ethic. She was much easier to resist when she was just a slacker. But now Sawyer was spending long hours in the restaurant, often not going upstairs after the morning deliveries. Instead, Jori found her in the office when she arrived every day. Sawyer had made the accounting changes they'd discussed and had also instituted a computerized scheduling system for the employees to replace the handwritten ones Erica used to post.

She wondered why it pleased her so much to see Sawyer investing her time in Drake's, though it certainly didn't take a rocket scientist to figure that one out. She was obviously hoping Sawyer would stick around after Erica returned. As much as Jori wanted to ignore the thought, she couldn't deny its truth. She wanted Sawyer to stay. She enjoyed seeing her every day. And even though she wasn't ready to admit that she wanted more from their relationship, she wanted Sawyer to want more. She'd never met anyone who could excite her with just a wink or a smile.

Sawyer shoved through the swinging door, as if Jori's thoughts had conjured her. When she saw Jori, she smiled widely. "Hello."

"Hey. You look tired." Fatigue smudged Sawyer's eyes, and Jori suppressed the desire to touch her cheek.

"I just took a nap." Sawyer tugged on her earlobe. "I thought I looked better. You should have seen me in the middle of the night."

Jori could imagine how Sawyer would look if awakened in the early morning hours for one more round of lovemaking. Desire would flare behind the sleepiness in her eyes, and Jori's body warmed at the thought of that desire focused on her.

"Did you bring baby pictures?"

"Brady's got them. Erica will be going home tomorrow or the next day. Well, actually, she'll be staying with Brady and Paige for two more weeks. But she expects you to stop by and see the baby."

Jori nodded.

“Okay.” Sawyer rubbed a hand over her face. “I guess I better get to work.” By the time she’d got back to Drake’s she’d managed only a thirty-minute nap. But despite her sluggish mind, her body was still sharp enough to react to Jori, and she didn’t rein in the impulse to touch her. She brushed her hand down the outside of Jori’s arm and tangled their fingers.

When she didn’t pull away, Sawyer was encouraged. Certain she could make Jori forget her reservations, she drew her close and kissed her. Heat flashed through her when Jori allowed her tongue to possess her, then tentatively stroked back. How was it possible that she’d missed the taste of Jori’s kiss after only one? She held Jori’s face in her hands, then slid them behind her neck. When her fingers encountered the knot of her bandana she worked it loose, balled the fabric in one hand, and buried the other in the back of Jori’s hair.

Jori leaned against her, grasping her collar almost desperately, and one of them moaned. While Sawyer was losing her mind, Jori must have been gathering herself, because in the next instant she tried to jerk out of Sawyer’s embrace, but Sawyer caught her around the waist.

“I can’t do this.”

“Sure you can.” Expecting no resistance, Sawyer trailed a line of kisses along her neck.

“No,” Jori insisted, and this time when she stumbled back, Sawyer let her go. “I thought I was clear. I won’t get involved with you.”

Sawyer bristled at the accusation in her tone. “I didn’t imagine your tongue in my mouth. You’re sending some pretty mixed signals. Or are you really just a tease?”

Jori flushed but Sawyer didn’t know if she was embarrassed or angry. Her jaw was tight and she avoided Sawyer’s eyes.

“I’ve got baby pictures,” Brady called as he strode into the kitchen, followed by Chuck.

Sawyer stepped back, giving Jori room so she and Chuck could ooh and ahh over the photos. Brady handed over the stack, then went to the sink to wash his hands.

The door to the dining room opened and a female voice said, "What does a person have to do to get service in this place?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. We're not open yet." Sawyer turned and grinned at her mother.

"That explains why the front door was still locked. Luckily, I have a key."

Tia's hair, the same shade as Erica's, fell in waves to her shoulders, brushing against the flowered dress that flowed around her slight frame. Sawyer's father, Tom, towered behind her. His dark hair was liberally peppered with gray and had begun to recede years ago. His neat mustache and wire-rimmed glasses made him appear academic.

Brady wiped his hands on the towel at his waist and crossed to her. "Hello, Mom. Dad." He kissed Tia's cheek and hugged Tom. "Have you been to the hospital yet?"

"We just came from there. Erica was resting so we decided to stop by here before we check into the hotel. Come give me a hug, Sawyer."

"Hi, Mom." Sawyer accepted Tia's embrace. "You guys can stay upstairs. I'll sleep on the couch."

Tia waved off the suggestion. "No one could sleep on Erica's couch. You wouldn't be able to walk in the morning."

"That's true," Brady said. "But you don't have to stay in a hotel. We've got room at our place."

"Okay, dear."

"It's settled, then. I'll call Paige and let her know to expect you."

"I understand you've been making some changes to my restaurant." Tia looked around the kitchen as if she would be able to see the difference.

Sawyer laughed. "You and Erica should get together and

decide whose restaurant it really is, because I can handle only one possessive woman at a time.”

Tia ignored Sawyer’s comment. “Show me what you’ve done.”

“Okay. But first”—hesitantly, Sawyer touched Jori’s shoulder—“let me introduce you to our pastry chef. Jori Diamantina, Tia Drake and my father, Tom.”

Jori smiled. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Drake.”

“Please, call me Tia. My daughters rave about your desserts.”

Jori blushed.

“Jori makes an awesome lemon-meringue torte.” Sawyer rested her hand at the small of Jori’s back, but her posture remained rigid and she didn’t meet her eyes.

“A great pastry chef is hard to find.” Tom smiled at Jori. “Please, don’t let my children run you off.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Dad. We don’t plan to let Jori get away. Do we, Sawyer?” Brady said with a wink.

Tia looped her arm around Sawyer’s. “I’d like that tour now, dear, before you get busy with opening.”

“Okay, Mom.”

Sawyer allowed her mother to lead her away, glancing back at Jori as they headed down the hall to the office. *We don’t plan on letting Jori get away.* Brady had purposely been trying to pique Tia’s interest with the comment, but their mother had been too distracted to notice. Thank God. Because if Tia caught on to Sawyer’s interest in Jori, she wouldn’t hear the end of it. Tia had always fancied herself a matchmaker for her children, and Sawyer was no exception.

Every time she split up with someone, Tia told her she was going after the wrong type of woman and that she should just let her find her a suitable mate. And when Sawyer implored Erica to stop telling their mother who she was seeing or not seeing, Erica only argued that it was Sawyer’s own fault for going through women as if they were disposable.

Well, it served them both right that Sawyer hadn't dated anyone new in more than three months. Had it really been that long? Yes, she'd been at Drake's for almost two months, and since she'd met Jori, she hadn't looked at another woman.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sunday morning, Jori mounted the steps to Brady's house and rang the bell. She was hoping she would run into Sawyer here, but she didn't see her Solara in the driveway. Between Sawyer's responsibilities at Drake's and visiting with her parents, Jori hadn't spent much time with her in the past two days. But the distance didn't have the desired effect. Jori thought about her even more, especially when she glimpsed her throughout her shift.

Now, though she was here to see Erica and the new baby, she was disappointed that she wouldn't see Sawyer. She tried to shove that feeling aside as Paige opened the door.

"Good morning, Jori. Come on in."

She shifted the brightly wrapped present from under her arm into her hands and followed Paige to the living room. Erica sat on the couch and Tia, holding the baby, sat beside her. Tom and Brady occupied the love seat opposite them.

"Hey, Jori. Thanks for coming by," Erica said.

"How are you feeling?" Jori placed her gift on the coffee table in front of Erica and sat in a nearby armchair.

"Good. I'm taking advantage of all this help, because once I go home and Mom and Dad leave, I won't be sleeping much."

"Would you like to hold her?" Tia asked as she rose.

“She’s beautiful, Erica,” Jori said, carefully accepting the bundle wrapped in a soft pink blanket. “Hello, Taylor,” she whispered to the sleeping baby.

Erica wondered if Jori was also thinking of the day she expressed doubts about her plans to keep the baby. Those doubts had dissolved the instant the doctor had placed Taylor on her chest. Distantly, she heard the front door open.

“Erica, are you here?” Sawyer called as she came down the hall.

Erica, Paige, and Jori shushed her in unison.

“Taylor’s asleep,” Paige said as she stood and offered Sawyer her chair. Sawyer waved her off. Instead, she perched on the arm of Jori’s chair.

As she sat, Sawyer glanced at Jori. “Hi.”

Erica watched Jori return the greeting with a shy smile. *Oh, no.*

“Hi there, gorgeous niece.” Sawyer stroked Taylor’s cheek with one finger. Her other hand rested on Jori’s shoulder, and Jori didn’t seem to mind.

Damn, I was hoping that wouldn’t happen. Erica had been expecting the energy that burned between Sawyer and Jori to fizzle out. When Jori had told her she’d rejected Sawyer’s advance, she’d expected that would be the end of it.

“Do you want to hold her?” Jori asked.

“You keep her. I don’t want to wake her.” When Paige asked Tom and Tia about their plans to drive back to Florida, Sawyer leaned closer to Jori and murmured, “I’ve missed you.”

“We’ve been at work together every day,” Jori whispered, and despite having rebuffed Sawyer’s last advance, she felt a sizzle of excitement in response to Sawyer’s words.

“Sure, but I haven’t gotten you alone so I could—”

“Sawyer,” Jori hissed, aware that any one of Sawyer’s family members could overhear.

“I was just going to say I want to—”

“I mean it.” Jori pinched the outside of Sawyer’s thigh and

smiled as Sawyer tried to smother her yelp, but the baby in Jori's arms stirred anyway.

When she began to cry, Erica glared at Sawyer. "Nice going. I should make you change her."

"Oh, no. Let Grandpa have her." Tom took Taylor from Jori's arms. "Where are the diapers?"

"They're in the guest bedroom, Dad. But I can take care of it."

"I don't mind. I wasn't around to change your diapers, but I can make up for it with my grandchildren." He headed down the hallway toward the bedroom, murmuring softly to the still-fretting infant.

"I should get going. She really is gorgeous, Erica. And if you need anything, please call me." Jori rose.

"Thanks for stopping by."

Sawyer stood as well. "I'll walk you out." She followed Jori to her car and opened the driver's side door. "I really have missed you," she said when Jori paused beside her. "Maybe we could have lunch one day, or go out for a drink after work."

"Sawyer, I don't know how many ways I can say it. I'm not looking to get involved." She sighed. "And if you can't accept that, then maybe I shouldn't continue to work at Drake's."

"What? You wouldn't leave."

"I don't want to. But I will." Jori's expression was serious. "I can't keep telling you no."

"Why can't you give us a chance?"

"I don't need to. I know how it would end."

Sawyer couldn't argue that point; she had a pretty good idea how it would play out as well. But for the first time in a very long time, she feared she might not be the one to end it. She wanted Jori in ways she'd never wanted anyone, and it had her so conflicted that she didn't know whether to grab Jori and pull her close or run.

"Maybe the journey would be worth it," she said quietly, but Jori had already turned away.



“What the hell was that?” Erica demanded as soon as Sawyer walked back into the living room. She hurried across the room and confronted Sawyer before she could escape.

“What?”

“You and Jori.”

Never one to be left out, Brady jumped in. “What about them?”

“Didn’t you see the way they looked at each other?”

“Obviously I didn’t. So why don’t you just tell me what you’re talking about.”

“Something is going on between them. Has anything happened that you didn’t let me know about?”

“No,” Sawyer said quickly. But Erica turned her accusing look on Brady.

Brady shrugged. “I guess they seemed pretty friendly the night we all went to the concert. But you know how Sawyer is. She’s like that with everyone.”

“Not like that,” Erica practically snapped. Brady could be so aggravatingly unobservant sometimes. He had apparently missed whatever had transpired between Sawyer and Jori. She turned to Sawyer. “Damn it, I told you to stay away from Jori.”

Tia laughed. “You tried to warn Sawyer off Jori?”

“What’s so funny?”

“Well, that’s like shoving them together.” Tia’s expression clearly indicated she thought that should have been obvious.

“Mom,” Sawyer protested.

“No, it’s not,” Erica said. “I had a serious talk with her and asked her to leave Jori alone. There are a ton of other women around. Why does she have to go after the best pastry chef we’ve ever had?”

“You’re worried about the restaurant?” Brady asked.

“Yes. And about Jori.”

"Maybe Jori will ground her." When Erica gave him an incredulous look, he rushed on. "It could happen. Paige managed to tame me."

"But we're talking about Sawyer."

"Hey, I'm in the room," Sawyer interrupted.

Brady went on as if he hadn't heard her. "Okay, I wasn't as bad as she is. But does that mean there's no hope for her? She's our sister. Aren't we supposed to have any faith in her?"

"Brady, I'm not saying Sawyer is a bad person. Or even that her intentions aren't good. But Jori isn't someone I want her passing time with for a few weeks until she decides to move on."

"How do you know she doesn't really care about her?"

Sawyer sighed loudly.

"That's just it—she always thinks she cares for whoever she's involved with. But eventually she'll find flaws—either they're too tall, too short, too thin, too needy, or not needy enough. The list goes on, Brady, and you know I'm right."

"Hey!" Sawyer threw her hands up between them, and they both stopped and stared at her. "When you two are done listing my shortcomings, can I speak?"

"Unless you're going to tell me nothing's going on between you and Jori, I don't want to hear it."

"Well, we—"

"I don't want to hear it," Erica repeated, folding her arms over her chest.

"Mom, help me out here."

"Ha," Erica exclaimed before Tia could speak. "It'd be easy for her to take your side. She doesn't have to be here to clean up the mess you always make."

"Whoa, hold on. No one has ever asked you to clean up anything." Sawyer knew where Erica's irritation came from. Sawyer had been away at college the last time she'd allowed herself to really love someone, and she'd never shared that part of her life with her sister. Erica had witnessed only Sawyer's more

recent quick escapes from relationships, and she still blamed Sawyer for the breakup that had cost her a close friend. Though Sawyer had insisted the relationship was never substantial enough for Erica's friend to sever their so-called friendship, Erica blamed Sawyer when her friend refused to answer her phone calls.

Tia finally interrupted. "Okay, girls. Enough."

"Think hard before you do this. Do you really want to hurt Jori?" Erica didn't wait for a response before she strode toward the kitchen.

When Sawyer turned away as well, Tia stopped her. "What's this all about? Are you dating Erica's pastry chef?"

"Jori, Mom. Her name is Jori. And she's not *Erica's* anything. She happens to work at Drake's, but I don't see what that has to do with—"

"Are you dating her, or not?"

Sawyer sighed and sat on the sofa. "No. We're not dating. But there's something—there's an attraction there. And I know she feels it, too."

"So, what's holding you back?"

"Erica's been on my case since the first day I met Jori. And I *don't* want to hurt her." Sawyer hesitated, not comfortable discussing Jori's background. "She had a tough life, and she deserves to be happy."

"And you're not the person to make her happy?"

"I don't know. No one else seems to think so."

When Tia silently studied her, Sawyer braced for the expected criticism. Tia, like Erica, always thought she knew what was best for her. But somehow Sawyer knew this time was different, Jori was different. And while she wasn't ready to admit she wanted anything more than to explore the sexual attraction between them, inside she knew she felt something she hadn't felt in years, maybe ever.

"Honey, what do you and Jori think? That's all that matters."

"I thought you'd tell me what I should do." Sawyer didn't try to hide her surprise at her mother's response.

"Would it do any good?"

"That never stopped you before."

Tia shrugged. "I just want you to be happy, Sawyer. That's all I've ever wanted. And if you've felt I went about it the wrong way sometimes, you need to understand that my intentions were good. But it seems like Jori has gotten under your skin. I could try to tell you what to do, but I think maybe this time you need to figure it out for yourself."



Sawyer hurried across the apartment, grabbing her keys from the sofa table. Brady and the others were probably already downstairs waiting. She'd scheduled a meeting with the kitchen staff and servers to review the new menu, and she was already twenty minutes late. Knowing Erica would have been ready for the meeting early, she cringed.

So when, minutes later, she walked into a nearly empty dining room, she stopped short. Chuck and Jori sat at one of the tables and Brady leaned against the bar, ankles crossed.

"Where the hell is everyone? I posted a notice about this meeting next to the time clock, a week ago." Now Sawyer was irritated. She'd been stressed about being late, and most of her employees hadn't even been responsible enough to show.

"I let them leave," Brady said, not moving from his indolent pose.

"You—let them leave?"

Pushing away from the bar he strolled over to an open box on the table in front of Chuck, pulled out a folded menu, and handed it to her. "Yeah, since we obviously can't use these."

Sawyer snatched the menu out of his hand and opened it. Erica had briefed her on the specifics of the order. The weight of

the paper felt right, the color scheme looked correct. “What am I looking for?”

“Well, my blue-cheese-crustied filet is stellar. But I don’t know if it’s good enough to charge three hundred and thirty-three dollars.”

Chuck started to laugh, then covered it with a cough when Sawyer glared at him.

She scanned down and found the error. “Damn,” she grumbled as she saw two more typos in the same column. “Well, I’ll just call the printer and tell them they screwed it up. They’re going to fix it before—”

“I checked the proof. It’s exactly as you sent it in.”

“And they didn’t think to question a three-hundred-dollar steak?”

“They’re printers, Sawyer. They don’t proof the copy. They just make it up as it’s sent in.”

“Okay. I’ll make the corrections and put in a new order. Thanks for handling that and I’m sorry I was late.”

Sawyer glanced at Jori and found unwelcome sympathy in her expression. Without another word she headed for her office to call the printer. She had to straighten out the menu, and then she would have to call Erica and inform her of the mistake. She really didn’t want to, but if Erica discovered she’d been left out of the loop, she’d be doubly mad.

Ten minutes later, Sawyer dropped the phone back in its cradle, struggling not to slam it down. The printer needed two more weeks to redo the order, and they weren’t going to give her a break on the second batch of menus. Sawyer’s insistence that the first set was unusable hadn’t swayed the manager there. He maintained that the menu was printed exactly as ordered, and Sawyer couldn’t argue.

It was her next conversation Sawyer dreaded, and even as she dialed the number she floundered for an excuse not to call Erica.



“I know proofing menus isn’t very exciting, but it’s not that hard to get it right.” Erica’s response to hearing about the mix-up was as expected.

“Okay. I made it mistake. I’ll get it fixed.”

“Mistakes cost money, Sawyer. Or didn’t they teach you that in business school?”

“God, Erica, can you get off my back for one damn second.” Sawyer fought the urge to fling the phone across the room. Imagining it flying into pieces as it hit the wall gave her a moment’s satisfaction, but that would just be another expense for Erica to bitch about.

“Well, you would think I could take a few weeks to have a baby without worrying about my sister running my restaurant into the ground.”

“Yeah, you would think so, wouldn’t you?” Sawyer agreed sarcastically. “Listen, I’ll pay for the damn menus. I shouldn’t have even told you about them.”

“Don’t you dare keep things from me. I want to know everything that’s going on down there.”

“Erica, you’re going to have to learn to trust me. I know I’m not getting everything right, but I’m trying.” Sawyer leaned forward, rested one elbow on the desk, and rubbed the back of her neck with her other hand.

“How am I supposed to trust you? As far as I can see, you only agreed to work at Drake’s so you could get in Jori’s pants, so—”

“That’s not fair.”

“Tell me it’s not true.” Erica raised her voice.

“It’s not.”

“Sawyer, I’m tired. Just deal with the menus, please.”

Sawyer hung up, then circled the desk, needing to get out of the office. In fact, she was fighting the urge to leave the restaurant

altogether. As she entered the kitchen she looked longingly at the back door and thought about how good it would feel to just walk out and get in her car.

“Sawyer, where are my apples? They should have been with this morning’s produce, but I can’t find them,” Jori called, interrupting her escape plot.

Sawyer groaned, remembering how she’d dragged herself out of bed that morning when she heard the bell from the loading dock. She’d been asleep for barely four hours, and the last thing she wanted to do was go down and count food. She’d waited just long enough for the deliveryman to unload the truck, then quickly signed the receipt. She’d been meticulously checking the orders every day and hadn’t found an error yet. But that morning, she had been upstairs crawling back into bed before the rumble of the delivery truck had faded.

“Sawyer?”

“Did you look in the pantry?” She crossed to Jori’s counter.

“Twice.”

“Well, I’m sure they’re around here somewhere.” So a bunch of apples were missing. Sawyer really didn’t understand what the big deal was.

“I can’t make my apple crisp without apples.”

“Can’t you just make something else?” Sawyer didn’t even try to keep the irritation out of her voice. She was tired. She’d just had her fill of attitude from Erica, and she wasn’t about to take more from Jori.

“I ordered them with this menu in mind. Now I’ll have to scrape something together.”

“Jori, if the apples aren’t here, there’s really nothing I can do about it, is there? You’re the head pastry chef. Can’t you just figure it out instead of needing me to hold your fucking hand?”

Jori didn’t respond.

“Ladies, is there something I can help with?” Brady interjected from behind Sawyer. His tone held a warning that she was certain was directed at her, and it irritated her.

“Just make something else, please,” Sawyer said, then turned away. She headed for the same office she’d fled earlier, now wondering if she could manage to hide in there for the rest of the day.



“I don’t need her to hold my hand,” Jori muttered as she mashed bananas in a small bowl. She’d decided to make the bananas Foster upside-down cake she’d planned for tomorrow night. She would go to the farmers’ market in the morning and get the apples for the crisp. “I don’t need anyone.”

She’d been proving she could handle things on her own since she was eight years old. It hadn’t even taken a year in foster care for her to realize she would never have the loving, supporting parents that many of her peers took for granted. But these days she told herself she didn’t care. She took a certain amount of pride in saying she’d provided for herself.

As she spread a mixture of melted butter, brown sugar, and cinnamon in a baking pan, she remembered the first and only time she’d returned to her childhood home, shortly after she began working at Drake’s. She’d taken a taxi there and had asked the driver to turn around twice as she struggled to recall the directions to the house. The neighborhood had looked different than she remembered; most of the dilapidated homes were abandoned now. Two blocks over, a crop of government housing had been hailed as progress a decade ago. Jori recalled seeing the mayor conduct a ribbon-cutting ceremony on television and noticed it hadn’t taken long before the residents here began to clear out.

She’d directed the driver to stop in front of a duplex that the owners had clearly given up on some time ago. Patches of weathered gray wood showed through chipped white paint, and jagged glass clung to the frames of several broken windows. She got out of the cab and paused on the sidewalk, weak with remembered fear even though over twenty years had passed since

she'd last been in this yard. The grass and weeds were up to her knees, and she could barely see the paved walk as she approached the house.

The porch sagged dramatically at the far end, and the steps creaked as she climbed them. The door wasn't locked, and when she stepped inside, the sting of vivid memories assaulted her.

The house was empty, but as Jori wandered through it she saw it as it had been. She'd often come down to breakfast in the morning to find her mother where she'd passed out the night before, slumped over the yellowed and chipped Formica tabletop. And in the living room, her father had pushed the sofa against the wall so he could watch the fights on television without a glare from the nearby window. Jori had often crawled into the space between the sofa and the wall and pretended it was a portal where she could escape to a magical world free of the darkness and pain of this one. But when she opened her eyes she was still there and, looking back, that was when she'd learned that no one would rescue her and she'd have to rely on herself.

When her mind wandered too close to her past physical abuse, she instinctively jerked it away and forced her attention to the batter she poured over the cinnamon mixture and a layer of sliced bananas. She avoided those memories whenever possible, and she certainly wouldn't revisit them while standing in the kitchen at Drake's.

She retreated from those old monsters in much the same way she still backed away from situations that made her uncomfortable. She'd spent most of her life cloaked in self-imposed isolation, cultivating avoidance instead of relationships. But recently, the Drake family had become an exception to this practice.

Everyone, herself included, accused Sawyer of running away from intimacy, but Jori did practically the same thing. Sawyer was confident in a crowd with superficial social interaction but ran from a real, personal connection, whereas Jori was the complete opposite. When she thought about it that way, it seemed they might be the perfect complement for each other.

Sawyer seemed determined to ignore Jori's insistence that they not get involved. She could be short-tempered when she was tired or when she was pushed. And if they were in a relationship, she would probably try more than once to run away. But she was also open and friendly, and she made Jori laugh. She understood Jori's shyness and tried to ease it when she could. Jori recalled the night of the concert and the way Sawyer had tucked her against her side as if she'd wanted to shield her from the crowd pressing in around them.

While Jori was afraid of the outcome of pursuing anything more than a professional relationship with Sawyer, she couldn't deny the physical pull between them. She enjoyed their flirtatious banter, and just thinking about kissing Sawyer was enough to make her heart race and her body respond in amazing ways, if she gave her imagination free rein.

She glanced toward the hallway leading to the office and wondered if it was crazy to think a relationship with Sawyer could be worth risking her job. More than just her job, she'd be risking her comfortable emotional cushion. She hadn't truly let anyone close since she was eight years old. But no matter how much she tried to deny it, Sawyer was already too close. She could restore the distance between them quickly enough. A few weeks of acting cool and professional and Sawyer would probably lose interest.

But what if she didn't? What if she forgot about the fear and certainty that it wouldn't last and for once in her life simply let things happen? Worst case, she got her heart broken. Oddly enough, the thing she'd spent years trying to avoid didn't seem so bad anymore, because even heartache meant she felt something. And she hadn't realized how much she needed that. Isolation protected her from hurt, but it also kept her from the elation she'd felt in Sawyer's arms.

When she'd asked about the apples, Sawyer had snapped at her. But Sawyer hadn't directed her anger solely at her. She'd seen her frustration begin during the exchange with Brady over the

menus. Again, she looked down the hall, wanting her, whatever her mood. By the time she put the cake in the oven, she had decided to reverse her usual instinct to withdraw from conflict.

She found Sawyer behind her desk, her glasses lying on its surface and her hands covering her face. At her determined knock, Sawyer glanced up.

“Come on in. I won’t bite.”

“Is something wrong?” Jori doubted that Sawyer *wouldn’t* bite if provoked.

“That’s a nice way of asking why I was being a bitch.”

“Well?”

Sawyer rubbed her hand over the back of her neck. After the way she’d acted, she’d expected Jori to put an icy distance between them. “I need to get away from this place.”

“Then let’s go.” Jori walked around the desk and laid her hands on Sawyer’s shoulders.

“Where?”

“I’m not working Monday. Can you take the day off?”

Sawyer thought for a moment, then nodded. “Sure, I can leave Wendy in charge. What did you have in mind?”

“You decide. You’re the one who needs some R and R. I’m all yours until Tuesday afternoon.”

“All mine, huh?” Sawyer immediately pictured the two of them in bed for twenty-four hours. This sudden shift in the direction of their relationship confused her. She knew she’d been pushing the boundary Jori insisted on keeping between them, and maybe that was unfair. But was Jori changing the rules now? The hands kneading the muscles of her shoulders sure hinted that she was.

“Just remember, the point is for you to blow off some steam and relax.”

“Oh, I can definitely see us blowing off steam.” Spinning around, Sawyer grabbed Jori’s waist and pulled her between her spread knees.

Jori had a pretty good idea what was going through Sawyer's mind, and though Sawyer sounded like she was teasing, Jori knew she was testing her willingness. They had been flirting from virtually the moment they met, and suddenly it felt as if they'd been leading each other to this moment and Sawyer was leaving the next step up to her.

She bent and kissed Sawyer, her decision sealed in the soft caress of lips, the thrill of arousal along her spine. Sawyer touched her cheek, and Jori wrapped her fingers around Sawyer's wrist, encircling it, feeling Sawyer's sprinting pulse.

She pulled back when Sawyer tried to deepen the kiss, conscious that they could be interrupted at any moment. "Monday. Let me know when and where."

Sawyer's face lit up, as if an idea had suddenly occurred to her. "Have you ever been whitewater rafting?"

"Are you serious?"

"Is that a no?"

"Well, I don't have a strong desire to be dumped in a river anytime soon."

Sawyer shook her head slowly. "No sense of adventure. I thought you said you were all mine."

"I did." Jori struggled not to stutter. Sawyer's eyes darkened as she drawled the words, *all mine*. Never before had Jori wanted so much to belong to someone, but she knew that wasn't what Sawyer had meant.

"So what's it going to be?" When Jori didn't argue, Sawyer said, "I'll pick you up at nine Monday morning."

"Okay." Jori covered Sawyer's hands, which still bracketed her hips, and pulled them away. "But right now, I need to get to back to work."

She turned toward the door and when Sawyer quietly said her name, she paused and looked back.

"Pack an overnight bag," Sawyer said, and Jori flushed with anticipation.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nervous?”
“A little.” Jori hefted the five-foot paddle in her hands as if testing its balance.

“It’ll be fun,” Sawyer assured her.

After their trip leader called them together, Sawyer grabbed two helmets from the nearby bin and led Jori closer to the assembly point. She’d been rafting before, but never with this company.

As the leader, a wiry man with thick gray hair and a deeply lined face, explained the basics of rafting safety, Sawyer studied the other three guides, two college-aged men and one woman, who would pilot boats filled with a share of the twenty people gathered around. The two men wore brightly colored swim trunks and were bare-chested and tanned golden. They leaned comfortably against the porch railing and watched as the crowd was divided into four groups, assigned to a guide, and instructed to board the old school bus parked nearby. The dark-haired woman, introduced as Lacey, would guide Sawyer and Jori, as well as four teenage boys.

The ride to the launch site took only a few minutes. They all disembarked and waited while the guides unloaded the inflatable rafts from the makeshift platform atop the bus.

“You’re going to love this.” Sawyer donned a yellow life vest.

Jori set the plastic helmet on top of her usual navy bandana and fastened the chin strap. “If I fall out, I expect you to pull me back in,” she said as she shrugged on her vest.

Sawyer pulled Jori’s vest closed and tightened the straps. “Too tight?”

“No. It’s fine.”

“Okay, my crew over here,” Lacey called from near one of the blue rafts with Ocoee Whitewaters emblazoned on the side. She pulled her dark hair back and secured it with an elastic band from around her wrist before she put on her own vest and helmet. “Are y’all ready to have some fun?” As she looked at each of them in turn, she smiled and lines crinkled at the edge of her bright blue eyes.

When they’d all introduced themselves and staked out their spots in the raft, she issued instructions. “I’m going to steer from the back of the raft. You two guys in the front will set the pace. Everyone else, when you paddle, follow the person in front of you. There are a few basic commands. Obviously, when I say ‘forward’ you paddle front to back.” She demonstrated with the paddle in her hand. “When I say ‘back,’ you go back to front. When I say ‘drift,’ don’t paddle at all. We’re also going to do some spins, and I’ll call out ‘right, forward, left, back.’ I’ll go over that again when we get ready to do it. Now, let’s get this boat down there.”

They all grabbed the strap strung through the rings in the side of the raft and carried it down the concrete ramp to the shore. The boys had clamored for the seats closest to the front, so Jori and Sawyer sat in the back, directly in front of Lacey.

Within minutes they were in the boat and drifting toward the first set of rapids. They plunged through the whitewater, clumsily trying to follow the paddling instructions Lacey called out. When their boat crested a large rock just visible beneath the water and

dropped into the swirling wash, Sawyer blinked against the cool spray misting her face.

The water calmed for a stretch, and Lacey continued to shout commands interspersed with information about the river and type of rapids they could expect to encounter. The churning water was broken up with more even stretches, and at one spot they could get out of the boat and swim downriver before they reached the next bit of rough water.

She explained that the Tennessee Valley Authority controlled the dams on the river so even in the height of summer the water level stayed fairly consistent. A large wooden chute on one steep bank closely paralleled the twists and turns of the river, and during scheduled times the river nearly dried up while the water was diverted through the chute in order to generate power.

The boys were far too interested in teasing each other to pay much attention to the women. Sawyer and Lacey carried on an easy conversation, Sawyer questioning Lacey about her history as a guide and the changes in the river over the years. Feeling a bit left out, Jori sat silently and studied the treed slopes of the gorge on either side of them. The sky was azure and cloudless; nothing impeded the brilliant sun. Despite the recent run of temperatures over one hundred degrees, the breeze along the river was enough to make the heat bearable.

By the third set of rapids, they found their rhythm and were beginning to paddle in unison, each timing their stroke with the person in front of them. As they entered calmer water, Lacey told them they could get out and swim if they wanted to. One by one they slipped over the edge of the raft.

Jori slid into the cool water, then lay back and let her life vest keep her afloat. Though there were no rapids here, the current was still strong enough to carry them downstream. She closed her eyes.

A few feet away, Sawyer watched Jori. The rafting had been a great idea, but, more than that, being with Jori, away

from Nashville, had recharged something in her that she hadn't even realized was drained. Their time together had both relaxed and aroused her. The pleasant three-hour drive down had been filled with music and casual conversation. When they reached the rafting outpost, Jori had stripped off her T-shirt to reveal a white bikini top that contrasted beautifully with her olive skin, and Sawyer had struggled to keep from leering. As Jori had boarded the bus in front of her, Sawyer's eyes had slipped down, of their own accord, to trace the waistband of her navy board shorts where they rode low on her hips.

Now she watched Jori floating a few feet away. Drawn to her but not wanting to disturb her repose, Sawyer swam slowly closer. But as she got within touching distance, Jori opened one eye and peeked at her. She reached out and captured Sawyer's hand, then drew her near.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Jori asked.

Sawyer rolled onto her back and smiled. She glanced over to find Jori's eyes once again closed. "I am. Very much."

"Thinking about Drake's?" Jori's fingers curled around Sawyer's, the warmth of her skin penetrating the cool water gloving their joined hands. They floated side by side, their sandal-clad feet lined up in front of them.

"No." Sawyer smiled. Jori looked so cute with wet curls clinging to the edge of her helmet, and Sawyer was anticipating a relaxing dinner with her when they finished rafting. But when she thought about where the rest of the evening might lead, her stomach tightened like her skin beneath the hot summer sun.

"Good. I'd like to do this again."

"Me, too. In fact, I'm already planning the next trip. We could invite Matt and Davis."

"If we got a group together we could fill a boat by ourselves," Jori suggested.

"That would be fun."

Jori smiled, thinking it would be fun but it probably wouldn't top this day. She'd wanted Sawyer to have this time of relaxation

but, she now realized, she'd needed this frivolous afternoon nearly as much. The time she spent away from work was often solitary, and even in her glass-blowing classes she usually kept to herself. But today, Sawyer's enjoyment of their outing enhanced Jori's. They drifted for several more minutes before Lacey called them all to the nearest bank. After they were settled back in the raft, she directed them to the center of the river.

"All right, folks. Are we chickens or heroes?" Lacey yelled.

"Heroes!" a couple of the boys called out, needing no further explanation.

Lacey laughed. "When we go through this next section, we can take the chicken route. Or," she paused, her blue eyes sparkling with mischief, "we can go the hero route and it's likely most of us will end up in the water. But everyone has to agree."

"Heroes," came the cry again from the front of the boat.

"Ladies?"

Sawyer glanced at Jori, clearly leaving it up to her. And Jori felt as if her answer was about more than just the raft route.

"I'm game." She knew if she'd said she wanted the tamer route, Sawyer would have backed her up. But when she looked at Sawyer, everything in her screamed to take a chance.



Sawyer nudged the door open and led Jori inside. The small cabin was surprisingly spacious, especially the great room with its high ceilings and honey-colored exposed logs. Flat river stones had been sculpted into an impressive fireplace in one corner, and Jori could imagine how cozy the room would feel with a fire burning there.

Sawyer nodded toward a door to the right. "You can take that bedroom. I'll take the loft."

Jori stopped, not understanding what she'd heard. She'd assumed Sawyer would expect to share her bed. Apparently she hadn't needed to be so nervous and anticipatory all day.

Sawyer paused halfway across the room as Jori still stood by the entrance. “Is something wrong?”

She looked at the bedroom Sawyer had indicated and then at the loft. “Um, no. I thought—” She felt ridiculous.

“Jori, I’m not a dog.” Sawyer slipped the strap of her bag from her shoulder and dropped it near the stairs. Skirting the rustic leather sofa in the middle of the room, she crossed to her, took her hands, and held them loosely. “You agreed to this trip so I could relax. Given that generosity, do you really think I planned it just to get in your pants?”

“I guess not.” Jori was surprised by a surge of disappointment.

Sawyer grinned. “Of course not. That would be an added bonus.” Jori flushed and Sawyer continued, “I didn’t want you to worry about my expectations. You need a break as much as I do. Let’s just have a good time.”

Jori had never been the type to “just have a good time” without worrying about the implications. But she forced a smile. “Sure.”

“Good. Now, let’s clean up and find someplace to have dinner.”

When Sawyer retrieved her bag and climbed toward the loft, Jori watched through the slatted railing, and Sawyer turned and deliberately grasped the bottom of her T-shirt.

“Jori, I’m starving and was looking forward to dinner. But if you’re going to watch me undress, we may not make it out of this cabin.” She pulled the shirt up, revealing a swath of skin.

“Oh, sorry.” Startled, Jori rushed into her bedroom and closed the door.

She dropped her overnight bag on the bed and paced, distracting herself with the details of the room. The bed looked far too large for one person, with its handmade quilt that complemented the frame fashioned from natural pine boughs. She jerked her mind away from the image of herself and Sawyer crawling across that quilt. Sawyer had put the ball firmly in her

court, and now she needed to decide what her next move would be.

In the attached bathroom, she discovered a whirlpool tub and glassed-in shower stall. Her mind overlaid a picture of Sawyer reclining in the gently churning water with one of Sawyer taking her, fast and hard, against the transparent wall. She pressed her thighs together to still the ache between them. At this rate she'd never make it through dinner.

She quickly showered and dressed in a pair of khakis and a dark green blouse. Exhausted from their day of activity in the sun, she suddenly found she was starving as well and hurriedly rubbed a dollop of gel into her wet hair, finger-combed it, and left it to air-dry.

When she entered the living room ten minutes later, Sawyer waited for her, wearing a white button-down tucked into dark jeans. She sat at one end of the deeply cushioned sofa, an arm stretched along the back of it and her legs crossed so a brown leather boot rested on her other knee. Sawyer's eyes roamed over her, drinking her in. When their gazes clashed, she thought Sawyer's relaxed posture was at odds with the intensity of that look.

Sawyer's casualness was possibly a ploy to draw her in and, she admitted, if that was case, it was working. Sawyer's apparent comfort with letting things progress or not intrigued her, made her uncharacteristically want to push the intimacy between them simply to see where it would lead. Jori allowed her smile to reflect her anticipation when she thought about what the evening might hold.



"How's your pasta?" Sawyer asked before she took another bite of stuffed eggplant.

"It's good." Jori smiled over the rim of a glass of house burgundy.

They'd been surprised to find an authentic Italian restaurant tucked against the mountainside. Even after Lacey had given it her endorsement as the place to get a good meal, Sawyer had been skeptical when they'd pulled into the parking lot of the tiny building with wood-shingle siding. The red, white, and green awning over the entrance was the only hint they were in the right place.

But the restaurant had been packed when they walked in, wall-to-wall booths and tables crowded with a mix of locals and tourists. The hostess had seated them on the back patio, where the glow from strings of bare bulbs overhead lit a dining area that was otherwise intimately shaded by a canopy of trees.

"Did you enjoy rafting?"

"Yes. It was great. I never would have tried that on my own."

"And you only got dumped in the river once," Sawyer said seriously. She'd been apprehensive as she'd watched Jori disappear in the swirling water. But when she had surfaced and one of the boys had grabbed her life vest and hauled her into the boat, Sawyer had felt her galloping heart slow.

Jori laughed. "Yeah, no thanks to Lacey. I think she was showing off for you."

"She was not."

"She purposely steered us toward the roughest part of every set of rapids."

Sawyer dismissed the notion with a wave. "She probably knew those boys wanted an exciting ride."

"I don't think she even realized anyone else was in the boat."

Sawyer studied Jori. At first she thought Jori had been joking, but now there seemed to be a bit of seriousness behind her teasing. Her hint of jealousy, however misguided, thrilled Sawyer in a way no set of rapids could.

"Well, *I* noticed there was someone else in the boat," Sawyer

said as she remembered how Jori had looked with her wet hair falling across her forehead and a broad smile on her face.

Jori caught her breath at the intimacy in Sawyer's tone. The candle flickering in the red glass votive jar on the table between them cast a dancing shadow over the planes of Sawyer's face, alternately hiding, then revealing the open appraisal in Sawyer's eyes.

"Sawyer, I—"

"Would you like dessert? Tiramisu?"

"No, thank you. I've eaten too much already." She pushed her empty plate away and accepted Sawyer's rapid subject change because she hadn't been certain what she was going to say anyway. But once again Sawyer had drawn her in, only to back off when the moment got heavy. "But please don't let that stop you from indulging."

"No, I'm sure it doesn't compare with your creations." Decisively, Sawyer swept her napkin from her lap and deposited it on the table in front of her.

"Flattery, huh? That will probably work."

"It's true. I still remember the chocolate cake you were making the first day we met."

"Princess cake," Jori supplied.

"You garnished it with strawberries and melted chocolate."

Jori laughed at the look of longing on her face. "Brady wasn't exaggerating about you and sweets."

"Not a bit."

When the waitress brought the check, Sawyer handed over her debit card, waving off Jori's offer to pay.

"At least let me leave the tip." While Sawyer signed the receipt, Jori laid several folded bills on the table.

They made the short drive back to their cabin in companionable silence. Jori was pleasantly tired and expected to be sore tomorrow, if she could even sleep. It was a good thing the loft was on the opposite side of the cabin, because

Sawyer's proximity inside the car had her body humming. She would definitely need some distance and perhaps a self-induced release. She didn't have that particular need often and had never considered herself an overly sexual person. But with Sawyer's tangy citrus scent teasing her and Sawyer's arm resting alongside hers on the center console, she couldn't think clearly.

Caught up in her thoughts, she didn't notice they'd stopped in front of the cabin until Sawyer lightly touched her arm.

"You okay?" Jori's distant expression concerned Sawyer. She'd been quiet during the ride back.

"Fine. I guess the day is just catching up with me."

Jori got out of the car and Sawyer sighed in relief. Once during dinner she hadn't been able to help herself and her composure had slipped. For a second she had felt as if Jori could sense the desire that stirred inside her. She wondered if Jori had been contemplating that moment as well, if she also felt like they were moving toward an inevitable encounter. *Or maybe I'm the only one who feels like I'll combust if I don't touch her.*

"Sawyer?"

Sawyer started and looked at her.

"You have the key."

She realized she'd been standing on the cabin porch lost in thought while Jori waited for her to unlock the door.

"Sorry," she mumbled as she opened the door.

Once they'd stepped inside, Sawyer reached around Jori to secure the deadbolt.

"Thank you for a wonderful day. I really needed this," Sawyer said.

She closed her fingers around the lock and stared at Jori's mouth. Jori moistened her lower lip and Sawyer realized she was only seconds from kissing her. She ached with the desire to close the space between them and could already taste her, need nearly overcoming logic. *Pull it back, Sawyer. Don't lose it now.* Only the voice in her head kept her from taking Jori right there, against

the front door of the cabin. She would stick by her decision to let her make the move.

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself. I did, too.” Jori’s voice held a slight rasp, as if she could see the battle raging within Sawyer.

“Good night.” Sawyer kissed her cheek, carefully keeping the gesture light.

Hoping Jori didn’t hear the tremor in her voice, she forced numb fingers to flip the lock into place. Then she backed away, though her body fought her at every inch. She fled before she could change her mind, seeking the safety of the loft.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jori lay awake listening to the silence in the cabin. She missed the noise of the city, things she hadn't noticed until they were absent, like the sound of distant sirens. Instead crickets chirped and leaves rustled outside the window. Then an indistinct creak came from inside. A moment later the wooden stairs popped. Sawyer was coming down from the loft. Jori's heart fluttered in anticipation until she realized Sawyer wasn't headed toward her room. A glass clinked, then the faucet ran. She pictured Sawyer standing at the sink.

Just once Jori wanted to act without knowing where she was headed, to ignore the curl of anxiety in her stomach. She didn't want to think about Sawyer's apparent inability to do long-term, and in the time it took her to ease from bed and creep to the open door, she managed to convince herself that for tonight, it didn't matter.

Sawyer had left the lights off, and Jori could just make out her silhouette in the moonlight pouring through the window over the sink. A white T-shirt hugged her broad shoulders, and her dark shorts just covered the tops of her thighs. The shadows and silver moonlight created the impression of a black-and-white photograph, and Jori didn't need to see Sawyer's face to know that the androgynous lines would be striking in such a medium.

As she stepped into the room, the hardwood creaked beneath her feet and she stopped.

"I'm sorry if I woke you." Sawyer set the glass in the sink but didn't turn around.

Jori shook her head, then realized Sawyer couldn't see her. "I was awake."

"Can't sleep?"

Smothering a burst of doubt, she moved closer and slipped her arms around Sawyer's waist. "It's very quiet here."

Sawyer laughed softly. She covered Jori's hands and pulled them more tightly around her, bringing Jori flush against her back. "That's supposed to be a good thing."

"I know." She rested her cheek against Sawyer's nape. "And I thought after all that exercise today, I would sleep deeply."

"So..." Sawyer hesitated. "What's keeping you up?"

Jori considered her next words carefully. Despite the intimacy of their time on the river and at dinner, Sawyer seemed content to keep things platonic. But though she knew it could be a mistake, at that moment, with Sawyer's body against hers, *platonic* was the last thing Jori wanted. Her breasts against Sawyer's back and Sawyer's backside nestled against her crotch made her want to press even closer. "I've been lying awake wondering why you were sleeping so far away."

"Jori, I told you—"

"I know what you said." She slipped her hands beneath Sawyer's T-shirt and stroked her stomach, feeling muscles jump in response. "But are you really this chivalrous? Or are you purposely trying to make me crazy?"

She found her answer in Sawyer's sharply indrawn breath and quickly squared shoulders.

"I'm not." Sawyer turned and retreated until her lower back hit the edge of the sink.

It wasn't clear which question Sawyer was responding to, but from the hazy look in her eyes when Jori moved close and traced inside the neck of her T-shirt, she could guess.

“You know...” Jori was enjoying Sawyer’s reaction to her touch. “You accused me of being a tease. But you’ve been teasing me all day.”

“No. I just didn’t want to pressure you.” Sawyer stuttered slightly. Jori had come on this trip half expecting smooth seduction. *That* she had been prepared to fend off, but this genuine, maybe a little nervous Sawyer was endearing and oddly empowering.

“Yes, you said you just wanted us to have a good time.” Jori deliberately trailed her fingers along the edge of Sawyer’s jaw. When Sawyer’s hands tightened at her waist, she smiled amid a surge of bravery. “I’m having a very good time. How about you?”

She wanted to blame the three glasses of wine at dinner, which still had her head buzzing. But in truth, Sawyer’s nearness was the natural high that gave her the nerve to push her hands into Sawyer’s hair, pull her head down, and kiss her.

Sawyer responded immediately as if she’d been waiting. When Sawyer opened to her, Jori let go of any hint of caution and poured herself into Sawyer’s mouth, stroking her tongue inside.

Sawyer’s head rushed with the feel of Jori against her, of Jori beneath her hands—the curve of her waist and the flare of her hips as Sawyer pulled them snug against her. Oh, God, she’d been fantasizing about this closeness for the entire day, for weeks even, and now that it seemed Jori wanted it as much as she did, she craved nothing more than to embrace it.

Backing through the living room, Jori nearly fell over an end table, but Sawyer held her up as they scrambled into the bedroom. Sawyer tugged at the hem of Jori’s T-shirt and, when she raised her arms, pulled it over her head and dropped it on the floor. Her own shirt followed.

“God, you feel good,” she moaned, smoothing her hands up Jori’s sides to cup her breasts.

When she rubbed her thumbs over Jori’s tightening nipples, Jori groaned and pushed her against the edge of the bed. Taken off guard, Sawyer fell back and Jori moved over her, straddling

her hips. Sawyer reached for her breasts again, but Jori caught her hands and pressed them to the mattress above her head.

“Let me touch you,” Jori whispered against her ear and Sawyer shivered, then met eyes dark and filled with exhilarating arousal. “Will you?”

“Yes.” She would have given anything to feel Jori’s hands on her.

Jori did touch her—urgently, as if she couldn’t help herself—firmly squeezing a tight nipple and bringing Sawyer to the sharp edge of pain and pleasure. She slid down and sucked one into her mouth.

“Harder,” Sawyer ground out as she buried her hands in Jori’s hair. “Ah, God. Yes.” She thrust against Jori’s belly, seeking friction against her throbbing sex.

Jori reached between them and shoved a hand inside Sawyer’s shorts. “I’ve been thinking about this all day. And you’re so wet,” Jori moaned as her fingers slid inside.

“For you.” Sawyer’s neck arched and she closed her eyes with the effort of holding off her orgasm as Jori’s thumb circled her clitoris. *Too soon. Just a little longer.*

“For me,” Jori whispered as she pulled away long enough to remove Sawyer’s shorts.

She spread Sawyer’s thighs and without hesitation pressed her mouth to Sawyer’s flesh. The sweet feel of Jori’s tongue circling her brought Sawyer close to the edge, too close. “Jori, wait, please. Slow down.”

“Next time,” Jori said and sucked her.

“Jori. Yes, oh, God.” Sawyer’s hips jerked. “Baby, please. There. Almost there,” she managed seconds before she surrendered to the pleasure that thrashed beneath her skin, burned in her muscles, and coursed through her as if the silky strands of Jori’s hair that wound around her fingers were live wires.

When finally Sawyer lay, spent, her body still vibrating, Jori trailed kisses up her hip and over her abdomen and chest until she reached her neck. Sawyer shivered and wrapped her arms around

Jori. She ran her fingers over Jori's back, tracing the angles of her shoulder blades and down her spine. She felt Jori smile against her skin and slowly roll her hips against her thigh.

Sawyer smoothed her hands over Jori's ass and pulled her even nearer, thrusting her leg higher.

"I need you," Jori said on a ragged breath. She grabbed Sawyer's wrist and guided Sawyer's hand between her thighs.

"Slow now?" Sawyer asked with a grin as she stroked inside. Her own body protested the statement with a renewed throb, but she ignored it in favor of the feel of Jori surrounding her fingers, of the back of her own hand grinding into her thigh.

"Not yet." Jori closed her teeth lightly on Sawyer's lower lip. "Too late for slow. I was more than halfway there from touching you."

"Okay," Sawyer whispered, curling her fingertips and thrusting deeper. "You can have your way this time, but later—I'm going to taste you."

"Oh, God."

Jori pumped her hips faster, her rhythm becoming erratic. Sawyer wrapped her other hand around Jori's neck and pulled her down to kiss her—hard, until with one final thrust, Jori collapsed against her shoulder.

Sawyer kissed her again, this time softly caressing her bruised lips. When she drew away she studied Jori's heavily lidded eyes.

"You—I—you caught me off guard. I mean, you're usually so shy."

"Not with you." She tucked her head against Sawyer's breast and closed her eyes.



The warm sun slashing across the bed slowly coaxed Sawyer from sleep. She stretched, her muscles pulling pleasantly, and her head began to clear. The other side of the bed was empty, and she

wondered how long she could avoid confronting what she and Jori had done the night before. She didn't want to risk disturbing the layer of satisfaction that lingered still.

"Oh, you're awake." Jori came in carrying a ceramic mug. "I would have brought you some coffee if I'd known you were up."

"I'll get some in a bit."

"I was going to jump in the shower." Jori sat on the bed and the edges of her terry-cloth robe fell to either side of her knees.

Sawyer squinted at the alarm clock. "I guess I'll go up to the loft and get ready. We should leave in a couple of hours if we're going to be back in time for work." She wanted to pull Jori back into bed and avoid the real world a bit longer.

Stalling, she angled her upper body enough to slide her hand under the hem of Jori's robe.

"Erica is going to be so mad," Jori said.

Sawyer froze, her fingers barely touching the top of a smooth thigh. She rose on one elbow and gazed at Jori for a moment before lowering her head to kiss Jori's knee.

"That's what you're thinking about right now? My sister?" Sawyer hooked one arm around Jori's leg and tugged her into bed. "Let's see if we can change that."

Jori barely had time to register the movement before she was flat on her back beneath Sawyer with her robe open to reveal her cotton briefs and tank top.

"Hmm. I was hoping to find you naked under there," Sawyer purred.

Jori laughed when Sawyer's hand found its way under her shirt. "That doesn't seem to be deterring you."

"Not much does when I want something."

"And, ah..." Jori nearly lost her train of thought when Sawyer's tongue brushed her earlobe. "Now that you've gotten what you wanted, do you still want it?"

Sawyer stopped and drew back, extricating the hand that she

had just closed over Jori's breast. "Are you really trying to pick a fight with me right now?"

"No. Yes. Well, I don't know." When Sawyer moved to lie alongside her, Jori shoved a hand through her hair in frustration. "Did we make a mistake?"

"Do you think it was a mistake?"

"I asked you first." Jori hated how needy she felt. That wasn't her. She'd been on her own, alone, for essentially her whole life, and she was fine with the status quo. She didn't need to rely on someone else, especially not someone notorious for running at the first sign of trouble or boredom. And Jori couldn't get Erica's warning about Sawyer out of her head. "I don't think you took me seriously the last time I said this, but I can't be involved with someone I work for."

Sawyer flicked aside the edge of Jori's robe with her fingertips, lazily pushed up Jori's top, and laid her palm on Jori's stomach. "Well, I will admit, it *is* much easier to take you seriously in this position," she said sarcastically.

Jori flushed, suddenly aware of how ridiculous her objections to their being together must sound considering the night they'd just had. The intensity of that first time hadn't yet faded when Sawyer had awakened her later to make good on her promise, stroking her to a maddeningly slow orgasm with her tongue.

Despite the teasing, Sawyer's eyes were serious when she next spoke. "Okay. Tell me about it."

"I was involved with someone at the last restaurant where I worked. Actually, she was the manager and our breakup was pretty nasty. She made things very difficult for me, and when I still didn't quit, she let me go."

"Was it serious?"

Jori considered the question and opted for a straightforward answer. "In the beginning I might have thought we had a future. But, no. As it turned out, losing the job hurt more than losing the girl."

“Jori, I’m not going to fire you.”

Jori covered Sawyer’s hand to stop its progress along her hip. She wouldn’t be able to continue to carry on her side of the conversation if Sawyer kept touching her. “It may sound silly to you, but working with Erica and Brady is more important to me than any job I’ve ever had. I’ve never felt more like I belonged somewhere.”

Sawyer sighed, rolled onto her back, and folded her arms behind her head. *We’re quite the pair, aren’t we? She’s worried about her job, and I’m afraid I won’t be able to be what she needs.*

“I do understand. But things are different for me. Erica doesn’t try to control you.”

“She worries about you.” Jori turned on her side and propped herself up on her elbow.

“She worries I’m screwing up my life. She’s never believed in my decisions.”

“Do you?”

“What?”

“Do you believe in your decisions? Enough to stand up for them?”

“I’ll make a deal with you,” Sawyer said, aware that she wasn’t answering the questions. “No matter what happens between you and me, if things get uncomfortable for you at work, I will leave Drake’s.”

“I can’t ask you to leave your family’s business.”

“You’re not. I’m offering.”

“They’re your family.”

“And they always will be, whether I work there or not.” When Jori turned away and started to sit up, Sawyer grabbed her arm. “Wait a minute. I know you think I can’t take anything seriously. And maybe that’s true most of the time. I don’t want to make things difficult for you at work, but I enjoyed last night, a lot. And I’d like to do it again. Right now, in fact.”

She kissed Jori’s palm, and when she got no resistance she

lightly bit, then sucked the end of one finger. Jori moaned and took Sawyer's mouth insistently. Jori's uncharacteristic aggression made her heart beat erratically.

"Jori," Sawyer said when Jori's mouth moved to her neck.

"Hmm?"

"I promise you'll always have a place at Drake's."

"Okay."

Jori seemed to easily accept the promise Sawyer hoped she could keep.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sawyer sat on a stool facing the dining room with her back resting against the edge of the bar. Brady perched next to her, his arm stretched behind her. The rest of the staff was gathered around the tables nearest them.

Jori was sitting next to Chuck, leaned back in a chair with her arms folded over her chest. Sawyer barely contained a wink and a wide smile as Jori's eyes met hers. It had been just over a week since they returned from the rafting trip, and, if possible, her desire for Jori increased daily. She enjoyed knowing that shy, reserved Jori so easily shed her inhibitions when they were alone.

Jori insisted they keep their relationship separate from work and had instituted a strict no-touching rule while at the restaurant. Sawyer did her best to respect it now that she knew Jori had been burned with a workplace romance. Usually they spent an entire shift flirting in the form of mumbled comments and eye contact, until she thought she might have to drag Jori into her office and lock the door. She had managed to convince her that the boundaries of Drake's did not include the upstairs apartment, so several times they had rushed up the back stairs in each other's arms after shift, and sometimes they actually made it as far as the bedroom.

Realizing she was staring at Jori, Sawyer forced her eyes to the notebook resting on her knee. "I need to make a few changes

to next weekend's schedule." She flipped through several pages. "Vesticom Enterprises wants to have a management brunch here on Friday. So I'm going to need some of you earlier than usual."

A couple of the servers volunteered right away and Sawyer made a note. Some of the college students always wanted as many hours as they could get, especially during the summer.

"Okay. I'll have a schedule up tomorrow morning. They want to see a menu by Wednesday, so Jori and Brady, please stick around for a few minutes. Everyone else is free to go."

When the others had left, Sawyer moved to the table where Brady and Jori sat. She scanned the ideas she'd jotted during her meeting with the Vesticom representative.

"Guys, I really want this to go well. We got good word of mouth from the mayor's benefit, and I'd like to see us get more corporate attention. That's why I agreed to open early for this brunch even though they don't have enough people to reserve the entire dining room."

"Are we even making enough to cover the servers' salaries?"

Sawyer had sensed Brady's skepticism from the moment she'd introduced the topic. "Barely," she reluctantly admitted.

"Does Erica know about this?"

"Erica's not here." It probably wasn't fair to leave Erica out of this decision, but in the face of Erica's continuing doubt about her abilities, Sawyer was beginning to feel like she had something to prove. And for perhaps the first time, she actually wanted to prove it. She'd never cared much about excelling at any of her jobs. But she knew this brunch was a good move for Drake's and was proud of her part in pulling it together. "Think big picture, Brady. Sometimes we've got to take risks if we want the payoff. Vesticom is big business."

"Sawyer, we're not caterers. We've got a solid reputation as a family restaurant."

"So we shouldn't aspire to more?"

Brady shrugged. “We are what we are. Do you plan on sticking around to back up all these aspirations after Erica returns?”

Sawyer opted for a safe answer. “Right now I’m not planning anything beyond this brunch. If we can increase our demand for private functions, we become more exclusive.”

“I knew a day would come when I’d regret letting my big sister run this place,” Brady mumbled, but Sawyer sensed the good-natured teasing behind his words.

“You may as well. You let your wife run your house. What’s the difference?”

“Okay, smart ass.” He stood and headed for the kitchen. “I’ll have a menu for you by this afternoon.”

Jori hadn’t moved. Now, her arms still crossed, she tilted her head. “Are you going to tell Erica?”

Sawyer pulled out the chair next to Jori and sat. “Eventually.”

“On Saturday? When you can declare it a success in the same breath?”

“Well, that might take some of the sting out.” Sawyer vacillated between feeling accountable to Erica and defiant. She’d been left in charge. Didn’t that mean she should be able to manage the place without constantly checking with her? Even as she asked the question, she knew what Erica’s answer would be. But she couldn’t do anything about the brunch if she didn’t find out about it until after the fact.



Friday morning, the Drake’s kitchen was active earlier than usual. The kitchen was fully staffed and Sawyer had scheduled enough servers to cover the tables. The aroma of baking pastries competed with the smoky smell of frying bacon. Jori carefully folded fresh blueberries into muffin batter.

“I need two cheese omelets and four ginger scones.” Jori

barely glanced up as the order was called out by an incoming server.

“Five minutes,” Chuck said as he expertly flipped the contents of one of the omelet pans in front of him.

“I need ten minutes on the scones,” Jori shot back.

“How about eight,” he suggested with a wink.

“I’ll race you.” Jori smiled and looked at Brady. “And you can’t help him.”

Minutes later, she and Chuck slid their plates onto the service counter at the same time. Sawyer hurried through the kitchen door just as the waitress spun toward it with her tray, narrowly missing a collision.

“Whoa.” Sawyer danced around the other woman and turned to Brady. “The CEO wants to compliment the chef.”

Brady nodded and untied his apron. “Schmoozing is my least favorite part of this job.”

“I thought complaints were your least favorite.”

“They are. But this is up there, too.”

“Be nice,” Sawyer warned.

“Yes, ma’am,” he called over his shoulder just before he disappeared through the door.

Sawyer grinned and crossed to Jori. “How’s it going in here?”

“We’re keeping up.” Jori forced herself to turn away, washing her hands in an effort to keep them occupied when what she really wanted was to grab Sawyer and kiss that sexy smile off her face. She’d been fighting those urges every time she got within a few feet of Sawyer.

“Sawyer, will you grab that tray of muffins out of the oven?” Jori asked as she turned off the water and dried her hands on the towel tucked into the apron at her waist.

Sawyer nodded, slid on an oven mitt, and stooped to pull the muffins out. Jori glanced at Chuck and suddenly wished she and Sawyer were alone. She would cross to Sawyer and bend her over the counter and—

“Jori?” Sawyer’s tone penetrated her fantasy.

She jerked her eyes from Sawyer’s backside. Sawyer was looking over her shoulder, and Jori smothered a gasp at the stark longing in her expression. Her gaze said she knew exactly what Jori was thinking about.

“Where do you want these?” Sawyer lifted the muffin tray but it slipped and reflexively she grabbed it with her unprotected hand. “Shit,” she hissed loudly enough to turn heads. She dropped the tray on the counter and stuck her burned fingers in her mouth.

“Come here.”

Jori pulled her over to the sink and held her hand under the cool stream while Sawyer continued to curse under her breath.

“I thought you were tougher than this,” Jori teased, trying to ignore the sick feeling in her stomach at Sawyer’s obvious pain.

“It really hurts. And it’s your fault anyway.”

“My fault?” When Sawyer tried to pull her hand back, Jori held on firmly. “Just a minute longer.”

“Yeah. If you hadn’t been looking at me like you wanted to sling me up on the counter and have your way with me, I wouldn’t have been so distracted.”

Jori flushed, knowing Sawyer wasn’t far off.

“Well, maybe I’ll have to think of a way to make it up to you.” She stepped in front of Sawyer, turning her back to the other occupants of the kitchen to hide her purposely flirtatious expression.

“That sounds promising.”

Mindful of Sawyer’s injury, Jori carefully patted a towel against her hand. “Any suggestions?”

Sawyer slowly raised one eyebrow. “Maybe. You could *actually* sling me up on the counter and—”

“As interesting as that sounds,” Jori gently examined her injured hand, “I think that might make Chuck uncomfortable.”

Sawyer frowned. “Hmm, I guess I’ll have to wait. But you

know I do have a key to this place so, after hours if you wanted to—”

Jori laughed. “You’re obsessed.”

“I’m just saying. We could even do it on Chuck’s counter.”

“Sawyer!”

“What? He’ll never know.”

“Okay, I think *you* need to get back to work.” She steered Sawyer in the direction of the door, but before she pushed her away she leaned close and whispered, “And *I* will consider it and get back to you.”



“Long day, huh?” Brady asked as he took off his chef jacket, leaving only a navy T-shirt tucked into the loose cotton pants. He picked up his wallet and keys from the counter.

Jori nodded. “But the brunch went well, don’t you think?”

“When I talked to the CEO he raved about Sawyer and talked about bringing his people back again. Can I walk you out?”

“I think I’ll check in on Sawyer before I go.” She and Sawyer hadn’t made any plans, but they seemed to gravitate toward each other at closing time. When Jori glanced at Brady she found a knowing smile and looked away quickly.

“She’s been in the office for over an hour,” he said and held the kitchen door open for her. “She should be about ready to wrap up.” Again, the smug grin.

As they stepped into the hallway, Sawyer emerged from the office. Jori warmed as Sawyer’s lips pulled into a sexy grin.

“Hey there. You ready to go upstairs and—” She bit off the rest of her words when she noticed Brady.

“Hey, Sawyer,” Brady greeted her with a touch of teasing in his voice. “I’ll see you ladies tomorrow.”

He headed for the back door, leaving them standing in the hallway. Jori searched Sawyer’s face, but found her expression unreadable. She was nervous about how Sawyer would react to

her family knowing what was going on between them. *Wonderful, Jori. You already know she can't commit. So why are you worrying about her family?* She'd been reminding herself that no matter how much it seemed Sawyer was taking things in stride, their relationship would inevitably end. Apparently Sawyer was built that way, and she hadn't indicated to Jori that this was any different. So she'd forbidden herself to have any expectations.

"I guess it's safe to assume Brady knows," Sawyer said quietly, as if to herself.

"I think so."

"And if Brady knows that means Paige knows."

"Maybe he didn't tell—"

"If he didn't, he will. He and Paige don't have any secrets. Besides, he knows Paige will love this."

"Why?"

Sawyer shrugged. *Because she wants me to be with someone. She wants me to be happy. And you make me so happy.* But she couldn't say that, so instead she sighed and said, "I guess I'll have to tell Erica. Brady won't keep it from her for long." She rested a hand between Jori's shoulder blades. "Are you heading home? Or do you—want to come upstairs?"

Jori carefully took Sawyer's left hand in hers and tenderly kissed the still-red skin. "I still need to make this up to you, so I better come up." Mindful of the injury, Jori led her toward the stairs.

Sawyer followed willingly, and closely, allowing her free hand to roam down Jori's hip and over her shapely ass. She was already imagining what she would do to Jori when, halfway up the stairs, Jori pushed her against the wall and devoured her mouth. Sawyer's legs tingled and if Jori's body hadn't pinned hers, she doubted her knees would have held her upright. These moments of aggression, so at odds with Jori's normally shy demeanor, still pleasantly surprised her.

"Jori. Upstairs." Jori's thigh was between hers, pressed firmly into her crotch.

“Here.” Jori braced her foot against a higher step, gaining leverage, and pushed her leg up.

“Oh, Jesus.” Sawyer wanted to let Jori take her right there on the stairs. They were alone in the building, and with Jori’s thigh thrusting against her distended clitoris, it wouldn’t take long. “Only a few more steps. I want you in bed.”

“Then hurry.”

They stumbled together up the remaining steps. Sawyer struggled with the lock, but, with Jori between her and the door, she couldn’t see what she was doing, and Jori’s mouth on her neck was making it hard to concentrate.

“Hurry,” Jori said, her words a low vibration against Sawyer’s skin.

She fumbled with the key once more before it slid into place and she swung the door open. Jori’s arms tightened around Sawyer and her mouth found Sawyer’s ear.

“Jori, I have to get my keys,” she protested when Jori pushed her through the foyer toward the living room. Her keys dangled from the knob of the still-open door.

“What are you worried about, there’s no one else in—” As Jori spun them into the room, she stopped so suddenly they both almost toppled over. Struggling to keep them upright, Sawyer glanced up and found Erica reclining on the sofa.

Erica stood slowly.

“You’re early,” Sawyer said. She hadn’t been expecting Erica to move back until late the next day.

“I missed being in my own place. I would have come downstairs, but Taylor was sleeping and I didn’t want to risk waking her.” Her tone was controlled, but Sawyer could tell she was angry. “It looks like I came back just in time.”

Jori released Sawyer and quickly moved away. Her face was flushed and her eyes downcast.

“How are you feeling?” Sawyer stepped slightly in front of Jori, shielding her from the irritation in Erica’s eyes. She hoped

Erica would accept the subject change, if only in deference to Jori's presence.

"Fine. How was the brunch?"

"You knew?"

"I lived with Brady. You didn't think I would notice when he left for work seven hours early?"

"I was going to tell you tomorrow." Sawyer shifted uncomfortably, wishing she could figure out how to get Jori out of the room before Erica's anger boiled over.

Apparently, though, Erica was too mad to care who else was there. "Damn it, Sawyer. I *asked* you not to do this."

"Actually, if I recall, you *told* me not to. Look, you don't need to worry about it. If things don't work out, I'll leave Drake's."

"You're damn right you will."

"I know—what?"

"What?" Jori echoed as she stepped around Sawyer. She'd recognized Sawyer's attempt to protect her. But she didn't need anyone to take a bullet for her.

Erica's attention didn't waver from Sawyer. "I'm not losing my pastry chef because you couldn't keep it in your pants."

"That's not fair. You know I'm not like that."

"Do I? How many women have you dated in, say, the last two years?"

"What difference does that make?" The fire behind Sawyer's argument was fading.

"How long can you keep convincing yourself that it's their fault it hasn't worked out? At some point you need to entertain the idea that maybe it's you."

"Oh, that's nice, Erica." Sawyer's expression went cold. "But what's between Jori and me really isn't your business."

"Fine. But if you want it to stay that way, keep it out of my restaurant." Without waiting for a response, Erica stalked toward the kitchen.

Sawyer walked to the window and stared out. After several silent moments, she drew a deep breath and turned back toward Jori.

“I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s okay.”

“No. It’s not. But it’s squashed for now.”

Jori crossed to her and touched her shoulder. “I’m going home. Would you like to come with me?” It was obvious she wouldn’t be spending the night there, and she sensed that Sawyer wanted some distance from Erica. Having her constantly on the premises now, instead of safely at Brady and Paige’s, would strain Sawyer enough.

“You know, this kind of killed the mood for me.”

“Sawyer, we don’t have to have sex. I’m just offering an alternative to staying here tonight. It’s up to you whether you take it.”

Her words seemed to reach Sawyer. She took Jori in her arms and pressed her face into Jori’s hair for a second before she spoke. “That sounds good. Thank you.”

Jori rubbed Sawyer’s back. “I’d like to talk to Erica. If you want to grab some things while I do, then we can take off.”

“This is between Erica and me. You don’t have to—”

“This involves me.” Jori stroked the side of Sawyer’s jaw. “I appreciate you trying to protect me. But she’s my boss. I’m in it, too.”

“Okay.”

When Sawyer headed for the bedroom, Jori took a breath and walked into the kitchen. Erica stood at the counter dunking a tea bag into a steaming mug.

Jori wasn’t confrontational and normally would try to find a way to escape this situation. But allowing her personal life to interfere with her professional wasn’t an option. She’d learned those lessons the hard way. “Erica, can we talk?”

She waited, but Erica didn’t respond. Instead, she draped the bag against the back of the spoon and wrapped the string around

it. As the silence stretched, she dropped the spoon onto a nearby saucer and carefully lifted the mug.

Deciding Erica wasn't going to speak, Jori made another attempt. "I didn't mean for—"

"I tried to warn you."

"I think you underestimate her." Jori had come into the kitchen hoping to preserve her relationship with her employer, but instead she found herself wanting to defend Sawyer.

"How long have you known my sister?"

"A couple of months."

"Well, I've known her my whole life. Maybe you're overestimating her. I just hate to see her keep making the same mistakes."

"And being with me is a mistake?"

"She won't commit." Erica skirted the question. "Is that really a healthy relationship for you?"

Jori couldn't answer. If it was true that Sawyer couldn't commit, she knew it wasn't healthy, but by now she'd convinced herself that it didn't matter. What they had right now was good, and she wouldn't relinquish the time they had even if it was guaranteed to end. But she knew she harbored a hope in a corner of her heart that it wouldn't end—that this time Sawyer wouldn't leave, that *she* would be the one Sawyer couldn't leave.

"Jori, we're going to have to agree to disagree on this one. As an employee, your personal life is not my business. But I don't think of you as just an employee. I can't say this enough—I don't want to see you get hurt. And I think you're a good fit at Drake's. So I hope she keeps her word when all this is over."

"You want her to leave?"

Erica laughed humorlessly. "It's not about what I want. It's about what's best for my business."

Shouldn't it be about what's best for your sister? For your family? The fact that Erica was her boss kept Jori from replying aloud. And when Sawyer came into the kitchen, Jori no longer needed to come up with a suitable response.

“Are you ready?” Sawyer didn’t look at Erica, but Jori did, expecting her to say something. But Erica seemed to have found something interesting in the bottom of her cup of tea and now ignored both of them.

So, instead, Jori nodded and followed Sawyer through the apartment. Sawyer took her hand as they walked outside.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Maybe this wasn't a great idea. I'm not going to be very good company. We should probably have called it a night," Sawyer said fifteen minutes later as Jori led her up the stairs to her apartment.

"We're here now. Just come in." She unlocked the door and pulled Sawyer inside. Sawyer had held her hand all the way from the restaurant and released it only long enough to get out of the car when they arrived, then reclaimed it. She seemed unaware that she clung to Jori, and something about the unintentional vulnerability touched her.

She gestured across the room. "Sit. I'll be right there. Do you want something to drink?"

"Water would be good."

She grabbed two bottles from the refrigerator and joined Sawyer on the futon, then settled close and stretched her arm along the back of the cushion. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Sawyer shrugged and stared at the bottle as she rolled it between her hands.

"Listen, Erica was out of line—"

"She wasn't wrong. I appreciate your loyalty, Jori, but I don't deserve it. I've earned my reputation."

"There must be a reason. I don't buy the short-attention-span line, so don't even bother."

“The truth is, I do decide pretty quickly whether things are going to work out with a woman. But it’s more about what *they* want, than what I want.”

“What do you mean?”

The plastic of the bottle crackled lightly under the pressure of Sawyer’s hands. “When I was younger, I really tried to have a long-term relationship. I got my heart broken a few too many times before I figured out the score.”

Jori took the bottle from Sawyer and set it on the coffee table. “Which is?”

“I’m just not the type that women fall in love with, never have been.”

Jori hadn’t expected this explanation. She recalled the nearly instant attraction she’d felt. She’d thought Sawyer’s smile contagious and her friendliness comforting. And for Jori, that was saying something, since she was never comfortable around strangers. “You’re not?”

“No. I’m not.” Sawyer forced a self-effacing grin. “You know those people described as having a *great personality*? I’m one of those people.”

“You *do* have a great personality. I envy how outgoing you are, and how witty.”

“Sure, because you don’t have to worry about being outgoing.”

“What does that mean?”

“Look at you. You’re gorgeous. People notice you without you even trying. I don’t make the same first impression. I fall back on being friendly and funny.”

“You shouldn’t have to ‘fall back’ on anything. You’re a great person.”

Sawyer shrugged. She knew what people saw when they looked at her, having never had any illusions about her appearance. She’d sometimes been described as cute and once as handsome, but the words that slashed through her mind when she looked

at Jori—*beautiful, stunning, breathtaking*—had never applied to her.

“I have a mirror, Jori.” Suddenly her surety fell away, a façade. And she hated her words, hated pointing out her own shortcomings and the weakness they revealed. She often forced the confidence she knew women found attractive, even in uncomfortable situations, in order to draw attention from her flaws—boring features hidden behind a pair of glasses. How could she expect to attract anyone with these looks? If she needed a reminder that she got the brains and personality in the family, she only had to look at Erica and Brady. Everyone had always told her she was the image of her dad, and he was no prize. Nothing like her mother and her sister, that was certain.

Having wanted Jori from their first meeting, Sawyer prayed she couldn’t see her abrupt lapse in self-assurance. Suddenly she very much wanted Jori to see things in her that made her special. “Anyway, I’ve gotten away from the point. When I was younger I did have a couple of serious relationships. But in the end, I was a diversion while they were waiting for their soul mate.”

“So somewhere along the way you convinced yourself that all women were the same, and we all wanted the same thing?”

“Well—”

“Do you think all women are shallow?”

“No, I guess not.” It sounded ridiculous when Jori said it that way. Could she, without realizing it, have applied the faults of a few to all women? Certainly she’d used that as a reason to keep emotional distance, especially with Jori. She’d been so intent on seeming confident and assured that she’d been a complete idiot.

“Then why is it so inconceivable that someone could want to be with you, to really know you, Sawyer? But you don’t let anyone close enough to give them a chance. How do you know one of the women in your past may have been good for you, but you didn’t give her a real opportunity?”

“Are you trying to convince me to get back with one of my exes?” Sawyer tried for humor but it fell flat.

“I want to know why you’re selling yourself short. Why you run.”

“You don’t ask for much, do you?” Sawyer said sarcastically, aware she wasn’t answering the question. “I get enough of this from Erica.”

Sawyer stood and took two steps toward the door before Jori grabbed her arm. “Okay. Hold on.” Jori made a mental note: *Too much, too quickly*. Not releasing Sawyer’s arm, Jori led her to the bedroom. “I didn’t mean to get you all worked up.”

She unbuttoned Sawyer’s shirt and eased it off her shoulders, then released the clasp between Sawyer’s breasts.

“I told you I wasn’t going to be good company.”

“Your company is just fine.” She continued removing Sawyer’s clothes and placed them neatly on the chair nearby, then gave her an old T-shirt. “Put this on and get in bed,” she said as she changed her own clothes.

“I don’t mind if you want to tell me to go,” Sawyer whispered.

She wants to run. Suddenly, Jori very much wanted to know if she could convince Sawyer to fight that instinct and stay. She lay down and drew Sawyer’s head to her chest, then sifted her fingers through her hair. “I don’t want you to go.”

Sawyer knew her body was tense with the desire to flee. It would feel so good to hear the door slam on her way out. Jori had ventured too close to the insecurities she had spent years carefully blanketing, and, without meaning to, Sawyer had revealed more than she usually did. But Jori’s touch, the gentle caress against her scalp, distracted her.

Jori’s patience lessened the frustration she usually felt when she thought about her past relationships and how they’d affected her. For months after the gorgeous woman in college rejected her, she’d been embarrassed to go out in public. And when she’d finally gotten the strength to try again with another woman, also

beautiful, she repeated the same pattern. Things always started out smoothly, but at some point her partner would end things. Though her lovers trotted out the usual reasons—*it's not you, it's me* and *I'm just not ready for a relationship right now*—something inside Sawyer withered with each new heartbreak, and she became increasingly convinced each breathtaking woman she was involved with was simply tired of looking at her drab appearance every day. And try as she might, she was stuck with it.

Eventually Sawyer decided that being the one to initiate the breakup would minimize the hurt. She determined quickly that the relationship didn't have long-term potential and ended it first. Generally, this had been a good practice—for her. The women she rejected didn't always receive it well, though Sawyer rationalized that her percentages were pretty good. Only once had a woman screamed at her that she needed professional help.

But lying next to Jori with her wonderful hands in her hair, she could almost forget every failed attempt. She nestled closer against Jori's side and closed her eyes.



Sawyer turned off the shower and stepped out. "Thank you for last night," she called through the open bathroom door as she toweled dry.

"Anytime. Do you want some breakfast?"

"No, thanks. I'll have to run by Erica's and get the rest of my stuff. She and I need some space right now."

"You can stay here, if you want to."

Sawyer stepped out of the bathroom. "Ah—I don't think—"

"I'm sorry. Forget it."

"Jori." The flash of rejection Jori failed to hide hurt. "It's not personal."

Jori paused with an open carton of juice poised over a glass.

Sawyer couldn't read her expression, but when she spoke the iciness in her tone was clear. "Of course it's not."

"So I'm going to call the office at my old complex and see if they have a one-bedroom open." Sawyer picked up her jeans from the chair and stepped into them.

"That's a good idea."

After she finished dressing, Sawyer crossed to Jori and slid an arm around her waist. "I want to see you again."

"You'll see me later at Drake's."

"I mean," she cupped Jori's jaw and kissed her lightly, "I want to *see* you. Not just sex. We could have drinks, watch a movie, or whatever you want."

"Okay. Maybe this weekend." When Sawyer kissed her again, Jori held her close and lingered.



Twenty minutes later, Sawyer knocked on Matt's door. When he opened it, wearing his favorite boxers and a familiar faded T-shirt, Sawyer realized they hadn't gone this long without seeing each other since they'd met. She missed the comfort of knowing she could wander into the next room and talk to him about whatever was on her mind.

"I was over at the office checking on vacant apartments so I thought I'd stop in and say hi."

"I'm glad you did. Come on in, I was just making breakfast. How's Erica doing? She and the baby move home?"

Sawyer followed him to the kitchen and leaned against the counter out of the way while he fried bacon and eggs. "Yeah, she came back yesterday afternoon. A bit unexpectedly."

Matt loaded up a plate, and she took it and got two forks out of the drawer. As they settled at the table, she gave him an edited version of Erica's discovery of her relationship with Jori.

When she described the moment she'd realized Erica was in

the room, he laughed. “Man, I wish I could have seen the look on your face.”

“I knew Erica was going to let me have it, but I thought she might wait until Jori left.”

“What did Jori do?”

“She was cool. We went back to her place and talked for a while, then went to sleep. This morning she offered to let me stay with her for a while.”

“How did she take it when you told her no?”

“How do you know I didn’t take her up on it?”

“Come on, Sawyer. Even if you hadn’t already told me you were over here looking for a place, I would’ve known you turned her down.”

Sawyer didn’t respond, instead taking a forkful of eggs.

“I think you should give Jori a chance.”

“Who says I’m not? I was with her last night. We’ve made plans to see each other again.” Once more, Sawyer found herself on the defensive.

“But you’re waiting for it to be over.”

“What’s wrong with being realistic?”

“Okay, I know I’m not going to win this argument. All I’m saying is that Jori seems good for you. She’s sweet, patient, and has a quietness about her that complements you.”

“Maybe you should talk to Erica, because she doesn’t see a relationship between Jori and me as a good thing.”

“She’s got a slightly different perspective than I do. It could be uncomfortable at the restaurant if things don’t work out.”

Sawyer shook her head. “I promised Jori I’d leave Drake’s. Besides, I’m not going to work there forever.”

Matt stood and stacked their empty plates. “Well, I can’t help you with that. But I can offer you an alternative regarding your living situation. Move back in here.”

She picked up their glasses and followed him into the kitchen. “Thank you. But you and Davis—”

“Davis wants to look for a house. There’s no sense in you leasing another apartment, when this one will be free when we find a place.”

“A house?” Sawyer had never seen Matt move so quickly with anyone.

“He wants a puppy, a golden retriever. So a yard, preferably with a fence—”

“A puppy?”

“I know it seems like it’s too soon. But I really don’t doubt that I love him. So, yeah, he wants a puppy. And I want to give him everything.”

“If you’re sure you guys don’t mind.” When Sawyer had gone to stay at Erica’s, she had taken only what she’d need for several weeks, leaving most of her things at the apartment she’d shared with Matt.

“We don’t. Besides, I don’t think it will be that long. Davis already has his eye on a house that he heard is going on the market soon.”

“Wow, a house.” Things really were changing quickly.

He shrugged. “It’s time to grow up and decide what I want from life.”

Sawyer wondered if those were his father’s words. When he’d graduated pre-med and announced his intention to sell cars instead of going to medical school, his father had been livid. For months, every time the two were in the same room, his father had thrown badly veiled barbs about wasted money and a shyster’s living. But Matt had known what he wanted and gone after it. Sawyer envied his surety then and now.

“And what you want is Davis, a house, and a dog?”

“Yes.” He wrapped an arm around her neck and pulled her into a hug. She wondered if she’d ever seen him so happy.

“Okay. But I’m not bearing any children for the two of you, so don’t even think about it.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Are you sure you'll be okay?" Erica asked for the third time in the fifteen minutes since Sawyer had walked through Brady's front door. She paced the living room, softly singing to the cooing baby in her arms.

"Yes. I've taken care of an infant before." When she paused, Sawyer touched Taylor's hand and felt the tiny fingers curl against hers. "I used to watch the boys all the time when they were babies, remember?"

"I know."

Erica and Derrick Ames were going to dinner with Paige and Brady, but Erica was nervous about leaving Taylor for the first time. Paige had called Sawyer earlier that day to ask if she would mind watching all of the kids. Sawyer was sure she'd heard a smile in Paige's voice when she'd told her to invite Jori over as well.

Though Ames had visited several times since Taylor's birth, Sawyer suspected Erica was nervous because this was their first real date. And she wondered if Paige and Brady had been invited along to buffer some of the pressure.

Erica had certainly dressed to impress. She wore a rich brown pencil skirt that ended just above her knees and showed off her shapely legs. Her wheat-colored silk blouse was the same shade as the lightest strands that wove through her French braid.

The only thing that detracted from her appearance was the towel tucked against her left breast and over her shoulder, to protect her blouse.

“You look nice.”

“Thanks.” Erica blushed.

During the three weeks since their argument, Erica and she had been politely distant, neither of them bringing up the dispute. They didn’t discuss her relationship with Jori, but limited their conversation to Drake’s, and even that was sparse since Erica hadn’t returned to work yet. Sawyer had already decided that she couldn’t change Erica’s mind, so she could hope for only a silent truce and maybe time would prove her wrong. *Surely I am capable of a long-term relationship with the right person. Is Jori that person?*

“I’m going to feed her before Derrick gets here.”

As Erica disappeared down the hallway, she passed Paige entering the living room. Paige’s deep purple dress accented her trim figure, and a teardrop-shaped diamond nestled in the plunging neckline.

Sawyer whistled. “Wow, fancy. Where are you guys going for dinner?”

“Brady’s been promising me we’d go to Antonio’s for months. Tonight he’s going to deliver.” She winked at Sawyer. “Then maybe later when we get home, I’ll deliver, too.”

“Oh, man, that’s my brother you’re talking about. I don’t need to hear that.”

Paige laughed. “I let the boys rent a movie earlier, so they’ll probably want to watch it. I put a pan of mac and cheese in the oven for dinner. The timer will go off when it’s ready.”

“Okay.”

“Is Jori coming over?”

Sawyer shrugged. “She might stop by.”

Paige looked like she wanted to say more, but the doorbell

pealed and she left the room. Sawyer heard her say, "Hello, Lieutenant."

"Please, call me Derrick," he said as she led him into the living room. He nodded at Sawyer and she returned the gesture. He looked every bit the gentleman in his dark gray suit, white shirt, and burgundy paisley tie. She guessed his jacket had been tailored to fit his broad shoulders.

"Are we ready to go?" Brady came down the hallway yanking on the knot of his tie. He crossed to Paige, who straightened it for him.

"We are now." Paige patted his chest. "Why don't you guys go start the car, and we ladies will join you in a minute."

"Yes, dear. Come on, Derrick, we can go out through the garage."

As they disappeared through the kitchen, Sawyer laughed. "You have him so well trained."

Paige waved a hand. "Please, men are easy."

"Compared to women, I'd have to agree."

"Your problem is not the other women, though. You're the complicated one."

"I'm complicated?"

"Well, being in a relationship with you is." Paige smiled as if trying to take the sting out of her words.

"Have you been talking to Erica?"

"Contrary to what you might believe, this whole family isn't against you." She touched Sawyer's shoulder. "And I understand more than you think. Before I met your brother, I wasn't very trusting. But I came around and, someday, you'll trust yourself enough, too."

Sawyer allowed Paige to wrap her in a quick embrace, then pulled away as Erica reappeared from the bedroom.

"The guys are waiting in the car," Paige said, picking up her small black clutch.

Erica nodded, then told Sawyer, “Taylor fell asleep. She’ll probably be out for a few hours.”

“We’ll be fine. Have a good time.”

“The boys are playing in their room, but if they get too loud make them go in the family room so they don’t wake her.” Paige squeezed Sawyer’s arm before she moved away.

After Sawyer closed the door behind them, she went to the boys’ bedroom. Intent on the video game they played, neither of them appeared to notice her standing in the open doorway. She watched in amazement as their little fingers manipulated the controllers while their onscreen characters battled in a flurry of kicks and punches. Each boy gloated that he was going to win and tried to bait the other into making a mistake. Their interaction reminded Sawyer of herself and her siblings when she was younger. Erica especially had been fiercely competitive, and the only thing that had changed over the years was the areas in which they competed. They weren’t playing silly games now. Instead, Erica compared their lives and found Sawyer’s lacking.

When Quintin bested his older brother, he jumped up and down chanting, then danced around, drawing his words out into multiple syllables. After the fourth refrain of “I won and you lost ’cause you’re a big loser,” Sawyer stepped in.

“Okay, boys. Let’s go get ready for dinner. Wash your hands and meet me in the kitchen.” Quintin was still whispering his taunt as he followed Daniel through the door. Sawyer palmed his head and slowed his progress. “Use soap. I’ll know if you don’t.”



Sawyer had just finished washing the dishes when the doorbell rang. She grabbed a towel, wiping her hands as she headed for the door.

"I'll get it," Daniel called from the next room.

"Look and see who it is before you open the door," she reminded him.

She reached the living room in time to see him peek out the glass panel alongside the door. Quintin hovered curiously at her side as Daniel pulled it open and stepped back to let Jori enter.

"Hi," Sawyer said. When Jori grinned back at her, she was surprised by a flood of pleasure just from seeing the spark in her eyes.

"Hi." Jori held up a plastic grocery bag and smiled down at Daniel. "I brought you guys something."

While Quintin clung to Sawyer's leg, Daniel rushed over and peered in the bag.

"Ice cream," he exclaimed.

"For sundaes," Jori said as she headed for the kitchen. "Who wants one?"

"Me!" Daniel followed and, lured by the promise of ice cream, Quintin trailed them.

As Sawyer walked into the kitchen and saw Jori unpack a carton of French vanilla ice cream, mason jars of topping, and a can of whipped cream, she wondered if the boys would ever go to sleep after ingesting so much sugar.

"Small sundaes, please," she said as she got out four bowls and spoons. "They just had dinner and bedtime isn't far off."

Jori twisted the cap off one of the jars and winked at Sawyer. "I've got homemade chocolate and caramel sauces."

"From scratch?"

Nodding, Jori put the jars in the microwave. "I made them this afternoon."

"Good Lord, you really are a woman after my own heart." Sawyer pressed a palm to her chest and stalked Jori across the kitchen, thinking, *If we were alone...*

"Help me up." Quintin's plea stopped Sawyer's progress. He stood on tiptoes next to the stool pulled up to the edge of the

island. Daniel had already climbed up and now leaned the entire upper half of his body across the counter to watch Jori assemble the sundaes.

“Do you want chocolate or caramel?” Jori asked Quintin as Sawyer helped him scoot up to the counter.

“Can I have both?” he asked shyly.

“You certainly can.” She spooned some of both sauces onto a small mound of ice cream.

“Oh, Lord, they’ll never sleep,” Sawyer muttered.

But they did. Two hours later, after watching the movie, she was tucking them into bed. Daniel had fallen asleep just before the credits rolled, so she had carried him and deposited him on the top bunk. Quintin climbed into the one below, then Sawyer sat down on the edge of his bed. He turned on his side and tucked one hand under his pillow.

“Night, Aunt Sawyer.” He looked at Jori standing in the doorway and said, “Thanks for the sundaes.”

“You’re welcome,” she whispered.

“Sleep well.” Sawyer smoothed a hand over his strawberry curls and kissed his forehead.

She stood and crossed to join Jori. “He gets his manners from Paige.”

“He’s sweet. They both are.”

As they stepped into the hallway, Sawyer eased the door closed behind them, then led Jori back to the living room. “Would you like something to drink?”

“No, thanks. I should get going.”

Jori turned toward the front door, but Sawyer grabbed her hand and pulled her back. She framed her face in her hands and kissed her lightly. “Stay. They’ll be here soon. Stay, then come home with me.”

When Sawyer’s mouth moved to her neck, Jori’s head dropped back and she moaned softly. “What do you have in mind?”

Sawyer nipped at her chin. "Do you have any of that chocolate sauce left?"

"Hmm, I think I do. But in that case, you'd better come home with me."

"Why's that?"

"Because I don't want to share with Matt and Davis."

Sawyer smiled and pulled her to the couch, tucking her against her side as they sat down. She picked up the remote and began to search for something to distract her until her family returned. Jori's head rested on her shoulder, and Jori's hand felt warm on her thigh even through her jeans.

A soft cry from the baby monitor sitting on the coffee table drew Sawyer's attention.

"It sounds like the princess is awake." She rose. "I'll be right back."

On her way to Paige and Brady's bedroom, she looked in on the boys, then, satisfied they were sleeping peacefully, she went into the room next door. Taylor lay in the portable crib fussing and waving her fists.

"Oh, what's the matter with my girl?" she whispered as she carefully picked her up. When she laid Taylor against her shoulder she knew what was wrong. "Ah, changing time."

As she put a fresh diaper on Taylor, she talked quietly to her. "Hey, little one, since I've got you here, there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about. You've got your mama's eyes, her nose, and it looks like you're going to have her hair, thank God." Taylor's father had jet-black hair, which he'd kept shaved. "You'll be a beauty, Taylor, like your mother and your grandmother. Nothing like your plain old Aunt Sawyer. You won't have to be a court jester like me. You'll attract all the women, or men, that you want without even trying."

Taylor scrunched her tiny features, then they smoothed and she cooed softly as if responding to Sawyer's words.

"But you really don't need to inherit your mother's

stubbornness. Maybe you could follow Aunt Paige when it comes to that. She has the patience of a saint. She'd have to, to deal with this family."

When Sawyer finished bundling Taylor back up, she carried her into the living room and settled carefully on the couch, laying Taylor against her chest and shoulder closest to Jori.

"Hi, sweetheart." Jori smoothed Taylor's pale wisps of hair, then kissed her forehead.

As Sawyer watched Jori, the familiar shard of fear folded within her. The undisguised longing in Jori's eyes as she looked at the baby reminded Sawyer of all that Jori had never had in her life.

"You want kids?" She knew the answer before she asked.

She could see each moment of pain, loneliness, and envy burn across Jori's expression and end with wonder. Then Jori gazed at her wearing a careful mask of concealment that nearly broke her heart.

"Four or five." Sawyer didn't think she imagined the emotion that choked Jori's words.

"Four or five? That's a handful."

"I want a big family."

"You need to spend some more time with these three and see if you still feel the same." Sawyer forced a light tone while doubt churned inside her. Did she dare toy with these emotions? She couldn't risk a relationship unless she was absolutely sure. Jori deserved everything that no one had ever offered her. She deserved something, and someone, special. Panic spread through Sawyer's chest when she found herself wishing she could be that special someone.

"These three are angels. Your children, now they would be a handful."

"Are you saying I'm hard to handle?"

"A little." Jori grinned when Sawyer pretended to look offended. "But I do so like *handling* you."

Taylor had drifted back to sleep and Jori curled against Sawyer's side. She tucked one hand inside Sawyer's and touched Taylor's foot with the other. Sawyer laced her fingers through Jori's, as if by clinging to this moment she could stave off her fears.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Neither of them had moved when, an hour later, the front door opened and Brady and Paige walked in.

“Hey, guys,” Sawyer said as Brady sat in the chair nearby and Paige headed down the hall to look in on the boys. “How was dinner?”

“Good.”

“Where’s Erica?”

“Outside.” He grinned. “Saying good-bye to Derrick.”

Before Sawyer could comment further, the door opened and Erica came in with a flushed face and goofy smile.

“Brady,” Paige called as she came back down the hall. “Could you pack the crib and put it in Erica’s car for her?”

“Sure thing.”

Careful not to wake Taylor, Erica lifted her from Sawyer’s arms, then sat in the chair Brady had just vacated. “How was she?”

“Perfect,” Sawyer answered. “I’ll go help Brady with your things.”

Left alone with Erica, Jori shifted on the sofa and wondered if she should say anything to her. They hadn’t really spoken since that night in the apartment, but earlier Sawyer had told her that Erica seemed content to let the awkward topic of their relationship drop.

Finally, she settled on polite conversation. “Did you have a nice night?”

Erica glanced at her, then back at her daughter, smoothing a hand over Taylor’s fuzzy head. “I did.”

“So? Are you going to see him again?”

Erica smiled faintly. “Yes, I think so. He asked if he could take Taylor and me for a walk in the park this weekend.”

“He seems like a good guy.” Having run out of small talk, Jori blurted, “I’m sorry we argued.”

Erica regarded her with a thoughtful expression. “Perhaps it wasn’t my place, but I was only looking out for you. You’ve obviously decided not to take my advice.”

“I know it might seem the smarter thing to do. On paper, we’re not the best match, but...” Jori wondered how to explain the need Sawyer inspired. She knew all of the reasons they shouldn’t be together, many of them relating to her own family history. “Haven’t you ever met someone and felt as if you really have no choice about whether to be with them? Like everything in you clamors to be near them, regardless of what the outcome might be?”

“Even if the inevitable outcome is heartache?”

Jori considered the question. Would she trade the feeling of being in Sawyer’s arms for the guarantee of an even keel emotionally? “Even then.”

Erica shifted forward in the chair, rocking Taylor when she stirred. She gazed at her daughter with the unconditional love of a devoted parent, the kind Jori had never known. And she wondered if Erica had finally found something that meant more to her than Drake’s.



Sawyer stretched out next to Jori on the bed and raised up on her elbow, then dipped a spoon into a bowl on the nightstand. “I’ve wanted to do this since the first day we met.”

“Really?” Jori smiled as Sawyer drew the spoon across her bare stomach, leaving a trail of melted chocolate.

Sawyer bent and dragged her tongue along the line. “Mmm, it’s so much better when it’s homemade.”

“Ah, no bottled syrup for my girl,” Jori said with a groan as Sawyer licked her skin again.

“I’m just glad you didn’t let the boys eat it all.”

Taking Sawyer’s face in her hands, Jori pulled her close for a kiss. Their stomachs rubbed together, smearing the chocolate between them. “You taste good.”

“So do you,” Sawyer murmured, biting Jori’s jaw.

“But I haven’t had any chocolate.”

“Then it’s all you, isn’t it?”

Sawyer traced the spoon across Jori’s throat, then followed it with her tongue, feeling Jori’s pulse beat heavily against her mouth.

“Hey, no marks,” Jori said when Sawyer sucked the syrup from the side of her neck. “I don’t need to explain hickeys to the guys in the kitchen.” She rolled Sawyer onto her back and trailed her hand across her stomach. “You’re a mess.”

Sawyer smiled and caught Jori’s wrist. She licked her chocolate-covered fingers clean, watched Jori’s eyelids flutter, and heard her soft gasp. “I can’t get enough.”

“I’d be flattered if I wasn’t convinced you were talking about the chocolate.”

Sawyer coated another of Jori’s fingers, then dragged her tongue along it. “Well, then it’s lucky for me that you go great with chocolate.” Sawyer emphasized her words by covering one of Jori’s nipples with sauce. “Mmm, chocolate-covered nipple. My favorite.”

Jori’s laughter turned into a moan as Sawyer drew the nipple into her mouth. “Oh, that’s nice. Bite it.”

Sawyer closed her teeth on the sweet-flavored flesh and felt a surge of heat low in her belly as Jori’s back bowed off the bed. She never tired of the rush that giving Jori pleasure brought, of

feeling as if she were being let in on a secret when she watched Jori's reservation fall away while her orgasm spiraled through her.

"Can you come like this?" she whispered against Jori's breast.

"I wouldn't have thought so." Jori's voice was husky. "But, ah—God, maybe." Sawyer sucked her nipple, hard, until the muscles of Jori's abdomen and thighs hardened and Jori dug her fingers into Sawyer's biceps. Then she eased back, licking it lightly.

"Do you want to?"

"Yes." Jori's coiled body, so close to release, protested the sudden lack of pressure.

"How bad?"

"Sawyer, please." Jori clung to Sawyer, every nerve ending seeming to scream for stimulation.

Sawyer slipped her fingers down Jori's stomach, and Jori shivered beneath them. "I could spend hours touching you."

She gripped Sawyer's wrist and guided her hand down. "Then touch me."

Sawyer sifted lightly through the downy hair and barely pressed into her folds and grazed her clitoris.

"God, please, Sawyer. More."

Sawyer kept her eyes on Jori's face and Jori cocked her head to study her, resisting the urge to tug the wrist she still held and force Sawyer's fingers deeper. She could tell by the trembling in Sawyer's arm that she was fighting a similar impulse. Sawyer was teasing them both, and Jori wondered if Sawyer enjoyed it as much as she did.

"Do you like it when I beg?"

Sawyer gasped and couldn't hide her surprise at Jori's boldly spoken words. "Yes."

Jori smiled and lifted her hips, nudging Sawyer's hand. She wrapped a hand around the back of Sawyer's neck, pulled her head down, and pressed her mouth against Sawyer's ear. She bit

Sawyer's earlobe and felt the answering twitch in the fingers that still rested against her throbbing center.

"Does it excite you to know how much I want you inside me?" she whispered hotly in Sawyer's ear.

"Jesus, yes," Sawyer gasped.

The hoarse excitement in Jori's voice ripped through Sawyer, frying the connection between her brain and body and leaving her completely at the mercy of her senses. She was aware only of the feel of Jori squeezing around her as her fingers, seemingly of their own accord, slid inside—of the taste of Jori's mouth when she took it again, roughly—and of the scent of chocolate and sex as Jori rode her fingers toward orgasm.



"You should have let me shower with you," Sawyer said, staring hotly at Jori across the bed.

Jori laughed. "Uh-uh. I know what would've happened."

"I would have behaved. If you'd asked me nicely."

"Somehow I doubt it." Jori pulled back the clean sheet she'd put on the bed while Sawyer had finished her shower.

Amusement sparkling in her eyes, Sawyer blatantly trailed her gaze down Jori's body then back to meet Jori's. "You're probably right. I don't know that I can resist you when you're wet and naked."

Jori slid between the sheets and covered herself, enjoying the look of disappointment that crossed Sawyer's lovely features. She turned onto her side and looked back over her shoulder at Sawyer. "Get in here."

Sawyer spooned her and touched Jori's waist. Jori took Sawyer's hand and tucked it between her breasts, pulling Sawyer's arm more tightly around her. Her muscles felt like liquid and, relaxed and truly sated, she basked in the cocoon of Sawyer's body.

"That was rather decadent." She recalled how Sawyer had

made love to her, somehow blending each climax into a rise to the next, until she had weakly pulled Sawyer's hand away, whispering, "Please, I can't take anymore."

Though she would have thought it impossible, she'd felt a renewed rush of moisture between her thighs when Sawyer had leaned over her and said, "I like it better when you beg me *not* to stop."

Jori had distracted Sawyer by flipping her onto her back and licking a smear of chocolate from her chest. When, later, they lay coated in chocolate and sweat, Jori had declared them both in need of a shower.

Now, Sawyer nuzzled Jori's neck. "Complaining?"

Jori angled her head, giving Sawyer better access. "Oh, absolutely not. How do you do that?"

"What?" Sawyer pushed damp ebony locks off Jori's forehead.

"Wreck me so thoroughly."

"Just talented, I guess."

"And modest." Jori chuckled.

Sawyer traced her lips along the curve of Jori's jaw and the side of her neck. "When I'm with you—touching you, I simply don't want to stop."

"Mmm, I like the way you touch me."

Sawyer's stomach tightened at the slight growl in Jori's voice. She squeezed her thighs together to contain the throbbing arousal that threatened to surge again. Almost of their own volition, her splayed fingers stroked the underside of Jori's right breast.

"Don't even think about it," Jori warned. "I need more recovery time."

Sawyer stilled her fingers. "This is not just about sex, Jori. I like being with you. You're—comfortable."

Jori laughed. "That's a first."

"What?"

"I'm *comfortable*? That's what you say about an old pair of slippers."

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I don’t own any slippers.” Sawyer grinned. “And even if I did, it’s not the same thing.”

“Then maybe you should explain it to me.”

“Comfortable is—I can walk around in the boxers I only sleep in when I’m alone. Hell, just tonight, despite how self-conscious I’ve always been about my appearance, I was walking through your apartment naked. Comfortable is not worrying that I have to impress you or make some kind of impression. And that’s great because I’m so busy—”

“Being comfortable?”

“I was going to say enjoying being with you. With you, I can be me.” *I’ve never been completely me before.*

Jori rolled over in Sawyer’s arms and fit one of her legs between Sawyer’s. “I’m glad,” she murmured drowsily.

Sawyer lightly stroked her fingers over Jori’s back. When Jori pressed her face into Sawyer’s neck, her soft wildflower-scented hair tickled Sawyer’s nose. Jori’s breathing evened out and Sawyer pulled back slightly to look at her face. Her eyes were closed, her lashes resting gently against her cheek. Sawyer dropped her head back on the pillow and smiled contentedly.

“Good night,” she whispered into the semidark room.

“Mmm. I love you.” Jori’s voice was heavy with sleep. Her arms tightened around Sawyer’s waist and she nestled closer, already too deep in slumber to feel Sawyer stiffen.



The next morning, Sawyer eased out of bed and was gone before Jori woke up. All the way to her apartment, she rambled to herself aloud, trying to figure out how she was going to explain her flight to Jori. She tried out every line she could think of and even tested the truth while she stood beneath the stinging hot spray of the shower. But the heavy mist of steam filling the stall

couldn't erase the image of Jori's face or the memory of her murmured protest when Sawyer had slipped out of bed.

By the time she drove to work, she was no closer to having a plan, and her stomach was knotted with dread as she opened the back door to Drake's. But, as it turned out, she was granted a reprieve, however short, because when she walked into the kitchen Erica was there, pacing the length of the room and gently bouncing a crying Taylor in her arms. Brady, Chuck, and Jori were all doing prep work at their stations.

"Are you sure you're ready to come back? It's only been a month," Brady asked as he set a saucepan on the stovetop and added a healthy slab of butter to melt.

"It's been five weeks. And yes, I'm ready." To Taylor, she murmured, "Come on, sweetie. What's the matter?"

"Sawyer's got things under control here, if you need more time."

Sawyer briefly made eye contact with Jori across the room and averted her glance when she felt her heart hitch. She crossed the kitchen and leaned against Jori's counter, her back to Jori and her arms crossed over her chest. The scent of vanilla drifted around her, and she could hear the rhythmic sound of Jori's whisk against the sides of a stainless- steel bowl.

"I just need the rest of this week to find a sitter. I'll start back Monday."

Brady stuck his pinkie in the reduction taking shape in his saucepan and tasted it, then added a pinch of salt. "I might be able to help you out. Paige has been talking about doing some baby-sitting to make extra cash since both boys are in school now. In fact, she's already got names of a couple of families who might be interested. If you want, I can see how she'd feel about keeping Taylor."

"That would be great, Brady, especially since she'd be with family, too. I've been fretting about leaving her with a stranger." Taylor had finally calmed and Erica laid her in the infant car seat perched on a countertop a safe distance from where Brady

worked. “So, um, Sawyer, I was thinking you might want to stay on after I come back.”

“You were?” After all the trouble they’d had during the months Sawyer had been at Drake’s, she didn’t expect Erica would want to continue working with her.

“Sure. I’m still short a waitress.”

Jori’s whisk stuttered to a stop at precisely the moment that Sawyer realized Erica was serious. Sure, she’d never taken an interest in the family business before, so maybe Erica didn’t have any reason to think she might want to now. But it still stung that Erica could so easily relegate her to server after the work she’d done managing in her stead.

“Waitress.”

“Yeah, you’ve still got your uniform, don’t you?”

Sawyer could tell from Brady’s expression that he realized Erica’s error. She turned away from his sympathetic gaze. Her blood ran hot but she kept her expression stone cold. She shook her head slowly, remembering how she’d returned the uniform to the linen closet the day Erica had collapsed—the day she’d assumed the reins of Drake’s. Temporarily, she reminded herself.

“Why wait until Monday, Erica? Why don’t you just take over right now?” Sawyer drew the keys to Drake’s from her pocket and tossed them on the counter in front of Erica. “I’m done.”

She didn’t even look at Jori as she headed for the back door, ignoring Erica’s confused exclamation and Brady’s plea to return and talk about it. Head down, she had the engine of the Solara cranked and her hand on the gear shift when she heard a knock on the car window. Without looking up, she pressed the button to roll down the glass.

“Sawyer, hold on a minute.” Jori touched her shoulder.

Her pride only dented but not destroyed, Sawyer held up a hand to silence her. “She’s on her own.”

“Sawyer—”

“Not now,” she snapped. Jori’s fingers still rested on her

shoulder and their warmth seeped through her shirt, making her long to step out of the car and pull Jori into her arms. She wanted so much from Jori. More than she had from anyone in so long, maybe ever. And that thought alone had her searching the street for the quickest escape route.

“Please, talk to me. I know Erica upset you just now.”

“I can’t talk about that right now.”

Jori suspected that Sawyer’s behavior wasn’t entirely about her anger with Erica. “Are we not okay? Because I thought things were going well with us, and last night was—well, incredible. Then this morning I woke up and you were gone.”

“I need some space.”

“Okay. I’ll call you later, and—”

“Jori, I need to sort some things out.”

Jori pulled her hand away and stared at Sawyer, confused. She’d watched Sawyer’s enthusiasm for her work at Drake’s grow with every day, so despite any pretense to the contrary, she knew Erica’s apparent inability to see Sawyer’s accomplishments had hurt her feelings. But that didn’t explain Sawyer’s absence that morning or the distance between them now. *She needs space*. Jori could almost manage to deny the trickle of fear at not knowing what “space” meant for them, but she couldn’t ignore the slash of pain in her chest.

She stepped back and was barely clear of the car when Sawyer backed into the street and took off.

Sawyer maneuvered through downtown traffic more aggressively than she should, ignoring two honking horns and one angry motorist whom she was sure would have flipped her off if she’d glanced his way.

Instead, she drove back to her apartment on autopilot while replaying the conversations with both Erica and Jori. Her anger with Erica was easy to figure out. Erica always made it plain that she didn’t expect too much from her, and then when she didn’t put forth the effort to prove her wrong, Erica practically gloated.

What surprised Sawyer more was the hollow feeling in her

chest when she thought about Jori. She usually knew when a relationship was about to end. It began as an itch beneath her skin and blossomed into full-blown restlessness eased only when she finally broke it off. She had come to expect the rush of relief that followed the last time she saw a woman. But with Jori, she didn't feel any of the usual cues. She was happy when they were together, and when they weren't, Jori was always on her mind, in sweet anticipation of when she would see her again.

But that had changed the night before. Jori's murmured declaration of love had been so quiet, Sawyer almost hadn't heard it. As the words sank in, Sawyer's heart had kicked with fear as she realized how much she wanted—no, *needed*—that love.

Jori had snuggled against her and Sawyer had wished she never had to let her go. Somehow, while she was preoccupied with the pace of life, love had sneaked in on her. She'd barely slept, wanting to ingrain the feel of Jori into her arms, because she knew in the morning she would flee. Sawyer simply couldn't bear the knowledge that Jori now had the power to devastate her.

"Fucking coward," she muttered. "Guess I'm job hunting again." In the past, she'd enjoyed the process of looking for a new vocation. Usually, she was tired of what she'd been doing and anticipated the promise of starting over. But today felt different, and she refused to examine why.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sawyer stood on Brady and Paige's front porch holding a gift bag decorated with a red cartoon sports car. She glanced once more at the driveway. She'd parked behind Erica's Land Rover so she had a pretty good idea what to expect when she got inside. She hadn't spoken to Erica in two weeks, having ignored several phone calls from her.

She knew she was being stubborn and she wasn't ready to give in yet, but she hadn't been able say no when Quintin had called and invited her to his birthday party. So she took a deep breath and pressed the doorbell. Seconds later feet thundered on the other side of the door, and when it swung open Quintin stood there flanked by his brother and six of their friends.

"Hey there, birthday boy." Sawyer ruffled his already mussed hair as she stepped inside.

"Aunt Sawyer, I'm five. I'm catching up to Daniel, he's only six."

Sawyer smiled at his logic. Once again she saw a reflection of her early relationship with Erica.

"No, you're not, dummy. I'm going to be seven in two months," Daniel asserted, making it clear he wouldn't let his brother pull even with him.

"Don't call your brother a dummy," Paige said as she came

from the kitchen. “You boys go play and let Aunt Sawyer come in the house, please.”

Sawyer followed Paige into the living room, trying to appear as if she was glancing around casually. Derrick Ames sat at one end of the sofa and Brady in the chair nearby.

“She’s in the kitchen.” Paige paused as she passed Sawyer. “Why don’t you go in there and help her with the cake.”

“I don’t think—”

“That wasn’t a request.”

Paige’s tone was unexpectedly firm, and when Sawyer looked at her, her expression didn’t invite argument.

“Yes, ma’am,” Sawyer muttered.

Erica was opening a box of birthday candles when Sawyer entered the kitchen, and suddenly Sawyer remembered the day an older boy had asked fifteen-year-old Erica out. But the Drakes wouldn’t let their daughters date until they were sixteen, so they didn’t allow her to go.

“It’s not fair,” Erica had screamed at their mother. “Sawyer’s old enough, but she’s not pretty, so nobody even wants to date her. So why can’t I go?”

All these years later, Sawyer recalled this comment and others like it. Now, it seemed ridiculous that she would let Erica’s childish frustration color her view of herself. Those three little words, “she’s not pretty,” had stuck in a soft spot deep inside her and festered for years. And coupled with her confusion about her sexual orientation during that time, Erica’s barbs had fed the doubts about her self-worth that grew each time she looked at herself in the mirror.

When she stripped away what she now knew was a normal sibling rivalry, she realized she was stronger than she’d thought. And she knew she should decide for herself what she wanted for her life, not let Erica’s past resentment cripple her.

As Sawyer crossed the room, Erica looked up and paused before she counted out six candles. Sawyer picked one of them

up and swirled it between her fingers, tracing the spiral grooves carved in the sides.

"You haven't returned any of my calls," Erica said quietly as she sank the candles into the thick white icing on the cake in front of her.

Sawyer shrugged. "I've been busy."

"I wanted to offer you a job."

"You shouldn't have any trouble finding another server."

"Oh, I've already hired another server." Erica paused again, and when she spoke apology laced her tone. "But I'm having trouble finding a trustworthy manager."

Sawyer knew her astonishment showed on her face. "I don't think me working for you is a good idea."

"You wouldn't be. We'd be working together." Erica held out her hand and Sawyer gave her the candle. "I've had some time to really take in the changes you made at Drake's while I was gone and I'm impressed. The new scheduling system is so much easier. And the CEO of Vesticom called. He wants to make the brunch meetings a quarterly event for his people, and he's reserved the private dining room for an annual employee-appreciation dinner."

"That's nice, but I still don't think us working together is good for either of us."

"It could be. Listen, I'm sorry. I didn't give you enough credit for your hard work, and I've meddled in your life. But you have to know why I've acted this way."

Sawyer did know. But she didn't think it would be easy to break such a long-standing pattern in their relationship.

"So here's my plan. You come back to Drake's, as co-manager, and handle the bulk of the management. I want to split my time between that and the kitchen—with Brady. I know it's not a foolproof solution. You and I will probably still butt heads. But we're family, Sawyer, and if the three of us work together, we could all benefit. We'd each have a lighter workload and could

spend more time away from the restaurant. Since I went back to work, I feel like Paige is raising my daughter, and I'd love to have more time with her."

Sawyer considered Erica's proposal. It had merit, but one big drawback. She would have to face Jori, and she wasn't sure she was up to that yet. Since they last spoke, Sawyer had almost convinced herself they were both better off if they ended it—until she lay down at night and longed for the feel of Jori's soft skin against hers. But, she reminded herself, she'd just decided she would go after what she wanted in her life, and, truthfully, she wanted Jori.

As if reading her mind, Erica said, "And as your first official act as manager, I need you to help me keep my pastry chef."

"Keep your pastry chef?"

"She gave me her resignation letter yesterday."

"What? Why?"

"She wouldn't say, but I suspect it has to do with you. Damn it, Sawyer, this is why I asked you not to go after her. I knew you would screw up my staff."

Sawyer rolled her eyes at the familiar chord of accusation.

"Okay. I can't change overnight." Erica acknowledged her slide back into their old dynamic. "Just fix it, please. I don't want her to leave. I'd like it if you two could at least find a way to work together."

Sawyer sighed. "I'll talk to her." *Tomorrow.*

"Get her to stay," Erica ordered, then her voice gentled. "You really love her, don't you?"

"Yeah. I guess I do."

"Then tell her."

It was certainly the last advice she thought she'd ever get from Erica.

"I know what I said about the two of you. But she's miserable, and you look like you haven't slept in days. Maybe I was wrong. If there's a chance you can make each other happy—well, you both deserve that."

“She makes me more than happy, Erica.” Sawyer searched for the words and finally settled on the simplest explanation. “She fills me.” That’s when she knew she couldn’t end things with Jori. For the first time in years, she would risk heartbreak for the chance at happiness.



By the next night Sawyer still didn’t know what to say to Jori. She’d rehearsed the conversation about a hundred times, trying out every scenario she could think of, from Jori embracing her right away to Jori forcibly throwing her out. Fearful that she would upset Jori, Sawyer decided to wait until after Drake’s closed to talk to her. So when she arrived early, she stalled by going to the bar and ordering a beer, which she nursed for the next hour.

The bartender, a slim brunette, leaned against the bar and met her eyes. “Last call, sugar.”

“I’m good.” The bar area had emptied until Sawyer was the only one still perched on a stool.

“I heard you don’t work here anymore.”

“Nah, I just took a few days off. I’m back starting Monday.” She rolled the bottom of her empty bottle in slow circles against the scarred mahogany.

“You going to hang around and walk me out?” The brunette winked suggestively.

Sawyer laughed, knowing she was teasing. “Now, I don’t think your husband would like that very much.”

“No. Probably not.”

Sawyer glanced at her watch. “I’ll catch you later.” She stood and crossed the dining room.

As she walked into the kitchen Chuck, Brady, and Jori looked up. Sawyer saw surprise cross Jori’s features, followed by a flash of emotion Sawyer couldn’t identify, and then her expression went blank. Jori held a sharpening steel in one hand and a large

chef's knife in the other. Chuck and Brady, perched on stools nearby, seemed to be hanging out, keeping her company.

"Hey, boss," Chuck called out. "You miss us?"

"Sure do, Chuck."

"So come on back."

Sawyer moved toward Jori until only a counter stood between them. "Guys, can you give us a minute?"

Chuck glanced uncertainly at Jori, but Brady stood without hesitation, slightly tugging Chuck's sleeve as he passed him. Sawyer smiled at Brady, appreciating the display of trust.

"Don't leave Drake's," Sawyer said when they were alone.

The steady rasp of the knife blade against the steel faltered, but Jori's eyes stayed on her task. "It's too late. I've got another job lined up. Friday is my last day."

"Where?"

Setting down the knife, Jori gave a defeated sigh. "Does it matter, Sawyer?"

It's not here. Sawyer blinked, realizing she'd heard the unspoken words as clearly as if Jori had said them.

"Erica doesn't want to lose you."

Now Jori did look up, her expression incredulous. "That's why you're here? Well, I'm so sorry, Sawyer, but I'm not interested in soothing your stupid conscience."

"Erica asked me to come back, to manage Drake's with her."

Jori remained silent.

"But if it means the difference in you staying or going, I won't do it. You belong here."

The quietly spoken words pierced Jori's heart, but the blood that spilled into her chest was cold and constricting. She wanted them to be true. She wanted to belong at Drake's, more than she'd ever wanted to be anywhere. But she couldn't be here, around Sawyer's family, without a constant reminder of her. And it was even harder to think about being here *with* Sawyer, knowing

that she had turned out to be another person in her life who had walked away from her.

“Tell me, Sawyer. Why did you leave?”

“Erica pissed me off. Besides, she was coming back. I wasn’t needed anymore.”

“Cut the bullshit. You know what I mean.” Jori drew a deep breath. “Why did you leave *me*?”

“I just needed to think.”

“So I don’t hear from you for two weeks?” Jori was mortified to feel tears welling up. “God, I hate how pathetic you’ve made me sound,” she muttered.

“You don’t sound pathetic.”

“Come on, I’m practically begging you to tell me why you didn’t call. I don’t think I could sound more needy.” Jori had always clung to her independence, which was one of the few positives she could attribute to her childhood. She’d never *needed* anyone. In the few relationships she’d had, she had honed her ability to exhibit just the right amount of reliance while still holding most of herself back.

“Shit.” Sawyer shoved both hands into her hair and blew out her breath on a heavy sigh. “I got scared.”

“Of what?”

“I don’t even know if you remember, I mean you were nearly asleep and maybe you didn’t realize what you were saying, but I freaked out.”

Jori spun away in frustration and leaned against the sink. “If any of that was supposed to clear things up—”

“You said you loved me.”

Jori turned back and stared. The emotion was real, but she didn’t remember saying the words. And Sawyer had just given her an out to deny it, if she wanted one. But the flicker of fear and confusion in Sawyer’s eyes made Jori want to make her face it, because seeing the weakness in Sawyer somehow made her feel better about her own. She could need Sawyer, even let Sawyer

see that need, and not be so afraid that she would frighten her away.

“And you don’t love me. You could have just said so—”

“No.” Sawyer stepped around the counter and stopped when only inches separated them. “I mean, I was scared because I do.”

“You do?”

“And I was—I *am* afraid of disappointing you. I know about your past, and I see how you’ve been hurt by it. And given my track record, I was afraid I would hurt you more. I want you to have everything, Jori. I know no one in your life has ever promised you forever.”

Jori steeled herself against Sawyer’s words, against Sawyer’s understanding of her loneliness and inability to trust. “It doesn’t matter—”

“So let *me* be the first.” Sawyer reverently traced the line of her jaw with one finger. “I love you, Jori Diamantina. I would do anything to make you happy. I want to be the person you turn to, the person you can rely on.”

“How am I supposed to depend on you?”

“I know I haven’t given you much reason to believe I can stick around. But if you give me a chance I’d like to change that.”

Jori shook her head. “I ask again, why should I believe you?”

“Because I can’t imagine being without you.” Jori’s expression remained neutral, but Sawyer thought she detected the tiniest tightening around Jori’s mouth.

“When trouble starts, you want to run. I’m more of the stay-and-talk-it-out type.”

Sawyer searched for the words to explain. “What’s wrong with needing a little bit of space to sort things out? Just because I don’t want to sit around and analyze every detail until I can’t breathe, let alone think.”

Hurt flashed across Jori's face. "I don't like it when you leave."

Suddenly Sawyer realized how her absence must have made Jori feel. What, to her, had been time to clear her head had felt like abandonment to Jori.

"Okay." Slowly she nodded. Testing the waters, she took Jori's hand but was disappointed when Jori only let hers lie there passively. "I'll try to stay and talk, if you'll try to understand when I need some time to process things."

"As long as *some time* doesn't mean two weeks."

She stroked Jori's cheek and was encouraged when Jori leaned into her palm. "I'm sorry. I've never been that good at relationships, but I can do better. I've never wanted anyone so much." Sawyer paused before she added, "I've never needed anyone before."

"Really? You're not just using me for my desserts?" The hint of a smile deepened Jori's dimple.

In answer, Sawyer kissed her, and what began as a gentle persuasion flared into a heated fusion of mouths. Sawyer stroked her tongue along Jori's lips, eased back, then returned for another quick kiss. And when she smiled at Jori, she knew it was with the goofiest of grins. "Well, where else am I going to find a woman who'll give me free rein with the chocolate sauce?"

"Mmm, the first time I caught you watching me drizzle chocolate on a plate I knew you'd be easy." Jori tapped a finger against Sawyer's chin.

"You saw that, huh?"

"You were practically drooling." She slipped out of Sawyer's grasp and put away her knives. "Walk me to my car?"

"Yes." It seemed that Jori was keeping some distance between them, and Sawyer wanted to push. But she didn't, because she realized she'd been pushing Jori in one way or another since they met. It was time to let Jori be in control.

"Let me grab my bag. I'll be right back."

Jori returned from the locker room minutes later with a brown leather messenger bag slung over her shoulder. They walked out side by side, their shoulders brushing lightly as they stopped next to Jori's car. Jori stepped close and Sawyer wrapped her arms around her. When Jori rubbed the back of her fingers absently over Sawyer's bicep, Sawyer guessed she didn't even realize she was doing it, and though it was probably silly, Sawyer enjoyed the unconscious caress. She liked thinking that Jori might need to touch her.

"I'm parked around front." She kissed Jori, then eased back, prepared to put her in her car and send her home, even though she was currently conjuring up images of Jori naked beneath her.

As if reading her mind, Jori said against her lips, "Come home with me."

"I'll meet you there." She stepped back, opened Jori's door, and waited until she was settled before closing it. She stood there and watched Jori back out and drive up the street before she cut through the alley toward the front of the building and her car.



Jori awoke to a buzzing noise in her head. Sawyer stirred against her back and the arm around her waist tightened, then relaxed again. She smiled to herself, thinking how glad she was that Sawyer had come to her damn senses. When she hadn't heard from Sawyer, Jori had been crushed, but her pride wouldn't let her call Sawyer.

Instead she'd tried to keep busy and ignore the aching fissure in her heart. She'd even flirted with her glass-blowing instructor, but soon realized that was a dead end. She couldn't look at another woman without comparing her to Sawyer. Even work didn't make her happy. She'd never particularly thought Sawyer looked like her siblings, but she began to see Sawyer in Erica's features and realized that when Brady smiled, his eyes sparkled

in much the same way as Sawyer's. Surrounded by reminders of Sawyer, she had seen no other solution than to leave Drake's.

When Sawyer had walked into the kitchen the night before, Jori had almost flung herself across the room and into Sawyer's arms. Only her sense of self-preservation, cultivated over many years, kept her standing on the other side of the counter.

Jori heard the buzzing again and Sawyer shoved lightly against her. "Answer your phone," Sawyer murmured against the middle of her back.

One of the two cell phones sitting on the nightstand vibrated against its surface. Jori picked it up and passed it over her shoulder. "It's not mine."

"Oh." Sawyer rolled onto her back and Jori turned over to face her. Sawyer flipped the phone open. "Hello. Hi, Mom, what time is it?"

Jori glanced at the clock and saw that it was barely past eight. And since she had an idea just how little sleep Sawyer had gotten the night before, she wasn't surprised when she growled at her mother's response.

"We really need to talk about the time of your phone calls." She glanced at Jori. "My mother says hello."

"How did she know?" Jori whispered, feeling her face flush.

Sawyer covered the end of the phone. "Probably Brady. Yes, Mom, I'm listening to you—of course—you're right—"

Sawyer continued trying to get a word in with her mother, and Jori drew back the edge of the sheet covering Sawyer. When it slid over her bare breasts, Sawyer pulled it back into place, gave Jori a stern look, and whispered, "On the phone with my mother here."

Jori pressed her lips to Sawyer's other ear. "Better hang up. We don't want her to hear me make you moan." She slid her hand between Sawyer's legs and squeezed.

"Ah, Jesus." Sawyer flinched and grabbed Jori's wrist.

“Gotta go, Mom. I’ll call you later.” She barely waited to hear Tia’s response before she closed the phone and tossed it over the edge of the bed. “I think my mother approves of you.” She released Jori’s wrist, rolled her onto her back, and slid on top of her, levering her upper body away to look at Jori.

“Enough talk about your mother.” Jori wrapped her arms around Sawyer, her hands following the graceful lines of her back.

“My whole family approves,” Sawyer said softly as she brushed a strand of hair off Jori’s forehead. Sawyer’s eyes were tender and deeply reflective. “You’ve helped me find my place among them again.” The corner of Sawyer’s mouth lifted. “I’d been a bit lost for a long while. But you calm things inside of me that I’ve never been able to put words to.”

Sawyer slowly lowered her body to rest fully against Jori and turned her face to Jori’s neck. She reached behind her, grasped Jori’s hand, pulled it around, and held their joined hands between their bodies.

With her other hand, Jori cradled the back of Sawyer’s head, then pressed her lips to Sawyer’s forehead. “I love you,” she whispered and felt Sawyer’s murmured response against her own skin.

“You belong right here.” Sawyer squeezed Jori’s hand.

Jori smiled. *Yes. This is home.*

About the Author

Born and raised in upstate New York, Erin Dutton now lives and works in middle Tennessee. But she makes as many treks back north as she can squeeze into a year because her beloved nephews and nieces grow faster every time she is away. Recently, she has rediscovered inspiration in her surroundings and is constantly trying to find new ways to capture those images. In her free time she enjoys reading, movies, and playing golf.

Her previous novels include two romances, *Sequestered Hearts* and *Fully Involved*. She's currently working on a Matinee romance, *Designed for Love*, which will be published in November 2008. She is also a contributor to an erotica anthology, *Erotic Interludes 5: Road Games*, and an upcoming romance anthology, *Romantic Interludes 1: Discovery* from Bold Strokes Books.

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by
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Dedication

To Gertrude,
because there wouldn't be a George without you.

CHAPTER ONE

Jillian Sealy climbed out of her BMW, tugging at her short skirt as it rode up her thigh. She flipped her sunglasses onto her head and dubiously studied the establishment in front of her. The building had definitely seen better days. Avocado green paint had long ago started peeling off the wood siding, and from the grime on the windows, she guessed it had been years since they were washed. The sign above the door read Johnson & Son Construction.

After only two days in Redmond, a small town in east Tennessee, she could almost picture the beefy rednecks who worked inside. She pulled on the hem of her skirt again and glanced down at her white silk blouse and black Tahari jacket to ensure she wasn't revealing too much cleavage. She wasn't in the mood to compete with her breasts for the men's attention.

"Well, let's get this over with," she muttered. As she crossed the gravel lot she cursed the thin layer of dust that settled on her Jimmy Choo sling backs.

When she stepped inside the front door the occupants didn't disappoint her. Three men in jeans and flannel shirts looked her way, and she could practically feel their gaze drop down her body.

"May I help you, ma'am?" The bravest of them took off his ball cap and stepped forward. At least he had manners.

"I'm looking for Mr. Johnson."

A bald man wearing a chambray shirt with *Johnson & Son* embroidered on the left pocket entered through a door at the right and said, "Well, you've found him."

"I'm Jillian Sealy. We spoke on the phone."

"Yes, Miss Sealy, come into the office." He indicated the door he still stood in front of and waited while she entered ahead of him.

"As I told you on the phone, Mr. Johnson, I've recently inherited Mary Connor's house. I intend to fix it up and sell it, and I'll need a contractor." She'd been surprised to learn that her great-aunt had left her the house. But it had offered the perfect reason to get out of Cincinnati. She'd barely hesitated before packing up and driving south.

"Please, call me Bud. My sympathies on your loss, ma'am. I did plenty of work for Mrs. Connor over the years. If you hire us, I'll send my kid's crew. They're my best."

She'd found the listing for Mr. Johnson's company in Aunt Mary's address book. Now that she'd met him, she was even more confident she'd made the right call. Bud Johnson struck her as an honest, hardworking man.

Thirty minutes later, after she'd finished outlining her plans for the house, Bud gave her a good-faith estimate.

"I think we've got a deal, then," she said, extending her hand, and he shook it firmly.

"Good. I'll send Wil over when it's convenient for you so you can review your plans."



The next morning Jillian sat in the front-porch swing making notes on her plans for the house. It was turning into a pleasant day, warm with just enough of a breeze to ruffle the leaves of the large sycamore. She made a note to have a tree service prune the sprawling branches so the house would be more visible from the street.

“Miss Sealy?”

Jillian looked up and her breath caught in her throat. The powerfully built woman standing at the bottom of the steps regarded her with eyes the color of light sapphires. Her black hair swept back from her face in thick waves and barely brushed the collar of her denim jacket. Her white T-shirt was tucked into jeans so well worn the denim looked as soft as flannel. Deeply tanned skin stretched over wide cheekbones.

Jillian realized the woman was still waiting for her to speak. “Yes?”

“I’m Wil. You met with my father yesterday. He told me you were expecting me.” Jillian sensed a raw edge in Wil, yet the sensuous alto with a lilting accent seemed oddly gentle.

“Yes.” She recovered a bit of her composure. “Yes. I’m sorry. It’s Johnson and Son—I guess I was thrown.”

“Actually, the original ‘Johnson’ was my grandfather. My father didn’t have any sons, but when he took over he didn’t want to change the name.” Wil shoved her hands in her pocket and the motion tugged her jeans lower, accentuating her narrow hips.

“I’m sorry, I’m being rude. Can I get you anything to drink?” Jillian forced her eyes to Wil’s face.

“No, ma’am.”

Jillian laughed. “Lord, save me from Southern hospitality. Please don’t call me ma’am.”

“Yes, Miss Sealy.”

“It’s Jillian.”

Wil smiled, revealing a small gap between otherwise perfect teeth. “Okay. Jillian.”

“Let’s get started, then,” Jillian said, more abruptly than she’d intended. The gentle way Wil’s low voice caressed her name was distracting and she needed to get back on track. “Would you like a tour while I explain what I have in mind?”

“Sure.”

“Well, for starters, I plan to do some of the smaller projects myself, like replacing the boards on this porch and giving it a fresh coat of paint. So I’ll just need you to handle the larger issues while I’m working on those.” She had decided on projects she could do herself so she could spend more money on the quality touches that would maximize her profit when she sold.

“That’s fine. So we’ll just do what you need us to and then you can finish up your tasks.”

“Actually, I’d planned on doing the work simultaneously.”

“What’s your hurry?”

“If we finish quickly I can get it on the market sooner.”

“My crew isn’t used to working with the homeowner underfoot.”

“Well, then I’ll try not to be *underfoot*.” Jillian’s tone purposely indicated that there would be no argument. “Let’s start in the dining room.”

Aware that she’d just been put in her place, Wil climbed the steps to the front porch that spanned the width of the house. The exterior needed paint, but the buttery yellow shade wouldn’t be Wil’s first choice.

After automatically assessing the outside of the house, Wil turned her attention to her new client. She couldn’t see Jillian’s eyes behind her sunglasses, but finely arched brows had lifted in surprise as she’d first looked at Wil. She couldn’t even guess how much Jillian spent on products to make her

skin look so soft and flawless. Wil didn't see any of the lines that marred her own face.

She glanced at the waistband of Jillian's jeans where her neatly pressed button-down shirt was tucked in, revealing the expected designer label. As her gaze drifted farther down, she wondered if it was the expensive jeans that made Jillian's ass appear so perfect. In just minutes, she'd pegged Jillian as high-maintenance and, though incredibly attractive, probably far too uptight for Wil's liking.

They entered the house and passed through the foyer into the dining room. Wil noted the pocket doors set in the ornately carved woodwork. She tested one, satisfied to feel it glide out smoothly.

"In here, there's just that bit of molding that needs to be fixed."

"That shouldn't be a big deal."

Jillian stepped into the kitchen and turned, causing Wil to stop quickly. At least six inches shorter, Jillian tilted her head back to meet Wil's eyes. "I also need to have the wiring inspected in the entire house. Can you recommend an electrician?"

"We've got a guy we usually use. I can give him a call or I can get you his number." Jillian had removed her sunglasses and Wil could now see that her irises were green, with flecks of gold. Realizing that she was staring into Jillian's eyes, Wil dropped her gaze. But that was a mistake as well, since the three buttons open on Jillian's shirt revealed the curve of her breasts. Wil's stomach clenched and she curled her fingers into her palms to quell the sudden urge to trace them inside the edge of Jillian's shirt.

"If you don't mind, I'll leave that up to you. In here, I want to push that far wall out a bit to open up the space and put in an island." Jillian pivoted away and swept a hand past the wall

in question and then indicated the one next to it. Wil fought to keep her breathing even and was astonished at how unaffected Jillian seemed by a moment that had rocked her. “Here I want to put in a bay window and make a breakfast nook. We’ll add recessed lighting and all new cabinets and countertops, to go with the updated appliances I plan to buy.”

“You’re going to spend most of your money in here,” Wil commented, trying to focus on the details. She pulled a small notebook from her jacket pocket and jotted notes as Jillian spoke.

“Kitchens sell houses,” Jillian responded quickly.

“You sound like a realtor.”

“I am.”

“Really? Local?” Wil was certain she would have run into Jillian before now if she was local. They’d worked with most of the area realtors at one time or another. She guessed Jillian had five or six years on her, putting her in her mid-thirties. Maybe she’d started a second career.

“Cincinnati, but I’ll be here until I sell this house.”

“If you want things done in a hurry, it’s going to be difficult for you to be living here at the same time.”

“Well, the kitchen won’t be a problem since I don’t do a lot of cooking anyway.” Jillian waved off her concern and headed for the living room. “I’ll set myself up in one of the spare rooms since it only needs fresh paint.”

The living room boasted high ceilings with crown molding and large double-hung windows. Wil really did love these old houses. She could tell from Jillian’s attention to detail that she had put a lot of thought into this restoration.

As Jillian led her through the rest of the house, she was overly aware of Wil’s scent, like sandalwood and summer rain. She couldn’t suppress her reaction, but hoped she hid it well. Wil occasionally asked questions, and Jillian was surprised by

how well she already seemed to understand her vision for the house.

In the master bathroom, Jillian said, “Next to the kitchen, I think most of the work will be in here. I want to add a tiled shower stall in the corner, a claw-foot tub, and a new pedestal sink.”

Jillian kept her tone controlled despite the fact that they stood very close in the small room. While Wil continued to jot notes, Jillian stared at her mouth and wondered how it would feel to kiss her, to trace Wil’s thin lips with the tip of her tongue before plunging inside. Would Wil respond with the energy Jillian felt vibrating within her?

When Wil drew her bottom lip between her teeth in concentration, Jillian imagined gently sucking it. She jerked her eyes away, but failed to dispel the image.

“Right, so that’s the tour.” Jillian moved past Wil, carefully avoiding contact. She’d never spent so much time fantasizing about someone she’d just met, and she didn’t think touching Wil, even accidentally, would help her condition. She led Wil back to the living room. In an effort to fill the uncomfortable silence, she kept talking. “Aunt Mary left me the furnishings too. I’ll put most of them in storage while the work is being done. Then, I don’t know, maybe an auction. There are actually some nice pieces here.”

Wil nodded. “I’m sorry for your loss. Were you close?”

“Not at all. I was here briefly five years ago when her husband died. I don’t know why she left me the house. Except that she didn’t have any children of her own.”

“Perhaps she felt a connection with you.”

“I rarely saw her,” Jillian said. It was impossible to feel connected to someone you barely knew. Wasn’t it? Yet here she was feeling as if she would go to bed with this stranger without a second’s hesitation. Shaking her head, she dismissed

the idea. “Given my profession, it’s more likely she knew I would be best equipped to sell the house.”

For a moment Wil looked like she might argue, but instead she headed for the front door.

“My crew is finishing up another job today. You and I should go to the hardware store and order the cabinets and some fixtures. I’ll get a tentative schedule drawn up so you’ll know when you’ll have room to work on your projects. Is it okay if I bring that by tomorrow?”

“I’ll look forward to seeing you then.”

Jillian watched from the porch as Wil walked toward the white Chevy pickup bearing the Johnson & Son logo. When Wil turned around to glance at her before climbing in the truck, Jillian flushed, hoping Wil was too far away to tell that she’d been transfixed by her confident swagger.



Jillian walked out the front door and looked around, marveling at her surroundings. For the time being, she’d landed in Small Town, U.S.A. Aunt Mary’s house was just four tree-lined blocks from the Redmond town square, complete with a drugstore, city hall, hardware store, and a diner, Jillian’s lunch destination. She hadn’t been kidding when she told Wil she didn’t cook, and since she’d arrived only days before, she hadn’t taken time to get even the barest essentials. Wil and her crew would probably be tearing up the kitchen by next week, so Jillian figured there was no reason to stock up when she could take a short walk for some country home cooking.

It was an idyllic early summer day, almost too much so. Sunlight slashed through gaps in the full shade trees overhead, and birds chirped cheerfully. The Mayberry atmosphere in

this town felt surreal in comparison to the constant hum of the city Jillian was used to hearing outside the window of her downtown condo, and she'd been having trouble sleeping.

When she'd first driven into town she'd worried she wouldn't survive for the couple of months it would take to fix up the house. After all, there wasn't a Starbucks for miles. And she doubted she'd be able to get a massage or a decent facial at the one salon in town. From a quick look through the window as she walked past, she could tell nothing had changed inside in close to a decade. The only surprise so far had been the sign in the window at the diner announcing the presence of Wi-Fi.

Everything she'd encountered here felt out of place, including the intensity of her initial attraction to Wil Johnson. To put it bluntly, blue-collar wasn't normally her type. She tended to go for polished and professional. Usually, she dated women that she had things in common with, but it was getting harder and harder to find someone who didn't quickly bore her. After all, you could have only so much intelligent conversation. She got that with her friends. What she wanted was a grand passion. Her reaction to women was often mostly intellectual and practical, nothing like the visceral response to Wil's physicality. She couldn't deny the spread of hot arousal when she'd found herself the subject of that concentrated gaze.

As distracting as it would probably prove to be, having Wil around the house for the next several weeks wouldn't be a hardship. She could certainly think of worse ways to spend her time than watching Wil get sweaty. *What has gotten into me? I've never been so turned on just thinking about someone.*

As she reached the Redmond Diner, Jillian pulled her thoughts away from the attractive contractor. The outside of the building looked like it hadn't had an overhaul in decades.

The painted logo on the front window had long ago faded and begun chipping. When she pushed open the door, the top of the metal frame nudged a small gold bell, announcing her arrival.

“Grab a seat anywhere, honey,” a waitress called from across the room.

Jillian slid into one of the vinyl-upholstered booths near the front window. When she noticed a woman she’d seen in the diner before watching her from the next booth, Jillian forced a smile and reminded herself not to react defensively. The small-town curiosity about newcomers took some getting used to.

The woman smiled back and the lines around her mouth deepened. “Make sure you try the apple pie, dear. It’s wonderful.”

“Thank you.”

The woman appeared about Aunt Mary’s age. Her neatly pressed paisley blouse was too formal for early afternoon at the diner. Jillian wondered if she had another engagement or if she was simply the type who felt one should always dress to impress when in public no matter what her surroundings. Her white hair was neatly set, and Jillian guessed she had a standing appointment at the salon down the street. She tilted her head and studied Jillian over her menu through a pair of bifocals.

“Aren’t you the young lady that’s fixing up Mary Connor’s place?”

“Yes. I’ve been here three days. How did you know already?”

“It’s a small town, word gets around. I’m Rose Beam.”

“Jillian Sealy.”

“Would you like to join me for lunch?” Rose gestured to the vacant side of her booth.

Jillian nodded and slid across the worn red vinyl.

"Mary will really be missed," Rose said as she handed Jillian her menu.

"Were you friends?"

"For a time. She was a generous woman." A deep sadness tinged Rose's voice, then just as quickly it was gone. "I hear you're a real-estate agent."

Jillian laughed. "Word really does get around."

"One of the ladies at bingo heard Bud Johnson talking at the hardware store."

While Jillian was still trying to picture a bingo-playing granny hanging out at the hardware store, their waitress approached and they both ordered meatloaf sandwiches and apple pie.

Rose waited until the waitress walked away, then leaned forward and said conspiratorially, "I might have need of your services."

"Well, actually, I'm licensed in Ohio, and since I'm only here for a short time I wasn't planning to apply for my license here."

"Oh." Rose seemed disappointed.

"Are you buying or selling?"

"Selling. I've finally given in and agreed to move closer to my daughter in Virginia. My granddaughter and great-grandchildren live there, as well. There isn't anything left for me here."

"Well, I'm sure there are several good agents in the area." She hadn't seen a real-estate office, but certainly there were others in neighboring towns.

"I shouldn't have bothered you. You probably have a lot of work to do at Mary's place."

Without really knowing why, Jillian wanted to help Rose.

So before she could change her mind, she said, “Maybe I could give you some advice. But I can’t collect a commission, and I won’t be offended if you want to hire someone else.”

“I can’t let you work for free.”

“Well, I can’t take your money.”

Rose seemed to be considering her options and then relented. “You stop by tomorrow and I’ll show you the house. We’ll work something out. Let me just give you the address.”

Rose pulled a pen out of her purse and, as she continued to search, Jillian produced one of her business cards and offered the back of it.

In Cincinnati she wouldn’t have taken the time to help someone sell a house without the promise of a decent commission. Even if she was so inclined, she wouldn’t have had the time. Because a lot of prospective buyers wanted to view property after hours and on weekends, her hours weren’t limited to nine to five. And she’d been even busier lately gearing up to sell units in an upscale condominium complex. It was to be her company’s biggest project thus far.

Losing that account was one of the things that had compelled her to take on Mary’s house.

CHAPTER TWO

Wil walked into the nearly deserted offices of Johnson and Son. Their secretary had taken the day off, and all of their crews were out on jobs. She made a beeline for the coffee urn and hoped her father hadn't been the one to make it. She tested the brew and winced. Bud came from his office as she was adding a healthy dose of creamer.

"Coffee's a little weak," she said sarcastically, just loud enough for him to hear.

"Did you go see Miss Sealy?" He ignored her remark.

Wil pulled a folded invoice from the inside pocket of her denim jacket and handed it to him. "Yesterday. And I just picked up some supplies for her job. Here's the bill. I'll be taking her around to the hardware store later this week to choose some of the custom items."

"What did you think?"

Wil shoved aside the various remarks that sprang to mind regarding Jillian. Her father was asking about the house. "It's a great old place and she has some specific ideas about what she wants done."

"Can your crew get it done in her time frame? I can't spare anyone else."

Wil sensed the challenge in her father's voice. Publicly she knew he supported her and respected her work. But she

also suspected on some level he waited for the point when her all-woman crew proved to be less capable than his crews of men. And she took great pleasure in continuing to demonstrate that they were better than the men.

She shoved her shoulders back. "We'll get it done." And they would. If Wil had to work double time to make it happen, the job would come in under Jillian's deadline.

"Good." He poured himself a cup of coffee and drank it undiluted. "We're tying up some big jobs over the summer months, and then I expect a lull in the fall."

Wil nodded. Typically, as early as October, people began budgeting for the holidays instead of home improvement. Business would pick back up in early spring, and by the time it stayed consistently warm they would once again be putting in long hours six days a week. Though it was hectic, Wil didn't mind the schedule. She had a great crew and enjoyed the feeling of accomplishment that came with working until she was too exhausted to do any more.



Jillian grunted as she leaned against the large antique bureau and it barely inched across the hardwood floor. She stopped, fearing she might injure herself or, worse, damage the floor.

"They don't make them like this anymore," she muttered to herself as she slapped her palm against the solid mahogany.

Deciding to leave the dresser until she had some help, she walked over to the stack of boxes she'd started filling that morning. She returned to packing Mary's books, taking a photo album from the half-empty bookcase. The leather cover was worn in places, but obviously well made, and she flipped

it open to reveal black-and-white snapshots of Mary's life. A child she guessed was Mary stood outside a church, wearing a dark-colored dress, wide-brimmed hat, and white gloves, her Sunday best. The child held a bunch of wildflowers clasped tight in her right hand, and she smiled widely at whoever was behind the camera.

Prodding herself, Jillian tucked the album in the bureau drawer. She couldn't spend all day looking through photos. Besides, she felt as if she was intruding on Mary's privacy. But there was no one else to tie up the loose ends of Mary's life, so she continued sorting and carefully packing her belongings. That thought saddened her and she couldn't help but wonder who would do this for her someday. While, at thirty-four years old, she was far from spinsterhood, in recent years she had become more aware that she was not where she'd planned to be by this point in her life.

After a string of unfulfilling relationships, she had let her personal life fall by the wayside in favor of her career and told herself that was enough to fulfill her. Her last partner had been unfaithful, then had informed Jillian it was her fault since she cared more about her next commission than their relationship. It had been so long since Jillian had even thought about what she wanted outside of work. She hadn't consciously decided to avoid romance. She had simply continued to make choices based on her opportunities, and it just happened that most of them furthered her career and left less time for social pursuits. But now that her career had taken a new turn or, rather, a drastic detour, she was uncertain. Without the framework of her profession to define her time, she felt directionless.

Thankfully, the sound of the doorbell signaled the end of her self-analysis. And she told herself she was foolish to let a minor setback make her so melancholy. There was nothing

wrong with her life a new job won't fix. She'd just been off balance lately and needed to get things back to normal.

She stepped into the main hallway and glanced toward the front door. Through the glass she could see Wil Johnson standing on the porch. Speaking of social pursuits, this woman would sure provide an interesting one.



As the door swung open, Wil stared. Jillian stood framed in the doorway wearing a white tank top and crisp khaki shorts that revealed a sinful length of leg. Her bare limbs glistened with a sheen of sweat, and the strands of hair that escaped her ponytail were damp.

"I've been packing Aunt Mary's things." Jillian seemed flustered. "The movers will be here soon to take them to storage until I figure out what to do with them."

Wil jerked her eyes up and, judging by the flush spreading over Jillian's neck, she guessed she'd been caught staring. She was sure she failed to hide the lust in her eyes, but she found it burning in Jillian's as well, their gold flecks seeming to glow. She dropped her gaze again to Jillian's braless breasts, where her nipples now tented the cotton tank top.

"I have some plans for you," Wil said. *Lord, do I have plans for you.* She held up the folder in her hands. "Um—for the house."

"Sure. Come on in. Can I get you a drink?"

"No, thank you."

Jillian led her to the kitchen. "You've been busy," she said as she went to the refrigerator.

"Yeah, well, when I start a project, I'm committed."

"So what did you bring me?"

Wil watched her take a long pull from a plastic bottle. A trickle of water escaped from the corner of her mouth and ran down her chin and over her neck, accelerated by the muscles in her neck as she swallowed.

When Jillian looked at her expectantly, she opened the folder, laid it on the counter, and consulted her notes. "I thought we could start here in the kitchen since that's where most of the work will be done."

Jillian crossed to stand beside her. "Ah, you're a jump-in-with-both-feet kind of girl, huh?" She leaned to look over Wil's shoulder, and when she did her breast brushed the back of her arm. They both froze, but neither of them acknowledged the contact.

When Wil spoke, her voice was tight. "Normally, no, but in this case it seems appropriate."

Jillian stared at the papers in front of her, unable to look at Wil as she flipped through several sketches and stopped at a floor plan.

"I went over some of your ideas and made a few changes, so I wanted to run them by you before we got started. Here's the new island."

"Okay," she murmured, watching Wil's strong fingers trace a line on the paper. She could imagine those confident hands on her body and a heavy throb began between her thighs, but she forced herself to focus on all the logical reasons why she shouldn't jump her contractor right there in the kitchen. She'd long ago learned it was best to keep working relationships professional. And it had been many years since she'd had a problem sticking to that policy.

"Jillian?" Wil whispered, and Jillian realized she'd been rubbing her breast against Wil's arm.

"Oh, God—I'm sorry." Mortified, she jerked back a step.

But when she would have fled, Wil grabbed her wrist, cupped a hand behind her neck, and kissed her. Her lips were gentle at first, then, when Jillian responded, more aggressive. Wil stroked her tongue silkily inside her mouth and she melted, clutching fistfuls of the back of her shirt.

Wil's mouth was everywhere, sucking her bottom lip, sliding along her jaw, then the side of her neck. Just as frantically, Jillian pulled Wil's T-shirt free from her waistband and shoved both hands under it. She touched the warm skin over Wil's ribs but it wasn't enough. She wanted more.

"This is crazy," she murmured, unsure if she was telling Wil or herself.

"It is," Wil agreed, but she continued to kiss the underside of Jillian's jaw.

I should stop. This time Jillian was certain she didn't speak aloud. Still, it was good advice. But when Wil's fingers slid into her hair at the base of her skull, pleasure spread through her, hot and liquid, and melted her resistance.

"The movers," she practically whimpered as Wil's teeth nipped at her neck. "Don't—have much—time."

"I guess we'll have to be quick," Wil said against her skin, her lips caressing with each word.

With one hand Wil struggled to push her shorts over her hips. Jillian grabbed the waistband and helped shove them down. After she kicked them off, Wil slid her palms against the back of her thighs and lifted her onto the counter.

Desperate to be beneath Wil, Jillian broke the kiss and murmured, "Bedroom?"

"No. Here."

She gasped when Wil cupped her hand against the cotton triangle between her legs. "Ah, you're right. Here is much better." She'd lost the ability to think about anything except having Wil's hands on her. In her. *Now. OhGodnow.*

When Wil squeezed her through her panties, her head swam and she fought the orgasm that threatened to wash over her. *Not yet.*

“Don’t. I’ll come,” she pled when Wil’s fingers closed again, milking the pleasure from her flesh.

“It’s okay.”

She grasped Wil’s wrist firmly and stilled her hand. “Not like that. I want you inside.”

Wil groaned and, fighting the urge to ignore Jillian’s request, pressed her face into Jillian’s neck and tried to gather her control. Somehow she knew if she continued to stroke Jillian to a quick climax, she wouldn’t resist. “God, you’re beautiful,” Wil murmured.

Wil shoved aside Jillian’s panties and slid inside her. Heat surged between Wil’s thighs as warm, wet muscles pulsed around her fingers. Jillian wrapped her legs around her, hooking her heels on the back of Wil’s calves, and buried her hands in her hair. She met every thrust, as if the pistoning of her hips could propel her closer to the razor edge of release.

“Harder,” Jillian moaned, tugging a fistful of Wil’s hair almost to the point of pain. Wil withdrew her fingers almost completely, and when she drove into Jillian, the heel of her hand pounded Jillian’s clit. “Oh, yes, that’s it.”

“Come for me,” Wil demanded, as the rasp of Jillian’s encouragement and the bite of Jillian’s fingernails against her scalp drove her own ascension toward orgasm. “Now.” She dragged her tongue across Jillian’s collarbone, then bit the silky skin where her shoulder met her neck. Hard. Jillian cried out and, with one final thrust, locked her legs around Wil’s hips.

Wil remained inside as the throbbing around her fingers eased.

Jillian sighed and kissed her temple, then her lips. “That was—”

The doorbell rang. Startled, Wil yanked her hand back and Jillian gasped as her fingers slipped out.

“Shit. The movers.” Jillian slid to the floor, but her legs were weak and she might have fallen if Wil’s arm hadn’t come around her waist. She reached between them and fumbled with the fly of her shorts.

“Let me.” Propping her against the counter, Wil nudged her hands aside and straightened her clothes. Then she tucked an errant strand of hair behind Jillian’s ear. “I’m not finished with you yet,” she said, kissing her quickly before taking her shoulders and steering her toward the front door.

Jillian hoped the movers were quick. The feel of Wil’s hands was tattooed on her skin, and the promise of more had her trembling as she answered the door.

Since she was going to live in the house for the coming weeks, in addition to furniture in one bedroom, she had elected to keep the sofa in the living room. When she passed through while directing the two men in gray jumpsuits to the dining room, Wil was slouched on the sofa, her knees falling lazily apart and her hands tucked behind her head. Jillian stumbled when she saw the indolent arousal in her eyes.

“Be careful, ma’am,” one of the movers said politely, reaching for her elbow.

“Thank you.” She flushed with the memory of what they’d been doing when the doorbell rang.

As if reading her mind, Wil smiled and winked at her. Jillian leaned against the door frame between the living room and dining room and tried to look anywhere except at Wil.

“Do you guys need any help?” Wil asked as the two men carried a large oak sideboard toward the front door.

"We've got it," the shorter man replied as they carefully maneuvered it through the front door.

"They've got it," Wil murmured when they were out of earshot. When Jillian glanced at her, she patted the cushion beside her. "You may as well sit down and relax."

"I'm fine." Jillian folded her arms over her chest. She couldn't possibly be within five feet of Wil just then.

Grinning, Wil shifted to the far end of the sofa. "I'll stay at this end and you can sit way down there."

"No, thank you."

Wil's innocent shrug was at odds with her knowing expression. She had to be fully aware of why Jillian kept her distance, and her eyes said she was thinking about the same thing.

By the time the truck was loaded, Jillian was completely avoiding Wil's gloating gaze. Her body hummed with anticipation, but she certainly didn't want the men to read the desire on her face.

"All set, ma'am."

"Thanks, guys." She'd rented a storage unit the day before and had arranged with the storage facility to let the movers unload everything there.

She closed the door, then turned and almost fell against it. Wil didn't move from the sofa but her eyes raked over Jillian's body, and when Jillian crossed the room she had to force herself not to run. She slid one knee on either side of Wil's legs and eased onto her lap, straddling her.

"I thought they'd never leave," Wil murmured, bringing her hands to Jillian's hips.

"You were looking at me as if you weren't going to wait until they left."

Wil ran her hands under her T-shirt and cupped her full

breasts. “I’m not into having an audience.” She rubbed her thumbs over erect nipples, stopped, and tilted her head in question. Then she lightly pinched Jillian’s right nipple, feeling the bar that passed through it.

Jillian gasped at the slight tug and smiled. “Youthful indiscretion,” she said by way of explanation.

“I want to see.” Realizing she had been in such a hurry earlier that she hadn’t found the piercing, Wil vowed to go slower this time.

Jillian pulled up her T-shirt, baring her right breast. Experimentally, Wil played with the small silver balls resting on either side of her nipple. She was fascinated by the piercing that seemed so out of character. Equally interesting was the way Jillian trembled and her breathing quickened as she toyed with the jewelry. Wil drew her shirt over her head and lightly bit her nipple.

“I have a confession,” Jillian said, her back arching as Wil’s tongue flicked against the piercing. Wil cradled Jillian’s shoulder blades in her hands, bent over her, and continued to work the hardened nipple with her teeth and tongue.

“What’s that?”

“Earlier, when you were talking about your plans for the house”—she rolled her hips hard in Wil’s lap and watched her eyes go hazy—“I didn’t hear a thing you said.” Straightening, she braced her hands on the back of the sofa on either side of Wil’s head.

“I’ll go over it again later.” Wil worked open her fly. “Or you could just trust in my considerable skill.”

Jillian threaded her fingers into Wil’s hair, pulled her head back, then raked her teeth over Wil’s neck. “Having experienced your skills firsthand, I think I’d like a more... thorough demonstration.”

“Oh, I can definitely do that.” Wil returned her mouth to

Jillian's full breast and toyed lightly with a pebbled nipple. When she sucked it gently, Jillian's hips ground restlessly against the tops of her thighs.

"Please, Wil. *Do* something."

Wil flipped her onto her back on the sofa, all thoughts of going slow fleeing at Jillian's plea. After she'd helped her remove her shorts and panties, she pulled her back into her lap, wrapped her arms around her waist, and pressed closer. With a hand under Wil's chin, Jillian guided her face up for a bruising kiss. In the not-so-gentle bite of teeth against tender lips and the aggressive stroke of tongues, they traded control while adding fuel to the arousal that flared hotly between them.

Wil led, kneading Jillian's breasts, then followed when Jillian gripped one of her wrists and guided her hand between her legs. Obeying Jillian's urging, Wil slid her fingers home, reveling in the feel of slick muscles gripping her and Jillian's low moan.

Her nerve endings screaming for gratification, Jillian rose up on her knees until only Wil's fingertips remained inside, then drove her hips downward, engulfing her again.

"More," she whispered, and Wil slipped another finger alongside the others.

Bracing her hands on Wil's shoulders, she set an increasing rhythm. Blinding pleasure spiraled inside her with each thrust as she forced Wil's fingers deeper. She raced onward, uncertain if she was rushing toward release or trying to outrun it. But when Wil moved her other hand between them and circled her thumb over her straining clitoris, she felt the first wave. Then she could no longer stay ahead of the curl as it barreled over her, swirling her in a wash of ecstasy. The erratic jerk of her hips eased to a slow roll in an effort to draw the last bit of pleasure from her sensitive flesh before she allowed Wil to withdraw.

Jillian slumped forward and rested her forehead on Wil's shoulder. Panting, she pressed her mouth to the salty skin of Wil's neck.

Wil traced her fingers lightly along the curve of Jillian's spine, apparently content to bask in Jillian's pleasure. But Jillian had other ideas as she dragged her tongue up the side of Wil's neck. She slid off her lap, knelt in front of her, and tugged open her button fly. Wil lifted her hips and Jillian eased her jeans off, then pulled her closer to the edge of the sofa. She caressed the inside of her thighs, pressing them apart. When she lowered herself to kiss the warm skin beneath her hands, the scent of Wil's arousal drew her fingertips upward, and she was compelled to feel the wetness she knew she'd find there.

She met Wil's eyes as she caressed into hot, slippery folds. Slumped against the back of the sofa, Wil watched her, azure eyes filled with such need that Jillian shivered, never having been the subject of such intensity.

Wil touched Jillian's cheek, then as Jillian bowed her head, Wil's fingers slipped into her hair. Jillian circled her tongue lightly around Wil's clitoris, teasing, and Wil raised her hips seeking more. With a forearm across her pelvis, Jillian held her down, continuing the light strokes.

"Please, I won't last long," Wil ground out, straining against Jillian's arm. "Baby, please, suck me." Before she'd finished her plea, Jillian took her fully in her mouth. "Ah, that's it."

Seconds later, as Wil's flesh pulsed against her lips and tongue, she dropped a hand to stroke between her own thighs. Once, then again, harder, and she tripped over the edge behind Wil.

CHAPTER THREE

Jillian awoke early, as she did every morning. But the difference today was the warm body against her bare back and Wil's arm circling her waist. She felt surprisingly rested considering she'd spent most of the previous afternoon and night crawling all over the woman lying next to her.

She rolled onto her back and Wil stirred beside her. Staying professional had never been a problem for her before, but she'd been completely unable to manage it where Wil was concerned. She could just imagine what her friends would say if they found out she'd slept with Wil. She didn't consider them snobs, but she knew in this case they would feel an affair with a contractor was beneath her. And she would have agreed. Though she certainly wasn't a prude, jumping into bed with someone she had just met wasn't like her either. But, the devil on her shoulder reminded her, sticking to her norm had never led to the incredible sex she'd had last night.

She trailed her fingers over Wil's bare shoulder. The skin there was pale, and the deep tan of her forearms, likely the result of hours spent working in the sun, began in the center of her bicep. A thin scar started at her elbow, ran down her arm, and ended at her wrist. A collection of smaller nicks peppered her hands, reminders of how different they were. In

comparison, Jillian's own hand was smooth and well tended, thanks to regular manicures.

She wondered if Wil was a late sleeper and realized she didn't know anything about her. She didn't know how she took her coffee. Hell, she didn't even know if she drank coffee.

"What are you thinking about so hard?" Wil murmured. Her arm was still draped across Jillian's midsection and she caressed her hip.

"How did you know I was thinking?"

Wil raised up on her elbow and shoved a lock of dark hair off her forehead. "You get a little wrinkle between your eyebrows when you're concentrating. I noticed it yesterday when you were giving me the tour."

Jillian smiled and touched Wil's bare chest just above a small, firm breast. Regardless of what she speculated her friends would think, even they couldn't deny Wil's attractiveness. Her blue eyes were clear and made even more brilliant by her tanned skin. The slight swells of her breasts and hips were the only hint of softness on her work-hardened body. And her wicked grin made her damn near irresistible. "I don't know how much experience you have with women, Wil. But where I come from, telling a woman she has a wrinkle is not considered flattery."

Wil laughed and Jillian felt the vibration beneath her palm. "Well, we do things a bit differently in the South."

"Do you, now?" Jillian smoothed her hand down Wil's stomach but Wil caught it and cradled it against her chest.

"You wore me out last night, Jillian."

"Not a morning person?" Again, Wil's accented voice caressing her name made Jillian's libido tug at her wayward self-control.

Wil lay back and gathered Jillian against her. After marathon sex the night before, she'd finally fallen into an

exhausted slumber, and this morning she wanted to linger in that afterglow. “Do you really think you can have this house ready to sell in five weeks?”

“Don’t you?”

“If you bust your ass.” Wil playfully squeezed the ass in question. “You must be in a hurry to get back home.”

“It probably seems that way. And I’m not even sure why. It’s not like I have much to go back to.” Jillian’s head rested on Wil’s shoulder and she absently drew figure eights on the center of her chest.

“What do you mean?”

“I quit my job three days before I found out about Aunt Mary’s passing.”

“You didn’t have anything else lined up?” Wil couldn’t imagine resigning without the security of another position. Then again, Wil was pretty much invested in Johnson and Son, since someday her father would hand over the reins.

Jillian’s fingers drifted across her breast, closer to her nipple, distracting her.

“I didn’t know I’d need to. I’d been there for seven years and had the highest sales in the company for the past six. Then my boss gave the biggest deal we’ve ever had to his idiot son-in-law.”

“So you quit?”

Jillian laughed bitterly. “I gave him an ultimatum. I marched into his office and told him either he would give me what I deserved or I was quitting. He told me to be out by the end of the day.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. Three days later I was here. Since I have some experience with home design and what buyers are looking for, I figured I might as well take the time to fix the house up a bit first.”

Jillian's index finger brushed Wil's nipple and she shivered. She'd spent the better part of the night responding to Jillian's ardent caresses, but this casual contact, seemingly not intended to arouse, affected her just as strongly.

Apparently not noticing her reaction, Jillian continued to talk. "Then when I got here I fell in love with the place. I'll admit it's a bit of a dream to have free rein over this house."

"You have a great eye. If you don't find another job in real estate, you could always flip a few houses. There's plenty of money to be made in that."

"We'll see how much fun I've had by the time I finish this one. I won't have trouble finding a job with another firm. I'm sure when word gets around that I'm available, I'll have plenty of offers." She made another pass over Wil's nipple.

"What? You're not having fun here?"

"Oh, I'm having fun."

The third time she skimmed over the puckered flesh, Wil suspected it was deliberate. The mischievous look in her eye confirmed it.

"Are you?" She bent her head to capture Jillian's mouth, purposely lingering. She traced her supple lips before stroking her tongue between them.

"Oh, yes. Very much." Jillian felt Wil responding to her touch and her own body surged with awareness of what Wil looked like when she climaxed, the flush on her chest and neck, the way her eyelids closed almost reverently, and the hoarse cry that carried Jillian's name with it. She slipped her leg over Wil's hips and rose to straddle her. "But right now, I've got to get up, because I have an appointment this morning."

She slid off her, letting the length of her body rub against Wil's. She smiled as she carefully skirted Wil's reaching hand.

“Tease.” Wil didn’t move from the bed.

“I told Rose Beam I would give her some advice about selling her house. So I’m going over to see it and discuss her asking price.” Jillian grabbed a silk robe from the chair nearby.

“She’s selling?” Wil folded her arms behind her head and watched Jillian move around the room gathering clean clothes.

“Surprised?”

“Yes, actually. She’s lived in that house for—well, longer than I’ve been alive. Before her daughter moved to Virginia, I went to school with her granddaughter.”

“Is Rose a widow?”

“No. She never married.” Wil sat up. “If you don’t mind letting me grab a shower, I’ll drive you.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“I haven’t seen Miss Rose in months,” she said. “Besides, if she’s selling, she’ll need to fix a few things up. So she’ll probably hire us anyway since we’ve done work for her before.”

“Okay, if you’re sure she won’t mind.”

“I’m sure.” When Jillian passed within reach, Wil grabbed her hand and drew her to the edge of the bed. “And we can conserve water if you shower with me.”

“So you’re concerned about my water bill?”

“If it will get us wet together, sure I am.”

“Oh, I’m quite certain we won’t have any trouble getting wet together.” Jillian stood and untied her robe. As she headed for the bathroom, she let it fall to the floor. “Hurry up, stud, we don’t have much time.”



Their shower took a bit longer than expected, because as it turned out Wil was a morning person after all. And by the time they both toweled themselves dry, her legs shook and her head was filled with steamy images of pressing Jillian against the shower wall and kneeling before her.

Jillian gave her a clean T-shirt, and she pulled on the jeans she'd worn the night before. When Jillian crossed the room in only her bra and panties, Wil paused in the midst of buttoning her fly. The curve of Jillian's waist flared at the hips and a triangle of pale pink cotton clung to her shapely ass. Suddenly overcome with the desire to pass her lips over the back of Jillian's thighs, she debated stripping her jeans off and trying to convince Jillian that they didn't have to go just yet. She wondered why it felt so good to torture herself and stood there and watched as Jillian covered those delicious expanses of skin.

After they finished dressing, she waited while Jillian locked up, then followed her down the walk. She would have opened the passenger door, but Jillian was around the front of the truck and climbing into the cab before she could. So she slid behind the wheel and started the engine.

"I still can't believe Miss Rose is selling," she said, but Jillian only murmured absently in response, seeming to be too distracted for conversation.

Jillian wondered how it was possible that even the way Wil drove was sexy, her hand draped lazily over the wheel. Seriously. She thought she'd be well past the stage in her life where she could get hormonal over a woman. But even after a night that should have left her sated, she was sitting here imagining what Wil would do if she climbed onto her lap and—*okay, enough. That's quite enough of that.* Aware she was riding down Main Street in a truck with a logo on the side,

she decided she should wait at least a full week before she started a town scandal.

What was she thinking? Was she really going to have a fling with her contractor? Well, it was too late to ask that question, since essentially she'd already begun it. Wasn't that what this was—a fling? Well, so what if it was? Shouldn't she just enjoy it for whatever it ended up being? She'd spent all of her life planning for the future, and it was about time she lived in the now for a change. What better time than when she had no plans whatsoever and a gorgeous prospect sitting inches away. Her life had been absolutely derailed when she'd lost her job, and she'd pounced on the opportunity to come to Redmond and sell the house. Now that she'd set a precedent for spontaneous change, she might as well continue it.

She glanced out the window as Wil pulled to the curb in front of a stone cottage-style home. The porch tucked under the low roof sagged, and one of the oversized green wood shutters flanking each narrow, arched window hung lopsided.

She got out of the car and studied the house, making mental notes. This was the first impression a buyer would get, and it was important to dress it up if they hoped to get anyone to look at the inside. The shrubs in front of the house were in desperate need of pruning, and some path lights would dress up the walk. A low stone retaining wall followed the length of the property line, and the creeping phlox that blanketed it had run rampant.

"You need to shore up that porch," she murmured as Wil joined her and they walked up the stone path.

"Okay. Listen, Rose has lived here for more than half her life. Be gentle with the criticism."

"I *have* handled this type of situation before." She bristled at Wil's attempt to tell her how to do her job. She didn't get

where she was by being insensitive to her clients' needs. People took criticism about their homes personally, and, while she didn't let that deter her from delivering an objective assessment, she was considerate of that fact.

"Of course, I didn't mean to imply—"

Wil fell silent when Rose appeared on the porch.

"Good morning," she called. Her eyes moved between the two of them, and Jillian suddenly realized Wil stood very close and her hand lightly touched the small of her back. "It's lovely to see you again, Jillian."

"It's very nice to see you too."

Rose turned to Wil. "Wilhelmina, it's been too long. How is your mother?"

"She's well, Miss Rose. She's still living in D.C. with my stepfather."

"Come inside, girls."

Behind Rose's back, Jillian whispered, "Wilhelmina?"

"My mother's idea," she mumbled.

Jillian giggled, but as Wil's expression hardened she choked her response off. "I'm sorry. It's a wonderful name."

"But it doesn't exactly fit me. Does it?" When Wil straightened, hooked her thumb through her belt loop, and thrust her shoulders back, Jillian was struck by the aggressive sexuality she exuded.

"Not really."

Rose held the door open for them. "I made lemonade and sugar cookies."

"Miss Rose, how do you always manage to make me feel like I'm twelve years old again?" Wil climbed the steps to the porch.

Jillian tried to imagine Wil as a twelve-year-old girl and immediately pictured a gangly tomboy in ripped jeans and an

old T-shirt. Was Wil always tall, or did she have a growth spurt during her teenage years?

“You spent as much time over here as you did at home that summer.”

The front door opened into a small foyer and Rose led them to a spacious kitchen. The linoleum was yellowed and the white cabinets needed a coat of paint. Actually, they needed to be replaced, but Jillian wasn’t sure what Rose’s budget was. The appliances were outdated—in fact, she guessed the fridge was circa 1950—but she didn’t think replacing them would gain that much value for the house. Besides, vintage was in again.

“Nancy and I were inseparable.” A smile softened by reminiscence touched Wil’s lips.

“Nancy is my granddaughter,” Rose said to Jillian as she took three glasses from the cabinet. To Wil she said, “Get the pitcher from the refrigerator, dear.”

“Then the next summer I started working for Dad.”

Jillian watched as Wil’s face took on a stubborn sadness. “Wasn’t that also around the time your parents split up?”

“Yeah.” Jillian thought she saw a look of understanding pass between them.

After a sympathetic smile, Rose changed the subject. “It’s such a nice day. Let’s sit on the back porch.”

Rose carried a plate of cookies and they followed with the lemonade and glasses.

Behind the house a large oak tree cast shade over most of the moderately sized yard, which would provide space for children to play and would be a selling point for potential buyers. The surprisingly large porch held a cedar table and chairs. A flower box on the railing was overflowing with lush purple flowers that Jillian couldn’t identify.

Wil pulled out a chair for her and, as she sat, Wil's hands brushed across the top of her shoulders to tease the bare skin of her neck.

"It's good to see the two of you together," Rose said.

"We're not—I mean—we didn't. Wil is doing some work on Aunt Mary's house for me." Responding both to the ripple of pleasure along her spine at Wil's touch and to something she thought she'd heard in Rose's tone, Jillian rushed to explain her presence and felt Wil stiffen beside her.

"Of course, dear. Thank you for bringing her along on your visit. I would have called her father after our meeting anyway," Rose said calmly. If she noticed Jillian's discomfort, she'd obviously chosen to ignore it.

While Rose served the lemonade, Jillian outlined some of her suggestions. Rose once again offered compensation for her time, but since Jillian wasn't licensed in Tennessee, she didn't feel right accepting.

"Well, then at least let me make you dinner tomorrow night."

Jillian held up a cookie. "If these are any indication of your culinary skills, I accept."

"I thought you might. You've been eating too many meals down at the diner. You need a good home-cooked meal."

She grinned. "I'm not really very good in the kitchen. And I enjoy the nightly walks through town to the diner."

Rose looked at Wil, who toyed with her half-empty glass, tracing her fingers through the condensation on the outside. "Wil, you're welcome too, of course."

"Thank you, but I already have plans."

To Jillian, Wil's reply sounded false, but Rose seemed to accept it easily.

"Come by if your plans change. It sounds as if I'll need

help with some of these projects. Would you ask your father to call me when he has someone free?"

"I can fit you in between work on Mary's place." Though Wil's mind was elsewhere, she had been half listening to Jillian and Rose talk about getting the house ready to sell. She had to admit, Jillian had handled the suggested changes delicately and seemed sensitive to Rose's limited income.

"Oh, I don't want to interfere with your other work."

She waved off Rose's concern. "My crew can handle some of the work over there without me. I'll squeeze yours in between supervising them." She could feel Jillian's eyes on her but didn't look at her. She'd caught Jillian's nervousness when she'd misinterpreted Rose's comment about the two of them. And she'd very quickly understood from where Jillian's reaction stemmed. So now she jumped on the excuse to be away from the job site at Mary's place whenever possible.



Wil strode out to her truck and Jillian hurried to keep up. She barely managed to slide into the passenger seat before Wil accelerated away from the curb.

"Is something wrong?" She touched Wil's arm.

"No." Wil jerked her arm away and gripped the wheel with both hands.

For several silent moments, Wil tested the strength of the seat belts, careening around a corner and screeching to a halt at a stop sign. Jillian's body lurched forward until the belt caught and locked almost painfully across her chest.

"Jesus, what is your problem?"

"I don't have a problem. As long as I remember my place."

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jillian didn’t have a clue what had set Wil off, but from the harsh bite in her voice and the firm set of her jaw, she was plenty mad.

“You were pretty quick to make it clear I was *just* an employee.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Was Wil joking? Maybe Jillian simply didn’t know her personality well enough to tell. If she was, she deserved an Oscar for this performance because she looked livid.

“Is it? You overreacted to Rose’s statement. Would it be that horrible if Rose figured out that there was something going on between us?”

“This isn’t personal. But I don’t need this whole town gossiping about what I’m doing with—”

“The handyman?”

“Now who’s overreacting?” Jillian muttered. The derision in Wil’s voice hit home and Jillian was getting angry too. After last night, she’d thought they were on the same page. It was just sex. Surely Wil could see that’s all they could share. Hell, she was only here for a short time anyway. She’d thought they were both adults and could merely enjoy each other, but here Wil was blowing everything out of proportion.

“I just don’t think Miss Rose is the type to gossip. Especially—”

She waited, but Wil didn’t continue. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Frustrated, she shook her head. “Look, I just didn’t want her to assume there’s anything going on between us.”

“I don’t think she assumed anything.”

“Wil, please don’t make this difficult.”

Wil pulled the truck up to the curb in front of her house and slammed the gearshift into Park.

Jillian tried again. “Well, is there something wrong with wanting to appear professional?”

Wil scowled. “That’s not what this was about. You’re worried about what people will think about you *doing* the hired help.”

“How dare you presume to know what I’m thinking. You don’t know me.” Wil had hit closer to the truth than Jillian was willing to admit.

“You’re right. I don’t.” Wil threw up her hands and stared out the windshield. “And that’s precisely why I shouldn’t have fucked you.”

Jillian flinched at Wil’s blunt language, even though moments ago she’d also reduced their encounter to just that.

“It’s okay, Miss Sealy.” Wil’s expression was blank, her voice emotionless. “I’m quite used to being seen as a second-class citizen in this town.”

“Wil—”

“Get out.”

“I just want—”

“Get. Out. Of my truck.”

She sighed and shoved the door open. As soon as her feet hit the ground, she slammed the door behind her. She didn’t turn around, but seconds later she heard gravel fly as Wil sped away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wil pulled a beer from the refrigerator and resisted the urge to slam the door. She tossed the cap in the sink on her way to the attached garage. After she flipped on the light, she set the bottle on the workbench where her tools were laid out neatly just inside the door. In the center of the garage, the makeshift table she'd fashioned out of a sheet of plywood and two sawhorses held four drawers. She'd finished assembling them the night before for a rolltop desk she was making for her father's office. Tonight she would begin cutting the pieces for the base.

Six years ago, after she bought this house on fifteen acres on the town's outskirts, she had transformed the garage into a workshop. A decade old, the house was more modern and sterile than she liked. As subdivisions crawled out from nearby cities, construction companies had begun to build cookie-cutter houses, and Wil's was no exception. She'd been more interested in the land than the house. But the relatively cheap cost of maintaining the small home allowed her to save until she built the house she really wanted.

Still, it was much nicer than the place her family had lived in when she was younger. Bud had been struggling to rebuild

the company that her grandfather, with a series of bad business decisions, had nearly run into the ground. They had rented a dilapidated house that probably should have been condemned years ago. Bud made what repairs he could with no money, but the house needed major work.

Wil knew her mother wasn't happy. She heard them arguing when they thought she was asleep. Her mother screamed at her father that her college education was wasted while she waited tables at the diner. She hated living in a small town and wanted to move back to D.C. where she had grown up. He usually tried to convince her that things would get better, but one night when Wil was twelve years old, he told her to go. And she did. Wil remembered standing in front of the house watching her drive away. Her mother had tried to explain why she was leaving, but Wil was too hurt and angry to listen and ignored her until she finally gave up and got in the car.

After that Bud had taken nearly any job he could just to keep food on the table. And still Wil had gone to school many days with no lunch money, in clothes from Goodwill. In such a small town, that meant the other kids recognized their own discarded, season-old clothing.

Wil took pride in owning her home because no one had ever expected anything from her. She and Bud had worked hard, and Johnson and Son now had a reputation for quality work and dependability. But she suspected many residents would always view her as the poor girl in secondhand clothes. She'd seen more than her share of pitying looks from her elders over the years.

This afternoon had proved that a part of her that could still be stung by an offhand remark. Jillian Sealy was white-collar, and not just by profession. Her carriage and the confidence with which she made eye contact communicated the expectation that she would be treated a certain way. Despite Wil's occasional

arrogance, she would never have that sense of entitlement. She knew she would always be susceptible to the resurgence of childhood shame, and Jillian's quick reaction to Rose's harmless remark had stirred that old inadequacy.

She would probably do best to remember that her relationship with Jillian was strictly professional. They'd lost their heads for one passionate evening, but she could put things back on track. Hell, she'd had a six-month relationship with Andy, one of her crew members, a while back, and they still managed to work together. She had a job to do, and Jillian had made it plain that her plans for them didn't include anything more than that.

"Yep, keep it professional," she muttered to herself as she drained the rest of her beer. She put on her safety glasses and set the guard on the saw. Burying herself in measurements and sawdust was one way to clear her mind.



"No, I don't know when I'll be home." Propped against the kitchen counter, Jillian wedged her cell phone between her cheek and shoulder while she filed her nails. Monica, her friend and fellow real-estate agent in Cincinnati, had called to check on her when she hadn't heard from her in several days.

"I thought you were just going down there to sell the house," Monica said.

"Well, I was. But there's a lot to be done before it's ready to list. Besides, I don't have a job to rush home to."

"You could get your old job back."

"I refuse to beg that asshole to rehire me." Jillian applied light pink polish to her thumbnail, then debated whether she liked the shade.

"I can talk to my boss."

"Monica, I'm not worried. I'm sure I could call any number of firms."

"If you want to get on with a good firm, you shouldn't stay away too long. Real estate is fickle."

"As soon as things are sorted here."

"I'd think you would be in a hurry. There can't be much in Hicktown to stick around for."

Jillian immediately recalled the hazy look of passion in Wil's eyes.

"Jillian?"

"What?" She shivered at the memory of Wil whispering her name.

"Am I missing something?"

"No." She shook her head as if she could clear Wil's face from her mind as easily as an Etch-a-Sketch screen. "No. If I take a few weeks and fix the place up, I can make a nice profit."

"A few weeks? Jillian, get your ass up here while people still remember your name."

"Don't be so dramatic. The market will still be there when I get back. Maybe I'll think about starting my own firm." She'd planned on going out on her own in about five years anyway. She would just be accelerating that schedule.

After finishing her nails, she carefully recapped the polish and waved her hands to dry. A knock at the door gave her an excuse to end the conversation. "Someone's here. I'll call you in a few days."

She hung up before Monica could protest. When she swung open the door, Wil stood on the porch, staring out at the street.

"Hello, Wil." After the way they'd left things the day

before, Jillian was surprised to see her. From the little she knew about her, she'd expected it would take a few more days for Wil to come around asking for forgiveness.

Wil faced her, shoved her hands in the back pockets of her jeans, and rocked on her heels. Her eyes were hidden by dark sunglasses and her expression was stony.

"We need to go to the hardware store if we're going to get your kitchen fixtures ordered in time."

Expecting an apology, Jillian blinked, taken off guard by her lack of contrition.

"I didn't call," Wil said abruptly.

"What?"

"I didn't call. So if this is a bad time I can come back later."

"Um—no. Now is fine."

She grabbed her coat and purse from the hook behind the door, locked up, and followed Wil to her truck. It was only a couple of blocks to the hardware store, and if they hadn't been picking up supplies she would have suggested they walk rather than get in Wil's truck again. Instead she climbed silently into the cab, staying as close to the door as she could. Beneath the scent of sawdust and paint thinner, she picked up the clean, light scent of Wil's cologne and cursed her awareness. She didn't need drama, and if that's what Wil was after, Jillian should get over her attraction very quickly. But considering the tension in the truck, it would be a long five weeks if she continued to be this physically conscious of Wil.

"I assume, since my father didn't fire me this morning, you didn't call him." Jillian sensed a touch of challenge beneath Wil's icy tone.

"No."

She'd considered it, but couldn't think of a plausible

reason to request a different crew. And she couldn't imagine telling Bud Johnson the real reason she didn't want to work with his daughter. Out of curiosity, she had contacted another contractor, but they wouldn't have a crew available for another three weeks. So she was left with little choice but to stick it out with Wil.

"I'm an adult, Wil. I see no reason to mess with your livelihood just because you and I had a misunderstanding."

Wil laughed humorlessly. "A misunderstanding? Is that what we're calling it?"

"Well, that would be the civilized way to handle things." Jillian could have said she was sorry. But stubbornly she refused, not wanting to be the first to apologize.

"Of course." Wil's expression was blank. She wheeled into the lot in front of Bill's Hardware, parked, and jumped out without another word.

Jillian felt like she'd been transported back in time as she followed Wil through the wood-framed screen door. Merchandise covered the walls, each of the six aisles, and nearly every available surface of the small store. A long counter across the front of the store held an antiquated cash register and stacks of catalogs. She wandered down the nearest aisle, passing bins with nails, bolts, and screws of every size. On the back wall she found a complete palette of paint samples arranged in a rack lit with fluorescent bulbs.

She selected several of the small cards in colors she liked and tucked them in her purse. She'd never actually painted a room, but she'd picked up a few home-improvement magazines and decided it sounded simple enough. The interior paint had gone on her list and she'd put the exterior paint on Wil's.

"We won't be ready for you to paint anything for at least a week," Wil said from behind her.

“I know. But I want to take some samples home and consider them. I like this green for the kitchen. And this one for the dining room.”

“It’s yellow.” Wil’s distaste was evident in her tone.

“You don’t like yellow?”

“Ah, it’s not my favorite.”

“But it’s not an obnoxious shade. And it will look perfect with the white trim and really reflect the light in that room.”

“Hey, it’s your house.” Wil raised her hands in surrender.

“Well, it’s really not.” Jillian replaced the rich ochre and selected beige instead. “And it’s better to stick with less dramatic colors when trying to sell.” She recited the advice she’d given numerous clients.

“Have you given any thought to an exterior color?”

“I guess I shouldn’t suggest yellow.”

Wil rolled her eyes and took Jillian’s elbow, seeming not to notice when Jillian started at the contact. “Come over here and look at these kitchen cabinets.”

Jillian shivered, unable, even after Wil released her, to banish the sensory memory of her touch. And it irritated her that Wil seemed unaffected as she led her to a display of varying types and shades of wood samples.

Wil flipped open a catalog on the counter in front of her, and once against Jillian found herself watching Wil’s hands. She remembered the feel of them grasping her hips, guiding her as she thrust against her.

“I think you should choose something of average price, very neutral.”

She forced herself to pay attention to the cabinets Wil pointed out, hoping that concentrating on business would calm her storming senses. Shutting out Wil’s light scent and the warmth of her body so close, Jillian focused on the pages

in front of her. She'd intended the kitchen to be attractive yet economical, but as they leafed through the catalog, she noticed the products she'd want in her own home.

"I want these. In white." She pointed out a set with frosted glass inserts in the upper cabinets. "Dark countertops. Granite, maybe, or engineered stone."

Wil shook her head. "Too expensive."

"These are the ones I want," Jillian insisted, annoyed by Wil's quick dismissal.

"Then compromise on the countertop. We can do tile cheaper."

"I like granite."

"I thought you wanted to make a profit. If you don't prioritize you'll never get back what you put into it."

Wil's confidence grated against Jillian's already tender nerves, and when she responded her tone was harsher than she intended. "Suddenly, you're an expert on real estate."

Wil stared at her for a moment and she wished she could identify the emotion that flashed quickly in those brilliant blue eyes. "No. But I know something about remodeling."

"Well, it's my project. Order these," she punctuated her words with a jab at the page, "and the granite."

While Wil wordlessly copied the product information, Jillian opened another catalog. She immediately noticed a beautiful brushed-nickel kitchen faucet whose clean, modern lines would go perfectly with the cabinets she'd just chosen. One glance at the price told her that she'd be pushing Wil if she insisted on ordering it. Instead she found a cheaper model and reminded herself that she planned to sell the house when she was done anyway. She chose a similar set for the bathroom sinks.

"We're putting the new shower in the master. It'll need

fixtures as well,” Wil said as she added the ones Jillian indicated to her list. “Do you have any ideas about the tile in there?”

“Do I need to decide that now?”

“We won’t start the bathroom until we’re done in the kitchen. But if Bill has to order it, he does need some lead time.”

Jillian thought varying shades of gray tile would complement the slate blue she wanted for the walls. Coupled with the glass shower, and the nickel fixtures, the overall effect would be clean and elegant. She tried to concentrate on the image of the finished bathroom instead of the feel of Wil’s breath against her neck as she leaned over her shoulder to look at the catalog. When Wil brushed against her back, she fought the memory of what had happened in the kitchen when their positions had been reversed.

“We’ll start demolition Monday morning. I’ve arranged for a Dumpster to be delivered. My girls will be there at eight.”

“Your girls?”

“My crew. Three of the hardest-working women you’ll ever find.” Wil started toward the front of the store. As they reached the counter, she called, “Bill, we’re ready.”

A young man pushed through the half door from what Jillian assumed was an office. He looked around Wil’s age, a few years younger than Jillian, she guessed. His sandy hair was shaggy, and he wore a faded black Scorpions T-shirt and worn jeans. When he took Wil’s list and turned to enter it in a compact laptop Jillian hadn’t noticed before, she saw the distinctive shape of a Skoal can in his back pocket. This wasn’t how she’d pictured the “Bill” in Bill’s Hardware. For some reason she imagined an older man in flannel and suspenders.

“All set, Wil.” He handed back her list and a receipt. “I haven’t seen you down at the Ranch lately.”

Wil shrugged. "You know how it is, we're busy."

"Me too. Ever since Granddaddy passed, I've been running this place by myself. But you gotta let off some steam sometimes."

"The ranch?" Jillian wondered how working on a ranch could be relaxing.

"Rambles Ranch is a bar on the west side of town. You probably drove by it on your way in," Wil explained.

Jillian recalled passing the wood-shingled building that resembled a bunkhouse. She hadn't paid attention to the name stenciled on a sign outside, but the glowing neon beer signs in the windows had made its purpose clear.

"You oughta hire one of the high-school boys to help out nights and weekends." Wil folded her receipt and shoved it in her jacket pocket.

Bill shrugged. "I've got one part-time guy already. And my brother will be home from college next week. He'll help out for the summer."

"Well, try not to work too hard," Wil said as she led Jillian out of the store.

"I guess there are a lot of family-owned businesses in this town," Jillian commented as they walked to the truck.

"There's not much in the way of jobs around town. So if you grow up here and want to stick around, you either commute to the city or go into the family business. Most places have been in the same family for generations."

"Like Bill's."

Wil slid behind the wheel and started the truck. "Yep. His grandfather, the one he's named after, opened the hardware store about the same time mine started Johnson and Son. Bill's father took off when he and his brother were young, but Bill has been working there since we were in high school."

Jillian suspected there were several parallels between Bill's life and Wil's. Except from what she'd gathered, it was Wil's mother who had left. She recalled the flash of sadness when Rose mentioned her parents' split.

"Were you and Bill good friends?"

"Oh, yeah. After Nancy moved away, Billy was my only friend for a while."

"Really?" Though Wil's tone was light, it felt false, and Jillian could sense the loneliness she tried to cover. Wil was attractive and magnetic, and Jillian had difficulty imagining her so solitary.

Wil's right hand rested on the gearshift between them, her other draped over the steering wheel, and she stared straight ahead. "Yeah. I went to school with the same kids from kindergarten on. You wouldn't think it would matter how much money my family had. Or didn't have."

"It was really a big deal? This doesn't seem like the type of town where wealth is important. It's too idyllic."

"It's not Mayberry. We have our share of problems."

Jillian laughed. "Yeah, like what? There's no traffic, no crime, everyone knows everyone else—"

"Exactly. So everybody was fully aware that, while my classmates were shopping and hanging out at the diner all summer, I was building additions to their houses, putting on new roofs, and unstopping their toilets. Because, after all, nothing was beneath us at Johnson and Son."

Wil bitterly ground out her last words, then clenched her jaw shut, a muscle jumping with the effort.

"And look at you now."

"Most of the time, I don't feel any different than I did then."

Jillian didn't understand the point in holding on to that

past resentment. If someone didn't think she was good enough, well—screw them. She knew who she was, and she'd never let anyone convince her otherwise.

CHAPTER FIVE

Are you sure I can't do something to help?" Jillian called from a chair at Rose's dining-room table. Though it was just the two of them, Rose had laid out matching white chinaware and polished silver on the starched linen tablecloth.

Rose entered from the kitchen with a bowl of mashed potatoes. "That's okay, dear, I've got it."

"At least let me carry something." When she returned to the kitchen, Jillian followed.

"Okay, I'll get the dinner rolls from the oven. You take this." Rose handed her a platter piled with thick slices of roast beef.

"You have a beautiful home. You must have many happy memories here," Jillian said as they sat down.

Rose smiled. "Yes. We had some lovely times. But the marks of my daughter's growth on the bedroom doorjamb and the loose board in the hallway that creaked every time she tried to sneak out aren't exactly big selling points."

"Well, I think they are. Not in the traditional sense, maybe. But this house has history, and with that beautiful yard out back, your target buyer is a young family who will make their own memories."

“That’s nice of you to say.”

They passed dishes back and forth until both of their plates were filled. The aroma of roast beef and rich gravy mingled with fresh-baked rolls that Jillian would bet were made from scratch.

“Are you looking forward to spending more time with your family?” Jillian took a bite. “This is delicious.”

“Yes. I have three great-grandchildren. And for so many years it was just my daughter and I. It will be nice to have family around.”

“It must have been difficult raising a child on your own.”

Despite a few rough patches, Jillian’s parents were still together, and she couldn’t imagine her mother trying to cope alone. Her parents had sacrificed a lot of time to provide her and her brother with their upper-middle-class lifestyle. As a surgeon, her father had been away often during her upbringing, leaving her mother, an obstetrician, with the bulk of the child-rearing responsibilities. But he’d done his part financially, which enabled them to hire a nanny to supplement her mother’s unpredictable schedule.

“Single parenthood definitely wasn’t as prevalent as it is now. As a high school math teacher, I didn’t make much money, so we had some lean times.”

“Wasn’t Aunt Mary a teacher too?”

Rose nodded. “For several years until she married. Her husband didn’t want her to work.”

“I only met him once. My mother isn’t close to that side of her family. She never understood what Aunt Mary found so appealing about small-town living.” Jillian recalled her mother’s numerous derisive comments about her Southern ancestors. “As the years passed, their visits with one another grew fewer and farther between.”

“As often happens, people grow apart.” Sadness colored

Rose's words, but before Jillian could question it, Rose stood and began to stack their plates. "Would you like a slice of pie? Coffee?"

"That sounds great."

"It's a beautiful night. Why don't we take our dessert on the back porch and watch the sun set?"

Rose waved off Jillian's offer to wash the dishes, insisting she would do it later. So, instead, they settled on the porch, sipped coffee, and enjoyed fresh peach pie.

Jillian stared at the night sky and wondered whether she could see this many stars in Cincinnati, or if she'd just never bothered to look. Though the days were warm and humid, the nights were still cool and the air felt crisp. Crickets had replaced the sounds of the city. Normally a driven person, Jillian wouldn't have thought she could enjoy sitting still so much. She couldn't remember the last time she'd spent an entire evening socializing. When she didn't skip her meals altogether, she either combined them with client meetings or ate on the run. She hoarded what little free time she did have, often taking a quick jog through her neighborhood to clear her head. But the pace of life was slower in Redmond. Maybe she should embrace the opportunity to relax, because she wouldn't have that chance when she returned home.



"Andy, bring me some more water, will you?" Wil passed her Nalgene bottle over her shoulder.

"Sure thing, boss." Andy squeezed Wil's shoulder and bounded down the stairs toward a large orange cooler of water on the open tailgate of Wil's truck.

Andy had been on Wil's crew the longest of the three women. In fact, they had gone to high school together, though

they hadn't hung out with each other then. Andy was the star player on the basketball team and had run with the popular crowd. When a knee injury blew her college scholarship, she had applied for work with Johnson and Son. Wil had been heading a crew of men at the time, and Bud had assigned Andy to work with her. Since then, as each of the men left the company, a woman had replaced him, at Wil's request. She preferred not to deal with the egos of men who didn't want to work for a woman.

They'd spent their first morning at Jillian's removing the appliances and starting to tear out the countertops and cabinets. Now they scattered across Jillian's front porch with their lunches spread out in front of them. Wil sat on the top step with her back pressed against the railing and her legs stretched out in front of her.

A few feet away, Andy's cousin, Tracy, sat cross-legged in the shade. The two women looked alike, with dark hair and skin, but their resemblance ended there. Andy's brown eyes were warm and friendly, whereas Tracy's, a shade deeper, were usually shadowed and secretive. Six months ago, when they'd lost a member of their crew, Wil had hired Tracy as a favor to Andy, but Tracy's quiet nature made her hard to get to know. Over time, Tracy had begun to open up, even smiling once in a while. Her grin transformed her face, lighting up her features and bringing out matching dimples.

Andy's partner, Patti, sat on the bottom step mirroring Wil's position. Patti was knowledgeable and hardworking, but most of all, her patience tempered Andy's excitable nature.

Andy stepped over Wil's legs and settled on the floor between them.

"Jillian Sealy sure is hot," Andy said as she unwrapped her sandwich. Patti gave her a sharp look. "What? You know

you have my heart, but, come on, she is. I wonder what her deal is.”

Wil ignored her, pretending to be engrossed in her potato chips.

“Wil, what do you think?”

“Huh?” Wil stalled.

“What do you know about Jillian?”

“Nothing, really.” Wil and Andy had been friends for a long time, ever since they mutually decided they were incompatible as a couple. She knew Andy better than anyone else, which was probably why she hesitated to talk about Jillian. Andy loved good gossip, even when she herself was involved. It had taken only a day for word of Wil and Andy’s split to spread around town. And Wil didn’t want what had transpired between her and Jillian taking the same route.

“Come on, Wil. I heard you’ve been over to Rose Beam’s with her and down to the hardware store. What did you two talk about?”

“About her plans for the house.” Wil let her displeasure with Andy’s prying seep into her voice.

“Andy, leave her alone,” Patti warned, but Andy persisted.

“But is she a lesbian? Single?”

Wil balled her napkin and shoved it into her lunch bag. She stood and scowled down at Andy. “How about less talking and more eating, so we can get back to work.” Wil strode down the steps toward her truck before Andy could respond, and she couldn’t hear what she muttered to Patti.

Wil had just stowed her empty bag in her truck when she spotted Jillian walking up the sidewalk toward her. She slipped her sunglasses from her pocket and put them on before allowing her eyes to roam the length of Jillian’s body. Pressed

khaki slacks covered her long legs, but they would feel lean and strong wrapped around Wil. A sudden breeze molded Jillian's light cotton blouse to her torso, and the sensation of her breasts seemed to be burned into Wil's palms. She curled her fingers into fists and deliberately tried to replace her awareness with indifference.

"Did you have a nice walk?" Already losing her fight, she stepped closer.

"Yes. I met Rose at the diner for lunch."

Wil shook her head. "I don't know how you can eat there every day."

Jillian laughed and patted her stomach. "I'm going to gain thirty pounds before the house is ready."

"Oh, now, I know better than to say something like that to a woman."

"You didn't have to say it. I did." Jillian had never been a creature of habit, but the familiar faces and the heavy cooking smells as she walked in the diner were oddly comforting. She glanced toward the house. "Are you making progress?"

"Yeah. We're on track. What are you going to do this afternoon?" Wil raised her hand as if she wanted to touch Jillian's arm, then let it drop back to her side.

Suddenly, the only thing Jillian wanted to do was spend more time with Wil. "I don't know. What are you guys doing? Do you need any help?"

Wil gave a halfhearted smile, and Jillian was irritated that the sunglasses prevented her from seeing if it changed her eyes. Jillian imagined that if she could see them they would still be arctic and emotionless. She wondered if she would be so bothered by that thought if she hadn't already seen them bright with desire.

"I agreed to let you work on your projects at the same time. But I can't let you work *with* us."

“Why not?”

“For starters, my father would have a fit. Besides, that’s why you’re paying us. By tomorrow we’ll have the kitchen completely gutted. We’ll spend the rest of the week pushing out that wall and installing the new window in the breakfast nook. Next week I’ll give you one day if you want to paint before we install the new cabinets.”

“That would be easier than painting around them.” Jillian made a mental note to go back down to the hardware store and buy the paint and supplies. “Your crew seems great. I get the impression you’re all close.”

“Andy and I are—friends. And she and Patti are together. I don’t know Tracy very well, but Andy says she’s good people.”

“A whole crew of lesbians?”

Wil shook her head. “Tracy’s straight. Recently divorced.” Wil glanced toward the porch where the girls were cleaning up the remains of their lunch. “We better get back to work.”

Jillian stood on the sidewalk as Wil quickly took the steps to the front porch. As she approached the other women, she pulled a small notebook out of her pocket and flipped it open. Though Jillian could hear the low timbre of Wil’s voice, she wasn’t close enough to hear her words. But her attention was focused on Wil’s long fingers as they gestured toward the paper. The women listened carefully and nodded in respectful agreement.

She’d already decided that Wil was competent and dedicated. And judging from her suggestions at the hardware store, she could complement Jillian’s vision for the finished renovation. Jillian was glad she hadn’t let a night’s indiscretion interfere with their professional relationship.



A generic country band competed with the din of conversation and laughter throughout the darkened interior of Rambles Ranch. But sitting at the bar with her back to the crowd, Wil ignored the noise. She swirled three swallows of amber liquid in her mug and thought she should probably just finish her beer and go home. Not in the mood for company, she'd avoided making eye contact with anyone but the bartender. The only reason she'd even come out was because she'd grown tired of restlessly prowling her house and replaying intimate moments with Jillian.

Her first full day of working at Jillian's hadn't been too bad. They'd made a lot of progress and Jillian had stayed out of their way. But though Wil wanted to ignore her, she was constantly aware of the sounds of Jillian working in another part of the house. And she didn't like the blaze of arousal when she caught sight of Jillian passing through the hallway adjacent to the kitchen. There was absolutely no logical reason why helping Tracy rip out the old countertop should make her wet from the memory of taking Jillian on that very surface.

"What's on your mind?"

"Nothing." Wil glanced up as Andy settled on the stool next to her.

"Come on. I know that look. You're thinking about something serious."

"No. It's definitely not serious." Wil drained her mug and set it back on the bar. "I'm surprised your woman let you out of the house tonight."

"You know she hates it when you call her that." Andy signaled the bartender, pointed at Wil's empty glass, and held up two fingers. "She knows I'm safe if I'm out with you."

"Oh, yeah? Why's that?"

"Because you haven't let a woman within ten feet of you in months."

"If you only knew," Wil murmured, too low for Andy to hear over the music. She flashed on the image of Jillian's face as she climaxed and felt an answering tightness in her stomach.

"It's not like you couldn't have anyone you want. Especially after you spent most of last month sweating your ass off up on the church roof in your cargos and a tight white tee."

"We were working. And it was hot," Wil protested. "Besides, you were up there with me, and I don't recall you wearing much more."

"Sure. But I'm taken. And"—she pinched the spot on her side she referred to as a love handle—"I don't have your rock-hard body."

"Shut up." Wil laughed and punched Andy's arm.

"So what's the problem? You're not still pining after me, are you?" The reference to their relationship was a testament to how far they'd come. The jokes hadn't been so easy in the first few months. But now that Andy was happily involved with someone else, they'd both put the past behind them and their easy camaraderie had returned.

Wil shrugged. "This town is so damn small. Everybody who's single has been with everybody else. It just feels a little incestuous."

"Yeah, we need some fresh meat around here." Andy grinned and lifted her glass. "What about Jillian Sealy? She's definitely got a fresh—"

"Andy," Wil warned.

"What?"

"We're working for her." It certainly wasn't the first time Wil had crossed a line physically with a client. But the few times she had, she'd kept it from her crew. And it had never been more than a mutual sharing of pleasure. She didn't discuss

her personal life, especially not her childhood. But despite the differences between them, something about Jillian invited her to open up. Even when she accused Jillian of condescending to her, Wil desperately wanted to change her mind, to prove she was worthy.

“Okay. But you have to admit she’s gorgeous.” Andy took a sip of her beer, then shrugged. “She’s probably a snob anyway.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, look at the way she dresses, all proper and perfectly creased. And that BMW sure wasn’t cheap.”

Wil had accused Jillian of being exactly how Andy was now assessing her. But for some reason, hearing Andy say it bothered Wil. Sure, Jillian’s wardrobe was designer, her car screamed money, and she had a swagger in her walk that said she was entitled to something. But Wil had touched her, had held her while she pled for more, then tumbled into orgasm. Wil couldn’t forget the passion she had seen beneath her cool exterior. Jillian Sealy had another layer, and Wil wanted to see it again.

CHAPTER SIX

Get ready to sweat, folks, because we're in for a hot, hot summer. Today we'll have record high temps...

Jillian flipped the radio dial in search of music and, finding only a few options among the static, finally settled on a country station. She rolled up the sleeves of her old button-down shirt, then picked up a can of paint and poured some into a tray.

Within minutes she was immersed in the monotonous action of painting. Brad Paisley's guitar didn't quite drown out the rhythmic wet sound of the roller against the wall. She'd been fairly productive the previous week, completing some of her smaller projects while Wil's crew worked in the kitchen. Though they saw each other in passing, by tacit agreement, they avoided being alone together.

But even with that distance, Jillian noticed far more about Wil than she wanted to. One day she'd wandered into the driveway while taking a break and found Wil there measuring the wood that would frame the new window. Wil's eyebrows drew together in concentration as she pulled a pencil from behind her ear and marked the cuts. When Wil glanced up, for a moment, Jillian had been the subject of that intense focus. Without thinking she'd offered Wil her water bottle. When Wil had stepped close to take it, she smelled like sweat and

sawdust, and Jillian wondered why that should be such an arousing combination.

Now she had to remind herself why she should just hurry up and get the house done and sold, and move on. Certainly, in the beginning flirting with Wil had been a nice distraction, and the sex—God, the sex had been incredible. But then she'd hurt Wil's feelings, though Wil had hidden it under anger, and things had become complicated. When their interaction was no longer a fun flirtation, she saw no point in carrying on, because it wasn't as if she intended to move to rural Tennessee and set up housekeeping with Wil Johnson. Though her time there was a nice break from her life, she just wasn't a small-town girl. Nor could she imagine Wil flourishing in her world back in Cincinnati.

She forced Wil from her mind and concentrated instead on her plans for the house, plotting again the changes she still wanted to make. She'd checked some comps in the area and had worked out her projected asking price. After reviewing Wil's schedule, she'd also set a tentative date for an open house.

Two hours later, her arms ached, but she'd nearly finished the first coat. That weather guy hadn't been joking. She took off her shirt, leaving only a tank top, and wiped a towel over her neck and chest. It wasn't even noon yet and the room was already stifling. She opened the kitchen window and a breeze swept in, pushing out the chemical smell of the paint and cooling her damp skin.

Before she could linger for long, she prodded herself back to work. Wil had only given her the one day for painting before her crew reclaimed the kitchen. Jillian sighed as her thoughts circled back to Wil, and she put a bit more muscle behind the roller to stave off the distraction.



“Andy, hand me that pipe wrench,” Wil said over her shoulder and held her arm out behind her. The cool metal handle was pushed into her hand. “Thanks.”

Wil suspected the house had once had the heavy porcelain fixtures of its era, but at some point, the master bath had undergone a renovation. A stock vanity sink and a fiberglass tub and shower shell had been installed, probably in an effort to save money. The changes Jillian wanted to make would bring back some of the classic styles and add a few new trends. So while Andy and Tracy removed the shower, Wil disconnected the pipes that supplied the sink.

“Are you having any problems with that?” When she received no response, she glanced over her shoulder and found she was now alone in the room.

The showerhead and knobs lay on the floor, but other than that, it appeared little progress had been made. Wil didn’t have to look very far for the two women. As she stepped out of the room she found both Andy and Tracy standing in the hallway and peeking into the kitchen.

As Wil approached quietly, Andy gave a low whistle. “So much for prim and proper.”

“What are you—” As Wil looked around the doorjamb, her brain ceased to function. Jillian stood with her back to them, paint roller in hand. Her cutoff denim shorts ended just below the curve of her ass, leaving long legs exposed all the way down to her bare feet. When she stretched to reach the upper part of the wall, her ribbed tank top pulled tight. The muscles in her calves bunched as she rose to her tiptoes, and Wil imagined tracing her fingers down them, then taking one

of those perfectly shaped feet in her hands. Busy enjoying the view, Wil was slow to realize that Andy and Tracy still stood beside her.

“Aren’t you two supposed to be taking out that shower?” Wil snapped.

Andy’s eyes never left Jillian, so she didn’t see Wil’s glare. “Are you kidding? And miss this—” She looked at Wil and choked off her words. “Uh, yeah. We’re going.”

“You don’t want Patti to catch you ogling Jillian, anyway,” Tracy teased as they headed for the bathroom.

Wil waited until they were gone to enter the kitchen. Jillian hadn’t noticed her yet, so Wil admired her a moment longer before clearing her throat loudly enough to be heard over the music.

“Oh, hey, Wil.” Jillian crossed to the counter and turned down the radio. “How’s the bathroom coming along?” Wil seemed dazed, and when several seconds went by with no answer, she thought she’d have to repeat herself.

“Don’t you think you should put some clothes on?”

Jillian looked down at herself, thinking she was sufficiently covered. “There’s nothing wrong with what I’m wearing.”

“You’ve got workers in the house.”

Jillian was confused. She didn’t think Wil was a prude, so what was the problem if she wanted to be comfortable in her own house? Just then one of Wil’s crew passed the doorway, and when Jillian caught an appreciative glance, she thought she understood. She took a step closer, and Wil’s eyes narrowed and she drew a quick breath. Jillian wanted to trace a fingertip along the neckline of Wil’s T-shirt just to see what kind of reaction she would get. A thrill raced along her spine, but she didn’t move, fearful that touching Wil would test her own willpower a bit too much.

"I have a house full of women, Wil. It's not like I have anything they haven't seen before."

"So if I had a man on my crew you would cover up?"

Jillian shrugged. "You don't."

"Andy's gay," Wil blurted almost desperately.

"I know. You told me. She and Patti seem pretty serious." Jillian could tell by Wil's expression that she realized it was a ridiculous thing to say. Despite her growing irritation, Jillian kept her tone even. She'd often found that the appearance of disinterest was as effective as raising her voice. And it was clear Wil was becoming frustrated with her lack of emotion.

"So you walking around half naked—"

"I am not half naked. You're overreacting. I was trying to let it go, but if you really want to force the issue, why does my attire have you so—bothered?"

"I'm not," Wil stuttered, and took a step back.

"Really? Because you seem a bit off-kilter."

"No. I'm perfectly—on-kilter."

Jillian smiled. "I don't think that's a word."

"If you want to walk around flaunting yourself, that's your business."

Wil still seemed flustered, and Jillian suspected she knew why, because her own awareness simmered just beneath her skin. They could probably go back and forth like this all day, when in truth they would both just get more and more aroused. She'd already endured waking after more than one erotic dream about Wil, so she was only torturing herself. But for reasons she didn't understand, Jillian couldn't back down.

Instead, she tossed her head deliberately and said, "I'm a single woman. Is there any reason why I shouldn't flaunt whatever I want to?"

Wil's jaw was tight as she stared at Jillian, then without

a word she turned and strode away, barely pausing as she met Andy in the living room.

“I’ll be working at Miss Beam’s. Call my cell if you need anything.”

She was out the front door before Andy could reply. When Andy shrugged and headed for the bathroom, Jillian still stood watching through the screen door as Wil stalked to her truck. Wil was sexy when she was agitated. And since Jillian had already had a taste of that passion, she thought she might reconsider having a casual affair.



Using the claw of her hammer, Wil pried plank after plank from the deck of Rose’s porch. The destructive activity was just what she needed. She’d arrived still steaming from her encounter with Jillian and had stopped only long enough to tell Rose she was there before she got to work. She was wound up, and since releasing that tension with Jillian the way she really wanted to was out of the question, she’d do it here, tearing away the rotted boards.

She didn’t know why Jillian got so far under her skin, but it seemed anytime she was around, Wil was either turned on or irritated. Sure, she’d had relationships, some serious and some—well, not so serious. She certainly wasn’t a prude, and in her younger days she’d had no aversion to physical interactions with no future. But she wasn’t a kid anymore. Now she wanted more.

She saw what Andy and Patti had and she wanted that—someone to share her life with, someone to build that house with, another person who knew her completely. And it was clear Jillian Sealy wasn’t that woman. Her time in Redmond

was far too temporary. Wil could almost feel the days ticking away. She couldn't explain it, but somehow she knew that she'd never be able to keep things strictly physical between them even for the short weeks until Jillian left. Since she wasn't up for having her heart broken, it was best to keep her distance, which was frustrating as hell when she kept remembering how it felt to touch her.

Yes, she'd overreacted to Jillian's attire, but after she'd opened her mouth she couldn't figure out how to back down. So she'd latched on to a reason to leave. She *had* promised Rose she'd come over, and her crew had things covered at Mary's. Despite the legitimate excuse, Wil couldn't stop thinking about Jillian, and that bothered her. No one had ever gotten to her so much that she couldn't lose herself in her work. Since the day she'd hired on with her father, it had always been her escape from whatever weighed on her personally.

But now, at odd moments, the memory of Jillian's lilting laugh, of the way her smile lifted one side of her mouth slightly more than the other, or of the unexpected contrast of solid metal against Jillian's tender nipple distracted her. Jesus, it was that kind of thinking that would get her in trouble. But despite knowing this, she involuntarily recalled the feel of that nipple against her tongue.

Just as her mind took hold of that image, Rose came around the corner of the house, and Wil shifted gears.

"I hope being here isn't keeping you from anything important at Mary's." In one hand Rose carried a pair of gardening gloves, and in the other a small foam pad meant for kneeling next to flower beds.

"Oh, no, ma'am. Andy, Tracy, and Patti are taking care of things." Wil paused and laid down her hammer. "Jillian's painting the kitchen today."

“She’s a sweet girl.”

Wil could think of several other adjectives for Jillian, such as stubborn, spoiled, smart, and sexy.

“She’s got backbone and a mind of her own too. She reminds me of Mary when we were just a bit younger than she is now.” Rose smiled. “Do you think Mary knew Jillian was so much like her?”

“I doubt it. I got the impression that Jillian didn’t know Mary well at all. Still, there must be a reason Mary chose her.”

“I’m sure there was.” For a moment, Wil thought she was going to say more, but she changed the subject. “I have bingo, then lunch with the ladies tomorrow. But I never lock the back door, so if you come over, just go on in the house.”

Wil nodded and picked up her hammer. Even though things were changing all over the world, it was still safe to leave the door unlocked in Redmond.

The small town had a sense of history that had dissipated in America’s cities. In Redmond, everyone knew everyone else, and folks could still tell stories about someone’s ancestors. Where else would so many people remember when Boone Rivers got arrested for painting “Marry me, Becky” on the side of her daddy’s barn? Her father had dropped the charges, but only after Boone had repainted the entire barn. Of course, Wil suspected Becky’s father didn’t still have any hard feelings, since Becky and Boone had just given him his fifth grandchild.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The edge of the island will start here.” Wil pulled a tape measure to a point near the center of the kitchen.

“How long is it?” Patti knelt beside her.

“Six feet,” Wil recalled quickly, without looking at her notes.

She had been back to Jillian’s only briefly in the two days since they’d argued, and had purposely stopped by to check the progress when she knew Jillian was out. Her crew was installing the new floor in the kitchen, and she really didn’t need to supervise such a simple task. Instead, she’d finished the projects at Rose’s.

But the cabinets were being delivered today, so she’d had to return. When she’d walked into the kitchen moments ago, Jillian had been talking with Patti and Tracy. But Wil needn’t have worried if she should apologize to Jillian, because just then Jillian’s cell rang and she excused herself to answer it.

So, while they waited, Wil began to go over the layout of the new kitchen with her crew. She paced out the dimensions she and Jillian had discussed, pleased with the traffic flow in the new area. She imagined how easily anyone could move from the refrigerator to the stove or island while preparing meals.

"It's going to be a beautiful kitchen. Did Jillian design it?" Patti asked as Wil indicated where the dishwasher would go.

"She had the initial plans and I altered them a bit."

"Well, it's great. You work well together." When Wil didn't respond she continued, "What's going on between you two?"

Wil glanced up sharply. "I thought meddling was your wife's job."

"Hey," Andy protested.

But Patti shrugged, unperturbed. "Usually. But I'll make an exception for you."

"Don't." She didn't want to talk about Jillian, least of all in front of her entire crew. Patti was crossing a line in their normal working relationship.

Patti ignored her warning. "One of the things I've enjoyed about working with you all these years is how easygoing you are. I've never seen you spend so much time away from a job—"

"You guys have handled things just fine without me."

"And when you are around you're jumpy as hell." Patti went on as if Wil hadn't spoken. "You bristle every time anyone even mentions Jillian's name."

"Damn it, Patti. I said drop it." When a horn sounded outside, Wil seized the reason to escape. "We have more important things to do than stand around analyzing my moods."

She walked out through the garage as a white box truck lumbered to a stop at the curb and Bill leaned out the open window.

"Got a delivery for you," he called as she came down the driveway.

"Hang on. I'll get Jillian to move her car and you can back in here," Wil said before jogging back to the house.

Jillian was pacing the backyard, still on the phone. Wil paused as she stepped onto the back porch, and Jillian stopped with her back to Wil and threw up one hand.

"I'm working on it, Mom. Doing it right takes time. Yes, I'll be there." Obviously frustrated, she spun around and saw Wil standing there. "I've gotta go. I'll call you later."

"Sorry. Bill's here and we need you to move your car."

"My mother," Jillian explained unnecessarily as she flipped the phone shut. "Reminding me that their anniversary party is the day after tomorrow."

"Are you heading home, then?" Though she'd been avoiding Jillian, a hollow feeling still accompanied the thought of her leaving.

"Just for a couple days. She's in a hurry for me to get back home for good, though."

"If I recall, you were in a bit of a rush as well."

"I was. I mean, I still am." Jillian paused, seeming to weigh her words. "But there's something about this house I don't want to let go of."

"It doesn't seem practical to keep it. There's not a lot of money in rental properties in this town."

"No, I can't imagine that there is." Jillian pulled her keys from her pocket and tossed them to Wil. "Move it wherever you need to."

Jillian watched her go, then resumed her pacing. Her conversation with her mother had left her agitated. But more than her mother's words, Jillian was unsettled by her own feelings. She had no connection to this home or the people who made their lives here. But she'd begun to feel invested on more than a financial level.

"This is ridiculous," she murmured. She had always been business-minded and her goals hadn't changed. Sell the house, get back to civilization, and find another job. She was surprised

at how unconcerned she was with what direction her career would ultimately take. They must put something in the water here. Because certainly that was the only way she could be feeling misty about some small town, an aunt she never knew, and an old house. She purposely left Wil off that list.



“Everything you ordered for the kitchen and master bath is here.” Bill handed over a clipboard with the invoice attached for Wil to sign.

When he tore off the yellow copy of the invoice and handed it to her, Wil scanned it, but the prices were higher than she expected. They’d carried the cabinets into the dining room and stacked the rest of the boxes in the garage. She crossed to a nearby box, flicked open her pocket knife, and sliced through the tape. She examined the kitchen faucet, then one of the bathroom ones as well.

“Bill, these aren’t the faucets I ordered.”

“I know. Miss Jillian was in last week and changed the order.”

“But these cost twice as much as the ones we originally chose.”

He shrugged. “I told her how much they were.”

“Damn it,” Wil mumbled.

“Do you want me to send them back?”

Wil considered it, thinking that since Jillian didn’t consult her before changing the order, she shouldn’t have to check with her either. But then Jillian would probably insist on the more expensive ones anyway, so she decided they might as well have this fight now rather than when the original fixtures came in. “No. I’ll take them for now. But if I talk her into the cheaper ones, can I return them?”

“Sure thing, Wil.” His expression said he doubted she’d change Jillian’s mind, and Wil was afraid he was right. He shook her hand, then climbed into the cab of his truck.

When Wil walked into the dining room, Jillian was admiring the cabinets as Andy, Patti, and Tracy removed the protective packing.

“I can’t wait to see these installed. Do we have the countertop too?” She looked around.

“It’s over here.” Tracy crossed to several long expanses of granite leaned against the far wall. She smiled shyly at Jillian and peeled back the corner of the protective paper, revealing the dark marbled surface. “This stuff is so durable. Once we get it sealed it won’t scratch, chip, or stain.”

Wil stared, thinking that was the most she’d heard Tracy say to Jillian at once.

Jillian moved to Tracy’s side and examined the countertop. “It’ll look great.” When Jillian gave her an excited smile, Tracy blushed.

“The faucets and fixtures are in the garage, if you’d like to see them as well,” Wil said quietly.

Judging from Jillian’s guilty expression, she knew right away what was wrong. “Wil, I—”

“Come look at them.” Wil took Jillian’s arm and led her toward the garage. She didn’t want to argue in front of her crew.

“Hey,” Jillian protested as Wil practically shoved her through the door. She jerked her arm out of Wil’s grasp. “I don’t think that was necessary.”

Normally, Wil wouldn’t touch a client, but considering how familiar they’d been, she hadn’t given it a second thought. She reached into the open box, pulled out a kitchen faucet, and held it in front of Jillian. “Do you want to tell me what this is?”

“Well, if you don’t know, then I’ve hired the wrong contractor,” Jillian shot back sarcastically.

“I’m serious, Jillian.”

“What’s the problem? I can afford it.”

“Well, for starters, you could have told me so I didn’t look like an idiot with Bill. I should know what orders are going through for my job site.”

“You would’ve tried to talk me out of it.”

“Damn right. If you keep making expensive choices you’re cutting into your profit. These faucets aren’t going to raise the value of the house.”

“I know.” Jillian sighed. Wil was giving her the same advice she would give a client. But she hadn’t considered that when she’d changed the order. She couldn’t seem to stop imagining how she would decorate the house if she were keeping it. “But I was down there getting the paint and when I saw these, I just had to have them.”

“I can return them and get the less expensive ones. It won’t delay our timeline if we just move on and install them when they come in.” Wil began to put them back in the box, but Jillian stopped her with a hand on her arm.

“No. They’re here now. I’d like to keep them.” She’d made a decision, and Wil’s assumption that she would abandon it at the first challenge only hardened her resolve.

“It’s not a smart investment.”

“I know.”

“You’ve got to be the most stubborn—” Realizing she was raising her voice, Wil paused and took a breath. She didn’t want her crew to overhear them arguing. “Jillian, what am I missing?” Initially, Wil had gotten the impression that Jillian was smart and ambitious about making money on the sale of Mary’s house. Now she seemed not only to be hesitant, but also recklessly spending money in ways that wouldn’t benefit

her in the long run. “I thought I understood your goals for this project.”

“I thought I did too.” Jillian pulled a key from her pocket and handed it to Wil. “I’ve got to do this anniversary thing. I’m going to leave early in the morning and drive up. Will you take care of things here while I’m gone? Please, don’t forget to lock up when you’re not here.”

“What?” The quick subject change confused Wil. Jillian had asserted her opinion and now she was refusing to discuss it further. But Wil was not so easily distracted. “We’re not done talking about this.”

“Yes. We are. Put in the fixtures I ordered.”

Wil wanted to argue, but her father’s philosophy regarding pleasing the client echoed in her head. Besides, what business was it of hers if this particular client wanted to waste her money? So instead, she inclined her head in mock submission. “The customer is always right.”

Jillian smiled. “See that you remember that.”

“I will. Do you have any other decrees?” Wil was quite aware that when it came to Jillian, she gave in more than she normally would. And that thought made her uncomfortable, but she couldn’t ignore Jillian’s mildly flirtatious tone.

Jillian’s smile widened. “I might be able to think of something. So long as you remember who’s the boss.”

Pleasure curled tightly in Wil’s stomach. Jillian’s words should have reminded her that she would always be someone’s underling. From anyone else they would have inspired anger. But somehow the thought of Jillian controlling her in an entirely different way brought a surprisingly strong wave of arousal. Suddenly she was glad Jillian would be gone for a few days, because distance was exactly what she needed.



“Wil, it’s almost eight o’clock. How late do you plan to work?”

Wil craned her head to look out from the cabinet under the sink where she was installing the plumbing. Andy stood bent over with a plaintive look on her face but Wil wasn’t swayed. “Until it’s done. Stop whining.”

Andy had already asked three times in the last two hours if they could go home, and she was getting on Wil’s nerves. All of a sudden her crew was averse to a little hard work?

“I’m not whining. You’re a damn slave driver.”

“We’re not getting any closer to done with you just standing around.” Wil scooted out and stood up to face her.

“There’s at least two hours of work left here. Just because you don’t have a life, that doesn’t mean the rest of us don’t have things to do.” Andy planted her hands on her hips, and Wil knew she was bracing for a showdown.

Patti said diplomatically, “We *have* been working late every day. Maybe we could just get a fresh start Monday.”

“Jillian’s going to be back tomorrow and I want this done before then.”

“So we all have to suffer so you can impress a woman you’re never going to make a move on anyway?”

“Andy, hold on,” Tracy began, but Andy cut her off.

“No.” She turned challenging eyes on Wil. “Do you think we don’t see the way you stare at her? Yeah, she’s good-looking. But please don’t make a fool of yourself. She’s leaving in a couple of weeks, and she won’t give this place a second thought.”

“Wait a damn minute. A few weeks ago you were trying to convince me to go after her. But now I’m making a fool of myself?”

“Wil, we just don’t want you to get hurt.” Patti stepped between them and put a hand on her shoulder.

Wil glanced at each of them, seeing sympathy in three pairs of eyes, and realized they’d come to a consensus before this conversation. “So you’ve all been discussing this. Sitting around talking about how pathetic Wil is for chasing some chick that’s out of her league.”

“If anyone thinks she’s out of your league, it’s her,” Andy shot back angrily.

“She’s not like that.”

“She knows she’s hot and thinks you should just fall at her feet and—”

“She’s not like that,” Wil repeated firmly, uncertain if she was trying to convince Andy or herself. She watched Andy’s eyes narrow with comprehension.

“You slept with her.”

“What?”

“Are you crazy?”

Patti and Tracy spoke at the same time, protesting, then fell silent when Wil didn’t argue.

All three women stared at her until Andy broke the silence. “How was it?”

“Amazing,” Wil answered honestly.

“I can’t believe I didn’t see it before now. How long has this been going on?” Andy asked, and Wil knew she was hurt that she hadn’t told her.

“It happened once. Two weeks ago.”

“So what now?”

Wil shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Why not?”

“You said it yourself. She’s leaving in a couple of weeks.”

“But if you—”

“It’s late. Let’s call it a night. In fact, take the rest of the weekend.” Wil made it clear she didn’t want to discuss Jillian further. “Try to keep this to yourself, please, Andy, at least until she leaves.” She wasn’t worried about her own reputation, but she didn’t want to take a chance Jillian might find out people were gossiping about her.

“Don’t worry, Wil. She’ll keep her mouth shut,” Patti assured her, giving Andy a stern look. “Let’s go, girls.”

They quickly packed up and headed for the front door. The last of the three to leave, Patti paused and looked back. “You coming, Wil?”

“Yeah. I’m going to clean up a little, then lock up.”

Patti nodded, then, apparently not fooled, she said, “Don’t work too late.”

When they’d gone, Wil crawled back under the sink. She hadn’t wanted her crew to find out that she’d been with Jillian and hoped one of them wouldn’t slip up and say something in front of Jillian. After she’d finished the plumbing, she installed the faucet.

Despite Patti’s admonishment, Wil worked well into the night. She thought briefly about going down to Rambles Ranch. Friday nights were usually busy, and she could probably find someone to take her mind off Jillian Sealy. But in a moment of honesty she admitted that probably wasn’t going to happen.

Though she knew it was foolish, as if she were a teenager trying to impress a crush, she wanted to present Jillian the finished kitchen when she returned the next afternoon. When she was a teen she’d never had the means or the confidence to impress anyone. An outsider, confused about her own identity, Wil wasn’t sought after by any of the boys in her class. And even if she’d admitted to herself she was attracted to girls, she wouldn’t have been brave enough to act on her feelings.

But after high school, she'd outgrown her concern about anyone else's opinion. The business was doing well and she'd bought her house. Finally, she began to feel like she had something to offer. And once she'd accepted her homosexuality, she'd discovered that the same qualities that made her unattractive to the boys made the women want her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jillian stepped out of her BMW and shaded her eyes against the late-afternoon sun hanging low in the sky. Wil sat on the front porch of Mary's house, elbows resting on her knees. As she popped the trunk, Wil stood. Dressed completely in black, she looked lean, dangerous, and exciting. And though Jillian was exhausted after the nine-hour drive from Ohio, she couldn't think of anything she'd rather come home to. Except this wasn't home, and Wil wasn't hers.

"Welcome back." Wil joined her next to the car. "Did you have a nice trip?"

"Two days with my entire family," Jillian answered sarcastically, pulling her suitcase and laptop bag from her trunk. "It was a laugh a minute."

"Not close to your folks?"

"Actually, I am. But they maintain a level of pretense that can be exhausting."

Jillian had always known that about her parents, but it had never been so obvious as these past couple of days. When she'd told her mother about her work on Mary's house, she'd received only a condescending look and a snippy comment about working among rednecks rubbing off on her. Her father hadn't reacted much better, saying that she should sell the

house under market value and get back home. He warned she was wasting her time. But as she thought about how much more relaxed and stress-free life felt there, she didn't think it was a waste. And she still believed she would make more profit on the house after the work was done. But she'd have to decide soon about whether to continue the renovation.

She'd gone by her condo to check on things and retrieved a voice mail from her former firm's biggest competitor. The president had called her personally, kissing ass on her answering machine and imploring her to return his call so they could discuss a "mutually beneficial proposal." She'd let him wait one more day before phoning him back and he'd offered her a top spot at his firm, but he wanted her there next week. She'd asked for two more weeks, claiming she still had matters in her aunt's estate to wrap up.

Wil picked up Jillian's suitcase and followed her toward the house. "Do you have any siblings?"

"One brother. He and his wife have four boys."

"Wow. I'll bet that's a handful."

"They kept hoping for a girl. His wife would give it one more try, if he'd agree. But I think he's done."

"I can't imagine such a big family. It's just been me and my dad for so long." Wil held the front door open.

"Do you see your mother often?" Jillian dropped her luggage right inside.

"More than I used to. When she first left, I was angry and didn't want to have anything to do with her. Plus, Dad needed me. We had a rough time for a while."

"And now?"

"Now I'm trying to understand that it wasn't really about us, because we couldn't make her happy. She had to do that for herself."

Jillian was curious about how the emotionally injured

child Wil described had grown into the strong woman standing before her.

“So you’ve lived here all your life?”

“Born and raised.”

“Have you ever thought about living anyplace else?”

“You mean, anyplace *bigger*?” Defensiveness colored her tone.

“Well, yes.” Jillian refused to apologize for believing there was more out there than this small town could offer.

“I’m not sheltered. I’ve visited other places, but I’ll always come back here. This is home.”

“But there’s so much more to the world than Redmond.” Even after Jillian’s time here, she could only begin to imagine the differences in their childhoods. Certainly, Wil’s father had never taken her to the theater or the symphony. Jillian had grown up being shuttled from ballet lessons to soccer practice by the current nanny. In high school, she’d excelled at academics, but her priority had been making sure she kept up with the latest fashion trends so as not to be outdone by a classmate.

“I have everything I need here.” Wil’s answer was quick, as if she couldn’t miss what she’d never had. She took Jillian’s hand and led her toward the kitchen. “Come see what we did while you were gone.”

What Jillian saw as they stepped in the room far surpassed her vision. The pristine cabinets contrasted beautifully with the dark countertop and tile floor. Natural light washed in through the new, larger window, making the room feel airy and open. The appliances had come in while she was gone, and seeing their sleek exteriors fall in perfectly with the design of the room made Jillian wish she knew how to cook.

“Oh, Wil, it’s perfect.” She squeezed Wil’s hand, not having realized until then that she still held it.

“If kitchens really do sell houses, you shouldn’t have any problem unloading this one.”

“Yeah.” Jillian released Wil’s hand and wandered around the room, touching surfaces and opening drawers. “I guess I’ll go get some things, so at least I can make coffee and a few simple meals.”

“So, peanut butter and jelly, then?” Wil said.

Jillian smiled. “That sounds about right.” She ran a hand along the edge of the sink.

“We still have some minor touches.” Wil watched as Jillian tested the faucet, then when their eyes met, she said, “Yes. It looks good. But I still say you should have stuck with the less expensive ones.”

Jillian raised an eyebrow and laughed. “Can’t just admit I was right, can you?”

Wil shrugged. “It’s your money.” The new faucet complemented the kitchen design perfectly, and Wil might have chosen it herself if it were for her own home. But she wouldn’t tell Jillian that.

“You guys must have worked hard to get all this done.”

“Once we got started, everything went smoothly.”



Jillian opened her eyes and the sun slashing through the window sent a blinding pain through her skull. Trying to escape, she rolled over, but her stomach violently protested the sudden movement and a deep throb began in her temple.

“Oh shit,” she muttered. “I cannot be sick.” Keeping her eyes tightly closed, she groped for the cordless phone on the nightstand, then dialed by feel.

She told Rose she wouldn’t be able to make it to Sunday brunch as they’d planned. After disconnecting the phone, she

dropped it on the floor beside the bed, drew her knees up to her chest, and concentrated very hard on not moving at all.

She must have fallen asleep because the next time she opened her eyes, the sun had stretched farther across the bed. Tentatively, she stretched out, then sat up slowly. Her nausea seemed to have lessened and the throbbing behind her eyes had eased, but her sinuses still felt as if they were stuffed with cotton. Maybe a cup of tea would help.

She was on her way to the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Flinching at the loud peal, she detoured to the front door, intent on getting there before her visitor felt the need to ring again.

She swung open the door just as Wil reached for the button.

“Don’t touch it,” she said softly, and Wil jerked her arm back. “What are you doing here?” Wil usually gave her crew Sundays off. Through the fog in her head, Jillian tried to recall if she’d mentioned that they would be working today.

She folded her arms over her chest, suddenly conscious of the fact that she had on her most worn pair of flannel pajama pants and a thin T-shirt, and she hadn’t showered since yesterday. Wil, on the other hand, looked great, dressed casually in khaki shorts and a navy V-neck shirt. She carried a paper bag and a large Tupperware bowl.

“Rose said you were sick,” Wil said, as if that explained everything. Without waiting for an invitation, she slipped past Jillian and headed for the kitchen. “I made you some soup.”

“Soup?” Jillian echoed. Still confused, she turned and followed Wil. “I have soup. There’s a can of chicken noodle in the pantry.”

“Canned soup? No.” Wil abandoned the crackers and ginger ale she’d unpacked and steered Jillian toward the living room. “You need homemade soup.”

“I don’t know what all the fuss is about, it’s just a cold.”

Jillian sat and allowed Wil to drape the throw from the back of the sofa around her shoulders.

Wil touched Jillian's forehead and she leaned into the touch. Wil's hand felt cool against her feverish skin. "It's more than just a cold. Now, be a good girl and lay down while I heat this up." Wil gripped her shoulders and guided her gently back.

When she seemed satisfied Jillian would stay on the sofa, she disappeared into the kitchen once again. Jillian shivered and pulled the blanket tighter around her. From the sounds of Wil moving around the kitchen, she could picture the activity taking place there. Wil pulled a pot from the cabinet and placed it on the stove with a series of metallic clangs, then ice cubes clinked into a glass.

Closing her aching eyes, Jillian allowed the sounds to drift in her head. She slid into the comforting cocoon and stopped fighting the exhaustion that swept over her.



"Soup's read—"

Wil strode into the living room and pulled up short as she saw Jillian lying on the couch with her forearm flung across her face. She'd tossed off the blanket and it now lay on the floor. Wanting to let her rest, Wil began to back out of the room.

"I'm not sleeping," Jillian croaked. She opened her eyes and shoved herself into a sitting position.

Mindful of the bowl she carried, Wil settled on the sofa next to her and handed it to her. "Be careful, it's still hot."

Jillian took a tentative spoonful. "It's good. Thank you."

"Homemade chicken soup is always the cure." Wil picked up the blanket and tucked it around Jillian again.

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

Wil shrugged. “You don’t have any family here. People should be cared for when they’re sick.”

Jillian had never needed a caretaker; she was very self-sufficient. But she enjoyed Wil’s attention. Since she couldn’t tell Wil that, she opted for a joke. “That damned Southern hospitality again.”

Wil flushed and looked away. “I’m sorry. I’ll go.”

As Wil stood, Jillian grabbed her wrist. “*I’m* sorry. I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. I’m just not used to strangers being nice.”

Wil glanced at Jillian’s hand. “Well, we’re not really strangers, are we?”

Wil’s skin felt hot beneath her fingers and Jillian released her. “No, I guess we’re not.”

“Jillian, I—”

“I’d like it if you would keep me company for a while.” Jillian didn’t want to hear whatever Wil had been about to say. The embarrassment hadn’t fully faded from her eyes and Jillian felt guilty for putting it there. She hadn’t meant to insult Wil’s generosity. She’d just been uncomfortable with the tenderness Wil had shown her. From the first day they’d met, she’d been willing to acknowledge the physical pull between them, but today their connection had another layer. And the more she learned about Wil, the more she felt as if she’d underestimated her depth.

Wil nodded, sat back down, and waited patiently while she consumed the soup. Jillian hadn’t had an appetite all day, but the flavorful broth soothed her and she finished as much as she could before setting the bowl on the coffee table.

“The soup really was thoughtful.” Jillian yawned. “I’m sorry. I can’t seem to stay awake for long today.”

“I’d hate to think I’m boring.”

“Certainly not.”

“Good. Come here.” Wil pulled a pillow onto her lap. She coaxed Jillian to lie down, then stroked her hair off her forehead.

Jillian rested her cheek against Wil’s stomach and wrapped her arms around herself. She looked up at Wil and wondered how she’d come to feel so comfortable with her. From the moment they’d met, Jillian hadn’t been herself. Anyone who knew her would be shocked by the fact that she’d slept with Wil the second time she’d seen her. Not normally a physical person, Jillian found herself constantly inventing reasons to touch Wil, even casually. Now here she was letting Wil see her at her absolute worst. But it didn’t matter because Wil had taken care of her, made her feel secure, and though her head still throbbed, she felt better.

Just then, she didn’t want to leave Redmond. But she needed to eventually—maybe sooner than she’d planned.

“I got a call from a competing firm,” Jillian said. Her sluggish mind muddled through the offer again, but she knew she wasn’t in any shape to make a decision.

Wil’s fingers paused in her hair. “And?”

“He made me an offer I shouldn’t refuse.”

“Don’t you mean *can’t* refuse?”

“No. Shouldn’t.” It was a sweet deal. Only two weeks ago, the thought of going back to Cincinnati and helping them surpass her former employer would have inspired her bloodlust. Maybe when she was feeling better, thinking clearly, she wouldn’t dread taking the job. “It’s conditional. He wants me to start in three weeks.” She chuckled. “I think he’s afraid if he doesn’t get me signed on quickly, someone will make me a better offer.”

“Is it a good firm?”

“They’ve got a great reputation and are doing a lot of high-dollar development deals. There’s potential for me to make a ton of money.”

“Sounds like a perfect fit for you.”

“It is.” Jillian nodded slowly. *Or it would have been two weeks ago.*

“I thought you were tired?” Concern darkened Wil’s eyes to the color of new denim.

Jillian reached up and traced Wil’s jaw. “I am.”

“So, sleep.” Wil’s fingers skated over Jillian’s brow, then she caught Jillian’s hand and held it.

Turning on her side, Jillian cradled their joined hands against her chest and closed her eyes. “You’ll stay?” she murmured, though she was too drowsy to wait for Wil’s response.



“I need to pull your crew off the Sealy job.” Wil’s father didn’t wait for her to get settled in the chair across the desk from him before he broke the bad news.

“For how long?” She sat slowly, not panicking. It wasn’t unheard of for a crew to be shifted for a day or two to help finish another project. Then if they kicked things up a notch, they could easily make up any time lost at Jillian’s.

“A couple of weeks. Three at the most. Alton’s crew isn’t going to have the school renovation done in time. I need you to go over there and help them catch it up.” He twirled a pen in his fingers and with the other hand flipped through a stack of papers.

“You’ve got be kidding.” Now she was panicking. “We’re on schedule. Jillian’s going to be pissed.”

“We’ll have to give her a break on her rate or something. The school is one of our biggest accounts, and it’s got to be done before the new school year starts up.”

“Dad, this just looks bad.” She understood the need to complete the school project. But they’d made a commitment to Jillian’s job, and Wil’s mind raced for a solution that would allow her to honor it.

Her father sighed and threw the pen down on the desk in front of him. “I know. We’re overextended and this one got away from me. I’m going to have to do something about those lazy college boys on Alton’s crew. But for now we need to clean up their mess.”

“Let’s split my crew. I’ll send Tracy and Patti to the school. If we work our butts off, Andy and I can keep Jillian’s on schedule.” Wil didn’t even want to think about telling Jillian they’d be off her job for a few weeks.

Their truce had been tentative at best, and Wil readily admitted it was her fault. But she was still shaken by the feelings caring for Jillian while she was ill had stirred. And she couldn’t stop replaying Jillian’s drowsy declaration that she’d been offered another job and now dreaded the day Jillian would tell her she had accepted the job and was leaving. Wil had never felt the aching tenderness that had swept over her while Jillian had rested with her head pillowed in Wil’s lap. She had fled as soon as she was certain Jillian was sleeping deeply enough not to notice. In the three days since then, they’d gone back to polite reserve while Wil tried to convince herself that nothing had changed.

Bud seemed to be considering her proposal, but he shook his head. “Three of you need to go to the school. Either you or Andy can stay on at Miss Sealy’s. That’s the best I can do.”

“There’s no way one of us can get everything done.”

“I’m sorry, Wil. But the job for the school district is

important. There's a rumor they're going to overhaul the county courthouse next year, and I'm hoping to get that job. But if we can't make this deadline we don't have a prayer."

"Dad—"

"It's done." He cut her protest off with a raised palm.

Jillian was going to be livid. One of them needed to stay and do what they could at Mary's in order to soften the blow, but she couldn't leave the task to Andy. The only way she would feel confident that the work was going as smoothly and quickly as possible was to do it herself. Besides, she needed to see Jillian. She'd go crazy working with Alton and thinking about Jillian.

"I'll send the three of them to the school in the morning," she said.

"Good. Tell them to report to Alton. Do you want me to call Miss Sealy and explain?"

"No. I'll tell her."

CHAPTER NINE

Hey, Miss Sealy,” Bill called from the doorway of the hardware store. He flipped the Open sign hanging in the window.

Jillian smiled and waved, but didn’t detour from her path. Accustomed to waking early, she’d been taking regular walks around town, often setting out while the clouds were still painted pink. It hadn’t rained in weeks and this morning promised another scorcher. The air was already warm and humid, and the sun hadn’t even cut through the haze yet.

She passed the post office just as one of the carriers stepped outside with an overflowing mailbag slung over his shoulder. Next door a firefighter raised Old Glory on the flagpole in front of the fire station. Only a few other people walked along the sidewalk, none in a hurry to reach their destination. Jillian reached the corner and waited just a second for a car to pass, then crossed and turned north toward home.

The easy pace of this small town as it began gearing up for the day was so different from the driving rhythm of the city, with its congested traffic and the fast click of expensively shod feet on the sidewalks. Jillian certainly didn’t miss being jostled along by a crowd as she made her way to her office.

The diner was already full of patrons eating breakfast and lingering over coffee. As Jillian passed it, her body clamored for caffeine but she kept her pace, knowing that by the time she got home a fresh pot would be brewing. As soon as the kitchen was functional, Wil had begun to make coffee when she arrived, and by the time Jillian returned from her walk the crew was ready to take a break and they all shared a cup together.

Since she'd been sick, they hadn't had much interaction aside from this morning ritual. After the compassion with which Wil had treated her that day, Jillian had expected more familiarity between them, but Wil seemed to prefer even more distance now. When her crew was around, she treated Jillian with impersonal respect. And the few times they'd been alone together, she'd acted as if she was in a hurry to get away. Soon taking the hint, and far too proud to try to change Wil's mind, Jillian had simply left the polite space between them.

As she turned the corner she heard the high-pitched whine of a saw, which got louder as she approached her garage. The overhead door was open and, inside, Wil leaned over a wet saw, carefully cutting a piece of tile. She paused and glanced up as Jillian passed.

"Good morning." Wil's stomach twisted with nervousness and she wondered how long she could put off revealing that she was down to a crew of one.

"Morning. Coffee ready?"

"Yep," Wil replied. Jillian was always somewhat single-minded after her walk.

Wil consulted her notes, then measured the next tile. She was about to turn the saw back on when Jillian reappeared and lounged in the doorway, cradling a mug in one hand.

"Where is everyone?"

Wil took off her safety glasses and set them on the makeshift table. "It's just me today."

"What happened?"

"Well, actually, it's just me for a while. We've had a bit of an emergency on another job and I had to send the girls over there."

"For how long?" Jillian tried not to panic, hoping it would be only a couple of days, and it wouldn't affect her projected listing date.

"I don't know. A few weeks maybe."

"A few..." Jillian was completely at a loss. They were supposed to be finished in less than three weeks. "Which job was more important than mine?"

Wil winced. "The school."

"Ah, I see. The hometown team gets priority," Jillian said calmly. Considering Wil's dedication, she knew if there was a better option Wil would have taken it, so there was no point in getting angry. As an idea formed, she realized she would need her energy elsewhere.

"There was nothing I could do." Wil sounded truly apologetic.

"So, *now* you'll let me work with you."

"No."

She planted a hand on her hip and gave Wil her hardest stare. "I'm sorry if that sounded like a question, because it wasn't."

"No. You're not working with me. I'll get it done." Wil lifted her chin a notch and Jillian was actually impressed. Lesser men and women had backed down from her before.

"I'm sure you will. But *you* don't need to. I want this done. Do you really expect me to sit around while you do it all?"

"Yes. That's what you're paying me for."

Jillian carefully skirted the stacks of tile on the floor and stepped closer to Wil. “Stop thinking that you work for me.” The resolve in Wil’s eyes didn’t waver, even when Jillian took her hand. “Circumstances have changed, and now we’re in this together.”

“I can’t let you do it.”

Jillian knew where Wil’s resistance stemmed from and, hoping it would pay off, she bluffed. “Then I’ll take my business elsewhere.”

“No one else is going to do it faster. You’ll have a hard time finding someone who can even start for a few weeks.”

“I know. But as I’ll tell your father, Johnson and Son has shown just how little my project means to them. And since you’re not showing enough flexibility to consider my suggestion, I’d rather someone else take twice as long than keep you on the job.” She saw the evidence of her barb in the quick tightening around Wil’s eyes and didn’t wait for a response. “Here’s my plan. The exterior paint will take forever with just two of us. So I’ll hire painters. Other than that, I think you and I can handle everything. I don’t know much about all this sawing and measuring.” She waved her hand toward the table behind Wil. “But I take direction well—I can bring you stuff, hold things while you hammer,” she laughed, “basically do whatever grunt work you’ve got. It has to be better than working by yourself.”

The corner of Wil’s mouth twitched as if she were fighting a smile.

“So—do we have a deal?”

“I don’t know. Are you going to be okay with...working for me now?”

“It’s still my house,” Jillian protested.

“Yes. But we’re not talking about design decisions. You’re

asking to join my crew, small though it may be now, so that means you work for me.”

Jillian was silent for so long that Wil thought she was going to refuse. Then she stuck out her hand and said, “Okay.”

“Good.” After a brief handshake, Wil had to force herself to release Jillian’s hand. But even then the feel of Jillian’s slender fingers and soft skin remained.

“So what’s first on the agenda?”

“Have you ever used a wet saw?”

“No.”

Wil handed her a pair of safety glasses. “Put these on. I’ll teach you.”



“In here.” Wil entered the bathroom and Jillian followed.

The room was still a work in progress, but already Jillian could see the potential. A new pedestal sink had replaced the stock vanity, and later she would hang a wood-framed mirror over it. The claw-foot tub sat under the frosted window, but the plumbing hadn’t been hooked up yet.

Jillian stepped into the shower stall and crouched to examine the wall. Tracy had installed the first row of tile yesterday and let it set overnight. That morning Wil had tiled the lower quarter of the stall.

“This is going to look great.” She ran her fingers lightly over the tile, pleased with the color. The gentle striations in the gray tone added depth, and the dark slate grout she’d selected would complement it well.

Jillian straightened and found Wil standing beside her. Suddenly they were face-to-face in the small space and Jillian wondered where all the air in the room had gone. Wil’s mouth

was at eye level and Jillian couldn't help staring at it. She barely smothered a moan as she remembered the feel of those soft lips. Gray dust smudged the side of Wil's neck and when, without thinking, Jillian rubbed her fingers over it, she felt Wil's pulse trip.

"You—ah, you do good work." Forcing her fingers from Wil's skin, she touched the wall instead. Her chest felt tight and her voice sounded breathy.

"I haven't had any complaints." Wil's slow smile said she knew how affected Jillian was.

"I don't suppose you have. And you certainly won't get any from me." Jillian needed to touch her again.

But when she raised her hand, Wil stepped back. Inside the shower, she had no place to go and her back hit the wall.

"We'd better get started on this tile," Wil practically stuttered.

Jillian figured it wouldn't take much to seduce Wil. Hell, they were halfway there just from the heat that flared between them every time their eyes met. But now that their crew was basically nonexistent, and Jillian's planned open-house date was looming closer, letting anything happen between them wasn't a good idea. They needed to work together without any potential of added tension. She shoved aside the quick thought that making love to Wil here against the bathroom wall would surely release some tension. "That's not what I need," she muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing." She clapped her hands together. "Show me what we're doing."

"Okay, hand me that trowel." Wil blinked at the quick change in mood. When Jillian had touched her, it took every ounce of her will not to gather her in her arms and kiss her

until they both melted onto the floor. But then the heaviness between them lifted as Jillian seemed to change gears easily.

Deciding she could summon at least as much self-control as Jillian, Wil knelt and picked up a trowel. She showed Jillian how to apply an even layer of thin-set mortar as an adhesive. Then, using spacers to keep the rows even, she pressed the tiles to the wall.

“I can do this,” Jillian said.

Wil sat back and watched for a moment, smiling when Jillian bit her lip in concentration as she placed the tile. She’d expected anger, even resistance when she told Jillian about the problem with her crew. And she’d seen them both flash in Jillian’s eyes, but what she hadn’t foreseen was how quickly Jillian recovered. Logic won out, and Jillian moved smoothly into determination. Her insistence that she work alongside Wil was admirable, and probably practical, if they had any hope of finishing on time. But though she might enjoy the closeness to Jillian, letting a client work on her own project still stung Wil’s pride.



“Does your daughter live in a small town?”

“Heavens, no. She couldn’t wait to get out of here.” Rose settled into a chair in the deep shade of her porch while Jillian, seeking the warmth of the morning sun, rested against the railing nearby.

“City living can be attractive. There are many more conveniences, more options.” Jillian appreciated the variety of takeout, movies, and theater within a few blocks of her condo.

“Dear, I’m seventy-one years old. I don’t need options. I

have a granddaughter and two beautiful great-grandchildren I rarely see. I have far too many regrets in this life, and I don't want not being a part of their life to be one more."

"I know what you mean. When I was packing up Aunt Mary's things, I realized I'd missed knowing a part of my family, and it made me sad."

Rose smiled wistfully. "Mary was certainly worth knowing."

"What was she like?"

"Stubborn. She was the most pigheaded person I ever met. And far too practical. Good Lord, getting that woman to do anything spontaneous was a chore. But she was also kind, honest, and very generous." Rose smiled at Jillian. "And now that I've met you, I would say those traits run in the family."

"Only the good ones," Jillian quipped.

"They're all good ones."

"That's nice of you to say. Why didn't they have any children?"

"I'd heard they were trying. I guess it just didn't happen."

"You two didn't remain friends?"

"You know how it goes, people grow apart. She was married then. She spent her time with her husband, not out running around with us single gals."

Rose wrung her hands in her lap, and when she lifted her eyes, Jillian thought she saw the shine of unshed tears. But she didn't feel comfortable questioning Rose. Perhaps the loss of her friendship with Mary was one of those regrets she'd spoken of.

After a brief silence, Rose changed the subject. "How are the renovations coming along?"

"Wil had to send the rest of her crew over to the school. So she and I are working on it together."

“I’m surprised she went for that.”

Jillian smiled recalling how Wil had clung to her stubbornness even when logic won out. “She required some convincing.”

“I imagine she would. Wilhelmina is prideful.”

“I get that. She acts as if she has something to prove to the people in this town.”

Rose seemed hesitant.

“I don’t mean to invade her privacy. She just seems so focused on not being seen as less than others. And in my experience that kind of determination comes from somewhere.” Jillian shifted and rested her other hip against the rail, feeling the pull of sore muscles with every movement. Nearly a week of the hardest work Jillian had ever done left her falling exhaustedly into bed every night.

“Her grandfather was not regarded highly in Redmond. He wasn’t a nice man, to anyone, including his wife and son. He, and by extension Johnson and Son, had a reputation for shoddy work and making his employees cut corners if it saved a dime.”

“That’s fairly common among contractors. Though not desirable.”

“In a small town that type of reputation is pretty hard to live down. Bud made some strides toward changing it, even through some lean times.”

“And Wil has inherited that quest.” Jillian was beginning to understand some of what motivated Wil.

Rose nodded. “Inherited it, and made it her life’s work. You won’t find a more hardworking, honest person in this entire town. And even though everyone already knows it, she seems intent on proving it over and over again.”

“She thinks people are constantly judging her,” Jillian guessed.

“That’s one theory. Feeling inferior can become so deeply ingrained that it’s difficult to overcome even when it’s not warranted.”

Thinking about everything she knew about Wil, Jillian doubted she was actually inferior to anyone. She was trustworthy, valued people over possessions, and genuinely cared about improving her town. In Jillian’s experience, there weren’t a lot of people like that left these days.

CHAPTER TEN

Jillian's shoes clicked on the kitchen tile as she walked slowly through the room. The finished project looked like something out of a magazine, far exceeding her original vision. Jillian never spent much time in a kitchen, but she warmed when she thought about Wil moving competently around the space. She'd been watching Wil work for several weeks now, and more than once she'd caught herself studying Wil's hands. Her broad palms and long fingers were surprisingly graceful and strong at the same time. They were confident and efficient, her movements purposeful, and Jillian imagined they would be the same if she was preparing a meal. She didn't need to imagine those same talented hands on her skin. The memory was as vivid as if they'd awakened together that very morning.

Jillian got two bottles of water out of the refrigerator and wandered into the dining room. There was still work to be done here. The crown molding along one wall had been replaced. After making a few repairs, Wil's electrician had signed off on all the wiring.

When she reached the living room she crossed to the fireplace. The mantel was in good condition, but the brick hearth

had needed to be restored. Jillian had opted to replace it instead with fieldstone, and Wil had completed that transformation while Jillian finished some painting in other rooms.

Wil walked into the living room at the same time Jillian settled on the couch. "The bathroom is completely done. I just installed the last towel bar."

Wil dropped onto the sofa next to Jillian with a sigh. They'd been putting in long hours every day for two weeks, but it was worth it. Jillian was a quick study and had thrown herself into the work, doing her best to ignore the sexual energy that constantly sizzled between them. Now, even with the loss of three members of Wil's crew, they had finished only a few days behind Wil's original schedule.

"I don't think I've ever worked this hard," Jillian said, handing over one of the water bottles.

Wil leaned back into the cushions and took a long drink, emptying a third of the bottle. "Yeah. Hey, since you're looking for a job, I think Dad's got a crew you could join."

"Funny. I'll leave the manual labor to someone else in the future." Jillian examined her hands. She'd broken three nails this week and she didn't think her skin had ever been this rough.

"Not really a get-your-hands-dirty type, huh?"

"Not at all."

They fell quiet and Jillian closed her eyes. She could easily go to sleep without caring that Wil lounged beside her.

"Let's go out." Wil's voice pulled her out of her trance.

"No thanks. All I want to do is take a shower and get in bed."

"Come on, we're done. We should celebrate."

"Wil, I'm exhausted."

Wil pulled her to her feet and guided her toward the hall

leading to the bedrooms. “Go take that shower and get dressed. I’ll meet you back here in an hour and take you to the Ranch and show you what a Saturday night in Redmond is like.”

“Okay.” She *was* curious about what a night out with Wil would be like.

“See you in an hour,” Wil said, just before she closed the front door.

Jillian nodded and headed down the hall. She went to the bedroom closet and pushed hangers aside one by one.

“What does one wear to a redneck bar?” she wondered aloud. Not expecting to do a lot of socializing, she hadn’t brought much more than a couple of business suits and clothes to work in. But she finally settled on dark jeans and a boldly colored scoop-neck shirt.

She showered quickly, dressed, and applied light makeup. Deciding to let her hair fall freely over her shoulders, she brushed it until it shone.

“What’s wrong with you? It’s not a date,” she muttered as she checked her reflection in the mirror and smoothed a hand over her hair. The hollow disappointment that followed this reminder was unexpected.



As Wil steered into the parking lot of Rambles Ranch, Jillian commented on the assortment of SUVs, sedans, and minivans among the expected pickup trucks.

A row of chrome-clad motorcycles flanked one side of the door.

“Do you ride?” she asked as Wil parked in one of few remaining spots.

“No,” Wil said emphatically.

“Really? Because I can picture you dressed in black leather on a big Harley.”

“I don’t like motorcycles. Don’t get me wrong, they look cool. But I have no desire to ride one.” Wil had seen one too many idiots lose control and end up sliding across asphalt. “You look surprised.”

“Well, I just—ah—you...”

Understanding the reason for the quick flush rising up Jillian’s neck, Wil let her stammer uncomfortably for a second before she interrupted. “Why, Miss Sealy, you weren’t stereotyping me. Were you?”

“Not stereotyping, exactly.” *Fantasizing is more like it.* She’d been imagining clinging to Wil on the back of a bike. Not once had she ever thought the smell of leather and exhaust could be an aphrodisiac, but if Wil’s body filled that leather, she might consider it so. She hoped the lust pumping through her wasn’t evident in her voice. To escape Wil’s amused expression, Jillian pushed her door open and slid out of the truck. She cleared her throat and said, “Busy place.”

“There aren’t a lot of places to go on Saturday night. The teenagers hang out at the quarry on the weekends.”

“They don’t get caught?” Jillian asked as they fell into step together.

Wil shrugged. “Kids have been going down there since I was that age. I guess as long as there’s no trouble, the cops leave them alone.”

Jillian bumped her shoulder against Wil’s. “So, you used to hang out there. Did you have a car?”

“Usually I ended up borrowing Dad’s old truck. Of course, I doubt he knew where I was taking it or what I was doing in it.”

“What were you doing?”

“You know what kids do—trying to be cool, drinking, playing our music loud.”

It was nearly dusk, not quite dark enough to trigger the lights in the parking lot, but a row of lantern-shaped path lights illuminated the shadows of the sidewalk next to the building.

Jillian threaded her arm through Wil’s. “Did you have a girlfriend?”

They reached the front door, and as Wil grabbed the handle she paused and answered quietly. “No.” She opened the door, and if she said anything else it was lost in the mix of music and voices that spilled out.

“Why not?” Jillian persisted, raising her voice to compete with the noise. “I bet you had a ton of girls chasing you.”

“No. I wasn’t even sure what it meant to be gay back then, and I definitely didn’t have any role models around. It wasn’t easy to be out in such a small town. I was just an awkward kid who was scared of being different and wanted my peers to like me.”

As they walked inside and were immediately surrounded by people, Jillian didn’t pursue the subject.

The decor was over the top, from the split-rail fence flanking the doors to the large milk cans acting as stools at the bar. Jillian was actually disappointed not to find a sawdust floor.

“What are you drinking?” Wil bent close to be heard over the music.

“Beer is fine.”

Wil signaled the bartender and Jillian surveyed the diverse crowd. Men in ties with their shirtsleeves rolled up and commuters stopping for a drink after their one-hour drive from the nearest city milled about among men in jeans and work shirts. At the bar, a few women scanned the crowd a

little too casually, and Jillian guessed they were sizing up the males. Near the dance floor a group of women filled two tables, clearly there to socialize together as opposed to seeking company.

“Wil,” a voice boomed from behind them. Jillian turned to find Bill leaning against the bar. Today he wore a dingy baseball cap and his T-shirt bore the Van Halen logo. “And Miss Jillian, it’s good to see you again.”

“Hi, Bill.”

“Hey, Billy.” Wil handed Jillian a bottle of beer and greeted him with a handshake that turned into a half hug.

“We’ve got a booth over there if you ladies would like to join us.” He hooked a thumb over his shoulder.

Wil looked at Jillian. “You mind?”

“Lead the way.”

“Fellas, meet Jillian Sealy,” Bill called as they approached a large booth full of guys.

Jillian tried to keep up as he called out names and each man raised a hand in greeting, but she was quickly lost. Two men cleared out of one side of the booth and pulled up chairs from other tables. Wil gestured Jillian in, then slid in behind her.

“Make room,” Bill said, moments before he squeezed in beside Wil.

“Sorry,” Wil mumbled as she was sandwiched between them. She stretched her arm along the back of the seat behind Jillian. “We can sit somewhere else.”

“It’s okay.” Jillian braced her hand on Wil’s leg and shifted in an effort to ease the tight fit.

Jillian’s fingers were pressing high on Wil’s thigh and she froze as their gazes collided. She caught her fingernails on the seam on the inside of Wil’s jeans and squeezed her leg. Wil’s eyes darkened and she moistened her lower lip. The table hid

Jillian's actions, and she could have easily slipped her hand up to cup Wil. Her hand trembled with the effort of containing the uncharacteristic impulse. Wil covered it with her own and said something under her breath.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Jillian felt the whisper of that word against her cheek and realized if she turned her head only a few inches, she could kiss Wil. She wanted to, badly. And despite the logical reasons why she shouldn't, only the five men crowded around them stopped her.



"Another beer, Wil?" One of the guys reached across the table, grabbed their empties, and passed them to the waiting server.

Wil nodded and turned to Jillian. "Do you want another?"

"I've had three already." Jillian was light-headed. It had been a while since she'd had more than the occasional Manhattan with dinner.

"So, that's a no?"

"Okay. One more, but that's my limit."

Wil held up two fingers and the server headed for the bar. "Are you okay? You're not bored, are you?" Wil asked, bending close.

"I'm fine. Your friends are...interesting." Jillian glanced at the men carrying on around them. They seemed like nice-enough guys, though a few were a little rough around the edges for Jillian's taste. And the Ranch lacked the sophistication of Jillian's usual watering hole in Cincinnati. But feeling Wil's body pressed firmly against the length of her side was enough

to distract her. Wil's thigh was warm against hers even through two layers of denim, and Wil's arm still rested along the back of her neck.

"Well, other than Bill, they're not exactly friends, more like—"

"Drinking buddies."

"For lack of a better term, yes. We spend so much time working, it's nice to be able to unwind every once in a while."

"What else do you do to...unwind?" Jillian hadn't meant the question to sound so much like a come-on.

Wil's smile brought butterflies to Jillian's stomach. "Well, I don't know. What did *you* have in mind?"

"I—uh—meant—"

"I know what you meant, but I couldn't resist. Summers are our busiest time, so I don't have a ton of free time. But I do a little woodworking or go down to the lake."

A sudden burst of laughter drew their attention back to the other occupants of their table.

"What about it, Wil, you wanna ride tonight?" Bill asked, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Wil shook her head. "I haven't done that since I was too young to know better."

"Done what?" Jillian asked, feeling left out.

"That." Wil pointed toward the back of the bar where Jillian saw a group gathered around a roped-off circle. In the center, a mechanical bull gyrated and dipped, trying to unseat the lanky man clinging to its back.

"Come on, Wil. I'll put twenty bucks on the bull." One of the men slapped a meaty hand with a crisp bill trapped under it on the table in front of them.

"I'm in," Bill said, throwing his money down. "But I know better than to bet against Wil. My money's on her."

Several other bills landed on the table as men shouted out their bets.

Jillian laughed. "You've actually done that?"

"What's so funny?" Wil seemed offended.

"Nothing. I just can't picture it."

"Well, let me help you out with that." She downed the rest of her beer, shoved Bill out of the way, and strode toward the back of the bar followed by an entourage of men egging her on.

"Wil." Jillian hurried to catch up and grasped her arm, but Wil pulled it away. "Wil, what are you doing?"

Wil reached the edge of the ring and nodded at the man operating the controls. He grinned and lifted his chin in return.

"I didn't mean—" Jillian flinched as the current rider was flung off and landed several feet away. Despite the foam pads lining the floor, he was slow to get up. "You're not really going to get on that thing, are you?"

Their eyes met and stubborn pride burned in Wil's. She unbuttoned her shirt and slipped it from her shoulders, revealing a gray tank top that hugged her small, firm breasts and flat stomach. "Hold this."

Jillian took the shirt and watched, stunned, as Wil walked over to talk to the operator. Then she climbed up on the worn leather and grasped the handle, the muscles of her forearm bunching as she set her grip. She squared her strong shoulders, then raised her left hand over her head and nodded.

The bull began to rock, slowly at first. Wil alternately folded herself over the front of the machine and stretched back, reaching her arm up and back. Her denim-encased thighs hardened with the effort of keeping her body centered, and her upper body flowed with the rhythm of the bucking bull. The operator jerked the machine hard to the right. Wil's chin was

tucked to her chest and her face was a study in concentration as she seemed to anticipate the spin and managed to stay astride.

Jillian would never have thought she would find anything remotely arousing about a woman riding a mechanical bull, but as she stood at the edge of the ring, her entire body buzzed. Though Wil's attention never wavered from the bull, Jillian could feel a thread of energy connecting them. Wil had reacted instantly to Jillian's amusement earlier and now she was showing off. For her. Obvious displays of bravado normally didn't do it for her. But seeing Wil's raw power meld sinuously with grace, combined with the knowledge that it was meant to impress her, turned her on. Molten heat flowed along her limbs and pooled between her thighs.

The bull made another sharp spin and Wil's hips slid against the impossible centrifugal force. Jillian braced herself, expecting to see Wil flung off, but somehow she held on. Her arm strained against her own weight, and Jillian was hit with the memory of those same muscles flexing beneath her grasping hand as Wil stroked her. Jillian watched Wil's hips and, suddenly, she wanted to feel that hard body rocking against hers again.

The operator seemed to take no mercy on Wil, grinning as he frantically worked the controls. But before he could unseat her, a horn sounded and he held his hands up. The bull slowed and, without power driving the hydraulics, sank lower. Raising both arms, Wil slid her leg over the machine and dropped to the ground. Amid whistles and shouts, she slapped the back of the bull.

As Wil approached, she responded to the high fives and pats on the back, but her gaze was locked on Jillian. Caught off guard by her own reaction, Jillian sought retreat behind familiar aloof indifference, but was unable to summon it. She was entranced by Wil's eyes, by the glassy high of triumph

in them, and even more by the way they seemed to seek her approval.

“Did you accomplish what you’d hoped to?” Jillian asked, tossing Wil’s shirt at her.

Wil caught it smoothly and slipped it on, but left it unbuttoned. “You tell me. Were you impressed?”

“Was that your goal?”

“Yes.”

The simple honesty seemed at odds with her cocky strut and the macho display just moments ago. Wil steered Jillian to the side as the next challenger, cheered on by the crowd, climbed on the bull.

“You could have been hurt.” Jillian took Wil’s hand and examined her callused palm. She caressed her fingers over Wil’s wrist and powerful forearm.

“I’m tougher than that. It takes a lot more than some old mechanical bull to break me.”

A roar from the crowd accompanied the new rider’s quick fall.

When Jillian traced the scar along the outside of Wil’s arm and met her eyes, Wil said, “Freshly cut thin-gauge sheet metal. That stuff is razor sharp.”

Jillian touched one of the larger nicks on the back of her hand, next to her thumb.

“Nail gun. That one could’ve been a lot worse.”

She turned Wil’s hand over and lightly scratched her fingernail over a knot nestled in the fleshy area just below her ring finger.

“Monster splinter.” Wil grinned. “I lost a lot of blood that day.”

Realizing Wil was teasing her, Jillian dropped her hand.

“I’ve got some other scars, and with a bit more privacy I’d be happy to show you.” The words slipped out before Wil

could stop them. Jillian's touch short-circuited the connection between her brain and her mouth. The swift darkening of Jillian's eyes reminded Wil that Jillian had already seen every inch of her body.

"Really?" Jillian slipped two fingers down the side of Wil's neck, rested them in the hollow between her collarbones, then angled close until her lips were within inches of Wil's ear. "If I say yes, do you plan to make good on that promise?"

"I'd love to." The bull ride still had adrenaline singing through Wil's veins, and Jillian's sexy tone and hot breath in her ear amped her up even further.

Just then she didn't care if Jillian thought she was beneath her or that Jillian was in Redmond temporarily. The feel of Jillian's fingers wandering down the center of her chest and her own heart thudding beneath them nearly silenced any practical objection she could offer. Images of taking Jillian home and making love to her flooded Wil's head, but she was still lucid enough to know that was the worst idea she'd had all night.

"Jillian," Wil said as Jillian slipped a hand down her stomach.

"Yes?" Jillian curled her fingers around Wil's belt buckle and tugged her closer. Jillian's breasts brushed hers, and when her nipples tightened in response, she pulled her shirt closed and buttoned it.

"Do you want to go someplace else?"

"Yes."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

This isn't exactly what I thought you meant by *someplace else*." Jillian turned on the seat of Wil's truck to look at her. Despite the darkened interior, the flickering images on the screen in front of them cast a harsh light across Wil's features.

"I promised you'd experience a typical Redmond weekend. You can't do that without catching the late show at the drive-in." Wil turned on the radio and tuned it to the proper frequency to hear the movie's audio. "You don't have to hang a speaker on the window anymore, but it still has a nostalgic feel, doesn't it?"

Jillian shrugged. "I've never actually been to a drive-in."

"Really? When I was a kid, I used to come here with my mom and dad."

Wil hadn't thought about the days before her parents' divorce in years. For so long it seemed like her only memories were of the fighting, her mother leaving, then Wil and her father working nonstop to get ahead. But now she remembered there had actually been happy times when she was younger. Occasionally, on summer nights, they would pile into the old Impala and come to this very spot. Of course back then it was

little more than a field with a big screen in the middle. They'd added another screen and a concession stand in the intervening years.

Her mother made popcorn and packed cold drinks in a small cooler. And when it got chilly they huddled under a blanket. Wil could still feel the scratch of the wool against her neck and smell her mother's heavy floral perfume.

"My parents worked a lot when we were young," Jillian said.

"What do they do?"

"They're both doctors."

"Impressive. You didn't want to follow in their footsteps?"

"Medicine never interested me. Plus, I'm squeamish about blood and needles. My brother is a surgeon, and one of us was enough for them."

"What do they think about your chosen career?"

"Well, it wasn't quite upper-middle-class enough for them until I really started earning the big commissions. My father would prefer that I handle strictly lucrative commercial accounts."

"And you don't want to?"

Jillian considered her answer, thinking that for the first time she understood why she liked residential real estate. "Don't get me wrong, I enjoy the income associated with commercial deals. But there's something satisfying about helping someone find a home where so many of their memories will be built."

"I knew it. You're really a romantic at heart."

Jillian had never thought of herself as such. She was too practical to be romantic. She'd accepted that she likely would never have the blazing passion that women swooned over. "No. I'll admit to being a tad sentimental, though."

“So you don’t want to be swept off your feet by a conquering hero,” Wil said.

Jillian shrugged. “There’s no point in thinking about it. That stuff only happens in books.”

“Maybe you’re right. But there are other kinds of romance.”

“Like what?”

“Small gestures. As obvious as bringing you flowers when I know you’ve had a bad day. Or as understated as a simple concession to something you want even if it’s not my preference, because it would make you happy.”

“Giving in. That’s romance?”

“It can be.”

Jillian jerked her head around at the sound of a scream. “Did I mention I don’t like scary movies?”

“This movie isn’t that scary.” Truthfully, Wil hadn’t paid attention to what was showing. When they’d left the bar, she’d wanted to spend more time with Jillian, but she was afraid to be alone with her. She’d driven here hoping that if she stuck to a public place she wouldn’t forget why she shouldn’t sleep with Jillian again. But shrouded in the darkened interior of the truck, she realized she hadn’t thought her choice of entertainment through quite enough. It certainly felt as if they were alone, and the urge to hold Jillian was strong.

“By definition, if it has a man who kills people by bludgeoning them with a shovel, it’s a scary movie,” Jillian argued.

“But it’s so predictable. Besides, it’s not even realistic.” Another shriek pierced the air, and Jillian jumped. Wil turned down the volume and held out her arm. “Come over here.”

Without hesitation, Jillian slid to the middle of the seat, lifting one leg over the gearshift. Wil draped her arm around

Jillian's shoulders and tried not to react when she buried her face against her neck while the man with the shovel claimed another victim.

"Is it over yet?"

Wil glanced at the screen just as a spurt of fake blood covered the killer's overalls. She waited until the scene cut away to a less gory setting. "Yeah, it's over."

Jillian glanced tentatively at the screen, then turned an accusing glare on Wil.

Wil raised her hands in innocence. "I didn't know what kind of movie it was. *And* how would I even know you didn't like them?"

"Okay. I'll give you a pass for now. But you can't use that excuse next time."

"Deal." Wil forced a smile, wondering why it should bother her that there probably wouldn't be a next time.



"Come sit with me for a while." Jillian circled the truck, took Wil's hand, and tugged her toward the house.

They sat on the third step, their shoulders touching. Wil drew her knees up and rested her forearms on them. Jillian tilted her head and Wil visually traced the line of her neck until it disappeared in the neckline of her shirt.

"Have you ever seen so many stars?" Jillian looked at Wil and caught her staring.

"Well, yeah, I have."

"Oh, that's right. This is a normal view for you."

"It's the same sky. Do you have too many buildings in your way to see it?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I just don't take the time to appreciate it. But the air is clearer and the stars seem brighter here."

Jillian propped her elbows on the step behind her, and Wil did the same. The stars spilled across the black velvet background like a scattering of brilliant diamonds. In that moment, Jillian couldn't think of anything more important than stretching out to catch a handful of that glitter. The priorities she'd been struggling with since arriving in Tennessee slipped away, and nothing she had in Ohio was as important as sitting on these stairs with Wil.

"I guess I take it for granted," Wil murmured. "I can't remember the last time I even looked at them."

"Well, you should stop and—"

"Please don't say smell the roses."

"I was going to say see the beauty."

"That's just as bad."

When Wil looked at her again, Jillian purposefully let her gaze caress her face. Wil's eyes were luminous. The silvery moonlight washed out her normally tan skin, and if she didn't have such strong features she would have had an almost ethereal quality. As it was, the contrast of her thick, dark lashes and brows brought to mind a dramatic charcoal rendering. Jillian was so entranced, she spoke without thinking. "There's plenty of beauty to be found without staring up in the air."

"That's certainly a smooth line." Wil's voice sounded shaky.

Jillian angled her body toward Wil's. "It isn't a line," she said softly. "You're stunning." Unable to resist the urge to touch her, Jillian edged closer. When Wil began to slide away, Jillian grabbed her lapels. "It's just a kiss, Wil."

"No. It's not *just* a kiss."

Jillian wasn't detoured. She wasn't thinking about anything other than the heat building within her. She moved closer and framed Wil's face in her hands.

"Jillian, please." Wil grasped her forearms.

Jillian slid her fingers deep into Wil's hair. "Please what?" She pressed her lips to Wil's jaw.

Wil's hands tightened on Jillian's arms. "Please don't." Her voice was a strangled moan.

Jillian paused. "Don't? Are you saying you don't want me to kiss you right now?" she whispered.

"I can't stop wanting you."

Jillian met her eyes and found them soft and vulnerable. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I don't want to want you. This would have been so much easier if I didn't." The stab of desire in Wil's chest made her more forthcoming than usual. She clung to Jillian's arms, but though she could easily have pulled Jillian's hands away, she didn't.

"This?"

"Working with you. Seeing you every day." They had chemistry, Wil would admit that. But there was more, which she was hesitant to put a voice to. The tenderness she'd felt when Jillian was sick, the respect for the way Jillian stepped in when she lost her crew, and the warmth expanding in her chest scared her more than any physical attraction. Jillian would be leaving soon, and she needed to remember that fact.

Jillian's fingers stilled against her skin, and Wil had only a moment to absorb their warmth before they were withdrawn.

"Is that why you keep running from me?" Jillian asked quietly.

"I do not."

"Yes. You do. Oh, you aren't now because you don't have your crew to hide behind. It's okay that we had sex, but when we connect on a more emotional level, you trot out that I'm-not-as-good-as-you bullshit." Jillian was beginning to see that quite the opposite might be true.

"I don't want to talk about this." Wil retreated verbally, further proving Jillian's accusation.

"I know. But I want to."

"Jillian, drop it."

"Why?" She reached up to touch Wil's face again, but Wil grasped her wrist and held it away from her.

"Because I don't want us to connect."

"Why not?" Jillian's heart pounded and she wondered if Wil could feel it in the pulse under her fingers.

"I know what you think of me, Jillian. And I'm not interested in being your charity case." Wil shoved Jillian's hand away.

"You can't seriously believe I think that."

Wil shrugged. "I'm a handyman's daughter. I grew up in this town basically on welfare. I've been dealing with that attitude my whole life." Jillian hated the resignation in her eyes.

"I should have apologized to you that day. I don't see you that way. I'm a private person, Wil. We'd just had an amazing night, and when I thought Rose could see right through me, I panicked. Are you going to let one misunderstanding keep you from—"

"From what? What exactly are you looking for? Are you planning to settle down here?"

"Is that what you want?" She searched her memory for any indication that Wil might have given that what was between them was more than sexual attraction. Where had she gotten the idea that was all it was? She'd cast Wil as the shallow playgirl, but Wil had never done anything to deserve that assumption. In reality, Jillian was the one who had been so concerned with appearances that she'd insulted Wil rather than face... whatever was between them. Jillian was stunned to

think Wil might want something more permanent. And what if she did? Jillian couldn't imagine either of them being happy in the other's world.

"It doesn't matter. I know you're leaving. And I still have my own reasons for not wanting to get involved with you. But none of that changes the fact that I only have to look at you or think about you and I want you."

"Then why shouldn't we enjoy each other?" The proposal was too little too late, and she knew it. But hearing that Wil wanted her so, and the rasp of longing in her voice, made Jillian want to reach out. But she couldn't reach far enough.

"No." Defeat saturated Wil's tone.

Jillian stood. "Okay. Thanks for tonight."

A spring creaked as Jillian opened the screen door, and she stepped inside and let it bang shut behind her. She stood in the darkness and listened until a minute later she heard Wil's truck start. Reminding herself that Wil had her reasons for turning her away didn't alleviate the sting of rejection. She'd offered Wil what she could and had been turned down.



"I finished it a couple nights ago." Wil pressed the remote to open her overhead garage door, then led her father inside.

"Wow. Wil, it's great." Bud crossed to the desk standing in the middle of the space and touched it lightly. "I had no idea you were making it so detailed."

She hadn't initially planned to, but as she worked she'd experimented with small touches of molding and decorative carving, testing her skill. She'd added ornate brass hardware and stained it the color of honey.

"It'll look nice in your office." Her father had been working behind the same banged-up metal desk for as long as

she could remember. At first he couldn't afford more, then she supposed it became habit. He'd spent most of his life fixing up other people's houses, but when it came to his own home and office he was content to leave things how they were. His house was still decorated the same as it had been the day his wife had walked out on him.

He nodded and continued to run a hand across the satiny surface.

"Hey, Dad, did Mom ever like it here?" Wil asked cautiously. They rarely talked about her mother. When she was younger, he didn't want to, and now she was just accustomed to not mentioning when she'd spoken to her.

"She said she did, at first."

Her mother had been living in D.C. when they'd met while her father was on vacation. He'd courted her long-distance and within six months had convinced her to move to Redmond.

"So what happened?"

He shrugged. "I guess some are just country folks, and some aren't."

"And you don't think they can change?" Wil had seen refusal slide across Jillian's features the night before when she'd asked if she planned to settle down in Redmond. Like Wil's mother, she would wither in a small town.

"Why don't you ask your mother these questions?" Some of the old bitterness seeped into his words.

"Cause I'm asking you." She and her mother weren't close, and often Wil related to her only out of a sense of obligation. She sensed her mother made an effort to reach out, but Wil would never understand how a mother could leave her child.

"Yeah, well," he circled the desk and grabbed one side, "can you talk and lift at the same time?"

Wil picked up the other end and they carefully carried

it out to the driveway where his old truck was parked. The logo on the side was faded and patches of rust showed through dulled green paint.

“About time for a new truck, isn’t it?” Wil rested her side of the desk on the open tailgate, climbed into the bed, and pulled the desk the rest of the way in.

“This one runs just fine.”

“The owner of a successful construction company shouldn’t be driving this old clunker.” Wil jumped to the ground. “All the foremen have nicer trucks than you do. Buy a new one. Call it a tax deduction for next year.”

“I suppose I could make this a shop truck. That one we’ve been using has seen better days.” They’d added three new storage buildings in the past five years and often used an old pickup to shuttle supplies between them.

Side by side they leaned against the edge of the still-open tailgate.

“If you’d known how it would end, would you still have asked her to marry you?” Wil steered the conversation back to her mother.

He folded his arms over his chest, clearly uncomfortable with the direction of their conversation. “Yes, I would do it again.”

“She broke your heart.” Wil remembered how devastated he’d been after her mother left. And sometimes she wondered if that was the reason he hadn’t dated since.

He shifted his weight and wrung his hands. “No one goes into a marriage thinking it’s going to fail.”

“But if she had stayed—”

“We both knew it was over well before that. Nothing’s ever so black and white. We had more problems than just geography.” He paced across the driveway, rubbing a hand over his scalp.

Feeling abandoned, Wil had made her mother into the bad guy. She'd spent years blaming her mother's inability to adjust to small-town living for the demise of their family. She'd called her mother uncaring and inflexible. But her father had let her. Lost in his own heartache, he hadn't been able to deal with her anger, so eventually she'd just buried her pain beneath so many layers that no one could touch it. And even now, she held her mother at arm's length, as if she could punish her by shutting her out of her life.

"What made you think about all this now?"

"It's nothing, Dad."

"Is something going on with your mother?"

"No." It wasn't about her parents at all.

"Okay." He seemed relieved to be off the hook, but his subject change didn't ease Wil's mind. "How are things at Miss Sealy's? Has she forgiven me for pulling your crew?"

"Yeah, I think she's over it." Wil neglected to mention that she'd had to let Jillian work with her.

"She seems easy to get along with."

Wil laughed. "Easy? Yeah. As long as she gets her way."

"I was out at the school Friday and your girls spoke well of her."

"Of course." Wil agreed without thinking. Despite having criticized her, after they found out Wil had slept with her, the girls seemed to have warmed up to Jillian again. "I've seen the way Tracy looks at her. And supposedly *she's* straight. And don't get me started on Andy and Patti. Jesus, my entire crew was half in love with her."

"Really? Your *entire* crew?"

Her words echoed in her head. Had she just admitted she was in love with Jillian? No. No, she'd said *half* in love. And she'd only been trying to make a point about the girls. She hadn't meant that she was actually...had she?

“Uh, no. It was a figure of speech. I just meant the girls really took to her.” She backpedaled quickly and he seemed to buy it.

Distracted by her line of thought, Wil barely responded as he thanked her again for the desk. His truck sputtered to life and she pulled herself together long enough to wave good-bye before crossing to her porch and sinking down on the steps.

She was an idiot. How did this happen? She’d been guarding herself against this very thing since the moment they’d met. *Right. So that’s why you slept with her after knowing her for two days. Way to keep your distance.* Distance. That’s what she needed now. Wasn’t it?

She shoved a hand through her hair. It would be smart to keep any future interactions professional. No more taking Jillian to the Ranch or sitting under the stars with her.

But even as she made this promise, she knew it wouldn’t do any good. Staying away from Jillian didn’t keep her from thinking about her, wondering what she was doing. It was too late to avoid getting hurt, she was certain of that. Jillian’s open house was next weekend. After that she’d be leaving and Wil would deal with missing her then.

Maybe the answer was to spend more time with her. Yes. They were so different that a relationship between them likely wouldn’t work out anyway. So she just needed to let the attraction run its course, as quickly as possible. By the time Jillian left, Wil would probably discover some annoying fault and be happy to be rid of her. It was either the most brilliant or the most insane idea she’d ever had.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Two hours later as Wil knocked on Jillian's door, she was still trying to decide which it was. When Jillian opened the door, Wil leaned toward insanity. Jillian had on the same cutoffs she'd worn to paint the kitchen, and this time a pale yellow tank top hugged the swell of her breasts, the arc of her ribs, and the flat plane of her belly. Jillian's exposed arms were firm, Wil guessed from a routine gym regimen, and her creamy skin lacked the uneven tan Wil always seemed to have from working in the sun.

Wil traced her eyes over the flare of Jillian's hips but wrenched them away when she reached her thighs. She had a visceral memory of those very muscles hardening under her hands as Jillian sat in her lap. Wil tried to swallow, despite the fact that all the moisture in her body had flooded to parts south.

Jillian stood completely still while Wil's gaze swept over her and a flush of heat followed in its wake. The path seared back up her body, and as they stared at each other, Jillian didn't even try to hide the images flying through her head. For a moment she allowed herself to wonder if she would rather Wil undress her slowly or tear her clothes off.

Wil was the first to look away, but the current continued to jump between them, snapping like the severed end of a live wire dancing in the air.

“We’re going on a picnic,” Wil blurted, as if she needed to fill the silence. And Jillian noticed for the first time that her right arm was wrapped around a paper grocery bag and a small cooler dangled from her other hand.

“We are?”

“Yes. It’s part of your typical Redmond weekend.” Wil shifted the bag and adjusted her grip on the cooler.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Jillian stepped aside. “Come in. Let me take that.” She lifted the bag from Wil’s arm and led her to the kitchen. “God, this smells great.”

“I made fried chicken, potato salad, and biscuits.”

“I could get used to you showing up at my door with food.” After setting the bag on the counter, she turned and almost ran into Wil.

“Sorry.” Wil grasped her upper arms. “For such a roomy house, I seem to get in your way an awful lot.”

“Yes. You do.” Jillian cleared her throat and took a step back. “I—just give me a minute to change and I’ll be ready to go.”

Wil gave her a slow perusal. “What’s wrong with what you have on?”

“Oh, *now* you don’t have a problem with what I’m wearing?”

Wil grinned. “Well, it *is* going to be just you and me. So whatever you’re comfortable in is fine.”

“Yeah. I think I’ll change just the same.” Jillian waved a hand toward the bedroom.

Arousal hung in the air between them, seeping into their clothing like the scent of campfire smoke, and lingered to

remind Jillian of the moments when the flames had consumed them.



“Where are we?” Jillian asked as Wil steered her truck into a tree-lined gravel drive. She stopped in front of a small house, further dwarfed by the towering trees and vast stretches of green grass that surrounded it.

“My place. It’s not much, but it’s home.”

Jillian slid out of the truck and looked around. Thick woods edged the lawn on three sides, and she imagined in the fall a colorful cocoon would surround the house. If any neighbors were within range, she couldn’t see them from here.

“How far does your property go?”

Wil lifted the cooler from the bed of the truck. “About two hundred yards into the trees on either side. The back runs to a clearing near the lake. I thought we could picnic down there.”

Jillian searched the tree line for a break that would indicate a road. “How do we get there?”

“On those.” Wil pointed at two ATVs sitting side by side near the corner of the carport. One had camouflage paint and black luggage racks on the front and back. The other, a smaller, sportier model, was bright yellow.

“Are you kidding?” Jillian eyed the two machines, wondering if she was about to embarrass herself.

“I told you I like to go down to the lake.”

“I thought you meant a peaceful walk on the shore.”

Wil grinned. “I guess we have different definitions of peaceful. Have you ever been on one of these?”

“No.”

“This one’s yours.” Wil crossed to the larger one and

stowed their dinner in a cargo box secured to the rack behind the seat.

“I don’t want the bigger one.”

“It’s wider and more stable than mine, and it has an automatic transmission. I’ve made a few modifications to the other one to kick up the horsepower, so trust me, you don’t want that one.” Wil smiled and handed her a helmet. “Get on.”

Jillian put her left foot on the step on the side nearest her and swung her other leg over the seat.

“The only shifting you have to do is forward or reverse.” Wil leaned over and indicated a small shifter in front of Jillian’s right knee. Jillian paid close attention as she went through the rest of the controls, showing her the brakes and throttle. When Wil straightened, her arm brushed Jillian’s breast, but she apparently didn’t notice because when Jillian shivered, she said, “Don’t worry, we’ll be on flat terrain. It’s an easy ride.”

She climbed on her ATV and started it. “Follow me,” she shouted before she put on her helmet.

Wil rolled forward, obviously going slow to give Jillian a chance to get used to the ATV. Jillian accelerated too quickly, and when her machine jumped forward she released the lever and tried again. This time her progress was smoother and she followed Wil across the backyard toward the trees. As they neared the edge, Jillian could make out a small break in the form of two tire tracks.

Wil glanced back for only a second before plunging into the woods. Jillian followed a bit more cautiously. She knew there was probably plenty of clearance on both sides as she carefully negotiated over roots, stones, and hard-packed dirt, but she felt as if she could reach out and touch the branches flanking the path. Shafts of sunlight pierced the thick canopy overhead,

lighting patches of bright green foliage as they stretched toward the ground. The scent of damp earth permeated the air, and moss crept up the sides of tree trunks.

As they emerged from the trees on the other side, a large clearing led to the edge of the lake. Feeling more confident, Jillian punched the accelerator and pulled alongside Wil. When Wil looked over, Jillian smiled inside the full-face helmet and pointed at the shore as if to say, "First one there wins." Wil nodded and Jillian took off with her fast on her heels. She gave it a little more gas and pulled away, enjoying a bit of speed as the wind rushed past.

Halfway across the grassy expanse, she had a considerable lead and was already savoring her win when Wil's engine revved. Before Jillian even had time to glance back, Wil flew by and she realized Wil had just been playing with her.

Wil was already dismounting by the time Jillian pulled alongside her. They'd parked a few feet from the shoreline, where the grass gave way to a sand and rock beach. A slight breeze swept off the lake, carrying with it a musky scent.

"I never had a chance, did I?" Laughing, Jillian dismounted and set her helmet on the seat.

Wil grinned. "My machine was built for speed." She wrapped an arm around Jillian's waist and pulled her closer. "What do I win?"

Thrown off balance, Jillian braced a hand against Wil's chest as her body came into solid contact with Wil's.

"What do you want?" Jillian whispered. When she moistened her lower lip nervously, Wil's heart beat harder under her hand.

"Just a kiss."

"I thought you said it wasn't just a kiss." Testing, Jillian slid her hand up to toy with the ridge of Wil's collarbone. Wil's

eyes darkened and her hand caressed the skin beneath the hem of Jillian's shirt.

"Maybe I've decided that it can be."

A tiny thrill traveled Jillian's spine with Wil's words. She tilted her head to accept the inevitable kiss, but Wil released her and turned back to the cargo box on the ATV. She got out the grocery bag, cooler, and a checkered blanket.

"Will you help me with this?" Wil shook out the blanket and Jillian grabbed the opposite side. They spread it in the grass a few feet from the waterline. "Have a seat."

When they were settled side by side Jillian waited for Wil to unpack the food. But instead she stretched her legs out in front of her and propped herself on her elbow.

"Are you enjoying your weekend?" Wil's words were casual, but the heat from a moment ago hadn't faded from her eyes. And her restraint was obvious in the deliberate way she tightened and relaxed her fists, then crossed her ankles.

Jillian mirrored her pose. "Very much."

"I know it's not big-city culture, but—"

"You must really think I'm high maintenance." Jillian edged closer and Wil's gaze flickered down her body. "Do I strike you as hard to please?"

Wil smiled at the innuendo in Jillian's words. "Not in the least." Though she'd changed to khaki shorts, Jillian still wore the yellow tank top. It gapped slightly at her chest, giving Wil a glimpse of cleavage, and she purposely let her eyes linger there. "In fact," Wil traced the back of Jillian's hand where it lay on the blanket between them, "I find you quite easy to please."

"Hmm. And where do you think calling me easy is going to get you?"

"Oh, there's nothing easy about you," Wil murmured as she danced her fingers up Jillian's forearm. Jillian's brow

wrinkled, but before she could take offense, Wil went on. "Maybe pleasing you just comes naturally to me."

"You might be right about that." Jillian's voice dropped seductively but also carried a touch of hesitation, as if she was trying to figure out where Wil was going with the flirtation.

Wil couldn't blame her, since she didn't know herself. She only knew that she liked teasing Jillian, liked touching her. And though her earlier discovery while talking to her father should have freaked her out, it didn't. Knowing she would hurt when Jillian left and having given herself permission to spend time with her anyway freed her.

"And what would please you now?" Wil touched Jillian's neck, then let her fingers dip into the cleavage to stroke her soft skin.

Jillian captured her hand and guided it to her breast. "Don't you know?"

"I've got a few ideas." Wil eased Jillian back to lie on the soft flannel of the blanket. Her hand still cradled Jillian's breast, and Jillian's nipple pressed eagerly into her palm.

Without hesitation, Wil leaned over and claimed her mouth, aggressively at first. And Jillian responded just as fervently, sucking Wil's tongue as she thrust it inside. Then Wil gentled the kiss, easing back to softly caress her lips.

"Please, don't stop," Jillian whispered, clutching Wil's shoulders.

She wouldn't stop. Couldn't have if she'd tried. For weeks she'd been fighting this attraction, beating back awareness at every turn, but she no longer needed to. Whatever happened after this day, she would have this moment. She would have Jillian on a blanket in the sun.

She pushed up Jillian's tank top and touched her warm, flat stomach, spreading her hand to span nearly the width of her torso. Her broad, work-roughened hand made Jillian's

skin look even more pale and feminine. “Like porcelain,” Wil murmured.

Jillian framed her face and pulled her closer. She bit Wil’s lower lip then kissed her chin. “Except I don’t break easily.”

She sat up and lifted Wil’s shirt over her head, then tossed it aside. As she reached for the hem of her own shirt, Wil’s hands were there dragging it upward and off. Wil’s eyes roamed over her body, alight with hunger. Wil bent and drew one of Jillian’s nipples into her mouth, while she cupped her other breast and pinched the nipple lightly. Jillian arched, pushing firmly into Wil’s touch.

The gentle suction and the ministrations of Wil’s fingers tugged a string connecting Jillian’s nipples to several inches of sensitive flesh between her legs. Her clit swelled and pulsed heavily. Pulling away for only a moment, she shed the rest of her clothing, then scooted closer and draped her legs over Wil’s and around her hips so they sat face-to-face.

Wil trailed her fingers over Jillian’s body, deliberately tracing her curves. Seeming to have infinite patience, Wil circled maddeningly low on Jillian’s stomach before veering away. Jillian needed more, harder. She needed to be possessed as Wil had done so many weeks before, filling her and making her feel as if she’d finally found a missing piece of herself.

“I won’t break,” she repeated, and took Wil’s hand and pressed it to her center. When Wil didn’t move, she slipped a finger between Wil’s to rub over her aching clit.

Wil’s knowing smile said she was fully aware of what Jillian was trying to do. She pulled her hand away, taking Jillian’s with it, and said, “It’s my turn to lead.”

“I need you to touch me.” Jillian tried to guide Wil’s hand back.

“When I say.” Wil kissed her neck. “Where I say.” She wrapped her arms around Jillian and caressed her back.

As Jillian's hips shifted restlessly between her thighs, Wil continued her slow exploration. She would not be hurried. Jillian's struggle with her self-control flashed across her face. Her eyes were dark with arousal and she pulled her lower lip between her teeth.

"You just wait until it's my turn," she growled in warning as Wil feathered her fingers down her stomach to the place where the patch of curls began.

"I can't wait." Grinning, Wil grasped Jillian's hips and pulled them closer.

"It seems that you can." Jillian's words ended on a moan as Wil trailed her fingers through the wetness, grazing her clit. "Wil."

The roughly spoken word carried a plea Wil could satisfy. This time as she stroked along the folds, she applied more pressure, lingering when Jillian's thighs quivered. And when she curled two fingers inside, Jillian sighed and tilted her hips, giving Wil better access. Jillian immediately tried to increase the pace but Wil controlled her from the inside, stroking long and slow, then pulling out until her fingertips teased Jillian's opening. And just when Jillian's hands fisted in frustration, Wil sank back in.

She kept this pace, even when her own throbbing body demanded attention. Her focus remained on Jillian's pleasure, on her gasping cries for more, and the undulation of Jillian's hips against her hand.

"Please, Wil." Jillian leaned back, arching until her shoulder blades rested against Wil's legs. With measured strokes, Wil drew Jillian to the edge and only then did she press her thumb over the ridge of swollen tissue surrounding Jillian's clitoris. Jillian whispered, "Oh, yes, there."

As Jillian's body tensed and drew her deeper with every stroke, Wil bent to press her mouth to the center of Jillian's

chest, just below her breasts. One of Jillian's hands tangled in her hair and the other grasped the back of her neck. When Jillian cried out and shuddered, she clutched Wil tightly to her.

As her body relaxed Wil continued to hold her, bowed over her and immersed in the salty taste of her skin and the scent of her arousal. Though she didn't utter a sound, she mouthed the words "I love you" against Jillian's skin.

After a moment she straightened, took Jillian's hands, and pulled her up too. Not ready to lose the connection, Wil circled her arms around Jillian's waist and held her close. She kissed Jillian's neck, feeling the tickle of her fragrant hair against her face.

Jillian played her fingers in Wil's hair, sweeping stubborn strands off her forehead. She traced the shell of Wil's ear and Wil shivered.

"Why are you still wearing your jeans?" Jillian teased against Wil's neck.

"Because you didn't take them off me." Wil kissed Jillian's bare shoulder.

"Well, that can be rectified."

Wil smiled. "Are you hungry?" she murmured. When she drew back to meet Jillian's eyes she was pleased with the haze of fulfillment that clouded them.

"Starving." Jillian's gaze was fixed on Wil's mouth and she clearly wasn't thinking about food. "But I'd rather take care of you first."

Wil debated the few minutes she knew it would take for Jillian to bring her to orgasm. She'd been almost there as Jillian had climaxed. But she decided she'd rather let her need simmer until they'd eaten. The steady throb of arousal felt good, and she wanted to spend their meal imagining the many ways Jillian might ease it. "I'm okay for now."

“Sure?” Jillian asked lazily.

“Mmm-hmm. Sorry. I let the chicken get cold.”

Jillian laughed. “I don’t think an apology is necessary.” She touched a finger to Wil’s chin. “Luckily, fried chicken is just as good cold.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Wil drove through the nearly deserted streets of town toward Jillian's house. Her body hummed with satisfaction and her skin felt tight from too much sun. Jillian rode beside her, their linked hands stretched across the expanse of seat between them.

"Where is everyone?" Jillian asked. "It's not that late."

Wil glanced at the clock in the center of the dash. "It's almost nine on Sunday night. Folks are getting ready for work tomorrow, I guess."

For Wil, the day had passed too quickly. After they'd eaten lunch, they had taken a walk, wading at the edge of the cool water. When they got back to where they'd left the ATVs, Jillian undressed Wil and drew her down to lie on the blanket. For the rest of the afternoon they alternated between talking, teasing, and making love. Hours later, they dug out the leftovers from their lunch and made dinner of it as well.

When darkness began to descend, Wil had reluctantly packed their picnic away and they'd returned to her house to stow the ATVs before she drove Jillian home.

Wil couldn't remember the last time she'd taken an entire day off work. Even when her crew wasn't working, she was

entrenched in one project or another. But today, she'd simply enjoyed being with Jillian. So much so that she could almost convince herself that Jillian didn't want to leave. Surely the passion they shared meant something. Though they hadn't discussed it, today had certainly felt like more than just sex to Wil, and unless she was completely misreading the situation, Jillian felt it too.

She was still lost in thought and driving on autopilot as she pulled to a stop next to the curb in front of Jillian's house. She got out of the truck and walked Jillian to her front door.

"Today was amazing." Jillian stepped close and looped her arms around Wil's neck.

"For me too." Wil rested her hands against the small of Jillian's back.

"Too bad you have to get up early." Cradling Wil's jaw in her hands, Jillian rose up on her toes and kissed her lightly on the mouth. Then again, deeper and lingering this time.

"Not that early." A flutter of anticipation overrode the knowledge that she likely wouldn't get much sleep if she stayed. She'd worked on little or no rest plenty of times, and this would definitely be worth it.

"Okay. Come in. But I'm tucking you in and we're going right to sleep."

"Define 'tucking me in,'" Wil teased.

Smiling, Jillian turned away to unlock the door. Over her shoulder she said, "I really did have a good time today. I wish I could have more days like that."

"You can." Wil made a split-second decision to take a chance. Their time together was close to expiring. Tomorrow she would report to the school to help her crew finish up there. Jillian would add some small touches, then on Saturday she would have her open house. Soon after that she would leave.

Jillian chuckled as she slipped her key into the lock. “Yeah, wouldn’t that be nice.”

“Don’t go.”

Jillian looked up, surprised at the intensity of Wil’s softly spoken words. Wil’s eyes were focused on her, and just then she wished it could be that simple. Her response faltered in the face of the raw emotion in Wil’s gaze.

“I wish I could pretend to be unselfish and say I’ll move to the city, but I can’t leave my father or the business. So I’m asking you to stay here. With me.”

Jillian understood. Wil would never be happy in Cincinnati. But it was just as ridiculous to think that she could stay in Redmond. Sure, she’d enjoyed these past weeks, but she viewed them as a vacation. She wasn’t looking for a lifestyle change. So that left them exactly where they’d been—leading separate lives.

“I’m sorry, I can’t.”

“But you said you wanted more days like today.”

“I meant, I wish I could have more carefree days in my schedule.”

“Oh.”

“Wil.” Jillian took a step toward her, but she stumbled back. “Wait a minute, let’s talk about this.”

Wil’s humorless laugh was more like a sarcastic snort. “Apparently there’s nothing to talk about.”

Wil jogged down the walk and practically vaulted into her truck. Jillian wanted to go after her, but what would she say? Perhaps she’d let things go too far today, but she hadn’t thought past the seduction of the moment. She hadn’t foreseen Wil asking her to stay or considered how she would respond.

She pushed open the door and walked inside. Only moments ago, she’d felt the stirrings of arousal at the thought

of another night in Wil's arms. Now she stood in the empty living room wondering how it was possible that she missed Wil already. But Wil had summed it up: she couldn't leave Redmond. And Jillian simply wasn't a small-town girl.

Her life was in Cincinnati, her career, her friends. *What career? What friends? You barely make time to sustain acquaintances.* Okay, she didn't have friends, per se. There were a couple of women with whom she commiserated over work. The only thing they had in common was real estate. They had husbands and kids, whose birthday parties Jillian was never invited to. They weren't involved in each other's lives outside of work. And she didn't have a job, but she did have an offer. And she could make a phone call tomorrow and secure a position. She made up her mind right then, that's what she would do. She'd accept that job and ignore the ache in her heart until it went away.



Jillian pulled a tray of chocolate-chip cookies out of the oven. She planned to set out finger foods for her open house, but she also hoped to entice potential buyers. The idea was to make the house feel like a home, and what better way than the smell of freshly baked cookies as one walked through the door. They weren't from scratch, but she had unwrapped the plastic from a preformed roll of dough and sliced them.

"Something smells good in there," Rose called through the open front door.

Jillian grinned. "Come on in."

"Nice touch," Rose said as she walked in the kitchen.

"They need to cool a bit, but then you can have a sample."

"Are you ready to sell the house?"

Jillian nodded.

"If I haven't said it, I appreciate your help with my house. I put a For Sale sign in the yard today."

"I'm not leaving just yet." Rose's words felt like good-bye and suddenly Jillian wasn't ready. "Iced tea?" She pulled a pitcher from the fridge.

"Yes, thank you."

"Sit," Jillian said, when Rose started to circle the counter to help her. She waited until Rose had settled into a chair at the dinette table in the new breakfast nook, then set a glass of tea in front of her.

"You've done a lovely job here. Mary would have approved."

"I'm glad. But I just had a few ideas. Wil did all the hard work."

"Are you going to see her before you go?"

"Probably not." She forced a casualness she didn't feel. She hadn't seen Wil since Sunday night. She had gone to Johnson and Son on Monday to settle up any remaining expenses and Wil's truck had been in the parking lot, but she wasn't inside the office and Jillian hadn't asked about her.

"I had hoped the two of you would work things out."

Stunned, Jillian stared at Rose. "You—how did you—"

"Dear, I may be old but I'm not a complete prude. Besides, it's quite clear to anyone who's paying attention that there are strong feelings between you."

"Feelings? No. I mean—it was physical—" She broke off, a hot flush staining her cheeks as she realized what she'd said.

"Was it? I guess I was wrong, then. I sensed something deeper." As usual, Rose was calm and nonjudgmental.

"Well, yes. Uh, no." Jillian took a deep breath and slowly released it. "We're from different worlds."

Rose smiled. “I always thought that was just an excuse people used when they were afraid to try.”

“It’s not. I’m not. Okay, I’ll admit there’s an attraction—a strong one.” Jillian blushed again. “But it takes more than that to make a relationship work.” Even to her own ears, it sounded more like a question than an assertion.

“Well, dear, I guess you know yourself best.” Rose patted Jillian’s hand. “Folks will be arriving soon.”

“Yes.” Jillian drew her focus back to her open house. That was her priority today. “I should make some coffee.”

The first of the guests arrived as Jillian was finishing the coffee, and she spent the next two hours giving tours and chatting with neighbors. She was pleased to recognize several people from the diner and her daily walks through town. When she had started this project she envisioned herself swooping in, fixing the house up, and selling it, all still as an outsider. But over the past several weeks, Jillian had been drawn into the circle of residents and was no longer a stranger.



“You really do wonderful work, Wilhelmina.”

Hearing Rose’s words from across the room, Jillian turned and saw Wil enter through the front door. Despite an intense and immediate urge to cross to Wil and wrap her arms around her, Jillian kept her distance. Throughout the afternoon she’d caught herself searching the faces for Wil’s, flooded with a mixture of relief and disappointment when she didn’t see her. Now here she was, only ten minutes before the open house was scheduled to be over.

Wil stepped closer to Rose, and Jillian couldn’t hear her response. At least a dozen people were in the space between them, most of whom Jillian had discounted as serious buyers.

In such a small town, she'd expected curiosity, not genuine interest, to be the biggest draw for the residents. Mary had been a fixture in this town, and now her neighbors wanted to see what had become of her house.

Rose drew Wil into a group of her neighbors, obviously fawning over her. Wil shoved her hands in the front pockets of her faded jeans and her T-shirt pulled tight across her shoulders. She bent her head and stared at her scuffed work boots as Rose continued to go on about the transformation of Mary's house. Her dark hair fell forward, blocking Jillian's view of her face. But she didn't need to see it. That visage had been haunting her sleep for the past week.

Under the guise of greeting a new guest, Jillian skirted the edge of the room, moving closer until she could hear what was being said. Now Wil faced away from her and she didn't have to be so surreptitious about watching her. She let her gaze wander over Wil's back, remembering running a hand down the curve of her spine. Wil's jeans showed signs of wear at the corners of the pockets, and the shape of her wallet stood out in the left one. Heat suffused Jillian's body as she flashed on herself clutching Wil's hips and ass as she thrust against her.

"Gert, if you ever get around to building that sunroom you've been talking about for years, you should give Wil a call." Jillian smiled at Rose's obvious attempt to drum up business for Wil.

"George says we can do it this summer," the elderly woman on Rose's right, who apparently was Gert, responded. She turned to Wil. "I remember you from when you were no bigger than a weed."

Wil stiffened.

Gert looked around the room. "You've done well for yourself. You're obviously a talented young lady. I'll certainly call you when we're ready to start."

Jillian watched Wil's shoulders visibly relax.

Rose nudged Wil's arm. "Give her your card, Wil."

"Yes, ma'am." Wil's soft alto seemed to vibrate in Jillian's own chest. She imagined a half smile of amusement touched Wil's lips as she handed over a card. Two other women in their cluster asked for one as well.

Still distracted, Jillian didn't look away quickly enough when Rose glanced up, caught her eyes, and smiled. Seeing this, Wil followed her line of sight and Jillian gasped aloud as she became the subject of azure intensity. She'd never before felt as if someone could so easily see inside her. With Wil, she didn't need to hold herself back. Then a couple approached her with questions about the kitchen and Jillian was reminded of why she should. She was going home. Ignoring the voice in her head that asked her why, when she could have everything she wanted right here, Jillian led the prospective buyers into the kitchen.

Wil watched her go, trying to resist the urge to follow. Wil Johnson didn't chase women. There was either a mutual interest or there wasn't, and Jillian had made her feelings on that matter clear. Hadn't she? So had Wil imagined the yearning in Jillian's eyes just now? She didn't think so.

She shouldn't have come here. Successfully avoiding Jillian for almost a week was a feat in such a small town. Luckily, Jillian was a creature of habit, and after weeks of working with her, Wil had her schedule down. She purposely didn't work in front of the school between seven and seven fifteen while Jillian was on her morning walk. She avoided the diner at lunchtime. And she never dropped in on Rose without calling first and casually inquiring if she had any company.

Then her father had insisted she stop by to make sure Jillian hadn't discovered any problems and, he'd said, it couldn't hurt to have a company truck parked outside with all those people

there. He dismissed her suggestion that he go instead. After all, she'd done all the work on the place and could better recount the transformation they'd made.

Wil had delayed as long as she could, inventing last-minute projects that needed to be done around her house. Finally, when she knew she would be subjected to only a few minutes of socializing, she headed over. During the drive, she made a plan to stay on the opposite side of the house from Jillian, thereby avoiding a scenario where she would get close enough to touch her, because she wasn't certain she could resist the urge.

As it turned out, her plan was a little more difficult to implement. Rose kept her corralled at one side of the living room, and by the time Jillian passed close by, it was too late to move. She glanced quickly to her right, assessing her chance for escape, but a couple with three kids trailing behind them headed for the door, cutting off her only possible route.

"Wil."

Her mind had to be playing tricks on her because Jillian's low caress of her name sounded like more than a greeting. She imagined she could shove those kids out of the way and be out the door before anyone could catch her. Instead, they stood in awkward silence while Wil searched for something appropriate to say.

"Hi. The house looks nice."

"Thanks to you."

"Dear, the last of the guests are leaving," Rose said.

As Jillian turned away to say good-bye, Wil sighed. *Just get through the next few minutes and then you're out of here.* When a neighbor looked at her curiously, she fixed a fake smile in place and waved. As a large group headed out the door, Wil thought she could simply fall in with them and escape unnoticed. The effort of pretending it didn't physically

hurt to be in the same room with Jillian was making her short-tempered.

Jillian returned just as her face was starting to ache from the faux gesture. The room had emptied out except for one woman, who lingered in the kitchen talking to Rose.

“Are you okay?” Jillian asked.

“Yeah. Why?”

“I don’t know. You just look—uh, nothing. Never mind.”

“You brought back Mary’s furniture,” Wil said, still hoping she could escape quickly after a bit of polite conversation. But even that was difficult, with Jillian acting as if they were nothing more than casual acquaintances. Wil deliberately hardened herself. What was it they said? The best defense is a good offense.

Jillian glanced around the room, satisfied with the result. She had already contacted an auction house in Knoxville about disposing of the pieces, but decided that until then they could be put to good use this weekend. “It’s amazing how a little bit of staging can make a house look like a home.”

“Ever the real-estate agent, huh?”

“What?”

Wil looked disappointed and Jillian wondered why that bothered her. “I should have figured you were just concerned about your sale.”

“Well, now I’m confused, Wil.” Jillian put her hands on her hips, irritated by Wil’s tone. “During this entire project you’ve accused me of spending without thinking of profit. And now you’re saying just the opposite. So which is it? Do you find me foolish or opportunistic?”

Wil’s expression hardened. “Maybe a little of both,” she said sharply.

“Why are you here, anyway?” Wil’s words stung, but it was the detachment in her eyes that drew blood. Jillian hadn’t

expected to see Wil again, nor had she expected that it would rattle her if she did.

“Just fulfilling a business obligation.”

“Well, then consider it fulfilled,” Jillian bit out before turning her back on Wil. She stalked into the kitchen, ignoring a curious look from Rose as she showed the last of the visitors out through the front. When she dared to glance back toward the living room, it was empty. Wil had apparently left as well.

Good riddance. A business obligation? What the hell did that mean? Was Jillian nothing more than business to her? She’d done the job and had her fun in the process and now was ready to wash her hands of Jillian. And why should that bother Jillian so much? After all, she’d never put it in such cold terms, but she had agreed it was temporary and physical.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Damn it!" Jillian flung the bedroom door shut behind her because she needed to slam something. But the loud bang did nothing to ease her irritation. Overall, the open house had been a success. One young family seemed very interested in the house, and Jillian had exchanged numbers with their agent. She should be concentrating on that instead of letting Wil get under her skin. She paced the length of the room, trying not to think about what emotions hid beneath Wil's cool exterior.

Her gaze landed on the bureau and, remembering the photo album she'd tucked in one of the drawers weeks ago, she crossed the room. She pulled open the handle a bit too hard and, distracted, she didn't catch the drawer as it flew out.

"Ow, shit," she cried. She grabbed her foot and hopped to the bed. A red line ran across the top of her foot and a knot was already forming. She stood and gingerly bore weight, and when the throbbing didn't increase she decided nothing was broken.

The drawer lay upside down and something was taped to the bottom of it. Jillian limped over and lowered herself to the floor. She slid her finger beneath the yellowed envelope and the aged adhesive came free easily. It was a letter, addressed

to Aunt Mary. Jillian carefully slipped the piece of paper from the envelope and unfolded it.

Dearest Mary,

Words cannot express what you mean to me. These past years have been the happiest of my life. I love you with all my heart, and while I don't understand your choice, I respect your decision. I wish I could say that we would always be friends, but I fear I'm not strong enough to watch you make a life with him when I want you for my own. I hope you find happiness.

*Yours always,
Rose*

Jillian stared at the flowing script and tried to reconcile the woman she'd come to know with the heartbroken soul who wrote this letter. She knew Rose had never married and now she knew why. Had Rose met anyone else in the years since Mary? Recalling the touches of sadness she'd seen in Rose, she guessed that, if she had, none had measured up to the true love of her life.



"Jillian, what a lovely surprise. Come in." Rose stepped back and waited for Jillian to enter. "I was just making some tea. Would you like some?"

"No, thank you."

Jillian followed her to the kitchen and waited while she

poured steaming water into a delicate china cup. She carried it to the table and sat down.

“Have a seat. Did you get any serious inquiries yesterday?”

“Maybe. One couple with young children showed interest. They wanted to think about it. But I’m confident they’ll make an offer.”

“That’s good news.”

Uncertain how to broach the subject except to be direct, Jillian pulled the worn envelope from her purse. Torn between curiosity and respect for Rose’s privacy, Jillian had tucked the letter in a drawer until she could return it this morning. “I found this among Mary’s things and thought you might want to have it.”

Rose’s eyes were riveted on the letter Jillian held out, but she didn’t take it.

Jillian laid it on the table. “Well, I don’t think I should be the one to throw it away. I’m sorry. I read it before I realized who it was from.”

Rose finally picked it up and slowly, almost reverently, ran a finger over Mary’s name on the outside of the envelope.

“You and Mary were more than just friends.”

“It doesn’t matter now.”

“I think it does. You obviously cared for her very much.”

Rose sighed. “It was ages ago. I was a naïve girl. When you’re in your twenties you think anything is possible. But reality is a bit colder.”

“Just yesterday you were trying to convince me anything was possible.”

“Those were different times. We weren’t supposed to be open. This town wouldn’t have accepted us, and Mary couldn’t live like that. I made my own attempts at conformity, but the

only happiness that ever brought me was my daughter. Mary was apparently more successful than I.”

Jillian recognized the sorrow in Rose’s tone. “She broke your heart.”

“She was ashamed of us,” Rose said tersely.

The urge to defend Mary was overshadowed by the tears in Rose’s eyes. Jillian couldn’t imagine loving someone so much that the wound was still fresh fifty years later. *Will I still wonder what I could have had with Wil fifty years from now?*

“It’s all history now. They were married for fifty-five years. I’m sure she had a happy life,” Rose said, as if Mary’s happiness was all that mattered.

“She kept the letter.”

“Do you suppose that brings me any comfort now?”

Would it? What difference did it really make to find out that Mary probably loved Rose to her dying day? They were still robbed of a life together. And at least if Mary was happy Rose could feel it was worth it, but if they were both miserable it was a waste.

“There’s nothing I can do to change it now.” Rose stood and crossed the kitchen. She tucked the letter in a drawer and Jillian wondered what the steel in her spine cost her. “The question is what are *you* going to do?”

Jillian considered the question. A week ago, she’d thought she knew what direction she was heading in. “One part of me wants to get in my car and drive away as fast as I can.”

“And the other part?”

Jillian sighed. “Maybe it’s as you said. It’s all history now.”

“Is it? Walking away was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

“Would you do it again?”

“No.” Rose shook her head firmly. “I’ve learned a few

things over the years. I thought I was being selfless, giving her what she asked for, when really I was just frightened.”

“Of what?”

“That I could never be enough. That if I fought for her, she would still choose him.”

“Well, this isn’t the same situation. There is no *him*.”

“No. But the thing I didn’t realize at the time was that she was just as scared as I was.”

“And you think Wil is scared?”

“Sweetheart, this is a small town, and I’ve known Wilhelmina since she was very young.” Rose reached across the table and covered Jillian’s hand with hers. “And I can tell you, without a doubt, that child is petrified.”

“Of what?”

“Of you.”

“Me?”

Rose studied Jillian with kind, moist eyes. “She’s afraid she won’t be able to keep you happy. That you’ll miss the city and want to leave.”

Suddenly Jillian understood. “Like her mother did.”

“Do you love her?”

Jillian nodded, swallowing against a sudden ache in her throat.

“Then hold on to that. There *is* a way to work everything else out.”



Jillian stood at the edge of the woods, where the clearing opened and stretched down to the lake. Directly in front of her sat the camo ATV devoid of its rider. Jillian searched the shoreline and found her sitting close to the water with her knees pulled up to her chest. Wil stared over the lake and

Jillian could only see her profile. Regardless, she was too far away to study her expression. The sun was only an hour from touching the horizon, then Wil would be a silhouette.

After her talk with Rose, she'd taken a walk to clear her head. She kept replaying Rose's promise that they could find a way to work everything out. But she still had her doubts. She'd never quite bought the whole love-conquers-all thing. This was real life, and there were worlds between her and Wil. Naturally, she would miss her. Their connection was stronger than any Jillian had felt before, like a physical cord strung between two hearts.

But as Wil said, she couldn't leave Redmond. So then the question became, could Jillian leave the convenience of city life behind her? In Redmond, she couldn't see the latest theater production or order Chinese takeout on a whim. Here there were no new condos to sell or high-rise development deals.

As Jillian had reached the town square, she'd paused and taken a deep breath of the freshest air she'd ever filled her lungs with. The front door of the pharmacy opened and a woman ushered two small boys onto the sidewalk. The elder couldn't be more than five years old, and as his mother reached for his hand, he sneezed. She grabbed his wrist before he would wipe his fist under his nose, then bent and pulled a tissue out of her purse. The woman was probably on a first-name basis with the pharmacist. She could call the clinic doctor in the middle of the night for a child's fever and he would probably make a house call.

Jillian had continued through the square and turned down the street toward home. By now she knew the exact spot where the sidewalk bowed and allowed a ridge of root from a large oak tree to peek through. She had pored through the contrasts between Redmond and Cincinnati until she realized she had

really only one decision to make. She could compare the superficial aspects of both places, but that had nothing to do with the value she now sought. She'd never felt anything was missing from her life, until she'd come here.

Clarity came as she mounted the steps to Mary's house. After making several phone calls, she'd grabbed her keys and set out again, this time in the car. She'd made her decision, and now she owed Wil this conversation before she considered things settled between them.

But first she wanted to look at her for a moment longer. It didn't seem possible that in only six weeks, this woman had come to mean so much to her. Wil had cared for her and challenged her like no woman ever had. She had found in a contractor in Redmond, Tennessee, something she hadn't even realized she'd been searching for.

When Wil stood and turned, Jillian stepped out of the shadows and walked toward her. She was close enough to see Wil's face when she noticed Jillian's presence, and her heart sank as a door slammed between them. She stopped a few feet from Wil.

"I didn't take the offer." Jillian paused but Wil's expression remained stoic. "I'm opening my own firm instead."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks. I'm starting out small, working from home to save expenses."

"You walked all the way down here to tell me that?"

Jillian moved forward, pausing next to Wil's ATV. She touched the hand grip nervously, wishing she could read something in Wil's eyes. "I came to offer you a job."

"A job?"

"Yeah, I need some help making the changes to Mary's house—well, my house, actually—in order to create a suitable office and reception area. I was thinking about turning the

dining room into an office. Then I could close the pocket doors while meeting with clients.”

“Rose said you expected to get an offer on the house.”

“Yes. I told them I wasn’t selling but that I knew of a cute little starter house. And I gave them Rose’s number.”

Wil stared at her.

“Well, are you interested or not, because I’m sure there are plenty of other contractors who would jump at—” Jillian yelped when Wil swept her into her arms, then moaned softly as their lips met.

Clinging to Wil, Jillian returned her kiss with all of the emotion flooding her heart. Wil’s arms tightened around Jillian’s waist even as she drew back to look at her.

“You’re staying?”

Jillian hoped she could someday erase the hint of fear in Wil’s eyes. She nodded. “You didn’t just kiss me so I would give Johnson and Son the job, did you?”

The half-smile Jillian was so fond of lifted one side of Wil’s mouth. “Well, you better not be letting any other contractors near your place.”

Jillian kissed her again and stroked her jaw. “I won’t.”

“What changed your mind?”

She touched Wil’s cheek. “Mary and Rose were a couple.”

Wil nodded.

“You’re not surprised.”

“I suspected.” Wil’s arms dropped away from her waist, but she caught one of Jillian’s hands and led her toward the beach. “I grew up here, and years ago there were rumors.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Rose never confided in me personally. And I don’t like gossip, especially not about someone who’s been so kind to

me. It wasn't my place to tell you. What does this have to do with us?"

"I wondered if Mary ever regretted her decision." They walked along the shore until they reached a large boulder, then sat down together. Jillian angled toward Wil, tucking one leg beneath her. "I don't want regrets. Rose believes Mary was ashamed of them, and it's too late to fix that. So I want to make it clear that I'm not ashamed of loving you."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure that I love you?"

"No. But you can keep saying that if you want to."

Jillian squeezed Wil's hand. "I love you."

Wil smiled. "I meant, are you sure you want to live in Redmond?"

"What are you worried about?"

"I'm never going to make a lot of money. I'll probably be driving the same work truck for the next ten years. I can't buy you fancy things."

"Are you really telling me again that you're not good enough?" Jillian stood up and paced away a step. "This has never been about money and you know that. I make my own money. Nor is it about your personal worth, because you're the only person who seems to have doubts about that."

"Since I was a kid—"

"I know. But, Wil, I've been here for weeks and I haven't heard anyone say one bad thing about you. You're honest, generous, and one of the hardest-working people in this town, and everyone knows it but you."

"I just—"

"No. This is about you and me. Nothing else." She took both of Wil's hands in hers and looked her in the eye. "Do you want to be with me?"

“More than anything.”

“That’s all that matters. Trust me, communicate with me. And I have it on good authority that we can work everything else out.” Jillian tugged Wil off the boulder. “Now are you going to give me a ride back, or do I have to walk?”

Wil gave an exaggerated bow and swept her arm toward the ATV. “Your chariot awaits, my lady.”

Jillian laughed and looped her arm around Wil’s waist as they walked. “Someday I’ll break you of those Southern manners.”

“Now, that sounds promising.” Wil’s mouth spread into a wolfish grin. She pulled Jillian to a stop and kissed her thoroughly. “But they’re pretty deeply ingrained, so that could take a while.”

“I’ve got the rest of my life.”

EPILOGUE

Jillian's short skirt stretched tight across her thighs as she got out of her BMW. She reached back through the window and grabbed her Calvin Klein blazer, but rather than put it on, she draped it over her arm. The midday sun had driven the mercury into an uncomfortable zone, and her silk blouse already clung to her. She couldn't wait to get inside and out of these clothes. Maybe she would change into Wil's favorite jean shorts and a white tank top, and just for Wil she would forgo a bra.

She smiled when she noticed Wil's truck in the driveway of Mary's—er, her new house. Considering it had been weeks since they had seen each other, most likely Wil would have her suit off her in minutes and she wouldn't need to worry about what to wear for some time. She'd been in Cincinnati packing her condo and making arrangements for a permanent move. Beginning today she was a resident of Redmond. Well, technically, the rest of her things wouldn't be delivered until this weekend, but she decided the two suitcases in her trunk made it official.

As she crossed the yard toward the porch, the front door opened and Wil stepped outside. Her black T-shirt was tucked

into stained blue jeans that hung loosely on her hips. Wil met her at the top step and pulled her close.

"Nice skirt," Wil murmured, taking a second to admire long, black-stockings-encased legs before covering Jillian's mouth in a passionate kiss that had been building for two weeks.

"I wore it just for you," Jillian said when they both needed to breathe. "This is nice to come home to."

Wil would never tire of hearing Jillian call Redmond home. They'd talked every night in the three weeks Jillian had been gone, and she'd finally stopped worrying each time that Jillian would say she'd changed her mind.

"What have you been into?" Jillian rubbed her thumb over Wil's jaw. "Is this paint?"

Wil grinned. "I've been busy while you were gone."

"Hmm. Well, you can show me what you've done later. Right now, I need to get you out of those jeans." Jillian pulled her toward the door.

Wil's libido kicked up in response to Jillian's words and the low growl in her voice. She'd been ready the minute she saw Jillian striding across the lawn in that impossibly sexy skirt and rumpled blouse.

"This will just take a minute."

When Jillian opened the front door, Wil moved behind her and covered her eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"No peeking. I have a surprise for you."

"Don't let me trip and land on my face." Jillian shuffled forward, her arms out in preparation for a fall.

"Don't worry. I won't let anything happen to your gorgeous face." Wil guided her through the living room. As they walked, Jillian slowed and pressed back into her. Wil

cleared her throat but failed to cover a moan as Jillian's ass rocked into her crotch.

"Are we almost there?" Jillian asked innocently.

"Ah, yeah. Ready? Here's your new office."

Wil removed her hands and Jillian looked around. They stood in the doorway to the dining room. Wil had painted it the same yellow Jillian had picked out that day in the hardware store. The crisp white crown molding contrasted nicely, and the overall effect was light and airy. She'd moved in one of Mary's bookcases and a large antique desk she'd found at an auction the weekend before.

"Wil, it's perfect." Jillian turned and Wil's breath caught at the radiant smile on her face. She couldn't believe this beautiful woman was in her life, but she planned to do everything she could to keep her there. "I told you it was a great color."

Wil grinned. "And you were right. It needs some accessories, but you're better with that stuff than I am."

"I have so much to do. I ordered a sign while I was in Cincinnati, a fancy one that hangs on a wrought-iron frame. Sealy Realty. What do you think?"

"It definitely has a ring to it." Wil wrapped her arms around Jillian's waist and kissed her neck just below her ear.

"Well, it's a beginning." Jillian leaned back against Wil and tilted her head to allow her better access.

"It certainly is." And for the first time, Wil believed it. She stood with Jillian at the dawn of something wonderful.

Jillian took Wil's hand. "Now, about those jeans," she said as she led Wil toward the bedroom.

Something wonderful, indeed.

About the Author

Born and raised in upstate New York, Erin Dutton now lives and works in middle Tennessee. But she makes as many treks back north as she can squeeze into a year, because her beloved nephews and nieces grow faster every time she is away. In her free time she enjoys reading, movies, and playing golf.

Her previous novels include three romances: 2008 Golden Crown Literary Awards Finalist *Sequestered Hearts*, *Fully Involved*, and *A Place to Rest*. She is also a contributor to *Erotic Interludes 5: Road Games* and *Romantic Interludes 1: Discovery* from Bold Strokes Books. Her next novel, *Point of Ignition*, is due out July 2009.

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